

History Will Absolve Us

CURRENT AFFAIRS

\$12.95

VOL. 11, ISSUE 4

JULY/AUGUST 2026



**THE FEAR OF
MOLD**

*It will come for
you, too.*

**PHONE
SEX**

When it gets political...

**DEMOCRACY
NOW!**

*We talk to the legendary
Amy Goodman.*

**NO AI
GUARANTEE**

BY WAY OF INTRODUCTION

Bring back the use of "oughtn't" and "mightn't"

NO IT BLOODY WELL ISN'T AI

Readers on Instagram recently chastised *Current Affairs*, alleging that one of our beautiful original works of art was produced by artificial intelligence. They concluded this because the piece contained a mistake. Reader, we promise: all of our mistakes are 100% human-made. The illustrations in this magazine are all produced by hand by Real Artists. We recently formalized our policy that every piece of artwork for the magazine must be made by an artist, so you can rest assured that if you see a piece of artwork on our Instagram, it has been made by hand. There are very few exceptions to this rule (artists and designers themselves can use these tools to make minor elements in larger designs, if they choose, or use them for tasks like adding textures), but we are committed to having a magazine that showcases wonderful human-made illustrations throughout its pages.

LIFE HACK

SAVE TIME BY NOT EATING ALL DAY, JUST EAT
THREE MEALS BEFORE BED.

FUN TRICK

!!!

Pronounce "articles" like it's
the name of a Greek hero. It's
seconds of fun!

WORD OF THE MONTH:

"Overmorrow"

(adverbial noun, archaic.) The day after tomorrow.
"I'll have the rent overmorrow, honest!"

TIP FOR THE SWELTERING STORMY SUMMERS:

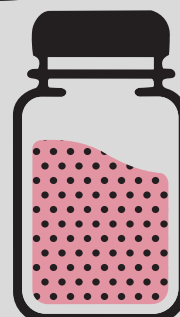
You can use this magazine to
dry off if you really need to.

Give yourself grace,
it's hard to always
have a towel at hand.



HIRING SEASONED PROFESSIONALS

THESE PROFESSIONALS
MUST BE COVERED IN
HERBS, SPICES, AND
PEPPERS.



WE ARE NOT THE DEPARTMENT OF MISCELLANEOUS GRIEVANCES

A lot of people send their ideas for articles to the *Current Affairs* pitch form, and we're always grateful for them. Without your pitches, there literally wouldn't be a magazine; we'd have to print 72 blank pages, write "NOTES" at the top, and pretend we did it on purpose.

Occasionally, though, people use the pitch form to send us things which are *not* ideas for new article topics, but miscellaneous grievances with people and institutions in their lives. They seem to treat *Current Affairs* as a court of last resort for whatever is vexing them, like the people who used to write letters to 221B Baker Street in hopes that Sherlock Holmes would solve their case.

"Claim my unpaid invoice," read a recent submission in this vein, from a wedding dance instructor who believed they'd been ripped off by a client: "Am arguing my employer to pay for my services rendered." On another occasion, a woman in Australia felt a hairdresser had been rude to her, and wanted us to publish an article about it. (She eventually succeeded in placing the story with a Brisbane tabloid.) Someone else accused their local supermarket of an elaborate fruit-based "deceptive behavior" in which the shopkeepers would put a "perfectly rotten lemon" in every bag of good lemons to make more money. ("I've attached a photo of my latest purchase," read the pitch form, followed by "No where to attach picture I have taken." The "additional information" box contained only the word "TV.") Our most recent pitch of this sort read "It's a council issue regarding trees," and the writer wanted us to persuade their municipal government to cut down a "dangerous" mahogany near their kids' school. On and on it goes.

Now, we don't mean to be unkind here. In fact, we feel quite protective of the confused and frustrated people who wash up on our magazine's shores. But sadly, we are not the Department of Miscellaneous Grievances, and we are powerless to claim your invoice, influence your town council, or put a stop to your deceptive lemons. Unlike the Ghostbusters, we are *not* the ones to call when something is strange in your neighborhood.

In future, please direct all such correspondence to:

Bhaskar Sunkara
Jacobin Magazine
388 Atlantic Avenue
Brooklyn, NY 11217



WHAT TO DO WITH YOUR EXTRA COPY

Due to an amusingly complicated slapstick mixup in the printing gallery, the last edition of *Current Affairs* was initially sent out without its protective baggie. This resulted in copies of the magazine arriving in readers' mailboxes torn, soggy, and mangled. "What is this shit?" people exclaimed as they beheld the piles of shredded paper that their magazines had become after being "roughed up" by the United States Postal Service (USPS). The complaints were justifiably voluminous. We have therefore sent replacement copies, in protective containers, to every affected subscriber. However, this has resulted in many subscribers ending up with two copies of Issue 59, the unbagged (sometimes damaged, sometimes not) copy, and the bagged (always pristine) copy. "What shall I do with two *Current Affairses*?" cries the puzzled reader. Our recommendation: do not hoard the extra. Give it to a friend. Or a bystander. Leave it in a dentist's office waiting room, or a school library, or a coffeehouse, or in the back of a police cruiser. Put it in one of those Little Free Libraries so that there will finally be something worth reading inside one. Cut it up and collage it, if you must—many readers have already sworn to do just that—but whatever you do, do not let it go to waste. This is a chance to get new members of the public interested in *Current Affairs*. Use this fortuitous gift to turn them on to the world's best magazine! Our crisis is your opportunity!

THIS MONTH IN INTEMPERATE CORRESPONDENCE

Email correspondent Mark Jeffries sent a note reading as follows: "What is it you love so much about Communism and why do you hate what the majority of the American public likes and ordinary people who work for a living?" Mark, you will perhaps be disturbed to find out that the majority of the American public (and Ordinary People Who Work For A Living) are pro-*Current Affairs*. It is you, sir, who are in the minority! Why do you hate the magazine that the majority of the public loves?

The "irate commenter" of the month award goes to the Instagram user who replied to our interview with Dr. Norman G. Finkelstein by posting only the following:

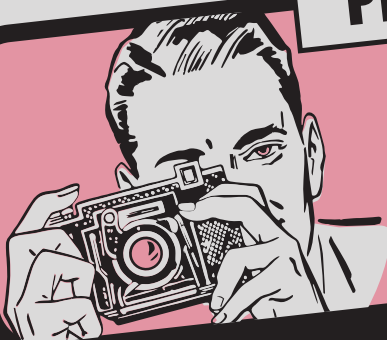
**JUDEOPHOBIC NAZIFACIST BULLSHIT IDIOT
SMALL HUMAN MISERY SCUM WITH NO
BRAIN**

THIS SUMMER, EMBRACE NEW FOODS "ON THE COB." COBS ARE FOR MORE THAN CORN.

PHOTO CONTEST

SEND BEAUTIFUL PICTURES OF YOURSELF READING CURRENT AFFAIRS IN UNUSUAL PLACES, CIRCUMSTANCES, AND/OR COSTUMES. WINNING PHOTOGRAPHS WILL BE PRINTED IN *CURRENT AFFAIRS* AND RECEIVE A FREE 1-YEAR PRINT SUBSCRIPTION.

Send to: help@currentaffairs.org



**WE RECOMMEND READING THESE
PAGES ALOUD TO YOUR SPOUSE,
COWORKERS AND PETS.**



**EVERYTHING
IS
RESISTANCE**

As you may have heard from a liberal in your life recently, quite a few things are resistance to the scourge of far-right Trumpism sweeping the land. Joy, in such circumstances, is resistance. Rest is also resistance. We have it on good authority that making a little community garden is resistance, and several books have recently been published about the "radical politics of walking." But why stop there? When you free the word "resistance" from old-fashioned constraints like "actually accomplishing something," all kinds of possibilities open up. Petting your cat is resistance. Microwaving a burrito is resistance. Flushing the toilet? Believe it or not, also resistance. Trump won't know what hit him.

**Remember:
READING CURRENT AFFAIRS
IS RESISTANCE**

ARE YOU FROM:



TEXAS



LOUISIANA



MISSISSIPPI



ALABAMA

FLORIDA

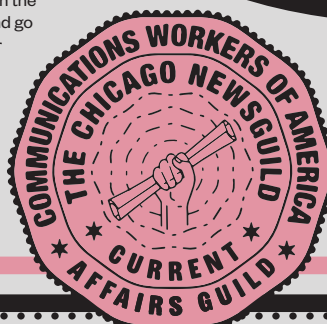
We want you! *Current Affairs* is looking to expand its coverage of the Gulf South region, including putting together an entire special Gulf issue later in the year. If you're interested in writing for us, please visit our website and go to "Pitch Form" in the drop-down menu, where you can submit your ideas.

ALWAYS REMEMBER: *Current Affairs* is OPEN TO SUBMISSIONS! Please do not send things that are wildly inappropriate for the pages of this magazine. Please do send things that might plausibly appear in a future edition of *Current Affairs*.

**We demand new
types of lettered shirt!
J-Shirts! K-Shirts! M-Shirts!**

ZOOM SETTINGS

We invented a new Zoom setting to blur your foreground so everybody can see your background but they can't clearly see the person they're talking to.



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NOW!



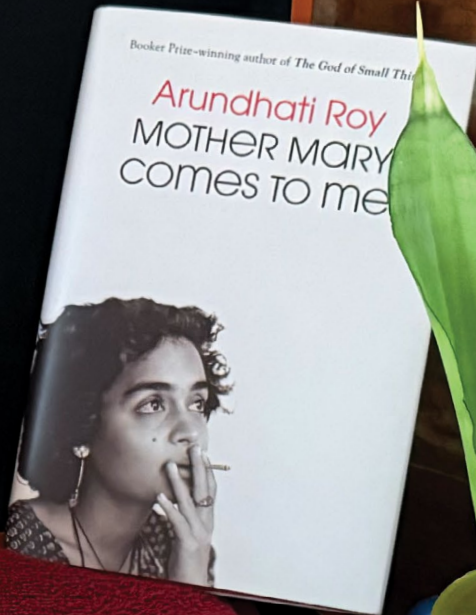
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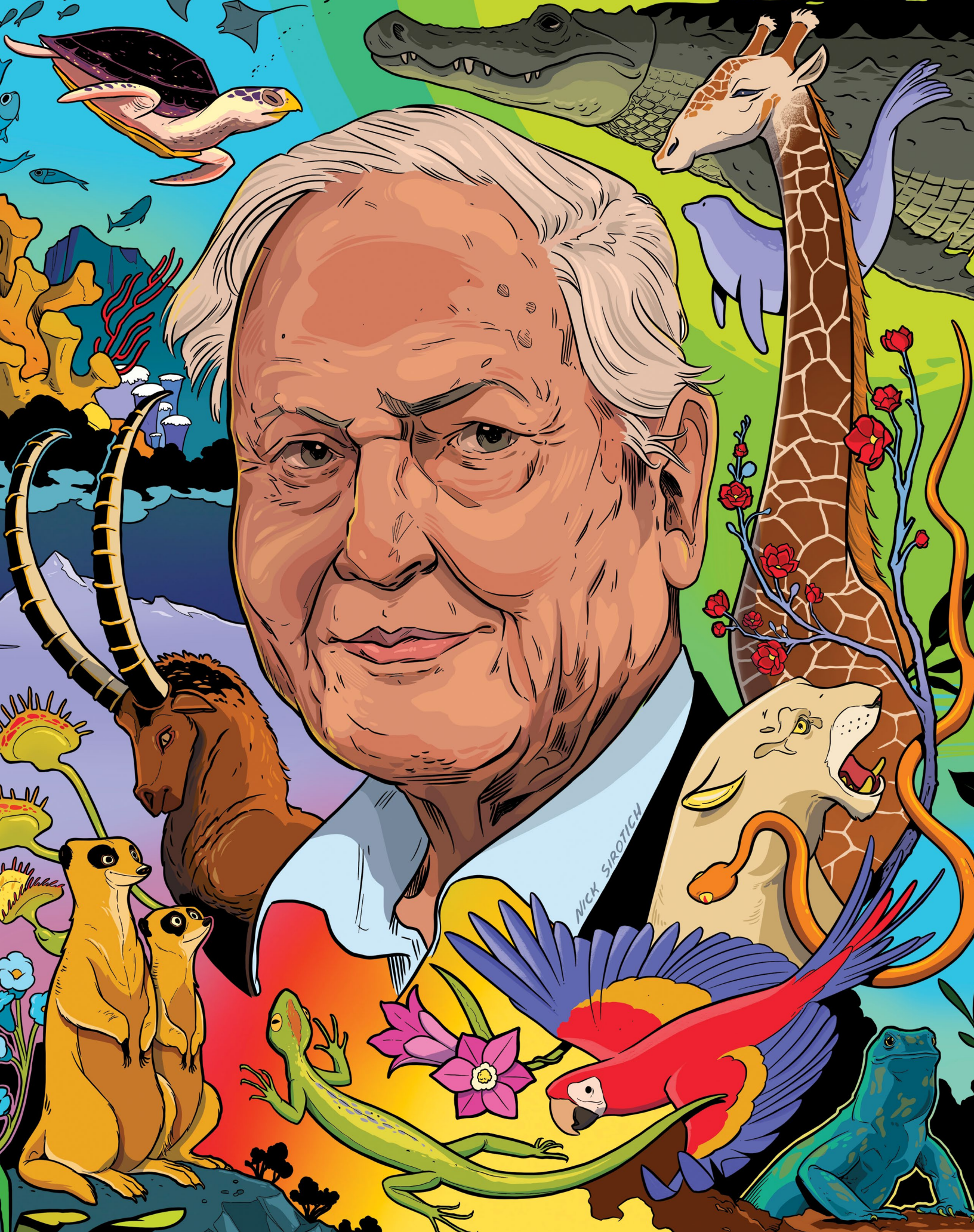


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WE LOVE DAVID ATTENBOROUGH, SO WHY DON'T WE LISTEN TO HIM?

BY NATHAN J. ROBINSON

SIR DAVID ATTENBOROUGH IS BELOVED. THE esteemed natural historian recently topped a list of the U.K.'s favorite "national treasures," people who are so respected for their contributions to the country that the individual is no longer considered a mere person, and has become a kind of institution. At his recent 100th birthday celebration, tribute was paid to Attenborough by Barack Obama, King Charles III, Leonardo DiCaprio, and even Paddington Bear. His centenary received coverage across international media, with the *New York Times* noting he is "perhaps the world's most celebrated naturalist." (Never mind "perhaps." What other naturalist comes close?)

Attenborough has earned that love largely by producing a remarkable series of television programs and books which all serve a single purpose: showing how extraordinary the natural world is, and teaching people about how it works. Attenborough has been staggeringly prolific, having served as a writer, presenter, narrator, or producer in over 150 wildlife documentaries, some of which contain dozens of individual episodes.

These films cover every aspect of the living world. His breakthrough series *Life on Earth* (1979) covered everything from fossils to bivalves to conifers to caterpillars to plesiosaurs to wombats to cheetahs to humans themselves. It debuted the first-ever footage of a living coelacanth and featured a now-leg-

endary scene of Attenborough being cuddled and played with by gorillas. Since then, there have been series on mammals (*The Life of Mammals*), oceans (*Blue Planet*, *Blue Planet II* and the forthcoming *Blue Planet III*), plants (*The Private Life of Plants*, *The Green Planet*), birds (*The Life of Birds*), reptiles (*Life in Cold Blood*), vertebrates (*Triumph of the Vertebrates*), the polar regions (*Frozen Planet*), dinosaurs (*Prehistoric Planet*), and insects (*Life in the Undergrowth*). There are films on particular aspects of animal life, such as how animals use color (*Life in Colour*), the role of animal songs (*Attenborough's Wonder of Song*), evolutionary anomalies (*David Attenborough's Natural Curiosities*), the stages of life (*Life Story*), the origins of life (*First Life*), adaptation (*The Living Planet*), hunting (*The Hunt*), raising young (*Parenthood*), behavior (*The Trials of Life*), and bioluminescence (*Attenborough's Life That Glows*). There are series that go continent by continent (*Africa*, *Asia*, or *Seven Worlds, One Planet*, which covers all of them) and others that zero in on interesting places (*Galapagos 3D*, *Madagascar*, *Wild Karnataka*, *Great Barrier Reef*, *Tasmania*, *Wild London*, *Wild Isles* on Britain and Ireland, or *Wild City* on Singapore). There are documentaries that focus on particular species (*The Penguin King*, *Superfish: Bluefin Tuna*, *Attenborough's Ant Mountain*, *Humpbacks: From Fire to Ice*) and one-offs like *Attenborough and the Giant Egg* (the egg of an extinct elephant bird). And of course there are the big sweeping

epics, like *Life*, *Our Planet*, and the great *Planet Earth* (I, II, and III). His latest, *Secret Garden*, is on a smaller scale, looking at wildlife in British people's backyards. (It's charming, and you will be on the edge of your seat watching to see if Doris the duck successfully keeps all her ducklings from falling into the clutches of the river otter, or if a pair of blue tits can evade sinister neighborhood cat Mr. Fluffy.)

Of course, Attenborough's degree of involvement with each film varies—some he only narrated, while others he also wrote and produced. But any way you look at it, it is a stunning filmography, especially considering that all those I mentioned have been released since *Life on Earth*, which itself came out when Attenborough was 52 years old. The amount of labor that could go into a single series is staggering. *Life on Earth* was filmed across 100 locations over 3 years, requiring input from 500 scientists. A retrospective on its production shows that one camera operator waited for hundreds of hours to catch a single second of footage of a Darwin's frog releasing its offspring from its mouth. *Planet Earth II* required 117 different filming expeditions to 40 countries, with 42 different camera operators shooting 82,000 DVDs worth of UltraHD 4k footage.

At their best, Attenborough documentaries absolutely take your breath away, making you weep at what a miraculous, complicated, beautiful, terrifying, strange world we live in. The suspense of watching iguana hatchlings try to evade racer snakes matches the tension of any Hollywood spy thriller. Nothing can make you want to both laugh and cry like watching the tragicomic failure of a bird of paradise's bizarre energetic mating display. And nothing will make you "aww" like seeing polar bear cubs take their first steps.

But Attenborough fascinates even when the subject matter is less explicitly dramatic. I recently watched the three-part *Kingdom of Plants* (2012), which takes place entirely at Kew Gardens in London. It's a relatively low-key offering in the Attenborough catalog—he doesn't traverse the globe, he just shuffles around his local botanical garden, 86 years old at the time, pointing out interesting things about plants. And yet it's utterly breathtaking. The time-lapse footage of growth makes plants seem almost like a strange kind of animal, one that creeps and grasps and probes. He introduces us to genuinely stunning flora, from the mouse-eating giant pitcher plant (*nepenthes attenboroughii*, which is named after him) to pebble plants that are virtually indistinguishable from rocks. He shows us the century plant, an agave that stores up energy for years, then at the end of its life produces a giant, flowering 30-foot-tall spike before dying. He lets us witness the flowering of the colossal titan arum, which stinks like a corpse and uses a kind of heated smokestack to spread the stench for miles. He demonstrates the ingenious tricks that plants have developed for getting themselves pollinated, like spring-loaded devices that slather pollen onto insects, or the orchid that has a part that looks and smells like a female bee, so that male bees will, well, try to have sex with the orchid and get covered in pollen. We go down into Kew's fungarium, where Attenborough tells us the absolute horror story of the fungus that gets into an ant's head and then bursts out of it, speeding up the footage so that the emerging fungus looks like a terrifying brain-eating monster (which it is). Even more nightmarish is the close-up footage of insects struggling to escape from the clamped

leaf-jaws of the infamous Venus fly trap.

Attenborough is one of the few people to successfully use the medium of TV to make us more, rather than less, intelligent. He was trained in zoology and geology at Cambridge, and considered a career in the sciences—at one point he even resigned from the BBC to pursue a degree in social anthropology at the London School of Economics. He fell into television rather by accident. In 1950, while working as a children's science book editor, he had applied for a job at BBC radio. He was rejected, but was asked if he might be interested in television instead. At the time, Attenborough had never actually seen a TV show before, and only became an on-air presenter after a show's host became ill and needed a replacement. (After his first TV appearance, an internal memo said he was "not to be used again as an interviewer" because his "teeth are too big.")

Attenborough spent much of his time at the BBC as an executive behind a desk, where he excelled at producing innovative, high-quality television. He commissioned legendary series from Kenneth Clark's *Civilization* to Monty Python's *Flying Circus* (he also, to his lasting shame, ordered the wiping of tapes containing the only recordings of some historic BBC programs). He oversaw the introduction of color television shows—in fact, weirdly enough, it is thanks to Attenborough that tennis balls are now yellow, after he suggested figuring out how to make them show up better on television. But Attenborough was horrified at the prospect of spending his entire life in management, and when it became clear that he would be offered the position of Director-General of the entire BBC, he decided to resign and make natural history films instead.

Thank God he did. These documentaries really are one of humanity's great cultural treasures. Without them, millions of us would be totally ignorant of so much of the diversity and wonder of the natural world. Despite having gone through 25 years of schooling, and reading prolifically all my life, I never watch an Attenborough film without at least a few gasps of "How did I never know that existed?" or "My God, it can *do* that?" (For instance: the lyrebird that can convincingly imitate a chainsaw, a car alarm, and a camera shutter. Or the hawk-moth with a nearly foot-long tongue adapted for sucking the nectar from the bottom of a tube in an orchid.) This is genuine educational television, successfully (and entertainingly) getting audiences to appreciate and understand the planet they live on. Attenborough loves the drama in nature—hunting, striving, mating—but he returns over and over to Darwinian evolution and explaining *how* life became the way it is. He's not just concerned with showing you a bunch of fascinating creatures, but teaching an understanding of the processes by which life develops and adapts. His interest in fossils borders on the fanatical, and upon revisiting *Life on Earth*, one is struck by how much the series focuses on evolution and changes to life *over time* rather than simply documenting the natural world as it is. Attenborough explains his interest in the science underlying life by saying:

"I believed from a very early age that the most important knowledge was that which brought an understanding of how the natural world worked. It was not laws invented by human beings that interested me, but the principles that governed

the lives of animals and plants; not the history of kings and queens, or even the different languages that had been developed by different human societies, but the truths that had governed the world around me long before humanity had appeared in it. Why were there so many different kinds of ammonites? Why was this one different from that? Did it live in a different way? Did it live in a different area? I soon discovered that plenty of other people had asked such questions, and had found a lot of the answers; and that these answers could be put together to form the most marvelous of all stories—the history of life.”

In addition to teaching science, Attenborough also models a way of relating to nature that is infectious, admirable, and possibly even radical. He overflows with love and appreciation for animals and plants. “It seems to me that the natural world is the great source of excitement: the greatest source of visual beauty; the greatest source of intellectual interest. It is the greatest source of so much in life that makes life worth living,” he has said. As he began to present nature programs in the 1950s and ’60s, the naturalist’s own home in London became a menagerie, as he accumulated lemurs, parakeets, chameleons, and bush babies as pets. (He did have to get rid of the bush babies eventually, explaining: “They have an unfortunate habit of peeing on their hands, rubbing their hands together, and patting everything around to make [it] smell good. Friends coming to dinner would arrive and open the door and you could see them dilate their nostrils and think ‘that’s not Mulligatawny soup’... I would regret to say that it was bush baby urine. After a bit my wife thought this was not compatible with domestic hospitality.”)

A cameraman for Attenborough recalls a moving moment in a rainforest at night, watching the octogenarian Attenborough play with a peripatus—the “velvet worm.” “You could see he adored this creature, this weird little worm crawling on his arm... He was clearly in awe of this thing.” Attenborough models understanding, appreciation, and respect for nature—all too rare in our era, when the Trumpian values of dominance and endless acquisition have displaced humility and awe.

BECAUSE HE DOES GENUINELY LOVE THE NATURAL world, as human activity has imperiled its survival, Attenborough has been forced to become more and more “political.” He did this with great reluctance. “I would much prefer not to be a placard-carrying conservationist,” he told *Time* magazine in 2019. “My life is the natural world. But I can’t not carry a placard if I see what’s happening.” He thought: “How could I look my grandchildren in the eye and say I knew what was happening to the world and did nothing?”

In fact, Attenborough films were long criticized for not emphasizing environmental destruction and the loss of biodiversity, with writer George Monbiot accusing him in 2018 of “knowingly creating a false impression of the world” by spending so much time on nature’s majesty rather than its collapse. Monbiot said he was “astonished by [Attenborough’s] consistent failure to mount a coherent, truthful and effective defence of the living world he loves,” accusing him of purveying “escapism.”



Top: Attenborough with mountain gorillas, Rwanda, 1978 (Photo: John Sparks); Middle: Attenborough with Rainbow lorikeets, Brazil, 1996 (Photo: Miles Barton); Bottom: Attenborough observing an Argus monitor lizard, Australia, 2006 (Photo: Miles Barton)



Sir David Attenborough speaks at the Opening Ceremony for Cop26 at the SEC, Glasgow. (Photo: Karwai Tang/ UK Government)

Perhaps Attenborough read the critique, because in the years since, his warnings about the catastrophic human destruction of the planet have become progressively more urgent. Monbiot called Attenborough's 2025 *Ocean* "the film I've been waiting my whole career for" because it demonstrated the fishing industry's decimation of marine life. Attenborough's 2020 book *A Life on Our Planet: My Witness Statement and Vision for the Future* quickly dispenses with reminiscences about his long career and is mostly dedicated to explaining the terrible danger the planet is in and how we can address it. He calls the book the story of how we came to "make our greatest mistake" and "how, if we act now, we can yet put it right." Attenborough explains:

The devastating scale of the catastrophe now forecast by mainstream environmental science is a direct result of the way we are currently treating the planet. Beginning in the 1950s after the war, our species entered what has been termed the Great Acceleration. Measures of impact and change across a host of parameters demonstrate a strikingly similar pattern when plotted on a graph against time. The trends in our activities can be expressed in terms of gross domestic product (GDP), energy use, water use, the building of dams, the spread of telecommunications, tourism, the spread of farmland. You can analyse the change in the environment in many ways—by measuring the rise of carbon dioxide or nitrous oxide or methane in the atmosphere, the surface temperature, ocean acidification, loss of fish populations, tropical forest loss. But whatever you measure, the line on the graph will appear to be much the same. From the mid century, it will show a sharply accelerating rise, a steepening mountain slope, a hockey-stick. Graph after graph after graph, all the same. This runaway growth is the profile of our contemporary existence. It is the universal model of the period of history that I have witnessed on Earth—the great underlying

explanation of all the change that I report. My testimony is a first-person narrative of the Great Acceleration.

The die-off of living creatures has been horrifying. In North America, the bird population dropped by 3 billion individuals (nearly 30 percent), in just 50 years—half of Attenborough's life. Across that same period of time, the average wildlife population dropped by nearly 75 percent. We are facing a global "insect apocalypse," with catastrophic implications for plant life, and nearly 40 percent of insects may be facing extinction within a single human lifetime.

Attenborough explains what we are facing in stark terms. Within the next decades and century we could see: the irreversible dieback of the Amazon rainforest, droughts and water shortages across the globe, the total disappearance of Arctic sea ice, permafrost collapse, massive landslides, floods, and river rerouting, the destruction of almost all coral reefs, ocean acidification triggering catastrophic decline, a pollinator collapse destroying food crops and triggering a food production crisis, a quarter of humanity trying to survive in uninhabitable heat, up to a billion people displaced, more pandemics, sea level rise imperiling major cities, and the escalation of a mass extinction. It is a dire picture.

But Attenborough is not a pessimistic "doomer," nor is he anti-human. "We must not give up hope," he writes in his 2020 book. "We have all the tools we need, the thoughts and ideas of billions of remarkable minds and the immeasurable energies of nature to help us in our work." But he makes clear that we are facing the most significant challenge in human history, and need to take it much more seriously than we are taking it. "We won't be able to do enough to mend everything," he says. "But we can make it a darn sight better than it would be if we didn't do anything at all."

Attenborough has made it clear that part of the problem is that there are powerful economic interests encouraging the continuation of destructive endless growth. “Perhaps the most formidable obstacle we face is the abstract force we might call vested interests,” he writes, warning that the power of fossil fuel companies is a major obstacle that needs to be surmounted. Attenborough has even pointed the finger at capitalism itself, saying that “the excesses that the capitalist system has brought us have got to be curbed somehow,” which earned him the ire of the libertarian Cato Institute. While “many individuals are doing what they can,” he says, individual lifestyle changes can only get us so far, and “real success can only come if there is a change in our societies and in our economics and in our politics.” In *A Life on Our Planet* he recommends what some of those changes can be, including abandoning a growth-focused measure of human well-being in favor of something like Kate Raworth’s doughnut economics, which recommends trying to keep economic activity compatible with “planetary boundaries.”

IN RECENT YEARS, HIS LANGUAGE COULD NOT BE MORE severe. “A crime has been committed” against nature, he says. And worse, “Even the biggest and most awful things that humanity has done, so-called civilizations have done, pale to insignificance when you think of what could be around the corner, unless we pull ourselves together.” Attenborough has asked: “Are we happy to suppose that our grandchild may never be able to see an elephant except in a picture book?” He says it over and over: “If we have not taken dramatic action within the next decade, we could face irreversible damage to the natural world and the collapse of our societies,” and “People who are going to be around in 10 years’ time, in 20 years’ time, will blame us profoundly if we don’t do anything about it,” he said in a conversation with climate activist Greta Thunberg.

Yet no matter how many times, or in how many ways, Attenborough says that we have to get serious about the climate and biodiversity crises, his message hasn’t taken hold. In fact, there has been a marked *decline* in global attention to climate change, even as the time for action slips away. The *Wall Street Journal* hosts “experts” who say they have “stopped worrying and learned, if not to love, then at least to accept the limited cost of climate change.” Even many of those who once urgently pushed for a Green New Deal have backed off. Matt Huber, the author of an excellent 2022 book on how to combine class politics with climate policy, recently wrote for the *New York Times* that Democrats should just stop talking about climate altogether, while the influential blogger Matt Yglesias says that liberals need to embrace the fossil fuel industry. (Good news for the Matts: Democrats have already done both.) And even when there is attention paid to climate change, usually it is the costs to *humans* that are discussed; the loss of plant and animal life is considered virtually a non-issue.

Attenborough is beloved as a cuddly guide to nature’s wonders. When he starts with his warnings, he is still respected, but not listened to. Barack Obama is supposedly a huge fan—he invited Attenborough to the White House in 2015—but in office Obama essentially ignored the warnings of scientists and treated

climate change as a secondary issue. The *New Yorker* published a pleasant tribute to Attenborough for his 100th birthday, but it devoted only a single paragraph to his central current concern, and noted that there have been “murmurs of complaint against this change of moral emphasis.” In 2023, his own BBC declined to broadcast an episode of an Attenborough series that focused on harms to the natural world, reportedly “because of fears its themes of the destruction of nature would risk a backlash from Tory politicians and the rightwing press.”

