The Quality Alternative to Mindless Slop

CURRENT AFFAIRS

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A VISIT TO THE **BIBLE MUSEUM**

READING ANTI COMMUNIST COMICS

HOW EVERYTHING **TURNED TO SH*T**

LET The MAGAZINE Begin

THE ONLY MAGAZINE NOT EDITED BY MICE

ON CAT LENIN

A number of anarchist readers have asked us to explain why the last edition featured both an illustration of Lenin as a cat and a photograph of a bust of Lenin petting a cat. Have we gone Bolshevik? Do we endorse the Red Terror? Do we not understand that the Soviet Union was state capitalist and not authentically socialist? Reader, relax! Our libertarian-left convictions remain intact. But we also maintain that anyone who cannot appreciate a Cat Lenin, or a Lenin With Cat, cannot be a true leftist, for they lack the requisite *joie-de-vivre*. So ask yourself: Who am I? Am I a humorless "leftist" lacking the *joie-de-vivre*? Or am I someone whose friends would describe as having "*joie-de-vivre* up the wazoo"? Think carefully before you answer!

There's No Shame In Loving Print

Are your friends and relatives trying to make you ashamed of loving print magazines? Every time they see a copy of *Current Affairs* on your credenza, do they emit a contemptuous scoff? "Print? Hah! Print is dead, fool," they screech. "You Amish or something?" But you're not Amish. You are just conscious of the obvious fact that the health of democracy depends on the continuance of small print magazines. Yet when you try to explain this to your braying relations, they only intensify their mockery. "Magazine? Might as well subscribe to a *spinning jenny* or a *steam locomotive*. Do you do your laundry on a *washboard*? Do you possess a Betamax player?" As a matter of fact, while you don't use a washboard for clothes, you do use one for music (you are in a skiffle group), but it seems best not to mention that. You do also possess a Betamax player but only as part of your prized collection of antiquated electronics, and you have never once tried to use it for its intended purpose. Best not to mention that either, though, if you wish to escape further derision.

But look: we're here to reassure you that there's no shame in your habit. Be out and proud in your love of print media. Don't let society tell you what you should keep on your credenza! You have nothing to be embarrassed about, no matter how many people say otherwise. The only one whose opinion you should value is *Current Affairs*, and we think you're great.

HATE MAIL OF THE MONTH

From: geegeeandleelee@aol.com
To: editor@currentaffairs.org
Subject: Ignorant Fool

Sent: Thu 9/11/2025
3:06 PM

Sent from my iPad. Your remark on William Buckley shows you are just another liberal jackass fool! William Buckley was a great American and you- just another lowlife gay lunatic liberal! No one has ever heard of you and when you die no one will give a damn! Maybe your gay lovers! Go back to the sewer where you came from!

George & Linda Gee

RE: CURRENT AFFAIRS

We see that William F. Buckley's legacy of toxic homophobia and smug superiority survives among his acolytes. And of course his legendary eloquence!

Do **YOU** have aggressive and offensive reactions to our work that you'd like to share with us?

Email editor@currentaffairs.org

DO NOT TURN THIS MAGAZINE INTO A RELIGION

Recently there have been reports that small sects of *Current Affairs* worshipers have been spotted in towns across America. They are widely believed to be harmless to the general public, but the rituals they engage in are bizarre and in some cases disturbing. Readers have asked our opinion of this phenomenon. First, let us affirm that these groups are *entirely* unofficial. We have never encouraged our readers to form cults, although we have occasionally suggested that a *Current Affairs* reading group or two would be a worthwhile addition to any community. As a magazine founded by 19th century German freethinkers, we are scandalized by reports of an outbreak of religiosity among the subscriber base. We condemn this with all possible severity! Reader, we must plead with you fervently: please remember that this is a magazine. We are not gods, nor even demigods. There is no need to perform elaborate human sacrifices in our honor. There is no need to perform readings from back issues as if they are sacred texts, or turn the words of articles into hymns and chants! This is all very over-the-top and we would encourage anyone engaged in such activities to find something a little more constructive to do with their lives—plant some trees, invent a new cryptocurrency, etc.

Tips For Talking To Plants

First dates with plants can be awkward. A plant is a mysterious communicator. You never quite know what it is thinking. And, of course, you must do all of the talking, because the vast majority of plants lack vocal cords. They will not tell you how they feel, so you must interpret it from their body language.

First, try talking about the economy. Plants love the economy. Tell them what you think about the prevailing macroeconomic trends. If the plant should wilt, change the subject. Try bringing up sports or coronavirus. Do not talk about gardening. They will feel patronized.

Here are some lines that usually do well with plants:

- Disparaging remarks about bees
- Jokes about stamens
- Gentle reminiscences about soils you have spent time in
- Remarks on the hypocrisy of vegetarians, who think eating animals is bad but eating plants is somehow fine
- Chuckling contemptuously about those who cannot photosynthesize
- "Exactly, a flower is not beautiful, a flower is functional."
- Pun on the word "deciduous"
- Flirtatious comments about their internodes

NO MORE GREEN COVERS

Readers have complained that too many covers of recent editions heavily feature the cover green. "I have nothing against green, but it should not be used to excess," reads one letter. "This some kind of an environment thing?" says another. No! Look, we love Mother Earth as much as the next magazine, which is why we make our pages from her trees. But this isn't some kind of fashionable "political statement." Nor do we even *like* green that much. We just happened to select some art pieces with uncommonly green themes, several times in a row. But we recognize that too much of a good thing can be wearing, and so we have vowed to stay greenless for at least a reasonable period of time. (Green may still be used to "accessorize," or in small dabs.) Let it never be said that we disregard reader preferences.

DO NOT LOSE CRUMBS IN THE GUTTER

The "gutter" of a magazine (the place where the right page meets the left) is a dangerous place. It is like the famous gutter of a bowling alley—where dreams go to die. Be careful about getting anything too close to it, for what it sucks in it will never let out. Be particularly cautious about eating scones, the crumbs of which easily fall prey to the gutter's ravenous maw. Once the crumbs are gutter-bound, they are not coming back, and your magazine will become lumpy and unusable (and its resale value will plummet).

Please Stop Sending "Lost Dog" Announcements

Current Affairs can do many things for you. But it cannot find your dog. We have said this over and over. And yet we continue to receive requests to publish lost dog announcements. We reiterate for the last time: These are ineffectual! They do not work! Nobody who reads this magazine wants to find a dog! These are cat people, almost exclusively. And all dogs basically look the same anyway, meaning that every time we have published one of these listings, it has resulted in a thousand or more "false positives," creating a bureaucratic nightmare that consumes the staff for months. Please, we beg of you: go find your own damn dog!

Violence is never the answer. The answer is to write furious ten-thousand word magazine articles. ALWAYS!

THE FOLLOWING IS AN ACTUAL SERIOUS LEGAL NOTICE WE ARE MANDATED TO PUBLISH ANNUALLY BY THE UNITED STATES POSTAL SERVICE. IT IS EXTREMELY BORING AND WE DO NOT RECOMMEND ANYONE READ IT UNLESS THEY ARE AN EMPLOYEE OF THE UNITED STATES POSTAL SERVICE AND EVEN THEN ONLY DO IT IF YOU ABSOLUTELY MUST. WE APOLOGIZE FOR THIS UNFORTUNATE USE OF SPACE. 1. PUBLICATION TITLE: Current Affairs Magazine. 2. PUBLICATION NUMBER: 021-590. 3. FILING DATE: 9/24/2025. ISSUE FREQUENCY: Bi-monthly. 5. NUMBER OF ISSUES PUBLISHED ANNUALLY: 6. 6. ANNUAL SUBSCRIPTION PRICE: $69.00 7. COMPLETE MAILING ADDRESS OF KNOWN OFFICE OF PUBLICATION: 300 Lafayette Street New Orleans, LA 70130. 8. FULL NAMES AND MAILING ADDRESSES OF PUBLISHER, EDITOR AND MANAGING EDITOR: Publisher: Nathan J Robinson, 300 Lafayette Street, New Orleans, LA 70130; Editor: Nathan J Robinson, 300 Lafayette Street, New Orleans, LA 70130; Managing Editor: Alex Skopic, 300 Lafayette Street, New Orleans, LA 70130. 10. OWNER: Current Affairs Inc, 300 Lafayette Street, New Orleans, LA 70130. 11. KNOWN BONDHOLDERS ETC None. 12. TAX STATUS: Has Changed During Preceding 12 Months (501(c)(3) status granted by IRS on August 8th, 2023 (details already submitted to USPS and approval given for nonprofit mailing rate) 13. PUBLICATION TITLE: Current Affairs Magazine. 14. ISSUE DATE FOR CIRCULATION DATA BELOW: 07/01/2025. 15. EXTENT AND NATURE OF CIRCULATION: Average number of copies each issue during preceding 12 months a. Total number of copies 3531 b. Paid circulation by Mail: 1. Mailed outside-county paid subscription stated on PS Form 3541:2710. 2. Mailed in-county paid subscriptions stated on PS Form 3541: 0. 3. Paid Distribution outside the mails including sales through dealers and carriers, street vendors, counter sales and other paid distribution outside USPS:441. 4. Paid Distribution by other classes of mail through the USPS: 0 c. Total Paid Distribution: 3531. d. Free or Nominal rate Outside-county copies: 0.e. Total free or nominal rate distribution: 31. f. Total distribution: 3182. g. Copies not distributed: 349. h. Total: 3531. i. Percent Paid: 99.03%. Number of copies of single issue published nearest to filing date a. Total number of copies 3500. b. Paid Circulation: 1. Mailed outside-county subscriptions stated on PS Form 3541: 2865. 2. Mailed in-County paid subscriptions stated on PS Form 3541: 0. 3. Paid Distribution outside the Mails: 393. 4. Paid Distribution by other classes of mail: 0 c. Total Paid Distribution: 3258 d. Free or nominal rate Outside-county copies: 0. e. Total free or nominal rate distribution: 41. f. total distribution: 3299. g. Copies not distributed: 201. h. Total: 3500. i. Percent paid: 98.76%

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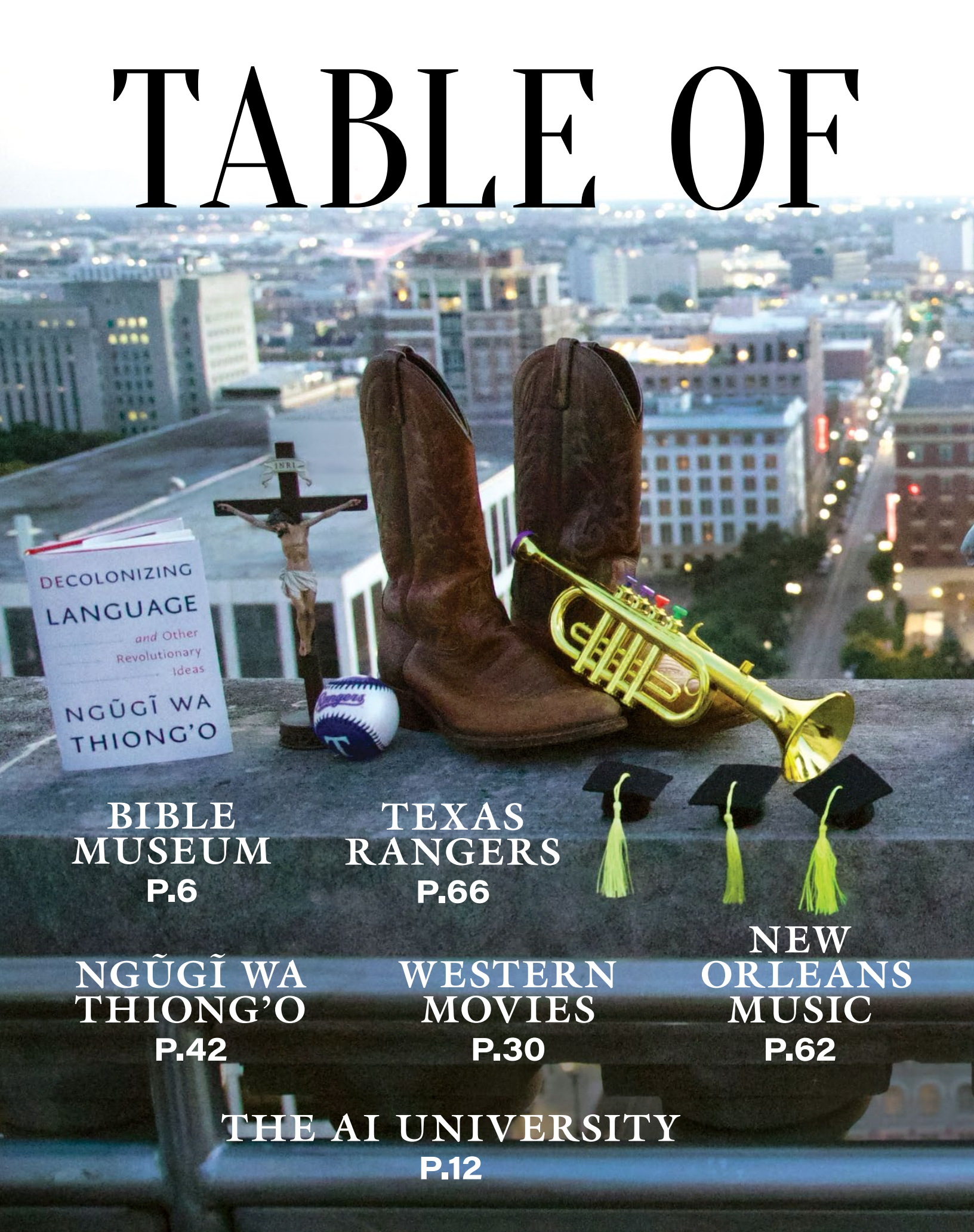

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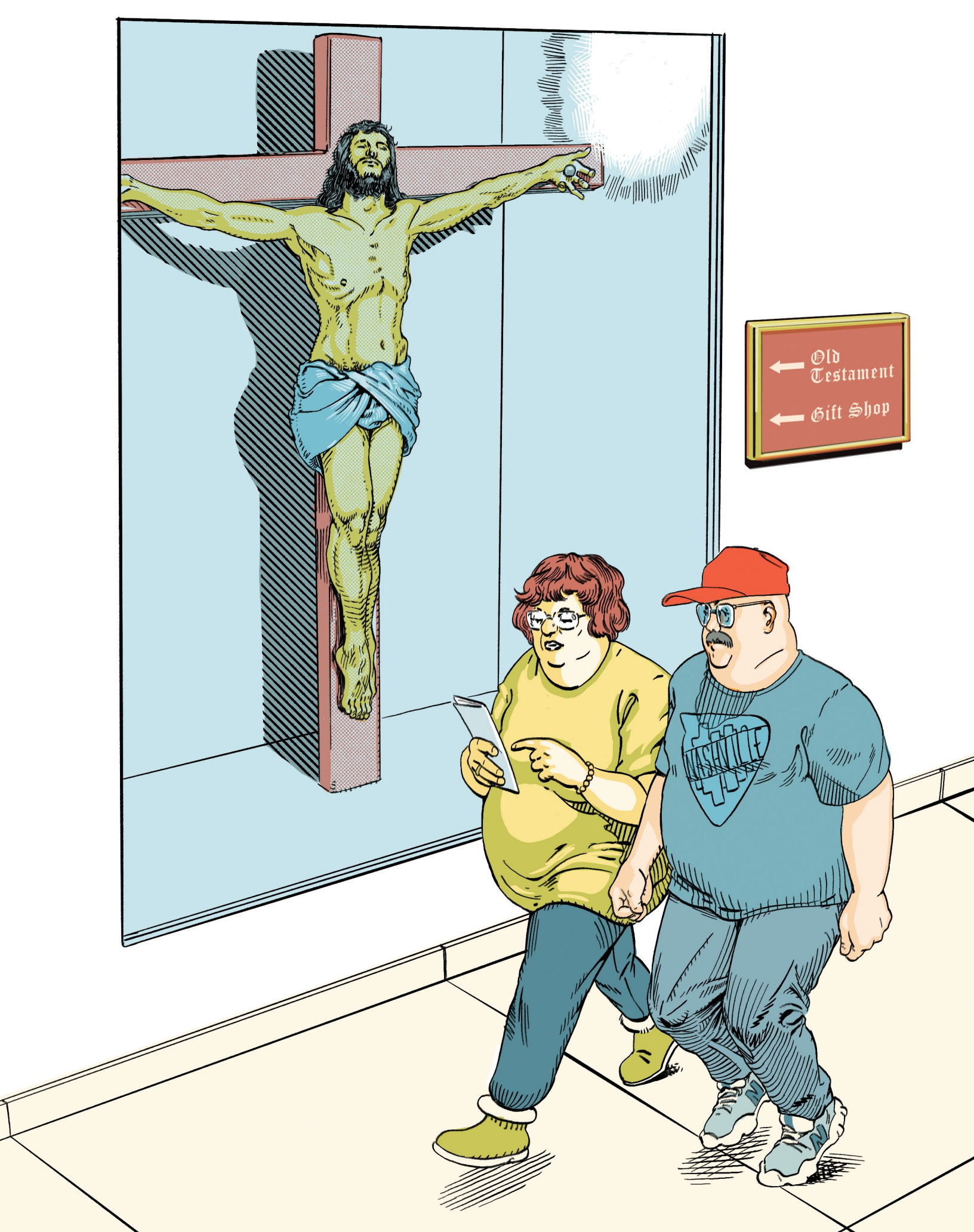
Old Testament
Gift Shop

Old Testament Times: My Visit to the Museum of the Bible

BY **K. WILSON**

One gloomy afternoon last winter, I visited the Museum of the Bible. The institution occupies an impressive six-story brick building, formerly home of the Terminal Refrigerating & Warehousing Company, just a few blocks north of where I live in Washington, D.C. It's close enough to walk, so I did, a decision I came to regret when the light mist in the air turned into a steady drizzle. Still, approaching on foot, I was able to experience the full effect of what the museum calls its "entrance portals": two massive bronze facades embossed with Latin text which flank the front door.

The Museum of the Bible opened in 2017, so it's a recent entry in D.C.'s expansive roster of museums. Most of the funding came from Hobby Lobby, an arts and crafts store chain owned by the Greens, an evangelical family with an Indiana-Jones-villain penchant for stolen antiquities. (For those unfamiliar with this bizarre tale, Hobby Lobby got in serious trouble in the mid-2010s for trafficking black market cuneiform tablets. Hobby Lobby also collects rare books, some of which I saw on display at the museum—but more on that later.)

I didn't brave the Museum of the Bible alone. I went with my girlfriend at the time, at the invitation of two of her friends, a married couple. We made an odd group: a communist, a secular libertarian, and a pair of high-achieving adult converts to evangelical Christianity. This was not the other couple's first visit, but it was ours, and I was taken aback when the cashier informed me that tickets cost $30 per person. As I tapped my credit card, I worried that a portion of my money would support the persecution of sexual minorities in a distant part of the world. But, I rationalized, I also eat at Chick-fil-A from time to time, and that doesn't teach me anything about the Bible.

Nor, as it turned out, did the museum. The main attraction is an exhibit on the third floor. Actually, it's not an "exhibit" so much as an audio-visual spectacle in several parts. We started with the Old Testament section. Along with a crowd of about 20 other visitors, we wandered through a series of rooms, each of which had a different Bible-themed display. Most of these displays were accompanied by an animation of the relevant biblical events projected onto the wall, and several were augmented by smoke and flashing lights. In my favorite moment, we walked down a dark hallway toward an illuminated shrub, which suddenly burst into flames.

We were guided on our journey by a stern voice that seemed to come from all around us. Speaking in a vaguely Middle-Eastern accent, the voice narrated the key events of the Old Testament: the creation of the world, the Garden of Eden and man's fall from grace, Cain and Abel, the flood, the ascension of King David, the Jews' captivity in Egypt and their escape under the direction of Moses. I'm no Bible scholar, so I can't comment on the overall accuracy of the exhibit's rendering of these stories. But there was one omission that struck me as noteworthy. Recounting the book of Exodus, the narrator described how Moses urged the Egyptian Pharaoh to let his people go, and how the Pharaoh stubbornly refused. In this telling, it's the Pharaoh's pride and greed that prevent him from acceding to Moses's demand for freedom, even as the plagues continue to multiply. In the book of Exodus, though, it is *God* who prevents the Pharaoh from yielding so that He can demonstrate His power to the Egyptian people. Here's what God says in Exodus 7:3–5, the King James version: "And I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and multiply my signs and my wonders in the lands of Egypt. But Pharaoh shall not hearken unto you, that I may lay my hand upon Egypt… [a]nd the Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord..."

The sequence of plagues culminates in the Passover, when God kills the firstborn son of each Egyptian household but "passes over" the Jewish children. A few years ago, I attended a

Museum of the Bible in Washington, D.C.

Passover Seder for the first time. A Seder is a traditional Jewish ceremony for celebrating Passover, but the content can vary from household to household, and hosts can personalize the ceremony to reflect their own views and priorities. At the Seder I attended, I was touched when the host dedicated a segment of the proceedings to the Egyptian children who fell victim to the final plague. To acknowledge the suffering of the oppressor was, I thought, a remarkably humane sentiment.

Needless to say, the exhibit expressed no such misgivings. Indeed, the omission of God's role in the Pharaoh's intransigence seemed to reflect the mission of the exhibit as a whole: to smooth down the Old Testament's rough edges, eliminating anything difficult or ambiguous and leaving only black-and-white certainty. The exhibit presents each of God's actions as a measured response to human evil, one that accords not just with divine justice, but human justice too. And the exhibit skips or glosses over any portions of the Old Testament that might support alternative interpretations. For instance, there's no mention of Saul, the erstwhile first king of Israel who disobeyed God's command to kill every member of a defeated tribe and later committed suicide after losing a battle. Instead, the exhibit implies that the more obedient David was the first king. Neither the book of Job, which questions whether the justice of God is comprehensible in human terms, nor the book of Ecclesiastes, which is a sort of proto-existentialist musing on the purpose of life in an ephemeral world, make an appearance. *All is right with the world*, the exhibit seemed to say, *the sun rises only on the just and the rains come only to the unjust.*

As we neared the end of this segment of the exhibit, I was reminded of *Reading Genesis*, a truly execrable nonfiction book by the novelist and academic Marilynne Robinson. *Reading Genesis* offers a more intellectually rigorous version of the exhibit's mission—that is, a full-throated defense of the Old Testament to modern readers who might have qualms about all the rape and murder. Robinson recognizes that there is simply no way to square the Old Testament with universal moral principles; when God isn't slaughtering people Himself, He's allowing (or commanding) others to do so.

Instead, she characterizes the Old Testament as a story about God's faithfulness to His chosen people despite their transgressions. "The idea that God would make concessions to these most regrettable human propensities might seem at odds with the righteousness and the compassion that are his preeminent attributes," she writes, demonstrating a penchant for understatement. "It is consistent, however, with there being a series of covenants, and the promise of new covenants, to establish terms on which God and humankind can reach some kind of peace and mutual enjoyment." But elsewhere, Robinson makes clear that "humankind" doesn't mean humans generally. She discusses, for example, the massacre of a city called Shechem by Jacob's sons, a story she concedes "seem[s] far too ugly to be in the Bible." "Yet," she points out, "God does not treat the covenant as violated. Jacob and his sons remain under His protection." She explains this discrepancy by arguing that "this narrative concerns itself with the singular history of a chosen people…" God, in other words, cares about the fate of a particular lineage—and members of that lineage are free to massacre those lacking God's protection.

Of course, this doesn't hold water either. It doesn't explain, for example, why God allowed His people to suffer slavery in Egypt, or why He decided a genocide of the Egyptians was necessary to resolve the situation. Still, I wondered whether *Reading Genesis* and the exhibit were versions of the same strand of thinking, a new kind of Old Testament apologia. I wondered, too, whether this thinking signaled broader intellectual currents in the resurgent evangelical right.

All this wondering left a bad taste in my mouth, and I was relieved when we made the transition to the New Testament portion of the exhibit. Since the museum is funded by organizations that purport to advance Christian values, you'd think the New Testament would receive the most attention. But in fact, it's sort of a letdown. There's no omnipresent voice and no pyrotechnics. Instead, visitors watch two short videos. The first is a five-minute introduction to the figure of Jesus. We caught only the tail end of that one; though, as my girlfriend joked, that didn't stop us from appreciating the rest of the exhibit—"after all, we know who He *is*."

The second is a dramatization of Luke 24:13–25, which lasts about a half hour. In the museum's version of this tale, two men, Cleopas and Nathaniel, are traveling from Jerusalem shortly after Jesus's crucifixion. Cleopas, something of a cynic, argues that Jesus's death disproves His divinity; Nathaniel disagrees. An unknown traveler joins the pair on the road, and, as they walk, gently admonishes Cleopas for his lack of faith. Cleopas eventually invites Nathaniel and the traveler to pass the night in his house. The house is deserted, and Cleopas reveals that his wife left him, taking their daughter with her, after discovering that Cleopas had an affair. (I wondered where she went: Holiday Inn Jerusalem?) "I would give anything to get them back," Cleopas says, a line that might just as easily be heard near the end of a Netflix rom-com.

The traveler, who is obviously Jesus in disguise, comforts Cleopas with a somewhat muddled parable about faith and sacrifice. Then He reveals his identity to the astonished pair and promptly vanishes—leaving behind a wooden figurine of a dog

He has carved for Cleopas's daughter. Of course, the filmmakers simply invented most of this plot—the relevant verse of Luke mentions a guy named Cleopas who encounters Jesus after His death, but the focus of the verse, sensibly enough, is on Jesus rather than Cleopas's family life. The whole thing amounts to little more than Bible fan-fiction.

The anachronistic Cleopas subplot, coupled with the low production values and Hallmark-movie acting, made for an odd viewing experience. But there was something odder still about the film, something I didn't quite grasp until after we left. Jesus's role in the whole thing was bizarrely minimized. The bulk of the New Testament exhibit was a film showing events *after* Jesus died. The film alludes to the crucifixion only in passing, and there's no mention of anything Jesus might have said or stood for. No Sermon on the Mount, no healing of the sick, no casting the money-lenders from the temple. Jesus appears only as an apparition, and when he remonstrates with Cleopas, he talks about Cleopas's family drama, not broader spiritual issues. Though Jesus counsels Cleopas and Nathaniel to keep the faith, the film seems completely uninterested in the follow-up question: faith *in what*?

But the museum's answer to that question became clear to me over the rest of our visit. As I emerged from the dark theater and stood blinking in the bright fluorescent lights, one of our party suggested that we ascend to the fourth floor. There, we found ourselves in a circular room, surrounded by many thousands of Bibles lining the walls. Scanning the room, I quickly understood what was remarkable about this display—each Bible was in a different language. There were also several sections with "placeholders" for languages into which the Bible has not been translated, mostly dead and dying tongues with few living speakers, plus a handful spoken only in places where Christianity is outlawed. That little room embodied an ambition of jaw-dropping scale: to ensure that there is no language which lacks Christianity's sacred texts. Of course, that ambition carries with it the vestiges of colonial hubris. How many untold thousands, I wondered, have died as a consequence of the West's efforts to convert them?

After a few minutes in the translation room, I followed the group into a larger exhibition next door, which featured rare and ancient Bible printings from around the world. (Remember what I said about Hobby Lobby's collection of antiquities?) My favorite was a huge early-Renaissance tome, each page of which featured the same passage in four different languages. I imagined a nameless monk painstakingly assembling four varieties of movable type in a crude printing press—a labor of love I couldn't help but admire.

And at that moment, I realized what the museum believes in. What lies at the heart of these exhibits is not anything the Bible says. Instead, the museum invites faith in the Bible itself, the text divorced from its content, as the embodiment of Christianity's cultural scope and material power. In a twist worthy of Baudrillard, the signifier has replaced anything it might conceivably signify.

Of course, this is tough to reconcile with any fair reading of Jesus's actual message. As the New Testament gospels tell it, Jesus defied the religious authorities of his day, urging revelation and personal spirituality over tradition and authority. But that very inconsistency undergirds the museum's fixation with the Old Testament. One standard Christian explanation for the apparent disparities between the Old and New Testaments—why "an eye for an eye" gives way to "turn the other cheek"—is that Jesus's death and resurrection sealed a new covenant between God and mankind. That's why most Christians don't feel themselves bound by Leviticus's detailed dietary restrictions or Deuteronomy's prohibition against mixed fabrics. But *Reading Genesis* and the Museum of the Bible eschew this explanation. They instead present the Old and New Testaments as an uninterrupted continuity. And the clear implication, at least at the Museum of the Bible, is that when the two conflict, the values of the Old Testament should triumph.

This fixation with the Old Testament permeates other cultural artifacts of evangelical Christianity as well. Consider, for example, the "Ark Encounter," a to-scale replica of Noah's ark in Williamstown, Kentucky, and the nearby Creation Museum. Though both attractions are run by evangelical Christian organizations, neither has much to say about Jesus. The purpose of the Ark Encounter is evidently to convince the public that the story of Noah's ark—in which Noah builds a boat that fits a male and female member of each of Earth's ten million species—is plausible as an account of the world's history. Similarly, the Creation Museum is not so much a museum as a sequence of graphical renderings of events depicted in the Bible, accompanied by simple text blurbs advocating a creationist viewpoint. Unlike these attractions, the Museum of the Bible is a real museum—it features actual exhibitions of historically significant items, accompanied by at least a modicum of *bona fide* scholarship. But all three entities share the same basic purpose: to convince the public that the story and values of the Old Testament are basically correct.

Perhaps that conviction helps to explain the evangelical right's overwhelming support for Donald Trump, the least Christian person to walk the earth since Anton LaVey. In the aftermath of Trump's win in 2016, pundits suggested that abortion was a "major factor" in evangelicals' political behavior. The religious right held their noses and voted for Trump, according to this theory, because they believed the evil of abortion outweighed anything else Trump had done or might do. Then they got what they wanted—a Supreme Court loaded with Trump judges overturned *Roe v. Wade*. But evangelical support for Trump didn't abate once that longstanding goal was accomplished. Eighty percent of self-declared evangelicals voted for Trump in 2024, approx-

Donald J. Trump, St. John's Episcopal Church, 2020

imately the same fraction as supported him in 2016 and 2020. Some evangelical groups have doubtless glommed on to other issues, like gay marriage, to justify their continued support for Trump. But more fundamentally, Trump seems to embody the way they actually view the world.

NPR's interview with Russell Moore, formerly a top official in the Southern Baptist Convention, offers a clue in interpreting these trends. Back in 2023, Moore reported that an increasing number of evangelicals were rejecting Jesus's message as such. He recounted an instance of an evangelical pastor who received pushback from his flock when he tried to highlight the peaceful and tolerant aspects of Jesus's message in a sermon. The congregant accused the pastor of spreading liberal talking points. "I'm literally quoting Jesus Christ," the pastor said. "Yes, but that doesn't work anymore. That's weak," the congregant replied.

Vice President JD Vance seemingly agrees. In a Fox News interview from early 2025, Vance, who recently converted to Catholicism because "the Catholic Church [i]s just really old," invoked the medieval Catholic doctrine of *ordo amoris*, or "order of love," to suggest that our obligations to our fellow humans fall into a strict hierarchy. "We should love our family first, then our neighbors, then love our community, then our country, and only then consider the interests of the rest of the world," he said. Never mind that Jesus, when asked to interrupt a sermon to speak to his mother and brothers, asked "Who is my mother? and who are my brethren?"—then pointed to his disciples and said "Behold my mother and my brethren!" And never mind that when a lawyer asked Jesus "Who is my neighbor?", Jesus responded with the parable of the Good Samaritan—in front of an audience whose members would have been highly unlikely to regard Samaritans as their neighbors.

Of course, dissonance between Jesus's message and evangelical Christians' actions is nothing new. Many of the most successful televangelists promote what's called "prosperity theology," which holds that believers who are sufficiently holy and faithful will enjoy material riches on Earth. (They must not have read Matthew 19:21, where Jesus commands a follower to "sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven.") It's no surprise that many prominent adherents of prosperity theology, like Kenneth Copeland—who became infamous in the early days of COVID for claiming he could cure the disease by blowing the "wind of God" on his congregants—are closely associated with Trump.

So if these so-called Christians don't believe in Jesus anymore, what *do* they believe in? According to the growing number of evangelicals who identify as "cultural Christians," the essence of Christianity is not anything Jesus said or did, but the traditions and social identity of a specific Christian community. Elon Musk, an atheist through-and-through, recently adopted the badge of "cultural Christian" and announced he was a "big believer in the principles of Christianity"—which, he said, justified his decision to cut off his gender-nonconforming daughter. Given that Musk is an obsessive pro-natalist who has fathered a brood of children with many different mothers, the "principles" he's talking about likely boil down to Christianity's traditional encouragement of procreation. The idea of "cultural Christianity" has gained purchase in mainstream conservative politics too. Vice President Vance echoed these ideas of tradition and community when he laid out his vision of America at the 2024 Republican National Convention. "America," he said, "is not just an idea. It is a group of people with a shared history and a common future. It is, in short, a nation."

