

HOW  
DID IT  
COME  
TO  
THIS?

Why the Virus Won  
*By Ed Yong*

The Power of  
American Denial  
*By Ibram X. Kendi*



*The Atlantic*  
EST. 1857



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# HOW CAN GREATER CONNECTIVITY HELP KEEP OUR DATA SAFE?

## I AM JEN EASTERLY

Global Head of the Fusion Resilience Center

While the Internet has made our lives easier, its interconnectedness has also made our data less secure, with a cyberattack now occurring every 40 seconds.<sup>1</sup> In the Morgan Stanley Fusion Center, we're capitalizing on the connectivity of our talent and technology to not only respond rapidly to cyberthreats, but also to proactively keep client data safe. So while the volume, variety and velocity of data are ever expanding, so is our ability to protect it.

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To watch Jen's Morgan Stanley Minute on "Cybersecurity in the Connected Age," go to [morganstanley.com/cybersecurity](https://morganstanley.com/cybersecurity).

<sup>1</sup>"13 Alarming Cyber Security Facts and Stats," [cybintsolutions.com/cyber-security-facts-stats](https://cybintsolutions.com/cyber-security-facts-stats), December 2018.  
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On the Cover

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# Your Business

# Has Gone Digital.

## Now What?

Future-proofing your company isn't just a matter of "digital transformation." It's about understanding your consumers and building a digital experience around what they need.

**B**

usiness leaders are told they need to do a lot of things when it comes to technology. They need to build an app. They need an AI chatbot. They need more data. They need a social-media strategy.

In short: To better serve their customers, they need to go digital—and fast. But beyond buzzwords, what's actually at stake in this transformation?

To better understand the challenges that organizations face and help them plan their digital transitions, ServiceNow surveyed 600 global executives in an array of industries—including telecoms, health care, manufacturing, the public sector, and financial services—in February and March of 2020. They discovered that businesses have a lot of catching up to do.

### You're probably not prepared, and you aren't alone.

Creating a positive customer experience isn't just about building a beautiful website or app. It's about creating a digital workflow that enables customers to seamlessly access what they need, and most organizations don't have a plan in place to do that. Even companies leading in digitization—those who have adopted the best practices of building a digital customer experience (listed here)—have a long way to go.

To gain more insight on how to keep pace with digitization, read the full article at: [TheAtlantic.com/NowWhat](https://TheAtlantic.com/NowWhat)

- The percentage of best practices that have been implemented by organizations to date
- The percentage of implementation they expect to reach by 2023

#### Developing digital skills



#### Implementing a customer-experience management system



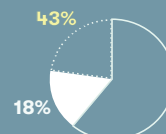
#### Aligning experience with business goals



#### Identifying key customer touchpoints



#### Creating an immersive and personalized experience





*Behind the Cover:* A picture is worth a thousand words—but sometimes only a few words are necessary. This month's unadorned cover poses an urgent national question in stark typographic terms. Ed Yong and Ibram X. Kendi, in their respective essays, elucidate answers by interrogating the uniquely American failures that have

allowed the dual crises of COVID-19 and racism to fester. They look squarely, too, at the choices the country now faces if it is to have any hope of recovery. On occasions such as this, a designer's touch should be light, giving the language space to resonate on its own terms.

— Oliver Munday, *Senior Art Director*

# THE

## Underlying Conditions

*In America, George Packer wrote, the coronavirus has revealed a sick and unequal society incapable of self-government (June).*

### Letters

As I read this excellent article, I was struck by the clarity of the writer's vision.

I was completely unprepared, however, to burst into tears when I read the last paragraph. The phrase "We can use this pause in our normal lives to pay attention to the hospital workers holding up cellphones so their patients can say goodbye to loved ones" conjured up such a strong image, I couldn't hold back my tears. We are all grieving—for ourselves, for our country, and for one another. The selflessness of so many people should be an inspiration to all of us.

Christine Szolkowski  
Howell Township, N.J.

I am a senior administrator at a major public hospital in New

York City and have been simultaneously awed by the work of my health-care colleagues and furious at how much has been asked of them because our federal government willfully stopped working like one long ago. It has placed minorities, wage laborers, and "essential workers" at needless risk as the result of replacing core principles of good governance with unrelenting partisan warfare, in all three branches. We'll dig out and recover from the daily impact of this crisis, but it's much less certain whether we'll ever recover the nation's sense of unity and purpose.

Todd Hixson  
New York, N.Y.

The article was powerful, but it did not tell the entire story.

There is a saying in the African American community that was captured by Sam Fulwood III in a 2015 article titled "When White Folks Catch a Cold, Black Folks Get Pneumonia." Those of us in the African American community who are cognizant of our history and have experienced American inequities are not shocked by the ineptness of the health-care system in poor and urban minority communities. However, white America appears to be.

I could not agree more with Mr. Packer when he says, "Invasion and occupation expose a society's fault lines ... clarifying essential truths, raising the smell of buried rot." If nothing else, the coronavirus has served as a harsh reminder that while white America is catching a cold, Black America is suffering a potential death threat.

Yolanda Brown-Spidell  
Westland, Mich.

Comparing President Donald Trump's performance to that of France's Marshal Philippe Pétain in World War II is a bit of a stretch. Perhaps a more apt World War II comparison is the United States's disgraceful response to the U-boat menace off our Atlantic coast, in the Caribbean, and in the Gulf of Mexico in 1942. Despite watching how the British dealt with the U-boats in the Atlantic for the first two years of the war, the U.S. failed to prepare, learn, or implement effective countermeasures. It all sounds so familiar.

John Whittemore  
Marion, N.C.

I shall chew on this article for several days. The taste is bitter. However, it should be swallowed and digested; hopefully its nutrients will be absorbed.

Ian McHugh  
Mattapoisett, Mass.



The accurate and devastating picture of today's United States speaks to a betrayal of the dreams I had when I came as an immigrant to this country in 1971. Fortunately for all, the U.S. has proved to be a most resilient country, able to recover from the worst natural and man-made disasters.

César Chelala  
New York, N.Y.

I am a refugee born after the end of World War II and a proud naturalized American citizen. My heart is wounded by every truth revealed in this article—but I thank Mr. Packer for writing it.

Helma Reynolds  
Sanibel, Fla.

While it is incredibly sad to see our great southern neighbor sink into irrelevancy, the real disturbing thing for Canadians is that our neighbor may drag our nation into the abyss with it.

Maurice Coombs  
Toronto, Ontario

Sadly, almost every word of George Packer's article is interchangeable with our experience over decades here in the U.K. It is no coincidence that our respective countries have among the highest COVID-19 death tolls in the world.

Paul Mellon  
Glasgow, Scotland

As an Australian, I daily sit in stunned amazement at my

American friends, whose leader revels in displaying his ignorance of science and disdain for facts while his fellow citizens die. I love my American friends, but for once I feel desperately sorry for you all.

Paul Jones  
St Kilda, Victoria, Australia

## Why Birds Do What They Do

*The more humans understand about their behavior, Jenny Odell wrote in June, the more inaccessible their world seems.*

I deeply appreciated Jenny Odell's article, and the simultaneous wonder and quiet concern interspersed throughout it. The stay-at-home orders many Americans have found

themselves under have allowed them an unusual peek into backyard worlds and dramas that previously they had no idea existed. For me, now that I know this whole universe is humming around me all the time, it's pretty hard to look away.

Megan Richter  
Ridgecrest, Calif.

## The Last Day of My Old Life

*In the June issue, Caitlin Flanagan wrote about cancer in the time of the coronavirus.*

During treatment for cancer, there are lots of images of the patient as a warrior, battling the cancer. I was always lukewarm about that imaging, but it is very prominent. Now I

hear the administration using the same language: that we are warriors against COVID-19. I was unable to avoid getting cancer. I should be able to avoid getting COVID-19. There should be testing, tracking, tracing, and a rational, coordinated national approach.

Now not only am I in the nightmare of knowing that at some point my cancer will return, but I am also in the nightmare of realizing that my government does not even want me to get to that point. My government is framing the argument that I am old, useless, and, for heaven's sake, defective because I have metastatic cancer.

Celia Abbott  
Banning, Calif.

To respond to *Atlantic* articles or submit author questions to The Commons, please email [letters@theatlantic.com](mailto:letters@theatlantic.com). Include your full name, city, and state.

## THE FACTS

### What we learned fact-checking this issue

On page 9, Jennifer A. Richeson considers why Americans overestimate the country's progress toward racial equality. Her research found that Americans underestimate the gap between Black and white familial wealth,

both past and present. That gap has remained relatively stable for half a century, but Americans tend to assume that it has narrowed over time.

Other research may help explain why such misconceptions persist. Participants in one 2015 study were asked to imagine America as having a population of 100 people, and to estimate how many

would see their income rise from the bottom 20 percent to the top 20 percent over 10 years. They guessed that 16 would make that leap; in reality, only one would. Of the respondents, young people and those who self-reported high socioeconomic status were especially off target. As the study's authors explain it, these two groups are particularly

invested in the notion of social mobility—the young rely on it for future success, and elites need it to justify their status as earned. Downplaying inequality, even unconsciously, can help people preserve comforting ideas about themselves—and about their country.

—Jack Segelstein,  
Assistant Editor



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# DISPATCHES

OPENING ARGUMENT

## THE MYTHOLOGY OF RACIAL PROGRESS

*Believing that things  
are always getting better  
actually makes them worse.*

BY JENNIFER  
A. RICHESON

For two days in early June, as America was erupting in sustained protests over the killing of a Black man, George Floyd, by police in Minneapolis, the most watched movie on Netflix was *The Help*. The 2011 film—which depicts Black servants working in affluent white households in 1960s Mississippi, and centers on a white female journalist—won acclaim in some quarters. But it has also been criticized as a sentimental and simplistic portrayal of racism—and redemption—amid the cruelties of Jim Crow.

To ask what was going on here—why people started watching *The Help* at a moment of deep racial trauma—is to risk tumbling down a rabbit hole. That



the movie was newly available on Netflix does not explain everything. One reality that the *Help* phenomenon makes us recognize is the enduring power of mythology when it comes to American racism. The mythology takes many forms. Sometimes it involves a desperate grasping for affirmation. Sometimes it involves a gauzy nostalgia. Sometimes it involves a willful ignorance. All of these strains, and others, are woven into a larger and enduring narrative—the mythology of racial progress.

This is a uniquely American mythology. Since the nation's founding, its prevailing cultural sensibility has been optimistic, future-oriented, sure of itself, and convinced of America's inherent goodness. Despite our tragic racial history, Americans generally believe that the country has made and continues to make steady progress toward racial equality. Broad acceptance of this trajectory underlies the way our leaders talk. It also influences the way racism is treated in popular culture.

When we think about the nation's racial history, we often envision a linear path, one that, admittedly, begins in a shameful period but moves unerringly in a single direction—toward equality. As if we're riding a Whiggish escalator, the narrative of racial progress starts with slavery, ascends to the Civil War and the Emancipation Proclamation, speeds past segregation and Jim Crow to the victories of the civil-rights movement, and then drops us off in 2008 for Barack Obama's election. Many people asserted at the time that America had become a "postracial" society, or was at least getting close—maybe one more short escalator ride away. This redemptive narrative not

only smooths over the past but smooths over what is yet to come: It holds out the promise of an almost predestined, naturally occurring future that will be even more just and egalitarian.

Thinking this way won't make the future better.

**THE MYTHOLOGY OF** racial progress distorts our perceptions of reality; perhaps more significantly, it absolves us of responsibility for changing that reality. Progress is seen as natural and inevitable—inescapable, like the laws of physics. Backsliding is unlikely. Vigilance is unnecessary.

It is obviously true that many of the conditions of life for Black Americans have gotten better over time. Material standards have in many ways improved. Some essential civil rights have advanced, though unevenly, episodically, and usually only following great and contentious effort. But many areas never saw much progress, or what progress was made has been halted or even reversed. The mythology of racial progress often rings hollow when it comes to, for instance, racial gaps in education. Or health outcomes. Or voting rights. Or criminal justice. Or personal wealth. History is not a ratchet that turns in one direction only. Martin Luther King Jr. famously asserted that "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." And maybe it will, in the end. But in our actual lifetimes we see backward steps and tragic detours.

The protests that began in late May have focused on fundamental questions of police violence and civil rights. This sort of awakening offers great opportunity—more on that in a moment—but it is rare in

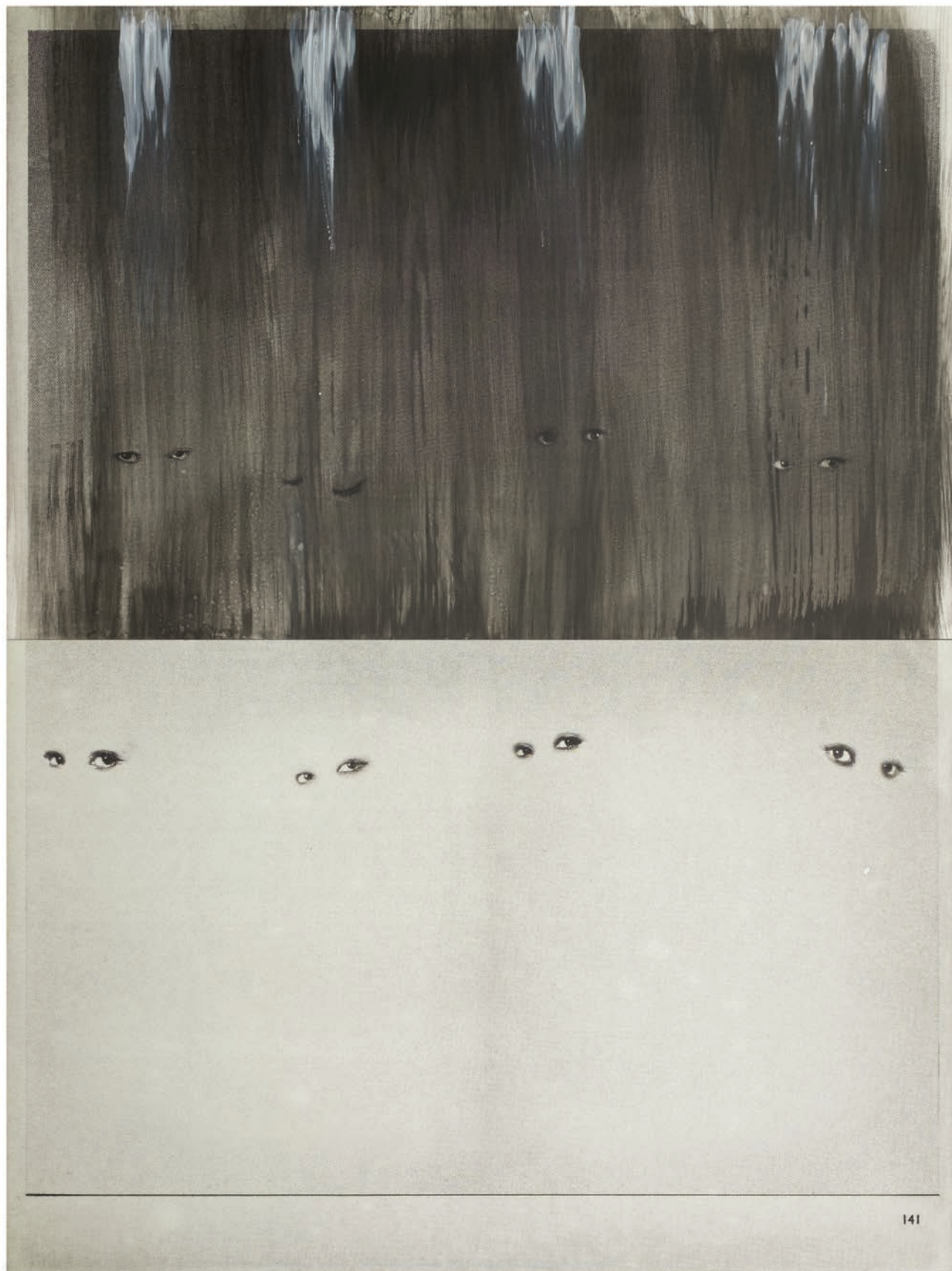
our history, and challenges the nation's prevailing psychology. My own research as a social psychologist focuses in part on racial wealth disparities—particularly, what people do and don't believe, and do and don't acknowledge about those disparities. Unless people understand the systemic forces that create and sustain racial inequality, we will never successfully address it. But perceptions, it turns out, are slippery.

For the past several years, I, along with my Yale colleague Michael W. Kraus and our students, have been examining perceptions of racial economic inequality—its extent and persistence, decade by decade. In a 2019 study, using a dozen specific moments between 1963 and 2016, we compared perceptions of racial wealth inequality over time with actual data on racial wealth inequality. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the respondents in our study significantly overestimated the wealth of Black families relative to that of white families. In 1963, the median Black family had about 5 percent as much wealth as the median white family. Respondents said close to 50 percent. For 2016, the respondents estimated Black wealth to be 90 percent that of whites. The correct answer for that year was about 10 percent.

People's estimates of inequality were not only far too low for every period, but the estimates actually grew more inaccurate the closer they got to the present. People are willing to assume that things were at least somewhat bad 50 years ago, but they also assume that things have gotten substantially better—and are approaching parity. The mythology of racial progress exerts a powerful hold on our minds.

And the hold is very hard to break, as a study we recently conducted, in collaboration with the Northwestern professor Ivuoma Onyeador, makes all too clear. Up to a point, this new study had the same basic design as the one just cited. But the sample group consisted only of white Americans. And before they provided estimates, a subset of the respondents were asked to read a short article about the persistence of racial discrimination. Exposure to the article had an impact. But here's the surprise: Those who read the article still estimated that, in 2016, Black wealth was close to that of whites. They simply plotted a more gradual slope of progress. In other words, if people accepted that progress had been slower than they'd imagined—the takeaway message of the article they read—then they arrived at the idea that the past must not have been as bad as they thought. They did not entertain the idea that the present must be worse than they think it is. The mind is a remarkable instrument, adept at many things, including self-delusion. Getting people to alter overly optimistic outlooks—at least in the domain of racial progress—is not a straightforward matter.

**FORMING NARRATIVES IS** a way for individuals to find meaning in life and to make life seem more orderly and predictable. The narratives we tell about ourselves—and about the social groups to which we belong—help us organize how we interpret events as they unfold, and respond to them. Narratives are part of our mental architecture, and certain quirks of mind make specific narratives hard to escape. For instance, there's what might



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be called the generational fallacy: Many who acknowledge the reality of racism see salvation in the ebbing presence of older white people and their replacement by a surging mass of enlightened younger people. But generational change is not so simple. Young people's racial attitudes are more like their parents' than they may realize. (It is also the case that this "solution," even if effective, would be very slow.)

The mythology of racial progress is corrosive in countless ways. It provides a reason to blame the victim: If we're converging on equality, then those left behind must not be trying. And it diffuses moral responsibility for actively and significantly reforming the American system: If we're converging on equality anyway, then why do we need laws and other measures to promote it?

This isn't some abstract worry. You'll encounter it everywhere, once you're primed to look for it. The mythology of racial progress animated the majority opinion written by Chief Justice John Roberts in *Shelby County v. Holder*, the 2013 decision striking down a key section of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Roberts wrote:

Nearly 50 years later, things have changed dramatically ... There is no doubt that these improvements are in large part *because* of the Voting Rights Act. The Act has proved immensely successful at redressing racial discrimination and integrating the voting process.

Since *Shelby*, multiple states have passed new election laws, including stringent voter-ID regulations, and purged their voter rolls. And the first-line

remedy—legal challenges demonstrating that these laws are discriminatory—is unlikely to prevent violations of voting rights.

Similarly, even in upholding some forms of affirmative action in *Grutter v. Bollinger* (2003), Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor invoked the narrative of racial progress:

It has been 25 years since Justice Powell first approved the use of race to further an interest in student body diversity in the context of public higher education. Since that time, the number of minority applicants with high grades and test scores has indeed increased ... We expect that 25 years from now, the use of racial preferences will no longer be necessary to further the interest approved today.

Seventeen years later, this prediction seems at best naive.

These Supreme Court decisions, different as they may be, rest on a rejection of the idea that systemic racism continues to make itself felt in American institutions. They reflect a Court that sees society, both in terms of institutions and individuals, as becoming more racially egalitarian—admittedly with the help of past "course corrections" that the justices believe are now or soon will be unnecessary and obsolete.

**THE MYTHOLOGY OF** racial progress is durable, and can survive many direct hits. The moments in our history when it has fractured decisively have been moments when a sense of national disruption was deep and pervasive, and people could not avoid seeing

the chasm between myth and reality. Such moments—after the Civil War, and again in the 1960s—are rare, but they can create significant opportunities. I believe we are in such a moment now. Most Americans are disgusted and angered by police tactics and attitudes toward Black citizens. Police killings of Black Americans are nothing new, of course, but the urgent attention to law enforcement's behavior comes at a time when the country is also facing a devastating pandemic and historic levels

ACTING FAST  
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of unemployment—both of which disproportionately affect minority communities. The year 2020 has not been a good one for America's "master narrative" in any of its traditional forms. And it has exposed, at least momentarily, the narrative of racial progress—automatic, continuous, requiring little real effort—for the myth it has always been.

This is the time to strike, the time to take audacious steps to address systemic racial inequality—bold, sweeping reparative action. The action must be concrete and material, rather than solely symbolic, and must address current gaps in every significant domain of social well-being:

jobs, politics, education, the environment, health, housing, and of course criminal justice. A window has opened, and acting fast is essential. It is possible that something has permanently shifted in the American psyche; we should hope that this is true. But history and psychology suggest instead that this window of clarity and opportunity will close quickly—it always has in the past. For one thing, success often proves self-limiting: Implement audacious new measures, and the temptation is to dust off your hands in satisfaction and declare the problem solved. For another, as the historian Carol Anderson demonstrates in her book *White Rage*, any significant advance toward racial justice will be met with a backlash. The passage of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments was followed by the rise of the Ku Klux Klan, lynchings, and a new era of racial subjugation in the form of Jim Crow. The landmark legislation of the civil-rights era was followed by Richard Nixon's "southern strategy" and the ascendance of racial dog whistles as a central tactic of American politics.

We should not think of the next year or two as the start of a decade or more of incremental progress. We should think of the next year or two as all the time we have, and a last chance to get it right. *A*

*Jennifer A. Richeson, a 2006 MacArthur Fellow, is the Philip R. Allen professor of psychology and the director of the Social Perception & Communication Laboratory at Yale University.*

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# POLICE REFORM IS NOT ENOUGH

*The moral failure of incremental change*

BY MYCHAL DENZEL SMITH

I know that where I live is the hood, and not only because I am in a part of Brooklyn where a substantial number of Black people still live. Nor is it because, year after year, for a solid month before the Fourth of July, my neighbors and I all play the game “gunshots or fireworks?” It is not because of the constant police presence, though that certainly helps with identifying it. I witnessed half a dozen police officers respond to one shoplifting call, and that was after the accused had already been handcuffed. But still this is not the telltale sign of the hood.

It is the trash. There is trash everywhere, always. Nearly 8.5 million people live in New York City, not including the tourists and bridge-and-tunnel folks who, in more normal times, flow in and out on a daily basis. Of course there is an abundance of trash. But when I get off the train to walk to my therapist’s office on the Upper East Side, a neighborhood devoid of any of the character that makes New York City appealing, I notice that there is no trash on the street. More people live in this

neighborhood than where I live; presumably they are creating more garbage, but their clean streets suggest otherwise.

A casual observer might suggest that the people who live in my neighborhood—mostly poor, mostly Black, mostly immigrant—take less pride in where they live. They throw their candy wrappers and used napkins, their half-empty soda bottles and unfinished pizza, their Styrofoam to-go containers and paper receipts on the ground because they don’t care about keeping their sidewalks presentable and livable.

And this, the observer may argue, is because of a cultural deficiency. They do not value this place, their home, because such value has not been inculcated by their surroundings. Some of these observations have been turned into academic studies that became the foundation for what we now call “broken-windows policing,” a theory that can be traced to a 1982 article in this magazine, which claims that if such minor infractions are allowed to fester, they serve as the prelude to much larger, more serious crimes.

Little, if any, consideration is given to the fact that my

neighborhood has fewer public trash cans than neighborhoods such as the Upper East Side. On the walk from the train station to my therapist’s office, I see a trash can on every corner. They are fewer and farther between on the 10 blocks from my local subway stop to

THE POLICE  
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SOCIETY.

the next one, on the always crowded, always bustling Flatbush Avenue.

The city could put more trash cans here, if keeping this neighborhood where mostly poor, mostly Black, mostly immigrant people live clean—as clean as the neighborhoods where mostly affluent, mostly

white New Yorkers live and work and go to therapy—were important. But then the city would also have to pay someone to collect the garbage from those cans. The city’s elected officials would have to deem these residents worthy of that expense.

What these officials have deemed the hood worthy of is policing, and not because it is so much cheaper. Policing is a costly public service, but the one most readily available here. There are undercover officers busting drug dealers. There are uniformed officers in patrol cars sitting on corners all day, all night. Sometimes they are standing next to huge, overpowering floodlights, warning the criminals off the street. Sometimes there are raids, 10 to 15 squad cars deep, in which one or two people are arrested. The police are always on duty. The people here do not lack for police, the way they do trash cans.

A casual observer may tell you that this is because there is so much crime in this hood. That the people here are lawless, violent. And it’s true, there is violence here, just as there is violence anyplace where the people are stripped of the means to build a good life.

Casual observers, who aren't always so casual—they begin to include academics, media professionals, policy makers, presidents—excuse the presence of the police here, and in other hoods like this one, because their position is that in order to stop the violence of the hood you must impose the violence of the state. The police are meant, in this view, to protect the people from themselves, to enforce the discipline their culture lacks.

In reality, the police patrol and harass. They reluctantly answer questions better suited for town visitor centers. They enforce traffic laws at their discretion, or to shore up municipal budgets through the imposition of exorbitant fines. They arrest people who have disobeyed them and then make up the charges later. They dismiss

the stories of rape victims; they side with domestic abusers. They break into homes via no-knock warrants. They introduce the potential for violence by responding to calls about loud music—or counterfeit \$20 bills. They shoot and kill with impunity. Regardless of the other responsibilities police have assumed, they have consistently inflicted violence on the most marginalized people in society.

**A LESSON YOU** learn fairly quickly while living in New York City and using public transportation is that if there is an empty subway car on an otherwise crowded train, you do not want to get in that car thinking you've somehow hacked the system. After one or two times believing that you've outsmarted all the other passengers, you realize that the

smell of the empty car is so repulsive, no person can reasonably bear it for any amount of time. Except there likely is a person in that car, and that person has likely been unhoused for some time. That subway car is their safest refuge. They have likely been riding for hours, having hustled their way onto the train at last, winning a swipe from one of the hundreds of people who have passed them by. They finally have a place to rest, but it has been who knows how long since they have been able to avail themselves of a bathroom, because in New York City all the restrooms are for customers only. So they smell like the piss and shit that they've been unable to wipe from themselves, now caked on and causing other passengers to run away—leaving them further

alienated from any sense of humanity and community.

Only they won't be left alone for too long, because someone else who is even more uncaring will not simply choose another subway car. They will see it as their right to ride unencumbered by the sight and smell of this other person. They will call the police, who will arrest this person, and for a night or two this person will have a place to sleep, in a jail cell.

The police cannot solve poverty, joblessness, mental illness, addiction, and the housing crisis—the actual culprits in the lives of the unhoused. But if we've deemed homeless people, not poverty, the problem, then what the police can do is make them disappear.

The major tools the police carry are handcuffs and guns; they can arrest or kill. The police



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can go forth and round up people without a home, then place them in cages. And to grant them this authority, local governments can criminalize sleeping outside, or criminalize panhandling, which begins to look a lot like the criminalization of vagrancy as part of the Black Codes in the era that ended Reconstruction. Governments can fund a separate police force for the subway system to punish turnstile jumpers, arrest women selling churros, and clear out more homeless people, while neighborhood associations ensure that no new homeless shelters get built near or in affluent neighborhoods. The streets remain the only place for the dispossessed to call home. Lawmakers, and those who aspire to become them, will continue to send the police to arrest the poor, because they respond to two groups, funders and voters, and the poor are neither.

The motto “To protect and to serve”—adopted by the Los Angeles Police Department in 1955 and later used by other departments around the country—has been a highly effective public-relations tool. With the propaganda machine churning on, the police, and the governments that direct them, are able to get buy-in from the very people they are meant to police. People in the community hear the gunshots; see the addicts wandering hopelessly and the dope boys pondering their next move; grow fearful that a shouting match will turn ugly quickly; and have been taught by teachers, counselors, television, movies, and the police themselves that the cops can solve this problem. So they call.

They have no alternative. No one will even pay for them to have trash cans. How can

a community deprived of the basics expect to receive the resources it needs so that it no longer has to depend on police? Its people have, purposefully, been given nothing else. When they ask, they are told to wait; when they shout, they are told that they are undeserving. They are shamed for the ways they have survived. They are blamed when they don’t survive.

**WHEN ASKED** “What would you have us do with the police?” I make a point of saying, unequivocally, “Abolish them,” because that is what I mean. I seek a world without police. When I explain that achieving such a world would require us to enact a number of redistributive policies and educational programs aimed at providing for everyone’s basic needs and reducing violence, both interpersonal and state-sanctioned, I’m asked why I don’t lead with that rather than the potentially alienating “Abolish the police.” And my answer is that I believe in stating, in clear language, what you want, because otherwise you are beholden to the current state of consciousness and accepted wisdom. I want a world in which the police do not exist, and there is no clearer way to say that.

In the past, I have been accused of hating the police. And I do. Such an admission may be taken to mean that I hate each police officer as an individual whom I have judged unfairly on the basis of his or her occupation. But I hate the police the same as I hate any institution that exists as an obstruction to justice. It’s important here to define justice, as the U.S. legal system has perverted our sense of it. It cannot be punishment or

retribution for harm caused. Justice is not revenge. Rather, justice is a proactive commitment to providing each person with the material and social conditions in which they can both survive and thrive as a healthy and self-actualized human being. This is not an easy thing to establish, as it requires all of us to buy into the idea that we must take responsibility for one another. But it is the only form of a just world.

The police have never been capable—historically, presently, either in statement of purpose or in action—and, I believe, will never be capable of fostering such conditions. And so I hate them, because I have grown past impatient with injustice. I am incensed by the delusion, so prevalent among the country’s supposedly serious thinkers, that tinkering around the edges of an inherently oppressive institution will lead to freedom.

**DONALD TRUMP SWORE** that he alone could rescue America, return it to glory—a dismissal of community in favor of a narcissistic desire to be adored for an impossible heroism. It’s uncomfortable to realize that, in different ways and to varying degrees, we have all bought into similar delusions. As a country, we obsess over the election of one person who is a part of one branch of our federal government. We become content to hand over the reins of decision making to one person, whom we exceptionalize out of necessity, because we must believe that this person is the most deserving caretaker of our national present, and can personally bring about a better national future. (Liberals placed this misguided faith in

Barack Obama and now seem poised to do the same with Joe Biden, positioning him as the savior of democracy.) Then we are left to panic when the country chooses wrong.

For liberals shocked and outraged by the election results of 2016, it became popular, when speaking of Trump, to dismissively refer to him as “not my president.” This is an empty rhetorical move, but one that allows the speaker a perceived moral high ground: She is not responsible for the current state of affairs, because this president does not belong to her.

I suppose I shouldn’t begrudge people their small acts of sanity preservation. But this one in particular reveals a deeper problem with Americans and our relationship to the presidency: the sense that in choosing the “correct” person for president, we have fulfilled our democratic duties. The sense that we don’t need to invest in constructing bonds of collective power and community outside the office of the presidency, because electing the “right” person is enough to ensure that the country will see real change. Flattering ourselves like this is part of how we ended up here. It’s why all of our so-called progress has been hollow. It’s why the so-called progress is so easily undone.

**ON THE THIRD NIGHT** of protesting in Minneapolis, the third precinct was set on fire. Up until then the protests, which had erupted in response to the circulation of a video showing the officer Derek Chauvin kneeling on George Floyd’s neck for eight minutes and 46 seconds, killing him, looked familiar. The scene was reminiscent of Ferguson in 2014, and Baltimore in 2015, albeit with face

masks meant to protect against the spread of COVID-19. The people gathered and they shouted for justice. The police stood guard outside.

Once the vacated police station began to burn, this protest became something altogether different. The fire was a militant action that put the protesters in direct conflict with the state, while also representing the decidedly new demand arising from the nationwide demonstrations: Defund the police.

“Defund the police” is an abolitionist call, part of a set of ideas to reduce the power of police in the short term, and to eliminate police and policing in the long term. Abolition demands an overall restructuring of our economic and political order. It holds that decriminalizing those things that have been treated as criminal matters but are not violent (the possession, use, and sale of drugs, and sex work, for example) would result in tremendous reduction of harm.

This restructuring would also require a massive public investment in the general welfare—safe housing, healthy food, free education, free health care, a basic income. For those harms that would still occur in such a world, abolition asks that we find ways of addressing them that do not include the further violence of punishment, but prioritize the needs of the victimized to be made whole, and require the perpetrator to make proper restitution and to be rehabilitated so he doesn’t commit harm again.

The protests started out with the predictable demands of arresting, prosecuting, and convicting the police officers responsible for killing Floyd—and Breonna Taylor

in Louisville, Kentucky—but shifted within a week’s time to be about an overhaul of the entire system of American policing. For those like myself who have believed in and advocated for police abolition for some time, it was a moment of rich opportunity.

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And yet, as of this writing, it already seems to be fading, at least in actionable ways. As “Defund the police” gained traction as a slogan, cable-news pundits implied that “Defund the police” did not mean “defund the police.” Instead of spending time understanding abolitionist ideas, they intervened to say that “Defund the police” was in fact a request to “reimagine the police.” The set of demands issued by the police-reform advocacy project Campaign Zero, branded “#8cantwait,” threatened to suck up the energy that was forming around defunding the police and divert it toward minor reforms that would have little impact on levels of police violence.

While Minneapolis’s city council formed a veto-proof majority to dismantle its police department, weak plans

cropped up around the rest of the country, either to take away small slices of the police budget, as in Los Angeles, or to do things like ban choke holds and increase funds for training, as in Philadelphia. This revolutionary moment seems to be turning into yet another flash of progress.

Perhaps I am being too harsh. Progress is progress. And progress is hard. Progress is wrestling concessions from the behemoth of systematized oppression.

The problem is when progress becomes its own ideology—that is, when advocacy for incrementalism is seen as the astute and preferred mode of political transformation. When we have done what is hard, and convinced ourselves that *hard* is a synonym for *revolutionary*. Incremental change keeps the grinding forces of oppression—of death—in place. Actively advocating for this position is a moral failure.

There have always been voices willing to take on the fragile American ego—to remind us that the racist principles on which this country was founded continue to guide each of its institutions. At their most critical and potent, these voices disabuse us of the notion that America’s foibles can be overlooked in favor of our inherent goodness.

Yet American mythmaking has a remarkable, insidious ability to swallow up the lives of those who stand in open rebellion to the American project and turn them into obedient symbols of American exceptionalism. Martin Luther King Jr., for example, fought for the rights of Black people to be full participants in a democracy that had yet to be built.

The power brokers who would have opposed him now use him to ensure that the democracy he envisioned never comes to fruition. They adopted King as a historic cudgel, because you can make a dead man believe whatever you want.

