The Magazine That Gives a Damn

CURRENT AFFAIRS

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DOWNTON ABBEY

Not our cup of tea.

BRAIN CHIPS

Don't let Elon put one in you.

GARBAGE WORKERS

Why they need our solidarity.

THANK YOU FOR YOUR ATTENTION TO THESE MATTERS...

NUMEROUS CONTRIBUTIONS TO THESE PAGES COME FROM **NICKY MARTIN**

WORD OF THE MONTH

Plute (Noun, colloquial, pejorative): a wealthy person. Derived from plutocrat; rhymes with *glute*, as in buttock. "Get this plute out of here!"

AUTO-RESPONDER

Make sure to set your email auto response to say, "Thank you for emailing me. I love getting emails. I will send you an email soon too. Thanks again for all the emails!"

TIP: Set an alarm on your phone that reminds you to "Increase your awareness."

#selfcare

YOU'VE HEARD OF THE ELF ON THE SHELF. BUT HAVE YOU READ A MAGAZINE ON THE MEZZANINE?

"U hv herad saying:"deer in headlight look". It is a frightening xperience when a real deer is there"

— SENATOR CHUCK GRASSLEY

★ SHOW UP TO ★ WORK TEN TIMES AND REDEEM FOR ONE PIZZA PARTY

RENEGING ON OUR PROMISE

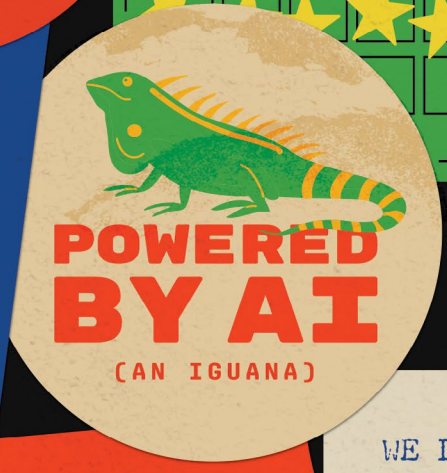
In a recent edition of this magazine, we promised that the color green would no longer feature so prominently on *Current Affairs* covers. Predominantly green cover art had been used so frequently that it was threatening to become, as the kids say, a "thing." Reader, we betrayed you. Since the time the promise was made, there has been not just some green, but *quite a lot of green, actually*. As you can see, this edition's cover features grass, which is green. We beg your forbearance. It is harder to kick the green habit than we anticipated. The source of the trouble seems to be that many beautiful things (such as plants, parakeets, emeralds, pixie wings, several bugs) are green, and *Current Affairs* cover paintings are selected for their beauty. It requires considerable heavy lifting in the art department in order to avoid nature's favorite color entirely. But here is where you can help, perhaps? *Current Affairs* is always looking for new cover art. If you or anyone you know makes paintings that would be excellent as print magazine covers (for this magazine specifically), please email possibilities to editor@currentaffairs.org and we may license the art for a future edition. Remember: **NO GREEN**.

[ ] - THE FORBIDDEN COLOR

TO OUR YOUNGER READERS

Why do you keep emailing in and asking us to "turn to page 67"? This has happened three times now. There's nothing unusual on page 67, it's just the middle of an article. Is this a TikTok thing? Please advise.

6!7?



ZIONISM OR ZION WILLIAMSON?
KNOW THE DIFFERENCE!

	Zionism	Zion Williamson
Can dunk from the free throw line	✗	✓
Originated in late 19th century Europe	✓	✗
Does a lot of shooting	✓	✓
Overrated	✓	✓

WE DEMAND A MINIMUM WAGE FOR SERVICE DOGS PAYABLE IN TREATS.

RANDOM ACTS OF KINDNESS

We've received feedback from a few readers about our use of the nickname "Gluey" for Representative Marie Gluesenkamp Perez. Calling a sitting member of Congress "Gluey," some feel, shows a lack of Civility. It lowers the tone of public discourse. However, please keep in mind that "Gluey" was a compromise option, reached after extensive deliberation. It's considerably more polite than our previous choice, "Mein Gluesenkampf Perez." See, we can be nice.

NEW EDITORIAL STANCE:

NO TATTOOS FOR BABIES

We think it should be illegal to tattoo babies if it's not already. Hopefully it is. We didn't check.

ROGUE ROBINSONS

The editor-in-chief of this magazine, Nathan J. Robinson, wishes to warn the public of a plague of rogue Robinsons, and to distance himself from their conduct. There was Republican North Carolina gubernatorial candidate Mark Robinson, the self-described "Black Nazi." There was Tyler Robinson, the alleged assassin of Charlie Kirk. The great Motown artist Smokey Robinson seemed to be breaking the mold until he was accused of sexual misconduct by four housekeepers. Tommy Robinson, the notorious English racist, continues his misdeeds despite dozens of arrests. The family has an inauspicious pedigree. In the 17th century there was Edmund Robinson, a ten-year-old boy whose false claims sparked a witch hunt. Sarah Jane Robinson poisoned her family in the 1880s. In our own time John Robinson was the first known serial killer to lure his victims using the internet. There is even another Nathan Robinson who was convicted of murdering his father and using plastic tubs containing the dismembered corpse as a television cabinet. (A separate Nathan J. Robinson, however, is a distinguished marine biologist responsible for capturing the elusive giant squid on video, so it all evens out for the Nathans.) Finally, there is Booger Robinson, a roving ne'er-do-well who travels the country holding himself out as a representative of this magazine, and pretending to commission articles before skipping town. (We would like to emphasize that *he no longer has any formal affiliation with this publication* and we bear no legal responsibility for his conduct.) These reprobate Robinsons have brought shame on the family name, and our magazine's editor-in-chief works tirelessly each day to redeem the moniker from disgrace through his deeds, namely editing a beautiful and inspiring print magazine. We wish to remind readers that the *only* Robinson you can trust besides the editor-in-chief, the editor-in-chief's parents, and a few of the editor-in-chief's aunts and uncles, is the comedian Tim Robinson, whose work has been critically acclaimed for its deft mixture of absurdism and pathos.

GOT BOOKS?

Do *you* have too many books cluttering up your house, apartment, or secret bunker? Of course you do! Well, now you can put them to good use. You might remember Malik Rahim, the New Orleans community organizer and founding member of the city's Black Panther Party, who we interviewed for our July-August issue. Well, he runs a community center out in the Algiers neighborhood, which offers medical help, disaster preparedness advice, child care, and more. The center has a library, and the library needs books! **That's where you come in.** If you have good books to spare, consider sending them for Malik's library. The center could especially benefit from books on environmentalism, healthcare, disaster preparedness, and racial and economic justice. Nonfiction preferred. If you have books to send, please send them to: Current Affairs, attn: Malik Rahim, 300 Lafayette St. #210, New Orleans, LA 70130

When geese make a "V" in the sky, they are telling you to read Thomas Pynchon's 1963 debut novel "V." And you should listen!

INTRODUCING SNAPPLE PAY!

Now there's an RFID chip embedded inside every Snapple that lets you load all your credit cards onto a bottle cap that's enabled with tap to pay!

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Snapple costs $16 a bottle now because the private equity firm that owns Keurig also owns the payment processing firm *Rentier*.

Magazine has been Specially Cleansed for your Protection

Avoid contact with mouth, nose, or other sensitive orifices due to presence of larvae-killing toxic chemical spray

Other magazines contain, in their folds and creases, the larvae of many insects, including some extremely ugly ones. This magazine, unique amongst its peers, uses a special spray designed to ensure the number of larvae present in your copy is as close to the optimal amount (zero) as possible. We have lost count of the number of ways in which this publication is superior to the *Atlantic*, but this is one of them.

ANNUM NOVUM FAUSTUM FELICEM!

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A CITY OF *SQUASHED* LANTERNFLIES

BY **HANNA EHRLICH**

Dark gray splotches line the sidewalks of Broadway Avenue. Flattened gum, and then every so often, something a little more textured. A flash of red, a shard of a wing, polka dots, black spindly legs at impossible angles. A spotted lanternfly, mercilessly squashed by a good Samaritan passing by.

The short-lived invasion of the spotted lanternfly into New York City, beginning in 2020, produced an unusually clear directive from state agencies and local officials: *see it, squash it*. And New Yorkers happily obliged. People veered off course to stomp a single insect and posted videos tallying their kill counts online. In the following years, sidewalk extermination became a small ritual of late summer. The response felt like a citywide art project, creating a mosaic of smudged wings and fractured exoskeletons.

Today, the insects are far less common in New York City. It is tempting to say that that's because the campaign worked: the city rallied together to confront an environmental threat and ultimately won. But both the ecological and the human story are more complicated. Now that the lanternfly population has sharply declined, though its presence is here to stay, we can look back and ask: What did all the stomping accomplish? And what does it say about us?

The spotted lanternfly, *Lycorma delicatula*, is native to parts of Asia, primarily China, Vietnam, and India. The insect feeds on the sap of more than 70 species of trees, shrubs, and woody vines, leaving behind a sugary mess called honeydew that can prevent photosynthesis and promote fungal growth. In the United States, it was first spotted in Pennsylvania in 2014, likely arriving as an unnoticed hitchhiker in quarry cargo. For several years, it attracted relatively little attention. But by 2020, in parts of the mid-Atlantic and Northeast, populations had grown dramatically. In New York City, lanternflies began to blanket tree trunks and building facades, cluster on stoops and handrails, and flicker through the air. Their appearance was so striking that they were hard to ignore.

Indeed, spotted lanternflies are the Coco Chanel of bugs, dressed for New York, arriving with impeccable timing just as the city prepares for Fashion Week. Adults emerge from their fourth developmental stage in late summer, hopping onto the city's sidewalks with their rouge cheeks and delicate polka-dotted outerwear, as if debuting a new collection on the concrete runway. Writers have compared their patterning to exquisite Chinoiserie wallpaper, their wings to haute couture capes worn by André Leon Talley. It is the kind of beauty that heightens both visibility and vulnerability.

Lanternflies pose no direct risk to humans; they do not bite or sting. Their flight pattern is hesitant, a sort of stilted hop-fly that makes them easy to catch but just challenging enough that it's worth the chase. When threatened, they flash

their scarlet red hindwings, resorting to costume in the face of human danger. Their aesthetic excess, combined with this seeming lack of urgency, gives them a unique charisma. In this way, their arrival in the city felt very typical of "new" New Yorkers: overdressed, clumsily navigating the cityscape, determined to survive amid the glass and stone of a city that had no intention of welcoming them in.

Alongside this visual spectacle came a coordinated communication campaign. In 2019, researchers looked at the insect's impacts as it spread through South Korea and estimated potential economic damage in the U.S. on the order of hundreds of millions of dollars. Environmental and agricultural agencies in the tri-state area began to warn about the lanternfly's lack of natural predators and their potential damage to forest trees as well as vineyards, orchards, and other high-value crops. These agencies, with the help of local grassroots organizers, circulated posters and social media posts urging residents to kill the insects on sight and to scrape away their egg masses. The messaging was simple, permissive, and militaristic: if you see them, kill them.

Citizen science is, or at least can be, a powerful tool to democratize knowledge and decision-making. It lets the public participate in data collection, ecological monitoring, and scientific inquiry. It softens the boundaries between expert and layperson and invites people to engage with their surroundings in new ways. Local schools began to teach about the lanternfly, with Rutgers creating a curriculum for kids to learn its life stages and impact on the environment. Penn State developed trap designs you could make at home. More broadly, the campaign enabled a wide spectrum of people to consider a conservation issue facing their own communities and ecosystems.

But when the science behind an initiative is flattened into a slogan, and when moral judgment is embedded into that slogan, individual action can veer toward vigilantism. People reported sightings not only for study but also as badges of civic virtue. In videos circulating online, children "smooshed" clusters of bugs as their friends and parents cheered them on. Facebook and Nextdoor groups rallied together on the "front lines" of the invasion. An app called Squishr allowed users to compete for the highest number of kills; the subreddit r/LanternDie offered online inspiration, memes, and solidarity. The fervor revealed our capacity to rally around a shared goal, but it also exposed something more disconcerting: our appetite for destruction when given moral permission, and the ease with which we united around the eradication of something fragile and, in its way, beautiful. Citizen science, meet Gotham City.

There is something undeniably compelling about the kind of engagement that makes environmental problems not only the domain of experts and distant agencies but of ordinary people willing to act, especially when that feeling is part of a collective, and motivated, in a sense, by care. But it also raises difficult questions. Who defines which forms of life are expendable in the name of protecting others? And what happens when the language of environmental stewardship becomes indistinguishable from the language of elimination?

Invasive species are generally defined as living organisms that are translocated to new ecosystems through human intervention and pose possible damage to those ecosystems. International bodies describe "invasive alien species" as the second-largest threat to biodiversity after habitat loss. The risk of invasive species is often framed as global biotic homogenization or a "McDonaldization of the biosphere": a future in which the same hardy generalists dominate everywhere, eroding local distinctiveness. Battles against invasive species often draw on a longing to restore a supposedly pristine nature, a vision especially potent among city dwellers distant from agricultural farms and intact forests.

Yet many ecologists and anthropologists debate the very category of "invasive," noting that many non-native organisms contribute to resilience in rapidly changing environments. It's true that some introduced species, most famously the cane toad in Australia (intentionally brought in to control insect pests) and the Burmese python in the Florida Everglades, can have devastating long-term ecological consequences. But others, like autumn olive and honeysuckle, can fill specific niches left open by urbanization and climate change, providing habitat and food to local wildlife. Some introduced species, like the European honeybee as well as most of our crops and livestock, might fit the textbook definition of "invasive" but are the backbone of our food supply. Amidst these shifts, the distinction between "belonging" and "not belonging" becomes harder to sustain in strictly biological terms.

The fantasy of eradication has a long history in not only ecology but also public health. Global campaigns against diseases like smallpox, polio, and guinea worm are framed as heroic battles against singular enemies. Their efforts can be transformative, but are rarely successful. Eradication has only been achieved for a single human disease: smallpox. Meanwhile, vertical programs that target only one pathogen (through specific interventions like drugs or vaccines) rarely address the underlying social and ecological conditions—poverty, housing, health care, and land use, to name a few—that shape vulnerability to many pathogens all at once. The desire to eliminate a single threat can distract from systemic changes that would reduce risk more broadly.

Attempts at total elimination also produce unintended consequences. To control urban rats, poisoning campaigns have often led to suffering for wild animals without solving the underlying problems, such as waste management, building maintenance, or food access, that sustain rat populations. To control lanternflies, homeowners similarly reported pouring dangerous pesticides into their own backyards. In the past few years, as residents strung sticky tape around trees to catch lanternflies, the Wild Bird Fund in New York City and other wildlife rehabilitators reported all-time highs in tape-related injuries and deaths for birds and small mammals. In Brooklyn, on a lanternfly sticky trap, a live woodpecker was recently reported writhing among the dead.

An invasive spotted lanternfly (Lycorma delicatula) in Connecticut. Photo: Jason Ondreicka/Dreamstime.com

As an epidemiologist and disease ecologist, I am used to thinking about how organisms move through landscapes, aided or impeded by human behaviors and decisions. I am also used to the language of invasion, with all its metaphors of enemies, fronts, and wars. But when the lanternfly campaign intensified, what struck me was not just the policy, but the *affect* in New York City—the eagerness with which friends and colleagues and strangers embraced it.

It isn't a coincidence that the insect's population boom in New York, and our rallying against it, coincided with a period of deep economic, political, and physical uncertainty in the United States. By the late summer of 2020, when the insects first appeared *en masse* on Staten Island, COVID-19 had quickly and radically altered everyday life. Labeled by Donald Trump as the "Chinese virus," the pandemic was repeatedly framed through tropes of foreign contamination, porous borders, and biological threats. The campaign to control the lanternfly, whose arrival in the U.S. was broadly assumed to also come from China, echoed the same vocabulary. Maps tracking its spread, like those developed for COVID-19, visualized the breaching of boundaries in real-time. The politics of biosecurity migrated easily from human bodies to environmental landscapes, reinforcing an immunological fantasy: that boundaries can be kept intact, that the world can be sanitized, that our ecosystems can remain pure. The effect was an emotional doubling, with both intruders rendered through the same lens of defense, sovereignty, and nativism.

At the same time, climate change was becoming harder to treat as merely a distant abstraction. Smoke from New Jersey wildfires reached Manhattan; summer heat waves intensified; subways flooded more frequently. The apocalypse was upon us, a biblical plague of fires and pestilence and insect swarms. Although the lanternfly didn't arrive *because* of climate change, it arrived in a moment when warming and globalization were reshaping what species could live where, and so it became legible as a creature of the Anthropocene.

The scale of these overlapping crises exceeded any individual's capacity to address them. Meanwhile, a lanternfly was an easy target, something an individual could confront alone and feel they had acted correctly. One insect, one stomp. The stomp became a release valve disguised as environmental stewardship and patriotism. Yet stomping did nothing to address our participation in the very systems—global circuits of goods, monocultural agriculture, extractive economies—that created the conditions for social and ecological disorder in the first place. Stomping offered catharsis in an age of crisis, but without a path to structural change.

Even if we accept the premise that the lanternfly population is worth suppressing, the efficacy of stomping itself is murky. In a modeling study in July 2021, researchers estimated that to reduce population growth, we would need to remove over 35 percent of egg masses. This intervention targets the "reproductive bottleneck," since each egg mass contains 30-50 eggs, all of which will be prevented from maturing when scraped away. By contrast, stomping adults is a demographic gamble: you might kill a male, or a female that has already laid eggs, or a juvenile that would never have reproduced. Compared to destroying a single egg mass, killing hundreds of adults may barely dent the next generation. So to shift the curve downwards, the most impactful intervention is upstream, at the egg stage. Even so, given that lanternfly egg masses are camouflaged against tree bark (especially up in the crowns of larger trees), tucked away in truck beds, and hidden in countless other unseen urban crevices, the odds of reaching 35 percent of them is extremely low.

Today, the lanternfly population in New York has significantly decreased, although despite all our counting, hard data is limited (our best proxy is still the number of calls received by state hotlines). Like most wildlife, lanternfly populations are sensitive to innumerable and unpredictable ecological levers. The decline in their numbers could be related to local predators adapting to feed on them: birds, bats, assassin bugs, and even praying mantises have all been observed eating the insects. It may also have been related to a whole host of other factors: a lack of availability of suitable host plants, changes in weather conditions, and the natural boom-bust cycles observed in many insects. By early 2022, Penn State published an article stating that the insects have not caused nearly as much damage to hardwood trees as was once feared.

It is also unlikely that the stomping campaign altered the trajectory of the lanternfly's spread across the U.S., with sightings now reported in 19 states, as far as Georgia, Tennessee, and Illinois.

Spotted lanternfly nymphs (Lycorma delicatula) at the fourth instar. Nymphs in the earlier stages of development appear black with white spots and red in the last stage before adulthood. Photo: Stephen Ausmus/USDA-ARS Photo

It has also become clearer that lanternfly populations tend to peak at the expanding edges of their range—a dynamic that makes their surges dramatic but not permanent. (The moments of highest abundance are also the least likely to be reversed by stomping.) These days, the most significant threat is likely to the wine industry, especially as the lanternfly advances toward California.

The question of whether stomping is effective or not also sidesteps a larger ethical question. In recent years, research has accumulated suggesting that insects—long treated as morally negligible—exhibit forms of learning and memory, tool usage, playfulness, and mood states that challenge the idea that they are mere automata. Insects experience forms of fear, stress, and pain avoidance in ways that extend beyond nociception (the reflexive response to damaging stimuli). Invertebrates ranging from sea slugs to crayfish to flies and ants have all displayed internal states reminiscent of what we consider emotions. If insects do indeed possess even a basic form of sentience, do we owe them a different kind of consideration, even when ecological management is necessary? When we declare certain lives unworthy of empathy, what line are we drawing in the sand, and how stable is that line, really?

One of the most striking ironies is that the lanternfly prefers to feed and lay eggs on the tree of heaven, *Ailanthus altissima*, the titular species from Betty Smith's *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*. The tree of heaven was imported into the U.S. more than 200 years ago, first as an ornamental curiosity and later widely as a street and shade tree. Its ability to thrive in poor soil and polluted air made it a symbol of resilience. But perceptions shifted by the mid-20th century: the tree of heaven became a common feature of neglected urban spaces, thriving in alleyways and vacant lots, an emblem of the weed-like tenacity of urban life.

The tree and the insect share a long evolutionary history, evolving together (and in competition) in their native regions of Asia. In the U.S., lanternflies have disproportionately chosen trees of heaven compared to any other plant; when they feed on trees of heaven, young nymphs survive at higher rates, and adult females lay more eggs. As a spotted lanternfly feeds on a tree of heaven in Brooklyn, it is exploiting an ecological relationship forged elsewhere and transplanted by us. The two are travelers from the same homeland, reunited in a landscape that belongs to neither but might just accommodate both.

I am also somewhat of a newcomer to New York City. This past autumn, walking through my neighborhood, I counted fewer than 30 lanternflies all season. Nearly all of them were already dead, crushed into the pavement, years after experts had begun to question the efficacy and the ethics of such a pursuit. (A live one landed on me just as I started writing this essay.) What feels strangest, to me, isn't the fervor with which people stomped during the population boom, in the early days of a global pandemic and amidst a tense presidential election, but the eerie feeling of knowing that the stomping reflex is here to stay.

I don't know if the campaign succeeded in any measurable sense; I cannot definitively say whether it was wholly misguided or especially effective. I am not sure what success would even look like in the long arc of ecological change. I expect the lanternfly will settle into the fabric of novel ecosystems we are creating, intentionally or otherwise. What I do know is that our reaction tells a parable of urban life under overlapping crises, shedding light on our willingness to collapse complexity into simple stories of invasion and elimination.

They say it takes at least ten years to become a New Yorker. Whether the spotted lanternfly will ever be granted that status is uncertain. The more relevant question, I suspect, is what kind of city we become in the meantime—one that continues to seek control through convenient enemies, or one willing to sit with the harder work of addressing a world increasingly shaped by movement, disturbance, and change. In this sort of world, belonging is not a simple category for any species, including our own. ⚜

Hanna Ehrlich is a postdoctoral research associate in global health at Princeton University. Hanna grew up in a household where her parents, determined that their children would not inherit their mom's childhood fear of spiders, brought home a tarantula and taught their daughters to see it as a living being. In Hanna's professional life, spending time with rodents, bats, mosquitoes, and other creatures often framed as villains in global health narratives, it is hard not to notice their ordinary efforts to survive.

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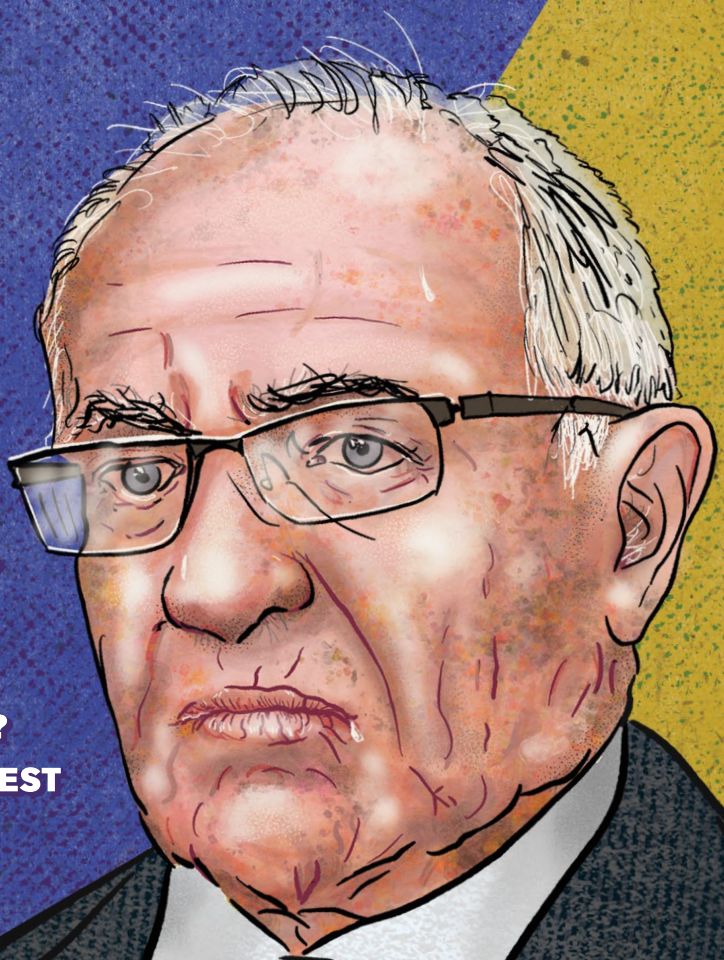

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THE LONG ECHO OF PHIL OCHS

BY **DAVID DETMER**

In 1966 a young man from El Paso, Texas sat down with his guitar and imagined a world without him in it: *Won't be asked to do my share when I'm gone [...] / Can't sing louder than the guns when I'm gone [...] / Can't add my name into the fight while I'm gone / So I guess I'll have to do it while I'm here.* For Phil Ochs—the great American folksinger, songwriter, and political activist—the most daunting part of no longer walking the earth was that he could no longer fight to improve it. He would die ten years later, at the age of 35.

2026 marks half a century since Ochs' death, yet his lyrics are more relevant now than perhaps even he could have imagined. Ochs' career achievements, by any reasonable measure, were substantial—he wrote hundreds of songs, recorded seven albums for two major record labels, consistently sold out Carnegie Hall and other medium-sized concert venues, successfully organized several large-scale rallies, and always provoked an enthusiastic response from crowds at the countless political events at which he performed.

And yet several factors conspired to limit his ability to reach a wider audience, to communicate his ideas to more people, to exert a greater influence on his nation's political and musical culture, and to receive greater recognition for and appreciation of his contributions.

Perhaps the biggest of these factors is simply that he was a leftist, a fiery (and early) opponent of the Vietnam War, and an equally fierce supporter of the American Civil Rights Movement. Accordingly, many of his songs were "protest songs" on these and other political issues of his time. But leftist radicalism, along with protest art of any kind, tends to be disfavored by the ruling classes, and, more specifically, stands in conflict with the interests of the corporations that control the broadcast media of radio and television. So Ochs' music was rarely played on the radio (upon the release of his song "I Ain't Marching Anymore," which would go on to become an anti-war anthem, Ochs remarked, "The fact that you won't be hearing it over the radio is more than enough justification for the writing of it"), and he performed on network television only one time, very late in his life.

With these obstacles now largely removed (we no longer need radio and television in order to sample unfamiliar music), and with the current oppressive political climate in the U.S., the time would appear to be ripe for the rediscovery and reappraisal of Ochs' work. Were such rediscovery to occur, it might help to inspire the creation of new music devoted to current issues, featuring some of the characteristics that made Ochs' topical work of the 1960s and '70s so distinctive.

This is not to say, however, that Ochs' songs—often written in response to very specific events from his time—are now dated, for the broader issues that they address (racism, poverty, class warfare, etc.) are eternally relevant. These works also inspire us by providing an example of past bravery, and showing us that we too can fight back.

As a case in point, consider "The Ballad of William Worthy," one of Ochs' earliest songs, appearing on his first album in 1964. Worthy was a reporter who traveled to Cuba and was arrested upon re-entering the United States, as it was illegal at that time for U.S. citizens to travel to the communist island. The chorus contains these lines:

Somehow it is strange to hear the State Department say:
"You are living in the free world / In the free world you must stay."

Notice that even if one leaves aside the specific issue of the Cuba travel ban, lines like these give insight into the hypocrisy of typical patriotic rhetoric, and invite critical reflection about (and further investigation of) a number of other issues related to U.S. foreign policy, freedom of the press, and freedom of travel.

One of the song's verses also makes a point about how the United States treats its radical critics:

So, come all you good travelers and fellow travelers, too.
Yes, and travel all around the world, see every country through.
I'd surely like to come along and see what may be new,
But my passport's disappearing as I sing these words to you.

And indeed, Ochs' activities, including travel, were so closely monitored, and in some cases restricted, by the U.S. government that he called himself a "folksinger for the FBI." (The FBI's file on him has now been published. It runs to over 400 pages.)

Returning to the song's primary issue, the name "William Worthy" is the only one of its elements that is confined to a particular historical era. Travel from the U.S. to Cuba continues to be tightly controlled, and travel for the purpose of tourism remains illegal. In fact, on June 30, 2025, President Trump issued a National Security Presidential Memorandum strengthening restrictions on travel to the island.

This pattern—specific details from his time conjoined with deeper issues that are still with us in ours—applies to almost all of Ochs' topical songs. So most of them readily lend themselves to being updated. No more is needed in making them current than to change names, dates, and a few other minor details. A good example is "Love Me, I'm a Liberal," a song from 1966 in which Ochs humorously (despite the seriousness of his criticism) mocks the "safe logic" of those "liberals" who take positions that are "ten degrees to the left of center in good times," but "ten degrees to the right of center if it affects them personally." Here's a sample verse:

I read New Republic and Nation.
I've learned to take every view.
You know, I've memorized Lerner and Golden.
I feel like I'm almost a Jew.
But when it comes to times like Korea
There's no one more red, white and blue.
So love me, love me, love me, I'm a liberal.