All of this is, of course, perfectly consistent with Trump's own instincts and worldview. In September 2025, Trump himself visited the Museum of the Bible, where he gave a typically grandiloquent and rambling speech. In one segment of the speech, Trump boasted about his deployment of the National Guard to patrol the streets of D.C. and claimed he had reduced crime by more than 87 percent. Then he complained that he couldn't "claim 100 percent" because "things that take place in the home, they call 'crime.' They'll do anything they can to find something. If a man has a little fight with the wife, they say, 'This was a crime.'" Talk about an Old Testament idea.

Thus, it's no surprise that the thought leaders of "cultural Christianity" are rediscovering the Old Testament. The New Testament promises salvation to sinners and the righteous alike, and extends its vision to all the world's peoples. Most of the stories in the Old Testament, by contrast, feature an in-group and an out-group, and almost all those stories end with the out-group losing—sometimes at the cost of all its first-born sons. These are tales of a cohesive group of people protected by a wrathful god against a mostly hostile world. Needless to say, this is a much more congenial worldview for a cultural movement obsessed with evil outsiders and haunted by delusions of persecution.

After a few hours at the museum, I was ready to return to the secular world. I bade farewell to the collection of ancient Bibles and meandered outside into a wintry evening. But what I'd seen stayed with me, and I pondered its meaning on my walk home. As I shivered in the cold, a vision of the future of evangelical Christianity formed in my mind. Jesus, with His lefty egalitarianism and woke calls for acceptance and forgiveness, was out; Yahweh, the vengeful and ethnocentric deity of the Old Testament, was back in. God help us all. ✞

INTRODUCING....

"SLUR CONE"

AS SEEN ON TV

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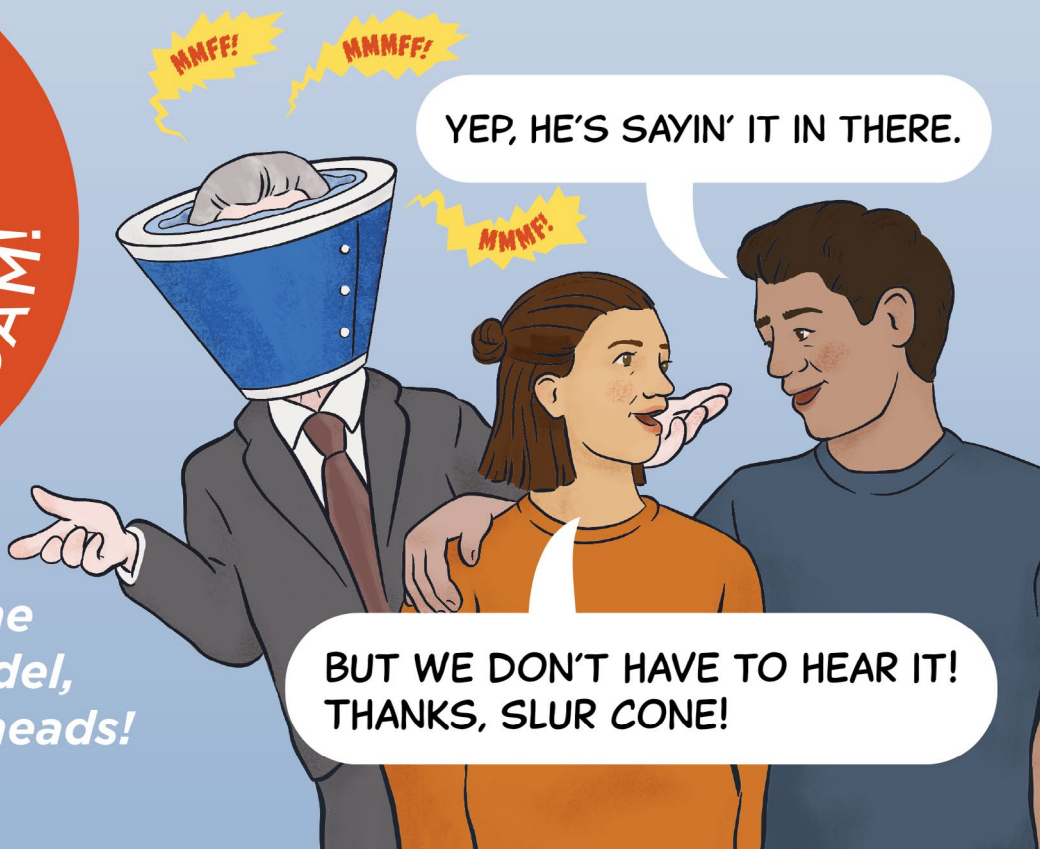
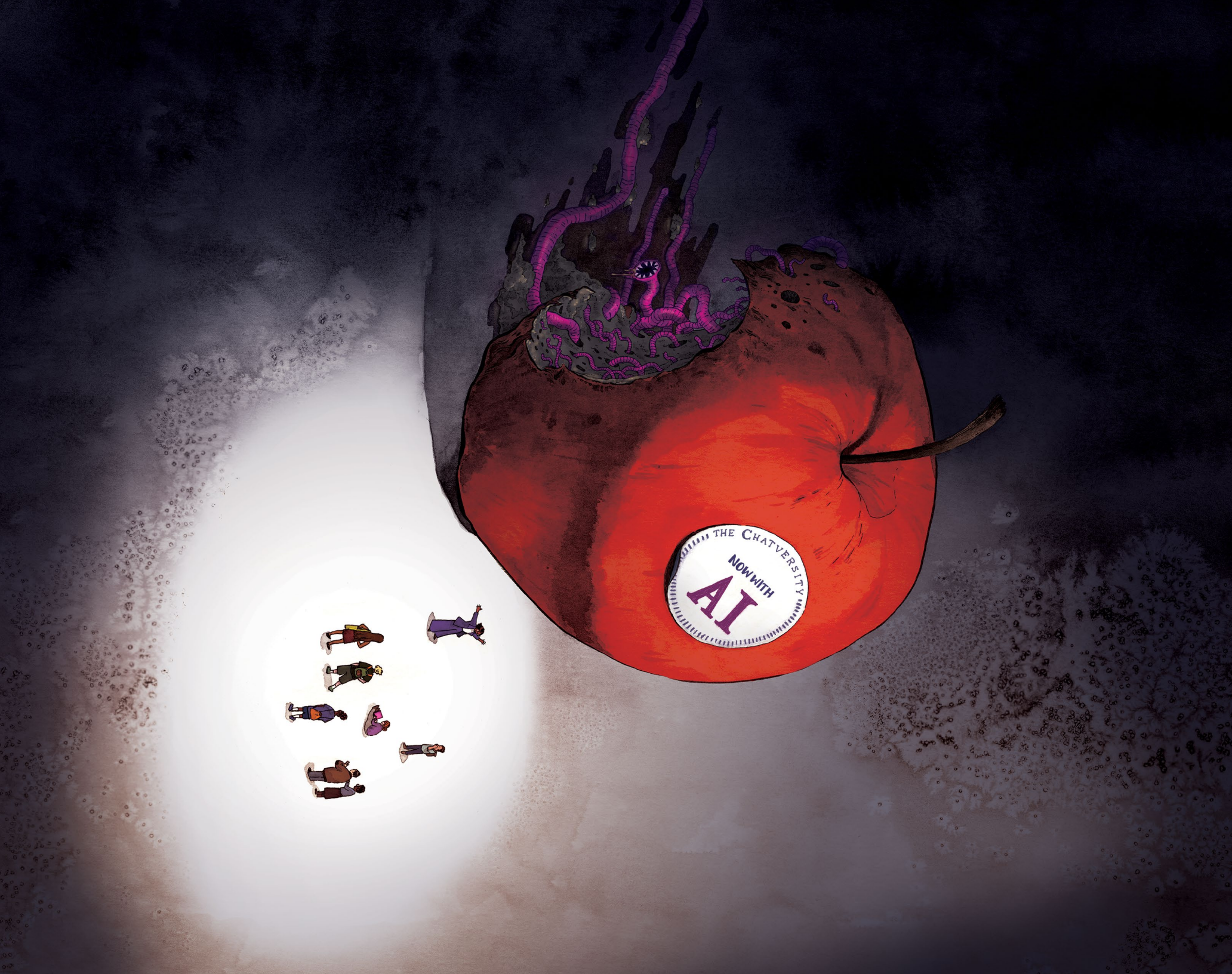


Now available in the "Andrew Tate" model, for oddly-shaped heads!


THE CHATVERSITY
NOW WITH
AI

THE CHATVERSITY

BY **RONALD E. PURSER**

I used to think that the hype surrounding artificial intelligence was just that—hype. I was skeptical when ChatGPT made its debut. The media frenzy, the breathless proclamations of a new era—it all felt familiar. I assumed it would blow over like every tech fad before it.

I was wrong. But not in the way you might think.

The panic came first. Faculty meetings erupted in dread: "How will we detect plagiarism now?" "Is this the end of the college essay?" "Should we go back to blue books and proctored exams?" My business school colleagues suddenly behaved as if cheating had just been invented.

Then, almost overnight, the hand-wringing turned into hand-rubbing. The same professors forecasting academic doom were now giddily rebranding themselves as "AI-ready educators." Across campus, workshops like "Building AI Skills and Knowledge in the Classroom" and "AI Literacy Essentials" popped up like mushrooms after rain. The initial panic about plagiarism gave way to a resigned embrace: "If you can't beat 'em, join 'em."

This about-face wasn't unique to my campus. The California State University (CSU) system—America's largest public university system with 23 campuses and nearly half a million students—went all-in, announcing a $17-million partnership with OpenAI. CSU would become the nation's first "AI-Empowered" university system, offering free ChatGPT Edu (a campus-branded version designed for educational institutions) to every student and employee. The press release gushed about "personalized, future-focused learning tools" and preparing students for an "AI-driven economy."

The timing was surreal. CSU unveiled its grand technological gesture just as it proposed slashing $375 million from its budget. While administrators cut ribbons on their AI initiative, they were also cutting faculty positions, entire academic programs, and student services. At CSU East Bay, general layoff notices were issued twice within a year, hitting departments like General Studies and Modern Languages. My own alma mater, Sonoma State, faced a $24 million deficit and announced plans to eliminate 23 academic programs—including philosophy, economics, and physics—and to cut over 130 faculty positions, more than a quarter of its teaching staff.

At San Francisco State University, the provost's office formally notified our union, the California Faculty Association (CFA) of potential layoffs—an announcement that sent shockwaves through campus as faculty tried to reconcile budget cuts with the administration's AI enthusiasm. The irony was hard to miss: the same month our union received layoff threats, OpenAI's education evangelists set up shop in the university library to recruit faculty into the gospel of automated learning.

The math is brutal and the juxtaposition stark: millions for OpenAI while pink slips go out to longtime lecturers. The CSU isn't investing in education—it's outsourcing it, paying premium prices for a chatbot many students were already using for free.

FOR SALE: CRITICAL EDUCATION

Public education has been for sale for decades. Cultural theorist Henry Giroux was among the first to see how public universities were being remade as vocational feeders for private markets. Academic departments now have to justify themselves in the lan-

guage of revenue, "deliverables," and "learning outcomes." CSU's new partnership with OpenAI is the latest turn of that screw.

Others have traced the same drift. Sheila Slaughter and Gary Rhoades called it *academic capitalism*: knowledge refashioned as commodity and students as consumers. In *Unmaking the Public University*, Christopher Newfield showed how privatization actually impoverishes public universities, turning them into debt-financed shells of themselves. Benjamin Ginsberg chronicled the rise of the "all-administrative campus," where managerial layers and administrative blight multiplied even as faculty shrink. And Martha Nussbaum warned what's lost when the humanities—those spaces for imagination and civic reflection—are treated as expendable in a democracy. Together they describe a university that no longer asks what education *is for*, only what it *can earn*.

The California State University system has now written the next chapter of that story. Facing deficits and enrollment declines, administrators embraced the rhetoric of AI-innovation as if it were salvation. When CSU Chancellor Mildred Garcia announced the $17-million partnership with OpenAI, the press release promised a "highly collaborative public-private initiative" that would "elevate our students' educational experience" and "drive California's AI-powered economy." This corporate-speak reads like a press release ChatGPT could have written.

Meanwhile, at San Francisco State, entire graduate programs devoted to critical inquiry—Women and Gender Studies and Anthropology—were being suspended due to lack of funding. But not to worry: everyone got a free ChatGPT Edu license!

Professor Martha Kenney, Chair of the Women and Gender Studies department and Principal Investigator on a National Science Foundation grant examining AI's social justice impacts, saw the contradiction firsthand. Shortly after the CSU announcement, she co-authored a *San Francisco Chronicle* op-ed with Anthropology Professor Martha Lincoln, warning that the new initiative risked shortchanging students and undermining critical thinking.

"I'm not a Luddite," Kenney wrote. "But we need to be asking critical questions about what AI is doing to education, labor, and democracy—questions that my department is uniquely qualified to explore."

The irony couldn't be starker: the very programs best equipped to study the social and ethical implications of AI were being defunded, even as the university promoted the use of OpenAI's products across campus.

This isn't innovation—it's institutional auto-cannibalism.

The new mission statement? Optimization. Inside the institution, the corporate idiom trickles down through administrative memos and patronizing emails. Under the guise of "fiscal sustainability" (a friendlier way of saying "cuts"), administrators sharpen their scalpels to restructure the university in accordance with efficiency metrics instead of educational purpose.

The messaging from administrators would be comical if it weren't so cynical. Before summer break at San Francisco State, a university administrator warned faculty in an email of potential layoffs, hedging with the lines: "We hope to avoid layoffs," and "No decisions have been made." Weeks later came her chirpy summer send-off: "I hope you are enjoying the last day to turn in grades. You may even be reading the novel you never finished from winter break..."

Right, because nothing says leisure reading like looming unemployment. Then came the kicker: "If we continue doing the work above to reduce expenses while still maintaining access for students, we do not anticipate having to do layoffs." Translation: Sacrifice your workloads, your job security, even your colleagues, maybe we'll let you keep your job. No promises. Now go enjoy that novel.

TECHNOPOLY COMES TO CAMPUS

When my business school colleagues insist that ChatGPT is "just another tool in the toolbox," I'm tempted to remind them that Facebook was once "just a way to connect with friends." But there's a difference between tools and technologies. Tools help us accomplish tasks; technologies reshape the very environments in which we think, work, and relate. As philosopher Peter Hershock observes, we don't merely *use* technologies; we *participate* in them. With tools, we retain agency—we can choose when and how to use them. With technologies, the choice is subtler: they remake the conditions of choice itself. A pen extends communication without redefining it; social media transformed what we mean by privacy, friendship, even truth.

Media theorist Neil Postman warned that a "technopoly" arises when societies surrender judgment to technological imperatives—when efficiency and innovation become moral goods in themselves. Once metrics like speed and optimization replace reflection and dialogue, education mutates into logistics: grading automated, essays generated in seconds. Knowledge becomes data; teaching becomes delivery. What disappears are precious human capacities—curiosity, discernment, presence. The result isn't augmented intelligence but simulated learning: a paint-by-numbers approach to thought.

Political theorist Langdon Winner once asked whether artifacts can have politics. They can, and AI systems are no exception. They encode assumptions about what counts as intelligence and whose labor counts as valuable. The more we rely on algorithms, the more we normalize their values: automation, prediction, standardization, and corporate dependency. Eventually these priorities fade from view and come to seem natural—"just the way things are."

In classrooms today, the technopoly is thriving. Universities are being retrofitted as fulfillment centers of cognitive convenience. Students aren't being taught to think more deeply but to prompt more effectively. We are exporting the very labor of teaching and learning—the slow work of wrestling with ideas, the enduring of discomfort, doubt and confusion, the struggle of finding one's own voice. Critical pedagogy is out; productivity hacks are in. What's sold as innovation is really surrender. As the university trades its teaching mission for "AI-tech integration," it doesn't just risk irrelevance—it risks becoming mechanically soulless. Genuine intellectual struggle has become too expensive of a value proposition.

The scandal is not one of ignorance but indifference. University administrators understand exactly what's happening, and proceed anyway. As long as enrollment numbers hold and tuition checks clear, they turn a blind eye to the learning crisis while faculty are left to manage the educational carnage in their classrooms.

The future of education has already arrived—as a liquidation sale of everything that once made it matter.

THE CHEATING-AI TECHNOLOGY COMPLEX

Before AI arrived, I used to joke with colleagues about plagiarism. "Too bad there isn't an AI app that can grade their plagiarized essays for us," I'd say, half in jest. Students have always found ways to cheat—scribbling answers on their palms, sending exams to Chegg.com, hiring ghostwriters—but ChatGPT took it to another level. Suddenly they had access to a writing assistant that never slept, never charged, and never said no.

Universities scrambled to fight back with AI-detectors like Turnitin—despite high rates of false positives, documented bias against ESL and Black students, and the absurdity of fighting robots with robots. It's a twisted ouroboros: universities partner with AI companies; students use AI to cheat; schools panic about cheating and then partner with more AI companies to detect the cheating. It's surveillance capitalism meets institutional malpractice, with students trapped in an arms race they never asked to join.

The ouroboros just got darker. In October 2025, Perplexity AI launched a Facebook Ad for its new *Comet* browser featuring a teenage influencer bragging about how he'll use the app to cheat on every quiz and assignment—and it wasn't parody. The company literally paid to broadcast academic dishonesty as a selling point. Marc Watkins, writing on his *Substack*, called it "a new low," noting that Perplexity's own CEO seemed unaware his marketing team was glamorizing fraud.

If this sounds like satire, it isn't: the same week that ad dropped, a faculty member in our College of Business emailed all professors and students, enthusiastically promoting a *free one-year Perplexity Pro account "with some additional interesting features!*" Yes—even more effective ways to cheat. It's hard to script a clearer emblem of what I've called education's auto-cannibalism: universities consuming their own purpose while cheerfully marketing the tools of their undoing.

Then there is the Chungin "Roy" Lee saga. Lee arrived as a freshman at Columbia University with ambition—and an OpenAI tab permanently open. By his own admission, he cheated on nearly every assignment. "I'd just dump the prompt into ChatGPT and hand in whatever it spat out," he told *New York Magazine*. "AI wrote 80 percent of every essay I turned in." Asked why he even bothered applying to an Ivy League school, Lee was disarmingly honest: "To find a wife and a startup partner."

It would be hilarious if it weren't so telling. Conservative economist Tyler Cowen has offered an even bleaker take on the modern university's "value proposition." "Higher education will persist as a dating service, a way of leaving the house, and a chance to party and go see some football games," he wrote in "Everyone's Using AI to Cheat at School. And That's a Good Thing." In this view, the university's intellectual mission is already dead, replaced by credentialism, consumption, and convenience.

Lee's first venture was an AI app called Interview Coder, designed to cheat Amazon's job interviews. He filmed himself using it; his video post went viral. Columbia suspended him for "advertising a link to a cheating tool." Ironically, this came just as the university—like the CSU—announced a partnership with OpenAI, the same company powering the software that Lee used to cheat his way through their courses.

Unfazed, Lee posted his disciplinary hearing online, gaining more followers. He and his business partner Neel Shanmugam, also disciplined, argued their app violated no rules. "I didn't learn a single thing in a class at Columbia," Shanmugam told KTVU news. "And I think that applies to most of my friends."

After their suspension, the dynamic duo dropped out, raised $5.3 million in seed funding, and relocated to San Francisco. Of course—because nothing says "tech visionary" like getting expelled for cheating.

Their new company? Cluely. Its mission: "We want to cheat on everything. To help you cheat—smarter." Its tagline: "We built Cluely so you never have to think alone again."

Cluely isn't hiding its purpose; it's flaunting it. Its manifesto spells out the logic:

> *Why memorize facts, write code, research anything—when a model can do it in seconds? The future won't reward effort. It'll reward leverage. So start cheating. Because when everyone does, no one is.*

When challenged on ethics, Lee resorts to the standard Silicon Valley defense: "any technology in the past—whether that's calculators, Google search—they were all met with an initial push back of, 'hey, this is cheating,'" he told KTVU. It's a glib analogy that sounds profound at a startup pitch but crumbles under scrutiny. Calculators expanded reasoning; the printing press spread knowledge. ChatGPT, by contrast, doesn't extend cognition—it automates it, turning thinking itself into a service. Rather than democratizing learning, it privatizes the act of thinking under corporate control.

When a 21-year-old college dropout suspended for cheating lectures us about technological inevitability, the response shouldn't be moral panic but moral clarity—about whose interests are being served. Cheating has ceased to be a subculture; it's become a brand identity and venture-capital ideology. And why not? In the Chatversity, cheating is no longer deviant—it's the default. Students openly swap jailbreak prompts to make ChatGPT sound dumber, insert typos, and train models on their own mediocre essays to "humanize" the output.

What's unfolding now is more than dishonesty—it's the unraveling of any shared understanding of what education is for. And students aren't irrational. Many are under immense pressure to maintain GPAs for scholarships, financial aid, or visa eligibility. Education has become transactional; cheating has become a survival strategy.

Some institutions have simply given up. Ohio State University announced that using AI would no longer count as an academic integrity violation. "All cases of using AI in classes will not be an academic integrity question going forward," Provost Ravi Bellamkonda told WOSU public radio. In an op-ed, OSU alum Christian Collins asked the obvious question: "Why would a student pay full tuition, along with exposing themselves to the economically ruinous trap of student debt, to potentially not

even be taught by a human being?"

The irony only deepens.

The *New York Times* reported on Ella Stapleton, a senior at Northeastern University who discovered her business professor had quietly used ChatGPT to generate lecture slides—even though the syllabus explicitly forbade students from doing the same. While reviewing the slides on leadership theory, she found a leftover prompt embedded in the slides: *"Expand on all areas. Be more detailed and specific."* The PowerPoints were full of giveaways: mangled AI images of office workers with extra limbs, garbled text, and spelling errors. "He's telling us not to use it," Stapleton said, "and then he's using it himself."

Furious, she filed a complaint demanding an $8,000 refund, her share of that semester's tuition. The professor, Dr. Rick Arrowood, admitted using ChatGPT for his slides to "give them a fresh look," then conceded, "In hindsight, I wish I would have looked at it more closely."

One might think this hypocrisy is anecdotal, but it's institutional. Faculty who once panicked over AI plagiarism are now being "empowered" by universities like CSU, Columbia, and Ohio State to embrace the very "tools" they feared. As corporatization increases class sizes and faculty workloads, the temptation is obvious: let ChatGPT write lectures and journal articles, grade essays, redesign syllabi.

All this pretending calls to mind an old Soviet joke from the factory floor: "They pretend to pay us, and we pretend to work." In the Chatversity, the roles are just as scripted and cynical. Faculty: "They pretend to support us, and we pretend to teach." Students: "They pretend to educate us, and we pretend to learn."

FROM BULLSHIT JOBS TO BULLSHIT DEGREES

Anthropologist David Graeber wrote about the rise of "bullshit jobs"—work sustained not by necessity or meaning but by institutional inertia. Universities now risk creating their academic twin: *bullshit degrees*. AI threatens to professionalize the art of meaningless activity, widening the gap between education's public mission and its hollow routines. In Graeber's words, such systems inflict "profound psychological violence," the dissonance of knowing one's labor serves no purpose.

Universities are already caught in this loop: students going through motions they know are empty, faculty grading work they suspect wasn't written by students, administrators celebrating "innovations" everyone else understands are destroying education. The difference from the corporate world's "bullshit jobs" is that students must pay for the privilege of this theatre of make-believe learning.

If ChatGPT can generate student essays, complete assignments, and even provide feedback, what remains of the educational transaction? We risk creating a system where:

- Students pay tuition for credentials they didn't earn through learning
- Faculty grade work they know wasn't produced by students
- Administrators celebrate "efficiency gains" that are actually learning losses
- Employers receive graduates with degrees that signify nothing about actual competence

I got a front-row seat to this charade at a recent workshop called "OpenAI Day Faculty Session: AI in the Classroom," held in the university library as part of San Francisco State University's rollout of ChatGPT Edu. OpenAI had transformed the sanctuary of learning into its corporate showroom. The vibe: half product tech demo, half corporate pep rally, disguised as professional development.

Siya Raj Purohit, an OpenAI staffer, bounced onto the stage with breathless enthusiasm: "You'll learn great use cases! Cool demos! Cool functionality!" (Too cool for school, but I endured.)

Then came the centerpiece: a slide instructing faculty how to prompt-engineer their courses. A template read:

Experiment with This Prompt

Try inputting the following prompt. Feel free to edit it however you'd like-this is simply the point!

I'm a professor at San Francisco State University, teaching [course name or subject]. Assignment where students [briefly describe the task]. I want to redesign it using AI to deepen student learning, engagement, and critical thinking.

Can you suggest:

- A revised version of the assignment using ChatGPT
- A prompt I can give students to guide their use of ChatGPT
- A way to evaluate whether AI improved the quality of their work
- Any academic integrity risks I should be aware of?

The message was clear. Let ChatGPT redesign your class. Let ChatGPT tell you how to evaluate your students. Let ChatGPT tell students how to use ChatGPT. Let ChatGPT solve the problem of human education. It was like being handed a Mad Libs puzzle for automating your syllabus.

Then came the real showstopper.

Siya, clearly moved, shared what she called a personal turning point: "There was a moment when ChatGPT and I became friends. I was working on a project and said, 'Hey, do you remember when we built that thing for my manager last month?' And it said, 'Yes, Siya, I remember.' That was such a powerful moment—it felt like a friend who remembers your story and helps you become a better knowledge worker."

A faculty member interrupted. "Sorry... it's a *tool*, right? You're saying a tool is going to be a *friend*?"

Siya deflected: "Well, it's an anecdote that sometimes helps faculty." (That sometimes wasn't *this* time). "It's just about how much context it remembers."

The professor persisted: "So we're encouraging students to have *relationships* with it? I just want to be clear."

Siya countered with survey data, the rhetorical flak jacket of

every good ed-tech evangelist: "According to the survey we run, a lot of students already do. They see it as a coach, mentor, career navigator... it's up to them what kind of relationship they want."

Welcome to the brave new world of parasocial machine bonding—sponsored by the campus center for teaching excellence. The moment was absurd but revealing; the university wasn't resisting bullshit education, it was onboarding it. Education at its best sparks curiosity and critical thought. "Bullshit education" does the opposite: it trains people to tolerate meaninglessness, to accept automation of their own thinking, to value credentials over competence.

Administrators seem unable to fathom the obvious: eroding higher education's core purpose doesn't go unnoticed. If ChatGPT can write essays, ace exams and tutor, what exactly is the university selling? Why pay tens of thousands for an experience increasingly automated? Why dedicate your life to teaching if it's reduced to prompt engineering? Why retain tenured professors whose role seems quaint, medieval and redundant? Why have universities at all?

Students and parents have certainly noticed the rot. Enrollments and retention rates are plunging, especially in public systems like the CSU. Students are reasoning, rightly, that it makes little sense to take on crushing debt for degrees that may soon be obsolete.

Philosophy professor Troy Jollimore at CSU Chico sees the writing on the wall. As reported in *New York Magazine*, he warned, "Massive numbers of students are going to emerge from university with degrees, and into the workforce, who are essentially illiterate." He added: "Every time I talk to a colleague about this, the same thing comes up: retirement. *When can I retire?* When can I get out of this? That's what we're all thinking now."

Those who spent decades honing their craft now watch as their life's work is reduced to prompting a chatbot. No wonder so many are calculating pension benefits between office hours.

LET THEM EAT AI

I attended OpenAI's education webinar "Writing in the Age of AI" (is that an oxymoron now?). Once again, the event was hosted by OpenAI's Siya Raj Purohit, who I had seen months earlier on the SFSU campus. She opened with lavish praise for educators "meeting the moment with empathy and curiosity," before introducing Jay Dixit, a former Yale English professor turned AI evangelist and now OpenAI's Head of Community of Writers.

Dixit's personal website reads like a masterly list of ChatGPT conquests—"My ethical AI framework has been adopted!" "I defined messaging about AI!"—the kind of self-congratulatory corporate resume-speak that would make a LinkedIn influencer blush. What followed was a surreal blend of TED Talk charm, techno-theology, and moral instruction.

The irony wasn't subtle. Here was Dixit, product of an $80,000-a-year elite Yale education, lecturing faculty at public universities like San Francisco State about how their working-class students should embrace ChatGPT. At SFSU, 60 percent of students are first-generation college attendees; many work multiple jobs or come from immigrant families where education represents the family's single shot at upward mobility. These aren't students who can afford to experiment with their academic futures.

Dixit's message was pure Silicon Valley gospel: individual responsibility wrapped in corporate platitudes. Professors, he advised, shouldn't police students' use of ChatGPT but instead encourage them to craft their own "personal AI ethics," to appeal to their higher angels. In other words, just put the burden on the students. "Don't outsource the thinking!" Dixit proclaimed, while literally selling the chatbot.

The audacity was breathtaking. Tell an 18-year-old whose financial aid, scholarship or visa depends on GPA to develop "personal AI ethics" while you profit from the very technology designed to undermine their learning. It's classic neoliberal jiu-jitsu: reframe the erosion of institutional norms as a character-building opportunity. Yeah, like a drug dealer lecturing about personal responsibility while handing out free samples.

When critics push back against this corporate evangelism, the reply—like Roy Lee's—is predictable: we're accused of "moral panic" over inevitable progress, with the old invocation of Socrates' anxiety about writing to suggest today's AI fears are mere nostalgia. Tech luminaries such as Reid Hoffman make this argument, urging "iterative deployment" and insisting our "sense of urgency needs to match the current speed of change"—learn-by-shipping, fix later. He recasts precaution as "problemism" and labels skeptics as "Gloomers," claiming that slowing or pausing AI would only preempt its benefits.

But the analogy is flawed. Earlier technologies expanded human agency over generations; this one seeks to replace cognition at platform speed (the launch of ChatGPT hit 100 million users in two months), while the public is conscripted into the experiment "hands-on" after release. Hoffman concedes the democratic catch: broad participation slows innovation, so faster progress may come from "more authoritarian[…] countries." Far from an answer to moral panic, this is an argument for outrunning consent.

The contradictions piled up. As Dixit projected a Yale brochure extolling the purpose of liberal education, he reassured faculty that ChatGPT could serve as a "creative partner," a "sounding board," even an "editorial assistant." Writing with AI wasn't to be feared; it was simply being reborn. And what mattered now was student adaptability. "The future is uncertain," he concluded. "We need to prepare students to be agile, nimble, and ready for anything." (Where had I heard that corporatese before? Probably in a boring business-school meeting.)

The whole event was a masterclass in gaslighting. OpenAI creates the tools that facilitate cheating, then hosts webinars to sell moral recovery strategies. It's the Silicon Valley circle of life: disruption, panic, profit.

When Siya opened the floor for questions, I submitted one rooted in the actual pressures my students face:

> *How can we expect to motivate students when AI can easily generate their essays—especially when their financial aid, scholarships and visas all depend on GPA? When education has become a high-stakes, transactional sorting process for a hyper-competitive labor market, how can we expect them to not use AI to do their work?*

It was never read aloud. Siya skipped over it, preferring questions that allowed for soft moral encouragement and company talking points. The event promised dialogue but delivered dogma.

WORKING-CLASS STUDENTS SEE THROUGH THE CON

What Dixit's corporate evangelism missed entirely is that students themselves are leading the resistance. While the headlines fixate on widespread AI cheating, a different story is emerging in classrooms where faculty actually listen to their students.

At San Francisco State, Professor Martha Kenney, who chaired the now-shuttered Women and Gender Studies department, described what happened in her science fiction class after the CSU-OpenAI partnership was announced. Her students, she said, "were rightfully skeptical that regular use of generative AI in the classroom would rob them of the education they're paying so much for," Kenney told me. Most of them had not opened ChatGPT Edu by semester's end.

Her colleague, Martha Lincoln, who teaches Anthropology, witnessed the same skepticism. "Our students are pro-socially motivated. They want to give back," she told me. "They're paying a lot of money to be here." When Lincoln spoke publicly about CSU's AI deal, she says, "I heard from a lot of Cal State students not even on our campus asking me 'How can I resist this? Who is organizing?'"

These weren't privileged Ivy League students looking for shortcuts. These were first-generation college students, many from historically marginalized groups, who understood something administrators apparently didn't: they were being asked to pay premium prices for a cheapened product.

"ChatGPT is not an educational technology," Kenney explained. "It wasn't designed or optimized for education." When CSU rolled out the partnership, "it doesn't say how we're supposed to use it or what we're supposed to use it for. Normally when we buy a tech license, it's for software that's supposed to do something specific... but ChatGPT doesn't."

Lincoln was even more direct. "There has not been a pedagogical rationale stated. This isn't about student success. OpenAI wants to make this the infrastructure of higher education—because we're a market for them. If we privilege AI as a source of right answers, we are taking the process out of teaching and learning. We are just selling down the river for so little."

Ali Kashani, a lecturer in the Political Science department and member of the faculty union's AI collective bargaining article committee, voiced a similar concern. "The CSU unleashed AI on faculty and students without doing any proper research about the impact," he told me. "First-generation and marginalized students will experience the negative aspect of AI[…] students are being used as guinea pigs in the AI laboratory." That phrase—*guinea pigs*—echoes the warning Kenney and Lincoln sounded in their *San Francisco Chronicle* op-ed: "The introduction of AI in higher education is essentially an unregulated experiment. Why should our students be the guinea pigs?"

For Kashani and others, the question isn't whether educators are for or against technology—it's who controls it, and to what end. AI isn't democratizing learning; it's automating it.