This makes sense when you consider what James Baldwin wrote in his 1961 profile of King:

The problem of Negro leadership in this country has always been extremely delicate, dangerous, and complex. The term itself becomes remarkably difficult to define, the moment one realizes that the real role of the Negro leader, in the eyes of the American Republic, was not to make the Negro a first-class citizen but to keep him content as a second-class one.

LAST SUMMER, someone tagged a nearby subway station after it had gotten a fresh coat of white paint. The tag read MAKE FLATBUSH BLACK AGAIN. It was covered up within a few days.

This year, in the middle of a global pandemic, multiracial crowds have made their way up and down Flatbush Avenue, shouting in unison, calling for the creation of a world in which Black lives matter. The police have not discriminated—they have kettled, arrested, shoved, and beaten the protesters, young and old, Black and white, gentrifier and native alike.

Maybe this is how progress looks now. *A*

*Mychal Denzel Smith is the author of the forthcoming book Stakes Is High, from which this essay was adapted.*



## LOOKING FOR FREDERICK DOUGLASS

*How a visit to his birthplace helped  
me understand this moment in America*

BY CLINT SMITH

T

The water under the Chesapeake Bay Bridge whipped against itself, the wind lifting up handfuls of foamy white and slapping them back down. The sky was a pearly blue, and thick, milky clouds hung above us like bulging lanterns. As we passed over the bridge—4.3 miles connecting Maryland's eastern and western shores—I rolled down the



windows and pulled back the sunroof. I hadn't realized how much I'd missed the feeling of wind rolling over my fingers; the feeling of my entire family singing along at the top of our lungs to my children's favorite Disney songs.

It was the first time since sheltering in place had begun, almost three months earlier, that my family was all together in the car for an extended period of time. We'd packed our masks, our sandwiches, and more Ritz Crackers than anyone was physically capable of eating. One never knows how traveling any meaningful distance with a 1-year-old and a 3-year-old will be, so my wife and I had emotionally prepared ourselves for tantrums and tears. But our children were well behaved, perhaps themselves simply grateful to be anywhere other than inside our home. They too seemed to relish the wind rushing past their faces.

"It is always a fact of some importance to know where a man is born, if, indeed, it be important to know anything about him." So wrote Frederick Douglass in his 1855 autobiography, *My Bondage and My Freedom*. I had been spending time with Douglass's work for several weeks, hoping that reengaging with his writing might help me more fully understand how our country had arrived at this moment. A moment in which a global pandemic has torn away the veil and revealed the deepest fissures and failures of America's promise to its most vulnerable. A moment in which people of all generations and races have taken to the streets to demand an end to state-sanctioned violence. A moment in which the statues

of white men who paved the way for genocide and fought to defend slavery are being taken down by cheering crowds. A moment in which *Black lives matter* has moved from a phrase laden with controversy to language at the center of our public discourse. A moment filled with rage, reckoning, and possibility.

It was with these reflections and Douglass's words in mind that, on Juneteenth, I got in the car with my family and drove from our home, outside Washington, D.C., to Talbot County, Maryland, where Frederick Douglass was born.

In *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Douglass described the region of his childhood with revulsion. He called it "thinly populated, and remarkable for nothing that I know of more than for the worn-out, sandy, desert-like appearance of its soil, the general dilapidation of its farms and fences, the indigent and spiritless character of its inhabitants, and the prevalence of ague and fever." He went on to say that the area was "seldom mentioned but with contempt and derision" and that, living there, he was "surrounded by a white population of the lowest order."

In 1878 Douglass returned to the county, and visited the farm that had once been owned by his master, Aaron Anthony, a man who may have also been Douglass's father. His grandmother's cabin had stood there. It was a place that had "few pretensions," Douglass wrote. "To my child's eye, however, it was a noble structure, admirably adapted to promote the comforts and conveniences of its inmates." But it was gone now.

What did remain was an old cedar tree Douglass recalled

from his boyhood. When he saw it, according to Dickson J. Preston in *Young Frederick Douglass*, he declared that he had found the exact spot where he had been born. Douglass stood under the tree in silence, and then plunged his hands into the earth to scoop up handfuls of soil to

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bring back to Cedar Hill, his home in Washington. At an event at the Talbot County Courthouse that evening, he told the audience he had collected "some of the very soil on which I first trod."

IT FELT PARTICULARLY important to visit the county of Douglass's birthplace on a day meant to celebrate the emancipation of Black Americans from bondage. According to the historian and Douglass biographer David W. Blight, Douglass "viewed emancipation as the central reference point of black history" and felt

that the nation "had no greater turning point." As Blight put it, Douglass believed Emancipation Day "ought to be a national celebration in which all blacks—the low and the mighty—could claim a new and secure social identity."

With two toddlers, I was cognizant of the fact that I would not be able to gradually trek through every place in Talbot County that had a meaningful association to Douglass. My family's public-history tour schedule was dictated by nap times and diaper changes. But there was one place in particular I knew I wanted to visit: the courthouse where Douglass had spoken nearly a century and a half earlier.

We pulled up to the Talbot County Courthouse and walked across the lawn to a large statue. The bronze rendering of Douglass stands atop an octagonal pedestal etched with his name. Douglass is captured mid-speech, his mouth ajar, his eyebrows raised in a spirited fervor. His left hand rests on a lectern. His right hand is lifted into the air, his fingers bending back toward his body. His long, thick hair is pulled into the style so familiar from pictures of Douglass, the most photographed American of the 19th century.

While Douglass is known to have spoken outside the courthouse, it is also where he was held in a jail cell for two weeks after attempting to escape from slavery 42 years earlier. In the 19th century, enslaved people were sold on the courthouse's front steps.

Douglass's statue was not the only one in front of the courthouse. Across a cinnamon pathway splitting the

lawn in two was a statue of a young man with a soft, boyish face wearing a brimmed hat. His hands were wrapped around the staff of a flag, the bronze cloth cloaking his shoulder. While my family and I stood in front of Douglass, others came to pose for photos with this statue. They did not take photos of or with Douglass, perhaps because they were attempting to practice social distancing, or perhaps because they had no interest.

I wasn't familiar with the person standing on top of this pedestal, and though I assumed it was an American flag draped over his shoulder, I couldn't quite make it out. After a woman and a young man had finished taking photos, I approached to get a closer look. Engraved on the front of the stone pedestal was:

TO THE TALBOT BOYS  
1861–1865  
C.S.A.

It did not take me long to understand what *C.S.A.* stood for, and to understand that the flag this young man was holding was not the American flag.

The Talbot Boys were 84 local soldiers in the Confederate States Army; their names are carved into the sides of the stone base. The statue, I would later learn, was erected in 1916, more than half a century after the end of the Civil War and during a period when the majority of Confederate monuments were built. These memorials were an effort to honor Confederate veterans, who were dying off in large numbers—to teach younger white southerners about the war and that this generation of men should be venerated. They were also a physical

symbol of white supremacy, an ornament in the landscape of Jim Crow meant to terrorize Black communities. In 2015, the Talbot county council voted unanimously against removing the statue; soon after my visit, however, the council president would introduce a resolution to take it down.

I looked up at the statue, its bronze body glimmering under the sun, and then back at Douglass, about 20 yards away. My son was running in circles under the shade of a large oak tree while my daughter toddled after him. I thought of what it meant to have Frederick Douglass share the courthouse lawn with the names of 84 men who fought to keep people like him in bondage.

The Douglass statue was approved by the county council in 2004, but it was not immediately installed. It took several years of deliberation and debate to decide how the statue should be erected—resulting in a policy that the Douglass statue, and any other new statues on the lawn, could not be taller than the Talbot Boys statue. When Douglass's statue was finally installed, in 2011, many were glad to see it erected and thought it might balance out the Talbot Boys monument. But there is no balancing out those who fought to perpetuate slavery with those who spent their lives working toward its demise.

Douglass himself was keenly aware that the story of slavery, the story of the war, and the story of emancipation were at risk of being told in ways shaped by southern postwar propaganda rather than truth. As Blight put it, Douglass knew that historical memory was not determined

simply by the passage of time; rather, “it was the prize in a struggle between rival versions of the past, a question of will, of power, of persuasion.”

On May 30, 1871, just six years after the Civil War ended, Douglass gave a speech at Arlington National Cemetery. “We are sometimes asked, in the name of patriotism,” he said,

to forget the merits of this fearful struggle, and to remember, with equal admiration, those who struck at the nation's life, and those who struck to save it—those who fought for slavery, and those who fought for liberty and justice.

I am no minister of malice. I would not strike the fallen. I would not repel the repentant; but may my right hand forget its cunning and my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth, if I forget the difference between the parties to that terrible, protracted, and bloody conflict . . . We must never forget that victory to the rebellion meant death to the republic. We must never forget that the loyal soldiers who rest beneath this sod flung themselves between the nation and the nation's destroyers.

I thought of this speech as I looked at the statue meant to commemorate these Confederate soldiers. Douglass feared that such statues might one day line the landscape of our country. But I wondered whether he could have imagined that his own likeness would stand alongside one, as if they were two equally moral sides of the same coin, both worthy of being lifted up and venerated.

This is the problem with hollow attempts at “balance” in our public discourse. They mistake balance for fairness. Suggesting that Douglass and the Talbot Boys are equally worthy of public memorialization might be “balanced,” but it is not fair; it is not just. This war, as Douglass put it in an 1878 Memorial Day speech in New York City, was not simply a battle in which two sides fought nobly for what they believed in. No. It was “a war of ideas, a battle of principles . . . a war between the old and the new, slavery and freedom, barbarism and civilization.” He went on: “There was a right side and a wrong side in the late war which no sentiment ought to cause us to forget.”

In early June, 113 miles from where I stood, Virginia Governor Ralph Northam had announced that a 130-year-old statue of Robert E. Lee on Monument Avenue, in Richmond, would be taken down. I had been thinking about Lee a lot lately, how central his name and likeness were to the iconography of my own childhood. Hundreds of statues, schools, and roads across the country are named after Robert E. Lee. The statue of Lee in my own hometown of New Orleans was taken down in 2017. I traveled down Robert E. Lee Boulevard to get to school each day. I remember when, before its name was changed in the mid-'90s, there was a Robert E. Lee Elementary School that was attended mostly by Black children.

The veneration of Lee—a slave owner who led an army predicated on maintaining the institution of slavery—began immediately after his death, in 1870. Douglass was appalled. “Is it not about time that this

bombastic laudation of the rebel chief should cease?” he asked. “We can scarcely take up a newspaper ... that is not filled with nauseating flatteries of the late Robert E. Lee.”

The way Lee’s legacy seemed to be taking shape gave Douglass one of his earliest and clearest indications about how difficult the fight against the propaganda machine of the Lost Cause would be. “It would seem from this,” he said of Lee’s rise to saintly status, “that the soldier who kills the most men in battle, even in a bad cause, is the greatest Christian, and entitled to the highest place in heaven.”

**MY CHILDREN WERE** growing restless, and it became clear that we would have time to visit only one more place before heading back home and hoping they might fall asleep in the car.

As we drove toward Covey’s Landing, the roads became both emptier and more narrow. The houses became less frequent, with more distance between each new address. On one side of the road, wheat fields stretched out in every direction, like a golden blanket had been laid atop the land; on the other, budding corn stalks shot up out of the soil. I remarked to my wife how striking it was to consider that so much of this land had once been plantation fields Black people worked on. How their spirits still sang over these large plots of earth. She mentioned a point we discuss often: None of this was that long ago. We sat with that thought as we drove on, the car spitting up gravel behind its wheels.

In front of the last house before the dock, the American flag rose up a tall staff along with a large blue TRUMP

PENCE 2020 flag that whipped in the wind. I looked at my children in the rearview mirror, grateful for all they were too young to know. The road ended at the water’s edge. I parked and kept the car running. I told my family I needed just a few minutes.

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I walked out onto a small wooden boat ramp and tried to take in my surroundings. The air was thick and heavy. The brown water was still but for the soft current that pulled ripples along its surface. On my right, a small tree jutted out from the shallow water, its branches bending down as if to drink. Across the river was a vast expanse of untamed, luscious green that looked like it ran out into the sky.

I turned to my left and saw the river bend to its right. Douglass’s birthplace was less than a mile north up Tuckahoe Creek. The only way to get a close view of the land upon which Douglass spent his childhood is to get in a canoe or kayak and paddle there yourself. I thought of a

young Douglass growing up here. Learning, over time, the unfreedoms placed upon his boyhood body. “Living here, with my dear old grandmother and grandfather, it was a long time before I knew myself to be a slave,” he wrote in *My Bondage and My Freedom*.

I learned by degrees the sad fact, that the “little hut,” and the lot on which it stood, belonged not to my dear old grandparents, but to some person who lived a great distance off, and who was called, by grandmother, “OLD MASTER.” I further learned the sadder fact, that not only the house and lot, but that grandmother herself ... and all the little children around her, belonged to this mysterious personage.

I only had a few minutes to take in the space, to breathe in the air. As I stood at the edge of the dock, I craned my neck and stood on my tiptoes as if that might allow me to get a better glimpse of the land that Douglass had run over as a child, the land he had sunk his hands into when he returned as a man.

I got back in the car, shut the door, and made a U-turn. My children quickly fell asleep in their car seats, and we switched from Disney musicals to the news, trying to hear updates on what had transpired that day with the protests, with the virus, with our country. We made our way through idyllic neighborhoods with open windows and colorful shutters. American flags hung from front porches. So did Confederate flags.

“I am not of that school of thinkers which teaches us to let bygones be bygones; to let the dead past bury its dead,” Douglass said in 1883.

In my view there are no bygones in the world, and the past is not dead and cannot die. The evil as well as the good that men do lives after them ... The duty of keeping in memory the great deeds of the past and of transmitting the same from generation to generation is implied in the mental and moral constitution of man.

The next day, I scrolled through my Twitter timeline and came across an image that left me breathless. Under the haze of dusk, activists in Richmond had transformed the Robert E. Lee statue into a canvas blooming with new and reclaimed meaning. Garlands of graffiti wrapped around the statue’s base, their anti-racist messages written in colorful letters that curled and popped on the pedestal. Projected onto the side of the 40-foot base was the face of Douglass, his visage enormous and striking, upstaging the darkened silhouette of Lee above him. Between Douglass’s head and Lee’s silhouette was a quote from Douglass that I think about often when I see the protests, in their myriad forms: “Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will.” *A*

*Clint Smith is the author of the poetry collection Counting Descent and the forthcoming nonfiction book How the Word Is Passed.*



## PROTEST WORKS

*How the Black Lives Matter demonstrations will shake up the 2020 election—and reshape American politics for a generation to come*

BY DANIEL Q. GILLION

I drove 1,200 miles, from Philadelphia to Minneapolis, to be a part of the George Floyd protest movement.

Throughout the city, from the predominantly white neighborhood of Bancroft to the more diverse streets of Bryant, I saw signs in living-room windows that read BLACK LIVES MATTER and WE STAND FOR EQUALITY. As I drove up Cedar Avenue, heading to 38th Street, I also saw signs in the windows of stores and restaurants that read MINORITY OWNED—an indication that these businesses stood with the Floyd movement, but also that they hoped to be spared should the protests turn violent.

Pressed together with protesters adorned in masks, I stood on the unofficially

renamed George Floyd Avenue, across the street from Cup Foods, where Floyd had been killed after allegedly passing a counterfeit \$20 bill. As I scanned the crowd, I saw what I had seen in the other cities I'd visited as I made my way west: a shockingly diverse group of protesters. As a Black man, I found myself standing next to many people who did not look like me—sometimes, their cries even drowned out my own. The coalition has changed. It has grown.

Of course, not all Americans have embraced Black Lives Matter. Some look at the men and women demanding reform and see only looters and thugs. They are nurtured in this view by the president of the United States, who greeted the outcry following Floyd's murder with threats of violence against the

protesters and tweets about “LAW AND ORDER” and the “SILENT MAJORITY.”

Richard Nixon introduced the latter term to the American people during another moment of ferment, one to which the current unrest has been compared. During the 1968 presidential campaign and into his first years in office, as anti-war demonstrations took place across the nation, Nixon sought to ostracize the protesters, painting them as radicals whose views did not reflect those of law-abiding Americans. The term, which he introduced in a speech in 1969, cut along racial lines: The leaders of the civil-rights movement had become prominent opponents of the war in Vietnam, where a disproportionate number of Black Americans were fighting

and dying. Martin Luther King Jr. went so far as to discourage Black college students from enlisting.

Donald Trump borrowed from Nixon's playbook during his presidential run in 2016. During a rally in Las Vegas early in his campaign, he villainized a protester by saying, “I would like to punch him in the face.” The rambunctious crowd cheered in response. In the months that followed, as his campaign stops continued to be disrupted, Trump turned the protesters into a useful foil: The roaring crowd was *us*; the demonstrators were *them*. *They* did not belong to the silent majority, whose prerogatives Trump intended to restore. Enterprising supporters even created signs: SILENT MAJORITY STANDS WITH TRUMP. Months after the election, the signs were still available for purchase on Amazon, for the low price of \$14.35, with positive reviews for the sturdiness of the paper.

The specter of Nixon's victory in 1968—and Trump's in 2016—has haunted the George Floyd protests. By channeling Nixon once again, Trump clearly hopes to revive his political fortunes. Polling shows that a majority of Americans view the protests positively. Trump's fractious response to the Floyd killing, coming on the heels of his administration's bungled response to the coronavirus pandemic, seems to have left him badly damaged politically.

Yet Trump has seemed damaged before. Some fear that, in the privacy of the voting booth, the American electorate will back the status quo over the calls for change in the streets. As of this writing, the protests have remained outraged yet largely peaceful. What if they

turn violent and support for the cause they are championing erodes? “THE SILENT MAJORITY IS STRONGER THAN EVER!!!” Trump tweeted in mid-June. But the silent majority need not be stronger than ever to reelect the president. Trump has to persuade only a small number of voters in a handful of mid-western states in order to win a second term.

My own view, having spent the past decade studying protest movements in the United States, is that we’ve always overestimated the power of the silent majority, and that we’re giving it too much credence

now. Righteous, nonviolent demonstrations are a hallmark of a functioning democracy. They provide catharsis for the participants and show the nation at large that something is wrong with our society and needs to change. Protests can also spark that change, by channeling energy, resources, and votes to candidates who take up the cause. Even 1968, the year that supposedly proves the risk of backlash, fails as an example if we consider the presidential race alongside the congressional, gubernatorial, and mayoral contests that year, which swept reform-minded politicians into office.

Far from playing into Trump’s hands, the demonstrators demanding justice for Floyd are engaged in a movement that is likely to aid those candidates who oppose the president’s policies in November—and that could reshape American politics for years to come.

I’VE LOOKED CLOSELY at how protests and elections have interacted in America since the 1960s, and I’ve found that protests nearly always benefit candidates associated with the causes being fought for—helping them build bigger war chests, bring

more voters to the polls, and ultimately win.

Both the people marching in protests and those observing them are inspired to contribute to candidates who are perceived as being committed to change. Consider the wave of protests that followed Trump’s inauguration. The most high-profile of these were the Women’s March, the March for Our Lives, and the counterprotests at the “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville, Virginia. But anti-Trump protest was widespread across the United States; hundreds of events occurred in his first year in office alone. Zip code by zip



Clockwise from top left: *Harlem, May 2020: a rally against police brutality; Washington, D.C., May 1957: the Prayer Pilgrimage for Freedom, calling on the federal government to enforce the Supreme Court’s decision in Brown v. Board of Education; Minneapolis, May 2020: protesting the murder of George Floyd; Chicago, August 1968: demonstrators confronting federal troops during the Democratic National Convention.*

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: KEVIN CLAIBORNE; GEORGE TAMES / THE NEW YORK TIMES / REDUX; BRANDON BELL; RAYMOND DEPARDON / MAGNUM

code, demonstrations on behalf of liberal causes were associated with a significant increase in donations to Democratic candidates; controlling for other factors, such as neighborhood wealth, the places that saw protests saw more money flow into campaigns. Spread across the nation, political activism was the source of millions of dollars in additional campaign giving.

This is not to say that protest doesn't inspire backlash. I also found a connection between liberal protests and donations to *Republican* candidates. But these contributions were smaller, overall. When liberal protests occur, all candidates make money. Democrats just make more of it.

Protests likewise increase voter turnout. For example, although Black voters cast ballots in lower numbers in the 2016 general election than they had in 2012, the drop-off was less pronounced in areas where Black Lives Matter was active. And in areas that witnessed heightened levels of protest activity, Black voter turnout increased.

All of this energy helps candidates affiliated with protesters' goals. On average, a district that sees 50 liberal protests in an election year sees the Democratic candidate in that district increasing his or her vote share by 2 percent and the Republican decreasing his or her vote share by 7 percent compared with the previous election. In a close race, such swings can be decisive. During the 2018 midterms, eight liberal protests occurred in the average congressional district. In districts with greater protest activity, liberal candidates fared well. Sixteen liberal protests in Charleston, South Carolina;

36 in Tucson, Arizona; and 43 in Miami helped Democratic candidates Joe Cunningham, Ann Kirkpatrick, and Donna Shalala flip seats in their respective districts.

This was hardly the first time that protests had fueled successful challenges against incumbents. In the 1960s,

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for instance, the civil-rights movement and anti-Vietnam protests descended on Abner Mikva's Chicago neighborhood. Mikva did not immediately champion either cause, and he lost in his run for Congress in 1966. Over the next two years, during which Illinois's Second Congressional District was the epicenter of protest activity in the state, he reinvented himself as a strong advocate of the campaign to end racial discrimination in housing. He also acted as legal counsel for protesters jailed by an aggressive police department during anti-war protests.

Mikva's embrace of these movements rattled Chicago's Democratic machine, led by Mayor Richard Daley, who infamously ordered the police and the National Guard to crack down on protesters at the 1968 Democratic

convention. Mikva unseated a superannuated Democratic incumbent during the primary and then roundly defeated his Republican challenger, even as Nixon carried Illinois. Mikva was not alone: Democratic candidates across the nation benefited from liberal protest, which helped the party maintain control of the House and the Senate.

Focusing too narrowly on Nixon's victory in 1968 has also encouraged Americans to overlearn another lesson from that year: that violent protest will necessarily provoke a backlash. The fact is, many protests turn violent when the supposed enforcers of law and order do harm to demonstrators, whether it's an Alabama state trooper fracturing John Lewis's skull in Selma in 1965 or Park Police dispersing the people who congregated in Lafayette Square in 2020. Voters understand this. While wanton, opportunistic destruction of public property can certainly undermine an otherwise righteous protest movement, nightsticks, rubber bullets, and tear-gas canisters can draw attention to—and sympathy for—a cause and those brave enough to advocate for it.

THE POINT OF PROTEST is rarely to swing a single race, however momentous that race may be. It is to change the terms of political debate, and ultimately to change society itself. And indeed, protest has always foreshadowed the most radical shifts in American history.

Protest calls attention to problems with the status quo—and often spells political doom for those who have upheld it. In my research, I've

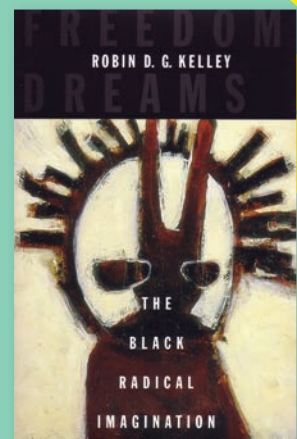
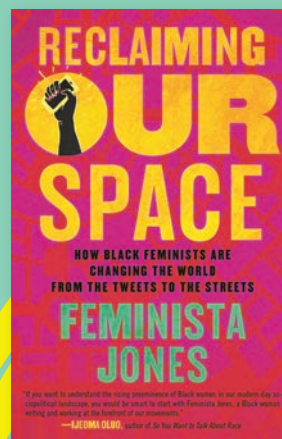
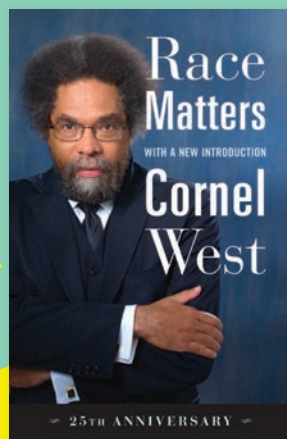
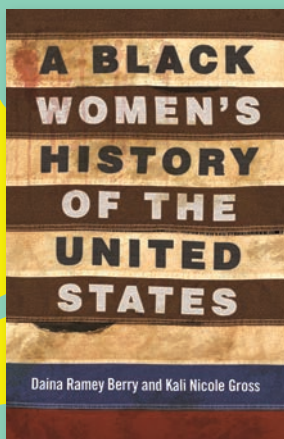
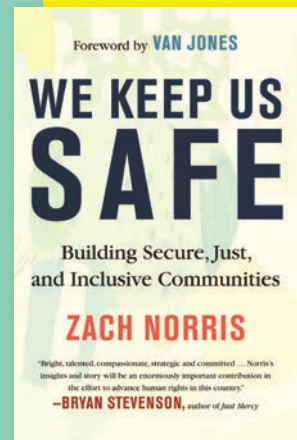
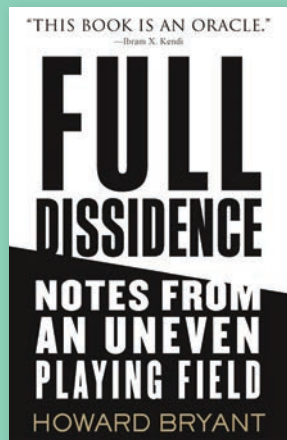
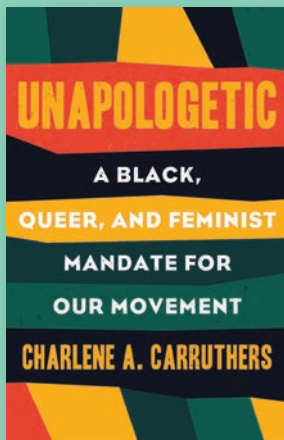
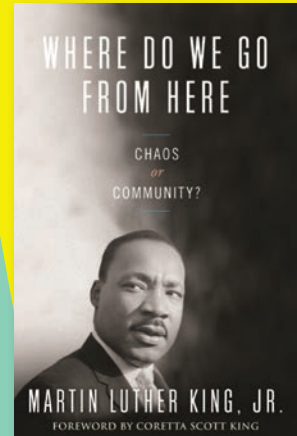
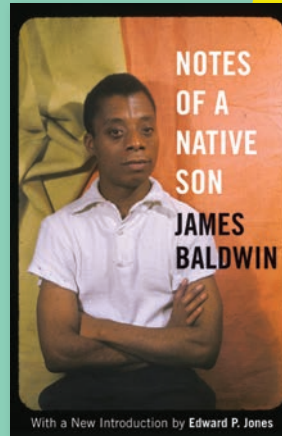
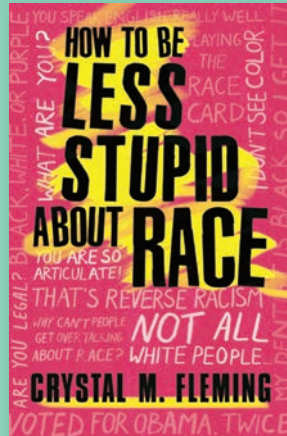
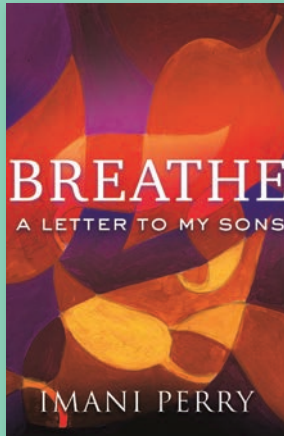
found that frequent liberal protest in a given congressional district increases the probability that a serious Democratic challenger will enter the race for that seat, whether it's occupied by a Republican or a complacent Democrat. Of course, those challengers don't always carry the day. But when they do—when they are propelled into office by a protest movement—they become its institutional allies, introducing bills and supporting policies that reflect protesters' concerns. In this way, protest not only affects electoral outcomes today, but establishes the conditions for change in the future. Abner Mikva went on to be a leading progressive voice for decades and helped launch the careers of Elena Kagan and Barack Obama.

The Floyd protests likely arrived too late in the 2020 cycle to push new candidates into the field, but they have shifted the dynamics of some races, helping progressive candidates win primaries and topple entrenched incumbents such as Representative Eliot Engel of New York, who lost his race despite the support of the Democratic establishment. We will continue to see the effects of these demonstrations in years to come. When protest occurs, we can expect that change is coming—change that reflects the evolving will of the people. *A*

*Daniel Q. Gillion is a political-science professor at the University of Pennsylvania and the author of The Loud Minority: Why Protests Matter in American Democracy, from which this article was adapted.*



# YOUR ANTI-RACIST EDUCATION NEEDS BLACK VOICES



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## THE RELENTLESS ERIN BROCKOVICH

*She was an early crusader for environmental justice.  
Today, she's sounding the alarm louder than ever.*

BY AMANDA FORTINI

Twenty years ago, *Erin Brockovich* was released, and the brash, unvarnished legal assistant turned activist at the heart of the film—memorably portrayed by Julia Roberts in micro-miniskirts and vertiginous high heels—had the surreal experience of becoming a household name almost overnight. “Let me be the first

to tell you that life takes an interesting turn when your name becomes a verb,” the real Erin Brockovich writes in the introduction to her new book, *Superman’s Not Coming*. “To ‘Erin Brockovich something’ has become synonymous with investigating and then advocating for a cause without giving up.”

The first case that Erin Brockovich Erin Brockoviched—the subject of the movie—was her 1990s battle with Pacific Gas & Electric. The power company had contaminated the groundwater in the small desert town of Hinkley, California, with chromium-6, a highly toxic chemical used in industrial

processes. In 1991, Brockovich, then a file clerk at the San Fernando Valley law firm Masry & Vititoe, happened upon suspicious medical records while sorting through a box of files for a pro bono real-estate case. She drove out to the Mojave Desert to investigate. The water was green. She saw frogs with two heads. Residents were suffering from nosebleeds, miscarriages, and cancers. She persuaded Ed Masry to take the case, and in 1996 they won a \$333 million settlement for 650 plaintiffs, at the time the largest toxic tort settlement in American history. (Brockovich herself received a \$2.5 million bonus.)

Brockovich, 60, is magnetic, fast-talking, and very funny, not unlike her character in the movie, a portrayal she calls “about 97 percent accurate.” On the early-May afternoon when we first speak via Zoom, she is in her home office in Agoura Hills, California, a sunny room with shelves full of framed photographs of her now-adult kids. She lives alone (she and her third husband divorced in 2015), save for her three small dogs, one of whom, a Pomeranian named Wiley, is yapping in the background. She tells me she has been working on an ABC drama based on her life, *Rebel*; she will executive produce and Katey Sagal will star.

*Erin Brockovich* grossed \$256 million worldwide, a success only partly attributable to Julia Roberts’s charismatic performance, for which she won the Best Actress Oscar. The movie made its namesake into a kind of American folk hero, à la Davy Crockett or Mother Jones. (Every time her name floated up on my phone, it was like Annie Oakley had texted me.) Like most folk



heroes, her appeal is a populist one. Audiences could see themselves in this struggling, twice-divorced single mom who wasn't a doctor, a lawyer, or a scientist, and believe that they too might fight injustice. To "Erin Brockovich something," then, means not only to investigate an issue, but to be a regular person who takes on a corporate giant polluting the environment. The notion feels especially urgent now, as the Trump administration's Environmental Protection Agency fails to regulate toxic chemicals and industry lobbyists wield undue power.

After the movie's release, Brockovich, who was already at work on another contaminated-groundwater case—this one in the Latino farming community of Kettleman City, California—was deluged with emails and letters. "I put my finger in the dike," she tells me, "and I thought I might help stop its flow. I had no idea." In 2005, she left the law firm to start her own company, Erin Brockovich Consulting, which she runs out of her home; she advises people on environmental-contamination issues, consults with law firms, and is a regular on the keynote-speaker circuit.

She continues to receive thousands of emails every month. "A mother writes me and says, 'I'm concerned. I live down in Florida. My daughter was diagnosed with a glioblastoma. I have heard reports that we had a solvent chemical in our water. Do you know anything about it?'" she says, describing a typical email. The following week, another email from another mother. A few of these, and she searches her inbox for the town's name: "I'm like, 'Holy shit. Ten people from that same community have reached

out to me.' This happened to me over and over again."

Brockovich is dyslexic and has a photographic memory; she prefers to see things laid out visually, so she started plotting the email inquiries on a map. One day, she looked at her map and counted 300 dots scattered around the country. She decided to make her work accessible to more people, so she digitized it and put it up on her website. Here, people can self-report health effects of environmental pollution, and find others reporting the same issue. "I looked at it today and there's 13,000 dots on it," Brockovich says. "It's like, 'What the fuck? What's going on?'"

IN LATE 2015, the country began asking similar questions as reports of exceedingly high lead levels in the water in Flint, Michigan, began to circulate. In April 2014, an emergency manager had made the disastrous cost-cutting decision to stop supplying Flint with water from the Detroit system and make the Flint River its temporary source while the city built its own pipeline. The Flint River had long been a dumping ground for industry; it also contains significant amounts of bacteria and organic matter, thus requiring high levels of chlorine and ferric chloride to clean it. But Flint had an antiquated system of lead pipes, which the disinfectants corroded, causing lead to leach into the water supply of 95,000 people.

Shortly after the switch, Flint residents—54 percent of whom are Black, and 40 percent of whom live below the poverty line—started complaining about their foul-smelling and discolored water, plus a host of strange new health issues,

including rashes, hair loss, and diarrhea. Eventually, they began emailing Brockovich, sending her photos of their brown, yellow, or orange water. She forwarded a few emails to Bob Bowcock, the water-quality expert she works with. Bowcock says that Brockovich has "this ridiculous sixth sense about her" and that "nine times out of 10" her hunches are borne

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CROCKETT  
OR MOTHER  
JONES.

out by his research. In late January 2015, almost a year before President Barack Obama would declare a state of emergency in Flint, Brockovich posted about the "Dangerous Undrinkable Drinking Water" on her public Facebook page.

When a water issue arises, Brockovich and Bowcock usually travel to the city or town in question. "My role is to quarterback all the experts and pull all the science together," Bowcock says. "Her part is to rally the troops and get the town organized and conduct the town-hall meeting." But at the time, Brockovich was in Australia for work, so in mid-February, Bowcock got on a plane to Flint himself. There, he found levels of chlorine that exceeded those of a swimming pool. Bowcock drew up a plan for Flint's mayor, the water municipality, and the Flint city council. "We actually wrote a whole water protocol,"

Brockovich says, "and the city told us to fuck off."

Flint's issues grew out of a tangle of bureaucratic incompetence, bad decisions, and racism, but the city is hardly unique. A 2017 study by the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) found that "contaminants that may harm human health" were present in the tap water of every state in the nation—often in poor communities and communities of color, which are targeted as sites for industrial plants and landfills. In 2015, community water systems had more than 80,000 reported violations of the Safe Drinking Water Act, the 1974 law that regulates roughly 100 contaminants. More than 18 million Americans got their drinking water from systems that had violated federal lead regulations, according to a 2016 NRDC report.

Brockovich's book—at once a master class on water for the layperson and an exhortation to work for improvements in our own communities—takes readers on a tour of struggling locales around the country. At Camp Lejeune, for instance, the Marine Corps base in Jacksonville, North Carolina, residents were exposed via drinking water to numerous contaminants, among them TCE, an industrial solvent that can cause birth defects and childhood cancers. Brockovich writes that so many babies died there in the '60s and '70s that a nearby cemetery had a section called "Baby Heaven."

