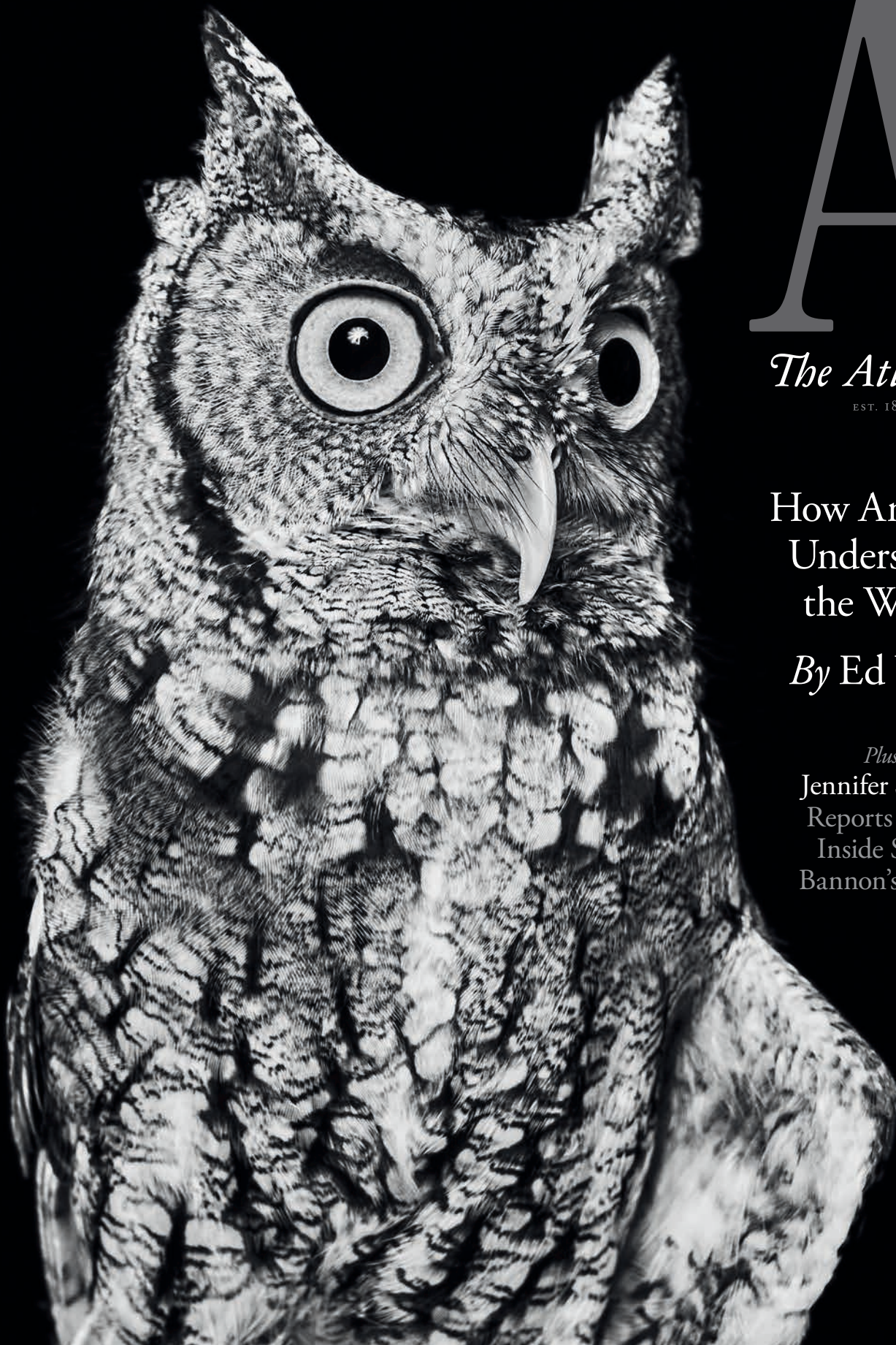


JULY/AUGUST 2022
THEATLANTIC.COM



A

The Atlantic

EST. 1857

How Animals
Understand
the World

By Ed Yong

Plus:

Jennifer Senior
Reports From
Inside Steve
Bannon's Head

From catering executive to agricultural entrepreneur.

Meredith learned how on YouTube.

Meredith left her life in catering and bought 20 acres of California farmland. She didn't know how to farm, but she learned how on YouTube. Her business, Autonomy Farms, has doubled its revenue in the last three years and has built a reputation as a menu staple throughout the West Coast.



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OF NO PARTY OR CLIQUE

VOL. 330-NO. 1

JULY/AUGUST 2022

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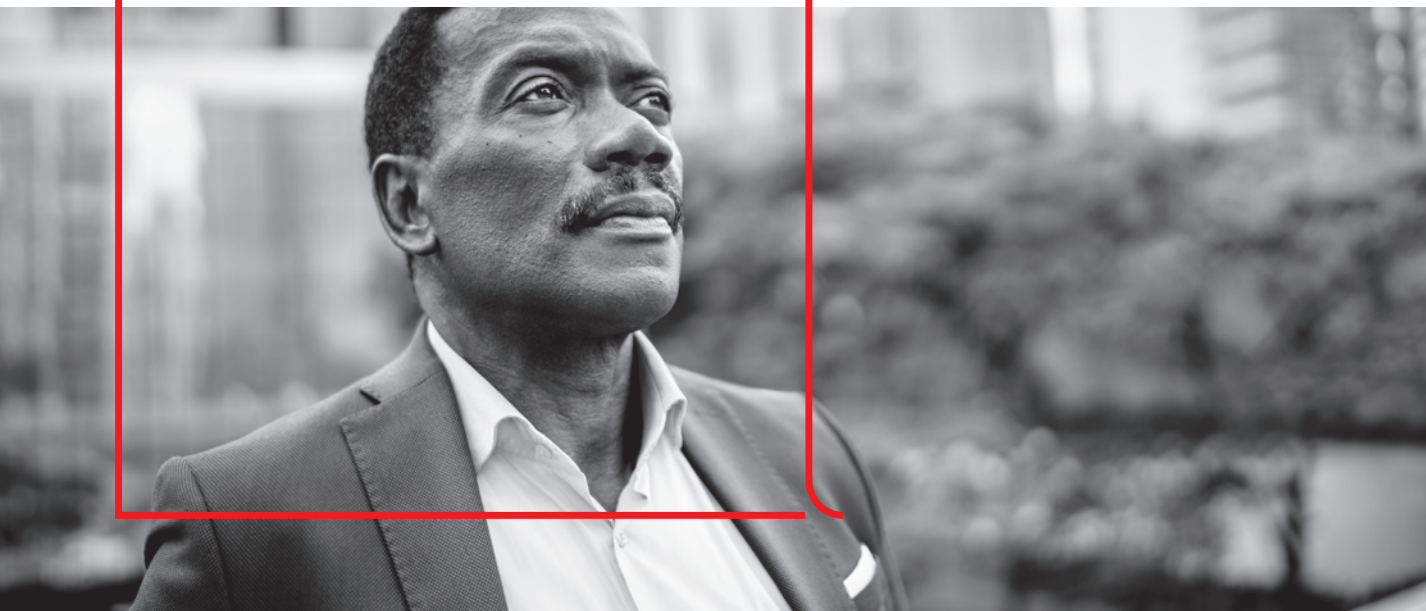
By James Parker

On the Cover

PHOTOGRAPH BY SHAYAN ASGHARNIA FOR THE ATLANTIC

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AGAINST LABELS

Dear Reader,

Sometimes I write to you about the parlous state of our democracy, other times about the travails of the pandemic. This month, I write to you about a matter of absolutely no importance to the future of the republic. My subject is peel-off magazine mailing labels.

Please stay with me here. First, take a look at the cover of your magazine. You will find, in the lower right corner, a mailing label. (Obviously, this message is directed to our subscribers. If you are not already a subscriber, I know of a solution to this problem.) Until recently, your mailing address was printed directly onto the cover of the magazine, inside a big white box. Many of us found this aesthetically irritating, because the big white box was laid over a portion of our cover, obscuring both its beauty and its message. We put a lot of time and energy into making our covers, and I believe that they are exquisite. They should certainly not be subjected to defacement by the needs of the United States Postal Service.

So I griped. Griping isn't seemly, but it is one of the more effective tools available to editors. Late last year, my grumbling bore fruit, and we switched to a glued-on, easily peeled-off mailing label. This was an important victory for the cause of beauty, but a victory only partially realized, because not all of you have yet discovered that these labels are indeed removable. I know this because even some of my own friends weren't removing these labels. (On several occasions I've done it for them, but our readers are too geographically dispersed for me to take on this task alone.)

Why do I care so much? Because *The Atlantic* has reached new heights of artistic sophistication over the past several years, and I want to share this sophistication with the world. Yes, I know, the baker shouldn't praise his own bread, but this isn't really my bread at all. Our appearance—in print, on your laptop, on your phone—is the work of an extraordinary team of designers, artists, and photography editors, a group I credit with making this 165-year-old magazine look as fresh, to borrow from Emerson, as a trickling rainbow in July.

Over the generations, *The Atlantic's* enthusiasm for aesthetics has waxed and waned. This was, and is, a magazine of words, and some past editors have felt that the words were enough. This approach was sometimes prompted by a specific sort of Yankee self-abnegation, sometimes by a feeling of superiority directed at now-long-gone New York-based illustrated magazines. To be fair, many periods in *The Atlantic's* history were marked by careful and elegant design, and, several years ago, when I asked the design team of Peter Mendelsund and Oliver Munday to reimagine *The Atlantic's* aesthetic, they looked directly to the past. Peter puts it this way: "We returned to first principles, meaning that we turned to the magazine's design source code—Issue No. 1, from November 1857. What we found was a visual system reflecting our editorial ethos, an ethos built in part on rigor, clarity, candor, and principles of the enlightenment. What this meant for our brand was a return to more classical typography and grids, and a ruthless scrubbing of unnecessary visual elements that had accreted over the past 162 years."

Our print covers—which, even in the internet age, remain the face of *The Atlantic*—were a special focus for Peter, Oliver, and crew. I asked them to make our covers uncluttered and elegant, and to design them in such a way as to make the words inside impossible to ignore.

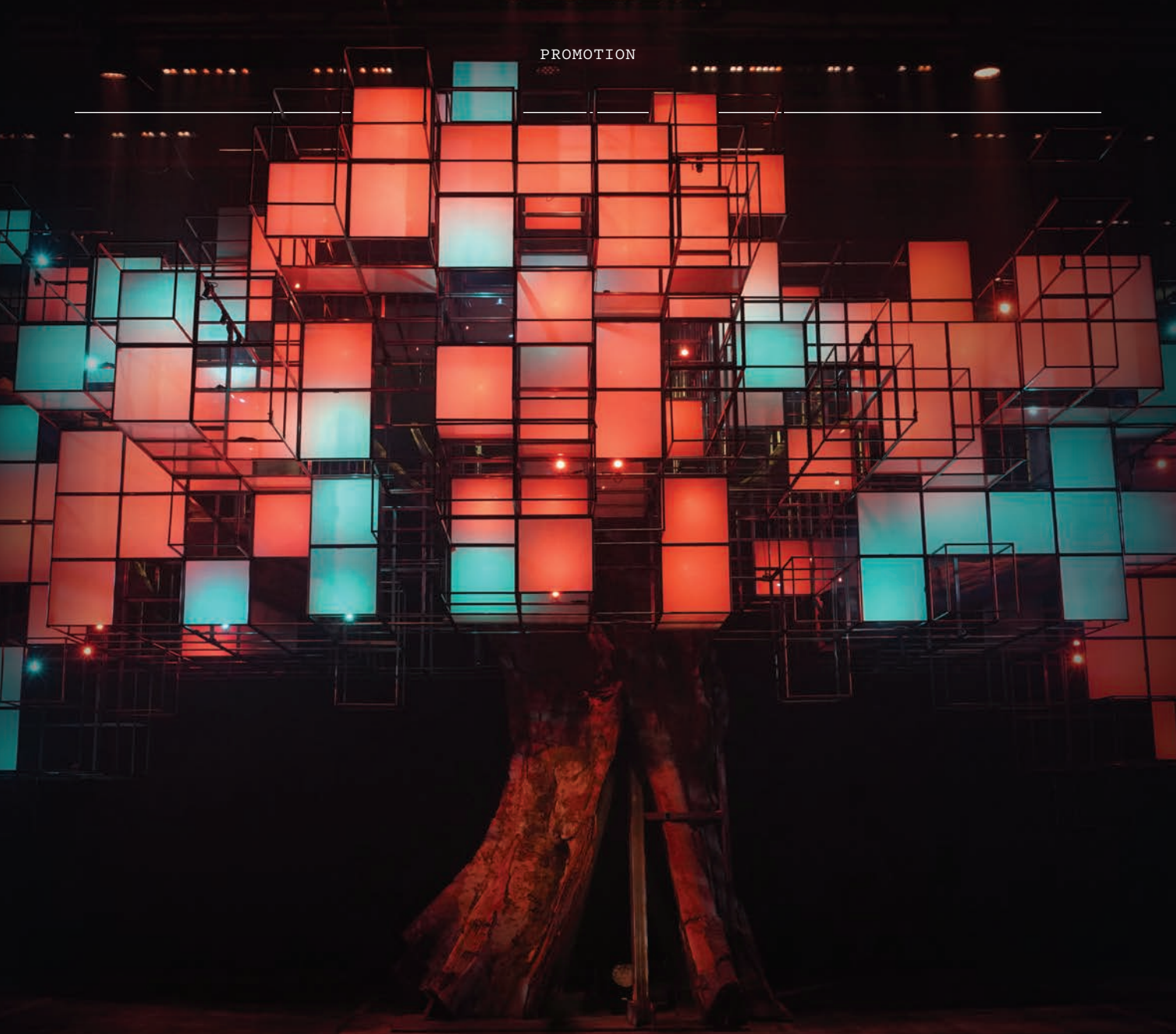
This month's cover, featuring gorgeous photography directed by Luise Stauss and Christine Walsh, is one of my favorites, only partially because of our perspicacious and knowing owl. It is also a favorite because it features stories by two of our most gifted writers, Ed Yong and Jennifer Senior. It is a coincidence of timing that Ed, who won a Pulitzer Prize last year for his work explaining the coronavirus pandemic, and Jen, who won a Pulitzer Prize this May for her cover story about a family traumatized by the 9/11 attacks, are appearing together on the cover. This coincidence allows me to brag about their achievements, and to note that it is the work of writers and creative thinkers like Ed and Jen, Peter and Oliver, Luise and Christine, that helped *The Atlantic* win the 2022 National Magazine Award for General Excellence, the top award of the American Society of Magazine Editors.

Self-abnegation, as I suggested before, is embedded in *The Atlantic's* DNA, and so I apologize for the crowing, but these awards, combined with the complicated, sophisticated stories our team produces daily, and combined as well with our unusually successful design aesthetic, make it a thrilling time to be at *The Atlantic*.

Nothing is as thrilling, of course, as peeling off a mailing label. So what are you waiting for?

—Jeffrey Goldberg

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Behind the Cover: This issue's cover story, by Ed Yong (p. 62), includes photographs of 10 different animals that are variously affected by noise or light pollution. The photographer Shayan Asgharnia is known for his celebrity portraiture—his previous subjects include Kristen Stewart and Lin-Manuel Miranda, among others. He approaches

animals the same way he would a human being. His cover portrait of Mowgli, an eight-inch-tall eastern screech owl (animal No. 11), draws our attention to the owl's eyes, prompting us to consider what it's like to experience the world from another creature's perspective.

— Christine Walsh, *Senior Photo Editor*

THE

After Babel

In May, Jonathan Haidt wrote about how social media dissolved the mortar of society.

Eliot Brenowitz
Seattle, Wash.

media to amplify their bigotries and conspiracies without facing consequences; Father Coughlin and Joseph McCarthy effectively used radio and early television, respectively, to spread hatred and divide Americans. Our societal conflicts arise more from the messengers than from the medium.

Professor Haidt presents an accurate, and somewhat horrifying, take on the impact of social media on the “mortar of society.” Allow me to offer a counterpoint.

Social media exhibits our worst behaviors, with polarization fueled by politicians and propagandists. But in many areas, we have learned to do better. The answer is not, as Haidt suggests, to regulate social media. Rather, I suggest that what's called for is a change in mindset, a return to an attitude of finding ways to collaborate, rather than things to take offense at. Clarity of thinking, critical analysis, seeking intent rather than taking offense at imprecise language—these are a lot harder to accomplish than imposing regulations, but ultimately more productive.

Miles Richard Fidelman
Acton, Mass.

Jonathan Haidt has it right in his concern for the development of today's generation of children. They need the space to get outside and negotiate interactions with peers, in the process developing the collaborative social skills and sense

Letters

F

For the past several years I've racked my brain trying to pinpoint exactly what has brought our country to the brink of civil war, knowing the causes were many, multilayered, and complicated. Jonathan Haidt's

thoughtful step-by-step summation of the “who, what, when, where, why” has given my taxed brain some level of peace and understanding.

Patti Kapp
St. Joseph, Mich.

Mr. Haidt's conclusion is too alarmist. The republic has survived much greater stresses than social media, such as the Civil War, the Great Depression, and the Vietnam War, and it will continue on its bumpy way into the 22nd century.

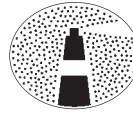
Great cacophony is the nature of democracy. Dictators take it for vulnerability when it is in fact the key to perpetuity.

J. R. Campbell
Odessa, Texas

The antipathy toward experts and institutions that Haidt describes is not simply “the turbulence and weakness of unruly passions,” as James Madison called it. Rather, it is the inevitable retaliation against a system that disenfranchises its constituents and perpetuates inequality.

Alex Milgroom
Brooklyn, N.Y.

Jonathan Haidt believes that over the past decade, social media has broken America into irreconcilable factions. Yet what is Twitter but the digital descendant of radio call-in shows, minus the host? Isn't Facebook the modern version of gossip around the water-cooler? Vile people use social



of agency and autonomy they will need in social interactions as adults. But social skills by themselves are not enough. Kids also need to develop and practice the intellectual skills entailed in reasoned discourse about important ideas. This doesn't happen by itself. This is where educators come in, creating the contexts and reinforcing the values needed to pave the way for engaged citizenship in a democracy.

Deanna Kuhn
Research Professor of
Psychology and Education
Teachers College,
Columbia University
Bronxville, N.Y.

Jonathan Haidt asks the right questions about the current era of stupidity in America: How did this happen? What does this portend? But where Haidt—and many authors, academics, and activists—comes up short is in offering ideas for how to prepare the next generation.

As a mother of two who could hardly send her kids to the local 7-Eleven for a Slurpee without inviting well-meaning criticism, I appreciate Haidt's calls for unsupervised play. But the challenges ahead of the next generation—challenges largely created by the current cohort of middle-aged and Boomer adults—require much more proactive problem-solving.

Nan Noble
Seattle, Wash.

Jonathan Haidt's urgent analysis of the havoc unleashed by social media has prompted some serious soul-searching on my part about my attitude toward the First Amendment.

Like many staunch liberals, I have always been a free-speech absolutist. That is, I would rather defend the right of repugnant ideas to be heard than to accept the slightest censorship.

But armies of bots and trolls now flood the internet with disinformation. Campaigns designed by foreign intelligence services stir up hatred and violence. This stuff no longer deserves the protection of the

First Amendment. This is not free expression; these are weapons of destruction.

Mick Stern
New York, N.Y.

Jonathan Haidt's article completely mischaracterized the left and failed to describe the real-world effects of the right's side of things. On the right, the dart-throwing on social media has bolstered actual policy change at the local, state, and national levels, with new laws restricting individual rights (abortion, voting), censoring speech, and hurting working people (lowering corporate

taxes, lifting environmental regulations, undermining unions). The left has plenty of dart throwers of its own, and some examples of individuals being "canceled" on social media. But the left has barely gotten anywhere with actual policy change. Haidt admits that "often the moderates win." In fact, on the left, the moderates always win.

Josette Akresh-Gonzales
Waltham, Mass.

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

Q • & • A

Unless democracies defend themselves, Anne Applebaum argued in May, the forces of autocracy will destroy them ("There Is No Liberal World Order"). Here, Applebaum answers a reader's question about her article.

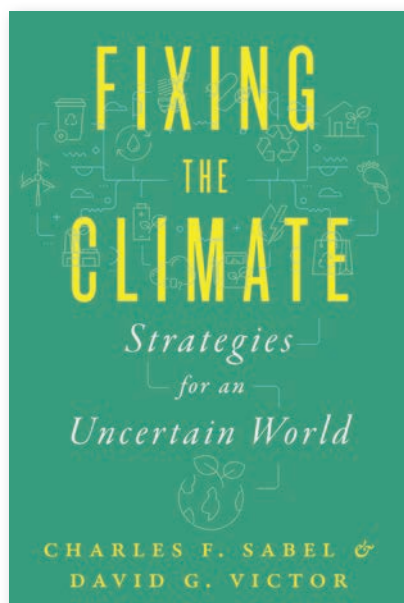
Q: Anne Applebaum's article succinctly yet passionately presents the historic realities of the West's global ignorance around autocratic states, and provides ideas for how we may evolve our foreign policy to combat corruption and tyranny. However, one part of Applebaum's article that remains unclear to me comes when she claims that "the billions of dollars we have sent to Russia, Iran, Venezuela, and Saudi Arabia have promoted some of the worst and most corrupt dictators in the world." Is this statement not self-contradicting, in the sense that the United

States not participating in trade with smaller autocracies (such as Saudi Arabia) will only lead to those states further associating with larger threats like China and Russia? I agree that if we are to oppose the autocratic threat, then we ought to remain consistent. Nevertheless, would there be value in engaging such autocracies so as to not inadvertently support larger threats?

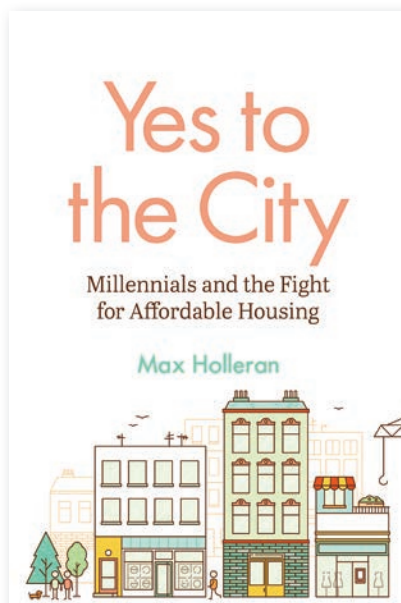
— Norman Grunder, Phoenix, Ariz.

A: I don't imagine the world dividing into blocs, "autocracy versus democracy," and I wasn't suggesting that we not conduct diplomacy or trade with smaller dictatorships. We need to have a wide range of relationships with a lot of countries. My point was rather about the oil and gas that make possible petro-dictatorships, societies in which one tiny group of people controls all of the resources and everything else. A dramatic shift away from carbon fuels would put an end to those monopolies and perhaps help millions of people transition to something better.