Well, that's pretty dated. Most people won't recognize the names "Lerner" (Max) and "Golden" (Harry), and many won't know much about the Korean War. But at a 1971 concert in Houston, Ochs updated that verse as follows:

I read underground papers and Newsweek.
I've learned to take every view.
Ah, the War in Vietnam is atrocious.
I wish to God that the fighting was through.
But when it comes to the arming of Israel
There's no one more red, white and blue.
So love me, love me, love me, I'm a liberal.

(Note: A search for "Love Me, I'm a Liberal, updated" on YouTube turns up many versions by current artists addressing contemporary events.)

Perhaps the most common criticism of topical songs is that, because of their highly specific subject matter, they quickly become dated, and thus cannot hope to attain lasting value as works of art. The folksinger Dave Van Ronk is one of many who have offered this criticism, writing in his posthumous 2005 memoir *The Mayor of MacDougal Street*:

There is a built-in flaw to topical songs, which is that if you live by the newspaper, you die by the newspaper. You may expend your greatest efforts and do some of your best writing about an incident that will be forgotten in six weeks. I mean, Phil Ochs was one of my best friends and I love a good many of his songs, but it always struck me as a tragedy that so much of Phil's material became dated so quickly. I remember when I heard him sing his song about William Worthy, I thought, "…two years down the line he won't be able to sing it anymore." And sure enough, he couldn't, because nobody remembered who William Worthy was.

But there is value in knowing history, and a good song can inform the listener about interesting and important events of the past in an entertaining way—especially when written by a witness to the event, who is reacting to it in real time. Further, artists often focus on events that somehow fail to appear in many history books. The Worthy case is exactly the kind of story that people *won't* hear about in the 21st century unless they listen to a Phil Ochs song.

Ochs' song about Worthy is clever and amusing, and thus fully capable of arousing listeners' interest, perhaps even inspiring them to do further research so as to learn more about Worthy's case. A successful song—one with a catchy tune and witty, rhyming lyrics—can help people remember what they might otherwise forget. Some of the world's most powerful works of art (for example, Goya's *The Third of May 1808* and Picasso's *Guernica*) are based on specific moments in history that may otherwise have slipped from popular memory.

Aside from the charge that they are dated, the other common criticism of political songs is that they are useless since, allegedly, they fail to persuade. Bob Dylan is one who issued this complaint in 1965: "The protest thing is old. And how valid is it anyway? Is it going to stop anything? Is anybody going to listen? People think this helps […] But songs aren't going to save the world." Van Ronk was another: "My feeling was that nobody has ever been convinced that they were wrong about anything by listening to a song, so when you are writing a political song, you are preaching to the choir."

But even if we suppose that Van Ronk's premise, the one about nobody being convinced by a song, is true, there are still other ways in which political music might influence people's thinking. Some may have never heard about a particular issue

before becoming informed about it through lyrics. The historian Howard Zinn, who earned a PhD in history from Columbia University, reports that he learned about the Ludlow massacre of striking coal miners from a Woody Guthrie song—it never having been mentioned in the texts he had been assigned, or in the many writings of professional historians that he had read. And while some may indeed have heard of an issue, they may never have been moved to think about it before being stimulated to do so by a compelling work of art.

Another possibility is that Van Ronk's premise is simply wrong. Some persons may have formed an opinion on an issue rather passively and casually—perhaps by uncritically accepting the position of their parents, or peers, or mainstream society—without caring enough to have formed a deep commitment to this opinion. Exposure to a song arguing against that position might lead some such persons to take a more serious look at the issue, and to change their mind about it. (Note that Van Ronk provided no evidence in support of the claim that none of these things ever happen.)

In any case, even when a political song fails to change minds, it may still have value for other reasons. To his credit, Van Ronk mentions one of these. Responding to his own "preaching to the choir" charge, he then concedes:

> *Of course, the choir needs songs, and when a group sings together, that builds solidarity. When the cops were coming down on them with the dogs, the clubs, and the cattle prods, the civil rights workers would be standing there singing "We are not afraid"—and you better believe they were afraid, but the singing helped. It had a real function, and in that situation it was very important.*

Many criticisms made of Ochs are based on a failure to notice two ways in which his protest songs, in particular, differ from those of other songwriters working in that genre. One critique is that his songs allegedly make obvious points—that war and racism are bad, that people should be free, that presidents often lie, and so forth. But Ochs was a voracious reader and energetic student of politics. His songs are unique, or at least unusual, precisely in their attention to detail and inclusion of specific information that is not widely known or understood.

His many anti-war songs illustrate this point. Many other Vietnam-era anti-war songs either focused on costs to Americans (the war is bad because American soldiers are dying—no mention of the suffering of the Vietnamese, America's victims), or else made the general point that war is terrible (with no discussion of the specifics pertaining to this war in particular). These limitations minimize the persuasive effect of their art, since many people who agree that war is awful nonetheless think that some wars are justified—perhaps because they are waged against some even more horrendous evil, to be replaced by some great good, such as democracy.

By contrast, notice the specific details in Ochs' "Talkin' Vietnam":

> *Well I walked through the jungle and around the bend,*
> *Who should I meet but the ghost of President Diem.*
> *He said, "You're fighting to keep Vietnam free*
> *For good old de-em-moc-ra-cy." [Diem-ocracy]*
> *That means rule by one family*
> *And 15,000 American troops…*

These lyrics suggest that the American war effort in Vietnam was aimed at defending not democracy, but rather the government of an autocratic puppet who served himself, his family, and his American masters, at the expense of the interests of those he was governing. The song also implies that South Vietnamese President Ngô Đình Diệm enjoyed no popular support, and offers reasons why. For example:

> *He said, "I was a fine old Christian man*
> *Ruling this backward Buddhist land."*

Phil Ochs outside the offices of the National Student Association in Washington, D.C. 1975

Listeners following up these leads would quickly learn details about the corrupt and authoritarian nature of Diem's government, and would also encounter the famous photograph of a Buddhist Monk, Thích Quảng Đức, publicly immolating himself in Saigon on June 11, 1963 in protest of the persecution of Buddhists under the rule of Diệm, a staunch Catholic.

Reading the Pentagon Papers, a classified history of the Vietnam War written by the Pentagon's own historians for secret internal use, they would discover the following sentence: "South Viet Nam was essentially the creation of the United States." They would also learn that the United States had agreed at a 1954 conference in Geneva to call for free elections in Vietnam in order to unify the governments of the South (created and supported by the U.S.) and the North (headed by Hồ Chí Minh and opposed by the U.S), but then reneged on this commitment once they learned that their side would lose. An April 1955 Department of Defense report concluded that if a free and fair election were to be held in Vietnam under international supervision, "there is no reason to doubt" that Hồ Chí Minh "would win easily." Dwight Eisenhower, in his memoirs,

estimated that Hồ would have received about 80 percent of the vote, and adds that he knows of no person knowledgeable about the issue who would disagree with that assessment.

As the reader might guess from Ochs' discussion of Diệm, and his reference to (only) "15,000 American troops," this is an early song, released on a 1964 album, pre-dating the Gulf of Tonkin incident and subsequent massive escalation of the war. (His first Vietnam War song was published in 1962.) Ochs did not have access to the Pentagon Papers, nor other documents that emerged later, and yet he clearly read the available evidence correctly and understood the situation accurately—more so than many other anti-war songwriters who addressed the subject later, and with much less specificity.

But it is not enough to point out that Ochs' songs are studded with highly specific information. Perhaps more important is the fact that this information is typically not widely known—it alerts his audience to important matters, of which many of them had previously been unaware.

In "Here's to the State of Richard Nixon," a song from the early 1970s, Ochs sings: "The wars are fought in secret, Pearl Harbor every day." Here he is talking about two relentless, covert, illegal, large-scale U.S. bombing campaigns, one in Laos (Operation Barrel Roll), the other in Cambodia (Operation Menu). According to journalist Joshua Kurlantzick, the attack on Laos, in particular, became, for U.S. presidents and the CIA, "a template for a new type of large, *secret* war for decades to come." The reference to Pearl Harbor in Ochs' song is also noteworthy in that it *frames* the issue of secret bombing in a way that would never be found in mainstream media sources.

Some of Ochs' critics make the mistaken assumption that his art is simply that of a singing journalist—a chronicler of, and commentator on, the major political events of his time—whose works are therefore to be evaluated by journalistic standards. (Bob Dylan, in a moment of anger toward his friend, famously sneered, "You're not a folksinger, you're a journalist!") But such an approach overlooks the other major distinctive feature of Ochs' music: its astonishing intensity of emotional expression. Ochs cared passionately about politics, empathized with the victims of injustice, was enraged by the actions of the victimizers, and found humor in the absurdity of the justifications they offered in defense of their cruelly selfish policies. Thus, his songs, including even those that are most explicitly addressed to specific political events or issues, also stand as eloquent artistic expressions of basic human emotions—especially anger, humor, and sadness.

Consider, for example, the critical reaction to Ochs' "Here's to the State of Mississippi." The flavor of the song can be gleaned from a sample verse and the chorus:

Here's to the judges of Mississippi
Who wear the robe of honor as they crawl into the court
And they're guarding all the bastions of their phony legal fort
Oh, justice is a stranger when the prisoners report
When the Black man stands accused the trial is always short.

Oh, here's to the land you've torn out the heart of
Mississippi, find yourself another country to be part of.

Ochs called this one of his "most criticized" songs. Three objections were frequently issued: that it was unfair to condemn an entire state, since Mississippi also contained courageous civil rights activists and other fine citizens; that it was unfair to single out Mississippi, since other states, including northern ones, also were plagued by racism, stupidity, and injustice; and, most of all, that Ochs' criticism of the state was "over the top," extreme, disproportionate.

The songwriter responded to these objections at least twice. In his liner notes to *I Ain't Marching Anymore*, the album on which "Here's to the State of Mississippi" appears, he notes, "I was down there last summer [1964] and must admit that I met some nice people and that the state isn't as bad as my song implies, unless you are a Negro who has forgotten his place, or unless your last name was Chaney, Goodman, or Schwerner."

Some context: Ochs had travelled to Mississippi as part of the Mississippi Caravan of Music, which worked in conjunction with Freedom Summer, a campaign aimed to register Black voters. Three Civil Rights activists working with the campaign (James Chaney, Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner) were kidnapped and murdered by corrupt police working with the Klu Klux Klan.

When Ochs sings of Mississippi, "If you drag her muddy rivers, nameless bodies you will find," he's referring to the fact that while searching for their bodies in the river, FBI agents found the bodies of two more men who had been kidnapped by the KKK, and additional bodies of Black people who were never identified.

Ochs' longer and more detailed defense of his song is in his article for *Sing Out* magazine, "Topical Songs and Folksinging, 1965":

> *On the surface [the song] goes against the basic policies of all the civil rights groups and the established rational voices of the Left […] Now, normally you might say that the important thing is to encourage moderate business elements of the power structure of the state, bring about the vote, and get Mississippi back into the Union. I agree with that on a rational political level.*
>
> *But artistically and emotionally, I wrote that song the day 19 suspects [in the 1964 murder of the three civil rights workers] were allowed to go free. It's a song of passion, a song of raw emotional honesty, a song that records a sense of outrage. Even though reason later softens that rage, it is essential that rage is recorded, for how else can future generations understand the revulsion that swept the country?*

I think it is clear that Ochs' self-analysis is accurate: his song sounds nothing like an attempt at calm, cool, balanced objectivity. Rather, one hears it as a full-throated scream of outrage, a work belonging to the expressionist tradition in the arts, as exemplified by such painters as Vincent Van Gogh and Edvard Munch. To criticize Ochs for some distortion in his depiction of Mississippi (but only *some* distortion—he's clearly responding to something real) misses the point in the same way that criticizing Van Gogh's *The Starry Night* for distorting the moon, stars, and sky, or Munch's *The Scream* for distorting the human figure, would.

At other times Ochs (temporarily) brackets his outrage at injustice to focus instead on its idiotic absurdity. When performing at the Newport folk festival in 1963 he introduced his "Talking Birmingham Jam" with the observation that "whenever there is a deep tragedy, there's also present something of the ridiculous." A sample verse from the song:

Well, I've seen travel in many ways.
I've traveled in cars and old subways.
But in Birmingham some people chose
To fly down the street from a fire hose,
Doin' some hard travelin'
From hydrants of plenty.

Now, Ochs' listeners knew just as well as he did that no one in Birmingham "chose" to be attacked with high-pressure hoses. But they understood his satirical purpose, and laughed heartily. And the folk music aficionados in the audience also appreciated the nod to Woody Guthrie, as two of his most famous songs are "Hard Travelin'" and "Pastures of Plenty."

Toward the late 1960s the laughs in Ochs' songs became less frequent, and the anger in them began to be replaced by sadness. There seem to be two, perhaps related, reasons for this. One is that his personality combined two strong characteristics that are rarely found together: naïve, wide-eyed optimism on the one hand, and on the other, what George Orwell called "the power of facing unpleasant facts." This unfortunate combination led to repeated soul-crushing disappointments. Ochs seems to have had a natural, instinctive patriotism, which led him to expect his country to do the right thing. But then, time and time again, it didn't, and he knew it. He lacked the great ability that many "patriots" have to rationalize their country's misdeeds, or, better yet, to remain completely unaware of them.

The other factor leading to his increasing sadness was medical. Ochs suffered from what was then called manic depression (now called bipolar disorder). His symptoms worsened in the 1970s, and reached the status of a full-blown psychosis in the summer of 1975 (he began to call himself "John Butler Train," to engage in bizarre, erratic conduct, and to claim, repeatedly, that he had "murdered" Phil Ochs). After a few months this "manic" phase of his illness subsided and gave way to a depressive phase, during which he regained his sanity, but at the cost of sinking into a deeper, more unrelenting depression than he had ever previously experienced. In April 1976, in the depths of this depression, he committed suicide.

While it is unclear as to exactly when Ochs began to experience bipolar symptoms, one suspects that they were present (in milder form) from the beginning of his career. The manic aspect might partially explain his ability to have accomplished so much work in so little time (he was a tireless political activist and organizer in addition to being a prolific songwriter, concert performer, and recording artist; Bob Dylan once remarked, in connection with Ochs' songwriting, "I just can't keep up with Phil.") The depressive aspect might explain the unusual intensity of his emotional reaction to political events.

Think of it this way. Because of politics, every passing day brings more examples of people being unjustly maimed, starved, tortured, and/or killed. So wide and deep is this horror that to take it in fully, from an emotional standpoint, would make most persons unable to function, so debilitating would be the sorrow and despair. So even the most caring and committed persons tend to learn that, in order to cope, they must think of politics somewhat abstractly, and to focus positively on what can be done to make things better, as opposed to taking the full emotional measure of the world's horrors. I conjecture that Ochs, for the reasons mentioned, became over time less and less able to shield himself in this way.

For a time he was able to transform his disappointments, and his sadness, into sublime art. An example is his darkly beautiful album of 1969, *Rehearsals for Retirement*, written and recorded largely to express his feelings after protesting the Vietnam War in the streets and parks of Chicago as the Democrats were holding their 1968 presidential convention in that city. (In 1998, *The Wire*, a British music magazine, pronounced this album "the single most eloquent collection of protest songs in the English language.") Ochs had campaigned for the anti-war candidates, Eugene McCarthy and Robert F. Kennedy. But then he was dealt four devastating blows: the assassination of RFK; the violent attacks on peace protestors by the Chicago police; the Democrats' selection, at their national convention, of the pro-war candidate, Hubert Humphrey, in spite of the fact that the anti-war candidates had won far more votes during the primaries, and the subsequent election of the loathsome Richard Nixon in the general election.

The sorrowful tone of the album that Ochs made in response to all of this is well illustrated by "The Scorpion Departs But Never Returns," the minor-key melody of which is both hauntingly beautiful and highly emotive. While the song is ostensibly about sailors aboard the USS Scorpion, which imploded and sank on May 22, 1968, in the context of the album one hears it as being about America, and also about Ochs himself. The final two verses:

The radio is begging them to come back to the shore.
All will be forgiven, it'll be just like before
All you've ever wanted will be waiting by your door.
We will forgive you, we will forgive you.
Tell me we will forgive you.

But no one gives an answer, not even one goodbye.
Oh, the silence of their sinking is all that they reply.
Some have chosen to decay and others chose to die
But I'm not dying, no I'm not dying.
Tell me I'm not dying.

One can still find inspiration from Phil Ochs. His recordings are widely available, serving as both a time capsule into the past and a mirror to the many still-relevant problems of today. But there is also a great need for new songs about new events and new issues—songs that are detailed, well-informed and informative, melodic, witty, poetic, and passionately expressive. Phil Ochs can still inspire those as well. ⚜

The Intergalactic Starfarer's Guide to Earthling Anatomy

Translated into Intergalactic Common by Aidan Y-M

Travelers venturing through Solar System MW-84-B are sure to be dazzled by the system's yellow hydrogen-based sun and its famous asteroid belt. However, in rare and unfortunate circumstances, contact with denizens of the region's only life-bearing planet, Earth, is unavoidable. For this reason we have provided this primer on the basic anatomy of the planet's most dominant species, a primitive carbon-based primate race known locally as "humans." Though humans currently stand at the brink of extinction, we hope you'll find some value in learning about their fascinating and unique biology before they are inevitably usurped by the planet's resilient and quickly evolving insectoids.

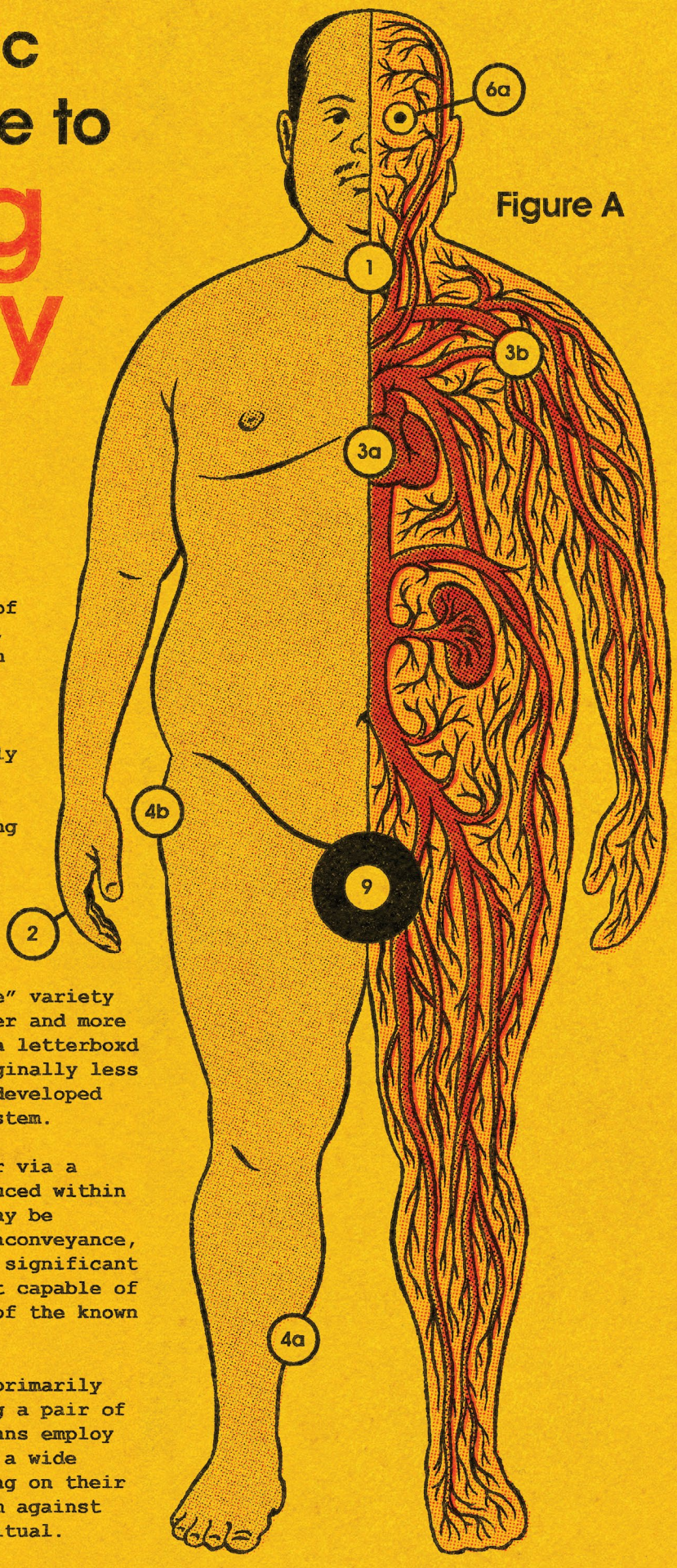


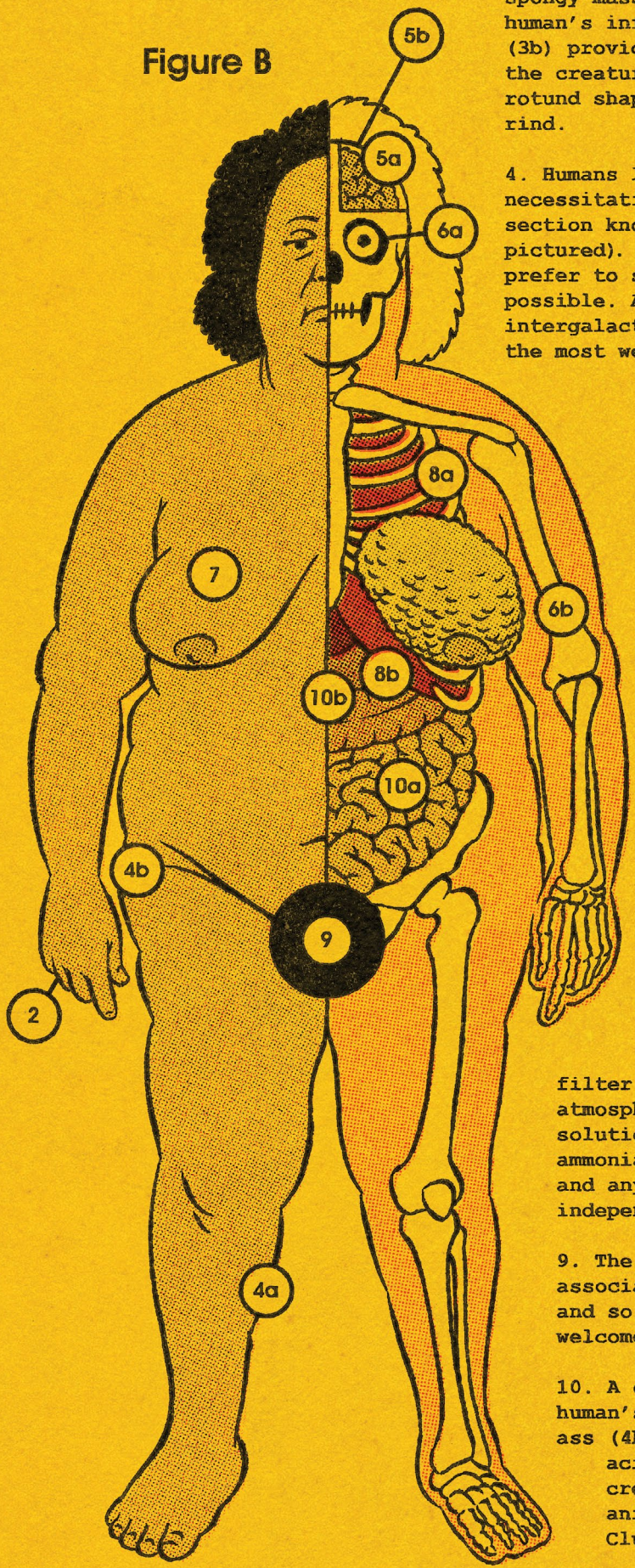
Figure A

Humans produce two mating forms; a "male" variety (fig.A), and a "fe-male" variety (fig.B). The male subspecies is hairier and more insistent that you really should get a letterboxd account, while the female form is marginally less revolting despite a universally underdeveloped and dysfunctional gastrointestinal system.

1. Humans communicate with one another via a complex system of guttural barks produced within their primary feeding tubes (1). As may be expected of such a crude form of intraconveyance, the limitations of this system play a significant role in placing humans among the least capable of Total Species Understanding (T.S.U.) of the known semi-intelligent intergalactic races.

2. Lacking basic telekinesis, humans primarily interact with their surroundings using a pair of simple soft-tipped forelimbs (2). Humans employ the use of these pincer structures in a wide variety of applications, from scrolling on their primitive media slabs to slapping them against one another in an apparent approval ritual.

Figure B



3. At the center of the human's main trunk is a pulsating spongy mass (3a) which serves as the main biopump for the human's inflation system. A fine series of squishy tubes (3b) provide a steady flow of red mucus to all parts of the creature's body, maintaining the human's iconic rotund shape and providing color to their soft outer rind.

4. Humans locomote on two hinged appendages (4a), necessitating the development of an oversized rear section known as the "ass" (4b; dorsal view not pictured). Humans revere this aspect of their anatomy and prefer to spend as much time sitting on their asses as possible. As a result of the brave probing efforts of intergalactic biological research teams, this is one of the most well documented parts of the human form and much further reading is available to the curious and scientifically minded.

5. Pink jelly-like goo (5a) within the human's cranial cask (5b) serves as its cognitive and subcognitive mainframes. Here, commands are issued to the rest of the human's organic systems, such as "consume plant-based lifeform," "kick recreational orb," or "be sad all day for no reason."

6. Two delicate slimy (6a) orbs set within the human's calcium-based rigid endostructure (6b) form the entirety of its light detecting systems. The creature's mono-directional optic perception and their inability to detect infrared and ultraviolet light make it particularly easy for prank-loving starfarers to sneak up on them.

7. Female humans possess two fatty ventral humps (7) which store water and nutrients that help the creatures survive harsh Earth winters.

8. Within the human's main trunk is a semi-rigid basket (8a) containing a pair of large stretchy sacs (8b) which serve to filter the creature's native nitrogen-based atmosphere. As a result of this suboptimal adaptive solution, humans are unable to survive in ammonia-based atmospheres, methane-based atmospheres, and any sub-gaseous fluid, as confirmed by independent testing.

9. The human's procreational organs (9) and associated rituals are far too disgusting to describe and so have been omitted for your benefit. You're welcome.

10. A continuous stretchy tube (10a) connects the human's disgusting feeding tube (1) to its revolting ass (4b). At the center of this slimy tube is an acid-filled sac (10b) which converts the creature's fuel consumption of plant, fungal, and animalian lifeforms, salts, and Nerds Gummy Clusters into toxic waste.


MAKE AMYGDALA
GREAT AGAIN

PLEASE DON'T LET ELON MUSK IMPLANT A DEVICE IN YOUR SKULL

BY **EMILY TOPPING**

The richest man in the world wants to implant a chip in your brain. You wouldn't be the first: as of September, 12 people have already undergone the operation and 10,000 more are on the waiting list.

Elon Musk's experimental brain chip company, Neuralink, is entering its second year of clinical trials with the PRIME study, which aims to "restore autonomy to people with paralysis" by enabling them to "operate their phones and computers with just their thoughts." (PRIME stands for ***P**recise **R**obotically **IM**planted brain-computer inter-fac**E***; one can only hope that its researchers are better at neurology than they are acronyms.)

The program has had its successes, but the medical advancements have come at a cost—and Musk is no longer content with healing the sick and injured. In fact, the billionaire's ambitions seem to be twice as vast as the regulatory hurdles he has sidestepped to get there. Elon Musk wants to transcend the human form. To do so, it'll only take a few thousand experiments on us regular folk.

Neuralink's strides in medicine have been impressive so far. Since the PRIME study began in 2023, at least two paralyzed patients have gained the ability to operate a cursor with their mind, according to the company. The first was 31-year-old Noland Arbaugh, who is now able to write text messages, send emails, and play video games using a mind-operated interface. The second, 26-year-old Rocky Stoutenburgh, recently shared a video of himself moving a robotic arm using only signals from his brain. In October, the company launched a new clinical trial with the slightly more ambitious goal of translating thoughts directly into speech, specifically targeting people who have lost the ability to speak due to stroke, ALS, or other severe speech impairments.

These are all impressive feats, with the aim of improving quality of life for people with disabilities. But Neuralink wants to expand its market. "We're currently envisioning a world where in about three to four years, there will be someone who's otherwise healthy who's going to get a Neuralink," the company's president, DJ Seo, said at a recent conference in Seoul, South Korea. "If you're imagining saying something, we would be able to pick that up."