Reading the book, one acquires a dispiriting sense of why water issues are so widespread and entrenched. The most obvious reason is that you can't see the majority of chemicals, so unless you have your water tested, you likely won't know a contaminant is



there. But water problems are also fairly technical, requiring a grasp of chemical and legal terms. “Water’s not an easy discussion; it’s not sound bites,” Brockovich says. “It’s a story.” She explains that “no two bodies of water on this planet have the same fingerprint,” which means that each has its own particular problems. Then there are the structural issues. Our country’s infrastructure is antiquated—some water mains are 50 to 100 years old. Of the approximately 40,000 chemicals on the market, less than 1 percent have been tested for human safety. Science is often manipulated by companies that put profit over public health. In sum, industry pollution goes largely unsupervised and laws remain unenforced.

The U.S. also lacks a national disease database where people can report their issues and connect the dots between illness clusters and environmental hazards. In 2013, Brockovich joined Trevor Schaefer, a young man from Idaho who had been diagnosed with brain cancer at the age of 13, to testify on Capitol Hill about the importance of documenting and tracking cancer clusters. Three years later, President Obama signed “Trevor’s Law” as part of the newly strengthened Toxic Substances Control Act, but the current administration has failed to implement it. Brockovich hopes her crowd-sourced digitized map will act as a *de facto* disease database. “She’s a pioneer in environmental investigations and with uncovering pollution sources,” Schaefer, now 30, says. “She’s been so *successful* in exposing it.”

AS BROCKOVICH herself often says, her path was not an obvious one. The youngest

in a family of four children growing up in Lawrence, Kansas, a university town 45 minutes west of Kansas City, Brockovich was placed in special-education classes for her dyslexia. Her parents—her mother, B. J. O’Neal-Pattee, was an editor of the University of Kansas alumni magazine; her father, Frank Pattee, was a mechanical engineer who worked as a regional manager for the U.S. Department of Transportation—taught her to believe in herself and gave her a solid moral foundation that emphasized honesty and “stick-to-itiveness,” as her mother called it. Those lessons, she says, didn’t sink in until she worked on the Hinkley case.

In 1978, Brockovich graduated from high school and enrolled in Kansas State University. She spent her first semester staying out all night and skipping classes, and when her father saw her report card, he made her drop out. She transferred to Wade College in Dallas, graduated with an associate’s degree in fashion merchandising and interior design, then took a job as a manager at a Kmart store in Los Angeles, but she hated the work and resigned after three months. She dabbled in the world of professional beauty pageants and was crowned Miss Pacific Coast in 1981.

The following year, she met and married her first husband, a house painter, with whom she had her son and her first daughter. Their five-year marriage was volatile, and Brockovich suffered debilitating panic attacks. When her husband got a job in the food industry that moved the family to Reno, Nevada, Brockovich was hired by a brokerage firm there; one of the brokers was a

man named Steve Brockovich, who would become her second husband and the father of her younger daughter. That marriage was tumultuous, too—her self-esteem took such a dive that she had to be hospitalized for anorexia—and lasted only a year, leaving her broke, pregnant, and shatteringly lonely. Around that time, Brockovich got in a car

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accident that herniated two disks in her spine. But the misfortune proved fortuitous. Not long after, she met a biker named Jorge; he introduced her to Jim Vititoe, who represented her in a lawsuit against the other driver. She lost, but she persuaded Vititoe to hire her. The rest is, well, a movie.

Brockovich and I speak for the last time in early June; the country is aflame with protests about police brutality against Black people, and the pandemic shows no signs of abating. When I ask how she is, Brockovich tells me she is deeply sad about the murder of George Floyd. But, as is her way, she sidesteps any concrete discussion of politics. Her dad was a Republican, and her book emphasizes that it was Richard Nixon who started the EPA. Yet she also worked with former Democratic Senator Barbara Boxer on Trevor’s Law, a bipartisan bill, and she has

been critical of Trump’s EPA on social media. “I never get into the politics of it. I’ll pull my hair out,” she says. “There’s plenty of blame to go around everywhere.” She believes that water is not a partisan issue but a human right: “It doesn’t matter what side of the aisle you’re on, the color of your skin, what’s in your bank account.”

If Brockovich does have a discernible politics, it’s her populism, her belief in people, her utter faith that they—we—can take matters into our own hands. “People think when I speak to a community that I’m coming in with an agenda, but my only role is to empower the people,” she writes. In her discussion of Hannibal, Missouri, where local women got ammonia banned as a disinfectant, she includes a quote often attributed to Margaret Mead: “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.”

Doesn’t she ever get demoralized? After all, Hinkley is almost a ghost town now because the groundwater contamination spread, and California currently has no legal limit for chromium-6. Seven years ago, she says, she did feel burned out—“It’s just too much; it doesn’t stop”—but then she stood in the delivery room and watched as her first granddaughter was born and thought, “What will this world be like for her if I don’t continue to fight? What legacy are we going to leave?” And she felt reinvigorated. *A*

*Amanda Fortini is a writer based in Las Vegas and Livingston, Montana.*

# FLOODLINES



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On August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina made landfall in Louisiana. Fifteen years later, *The Atlantic* tells the story you haven't heard about the aftermath in New Orleans.

A podcast hosted by Vann R. Newkirk II.

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"You only *think* you know the story of Hurricane Katrina."

— *Oprah Magazine*

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"An expansive and powerful piece of work."

— *Financial Times*

"The best audio documentary to come out this year so far, hands down."

— *Vulture*

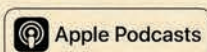
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"Eerily prescient."

— *AnOther Magazine*

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*The Atlantic*





The Black Yearbook  
*Photographs by*  
*Adraint Khadafhi*  
*Bereal*

In August 2016, during his first week of college, Adraint Khadafhi Bereal went to “Gone to Texas,” a large back-to-school event held every year for students at the University of Texas at Austin. Hundreds upon hundreds of people had gathered in front of the campus clock tower for the welcome event and fireworks display. But despite the throng of students, Bereal didn’t see any who looked like him—and he wouldn’t for another week.

The university, like many flagship colleges across the country, enrolls vanishingly few Black undergraduates—just 4 percent of the 40,000 students are Black, and just 1.5 percent are Black men. That can leave the few Black students the university does enroll feeling isolated. So last summer, just before the start of his senior year, Bereal began work on *The Black Yearbook*, a project that aims to give expression to their experiences. It’s not a traditional yearbook; through portraits and 100 interviews, *The Black Yearbook* shows the highs and lows of Black life at a predominantly white college, both the beauty of the campus experience and the stress of having such scant representation. In several images, students turn their back to the camera. This, Bereal told me, is how white students too often see their Black peers: as faceless. They regularly mistake one for another. But even shot from behind, Bereal’s subjects reveal their individuality—a do-rag here, an expressive pose there.

The yearbook is “a view into what our daily life looks like on a predominantly white campus,” Bereal said. He hopes people can see the full picture.

— Adam Harris





Clockwise from top left: *Octavian Moten*; *Siji Deleawe*; *Awab Ahmed*; *Jala Jones*; *Black Homecoming*, September 28, 2019. Opposite page: *Members of the Longhorn Band*.



How the virus won



# Anatomy of an American Failure



By Ed Yong



# How did it come to this? A virus a thousand times smaller than a dust mote has humbled and humiliated the planet's most powerful nation.

America has failed to protect its people, leaving them with illness and financial ruin. It has lost its status as a global leader. It has careened between inaction and ineptitude. The breadth and magnitude of its errors are difficult, in the moment, to truly fathom.

In the first half of 2020, SARS-CoV-2—the new coronavirus behind the disease COVID-19—infected 10 million people around the world and killed about half a million. But few countries have been as severely hit as the United States, which has just 4 percent of the world's population but a quarter of its confirmed COVID-19 cases and deaths. These numbers are estimates. The actual toll, though undoubtedly higher, is unknown, because the richest country in the world still lacks sufficient testing to accurately count its sick citizens.

Despite ample warning, the U.S. squandered every possible opportunity to control the coronavirus. And despite its considerable

advantages—immense resources, biomedical might, scientific expertise—it floundered. While countries as different as South Korea, Thailand, Iceland, Slovakia, and Australia acted decisively to bend the curve of infections downward, the U.S. achieved merely a plateau in the spring, which changed to an appalling upward slope in the summer. “The U.S. fundamentally failed in ways that were worse than I ever could have imagined,” Julia Marcus, an infectious-disease epidemiologist at Harvard Medical School, told me.

Since the pandemic began, I have spoken with more than 100 experts in a variety of fields. I've learned that almost everything that went wrong with America's response to the pandemic was predictable and preventable. A sluggish response by a government denuded of expertise allowed the coronavirus to gain a foothold. Chronic underfunding of public health neutered the

nation's ability to prevent the pathogen's spread. A bloated, inefficient health-care system left hospitals ill-prepared for the ensuing wave of sickness. Racist policies that have endured since the days of colonization and slavery left Indigenous and Black Americans especially vulnerable to COVID-19. The decades-long process of shredding the nation's social safety net forced millions of essential workers in low-paying jobs to risk their life for their livelihood. The same social-media platforms that sowed partisanship and misinformation during the 2014 Ebola outbreak in Africa and the 2016 U.S. election became vectors for conspiracy theories during the 2020 pandemic.

The U.S. has little excuse for its inattention. In recent decades, epidemics of SARS, MERS, Ebola, H1N1 flu, Zika, and monkeypox showed the havoc that new and reemergent pathogens could wreak. Health experts, business leaders, and even middle schoolers ran simulated exercises to game out the spread of new diseases. In 2018, I wrote an article for *The Atlantic* arguing that the U.S. was not ready for a pandemic, and sounded warnings about the fragility of the nation's health-care system and the slow process of creating a vaccine. But the COVID-19 debacle has also touched—and implicated—nearly every other facet of American society: its shortsighted leadership, its disregard for expertise, its racial inequities, its social-media culture, and its fealty to a dangerous strain of individualism.

SARS-CoV-2 is something of an anti-Goldilocks virus: just bad enough in every way. Its symptoms can be severe enough to kill millions but are often mild enough to allow infections to move undetected through a population. It spreads quickly enough to overload hospitals, but slowly enough that statistics don't spike until too late. These traits made the virus harder to control, but they also softened the pandemic's punch. SARS-CoV-2 is neither as lethal as some other coronaviruses, such as SARS and MERS, nor as contagious as measles. Deadlier pathogens almost certainly exist. Wild animals harbor an estimated 40,000 unknown viruses, a quarter of which could potentially jump into humans. How will the U.S. fare when "we can't even deal with a starter pandemic?" Zeynep Tufekci,

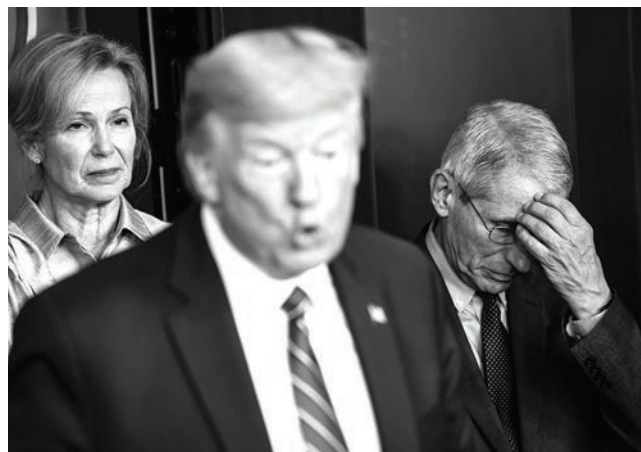
a sociologist at the University of North Carolina and an *Atlantic* contributing writer, asked me.

Despite its epochal effects, COVID-19 is merely a harbinger of worse plagues to come. The U.S. cannot prepare for these inevitable crises if it returns to normal, as many of its people ache to do. Normal led to this. Normal was a world ever more prone to a pandemic but ever less ready for one. To avert another catastrophe, the U.S. needs to grapple with all the ways normal failed us. It needs a full accounting of every recent misstep and foundational sin, every unattended weakness and unheeded warning, every festering wound and reopened scar.

**A PANDEMIC CAN BE PREVENTED** in two ways: Stop an infection from ever arising, or stop an infection from becoming thousands more. The first way is likely impossible. There are simply too many viruses and too many animals that harbor them. Bats alone could host thousands of unknown coronaviruses; in some Chinese caves, one out of every 20 bats is infected. Many people live near these caves, shelter in them, or collect guano from them for fertilizer. Thousands of bats also fly over these people's villages and roost in their homes, creating opportunities for the bats' viral stowaways to spill over into human hosts. Based on antibody testing in rural parts of China, Peter Daszak of EcoHealth Alliance, a nonprofit that studies emerging diseases, estimates that such viruses infect a substantial number of people every year. "Most infected people don't know about it, and most of the viruses aren't transmissible," Daszak says. But it takes just one transmissible virus to start a pandemic.

Sometime in late 2019, the wrong virus left a bat and ended up, perhaps via an intermediate host, in a human—and another, and another. Eventually it found its way to the Huanan seafood market, and jumped into dozens of new hosts in an explosive super-spreading event. The COVID-19 pandemic had begun.

"There is no way to get spillover of everything to zero," Colin Carlson, an ecologist at Georgetown University, told me. Many conservationists jump on epidemics as opportunities to ban the wildlife trade or the eating of "bush meat," an exoticized term



OPENING SPREAD: NEW YORK CITY AT THE HEIGHT OF THE PANDEMIC. THIS PAGE, LEFT: PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP AND THE CORONAVIRUS TASK FORCE BRIEF THE PRESS AT THE WHITE HOUSE. RIGHT: A RECORD NUMBER OF BODIES BEING PROCESSED AT A FUNERAL HOME IN QUEENS, NEW YORK.

for “game,” but few diseases have emerged through either route. Carlson said the biggest factors behind spillovers are land-use change and climate change, both of which are hard to control. Our species has relentlessly expanded into previously wild spaces. Through intensive agriculture, habitat destruction, and rising temperatures, we have uprooted the planet’s animals, forcing them into new and narrower ranges that are on our own doorstep. Humanity has squeezed the world’s wildlife in a crushing grip—and viruses have come bursting out.

Curtailing those viruses after they spill over is more feasible, but requires knowledge, transparency, and decisiveness that were lacking in 2020. Much about coronaviruses is still unknown. There are no surveillance networks for detecting them as there are for influenza. There are no approved treatments or vaccines. Coronaviruses were formerly a niche family, of mainly veterinary importance. Four decades ago, just 60 or so scientists attended the first international meeting on coronaviruses. Their ranks swelled after SARS swept the world in 2003, but quickly dwindled as a spike in funding vanished. The same thing happened after MERS emerged in 2012. This year, the world’s coronavirus experts—and there still aren’t many—had to postpone their triennial conference in the Netherlands because SARS-CoV-2 made flying too risky.

In the age of cheap air travel, an outbreak that begins on one continent can easily reach the others. SARS already demonstrated that in 2003, and more than twice as many people now travel by plane every year. To avert a pandemic, affected nations must alert their neighbors quickly. In 2003, China covered up the early spread of SARS, allowing the new disease to gain a foothold, and in 2020, history repeated itself. The Chinese government downplayed the possibility that SARS-CoV-2 was spreading among humans, and only confirmed as much on January 20, after millions had traveled around the country for the lunar new year. Doctors who tried to raise the alarm were censured and threatened. One, Li Wenliang, later died of COVID-19. The World Health Organization initially parroted China’s line and did not declare a public-health emergency of international concern until January 30. By then, an estimated 10,000 people in 20 countries had been infected, and the virus was spreading fast.

The United States has correctly castigated China for its duplicity and the WHO for its laxity—but the U.S. has also failed the international community. Under President Donald Trump, the

U.S. has withdrawn from several international partnerships and antagonized its allies. It has a seat on the WHO’s executive board, but left that position empty for more than two years, only filling it this May, when the pandemic was in full swing. Since 2017, Trump has pulled more than 30 staffers out of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s office in China, who could have warned about the spreading coronavirus. Last July, he defunded an American epidemiologist embedded within China’s CDC. America First was America oblivious.

Even after warnings reached the U.S., they fell on the wrong ears. Since before his election, Trump has cavalierly dismissed expertise and evidence. He filled his administration with inexperienced newcomers, while depicting career civil servants as part of a “deep state.” In 2018, he dismantled an office that had been assembled specifically to prepare for nascent pandemics. American intelligence agencies warned about the coronavirus threat in January, but Trump habitually disregards intelligence briefings. The secretary of health and human services, Alex Azar, offered similar counsel, and was twice ignored.

Being prepared means being ready to spring into action, “so that when something like this happens, you’re moving quickly,” Ronald Klain, who coordinated the U.S. response to the West African Ebola outbreak in 2014, told me. “By early February, we should have triggered a series of actions, precisely zero of which were taken.” Trump could have spent those crucial early weeks mass-producing tests to detect the virus, asking companies to manufacture protective equipment and ventilators, and otherwise steeling the nation for the worst. Instead, he focused on the border. On January 31, Trump announced that the U.S. would bar entry to foreigners who had recently been in China, and urged Americans to avoid going there.

Travel bans make intuitive sense, because travel obviously enables the spread of a virus. But in practice, travel bans are woefully inefficient at restricting either travel or viruses. They prompt people to seek indirect routes via third-party countries, or to deliberately hide their symptoms. They are often porous: Trump’s included numerous exceptions, and allowed tens of thousands of people to enter from China. Ironically, they *create* travel: When Trump later announced a ban on flights from continental Europe, a surge of travelers packed America’s airports in a rush to beat the incoming restrictions. Travel bans may sometimes work for remote



LEFT: LOS ANGELES UNDER LOCKDOWN IN MARCH. MIDDLE: AN UNEMPLOYED WOMAN IN HOUSTON. RIGHT: AN EMPTY STREET IN BOSTON IN THE EARLY MONTHS OF THE PANDEMIC.

ADAM AMENGUAL; ELIZABETH BICK; YOAV HORESH



*In the middle of the greatest health and economic crises in generations, millions of Americans have found themselves impoverished and disconnected from medical care.*

island nations, but in general they can only delay the spread of an epidemic—not stop it. And they can create a harmful false confidence, so countries “rely on bans to the exclusion of the things they actually need to do—testing, tracing, building up the health system,” says Thomas Bollyky, a global-health expert at the Council on Foreign Relations. “That sounds an awful lot like what happened in the U.S.”

This was predictable. A president who is fixated on an ineffectual border wall, and has portrayed asylum seekers as vectors of disease, was always going to reach for travel bans as a first resort. And Americans who bought into his rhetoric of xenophobia and isolationism were going to be especially susceptible to thinking that simple entry controls were a panacea.

And so the U.S. wasted its best chance of restraining COVID-19. Although the disease first arrived in the U.S. in mid-January, genetic evidence shows that the specific viruses that triggered the first big outbreaks, in Washington State, didn’t land until mid-February. The country could have used that time to prepare. Instead, Trump, who had spent his entire presidency learning that he could say whatever he wanted without consequence, assured Americans that “the coronavirus is very

much under control,” and “like a miracle, it will disappear.” With impunity, Trump lied. With impunity, the virus spread.

On February 26, Trump asserted that cases were “going to be down to close to zero.” Over the next two months, at least 1 million Americans were infected.

AS THE CORONAVIRUS established itself in the U.S., it found a nation through which it could spread easily, without being detected. For years, Pardis Sabeti, a virologist at the Broad Institute of Harvard and MIT, has been trying to create a surveillance network that would allow hospitals in every major U.S. city to quickly track new viruses through genetic sequencing. Had that network existed, once Chinese scientists published SARS-CoV-2’s genome on January 11, every American hospital would have been able to develop its own diagnostic test in preparation for the virus’s arrival. “I spent a lot of time trying to convince many funders to fund it,” Sabeti told me. “I never got anywhere.”

The CDC developed and distributed its own diagnostic tests in late January. These proved useless because of a faulty chemical component. Tests were in such short supply, and the criteria for getting them were so laughably stringent, that by the end of February, tens of thousands of Americans had likely been infected but only hundreds had been tested. The official data were so clearly wrong that *The Atlantic* developed its own volunteer-led initiative—the COVID Tracking Project—to count cases.

Diagnostic tests are easy to make, so the U.S. failing to create one seemed inconceivable. Worse, it had no Plan B. Private labs were strangled by FDA bureaucracy. Meanwhile, Sabeti’s lab developed a diagnostic test in mid-January and sent it to colleagues in Nigeria, Sierra Leone, and Senegal. “We had working diagnostics in those countries well before we did in any U.S. states,” she told me.

It’s hard to overstate how thoroughly the testing debacle incapacitated the U.S. People with debilitating symptoms couldn’t find out what was wrong with them. Health officials couldn’t cut off chains of transmission by identifying people who were sick and asking them to isolate themselves.

Water running along a pavement will readily seep into every crack; so, too, did the unchecked coronavirus seep into every fault line in the modern world. Consider our buildings. In



LEFT: A WOMAN WITH COVID-19 SYMPTOMS GETS HER VITALS CHECKED IN MONUMENT VALLEY, ARIZONA, IN THE NAVAJO NATION. MIDDLE: BLOOD SAMPLES IN A LAB IN FLORIDA. RIGHT: THE USNS MERCY ARRIVES IN THE PORT OF LOS ANGELES TO PROVIDE HELP TO OVERSTRETCHED HOSPITALS.

response to the global energy crisis of the 1970s, architects made structures more energy-efficient by sealing them off from outdoor air, reducing ventilation rates. Pollutants and pathogens built up indoors, “ushering in the era of ‘sick buildings,’” says Joseph Allen, who studies environmental health at Harvard’s T. H. Chan School of Public Health. Energy efficiency is a pillar of modern climate policy, but there are ways to achieve it without sacrificing well-being. “We lost our way over the years and stopped designing buildings for people,” Allen says.

The indoor spaces in which Americans spend 87 percent of their time became staging grounds for super-spreading events. One study showed that the odds of catching the virus from an infected person are roughly 19 times higher indoors than in open air. Shielded from the elements and among crowds clustered in prolonged proximity, the coronavirus ran rampant in the conference rooms of a Boston hotel, the cabins of the Diamond Princess cruise ship, and a church hall in Washington State where a choir practiced for just a few hours.

The hardest-hit buildings were those that had been jammed with people for decades: prisons. Between harsher punishments doled out in the War on Drugs and a tough-on-crime mindset that prizes retribution over rehabilitation, America’s incarcerated population has swelled sevenfold since the 1970s, to about 2.3 million. The U.S. imprisons five to 18 times more people per capita than other Western democracies. Many American prisons are packed beyond capacity, making social distancing impossible. Soap is often scarce. Inevitably, the coronavirus ran amok. By June, two American prisons each accounted for more cases than all of New Zealand. One, Marion Correctional Institution, in Ohio, had more than 2,000 cases among inmates despite having a capacity of 1,500.

Other densely packed facilities were also besieged. America’s nursing homes and long-term-care facilities house less than 1 percent of its people, but as of mid-June, they accounted for 40 percent of its coronavirus deaths. More than 50,000 residents and staff have died. At least 250,000 more have been infected. These grim figures are a reflection not just of the greater harms that COVID-19 inflicts upon elderly physiology, but also of the care the elderly receive. Before the pandemic, three in four nursing homes were understaffed, and four in five had recently been cited for failures in infection control. The Trump administration’s policies have exacerbated the problem by reducing the influx of immigrants, who make up a quarter of long-term caregivers.

Even though a Seattle nursing home was one of the first COVID-19 hot spots in the U.S., similar facilities weren’t provided with tests and protective equipment. Rather than girding these facilities against the pandemic, the Department of Health and Human Services paused nursing-home inspections in March, passing the buck to the states. Some nursing homes avoided the virus because their owners immediately stopped visitations, or paid caregivers to live on-site. But in others, staff stopped working, scared about infecting their charges or becoming infected themselves. In some cases,





A WOMAN PROCESSES TAKE-OUT ORDERS AT A RESTAURANT IN THE EAST VILLAGE, IN MANHATTAN.





LEFT: HEALTH-CARE WORKERS SURROUND A COVID-19 PATIENT AT LENOX HILL HOSPITAL, IN MANHATTAN. RIGHT: A WOMAN WEARS A MASK IN LOS ANGELES.

residents had to be evacuated because no one showed up to care for them.

America's neglect of nursing homes and prisons, its sick buildings, and its botched deployment of tests are all indicative of its problematic attitude toward health: "Get hospitals ready and wait for sick people to show," as Sheila Davis, the CEO of the non-profit Partners in Health, puts it. "Especially in the beginning, we catered our entire [COVID-19] response to the 20 percent of people who required hospitalization, rather than preventing transmission in the community." The latter is the job of the public-health system, which prevents sickness in populations instead of merely treating it in individuals. That system pairs uneasily with a national temperament that views health as a matter of personal responsibility rather than a collective good.

At the end of the 20th century, public-health improvements meant that Americans were living an average of 30 years longer than they were at the start of it. Maternal mortality had fallen by 99 percent; infant mortality by 90 percent. Fortified foods all but eliminated rickets and goiters. Vaccines eradicated smallpox and polio, and brought measles, diphtheria, and rubella to heel. These measures, coupled with antibiotics and better sanitation, curbed infectious diseases to such a degree that some scientists predicted they would soon pass into history. But instead, these achievements brought complacency. "As public health did its job, it became a target" of budget cuts, says Lori Freeman, the CEO of the National Association of County and City Health Officials.

Today, the U.S. spends just 2.5 percent of its gigantic health-care budget on public health. Underfunded health departments were already struggling to deal with opioid addiction, climbing obesity rates, contaminated water, and easily preventable diseases. Last year saw the most measles cases since 1992. In 2018, the U.S. had 115,000 cases of syphilis and 580,000 cases of gonorrhea—numbers not seen in almost three decades. It has 1.7 million cases of chlamydia, the highest number ever recorded.

Since the last recession, in 2009, chronically strapped local health departments have lost 55,000 jobs—a quarter of their workforce. When COVID-19 arrived, the economic downturn

forced overstretched departments to furlough more employees. When states needed battalions of public-health workers to find infected people and trace their contacts, they had to hire and train people from scratch. In May, Maryland Governor Larry Hogan asserted that his state would soon have enough people to trace 10,000 contacts every day. Last year, as Ebola tore through the Democratic Republic of Congo—a country with a quarter of Maryland's wealth and an active war zone—local health workers and the WHO traced twice as many people.

**RIPPING UNIMPEDED THROUGH** American communities, the coronavirus created thousands of sickly hosts that it then rode into America's hospitals. It should have found facilities armed with state-of-the-art medical technologies, detailed pandemic plans, and ample supplies of protective equipment and life-saving medicines. Instead, it found a brittle system in danger of collapse.

Compared with the average wealthy nation, America spends nearly twice as much of its national wealth on health care, about a quarter of which is wasted on inefficient care, unnecessary treatments, and administrative chicanery. The U.S. gets little bang for its exorbitant buck. It has the lowest life-expectancy rate of comparable countries, the highest rates of chronic disease, and the fewest doctors per person. This profit-driven system has scant incentive to invest in spare beds, stockpiled supplies, peacetime drills, and layered contingency plans—the essence of pandemic preparedness. America's hospitals have been pruned and stretched by market forces to run close to full capacity, with little ability to adapt in a crisis.

When hospitals do create pandemic plans, they tend to fight the last war. After 2014, several centers created specialized treatment units designed for Ebola—a highly lethal but not very contagious disease. These units were all but useless against a highly transmissible airborne virus like SARS-CoV-2. Nor were hospitals ready for an outbreak to drag on for months. Emergency plans assumed that staff could endure a few days of exhausting conditions, that supplies would hold, and that hard-hit centers could be supported by unaffected neighbors. "We're designed for discrete



LEFT: A PRO-TRUMP PROTESTER IN HARRISBURG, PENNSYLVANIA, IN APRIL. RIGHT: AN ANTI-LOCKDOWN PROTEST IN MOUNT WOLF, PENNSYLVANIA, IN MAY.

disasters” like mass shootings, traffic pileups, and hurricanes, says Esther Choo, an emergency physician at Oregon Health and Science University. The COVID-19 pandemic is not a discrete disaster. It is a 50-state catastrophe that will likely continue at least until a vaccine is ready.

Wherever the coronavirus arrived, hospitals reeled. Several states asked medical students to graduate early, reenlisted retired doctors, and deployed dermatologists to emergency departments. Doctors and nurses endured grueling shifts, their faces chapped and bloody when they finally doffed their protective equipment. Soon, that equipment—masks, respirators, gowns, gloves—started running out.

American hospitals operate on a just-in-time economy. They acquire the goods they need in the moment through labyrinthine supply chains that wrap around the world in tangled lines, from countries with cheap labor to richer nations like the U.S. The lines are invisible until they snap. About half of the world’s face masks, for example, are made in China, some of them in Hubei province. When that region became the pandemic epicenter, the mask supply

shriveled just as global demand spiked. The Trump administration turned to a larder of medical supplies called the Strategic National Stockpile, only to find that the 100 million respirators and masks that had been dispersed during the 2009 flu pandemic were never replaced. Just 13 million respirators were left.

In April, four in five frontline nurses said they didn’t have enough protective equipment. Some solicited donations from the public, or navigated a morass of back-alley deals and internet scams. Others fashioned their own surgical masks from bandannas and gowns from garbage bags. The supply of nasopharyngeal swabs that are used in every diagnostic test also ran low, because one of the largest manufacturers is based in Lombardy, Italy—initially the COVID-19 capital of Europe. About 40 percent of critical-care drugs, including antibiotics and painkillers, became scarce because they depend on manufacturing lines that begin in China and India. Once a vaccine is ready, there might not be enough vials to put it in, because of the long-running global shortage of medical-grade glass—literally, a bottle-neck bottleneck.

The federal government could have mitigated those problems by buying supplies at economies of scale and distributing them according to need. Instead, in March, Trump told America’s governors to “try getting it yourselves.” As usual, health care was a matter of capitalism and connections. In New York, rich hospitals bought their way out of their protective-equipment shortfall, while neighbors in poorer, more diverse parts of the city rationed their supplies.

While the president prevaricated, Americans acted. Businesses sent their employees home. People practiced social distancing, even before Trump finally declared a national emergency on March 13, and before governors and mayors subsequently issued formal stay-at-home orders, or closed schools, shops, and restaurants. A study showed that the U.S. could have averted 36,000 COVID-19 deaths if leaders had enacted social-distancing measures just a week earlier. But better late than never: By collectively reducing the spread of the virus, America flattened the curve. Ventilators didn’t run out, as they had in parts of Italy. Hospitals had time to add extra beds.

Social distancing worked. But the indiscriminate lockdown was necessary only because America’s leaders wasted months of

*Rather than countering misinformation during the pandemic, trusted sources often made things worse.*





A MASKED WORKER CLEANS A NEW YORK CITY SUBWAY ENTRANCE.





prep time. Deploying this blunt policy instrument came at enormous cost. Unemployment rose to 14.7 percent, the highest level since record-keeping began, in 1948. More than 26 million people lost their jobs, a catastrophe in a country that—uniquely and absurdly—ties health care to employment. Some COVID-19 survivors have been hit with seven-figure medical bills. In the middle of the greatest health and economic crises in generations, millions of Americans have found themselves disconnected from medical care and impoverished. They join the millions who have always lived that way.

**THE CORONAVIRUS FOUND**, exploited, and widened every inequity that the U.S. had to offer. Elderly people, already pushed to the fringes of society, were treated as acceptable losses. Women were more likely to lose jobs than men, and also shouldered extra burdens of child care and domestic work, while facing rising rates of domestic violence. In half of the states, people with dementia and intellectual disabilities faced policies that threatened to deny them access to lifesaving ventilators. Thousands of people endured months of COVID-19 symptoms that resembled those of chronic postviral illnesses, only to be told that their devastating symptoms were in their head. Latinos were three times as likely to be infected as white people. Asian Americans faced racist abuse. Far from being a “great equalizer,” the pandemic fell unevenly upon the U.S., taking advantage of injustices that had been brewing throughout the nation’s history.

Of the 3.1 million Americans who cannot afford health insurance, more than half are people of color, and 30 percent are Black. This is no accident. In the decades after the Civil War, the white leaders of former slave states deliberately withheld health care from Black Americans, apportioning medicine more according to the logic of Jim Crow than Hippocrates. They built hospitals away from Black communities, segregated Black patients into separate wings, and blocked Black students from medical school. In the 20th century, they helped construct America’s system of private, employer-based insurance, which has kept many Black people from receiving adequate medical treatment. They fought every attempt to improve Black people’s access to health care, from the creation of Medicare and Medicaid in the ’60s to the passage of the Affordable Care Act in 2010.

A number of former slave states also have among the lowest investments in public health, the lowest quality of medical care, the highest proportions of Black citizens, and the greatest racial divides in health outcomes. As the COVID-19 pandemic wore on, they were among the quickest to lift social-distancing restrictions and reexpose their citizens to the coronavirus. The harms of these moves were unduly foisted upon the poor and the Black.

As of early July, one in every 1,450 Black Americans had died from COVID-19—a rate more than twice that of white Americans. That figure is both tragic and wholly expected given the mountain of medical disadvantages that Black people face. Compared with white people, they die three years younger. Three times as many Black mothers die during pregnancy. Black people have higher rates of chronic illnesses that predispose them to

fatal cases of COVID-19. When they go to hospitals, they're less likely to be treated. The care they do receive tends to be poorer. Aware of these biases, Black people are hesitant to seek aid for COVID-19 symptoms and then show up at hospitals in sicker states. "One of my patients said, 'I don't want to go to the hospital, because they're not going to treat me well,'" says Uché Blackstock, an emergency physician and the founder of Advancing Health Equity, a nonprofit that fights bias and racism in health care. "Another whispered to me, 'I'm so relieved you're Black. I just want to make sure I'm listened to.'"

Black people were both more worried about the pandemic and more likely to be infected by it. The dismantling of America's social safety net left Black people with less income and higher unemployment. They make up a disproportionate share of the low-paid "essential workers" who were expected to staff grocery stores and warehouses, clean buildings, and deliver mail while the pandemic raged around them. Earning hourly wages without paid sick leave, they couldn't afford to miss shifts even when symptomatic. They faced risky commutes on crowded public transportation while more privileged people teleworked from the safety of isolation. "There's nothing about Blackness that makes you more prone to COVID," says Nicolette Louisaint, the executive director of Healthcare Ready, a nonprofit that works to strengthen medical supply chains. Instead, existing inequities stack the odds in favor of the virus.

Native Americans were similarly vulnerable. A third of the people in the Navajo Nation can't easily wash their hands, because they've been embroiled in long-running negotiations over the rights to the water on their own lands. Those with water must contend with runoff from uranium mines. Most live in cramped multigenerational homes, far from the few hospitals that service a 17-million-acre reservation. As of mid-May, the Navajo Nation had higher rates of COVID-19 infections than any U.S. state.

Americans often misperceive historical inequities as personal failures. Stephen Huffman, a Republican state senator and doctor in Ohio, suggested that Black Americans might be more prone to

COVID-19 because they don't wash their hands enough, a remark for which he later apologized. Republican Senator Bill Cassidy of Louisiana, also a physician, noted that Black people have higher rates of chronic disease, as if this were an answer in itself, and not a pattern that demanded further explanation.