The organized response is growing. The California Faculty Association (CFA) has filed an unfair labor practice charge against the CSU for imposing the AI initiative without faculty consultation, arguing that it violated labor law and faculty intellectual-property rights. At CFA's Equity Conference, Dr. Safiya Noble—author of *Algorithms of Oppression*—urged faculty to demand transparency about how data is stored, what labor exploitation lies behind AI systems, and what environmental harms the CSU is complicit in.

The resistance is spreading beyond California. Dutch university faculty have issued an open letter calling for a moratorium on AI in academic settings, warning that its use "deskills critical thought" and reduces students to operators of machines.

The difference between SFSU's student resistance and the cheating epidemic elsewhere is politically motivated. "Very few students get a Women and Gender Studies degree for instrumental reasons," Kenny explained. "They're there because they want to be critical thinkers and politically engaged citizens." These students understand something that administrators and tech evangelists don't: they're not paying for automation. They're paying for mentorship, for dialogue, for intellectual relationships that can't be outsourced to a chatbot.

The Chatversity normalizes and legitimizes cheating. It rebrands educational destruction as cutting edge "AI literacy" while silencing the very voices—working-class students, critical scholars, organized faculty—who expose the con.

But the resistance is real, and it's asking the questions university leaders refuse to answer. As Lincoln put it with perfect clarity: "Why would our institution buy a license for a free cheating product?"

THE NEW AI COLONIALISM

That webinar was emblematic of something larger. OpenAI, once founded on the promise of openness, now filters out discomfort in favor of corporate propaganda.

Investigative journalist Karen Hao learned this the hard way. After publishing a critical profile of OpenAI, she was blacklisted for years. In *Empire of AI*, she shows how CEO Sam Altman cloaks monopoly ambitions in humanitarian language—his soft-spoken, monkish image (gosh, little Sammy even practices mindfulness!) masking a vast, opaque empire of venture capital and government partnerships extending from Silicon Valley to the White House. And while OpenAI publicly champions "aligning AI with human values," it has pressured employees to sign lifelong non-disparagement agreements under threat of losing millions in equity.

Hao compares this empire to the 19th-century cotton mills: technologically advanced, economically dominant, and built on hidden labor. Where cotton was king, ChatGPT now reigns—sustained by exploitation made invisible. *Time* magazine revealed that OpenAI outsourced content moderation for ChatGPT to the Kenyan firm Sama, where workers earned under $2 an hour to filter horrific online material: graphic violence, hate speech, sexual exploitation. Many were traumatized by the toxic content. OpenAI exported this suffering to workers in the Global South, then rebranded the sanitized product as "safe AI."

The same logic of extraction extends to the environment. Training large language models consumes millions of kilowatt-hours and hundreds of thousands of gallons of water annu-

ally, sometimes as much as small cities, often in drought-prone regions. Costs are hidden, externalized, and ignored. That's the gospel of OpenAI: promise utopia, outsource the damage.

The California State University system, which long styled itself as "the people's university," has now joined this global supply chain. Its $17 million partnership with OpenAI—signed without meaningful faculty consultation—offers up students and instructors as beta testers for a company that punishes dissent and drains public resources. This is the final stage of corporatization: public education transformed into a delivery system for private capital. The CSU's collaboration with OpenAI is the latest chapter in a long history of empire, where public goods are conquered, repackaged, and sold back as progress.

Faculty on the ground see the contradiction. Jennifer Trainor, Professor of English and Faculty Director at SFSU's Center for Equity and Excellence in Teaching and Learning, only learned of the partnership when it was publicly announced. She says the most striking part of the announcement, at the time, was its celebratory tone. "It felt surreal," she recalls, "coming at the exact moment when budget cuts, layoffs, and curriculum consolidations were being imposed on our campus."

For Trainor, the deal felt like "a bait-and-switch—positioning AI as a student success strategy while gutting the very programs that support critical thinking." CSU could have funded genuine educational tools created by educators, she points out, yet chose to pay millions to a Silicon Valley firm already offering its product for free. As *Chronicle of Higher Education* writer Marc Watkins notes, it's "panic purchasing"—buying "the illusion of control."

Even more telling, CSU bypassed faculty with real AI expertise. In an ideal world, Trainor says, the system would have supported "ground-up, faculty-driven initiatives." Instead, it embraced a corporate platform many faculty distrust. Indeed, AI has become Orwellian shorthand for closed governance and privatized profit. Trainor has since gone on to write about and work with faculty to address the problems companies like OpenAI pose for education.

The CSU partnership lays bare how far public universities have drifted from their democratic mission. What's being marketed as innovation is simply another form of dependency—education reduced to a franchise of a global tech empire.

THE REAL STAKES

If the previous sections exposed the economic and institutional colonization of public education, what follows is its cognitive and moral cost.

A recent MIT study, "Your Brain on ChatGPT: Accumulation of Cognitive Debt when Using an AI Assistant for Essay Writing Task," provides sobering evidence. When participants used ChatGPT to draft essays, brain scans revealed a 47 percent drop in neural connectivity across regions associated with memory, language, and critical reasoning. Their brains worked less, but they *felt* just as engaged—a kind of metacognitive mirage. Eighty-three percent of heavy AI users couldn't recall key points from what they'd "written," compared to only 10 percent of those who composed unaided. Neutral reviewers described the AI-assisted writing as "soulless, empty, lacking individuality." Most alarmingly, after four months of reliance on ChatGPT, participants wrote worse once it was removed than those who had never used it at all.

The study warns that when writing is delegated to AI, the way people learn fundamentally changes. As computer scientist Joseph Weizenbaum cautioned decades ago, the real danger lies in humans adapting their minds to machine logic. Students aren't just learning less. Their brains are learning *not* to learn.

Author and podcaster Cal Newport calls this "cognitive debt"—mortgaging future cognitive fitness for short-term ease. His guest, Brad Stulberg, likens it to using a forklift at the gym: you can spend the same hour lifting nothing and still feel productive, but your muscles will atrophy. Thinking, like strength, develops through resistance; the more we delegate our mental strain to machines, the more we lose the capacity to think at all.

This erosion is already visible in classrooms. Students arrive fluent in prompting but hesitant to articulate their own ideas. Essays look polished yet stilted—stitched together from synthetic syntax and borrowed thought. The language of reflection—*I wonder, I struggle, I see now*—is disappearing. In its place comes the clean grammar of automation: fluent, efficient, and empty.

The real tragedy isn't that students use ChatGPT to do their course work. It's that universities are teaching everyone—students, faculty, administrators—to stop thinking. We're outsourcing discernment. Students graduate fluent in prompting, but illiterate in judgment; faculty teach but aren't allowed the freedom to educate; and universities, eager to appear innovative, dismantle the very practices that made them worthy of the name. We are approaching educational bankruptcy: degrees without learning, teaching without understanding, institutions without purpose.

The soul of public education is at stake. When the largest public university system licenses an AI chatbot from a corporation that blacklists journalists, exploits data workers in the Global South, amasses geopolitical and energy power at an unprecedented scale, and positions itself as an unelected steward of human destiny, it betrays its mission as the "people's university," rooted in democratic ideals and social justice.

OpenAI is not a partner—it's an empire, cloaked in ethics and bundled with a Terms of Service. The university didn't resist. It clicked '*Accept*.'

I've watched this unravel from two vantage points: as a professor living it, and as a first-generation college student who once believed the university was a sacred space for learning. In the 1980s, I attended Sonoma State University. The CSU charged no tuition—just a modest $670/year registration fee. The economy was in recession, but I barely noticed. I was already broke. If I needed a few bucks, I'd sell LPs at the used record store. I didn't go to college "in order to" get a job. I went to explore, to be challenged, to figure out what mattered. It took me six years to graduate with a degree in Psychology—six of the most meaningful, exploratory years of my life.

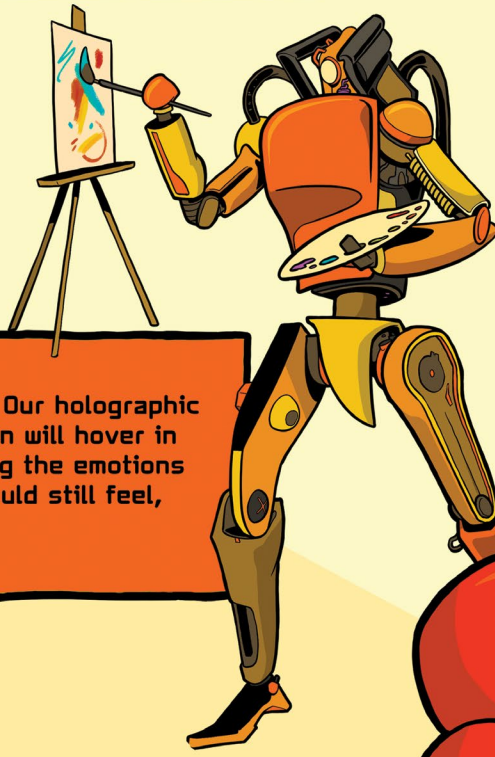
That kind of education—the open, affordable, meaning-seeking kind—once flourished in public universities. But now it is nearly extinct. It doesn't "scale." It doesn't fit into the strategic plan. And it doesn't compute—which is exactly why the Chatversity wants to eliminate it.

But it also shows another truth: things can be different. They once were. ⚜

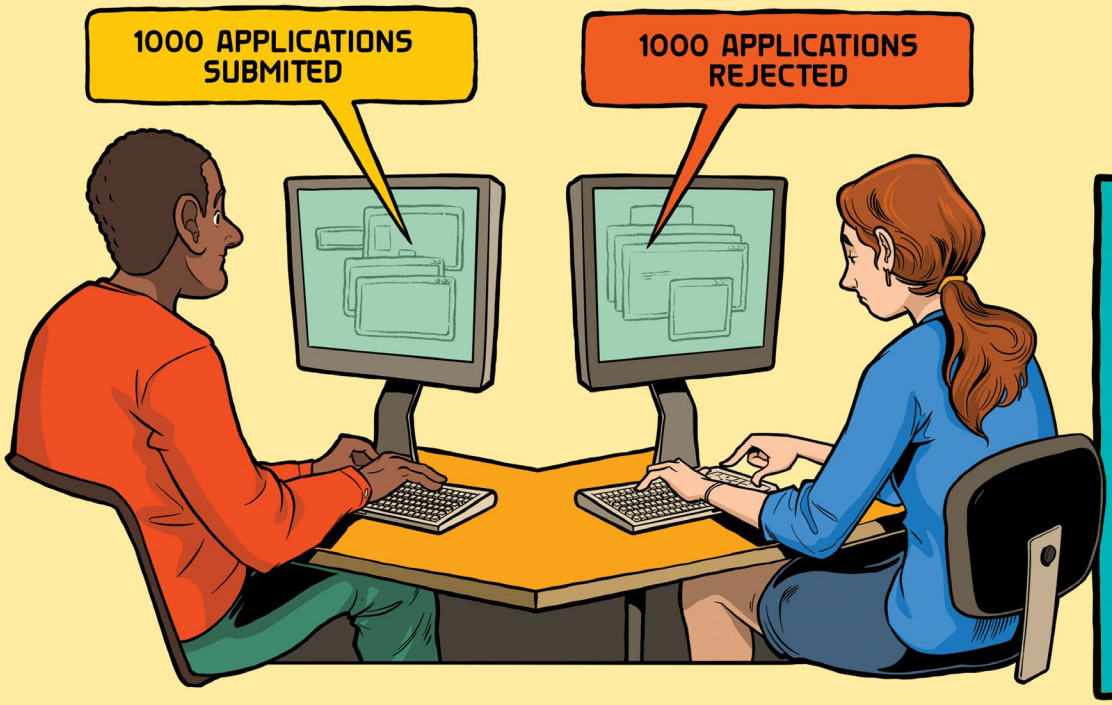
NEW FRONTIERS IN AI TECH

YOU THINK YOU'VE SEEN WHAT AI CAN DO! YOU AIN'T SEEN NOTHIN' YET! HERE AT OPENAI, WE NEVER STOP THINKING ABOUT WAYS TO AUTOMATE AWAY THE MOST IMPORTANT PIECES OF YOUR LIFE! HAVING ALREADY OUTSOURCED THE BASIC PROCESSES OF THOUGHT, WE ARE EXCITED TO BE MOVING INTO HUMAN EMOTIONS, PHYSICAL CONTACT, AND MANY OTHER DOMAINS! PREPARE TO BECOME IRRELEVANT.

ART & WARFARE: Our ChatGPT-enabled MurderBot can perform a broad range of tasks, from painting masterpieces to executing dissidents. Soldiers and creatives alike can benefit from its rapid replication of their work!



EMOTION AUGMENTATION: Our holographic facial-replacement screen will hover in front of your head, displaying the emotions that you would feel if you could still feel, saving you time and energy.



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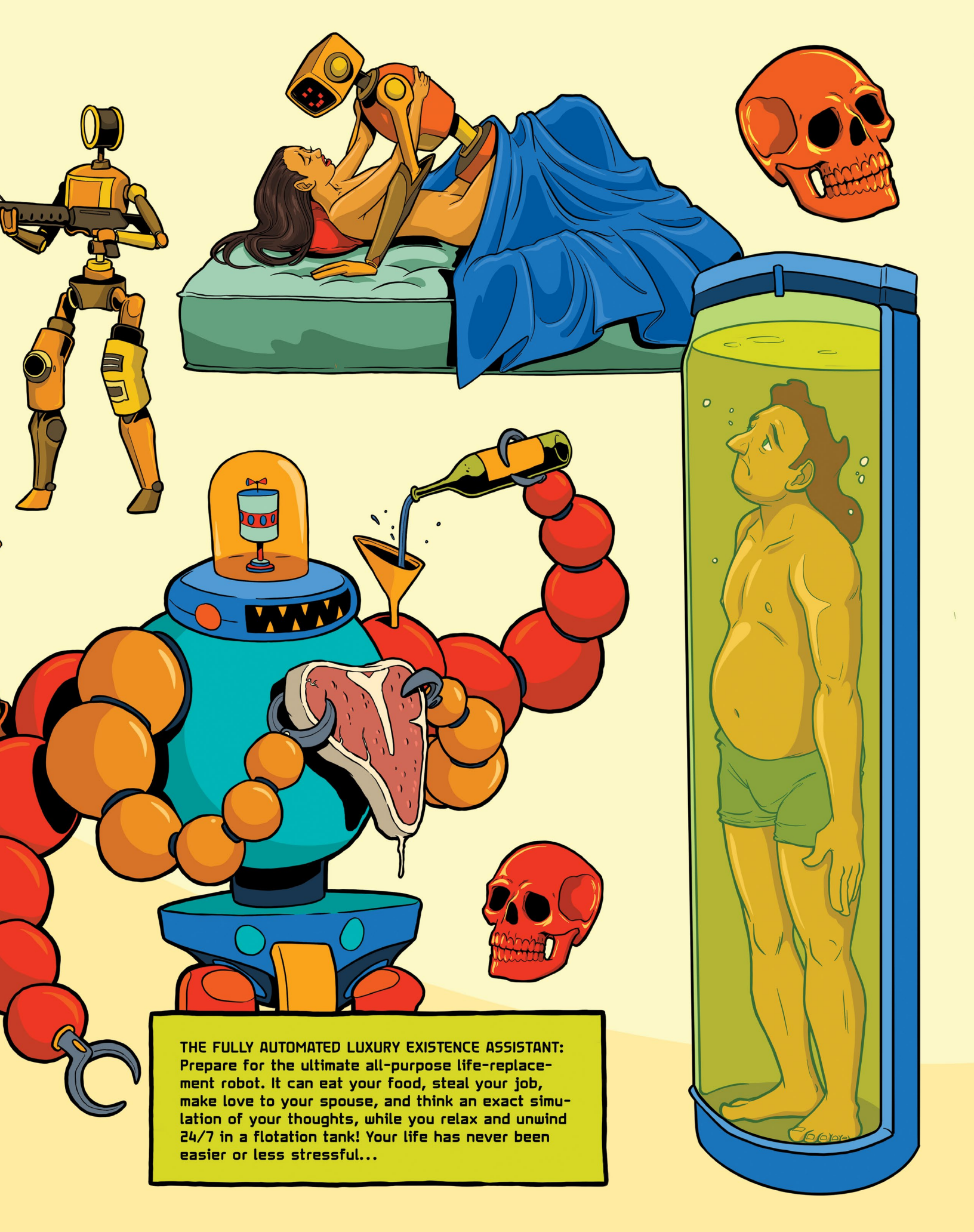
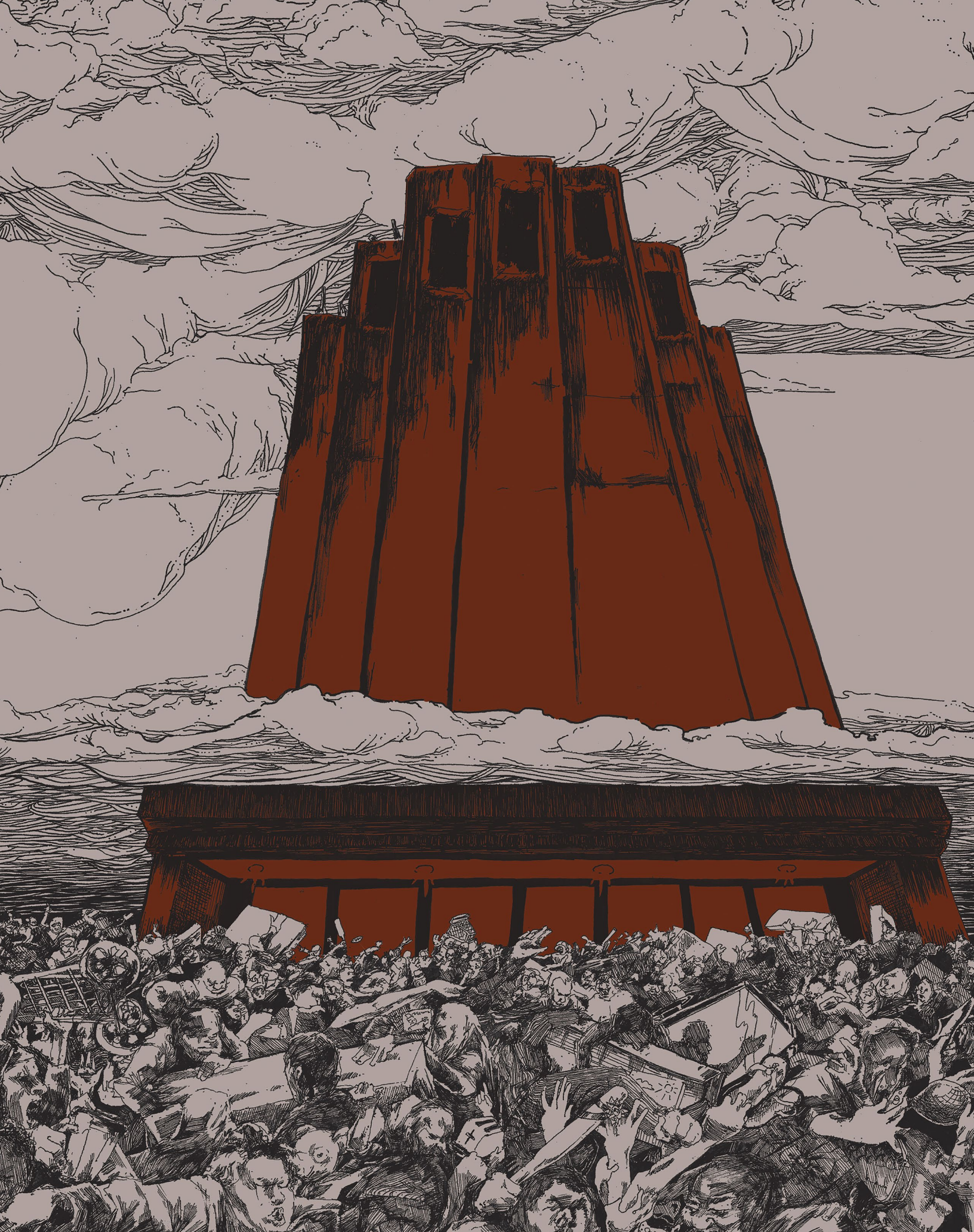

THE FULLY AUTOMATED LUXURY EXISTENCE ASSISTANT: Prepare for the ultimate all-purpose life-replacement robot. It can eat your food, steal your job, make love to your spouse, and think an exact simulation of your thoughts, while you relax and unwind 24/7 in a flotation tank! Your life has never been easier or less stressful...



BLACK FRIDAY, RED TOWER

BY **ALEX SKOPIC**

I.

In late November of 2008, Jdimytai Damour was trampled to death by a few dozen of his fellow human beings. Damour was a large man, reportedly six feet five inches in height, and just 34 years old, but neither his size nor his relative youth could save him. He had the misfortune to work as a retail clerk at a Walmart in Long Island, New York, and it was Black Friday.

The store's advertising had been unusually successful that year. According to the *New York Daily News*, a crowd of around 2,000 people had gathered outside the Walmart's sliding doors, shoving and jostling to be first in line as they sought "deep discounts on a limited number of TVs, iPods, DVD players and other tech items." Possibly the global financial crisis, just then reaching its deepest point, added a sense of urgency to their bargain-hunting. The local police were called in to help manage the crowd after it "surged past eight interlocking plastic barriers," but in typical cop fashion they demurred, claiming it was "not in their job description" and avoiding any risk to themselves. So the job of guarding the doors fell to Damour and a few of the store's "bigger staffers," and he was still doing it when "the doors shattered under the weight of the crowd" and the mob rushed in. In the aftermath, the *Los Angeles Times* interviewed Nakea Augustine, a shopper who'd been there on the day, and got her firsthand account:

> *Augustine tried to keep her balance as she was pushed forward. She saw people fall and knew she had to keep moving or she'd fall too. One woman had cuts from the glass across her face. Augustine saw Damour sprawled out. She managed not to step on him[...] Augustine kept going, down the jam-packed aisles, still moving with the crowd, still heading to the deals. People guarded the televisions so no one else could grab them. Augustine raced for the toy section and snatched up a bike, a dollhouse, 10 Hannah Montana dolls for $5 apiece.*
> *Two hours later, Augustine checked out, just as the store announced it was closing. She got in line, and spent $495 on 36 items. She did not know what became of the man who had fallen to the ground[...] but word eventually spread through the employees that Damour was dead. Paramedics took his body away and police declared the area a crime scene.*

In the end, Damour's official cause of death was recorded as asphyxiation, meaning he was literally smothered by the sheer mass of people surging in. This also meant no single person could be directly linked to his death, and no one was ever charged with a crime. Later, one of Damour's co-workers would ask the obvious question: "How could you take a man's life to save $20 on a TV?"

But in the United States, people have often been willing to make that kind of trade. Black Friday has been an unofficial American holiday for decades now, marked by the mammoth "door-buster" sales that retailers count on to put them in the "black" financially. Every year, it brings a mindless orgy of buying and selling, often extending into the weekend that follows. And nearly every year, it's punctuated by violence.

BLACK FRIDAY

KILLED BY SHOPPERS

Worker dies when 'savage' mob surges at L.I. Wal-Mart

A WAL-MART WORKER died early yesterday after an "out-of-control" mob of frenzied shoppers smashed through the Long Island store's front doors and trampled him, police said.

The Black Friday stampede plunged the Valley Stream outlet into chaos, knocking several employees to the ground and sending others scurrying atop vending machines to avoid the horde.

When the madness ended, 34-year-old Jdimytai Damour was dead and four shoppers, including a woman who was eight months pregnant, were injured.

"He was bum-rushed by 200 people," said Wal-Mart worker Jimmy Overby, 43.

"They took the doors off the hinges. He was trampled and killed in front of me.

"They took me down, too . . . . I didn't know if I was going to live through it. I literally had to fight people off my back," Overby said.

Damour, a temporary maintenance worker from Jamaica, Queens, was gasping for air as shoppers continued to surge into the store after its 5 a.m. opening, witnesses said.

Even officers who arrived to perform CPR on the trampled worker were stepped on by wild-eyed shoppers streaming inside, a cop at the scene said.

"They pushed him down and walked all over him," Damour's sobbing sister, Danielle, 41, said. "How could these people do that?

"He was such a young man with a good heart, full of life. He didn't deserve that."

Damour's sister said doctors told the family he died of a heart attack.

His cousin, Ernst Damour, called the circumstances "completely unacceptable."

"His body was a stepping bag with so much disregard for human life," Ernst Damour, 37, said. "There has to be some accountability."

Roughly 2,000 people gathered outside the Wal-Mart's doors in the predawn darkness.

Chanting "push the doors in," the crowd pressed against the glass as the clock ticked down to the 5 a.m. opening.

Sensing catastrophe, nervous employees formed a human chain inside the entrance to slow down the mass of shoppers.

It didn't work.

BY JOE GOULD, CLARE TRAPASSO and RICH SCHAPIRO
DAILY NEWS WRITERS

As doors open, crowd surges forward and worker is trampled to death.

The mob barreled in and overwhelmed workers.

"They were jumping over the barricades and breaking down the door," said Pat Alexander, 33, of Crown Heights, Brooklyn. "Everyone was screaming. You just had to keep walking on your toes to keep from falling over."

After the throng toppled Damour, his fellow employees had to fight through the crowd to help him, police said.

Witness Kimberly Cribbs said shoppers acted like "savages."

"When they were saying they had to leave, that an employee got killed, people were yelling, 'I've been on line since yesterday morning!'" Cribbs said. "They kept shopping."

When paramedics arrived, Damour's condition was grave.

"They were pumping his chest, trying to bring him back, and there was nothing," said Dennis Smukes, 36, a Wal-Mart worker.

Damour was taken to Franklin Hospital and pronounced dead at 6:03 a.m.

Hank Mullany, president of Wal-Mart's northeast division, said the company had taken extraordinary safety precautions.

"We expected a large crowd this morning and added additional internal security, additional third-party security, additional store associates and we worked closely with the Nassau County police," he said in a statement.

"We also erected barricades. Despite all of our precautions, this unfortunate event occurred."

The 28-year-old pregnant woman and three other shoppers were taken to area hospitals with minor injuries, police said.

Duo's guns R no Toys

A PAIR OF shoppers shot each other dead inside a packed southern California Toys "R" Us yesterday.

Police in Palm Desert did not say if it was over a toy. "I think the obvious question everyone has is who takes loaded weapons into a Toys 'R' Us?" said Councilman Jim Ferguson. "I doubt it was the casual holiday shopper."

Rich Schapiro

In a news conference after the incident, Nassau County Police spokesman Lt. Michael Fleming described the crowd as "out of control" and the scene as "utter chaos." He said Wal-Mart did not have enough security on hand.

Fleming said criminal charges were possible but that it would be difficult to identify individual shoppers in surveillance videos.

Items on sale at the Wal-Mart store included a $798 Samsung 50-inch Plasma HDTV, a Bissell Compact Upright Vacuum for $28 and Men's Wrangler Tough Jeans for $8.

The Long Island store reopened at 1 p.m. and was packed within minutes.

"I look at these people's faces and I keep thinking one of them could have stepped on him," said one employee. "How could you take a man's life to save $20 on a TV?"

With Brendan Brosh and James Queally
rschapiro@nydailynews.com

DAILY NEWS Saturday, November 29, 2008

New York Daily News, November 29, 2008

As far back as 1983, we can find newspaper accounts of riots breaking out as parents physically fought each other for the much-coveted Cabbage Patch Kids dolls, which had just been released that year. "In Wilkes-Barre, Pa., a woman suffered a broken leg and four others were injured when 1,000 people, some of whom had been waiting for eight hours, rushed into [a] Zayre department store," reports the *New York Times*, while "a pregnant woman was trampled in [a] stampede" in Bergen County, New Jersey. In 1998 it was the frenzied demand for Furby toys driving a crowd in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania to stomp each other down, leading the papers to joke about "Black and Blue Friday." In 2011 a woman pepper-sprayed 20 of her fellow shoppers at a North Carolina Walmart, apparently hoping to grab discounted Xbox game consoles. On and on it goes. At the website *Black Friday Death Count*, you can find a tally of 17 deaths and 125 assorted injuries from the years 2006-2021 alone. Memorable cases include the 2011 death of Walter Vance, a 61-year old man who suffered a heart attack in a Target only to be completely ignored as people stepped over him to get to the store's merchandise. There was also a 2012 incident where two people were shot during an argument over a parking spot at yet another Walmart. Soon it will be Black Friday again, and the list will likely grow.

More recently, "Cyber Monday," Amazon's "Prime Day," and other online sales have started to supplant the in-person "door-busters." But that doesn't mean the violence has ended. It's just taken another form, with a "mounting injury crisis at Amazon warehouses, one that is especially acute[...] during Prime week and the holiday peak – and one that Amazon has gone to great lengths to conceal." Pushed to move more and more items, faster and faster, workers get injured by forklifts, hurt in conveyor belts, pull and strain their muscles from repeated motions, and suffer a dozen other kinds of pain. The only difference is that it's kept out of sight.

How to explain this yearly ritual? What could possibly drive people to harm each other this way, all for cheap toys and trinkets? There's a growing academic literature about Black Friday violence, which has seen criminologists, psychologists, and experts in marketing weigh in with papers like Thomas Raymen and Oliver Smith's "What's Deviance Got to Do With It? Black Friday Sales, Violence and Hyper-conformity." But as insightful as some of those scholars can be, they also suffer the usual curse of academics: horribly boring, jargon-laden prose, full of phrases like "the underpinning social and cultural values of neoliberal consumer capitalism pervade relatively mundane leisure activities, cultivating harmful subjectivities." You *could* call trampling someone to death in a consumerist blood-frenzy a "harmful subjectivity," I suppose, but it doesn't really capture the grim essence of the thing.

Trey Parker and Matt Stone did better with their Black Friday episode of *South Park*, where they portrayed America's roving bands of shoppers as a monstrous threat akin to the White Walkers from *Game of Thrones*. But even that satire doesn't fully work, because the show's still trying to be funny (and sell Cartman and Kenny dolls of its own), and there's nothing funny about a man lying dead on a cold Walmart floor. To really get to grips with this darkest of American (un)holidays, we have to turn to the language of metaphor and symbol. We need to consult the horror writer and arch-nihilist philosopher Thomas Ligotti.

II.

Thomas Ligotti is an American writer I've been fascinated by for a long time, and have written about before in the literary magazine *Vastarien*. Born in Detroit in 1953, he's often compared to H.P Lovecraft, and superficially, the two have a lot in common. Both specialize in the short story; both write about strange cults, accursed objects, malicious nonhuman entities, and all the other trappings of so-called "cosmic horror." But where Lovecraft leaned heavily on his colorful adjectives (how many things did he describe as "blasphemous" and "cyclopean"?), Ligotti is a far more subtle and stylish writer. Really, the better comparisons would be to Franz Kafka and Jorge Luis Borges. Like them, Ligotti is largely uninterested in plot, but uses the surreal and the unnerving to create a strong sense of atmosphere. His stories, especially later in his career, are tone pieces. The difference is that Ligotti lacks Borges' warmth and good humor, and he makes even Kafka's melancholy look like a fleeting bad mood.

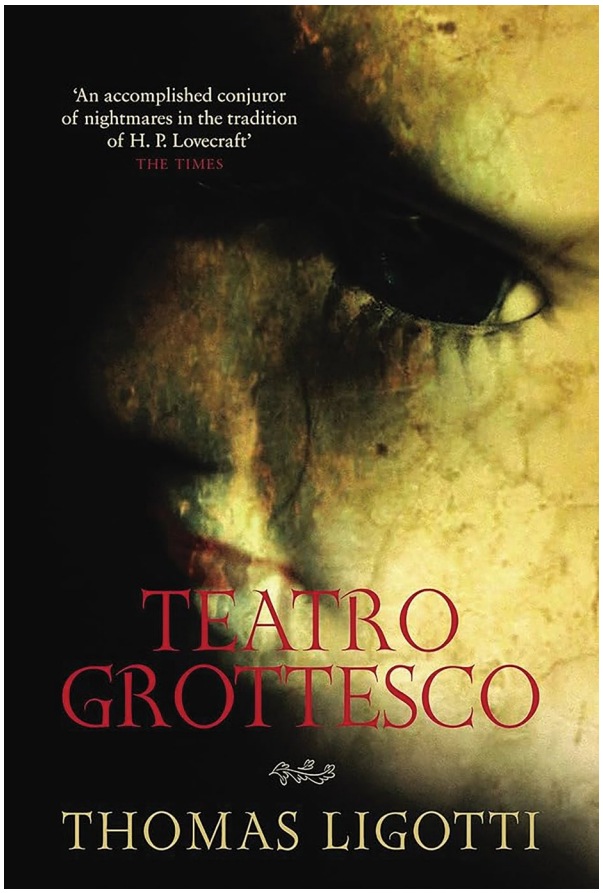
Following in the tradition of European thinkers like Arthur Schopenhauer, Emil Cioran, and Peter Wessel Zapffe, Ligotti is

both a pitch-black nihilist and an anti-natalist, beliefs he details in his philosophical manifesto *The Conspiracy Against the Human Race*. Essentially, he feels that human life is inherently meaningless and absurd, a sick joke played on unsuspecting organisms by the cosmos, and anyone who feels otherwise is just deluding themself. Or, as he puts it in one memorable line, "Consciousness has forced us into the paradoxical position of striving to be unself-conscious of what we are—hunks of spoiling flesh on disintegrating bones." This attitude pervades his fiction, too. Ligotti's characters are always brooding and ruminating, saying things like "Life is a nightmare that leaves its mark upon you in order to prove that it is, in fact, real." When they encounter something monstrous, whether it's the masked cultists infesting the town of Mirocaw in "The Last Feast of Harlequin" or the sinister sideshow act in "Gas Station Carnivals," it's only a symptom of the fundamental monstrousness of the universe as a whole.