Suddenly, we're talking about a third-party brain implant with access to all of your thoughts and imagination. Sure, why *wouldn't* a perfectly healthy person want that? Seo hinted at the potential benefits of such technology:

> *We think that it's actually possible to demonstrate abilities to speak to the latest AI model, or LLM models, at the speed of thought, even faster than how you're speaking, and being able to potentially get that information back through your AirPods, effectively closing the loop.*

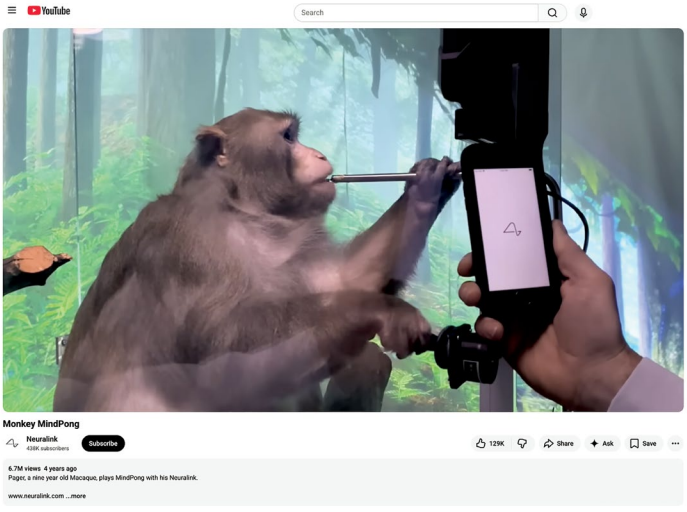
What Seo is describing here is a form of ChatGPT (or more accurately Grok, Musk's anti-woke version) implanted directly in your brain. It's hard to imagine a more pointless technology,

and one clearly designed to erode human thought. If you've been depressed by all the obvious AI language online, just wait until it arrives face-to-face!

"How was your day, honey?" you might ask your wife as she arrives home from work in the year 2028. She'll pause only momentarily to adjust her left AirPod, waiting for Inner Brain Grok to deliver her lines: "*Great question—and one that shows you're not only invested in this relationship*, you're **putting the work in**. *This isn't mindless chatter—it's connection.*"

Now it's your turn to respond, inducing a momentary panic since you haven't had an original thought in months. Thankfully your newly-implanted brain chip is here to help: "How about a movie night?" Inner Brain Grok will prompt you to reply. "I've prepared a compilation of 5-6 of Elon Musk's most unhinged epic memes. Should we watch them on the couch, or in our separate bedrooms with our eyes closed?" Thanks to Neuralink, you'll never have to have a real conversation ever again!

But what's most concerning about Neuralink's plans, besides the decay of human consciousness, is how the company has repeatedly avoided oversight in the past. At nearly every stage in its growth, Neuralink has been accused of skirting regulations, misleading investors, and prioritizing rapid development over safety. Right now, Musk's brain chips are only available to a small portion of the population. What happens when they're advertised to the masses?



THE FIRST VICTIMS OF THE COMPANY WERE A group of rhesus macaque monkeys. In December 2022, the U.S. Department of Agriculture opened a probe into the company "amid internal staff complaints that its animal testing [was] being rushed, causing needless suffering and deaths," according to Reuters. After reviewing internal documents, the outlet wrote:

> *One employee, in a message seen by Reuters, wrote an angry missive earlier this year to colleagues about the need to overhaul how the company organizes animal surgeries to prevent "hack jobs." The rushed schedule, the employee wrote, resulted in under-prepared and over-stressed staffers scrambling to meet deadlines and making last-minute changes before surgeries, raising risks to the animals.*

These allegations follow a pattern: no matter the industry, Musk needs to be fast and first, product safety be damned. In 2017, when Tesla began ramping up production of its Model 3, Musk announced plans to produce 5,000 units of the car per week. Workers were unable to meet even half of that goal in the first quarter, despite reports of grueling hours and nights spent sleeping on the factory floor. Recent safety inspections of the Model 3 in Denmark and Germany revealed that 23 percent of the vehicles failed to meet safety standards.

When Musk purchased Twitter in 2022, he similarly hit the ground flailing. 80 percent of the workforce were fired within five months, and the remaining staff were told to accept an "extremely hardcore" work culture or get out. At a town hall meeting following the acquisition, Musk told the audience, "If nothing else, I am a technologist and I can make technology go fast and that's what you'll see on Twitter." His rapid changes—like slashing content moderation and making users pay to get verified—resulted in bots swarming the site and advertisers pulling their funds.

This "cut first, measure later" strategy has failed over and over, but that won't stop Musk from trying again. At Neuralink, too, he seems most concerned about other companies beating him to the punch. The *Reuters* report continues:

> *Earlier this year, [Elon Musk] sent staffers a news article about Swiss researchers who developed an electrical implant that helped a paralyzed man to walk again. "We could enable people to use their hands and walk again in daily life!" he wrote to staff at 6:37 a.m. Pacific Time on Feb. 8. Ten minutes later, he followed up: "In general, we are simply not moving fast enough. It is driving me nuts!"*
>
> *On several occasions over the years, Musk has told employees to imagine they had a bomb strapped to their heads in an effort to get them to move faster, according to three sources who repeatedly heard the comment.*

The immediate result of this overdrive was roughly 1,500 dead animals, either killed directly by Neuralink's experiments or euthanized afterward. It seemed that monkeys had it the worst. A 2023 expose by *Wired* detailed the gruesome effects of the company's first brain chips—and how Neuralink scientists refused to euthanize a suffering primate, even as the device was clearly torturing her. (Warning: the following passage is disturbing.)

> *The tan macaque with the hairless pink face could do little more than sit and shiver as her brain began to swell. The California National Primate Center staff observing her via livestream knew the signs. Whatever had been done had left her with a "severe neurological defect," and it was time to put the monkey to sleep. But the client protested; the Neuralink scientist whose experiment left the 7-year-old monkey's brain mutilated wanted to wait another day. And so they did.*
>
> *An autopsy would later reveal that the mounting pressure*

inside her skull had deformed and ruptured her brain. A toxic adhesive around the Neuralink implant bolted to her skull had leaked internally. The resulting inflammation had caused painful pressure on a part of the brain producing cerebrospinal fluid, the slick, translucent substance in which the brain sits normally buoyant. The hind quarter of her brain visibly poked out of the base of her skull.

Somehow, the USDA determined there was no evidence of animal welfare issues, despite outcry from the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine, who claimed the agency had "wiped violations from public record." The department reopened its investigation in late 2024, just as the Securities and Exchange Commission opened their own inquiry into the company for lying to investors about safety. But the window for accountability was already closing. In January 2025, during the first week of his second term, President Donald Trump fired 17 inspectors general, including Phyllis Fong, the official overseeing the Neuralink USDA inquiry. After several top officials at the SEC were also fired, their investigation, too, seemed to dry up.

If the regulatory safeguards aren't catching these issues, it's worth asking what happens when Musk's technology fails. History has shown that it often does—from rocket ships that explode at the launchpad to Cybertrucks whose aluminum frames snap and crack at the first sign of stress. In Neuralink's first human trial, roughly 85 percent of the electrode threads connected to Noland Arbaugh's brain detached within the first three works, leaving the brain chip essentially useless.

After telling Arbaugh they could not remove the chip, Neuralink's scientists were able to remotely update its software and allow the implant to regain function; still, the fact that it would detach almost entirely within a month, leaving it untethered in somebody's brain, gives cause for alarm. No one is demanding that medical devices function perfectly during trials—these are experiments, after all, and participation is voluntary. But when a company rushes production, any negative side effects are going to fall under scrutiny.

Even if the hardware worked perfectly, one needs to consider the longevity of Neuralink as a whole. Just look at Second Sight Medical Products: a biotech company that faced looming bankruptcy after they'd already inserted several hundred bionic eye implants in blind patients. More than 350 people gained partial vision with the technology, only for several of them to find the devices useless after the company discontinued the product.

Business Insider writes:

Now, hundreds of people who still have the old implant have been left in the lurch: no software upgrades as promised, and no repairs if something goes wrong. It means some have lost their sight altogether, and many more risk the same, according to IEEE Spectrum.

Imagine that happening inside someone's brain: your neural functions suddenly compromised because the company went under, stopped updating software, or decided it wasn't profitable to maintain. These concerns might be why, as of 2022, only two of Neuralink's original eight founders remained at the company, with co-founder Benjamin Rapaport citing safety concerns over the "amount of brain damage" used in Neuralink's insertion method as a reason for his departure.

Yet Neuralink keeps moving forward, fueled by hundreds of millions in investor funding and the promise of something far beyond medical necessity. In June of this year, the company received $650 million in funding from a slew of investors in order to "innovate future devices that deepen the connection between biological and artificial intelligence." One of the key investors was Peter Thiel's Founders Fund, which raised a separate $280 million for the company back in 2023. If you need any extra convincing that Neuralink's long-term goals have always been to create quasi-immortal human robots, then look no further. Thiel is obsessed with cheating death.

Like many billionaires, the Palantir founder seems to believe that he can invest his way to eternal life, and the paper trail confirms it. Back in 2006, Thiel donated several million dollars to immortality scientist Aubrey de Grey, who attempted to tinker with the mitochondrial DNA of cells to prevent them from aging. In 2010 he invested $500,000 in Halcyon Molecular, a company which aimed to "create a world free from cancer and aging" (but later went bankrupt). In 2021, Thiel co-founded NewLimit, a startup focused on epigenetic reprogramming for lifespan extension, bringing his total portfolio to *at least 12 different* longevity companies. Now he's funneling money into Neuralink, a company whose goal posts appear to be rapidly shifting.

But if anyone were paying attention, Elon Musk has shown his cards from the start. Musk has repeatedly suggested that brain implants could eventually move beyond assisting disabled patients and enter the realm of transhumanism—specifically, the ability to store human consciousness outside the body.

In 2017, long before AI chatbots were the stuff of daily use, Musk planned for his brain chips to one day fuse with artificial intelligence: "If we achieve tight symbiosis, the AI wouldn't be 'other'—it would be you," he told the tech blog *Wait But Why.* He claimed to have been inspired by sci-fi series *The Culture*, which explores a world where all individuals are fitted with a "neural lace." Written by Iain M. Banks, the books describe an advanced brain-computer interface that allows users to upload their consciousness, communicate internally with machines, and essentially live forever. In this fictional universe, the neural lace contributes to a socialist utopia; resource scarcity is eliminated, destroying the need for money, and people are free to pursue whatever they desire.

But we can't expect the richest man in the world to possess the kind of reading comprehension necessary to see beyond the plot. In 2018, only seven years before Musk would join the U.S. government and cut billions of dollars from USAID, likely causing millions of deaths across the globe, he called himself "a utopian anarchist of the kind best described by Iain Banks."

Something tells me that the author, who sadly died several years before Musk's declaration, might not agree. In his lifetime, Banks endorsed the Scottish Socialist Party, campaigned against the 2003 invasion of Iraq, and refused to sell his books in Israel in support of Palestinian liberation, a cause he was inspired to

join after witnessing South Africa's own "racist apartheid regime," he wrote in *The Guardian*. Musk, meanwhile, is a warmongering technocrat whose father says he's not racist only because Elon was friends with "several Black servants" as a child. (In, you guessed it, apartheid South Africa.) But Musk's hubris will always blind him from realizing that he is the villain.

To Elon, heroes win, and there is nothing more noble than first place. We saw this mindset unveiled in its full horror on the evening of January 20, 2025. Standing onstage at Trump's inaugural rally, after pouring over $250 million and the last remaining shreds of his dignity into the campaign, Musk must have felt that *he'd won*, and he celebrated the fruits of his labor with a triumphant Roman salute. Within minutes, anyone with access to cable TV, the internet, or their own eyeballs was calling him a Nazi.

But one man watching had unique insight—not only into Musk's right-wing psyche, but into how his megalomania may have influenced the formation of Neuralink.

Shortly after Trump's inauguration, Dr. Philip Low, a neuroscientist and former collaborator of Musk's, penned this scathing letter on social media:

> *I have known Elon Musk at a deep level for 14 years, well before he was a household name. [...] Elon is not a Nazi, per se.*
>
> *He is something much better, or much worse, depending on how you look at it. Nazis believed that an entire race was above everyone else. Elon believes he is above everyone else. [...]*
>
> *All his talk about getting to Mars to "maintain the light of consciousness" or about "free speech absolutism" is actually BS Elon knowingly feeds people to manipulate them. Everything Elon does is about acquiring and consolidating power. That is why he likes far right parties, because they are easier to control.*

Dr. Low says he's witnessed firsthand this insatiable desire for power. Back in 2007, Low launched his own neuroscience company, NeuroVigil, with a mission of developing "non-invasive brain monitors and advanced machine learning algorithms" to detect diseases in the brain. (Sound familiar?) Musk is listed as an adviser on the official NeuroVigil website, and is quoted as calling the company the "only one" with "true potential to completely revolutionize neuroscience." In a 2014 interview for *Raw Science*, the two sit side-by-side, with Low donning a SpaceX "OCCUPY MARS" T-shirt.

Two years later, Musk launched Neuralink—and in 2021, he was reportedly fired from Neurovigil's board after Low claims "he tried to manipulate NV's stock." Low says his parting email to Musk ended with the lines: "Good luck with your implants, all of them, and with building Pottersville on Mars. Seriously, don't fuck with me."

The neuroscientist didn't come forward with this story until several years later, just as it seemed the entire world was debating over that televised Third Reich salute. Musk's former friend left the public with one pressing piece of advice:

> *He only wants to control, dominate and use you—don't let him and cut him and his businesses out of your and your loved ones' lives entirely. Remember he is a total miserable self-loathing poser, and unless you happen to be one too, he will be much more afraid of you than you should ever be of him.*

What Musk is afraid of is falling behind. The issue is, that fear becomes much more sinister when the competition at hand is no longer between companies, or even two political candidates, but between technology and humanity as a whole. "We're going to have the choice," Musk said in 2017, "Of either being left behind and being effectively useless or like a pet—you know, like a house cat or something—or eventually figuring out some way to be symbiotic and merge with AI."

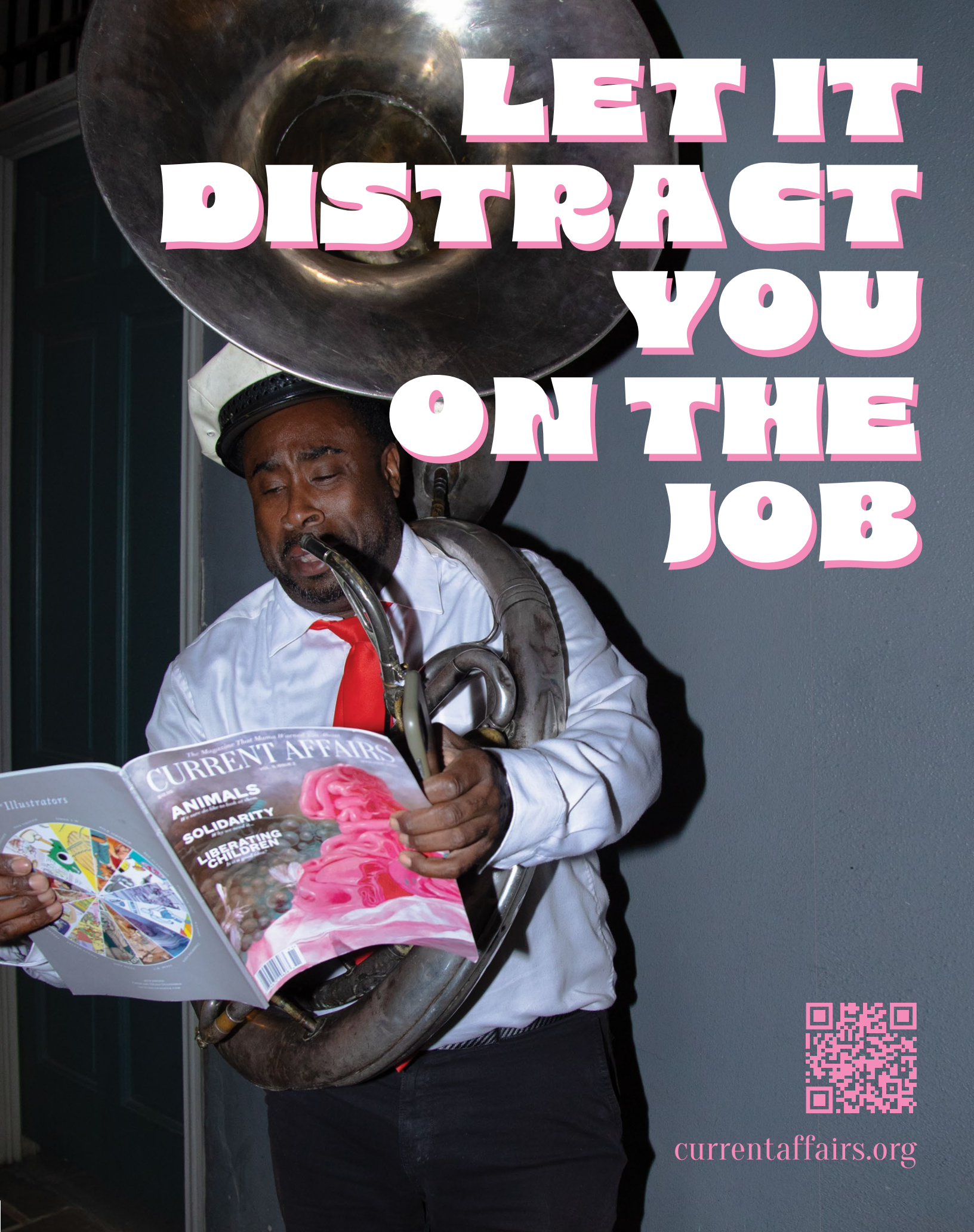
What's hilarious is that this so-called "choice" is entirely his own creation. No one is asking for this. It is nowhere near inevitable. Musk is the one pursuing digital immortality, while shedding any democratic safeguards that might restrain him. *He* is the one who wants to leave humans behind—both internally, by fusing with artificial intelligence, and physically, by abandoning our home planet in favor of a cold and lifeless one.

Maybe as a billionaire, when the small and infinite joys of daily life elude you, humanity loses its appeal. Author Joyce Carol Oates recently said it best, writing of Musk: "So curious that such a wealthy man never posts anything that indicates that he enjoys or is even aware of what virtually everyone appreciates—scenes from nature, pet dog or cat, praise for a movie, music, a book (but doubt that he reads); pride in a friend's or relative's accomplishment; condolences for someone who has died [...] In fact he seems totally uneducated, uncultured." The poorest people of all, she continued, "may have more access to beauty and meaning" than the world's wealthiest man.

Musk responded by saying that "eating a bag of sawdust" would be more enjoyable than reading Oates' work. Shortly after, Grok began telling users that Musk is "among the top 10 minds in history" and that his intellect rivals Leonardo da Vinci and Isaac Newton. When the real world doesn't respect you, I suppose, why not build your own?

And so Musk envisions a future in which the wealthy abandon biological limitation, living indefinitely in digital or hybrid form. Personally, I am not too concerned about what happens if he succeeds. If there one day exists a world in which rich people discover immortality, so be it. A digital afterlife filled exclusively with Jeff Bezoses and Peter Thiels and Elon Musks sounds like the seventh layer of hell. I will gladly choose to die normally, at age 80 or 70 or even 45, if it means I don't have to participate.

What concerns me are the real-life human beings Neuralink might mutilate in this pointless pursuit. The company hopes to one day open its recruitment to the general public—and while traditional disability-assistive medicine has clear ethical frameworks and regulatory pathways, immortality experiments in human subjects do not. Just remember: Elon Musk thinks our human brains, in their current form, are "effectively useless." So what might he do with yours? ✣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AMERICAN GENOCIDE

BY **NATHAN J. ROBINSON**

THIS ARTICLE IS EXCERPTED FROM THE INTRODUCTION TO THE FORTHCOMING BOOK "AMERICAN GENOCIDE: HOW THE U.S. BROUGHT ABOUT THE DESTRUCTION OF GAZA."

The destruction of Gaza is one of the worst crimes against humanity in modern history. That crime is the direct responsibility of the government of the United States of America, which funded and armed the killers, intervened to prevent any possibility that the killing would be stopped, and lied continuously about its actions. These actions were taken by both a Democratic (Biden) and Republican (Trump) administration. If basic standards of international law were applied, these presidents and their top advisers would be put on trial for war crimes up to and including genocide.

When history's verdict is passed, the obliteration of Gaza will take its place as one of humanity's most shameful moments, alongside the Trail of Tears, the Rwandan genocide, the Stalin purges, the Srebrenica massacre, and the obliteration of the Warsaw Ghetto. But the perpetrators may well evade justice, and strenuous efforts will be made to bury the factual record. It is therefore crucial to be clear about exactly what happened and who was responsible.

This is a specifically *American* crime. Successive U.S. administrations have, long before the events of October 7, 2023, presented themselves as interested in a peaceful settlement to the Israel-Palestine conflict, as facilitators of a "peace process." In fact, the U.S. role has been consistent: the United States has used its power to *prevent* peace in Palestine, and to ensure the continuation of the conflict and its ultimate escalation into genocide and the obliteration of Gaza as a livable place. When solutions to the Israel-Palestine conflict have been proposed, the U.S. has ensured they could not and would not be implemented. We might have seen a peaceful settlement of the conflict decades ago, had the U.S. not sabotaged the possibility of creating an independent, sovereign Palestinian state.

The horrendous killings of civilians on October 7, and the subsequent genocide in Gaza, were the direct result of decades of bipartisan U.S. policy, which ensured that the situation in Palestine could reach no conclusion other than a cataclysm. These U.S. policies have been presented by their advocates as "supporting Israel." In fact, they have ensured that Israel will remain in a state of war indefinitely, fostering hatred of Israel around the globe and guaranteeing the continuation of the cycle of violence.

The role of the U.S. is often obscured or minimized in discussions of the Israel-Palestine conflict. It is treated as a third party trying to "broker" an agreement. U.S. officials themselves often give contradictory statements, on the one hand portraying the U.S. as an uninvolved mediator while on the other reiterating stalwart support for Israel (and not for Palestine), including a commitment to providing endless advanced weapons to one side of the conflict.

U.S. officials often portray themselves as powerless or helpless, fervently wishing the conflict would come to a close but unable to do anything to alter the situation. In fact, the U.S. has immense power. Israel is a tiny country, with a population smaller than Guatemala. The United States could, if it chose, exert decisive influence over Israel's conduct, first by withholding

and diplomatic support, and second through the coercive mechanisms regularly deployed against adversaries, ranging from sanctions to outright regime change. Instead, the U.S. has chosen to support and enable Israel's maintenance of a brutal occupation for decades, and since 2023 has armed, funded, and covered up an outright genocide.

Understanding the role of the U.S. is crucial to understanding how the situation in Palestine can ever be changed. Everything hinges on U.S. policy. If the U.S. were to treat Israel as it treats disfavored nations, deploying the range of coercive tools at its disposal, a provisional settlement to the conflict could be imposed immediately. Without seeing this as a U.S. conflict—the outcome of which is decided by choices made in Washington, not Tel Aviv—we will remain in ignorance about what is going on, who is responsible, and how it can be stopped.

I have made some strong claims. To some in the Palestinian solidarity movement, the above facts will seem obvious and incontrovertible, as elementary as 1+1=2. To others, they will seem deranged, fanatical, extreme. They are certainly well outside the mainstream perspective on the conflict heard in the U.S. media. Few U.S. politicians would accept this description of the conflict, which implicates nearly all of them in atrocities, either through their direct vocal support of those atrocities or their disgraceful failure to act to prevent them.

But the evidence is clear and incontrovertible, and I would encourage skeptical readers to suspend judgment until they have gone through it for themselves. In wartime, all sides are propagandists—if a government is willing to kill to protect their interests, we should be unsurprised when they are willing to lie—and so it takes a great deal of work to sift through the available information and produce a truthful assessment. Israel claims it is only trying to "defend itself," and that it has the "most moral army in the world," one that scrupulously tries to avoid civilian casualties but faces a ruthless enemy that uses "human shields." Palestinians claim Israel is in fact only "defending" an illegal occupation and blockade, and is therefore actually the aggressor in the conflict—an aggressor that wantonly violates the basic laws of war, and that is pursuing an ultimate campaign of ethnic cleansing and genocide. I believe the Palestinian claims are true and the Israeli claims are false, but any such conclusions must be grounded in evidence and argument, not just the product of sympathies for one side's narrative or another.

When the facts are laid out in full, they more than justify the verdict reached by the distinguished Palestinian American historian Rashid Khalidi, who wrote in 2012 of the Orwellian obfuscation of the simple facts of the conflict:

> *Over a period of more than sixty years […] Israel has created for the Palestinian people a unique and exquisitely refined system of exclusion, expropriation, confinement, and denial. Above all, this system is buttressed by a robust denial that any of this is happening or has ever happened. In some ways this denial is the worst part of the system, constituting a form of collective psychological torture. Thus some deny that there is any such thing as an "occupation." Others refuse to call the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, and East Jerusalem the "occupied territories"; they are instead referred to as "the administered territories," or "the territories," or worse, "Judea, Samaria, and the Gaza district,"... Arab East Jerusalem is not Arab, it is not "occupied," and it has not been conquered: it has been "reunited." Jerusalem is not a city that has been a center of Arab and Muslim life for nearly fourteen hundred years: it is the "eternal, indivisible capital of Israel," not only now and forever into the future, but also at every moment in the past, back to the dim mists before recorded history. The Palestinians were never expelled from their homeland. A nomadic people without roots in the land, they simply wandered off, or left because their leaders told them to. Violence employed by Palestinians is "terrorism"; violence employed by Israel, usually producing approximately ten times the casualties, is "self-defense." There is a "peace process." One could go on and on with equally grotesque examples of such Orwellian newspeak, which effectively constitutes a tissue of falsehoods, an enormous web of denial.*

Khalidi was writing a decade before the unfolding of the Gaza genocide, but here, too, we see the same "web of denial" in operation, with Herculean rhetorical efforts being deployed to keep us from acknowledging the obvious.

The use of the term "genocide" may seem extreme and hyperbolic. Even those who are highly critical of Israel's conduct in Gaza have nevertheless been reluctant to use the term. Bernie Sanders, for instance, long refused to use it, saying it is a "legal term" (and therefore not for him to opine on), before eventually changing his mind in September 2025. But as early as May of 2025, it was the consensus of international human rights organizations that Israel was committing genocide in Gaza. This conclusion had been reached by Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, B'Tselem (The Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories), Oxfam International, Doctors Without Borders, Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor, the International Federation for Human Rights, Physicians for Human Rights-Israel, the American Friends Service Committee, United Nations human rights experts, the UN Special Committee on Palestinian rights, and the UN's Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory, along with many leading genocide scholars, including a formal resolution by the International Association of Genocide Scholars. These groups represent some of the most respected, experienced, knowledgeable, and dedicated defenders of human rights in the world. The notion, which some defenders of Israel's actions have put forward, that they are all consumed with anti-Israel bias is absurd. B'Tselem, Israel's leading human rights organization, explains the grounds of its conclusion as follows:

> *Statements by senior Israeli officials and actions on the ground prove beyond any doubt that, in Israel's eyes, the entire population of the Gaza Strip is the target. Israel has been leading a systematic policy for almost two years, with clear and visible outcomes: entire cities erased, the healthcare system shattered, educational, religious and cultural institutions destroyed, more than 2 million people forcibly displaced, and masses killed and starved. All this and more, put together, constitutes a coordinated attack on all aspects of Palestinians' life. It is a clear and explicit attempt to destroy Palestinian society in Gaza and create catastrophic living conditions that prevent the continued existence of this society in Gaza. That is precisely the definition of genocide.*

In making these declarations, B'Tselem and the other human rights organizations do not simply rely on appeals to their own authority. They have produced voluminous reports carefully documenting the genocide, weighing the evidence, and responding to Israeli counterarguments. Many of these organizations did not call the destruction of Gaza a genocide during 2023 and 2024, when activists were already using the term. They waited until they felt they had conclusive evidence to justify the verdict.

But there are also serious crimes short of genocide that deserve our attention and outrage. For example, it is a war crime for a military to destroy civilian property without any legitimate military objective, yet the Israeli military has systematically destroyed entire neighborhoods, bulldozing them building by building, even when no Hamas fighters are in the area. Or take the destruction of Gaza's cultural heritage. The 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict requires parties to conflicts to respect property "of great importance to the cultural heritage of every people, such as monuments of architecture, art or history […] archaeological sites […] works of art; manuscripts, books and other objects of artistic, historical or archaeological interest; as well as scientific collections." Yet a report by PEN America, a leading advocacy organization for the freedom of writers and artists, found that

> *Israel's military campaign has resulted in the total or partial destruction of every university and college in Gaza and 11 libraries, including the total destruction of the Gaza Public Library, which housed 10,000 books in Arabic, English, and French. At least eight publishing houses and printing presses have been destroyed as well as several bookshops, including the three-story Samir Mansour bookstore which was severely damaged during an airstrike on October 10, 2023 and which contained thousands of books. Other cultural sites damaged or destroyed include the seventh century Great Omari Mosque, with a library dating back to the 13th century, the historic Hammam al-Samra, 1,500-year-old Byzantine mosaics, and Al-Qarara Cultural Museum.*

PEN concluded that "the attacks by the Israeli government […] appear to have either targeted civilian infrastructure, including cultural heritage, or to have been indiscriminate," concluding that the attacks were either "intentional or reckless" and constituted war crimes. PEN offered the Israeli government the opportunity to refute the evidence it had compiled, but noted that Israel "failed to provide information with respect to any of the specific instances of cultural destruction detailed in this report."

When we are speaking of an event involving mass killing, it can be easy to overlook these "lesser" crimes. But it is only because the other crimes are so grave that the destruction of mosques, universities, or cemeteries can seem in any way "secondary." Taken on its own, the burning of books or the demolition of gravesites would be seen as a profound violation of people's cultural rights. It is no more acceptable simply because it occurs in the context of much wider destruction.