**CLEAR DISTRIBUTION** of accurate information is among the most important defenses against an epidemic's spread. And yet the largely unregulated, social-media-based communications infrastructure of the 21st century almost ensures that misinformation will proliferate fast. "In every outbreak throughout the existence of social media, from Zika to Ebola, conspiratorial communities immediately spread their content about how it's all caused by some government or pharmaceutical company or Bill Gates," says Renée DiResta of the Stanford Internet Observatory, who studies the flow of online information. When COVID-19 arrived, "there was no doubt in my mind that it was coming."

Sure enough, existing conspiracy theories—George Soros! 5G! Bioweapons!—were repurposed for the pandemic. An infodemic of falsehoods spread alongside the actual virus. Rumors coursed through online platforms that are designed to keep users engaged, even if that means feeding them content that is polarizing or untrue. In a national crisis, when people need to act in concert, this is calamitous. "The social internet as a system is broken," DiResta told me, and its faults are readily abused.

Beginning on April 16, DiResta's team noticed growing online chatter about Judy Mikovits, a discredited researcher turned anti-vaccination champion. Posts and videos cast Mikovits as a whistleblower who claimed that the new coronavirus was made in a lab and described Anthony Fauci of the White House's coronavirus task force as her nemesis. Ironically, this conspiracy theory was nested inside a larger conspiracy—part of an orchestrated PR campaign by an anti-vaxxer and QAnon fan with the explicit goal to "take down Anthony Fauci." It culminated in a slickly produced video called *Plandemic*, which was released on May 4. More than 8 million people watched it in a week.



LEFT: A WOMAN HUGS HER GRANDMOTHER THROUGH A PLASTIC SHEET IN WANTAGH, NEW YORK. RIGHT: AN ELDERLY WOMAN HAS HER OXYGEN LEVELS TESTED IN YONKERS, NEW YORK.

PREVIOUS SPREAD: DINA LITOVSKY / REDUX. THIS PAGE: AL BELLO / GETTY; ANDREW RENNEISEN / THE NEW YORK TIMES / REDUX.

Doctors and journalists tried to debunk *Plandemic*'s many misleading claims, but these efforts spread less successfully than the video itself. Like pandemics, infodemics quickly become uncontrollable unless caught early. But while health organizations recognize the need to surveil for emerging diseases, they are woefully unprepared to do the same for emerging conspiracies. In 2016, when DiResta spoke with a CDC team about the threat of misinformation, "their response was: 'That's interesting, but that's just stuff that happens on the internet.'"

Rather than countering misinformation during the pandemic's early stages, trusted sources often made things worse. Many health experts and government officials downplayed the threat of the virus in January and February, assuring the public that it posed a low risk to the U.S. and drawing comparisons to the ostensibly greater threat of the flu. The WHO, the CDC, and the U.S. surgeon general urged people not to wear masks, hoping to preserve the limited stocks for health-care workers. These messages were offered without nuance or acknowledgment of uncertainty, so when they were reversed—the virus is worse than the flu; wear masks—the changes seemed like befuddling flip-flops.

The media added to the confusion. Drawn to novelty, journalists gave oxygen to fringe anti-lockdown protests while most Americans quietly stayed home. They wrote up every incremental scientific claim, even those that hadn't been verified or peer-reviewed.

There were many such claims to choose from. By tying career advancement to the publishing of papers, academia already creates incentives for scientists to do attention-grabbing but irreproducible work. The pandemic strengthened those incentives by prompting a rush of panicked research and promising ambitious scientists global attention.

In March, a small and severely flawed French study suggested that the antimalarial drug hydroxychloroquine could treat COVID-19. Published in a minor journal, it likely would have been ignored a decade ago. But in 2020, it wended its way to Donald Trump via a chain of credulity that included Fox

News, Elon Musk, and Dr. Oz. Trump spent months touting the drug as a miracle cure despite mounting evidence to the contrary, causing shortages for people who actually needed it to treat lupus and rheumatoid arthritis. The hydroxychloroquine story was muddled even further by two studies published in top medical journals—*The Lancet* and the *New England Journal of Medicine*—that claimed the drug was not effective and was potentially harmful. The papers relied on suspect data from a small analytics company called Surgisphere. Both were retracted in June.

Science famously self-corrects. But during the pandemic, the same urgent pace that has produced valuable knowledge at record speed has also sent sloppy claims around the world before anyone could even raise a skeptical eyebrow. The ensuing confusion, and the many genuine unknowns about the virus, has created a vortex of fear and uncertainty, which grifters have sought to exploit. Snake-oil merchants have peddled ineffectual silver bullets (including actual silver). Armchair experts with scant or absent qualifications have found regular slots on the nightly news. And at the center of that confusion is Donald Trump.

**DURING A PANDEMIC**, leaders must rally the public, tell the truth, and speak clearly and consistently. Instead, Trump repeatedly contradicted public-health experts, his scientific advisers, and himself. He said that "nobody ever thought a thing like [the pandemic] could happen" and also that he "felt it was a pandemic long before it was called a pandemic." Both statements cannot be true at the same time, and in fact neither is true.

A month before his inauguration, I wrote that "the question isn't whether [Trump will] face a deadly outbreak during his presidency, but when." Based on his actions as a media personality during the 2014 Ebola outbreak and as a candidate in the 2016 election, I suggested that he would fail at diplomacy, close borders, tweet rashly, spread conspiracy theories, ignore experts, and exhibit reckless self-confidence. And so he did.

No one should be shocked that a liar who has made almost 20,000 false or misleading claims during his presidency would lie



LEFT: PROTESTERS AT THE MINNEAPOLIS INTERSECTION WHERE GEORGE FLOYD WAS KILLED BY POLICE. RIGHT: PROTESTERS IN MANHATTAN'S WASHINGTON SQUARE PARK IN JUNE.



about whether the U.S. had the pandemic under control; that a racist who gave birth to birtherism would do little to stop a virus that was disproportionately killing Black people; that a xenophobe who presided over the creation of new immigrant-detention centers would order meatpacking plants with a substantial immigrant workforce to remain open; that a cruel man devoid of empathy would fail to calm fearful citizens; that a narcissist who cannot stand to be upstaged would refuse to tap the deep well of experts at his disposal; that a scion of nepotism would hand control of a shadow coronavirus task force to his unqualified son-in-law; that an armchair polymath would claim to have a “natural ability” at medicine and display it by wondering out loud about the curative potential of injecting disinfectant; that an egotist incapable of admitting failure would try to distract from his greatest one by blaming China, defunding the WHO, and promoting miracle drugs; or that a president who has been shielded by his party from any shred of accountability would say, when asked about the lack of testing, “I don’t take any responsibility at all.”

Trump is a comorbidity of the COVID-19 pandemic. He isn’t solely responsible for America’s fiasco, but he is central to it. A pandemic demands the coordinated efforts of dozens of agencies. “In the best circumstances, it’s hard to make the bureaucracy move quickly,” Ron Klain said. “It moves if the president stands on a table and says, ‘Move quickly.’ But it *really* doesn’t move if he’s sitting at his desk saying it’s not a big deal.”

In the early days of Trump’s presidency, many believed that America’s institutions would check his excesses. They have, in part, but Trump has also corrupted them. The CDC is but his latest victim. On February 25, the agency’s respiratory-disease chief, Nancy Messonnier, shocked people by raising the possibility of school closures and saying that “disruption to everyday life might be severe.” Trump was reportedly enraged. In response, he seems to have benched the entire agency. The CDC led the way in every recent domestic disease outbreak and has been the inspiration and template for public-health agencies around the world. But during the three months when some 2 million Americans contracted COVID-19 and the death toll topped 100,000, the agency didn’t hold a single press conference. Its detailed guidelines on reopening the country were shelved for a month while the White House released its own uselessly vague plan.

Again, everyday Americans did more than the White House. By voluntarily agreeing to months of social distancing, they bought the country time, at substantial cost to their financial and mental well-being. Their sacrifice came with an implicit social contract—that the government would use the valuable time to mobilize an extraordinary, energetic effort to suppress the virus, as did the likes of Germany and Singapore. But the government did not, to the bafflement of health experts. “There are instances in history where humanity has really moved mountains to defeat infectious diseases,” says Caitlin Rivers, an epidemiologist at the Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security. “It’s appalling that we in the U.S. have not summoned that energy around COVID-19.”

Instead, the U.S. sleepwalked into the worst possible scenario: People suffered all the debilitating effects of a lockdown with few of the benefits. Most states felt compelled to reopen without accruing

enough tests or contact tracers. In April and May, the nation was stuck on a terrible plateau, averaging 20,000 to 30,000 new cases every day. In June, the plateau again became an upward slope, soaring to record-breaking heights.

Trump never rallied the country. Despite declaring himself a “wartime president,” he merely presided over a culture war, turning public health into yet another politicized cage match. Abetted by supporters in the conservative media, he framed measures that protect against the virus, from masks to social distancing, as liberal and anti-American. Armed anti-lockdown protesters demonstrated at government buildings while Trump egged them on, urging them to “LIBERATE” Minnesota, Michigan, and Virginia. Several public-health officials left their jobs over harassment and threats.

It is no coincidence that other powerful nations that elected populist leaders—Brazil, Russia, India, and the United Kingdom—also fumbled their response to COVID-19. “When you have people elected based on undermining trust in the government, what happens when trust is what you need the most?” says Sarah Dalglish of the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, who studies the political determinants of health.

“Trump is president,” she says. “How could it go well?”

**THE COUNTRIES THAT** fared better against COVID-19 didn’t follow a universal playbook. Many used masks widely; New Zealand didn’t. Many tested extensively; Japan didn’t. Many had science-minded leaders who acted early; Hong Kong didn’t—instead, a grassroots movement compensated for a lax government. Many were small islands; not large and continental Germany. Each nation succeeded because it did enough things right.

Meanwhile, the United States underperformed across the board, and its errors compounded. The dearth of tests allowed unconfirmed cases to create still more cases, which flooded the hospitals, which ran out of masks, which are necessary to limit the virus’s spread. Twitter amplified Trump’s misleading messages, which raised fear and anxiety among people, which led them to spend more time scouring for information on Twitter. Even seasoned health experts underestimated these compounded risks. Yes, having Trump at the helm during a pandemic was worrying, but it was tempting to think that national wealth and technological superiority would save America. “We are a rich country, and we think we can stop any infectious disease because of that,” says Michael Osterholm, the director of the Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy at the University of Minnesota. “But dollar bills alone are no match against a virus.”

Public-health experts talk wearily about the panic-neglect cycle, in which outbreaks trigger waves of attention and funding that quickly dissipate once the diseases recede. This time around, the U.S. is *already* flirting with neglect, before the panic phase is over. The virus was never beaten in the spring, but many people, including Trump, pretended that it was. Every state reopened to varying degrees, and many subsequently saw record numbers of cases. After Arizona’s cases started climbing sharply at the end of May, Cara Christ, the director of the state’s health-services department, said, “We are not going to be able to stop the spread. And so we can’t stop living as well.” The virus may beg to differ.

At times, Americans have seemed to collectively surrender to COVID-19. The White House's coronavirus task force wound down. Trump resumed holding rallies, and called for *less* testing, so that official numbers would be rosier. The country behaved like a horror-movie character who believes the danger is over, even though the monster is still at large. The long wait for a vaccine will likely culminate in a predictable way: Many Americans will refuse to get it, and among those who want it, the most vulnerable will be last in line.

Still, there is some reason for hope. Many of the people I interviewed tentatively suggested that the upheaval wrought by COVID-19 might be so large as to permanently change the

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nation's disposition. Experience, after all, sharpens the mind. East Asian states that had lived through the SARS and MERS epidemics reacted quickly when threatened by SARS-CoV-2, spurred by a cultural memory of what a fast-moving coronavirus can do. But the U.S. had barely been touched by the major epidemics of past decades (with the exception of the H1N1 flu). In 2019, more Americans were concerned about terrorists and cyberattacks than about outbreaks of exotic diseases. Perhaps they will emerge from this pandemic with immunity both cellular and cultural.

There are also a few signs that Americans are learning important lessons. A June survey showed that 60 to 75 percent of Americans were still practicing social distancing. A partisan gap exists, but it has narrowed. "In public-opinion polling in the U.S., high-60s agreement on anything is an amazing accomplishment," says Beth Redbird, a sociologist at Northwestern University, who led the survey. Polls in May also showed that most Democrats and Republicans supported mask wearing, and felt it should be mandatory in at least some indoor spaces. It is almost unheard-of for a public-health measure to go from zero to majority acceptance in less than half a year. But pandemics are rare situations when "people are desperate for guidelines and rules," says Zoë McLaren, a health-policy professor at the University of Maryland at Baltimore County. The closest analogy

is pregnancy, she says, which is "a time when women's lives are changing, and they can absorb a ton of information. A pandemic is similar: People are actually paying attention, and learning."

Redbird's survey suggests that Americans indeed sought out new sources of information—and that consumers of news from conservative outlets, in particular, expanded their media diet. People of all political bents became more dissatisfied with the Trump administration. As the economy nose-dived, the health-care system ailed, and the government fumbled, belief in American exceptionalism declined. "Times of big social disruption call into question things we thought were normal and standard," Redbird told me. "If our institutions fail us here, in what ways are they failing elsewhere?" And whom are they failing the most?

Americans were in the mood for systemic change. Then, on May 25, George Floyd, who had survived COVID-19's assault on his airway, asphyxiated under the crushing pressure of a police officer's knee. The excruciating video of his killing circulated through communities that were still reeling from the deaths of Breonna Taylor and Ahmaud Arbery, and disproportionate casualties from COVID-19. America's simmering outrage came to a boil and spilled into its streets.

Defiant and largely cloaked in masks, protesters turned out in more than 2,000 cities and towns. Support for Black Lives Matter soared: For the first time since its founding in 2013, the movement had majority approval across racial groups. These protests were not about the pandemic, but individual protesters had been primed by months of shocking governmental missteps. Even people who might once have ignored evidence of police brutality recognized yet another broken institution. They could no longer look away.

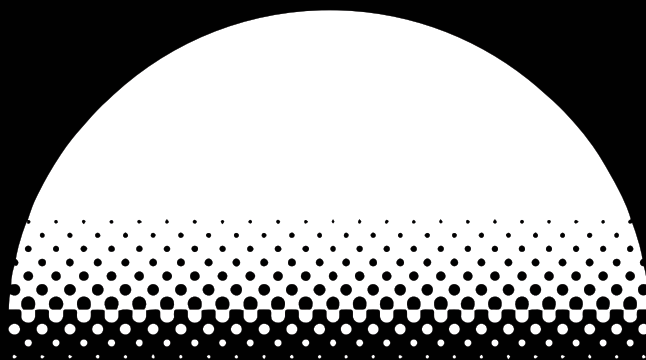
It is hard to stare directly at the biggest problems of our age. Pandemics, climate change, the sixth extinction of wildlife, food and water shortages—their scope is planetary, and their stakes are overwhelming. We have no choice, though, but to grapple with them. It is now abundantly clear what happens when global disasters collide with historical negligence.

COVID-19 is an assault on America's body, and a referendum on the ideas that animate its culture. Recovery is possible, but it demands radical introspection. America would be wise to help reverse the ruination of the natural world, a process that continues to shunt animal diseases into human bodies. It should strive to prevent sickness instead of profiting from it. It should build a health-care system that prizes resilience over brittle efficiency, and an information system that favors light over heat. It should rebuild its international alliances, its social safety net, and its trust in empiricism. It should address the health inequities that flow from its history. Not least, it should elect leaders with sound judgment, high character, and respect for science, logic, and reason.

The pandemic has been both tragedy and teacher. Its very etymology offers a clue about what is at stake in the greatest challenges of the future, and what is needed to address them.

*Pandemic. Pan and demos. All people. A*

*Ed Yong is a staff writer at The Atlantic.*





**THE**

**END**

**OF**

**DENIAL**

*Donald Trump has revealed the country's prejudice—and forced Americans to confront a racist system.*

**BY**

**IBRAM X. KENDI**

## I.

MARINE ONE WAITED for the president of the United States on the South Lawn of the White House. It was July 30, 2019, not long past 9 a.m.

Donald Trump was headed to historic Jamestown to mark the 400th anniversary of the first representative assembly of European settlers in the Americas. But Black Virginia legislators were boycotting the visit. Over the preceding two weeks, the president had been engaged in one of the most racist political assaults on members of Congress in American history.

Like so many controversies during Trump's presidency, it had all started with an early-morning tweet.

"So interesting to see 'Progressive' Democrat Congresswomen, who originally came from countries whose governments are a complete and total catastrophe, the worst, most corrupt and inept anywhere in the world (if they even have a functioning government at all), now loudly and viciously telling the people of the United States, the greatest and most powerful Nation on earth, how our government is to be run," Trump tweeted on Sunday, July 14, 2019. "Why don't they go back and help fix the totally broken and crime infested places from which they came. Then come back and show us how it is done. These places need your help badly, you can't leave fast enough."

Trump was referring to four freshman members of Congress: Ilhan Omar of Minnesota, a Somali American; Ayanna Pressley of Massachusetts, an African American; Rashida Tlaib of Michigan, a Palestinian American; and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of New York, a Puerto Rican. Pressley screen-shot Trump's tweet and declared, "THIS is what racism looks like."

On the South Lawn, Trump now faced reporters and cameras. Over the drone of the helicopter rotors, one reporter asked Trump if he was bothered that "more and more people" were calling him racist.

"I am the least racist person there is anywhere in the world," Trump replied, hands up, palms facing out for emphasis.

His hands came down. He singled out a vocal critic, the Reverend Al Sharpton. "Now, he's a racist," Trump said. "What I've

done for African Americans, no president, I would say, has done ... And the African American community is so thankful."

It was an absurd statement. But in a twisted way, Trump was right. As his administration's first term comes to an end, Black Americans—indeed, all Americans—should in one respect be thankful to him. He has held up a mirror to American society, and it has reflected back a grotesque image that many people had until now refused to see: an image not just of the racism still coursing through the country, but also of the reflex to deny that reality. Though it was hardly his intention, no president has caused more Americans to stop denying the existence of racism than Donald Trump.

## II.

WE ARE LIVING in the midst of an anti-racist revolution. This spring and summer, demonstrations calling for racial justice attracted hundreds of thousands of people in Los Angeles, Washington, New York, and other large cities. Smaller demonstrations erupted in northeastern enclaves such as Nantucket, Massachusetts, and Bar Harbor, Maine; in western towns such as Havre, Montana, and Hermiston, Oregon; in midsize cities such as Waco, Texas, and Topeka, Kansas; and in wealthy suburbs such as Chagrin Falls, Ohio, and Darien, Connecticut.

Veteran activists and new recruits to the cause pushed policy makers to hold violent police officers accountable, to ban choke holds and no-knock warrants, to shift funding from law enforcement to social services, and to end the practice of sending armed and dangerous officers to respond to incidents in which the suspect is neither armed nor dangerous. But these activists weren't merely advocating for a few policy shifts. They were calling for the eradication of racism in America once and for all.

The president attempted to portray the righteous demonstrations as the work of looters and thugs, but many of the people watching at home didn't see it that way. This summer, a majority of Americans—57 percent, according to a Monmouth University poll—said that police officers

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were more likely to use excessive force against Black "culprits" than they were against white ones. That's an increase from just 33 percent in December 2014, after a grand jury declined to indict a New York City police officer in the killing of Eric Garner.

What's more, by early June, roughly three out of four Americans were saying that "racial and ethnic discrimination" is a "big problem" in the United States—up from only about half of Americans in 2015, when Trump launched his presidential campaign.



It would be easy to see these shifts as the direct result of the horrifying events that have unfolded in 2020: a pandemic that has had a disproportionate effect on people of color; the video of George Floyd dying beneath the knee of an impassive Minneapolis police officer; the ghastly killing of Breonna Taylor, shot to death in her own home.

Yet fundamental shifts in American views of race were already under way before the COVID-19 disparities became clear and before these latest examples of police violence surfaced. The percentage of Americans who told Monmouth pollsters that racial and ethnic discrimination is a big problem made a greater leap from January 2015 (51 percent) to July 2016 (68 percent) than from July 2016 to June 2020 (76 percent). What we are witnessing right now is the culmination of a longer process—a process that tracks closely with the political career of Donald Trump.

### III.

IN THE DAYS leading up to Trump's attack on Omar, Pressley, Tlaib, and Ocasio-Cortez, Fox News slammed the "Squad," especially Omar. All four had been publicly

sparping with House Speaker Nancy Pelosi over a \$4.6 billion border-aid package that they thought did not sufficiently restrain Trump's immigration policies.

Yet Pelosi promptly defended her fellow Democrats on July 14, 2019. "When @realDonaldTrump tells four American Congresswomen to go back to their countries," Pelosi tweeted, "he reaffirms his plan to 'Make America Great Again' has always been about making America white again."

It has always been a racial slur for white Americans to tell Americans of color, "Go back to your country." Because their country is New York City, where Ocasio-Cortez was born. Their country is Detroit, Tlaib's birthplace. Their country is greater Boston, where Pressley lives. Their country is the United States, to which Omar's family immigrated when she was young.

As Democratic politicians raged at the president that Sunday, Republicans were silent. "It's become frighteningly common for many of my Republican colleagues to let these moments sail by without saying even a word," Minority Leader Chuck Schumer said on the Senate floor.

To be fair, by Monday, a few Republicans, including Representatives Mike

Turner of Ohio and Will Hurd of Texas, had called the president's tweets racist. But Trump, emboldened by the silence from the rest of his caucus, doubled down on his attacks.

"IF YOU ARE NOT HAPPY HERE," Trump wrote to the four women on Twitter, "YOU CAN LEAVE."

The president added: "If Democrats want to unite around the foul language & racist hatred spewed from the mouths and actions of these very unpopular & unrepresentative Congresswomen, it will be interesting to see how it plays out."

By Monday night, House Democrats had had enough. They introduced a resolution to "strongly" condemn the president's racist tweets.

Trump woke up the next morning once again in a state of angry denial. "Those Tweets were NOT Racist," he tweeted. "I don't have a Racist bone in my body!"

### IV.

FOR BETTER OR WORSE, Americans see themselves—and their country—in the president. From the days of George Washington, the president has personified the American body. The motto of the United States is *E pluribus unum*—"Out of many, one." The "one" is the president.

To Trump, and to many of his supporters, the American body must be a white body. When he launched his presidential campaign, on June 16, 2015, he began with attacks on immigrants of color and on the person whose citizenship he'd falsely questioned as a peddler of birtherism: Barack Obama. They were all desecrating the American body. Of Mexican immigrants, he said: "They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists." Of Obama, he said: "He's been a negative force. We need somebody that can take the brand of the United States and make it great again."



Trump presented himself as that somebody. To make America great again, he would make it seem as if a Black man had never been president, erasing him from history by repealing and replacing his signature accomplishments, from the Affordable Care Act to DACA, the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals policy. He would also build a wall to keep out immigrants, and he would ban Muslims from entering the country.

Days after first proposing his Muslim ban, in December 2015—still early in his candidacy—Trump told CNN’s Don Lemon, “I am the least racist person that you have ever met.”

Trump’s denial was audacious, but back then, his audacity only contributed to the complacent sense among many Americans that this interloper from reality television posed no serious threat. Yet the Americans who dismissed Trump’s chances were living in denial themselves.

For many, Obama’s presidency was proof that the country was rising to its ideals of liberty and equality. When a Black man climbed to the highest office in the land, it signified that the nation was postracial, or at least that history was inexorably bending in that direction. The Obama administration itself boasted that it was fighting the remnants of racism—a mop-up operation in a war that was all but won.

I was less sanguine. In the months leading up to the 2016 election, I told family and friends that Trump had a good chance of winning. Across American history, racial progress has normally been followed by its opposite.

So I was glad to be alone on Election Night. I did not want to see people I loved shocked that a racist nation had elected a racist president. On November 8, 2016, I watched the returns come in by myself, on the couch. My daughter, Imani, was sleeping in her crib. My wife, Sadiqa, was at the hospital, treating patients during an overnight shift in the pediatric emergency department.

I stayed up until 1:35 a.m. When Trump carried Pennsylvania, I turned off the television and called Sadiqa to hear how her shift was going. Our conversation was brief; she had to get back to her

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patients. Later, I would read about how, around 2:50 a.m., Trump greeted his exuberant supporters in New York City with a victory speech. He pledged to be “a president for all Americans.”

**V.**

WITHIN DAYS of being sworn in, Trump broke that promise. He reversed holds on two oil-pipeline projects, including one through the Standing Rock Indian Reservation, which was opposed by more than 200 Indigenous nations. He issued executive orders calling for the construction of a wall along the southern border and the deportation of individuals who “pose a risk to public safety or national security.” He enacted his first of three Muslim bans.

By the end of the spring, Attorney General Jeff Sessions had directed federal prosecutors to seek the harshest prison sentences whenever possible. Sessions had also laid the groundwork for the suspension of all the consent decrees that provided federal oversight of law-enforcement agencies that had demonstrated a pattern of racism.

Led by Steve Bannon and Stephen Miller, the administration worked on ways to restrict immigration by people of color. There was a sense of urgency, because, as Trump said at a private White House meeting in June 2017, Haitians “all have AIDS” and Nigerians would never “go back to their huts” once they came to the United States.

Then came Charlottesville. On August 11, 2017, about 250 white supremacists marched on the University of Virginia campus, carrying torches that lit up the night sky with racism and anti-Semitism. Demonstrating against Charlottesville’s plan to remove statues honoring Confederates, they chanted, “Blood and soil!” They chanted, “Jews will not replace us!” They chanted, “White lives matter!”

The white supremacists clashed with anti-racist demonstrators that night and the next afternoon. White lives did not matter to the white supremacist James Alex Fields Jr. He drove his Dodge Challenger







into a crowd of counterprotesters, murdering Heather Heyer and injuring 19 others.

“We condemn, in the strongest possible terms, this egregious display of hatred, bigotry, and violence on many sides, on many sides,” Trump said in response. He spoke about there being “very fine people” on “both sides.”

On September 5, 2017, Trump began his long and unsuccessful attempt to eliminate DACA, which deferred deportations for roughly 800,000 undocumented immigrants who had arrived in the U.S. as children. The Trump administration also began rescinding the Temporary Protected Status of thousands of refugees from wars and natural disasters years ago in Sudan, Nicaragua, Haiti, El Salvador, Nepal, and Honduras.

Near the end of his first year in office, Trump wondered aloud at a White House meeting: “Why are we having all these people from shithole countries come here?” He was referring to Haiti, El Salvador, and nations in Africa. He suggested that the U.S. should bring in more people from countries like Norway.

Three days later, on January 14, 2018, speaking before reporters in West Palm Beach, Florida, he was again asked if he was racist. “No, I’m not a racist,” he responded. “I am the least racist person you have ever interviewed.”

## VI.

THE AMERICA THAT denied its racism through the Obama years has struggled to deny its racism through the Trump years. From 1977 to 2018, the General Social Survey asked whether Black Americans “have worse jobs, income, and housing than white people ... mainly due to discrimination.” There are only two answers to this question. The racist answer is “no”—it presumes that racist discrimination no longer exists and that racial inequities are the result of something being wrong with Black people. The anti-racist answer is “yes”—it presumes that nothing is wrong or right, inferior or superior, about any racial group, so the explanation for racial disparities must be discrimination.

In 2008, as Obama was headed for the White House, only 34.5 percent of respondents answered “yes,” a number I’ll call the anti-racist rate. This was the second-lowest anti-racist rate of the 41-year polling period. The rate rose to 37.7 percent in 2010, perhaps because the emergence of the Tea Party forced a reckoning for some white Americans, but it fell back down to 34.9 percent in 2012 and 34.6 percent in 2014.

In 2016, as Trump loomed over American politics, the anti-racist rate rose to 42.6 percent. It went up to 46.2 percent in 2018, a double-digit increase from the start of the Obama administration. In large part, shifts in white public opinion explain the jump. The white anti-racist rate was barely 29.8 percent in 2008. It jumped to 37.7 percent in 2016 and to 40.5 percent two years into Trump’s presidency.

The deniers of racism, those who blame people of color for racial inequity and injustice, have mostly been white, but not exclusively so. Between 1977 and 2018, the lowest anti-racist rate among Black respondents—47.2 percent—came in 2012, the midpoint of Obama’s presidency. That rate climbed to 61.1 percent in 2016 and 66 percent in 2018, a nearly 20-point swing from the Obama years.

It has become harder, in the Trump years, to blame Black people for racial inequity and injustice. It has also become harder to tell Black people that the fault lies with them, and to urge them to improve their station by behaving in an upstanding or respectable manner. In the Trump years, the problem is obvious, and it isn’t Black people’s behavior.

## VII.

THE UNITED STATES has often been called a land of contradictions, and to be sure, its failings sit alongside some notable achievements—a New Deal for many Americans in the 1930s, the defeat of fascism abroad in the 1940s. But on racial matters, the U.S. could just as accurately be described as a land in denial. It has been a massacring nation that said it cherished life, a slaveholding nation that claimed it valued liberty, a hierarchal nation that

declared it valued equality, a disenfranchising nation that branded itself a democracy, a segregated nation that styled itself separate but equal, an excluding nation that boasted of opportunity for all. A nation is what it does, not what it originally claimed it would be. Often, a nation is precisely what it denies itself to be.

There was a grand moment, however, when a large swath of Americans walked away from a history of racial denial. In the 1850s, slaveholders expanded their reach into the North. Their slavecatchers, backed by federal power, were superseding state and local law to capture runaways (and free Blacks) who had escaped across the Mason-Dixon Line. Formerly enslaved people such as Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth, as well as journalists such as William Lloyd Garrison, stood in pulpits across the North and West describing the brutality and inhumanity of slavery. Meanwhile, slaveholders fought to expand their power out west—where white people who did not want to compete with enslaved Black labor were calling for free soil. Beginning in 1854, slaveholders went to war with free-soilers (and abolitionists like John Brown) in Kansas over whether the state—and the United States—would be free or slave. The Supreme Court’s *Dred Scott* decision, in 1857, implied that Black people and northern states “had no rights” that slaveholders were “bound to respect.”

Slaveholders seemed intent on spreading their plantations from sea to shining sea. As a result, more and more white Americans became antislavery, whether out of concern for the enslaved or fear of the encroaching slave power. Black Americans, meanwhile, fled the country for Canada and Liberia—or stayed and pressed the cause of radical abolitionism. A critical mass of Americans rejected the South’s claim that enslavement was good and came to recognize the peculiar institution as altogether bad.

The slaveholders’ attempts to perpetuate their system backfired; in the years before the Civil War, the inhumanity and cruelty of enslavement became too blatant for northerners to ignore or deny. Similarly, Trump’s racism—and that of his allies and enablers—has been too



blatant for Americans to ignore or deny. And just as the 1850s paved the way for the revolution against slavery, Trump's presidency has paved the way for a revolution against racism.

## VIII.

ON JULY 16, 2019, the House bitterly debated the resolution to rebuke Trump for his racist tweets against the four congresswomen of color. The four were members of the most diverse class of Democrats in American history, which had retaken the House in a midterm repudiation of the president.

"Every single member of this institution, Democratic and Republican, should join us in condemning the president's racist tweets," Speaker Pelosi said from the House floor. Republicans sounded off in protest. Pelosi turned to them, voice rising, and added: "To do anything less would be a shocking rejection of our values and a shameful abdication of our oath of office to protect the American people."

Republicans claimed that Pelosi had violated a House rule by characterizing an action as "racist." They moved to have the word struck from the congressional record.

The motion to strike *racist* from the record failed along party lines. "I know racism when I see it, I know racism when I feel it, and at the highest level of government, there's no room for racism," Representative John Lewis, the civil-rights icon, said during the debate.

One after another, Republicans rose to defend their president. "What has really happened here is that the president and his supporters have been forced to endure months of allegations of racism," said Representative Dan Meuser of Pennsylvania. "This ridiculous slander does a disservice to our nation."

In the end, only four Republicans and the House's lone independent voted with all the Democrats to condemn the president of the United States. That means 187 House Republicans, or 98 percent of the caucus, denied that telling four congresswomen of color to go back to their countries was racist. They believed, as Senate

# TRUMP'S PRESIDENCY HAS PAVED THE WAY FOR A REVOLUTION AGAINST RACISM.

Majority Leader Mitch McConnell said, that "the president's not a racist."

To call out the president's racism would have been to call out their own racism. McConnell had been quietly killing anti-racist bills that had come out of the House since January 2019, starting with the new House's first bill, which aimed to protect Americans against voter suppression.

The day after being rebuked by House Democrats, Trump held the first rally of his reelection campaign. He spent a large portion of his speech in Greenville,

North Carolina, railing against the four congresswomen. As he was pummeling Omar with a round of attacks, the crowd started chanting, "Send her back! Send her back! Send her back!"

Trump stopped speaking. He made no effort to stop the chant as it grew louder. He basked in the racial slur for 13 seconds.

"Send her back! Send her back! Send her back!"

On Thursday, Republicans were quick to denounce the chant. "There's no place for that kind of talk," Tom Emmer of Minnesota said to reporters. But, he added, "there's not a racist bone in the president's body."

Trump disavowed the "Send her back" chant, but by Friday he had disavowed his disavowal, calling the chanters "incredible patriots" and denying their racism along with his own. Many Americans saw through these patently false claims, however. By the end of July, for the first time, a majority of voters said the president of the United States was, in fact, a racist.

## IX.

I THOUGHT I APPRECIATED the power of denial from studying the history of racist ideas. But I learned to understand it in a personal way during the first year of Trump's presidency. In 2017, I fell ill; I felt as sick as I'd ever been. But I told myself the hourly trips to the bathroom were nothing. The blood wasn't serious. I ignored the symptoms for months.

I waited until the pain was unbearable before I admitted that I had a problem. And even then, I wasn't able to acknowledge it on my own. My partner saved my life.

Sadiqa saw the totality of my symptoms during a weeklong vacation over New Year's. It was the first time in months that we were together all day, every day. As soon as we returned home, in January 2018, she dragged me to the doctor.

I acquiesced to the appointment, but I still wouldn't permit the thought that my condition was serious. I did not have any of the commonly known risk factors for the worst possibility—colon cancer. I was 35, and I exercised regularly, didn't smoke, rarely drank, and had no family history. I was a vegan, for goodness' sake.

I realize now that I was engaged in a powerful bout of denial. Americans, too, can easily summon a litany of reasons their country is not racist: Look at the enlightened principles upon which the nation was founded. Look at the progress the country has made. Look at the election of Barack Obama. Look at the dark faces in high places. Look at the diversity of the 2020 Democratic field.

Even after the doctor found the tumor, my denial persisted. Once I accepted that I had cancer, I was convinced that it had to be Stage 1, for all the reasons I had been convinced that I did not have cancer at all. A routine surgery was in order, and then all would be good.

I fear that this is how many Americans are thinking right now: Routine surgery—the defeat of Donald Trump at the polls—will heal the American body. No need to look deeper, at police departments, at schools, at housing. Are Americans now acknowledging racism, but telling themselves the problem is contained? Are they telling themselves that it is a big problem, but it can't have spread to almost every part of the body politic? Will this become the new form of American denial?

False hope was my new normal, until it wasn't. When they scanned my body, doctors found that the cancer had spread. I had Stage 4 colon cancer. I had two choices: denial and death, or recognition and life. America now has two choices.

X.

TRUMP'S DENIALS OF HIS RACISM will never stop. He will continue to claim that he loves people of color, the very people his policies harm. He will continue to call himself "not racist," and turn the descriptive term *racist* back on anyone who has the temerity to call out his own prejudice. Trump clearly hopes that racist ideas—paired with policies designed to suppress the vote—will lead to his reelection. But now that Trump has pushed a critical mass of Americans to a point where they can no longer explain away the nation's sins, the question is what those Americans will do about it.