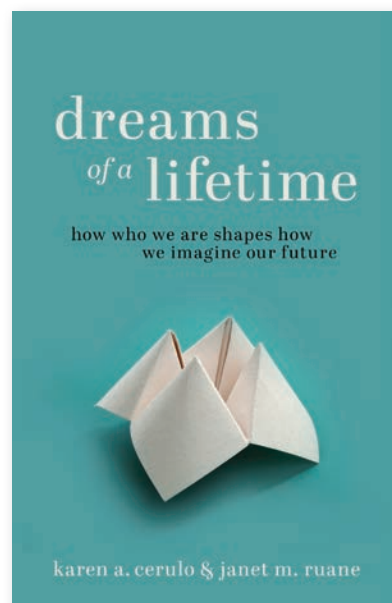
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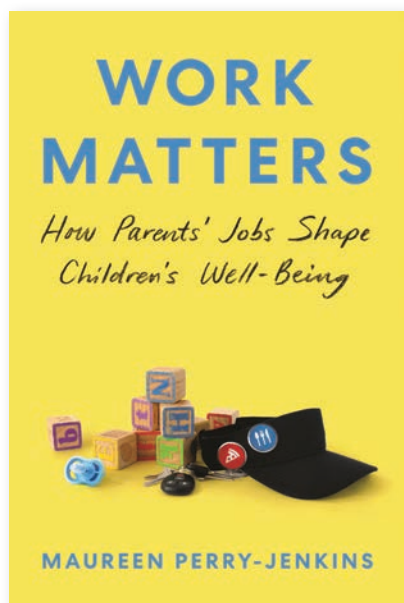
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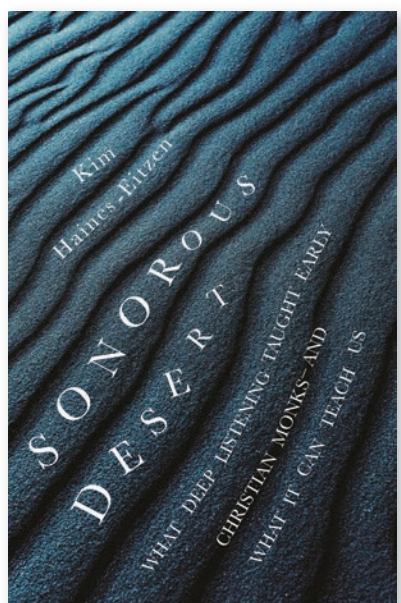
A fascinating account of the growing “Yes in My Backyard” urban movement



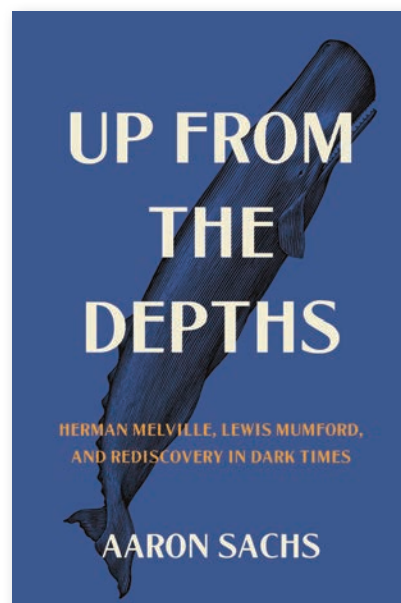
How social status shapes our dreams of the future and inhibits the lives we envision for ourselves



How new parents in low-wage jobs juggle the demands of work and childcare, and the easy ways employers can help



Enduring lessons from the desert soundscapes that shaped the Christian monastic tradition



A double portrait of two of America's most influential writers that reveals the surprising connections between them—and their uncanny relevance to our age of crisis

DISPATCHES

OPENING ARGUMENT

WE HAVE NO NUCLEAR STRATEGY

*The U.S. can't keep ignoring
the threat these weapons pose.*

BY TOM NICHOLS

Americans have had a long respite from thinking about nuclear war. The Cold War ended more than 30 years ago, when the Soviet Union was dismantled and replaced by the Russian Federation and more than a dozen other countries. China at the time was not yet a significant nuclear power. A North Korean bomb was purely a notional threat. The fear of a large war in Europe escalating into a nuclear conflict faded from the public's mind.

Today, the Chinese nuclear arsenal could destroy most of the United States. The North Koreans have a stockpile of bombs.

And the Russian Federation, which inherited the Soviet nuclear arsenal, has launched a major war against Ukraine. As the war began, Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered his nation's nuclear forces to go on heightened alert and warned the West that any interference with the invasion would have "consequences that you have never experienced in your history." Suddenly, the unthinkable seems possible again.

There was a time when citizens of the United States cared about nuclear weapons. The reality of nuclear war was constantly present in their lives; nuclear conflict took on apocalyptic meaning and entered the American consciousness not only through the news and politics, but through popular culture as well. Movie audiences in 1964 laughed while watching Peter Sellers play a president and his sinister adviser in *Dr. Strangelove*, bumbling their way to nuclear war; a few months later, they were horrified as Henry Fonda's fictional president ordered the sacrificial immolation of New York City in *Fail-Safe*. Nuclear war and its terminology—*overkill*, *first strike*, *fallout*—were soon constant themes in every form of entertainment. We not only knew about nuclear war; we expected one.

But during the Cold War there was also thoughtful engagement with the nuclear threat. Academics, politicians, and activists argued on television and in op-ed pages about whether we were safer with more or fewer nuclear weapons. The media presented analyses of complicated issues relating to nuclear weapons. CBS, for example, broadcast an unprecedented five-part documentary series on national

defense in 1981. When ABC, in 1983, aired the movie *The Day After*—about the consequences of a global nuclear war for a small town in Kansas—it did so as much to perform a public service as to achieve a ratings bonanza. Even President Ronald Reagan watched the movie. (In his diary, he noted that *The Day After* was

I REMEMBER
AN AIR FORCE
MAJOR COMING
UP TO ME AFTER
CLASS AND
TELLING ME HE'D
NEVER HEARD
OF "MUTUAL
ASSURED
DESTRUCTION."

"very effective" and had left him "greatly depressed.")

I was among those who cared a lot about nuclear weapons. In the early days of my career, I was a Russian-speaking "Sovietologist" working in think tanks and with government agencies to pry open the black box of the Kremlin's strategy and intentions. The work could be unsettling. Once, during a discussion of various nuclear scenarios, a colleague observed matter-of-factly, "Yes, in that one, we only lose 40 million." He meant 40 million people.

The end of the Cold War, however, led to an era of national inattentiveness toward nuclear issues. We forgot about

nuclear war and concentrated mostly on keeping nuclear weapons out of the "wrong hands," which reflected the American preoccupation with rogue states and terrorists after 9/11. This change in emphasis had worrisome side effects. In 2008, a blue-ribbon commission headed by a former secretary of defense, James Schlesinger, sounded the alarm: A new generation of nuclear-weapons personnel in the Air Force and Navy did not understand its own mission. In 2010, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Michael Mullen, warned that American defense institutions were no longer minting nuclear strategists. "We don't have anybody in our military that does that anymore," Mullen said.

I saw this firsthand at the Naval War College, a graduate school for mid-level and senior U.S. military officers, where I taught for more than 25 years. Nuclear issues fell out of the curriculum almost immediately after the Cold War ended. I remember an Air Force major coming up to me after class and telling me he'd never heard of "mutual assured destruction"—the concept that underlies nuclear deterrence—until my lecture that day.

Voters no longer cared either. During the Cold War, regardless of what other issues might be raised, every presidential election was shadowed by worry over whose finger would be on "the button." In 1983, Reagan—hardly a detail-oriented president or master policy wonk—asked for an uninterrupted half hour of television during prime time to discuss his defense budget and his plans for a national missile-defense system, replete with

charts and graphs. Millions of Americans watched. But in 2015, when Donald Trump was asked during the Republican Party primary debates about U.S. nuclear forces, he could only say, "With nuclear, the power, the devastation is very important to me." Such an answer would once have been disqualifying for any candidate. This time, millions of Americans shrugged.

IT WAS PERHAPS inevitable after the Cold War that serious thinking about nuclear weapons would be stashed away, in the words of a NATO nuclear planner some years ago, like "the crazy aunt in the attic."

But the end of the Cold War did not resolve the most crucial question that has plagued nuclear strategists since 1945: What do nuclear weapons actually do for those who have them? The American security analyst Bernard Brodie declared in the mid-1950s that nuclear weapons represented the "end of strategy," because no political goal could justify unleashing their apocalyptically destructive power. In the 1980s, the political scientist and nuclear-deterrence scholar Robert Jervis amplified the point, noting that "a rational strategy for the employment of nuclear weapons is a contradiction in terms."

American leaders, however, didn't have the luxury of declaring nuclear war to be insanity and then ignoring the subject. The dawn of the Cold War and the birth of the Bomb occurred almost exactly at the same time. The Soviet Union, once our ally, was now our foe, and soon its nuclear arsenal was pointed at us, just as ours was pointed right back. Someone had to think about what might come next.

When contemplating the outbreak of nuclear war, the British strategist Michael Howard always asked: What would such a war be about? Why would it happen at all?

History supplies an answer, and reminds us that the perils of the past remain with us today. The American nuclear arsenal was constructed as the United States dealt with a series of postwar crises. From the Berlin blockade to a hot war in Korea, Communist dangers seemed to be spreading unchecked across the planet. By 1950, the Communist bloc extended from the Gulf of Finland to the South China Sea. With America and its allies outnumbered and outgunned, nuclear weapons and the threat of their use seemed to be the only Western recourse.

Nuclear planning in this period was shaped by the inescapable dictates of geography. The Soviet Union straddled two continents and spanned 11 time zones. The United States was relatively safe in its North American fortress from anything but an outright Soviet nuclear attack. But how could Washington protect NATO in Europe and its other allies scattered around the world? With Germany a divided nation and Berlin a divided city, any future conflict in Europe would always favor the Soviets and their tanks, which could roll across the plains almost at will.

This set up the basic structure of some future World War III in a way that every American of that period could understand: No matter how or where East and West might come into significant military conflict, the Soviets were certain to move the confrontation to Europe. A crisis

might begin somewhere else—maybe the Caribbean, maybe the Middle East—but war itself would move to Germany and then spiral into a global catastrophe. American strategists tried to think through the possibility of “limited” nuclear wars in various regions, but as Schlesinger later admitted to Congress, none of the

Soviet leaders. The leadership declined the defense minister’s advice, and the episode was kept secret for decades. But the Kremlin and its high command continued to plan for defeating NATO quickly and decisively in Germany, no matter where a crisis might begin. They knew it was their best option, and so did we.



scenarios stayed limited for long. Everything came back to escalation in Europe.

This was not an idle fear. In 1965, for example, when the United States began bombing North Vietnam, the Soviet General Staff proposed a “military demonstration” of an unspecified nature aimed at Berlin and West Germany. “We do not fear approaching the risk of war,” the Soviet defense minister told Leonid Brezhnev and other

Once war moved to Central Europe, events would cascade with a brutal inevitability. The only way the United States could stop such an attack would be to resort to the immediate use of small, short-range nuclear arms on the battlefield. As Soviet forces advanced, we would strike them—on NATO’s own territory—with these “tactical” weapons. The Soviets would respond in kind. We would then hit more targets throughout Eastern Europe

with larger and longer-range weapons, hoping to bring the Soviets to a halt. Again, the Soviets would respond. With so many nuclear weapons in play, and with chaos and panic enveloping national leaders, one side or the other might fear a larger attack and give in to the temptation to launch a preemptive strike against strategic nuclear weapons in the American or Soviet heartland. All-out nuclear war would follow. Millions would die immediately. Millions more would perish later.

The U.S. and NATO not only expected this nuclear escalation but threatened to be the ones to initiate it. There was a terrifying but elegant logic to this policy. In effect, the West told the Kremlin that the use of nuclear weapons would occur not because some unhinged U.S. president might wish it, but because Soviet successes on the battlefield would make it an inescapable choice.

By the 1960s, the march of technology had allowed both East and West to develop a “triad” of bombers, submarine-launched missiles, and land-based intercontinental missiles. Arsenal on both sides soon numbered in the tens of thousands. At these levels, even the most aggressive Cold War hawks knew that, in a full exchange, mutual obliteration was inevitable. Detailed and exacting war plans would collapse in days—or even hours—into what the nuclear strategist Herman Kahn called “spasm” or “insensate” war, with much of the Northern Hemisphere reduced to a sea of glass and ash.

The reality that nuclear war meant complete devastation for both sides led to the concept of mutual assured destruction, or MAD, a term coined

by American war planners. MAD was at first not so much a policy as a simple fact. In the early 1970s, the United States proposed that both sides turn the fact into a defined policy: The superpowers would recognize that they had enough weapons and it was time to set limits. The Soviets, with some reservations, agreed. The race to oblivion was put on pause.

Today, MAD remains at the core of strategic deterrence. The United States and Russia have taken some weapons off their quick triggers, but many remain ready to launch in a matter of minutes. By treaty, Washington and Moscow have limited themselves to 1,550 warheads apiece. The basic idea is that these numbers deny either side the ability to take out the other's arsenal in a first strike, while still preserving the ability to destroy at least 150 urban centers in each country. This, in the world of nuclear weapons, is progress.

THE FALL OF the Soviet Union changed many things, but in nuclear matters it changed almost nothing. The missiles and their warheads remained where they were. They continue to wait in silent service. The crews in silos, submarines, and bombers now consist of the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of the people who built the first nuclear weapons and created the plans for their use. And yet for years we have conducted international politics as if we have somehow solved the problem of nuclear war.

Nuclear weapons are a crutch we have leaned on to avoid thinking about the true needs and costs of defense. With hardly any debate, over a period of 30 years we doubled

the number of nations under NATO's nuclear guarantee. We have talked about drawing down forces in places such as South Korea and shied away from expensive decisions about increasing our naval power in the Pacific—all because we think that nuclear weapons will remedy imbalances in conventional weapons and that the mere existence of nuclear weapons will somehow stabilize these unstable situations. Worrying about whether this broad reliance on nuclear deterrence risks escalation and nuclear war seems outdated to many. Memories of the Cold War, a young scholar once said to me, are a form of “baggage” that inhibits the making of bold policy.

This brings us, of course, to Ukraine. The war there could put four nuclear-armed powers—Russia, the United States, the United Kingdom, and France—onto the same battlefield, and yet arguments over the U.S. and NATO response to the Russian invasion have sometimes taken place in a nuclear void. President Joe Biden has rallied a global coalition against Moscow while remaining determined to avoid a direct military conflict with Russia. He wisely declined to raise U.S. nuclear readiness to match Putin's nuclear alert. But he has had to steer this careful path while buffeted by demands from people who seem unmoved (or untouched) by memories of the Cold War. Calls for a more aggressive confrontation with Russia, including demands for a no-fly zone over Ukraine, backed by American power, have been advanced by a range of prominent figures. Republican Representative Adam Kinzinger even introduced a congressional resolution authorizing

Biden to use American military force against Russia.

These demands ignore the reality, as the Harvard professor Graham Allison wrote earlier this year, that in the event of a hot war between nuclear superpowers, “the escalation ladder from there to the ultimate global catastrophe of

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nuclear war can be surprisingly short.” Allison's warning is especially relevant today, when Russia and NATO have effectively switched places: Russia is now the inferior conventional power, and is threatening a first use of nuclear weapons if faced with a regime-threatening defeat on the battlefield.

Our collective amnesia—our nuclear Great Forgetting—undermines American national security. American political leaders have a responsibility to educate the public about how, and how much, the United States relies on nuclear weapons for its security. If we mean to reduce U.S. conventional

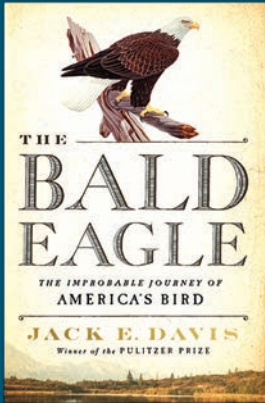
forces and go back to relying on nuclear weapons as a battlefield equalizer, then the public should know it and think about it. If the U.S. nuclear arsenal exists solely to deter the use of enemy nuclear weapons, then it is time to say so and spell out the consequences.

Every presidential administration since 1994 has released a “nuclear posture review” that supposedly answers the question of why, exactly, America has a nuclear arsenal. Is it to fight nuclear wars or to deter a nuclear attack? And every administration has fudged the response by saying, essentially, it's a little of both. This is not a serious answer. And it avoids the deeper question: If we do not in fact wish to use nuclear weapons, then what must we do to ensure that our conventional capabilities match our international commitments?

We have accepted evasions from our leaders because we take strategic nuclear deterrence for granted—as something that exists around us almost independently, like gravity or the weather. But deterrence relies on human psychology and on the agency and decisions of actual people, who must continually manage it.

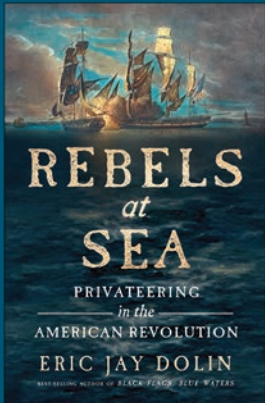
Decades of denial have left Americans ill-prepared to think about the many choices that keep the nuclear peace. Effective deterrence, even in a post-Cold War world, requires the capacity to face the reality of nuclear war squarely. And it means understanding once again what it would feel like to hear the sirens—and to wonder whether they are only a drill. *A*

Tom Nichols is a contributing writer at The Atlantic.



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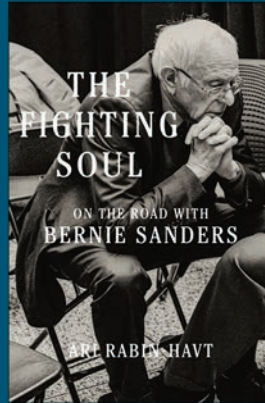


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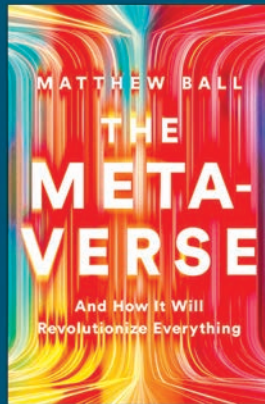
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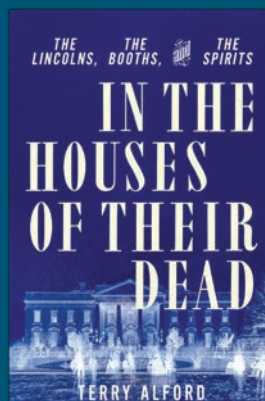
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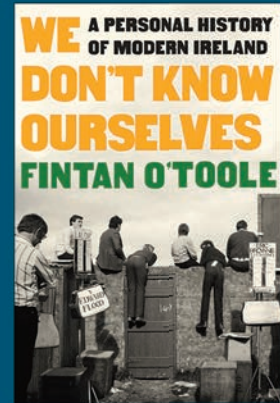
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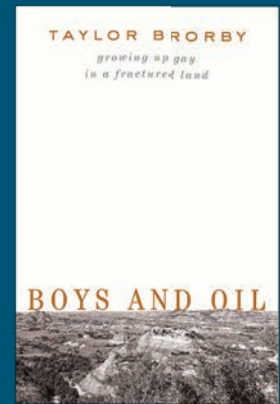
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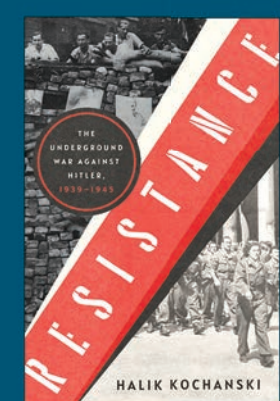
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MY FAMILY'S DOLL TEST

Toys can reflect racial attitudes—and shape them.

BY IBRAM X. KENDI

I noticed. I didn't make much of it. The day care was closing. I walked over to Imani, took the blue-eyed white doll out of her hands, picked her up off the carpet, and raised her high. She frowned. I smiled. Her frown turned to a smile.

It was the summer of 2017. My partner, Sadiqa, and I had just moved to Washington, D.C. We'd selected our neighborhood, Columbia Heights, because we liked its walkability, access to public transit, and racial diversity. We had enrolled Imani, our 1-year-old daughter, in a day care about 10 minutes from our new home.

The next day, when Sadiqa picked Imani up, she, too, noticed our daughter playing with the white doll. We laughed it off. We expected Imani to start playing with a different doll or toy soon.

But she didn't. Her frown on day one turned into a sharp "No!" on day two, when Sadiqa tried to take the doll out of her hands, which turned into a car ride of whining on day three, and into an all-out tantrum on

day four as she held on firmly to the doll, not wanting to go home.

Sadiqa and I were probably unduly sensitive about the whole situation. But we wondered if our Black child's attachment to a white doll could mean she had already breathed in what the psychologist Beverly Daniel Tatum has called the "smog" of white superiority.

Maybe our minds were sounding a false alarm. Maybe the eye and skin color and hair texture of the doll had no bearing on why Imani had become attached. I did not know. No one knew. But I did know why the alarm was ringing.

In 1897, the father of American child psychology, G. Stanley Hall, published his influential *A Study of Dolls* with Alexander Caswell Ellis. They found that white dolls with "fair hair and blue eyes are the favorites." Children who played with nonwhite dolls, Hall and Ellis posited, often did so because the dolls' appearance made them "funny" or exceptional.

Mass-produced toys of all kinds had begun to enter American homes around

this time, and many of them exploited racist tropes. Consider the mechanical banks then popular among children. The kids who played with the "Always Did 'Spise a Mule" mechanical bank could push a button and make a Black man fly off a mule face-first, a simulation of racial violence presented, during the lynching era, as a game. Playing with the "Shamrock Bank," later nicknamed "Paddy and the Pig," children pulled a lever to make a pig kick a penny into an Irishman's mouth. The "Reclining Chinaman" mechanical bank featured a Chinese man flashing a handful of aces with a rat at his feet. The cards suggested a deceitful competitive advantage, evoking the idea, widely held at the time, that Chinese immigrants were stealing work from white people.

What lessons did these toys teach the children who played with them? For the social scientist Mamie Phipps, such racist caricatures were anything but humorous. Growing up in segregated Arkansas in the 1920s, Phipps lived in the shadow of that racism. "You had to have

In 1947, the photographer Gordon Parks documented one of Kenneth and Mamie Clark's doll tests for Ebony magazine.







Barbie and Ken dolls, 1961

a certain kind of protective armor about you, all the time," she later said.

In 1934, Phipps enrolled at Howard University, where she met a psychology master's student named Kenneth Clark. He encouraged her to major in psychology; the two later married.

The Clarks entered a discipline dominated by eugenicists determined to prove, scientifically, the superiority of the white race. But some social scientists, at least, had come to recognize the dangers of eugenicists' work. These researchers wanted to use social science, instead, to understand the origins of racist sentiment. Were humans born prejudiced or were they socialized to be that way? This question turned scholarly attention to the racial attitudes of children.

Research in the late 1920s by the social worker and writer

Bruno Lasker had demonstrated that "race prejudice," as he called it, was not an inborn trait but the result of acquired habits—habits that even children as young as 5 years old could develop.

Starting in 1940, the Clarks surveyed 253 Black children ranging in age from 3 to 7. Their goal was to determine whether the children had a concept of racial difference, and if so, whether they expressed racial preference. A little more than half of the children attended segregated nursery schools and public elementary schools in Arkansas, while the rest went to integrated schools in Massachusetts. Each child was shown two dolls with yellow hair and white skin, and two with black hair and dark-brown skin. "Give me the doll you like to play with," the Clarks instructed the children. Most of the children

gave them a white doll. When they prompted the children to "give me the doll that is a nice doll" or "the doll that is a nice color," most of the children again gave them a white doll. As Kenneth Clark later wrote, the doll study showed "that at an early age Negro children are affected by the prejudices, discrimination, and segregation to which the larger society subjected them."

Social scientists suspected that segregation had negative effects on white children too, even if they lacked the data to prove it empirically (more recent research has born this out). In 1948, the psychologists Max Deutscher and Isidor Chein surveyed 517 social scientists. Ninety percent, they found, thought that segregation had detrimental effects on the "segregated" group, and 83 percent thought that it had negative effects on the "segregating" group as well. "Enforced segregation builds up attitudes of superiority not based on achievement but upon definitions which cannot be supported when subjected to reality testing," one psychologist explained.

In 1950, Kenneth Clark presented the doll research, along with Deutscher and Chein's survey results, at the Mid-century White House Conference on Children and Youth. The following year, as the NAACP mounted the legal challenge to school segregation that would become *Brown v. Board of Education*, its lawyers asked Clark to submit a similar report. Thirty-two of the era's leading anthropologists, psychiatrists,

psychologists, and sociologists co-signed its conclusion: Racism and segregation "potentially damage the personality of all children."

On May 17, 1954, the Court issued a unanimous ruling, written by Chief Justice

THE COURT HAD STRUCK DOWN SEGREGATED SCHOOLS, BUT IT HAD NOT STRUCK DOWN THE RACIST IDEA THAT THE WHITER THE SCHOOL, THE BETTER.

Earl Warren, striking down the "separate but equal" doctrine. "Segregation of white and colored children in public schools has a detrimental effect upon the colored children," Warren wrote. But the decision overlooked the experts' argument about segregation's effects on white children. The Court had struck down segregated schools, but it had not struck down the racist idea that the whiter the school, the better.

Some Americans saw school integration as a chance to facilitate Black assimilation into white American culture. In the '40s and '50s, Italian, Jewish, and Irish immigrants had been assimilated or were assimilating into the broader racial category of "white." But the newly capacious white American identity still had no room for Blackness.