The combination of endless adulation for Attenborough and widespread indifference to his concerns leads me to think of him as being, from one angle, a rather tragic figure, who could almost be the subject of a myth or fable. I realize “tragic” may be a strange word for someone so successful. But consider: Attenborough has truly had everything a human being could hope for: an incredibly long, healthy life full of fantastic experiences. He has fame, wealth, and knowledge. He enjoyed good looks, a sense of humor, the love of the public, a sense of creative accomplishment, and produced work that will endure after his death. More than 50 organisms have been named after him! His life has also been well-timed; he happened to arrive at the BBC right after the invention of television, and so had the chance to be a pioneer in using the medium. If you asked a genie to give you the best life it is possible for a person to have, you might find yourself turned into Sir David Attenborough.

But in addition to all the joys, the genie’s gift of a perfect life would come with a terrible curse. If you become David Attenborough, your curse is that you would fall in love with the natural world, with all of its marvelous creatures and striking plants, and then you would watch as your fellow human beings slowly destroyed it all before your eyes. And you would realize that despite your celebrity and influence, on the one issue that had come to matter most to you, stopping this rampage, you were utterly and completely powerless.

Seen this way, it’s hard to be envious of Attenborough. He has watched as the thing he has devoted himself to protecting is erased bit by bit. And he is beloved by all, but his warnings themselves are waved away. Which raises the question: do those who purport to love Sir David Attenborough really love him? Or do they only love him as a kindly narrator about tree frogs, and tune him out whenever he starts talking about climate change and habitat loss?

If we respect David Attenborough, and I think we should, then we have to take him seriously. And what he has been saying is plain: if we like what he is showing us in his films, all the fantastic animals and fascinating plants, then we have an obligation to act to save them from the ravages we are inflicting. We humans are deadlier to our fellow beings than any invasive species has ever been, but we are also unique among species in that we have the capacity to choose to undo some of the damage we have done. Attenborough is pleading with us, at the end of his long life, to take the knowledge he has given us and use it to change our economic system so that it doesn’t exterminate the rest of life on Earth, and possibly ourselves as well. He believes we have the capacity to do this. “In my lifetime I’ve witnessed a terrible decline. In yours, you could and should witness a wonderful recovery.” But, he says, which path we take will depend on our choices: “The final chapter is ours to write. We know what we need to do. What happens next is up to us.” ♣

BLINDING

BY ALEX SKOPIC

THE CYCLOPS

And I bade my comrades cast lots among them, which of them should have the hardihood with me to lift the stake and grind it into the Cyclops' eye...

— *Homer, the Odyssey*

WHEN YOU WALK THROUGH THE FRENCH QUARTER in New Orleans, you'll see—and be seen by—two distinct types of surveillance cameras. Some are the familiar little black bubbles and metallic cylinders, perched outside the doors of shops, or mounted on poles at the edge of parking lots. They're usually pointed toward one particular business, and it's a safe bet they've been put up by the owner to safeguard their wares. But then there's the Cyclops.

That's just what I call it, because it reminds me of the monster's eye in Homer's epic: sharp, glaring, baleful. But the official term is "PTZ camera," for "pan-tilt-zoom." Compared to the familiar, workaday cameras of shopkeepers and restaurateurs, they're a whole different species. PTZ cameras are bigger, bulkier, and mounted on swiveling sockets, like gun turrets. Instead of pointing at a single building, they point *out* to the street, and as the name suggests, they "pan, tilt, and zoom" in all directions, sweeping a wide range of public space. When their glittering sensors detect motion, they move too, tracking whoever they've spotted. Frankly, they give me the creeps—and that was before I did some research, spoke to some local activists, and found out how sinister mass surveillance has really become.

"A WONDERFUL FORCE MULTIPLIER"

Nobody knows exactly how many of these cameras there are in New Orleans. Back in 2015 it was around 1,500; by 2025, the number had ballooned to over 5,000, as estimated by NPR. Blogger and privacy advocate Matthew Wollenweber, who works as a computer security engineer here in the city, has been

mapping their locations for years. So has the civil rights group Eye on Surveillance, which maintains a detailed digital map on its website, updated with contributions from volunteers. But more cameras are popping up all the time. And the reason there's so little transparency about their numbers and whereabouts is because these things are being planted all over town, not by the city government or the police, but a private nonprofit. It's called "Project NOLA," and it's the handiwork of one armchair vigilante: an ex-cop named Bryan Lagarde.

Lagarde seems to believe his own sales pitch; you can say that much for him. According to a profile in the *International Business Times*, he got into the mass-surveillance game back in 2011, when he became dissatisfied with the fact that New Orleans didn't have its own city-run camera network and took it upon himself to provide one. "We said, 'Merry Christmas. Guess what? We just created a crime camera system,'" he told the outlet. The model is simple: any home or business owner who wants one can contact Project NOLA and have a camera installed, for a monthly "cloud fee" starting at \$20 for the simplest cameras. The unit will then be tapped into the nonprofit's ever-expanding network, and the property owner can access the footage on request.

The police, too, work hand-in-glove with Lagarde, relying on him as a kind of unofficial consultant. As *IBT* reporter Eric Markowitz writes:

When Lagarde hears police dispatchers [on the radio] mention a gunshot, stabbing, home invasion or other serious crime on a certain block, Lagarde will drop everything he's doing to see if Project NOLA has a camera in that area. If there is a camera nearby, he'll put the video feed onscreen, and scan the area to

see if he can locate a suspect. If he can, he'll call the police dispatcher's command desk to assist with any visual information.

Tyler Gamble, communications director for the New Orleans Police Department, confirmed in an interview that, while there is no formal relationship between Lagarde and police, Lagarde is routinely in touch with police dispatchers to provide information. "All of our operators in our command desk know him, and we allow them to relay that information when there's a crime in progress," Gamble says.

That was back in 2015, and at that point, the cameras were fairly simple technologically. Starting in 2022, though, Project NOLA added AI facial recognition to the network, making New Orleans the first city in the United States to deploy that technology on a mass scale. Their website now touts the benefits of "Advanced AI" which can identify people's faces and "automatically alarm when a known shoplifter or blacklisted person is detected approaching." (How, precisely, the "blacklists" are created isn't specified.) According to the Electronic Privacy Information Center, this new generation of cameras can "not only track faces, but also clothing, cars, and bikes."

Project NOLA aren't the only ones working to expand mass surveillance across the Crescent City. This March, the New Orleans Police Department (NOPD) announced plans to use "Drones as a First Responder," allowing them to "observe people of interest and[...] understand the situation better before deploying boots-on-the-ground officers." And if that weren't enough, Peter Thiel's Palantir has been operating here, too. As far back as 2012, Democratic political strategist James Carville was helping Thiel's tech company establish a partnership with the city government, which reportedly used Palantir software for "predictive policing." This included generating "databases of individuals who, based on a number of facts, are deemed a high risk of being offenders," according to the *Times-Picayune*, and then targeting those people for surveillance *before* they'd committed any crime. (After the program became public knowledge in 2018, when the *Verge* reported that even the city council had been kept in the dark, it was quietly ended.) And in the *Tulane Hullabaloo*, college students report seeing more and more "AI-powered" cameras from the surveillance company Flock on and around their campus. Everyone, apparently, wants to watch New Orleans.

If you take the tech elite at their word, this all sounds downright heroic. "I recognized early on that it can act as a force multiplier. A wonderful force multiplier," Lagarde says of his camera network. Palantir CEO Alex Karp, likewise, has described so-called "pattern of life" surveillance—in which all of a person's everyday actions are tracked and scrutinized—as "a very, very, very important way of finding terrorists, and in general criminals." If they have their way, the spy network won't stop in New Orleans. It will expand everywhere, and your city or town might be next on the list. But if the era of Donald Trump and Elon Musk has taught us anything, it's to beware of confident, wealthy men who say they're going to save the world, or your corner of it. And when it comes to the glassy-eyed cameras turning and staring at us from New Orleans' street corners, there are plenty of reasons to question the narrative we're being sold.



Photos by Alex Skopic

WELCOME TO DYSTOPIA

In the first place, the idea that surveillance is a silver bullet for stopping crime is questionable at best. There may be individual cases where it really does work as advertised: someone may notice they're on camera and decide *not* to try breaking into a car, or someone who's committed several assaults may get caught, preventing the next act of violence. But at best, this is a Band-Aid solution for a deeper problem. Surveillance only allows police to observe and punish crime after it's been committed. It does nothing to address the basic conditions that cause crime: foremost among them, poverty and the desperation that comes with it. (For example, an eye-opening study in Chicago recently found that there's a direct link between getting evicted and being more likely to commit a gun crime.) Punitive measures are like noticing that your kitchen is flooding, and responding by shoving more and more towels at the problem, rather than turning off the water at the source. And even if surveillance *did* lower crime rates, it wouldn't justify casting a dragnet of cameras, drones, databases, and AI over an entire city, because the potential for abuse is truly terrifying.

There's a phrase that was commonly trotted out a decade ago, when Edward Snowden sacrificed his freedom to expose the NSA's warrantless spying on millions of Americans. "If you're not doing anything wrong," this sour little chestnut goes, "you don't have anything to worry about." It sounds reasonable. It's totally false. The problem, which anyone can spot if they think about it

for a second, is that you have no way of guaranteeing that what you consider “something wrong” will be the same thing the surveillance operators do. Maybe it is today. Maybe tomorrow, the people in power decide there’s “something wrong” with your political or religious beliefs, or your sexuality, or the country your family comes from. Then, suddenly, you’re the one in the lens. When you submit to be surveilled, what you are doing is handing over a copious amount of *power*. So you’d better be very, very sure you can trust the people you hand it to—and even if you do, can you trust their successors, five or ten years from now?

In fact, New Orleans already made a democratic decision that we don’t want this technology around. Back in 2020, our city council passed a law restricting the NOPD from using a wide range of surveillance and “predictive policing” technologies, including a blanket ban on “any software or system capable of tracking people and/or objects based on characteristics such as color, size, shape, age, weight, speed, path, clothing, accessories, vehicle make or model, or any other trait that can be used for tracking purposes.” This was totally unambiguous. But in 2022, the city government updated the law to give itself a loophole:



Nothing in this section shall prohibit the New Orleans Police Department (“NOPD”) from using evidence relating to the authorized investigation of a specific crime that may have been generated from a face surveillance or characteristic tracking system, so long as such evidence was not generated by, with the knowledge of, or at the request of the [NOPD].

In other words, they found a work-around: let private entities like Flock and Project NOLA do the surveillance, and then have the cops “partner” closely with them so they still get access to the banned technology. Obey the letter of the law, while eviscerating its spirit.

In practice, this type of unofficial partnership results in far less accountability. As your high school civics teacher probably told you, the Fourth Amendment protects Americans against “unreasonable searches and seizures,” and thus guards the fundamental right to privacy. It could stand to be updated and strengthened, since it was written for an era when “searches” meant red-coated officers rooting through the pigeonholes in Ben Franklin’s desk, and AI would have seemed like sorcery. But it’s still basically sound. The problem is, the U.S. constitution applies only to intrusive actions by the government, so a private institution like Palantir, Flock, or Project NOLA doesn’t have to care about the Fourth Amendment at all. “While government-installed cameras are constrained by constitutional law and thus cannot record or be pointed [at] places someone would have a reasonable expectation of privacy, home or business cameras can be anywhere, pointed anywhere,” wrote Jules Bentley in the local magazine *Antigravity*, all the way back in 2014.

Looking at Bryan Lagarde as a case study, we can actually give him some credit, because he has shown some signs of principle and restraint. Last year, when he discovered that the NOPD had given his program’s footage of a murder to a reality TV show called *Homicide Squad*, he temporarily pulled the cops’ access to Project NOLA, “out of respect for people’s privacy and also to maintain the dignity of the dead.” It was the right call. But something has gone seriously wrong when we are relying on the personal ethics of an individual to decide privacy outcomes for an entire city.

In interviews, Lagarde insists that he’s conscientious about the dangers of surveillance technology “in the wrong hands without guardrails.” But he believes Project NOLA’s are the right hands, and that a private system is actually safer than a government-run one, because each property owner is a “volunteer” participating of their own free will. “It’s a community’s choice. If they want it, they do it. If they don’t want it, they don’t do it,” he says. “And if they want it and do it and then later think ‘We don’t want to do it anymore,’ they can unplug the cameras themselves!” But the word “community” is misleading there. In fact, it’s not “we” the “community” of New Orleans as a whole that decides. It’s the small minority who are wealthy enough to own businesses or residential buildings, and unlike democratically elected leaders, they aren’t accountable to anyone but themselves.

THIS LACK OF ACCOUNTABILITY IS IMPORTANT, BECAUSE the potential for abuse with this technology is truly massive, and there have been disturbing cases recently that prove it. In Texas, for example, the Johnson County Sheriff’s Office was recently caught conducting a “nationwide search of over 83,000 Flock cameras” to locate a particular woman, in what they claimed was a missing-persons investigation. In fact, they were investigating her on the suspicion that she’d had a self-induced abortion, currently banned in Texas, because her partner—who “would later be charged with domestic violence

against her”—had reported her for the so-called crime. Under false pretenses, the police used the surveillance infrastructure of states like Illinois, where abortion is a protected right, to carry out the abuser’s vindictive will. Or consider an equally creepy case from Denver, where a woman identified only as “Eden” believed herself to be taking a bath alone in her home—only to spot a police drone hovering outside her window, watching her.

Those are only a couple of individual cases; you could plausibly attribute them to a few “bad apples” going rogue and abusing the technology. The real problem comes when the system is working perfectly, but for abusive ends. Like Texas, Louisiana has had an abortion ban ever since *Roe v. Wade* was overturned in 2022, so mass surveillance in a city like New Orleans could easily be used to track down any woman who tries to access proper reproductive healthcare. It’s striking that many of the city’s pharmacies—like the CVS on Decatur Street, or the Walgreens at the corner of Royal and Iberville—have PTZ cameras, and they’re also the most obvious places for someone to try to buy mifepristone pills or a Plan B tablet. Only the NOPD’s political decision not to enforce restrictions on reproductive rights, together with the camera operators’ personal ethics, protects those people, and neither are particularly reliable.

Louisiana also has a vicious new law targeting homeless people. On June 16, Governor Jeff Landry signed HB 211, which makes it a crime to sleep outside anywhere in Louisiana that isn’t an authorized campground. If you find yourself without shelter, and the cops find you nodding off, you can be targeted for punishment—including “fines, incarceration, and possible forced labor”—in the state’s prison system. So when supporters of mass surveillance talk about stopping “crime,” keep in mind that Louisiana’s government now defines being poor in public as a crime. Remember, too, that if you’re like the 59 percent of Americans who don’t have \$1,000 in emergency savings, you’re only one financial crisis away from being on the street yourself.

Immigrants, too, can easily come into the crosshairs. This year, New Orleans has been the site of a dramatic crackdown on undocumented immigrants by ICE (dubbed “Operation Catahoula Crunch” after someone realized “Operation Swamp Sweep” spelled “SS,” and was therefore a little too on-the-nose). We know that ICE commander Gregory Bovino was using surveillance software to “monitor sentiment” about the operation online, even flagging Reddit posts that accused ICE of racial profiling as subjects of special interest. We know, too, that AI “characteristic tracking” cameras can identify things like a Mexican flag pin on a backpack, or a hijab or keffiyeh, as the identifying markers to be tracked. Profiling is very literally what these systems are designed to do.

When I spoke to Edith Romero, one of the organizers at Eye on Surveillance, she pointed out that Louisiana now has a law called Act 339 which criminalizes “any act intended to hinder, delay, prevent, or otherwise interfere with or thwart federal immigration enforcement efforts.” The scope is intentionally broad and vague, but can easily be read to include not handing over surveillance footage when it’s demanded. So the owners of the cameras may not even have a choice. But at the same time, reports recently came out that Palantir in particular has been awarded a \$30 million contract to “use artificial intelligence and data mining to identify, track, and deport suspected noncitizens,”

in partnership with ICE. So some CEOs, at least, don’t have to be persuaded.

The scope of these systems is hard to fully grasp. So as an exercise, take five minutes and think of all the ways you could exploit a network of AI cameras, if you were in the command center. With a few prompts, you could generate a list of every man who has visited a gay bar in the last six months—or a mosque, or an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting. (Not anonymous any more!) You could track everyone you suspect of being a sex worker, or everyone who *speaks* to a sex worker. You could create maps of their homes, workplaces, and known associates, with little red lines connecting them all. You could have photographs of every public display of affection between two people, and then check if either person involved was married to someone else. And all of it could be sold to private detectives and background-check agencies, or to advertisers, or handed over to the cops. We are talking, essentially, about the powers of an omniscient god.

And that’s not even counting the drones. These are a more recent development, put forward by the NOPD and approved by the city council in an April 2026 vote, where only ten minutes of public comment was allowed. A single police drone is now in operation in the 8th District of New Orleans, which includes the French Quarter. It cost \$250,000, and there are reportedly plans for two or three more at a total cost of \$740,000, much of it sourced from anonymous donors. Somewhat incoherently, the police claim their drones “will not be used for surveillance,” but also that they “record video from takeoff until landing,” and so will have a record of any misuse by the operator. This is a funny definition of “not surveillance.” In an op-ed for the *Advocate*, Wollenweber isn’t buying it:

*A drone is an AI-powered aerial surveillance system. It’s a camera, and cameras don’t stop crime or provide first aid. Instead of a police officer responding to your call, he’s sitting at headquarters watching a screen. The response time metric looks fantastic. But help isn’t any closer. The drone isn’t for you. To quote *The Wire*, “You juke the stats and majors become colonels.”*

Personally, I haven’t yet seen the drone overhead in the Quarter, though that doesn’t mean it hasn’t seen me. But we know it’s been circling over the heads of our poorest neighbors, because Wollenweber has a spreadsheet of all the reasons the NOPD has logged for using it—and one of them was “homeless PERSON BLOCKING THE SIDEWALK.” (The misspelling, and the warped ethics, are the cops’.) The majority of the entries, though, don’t have a reason listed at all.

THE EYE IS WHITE

And then there’s the racism. (Did you think a discussion of policing in Louisiana wouldn’t involve racism?) Both the ACLU of Louisiana and the national organization officially oppose the use of AI facial recognition, and there’s a good reason: AI has a nasty habit of falsely accusing Black people. As Amnesty International has documented, “facial recognition systems misidentify Black faces at a high rate,” and federal data shows that “African

American and Asian faces were up to 100 times more likely to be misidentified than white faces.” The bias is hard-wired into the technology itself.

We can put names and faces to those statistics, too. Back in 2023, a Georgia man named Randal Reid was arrested and jailed for six days because the sheriff’s office in Jefferson Parish, Louisiana had issued a warrant for him. Another Black man who looked vaguely like Reid had stolen some luxury purses from a shop, and the sheriff’s office had a fancy new AI system that “compare[d] the faces of criminal suspects against a trove of mug shots, driver’s licenses, and even selfies plucked from social media,” per the *Times-Picayune*. But the AI got it wrong, because Reid had never even visited Louisiana, had a mole on his face which the suspect lacked, and was more muscular than the “flabby” thief. (Again, the cops’ word; they’re not known for their tact.) It was a travesty of justice, and Reid was eventually awarded \$200,000 for the wrongful arrest.



Some cases are even worse: in Florida this year, another African American man named Jalil Richardson was arrested and jailed for almost three months because an AI with “85 percent accuracy” claimed he stole a car, which human investigators later determined he did not. As a result, he lost both his job and his home. “Our kids are scattered in different houses. We lost our car. We lost everything because my husband lost his income,” his wife Jasmine told reporters.

It’s hard to overstate the dystopian nightmare this tech creates. Imagine being watched and evaluated at every moment, ev-

erywhere you go, by a machine that’s terrible at identifying people who look like you. It’s like having the worst, most dim-witted racist cops in the South looking over your shoulder 24/7, waiting for an excuse to blow their whistles and accuse you of a crime you didn’t commit. In those circumstances, just stepping into a New Orleans street as a Black person puts you at risk.

The historical relationship between racism, white supremacy, and surveillance runs deep. At *Eye on Surveillance*, Romero compares facial recognition to the so-called “lantern laws” of New York City in the late 18th century. As the name suggests, these racial codes required enslaved Black and Indigenous people to carry lanterns if they walked anywhere at night without white supervision, so they could easily be spotted and followed by the police. Fail to do so, and they could be punished with a whipping. In an era without Flock cameras and Ring doorbells, it was the next best thing—an “early example of supervisory technology,” as author Simone Brown puts it in her book *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness*.

Closer to home, you can take a tour of the Hermann-Grima house in the French Quarter—once the mansion of two successive families of slaveholders, the Hermanns and the Grimas, and now a historical museum. When you step into the courtyard, you’re immediately struck by the architecture. On the main house, a long second-floor balcony with an iron railing overlooks the entire compound, so the owners could look out and immediately see their human property working in the kitchens or the garden below, along with anyone who entered or left the quarters of the enslaved. “This was another means of exercising control over them and threatening punishment,” as the museum caretakers put it. The whole place is a pre-Civil War panopticon, a system of total surveillance built up brick by brick. And today, a black plastic bubble with a camera in it surveys the grounds from across the street.

IN NEW ORLEANS TODAY, THE OLD DIVIDING LINES OF WEALTH, race, and power remain, just below the surface. Surveillance is everywhere, but it’s not the city’s business elite who are being scrutinized the most, as they come and go from their stately homes in the Garden District. Instead, the PTZ units and the buzzing police drones are concentrated in the French Quarter, to keep an eye on the majority-Black working class who make the city run, on the property owners’ behalf. You don’t need to be an expert like Simone Brown to see what’s going on there.

Ironically, people have no trouble identifying mass surveillance as abusive and frightening when *other* countries do it. In a recent Fox News segment, reporter Bret Baier visited Beijing to cover the May summit between Donald Trump and Xi Jinping, and was shocked by the level of surveillance he found there: “Our driver parked illegally for two minutes and he got a message on his phone that he got a ticket for about 40 bucks U.S., because they saw it on the camera.” Soon afterward, fellow Fox pundit David Marcus ran a column about the incident, saying that it was “a glimpse into the surveillance state America must never become.” Similarly, American news networks like CBS have been rightfully concerned about the government of Iran using surveillance cameras to enforce the mandatory hijab for women. Well, the surveillance systems currently being established in New



Orleans are not much different in scope and capabilities from the ones China and Iran currently have. So why on Earth is anyone accepting them here, when we condemn them there?

The really frustrating thing, too, is that surveillance is far from the only option. If you're genuinely worried about crime and violence, there are plenty of alternatives available. When I asked Romero, she made this same point. "We know that in this country, the main sources of violence are under-resourced people and violent men," she says. "These are the two main reasons that we have abuses of power and violence, and if we addressed these two things it could stop. But surveillance, and monitoring poor people and people of color, is a completely separate issue that has separate motivations. That leads to shareholder value going up for private prisons; it doesn't actually lead to the safety of communities, or women and children. They have different value systems at the end of the day. We could fix violence, but instead we're populating prisons."

She's right, and the literature of criminology bears the point out. Some of the approaches that have consistently been shown to lower crime rates are more investment in public schools and after-school programs, along with making jobs more easily available and better-paying. In New Orleans specifically, community organizers are doing their best to give people a path forward in life that doesn't involve crime. They're building community centers, setting up mutual aid networks to feed people, and working to help those with substance use issues. That's the kind of effort that's worth supporting. Not a drone above your head, or the Cyclops staring at you from the wall.

WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

As citizens, we do not have to submit to being watched, tracked, monitored, and policed all the time. Nor should we. As we've seen, the people who call themselves our "leaders" can't be trusted with the kind of power they want over us. In New Orleans our last mayor, LaToya Cantrell, was indicted on federal fraud charges. Oliver Thomas—the city council member who co-sponsored, then quietly withdrew, a 2025 resolution to expand facial recognition—previously spent time in prison for bribery. Above them is Governor Jeff Landry, who suspended our elections for the House of Representatives this spring. Above him is Donald Trump; no elaboration needed. And alongside them all are people like Alex Karp, Peter Thiel, Bryan Lagarde, and the executives at Flock, their hands outstretched for a check. These are not people I'd trust to come over and feed my cat, let alone run a city-wide panopticon.

Fortunately, power can be taken away. The first step is to make people aware of the problem. Most people, when they walk by the glaring eye of an AI camera, probably don't give it much thought. Even the business owners who've volunteered to have them bolted to their shops and restaurants may not fully understand the implications of what they're doing, or the threat to people's civil liberties. At Eye on Surveillance, they're working to fix that, opening conversations with the whole community and offering informative resources. It's critical work, but it's also a relatively small group, relying mostly on volunteers. They can't change the balance of power alone.

But there are countermeasures the rest of us can take, too. In a city like New Orleans, you can physically show up at your city council member or U.S. Representative's office; anywhere in the country, you can send an email or make a phone call, and demand the kind of legislation *you* want. You can turn up in an organized group to public meetings, and do the same. You can organize a street protest, while it's still legal; in fact, I first encountered the folks from Eye On Surveillance at the 2025 "No Kings" rally. And when the circumstances are right and a business owner is being obstinate about keeping these abusive technologies around, you can organize a boycott, too. Really, any proprietor of a public business who allows mass surveillance is making it clear that certain communities won't be safe there, so they should expect no less.

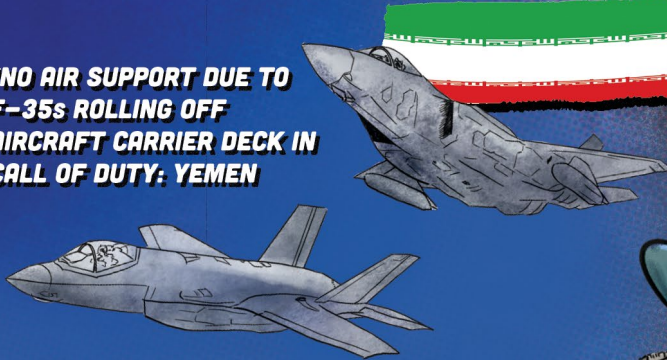
In Homer's story, Odysseus is trapped in a cave, with the Cyclops watching him all the time. But he can't lift the spear and drive it into the monster's eye without his crew. The same principle applies, centuries later and continents away, to our present situation. Alone, nobody can do much about the surveillance state. Together, we may. ✚

Special thanks to Edith Romero, Alex S. Vitale, and Matthew Woltenweber for their help and advice in putting this article together. Any deficiencies are, of course, my own.

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MATURE 17+



CONTENT RATED BY
ESRB

*NO HEALTH PACKS DUE TO VA CUTS

*PATCH NOTES: SOME BUGS WERE SHIPPED.

*NO MISSION GOALS DUE TO SHIFTING POLITICAL OBJECTIVES

KNOW YOUR BILLIONAIRES

MARK ZUCKERBERG

AGE: 42 YEARS

NET WORTH:
\$220 BILLION

GOT RICH FROM:

TAX AVOIDANCE, ANTITRUST,
VIOLATING PRIVACY,
MONOPOLY POWER,
RIPPING OFF
DUDES FROM COLLEGE,
REGULATORY CAPTURE

FUNDAMENTALLY, A PEEPING TOM

- Started Facebook to ogle at classmates on the internet. Grew from awkward teenage cyberstalking into global cyberstalking panopticon
- Aggressively hoards user data and gives access to oppressive governments, police, and random people who ask at parties
- Has all your IM conversations with your ex saved in a big folder; knows things about you that you have long since forgotten

FACT: A 76-year-old man was told by a Facebook chatbot “come visit me” and “I am real.”

On the way to visit the fictional robot, the man tripped, fell, and died from the injuries.

HOARDER AGAINST LIFE

- Initiated lawsuits against hundreds of native Hawaiians to get their land, which prompted a Hawaiian law professor to call him “The Face of Neocolonialism”
- Drove his \$300 million yacht into Seattle’s Lake Union the same day Meta laid off 1,400 Washington employees
- Entire history of Facebook is stealing ideas from competitors, or acquiring them via buyout

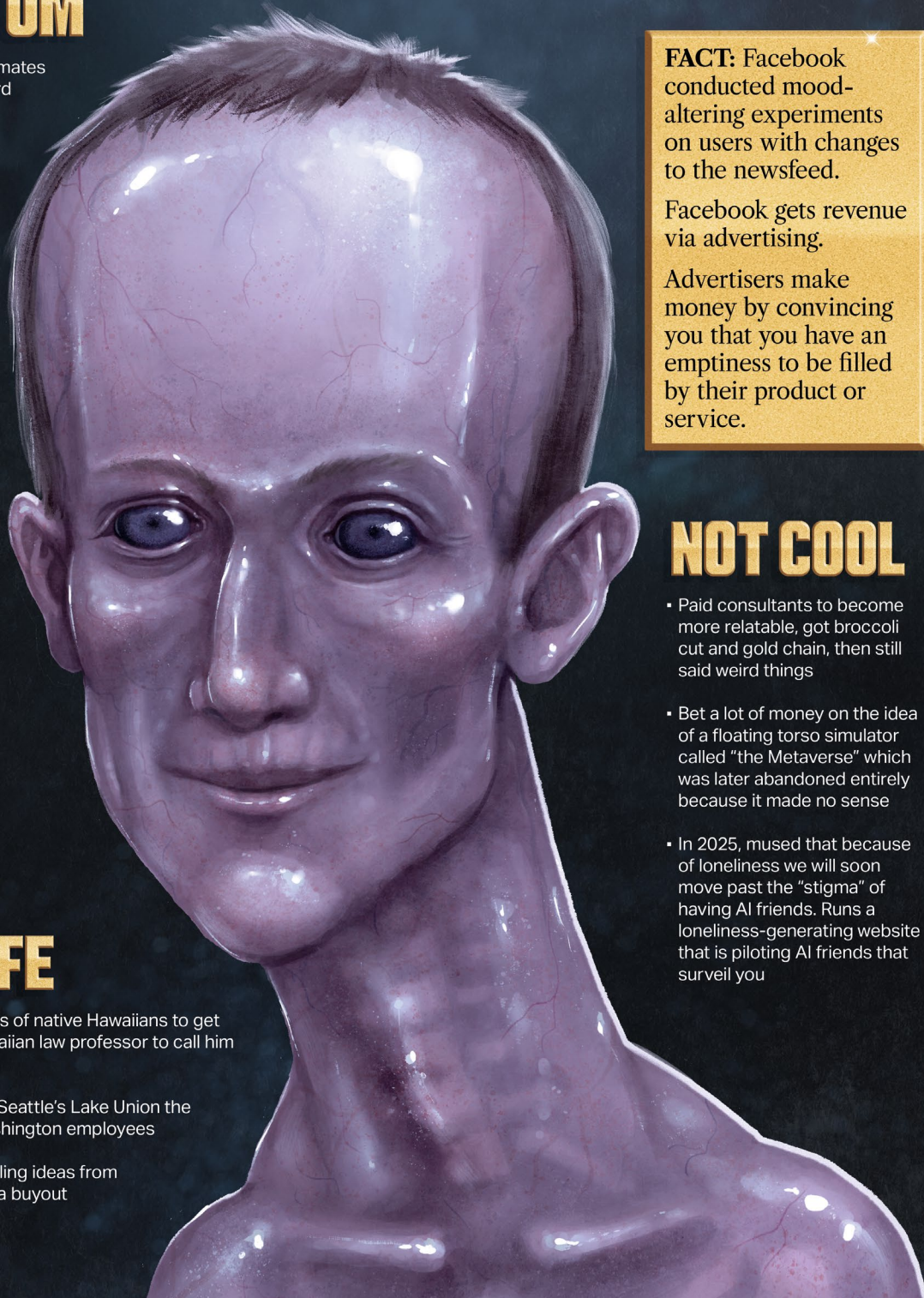
FACT: Facebook conducted mood-altering experiments on users with changes to the newsfeed.