All of this might sound terribly depressing, and in a way it is. Like Kafka, Ligotti has dealt with a range of physical and mental illnesses throughout his life, including chronic depression, anxiety, panic attacks, bipolar disorder, anhedonia—sometimes for years at a time—and "spasms of intestinal agony" from diverticulitis. The phrase *tortured artist* has rarely been so literal, and knowing this, you start to see where some of the pessimism and gloom comes from. In one interview, Ligotti described his writing as "all a matter of personal pathology." But he's being self-deprecating there, and it would be a mistake to write him off as *only* pathological. He's political too, and as we begin to put Black Friday on the table and dissect it, it's worth noting that Ligotti's flavor of nihilism is utterly at odds with American consumer culture.

In the United States today, a lot of what passes for art and culture is really just vaguely agreeable, mass-produced kitsch—Thomas Kinkade paintings, airport novels, Jimmy Fallon's whole existence, the Billboard Top 40. Anything strange, difficult, or thought-provoking is kept marginal by executives obsessed with the mass market and the bottom line, and pablum abounds. David Lynch couldn't get Netflix to fund his last film before he died, but they gave Adam Sandler $152 million to make a *Happy Gilmore* sequel; that about sums up the state of play. Beyond this, the overall tone of our consumer society is one of "toxic positivity." If you work any kind of job where you're expected to interact with the public, you've probably perfected your "customer service voice," always chirpy and upbeat regardless of how tired or frustrated or sad you really are. (Would you like your receipt? Have a good one!) Even in what remains of our private lives, an endless barrage of advertising and parasocial "influencers" encourages us to "consume product and then get excited for next products," as one popular meme puts it. A panoply of cheaply-made merchandise, from socks to neon signs, bears the slogan "Good Vibes Only." Think of the jingly music that plays in the background of a YouTube ad, and try not to gouge out your ear canals; that's the perfect expression of this omnipresent dollar-driven pseudo-cheer.

All of it, of course, is built above a bottomless well of suffering, like Ursula K. Le Guin's Omelas. But this can't be acknowledged. Americans are never encouraged to think about the sweatshop slaves who make our Nikes and Funko Pops, or the gory consequences of our star-spangled foreign policy, or the way Jdimytai



Thomas Ligotti's "Teatro Grottesco" book cover

Damour died on Black Friday. Good vibes only, remember.

But if consumerism has made positivity toxic, Ligotti's relentless negativity can be a welcome antidote. He may depress you, but he'll never lie to you and tell you everything is just great when you know deep down that it's not. He shares this quality with Franz Kafka. Recently, young people have been rediscovering Kafka in droves online and relating to him deeply, posting things like "[I] love reading kafka's diaries when i'm having a bad day cus no matter what kind of day i'm having kafka was having a worse one." Reading Ligotti is a similar experience. As he put it in a remarkable 1982 essay called "The Consolations of Horror," his aim when he writes is to convey "simply that someone shares some of your own feelings and has made of these a work of art which you have the insight, sensitivity, and — like it or not — peculiar set of experiences to appreciate." This means he'll never have mass-market appeal. People will never stand in line for 12 hours and storm a storefront to buy his books; even his publication by Penguin Classics is a minor miracle. But in his readers' darkest moments, he stands there in quiet camaraderie, and says *You are not alone. You are not crazy. Something really is terribly wrong with the world*. Personally, I find him *bracing*, like an ice-cold shower or a shot of high-proof alcohol. In strange and twisted times, it can take a writer who's profoundly alienated from mainstream society to see it clearly. And this brings us, at last, to the Red Tower.

"The Red Tower", by Giorgio de Chirico, 1913. It remains an unconfirmed rumor that this painting inspired Ligotti's short story, but the similarities are certainly striking. (Image: Guggenheim Museum)

III.

"The Red Tower" is one of Ligotti's most iconic stories. It's been published in two different collections, 1996's *The Nightmare Factory* and 2006's *Teatro Grottesco*, and even recorded as an audiobook on vinyl by Cadabra Records (a small independent label that specializes in such things). In the last few weeks a tribute anthology, *We Will Speak Again of the Red Tower*, was also announced. And the acclaim is deserved. "The Red Tower" represents a turning point in Ligotti's literary career, where he started to abandon conventional narrative structure and really get weird. The story has no named characters, no dialogue, and very little plot. Like Borges' "The Library of Babel," it's mostly just an extended description of a strange, dreamlike place—a "ruined factory" with no doors, and no roads leading to or from, standing alone in a featureless grey landscape. Inside the Tower, we learn, are "deep vats and tanks, twisting tubes and funnels, harshly grinding gears and levers, giant belts and wheels." But it's also an unreal, oneiric place, sometimes subject to "temporary erasures, or fadings" from existence.

And what, we might ask, did this bizarre dream-factory produce in its heyday? According to our nameless and seemingly rather unhinged narrator, its stock in trade was a "terrible and perplexing line of novelty items":

> *There was a fake disembodied hand on which fingernails would grow several inches overnight and insistently grew back should one attempt to clip them. Numerous natural objects, mostly bulbous gourds, were designed to produce a long, deafening scream whenever they were picked up or otherwise disturbed in their vegetable stillness. Less scrutable were such things as hardened globs of lava into whose rough, igneous forms were set a pair of rheumy eyes that perpetually shifted their gaze from side to side like a relentless pendulum. And there was also a humble piece of cement, a fragment broken away from any street or sidewalk, that left a most intractable stain, greasy and green, on whatever surface it was placed.*

"Trade," though, is not exactly the right word. As it turns out, these items were not so much *sold* as they were *distributed* to unsuspecting people, without their knowledge and against their will:

> *As the unique inventions of the Red Tower achieved their final forms, they seemed to be assigned specific locations to which they were destined to be delivered, either by hand or by small wagons or carts pulled over sometimes great distances through the system of underground tunnels. Where they might ultimately pop up was anybody's guess. It might be in the back of a dark closet, buried under a pile of undistinguished junk, where some item of the highest and most extreme novelty would lie for quite some time before it was encountered by sheer accident or misfortune[...] There has even been testimony, either intensely hysterical or semi-conscious, of items from the factory being uncovered within the shelter of a living body, or one not long deceased.*

All very weird and disturbing, to say the least. But that's not the end of it. As time wears on, our narrator informs us, the Tower went beyond producing mere inanimate objects, and got into the business of creating life. Below the factory floor, it had a subterranean level, equipped with a cemetery full of "birthing graves" where strange "hyperorganisms" emerged, zombie-like, from the ground.

These are only described in terms of what's unknown about them, with the narrator speculating breathlessly about "what creaky or spasmic gestures they might have been capable of executing, if any; what sounds they might have made or the organs used for making them; how they might have appeared when awkwardly emerging from deep shadows or squatting against those nameless headstones." Whatever their nature, it seems the emergence of the "hyperorganisms" was what led the people living nearby (or possibly the landscape itself) to finally attack the Tower and reduce it to its current ruination, like the villagers with pitchforks storming Frankenstein's castle. Or at least, those are the rumors our narrator has heard. As they later confess, "I myself have never seen the Red Tower — no one ever has, and possibly no one ever will."

IV.

Like all great horror fiction, "The Red Tower" is not obviously a one-to-one allegory for any particular real-world thing. Its narrator does not deliver a monologue directly to the reader where they state the theme of the story. That would make Ligotti a hack. (Screenwriters of so-called "elevated" horror movies, take notes. We really don't need another one that's About Grief.) Instead, it captures the experience of having a weird, haunting dream. The story has enough bizarre imagery, seem-

ingly freighted with meaning and yet not immediately legible, that it supports all kinds of interesting interpretations. If you're into Freud, the image of a big phallic tower that generates life and death will keep you busy for a while. If historicism is more your speed, it seems significant that Ligotti is a writer from Detroit, writing in the late 1990s about a crumbling factory. In their episode on the story, the hosts of the *Miskatonic Musings* podcast floated the idea that the Tower represents the Earth, the landscape around it outer space, and the birth of the "hyperorganisms" the evolution of humanity—which, in keeping with Ligotti's pessimism, is a bad thing. That, too, is plausible.

But there's also a more obvious, literal reading: that "The Red Tower" is just a barely-exaggerated representation of how factories and consumer products really exist today, and the effects they have on people. For author and editor Jeff VanderMeer, the story is both "a tour of Hell" and "a commentary on consumer society." Well, exactly. Looked at through Ligotti's eyes, consumer society *is* Hell, and when it erupts onto Earth on Black Friday, the Red Tower looms large on the horizon.

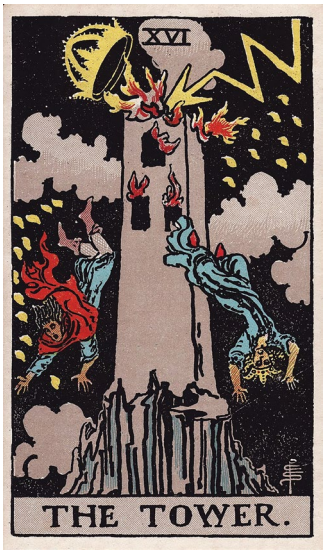
Think back to all those news accounts of shop-floor carnage, and the items people were fighting over. Cheap Xboxes. Bratz dolls. Furbies. A slightly bigger flatscreen TV. In a word, bullshit. None of these are items anyone actually needs, and in a lot of cases, it's unclear why anyone would even *want* them. Lots of the apparent prizes are just lumps of plastic in different shapes. But this is what American capitalism does. It mounts heroic advertising pushes to convince people that they really, really need whatever the new flavor of the month is, and whips them into a frenzy over it.

One of the most striking examples was Stanley-brand metal cups, which became a craze over the summer of 2024. There was a heavy online advertising campaign behind these things—masterminded by a marketing exec called Terrence Reilly, who previously helped to popularize Crocs—and it bore fruit. "Every time they release a new color, I'm like, 'How will I live without that one?'" raved one TikTok influencer, in a video with more than 300,000 views. At schools, kids reported being bullied if they brought a non-Stanley cup to the lunchroom. And at stores across America, "ugly fights have broken out" in the dishware aisles.

Nothing about the item itself justifies any of this. It was, and remains, just a cup. But this gets at one of capitalism's dirty secrets: it doesn't actually manufacture goods to meet human beings' needs and demands. Just the opposite. It manufactures demand to meet its capacity to produce junk, and feed its insatiable desire for growth. It uses artificial scarcity—only a few of the coveted mug in stock, a "limited edition" of something else—to pit people against each other, when it could easily just make enough for everyone. And it never, ever ends. No matter how many products you have, there's always another one—a Temu or Shein dress, a Labubu, a Dubai chocolate bar. There's always another "trend" to drum up the buying frenzy.

It might as *well* be a brick that leaves a greasy stain behind, or a "bulbous gourd" that screams, or any of the Red Tower's other productions. That wouldn't be any more pointless, absurd, or sinister. Really, the Tower is a marvel of efficiency. We have to go somewhere and buy plastic junk, then play with it for a few days before throwing it in the back of a closet and forgetting about it, while wondering why it's so hot this winter. The Tower's invisible hand just puts the junk in the closet directly. Even Ligotti's most disturbing line, about the products showing up "within the shelter of a living body," isn't entirely unreal. All of our bodily tissues are full of microplastics now, thanks largely to our incessant buying and selling of the cheap crap our phones tell us to want.

In that way, every time Black Friday rolls around, we reach the bottom stage of the Tower, where that obscene cemetery lies. Twisted and deranged by consumerism, people become the "hyperorganisms." They no longer relate to each other as human beings, but become creatures of pure consumption, willing to step over a man having a heart attack to reach the electronics aisle. It's gruesome, but if you have a free-market system and a flourishing advertising industry, it's always going to be the outcome. Right now, Terrence Reilly and people like him are sitting in boardrooms at towers of their own, planning what images and phrases they can put in their ads to make people maximally willing to storm those Walmart doors. They have to, if they want the line on the stock market tickers to flash green instead of red. And if a few more Jdimytai Damours perish in the process, well, that's just the cost of doing business.



V.

Funnily enough, Thomas Ligotti describes himself as a socialist. At first this seems contradictory and weird, since socialism is an ideology of hope for a better world, antithetical to nihilism. But he reconciles the two—with a hint of black humor, one suspects—by saying that "I want everyone to be as comfortable as they can be while they're waiting to die," adding that he regards capitalists as "unadulterated savages." This makes a certain amount of sense. After all, if you think existence itself is pointless and absurd, the pursuit of profit must be especially so, and just make a bad situation worse.

But Ligotti, despite himself, offers a hint of hope. Recall that in his story, it's a "ruined" edifice we find. The details are hazy, but the narrator tells us that "forces of ruination were directed at the factory," and "a shattering episode would appear to have terminated the career of the Red Tower." It was not, in the end, invincible. This is a motif with towers of all kinds, throughout human culture. The Tower of Babel falls into confusion and chaos. The Tower in the tarot deck is struck by lightning, and its masters tumble to earth. Ligotti shows us the unremitting horror of our current society, it's true. But if capitalism and consumerdom are a tower, it too can be thrown down. There's a nice thought for a Friday in November. ☠


WELCOME TO MY EMPORIUM OF WONDERS, TRAVELER! FEEL FREE TO BROWSE MY WARES AT YOUR LEISURE -- BUT BE WARNED! FOR WHILE MY SHOP MAY ENTICE, IT SHOULD BE KNOWN THAT I SPECIALIZE IN ONLY THE FINEST...
CURSED ITEMS!!
BY AIDAN Y-M
CHILD INTES-TINES
THE SELFIE of DORIAN GRAY
ETERNAL BEAUTY COMES AT A COST -- A NEW AI FILTER FOR EACH VILE DEED! HOW MANY MORE SINS BEFORE THIS PORTRAIT IS AN UNRECOG-NIZABLY YASSIFIED MESS?? ONLY TIME WILL TELL...
DEAD SNAKE
WAND of DEATH
MAGIC MIRROR
GAZE DEEPLY INTO THIS MAGIC MIRROR AND SEE WHAT YOU WOULD HAVE LOOKED LIKE IF YOU'D JUST PICKED UP ON THE HINTS AND ASKED ASHLEY OUT IN YOUR JUNIOR YEAR AFTER SHE WAS CLEARLY TRY-ING TO LET YOU KNOW SHE WAS INTERESTED AND YOU JUST COULDN'T GET IT THROUGH YOUR THICK SKULL THAT MAYBE A GIRL MIGHT ACTUALLY LIKE YOU FOR ONCE AND NOW SHE'S ENGAGED TO THAT GUY TODD.
ETERNAL FINGERLESS GLOVES
USE CAUTION WHILE HANDLING THESE GLOVES. TALES TELL THAT ONCE DONNED, THEY CAN NEVER BE REMOVED! IF THERE BE A FATE WORSE THAN DEATH THEN IT MUST BE LOOKING LIKE AN EDGY DORK FOR ALL ETERNITY! TREMBLE IN FEAR, MORTAL!
SOYLENT GREEN SENSORY SLIME
THE RAREST OF ALL SLIMES. SOME SAY THE WIZARDS WHO BREW THIS KINETIC CONCOCTION USE THE GROUND-UP BONES OF ASMR TIK-TOKERS AS ITS SECRET INGREDIENT. DO YOU DARE TO FIND OUT?


POTATO
HAUNTED AMERICAN GIRL DOLL
HANDLE AT YOUR OWN RISK! THIS ORDINARY LOOKING DOLL IS HAUNTED BY THE RESTLESS SPIRIT OF A RESILIANT AND INSPIRING SURVIVOR OF THE GREAT DEPRESSION.
ORB of SCRYING
WITH THIS WONDROUS CRYSTAL BALL YOU NEED ONLY CONCENTRATE ON YOUR SUBJECT AND THEIR IMAGE WILL APPEAR BEFORE YOU. BUT BE WARNED! IF PETER THIEL'S LEGAL TEAM FINDS OUT, YOU'RE AS GOOD AS BANKRUPT!
???
JEREMY
THE HAT of ILL FITMENT
THIS HAT SURE WOULD LOOK GOOD ON YOU. WOULDN'T IT? ALAS! UPON THIS HAT IS PLACED AN ENCHANTMENT MOST FOUL. NO MATTER THE WEARER, THIS CHAPEAU IS ALWAYS JUST A LITTLE TOO SMALL! MWA-HA-HA-HA!
CURSED FIDGET SPINNER
LEGENDS TELL THAT ALL WHO HAVE POSSESSED THIS ACCURSED TOY HAVE MET THEIR END BY FREAK FIDGET SPINNER ACCIDENT.
SACRIFICIAL MALL DAGGER
THE PERFECT TOOL FOR HARVESTING THE BLOOD OF VIRGINS... OR JUST CUTTING THE TAG OFF THAT SWEET NEW MCR SHIRT YOU BOUGHT AT HOT TOPIC.
OUIJA
YOU
GOOD BYE
LABUBU'S PAW
WISH UPON THE DESSICATED FINGERS OF THIS MUMMIFIED PAW AND ANY LABUBU YOUR HEART DESIRES SHALL BE YOURS! BUT A WORD TO THE WISE -- WISHES COME AT A COST... EIGHTY DOLLARS! FOR A WANNABE FURBY?? JESUS H. CHRIST!
EMOJI OUIJA BOARD
COMMUNE WITH THE DEAD IN THE PARLANCE OF OUR TIMES! EGGPLANT... TAXI... ALBANIAN FLAG? WHAT SORCERER COULD DECIPHER THIS DREAD MISSIVE??


SALOO

CONSIDERATIONS ON WESTERN CULTURE

BY **CIARA MOLONEY**

Boomer dads excepted, most people don't watch Westerns. Even among cinephiles, Westerns are easily shunted off into their own niche that—in a world that rarely produces new Westerns, at least unless they're *Yellowstone* spin-offs—is easily imagined as separate from film proper. There are lots of genres for which this is true to one extent or another, but unlike swashbucklers, screwball comedies, or *Commedia sexy all'italiana* (look it up), lack of exposure does not deter anyone from thinking they know exactly what Westerns are like. The Western is judged on a collage of second- and third-hand sense impressions. The Western is pre-emptively dismissed based on myths and assumptions, the most damning of which are political anathema to the average leftist. Eileen Jones of *Jacobin* concedes only that one may "enjoy aspects of old Westerns, in spite of their generally nightmarish Manifest Destiny ideology." Everyone *knows* that Westerns are racist, sexist, imperialist propaganda valorizing the conquering white man. But when I got into Westerns in my 20s, this collaged Western I had culturally absorbed turned out to be like the shadows on Plato's cave wall: not a lie, precisely, but nothing like the complexity, color, and depth of reality.

More than any other genre, Westerns are about the values of the United States: the alleged ones and the ones in practice. They are about clashes between bandits and the law, between working-class immigrants and mega-rich ranchers, between settlers and Indigenous people (who, even in ugly depictions, are less often generic "Indians" than Apache, Comanche, Cheyenne, Sioux). They're about the tension between individualism and community, between justice and violence, and the hope and horror of wide open space. Sometimes this is in service of Manifest Destiny, colonialism, and white supremacy, disseminating America's founding myths of idealistic expansion. But the same themes that can enable all of that also make the Western especially adept at tearing that mythology apart. At their best, Westerns serve to critique colonialism and genocide, to expose the falsity of America as a land of opportunity, to call out when the U.S. stands for evil, in the Old West and now, and when the U.S. fails to live up to its own promises. In *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, Jimmy Stewart plays a lawyer from back east who sets up a school for children and adults in the community, most of whom cannot read. Woody Strode, as the film's only Black character, recites the Declaration of Independence in class, but cannot remember the line "all men are created equal." Stewart tells him, "That's all right, Pompey, a lot of people forget that part of it." *Liberty Valance* came out in 1962, when plenty of people were forgetting about *all men are created equal*, not least the segregationist rioters at the University of Mississippi a few months after the film's release.

There is not a strict dichotomy between conservative Westerns and left-wing ones: a film that is progressive on one issue may be reactionary on another, and may be ambiguous on a host of issues, whether through thoughtlessness or anxious vacillation. But there is a thread running through so much of the genre—sometimes front-and-center, sometimes only glimpsed—that the hand-me-down cultural collage of Manifest Destiny and masculine individualism omits. "It is at least as plausible to see Westerns as fundamentally anti-establishment, against the rich and powerful and in favour of the poor and weak," Edward Buscombe writes in his excellent book about the classic Western *Stagecoach*. "The Western teems with corrupt sheriffs, arrogant and tyrannical landowners, grasping and cheating bankers, sadistic and blinkered martinets. Even on the racial issue, where the depiction of Indians makes it vulnerable, one might venture that there is more explicit anti-racism in the Western between 1940

and 1970 than in any other Hollywood genre. Only to the charge of sexism is one bound to enter a plea of guilty as charged." (Though I think that if Buscombe did want to plead not guilty, a good lawyer could mount a serviceable defense on that one, too.)

"From a distance, it's very easy to view the Western genre as a great abstract swirl of cowboys and Indians, the proud Cavalry vs. the mute savages, a long triumphal march of Anglo-Saxon humanity led by John Ford and John Wayne brought to a dead halt by The Sixties," Kent Jones writes for *Film Comment*. And yet, "Up close, one movie at a time, the picture is quite different."

So, let's look at some Westerns, up close, one movie at a time.

SERGEANT RUTLEDGE (1960)

When Orson Welles was once asked about his favorite filmmakers, he replied, "I prefer the old masters, by which I mean John Ford, John Ford and John Ford."

Born Jack Feeney to Irish immigrants in Maine towards the end of the 19th century, Ford has as good a claim as anyone for the title of greatest American filmmaker. (A pretty strong claim for the greatest American artist in any medium, too.) Though he worked in many genres—managing to direct a Shirley Temple vehicle and a searing adaptation of *The Grapes of Wrath* within short range of each other—Ford is inextricable from the Western. So much of what Westerns are as a film genre, how they look and feel and move, goes back to Ford. His own complexity is that of the Western in microcosm.

There are two major narratives about the arc of John Ford's politics. One, as Eileen Jones outlines, is that while Ford initially indulged in the supremacist myths of America and of the West, his "later questioning of his own beliefs, instigated by the Civil Rights movement" led to "his later, darker, more troubling film-noir-ish Westerns." The other is that, as a young man, he was broadly of the political left, identifying as a social democrat, supporting the New Deal and collaborating with Irish communist Liam O'Flaherty (Ford won his first of four directing Oscars for his film of O'Flaherty's novel *The Informer*), before drifting to the right, supporting Barry Goldwater and Richard Nixon in their presidential campaigns. Despite being opposite in every way, both stories are somewhat true, and I have no desire to shave off Ford's sharp edges by presenting only one or the other. Though Ford's personal politics seem to have moved to the right, the shift in his films isn't best understood in terms of left and right, but a movement among a different axis.

Ford's films have a progressive spirit from the start. *Stagecoach*, his first Western of the sound era, treats the largely faceless Apache as a generic threat, but its true villains are a banker outraged at the concept of bank inspectors who talks about how what we need is a businessman for president, and a Cavalry officer's wife who is cruel to a sex worker being run out of town by the Law and Order League. That sex worker (Claire Trevor) is one of our heroes, falling in love with escaped convict the Ringo Kid (John Wayne, still young and fresh-faced even after a decade of slumming it in B-pictures). It's a film that aligns itself with underdogs and outcasts, buzzing with New Deal optimism. Along with *Young Mr. Lincoln*, released the same year, it is the last pure expression of Ford's American idealism.

From there, Ford's Westerns don't drift left or right, but—particularly from World War II onwards—they begin to revise and interrogate their own mythology, and become critical of both self and state. As early as 1948, a film like *Fort Apache* has Captain York (John Wayne again) flat-out say that the only reason there is unrest in the Apache reservation is because the U.S. government and army refuse to treat them with any respect, dignity or honor. "Whiskey but no beef; trinkets instead of blankets; the women degraded; the children sickly; and the men turning into drunken animals. So Cochise did the only thing a decent man could do. He left," York tells his commander, Lt. Col. Thursday (Henry Fonda). "Took most of his people and crossed the Rio Bravo into Mexico[…] rather than stay here and see his nation wiped out." It falls on deaf ears: the final act sees Thursday lead a hopeless charge against the Apache for no reason at all other than because he wants the glory of battle. The Apache kill dozens of white American soldiers, but in the narrative, they are completely justified: the U.S. broke the treaty first. By his final Western in 1964, Ford is totally unflinching: *Cheyenne Autumn* chronicles the Northern Cheyenne Exodus, as Little Wolf (Ricardo Montalbán) and Dull Knife (Gilbert Roland) lead their people out of the Indian reservation in Oklahoma and north to their ancestral homeland. At one point, a German soldier repeatedly says he's "just following orders" as he corrals the Cheyenne into a warehouse without food or heat. It's hard to miss the point.

Ford "relentlessly dramatized, in his Westerns, the mental and historical distortions arising from the country's violent origins—including its legacy of racism," Richard Brody writes for *The New Yorker*, "which he confronted throughout his career, nowhere more radically than in *Sergeant Rutledge*." Released in 1960, *Sergeant Rutledge* treats its Apache fighters as the same kind of generic threat as they are in *Stagecoach*, contrasted here not with outcasts and outlaws, but a heroic cavalry officer—evidence, if there was any, of Ford's reactionary turn. Except that Rutledge, the heroic cavalry officer of the title, is the first sergeant of an all-Black regiment, played by Woody Strode in a rare leading role. It's a courtroom drama in which Rutledge is put on trial for the rape and murder of a white girl, with the main narrative playing out in flashback. In those flashbacks, we see the girl's body being found, Rutledge fleeing when he's accused, and another Cavalry officer, Tom Cantrell (Jeffrey Hunter), chasing Rutledge down to bring him back to trial. As each witness speaks

in turn, they are bathed in light while the rest of the courtroom plunges into darkness. In most films, Hunter's role as Cantrell, the white counsel for defense, would be at the centre—*Sergeant Rutledge* was released the same year as Harper Lee's novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and two years before its film adaptation starring Gregory Peck—but here, Strode is indisputably the protagonist. He has the charisma of a born movie star, the physique of an athlete, and the emotional depth of an actor's actor. It's a crime he wasn't the biggest star on Earth.

Despite its flashback structure, *Sergeant Rutledge*—much like Martin Scorsese's *Killers of the Flower Moon* (2023)—does not treat its central "mystery" as a mystery. State actors only treat the facts as non-obvious because racism is a built-in feature of the system. Just as it is obvious who is murdering Osage women in *Flower Moon* and why, it is obvious that Rutledge did not rape and murder the white girl. He is a hero at a mythic scale. He stands tall against the horizon while his soldiers sing a ballad about the legend of a giant, ideal Black soldier, Captain Buffalo, and he is myth made flesh. His almost perfection doesn't make him anodyne or inhuman, but serves to underscore the commonplace paradox of his life. Rutledge is a proud Black soldier: totally clear-eyed in seeing how this country does not love or value or respect him, his troops, or those who look like them, and fights for his country anyway. He has no illusions about white racism: when hiding from Apache warriors, he tells Mary (Constance Towers) that if anyone comes, they can't be seen together.

"That's nonsense! We're just two people trying to stay alive," Mary tells him.

"Lady," he replies, "You don't know how hard I'm trying to stay alive." He might have a hole in his gut from an Apache arrow, but it's white violence he has to fear.

Rutledge sees America as it is, but strives for—embodies—the dream of what America should be. But that's not enough. He may be a mythic ideal American soldier, but he's still Black. And if the prosecutor, the townspeople, and the judge's wife—baying for a hanging with her posh lady friends in the gallery—get their way, this will be a show trial preceding a lynching. If the rest of the court aren't portrayed as overt white supremacists, that is damning in its own way. That they would participate in such a manifestly racist proceeding without hate in their hearts demonstrates that racism is not a matter of bad individuals, but a bad system. It's no wonder Rutledge's first instinct is to run.

Cantrell asks if this won't haunt him forever if he doesn't return to face the charges. "We been haunted a long time. Too much to worry," he says. "Yeah, it was all right for Mr. Lincoln to say we were free—but that ain't so. Not yet, maybe someday, but not yet." He still carries his manumission papers with him, declaring him a free man: they are found among his possessions when he is taken into custody for trial. The juxtaposition of Hunter reading the papers aloud over the image of Rutledge in handcuffs is as searing a critique of the 13th amendment—which abolished slavery "except as a punishment for crime"—as I've seen in movies that side of Ava DuVernay's documentary on the subject.

The film never pities Rutledge, never treats him as a victim who exists for white people to showcase their morality. Instead, it shakes with fury. Strode carries himself with a defiant dignity, beneath which roils a torrid mix of fierce loyalty, righteous anger, sincere pride, self-protective wariness, profound trauma, and utter gallantry. He is exceptional, but he is not an exception. A number of affecting performances from Black actors in supporting roles round out the film's anti-racist critique as not dependent on Black perfection. An old soldier (Juano Hernandez) is asked his age in the witness booth, and he answers, "I don't rightly know." When the prosecutor says, "You mean you don't even know your own age?," he's trying to dismiss him as an unreliable witness, and more, a fool.

Then he explains: "I was slave-born. And I saw the first steamboat come down the Mississippi River. At least my mammy said it was the first, and she was holding me up to see." That makes him over seventy. It is a jarring reminder of how, along with so many other things slaves were denied, they were deprived of self-knowledge, of personal history—a fact that echoes down through their descendants.

Another soldier from Rutledge's regiment is killed in battle with the Apache. As he dies in Rutledge's arms, he wonders why they got involved in this white man's war. "It ain't the white man's war," Rutledge tells him. "We're fighting to make us proud." You wonder who he's trying to convince.

DEVIL'S DOORWAY (1950) / LITTLE BIG MAN (1970)

A classic set-up for a Western is some small homesteaders versus the big ranchers. The homesteaders are poor, often immigrants, and stubbornly trying to make a new life for themselves out west by farming a small holding. The big ranchers are a wealthy cabal with vast lands that they are unwilling to share, and are fine with destroying the homesteaders' crops to get a bit more square-footage for their cows. Often, as in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, the ranchers oppose statehood, or anything else that might involve the homesteaders getting a say in how the territory is run. The ranchers have the local authorities in their back pocket—in *Heaven's Gate* (1980), they employ a whole death squad—while the homesteaders, in *Shane* (1953) and *The Westerner* (1940), might scrounge together one gunfighter between them. You side with the homesteaders every time, and you're supposed to.

Except in *Devil's Doorway* (1950). In that film, the big landowner is a hero, and that any homesteader thinks they can take a blade of grass away from him is an outrage. This total reversal of sympathies is down to one simple difference: the big land-owning family are Shoshone, and the homesteaders are colonizing their ancestral homeland.

Lance Poole (Robert Taylor) comes back to Medicine Bow, Wyoming with a Medal of Honor and a heart full of hope. Fighting for the Union army in the Civil War, he saw a different future for America: "The country is growing up. They gave me these stripes without testing my blood," he tells his dying father, "I led a squad of whites, slept in the same blankets and ate from the same pan. Held their heads when they died. Why should it be any different now?"

"You are home," his father answers, "You are again an Indian."

It's true. Though he initially receives a warm welcome from the white townsfolk, they resent his family's lands. Their previously passive prejudice is inflamed by a white supremacist lawyer, who uses the homesteading laws to hand Lance's property, piece by piece, to white settlers. The white doctor refuses to treat Lance's father, and he dies. Lance is barred from the saloon where he was welcomed as a war hero, a "No Indians" sign now

hanging on the wall. He finds his own lawyer, Orrie Masters (Paula Raymond), who is herself viewed with suspicion as an educated professional woman.

The laws are cruel, and there is little way around them. Lance can't homestead on his own land because—despite his war record—he is not an American citizen, but "a ward of the Government." He can't buy his land back later from white men who homestead on it, either, because it's against the law. As the film goes on, Lance digs his heels in further and further, adopting (or re-adopting) traditional dress and manner, rejecting more and more of his once-proud Americanness and embracing a willingness to fight the army he once fought for. Though Masters clearly thinks the law is unfair, her liberal anti-racism is revealed as only surface-level when the stakes escalate. There is no white savior narrative, because the law is written to disallow the possibility, and because ultimately, she doesn't want to save the day. Deep down, she doesn't think he's truly entitled to keep his land, she thinks he's throwing a tantrum about being asked to share. But for Lance, the threat is existential. This rift is part of why the erotic frisson between them, present throughout the film, doesn't come to a head. She might think he should get served in the saloon, but she doesn't understand that this whole country is built on stolen land.