You can follow this history through the evolution of American toys. By mid-century, toy

PREVIOUS SPREAD: GORDON PARKS / COURTESY OF THE GORDON PARKS FOUNDATION. LEFT: HULTON ARCHIVE / GETTY.

makers had mostly stopped producing the toys that ridiculed purported ethnic and racial differences; instead, they ignored these differences. Popular games like Chutes and Ladders and Candy Land presented white children on their boxes and boards. In 1959,

Mattel introduced the Barbie doll at the American International Toy Fair as a white “Teen-age Fashion Model.” White children continued to play Cowboys and Indians, but in the world of manufactured toys, people of color virtually ceased to exist.

THINGS STARTED TO change in the ’60s. By 1968, James Brown was singing the anthem of a new anti-assimilation consciousness: “Say it loud—I’m Black and I’m proud.” Black had become beautiful during the Black Power movement, which

inspired the Red Power, Brown Power, and Yellow Power movements in the late ’60s and the ’70s.

This environment compelled at least some companies to produce a more diverse assortment of toys. Mattel released its first explicitly Black Barbie in 1968, and Remco’s line of Black dolls appeared that same year. These dolls, though, were mostly marketed to Black children.

Not until the 1980s were nonwhite characters marketed to a wide audience, and then only gradually. A Hispanic Barbie and an Asian Barbie (called “Oriental Barbie”) arrived in that decade; though Hasbro had released a Black G.I. Joe in 1965, it didn’t make an explicitly Hispanic G.I. Joe doll until 2001. Still, by 2019, 55 percent of all Mattel dolls sold globally depicted a historically marginalized group in some way, in terms of either race, ethnicity, religion, gender expression, or body type.

The toy market was coming closer to reflecting America’s diversity. But had children’s attitudes shifted since the Clarks’ era? In 2010, CNN commissioned the child psychologist Margaret Beale Spencer to design an updated version of the doll test. Her team interviewed 133 kids, ages 4, 5, 9, or 10, hailing from both majority-white and majority-Black schools in the New York City and Atlanta areas.

The Clarks had not studied white children, but Spencer did. She found that they displayed a high rate of “white bias,” identifying lighter skin



EVE ARNOLD / MAGNUM

Remco began producing Black dolls in 1968.

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AMERICAN

PHOTOGRAPHS
BY
CHRIS BUCK

STEVE
BANNON
IS
STILL
SCHEMING.
AND
HE'S
STILL
A THREAT
TO
DEMOCRACY.



BY

JENNIFER

RASPUTIN



SENIOR

Winning debates. Winning elections—in France, in Hungary, in South Texas, where Hispanic voters are migrating into the R column with impressive speed. One night, as I was reading in bed, I heard the ping of my phone: Bannon had sent me a story from a Rio Grande Valley website, reporting that Republican turnout at early-voting polls was up up up.

Kaboom

And good night

It was 11:37 p.m. Never too late to own the libs.

ONE OF THE surest ways to get under Bannon's skin is to call *War Room* a podcast. It is not a podcast, he is always telling me; it is a TV show, with tons of visual components that listeners-only miss—the charts explaining economics, the montages of news clips that form his cold opens, the live shots of his correspondents. He broadcasts from the ground floor of a Washington, D.C., townhouse, and there are cameras, bright lights, a backdrop that devoted viewers know well: a fireplace mantel

This is the Democratic Party's nightmare scenario, the hobgoblin that visits at 4 a.m.

displaying a gold-framed picture of Jesus and a black-and-white poster saying THERE ARE NO CONSPIRACIES, BUT THERE ARE NO COINCIDENCES. — STEPHEN K BANNON.

But since January 8, 2021, when YouTube pulled his show for spreading falsehoods about the 2020 election, viewing *War Room* has become harder to do. It's still available in the far-right online ecosphere, and it's streamable on various TV platforms, including Channel 240 of Pluto TV, but that seems like its own sad metaphor—*War Room* as a small, demoted planetoid, available mainly in the icier regions of the broadcast cosmos. The whole operation has an amusing shoestring quality to it. The audio occasionally cuts out or sounds like it's bubbling through a fish tank; two of Bannon's phones buzz throughout the show; the segment openers aren't always ready when he needs them. It's a bit like Father Coughlin stumbled into Wayne and Garth's basement.

Bannon started *War Room* in October 2019, initially to fight Donald Trump's first impeachment; in January 2020, the show morphed into *War Room: Pandemic*. But over time, the show became a guided tour through Bannon's gallery of obsessions: the stolen election, the Biden-family syndicate, the invaders at the southern border, the evil Chinese Communist Party, the stolen election, draconian COVID mandates, the folly of Modern Monetary Theory, the stolen election.

But Bannon is more than just a broadcaster. He's a televangelist, an Iago, a canny political operative with activist machinations. With almost every episode, he hopes to transform his audience into an army of the righteous—one that will undo the "illegitimate Biden regime" and replace the current GOP infrastructure, still riddled with institutionalist RINO pushovers, with adamant Trumpists who believe that 2020 rightfully belonged to them. "The show's not about entertainment," he told his audience in one of his typical pep talks. "That's not us. This is for the hard-cores, okay? ... The people who say, 'No no no no no, not on our watch.'" He goads his followers into action with a combination of praise, flattery, and drill-sergeant phrases he repeats like a catechism: *Put your shoulder to the wheel! Be a force multiplier!* And especially: *Use your agency!*

And how, specifically, does Bannon propose that his audience *use its agency*? By taking back their government from the ground up—as election inspectors, as school-board members, and, most practically of all, as precinct-committee members. Bannon may be the country's biggest exponent of the "precinct strategy," first developed by the Republican lawyer Dan Schultz, which encourages interested citizens to sign up for the grunt work of elections, because it can lead to the big stuff, like helping decide who oversees them. *War Room* regularly features citizen activists who have figured out how to work the system. After each segment, Bannon asks: "How can people get to you? How do they find out more about what you're doing?" And they provide Twitter and Gettr handles, websites, on occasion even a cellphone number.

Why do you do that? I once asked him.

"It's a force multiplier," he answered.

Right right right.

This is the Democratic Party's nightmare scenario, the hobgoblin that visits at 4 a.m.: The infrastructure of civil servants on the state level, which barely held the United States together in the aftermath of the 2020 election, comes entirely undone through democratic means. As it is, the Republicans are poised in the 2022 midterms to take back the House in a potential rout, a prospect that fills Bannon with inexpressible glee, and for which he seems to take partial credit. He's hoping for a 60-, 70-, 80-seat loss for the Democrats—something that will set the party back for generations.

"The left in the media ... *they're* all about democracy?" he ranted to me one day. Then he broke into a smile. "On November 8, the *War Room* and the *War Room* posse and all the little people at the school boards and things—we're gonna give you democracy shoved up your ass. Okay? We're gonna give you a democracy *suppository*."

All bluster, you might say. Showmanship. Bannon is merely jumping on bandwagons that were already rolling. Murkowski hardly seemed moved by his efforts.

"Bannon? Please," says John Podhoretz, the old-school conservative editor of *Commentary*. "He was a third-rate banker who got a tiny slice of an enormous pie." He's referring to the piece of *Seinfeld* profits that Bannon got when he helped

orchestrate a deal between Ted Turner and Castle Rock Entertainment. “He ended up taking over *Breitbart* because Andrew Breitbart suddenly died. If Paul Manafort weren’t a criminal, he and Kellyanne Conway wouldn’t have taken over the Trump campaign. He’s not an emperor *and* he has no clothes.”

Bannon, according to this theory, is a fundamentally unsuccessful guy who has failed ever upward—one of those strange id creatures who’s come to sudden prominence in this id-favorable internet age, but is too undisciplined to hang on to any power for very long. He lasted in the White House for, what, seven months?

The problem is, there’s now loads of room for those id creatures in American politics and culture, and they can accumulate considerable influence. Last September, ProPublica contacted GOP leaders in 65 key counties around the country and discovered that 41 of them “reported an unusual increase in sign-ups since Bannon’s campaign began,” with at least 8,500 new precinct officers joining their ranks. And Bannon is now on *Axios*’s list of the Republicans’ new kingmakers, compiled this year based on interviews with top GOP consultants and operatives around the country, in part because his show is “a goldmine” for primary candidates who are fundraising online.

Reports of Bannon’s influence would be far less alarming if his show were a reliable source of news and information. But an analysis by the Brookings Institution found that *War Room* had more episodes containing falsehoods about election fraud than any other popular political podcast in the months leading up to January 6. And January 6 is the stench that hangs over this discussion, is it not? Not that he necessarily coordinated the logistics of that day in any significant way (he’s such a dervish of chaos that I wouldn’t trust him to organize so much as a birthday party). But the energy behind January 6? Especially given the size and commitment of his citizen army, and how relentless he is in firing up his troops? *That* he does seem to have helped marshal.

There’s a scene I keep looping back to in Errol Morris’s 2018 documentary about Bannon, *American Dharma*. Bannon is recalling his Hong Kong days in the

2000s, when he was working for Internet Gaming Entertainment. He notes how stunned he was to discover how many people played multiplayer online games, and how intensely they played them. But then he breaks it down for Morris, using the example of a theoretical man named Dave in Accounts Payable who one day drops dead.

“Some preacher from a church or some guy from a funeral home who’s never met him does a 10-minute eulogy, says a few prayers,” Bannon says. “And that’s Dave.”

But that’s *offline* Dave. *Online* Dave is a whole other story. “Dave in the *game* is Ajax,” Bannon continues. “And Ajax is, like, *the man*.” Ajax gets a caisson when he dies and is carried off to a raging funeral pyre. The rival group comes out and attacks. “There’s literally thousands of people there,” Bannon says. “People are home playing the game, and guys are not going to work. And women are not going to work. Because it’s *Ajax*.”

“Now, who’s more real?” Bannon asks. Dave in Accounting? Or Ajax?

Ajax, Bannon realized. Some people—particularly disaffected men—actively prefer and better identify with the online versions of themselves. He kept this top of mind when he took over *Breitbart News* in 2012 and decided to build out the comments section. “This became more of a community than the city they live in, the town they live in, the old bowling league,” he tells Morris. “The key to these sites was the comment section. This could be weaponized at some point in time. The angry voices, properly directed, have latent political power.”

I mentioned this moment to Bannon the second time we spoke. On *War Room*, he frequently talks about three levels of participation: the posse, the cadre, and the vanguard. It sounded to me like the gamification of politics. Yes, he told me. That’s just it: “I want Dave in Accounting to be Ajax *in his life*.”

But that’s precisely what happened on January 6. The angry, howling hordes arrived as real-life avatars, cosplaying the role of rebels in face paint and fur. They stormed the Capitol while an enemy army tried to beat them away. They carried their own versions of caissons. They skipped a

day of work. And then they expressed outrage—and utter incredulity—when they got carted away.

The fantasy and the reality had become one and the same.

A FEW HOURS into my first interview with Bannon, he tells me the story of how he became a father of two more kids than he’d planned. It was the mid-’90s, and he was already a once-divorced dad of a little girl, when he began to casually date a “knockout” he met at a photo shoot. At the time, he had his own boutique investment bank, Bannon & Co., in Beverly Hills, but in April 1994, he went off to Arizona to manage the quixotic eco-experiment Biosphere 2—one of the odder aspects of Bannon’s already unlikely biography (but typical in that it resulted in a lawsuit)—and decided one weekend to have her come visit. She flew in, she flew out, and he assumed that that was that. But a month or two later, he says, she contacted him, asking if they could get together when he was next in L.A.

“So we go to a restaurant and we’re having a great conversation,” he tells me. “I’m just kind of in listen mode, because she had a tendency to go into talk mode.” Bannon himself is in storytelling mode—relaxed, sunny, nothing at all like the tightly wound belligerent howling into the mic. “Finally, because I had to go to another meeting, I said, ‘You know, I gotta bounce.’ And she goes, ‘Um, can we order a couple of espressos or some coffee?’” He sensed exactly where the discussion was headed. “And my heart’s like”—he starts pounding his chest—“*boom boom boom*.”

She was pregnant. With twins. “I knocked her up at the Biosphere,” he says, shaking his head. “We were watching ... who was that old crazy guy with the TV show?”

John McLaughlin?

“John McLaughlin. It was whatever show he hosted.”

That would be *The McLaughlin Group*. Was there ever any question of not marrying her?

“No. I had to. Knowing my mom, there was just no chance. The girls could



not be illegitimate. I retained a lawyer and we had a prenup.”

Somehow, this story came up a few weeks later, when I was chatting on the phone with one of Bannon’s former colleagues. I heard an audible scoff. “He’s using you. He knows that story makes him look good. Like he’s responsible.”

He’s using you. It’s a refrain I will hear over and over again on this strange odyssey. Bannon’s the guy with a perpetual meta-motive, always working an angle. He’s extremely skilled at getting others to do what he wants them to do. He speaks openly, almost exuberantly, about his talent for thought-puppetry. When I asked him why Democrats are terrible at talk radio, he had an immediate reply: Democrats are masters of the cool mediums, like TV. “But radio is theater of the mind,” he said. “*Hot* and theater of the mind. I can fuck with your mind so badly if you’re just hearing my voice, right? It’s a much more powerful medium.”

No one disputes that Bannon is very smart. He sweeps in information quickly, has a file-cabinet memory, can keep multiple tabs open in his brain. It’s how he *uses* his brain that horrifies people—and I’m talking not just about Democrats, but about many of his former colleagues, who see in him a disordered, nefarious kind of brilliance. Stephanie Grisham, who worked both on the Trump campaign and in the Trump White House in various press jobs (including nearly a year as communications director), called him a con man when we chatted on the phone.

“Your subject is a very sick megalomaniac,” wrote Anthony Scaramucci, who for a brief 11 days was also Trump’s communications director, when I emailed and asked him about Bannon. “Study Ullrich, a great biographer (Hitler). We have seen his sinister form before. We are ready.”

“Steve may well be mentally unstable, in a frightening, disturbing kind of way. He was certainly a cancer in the

Administration,” wrote yet another former White House colleague, and not a low-ranking one, in an email when I sent a query about Bannon.

Care to elaborate? I wrote back. The reply:

He immersed himself in an office covered, literally wall-to-wall, with whiteboards filled with his various musings and plans and accomplishments—which I found just bizarre. In conversations with him, I got the very distinct impression that he was a very ends-justify-the-means kind of person. And way too many conversations ended with “then we burn it all down . . . just burn it down.” It was never clear as to what “it” was. Congress? The “establishment?” DC? The country as he perceived it? The “world order?”

A con man, a cancer, *Hitler*. Did people speak about even Richard Nixon in this way?

Yet here's the dirty secret about Bannon: Many liberals who have met him are disarmed by how charming he is. (*He's using you.*) When Bannon isn't in full gladiatorial mode, he is upbeat, good company, almost *clubbable*. "He's a lot like his mother," his old friend and Navy pal Sonny Masso told me. "Never met a stranger." He called me "ma'am" and "kid."

White House reporters were fond of him. In a leaky White House, Bannon was a gusher. (And often with the dirtiest dish.) He's quite capable of code-switching into the patois and patter of the coastal elite, probably because he's a card-carrying member, whether he likes it or not: an alumnus of Harvard Business School, Georgetown School of Foreign Service, Goldman Sachs, Hollywood. But his actual beliefs are hard to discern. Michael Wolff's entertaining anthology, *Too Famous*, includes an astute essay about Bannon, noting that he "could seem like a person both professing quite an extraordinary level of bullshit, and yet, as dramatically, not believing any of it at all." He is Schrödinger's bullshitter, at once of his nonsense and above it.

This ambiguity—this doubleness—extends to the Big Lie, the notion that the 2020 election was stolen from Donald Trump. The number of people who know Bannon and say he doesn't believe it is surprising. But think about it, many of them say: Did he really have a choice? Just months before the election, Bannon was arrested for allegedly defrauding investors in "We Build the Wall," a crowdsourced project to erect a barrier on the southern border. Faced with a potential future in orange pajamas, Bannon insinuated himself back in Trumpworld, helping the president sell his message that the election was stolen—and that he had to fight back by any means possible. "Steve was in on the joke," says Sam Nunberg, one of the first hires of the 2016 Trump campaign, now a political consultant. "He never believed that the election would be overturned. Steve needed a pardon."

"That's absurd," Bannon says. I tell him many people he knows are convinced that he sells this dangerous message for sport. He waves it off. "'Cause *they* don't believe it," he says. "Doesn't mean *I* don't believe it. I absolutely believe it, to the core of my being."

"I have a very big soft spot for Steve," a former colleague and senior political operative tells me. "I really think he believes he's fighting for the greater good. But I definitely get frustrated with him sometimes, and I definitely disagree with him sometimes"—particularly about his unflagging, crackbrained message to his audience that the election was stolen. "I think it's very dangerous for democracy. And I've *said* this to Steve."

What does he say back?

"He just starts talking about Confucius and Alexander and all this fucking shit."

"His old life, as he knows it, is gone," says Grisham, who recently wrote a memoir about her chaotic time in the White House, *I'll Take Your Questions Now*. "He has gone in soooooo deep on the Big Lie of this election being stolen—he's not gonna go back to, I don't know, doing whatever it was he did before." She points out that very few former aides can achieve the escape velocity required to make it out of Trump's world. They're stuck in low orbit.

"The tragedy of Steve Bannon," Nunberg tells me, "is that when he leaves the White House, he's known as the great manipulator, the intellectual heavy of the international populist uprising. But *still* he ends up in the fetal position at Donald Trump's feet."

Is that on the record? I ask.

"Fuck yeah."

THE BOTTOM FLOOR of the so-called Breitbart embassy, former home of *Breitbart News* and now home of *War Room*, is part man cave, part grad-student flop-house, and part devil's lair. Books cover every surface. Two framed pictures of Bannon sit on the floor, unhung. An anti-Hillary Clinton poster glares from a wall in the living room; anti-Joe Biden mugs lurk in the kitchen cupboard. His fridge is a cry for help, a Stonehenge of takeout cartons and bagged carrots. The toilet seat in his bathroom is always up. His living room is dominated by a giant leather couch and a flatscreen TV that runs MSNBC all day long. Bannon loves hating on MSNBC. But he also thinks its shows, Rachel Maddow's in particular, set the gold standard for production values and narrative verve.

The first afternoon I visit, Bannon is doing segment Tetris, shuffling his A, B, C, and D blocks for the afternoon show. Though he has a handful of employees cycling through his home, he does an awful lot by himself, often on the fly, including many preinterviews.

"Senator, thank you for doing this ... Did you file this today?" It's minutes before showtime, and he's talking with Jake Corman, the president pro tempore of the Pennsylvania Senate, who's just filed a letter urging impeachment proceedings against the Democratic district attorney of Philadelphia, based on a spike in crime. This kind of shit-stirring, norm-shattering, institution-weakening exercise is right up Bannon's alley. Crime is up, so ... what the hell, let's impeach someone.

Bannon hangs up and describes the "order of battle" to his producer Cameron, a young fellow with an unflappable demeanor and a Phish sticker on his laptop. "I'll go right to Corman, I'll do a Pillows read"—MyPillow, one of his sponsors—"I'll go to Tina." That's Tina Peters, a Mesa County, Colorado, clerk, whom he describes as his show's Joan of Arc. "Let me have Tina?"

Peters will eventually be indicted by a grand jury for a long and impressive list of allegations concerning election-security breaches, including aiding an unauthorized individual in making copies of Dominion's voting-machine hard drives. A judge will also rule that she cannot oversee the 2022 elections. (Peters has denied wrongdoing, and insists the investigation of her was politically motivated.)

At a disinformation conference at Stanford in April, Barack Obama told an audience: "People like Putin—and Steve Bannon, for that matter—understand it's not necessary for people to believe disinformation in order to weaken democratic institutions. You just have to flood a country's public square with enough raw sewage." This was an echo of what Bannon had told the journalist Michael Lewis in 2018, that his preferred media strategy was to "flood the zone with shit."

Roughly 2,000 episodes in, Bannon's show has produced a mighty river of ordure. Every state official, no matter how marginal or ostracized (or indicted), gets a chance to recite what they deem evidence of a stolen election—harvested

He is Schrödinger's bullshitter, at once of his nonsense and above it.

ballots! hinky machines! lapses in signature matches!—and other assorted crimes committed by Democrats. His show is ground zero for epistemological warfare, and he recruits all kinds of fringe combatants to the cause, including the Mos Eisley Cantina caucus of Congress (Matt Gaetz, Mo Brooks, and, for a long while, with alarming regularity, Marjorie Taylor Greene). And if they say something truly off-the-wall, even by *War Room* standards, well ... there's always plausible deniability. Bannon wasn't doing the talking. He only hands his guests the mic, right? How could he know they were lousy at karaoke?

I will say that the *War Room* is, in its own frantic way, more varied and ambitious than the other shows of its kind, lurching between republic-endangering lies and granular wonkery, especially when it comes to polls and economics. (There's a lot of talk about wage-price spirals and quantitative easing.)

But the motto that sits on Bannon's mantle—THERE ARE NO CONSPIRACIES, BUT THERE ARE NO COINCIDENCES—is quite apt. It's perfect doublespeak, a formula

that allows his viewers to embrace a conspiracy without calling it a conspiracy, to believe a lie while claiming it isn't one. His show positively burbles with conspiracies, or at least darkly hints at doings within doings, grimy wheels within wheels. Before the Olympics in China, Bannon suggested that something was terribly suspicious about the lockdowns happening there—it couldn't just be Omicron that was spooking the Chinese government.

So what's your theory? I asked.

"Some people think it's a combination of Ebola and hemorrhagic fever," he answered. "I don't know."

That would mean China successfully concealed an Ebola outbreak.

Early in the Ukraine conflict, Bannon took Vladimir Putin's latest propaganda out for a spin, repeating more than any other far-right broadcast (again, according to Brookings) that Ukraine was developing bioweapons with funding from the United States. Even his own expert, the virologist Steven Hatfill, slapped him down on the air for repeating that one: "*Russia's* the one with a biological-weapons program in this area."

And don't get Bannon started on the COVID vaccines. They're an experimental gene therapy! Shots that kill 15 people for every person they might save! (Well, he didn't say that. A *guest* did—Steve Kirsch, the head of something called the Vaccine Safety Research Foundation.) Naomi Wolf, who suggested on Twitter (before getting kicked off) that COVID vaccines were a "software platform that can receive uploads," is one of his most popular regulars. He insists on calling her *Doctor* Naomi Wolf every time she comes on the show, pausing and then leaning hard on the word *Doctor*. I point out that this is rather deceptive.

"She's a Ph.D. from Yale, isn't she?"

Oxford, I say. In *philosophy*.

"I rest my case. It's good enough for me."

"YOU ALLOWED IT to happen, you stupid motherfucker!"

This is what Bannon sounds like when he loses it. I had heard about his famous temper, but had yet to witness it in real time.

"You know why? 'Cause you don't *give a shit*."

The target of his pique is one of his employees. I will later feel terrible about this and apologize. He is yelling at the employee based on a mistake I made—I'd been pestering Bannon about a bizarre newsletter that I thought was issued by *War Room* but in fact came from a fan site. Bannon thought the employee was to blame.

"If I didn't give a shit, I wouldn't be here doing this stuff," the employee replies.

"Bullshit," Bannon says. "You're doing this for a fucking paycheck. Go fuck yourself." He then calmly turns to Cameron, the producer. "Do we have Ben at the border?" Suddenly the tantrum has the quality of WWE wrestling—dialed up for my benefit, a performance.

Was it for my benefit? I ask the employee.

He shakes his head. *No*. He stares at his computer, grim-faced.

Bannon's blood is still up about half an hour later, when I ask him why he thinks his Apple podcast rankings dipped shortly after the start of the Ukraine invasion. They did *not* dip, he says, and starts punching his phone, this time to yell at his publicist. "Why did you not send her the Chartable chart every day?"

I get it every day, I interrupt.

"Stop," he snaps at me. "Am I asking you?"

No, I say.

He continues giving a heated lecture to his publicist. "Are we the No. 1 or 2 podcast every day in politics on Chartable?" Pause. "Have we had any dips since the war started?" Pause. "Thank you. All 30 days you send me, I want you to send her, and I want you to copy me on it."

I get it later. The chart shows a clear dip—with the show sliding to third, fourth, fifth place in the politics category—around the beginning of the war.

Bannon gets off the phone, perfectly cheerful.

When you were married, I ask, did you yell at your wives like this?

"Was I yelling?"

Yes, I tell him. What would his ex-wives say about him?

"They'd say, 'Another day at the Bannon ranch.'"