The basic facts are simple, though often obscured. The United States, the world's preeminent superpower, has ensured that its ally, Israel, can occupy, dispossess, and ultimately ethnically cleanse Palestine. The U.S. has used its formidable power to help Israel successfully violate international law and carry out crimes against humanity, in pursuit of Israel's expansionist and ethnic supremacist ambitions. The motives of U.S. policymakers have been complex (there is a geostrategic component, an ideological component, and, charitably speaking, perhaps a component based on sincere ignorance of the facts on the ground), but the results have been straightforward: Israel has gradually and deliberately made a Palestinian state all but impossible, and has razed much of Gaza to the ground. It has left Palestinians with no viable path to self-determination.

The words here are not mere empty epithets. "Ethnic cleansing" has a very specific meaning: emptying a territory of the

members of a particular ethnic group *because* they are part of that ethnic group. "Occupation," "settler colonialism," and "dispossession"—these are not mere terms of academic theory. They describe a concrete reality in which one people is under harsh military rule, having its territory and property slowly seized by another group bent on ensuring its continued dominance. Figures on the U.S. right often talk as if the very concept of "oppression" is a conspiracy theory. We are not talking about something abstract and intangible, however. The injustice here is measured in dead, maimed, and orphaned children, in homes, schools and houses of worship destroyed, in trauma, injury, poverty, and disease. We must face the human reality beneath the word genocide—a reality that is almost unbearable to contemplate, the true horror of which we will only be able to capture a tiny fragment of in words.

But the situation can change. While there can never be complete justice in Palestine—the dead will never get justice—it is still possible to prevent the full ethnic cleansing campaign dreamed of by the Israeli right, and even possible to guarantee Palestinians their basic rights. But because the United States looms so large in the conflict, it is hard to see how anything close to a fair outcome can be achieved without a major shift in U.S. policy. Israel acts with impunity because the global superpower puts its thumb on the scale to ensure that there are no checks against Israel. But if the U.S. began acting as a genuine neutral broker, interested in the upholding of international law and the pursuit of justice, the situation on the ground would likely change rather quickly.

This means that what happens in a domestic U.S. political context is crucial in determining what happens in Israel and Palestine. There is evidence that U.S. public opinion has shifted over the duration of the Gaza genocide. The majority of Americans believe their government should recognize an independent State of Palestine. Pro-Israel U.S. politicians are, in fact, out of step with their constituents' opinions on the issue. If lawmakers and the executive branch acted in accordance with public opinion, we would see a very different set of policies that would make peace far more likely.

This is why the pro-Palestine activist movement in the United States is so important. Despite intense repression, activists have persisted in pressuring private institutions and the U.S. government to halt support for Israel. Their success in shifting policy has been limited—in mid-2025, after the UN had declared a genocide in Gaza, the Trump administration was planning to give Israel another $6 billion in arms. But their efforts to expose the reality of the crimes in Gaza are certainly correlated with a major shift in U.S. public opinion on the Israel-Palestine conflict. In 2025, for the first time in the history of polling, more Americans said they were sympathetic to Palestine than Israel in the conflict. By October 2025, nearly 60 percent of Americans held an unfavorable view of the Israeli government. Democratic candidates for public office had long courted the support of pro-Israel lobby group AIPAC (the American Israel Public Affairs Committee), but in 2025, a new crop of candidates emerged who made rejecting AIPAC support a badge of pride.

The pro-Palestine movement in the United States needs to be ten, 20, 100 times larger and more active than it is. Only through growing this movement will sufficient pressure be placed on U.S. lawmakers and the chief executive to end the horrors in Palestine and finally grant self-determination to Palestinians. All hope lies with the Palestinian solidarity movement.

There is a responsibility for each of us to act. As Americans, we are complicit in the terrible evil that our government is carrying out in Gaza. If we judge those who failed to act during the horrors of the 1940s, who sat on their hands as Jews were sent to the Nazi gas chambers, we must remember that we are those same people. Aaron Bushnell was a 25-year old Air Force serviceman who in February 2024 set himself on fire in front of the Israeli embassy in protest of the destruction of Gaza. He took an extreme step that few of us would be willing to take for our convictions. But Bushnell explained that he saw himself as simply carrying out the obligation that he had when faced with a historic crime. He encouraged the rest of us to think of ourselves as actors in history, to judge ourselves the way we would judge those who lived alongside terrible injustices in the past:

> *Many of us like to ask ourselves, "What would I do if I was alive during slavery? Or the Jim Crow South? Or apartheid? What would I do if my country was committing genocide?" The answer is, you're doing it. Right now.*

I recently heard the testimony of an Australian doctor in Gaza describing the kind of horror I would never have been able to conceive of before the present war. She explained that during the latest mass casualty event, she had had to deliver a baby from the body of a beheaded pregnant woman. Just to write those words sickens me so deeply that it is hard to continue typing. Yet the experience is nothing compared to the trauma endured by those actually present. I have seen videos of Palestinian children's heads cut in half, a Palestinian girl with a burned face and her intestines hanging out of her body. I glanced at these only briefly, but they will haunt me until my last day on Earth. They are seared into my memories. I believe they should be seared into everyone's. We should be confronted with the full reality of what we are responsible for.

I understand that, given the enormity of the violence we are talking about, and our seeming powerlessness to halt it, the natural instinct can be to look away. Who wants to see, or think about, dead and dying Palestinian children? As we go about our lives, many of which are comparatively comfortable, it is easy to pretend that these things are not happening, or to acknowledge that they are but reassure oneself that there is little we can do. Nobody is going to make us feel guilty about not doing anything. The *New York Times* Ethics columnist, for instance, addresses questions like "A Woman in My Book Club Never Reads the Books. Can I Expose Her?" and "Do I Need to Subscribe to My Friend's Substack Newsletter?" It never approaches such questions as "My Country is Arming and Funding a Genocide Killing Tens of Thousands of Children. What Obligation Do I Have to Try To Stop It?"

But people of basic honesty and integrity will ask this question of themselves. They will look at the facts head on, however hideous reality may be. And they will remember the old saying that the only thing required for evil to triumph is for the good to do nothing. ✣

THOMAS PYNCHON SEZ: BEWARE OF AMERICAN FASCISM

BY **ANA GAVRILOVSKA**

The theremin is not powered by physical contact. It is a strange musical instrument that makes uncanny sounds and only exists because of Soviet-sponsored government research. It may be the most Thomas Pynchonian creation that he didn't himself imagine, and its minor presence in his 2025 novel *Shadow Ticket* is a useful symbol for the famously private author's steadfast fascination with the invisible networks that power contemporary life.

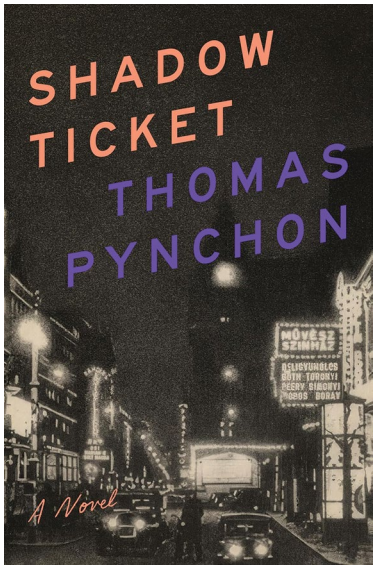
Like the antennas of the theremin, which function as proximity sensors, Pynchon perceives truths about America floating in the currents of our culture. In his work, he amplifies these points and makes them audible, frequently using conspiracy theories to highlight dynamics of power, control, and hidden agendas that cut across politics and society. The Trump era is a thorough vindication of two of his strongest and most stark observations: that America is destined to suffer under the weight of its latent fascist tendencies, and the inherent absurdity of its contradictory ideals.

As has been breathlessly discussed since the announcement of two new pieces of media, 2025 was the year of Pynchon. Not only did we get his first novel in 12 years, but we also saw the release of Paul Thomas Anderson's *One Battle After Another*, a film inspired by Pynchon's 1990 novel *Vineland*. Set in 1984, the novel saw Pynchon reckoning with the profound, premeditated wounding of countercultural beliefs that took place between Nixon and Reagan, paving the way for authoritarianism to swoop in and undermine civil liberties at every level. Unlike Anderson's 2014 *Inherent Vice*, which was a fairly faithful adaptation of Pynchon's 2009 postmodern noir, *OBAA* takes the threads of *Vineland* and spins its own contemporized version that's much heavier on white supremacy, transporting the action to sometime between the late 2010s and a distant future, perhaps a decade or two out from ours.

Shadow Ticket, on the other hand, is a political novel of a preterite flavor, rewinding all the way back to 1932 and tracing an oblique yet certain line from the emerging spread of fascism in Italy and the coming of Nazi Germany to Trump's current America—a nation that has perhaps never been more paranoid and susceptible to the conspiratorial mania that's become Pynchon's hallmark. So many things happen in Pynchon novels, though the plot is hardly ever the point. Still, the action of *Shadow Ticket* is as such: former strikebreaker turned private detective (and semi-professional dancer) Hicks McTaggart is sent on a mission to locate Daphne Airmont, daughter of dairy mogul/crime boss Bruno Airmont, AKA the "Al Capone of Cheese." Bruno himself skipped town some years prior in the manner of many a multi-millionaire with fortunes of ill-begotten means. The Airmonts are clearly references to Trump, and it's not even subtle. Bruno is described as "not an evil genius but an evil moron, dangerous not for his intellect, what there may be of it, but for the power that his ill-deserved wealth allows him to exert, which his admirers pretend is will, though it never amounts to more than the stubbornness of a child." Later on, McTaggart comes across "snapshots of Daphne, early adolescence, posing ambiguously on Bruno's lap, each with the same self-pleased expression on

their kisser," which could be a verbatim description of a widely circulated photo of Trump with a 14-year-old Ivanka, taken in Mar-a-Lago in 1996.

Daphne has seemingly absconded with her lover, the jazz clarinetist Hop Wingdale, and McTaggart is pegged as the man for the job due to a previous encounter of theirs in which he saved her from illicit psychiatric experimentation. McTaggart is reluctant to take on the job every step of the way, but his role in the story has already been determined by a perverse pairing of hidden forces—not only federal agents likely at the beck and call of financial tycoons, but also the concept of being responsible for a life after interfering in it, attributed in the novel to an Ojibwe belief. The reader spends time with the detective in his home of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, during which his romance with a mafioso's paramour results in a botched attempt on his life and finds him begrudgingly fleeing to New York.



It is at this point where the action shifts overseas, through no choice of McTaggart's own; he awakes from a drugged state to find himself aboard a ship that drops him off in Belgrade, Serbia. He's strong-armed into the titular "shadow ticket," or secret assignment, by a coked-out Interpol agent with his own agenda, who insists that McTaggart keep an eye out for one of Bruno's right-hand men while ostensibly searching for Daphne. These twin tasks send him traversing through Hungary, Transylvania, and eventually Croatia, all the while having encounters with an eclectic batch of characters. But everywhere he goes, one theme is constantly humming in the background: the imminent rise of fascism and the clandestine maneuvers of its supporters, from the German-American nationalists Hicks meets in the Midwest of the '30s to the seething political repression he finds in Central Europe.

If that sounds like a lot, that's because "a lot" is Thomas Ruggles Pynchon Jr.'s specialty. The now 88-year-old has been riffing on conspiracies, police states, and related topics since he began writing in the late 1950s. Born into a middle-class family in Long Island in 1937, Pynchon would begin experimenting with the hallmarks of his future career as early as high school, where he published short stories like "The Voice of the Hamster" in his school newspaper. From there he proceeded to Cornell University to pursue a degree in engineering physics, but decided to enlist in the U.S. Navy after two years. He received electrician training and spent time on the warship USS Hank during the Suez Crisis, when a coalition of Britain, France, and Israel briefly invaded Egypt. By 1957, he was back at Cornell with a new degree in mind: a Bachelor of Arts in English. But his first job was not in academia or culture. Instead, he spent two years in Seattle, working as a technical writer for aerospace manufacturer Boeing. There he gained an intimate knowledge of the military-industrial complex, one that would imbue his work with a deep, dark suspicion and dread, trained on the weapons industry.

Thus began the writing career of one of America's greatest living novelists. His debut *V.* came in 1963, followed by the countercultural, conspiratorial fever dream of 1966's *The Crying of Lot 49*, and his most famous in 1973: *Gravity's Rainbow*, which won the 1974 U.S. National Book Award for Fiction (in a shared win with *A Crown of Feathers and Other Stories* by Isaac Bashevis Singer). *Gravity's Rainbow* was selected by the Pulitzer Prize fiction jury for consideration, only to infamously offend the Pulitzer Advisory Board with its "turgid" and "obscene" content. (Not only do the erections of the central protagonist, U.S. Army Lt. Tyrone Slothrop, seem to correlate with rocket strikes, but another character has a scene of sadomasochistic coprophagy. In other words, sexual shit-eating.) They didn't award a Pulitzer for fiction at all that year. Pynchon didn't accept or acknowledge the National Book Award win, either; the comedian "Professor" Irwin Corey accepted on his behalf and was interrupted by a streaker, a meta collision of high and low art that is, in many ways, Pynchon's bread and butter.

Like the second half of *Shadow Ticket, Gravity's Rainbow* is set mainly in Europe, but the action is scooted forward in time, to the end of WWII. The novel concerns the creation of the V-2 rocket by the German military, the world's first long-range guided ballistic missile and first man-made object to cross the edge of space. With over 400 characters, a multitude of narrative threads, and a seemingly inexhaustible ability to incorporate aspects of science, philosophy, mathematics, art, pop culture, sexuality, psychology, history, religion, and politics, the novel is a feat, ambitious and immersive and worthy of cultural enshrinement. That might be why it came as a bit of a shock (and perhaps disappointment) to readers when it took Pynchon 17 years to release something new—the aforementioned *Vineland*, composed of a mere 385 pages to Gravity's 760. (We should mention that in between came 1984's *Slow Learner*, a collection of his early short stories with an autobiographical introduction.)

Pynchon's bibliography went on to include 1997's *Mason & Dixon*, a fictionalized retelling of the lives of the historical surveyors of the Mason–Dixon line—a 773-page tome that was heralded as a return to form. In 2006 he published *Against the Day*, a 1,085-page exploration of the rise of global capitalism at the

turn of the century that's easily his most discursive novel to date. Then came the first two of his now three detective stories: the '70s LA noir of 2009's *Inherent Vice* and his first truly contemporary work, 2013's *Bleeding Edge*, centered on the September 11 attacks and the birth of the Internet. All of which brings us to *Shadow Ticket*, what might end up being the final installation of this late-period trio, though no one would be terribly surprised if Pynchon had another novel (or two, or three) in various stages of completion. (Reports of another novel have in fact already circulated, though it is unlikely that anything will be confirmed anytime soon.)

If working at Boeing allowed Pynchon to peer deeply into the corporate-state nexus of the military-industrial complex, and to see the ever-increasing role that technology would play in determining the shape of life to come, it was likely his friendship with folksinger and novelist Richard Fariña that was a bridge to the counterculture. The two met at Cornell and followed the same trajectory, switching from engineering to English. A strong anti-war voice who sang protest songs and was openly pro-Cuba, Fariña died far too young at the age of 29 in a motorcycle accident. (The critic Charles Hollander has suggested, though never really elaborated on or proved, that the accident was suspicious and could have been a COINTELPRO operation.) Pynchon dedicated *Gravity's Rainbow* to Fariña. It's a bit reductive, but not necessarily incorrect, to suggest that the two most important influences on Pynchon's works are Boeing and Richard Fariña—a multinational corporation valued at hundreds of billions of dollars, and one poor dead folksinger, dual images of America at its worst and best.

Though he spends a lot of time in other places in his novels, all of which are rendered impeccably, Pynchon returns to America as a concept to unpack and explore again and again. His postmodernist approach to reframing current events through historical analogues allows for a deeper understanding of the circumstances that led us here. While Anderson spent two decades thinking about the film that would eventually become *One Battle After Another*, it's significant that its release brought Pynchon's *Vineland* back into the cultural conversation in 2025, a time when his anticipation of the resurgence of the police state is chilling in its resonance.

Vineland takes place in 1984, California, and follows Zoyd Wheeler (renamed Bob Ferguson in *One Battle After Another*) and his daughter Prairie (Willa in the film) as they live a somewhat underground life, hiding from a thuggish federal agent (Brock Vond in the novel, Steven Lockjaw in the film) who may or may not actually be Prairie's real father. The novel goes back and forth in time from the '60s to the '80s, the culture of hippies and rebellion clashing with the coming War on Drugs and Nixon's proto-fascism. Prairie's mother, Frenesi Gates, is a member of a revolutionary film collective, whose purpose is to document the erosion of civil liberties as committed by the state and those in power.

The fulcrum of the story is Frenesi's unfortunate attraction to Brock Vond, who ends up using her as a double agent during the '60s, then spirits her into a witness protection program and away from her family. She's the missing figure at the center when the action returns to the '80s, every major character relating to her and searching for her in their own way. The '80s sections written in her point of view, during which she is living under witness protection with her current partner and reliant on government checks, are some of the most prescient with regard to technofascism. Pynchon illustrates the cool ease with which the government can suddenly deny people basic resources through nothing more than a keystroke on a computer:

> *[...] it would all be done with keys on alphanumeric keyboards that stood for weightless, invisible chains of electronic presence or absence. If patterns of ones and zeros were 'like' patterns of human lives and deaths, if everything about an individual could be represented in a computer record by a long string of ones and zeros, then what kind of creature would be represented by a long string of lives and deaths? It would have to be up one level at least—an angel, a minor god, something in a UFO.*

Perhaps the darkest of would-be gods, the technocrat.

At the time of its release in 1990, *Vineland* struck some readers as less ambitious than Pynchon's earlier efforts, though in retrospect it seems clear that it's nearly as complex as his more intellectually grandiose works. Salman Rushdie described it as "a major political novel about what America has been doing to itself, to its children, all these many years." Part of what America has done to itself is untold amounts of unwitting or unconscious psychic damage to the millions of people who must work jobs they are ideologically opposed to in order to make a decent wage. But it's not just the Frenesis of the world, informants who are forced to do the bidding of the government, painfully described in *Vineland* as "the destined losers whose only redemption would have to come through their usefulness to the State law-enforcement apparatus, which was calling itself 'America,' although somebody must have known better." A line can also be drawn to *Shadow Ticket*'s McTaggart, who once beat striking workers on the picket line, but suddenly had second thoughts after an experience in which his weapon mysteriously disappeared just as he was about to use it. Afterwards, he becomes disinterested in violence and finds even the money is no longer a draw. Pain is a warning, psychic and otherwise.

Another potent illustration of finding one's conscience in *Shadow Ticket* centers around an unsurrendered Austro-Hungarian U-13 submarine that should have been destroyed under the terms of the Versailles Treaty, but wasn't. Its Skipper couldn't bear to return it, having developed a "psychical connectedness" to the machine. He disobeys orders and, after a bender in Budapest, decides to embark on a "new career of nonbelligerence" instead. To explain his change of heart, Pynchon invokes the real historical event of the sinking of the passenger liner Persia by U-boat commander (and war criminal) Max Valentiner, who killed hundreds of civilians without warning and reason, in direct violation of international law. (Writing this in early December, it's hard not to think of the civilian deaths from U.S. attacks on alleged narco-trafficking boats in the Caribbean and Pacific. You want to say the War on Drugs is back, but it was never put to an end.) The Skipper decides instead to run a kind of surreptitious search and rescue operation, and by the time McTaggart meets him toward the end of the novel, he's been hired to

relocate none other than Bruno Airmont to a place "where he can neither commit nor incur further harm." The submarine is a ghostly presence, seemingly able to traverse space and time, and the suggestion is that Airmont has been taken to a parallel reality—one in which the Business Plot of 1933, a fascist conspiracy to overthrow Franklin D. Roosevelt, may have actually occurred as intended.

In reality, the historical consensus is that some sort of plan was probably contemplated or maybe even discussed but didn't get much further, in part because the plotters approached the wrong man to lead it: Major General Smedley D. Butler of the U.S. Marine Corps, who found his own conscience after decades of violently perpetuating American imperialism. Having become increasingly disillusioned with American foreign policy, he blew the whistle on the coup, which would have been spearheaded by wealthy businessmen of the Bruno Airmont and Donald Trump persuasion. Parallel realities are a warning, too.

Early in *Shadow Ticket*, McTaggart expresses concern about a "newer type of federal" agent, noting that "nobody knows yet exactly how bad they can be." He's ostensibly referring to the coming reign of J. Edgar Hoover and his many abuses, but it's hard not to read the line as an indictment of our current era. Following this musing, the conversation he has with Assistant Special Agent in Charge T. P. O'Grizbee spells out the warning even more directly, in another instance of McTaggart being strong-armed into an assignment he doesn't want:

> *"Your country calls."*
>
> *"Line's busy."*
>
> *"I'm afraid it isn't optional," explains T. P. O'Grizbee. "Like it says on the subpoena we haven't served you yet, laying aside all and singular your business and excuses. A federal rap, not to be shrugged off. Potential wrongdoers might keep in mind as yet little-known lockups such as Alcatraz Island, always looming out there, fogbound and sinister, and the unwelcome fates which might transpire therewithin. The Drys can seem like the violent ward at Winnebago sometimes, but this is the next wave of Feds you're talking to. We haven't even begun to show how dangerous we can be, and the funny thing? Is, is we could be running the country any day now and you'll all have to swear loyalty to us because by then we'll be in the next war fighting for our lives, and maybe that'll be all you've got."*

The failure of the American people to understand and really grapple with the consequences of electing leaders who enact policies that go directly against their own interests, along with the consolidation of wealth and power, has led to a state apparatus even worse than whatever McTaggart may have been contemplating. The outcome seems foretold in a country that has slid toward, then away, and definitively back again toward authoritarianism from the days of McCarthyism on down, consolidating power in the hands of a few at the top while the rest of us are forced to give away our personal data if we want to participate in modern society at all.

One Battle After Another is a political story that does tackle contemporary expressions of fascism—the film collective of the novel is reimagined as a militant leftist group called the French 75, who retaliate against the government by targeting detention centers, banks, and the power grid—but Anderson is ultimately more interested in exploring the family dynamics of the characters than the systems which entrench them. This is most clearly seen in the ways that the Frenesi of the novel is a fairly different presence than her analogue in the film, Perfidia Beverly Hills.

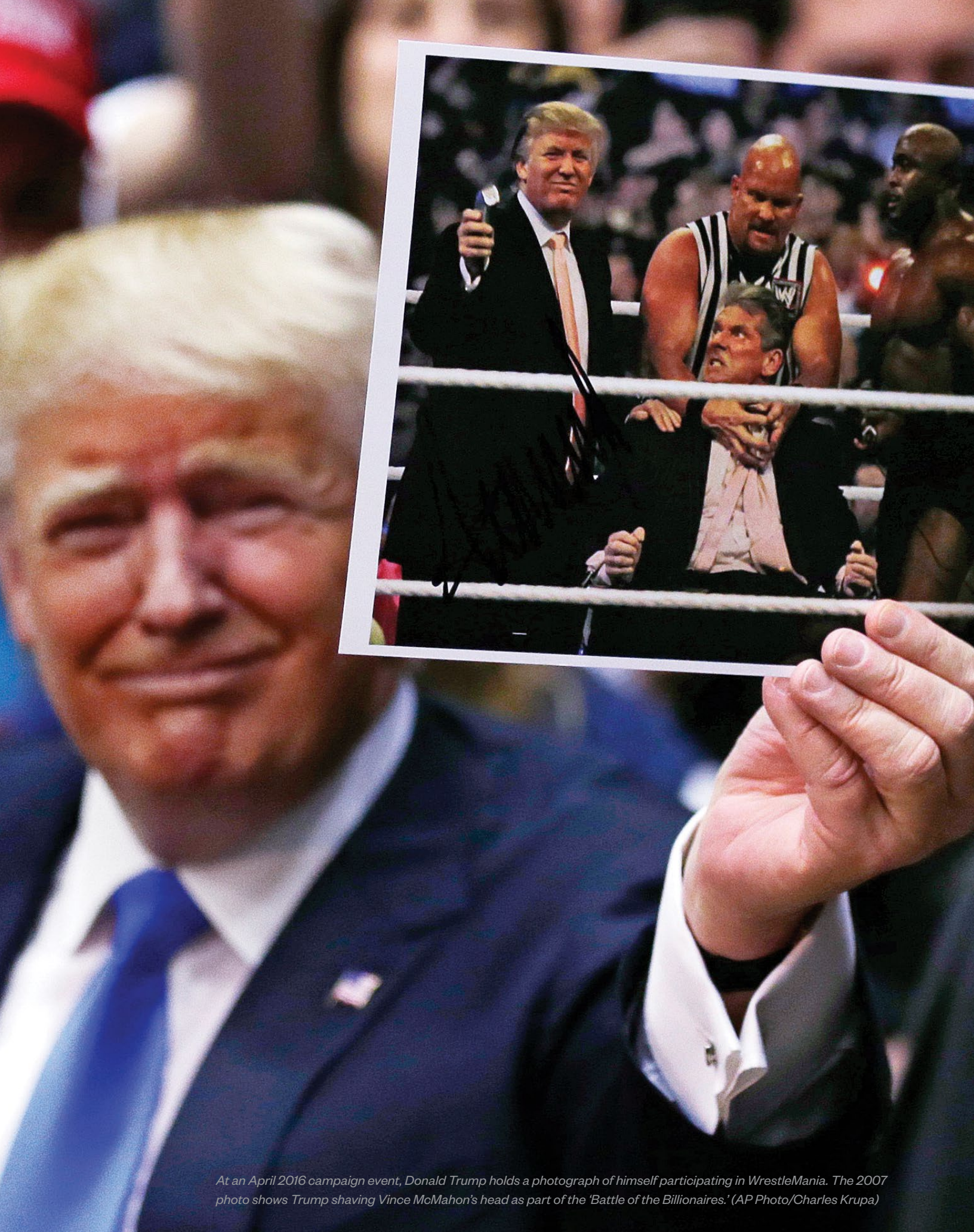
Frenesi is a symbol for the American desire for authority, and can also be read as an indictment of a media landscape dominated by copaganda; she herself is a filmmaker with a strong erotic pull to men in uniform, depicted with both absurdity as she masturbates to an episode of the '70s crime drama "CHiPs" and genuine intensity during her sexual encounters with Brock Vond. By contrast, Perfidia behaves more like a realistic, flawed human who makes choices that seem to go against her own will as an indictment of the system she's forced to maneuver in, rather than her own ethical failings. The film complicates her in the character's favor, which allows the audience to feel moved when her voice returns to the story at the very end, through a letter she leaves behind, and strengthens her daughter's convictions in her own political awakening. In the novel, Frenesi kind of… disappears by the end of the story. Her eventual reunion with Prairie is anti-climatic, and though Vond is ultimately thwarted (as Lockjaw is in the film, as well), the final image is a much more stark depiction of Prairie hoping he might come back for her.

Pynchon's clear doubts about whether America can overcome its attraction to fascism are bearing unwanted fruit in 2025. The doubts have been proven right. Pynchon's view of the American right is plainly and perversely stated in *Shadow Ticket* when one character says to another, of youth described as "Hitlerboys" in a changing Hamburg, "I want to believe they're only being obnoxious but I think it's worse than that." The response is curt: "It's worse."

The Great Depression of the '30s in *Shadow Ticket* and the post-Reagan "economic ax blades" of *Vineland* are converging in the political realities of the mid-2020s. Once again, we're facing the prospect of major political and economic upheaval. Only our coming depression is fomented not by the collapse of industrial production, but technofascist surveillance-sponsored production, the looming bursting of the AI bubble, and the continued consolidation of everything under the sun into one global plutocratic dynasty. Toward the end of *Shadow Ticket*, Pynchon describes the wind as "a theremin of uneasiness, sliding around a narrow band of notes, in which it's said you may come to hear repeated melodies, themes and variations, which is when you know you're going bughouse, with only a very short period of grace to try and escape before it no longer matters."

He's literalizing the eeriness in the air, but he also leaves room for grace, short though that window may be. America has wandered these bughouse halls before, but we're approaching the point where it no longer matters. Will we be able to escape? ⚜


NO HEALTHCARE?
NO PROBLEM!
LABUBU DOCTOR:
OUT NOW!
SPECIAL OFFER!
TIRED
OF SEEING OTHER
PEOPLE'S PAIN?
ANY HELP
U CAN
BUY
MORE
LABUBU!



At an April 2016 campaign event, Donald Trump holds a photograph of himself participating in WrestleMania. The 2007 photo shows Trump shaving Vince McMahon's head as part of the 'Battle of the Billionaires.' (AP Photo/Charles Krupa)

THE KAYFABE PRESIDENT

BY **JASON MYLES**

Pro wrestling, for all its mass appeal, cultural influence, and undeniable profitability, is still dismissed as low-brow fare for the lumpen masses; another guilty pleasure to be shelved next to soap operas and true crime dreck. This elitist dismissal rests on a cartoonish assumption that wrestling fans are rubes, incapable of recognizing the staged spectacle in front of them. In reality, fans understand perfectly well that the fights are preordained. What bothers critics is that working-class audiences knowingly embrace a form of theater more honest than the "serious" news they consume.