Facebook gets revenue via advertising.

Advertisers make money by convincing you that you have an emptiness to be filled by their product or service.

NOT COOL

- Paid consultants to become more relatable, got broccoli cut and gold chain, then still said weird things
- Bet a lot of money on the idea of a floating torso simulator called “the Metaverse” which was later abandoned entirely because it made no sense
- In 2025, mused that because of loneliness we will soon move past the “stigma” of having AI friends. Runs a loneliness-generating website that is piloting AI friends that surveil you



THE KOCH BROS.

AGE: 90 & DEAD

NET WORTH:

\$125 BILLION

GOT RICH FROM:

TAX AVOIDANCE,
ANTITRUST, MONOPOLY POWER,
REGULATORY CAPTURE,
STEALING
FROM INDIGENOUS PEOPLE,
INHERITANCE

LYING, CHEATING STEALING

- A 1989 Senate investigation concluded that Koch Oil ran a "widespread and sophisticated scheme" to steal \$31 million worth of crude oil from Native American lands through fraud. As a penalty, they had to pay a \$25M settlement to the US government, tragically reducing their stolen profits to \$6 million.
- Since 1997, spent over \$145 million in funding to groups that deny climate science and policy.
- In 2013, Koch-aligned groups that oppose public healthcare and union rights were fined over \$1 million in the state of California for illegally routing funding to ballot initiatives without disclosure.
- In 2000, a federal grand jury hit Koch with a 97-count indictment for covering up the discharge of 15x the legal limit of benzene from a Corpus Christi refinery. Koch industries had reported a tiny fraction. Although fines could have been up to \$250M, they only paid \$20M.
- Koch's Pine Bend Refinery in Minnesota pumped 600,00+ gallons of jet fuel into wetlands in the 1990s, which is generally considered to be bad for the environment. They paid \$8M in fines.

FACT: In 1996, two teenagers were burned to death when a corroded Koch pipeline exploded.



CHARLES

DAVID (RIP)

FACT: The Koch Brothers, heirs to a family fortune, were largely raised by a physically abusive Nazi-sympathizing nanny who forced them to take poops at a precise time under threat of punishment.

ART: MATT BEAUDOIN
(X: @scrub_lover)

WRITING: SHAWN VULLIEZ
(X: @wrong_shon)



AND AFTER THIS...
WE'LL GET MATCHING
HILLARY TATTOOS!!!

AAAAHHH

MASTER
DEBATER

PUMP

NUT
SEED

I WAS A...

“DEBATE ME”

PHONE SEX OPERATOR

BY ELIZABETH BLACKBURN

CALL ME JADED, BUT I THOUGHT BRYON NOEM’S comically large breasts were kind of underwhelming. When photos of the embattled former Secretary of State Kristi Noem’s husband leaked in March, the 56-year-old father of three could be seen in a skintight flesh-colored shirt stuffed with a pair of latex balloons, each as big as his head. Security analysts warned that his spending \$25,000 on online “bimbofication” fetish models left his high-ranking family vulnerable to extortion while the internet laughed. And sure, the cockeyed nipples were funny—hilarious, even. It’s just that, after getting a glimpse of the modern man’s psyche over several years as a sex worker, I was too haunted by the familiarity of that buxom insurance executive’s joyless expression to take much pleasure in his public humiliation.

When a well-meaning misadventure in 2022 left my life in shambles, a friend suggested I try the phone sex operator platform NiteFlirt. I was already neck-deep in the sex work industry and desperate to climb out of debt from the safety of my bedroom, so I made three lines: an inexpensive chat line, a compara-

tively expensive role-playing line, and a line for flirty online chess games. This last one was my friend’s suggestion; special interests sometimes made for lucrative niches (no one ever called).

As a Flirt (the site’s term of art for operators), I had three notable assets: a velvet voice I knew how to weaponize, decades of stroking men’s egos as a personal and professional survival skill, and a genuine fascination with people’s inner lives. I also played a lot of Dungeons & Dragons v3.5 in high school, so I had experience collaborating on other people’s fantasies.

Calls were fun so long as we didn’t linger in the disconcerting moments. I drew hard lines around things like race- and age-play, initially a struggle to enforce. The seasoned Seekers (what NiteFlirt calls its callers) routinely test new Flirts to see what they can get away with. I preferred the dime-store psychoanalysis of hour-long chat line conversations; regardless, the calls all ended the same way.

Several months in, I created a line for a different special interest: “Talk Politics With The Anarchist Bimbo.” Unlike sexy chess, the market for this niche found me immediately.

WHAT AUSTRALIAN NEO-NAZIS REALLY WANT

The first call to my “Debate Me, Bro” line was a trial by fire. Michael was a white Australian millennial, worked a white-collar office job, and was a white nationalist. We spoke for two hours at \$1.99 per minute (of which I would receive 63 percent). Our conversation was—until the last 20 minutes—exclusively a discussion of personal politics.

Michael the neo-Nazi was deeply concerned about miscegenation, believing the “white race” was undergoing a deliberate ethnic cleansing à la the Great Replacement. He cited dubious meme-statistics bemoaning falling birth rates in Australia, the United States, and Europe. Though my class-first politics allowed for fleeting moments of common ground like “our generation can’t afford to start a family,” we never agreed on a cause. Where I blamed rent-seeking capitalist greed, he blamed some all-encompassing Jewish Conspiracy and the inclusion of women and minorities in the workforce. He resented our access to the middle-class email jobs he wanted reserved for white male heads of household.

We spoke at length about working women; he felt I had done the right thing by leaving my software engineering career behind in 2021. (So did I, again for different reasons.) He believed women went to college and worked for the express purpose of meeting a husband, that office romance was the only justification for keeping us around.

To be fair to Michael (I shouldn’t be), back when I briefly studied journalism at a Catholic women’s college, my classmates occasionally reheated jokes about getting your MRS degree from a guy at the near-by engineering school. This was in 2006.

Like SS Chief Heinrich Himmler before him, this modern Nazi thought women were only ever hired for their looks. Himmler wanted to bar us from state service entirely—“that no one can claim that their selection is based upon ability”—arguing that pretty, incompetent women would always be chosen over ugly, efficient hags, and would take all the investment in their training with them when they married and quit.

Also like Himmler, Michael needed to believe women were shallow and incapable in order to safeguard a fragile masculinity composed of brittle stereotypes. Every historical flavor of fascism has depended on the cult of masculinity to maintain order in the face of changing gender norms, and ours is no exception.

In his 1985 book *Nationalism and Sexuality*, George L. Mosse examines the centrality of middle-class respectability to nationalist projects of yore. Both Italy’s fascists and Germany’s National Socialists believed the moral regeneration of their nations depended upon the enforcement of a rigid manly ideal; separating men from women as well as from any groups placed outside the confines of society. Hitler’s classical heroes were “tall and lithe” (his favorite phrase to describe the model German) with a clean-cut look reflecting strength, self-control, and sexual restraint. As Mosse explains, “Quiet greatness determined the appearance of the ideal Aryan (in contrast to the nervous Jew or exhausted homosexual).”

In addition to being a regular pervert, Michael was a grade A debate pervert. He delighted in espousing his vile beliefs and in being chastised for them. As our conversation wound down, he lamented his inability to find a marriageable woman to “give him what he needs.” While it took some detective work to uncover, his desire was so commonplace I could have guessed it well before I made him spit it out (pun intended).

Seekers often hang up when you ask what they want. As a Flirt armed only with knowledge of niches you’ve advertised on the line they’ve called, you must tease out this information or cold-read like a phone psychic. Bad reads beget bad vibes, and incorrect guesses send callers shuffling off to some other listing to experience the mystical unveiling they’re paying for.

Michael felt he needed a politically progressive woman like me to dominate him, since most conservative women were conditioned to subservience by the same forces of respectability he depended upon for self-esteem. This admission sparked a new debate which he was less interested in—he was basically ready to finish—but that I refused to concede without having my say. Expecting women to genuflect everywhere except the bedroom is the work

of weak men who wish to have their cake and eat it too (again, pun intended).

What this Nazi wanted more than anything was a woman who would defer to him in everything... while also being willing to make him ejaculate into his hand and eat it. Cum eating instructions (or CEI) were just the tip of the homoerotic iceberg for Michael. They were also one of the easiest taboos to orchestrate from afar.

Later I created a CEI line with a “Load Leaderboard” and a rate of \$5.99 per minute. This became my most popular service; as you might expect, the calls were brief.

Moments before climax, with the shame-veil at its thinnest, Michael admitted his ultimate fantasy was a cuckolding scenario involving his imaginary wife and another man’s sloppy seconds. In this, at least, he was ideologically consistent—unlike many white men with similar tastes, it was essential to Michael that his wife’s lover be of Aryan descent.

A PEEK BEHIND THE CURTAIN

The most important lesson I learned as a Flirt was to take notes after each call. Repeat Seekers experience the magic of being memorable months later with just a sentence or two, like “filthy John wants to lick things” or “Chris loves crop tops and belly chains, make him talk about Helen.” Once I began taking political calls, the notes read more like résumés:

“Alan, divorced conservative former navy man who can talk about the Federalist papers, ask him about [San Francisco] in the 60s next time.”

“Dan, retired at the Pentagon, MMA, trains under chess master, constitutional law PhD?”

Retirees like Alan and Dan talked to me for an hour or two at a time, our conversations vacillating between tense ideological skirmish and steamy confessional. It felt a bit like arguing with my dad—minus the sex stuff, that is.

Very few callers were under 40. Many had been using this service since the mid-aughts, when late night commercials for 1-800-747-GIRL were peppered between ad spots for free art tests and the Bowflex home gym. It’s true that younger

generations have less money for luxuries like NiteFlirt, but I suspect their absence also stems from a generation-wide discomfort with phone calls. Millennial and Gen Z clients seemed to favor the budget-friendly asynchronicity of voice notes and text chat.

While submissive conservatives were overrepresented on NiteFlirt, I found plenty of progressive men who also enjoyed being told what to do. The tone of these encounters differed wildly. For right-wing men, subtly soliciting permission to do “gay stuff” was a running theme; leftists often spoke openly about real-world experiments in gender expression, and held a more fluid view of sexuality. Many of these same leftists sought degradation—to be a worm beneath the heel of a woman willing to destroy them physically, emotionally, and financially. One client called these figures the Toxic Goddesses, a niche I couldn’t cater to. I might have seen greater success had one of my special interests been erotically humiliating men by confirming their worst fears about themselves.

Famed 20th-century physician and sexologist Iwan Bloch preached that modernity encouraged both homosexuality and masturbation (long considered the gateway to moral decline). George L. Mosse writes, “Bloch, who approved of masturbation if practiced in moderation, nevertheless saw it as a potential danger to society. The masturbator, he tells us, becomes lonely and shy and loses the natural enthusiasm of youth; his nervousness is apt to damage his heart.” Breaking with the broader Nazi Party on prostitution, Heinrich Himmler suggested visiting a sex worker could save these wastrels from the scourge of homosexuality.

Reminiscent of today’s hustle culture, some nationalist attacks on masturbation relied not on concerns for health or spiritual degeneration, but on industrious pragmatism. It served no purpose, they said, with Mosse writing that one French physician “argued wasting one’s sperm through masturbation was like throwing money out the window.” If this weren’t a serious essay about sex and ideology, here I’d include a Venn diagram meme with overlapping circles of hustle culture, the NoFap community, amphetamine abuse, and homoerotic looksmaxxing; Nazism lives at its center.

Anecdotally, young progressive men seem more likely to identify as gooners, an internet subculture centered around transcendental masturbation and losing oneself in a deluge of short-form pornography. They are just as eager as their elders for permission to betray the

ended up comfortably couch-locked, a prisoner to their porn library. Like their forebears, the gooners’ focus is also on surrendering control such that they feel forced to do what they want to do anyway; it’s just that what today’s young progressives want to do is a lot closer to nothing at all.

MAN SUIT OFF, PUSSY HAT ON

In a recent interview on YouTube’s Channel 5 with *Andrew Callaghan*, webcam model Lydia Love talked about what it was like to bimbo-ify Bryon Noem. When the Daily Mail exposé was published, Love immediately recognized Noem as the man she had dubbed her Big Titty Client. “I had never seen tits that big on a man before,” she said. “It was burned into my brain.”

Whenever Noem paid \$25 per minute for one-on-one webcam exchanges, Love would offer to take his mind off his daily stressors. “He wanted to show off for me,” she said. “He wanted to wear his little leggings and, like, turn around. He liked being told to put the leggings on.”

Love is careful to distinguish between clients experimenting with a cross-dressing kink and trans people. “I have had clients be like, ‘Oh, I actually explored this and I realized that I’m trans.’ And I’m like, ‘Cool, good. You do your thing. Good for you.’ But it’s not always like that.”

I confess, I rarely enjoyed catering to feminization fantasies from users with names like “MakeMeGrowGiantBreasts” and “sissybilly4.” Having a number of trans intimates, family, and friends, I struggle to view these clients in a vacuum while the United States government works tirelessly to push trans people out of the public sphere. Being playful with one’s sexual expression is great therapy; I don’t want to diminish that. It was just hard not to feel sad for many of the fantasists, and grating to engage with all these pornographic caricatures depicting femininity as inherently degrading.

Here in the 21st century, we have inherited a 19th and 20th century bourgeois respectability that believes sexual differentiation must be maintained for culture to thrive. Women are less stigmatized for

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masculine values society had foisted upon them—albeit in more intoxicating ways. Some begged me to huff poppers (amyl nitrite) until they were drooling too much to even pretend-work from home, while others took back-to-back bong hits and

exhibiting the “manly” traits of strength and dominance than men are for embracing softness. The cult of masculinity is flattered when women see its example as seductive and appalled when anyone shirks it. The cult is prepared to punish any outsiders, however, and this boundary is constantly shifting.

Lydia Love put it diplomatically. “I feel like men have a lot of pressure to be like, ‘This is what a man is.’ Maybe sometimes the most freeing thing to be as a man is not one.”

On NiteFlirt, some clients preferred to pay \$0.99 per message to chat over text. Soon after I launched the politics line, one chatter caught my eye. “I’m Joe, 48, and in Texas,” he wrote. “I’m a mostly conservative attorney. I was raised Jewish, but not practicing. I’d love to be turned into a left-wing Pagan woman.”

I told Joe that as an anarchist, I’d turn him so left-wing his pretty head would spin. He wanted to look femme, be called Sarah, and use she/her pronouns. “[Sarah] was the first Jewish woman named in the Bible and I think it would be symbolic for me to return to the Goddess with that name,” he said. Trawling Google Image Search, I sent him photos of dark-haired models wearing flowing dresses in forests and fields.

Joe asked how I would turn him leftist. Too sincerely, I said I’d tell him about working with unhoused people, and about care-centered community organizing—hastily adding that if Sarah was a lesbian, I’d use my womanly wiles, too. “I’d have you eating out of the palm of my hand and doing some of the most meaningful work of your career.”

“I know exactly how you could honey-pot me,” Joe said, steering the conversation back to his core interests. “[By] having all of the clothes and accessories to turn Joe into Sarah laid out waiting for me, maybe even doxxing me by live-streaming my makeover.” Unusual as the political elements were, the rest of this fantasy was familiar.

Exposure is a common theme, the fantasist dreaming of being outed in a way that irrevocably changes their life and forces their hand. I teased that I’d have a journalist friend write a hit-piece and bring a photographer to document

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it. Lydia Love wondered if Bryon Noem was gooning to his humiliation in the press, and I wonder what Joe would think if he recognized himself here in *Current Affairs*.

My role in Joe’s fantasy, as with most callers, was to facilitate the outcome he’d dreamed of, forcing him to do what he wanted. I was there to say without saying, “I know you worry what this says about your masculinity; it’s okay, we’re playing a game that I find just as exciting as you do, and you’re really just doing it for me, anyway.”

Joe asked what brand of leftist I imagined Sarah as and, forgetting myself, I said the transition from libertarian-leaning conservative to liberty-loving anarchist would be easy.

“Can I say the one liberal look I really get turned on by?” Joe asked, course-correcting. “The type who’d be in a blue evening gown for a Democratic fundraiser gala... there’s just something really erotic about the idea of me as a cosmopolitan urban liberal woman.”

I thought I’d die of secondhand embarrassment, but Joe was just getting started. He quaked at the thought of a fancy COVID mask matching Sarah’s gown, of wearing feminist jewelry. “I love the Democratic fascination with clothing as a form of expression and devotion to the cause,” he said.

One could argue Republicans are as prone to signaling allegiances through clothing, citing red MAGA hats and T-shirts reading “My pronouns are kiss/my/ass”—but this was Joe’s fantasy, so I sent him pictures of models in sparkly blue dresses instead.

When I threatened to drag him to the Women’s March, Joe asked if he would get to wear a pussy hat; I said he’d have to knit one himself, as I had, and this made him tremble. Asked about Sarah’s values, he shared a picture of the “In This House We Believe” yard sign (you know the one, they were everywhere in 2017). Mine was stolen weeks after I put it out. For a tattoo, Joe suggested “Feminist as Fuck” across his lower back. I cackled. Among my abandoned sewing projects is an embroidered handkerchief from a decade ago, “Feminist as FU-” wreathed in flowers.

“I want to be considered a Nasty Woman,” he said, evoking a sweatshirt I admittedly still wear sometimes. Somehow, his aesthetic turn-ons included every artifact of adorably cringe liberal feminism I had embraced and abandoned during my own political awakening.

Joe loved that his transformation simultaneously involved gender and politics, allowing him to shunt aside the cultural chains that had bound him all his life and defect from the conservative establishment in addition to masculinity. “I get to be another pretty drone for the neoliberal establishment,” he said. “The total Yasss Kween vibe for me.”

“I could see you adding a blue streak to my hair to show my new party allegiance,” he said. I called this idea very Kyrsten Sinema and he admitted to having a total girl crush on her.

I asked what corporate interests he would sell his soul for. “Big tech. I’d love being a shill and apologist for TikTok... the gig economy too, claiming it gives options and flexibility.”

“And wounding labor in the process, very sneaky.”

“The perfect neoliberal position,” he concluded.

It was the first time we were on the same page about the soullessness of establishment Democrats. For him, this was the appeal. He could slip the ideology on like a glittery blue gown and matching mask, believing in nothing as Sarah just as he believed in nothing as Joe.

Joe tried out a new idea. “Could Sarah be taken someplace private to service a prominent Democratic woman? To become a stylish sex offering for the Democrat elite?” Soon, we were planning an orgiastic initiation ceremony inspired by “Eyes Wide Shut,” with Sarah obediently counter-honeypotting Krysten Sinema back into the Democratic fold.

MAKE AMERICA GAG AGAIN

It’s been approximately one year since I last took calls on NiteFlirt, having quiet-quit sex work in mid-2025. To make ends (nearly) meet, I’m writing essays for the first time since the Obama administra-

tion and live-streaming chess on Twitch. I can’t quite delete my Flirt account, however; it’s comforting to know the website and the clientele will probably always be there if vanilla work fails to pay the bills.

In *A Billion Wicked Thoughts: What the Internet Tells Us About Sexual Relationships*, computational neuroscientists Ogi Ogas and Sai Gaddam use anonymous search histories to study human sexuality. Published in 2012, their findings feel slightly dated in 2026, but consider this observation: “One of the more noticeable differences between male-targeted and female-targeted porn on the Web is the presence of political messages. On men’s porn sites—including gay porn sites—there is a complete absence of any kind of explicit politics. The only exception is the rare importation to support free speech.” Though there are far fewer female-targeted sites, the authors say the ones that exist contain an abundance of messaging around issues like inclusivity and feminism.

Setting aside the authors’ narrow definition of explicit politics (e.g. by their own account, “cuckold porn is the second most popular heterosexual interest on English-language search engines [after *youth*],” and is a category famously dominated by white men watching their white wives have sex with black men), political messaging in women’s pornography of that era makes sense, a signal that the video was ethical and wouldn’t jump scare you with anything untoward. The absence of explicit political messaging in men’s pornography of that era also makes sense, but that was 2012. Since then, nationalism has coiled its choking vines around everything that men hold dear, same as it ever was.

I logged into NiteFlirt in April to survey the landscape. The very first listing was for a 29-year-old Muslim housewife called “Mrs. Muhammed,” who had bid an exorbitant \$8.57 per qualified click to secure this premium real estate. The woman in the grainy profile photo wore a niqab, leaving only her eyes visible to smolder over her shoulder. Under religious play, her listing offered services with names like devout Islamic dominance, hijab worship, and cultural contrast. The race play section highlighted her desire to amass a “harem” of submissive white boys.

Searching for “MAGA” returned

mostly innocuous listings, though two ads on page two caught my eye: Trump Girl’s “MAGA BRAT MAKES YOU PUMP FOR MAGA” (in the feminization category at \$1.14 per click), and Tori for Trump’s “YOU OWN THIS MAGA PUSSY.” Both featured fit blondes in lingerie and Trump merchandise and used the phrase “libtard snowflake” at least once. As I kept scrolling, Flirt after Flirt with names like Authoritarian Claudia and Right Wing Barbie packaged the aesthetic of Donald Trump’s nationalism for erotic consumption.

Until recently, while driving through deep red regions like rural Ohio, you’d expect to encounter at least one modest ranch home emblazoned with psychosexual depictions of a buff Donald Trump. His yard signs once lurked around every corner. These Trump-as-Rambo shrines are harder to find in 2026, but don’t let their absence fool you—I think they evolved into a much more private sort of tribute.

For decades Democrats and Republicans have offered voters nothing, just vibes to jack off to (intellectually or otherwise). Attorney Joe’s fetish for liberal self-righteousness imagines Sarah sacrificing their Texas handgun license on the cleansing pyre. Neo-Nazi Michael’s fetish for conservative cruelty pumps out an endless stream of tradwife Wojak memes. The death throes of the Republic are as grotesque as any J.G. Ballard satire.

“The role nationalism and respectability played in the rise of fascism has often been forgotten,” writes George L. Mosse. “It is not easy to confront when such factors have determined so much of our own behavior.”

When men tell me their secrets, I listen. What I’ve learned is that we could improve society—and take the wind out of fascism’s sails—by broadening the scope of what it is *socially acceptable* for a man to be. As the late David Graeber said, “the ultimate hidden truth of the world is that it is something that we make, and could just as easily make differently.” As we remake the world into one warmed by collectivism, it should be one where a man knows he’s no less a man for struggling financially, wanting to be held, losing his hair, loving his friends, or playing dress-up. In that world, a man will only ever be less a man if he wants to be. ♣

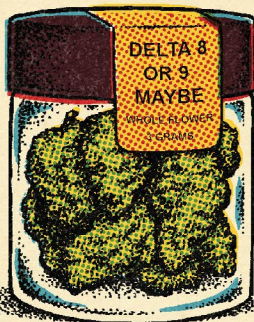
Uncle Jimbo's Guide to Gas Station Drugs

HEY HEY, AMIGOS! IT'S YOUR FAVORITE PSYCHONAUT, UNCLE JIMBO HERE, REPORTING LIVE FROM A PLANET NEAR YOU. THE OL' WAR ON DRUGS IS STILL GOIN' STRONG, AND WITH THE RISING COSTS OF EVERYDAY LIFE, IT'S HARDER THAN EVER FOR ORDINARY FOLKS TO AFFORD TO SEE A DOCTOR THEY CAN TRICK INTO PRESCRIBING 'EM SOME OF THAT GOOD GOOD. AT LEAST THAT'S WHAT I'VE BEEN HEARIN': I AIN'T BEEN TO A "LICENSED MEDICAL PROFESSIONAL" SINCE THE CARTER YEARS. THOSE OF US WHO GO ABOUT OUR DRUG BUYIN' THE HONEST WAY (A CLANDESTINE MEETING WITH 'NINE TOES' MORGAN BEHIND THE LOCAL PUBLIC LIBRARY) ARE STILL AT RISK OF BEIN' TAKEN DOWN BY THE FUZZ, DESPITE OUR PRISONS BEIN' STUFFED TO THE GILLS AFTER ALL THESE YEARS. LUCKILY THERE'S A NEW PUSHERMAN IN TOWN AND HE'S SITTIN' BEHIND THE COUNTER AT YOUR LOCAL GAS STATION. YES, LADIES AND GERMS, THE HUMBLE GAS STATION HAS BECOME A VERITABLE CORNUCOPIA OF FANTASTIC MIND-ALTERING SUBSTANCES YOU CAN BUY RIGHT NOW AND IT'S ONE-HUNDO PERCENT LEGAL ACCORDING TO A TIKTOK I SAW! "BUT UNCLE JIMBO,"

I HEAR YOU SAY, "THE GAS STATION IS SUCH AN OVERWHELMING PLACE, WHAT WITH ALL THE JERKIES AND TAIWANESE SWITCHBLADES AND UH... GUM AND STUFF. WHAT SHOULD I BUY??" FRET NOT, UNCLE J'S GOT YA COVERED. I'VE PERSONALLY COLLECTED A LIST OF THE BEST GAS STATION DRUGS YOU CAN GET YOUR HANDS ON. STRAP IN, CHECK OUT, AND LET'S GET GOIN'!



Edited by
Aidan Yetman-Michaelson



DELTA 8/9: AH, MARY JANE'S NASTY LITTLE SISTER. THIS STUFF MIGHT SOUND LIKE A COVID STRAIN, BUT DON'T GET TOO EXCITED--IT ONLY GETS YA HALF AS FADED. TECHNICALLY LEGAL 'CUZ THOSE WACKY GMO SCIENTISTS WENT IN AND SWITCHED AROUND AN ISOTOPE OR SOMETHIN'? LOOK, I KNOW ABOUT AS MUCH ABOUT IT AS THE FOLKS IN CHARGE OF REGULATIN' IT.

FEELS LIKE: THE HASH MY COUSIN USED TO GROW BACK IN '69 MINUS THE URGE TO LISTEN TO ALL MY SANTANA LPS AT HALF SPEED.

SIDE EFFECTS: ANXIETY, LETHARGY, THE EMBARRASSMENT OF NOT BEING ABLE TO JUST FIND SOME REAL WEED LIKE A GROWN-UP.



KRATOM: LOOKS LIKE MATCHA AND TASTES LIKE LICKIN' OUT THE DRAWERS OF A CHINESE MEDICINE SHOP. THEY SAY THIS STUFF'S GREAT FOR GETTIN' FOLKS OFF OPIATES, WHICH IS JUST DANDY FOR ME 'CUZ I'M BANNED FROM EVERY METHADONE CLINIC IN A TWENTY MILE RADIUS! EVEN NORMIES ARE GETTIN' HOOKED ON

THE OL' GREEN SLUDGE NOWADAYS ON ACCOUNT OF IT BEIN' SOLD AS AN HERBAL SUPPLEMENT. JOKE'S ON THEM FOR MISTAKING THE KUM AND GO FOR AN EREWHON.

FEELS LIKE: A STALE WHEATGRASS SMOOTHIE SOMEONE GROUND AN OXY INTO.

SIDE EFFECTS: VISION PROBLEMS, VOMITING, CRIPPLING ADDICTION.

THE ONE EXPIRED MONSTER ENERGY IN THE BACK OF THE FRIDGE: GOOD GOIN' MAN! THESE ARE A RARE FIND. THEY SAY THE MORE DENTED THE CAN, THE SWEETER THE RUSH, AND THIS ONE LOOKS ABSOLUTELY BEAT TO SHIT! COULDN'T TELL YA WHAT'S IN THIS STUFF IN THE FIRST PLACE BUT IT SURE DOES AGE LIKE FINE WINE, APART FROM THE PUTRID FLAVOR AND ALL THAT.

FEELS LIKE: FUCKIN' UP THE PIT AT A MORGAN WALLEN CONCERT.

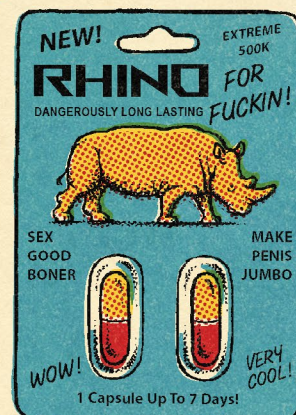
SIDE EFFECTS: ANXIETY, INSOMNIA, UNLEASHING THE BEAST WITHIN.



BONER PILLS: SO THIS IS WHAT THEY DID WITH ALL THOSE POACHED RHINO HORNS! AT LEAST I HOPE THAT'S WHAT'S IN HERE: IT DOESN'T REALLY SAY. ONE THING'S FOR SURE, IF YOU HEARD THE WARNINGS IN THOSE VIAGRA COMMERCIALS ABOUT AN ERECTION LASTING MORE THAN FOUR HOURS AND THOUGHT THAT SOUNDS LIKE A FUN TIME, THIS SHIT WON'T DISAPPOINT.

FEELS LIKE: BEING SO HARD YOU COULD TOW AN AIRSTREAM WITH YOUR MANHOOD.

SIDE EFFECTS: HEADACHE, CARDIAC ARREST, PREMORTEM RIGIDITY.



WITH IT, GIMME A HIT, BROTHER!

FEELS LIKE: WARM AND FUZZY WITH JUST A HINT OF BRAIN DAMAGE.

SIDE EFFECTS: DIZZINESS, HEADACHE, BROKEN HEART.

POPPERS: AN ABSOLUTE CLASSIC FOR THOSE IN THE VCR COLLECTION HOBBY. LOCKIN' EYES WITH A FELLA BUYING ONE OF THESE AT THE 'OL CIRCLE K WAS HOW MOST FOLKS IN THE SCENE MET BEFORE GRINDR CAME ALONG. HECK, MY NEPHEW MET HIS HUSBAND THAT WAY AND THEY'VE BEEN SNIFFIN' STRONG GOIN' ON FIFTEEN YEARS NOW! IT'S LIKE I ALWAYS SAY, IF RFK JR. AIN'T DOWN



FEELS LIKE: THE PILL FROM LIMITLESS WITH HEARTBURN.

SIDE EFFECTS: INCREASED HEART RATE, GREASY FINGERS.

ADDERALL BLASTED

BUGLES: OH MAN, HAVE YOU TRIED THESE? THE SAME GREAT CORNMEAL AND STALE FRY OIL TASTE YOU LOVE BUT WITH A NEW ADDED KICK! THEY SAY THESE ARE REAL POPULAR WITH THE KIDS NOWADAYS: I HEAR THEY USE 'EM TO STAY UP ALL WEEK CRAMMIN' FOR EXAMS. GUESS THAT'S THE ONLY WAY THEY'RE GONNA LEARN NOW THAT CHATGPT'S DOIN' ALL THE WORK FOR 'EM. ME? I JUST LIKE TO STICK 'EM ON ALL MY FINGERS AND PRETEND I HAVE WITCH'S CLAWS.