Did any of his ex-wives ever drag him to therapy?

“Stop.” He starts laughing.

Look, if you want to stay married—

“Marriage to me *was* therapy.”

But did any of them ever take him to a shrink?

“Never mentioned it. Are you nuts? I’m an Irishman.”

I know, I say. Famously unanalyzable. Still, your personality is not garden-variety—

“That’s so not true.”

But of course it is true. The charisma, the quick temper, the overt delight in manipulating people ...

... And again, the majestically unreliable narration. A few weeks later, I consulted a report from the Santa Monica Police Department filed on New Year’s Day 1996, following a 911 call. It said that Bannon’s second wife—the mother of the twins—had had an argument with Bannon so intense that she followed him out to the car, where he’d already climbed into the driver’s seat, and spat on him; he reached through the open window and grabbed her by the wrist and neck, leaving red marks.

I remembered the story well, having read it in *Politico* when it first broke, in 2016. Bannon was charged with misdemeanor domestic assault, battery, and dissuading a witness. When the story came out, Bannon told *Politico* through a spokesperson that he’d never been interviewed by the police about the incident. He pleaded not guilty to the charges. The case was later dismissed.

But as I reread the grim police report, something else caught my eye. It was the part that said, *They have been going to counseling.*

He *had* been dragged to a therapist.

“That’s not therapy,” Bannon says, when I mention this to him a few weeks later. “That’s marriage counseling.”

I do wonder what that counselor had to say.

I’VE GOTTEN USED to this strange house. Bannon and I are mid-conversation when my colleague David Frum appears on the flatscreen in the living room. Is that David? I ask, interrupting our

conversation. Bannon turns around. He’s thrilled. “Ask David Frum how it was to get *crushed*,” he tells me. “You heard the story of how I destroyed him in Toronto?”

He’s referring to the debate the two had in 2018. It drew lots of publicity at the time. I did, in fact, watch it, and David did not, in fact, get crushed. According to the audience meter, the debate was a draw, the attendees unbudging in their final views—which overwhelmingly corresponded with David’s, by a 44-point margin. (David had argued that the future belonged to liberals, in the broad sense of the term; Bannon had argued it belonged to populists.) David wrote about the experience for *The Atlantic*.

“It was *full-spectrum dominance*.”

Full-spectrum dominance. It’s a staple in Bannon’s pantry of war cries. We will show *full-spectrum dominance* in November. We will *run the tables* on those feckless Democrats; we will *fieldstrip* these clowns. Trump was *the tip of the spear, an armor-piercing shell*.

Navy speak, basically, with extra habanero.

A streak of machismo definitely runs through *War Room*. Bannon crows about the new “muscular, ascendant Republican Party.” He despises “emotionalism.” He’s bellicose when it comes to the culture wars, possessed of unerring instincts about what will inflame and polarize. Demagoguing critical race theory? Here for it. Just hours before the invasion of Ukraine, he declared: “Putin ain’t woke.” The undocumented immigrants streaming over the border? “An invasion,” the *real* invasion, the one Americans should care about, as opposed to what’s happening in Ukraine.

Come next January, Bannon hopes the new Republican majority will impeach President Biden for this so-called invasion. The notion strikes me as insane. But he talks about it with metronomic regularity on his show.

“His ability to see the crack, create the wedge, and then deliver a message with emotional impact is second to none,” Brad Parscale, a senior campaign manager for Trump in both 2016 and 2020, told me. “I’ve seen him do it in real time.”

But Bannon also has a darker, more oracular message to impart: We are at a historic *inflection point*. It’s *The Fourth*

Turning. That’s the title of one of Bannon’s favorite texts, published in 1997. The authors, Neil Howe and William Strauss, take a cyclical view of history, stipulating that we go through four cycles every 80 to 100 years: a High (characterized by order), followed by an Awakening (characterized by questioning, consciousness-raising), followed by an Unraveling (marked by pessimism, selfish pursuits), which culminates in a Crisis (marked by destruction, possibly war).

At some point I ask Bannon: If you use your show to sow doubts about every institution there is—

“That’s good!”

About our media—

“That’s good!”

Then what replaces them?

“People are gonna come in to rejuvenate these things. It’s the cycle! It’s a natural process that has to happen. That’s where Donald Trump comes up.”

He trusts *Donald Trump* to re-sow the soil and build everything back?

“Donald Trump is an armor-piercing shell.”

Which is to say: There is no plan. The plan is to leave a smoldering crater where our institutions once were. Others will eventually fill it.

It must be so intoxicating to be the one in the crane with the wrecking ball.

EARLY ON IN my acquaintance with Bannon, his father died. Our original plan had been for me to meet Marty Bannon—Steve had dinner with him most weekends in Richmond—and we’d even gone some way toward coordinating the logistics. But then I got a text saying he’d died. I went to Martin Bannon’s funeral instead.

You could say that this was one hell of a brazen PR move, having a reporter tag along to your dad’s funeral—and an insensitive guerrilla stunt to pull on your family, too.

And on some level, it was. (*He’s using you.*)

But the Bannons barely blinked when I told them what I was doing there. They seemed to be used to this type of thing from Steve, and basically shrugged it off. (“Anything Steve says, you have to cut in half and divide by two,” one of them said.)

His first wife was there, and she seemed to be on pleasant terms with him. His brother Chris, who went out of his way to make sure I didn't feel marooned or awkward, was especially helpful when I phoned some weeks later, telling me that Steve had always been a reader and a control freak and "the most competitive guy on the planet."

Marty's story plays a key role in Steve Bannon's own political transformation. He was a father of five, a man who worked for the phone company his entire life, only to panic and sell off most of what remained of his savings when the market crashed in 2008. That was Steve's true moment of conversion on the road to Damascus, or so he says—what made him embrace the cause of the forgotten deplorable. "The civic society in our country is predicated upon Marty Bannons," he told me. "The world *depends* upon the Marty Bannons. And they're always getting the shit end of the stick."

Steve was the sole member of his family not to take Communion. (He has a beef with the current pope: "He's a Marxist.")

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But that was the only way he stood out. That was the biggest revelation over those two days at Marty's funeral: Bannon basically recedes when he's in the bosom of his family. No one treats him like a celebrity. There's no gravitational shift when he enters the room. His eulogy was brief, affectionate, appropriate—focused on the living, how the accomplishments of the grandkids had made Marty so proud. In this setting, anyway, Bannon never once stole the show.

ZELENSKY ... JUST another degenerate Jew. These Jews keep showing up when societies collapse.

The Wuhan Lab was a Zionist Lab (Yves Levi, Rothschild)

I will say that Bannon tried to warn me.

Nothing burger with Jew sauce

Jews hate anyone that goes against the world financial machine.

He knew I was Jewish. So when I asked him about *War Room* chat rooms, he told me that some of them got "a little spicy."

Only a matter of time until the Jews destroying this country get noticed and expelled

At first, I didn't understand what he meant. Spicy?

There was a long pause. "How much do you drill down on the, on the right?" he finally replied. "Not the conservatives. People who are considered far-right or populist or nationalist. How familiar are you with this ecosphere?"

I told him getting more so, but not very.

"Look, it's freedom of expression," he said, "and they're pretty blunt about what they're saying."

Jews to the left, Jews to the right, stuck in the middle of Jews.

These comments—all from different handles, by the way—are on Rumble, which carries Bannon's show live, and usually has tens of thousands of viewers in real time. (I didn't even venture onto Telegram, where I knew the commentary would be fouler still.) I got used to it after a while. I also came to expect it: Anti-Semitic rhetoric was the most abundant form of ugliness I saw from commenters during his broadcast, even more abundant than anything floridly racist or anti-immigrant.

This hardly seems an accident. Anti-Semitism is the mother of all conspiracy theories. Jews: They've rigged everything.

"You cannot possibly—you cannot possibly, possibly watch the *War Room* and think it's in any way anti-Semitic," Bannon says to me when I ask him about this. Give me an example of a show segment that's anti-Semitic, he tells me.

But it's never as straightforward as that.

For starters, it's the people he brings on his show. Like Marjorie Taylor Greene, one of his most ubiquitous guests, whom he cast aside only after she spoke at a February conference where the organizer, Nick Fuentes, cheerfully praised Hitler. Her beliefs were hardly a secret before that. In 2018, she shared on Facebook a video claiming that "Zionist supremacists" were trying to displace white Europeans with immigrants (in other words, the "Great Replacement" theory); she also posted a hypothesis that the California wildfires may have been caused by lasers controlled, in part, by a vice chairman at "Rothschild Inc, international investment banking firm."

Jewish space lasers, I say to him.

"I haven't really seen that," he tells me.

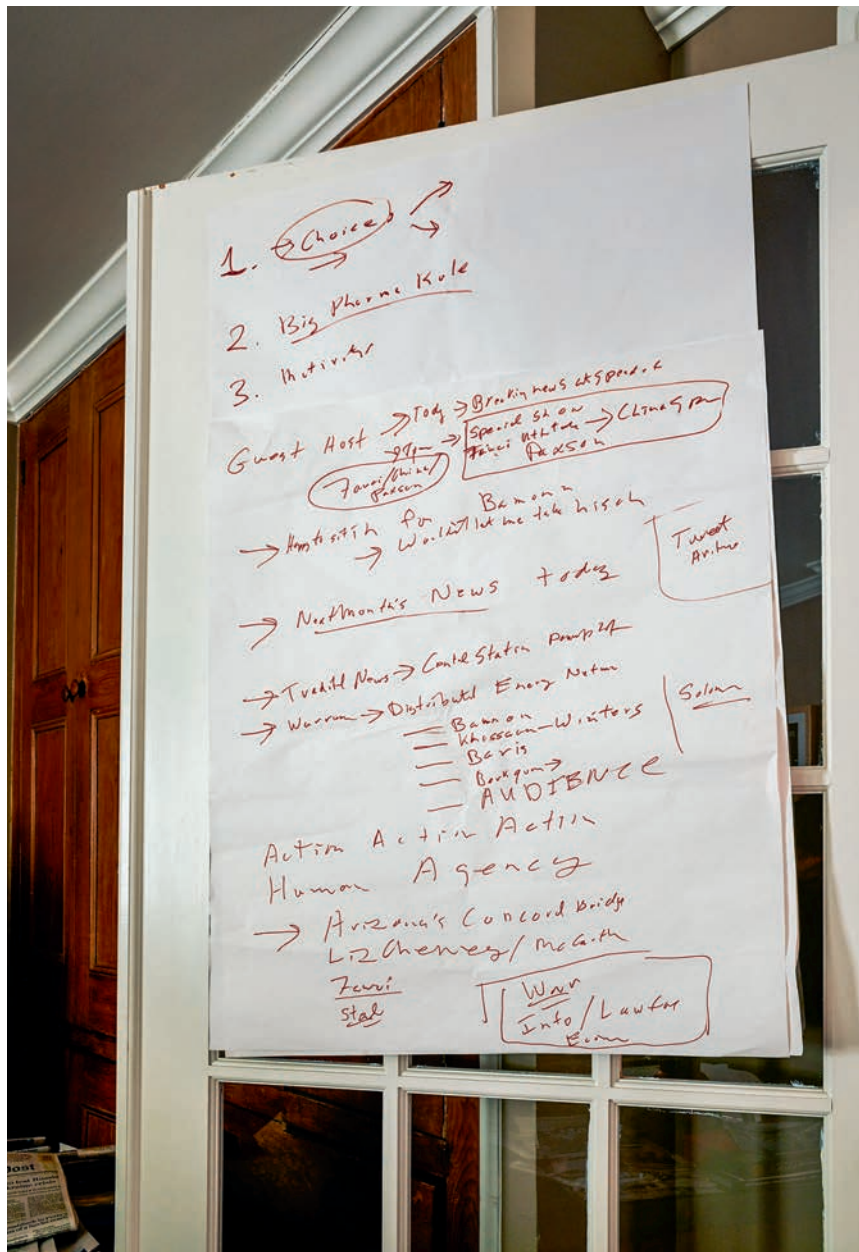
But the *War Room* regular who truly gives me the creeps is Jack Posobiec.

"Are you saying Posobiec's an anti-Semite?" he asks. "Show me any evidence at all that he's an anti-Semite."

I'm uncertain how to reply to this. Hatewatch, a blog of the Southern Poverty Law Center, published a detailed account of Posobiec's anti-Semitic postings on social media. (Posobiec called Hatewatch's findings "disinformation" and claimed to have filed an FBI report about it.) The crudest evidence was once on Twitter. According to the SPLC, he was part of the crusade to identify Jewish users with three sets of parentheses—the "echoes meme," as it became known—so that they could be targeted and harassed by white supremacists online. He erased those tweets, but some are still archived.

"Surrounded by (((them))) at Peter Thiel press conference," Posobiec tweeted in October 2016, accompanied by a selfie with people who I gather are Jews in the background.

"(((WOLF)))," he tweeted in July 2016 above another person's tweet complaining about Wolf Blitzer's behavior in a restaurant.



just reported it, along with the news that more than seven hours of White House phone logs—which happened to encompass the window of the insurrection—were missing. I ask Bannon what might account for the gap.

“During the working day, I don’t think Trump takes a lot of calls on the cellphone.”

Except we already know that the president tried to reach Senator Tommy Tuberville and accidentally got Senator Mike Lee, I say.

So he really never talked to Trump?

“Talking to Donald J. Trump was not a priority in those hours. What was a priority,” he says, was getting all dozen Republican senators who’d originally agreed to reject the election results to stay the course. He was “livid” that some of them backed off their objections after the Capitol was breached.

This was not a response I had anticipated.

You wanted to stay the course, I say, even while men in horns and fur were storming the Senate floor? Even though a woman got *shot*?

“I assume that the Capitol Police, they’re gonna get good order and discipline, but yes,” he says. “As bad as that looks, you still have your duty to do . . . And we failed that day. And the failure is on McConnell, and Schumer and Pelosi, and McCarthy, and all of them that wet themselves that day.”

Forget about the physical insurrection. He was furious that the legislative insurrection hadn’t taken place.

This is what he was talking about with Trump, he says, on the evening phone call. He told Trump it was over. “We had our shot,” he says, summarizing his message to the president. “What we now have is: You can have a state legislature go back after the fact and *decertify*. And then you’re kind of in uncharted territory. But the process to take the presidency” *before* it got certified was over.

It is hard to know what to make of this, the thinking is so outlandish, and so utterly estranged from the realities on the ground. True, Bannon had been at the Willard Hotel on January 5, along with a ragtag group of misfit lawyers and advisers, helping cook up a political and messaging strategy to overturn the election.

And look: I didn’t expect Steve Bannon to be honest about this. He’s already been charged with two counts of criminal contempt of Congress for failing to respond to a subpoena from the January 6 committee. His first attempt to get the charge dismissed, based on the bizarre claim of executive privilege, didn’t work. His trial starts July 18.

When I asked Maureen what she thought her father was doing upstairs, she told me she wasn’t sure, but she believed he was on the phone with the president, urging him to tell the protesters to stand down. “I can’t say with absolute certainty, because I did not hear him on the phone.

But knowing my dad, I believe that he did tell Trump . . . that he needed to put out a statement telling them to stop.”

“She’s very sweet,” Bannon tells me when I relay this to him.

So you’re going to tell me you *didn’t* call Trump?

He coyly rolls his eyes. “I don’t remember.”

What?

“Hey, if they come up with it, I’ll have to rethink it, but I don’t think I did.”

I did it if they find it.

He’s quick to note that he did phone Trump that morning and evening, which of course I know, because the papers have

But he was now fuming over the failure to act on an interpretation of the 1887 Electoral Count Act, one that would have allowed the vice president to refuse to accept states' electoral votes. It's a dangerous interpretation. To embrace it would give our democracy the means to die by its own hand. And introducing it as a viable concept in the run-up to January 6, 2021, is what led to *literal* deaths—and had the Secret Service frantically trying to protect Vice President Mike Pence from grave physical harm.

Yet Bannon bitterly claims that Pence himself was the problem. Which is presumably what the guys with the hangman's noose also thought. "As a gutless coward—and he is a gutless coward—he dropped a thermonuclear weapon on a city that was obviously on edge," he insists, speaking of Pence's failure to reject states' electors. "He's responsible. One thousand percent."

This is the world according to Bannon: Mike Pence is to blame for January 6.

So what most upset you about that day, I ask, was that your legislative machinations were not fully carried out, even though they were never going to succeed?

"We would've lost," he says. "Definitely lost. But you would've had it in an official record, right? That could be debated later on."

Moving the Overton window—the spectrum of political and cultural ideas that a society is willing to countenance—is very important to Bannon. But getting the American public to accept the idea that the vice president can reject the results of a free and fair election—that's more than shifting the window. That's installing a new one.

So whom *did* Bannon call that day?

There's a five-second pause. "I have to think about that. But we worked the phones in the afternoon—where I was told, in no uncertain terms, *This is over.*"

So whom did you talk to? I repeat.

"I gotta remember," he says.

I stare at him.

"I blocked that whole thing out ... I was worked up."

He does say one thing: He wasn't in touch with Ginni Thomas. (I asked.)

That, at least, is something. If you can believe it. If you can believe anything.

THE HOUSE NEXT DOOR to the Breitbart embassy is Bannon's now. Purchased for \$2.3 million, according to public records. He hopes it will one day be the headquarters of the nationalist populist movement. "We're gonna have all the lectures here, all the talks, all the cocktail parties," he says as he walks me through it. It's a lovely wedding cake of a place, with ornate molding and twinkly chandeliers. I ask if he sees any irony in its grandeur.

"In revolutionary France, didn't they have the nicest salons?"

True, but didn't Robespierre eventually find his own head in the cradle of the guillotine?

"I didn't say it worked that well for everyone individually."

Bannon may have styled himself as the leader of the nationalist populist movement. But he's completely at home in the system he despises. After leaving the White House, when he was trying to build a continent-wide clearinghouse for the populist movement in Europe, he was partial to staying in luxury hotels. When federal agents came to arrest Bannon in August 2020 for allegedly defrauding investors in "We Build the Wall," they had to pull him off the yacht of his latest patron, Guo Wengui (also known as Miles Kwok), where he'd been living for weeks.

"This guy stumbled into the MAGA movement as a way to make money and to get fame and fortune," says another ex-colleague. "He lives off other people's money—Andrew Breitbart, Bob Mercer, a Chinese billionaire. How is he any different from a kept woman? He's a 68-year-old kept woman."

Bannon has answers to this litany, of course, which he's heard some version of many times before. His stint at Goldman gave him a glimpse inside the beast, how it fed off the little guy. His assorted collaborations with the billionaire Mercer family also served the cause, whether those were creating Cambridge Analytica, the data firm that fed the Trump campaign, or the Government Accountability Institute, whose president wrote the book *Clinton Cash*. His current association with the media mogul Robert Sigg and Miles Kwok has served *War Room*.

We will set aside, for now, that Sigg has a criminal record that includes bank fraud

and assault, according to *The Washington Post*, and that Kwok was wanted by the Chinese government for fraud, as well as bribery and money-laundering, charges he has denied. And that Kwok not long ago filed for bankruptcy, suggesting that his assets are between \$50,001 and \$100,000 while his liabilities are between \$100 million and \$500 million.

Bannon does have some monastic habits. He's seldom seen around town. He never discusses his girlfriend—or is she an ex?—and her daughter, who live several states away. He says the last time he had a fancy meal in D.C. was 10 years ago, at Cafe Milano, where the food was merely "fleet average."

But Bannon is still the king of the side hustle. He is now dabbling in cryptocurrency. (FJB coin. *JB* stands for "Joe Biden.") He's partnered with Birch Gold, a sponsor of his show, writing a pamphlet on the demise of the dollar. Most important, he's partnered with Kwok in ways both conspicuous and obscure: He received \$1 million from Guo Media in 2018 to serve as a consultant to the company, which is dedicated in equal measure to savaging the Chinese government and spreading disinformation in America; he was identified in 2020 as one of the directors of GTV, an alternative news and social-media platform also linked to Kwok.

Last fall, GTV and the other media companies connected to Kwok were fined \$539 million for illegally selling shares. (The companies neither admitted nor denied any wrongdoing; GTV has since shut down.) This spring, two of Bannon's co-defendants in "We Build the Wall" pleaded guilty to defrauding donors of hundreds of thousands. The fourth co-defendant has pleaded not guilty, and is calling Bannon as a witness. Bannon says his arrest was politically motivated. "This was 1,000 percent to keep me off the Trump campaign in 2020."

For all his big talk, it is unclear how much Bannon is worth or what, in fact, truly belongs to him. The Breitbart embassy is owned by Moustafa El-Gindy, a former member of the Egyptian Parliament. This beautiful new house is owned by an LLC based in Delaware, but there's no way to tell if that LLC is his.

I ask Bannon when he last flew commercial.

“He’s a smart man,” says a former colleague. “He’s a crafty man. He’s a showman. And ultimately, he’s a dangerous man.”

He grins. “Oh, years ago.”

How many years?

He reconsiders. “Commercial *overseas*, I’ve flown a bunch. But commercial *domestic*? Hasn’t been since before I took over the Trump campaign.”

He continues his tour, explaining where and how the two houses will become one. There are at least some walls he’s in favor of removing.

“CAN I SAY SOMETHING?” Bannon asks me during our final hours together. “There’s not a more sophisticated show on all television than *War Room*.”

I don’t know about that. He’s certainly working very hard at it.

But where, exactly, is the line between mania and desperation?

When I first met Bannon, he was already podcasting three hours per weekday and two hours on Saturdays. In March, he added a fourth hour to his weekday load, *War Room: Battleground*, to focus on

local elections. What was already a frenetic schedule got even zanier; a Red Bull habit, which he’d quit, was back.

Bannon and I were originally going to fly out to Arizona for this story. He recently purchased a home there too, and he says its broadcast studio is an exact replica of the one in D.C., so that viewers won’t notice the difference. His plan had been to spend the winter and spring out there.

But we never made it. It may have been because his father died, throwing his life into temporary disarray. But I kept wondering if the real reason was something else, possibly financial trouble—maybe that’s why he added a fourth hour of programming to his load. But no, he tells me. “The *War Room* is a cash machine because it costs nothing to produce.” In fact, he says, he needed that fourth hour to accommodate all of his sponsors.

What’s really tying him to Washington, he explains, is a furious desire to keep the momentum going on his show. He’s on a roll. There’s so much energy now in the MAGA movement. Inflation is soaring; Biden is tanking. “The largest voting bloc in this nation is non-college-educated whites,” he tells me. “I have 52/48 of men and I have 50/50 of women that believe he’s illegitimate, okay?”

Note the use of the pronoun *I*. He really does see this as his movement. The nearer we get to 2024, the more he seems to feel compelled to stick around.

And you can see it. How *this* will finally be Bannon’s moment, when the nationalist populist movement at last takes wing, and he’ll be at the center of it all, hosting his salons.

But will he?

I mean: Is this guy Lenin in Zurich, patiently biding his time? Or is he some Estonian anti-Communist émigré from a Le Carré novel, waiting to die in a lonely bedsit in London?

Matthew C. MacWilliams, a public-opinion strategist and the author of *On Fascism*, is guessing the latter. “Trump threw him out. The Europeans kicked him to the curb. His empire crashed and he ended up with a podcast,” he says. “He’s a parasite. A talker. Rasputin with a digital show. Rasputin was *knifed*.”

But others still think he has plenty of influence. “He’s a smart man. He’s a crafty

man. He’s a showman. And ultimately, he’s a dangerous man,” says yet another former colleague. And a vindictive man: “He commands a little army of terrifying people who can make life really difficult if you cross him.” Which explains why so many people in this story asked for anonymity.

In this person’s estimation, it would not be giving Bannon too much credit to say that he’s built the ideological foundation for Trumpism in this country. “And frankly, I think that that foundation has formed the basis of the mainstreaming of conspiracy theories, a spike in political violence, and a deep and continuous damage to our democratic institutions.”

On April 25, my phone dinged at 8:39 p.m. A text from Bannon, this time containing a link to a story in *Axios*. It said that 133 House Republicans had sent a letter to Alejandro Mayorkas, Biden’s secretary of homeland security, that essentially laid the groundwork for Mayorkas’s impeachment. “Enthusiasm for impeaching top Biden officials has spread from the fringes of the House Republican conference to its mainstream,” read the lede.

And you doubted WarRoom!!! Bannon texted.