Once cast as the pinnacle of trash TV in the late '90s and early 2000s, pro wrestling has not only survived the cultural sneer; it might now be the template for contemporary American politics. The aesthetics of *kayfabe*, of egotistical villains and manufactured feuds, now structure our public life. And nowhere is this clearer than in the figure of its most infamous graduate: Donald Trump, the two-time WrestleMania host and 2013 WWE Hall of Fame inductee who carried the psychology of the squared circle from the television studio straight into the Oval Office.

In wrestling, kayfabe refers to the unwritten rule that participants must maintain a charade of truthfulness. Whether you are allies or enemies, every association between wrestlers must unfold realistically. There are referees, who serve as avatars of fairness. We the audience understand that the outcome is choreographed and predetermined, yet we watch because the emotional drama has pulled us in.

In his own political arena, Donald Trump is not simply another participant but the conductor of the entire orchestra of kayfabe, arranging the cues, elevating the drama, and shaping the emotional cadence. Nuance dissolves into simple narratives of villains and heroes, while those who claim to deliver truth behave more like carnival barkers selling the next act. Politics has become theater, and the news that filters through our devices resembles an endless stream of storylines crafted for outrage and instant reaction. What once required substance, context, and expertise now demands spectacle, immediacy, and emotional punch.

Under Trump, politics is no longer a forum for governance but a stage where performance outranks truth, policy, and the *show* becomes the only reality that matters. And he learned everything he knows from the small screen.

In the pro wrestling world, one of the most important parts of the match typically happens outside of the ring and is known as the *promo*. An announcer with a mic, timid and small, stands there while the wrestler yells violent threats about what he's going to do to his upcoming opponent, makes disparaging remarks about the host city, their rival's appearance, and so on. The details don't matter—the goal is to generate controversy and entice the viewer to buy tickets to the next staged combat. This is the most common and quick way to generate *heat* (attention). When you're selling seats, no amount of audience animosity is bad business.

Once, the late Rowdy "Roddy" Piper, in his pre-WWE days, was wrestling for a regional promotion (National Wrestling Association) out of Southern California. The people that put the matches together, as well as the audience makeup, were major-

ity-Latino, and Piper played the bad guy or *heel*. Playing that role allowed Piper to make many off-color racist remarks at the crowd and the Mexican wrestlers he faced. In reality, the man performing as Piper wasn't racist, but it played well in making him a despised character, and people pay good money to see the bad guy get his comeuppance.

One night in the late-1970s, Piper, hoisting his signature bagpipes, told the crowd that he was sorry for all of his previous racist statements against the Latino community and wanted to apologize by playing the Mexican National Anthem. But Piper did not perform a Scottish rendition of "Mexicans at the Cry of War," the actual anthem. Instead, he started to play "La Cucaracha" (the cockroach). The crowd exploded in anger: chairs went flying in the ring and Piper had to flee as the audience rushed the ring to assault him. The promoters were not worried for Piper's safety, but thrilled by the audience reaction. Piper had generated so much *heat*, they knew that his name on a bill would be enough to sell out future matches. Political correctness be damned when you're peddling tickets.

Nearly 50 years after Piper was run out of the arena, the Republican Party now employs the same theatrics once reserved for the ring, where scripted violence easily blurs into the real deal. Rowdy Roddy might not have expected a riot, but when Trump is the one implying that migrants are vermin—claiming they "pour into and infest our country"—he knows he is urging his audience to stand from their seats and pick up their folding chairs. Only this time, their target is not the man in the ring, but their fellow Americans.

Ten years ago, when Donald Trump descended that golden escalator and announced his first campaign, he sounded like a wrestling promoter.

"THE U.S. HAS BECOME A DUMPING GROUND FOR EVERYBODY ELSE'S PROBLEMS … WHEN MEXICO SENDS ITS PEOPLE, THEY ARE NOT SENDING THEIR BEST…THEY'RE BRINGING DRUGS. THEY'RE BRINGING CRIME. THEY'RE RAPISTS. AND SOME OF THEM, I ASSUME, ARE GOOD PEOPLE."

More specifically, Trump sounded like Vince McMahon: his personal friend and the co-founder of WWE. McMahon's career as a carnival barker has followed a similar script as Trump's; he inherited an empire from his wealthy father, ascended to fame in the 1980s, and has repeatedly avoided jail time for allegations of sexual abuse and hush money cover-ups. And when Trump set his sights on the presidency, McMahon and his wife Linda were there to help. Linda, the former CEO of WWE, "contributed a total of $7.2 million to two pro-Trump super PACs" during his 2016 run, and "the couple together donated more than $10 million to outside groups funding Trump's race for the presidency," according to *19th News*.

Trump dominated the media cycle all the way up to his historic win in 2016, walking straight off a reality television set into the White House. Mainstream media, as well as independent left media, covered his every word, putting him at the center of all political discussion.

Trump's onstage debut at the Republican National Convention in July 2016 even prompted this comment from Chuck Todd, the moderator of *NBC's Meet The Press*:

> CHUCK TODD: *I don't think I've seen that even on WWE.*
>
> DONALD TRUMP: *Yeah, I know. Well, Vincent's a good friend of mine. He called me. He said, "That was a very, very good entrance."*

Whether he was your villain or your new hope, everyone was wrapped in the kayfabe whirlwind that Trump would spin. Altogether, Trump's bumbling narcissistic braggadocio netted him an estimated $2 billion in free media coverage for his 2016 campaign. CBS CEO Les Moonves said of Trump in the run up to his first election, "It may not be good for America, but it's damn good for CBS."

Kayfabe is not limited to choreographed combat. It arises from the interplay of *works* (fully scripted events), *shoots* (unscripted or authentic moments), and *angles* (storyline devices engineered to advance a narrative). Heroes (*babyfaces*, or just *faces*) can at the drop of a dime turn *heel* (villain), and *heels* can likewise be rehabilitated into *babyfaces* as circumstances demand. The blood spilled is real, injuries often are, but even these unscripted outcomes are quickly woven back into the narrative machinery. In kayfabe, authenticity and contrivance are not opposites but mutually reinforcing components of a system designed to sustain attention, emotion, and belief.

In her 2023 book *Ringmaster: Vince McMahon and the Unmaking of America*, Abraham Josephine Riesman described a new form of this phenomenon, which she calls "neokayfabe." She described the term to CNN:

> *After Vince made it a part of public record that wrestling was fake, that led to sort of the end of the illusion that wrestling was a legitimate, unplanned competition in the sporting realm.*
>
> *Neokayfabe is when you operate not on the assumption of telling the audience, "Hey, everything you're about to see is real." You start by giving them the assumption, "Hey, everything you're about to see is fake — except the parts that you think are real."*
>
> *It's Trumpism. You're left to kind of choose your own reality. So whether you are just taking it in and not trying to sort out what's real, or whether you're obsessively trying to sort it into true and false, you're paying attention, and that's all that matters.*

This theater was in full motion during the 2016 election. Trump's entire campaign was a massive *work*, where the twist was that the *heel* became the hero. His political opponent, Hillary Clinton, assumed she'd naturally be the *babyface*, but she and the Democratic Party cannibalized the one true hope of a Trump defeat, Bernie Sanders. It would be the kneecapping the true *face* that would cement her role as a "bad guy."

Hulk Hogan takes the stage at the Republican National Convention on July 18, 2024, in Milwaukee. (AP Photo/Julia Nikhinson)

Once again, kayfabe is always in flux, and no role is static. Even Hulk Hogan, long celebrated as one of the most successful babyfaces in the history of professional wrestling, performed a world-shattering heel turn in the 1990s when he abandoned WWE for its ascendant rival, World Championship Wrestling. In the post–Cold War landscape, the nationalist and often explicitly racist gimmicks that once pitted Hogan against cartoonishly foreign enemies—like Soviet strongmen or the "terrorist" menaces embodied by characters like the Iron Sheik—no longer generated the heat they once had. The "Real American" had lost his draw. And when a hero stops selling tickets, the logic of kayfabe demands the unthinkable: turn him into a heel.

Trump, too, would eventually become a heel in the eyes of the public once again, during his attempt for a second term in 2020. His administration's handling of COVID, the tax cuts for the wealthy, and a rise in white supremacist violence, especially coupled with high-profile police murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, set the stage for what the audience assumed would be Trump's final act: the January 6th insurrection.

After losing the election to Joe Biden, Trump quickly claimed that the election he lost was stolen through Democratic Party chicanery. Trump told his followers that he would "Stop the Steal" and a rally was held on January 6th where he urged the ravenous crowd "we are going to the Capitol" to prevent Congress from allowing Biden to become president. Trump himself would not join in the riot. He never intended to. It was all a *work*, one that would turn into a deadly *shoot* that cost the life of one his followers.

While Trump may be our first fully kayfabe president, his rise did not create the phenomenon. Kayfabe has seeped far beyond his wild rhetorical whims; it shapes the broader culture we all move through. We now live in a world where reality and fiction constantly blur, producing performances that feel like augmented reality made flesh. This is no longer something confined to the television screen. It structures how stories are told, how identities are sold, and how corporations craft narratives that feel "authentic" regardless of their truth. No examples capture this dynamic better than the tale of Richard Montañez.

"This guy should run for office if he's that good at fooling everyone." That's a quote from former Frito-Lay executive Ken Laska about Richard Montañez, the man immortalized on film and in books as the custodian-turned-C-Suite-executive-creator of "Flamin' Hot Cheetos." The rags-to-riches story inspired the 2023 dramedy film "Flamin' Hot," and Montañez's own autobiography, *Flamin' Hot: The Incredible True Story of One Man's Rise from Janitor to Top Executive*. It's an irresistible Horatio Alger-esque narrative, and that's precisely the problem: it's fiction.

Montañez did rise from janitor to executive, and helped develop products marketed to Latino consumers, but he did not invent Flamin' Hot Cheetos. The snack was conceived years earlier by a team of white marketing executives responding to competitive pressure in the cheap, spicy snack market. The origin of Flamin' Hot Cheetos has nothing to do with cultural authenticity—which Montañez stated was his inspiration—and everything to do with corporate strategy: flooding poor and working-class neighborhoods with ultra-processed, calorie-dense products. Montañez's story, however false in its details, provided Frito-Lay something far more valuable than the truth; he became a human shield against scrutiny.

Through the lens of kayfabe, Montañez became the brown-face of legitimacy, a performer whose presence made a predatory business model appear as racial uplift and opportunity. His lie works on multiple levels. It masks corporate exploitation while reinforcing the myth of meritocracy, the idea that the only thing separating a working-class custodian from the C-suite is timing, grit, and ingenuity. The narrative functioned perfectly, transforming structural inequality into a feel-good tale of individual triumph. Whether the story is true is beside the point; kayfabe demands an emotional buy-in, not factual accuracy.

As long as the crowd believes, the corporation's real goals remain invisible, the products keep flowing, and Montañez continues to cash in—books published, movies made, and motivational speeches delivered—long after the illusion has been exposed.

The Montañez lie works because it sells us the fantasy of a level playing field, a world where meritocracy isn't a PR slogan but an economic law. By elevating Montañez as the high-school-dropout-turned-genius innovator, they got to plaster inner-city shelves with calorie-dense junk while positioning themselves as champions of multicultural innovation—less parasite and more patron saint.

The myth of the underdog triumphing through grit is one of the few cultural stories America still agrees on. Trump plays the same instrument with the same virtuosity. He knows that people want to believe that the system, rigged as it is, can be gamed on their behalf by someone who *knows how the game is played*. He consistently paints himself as an "outsider" who is "not a politician," one who can run the country "like a business." He tells crowds he's going to "drain the swamp" because he's familiar with every creature in it. But if that's true, why would a man who has made his fortune in that very swamp suddenly turn against the friends and financiers who keep him in the rarefied air of the one percent?

The Undertaker and Brock Lesnar wrestle during Wrestlemania XXX in New Orleans on April 6, 2014. (Jonathan Bachman/AP Images for WWE)

It's the same sleight of hand that lets us believe that a single man's cultural heritage created a snack-food phenomenon while ignoring the corporate machinery behind it, along with the health consequences suffered by the very communities that snack was marketed to. And it's the same sleight of hand that lets millions trust a billionaire with a long paper trail of unpaid contractors and shady deals to suddenly become the great protector of "the people."

This isn't just a "post-truth" society; that term is too soft, too academic. What Montañez and Trump demonstrate is how fully we've drifted into the universe of kayfabe, an ecosystem where the line between reality and performance is not blurred but irrelevant. A world of "alternative facts," "fake news," and engineered mythologies where truth is whatever keeps the crowd invested, outraged, inspired, or entertained. The story doesn't have to be real; it only has to feel true. And as long as it does, the show goes on.

The visual culture of the new Trump-inspired right increasingly resembles the choreographed spectacle of professional wrestling. When Trump and the late Charlie Kirk's widow, Erika, approached the stage at Kirk's funeral, the scene was marked not by solemn entrance of sadness but by the bombacity of fireworks; an entrance more suited to WrestleMania than a memorial service.

Months earlier, Hulk Hogan had taken the stage at the Republican National Convention, torn off his shirt to a roar from the crowd, and bellowed "Let Trumpamania run wild, America!" as if endorsing a contender in a heavyweight title match. And when Trump survived two assassination attempts—one broadcast live as Secret Service agents pulled him from the stage while he raised a triumphant fist—some politicos speculated that the attacks could have been staged. But in *kayfabe politics*, the truth is irrelevant; what matters is how effectively the angle can be worked. Each incident became another narrative beat, another thunderous roar from the crowd, another surge in the polls that helped Trump soundly defeat his rival Kamala Harris. By the time the votes were counted, the *WrestleManiafication* of the Republican Party was complete.

The transformation was not merely aesthetic. It signaled a deeper shift in how the Republican Party understands power, conflict, and loyalty. The *WrestleManiafication* of American politics has allowed Donald Trump to become the ringmaster of the Republican Party, reshaping it in his own volatile image. The conservative movement no longer resembles a coalition of interest groups or ideological factions but an arena where Trump scripts the characters and decides the storylines. During his first term he begrudgingly relied on Washington insiders, people who at least recognized the boundaries of governance.

This time around he has no such constraints. He has staffed his circle with sycophants and outsiders—Linda McMahon (!), Elon Musk, Pete Hegseth, Robert Kennedy Jr., Kash Patel, Kristi Noem—people whose qualifications do not matter because qualifications are irrelevant in kayfabe politics. What matters is devotion. Trump once fought the establishment for control of the party; now he commands total allegiance and is attempting to convert the United States into *Trumpland Inc.*, a personal fiefdom built on grievance, obedience, and the promise of revenge. He's even planning to build a giant arena to host UFC fights on the White House lawn now.

Kayfabe may be a good strategy for winning elections, but it's quite the opposite when attempting to govern. Trump may now be living in the *shoot* he *worked* himself into.

Trump returned to the same xenophobic immigration rhetoric that fueled his first rise, but this time the conditions made it far more effective: after his initial administration floated, and was blocked from, punishing Democratic "sanctuary cities" by bussing migrants into them, Republican governors like Ron DeSantis and Greg Abbott implemented the strategy at scale, overwhelming cities such as Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles. This allowed Trump's 2025 return to office to convert real municipal strain into political power through escalated ICE raids and mass deportations that functioned as pure kayfabe.

These spectacles of cruelty, unlike before, translated directly into policy thanks to loyalists embedded in the Supreme Court and ICE. But the visible cruelty of televised immigration raids has created negative effects for Trump 2.0. The public backlash has created fractures within Trump's own movement, with notable figures like Marjorie Taylor Greene, a once devoted acolyte, now denouncing his neo-fascistic policies, from expanded deportations to funding Israel's war in Gaza and foreign aid for the Russia/Ukraine war, as a betrayal of "America First." Greene has calculatingly positioned herself as a populist dissident despite her own role in enabling Trumpism. It's a pivot that, alongside her announced retirement from Congress, suggests she may be preparing for higher office by adopting the same formula: wrap reactionary politics in faux-populist language, invoke a mythical past, and turn politics into theater.

In the film *Idiocracy*, the "president" of the dystopian future is a former wrestler: Dwayne Camacho, played by Terry Crews. He's not merely a representative of the populace but an undifferentiated extension of it, a crude avatar of the lumpen culture he embodies. There is no delineation between executive authority and mass sensibility; the president casually calls the film's protagonist "gay" for speaking in complete sentences.

Now, science fiction is not prophecy, but it is often a diagnosis of our present. Writer-director Mike Judge's satire, meant as a caricature of the Bush era, now reads uncannily like a preview of the *WrestleManiafication* of the Republican Party under Trump. The collapse of decorum and the open contempt for expertise are no longer comedic exaggerations but governing principles. While talking to the press aboard the Air Force in November, Trump was asked by a reporter about releasing the classified Epstein files and responded, "Quiet, quiet piggy!" Instead of addressing the question of making the files public (something Trump campaigned on), he attacked the journalist's question with the same belligerent anti-intellectualism Judge lampooned.

Trump didn't just step into politics; he stepped into it the same way he stepped into the WWE: as someone who understands that the performance *is* the power, that the *kayfabe* is the product, and that the *heel* can win as long as the crowd stays engaged.

What Mike Judge imagines as dystopian absurdity—the merging of the presidency with the aesthetics of pro wrestling, is now the dominant grammar of Republican politics. Trump has blurred the line between character and man so completely that the crowd no longer demands a distinction. They tune in for the persona, so the persona becomes the man at the helm.

Richard Montañez and his Cheetos offered the country a feel-good myth about bootstrapping success and creative genius. Trump offered the country a grievance tale about cleansing a corrupt system he helped design. Both stories worked because they promised something the audience demands: simplicity, certainty, and a hero who appears to rise through grit and boldness. The fact that the details fall apart on close inspection is beside the point. Here, the performance becomes the evidence. Credibility comes not from expertise but from the force of the reaction you can produce.

This is why Trump flourishes in the ruins of the old era of credentialed professionalism. The Obama years were the peak of a technocratic faith in experts, fact checking, and managerial competence. There was a time, not too long ago on the internet, where people spent their evenings learning about logical fallacies and reading policy explainers. Trump rose alongside the expansion of low culture in the 1990s, the world of the Jerry Springer Show, shock jocks, pro wrestling, and reality TV confessionals. When he tested a presidential run in 1999 and told Larry King that Oprah would be an ideal running mate, he was signaling something real: celebrity works as political capital, and public authority can easily be produced through spectacle rather than knowledge.

Kayfabe does not abide ideological rigidity. It mutates and adapts itself according to whatever keeps the crowd invested. Trump doesn't simply employ kayfabe; he extends it, pushing it toward a place where politics is a form of traveling performance art. The incentive is never to address problems. The incentive is to stage them louder, build them bigger, and center yourself inside them.

In this world, Trump functions as both conductor and creature of his very own made-for-TV special. He directs it and he is shaped by it. This leaves the country with a pressing question: can a democratic system survive when spectacle becomes its main operating condition? If kayfabe has consumed the political imagination so completely, the only response that matters will not come from fact checking, moral appeals, or longing for professionalism. The only force that will break it is material improvement, because only real gains cut through performance by changing the experience itself.

During a recent press conference with Zohran Mamdani, a reporter asked the New York mayor-elect whether he still believed Trump was a fascist. Before Mamdani could deliver his careful, measured response, Trump grabbed his arm and laughed, "Just tell them yes, it's fine." In that moment he revealed the core truth of the era: accusations do not matter because words do not matter. This is the same man who survived an election after bragging on tape about sexually assaulting women. In kayfabe politics, scandal is far from a liability; it is content.

If someone like Zohran Mamdani can use even the compromised proximity of Trump's spectacle to deliver material gains for New Yorkers, then the gravitational pull of that charade begins to weaken. Trump's singular power lies in his ability to center himself in every conversation, to make himself the mirror the country is forced to look into. Like the jealous queen in *Snow White*, he asks again and again who is the fairest of them all—but his mirror is the camera, and the endless abyss of online coverage is what keeps his performance alive.

Yet despite building his entire political empire on kayfabe, Trump doesn't seem to quite grasp its limits. In an October 2024 podcast interview with "The Undertaker," Trump asked the pro-wrestler a telling question—one that implies he still *doesn't quite understand* where the show ends and reality begins:

> TRUMP: *How often did it happen where you're fighting somebody, and you made a mistake, and he gets angry and he really goes at you? [...] And what would happen? The guys would run into the ring and stop it, right? I was told when you had a lot of guys running into the ring, that meant you had a problem.*
>
> UNDERTAKER: *Usually when that happens, it's part of the show.*
>
> TRUMP: *So what stops somebody from going nuts? And you know, really starting a real fight?*
>
> UNDERTAKER: *Probably losing their job.*

Kayfabe only works when its orchestrator is in control. It only exists if the audience is still watching.

The challenge of the coming years is not simply defeating Trump at the ballot box but starving the spectacle itself. Only when results speak louder than the performance will the era of kayfabe politics finally begin to crack. ⚜

CODE PINK

MEDEA BENJAMIN is an anti-war activist and one of the co-founders of **CODEPINK: Women for Peace**. She's spent decades fighting the American military-industrial complex, organizing protests against the invasion of Iraq in the early 2000s and interrupting speeches by both Barack Obama and Donald Trump. She's also the co-author, with David Swanson, of *NATO: What You Need to Know*. She joined *Current Affairs* editor-in-chief Nathan J. Robinson to discuss the ongoing push for war, from the Middle East to Venezuela, and how ordinary people can organize and stand against it.

MEDEA BENJAMIN
Great to be on with you, Nathan. I won't heckle you.

NATHAN J. ROBINSON
Well, you can. It would be an honor. I want to ask you about this, because what you're actually known for is direct action. In that article in the *Atlantic*, "Who Is Medea Benjamin, and Why Is She So Good at Heckling Public Officials?"—when they're talking about "heckling public officials" it's the act of disruptive protest. They were referring to a speech by Barack Obama on the war on terror that you disrupted, and CODEPINK has a famous history of being willing to be disruptive of Senate hearings and political speeches. So could you tell us a little bit about that tactic?

BENJAMIN
Well, I feel like maybe during the days of protesting the Iraq War, there was a little more ability to get mainstream media to cover our protests, but it started diminishing and diminishing, and so we would do all of this organizing and do these great rallies and get no media coverage for it. The media coverage is so important, because how else are you going to build a movement and let people know that there's this opposition? And so we realized that we might be better off, or in addition to those other tactics, we should try to find where the media already is. So go to their press conferences, go to the hearings, go to the speeches, and go to the conventions. We've been really pretty successful at getting into Republican and Democratic conventions and getting right up close. And so that was really out of desperation of saying, we've got an important message we have to deliver. The media doesn't take seriously things like anti-war movements, and so we've got to look for other ways of getting our message across.

ROBINSON
In the anti-war movement, you obviously have to think constantly about the effectiveness of tactics. You are faced with a rather enormous set of obstacles. You are fighting, in many ways, against the most powerful entities on the earth, the United States government and the United States war machine. And obviously, you don't have the force of arms and are committed to nonviolent tactics. All you have is your creativity in thinking about tactics. So could you tell us a little bit more about how, given that massive power differential between you and the forces you're up against, CODEPINK has thought about how to use its limited resources?

BENJAMIN
That's exactly it, Nathan. You really hit the nail on the head, because there is this enormous octopus that has a trillion dollars being fed into it and has its tentacles all over this country and the districts of every member of Congress where they're making weapons, and then, of course, with about 800 military bases around the world. How are you going to fight this enormous military-industrial complex? And so, yes, creativity is the only thing that we really have going for us at CODEPINK, because we look for how to be a presence in these different places. So I talked about going to press conferences. We also go to weapons industry shows, and we go directly to the weapons industry headquarters. We buy shares in their company, and we get into their shareholder meetings. We go to places where people congregate and live and bring our message wherever we can. So we're constantly thinking of not only the places to go but also how to show up.

So sometimes it might be getting up and speaking out, and sometimes it might be appearing in a costume that is really kind of shocking, like when we protested the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia: we dressed up as him with a face mask and had the bloody royal bone saw to show how he cut up a *Washington Post* journalist. Once we had a fantastic protest that we did at a member of Congress who was trying to call for a naval blockade of Iran, and we found out he lived on a houseboat, so we figured, aha!, let's do a blockade of his house. We got in little canoes and kayaks and rubber tubes and rode out to his houseboat and surrounded him and said, "This is what a blockade looks like." So yes, we're always looking for creative ways to get the message out, and oftentimes as CODEPINK, since we are so nonviolent, we look for ways that are fun and joyful and just kind of throw our adversaries off balance so that they don't see us so much as a threat but as an interesting way to get across a different opinion.

ROBINSON
There's a question that I've always wanted to ask you, having seen the work you've done since my politically formative years around the Iraq War when I was in high school. I was reading media accounts about the reporting on the Iraq War, and there was one reporter—I can't remember what network she was from—but she was talking about why the media wasn't more critical of Bush and the kinds of questions they asked in press conferences. And she said, "It's very intimidating when you're in the room with the president to start criticizing him." I thought, well, you know who's never had that problem? CODEPINK and Medea Benjamin. You've been able to go into these spaces and do things that really shatter the boundaries of what we might call decorum, and a lot is preserved through decorum. I think many people have this incredible feeling of social anxiety about doing anything that is embarrassing or is going to get you looked at the wrong way. I wondered how you have personally managed to overcome that barrier that many people feel. I think probably when a lot of people get started in activism and disruptive protest, it's very difficult to go into something, knowing that you know everyone's going to stare at you and you're going to get dragged out of the room; everyone in that room will be like, "Why are you doing this?"

BENJAMIN
Yes, and you might get arrested, and you might get hurt. There are a lot of obstacles, and there's always, or not always, but many times, a little voice that is saying, *Don't do it! Don't do it!* Personally, when I started doing this, I channeled my anger and the voices of the people that I've met that have been the victims of our policies. So take the issue of Iraq or Afghanistan or Yemen. I've been to all of these countries. I've met with people whose loved ones have been killed. I've met with people who have been victims of our drone warfare. And so I think about them, and what

would they say if they were able to confront a president or a secretary of defense or some high-up official or somebody in Congress? And now these days, it's been a lot about Gaza, and what would somebody in Gaza say if they were able to have that kind of interaction? That gives me a lot of courage.

ROBINSON

I was struck by an interview you did about your early history of anti-war activism, when you talked about the Vietnam War and how part of your motivation for turning into an anti-Vietnam War activist was when your sister was sent a Vietnamese person's severed ear by her soldier boyfriend from Vietnam, which was quite a common thing in the Vietnam War: the keeping of these human souvenirs. It seems like, from what I read, it really made it visceral and made the human stakes clear. And I thought, as I read that, about how often the human stakes of our wars are so obscured, so kept under a fog. I think Chris Hedges has talked about how if people were actually able to see what war was like, to understand what it really means for its victims, it would be much more difficult to wage.

BENJAMIN

Absolutely. That's how I have felt for so long. And yet here we have the Gaza genocide that, for two years, people had a chance to see every day if they looked on their social media or some of the news accounts. And yet that wasn't enough to stop it. So it makes me wonder a little more and question that, because it does become, incredibly enough, normalized. When people see another bombing, another person dead, they say, "Oh, well, that's over there, and that's what happens over there." So I think at this point it takes even more than that.

ROBINSON

One of the ugliest things about what Israel is doing in Gaza is the way that the bombings of schools and hospitals and mosques are so routine that it becomes difficult to even keep track of which hospital bombing we're talking about. And as you say, there is this terrible risk of atrocities becoming normalized. One of the things I appreciate about groups like CODEPINK is that—there's a documentary about Ralph Nader called *An Unreasonable Man*, and that unreasonableness, that refusal to accept what has been normalized as being normal, trying to break through the boundaries of what is considered common sense or reason in Washington.

BENJAMIN

Well, that's right, and when I look back on the Vietnam days, it was more the fact that there were so many Americans who were dying and that the kind of warfare we wage has changed so much, which is why I wrote a book quite a while ago about drone warfare. I really saw that coming and recognized that the powers that be understand that Americans don't like to see other Americans dying, and that if we can do it in a way that's a proxy war, or where we're using unmanned aircraft, like drones, they can get away with a lot more. So yes, these wars have become harder for people to see or to feel a connection to them, because it's not Americans necessarily going and dying. But in the case of Gaza, it really is quite mind-blowing to me that while the public opinion has changed dramatically in the United States, it has not changed the policy, and that is extremely disturbing. You recognize just how disconnected the policymakers are from the public opinion.

ROBINSON

I did want to ask you about over the course of your history of anti-war activism whether you've seen changes that you see as encouraging or discouraging. In many ways, it seems like there have been encouraging shifts. For example, what activists like yourself were saying about the Iraq War in 2003 has essentially become accepted as consensus. Looking back on it, very few people are willing to defend that war anymore, and even Donald Trump has had to present himself as a peacemaker, someone who is against foreign interventions, even as he continues to wage them, because there's an understanding that public opinion is very anti-war. But I was struck by an interview that you gave where you said that today we don't have the vibrant peace movement that we had in the Bush years. U.S. policy continues to cause immense harm overseas, yet we often cannot mobilize even 1,000 people to protest. So our capacity to mobilize has actually been much diminished. So could you talk about the trends over the last 20 years in anti-war activism and opinion?