**JUST AS THE  
ABOLITIONISTS  
OF THE 1850S  
DEMANDED THE  
IMMEDIATE  
ERADICATION  
OF SLAVERY,  
IMMEDIATE  
EQUALITY  
MUST BE THE  
DEMAND  
TODAY.**

One path forward leads to a mere restoration. Barack Obama's vice president unseats Trump, removing the bad apple from the barrel. With Trump dispatched, the nation believes it is again headed in the right direction. On this path, Americans consider racism to be a significant problem. But they deny the true gravity of the problem and the need for drastic action. On this path, monuments to racism are dismantled, but Americans shrink from the awesome task of reshaping the country with anti-racist policies. With Trump gone, Americans decide they don't need to be actively anti-racist anymore.

Or Americans can realize that they are at a point of no return. No returning to the bad old habit of denial. No returning to cynicism. No returning to normal—the normal in which racist policies, defended by racist ideas, lead to racial inequities.

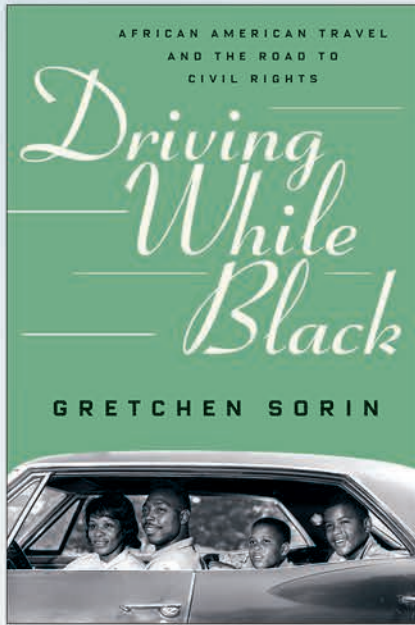
On this path, Trump's denialism has permanently changed the way Americans view themselves. The Trump effect is real, and lasting. The reckoning we have witnessed this spring and summer at public demonstrations transforms into a reckoning in legislatures, C-suites, university-admissions offices.

On this path, the American people demand equitable results, not speeches that make them feel good about themselves and their country. The American people give policy makers an ultimatum: Use your power to radically reduce inequity and injustice, or be voted out.

The abolition of slavery seemed as impossible in the 1850s as equality seems today. But just as the abolitionists of the 1850s demanded the immediate eradication of slavery, immediate equality must be the demand today. Abolish police violence. Abolish mass incarceration. Abolish the racial wealth gap and the gap in school funding. Abolish barriers to citizenship. Abolish voter suppression. Abolish health disparities. Not in 20 years. Not in 10 years. Now. *A*

*Ibram X. Kendi is a contributing writer at The Atlantic, the Andrew W. Mellon Professor in the Humanities at Boston University, and the director of the BU Center for Antiracist Research.*

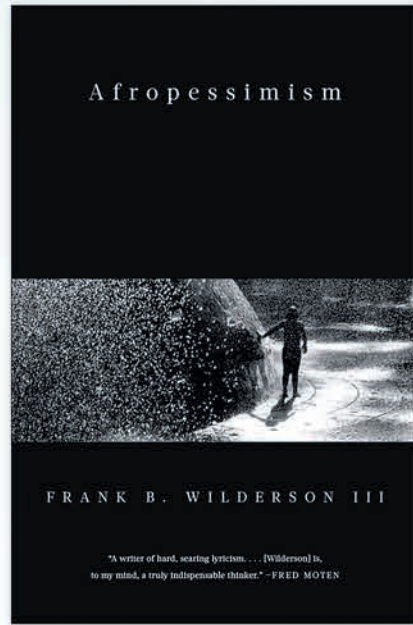
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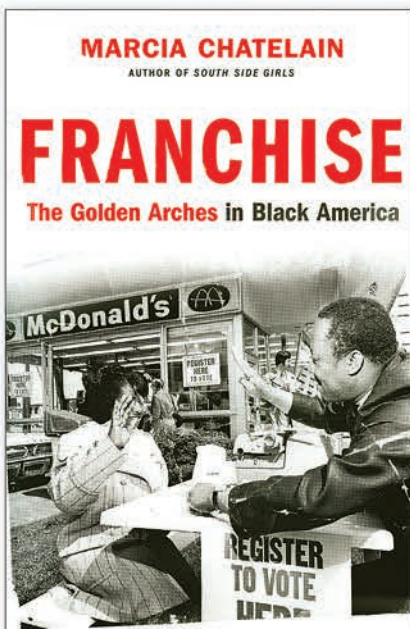


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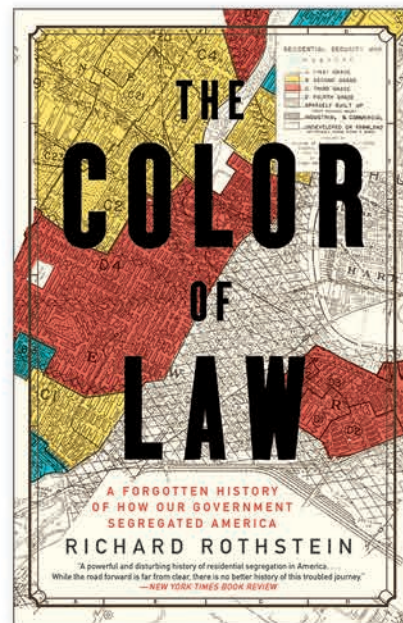


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# WHEN CHINA SEES ALL

XI JINPING IS USING ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE TO QUICKLY  
EXTEND HIS GOVERNMENT'S SURVEILLANCE CAPABILITIES  
AND ENHANCE ITS TOTALITARIAN CONTROL—AND HE'S EXPORTING  
THIS TECHNOLOGY TO REGIMES AROUND THE GLOBE.

BY ROSS ANDERSEN



# NORTHWEST OF BEIJING'S FORBIDDEN CITY,

outside the Third Ring Road, the Chinese Academy of Sciences has spent seven decades building a campus of national laboratories. Near its center is the Institute of Automation, a sleek silvery-blue building surrounded by camera-studded poles. The institute is a basic research facility. Its computer scientists inquire into artificial intelligence's fundamental mysteries. Their more practical innovations—iris recognition, cloud-based speech synthesis—are spun off to Chinese tech giants, AI start-ups, and, in some cases, the People's Liberation Army.

I visited the institute on a rainy morning in the summer of 2019. China's best and brightest were still shuffling in post-commute, dressed casually in basketball shorts or yoga pants, AirPods nestled in their ears. In my pocket, I had a burner phone; in my backpack, a computer wiped free of data—standard precautions for Western journalists in China. To visit China on sensitive business is to risk being barraged with cyberattacks and malware. In 2019, Belgian officials on a trade mission noticed that their mobile data were being intercepted by pop-up antennae outside their Beijing hotel.

After clearing the institute's security, I was told to wait in a lobby monitored by cameras. On its walls were posters of China's most consequential postwar leaders. Mao Zedong loomed large in his characteristic four-pocket suit. He looked serene, as

though satisfied with having freed China from the Western yoke. Next to him was a fuzzy black-and-white shot of Deng Xiaoping visiting the institute in his later years, after his economic reforms had set China on a course to reclaim its traditional global role as a great power.

The lobby's most prominent poster depicted Xi Jinping in a crisp black suit. China's current president and the general secretary of its Communist Party has taken a keen interest in the institute. Its work is part of a grand AI strategy that Xi has laid out in a series of speeches akin to those John F. Kennedy used to train America's techno-scientific sights on the moon. Xi has said that he wants China, by year's end, to be competitive with the world's AI leaders, a benchmark the country has arguably already reached. And he wants China to achieve AI supremacy by 2030.

Xi's pronouncements on AI have a sinister edge. Artificial intelligence has applications in nearly every human domain, from the instant translation of spoken language to early viral-outbreak detection. But Xi also wants to use AI's awesome analytical powers to push China to the cutting edge of surveillance. He wants to build an all-seeing digital system of social control, patrolled by precog algorithms that identify potential dissenters in real time.

China's government has a history of using major historical events to introduce

and embed surveillance measures. In the run-up to the 2008 Olympics in Beijing, Chinese security services achieved a new level of control over the country's internet. During China's coronavirus outbreak, Xi's government leaned hard on private companies in possession of sensitive personal data. Any emergency data-sharing arrangements made behind closed doors during the pandemic could become permanent.

China already has hundreds of millions of surveillance cameras in place. Xi's government hopes to soon achieve full video coverage of key public areas. Much of the footage collected by China's cameras is parsed by algorithms for security threats of one kind or another. In the near future, every person who enters a public space could be identified, instantly, by AI matching them to an ocean of personal data, including their every text communication, and their body's one-of-a-kind protein-construction schema. In time, algorithms will be able to string together data points from a broad range of sources—travel records, friends and associates, reading habits, purchases—to predict political resistance before it happens. China's government could soon achieve an unprecedented political stranglehold on more than 1 billion people.

Early in the coronavirus outbreak, China's citizens were subjected to a form of risk scoring. An algorithm assigned people a color code—green, yellow, or red—that determined their ability to take transit or enter buildings in China's megacities. In a sophisticated digital system of social control, codes like these could be used to score a person's perceived political pliancy as well.

A crude version of such a system is already in operation in China's northwestern territory of Xinjiang, where more than 1 million Muslim Uighurs have been imprisoned, the largest internment of an ethnic-religious minority since the fall of the Third Reich. Once Xi perfects this system in Xinjiang, no technological limitations will prevent him from extending AI surveillance across China. He could also export it beyond the country's borders, entrenching the power of a whole generation of autocrats.

China has recently embarked on a number of ambitious infrastructure projects



abroad—megacity construction, high-speed rail networks, not to mention the country's much-vaunted Belt and Road Initiative. But these won't reshape history like China's *digital* infrastructure, which could shift the balance of power between the individual and the state worldwide.

American policy makers from across the political spectrum are concerned about this scenario. Michael Kratsios, the former Peter Thiel acolyte whom Donald Trump picked to be the U.S. government's chief technology officer, told me that technological leadership from democratic nations has “never been more imperative” and that “if we want to make sure that Western values are baked into the technologies of the future, we need to make sure we're leading in those technologies.”

Despite China's considerable strides, industry analysts expect America to retain its current AI lead for another decade at least. But this is cold comfort: China is already developing powerful new surveillance tools, and exporting them to dozens of the world's actual and would-be autocracies. Over the next few years, those technologies will be refined and integrated into all-encompassing surveillance systems that dictators can plug and play.

The emergence of an AI-powered authoritarian bloc led by China could warp the geopolitics of this century. It could prevent billions of people, across large swaths of the globe, from ever securing any measure of political freedom. And whatever the pretensions of American policy makers, only

China's citizens can stop it. I'd come to Beijing to look for some sign that they might.

**THIS TECHNO-POLITICAL MOMENT** has been long in the making. China has spent all but a few centuries of its 5,000-year history at the vanguard of information technology. Along with Sumer and Mesoamerica, it was one of three places where writing was independently invented, allowing information to be stored outside the human brain. In the second century A.D., the Chinese invented paper. This cheap, bindable information-storage technology allowed data—Silk Road trade records, military communiqués, correspondence among elites—to crisscross the empire on horses bred for speed by steppe nomads beyond the Great Wall. Data began to circulate even faster a few centuries later, when Tang-dynasty artisans perfected woodblock printing, a mass-information technology that helped administer a huge and growing state.

As rulers of some of the world's largest complex social organizations, ancient Chinese emperors well understood the relationship between information flows and power, and the value of surveillance. During the 11th century, a Song-dynasty emperor realized that China's elegant walled cities had become too numerous to be monitored from Beijing, so he deputized locals to police them. A few decades before the digital era's dawn, Chiang Kai-shek made use of this self-policing tradition, asking citizens to watch for dissidents in their midst, so that

communist rebellions could be stamped out in their infancy. When Mao took over, he arranged cities into grids, making each square its own work unit, where local spies kept “sharp eyes” out for counterrevolutionary behavior, no matter how trivial. During the initial coronavirus outbreak, Chinese social-media apps promoted hotlines where people could report those suspected of hiding symptoms.

Xi has appropriated the phrase *sharp eyes*, with all its historical resonances, as his chosen name for the AI-powered surveillance cameras that will soon span China. With AI, Xi can build history's most oppressive authoritarian apparatus, without the manpower Mao needed to keep information about dissent flowing to a single, centralized node. In China's most prominent AI start-ups—SenseTime, CloudWalk, Megvii, Hikvision, iFlytek, Meiya Pico—Xi has found willing commercial partners. And in Xinjiang's Muslim minority, he has found his test population.

The Chinese Communist Party has long been suspicious of religion, and not just as a result of Marxist influence. Only a century and a half ago—yesterday, in the memory of a 5,000-year-old civilization—Hong Xiuquan, a quasi-Christian mystic converted by Western missionaries, launched the Taiping Rebellion, an apocalyptic 14-year campaign that may have killed more people than the First World War. Today, in China's single-party political system, religion is an alternative source of ultimate authority, which means it must be co-opted or destroyed.

By 2009, China's Uighurs had become weary after decades of discrimination and land confiscation. They launched mass protests and a smattering of suicide attacks against Chinese police. In 2014, Xi cracked down, directing Xinjiang's provincial government to destroy mosques and reduce Uighur neighborhoods to rubble. More than 1 million Uighurs were disappeared into concentration camps. Many were tortured and made to perform slave labor.

Uighurs who were spared the camps now make up the most intensely surveilled population on Earth. Not all of the surveillance is digital. The Chinese government has moved thousands of Han Chinese “big brothers and sisters” into homes

XI WANTS TO USE ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE  
TO BUILD A DIGITAL SYSTEM OF SOCIAL  
CONTROL, PATROLLED BY PRECOG ALGORITHMS  
THAT IDENTIFY DISSIDENTS IN REAL TIME.

in Xinjiang's ancient Silk Road cities, to monitor Uighurs' forced assimilation to mainstream Chinese culture. They eat meals with the family, and some "big brothers" sleep in the same bed as the wives of detained Uighur men.

Meanwhile, AI-powered sensors lurk everywhere, including in Uighurs' purses and pants pockets. According to the anthropologist Darren Byler, some Uighurs buried their mobile phones containing Islamic materials, or even froze their data cards into dumplings for safe-keeping, when Xi's campaign of cultural erasure reached full tilt. But police have since forced them to install nanny apps on their new phones. The apps use algorithms to hunt for "ideological viruses" day and night. They can scan chat logs for Quran verses, and look for Arabic script in memes and other image files.

Uighurs can't use the usual work-arounds. Installing a VPN would likely invite an investigation, so they can't download WhatsApp or any other prohibited encrypted-chat software. Purchasing prayer rugs online, storing digital copies of Muslim books, and downloading sermons from a favorite imam are all risky activities. If a Uighur were to use WeChat's payment system to make a donation to a mosque, authorities might take note.

The nanny apps work in tandem with the police, who spot-check phones at checkpoints, scrolling through recent calls and texts. Even an innocent digital association—being in a group text with a recent mosque attendee, for instance—could result in detention. Staying off social media altogether is no solution, because digital inactivity itself can raise suspicions. The police are required to note when Uighurs deviate from any of their normal behavior patterns. Their database wants to know if Uighurs start leaving their home through the back door instead of the front. It wants to know if they spend less time talking to neighbors than they used to. Electricity use is monitored by an algorithm for unusual use, which could indicate an unregistered resident.

Uighurs can travel only a few blocks before encountering a checkpoint outfitted with one of Xinjiang's hundreds of thousands of surveillance cameras. Footage from the cameras is processed by algorithms

that match faces with snapshots taken by police at "health checks." At these checks, police extract all the data they can from Uighurs' bodies. They measure height and take a blood sample. They record voices and swab DNA. Some Uighurs have even been forced to participate in experiments that mine genetic data, to see how DNA produces distinctly Uighurlike chins and ears. Police will likely use the pandemic as a pretext to take still more data from Uighur bodies.

Uighur women are also made to endure pregnancy checks. Some are forced to have abortions, or get an IUD inserted. Others are sterilized by the state. Police are known to rip unauthorized children away from their parents, who are then detained. Such measures have reduced the birth-rate in some regions of Xinjiang more than 60 percent in three years.

When Uighurs reach the edge of their neighborhood, an automated system takes note. The same system tracks them as they move through smaller checkpoints, at banks, parks, and schools. When they pump gas, the system can determine whether they are the car's owner. At the city's perimeter, they're forced to exit their cars, so their face and ID card can be scanned again.

The lucky Uighurs who are able to travel abroad—many have had their passports confiscated—are advised to return quickly. If they do not, police interrogators are dispatched to the doorsteps of their relatives and friends. Not that going abroad is any kind of escape: In a chilling glimpse at how a future authoritarian bloc might function, Xi's strongman allies—even those in Muslim-majority countries such as Egypt—have been more than happy to arrest and deport Uighurs back to the open-air prison that is Xinjiang.

**XI SEEMS TO HAVE USED** Xinjiang as a laboratory to fine-tune the sensory and analytical powers of his new digital panopticon before expanding its reach across the mainland. CETC, the state-owned company that built much of Xinjiang's surveillance system, now boasts of pilot projects in Zhejiang, Guangdong, and Shenzhen. These are meant to lay "a robust foundation for a nationwide rollout," according to the company, and they represent only one

piece of China's coalescing mega-network of human-monitoring technology.

China is an ideal setting for an experiment in total surveillance. Its population is extremely online. The country is home to more than 1 billion mobile phones, all chock-full of sophisticated sensors. Each one logs search-engine queries, websites visited, and mobile payments, which are ubiquitous. When I used a chip-based credit card to buy coffee in Beijing's hip Sanlitun neighborhood, people glared as if I'd written a check.

All of these data points can be time-stamped and geo-tagged. And because a new regulation requires telecom firms to scan the face of anyone who signs up for cellphone services, phones' data can now be attached to a specific person's face. SenseTime, which helped build Xinjiang's surveillance state, recently bragged that its software can identify people wearing masks. Another company, Hanwang, claims that its facial-recognition technology can recognize mask wearers 95 percent of the time. China's personal-data harvest even reaps from citizens who lack phones. Out in the countryside, villagers line up to have their faces scanned, from multiple angles, by private firms in exchange for cookware.

Until recently, it was difficult to imagine how China could integrate all of these data into a single surveillance system, but no longer. In 2018, a cybersecurity activist hacked into a facial-recognition system that appeared to be connected to the government and was synthesizing a surprising combination of data streams. The system was capable of detecting Uighurs by their ethnic features, and it could tell whether people's eyes or mouth were open, whether they were smiling, whether they had a beard, and whether they were wearing sunglasses. It logged the date, time, and serial numbers—all traceable to individual users—of Wi-Fi-enabled phones that passed within its reach. It was hosted by Alibaba and made reference to City Brain, an AI-powered software platform that China's government has tasked the company with building.

City Brain is, as the name suggests, a kind of automated nerve center, capable of synthesizing data streams from a multitude of sensors distributed throughout an urban environment. Many of its proposed uses are benign technocratic functions. Its





algorithms could, for instance, count people and cars, to help with red-light timing and subway-line planning. Data from sensor-laden trash cans could make waste pickup more timely and efficient.

But City Brain and its successor technologies will also enable new forms of integrated surveillance. Some of these will

enjoy broad public support: City Brain could be trained to spot lost children, or luggage abandoned by tourists or terrorists. It could flag loiterers, or homeless people, or rioters. Anyone in any kind of danger could summon help by waving a hand in a distinctive way that would be instantly recognized by ever-vigilant computer vision.

Earpiece-wearing police officers could be directed to the scene by an AI voice assistant.

City Brain would be especially useful in a pandemic. (One of Alibaba's sister companies created the app that color-coded citizens' disease risk, while silently sending their health and travel data to police.) As Beijing's outbreak spread, some malls and restaurants in the city began scanning potential customers' phones, pulling data from mobile carriers to see whether they'd recently traveled. Mobile carriers also sent municipal governments lists of people who had come to their city from Wuhan, where the coronavirus was first detected. And Chinese AI companies began making networked facial-recognition helmets for police, with built-in infrared fever detectors, capable of sending data to the government. City Brain could automate these processes, or integrate its data streams.

Even China's most complex AI systems are still brittle. City Brain hasn't yet fully integrated its range of surveillance capabilities, and its ancestor systems have suffered some embarrassing performance issues: In 2018, one of the government's AI-powered cameras mistook a face on the side of a city bus for a jaywalker. But the software is getting better, and there's no technical reason it can't be implemented on a mass scale.

The data streams that could be fed into a City Brain-like system are essentially unlimited. In addition to footage from the 1.9 million facial-recognition cameras that the Chinese telecom firm China Tower is installing in cooperation with SenseTime, City Brain could absorb feeds from cameras fastened to lampposts and hanging above street corners. It could make use of the cameras that Chinese police hide in traffic cones, and those strapped to

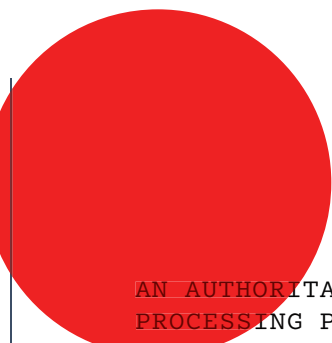


officers, both uniformed and plainclothes. The state could force retailers to provide data from in-store cameras, which can now detect the direction of your gaze across a shelf, and which could soon see around corners by reading shadows. Precious little public space would be unwatched.

America's police departments have begun to avail themselves of footage from Amazon's home-security cameras. In their more innocent applications, these cameras adorn doorbells, but many are also aimed at neighbors' houses. China's government could harvest footage from equivalent Chinese products. They could tap the cameras attached to ride-share cars, or the self-driving vehicles that may soon replace them: Automated vehicles will be covered in a whole host of sensors, including some that will take in information much richer than 2-D video. Data from a massive fleet of them could be stitched together, and supplemented by other City Brain streams, to produce a 3-D model of the city that's updated second by second. Each refresh could log every human's location within the model. Such a system would make unidentified faces a priority, perhaps by sending drone swarms to secure a positive ID.

The model's data could be time-synced to audio from any networked device with a microphone, including smart speakers, smartwatches, and less obvious Internet of Things devices like smart mattresses, smart diapers, and smart sex toys. All of these sources could coalesce into a multitrack, location-specific audio mix that could be parsed by polyglot algorithms capable of interpreting words spoken in thousands of tongues. This mix would be useful to security services, especially in places without cameras: China's iFlytek is perfecting a technology that can recognize individuals by their "voiceprint."

In the decades to come, City Brain or its successor systems may even be able to read unspoken thoughts. Drones can already be controlled by helmets that sense and transmit neural signals, and researchers are now designing brain-computer interfaces that go well beyond autofill, to allow you to type just by thinking. An authoritarian state with enough processing power could force the makers of such software to feed every blip of a citizen's



AN AUTHORITARIAN STATE WITH ENOUGH  
PROCESSING POWER COULD FEED EVERY  
BLIP OF A CITIZEN'S NEURAL ACTIVITY  
INTO A GOVERNMENT DATABASE.

neural activity into a government database. China has recently been pushing citizens to download and use a propaganda app. The government could use emotion-tracking software to monitor reactions to a political stimulus within an app. A silent, suppressed response to a meme or a clip from a Xi speech would be a meaningful data point to a precog algorithm.

All of these time-synced feeds of on-the-ground data could be supplemented by footage from drones, whose gigapixel cameras can record whole cityscapes in the kind of crystalline detail that allows for license-plate reading and gait recognition. "Spy bird" drones already swoop and circle above Chinese cities, disguised as doves. City Brain's feeds could be synthesized with data from systems in other urban areas, to form a multidimensional, real-time account of nearly all human activity within China. Server farms across China will soon be able to hold multiple angles of high-definition footage of every moment of every Chinese person's life.

It's important to stress that systems of this scope are still in development. Most of China's personal data are not yet integrated together, even within individual companies. Nor does China's government have a one-stop data repository, in part because of turf wars between agencies. But there are no hard political barriers to the integration of all these data, especially for the security state's use. To the contrary, private firms are required, by formal statute, to assist China's intelligence services.

The government might soon have a rich, auto-populating data profile for all of its 1 billion-plus citizens. Each profile would comprise millions of data points, including the person's every appearance in surveilled space, as well as all of her communications and purchases. Her threat risk to the party's power could constantly be updated in real time, with a more granular score than those used in China's pilot "social credit" schemes, which already aim to give every citizen a public social-reputation score based on things like social-media connections and buying habits. Algorithms could monitor her digital data score, along with everyone else's, continuously, without ever feeling the fatigue that hit Stasi officers working the late shift. False positives—deeming someone a threat for innocuous behavior—would be encouraged, in order to boost the system's built-in chilling effects, so that she'd turn her sharp eyes on her own behavior, to avoid the slightest appearance of dissent.

If her risk factor fluctuated upward—whether due to some suspicious pattern in her movements, her social associations, her insufficient attention to a propaganda-consumption app, or some correlation known only to the AI—a purely automated system could limit her movement. It could prevent her from purchasing plane or train tickets. It could disallow passage through checkpoints. It could remotely commandeer "smart locks" in public or private spaces, to confine her until security forces arrived.

IN RECENT YEARS, a few members of the Chinese intelligentsia have sounded the warning about misused AI, most notably the computer scientist Yi Zeng and the philosopher Zhao Tingyang. In the spring of 2019, Yi published “The Beijing AI Principles,” a manifesto on AI’s potential to interfere with autonomy, dignity, privacy, and a host of other human values.

It was Yi whom I’d come to visit at Beijing’s Institute of Automation, where, in addition to his work on AI ethics, he serves as the deputy director of the Research Center for Brain-Inspired Intelligence. He retrieved me from the lobby. Yi looked young for his age, 37, with kind eyes and a solid frame slimmed down by black sweatpants and a hoodie.

On the way to Yi’s office, we passed one of his labs, where a research assistant hovered over a microscope, watching electrochemical signals flash neuron-to-neuron through mouse-brain tissue. We sat down at a long table in a conference room adjoining his office, taking in the gray, fogged-in cityscape while his assistant fetched tea.

I asked Yi how “The Beijing AI Principles” had been received. “People say, ‘This is just an official show from the Beijing government,’” he told me. “But this is my life’s work.”

Yi talked freely about AI’s potential misuses. He mentioned a project deployed to a select group of Chinese schools, where facial recognition was used to track not just student attendance but also whether individual students were paying attention.

“I hate that software,” Yi said. “I have to use that word: *hate*.”

He went on like this for a while, enumerating various unethical applications of AI. “I teach a course on the philosophy of AI,” he said. “I tell my students that I hope none of them will be involved in killer robots. They have only a short time on Earth. There are many other things they could be doing with their future.”

Yi clearly knew the academic literature on tech ethics cold. But when I asked him about the political efficacy of his work, his answers were less compelling.

“Many of us technicians have been invited to speak to the government, and even to Xi Jinping, about AI’s potential risks,” he said. “But the government is still in a learning phase, just like other governments worldwide.”

“Do you have anything stronger than that consultative process?” I asked. “Suppose there are times when the government has interests that are in conflict with your principles. What mechanism are you counting on to win out?”

“I, personally, am still in a learning phase on that problem,” Yi said.

Chinese AI start-ups aren’t nearly as bothered. Several are helping Xi develop AI for the express purpose of surveillance. The combination of China’s single-party rule and the ideological residue of central planning makes party elites powerful in every domain, especially the economy. But in the past, the connection between the government and the tech industry was discreet. Recently, the Chinese government started assigning representatives to tech firms, to augment the Communist Party cells that exist within large private companies.

Selling to the state security services is one of the fastest ways for China’s AI start-ups to turn a profit. A national telecom firm is the largest shareholder of iFlytek, China’s voice-recognition giant. Synergies abound: When police use iFlytek’s software to monitor calls, state-owned newspapers provide favorable coverage. Earlier this year, the personalized-news app Toutiao went so far as to rewrite its mission to articulate a new animating goal: aligning public opinion with the government’s wishes. Xu Li, the CEO of SenseTime, recently described the government as his company’s “largest data source.”

Whether any private data can be ensured protection in China isn’t clear, given the country’s political structure. The digital revolution has made data monopolies difficult to avoid. Even in America, which has a sophisticated tradition of anti-trust enforcement, the citizenry has not yet summoned the will to force information about the many out of the hands of the powerful few. But private data monopolies are at least subject to the sovereign power of the countries where they operate. A nation-state’s data monopoly can be prevented only by its people, and only if they possess sufficient political power.

China’s people can’t use an election to rid themselves of Xi. And with no independent judiciary, the government can make an argument, however strained, that it ought

to possess any information stream, so long as threats to “stability” could be detected among the data points. Or it can demand data from companies behind closed doors, as happened during the initial coronavirus outbreak. No independent press exists to leak news of these demands to.

Each time a person’s face is recognized, or her voice recorded, or her text messages intercepted, this information could be attached, instantly, to her government-ID number, police records, tax returns, property filings, and employment history. It could be cross-referenced with her medical records and DNA, of which the Chinese police boast they have the world’s largest collection.

YI AND I talked through a global scenario that has begun to worry AI ethicists and China-watchers alike. In this scenario, most AI researchers around the world come to recognize the technology’s risks to humanity, and develop strong norms around its use. All except for one country, which makes the right noises about AI ethics, but only as a cover. Meanwhile, this country builds turnkey national surveillance systems, and sells them to places where democracy is fragile or nonexistent. The world’s autocrats are usually felled by coups or mass protests, both of which require a baseline of political organization. But large-scale political organization could prove impossible in societies watched by pervasive automated surveillance.

Yi expressed worry about this scenario, but he did not name China specifically. He didn’t have to: The country is now the world’s leading seller of AI-powered surveillance equipment. In Malaysia, the government is working with Yitu, a Chinese AI start-up, to bring facial-recognition technology to Kuala Lumpur’s police as a complement to Alibaba’s City Brain platform. Chinese companies also bid to outfit every one of Singapore’s 110,000 lampposts with facial-recognition cameras.

In South Asia, the Chinese government has supplied surveillance equipment to Sri Lanka. On the old Silk Road, the Chinese company Dahua is lining the streets of Mongolia’s capital with AI-assisted surveillance cameras. Farther west, in Serbia, Huawei is helping set up a “safe-city system,” complete with facial-recognition

cameras and joint patrols conducted by Serbian and Chinese police aimed at helping Chinese tourists to feel safe.

In the early aughts, the Chinese telecom titan ZTE sold Ethiopia a wireless network with built-in backdoor access for the government. In a later crackdown, dissidents were rounded up for brutal interrogations, during which they were played audio from recent phone calls they'd made. Today, Kenya, Uganda, and Mauritius are outfitting major cities with Chinese-made surveillance networks.

In Egypt, Chinese developers are looking to finance the construction of a new capital. It's slated to run on a "smart city" platform similar to City Brain, although a vendor has not yet been named. In southern Africa, Zambia has agreed to buy more than \$1 billion in telecom equipment from China, including internet-monitoring technology. China's Hikvision, the world's largest manufacturer of AI-enabled surveillance cameras, has an office in Johannesburg.

China uses "predatory lending to sell telecommunications equipment at a significant discount to developing countries, which then puts China in a position to

control those networks and their data," Michael Kratsios, America's CTO, told me. When countries need to refinance the terms of their loans, China can make network access part of the deal, in the same way that its military secures base rights at foreign ports it finances. "If you give [China] unfettered access to data networks around the world, that could be a serious problem," Kratsios said.

In 2018, CloudWalk Technology, a Guangzhou-based start-up spun out of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, inked a deal with the Zimbabwean government to set up a surveillance network. Its terms require Harare to send images of its inhabitants—a rich data set, given that Zimbabwe has absorbed migration flows from all across sub-Saharan Africa—back to CloudWalk's Chinese offices, allowing the company to fine-tune its software's ability to recognize dark-skinned faces, which have previously proved tricky for its algorithms.

Having set up beachheads in Asia, Europe, and Africa, China's AI companies are now pushing into Latin America, a region the Chinese government

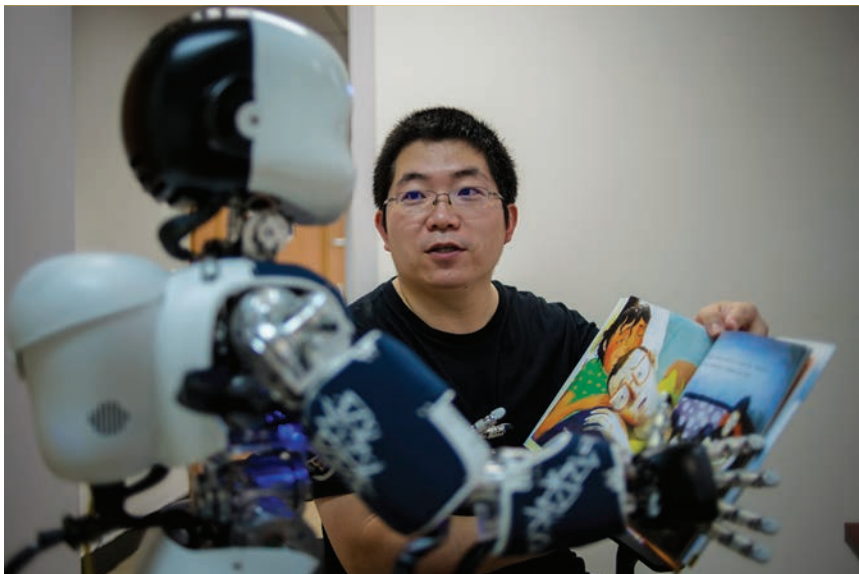
describes as a "core economic interest." China financed Ecuador's \$240 million purchase of a surveillance-camera system. Bolivia, too, has bought surveillance equipment with help from a loan from Beijing. Venezuela recently debuted a new national ID-card system that logs citizens' political affiliations in a database built by ZTE. In a grim irony, for years Chinese companies hawked many of these surveillance products at a security expo in Xinjiang, the home province of the Uighurs.

**IF CHINA IS** able to surpass America in AI, it will become a more potent geopolitical force, especially as the standard-bearer of a new authoritarian alliance.

China already has some of the world's largest data sets to feed its AI systems, a crucial advantage for its researchers. In cavernous mega-offices in cities across the country, low-wage workers sit at long tables for long hours, transcribing audio files and outlining objects in images, to make the data generated by China's massive population more useful. But for the country to best America's AI ecosystem, its vast troves of data will have to be sifted through by algorithms that recognize patterns well beyond those grasped by human insight. And even executives at China's search giant Baidu concede that the top echelon of AI talent resides in the West.

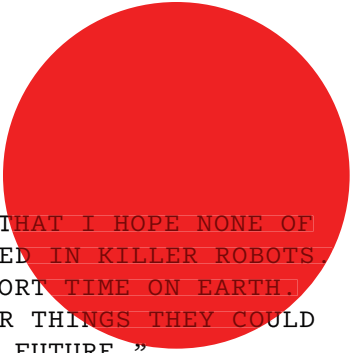
Historically, China struggled to retain elite quants, most of whom left to study in America's peerless computer-science departments, before working at Silicon Valley's more interesting, better-resourced companies. But that may be changing. The Trump administration has made it difficult for Chinese students to study in the United States, and those who are able to are viewed with suspicion. A leading machine-learning scientist at Google recently described visa restrictions as "one of the largest bottlenecks to our collective research productivity."

