

The Antidote to Doomerism

CURRENT AFFAIRS

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SKA

*The music of
the people?*

IGNORING CRISES

*Adam McKay on how the
media misreports climate.*

TEXAS

*Not as bad as
you think!*

WORDS TO THE WISE

DISCUSSION QUESTION OF THE MONTH

IS CAPITAL A PROCESS OR A THING? ARGUE ABOUT IT WITH YOUR FAMILY! HOURS OF FUN!

A Truce

The staff of *Jacobin* magazine and the staff of this magazine (*Current Affairs*) recently met in New Orleans to discuss and finalize a peace accord between our respective periodicals.

After many rounds of negotiations, a breakthrough in diplomacy was reached, and the "New Orleans Protocols" were signed, which formalize a full ceasefire and guarantee at least a fifty (50) year cessation of all hostilities, including armed conflict, public insults of the other magazine's editorial stances, and general ridiculing of one another's content. The cause of socialism is too important for us to continue years of strife, and the (literal) circular firing squads that have taken the lives of far too many members of the editorial staff of each magazine. It is to their memory that we dedicate this historic treaty.

BERRY OF THE MONTH

The Grape

Also the most socialist berry. Grapes hang together.

IF SOMEBODY ASKS YOU A QUESTION AND YOU DON'T KNOW THE ANSWER, HERE'S PERMISSION TO SUCK YOUR THUMB AND LOOK COY.

YOU CAN JUST TAKE COUNTRIES NOW

In a recent message to Norway's Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Støre, President Donald Trump declared that he was considering invading Greenland in part because "your Country decided not to give me the Nobel Peace Prize for having stopped 8 Wars PLUS," which meant that "I no longer feel an obligation to think purely of Peace." Now, we would note that, despite being far more deserving of the Nobel Peace Prize than Donald Trump (or, for that matter, many other previous recipients like Henry Kissinger or Barack Obama), *Current Affairs* was snubbed this year, too. This despite the fact that the word "peace" appears more in this magazine than any other word (we think). But because it is the President of the United States who sets the moral tone for the nation, *Current Affairs* feels duty-bound to operate by the same principle as President Trump. We therefore feel no obligation to think purely of Peace, and are Contemplating the various Countries we might annex in order to achieve full Periodical Security. We welcome suggestions from readers as to the territories we ought to invade and what we ought to do with them when we've got them. Big countries only. We don't want pitiful little island chains or to establish a Republic of North Antarctica. *Current Affairs* is a superpower and we're damn sure going to start acting like one.

ACTIVITIES

WRITE A POEM: about something you read in *Current Affairs*. A good way to do this is to cut up a page of the magazine into words, put the bits in a bag, and assemble the words into poems.

JIGSAW: Cut a *Current Affairs* illustration into pieces and reassemble. The more pieces you cut it into, the more respect you'll get when you put it back together!

SCAVENGER HUNT: Take two different issues of *Current Affairs* and give one to a friend. Disassemble the issues fully. Have your friend hide each page in a separate location, while you hide all of the pages of the other copy. Then have your friend search for the pages of the issue you hid, while you do the same for the one they hid. Whoever has a complete copy of *Current Affairs* first wins!

ARTICLE: Write a parody in the style of a *Current Affairs* article. Submit it to *Current Affairs*. If it's accepted for publication, you win!

COLLAGE: Make a meaningful collage from pieces of *Current Affairs*. Make sure it includes social commentary!

CAKE: Conceal a copy of *Current Affairs* in your friend's least-favorite type of cake. When they complain about the cake, say they should eat it anyway because there "may be a surprise inside." When they find the magazine, they will be delighted!

STRANGER: Invite a stranger to discuss a *Current Affairs* article with you.

JOHNNY CURRENTSEED: Travel the land, depositing copies of *Current Affairs* across the country wherever you go. Each is an ideological "seed" that will sprout in unexpected ways 20 years hence!

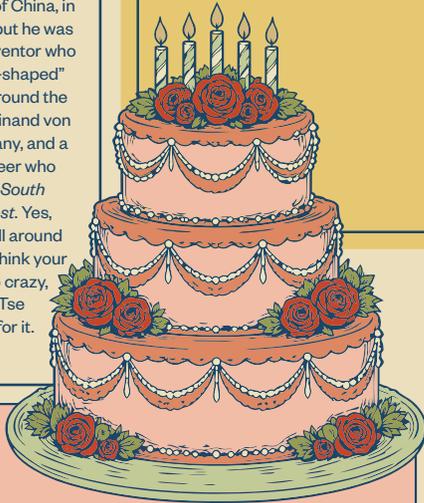
THIS WHOLE MAGAZINE WAS METICULOUSLY DRAFTED ON A VINTAGE MANUAL TYPEWRITER. YOU'RE WELCOME.



HISTORICAL FIGURE OF THE MONTH:
TSE TSAN-TAI



Most of us are lucky if we become well-known for one thing, but Tse Tsan-tai was famous (or notorious, depending who you ask) in three separate spheres. He was a political revolutionary who churned out books and pamphlets advocating the overthrow of the Qing dynasty, the last emperors of China, in the early 1900s—but he was also an amateur inventor who designed a "cigar-shaped" dirigible aircraft around the same time as Ferdinand von Zeppelin in Germany, and a newspaper pioneer who co-founded the *South China Morning Post*. Yes, the paper that's still around today. If you ever think your ambitions are too crazy, just remember Tse Tsan-tai, and go for it.



Birthday Wishes

This year, let's all agree to collectively use our birthday wishes to wish that all of our next birthday wishes really come true, thereby charging the power of birthday wishes for many years to come.

XST

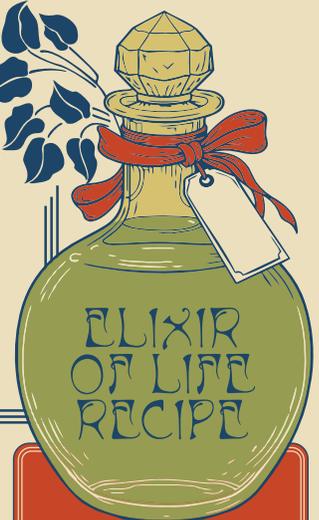
WE INVENTED A NEW, EXTREME TIME ZONE: XST. IT'S THE PERFECT TIME ZONE FOR GOING FAST ON ROLLERBLADEZ OR CHUGGIN' A WHITE MONSTER.

RECORD OFFICE PRANK

Get married on Monday, get divorced on Tuesday, then get remarried again on Wednesday, and divorced again on Thursday just to fuck with the county records office.

"APT STORE"

Apple Apt Store, a virtual marketplace that promises to sell you the most relevant word or analogy for any situation by reading your brainwaves.



1. Combine wet, dry, hot, and cold into a vessel.
2. Put the mixture into a copper plate, and surround it in ash.
3. Wait many months.
4. Eventually, you'll have an elixir.
5. Drink it and live forever.

THIS MONTH IN: INTEMPERATE CORRESPONDENTS

NAME OF AUTHOR: Clovis Davis

HEADLINE/THESIS: ALL DEMOCRATS PROVEN TO BE D*CK SUCKING COMMUNISTS

PLEASE LAY OUT THE MAIN ARGUMENT: Just stating facts

LINK TO 1-3 WRITING SAMPLES: Go lick your mothers rectum you dumb f—t

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION: I wouldn't even wipe my ass with your publication or my dogs asshole it's not really fit for anything maybe I'll just find you and shove it up your g—m f—ng wreck you f—ts communist piece of s—t for Christmas I hope you get your throat ripped out by an illegal immigrant you f—ts b—h go to hell today I'm gonna sit on your grave when you go dumb f—ts piece of s—t g—n you to hell today you f—ng f— b—h n—r d—k sucking son of a worthless N—r whore

Dear Mr. Davis,

While we appreciate your interest in contributing to *Current Affairs*, we're afraid this pitch isn't right for us at this time. We wish you all the best in your future writing endeavors.

Sincerely,
The Editors

COUGH DROPS



THEY'RE HEALTH CANDY. EAT AS MANY AS YOU WANT! ANY SEASON! YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE SICK!

HEART OF STATE



They always talk about the Head of State, but never the Heart of State or the Soul of State and we believe this is the root of our nation's problems today, in addition to everything being controlled by billionaire pedophiles.

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A SPECIAL HELLO TO OUR FRIENDS AT THE REAL NEWS NETWORK

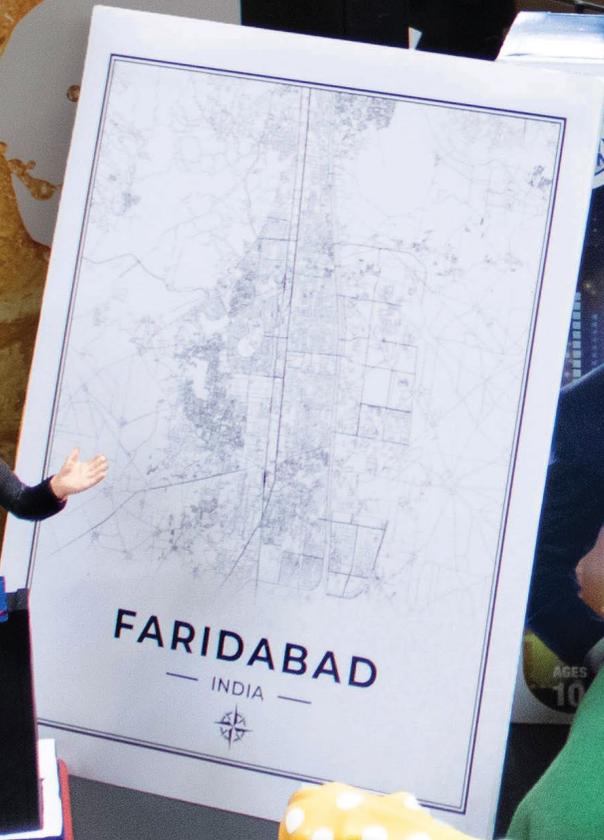
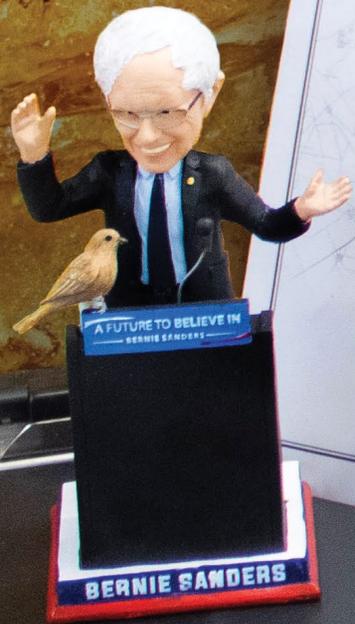
In the spirit of comradely relations with other left-wing media outlets, we would like to extend a warm greeting to our friends at The Real News Network, who also made a historic visit to CAHQ last year. We encourage all of our readers to check out this Baltimore-based outlet's excellent coverage of protest movements and global issues. However, we would also caution readers: TRNN staff are known to give out large numbers of promotional handheld fans, which they deposit wherever they go like a flock of pigeons deposits droppings. Because nobody wants the fans, they are forced to resort to subterfuge in order to foist them on unsuspecting victims. Watch The Real News Network, but beware its staff. Beware!



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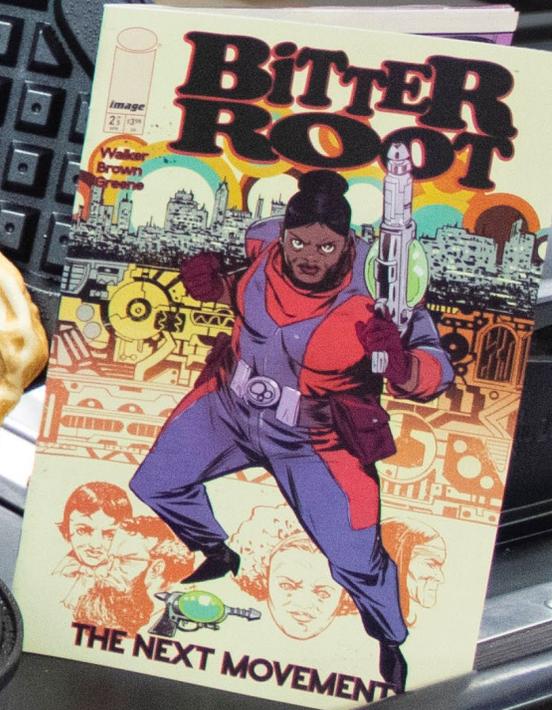
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THE MYTH OF RED TEXAS



BY EMILY CARMICHAEL

IN TEXAS, OUR HERITAGE IS A SACRED COW. WE CLOSE our eyes and we can see the huge sky, the mesquite trees in the hill country, the spindly pines in the east, where I am from, and the green waters of Galveston. We watch Westerns—my father loves them—and we see ourselves in the outlaws, the cowboys who rode across the open range with their cattle, bandanas pulled over their noses to keep out the dust. Though I am from the suburbs, a creature of air conditioning far removed from any kind of cowboy living, I spent nearly every weekend for a decade in a more rural corner of Harris County, riding horses behind a limestone house. There was perhaps nothing I heard more during my lessons than, “Get tough!” And as I did, a small child alone atop a horse kicking him along with all of my might, I had a latent sense that I was participating in some grand tradition. Under that sticky, humid, unrelenting Texas sun, you whip the horse, you do the work, and for the love of all things good, you do not talk back (which of course, I was liable to do, anyways). This was what we got for being born in Texas: an inheritance of grit, land, and rugged individualism that our state has proudly fought for since its inception. Hell, even our Ziploc bags, purchased from beloved local grocery chain H-E-B, read “Texas Tough.”

But what if someone had tinkered with our view of the past, gone through it with an editor’s pen and changed the story of where we come from, and therefore who we are? What if our cowboys were rugged, yes, but not the hyper-individualists we

thought they were, and Texas, or at least its government, was not always on their side? Indeed, the original cowboys had a very different relationship to their bootstraps than Texans of today, and if they were still around, they might find themselves as outsiders in a state that still likes to dress up in their jeans. If you’re a Texan reading this, and I’ve just touched a nerve, then David Griscom’s new book, *The Myth of Red Texas*, will get you up in arms.

“Republicans in Texas have been skillful at crafting a version of Texas history that is favorable to their current goals. And they are not afraid of using their political power to enforce this Narrative,” Griscom, a Texan who hosts the political podcasts *Left Reckoning* and *The Jacobin Show*, writes in the introduction to his book. He’s right, and their narrative strategy starts as early as elementary school. Every student takes Texas history, where they learn about life on the open range, frontiersman Davy Crockett, the Alamo he died defending, and the few years Texas operated as an independent republic. As a young student in the 2000s, I got the impression that early Texans were freedom-loving rebels in the style of the cowboys, and the state today, with its limited, conservative government, is an inevitable outgrowth of their moral belief in autonomy. Texas’s modern wealth, success, and enviability come from that love of freedom, an inherently capitalist value that teaches us how to build great things on our own, take care of ourselves by ourselves, and do whatever we damn well please. Looking back, the education—which is impossible to fully separate from the cultural lessons I got outside of the

David Griscom, The Myth of Red Texas: Cowboys, Populism, and Class War in the Radical South (OR Books/Nation, 232pp., \$20.00)

classroom in a conservative town—now feels less like history than it does software, a process of calibrating young minds to the state’s default setting. This narrative was so pervasive that even my Spanish teacher gave a lesson (in English) on why socialism, with all its big government programs, is bad.

For this story to appear true, Griscom writes, huge swaths of Texas history had to be ruthlessly re-written. *The Myth of Red Texas* offers a first-of-its-kind, jaw-dropping corrective. For example, those cowboys we iconize? Griscom tells us they were not Texas’s golden boys, but at moments, the enemies of the powerful men who built our state. In fact, cowboys were actually some of the first labor organizers; not lone wolves, but people who worked together to fight for fair wages and public ownership of Texas’s vast land. When the early corporate ranchers put up miles and miles of barbed wire around their newly acquired

COWBOYS WERE ACTUALLY SOME OF THE FIRST LABOR ORGANIZERS

property lines, these land-owners willfully broke up cattle trails cowboys had used for decades and claimed exclusively as their own water sources necessary for the livestock’s survival. So the cowboys cut the fences. Instead of coming to their senses and sharing the state’s bountiful resources, the ranchers colluded with the government, who sent the Texas Rangers after our cowboys—rangers who took “morbid pleasure” in hunting them down. When those same ranchers tried to underpay them, cowboys banded together and went on strike in 1883. According to the U.S. Commissioner of Labor, the cowboys won, though many history books will errantly say they lost. In an epic debunking, Griscom writes:

The simple fact is that when Thomas Harris turned down his boss’s offer to break the strike and preserve his \$100-a-month position, it was not because of a ‘value system of the rugged individual.’ Call it neighborliness, bravery, or simply looking out for the men riding next to you on that day in Old Tascosa. In any case, being a cowboy in those days—not just working on the range, but more broadly, living by Texan values—meant solidarity.

Without the support of Texas leadership, who vastly preferred to align with rich people, the cowboy’s cooperative mindset matured into worker’s unions and a formal political force that abhorred financialization and corporatization. This coalition had its own left-leaning magazines and ran its own independent political candidates who likely would have won statewide seats had the much more conservative Democrats not rigged the elections. One such candidate, Thomas L. Nugent, advocated for a “gospel-infused socialism,” and beat out the Republican candidate in 1894, winning 36 percent of the vote despite the fact that the Democrats, who controlled the state, intimidated voters and just so happened to run out of Populist Party ballots on election day. Nugent had the support of the United States’ most famous socialist, Eugene V. Debs, an affinity that might have seemed obvious at the time. He aligned himself with the populist Farmer’s Alliance, whose 1886 Cleburne Demands—published as the group became more politically active—was among the first formal documents to detail many of American socialism’s priorities, from the end of convict labor to taxes on speculation. As *The Myth of Red Texas* explains:

Gone was the traditional language of rural revolt, of conflict between town and country. Here, instead, were bold and explicit condemnations of arrogant capitalists and powerful corporations. [...] [T]he farmers now saw themselves not just as allies of the union movement but as members of the same class—the working class. The demands should be considered the founding documents of the progressive and the American socialist movement.

True though it may be, Griscom’s Texas is not one that Texans will easily recognize. The reality is that American populism started in Texas. It gave way not to a proto-MAGA belief system, but to one of the largest, most radical bands of socialists in the country, cultivated right here in the Lone Star State. This is a major, multi-generational political movement that, with some conniving strokes of an eraser on the whiteboard, has gone *poof* into thin air. “The fact that maintaining a particular politicized view of Texas history requires very active enforcement from conservative politicians shows that it’s not some natural outgrowth of simple facts. It’s a concerted effort for Texas to be seen in a certain light,” Griscom writes.

To help readers integrate all this new, opposing information as smoothly as possible, Griscom uses archival details to reconstruct left-leaning historical characters and stories that Texans can see themselves in, nicknames and all. There’s the blunt, punny name given to Thomas “Red Tom” Hickey, the Irish-born leader of the Texas Socialist Party, who was arrested without a warrant by a one-armed Texas Ranger, apprehended at the post office as he was picking up 60 sheets of a publication he had contributed to. There’s Thomas Harris, that angry cowboy striker, who started his own cattle business in New Mexico called “The Get Even Cattle Company.” We meet “Stump” Ashby, a leader of the populist Farmer’s Alliance, who worked as a circus clown before entering politics. His colleague, J.H. “Cyclone” Davis, earned his nickname after he so thoroughly demolished a Kentucky Democrat in a debate that a local paper declared him “The Cyclone from Texas.” (Texans know how to put on a

show.) There are enthralling tales of encampments, multi-night outdoor socialist retreats where thousands gathered to hear “fiery populist speakers [talk] about the evils of capitalism,” dance, and debate. By the time I finished reading about the revelry, I was yearning to attend an encampment myself. I suspect this was Griscom’s intended effect. “While abstract principles are important, alongside calls for solidarity with the people and the working-class, it is even better when you know the names of those you are standing with,” he writes.

And from the mouths of these oh-so-Texan characters, we hear the same ideals and quandaries that we might in a Democratic Socialist meeting today. Should they accept the Democrats’ watered down reforms, or demand more? Why is that,” as one traveling lecturer put it, those “who work most get least, and those who work least get most?” In one newspaper article, an eloquent farmer poses: “When you are laboring side by side with your wife and daughter and see your children developing into manhood and womanhood with minds uncultured and bodies deformed from labor, ask yourself if you live in a free country.”

Lefty Texans like me will happily work our way through the book, but the question remains, will moderate and conservative Texans buy it? Probably not in large numbers, not yet. If there is anything we have learned, it’s that facts are not enough to change someone’s mind. Persuasion must be narrative and gripping. Though there are moments of convincing drama and thrill, there are others in which the text is bogged down by the intricacies of interparty politics from 125 years ago. Names pile up, the story feels rushed, and the plot becomes hard to follow. What’s more, Griscom, an accomplished political writer, uses the language of the left without much explanation, which could intimidate someone who has never been exposed to political discourse beyond the morass that bubbles and burps on X. For example, jargon like “cooperative commonwealth” never gets a proper definition. When I was child, for no reason except for the energy in the air, I thought that unions were somehow mafia-adjacent. The simple term “working-class political movement” could make someone close the book. That’s not Griscom’s fault, but it is his challenge,

THE REALITY IS THAT AMERICAN POPULISM STARTED IN TEXAS

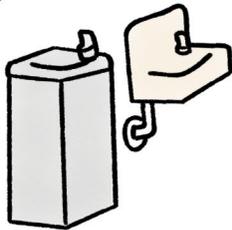
and one this book at times fails to meet. I desperately hope that *The Myth of Red Texas* is adapted for film, where the characters unearthed by Griscom can tell these stories themselves, with much less politico speak and all the due drama.

Griscom’s book does, however, put modern, urban leftists in an unfamiliar position: he asks them to learn not from the historic failings of the South, but its successes. The Texas Griscom writes about is so similar to the United States we live in today. Both have a political reality dominated by powerful company owners determined to depress wages and exploit workers within an inch of their life. Both then and now, those in power have tried to pit minority groups against each other as a way to stifle solidarity and keep workers in line. Although, today’s company bosses are probably less likely to draw a gun on their striking workers. In this context, and without a single meme or bit of polling data, populists and socialists in once Texas spread an awareness among workers of their class position and turned it into a grassroots, class-rooted movement of economic populism. They did it person by person, through encampments, magazines, and traveling lectures, creating a dedicated, celebratory culture of gathering, full of in-person debate, disagreement, and dancing. Griscom’s telling of Texas history makes their lessons clear.

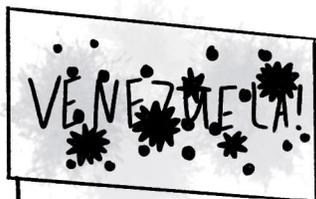
There’s a tendency in the West and the North to call the South backwards, to scoff that its residents deserve the disastrous outcomes of conservative governance—be it infrastructure failure during a freeze or poor disaster recovery after a storm—simply because of their birthplace and how they may or may not vote. If this sounds heartless, know that I’ve heard such things numerous times, said to me by peers who have forgotten where I come from. These are the very people who need to pay attention to Griscom’s Texans. Their buried lessons of community and solidarity are all the more urgent right now as we encounter another moment of narrative seizure, a renewed, fierce attempt to tell Texans—and Americans—who they are.

In December 2025, Texas Governor Greg Abbott debuted a plan to put a chapter of Turning Point USA, the conservative youth political group founded by the late Charlie Kirk, in every high school. Texas A&M, a major university in the state, has severely limited what its professors are allowed to teach, only allowing discussion of race, history and gender if it flatters conservatives. Even the Alamo, a place we are famously supposed to remember, is not off limits. When the historic site’s nonprofit leader tried to share its “full story,” including the land’s indigenous history and the reason white Texas settlers waged battle here—to stop Mexico from abolishing slavery in the area, a reality I did not learn in school—Texas Republican leaders forced her to resign. Likewise, at national parks and monuments across the nation, the footprints of American identity, President Donald Trump has attempted to erase any mention of racism, in a country where Black people were enslaved for hundreds of years. What readers of Griscom will know is that their story, and their United States, is a myth.

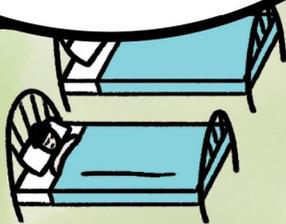
Griscom’s book is an opening salvo. It issues an invitation to other Texans to finally wise up to the fact that we have been lied to, that our heritage has been manipulated. And if there is anything Texans hate, this Texan included, it is being taken for fools. The real cowboys should be pissed, and leftists across the country discount them at their own risk. ✚



NEWLY UN-WOKE
SEGREGATED
DRINKING FOUNTAIN



WHITEBOARD RIPPLED WITH
BULLETS AFTER GENERAL
WROTE "VENEZUELA" AND
EVERYONE GOT SCARED
AND STARTED SHOOTING IT



CANCER WARD FOR
SOLDIERS SUFFERING
FROM MONEY BURN PITS



SOLDIERS BURNING
PILES OF MONEY



PTSD
IMMERSION
TANK



HIGH-PERFORMING
PILE OF COCAINE
EARNING TRANSFER
TO FORT BRAGG

PORTRAIT WALL
OF WAR CRIMINALS

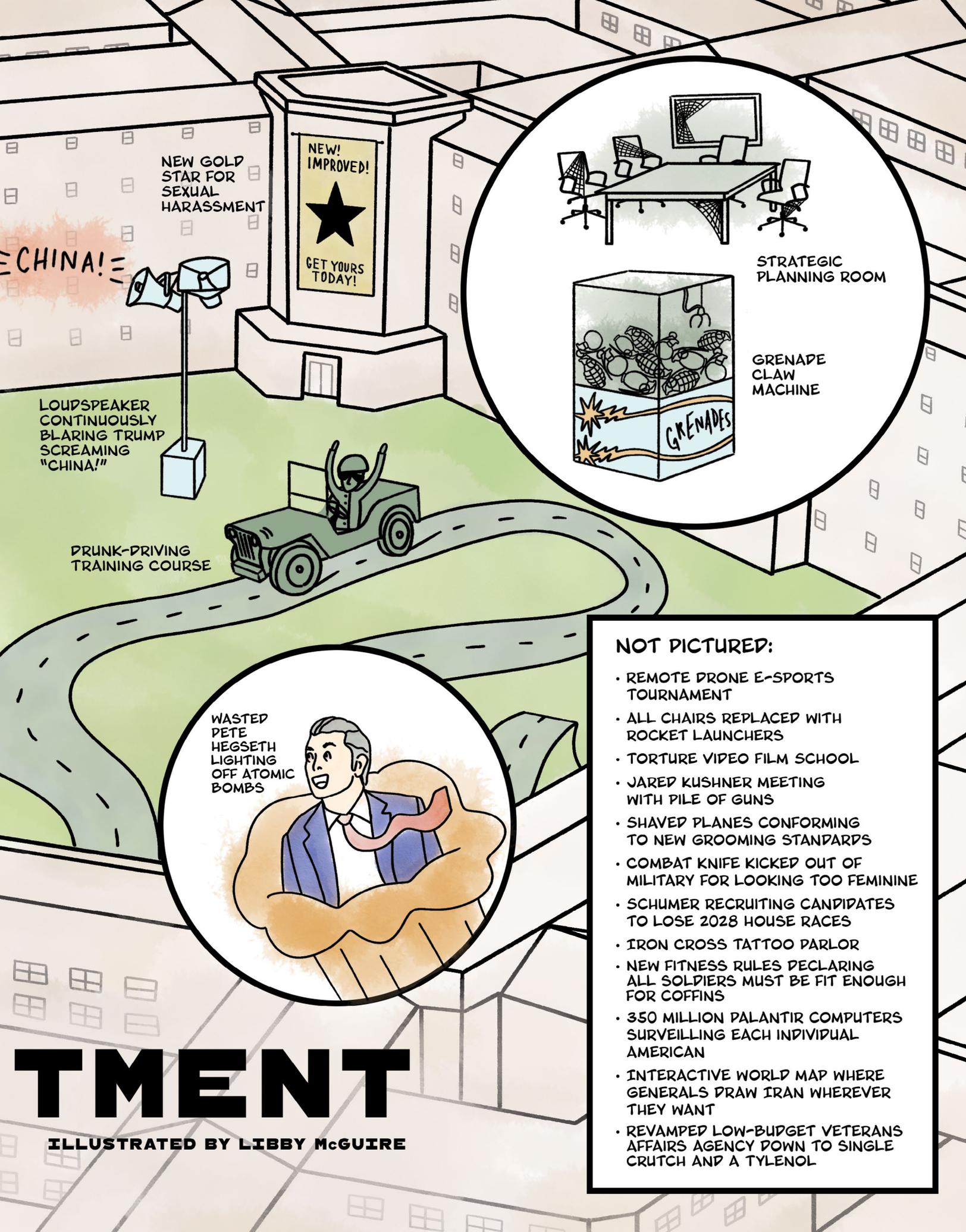


TOP-SECRET PLANNING GROUP THAT WILL
INDIRECTLY LEAD TO 2031 MIAMI MASSACRE



THE WAR DEPAR

WRITTEN BY DEVIN SCHIFF



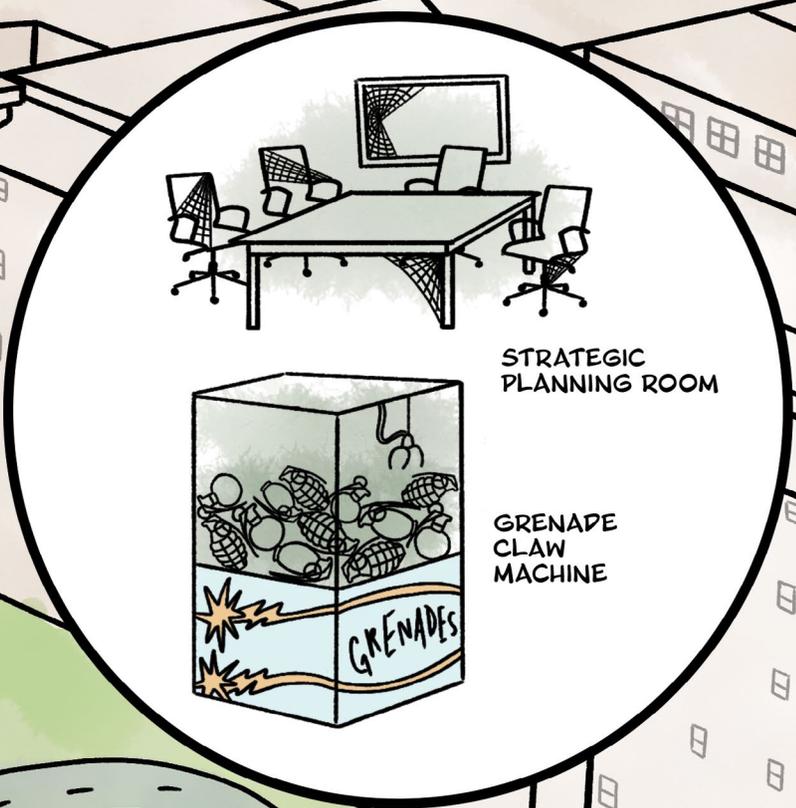
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IMPROVED!
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CHINA!