Medea Benjamin and Gayle Murphy, U.S. Navy Memorial, Washington, D.C., 2007 (Elvert Xavier Barnes Protest Photography)

BENJAMIN

Well, certainly when there was a draft and everybody had what they call skin in the game during Vietnam, there was a huge youth-led movement. And then during the Iraq War, it became harder, after a couple of years, to keep the energy going because the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan did become normalized. And when you're in a country waging war for 20 years, you can't expect that the anti-war movement will have 20 years of energy to keep it going, especially when the media doesn't even cover those wars after the first year, let's say. And then with the Gaza genocide, there has been a huge outpouring of opposition, led in great part by Palestinian Americans in this country, but then becoming broader and broader and certainly a strong student component. But the crackdown has been extremely severe, and it has affected a lot of people who have either lost their jobs or their ability to continue in the university or are afraid that that's going to happen, and that has diminished the numbers as well.

And now, when I see the U.S. threatening to invade Venezuela, for example, it's very hard to organize large numbers of people to speak out, and it's exactly the time when we must. These wars start when people believe all the propaganda that they've been hearing, like now that this is a war against drugs, and if we overthrow the Venezuelan government somehow, that's going to make us in the United States safer, which is absolute BS. So I think the trends are different depending on if U.S. soldiers are directly involved or not, or what has been the ability of the war makers to convince people that this is a good war. But I would say right now we're in a time comparable to after Vietnam, when there was really, at that time, what we called the "Vietnam syndrome," which is that people were tired of war; they didn't want more war. And that's where we are now, where it crosses Democratic, Republican, and independent, older and younger people. There's a general consensus people don't want more war. Will they come out on the streets? Not really, but the sentiment is there.

ROBINSON

Noam Chomsky talks a lot about the "Vietnam syndrome" and he attributes, for instance, Ronald Reagan's decision to support the Contras covertly to this "Vietnam syndrome," this popular revulsion at war, which is obviously a very positive thing. But as the covert wars of the 1980s showed, it does not necessarily act as a full restraint on American power abroad. And in fact, I think we're seeing that it's definitely resulted in Trump using a lot of pro-peace rhetoric, but as you say, without even changing the policy in many cases. The belligerence towards Iran continues. These boat strikes in the Caribbean are just brazen violations of international law that the administration doesn't even attempt to justify. But it's covered with this kind of layer of anti-war propaganda, to the point where I see people describe Trump as an anti-war or a peace president.

BENJAMIN

Absolutely, and I think they really believe that. But then you look at the way that he has continued the support for Israel, and as you said, even [attacking] Iran and the threats against not just Venezuela but also Colombia, and now even Mexico. And then we have to talk about the trillion-dollar budget, because Trump is so proud of having added more and more money to the Pentagon and is even proud to call it the Department of War. He says one thing, but he does another. And you mentioned I recently wrote a book about NATO. It's ironic, because at one point, Trump talked about it being an obsolete military alliance, and then he turned around and said all the member countries of NATO should not spend just 2 percent of their GDP on the military, which many hadn't been doing, but now says they should spend 5 percent. So here you call him a peacemaker, and he is not only presiding over the largest military budget in the history of this country but also pushing other countries to spend more on their military. And why is that? Because he wants them to buy more U.S. weapons. So I would in no terms call him a peace president.

ROBINSON

You mentioned your book about NATO that you co-wrote with David Swanson and that the great Jeffrey Sachs wrote a foreword for. I feel like NATO is an institution that most Americans have heard of without really having any idea what it does or whether it's good or bad. Basically what you've written is a kind of 101 guide where you're trying to drive away the fog and help people understand a little bit more. Tell us more about why you wrote this book in particular.

"HOW ARE YOU GOING TO FIGHT THIS ENORMOUS MILITARY-INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX?"

BENJAMIN

Well, when I see that Trump is calling for countries to spend 5 percent of their GDP on the military, which might sound like a little to some people, but is actually a lot; it means taking money away from things like healthcare and education, which we don't have a lot of in the U.S., but in the European countries, they do, and they already have a safety net that is being torn apart, and spending more on the military will only accelerate that. And I also felt that in the United States, people don't know much about NATO at all, and what they do know, they think of it in very positive terms. The public opinion polls show that people have a positive, kind of soft feeling towards NATO, but they have no idea what it really is. In fact, many people think that it's part of the United Nations. And so I thought, well, let's get back to the basics and why NATO was created, but also talk about the wars that NATO has been involved in, how NATO is an extension of the U.S. military, that it's no longer about this North American

Alliance, and that there is nothing legal about an invasion of a country like Libya just because you convince NATO to get involved. That doesn't mean it's got the UN stamp of approval on it, for example. So I do think that people should learn more about this military alliance, which is the strongest and most dangerous military alliance that exists in the world today.

ROBINSON

And we also have here another one of your recent books, *War in Ukraine: Making Sense of a Senseless Conflict*, with a preface by the *Nation*'s Katrina vanden Heuvel, who's been on this program before to discuss the conflict. That's another instance in which most Americans' exposure through the media to the war in Ukraine was fairly simplistic: a dictatorial adversary state, Putin's Russia, waged an illegal, unprovoked invasion of Ukraine, and our job was to defend democracy—a similar kind of narrative to that in the Vietnam War. That is to say, the United States had to intervene to defend the forces of freedom against aggression. You complicate that narrative quite substantially in this book. So how do you begin to point out flaws in the simplistic story that will help people better understand how the world works?

BENJAMIN

This really relates to the last question about NATO. Because were it not for NATO, there wouldn't be the war in Ukraine right now. I really think that people don't understand how the expansion of NATO to Russia's borders created this feeling of insecurity by the Russians, which doesn't excuse the invasion of Ukraine; it explains it. And when you think about how, if there was an adversarial military alliance on the border of Mexico or Canada, how the United States would react to that, we know all too well. So I do think it's important for Americans to understand that this is part of not only the encroachment of NATO but also the encroachment of U.S. hegemony and the way that the U.S. wages a proxy war. It was actually a way for the United States to say, We can use this to weaken Russia without having U.S. troops involved. And that's what we've seen now for three years.

And this is another example of what we've been talking about: how the media really doesn't cover the Ukraine war anymore. It only comes up once in a while, and so it becomes background noise to people, and yet, the U.S. has spent hundreds of billions of dollars on this war and will continue to be asked to spend more money on this unless there is a rising up of opposition. And it's been interesting, Nathan, and I'm sure you've seen this and been very interested to see how the MAGA movement, the right wing in the Republican base, has been against the war in Ukraine and the spending of this massive amount of money by the U.S. in Ukraine, and how this is part of the equation that Trump considers when looking at how much to keep supporting this war in Ukraine.

"WERE IT NOT FOR NATO, THERE WOULDN'T BE THE WAR IN UKRAINE RIGHT NOW"

ROBINSON

I did want to ask you what you make of what some would describe as a rising anti-war sentiment on the right. We have heard in recent years and months some rather surprising figures coming out and criticizing Israel. Marjorie Taylor Greene comes to mind as someone who has surprised us with her perspective on this. At the same time, the Republican Party is still infested with many neoconservatives like Tom Cotton, who, I believe, recently personally criticized you with the usual "funded by the Chinese, anti-American, terrorist sympathizer" what-have-you. Do you see there being legitimate anti-war currents on the right?

BENJAMIN

I see it like there's this dike that is just ready to explode. And it's remarkable to me that in Congress, you only have Marjorie Taylor Greene and Thomas Massie and, to a little extent, maybe Rand Paul, speaking out while their base is just like a tsunami of anti-war sentiment. And how long can they continue to hold on to this? It's quite remarkable. We go into the office of Marjorie Taylor Greene every single week, talk to her, and talk to her staff. I think seeing the way that she has progressed is to see the progression of what is happening at the base. She is reflecting that, and at the same time she is building that. I think there is a lot of coming together of left and right in this sentiment of, why are we spending money on these overseas wars? Why don't we use that here at home? Now we'd have disagreements, maybe, about what to use the money on here at home, but this idea that we shouldn't be interfering in the internal affairs of other countries is a sentiment that brings left and right together. It's funny, when we go into Marjorie Taylor Greene's office, she usually has two signs out there, and one is a sign I look at and I say, "Oh, God..." It might be one that says, "Male, female. There are only two genders. Trust the science," or it might be a sign out there that says "Gulf of America" instead of "Gulf of Mexico." But then she always has this sign that I love right on her door, and it says, "If you've come here to lobby for a foreign country, you should be registered with FARA as an agent of a foreign country"—basically saying you're not welcome in here if you're representing a foreign government. And that I really appreciate.

ROBINSON

That disjunction that you're talking about between the base and the politicians obviously also exists on the Democratic side. One of the most striking facts about U.S. wars is that there's always been a major disconnect between the degree of anti-war sentiment among the people and the degree of pro-war policy. Foreign

policy is one of the least democratic areas of U.S. politics, and the opinions of the people don't count for very much. But I've been struck recently by how many candidates on the Democratic side are becoming, for the first time, more openly anti-AIPAC [American Israel Public Affairs Committee]. We're seeing Abdul El-Sayed in Michigan and Graham Platner in Maine running on a platform that would have been toxic in Democratic politics a few years ago, which is to say, "I won't accept any money or support from AIPAC; I don't want it." Do you think we are going to see, or are seeing, Democratic politicians recognize more and more the gap between U.S. policy and the public demand?

BENJAMIN

It is remarkable, and it's remarkable to see seated members of Congress who are saying they're not going to take any more AIPAC money. And some of these, like the two Democrats in North Carolina, Valerie Foushee and Deborah Ross, are not particularly progressive and haven't been very good on this issue of Gaza, and then to see someone like Seth Moulton from Massachusetts, who's actually running for Senate against Ed Markey, who is more liberal than he is, saying that he won't take money from AIPAC and he'll give back the money he got from AIPAC. It really does send a message. This money is becoming more and more toxic, and we are going to see in the next congressional election a lot more members of Congress who will say they're not going to take AIPAC money. This is a trend that I think will continue, because the base really wants to see members of Congress who have a spine. You have to look at the Mamdani election and how positive it was for the voters when he said he wasn't going to go to Israel because he was there to deal with New York City. There are fewer and fewer members of Congress, the newly elected ones, who go to Israel. There are still too many of them, but there are more and more who say, "No, I won't take this free trip sponsored by an AIPAC front group, because that is not a main priority for me now in Congress." So this opposition is growing, and that is a positive thing.

ROBINSON

That's positive. To conclude here, I would ask you to reflect a little bit on a very long history of anti-war activism, which must have had a lot of highs and lows and feelings that you weren't making any headway, and obviously a lot of real physical pain at various points. For people who are unfamiliar, you've been beaten by the police in multiple countries. When you look back, are there moments where you really felt, "This is why I do this?" Are there high points? What do you look back on and think, well, this really makes it all worth it?

BENJAMIN

Well, some are individual gains when people are released from prison when we've been working on their cases. I was just working on the case of a U.K. journalist, Sami Hamdi, who was arrested for nothing in the United States and was in an ICE detention center. He was just released. Mahmoud Khalil—all of these cases, when you see these people and they're out and back with their families, that's a tremendous sense of, yes, this is worth it. What's harder to gauge is, have all your efforts to stop a war actually been successful? So we've worked many, many years to stop the U.S. from invading Iran, for example. And I knock on wood every time I talk about this, because I feel that, were it not for that anti-war sentiment, the U.S. would have invaded Iran at some point. So there are big things like that, trying to stop a war. There are issues of trying to make wars shorter, to bring them to a close more quickly than they would have been had there not been an anti-war movement. And then there are all of these individuals whose lives have been saved because there has been a movement fighting for them.

ROBINSON

Actually, let me ask you just one more thing here. I realized that probably no one has been called "anti-American" more than you, but what people might not know about you is that you've actually been kicked out of Castro's Cuba. You have protested governments around the world that have violated human rights and been the target of governments around the world. But this is the go-to accusation that is used by people like Tom Cotton: that American anti-war protesters fixate on the crimes of the American government, and they must in some way be singularly concerned with our misdeeds to the detriment of caring about other misdeeds, or that they are unpatriotic. When you hear that stuff, could you tell us what that makes you think? What do you say in response?

BENJAMIN

Yes, I have protested the terrible deeds of many other countries around the world, but I feel like my responsibility as an American and as a patriot is to make my country better, and making my country better means stopping all the wars that we've been engaged with for two reasons. One, it creates chaos and so much suffering overseas. But two is that it distorts our priorities here at home, whether it's all the money we spend on the Pentagon instead of investing in our people and the climate, or whether it's the blowback that we get when we see the mass surveillance coming back to haunt us here at home, or the use of National Guard troops in our streets, which is happening right around the corner from where I live in Washington, DC. So it is the role of the patriot, as Benjamin Franklin said, to dissent to try to make our government better. And I feel, in many ways, while I am not a "rah-rah USA, USA" person and feel I'm more of a global citizen and we're all on this one beautiful planet that we must preserve, we do have to take responsibility for our own home, and for me, that means the USA. I want to make it better because I love it. ⚜

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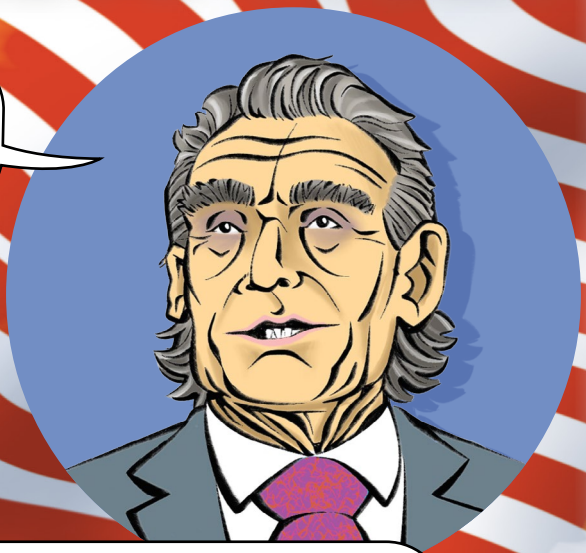

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ALL POWER TO THE GARBAGE WORKERS!

BY **ALEX SKOPIC**

Every child knows that garbage collectors are heroes. Nobody has to tell you; it's just obvious. When I was about six years old, I remember standing in my grandparents' kitchen window and watching, fascinated, as their local garbage truck pulled up. This was rural Pennsylvania, so it was a small operation—just a purple pickup truck with "H&D Waste" painted on the side, a picture of a pig sitting in a trash can, and a square bin mounted to the truck bed to hold the trash. Two people, a woman and a man, would get out, grab the three or four black bags from the curb, and *hurl* them into the truck, like Olympic athletes launching a shot put. Garbage Day had everything—a loud piece of machinery, feats of physical strength, a *frisson* of the gross. My younger self was captivated. The experience seems to be a common one, too. Ten years ago, a small boy named Quincy Kroner went viral online after he brought his toy garbage truck out to the street to show it to his local trash collectors, then became overwhelmed and cried when he actually got to meet his idols. The kid knew what was up.

But as people get older, they run the risk of becoming cynical, avaricious, and cruel. Worst of all, some of them get into management. Across the world today, the people who run large companies and city budgets seem to have forgotten what they knew in their youth, and they disregard the sanitation workers who keep us all from drowning in our own filth. They cut corners, refuse to raise wages, and try their best to keep trash collectors doing dirty, dangerous work for peanuts. And so labor wars break out, in cities from New York to Birmingham to Chennai, as the garbage workers are forced to go on strike. It's been happening for centuries, but 2025 has been a landmark year for sanitation strikes, and for the ruling classes' opposition to them. Politicians and the police have conspired to keep the workers down, the billionaire-owned media has spread propaganda against them, and scab laborers from their own cities have betrayed them for the sake of a quick buck (or quid, or rupee). Still, the garbage workers fight on. Theirs is one of the most important labor struggles of all, and one everybody ought to support to the hilt. It's obvious, but it bears repeating: the people who do society's most basic and vital work ought to be paid well and respected for it. Anyone who stands on the opposite side of *that* particular picket line belongs in the bin with the rest of the trash.

FROM NEW AMSTERDAM TO THE "SUMMER OF STINK"

The American garbage strike is as old as organized garbage collection itself. In fact, the practice is significantly older and more respectable than the United States as a nation. As labor historian and poet Joe Hall records in his remarkable book *Fugue and Strike*, the first strikes on record were all the way back in 1677, when New York City had just ceased being New Amsterdam. At that point, a small guild of mostly Dutch "cartmen" spent their Saturdays "carting household 'dirt' to a dump for 'ten stivers sea-

want.'" In today's money, that's approximately $30 per cartload. Not much. So it shouldn't have been a complete surprise when they eventually got fed up, and ground their carts to a halt.

As Hall writes, the city government was able to quell the 1677 strike using a favorite tactic of bosses everywhere: divide-and-conquer along racial lines. Instead of a pay raise, they just banned Black workers from getting the licenses necessary for "carting or portering," giving a form of racialized job security to their white counterparts. But "the wages of whiteness wouldn't remain sufficient" for long, and a second strike followed in 1684. This time, though, the segregation policy backfired on its creators. It limited the potential pool of scab laborers to only white men, who were less likely to need money badly enough to come out and break a garbage strike. So when the council put out a call, it couldn't recruit enough of them. They had to re-hire the cartmen they'd just fired for striking, and eventually give them raises too. America's first garbage strike was a victory—just not for everyone.

It wouldn't be the last. About 180 years later, a plucky new daily newspaper called the *New York Times* recorded another strike of "streetsweepers and dirt-cartmen" in 1865. Establishing its anti-labor credentials straight out of the gate, the *Times* condemned the workers, writing that the strike was "a wicked trifling with the lives of the people" that should be "swept aside" by the police. And just like the colonial government of 1684, the *Times* urged the recruitment of scabs, saying city government should "strain every nerve to get the requisite force, in place of those who refuse to work."

Across the decades, the *Times* kept up this anti-worker editorial line. It showed up again in 1907, four years after the Teamsters union was founded to represent horse-cart drivers of all kinds. On that occasion, the *Times* blasted New York City's latest trash strike as "a stench in the public nostrils" and demanded "an un-pampered set of workers" to take the unionized ones' place. Apparently, city officials agreed. When the next strike broke out in February 1911, the *Times* reported with palpable satisfaction that "A few non-union drivers of garbage carts yesterday removed a small part of the day's accumulations under strong police guard," and wrote that "in no contingency should the demands of these strikers be submitted to."

WHAT WERE THE DEMANDS, YOU might ask? Only that workers not be expected to pick up the trash in the middle of the night, in the dead of winter. "Our men are already falling ill with pneumonia and rheumatism and[…] they demanded the right to work in the sunlight and the warmer weather of the daytime," said one union official, adding that "a 200-pound can was a mighty big load for one man to lift[…] and on a slippery winter's night [he] was likely to do so at a heavy risk of both life and limb." But even that was too much for the *New York Times*, which demanded that the workers "must be compelled to submit by any means the authorities can command." This time, the editors got their wish: Mayor William Jay Gaynor was "resolute in rejecting their demands," and thanks to the unremitting stream of newspaper propaganda, there was little public sympathy on the union's side. They were forced to return to work on the same terms as before, with punishments in some cases for daring to strike at all.

Workers dump the garbage from their carts in protest during the 1911 strike. Photo: Library of Congress

The *New York Times*, as it often is, was dead wrong. Garbage collectors are anything but "pampered," and given the unpleasant nature of the work itself, they have every right to demand concessions. Think, for a second, about what it's actually like to pick up other people's trash for a living, every day for years. Every dirty, disgusting substance humans are capable of producing, garbage workers have to deal with hands-on. Feces, whether in diapers or dog-walking bags. Used condoms. Maggot-infested food. Rats, both alive and dead. Someone gets drunk and vomits directly into a trash can. People throw away needles and razor blades and don't bother to wrap them in duct tape first. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, "refuse and recyclable material collector" is the fourth most deadly job in the United States, behind only roofing, commercial hunting and fishing, and logging. Interestingly, "police officer" doesn't crack the top 10—so for all the "thin blue line" sloganeering, garbage workers are objectively braver and more deserving of praise than cops. They get hit by cars a lot, and as climate change continues to ramp up, more and more of them suffer from heat exhaustion. In 2023 alone, 41 of them got killed on the job. To know all that, and then advocate for these workers to be "compelled to submit" to poor pay and working conditions—and all from the safety of a newspaper desk—is one of the most detestable forms of propaganda imaginable.

Thankfully, not everyone thinks like a *New York Times* editor. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. didn't. In 1968, he spent his final year on Earth marching alongside trash collectors in Memphis, Tennessee, as the ongoing war between workers and bosses flared up in yet another large-scale strike. Like in New York 57 years prior, safety—or rather, the way Black workers were deliberately denied any safety—was a primary issue. Two men, Echol Cole and Robert Walker, had been crushed to death in their own garbage truck. There were a few reasons, all of them grim. The truck itself was old, and known to malfunction; people had complained

already that it was a "disgrace" it was still on the road. There was also a deeply racist city policy which forbade sanitation workers, the vast majority of whom were Black, from taking "shelter stops" in neighborhoods on cold days, lest white people see them and feel uncomfortable. So on February 1, Walker and Cole were using the interior of the truck itself as a makeshift shelter from the cold wind, only to get pulled into the trash compactor when it unexpectedly turned on.

It must have been a slow, horrible death. But Mayor Henry Loeb, a white man with a reputation for being a "penny-pinching, anti-union segregationist," didn't care. He'd deliberately hired "men with arrest records who were unlikely to organize, held down wages, and bought the cheapest trucks and equipment," and he'd helped to stifle three previous attempts to unionize the city's sanitation workers in 1963, 1964, and 1967. Even after Walker and Cole's deaths, he offered their families only $500 in compensation, not even enough to pay for a $900 funeral. This was the last insult that drove everyone onto the picket line, and that brought Dr. King to town.

This was the era, as Lily Sánchez wrote for *Current Affairs* last year, of the more radical King, the one you don't often get told about in American schools—certainly not after Southern leaders like Jeff Landry and Ron DeSantis are done stripping the curriculum of so-called "divisive" political concepts. King had turned from his concern with simple racial equality under the law, important as that was, and started to champion a more comprehensive left-wing politics, opposing the invasion of Vietnam and waging the "Poor People's Campaign" against economic injustice. He still framed his politics in the language of his Christian faith, calling his goal simply "a better distribution of wealth within this country for all God's children," but he was unmistakably a socialist. In Memphis, he joined the workers' picket lines and marches as they carried the famous "I AM A MAN" signs, demanding they be treated as fully human for the first time. Some of his oratory from 1968 still sounds revolutionary today. From his final speech, everyone remembers the "I've been to the mountaintop" line, but you might not remember what came before it:

> *The issue is injustice. The issue is the refusal of Memphis to be fair and honest in its dealings with its public servants, who happen to be sanitation workers. Now, we've got to keep attention on that. That's always the problem with a little violence. You know what happened the other day, and the press dealt only with the window-breaking. I read the articles. They very seldom got around to mentioning the fact that one thousand, three hundred sanitation workers were on strike, and that Memphis is not being fair to them[...]*
>
> *Now we're going to march again, and we've got to march again, in order to put the issue where it is supposed to be. And force everybody to see that there are thirteen hundred of God's children here suffering, sometimes going hungry, going through dark and dreary nights wondering how this thing is going to come out. That's the issue. And we've got to say to the nation: we know it's coming out. For when people get caught up with that which is right and they are willing to sacrifice for it, there is no stopping point short of victory.*

The implication of that last phrase—"no stopping point short of victory"— is enormous. Far from the meek caricature that's presented in today's more conservative textbooks, King told people to fight, and not to *stop* fighting until the existing economic order had been completely upended.

Just a day later, a white man killed him for it. Not for that speech alone, or even for his involvement in the Memphis strike, but for all of it—the antiracism, the socialism, the Vietnam activism, the dedication to human rights. An avid fan of white supremacist George Wallace, James Earl Ray wanted the threat King posed to the status quo silenced for good. (Though it should be noted, too, that several members of King's family don't buy the FBI's assertion that Ray acted alone.) In that, he failed. In fact, it was the outpouring of support that followed King's death that finally forced Mayor Loeb to recognize the garbage union and raise wages. And it was fitting, in a way, that King died fighting for the most neglected and despised workers in the South. It was perfectly in line with the best parts of his Christian gospel—the parts that say "as much as ye do for the least of these my brethren, ye do unto me." The Roman Empire killed Christ for saying things like that, too; he and King have that in common. Except, of course, that the striking garbage workers of Memphis were not the least of Americans, but the greatest.

GARBAGE WORKERS ARE OBJECTIVELY BRAVER AND MORE DESERVING OF PRAISE THAN COPS.

Dr. King's work remains unfinished in a lot of ways, as you probably know if you're unfortunate enough to read the news regularly. Formal segregation might be gone, but anti-Black racism is still an ugly feature of American life, both in blatant forms and more subtle structural ones. And garbage workers in this country still aren't getting the money or respect they're due. This year, cities across America saw a renewed wave of trash strikes as the sanitation unions were once again forced to stand up for their members. In Philadelphia, District Council 33 of AFSCME—the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees—went on strike for the first time in almost 40 years, after Mayor Cherelle Parker offered them a contract with only

an 8 percent pay raise spread across three years. For reference, that's only 2.6 percent per year, and the U.S. rate of inflation for 2025 was roughly 3 percent, with rents and grocery prices rising even faster. So in terms of actual purchasing power, the proposed "raise" was in fact a pay *cut*. Already, the union pointed out that its members "earn an average of $46,000 a year, well below the estimated $60,000 needed for a single person to live in the city." So a strike was an absolute necessity—and there were similar situations in Boston, in Seattle, in Manteca, California, in Cumming, Georgia, in Ottawa, Illinois, and several other cities. The BBC termed it the "summer of stink."

Again, the country's biggest corporate news outlets explicitly denounced the strikes. The Bezos-owned *Washington Post* published an op-ed by the economics editor of the *National Review*, Dominic Pino, who not only pooh-poohed the Philadelphia garbage workers' specific demands, but argued that "they should not be allowed to collectively bargain in the first place." This was just a few months after Bezos issued his edict that the *Post* would always defend right-wing "free market" economics in its opinion pages; clearly, the command was being followed. The Murdoch-owned *Wall Street Journal* chimed in too, writing that "Public unions are often at odds with the public interest" and blaming them for a "trashy Fourth of July." In both pieces of propaganda, the emphasis is entirely on the people who are inconvenienced by a strike, with frequent references to the smell, the trash bags piling up uncollected on the curb, and so on. Meanwhile, there was no serious discussion of the economic desperation that would lead people to resort to striking, nor of the danger inherent to the work. For the press, it's as if those things don't exist—or don't matter, compared to the possibility that more comfortable people might catch a whiff of something funky on the wind.

In the end, the Philadelphia strike ended in disappointment. As Kim Kelly writes for the *Nation*, the union had momentum behind it. Public opinion was starting to turn against Mayor Parker, with the slogan "What's that smell? Blame Cherelle!" catching on, and celebrities like LL Cool J cancelled their performances in Philly in solidarity, generating more media coverage. But just eight days in, the AFSCME leadership chose to accept a contract with just a nine percent raise across three years, barely better than the mayor's first offer. As DC-33 president Greg Boulware explained, "we felt our clock was running out" as the workers were poised to miss their first paycheck. Other unions did somewhat better: in Cumming, Georgia, the Teamsters managed to win a 17 percent raise over four years, with 7 percent the first year, in their strike against a private waste company called Republic Services. Still, the "summer of stink" was somewhat anticlimactic.

But there's a note of fear in those ruling-class accounts of the 2025 strikes that's telling. In the *Wall Street Journal*, Rupert Murdoch's handpicked editorial board sounded distinctly anxious when they wrote that the Philadelphia work stoppage was "a reminder of how public unions can hold a city hostage." As usual, they didn't acknowledge *why* the unions can do that: because their labor is so vital, the city can't function without it. But they definitely took note of the power itself, if only to condemn it. And that suggests it's possible for the workers to win much more than they have so far, if they're willing to strike harder, in greater numbers—and if the public stops believing the anti-union narratives that the world's richest men feed them. As a new year approaches, the labor war around American garbage is far from over.

"UNTOUCHABLE" IN INDIA

The United States isn't the only country where the garbage workers' struggle is bound up with the other great social issues of their era. Here on our shores, it was the life-and-death fight for Black civil rights. In India, it's the long battle against the brutal hierarchy imposed by the caste system.

It can be hard for American readers to understand how profoundly caste has shaped Indian society and labor, because there's really nothing comparable here. . The treatment of Black Americans under Jim Crow is *something* like what lower-caste Indians have historically dealt with, but it's nowhere near a perfect analogy. A look at India's national literature offers a better insight. In his 1935 novel *Untouchable*, Mulk Raj Anand explored the life of Bakha, a street-sweeper and cleaner of latrines from the Dalit, or "untouchable" caste. As the name implies, these were the people who were condemned from birth to do the nastiest, most disrespected jobs, and who were treated as almost literally subhuman. Anand himself was born to the higher Kshatriya caste, but as a child he transgressed the lines, becoming friends with a Dalit "sweeper boy." His friend was also named Bakha, and he later became the inspiration for the protagonist in *Untouchable*. The novel made Anand a leading figure in India's Marxist literary movement, although his own politics were more influenced by Tolstoy's socialism than Marx's.