Meanwhile, Chinese computer-science departments have gone all-in on AI. Three of the world's top 10 AI universities, in terms of the volume of research they publish, are now located in China. And that's before the country finishes building the 50 new AI research centers mandated by Xi's "AI Innovation Action Plan for Institutions



Yi Zeng, photographed in his office at the Institute of Automation, in Beijing, July 2020. Yi, the author of "The Beijing AI Principles," has been a lonely voice in China warning that government misuse of AI could pose a threat to humanity.





“I TELL MY STUDENTS THAT I HOPE NONE OF THEM WILL BE INVOLVED IN KILLER ROBOTS. THEY HAVE ONLY A SHORT TIME ON EARTH. THERE ARE MANY OTHER THINGS THEY COULD BE DOING WITH THEIR FUTURE.”

of Higher Education.” Chinese companies attracted 36 percent of global AI private-equity investment in 2017, up from just 3 percent in 2015. Talented Chinese engineers can stay home for school and work for a globally sexy homegrown company like TikTok after graduation.

China will still lag behind America in computing hardware in the near term. Just as data must be processed by algorithms to be useful, algorithms must be instantiated in physical strata—specifically, in the innards of microchips. These gossamer silicon structures are so intricate that a few missing atoms can reroute electrical pulses through the chips’ neuronlike switches. The most sophisticated chips are arguably the most complex objects yet built by humans. They’re certainly too complex to be quickly pried apart and reverse-engineered by China’s vaunted corporate-espionage artists.

Chinese firms can’t yet build the best of the best chip-fabrication rooms, which cost billions of dollars and rest on decades of compounding institutional knowledge. Nitrogen-cooled and seismically isolated, to prevent a passing truck’s rumble from ruining a microchip in vitro, these automated rooms are as much a marvel as their finished silicon wafers. And the best ones are still mostly in the United States, Western Europe, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan.

America’s government is still able to limit the hardware that flows into China, a state of affairs that the Communist Party has come to resent. When the Trump administration banned the sale of

microchips to ZTE in April 2018, Frank Long, an analyst who specializes in China’s AI sector, described it as a wake-up call for China on par with America’s experience of the Arab oil embargo.

But the AI revolution has dealt China a rare leapfrogging opportunity. Until recently, most chips were designed with flexible architecture that allows for many types of computing operations. But AI runs fastest on custom chips, like those Google uses for its cloud computing to instantly spot your daughter’s face in thousands of photos. (Apple performs many of these operations on the iPhone with a custom neural-engine chip.) Because everyone is making these custom chips for the first time, China isn’t as far behind: Baidu and Alibaba are building chips customized for deep learning. And in August 2019, Huawei unveiled a mobile machine-learning chip. Its design came from Cambricon, perhaps the global chip-making industry’s most valuable start-up, which was founded by Yi’s colleagues at the Chinese Academy of Sciences.

By 2030, AI supremacy might be within range for China. The country will likely have the world’s largest economy, and new money to spend on AI applications for its military. It may have the most sophisticated drone swarms. It may have autonomous weapons systems that can forecast an adversary’s actions after a brief exposure to a theater of war, and make battlefield decisions much faster than human cognition allows. Its missile-detection algorithms could void

America’s first-strike nuclear advantage. AI could upturn the global balance of power.

ON MY WAY OUT of the Institute of Automation, Yi took me on a tour of his robotics lab. In the high-ceilinged room, grad students fiddled with a giant disembodied metallic arm and a small humanoid robot wrapped in a gray exoskeleton while Yi told me about his work modeling the brain. He said that understanding the brain’s structure was the surest way to understand the nature of intelligence.

I asked Yi how the future of AI would unfold. He said he could imagine software modeled on the brain acquiring a series of abilities, one by one. He said it could achieve some semblance of self-recognition, and then slowly become aware of the past and the future. It could develop motivations and values. The final stage of its assisted evolution would come when it understood other agents as worthy of empathy.

I asked him how long this process would take.

“I think such a machine could be built by 2030,” Yi said.

Before bidding Yi farewell, I asked him to imagine things unfolding another way. “Suppose you finish your digital, high-resolution model of the brain,” I said. “And suppose it attains some rudimentary form of consciousness. And suppose, over time, you’re able to improve it, until it outperforms humans in every cognitive task, with the exception of empathy. You keep it locked down in safe mode until you achieve that last step. But then one day, the government’s security services break down your office door. They know you have this AI on your computer. They want to use it as the software for a new hardware platform, an artificial humanoid soldier. They’ve already manufactured a billion of them, and they don’t give a damn if they’re wired with empathy. They demand your password. Do you give it to them?”

“I would destroy my computer and leave,” Yi said.

“Really?” I replied.

“Yes, really,” he said. “At that point, it would be time to quit my job and go focus on robots that create art.”

If you were looking for a philosopher-king to chart an ethical developmental

trajectory for AI, you could do worse than Yi. But the development path of AI will be shaped by overlapping systems of local, national, and global politics, not by a wise and benevolent philosopher-king. That's why China's ascent to AI supremacy is such a menacing prospect: The country's political structure encourages, rather than restrains, this technology's worst uses.

Even in the U.S., a democracy with constitutionally enshrined human rights, Americans are struggling mightily to prevent the emergence of a public-private surveillance state. But at least America has political structures that stand some chance of resistance. In China, AI will be restrained only according to the party's needs.

It was nearly noon when I finally left the institute. The day's rain was in its last hour. Yi ordered me a car and walked me to meet it, holding an umbrella over my head. I made my way to the Forbidden City, Beijing's historic seat of imperial power. Even this short trip to the city center brought me into contact with China's surveillance state. Before entering Tiananmen Square, both my passport and my face were scanned, an experience I was becoming numb to.

In the square itself, police holding body-size bulletproof shields jogged in single-file lines, weaving paths through throngs of tourists. The heavy police presence was a chilling reminder of the student protesters who were murdered here in 1989. China's AI-patrolled Great Firewall was built, in part, to make sure that massacre is never discussed on its internet. To dodge algorithmic censors, Chinese activists rely on memes—Tank Man approaching a rubber ducky—to commemorate the students' murder.

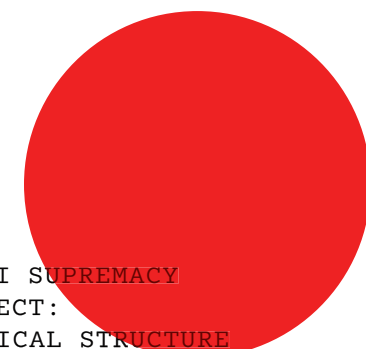
The party's AI-powered censorship extends well beyond Tiananmen. Earlier this year, the government arrested Chinese programmers who were trying to preserve disappeared news stories about the coronavirus pandemic. Some of the articles in their database were banned because they were critical of Xi and the party. They survived only because internet users reposted them on social media, interlaced with coded language and emojis designed to evade algorithms. Workarounds of this sort are short-lived: Xi's

domestic critics used to make fun of him with images of Winnie the Pooh, but those too are now banned in China. The party's ability to edit history and culture, by force, will become more sweeping and precise, as China's AI improves.

Wresting power from a government that so thoroughly controls the information environment will be difficult. It may take a million acts of civil disobedience, like the laptop-destroying scenario imagined by Yi. China's citizens will have to stand with their students. Who can say what hardships they may endure?

China's citizens don't yet seem to be radicalized against surveillance. The pandemic may even make people value privacy less, as one early poll in the U.S. suggests. So far, Xi is billing the government's response as a triumphant "people's war," another old phrase from Mao, referring to the mobilization of the whole population to smash an invading force. The Chinese people may well be more pliant now than they were before the virus.

But evidence suggests that China's young people—at least some of them—resented the government's initial secrecy about the outbreak. For all we know, some new youth movement on the mainland is biding its time, waiting for the right moment to make a play for democracy. The people of Hong Kong certainly sense the danger of this techno-political moment. The night before I arrived in China, more than 1 million protesters had poured into the island's streets. (The



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free state newspaper in my Beijing hotel described them, falsely, as police supporters.) A great many held umbrellas over their heads, in solidarity with student protesters from years prior, and to keep their faces hidden. A few tore down a lamp-post on the suspicion that it contained a facial-recognition camera. Xi has since tightened his grip on the region with a "national-security law," and there is little that outnumbered Hong Kongers can do about it, at least not without help from a movement on the mainland.

During my visit to Tiananmen Square, I didn't see any protesters. People mostly milled about peacefully, posing for selfies with the oversize portrait of Mao. They held umbrellas, but only to keep the August sun off their faces. Walking in their midst, I kept thinking about the contingency of history: The political systems that constrain a technology during its early development profoundly shape our shared global future. We have learned this from our adventures in carbon-burning. Much of the planet's political trajectory may depend on just how dangerous China's people imagine AI to be in the hands of centralized power. Until they secure their personal liberty, at some unimaginable cost, free people everywhere will have to hope against hope that the world's most intelligent machines are made elsewhere. *A*

*Ross Andersen is a deputy editor of The Atlantic.*

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**BY CARINA  
CHOCANO**



Sometimes an advertisement is so perfectly tailored to a cultural moment that it casts that moment into stark relief, which is how I felt upon first seeing an ad for the mega-best-selling writer James Patterson's course on MasterClass a few years ago. In the ad, Patterson is sitting at a table, reciting a twisty opening line in voice-over. Then an overhead shot of him gazing out a window, lost in thought like a character in a movie. A title card appears: "Imagine taking a writing class from a master." It didn't matter that I'd never read a book by Patterson before—I was hooked. What appealed to me was not whatever actionable thriller-writing tips I might glean, but rather the promise of his story, the story of how a writer becomes a mogul. Any hapless, hand-to-mouth mid-lister can provide instructions on outlining a novel. MasterClass dangled something else, a clear-cut path out of the precariat, the magic-bean shortcut to a fairy-tale ending—the secret to ever-elusive success.

MasterClass launched in 2015 with just three classes: Dustin Hoffman on acting, Serena Williams on tennis, and Patterson on writing. Since then the company has grown exponentially, raising \$135 million in venture capital from 2012 to 2018. It now has more than 85 classes across nine categories. (Last year it added 25 new classes, and this year it intends to add even more.) After the pandemic hit, as people started spending more time at home, its subscriptions surged, some weeks increasing tenfold over the average in 2019; subscribers spent twice as much time on the platform as they did earlier this year. In April, the company moved from offering individual classes for \$90 a pop, with an all-access annual pass for \$180, to a subscription-only model, and in May, it raised another \$100 million. Its trailers have become so familiar and ubiquitous that they spawned their own SNL parodies, "MasterClass: Quarantine Edition," in which Chloe Fineman appears as Phoebe Waller-Bridge for a class on journaling, as Timothée Chalamet for a class on fashion, and as Britney Spears for a class on ... something.

MasterClass trailers tend to follow a certain playbook: the introduction of a famous person; a peek behind the curtain; an overview of their setbacks and failures; the promise of what you might learn; the emotional, soaring soundtrack. But the courses are distinct from one another—there's no standard format or formula. What MasterClass purports to provide is a premium,

high-level learning experience via a series of glossy videos taught by the world's best. In some classes, instructors address the camera for a few hours. In others, they are more hands-on, demonstrating techniques or leading workshops. You can take writing classes with Margaret Atwood, Dan Brown, David Baldacci, Joyce Carol Oates, David Sedaris, Shonda Rhimes, Malcolm Gladwell, or Aaron Sorkin. You can take photography with Annie Leibovitz; acting with Natalie Portman; comedy with Judd Apatow or Steve Martin; and cooking with Thomas Keller, Gordon Ramsay, or Alice Waters. There's a directing class with Ron Howard, a makeup class with Bobbi Brown, a negotiation class with the former FBI hostage negotiator Chris Voss, and a class on how to be a boss with Anna Wintour. RuPaul has a class on authenticity and self-expression, and Neil deGrasse Tyson has one on scientific thinking. Two classes—taught by Kevin Spacey and Hoffman—have been removed following allegations of sexual misconduct against the actors (which both have denied). MasterClass is a brand built on other people's impeccable brands.

**DAVID ROGIER**, who co-founded MasterClass, likes to tell the story of his grandmother who as a young woman fled the Nazis, emigrating to the United States with her mother. After working in a factory for years, she applied to medical schools and was rejected by dozens of them—one dean flat-out told her that she had three strikes against her: She was a woman, she was Jewish, and she was an immigrant—until she finally found one that would accept her. She always impressed upon her grandson that an education could never be taken away from you. That was the grain of the idea for MasterClass.

It's a great origin story, the kind perfectly suited for a MasterClass trailer, and also the kind that every young Silicon Valley founder is more or less ready to recite when the press comes along. But the story sits somewhat uncomfortably alongside the actual product, which is to a medical degree what an apple is to an orange planet.

Rogier grew up on the Westside of Los Angeles, the son of two lawyers who became artists in retirement. After getting his M.B.A. at Stanford, he asked one of his professors—the angel investor Michael Dearing, who founded Harrison Metal, a seed-stage venture-capital fund in San Francisco—for a job. Rogier got the position, but after a year or so realized it wasn't for him. He went to Dearing and told him he planned to quit. When Dearing asked what he had lined up, Rogier responded, "I'm going to build something." He's like, "What?" I said, "I don't know." So he wrote me a check for about half a million dollars." Rogier formed a holding company and called it Yanka Industries, after his grandmother.

The question of who (and what and how and why) gets funded in Silicon Valley might not be asked often enough, considering the impact of technology on our society, economy, politics, and daily lives. But patterns are discernible: Mainly, the ideas that rise to the top are





those that seek to address deficiencies in an industry by creating a new category from within the old one, the way caterpillars consume themselves to become butterflies. (Also, most of these ideas are had by young white guys.) Turning the housing market into an infinite unregulated hotel, for instance, or everyone's cars into an unregulated fleet of taxis. Or aggregating mastery across disciplines.

"I felt a lot of pressure," Rogier told me of the windfall investment. He was aware that he'd been given a gift. "You can't whine about it or complain about it, because there's nothing to whine or complain about, right? This guy threw me a blank check." Rogier knew he wanted to do something related to education, but he wasn't sure what. So he posted ads on Craigslist offering to pay people \$25 an hour to talk about their experiences with

education. He asked subjects about the schools they'd gone to, whom they'd learned from the most, the topics they wished they had studied more. What things did they want to learn now? *How* did they want to learn now?

Rogier already knew life was changing at a much faster rate than it had for his parents' generation. What you learn in school no longer lasts you through your career. His research showed that people are willing to invest in personal growth and education, but many feel "ripped off" by their education. He isn't referring only to formal education. "People pay tremendous amounts to take not-great classes," he said. "And then there are also the scam stories. Somebody went to school to be a receptionist, and she paid for it, but the 'school' was answering phone calls for two weeks at an office."

Rogier had an idea: What if anybody could learn from the best? "That would be kind of awesome," he said. Especially if he could offer the class at a relatively low price. After two rounds of fundraising, getting the first instructors on board (Hoffman was the first to agree—Rogier was school friends with his daughter), filming some test classes, and hiring a small team, Rogier asked a friend, the entrepreneur Aaron Rasmussen, to join the company as co-founder and chief technology officer, which he did. (Rasmussen left the company in January 2017 and later founded the for-college-credit education platform Outlier.org.)

At first, Rogier said, many people told him his idea would never work. It was unclear whether people would pay to watch high-end tutorials when they could view lower-budget ones on YouTube for free. It was also unclear whether celebrity teachers could be recruited in meaningful numbers. *The best in the world will never want to teach*, people told him. *They're not going to be good at teaching. People aren't going to want to learn from them. It's going to be too expensive. People won't pay for production—they won't care if it's higher production quality. Everything's free on the web. Why are you trying to do everything from making the classes to putting the classes out? You should just take one small slice.* One of the things Rogier is still often asked is whether he's selling education or entertainment. The question annoys him. "Why can't education also be entertaining?"

Rogier always knew that part of being an entrepreneur is believing in something that nobody else believes in, but still, he was scared. Within a few days of MasterClass's launch in May 2015, however, the numbers told him he was onto something. Within four months, he had 30,000 students.



Opening spread, clockwise from top left: *MasterClass* instructors Serena Williams (who teaches tennis on the platform); Natalie Portman (acting); Gordon Ramsay (cooking); Malcolm Gladwell (writing). This page, from left: Shonda Rhimes (writing for television) and RuPaul (self-expression and authenticity).

**MASTERCLASS'S MISSION**, as it was originally defined, was to “democratize access to genius.” But the service actually offers something different—although what that is, exactly, is hard to put your finger on. Strictly speaking, a master class is a small class for very advanced students taught by a master in their field. But very advanced students in particular subject areas are vanishingly small cohorts—certainly not enough to attract hundreds of millions of dollars in investments. And so, MasterClass courses are not really designed for a specific skill level, but instead are aimed at the most general of general audiences.

MasterClass doesn't disclose how much it pays instructors, although a 2018 Bloomberg article reported that they are paid a guaranteed sum, plus up to 25 percent of revenue generated by their classes. (In 2017, *The Hollywood Reporter* claimed that instructors were paid roughly \$100,000.) But money is not the only motivation. For many of the instructors, MasterClass presents an opportunity to take stock of a remarkable career. Wintour, the longtime editor of *Vogue*, kicks off her MasterClass by saying, “I know many people are curious about who I am, how I approach my work, and what I believe . . . I have never had the opportunity to share the many lessons I have learned as an editor and as a creative leader in one place before.” Her class feels, more than anything, like a historical document.

For Atwood, the celebrated author of *The Handmaid's Tale*, among many other novels, the decision to participate was partly motivated by her age, “which is old,” she told me over the phone. “This is a way of downloading what I would ordinarily do, or possibly uploading it.”

The last time Atwood taught full-time at a university was in 1970s. Filming a MasterClass was an opportunity to reach a less-privileged cohort than she might in a university setting. “For a lot of people who might have jobs, but also might be interested in writing, [MasterClass is] a way they can pursue this in their own time, at their own pace,” she said. On the other hand, Atwood said, “in-person teaching is interactive. People get to ask you direct questions.” Later she added, “If you're teaching in a university,

*Scenes from MasterClass courses led by (from left to right) Margaret Atwood (creative writing), Thomas Keller (cooking techniques), Anna Wintour (creativity and leadership), Aaron Sorkin (screenwriting), and Misty Copeland (ballet technique and artistry).*

you can see the people you're teaching. You know how old they are. You have some idea about what background they may have come from. You usually start asking them what were the last five books that they read . . . But if you're doing something online, it could be anybody. It's more like publishing a book. It's out there. It's accessible. You don't know who may be accessing it.”

As an educational platform, MasterClass is limited by its instructors' inaccessibility. But as a repository for career advice and discussions about the creative process and how to navigate life as an artist (or athlete, chef, magician, entrepreneur), it's a gold mine. When you are just starting out—especially if you lack connections in your areas of interest—it can be helpful to hear how other people “did it,” what obstacles they faced and how they overcame them. You might get a hit of encouragement or see yourself reflected for the first time in a field you thought was off-limits to you. The ballet dancer Misty Copeland says MasterClass was a way of doing this.

Copeland's class is typical of MasterClass's more inspirational offerings. It's a mix of instruction and aspiration, covering subjects on everything from owning your power and being confident, to barre exercises (pliés, tendus), to working with Prince, to the importance of mentorship and diversity, to showing people that ballet is more approachable than they think.

“The fine arts and classical dance have been kind of categorized as this elite form that is only for an elite, exclusive category of people,” Copeland—the first Black principal dancer of the prestigious American Ballet Theatre—told me over the phone. She wanted to show that dance didn't have to be so intimidating—“that it's for every person, with any background and body type.” For Copeland, the tools, perseverance, strength, and passion that you need to be an artist are derived from doing the work, engaging in the process. That's what she aimed to share in her class, to “give people some insight into what it is to be an artist and an athlete.”

I've taken Atwood's class, Rhimes's class, and most of Gladwell's, among others. I've watched Part One of Keller's course, and a little bit of Part Two. I've watched Brown's “smoky eye” tutorial, tried the technique on myself, and came out looking like a prizefighting panda. The classes are visually sumptuous, transporting, uplifting, and yet, frankly, a little boring, especially if you try to watch them all the way through. Doing so feels like being seated next to the dinner guest of your dreams—the Dalai Lama or Oscar Wilde or Barack Obama—and discovering that they won't stop talking and that the dinner is 12 courses long.



The cooking classes are enjoyable and resemble the prestige food programming on Netflix. The mixology and gardening classes interested me as an unskilled cocktail maker and novice gardener, but I still found it easier to Google specific questions like how exactly to deal with my lettuce or make a cocktail with things I already have in my bar. Yet, after watching Gordon Ramsay do it, I did finally learn how to properly salt an eggplant.

Instructors approach their classes in different ways, from simply walking viewers through their practice and methods, to putting their teams to work on a comprehensive curriculum, as Keller did upon being asked to come up with a class. But Keller was told his curriculum was too much.

“From what they told me, they’d never seen anything like it before, both in presentation, as well as in content, as well as in length,” Keller said when we spoke. It would have been much too long to film, so it was distilled down to the fundamentals and split into three parts.

Having someone of Thomas Keller’s stature teaching the basics of cooking is impressive, but is it necessary? You can learn useful things by watching a video, but formal education is generally understood to demand some kind of participation, as well as a teacher evaluation. Some instructors host promotional contests with student participation—in one case, James Patterson co-wrote a book with a student—but in general, Malcolm Gladwell isn’t going to grade your essay, nor is Thomas Keller going to evaluate your meringue.

**AS TERRIBLE AS** the pandemic has been, it has proved unexpectedly good for some—specifically billionaires, yeast manufacturers, and streaming services, of which MasterClass is now one. For a certain cohort of people looking to pass the hours at home, namely those with leisure time and money, the new courses in cooking, mixology, and gardening arrived at the perfect home-steadying moment. But the fact that MasterClass is so popular now also speaks to people’s fears, especially economic uncertainties that have only been exacerbated by the pandemic. Tens of millions of jobs have been lost, and many newly unemployed people are looking for a different direction. And if they’ve kept their jobs, they are dealing with a whole new way of navigating work, which is stressful and confusing. In a way, MasterClass seems ideally suited to frustrated 30-somethings for whom education has not necessarily resulted in upward mobility or even a job, who feel stuck in their career without a clear path to success.

**MasterClass seems ideally suited to frustrated 30-somethings for whom education has not necessarily resulted in upward mobility or even a job.**

In fact, the company refers to its target customers as CATS: “curious, aspiring 30-somethings.” CATS are old enough not to be planning to return to school, but young enough, in theory, that they need help advancing in their career. A CAT is a person whose life has become complicated, who has had to put aside some of the things they loved to do, who isn’t exactly doing the thing they dreamed of doing, David Schriber, MasterClass’s chief marketing officer, told me. They’re anxious about their future, their present, their position relative to that of their peers. “They’ll talk about having anxiety that their co-workers or the people on their social networks all seem to know more about a subject than they do,” Schriber said, referring, presumably, to pre-pandemic focus testing. “Someone will come to the office party and talk about wine, and then they’ll feel like *I don’t know enough about wine*. Someone else will talk about photography, and they’ll be like *Man, I should pay attention to who the photographers are these days*. Or their boss will say things like ‘You need to work on your leadership profile, or hone your creative judgments,’ and the poor 30-something is like *Where am I gonna get all this?*” Something about this struck me as clammy and sad, as far away from *They can’t take your education away from you* as it’s possible to be. As though it’s revealing another





**Lately, MasterClass  
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layer of unpaid labor—cultural labor—one is expected to do in order to secure the privilege of performing *actual* labor.

What MasterClass offers 30-somethings is “a curated group of people” recognized as “the world’s best,” who are “breaking down the thing that they do in a really entertaining and digestible way,” Schriber said. “You can take away the life lessons, but you can also take away the conversation points. You can come back to work on Monday and talk about what Anna Wintour did for the Met Gala—you can also think, *Man, Anna Wintour really gave me permission to show up like a boss today.*”

But what does it mean to “show up like a boss” at this moment? And what does it mean to learn it from Anna Wintour, who has recently come under fire for allegedly feeding a toxic and racist culture at Condé Nast? The idea that everyone should show up like a boss, so current five years ago, feels hollow now that the brutal inequalities in our system have become undeniable to all but the most willfully obtuse.

Education researchers have known for decades that being good at something and being good at teaching something are two completely different skill sets. In fact, universities are mostly ranked on the strength of their research, and, of course, the brand name can be worth a lot. Something similar holds true for MasterClass, whose impressive roster of talent feels like a who’s who of elite professionals, a gallery of the meritocracy’s winners.

**TO UNDERSTAND** where we are right now, and why MasterClass seems to slot in so perfectly with the moment, it’s useful to think about how it has evolved over time.

MasterClass launched after the early hype around online education had already fizzled. Filmed university lectures seemed to be even less thrilling than the real thing. MOOCs (massive open online courses) had poor retention rates, and still structurally favored people of means. At first, MasterClass focused on specific

skill sets, and providing an educational journey from beginning to end. But its data revealed that people weren’t necessarily consuming the courses from start to finish, nor was this really necessary to benefit from the content. “What we were finding was that when people were allowed the freedom to jump from lesson to lesson based on their interest, it was just a much more freeing experience,” Nekisa Cooper, MasterClass’s vice president of content, told me. What people seemed to want was a fun mix of short-form inspirational content. They also displayed surprisingly wide-ranging interests. Students who first watched Bobbi Brown followed her up with Chris Voss.

Lately, MasterClass has started presenting its offerings less as classroom education and more as part of a learning lifestyle built around a community of people with common interests and concerns. It reminds me of a kind of Spotify for careerist inspiration, a platform for dispensing assorted self-help and personal-development bonbons for the young capitalist striver. “And we’re not just offering classes or education,” Cooper said. “We’re also offering escape.”

As for whether it matters if a MasterClass member finishes a course, Rogier said, “Most education sites look at completion rates. But I think that’s the wrong metric. The measure I look at is what’s the impact we have on your life. I know it’s going to sound fluffy, but we legitimately ask people if we changed their life”—which nearly 20 percent of those polled said it did.

Silicon Valley has talked about changing the world and people’s lives for a long time, and it’s safe to say that it has succeeded. The world has been remade by private equity and venture capital. Tech has “disrupted” almost every aspect of modern living.

Maybe it’s not a coincidence, then, that we find ourselves in a golden age of self-help and self-development, of “how I did it” podcasts and conferences and workshops. We’re encouraged to optimize ourselves at all times, and told to look upon this as fun, albeit compulsory. But although you can get a lot out of these activities, you can waste time looking for the answer, when what these stories all reveal is that great success is a combination of doing the work and getting (or perhaps starting out) really, really lucky.

Lately, I’ve been thinking about how prospectors in the California Gold Rush rarely struck it rich. In 1849, the ones who did well were those who supplied prospectors with shovels, tents, and jeans—they kept the dream alive. Samuel Brannan, who sold shovels and other goods, was considered California’s first millionaire. Levi Strauss, who co-invented blue jeans, died with a fortune of \$6 million, worth \$175 million today. There’s nothing wrong, of course, with supplying people with what they need to pursue their dreams, but it seems that during this time of growing wealth and social inequality, the jeans and shovels have become largely symbolic, and the prospecting they facilitate, the endless panning for something, anything, ever more intangible. There is no goal, really. The panning is the goal. *A*

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# Culture & Critics



OMNIVORE

## *David Copperfield's* Wild Ride

*Armando Iannucci's mad, loving, and brilliant adaptation of Dickens's novel*

By James Parker

The child and the writer are born at the same moment, to the same mother, each to his separate destiny. The child's is to see everything, feel everything, be everything, and live in the scraps and sparks of language by which he understands everything; the writer's is to wait, and hide, and grow, until the day when he steps in—pen in hand—to take possession.

In *The Personal History of David Copperfield*, Armando Iannucci's mad, loving, and brilliantly cinematic extrapolation of the novel by Charles Dickens, the grown-up hero—now a successful author—attends his own birth. He also, later on, has a consoling, avuncular chat with his frightened boy-self. *David Copperfield* (1850) was Dickens's characteristically rowdy variant on the inward investigation that William Wordsworth had undertaken in his long poem *The Prelude*. It was the novel, in the words of Dickens's friend and biographer, John Forster, in which he took “all the world into his confidence.”

David's labile, one-crush-after-another nature was by all reports close to Dickens's own. And David's story—of being stunted and oppressed by terrible adults (largely of the professional classes); cherished and protected by wonderful adults (largely of the laboring classes); caught for a time in the gears of the Industrial Revolution (working in a factory at the age of 12); surviving, stormily, and by a mighty expansion of his sensibility—is Dickens's life not fictionalized but mythicized.

Today the book reads unevenly and, in a strange way, un-Dickensianly. It billows, it sags, it contracts suddenly to a point of diamond hardness and then billows and sags again. This is Dickens in his middle period, with confused middle-period energies; the fairy-tale intensity of the early work—of, say, *Oliver Twist*—is behind him, and the sorcerous glooms of *Our Mutual Friend* are not yet glimpsed. Also: David Copperfield, in manhood, is not an especially interesting person. (“He's such a drip,” commented a friend of mine.) But if you can rise above your need for coherence and carefully graded shifts in tone, then *David Copperfield* becomes a kind of fun-house ride, jolting you about with an almost modernist brusqueness. The comedy is wild and timeless; the melodrama is strained and alien.

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And because it's Dickens, one character contains this opposition within his own body: the bipolar optimist Mr. Micawber, always in debt, always speculating. Micawber is a comic creation who sees himself melodramatically; he makes windy threats of self-destruction, and despairingly flourishes a straight razor in the air, but can be distracted—morally revived, even—by the approach of a hot kidney pudding and a plate of shrimp. Dickens has also introduced into his text the pathogen Uriah Heep, David's great enemy. Heep hates our virtuous hero with a visionary, almost saintly hatred. He hates him like poison, like kryptonite, like the last crawling hypocrisy on Earth.

Dickens was a radical artist. Half a century before James Joyce wrote the first lines of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* in shining polymorphous baby talk—"Once upon a time and a very good time it was there was a moocow coming down along the road"—Dickens was lowering his language probe into the earliest, most germinal moments of subjectivity. "The first objects that assume a distinct presence before me," narrates David in the book's second chapter (titled "I Observe"), "as I look far back, into the blank of my infancy, are my mother with her pretty hair and youthful shape, and Peggotty [David's nanny] with no shape at all, and eyes so dark they seemed to darken their whole neighbourhood in her face." As with Joyce, we are inside the perceptual theater of actual babyhood. Hair, shape, eyes, shadow—the details loom separately, almost unrelatedly, out of a supercharged vagueness.

Iannucci's movie flings itself into all of this. The vibration is dreamlike. Sets collapse, or turn into stage curtains that blow open into the next scene. Dev Patel, as David, is gangling, huge-eyed, heavy-breathing: cartoonish, in the best sense. The multicolored casting is both an anti-hegemonic kick in the ass and a Brechtian device: It keeps us aware of the fictive nature of the proceedings. Excess seems to warp or bulge out of every frame, and every story line wants to go writhing off on its own. There are compressions and contractions; one senses steaming coils of surplus footage, whole subplots excised. Warm work in the editing suite, I imagine.

Iannucci, a writer and director on *Veep* and *The Death of Stalin*, is the sharpest of comic minds, a master of competing registers, and he knows what he's doing. Indeed, having the artistic advantage of not being Charles Dickens, of being able to see around the edges of that enormous personality, he knows in a couple of places better than Dickens himself what *David Copperfield* is about. In one particularly inspired digression, he gives us a long scene in which David ingratiates himself with his fellow schoolboys by means of his gift for impressions: physical caricatures of teachers and other boys, feats of mimicry,

their entertainment value in direct proportion to their cruelty, that have his peers in stitches.

This, not to put too fine a point on it, is one way that a writer becomes a writer—by cultivating, as a defense mechanism, a merciless eye for weakness. (Dickens's own talent for impressions became, rather unsettlingly, part of his literary process; his daughter Mamie recorded watching him work one morning, "when he suddenly jumped from his chair and rushed to a mirror which hung near, and in which I could see the reflection of some extraordinary facial contortions which he was making. He returned rapidly to his desk, wrote furiously for a few moments, and then went again to the mirror.") Iannucci works magic elsewhere, too. Ben Whishaw as Uriah Heep, his wit playing along the knife edge between self-abasement and contempt, is stranger and more dangerous than even Dickens could manage; in his final, explosive unmasking—"You and yours have always hated me and mine!"—he rears up into nihilistic grandeur, achieving a kind of punk-rock nobility.

Dickens was not an egalitarian; he was an everyone's-invited elitist. Beneath his eye we are all aristocrats of human nature, simply by virtue of possessing it. His characters have a hyperbolic presence, a hyperbolic value, and if they are frequently deluded about one another, those delusions just as frequently turn out to be beautiful. David's Aunt Betsey regards her broken-minded lodger, Mr. Dick (limpidly and wonderfully portrayed by Hugh Laurie in the movie), as a man of great wisdom; and so, it transpires, he is. Mrs. Micawber has unbudgeable faith in her hopeless husband; her faith is rewarded.

This basic grasp of essential human worth was behind Dickens's horror (recognized and saluted by his contemporary and fellow Londoner Karl Marx) at the exploitation of children, working people, and the poor: It was a sort of outraged innocence. "From the reformer is required a simplicity of surprise," wrote G. K. Chesterton in his book on Dickens. "He must have the faculty of a violent and virgin astonishment. It is not enough that he should think injustice distressing; he must think injustice *absurd*, an anomaly in existence." And it's this primal double take—at the shape of this person's nose, at that person's verbal or conceptual tics, at the fact that 12-year-olds can be put to work in factories—that is the keynote of Dickens's work. In his ends were his beginnings; as in Iannucci's movie, the writer supernaturally assisted at the birth of the child, which was his own birth, too. He was, in this way, the complete—the total—novelist. His humanity was enormous, and fully alive to itself. He knew us all so well, and we never stopped blowing his mind. *A*

*Iannucci  
sometimes  
knows better  
than Dickens  
himself what  
David  
Copperfield  
is about.*

*James Parker is a staff writer at The Atlantic.*

## BOOKS

# What to Do About William Faulkner

*A white man of the Jim Crow South, he couldn't escape the burden of race, yet derived creative force from it.*

By Drew Gilpin Faust



William Faulkner and his wife, Estelle, stand outside their home, in Oxford, Mississippi, in the spring of 1955.

In June 2005, Oprah Winfrey announced a surprising choice as the 55th selection for her influential book club. The coming months would be, she proclaimed, a “Summer of Faulkner,” focused on three of his novels—*As I Lay Dying*, *The Sound and the Fury*, and *Light in August*, available in a special 1,100-page box set weighing in at two pounds. Oprah’s website posted short videotaped lectures by three literature professors to assist readers in making sense of the writer’s notoriously demanding prose. The Faulkner trilogy quickly rose to the No. 2 spot on Amazon’s best-seller list. Some literary critics hailed Winfrey for bringing William Faulkner back into popular consciousness; others challenged any notion of recovery or revival, asking whether he had ever really gone away.

In the decade and a half since then, the issues of race and history so central to Faulkner’s work have grown only more urgent. How should we now regard this pathbreaking, Nobel Prize-winning author, who grappled with our nation’s racial tragedy in ways that at once illuminate and disturb—that reflect both startling human truths and the limitations of a white southerner born in 1897 into the stifling air of Mississippi’s closed and segregated society? In our current moment of racial reckoning, Faulkner is certainly ripe for rigorous scrutiny.