LOUDSPEAKER CONTINUOUSLY BLARING TRUMP SCREAMING "CHINA!"

DRUNK-DRIVING TRAINING COURSE



STRATEGIC PLANNING ROOM

GRENADE CLAW MACHINE



WASTED PETE HEGSETH LIGHTING OFF ATOMIC BOMBS

NOT PICTURED:

- REMOTE DRONE E-SPORTS TOURNAMENT
- ALL CHAIRS REPLACED WITH ROCKET LAUNCHERS
- TORTURE VIDEO FILM SCHOOL
- JARED KUSHNER MEETING WITH PILE OF GUNS
- SHAVED PLANES CONFORMING TO NEW GROOMING STANDARDS
- COMBAT KNIFE KICKED OUT OF MILITARY FOR LOOKING TOO FEMININE
- SCHUMER RECRUITING CANDIDATES TO LOSE 2028 HOUSE RACES
- IRON CROSS TATTOO PARLOR
- NEW FITNESS RULES DECLARING ALL SOLDIERS MUST BE FIT ENOUGH FOR COFFINS
- 350 MILLION PALANTIR COMPUTERS SURVEILLING EACH INDIVIDUAL AMERICAN
- INTERACTIVE WORLD MAP WHERE GENERALS DRAW IRAN WHEREVER THEY WANT
- REVAMPED LOW-BUDGET VETERANS AFFAIRS AGENCY DOWN TO SINGLE CRUTCH AND A TYLENOL

TMENT

ILLUSTRATED BY LIBBY MCGUIRE



THE CASE FOR SKA

BY MILES KAMPF-LASSIN

IN A 2016 EPISODE OF THE POPULAR COP-THEMED COMEDY *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*, lead character Jake (played by Andy Samberg) has a flashback to 1998, when he was featured on a local news broadcast decked out in checkered sunglasses, a black bowler hat, white shirt, and suspenders. “Ska defines who I am as a person and I will never turn my back on ska,” he declares. When the scene flashes forward to the present, Jake denies having any regrets, before admitting to his fellow detective that yes, actually, he should.

The gag lands because fandom of ska music has become shorthand for a kind of youthful overenthusiasm—the same earnestness typically associated with theater kids and band dweebs. The punchline is that enthusiasm for ska isn’t just regrettable but humiliating: the butt of a joke that ska fans aren’t in on. Often reduced to glib descriptions like “fast reggae” or “punk with horns,” the U.S. brand of ska music that exploded in popularity in the 1990s has become synonymous with goofy fashion, silly lyrical content, repetitive instrumentation and nerdy aesthetics. In some musical circles, appreciation for the genre is met with ridicule and must be shared with caution, the way one might disclose a passion for fanfiction or mukbang food videos on Instagram. As one formerly-closeted fan posed on Reddit: “Has anyone been afraid to tell people that they like ska?”

Throughout countless television shows, memes, and online threads, the genre is treated as a source of embarrassment. But far from a brief and lamentable fad, ska is a decades-long movement whose existence far preceded its breakthrough into ’90s pop culture. It has traveled from the slums of Kingston, Jamaica to the industrial hamlets of the United Kingdom, to stages across America and the globe, spreading a message of working-class solidarity against power-hungry elites—and of unity in the face of racial oppression.

The musical style’s relentless optimism and signature horn-driven melodies were born out of anticolonial struggle and exultant proclamations of freedom. As the genre has spread over the second half of the 20th century and into the 21st, it has moved in many different directions, but continues to offer an uplifting expression of resistance to political and economic despair, extending community as an alternative to division. As author Heather Augustyn writes in her 2013 book *Ska: The Rhythm of Liberation*, “Whether it is received on the street corner, in a concert arena, or through earphones, ska is still the people’s music, in whatever form it takes.”

Ska might always be fodder for memes and mockery. But today, with a new wave of bands carrying on the genre’s evolution in the United States, it’s time to look past the tired shitposts and see ska for what it really is: a diverse style of dance music that has instilled joy and passion in generations of followers while provoking its haters because it refuses to go away.

SOUND SYSTEMS IN SHANTYTOWNS

LONG BEFORE IT REACHED THE WARPED TOUR, SKA WAS THE sound of working-class Kingston building something of its own. The genre took shape in the late 1950s across the shantytowns of West Kingston, Jamaica, where local musicians combined elements of traditional mento and calypso (African-inspired forms of Caribbean folk music) with American jazz and rhythm and blues, which had recently begun to reach the island.

During and after World War II, many American soldiers stationed in Jamaica brought their favorite swing and R&B records with them, sometimes trading the vinyls for rum, marijuana, and the services of local sex workers. Meanwhile, island radios began picking up stations broadcasting from cities like Miami and New Orleans, which played popular U.S. artists like Fats Domino and Jack Dupree. After travelling hundreds of miles over the airwaves to reach Jamaica, the music came through choppy and delayed, which some people theorize may have influenced the genre’s staccato sound.

Ska’s defining feature is its energetic tempo, created by accentuating the second and fourth backbeat in a 4/4 measure, rather than the traditional first and third, along with jazzy walking bass lines and bouncy melodic horns. Lyrics reflected subjects like national independence and freedom from daily strife, exemplified in songs like “Forward March” by Derrick Morgan:

*Gather together, be brothers and sisters
We’re independent
Join hands to hands, children started to dance
We’re independent*

The dance style of “skanking” evolved out of a running motion paired with two-step punching and kicking arm and leg movements synching up with the offbeat rhythms of the songs.

The backdrop to this musical eruption was a Jamaican population under colonial rule. Jamaicans had for centuries endured enslavement and subjugation by Great Britain (and before that, Spain), beginning in the early 16th century. Through the Atlantic slave trade, the island’s indigenous dwellers were joined by hundreds of thousands of Africans brought in to work the sugar plantations. While slavery was technically outlawed in the mid-1800s, a stark class system of wealthy landowners and poor servants continued to permeate the whole of society well into the 20th century. It was under this strictly divided class system that ska music began to blossom.

As historian Joseph Heathcott writes in his article “Urban Spaces and Working-Class Expression Across the Black Atlantic: Tracing the Routes of Ska”, the genre grew out of “the intensely local world of urban (particularly Kingston) working-class Jamaican youth”:

such as the iconic “Pressure Drop” by Toots and the Maytals. The song, which was later covered by artists ranging from Robert Palmer to The Clash, references lead singer Toots Hibbert’s jail stint for marijuana possession: “When I got out of jail, I had a sense of injustice and a desire to make up for lost time. Ideas just started flowing,” he later told *the Guardian*. In “54-46 That’s My Number,” Hibbert proclaims his innocence, while pointing to the dehumanization of the prison system, in which inmates’ identities become interchangeable: “So I was innocent of what they done to me[...] 54-46 was my number / Right now, someone else has that number.”

Other breakthrough songs of the time, like “(Everybody Jump On) Socialism Train” by The Ethiopians, envisioned a post-capitalist world of equality and civilizational advancement:

*Forget your worries
Your trials and crosses
Everybody equal
Get social as a title
Everybody jump on socialism train*

“SKA MUSIC IS KNOWN FOR ITS OPTIMISM, BUT THAT QUINTESSENTIAL JOY IS ROOTED IN STRUGGLE.”

At the same time, ska developed within the global context of rural dislocation, labor migration, and rapid urbanization, processes that turned peasant families into an urban and rural proletariat, and that unfolded within the development of U.S. and British economic colonialism in the Caribbean throughout the twentieth century.

Shantytowns would throw parties in outdoor “dancehalls” using massive sound systems made up of powerful speakers on which DJs (or “selectors,” as they were called) played records of the time for crowds of downtown residents, including “rudeboys”—wayward young people donning black suits, skinny ties and pork pie hats. The practice of “toasting” gained popularity at this time as selectors would scat over recorded tracks, adding repetitive phrases like “chick-chick” and “get up-get up” to help animate the crowd. As Augustyn writes, “sound system dances were hugely popular with the masses who longed to escape poverty and oppression that were rife in Kingston in the 1950s.”

The musical style exploded in popularity in the ensuing years, giving rise to artists like Prince Buster, Desmond Dekker, and The Skatalites, who were instrumental in turning ska into a genre of its own. In 1962, following decades of struggle for freedom, Jamaica officially cast off British rule and became an independent country. Ska musicians celebrated this newfound independence and the music soon became an export to the rest of the world, along with the ensuing genres it helped give rise to: rocksteady and reggae.

Many songs of the later 1960s and 1970s exemplified the spirit of resistance and fighting injustice that were hallmarks of the genre,

Ska music is known for its optimism, but that quintessential joy is rooted in struggle.

THE RISE OF 2-TONE

ACROSS THE ATLANTIC OCEAN, SKA WOULD SOON FIND A NEW hotbed in the industrial neighborhoods of London. In the years following the ravages of World War II, the United Kingdom began recruiting scores of workers from Jamaica, Trinidad, and other parts of the West Indies to take jobs in sectors British residents had avoided, such as transit and construction.

Once there, these workers were largely confined to poverty-stricken urban areas while outright racism was a daily fact of life, including physical attacks from white reactionaries. Music, however, provided an escape. Many of the DJs who made the journey brought with them their ska records, which they would play at underground parties in neighborhoods like Brixton in South London, attracting the interest of local crowds drawn to the music. As Augustyn writes, “Just like their Jamaican counterparts[...] struggling British youths found sanctuary in the optimistic sounds of ska.”

By the later 1970s, the British economy was in a tailspin and unemployment was steadily rising. White nationalist movements like the National Front blamed the influx of people of color for the nation’s problems, while Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher



similarly placed the onus on immigration for economic hardship. In one televised interview, Thatcher called for “a clear end to immigration,” saying that “people are really rather afraid that this country might be rather swamped by people with a different culture.” In the face of this right-wing bigoted rhetoric, ska music offered an alternative of racial coalition against the forces of hate, as bands like The Specials, The Selecter, The Beat, and Madness cropped up, incorporating both the style and sounds of their Jamaican forebearers.

The result was a sensation. As Heathcott writes, “White and Black working-class youth in decaying urban centers in Britain (and to a lesser extent in the United States) adopted the Rude Boy idiom as a tool of protest amid a climate of disintegration and decline in the fortunes of working-class families.”

While Thatcher pushed through a neoliberal agenda of austerity and stoked racial strife, ska bands made up of multiracial lineups promoted a message of camaraderie among the disenfranchised, with lyrics reflecting commonality and collective history. By the 1980s, the “2-Tone” style associated with Jerry Dammers of The Specials incorporated components of punk and pop with ska, making for a faster, rawer form of the music. The checkerboard pattern was featured in ska fashion, symbolizing racial unity. Popular songs of the time like The Specials’ “Doesn’t Make It Alright” (“*Just because you’re a Black boy / Just because you’re a white / It doesn’t mean you’ve got to hate him / It doesn’t mean you’ve got to fight*”) and The Beat’s “Stand Down Margaret” (“*I said I see no joy I see only sorrow / I see no chance of your bright new tomorrow / So stand down Margaret*”) cast explicitly left-wing political messages to audiences, protesting racist policies and demanding Thatcher’s resignation.

And it wasn’t just a musical revolt; demonstrators across the country also took to the streets calling for justice. Alongside ska’s rise in the UK, Augustyn writes, “through the revolution and rioting, [West Indian immigrants] were standing up and demanding to be recognized as equal.”

COMING TO AMERICA

IN THE 1980S, A HANDFUL OF 2-TONE BANDS FROM ENGLAND toured the United States—mostly gracing mid-sized clubs and university venues—while a range of record stores carried their al-

bums, likely tucked away in the reggae section. But ska didn’t really begin to take off stateside until the music took on a more distinctly American form.

That process kicked into gear in New York City, where Rob “Bucket” Hingley had immigrated from the UK to manage a Manhattan comic shop called Forbidden Planet. After arriving in the U.S., he sought to recreate the ska sounds and live show environment he’d left behind. Hingley founded the band The Toasters in the early 80s, and formed Moon Ska Records shortly after, having failed to convince any existing record labels about the viability of ska. In a 2025 interview with *Almost Famous Magazine*, Hingley recalls getting “laughed out of the room” by music executives, who said he’d “never get anywhere with that circus music.” Moon Ska Records would go on to put out albums featuring ska artists ranging from No Doubt to the Dance Hall Crashers. Songs like “Don’t Let the Bastards Grind You Down” by The Toasters decried workplace drudgery and low wages, beckoning listeners to fight back in defiance of an intolerable system:

*Each day I wake up in this gray old town
Each day the system tries to bring me down
With a minimum wage in the factory
I’m slaving in the Twentieth Century*

Other East Coast bands soon formed, including The New York Citizens and The Second Step, merging ska sounds with hardcore punk, New Wave, and other genres that already had built-in audiences. Handmade zines helped spread the word about American ska bands and shows, including those compiled by labels like Jump Up! Records (*Everything Off-Beat*) and Stubborn Records (*Black and White*), as well as popular fanzines like *Ska’d For Life* and *Kill Every Racist Bastard*. Compilation records served as an introduction for listeners unfamiliar with the upbeat, horn-driven music.

On the other side of the country, British expat Howard Paar in 1980 opened the ON Klub in the Silver Lake neighborhood of Los Angeles, which soon became a hub for the area’s budding ska bands like The Untouchables, which mixed Jamaican ska with Motown and soul, and Fishbone, an all-Black band from South Central, Los Angeles whose music was equal parts funk, punk and ska.

In California’s East Bay, emerging ska bands put on energetic live performances for diverse crowds, helping to break down politically-drawn lines of race and class. These bands trained their lyrical



“HAVING BEEN IN A SKA BAND BECAME A MUSICAL LIABILITY”

ire at conservatism, Cold War-era militarism, and the economically-destructive policies of the Ronald Reagan administration. A prime example is Operation Ivy’s 1988 song “Freeze Up,” which feels as if it could have been written in 2026:

*Empty factories to the east and all our waste
The shape of things that came show on the broken worker’s face
To the west you’ll find a silicon promised land
Where machines replace our minds for systematic profit plans
Course of human progress staggers like a drunk
Its steps are quick and heavy, and its mind is slow and blunt
I look for optimism, but I just don’t know
Its seeds are planted in a poison place where nothing grows*

ENTER THE THIRD WAVE

IT WASN’T UNTIL THE MID-1990S THAT SKA FINALLY BROKE into the mainstream with the advent of what became known as the “Third Wave.” It was this era that flooded American pop culture with checkerboard prints, horn sections, and skank-dancing youth, imagery that still clings to the genre today.

The release of No Doubt’s seminal album *Tragic Kingdom* in 1995 helped spread “skacore” across the radio and airwaves as MTV played their videos constantly (even if the record strayed from the band’s previous traditional ska sound). That year also saw the release of Rancid’s *...And Out Come the Wolves*, and a few months later came Sublime’s hit self-titled record, both of which acquainted throngs of young American listeners to ska music.

As the genre gained notoriety over the next few years, U.S. ska bands were featured across television and mass-market movies, including The Mighty Mighty Bosstones in *Clueless* (1995), Reel Big Fish in *BASEketball* (1998) and Save Ferris in *10 Things I Hate About You* (1999). Bands like Less Than Jake and the Voodoo Glow Skulls, meanwhile, were showcased on the nationwide Vans Warped Tour. The sudden acclaim led advertisers to pounce, putting ska music (and its fashion) in ads for everything from AOL to Kit-Kat bars. This quick commodification of the genre—and its oversaturation in what was then still a largely mass culture environment—turned off many fans, while critics skewered the zany optics of bands playing bouncy, humor-filled music at a time when grunge

and alternative rock were considered more serious with their embellishment of angst and malaise.

As more and more ska bands got signed by major labels, they began getting tarred as “selling out,” as spoofed in Reel Big Fish’s 1996 song “Sell Out” (“*Sell out with me tonight / The record company’s gonna give me lots of money / And everything’s gonna be alright*”), while the genre’s optimistic and even joyful vibe was maligned as overly naive, despite the fact that it was originally borne out of real political activism and a refusal to give in to powerful regimes of authority.

Having been in a ska band quickly became a musical liability, as “ska-vestigators” began looking into any past affiliation with the genre in order to shame bands that were gaining popularity. *Spin* magazine published an article titled “Ska-letons in the Closet” revealing the rock bands who had members with unfortunate ska pasts. And in 2007, *Stereogum* attempted to expose indie-electronic artist Dan Deacon as a former member of the late-’90s ska band Channel 59, publishing photos of him skanking on stage. Rather than run from his past association with the genre, Deacon stood by it. “Ska was a way for me to escape into this happy, weird, ‘everything’s fun but nothing’s important’ place,” Deacon told author Aaron Carnes in the 2021 book *In Defense of Ska*, adding, “listening to ska transports me immediately back to this mindset that music is fun. And people get together to have fun.”

There was also a racial and political component to some of ska’s criticism: a musical style created by people of color was being popularized and profited off of by a largely white cohort of musicians who were more interested in partying than rebellion—a critique that’s far more valid than what most of ska’s detractors have made their focus. Where Black musicians once stood decrying oppression, all-white bands were now cashing in.

Despite all the derision, many ’90s ska punk bands continued to issue pointedly political content. In 1998, Detroit’s The Suicide Machines released *Battle Hymns* containing songs pillorying warmakers and mocking the ultra-rich ruling class, and Florida’s Against All Authority put out *Destroy What Destroys You*, featuring tracks titled “Lifestyle of Rebellion,” “Corporate Takeover,” and “No Government Can Give You Freedom.”

That same year, Asian Man Records—a label started by Korean-American musician Mike Park—hosted the Ska Against Racism tour in cities across the U.S. As Park told the *Chicago Reader*’s J.R. Jones at the time, the goal was to “educate about the history of ska, but also hit an age group that’s really impressionable. I know a lot of these kids are just here to see the music, but if we can get a small

percentage to really get involved, become proactive, and volunteer their time with youth centers and demonstrate against Klans in their area—whatever. Just to become more educated.”

While that tour faced some criticism (including from Jones) for not doing more to center the work of anti-racist organizations, it did donate the proceeds to local groups. It also uplifted the cause at a time during the Bill Clinton administration when political apathy was a hallmark of American youth culture.

The late 1990s marked the zenith point for ska in the United States, and by the early 2000s boy bands and nu-metal were ascendant. Yet ska didn’t simply disappear—once again it mutated.

21ST CENTURY SKA

MANY OF THE BANDS THAT TOOK OFF DURING SKA’S THIRD WAVE craze continued putting out records and touring, even as their audiences waned and their reach narrowed. In 2004, Michigan ska group Mustard Plug inaugurated a tour called Ska’s Not Dead, nodding to the genre’s fall from favor, alongside bands like Catch 22 and MU330. (This was around the same time my own high school ska-punk band Blue Aftertaste put out our sole album, which

projecting an explicitly more diverse and queer face of the genre, grounded in inclusivity and anti-authoritarianism.

As Kenneth Partridge writes in his book *Hell of a Hat: The Rise of ’90s Ska and Swing*, “Two decades into the twenty-first century, ska is still reaching pockets of young Americans. These amateur skankers are too young to remember just how uncool ska became around the turn of the millennium, when casual fans abandoned the genre and industry tastemakers began pushing other sounds, like nu-metal, garage rock, and emo.” In 2020, Mike Park revived Ska Against Racism as a compilation album highlighting contemporary ska bands to raise funds for organizing groups including the Movement for Black Lives, and, amid the COVID pandemic, copies of the record sold out in days.

In *New Noise Magazine*, Bad Operation’s Jeremy “Jer” Hunter recently hailed being able “to see new bands come up with fresh new spins on classic sounds, and to see a big connection back to the roots of the genre. To see this new generation of bands take a stance against racism, sexism, transphobia, homophobia, and whatever else excludes marginalized groups. To many, ska is a joke and a fad from the ’90s. What we are doing is not a nostalgia-driven gimmick [...] We are

“THE COMMODIFICATION OF THE GENRE TURNED OFF MANY FANS...”

included a cover of Mustard Plug’s “Beer Song.”)

In the 2019 documentary *Pick it Up: Ska in the ’90s*, Aimee Allen, frontwoman of current ska band The Interrupters, put it this way: “Ska never went away, it just dips in and out of the mainstream.”

South of the border—in Mexico, Central and South America—ska captivated large fanbases into the 2000s and still does today, with major festivals like SkaTex and Non Stop Ska Fest continuing to attract hundreds of thousands of people. And the bands and culture of Latin American ska have carried on the music’s political messages of fellowship and liberation. As Daniel Hernandez wrote in a 2012 article for the *Los Angeles Times*, “Ska came to represent a movement of musical protest, just as it had during the second wave across England and the U.S., with bands aligning themselves with social justice causes.”

In other countries across the globe, from Japan to Eastern Europe, ska remains a vibrant musical movement. And in the United States, bands like Bad Operation, Kill Lincoln, and We Are the Union are now drawing in kinetic crowds of younger fans, and

creating a message and a space where everyone can feel safe and welcome, because we couldn’t find one for ourselves.”

The irrepressible buoyancy at the heart of ska music has always been part of its appeal to those facing down subjugation and exclusion. So why has the genre generated so much animus amongst the influencer set? As longtime punk musician Jeff Rosenstock wrote in the introduction to *In Defense of Ska*: “A grand musical environment anchored in acceptance, DIY-ethics, and uncontrollable chaos was never really going to get a gold star from label execs or pretentious pundits.” The truth is that, love it or hate it, ska still remains—as The Skatalites once put it—the “freedom sound.” +



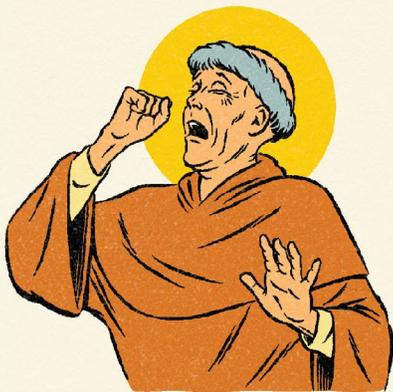
Prayer Cards of the Lesser Known Saints

By Aidan Yetman-Michaelson

It's the most Catholic time of the year! Lent! In this time of moderation, self denial, and other Catholic stuff, it's important to remember the saints and pray to them in times of need.

Unfortunately, there are just so darn many of them to keep track of! Even the most thorough religious supply stores only stock a scant selection of worship items for the most "popular" and "marketable" saints. Here at Current Affairs, the holiest and most God-fearing publication you probably read, we believe that that simply won't

do. Luckily, we've supplied a selection of cut-em-yerself prayer cards so you can remember some of the lesser known saints when you need them. Keep those prayers comin', kiddos!



Prayer to Saint Achu

Patron of those on the verge of sneezing

Good Saint Achu,
benefactor of...*ab...*
In times of...*ab...need...ab...*
I call upon you. Let me...*ab...*
In your name I pray.
Ab...ab...AH...
men.



Prayer to St. Wutziface

Patron of forgotten names

Oh blessed Saint... guy,
heavenly patron of forgotten monikers,
help me to recall this fellow's name.
Was it Josh? Or Jake?
I'm pretty sure it was Jake.
Or Jason? Oh blessed Saint,
pray for me that I may find some
comfort in this time of dire need!
Maybe it was a K name?
Kevin? Kosh?
Is that even a name?



Prayer to Saint "Dry" Wilhemina

Patron of protection against Wet Willies

O Saint Dry Wilhemina,
I pray to thee for your
aural protection and sanctuary.
Be with me in my comings and goings,
shielding me from the wet fingers
of those who wish to do me ill.
May your presence go before me
and behind me, making both my ears secure.
I place my trust in you
that you might be my fortress. Amen.



Prayer to

St. Wyrilus

Patron of Bluetooth connection

Mysterious Saint Wyrilus,
keeper of arcane wisdom,
master of the unknowable,

I pray to thee, grant me
the knowledge and patience I need
to connect this bluetooth device.

It says you're supposed to hold the sync
button for five seconds and I do that and
the light flashes but then nothing happens?
I tried turning it off and on again.

Do I have to press something
on the other thing? Amen.

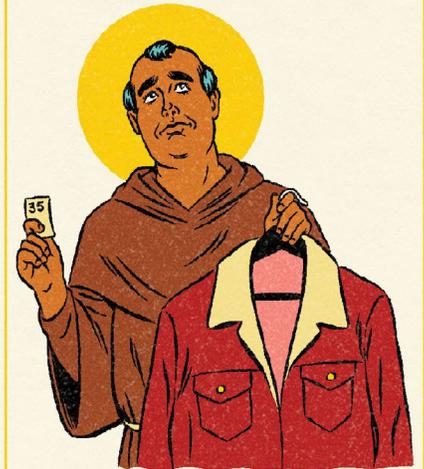


Prayer to

St. Cuttit

Patron of parallel parking

Now I line me up to park
I pray before I disembark
O Saint Cuttit, be my guide
And help me not scratch up my ride
If this space should be too small
I pray to thee I park at all



Prayer to

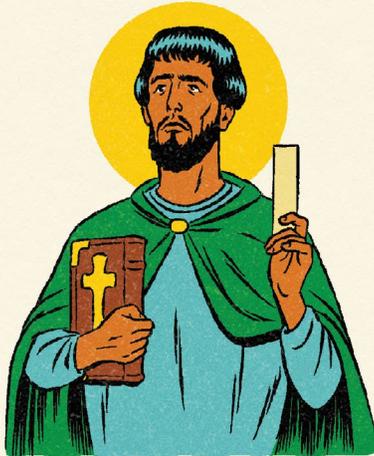
St. Hangar

Patron of coat check attendants

Blessed Saint Hangar, be my guiding star
as I ply this my noble trade.

Watch over me as I watch over this
bounty of outerwear which has been
entrusted to me. May each client
return with slip in hand and may I render
their coats unto them unmarred.

Finally, may my tips be reflective of
my vigilance in this honored pursuit. Amen.



Prayer to

St. Buhkmark

Patron of pagekeeping

Good Saint Buhkmark,
keeper of pages,

lend me a scrap that I may find my place
henceforth. Let me not dwell in sin
amongst the woeful dog-eared masses.

Protect my book and slip not from
its pages. In your name and in
the name of our Lord I pray. Amen.