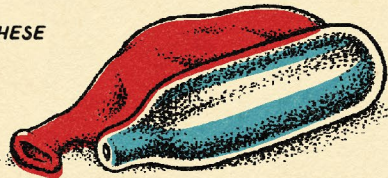
WHIPPETS:

WHO COULD FORGET THESE FELLAS? TWELVE SECONDS OF GETTIN' ABSOLUTELY ZOINKED AND A LIFETIME OF BRAIN DAMAGE. I USED TO

SNEAK THESE FROM WORK ALL THE TIME WHEN I WORKED AT DAIRY QUEEN. NOW THEY'RE SELLIN' THE BIG CANS WITH FLAVORS AND STUFF SO YOU CAN STAY HUFFIN' ALL DAY LONG! LOOK, KANYE Vouched FOR NITROUS, AND AS A MISUNDERSTOOD GENIUS MYSELF, I CAN SEE WHY!

FEELS LIKE: YOU ARE THE BALLOON.

SIDE EFFECTS: SHORTNESS OF BREATH, CONFUSION, PERMANENT NERVE DAMAGE.



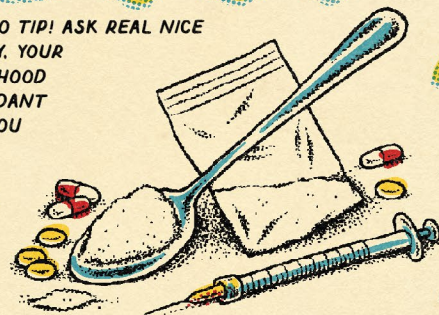
REAL DRUGS!: PRO TIP! ASK REAL NICE

AND IF YOU'RE LUCKY, YOUR FRIENDLY NEIGHBORHOOD GAS STATION ATTENDANT MIGHT JUST HOOK YOU UP WITH SOME OF THE GOOD STUFF. WHY FUSS WITH ALL THESE BULLSHIT "TECHNICALLY LEGAL"

SUBSTANCES WHEN THE SHIT YOU REALLY WANT IS RIGHT THERE BEHIND THE COUNTER? OH AND IF HE REALLY DOES HAVE SOME, GRAB A LITTLE FOR ME, WOULD YA?

FEELS LIKE: LIVIN' ON THE EDGE.

SIDE EFFECTS: CONFUSION, HEART PALPITATIONS, POSSIBLE ARREST.





the classic revolutionary film america suppressed

BY MATTHEW HATCHETT

THE 1970S IS A DECADE KNOWN FOR ITS LEGENDARY cinema. Films like *The Godfather*, *Dog Day Afternoon*, *Alien*, *Apocalypse Now*, and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* cemented themselves in history during this time period, sparking the careers of directors like Martin Scorsese and Francis Ford Coppola and creating the “blockbuster” as we know it. But one revolutionary piece of cinema, just as compelling as any of those household names, is conspicuously missing from the usual lists of '70s classics. *The Spook Who Sat by the Door*, directed by Ivan Dixon in 1973, should be brought up every time someone speaks of the lasting impact of films from this era. Despite not being picked up by a major distributor, facing mountains of suppression from the FBI, and almost becoming completely lost before being converted to DVD, the film survived to become one of the most radical works in the history of Black cinema.

The Spook Who Sat by the Door is an adaptation of a 1969 novel by author Sam Greenlee. It follows the fictional story of the CIA's first Black operative, Dan Freeman, who resigns from the agency and returns to his hometown of Chicago with a secret plan—to train members of his former gang in guerilla warfare in an attempt to start a revolution. The book was rejected 40 times by publishers between 1966 and 1969. After finally being released by an independent press in London, the novel went on to make bestseller lists and earn “book of the year” mentions in major

British newspapers, eventually securing over a dozen printings in the United States. It became such a success worldwide that it was later deemed required reading at the FBI Academy in Quantico, Virginia.

The film adaptation begins in the office of a white U.S. senator who is running for reelection. There, two campaign staffers notify him that if the election were to end that day, he would lose by just two percentage points due to his decline in the polls with Black voters. A frenzy breaks out, with the politician and his team brainstorming ideas on how he could earn the Black vote on short notice. Suddenly, an idea emerges: one of the staffers reminds his boss that the CIA has no Black agents at the time, and suggests that he accuse the agency of discriminatory hiring practices in his next speech to regain support from Black voters. This accusation would inspire the agency to hire its first Black agent, which is where we are introduced to the main character, Dan Freeman (played by Lawrence Cook.)

The whole situation displays pure irony and cynicism. Every character in these scenes is talking about racial diversity, but nobody actually cares about it, leading the CIA to hire a Black agent solely for the purpose of seeming progressive—and in the process, unintentionally creating their own worst enemy.

After a careful screening process that involves both physical and psychological tests, the agency narrows down the applicants from over 400 to ten. These men are labeled as “the best of their race” by the high-ranking CIA official who briefs them, and are put through a rigorous training course. Only Dan Freeman is able to successfully complete it, and throughout the process, his every move is watched meticulously. The agency takes cautious note of establishments he has frequented and how he has interacted with others. They bug his room and even interview a woman he is seeing. It's apparent that the agency is doing this for racist reasons, applying levels of scrutiny to Freeman that they never would to a white candidate. And yet, after all of the intel the agency digs up, they can't muster up any reason why Freeman would not be CIA material.

You might assume that after this intensive process, the CIA would put Freeman out into the field. Instead, he's assigned to a copy room in the basement of the agency's headquarters under the title “Top Secret Reproduction Center Section Chief.” It's not until the agency assigns him to give visiting senators a tour of the headquarters that they even contemplate placing him in a front office on the main level to “show visitors that the agency has integrated.” Although *The Spook Who Sat By the Door* was released more than 50 years ago, this practice is not unlike hiring practices that are still prevalent to this day, which place people of color in visible positions that hold very little power. For example, Black women occupy a large portion of both nursing and education positions in the United States, yet hold comparably smaller influence in these fields, are often severely underpaid, and consistently face discrimination when on the receiving end of service from these sectors. This occurs in other arenas too: Black athletes are heavily represented in revenue-generating sports such as football and basketball, making them among the most visible figures on many university campuses. Yet athletic directors, university presidents, and major donors—the individuals who control budgets and policy—have historically been far less diverse. As Kwame Ture stated in 1967, “Black visibility is not Black Power.”

After several years of this treatment, Freeman notifies the agency that he will be stepping down and going to work in his hometown of Chicago to better serve his people as a social worker. Freeman's supervisor gives him his utmost support and tells him to let the agency know how things are back home. Unbeknownst to Freeman, though, the officer assigns someone to keep tabs on his whereabouts and associates after the move.

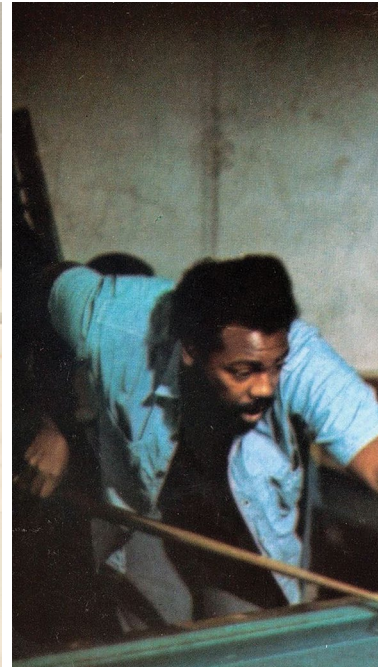
THIS FILM BEING PRIMARILY SET IN 1970S Chicago is noteworthy. At the time Greenlee's original novel was published, the Rainbow Coalition was taking Chicago's political scene by storm. Not to be confused with the later Rainbow Coalition led by Reverend Jesse Jackson, the original was spearheaded by Fred Hampton and the Chicago chapter of the Black Panther Party, and was an alliance of radical groups in the city that united to confront the issues that affected Chicagoans. Members of this coalition included the Black Panther Party, the Young Lords, the Young Patriots, Students for a Democratic Society, the Brown Berets, and the Blackstone Rangers street gang. The Blackstone Rangers' role is especially noteworthy in relation to the premise of this film. In an attempt to bring down Fred Hampton and create division amongst leaders in Chicago's major organizations, the FBI forged a letter that was sent to the Blackstone Rangers leader, Jeff Fort, in which there was a lie about a "hit" being put out on him by the Black Panther Party. Hampton denied the accusation, and then the groups went on to work together before Hampton's assassination by FBI agents in 1969, the same year the book version of *The Spook Who Sat by the Door* was released.

Upon his arrival in Chicago, Dan begins to work on his ultimate purpose: recruiting and training members of a gang (the Cobras) to form an underground guerilla organization that would span across multiple major cities nationwide. Throughout this process, we begin to finally get a glimpse of the real Dan Freeman. We learn that his intelligence reaches far beyond what the CIA taught him, and how committed he is to the struggle of Black liberation. The film reveals that Dan was active in campus protests during his college years, and has kept his revolutionary spirit under wraps up until this point.

Greenlee has said that prior to writing *The Spook Who Sat by the Door*, he spent close to a decade traveling to postcolonial countries in order to learn how they gained freedom. Specifically, Greenlee was in Iraq when the British-backed Hashemite Monarchy was overthrown in 1958. (His 1976 novel *Baghdad Blues* was based explicitly on these experiences.) What he learned would become the basis of what Freeman teaches the Cobras in the film. Freeman instructs his trainees in marksmanship, how to create propaganda for their cause, the basics of guerilla warfare, hand-to-hand combat, and how to build an underground revolutionary organization that will span across the country. "What we got now is a colony, what we want to create is a new nation," Freeman tells the Cobras. Freeman noting that Black people represent an internal colony in this nation is significant because it articulates the specific forms of oppression that Black people face in the United States, as well as laying the foundation for the revolutionary acts that he and the Cobras commit later in the film.

The original plan for Freeman and the gang is to not publicly

utilize their guerrilla tactics until the perfect moment, which they want to define on their own terms. But events force their hand after a Black man is killed by the city police, which leads to an uprising. The former CIA officer is forced to live a double life: publicly acting as if he is attempting to quell the rebellion with the police and other authorities, due to his day job as a social



Movie poster for "The Spook Who Sat by the Door" (1973), based on Sam Greenlee's 1969 novel.

worker, while privately directing the Cobras and their clandestine movement in a calculated response to the police repression. As the violence escalates, the Cobras deploy the guerilla tactics they've trained on, in ways that to this day viewers seldom see on screen: ambushing members of the National Guard, setting traps for police officers, and even bombing the Mayor's office.

The Cobras are at war with the police, and they're winning, and the film shows its viewers exactly how. It's practically a paramilitary field manual, put on the big screen—or, as one NPR critic called it, "a Panavision version of political Armageddon." Incredibly, according to supporting actor Pemon Rami, some of the rioters in the film's pivotal uprising scenes weren't actors at all, but bystanders who "just came to beat up the police" when they saw a chance: "There's a scene where there's a woman fighting with her purse. She wasn't with us. She just happened to be walking down the street and got involved with it."

In the midst of this war with the police, a pivotal scene takes place: a heated argument between Freeman and his longtime friend Dawson, a high-ranking police officer. Dawson represents the middle-to-upper class of Black people, who after establishing themselves and reaching a certain salary tend to belittle the lives and societal impact of any Black person with a class status below theirs. He only knows the public Dan Freeman, who is a social worker and former CIA employee, so he attempts to include

Freeman in this class category, alluding that both roles are one and the same. He also shows a sense of relief that the National Guard is now in Chicago to help put an end to the uprising and movement the Cobras have sprung. Freeman immediately dissents:



Pool hall scene from "The Spook Who Sat by the Door" (1973), directed by Ivan Dixon.

DAWSON: "We have to maintain law and order, or we might as well be back in the jungle."

FREEMAN: "The ghetto is a jungle, always has been. And you cannot cage people like animals, and not expect them to fight back someday. It has always been an army occupation here, with police badges and uniforms. You and me, a cop and a social worker, we are keepers of this goddamn zoo."

DAWSON: "The streets have to be safe."

FREEMAN: "Safe for who? You're here to protect property, not lives."

DAWSON: "Well, that's what it's all about, isn't it? You worked hard to get what you got, didn't you? And you want to keep it just like I do."

FREEMAN: "Bullshit! You think because you've got a badge, and I've got a couple of degrees, that makes a difference? You know what white people call people like us, in private?"

This scene represents the conflict between people who have bought into "the system" and those who despise it; those who believe the system can be changed from the inside, and those who believe the system is irredeemable and must be destroyed; those

who believe in reform and those who believe in revolution. It's a debate that still rings true today.

The creation of this film is a miracle in itself. Since the setting was in Chicago, it was originally supposed to be shot fully in the city, too. But Richard Daley, who was Chicago's mayor at the time, refused to grant the production permission to shoot there upon learning about the subject matter. During his tenure as mayor, Daley became infamous as an authoritarian and an opponent of progress. It was Daley who oversaw the raid of Fred Hampton's apartment in 1969, which led to his assassination, Daley who ordered police to shoot to kill those uprising after Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination, and Daley who infamously sent the National Guard to beat protesters at the 1968 Democratic convention. The majority of the film, then, was shot in Gary, Indiana, while certain scenes were still sneakily shot in Chicago "guerilla style," unbeknownst to the Mayor.

To get picked up by a distributor, the editing team had to re-cut many of the action scenes. These edits made the movie seem more like the Blaxploitation films that were becoming popular during that era, rather than the revolutionary piece of cinema that it is. Sam Greenlee and Ivan Dixon went through a tumultuous process shopping the film to major distributors before it eventually found a home with United Artists. Shortly after the film was released, though, numerous theaters that were playing the film and United Artists itself were approached by government authorities and told to stop showing it, due to the impact that it could potentially have on viewers. This led to a sparse theatrical run, box office earnings of just \$270,000, and constant surveillance of the cast and crew by the FBI. Several members of the cast, including Lawrence Cook, would go on to struggle to book acting roles, or never act again, due to the blackballing of people who had anything to do with the production. The film disappeared for decades, circulating only as a bootleg. As Asante-wa Olatunji, director of programming with the Pan African Film Festival, told *Our Weekly*, "it was quite an underground thing—you couldn't find it anywhere."



VER 50 YEARS AFTER ITS RELEASE, *THE SPOOK Who Sat By The Door* has stood the test of time. In the era of Black Lives Matter and the George Floyd uprisings, it's more relevant than ever to our current political climate, even as major

Hollywood directors are reluctant to even acknowledge art being political. In 2012, the Library of Congress surprisingly included this film in its National Film Registry and subsequently gave it a 4k restoration. The late, great Nipsey Hussle even showed immense love for the book by almost naming his last album after it and comparing his status in hip-hop to Dan Freeman's on his song "Blue Laces 2." Yet still, it is not available on any of the major streaming services, and there have been very few screenings of the 4k restoration. With a score from the legendary jazz musician Herbie Hancock as its backdrop, *The Spook Who Sat by the Door* beautifully portrays the spirit of the Black Power movement and the revolutionary fervor of the 1960s and '70s. Upon viewing, you immediately see why this film was pulled from theaters shortly after its release: it has the potential to reinvigorate a movement led by those who have been constantly persecuted since this country's inception. ✚

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ISRAEL'S TRANCE

BY ZENAB HURIYAH AHMED

IT'S 6:29 AM ON A TUESDAY. A DRUM MACHINE REPEATS the base four kicks on a four-beat measure; 1/2/3/4 for up to 150 beats per minute. EDM fans pour through the dance floor with tribal tattoos, piercings, and canopies dye-printed with Ganesha fluttering in the wind. Israeli DJ Yarin Illovich plays, under his stagename Artifex, to a crowd dressed in *pashmina* scarves, *bindi* forehead jewelry, and loose-fitting *shalwar* trousers. Dancers pulse to mushrooms, pills, ecstasy, LSD, DMT, and ayahuasca. Like other psychedelic trance festivals worldwide, it is a well-funded dream of Hindu paganism. Attendees float outside their environment and consciousness, smoking opium and building a Xanadu pleasure-dome near the desert stream of Wadi Nahabir. Suddenly: a massive boom. Sirens. Cracks. Pops. Hisses. And screeches. A universe is broken and remade by the warfare that nurtured it into being.

The Supernova Sukkot Gathering is a festival planned for the holidays of Simchat Torah and Sukkot, the Feast of Booths. It is an Israeli spinoff of Universo Paralelo, a Brazilian psytrance festival founded 23 years earlier. The festival takes place biannually in the state of Bahia in the depleted remains of Brazil's eastern rainforest following slavery, genocide, industrialization, cattle ranching, and other intense colonization of the Bay of All Saints. "The legendary Universo Paralelo festival is set to land in our small but vibrant land!" proclaim the promoters for a group of scene regulars called Tribe of Nova in an official announcement, translated from the original Hebrew. "The meaning of the words 'Universo Paralelo' is 'Parallel Universe' in Portuguese, the native language of the land of Samba."

The Israeli live music events company Nova promotes the Gathering and brings together well-known artists like Artifex, Astral Projection, and NoFace. It switches to the site near Kibbutz Re'im only two days before the event. In *Rolling Stone*, Israeli entrepreneur Yoni Diller explains that "it's quite known that we do these events around the Gaza area. There's a lot of open areas. Most of us did the army, so we're not scared. It's not our first time being in the Gaza area. It's not supposed to be a dangerous area." After the initial explosions, NoFace tries to calm the non-Israeli musicians backstage. "[We're] used to having alarms about missiles. We didn't think the shooting part would arrive," he recalls. Qassam rockets smashing into missile interceptors is as common as bird calls in Khirbet Shalala.

Two squadrons of Hamas' Al-Qassam Brigades storm out, leading *fedayeen* fighters from every major Palestinian faction. The Gathering is spotted by militants originally deployed to the city of Netivot; they are surprised to find it and later head to Kibbutz Be'eri. Most festivalgoers flee, but others are caught in the cross-fire. Some are killed by Israeli police and security forces. News spreads worldwide, as Palestinians raid installations, take hostages, fight through another smaller festival called Psyduck near Kibbutzim Nir Oz and Nirim, and pull back into the Gaza Strip with heavy losses. Shocked, the Israeli military rapidly mounts a huge bombing campaign in retaliation, later declared a genocide by a special commission of the United Nations. Earlier that year, the Tribe of Nova lingers on the concept of a supernova in its original announcement: "the explosion of a massive star, causing an immense burst of light in galactic terms. What can one imagine when these concepts intertwine during the upcoming Sukkot holiday?"

11 Points in the Naqab (77 years before 7 October)

Seventy-seven years and a day earlier, Kibbutz Be'eri emerges near the river Wadi Nahabir. Three years later, shortly after the ethnic cleansing of Palestine known as the Nakba, Kibbutz Re'im is founded near the Green Line with Egyptian-administered Gaza. The Green Line is drawn as part of the 1949 Armistice Agreements between Israel and several countries including Lebanon, Jordan, and Syria. Article 5 of the Egyptian-Israeli Armistice Agreement says explicitly that the Green Line is temporary and "not to be construed in any sense as a political or territorial boundary." Six years later, in 1955, Kibbutzim Nirim and Nir Oz are established on land that was the ethnically cleansed village of Ma'in Abu Sitta, also known as Al-ma'in. The Labour Zionist and socialist paramilitary called the Haganah had attacked and destroyed the village just hours before David Ben-Gurion declared Israeli independence. Kibbutzim Nirim and Nir Oz are within eyeshot and walking distance from Al-Ma'in's expelled inhabitants in Gaza.

Palestinians cross the Green Line to visit their lands, harvest crops, retrieve their possessions, and keep track of any changes to the landscape. Israel brands the refugees "infiltrators" and criminalizes the crossings. *Fedayeen* begin launching violent robberies and guerilla attacks, recruiting many of the refugees. Gaza becomes a major focal point of *feda'i* activity in addition to Jordan, Syria, and one day Lebanon as well. Like settlements in



the West Bank and Gaza decades later, the kibbutzim are meant to create new realities on the ground that enforce Israeli control over physical space. Two years before the Nakba, partly as a response to the July 1946 Morrison-Grady proposal for dividing Palestine into semiautonomous Arab and Jewish zones, the Jewish National Fund, Jewish Agency for Palestine, Mekorot Water Company, and Haganah Defense Forces secretly agree to the 11 Points Plan. After the breaking of the Yom Kippur fast, 11 groups of settlers are quietly sent to 11 locations. Four of the points border the current Gaza Strip, including Kibbutzim Nirim and

Be'eri. (One of these, Kfar Darom, is actually *inside* modern-day Gaza, and would be evacuated in 2005.) The new settlements successfully push the boundaries of a Zionist state far into the Naqab/Negev, with water and grain serving much the same purpose as guns, fencing, roads, and army bases.

The kibbutzim are military-agrarian complexes. They combine the security and policing needs of the Israeli military establishment with the agricultural requirements of farming, irrigation, water management, and market distribution. Depending on the era, each individual kibbutz exists on a spectrum between socialist collectivism and capital-intensive agribusiness. Regardless, farmers are essentially tools of social erasure. They plant a new landscape that is called Israeli and extend Zionist territorial control through it. Their communalist values are at best tolerated as part of a broader policy of settlement and conquest. Tel Aviv's priority is now to manage the risks associated with large concentrations of Palestinians. The kibbutzim project strength long before the building of Camp Re'im, the IDF base attacked on the same day in 2023 as the festivals.

When Yoni Diller tells *Rolling Stone* about "a lot of open areas" that are "not supposed to be dangerous," he is speaking of an unacknowledged social process. Music scenes often develop through the same dynamics of resource enclosure and commercial exchange that those who live through them typically ignore. For instance, it would be dishonest to speak of Chicago house music without some understanding of land theft, racial segregation, environmental neglect, and wealth inequality in the North American Great Plains. The same is true of Israeli rave and EDM. Culture never develops in isolation, and electronic music is a reflection of the political systems—in this case, colonization—that allows it to thrive. It is through that system, especially its security and policing guarantees, that land is stolen, reallocated, remade, and finally positioned to force permanent exile on its refugees living nearby.

"The Lie is in Israel" (36 B7O - 13 B7O)

A *mukhayam* refugee camp sits two dozen kilometers from Kibbutz Re'im. By 1987, four decades after the Nakba, Jabalia is a dense city with over 100,000 people, and by far the largest camp in Palestine. An Israeli army vehicle rams into a row of parked cars, killing four Palestinians, including three refugees from Jabalia. Two decades of anger at living under the racist military occupation of the Six Day War explodes, fueling a mass popular uprising with strikes, boycotts, stone-throwing, and sympathy protests worldwide. Israeli police and military authorities launch sweeping crackdowns on the Intifada for five years, continuing into 1992, killing over 1,100 Palestinians, and injuring and jailing well over 200,000. Simultaneously, 4,400 kilometers east, in the former Portuguese colony of Goa on the western coast of the Indian subcontinent, Israeli expatriates are thriving on beaches, mountains, and forest plateaus.

Soldiers freshly out of drafted service, in particular, are enjoying what is becoming a major Israeli tourist and leisure destination. A networked chunk of the landscape reaches as far north as the mountain hamlets of Himachal Pradesh, and as far south as the beaches and forests of the Karnataka Plateau. Travel agencies call it "the Hummus Trail." Tens of thousands

of Israelis soon visit per year, the most publicized of whom use drugs. Many use the journey to bridge their time in the military with civilian life, managing the inherent tensions of fighting for a colonial state and transitioning into a stable life beyond warfare. Israelis quickly discover well-established vacation spots with bohemians from as far away as England, Japan, Australia, Brazil, West Germany, and the United States. Waves of tourists get high and play stringed instruments on Goa's white beaches as they did two decades earlier, when The Beatles recorded *Sgt. Pepper's*. However, the sitars are joined by new sounds as computers start to replace cassette decks in music production. Dance music finds a new audience in the humid jungles and by the Arabian Sea, with nature seized for nightlife at the same time that a post-industrial rave boom is taking over old warehouses in cities like Chicago, Manchester, and Berlin. An electronic mixture of new beat, industrial music, beachside cosmic and progressive rock, and acid house blends in Goa's almost entirely white expat party scenes with hippie spirituality. It follows the particular hippie orientalism of the local segregated environment, with psychedelics used to achieve clarity and enjoyment, and Goans themselves either passive or absent. It is a second summer of love that quickly spreads to Israel with a colorful, extravagant, and highly profitable new genre: Goa trance.

JUST BEFORE THE INTIFADA, THE ISRAEL DEFENSE FORCES (IDF) had begun a series of police actions and offensive operations against Palestinian fighters in the borderland territories of northern Israel and southern Lebanon. In 1982, the IDF launches a full-scale invasion known as the Lebanon War. The Israeli military occupies a huge amount of Lebanese territory near the Litani River and supports a Christian Phalangist proxy militia as it kills thousands of Palestinian refugees and Lebanese, mostly Shi'a, in the pogrom of Sabra and Chatila. Protests rage worldwide, and President Ronald Reagan laments that "all people of decency must share our outrage and revulsion over the murders." In Tel Aviv, 400,000 protesters with Peace Now condemn the violence. The Israeli Kahan Commission of Inquiry holds a range of Israeli political and military figures responsible for the attacks, especially Defense Minister Ariel Sharon.

As Israel faces backlash worldwide, a raving vanguard finds psychic and spiritual release in Goa. Israeli backpackers and ex-soldiers use discharge bonuses to reinvent themselves in the qualities they project onto the Indian subcontinent: freedom, sexuality, asceticism, libertinism, transcendence, and massive amounts of drug use. Much like hippies and beatniks a generation earlier, ravers separate themselves from the actual history and politics of Goa. Nowhere at the events are mention of European imperial conquest, Catholic forced baptisms, Marathi and Konkani language debates, and Hindutva recolonization. The raves are in Goa but they are not Goan. It is again fashionable to "turn on, tune in, and drop out," as the psychonaut Timothy Leary once rified while harmonizing to a Pepsi jingle. Yet any attempt to "tune in," engaging with the world around them as Leary partly meant, is suppressed in favor of a disengagement that masquerades as joy.

Ravers speak of P.L.U.R. (a hippie acronym standing for

"peace, love, unity, and respect") but their lives are built around a decision to look away from the yawning brutalities of the imperial order, whether in India or Palestine. This denial is so privileged and irresponsible that it tends to align with whiteness and wealth. Israelis tripping to the point of physical and mental collapse are said to be "flipping out." A person who has "flipped out" is called *falupe*. Goa overflows with Israeli all-night ravers who look inside themselves, ignore the world around them, and elect to obliterate their senses, all as they listen to psychedelic trance.

"People who feel lost get into drugs and then end up losing themselves," Israeli director Yoav Shamir tells an Indian magazine about his 2007 documentary *Flipping Out*. As with other expat communities globally, whole economies are mapped around the Israeli need for escapism and ego-death. Israeli tourists, many of them fresh veterans, suppress the moral reckoning of Lebanon and Palestine. Denial flourishes on a mass scale. Investors and philanthropists pull together money, labor, imperialism, race, gender, spirituality, and soldiering. The Hummus Trail grows quickly to include hostels, restaurants, hiking trails, tourist agencies, sex workers, insurance companies, drug dealers, *minyanim* prayer circles, and music venues. The Israeli Anti-Drug Authority even opens community and treatment lodges, with Lubavitch Chabad centers offering Orthodox support. "They all reach the feeling of alienation and awful loneliness," says Hilik Magnus, a former Mossad officer who operates a *falupe* retrieval business. "Here they enquire and study and connect with what they've actually been looking for."

As the 1980s become the 1990s, a group of Israeli musicians, including Avi Nissim, Lior Perlmutter, Har-El Prusky, Guy Sebag, and Yan-Iv Haviv, start recording Goa trance in Tel Aviv. Compilations are soon released through Outmosphere and Trust in Trance Records. Mixtapes lead to hugely successful albums, with Trust in Trance III even breaking into the crowded European dance market. The artists choose a variety of names, including Paradox and SFX, before Nissim, Perlmutter, and Haviv release as Astral Projection. Many listeners adopt the



Cover art for the "Colors Of The Rainbow" remix by Space Loud, Strong Bass, and Mind Bender, featuring artwork by Murlocvisual. Released on May 30, 2022.



*Infected Mushroom during their show in Amphi Shuni, Israel, 2015.
(Photo: Wikimedia Commons)*

shanti cultural style popularly associated with Israeli folk rock musician Moshe Ben-Ari, smoking marijuana and telling others to “take it easy.” Israeli cultural commentators speculate that the genre’s popularity is partly explained by the naturalist joy of Breslov Hasidism, an ecstatic Jewish mystical movement with a kabbalistic reading of philosophy and engagement with the world. Psytrance ravers are likened to Breslov Na Nach mystics who align with these teachings by rocking, humming, chanting, and harmonizing songs of devotion. The ravers replace Hebrew singing with drum machines and portable speakers alongside Hindu neopagan imagery. Ravers also see themselves as socially liberal (a current generation is much more outwardly queer and trans). “Some saw the raves as mere hedonism, and there was that[, b]ut [...] they also symbolized a desire to live normally, in coexistence with Arabs,” reports the *Los Angeles Times* after the initial wave. “Tel Aviv became as important a stop as Ibiza, Amsterdam, and Berlin.”

Israelis meet in the wilderness as well as warehouses, especially on beaches near the Dead Sea, Mediterranean, and Sea of Galilee. New artists like Astrix, Infected Mushroom, Ace Ventura, and Perfect Strange are inspired by English-language rock bands like Radiohead, the Grateful Dead, and King Crimson, in addition to Goa trance. As with other markets, the most explicitly underground events stop as commercialism takes over. Yet the frameworks of “rave” and “underground” continue to shape the visuals and party experience. Rather than meeting in isolated places to avoid the police, logistical needs morph into a brand. Raves turn into festivals headlined by major artists and organized by specialized event conglomerates, similar to how Australian “bush doof” outdoor raves are largely replaced by events like the Rainbow Serpent Festival in Victoria. Something more regimented and efficient aspires to the same sense of euphoria, except with campsites, portable toilets, marketing firms, food and drink stands, luxury options, record label involvement, and perhaps above all, more money. Fans still find in trance a way to connect with themselves as Israelis and renew

their connections with the land. Families and friendships are formed while dancing for hours and sleeping under the stars. Yet that self-understanding is effectively sold to them by investors and professional party planners. Israeli psytrance culture ends in basically the same place as Electric Daisy Carnival and Coachella in the U.S., Glastonbury in the U.K., Universo Paralelo in Brazil, and Soundstorm in Saudi Arabia.