Michael Gorra, an English professor at Smith, believes Faulkner to be the most important novelist of the 20th century. In his rich, complex, and eloquent new book, *The Saddest Words: William Faulkner’s Civil War*, he makes the case for how and why to read Faulkner in the 21st by revisiting his fiction through the lens of the Civil War, “the central quarrel of our nation’s history.” Rarely an overt subject, one “not dramatized so much as invoked,” the Civil War is both “everywhere” and “nowhere” in Faulkner’s work. He cannot escape the war, its aftermath, or its meaning, and neither, Gorra insists, can we. As the formerly enslaved Ringo remarks in *The Unvanquished* (1938) during Reconstruction-era conflict over voting rights, “This war aint over. Hit just started good.” This is why for us, as for Jason and Quentin Compson in *The Sound and the*

*Fury* (1929), *was* and *again* are “the saddest words.” As Gorra explains, “What *was* is never over.”

In setting out to explore what Faulkner can tell us about the Civil War and what the war can tell us about Faulkner, Gorra engages as both historian and literary critic. But he also writes, he confesses, as an “act of citizenship.” His book represents his own meditation on the meaning of the “forever war” of race, not just in American history and literature, but in our fraught time. What we think today about the Civil War, he believes, “serves above all to tell us what we think about ourselves, about the nature of our polity and the shape of our history.”

The core of Gorra’s book is a Civil War narrative, which he has created by untangling the war’s appearances throughout Faulkner’s fiction and rearranging them “into something like linearity.” From the layers and circularities and recurrences and reversals of Faulkner’s 19 novels and more than 100 short stories, Gorra has constructed a chronological telling of Yoknapatawpha’s war, of the incidents and characters who appear in the writer’s extended chronicle of his invented “postage stamp” world. Faulkner took liberties with the historical order of events; what he sought to depict was the “psychological truth of the Confederate home front” and the war’s aftermath. This is work, Gorra argues, that actual documents of the period would be hard-pressed to do. And that psychological truth certainly could not have been derived from study of the racist historiography of Faulkner’s era, which he insisted he never even read. Instead, this understanding is the product of what Toni Morrison once called Faulkner’s “refusal-to-look-away approach” to the burden of his region’s cruel past.

Faulkner enacts this refusal through his practice of looking again, of revisiting the same characters and stories, and through the prequels and sequels and outgrowths of those he has already told, digging deeply into the hidden and often shocking truths of the South he portrays. Gorra endeavors to unknot and clarify Faulkner’s oeuvre by reconstructing it himself, but his act of literary explication is also one of participation—a joining in the Faulknerian process. Gorra renarrates these Civil War stories as he seeks to come to terms both with America’s painful racial legacies and with William Faulkner.

Perhaps the most powerful of Faulkner’s tellings of the Civil War story is *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), a novel structured around Quentin Compson’s own refusal to look away. Although Faulkner insisted that Quentin did not speak for him, Gorra has “never quite believed him.” Quentin’s search to understand why Charles Bon was murdered during the very last days of the war unfolds through his elaboration of successive narratives in a manner not unlike Faulkner’s own. Unsatisfied with

each version of the story he uncovers, Quentin looks again, arriving through ever more disturbing revelations at the South’s original sin: the distorting and dehumanizing power of race. It is race that pulls the trigger. “So it’s the miscegenation, not the incest, which you cant bear,” Bon says just before Henry, at once his brother and his fiancée’s brother, shoots him.

To think of this novel appearing in the same year as *Gone With the Wind* is startling. It was moonlight and magnolias, rather than a searing portrait of the persisting legacies of slavery, that captured the public’s acclaim: Margaret Mitchell, not Faulkner, won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1937. But Faulkner’s period of “explosive productivity,” beginning in 1929—13 books in 13 years—attracted a different sort of attention, because of his formal innovations and literary experimentalism, not just his unvarnished portrayals of race. In a 1939 essay, Jean-Paul Sartre compared him to Proust, and Faulkner became an idol in the eyes of young French intellectuals as well as literary critics around the world. Faulkner might not have won the Pulitzer, but he was on the path to his 1949 Nobel.

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GORRA NOTES the “ever-increasing importance of race” in Faulkner’s fiction. Yet society’s racial attitudes and practices were evolving even more rapidly than Faulkner’s own. As the civil-rights movement gained momentum after the end of World War II, Faulkner engaged in more explicit public commentary about America’s divisions and inequities. Like critics in those years and ever since, Gorra struggles to come to terms with the distressing views Faulkner frequently articulated on questions of racial progress and racial justice. Gorra does not look away from Faulkner’s troubling public statements or from some disconcerting stereotypes and assumptions in his literary work that became newly jarring as social attitudes shifted.

A great deal is at stake in Gorra’s effort. We are in a time when authors’ reputations are overturned, their works removed from reading lists, their achievements devalued because of their blindness on questions we now see with different eyes. At the outset of his book, Gorra reminds us of persisting debates over Joseph Conrad, initially stimulated by a 1977 Chinua Achebe essay labeling him an apologist for imperialism. Today, Gorra believes, Faulkner “stands to us as Conrad does,” in need of reexamination and an updated understanding that confronts his racist shortcomings.

Faulkner, Gorra concedes, “remained a white man of the Jim Crow South and did not always rise above it. At times his words both can and should make us uncomfortable.” His fiction offers an “all-too-forgiving depiction of slaveholder paternalism.” His novels and stories fail to render slavery’s physical cruelties; they include no depiction of an auction, a family separated



by sale, or a whipping. Many of his Black characters seem incomplete, although they're certainly not the caricatured stereotypes typical of so much white southern writing of his time. Faulkner remarked upon white men who had "the courage and endurance to resist ... Reconstruction." *The Unvanquished* presents John Sartoris as a leader of the local Klan admirably determined to keep "the carpetbaggers from organizing the negroes into an insurrection," which was Sartoris's view of the Black claim on the franchise. As Gorra observes, Faulkner's "picture of black voters as inevitably ignorant and corruptible simply parrots the view of Reconstruction that was current in Faulkner's childhood and for some decades thereafter." A 1943 short story Faulkner wrote for *The Saturday Evening Post* presents the slave broker and Confederate general Nathan Bedford Forrest in a generous manner that Gorra finds particularly "hard to stomach." At the same time, Gorra points out, the depiction of enslaved people fleeing to freedom and securing their own emancipation transcends the historiography of Faulkner's time and anticipates that of our own. He is no apologist for the Old South, and resists in any way glorifying the war, unlike almost every other white southerner of his era.

The public pronouncements Faulkner made on race as the civil-rights movement unfolded are in many ways even more disturbing than the shortcomings Gorra identifies in his fiction. In an appalling drunken interview with the British *Sunday Times* in 1956, Faulkner invoked the specter of race war if the South were compelled to integrate, but when his words were widely reviled, he denied ever having uttered them. He regularly spoke out against lynching and deplored the 1955 murder of Emmett Till, saying that any society that murdered children didn't "deserve to survive, and probably won't." But he had once suggested that mobs, "like our juries ... have a way of being right." Gorra underscores the "incoherence" of Faulkner's position as both critic and defender of the white South's resistance to change.

In many ways, he was a quintessential white southern "moderate," an identity much scrutinized as the civil-rights movement gathered momentum. He condemned violence and recognized the need to end segregation, but he rejected what Martin Luther King Jr. later described as "the fierce urgency of now." Indeed, it was the moral failures of just such moderates that King would directly assail in his 1963 "Letter From Birmingham Jail." Faulkner urged patience and delay and spoke out against federal coercion of the white South. His critics thought he should have known better. As James Baldwin explained in a 1956 essay condemning his views on desegregation, Faulkner hoped to give southern whites the time and opportunity to save themselves, to reclaim their moral identity. But

their salvation could come, if at all, only at the cost of postponing justice for Black Americans, which Baldwin made clear was no longer conceivable.

Gorra assembles quite a bill of failings, especially if we view Faulkner with the assumptions of our time and place rather than his own. Yet having meticulously acknowledged all of this, Gorra makes his claim for Faulkner the writer by reproving Faulkner the man. "When writing fiction," Faulkner "became better than he was." He had, Gorra argues, an uncanny ability to "think his way within other people," to inhabit their being so as to erase preconceptions and prejudices in the very act of portraying their minds and souls. Through fiction, Faulkner could "stand outside his Oxford, his Jefferson, and see the behavior his people take for granted, the things they don't even question." As Gorra presents it, the act of writing bestowed an almost mystical clear-sightedness. Yet that clarity was always challenged in the fetid Mississippi air that Faulkner, like all his characters, had to breathe. And it is that very tension, the combination of the flaws and the brilliance, that for Gorra makes his case.

Is this rendering of Faulkner's weaknesses as the source of his strength just an act of interpretive jiu-jitsu? Or perhaps a reversion to a romantic notion of redemptive genius? Or is Gorra influenced by what Faulkner himself urged upon posterity: that his life be "abolished and voided from history," leaving only "the printed books"? After all, Faulkner once declared that he wanted his epitaph to read "He made the books and he died."

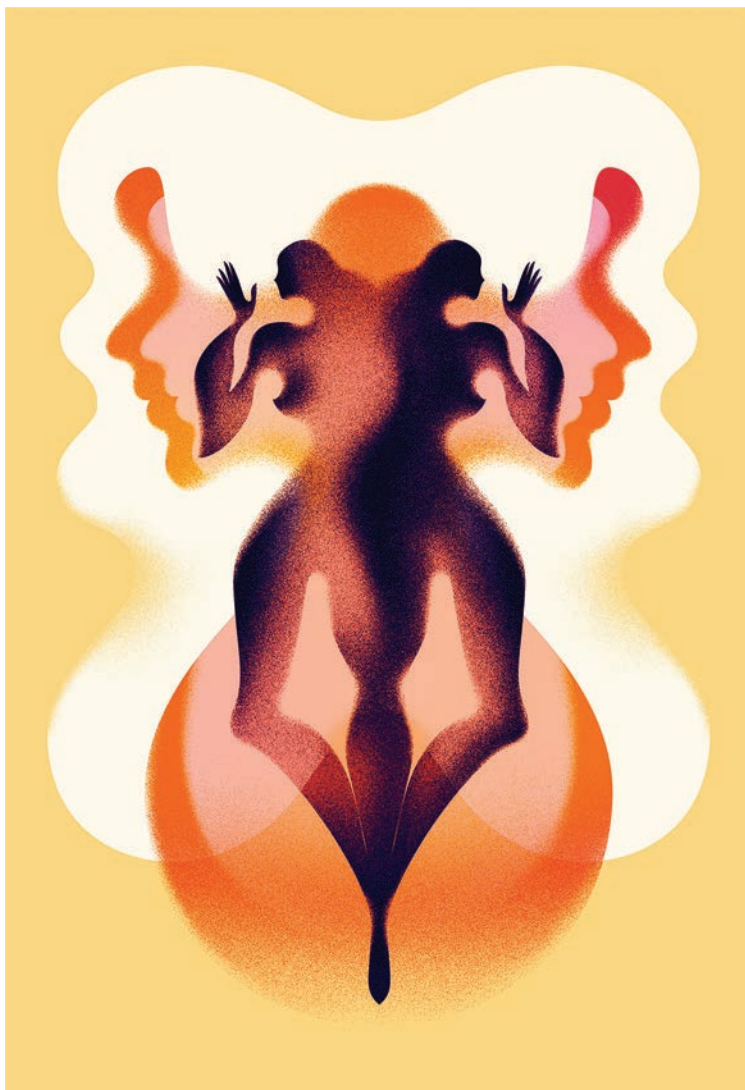
But Gorra insists on the importance of the teller and the tale, as well as on the creative force Faulkner derived from the burden of race, which he could not escape. It is because of, not in spite of, Faulkner's shortcomings that we must continue to engage with his work: These failures are product and emblem of the legacies of racial injustice that shape us all. In his Nobel Prize speech in 1950, Faulkner declared that the only thing worth writing about was "the human heart in conflict with itself." He lived that conflict even as he wrote about it. His struggles forced him to experiment and to innovate, yielding both his aesthetic and his ethical insight. These very difficulties—"the drama and ... power of his attempt to work through our history, to wrestle or rescue it into meaning"—are what make Faulkner so worthwhile. We read him because he takes us with him into our national heart of darkness, into the shameful history we have still failed to confront or understand. Our past, Gorra and Faulkner agree, is "never over." Or certainly not yet. *A*

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THE SADDEST  
WORDS: WILLIAM  
FAULKNER'S  
CIVIL WAR

Michael Gorra

LIVERIGHT



## BOOKS

## Lying as an Art Form

*Elena Ferrante's new novel about adolescence explores the power of fictions.*

By Merve Emre

"To tolerate existence, we lie, and we lie above all to ourselves," Elena Ferrante observed in a 2002 interview. "Falsehoods protect us, mitigate suffering, allow us to avoid the terrifying moment of serious reflection, they dilute the horrors of our time, they even save us from ourselves." For Ferrante, the falsehoods that people tell one another and themselves in everyday life—*I am happy; I love my wife; I didn't know what I was doing*—are "lovely tales," or "petty lies." At moments when guilt and shame threaten our conscience, when they shake our deepest beliefs about who we are, petty lies stop us from looking too closely at ourselves.

Literary fiction is also a lie, according to Ferrante, but a lie that is "made purposely to always tell the truth." The lies that fiction tells—once upon a time a person said and did this and that—are unmotivated by self-interest. Fiction is an illusion that tinkers with our sense of reality to lay bare the price we pay for our petty lies: Fiction shows us that narcissism and self-doubt impel us to hurt others; that we are quick to betray people who trust us; that love can be more destructive than hate. Central to Ferrante's theory of fiction as an act of truth-telling is her conviction that the truth dawns more radiantly when glimpsed through the veil of fiction's lies.

What can we learn about the conjunction of life and fiction from a work of fiction about lying? Ferrante's exquisitely moody new novel, *The Lying Life of Adults*, is about a teenager named Giovanna who learns that the grown-ups in her life have been lying to her. She also learns that the contents of their lies are less intriguing than their styles of lying—exaggeration, omission, justification, obfuscation—which vary in their skillfulness, and in the pleasure and pain they afford. All lie differently from *The Lying Life of Adults* itself, which invites us to evaluate lying not only as a moral problem, but also as an aesthetic challenge—to ask whether a lie can ever be elevated into an art form.

We might ask this question of all of Ferrante's writing. Her fiction teems with liars of every age, from the insecure children of her beloved Neapolitan quartet, to the anguished adults of her early novels, to Elena Ferrante herself, an authorial persona who claims that she resorts to lying to shield herself. Unlike the Neapolitan quartet, which spans more than half a century in the lives of two friends, *The Lying Life of Adults* concerns itself with adolescence—a time when deception and self-deception loom large, and growing up means learning to catch oneself and others in the act of lying. Everything that entails—ridding oneself of childish illusions, recognizing the hypocrisy of adults, suffering romantic disappointment—is standard fare for novels of adolescence. But for Ferrante, whose novel bestows on familiar experiences an ardent, unreal shimmer, growing up also involves

learning how to cultivate a talent for deception that approaches a talent for writing fiction.

THE QUARTET began with intensity, in a violent, working-class neighborhood of Naples, but *The Lying Life of Adults* opens amid the educated, affluent, and peaceable. Giovanna's father is a teacher at a prestigious high school and an aspiring Marxist intellectual, "an unfailingly courteous man" whose love and admiration she desperately desires. Her mother teaches Greek and Latin and proofreads romance novels. Giovanna's best friends, pretty Angela and poetic Ida, are the daughters of her parents' best friends, the wealthy Mariano and Costanza. All seem content in their bourgeois happiness—until the day Giovanna, then 12, overhears a conversation between her mother and father.

Giovanna recalls the conversation from an unspecified present: "Two years before leaving home my father said to my mother that I was very ugly." We have no reason to doubt her account. "Those words," she tells us, "remained fixed" in her mind as a cruel judgment on her pubescent body and poor performance in school. But we soon discover that what her father actually said was worse: She was "becoming like his sister," her estranged Aunt Vittoria, "a childhood bogeyman, a lean, demonic silhouette," whose vulgarity and cruelty her noble father has detested for as long as Giovanna can remember.

Reversing the quarter's story of upward mobility, Giovanna descends from her home atop Naples's highest hill to the industrial neighborhood where Vittoria lives, determined to discover the truth of her aunt's estrangement. Her father begs her "to put wax in [her] ears like Odysseus." But Giovanna listens as Vittoria tells the agonizing story of her love for a married man named Enzo, their affair exposed by Giovanna's father, no longer a heroic man but a puritanical, petty bourgeois opportunist. Vittoria describes the sublime feeling of "fucking," "an adherence to pleasure so desperately carnal" that Giovanna finds herself shockingly aroused. "Tell your father: Vittoria said that if I don't fuck the way she fucked with Enzo, it's pointless for me to live," her aunt demands. We know Vittoria's pronouncement is a lie, but Giovanna is too overwhelmed by the pleasure the lie elicits to see it. The moralizing lies of her father and the eroticizing lies of her aunt loom before her like Scylla and Charybdis. To navigate between them safely, she must cultivate her own style of deception.

FOR FERRANTE, lies, like literature, cleave to different genres, each with its own conventions of language. To her parents, Giovanna downplays her fascination with Vittoria, clipping her descriptions of her visit. To Vittoria, whom she starts to see regularly, she

*Ferrante's fiction teems with liars of all ages, from the insecure children of her Neapolitan quartet to the anguished adults of her early novels.*

begins "almost inadvertently to invent" things about her parents, though she restrains herself from being too "novelistic." To Angela and Ida, she lies about Vittoria recklessly, almost giving her "the capacity to fly through night skies or invent magic potions." The quartet allowed its narrator, a writer named Lenù, to move among several different genres of storytelling: the fable, the romance, the realist novel. *The Lying Life of Adults* makes the same imaginative experiment available to readers. "I'm not wise, but I read a lot of novels," Giovanna says of her education in lying. "Instead of my own words, phrases from books come to mind."

The books she begins with are the epics her father loves to quote. Then her lies start to toggle between fable and romance, with their enchanted objects (she imagines a bracelet Vittoria gives her as possessing magic) and fairy-tale archetypes (she casts Vittoria as an evil witch). Yet the more Giovanna lies, the more she flexes her nascent powers of perception and narration. Her inner world, her imagination, grows critical, rebellious, and she starts to see the "well-ordered world" of her parents with unnerving clarity. She discovers that a more melodramatic configuration of lies (reminiscent of the quartet's later books) has corrupted her family's happiness. There is her intellectualizing father's long affair with Costanza, which he justifies artlessly, in "a frenzy to redeem himself by listing his grand reasons, his pain and suffering." There is her mother's improvisation of "nostalgic little speeches" about her estranged husband's goodness, honesty, and fidelity.

Giovanna deems these lies "offensive," and is as repelled by their self-serving sentimentality as she is, eventually, by Vittoria's romantic vulgarity. Part of learning how to lie, Ferrante suggests, is learning how to judge lies based on their aesthetic merits. As we grow up, some varieties of lying must be cast aside: We know too much to accommodate their obvious falsity, their clichés, their failure to reconcile us to the intractable realities of life. What makes the adults seem so stunted is that none of them lies with elegance or verve, with imagination or originality. As non-novelists—teachers of the classics, proofreaders of romance—their lies borrow tropes from the fiction they produce and consume: romantic idealization, passivity in the face of passion, a feeling of fatedness. Yet, as Giovanna soon realizes, the lies designed by their literary culture are too reductive to give meaning to her quest to understand her sudden alienation from her life.

THE LYING LIFE OF ADULTS is not an epic, a fable, or a romance like the novels Giovanna's mother proofreads. It is not a bildungsroman or *Künstlerroman* in the way the quartet is. It is a novel of disillusionment, as the literary critic Georg Lukács once described the category: a novel that strips away its young protagonist's



major social relationships to elevate her interiority to “the status of a completely independent world.” From its origins in Balzac’s *Lost Illusions* and Flaubert’s *Sentimental Education*, the genre explores an individual’s struggle to adapt private fantasies and illusions to an outer world hostile to them. The word Ferrante uses to describe this feeling of discordance is *estraneità*: “extraneousness,” “noninvolvement,” or, as Ann Goldstein beautifully translates it, “estrangement.” When Giovanna embraces her father, but draws no comfort from his familiar scent, she is overwhelmed by “a sense of estrangement that provoked suffering mixed incongruously with satisfaction”—suffering from the rupture with her family, from the loss of a shared world; and satisfaction at how her distance allows her to see her parents and aunt anew, her outer gaze clarified by her inner state of homelessness.

The novel’s second half shows how estrangement might allow Giovanna to approach, blindly, haltingly, more elevated forms of lying than what her parents have offered. The catalyst is Roberto, a classic Ferrante love interest. He is a brilliant scholar of religion, a Neapolitan boy who has found success as a young man in Milan but remains attached to his origins; he is engaged to an attractive, if insipid, girl from Vittoria’s neighborhood. When she meets Roberto, Giovanna, now almost 15, tells him she is reading a book about “the search for lost time,” and he praises her intellect. She tells herself the lie that comes fluently to all teenagers: “Become his friend, only that, and show him that, somewhere inside me, unknown even to myself, I possess the qualities he needs.”

A pointedly Proustian story of fantasy and desire unfolds. Call this kind of lie the self-deception of infatuation. It rarely lasts, as Ferrante knows, but as long as it does, it allows Giovanna to live lies that only intensify the desire they seek to suppress. Around Roberto, Giovanna projects an aura of intellectual purity, compassion, and wisdom, and strives to be as good as she believes him to be. His work is about “compunction,” which he describes to her not as moral scrupulousness, but as “a needle that had to pull the thread through the scattered fragments of our existence.” That he will let her down is inevitable—from the moment they meet, we know he will never live up to her illusions. But her infatuation allows her to discover that the compunction of which Roberto speaks is key to what some liars, like some novels, do. They create the appearance of a unified self, smoothing the painful and unassimilable edges out of our histories; they offer a false sense of consolation, which we accept, eager not to look too hard at ourselves.

WHAT KIND OF NOVEL is best at transforming lying into an art form and fiction into a truthful lie rather than mere consolation? Not the epic, not the romance,

and not the Proustian novel, which labors to create a single self out of the fragments of existence. The answer can be found at the very beginning of *The Lying Life of Adults*, when Giovanna describes the story to come.

I slipped away, and am still slipping away, within these lines that are intended to give me a story, while in fact I am nothing, nothing of my own, nothing that has really begun or really been brought to completion: only a tangled knot, and nobody, not even the one who at this moment is writing, knows if it contains the right thread for a story or is merely a snarled confusion of suffering, without redemption.

Everything the sentence suggests—that the “I” who speaks from within fiction is elusive; that writing is like weaving a fabric that conceals and reveals the life beneath; that this fabric will never redeem life’s suffering—is a description of Ferrante’s own fiction.

The novel alludes to the quartet as it closes, and Giovanna (the reader) and her poetic friend Ida (the writer) leave for Venice together, vowing to become “adults as no one ever had before.” On the one hand, the ending could be read ironically, as a version of the thrillingly cliché adolescent illusion that running away from home will free us from the ties that bind. On the other, the embrace of friendship over family and romance could signal the beginning of a superior and entirely truthful lie: the writing of the novel itself, a collaborative examination of the past by two people—both Giovanna the liar and “the one who at this moment is writing.” Whether the one who is writing is the older Giovanna or her friend Ida, the echo of the intertwined protagonists of the quartet, Lila and Lenù, is clear.

The end of *The Lying Life of Adults* suggests that the way to reckon with the “snarled confusion of suffering” is literary partnership—that this marvelously disconcerting novel of disillusionment is a product of the grace extended to the liar by the writer. Only the writer’s truthful lies can mirror the liar’s petty ones with the clear sight needed to affirm the intensity of her past. Only the writer knows how to conjure desire; sympathize with misjudgment; rebuke carelessness; disappoint mercifully. Always, Ferrante’s fiction reminds us that sometimes you need someone else to help gather the scattered fragments of your existence. A writer is a friend who can find the thread of your story when you are too blinded by your lies to grasp it yourself. She can give you the beginning and end you need—if not in life, then in fiction. *A*

THE LYING LIFE  
OF ADULTS

Elena Ferrante  
Translated by  
Ann Goldstein

EUROPA EDITIONS

Merve Emre is an associate English professor at the University of Oxford. She is a co-author of *The Ferrante Letters*, published in January.



PUTIN: ULRICH HÄSSLER /  
ULLSTEIN BILD / GETTY

# The World Putin Made

*How KGB methods, tactics, and operations have fueled Russia's quest for glory*

By Anne Applebaum

It was December 1989, the Berlin Wall had fallen, and in Dresden, crowds were gathering outside the headquarters of the Stasi, the East German secret police, shouting insults and demanding access. Nearby, frantic KGB officers—the Soviet advisers whom the Stasi had long referred to as “the friends”—were barricaded inside their villa, burning papers. “We destroyed everything,” remembered one of those officers, Vladimir Putin. “All our communications, our lists of contacts and our agents’ networks ... We burned so much stuff that the furnace burst.”

Toward evening, a group of protesters broke away from the Stasi building and started marching toward the KGB villa. Panicked, Putin called the Soviet military command in Dresden and asked for reinforcements. None were forthcoming. “I got the feeling then that the country no longer existed. That it had disappeared,” Putin told an interviewer years later. “It was clear the union was ailing. And it had a terminal disease without a cure—a paralysis of power.” The shock was total, and he never forgot it.

For hundreds of millions of people, the fall of the Berlin Wall was a great triumph: The moment marked the end of hated dictatorships and the beginning of a better era. But for the KGB officers stationed in Dresden, the political revolutions of 1989 marked the end of their empire and the beginning of an era of humiliation. In interviews, Putin has returned to that moment—the moment when reinforcements did not come—always describing it as a turning point in his own life. Like Scarlett O’Hara shaking her fist at a blood-red sky, Putin swore, it seems, to dedicate his life to restoring his country’s glory.

But Putin’s cinematic depiction of his last days in Dresden captures only part of what happened. As Catherine Belton demonstrates in *Putin’s People*, large chunks are missing from his story and from the stories of his KGB colleagues—the other members of what would become, two decades later, Russia’s ruling class. As the title indicates, Belton’s book is not a biography of the Russian dictator, but a portrait of this generation of security agents. And many of them were not, in fact, entirely shocked by the events of 1989.

On the contrary, some of them had been preparing already. In August 1988, a high-ranking official from Moscow arrived in East Berlin and began recruiting German sleeper agents, who continued to work with the KGB, or rather the institutions that replaced the KGB, even after the reunification of Germany and the fall of the Soviet Union itself. At about the same time, the KGB was also setting up the offshore accounts, fake businesses, and hidden “black cash” funds that would, in the 1990s, propel some of its members to great wealth and power. From 1986 to 1988, for example, the Stasi transferred millions of marks to a network of companies in Switzerland, Liechtenstein, and Singapore, all run by an Austrian businessman named Martin Schlaff. He and his companies would reemerge years later, Belton writes, as “central cogs in the influence operations of the Putin regime.”

The KGB’s Dresden team may have also played another role in the organization’s careful preparations for a post-Communist future. Precisely because the city was a backwater—and thus uninteresting to other intelligence agencies—the KGB and the Stasi organized meetings in Dresden with some of the extremist organizations they supported in the West and around the world. One former member of the Red Army Faction—the West German terrorist organization, also known as the Baader-Meinhof gang, that killed dozens of people during its heyday—told Belton that one of its most notorious final actions was planned with the help of the KGB and the Stasi in Dresden. In late November 1989, Alfred Herrhausen, the chairman of Deutsche Bank, died after a bomb hit his car. Herrhausen was, at that time, a close adviser to the German government on the economics of reunification, and a proponent of a more integrated European economy. Why him? Perhaps the KGB had its own ideas about how reunification should proceed and how the European economy should be integrated. Perhaps Russia’s secret policemen didn’t want any rivals messing things up. Or perhaps they wanted, as their successors still do, to create havoc in Germany and beyond.

Belton does not prove Putin’s personal involvement in any of these projects, which isn’t surprising. The Russian leader has gone to great lengths to conceal his real role during the four and a half years he spent in Dresden. But throughout her book, which will surely now become the definitive account of the rise of Putin and Putinism, she adds enough new details to establish beyond doubt that the future Russian president was working alongside the people who set up the secret bank accounts and held the meetings with subversives and terrorists. More important, she establishes how, years later, these kinds of projects came to benefit him and shape his worldview. Building on the work of others—Masha Gessen’s *The Man Without a Face: The*



*Unlikely Rise of Vladimir Putin*, Karen Dawisha's *Putin's Kleptocracy: Who Owns Russia?*, Steven Lee Myers's *The New Tsar: The Rise and Reign of Vladimir Putin*, and Fiona Hill and Clifford Gaddy's *Mr. Putin: Operative in the Kremlin*, among many books on this subject—Belton, a former *Financial Times* correspondent in Moscow, incorporates crucial new material from interviews with former KGB operatives, Kremlin insiders, and bankers in various countries. She shows that Putin may have been burning documents in Dresden, but he never lost touch with the people, the tactics, or the operations launched by the KGB at that time.

**STEP BY STEP**, Belton demonstrates how the future president made full use of KGB methods, contacts, and networks at each stage of his career. She describes the famous swindle he ran in St. Petersburg in the '90s, selling oil abroad on the city's behalf, supposedly to buy food for its inhabitants; instead the profits went to create a hard-currency slush fund—known in Russian criminal slang as an *obshchak*—much of which financed other operations and eventually enriched Putin's friends. Later, Putin won the confidence of the Russian oligarchs of President Boris Yeltsin's era, in part by promising them immunity from prosecution after Yeltsin resigned; once he took power, he eliminated them from the game, arresting some throughout the early 2000s and chasing others out of the country. In the years that he has been president, his cronies have launched a series of major operations—the Deutsche Bank “mirror trading” scheme, the Moldovan “laundromat,” the Danske Bank scandal—all of which used Western banks to help move stolen money out of Russia. Similar schemes continue to the present day.

But the pivotal political event for Putin took place in 2005, when a pro-Western president, Viktor Yushchenko, came to power in Ukraine after a street revolution. The Russian president blamed these events on American money and the CIA (an organization that, for better or worse, never had anything like that kind of influence in Ukraine). “It was the worst nightmare of Putin's KGB men that, inspired by events in neighboring countries, Russian oppositionists funded by the West would seek to topple Putin's regime too,” Belton writes. “This was the dark paranoia that colored and drove many of the actions they were to take from then on.” Not coincidentally, this scenario—pro-Western-democracy protesters overthrowing a corrupt and unpopular regime—was precisely the one that Putin had lived through in Dresden. Putin was so upset by events in Kyiv that he even considered resigning, Belton reports. Instead, he decided to stay on and fight back, using the only methods he knew.

Although the American electorate awoke to the reality of Russian influence operations only in 2016,

they had begun more than a decade earlier, after that first power change in Ukraine. Already in 2005, two of Putin's closest colleagues, the oligarchs Vladimir Yakunin and Konstantin Malofeyev, had begun setting up the organizations that would promote an “alternative” to democracy and integration all across Europe. With the help of intermediaries and friendly companies, and more recently with the assistance of troll farms and online disinformation operations, they promoted a whole network of think tanks and fake “experts.” Sometimes they aided existing political parties—the National Front in France, for example, and the Northern League in Italy—and sometimes they helped create new ones, such as the far-right Alternative for Germany. The most important funder of the British Brexit campaign had odd Russian contacts. So did some cabinet ministers in Poland's supposedly anti-Russian, hard-right government, elected after a campaign marked by online disinformation in 2015.

The pro-Russian “separatists” who would later launch a war in eastern Ukraine got their start around 2005 too, with an even more apocalyptic result. Russian propaganda deliberately sought to divide Ukraine and polarize its citizens, while Russian corruption reached deep into the economy. Within a decade, the Russian operations in Ukraine led to mass violence. Some of the Ukrainians who attended Kremlin youth camps or joined the Eurasian Youth movement during the 2000s—often funded by the “charities” created by Malofeyev, Yakunin, and others—took part in the storming of Donetsk's city-administration buildings in 2014, and then in the horrific Russian-Ukrainian war, which has disrupted European politics and claimed more than 13,000 lives. Russian soldiers, weapons, and advisers fuel the fighting in eastern Ukraine even now.

All of these Russian-backed groups, from refined Dutch far-right politicians in elegant suits to the Donetsk thugs, share a common dislike for the European Union, for NATO, for any united concept of “the West,” and in many cases for democracy itself. In a very deep sense, they are Putin's ideological answer to the trauma he experienced in 1989. Instead of democracy, autocracy; instead of unity, division; instead of open societies, xenophobia. Amazingly, quite a few people, even some American conservatives, are taken in by Russian tactics. It is incredible, but a group of cynical, corrupt ex-KGB officers with access to vast quantities of illegal money—operating in a country with religious discrimination, extremely low church attendance, and a large Muslim minority—have somehow made themselves into the world's biggest promoters of “Christian values,” opposing feminism, gay rights, and laws against domestic violence, and supporting “white” identity politics. This is an old geopolitical struggle disguised as a new culture war.

*Belton documents the activities of the businessmen who have circled around Trump for 30 years, bailing him out, offering him “deals.”*

PUTIN'S PEOPLE:  
HOW THE  
KGB TOOK BACK  
RUSSIA AND  
THEN TOOK ON  
THE WEST

Catherine Belton

FARRAR, STRAUS  
AND GIROUX

Yakunin himself told Belton, frankly, that “this battle is used by Russia to restore its global position.”

Ultimately, all of these tactics had their culmination in the career of Donald Trump. In the last chapter of *Putin's People*, Belton documents the activities of the *biznesmeny* who have circled around Trump for 30 years, bailing him out, buying apartments in his buildings for cash, offering him “deals,” always operating in “the half-light between the Russian security services and the mob, with both sides using the other to their own benefit.” Among them are Shalva Tchigirinsky, a Georgian black marketeer who met Trump in Atlantic City in 1990; Felix Sater, a Russian with mob links whose company served, among other things, as the intermediary for Trump buildings in Manhattan, Fort Lauderdale, and Phoenix; Alex Shnaider, a Russian metals trader who developed the Trump hotel in Toronto; and Dmitry Rybolovlev, an oligarch who purchased Trump's Palm Beach mansion in 2008 for \$95 million, more than double what Trump had paid for it in 2004, just as the financial crisis hit Trump's companies.

While many of these stories have been written before, Belton puts them in the larger context. The hard truth is that Trump was not exceptional. He was just another amoral Western businessman, one of many whom the ex-KGB elite have promoted and sponsored around the world, with the hope that they might eventually be of some political or commercial use. Many of these bets didn't pay off, but in 2016, Putin finally hit the jackpot: His operatives helped elect an American president with long-standing Russian links who would not only sow chaos, but systematically undermine America's alliances, erode American influence, and even, in the spring of 2020, render the American federal government dysfunctional, damaging the reputation of both the U.S. and democracy more broadly.