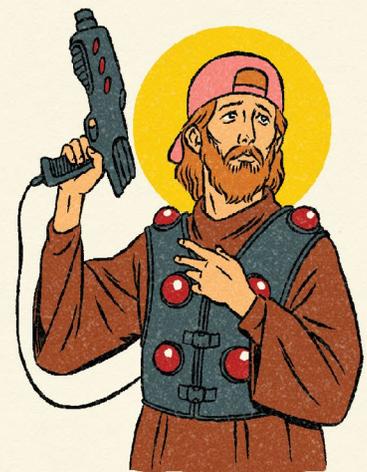


Prayer to

St. William Bookcase

Patron of furniture assembly

Good Saint William Bookcase,
master of the Allen wrench,
I beseech thee, guide me through these
strange hieroglyphics that I may assemble
this couch without error. Grant me
the wisdom to know the difference between
these 3/4" bolts and these 9/16" bolts
and let me not misuse them. Amen.



Prayer to

St. Lazerus

Patron of laser tag

O St. Lazerus, protector of the righteous,
aficionado of fog machines,
guide my hand that my blaster might
strike true against my adversaries.

Defend my sensor vest against those
who would seek to destroy me.

In your sacred name I pray,
hear my plea and let my cup
runneth over with arcade tokens. Amen.



FOR A BRIEF SHINING MOMENT

BY RISHI MITTAL

“A MOMENT COMES, BUT RARELY IN HISTORY, when we step out from the old to the new, when an age ends, and when the soul of a nation, long suppressed, finds utterance.”

On a chill November night at the Brooklyn Paramount theater, Zohran Mamdani became the most powerful Muslim elected official in the United States. Thousands thronged the venue, now restored to its former, decadent glory. On the sloping dance floor, amidst gilded statues, lattices and medallions, under the ornate ceiling backlit in blue, gold, and red, New Yorkers danced. To the consternation of the rich and their hangers-on, the “unapologetic socialist” (as the *Washington Post* labeled him) built his platform on the radical politics of his predecessors, from current progressive champions like Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez to symbols of New York’s own rich history, like former mayor Fiorello La Guardia and labor leader A. Philip Randolph. To the people, he promised the moon and the earth and everything in between: rent freezes on a million apartments, fare-free buses, city-run grocery stores, and universal childcare, all paid for by taxing the rich. It was a dream run, and within a year he went from polling at 1 percent to a clear mandate: over 1.1 million votes,

more than 200,000 over his nearest competitor.

And then, as the clock neared midnight, he gave his speech. “A moment comes,” he said, “but rarely.” These words were first spoken nearly 80 years ago by Jawaharlal Nehru, a freedom fighter and independent India’s first Prime Minister. Amidst the table-thumping, clapping and cheering by the Constituent Assembly, India became an independent nation, free to, as Nehru put it, “tryst with destiny.” While the scope of the territory under his command and the authority at his disposal were different, the central question that confronted him was the same that confronted Mamdani on the night of his victory: how do we take power from the powerful and hand it to the people? Nehru had an idea—a cooperative model of a city, organized on the basis of self-help and mutual ownership, from where one could lay the foundations of a socialist nation.

Politics is not kind to idealists. In the middle of a brewing Cold War, facing ideological warfare within his party and combatting ill health, Nehru’s visions of a better tomorrow fell into the dustbin of history. But when demons from yesteryears rise with new horns, when fascism wears a new face, when the old order lays ruptured at our feet and the new struggles to be born—who can we turn to but history?

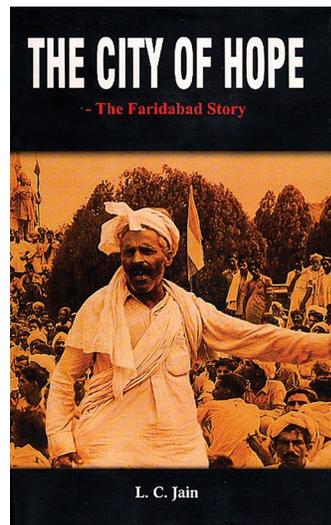


BACK IN INDIA, IN 1947, OUTSIDE THE SANDSTONE walls of the Parliament House, things were dire. The country had been cleaved in two. Partition, the British Empire's parting gift, divided British India into two dominions: Hindu-majority India and Muslim-majority Pakistan. The task of etching the new borders fell on Sir Cyril Radcliffe, an English lawyer and civil servant who had never visited India before. He did not bother with field surveys or community engagement to ensure that people belonged to the new nation of their choosing. Instead, Radcliffe drew on outdated maps and census reports. Then, days before the August 15th deadline, he declared his job finished and left. Consequently, communities woven together over centuries by ties of language, culture, food, and music, crafting a beautiful mosaic, were torn apart, surgically split overnight. As Bishwanath Ghosh put it in his book *Gazing at Neighbours*, these pencil markings were "surgical scars" running through "towns, villages, valleys, farmlands, forests, rivers, ponds and people."

Madness soon gripped the two new nations. Not all at once; news travelled slowly in those days. Rumors of a massacre—of Hindus by Muslims, or vice versa—would reach new areas over the coming days and weeks. From the heartlands of India to the frontiers of Pakistan, 15 million people were forced to leave their homes and farms and settle in lands alien in terms of language and customs, with not a rupee to their name. At least one million died, either along the way, to starvation or disease, or to horrific acts of violence, as entire towns were slaughtered and trainloads of refugees were set ablaze. Some died in their homes before they had a chance to begin the journey, burnt alive by people who moments before midnight were their friends, neighbours, or comrades, united in the struggle for independence. Nehru was "sick with horror," as he confessed in a letter to Lord Mountbatten, the last Viceroy of British India and a close friend. "Above everything was a creeping sense of horror," Nehru wrote, only two weeks after delivering his hopeful victory speech. "There was still an odour of death, a smell of blood and of burning human flesh."

Partition was not the only tragedy the fledgling state had to confront. The British had left India in truly ruinous conditions. Throughout the period of British rule, India was debilitated by dozens of famines, most infamously the Bengal Famine of 1943, which killed an estimated 3 million people. In 1946, the Health Survey and Development Committee, referred to as the Bhoré Committee after its chairman Sir Joseph William Bhoré, had laid bare the state of the nation and of its people. In 1941, India had an average life expectancy of 27, for a population of over 300 million people. Nearly half the deaths were children under 10. Half of those were under one year old. India was not at war, nor was it the site of any (recognized) genocide. It was just the unwilling recipient of 200 years of British "civilization." By 1947, a polycrisis had arrived—poverty, public health collapse, agricultural exhaustion, industrial underdevelopment, an entrenched caste system, border conflicts, and, of course, being a plaything in the ideological battle between superpowers in a world slowly going mad. The Partition was adding gasoline to this fire.

Nehru set up a Ministry of Rehabilitation for the refugees



that now called India home. The Ministry promised food, shelter, and eventually profitable work. Of course, bureaucracy is a Lovecraftian god; its motives and actions are impossible to comprehend, and even a mere attempt to do so would render you insane. Committees and sub-committees were set up and disbanded, meetings and assemblies called with representatives from all concerned provinces, strict letters were sent back and forth between

the highest offices carrying the pettiest grievances, all while the months passed, and the refugees survived on meager rations and the generosity of strangers.

One such stranger was Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, a socialist and the first president of the Indian Cooperative Union. Under her leadership, the ICU, a non-governmental body, promoted the development of worker cooperatives. As L.C. Jain recalls in *City of Hope: The Faridabad Story*, the ICU organized "refugee widows in Delhi" into "a milk cooperative," helped provide loans and credits for already established cooperatives, and exposed government corruption, like when "agricultural land was being cornered by senior civil servants in Delhi[...] instead of being given to landless workers." Owing to these successes, Chattopadhyay and the ICU were given their first refugee rehabilitation site at a location near Delhi. The idea was simple. The refugees would construct their own homes with materials provided by cooperative firms, generous donors, or the state. After some initial help, the refugees would have the skills to earn their own livelihood—not working under the boot of a capitalist, but arm in arm with their fellow workers.



IT WAS NOT SO EASY IN PRACTICE. AS SANDIP KANA notes, the land was "dry and arid" in stark contrast to the "riverine lushness of the Punjab" the refugees had fled from. In addition, many of the refugees claimed

they were zamindars used to "living comfortable lives," not working with their hands. Chattopadhyay had had the unfortunate luck of encountering landlords. These were the last embers of the zamindari system created by the East India Company with the Permanent Settlement Act of 1793. Zamindars had existed before British rule, during the rule of the Mughal Empire. But the Company turned them from mere tax collectors (albeit some so rich they were likened to kings) to an actual class, to landlords acting as intermediaries between the Empire and its peasant subjects.

Under British rule, the *zamindars* and their hereditary heirs lived a life of decadent luxury while squeezing the agricultural tenants toiling on their lands tighter and tighter. When the Brit-

ish left, the zamindari system was abolished, and their privilege went up in smoke. But, for at least a while, their pride remained. They would not work, not with their hands; it was beneath them. At Chattopadhyay's camp, after much convincing, the women gave in first and eventually, the men followed suit. They converted a dry and arid land into a township. Following the construction of their houses and the establishment of agriculture, there were refugee reskilling workshops run by experts to prepare them for a new life.

Chattopadhyay's system had worked. The rest of the refugees in India were in dire need of help. So Nehru gave her another project. That project was Faridabad.

If you ask the people of Faridabad, the city is named after Farid ad-Din Mas'ud Ganj-i Shakkar, a 13th century Sufi religious leader revered by Indians regardless of religion. For Muslims he is Sheikh Farid, the leader of the Chishti Sufi order, the pioneers of Sufism in India. For Punjabis, Hindus, and Sikhs alike, he is known as Baba Farid, a master of Punjabi poetry, who turned Punjabi into a literary language. His poetry and teachings grace the pages of the *Guru Granth Sahib*, the Sikh holy book. This cross-religious veneration isn't unique; South Asia has a history of saints revered by people of different faiths. Together, their stories form the *itihasa*, the oral history and legend.



Nehru addresses the Faridabad refugees on August 10, 1949, shortly before the construction of their new city. (Photo: Wikimedia Commons)

It is different from the history books which record a different Farid: Sheikh Farid Bukhari, titled Murtaza Khan, a 17th century imperial treasurer. The Sheikh built the original walled city as a resting stop on the Grand Trunk Road, a major ancient trade route linking South Asia to Central Asia. Over the decades, the city slowly expanded. Into the early 20th century, many different people lived in this old Faridabad—from rich Muslims like the Syeds to upper-caste Brahmins and Punjabi Khatri, in addition to the migration of nearby agricultural castes like the Jats and Gujjars. Per the 1911 census, Faridabad held around 5,000 people. When Nehru and Chattopadhyay talked about resettling some refugees in Faridabad, they were talking about 30,000. It

was a vast, dramatic expansion of the population, almost overnight.



MOST OF THE REFUGEES WERE FROM THE North-West Frontier Province, home to Hindus, Sikhs, and Muslims, all under the aegis of Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, commonly called Badshah Khan or “the Frontier Gandhi.” After the Partition, he and his followers tried to protect the Hindu and Sikh minorities from the ensuing violence, but it was a doomed endeavor. The forces arrayed against them were vast, from the machineries of a modern state, to the stirrings of centuries-old feuds. The refugees were forced to flee and eventually made their way to Faridabad.

The goal, much like with Chattopadhyay's first success, was to turn Faridabad into a self-sufficient industrial township. Swiftness was the priority rather than bureaucratic thoroughness. A semi-autonomous governing body was created for the new city, the Faridabad Development Board. While still under the central government, it was given broad latitude in conducting its affairs. Nehru, though not officially a member, attended the majority of the meetings. At first, the Board was supported in its day-to-day operations by the army units that oversaw the initial move of the refugees into Faridabad. But the army was soon replaced by an Advisory Committee elected in the first election in independent India on the basis of full adult enfranchisement. All refugees above the age of 21 could both vote and stand for elections to the Advisory Committee to the Faridabad Development Board.

Now came the first real challenge: building the city itself. The central government's Public Works Departments had a seemingly ambitious plan to build 5,000 houses, schools, and health centers, along with the required drainage and roads and electricity. They gave an initial estimate of five years and nearly 50 million Indian Rupees (worth \$10 million in 1950, not a small amount for a poor nation) to complete the project. However, there was a catch. The money and five-year timeline were only for the construction of 10 percent of the houses, to be built by private contractors known to the PWD. The rest, they said, would eventually be developed by some private firm, enticed by some promise or another.

For a look at how these homes would likely have turned out, wander Delhi today, with its bungalows for the rich, staffed by daily wage-laborers and domestic helpers (likely the only positions the refugees would have been able to fill, rather than being masters of their own fate). Or stroll India's countryside and look at the palatial “farmhouses”—vast tracts of land, ostensibly for agricultural use, which really serve as nothing more than mansions for the mega-wealthy. There were even plans for a golf course in Faridabad.

Thankfully, this privatization plan was rejected. The Board went with the ICU and Chattopadhyay's idea of bringing in labor cooperatives from around the nation who would work together with the refugees to lay the essential foundations of the city. The Board and the Union hoped that after the first brush with the cooperative model in constructing their own homes, the refugees would go on to either establish their own cooperative firms or join existing ones.

The refugees at Faridabad were no more experienced in

construction than the ones at Delhi. But after some initial hiccups, these former merchants, traders, and artisans created cooperatives of earth workers, brick manufacturers, and carpenters. They built houses, hospitals, schools, and factories, all run on a cooperative basis, with equal pay and without bosses. It was relentless hard work by the people, diametrically opposed to their life just a few months ago—laboring to the bone, breaking stones, all to build up a new city. In it, they saw hope for the future, for their children, free from the trauma of Partition. They finished the project, all 5,000 houses in record time—under two years and under budget.

L.C. Jain explains the methodology in *The City of Hope*. “The ICU organised these thousands of workers into hundreds of homogeneous working groups” of 10 to 15 people. Membership in each group was voluntary. Each group was tasked with 10 to 20 houses. Older workers were given lighter tasks like picking up “loose pieces of stones on the hillock in Faridabad and gathering them in small piles at convenient places.” One of the workers took on the role of group leader: measuring construction equipment, seeking guidance from engineers (who were overseeing the process), and collecting and distributing payments. To maintain the cooperative spirit of the whole endeavor, it was crucial to prevent this leader from devolving into a boss. The ICU came up with innovative solutions, like setting a ceiling on the salary of the leader and rotating the position amongst all the workers monthly by drawing lots.

Many workers readily accepted these changes, but the group leaders did not. The first cracks started showing on the Faridabad experiment. They complained that it was hypocritical to place a salary cap on their jobs, since India’s top elected leaders, the Prime Minister and the President among others, had not accepted a ceiling on their income: “Why should Faridabad refugees alone be made *guinea pigs* of socialism?” In addition to earning the enmity of these leaders, the Rehabilitation Ministry had become the primary source of antagonism. Chattopadhyay voiced her frustrations in her letters to Nehru: she talked of the Ministry warning off a foreign technician from working with the ICU, about missing payments and bureaucratic hurdles, of “higher officials in the Secretariat” who saw “this new movement of making people self-reliant as a challenge to their established leadership.”

The refugees built themselves a socialized health service, with one health center in each of the five neighborhoods and a central hospital. In the ocean of communal anger, there was a moment of solidarity—the hospital was named after Badshah Khan. The inauguration plaque read, “this hospital built by the people of Faridabad with their own hands was named after their beloved leader.” Healthcare was community-driven, with up to three health check-ups per family per week. The health centers were managed by the People’s Health Committee of the neighborhood, whose members were chosen by the residents. “Health visitors” were another unique invention, distinct from hospital staff—not doctors or nurses, but women trained in maternal, infant, and family care. They visited the families each week, built personal connections, educated them on disease prevention, advised them on common cures, kept updated medical records, and created a support network for the families to depend on.



THE NEIGHBORHOOD COMMITTEES TOGETHER formed a higher body, the Central Health Committee, that worked with the Health Department to ensure the people understood the different medications and vaccinations that would help them survive through serious outbreaks of preventable diseases. This did not require much money, which India did not have anyway. Nor did it require many resources, which the British had stripped over centuries. In *City of Hope*, L.C. Jain recalls the words of Dr. Shanti Ghosh: “You need willing people. We do not need a lot of money. We need organisation.”

The health service dovetailed with Nai Talim, the broad education policy envisioned by Mahatma Gandhi as a new model of education. The neighborhood health centers doubled as public schools. The policy was antithetical to the ones established by the British, who had restricted literacy and modern education to the upper classes. In Faridabad, there were two schools in each neighborhood that, in addition to the traditional subjects of maths, science, English, history etc., taught crafts such as weaving, woodworking, gardening etc. There were classes on the cooperative model of working. And there were night schools to begin to fix the illiteracy of the adults at Faridabad.

The story of Faridabad does not have a happy ending, though. Although tremendously successful in these initial stages, the city’s independence and autonomy merely irritated the people higher up the chain of command. Prime Minister Nehru could not write a letter every time the Rehabilitation Ministry overstepped its bounds. Eventually, when problems arose, when conditions worsened, the city’s leadership was dissolved by orders from above.

After the construction was finished, refugees needed a more permanent source for their income. For the Board and the ICU, this would ideally be entirely facilitated by labor cooperatives. The refugees wished for “cooperative industries” like the ones they were now familiar with, rather than the “capitalistic type of factories”—and cooperatives did arrive, for everything from button manufacturing to wool and cotton making. Some refugees also acquired independent streams of income as weavers, tailors, cobblers, mechanics and carpenters. If this transition had been allowed to proceed over many months, if not years—if, say, as one construction group finished a project, its members joined a labor cooperative of their choosing—then maybe Faridabad would today be a story of socialist success celebrated the world over. But the sudden flood of people, now unemployed and needing help, was too much for the cooperatives alone. The government courted different industrialists, including national and international capital.



CAPITALISTS STEPPED IN, CAPITALISTS WHO are still big names in Faridabad. The Czech-based Bata Corporation was the first and the biggest, establishing a massive shoe



A young worker in a Faridabad clothing factory, 1951 (Photo: Government of India, via The Heritage Lab)

factory in 1951 that employed thousands of refugees. In the years that followed, others arrived, like Escorts Limited and Eicher Motors, which focused on agricultural machinery like tractors. The Rehabilitation Ministry pounced on this moment of weakness and took direct control of the city, relegating the till-now de facto autonomous Faridabad Development Board to a hollow shell. Chattopadhyay wrote to Nehru, but defeat has a sour taste. In Nehru's letters, recorded by L.C. Jain, he expressed frustration and exasperation at the state of affairs, as if he was tired of the whole thing and just wanted it to go away: "[Chattopadhyay] begged me yesterday to take personal interest in this and try to save Faridabad. It is not quite clear what she or anyone else expects me to do."

Rather than seeing the Board and the ICU as comrades in a shared struggle, the Rehabilitation Ministry saw them as threats to its own power. The Ministry buried what Jain calls "the cultural revolution" of Faridabad. The Board meetings became infrequent and, eventually, the Board was declared unnecessary. Private contractors were brought in to replace the cooperatives that did exist, and the ICU was pushed out. Faridabad—the city

it was becoming and the city it could have been—both were no more.

You can still see traces of what it once was. The centrally planned neighborhoods the refugees built have now become the New Industrial Township. The old houses were torn down, but the structure remains, retained in the shape of the buildings and the narrow lanes that separate them. Nearby is what was once proudly Badshah Khan Hospital, now renamed the District Civil Hospital. The memorial plaque is squirreled away somewhere in its upper floors. The hospital is in dire need of renovation, but it still serves the people—the staff are friendly, the doctors just as good as you'll find at any other. That era still exists, at least in people's memories.

There is, also, unfortunately, a golf course.



BACK IN NEW YORK, ZOHAN MAMDANI—himself a part of the Indian diaspora—would return to Nehru and his "Tryst with Destiny" speech, when, at his inauguration, he would talk of the rarity of such moments, the need to transform and reinvent, the need for a new politics and a new approach to power. If there is one thing he could learn from Nehru's legacy, it is how monumental the task of seizing that moment can be. And how no one, whether the mayor or the Prime Minister, can accomplish it on their own.

To witness the history of socialism, we turn not to a museum but a graveyard. Not dusty books, entombed bodies, carefully preserved artifacts. Socialism isn't there. It is in the unmarked graves of martyred revolutionaries. It exists in crumbling buildings. Failed revolutions. Ideas that died in boardrooms, plans for a better future lost amidst rotting paper, trapped in spiderwebs. But, specter-like, socialism rises again and again.

Mamdani needs to ensure his City Hall maintains the independent spirit with which it has begun its tenure. He must not drink the sweet poison of compromise at Astoria, or playact in the telenovela at the national stage. Clear-eyed, he must drag his dream from heaven to earth, and hand the keys to the city to its people. Mamdani is not a superman who, in one term alone, can fix New York. No, he must merely be the first of many who will together, *forever*, dull the instruments of the billionaire class—Andrew Cuomo, Gavin Newsom, Rahm Emanuel, and countless others. There is no limit when you have the people on your side—and the people are on his side! Everything from socialized medicine to education to worker co-ops: all of it and more has been done before, in Faridabad and elsewhere. You do not need money, not really. If a refugee populace could do it, with nothing but the clothes on their backs, in a nation left to rot after centuries of colonialism, why cannot New Yorkers? What is stopping them? What is stopping any of us? ❄️

KNOW YOUR BILLIONAIRES

JEFF BEZOS

AGE: 61 YEARS

NET WORTH:
\$238 BILLION

GOT RICH FROM:
ANTI-TRUST VIOLATIONS,
MONOPOLIZATION,
REGULATORY CAPTURE

AMAZON PREDATOR

- Amazon's business model was to function at a loss to starve out competitors, and secure long-term profits for investors by monopolizing the market.
 - Creates a marketplace that suppliers rely on, and then produces Amazon-branded knockoffs that compete with them.
 - Uses unequal market access to coerce suppliers into contracts that guarantee Amazon has the lowest price, meaning that suppliers raise prices elsewhere to subsidize Amazon.
- Avoids billions in taxes and reinvests a fraction of that money into political lobbying to capture the regulatory environment.
 - Ruthlessly churns through workers against a bloodied wheel of algorithm-optimized extraction, exploiting loopholes in labor law.

FACT: Workers under Jeff Bezos pee in bottles to appease ticking surveillance clocks.

FACT: Amazon started by selling books.

Now it sells tiny homes, off-brand supplements, and sex toys for dogs.

HORNY BALD FREAK

- Flies to space in a big robotic penis while laughing maniacally. Has no other apparent interest in space or science.
- An anonymous Amazon engineer said "[Bezos] loves Prime Video because it gives him access to the social scene in LA and New York. He's newly divorced and the richest man in the world. Prime Video is a loss leader for Jeff's sex life."
- He got a divorce right after Saudi Arabia leaked his horny texts to the National Enquirer.
- Probably a swinger or something. Just guessing, but I think he has pierced nipples.

FACT: When Jeff Bezos came back from space to do nothing except be rich in space, he said: "I want to thank every Amazon employee and every Amazon customer, because you guys paid for all this."



PETER THIEL

AGE: 58 YEARS

NET WORTH:
\$26.7 BILLION

GOT RICH FROM:
MONOPOLY POWER,
REGULATORY
CAPTURE

THAT BOY AIN'T RIGHT

- Stutters and sweats while arguing that democracy should be abolished and that climate change isn't real.
- Grew up white in Apartheid South Africa, left hating multiculturalism and loving rule by the elite (you connect the dots).
- Shadowy elite figure who advances an inspiring vision of rule by a shadowy elite.
- Resentful overdog who imagines himself the underdog.

FACT:
JOKE REMOVED;
THIEL IS INFAMOUSLY
LITIGIOUS! -EDITOR

ESCHATON IMMANENTIZER

- Got rich charging fees and freezing accounts on Paypal.
- A self-described libertarian whose business model is built on licensing oppressive surveillance machinery to the state.
- Financier of far-right campaigns & thinktanks and divider of Thanksgiving dinners.
- Like a philanthropist, except only for the cause of producing the Apocalypse.

FACT: He thinks that Greta Thunberg is the "Anti-Christ" despite his conspicuously Anti-Christ-like appearance and behavior.

GHOUL WHO CRAVES YOUNG BLOOD

- Could not give a direct answer to the question, "Should humanity survive?"
- Allegedly takes blood transfusions from the young to extend his lifespan.
- The closest thing we have to a real-life Emperor Palpatine or Voldemort. I mean, look at him.

FACT: He co-wrote a book against affirmative action in 1995.

He could have written a book about anything.

ART: MATT BEAUDOIN
(X: @scrub_lover)

WRITING: SHAWN VULLIEZ
(X: @wrong_shon)





THE BANAL HORROR OF JIMMY FALLON

BY JON GREENAWAY

THERE IS A DISTINCTIVE, deeply uncanny horror to the way Jimmy Fallon laughs. Look it up—there are literally hundreds of videos showing him breaking out into laughter at the slightest provocation. It is not a reaction (he sometimes won't even wait for his guest to get to their carefully scripted punchline). Rather, it is a *performance*, a sudden, corporeal convulsion.

Fallon leans in his chair, as if pressed back by some unseen force. It's accompanied by the ritualistic slapping of the desk, a sound that echoes like a gavel in a courtroom. Watching the *Tonight Show* in the deep hours of the night, beaming out from a phone screen or laptop, there's an unshakeable impression that this is not really entertainment but a desperate kind of ritual.

Fallon acts as the high priest of a terrified optimism, his rictus grin serving as a shield against the encroaching silence of the real. Here, in the sanitized, over-lit heart of the American culture industry, there is an inescapable horror. But it isn't a monster lurking in the shadows; it is the manic, unblinking insistence that actually,

there are no shadows at all. If the Gothic tradition of fear teaches us that the ruins of the past haunt the present, *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon* offers the inverse: a present so forcefully flattened, so aggressively “fun,” that it has exorcised history entirely, leaving us trapped in a sterile, eternal loop of viral games and celebrity lip-syncing while the world slides into climate collapse and fascist politics.

A typical episode of Fallon's *Tonight Show* has the usual staples of the late-night format, the ones introduced by Steve Allen all the way back in the 1950s and perfected by Johnny Carson: an opening monologue, a couple of celebrity interviews, a musical performance to close out the evening. But what's made Fallon so popular has been his use of endless, repetitive, shareable games. Night after night, he invites you to watch people you know from other shows on TV, or who just coincidentally have a movie or an album to promote, play Pictionary. Watch them Lip Sync Battle! When watching almost any video that goes viral from *The Tonight Show*, all I can think is: “haven't I seen this already?” Of course I have—we all have. The whole point of these dance challenges, or singing challenges or party games, is that they are

fundamentally repeated gestures. They're shared, copied, and endlessly reproduced.

These games are not true “play” in the revolutionary sense of the word, wherein games are unscripted, free, and disruptive. Instead, they represent the total commodification of play. In a cultural landscape dominated by the attention economy and defined by precarious labor and existential dread, Fallon presents play not as an escape from work, but as an obligatory task that must be performed, a contractual obligation to a marketing team. He recently joined forces with the soulless monstrosity that is State Farm to shill their insurance, and in a great detail, their ad highlights that you don't actually need to tell a joke for Jimmy to appear. You just need to say the word “joking” to summon him like a cheap simulacra of Bloody Mary or Candyman. Advertising Fallon is indistinguishable from him on the show—after all, he's doing exactly the same thing.

Fallon and his pseudo-play are, as Bo Burnham pointed out in a 2016 standup set, the end of culture: “People we've seen too much of, mouthing along to songs we've heard too much of.” Celebrities fucking around in front of us to take up our time and our attention.

Watching the *Tonight Show* is an exercise in cultural déjà vu. It's the endless repetition of the already familiar in a setting that is designed to gain our attention, but makes no other demand upon us as a viewer. The familiar cry of “Let people enjoy things” might come in response. But *this*? This is what we're supposed to enjoy? As Kate Wagner writes for *The Baffler*:

It may appear somewhat cruel to take entertainment to task. But the far worse alternative would be a world without criticism—a world well-wishing people are now working to build for their bosses, one where monopolistic media conglomerates cater to our simplest desires and most superficial political awareness. Until we are all forced to communicate with memes from pods wholly owned by Disney, we're just going to have to Let People Dislike Things.

Fallon presides over his rituals of play like a vampire, feeding not on blood but on enthusiasm. He doesn't really converse



Fallon gives Donald Trump a friendly ruffle in 2016

with any of his guests; they all know what they are there for. Rather, he *extracts*. He demands “relatability” from them, draining the authenticity from the interaction until only the husk of a “viral moment” remains. The horror lies in the repetition: the feigned shock, the hysterical laughter at unfunny mishaps, the relentless “Golden Retriever energy.”

It is a performance of joy so excessive, so desperate, that it reveals the void it attempts to cover. It is the logic of the assembly line applied to human connection. What Fallon offers is a standardized production of “fun” that feels increasingly like a desperate plea to ignore the crumbling world outside the studio walls.