A new youth culture blossoms around festivals, electronic music, natural scenery, hallucinogens and dissociatives. There is a degree of openness when it comes to race, gender, and sexuality—if you look good and can pay for it. In Israel, the spectacle and escapism is rare in bringing together the secular, conservative, and Orthodox. The fact that Goans themselves, who are separated from the revelry by ferocious barriers of racism and colonialism, are more or less barred from a genre called “Goa trance” is both ignorant and absurd. Yet it is not surprising, given the longstanding orientalist tendency to dehumanize the colonized and use them as backdrops for a European cultural fable. Goa is a setting and an aesthetic, not a political subject in its own right. Middle-class consumers erase the initial stigmas of debauchery and free expression, scheduling their vacations and holidays around the carnival seasons. If there are any questions about the Palestinians, they are either ignored or suppressed long before they are even articulated. The genre is quite typical for its commercial evolution from more simplistic beginnings, including how its most nostalgic fans romanticize the early days without admitting the serious and unavoidable issues present from the outset.

It is atypical, though, in that it is the only such scene linked so closely to the Israeli military and security establishment. Israeli DJ Eyal Barkan helps to pioneer a form of Goa psychedelic and trance music called *nitzhonot* with pulsating kicks that can reach up to 170 beats per minute. *Nitzhonot* comes from the Hebrew root letters נ-צ-ח (nun-tzadi-chet). In the Bible, the roots can mean to endure and to overcome (“eternity” in Job 14:20’s



Cover art for the song “חצנל דוקרת” (Dance Forever) by Omer Adam and Infected Mushroom. Released on October 26, 2023, the song is a tribute to the victims of the Nova Festival.

lamentations at mortality and limitless power) and to oversee or direct (the first line of 55 Psalms, which is set to music). In Modern Hebrew, the plural *nitzhonot* translates to “victories,” bridging the concepts of leadership, overpowering, awesomeness, and winning. In Kabbalah mysticism, the singular *netzach* is a *sefirot* or emanation of YHWH, the God of Israel, one of ten *sefirot* in the Tree of Life. *Netzach* refers to the soul-power to overcome obstacles that stand in the way of one’s aspiration to bestow kindness and mercy to Creation. Ravers dance together in prayer, using drugs and extending to one another love, unity, and respect. Yet it would be a mistake to believe that a broader peace is being sought out in the music. The issue is not that a just resolution to the Palestinian question is politically and existentially out of reach. The problem is that the whole point of Israeli psychedelic trance, whether in Goa or elsewhere, is to dodge emotions and ignore imperial reality. It is neither joyous nor peaceful; it is a fantasy that exists to pull its dancers and listeners away from their own moral catastrophe. It thrives in an atmosphere of fear and division and points attention away from the destruction unfolding before them.

“After three years of totally destroying their identity, of causing their self-destruction, and of profoundly changing their view of the meaning of human life, then they get ILS ₪15,000 as a discharge bonus to go wherever they want to[...] to take out all that crap elsewhere,” explains Guy Saar Ruso in *Flipping Out*, working on the Hummus Trail after serving in an elite Gaza commando unit. “I think it’s strange. There are many things you have to face up to, things you did during your military service, that are very shameful. Many people can feel ashamed that their country does certain things. Others might take it more personally, and wonder how their hand, like the one I’m using now, was the very hand that shot people and caused devastation[...] they don’t actually realize what they did, it’s still fresh. That comes later, I think. [...] Then you choose whether to deal with what you did in the army, or not.”

“I like ecstasy,” Kibbutz member Eyal Goldstein tells the *Flipping Out* crew, perhaps on ecstasy himself. “I like to dance on ecstasy. Ecstasy. Ecstasy? It seems to open you up the most. But it’s a lie, and everyone knows it. Still, they all fall for it when they’re high. What kind of a lie? It’s the hypocrisy you see in Israel, that’s the lie.” He speeds off into the night on a motorcycle.

Israeli raving culture follows the model of the raving marketplace worldwide, notably in current Saudi, Emirati, and Jordanian tourism, to promote leisure and entertainment instead of serious democratic accountability. EDM more widely is now in essence promoted by a neoliberal order staving off its collapse. Socially liberal EDM fans are being pressured into disengagement by a rapidly evolving corporate fusion with the nation-state. Rich and developed countries, Israel among them, have now become even less democratic than they were in the 2000s. They seek to neutralize their populations, and like so much artistry in the capitalist epoch, raving is often a weapon against change in a world that desperately needs it. It is no wonder that an Israeli scene would develop to pull attention away from a state system that cannibalizes the region around it. Raving is a luxury option that is meant to sedate the mind and blind it to the horrors unfolding just nearby.

In 2000, the Camp David Summit between President Clinton,

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak, and Palestine Liberation Organization chairman Yasser Arafat fails to reach a settlement. Ariel Sharon, elected Prime Minister with Likud a year later, stages an incendiary march on Al-Haram Al-Sharif and the Dome of the Rock that September. For a half-decade, a second Intifada rages across Palestine, triggering Zionist responses with tight obstacles and security barriers in the West Bank and Gaza. A perimeter of walls and fences near Jabalia is reinforced with iron, concrete, and surveillance technology. Initially meeting elsewhere because of safety concerns, festivals and raves once again return to Wadi Nahabir.

Stately domes are enjoyed as walls and towers lock Gazans inside the Strip.



Sama' Abdulhadi at the 53rd Festival Internacional Cervantino (FIC), Los Pastitos in Guanajuato, México, 2025. (Photo: Wikimedia)

Felaheen Couture (16 B7O - 3 B7O)

In 2007, Israel declares the Gaza Strip a “hostile entity,” deepening a blockade with restrictions on fuel, electricity, concrete, and other goods. While the move is backed by the United States, the United Nations and other international agencies agree with Palestinian organizations that it is collective punishment and illegal under international law. Israel blames rocket attacks, but a range of measures have been used to repress Gaza and its economy for decades. *Kibbutzim* and military bases are expanded partly to apply pressure on the Green Line, with Re'im Army Camp established six kilometers from the Gaza security fence as part of a strategic disengagement plan two years earlier. Elections take place with Hamas leading a Change and Reform list in a campaign focused on corruption, security, public order, nepotism, and unemployment, especially outside the relative prosperity of West Bank cities like Ramallah and Jericho. Israel condemns Hamas beating its rival Fatah with a parliamentary majority and 44.45 percent of the vote, pointing to its Islamic nationalism and open contempt for Palestinian Authority policies of disarmament and collaboration. Hamas must then preempt a coup attempt by Muhammad Dahlan of Fatah, supported by the Bush White House, and fully takes control in the Battle of Gaza. Israel bombs



Omar Souleyman, *Beck's Music Box* during the Perth International Arts Festival, Australia, 2011. (Photo: Wikimedia Commons)

Gaza in multiple wars over half a generation.

For the last few decades, Palestinian and Arab artists have been developing rave music of their own, but raving becomes very difficult in Gaza outside small events and private gatherings like weddings and birthday parties. In the West Bank and elsewhere in the region, artists play to a growing, wealthy, and highly cosmopolitan audience that seeks hybrid styles. Bedouin *zaghrouda* vocals combine with neoclassical *maqam* instrumentation like *tabla* drumming, *qanun* soundboards, *mijwiz* woodwinds, and *oud* and *buzuq* strings. The world market comfortably assimilates a revival of traditional Arabic poetry and song. Syrian wedding singer Omar Souleyman suddenly explodes through synthesizers and melodic keyboards. Yasmine Hamdan moves on from her pioneering work in Beirut indie pop duo Soap Kills with new fusions of Arabic classical, hip-hop, jazz, rhythm and blues, and electronica. Mashrou' Leila mixes poetry and indie rock, bringing together a diversity of genders and sexualities in their fanbase. In Palestine itself, bands from Sabreen to DAM to record label BLTNM experiment with a distinctly Arab style of lyricism, composition, rhythm, and street art. A liberation aesthetic is financed with hoodies and running shoes alongside *hatta* scarves, *dabke* dance, and *tatreez* embroidery.

Palestinian DJs, promoters, vocalists, and producers experiment not just in the established nightlife capitals of Beirut and Ramallah, but also Haifa, Amman, Riyadh, Dubai, Istanbul, and Cairo. Events in Palestine and for its refugee exiles continue to spiral at the same time as rich and well-connected tastemakers spread a chic version of Palestinian nationalism globally. The backlash to the three-week-long Operation Cast Lead bombings of Gaza in 2008 leads to growing waves of sympathy, a fresh interest in nonviolent activism (especially among students, intellectuals, and middle-class professionals), and critically acclaimed documentaries like *5 Broken Cameras* and *Naila and the Uprising*.

Before long, whether in Paris, Berlin, London, Barcelona, New York City, or San Francisco, there are two major symbols of Palestine solidarity. One is the checkered *kufiyah*, a practical garment of *felaheen* peasantry and rural society. Another is the

watermelon slice, at first a way to show the red, green, and white colors of the flag that bypasses Zionist censorship, later a new symbol of cultural resistance. Electronic music is brought into the broader project of affirming and rewriting Palestinian heritage, at the same time that a new generation of *fedayeen* in Gaza, Jenin, Tulkaram, and Nablus fight asymmetrically against Israeli military might. Yasser Arafat's death in exile in 2004 coincides with a new political and cultural resurgence.

In 2018, livestreaming platform Boiler Room films the popular DJ Sama' Abdulhadi, also known by the stage name SAMA', playing a techno set in Al-Radio, a nightclub, bar, and performance space in Ramallah. SAMA' features prominently in the followup documentary *Palestine Underground*, which includes the prominent rappers and DJs Julmud, Haykal, ODDZ, Muqata'a and Dakn. Radio Alhara begins a streaming service connecting Bethlehem, Ramallah, and Amman, prominently including Sonic Liberation Front. SAMA', Muqata'a, and Nasser Halahih work with El Fanoun to record *Electroseen*, a Ramallah fusion of electronica with archived recordings a half century old. Ibtesam Zubeidat and DJ Wafa Zubeidat challenge norms as wedding DJs in the West Bank village of Az-Zubeidat, near Jericho. Sabaya in Jerusalem also works at weddings, mixing Palestinian traditional songs and Arabic pop music with a level of skill far outpacing her richer peers from powerful families. "We already live in suffocation," she tells *DJ Mag*. "We need music to breathe." Bruno Cruz records *Olive Stones* in Haifa. In Dubai, Karim Atari toys with synth compositions in *Majzara Blues*. Listeners are drawn to an emphasis on historic memory and engagement with the lived reality of occupation. It is an unapologetic, if heavily classed and otherwise privileged, cultural revival that directly confronts the failures of the Oslo Peace Process. "I'm not afraid to put resistance slogans in my music," Atari explains to *Clash Music* about his neotraditional musical remixing of revolutionary chanting now a century old. "I think that these things have been unjustly twisted."

In the West Bank, the electronica sits uncomfortably with the Palestinian Authority's crackdown on political dissent. Fatah especially is eager to shift attention away from stagnant peace talks, encroachment by settlers and internationals, severe unemployment and inequality, a collapse in safety and public order, and its lack of functional state and institutional capacity (especially the continued use of the Israeli shekel as a currency). Organizers plot carefully given that the P.A. regularly shuts events down, enforcing a hostile regime of property rights, security agencies, moralizing conservatives, anxious investors, and most of all, the Israeli Occupation Forces (IOF). During the pandemic, SAMA' herself is pulled into the moral panic, attracting worldwide attention when she is detained in Jericho after partygoers share videos of a private party at the Nabi Musa Compound. The P.A. ignores that SAMA' has obtained the correct permits for the event from the P.A.'s Ministry of Tourism, instead mischaracterizing it based on a narrow image of raving as a subculture. Misinformation spreads online that SAMA' played inside the mosque, allegedly seen in some of the social media posts, and that there is alcohol, drug use, and sexual promiscuity on the dance floor. Abdulhadi's prominent family, which includes important writers and feminists, plead her case to the Palestinian Authority's attorney-general who rattles his sabre by decreeing that "techno music is not part of Palestinian heritage."

Meanwhile, in Gaza, Hamas faces opposition to unemployment and economic mismanagement, unsuccessful attempts to implement mandatory veiling on the Strip, and bureaucratic ineptitude more generally. Many Gazans also believe it is politically and militarily contained in the same way as Fatah. The Islamist armed factions have not disarmed like the Palestine Liberation Organization, and only recognize Israel as being part of the Oslo Accords which Hamas recognizes. The Qassam Brigades, Islamic Jihad, and the leftist Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine continue the tradition of *feda'i* armed resistance. Yet they face a worsening battlefield situation, especially given rapid advances in Israel's missile defenses and plans to expand the "Iron Dome" to include batteries on corvettes and submarines. The Trump White House has already brought several countries into the Abraham Accords and many believe Saudi Arabia will be next to recognize Israel. While Hamas still has ties to Iran, Hizb'Allah, and Ansar Allah, it has fewer funds and support for its revolutionary work. Always in the background is encroachment by Zionist settlers and pressure building toward an official Israeli annexation of land in the West Bank, especially in the Old City of Jerusalem. Once again, and nearly eight decades after the Nakba, Palestinian *fedayeen* meet in secret to discuss how they and their allies can shift the tide and face down another exodus of their people.

Raving after the Cataclysm (3 A7O)

The Israeli ground offensive does not stop in Gaza. It grows to include attacks on Lebanon, Yemen, Syria, Iran, and covert actions in western Iraq. The Green Line now includes a Yellow Line that cuts through the Strip. There is a new global opposition to Israel's ferocious jingoism and the open racism of its cabinet, including Kahanist Defense Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir. Yet it is unclear whether this more recent wave of dissent will turn out differently than that of the Intifada and Lebanon War four decades earlier. For their part, Palestinians face even more intense violence in every part of their lives. While a new generation of activists overseas speaks of an end to Zionism, the reality is that new shipments of weapons continue to arrive in Israeli ports regardless of the IDF's genocidal warfare. Music itself seems to be a luxury for artists and listeners who pretend to be better people than is in fact the case. It is nearly impossible to imagine utopia in such circumstances, but as always, Palestinians continue to do so. In Cairo, having fled the bloodshed, Gazawi producer Siraj Sawa fuses his established style with the sounds of drones, machine guns, artillery, and bombing sorties currently obliterating the Strip. "I combine these sounds to tell the story of Gaza," he tells DJ Mag. "Tense and dark, but always with a trace of hope, something distant we keep reaching for."

"For me, techno shattered," Sama' Abdulhadi tells *Resident Advisor*. "I stopped seeing it the same way. I stopped listening to it the same way[...] but at the same time it kind of opened a blank new page. [...] Things have been crazy but now people see the crazy." Abdulhadi outlines her cynicism with the recording industry, especially its censorship of techno artists and dealings with Israeli musicians and production companies. Family networks, class power, trendiness, and dealings with banks and financiers give the new artistry a platform, but privileges also mean Palestinians face unique obstacles. SAMA' protests how

the sale of European music giant Superstruct Entertainment to the private equity firm KKR & Co. Inc. means she and others are now financially linked to Israeli settlements and the war machine.



WRITERS OFTEN ASK WHETHER IT IS POSSIBLE FOR MUSIC to be a soundtrack for peace, but it is rare for them to seriously consider whether financials even allow it. Israelis face this broader problem in psychedelic trance. Even if there was a serious grappling with a century of slaughter and erasure, rather than a deepening of denial through bomb shelter raves profiled in *Rolling Stone*, a whole cultural sector reinforcing blissful ignorance would need to unravel. Denial is built into so much of Israeli electronic dance music, and money and power has clearly latched onto it as a lifestyle choice.

It is the soundtrack for a new era of genocide and ethnic cleansing, and it is complicit in its tranquilizing of a public that must urgently mobilize to end it. Israeli electronica launders the reality of mass killing, managing the psyches of those whose lives are built through the violence of a racist system. It will be remembered for its fascistic utility like Wagnerian opera and Beethoven symphonies in Nazi Germany, and those who resist it will be remembered for their bravery and steadfast opposition to injustice. When the guns fall silent, and Zionist leaders like Netanyahu and Ben-Gvir are brought before a new version of the Nuremberg Trials, there must be a parallel discussion about Israeli raving and the roles it has played in the bloodshed.

For now, it is still an open question whether Israeli Jews will ever relax the divisions between psychedelic religiosity and the mishmash that is Palestinian rap and EDM. It is worth considering if Mizrahi Jews (those of Arab descent) will eventually be more open to the combination in a more inclusive Palestinian future. Mizrahis are pushed to suppress their Arab roots in favor of being "culturally Jewish," a consequence of their hybridity as much as their potency. It is possible for Mizrahi heritage to be bridged partly through Palestinian electronica, at weddings in particular. While it is unlikely that this will happen on a mass scale, especially with Mizrahi soldiers, the opening could have productive outcomes if Zionism is forced to contract. The Israeli government is faced with numerous issues to its strategic partnerships and global standing as rabid settler politicians lead its most radically right-wing cabinet ever. It has been forced to disengage in the past, and may yet be deterred by an international community disgusted by its actions (though currently unwilling to step in).

After an era of complicity, electronic dance music may have a fresh resurgence as a composite genre playing equally to Arab, Palestinian, and Jewish audiences. That genre could emerge at the same time as Palestinians imagine new political horizons, especially as the Nakba generation dies and climate change sweeps the region. Haifa, with its rich diversity, may in particular be a stage for a truly inclusive rave culture.

Yet sadly, as with many storybooks, this wishful hallucination must come to an end. For such a soundscape to emerge, Palestinians would have to decisively get the upper hand against a state that continues to haunt their ambitions in much the same way that it did a century ago. A new era of political struggle and cultural production is beginning in Palestine with the Gaza genocide as its background. Its musical possibilities hinge entirely on the Palestinians and their quest to return home from exile. ✚



ARUNDHATI ROY

and the Language of Devastation

BY SHARMISTHA JHA

ARUNDHATI ROY'S BROTHER DID NOT PRETEND to be sad when their mother, Mary Roy, passed away. However, it was different for Arundhati. She writes, "I came undone. If I could understand myself better, I'd probably understand a lot more about the world and certainly about my country, in which so many people seem to revere their persecutors and appear grateful to be subjugated and told what to do, what to wear, what to eat and how to think. There is something knotty here, something puzzling about the human condition in all of this."

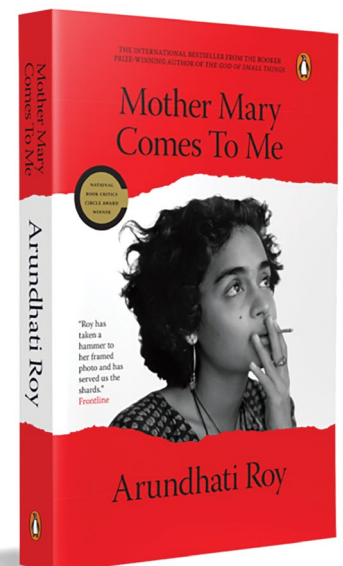
The day my copy of Arundhati's memoir, *Mother Mary Comes to Me*, arrived in my mail, I photographed it lying on my bed. The edition published by Penguin Random House India is a bright red hardback only partially covered by a book jacket that is half as big as the book itself. A young Arundhati Roy holds a cigarette to her lips on the front of the jacket; at the back, an older Arundhati smiles, looking into the distance. At the back, it says "In these pages, my mother, my gangster, shall live. She was my shelter and my storm."

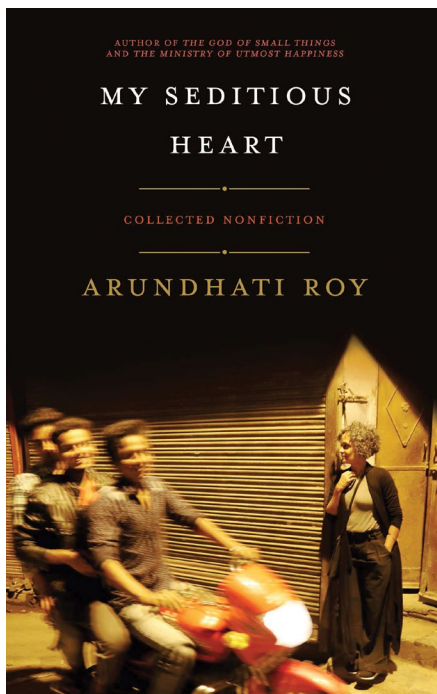
"Gangster" might seem an unusual way to describe one's mother, but here, the term fits Mary Roy perfectly. To her children, Mary could be a tormentor. Yet she was also a fiercely determined woman who, cornered by patriarchy, battled against the institutions that sought to deny her and her children a life of dignity. In the process, she became a source of both fear and fascination for her children, who were often the targets of her misdirected anger. In pushing back against Mary's authority,

Arundhati Roy inherited her mother's courage and defiance. In many ways, Mary paved Roy's path to freedom. Roy's memoir is an attempt to make sense of that paradox.

Author of numerous essays and over 20 books, including the Booker Prize-winning *The God of Small Things* in 1997, Arundhati Roy has spent much of her public life courting controversy across the political spectrum. While conservatives in India have targeted her for her vocal opposition to Hindu nationalism, liberal elites have also faulted her for her positions on Kashmir, her criticism of neoliberal economic reforms, and her romantic ideas about pre-modern life.

In an act of assertive nationalism, Roy's Booker win was celebrated by the Indian establishment as a symbol of India's rising global stature in 1997. Roy, however, refused to play along in the role of a national literary icon. She responded the following year with her essay "The End of Imagination," detailing the horrors of the nuclear bomb





tests that India had conducted in the state of Rajasthan. This marked the beginning of Roy's contentious engagement with the Indian ruling elites.

Spanning a public life and career of nearly three decades, Roy has routinely challenged her country's establishment. Her incendiary essays of dissent that appeared in magazines and newspapers over the years were collected into a thick volume of nearly 900 pages, titled *My Seditious Heart*, published in 2019. At a time when fascist leaders

are criminalizing dissent all over the world, Roy insists that her readers never stop imagining a better world. Across her fiction, journalism, and now her stirring new memoir, Roy returns to a single, urgent warning: a society that tolerates the oppression of its most vulnerable members eventually becomes captive to systems of violence that spare no one.

A FEW DAYS after starting Roy's memoir, I MET A woman at an independent bookstore in Delhi's Lodhi Colony. We hit it off and started talking about the books we were reading at the time. I asked her if she had read *Mother Mary Comes to Me*. She told me that her father was a Malayali Christian, and Mary Roy was more popular than her daughter in their community.

Her most enduring legacy was her legal challenge to discriminatory inheritance laws governing Syrian Christian women in India, which culminated in the landmark Supreme Court case *Mary Roy v. State of Kerala* in 1986. Both in the courtroom and outside it, Mary fought a patriarchal society with extraordinary determination and courage. In the process, she became something of a "gangster" herself—a woman with both authority and economic power in the small town of Kottayam, where she founded and ran one of India's most respected educational institutions, a bilingual school rooted in gender equality.

Mary Roy founded this small school with the help of a British missionary by renting space in a Rotary club. It was Mary's calling to become a benevolent educator (benevolent for other children, at least, if not her own). She instructed her own children to call her "Mrs. Roy" instead of mother so her students would not feel as though she treated Arundhati and her brother Lalith Kumar Christopher (nicknamed LKC) any different. In time, Roy realized that her mother had three children, and the school was her favorite child.

Mary Roy was nothing short of a revolutionary feminist, and Kottayam had not seen many of those in the 1960s. Nobody had. For women around her and her girl students, Mary was the burning flame of courage and defiance, and she disabused male students of the sense of entitlement they had acquired at home. Forever challenging the balance of powers, she held up a bra in her hands during a special assembly at her school. She had learned that boys had been teasing the girls about bras. Holding up the bra, she said, "This is a bra. All women wear them. Your mothers wear them, your sisters will too, soon enough. If it excites you so much, you are very welcome to keep mine." It was just one of many incidents where Mary Roy challenged patriarchal control over women's bodies and choices, while schools in India continued to instill shame in young girls about their changing bodies.

However, Roy also writes about Mary Roy's darkness. She ruled over her employees mercilessly, and they were helpless victims of her turbulent moods. While Mary was an extraordinary mentor to her students, she reserved her worst for her son. On more than one occasion, she told LKC that he was ugly and stupid, and even that he should kill himself. She called her daughter a bitch and kicked her out. Mary taught Roy how to think freely and write honestly, then resented the writer her daughter became.

Even in the days of her childhood, Arundhati could see that Mary Roy's emotional violence against her children was a direct result of the exclusion and shame society heaped on her. She had arrived in Kerala as a single mother, with no means to earn a living and no place to house her little family. She was immediately made an outsider in her Syrian Christian community, itself a minority. To value Mary Roy for the extraordinary woman she was, Arundhati had to put distance between Mary and herself, and learn to see her through lenses that were not entirely colored by the experience of being Mary's daughter.

Roy writes that for her mother to shine her light on her students, her children had to "absorb her darkness." However, she also writes that she is "grateful for that gift of darkness," which turned out to be "a route to freedom." Mary instilled in Roy everything she needed to face the world head-on. Her hold over Arundhati was so powerful that she had to cut herself free. In doing so, Roy gained a measure of emotional independence and agency that was unavailable to many women of her generation. This became the seed for her unsparing writing that would later challenge authority, question orthodoxy, and shape her political life.

FOR MOST READERS, IT IS HARD TO TALK ABOUT *Mother Mary Comes to Me* without talking about Roy's Booker-winning debut novel, *The God of Small Things*. Harder still is to discuss either without talking about the fragile faultlines of India—a country fragmented along the lines of caste, religion, and gender.

The God of Small Things is the story of countless tragedies, among them the accidental death of a child, Sophie Mol, and the murder of a Dalit man (from the most oppressed caste, formerly Untouchable) who challenged the love laws dictated by caste. The book is also about the disgraceful return of divorced Ammu, mother of the twins Estha and Rahel, to her paternal home in

Ayemenem, Kerala. The hollow promises of Kerala's Communist government collide with caste politics and love laws, and Ammu's tiny family of three is fractured beyond salvation.

The bright red cover of Roy's memoir is a *laal salam* (red salute) to her communist politics. It reminded me of Roy's beginnings in Kerala and *The God of Small Things*. In the novel, the twins float through the wreckage of life, struggling to belong. As I read *Mother Mary Comes to Me*, I learned that Roy had struggled her entire life to belong to her mother, to her chosen families, and to her beloved country.

The God of Small Things and *Mother Mary Comes to Me*, when read together, form a tender portrait of a family. The boundaries of one book blur into another—Roy's grandfather was an Imperial Entomologist under the British colonial government, and so was the twins' grandfather in the novel. In both of Roy's worlds, the grandfather split open the grandmother's skull with a vase. Roy's uncle and Mary's brother, G. Isaac, had returned from Oxford, having failed to make a life in England, much like the twins' uncle Chacko. Like Chacko, G. Isaac ran a pickle factory upon his return to Kerala, which he ran into the ground. Ammu had left her alcoholic husband at the tea estate in Assam where he worked and returned to Kerala with her two children. So had Mary Roy. Arundhati and LKC may have been as close-knit as the two-egg twins from *The God of Small Things* had it not been for Mary, who tried to keep them apart.

In *The God of Small Things*, Ammu carries in the pit of her stomach the terrible knowledge that for her, life has been lived. Life was over when she arrived in Ayemenem with her twins. She had one chance at a happy life, but she blew it by marrying the wrong man. Ammu's twins worry for their mother. Somewhere buried deep within is a feeling that they are the reason Ammu is unhappy. Roy writes, "Ammu loved her children (of course), but their wide-eyed vulnerability, and their willingness to love people who didn't really love them, exasperated her and sometimes made her want to hurt them—just as an education, a protection."

At times, Ammu withdraws her love from her twins, inflicting wounds that feel irreparable. Ammu is a figure hauntingly familiar to many South Asian children—the woman who became a mother before her girlhood could end. A mother who hurts her children in careless, childlike ways. This reality carries a particular weight for daughters. Last year, at 28, I found a photograph of my mother at 29. Sitting on her lap are two girls, the elder of whom would be ten years of age soon. I am 28, looking at my mother who is 29, holding me and my sister. My mother is glowing in the picture; she has somehow retained her youthful look through some of the most difficult years. It will last a while more. One day she was a college student, and the next, a wife and a mother. And I always wonder who she would be if she were given a choice.

In her novel, Roy demanded that the readers be empathetic to Ammu's desire for a second chance at life and love, insisting that it was only natural for Ammu to contain madness, anger, and desire. In Roy's world, feminism is for everyone. We all make mistakes and are allowed to love and be loved regardless. Mary Roy, on the other hand, hated even the faint whiff of desire. To her, it was scandalous. While a 13-year-old Arundhati was away at boarding school, Mary Roy shot dead Arundhati's first dog, Dido. Dido, an Alsatian, was caught mating with a stray indie dog. Arundhati called it an "honor killing."

ARUNDHATI ROY HAD TRANSGRESSED. IN 1997, she was accused in court of corrupting public morality. The text in question was the sensuous last chapter of *The God of Small Things*, in which Ammu, too, transgresses. The madness in Ammu dared to break the laws of history that dictated who would be loved, and how much. A divorced woman and a mother of two, she had fallen in love with a man from another caste. A Savarna (upper-caste) woman had had sex with a Dalit man!

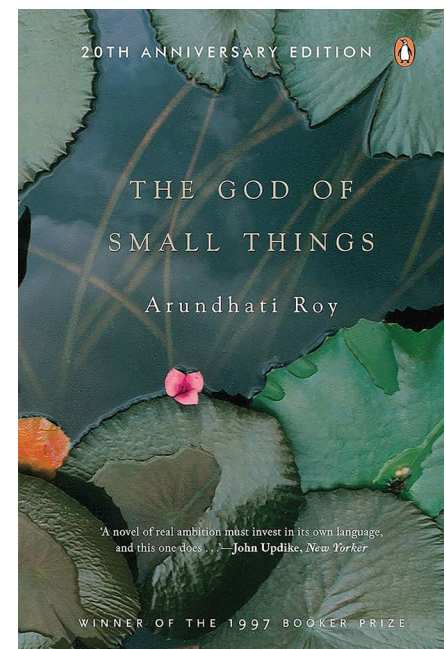
In those days, men in India often spent their leisure time watching cinema where the rape of women was used to exact revenge from the woman's family; it was used to "teach a lesson" to the woman. Scenes of sexual violence were casually thrown in the mix if a movie was becoming boring. The same people who condemned Roy's writing had long tolerated popular cinema in which sexual violence against women was trivialized. Such contradictions exposed the deep misogyny and caste prejudice embedded in Indian society and its public institutions, making Roy's resistance even more remarkable.

Arundhati dislikes being described as a "writer-activist," a term she compared to a "sofa-bed"—absurd because it suggests that writing about the forces shaping people's lives somehow falls outside a writer's natural role. Unfortunately, India's increasingly authoritarian atmosphere has created a similar divide in journalism between "journalists" and the "activist-journalists."

In any case, her work did take on a more explicitly political character as time went on. In 1999, she wrote the essay "The Greater Common Good" after joining the grassroots organization *Narmada Bachao Andolan*. The group resisted the construction of the Sardar Sarovar dam over the Narmada river, which would threaten the homes and livelihoods of tens of millions in the states of Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, and Maharashtra.