A huge success for Putin's people has proved a terrible tragedy for the rest of the world—a tragedy that also touches ordinary Russians. In her epilogue, Belton notes that in seeking to restore their country's significance, Putin's KGB cronies have repeated many of the mistakes their Soviet predecessors made at home. They have once again created a calcified, authoritarian political system in Russia, and a corrupt economy that discourages innovation and entrepreneurship. Instead of experiencing the prosperity and political dynamism that still seemed possible in the '90s, Russia is once again impoverished and apathetic. But Putin and his people are thriving—and that was the most important goal all along. *A*

*Anne Applebaum is a staff writer at The Atlantic. Her latest book is Twilight of Democracy: The Seductive Lure of Authoritarianism.*

## *I Feel Good* By Nikky Finney

*On the occasion of the state of South Carolina taking control of the \$100 million James Brown I Feel Good Trust, willed to the education of needy students, and after the death of Prince*

Whores raised him *with intellect*  
and *savoir faire*, teaching:

pack your fragrant pants proper  
like a mattress, stock the edges

for comfort, with newspaper  
headlines & purple velvet cock feathers,

scrupulously tilt the tucked  
microphone like it's your johnson,

hips travel best when horizontal of how  
the crow flies, keep spinning and splendor

in your daily moves, know sound  
is guilt-edged & saturnalian like lightning,

meant to enter but never land, cotton-slide  
your closed eyes all the way back to Watusi land;

caterwaul & amplify,

exalt yourself on your backside,  
spell yourself out with your alligator feet,

the world will prefer you in heels,

when you *open up the door*  
sport hot curls and a sexy cape,

drop to your knees before, during, and after  
the end of every song,

clothes are tight for a reason,  
sweat is money in any season,

men pretending to be wallflowers  
are all ears and antsy in the parlor,

straining at the bit  
for you to finish your dying.

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*Nikky Finney's 2011 collection, Head Off & Split, was the winner of the National Book Award for poetry. This poem appears in her new book, Love Child's Hotbed of Occasional Poetry: Poems and Artifacts, published this spring by Northwestern University Press.*

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## ESSAY

“No Novel About  
Any Black Woman  
Could Ever Be  
the Same After This”

*That's how Toni  
Morrison described  
Gayl Jones's first  
book in 1975.  
Jones has published  
to great acclaim  
and experienced  
unspeakable tragedy.  
Now she is releasing  
her first novel in  
more than 20 years.*

By Calvin Baker

In the winter of 1975, a quiet young woman from Lexington, Kentucky, met her Ph.D. adviser in Brown University's writing program for a series of unsatisfactory tutorials about an ambitious project of hers that had yet to fully reveal itself. The encounters were strange enough that her adviser still recalled them in an interview a quarter century later: “I was doing all the talking, and she would sit rigidly, just bobbing her





head in a regal manner. Yet there was a kind of arrogance to her. Perhaps it was the arrogance of an artist fiercely committed to a vision, but I also sensed a bottled-up black rage.” There’s nothing unusual about a young writer seething at the world, especially in the 1970s, when protests and bad attitudes about race, war, and university curricula were so de rigueur that they may as well have been taught at orientation. Likelier than not, his student sensed her (white) adviser’s judgment and withdrew in response—and didn’t think he had much to offer, anyway. While her natural range was virtuosic, his work consisted primarily of a host of popular paperbacks and magazine stories whose titles, including *Dormitory Women* and “Up the Down Coed,” accurately convey their subjects and sensibilities.

However mutually frustrating the meetings between Gayl Jones and R. V. Cassill may have been, his comment is most striking for having been made to *The New York Times* after her husband, Robert Higgins, slit his own throat when a SWAT team stormed their house in February 1998 to arrest him on a 14-year-old warrant from another state. Two decades earlier, Jones had been hailed as one of the great literary phenoms of the 20th century, only to then drop out of sight; just days before her husband killed himself, she’d reemerged on the American literary scene with a new novel that would become a finalist for a National Book Award.

Leaving aside the callousness of Cassill’s remarks (and the obvious question: What does “black rage” mean?), they violated the typical assumptions of academic privacy. That the reporter and his editors deemed Cassill’s observation useful in understanding Jones’s life does not confirm her anger so much as it affirms all there is to be angry about. No matter her insights and achievements, the frame through which she was viewed and understood by the white world remained the same. She sat silently as he read the early drafts of what would become her first novel. He talked. She left. He was flummoxed. She returned, because she had to.

It could have been a Beckett play, almost funny until you lived it.

Fortunately, Jones also worked closely at Brown with a true mentor, the noted poet Michael Harper, who’d overseen her master’s degree and would become a lifelong friend. She received her doctorate in 1975 and published her first novel, *Corregidora*, the same year. The story is told by a 1940s Kentucky blues singer, Ursa, whose troubles with men are refracted through memories of slavery handed down by her matrilineal line:

My great-grandmama told my grandmama the part she lived through that my grandmama didn’t live through and my grandmama told my mama what they both lived through and my mama told me what they all lived through and we were suppose to pass it down like that from generation to generation so we don’t forget.

Or, as the protagonist, whose mother and grandmother were fathered by the same Portuguese slave owner, says at another point: “I am Ursa Corregidora. I have tears for eyes. I was made to touch my past at an early age. I found it on my mother’s tiddies. In her milk.”

What Faulkner saw in the haunted old mansions of Oxford, Mississippi, Jones saw in the ghosts of the Black dead. She was a pioneer in grappling with the contemporary legacy of slavery, and her debut was praised by the likes of John Updike, in *The New Yorker*, as well as a host of Black writers. “*Corregidora* is the most brutally honest and painful revelation of what has occurred, and is occurring, in the souls of Black men and women,” James Baldwin wrote.

Jones’s early novels were shepherd by Toni Morrison, then an editor at Random House, who’d dedicated herself to publishing Black writers, especially women. To put things in perspective, at the time *Corregidora* came out, Morrison had only recently published her first works of fiction, *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*. She had yet to hit her stride as a writer, while Jones burst forth in her early 20s all but fully formed

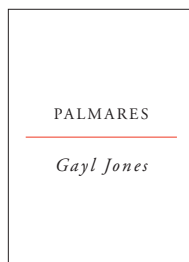
and requiring little editing. Jones needed a champion, however, someone who could understand and appreciate the sophistication of her approach to subject matter as well as language. “No novel about any black woman could ever be the same after this,” Morrison declared after reading the manuscript of *Corregidora*.

Richard Ford, who got to know Jones when they were both fellows at the University of Michigan, in Ann Arbor, called her a “prodigy”: “History may have caught up with her, but she was a movement unto herself. Toni knew this very, very, very well when she published her.”

Jones had a marked effect not only on Morrison’s subsequent novels but on an entire generation of writers, whether they realized it or not. The tentacles of slavery in the present day have grown into a principal concern of Black literature, and Jones’s early work was absorbed into this canon almost imperceptibly. Over time, her literary ambitions would evolve, as she published and then receded from the public eye, published and then receded. This spring, she self-published her first novel in 21 years—*Palmares*, a six-volume work about the last fugitive-slave settlement in Brazil. In mid-June, Beacon Press bought the rights to the book, with plans to release it in the fall. In the sprawling narrative, set in the 17th century, Jones’s feats of linguistic and historical invention are on ample display. Describing the impact of her singular vision and intensity, John Edgar Wideman remarked 22 years ago: “I think she scared people.”

GAYL JONES was born into a modest family in 1949. Her father, Franklin, worked as a line cook in a restaurant, an occupation she would later give to the father of the narrator of her second novel, *Eva’s Man*. Her mother, Lucille, was a homemaker and a writer; Jones would incorporate lengthy passages from her work into her experimental fourth novel, *Mosquito*.

Jones spent childhood weekends visiting her maternal grandmother on a small farm outside Lexington, where she absorbed the stories of the adults around her. It is an unremarkable detail, save for the importance and seriousness Jones later ascribed to this time, as an educated woman channeling those locked out of institutions of



so-called higher learning, as a daughter in communion with her mothers, as a formidable theorist validating the integrity and equality of oral modes of storytelling. “The best of my writing comes from having *heard* rather than having read,” Jones told Michael Harper in an intimate interview conducted the year *Corregidora* was published. She hastened to add that she wasn’t dismissing the glories of reading, only pointing out that “in the beginning, *all* of the richness came from people rather than books because in those days you were reading some really unfortunate kinds of books in school.”

In the mid-1960s, when Gayl and her younger brother were teenagers, Lucille managed to enroll them in the segregated but academically well-regarded Henry Clay High School. (The public-school system in Lexington did not formally integrate until the mid-1970s, 20 years after *Brown v. Board of Education*.) Jones proved an extraordinary student, and through the efforts of her Spanish teacher she was introduced to the poet Elizabeth Hardwick, who, together with her sometimes husband, Robert Lowell, helped arrange a scholarship for Jones at Connecticut College. She proved an equally exceptional student in New England, devoting herself to literature.

JONES PUBLISHED *Eva’s Man* in 1976, a year after *Corregidora*. Like Ursa, Eva is a 40ish woman recounting her life story, in this case from prison. Eva landed there after murdering and castrating in graphic fashion a lover she’d spent a few days with—ostensibly because she’d learned he was married. In conversations with a fellow inmate and a prison psychiatrist, Eva “stitch[es] her memories and fantasies into a pattern of sexual and emotional abuse,” as the critic Margo Jefferson wrote. When the psychiatrist asks Eva if she can pinpoint what triggered her to kill the man, she replies only, “It was his whole way.”

Jones called *Corregidora* a “blues novel,” because it communicated the “simultaneity of good and bad, as feeling, as something felt,” she told Harper. Meanwhile, she considered her second novel a “horror story,” explaining in another interview—with Charles H. Rowell, the editor of *Callaloo*, an African American literary

magazine—that what Eva “does to the man in the book is a ‘horror’ ... Eva carries out what Ursa might have done but didn’t.”

Published back-to-back, the books form a diptych exploring the undercurrents of the psyche in a world of slave-owners, whoremongers, prostitutes, killers, man-eaters, jealous husbands, wayward wives, psych-ward inmates, pedophiles, wife-beaters, women in love with their abusers, and girls who carry knives. Nobody goes to church much.

Instead of sermons, sense and sustenance flow from a web of intimacy and memory, at least for Jones’s female characters. The men are mostly phalluses tumescent with bad news. Their collective role is

*Telling stories out loud  
was a matter of survival—  
and the way Jones  
wields this tradition  
transforms even a  
nursery rhyme into  
something dirty, dangerous,  
and important.*

as a source of fear and pain, but also desire. Love is not absent, but the word can’t capture what transpires between her women and men. Jones has often been read as a political warrior speaking for unvoiced Black women, but she’s too great a writer with too broad a mind—and too mesmerized by psychological complexity—to pass any ideological purity tests. As she told Rowell, her preoccupations were “contradictory character and ambivalent character, and I like to explore them even without judgments entering the work.”

Jones’s politics are inscribed in her choice to write about the lowborn and low-down,

giving them as much intelligence as she possesses; to work in flawless Black English; and to position herself inside rather than outside her characters. The vantage stands in contrast to the approach of Zora Neale Hurston, for example, whom Jones admired for her up-close treatment of relationships between Black men and women, but who at points wrote *on behalf of* Janie, in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, not *as* her. As Jones well understood, Hurston, like all writers, was a product of her time, and of the circumstances of her oppression. She and her fellow members of the Harlem Renaissance were self-consciously striving to create a literature of Black people’s expanding worlds beyond slavery, but the mission could devolve into representing Blacks for a white audience, giving their fictions an unintended stiltedness. The problem might be summarized as one of code-switching between the Black world and the white gaze. The Black writer who knows the codes of both must always explain the lives, decisions, and humanity of her Black characters to whites who might not otherwise credit them. In Jones’s storytelling, however, there was no “‘author’ getting in the way,” Morrison noticed.

The other Black inventors of the modern novel about slavery were Leon Forrest (*Two Wings to Veil My Face*), who wrote with lyrical, epicurean elegance, and Charles Johnson (*Oxherding Tale*), whose stories of slave escapes are entwined with the Buddhist quest to get off the wheel of suffering, as well as with the ontological questions of Western philosophy. They bring the high-minded into the lives of the low. By working the other way around, Jones challenges literature itself to embrace other registers of the language, including the obscene, as in this relatively mild example from *Corregidora*:

A Portuguese seaman turned plantation owner, he took her out of the field when she was still a child and put her to work in his warehouse while she was a child ... I stole [the picture of him] because I said whenever afterward when evil come I wanted something to point to and say, “That’s what evil look like.” You know what I mean? Yeah, he did more fucking than the other mens did.





Jones elaborated on the politics of the English language with Harper:

I usually trust writers who I feel I can hear. A lot of European and Euro-American writers—because of the way their traditions work—have lost the ability to hear. Now Joyce could hear and Chaucer could

hear. A lot of Southern American writers can hear ... Joyce had to hear because of the whole historical-linguistic situation in Ireland ... *Finnegan's Wake* is an oral book. You can't sight-read *Finnegan's Wake* with any kind of truth. And they say only a Dubliner can really understand the book, can really "hear" it. Of course,

black writers—it goes without saying why we've always had to hear.

Telling stories out loud was a matter of survival and wholeness for a community forbidden to read, as well as an act of rebellion, and the way Jones wields this tradition transforms even a kind of nursery rhyme

shared between daughter and mother into something dirty, dangerous, and important.

I am the daughter of the daughter of the daughter of Ursa of currents, steel wool and electric wire for hair.

While mama be sleeping, the ole man he crawl into bed ...

Don't come here to my house, don't come here to my house I said ...

Fore you get any this booty, you gon have to lay down dead.

When Harper asked for her thoughts on the architects of 20th-century Black literature, namely “Gaines, Toomer, Ellison, Hurston, Walker, Forrest, Wright, Hughes, Brown, Hayden et. al,” Jones pointed out the wide variation in a group that to the mainstream might appear homogeneous:

You know, I say the names over in my mind, and I think about those people who will speak of black writing as a “limited category,” the implication being that it's something you have to transcend. And it surprised me because I thought critics had outgrown that sort of posture.

She certainly had. Whereas Baldwin famously lashed out at the protest-novel straitjacket put on mid-20th-century Black writers—“The ‘protest’ novel, so far from being disturbing, is an accepted and comforting aspect of the American scene”—Jones came of age breathing the air of the Black Arts Movement. Founded by LeRoi Jones (no relation), who combined immense talent, critical acumen, and, after being brutalized by the police, a rusty shank of disdain for the lassitude of white America, the movement advanced the idea that white people's approval was beside the point. Why bother being the Black exception in a country where attempts to control the mind and body of Black people knew no bounds? In his fiery 1965 manifesto, “The Revolutionary Theatre,” LeRoi Jones described the mission for Black artists this way: “White men will cower before this theatre because it hates them ... The Revolutionary Theatre must hate them for hating.” Gayl Jones's “fuck off” was less explicit but no less radical: She wrote fiction as if white people weren't watching.

Eva embodies that position. In a conversation about Jones's second book published last year in *The Believer*, the young Zambian-born novelist Namwali Serpell explained the “brilliance” of Jones's choice to let Eva be “bad,” to seemingly lack or reject the reflex to see herself through white people's eyes. Eva's “un-self-consciousness,” her unwillingness to “be known, or know how others know her,” Serpell said, “is a kind of freedom.”

**MORE THAN** a few readers of Jones have assumed that her volatile husband inspired *Eva's Man*, but she didn't meet him until several years after she wrote that book, in Ann Arbor. In other words, she wasn't the naive Black girl writing autobiographical workshop fiction, an expectation Jones was accustomed to. “Always with black writers,” she told Rowell, “there's the suspicion that they can't ... invent a linguistic world in the same way that other writers can.” A white professor, in fact, once told Jones that he was surprised that she didn't talk more like Ursa.

Ford, who recalls Jones as “within herself, but friendly and very smart,” says it's a mistake to conflate authors with their characters. “Gayl's books were dramatic, sexual, sexually violent, eloquent, and harsh in their assessments of the life she was vividly portraying,” he told me. “But fiction is not simply an emotional ‘readout’ of a writer's feelings. It's a congeries of made-up, ill-fitting, heretofore unaffiliated shards of experience, memory, feeling, event.”

Not much is known about Robert Higgins, apart from the dramatic run-ins he had with the law, including a pivotal one in 1983, when the pair attended a local gay-rights rally. There, he was alleged to have proclaimed himself God and declared HIV a form of divine retribution, prompting a woman to punch him. Whatever actually happened, Higgins, being an American, went home and returned brandishing a gun. He was arrested by the Ann Arbor police; his assailant was not. Rather than appear in court to defend himself, he and Jones left town, with a letter of protest to the university (and to President Ronald Reagan) that said, in part: “I reject your lying, racist shit. Do whatever you want. God is with Bob, and I'm with him.”

The couple then decamped from the United States altogether and spent the next five years in Europe, mostly in Paris, joining the tail end of a Black expatriate scene made up of people who did not wish to return to America after World War II.

Around this time, Jones published three books of poetry. The best-known of these, *Song for Anninbo*, shares the essential story of *Palmares*, the epic novel she began composing more than four decades ago. It's a love story about a man and a woman who live there (and, incidentally, was dedicated to Higgins). In this faraway past in a world populated by Africans, American Indians, Europeans, and all their possible admixtures, Jones pursued her desire to link Black Americans' struggle to that of colonized people across the globe—the goal of what's known as the universal freedom movement. “I'd like to be able to ... write imaginatively of blacks anywhere/ everywhere,” she told Rowell. She was a passionate student of Latin American literature, and her poetry has the lushness—and at times the over-the-top romanticism—of pan-Americanists such as Eduardo Galeano and Pablo Neruda: “I struggle through memory ... the blood of the whole continent / running in my veins.”

In the late 1980s, Jones and Higgins returned to America, moving to Lexington to live with Jones's mother, who was ill. Meanwhile, the rights to *Corregidora* and *Eva's Man* had been acquired by the old Boston publisher Beacon. In 1997, however, Jones asked her editor there, Helene Atwan, to remove them from print. “She said they portrayed Black men very negatively, and she didn't want those to be her only books out there,” Atwan told me, admitting to being intimidated by her author's brilliance. “I said, ‘No! They're important books. Send us new books, and we'll publish those.’”

Jones promptly forwarded the manuscript for *The Healing*, the story of an itinerant faith healer, a woman named Harlan who is one step ahead of hard times and of her own past. In a 1991 book of critical essays, called *Liberating Voices*, Jones had described the trajectory of Black literature as moving from “the restrictive forms (inheritors of self-doubt, self-repudiation, and the minstrel tradition) to the liberation

of voice and freer personalities in more intricate texts,” and *The Healing* puts the author herself on that path. The narrative voice is that of a world-weary, often wry country preacher with a self-proclaimed ability to cure the sick and soul-wounded. As Harlan encounters believers and non-believers during her travels, Jones plants notions about how narratives are deployed in everyday life to both reveal and hide. The story’s small “tank towns” and ordinary

*The past, present,  
and future play  
on a Finnegan’s  
Wake—style loop  
of language and  
consciousness.  
It’s an Olympian  
move, but if you’re  
Simone Biles,  
who’s to tell you  
not to play hopscotch  
with the gods?*

people are familiar from her other books, but where the earlier work seems to resign itself to the world, *The Healing* holds forth the possibility of redemption.

The speed with which Jones presented the manuscript to Beacon suggests that it was a novel she had written earlier, and only then decided to publish. When it was named as a finalist for a 1998 National Book Award, Jones asked Michael Harper to attend in her place, eschewing industry hobnobbing for a private life in Kentucky.

This privacy was soon upended, after the Lexington police saw a celebratory article

about her in *Newsweek* and, armed with the old warrant from Michigan, went to arrest Higgins, then living under the alias Bob Jones. When they arrived at the couple’s door, he threatened suicide rather than surrender. The police then called for a SWAT team. Higgins signaled his seriousness by taking up a kitchen knife. They stormed inside anyway, tackling Jones as Higgins did what he said he’d do. A district attorney defended the police’s “perfectly” executed handling of the warrant, noting that Higgins had written threatening letters about the shoddy hospital care his mother-in-law received, and that by the time the authorities arrived they were “sitting on a bomb.”

After her husband’s death, Jones was committed to a hospital amid fears that she might harm herself. When her fourth novel, *Mosquito*, appeared the following year, everyone flocked to it for clues about the tragedy. Instead, they were greeted with a wildly ambitious novel that took its inspiration from the free-form riffs of jazz, in line with Black writers like Ralph Ellison and Albert Murray. Jazz is many things, and *Mosquito* came from its more daring vein. It was not well received. In a pan of the book published in *The New York Times*, Henry Louis Gates Jr. complained that it

often reads more like Jones’s “Theory of the Novel,” her encyclopedic version of Jamesian prefaces, than like any of Jones’s previous works. It’s a late-night riff by the Signifying Monkey, drunk with words and out of control, regurgitating half-digested ideas taken from *USA Today*, digressing on every possible subject, from the color of the Egyptians to the xenophobia of the Great Books movement, from the art of “signifying” and the role of Africans in the slave trade to the subtleties of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*.

Clearly Gates likes to play the dozens.

The book demands to be taken more seriously. On the simple level of story, it’s about a truck driver named Mosquito—the only female on a route that traces the Mexican border—who becomes a coyote for a group called the Sanctuary, ferrying refugees on the “new Underground Railroad.”

All of Jones’s women are on the run, but from book to book they become more likely to have a place to go. *Mosquito* is one of Jones’s trademark mash-ups—fusing her interests in history, character, and contemporary events. Time is collapsed, such that the past, present, and future play on a *Finnegan’s Wake*—style loop of language and consciousness. It’s an Olympian move, but if you’re Simone Biles, who’s to tell you not to play hopscotch with the gods? Like other late-postmodern works, the book overflows the usual frames of realism; it includes the author’s original theories about the relationship between story and life, between the speaker/writer and the listener/reader. It often sounds like overhearing a lunch date between Derrida and Calvino, at a table where both theorist and master are Jones. *Mosquito* didn’t find a general readership, but it helped feed a lot of dissertations.

Its reception aside, the novel marked a formal shift for Jones. The wealth of knowledge inside the author’s mind by then—the ideas, and the layers of experience she was trying to put across—strain the naive first-person narrator. Jones may have been listening to jazz, but she was also exploring the boundaries of what is possible in the modernist forms of the novel.

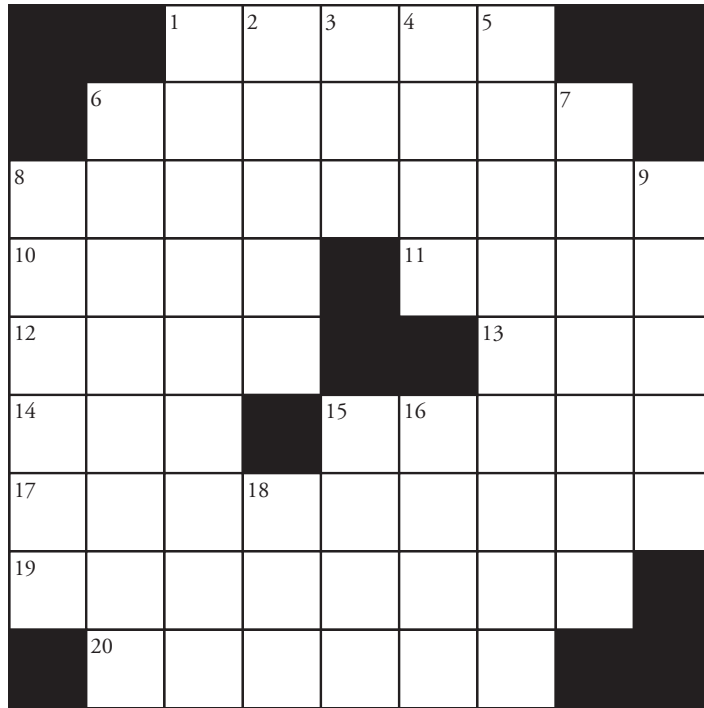
At 50, an age when many writers are just arriving at the height of their power, Jones might have been expected to tally the lessons from her experiment and keep moving. Indeed, Atwan said that *Mosquito* wasn’t yet published when Jones sent her the manuscript for *Palmares*. But for reasons unavailable to us, Jones—who communicated only sporadically with her Beacon editor—decided against following through with the book. And soon, Atwan said, Jones told her that she’d stopped writing entirely.

A MAIN DEFINITION of a canonical artist is one whom other artists keep alive across generations. And word of mouth is what led me to Jones’s work a few years after college, when I decided to truly educate myself. As an aspiring novelist, I wanted to see where my own writing fit in, sure, but I’d also matured enough to realize that what I liked and didn’t like was irrelevant to the task of understanding the vastness of literature. During this years-long



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Our mini puzzle gets bigger and more challenging each weekday. Can you solve this Friday one? On Sundays, play our largest crossword, which is created by a rotating cast of puzzle makers.



A Friday crossword from Caleb Madison

## Across

1. Detective work
6. Middle-management tools?
8. Toy that's making a comeback?
10. Fashion brand with a rhino logo
11. "Then again ..." in a text
12. Head locks?
13. Temporal chunk
14. Lucky blackjack deal
15. *A Fish Called Wanda* star Michael

17. Autonomous Serbian province in the Pannonian Plain
19. Going by
20. Fictional French "gentleman thief" \_\_\_\_ Lupin

## Down

1. Site of many juvenile theft attempts
2. Hard suit
3. Atlanta-to-Miami dir.
4. Saarinen who designed the Gateway Arch

5. Crossing on a road trip, perhaps
6. Beverage named for a leaf and a nut
7. Preventing the rest of the sleepover from getting shut-eye, say
8. Not act up
9. It means "warrior king" in the Soninke language
15. FX show for which Billy Porter won an Emmy
16. Score after deuce, perhaps
18. Biden and Bush: Abbr.

period, I read through the books that get anthologized as the American canon, the English, the World Lit, and sampled various national traditions. I read the Nobel Prize winners I hadn't before. Harold Bloom was the GOAT among readers, so I measured myself in those days against the indexes of *The Western Canon*. You can read all of these things and still not know much about Black literature. My education there was in bookshops and libraries, but especially in talking with other writers, visual artists, musicians, filmmakers, dancers. It was the best education I ever had.

One Friday after work at my day job as a magazine writer, I made my way from Sixth Avenue to a bar in Hell's Kitchen where industry people gathered. I joined some friends from *Newsweek* at the Black table, where they were sitting in stunned silence and self-reproach. Higgins had just killed himself, after the magazine outed his location. I don't remember the specifics, but we talked bitterly about the editorial decisions that led the police to his door. About the things that white Americans understood and did not understand about being Black in this country. Things they might not wish to know.

The reason I've told you all this is so you'll understand what I mean when I say that Gayl Jones's new work is as relevant as ever. With monumental sweep, it blends psychological acuity and linguistic invention in a way that only a handful of writers in the transatlantic tradition have matched. She has boldly set out to convey racial struggle in its deep-seated and disorienting complexity—Jones sees the whole where most only see pieces.

More than a third of all Africans removed from their homeland from the early 1500s to the mid-1800s—more than 4 million people—were transported to Brazil and enslaved alongside the indigenous people, at least those who hadn't been exterminated. Today Nigeria is the only country with a larger Black population than Brazil, and in the body of

African American culture stretching from Harlem to Rio, the state of Bahia might be fairly viewed as its spiritual heart. Perhaps the heart of the entire Black world. *Palmares* centers on the reenslavement of the last settlement of free Blacks in Brazil—and is told from the point of view of Almeida, a young girl who has learned

*I joined some  
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his location.*

to read with the help of a local Catholic priest named Father Tollinare, though he tries to limit the books available to her. The novel has a García Márquezian pace, and, because it imitates the rhythms of Portuguese and imports words without the usual linguistic signposts, it almost feels as though it has been translated into English. But where García Márquez writes of generals and doctors, Jones tells of

slaves and whores. The rhetoric of race in Latin America is different from our own, of course, but its history, and the ways blood and money operate, are familiar.

Plot is beside the point in *Palmares*—the book unfolds on a plane of consciousness where the things achieved are shifting relationships and states of being. Ultimately, the book is about taking full possession of the entire Black experience, including tenderness—and Jones's quest to free the individual Black voice. Father Tollinare, born back in the Old World and wedded to its old sounds, doesn't realize his young student's hunger to expand and integrate:

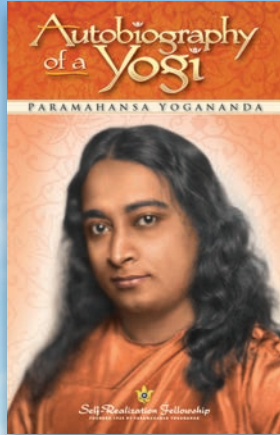
During the studies, he'd pass one worn Bible around and we'd read the stories, and he'd shake his head when we dropped letters off the ends of words, and he'd say, "In Portugal they say it this way." "But here we say it this way," I protested once. He looked at me sternly ... I was silent because I wanted to know how to read and write the words, even if I continued to pronounce them a different way.

At her best, Jones wields the words of a larger literary tradition with a subversive power that is rare in its all-encompassing purity. Dropping letters, she adds new worlds to that tradition, one that has been—in this country, and in the American language—as versed in duplicity as in revelation. One wishes that the blooming of Jones's genius were as simple as the saying "You can't keep a good woman down." The truth is, you can, and it's been done for centuries. The old women in Kentucky presumably told her that long ago, and how best to endure. *A*

*Calvin Baker is a novelist and the author of A More Perfect Reunion: Race, Integration, and the Future of America.*

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*There are  
balloons,  
and then there  
are balloons.*

There's the domestic balloon, over which we shall quickly pass—the sad little sphere that you blow up at home, with your own laborious, why-am-I-doing-this carbon dioxide. A lot of pathos, for whatever reason, attaches to this balloon.

Then there is the irrepressible balloon, the balloon pumped taut with cartoon levity. A balloon of this sort is essentially an arrested impulse. A trapped prayer, if you like. Each balloon represents a thwarted attempt by that noble and high-spirited gas, helium, to fly joyfully up to heaven.

But the balloon doesn't care. Brainless and glorious, it bobs about. Its urge to transcend is perfectly contained. Life is heavy, heavy, heavy. Since we crawled up onto dry land, gravity has been patiently dismantling us—we sag, we stoop, our lower backs hurt. Experience accumulates, and it has its own weight. Bring on the balloons.

I love the balloons that float like deities above the aisles in CVS, the balloons made of Mylar and ancient symbolism. These balloons are magic. These balloons, out in the world, will activate gratuitous nonmalignant forces. They'll get you smiles, fist bumps, kisses, drinks. I once walked several blocks with a large balloon in the likeness of SpongeBob SquarePants surging and tugging over my head. People cried out, reflexively—they were glad to see him. (That balloon later escaped, and I watched SpongeBob recede, grinning, into the blue-eyed void of the sky.)

I've been hauling balloons into my apartment recently, great gaggles of them, in the interest of general mood elevation. There have been occasions, too, moments to mark: birthdays, graduations, whatever. They're over. But the balloons remain—glimmering, immaterial. A flamingo; a sunflower; a gigantic golden replica of the thumbs-up emoji. The balloon I bought myself on Father's Day: BEST DAD EVER. My wife says they satisfy my "need for cheese"—which is to say, my vulgar consumerist attraction to garishness and buoyancy.

But to me the balloons are like Yeats's wild swans at Coole: "mysterious, beautiful." Or like Jeeves at his most silvery and wafting. They travel unaccountably from room to room, trailing their strings. They nudge me at my desk. They drift together, and nod, and seem to confer—a symposium of balloons. They touch one another so gently. *A*

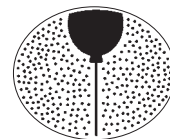
*James Parker is a staff writer at The Atlantic.*

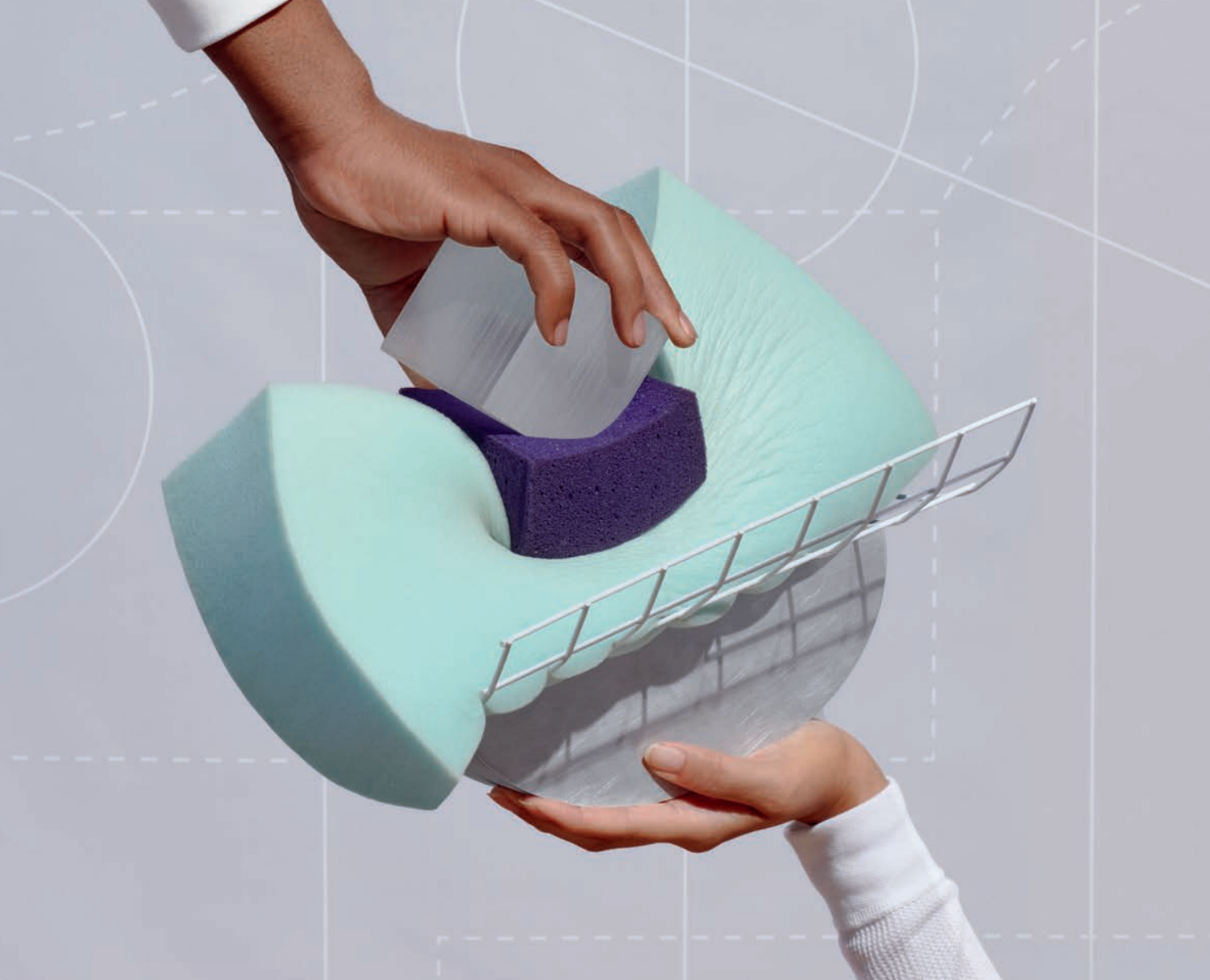
# ODE

— to —

## BALLOONS

*By James Parker*





Too many people are getting injured playing hockey,  
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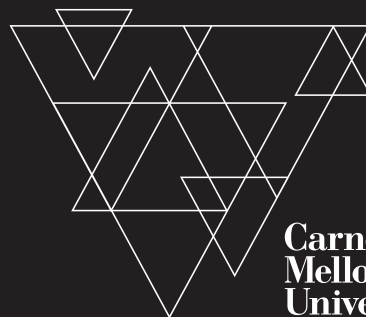
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