I don’t know if *War Room* was responsible. The *Axios* authors never mentioned it. But Bannon has, as I’ve said, been banging on about impeaching Biden for the southern “invasion” for months. To borrow his former colleague’s term, he has helped mainstream this treacherous idea. And now here is a version of it, embraced by more than half of the House Republicans.

This is going to be so fucking epic.

Two-thirds of House Republicans voted to reject the result of the 2020 election. How long before it’s three-quarters, four-fifths, nine-tenths? How long before one of these people becomes speaker?

Why, I ruefully asked, was he so relentless with his pronunciamientos?

Because like a Kafka novel one can never escape.

Watch me, I wrote. I’m going downstairs and doing a load of laundry.

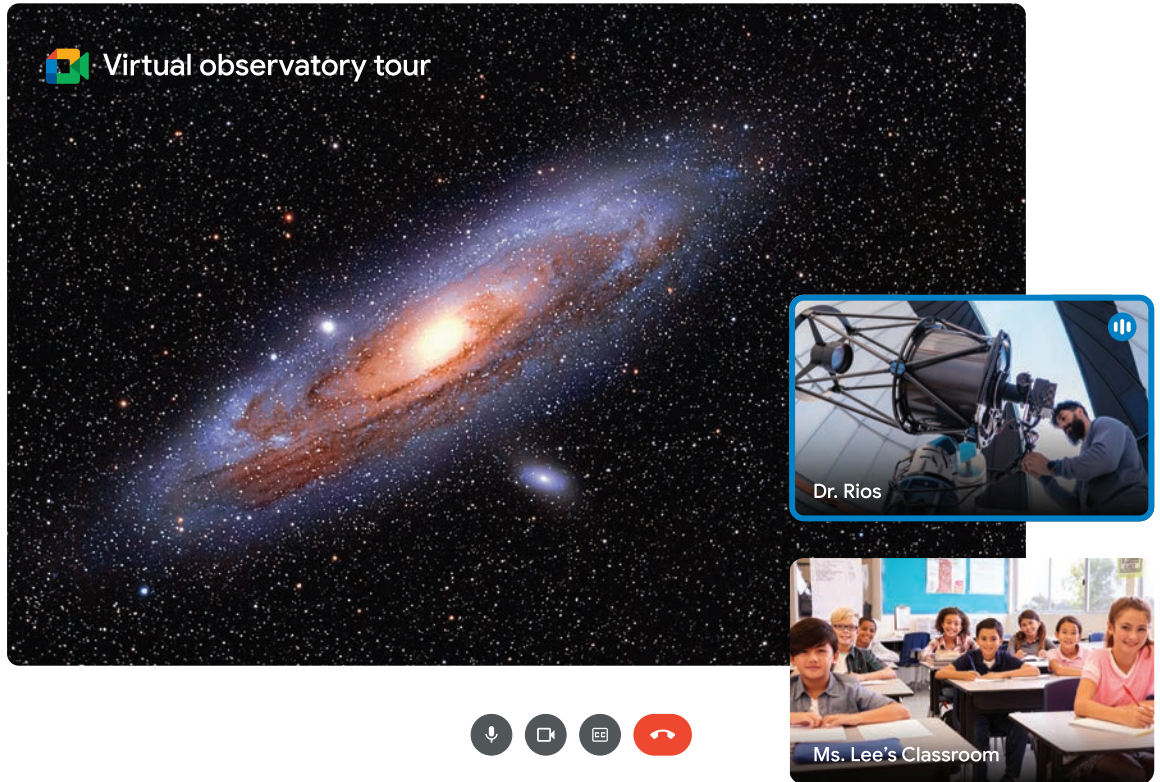
And I did. But my phone still lights up most nights. Bannon is still texting. *A*

Jennifer Senior is a staff writer at The Atlantic.



How Electronic Arts builds immersive worlds

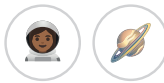




is how Ms. Lee's class explores the galaxy.

Amy

Charlie

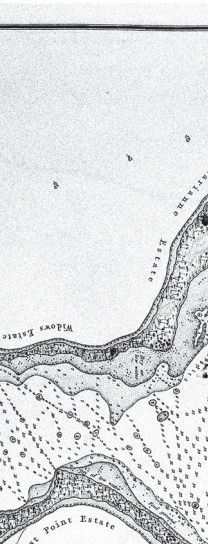


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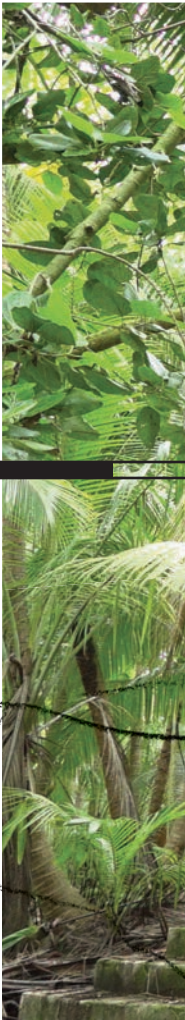
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By
CULLEN MURPHY



Chagos



HALF A CENTURY AGO, 2,000 PEOPLE
WERE FORCIBLY REMOVED FROM
A REMOTE STRING OF ISLANDS IN THE
MIDDLE OF THE INDIAN OCEAN.



THIS YEAR, A GROUP OF THEM
SET SAIL FOR HOME.



L

Victoria, Seychelles

When Olivier Bancoult boarded the ship that was to take him 1,000 miles across the Indian Ocean to the Chagos Archipelago—his childhood home, from which he and his fellow islanders had been expelled 50 years earlier—he carried five wrought-iron crosses. Most of them bore a short inscription, hand-lettered in white paint, memorializing the return of Chagossians to their birthplace. The crosses were to be driven into the ground of Peros Banhos and Salomon, two of the archipelago’s once-inhabited atolls. But one cross was different.

It was inscribed with the name of Bancoult’s grandfather Alfred Olivier Elysé, and it was destined for an island cemetery. Elysé had died in 1969, as expulsions from the archipelago were under way.

The expulsions were part of an international bargain, though not one that the 2,000 people of Chagos had any say in. The short version: For many years, the archipelago was a faraway administrative appendage of the British colony of Mauritius, an island off the coast of Africa. When Mauritius sought independence, in the mid-1960s, Britain decided to keep Chagos for itself. It did so primarily to sequester one of the atolls, Diego Garcia, for use by the United States—part of a global American ambition, at the height of the Cold War, to establish military outposts in strategic places. Chagos itself was nowhere, but it was equidistant from everywhere: Draw a long line from Madagascar to Indonesia, and another from India to Antarctica, and stick a pin in the blue at the intersection. The catch for Britain was that under international law, the archipelago could be separated from Mauritius only if it had no “permanent population.”

Chagos did have a permanent population—it had had one for centuries. The Chagossians harvested

coconuts and they fished. They had churches of stone. Mossy grave-stones go back many generations. But a world away, in the offices of Whitehall and the clubs of St. James’s, this was a technicality. That the islanders involved were Black made decisions even easier. The conversations might reasonably be imagined, but they don’t have to be. Foreign and Colonial Office documents from the period state that, for official purposes, people living in Chagos were to be referred to as transitory “contract laborers.” The archipelago was described as having “no indigenous population except seagulls.” Internal documents freely admitted that all of this was a “fiction.” A few years before Alfred Olivier Elysé was laid to rest in the Catholic cemetery on Île du Coin, one of the Chagos islands, a comment scrawled on a British document by an official named Denis Greenhill captured the government’s outlook: “Along with the Birds go some few Tarzans or Men Fridays whose origins are obscure.”

One thing at least was true: Governmental fiat had the power to turn fable into fact. For reasons of state, the permanent inhabitants



PREVIOUS PAGE: THE RUINS OF A CHAGOSSIAN CHURCH ON BODDAM ISLAND.

ABOVE: OLIVIER BANCOUTL HAS LED EFFORTS TO SECURE HIS PEOPLE’S RIGHT OF RETURN TO THEIR HOME ISLANDS, INCLUDING DIEGO GARCIA, NOW THE SITE OF A U.S. MILITARY BASE.

of the archipelago were removed, often with little warning, and typically allowed to bring only a single bag or suitcase or wooden box. The United States, which wanted and endorsed the expulsions, built its military base. The archipelago as a whole—Diego Garcia and some 60 other islands, mainly in the Peros Banhos and Salomon atolls—was reconstituted into a colonial entity known as the British Indian Ocean Territory, within which Diego Garcia could nest. Having been detached from Mauritius, BIOT would become both the newest British colony in Africa and the last remaining one.

Uprooted and desperately poor, the Chagossians formed small communities in Mauritius, the Seychelles, and the United Kingdom, with little support from any of those countries. As a remembrance, many kept sand from Chagos in small bowls in their home. On the balance scale of Cold War morality, the sand didn't count for much. But the Chagossians never forgot where they'd come from—or, given that half a century has now elapsed, where their parents and grandparents had come from. Some hoped to return to Chagos, or at least to have that right. Some wanted a path to citizenship in Britain. Most wanted compensation commensurate with their loss.

Bancoult, who makes his living as an electrician in Mauritius, is the president of the Chagos Refugees Group. He left Île du Coin, in Peros Banhos, on March 30, 1968, at the age of 4, taking a small boat from the jetty to a bigger boat anchored in the lagoon. He has an islander's way of using *on* rather than *in* to refer to where he comes from: "*on* my birthplace." Bancoult is a large man with a large personality. He is friendly and he is forceful. In the register of his voice, the calm vivisection of British actions can mount by degrees into the more insistent tones of a man who has truth on his side.

Over the years, Bancoult has pressed the Chagossian cause with the Congressional Black Caucus and the pope. Starting in the 1990s, he began looking for cracks to exploit in the edifice of British law. Future historians sifting through musty files in the Public Record Office will find an impressive volume of litigation bearing the name Bancoult. The documents point the way to a tangle of episodes—in British tribunals as well as the International Court of Justice (or World Court) and the United Nations General Assembly. In 2019, to the surprise of many, the UN confirmed a finding by the World Court: The creation of the British Indian Ocean Territory had been illegal. The archipelago belonged to Mauritius. The Chagos islanders could turn their eyes toward home.

Which is why, earlier this year, Bancoult and a group of other Chagossians found themselves on a converted British minesweeper, now a private vessel named the *Bleu de Nîmes*, with those five homemade crosses. They'd also brought bouquets of flowers, asking the crew to keep them cooled. The five Chagossians on the ship were guests of the government of Mauritius, which had an additional agenda of its own for this voyage: to assert its sovereignty over the archipelago—to, quite literally, plant a flag. The voyage was hopeful, if uncertain. The World Court and UN notwithstanding, Mauritian sovereignty is something that London has yet to concede; for all anyone aboard knew, the British might seek to impede the trip in some fashion. Just out of sight, a British patrol vessel shadowed the *Bleu de Nîmes* when it entered Chagossian waters. Jagdish Koonjul, the ambassador of Mauritius

to the United Nations, was aboard the *Bleu de Nîmes*; he smiled diplomatically when someone referred to him as a "human shield."

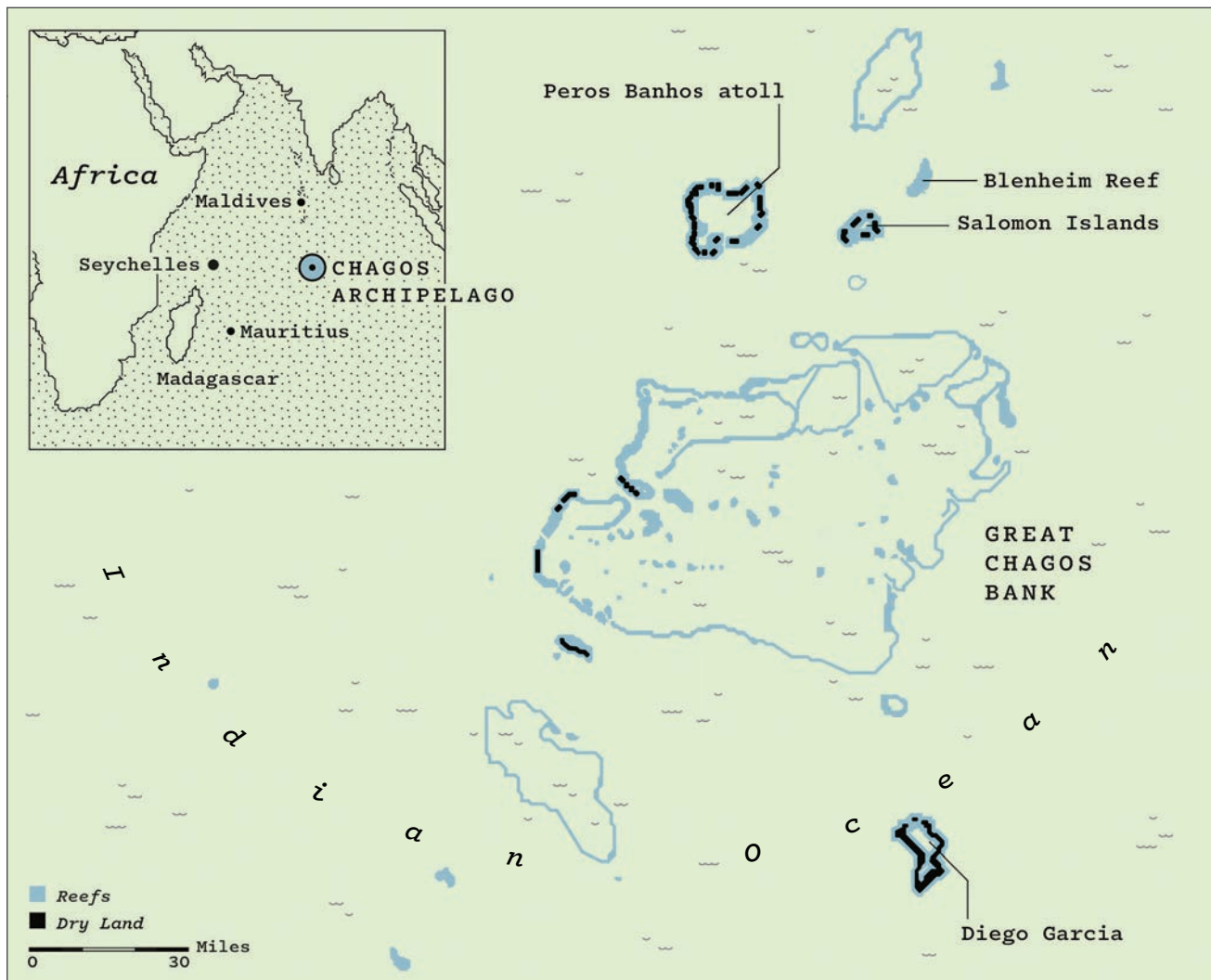
We had departed from the Seychelles; typhoons made departure from Mauritius impossible. The ship slipped past the megayachts of oligarchs, anchored off Victoria. Mountains receded, then disappeared. Between the Seychelles and Chagos lies nothing but open sea, sometimes rough. Five full days elapsed before the first hint of land—shorebirds diving for fish. A few hours later, the *Bleu de Nîmes* reached Peros Banhos, anchoring in its lagoon. Like every atoll, Peros Banhos is the rim of an extinct volcano, this one about 10 miles in diameter. In places the rim emerges sufficiently above water to create a necklace of tiny islands, linked by reefs.

The Chagossians took a launch to Île du Coin, where three of the group had been born, and waded onto the smooth, coralline sand. The island is narrow and slightly curved, about a mile and a half long. The white beach was alive with small crabs. Coconuts bobbed in the surf. The Chagossians bent to their knees and kissed the sand, leaving a splay of palm prints. They stood and joined hands, closing their eyes and reciting the Lord's Prayer in Kreol, the French-based language of the islands. They concluded the prayer and planted the first of the wrought-iron crosses.

Then they ventured into the dense vegetation—coconut trees heavy with green fruit, flame trees that bloom a brilliant red—to seek the remains of their civilization.

II.

The fate of the Chagos Archipelago has rested for centuries in the hands of the Great Powers, whether those powers were moving in, moving out, or just trying to hold on—"to get some rocks which will remain *ours*," as Sir Paul Gore-Booth, the permanent undersecretary at the Foreign Office, described his country's intentions in the 1960s. The Chagos Archipelago spreads out across 250,000 square miles, an area the size of Texas; taken together, the islands have a landmass the size of Manhattan. In two weeks at sea, traveling to, from, and among them, we did not see another ship. The recorded history of the archipelago has chiefly been scientific and geopolitical rather than cultural or social. Charles Darwin sailed through in 1836, during the voyage of the *Beagle*, but his interest lay in coral. For all but one of the islands, there is no longer any human history to record: Everyone is gone. The exception, Diego Garcia, is inhabited by 2,500 American-military personnel and temporary foreign workers, mostly Filipino. That tiny atoll, a single V-shaped island with a central lagoon, is strictly off-limits. Those who have been stationed there describe a place that would resemble the base at Guantánamo Bay—gyms, fast food, television, snorkeling—if Guantánamo were on the moon and the moon were an ocean. Until their expulsion, more than 1,000 Chagossians lived on Diego Garcia. Many accounts of the island by Americans stationed there



mention signs of previous habitation: a ruined house here, a crumbling church there, a handful of graveyards. Diego Garcia's runway and "downtown" lie atop two village sites.

Chagos was chanced upon by Portuguese navigators in the 16th century. They mapped the islands and gave some of them, such as Peros Banhos, the names they retain. The Dutch came next, but didn't stay. Chagos eventually came into the possession of France, as did Mauritius and Réunion. The French gave names to more of the islands. They imported enslaved workers from Madagascar and Mozambique, and later brought indentured workers from southern India, to labor in coconut plantations. After the defeat of Napoleon, Great Britain acquired Chagos and Mauritius.

Little changed for the people of the islands, who by then numbered in the several hundreds. In time, after abolition, slavery was replaced completely by indentured servitude; in the 20th century, indentured servitude became low-wage employment by corporate planters. The language of the people remained Kreol. The main religion was Catholicism. Cargo ships provided an occasional connection to Mauritius—at most, four times a year. In the 1960s, as Mauritius negotiated its independence, the Chagos islanders were working for a single company, Chagos-Agalega Ltd., which exported

copra—the dried kernel of a coconut—along with the oil pressed from it. The Chagossians had created a distinctive society. They had their own houses, their own boats, their own gardens. Their form of *sega* music provided the soundtrack for our time at sea.

One evening on board the ship, Bancoult spread out half a dozen well-creased nautical charts, pointing to key features of the archipelago. Starting from the far north: Blenheim Reef, a treacherous marine structure about 20 miles in circumference that has caused the destruction of scores of ships; below that, Salomon atoll, with a dozen small islands around its rim; to the west of Salomon, the larger Peros Banhos atoll, with about 30 small islands; and finally, at the bottom, Diego Garcia, some 150 miles south of Blenheim Reef. Bancoult pointed to where the Chagossians on the ship, all now living in Mauritius, had been born. Suzelle Baptiste was from Diego Garcia. Rosemonde Bertin was from Salomon. Lisbey Elysé, Marcel Humbert, and Bancoult himself were from Peros Banhos.

When Chagossians look back at the life they recall, or the life they've heard about, they conjure an idyll—Garden of Eden meets Shangri-la. They use the word *paradise*. They talk of "*la vie facile*." People ate fish from the sea and shared with one another. There was enough of everything to go around. Could it have been that

good? Once, on deck, still a day out from Peros Banhos, I heard two of the Chagossians talking about the remoteness of island life, and how remoteness can produce contentment: “What you see is all you know.”

The plantation company paid workers both in cash and in food and supplies. It provided small pensions after retirement. There was a certain amount of infrastructure, including electricity in a few places. A Catholic priest traveled among the atolls. A number of islanders learned to read and write; others signed documents with a thumbprint. Photographs of special occasions from a century ago show people of the archipelago wearing dresses and suits.

The islands are certainly beautiful—thickly wooded atolls in a turquoise sea as pure as anywhere on Earth. The most startling creature is the coconut crab, which grows to the size of a cat and may drop suddenly from trees. Its claws can take off a finger. They are not a problem, Bancoult explained, “if you know how to pick them up,” and they are good to eat. Still, the work of the islanders was hard. The rows of tiny stone rectangles in the cemeteries of Chagos tell a story of death at an early age. And as events would show, the existence of the Chagossians as a people was at the mercy of forces beyond their control.

III.

The deal between the United Kingdom and the United States was worked out in secret against the backdrop of the Vietnam War, which Britain had declined to support. As if to make amends, the government of Prime Minister Harold Wilson sought to accommodate Washington’s desire for a foothold in the Indian Ocean. In diplomatic memorandums, officials avoided the term *military base*; the preferred locution was *joint communications facility*. Diego Garcia seemed ideal. The atoll’s lagoon could shelter a small navy. The ribbon of land on the western side had room for miles of runway—an unsinkable aircraft carrier. The U.S. naval commander in the Pacific, Admiral John McCain, father of the future senator, described the atoll as the Malta of the Indian Ocean.

At the time, Britain was engaged in negotiations over Mauritian independence. Decolonization was occurring worldwide, and the United Nations had adopted rules—which Britain had endorsed—about “self-determination” and “territorial integrity.” When it came to Chagos, Britain finessed the self-determination argument through its claim that the islands had no permanent inhabitants, only a “floating population” of migrant workers. It finessed the territorial-integrity argument by inducing negotiators from Mauritius, meeting in London, to accept dismemberment. As the release of a Downing Street document later revealed, the idea, in dealing with the chief Mauritian negotiator, was to “frighten him with hope”: Independence could be had, but only if the Mauritians relinquished Chagos.

This approach had the desired effect. Mauritius became independent. Chagos was “detached.” Because the U.S. wanted no one nearby, the people of Chagos—who did not officially exist—were forced to leave. The entire population of Diego Garcia had been removed by the end of 1971. A military base had to be constructed, and the Americans needed the island “sanitized” and “swept,” a task that fell to the British. The people expelled from Diego Garcia were not permitted to take their animals; about 1,000 pet dogs had to be left behind. Many followed their owners to the beaches. In his meticulous book about Diego Garcia, *Island of Shame*, the anthropologist David Vine describes how, at the direction of Sir Bruce Greatbatch, an order came down to eliminate the dogs. Animals that could not be easily poisoned or shot were lured with meat into a copra-drying shed and then gassed with motor-vehicle exhaust.

Bob Hope arrived on the first jet to land on the runway, in 1972, using Diego Garcia to stage one of his Christmas shows for American troops. He flew in with Redd Foxx and Belinda Green, Miss World that year. A British naval officer remains nominally in charge of Diego Garcia and commands a small complement of Royal Marines. But the island is leased to the U.S. through 2036. Vehicles drive on the right.

As for the Chagossians who’d lived there, many were transported to Mauritius—crowded under tarpaulins on the merchant ship Nordvaer, or packed into the ship’s sweltering hold along with the copra and coconut oil—and more or less left on the docks to fend for themselves. Others made their way to Peros Banhos or Salomon, until an ongoing campaign of attrition made life on those atolls untenable. The plantation company was bought out by the British government and ultimately shut down. Supplies of rice and flour were curtailed. Anyone who made the mistake of leaving Chagos—to visit relatives, to see a doctor—would discover, without warning, that going home was prohibited. Bancoult had traveled with his parents, Rita and Julien, and his sister Noellie to Mauritius; Noellie needed urgent medical attention after her foot had been run over by the wheel of a cart and she’d developed gangrene. The medical care came too late, and Noellie died. The family prepared to return to Peros Banhos, but were prevented from doing so. Nor could they communicate with people back home: Mail delivery had been halted. Rita did not learn of the death of her father, still in Chagos, for several years. In 1973, those who’d clung to Salomon and Peros Banhos were rounded up. People had as little as a day to pack a bag.

When Chagossians look back at the life they recall, they conjure an idyll—Garden of Eden meets Shangri-la. Could it have been that good?

The Chagos Archipelago, meanwhile, began its new chapter as the British Indian Ocean Territory. Rather than opening with something along the lines of “We the people,” the territory’s constitution declares, “No person has the right of abode.” Accompanied by British military personnel, small groups of Chagossians have in recent years been allowed brief “heritage visits” to some of the islands. A larger group, also under military escort, made a pilgrimage in 2006. On their visits, the Chagossians have used the limited time on each island—never overnight—to clear vegetation from the decaying churches and restore the crumbling graves of their loved ones. They have cleaned inscriptions. They have left flowers. And then they have had to depart.