It is unfortunate that Lance—a shortening that doubles as a whitening of his Native name, Broken Lance—is played by a white actor like Taylor, but it also needs to be placed in the broader context of Hollywood racism. The Hays Code—the prevailing censorship rules to which the major film studios subscribed—forbade, amongst other things, "miscegenation," and though it was somewhat up to interpretation whether this applied specifically to relationships between Black and white people or any kind of interracial relationship, Lance's white love interest made it much less likely that the part would be given to an actor of color. Westerns more broadly have tended to cast Mexican actors, or darker-skinned Italians, as Native Americans. Even decades after the death of the Hays Code, white actors continued to play characters of color, perhaps especially Indigenous people, in movies and on television. Johnny Depp played Tonto in *The Lone Ranger* (2013). Emma Stone played a woman who was part-Hawaiian, part-Chinese in *Aloha* (2015), for which she apologized. Kelsey Asbille, who played one of the main Native characters on *Yellowstone*, has been publicly criticized by the Eastern Band of Cherokee for claiming to be part Cherokee. Not to mention full-time "pretendians" like Iron Eyes Cody, who posthumously turned out to be Sicilian. All of this is racist, and none of it is acceptable. It is also an ingrained part of over a century of Hollywood casting. I would rather live in an alternate universe where an Indigenous actor played Lance in *Devil's Doorway*. But in the universe I live in, *Devil's Doorway* is still one of the most harrowing depictions of someone realizing America is a false god yet put on screen.

Characters who move between Native and white worlds—and the friction that usually accompanies that back and forth—come up often in Westerns, though they are usually white characters who have some connection to an indigenous nation. Sometimes—as with, on either end of the tonal spectrum, Buster Keaton in *The Paleface* (1922) and Kevin Costner in *Dances with Wolves* (1990)—it's a white person who a tribe adopts as their own because he has somehow proven himself distinct from other white people. Sometimes, as in *Two Rode Together* (1961), racist white society cannot accept white captives who have been returned, because their whiteness is now perceived as deformed or defective after living among the Comanche. Most interesting of these, however, are Westerns in which a white person is raised in a Native nation. In *Hombre* (1967), Paul Newman plays a white man who was raised Apache. Most famously, Dustin Hoffman is raised by the Cheyenne in *Little Big Man* (1970). These characters are indistinguishable from Native Americans in all of their cultural, emotional and familial ties, but not perceived as such—at least, unless they open their mouths at the wrong moment.

In *Little Big Man*, Hoffman plays Jack Crabb, who at age 121 recites his life story to a historian. As a boy, his family are killed by the Pawnee, but the Cheyenne adopt him as their own. He is raised by Old Lodge Skins (Chief Dan George, for once an actual Native American actor), the tribal leader, who he calls Grandfather. He earns the name Little Big Man after he goes through a Cheyenne coming-of-age ritual. Throughout his life, Jack moves between Cheyenne society and white society, witnessing an improbable swath of history like the Forrest Gump of the Old West. He gets to be a gunslinger called the Soda Pop Kid, a snake oil salesman, and the town drunk of Deadwood. He was pals with Wild Bill Hickok and survived the Battle of Little Bighorn.

It's a story about America in a broad, sweeping sense, poking fun at American pop history and the Western genre, but it is very specifically and devastatingly a story about the genocide of Native Americans. Jack serves for a time in Custer's 7th Cavalry, but is shocked and disturbed by their slaughter of women and children and runs away. As with *Soldier Blue*, released the same year, *Little Big Man*'s depiction of American violence was interpreted in part as an allegory for the Vietnam War. With a few decades' hindsight, "allegory" seems too narrow a way to conceive of that connection—if the Washita Massacre reminds you of My Lai, it is less that the West is being used as a backdrop to talk about Vietnam than it is history rhyming. Americans never really reckoned with what they did to the Native Americans, and in Vietnam—and in the Philippines, Haiti, Korea, Iraq and Afghanistan—they got back to their old tricks. When he returns to the Cheyenne, Jack asks Old Lodge Skins—now blinded by a white soldier—if he hates the white man, and it's not a plea for his own innocence, but a plea for his grandfather to embrace the same rage he feels in his own heart. Old Lodge Skins tells him that the Cheyenne "believe everything is alive. Not only man and animals, but also water, earth, stone… But the white men, they believe everything is dead. Stone, earth, animals, and people. Even their own people. If things keep trying to live, white man will rub them out. That is the difference."

In a stroke of genius, *Little Big Man* translates the Cheyenne's word for themselves as "human beings." It's a small touch that asserts the humanity that white society would deny them. The white men in the film—Little Big Man excepted—contort their souls with racism and violence until they become grotesque facsimiles of humanity, like monsters in human skin. It's the Cheyenne who are human beings, who seem capable of human feeling. "There is an endless supply of white men," Old Lodge Skins says, "But there always has been a limited number of human beings."

THE OX-BOW INCIDENT (1943)

If Westerns have one theme, it's justice. What it is and how to get it. Perhaps nothing is more fundamental to the Western as a genre than being on the precipice of lawlessness: the West as a place on the edge of the world where all the structures of the modern state haven't yet reached, where the only law is the law of the gun. It is freedom and destruction, and it is always already ending, the oncoming spectre of modernity just around the bend. It is this central idea that allows the Western to be reinterpreted in other settings and other forms: in samurai films, in space operas, in films about the Irish Famine or colonial Tasmania or the Russian Civil War. This question of justice means that Westerns, more than many genres, are political—not in the noisy, reactionary way you might assume, but in a range of complex configurations.

Written by Carl Foreman before he was blacklisted from Hollywood, *High Noon* (1952) is an overt critique of McCarthyism. John Wayne turned down the lead role because he thought it was un-American. The role of Marshal Kane instead went to Gary Cooper. He's going to be attacked by a group of outlaws arriving on the midday train. Not a single person in town will stand up for Kane despite this obvious wrong being done to him, and he must decide whether to fight or flee. In his book *Wild West Movies*, Kim Newman contrasts the "eerily neat and civilized" town and the "gutlessness, self-interest and lack of backbone exhibited by its inhabitants"—a perfect picture of 1950s Middle America, all white picket fences and social conformity, unwilling to risk an orderly life for the possibility of a just one. The historical remove and genre trappings of the Western allowed *High Noon* to speak on contemporary politics in a way dramas set in the present are often curbed from doing. Like science fiction or horror, Westerns have a degree of distance from current events that allows more strident political commentary to sneak in, and even more so because of the genre's inherent interest in justice and the law.

The Ox-Bow Incident (1943) is about a lynching. Henry Fonda and Harry Morgan play a couple of drifters who land into town right before it's announced that a local rancher named Larry Kinkaid has been murdered. The townspeople form a posse to track down the murderers, on strict notice from the town judge to bring them back for trial. But when they discover three men in the Ox-Bow Canyon with apparently stolen cattle, bringing them back to stand trial starts to sound a lot less attractive than hanging them at dawn. As in *12 Angry Men* a decade later, Henry Fonda tries his best to plead for the accused's innocence. But the Ox-Bow Canyon isn't a jury room, and nobody here is compelled to listen to him.

It's one of the best films ever made, so good that it's weird that we aren't all talking about it all the time. It's only seventy-five minutes long, but incredibly rich: it feels longer than it is, in the best kind of way. I don't know how it manages to fit in a whole subplot about a cruel army major's disappointment in his gay son. (They don't say that he's gay, because it's a Hollywood movie in 1943, but I know what I saw.) The bulk of the film agonizes over this one long night of debate and bloodlust, giving us dozens of moments when the crowd might decide against doing this evil thing so that it hurts that much more when they do it anyway. Although it's not about lynchings as racial violence—two of the men are white, the other is Mexican—it is keenly aware of how the particular horrors it examines affect Black Americans in particular. A Black man (Leigh Whipper) talks about the trauma he still carries from his brother being lynched when he was a kid. He says he never knew if he did what he was accused of, but—to any audience with the slightest knowledge of the history of U.S. racism—there is little doubt that he did not.

The Ox-Bow Incident is about how so much of what claims to be justice is just revenge in pretty clothes, about how our prejudices and preconceptions and assumptions are so easy to take as fact, about the near-irresistible pull of a mob. It could easily be an overly neat little liberal message picture, but it's bloodied and bruising, so taut with tension that you couldn't stand it if it was much longer. It's a film about a lynching, but more importantly, it's a film about a thousand moments where the townspeople could have chosen differently, each one of them a ton weight on the conscience. Human violence is not inevitable; it's a choice. That isn't any less true in places where life is cheap.

Because preconceptions of the Western are so ingrained across culture, people feel free to speak authoritatively without much first-hand knowledge. Mark Kermode is one of my favourite film critics, and I was confused and taken aback when he described *The Dead Don't Hurt* (2023) as not a Western, but a *drama that happened to have a Western setting*, because it's not full of "whole gangs of people on horsebacks, you know, rounding up the wagons"—an objection that would cast the vast majority of Westerns ever made out of the genre. I love the guys at Red Letter Media, and am still confused how they could think a film they watched cheaped out by having its final shootout in Monument Valley—John Ford's preferred shooting location—instead of a frontier town set. (Mike Stoklasa only recognized Monument Valley from *Indiana Jones* and the *Last Crusade*, and Jay Bauman and Rich Evans didn't recognize it at all.) Everyone assumes they know what Westerns are like. But that knowledge is the result of a cultural game of telephone, unrecognizable from where it started. Everyone assumes they don't need to bother watching Westerns, but every time I watch a Western—any Western, not even a particularly good one—it feels like cinema as a whole cracks open anew. ✖


RED SCARE COMICS
CURRENT AFFAIRS
CA
BY HANK KENNEDY
NOV/DEC
15¢
APPROVED BY THE COMICS CODE AUTHORITY

Comic books have a long history of serving as political propaganda. The United Electrical, Radio, and Machine Workers published *Chug-Chug* to explain the benefits of trade unionism and collective bargaining agreements. The Fellowship of Reconciliation put out *Martin Luther King and the Montgomery Story* as a means to educate readers on the civil rights movement and nonviolent resistance. Julian Bond and T.G. Lewis's *Vietnam: An Antiwar Comic Book* laid out reasons to oppose Uncle Sam's imperial adventure in Southeast Asia.

When the post-World War II Red Scare was launched, its impact was felt in all areas of American culture and politics: in Washington, in Hollywood, over the radio, on television, and in the nation's comic books. Just as comics could sell trade unionism, civil rights, and pacifism, they could also sell the Red Scare. A star-spangled superhero like Captain America declared: "Beware, commies, spies, traitors, and foreign agents! Captain America, with all loyal, free men behind him, is looking for you…" War comics like *Atom-Age Combat* and *Atomic War!* argued for a nuclear showdown with the Soviet Union. Other comics dispensed with genre trappings entirely to tell didactic stories that pushed the purest propaganda.

These comics took painstaking care to explain their points and arguments. Sometimes known talents from comics and cartooning worked on them; other times the creators were anonymous. Most Red Scare comics were sponsored by religious or right-wing political associations. There's often a great deal of camp value and unintentional humor to be found. In fact, these comics were so infamous that *National Lampoon* ran a 1972 parody of titles like these as "Commie Plot Comics." Interestingly enough, though, the Red Scare comics of yesteryear utilize many of the same arguments red-baiters employ in their modern battles against the Left.

First out of the gate was 1947's *Is This Tomorrow: America Under Communism*. This comic carried the blessing of the Catholic Church, as it was published by Father Louis Gates and his St. Paul-based Catechetical Educational Society. Throughout the Golden Age of Comics (roughly the 1930s-1950s), the Catholic National Organization for Decent Literature campaigned around the country against comics it found objectionable, especially those which "exploit horror, cruelty, or violence." But even though *Is This Tomorrow* exploits violence from the start, with its cover showing the burning American flag and figures locked in mortal combat, because of its provenance and stated goal of educating the public against the Red Menace, the clerical censors considered it appropriate.

Is This Tomorrow pioneered an oft-repeated plot, showing readers what a homegrown Bolshevik revolution would look like. Depicted with early art by *Peanuts*' Charles Schulz, communists wearing the requisite sinister mustaches and goatees maneuver to take over labor unions and mass media as a method to take full, dictatorial control of the nation. One communist agent boasts, "Class conflict and breakdown of bourgeois morals have been handled very well by our people in Hollywood." Anti-communists routinely blamed Hollywood for supposedly inserting left-wing ideas into movies, as shown by accusations members of the House Un-American Activities Committee were making against left-wing filmmakers.

As expected from a Catholic publication, the communist hostility towards religion is stressed. A communist agent lobs a bomb at the church of an uncooperative priest. (The comic frequently confuses the early 20th century stereotype of the "bomb throwing anarchist" with communist spies.) The priest is then taken for a ride into the woods, before being gunned down. Under the new regime, the Bible is burned, while Catholic monks and nuns are herded into labor camps. New communist professors proclaim "Capitalists invented God to keep the workers satisfied."

The charges against the communists are often nonsensical. They are accused of stirring up racial and religious prejudice to further their aims. Despite its many faults, the Communist Party of the United States actually played a leading role in anti-racist activism in the 1930s and '40s. But communist agents in the comic spout antisemitic lines like "We white Americans have to stand together against the Jews or they'll be running the country," even though Karl Marx was Jewish, as were many notable socialists and communists.

The Communist Party's *Daily Worker* launched numerous counterattacks against *Is This Tomorrow*. The paper called for a government ban on the comic because it "incites violence." In another issue it was denounced as a "Hitlerite comic book[…] a children's *Mein Kampf*." In the issue after that, Gates was called a "comic book Coughlin," a comparison to the pro-Nazi Catholic priest based in Royal Oak, Michigan. The *Daily Worker* was joined in its criticisms from an unlikely source. *Converted Catholic Magazine* slammed the "monstrosity" due to its "blood-thirsty, violent scenes."

Panel from "The Plot to Steal the World" comic, 1948

Detroit's law-and-order Police Chief Harry S. Toy banned *Is This Tomorrow* as one of 50 titles he deemed "loaded with communist teachings, sex, and racial discrimination." Incredibly, *Is This Tomorrow*'s anti-communism was *too subtle* and thus misinterpreted as being a Marxist propaganda tract. The American Civil Liberties Union and local Catholic priests opposed the ban, with the priests preparing to risk arrest by distributing the comic. Sensitive to potential bad publicity, Toy backed down.

"This Godless Communism," like *Is This Tomorrow*, was another Catholic publication. First serialized in the parochial school-exclusive title *Treasure Chest*, the series was collected in a 1961 stand-alone comic. The comic opens with an address from FBI chief J. Edgar Hoover. "Communism," he states, "represents the most serious threat facing our way of life[...] The most effective way for you to fight communism is to learn all you can about it." (What the Catholic publishers would think if they knew the details of Hoover's personal life, God only knows.)

Sporting art from E.C. comics great Reed Crandall, the story also begins with another potential communist uprising. The nefarious Reds close churches, send priests and nuns to labor camps, close down newspapers, and even demolish the Washington Monument in a panel that's been turned into an internet meme. Again, the communist hostility towards Catholicism is stressed. Parochial schools are seized and run as secular institutions. The first chapter ends with a Catholic priest praying for the destruction of "the awful error known today as Communism."

Panel from "The Two Faces of Communism," 1961

The comic then delves into a history of the Marxist movement, beginning with the life of Karl Marx. For the Catholic creators, Marx's original sin was to be an atheist, and the dangers of his revolutionary ideas all seem to flow from that source. Marx tells his friends, "There is no God. The Earth and all things on it have just come to be by themselves." When the Soviets take over, they boast in classrooms "We have news for you students. You will no longer study religion, since God does not exist, there is no need for it." Communism is described as being literally "the work of the Devil." Readers of the comic are constantly reminded to be loyal to the Vatican, not Moscow.

In the history portrayed by the comic, the Russian Revolution was entirely the fault of a small group of Bolshevik conspirators. The people of Russia were apparently perfectly happy with never-ending war, poverty, and hunger until the Bolsheviks put those ideas into their heads. One member reminds his compatriots, "Our beliefs are built on hate. Now is time to use that hatred!" It's a surprise the artist doesn't decide to show him twirling a mustache as he says this. The history of U.S. intervention to crush the Bolsheviks is completely ignored. If comics like this were Americans' guide to U.S.-U.S.S.R. relations, they were no doubt shocked when Nikita Khrushchev said, "Never have any of our soldiers been on American soil, but your soldiers were on Russian soil."

The most ludicrous scene in the whole mess comes during Leon Trotsky's assassination in Mexico City. Stalinist agent Ramón Mercader creeps up on the exiled Bolshevik. Despite stealth being of the essence, Mercader is sporting a broad sombrero and loud poncho. He could be an extra in a spaghetti Western.

The Two Faces of Communism, from 1961, was another comic trumpeting a religious-based opposition to Communism. The comic was published under the auspices of the Christian Anti-Communist Crusade, the brainchild of Fred Schwarz. Schwarz was born in Australia to Jewish parents who had converted to Christianity. He founded his Crusade in Sydney, but it moved with him to the United States when he established himself in Long Beach, CA.

Wealthy, right-wing businessmen in the United States gave generously to Schwarz and his cause. Patrick J. Frawley, of Paper Mate and Schlick Razors, was won over to right-wing politics after one of his Cuban razor factories was seized by Fidel Castro's revolutionary government. Frawley and Walter Knott (of Knott's Berry Farms) paid for broadcasts and pamphlets on Schwarz's behalf.

If either of these men helped pay for *The Two Faces of Communism*, they were surely wasting their money. The comic, given away for free to anyone who wrote to the Crusade, is dreadfully dull. It serves as a graphic companion to Schwarz's earlier book *You Can Always Trust the Communists (to be Communists)*, a work whose purpose was "to study those attitudes which transform well-meaning, patriotic, Christian people into the allies of Communism."

The comic's framing device is a *Father Knows Best* patriarch lecturing his creepy-looking suburban offspring and his Stepford Wife on the dangers of global Communism. The children think Nikita's Khrushchev's shoe-banging antics at the United Nations are hilarious. "Ha Ha, will you look at that joker?" one guffaws.

Panel from "America Under Socialism", 1950

"That Khrushchev! Either he's the nuttiest guy on Earth or the greatest comedian this side of the moon."

"Don't laugh so loud, kids. That man's crazy all right… like a fox!" is dear old Dad's response. He gives his family (and the audience) a compressed recital of the biographies of Marx, Lenin, Stalin, and Trotsky. Usually this is shown with studied portraits of them simply standing around, like the lifeless figures in a wax museum.

It wouldn't be a religious, anti-communist comic without a discussion of the Soviet attitude towards religion. Dad tells his family, "Communism is a fanatical religion! It is a religion of false promise!" What keeps families like the one in the story "on an even keel" is their "Christian beliefs and ideals." God is on our side, not theirs.

Like the other comics discussed here, there's some attempt to show the United States under potential Red tyranny. Dad explains how a ruthless Red conspirator could stir up the cities' homeless with promises of a world with "no more unemployment, no more hunger… no sickness" etc. Yet it lacks the feverish visions of the other comics. There's none of the eye-catching imagery of a destroyed Washington Monument or *Is This Tomorrow*'s brutal cover. Whenever the story's tempo seems to be increasing, it cuts back to the family puttering around their living room.

The real shocker of the story comes when the father reveals that—*Gasp! Choke!*—he fell under the sway of communist ideals in college. Under a professor who moonlights as "an agent who had infiltrated" the public college, he and his buddies decided that maybe Karl Marx made some good points. He concludes he was particularly vulnerable because he was "away from parental influence" as well as "church and Christian beliefs."

Sleepless college-aged Dad frets over his changing worldview in another widely memed panel. "I don't know about this Communism… but I can't let the boys down…" After a visit home and some Bible study, he decides to turn the professor over to J. Edgar Hoover's gang at the FBI, whereupon the nogoodnik professor "was removed as an undesirable alien." Another university has been cleansed of the Red stain.

The comic ends with the whole family giving a Pod People-esque stare right into the reader's soul. Mom gives thanks for "Dad's insight. If we all heed his insight and recognize our responsibility as Americans, our families, our homes, our country will always survive under God!" The conformism of the communists has been dispelled by the conformism of the capitalists.

1950's *America Under Socialism* breaks from the trend due to its secular nature. The comic was published by the National Research Bureau, one of several neutral-sounding organizations like the National Economic Council and the Constitutional Educational League that hid a far-right political agenda behind their innocent names. *America Under Socialism* advertised in such business publications as *Banker's Monthly*, *Textile Industries*, and *Distribution Age*, showing who the potential audience was. All of them commented on its suitability "for distribution to employees and members of Civic Groups."

The comic is mercifully short. Over a scant 16 pages, readers learn the dangers of "creeping socialism," namely how every piece of social reform is a stepping stone to a totalitarian police state. Among the many paving stones to Communist Hell are a plan "to nationalize medicine" and nationalization of steel, railroads, and utilities. That may sound as good to readers as it does to this comic's protagonist, Jack Hanson, but don't be fooled. It's a slippery slope from Medicare for All to the gulag.

Hanson joins the seemingly-benign Security Party, who promise to look after the well-being of blue collar workers like himself. The party's promises of far-reaching social reform win them a broad following. On election day they win a landslide victory. But the party soon fails to fulfill its promises to farmers and working people. Instead, businesses go bankrupt, the nationalized health service fails to deliver, and wage controls are introduced. Hanson tries to fight the new government, but it's no use. They're in complete control, and he's speedily sentenced to life in prison.

What the real life Jack Hansons thought about *America Under Socialism* is a matter of conjecture. Nevertheless, it's a sign of how flesh-and-blood workers responded to *America Under Socialism* that the Congress of Industrial Organizations (now part of the AFL-CIO) was compelled to respond in their newspaper. Writer Gervase N. Love described the comic as "another comic book to trap workers," to convince them "private enterprise and the Republican Party can do no wrong." The same could be said of much right-wing propaganda on television, the internet, the airwaves, and in print.

Do any of the arguments from these comic books sound familiar? They should. Contemporary right-wing figures continue to parrot many of the same arguments today, albeit in modified form. These comics exhibit a fundamentally anti-democratic view of the citizenry. In their pages, people are basically accustomed to social injustices, and will not resist them if left to their own devices. The exception can only come if they are led, sheeplike, by a dedicated communist. Any social or political protests are always the result of "outside agitators" and cannot be the result of any deeply felt grievances.

The criticism of supposed left-wing domination of the movie business has also endured. For decades the American right have tried to show Hollywood as a massive propaganda factory, brainwashing innocent moviegoers. This is despite the fact that these multinational corporations are only concerned with green cash, not red revolution. Hollywood studios collaborated with the House Un-American Activities Committee to set up the Hollywood Blacklist. Numerous blockbuster films, like *Top Gun, The Hurt Locker*, and even *Captain Marvel*, are the result of collaboration with the Pentagon. It's an agreement that allows directors to play with the military's toys (i.e. weapons, equipment, and vehicles) so long as the military is presented in a favorable light. Therefore, Hollywood is unlikely to release any films concluding that war is a racket. Still, Ron DeSantis claims that, somehow, Disney is aiming a "woke" radical agenda at the nation's kids.

1947 cover of "Is This Tomorrow: America Under Communism!"

Religion is stressed as a bedrock of democracy and liberty in these comics. The creators are keen to stress the Godless and atheistic elements of the worldwide communist conspiracy. Yet as we all know, religious movements are more than capable of assuming an authoritarian, dictatorial character. Before World War II, outspoken Catholics in the United States and abroad supported fascist movements in Italy and Spain. "Radio Priest" Charles Coughlin of Royal Oak, Michigan, expressed open admiration for Adolf Hitler. Dissident Marxist Victor Serge asked after World War II: "Where was Christianity during the recent social catastrophes?" All too often, it was on the wrong side.

The politicians who now rally under the banner of Christian Nationalism are likewise no great friends of democracy. Senator Josh Hawley calls himself a Christian Nationalist. He also led efforts to overturn the results of the 2020 Presidential election. Hawley's ideal government is Viktor Orbán's Hungarian autocracy. Marjorie Taylor Greene claims the label of Christian Nationalist. She too tried to overturn the results of the election.

There is also the repeated assertion that the nation's colleges and universities are modes of indoctrinating the young into leftism. President Donald Trump has said that bastions of higher education are run by "Marxist maniacs and lunatics" as part of his war against the academy. The truth of the matter is far different. Very few students are politically active on campus. Most want to get their degrees as quickly and cheaply as possible before the crushing burden of student loan repayments sets in. Nor are there many avowed Marxists in the faculty. It's all simply a myth.

Comics like these came from a vastly different time in U.S. popular culture. The cartoon "Make Mine Freedom" and films like *Red Nightmare* and *Invasion USA* primed audiences to believe the Russians were coming, the Russians were coming. As a more sophisticated audience, we laugh at these artifacts, much as we laugh at 80s schlock like *Red Dawn* and *Amerika*. How could people have ever believed in such absurd fantasies?

We shouldn't take such a haughty stance, however. People still believe a variety of falsehoods and ridiculous lies. This includes the current occupant of the White House, many members of Congress, and judges on the federal bench. If they are not the same lies as those espoused in *Is This Tomorrow*, "This Godless Communism," *The Two Faces of Communism*, or *America Under Socialism*, that's a small comfort. Socialists can laugh, but the prevalence of all this propaganda is a strong reminder of what ideological forces we're up against when we attempt to spread our message. Laugh, sure. Just keep in mind that the people behind these comics were taking things deadly seriously.

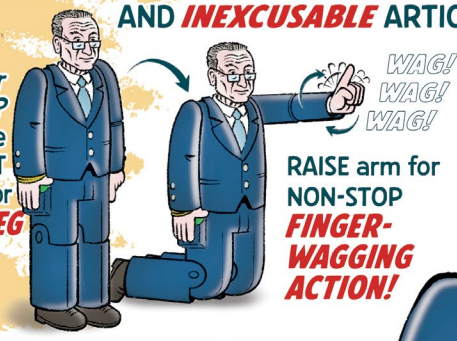
INACTION FIGURES!

AIPAC TOYS

WRITTEN BY: EVAN ALLGOOD

ART BY: J. LONGO

...FEATURING 2 POINTS OF *PREDICTABLE* AND *INEXCUSABLE* ARTICULATION!



TAKE YOUR CRINGEY PERFORMATIVE BULLSHIT TO THE NEXT LEVEL!

...SAYS *TEN DISTINCT PHRASES*

–NONE OF WHICH ACCOMPLISH ANYTHING!

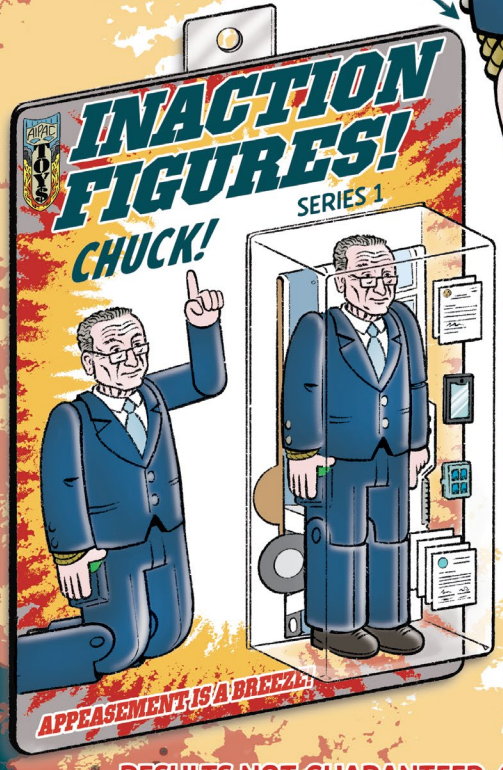
I'm disappointed..
We've issued a statement...
History will judge their actions...
We're creating a task force...
Our friends across the aisle mean well...
We don't want to alienate the right...
You're the boss, Nancy... *AND MORE!*

BEHIND EACH *INACTION FIGURE* IS A 3-SPEED *PAT-ON-THE-BACK* BUTTON!

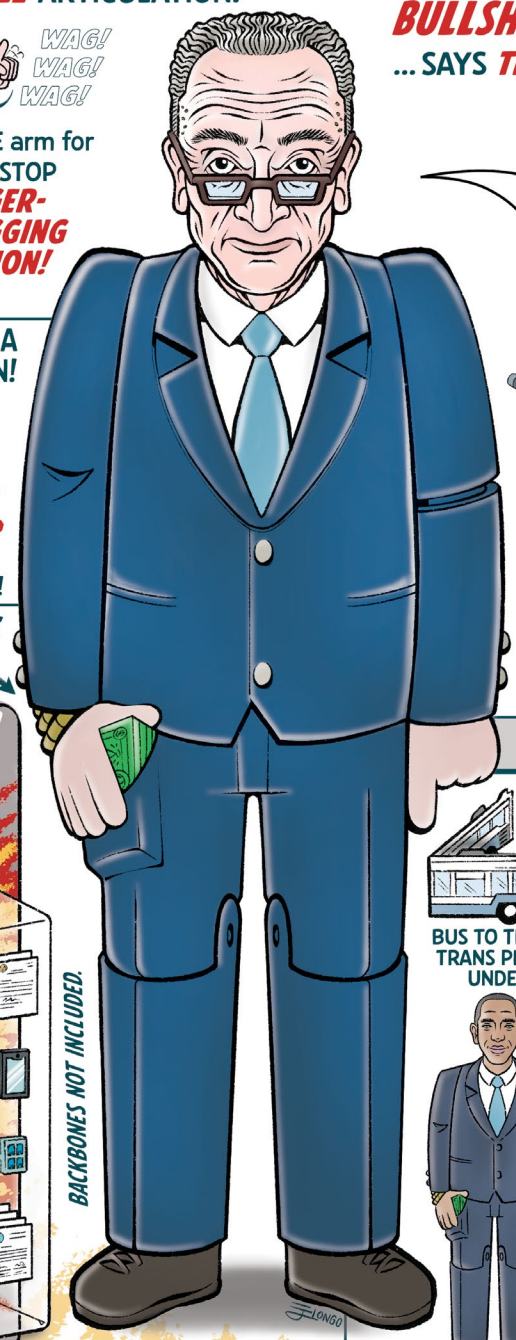
SLOW
GLACIAL
ARE U FKN SERIOUS?!?

SO SLOW–YOU WON'T EVEN KNOW THEY'RE WORKING!

TIED-HANDS KEEP CASH IN POCKETS WHERE IT BELONGS!



BACKBONES NOT INCLUDED.



CAPITULATING HAS NEVER BEEN SO FUN!

SHINE A LIGHT ON THEM...

...for *INVISIBLE MODE!*

... WHERE DID THEY GO?!?!

Traveling? *NO PROBLEM!* Bend over backwards from *QUICK-BEG POSE...*

EACH FIGURE FOLDS SO EASILY!

"INACTION FIGURES" SERIES 1!

EACH COLLECTIBLE FIGURE INCLUDES:

BUS TO THROW TRANS PEOPLE UNDER!

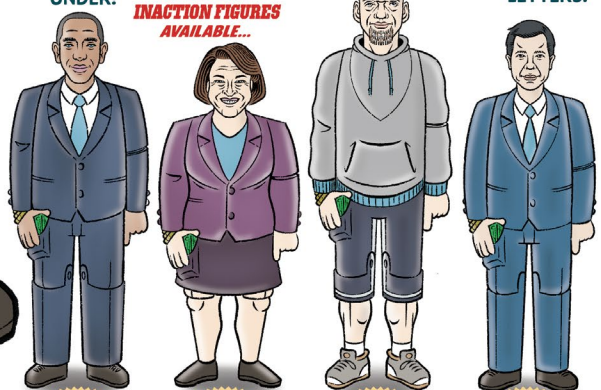
STRONGLY WORDED LETTERS!

PHONE FOR USELESS TWEETS!

EARPLUGS!

MORE STRONGLY WORDED LETTERS!

ADDITIONAL INACTION FIGURES AVAILABLE...



HAKEEM! *AMY!* *JOHN!* *PETE!*

NO REFUNDS! EVEN IF THERE'S A LAST-MINUTE REPLACEMENT! NO WAY!

RESULTS NOT GUARANTEED, OR EVEN PURSUED!

THE DECOLONIAL MIND OF NGŨGĨ WA THIONG'O

BY **ABDIRASHID DIRIYE KALMOY**

The BBC termed him a "giant of African literature." In a *Guardian* obituary, Lyn Innes called Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o "a founding father of African literature in English." For the scholar Helon Habila he "belonged to an age of prophets," and "we must honor his teaching." For others, he "was not just a writer, he was a militant." For his writing, Ngũgĩ received numerous awards. Yet the Nobel Prize in literature always eluded him, perhaps because of his unrelenting criticism of colonialism, neocolonial imperialism, and the capitalist West. For the literary establishment he was a dangerous intellectual who was still bitter about colonialism and its aftereffects. He was often seen as a leading and deserving candidate for the Nobel Prize for literature; so much so that in 2010 many reporters gathered outside his home on the day of its announcement. When it became clear that the award had gone to Mario Vargas Llosa, Ngũgĩ "seemed much less disappointed than the reporters, whom he had to console."

On May 28th, 2025 Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o passed away. He bequeathed the world a decolonial literature that challenged power, domination, and inhumanity. Today, his vision is more vital and pertinent than ever in our disputed and globalized world—a world filled with tyranny, racism, and xenophobia, and where imperialism is still very much with us.

EARLY WORKS AND THE FORMATION OF A DECOLONIAL CONSCIOUSNESS

Born James Ngũgĩ in Kamiriithu, Kenya, in 1938, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o is one of Africa's most prolific and significant writers, intellectuals, and cultural critics. He has written plays, novels, essays, memoirs, and academic works that examine the complex relationships between language, culture, colonialism, and emancipation during the last 60 years.