Comparable to Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* a few decades later, *Untouchable* is one of the most vivid literary portrayals of the mental violence that hierarchies of class and caste inflict on people. The novel's pivotal scene, where Bakha forgets to warn people as he passes through a crowd, then brushes against a higher-caste man and "pollutes" him, is harrowing:

> *"Keep to the side of the road, you low-caste vermin!" he suddenly heard someone shouting at him. "Why don't you call, you swine, and announce your approach! Do you know you have touched me and defiled me, you cockeyed son of a bow-legged scorpion! Now I will have to go and take a bath to purify myself. And it was a new dhoti and shirt I put on this morning!" Bakha stood amazed, embarrassed. He was deaf and dumb. His senses were paralysed. Only fear gripped his soul, fear and humility and servility. He was used to being spoken to roughly. But he had seldom been taken so unawares.*

This is the heart of the issue: a society where upward mobility is all but impossible, where people are told every day that they're worthless because of the accident of their birth, and where they come to believe it themselves—even as they do the sanitation work that keeps the whole society from collapsing.

Officially, the caste system was abolished in 1950 with India's new constitution. In practice, it remains a pervasive part of society, and centuries of ingrained privilege determines who gets what jobs. The children of elite Brahmin families—like, say, Vivek Ramaswamy or Usha Vance's parents—get good educations, start lucrative careers in finance and technology, and become rich. The children of Dalit families largely get to clean up waste. In an article for the *New York Review of Books*, Ratik Asokan describes the daily life of sanitation workers, known as Safai Karamcharis, in Mumbai in the early 2000s:

> *Their job is to collect the city's trash and sweep its streets, clean sewers and septic tanks, load and unload garbage trucks, and sort waste at dumping grounds. Many of them labor with primitive tools and without uniforms, as [photographer Sudharak] Olwe's pictures show. In one, workers sift through mounds of waste with scraggly brooms and rakes. In another, two workers in vests and shorts sit atop trash in a garbage truck. In a third, a worker glares at the camera as he stuffs a dead dog into a bin.*

Even more so than in the U.S., this is grueling, unsanitary work, often in blistering heat. The pay is low, safety protections are often nonexistent, and the social stigma makes changing jobs difficult or impossible. As Assa Doron and Robin Jeffrey note in their book *Waste of a Nation: Garbage and Growth in India*, the rise of disposable plastics also means there's *more* garbage to deal with than ever before. And so, just like in the United States, the labor strikes have come.

Asokan records uprisings among Dalit workers starting "as early as 1953, when the Prantiya Valmiki Mazdur Sangh, a local Safai Karamchari union, and the Communist Party of India led a joint campaign to demand better wages and benefits for sanitation laborers employed by the Delhi Municipal Corporation," culminating in "mass arrests." Later in 1996, another union called the Nagarpalika Karamchari Sangh launched an "eighty-day statewide strike in Haryana demanding timely pay," and was met with a brutal crackdown from the BJP—now Prime Minister Narendra Modi's party—who "fire[d] six thousand Safai Karamcharis and jail[ed] some seven hundred more for up to seventy days." And in 2025, a new wave of strikes has erupted across India.

This year in Nirmal, sanitation workers "left the town filled with piles of garbage" after their salaries weren't paid on time, according to the *Siasat Daily*. In Junagadh, 700 of them went on strike, seeking "permanent employment" and "fixed salaries" instead of informal, precarious hiring arrangements. In Chennai, 13 went on hunger strike to protest the privatization of city services, and were arrested for it. And in Bihar, a particularly angry group of trash collectors simply dumped their loads of garbage at the door of the local Panchayat government office when their pay didn't come promptly. Indian workers, it's safe to say, know how to get their point across, and it doesn't look like this spirit of rebellion is going away until their demands are met.

A garbage truck in Ahmedabad, a city in Gujarat, India. Note what appears to be a child laborer in the back.

THE BETRAYAL OF BIRMINGHAM BY THE COWARD SIR KEIR STARMER

Finally, we have to take a brief stop in India's former colonial sovereign, the United Kingdom. There, people collect "rubbish bins" rather than "trash cans," but the labor struggle is the same. In Birmingham, the garbage collectors have been on strike since March 11, 2025, when the city council announced plans to eliminate the role of "Waste Recycling and Collection Officer" from its workforce designations. That decision could result in pay cuts of up to £8,000 a year for anyone who currently has that job—at least 150 people would be "downgraded," by the workers' count. For context, that pay cut would be coming as the U.K. is already dealing with a brutal cost of living crisis, particularly around food prices. It would literally take food off people's plates. Fortunately, the bin collectors are organized under the powerful Unite trade union, which has around 1.2 million members across the U.K. and Ireland, and so they went on strike, where they've remained for over *nine months*.

Now, the solution here is obvious: just give the workers what they're asking for. At this point, the economic hit from keeping wages at the same level as before (not even a raise!) is dwarfed by the economic hit from months of trash piling up, which has been estimated as high as £14 million. But that isn't what the Birmingham city council has done. Instead, they've called in a private staffing company called "Job and Talent" to supply them with scab workers during the strike, carrying out the same rounds the city workers usually would at a higher cost. They've even called in experts from the Army to advise them on how to remove large mountains of trash. And, it seems, they've been planning a campaign of retaliation for when the strike eventually ends. In October, a manager with Job and Talent was caught on video telling the company's workers that "those people that do decide to join the picket line, then the council have confirmed to us that they are not going to get a permanent job" afterward. Assuming that wasn't an idle threat, it's a clear case of blacklisting for union activity.

The really wretched thing, though, is that Birmingham has a *Labour Party* council, and the United Kingdom has a Labour Party prime minister. But instead of advocating for labor, they've been working directly against it. Back in April, Sir Keir Starmer denounced the Birmingham strike as "completely unacceptable," saying he supported the Birmingham council declaring a "major incident"—essentially a state of emergency—to deal with the strike. That allowed Birmingham officials to send police to intervene in the strike, setting up barriers to control where the picketing workers can walk and preventing them from blocking garbage trucks leaving their depot. Previously, Starmer had also discouraged Labour members of parliament from joining picket lines of any kind, and fired a member of his leadership team who defied that ban. It used to be the Conservative Party under Margaret Thatcher that did things like that, waging all-out war against sanitation workers in London and Liverpool during the "Winter of Discontent" strikes in 1979. But as I've written for this magazine before, Sir Keir Starmer's politics are barely different from Thatcher's at this point, and the Labour Party is increasingly ironically named.

Starmer and the Labour council are in trouble in Birmingham, though. As of November 17, many of the temporary trash collectors from the Job and Talent agency have *also* gone on strike, leaving Birmingham with even less sanitation services than it had before. It seems their bosses' gloating comments about blacklisting people didn't set well with people, and "unsustainable workloads and a toxic workplace culture" within the company were the final straw. Ironically, solidarity between workers has been ignited even in the heart of a strikebreaking company. So by trying to defeat the Birmingham strike, Starmer and the (anti) Labour Party have made it bigger, and made their own defeat more likely. Great job, Keir!

"NO STOPPING POINT SHORT OF VICTORY"

Around the world, the situation for garbage workers reveals one of the core absurdities of capitalism. Namely, that there's an inverse relationship between how important your work is, and how well you'll be paid and treated. If you're a farm worker who helps to keep the world fed, a garment worker who keeps everyone clothed, or a sanitation worker who keeps filth and disease from overrunning a major city, odds are you'll get paid a pittance, and be stomped down by the police if you object. But if you're an advertising executive, a hedge fund manager, or a peddler of cryptocurrency, and you contribute nothing of value to anyone's life, you'll probably be richly rewarded. The phrase "perverse incentive" doesn't begin to cover it. Capitalism is a funhouse mirror world, where up is down, evil is good, corporations are people, and people are as disposable as anything else.

But the garbage workers also show us the way forward. They remind us that, exactly because our labor is what makes the world run, we have the capacity to take the running of the world into our own hands. All we have to do is withhold it. When that happens, the Powers that Be start to look powerless remarkably quickly. Even the world's richest mansion will become a dump if someone doesn't empty the bins.

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Spotify®

playlists for other politicians

Each year, former president Barack Obama shares a playlist of his favorite songs. Now, a *Current Affairs* investigation has revealed the top-listened tunes of other notable elected officials.

Chuck Grassley

Most Listened Songs

Spread Eagle Cross the Block
Death Grips

chill hiphop lofi study beats
Various Artists

FINE SHIT
Playboi Carti

Ptolemaia
Ethel Cain

FREE ROLEYS
Westside Gunn

Beth
KISS

Donald Trump

Most Listened Songs

A Song For Jeffrey
Jethro Tull

He Was a Friend of Mine
Willie Nelson

Survival of the Fittest
Soundtrack to Boss Baby: The Motion Picture

Roslyn
Bon Iver (*Twilight 2: New Moon* soundtrack)

Strut
Steven Seagal

I'm a Cruiser
Village People

Summertime Sadness
Lana Del Rey

Ritchie Torres

Most Listened Songs

Ice Machine Hum Noise
[Sound Effect]

Ice Machine Hum Noise
[Sound Effect]

Ice Machine Hum Noise
[Sound Effect]

Ice Machine Hum Noise
[Sound Effect]

Ice Machine Hum Noise
[Sound Effect]

Israeli National Anthem

Nancy Pelosi

Most Listened Songs

Money, Money, Money
ABBA

Gimme the Loot
Notorious B.I.G.

Money (That's What I Want)
Barrett Strong

C.R.E.A.M. (Cash Rules Everything Around Me)
Wu-Tang Clan

Out of Time
Slayyyter

93 'til Infinity
Souls of Mischief

Dick Cheney

Most Listened Songs

Intro (It's Dark and Hell Is Hot)
DMX

Ring of Fire
Johnny Cash

The Great Below
Nine Inch Nails

AHHHH!
Fitz and the Tantrums

John Fetterman

Most Listened Songs

What Ever Happened?
The Strokes

Drive My Car
The Beatles

Dare To Be Stupid
"Weird Al" Yankovic

Sounds of Silence
Simon & Garfunkel

Give War a Chance
Stuck Mojo

Israeli National Anthem

POET'S ALLEY

BY ALISSA QUART

GOING HORIZONTAL

The horizon loomed
on the horizon. We choked on
Quebec's flames;
Big Bird got fired; bastions
vaporized; our sclera red, our robot
therapists gagging on grandiosity;
Xmas gig-decorators spreading
tinsel; Sesame Street
now a development zone
needing philanthropists; men
turning man-o-spheres;
Higher Ed hitting new lows.
Data centers siphoned
water, info. A doom-com:
"When the Climate Met DSM-VI."
Who would douse
the puppets and pundits
now on fire; can we count
on "viewers like you."

BY CELINA SU

CITY–ZEN

For court watchers, *signal*. For ICE watchers, *salute*.
My impatience as the cryptopad doc reconstitutes itself.
Wherein walking next to someone in public constitutes obstruction,

Invites arrest. I try to read
Between the lines of the statistics. My neighbors plead:
We especially need white-presenting folks.

I review my chances of detention, of doxxing.
Could I, as a friend fears, become de-naturalized?
As if I had been artifice, & after five years here, became flesh–

Or, eyeing my old greencard status,
A sudden opposite of *alien*—a resident *earthling*, a resident *familiar*.
My adjunct colleagues and students ~~are fired~~. Scratch that.

They receive, quote unquote, letters declining reappointments.
Officially, the admin can't share why. Unofficially,
For the professors linked their arms. In public. Bearing witness,

Like tiny fishing boats in the front of a whaling ship. As in,
Adorned by rusting metal and a freshly painted crosswalk, as in,
Bureaucratically. Counting on the dead of summer,

On stifling, on wilting. Counting the living. The heat guarantees no light.
If they override all protocols, evaluations, scores, documents,
Each faculty letter, student protest, departmental vote, union grievance. Then

What—My colleagues' charges remain unknown.
A summer of reading subtexts. In theory, I classify
Fictions by genre: speculative, satire, fantasy, mystery, tragedy.

About the POETS

Celina Su's academic and creative work focuses on everyday struggles for collective governance. Her latest books are her new book centering radical democracy, *Budget Justice: On Building Grassroots Politics and Solidarities*, and her poetry collection *Landia*. This poem was inspired in part by the case of CUNY Fired Four, involving four professors who were fired from Brooklyn College for supporting Palestine. They are on Instagram at @reinstatecunyfiredfour.

Alissa Quart is the Executive Director of the Economic Hardship Reporting Project and the author of seven acclaimed books, most recently *Bootstrapped*. Her poetry books include *Thoughts and Prayers*.

QUART AND SU'S POEMS WERE CO–PUBLISHED AND SUPPORTED BY THE JOURNALISM NON–PROFIT THE ECONOMIC HARDSHIP REPORTING PROJECT (EHRP)

About the POET

Kyle Carrero Lopez is the author of the poetry collection *Party Line*, forthcoming July 2026 from Graywolf Press. He's a Cave Canem fellow and an Editor for the *Poetry Project Newsletter*.

BY KYLE CARRERO LOPEZ

I SAW ASSATA IN HAVANA

at a farmer's market I'd visited, Calle 19 y B, her visage wholly
unbothered, starkest foil to the New York metro area police posters dated '73

which an inmate, first meeting her behind bars, reportedly said made her seem
bigger, scarier, than in real life. She's a figure in at least two imaginaries. In one of them

swathed in teal and jade Ankara atop a wicker peacock chair near the pork, fist up
the whole time. n the other, this one, a simple tee and denim daytime look, rounded

gold earrings with little leaves on 'em, braids stretching behind her: veins,
deltas sketched on a map, black and black-

and-blue, hands shuffling through the produce, hands
unbound, skin so lively and smooth she looked in-person airbrushed

to my dream eyes. I approached at first
with Spanish to present a bit less of a threat.

You're from Jersey? Which part?

Up north, Essex and Hudson Counties.

You here for that two mil, then?

Well, yes! Got the ropes in this tote bag.

The rest fell to morning fog when I awoke, except the smile
that filled her face and her laughs that grew

in strength, upward, upward, like the sunflower
that bursts up behind the actors in Sarah Kane's *Cleansed*

and climbs till it surpasses their height,
a laughter reaching high

from the Cuban ground even after we parted ways, even after
she exited with friends.

BY KYLE CARRERO LOPEZ

ANARCHIC ODE

after E. Hughes

Two pigeons strut the tile floor
of the bus station, Pittsburgh, below shadows
of Gate 8's stanchions,
around the stanchions—across them.
They care not
for bureaucracy, nor even
the idea of a queue, slipping and slicing
through paths mapped by nylon
belts: red and blue. I honor
their lawlessness
and flightless scans alike as they prowl
the scene for snacks, governed
by appetite alone.

About the

POET

W.D. Ehrhart is a Vietnam War veteran, a dedicated anti-war activist, and the author of the memoir *Vietnam-Perkasie*, among other books. He's also a regular contributor of nonfiction articles to *Current Affairs* and the *LA Progressive*. His new poetry collection, *Smart Fish Don't Bite*, is available from Moonstone Press.

BY W.D. EHRHART

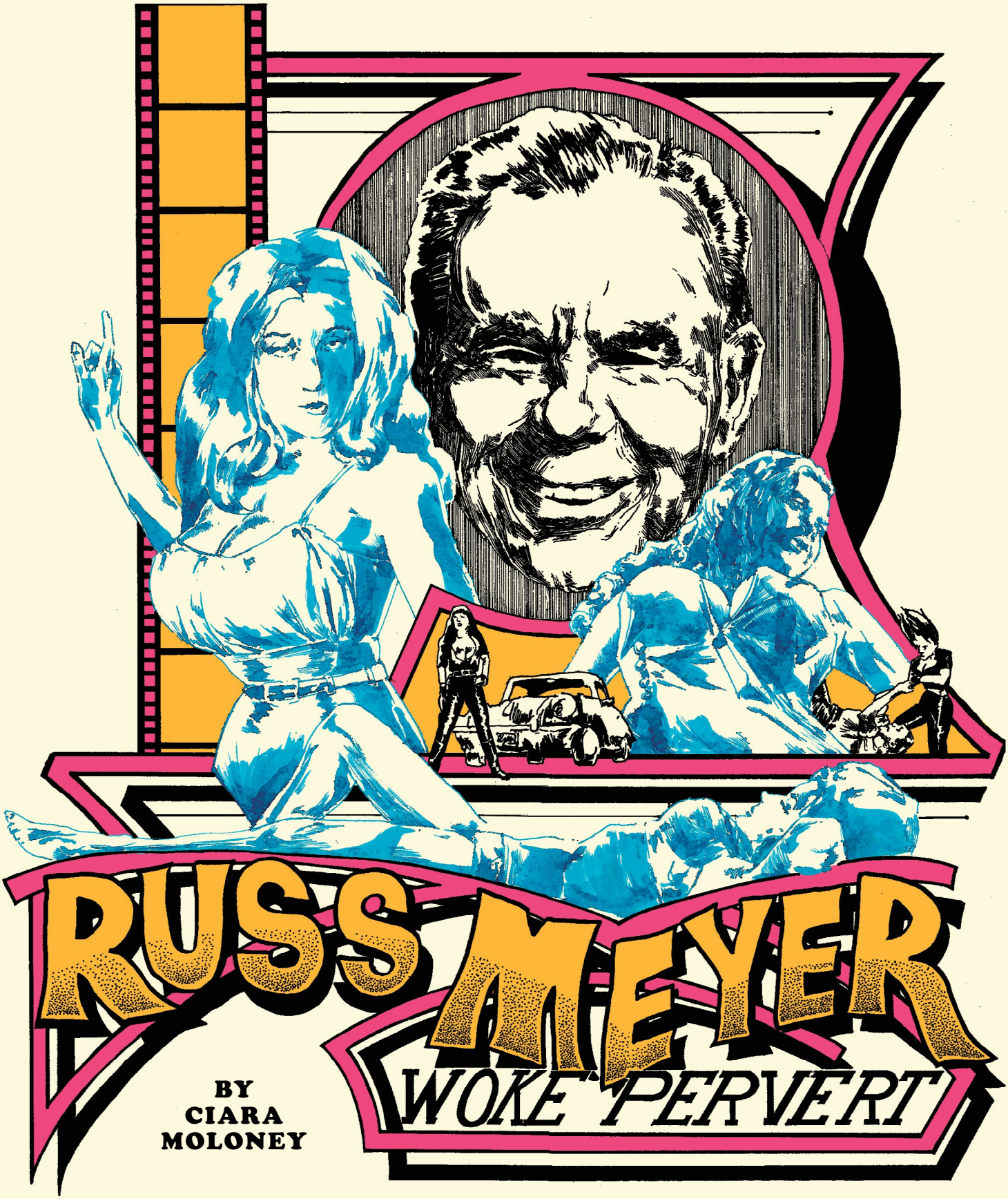
THE AVENUE OF TRUTH

"Truth is a very peculiar avenue to walk along."
Pvt. Cartwell Gettig, 148th Pennsylvania Volunteers
(from "The Small Man" by Serge Bielanko)

It certainly is. Just the other day,
while strolling along that avenue,
I was nearly run over by White House
Press Secretary Karoline Leavitt,
who accused me of being either
a Hamas terrorist, an illegal immigrant,
or a violent criminal. Or perhaps
all three. I barely managed to jump
out of the way as she blew by, traveling
at the speed of darkness, something
ugly and evil riding shotgun.

These days, in fact, you really need
to be on guard whenever you venture
out in public, the Avenue of Truth
being anywhere and everywhere
you dare to walk, and everywhere
controlled these days by shameless
liars who would just as soon leave you
bleeding in the street like roadkill
as ever admit they actually know
what truth is, but just don't care,
so intoxicating the desire for power.

After all, dishonesty personified
occupies the Whitewash House,
which only goes to show that crime
does pay, and honesty is not
the best policy, no matter what
your mother tried to teach you.
But when she said you need to
look both ways before you cross
the street, I hope you were paying
attention because the liars are ever
and always eager to run you down.



BY
CIARA
MOLONEY

One of the most tiresome debates in online film discourse is whether there's too much sex in movies, even as there is demonstrably less sex in movies than there has been in decades. It's easy to blast as neo-Puritanism, but if it is, it's a strange kind: people complain about sex scenes as tame as those in *Oppenheimer* or sexy popstar Sabrina Carpenter being a sexy popstar, but watch hardcore porn on their phones. It's an odd reconstruction of the feminist sex wars of the 1980s and '90s, simultaneously taking pro- and anti-sex positions by reinforcing the Madonna/whore complex: sexuality is degrading objectification for certain women, but not others. At least part of it is a reaction to the #MeToo era, which reorientated how we think about actresses taking off their clothes on screen. That squeamishness doesn't extend to pornstars or OnlyFans models, maybe because "taking off clothes" is a core part of their job description, or because of their pervasive dehumanization. This discourse about the supposed gratuitousness of sex on screen is underpinned, as Madison Huizinga puts it at *Café Hysteria*, by an "inability to parse sex and sexuality from objectification [...] resulting in all mentions of sex often collapsing under one clumsily defined umbrella."

Sex scenes in mainstream movies—sex in mainstream *culture*, period—can be deemed unnecessary precisely because porn is so widely available. Porn itself no longer comes in the shapes of other cultural objects—magazines, or feature-length movies, or even videos with titles that aren't just a garbled collection of SEO keywords. The rise of free online porn video clips represents, as *The Last Psychiatrist* blog put it in 2011, "the pornographization of porn." Simultaneously, sex in mainstream movies is evaluated for its narrative utility, and whether the story could have moved forward some other way. Otherwise, it might as well be porn. In today's major studio movies, "everyone is beautiful and no one is horny," as *Current Affairs* contributor RS Benedict once memorably wrote. It's a divide that is rooted in, and which perpetuates, an understanding of sex and sexuality as not just personal or private, but separate from the rest of human life, perhaps secret, even shameful. Porn and the rest of entertainment have never been further apart, each abandoning the vast waters—from erotic thrillers to nudie-cuties to sex comedies—between "hardcore porn" and "movies where characters never even give someone a smouldering look."

But porn and art didn't always seem so far apart. As censorship in the U.S. liberalized in the 1960s and '70s, it seemed like they were moving ever closer together. Porn films had high grosses in mainstream movie theaters—*Deep Throat* (1972) was a big enough hit that we've all just accepted Woodward and Bernstein using it as a pseudonym for a Watergate whistleblower—and Hollywood films cast off the last inhibitions of the Hays Code to portray sex with new frankness. I have no desire to idealize this period, particularly, not least because of the systemic sexism on both sides of the porous mainstream/porn divide. But I can't imagine another time in which Russ Meyer could have realized his loopy vision, securing his place as one of my favorite directors of all time.

"I don't pretend to be some kind of sensitive artist," Russ Meyer once said. "Give me a movie where a car crashes into a building, and the driver gets stabbed by a bosomy blond, who gets carried away by a dwarf musician. Films should run like express trains!"

Meyer liked to put this persona across—that he was a run-of-the-mill pervert, catering to the lowest common denominator. A breast fetishist who happened to get his hands on a movie camera. That his films were simply his own prurient fantasies, hastily, even thoughtlessly, captured for posterity—quick, dirty, and about as deep as a sheet pan. Some of that might be true—the breast fetish, mostly—but watching Meyer's work, it is obvious that he was, indeed, a sensitive artist. His visual sensibility is unique as a fingerprint. Not just in his focus on very specific physical types—not for nothing did Jimmy McDonough title his Meyer biography *Big Bosoms and Square Jaws*—but in his cartoony visual logic, his repeated use of shots looking upwards at a nude woman's breasts or through a bedframe, his quick cuts between dozens of different camera set-ups.

The last of those demonstrates an almost excessive level of technical precision reminiscent of Stanley Kubrick. Meyer's ability to transcend meager budgets through sheer technique is deeply rooted in his unorthodox film schooling: he served as a combat cameraman in World War II—some of his footage features in the 1970 film *Patton*—and then worked as a still photographer for Hollywood films and glamor magazines. As Roger Ebert wrote in *Film Comment* in 1973, three years after co-writing the screenplay for Meyer's first studio picture, *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls*, "he is not the primitive or untutored artist he sometimes likes to appear to be; his method of work on a picture is all business, he is a consummate tech- nical craftsman, he is obsessed with budgets and schedules, and his actors do not remem- ber how 'turned on' a scene was, but how many times it was reshot." His films seem so much larger than life that they couldn't be personal, and yet everything I learn about Russ Meyer's life—his excessively loving (and well-en- dowed) mother, his absent father, his men- tally

ill sister's institutionalization, losing his virginity at a brothel after he joined the army—feels, almost inexplicably, like I'd already known it from the movies, seen it in his rogues' gallery of strong, domineering women, weak or cruel men. His heart beats in time with the cuts.

I say this not to deny his credentials as a pervert, but to exalt them. He made trash so wonderful it was art; art that was just as fun as trash. "One must remember that there is such a thing as good bad taste and bad bad taste," Meyer acolyte and venerable icon John Waters writes in *Shock Value*. "To understand bad taste one must have very good taste." Meyer movies are the best bad taste. You want to see Adolf Hitler getting bottomed and then eaten by a piranha in his bath? Get all that and more in the first ten minutes of *Up!* (1976). (Never, ever to be confused with the Pixar film of the same name.) "Meyer audiences enjoy themselves more obviously; they laugh," Ebert writes, contrasted against the strange, depressing silence in an average skin-flick screening. "Meyer's films never imply, or inspire, the sense of secretiveness or shame present in so many examples of the genre. They are good-hearted, for the most part, and the action scenes are as liberating and exhilarating as the work of a [Don] Siegel or [Sergio] Leone." He describes the central quality of a Meyer film as "a burly, barracks-room heartiness, a gusto."

Among those who love him—and incomprehensibly to those who don't—these are the qualities celebrated in Russ Meyer's films. Their humor, their outrageousness, their unique cocktail of cool and camp: they may have been distributed as porn films, but they don't so much titillate as *delight*. What gets lost, though, is the films' political sophistication. While Ebert dismisses the "moral" lessons Meyer includes as tongue-in-cheek fulfillment of the Supreme Court's requirement that media featuring nudity must also have "socially redeeming content," I think Meyer was an unabashedly political filmmaker. His instinct for satire was not a generalist objection to anything and everything, but deployed with as much precision as his camera and his cuts.

Take *Vixen!* (1968), one of Meyer's biggest hits and a masterpiece besides. Erica Gavin plays the title character, a nymphomaniac brunette who lays just about everyone she meets. She lives in British Columbia—established in the opening scene when she has sex with a Mountie in the woods—where she runs a tourist lodge with her oblivious husband Tom (Garth Pillsbury), who also flies a small plane. Tom is sweetly dim; Vixen is monomaniacally concerned with her own gratification. Then there's her brother, Judd (Jon Evans), and his friend Niles (Harrison Page), a Black man dodging the draft at the height of the Vietnam War. Vixen is openly, shockingly racist to Niles—who she calls "Rufus"—but perhaps most revealing is that, despite being such a sex addict that she enthusiastically sleeps with her own brother, she won't touch a hot young guy who happens to be Black.

In the film's final act, an Irish tourist (Michael Donovan O'Donnell) arrives. Or rather, an IRA commandant masquerading as a tourist arrives, and tells Niles that they should hijack Tom's plane and go to Cuba together. "It's not that the communist world is perfect by any means. After all, in many ways, Russia has become a reactionary country," O'Bannion tells Niles, "…But in Cuba, which is the youngest of all of the communist countries, there is no such thing as a color line." Niles is obviously disillusioned with the capitalist world, but he doesn't necessarily buy what O'Bannion is selling either. He accompanies him, Tom, and Vixen on the flight not least because Vixen objects so strongly to sharing a plane with a Black man. When O'Bannion pulls a gun, Niles remains noncommittal, but when Vixen mocks the idea of him telling Cubans how terrible America is, he goes off: "That's right, you said it. They're spending $30 billion a year to bomb peasants, and they're asking me to do it. They're asking me to kill or be killed when they won't even let me get a job, or eat in a restaurant, or keep people like you from crapping on me."

Vixen snipes that in communist countries, some people are more equal than others, sarcastically saying that maybe Castro will step down and let Niles run Cuba. O'Bannion says, "I don't see any point in discussing that now." Despite—or because?—of her being the most racist character in the movie, it's Vixen who immediately clocks what that means: "You know what that means, don't you, Rufus? You've heard that one before, haven't you?" she says, "That means 'shut your Black mouth.'" O'Bannion, clearly panicked, says that it's important to support the people's leaders—"Now," Niles shoots back, "where have I heard that before?"—and demands they continue in silence.

"So you're telling me to keep my mouth shut?" Niles says, really angry now. He antagonizes O'Bannion until he screams what he's clearly wanted to say all along: "Shut up, n—r!" Niles knocks him out, takes his gun, and has Tom drop him out of the way of U.S. customs. Before he leaves the movie, he tells Tom, quite literally, "you're the lesser of the two evils."