The British Indian Ocean Territory came to possess all the outward trappings of a colony. Its head of state is Queen Elizabeth. It has a commissioner, in London, who also oversees the British Antarctic Territory. There is a flag. Coins have been issued: The silver 50-pence coin displays the Queen on one side and an orange anemonefish, like Nemo, on the other. The coins are legal tender within the territory, though there is really no place to spend them. British Indian Ocean Territory stamps have been designed and printed—for collectors, or for use at the post office on Diego Garcia. The territory has the internet country code .io—for “Indian Ocean”—created by an entrepreneur and used extensively by internet start-ups and online-gambling operations. Signs have been posted on some of the islands by the BIOT government. They signal to the very few visitors—mostly owners of mega-yachts—that they have stepped foot on British territory. Visitors are asked to refrain from littering.

IV.

All told, some 2,000 people were displaced from the Chagos Archipelago. At U.S. insistence, the islanders were even barred from working on Diego Garcia; instead, foreign laborers were brought in. The Chagossians had been promised housing and various kinds of assistance, but the promises were not kept. Some settled in the Seychelles, at the time still a British colony, where hundreds were lodged at first in a prison. Those who found themselves in Mauritius settled mainly in Port Louis, the capital. The Chagossians were treated badly—unwanted newcomers, and culturally different from everyone else. They were shunted into the worst urban districts, near garbage dumps and in neighborhoods with high crime. They had skills, but none that were highly valued. Drug use, prostitution, suicide—all became serious problems, reflected in *sega* lyrics and oral histories. The Chagossians were referred to collectively, and pejoratively, as *les Îlois*—“the islanders.”

Were they citizens of *any* nation? They seem to have thought so. Many of the poorest Chagossian homes in Mauritius displayed a pressed-tin portrait of the Queen. But the United Kingdom in the early 1970s was not generous with passports, especially for

“Tarzans or Men Fridays,” nor is it generous with them now. Those who had been expelled from Chagos did become citizens of Mauritius, if that’s where they went, though it didn’t feel like home. In time, many also came to hold British Dependent Territories Citizenship, which entitled the bearer to the vague condition of British “subject” and to a passport, but not the right to live in Britain (or, in this case, to live in the dependent territory).

Only in 2002, after much agitation, did people born on the islands (along with their children, but not their grandchildren) get the right to apply for full British citizenship. Nothing about the status of Chagossians today is uniform: It varies from person to person, generation to generation, place to place. In March, the British government accepted an amendment to proposed legislation—which recently became law—that would streamline the citizenship process for anyone of Chagossian heritage, despite fears voiced by some about precedent. (The author of the amendment, Baroness Lister of Burtsett, responded, “We are not setting a precedent because I assume we are not planning to evict anybody else.”)

When Bancoult surveyed the domains of the Chagossians with his nautical charts, he left out Crawley, in West Sussex. A quarter century after the expulsion, many Chagossians decided that life in Britain, unfamiliar as it was, might be better than life anywhere else. The first small groups arrived on flights from Port Louis to Gatwick Airport, south of London, in 2002. There were no resettlement officials to meet them, no gift baskets of Marmite and Major Grey’s. Not knowing what else to do, they camped out in the airport arrival lounge, for days and even weeks. Gatwick is adjacent to Crawley, and the Chagossians began moving into town after the local council grudgingly found some housing.

With great persistence, the Chagossians in Crawley put down roots. Others followed. Today, the number of people in Crawley whose ancestry can be traced to Chagos is about 3,000. Chagossians can still be found at Gatwick—they are a mainstay of the service infrastructure that makes the airport possible, from handling baggage at the terminals to making beds at the hotels. But joblessness is high, as is the incidence of depression and other challenges. Chagossians use a word with the Kreol spelling *dérasiné* to describe the experience of being cut off from the past. They use another word, *sagren*, to capture a deep, wasting sorrow. The term may not

In 1973, those who’d clung to the islands were rounded up. They had as little as a day to pack. Chagos began its new chapter as the British Indian Ocean Territory, where “no person has the right of abode.”

appear in medical journals, but it is a diagnosis I heard more than once from Chagossians talking about friends, or about themselves.

During a recent trip to London, I took a train down to Crawley to meet members of the Chagos community, which extends two and even three generations beyond the one expelled from the archipelago. The town is not the kind of place one sees on tourist posters. Crawley grew quickly both because of Gatwick and because the government chose to build tracts of new housing there after the Second World War. The architecture is repetitive and nondescript. The heart of the town is the County Mall Shopping Centre, not some holy well or Norman keep.

The Chagossians in Crawley present no unanimity of opinion about Chagos and their future. Some have been more interested in rights and compensation than in resettlement, and in any case don't harbor warm feelings toward Mauritius. This point of view is articulated on the U.K.-based website Chagossian Voices. Others in Crawley share the same desire for recognition and support, but their views are more in line with those of the Chagos Refugees Group. They are drawn emotionally to the idea of resettlement—even if not necessarily for themselves—and believe it could happen. They would like to set foot on the archipelago one day.

If Chagos possesses anything like a National Archives, it would be the iPhone of Evelynna Bancoult, one of Olivier's daughters. She lives in Crawley with her two young children. Evelynna's sister, Jessica, a mother of three, lives in Crawley as well. So do many relatives. When I came to visit, people converged on the home of a cousin of Evelynna's to talk about their memories. On her phone, Evelynna pulled up black-and-white historical photos, grainy videos, and recent family pictures. Her grandmother, now deceased, spoke to the room from the phone. In soundless footage, military officers watched Chagossians descend a gangplank—the fading record of a heritage visit. Evelynna's quick fingers found news reports, documentaries, press conferences, music. Children playing in the room paused to lean on her shoulder as she sat on a couch, pointing when they saw someone they knew.

The scene was enthusiastic but also serious. The people there felt that few in Britain had their interests in mind. They denounced xenophobic dithering in Parliament over immigration. Fingers jabbed toward my knee for emphasis. Then, calmly, more than one of those in the room brought up the subject of history—history in a narrow sense (*our* history) but also in a larger sense: the responsibility of nations to face their failures.

The Chagossians do not live in any single neighborhood of Crawley—and there are Chagossians in Manchester, Leeds, and other cities—but you cannot miss the glimmerings of shared identity. They cook from recipes handed down by their mothers and grandmothers, though certain ingredients are hard to find. They draw on extended family networks. The adults have been in England for years, most of them, and speak with a variety of London-area accents, but a cadence of elsewhere is unmistakable. In their homes, what you do not see, because the Chagossians were expelled so suddenly and allowed to bring so little with them, are mementos of life on the archipelago. If Evelynna loses her cellphone, the only physical evidence of the community's origins may be chromosomes and grains of sand.

Though I'd be tempted to include the football jerseys. In 2014, a soccer team representing the Chagos diaspora became a member of Conifa, the Confederation of Independent Football Associations—a version of FIFA for soccer teams not affiliated with that body. Many of Conifa's members have a claim to national distinctiveness. The Roma people field a team. South Ossetia, Kashmir, Kurdistan, Tibet, Cornwall, and Western Sahara each field a team. The Chagossian team draws on local players. In recent years, it has twice qualified for the Conifa World Cup.

When I met him in Crawley, Cedric Joseph, the very young goalkeeper—he is 19—showed me his gloves, painted with the orange, black, and blue of the Chagossian flag. Three people jumped in to explain the symbolism. The cross talk boiled down to this: Orange is for the plantations and the sun; black is for the dark times; blue is for the sea and the future. Joseph's grandmother was born in Chagos; he said he felt sometimes that he was representing her. But really, it was great just to get out there and play. And the team was good. And so was he. He made fun of himself, slipping into a parody of a sports announcer's voice: "The best, youngest goalkeeper in south England."

V.

Olivier Bancoult has been to Crawley many times, to visit his daughters and to advance the interests of the Chagos Refugees Group. The lawsuits he has filed on behalf of his people have almost all been brought in British courts. Search the internet for the name Olivier Bancoult, and you will scroll through a long list of entries that commence with the tagline *Bancoult v.* For brevity's sake, lawyers refer to the various cases by the order in which they were filed: *Bancoult 2*, *Bancoult 4*.

What Britain did to Chagos provoked legal challenges along two broad tracks. The first—the Bancoult track—began in the 1990s. Whatever their private opinions, Bancoult and his lawyers have never sought to contest British sovereignty before the courts of England. Their focus is human rights under British law. They have contended that the Chagossians were wrongly evicted from their homes and that they have a right to return to their islands. Bancoult's first lawsuit went so far as to invoke the Magna Carta, which prohibits forcible expulsion without what today would be called due process. In the face of stiff headwinds, and to general astonishment, he won the case, in 2000. Britain's foreign secretary at the time, Robin Cook, announced that he would accept the High Court's decision on the right of return.

But then, less than a year later, came 9/11. Tony Blair's government—and a new, more compliant foreign secretary—had no desire to disturb the status quo on Diego Garcia or any of the other islands. The military base was being used as a waypoint for extraordinary rendition—and by some reports, as a detention

“We boarded the ship in the dark so that we could not see our island,” Elysé said in her testimony before the World Court. “People were dying of sadness in that ship.”

and interrogation site—while the War on Terror ramped up. Bombing campaigns against Afghanistan and, later, Iraq would be launched from there. In 2004, the British government used a device called an Order in Council—an archaic procedure allowing ministers to bypass Parliament and wield regal powers that the monarch herself can no longer exercise, but to which she must assent—to quash Bancoult’s victory. None of his subsequent legal actions has been able to restore the right of return. But his follow-on cases have achieved something else: Through the process of discovery, they’ve dredged up a mass of historical documents that confirm the cynicism and lies of the government’s inner councils. Henceforward, British officials would have to preface remarks about Chagos

with a throat-clearing admission that the government’s behavior had of course been “shameful and wrong.”

The second track was the international one: the attempt by Mauritius to get Chagos back from Britain, alleging that detachment had been agreed to under duress. Early efforts got little traction. But then the British government made a mistake. In 2010, Foreign Secretary David Miliband announced that the British Indian Ocean Territory would be turned into a “marine protected area” and placed off-limits to habitation and commerce (but not to U.S. military operations). Miliband’s decision was cheered by many environmental organizations. The archipelago encompasses the largest coral atoll structure on the planet—the Great Chagos Bank. Turtles and sharks abound. Fork-tailed frigate birds, among the fastest on Earth, skim by overhead. But Britain wasn’t thinking about a *National Geographic* documentary. A cable to Washington from the U.S. embassy in London quoted a British diplomat stating that “no human footprints” or “Man Fridays”—that language again—would be permitted within the protected area, and admitting privately that the move would “put paid to resettlement claims of the archipelago’s former residents.”

The marine protected area may have been intended as a clever way to cauterize all pending legal disputes involving a right of return, but it in fact gave Mauritius a new, if seemingly unlikely, line of attack through the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. The government enlisted the assistance of a prominent international and human-rights lawyer named Philippe Sands. Sands is a longtime friend; when he first explained the case to me, a decade ago, he described all of the dominoes that would

have to fall. He did not use the word *quixotic*. Over time, he assembled a legal team from Mauritius, Belgium, India, Ukraine, and the United States.

The legal battle for Chagos lacks the drama of *Inherit the Wind* or *Twelve Angry Men*. The dominoes fell, but in slow motion, one every few years. In accordance with the Convention on the Law of the Sea, Mauritius brought its case before a tribunal of international arbiters. The government argued that Britain had no standing to create the marine protected area; Chagos had been illegally detached from Mauritius, and Britain was therefore not the relevant “coastal state.” The arbitrators agreed unanimously that creation of the protected area was “not in accordance” with the provisions of the Law of the Sea convention but kicked the sovereignty question to the UN General Assembly, which then weighed in with a lopsided vote: Let’s see what the World Court has to say about whether the detachment of the archipelago was legal in the first place.

None of this involved the fate of the Chagossians—not directly—but many of them believed that if Britain’s sovereignty were upended, their efforts could be aided. Mauritius had not barred them from their homeland; Great Britain had done that. And the Mauritian government had indicated receptivity to the Chagossian cause. The World Court heard the case in September 2018, and it began by looking at the “factual circumstances” behind detachment and expulsion. Lisbey Elysé, expelled from Chagos when she was not yet 20, gave testimony before the justices. She was a little overwhelmed, she told me, and ever mindful of the fact that she had been chosen to represent all Chagossians. Fearful that she might be nervous speaking directly to the court, she asked for and was granted permission to present a video. It was three minutes and 53 seconds long. Elysé, then 65, spoke in Kreol. Seated next to Sands, she watched from a front-row seat in a black suit as the video, with English subtitles, flickered in the Great Hall of Justice.

We boarded the ship in the dark so that we could not see our island. And when we boarded the ship, conditions in the hull of the ship were bad. We were like animals and slaves in that ship. People were dying of sadness in that ship. And as for me, I was four months pregnant at that time. The ship took four days to reach Mauritius. After our arrival, my child was born and died . . .

I maintain I must return to the island where I was born and I must die there and where my grandparents have been buried. In the place where I took birth, and in my native island.

In the end, the World Court declared that Britain was in the wrong—the detachment of Chagos had indeed been illegal because “this detachment was not based on the free and genuine expression of the will of the people concerned.” The court’s opinion was ultimately affirmed by the UN General Assembly, with only six votes in opposition. The Mauritian case was strong. Jagdish Koonjul, its ambassador, made it well. The United Kingdom’s European allies were nowhere to be seen—Britain’s hasty, messy exit from the European Union had made sure of that.

The World Court’s opinion was advisory, and the U.K. has so far done its best to ignore it. A Royal Navy officer continues to serve as

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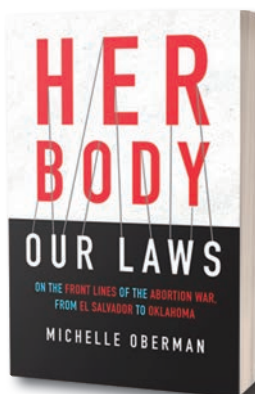
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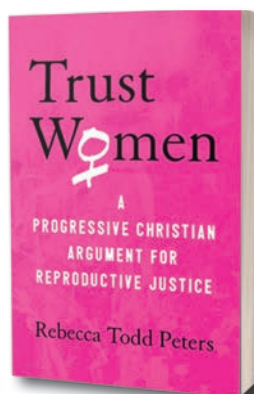
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KEEP BANS OFF OUR BODIES



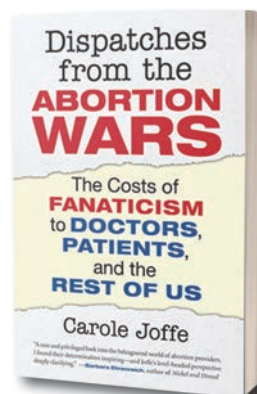
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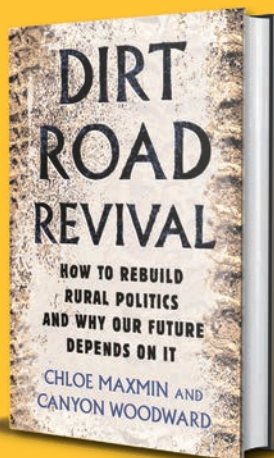
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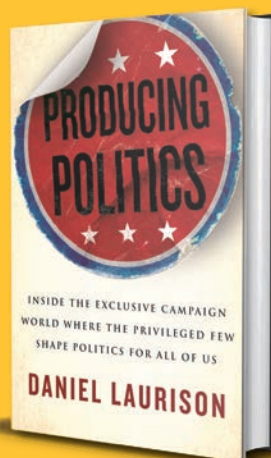
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the titular commandant of Diego Garcia. Yachts wishing to transit the marine protected area are still directed to obtain permission from the colonial administration. The United Kingdom's BIOT website is unflappably vague: "We remain open to dialogue on all shared issues of mutual interest." A strategic rationale for the British position has not been advanced, other than the open-ended one that defense of the realm requires it. The psychological rationale is obvious—shedding the last bits of empire is hard to contemplate. It is the remote-island dynamic in reverse: "What you see is all that's left."

But Mauritius can now claim international recognition of its sovereignty over Chagos. As Sands, the Chagossians' lead attorney, maintains in a forthcoming book, the British position is eroding, in small steps that may lead to larger ones. Citing the UN's decision, the Universal Postal Union, which governs mail service among nations, has withdrawn recognition of Britain's BIOT stamps. The .io domain name is under legal challenge, and the government of Mauritius has asked Google to relabel its maps. It seems inevitable that the International Civil Aviation Organization, which coordinates a variety of essential protocols, will recognize Mauritian control of the airspace over Chagos. The United States still takes Britain's side; it is convenient to have an absentee landlord who allows almost anything. But there is a difficulty. Secretary of State Antony Blinken has argued forcefully that Beijing must accept a "rules-based order" when it comes to the South China Sea. Beijing has a ready response: *What about Chagos?* Ultimately, American wishes may not need to become an issue. Mauritius has stated repeatedly that it has no objection to the use of Diego Garcia as a U.S. military base. There would have to be a "status of forces" agreement, as there is for any base on foreign soil, which would set the rules and the rent. An agreement might even accommodate a partial resettlement of Diego Garcia itself; foreign nationals live close to other U.S. bases, sometimes in great numbers.

The time will come when Britain throws in the towel, and it may come soon. When the government of Mauritius decided in February to send a ship into Chagossian waters under its own flag—the ship I traveled on—London's response was annoyed but restrained. It would not fight the Mauritians on the beaches; it would not fight them on the landing grounds. The BIOT patrol vessel that shadowed the *Bleu de Nîmes* kept its distance, though it was visible on radar. We never learned whether the loss of internet service, which started when the ship entered the BIOT zone, had anything to do with its presence. One purpose of the voyage—an oceanic survey of Blenheim Reef, relating to a boundary dispute with the Maldives—was a deliberate challenge: Mauritius shares a boundary with the Maldives only if the Chagos Archipelago is Mauritian territory. Mauritian officials also took the opportunity to pour some concrete, plant some flagpoles, and run up the Mauritian colors on Salomon and Peros Banhos. There were no statues to topple, but someone unbolted and took away a metal sign warning of arrest and imprisonment by the "BIOT government" for various infractions, such as overnight camping and "possession of crabs, dead or alive."

For Mauritius, asserting a claim to Chagos was a main reason for this expedition. But that assertion dovetailed with the desires of the

Chagossians. If the British were no longer in charge, then the prohibition against "right of abode" was a dead letter. For the first time in 50 years, the Chagossians could go home without asking permission.

VI.

The islands of Peros Banhos—5.3333° S, 71.8500° E—encircle a crystalline lagoon. From a distance they are low, green smudges that a swell can hide from view. Waves crash on submerged reefs between them. On February 12, as the *Bleu de Nîmes* sailed through a single open channel into the lagoon, Olivier Bancoult stood at the gunwales and began to name the bits of land. For once he seemed a little uncertain. He grabbed Marcel Humbert, a fisherman, to confirm the names. Humbert pointed to each island as he began turning in a circle: "Grande Soeur, Petite Soeur, Île Poule, Île Monpâtre, Île Anglaise, Île du Coin ..." The shore of Île Monpâtre was marked by a dull-red oblong, the overturned hull of a yacht, beached and bleached for decades. Bancoult had started the day wearing the bright home-field jersey of the Chagos soccer team, but by now he and others from the islands had changed into simple white T-shirts bearing words in black letters: EVERYONE HAS THE RIGHT TO LIVE ON HIS BIRTHPLACE.

The Chagossians knelt on the sand as they came off the launch that had brought them to Île du Coin. Some of them held up birth certificates—destroyed in the course of a riot, they'd been told by British authorities, until Bancoult tracked the records down. The jetty many of them had walked when they left Île du Coin was now in ruins; only a small-gauge rail track, once used to transport barrels of coconut oil, held the concrete together. A pair of rusted wheels, joined by an axle, remained on the rails.

The Chagossians led the way inland with a rhythmic whack of machetes. The air was humid and earthy, the ground everywhere an ankle-turning carpet of fallen coconuts. We came to a place where a village had been. I had seen a photograph from the 1960s of the island administrator's house—whitewashed walls, cool verandas, a monumental stone staircase ascending from a prim English garden. All that was left was the staircase, rising to nothing and held fast in a tangle of banyan roots, like a temple at Angkor Wat. The roofless stone church held a congregation of palm trees and coconut crabs. The Chagossians labored to clear the building—it remained a sacred space. Several of them had been baptized within its walls.

We put in the next day at Salomon atoll, this time on an island called Boddam, roughly the same size as Île du Coin. The ruins here were even more extensive—tin roofs rusted and collapsed; stone walls dank with moss and mold; trees and vines sprouting from windows and doors. From one beam a pair of recently discarded buoys dangled above broken liquor bottles. Crudely painted on the buoys were the names OLGA and IVAN.



OLIVIER BANCOULT, MARCEL HUBERT, AND ROSEMONDE BERTIN WERE AMONG THE GROUP OF FIVE CHAGOSSIANS WHO THIS YEAR, FOR THE FIRST TIME, COULD RETURN TO THE ISLANDS WITHOUT BRITISH PERMISSION.

The Chagossians again made their way to a roofless church. They cleared it of vegetation. In one chancel window, a few panes of colored glass had somehow survived unbroken, gleaming in a wooden lattice. Next door, in what had been a clinic, Rosemonde Bertin, born on Boddam, pushed through the foliage and found the dark, damp corner where she had given birth to her first child, in 1972—shortly before she and her family were forced to leave.

Later, half a mile away, in the island cemetery, Bertin poured water on an inscription and wiped it with leaves to bring out the name: MME. YVON DYSON, NÉE DENISE ROSE. Denise Rose was the midwife who'd brought Bertin into the world; she herself died in childbirth not long afterward. The cemetery occupied a full acre. Bertin, Bancoult, and others splashed water on more of the weathered slabs to reveal the inscriptions. From 1880: ICI REPOSE DOOKIE—just that single name, once known to everyone, now a cipher.

Is a repopulation of Chagos even possible at this point? The grandchildren in Crawley, watching *Young Sheldon* and reading Roald Dahl, may not see a path to the future that leads through Peros Banhos. A study conducted by the British in 2002 concluded that significant development of the islands would be impractical for a variety of reasons, including a possible insufficiency of fresh groundwater. (The study did not consider rainfall.) A second study, in 2015, came to a different conclusion, suggesting that an economy based on coconuts, fish, and a limited amount of tourism could be sustainable. History, of course, has already conducted its own experiment: Although climate change is unpredictable, these islands once supported a population of

thousands. On our way to the graveyard on Boddam, a storm blew in with impressive speed, and it rained heavily for half an hour. Sheltering under a tree, machete in hand, Bancoult commented, “The British said there was not enough water.”

I don't know how realistic any plans may be for Chagos. The Mauritian government has pledged to assist, but has avoided specifics. It's easy to imagine some form of World Heritage Site coexisting with some form of modest development. I do know this: With every encounter, the Chagossians have sought to take the fate of the islands back into their hands—to possess the islands by word and deed. They have spent the few hours of every heritage visit tending graves and cleaning churches. On the extended trip in February, when Chagossians could at last travel freely and do whatever they wished, they did the same. They also trapped crabs and fished for red snapper and drank milk from coconuts. As if bouncing on a seesaw, Lisbey Elysé sat on the trunk of a coconut tree jutting out over the water. The Chagossians remembered old names and told old stories. As they talked, the rusting wheels on the jetty became a wagon again, rolling back on its track toward the oil press and the drying sheds and a world that was alive.

Mauritius raised flags over islands on this voyage; anthems were sung. The moments were moving: a legal and moral victory, even as Britain harrumphed. But the embrace of the islands by the Chagossians was something different. It had the intimate physicality of love. *A*

Cullen Murphy is an Atlantic editor at large.

A MAD HUNT ^{FOR}
CIVIL WAR TREASURE

BY **CHRIS HEATH**

**DID THE FBI
STEAL THE GOLD
OF DENTS RUN?**

ILLUSTRATIONS *by* ERIK CARTER
PHOTOGRAPHS *by* JINGYU LIN



The FBI was excited. That much seemed evident from the affidavit the agency lodged on March 9, 2018, asking a court for permission to dig up a Pennsylvania hillside in search of Civil War gold.

The affidavit related a story from a document titled “The Lost Gold Ingot Treasure,” which had been found in the archives at the Military History Institute, in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. The tale, in its barest bones, was this: In June 1863, a caravan of Union soldiers transporting a shipment of gold through the mountains became lost. Three men were sent to get help and eventually one returned with a rescue party, which located the group’s abandoned wagons but no men, no gold. Teams from the Pinkerton detective agency scoured the hills. In 1865, two and a half buried ingots were found, and, later, the bones of three to five human skeletons. The rest of the gold remains missing.