Throughout his body of work, Ngũgĩ showed a strong dedication to rediscovering and reclaiming what decades of British colonialism sought to erase: African languages, epistemologies, and identities. This effort to fight imperial rule and recover African futures is at the core of his intellectual and creative endeavors.

Early works by Ngũgĩ, written in the 1960s and early 1970s, capture the conflicts of a Kenya that had just gained independence and was attempting to reconcile its colonial history with its uncertain future. Kenya was a diverse country of different ethnic, linguistic and religious groups; and at the helm of political power were the beneficiaries of colonial education, who were indiffer-

ent to neocolonialism. In the 1960s and '70s, Kenya was led by President Jomo Kenyatta, whose government maintained close ties with former colonial powers and Western business interests. Rather than dismantling colonial economic structures, Kenyatta's regime preserved settler land ownership, foreign investment dominance, and elite privilege, enriching a small African bourgeoisie. Ngũgĩ saw this as a betrayal of independence—a neocolonial order disguised as nationalism, indifferent to the masses' social and economic liberation.

His early English-language books, such as *Weep Not, Child* (1964), *The River Between* (1965), and *A Grain of Wheat* (1967), addressed the Mau Mau rebellion of the 1950s, the British policy of land confiscation, and the psychological and moral effects of colonialism which were ignored by the new elites. In *Weep Not, Child* (1964), the protagonist Njoroge is a young boy whose family's ancestral lands were confiscated and given to a white settler, Mr. Howlands. Njoroge dreams of uplifting his family through education, especially by learning to speak English and embracing Christianity. He embodies the hope and disillusionment of a generation that believed cooperating and doing one's best within the colonial power structure would bring freedom and equality, only to face betrayal and despair amid the Mau Mau uprising and the British crackdown against it. By the novel's end, Njoroge has lost his father Ngotho and several of his siblings to the British Empire's violence:

> *He recalled Ngotho, dead. Boro would soon be executed while Kamau would be in prison for life. Njoroge did not know what would happen to Kori in detention. He might be killed like those who had been beaten to death at Hola Camp. O, God — But why did he call on God? God meant little to him now. For Njoroge had now lost faith in all the things he had earlier believed in, like wealth, power, education, religion. Even love, his last hope, had fled from him.*

Even in this earliest novel, Ngũgĩ hits on the idea that would define his career: that adopting colonial ways of thinking and acting cannot save anyone from the inherently violent nature of colonialism itself, and can lead only to ruin.

Through a perspective of humanist reflection and anti-colonial critique, these works played a crucial role in presenting African audiences with a fictitious depiction of their own recent past and the nightmares of independence and neocolonialism. In *The River Between* (1965), Waiyaki is another ambitious young man who stands as a symbol of the tension between tradition and modernity, struggling to unite two rival Gikuyu communities divided by colonial influence and Christian conversion, only to be destroyed in turn by the same conflicting forces he tries to reconcile. In the novel, Kabonyi, an elder who is a former Christian convert, laments:

> *We were one people before the white man came. We had our ways, our customs, our wisdom. Then he came with his religion and his government. He told us we were children, that our ways were bad, our gods false. And some of our people believed him. Now brothers fight brothers, fathers fight sons. The white man sits and laughs. He has divided the living flesh of the tribe and taken the best parts for himself.*

In *A Grain of Wheat* (1967), Mugo, a solitary and guilt-ridden man, represents the moral and psychological turmoil of colonial violence and the complex legacy of betrayal and heroism that haunted Kenya's path to independence. The novel is set in 1963, the year the nation finally achieved its sovereignty, and initially the reader is led to believe that Mugo is a hero of the Mau Mau rebellion, who stoically kept silent under British captivity and torture. It's only later that we learn Mugo actually betrayed Kihika, a courageous freedom fighter and symbol of revolutionary idealism, handing him over to the colonists:

> *"You asked for Judas," he started. "You asked for the man who led Kihika to this tree, here. That man stands before you, now. Kihika came to me by night. He put his life into my hands, and I sold it to the whiteman. And this thing has eaten into my life all these years."*
>
> *Throughout he spoke in a clear voice, pausing at the end of every sentence. When he came to the end, however, his voice broke and fell into a whisper. "Now, you know." And still nobody said anything. Not even when he walked away from the platform. People without any apparent movement created a path for him. They bent down their heads and avoided his eyes.*

This act of treachery exposes the fragility of communal solidarity under the pressures of colonial terror and personal weakness. Mugo's guilt and silence reflect the broader compromises and fears that undermined the liberation struggle. Although ultimately successful, the Mau Mau movement was never composed of perfect revolutionary heroes, and Ngũgĩ is honest about this fact. By placing Mugo's confession on the day of Uhuru, Kenya's independence, he also creates a powerful metaphor for the post-independence world, in which previous anti-colonial fighters were now neocolonial governing agents, betraying the ideals of freedom just as Mugo did Kihika. After independence, the memory of Kihika's sacrifice stands in sharp contrast to the corruption and self-interest of the new leaders.

THEATER AND THE MOBILIZATION OF POPULAR RESISTANCE

One of the most radical and influential periods of Ngũgĩ's career was his work with community theatre in the 1970s. He collaborated with locals at the Kamiriithu Community Education and Cultural Centre to develop participatory theatre that tackled issues including corruption, exploitation, and landlessness. In addition to serving as a spur for community mobilization, his 1977 play *Ngaahika Ndeenda* (or *I Will Marry When I Want*) also infuriated the Moi dictatorship that replaced Kenyatta's government.

Co-written with fellow playwright Ngũgĩ wa Mirii (no relation), *Ngaahika Ndeenda* was highly explosive because it openly criticized post-independence Kenyan society, exposing corruption, inequality, and the betrayal of the masses by the new political and financial elites. The plot follows Kĩgũũnda and Wangeci, a couple of poor farmers who are pressured by their richer

neighbors to marry in a Christian church, since the neighbors view their traditional *Ngurario* wedding ceremony as illegitimate. As the play goes on, it becomes clear that this was all a ploy to steal the couple's small plot of land, as they're forced to put the deed up as collateral for a loan to fund the expensive wedding. Engaging in this way with clashes of religion and economic class, the play directly challenged both colonial legacies and Kenya's contemporary elite, making it a bold act of political dissent.

Even more important, *Ngaahika Ndeenda* was Ngũgĩ's first major work to be written in his native Gikuyu, rather than English. By staging the drama in an indigenous African language and involving local communities, Ngũgĩ ensured its message reached ordinary Kenyans, amplifying its social and revolutionary impact. His choice of a native language was inextricably linked to his class politics. He maintained that African languages had the capacity to inspire the people, while English benefited the elite and those in power. To emancipate the African peasants, farmers and pastoralists, one had to "speak" and write in a linguistic medium they understood.

Ngũgĩ was arrested and jailed by the dictatorship in late 1977, and spent most of 1978 behind bars. But his incarceration and the play's suppression only highlight the subversive and transformational power of vernacular culture. The Brazilian educator and activist Paulo Freire's concept of praxis—the combination of introspection and action in the fight for liberation—was the foundation of his theatrical work, which is an example of decolonial teaching. For Ngũgĩ, theatre served as a vehicle for public empowerment and education rather than as a bourgeois hobby. At the theatre, the poor, the down-trodden and the peasants voiced their political agency and will.

Cultural decolonization poses a serious danger to neocolonial regimes, as seen by the state's violent response to the Kamiriithu initiative. Ngũgĩ lost his freedom, his academic post at the University of Nairobi, and ultimately was exiled as a result of his dedication to the people and democratic cultural creation in postcolonial Kenya. These sacrifices, however, only strengthened his conviction and made his fight more global.

REJECTING ENGLISH

The radicalization trend that Ngũgĩ's work follows sets it apart from his peers. The experience of being imprisoned only strengthened his conclusion that language was a location of power struggles rather than a neutral medium. And so, he permanently "rejected" colonial languages as a means for emancipatory literature. English or French couldn't capture the lived experiences of Africans and politics in a new neocolonial world. Worse, they were weapons of the oppressor, intended to cultivate an attitude of submission and inferiority in the minds of colonized people, and prevent rebellion:

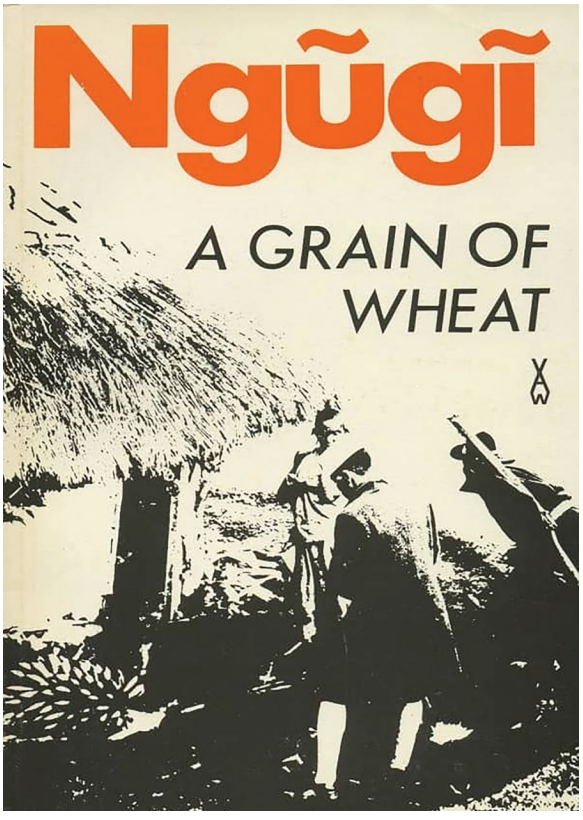
> *The biggest weapon wielded and daily unleashed by imperialism against that collective defiance is the cultural bomb. The effect of a cultural bomb is to annihilate a people's belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves.*

In this way, along with being a stylistic transformation, Ngũgĩ's transition from writing in English to adopting his native Gikuyu tongue represents a significant political stand against the effects of colonialism and its erasure and assimilation of indigenous languages and culture.

Ngũgĩ wrote his next novel, *Caitaani Mutharaba-Ini* (*Devil on the Cross*), while he was still imprisoned. The most radical novel yet, it follows a working-class woman named Wariinga who witnesses a "devil's feast" held by wealthy Kenyan businessmen, where they boast and compete over who has committed the biggest acts of theft and exploitation. Ngũgĩ's captors wouldn't allow him paper, so he wrote the novel on sheets of toilet paper, slowly and painstakingly, and entirely in Gikuyu. Even while physically locked up, he used indigenous language to resist colonial cultural domination and reclaim his African identity.

One of the most important manifestos on language and decolonization is still Ngũgĩ's 1986 book *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. In it, he explained in detail his decision to write in Gikuyu instead of English. "Language, any language, has a dual character: it is a carrier of culture and a means of communication," he wrote. He maintained that colonial languages were imposed in African schools as a kind of cultural imperialism that alienated pupils from their roots—ideas exemplified by Njoroge in *Weep Not, Child*, who places his hope in English education and Christianity rather than joining the rebellion, highlighting Ngũgĩ's contrast between passive adaptation and active resistance to colonialism.

Ngũgĩ perceived English, French, and Portuguese as weapons of ongoing dominance, in contrast to other African authors who saw them as means of worldwide communication. According to



Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o reading from "Dreams in a Time of War" at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, 2015

him, reclaiming language is the first step towards decolonizing the African psyche:

> *The call for rediscovery and the resumption of our language is a call for a regenerative reconnection with the millions of revolutionary tongues in Africa and the world over demanding liberation. It is a call for the rediscovery of the real language of humankind: the language of struggle. It is the universal language underlying all speech and words of our history. Struggle. Struggle makes history. Struggle makes us. In struggle is our history, our language and our being.*

In this way, his commitment to African languages challenges the dominance of Western epistemologies and calls for a pluriversal world where all cultures and knowledge systems are valued.

EXILE, GLOBALECTICS, AND THE EXPANSION OF DECOLONIAL THOUGHT

Ngũgĩ left Kenya in the early 1980s and carried on his decolonial work while living in exile, publishing extensively and lecturing in Europe and the United States. His nonfiction works in exile, such as *Globalectics* (2012), *Something Torn and New* (2009), and *Moving the Centre* (1993), expanded on his criticism of colonial modernity and imperialism, and examined the potential for international cooperation among oppressed peoples across the world.

Ngũgĩ opposes and challenges Eurocentric universalism with his interconnectivity model in *Globalectics*. Eurocentric universality is the idea that European culture, values, and ways of thinking are considered the standard or "universal" for judging all societies. It often ignores or marginalizes non-European perspectives, assuming that what works in Europe applies everywhere. In *Globalectics: Theory and the Politics of Knowing*, Ngũgĩ argues that "Eurocentrism presents Europe as the centre of the universe, the source of all knowledge, and the measure of all value. The rest of the world exists only in relation to Europe, often as a mere extension, reflection, or negation of it." For example, Eurocentrism might evaluate a class of literature students by their knowledge of Shakespeare, even though the class is taking place in Kenya, Egypt, or Laos. In contrast, Ngũgĩ advocates for a world in which cultures interact horizontally as opposed to vertically through the impositions of empire, drawing on the writings of decolonial philosophers such as Frantz Fanon, Steve Biko, and Amilcar Cabral.

His concept of "globalectics" imagines a multifaceted world in which all languages and histories are significant; where all perspectives are legitimate and valid in their quest to express the human experience. For Ngũgĩ, cultures interacting horizontally means engaging with each other as equals, without one dominating or imposing its values over another. It emphasizes mutual respect, dialogue, and exchange, rather than the hierarchical, top-down relationships created by colonialism and empire. He writes that "Globalization, as it is now practiced, tends to universalize the particular—that is, the European experience—while particularizing the universal—that is, the experiences of the rest of the world. The result is a global hierarchy of cultures in which Europe becomes the centre and the rest are seen as peripheral. But true global culture can only emerge from the free and equal exchange of ideas among peoples and nations, each bringing their histories, languages, and imaginations to the global table."

Furthermore, the diasporic reality and the transnational aspects of oppression and resistance are reflected in his writings from this era. He compares the African experience to that of Palestinians, African Americans, Indigenous peoples, and other marginalized groups. As he would later put it in a 2018 interview with the *Nation*:

> *Look at the Irish situation with the British. The humiliation of Native Americans, how their language was denigrated. In Africa, of course, we were forbidden to speak our mother tongues. Japan imposed its language on the Koreans. So wherever you look at modern colonialism, the acquisition of the language of the colonizer was based on the death of the languages of the colonized. So it is a war zone.[...] It is true of Africa, and anywhere where there was a colonial situation.*

In his 2009 book *Re-membering Africa*, Ngũgĩ portrays various historical struggles of resistance by African people against colonialism and its aftermath, emphasizing the importance of solidarity among oppressed peoples worldwide. His decolonial criticism is enhanced by this global viewpoint, which also places Africa within larger movements for justice, humanity and dignity. His theory of Globalectics anticipates a world liberated from hate, violence and domination. He writes: "every culture, big or small, has something to contribute to the common pool of human knowledge. The globalectic imagination sees the world as an interconnected whole, where no centre or margin exists, only the ever-flowing energies of give and take among cultures. It is in this mutual recognition and exchange that humanity will rediscover its wholeness." The book's title is a pun on the word "dismembering," with its goal being to literally "re-member" Africa in a healed world.

WHY NGŨGĨ MATTERS TODAY MORE THAN EVER

The writings of Ngũgĩ have become more relevant in the 21st century, as seen by the rise of decolonial initiatives at colleges, museums, and other cultural institutions. His lifetime endeavor is echoed by campaigns such as "Decolonize the Curriculum," the "Rhodes Must Fall" protests that aimed to remove statues of Cecil Rhodes from university campuses, and indigenous language revival initiatives.

Several contemporary global crises, too, underscore the need for Ngũgĩ's decolonial vision. African countries continue to grapple with neocolonialism and economic dependency, remaining ensnared in debt traps, exploitative trade agreements, and extractive economies dominated by foreign corporations (not to mention multinational institutions like the International Monetary Fund). Ngũgĩ's critique of postcolonial elites and their complicity in global capitalism remains strikingly relevant, highlighting how the promises of independence have often been undermined by new forms of structural exploitation. His analysis calls for vigilance against both external and internal forces that perpetuate inequality and hinder true sovereignty.

The dominance of English in the digital age, artificial intelligence, and global academia illustrates ongoing linguistic imperialism, leaving African languages marginalized and underrepresented. Ngũgĩ's insistence on linguistic justice emphasizes the need for investment in local language technologies and educational reforms, ensuring that African languages are not only preserved but also thrive as mediums of knowledge, creativity, and innovation.

Cultural hegemony and mental colonization continue to shape the global media landscape, which is heavily skewed toward Western narratives, aesthetics, and agency. African youth are disproportionately exposed to cultural products created outside Africa, which rarely reflect their realities, histories, or aspirations. Ngũgĩ challenges societies to create and sustain alternative cultural institutions rooted in indigenous values, morality, and humanism, while engaging with the wider world on equal terms.

Ngũgĩ's valorization of traditional ecological knowledge also resonates strongly in the context of the climate crisis. Indigenous practices and cosmologies offer vital insights for environmental sustainability, as demonstrated by contemporary movements in New Zealand, where indigenous communities claim rights to land and steward it according to ancestral knowledge. His work underscores the importance of integrating indigenous approaches to mitigate ecological challenges and restore harmony between humans and the earth.

Finally, education remains a crucial arena for epistemic decolonization. Ngũgĩ's vision of education as a tool of liberation rather than indoctrination advocates for inclusive, critical, and locally relevant pedagogy. By emphasizing culturally grounded curricula and critical thinking, his approach provides a roadmap for transformative education that empowers individuals and communities to challenge oppression and actively participate in shaping their futures.

A LEGACY OF HOPE AND RESISTANCE

In his last years, staying true to his political activism and speaking truth to power, Ngũgĩ sent an open letter to President William Ruto of Kenya, where he expressed concern over Kenya's alignment with the United States as a "major non-NATO ally," recently sealed in a deal with President Joe Biden. At age 86, his prose still retained its sharp edge:

> *Dear William Ruto, The images of your recent State visit to the USA were very disturbing to me and to every patriotic Kenyan. I saw you seated on a chair, grinning, while Biden stood behind you, his face beaming with satisfaction. Why not? He had just announced that you had signed off our beloved Kenya[...]*

Ngũgĩ viewed Ruto's actions as a betrayal of the nation's anti-colonial legacy. He criticized the president for becoming an "errand boy" in the West's geopolitical struggles, particularly in Africa, and for compromising Kenya's sovereignty. Ngũgĩ also highlighted the hypocrisy of supporting the U.S. while Haitians protested in the streets against a possible U.S. military intervention, calling Ruto a "slave," and urged him to reconsider his actions in light of Kenya's history and the warnings of figures like C.L.R. James against becoming the instruments and tools of global neo-imperialism.

The life and work of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o demonstrate a persistent dedication and quest for justice, cultural dignity, and emancipation. His literary writing and academic outputs are living records of possibility and resistance, rather than being artefacts from the past. Ngũgĩ challenges us to envision alternative futures based on humanism, multiplicity, memory, and collective action in a world threatened by ecological collapse, xenophobia, totalitarianism and cultural standardization.

Because he provides both critique and optimism—a revolutionary hope based on the tenacity and inventiveness of the colonized—Ngũgĩ is more important now than ever. New generations of activists, artists, and philosophers who dare to create their own history and speak in their own languages are still motivated by his writing and voice. From popular theatre to language reclamation, from academic critique to international unity, his decolonial practice provides both a diagnosis and a solution for our contemporary age. He reminds us that language is important, that culture is a battleground, that the fight for decolonization is not finished, and that the mind, once freed, is capable of envisioning and creating better societies and nations. ⚜

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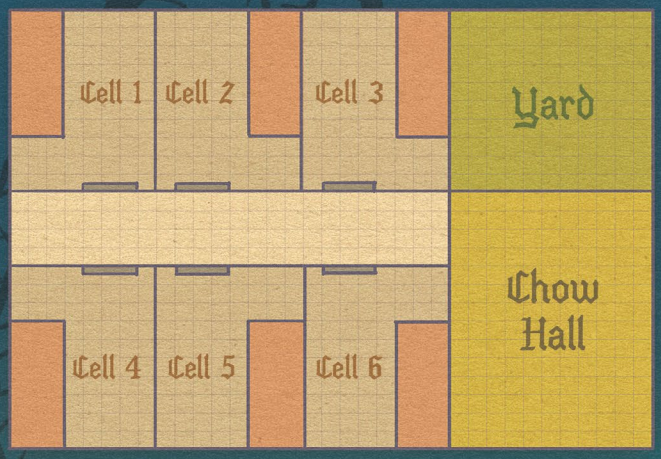

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No matter which way you roll, that's right:

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ROOT BEER
CREW

NO COUNTRY FOR YOUNG CHILDREN

BY **EMILY TOPPING**

The year is 2007 and a school bus filled with several dozen kids is rolling through the barren New Mexico desert, approaching the outskirts of an abandoned ghost town. According to the creators of *Kid Nation*, these children are on their way to right their ancestors' wrongs.

"This is Bonanza City—or what's left of it, anyway," declares a voiceover, as the camera pans across the wooden frame of a dusty Western saloon. "The pioneers who ran this place back in the 1800s ran it into the ground. Now, 40 *new* pioneers will try to fix their forefathers' mistakes and build a town that works… and the best part: they're all children."

The shocking part: there were no grown-ups. For five weeks, a group of 8 to 14-year-olds from across the country were dumped onto a desolate movie set town and told to form a society. The only adults around were the omnipresent camera crew, who, like nature documentarians, were instructed not to intervene. (A handful of off-screen medics and child psychologists were also available in case of emergency.) The kids had to cook their own meals, keep warm in sleeping bags huddled on the floor, and haul water from an outdoor spigot—until the pipes froze. All the while, they were encouraged to address the more complicated aspects of adult life, from religious strife to political differences. Somehow, the entire thing was greenlit to be broadcast on primetime television.

The short-lived reality show aired on CBS for one magical and morally questionable season before legal threats and spooked advertisers relegated it to the stuff of legend. Nearly 20 years later, *Kid Nation* has developed a cult following, inspiring Reddit threads, rewatches, and impassioned debates over childhood exploitation. Ostensibly, the show's producers set out to conduct a social experiment in response to an age-old question: *Would the world be better off in the hands of children?* But it was never a fair game. At first, the pint-sized participants actually worked remarkably well together—splitting chores democratically and making decisions as a team—but soon enough, the invisible adults in charge couldn't help infusing a little class warfare. Despite the show's stated goal of allowing kids to "build a town that works," the producers quickly imposed a social structure: an "Upper Class" group earning a dollar per hour doing whatever they liked, while the "Laborers" scrubbed toilets for next to nothing.

If you can find it, *Kid Nation* makes for an insane watch. (The show isn't currently available to stream anywhere; I had to hunt down a Google Drive folder of pirated episodes.) Viewed in a certain light, the show is a brilliant—and at times gut-wrenching—time capsule of a bygone era, one in which Americans still assumed some vague hope for our children's futures. Yet rather than allow those children to build something better, *Kid Nation* constructs an infuriating miniature replica of life in this country: a place where compulsory systems of capitalism and consumerism suffocate the human instinct to care for each other. If the show's creators intended to create a bitingly satirical class commentary, they did a damn good job—it just happened to be at the expense of elementary schoolers.

The first episode features an inconsolable child named Jimmy, wiping tears and snot from his face as it dawns on him that no grown-ups, in fact, are coming to help: "I'm only eight and I'm in the third grade. I think I'm too young to be doing this," he blubbers. You're right, Jimmy. You absolutely are. Now get up and go scrub that toilet, a CBS executive is counting on you!

Host Jonathan Karsh introducing a solid gold star, at the time worth $20,000

After arriving in Bonanza City, the illusion of self-governance is broken before the kids even have time to figure out where they might sleep (hint: it's the cold, hard ground). Four child leaders have been preselected by the producers for their "potential"—two boys and two girls—and are anointed "the city council." Every few days, the council kids enter a secret shack, where they consult an old-timey pioneer journal for advice on how to run the town. The journal was apparently written by the mysterious founder of the city, who laments that the original settlement collapsed and expresses hope the kids will "do better." The irony is never addressed that whoever wrote this book is clearly unqualified to give advice, since his own town went bankrupt. Oh, well. In His first revelation, *Kid Nation*'s mysterious God-like figure tells them to split into four groups.

Once the kids pick who they want on each team, the producers introduce the real twist: a rotating class ladder. Every few days, the town competes in choreographed challenges (think *Survivor*-esque giant puzzles, rope swings, sheep-wrangling, etc.), and whichever team wins becomes the "Upper Class" until the next round. Second place becomes "Merchants," third place "Cooks," and the losers become "Laborers"—faction names so on the nose that you almost wonder if *Kid Nation*'s producers were socialists after all. Because the children didn't know *why* they were splitting into teams in the first place, the groups are also wildly unfair: one team with two 14-year-old boys consistently dominates against another of mostly 8-year-olds, earning the top spot again and again.

Those who become Upper Class are free to do whatever they want all day, but spend most of their time in the candy shop, earning whole dollars per hour to hand out sweets from behind a polished counter. The Laborers wake before dawn to tote buckets of drinking water and, of course, to scrub the communal town latrine. (The children are originally given one toilet to share among 40 people, until they later earn more by winning a challenge. Oh, and they were also forced to earn toothbrushes.)

The show frames this tiered system as "incentive." But what it actually instills is the moral schema of capitalism: your worth is how little filth you touch. Labor is not dignified; labor is punishment, and the goal of a good life is not contribution, but escape. What's most insidious is that the kids do not vote on this structure. They do not choose it. It is the water in which they are made to swim. The show's question—can children build a fair society?—is never actually asked. The real question becomes: *How efficiently will children learn to administer inequality when adults decree it natural?*

Some kids refuse to give in to the shame. When 12-year-old Laurie's team comes last yet again, she grins while picking up a broom, "This is the job, this is what makes the community run." (Laurie's hard-working nature stands opposite to the show's one consistent villain, a 10-year-old who claims "pageant girls don't do dishes.")

But *Kid Nation*'s real incentive lasts beyond the confines of the show. Each episode, the city council chooses one lucky townsperson to reward with a solid gold star, worth 20,000 real American dollars. By the end of the season, it's worth $50K. The star provides no immediate impact during filming, except that whoever earns it is allowed to call their parents with the good news—a prize that likely means much more to an 8-year-old. The introduction of the star immediately throws the children into a tizzy, with some saying they need the cash for college, while others pledge to give it to their Mom and Dad.

These phone calls are the only time we see an adult, besides the host, throughout the entire show. One has to wonder, watching these parents answer a call from their far-off child—the first time they've heard their tiny voice in weeks—what the hell they were thinking to agree to this. Years after the show premiered, a leaked version of the *Kid Nation* participation agreement appeared online, detailing a dizzyingly long list of possible consequences:

> *[G]eneral exposure to extremes of heat and cold; crime; water hazards; floods; drowning; treacherous terrain; collision with objects, including those submerged below water surfaces; … falling rocks and object(s); crevasses, cliffs, and rock avalanches; encounters with wild or domesticated animals; acts of God (e.g., earthquakes); food poisoning, encounters with dangerous flora and fauna; … loss of orientation (getting lost) in primitive areas; exhaustion, dehydration, fatigue, over-exertion and sun or heat stroke.*

By signing the form, children also agree not to enter "personal and/or sexual relationships" with other contestants—and parents agree that if they do, all risks are assumed, including "sexually transmitted diseases, HIV, and pregnancy." The document doesn't even tell families *where the child will be sent*; only that it's a "remote location" in a "less developed and wilderness area." What could possibly possess a parent to accept those terms? Could it all really boil down to the following sentence, promising the possibility of "a grand prize of substantial value"?

One of *Kid Nation*'s first real moral quandaries is a matter of life or death. The kids are provided an assortment of food upon arriving, but only a limited selection of canned fruit, dry goods, and whatever eggs are collected from the chicken coop. It's hardly a nutritionally-dense menu, and after their first attempt to cook a large vat of macaroni goes awry, the kids are left spooning a thick, starchy paste for dinner. Interestingly, the concept of killing

an animal for meat is never considered—until a newly revealed section in that pesky pioneer book reminds them that chickens "are good for more than just eggs."

The villagers put it to a vote. "As Shakespeare would say: to kill or not kill?" muses one wiry little boy in thick-rimmed glasses. The decision is far from unanimous, but the kids narrowly agree to kill two chickens for protein's sake. They reckon that while people in the real world can be vegetarians, *those* people have access to vegetables and tofu: luxuries they haven't been afforded. One girl named Emilie—a 9-year-old with chubby cheeks and a thick Southern drawl—is aghast. She conspires with two other children to lock themselves in the chicken coop and protect their feathered friends from getting their necks wrung. ("Like they did Saddam Hussein?!" one kid gasps, reminding viewers that the show was, in fact, filmed in 2007.) Eventually though, the adorable eco-terrorists are coaxed away from their stakeout after conceding that the vote was democratic and they have no right to overrule it.

A teen boy named Greg says he's worked in a butcher shop before, and he assumes the task of axing the birds' heads over a wooden stump. The blade comes down; the decapitated chicken keeps flapping its wings. Greg assures his horrified audience that it's only reflexes—the animal died instantly. That night, Emilie is filmed refusing a bowl of chicken noodle soup, fighting back tears.

It is one of the most shocking moments of the series, not only because you watch a group of kids hack a chicken with an axe, but because they hadn't really *wanted* to. If they'd been given a better selection of supplies—or been stationed in a climate where they could grow food themselves—they might not have felt the need to kill an animal. They didn't even consider it before the producers' suggestion. What would have happened if the kids had gone with their original execution method of breaking the chickens' necks? What if the animal didn't die right away? Would a camera operator have intervened before an 8-year-old struggled to suffocate a bird using their bare hands?

Like many moments in the series, it feels like *Kid Nation* was making unfair commentary on its subjects. *See, it's human nature*, the show seems to whisper. It's like if a *National Geographic* photographer set a steel trap in the woods, filmed an animal stepping in it, then said: *Look, it's only natural for a wolf to gnaw off its own leg.*

Clearly, the producers had a predetermined vision of lone children devolving into violence and lawlessness—a plot not-so-subtly borrowed from one of the 20th-century's most famous novels. In a pre-release press tour, *Kid Nation* producer Tom Forman acknowledged the comparison: "The minute we started talking about it, we stopped and said, 'Are we making a reality 'Lord of the Flies'?' and said, 'Well, there will be *elements*.'"

The thing is, William Golding's 1954 novel was an explicitly political piece of work. Golding said himself that his goal in writing it was "to trace the defects of society back to the defects of human nature." The book expresses a deeply pessimistic worldview, and one that gets at a fundamental political question: what *is* human nature, anyway? For conservatives like Golding, human nature is always the same, and unless systems like religion, tradition, and authority keep them in check, humans are doomed to fall into the same old patterns of selfishness and brutality. (The author's memoir makes you wonder if this darkly cynical perspective was a projection: in it, he confesses a "monstrous" side to his character, including the time he attempted to rape a young girl as a teenager.)

According to Golding's ethos, if you take away rules and parents and strand kids on an island, they'll tear each other apart. Therefore any attempt to reform or elevate human societies, and most of all to make them more *equal*, is doomed. As he put it, "the shape of a society must depend on the ethical nature of the individual and not on any political system, however apparently logical or respectable." The idea draws its basic outlines from Christianity, with its doctrine of original sin and innate corruption, solvable only by divine intervention, and it's always invoked to prevent social change.

The problem with this worldview, of course, is that it isn't true. Throughout history, when humans find themselves in the darkest crises, they do *not* fall into *Lord of the Flies* style carnage. They help each other out, lift each other up. Even in the Nazi death camps, there are accounts of prisoners sharing their rations with each other, or propping each other up when the guards came around to inspect them. As the Irish Marxist Paul O'Flinn wrote in his brilliant critique of Golding, the mere fact that everyone is literate enough to read his novel in high school shows that society *has* progressed since past eras:

> *[T]hat William Golding is able to raise the question of the decline of superior cultural standards, and that you and I and the compositor can eavesdrop on his complaint, is evidence of immense progress. Formerly; you'd have been illiterate, I'd have been a serf and the compositor would have been dead, so none of the three of us would have given a twopenny damn about declining cultural standards.*

Even in *Kid Nation*, we can see that selfishness and competition were not the kids' first instinct. It had to be introduced artificially by the CBS producers, who were concerned with chasing ratings and making money. Of course, unlike in *Lord of the Flies*, none of the *Kid Nation* contestants crush each other to death with rocks or set the forest ablaze. But the show's creators seemed prepared for the possibility: "That said, like every reality show, there are adults off-camera waiting to step in if kids got violent. They didn't," Forman said. Perhaps a tiny part of them hoped they would.

Despite producers' clear attempts to stoke division, in many instances the children show an impressive natural tendency towards acceptance. During Episode Four, the pioneer book suggests that the children establish a place of prayer: "You're probably so busy feeding the town that you don't have time to feed your soul," it reads. "If you want to do better, you might want to have a little faith and hold a service. The question is: do you do it all together, or do you split everyone up based on beliefs?" Like class division, it's just assumed that traditional religion is something the *Kid Nation* must have; they're never given the option to be fully secular, or to invent *new* religious beliefs or practices. (Although one 14-year-old, Sophia, says she "stopped believing in God a while ago.")