The real, unsettling mechanism of Fallon’s banal horror is its insistence on a radical non-engagement with reality: a position that, in our current political climate, is itself an aggressively political act. Fallon doesn’t *do* politics, or if he does, he wants to “keep his head down” because “we hit both sides equally.” Tellingly, Donald Trump has called for the firing of almost all of the other late night hosts—Colbert, Kimmel, even Seth Meyers—but excluded Fallon from his hit-list, because Trump recognizes that there’s nothing about Fallon’s empty banality that could be anything close to a threat. Contrast Fallon’s “head empty, no thoughts” presentation with someone like Dick Cavett. Back in 1969, on what was, at the time, the most popular show in the country, there’s a 17-minute segment with James Baldwin on the possibility of Black liberation in America. There’s a moment where Baldwin talks of

the American system wanting him, as a Black man, to be an accomplice to his own murder. The camera cuts back to Cavett, who has been listening intently. “I don’t understand that last sentence,” says Cavett, which leads into a discussion of the work and activism of Stokely Carmichael. What’s shocking is not just the content but the space and time given to ideas—to the intellectual and cultural problems of the world outside the studio walls.

In contrast, Fallon is desperate to keep the real world out. In his interviews, he barely seems to be listening to his guests, waiting for them to finish speaking so his rituals can begin anew. The constant, forced joviality can’t completely conceal an encroaching terror—the horror of the political world that keeps threatening to break down the

walls around his studio-castle.

This machinery of niceness reaches points of fracture, but only occasionally. The most infamous was back in September 2016, when Fallon hosted Donald Trump. He sat with the then-candidate, not to interrogate or even lampoon him, but to perform a brief, cozy skit culminating in Fallon mussing Trump’s hair. The moment was not just a lapse in judgment; it was the ultimate, logical end point of the show’s ideological structure.

THE *TONIGHT SHOW* IS BUILT to liquify all phenomena into content. Trump, the political reactionary and demagogue, the harbinger of a crisis, was treated not

as a threat to democracy or a figure of public concern, but just another wacky celebrity guest willing to play along. Fallon and his show are not horrifying because they are malevolent, actively creating suffering in the world, but because of a thoughtless, systematic refusal to perceive any of their work as having ethical consequences. Trump’s monstrosity becomes merely eccentric, as neoliberal media packaged as entertainment normalizes a failing status quo.

Another example: Paris Hilton went on the show in 2022 to discuss her then-recent wedding. In the video, Jimmy even holds up a framed picture from the altar. On cue come the “awwws” from the audience. We’re told that Paris didn’t cry, but her fiancé (now husband) did. Jimmy laughs at this for no discernible reason.



Fallon with Paris Hilton in 2022. Less than two years after this episode was filmed, virtually all NFTs would be worthless

Then comes the horrifying turn. They start talking about NFTs (“non-fungible tokens,” the pictures of cartoon primates that were briefly supposed to be the future of finance). Jimmy pulls out a picture of Paris’s NFT, one of the infamously fugly “Bored Apes.” Fallon’s face is a perfect death mask of impassivity, his eyes a blank and empty void. He confesses that he has one too. These financial instruments are now virtually worthless, but at the end of the interview the point of the segment becomes clear. She’s there to give away her own NFT to the audience who, on cue, cheer. Fallon lurches to his feet: “I think that’s the first NFT giveaway in television history,” he cries. You can practically see the blood dripping from his mouth and eyes. There has not yet been a second giveaway, but perhaps with this particular blend of vapid, ritualistic positivity and speculative, environmentally damaging technology, once was enough.

The peak of this banal nightmare arrived only recently when Sam Altman, the serene architect of our contemporary algorithmic enclosure, sat across from Fallon to discuss the most intimate of human labors: the rearing of a child, and how he simply couldn’t imagine raising his newborn baby without the “help” of ChatGPT. With the flat, bloodless affect of a man who has already priced in the end of the world, Altman described using ChatGPT as a parental surrogate. Unlike with Hilton, here the audience is deathly quiet. As Altman offers up the future of his own offspring to the black box of his company’s large language model, Fallon’s grin never wavers. It is the ultimate Gothic inversion: the living child is transformed into a data set to be optimized, while the host performs a pantomime of joy to mask the sound of a tomb clicking shut.

The horror of *The Tonight Show* is perfected not in its live broadcast, but in its fragmentation and digital afterlife. The show is precision-crafted for algorithmic engagement. Every episode is around 90 minutes of filming whose primary purpose is to generate ten minutes of highly clickable YouTube content. Fallon isn’t really a host, he’s more a content *curator*, constantly mining the moment for its potential as a self-contained, shareable commodity.

The true audience is not the people watching at home at 11:30 PM, but the anonymous mass scrolling through video

feeds the next morning. The original broadcast becomes merely the raw material for the machine, haunted by its digital offspring. This is where the Gothic element reasserts itself: the uncanny feeling that the show you are watching is not really happening. It is a ghostly simulacrum, merely rehearsing itself for its eventual, more profitable existence as a series of clips.

That said, the live studio audience plays a crucial though ultimately passive role in this arrangement. Their exaggerated, almost robotic applause and laughter are essential; they provide the necessary social proof that the segment is, indeed, “fun.” They are asked to perform the joy that the viewer might no longer feel. The audience under the thrall of the glowing “applause” sign becomes, in effect, a collective mechanism for suppressing negative critique, enforcing the manufactured consensus that this vapid spectacle is exactly what we want, and exactly what we deserve.

The horror of *The Tonight Show* is not found in any singular problem, but in the

totality of its project: the systematic replacement of the real world with a brightly lit simulation of “niceness.” Fallon is the court jester of the Anthropocene, a figure who invites us to watch celebrities play parlor games on stage while the air outside the studio begins to smell of tear gas and smoke. In Fallon’s sterile loop of viral repetition comes the final victory of the commodity over human beings—a world where even our laughter is outsourced to the demands of the algorithm. You don’t even need jokes anymore. All you need is to say something that sounds like it could be a joke, and the hollow laughter will come. To watch Fallon is to stare at the face of a culture that has chosen the comfort of a rictus grin over the heavy, necessary terror of the truth. It serves as a grim warning: if we cannot reclaim our play, our politics, and our presence from this algorithmic void, we will be left with nothing but the echoes of a desk being slapped in an empty room, for an audience that has long since ceased to exist. ♣



STARING AT THE POINTING HAND

BY ADAM MCKAY

WHEN I POINT TO where I just threw a ball or dropped a treat for our seven-year-old Shepherd/Chow mix, Timothy, he simply stares at my hand. Not to where I'm pointing.

The more desperately I move my arm around, the more Tim focuses on it, my hand now looking like a pecking woodpecker or a fleshier, tastier version of the treat I'm trying to point him toward.

But who's really the confused party here—me, or black-nosed, curl-tailed Timothy? How could he know what pointing means? He doesn't have fingers. His sense of direction is based on a highly developed sense of smell, not the

arrows and signs that my pointing tries to simulate.

So why do I keep pointing, when it's not working, and will never work?

As Timothy stares at my hand, while I impotently repeat a cryptic gesture known only to my species, I'm reminded of the way our society has been politically frozen during the last decade, with none of the biggest problems getting solved. Why is it so difficult to direct popular attention and action toward what matters?

Part of the answer is that mainstream news, social media, and the dozens of other ways we communicate with each other have become hyper-profitized, algorithmically manipulative and twisted into weapons of division by the forces of big capital that are currently having their way with the world. Yet over and over

again we return to the same legacy news outlets, pundits, talking points, and pieces of conventional wisdom that once seemed to work, but are now plainly making things worse.

And here we sit, staring at a pointing finger while preventable disaster after disaster pummels us.

The crises could not be more urgent. Mass detention centers are currently being set up across the U.S., with billions being spent on a terrifying "nationwide 'ghost network' of concentration camps." Cartoonish levels of corruption are exploding, with the U.S. falling to its worst-ever rank in a global corruption index and the White House brazenly embracing a "pay to play" philosophy of politics. Fossil fuel companies are escalating their destruction of the planet,



obliterating our species' hopes for a livable future, with scientists warning that global warming is accelerating faster than predicted and feedback loops may well trigger "a new and hellish 'hothouse Earth' climate." And since 2023, we have watched the livestreamed, nonstop slaughter of tens of thousands of people in Gaza, the majority of them women and children, with the full support of the U.S. government under both Democratic and Republican presidents.

In the face of these overwhelming catastrophes, legacy news, talking heads, and elected officials repeat the same kinds of tired, spurious talking points designed to waylay consensus and divert us from taking meaningful action.

It's complicated.

You have to choose between the lesser of two evils.

Any change must be driven by market incentives.

Or we hear that *activists* are the problem, not the companies wrecking the planet. On the *New York Times* op-ed page we read that "attempts to punish the fossil fuel industry by limiting leases or permits for export facilities or blocking projects often backfire," so "advocates should support stable oil and gas production." Matt Yglesias pleads with us to "support America's oil and gas industry" as they drive planetary warming off the charts.

Anyway, *don't be so worried*. The *Wall Street Journal* op-ed page says there's no need to "freak out" about the climate crisis, repeating fossil fuel industry falsehoods to paint a rosy picture of the future. When they do acknowledge the crisis, they tell us that *we can't do anything anyway*. Global warming is simply "the future we're heading toward," because "humanity has shown that it's

unwilling to impose the limits on economic activity that would be necessary to keep global warming below 1.5 degrees Celsius," and therefore all we can do is resign ourselves.

But the most powerful weapon of all is silence: simply *not mentioning* that any of this is happening. Or burying it in the back of the newspaper, as the *New York Times* infamously did with the Holocaust and now does with climate news. Or reporting it, but doing so only once it's too late and the window for action has closed.

Helplessness, confusion, and anger have become the one common reality we all share, precisely because we've been robbed of any unifying mass media depiction of anything remotely resembling reality. Americans are bombarded with dozens of micro-targeted narratives every day, tailored to their comfortable consumer profile but not their need to know in order to act. And nobody can be expected to navigate this moment without having even one functioning, widely-available news outlet, a trusted source of information to replace the dozens of "legacy" outlets that have collapsed like a 100-foot-tall ice sculpture of Edward R. Murrow on a 92-degree January day.

The oligarchs aren't even pretending they want to keep us informed anymore. They view functioning news as a threat—which it is, because if people understood how their futures are being wrecked to keep the rich rich, they'd be furious. The pitchforks might come out.

It's getting worse every day. *CBS News*, the legendary home of Murrow and Cronkite, is now run by Bari Weiss, a pro-Israel zealot who has already started yanking stories that don't show "balance," i.e., that are insufficiently deferential

to the powerful. Jeff Bezos ordered his *Washington Post* to print only opinions that are favorable to free-market capitalism—in other words, to celebrate the very system that is erasing the possibility of maintaining a livable planet. A billionaire dictated that one of our nation's leading papers, instead of trying to halt our civilizational suicide, will actively cheerlead for it. Soon after, he fired more than 300 journalists, about one-third of the staff, including eliminating the entire books section. (Who needs *books*?)

The *New York Times* has shamefully downplayed the Gaza genocide, and blacked out the role of billions and billions of dollars in soft and dark money in steering the direction of U.S. government. They have also buried the climate crisis for decades. Despite having many excellent climate journalists on their payroll, the *Times* has treated it as a mere “environmental issue,” and the paper has even accepted (and produced) sponsored content for the fossil fuel industry.

Amidst this bog of omissions, half truths and straight up misinformation—even when a preeminent climate scientist like James Hansen posts that with a high probability of an El Niño weather system coming by the end of the year, we will likely see even faster, incredibly dangerous global warming—a person almost can't be blamed for asking, “Who do I believe? This guy I've barely heard of telling me this sci fi movie information or a 100-year-old news outlet like the *BBC* or the *Times*?”

And then, Dr. Hansen or one of dozens of other scientists reminds us that in 2023, when we last had an El Niño, temperatures surpassed the Paris Accord's “do not cross line” of 1.5 degrees Celsius—and did not go back down even after the El Niño ended. (That's an average global temperature increase of 34.7 degrees Fahrenheit compared to pre-industrial levels.) By now, I don't know about you, but I can't take my eyes off this weird scientist's pointing hand. Why is he so excited and animated? And what's with the hat?

And then, finally, when Hansen informs us we could easily hit *1.7 degrees Celsius* warming in 2027, and there is no guarantee civilization can withstand the violent weather and climatic changes that kind of blindingly fast warming will unleash, the medium has fully and completely become the message. And that message is: “Who is this crank CNN won't even talk to and why won't he

stop jabbing his pointing finger in the air?”

After all, there is zero chance as flawed as our mainstream news ecosystem is, it would fail to report a story as seismic and life threatening as approaching two degrees Celsius warming in just a few fucking years, right?

Right?

This is exactly the murky place in which a lot of us are stuck. A gray area between the truth and where we grew up believing the truth would come from. Individuals and data versus the warm comfort of an established brand.

And we've been getting hammered because of it.

There is some good news though. All of the high-end graphics, high-priced talent, reach, and brand loyalty in the world can't change one thing: stone cold reality. The facts are real, whether they're reported, distorted, or ignored.

You see, all of the advertising, troll farms, focus-grouped talking points, and bots that are deployed every day by big capital have one end goal in their sights: something the marketing world calls “unaided awareness.” Unaided awareness is when a person brings up a product, movie, candidate, event, issue, etc. without being prompted. Slang for this threshold is “living rent free in your head.” It means a consumer has internalized the marketing and thus big capital's world view.

But here's the thing. Actual reality and the way we experience it is by *its very nature unaided awareness*.

And best of all, it's free.

For instance, *Drop Site News* didn't have a large marketing budget when a couple of veteran journalists shunned corporate funding and set up independently in 2024. They have been breaking story after story about the Gaza genocide, the most horrific atrocity in recent history. The story of how Big Oil fully knew they were destroying the livable climate way back in the 1970s and chose to lie about it? That was reported by *Inside Climate News*—you won't see it on *60 Minutes*, or hear the reporters interviewed by Jake Tapper. Reporter Julie K. Brown of the *Miami Herald* was “a single mother with two kids to put through college [...] permanently in debt and struggling week-by-week to keep her head above the gathering waters of financial overstretch.” But she started poking around

on a story about a sweetheart plea deal that federal prosecutors had given to a Florida billionaire named Jeffrey Epstein. In 2018, Brown eventually exposed how a powerful elite network shielded one of the most prolific sexual predators of our time.

The Lever, 404 Media, Inside Climate News, Sludge, journalist Ken Klippenstein, *The Handbasket, The Real News Network, In These Times, Status Coup News, Current Affairs, Democracy Now!, The Nation, Capital and Main* and dozens and dozens of other independent news outlets have experienced hockey stick-level subscriber growth over the past five years, as hyper-financialization and the oligarchs devour what's left of the old information system. And when a new social media site called UpScrolled launched a few weeks ago, one that is not owned by a creepy, amoral billionaire, account sign-ups shattered all expectations.

There is a hunger for something different and better. People know there's something wrong. There's an active change happening in the production of news—the way we relate to it, how we get it, and the way we question, challenge, and support it.

And yes, after idiotically pointing dozens and dozens of times I finally stopped and tried another way to help Timothy find the ball. I just pretended to do another throw in the same direction, and his eyes instantly went in the right direction.

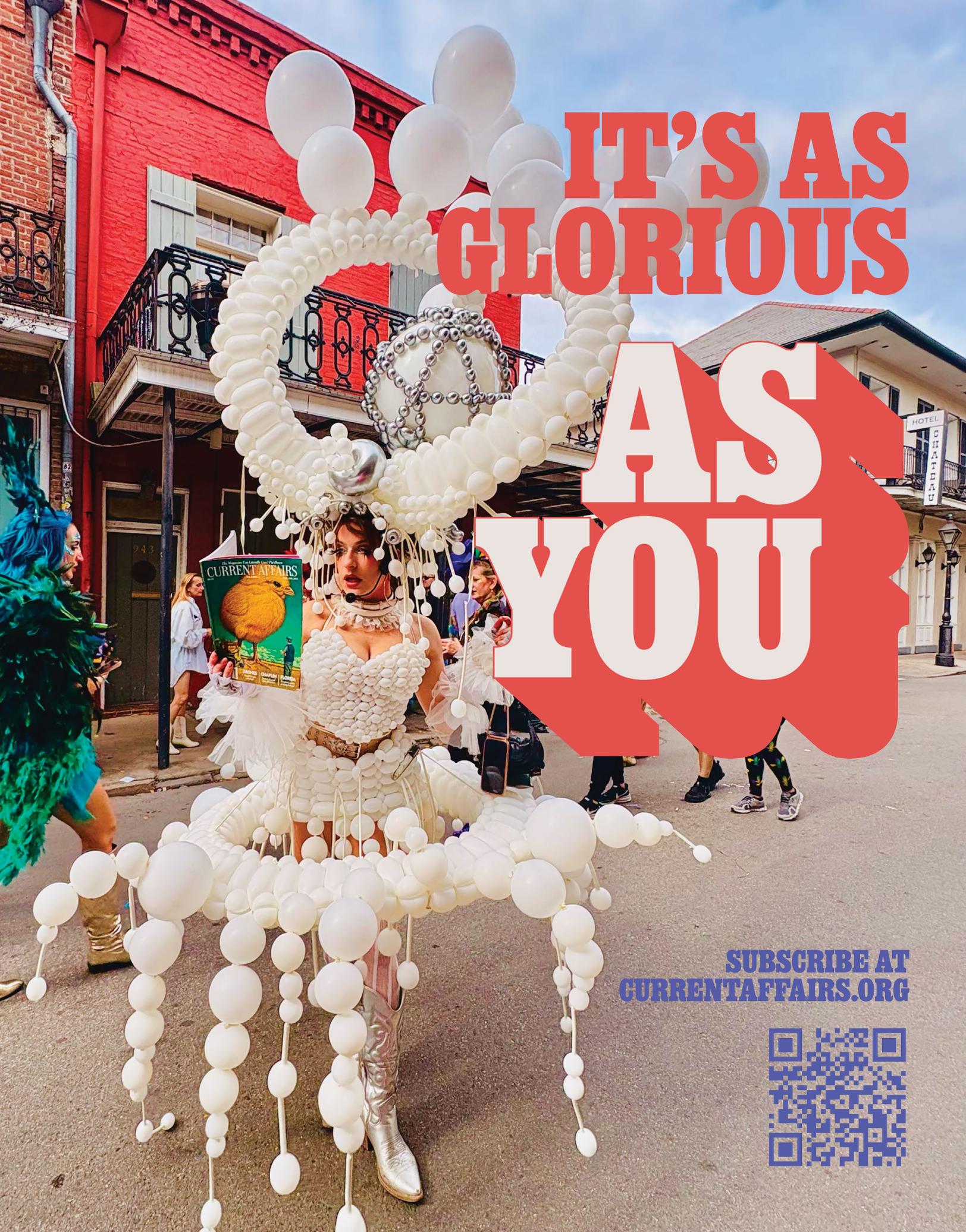
Tim doesn't screw around. He only understands action.

But he wouldn't give me that ball back and I couldn't catch him. Still working on that part. 🍀



**YELLOW DOT
STUDIOS**

Adam McKay is the Academy Award-winning filmmaker behind *Anchorman, The Big Short, Vice* and *Don't Look Up*. He founded the nonprofit Yellow Dot Studios in order to harness the power of entertainment to combat Big Oil disinformation and mobilize action on the fossil fuel pollution crisis.

A woman is the central figure, wearing a costume made of numerous white balloons. She has a large, circular balloon arch around her head and a skirt-like structure of balloons around her waist. She is holding a magazine titled "CURRENT AFFAIRS" which features a large yellow bird on the cover. She is also wearing silver boots and a necklace. The background shows a street scene with a red brick building and a "HOTEL GATEAU" sign.

**IT'S AS
GLORIOUS**

**AS
YOU**

**SUBSCRIBE AT
CURRENTAFFAIRS.ORG**





MILKING THE LOLCOW

BY EMILY TOPPING

HE STARTED OUT BY EATING A ROLL OF TOILET paper in 2011. Then came the videos swallowing raw eggs, jars of wasabi, burgers still in the wrapping, Vegemite by the spoonful, and soon enough, sticks of deodorant by the mouthful, lit matches, and bottles of glue. By 2014, Chris Schewe (better known by his username “shoenice”) had built a YouTube following of more than 50 million views and over 200,000 subscribers, who continued to tune in as he perfected his star act: downing entire bottles of high-proof liquor in one gulp.

Shoenice occupied a niche corner of internet micro-celebrity, but he had some brushes with the big leagues. A 2014 *Vice* documentary shows the Gulf War veteran leaning on the balcony of a motel in Lake George, New York, while he muses about losing his ex-wife and teenage son over his newfound obsession: “My family threw me out two years ago because they just don’t understand my YouTube career and what it’s all about,” he says, looking out over a barren parking lot.

The YouTuber then leads the camera crew on a tour of his childhood neighborhood, explaining that as a kid, he developed a reputation as a class clown with an iron stomach, earning the respect of playground bullies by scarfing down shards of metal, grass, and fistfuls of sawdust. Later, Schewe says, after serving in the military and rescuing a child from starvation, he realized his true calling: “Shoenice believes that through his massive social media fanbase, he will lead a revolution effectively ending global hunger forever,” reads the documentary caption.

It’s never explained exactly how Schewe expects to achieve this goal, let alone how filming himself eating household items

and chugging liquor will help. What’s clear is that Schewe loves the attention from his “fans,” whose comments he reads for hours on end, and who tell him what to eat next: “My mother always said I was going to change the world, and she was right,” he says.

At the end of the documentary, we learn a different explanation for Schewe’s stomach of steel: his mother was a severe alcoholic, and when she failed to bring home food, he would eat toilet paper to soothe his grumbling belly. Schewe later found her dead on the living room floor from alcohol poisoning. Still, he can’t seem to stop posting on YouTube, and in turn, drinking. “I’m a lot of people’s higher power; I’m their antidepressant,” he says of his fanbase. It sounds like he believes it.

More than a decade later, most of Shoenice’s videos have been scrubbed from YouTube. But in recent weeks, he seems to have returned to the platform. A video posted in late January titled “Screaming at the public” shows Schewe driving erratically through an unknown suburb, yelling obscenities at passersby. The video has fewer than 800 views and only two comments.

One of them reads, “Can you plz do this again, but right after a bottle slam?”

If the internet is a pasture, then it will never be empty of laughing stock. The term “lolcow” first appeared online around 2007, defined as a person who is gullible, attention-seeking, and easy to milk for laughs. Shoenice skyrocketed to internet fame because he would eat anything you told him to, but more importantly, because he wasn’t in on the joke. Many of today’s lolcows entertain their audiences in different ways, but always because they’re easy to provoke.

On the darkest corner of the early internet, an online forum



Screenshots from Chris Schewe's YouTube channel—which show him downing liquor and eating items from the medicine cabinet—are featured in the 2014 Vice documentary “Shoemice22 Will Eat Anything for Fame.”

called Kiwi Farms was formed to facilitate the discussion and harassment of lolcows, and provide a working database of their identities. Originally created to track a single early lolcow, the site would later expand into a rolling archive of internet personalities—many of them autistic, mentally ill, or otherwise socially vulnerable—whose behavior could be endlessly documented and provoked. The site is also a hotbed for right-wing extremism, and many of its targets are transgender. In extreme cases, the tactics for harassment include doxxing (publishing private information like addresses or phone numbers), trying to get them fired from jobs, or reporting crimes at their location in order to send police to their homes (known as swatting). As of 2022, Kiwi Farms had 16,000 daily logins, according to its administrators. The website has been linked to three different suicides.

But it's only a minority of lolcow-watchers who actively try to ruin their targets' lives. Today, most people familiar with these “celebrities” likely don't even know the word—they just find entertainment in watching clips of some odd, eccentric person.

Across the internet, everyday people often skyrocket to niche stardom simply for being overly confident, socially unaware, and for daring to broadcast themselves online. People watch out of pity and apparent camaraderie with fellow viewers. *At least that's not me*, they tell themselves, as the lolcow embarrasses himself yet again: by thinking they really have fans, or by falling for a viewer's trick. And if the lolcow is revealed to actually be a “bad person”—having said a slur, or committed a crime—that's the greatest gift of all. Then you can tune in guilt-free, and never question your own motivations.

One of the clearest contemporary examples is Joshua Block, who is autistic and initially gained popularity on TikTok in 2020 for posting coffee reviews and videos exploring New York City. (In his first viral clip, Block belted the Alicia Keys song “Empire State of Mind” in Times Square, apparently oblivious to the throngs of tourists around him.) As his audience grew, so did their involvement in his life. Block now has over half a million followers on Instagram, while a Reddit thread dedicated to tracking his whereabouts receives more than 1,500 posts a week. Since amassing a sizable audience, the streamer has descended into alcoholism, encouraged by viewers who sometimes send money and goad him to drink.

ANOTHER IS DANIEL LARSON, A MAN DIAGNOSED with autism and schizophrenia whose erratic outbursts and paranoid delusions have earned thousands of followers on TikTok. To even be aware of Larson's existence is to be part of an inside joke—which is why you can buy T-shirts emblazoned with his face on Etsy.

Through Instagram and live-streaming platforms like TikTok and Twitch, the lolcow phenomenon has crawled from the depths of cyberspace and entered the mainstream. In 2012, *Force of Geek* writer Stefan Blitz analyzed the term in an article titled “The Anatomy of a Lolcow”:

America has Sarah Palin, TV has Toddlers and Tiaras, Office Space had Milton, and the internet has lolcows, people infamous across the web for pushing the weird line just a little too far. Lolcows are named as such because they provide endless milk in the form of creepy fan fiction, terrible art, temper tantrums, fragile egos, or anything else for a good laugh. [...] A big reason lolcows appeal to internet users is their disturbing sense of familiarity: many of us can look at a lolcow and see a reflection, however distorted.

The original lolcow was a person named Christine Chandler, also known online as Chris Chan, who became the subject of internet obsession in 2007 when 8chan users caught wind of her comic Sonichu (a hybrid of Pikachu and Sonic the Hedgehog). Chandler's intense earnestness, and the poor artistic quality of the comic, made her an easy target—along with the fact that she responded extensively to the criticism and mockery. From there, an informal network of observers began “tracking Chandler's digital footprint as well as her movements in real life through filming, doxxing, hacking, and in some cases, even impersonating potential partners,” writes *Business Insider*.

For trolls, the draw of a lolcow comes from watching a train-wreck unfold in real time. In this case, there has never been a shortage of content: the comic book creator, who is autistic and transgender, was charged in 2015 with attacking a video game store employee, and in 2021, after years of online speculation about a sexual relationship with her elderly mother, she was arrested on charges of incest. (The case was dismissed by a judge after attorneys requested a deferred prosecution due to Chandler's mental state).

The Kiwi Farms forum (also known as CWCKi) was first created in dedication to the extensive knowledge of Chandler's life. Under an FAQ section, one question reads “How can you get off taunting an autistic person?” The dubious answer: “The CWCKi itself is not involved in any trolling; it merely documents Chris's life in detail.” Still, any trolling is justified as such:

Even before the incest scandal, Chris has been notorious on the Internet as a perverse, disgusting, quarrelsome, mean-spirited, delusional[...] utterly untalented thief and all-around failure who wastes his countrymen's hard-earned tax money on video games and sex toys while contributing nothing to society (comics aside), despite those with more severe mental states living far more independently and successfully.

On top of that, Chris was once incredibly responsive to trolling,

adding fuel to the fire by producing many videos in which he raged at the camera as a result of trolling; this no doubt gave many trolls significant motivation. While Chris was manipulated into making many of these videos, he ultimately decided to create and publish them.

The section is filled with hyperlinks to various pieces of internet evidence that supposedly prove Chandler's sexual and moral perversions, thus moralizing the internet's taunting. But any further digging only makes the entire website more baffling. The question isn't whether this person "deserves" to be trolled, it's why troll at all? When Chandler was first singled out, she was just a random nobody from Virginia, posting anime drawings on secluded outposts of the internet. Now, a "documentary series" on YouTube titled "Chris Chan: A Comprehensive History" has 91 published episodes, each over 30 minutes long. The first installment was posted six years ago; the most recent, in the last three months. Why have thousands of people dedicated years to obsessively fixating on, and inserting themselves into, a stranger's seemingly bizarre and tragic life?

In 2024, one year after the incest charges were dropped against Chandler, bodycam footage of her arrest was pub-

lished online. (The video now has 9 million views on YouTube.) As officers lead her from an apartment in handcuffs, a crowd of hecklers appears outside, shouting taunts. "Oh my god," laughs one of the cops in disbelief, "What the fuck is this?!" It's a reasonable question. But in one form or another, the lolcow has always existed.

EVERY ERA HAS PRODUCED ITS RITUAL FIGURES of humiliation. Medieval courts kept licensed fools, while early towns staged public punishments and 21st-century tabloids and reality shows thrust off-center weirdos into the spotlight. The lolcow is simply the internet's industrial-scale rebrand. A village once had a single laughingstock; the internet has a searchable archive of them, updated in real time. And with a few clicks of your keyboard, you can insert yourself in their downfall.