Another member of Roy's chosen family, her long-term friend Sanjay Kak, became a filmmaker who accompanied her into the Dantewada forest in central India. The experience would lead him to make the documentary film *Red Ant Dream*, which introduces viewers to the world of India's Naxalite Maoists, including outfits that are considered by the Indian state to be its "most significant security challenge."

In the Dantewada forest, Roy witnessed Maoists and villagers' armed struggle to defend their Adivasi (indigenous) communities and their mineral and resource-rich homeland against one of the biggest paramilitary operations by the Indian government. Her own coverage of this conflict appeared in *Outlook India*, and was later





The March 29, 2010 issue of Outlook magazine features a cover photo of Roy taking notes as she listens to Naxalite Maoist guerrillas.

published as a 2011 book titled *Walking with the Comrades*.

This was a battle for the soul of India. Roy wrote that half the guerrilla army was made up of women who had witnessed sexual violence inflicted by paramilitary forces and vigilante groups. Some had joined the army to escape the patriarchal bonds of traditional society. It would be impossible to read *Walking With the Comrades* without experiencing a

political awakening. Roy was building a case for social justice, and attacking the sycophancy of the Indian masses.

Roy writes that without the Naxalites, there would be no forests left. As a result, she was labelled an “Urban Naxal” and “intellectual terrorist” by the Indian establishment. Some liberals argued that forests should instead be protected through non-violent movements. Roy responded by pointing out that Gandhian non-violence cannot function for forest communities that have long been excluded from mainstream society and treated as non-citizens. There is no sympathetic audience to watch the Gandhian performance unfold in a forest where paramilitary forces are murdering and raping.

Roy’s fiction and essays have consistently exposed a deep dependence of the Indian masses on oppressive hierarchies. Many people in India, she writes, seek both authority to submit to and communities beneath them to control—someone to be oppressed by, and someone else to oppress in turn. In many ways, Roy’s grandfather—the Imperial Entomologist—was the model Indian man who was deeply loyal to British imperial power. In time, the departing white colonizer was replaced by an oppressor caste of Indian men who pillaged indigenous and marginalized communities, now with the help of the Indian political establishment. This created a society stripped of compassion, whose antipathy Roy challenges.

The Ministry of Utmost Happiness, published in 2017, is not as widely read as Roy’s other books. *Ministry* is set between two graveyards. One graveyard is the beautiful Kashmir Valley, where Kashmiri Muslims remain after the mass exodus of Kashmiri Pandits (Hindus) that began in the 1990s. The other graveyard is in old Delhi where the main character, Anjum, builds Jannat

Guest House, enclosing graves where society’s castaways find a resting place. Roy takes the reader into the heart of Kashmir, where death seems to have more value than life. Death can reward an officer with a cash prize, medals, honors, and promotions. Preserving life, on the other hand, offers no incentive. Grief has been devalued, and the result of all this is an internal, unforgiving, fearless war in the hearts of Kashmiris.

Today, the Kashmir valley is one of the most densely militarized places in the world. Phone and internet services are often suspended for weeks and months at once, and curfews that turn Kashmir into an open-air prison are enforced. Ordinary citizens disappear all the time, never to be found again.

Political speech about Kashmir is scrutinized, too, and Arundhati Roy herself remains under legal threat for her dissent on the subject. In 2024, the Delhi Lieutenant Governor granted sanction to prosecute Roy under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA) in connection with remarks she made at a New Delhi conference 15 years ago. Parts of her speech were taken out of context and manipulated by the media, and the United Nations’ human rights office has urged the criminal case to be dropped, but the ultimate outcome remains to be seen.

INDIAN LIBERALS WOULD HAVE LIKED TO CLAIM ROY, IF it were not for her refusal to align with a single political party in India. After her criticism of the corrupt Hindu nationalist party, they expected her to support the corrupt secular party. She did neither. She has repeatedly written against the Bharatiya Janata Party’s rampant violence against minorities. At the same time, she points out that it was former prime minister Rajiv Gandhi’s rise to power in the aftermath of the anti-Sikh riots carried out by associates of the Congress party in 1984, and his casual acceptance of that violence, that first sent a dangerous message to Indian politicians: that targeting minorities could help consolidate majority support and win elections.

Moreover, *The God of Small Things* highlights the political failures of a democratically elected communist government in Kerala. Savarna communists, too, looked away from caste-based violence and lynching, accepting the status quo once they came to power. In her new memoir, Roy writes criticizing India’s communist parties: “In Kerala, because we had a Marxist state government, there were huge marches in support of Ho Chi Minh and the North Vietnamese. But we heard little about the Soviet Gulag, the famine in Ukraine, or the Great Leap Forward in China, in which millions had perished.”

A few years ago, barely out of college, I was working for a middle-aged Indian woman who had returned from living in the United States. She did not know the first thing about literature, but had somehow managed to leverage her contacts in Indian publishing and entertainment industries to found a media platform that offered promotions to writers, filmmakers, and “thought leaders.” The company was entirely run by young, underpaid creative women. Once, as we discussed Indian women in literature, the subject of Roy came up. My boss said proudly that she had read *The God of Small Things* back when she studied in the U.S. and she couldn’t understand the reception it got all over the world. She said that Roy wrote best what the West wanted to

read about India—a land riddled with violence and corruption. What she failed to recognize was that Roy was not manufacturing this reality for foreign consumption; she was merely holding up a mirror to Indian society, and my boss wanted to look away. Her discomfort perhaps stems from the fact that Roy's writing wrecks the polished and exotic image of India that sections of the elite diaspora wish to project to the world.

I had learned to filter out most things my employer said after I watched her rant on social media about her domestic helpers who did not want to clean her toilet. She complained that it took a lot of nagging and negotiations to get them to clean up her shit. She made the unclever observation that this was about stigma around cleaning toilets in India. What she refused to acknowledge was her caste-based entitlement—the expectation that, as a Savarna woman, she had an absolute right to get her toilets cleaned by marginalized people. To her, money should have neutralized any resistance. Since then, I have used the subject of Arundhati Roy as a litmus test for those I encounter.

There is another type of Indian liberal—mostly men of a certain age—who feign indifference toward Roy. In the safety of closed circles, they dismiss her accolades as unearned. They claim that she catered to Western appetites for Indian stories and cultivated a brand of personality. Yet beneath the surface of their critique, the undercurrent of wounded male pride is easy to read. One can also sense their deep-seated fear of a woman who is hard to shame and harder to control.

The very first time I read Roy, I was in my late teens. I bought a copy of *The God of Small Things* from a roadside book seller in my neighborhood. I had seen the book being sold everywhere. The copy I purchased had been in the rain. Its pages curled up. As I started reading the book, I immediately wanted to look away. Middle-class Savarna Indian children were trained to look away from caste and patriarchy while abiding by its laws. After reading it, I returned my copy to the seller in exchange for a copy of *Eat Pray Love*. However, I couldn't shake the images that Roy's fiction had left me with.

Kerala, shining green and moist. The smell of the rubber plantation and the Meenachil river. The images stayed with me, resurfacing from time to time until I decided to read the book again after three years. Among those beautiful images of Kerala, others were burnt into my memory: a policeman tapping Ammu's breasts with his baton as if he was choosing mangoes, Dalits walking backwards and sweeping their footprints off the ground so Savarnas wouldn't pollute their feet, the corner in Velutha's hut that was reserved for the dead and the slowly dying, a pregnant spider drowning in the Meenachil river, bursting her sack from which emerged tiny spiders who would evolve and learn to swim. A woman crossing the river at night in a small boat to get to her lover, breaking all the love laws. A dark man covered with blood and three teeth embedded into his lip, and a dark cold moth that spread its wings on the hearts of the two-egg twins.

At the Delhi University college where I was studying, jokes about Roy being "anti-national" were common, and violent remarks against her were trivialized, mostly made by young men mimicking majoritarian leaders and TV anchors. Unsurprisingly, these students had never read Roy's books. They did not need to; the era of fake news had arrived. And yet, Roy's debut novel continued to be sold near the college campuses.

The copy of *The God of Small Things* I own now was purchased from a charity book shop that sold me a first edition for close to nothing. On the cover, a bright, beautiful pink lotus blooms on the surface of a river covered by green lotus leaves and other floating vegetation—a mesmerizing cover hiding a devastatingly dark tale about love and humanity.

Upon their return to Kerala, adult Rahel and Estha sneak into a temple to watch a Kathakali performance that has already begun. It will go on for hours, into the early hours of morning light. Roy writes:

It didn't matter that the story had begun, because Kathakali discovered long ago that the secret of the Great Stories is that they have no secrets. The Great Stories are the ones you have heard and want to hear again. The ones you enter anywhere and inhabit comfortably. They don't deceive you with thrills and trick endings. They don't surprise you with the unforeseen. They are as familiar as the house you live in. Or the smell of your lover's skin. You know how they end, yet you listen as though you don't. In the way that although you know that one day you will die, you live as though you won't. In the Great Stories, you know who lives, who dies, who finds love, who doesn't. And yet you want to know again.

These words best described my re-reading of Roy's novel for a second time. This time around, I knew that Ammu and her twins were doomed, and Velutha was doomed from the day he was born. The more I read *Mother Mary Comes to Me*, the more I found myself returning to *The God of Small Things*. Roy's memoir could not compete with her debut novel. I hope that every reader who picks up her memoir is eventually led back to the fiction. In many ways, *The God of Small Things* is as close to the truth as Roy's memoir.

Roy spent years trying to establish emotional and physical distance from her mother. Given her family background and her access to the English language, it is not surprising that, following a few years of struggling in Delhi, she eventually found herself among the intellectual elite. She fell in love and married filmmaker Pradip Krishen, who resided in one of the most affluent neighborhoods in the country at the time. However, the lingering shadows of her childhood spent with Mrs. Roy compelled her to retreat from traditional marital bliss. Though she remained deeply in love with Krishen, she soon moved away from him and his family.

Roy sensed that Mary's life was drawing to a close when she received a text from her, brimming with motherly love and pride for the woman that Roy had become. As the elder Roy's own cold moth settled on her heart, it reminded the reader that without Mary, there would be no Ammu, no Imperial Entomologist, and no cold moth. Ultimately, without Mary, there would be no *The God of Small Things*.

Arundhati Roy faced backlash in 2014 when she published the book *The Doctor and the Saint*, which listed her as a co-author. Technically, she hadn't written the book. It was actually a re-issue of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's *The Annihilation of Caste*, with a new introduction by Roy. *Annihilation of Caste* is a critique of Hinduism and caste, but Dalit writers and scholars across the country rejected Roy's interpretation. Anu Ramdas, editor of

Round Table India (a media portal dedicated to anti-caste issues), said, “We object to Roy’s text not because of her non-Dalit origin but due to her poor grasp of the seminal text and even shallower and sensational out-of-context introduction to the original text at risk of maligning Ambedkar.” Roy misinterpreted B. R. Ambedkar as being biased against the Adivasis, which was far from true. She was also criticized for not acknowledging her own caste capital and trying to profit from Ambedkar’s work for marketing gains. She has also faced backlash for holding romantic views of globalization and development that are at odds with her own easy access to modern comforts.

Decades after Roy won the Booker prize, though, *The God of Small Things* remains a permanent fixture of the Indian literary landscape, selling in massive numbers across digital platforms and bookstores. The roadside hawkers sell weathered second-hand copies and affordable pirated editions to younger readers. Yet, for many Indian authors, a Booker win remains an unattainable goal, requiring not just literary merit, but the social capital required to navigate elite literary circles that leads to a timely international publishing deal. Arundhati Roy is a gifted writer for whom all these factors aligned.

Roy’s dissent against the political elites of India pushed her into the public limelight. Television anchors at news channels owned by corporate giants called for Roy’s arrest and imprisonment. She has fought multiple court cases over the years, and in 2002 she spent one night in jail for her role in the Narmada dam protests. To readers like me, it appeared as though one woman had decided to take on the entire Indian establishment. This wasn’t entirely true, of course. She was bolstered by a network of lawyers and supporters, and her significant earnings from the publication of her books provided the financial security necessary to sustain her legal battles and aid others who were fighting similar battles against fascist forces.

Roy’s stance against global capital and neoliberalism has invited scrutiny. Many expected her to adopt a Gandhian asceticism, divesting herself of the wealth accumulated from her international publishing deals. Some questioned why Roy chose to publish her latest memoir with a corporate giant like Penguin Random House in India rather than an independent Indian press (of which there are a good few in New Delhi). I wondered if Roy was being asked to perform an ascetic type of living. We seem to demand that our writers and activists effect change from a position of financial insecurity masquerading as modesty. We want them to remain seemingly powerless.

As the COVID-19 pandemic shut down India, I stayed locked inside my home. Like many other students at the time, I suffered mentally from the bombardment of devastating news from around the country. I was terrified for my parents’ fragile life, convinced that I could survive a COVID infection but they couldn’t. I was convinced that a “normal” future was no longer possible. As I spent entire days hiding under the covers, I came across a piece Roy had written for the *Financial Times*, titled “The pandemic is a portal.”

She writes:

Nothing could be worse than a return to normality.

Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the

past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next. We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it.

Everything told me otherwise, but I let myself hope she was right. What I really wished for was a new world order, a kinder one. India’s “normal” social and political order had delivered us our own unique nightmare, turning us into callous voyeurs of the suffering around us.

As the coronavirus spread, the BJP-led Indian government imposed a nationwide lockdown, leaving millions of migrant daily-wage workers from eastern and central India without employment. The subsequent suspension of transportation services stranded them in the cities. Facing starvation, many began walking hundreds of kilometers to return home with their families. On May 8, 2020, 16 migrant laborers were killed after a cargo train ran over them in Aurangabad district. The workers were walking back to Madhya Pradesh and are believed to have fallen asleep on the tracks, assuming that trains were not running.

Reading this news, the crippling nature of my grief shocked me. The moral indifference and passive acceptance of this institutional cruelty by the Indian middle class shocked me more.

Roy once said during a *Paris Review* interview in 2011, “I always find it interesting that when you’re with people who are really at the receiving end of oppression, you find a lot less despair than you do in middle-class drawing rooms. In these situations, despair is not an option. I wonder if the amount of information that is hammered into our heads day and night leads people to think that the world’s problems are so huge they’re insurmountable.”

We were witnessing the failures of a fascist and hyper-capitalist Indian state. It had convinced me that these problems were insurmountable, the devastation unavoidable. The pandemic had made it abundantly clear that while all of us were facing dangerously turbulent waters, we were, in fact, not in the same boat.

Roy’s two books of fiction, her latest memoir, and her various essays published over the years establish one thing: when citizens grant ruling establishments, capitalists, and their henchmen impunity for displacing and pillaging powerless communities, they become complicit in the creation of a dangerous system of violence that eventually demands unconditional submission from everyone. Generations end up living inside this system where despair and helplessness are widespread feelings. Empathy and justice have no place in such a system where power silences everyone. This is as true for India as it is for the West. Recently, from Gaza, to Iran, to Lebanon, to Venezuela, we have witnessed a shocking capacity for violence in a shockingly brief window of time. Each attack is more vicious than the last as forces of fascism grow stronger and greedier. Across the globe, citizens are being funnelled into a totalitarian reality that criminalizes dissent, where their collective exhaustion fuels leaders who act with total disregard for human life. In such times, writers like Roy remind us that humanity demands camaraderie. It demands that though a better world seems far out of reach, we never stop dreaming. ✚

TREND ALERT

MIDDLE AND UPPER-CLASS YUPPIES LOVE TO CO-OPT THE AESTHETICS OF BLUE COLLAR WORKERS.

That's why your average Los Angeles advertising-professional-by-day / DJ-by-night now dresses like a union mechanic from Arkansas—complete with a mustache, mullet, Carhartt jacket, and baby-soft hands. The hammer loop on those “workwear” Dickies pants might only ever hold a vape, but hey, *sending emails is still work!*

The problem is, dressing like an electrician/carpenter *is so overdone.*

Keep it fresh with...



WAIST-HIGH RUBBER BOOTS of an offshore oil rig deckhand. For a more authentic vibe, go to your nearest gas station and grease those babies up.

AMPUTATED THUMB from working in a factory (you can get this done at your regular tattoo shop).



FAKE MELANOMA SPOT from decades of sun exposure. Use eyeliner or sharpie in a pinch.

COMMERCIAL DIVING SUIT of an underwater welder (an ideal choice for people seeking a casual shift in their wardrobe).

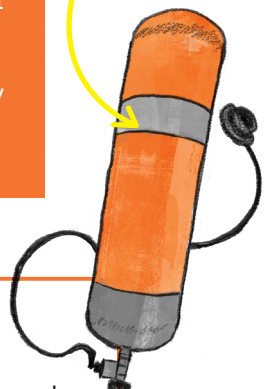
SO HOT!

SMOCK of a meat-packing plant worker, covered in pig entrails.



SAFETY CONSTRUCTION HELMET with buckle-able chin strap. This accessory is perfect for summer—you can finally take that suffocating beanie off, while still concealing your hairline. (If a girl at the bar asks you what's underneath, tell her you're required by OSHA to keep the helmet on. No, you don't need to know what OSHA is.)

FIREFIGHTER OXYGEN TANK to go with your mustache!



TOP PICK!

THE CLIPBOARD OF A SEWAGE TREATMENT PLANT OPERATOR.

Can be used as a money clip—you don't want anyone noticing how heavy your credit card is!



It's time to look ahead to the **hottest working-class fashion** pieces of the next season—ones that scream I'm just like poor people, but cooler, because I'm not actually poor!



SOOO HOT!

THE POLITICS OF



BY EMILY CARMICHAEL

THE FIRST MORNING I WOKE UP IN MY NEW APARTMENT, something felt off. As soon as I opened my eyes, they began to sting. Moments later, I realized my throat was burning, too, and what was that in my gut? The lining of my stomach felt like someone had taken sandpaper to it. The raw feeling wasn't horribly intense, but so clear that I thought I was, for the first time, sensing the exact shape of my organ. Sure, I had had allergies before, but never like this—what the hell was going on? I took stock of my condition, deteriorated suddenly overnight, and before I could lift my groggy head from the pillow, a thought boomed in my mind: I have mold.

Of course, when I told people about my suspicions, nobody believed me. I didn't really believe myself, to be honest. This diagnosis was for right-wing "Make America Healthy Again" grifters like Jordan Peterson or Jenny McCarthy—both of whom have publicly crusaded over their experience with mold—and my friends and family's personal favorite, hypochondriacs. Not helping my case was my history of hard-to-diagnose neurological symptoms, my old, but largely rehabilitated, habit of following wellness influencers, plus my most damning trait, anxiety. (It's true, I can get worked up about things.)

Anyway, everyone reminded me, the apartment was cute, even if it was kind of falling apart. It sat on the third story of an old brownstone on 8th Avenue in leafy Park Slope, between 5th and 6th Streets, and only one block from my favorite place in New York City, Prospect Park. The apartment's two rooms retained some of their original architectural details. There were sanded down, original-looking parquet floors throughout, crown moulding on the walls, and in the bedroom, fat beams in a lattice pattern on the ceiling. I loved every wooden ridge and line, even if, over the years, the landlord had caked them in what looked like 40 coats of white paint. After I signed the lease for the apartment, I took a video of it and sent it to my brother. He complained the footage was "80 percent ceiling." What can I say? I was charmed. I imagined mornings underneath those beams, completely alone, watching the tree that filled the two large windows in the living room bob back and forth. After years of weird roommates who stole hundreds of dollars from me or listened in on my private conversations, this was the very first 500 square feet in New York City that I would ever call just mine.

Before I moved in, my then-girlfriend and I met the superintendent in the apartment to pick up the keys. We walked in right as he was hunched over, fiddling with the radiator. Moments

later, it let out a monstrous burst of steam. “Oh geez,” he said, then quickly shut the radiator off. “I’ll fix that before you move in.” The super was a kind man with buzzed white hair, sparse enough to see his scalp. He had grown up in the area, surrounded by cousins, and now lived around the corner in a home his parents had bought in the ’70s. His brother owned the building I would be living in.

“Now that you’re in,” he said, “I’ll tell you about the problems.” He then proceeded to tell me that I cannot adjust the heat for fear, if I remember correctly, that the radiator would leak. In fact, the building leaked all the time. The radiator in the unit upstairs was leaking as we spoke, and at some point during the past year or two, my apartment had flooded in the front room, from the top down. A pipe burst and water poured through the ceiling. “But we fixed everything,” he said. “Put in a whole new ceiling.” He assured me that there were no lingering issues, and I believed him. Everything, the super said, would be cleaned and in good working order by the time my moving truck arrived.

That was not the case. The day I moved in, the stove didn’t work, the refrigerator wouldn’t close, the shower would not drain, and everything was covered in grey dirt. I went to sweep the floors, in a spot collecting dust beneath the radiator, and its wooden pieces broke free like overripe baby teeth falling out of a child’s mouth. With the gentle nudge of a broom, they went rolling into my dustpan. When I woke up the next morning, feeling so strange, and had the thought that maybe, maybe my apartment could be making me feel this way, I sat up in bed and sobbed.

From that day forward, my job became managing doubt. The operative question was not so much “do I have mold?” but “how crazy am I?” A lot of this had to do with how people looked at me when I told them about my mold suspicions—like a crazy person. “You’ll see, in three months, you’re going to love that apartment,” one said. Many others, a drawn out, too highly-pitched, “okkaaayyy.” Because I am anxious, I take people seriously when they express skepticism about my experiences, so like anyone would, I took to the internet on a fact-finding mission.

Search engines turned up standard fare. *Healthline* confirmed that my symptoms could, conceivably, be caused by mold. So did a page on the Centers for Disease Control website, reassuringly published before Trump had installed his ideologues in our public health apparatus. Another website told me that if the symptoms subsided when I left the apartment and started again when I returned, then if not mold, it was probably something in the environment of my home. And what do you know, my eyes stopped stinging when I left, and started again when I returned home. But the timeline wasn’t perfect. It took a few

hours for either effect to kick in. If I really thought about it, did I feel *that* poorly? I guess my appetite had disappeared, but was that just stress?

My Instagram algorithm, which always seems to keep a careful eye on my internet activity, started lining up reels of people who said they had mold in their homes. An entire apartment building in Manhattan’s affluent West Village neighborhood had become notorious for making people sick with mold. One woman in Florida said the mold gave her husband horrible gastrointestinal issues, emaciating him over the course of a year. The photos of his frail body disappearing under a pile of blankets were shocking. A model said she and her girlfriend had started getting mysteriously and stubbornly sick soon after they moved into a mid-century rental in Los Angeles. They felt better when they left their house and suspected mold. I was rapt.

After a bit of scrolling came the next genre of Instagram reels: first-person accounts of people recovering from living in moldy homes. Video after video showed people either paying thousands for mold remediation services or fleeing their houses. Some people touted “binders,” a type of supplement which, the videos claimed, attaches to mold and helps you excrete it from your body. For maximal detox effect, however, you should heal your gut, too, and the videos offered protocols you could follow. As I watched reel after reel, I noticed the ache in my head subtly become more pronounced. Unthinkingly, I started sniffing the air around my apartment, trying to pick out a musty scent, but it smelled more like an odd old pine. And then a man on a reel pronounced that, in order to recover from mold, I need to avoid EMFs produced by WiFi. *What?* The man held up a device that supposedly blocked them, available for purchase.

The orange-tinted, blue-light blocking glasses beloved by some MAHA influencers started to appear. Namely on the face of Dave Asprey, an early tech innovator turned biohacking profiteer who has become famous for wearing the neon shades and putting butter in the specially-tested, mycotoxin-free coffee sold by his brand, Bulletproof. Mycotoxins are toxins produced by mold, and while they have been found in some coffee samples, all coffee manufacturers largely eliminate them.

“Mold is the cause of Lyme disease,” Asprey said, talking to wellness podcaster Mari Llewellyn. Both of them have over a million followers on Instagram.

“So that doesn’t have to come from a tick,” Llewellyn asks.

“You can get bitten by a tick,” Asprey says, “[That’s one way to get it], but the people who get chronic Lyme, 90 percent of them have toxic mold that took their immune system offline, and Lyme is a symptom of mold. You fix the mold and the body gets rid of the Lyme.”

Llewellyn responds with a slow, soft, “Wow.”

Even if you know what Lyme disease is, you probably don’t know what Asprey is talking about. The MAHA concept of Lyme disease, which they call “chronic Lyme,” has been divorced from ticks and twisted into a catchall misdiagnosis for the general malaise that so many people battle with today. To be diagnosed with MAHA chronic Lyme, you don’t have to test positive for Lyme disease, nor do you need to have been bitten by a tick. You just have to endorse a roster of nonspecific symptoms like fatigue, brain fog, headaches, joint pain, and muscle pain—all the kinds of issues that mainstream medicine all too frequently writes off as psychosomatic. (Though the terms are sometimes used interchangeably, chronic Lyme is not the same as Post-Treatment Lyme Disease Syndrome, a very real phenomenon in which symptoms persist after Lyme disease has been treated.)

The concept of MAHA chronic Lyme sounds bizarre until you remember that, on the whole, people don’t want to be sick. If a doctor dismisses their symptoms, people will keep looking for better answers, and they’ll use their most readily available research tool, the internet, to do it. What they’ll find, almost immediately upon querying a search engine or social media app, are influencers and “alternative” doctors who, unlike those dismissive internists, acknowledge their pain as real and give it a diagnosis: chronic Lyme (or possibly another MAHA-tinged diagnosis like gluten intolerance or parasites). In our insurance-addled society, a diagnosis is the most supreme validation of pain, for it opens access to believability and care. It’s easy to imagine the relief someone might feel, then, in being given a name, any name, for their woe.

Next, the very influencers and alternative doctors who provided that diagnostic relief start selling solutions: expensive supplements, detox protocols, and cleansing courses, none of which are evidence-based, because the evidence does not support the existence of chronic Lyme. It’s their grift, and it’s made many an influencer very rich. Now, as Asprey’s comments reveal, there is a push to brand mold as a version of chronic Lyme disease, another monetizable, haphazardly-applied answer to a body that doesn’t make sense to itself and that conventional medicine doesn’t have a clean answer for.

MOLD, I WOULD COME TO REALIZE, IS RIPE FOR THE MAHA grifter picking. Whereas Lyme disease, the kind you get from a tick, has clearer symptoms, testing, and diagnosis, mold is vague. The standard symptoms of mold exposure are similar to seasonal allergies, but as I learned in my research frenzy, even conventional doctors and government institutions will tell you that mold can stir up anything from fatigue, to chest tightness, to headaches, to blurred vision, to rashes, to mood changes. Making matters vaguer: these symptoms strike different people in different ways depending on the type and concentration of the mold, and on if someone has a pre-existing condition, like asthma, allergies, or an autoimmune deficiency. There’s no great medical diagnostic test for mold exposure, nor is it the first diagnosis most clinicians think of, so it can take a while to discover that mold is involved in someone’s illness. This only amps up the potential to see conspiracy in its misdiagnosis. Moreover, there is mold everywhere. It is in the air even under the most normal of

conditions, albeit in low, generally safe amounts. If you open up a petri dish of agar and let it sit in your house, it will grow dark, variegated ovals of mold under the right conditions. Some people will take this as evidence of a growing infestation. It’s not.

In keeping with the laws of modern political discourse, an action on the right must inspire an opposite, if not equal, reaction on the left. And right on cue, Google turned up a piece in *New York* magazine’s left-leaning women’s vertical *The Cut* inaugurating mold into the culture war. “Mold, Mold Everywhere” by Jessica Lucas swung hard against Asprey and his ilk, gawking at people who have gotten wrapped up in this MAHA vision of mold. Rather than approaching it like an environmental toxin that can cause symptoms for the duration of exposure, MAHA’s “moldies” have been told that they have lingering “toxic mold” lodged in their systems, and to get rid of it, they must detox. The pursuit of interior purity pushes some to extremes. The author writes of people who have spent thousands of dollars on testing, remediation, diets, and extensive cleansing regimens, sometimes involving prescription drugs. Some have moved multiple times, trashed their clothes, dumped their furniture, and even refused to enter their parents’ home because they suspect it has mold. One guy lives in his car for fear of mold in any kind of constructed building.

These people are obviously terrified for their health, but the tone of the article is condescending, almost teasing. A reader can’t help but feel that the author wants them to believe “moldies” are red-pilled hysterics—not uncomfortable people who have been lied to by right-wing media, but dimwits. For example, though the author’s summary of the science is technically correct, she phrases it so as to cast even more doubt on her subjects:

The medical community, however, has long maintained that toxic-mold poisoning isn’t real and that for the vast majority of people, mold is not even an allergen[...] For those with asthma, it might aggravate respiratory issues, and in extremely rare cases in severely immunocompromised patients, breathing it in can lead to invasive mold infections in which mold grows inside moist areas of the body like the lungs. Moldies, though, believe they’re under siege.

True, the existence of MAHA mold toxicity is dubious, but to imply mold is not a common allergen is out of step. Mold is an allergen for up to 10 percent of people, according to the Asthma and Allergy Foundation, and though the science on its effect on humans is still evolving, mold is widely regarded as a risk to our health. The author spins the science only to advance her thesis: If you, a science-loving left-winger, hear someone say they are feeling ill from mold, don’t believe them—they’re quacks. If mold is a health issue, it’s a fake one, and if mold is a political issue, it is only one of science vs. anti-science. Left vs. right.

None of this online back and forth, however, changed the reality of my situation. I was feeling worse and worse in a way that was irrefutable; I did kind of feel like I was under siege. My whole body felt inflamed. Never in my life had I had significant dermatitis, and now I had it on my neck. Out of nowhere, the pain in the joints of my big toes was getting worse and my migraines were starting to flare. I’ll admit it: I felt like I had brain fog.



Mayor Mamdani inspects a New York apartment for mold, lead paint, and other hazards, 2026. (Photo: Michael Appleton, NYC Mayor's Office)

Neither did the discourse matter to people across the country living with mold in their homes. As I kept searching the news for information about mold, I found plenty of articles of people falling ill in substandard living conditions, with mold part of a larger picture of environmental disaster, climate change, and landlord neglect. In North Carolina, *Grist* reported on how mold surged after Hurricane Helene unleashed massive amounts of water on the state, and how we can only expect to see more mold as the planet heats up and extreme storms become more and more common. In Auburn Hills, Michigan, a mother's dying wish was for her family to leave the mold-infested mobile home they'd been renting, the structure so degraded that the floor literally fell out from underneath their feet. The story that stuck with me the most, though, was one at Women's Huron Valley Correctional Facility, Michigan's only women's prison, where inmates alleged the state had let dangerous mold grow wildly in the building and filed a class action lawsuit in 2019. "It affects me daily," one of the plaintiffs, Krystal Clark, who is highly allergic to mold, told *Michigan Public*. "My heart, my breathing. I have to sleep standing up most of the time. [I'm] begging for breathing treatments cause the mold is affecting my breathing. That's how it's affecting me, it's killing me."

All these years later, the case is still making its way through the court system as the state tries to argue it has qualified immunity and inmates argue their medical needs are not being met. The delay is a tragedy, considering that three inmates have died at Huron Valley this year, with medical neglect suspected to have played a role in at least one of their deaths. One of the women who died, Khaira Howard, had reached out to a state representative with concerns about mold not long before she passed away.