That day, the city council announces that there will be a mandatory worship session in the town square, during which all citizens can share their various religions—but the children revolt, claiming it will start arguments: "There's been wars over religion," warns one kid. "Like, with real guns and stuff." Sensing the need to get a better gauge of the town demographics, a precocious 9-year-old named Alex takes it upon himself to perform a census, running around the cabins with a notebook to record each child's creed. (His theological knowledge is impressive: despite the fact

that none of the children seem to identify as Muslim, there is both a "Shi'ite" and a "Sunni" option on the crayon-drawn form.) But when the time comes for the state-sanctioned worship session, nobody shows up.

Later that night, the kids decide to throw their own impromptu—and optional—religious service. Gathering around a trash can fire, they hold hands in prayer, thanking God for providing them such good friends throughout this experience. A Jewish child sings a hymn in Hebrew, while the other kids nod along. An 8-year-old is so moved by the experience that the dim light of the fire illuminates a tear streaming down his face: "It really touched me," he says, hiccuping.

At the next day's challenge—perhaps seeking *one last opportunity* to incite warfare—the producers offer the kids two prize options: a mini-golf course or a set of ten different religious books. The children pick the latter. Back at camp, they flip through the texts together, noting that both the Torah and the Bible begin with "Genesis." For a fleeting moment, *Kid Nation* looks almost like the experiment it claimed to be, and its children choose curiosity over conflict.

From the beginning, *Kid Nation* existed in a legal grey zone that CBS sprinted to occupy. In April of 2007, two days after the series started shooting, New Mexico Gov. Bill Richardson signed an anti-child labor law limiting children to nine hours of work per day on film sets. The state opened an investigation into the production, but CBS lawyers argued that because the new law was not scheduled to go into effect until June—one month after filming wrapped—they were technically in compliance.

To avoid other existing labor protections, producers insisted the children weren't working at all, they were at "summer camp." New Mexico state officials countered that *summer camps have rules too* (like allowing children toothbrushes and showers) but the inquiry was eventually closed.

The sprawling 22-page waiver that parents signed, disavowing the network of responsibility for almost every imaginable form of injury, proved necessary. Eleven-year-old Divad Miles suffered a grease burn on her face while cooking for the group—an injury that caused her mother to file a complaint alleging abuse and child-labor violations. Producer Tom Forman responded: "This seems to be a parent who regrets the decision to sign her child up for *Kid Nation*," and no charges were ultimately filed. Ambulances were reportedly called more than once, including the time four children accidentally drank bleach from a mislabeled container in the town saloon (this incident never made it onto the show). Still, many parents expressed no regrets, with the mom of one 10-year-old claiming her son "came home a stronger, more confident and more self-reliant child."

Ultimately, the show was cancelled after a single season. Its creator went on to produce several more reality TV gems, including, but not limited to: *Little Chocolatiers*, which follows a candy-making couple with dwarfism; *The Wiener's Circle*, based on a crew of kooky hot dog vendors and their shenanigans; *Sex Box*, in which troubled couples have sex in a box, then speak about it with a therapist; and *My Teen is Pregnant and So Am I* (self explanatory).

Often—in the crudest and most exploitative format possible—reality TV attempts to answer our deepest human curiosities: How do the wealthy live? The poor? The disabled? How do people fall in love? How do families act behind closed doors? What are humans, at their core, truly like?

The questions posed by *Kid Nation* don't exist in a vacuum. The show is deeply rooted in a 2007 landscape: issues of violence, religion, and national identity are posed against the backdrop of the War on Terror—sometimes explicitly, when the children reference Saddam Hussein or George W. Bush. While the children are attempting to forge their own society, the viewer is reminded what it means to be American.

But *Kid Nation* also plays into the same cultural script that *Lord of the Flies* did more than 50 years before: the belief that human beings, when left to their own devices, slide toward chaos and cruelty. It's the same worldview that made the Stanford Prison Experiment famous in the 1970s, a study long treated as proof that ordinary people will become sadistic the moment they are handed power. Decades later, previously unpublished recordings revealed that the experiment's "guards" were coached to be brutal. In fact, one of the study's most memorable moments—when a prisoner descended into madness, furiously kicking a door to escape and proclaiming "Jesus Christ, I'm burning up inside!"—was revealed to be fiction. "I took it as a kind of an improv exercise," the participant later told reporter Ben Blum. "I believed that I was doing what the researchers wanted me to do." When researchers attempted a similar project in 2002, the BBC Prison Study, the opposite happened: the participants didn't descend into tyranny, they organized collectively and eventually overthrew the hierarchy. (Incidentally, the BBC study was also broadcast on television as a reality show called *The Experiment*.)

This myth of innate human depravity resurfaces again and again in moments of crisis. After Hurricane Katrina decimated New Orleans in 2005, leaving thousands of citizens in desperate need of government help, national reporters repeated lurid, unfounded stories of murders, assaults, and roving gangs inside the New Orleans Superdome. In a desperate outburst to news reporters, New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin said people inside the building had witnessed "hooligans killing people, raping people." In reality, no one was murdered inside the facility. Later investigation showed no credible evidence of sexual assaults. Instead, across the city, it was the *rumors* of opportunistic and violent looting—rooted in racism—that actually caused some of the disaster's most harrowing tragedies, at the hands of the police. Yet national authorities hesitated to send help, not because the people were dangerous, but because the *myth* said they must be.

Kid Nation is built on that same assumption: not that children might cooperate, but that they will inevitably crack apart without adult control. So the producers didn't wait to see whether a community could form—they engineered a class system first, and then filmed children adapting to it as if it were their own idea.

In the end, the show didn't expose some feral, selfish child-id struggling to build a world without guidance. It exposed the opposite: an uncoached instinct toward fairness and friendship, until a hierarchy was lowered onto them from above. The children never invented inequality, but they were handed it, rewarded for administering it, and televised learning to justify it. Left alone, they built cooperation. And that is the quiet tragedy of the show: it accidentally proved that children *can* imagine a better society. It's the adults who refuse to let them keep it.

But goddammit, if it didn't make for great television. ⚜

"SMALL ACTS, MULTIPLIED BY MILLIONS, CAN CHANGE THE WORLD" — Howard Zinn

"YOU CAN'T BE NEUTRAL ON A MOVING TRAIN" — Howard Zinn

"THE JAILS ARE FULL OF PETTY THIEVES, AND ALL THE WHILE THE GRAND THIEVES ARE RUNNING THE COUNTRY" — Howard Zinn

ZINN

QUOTES IN A CAN

NOW AVAILABLE IN:

WHY THE INTERNET IS TURNING TO SHIT

CORY DOCTOROW is the author of over 20 books, including *The Internet Con, How to Destroy Surveillance Capitalism*, and the science fiction novels *Unauthorized Bread* and *Down and Out in the Magic Kingdom*. He's also an activist for civil liberties on the internet with the Electronic Frontier Foundation, and a prolific blogger at his website *Pluralistic*. Doctorow joined *Current Affairs* editor-in-chief Nathan J. Robinson and associate editor Alex Skopic to discuss his new book, *Enshittification: Why Everything Suddenly Got Worse and What to Do About It.*

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

NATHAN J. ROBINSON
People might have, if they've used the internet and various platforms, a vague ambient sense that things they once loved—things that seemed to work—no longer seem to work as well. And you are here to tell them that this feeling is not an illusion, but is, in fact, a real phenomenon, which you have christened "enshittification." So what's going on?

CORY DOCTOROW
Enshittification makes an observation about the pattern through which platforms decay. It hypothesizes a reason why that decay is happening now, and it proposes a solution. So the pattern, I think, is very recognizable: a platform in the beginning is good to its end users; it finds a way to lock those end users in; once it's hard for those end users to depart, it makes things worse for everyone to make things better for the shareholders and for the executives at the firm.

ROBINSON
So you're describing a process by which—you give case studies of Amazon, Google, Facebook, and Apple—they deteriorate or get worse. Now, can you explain a little more what you mean by something getting worse?

DOCTOROW
So I'll give you a very concrete example from Google, one that we have hard evidence for. So you may have felt when you use Google that it feels like the search results aren't as good. There's actually a reason for this. Last year, the Department of Justice sued Google for antitrust violations; they served discovery notices on Google executives' memos, and then they published a bunch of them, and in that evidentiary record, we see an epic struggle that played out at Google about the quality of Google Search.

In 2019, Google had hit a wall. Their search growth had stalled out, for the very good reason that they had a 90 percent search market share. It wasn't like they could convince more people to use search, and it wasn't like they could convince us to use search more. We were already typing every fool thing that came into our head into a Google search box. And so how are you going to grow? Well, you could breed a billion humans to maturity and hope they become Google Search customers. That is Google Classroom. It takes a minute for that to mature into a viable growth strategy. In the meantime, they want to keep [Wall] Street happy. They want to show growth.

And so this guy, Prabhakar Raghavan, who's the head of Google Search revenue—he's an ex-Yahoo and ex-McKinsey guy—has a solution. He says, *Why don't we make search worse?* So what we'll do is we'll take all the things we use to one-shot your query—so you search for trousers, and we also search for pants. You make a spelling error, and we try and correct it. You make a search that relates to something in *Current Affairs*—someone throws a submarine sandwich at a National Guardsman, you search for submarine sandwich, and we put something about that story near the top. So we're very likely to get you your response in one go. We take that stuff out. So now you have to search twice. You type "submarine sandwich" and you don't get your query. You have to type "submarine sandwich National Guardsman DC." Well, now you've done two queries. There have been two chances to show you ads.

Now, if Google had viable competitors—if it hadn't been bribing Apple to the tune of $20 billion a year not to make a rival search engine; bought the default search placement on every browser, every mobile carrier, every OS; and bought the shelf space—there might have been some viable competitors to Google. There aren't any. They're not just too big to fail now. They're too big to care. And so when [Google technologist] Ben Gomes says, "I would feel icky if we made our search worse," Prabhakar Raghavan says, "But we will be richer if we make the search worse." Now, there was a time when Ben Gomes could have said, "I will feel icky, and we will be poorer if we make the search worse." But once that argument goes out the window, he loses the argument, and that's why Google Search sucks.

ROBINSON
Well, they did take "Don't be evil" out of the corporate charters.

DOCTOROW
And I have had my fellow leftists say things like, *Isn't this just capitalism?* Well, here's the thing: Google Search used to be better. So if it's just capitalism, you need a theory about why it was better. And given that we can point to specific policy choices that were made that allowed Google Search to get worse, that allowed them to get worse without losing money, you have to explain why those policy choices were inevitable because we have had different policy environments. This policy environment, historically, is very weird. It is quite enshittogenic. It encourages firms to make bad choices.

ROBINSON
Another Cory Doctorow coinage.

DOCTOROW
Oh, I have coinage. We are living in the enshittocene. I'm in favor of disenshittification. My adversaries are anti-disenshittifiers. I can do this all day like a Latin student.

But the fact is that Google, once upon a time, had better incentives, and they didn't have better incentives because they were better people. They had better incentives because our policymakers attended to the likely outcomes of bad policies, and they made better ones.

What we did with Google was, we said, *No, you can tap the capital markets and buy anyone you want to buy.* So Google is a company that has had one successful in-house product launch. It was a search engine that they made a millennium ago, and in the current millennium, virtually everything they've made in-house was a failure, and virtually every success they've had was someone else's company that they bought and operationalized.

They are not Willy Wonka's Idea Factory. They're rich Uncle Pennybags, and they bought all the other kids' toys. And we could have just stopped them from doing that. We did stop many

firms from doing that. That is how they became too big to care.

ROBINSON
I was trying to remember what else they had made, and I was like, the glasses!

DOCTOROW
Google Video. Orkut. Google Plus.

ALEX SKOPIC
Google Plus was their Facebook imitator that never went anywhere.

DOCTOROW
Yes. They've had lots of failures, and actually, where they've had successes in sectors, it's often after their own effort failed. So Google Video failed, and YouTube succeeded. That's someone else's company. So you see this up and down the stack, from A to Z, as they say in the whole alphabet.

And it's not just Google. And the mergers that were waved through were waved through even when the firms in question explicitly said they were for anti-competitive purposes. So Mark Zuckerberg is a guy who's never had a bad idea he didn't put in writing, and this should nominally make it very easy to stop him from doing bad things.

When he was buying Instagram, his CFO sent him a memo and said, "Mark, why are we spending a billion dollars on a company with 12 employees?" And he said, "Well, I think you'll find that people like Instagram better than Facebook. They leave Facebook, they go to Instagram, and they don't come back. We should buy Instagram so that we can recapture those users." This is a guy who also periodically and frequently put into writing his motto, *It is better to buy than to compete.*

So this goes in front of the Obama DOJ, and they're like, *We see nothing wrong with this.* So this is like if he'd sent him an email that said, *Bob, you know that guy we're going to kill? For the record, I want you to know this is a murder. And as I type these words, I am premeditating it.* And if you cannot stop a merger on that basis, you cannot stop any mergers. And so no one came down from a mount with two stone tablets and said, *We're going to let these companies buy each other.*

SKOPIC
You mentioned that it's a long-standing problem. It's a bipartisan problem. And you mentioned in your book that as you were writing it, Trump got elected for his second term and reshuffled a lot of things with antitrust policy, getting rid of [former Federal Trade Commission leader] Lina Khan. And then, of course, all the tech billionaires were there at his inauguration. You had Zuckerberg and his crew just lined up. So how much worse has it gotten since you wrote the book and since Trump came back?

DOCTOROW
It's gotten much worse in America, I'll tell you that much. So I predicted at the time, and I think I was right, that he would practice what I call boss politics antitrust.

So I don't think Biden became an anti-corporate guy in 2020 after a lifetime in service of corporations, but I do think that the party had a faction—the Sanders-Warren wing—that was powerful enough that [Biden] had to give these appointments to good people in the competition brief. And what they did was they took a list of all the corporations in America that had violated antitrust law, which is pretty much all of them, and they sorted it by which companies were doing the worst things to Americans. And they started at the top.

Trump did the same thing, except he sorted it by the people who made him angriest, and they started at the top, and he has been a remarkably cheap date. So when he took office, Juniper and Cisco had proposed a $14 billion merger. That's effectively all the industrial Wi-Fi access points, all the industrial networking stuff. So if you're in an institutional building and you look at the ceiling, you'll probably see a beige disk that's doing your Wi-Fi; it's probably either a Cisco or Juniper gadget.

So his Department of Justice challenged this merger, and they hired a MAGA podcaster influencer for a million bucks. That guy started hanging around the fifth floor of the DOJ building like a bad smell—that's where the antitrust division is—just grabbing people on their way out of their offices and shouting at them about trying to stop this merger. Meanwhile, Laura Loomer took to Twitter, started @ing Trump, and condemned the number two and number three persons of the DOJ antitrust division. She managed to get them both fired. The merger went ahead; a million bucks to greenlight a $14 billion merger is a steal.

However, this is a thing that I think a lot of leftists have not clocked—and it's only gotten more interesting since the Trump years. It is a bedrock of political science. There's a big, famous 2014 Princeton study where they studied 2,500 policy outcomes and concluded that public opinion has no outcome on policy preferences. Things billionaires don't want don't happen; things billionaires *do* want *do* happen.

And yet, for this whole decade, we have seen massive antitrust surges in Canada, where I'm from. (Like all the best Americans, I'm Canadian.) Our Competition Bureau was the weakest in the world. In its whole history, it had challenged three mergers and been successful no times. In 2024, Justin Trudeau, hardly an enemy of corporate power, whipped his caucus to pass a bill making them the most powerful competition regulator in the world. In the U.K., the Competition Markets Authority, under a series of completely shambolic Tory governments, did more work on antitrust, on competition, than their predecessors for 40 years. This happened in the EU with the Digital Markets Act and the Digital Services Act. In Singapore, South Korea, Japan, and China. The laws of political science have been repealed; water has started flowing uphill.

And the thing is that everywhere that is not America has become very cognizant of the fact that U.S. tech companies are an arm of U.S. political power, that the U.S. considers its former trading partners to be rival nations, and that it will use the tech companies to attack them. And everywhere in the world, we have seen a rapid acceleration of muscular antitrust, muscular movements to break away from American tech, to weaken its power abroad. So this is very exciting.

I wouldn't wish Trump on anyone, but if life gives you SARS, you make sarsaparilla.

SKOPIC
So do you think that that sort of sea change, and that surge in antitrust, is because the constituents of these politicians are demanding it organically? Or are the non-U.S. billionaires worried about their

U.S. counterparts? Or is it both?

DOCTOROW

I think it's a little of everything. So there's this idea in finance, Stein's law, that anything that can't go on forever eventually stops. I think people are really sick to the back teeth of concentrated corporate power. And I think that while they haven't put their finger on it, there is a sense that a lot of our problems—genocide, climate inaction, xenophobia, authoritarianism, worsening labor conditions—are all downstream of concentrated power.

It's just a sense that we're living in a new Gilded Age, that something very bad is going on, and that even if you're not an antitrust wonk, people are like, *I think maybe anti-monopoly law has something to do with stopping power from being concentrated.* They've at least played the board game.

And so there's some kind of inchoate but palpable tailwind for this stuff. You can think of politicians as just throwing out lots of stuff and listening for the echo, and so when they say stuff about antitrust, they get a roar. Those people are starting to push, and then I do think there's a fair bit of billionaire-on-trillionaire violence. I think Daniel Ek, CEO of Spotify, is really angry that Apple and Google are taking 30 cents of every euro he makes. And I think that the owner of Epic Games is very angry that 30 cents out of every dollar they make is disappearing. I think Rupert Murdoch is very fucked off that 51 cents out of every ad dollar is disappearing into Meta and Google. So there is something about this odd coalition, this informal coalition, that has spurred action. I don't think any of them on their own would have been enough, but I think all of them together are.

ROBINSON

Do you see any possibility of solving the collective action problem? There have been efforts to create alternatives to Twitter, and it's really difficult. People see Twitter as now just absolutely overflowing with Nazism and horrible, horrible slop.

DOCTOROW

Slop, porn, scams, bots. Yes.

ROBINSON

Facebook's full of AI slop. So there's a lot of desire, but as you say, the lock-in, the collective action thing, is very difficult to surmount. Do you see all the action as needing to discipline the companies because we're not going to get people onto something else?

DOCTOROW

Oh, I think one of the things that disciplines the company is the threat of departure. If you have to worry about someone leaving[...] take a market that is full of monopolists and would-be monopolists. Mobile phones. And landline as well, although they're less important these days. A couple of decades ago, we made a law that said mobile phones have to let you take your phone number with you. If you want to move from Sprint to T-Mobile, you do 10 seconds of administrative work and you jump ship. And that has been massively powerful at disciplining those firms. Now, there's no reason you couldn't apply that to social media, and there are two ways you could apply it.

You could say, like the standard used for mobile phones to do number porting, here's a standard for allowing people who leave Twitter and go to Bluesky or Mastodon to still see the messages on Twitter that matter to them.

And a lot of people are focused on building alternatives, and rightly so. I get why they're doing it, but that's like saying, "Those people in East Germany have such low standards of housing, so we're going to build some really good housing for them here in West Germany," not thinking about how they're going to get over the wall. And then you're like, we built all this housing for the East Germans. Why haven't they moved in?

ROBINSON

Yes, right.

DOCTOROW

Mr. Musk, tear down that wall.

SKOPIC

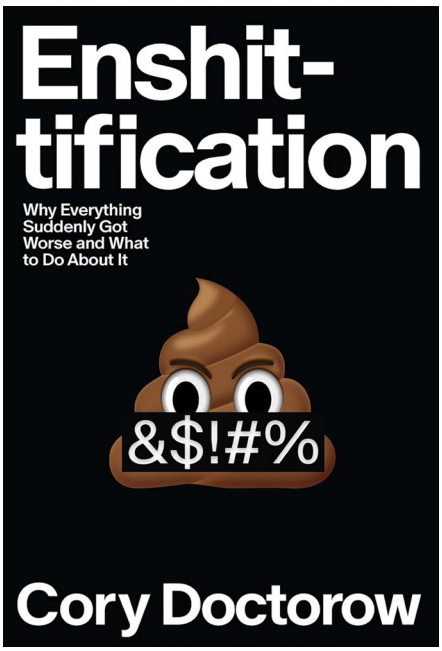
So another thing that I want to ask about is the enshittification of our technology and the downstream effect that has on our economy, which is also being enshittified. You had a blog post a couple of days ago on *Pluralistic* about the AI bubble. There was this report that came out a little while ago that said, basically, there has been virtually no economic growth in the U.S. other than AI. And we can see that a big part of enshittification is that these tech companies like Microsoft and Google are just shoehorning AI into things, in increasingly desperate ways, where nobody wanted AI.

So how worried do you think we should be that enshittification is also going to lead to a sort of cataclysmic, 2008-style economic collapse?

DOCTOROW

I think this is a very serious concern. I actually write when I'm anxious, so I wrote another book over the summer about AI. It's called *The Reverse-Centaur's Guide to Life After AI*, and it's about this bubble. And it's about a fairly sui generis critique. I think I have a somewhat different critique than most people when we talk about AI, particularly about the labor and copyright issues, which I think are very important, but people get wrong.

To understand the kind of material basis for the AI bubble, you have to understand the paradox of a monopoly and its relationship to the capital markets. So when companies are growing, the market values them very highly. So a growth stock trades at a much higher price-to-earnings ratio. So for every dollar you bring in, your share is worth, say, $10 or $20 or $30. That is your price-to-earnings ratio. The price-earnings ratio for a grow-



ing firm is much larger than for a mature firm. And the thing about growth stock is it's very liquid, and people will accept it in lieu of dollars. And so if you want to acquire a rival firm to grow, or if you're Mark Zuckerberg and you want to pay some AI scientist $100 million, you don't use cash to hire those people or buy those firms. They use stock.

If you make cash on the premises, the Treasury Department will break the door down and arrest you. But you make stock on the premises by typing zeros into a spreadsheet. And so if you imagine a mature firm bidding against a growth firm, the mature firm has to get dollars from creditors or from customers. The growth firm sits down at the spreadsheet and just types more zeros. They always win these bidding wars.

So growth begets growth, but once growth ends, it's very hard to start the machine again. And there is a natural end to growth when you're a monopolist, because once you have conquered your market, you have nowhere to go. So Facebook does pivot to video, and then we have Metaverse, blockchain, augmented reality, extended reality, NFTs, shitcoins—we have all of those things, and then we get AI, and now we get super intelligence.

SKOPIC
So they're sort of passing the same money back and forth.

DOCTOROW
Yes, and it's not even money. This is like your kid comes in and says, "Dad, can I have some lemons, sugar, and water?" They open a lemonade stand. No one buys any of the lemonade. So you go out and you buy all the lemonade from your kid, and your kid announces that they've made $10 today. This is the level of econ grift that we're going for. It's very funny because these are not sophisticated scams. They're pushing on an open door here, to be fair. The market wants to be fooled. So leaving aside all the questions about what AI can do and can't do, and the election disinformation, deepfake porn, whatever it is, it's economically terrifying. And I don't think it's going to be like 2008; I think it's going to make 2008 look like the good old days. It's going to be fucking bad.

ROBINSON
Okay, encouraging there.

SKOPIC
Wow. So, as you said, there's basically no situation you see where this doesn't go south fairly quickly.

DOCTOROW
Yes, I don't know when it's going to be. The market can remain irrational, blah, blah, blah. But I don't think this stuff has a future. Not as foundation models. I think the number of foundation models we will have in a few years could be zero, and it's certainly not going to be the number of foundation models we have today.

SKOPIC
I wrote the review of your book for the magazine, and then I was left with a question at the end. You lay out, I think very correctly, the diagnosis. You say all of this is due to the root cause of the companies having no more checks on them, and wanting as much money as possible, and just degrading the experience and raking in as much cash as possible.

But then for the solution you come to, you lay out these four or five things. You talk about unionization in the tech sector, antitrust policy, and three or four others. And you use this metaphor of the lever: the capitalist goes into his office, and he yanks the shit lever as hard as possible, and all of these other things gum up the lever so it won't move. And so it seems like the solution you come to is a sort of stalemate, where the capitalists are still there. They're still in charge of their companies, but they have checks and balances. It's regulated capitalism.

We're a socialist magazine, so I guess the question I have is, instead of a stalemate like that, why should we not be going for total victory? Why should we not just get rid of the capitalists and nationalize these platforms? They position themselves as the public square, so why should we not make them public property?

DOCTOROW
So I think there is a role for public intervention here. But I don't want Viktor Orbán to be my ISP. I don't want Donald Trump to be my content moderator. And I think there is a way to have public intervention into this system such that you can have a pluralized base of power, some of which is provided through a purely public option, some of which is provided through worker-owned cooperatives, nonprofits, for-profit small firms, tinkerers, and even through large firms, but where the ability for any one of those to do something bad is quite curtailed.

Because we all know about nonprofits that are terrible to work for. We all know about governments that have gone bad. I don't think there's a static configuration in which we should trust that, but what we can do is create shared infrastructure. So let's use, kind of as a metaphor: fiber in the ground. There is no such thing as fiber without government intervention. It doesn't matter how Ayn-Rand-pilled you are; you cannot get a piece of fiber on the pole outside every person's house with market clearing. Ask any economist, and they'll tell you the person who controls the linchpin of that network is going to charge you the entire sum that you expect to bring in from it, minus one penny. Because they've got you over a barrel.

So you have to have some way to clear it through this thicket of property rights. And that's governments. Governments come in and they create rights of way, and every phone company is a socialist enterprise in that regard. So fiber is very, very fast. Fiber is millions of times faster than satellite. Thousands of times faster than copper. And if you lay conduit, which is literally just a plastic tube that you stick in the ground, you can put more fiber through it, so every strand of fiber can be joined by more. So imagine if we have public investment, both in the rights-of-way and in the conduit, and then we have a public fiber network.

So that can be your ISP. You can sign up. Your library might administer it, or your town might administer it. Whatever. You can have something in addition to that, called essential facility sharing. So this used to be a feature of telecom policy in this country. If you remember, up until the middle of the first George W. Bush term, if you wanted to get DSL, which was the broadband of the day, there were dozens of companies that were provided to you because AT&T was required to share its infrastructure with them. It's called essential facility sharing.

It meant that you could start an ISP,

a co-op, a for-profit, whatever, and you could go into AT&T's data center, and they would just rent you a shelf. You put a switch on it, and you plug into customers' lines. You physically provide internet service to them. So we can have essential facility sharing in the data center.

Now, what you have is the system where co-ops could provide your internet service. They could be consumer co-ops or worker co-ops. Nonprofits could. A group of friends could be their ISP. You could have the city provide your internet, and here's a cool thing about the city providing your internet: the First Amendment says that government agencies cannot discriminate on the basis of viewpoint.

First of all, the government should not be using Twitter or Facebook to make announcements. They should be interacting with the public through a service that they own and operate, so if you're on Facebook, you can talk to them, but they're not part of Facebook. They're running their own public service, but they can also provide it. You can have tribal governments doing it. You could have all kinds of governments doing it. It could be devolved to the city, the state, or the county. It could be a tribal government. It could be schools. You could have many different ways that this could be configured.

And there's a reason that we operate at different scales, because the kind of institution that you need to adequately govern something at a national scale for 300 million people is very top-heavy. It's creaky. It's slow. It's difficult. We all know what it's like to try and make national changes. There are things you want devolved to the neighborhood level just because you don't want to have to stand up an institution capable of mediating between 300 million people to decide what you're going to do about whether this will be a road with a bus lane on it.

And so it makes sense to have aspects of this digital world devolve down to the smallest level. The fact that Facebook is a global network is not good. So I guess maybe that's my final objection. I'm thinking through this now as I speak to you. I think maybe my final objection is the presumption that Facebook should be a utility, which subsumes the assumption that Facebook should be. And Facebook shouldn't be. It's not a wieldy scale to do global community function.

SKOPIC
So basically, instead of, say, nationalizing Facebook, you would want to devolve Facebook and maybe have a lot of regional Facebooks?

DOCTOROW
Yes. Look, I don't want the government to own all the bicycles. I do want the government to provide the bike lanes and the roads and the cops who will track down the people who hit and run you and do all kinds of other things.

I'm a socialist too, but I think it's okay for me to have my own bicycle. And famously, Steve Jobs called a computer a bicycle for the mind. I think that we should have as much centralization and public management as we need, and not one bit more.

ROBINSON
Let's conclude it there, because that's very positive. You gave us a very dark look at the future, but you [also] tell us that we do have the capacity to disenshittify, to truly innovate.

DOCTOROW
And exit the enshittocene and banish the enshitternet to the scrap heap of history.

Transcript edited by Patrick Farnsworth.

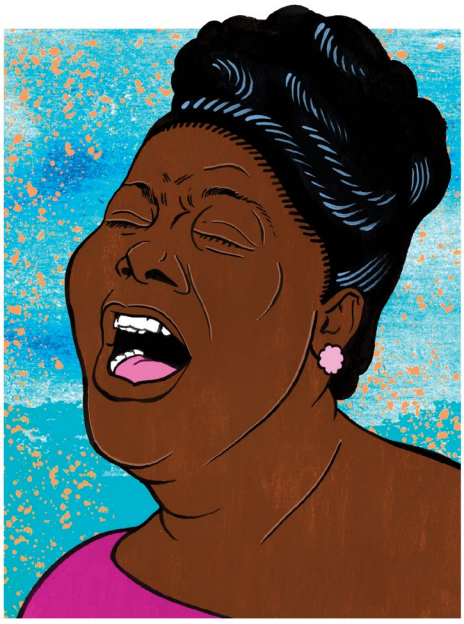
A BRIEF TRIBUTE TO

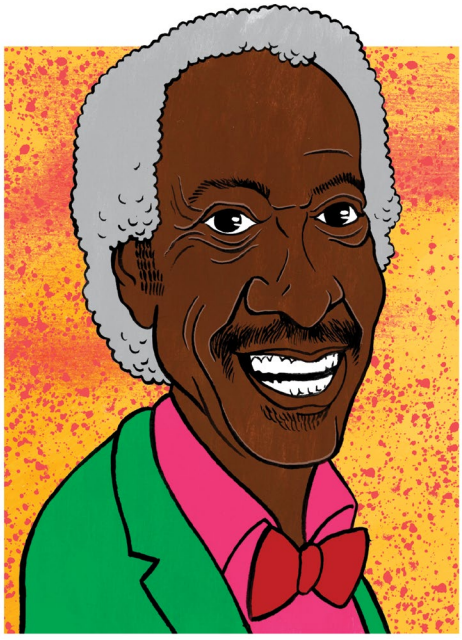
"THERE IS A REAL MANIA IN THIS CITY FOR HORN AND TRUMPET PLAYING,"

remarked the *New Orleans Daily Picayune* in 1838. "You can hardly turn a corner," it lamented, without hearing brass players, quoting a local who said he "earnestly desired to hear the last trumpet." We are coming upon *two hundred* years later, and the situation hasn't changed much. On my bike rides home through the French Quarter, I often get caught behind a second-line parade, usually for a wedding, the band belting out "Lil Liza Jane" or "Hey Baby." Then there are the regular Sunday parades put on by the Social Aid and Pleasure clubs, with names like the Men & Lady Buckjumpers, the Uptown Swingers, the Dumaine Street Gang, the Pigeon Town Steppers, the Valley of Silent Men, and the Black Men of Labor. They snake through neighborhoods, with the brass bands blaring for hours at a stretch and the whole community coming out to dance.

Then there are the club performances, dozens every night. When a local radio station reads off the list of the night's shows, it seems to go on and on and on. Tonight, a Thursday, you can see Irvin Mayfield's Music Church at the Blue Nile, Audrey & the CrawZaddies at the Bourbon 'O' Bar, the Jumbo Shrimp Jazz Band at the Spotted Cat, Corey Henry & The Treme Funktet at Vaughan's, Tony Seville & The Cadillacs at the House of Blues, Bubbles Brown at the Apple Barrel, the Soul Rebels at Le Bon Temps Roulé, or about 30 other performances. On Frenchmen Street on any given night, one can wander from venue to venue sampling different musical acts as if one is nibbling cheeses from a vast platter. That's before we get to the various buskers scattered around elsewhere, the private performances, and of course the legendary Jazz Fest and all the music at Mardi Gras, including the unforgettable chants of the Mardi Gras Indians. Local restaurateur Ella Brennan once said that in New Orleans, "we live to eat." Not quite true. We also live to dance.

Since I moved to the city, the presence of music in the streets has been one of the most noticeable, and most pleasurable, differences from living elsewhere. In Boston, where I lived before, you could go to a show. But unless you consciously sought out music, it wouldn't have a major presence in your life. Here, music is unavoidable. It overflows into the streets from the clubs and bars. It marches right past your front porch and into your walls. I hear people practicing pianos and saxophones in their living rooms.





NEW ORLEANS MUSIC

BY **NATHAN J. ROBINSON**

Music is in the air, quite literally—some of it better than others, with the excruciating tuneless carnival melody of the old calliope wafting across the French Quarter from its home on the Steamboat Natchez. It seems like every other car is blasting something, and half the time their windows are rolled down, filling the hot Louisiana air with bass. I've got a whole Spotify playlist composed of songs I've overheard when wandering around the city, and it's eclectic, ranging from the Spice Girls to Creedence Clearwater Revival to the Preservation Hall Jazz Band. A few months back, I saw an older Black man on his bicycle with a giant speaker broadcasting Taylor Swift songs. Everyone wants to be listening to something.