The medieval court jester is often remembered romantically, as a clever entertainer granted license to poke fun at royalty, but the historical reality was murkier. Many court "fools" were people with intellectual disabilities or visible physical conditions who were placed in aristocratic households as curiosities. One of the most heartbreaking examples is Eugenia Martínez Vallejo, a child jester in Spain who became a human oddity because of her overweight stature (now thought to be the result of a genetic disorder). King Charles II was so fascinated by her appearance that he commissioned his court painter to create two full-body portraits of her: one clothed and one naked, titled "The Monster, Dressed" and "The Monster, Nude," respectively. In the nude painting, tears are visible in the six-year-old's eyes. (It should be noted that Charles, himself, was known for his extreme physical deformities due to generations of inbreeding, especially his protruding "Hapsburg Jaw.")

Many European villages also maintained what would later be called the "village idiot": a locally known eccentric, disabled, or otherwise socially marginal person, whose position in the community was a double-edged sword. They might receive a degree of tolerance, but they were also frequent targets of ridicule and pranks. As with today, collective mockery reinforced the social hierarchy: by laughing together at someone deemed abnormal, the rest of the community reaffirmed their own sense of normalcy. Anthropologists have long argued that ridicule serves a regulatory function in society, drawing the boundaries of acceptable behavior by demonstrating the punishment that awaits those who cross the line.

Radio, and later television, only expanded the phenomenon further. By the late 20th century, talk shows and reality TV routinely showcased people whose unusual behavior or emotional instability provided a quick laugh. Beginning in 1999 on the popular *Howard Stern Show*, radio host Stern was often joined by his own personal jester, "Beetlejuice": AKA Lester Green, an entertainer born with microcephaly, a condition resulting in a small stature and intellectual disability. Beetlejuice's naivety routinely made him the butt of the joke. In 2001, he was brought into the studio dressed in an alien costume, while comedian Dave Chappelle convinced him "that they were crime fighters." In 2008, Stern recruited callers to play the "Beetlejuice Barnyard Game," in which they had to bet on whether he would be able to

Josh Block



Josh posing for a glamour shot at Hoyt-Schermerhorn Station

Name: Joshua Paul Block

Aliases: WorldOfTShirts • Captain • Clone • WorldOfOneShirt • The King of New York • Jimmy Shirts

A photo of Joshua Block is featured on his lolcow Wiki forum, which calls itself a "community of passive observers dedicated to preserving Josh's history in a fair, and accurate way." The original lolcow was Chris Chan, who was first discovered by the internet in 2007.

correctly identify basic animal noises, like a cat's meow or cow's moo. (Even after leaving the show due to health reasons in 2016, Beetlejuice's humiliation has continued; a 2018 "game" on Stern's website asked Beetlejuice which ingredients go into simple food items, like banana bread and grilled cheese, then had players guess which answers he got wrong.)

Fans of the show defend this behavior by arguing that Beetlejuice was able to make a living from his appearances, and even financially support his family. "Other than being famous from the Stern show, there are no other opportunities for Beetlejuice to make a living," wrote one college student at the University of California Santa Barbara, in a blog post for a class titled *Freaks, Aliens, and Monsters*. "Yes it is exploitation, but not all exploitation is bad."

Ignoring that the first assertion is simply not true—disabled people hold all kinds of jobs—why should the only job a disabled person is forced to accept be one where they're publicly mocked? The justification sounds eerily similar to the ones given by attendees of 20th century circus freak-shows: *my mockery provides income, so what's the big deal?* It's the same defense given by lolcow-watchers today—maybe not the ones who doxx and harass their targets, but those who simply tune in for entertainment; the ones who send money via livestreams to encourage them to drink; or those who purchase Cameo videos from people like Shoenice, requesting that he eat a piece of paper scrawled with their username.

But while cases like Beetlejuice's feel more straightforwardly "wrong," due to his visible disabilities, lolcows have long been a core element of much more broadly-accepted reality television. Across multiple seasons of *American Idol*, the audition episodes consistently drew much higher ratings than later rounds, even including finales. Sure, you could argue there were multiple reasons for this—but an unmistakable draw of the show was watching terrible, overconfident singers embarrass themselves in front of the judges. It wasn't the off-key melodies that were entertaining; it was the contestants' earnest self-assurance. A TV show that pulled random people off the street and asked them to perform would likely produce equally tone-deaf results, but it wouldn't be nearly as fun to watch.

What was *funny* was that these people actually believed they were good. Never mind the fact that before reaching the judges, each contestant had to pass multiple screening rounds with other producers, likely boosting their confidence. As Andy Dehnart of *Reality Blurred* explains, "The people in the middle never make it through, but the freaks certainly do."

When contestant Mary Roach performed "I Feel the Earth Move" by Carole King for the *American Idol* panel in 2007, Simon Cowell called her "one of the worst singers I've ever heard." Roach refused to accept the verdict and tried to bargain her way forward, later returning for multiple audition segments. Her persistence was the punchline—along with her claims that she heard "voices in her head."



THE INTERNET DIDN'T INVENT THIS PHENOMENON, but it certainly removed the barriers that once contained it. In the past, producers, editors, and entire teams selected which individuals would

become public spectacles (and usually, that individual had at least agreed to be on TV). Now, online algorithms allow a person to be pulled from obscurity seemingly out of nowhere. When you upload a TikTok, it could receive 12 views or 20 million—meaning someone who shares a handful of awkward videos can, within days, find themselves the subject of thousands of posts dissecting their appearance, mental health, family life, or criminal history. And because the lolcow took the first step—presenting their existence on the internet—whatever happens next is fair game.

The communities who track these people often describe themselves as neutral archivists, simply "documenting" behavior that's already available online. But what follows is less like watching an episode of TV, and more like playing a video game: users might suggest pranks for the lolcow to perform, impersonate authority figures to intimidate them, or fabricate romantic partners in order to generate more content.

What is most fascinating about lolcow culture is that the majority of participants don't seem to view themselves as cruel. On the contrary, they often frame their behavior as justified, and even virtuous. The language surrounding lolcows is filled with moral claims: the target is a scammer, a liar, a bigot, a criminal, a predator, or simply a "terrible person." Once such a label is attached, mockery is no longer considered harassment, but accountability. Ridicule is the punishment, and obsession is obscured as civic duty.

One need only look at Daniel Larson, a homeless man who is among lolcow culture's most obsessively surveilled and vilified figures. According to his lolcow wiki page, Larson—who is autistic and schizophrenic—grew up in a variety of abusive foster care homes until being taken in by his grandmother. Following her death in 2019, he began to gain notoriety on TikTok:

His content ranged from showcasing his disability housing to expressing his aspirations to be a singer-songwriter and celebrity. Though, it would be his unorthodox appearance and strange mannerisms that would truly gain him notoriety.

One of his popular videos during this time was one where he said "good night, everyone," to the camera, marking a significant rise in his popularity. In July, he announced his 2020 presidential candidacy, gaining ironic support.

Because of this, followers of his would begin to call him "Mr. President" ironically. By August, trolls under the guise of entertainment management companies and record labels began exploiting his desire for fame, manipulating him into saying and doing increasingly offensive and questionable things.

Within months, trolls had manipulated Larson into saying racial slurs online, saying he possessed child pornography, and even stripping nude on a TikTok livestream. At first, the harassment was done purely for entertainment—but when trolls discovered alleged evidence of Larson's pedophilia (a Pinterest account linked to his name, which contained photos of children under the title "girl crushes") the goading took on a new life.

According to online archives compiled by his document-

ers, Larson became infatuated as a teenager with singer Grace VanderWaal after she appeared on *America's Got Talent* in 2016, when she was 12 years old. In 2021, when VanderWaal turned 18, Larson became convinced they were in a relationship—an idea “influenced by [his] own delusions, which were further strengthened by interactions with managers, trolls, and those pretending to be Grace.” For years, online antagonists encouraged this belief, messaging Larson while pretending to be VanderWaal, or her family, and escalating his fixation for entertainment. Over time, his behavior grew more erratic and disturbing. Larson eventually posted sexually explicit videos referencing the teenage singer, crossing a clear moral and legal line.

Trolls then flooded VanderWaal's social media with references to Larson, to the point that she was forced to filter comments containing his name. In 2024, Larson was arrested in Colorado on unrelated charges; when a persistent troll managed to call him in jail, Larson said he hoped that VanderWaal might bail him out. (This came after a separate Reddit user apparently paid \$174 to acquire bodycam footage of Larson's arrest. Both the video and phone call, of course, were posted online.)

VanderWaal has only acknowledged the situation once, referring to Larson in a TikTok comment as “a p*do that's haunted my life.” The stress on her is undeniable, and nothing about this dynamic excuses Larson's actions or the harm he caused.

But if the allegations are taken at face value—if Larson is genuinely dangerous—then the culture that has grown around him is only weirder. Why does an accused predator inspire a subreddit with over 140,000 members devoted to ironic fandom? Why do people make Valentine's Day memes pairing him with VanderWaal (his alleged victim), and encourage others to send them to her directly? Why has he been rendered into a cardboard cutout at a frat party? Why did someone on Reddit post a printed photo of Larson hanging above their desk at work? It would be no less strange to pick a random person from a list of convicted sex offenders, and then dedicate your life to editing TikTok compilations of them.

It's because Larson is a meme. Laughing at his odd appearance, delusions of grandeur, and his bizarre behavior is the point. His alleged crimes are just the reason it's acceptable to laugh. At one point, trolls convinced Larson that VanderWaal and other celebrities were waiting for him at an Olive Garden restaurant; after waiting for two hours at an empty table, he got into an altercation with staff and was arrested. A few weeks later, Larson was stalked and taunted with a flying drone for several days, the footage of which was posted online. Another time, after trolls sent him fabricated images purporting to be from the FBI and accusing him of crimes, Larson spiraled into a meltdown, eventually throwing a rock through the window of a gas station, and was arrested on charges of criminal mischief.

All of these acts were thoroughly documented online, and are referred to by “Larsonists,” respectively, as “The Olive Garden Incident,” “The Drone Incident,” and the “July 24th Meltdown.”

These people don't actually want him removed from society; that would be like their favorite show getting canceled mid-season. In fact, Larson has already been in prison since April 2024 for making bomb threats—and ever since, his dedicated subreddit has been filled with posts speculating about a possible release date and counting down to his next court hearing, desperate for some fresh content. The arrest hasn't satisfied Larson fanatics; if anything it's fueled their obsession.

HISTORICALLY, PUBLIC HUMILIATION RITUALS were almost always accompanied by moral explanations of why the victim deserved what was happening. People locked in stocks or paraded through town squares were accused of adultery, blasphemy, abuse—individuals whose public shaming supposedly served the greater good. The humiliation of the offender reassured everybody else that justice had been served, and warned the rest of the community to stay in line. Online ridicule operates through a similar framework, although the line between criminal behavior and cringe often blurs. Some internet figures targeted as lolcows have committed actual crimes or expressed reprehensible views. Others have done little more than exaggerate their talents or fail

r/Daniellarson · 19 days ago
m00nspell · roaring thunder

larson cutout at frat party

meme



Daniel Larson first gained notoriety on TikTok in 2020. Since becoming a real-life meme, his likeness has spread beyond the internet to the creation of ironic cardboard cutouts, posters, and T-shirts—which are inexplicably available on the fast-fashion website SHEIN. (credit: r/Daniellarson subreddit, SHEIN)

to realize they're being made fun of. Yet in both cases, the same dynamic emerges.

This process serves a psychological purpose for the audience. Mockery is a lot more acceptable when it's viewed as striking up at a villain rather than punching down at a vulnerable stranger. If the target is portrayed as malicious, then cruelty feels more like righteous exposure. The community's attention becomes self-justifying: they are not obsessed, they insist, they are documenting wrongdoing. They are demanding *accountability*. The hours spent cataloguing livestreams or provoking reactions in private messages might as well be honorable investigative work.

And yet, the targets almost always hold no power. For lack of a better word, lolcows are "nobodies." They are highly visible online *precisely* because they lack the kind of protection afforded to other members of society. What does it mean to demand accountability from a homeless man with schizophrenia? What punishment could you inflict that life hasn't already? Surely, there is an abusive CEO—or politician, or priest, or soccer coach—out there equally "deserving" of harassment. But in those cases, the lolcow dynamic would be impossible to replicate. Most powerful people aren't isolated, sourcing their only human connection from the internet. If their cringeworthy video went viral, friends or family members would tell them to delete it, to stop replying to comments, to walk away. If the harassment escalated, they'd hire a lawyer.

So while a scandal involving a powerful institution might briefly dominate the news cycle, it rarely manifests the kind of long-term participatory obsession that surrounds a lolcow. A politician who lies may be criticized for a week, but a mentally ill livestreamer who behaves erratically may be taunted for years. The crowd returns, day after day, to the person least capable of defending themselves.

ULTIMATELY, NEARLY A DECADE AFTER THE SITE was created, the very weapon that drew trolls to Kiwi Farms is what led to the forum's partial decline. After users pushed yet another person to suicide in September of 2021, the web hosting platform Dream-Host stopped providing domain services to the site; Kiwi Farms was later blocked again by Cloudflare due to an "an imminent and emergency threat to human life." A company named Vanwa-Tech—which has provided service to a litany of neo-Nazi sites like *The Daily Stormer* and 8chan—briefly revived the website, but it soon suffered a data breach. Kiwi Farms founder Joshua Moon told users to assume their IP addresses, email addresses, and passwords had been leaked.

In a perfect world of balanced karmic retribution, this would be the end of the story: serial abusers receive a taste of their own toxic sludge, and are forced to retreat from the internet.

Shockingly enough, however, the kind of people who dedicate their entire lives to abuse are very committed to their sole purpose. As of late 2025, the original hub of lolcow harassment still exists, but is now fragmented amongst a smaller, more fragile, stack of servers. As Alexander Yen writes for the *Global Network on Extremism & Technology*, "For policymakers and practitioners, this should not be read as a reason to abandon infrastructure-level interventions. Most sites will not have the

capacity or determination to do what Kiwifarms did."

Fully dismantling the lolcow factory farm—at least, its darkest machinery—will require sustained, coordinated pressure from governments and hosting providers. But most people who participate are not hardened lifers. Casual internet users scroll past lolcows every day: a clip of someone clearly unwell, screaming in a grocery store, acting erratically (or offensively) in a crowded street, or in the dark of their bedroom, singing a cringeworthy song, or drinking themselves sick for donations. And while most of us do not dedicate our waking hours to obsessing over the people onscreen, the question still lingers: *what, exactly, is so funny?*

It is at this moment that I must make a confession. The answer to that question is one I might understand. Six years ago, while in college, I was scrolling through Cameo to find a celebrity to make a video for my then-boyfriend's birthday, and Shoemice's profile popped up. I paid him \$20 for a personalized clip. (I should be clear: I didn't ask him to eat anything in the video, and he didn't. I'm not that depraved. He just sang "happy birthday.") I had never really watched Schewe's YouTube channel, but I knew it was a running joke in my boyfriend's friend group. Sometimes—in the pseudo-macho, semi-ironic persona that teenagers often don—they would invoke Shoemice's name while shotgunning a can of beer. I recall one dorm room dispute over whether the clips of him chugging liquor were fake; we decided they probably were. But the videos of him eating glue were less open to debate. None of us had watched the *Vice* documentary. I certainly didn't know what a lolcow was. Shoemice didn't occupy much space in my mind, but I had assumed he was a goofy competitive eater, putting on an act. If I'm honest, I guess I didn't think about it much at all.

Now, after spending countless hours prowling the loneliest crawlspaces of the internet to finish this piece—and discovering a world I'd never wanted to know—it felt as if the glow from my laptop was emitting cancerous radiation.

Finally, I came across one last Reddit thread. "Unpopular Opinion: I find people who keep trolling lolcows and the people who egg them on are pathetic," it read. Judging by the comments, the opinion wasn't all that unpopular—even from those who had once partaken in the lolcow ecosystem.

"I never got in streams or chats with them, but it was my entertainment to watch them and videos about them, etc.," one person wrote, "Then one day I just... felt weird doing it."

"Kiwifarms is full of broken people—and I'm not talking about the lolcows they harass," said another.

The original writer concluded their post: "The internet doesn't need more hate-watchers or 'documentarians.' It needs more people who can recognize when something's gone from accountability to exploitation."

There is plenty of evil in the world, and most people don't *want* to participate. With a fraction of self-reflection, we don't have to.

I wished I could call Schewe to apologize for how his life had spiraled, for what the internet—and I—had contributed to. Instead, in the moment, all I could think to do was close my laptop, open the blinds, take a walk, and hopefully find someone along the way who could use the 20-dollar bill in my wallet. ✦

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The CEO says that torture demons keep dangling a glass of water in front of him, then yanking it away when he doesn't have a weird coin to pay them with. It's, like, their favorite thing to do...

Huh, ironic. Do we have any more chips?





The Ghost of Molly Maguire

BY ALEX SKOPIG

ACCORDING TO HIS BIOGRAPHERS, NATHANIEL Hawthorne once discovered that he had an ancestor, a man named John Hathorne, who had been a judge in the Salem Witch Trials. Draconian even by the standards of the 1690s, Hathorne was known for berating innocent women on the stand until they confessed to so-called “Satanic” transgressions, which quickly led to their execution by hanging. Unlike some of the Salem judges, he never showed remorse. Horrified by the blood on his great-great-grandfather’s hands, the novelist changed his surname, adding the extra “w” to distance himself, and he made Hathorne the template for his villains in works like “Young Goodman Brown” and *The House of the Seven Gables*. By all accounts, the knowledge haunted him throughout his life.

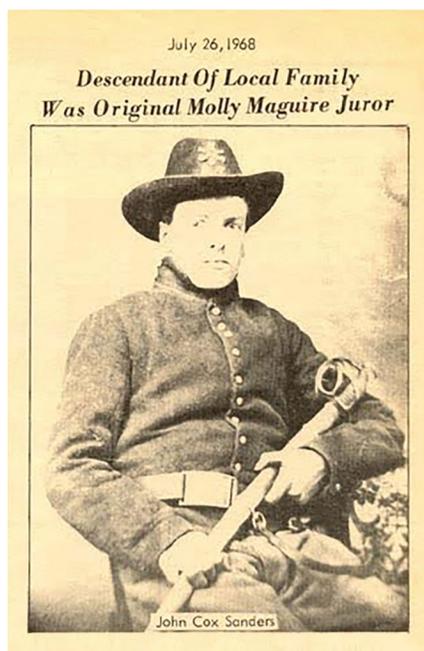
As it turns out, I have something in common with old Hawthorne. We both have ancestors who played an instrumental role in getting people executed unjustly. It was my great-grandmother Geraldine who discovered this unfortunate fact, when she made a study of our family’s genealogy back in 1968. Digging through moldy old newspaper clippings in northeastern Pennsylvania, she discovered that *her* great-grandfather, a man named John Cox Sanders, had been a juror in the 1876 hanging trials of the Molly Maguires.

Semi-legendary figures in Pennsylvania history, the “Mollies” were militant Irish coal miners who were accused of forming a secret society to assassinate and intimidate mine bosses. Altogether, 20 of them were hanged, and John Cox Sanders—my four-times-great grandfather—was one of the jurors who made it happen. Except that the trials were a complete travesty, full of

suspect testimony, dirty tricks from the prosecution, and rampant anti-Irish racism. Some of the accused may have been guilty, if shooting a boss who is working you to death can be called a crime, but others might well have been innocent; like the Italian anarchists Sacco and Vanzetti a few decades later, they were railroaded, and never got a fair hearing.

Ever since, the Molly Maguires have lingered in the cultural memory of Pennsylvania, becoming the subject of folk songs, lurid ghost stories, and even an underrated Sean Connery movie. Somehow, they just won’t stay dead. I suspect it’s because the underlying issues in their day—grueling labor for low pay, racial and religious discrimination, and a rigged legal system that only serves the rich—are still the animating issues of our own time. None of it has ever been rectified, and until it is, the ghosts of the Molly Maguires will haunt us.

THE FIRST THING TO UNDERSTAND IS THAT A JOB IN A Pennsylvania coal mine, in the 19th century, was effectively a death sentence. There were a dozen ways to die prematurely down the mines, from being crushed by falling rocks, to drowning in a sudden flood, to blowing up in a dynamite accident or breathing in poisonous fumes. (Those canaries in cages were no joke.) In many mines, the owners mandated a practice called “pillar-robbing,” in which the miners would slowly chip away more and more coal from the pillars that supported the roof, and pray it wouldn’t cave in on them. Everyone knew the mines would kill you; the question was how and when, not if.



The author's ignominious ancestor.

The “best-case” scenario was that you’d work down there in the dark for 30 or 40 years, breathing in soot and dust, until a respiratory condition cut your lifespan short—either cancer, or tuberculosis, or the feared black lung disease. Decades before the invention of the N95 mask, the retirement plan for any miner was to slowly succumb to the decades of carbon and silicon particles that had built up in their lungs. And because

you might start work at the age of nine or ten, as a “breaker boy” whose job was to pick out useless slate from among the coal by hand, you never really got a childhood, either. Your whole existence on Earth was a kind of living death—just hitting a rock face with a pick, over and over and over again, the work both endless and mindless. Comparisons between the mines and the pits of Hell were common, and for good reason.

But not all jobs in the coal fields were equal, and the all-important question of who got the dirtiest and most dangerous work broke down along ethnic lines. As historian Kevin Kenny records in his book *Making Sense of the Molly Maguires*, there was a big difference between a “contract miner” and a “mine laborer.” The former were the elite workers, the ones who got to draw up plans for new mine shafts, plant explosives, fix water pumps, and so on. Their “contracts” paid relatively well, and they got to decide the length of their own working day. “Mine laborers,” on the other hand, took on the actual breaking and hauling of rocks, got far less money for it, and could be abruptly fired at any time. And because the mines were usually owned by British and Welsh Americans, it was usually British and Welsh workers who got to be “contract miners.” Meanwhile, the Irish—who were still a racialized group, not yet considered “white”—were condemned to a life as disposable rock-breakers, and they knew that was all their children could expect, too. So in that context, it should be no surprise at all that Irish miners became desperate, and started forming militant groups.

The origins of the Molly Maguires are mysterious, because unlike a lot of political radicals, they left behind very little writing: no manifestos, no Verso books, just a few anonymous threats. But Kenny’s book traces their lineage back to Ireland, where secret societies and rebel cells were common in the 19th century. At that point, Ireland was a colonized territory of the British Empire, and as it turns out, you can’t occupy a nation without creating secretive bands of angry people with guns.

(This is a historic lesson people keep forgetting, from Iraq to Palestine.) As predominantly English landlords came into Ireland, seized land, and started charging rent, they were met with violent pushback:

Landlords’ agents were threatened, beaten, and assassinated, as were tenants who settled on land from which others had been evicted. Merchants and millers who charged prices deemed unjust were threatened and attacked. Land converted to pasture was dug up at night to make it arable once again[...]

Two of the groups conducting this peasant warfare were called the “Whiteboys” and the “Ribbonmen”; a third was called the “Molly Maguires.” There are conflicting stories on the name’s meaning:

One version held that an old widow called Molly Maguire had been evicted from her house and local peasants had banded together to avenge her. Another version held that Molly Maguire was the owner of the “shebeen” (illicit tavern) where the secret society met to plan its activities. According to a third version, Molly Maguire was a fierce young woman, pistols strapped to each thigh, who led bands of men through the countryside on their nocturnal raids.

Whichever story is the true one, “Molly Maguire” became a mythological figure, like Lady Liberty—a personification of Irish working-class rebellion. When they undertook the long voyage from Ireland to the United States, miners brought the legend along with them. And in Pennsylvania, the “Sons of Molly” took up the old tactics again.

GEORGE K. SMITH, A MINE OWNER FROM CARBON County, was one of the first to die. According to the *Miners’ Journal* of Pottsville, a “party of men with blackened faces” broke into his house on the night of November 5, 1863—Guy Fawkes’ Night—and shot him with revolvers “as soon as he came downstairs.” The assassination was quick, merciless, and efficient. But this was only one blow in a much larger labor war.

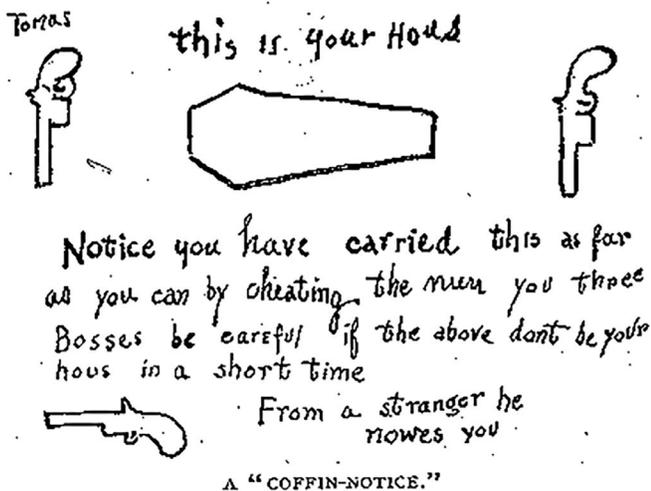
The invention of the Bessemer steel forging process in 1856 had changed everything for the coal industry, dramatically ramping up demand, and so had the onset of the U.S. Civil War in 1861. Mine owners like Smith were suddenly wealthier than ever before from military contracts, but the wealth didn’t trickle down, and the Irish miners were as poor as ever. They tried to organize, forming rudimentary labor unions called simply “the committee.” They launched wildcat strikes, hoping to constrict the supply of coal, raise the price, and therefore raise their pay. But not everyone was a peaceful labor organizer. At the same time, the Molly Maguires made their presence known, issuing anonymous threats called “coffin notices” to any miner who crossed the picket lines. One such notice was found nailed to the doors of a colliery:

This is to give you the Gap men a cliar understanding that if you dont quit work after this NOTICE you may prper for your DETH. You are the damdest turncoats in the State—there is no

pies fit for you bute Hell and will soone be there. MOLLY.

But the bosses were using violence, too, and the Civil War itself was their favorite weapon. Because Uncle Sam wanted the coal to keep flowing to the Army and Navy, going on strike was treated as treason, and the U.S. military could be used to crush unions. In places like Cass Township, troops were stationed to break strikes and arrest the “committee men” who started them, handing out frequent beatings as they went; today, it would be called a counter-insurgency force. George K. Smith himself was among the fiercest opponents of the unions, and he reportedly “entertained a body of forty or fifty cavalry at his house on October 20,” shortly before his assassination, to discuss strikebreaking. And so, seeing no other option left, a few of the miners shot him.

The point here is not to valorize or condemn the violence itself, but to point out that the bosses’ utter refusal to accept non-violent labor organizing made it inevitable. As Karl Marx would say, they created their own gravediggers. The historian Mark Bulik calls this era “America’s first labor war,” and although “first” is debatable, it was certainly a class war, and a bloody one. Seven other men were killed by self-proclaimed Molly Maguires in the years 1862-1870, all of them mine superintendents or foremen, and the pattern was always the same. They would earn a reputation for abusing the workers under their control, discriminating against Irish miners in particular, or forcibly breaking up a union. They would be issued a “coffin notice,” warning them of lethal consequences if they carried on. And if they ignored the warning, they’d be shot by a few shadowy figures when they least expected it.



For the owners, the post-Civil War years saw a dramatic increase in both their financial power and their capacity for violence. One capitalist in particular, Franklin B. Gowen of the Philadelphia & Reading Coal & Iron Company (PRCI), spent the 1860s buying up more and more small mining companies, bringing huge swathes of the Pennsylvania anthracite region under his personal control. At the height of his power, one journalist wrote at the time, Gowen held an “unchallenged, near-perfect monopoly over the Schuylkill coal trade,” owning both the mines and the railroads that carried the coal away. Every time

he bought a mine, it got strict new work rules, a “company store” with extortionate prices, and a mandatory ten-hour working day. And to enforce this discipline, Gowen dispatched a private police force, the Coal and Iron Police, to put down any hint of unrest.

Despite all this, the guns of the Molly Maguires fell silent in the early 1870s, because an aboveground organization was doing a better job fighting for the miners’ interests: the Workingmen’s Benevolent Association (WBA). Slowly, and with great personal sacrifice, the workers had managed to build up a regional labor union, led by an organizer named John Siney. Siney and the rest of the WBA condemned vigilante violence, and while the union was active, the assassinations stopped—though there were still occasional threats against “scab” miners, and some suspicious fires.