The affidavit also laid out how this story had come to the FBI’s attention. A treasure hunter named Dennis Parada had heard folklore alluding to the lost gold “since he was a child,” and had spent “over forty years” searching for it. Now he and a team including his son, Kem, believed they had finally located it, in the inaccessible recesses of a “turtle-shaped cave” near the community of Dents Run. FBI agents had visited the site twice and ordered geophysical surveys that had detected something underground—something “with a density of 19.5g/cm³ (the density of gold) and consistent with a mass having a weight of approximately 8½ to 9 tons.”

In other words, the FBI believed it knew where an enormous hoard of gold was, and as soon as they could get their hands on a warrant, federal agents were coming to get it.

DENNIS AND KEM PARADA had been connected with the FBI several weeks earlier by a middleman. One day in November 2017, Warren Getler, a former *Wall Street Journal* reporter, was browsing

TreasureNet.com, where people interested in buried treasure gather to share theories and discoveries, and to subject themselves to one another’s enthusiasm and scorn. That day something caught Getler’s eye: a post by Parada, who identified himself as the head of a small Pennsylvania-based treasure-hunting group called Finders Keepers. Getler was convinced that they needed to talk.

Getler wasn’t interested in just any treasure. His focus was on a Confederate-aligned organization called the Knights of the Golden Circle, or KGC. The existence of the KGC is an established part of Civil War history, but the depth of influence Getler believes it had, and its continued secret operation, is not. Getler believes that the KGC hid hundreds of caches of gold from the South up to Canada, and that a significant number remain undiscovered. He co-wrote a book on this subject, published by Simon & Schuster: *Rebel Gold: One Man’s Quest to Crack the Code Behind the Secret Treasure of the Confederacy*. Since then, he has continued to look for evidence, and in the Dents Run story he thought he could spot clues and symbols that, to those who knew how to read them, were telltale signs of KGC involvement.

Dennis says that he was skeptical when Getler approached him. He’d never heard of the KGC. “We’re thinking this guy was a nut job,” he told me. “I don’t know what the hell he’s talking about . . . I don’t believe in this shit.” Still, the men kept speaking and soon found common ground.

Dennis explained to Getler the impasse that Finders Keepers had reached. The gold they believed they had located was on state land, so they needed the cooperation of Pennsylvania’s Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR) to act further. But DCNR and the Paradas had a long, complicated history and were currently at loggerheads.

There was, however, a possible way forward. If the gold could be shown to have been federal property, as the narrative in the historical documentation seemed to suggest, then the FBI could step in and claim it for the United States government. So far, Dennis had failed to get the federal authorities interested. Getler offered to handle that.

In Kem’s telling, it happened like magic. “Mr. Getler says, ‘Give me a day or two; I’ll have you in the FBI office,’” Kem recalls. “Sure enough, within a day or two, he calls back: ‘I got you in the FBI office headquarters, a meeting.’ And we’re like, ‘Holy shit.’”

On Friday, January 26, 2018, the Paradas walked with Getler into the United States Attorney’s Office in Philadelphia. They met with Assistant U.S. Attorney K. T. Newton and two agents from the FBI’s Art Crime team, Jake Archer and Sarah Cardone. The following account of the meeting, and of their subsequent talks with the FBI, is based on the treasure hunters’ descriptions. (The FBI declined multiple requests to comment on the details of these interactions.)

The treasure hunters had a hard time reading the room. Their government hosts were attentive, but didn’t necessarily seem receptive. There was one moment, however, that would later come to seem significant. Archer, they say, declared that should gold be found, the government would of course be taking it, slamming his hand down on the table to emphasize his point. Dennis slammed down his hand, too, and declared that they would be fighting for a finder’s fee. At this, Dennis recalls, Archer responded, “Fair enough.”

Not long after, Archer called Dennis and made arrangements to visit the site the following Wednesday. The FBI team—Archer, Cardone, and five colleagues—arrived on Tuesday, and everyone had dinner together at a pub in DuBois. “It was jovial,” recalls Getler, who flew in from Washington, D.C. “We were so high. I believed that we were going to pull up this big KGC cache together.”

The next morning, January 31, the 10 of them hiked up to a level piece of ground about 15 minutes above Dents Run. This was the place. The FBI used a metal detector, which indicated a three-by-five-foot area of buried metal. The Paradas used their own Ground Penetrating Locator machine to demonstrate what they’d previously found at the site. “Got gold readings right off the bat,” Kem recalls.

“Everybody’s yelling and screaming,” Dennis says, “because it’s solid gold.” He told the FBI that, in his estimate, there

must be two and a half tons just below them. A find like that could be worth \$100 million, or even more.

Now the FBI agents were clearly interested. Over the following days, emails and texts flew back and forth as the government team solicited all the potentially relevant historical documentation.

The FBI commissioned its own more sophisticated geophysical study. Archer called Getler with the results.

This is how Getler remembers that conversation: “I said, ‘What was the volume? What was the size?’ He said, ‘Seven to nine tons.’ I went, ‘You got to be fucking kidding.’ My heart’s going *boom boom boom* ... I literally jumped out of my face.”

This is Dennis’s summary: “Archer says, ‘Yes, we got the results. Well,’ he says, ‘Denny, you’re wrong at two and a half tons ... It was over nine tons of gold.’”

WHEN THINGS START GOING AWRY in this story—and they will—you may start to doubt every wrinkle of the treasure hunters’ account. You may be tempted to ask whether it bears any relation to the truth as it exists in the world of dreary, not-all-that-glitters actuality.

When that happens, remember the affidavit. The FBI has declined to fill in its side of the story, but that document isn’t some vaguely speculative memo. It’s 29 pages of apparently rigorous detail, assertively laying out the whole “Lost Gold Ingot Treasure” narrative alongside the geophysical surveys and the wider historical and mineralogical research that the FBI did. What was written in those pages served its purpose: A judge signed off on a warrant giving the FBI 14 days to seize “approximately one or more tons of gold belonging to, and stolen from, the United States Mint, and located on the Dents Run Site, in Elks County, Pennsylvania.”

A dig was scheduled to begin on the morning of March 13. The treasure hunters were told that no press would be allowed. But they insist they were told that they could watch the dig as it progressed.

At the time, Getler’s father was on his deathbed, but Getler decided to come anyway. “I’ve been waiting for 22 years to see a touchstone treasure of the Knights of the Golden Circle ... come out of the ground



Kem and Dennis Parada stand above the cave at Dents Run with a metal detector in May.

to prove this network exists,” Getler told me. “I actually said to him, ‘Dad, I’m going because I know you would want me to do this.’”

The night before, Getler stayed at Dennis’s house; in the morning the Paradases and Getler drove together to Dents Run. It was only when they arrived that they got a sense of the scale of the operation they had triggered. Perhaps their estimates were a little hyperbolic—“70 FBI agents, military and stuff”; “70-some vehicles”—but a Dents Run local, Cheryl Elder, who lives at the bottom of the hill, also remembers a lot of vehicles: “At first there was, like, 38. The next day there was, like, 40-some.” She told me, “It looked like a

city up there ... They had outhouses; they had a big tent. They had guards, too. I mean, they had them in bulletproof vests.”

When the treasure hunters arrived, Jake Archer came to greet them at their car. He told them that it was crowded up on the hill, and that they should wait down here for now. So they waited. And waited.

Six hours passed before they were escorted up to the snow-covered dig site, where a backhoe was removing soil. The hole was several feet deep, and nothing of note had yet been discovered, when, an hour or two later, Archer stopped the proceedings. As Kem remembers it, he said, “It’s 4 o’clock, we’ve been up here all day, we’re cold, and we’re hungry. We’re going

to pack it up for the night. Everybody go home ... Come back up here at 8 a.m. tomorrow morning. We'll all come back up this hill together; we'll start digging right here where we left off."

When the treasure hunters returned the next day, they expected to be taken straight up the mountain. That did not happen. There was "a water delay," Archer told them; the hole had filled up. This might take a while to sort out, he said, and they should stay in the car, keep warm.

So they did. Once more, they waited. As the hours passed, Dennis's frustration grew. "I says, 'Things ain't going on right ... something's going on here.'"

Finally, after about six hours, they were allowed up. Dennis's creeping disquiet notwithstanding, they still imagined they were walking toward a moment of majestic triumph. At the excavation site, the FBI crew parted to allow them through.

"There," Archer told them. "Look in the hole. What do you see?"

Dennis looked down. The hole was now considerably deeper and wider than

the one they had left the afternoon before. Inside it? Dennis answered: "Nothing."

As a parting indignity, the Paradas were given an armful of copper rods that they had driven into the ground years earlier to facilitate their geophysical readings, and that had been dug up during the excavation. As though to say: *Get out of here, and take your trash with you.*

Back at their car, they recall, Archer lectured them not to say a word about this to anybody. He told the Paradas that they should change the name of their company, because it'd be embarrassing after this, and maybe they should all just go on a holiday to Disney World.

The next morning, Getler received the call that his father had died.

NEWS OF WHAT HAD—or hadn't—happened at Dents Run began to spread. When a local TV-news crew, alerted to the hubbub, had turned up during the dig, the FBI's only comment was that it was conducting "court-authorized law-enforcement activity." As media interest

grew, the FBI issued a brief statement, declaring that "nothing was found."

But the Paradas and Getler weren't satisfied. As they chewed over the details, and as they learned more about what had taken place that week, they came to what felt like an inescapable conclusion: that, right under their noses, the FBI had dug up and stolen away the buried gold of Dents Run.

The treasure hunters' narrative of what they believe happened is a sprawling one, in which every snippet of conversation, every incidental moment, reveals itself as evidence of the FBI's dastardly plan. But in essence, they became convinced that the FBI removed nine tons of gold from Dents Run after they left on the first day of the dig, in an excavation that secretly restarted that evening and continued through the night.

Through this prism, so many of the surrounding events started to make sense to them. That was why, when they arrived at Dents Run at 8:15 a.m. on the second day—15 minutes behind schedule—Archer had seemed irritated. They couldn't understand this back then, but they now saw how their late arrival threatened to throw off the choreographed movements of vehicles removing evidence. (The treasure hunters have found multiple witnesses who believe they saw armored trucks in this period, either parked for hours in nearby communities or traveling in convoys along nearby routes, and there were also periodic closures of the main route in and out of Dents Run. The FBI denies using armored trucks.)

That was also why, they say, Archer had a cut on the back of his hand on that second day, and why there was dirt and mud on his knees, and why they logged him visiting a porta-potty five times—indicative of someone who had been up drinking coffee all night. That was why they were told the water-in-the-hole story. (The treasure hunters note that when they were finally allowed to see the hole, there was no sign of any water at the bottom, nor was there any indication that water had been pumped out onto the surrounding snow-covered area.) That was why Getler had heard Archer muttering, "I hate this case." (Because Archer—who generally seemed like a good guy—was uncomfortable with the deception he was obliged to

Warren Getler at home in Washington, D.C.



“THERE,” THE AGENT TOLD THEM. “LOOK IN THE HOLE. WHAT DO YOU SEE?”

stage-manage.) And, of course, all of this was why they had been permitted to see so little of the actual excavation.

The treasure hunters propose this narrative, which has many offshoots, with a mixture of great conviction and *Well, what else could this all have meant?* beseeching. Parts of what they argue might sound compelling. Others feel like a stretch. For instance, Getler explained to me that he had been chatting with another FBI agent who stiffly used the same phrase as Archer had, about “a water delay.” To Getler, this is a giveaway that the agent was hewing to a script. Possible, I suppose, but isn’t it more likely that two agents used the same phrase not because it was the approved language of a cover story, but because it was the phrase that described how something was?

The funny thing is, though, even some of the treasure hunters’ most far-fetched flourishes can’t be summarily dismissed. On a February 2020 episode of the TV series *American Mystery*, Dennis mentioned one scenario that sounded pretty out there. “If somebody in the United States wants to make our gold disappear,” he proposed, they could have secretly shipped it to

Russia, pretended it had been dug out of a Russian gold mine, and brought it back into North America. Nine tons of gold disappeared from Dents Run, Dennis said, “and within 48 hours, an airplane in Russia dropped nine tons of gold on the runway.” Absurd? Probably. But the runway incident is a real one. On March 15, 2018, two days after the dig began, a plane in Siberia lost 3.4 tons of its nine-ton cargo of gold and silver when the cargo door accidentally opened soon after takeoff. There is video on YouTube of the bars scattered across the runway. For a coincidence, it’s a remarkable one.

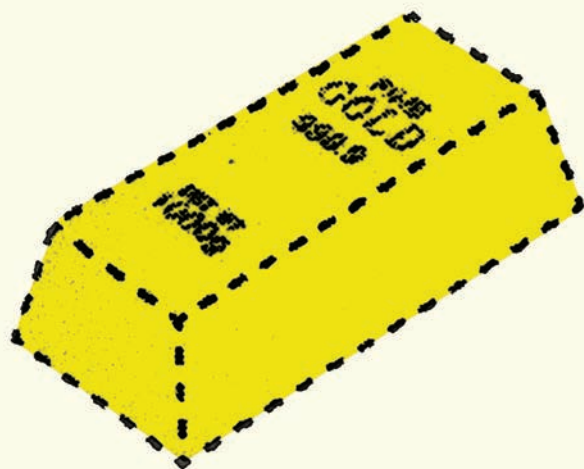
Most problematic has been the FBI’s reluctance to clarify anything. Maybe the agents don’t consider themselves to be in the explaining business. But in the space created by their silence, at a time when people are primed to embrace any suggestion of government malfeasance, the treasure hunters’ version of events is the one that has been heard. The FBI’s decision to keep them away from the excavation seems to have been a spectacular misjudgment. Did the agents really imagine that these were people who—without seeing

the evidence, or lack of it, with their own eyes—would easily accept this outcome? If so, they have since learned otherwise. For four years now, in articles and documentaries and podcasts, the treasure hunters have berated and accused the FBI, and weaponized the agency’s silence as a sign of guilt.

The treasure hunters have also bombarded the government with legal motions and Freedom of Information Act requests. In August 2019, the FBI acknowledged to the Finders Keepers’ attorney that it has approximately 2,378 pages and 17 CDs of video files “of potentially responsive media.” But it asserted that producing such a large volume of materials requires an average of 47 months. The Associated Press and *The Philadelphia Inquirer* have also filed FOIA lawsuits—one result being the release in 2021 of the FBI affidavit making clear just how comprehensively the agency had once argued for the presence of this gold.

The treasure hunters have continued to fight in the courts for expedited access to the withheld material. In May, the FBI released the first 1,035 pages, which included some historical research, the data from the promising geophysical scan, and many, many photos from the excavation. The images of bare trees against the snowy hilltop are surprisingly artful; revelatory, they are not—though one series does show a puddle of water in the bottom of the hole. The balance of the documents is due over the following months, though the government has filed a series of perplexingly convoluted petitions to delay releasing any video evidence until August, and thereafter only at a rate of 15 minutes’ worth a month.

Even the greatest skeptics, who see nothing suspicious in the FBI’s apparent intransigence, and who find the treasure hunters’ other arguments unpersuasive, must be puzzled by lingering questions. For instance: If nothing at all was there, under the ground,



what explained the FBI's geophysical readings? (The Paradases have rescanned the dig area; they now detect nothing.) And what about the suggestion that the FBI worked at the site through Tuesday night? It could be just a convenient theory, except that there is a witness: Cheryl Elder, again.

She told me that she started hearing noises—"beep-beep and, like, hammering"—at about 10 or 11 that night. After a while, she went outside to see what was going on. "And that mountain was lit—they had a lot of lights up there. You could see the whole sky lit up."

The noise, it carried on and on, "the hammer and the backhoe," she said. It was so loud that she couldn't sleep. Eventually, she telephoned her husband. He was away—he works in natural gas and was on an overnight job down by Smithburg, pigging pipelines.

"She called me middle of the damn night," he told me, recounting their conversation: "I can't sleep.' 'What do you mean, you can't sleep?' 'There's all kinds of racket up there ... Lights everywhere.' It was lit up like the Fourth of July up there."

AT THE END of October 2021, I visited the Paradases in Clearfield, Pennsylvania—about an hour from Dents Run. The Finders Keepers office is on the ground floor of the house where Dennis lives with his elderly mother.

This is also the center of what might be called his property empire. He earns his living from the 18 rental apartments he owns, 11 of them in a large building around the back of his house. He told me the building cost him "475"; I waited a moment for this sentence to be completed before realizing that it already had been. (I dug up the records to confirm it: In 1982, Dennis purchased the property for \$475.) Rent is now \$300 a month—"the cheapest in town." But lately he's gotten tired of rentals, he told me. After 40 years, he'd like to get out of the landlord business, if he can just "get some money from the FBI."

But I don't really believe that the principal motivation behind Dennis's treasure hunting is a mercenary one. He likes the stories he finds out in the world, and he likes the stories he finds in his head, spinning grand tales of the past that he sees

revealed by whatever traces show themselves to him in the present day; whether it is a blessing or a curse, Dennis has an almost supernatural ability to weave together an intricate narrative from a few slender and sometimes tentative facts. "I'm living the dream of a little kid wishing to be on a treasure hunt with a pirate ship when they grow up, or something like that," he told me. "I've been having fun."

Certainly, if this project is a mercenary one, so far it hasn't been a success. Sitting in their office, Dennis and Kem told me that a 10 percent finder's fee from what they believe was at Dents Run would work out "at the low end" to about \$60 million. "I'm not backing down," Dennis said. "If they offer me money, I already told my attorney, anything below 20 million—hang up on them and tell them to kiss your ass. We're going to court."

But when I asked how much money Finders Keepers had earned over the years from finder's fees, they laughed.

"Nothing," Kem said. He gestured around him: "Have you seen the house?"

"I'm still cleaning commodes out back as a janitor, okay?" Dennis said.

In fact, the only money in motion has flowed in the opposite direction. Over the years, Dennis reckons he has spent about

\$60,000 on the Dents Run search, and plenty more on a location in Nova Scotia where Finders Keepers believe they have detected a network of ancient tunnels. At Dents Run, the money has mostly gone toward geophysical scans, equipment, legal fees, and hired labor.

Finally, for Dennis, this is a fight about principle, and honor, and who will get the last word. "I want to get my credibility back," he told me. "I have a lot of friends who laugh at me. They go, 'Oh, Denny, did you find any gold this week? How are you and the FBI doing?' Laughing at my back." Now he says he'll do whatever it takes to get the truth out. "I'm going to find out what the hell the FBI did and I'm going to expose it to the world."

ON MY THIRD DAY in town, we drove to Dents Run. Kem couldn't make it—his daughter had a fever—but Dennis and I were joined by two other members of Finders Keepers, Dwayne Kelly and Brian Shull.

We parked at the bottom of the hill and hiked up to a flat section. Dennis pointed at the ground beneath his feet with the branch he had been using as a walking stick.

"A lot of memories here, buddy," he said. "A lot of memories here."



ERIK CARTER FOR THE ATLANTIC

Dennis had first been told that treasure lay in this area by a stranger in the 1970s—I'll come back to that—but after a few sorties came up cold, he abandoned the search for 30 years. Now and then, he'd talk about the gold. Kem, who cherished the tale as a bedtime story, was always saying they should go look for it, but Dennis would demur. There were rattlesnakes and copperheads; there might be abandoned mine shafts. But in 2004, Dennis told the story to one of his tenants, Scott Farrell, and Farrell persuaded him to take another look. It was Farrell who found the cave.

The thin strip of the cave's mouth is impossible to see without clambering down next to it. The roof of the entrance is just high enough for a person to crawl through on their belly. We peered inside, and Kelly caught a salamander. Dennis says there's loads of those in the cave, and cave crickets, too: "They're huge and they're comical. They've got big black eyeballs, and they run like little groups of bad guys."

Back in 2004, when Dennis and Farrell, joined by Kem, began to explore the cave, it was a slow and difficult process. Aside from the cramped environment, and the wet and the mud, and the cave crickets, there were spiders and crayfish and porcupines. But they identified what they thought were clear signs of human occupation: charcoal burn marks on the ceiling, presumably from torches. About 15 feet in, they found what seemed to be a man-made wall, which they managed to remove. For five years they'd go up there maybe twice a week, pushing farther and farther back. When they had rocks to remove, they'd load them into a turkey-roasting pan, which they'd pull out of the cave by a rope.

"I loved every minute of it," Dennis told me. "I didn't care if I got anything back out. I just wanted to see something happen."

He says that they regularly reported to the state authority, the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, what they were doing: "pictures, drawing records, all the readings." When it became clear that the cave was unstable, and that the three men were at risk of being buried in a collapse, it was actually a DCNR engineer, they say, who suggested a new approach: drilling from above. So that's what they did, until one day, pulling up a

three-quarter-inch drill bit, they saw on its tip a shiny golden smear. If there was too little to sample or save, it hardly mattered, Dennis felt: "We had hit gold."

But DCNR did not always agree with them about what they were discovering—artifacts that they felt sure were from the Civil War era were examined by DCNR and pronounced "hunting camp debris," with "no cultural or historic significance." In April 2012, DCNR forbade Finders Keepers from conducting further "treasure hunting activity" at the site. This wasn't the first time they had been told something similar—a DCNR document from back in June 2005 states, "Mr. Parada was banned from all further excavation" and had been "informed that removal of any possible historic material from State Forest lands may constitute a crime," though Dennis implies that this situation was smoothed over. As for the 2012 order, Dennis saw loopholes. "We kept going back," he told me.

Occasionally, in our conversations, his frustration with the government bubbled over. "Just because I don't have a Ph.D., they treat us like amateurs. I have 40 years of experience in the woods," he said. "We're on the ground. We get right down into the dirt. These bookworms who sit back and call themselves archaeologists and stuff—I get really pissed off at this shit."

I asked him what those people think they have that he doesn't.

"Intelligence," he scoffed. "They think they know more than us."

AFTER LEAVING DENTS RUN, I found myself puzzling over the gold's origin story, so I went searching for written accounts. I found two that had circulated widely in treasure-hunting circles: Sandra Gardner's "26 Missing Pennsylvania Gold Ingots," from the July 1974 issue of *Treasure* magazine, and Francis X. Sculley's "Pennsylvania's Lost Gold Ingots," from the August 1974 issue of *True Treasure* magazine. I also tracked down a more obscure example in a 1973 issue of *The Elk Horn*, a local history magazine published by the Elk County Historical Society: Mary Morgan Dixon's "Thar's Gold in Them Thar Hills?"

All three accounts appear to draw directly from the "Lost Gold Ingot

Treasure" document referred to in the FBI affidavit. Whereas Gardner and Dixon hew closely to this source—at times Dixon simply reprints whole paragraphs—Sculley's article is more impressionistic, weaving in extra details. But I suspect this indicates less that he had further sources, and more that he was a pro nimbly riffing on a theme.

What of "The Lost Gold Ingot Treasure" itself? It is typewritten, its pages numbered 98 to 109, apparently taken from a larger work, and its author is unknown. If the signpost in its first sentence ("This is the centennial anniversary of the Civil War ...") can be trusted, it dates from 1965. In its descriptions of the Union soldiers' mission—how, on their way toward Pittsburgh to rendezvous with a steamboat called the *River Queen*, the soldiers and two wagons secretly loaded with 26 ingots of gold disappeared somewhere in these mountains—the document is an impressively, and puzzlingly, rich account. How, 102 years after the events described, did such knowledge spring forth?

The document mentions two firsthand testimonies: a written account of the journey that its leader, Castleton, gave to a man named Conners—conveniently, the group's only survivor—and an inquest statement given by Conners. It also alludes to a series of investigations in the years that followed.

But nobody has turned up these documents or any previous reference to them, or any earlier accounts of the lost gold itself. I have looked and looked, but I have unearthed no specific reference to the story in the 100 years before "The Lost Gold Ingot Treasure." Search for mentions of Dents Run before the 1960s, and you'll find a lot about mining and fishing, a certain amount about botany, and the unverified tale of the time, in 1882, when a local resident named Fred Murray is supposed to have seen, passing overhead, a flock of buzzardlike birds with wingspans of more than 16 feet. But about gold in them thar hills, nothing.

What about the local folklore, the tales of lost gold that have been the talk of Dents Run for as long as anyone can remember? Cheryl Elder told me, "I used to sit at the bar and they'd talk about the gold ... the old-timers." Garrett Osche, who lives in a Dents Run house that his

parents bought back in 1942, remembers reading about the gold in the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* when he was 18.