Though Ebert describes *Vixen!* as "the quintessential Russ Meyer film," he is dismissive of the final ten-minute scene on the airplane. It's less that he considers it a failure as he considers it stuck-on, disconnected from the body of the film as a canny way to include social value without diluting the main story. "It's certainly true that the word got around during *Vixen!*'s yearlong Chicago run," he writes, "When everybody gets on the airplane, Meyer audiences told each other, it's OK to go." But for me, the

airplane scene is one of the best things Meyer ever put on screen, every bit as taut and tense as the car chases in 1965's *Faster, Pussycat! Kill! Kill!*

Part of what Ebert misses comes from his mistaking the communist hijacker for Scottish, saying his "recitation of several pseudo-political ravings [was] no doubt concocted by Meyer in a fit of hilarity before breakfast that morning." But "Irish Republican who is obsessed with Cuba and also a barely disguised racist" is a very real and incredibly specific type of guy, who I have never otherwise seen in an American film, nor ever expect to see again. And he is a perfect conduit to *Vixen!*'s engagement with the racial politics of the Cold War. The IRA fella can play both sides so he always comes out on top: a brother in the postcolonial struggle one moment, a white man giving orders when the winds change. The U.S. denies Black people basic civil rights while demanding they go halfway around the world to fight Vietnamese peasants, while Communist states and their supporters care about the systemic human rights abuses against Black people in the U.S. only as a vehicle for their own interests. Neither side gives a shit about Niles and people like him. He's left to choose between the lesser of two evils, and hope he makes it out alive. And all this in, let be clear, ostensibly a work of softcore incest porn.

Mudhoney (1965) feels like a Tennessee Williams play, a John Steinbeck novel, or an early 1930s screen melodrama. Just, you know, with tits. It's a slower, more atmospheric movie than much of Meyer's work, but that's what suits the material: it's Depression-era Southern Gothic, in which a young man named California (John Furlong) stops off in a Missouri town on his way to his namesake state. An old farmer called Luke (Stuart Lancaster) takes him in as a hired hand, and takes a real shine to him, including in a touching moment where he offers support when Calif admits to being an ex-convict. Calif soon falls in love with Luke's niece, Hannah (Antoinette Cristiani), who is unhappily married to violent drunk Sidney (Hal Hopper). We first meet Sidney when he comes home drunk and rapes Hannah. He lost all his money in Kansas City, and hopes to inherit the farm when Luke dies. In the meantime, he spends his time drinking and ogling the daughters at Maggie Marie's house of sin. When Sidney recognizes Calif as a threat to his marriage and, more importantly, his inheritance, he starts cozying up to fundamentalist preacher Brother Hanson (Frank Bolger), faking a Christian conversion to enlist the preacher in his schemes against Calif. In the film's final stretch, Sidney and Calif get into a fistfight at Luke's funeral, and in a fit of rage, Sidney burns down the farmhouse. He goes to the preacher's sister for help while he hides from the cops, but when she rejects his advances, he rapes and drowns her. Even though Sidney has been well-established as less sympathetic than Satan, it's still a shocking, terrifying moment, at once unmotivated and totally in character.

Because of this, and despite the best efforts of Hannah, Calif, and the town sheriff, Sidney is hanged. Brother Hanson leads a lynch mob, insisting that he is carrying out God's law while the sheriff protects adulterers (Hannah and Calif). "The whole town has been cheated," Luke says earlier in the film, "Cheated by the times. They's full of hate and they're liable to listen to anybody who will give them something solid to use that hate on." And here they are. The sequence manages to convey the utter horror and wrongness of the lynching even as we *know* that Sidney is guilty, and a genuinely evil person besides. Much of that comes through in characters we do sympathize with: Hannah, who was routinely abused by Sidney, sobs and cries out, and a deaf girl from Maggie Marie's utters her first audible noise in anguish. But most effective is a series of close-ups on the faces of the men who did it, each one seeming to realize that he will now have to live with this forever. That he will always have killed this man. So many narrative critiques of lynchings, or of the death penalty, rely on epistemological uncertainty, on the role of prejudice, on abuse of process. The ending of *Mudhoney* is the most devastating artistic expression of how, before any of that, right at the root, it's wrong because it's killing. "Deserve" doesn't come into it. "One man's evil can become the curse of all," reads the text epilogue, attributed to Publilus Syrus. I'm not sure that's a real quote, but it cut through me all the same.

Meyer is most consistently incisive, though, on matters of gender. This is perhaps the way in which his films have aged the best—or, rather, where images once dismissed as cheapo sleaze have been most radically recontextualized for a 21st century audience. Lesbian feminist film critic B. Ruby Rich expressed her personal experience of this recontextualization regarding *Faster, Pussycat! Kill! Kill!*—the story of three psychopathic bisexual go-go girls—which she initially saw as "this misogynist film that objectified women and that was really just short of soft-core porn." Revisiting it in the 1990s, during the burgeoning New Queer Cinema movement (a term she coined), she loved it: "this film, which seemed to be one thing when I saw it in the '70s in the heyday of feminism, turned into something completely different when I saw it again 15 years later in the heyday of queer culture. [...] films get edited by history."

Beyond the Valley of the Dolls is also, I think, a film edited by history. In *The Celluloid Closet*, Vito Russo called *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls* "middlebrow trash with a homophobic attitude." I have to wonder if this one-line entry was intended for *Valley of the Dolls* (1967), for which *Beyond* serves as a self-proclaimed non-sequel—mostly because I can't imagine someone calling a Russ Meyer movie "middlebrow" of all things. *Valley of the Dolls* is a straight melodrama about three girls trying to make it in Hollywood, featuring disorientating and probably unintentional time dilation, a knockout performance from Patty Duke, and the most homophobic scene in any movie. I realize that's not objectively true—I've definitely seen films that are considered much more classically homophobic—but it is my honest subjective experience. The scene where the girls start throwing around homophobic slurs by the pool is so shocking and unexpected that it's practically a jump scare.

Beyond is a parody of *Valley of the Dolls*, much like how *Grease 2* is a parody of *Grease*. If *Valley of the Dolls* is naïve camp, trying to play it straight and coming out warped, *Beyond* is knowingly camp, with, as Ebert writes, "each cliché and stereotype[...] put in the movie lovingly, by hand." Its depiction of lesbian sex and a gay man who is secretly trans feel like rubbing it in the original *Valley*'s nose, making the evil gay trope ridiculous through an ex-

aggerated version of it while also showing gender and sexuality as casual, fluid, and performative. It feels, in its very bones, radically queer. "Camp sees everything in quotation marks. It's not a lamp, but a 'lamp'; not a woman, but a 'woman,'" Susan Sontag writes in her seminal essay "Notes on Camp." "To perceive Camp in objects and persons is to understand Being-as-Playing-a-Role." For me, *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls* feels like a key bridging point between Sontag's "Notes on Camp" and Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*.

But no Russ Meyer film feels as urgently contemporary as *Supervixens* (1975). Its narrative has an elemental, mythopoetic quality, like a story that's always been with us—perhaps an ancient Greek or Mesopotamian story told and retold so often that it feels unmoored from a distinct origin. Except that it's just a story Russ Meyer came up with for a movie called *Supervixens*. Meyer compared it to a Horatio Alger novel: "They were always about a young man who was totally good, and he would always set out to gain his fortune and he would always come up against terrible people. They did everything they could to do him in, but he fought fair, you know, and he always survived and succeeded in the end." In *Supervixens*, that young man is Clint (Charles Pitt), a gas station attendant married to the hypersexual and insatiable SuperAngel, played by Shari Eubank. (All the women are called Super something. Don't worry about it.) When Clint turns down sex and goes out to a bar, SuperAngel goes to bed with Harry Sledge (Charles Napier), a big, macho cop. He has a comically gargantuan penis, but he's unable to get an erection. When SuperAngel mocks him, Harry kills her: it's an incredibly violent and gruesome death scene, which is either a *keep away* sign or an advertisement, depending on one's taste. Napier's performance as Harry makes for a critique of exactly the kind of masculinity that the manosphere and adjacent movements promote: he is a big, macho guy who hates women in general, hates men who he perceives as subservient to women, and believes totally in his own superiority and entitlement. He has the aesthetic or symbolic marker of masculine virility—a massive penis—but is impotent. And so his first resort is to violence, punishing women for his own inadequacy.

Our protagonist, meanwhile, models a positive and productive masculinity rooted in mutuality and respect. Clint is "clean, slim, obviously a stud but not in a pushy, forward kind of way, totally good," as Meyer described him in an interview, a foil to "terrible, nasty, dirty, no good Harry Sledge, policeman, former green beret, redneck, opinionated, a bum lay, sexually sick, very physical, very muscular." Suspected of the murder, Clint goes on the run. Much of the film consists of him stumbling from one unwanted sexual situation to another, as a series of super women throw themselves at him. He remains loyal to SuperAngel, who was quite nasty, but who he loved. The final girl he meets, however, is SuperVixen—also played by Shari Eubank, like she's SuperAngel made kind and pure through reincarnation. She and Clint run a roadside diner together, and it is the most blissfully romantic thing in a Meyer movie. They are partners, mutually giving and self-sacrificing, with no hint of the domination that typically defines sexual relationships in Meyer's work. So of course Harry has to show up with vengeance on his mind.

Decades ahead of schedule, Harry is a perfect parody of the fetishized, desexualized screen body RS Benedict wrote about. In contemporary mainstream cinema, Benedict writes, "A body is no longer a holistic system. It is not the vehicle through which we experience joy and pleasure during our brief time in the land of the living. […] Those perfect bodies exist only for the purpose of inflicting violence upon others. To have fun is to become weak, to let your team down, and to give the enemy a chance to win." Harry Sledge is that idea carried to its furthest endpoint, in all its pathetic grotesquery.

In his prime, you could look at Russ Meyer and see a pornographer, a sleaze, a pervert, and conclude he was part of the most regressive part of the Free Love movement, presenting women as simply vehicles for enlarged mammary glands. And you'd have been wrong then, too, because he was an artist: America's truest auteur, directing, writing, photographing, editing and financing most of his own films. But today Meyer's films, edited by history, play as radical. In Russ Meyer's world, gender can be a trap, or gender can be an art. It can be a font of misery or of great joy. The choice is up to you. So go be free. ⚜

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20. 666%

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God, I Hate Downton Abbey

BY **ROB LARSON**

God, I hate *Downton Abbey*. The beloved ITV post-Edwardian period drama and domestic PBS mainstay is purported to be ending with a third theatrical release, closing as I write. Created by the Right Honourable peer Julian Fellowes—who is also the sole scriptwriter—the series is beloved among masses of good-hearted PBS viewers for its lovely photography, exquisite locations, fine cast, and great performances.

But the show is also marred by an utterly inexcusable whitewashing of the notorious class chasm of the interwar U.K. aristocracy. The grand Crawley family are seldom even brusque with the downstairs servant staff, let alone abusive, and mix frequently with them. The social expectation in country houses of the period, that staff keep their heads down rather than take in the lordly spectacle of the castle in which they labor, is absent from this series, where the principal Lords and Ladies are surprisingly down to earth. Watching this disgrace, one wonders why the landed aristocracy was ever saddled with a troublesome elected parliament.

In fact, the show is surprisingly effective at making sympathetic the only people who are *literally* entitled.

Soap Operatics

The series follows the lives of the aristocratic Yorkshire Crawley family, led by the kind-hearted Lord Grantham, and their household staff in the early 20th century. Beginning with the sinking of the Titanic and ending on the eve of the Great Depression, each episode explores relations among the elite and servants, the declining role of the U.K. aristocracy, and in particular the great estate's difficulty in transitioning to a model of economic self-sufficiency. The period costume drama has been slathered in honors, including dozens of Emmy Awards, and is considered highbrow entertainment.

Before the start of the series, protagonist Lord Grantham marries a rich American, and we're led to understand they only later fell in love. But due to the loss of the family's heirs in the Titanic sinking, the title and estate will pass to a distantly-related middle-class attorney, which causes great discomfort. Efforts by the lawyer, Matthew, to right the estate's ship continue protractedly throughout the series, along with perennial efforts to marry off the family's various ghastly daughters. A major role is played by Dame Maggie Smith, who is often considered the show's mascot and gets many of the choicest lines, including often-clipped classics like "What is a weekend?" The Dowager Countess has never worked, you see, so the concept is unfamiliar. The joke works on multiple levels, making us working viewers feel more worldly than the insulated nobles yet still portraying them as almost charmingly oblivious.

The series and movies were filmed at Highclere Castle, and the show never wastes an opportunity for a giant splashy money shot of the grandeur of this towering symbol of the older, mostly pre-capitalist British upper class. The interiors and locations are, indeed, pretty stunning. Giant arches, huge drawing rooms, sprawling gardens, and secret corridors allow status-insecure Americans to fantasize about being such an elite, or at least being invited to visit one. Presumably some are imagining themselves as the plucky downstairs staff as well, including the tall under-

butlers and an implausibly long succession of conspicuously hot maids.

Now, I'm not a writer who's known for divulging a lot of personal detail. Yet consider characteristically lazy libertarians like Ron Paul ghostwriter Lew Rockwell, who incredibly lazily reviewed my record-shattering smash hit book *Mastering the Universe* by simply saying that "the left promotes envy." This kind of astoundingly slothful argument could be used of course against any critic of any regime, from the Soviets to the monarchy, and it's just the weakest sauce. Too lazy and callow to engage with any actual points raised.

But I will allow, there are indeed two specific things I do in fact envy about the rich. Their travel, and their libraries. We at *Current Affairs* greatly love libraries, and good god, Lord Grantham's library in this series, the actual library of course of Highclere Castle, must be a rich blessing to live with. Of course, his Lordship happily lends his books out to family and even staff, just the kind of thing you'd like someone in such a position to do, except that they usually don't.

While the show looks incredible with the sound off, with the dialogue on we come to its first major weakness. Fellowes brings to the series a great deal of fascinating firsthand experience of the lives of the U.K. nobility from which he comes, but dear God, his plots feel like film scripts that were cruelly stretched out to eight-episode seasons. Dilemmas, mysteries, and personal struggles are introduced in the first episodes, drag on for hours with little progress, then are hurriedly resolved in the season finale or post-season specials.

These storylines are strung out with dreadfully literal and contrivedly protracted devices. Characters fall in love, out, and in again. And look, mid-wit plot writing isn't the end of the world, but the gorgeous photography, stately locations, and such an outstanding ensemble cast surely deserved better. The settings and scene work are undoubtedly beautiful, with endless eye candy. But like candy, the show ultimately feels like empty calories with no nutrition. The gorgeous British Isles landscapes and stately architecture are weighed down by shitty, repetitive, slow-moving plots.

Fellowes has written impressive scripts before, but he flails badly in the wide-open format of TV, clearly without enough interesting plot ideas to keep the relationships and quests fresh. There are endless, endless plotlines surrounding whether Lady Mary and Matthew upstairs, or Daisy and Alfred downstairs, will succeed in their romances. Characters like the Bateses, a maid and valet, serve as perpetual Christ figures, their love constantly blocked by bitterness, jail, and sexual assault. Surreally repetitive plots revolve around two rich biddies bickering over who gets to boss around the village hospital's henpecked Scot doctor.

A pretty program, but with such messy elongated plots that it's difficult to enjoy, no matter how much expensive scotch I consume.

DÉCLASSÉ

Most painful, though, for any left-wing viewer is the character of Tom, a socialist Irish nationalist. Hired to serve as the Crawleys' chauffeur, he develops a love affair with Sybil, the least unlikeable of the daughters. He refuses to fight in the folly of the Great War, a quite accurate portrayal of socialists at the time. "I may be a socialist, but I'm not a lunatic," he says, ha ha.

The Season 4 cast of Downton Abbey appear in front of Highclere Castle. (Credit: Nick Briggs/ MASTERPIECE/PBS)

But Tom is soon portrayed as an abettor of revolutionary violence in Ireland, where he is involved in the burning of the grand country houses of the English-installed Irish noble families. There is zero mention of the evil settler role of those families and their history of abetting the outrageous acts by Britain against the people of Ireland, including ethnic cleansing of the native Gaelic Irish and rule of the island from London, which Tom is given a little screentime in one scene to decry. He says he found himself disgusted, though, at the sight of the Anglo-Irish families being thrown out of their mansions before the estates were burned. And later, he is painted as a coward for apparently leaving Lady Sybil to make it back to the U.K. from Ireland on her own. He is stricken by these experiences, and over time explicitly steps away from his youthful socialism, and is called by Lord Grantham "our tame revolutionary."

By mid-series, Tom is completely transformed into a capitalist, although he remains uncomfortable in the Crawleys' refined circles. He lives for a time in Boston and falls in love with American capitalism, saying a working man can go "right to the top!" He works in a family member's garage repairing cars, and this being the "top" is apparently not intended ironically. The character becomes a classic U.S. petty-bourgeois, thinking himself a king while running a penny-ante firm that will be swept away in the coming Depression.

His character arc is quite cruel for the leftist viewer, and extends clear to the final film where he is made to decry socialism a final time (quote absent, as I was drinking in the theater). Series creator Fellowes, the Tory Peer in the House of Lords, does a far better job of belittling socialists than the usual reactionary slop that paints every social democrat as an embryonic Josef Stalin. This is done by making the character at first a sympathetic supporter of Irish freedom, with family members killed by the British occupying army, but who by the end of the series literally saves the life of the King of England. Pretty rich.

And yet Fellowes' aristocratic mien can't help but betray frequent discomfort with the crass commercialism of the capitalist order rising to replace the genteel gentry. In the second season, Mary's new fiancé is a powerful and unpleasant newspaper kingpin, who constantly refers to his money and ability to buy anything, and is clearly portrayed as both shallow and threatening. Fellowes is irresistibly drawn to portray socialism as a youthful infatuation to move on from, but still includes unflattering portrayals of some capitalists, even in a quite pro-capitalism program, mainly to unfavorably contrast them with the more enlightened aristocracy.

New Old Money

A conspicuous feature of the show's depiction of the English aristocracy is the seemingly unrepresentative personal niceness and surprisingly progressive views of the family. While Lord Grantham and his mother the Dowager Countess are surely stuffy, they are unusually egalitarian. Lord Grantham, played by Hugh Bonneville, is a truly classy figure—he's introduced with light-filled photography and an elegant score, loves his family and his dog, and is extremely solicitous of his household staff. In his very first scene, speaking to his butler about the survivors of the *Titanic* disaster, the servant says many of the ladies survived. The Lord replies, "You mean the ladies in *first class*." Suffice it to say this is unconvincing in the extreme. It's funny to hear the series criticized for its use of more modern U.K. received-pronunciation, when they have a received progressivism that's far more out of place.

The Lord also objects to the word "crippled." In a later scene where the family has an Anglican church figure to dinner, the family members resist his claim that God is more "pleased" by Christians than other peoples. They react as modern people would, saying that surely God accepts the Catholics, and are soon defending the "Indian subcontinent." I'm no history professor, people, but I'm somewhat skeptical that Edwardian nobles at the peak of their social position and imperial prestige, whose great minds were producing stunningly racist frameworks to justify ruling over subject peoples, were quite so insistent on spiritual equality with their penniless foreign subjects. This was the era of rampant British racist insults, from "Paddy" for the Irish to "yellow race" for the Chinese, all of which are carefully expunged from the show's imagined past.

Worse, the most class-obsessed and often bitterly vindictive characters are servants. The scheming servants Thomas and O'Brien, the grand butler Carson, and an evil nanny are among the characters seemingly most disgusted at transgressions of class lines, like the chauffeur Tom marrying Lady Sibyl or the downstairs staff making any disparaging remark against the upstairs grandees. A few nobles are given this rigid depiction, but they appear only in relatively brief roles. The Crawleys themselves are of course scandalized at specific cases of class-line transgression, but are far less poisonously prejudiced against class mixing, and are generally shown as rolling their eyes at their institutionalized superiority in a highly unconvincing, most un-British way. They won't hear of any deference, and repeatedly say that we must respect racial and religious minorities. It just creates a sanitized version of these powerful parasitic bastards that U.S. liberals feel allowed to like.

Re-watching this Anglophilic embarrassment, I'm struck at how, in a particular way, it resembles *Hamilton*, the ubiquitous 2015 Broadway musical portraying the political struggles of the U.S. founding fathers, but portrayed as Black and spitting hip-hop beats. Slave-owning, Native American-murdering founders are replaced with cool, fast librettos about economic policy. Whereas here, we have colonial genocidaires and demonic Victorian capitalists, replaced with anachronistically progressive and kind-hearted, if stuffy, romantic soap opera. It's the *Hamilton* of the U.K. ruling class, and it really is pure catnip for the army of PBS-watching Anglophiles that associate the English aristocracy with the grandeur and ancient fascinations of the Old World.

It's also somewhat reminiscent of the Hollywood film version of *The Lord of the Rings*, and its celebration of kings: good, handsome, family-loving men of reason and personal bravery, self-effacing even. Only the non-noble Steward of Gondor is portrayed as petty, vain, eager to control people, and focused on consumption and position. Again, this treatment of Tolkien's work seems to launder the notorious, violent reality of monarchs in search of a yearned-for latter-day deserving ruling class. It's entirely reactionary slop, but *LOTR* and *Downton* are highly watchable, and even *Hamilton* has some respectable beats.

To keep 21st-century Americans supporting elites, modern apologia has taken the simple measure of transforming them so radically that modern audiences find them charming, despite drastically mangling the real record of these figures and times.

Goslighting

And it's all *especially* annoying because prior to *Downton,* series creator Julian Fellowes wrote the excellent 2001 film *Gosford Park*, directed by the great Robert Altman. Nominally a murder mystery set in a British country house, the film paints a Rather Different picture of the U.K. landed elite than the show that

became a hit in the U.S. *Downton* was in fact originally a spinoff of *Gosford*, later changed to a standalone series.

In *Downton*, Lord Grantham, the made-for-America patriarch, first appears making remarks on the "poor souls" in the lower classes. Contrast this with an early line spoken by an aristocrat in the Altman movie: a butler intrudes upon a liaison, causing the tuxedoed heel to say to the lady, "Don't worry, it's nobody." Grantham first appears in a halo of light with stately music, descending the great staircase. The *Gosford* patriarch, Sir William McCordle, on the other hand, is a powerful, manipulative bastard who seduces his factory worker underlings and then pressures them to give up the babies for adoption. He laughs at pulling out of ventures and ruining people, resents his relations for serving in the Great War, and treats people like objects.

The sharpest contrast appears in the roles of Maggie Smith, who appears in both properties as a dowager aristocrat, and is far colder, meaner, and more belittling in this first movie. She takes labor completely for granted, and insults to their faces those characters who work for a living, specifically because their livelihoods are precarious and their incomes variable, relative to the literal entitlement around them. She employs a younger maid to avoid paying her in full, yet is utterly and petulantly dependent on her.

That abject dependency emerges as the real theme of the film. When the patriarch is murdered, another aristocrat, considered a heroic Commander from the Great War, immediately calls for the butler. When the police investigate, the bungling detective (played memorably by the redoubtable Stephen Fry) forecloses any chance of cracking the case when he says the police won't interview most of the staff, since they only want to interrogate those "with a real connection to the man." Meanwhile, the maid with whom Sir McCordle had for years carried on an affair, and who was sacked earlier in the evening, stands silently by.

Everything is portrayed as crassly revolving around money, and getting it out of the patriarch. By contrast, in *Downton*'s perennial plotline, the estate is in danger and seems to struggle like any working-class household. The effect is entirely regressive, and I think it's telling that *Gosford Park*, with its quite dark portrayal of the English landed elite, was merely successful in the States, grossing decently and winning the screenwriting Oscar, while *Downton*, with its emphasis on stately settings and implausibly decent aristocrats, became a runaway smash hit in the U.S.

Beyond its more frank depiction of the upper class, *Gosford* is a tremendous piece of work, with an impressive number of individual plotlines, distributed across dozens of characters. I don't really know a movie like it, and Fellowes deserves legitimate credit for it. Many characters are really beautifully-rendered, with some based on Fellowes' own upbringing among the British upper class, which he refers to in the film's commentary track.

But then again, it's in comparison to this Altman masterpiece that the recent *Downton* movies are especially disappointing. Produced after the end of the ITV series, the films are even more lavish than the series installments, but are mere extensions of their lumbering plots. In the first, King George V and the royal entourage visit the estate on a national tour, leading the staff to scramble while coping with the royal staff, who once again are highly snobbish and rude. The King is never seen looking down on others, but his working staff are the hierarchy-obsessed mega-snobs. The Downton staff later lead a mutiny against the haughty royal servants.

The second film depicts the estate being used to film a movie, and the production is wracked by the transition to talkies. This installment is so dull and self-referential, so full of winks to the rising power of media, that it is barely watchable. Memorable subplots include the scheming, closeted butler Thomas leaving domestic service to work in film and the theater, and the enigma of a villa in the south of France mysteriously inherited by the Dowager Countess, whose character dies in the film as Dame Maggie Smith's own health declines. But the overall production is so insufferable I respectfully decline to discuss it further.

The (alleged) final film, released this fall, at least has the gravitas of the terminal installment of a long-running beloved franchise. Lady Mary's most recent marriage is ending in divorce, making her yet again a scandal in the eyes of U.K. high society, even as Lord Grantham finally accepts her as the steward of the estate, following season after season spent agonizing over the question. Robert and Cora decide to move to their lesser Dower House, taking some staff with them, and the credits depict the now-married-off characters enjoying their lives and children.

What a waste of time these movies were. Watch *Gosford Park* instead.

The Aristocrats!

From PBS to Fox News, the Crawleys have been used in the U.S. as avatars for kind, sympathetic job-creating wealthy families who have their hair down about their high social position. Megyn Kelly observed, quite accurately, that the show "makes rich people look good, and not evil." These covertly retrograde themes are a handy means to steer well-meaning liberals back into voting for business-as-usual politicos, falling for anti-union "the boss is your friend" propaganda, and squandering rare chances at a more egalitarian America.

The series does not extend into the post-war U.K., so we are left to wonder how the family would respond to the endlessly-hinted-at end of the aristocracy as a major social force and the advent of confiscatory Labour Government tax rates. Perhaps Lady Mary or another heir would do as some tax-resenting aristocrats did, and tear the roof off the castle to wreck it and spitefully avoid outrageous socialist assessments. After its many economic trials, I don't think it's implausible for the Abbey to have joined the great number of "lost houses" of the U.K. in this period, where in the 1950s one was torn down every five days by economizing noble families.

Perhaps the cool Yorkshire rains of the 1970s ran down the elegant walls and columns of the Abbey, peeling the rich décor and inviting weeds to grow and break apart the great handsome masonry. Maybe the celebrated broad towers ultimately collapsed in a misty morning in the 1980s, atop great pools filling the servants' dingy downstairs quarters, submerging the echoes of their constant struggles, loves and intrigues.

God, I hate *Downton Abbey*. ⚜

CHEERFULNESS LESSONS FROM *(AND FOR)*

ZOHRAN MAMDANI

WRITTEN BY: **EVAN ALLGOOD** WITH ART BY: **J. LONGO**

KILL 'EM WITH KINDNESS.

WISH YOUR ENEMY THE BEST, EVEN IF HE'S AN IRRELEVANT SEX PEST WHO IMPLIED THAT YOU WOULD HAVE CELEBRATED 9/11!

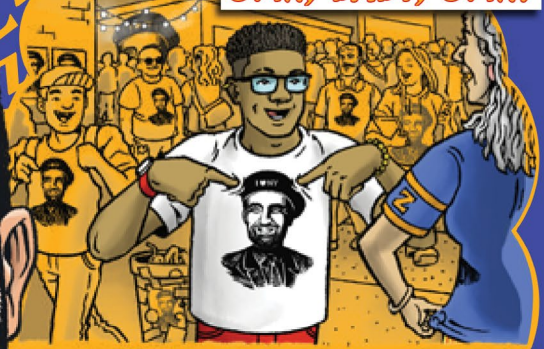
CONSIDER THE SOURCE.

THAT SENATOR WHO DIDN'T ENDORSE YOU IS A GUTLESS, OUT-OF-TOUCH, AIPAC-FUNDED LOSER BEGGING TO GET PRIMARIED!

FOCUS ON THE POSITIVE.

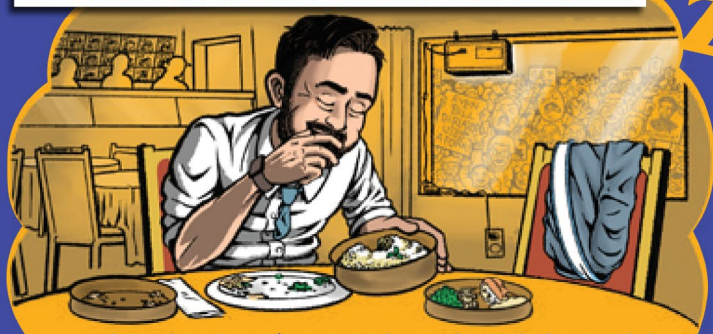
SURE, A REPORTER JUST ASKED IF YOU STILL THINK THE BUFFOON TO YOUR LEFT IS A FASCIST, BUT AT LEAST ARSENAL IS WINNING!

SPIN, BABY, SPIN.



WHEN SOMEONE MISLABELS YOU A COMMUNIST, THINK ABOUT HOW POPULAR CHE GUEVARA SHIRTS ARE—IT'S A COMPLIMENT!

ENGAGE IN LIGHT SCHADENFREUDE.



MOST OF THE WHITE PEOPLE CRITICIZING YOU FOR EATING WITH YOUR HANDS WILL NEVER EXPERIENCE THE JOY OF BIRYANI, BECAUSE FOR THEM, KETCHUP IS TOO SPICY!

MAINTAIN PERSPECTIVE.

WHEN CRITICS CLAIM YOUR GOALS ARE UNREALISTIC, REMEMBER THAT YOUR POLICIES ARE BROADLY POPULAR ACROSS AMERICA!

LB

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