Gowen and his Coal and Iron Police were determined to break the union. As Kenny writes, the company spent the autumn of 1874 stockpiling enough surplus coal to last through a long work stoppage, then issued harsh pay cuts—between 10 and 20 percent—to force the union into a strike before they were truly ready. An estimated 7,000 miners downed tools, and they held out longer than anyone expected, in a “Long Strike” that lasted over six months. But in the end, a lack of regional solidarity doomed them. The workers at the Hyde Park mines in Luzerne County voted not to join the strike, so the company was able to keep up basic production, and poverty and hunger forced the strikers to come back and accept the pay cuts. The Long Strike took its toll on those who participated—in the aftermath, “at least one superintendent found his employees too weak to work, for want of food”—and the WBA collapsed soon after.

That same year, there were six new Molly Maguire killings, all following the old pattern. In one of the more dramatic cases, a policeman named Benjamin Yost who had a reputation for beating up union members was shot in the cemetery of a town called Tamaqua, where he had gone to extinguish the street lamps. In another, a Welsh superintendent named John P. Jones, who maintained an extensive “blacklist” of Irish miners, was assassinated at the Lansford railway station. On October 2, 1875, an anonymous miner wrote a letter to the *Shenandoah Herald* newspaper, explaining the group’s motivations:

i am against shooting as mutch as ye are[...] But the union is Broke up and we Have got nothing to defind ourselves with But our Revolvers and if we dount use them we shal have to work for 50 cints a Day. i have told ye the Mind of the children of Mistress Molly Maguire, all we want is a fare Days wages for a fare Days work, and thats what we cant get now By a Long shot.

The eccentric spelling and Capitalization aside, this is a remarkable document, because it’s the only surviving writing where a member of the secret society explained its agenda in their own terms. The whole focus is on economics, and whoever wrote it clearly felt they were fighting for their lives. The rest of what we know about the Molly Maguires comes either from newspaper reporters who were hostile to the group, or from their enemies in the coal companies and the police—and soon, those forces would combine to wipe them out altogether.

Besides the Coal and Iron Police, Franklin Gowen hired the

infamous Pinkerton detective agency to infiltrate and destroy the Molly Maguires, once and for all. The group's founder, Allan Pinkerton, personally dispatched one of his top detectives, an Irishman named James McParland, to pose as a miner and become a Molly Maguire himself. His job was to collect all the information he could, identify the society's members, and "remain in the field until every cut-throat has paid with his life." In 1876, the company felt the time had come to close the net, and the Coal and Iron Police made a sweeping series of arrests, followed by high-profile murder trials. And that's where the real mockery of justice occurred, and Mr. John Cox Sanders comes into the picture.

In his own book on American mining unions, historian Harold W. Aurand is blunt about the legitimacy of the Molly Maguire trials: they had none. As he puts it, the whole process was:

[...]one of the most astounding surrenders of sovereignty in American history. A private corporation initiated the investigation through a private detective agency; a private police force arrested the alleged offenders; and coal company attorneys prosecuted them. The state provided only the courtroom and hangman.

In an unprecedented move, Franklin B. Gowen himself served as the chief prosecuting attorney in several of the trials. The judges allowed him to make long, grandiose speeches about the evils of the Molly Maguires, claiming the group was responsible for killing "hundreds of unknown victims whose bones now lie moldering over the face of this county." In fact, there were only 16 killings in total, some of them with little or no evidence to connect them to an organized group.

For just one example, take the May 1876 trial over the killings of Benjamin Yost, the policeman, and John P. Jones, the mine superintendent. As Kenny writes, five alleged Molly Maguires stood in dock for these crimes: James Carroll, Thomas Duffy, James Roarity, Hugh McGehan, and James Boyle. All of them were Irish Catholics, but no Irish Catholics were allowed on the jury. In fact, Irish jurors were systematically excluded from *all* of the Molly Maguire trials, so the basic right to a jury of one's peers was violated from the start. Instead, the jurors were predominantly English, German, and Dutch. Based on his surname, John Cox Sanders could have belonged to any of those groups, but it seems he kept quiet during his particular trial, so very little information about him has survived. The same can't be said for other jurors. One man, William Becker, reportedly confessed that he "would not understand the witnesses" since he spoke mainly Dutch, while another, Levi Stein, spoke German and "[not] much English." Both were accepted onto the Yost/Jones jury anyway.

In that case, there was no physical evidence connecting the five accused to the killings whatsoever: no bullet casings, no bloodstains, and no fingerprints (which wouldn't be used to solve a crime until 1892). Instead, the prosecution's case hinged entirely on the testimony of James McParland, the Pinkerton spy, and a miner named Jimmy "Powderkeg" Kerrigan, who claimed to be a former Molly Maguire who'd turned state's evidence. McParland testified that the secret society had an elaborate system of "lodges" throughout northeastern Pennsylvania, one

in every mining town, with a ringleader called a "bodymaster" in each lodge and a system of reciprocity between them. When miners in town A had a grievance with their boss, they'd send a message to the Molly Maguire lodge in town B, and killers from there would be dispatched, so nobody in town A would recognize them.

According to Kerrigan, this was how Yost had been killed: Thomas Duffy was the one who actually planned it, as an act of revenge, because Yost had previously arrested and beaten him. But he called on Roarity, the "bodymaster" of the lodge in nearby Coaldale. So Roarity sent McGehan and Boyle to actually shoot Yost, while Carroll, a tavern owner, provided shelter and weapons for the visiting assassins. In exchange for their services, McGehan and Boyle later called on some Tamaqua miners to kill John P. Jones, who had blacklisted them.

It was certainly a dramatic story. The problem is, neither McParland nor Kerrigan were remotely trustworthy witnesses. McParland had been hired by the Pinkertons to destroy the labor movement in Pennsylvania, so he had a vested interest in getting convictions, whether or not the people he accused were guilty. Years later, he admitted that he paid at least one witness, a miner pejoratively nicknamed Daniel "The Bum" Kelly, \$1,000 to testify against alleged Molly Maguires—a fortune in those days. Meanwhile, Kerrigan freely admitted that he'd been involved in both Yost and Jones' killing, but pointed the finger at others to save himself. As Kenny writes, "his own wife publicly denounced him as a liar, and testified in court that he had told her he had killed Yost himself." Apparently, the jury didn't believe her. All five "Sons of Molly" were convicted of first-degree murder, and all five were publicly hanged in 1877.

The same story would play out, with slight variations, in the rest of the trials: juries where the Irish were systematically excluded, prosecutions run by the coal company, dramatic testimony from McParland and his handpicked witnesses, and swift guilty verdicts. The defense lawyers barely put up a fight, possibly because the impoverished miners couldn't pay for competent ones. In one case, the jury deliberated for only 20 minutes before handing down the death sentence.

One man, John Kehoe, was tried in 1876 for a murder committed in 1862, and was found guilty despite an eyewitness who said he wasn't present at the crime scene, mainly because he had called the murdered mine boss a "son of a bitch." In 1979 Kehoe was issued a posthumous pardon. Altogether, 20 miners were executed that year, ten of them on the same "Black Thursday." Maybe some of them were guilty; maybe the actual killers walked free, because the prosecution just grabbed whoever it could. At this point, we'll never know. But none of them got anything resembling a fair trial. The judges failed them, and so did the jurors, my great-great-great-great-grandfather included. It was nothing more than a massacre of rebellious workers by capitalists, with a thin pretense of "law" to cover it. In America, that's all it takes to put you in the cemetery.

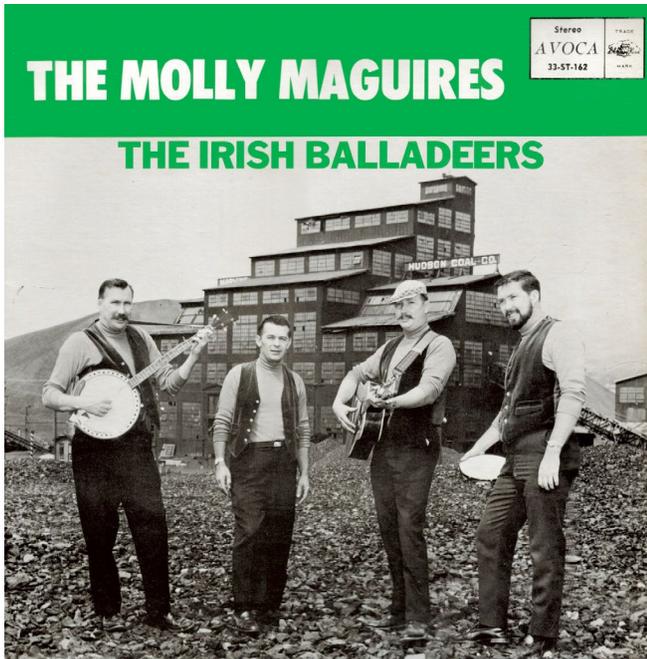
IT'S PENNSYLVANIA'S FOLK MUSIC, THOUGH, THAT CAPTURES the story in its most evocative form. This was how I first encountered the Molly Maguire legend, before discovering my family's connection to it: on a thrift-store CD from a local band called Donnybrook, who were themselves covering

an older band called the Irish Balladeers. Their song, “Sons of Molly,” is a ghost story:

*When the wind blows wild at night
Past the breakers melancholy
If you stand in the dark with your ear to the wind
You can hear the sons of Molly*

*And deep in the dark of the old mine shaft
You can smell the smoke and fire
And the whispers low in the mine below,
‘Tis the ghost of Molly Maguire.”*

In each of the next verses, a different ghost speaks, some proudly admitting to a killing (“*I come from Carbon County / and I shot the boss of the Lansford mine / now my soul is up for bounty,*”) and others protesting their innocence (“*No pistol did I fire / But I will fall from the gallows tall, just for being a Molly Maguire.*”)



In either case, you get a profound sense that an injustice was done to them, and because of it, their spirits can't rest.

THERE'S EVEN A MOVIE ABOUT THIS PERIOD, FILMED ON location in northeastern Pennsylvania's coal towns and released in 1970. Simply titled *The Molly Maguires*, it's been largely forgotten by cinema critics, but it's underrated. The director was Martin Ritt, who also made *The Spy Who Came in From the Cold* and *The Great White Hope*, and who had been blacklisted from working in television as a suspected communist in 1952. (He'd get his revenge in 1976 with *The Front*, a savage satire of the blacklist itself starring Woody Allen.) In *The Molly Maguires*, Ritt takes on the style of an American Ken Loach, capturing the soul-crushing environment of the anthracite mines. Visually, the film is mostly grey and brown, punctuat-

ed by occasional eruptions of bright orange flame. It boils down the extended cast of the real Molly Maguire saga into just two totemic figures: Detective McParland, played by Richard Harris, and Sean Connery as John Kehoe, his adversary. On paper, Harris is the protagonist—but the real star is Connery's Kehoe.

Connery gives a strictly restrained performance, and doesn't speak his first line of dialogue until about 45 minutes in. As the detective meets and befriends him, he's still guarded and taciturn—until his mentor, an old retired miner named Mr. Raines, dies of a lung disease in the third act. As the time comes for Raines' funeral, Kehoe realizes the old man doesn't even own a suit to be buried in. He finally breaks, and decades of suppressed rage come loose as he talks to his friend's corpse:

KEHOE: He never made a sound. Forty-two years in the pits, and not even an echo left hanging in the air. Go on, make your sound now, you old bastard! You're safe among friends. Silence is golden, is that it? Seen but not heard. They beat that lesson into you, didn't they?

Mad with grief, he storms across the town to the company store, with McParland in tow. Kehoe breaks down the door and steals a suit for Raines, then grabs all the other clothing off the racks and throws it out to the crowd of miners who've gathered around. Then he takes an axe to the shelves, douses everything in gasoline, and sets the whole place ablaze. It's a moment of fierce, revolutionary joy. The company stores were all too real, and the mine bosses of this era exploited them ruthlessly, often clawing back the majority of their workers' wages by overcharging for basic necessities like food and clothes. But Ritt captures the moment where the workers finally see the house of exploitation for what it is, and destroy it. That moment is the essence of all revolutionary politics. For one night, humanity triumphs over money. After that, the trials and executions feel like an afterthought.

The astute reader may notice that this whole saga is not exactly a “current affair.” *Some miners got a crooked trial in 1876—so what?*, you might ask. But there's a reason this story has stuck in people's minds for so long. The events themselves are specific to the world of the 19th century, but the political forces that made them happen are not.

For one thing, the coal mining industry never ended, and neither did the miners' labor struggle. It *should* have ended; coal is the filthiest and least efficient of all the fossil fuels, and even China is now beginning to phase it out in favor of renewables. It's frankly embarrassing that “burning rocks” is still a real industry. But the two Trump presidencies have seen a concerted push to keep coal around, aided and abetted by Democrats like West Virginia's Joe Manchin. Lately, Trump and his flunkies have taken to using the absurd phrase “Beautiful Clean Coal” in all their propaganda. They've even deployed a cartoon mascot called “Coalie.” Worse, Trump has signed executive orders allowing coal mines to emit more pollution, while cutting health programs for workers with black lung disease. More than 150 years after the Molly Maguires, he and the rest of the financial elite are still sacrificing coal miners' lives and health for profit. Franklin Gowen would approve.

The Trump government has also embraced another tactic



The climactic scene of *The Molly Maguires* (1970, dir. Martin Ritt)

that Gowen and the Pinkertons pioneered: accusing immigrants of being in criminal gangs, with little or no evidence, and punishing them without fair trials. Back then it was the Irish; now it's mainly Latinos in the crosshairs. Remember Andry Hernandez Romero, the gay hairdresser the Trump administration abducted to El Salvador's CECOT prison camp? He was accused of being in the Tren de Aragua gang simply because he had a tattoo of a crown. Kilmar Abrego Garcia, another deportee, was labeled a member of MS-13 because he wore a Chicago Bulls hat, and because an anonymous informant said so. None of it is proof of wrongdoing, any more than John Kehoe calling a mine boss a "son of a bitch" all those years ago was proof. But because these people aren't wealthy, and aren't white, it doesn't matter. They can't afford rights.

It was the same with Sacco and Vanzetti, who were never proven to have committed any crime, but were hanged in 1927 regardless. It was the same with Ethel Rosenberg, who was executed as a spy for the Soviet Union in 1953, despite no solid evidence that she shared in her husband's espionage. Countless Black defendants across the South in the Jim Crow years, falsely convicted by all-white juries, could tell you about the "rule of law." So could the Native American activist Leonard Peltier, who spent 50 years in prison for murders he was never proven to have committed, and only got his sentence commuted in 2024, as Joe Biden was shuffling out the door of the White House.

It's all still happening today. Environmental lawyer Steven Donziger spent more than two years under house arrest thanks to a private prosecution by the oil company Chevron, exactly like the private prosecution Franklin Gowen mounted in 1876. In Atlanta, activists who oppose the "Cop City" law enforcement facility have been slapped with RICO charges designed for mafia bosses. Time after time, we see that when the interests of big corporations and the state conflict with those of ordinary people, it's the ordinary people who lose, no matter the facts of the case. In *The State and Revolution*, Vladimir Lenin famously said that "Freedom in capitalist society always remains about the same as it was in the ancient Greek republics: freedom for the slave-owners." We might adapt the quote today, and say that law in capitalist society remains the same: law for mine bosses.

The person who really troubles me, though, is John Cox Sanders, and not only because of the long-attenuated genetic connection between us. He's a perfect example of how easy it is for someone to become an instrument of injustice and death, just by quietly accepting what they're told by authority figures. He probably wasn't a particularly bad man. But when he saw that he had been placed on a segregated jury with no Irish people on it, he didn't speak up. I've spent a lot of time scrolling through PDFs of old newspapers, and there's no record I can find of *anything* specific he said, during what was obviously a series of rigged and unfair trials. It seems he just meekly did what was expected of him, nodded along, and cast his "guilty" vote. He trusted in the institutions and the rule of law, like a good liberal. When Gowen and McParland were giving their speeches, he didn't ask the all-important question: *is it actually true?* And when that question isn't asked, the consequences are almost always grim.

There's a line in that old folk song, "Sons of Molly," that sticks with me, too. It's part of the chorus, after each of the condemned men announces his guilt or innocence:

*But I will die with my head held high
For I fought for the men below
The men who slave and sweat and die
Down in the black hell-hole.*

This is exactly what John Cox Sanders could never say. He didn't fight for anyone, let alone the miners, and his memory will always be a shameful one because of it. But if you tweak the gendered language a little, it's the best epitaph I can think of: *For I fought for the ones below.* I wouldn't mind having that on my own tombstone, when the day comes. We should all aspire to be the kinds of people who can say it truthfully: that we didn't just sit quietly in the jury box and let the rich and powerful do whatever they want. That in the long war between the classes, we struck a blow back. That when we had the chance, we burned the company store to the ground. Only then will we be able to hold our heads high, in a better world. ✚

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*Thanks to our partners
at Chevron, summer now
lasts eight months!*



**Come for the TAX BREAKS.
STAY because our bridges collapsed.**



HOW BITTER ROOT HEALS

BY ETIENNE C. TOUSSANT

THE BOYS WERE FIGHTING AGAIN. NOT ALL THREE, just the six-year-old and the four-year-old, tussling over an action figure one had snuck into the convention center. The two-and-a-half-year-old pulled me in the other direction. He wanted everything. Every vendor table held another treasure to grab, another shiny thing that should be his. I watched him like a hawk.

We were at Heroes Con 2024 in Charlotte, North Carolina, one of the nation's premiere comic book conventions. It was mid-June, more than four months before Halloween, but the boys wore their costumes anyway for the two-hour drive up from South Carolina—Superman, the Hulk, and Captain America. We'd come partly for a family weekend, partly to support my wife Ebony's work as co-host of the Ororo Comics Podcast. But Ebony was nowhere in sight, lost somewhere in the masses of Marvel fanatics and cosplayers.

"Oh my God, I need to find Sanford Greene," she'd said 15 minutes earlier. "Wait here with the kids."

Ten minutes turned into 20. Superman and the Hulk escalated from tussling to full combat. Captain America discovered that if he stood on his chair and jumped hard enough, he could almost fly. The convention buzzed around us like a hive, vendors passing collectibles to customers with frantic energy.

When I finally loaded all three boys up—one on my hip, the other two corralled by my sides—and ventured into the chaos to find Ebony, she was connecting with friends and colleagues. But she hadn't found Sanford. Her disappointment hung in the air. My exhaustion made everything heavier.

IT WOULD BE SEPTEMBER BEFORE EBONY FINALLY FOUND Sanford Greene at a comic convention in Baltimore. I was home with the boys when she called, her giddy voice like a kid jumping on a trampoline in her minivan seat.

"He wants to work together!" she said. "He was so impressed. My science background, the healthcare experience, the ethnobotany stuff. It all connects to what they're doing in *Bitter Root*."

Over the next few months, I learned about Sanford's work the way you learn about your partner's passions when you only half understand them—bits and pieces absorbed through dinner conversations and late-night reading sessions after the kids were asleep. Over 15 years in comic illustration. Award-winning work for Marvel, DC, Dark Horse, Image Comics. But the project Ebony kept returning to, the one she couldn't stop talking about, was *Bitter Root*, a series Sanford co-created with David F. Walker and Chuck Brown.

The comic follows the Sangerye family, Black monster hunters in 1920s Harlem who battle people literally transformed by hatred. White supremacists become grotesque creatures, and Black victims of racial trauma transform into monsters too. The family fights them all using ancestral root medicine and hi-tech weapons.

I resisted picking it up at first. After years buried in dense academic texts and case law as a law professor, I wasn't sure a comic would be worth my time. Then one evening in late fall, after the boys were in bed, I found myself standing in our kitchen with a collected volume of the comic series in my hands. I smiled as

I took in gorgeously rendered 1920s Harlem—rich browns and golds and deep blues, Black folks smiling and dancing—until I saw the monsters. Twisted bodies and distorted faces, hunters in pursuit armed with futuristic-looking guns.

I kept turning pages and found something I'd never encountered in legal scholarship. I discovered a visual language for racial terror that refuses abstraction. *Bitter Root* makes visible what law systematically obscures: the visceral reality of hate, the debates about justice that never reach courtrooms, the impossible choices Black communities face under siege. This is why this comic matters for understanding law, history, and the future of justice itself.

This is how *Bitter Root* heals, through what scholars call Afrofuturism, using speculative elements not to escape history but to reveal it.

VOLUME ONE OF THE COLLECTED COMIC SERIES opens with two lovers walking through a park after a night at the local jazz club. They spot something in the darkness. We don't see it yet, only their terror. The next day, the Sangerye family is hunting again. On a rooftop in Harlem, protagonists Cullen and Berg fight a monster—red skin, bulging muscles, yellow eyes, horns jutting from its head like a man merged with a bull. The beast is demonic, roaring with sharp teeth and long claws.

Several floors below, Ma Etta and her granddaughter Blink grind herbs and bitter roots to form a potion. As the story unfolds, we piece it together. The monster is actually a human infected with a peculiar disease, and the Sangeryes are trying to cure it. In defiance of her grandmother, Blink makes her way to the roof and joins the fight. She's young, skilled with a staff, and unsympathetic to both gender norms and Ma Etta's orders that she remain indoors. With her aerial assault, Blink, alongside Cullen and Berg, finally pin the creature down. After they inject it with Ma Etta's Fiif'no serum, we see a confused and naked white man emerge on the page, cured of his sickness but unaware of where he is or what he has done.

This is a Jinoo: a white supremacist transformed by hatred itself, an evil that infects like a disease, turning the consumed into monsters that hide in plain sight until they strike.

That same night, in Mississippi, another Sangerye named Ford saves a Black man from hooded Ku Klux Klan members preparing to lynch him. Ford arrives heavily armed. Monsters emerge from under the white hoods, revealing green skin, sharp teeth, and drooling grimaces, as if the Incredible Hulk had children with a werewolf. Ford shoots them all dead without hesitation.

But hate isn't the only force that transforms. Later, we discover the Inzondo, people transformed not by hatred of others, but by the trauma and grief inflicted upon them. While Jinoo are created by perpetrating violence, Inzondo emerge from enduring it, their pain and rage turned inward until it consumes them.

Standing in my kitchen that evening, I kept thinking about something James Baldwin once wrote, something I'd cited in my legal scholarship without fully grasping its significance: "The purpose of art is to lay bare the questions that have been hidden by the answers." *Bitter Root* gestured at difficult questions. How do communities respond to systemic violence? Can people be

healed from hatred, or must they be stopped by force? What do we owe to those in our own communities who've been so traumatized by oppression that they've become a danger to themselves and others?

I'd spent years analyzing Afrofuturism's relationship to law, tracing how Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* reimagines social contracts, how W.E.B. Du Bois's "The Comet" reveals cycles of constitutional rupture and restoration. But I'd never seen the tradition work quite like this. Comics offered something my scholarly texts couldn't, a visual vocabulary that made abstraction impossible. The monsters I'd been writing about theoretically were now in front of me, exploding from the page.

These questions had shaped my scholarship for years, buried in footnotes and case citations, hidden behind legal history and constitutional analysis. Critical race theory taught me how law embeds racial hierarchy, how formal equality can mask substantive harm, and how legal doctrine systematically disadvantages disempowered communities. But even the most critical scholarship works within the constraints of legal language: analyzing cases, deconstructing statutes, critiquing judicial reasoning, proposing reform. *Bitter Root* does something different. It visualizes the human cost of racial violence in ways legal analysis too often obscures. It reveals what hate actually does to human bodies, to families, to communities. It renders visible the monsters that law refuses to name.

Legal scholarship, even at its most critical, struggles to represent the visceral reality of racial oppression. We write about "badges and incidents of slavery," "structural racism," "systemic harm," and "racial capitalism," abstractions that gesture toward suffering without making us feel it. *Bitter Root* doesn't allow that intellectual distance.

THE JINOO

The Jinoo are fictional monsters, but the violence they represent is a historical fact. The first volume of the comic is set in the 1920s, during what historians call the "nadir" or low point of American race relations. During this time, racial violence reached its peak and federal protection for Black Americans practically vanished. Between 1890 and 1920, thousands of Black Americans were lynched, often while law enforcement stood by or actively participated. Courts treated each killing as an isolated crime, never as systematic terror.

Investigative journalist and activist Ida B. Wells documented the assault in her anti-lynching campaigns, traveling the country with evidence, statistics, and public testimonies. She revealed lynching as organized racial terrorism designed to maintain a white supremacist social order and enforce Black subordination through the spectacle of public violence. Yet federal anti-lynching legislation failed repeatedly. Wells's work exposed how the legal system treated each killing as an isolated crime. She revealed that racial violence wasn't driven by individual pathology, but by social structures designed to maintain white supremacy through terror. Decades later, critical race theorists like Derrick Bell and Kimberlé Crenshaw would similarly demonstrate how legal doctrine systematically fails to recognize structural racism, lacking both the vocabulary and the political will to address how law itself embeds and perpetuates racial hierarchy.



Monsters in Klan robes stalk the woods. (Art by Sanford Greene from *Bitter Root*, Issue 2)

Bitter Root visualizes this structural reality in vivid imagery. The Jinoo don't appear as isolated madmen, but as a social movement multiplying across communities, their numbers growing, not shrinking. The evil operates like a disease that infects through hate, and when it grows strong enough, it transforms white supremacists into literal monsters. When Ford confronts the Klan in Mississippi, he doesn't face one creature but many, their twisted forms emerging from under white hoods to reveal an organized collective. The comic shows police and government officials—the very institutions meant to protect people—harboring the monsters, perpetuating the hate that creates them.

Most tellingly, the evil itself is depicted as an otherworldly, demonic force from Barzakh, another dimension, suggesting that white supremacy operates as a system larger than any individual, a corruption that infects through social structures rather than spontaneous individual moral failure. *Bitter Root* makes it impossible to ignore what Wells documented and the law refused to name. White supremacy is a sickness that, when allowed to intensify unchecked, perpetuates itself through the continuous production of monstrous hate.

For centuries, legal doctrine has treated Black people as a threat to civility, bodies that need to be surveilled, contained, and controlled. From slave codes to Black codes, vagrancy laws, stop-and-frisk policies, and the school-to-prison pipeline, law has been premised on the fiction that Black persons and groups are inherently dangerous, inherently monstrous. Both comics and horror fiction have reinforced these narratives too. Horror films like *Candyman* turned a Black lynching victim into a supernatural threat, while mainstream comics spent decades either erasing Black characters or portraying them as savages and criminals, the “dangerous Black brute,” until the Black Panther appeared in 1966.

Bitter Root upends this racial logic entirely. The white man who shows up as a Jinoo on that Harlem rooftop and nearly kills Cullen is offered something the legal system rarely extends to Black victims of racial violence: the possibility that the perpetrator was sick, that transformation is possible, and that the real

enemy remains hidden.

Baldwin understood this when he wrote that white Americans invented “the Negro problem” to avoid confronting themselves, and that “this problem, which they invented in order to safeguard their purity, has made of them criminals and monsters, and it is destroying them.” The Jinoo visualize Baldwin's insight: hatred as self-destruction, racism as a disease that consumes its host.

And then there's Ford Sangerye, standing over the corpses of Klansmen in Mississippi, his futuristic gun still smoking. He didn't try to cure the Jinoo. He killed them. The comic offers both approaches—Ma Etta's cure and Ford's kill—and refuses to tell us which is right. Maybe there is no right answer. Maybe it depends on the scale of the threat, the resources available, or how much danger your community is in. Maybe the real question isn't what to do about individual Jinoo but what to do about the political, economic, and cultural systems that keep producing them.

THE INZONDO

But the Jinoo aren't the only monsters the Sangeryes face. By the end of Volume One, the Black families are fighting one another. The Sangeryes face Dr. Walter Sylvester, a Black man transformed into an Inzondo. Where white supremacists become Jinoo through hate, Black victims become Inzondo through trauma, their grief and rage turned inward by systemic violence with no outlet for justice. Sylvester towers above the Sangeryes, filled with rage that has turned him into a muscular giant with discolored skin, long claws, a long beard, and superhuman strength. When they call him a devil, pleading for him to stop attacking innocent people, he declares:

I am not the devil. It was the evil that made me what I have become[...] You saw the hell unleashed in the summer of 1919[...] I lay buried in rubble, next to the corpses of my children, and amidst the fire and smoke and blood and tears, I was born again. I was given purpose.

Dr. Sylvester didn't become a monster by hating others. He became a monster because of what hatred did to him. The "hell" of 1919 refers to the Red Summer, dozens of race massacres that erupted across the United States that year. But Dr. Sylvester's transformation would be complete in 1921 when white supremacists burned Tulsa's Black Wall Street to the ground. His children died in the rubble, and the legal system never prosecuted the perpetrators. His transformation came from wounds turned inward, from grief and pain that couldn't be witnessed or remedied. After his transformation, events spiral further. When the Sangeryes kill Dr. Sylvester's partner, Miss Eliza Knightsdale, in their confrontation, he vows to avenge her death and destroy them.