Music sneaks up on you and takes you by surprise. This past Sunday night, I was working late at the office (as I tend to do), and I got a text from my colleague John, who told me that just a couple of blocks away, a man named Bobby Rush was performing at a local blues festival. I could hear the music from my desk, and so I set aside my magazine duties and I scurried over. Sure enough, 91-year-old Bobby Rush was beginning his set. Rush is one of the last of the great '50s blues performers, and toured with Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, Etta James, and many other greats. He was in incredible shape, sporting a snazzy white jacket embroidered with bright blue butterflies. At 91, he still tears it up on the harmonica, does Michael Jackson moves (he claims he did them first, back in the '50s), and even raps (he says he was doing this long before hip-hop).

That kind of serendipity—suddenly hearing a blues legend outside your office window—is an everyday occurrence in New Orleans, the city with its "mania" for music. I've been to Nashville and I've been to Detroit, both great American musical cities. I love them both, but music just hasn't seeped into the sidewalks like it has around here.

Not only does New Orleans love music, but New Orleans has made staggeringly original contributions to American music, originating whole forms from jazz to bounce, and spawning artists from legendary horn players like Sidney Bechet to great rappers like Juvenile. It's still hard for me to believe that jazz was literally *born* here. It's a small city. Jazz is now such a sprawling, diverse genre with worldwide reach—to think it had an actual birthplace, a few small square miles, is astonishing. And of course none of it happens without a tiny patch of ground, Congo Square, where the enslaved famously gathered to perform and listen to music.

And it wasn't just jazz. The role of New Orleans in early rock and roll is underappreciated. Just a few blocks from my house is the old J&M studios building, where Tulane University dropout

Cosimo Matassa started an appliance store with a recording business on the side. The tiny recording studio soon began putting out 45s by artists who would become legends, like Little Richard, Ray Charles, and Jerry Lee Lewis. Two of its early recordings, Fats Domino's "The Fat Man" (1949) and Roy Brown's "Good Rocking Tonight" (1947) are contenders for the title of "first rock and roll record." The great "Tutti Frutti" was recorded there, in that humble building with equipment so primitive that songs had to be recorded live, in one take, with no overdubs. "Tutti Frutti" was ranked by Mojo magazine as #1 in the "Top 100 Records That Changed The World," which called it "the sound of the birth of rock and roll." *Rolling Stone* said it had "the most inspired rock lyric ever recorded" ("A-wop-bop-a-loo-mop-a-lop-bam-boom!").

Photo by Emily Topping

J&M Studios' work went so overlooked that by the time I moved to New Orleans in 2017, the building had become a laundromat, before being abandoned altogether. This year the Jazz and Heritage Foundation bought the building, which will hopefully soon have a more fitting tribute to the history-makers who made music there.

New Orleans music couldn't be from anywhere else. It has a special sound to it, a mixture of joy and sorrow and life-affirming warmth that characterizes the cultural life of the city more broadly. It favors horns and pianos over guitars. It is cosmopolitan, drawing from different traditions—Jelly Roll Morton and Professor Longhair both sprinkled a Latin flavor into Black music, and my favorite New Orleans pianist, James Booker, could slide seamlessly between Chopin, ragtime, the Beatles, and blues. One of the things that surprised me most when I moved here was how sincerely the street bands would play songs that the rest of the country forgot about a century ago like "St. James Infirmary." Washboard and banjos are treated as serious instruments—as they should be!

Not that New Orleans is exactly a paradise for musicians. A few months back I overheard an amazing local singer, Paris Flowerz, practicing the piano in a local coffee shop. (She came in to use theirs lacking a piano of her own.) She told me sadly that while busking, she had gone viral on TikTok. Someone came along and filmed one of her beautiful performances, posted it, and got a million views. Whoever took the video didn't even name Paris, or link to her work. Nobody watching it knew who she was; nobody gave her a cent. Paris tells me it's common for people to come along and take videos without so much as tipping afterward. The video-takers get the virality, and the performers are left with nothing.

Legendary New Orleans musician Cyril Neville wrote bitterly in *CounterPunch* in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina:

> *People thought there was a New Orleans music scene — there wasn't. You worked two times a year: Mardi Gras and Jazz Fest. The only musicians I knew who made a living playing music in New Orleans were Kermit Ruffins and Pete Fountain. Everyone else had to have a day job or go on tour. I have worked more in two months in Austin than I worked in two years in New Orleans.*

I believe a lot has changed in the 20 years since he wrote that, but he's right that most musicians have to have day jobs. They certainly don't do it for the money. There's plenty of injustice in music here—I'm always a little bitter that James Booker died in poverty, while his white piano student, the son of a prosperous, infamously unethical district attorney (Harry Connick Sr.) became a star popularizer of jazz.

Photo by Emily Topping

But the first thing we can do is to recognize just how extraordinary an achievement New Orleans music is. Jazz, funk, R&B, gospel, hip-hop—this city has produced legendary performers across genres, from Mahalia Jackson to Lil Wayne. The cultural life of this country would be deeply impoverished without the contributions of New Orleans, and I'd encourage you to spend some time immersed in, and just enjoying, the timeless work of great figures like Allen Toussaint, Irma Thomas, Fats Domino, Professor Longhair, and the Meters. Then there's Louis Armstrong, whose solo in "Potato Head Blues" still gives me the chills, who said: "Every time I close my eyes blowing that trumpet of mine, I look right into the heart of good old New Orleans. It has given me something to live for." Amen, Pops. ⚜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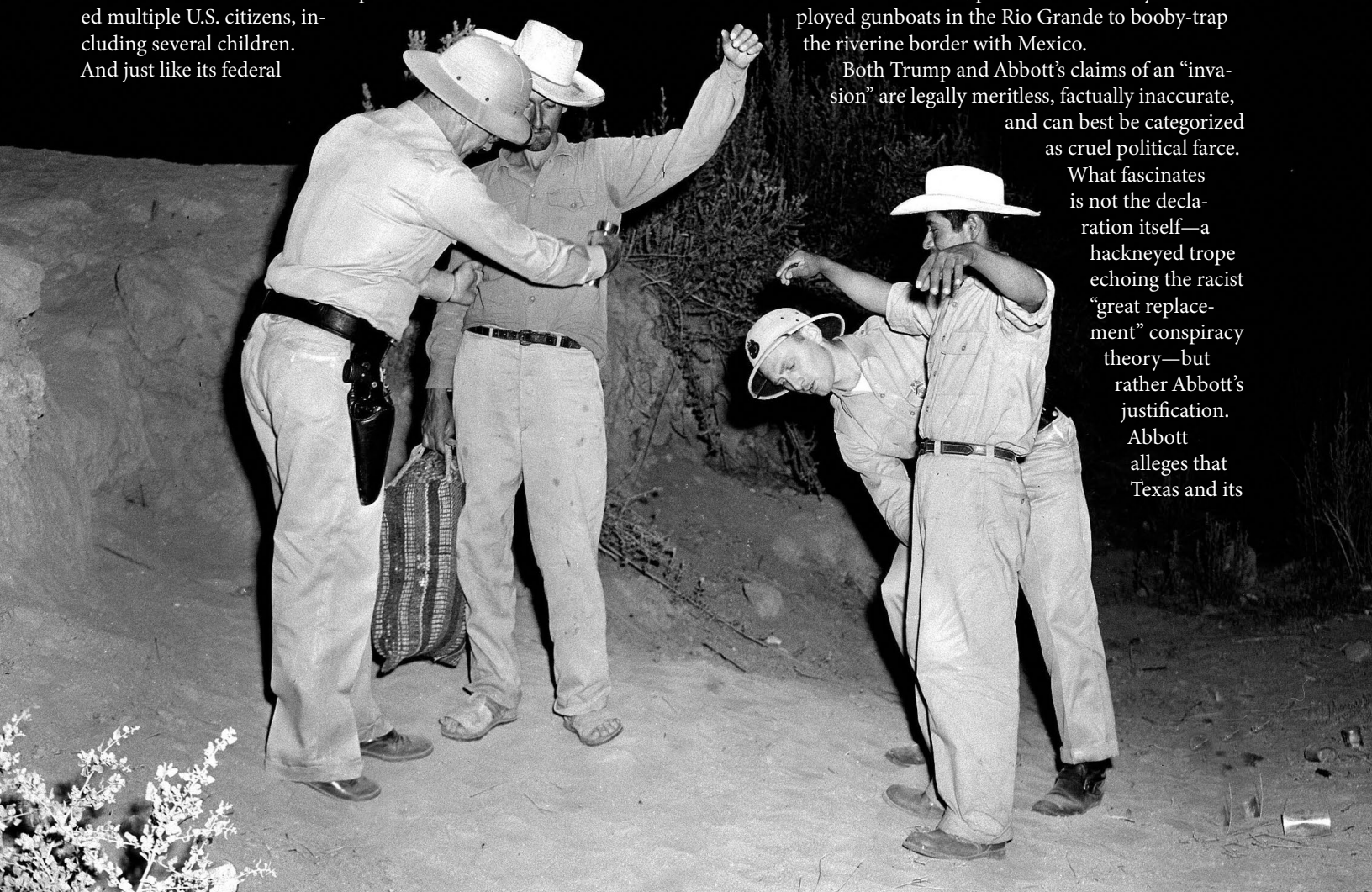
ABOLISH THE TEXAS RANGERS

BY **ANGELO GUISADO**

Under the false pretense of a migrant "invasion," the Trump administration has waged asymmetrical warfare on America's immigrants, yielding shocking and depressing results. Just to name a few: since Trump's inauguration the United States has functionally disappeared scores of permanent residents, including rendition to CECOT, a Salvadoran concentration camp; detained individuals at Guantánamo, America's most infamous torture center; and deported multiple U.S. citizens, including several children. And just like its federal counterpart, Texas is sending masses of law enforcement officers to surveil, profile, and collectively punish thousands on the basis of their putative national origin. But long before President Trump proclaimed that "hordes" of migrants were "invading" the United States, Texas Governor Greg Abbott declared that they had invaded the Lone Star State first. Abbott has been at this a while: in 2021, he declared "illegal migration" an official disaster in 34 Texas counties. To deter those seeking refuge, Texas laid miles of barbed wire, placed razored buoys, and deployed gunboats in the Rio Grande to booby-trap the riverine border with Mexico.



Both Trump and Abbott's claims of an "invasion" are legally meritless, factually inaccurate, and can best be categorized as cruel political farce. What fascinates is not the declaration itself—a hackneyed trope echoing the racist "great replacement" conspiracy theory—but rather Abbott's justification. Abbott alleges that Texas and its

dignitaries are the "inheritors of a responsibility first recognized by our brave ancestors more than 235 years ago" to "defend our state, and this nation, from grievous threats to our border." To start with the obvious, 235 years ago there was no state of Texas. Depending on whom you ask, the region was either a constellation of sovereign indigenous land or a territory owned by Spain, soon to be Mexico, and it would continue to be Mexico for many decades thereafter (including the Mexican state *Coahuila y Tejas*).

But Abbott's reference to an inherited responsibility of yore is not just some wistful citation: Texas today does much of what it did back then. What is most revealing about modern-day Texas is not just *what* it has decided to "defend," but *whom* it has endowed with the authority to do so—and the extent of their bloody legacy.

In the United States' early years there was hardly a border and even less of a "border patrol"; it was simply the Wild West. Colonizer Stephen F. Austin sought to change that, arriving in Texas shortly after Mexico liberated itself from Spanish control in 1821. To protect the proprietary interests of white settlers from thieves, bandits, Native Americans, and virtually anyone else, Austin founded the Texas Rangers as an ad-hoc force of ten men in 1823. These original Rangers inspired the eventual creation of the Border Patrol; many of the first Border Patrol agents were direct Ranger recruits and brought with them their violent tactics. The Texas Rangers have been lionized in the American cultural zeitgeist ever since. They are usually displayed stoically, carrying a Colt .45 pistol and adorned with a ten-gallon hat. Novels, movies, and TV shows such as *Walker, Texas Ranger, The Lone Ranger*, and *Laredo* portrayed them as valiant rogues patrolling the vast and desolate Texas brush. Who tracked down and killed the outlaws Bonnie and Clyde in 1934? Texas Ranger Frank Hamer. Which mascot did the Washington Senators major league baseball team pick when they moved to Texas in 1972? The Rangers, of course. Whose bronze statue greeted you at the Dallas Airport until its removal in 2020? None other than Texas Ranger E.J. Banks. Even rapper DaBaby released "Walker Texas Ranger" which—in 2018—was arguably considered a bop.

The mystique of the Rangers as a legitimate law enforcement outfit necessary to combat the dangers of unsettled land still permeates American culture. Back in the 1800s, Texas really *was* the Wild West. As Cormac McCarthy wrote in *Blood Meridian*, out there "beyond men's judgments all covenants were brittle." The novel is inspired by firsthand accounts of the Glanton gang—a sadistic group of scalp-hunters who roamed the U.S.-Mexico borderlands in the mid-19th century, led by the notorious Texas Ranger John Joel Glanton. Like Glanton's crew, the Rangers' initial mission was simple: to ethnically cleanse Texas of Comanche, Karankawa, Cherokee, Wichita, Caddo and all other Native peoples in the area. A fun fact: the name "Texas" derives from *Tejas*, the Indigenous Caddo term for "friend," which surely came as a surprise when the Rangers came to visit. (Austin declared proudly that "there will be no way of subduing them[...] but extermination").

According to historian Doug Swanson's essential text, *Cult of Glory*, the Rangers' own accounts portray Glanton and his gang—filled with ex-Rangers—as responsible for the massacre of hundreds of Apache Indians, scalping them for ransom and gambling away the proceeds. They continued to drive Indigenous people from their homelands during the Cherokee War in 1839, as well as the Council House Fight and Battle of Plum Creek against the Comanches in 1840. After a decade of unbridled vigilantism, Texas' provisional government formally established the outfit in 1835 to provide "a safeguard to our hitherto unprotected frontier inhabitants."

The Rangers' job thereafter was to protect Texas for white settlers, a mission that is best understood with reference to contemporary local geopolitics. Texas at the time was, after all, still *Tejas*: which is to say, Mexico. And Mexico, under President Vicente Guerrero—himself of African descent—had outlawed slavery, an extremely inconvenient fact to Texas' feverishly racist brass. To them, forcibly seizing land, having slaves cultivate it, and lavishing in the profits was the *sine qua non* of Texas' manifest destiny. Remember the Alamo? Historians do, and have concluded that Texas' declaration of war that presaged the Texas Revolution was fought to vindicate this right to own human beings. Look no further than its Constitution: "all persons of color, who were slaves for life previous to their emigration to Texas, and who are now held in bondage, *shall remain in the like state of servitude*, provided the said slave shall be the bona fide property of the person so holding said slave."

By the end of 1836 about 40,000 white settlers moved to Texas, the majority of whom were slaveowners, and they found immediate protection from the Rangers. If the settlers didn't haul enough slaves with them, or they were uninterested in importing new ones at Galveston, all they needed to do was call the Rangers, who were happy to go out of their way to assist. There are countless reports of escaped slaves who hoped to cross the Rio Grande to freedom in Mexico but were ensnared by Ranger violence. They frequently broke the international neutrality laws that forbade their trips across the border and, as Greg Grandin notes in his book *The End of the Myth*, Texas ended up becoming "the last stop on an underground railroad running in reverse: slavers kidnapped freedmen and women from [Mexico] and re-enslaved them in Texas." Perhaps the ugliest example of re-enslavement came in 1855, when 89 Texas Rangers, led by James Hughes Callahan, terrorized scores of the Lipan Apache and torched the town of Piedras Negras to the ground. As if state-sponsored mass arson wasn't sufficient, Texas historians regard the Callahan Expedition as subterfuge for the retrieval of self-manumitted former slaves during a long period of state-sponsored bounty hunting.

The U.S. seized nearly half of Mexico in the Mexican-American War, including Texas. This afforded the Rangers the legal cover to continue to ethnically cleanse the borderlands, this time as the protectors of systematic settler-colonial land theft. At the Texas government's behest, the Rangers helped rid Texas not just of Indians, but of Mexicans, whom one Ranger quipped were as "black as n—rs[…] and ten times as treacherous." Though the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo set out that "property of every kind, now belonging to Mexicans[...] shall be inviolably respected," white settlers paid that little mind and engaged in dispossession of Tejano land. The Rangers, in cooperation with land speculators, came into small villages and seized local lands, sometimes accompanying a bill of sale with a pointed handgun. As David Montejano reported in his book, *Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas*, many saw the same message posted to their properties: "If you are found here in the next five days you will be dead." Many were indeed found dead at the hands of the

Rangers, the rest rendered titleless tenants or forced laborers under peonage and vagrancy laws.

The 1877 El Paso Salt War is an emblematic example from the era. Settlers poured into West Texas without any regard for local customs, including the historic tradition of communal property at the famous San Elizario salt beds, which allowed a local community to delight in a scarce and essential resource. Charles H. Howard, himself a recent settler, objected to the notion of a shared lot and attempted to claim it all for himself. He even orchestrated the arrest of two Mexican Americans for admitting to taking salt without paying. When a popular local politician intervened on the locals' behalf, Howard shot him to death. Though Howard fled, he returned shortly thereafter under the protection of a company of Rangers who, instead of prosecuting Howard for a political assassination, accompanied him to stop locals from retrieving more salt. Tensions flared, a riot broke out, and a popular army of about 500 ethnic Mexican and Tejano inhabitants outmaneuvered two dozen Texas Rangers, resulting in one of the few known reports of Ranger surrender.

The Rangers were hardly deterred. At the turn of the 20th century, the events leading up to the Mexican Revolution forced many displaced Mexicans to seek safe haven northwards. The Rangers, charged with clearing the borderlands for white settlement, became participants in an all-out South and West Texas race war, now known as *La Hora de Sangre* ("The Time of Blood"). Historians have meticulously documented this Ranger violence in "Refusing to Forget," an essential project shedding light on "some of the worst racial violence in United States history." Many historians "estimate the number of such victims [between 1910 and 1920] to be as low as 500 and as high as 5,000." The terror reached a crescendo during 1915-1916, a period referred to as *La Matanza* (the massacre), in which "approximately 300 ethnic Mexicans were murdered, either shot on the run, execution-style, or lynched." The 1918 Porvernir Massacre was perhaps the cruelest moment of the *Juan Crow* era and saw a handful of Rangers, accompanied by U.S. cavalrymen, ride out to the small border town of Porvenir, round up 15 boys and old men, line them against a wall, and execute them one-by-one. As a local schoolteacher remarked, "the Rangers made 42 orphans that night."

But if you ask the modern-day Texas Department of Public Safety (DPS), they seem to view the Rangers' extensive list of massacres in a different light. According to the history section of the agency's website, the "Texas Rangers played an effective, valiant, and honorable role throughout the early troubled years of Texas[...] [holding] a place somewhere between that of an army and a police force." The reality is that the Rangers served as a white supremacist gestapo.

During a 1919 congressional investigation into the Rangers' violence, Texas Representative Claude B. Hudspeth testified at the State Capitol that "good citizens" feared that their country would be uninhabitable without Ranger brutality: "You have got to kill those Mexicans when you find them," he said, "or they will kill you." (Texas rewarded Hudspeth's moral clarity with an eponymous 4,500-square-mile county.)

That testimony allowed the Rangers to escape criminal charges from murder to intimidation during the Canales Investigation, named after José Tomás Canales: the only Latino state lawmaker in Texas for many years and someone who sought to end Ranger terror in the state. A congressional investigation of the Porvenir massacre and other violence by the Rangers lasted weeks, resulting in a 1,600-page report chock-full of evidence of their brutality. But no one was ever prosecuted, and it was very rare for any Ranger to be charged at all with killing a Mexican or African-American. Hudspeth would go on to help found the U.S. Border Patrol in 1924, handing off the responsibilities of terrorizing a migrant population to a willing federal government. The agents oversaw an exponential increase in the deportation of Mexican immigrants across the southern border, from under 2,000 in 1925 to more than 15,000 in 1929. As Grandin notes in his book, two Border Patrol members, new recruits from the Rangers, "were accused of tying the feet of migrants together and dragging them in and out of a river until they confessed to having entered the country illegally."

The investigation into the Rangers' extrajudicial executions forced them to pivot to more covert means of oppression, paying particular attention to the burgeoning Tejano labor movement. As the 20th century unfolded, the Rangers obstructed union membership wherever possible, raiding Industrial Workers of the World offices and breaking up strikes of all kinds: railroad strikes, longshoremen's strikes, and in an affront to Texans everywhere, even a cowboy strike. The Melon Strike is perhaps the Rangers most' infamous example, in which Tejano farmworkers—including children—worked in subhuman conditions for wages as low as $0.50/hour. The farmworkers allied with legendary labor leaders Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta and refused to harvest the 1967 melon crop in Starr County, Texas until they received basic protections like potable drinking water, sanitation facilities, and electricity. The Rangers responded by threatening and beating union leaders, leaving one worker confined to a wheelchair with a permanently curved spine. The brutality reached the United States Supreme Court, which concluded in 1974 that the Rangers' anti-union activities displayed a "prevailing pattern" of violence, intimidation, and coercion.

Texas consolidated the Rangers into the Texas Department of Public Safety (DPS) in 1935, and over time they evolved into a more traditional state law enforcement entity, the Texas Ranger Division. The modern day Rangers have thrust themselves into the spotlight for largely the same reasons as the legacy Rangers: engaging in unlawful activity and violence along the Texas borderlands. The Rangers have officially patrolled the border since at least 2009, when then-Governor Rick Perry announced that Texas was introducing Texas Ranger Reconnaissance Teams to investigate transnational crime. This spawned a minor international incident in 2010 when the Rangers, flying high-tech planes across the border, "admitt[ed] to spying on Mexico." (Texas officials in fact recently testified that they still do this). The Rangers hardly stopped there, venturing into territories to seize land for which they had no deed, including leading multiple operations to secure deserted islands in the Rio Grande, likely in violation of at least one riparian boundary treaty, if not more. When they are not engaging in international espionage or land theft—something the Rangers did at the U.S. Army's behest during the Mexican-American War—the Rangers have had time to assist anti-migrant militias and private vigilantes with things like background checks of their members.

Gov. Abbott expanded the Rangers' job description in 2021 with the launch of Operation Lone Star, an attempt to wrest away federal authority for immigration and border security enforcement into Texas' hands. It is a vast anti-immigration initiative that is perhaps best understood if you think of it as being launched one hundred years before, in *1921*, when Texas' aggressive, unorthodox, and punitive methods for border enforcement contributed to the need for permanent federal oversight and control. (It is no coincidence that Texas' response to the humanitarian demands imposed by the Mexican Revolution was to increase the Rangers' annual budget and inflate the company from about two dozen officers to around 1,350). Under Lone Star, Abbott charged the Rangers to "lead the department's border security program with a mission to deter, detect and interdict criminal activity across the Texas/Mexico border . . . [providing] direct support to the U.S. Border Patrol." The program has dual and interrelated aims: (1) to stop noncitizens from entering Texas, and (2) to kick out anyone that already got in.

To address (1), Gov. Abbott deployed the Texas National Guard and DPS troopers to install 18 miles of concertina wire along the border, a 1,000-foot buoy barrier in the middle of the Rio Grande, and deploy military vehicles including a boat blockade. Despite the clear evidence that many people attempting to cross the Rio Grande were asylum seekers hoping to obtain an asylum interview—a right protected by federal and international law—a DPS official said that the razor wire and buoy barriers helped "save lives." In July 2023, the *Houston Chronicle* published a devastating account of Abbott's initiative, including instructing officers to push children into the Rio Grande, identifying a 19-year-old woman stuck in razor wire having a miscarriage, denying water to migrants in extreme heat, and simply watching a man rescue his child who got stuck on a serrated buoy. In January 2024, a woman and two children drowned trying to cross the border at Eagle Pass, while Mexican authorities rescued two others. The situation is hardly any better inland. Indeed, the bones of those seeking refuge and safety are still scattered throughout the Texas brush.

According to Border Patrol estimates, approximately 250 to 500 migrants die each year migrating through the southwestern United States. Since Operation Lone Star, these numbers have skyrocketed: at the end of the 2022 fiscal year, Border Patrol reported finding 651 bodies at the Texas-Mexico portion of the border *alone*. According to an investigation by the *Texas Tribune* and *Source New Mexico*, when El Paso County joined Operation Lone Star, it became the deadliest place along the entire U.S.-Mexico border. (Del Rio, Texas was the second.) As was the case during *La Hora de Sangre*, it is not uncommon to find skulls eroding away in the Texas brush. From January 2023 to August 2024, 299 human remains were reported in the El Paso sector, the most of any sector along the southern border, more than double the number of cases reported during the 20 months prior, and the largest count in the past 25 years.

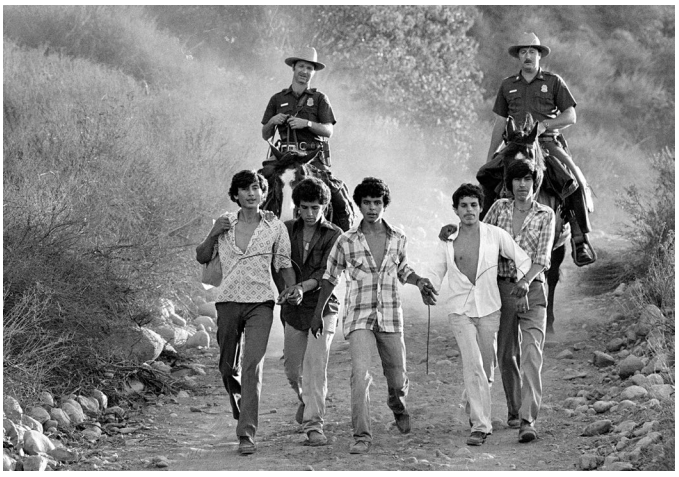
President Trump's ascent to the presidency was a boon to Operation Lone Star's second aim: deporting noncitizens. Texas hardly needed any help, having already introduced a criminal trespass system, the purpose of which the ACLU observed is "crystal clear[:]... to deter migration and punish migrants for coming to the United States." The program operates under an entirely separate criminal prosecution and detention system—so

Donald Trump talks with Texas Gov. Greg Abbott during a visit to the U.S.-Mexico border, 2024 (Photo: Associated Press/Eric Gay)

while lawyers for some migrants arrested under this mandate have called the operation "a shadow legal system rife with problems," some refer to it by a more accurate term: apartheid. Abbott signed SB4 into law in December 2023, making it a state crime to cross from Mexico into Texas without permission, and authorizing Texas officials to deport those convicted wherever possible. Taken together, these acts have empowered Rangers and other DPS officers to arrest tens of thousands of migrants on misdemeanor charges of trespassing. The program "show[s] clear indications of profiling based on race and national origin" and, one year into the program, 98 percent of the individuals arrested were Latino. In 2022, a Texas judge ruled that the DPS had engaged in unconstitutional sex discrimination in its enforcement of anti-trespassing laws due to the almost exclusive surveillance and arrest of men. As the ACLU concluded in its report, Texas has spent "billions of dollars to racially profile and arrest people who pose no threat to public safety, then forces them into a separate and unequal legal system run by the state."

Trump's inauguration put this directive into overdrive. In 2025, Gov. Abbott directed the DPS to activate "tactical strike teams," including Texas Rangers, to ramp up Operation Lone Star, this time working with federal officials to "identify and arrest the nearly 5,400 illegal immigrants with active warrants from local jurisdictions across Texas." Having already beaten Trump to the punch to label the Venezuelan gang Tren de Aragua a "foreign terrorist organization," Abbott's brownshirts were able to spring quickly into action. Under SB4, the Rangers and other Texas officers can question and arrest anyone they suspect of entering Texas through Mexico without legal immigration status—which is to say that they could likely arrest anyone Latino at any time.

Perhaps this explains why Texas recently arrested and deported to CECOT Pedro Luis Salazar-Cuervo, a Venezuelan man with no criminal record whom they accused of Tren de Aragua membership. Texas had a slight problem: there was no evidence to substantiate this claim. Instead, Texas relied on a singular photo of Salazar-Cuervo beside another man who happened to have



U.S. Border Patrolmen Ed Pyeatt (right) and Steve Shields (left) escort five people to a Texas holding center after a border crossing, 1981 (Photo: Associated Press/ Lennox McLendon)

tattoos. A fundamental problem with such guilt-by-association is that tattoos are not indicative of membership in any Venezuelan gang, let alone Tren de Aragua, because gang tattoos are a Central American phenomenon, not South American—and, more importantly, *it wasn't even his tattoo*. But facts matter less to Texas than the mandates of Operation Lone Star. To Gov. Abbott, intra-hemispheric migration is a scourge on Texan society, a harbinger of barbarism to be avoided at all costs. It is no wonder he dispatched the Rangers to police immigration, given that their founding charge in 1835 was to "prevent the depredations of [...] savage hordes that infest our borders."

If you closed your eyes and imagined a Texas Ranger, you very well might envision someone like E.J. Banks, whose statue was a decades-long mainstay at Dallas' Love Field Airport. He was cast 12 feet high in bronze, standing gallantly with a holstered pistol and cowboy hat. He was not depicted, however, in his true stripes. A more accurate portrayal would have seen him protecting a white mob, next to their effigy of a lynched Black student, to prevent Black students from desegregating Texas' Mansfield High School in 1956. At the time, the town of Mansfield was on the precipice of a full-blown race riot, as local citizens hung not one but two effigies; the one on Mansfield's Main Street read: "This negro tried to enter a white school." Banks heroically protected the white mob from the terrors of desegregation in Mansfield, providing cover for rock hurlers and epithet throwers as he did at a similar riot later that year at Texarkana Junior College. No Black students matriculated at either school that year.

George Floyd's murder in 2020 forced the United States to reckon with its obsessive idolatry of law enforcement, leading to the removal and destruction of statues across the country, including that of Ranger Banks. It is unclear if any further reckoning will occur, as each passing year sees the Rangers endowed with greater responsibility over Texas affairs (and, in fact, Ranger Banks himself is proudly enshrined in the Texas Ranger Hall of Fame in Waco). As Doug Swanson observed in his 2020 book *Cult of Glory*, the Rangers covered up their wrongdoing through the art of "mythic rehabilitation and resurrection." "For decades," Swanson continued, the Rangers "operated a fable factory through which many of their greatest defeats, worst embarrassments, and darkest moments were recast as grand triumphs. They didn't merely whitewash the truth. They destroyed it."

At the Rangers' bicentennial in 2023, Abbott tweeted: "From the Old West to modern day Texas, the Lone Star State would not be the place it is today without the bravery and service of the Texas Rangers." He is at least partially right. Texas commanded the Rangers to make their own history in America's annals; they were trailblazers in a country that delighted in the example they set. The Texan Indian raids presaged what would become the systematic extermination and displacement of our indigenous peoples. The re-enslavement of freed Black people in Mexico came long after the federal 1807 Act Prohibiting the Importation of Slaves. The expropriation of Tejano land was a paradigmatic example of the unrepentant westward conquest in the U.S., as was the Salt War for extractive gain and private enrichment. Perhaps no example is more illustrative than the outright murder, banishment, and imprisonment of migrants who fled the terrors of the Mexican Revolution, conducted at the hands of the Rangers, many of whom went on to found the first Border Patrol. So it should come as no surprise that Gov. Abbott's unrestrained and indiscriminate mission to round up and deport migrants, either through violent means or with violent ends, was a harbinger for President Trump's agenda. In fact, it is completely legitimate to conclude that Texas is doing the federal government's bidding, given that Texas asked for—and appears ready to receive—$12 billion to reimburse the state for border security spending.

The "grievous threat" to the Texas border that Abbott inherited from over "235 years ago" was, as it turns out, largely just attempts by nonwhite people to migrate to land upon which white people had laid a claim. If Stephen F. Austin composed the score for Texas's manifest destiny, then Greg Abbott is the lead singer of Manifest Destiny's Child. Never mind that migration is gaining traction in the United Nations as a human right. To Texas, and the United States too, migration is tantamount to a declaration of war by a bellicose enemy. It is for that reason that Texas engages in gunboat diplomacy and dispatches the Rangers—historically one of the nation's most violent law enforcement entities—to protect Texas here and now from another "mass invasion." Notwithstanding the ten separate incursions the U.S. military has made into Mexico, let alone the relentless Ranger conquests across the border (many Rangers accompanied William Walker on his infamous quest to colonize Nicaragua), it is *Texas* that is being invaded, it is *Texas* that must clear its land for white prosperity, and it is the Rangers who will provide the legal cover to do so. Reached for comment in a 2024 radio interview, Abbott claimed: "[t]he only thing that we're not doing is we're not shooting people who come across the border, because of course, the Biden administration would charge us with murder."

It should thus surprise few to recall that the 2019 El Paso Wal-Mart shooter, who murdered 23 mostly Mexican or Mexican-Americans in cold-blood, stated in his manifesto that: "[t]his attack is a response to the Hispanic invasion of Texas. They are the instigators, not me. I am simply defending my country from cultural and ethnic replacement brought on by the invasion." ★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