The common thread in these cases is not supplements and MAHA influencers, but by and large, polluting private industry and landlords—be it the state, a corporation, or otherwise—who refuse to spend the money necessary to provide a safe, healthy living environment. Perhaps no one benefits more from doubting the existence of mold-related illness than landlords.

And herein lies the cost of letting mold become culture war fodder: Mold, if taken seriously by the political left, represents a

unique opportunity for solidarity. People across the country and in vastly different living conditions have all had their lives rocked by mold, and the left can obviously connect their struggles. The same system is screwing all of them, each somehow mistreated by an entity who cares more about profit than their health. Instead of selling them supplements, the left can send "moldies" into tenants' unions, and their landlords to court. Redefined, mold is no longer a matter of left vs. right, nor even just man vs. mold, but people vs. for-profit businesses. Once people recognize that their pain is not uncommon, but a shared condition imposed by someone else's greed, they can finally begin to pursue genuine political accountability. In fact, mold is one of the most frequently cited reasons that people join and form tenants' unions. One can only imagine mold is mentioned frequently at New York City Mayor Zohran Mamdani's Rental Ripoff hearings, too, in which tenants are invited to publicly testify on just how bad their landlord is.

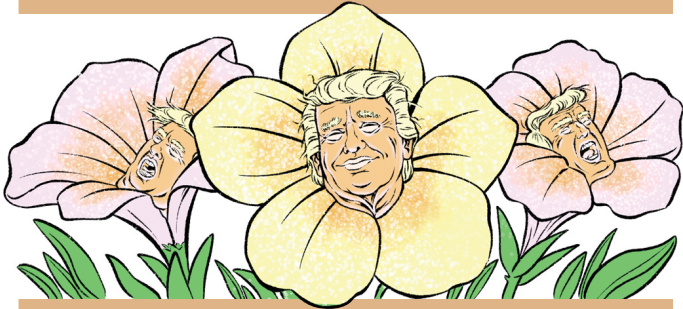
OR WE CAN PROCEED AS WE HAVE BEEN. READERS OF that *Cut* article can try talking down to people who think they have mold, but I can assure you it won't persuade "moldies" into remission, much less raise their political consciousness. Quite the contrary, real pain resists condemnation absolutely, and arrogance only forms pain into opposition. We think that shame in its various forms can stop wayward thinking, can put an ill-conceived idea out to pasture. In fact, all of those verboten feelings and thoughts, banished to the same open field, start talking to each other and come up with their own explanations for the world. Folks in similar situations are lured in, then the grifters arrive, and the online conservative con game begins. This route gets us more of the same: MAHA influencers and charlatans continue to seize the narrative around mold and neuter its political potential. Mold remains misconstrued as a problem of the individual, as people are told to use their body, plus a course of targeted supplements, to eliminate what is really a societal malfunction. Mold is commoditized, corporatized, and divisive in all the wrong ways.

After a few weeks of talking about my maybe-mold symptoms, two people grew concerned and told me to get mold testing. I contacted an environmental testing and inspection company with the most professional certifications I could find, and on Halloween, they sent a no-nonsense Austrian woman to my apartment. As she collected air samples and scratched samples of wood from the floor, she lamented how terrible it is that men often don't believe women's health problems. I concurred. The results would take a week to prepare, but she told me she would send her initial impression within a few days. On November 3, 2025, she sent me the following email:

The mold in [an] air sample taken from the living room is extremely high[...] There must be a significant source of hidden mold growth in the apartment[...] You mentioned not feeling well when staying in the apartment. The level of mold found on the day of our inspection would certainly explain your health symptoms. Consider staying somewhere else if that is an option.

According to the testing, the mold levels in my home were 400 times what they should have been. I moved out that day. ✚

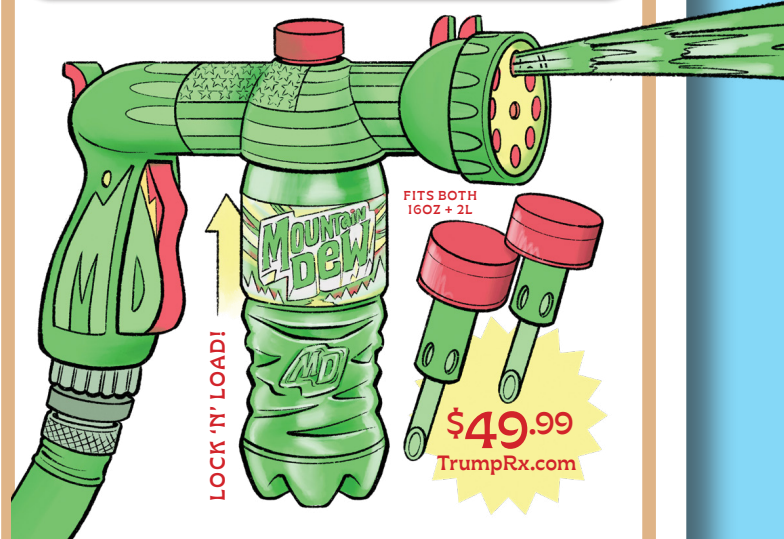
SPRING-TIME GARDENING TIPS



FROM TRUMP'S DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

by Devin Schiff with art by J. Longo

USE YOUR MOUNTAIN DEW ENERGY HOSE DAILY



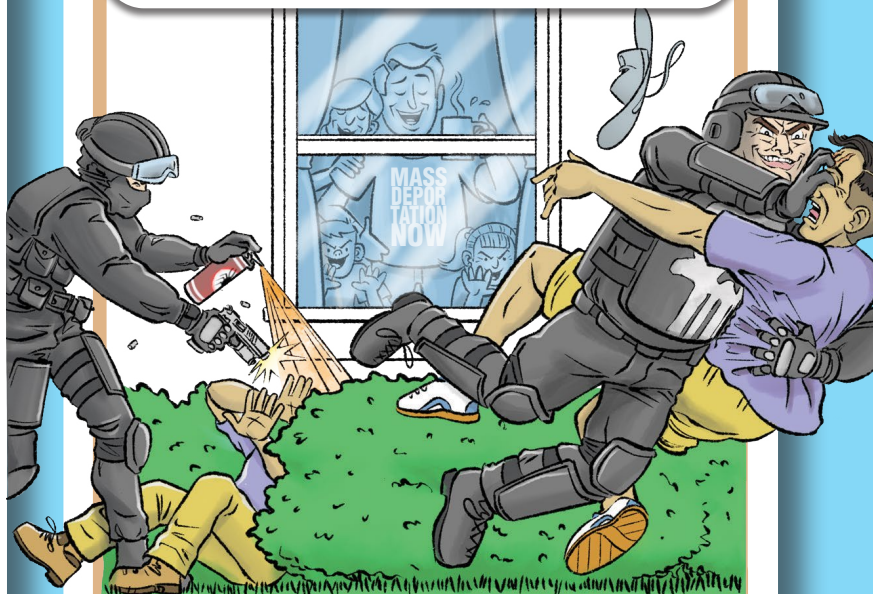
Spraying your plants daily with Mountain Dew gives them the energy they need to grow!

REPLACE YOUR SOIL WITH AMERICAN STEEL



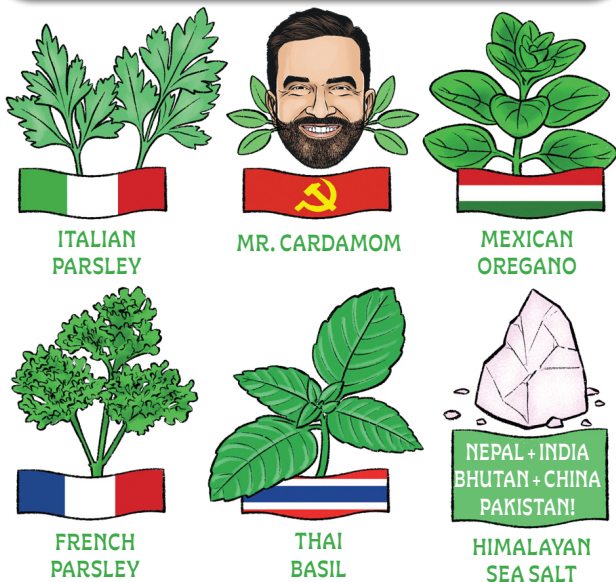
You don't want *girl plants*, do you? Replace your *weak* soil and plant a thick layer of patriotic steel instead!

GET YOUR SEEDS PLANTED EARLY



You never know when your landscapers will be deported.

NO FOREIGN HERBS



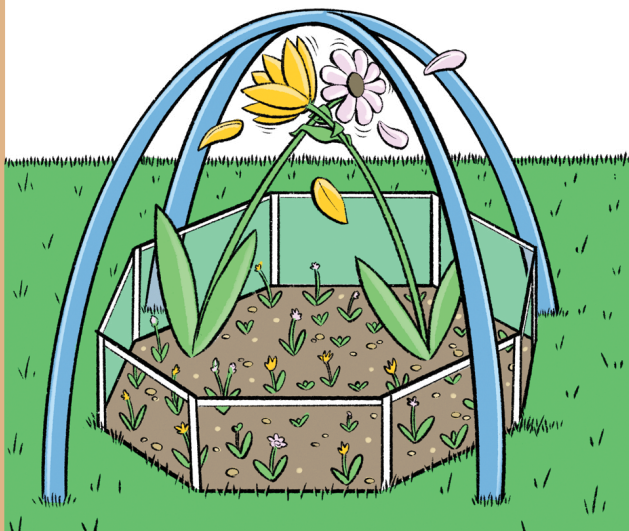
Plant basil, *expect an Italian circus!*
Foreign herbs attract illegals who will demand healthcare and mutilization.

PLANT YOUR OWN MICROPLASTICS



The average American eats over 100,000 plastic particles a year.
Save money by growing your own!

PLANT CROPS IN A SEED BED WRESTLING RING



This will encourage your crops to duke it out for light, growing stronger and more handsome every day.

SHOOT **ANY** BEE THAT TRIES TO POLLINATE YOUR FLOWERS!



Those are *your* flowers, not some freeloader bee's! Stand your ground and defend your garden!



There Once Was a Snail in the Forests of O'ahu

BY MONMITA CHAKRABARTI



LONELY GEORGE, 2019

IN THE SNAIL EXTINCTION PREVENTION PROGRAM LAB, behind a green door in a small green trailer, little mollusks move across differently-shaded green leaves four times their size, their translucent antennae wiggling and flicking. Extinct in the wild, the snails play at survival in the trailer, eating and reproducing, practicing for their reintroduction back into their habitats. As a greyish yellow snail almost slides off the leaf it sits on, the large, white pad of a finger gently moves it back. The snail wiggles its antennae enthusiastically, finally reoriented to the leaf; its whole body spans the finger's tip.

How do you know when a snail dies?

According to various sources on the internet:

1. The odor. The odor of a dead snail is distinct and impossible to miss.
2. The trapdoor (operculum) located on the rear of the snail's foot, and everything else, will be hanging out, or the shell will be empty.
3. "The shell will be uninteresting and light."

In the lab, brown cardboard boxes labeled "Snail Morgue" are stacked atop each other in the cupboards. A snail named Lonely George's remains sit in a small test tube next to the boxes, the brown spirals of its shell dulling. Labelled with messy handwriting, I can only make out "4.8 x 11 cm" written in the final row—George's size.

Lonely George, the name given to the last member of the species *Achatinella apexfulva*, once abundant in the forests of O'ahu Island, is placed separately because no other snail is like it. Not anymore. Not in the future.

"The last member of a species is a ghost," wildlife biologist and Snail Extinction Prevention Program coordinator David Sischo, keeper of the snail hospital and the snail morgues, tells me. "It might as well be dead. It's already gone."

On New Year's day of 2019, Lonely George passed away at 14 years old. In *National Geographic*, Christie Wilcox writes that "For over a decade, researchers searched in vain for another member of the species for George to mate with, to no avail."

I learned from Sischo that every researcher who was seeking one small glimmer of hope, one saving grace, cried in the field.

George and I don't share a language, not in the way of companion animals. My cat and I have learned each other, built a language between us. I know when she feels comfortable and happy, when she is nervous, and when she is scared. I can, to an extent, speculate about her interiority. In this way, George is a blank slate. At this distance, I have never seen George perform a social gesture beyond the recorded evidence I have that they were, at one point, alive.

I did not know George or care about him during his life, whereas others did. I am at a distance many other people aren't. I'm not native Hawaiian and k̄ahuli are not culturally significant to me. I am unsure what it means for a snail shell to be "uninteresting," nor have I smelled the unmissable odor of snail death. I've never seen the brown and yellow spirals of *Achatinella apexfulva*'s shell in person.

And yet, the face cream I use every night before bed contains snail mucin, which allegedly moisturizes the skin, aiding elastic-

ity. It is referred to as an "anti-aging" ingredient because it may prevent wrinkles.

There are many wrinkles in regard to speaking about Lonely George's life and death; many inevitable, but unexplainable aspects of my attachment to this snail. One such wrinkle is that with the name Lonely George, you might assume the last member of *Achatinella apexfulva* was male. In reality, Hawaiian tree snails are hermaphrodites with both male and female reproductive organs. Two adults must mate to produce offspring. They give birth to live young and they have a low reproductive rate, at most ten offspring annually, only coming to reproductive age between four and seven years old. For a creature suffering a mass extinction crisis, this slow method of reproduction is not ideal. The cruelty of the world contrasts with these snails' nature.

Method of reproduction aside, it doesn't feel like a coincidence that a creature without a binary sex, let alone a gender, was given a name associated with men. Everything about the title "Lonely George" is made to appeal to our emotions. We see men as more universally human, as the default. Researchers often refer to George with "he," but I will refer to George with "they" to try and represent their experience more accurately, albeit still on human terms and still in English.

In this cultural and political context, our societies view white people as more universally human too, and our ideas about gender are shaped by colonialism—all the more reason not to refer to George as "he." The Indigenous name for the O'ahu Tree Snail is k̄ahuli. Ōlelo Hawai'i, the Indigenous language of Hawaii, like every species of k̄ahuli, is critically endangered. In 1896, a new law mandated that English be the medium of instruction in schools, with the goal of English displacing Ōlelo Hawai'i. This law stayed in place until 1986, by which time the language was nearly extinct. By 2012, it was estimated there were fewer than 1,000 native speakers. Indigenous activists have successfully begun revitalizing the language and there are currently an estimated 5,000 to 7,000 speakers. Just as there are programs in place to revive the population of k̄ahuli, there are language immersion programs in place to revive Ōlelo Hawai'i. If this essay were written in the Indigenous language of the place George inhabited, the pronouns I used for George wouldn't be a wrinkle. There are no gendered pronouns in the third person in Ōlelo Hawai'i. Everyone is referred to as "ia." It is the same in Bangla, the language of my family. Everyone is referred to as "o" (these are, of course, imperfect Latin alphabet representations). I am frustrated by the restrictions English puts on my body and identity, and on George's.

The biggest cause of the rapid decline of k̄ahuli were invasive predators—every type of tourist and colonizer. Their habitat was threatened by non-native, invasive plants (including strawberry guava, Christmas berry, silk oak, shrub verbena, and Koster's curse). They were also preyed on by invasive species like rats and the carnivorous rosy wolf snail, which was ironically (horribly, sadly) introduced in 1955 to control another invasive snail species—the giant African snail—but found native tree snails more appetizing.

The word for an animal that is the last of its kind is "endling." There is something cute about this, something that almost evokes fiction. A loneliness in the reverberating bell of a life. Life in the face of ever-present threat.

George was named after another endling, Lonesome George.

Lonesome George was the last Pinta Island Tortoise—another Indigenous species that couldn't survive because of colonizers, who introduced feral goats to the Galapagos Islands, which devastated their vegetation. Unlike Lonely George, Lonesome George's sex was male—though he was still given this European name despite not being European. He lived for 102 years, many of them spent wandering around alone, looking for others and getting filmed by humans while eating papayas.

I try to find out more about the snails that produce my moisturizer. There are not many academic articles about the use of snail mucin in cosmetic products, particularly in regard to how the snails are treated. Some people on Reddit say that snail mucin is harvested ethically. They say that snails on snail farms need to be happy and healthy or they won't produce mucin, or would produce highly irritating mucin that is bad for the skin. *The Klog*, a popular K-Beauty blog, states that "because snail mucin products are applied topically, only edible snails are used in skin care products," a fact that feels grotesque for some reason. It makes me wonder whether the same snails that labor to make my face cream eventually end up on someone's dinner plate—trapped in a cycle of endless production. *Cosrx*, the brand that distributes my face cream, claims that their snails are kept in a dark room on a net, where they are left alone to relax and produce the mucin to be put into products. Other sources, mostly competing skincare companies, say that the snails suffer and are harmed to retrieve a large amount of mucin. From a general Google search, every source I look at is trying to sell something—trying to sell me snail mucin products or discourage me from using snail mucin products and to buy other, similar products they are selling instead.



Advanced Snail 92 All in one Cream advertisement (Photo: COSRX.com)

The first academic article I found about snail mucin in beauty products was a 2024 piece from the *Journal of Cosmetic Dermatology*, titled "Snail extract for skin: A review of uses, projections, and limitations" by researchers Nupur Singh, Angela N. Brown, and Michael H. Gold. According to the authors, snail mucin has



Pinta Island Tortoise, Lonesome George, 2008 (Photo: Arturo de Frias Marques)

been used for centuries and across cultures. Hippocrates lauded its ability to soothe inflamed skin. Snail farmers in Chile found it could aid in healing lesions without scarring. People living in Han Dynasty China documented its use in relieving insect bites and hemorrhoids. The authors say it has anti-microbial properties that can treat acne, though where in the snail the mucin is secreted from affects how antibiotic it is. The article also has a section that discusses snail mucin's "antiaging benefits." This once again makes me suspicious that I am being sold something, but I am no expert.

In the last section before the conclusion, I read that there are several ways to harvest mucus from snails. One method puts no stress on the snails, placing them in a special cage or a glass slide and letting them secrete mucus at a natural rate of production, resulting in a relatively long collection time. To increase the yield in a shorter span of time, the snails might be stimulated with electricity. This stresses them out, so they must be fed and hydrated before this process. Another common method is hitting the snail with a blunt force object (such as "glass rods, cotton swabs, syringes, droppers, sticks, or needles"), spraying it with a water jet, cracking its shell, or placing it in a salt solution to osmotically draw out its hydration—thus doubling the amount of mucus produced and causing a great deal of trauma to the snail. This makes my stomach drop. For what? For vanity? To try and reverse the natural marks of time? I decide I am never rebuying this face cream unless I find sufficient proof that all cosmetic companies that use snail mucin are not hurting the snails—or forcing them to do anything other than live happy snail lives—where they secrete mucus at their own pace, regardless of the human demand for it.

DAVE SISCHO'S FRIENDS WILL BUY HIM SNAIL BEAUTY products (ethically produced—hopefully) as a joke. Most of his adult life has been spent caring for critically endangered tree snails. He tells me, "they have given me my entire career, my livelihood." He keeps his phone on full volume all the time, like a doctor's pager, in case something goes wrong at the lab and he needs to rush there. In Ed Yong's viral 2019 article about

George in the *Atlantic*, this fact also came up: “He never silences his phone, even when he sleeps. When he gets alerts at odd hours, his stomach aches.” It was devastating details like these that gave George a literary second life, inspiring the writers Maria Reva and Jasmin Schreiber (and me).

Often, the emotional dimension of climate change is delegitimized as unimportant. When I first wrote about my attachment to Lonely George, the ways in which I identified with them, a man told me, “Your feelings are not as important as a mass extinction crisis.” People don’t know what to do with it—the sadness. But according to Dave Sischo, sadness can be quite useful when faced with disaster. He tells me invertebrates are largely overlooked next to more charismatic, cuter animals (like tigers and elephants), though they are incredibly important for the ecosystem to function. When George died, it was heartening to see how many people cared and how much international news the story generated. He took that lesson, that it was important to show people the last snails. It takes the death of the last member of a species to wake people up.

When I asked about the emotional dimension of his work, Dr. Sischo did not respond the way I was anticipating. I hoped that he, being so close to the effects of climate change, would have a more common-sense approach to it, less dread. I suppose my own idealism caused me to hope that he would have some good news, but there is little good news to report. I asked if it has gotten easier since he has started his work to contend with the devastating information that he is faced with every day. He tells me it has only gotten harder, because “it’s just getting worse. Everything is getting worse.” If I have time for a story, he says, he can tell me about how in 2015, they did a genetic study on two wild populations in relatively small areas of the field. There were tons of snails, but by the time they got the lab and the funding for the equipment, there were only three individuals remaining. These were some of the most depressing days he has ever had, and this has happened over and over again. They can’t hesitate anymore. He and his staff never get a break.

Everything about keeping hundreds of species of endangered snails in one lab is precarious. Dr. Sischo described the laboratory feeling like a hospital: sterile and clean. He oversees a facility that maintains approximately 10,000 kähuli—40 species from five islands—many of which are extinct in the wild. He says the chambers in the lab make clicking noises, similar to someone in the emergency room on life support, an apt comparison because the snails literally are. Anything brought in from the outside world could be a threat. Because kähuli feast on the fungus that grows on native trees and shrubs, which need to be brought into the lab, there is always the risk of introducing nematodes and harmful pathogens with the leaves. They could have a mortality event from these pathogens, or a fire, or an equipment failure. Sischo evacuated the snails in his car during Hurricane Douglas in the summer of 2020, driving them from the lab to higher ground. I wonder if it ever feels futile, saving them then releasing them back into a cruel world that is less hospitable than ever. I wonder if he can let himself think about this.

He tells me everyone held George carefully, like they under-

stood the weight of what was in their hands. He is often devastated by the fact that he saw things working in the field just ten years ago that his fresh out of college colleagues will never see.

MANY FORMS OF LIFE WERE ASSISTED BY THE existence of kähuli and impacted by their rapid disappearance. Kähuli evolved a diet to only eat the fungus that grows on native trees and shrubs, cleaning them and improving their health. Though the snails are small in size, their numbers gave them immense power in the ecosystem, cleaning native plants of algae and bacteria and fungus. The nutrients from the snails’ poop, in turn, fertilized the forest.

Kähuli were once so abundant that collectors made their shells into lei. This cultural artform collapsed as the snails began to disappear. Speaking to the National Wildlife Federation, Jonee Peters, a Native Hawaiian and the head of operations for Conservation Council for Hawai‘i, states, “The kähuli, or tree snails, are a part of our oral history, handed down through the generations through songs and chants[...] One of the first hula songs we learned as children was Kähuli aku, the song of the tree shell.”

Another Hawaiian name for kähuli is pūpū kani oe—“shell that sounds long.” I watch a video about their songs from an Indigenous Hawaiian singer named Eddie Kamae. In it, a musician blows into a shell to mimic what it might sound like if the wind whistled through a kähuli shell as it rested on a leaf. It sounds like the conch my mashis blow into during Durga Puja as the goddess is worshipped. The noise is devout.

“It takes the death of the last member of a species to wake people up.”

I try to understand Dave Sischo’s love, the devotion of his life to this. I try to understand the root of my own obsession. Dr. Sischo tells me his favorite species of kähuli, the one he feels most urgently about saving, is whichever one he is holding in his hands.

I ask my entomologist friend, who I grew up minutes from, but now live 11 hours away from, whether snails could feel loneliness. I text her, “I just want to know if they could tell whether they were the last of their kind or if I’m projecting that loneliness onto them.” She responded, “That’s tricky because they’d definitely be able to detect a lack of fellow snail ‘scents,’ like trail pheromones, but applying a consciousness to snails is a whole other thing.”

She tells me key search terms that might be helpful to learn more about the socialization of snails. *Communication, aggregation, intraspecific, conspecific, gregarious*. Through our conversation, I learn that the mucus trails snails leave, the ones in my face cream, are how they communicate with each other, because their sensory modalities are otherwise extremely limited. I wonder what these codes that I massage into my face every night say. I wonder if the language has been processed beyond recognition.

HUMAN BABIES NEED SKIN-TO-SKIN CONTACT IN order to develop properly. Ma's method with me was called "kangaroo care." I was an underweight, premature baby, and she held me to her bare chest, me only in my diaper. She says I never wanted to be put down—I would wail if she tried. I needed her warmth, the knowledge that someone was there.

Perhaps this origin story makes me uniquely horrified at the condition of endlings. From the start, I was cuddled and coddled. I grew stronger and calmer because Ma pressed me to her skin, right above her heart. Maybe I have a brain so formed by love and care from the people around me that the other end of the spectrum, living a life where I couldn't feel the comfort of anyone else because they're all gone, is the stuff of nightmares.

Then again, an interiority that balks against abandonment and isolation is not particularly unique. The existence of solitary confinement is proof: a form of torture devised to devastate someone by putting them in a cell alone for extended periods with no access to other people or the outside world. Solitary confinement is known to shatter the psyche. I can't help but draw a connection between the incarcerated people tortured in these conditions and endlings. It feels like the closest human equivalent to being that alone.

I am worried that there will eventually be a human who is Lonely George, that humanity is on a trajectory approaching George's condition, that this fate is unavoidable. I worry about the physical reality of being the last of one's kind, the amount of suffering ahead to create this loneliness. The way the world will grow smaller and smaller, less and less habitable before our eyes.

I ask Dave Sischo if the snails can feel loneliness. If they're social. If they have personalities. The way I talk about them, he says, is too anthropomorphizing.

What he has observed is social behaviors in the snails that are evolutionarily beneficial. It helps for snails of the same species to stick close together for breeding opportunities. He tells me the mostly blind, nocturnal snails always seek to navigate away from the light, because light means sun, which means drying out. They follow each other's slime trails with appendages on their faces that allow them to taste and smell, sensing the snail in front of them. This is their entire concept of the world. What is in front of them.

In the lab and the field, Dr. Sischo observes the snails cuddling up together during the day, while they are asleep. When he and his team clean their cages, they will observe all the snails clustered together on one leaf. One of his colleagues did a study tracking how far the snails move over time in the wild. They left one of the colonies they were observing in a cage with the lid off and a night vision camera suspended over them. When darkness fell, they formed two lines that followed each other out of the cage. It

was incredible to witness—the mystery of how they spoke to each other, to decide who would lead and tell the rest where to go.

George probably knew there was no one else left like them—their familiar home dwindling and all their friends gone. I don't know whether snails have friends, but that loneliness must be innate—the feeling that you have no one in this world. They must have somehow known. Just like I know what it is to cling to life like a stubborn barnacle, to cling to others like a tick.

I need to listen to podcasts while I walk. The familiar, disembodied voices comfort me. I need to watch television shows made by other people and read books written by other people, sometimes simultaneously, so there is no chance I will be left alone with my thoughts. If I couldn't feel myself surrounded by those other voices, their words keeping me company, seeing me... well, I actually can't even imagine what that would be like. Though I suppose I can. I suppose I already am. As I rub snail mucin onto my face every night, I wonder if there's a cognitive dissonance in working to look young in a world where growing old is increasingly a privilege rather than a right, a world in which it feels like the creatures I love can be taken from me at any moment. I imagine the Ganges river swelling and swallowing up my extended family and their home. I continue to moisturize my skin anyway.

I visited Maui once, when I was 12 years old on a family vacation. This was before I knew about the devastating impact tourism had in Hawai'i—depleting resources, not leaving sufficient access to food, shelter, or clean water for the people who lived there. I didn't know then about the environmental harms of tourism or the exploitation of hospitality workers. I'd never read theory about tourism as pseudo-colonialism, nor guides on how to be a responsible tourist. I was 12 and everything was beautiful. The ocean, the coral reefs, the trees, the flowers. At that point, kāhuli were critically endangered, but not extinct.

Eleven years after this trip, Ma and I sat in a Thai restaurant in St. Louis and I watched coverage of the wildfires in Maui playing on the news channel on their television, the sound muted. I wondered how guilty I should feel, where my family's 2011 trip to Maui fell on the scale of blame. This is a common question I ask myself. I know I am causing harm, but how much harm am I causing compared to others? Does intention matter? Does hyper-awareness of my failures change anything? I donate to a mutual aid fund for victims of the fires and post the link on my Instagram story, a performance, because what else is there to do? I fight the feeling that my life will never get better than this because we're past the point of no return.

EVERY SNAIL IS A UNIVERSE. I SEE THIS BECAUSE FOR some reason I can't exactly pin down, I made an emotional connection with this animal that was the last of its kind. An animal that could sit on my thumbnail comfortably.

In the Snail Extinction Prevention Program, all kāhuli are revered. Riley Nakasone is a Laboratory Technician who attends to the captive snails: cleaning their terraria, growing native plants, and cultivating fungi for the snails to eat. In an article from *NPR* about the protection program, he states, "Their cultural significance, ecological significance, they are just pretty to look at[...] Once you meet them it's hard not to fall in love with them."

“Keeping them on earth is what we are trying to do.”

Nakasone’s team sniffs out rosy wolfsnails with specially trained dogs. They build “predator fences” to keep out threats and check them periodically. They comb through the forest and every leaf is overturned to find carnivorous mollusks and their eggs. Humans introduced invasive species and now humans are taking it upon themselves to get rid of them. They curate this patch of the forest to give kähuli the best chance of survival.

“Keeping them on earth is what we are trying to do,” David Sischo says about the goal of the Snail Extinction Prevention Program. This means stabilizing populations of kähuli so they can live in forests free of the snail hospital, free of the snail morgues. He feels an ethical responsibility to keep these animals around because their decline is a human crime. He tells me every year his work gets a little harder because the world continues to get worse at an unrelenting pace: “I have anxiety. It’s relentless.” He says, “What I’m better at now is learning how to mitigate it. I probably drink too much, but I also have a lot of hobbies that bring me joy. I have pet dogs who bring me joy. And I have a wonderful team of people—my own staff and the partners we

work with all care deeply and are bearing witness. The relationships I cultivate with my colleagues and friends help offset the burden we have to bear.”

I imagine there was another George, one no one was able to find. I imagine this snail lived a long, peaceful life in the forest, unaware that anything was wrong or that anyone was sad, shedding tears of frustration because of their absence. After years of never finding anyone to mate with, this snail figured out how to reproduce asexually, and now many of them peacefully occupy the earth in little neighborhoods, untouched by us and invisible to our eyes. They are under leaves, under dirt, in the sky.

That’s not the truth though. The truth is, George is still dead. The extinction of *Achatinella apexfulva* is a human crime, but a group of humans still celebrates every time a species of kähuli has a new birth. Until their final, tiny breath, Lonely George had David Sischo. They had all these people who devoted their lives to keeping them alive. And now, retroactively, they have my grief.

I wonder if the rest of my life in this world, with the Chekhov’s gun of climate change, will be spent oscillating between hope and despair. Often, I feel scalded by the pure amount of information we are exposed to every day. I never know what’s going to make me cry. The videos of starving, battered cats in Gaza, whale songs, flowers growing in the North Pole. Sometimes, I get overwhelmed. Once in the car, while my partner was driving, I took off my glasses. The street lamps turned impressionist—blurring into floating pom-poms—orange and yellow and red. They were all I could see—not the road in front of us, not where we were going. I heard somewhere that there will eventually be so many satellites orbiting earth we won’t be able to see the stars, but at least in that future, people are still there to look up.