Volume Two, titled "Rage and Redemption," reveals the deeper roots of the hate infecting American society. The comic takes us to the 1850s, where purple monsters chase runaway enslaved people through the jungles of Maryland. A younger Ma Etta is among them, learning how to hunt and cure Jinoo on the Underground Railroad. We're taken to Barzakh, a liminal space in Islamic cosmology reimagined here as a gateway realm between Earth and Hell, where those who have been battling white supremacy for centuries—Black, Asian, Native alike—are trapped, the only ones keeping dark forces from invading Earth. Here, the comic's Afrofuturist vision becomes cosmic, recentring people of color not as victims awaiting rescue but as guardians who have held the line across centuries, their labor and sacrifice keeping the world intact while remaining invisible in dominant historical narratives.

In this volume, Eliza Knightsdale has reincarnated into a new monster, a far more powerful form of Inzondo she calls an "angel of salvation," transformed by grief and rage into something beyond what Dr. Sylvester has become. One of the most haunting scenes shows the reborn Eliza bringing Walter face to face with a lynched child in Georgia. She urges him to feed himself from their pain, to embrace that suffering and let it complete his transformation into a stronger Inzondo and join her in seeking retribution.

The more we learn of Walter's story, the more we understand how he was consumed not by hatred of others, but by the accumulated weight of trauma inflicted upon him. Unlike the Jinoo, whose transformation comes from perpetrating racial violence, Dr. Sylvester's transformation comes from enduring it.

Throughout the volume, Berg Sangerye endures his own struggle. Infected while hunting the Jinoo, Berg battles to resist the transformation. The Sangerye family desperately attempts to save him from becoming an Inzondo, but he struggles against the fear, grief, and loss he has witnessed. He internalizes the deep sorrow and pain of white supremacy's victims, and it begins to change him too.

THE TULSA MASSACRE DIDN'T MERELY KILL DR. Sylvester's children. It destroyed something in him. The legal system responded not with prosecutions, not with reparations, not with federal intervention, but with silence and erasure that made the wound permanent. Toni Morrison wrote in *Beloved* about stories that are "not to pass on," too painful to remember yet too dangerous to forget. The Inzondo embody that reality. They're people crushed under the weight of a history they didn't create but cannot escape, trapped in a

present that continues to inflict the same wounds their ancestors suffered.

Legal frameworks assume harm can be remedied through compensation or punishment. But how could you possibly compensate Dr. Sylvester for watching his children burn in Tulsa? How do you punish perpetrators when most were never prosecuted? How do you prove criminal intent when massacres are publicized by the media, photographed by onlookers, and even surveilled by law enforcement while no one is held accountable?

Even critical race theory, which reveals how law embeds and perpetuates racial hierarchy, tends to focus on harm inflicted from the outside, through discriminatory statutes, biased enforcement, and unequal protection. The Inzondo reveal something harder to conceptualize: the way oppression turns inward. What media pundits cynically label as "Black-on-Black crime" may be better described as people who are both victim and threat, damaged so severely by systemic racism that their pain endangers their own communities.

Berg Sangerye's infection makes this threat personal for the family in ways the Jinoo never did. When you fight a white supremacist transformed by hatred, the moral calculus is relatively clear: cure if you can, kill if you must, protect the community at all costs. But what do you do with Berg? He's not the enemy. He's family. His transformation comes from witnessing too much suffering, from feeling too deeply the pain of those around him, from the accumulated weight of fighting monsters year after year with no end in sight.

Bitter Root doesn't present the Inzondo as obvious villains. Dr. Sylvester's rage is legitimate, born from grief, pain, and the ongoing struggle to survive racial oppression. But the comic also doesn't sentimentalize their transformation. The Inzondo are dangerous, not because they attack Black communities indiscriminately, but because their philosophy of retribution puts them at odds with those pursuing different strategies. Where the Sangeryes seek to cure the Jinoo, Dr. Sylvester and Eliza believe they must be destroyed. And they're willing to eliminate anyone who stands in their way, including other Black families who disagree with their approach.

While their danger comes from a place of pain rather than hate—a distinction that matters morally and politically—their willingness to kill both Jinoo and those who would cure them makes them no less of a threat. The legal system has no vocabulary for this kind of harm, no remedy for wounds that compound across generations, no way to address trauma that the law itself helped to create and then refused to acknowledge.

THREE WAYS TO FIGHT MONSTERS

Volumes Three and Four of *Bitter Root*, "Legacy" and "The Next Movement," bring us face to face with the deeper issues at stake. For generations, the Sangerye family has fought to save the world from being destroyed by the Jinoo. Yet they and others in the Black community remain divided on how to overcome the hate that transforms people into monsters.

Ma Etta, who has been fighting Jinoo since before the Civil War, and her granddaughter Blink remain convinced that their job is to purify the infected with medicine. Ford believes that not

all threats can be cured, and that they must kill the monsters before the monsters kill them. Berg and Cullen emphasize training the next generation and building communal strength before grief and trauma have time to transform more people into Inzondo.

These aren't just character traits or family squabbles. They're dramatizations of real philosophical and political debates that have shaped Black resistance movements since the antebellum era.



Ma Etta prepares an antidote. (Art by Sanford Greene from *Bitter Root*, Issue 1)

When Reconstruction granted formerly enslaved people formal freedom in 1865, the question immediately became clear. What does freedom actually require? Booker T. Washington argued for gradual reform, emphasizing education, economic advancement, and opportunities to demonstrate Black humanity toward eventually securing rights. W.E.B. Du Bois insisted on immediate political and civil rights, not second-class citizenship with the hope of future change.

Others, following in the footsteps of David Walker, whose 1829 *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World* called for enslaved people to violently resist their bondage, and Henry Highland Garnet, an abolitionist minister who urged enslaved people to rise up and strike for freedom, insisted that white supremacy would never voluntarily relinquish power, and that freedom must be taken by force. Still others focused on building strong Black institutions independent of the existing power structure.

The Freedmen's Bureau, a federal agency established in 1865, embodied the reform approach. It provided formerly enslaved people with education, healthcare, land, and support, but faced violent white resistance and was defunded within seven years. Frederick Douglass articulated the revolutionary position in 1857: "Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will." After emancipation, when white supremacists launched their campaign to restore Black subordination through terrorism, some Black communities took up arms in self-defense. Meanwhile, countless Black communities built churches, schools, and mutual aid societies.

Ma Etta, Ford, Berg, and Cullen embody all three traditions. Ma Etta's root work and her insistence on healing rather than killing represents the reform tradition's enduring hope that trans-

formation is possible, that even those infected by hatred can be healed. Her willingness to risk proximity to danger, to test if the cure will work, represents a faith in the possibility of redemption and change.

Ford's position—killing Klansmen in Mississippi without hesitation—represents the revolutionary tradition's recognition that liberty cannot be achieved through moral persuasion or gradual reform. White supremacists preparing to lynch a Black man aren't open to dialogue. They're an immediate threat requiring an immediate response.

Berg and Cullen's work training the next generation, maintaining the family's root-working knowledge, keeping the practice alive, represents what scholars call the Black radical tradition. It's the long view that understands neither individual cures nor tactical kills will end the production of monsters in a system that demands structural transformation.

This refusal to choose among these strategies reflects Afrofuturism's temporal politics. Rather than a linear narrative of progress, from accommodation to militancy to revolution, *Bitter Root* insists all three approaches must exist simultaneously, in tension. This rejects the Western temporal logic that says communities must move through stages, that one strategy replaces another. Instead, the Sangeryes demonstrate what African diasporic resistance has always known. Survival under siege requires holding multiple temporalities at once, honoring ancestral knowledge while building new futures, healing when possible and fighting when necessary.

BITTER ROOT SHOWS US THE TOLL THIS WORK TAKES. IN one haunting scene, Cullen is attacked by a tree that has become a monster—red eyes dotted across its bark, branches morphed into claws and teeth, bodies hanging from nooses on its limbs. Toni Morrison once observed that "the very serious function of racism is distraction. It keeps you from doing your work." The tree scene visualizes this reality. Even as Cullen escapes, he fears that something greater than individual monsters has begun to infect the land itself. The burden is consuming his whole life.

Meanwhile, Blink urges the families of the oppressed to work together. "For generations now, all of our families have fought for the same thing, but we haven't agreed on how to fight," she says. "Some use herbs. Others use magic. Some rely on weapons. But one thing none of us has done is stand together against the evil that infects the soul."

Volume Four, "The Next Movement," takes us to 1964, showing how the next generation continues the fight. The volume opens with a school bus full of teenagers heading south to Mississippi—evoking the Freedom Riders—attacked by a Jinoo whose tentacles burst from his chest. In one desperate moment, one of the Sangeryes transforms into an Inzondo to save a potential victim, blurring the line between protector and threat. An older Dr. Sylvester returns, still advocating for destroying the Jinoo rather than curing them.

Toward the end, the Sangeryes realize that even when confronted with a race massacre that levels an entire town, government leaders remain determined to blame the violence on the Black community and preserve racial segregation, the true monster in the saga.

WHY COMICS MATTER

When I teach the Reconstruction Amendments in my legal history seminar, I can explain the 13th Amendment's promise to abolish slavery's "badges and incidents." I can lecture about structural racism, about how inequality persists through facially neutral policies. I can assign critical race theory that deconstructs how these mechanisms operate. But I can't make students see what racial terror looks like. I cannot make them feel what racial violence does to families, or witness the impossible choices communities face under siege.

Bitter Root performs that work through its visual art. You can't skim past a Jinoo transformation the way you might skim lynching statistics. The twisted body, grotesque face, violence etched in color and shadow. You cannot look away. When the Sangerye family argues about strategy around their kitchen table, the panel layout shows you who's isolated in their own frame, who's sharing space, whose voice dominates the composition. When Berg or Cullen treats a Jinoo with Ma Etta's serum, the sequential art makes you feel the painstaking slowness of the work, the risk they're taking, the love that motivates it.

One of the most fascinating elements of *Bitter Root* is the back matter at the end of each volume. Edited by John Jennings—artist, professor, and director of Abrams ComicArts imprint Megascope, which publishes graphic novels centering the experiences of people of color—each volume concludes with essays and interviews with Afrofuturist writers and artists. Reading essays by scholars like Kinitra Brooks, Regina Bradley, and Qiana Whitted expanded my understanding of the cultural themes woven into the storylines. Interviews with writers and activists like Ebony Elizabeth Thomas and Brandon Massey helped me link the work to important cultural works in the horror and speculative genres.

I even got to witness my wife Ebony join the team and become an interviewer for Volume Four. This multilayered approach—visual narrative, historical references, scholarly essays, artist interviews—creates something more than entertainment. It creates a form of public scholarship, making critical ideas accessible to readers who might never pick up an academic journal but will spend hours with a comic book.

The back matter also confirmed what I'd been sensing. *Bitter Root* isn't just a comic. It is part of the Afrofuturist intellectual tradition I've been studying in my own work on law and literature, a conversation among thinkers using speculative fiction as a method of social analysis.

Law schools teach students to reason through precedent, looking backward at past decisions. But what if those precedents systematically excluded certain experiences from the record?

Bitter Root embodies the Black radical imagination. It takes the 1920s Harlem Renaissance, typically remembered for jazz, literature, and cultural flourishing, and asks a different question. What if we also remember it as an era of monsters? What if we don't separate the joy in that Harlem club from the Jinoo being fought on a nearby rooftop? This is the methodology at Afrofuturism's core, not escapism into fantasy futures, but using speculative elements to make visible what dominant histories obscure.

While the Sangerye family's root-working isn't law in the formal sense, it functions as law. It establishes norms, creates

procedures, grants authority, and determines life and death. Their debates about how to eliminate the evil that drives the Jinoo and Inzondo parallel contemporary debates about criminal justice reform versus abolition, about whether systems can be redeemed or must be dismantled.

THAT CONVENTION IN CHARLOTTE FELT LIKE A failure at the time. Three boys in chaos, no Sanford Greene, exhaustion everywhere. I knew how much finding Greene meant to my wife, but I didn't quite understand why. Now I see how that moment began an exploration into the way comics provide a unique lens for rethinking our world's future. I wasn't in Charlotte to find *Bitter Root*. I was there to support my wife in finding Sanford Greene. But in that journey, I found so much more.

Ebony and Sanford are building something together now, a creative partnership grounded in a shared vision of what Black storytelling can do, what it can teach, and what futures it can imagine. She is part of the *Bitter Root* team, contributing to the back matter, joining the conversation she'd been following from the outside. Her success is a reminder that cultural conversations are as crucial as political and legal dialogue in the journey toward social transformation.

When I think about what this work means for my three Black sons, I hope it not only fosters a love of reading but also challenges them to lean into their imaginations as a vehicle to think critically about the world around them. *Bitter Root* shows young Black readers they can be protagonists of justice stories, not just victims. It shows all readers that the categories we take for granted—who counts as human, who deserves protection, what counts as harm, whether transformation is possible—are constructed, and can be contested and changed.

Bitter Root's very title captures something essential about justice work. Roots work slowly, underground, building networks that sustain life even in hostile soil. They draw nutrients from the past while reaching toward new growth. They connect, stabilize, and persist across generations. Justice movements require this too. Not one-time radical transformation but sustained commitment to creating the conditions where human dignity flourishes. The Sangerye family doesn't defeat all the monsters or solve the problem of racism by the end of Volume Four. They survive another day, heal another person, train another generation to maintain the work.

As we exited the convention center that day and headed to our minivan, my three sons ran ahead: Superman, the Hulk, and Captain America. They are the ones who will confront the demons that plague society tomorrow. I hope they learn not only the importance of law in establishing justice in courtrooms but also the critical need for radical imagination in revealing the bitter roots of our current challenges and painting a bold vision of a brighter future.

In the meantime, the monsters are still out there. The debates continue. The work goes on. But so does the imagination that makes that work possible, the creativity that refuses to accept the present as inevitable, the stories that show us what law cannot yet see. ✚

CURRENT AFFAIRS IS INTEGRATING PREDICTION MARKETS

in partnership with **Kalshi**  **Polymarket**

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After 2028 Trump "Reelection" | \$0.50 | EVEN | **2x**
2029 (*beware the nines, just like the last times*) | \$0.09 | +999 | **11x**
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2030, Jake Paul does something bad (*really* bad) | \$0.58 | -138 | **2x**
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2040, To honor the inspiring century-long legacy of Sir Vince McMahon | \$0.316 | +217 | **3x**

Q5: How will Fox News integrate predictive markets and butcher their bovine audience?

Hannity gets them betting on Civil War Reenactments | \$0.60 | -150 | **2x**
Collectible Coins Commemorating January 6th Victims Paid For With Medicare Reimbursements | \$0.16 | -233 | **6x**
Predicting menu items for Greg Gutfeld mukbang videos | \$0.10 | +900 | **10x**
Betting on the outcome of a high-stakes hostage negotiation to kill either Steve Doocy or his son Doocy Jr. | \$0.01 | +9900 | **100x**

Q6: How will the media conceal the food shortages?

Rations and shortage lines get rebranded as loot crate drops | \$0.90 | -900 | **2x**
Free Ozempic nasal spray, like Narcan for hunger | \$0.60 | -150 | **2x**
Nude Wolf Blitzer | \$0.074 | +1251 | **14x**
Mandatory participation in live-streamed viral-video physical challenges that, due to copyright restrictions, cannot legally be called *The Hunger Games* | \$0.20 | +400 | **5x**

Q7: The rate of profit's tendency to fall:

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WHEN BERNIE CONQUERED BURLINGTON

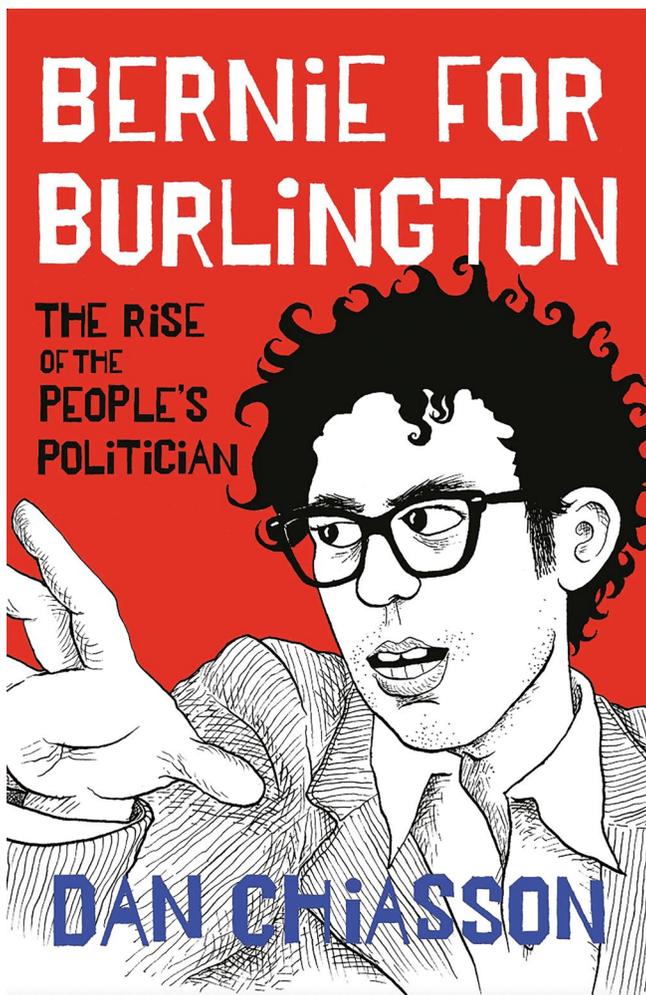
BY NATHAN J. ROBINSON

TODAY, BERNIE SANDERS IS ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT figures in American politics. As biographer Dan Chiasson puts it, Sanders is “arguably the most influential leftist politician in the modern history of the nation,” and he’s consistently ranked as one of the most popular American leaders of any kind, alongside Barack Obama. He may not have prevailed in his 2016 or 2020 presidential candidacies (and it’s unlikely there will be another, given Sanders’ advanced age), but he left a permanent mark on the generation that campaigned for him. As Chiasson writes, “Bernie’s influence will be long and profound, as his enthusiastic voters age into power and influence.” Indeed, one of his democratic socialist devotees, Zohran Mamdani, has just been sworn in (by Sanders himself!) as mayor of New York City. But Sanders’ national prominence is a relatively recent development, and even committed leftists may not know the full story of what came before. Chiasson’s new book, *Bernie for Burlington: The Rise of the People’s Politician*, is about Sanders’ first act, when in 1981 he improbably became the country’s only socialist mayor, just as the “Reagan Revolution” was sweeping the country. Today, Mamdani, Seattle’s Mayor Katie Wilson, and others are aiming to replicate something like what Sanders tried in tiny Burlington, Vermont. This makes Sanders’ origin story worthy of study, especially for those of us who want to know how the left can succeed.

Chiasson’s book is well-timed, because it offers one potential answer to the question of what “socialism in one city” might be like, for those curious how a Mamdani or Wilson administration will play out. But *Bernie for Burlington* is not just a study of the

years of Sanders’ municipal governance. Coming in at nearly 600 pages, it is several books in one, comprising a dense political and cultural history of Vermont from the 1950s through the 1980s, a biography of Sanders from his Brooklyn childhood through his 1990 Congressional campaign, and a memoir of Chiasson’s own upbringing in Vermont, having spent his teenage years living in Sanders’ “People’s Republic of Burlington.”

Chiasson is clearly fascinated by Vermont and cannot resist throwing in every detail he uncovered during the course of his extensive research. Over the course of the book we learn about: the social etiquette of using a rural payphone in 1972 Vermont, the origins and corporate structure of Vermont’s public television station, the background and clientele of seemingly every diner and coffee shop in the downtown Burlington area, the sexual abuses committed by infamous local priest Father Baffa, the history of the Ben and Jerry’s ice cream company, the time during William H. Macy’s college years when he stumbled into the warehouse of the Bread and Puppet Theatre while stoned, the burning down of two Burlington cathedrals in 1970 and ’71, the economic significance of the state’s marble quarries, a controversially chaotic 1977 Supertramp concert, the time Chiasson’s weird childhood friend ordered him to make a diorama of heaven out of cotton balls, the time 9-year-old Chiasson was shown a bondage magazine in a woodshed, the reggae scene in Burlington’s music clubs, the lurid art on the pinball machines at Upton’s Ice Cream Circus across from City Hall, the history of various underground and independent newspapers in Burlington (*The Queen City Special*, *The Vermont Freeman* and Sanders’ own



Movement), the SS uniform Chiasson once found in a trunk in his grandfather's attic, the various foods Chiasson had to scrub from plates when he worked at a restaurant called Sneakers in the neighboring city of Winooski ("egg yolk, ketchup, or maple syrup, always with cigarette butts and ashes mixed in"), the time the kids who lived next to Chiasson were beaten by their otherwise-absentee father, Cyndi Lauper's first impressions of Burlington upon moving there, the legend of the Lake Champlain Monster ("Champ," who gets a full multi-page digression), the various cars Chiasson *nearly* bought in the spring of 1987 (a 1974 BMW, a cantaloupe-colored 1975 MGB, and a "fern-green Saab 99 with a stuck odometer" and a "badly slipping clutch"), and the mechanical defects that plagued the Volvo that Chiasson ultimately settled on. (I am only scratching the surface.)

I am tempted to say the book is rather in need of aggressive editing, but I realize Chiasson is doing all of this deliberately, to provide us with a kind of kaleidoscopic portrait of the milieu that Bernie Sanders emerged from, on the theory that unless you understand Vermont in all of its rich detail, you cannot understand the Sanders mayoralty, itself foundational to the American left in 2026. Perhaps this is so—and it did make me want to visit Vermont, to try a maple "creemee" and see the fruits of the state's famous "billboard law" that preserves scenic landscapes from unsightly advertising signage. But readers who are not interested in minor Vermont lore—such as the time Orson Bean marched

in the 1976 Burlington bicentennial parade, or the time in 1979 when neighboring Winooski adopted a bizarre scheme to build an inflatable dome over its town center, with the blessing of geodesic dome enthusiast R. Buckminster Fuller—may find themselves skipping around during the first 300-odd pages of the book. (Sanders is finally elected mayor on page 298.) You might be tempted to shout at Chiasson, *Monty Python* style, "GET ON WITH IT!"

OKAY, SO, BERNIE SANDERS. THE SHORT VERSION IS: THE son of struggling Brooklyn parents who died young, Sanders was a star track athlete in high school before matriculating at the University of Chicago, where he became politicized and participated in the Civil Rights movement. Soon after graduation, Sanders bought farmland in Vermont, which was then cheap and drew young idealists from around the country. There, while working odd jobs as a carpenter and selling his homemade educational film strips to public schools, Sanders ran a series of quixotic campaigns with the newly-founded Liberty Union Party during the 1970s. After ten years as a "perennial candidate," he finally became mayor of Burlington in 1981, running on the slogan "Burlington Is Not For Sale" and defeating the long-serving Democratic incumbent by ten (!) votes. The victory of a socialist made national news (he appeared on *Donahue*), and despite the predictable warnings that Sanders' socialism would Destroy The Local Economy, Sanders turned out to be a popular mayor, serving four terms and being reelected by overwhelming margins each time. After leaving office in 1989, Sanders ran for Congress, where he would go on to become the longest-serving independent in U.S. congressional history, before launching his famous presidential campaigns.

Some of the parallels with Mamdani are striking. Sanders went up against a long-serving establishment Democrat, Gordon Paquette, who was totally unprepared to deal with an upstart socialist challenger. (Paquette called Sanders "Saunders," just like Andrew Cuomo called Mamdani "Mamdami," and similarly resorted to ugly ethnic insinuations, saying Sanders would make Burlington "more like Brooklyn.") He mobilized unexpected constituencies who had been disillusioned with city politics, particularly students. He used creative campaign tactics, for instance handing out sturdy reusable shopping bags to the elderly that said "FOR THE PEOPLE" on one side and "SANDERS FOR MAYOR" on the other. (Chiasson tells us that the so-called Bernie Bags "became a coveted item for years after" and would "often come up" when people talked about what sealed Sanders' victory.) Like Mamdani, who disavowed his 2020 "defund the police" stance, Sanders walked back prior criticisms of cops (e.g., "There is no doubt that there are many Nazis on the force.") In fact, he won the endorsement of the police union, who had felt neglected by the incumbent mayor.

Like Mamdani, Sanders did not speak the language of Marxist theory on the campaign trail, instead campaigning against the incumbent's plan to raise property taxes and promising to "provide the quality of life that ordinary people are entitled to" and "address the problems that face the people of Burlington on a day-to-day level." Asked by a reporter to sum up his stance in one word, he said "radical," but when pressed on what "socialism" meant, he waved the issue aside, saying "we're not discuss-

ing that now” and “That’s not relevant.”

Notably, both Sanders and Mamdani were brought to power the year after right-wing presidents had taken power, and both rode the waves of backlash. Chiasson quotes local observers saying there would have been no Bernie without Ronald Reagan, and we might wonder whether there could have been a Mamdani without Donald Trump. Horrible as they’ve been, Trump’s presidencies have also been fuel for left-wing organizing in this country, and it’s notable that the Democratic Socialists of America has grown during both Trump terms but shrank under Biden. Looking back at Bernie’s Burlington, one wonders whether right-wing successes can create unusual, unpredictable openings for the radical left that we must be prepared to take advantage of.



Bernie Sanders on the street campaigning for Mayor of Burlington Vermont, 1981 (Photo: Rob Swanson)

There are notable dissimilarities with Mamdani as well. By contrast with Mamdani’s meteoric rise, Sanders had spent ten years as a losing candidate. He was something of a fish-out-of-water as a brash Brooklynite in bucolic Vermont, which had attracted waves of “back to the land” hippie types during the ’60s and ’70s (including “puppeteers, foragers, goat farmers, draft dodgers[...] potters, glassblowers, poets, underage runaways.”) Sanders, too, was a ’60s activist lured by rural living, but he never joined the counterculture and was only ever “hippie-adjacent.” Sanders came to reject what a friend called the “symbolic politics” of the “lifestyle left,” actions that demonstrated commitments to radicalism without achieving policy victories.

The Sanders of *Bernie for Burlington* is an endearingly recognizable figure. In the 1970s, he barnstorms the state in a rusty Mercury Comet, with “one windshield wiper, which he kept in the glove box.” At home, he “siphoned electricity from his neighbor,” and his toddler son called him “Bernard” or “Bernie” instead of “dad.” When Sanders proposed a new city concert series, he said there would “even [be] rock, which I personally have a hard time with.” A friend recalled that when he proposed going out for a beer, Sanders reacted like he was “suggesting an orgy.” Sanders’ orneriness is also on display. As mayor, his staff sent him a memo warning that he looked “bored and annoyed”

in meetings, refusing to smile or chit-chat with people, and this was alienating people. Sanders ignored the memo and would continue to look bored and annoyed.

Once elected, Sanders quickly found that it was difficult to implement much socialism under the city’s “weak mayor” system, which gave him the constitutional power to appoint the harbormaster and the keeper of the dog pound but reserved the real power for the Board of Aldermen. “There was nothing terribly ‘socialistic’ we could do,” said one Bernie ally. “We weren’t going to take over the banks.”

That meant Sanders had to develop a slate of progressive allies to take over the board, and had to get creative in the uses of power, for instance by creating a “shadow government” outside the formal administration, and going to the courts and the press. He also introduced popular civic participation initiatives, like “Project Snowshovel,” which assigned teenagers to shovel the driveways of the elderly. By budgeting carefully and running the city well, Sanders earned praise even from Republicans and voters to whom socialism was anathema. One machinist told a local paper “He says ‘socialism’ and I want to see him deported, but if you stick around and listen some more, he starts to make sense.”

Sanders was red-baited by the local paper and businesspeople, of course. “Socialist principles have not worked anywhere in the world... they won’t in Burlington, either!” read one ad in the *Burlington Free Press*, whose anticommunist former owner had kept a literal enemies file full of damaging research on local activists. Sanders was accused of plotting a “reign of terror.” In one of his reelection campaigns, an opponent ludicrously compared Burlington under Sanders to “Nazi-occupied Poland, where my family helped many people evacuate,” where “people were forced to sit in the mud and excrement” while the Gestapo “painted yellow stars on the walls and doors.” Pressed on the comparison, she said Sanders was “not that different” in his methods from Hitler (a deeply offensive thing to say about a Jewish man who lost family in the Holocaust). This was overreach, and it didn’t work. Sanders’ enemies thought his administration would be a “blip” they could wait out, but he was easily reelected and remained in office for virtually the entire rest of the decade.

SANDERS’ BURLINGTON SOON BECAME “THE PLACE TO see socialism in action,” and was spoken of “like it was *fin-de-siecle* Vienna or Sartre’s Left Bank.” It was an “epicenter of the anti-imperialist, anti-Reagan left.” Allen Ginsberg wrote a poem about Burlington socialism. Michel Foucault turned up for three weeks in 1982, “lured in part by the desire to behold this unique American experiment firsthand.” (Bernie himself was not much of a Foucauldian, turning to a friend during the great philosopher’s “Technologies of the Self” lecture and asking: “Do you think anyone in this audience knows what the fuck he’s talking about?”)

But Sanders was not universally beloved on the local left. Many activists felt betrayed when peace demonstrators staged a sit-in at the local General Electric weapons plant, and Sanders had them arrested. When Sanders claimed that he was simply defending the unionized plant workers (he had been “looking for opportunities to demonstrate his loyalty to organized workers”), the anarchist environmentalist writer Murray Bookchin, who became Sanders’ “fiercest local critic,” claimed he was “acting as a

publicity man for GE, not the socialist mayor of Burlington.” In a harsh 1986 essay, Bookchin accused Sanders of being a “centralist, who is more committed to accumulating power in the mayor’s office than giving it to the people,” and disparaged Sanders’

[...]belief in technological progress, businesslike efficiency, and a naive adherence to the benefits of “growth.” The logic of all these ideas is that democratic practice is seen as secondary to a full belly, the earthy proletariat tends to be eulogized over the “effete” intellectuals, and environmental, feminist, and communitarian issues are regarded as “petit-bourgeois” frivolities by comparison with the material needs of “working people.”



Bernie Sanders celebrating the Mayoral election victory on March 3, 1981 (Photo: Rob Swanson)

The scholar and activist Michael Parenti had campaigned for office alongside Sanders on the Liberty Union ticket, and was a cause célèbre on Vermont’s anti-war left after being denied a teaching job for being arrested at a Vietnam protest. But Parenti, too, became disillusioned and became a “critic of Bernie’s accommodation of local capitalists.” (By 2015, Parenti’s verdict on Sanders was mixed.)

Indeed, Sanders took pains not to alienate the local business community, and when he ran for reelection it was “not as a brash revolutionary socialist but as a good government fiscal conservative who chased vice, debauchery, and rudeness out of the city of Burlington, made peace with developers, and shoveled every driveway.” This raises the question: much as socialists might delight in the story of a socialist administration that became “essentially unbeatable” at the polls, was the “socialism” something of an illusion? In other words, was Sanders much different to a “good government” Democrat, with a bit of radical branding? Bookchin and Parenti might have said he wasn’t, but Chiasson argues that there was something genuinely remarkable about Bernie’s Burlington. Sanders “transformed our city into a progressive, heterogenous place that particularly welcomed the

young.” Despite being advised by aides to stick to local issues and avoid foreign policy (they thought it was “a bad idea that I hold a press conference on Chile”), Sanders used his mayoral pulpit to condemn Reagan’s Central American interventions and apartheid South Africa.

He fostered a public spirit that was widely felt, and during this “wacky, DIY civic experiment,” citizens found themselves debating questions like “Could Bernie win public access for our waterfront from greedy, mustache-twisting developers? Should Bernie succeed in stripping the kindly doctors at our beloved local hospital of their tax exemption? Should our mayor defy the Reagan administration and fly to Nicaragua to meet with our country’s bitter adversaries?” Even his public access TV show, “Bernie Speaks with the Community,” radiated respect for ordinary people and a desire to involve them in politics. In one episode that has become famous online, Sanders interviews teenagers dressed as punks at a local mall about why they’re dissatisfied with society, and treats their answers perfectly seriously, as if he were speaking to members of the Board of Commerce. Sanders has always believed that it is both the right and the obligation of everyday people to take part in democracy, a conviction that is *not* shared by conventional elitist politicians of either major party.

And there *were* initiatives that a more cautious Democrat would never have attempted, such as his attempt to municipalize the cable company, and the establishment of Burlington’s Community Land Trust, which provides affordable homes on publicly-owned land. Sanders was willing to take on large local institutions, including the utility companies, the university, and the hospital, and he is credited with keeping the city’s waterfront accessible to the public rather than allowing it to be developed into luxury housing.

CHIASSON’S ULTIMATE VERDICT ON BERNIE’S MAYORALTY appears overwhelmingly positive. He seems to regard these as magical years in Burlington, although his verdict is tinged by obvious nostalgia for his youth there. (Chiasson even personally knew the famous “mall punks.”) He makes a good argument that the Sanders administration was something remarkable:

In Burlington, Bernie, “the avowed socialist,” overcame the fears of the establishment with one smart, nonpolitical initiative after another. He brought a professional baseball team to Burlington; he plowed the streets and sidewalks efficiently, prioritizing the poor neighborhoods where people walked to church and school; he got a deal on cable TV for the elderly; he welcomed musicians, poets, and puppeteers to our streets; he built a land trust for affordable homeownership and wealth creation; he and his administration salvaged our city’s beautiful waterfront from scrap and toxins. Sanders won over Burlington by making even the businesspeople in our prosperous city feel they had an agile and imaginative government. By the end of his eight years, many of us realized we’d played a role in a one-of-a-kind, historic inquiry into the possibilities for human happiness in an American city.

Chiasson does not write as a committed socialist, but as someone from a fairly nonpolitical background who was captivated by the effect of Sanders on the city he grew up in. Chiasson's family were not leftists—he recalls his grandfather shouting “don't answer the door, it's SANDERS!” when Bernie would come canvassing—and he had been told that socialism was “an evil ideology practiced by authoritarians doling out stale bread and block cheese.” Yet Chiasson saw firsthand that “entrusted to our new socialist overlords[...] everything about Burlington was getting obviously, dramatically so much better, crisper, more buoyant, before our eyes—as even the city's businesspeople had to concede.”

There are a few lessons leftists can take from Chiasson's exhaustive case study, even though Burlington in the 1980s comes across as singular and unlikely to be replicated. One obvious lesson is that every vote counts. Sanders' ten-vote victory margin over a candidate who had gotten 70 percent of the vote two years prior is one of the great electoral upsets of all time. Another: don't give up. Sanders had to lose many times before he won, and when he did win it was in part because the right political moment had arrived—the old mayor had blundered into supporting an unpopular tax hike, the opponents of Reagan were angry and ready to mobilize, the '60s kids who had moved to Vermont were growing up and getting politically engaged. Sanders was ready for that moment when it came, and that was in part because he had been practicing for it. By 1981, he'd gotten some of the kookier stuff out of his speeches. (Chiasson says Sanders was for a long time inspired by, and adopted some of the rhetoric of, the somewhat fringe psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich, who had complicated theories about a universal energy force called “orgone.”) He'd been through a few fights, fighting phone rate

increases with the Vermont Telephone Boycott Committee and successfully forcing the public television station to air his Eugene Debs documentary. And so even though he found himself asking “What the fuck do I know about being the the mayor of a city?,” he had prepared himself well and flourished in the role.

We can see that Sanders believed he needed to be intensely pragmatic in order to succeed, to “distinguish his politics from the bourgeois orthodoxies of the activist left,” as Chiasson puts it. Whether that was *true* is not clear. Did Sanders really need to take the side of the weapons company workers over the peace activists? Chiasson provides some evidence that he didn't, that the community was broadly sympathetic to the activists and Sanders may have gone too far in trying to prove he wasn't a radical to be feared. Mamdani faces the same risk. Like Sanders, he has extended olive branches to the business community and the police commissioner, and seems determined to prove that he is a good-government mayor who will focus foremost on plowing the streets and picking up the trash. But how much compromise is too much? When does socialism become toothless? The questions do not have fixed or obvious answers.

Still, the impression one gets from *Bernie for Burlington* is that Sanders had a successful run in city government, brought some important lasting changes, remained popular with voters, and presided over a golden age for the city. Leftists who want to go from the fringe to the mainstream would do well to learn from this example. “Most people who hold our views do not hold public office in this country,” Sanders said in his 1989 farewell address. But for a few years, one did, and it showed that, at the very least, socialists in office do not lead a city to ruin. In '80s Vermont, one remarkable socialist helped his city prosper, and left a lasting imprint. ✚

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BEN COHEN

On War, NATO, Corporate Overlords, and Ice Cream

BEN COHEN is the co-founder, along with Jerry Greenfield, of the Ben and Jerry's ice cream company. But he has also been involved throughout his life with a number of major activist efforts on issues of peace, social justice, anti-racism, and climate change. He is currently heading the Up In Arms campaign to rein in military spending. Other initiatives he has played a major part in establishing include the People's Power Initiative, the Eisenhower Media Network, the Pierre Sprey Award for Investigative Journalism, and the Stamp Stampede campaign for campaign finance reform. Cohen was a national co-chair of Bernie Sanders' 2020 presidential campaign. He has been arrested multiple times in the course of his activism, including disrupting an RFK Jr. Senate hearing to protest the war in Gaza. He is the author of the book *Above The Law: How Qualified Immunity Protects Violent Police* (OR Books, featuring an introduction by Killer Mike) and he is currently running a campaign to "free Ben and Jerry's" from its corporate overlords to protect its social activism.



ROBINSON

You are an ice cream man by trade, but one of the most common threads in your extracurricular activities has been issues of war and peace. Recently, people might have seen the conflict with Ben & Jerry's owners over creating a flavor for Palestine. People might have seen you in front of the White House chainsawing a mockup of the Pentagon filled with dollar bills. So let me start by asking you: why has war been such a motivator for you?

BEN COHEN

I think it really resonated for me when I saw this quote from Cornel West saying that "justice is what love looks like in public." That's where it's coming from for me. I just see people—myself, I'm one of them—as wanting to have a decent life, wanting to have a good life for themselves and for people like them. And I believe people hate war. People have no desire to kill other mothers, fathers, sons and daughters, sisters and brothers, and families just like them in other countries that they have nothing against.

The thing that drives me crazy about it is that it just sucks up so much money, so much energy, and so much of our spirit. And nobody expressed that better than general and president Dwight Eisenhower, when he talked about how "every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed."

It's just incredible to me that there's



no limit to the amount of money that the government decides to spend on the Pentagon, and yet, when mothers and fathers come to Congress and say, “We need more money for our schools—I can’t afford childcare, I can’t afford housing,” congresspeople look at them and are just so sympathetic and say, “Oh, I really care about your kids. That’s just horrible, but there just isn’t any money.” And it is a crock of shit. It’s bullshit. It’s a lie. If we could just spend the money on taking care of people instead of preparing to kill literally tens of millions of them, there’d be all the money we need.

ROBINSON

You mentioned the words of Eisenhower. I take it this is one reason why your Eisenhower Media Network is named after him. Because there you have someone who had a better technical grasp of issues of war and peace than perhaps anyone else in history, and he comes out at the end of his presidency with this remarkable speech, with this idea that it is not just “waste” but outright theft.

COHEN

He also talked about the effect that it has on our spirit, our soul as a nation, that we’re using people’s energy, people’s life force, to build these weapons instead of using that energy to improve the quality of life for people. And so, yes, I helped to found the Eisenhower Media Network because we need people who have the credentials to support this argument, and the Eisenhower Media Network is all former high- and mid-level military and national security experts who are all backing this up.

It’s easy to see. If you just look at how much other countries are spending on their militaries—parenthetically, just the budget of ICE is bigger than the military budgets of most countries—but the country that spends the next most, besides the U.S. currently, is China. And we spend three times more than they’re spending already. So the argument that we need these expenditures to protect ourselves is absurd.

ROBINSON

I read an interview, you mentioned at a

very early age being very struck by the lyrics of Bob Dylan’s “Masters of War” about “the men who hide behind walls and hide behind desks.” In our glorious capitalist system, there are companies that make their profits by making ice cream, and there are companies that make their profits by making bombs. And under the Milton Friedman theory that the only social responsibility of a corporation is to maximize its profits, a weapons company has a social responsibility to foment future violence, fear, and war. What a dangerous type of industry that is to have!

COHEN

Yes, you got it exactly right, Nathan. The weapons industry provides two lobbyists for every member of Congress. They are driving the legislation and who gets elected. And they keep on saying, “Well, it’s jobs; we provide jobs. That’s our social responsibility.” But the reality is that for a given amount of money spent by the government, you could create a heck of a lot more jobs in almost any other area than producing weapons—building houses, teachers, nurses, you name it.

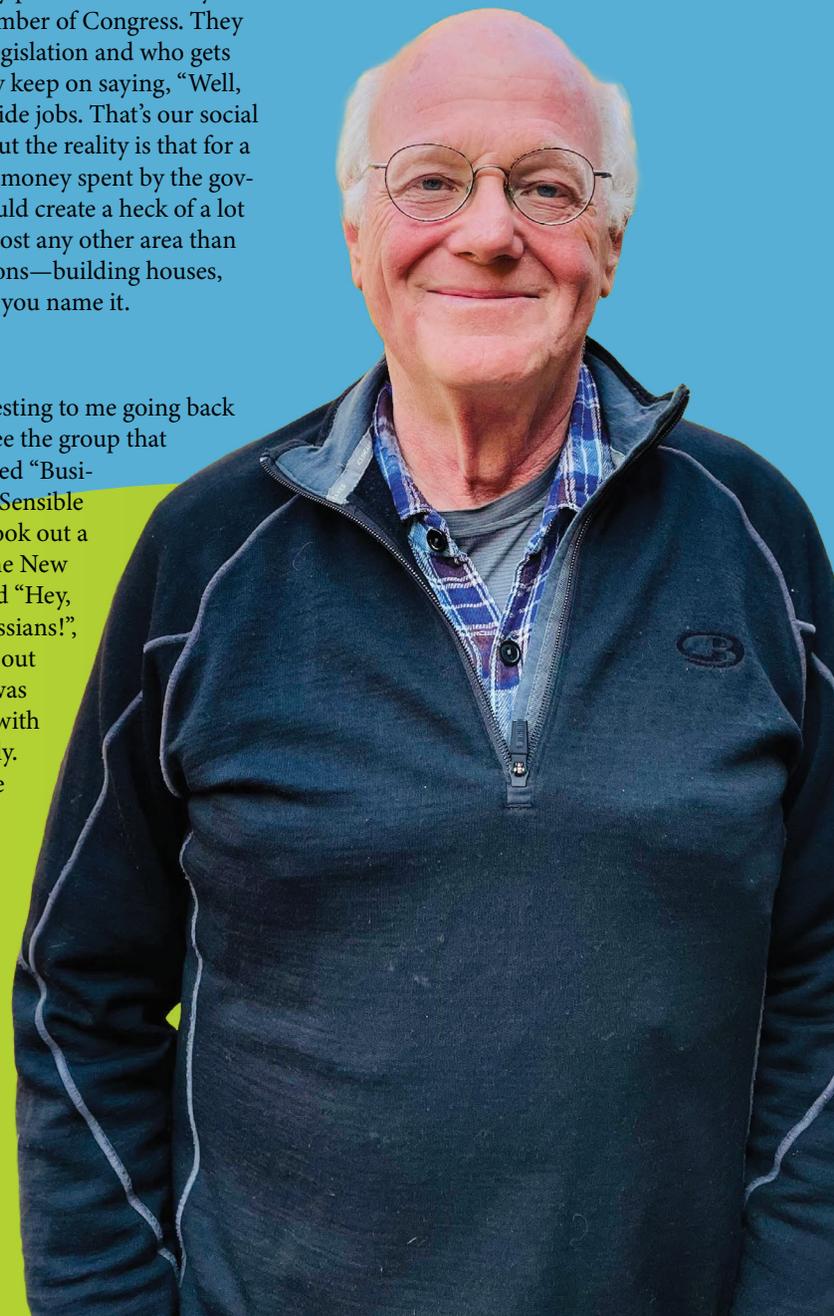
ROBINSON

It was very interesting to me going back to the 1990s to see the group that you founded called “Business Leaders for Sensible Priorities.” You took out a full-page ad in the New York Times called “Hey, let’s scare the Russians!”, and you pointed out that U.S. policy was making conflict with Russia more likely. At the time, there were those that were warning that the expansion of NATO, the failure to try diplomacy with Russia, was risking this spiraling geopolitical conflict. You and some others were

warning that our own policy was going to lead to this kind of catastrophic escalation and a renewal of arms races and mistrust. And I believe you would say that partially came to fruition in the current conflict over Ukraine.

COHEN

Yes, I think that’s exactly right. The U.S. drives the arms race, and the other countries are just trying to catch up. The other countries are just trying to not get invaded or bombed by the U.S. And yes, it is very true that the war in Ukraine was a direct result of NATO expansion. At the end of the Cold War, the U.S. agreed not to expand NATO, and then they continued



to do it in several tranches. If the situation were reversed, the U.S. would be apoplectic. If some other country put a bunch of nuclear weapons on the Mexican border aimed at the U.S., what would the U.S. do? The Cuban Missile Crisis—that’s what that was.

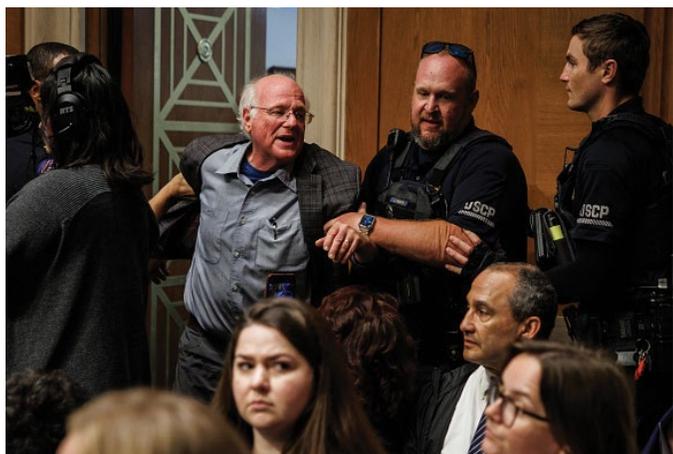
The reality was that the whole purpose of NATO was to defend Europe from the Warsaw Pact. When the Soviet Union dissolved, there was no longer a Warsaw

any mechanism for making sure those who commit murder are subject to the same penalties that you would be if you committed murder in civilian life.

COHEN

Yes, I think that’s absolutely right. They have immunity—a legal decision, a precedent that’s been set for the police, and now the boss of ICE is claiming it for ICE. All a police person needs to say if they want

ture, we’ll have to actually do on the radio. With the BB demonstration, what I say is: I’m going to show you the size of our current nuclear arsenal. What I’m going to do is I’m going to drop some BBs into this bucket, and I drop one BB and I say that represents the nuclear bomb that blew up Hiroshima. Now I’m going to drop in 25 BBs—that’s enough to blow up every major city on earth. And then I say, Now I’m going to drop in the amount



Left: Ben Cohen in 2023 being escorted out of a Senate hearing after protesting for Gaza. Right: Ben Cohen in 2023 blocking the entrance to the Justice Department in protest of the Justice Department’s prosecution of Wikileaks founder Julian Assange. (Getty/Associated Press)

Pact. There was no purpose for NATO to continue. And as a matter of fact, there were talks about ending NATO. What ended up happening was that a bunch of weapons manufacturers got together and formed the committee to expand NATO and showered Congress with lobbying, campaign contributions, the whole works, and then the discussion was, okay, let’s expand NATO.

ROBINSON

I want to talk about lack of accountability. We had Dennis Fritz of your Eisenhower Media Network on the program to talk about the lies leading up to the invasion of Iraq. Nobody was held accountable for that war. No prosecutions. Relatedly, you wrote a whole book about qualified immunity, where even in the worst cases of basically police murders, no one is held accountable. These institutions that create the worst violence in our world today can do so in part because we have eliminated

to get off is, “I feared for my life.” They just say those words, and it’s like magic. It could be, well, the guy was reaching for his cell phone, and I feared for my life. He looked at me with wild eyes; I feared for my life. It’s horrible.

ROBINSON

We were talking about the military budget and how outlandish it is, the number of nuclear weapons the United States has, and the effect of that on global stability. You have talked before about “the BB demonstration” and “the Oreo demonstration,” and I wondered if you could describe those for us, because they’re very vivid ways of driving these home.

COHEN

Well, they’re certainly better as actual demonstrations, but in terms of trying to describe it: the BB one is actually an audio demonstration, which sometime in the fu-

of BBs that represents our total nuclear arsenal, and it’s 10,000 BBs, and it makes a heck of a racket for a pretty long period of time, and it is absurd. Conservatively speaking, people I work with say our current nuclear arsenal is enough to blow up the entire Earth ten times over. Trump says it’ll blow up the entire Earth 100 times over. And then he says, “But I’m going to spend another \$2 trillion on creating a whole new generation of nuclear weapons.” It defies rationality or logic, and it’s just totally immoral.

ROBINSON

“And I want the Nobel Peace Prize.”

COHEN

Well, I think what he said recently is, “I didn’t get the Nobel Peace Prize, so I’m going to stop going for it. I’m going to be the war president.”

And the Oreo demonstration. The problem when you hear about these huge

numbers is that you hear about them in isolation, and you don't have any conception of how much they are and how much they are in relation to the rest of it. So when they're dealing with the federal budget, they deal with one department at a time, and you hear they're planning on spending, I don't know, 10 billion on the Department of Education; they're thinking of spending 20 billion on housing or whatever; 30 billion on health care. But you don't hear about it together. You hear about it one at a time, and then you hear they're going to spend 800 billion on the Department of War.

And so what this Oreo demonstration does is we say that each Oreo represents \$20 billion, and there's one or two Oreos spent for anything else that we do. And then you get to the Pentagon, and there are 40, or now 50, Oreos. Then what I demonstrate is that you take a few Oreos off the top of that big Pentagon stack, and what do you know? You can fully fund our schools. You can make it so that housing is affordable for people, and you can make it so you can get child care at a rate that's not going to break you. And then on the other side, we take those Oreos off, and then we say, well, what about these adversaries, these countries that also have military budgets? Isn't that going to make us vulnerable to them? And then we show how the country that spends the next most is China, which spends 300 billion, and the amount of money that we still have is like three times what they're spending. Then you get to countries like Iran; they're spending like half an Oreo. It's absurd. It's mostly immoral. I think that the answer is in the spiritual realm. I'm a Jew, and even I know this is not what Jesus would do.

ROBINSON

I saw that headline recently that said "Ben Cohen says he loves Jesus."

COHEN

Yes, that was from an interview I did with Tucker Carlson. We only talked about the Pentagon and militarism. We agreed on everything. And at the end, he says, "Well, do you have some kind of spiritual path that you follow?" I say, "Not really, but I love Jesus Christ," and that was the bit that the Israeli newspaper took as the headline.

ROBINSON

Yes, "Ben Cohen converts!" New recruit!

COHEN

I mean, Jesus was a Jew, man! They ought to own him.

ROBINSON

I don't know how you feel about it being called the "Department of War," but I feel like I'm all for it, because it's at least honest.

COHEN

Totally, it's the only honest thing he's done. I appreciate it, because people should know that that's what it's about. It's not about defense.

ROBINSON

I want to get to your current fight against the owners of the company you founded. I discussed the usual capitalist model of the company existing to maximize profits for its shareholders. That's why it exists, and it must do anything—according to the Friedman doctrine—that contributes to the increase in benefits for those shareholders. Now, Ben & Jerry's is a business, but you, from the start, did everything you could to try and have a model that departs from that, that incorporates a social mission. What historically has it meant for Ben & Jerry's to have a social mission embedded into its work along with the making and selling of ice cream?

COHEN

Well, originally, Jerry and I were not planning on becoming businessmen. We were planning on becoming shop owners, and we opened up a little homemade ice cream shop, and that's all it was going to be. And then, as the business grew and we realized that we were becoming businessmen, that was not a pleasant realization, because we realized that business tends to have a negative impact on communities. It tends to exploit workers. It despoils the environment. And that wasn't what we wanted to do.

Our immediate reaction was to sell the business, and then I ended up talking to this guy I had gotten to know, a kind of eccentric restaurateur, and I was telling

him we were going to sell the business. And he said, "Ben, how could you possibly do that? The business is your baby. It has so much potential." I said, "Maurice, you know what business does. It destroys the society." And he said, "Well, if you don't think that's the way business should be done, why don't you just do it differently?" And that hadn't really occurred to me, and so we decided to see if it was true that business is essentially a neutral tool, like a hammer, and you can use it to either destroy things or to build things up. So we set out to use our business as a force for progressive social change, and it hadn't really done that before. We thought the odds were that we were going to fail, but we didn't. It turns out that there's a spiritual aspect to business, just as there is to the lives of individuals, and as your business supports the community, the community supports your business.

Most people are buying stuff from corporations *despite* the values of the corporations, and when they have a chance to buy something from a corporation whose values they agree with, they love it, and it forms the deepest possible relationship that you can have with your customers, which is a relationship based on shared values. It used to be, in terms of what we called the social mission at Ben & Jerry's, that there was a feeling that if we put money and time and resources into improving the quality of life for people, that was going to take away from money and time and resources we could put into increasing profitability. And what we discovered was that you can find ways of doing business that are profitable and improve the quality of life for people, and that's what Ben & Jerry's has been doing, and people seem to really like it.

ROBINSON

Famously, the company stopped selling ice cream in the occupied Palestinian territories, but you have had a great deal of struggle in maintaining that unique model of a company that embodies progressive values. There was a fight when you tried to introduce a flavor for Gaza. And now, Magnum, which owns the company, is really pulling out all the stops to end that model forever by eliminating the struc-

ture that keeps Ben & Jerry's independent. What is the current Free Ben & Jerry's struggle about?

COHEN

Ownership recently transferred. Unilever was the owner, and they spun off their ice cream division into its own publicly held company, the Magnum corporation. And as soon as that happened, the Magnum corporation set about dismantling the Ben & Jerry's independent board of directors, which is a legally constituted entity that exists in perpetuity. That entity has responsibility over the social mission of the company, the quality of the product, use of the trademark, etc. And the Magnum corporation didn't want to deal with that. They own 100 brands around the world, and none of them have an independent board. They don't have to get any approval from anything. And they decided they want to get rid of this independent board.

First, they tried character assassination on the chair of the board, publishing a public statement and a legal document saying that she's "not fit to serve." And then they expected the rest of the board members to, therefore, depose her. Instead, the rest of the board members supported her. So the next thing they did was say they're retroactively instituting term limits, and all of these guys have served too long, so we're going to kick them all out. They're no longer meeting with the board. They're ignoring the board. They're trying to dismantle the board, which is illegal.

And so Jerry and I have been familiar with the situation for a long time and came to the conclusion that there's no way that the social mission of Ben & Jerry's will survive under the ownership of the Magnum corporation. So we put out a call for socially aligned investors to buy the company. Those investors have made themselves known to us, and they're ready to do it, but the Magnum Ice Cream Company refuses to sell. So that's why we have started the Free Ben & Jerry's campaign—that's freebenandjerrys.com, #FreeBenandJerrys—to pressure the Magnum corporation to do the right thing. And financially speaking—which, as you say, is the only thing

they care about from an investor's point of view—what they're doing is they've raised money and gotten investments based on the power of Ben & Jerry's brand while they are destroying the brand, and so it's a shitty investment.

ROBINSON

It's very odd that they're willing to, basically, drive away Ben and Jerry from Ben & Jerry's, drive away the customers, and really hurt the brand itself for the sake of crushing that independence and ensuring that the company cannot do anything political. How do you understand why they're doing what they're doing? Because it doesn't really make sense from a purely financial perspective.

COHEN

First of all, they don't understand it. They don't have it in their heart, in their soul. They, like most every other corporation around, don't want controversy. They don't want to take stands on controversial issues, and they don't like getting pushback from people in high places or low places that don't agree with the stand that's being taken. And I think they think that if this Ben & Jerry's brand, which is one of the top three brands that they own, goes and creates this controversy, it's going to rub off on the rest of their brands.

The other part of it is that they don't understand how to do it. The way they run all their other brands is, "We want more people to buy stuff. Okay, let's hire some ad agency to come up with some ads, and let's hire a PR agency to push it," and it's not about values. They don't understand the concept of values-led business. The normal business model is you hire an ad agency, and they make up a story that people like. It's cute, funny, and emotional, and so they like it, and they are more likely to buy your stuff. That's what they want to do. That's what they know how to do.

ROBINSON

The people who love your ice cream may be wondering, should they stop eating it?

COHEN

No, they should not stop eating it.

ROBINSON

Are you asking them to boycott Ben & Jerry's?

COHEN

I am not asking them not to buy Ben & Jerry's. Ben & Jerry's is the victim here. It's essentially under occupation, and we want to rescue Ben & Jerry's from the occupation. There are a bunch of other brands that the Magnum company owns. If you don't want to buy them, that works. We don't want to hurt our employees. We want the company to be strong for when eventually enough people put enough pressure on Magnum and they do agree to sell it. We want a strong company.

There is litigation. There is a lawsuit, and we'll see what happens. But those things take a long time to wind their way through the courts, and they're not going to solve the problem. We need to find an owner that actually supports the social mission and will not be forced into it. ✦

Transcript edited by Patrick Farnsworth.



NOTE: Not an actual Ben and Jerry's flavor (but maybe someday?)

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