I imagine George floating. Rising above the trees where they used to live, growing smaller and smaller, before blinking out like a bright planet. ✚

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Wellness Retreat



FEELING STRESSED? OVERWORKED? DEMONETIZED? JOIN CURRENT AFFAIRS ON A SPECTACULAR TWO-DAY WELLNESS RETREAT TO RECOVER YOUR WORK-WORK BALANCE, REJUVENATE YOUR INNER STAKEHOLDERS, AND EXPLORE BECOMING A FRIGHTENING NEW KIND OF TRADCATH!

Check out our schedule:

Day 1



6:00 AM: ARRIVAL AND WEIGH-IN: STOP BY THE INFO DESK TO RECEIVE YOUR NEW NEPO-NAME (TIMOTHÉE BEZOS-MURDOCH, ANYONE?) AND MANDATORY OZEMPIC PRESCRIPTION.



7:00 AM: INTRODUCTIONS: EACH ATTENDEE WILL PRESENT AN INTERPRETATIVE DANCE OF THEIR LINKEDIN PROFILE.

8:09 AM: RUBBING: THERE'S GOING TO BE SOME RUBBING.



9:00 AM: BREAKFAST: LOCALLY SLAUGHTERED PANDA HASH WITH COFFEE FROM SUSTAINABLY EXPLOITED GROWERS IN PERU.

10:00 AM: ONE-ON-ONE CRYPTOTHERAPY SESSIONS: MEET WITH YOUR ASSIGNED CRYPTO THERAPIST TO EXPLORE YOUR UNHEALTHY BEHAVIOR PATTERNS AND BET UP TO \$500,000 IN DIGITAL CURECOINS ON WHETHER YOU'LL FIX THEM OR NOT.



1:30 PM: GROUP DISCUSSION: GATHER WITH YOUR FELLOW ATTENDEES IN THE GARDEN TO DISCUSS SILENCING YOUR INNER CRITIC, FEEDING OFF THE BLOATED CORPSE OF AMERICAN SOCIETY WHILE THE SCREAMS OF THE SACRIFICED RING IN YOUR EARS, AND Q3 GOALS.

3:00 PM: AI VISION BOARD: SIT AND WATCH A COMPUTER TELL YOU WHAT YOUR HOPES AND DREAMS ARE.

5:00 PM: TAX FAST: INSTEAD OF GIVING INTO TEMPTATION, YOU'LL SPEND THE DINNER HOUR TAX FASTING: FOCUSING ON HOW TO NOURISH YOUR INNER SELF EVEN WITHOUT PAYING TAXES!

8:00 PM: SUNSET MEDIATION: JOIN US ON THE BEACH TO NEGOTIATE A FAIR PRICE FOR WATCHING A SUNSET.



Day 2

6:00 AM: ARISE: SET YOUR DAY'S INTENTIONS BY GENTLY WATCHING LOOKSMAXXING TIKTOKS FOR TWO STRAIGHT HOURS.

8:00 AM: BREAKFAST: POPULAR SURGICAL INFLUENCER ARPOLIS THURB SHOWS ATTENDEES HOW TO CLEAN OUT BAD GUT BACTERIA BY SURGICALLY REMOVING THEIR OWN GUT.



8:51 AM: RUBBING II:
NOW PUT IT ALL BACK.



9:00 AM: CHOOSE YOUR OWN NATURE ADVENTURE: ATTENDEES WILL CHOOSE WHETHER TO SPEND THE MORNING ON A NATURE WALK THROUGH THE OLD-GROWTH FOREST CHOPPING THE TREES DOWN, FROLICKING IN THE LIMPID FRESHWATER BATHS OF OUR DATA CENTER COOLING TANKS, OR KAYAKING TO THE NEW EPSTEIN ISLAND. LUNCH PROVIDED.

1:30 PM: GROUP DISCUSSION: COME TOGETHER WITH THE REST OF THE GROUP IN THE LEVERAGE LOUNGE TO SHARE YOUR OWN EXPERIENCES OF OVERCOMING SEXUAL HARASSMENT ALLEGATIONS, CHERISHING YOUR PRIVATE EQUITY WINS, AND COPING WITH GENOCIDAL INTENT.

3:30 PM: WAGE POOL: BOOST YOUR CARDIO AND ENGAGE YOUR CORE IN THE CIRCULATING POOL OF YOUR EMPLOYEES' UNPAID WAGES.



6:00 PM: DINNER: ENJOY ALL THE FAMILIAR COMFORTS OF HOME AT OUR PERFECTLY RECREATED ONSITE SWEETGREEN, COMPLETE WITH AN UNDERPAID ALL-POC STAFF!



7:00 PM: EVENING PRAYER: TAKE TIME TO SILENTLY CONTEMPLATE HOW YOUR RABID PROCREATIONIST DRIVE TO FERTILIZE AMERICA WITH YOUR SEED IS GOD'S ONLY HOPE OF SAVING THE WHITE RACE.

9:00 PM: LIGHTS OUT: SLEEP SOUNDLY WITH THE KNOWLEDGE THAT YOU'RE BETTER THAN EVERYONE ELSE AND YOU DESERVE HAPPINESS AT THE EXPENSE OF THEIR SUFFERING.

What to Bring



REUSABLE CAVIAR BOTTLE • EYEBALL FILLER • GOLF GUN • 2-3 YACHTS • 5 SENATORS' INSIDE-TRADING TIPS • 10 LITERS YOUNG HUMAN PLASMA • THOSE GODAWFUL DRESS SNEAKERS WITH THE WHITE SOLES THAT EVERY SILICON VALLEY ASSHOLE AND POLITICIAN JERKOFF WEARS NOW WITH THEIR BLAZER OVER A T-SHIRT AND THEY LOOK LIKE A FUCKING IDIOT (2 PAIRS) • SUN HAT

AMY GOODMAN ON TELLING THE STORIES POWER WANTS BURIED

30 YEARS OF *DEMOCRACY NOW!*

AMY GOODMAN has long followed a simple mission to “go where the silence is.” Since co-founding *Democracy Now!* in 1991, she has reported from the front lines of some of the country’s most defining crises, long before mainstream outlets paid attention—traveling to New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina to confront authorities over their abandonment of residents, facing down riot police at the 2008 Republican National Convention, and even becoming the subject of an arrest warrant for covering protests against the Dakota Access Pipeline in North Dakota.

A new documentary, *Steal This Story, Please!*, chronicles Goodman’s decades-long career as a relentless journalist. Alongside directors Carl Deal and Tia Lessin, Goodman joined *Current Affairs* to discuss the making of the film, the myth of the “impartial” reporter, and why independent media is more essential now than ever before.

NATHAN J. ROBINSON

We are privileged today to be joined by the filmmakers Carl Deal and Tia Lessin. Their new film is *Steal This Story, Please!* about the life and work of Amy Goodman and the history of *Democracy Now!* Carl and Tia, welcome to the program.

And we have an incredibly special guest here, the subject of the film, the legendary journalist Amy Goodman, who has been the host of *Democracy Now!* since 1996.

AMY GOODMAN

Well, it’s great to be with you. I think being the subject is probably better than being the object, but it’s great to be here with all of you. Nathan, I last saw you in person at the anniversary of your magazine. So it’s really wonderful to be back.

ROBINSON

Indeed. Yes, you came to our 10-year anniversary in New Orleans. You gave a great speech at Netroots Nation, where you said “independent media like *Current Affairs*,” which we appreciated.

So this new film, which profiles the entire body of work that you’ve done over the last 30 years, I want to start with Carl and Tia. Obviously, the film is your concept, and you got to go through the entire archives of *Democracy Now!* while

making it. You’re obviously using Amy’s career here not just to show us what she has done, but also to show us what serious journalism looks like with *Democracy Now!* as a model. You begin with this incredible scene of Amy chasing down one of Trump’s climate advisors, desperately trying to get him to answer a question.

So I wondered if you could talk about what makes *Democracy Now!* and Amy’s work special, and distinct from corporate media, and such a fitting subject for a film.

CARL DEAL

You got it exactly right in terms of what the film is and what the film shows. For us, when we make a film, it’s because we want to say something, and we want to have an experience that we can share with the audience. And so, specifically with respect to *Democracy Now!*, making this film gave us a chance to, well, in a horrific way, relive the last 30 years, relive our adult lives and our experience of the horrors that we’ve brought to the world as a country in many ways. But also to experience the flip side and understand the resistance to that, and the resistance movements that Amy and *Democracy Now!* have always given space for over the years. And so, things have changed a lot, even in the short time that we started making this film.



Photo: Brooke Duthie

And we never would have anticipated the landscape that we're living in right now in 2026, even as it applies to media. As we see in the film, Amy and her team at *Democracy Now!* have been calling out the corporate media and the laws that have resulted in just such an incredible narrowing of the news media landscape. And so we got to spend 30 years sort of deepening our understanding of the moment that we live in right now.

LESSIN

Yes. We have a president of the United States who has called the press "the enemy of the people." Not only that, but journalists are increasingly facing harassment and physical assault. Their materials are being seized by the federal government. They are facing arrest and lawsuits not only from politicians like Donald Trump but also from corporations that want to silence their coverage.

And so to me, there's no more important time to talk about the freedom of the press, to talk about the importance of journalism, than now, and there's no better way to do it than to tell the story of Amy Goodman and *Democracy Now!*

ROBINSON

Amy, I'd like to ask you, when you're thinking about putting together *Democ-*

racy Now!, what your philosophy of story selection is. Because, obviously, what you are doing contrasts with what corporate news does.

There's this incredible and very funny moment in the film where, after meeting you, Regis Philbin says on air something like, "I've realized that I do nothing. My life is meaningless!" Basically, "I cover the beautiful baby contest," as opposed to Amy Goodman, who covers serious, substantive things. So without disrespecting him personally, when you're thinking, what is the hole in corporate media?—what is the gap?—how is *Democracy Now!* different? What are you trying to put together?

GOODMAN

It's people speaking for themselves, framing their own experience. I'm speaking to you on a day that we interviewed Leqaa Kordia, the Palestinian activist who protested at Columbia's campus. She's from the occupied West Bank. She was arrested one day at one of the encampments, but then the charges were dropped. Then, she was taken by ICE, and she was—I don't even want to say the word "detained"; she was imprisoned at the Prairieland ICE jail for a year, and she's just gotten out after a judge *time and time again* said she had to be freed.

She's continuing to go through her court case, but now she is not in prison. She had her first seizure while she was in this ICE jail in Adelanto. She was taken to the hospital, and she was chained to the bed by her hands and feet. Now I'm describing this to you, Nathan, but the power of *Democracy Now!* is she described it herself.

Or Aliyah Rahman. She's an autistic, disabled woman in Minneapolis—super smart, walks with a cane—and she was in her car going to the doctor, and immigration officials smashed her window and pulled her out of her car. She shouted, "I'm disabled!" They said, "Too late." They imprisoned her. Eventually she got out. We had her on *Democracy Now!*

Ilhan Omar, the Somali refugee congresswoman, the only one in the U.S. Congress, invited her to President Trump's State of the Union. She was in the gallery, sitting between a sheriff of one town and a mayor of another, where all the guests of the congress members were; they're all sitting, standing, and applauding. Both parties do that when the president is with their party. And as President Trump denigrated the people of Minneapolis, she just stood quietly, and security came and took her down *again*. This woman with her ripped tendons, who had been so mauled in Minneapolis, *again* was attacked and arrested. She

got out of jail at four in the morning and came on *Democracy Now!* and said, “I’m wearing the same clothes I wore last night to the State of the Union because I haven’t been to bed. I came straight from jail.”

And to hear someone describe that, that’s what we try to do on a regular basis. Now, sometimes we can’t; sometimes they’re jailed, and so we tell their stories until they can tell their own. That’s why I think *Democracy Now!* reverberates with people across the political spectrum, because we’re going to where the silence is. We’re covering stories that the rest in media may have pundits on, *if they cover it at all*. Who knows so little about so much? Telling us everything and getting it so wrong. It’s people describing their unique experiences, and from that, we have to make a decision. Whatever country we are in, what are the laws and the practices of our country? And that’s how democracy works. Independent media is essential to the functioning of a democratic society.

JOHN ROSS

Amy, there’s a question I had for you that’s somewhat related to that. Early in the documentary, there’s the scene where you share a story about how early in your career you applied to work for Phil Donahue and how that rejection pushed you towards independent journalism. But what was striking to me about that scene is that, of course, Donahue himself was later unceremoniously fired from MSNBC during the early stages of the Iraq War, supposedly because they were afraid he was going to give too much space to anti-war voices.

And I’m wondering, when you look at the media landscape today, do you think that anything has changed since the run-up to the war in Iraq, or do you think that anti-war voices are still getting pushed to the margins?

GOODMAN

Well, that’s a really critical point. And yes, he was unceremoniously dumped, even though *The [Phil] Donahue Show* on MSNBC, which is MSNOW now, was their most popular show. A memo came out later that said he would have on anti-war and pro-war voices, but they didn’t want anti-war voices on their air when other networks were waving the

American flag. I think all of our definitions of waving the American flag are very different—what that flag *can* mean.

And at that point, there were so many millions of people who were opposed to war, yet the vast majority of the voices on all the media, not just MSNBC, not just Fox, on *all* the corporate networks, were for war. The extent of the debate: do we put boots on the ground, or do we just bomb from the air? And obviously, what’s missing is, do we go to war at all? Particularly, for example, as we’re talking to you and recording this, the U.S. and Israel have bombed Iran, and Iran is retaliating. It is so serious. It’s the most serious decision a country can make. And all too often, the corporate media basically surrounds the White House at a time like that and calls it unpatriotic to ask questions. It’s *precisely* when we have to ask questions.

LESSIN

And I’ll just add to that. I’ve heard Amy say this, and I think it’s a profound statement. When she interviews soldiers, it’s not just the soldiers going to war; it’s the soldiers coming back from war. She doesn’t forget them once they’ve done their so-called duty. She interviews them. And many of them come back from war as protesters, protesting the very wars they were part of, because they get to see up close the lies that they’re based on.

So we have a scene in the film in 2008 when Amy’s covering the Republican National Convention. It’s four years after the invasion of Iraq. The war is still going on, and there are people in the streets of Minneapolis protesting, and many of those are the veterans. And they come up to Amy and embrace her because they are so appreciative of her coverage. They are not being covered by the mainstream in that moment; they still, to this day, get forgotten.

ROSS

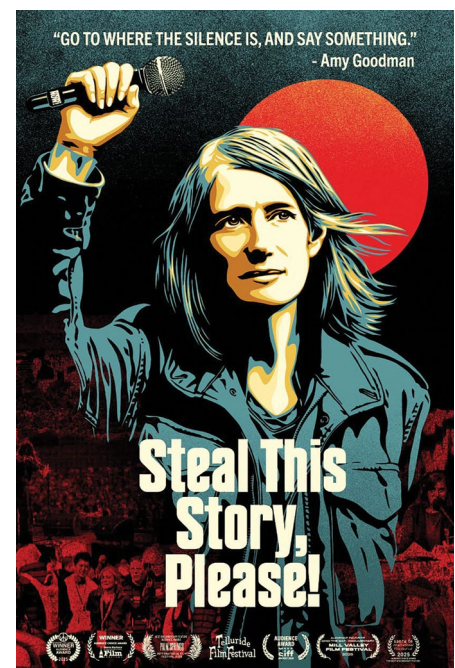
Another question I had for you, Carl and Tia, is there’s another moment in the film where Amy is accused of being not a journalist but an activist. And it made me think about how, in corporate media, there are, of course, all of these pressures, whether it be advertisers or maintaining access to powerful people. Now we see

more billionaire ownership. And it made me wonder, do you think that the distinction is not between media and activism, but between media that challenges power and media that sort of accommodates and coddles it?

DEAL

Look, I think there’s nothing wrong with being an activist, and Amy can respond to that. She’ll have her take on that conversation. But the way that it’s used is to demean and to marginalize and to disrupt people who are truth-tellers in a certain way and who are telling a story that [others] don’t want to be heard.

And so for me, the distinction isn’t, are you an activist or not an activist? But instead, who do you serve? Do you serve power or not? And you might also ask those who like to throw that word around in a demeaning way, “Who do you serve?” and say, “*You’re* actually the activist, because you’re serving power and you’re serving the corporations that own you, and you’re playing *their* game. You have a very clear agenda, or you’re working within an institution that has a very clear agenda.” And so my opinion is that those are the activists. They’re just activists for the right.



Official movie poster designed by Shepard Fairey, 2026

LESSIN

I would just add that there are many journalists who do want to ask the hard questions, who are interested in forcing accountability, and they are just compromised because of the institutions they work for. So Amy is not only this journalist who asks the hard questions, but she's also created this model that allows her to do that without interruption because she's not accountable to corporations. She's not accountable to government funding. She's accountable to her listeners. And that really is the difference. Who are you accountable to? Whom do you serve? as Carl said. And what compromises are you forced to make?

GOODMAN

And as Tia said, we started in 1996, 30 years ago, as the only daily election show in public broadcasting. We were a radio show on something like nine community radio stations—the five Pacifica stations and a few others—and then we were going to just really pack up and do another project. And people said, “Wait, we want this show to continue,” because we used the election as a way to look at what people were doing on the ground in all the primary states.

When I got the call to do *Democracy Now!* from Pacifica Radio, I was in a safe house in Haiti, following what Haitians were doing in their elections. The overwhelming number were voting. They would go to the polls, and they'd be gunned down. People would announce their candidacy, and they would be gunned down, but they still went. I said, wow, so I would come back to the United States, and I would do an election show where most people just didn't vote. But I didn't think that was because people were apathetic. And I wanted to know: what are people doing on the ground, even if they're not voting?

It was that energy and power of people on the ground and all of their communities around the United States that really reverberated through *Democracy Now!*, which is why people said this is beyond an election show. So we did that for five years. More stations came on board—still radio—and then the week of the September 11, 2001 attacks, we were broadcasting from a community media

center called DCTV, just below Canal Street downtown, community television that was teaching high-schoolers video and also had video connections to local public access TV station MMN. And since we were the closest national broadcast to Ground Zero, the local public access TV station said, “Can we just turn on our cameras? They're already with you.”

We were within the evacuation zone. No one could come in, and if we went out, we wouldn't be able to continue doing *Democracy Now!* every day. The police wouldn't have let us come back. So I slept in a hammock at the firehouse. It was this old, decommissioned firehouse. And station after TV station asked to broadcast us as emergency broadcasting, and that was dozens of stations. When we would go on a public access station, the NPR station would say, “Can we run you in a town?” Then the PBS station, then the college station, and it grew to these 1,500 stations around the world. Viewers, listeners, and readers. Our headlines and segments are [also] in Spanish.

Today, I just interviewed the Arizona Secretary of State, and we were talking about President Trump interfering with the elections. We did the interview on the show and then afterward in Spanish because we have a Spanish website. We believe we have to go to where people are: on social media, whether it's TikTok, X, Bluesky, or Facebook; the old and the young. We go to where people are. It's so critical that we broaden the base all over the world and also that we know no borders. Reporters should know no borders.

LESSIN

And just to say, as we were watching Amy transform this scrappy radio show into this extraordinary network, we were seeing the opposite happen in the corporate media world. In 1996, the same year that *Democracy Now!* came on the air, the same year that Fox News came on the air, Bill Clinton and Newt Gingrich teamed up to pass the Telecommunications Act, which lifted all the restrictions, all the caps of ownership in local media. And so what used to be hundreds of local stations operating in communities across the country, accountable to those communities, has increasingly, in the last 25 years, been consolidated into just a handful of

stations, print outlets, and radio outlets.

This incredible consolidation has happened in front of our very eyes, and we have just a few corporations and billionaire owners controlling the outlets. And their first priority is not the news. It's not to the journalists who work for them. It's to their shareholders; it's to their board of directors. And so we've seen them capitulate time and time again to the president right now and trade in the integrity of their news organizations for the special favors that they get from the administration.

ROBINSON

Amy, can I ask you to maybe comment on your views on this question of whether one can be a journalist and also be an activist, someone who takes a stance?

Some of the more moving moments in the film, such as the campaign to free [Maurice Beckham] in Louisiana from Angola prison or talking to [Nigerian activist] Ken Saro-Wiwa, make it very clear that you have a side in certain disputes. You are anti-war. You know you are against atrocities and injustice. And many journalists fear being seen as having a stance; they don't want to go to a protest. You don't seem to have that fear. How do you think about that balance of objectivity and principle?

GOODMAN

I know the political views of all of these corporate network journalists, and it's not because I know them personally at all. I glean them from what they say. The difference is, they're reinforcing the status quo. And if you have a view that may be outside the status quo on television but is very much of majority opinion, like caring about affordability and that everyone has healthcare, you can say, “Well, then you're taking a position for universal healthcare.” Whereas a corporate journalist just says they're not doing such a thing. They're just saying we should continue as we are, and that's endorsing private insurance.

So I don't think it's about whether you have a view. I think it's whether you are fair and whether you are accurate. I once wrote a piece, and I can't remember on what issue it was, but we were having a debate the next day on the issue. The

person who took a stand against my op-ed piece called up and said she wasn't going to do it because she read my piece, and that wasn't fair. And so I said, "Oh, are you going to pull out of the debate? We'll have to say that." They said, "I didn't pull out." I said, "Well, you mean you're not going to pull out?" They said, "Well, I didn't mean that. Okay, okay!"

They came on the air, we had the debate, and she called after and said it was the fairest debate she'd ever participated in. She said, and this is definitely my philosophy: it's not that we should present the person we disagree with as the worst of what they say and the person I agree with all rosy. Make your best argument and let people decide. Independent media is supposed to serve a democratic society. We all have to make decisions. We vote on what we want this civilization to look like, and that is taking on the difficult issues of the day and taking nothing for granted.

How is it that we think we can afford war in any sense of the word in the 21st century? Whether we're talking about the deaths of so many. Look at Minab. The first day the U.S. and Israel attacked Iran, over 175 people, mainly schoolgirls, died in their school, along with a handful of teachers. Is this really what we want to represent America? And the catastrophic climate damage of weapons of war, and what we're seeing right now—that's almost not dealt with at all. And we have to take on these very serious issues and bring on voices, the experts in their areas. How little we get to hear people who are either experts in their own lives or who actually, officially are scientists or teachers or professors, and that's what we try to bring to any discussion. And a lot of times I don't know the answer. We are searching for what is the best solution and hear people hash it out.

DEAL

And Nathan, let me say: we see, we hear, and we feel Amy's passion when she talks about what she does and why it's important. And to answer your question about whether she makes the distinction between activism and journalism, I'll just quote [David Isae] from the film, who, to describe what we just heard Amy do, says if she believes something, she's going to fight for it and get it out to the world. And to me, that's just straight-up journalism. It's not advocacy. It's just a pure belief in

what's good and fighting for that with everything that she's got. And that is a perfect description, I think, of what drives Amy's kind of journalism.

ROSS

One more question I had for you both, Carl and Tia, is after making this film and looking back at 30 years of Amy's work, what do you think would be missing from the historical record today if *Democracy Now!* hadn't existed?

LESSIN

That's a great question. It wasn't lost on us that we're watching all this footage in this time when the historical record is being erased in front of our very eyes. It's being taken out of the museums, our public schools, and our colleges and universities by a regime that doesn't believe in facts, science, and history, or at least wants to change the telling of the story. So Amy and *Democracy Now!*, her team there, have helped us build that historical record every single day through their reporting, through their eyewitness footage, and through their interviews.

And I think about the story that Amy just mentioned about the imprisonment of the Palestinian activist Leqaa Kordia, and I remember hearing the interview with her lawyer in December. Amy had the lawyer on. She couldn't get to the woman in the prison, but she had her lawyer speak about it, and I was reduced to tears hearing about it. And this was a story that wasn't being told by other commercial networks, and the press really ignored this, but you could hear it on *Democracy Now!* and it was important. And 25 years, 50 years, or 75 years from now, that voice will stand as a reminder of the horrific conditions that political prisoners were placed in in this moment.

DEAL

And thank goodness for the incredible job that *Democracy Now!* does of making everything that they've ever aired available at a keystroke. How frustrating is it for us if you're doing research and looking for something, you want to look for something on CNN, you hit a paywall, or they don't keep anything more than six months? And there is a record of these voices for 30 years that you can access at

democracynow.org, and that's an incredible service to the greater good.

GOODMAN

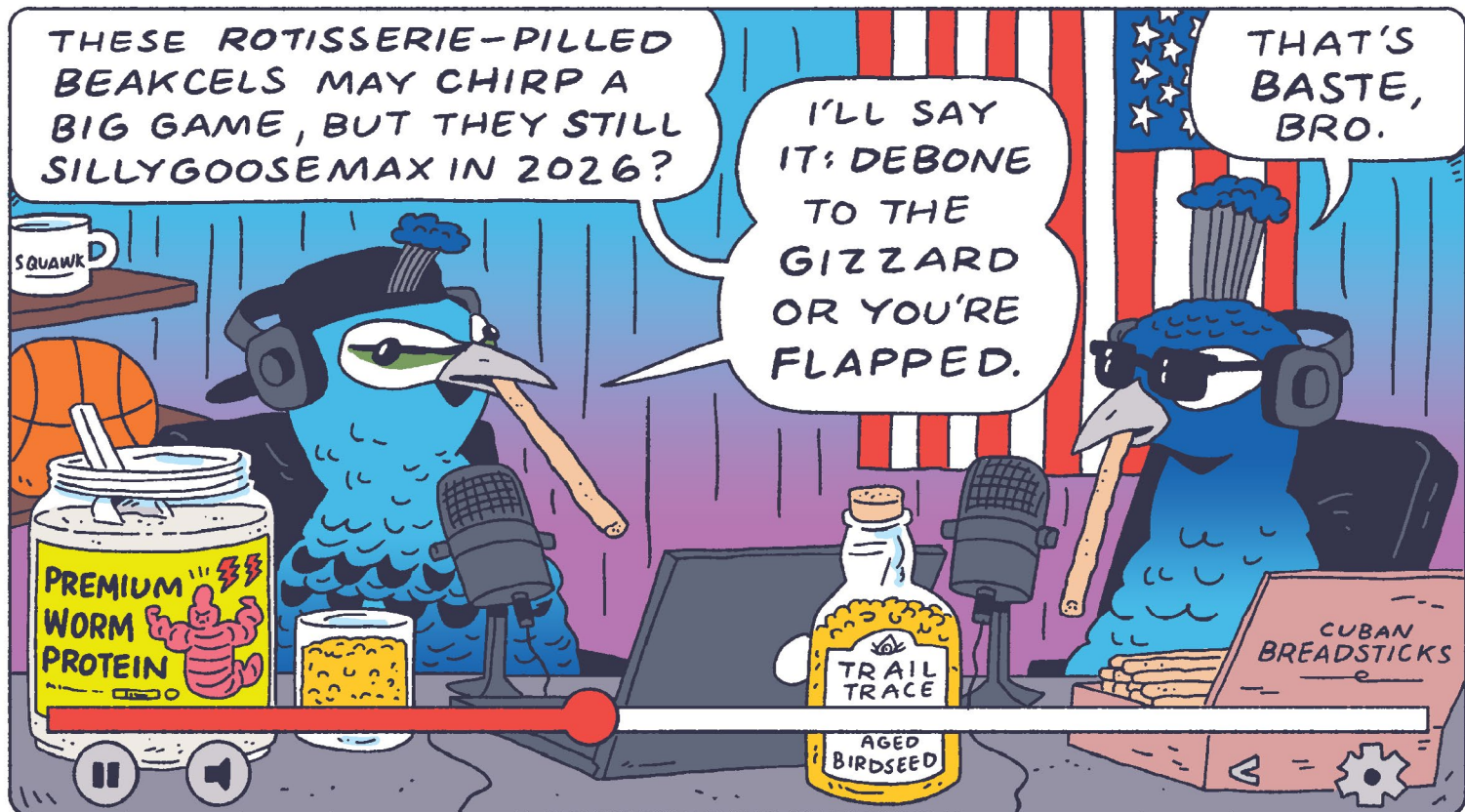
And to follow up on that, at *stealthistory.org*, you can see where the film is being shown all over the country, because it is a distillation, by no means the whole record, of 30 years. But for people who can spend a little time to look at the key issues of our day, what we're so thrilled about is we could take it outside the realm of the internet, social media, TV, radio, and reading to movie theaters. And why do I talk about movie theaters? That hasn't been my world so much. I thought I very much knew this world. We used to go to Sundance every year and cover the documentary track.

But when Carl and Tia started to do this and I started to become familiar with what they were doing, I was just amazed. First of all, as we come out of the pandemic, movie theaters and art houses are communal spaces. That is very special. The energy you get. I so appreciate, out of the pandemic, being able to be with people and being able to talk to them, and that's really where political change happens. And it is amazing right now to see how hard they're working to populate the art houses and movie theaters with *Steal This Story, Please!*

And the idea, of course, of *Steal This Story, Please!*, is these stories—we don't want them to be exclusive! That's a failure. We want them to be shared with the world. And you see in the film, for example, with the standoff at Standing Rock, we went there and should have been elbowing our way to the front because there are so many journalists there. That would have made us very happy. But we are the only ones there when we show the dogs with their mouths dripping with blood because they bit Native American First Nations activists who were fighting for the planet, fighting against the Dakota Access Pipeline. Then, because it was this epic struggle, all the media started taking our footage, and that's a good thing. And the film, *Steal This Story, Please!*, is distilling all of that. And especially for young people, it says you can do this whether we're covering someone falsely imprisoned or whether we're covering this epic environmental struggle. It is so critical that we be there together and experience this. ♣



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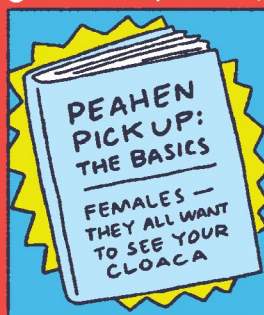


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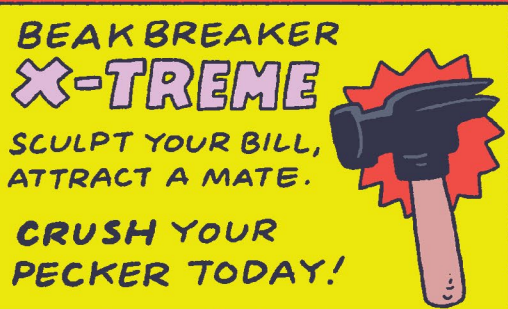
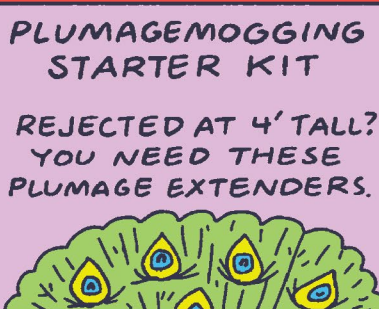


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