The thing is, these old-timers' memories aren't so very old. Osche was 18 in 1967. Elder is about a decade younger. Nothing in their accounts undermines the possibility that the legend of Dents Run emerged, fully formed, in 1965.

Furthermore, the provenance of "The Lost Gold Ingot Treasure" is murkier than the FBI affidavit suggests. It did technically come "from the archives of the Army Heritage and Education Center at the Military History Institute in Carlisle, Pa." Dennis obtained a photocopy of the document in 2008 from that institute's retired historical-reference chief, John Slonaker. But that implies a credibility it may not have.

"What I can tell you is very little," Slonaker told me when I called him. "Not that I don't remember, but that I never did know very much. We would occasionally get queries from treasure hunters, looking for official documents, and we never found any in the war-department records. But over the years, as these queries mounted, I began to keep a file of the information that people would send me. They would say, 'Here's some evidence I found—what can you do to add to that? Or to corroborate?' And so I would just keep that evidence that they sent in a file marked LOST TREASURE, or something like that."

That, he said, is where any document he sent Dennis came from.

"I can't tell you the source of any of those documents other than that patrons, people directing the inquiries to us over the years, would sometimes send us material. We just collected it. It doesn't come from the Army's archive."

Warren Getler has his own idea about the origins of "The Lost Gold Ingot Treasure." He has never believed that it's a literal historical document. He thinks it's a "waybill"—a symbolic tale crafted by the Knights of the Golden Circle, one that intertwines facts with references to KGC motifs like copperheads (northerners sympathetic to the South) and tree markings. The names of soldiers in the story (Castleton and O'Rourke) supposedly represent units within the KGC ("castles" and "rooks"). All of these are clues that

will direct those in the know to the hidden gold, banked to finance the KGC's agenda—which was, at least originally, the creation of an alliance of slave-owning territories that would include areas in Mexico and elsewhere.

But surely the central mystery remains: Whether the document is a real historical narrative or a coded waybill, how and why did this story surface in the 1960s, and where had the information on which it was based been hidden for the previous 100 years?

WHEN TRYING TO ASSESS what to believe, some people may want to take into account the story of how Dennis Parada came to be searching for gold at Dents Run to begin with.

It was 1974. Parada was 22. He sold furniture at a department store, W. T. Grant, where the big impress-the-customers stunt was to shoot an arrow into a sofa to prove how durable the fabric was. Sometimes management would hold more formal events to entice shoppers. On this particular day, there was a demonstration by a man billed as Professor Michael G. Malley—an expert in "extrasensory perception."

This was, Dennis insists, of minimal interest to him: "What a bunch of bullshit." During a break, though, Malley sat down with Dennis and some of his co-workers. Somebody happened to have a copy of the 1974 *Treasure* magazine with the Sandra Gardner story. (A mistake in the FBI affidavit: Dennis had not heard the lost-gold story "since he was a child"—this day was the first he learned of it.)

Someone asked Malley if he could do treasure hunts, and suggested he look at Gardner's article. Malley appeared to speed-read it, entered a kind of trance, and started talking in voices that were not his own. "At least three different voices," Dennis recalls. "It was the soldiers talking about their experience, something like that. They're hungry. Lost. I don't know. It's about 10, 15 minutes I'm hearing all this ... thinking, *Bullshit, bullshit.*"

Then Malley asked for an atlas that was sitting on the table, and for a pen. With the atlas open to the general area described in Gardner's article, Malley

looked upward, eyes to the ceiling, as he brought the pen down onto the page.

"The pen hit," Dennis says, "and he looked right at me. And he goes, 'Denny'—I don't know how he knew my name. He goes, 'Denny, I want you to go to this spot' ... And it was Dents Run."

Malley instructed him to gather five dirt samples. He was to scoop the dirt up with a wooden spoon and keep each sample in a plastic container—"no metal objects allowed." Malley would tell him which one had been collected from the area closest to the gold.

So that's what Dennis did. He and a colleague went up to Dents Run, taking five soil samples at various points up and down the mountain. To mess things up a bit, he also took three samples from his stepfather's yard, then drove in his white '69 Corvette to meet Malley. Malley instantly set aside the three that weren't from Dents Run, then selected sample No. 5.

Malley said to look for a cave within 500 feet of where this soil had been taken. And that is how Dennis Parada came to believe that there was gold at Dents Run.

WHEN DENNIS FINALLY found the cave in 2004, he decided to track Malley down, to share the news. (Dennis told me that when he cold-called after 30 years and said his name, Malley immediately replied: "I know—the guy with the white Corvette.") They haven't met in person since 1974, but they've stayed in touch: Dennis still periodically solicits Malley's insights about Dents Run and other sites. "This guy, everything is 100 percent correct," he says. As a result, he has promised Malley 25 percent of any proceeds from these searches.

Naturally, I tell Dennis and Kem that I would like to talk with Malley. They seem dubious. Malley has never spoken to anyone about this, they tell me. I keep asking anyway; Dennis keeps prevaricating. But on the evening after we returned from Dents Run, I tried again, and for some reason, Dennis seemed to feel differently. He allowed that maybe we could just call Malley now and ask.

When Malley answered—he was on speakerphone—Dennis first updated him on the progress his attorney was making with their FOIA filings.

“It’s going to be exciting, Dennis,” Malley said.

Then Dennis introduced me. Malley told me he’d be glad to talk, and explained that he had just come back from the personal-care home where his wife had recently moved. “Today was a fair day,” he said. “Two days ago was miraculous, but I guess I have no right to expect miraculous every day. She’s clearly going downhill fast.”

At first, when I asked Malley about that visit to W. T. Grant 47 years ago, he seemed a little hazy. “This is quite a while ago, my friend,” he said. “I’m 81.”

But then he began to talk about the otherworldly moments when, once in a while, he would be in the middle of a performance and “something takes place that is not simply show business.”

What, I asked, would he say to people who think that this doesn’t make any sense, that you can’t predict information about things like this?

“Believe me, I’m about as skeptical about this as skeptical could get,” he said. “And yet, it’s happening.” He said that he found Dennis’s faith in him “frightening.” In fact, he’d tried to talk Dennis out of pursuing the gold over the years. But his wife’s care costs more than \$5,000 a month—if the gold is real, he could really use his cut of the money.

Malley no longer performs, and I asked whether he missed it.

“Yes. The little boy in me never grew up. So I miss being onstage. But no, I do not miss what I did with Dennis at all—that tore me up inside when I did it. But I shouldn’t say ‘when I did it.’ When it *happened*. It was more happening than a doing. It wasn’t something [where] I said, ‘Oh, you know, I’ll do this today.’ It just happens, period. Just happens. I didn’t have an explanation for it then. I don’t have an explanation for it now.”

I asked if he remembered the first time it had happened.

“Yes!” he exclaimed, with what seemed like a strange kind of glee. “It was in Bakersfield, California.” He said he’d done a series of shows at a restaurant there, but when it was time to get paid, the owner told him, “Mike, I will only give you the check if you tell me something personally about myself that nobody else knows.”

Malley stared at him—“he had a gray-cast look on his face”—and said, “Sir, you’re going to die in two weeks.” The man laughed it off and handed him his money. But six months later, when he went by the restaurant again, he was told that the owner was dead: “Beaten, pistol-whipped to death two weeks after you left.”

Malley said he was so shaken up that he couldn’t eat for a week or more. “Nothing. I drank some liquid water. But that was it. I mean, that tore me up so bad, I can’t put it into words.”

THINKING BACK OVER this conversation, I was struck by how perfectly pitched Mike Malley’s *Aw shucks, I’m as skeptical*

as you are slant was for a pair of ears like mine. It began to nag at me: Had I been expertly played by an 81-year-old psychic?

I wanted to know more about who he was—the man at the beginning of it all—and over the next few days, I tried to unearth what I could. Not much came readily to hand, beyond a few newspaper interviews and advertisements for performances, mostly from the 1970s. In these he is usually referred to as either “Michael G. Malley” or “Prof. Michael G. Malley,” though in the earliest, from the late 1960s, he is “The Rev. Michael G. Malley,” a “Catholic priest of the Byzantine Rite.”

From more recent times, I stumbled upon references to Malley’s other

Mike Malley at home in Portage, Pennsylvania



career—selling life insurance—and two letters he published in a local newspaper, one recommending the use of shampoo on grease stains, the other arguing fiercely in favor of Bill Clinton’s impeachment. I could find no other traces. Until, in the unlikelyst of places, I did.

Keith and the Girl is a long-running podcast made by two comedians in Queens. They recorded their first episode in March 2005 and since then have done about 3,500 more, something they claim is a record. Though episodes typically revolve around banter and current events, their mission—“Keith and his ex-girlfriend talk shit”—is broad enough to allow all kinds of weirdness. Regular listeners are well aware of one recurrent theme: the failings of Keith’s father. The portrait painted of this man is of a pompous blowhard and bully, a self-deluded manipulator, a life-long fraud who has always talked big and achieved little. “He’s just so full of lies and garbage,” Keith will say. Or: “My dad is a psychopath, without any exaggeration.” In a series of shows devoted solely to this subject—“Daddy Issues”—Keith’s younger brother Ken joins in, hour after brutal hour.

As you doubtless will have guessed, their father is Mike Malley.

Dennis Parada’s Mike Malley, the so-called psychic, almost never appears in Keith’s accounts of his father’s many schemes and forestalled careers. And when I called Keith, he seemed surprised to hear of the context in which I had spoken with his father. He had no memory of his dad even hinting at anything to do with treasure hunting. “I remember as a kid, I had to dig little holes as punishment,” he said, a bit wryly. “I wonder if I was burying gold.”

Sometimes, he said, his dad would allude to psychic capabilities. I asked whether his father truly believed those powers were real.

“I wouldn’t be surprised if he did,” Keith told me. “He does believe, for example, that God talks to him and he hears God’s literal voice . . . A lot of these stories with my dad, who knows? So I guess I’ll never know—the end. That’s how I live.”

I found myself being strangely careful when I spoke with Keith Malley. For instance, I didn’t make clear just how involved his father still was with Finders

Keepers, or how he’d been promised a share of any rewards. It’s not that I found Keith’s account unconvincing. But I was uncomfortable at the thought that I might be feeding Keith information that could somehow be used against his father, as though that would be taking sides in a situation where I had no standing to do so. (For the record, when asked for comment, Mike Malley described his son’s accusations as “vicious lies.”)

There’s one other thing I didn’t mention to Keith, partly, I guess, because I didn’t know what, if anything, I would have meant by telling it—just one more loop within a loop that could signify as much or as little as you want it to. But in the spring of 1974, within a few weeks of the day when Mike Malley first set Dennis Parada chasing hopes up a Pennsylvania mountain, Malley appeared in his local newspaper for a different reason. It was just a few words—“Mr. and Mrs. Michael Malley, Somerset RD 4, boy”—marking the arrival of the son they would name Keith.

I COULD TELL YOU things that might make you doubt the Paradas more. Might it shift your view if I described how the Finders Keepers men have become keen proponents of dowsing, in which

handheld metal rods are believed to rotate in response to buried objects, and that they talk freely of vortexes and ley lines? Or if I detailed some of Dennis’s inventions, including, in his basement, an engine that “makes energy” by utilizing the way magnets reverse polarity as an iron bar moves back and forth between them? (When I pointed out that if this were truly creating energy, it would be a much bigger deal than finding millions of dollars in gold—it could solve climate change and rewrite the laws of physics—Parada brushed this off as if it were somehow beside the point.)

Likewise, I could expand upon Warren Getler’s beliefs about the Knights of the Golden Circle—for instance, that Jesse James was a key KGC money-gatherer and strategist who tended to its gold caches long after his faked death, and that John Wilkes Booth was KGC-financed. Getler suggests that the FBI absconded with the Dents Run treasure because it knows that there’s “tens of billions” of dollars’ worth of hidden gold out there, and considers the caches a matter of national security.

On the other side of the ledger, what of the FBI? Why, if all of this is gossamer fantasy, can’t the agency just set the record straight?



WHAT OF THE FBI? WHY, IF ALL OF THIS IS GOSSAMER FANTASY, CAN'T THE AGENCY JUST SET THE RECORD STRAIGHT?

Early in my reporting, I emailed Jake Archer asking whether he could help me understand what had happened. He never replied directly, but less than two hours later, I was contacted by the FBI's public-affairs office in Philadelphia.

In the discussions that followed, the FBI implied that it might engage. At one juncture, there was a suggestion that key people might be willing to meet and discuss the whole operation, though it wasn't clear how much would be on the record, and the idea was soon withdrawn. I was then told that the FBI might answer written questions, so I sent a list. I asked what had or hadn't been found at the site, whether anything had been removed, whether anything had been tested or analyzed, what steps had been taken to understand any discrepancies between the geophysical surveys and whatever had or hadn't been found, and what conclusions had been drawn. I asked if the FBI had any response to the treasure hunters' theories, and their accusation that the agency had deceived both them and the public.

Six weeks later, the FBI responded, in part: "No work took place at the site after hours; the only nighttime activity was conducted by FBI Police personnel who secured the site around the clock for the duration of the excavation ... Nothing was found in the excavation ... The only items the FBI removed from the site were the equipment and supplies brought in for the dig. No gold or other items of evidence were located or collected."

The statement concluded: "While information had suggested a potential cultural heritage site at Dents Run, that possibility was not borne out by the excavation. The FBI continues to unequivocally reject any claims or speculation to the contrary."

A spokesperson later added that the "excavated dirt was visually inspected and scanned with metal detectors," and clarified a few incidental details. But beyond this, the FBI would say nothing more, which baffled me. At the very least, why wouldn't it have tried to square the geophysical results with what was actually under the ground, if only for future cases?

But then I began to wonder whether my assumption that the FBI had conducted some thorough post hoc analysis, and was declining to share the results, might be wrong. Maybe it doesn't work like that. Maybe the reality is something flatter and more indifferent—that the agents do a job and don't look back, because there are more important things to think about. That all the rest—this Finders Keepers hullabaloo and questions like mine—is just a nuisance. An embarrassing nuisance.

Could it be as simple as this: The FBI staged a large and costly operation that left it feeling foolish? Archer and his colleagues, after all, would not have been the first people in history to get a little overexcited and ahead of themselves at the thought of some gold. Maybe they're doing all they can not to draw any more attention to this. (Though, as already noted, if this is their strategy—not going too well.) The treasure hunters won't see it this way, but it's not difficult to recast some of what they describe—Archer saying he hates this case, for example—as what someone might say if it's dawning on him that he got carried away, as the words of a man annoyed both with himself and with those who fed his wrongheaded optimism.

Picking my way through this strange tale's tendrils, I found myself thinking a lot about treasure and treasure hunts. I couldn't shake the disconcerting feeling

that there may be a lot more treasure hunting out there than actual treasure, perhaps to a hugely disproportionate degree. This community feels like a group feeding hungrily on its own collective belief, creating a kind of circular logic: If so many people are chasing so much, so assiduously, and finding what seem like so many promising leads, then at least a good amount of what they are searching for must be out there, right? And yet. If there really were so many grand treasure hoards, wouldn't more of them have been discovered by now, both by chance, as we churn up the land beneath us, and by use of all the modern technologies that those who buried the treasure could never have imagined?

I know someone like Warren Getler might rebut this by saying that some large hauls have been found, but that the government has covered them up—read the stories about Victorio Peak, in New Mexico, if you want to explore this kind of thinking. I'd so like to believe, but I just can't quite get there.

Still, the dream of treasure relies on possibility, and in the case of Dents Run, possibility remains. Plenty of people—maybe with a gleam in their eye and a spring in their step—will glimpse enough in this story that just doesn't make sense to make them suspect that the gold was real. *We may not have seen it yet. But we will.* And if some of us are drawn to a different conclusion—say, that a psychic talking to a furniture salesman triggered a wild goose chase that, 44 years later, led dozens of FBI agents to dig up a snow-covered Pennsylvania mountainside where nothing ever was—then that is, doubly, our loss. *A*

Chris Heath is a longtime magazine writer.

Our
Blinding,
Blaring
World

By
Ed Yong



Photographs by
Shayan Asgharnia

By flooding the environment with light and sound, we're confounding the senses of countless animals. But we can still save the quiet and preserve the dark.



W

Within the 310,000 acres of Wyoming's Grand Teton National Park, one of the largest parking lots is in the village of Colter Bay. Beyond the lot's far edge, nestled among some trees, is a foul-smelling sewage-pumping station that Jesse Barber, a sensory ecologist at Boise State University, calls the Shiterator. On this particular night, sitting quietly within a crevice beneath the building's metal awning and illuminated by Barber's flashlight, is a little brown bat. A white device the size of a rice grain is attached to the bat's back. "That's the radio tag," Barber tells me. He'd previously affixed it to the bat so that he could track its movements, and tonight he has returned to tag a few more.

From inside the Shiterator, I can hear the chirps of other roosting bats. As the sun sets, they start to emerge. A few become entangled in the large net Barber has strung between two trees. He frees a bat, and Hunter Cole, one of his students, carefully examines it to check that it's healthy and heavy enough to carry a tag. Once satisfied, Cole daubs a spot of surgical cement between its shoulder blades and attaches the tiny device. "It's a little bit of an art project, the tagging of a bat," Barber tells me. After a few minutes, Cole places the bat on the trunk of the nearest tree. It crawls upward and takes off, carrying \$175 worth of radio equipment into the woods.

I watch as the team examines another bat, which opens its mouth and exposes its surprisingly long teeth. This isn't an aggressive display; it only looks like one.

The bat is unleashing a stream of short, ultrasonic pulses from its mouth, which are too high-pitched for me to hear. Bats, however, can hear ultrasound, and by listening for the returning echoes, they can detect and locate objects around them.

Echolocation is the primary means through which most bats navigate and hunt. Only two animal groups are known to have perfected the ability: toothed whales (such as dolphins, orcas, and sperm whales) and bats. Echolocation differs from human senses because it involves putting energy into the environment. Eyes scan, noses sniff, and fingers press, but these sense organs are always picking up stimuli that already exist in the wider world. By contrast, an echolocating bat creates the stimulus that it later detects. Echolocation is a way of tricking your surroundings into revealing themselves. A bat says "Marco," and its surroundings can't help but say "Polo."

The basic process seems straightforward, but its details are extraordinary. High-pitched sounds quickly lose energy in air, so bats must scream to make calls that are strong enough to return audible echoes. To avoid deafening themselves, bats contract the muscles in their ears in time with their calls, desensitizing their hearing with every shout and restoring it in time for the echo. Each echo provides a snapshot in time, so bats must update their calls quickly to track fast-moving insects; fortunately, their vocal muscles are the fastest known muscles in any mammal, releasing up to 200 pulses a second. A bat's nervous system is so sensitive that it can detect differences in echo delay of just one- or two-millionths of a second, which translates to a physical distance of less than a millimeter. A bat thus gauges the distance to an insect with far more precision than humans can.

Echolocation's main weakness is its short range: Some bats can detect small moths from about six to nine yards away. But they can do so in darkness so total that vision simply doesn't work. Even in pitch-blackness, bats can skirt around branches and pluck minuscule insects from the sky. Of course, bats are not the only animals that hunt nocturnally. In the Tetons, as I watch Barber tagging bats, mosquitoes bite me through my shirt, attracted by the smell of the carbon dioxide on my breath. While I itch, an owl flies overhead, tracking its prey using a radar dish of stiff facial feathers that funnel sound toward its ears. These creatures have all evolved senses that allow them to thrive in the dark. But the dark is disappearing.

Barber is one of a growing number of sensory biologists who fear that humans are polluting the world with too much light, to the detriment of other species. Even here, in the middle of a national park, light from human technology intrudes upon the darkness. It spews forth from the headlights of passing vehicles, from the fluorescent bulbs of the visitor center, and from the lampposts encircling the parked cars. "The parking lot is lit up like a Walmart because no one thought about the implications for wildlife," Barber says.

Many flying insects are fatally attracted to streetlights, mistaking them for celestial lights and hovering below them until they succumb to exhaustion. Some bats exploit their confusion, feasting on the disoriented swarms. Other, slower-moving species, including the little brown bats that Barber tagged, stay clear of the light, perhaps because it makes them easier prey for owls. Lights reshape animal communities, drawing some in and pushing others away, with consequences that are hard to predict.

To determine the effect of light on the bats of Grand Teton, Barber persuaded

Previous spread: A sea turtle's hatchlings can be diverted away from the sea by artificial lights. For mice, human-made noise can mask the sounds of predators. *Opposite page:* A big brown bat's ability to echolocate allows it to thrive in the dark.

Every animal is enclosed within its own sensory bubble, perceiving but a tiny sliver of an immense world.

the National Park Service to let him try an unusual experiment. In 2019, he refitted all 32 streetlights in the Colter Bay parking lot with special bulbs that can change color. They can produce either white light, which strongly affects the behavior of insects and bats, or red light, which doesn't seem to. Every few days during my visit, Barber's team flips their color. Funnel-shaped traps hanging below the lamps collect the gathering insects, while radio transponders pick up the signals from the tagged bats. These data should reveal how normal white lights affect the local animals, and whether red lights can help rewild the night sky.

Cole gives me a little demonstration by flipping the lights to red. At first, the parking lot looks disquietingly infernal,

as if we have stepped into a horror movie. But as my eyes adjust, the red hues feel less dramatic and become almost pleasant. It is amazing how much we can still see. The cars and the surrounding foliage are all visible. I look up and notice that

fewer insects seem to be gathered beneath the lamps. I look up even farther and see the stripe of the Milky Way cutting across the sky. It's an achingly beautiful sight, one I have never seen before in the Northern Hemisphere.

EVERY ANIMAL IS enclosed within its own sensory bubble, perceiving but a tiny sliver of an immense world. There is a wonderful word for this sensory bubble—*Umwelt*. It was defined and popularized by the Baltic German zoologist Jakob von Uexküll in 1909. *Umwelt* comes from the German word for “environment,” but Uexküll didn't use it to refer to an animal's surroundings. Instead, an *Umwelt* is specifically the part of those surroundings that an animal can sense and experience—its perceptual world. A tick, questing for mammalian blood, cares about body heat, the touch of hair, and the odor of butyric acid that emanates from skin. It doesn't care about other stimuli, and probably doesn't know that they exist. Every *Umwelt* is limited; it just doesn't feel that way. Each one feels all-encompassing to those who experience it. Our *Umwelt* is all we know, and so we easily mistake it for all there is to know. This is an illusion that every creature shares.

Humans, however, possess the unique capacity to appreciate the *Umwelten* of other species, and through centuries of effort, we have learned much about those sensory worlds. But in the time it took us to accumulate that knowledge, we have radically remolded those worlds.



SHAYAN ASGHARIYA FOR THE ATLANTIC



Much of the devastation that we have wrought is by now familiar. We have changed the climate and acidified the oceans. We have shuffled wildlife across continents, replacing indigenous species with invasive ones. We have instigated what some scientists have called an era of “biological annihilation,” comparable to the five great mass-extinction events of prehistory. But we have also filled the silence with noise and the night with light. This often ignored phenomenon is called sensory pollution—human-made stimuli that interfere with the senses of other species. By barraging different animals with stimuli of our own making, we have forced them to live in our Umwelt. We have distracted them from what they actually need to sense, drowned out the cues they depend upon, and lured them into sensory traps. All of this is capable of doing catastrophic damage.

In 2001, the astronomer Pierantonio Cinzano and his colleagues created the first global atlas of light pollution. They

calculated that two-thirds of the world’s population lived in light-polluted areas, where the nights were at least 10 percent brighter than natural darkness. About 40 percent of humankind is permanently bathed in the equivalent of perpetual moonlight, and about 25 percent constantly experiences an artificial twilight that exceeds the illumination of a full moon. “Night’ never really comes for them,” the researchers wrote. In 2016, when the team updated the atlas, it found that the problem had become even worse. By then, about 83 percent of people—including more than 99 percent of Americans and Europeans—were under light-polluted skies. More than a third of humanity, and almost 80 percent of North Americans, can no longer see the Milky Way. “The thought of light traveling billions of years from distant galaxies

only to be washed out in the last billionth of a second by the glow from the nearest strip mall depresses me to no end,” the visual ecologist Sönke Johnsen once wrote.

At Colter Bay, Cole flips the lights from red back to white and I wince. The extra illumination feels harsh and unpleasant. The stars seem fainter now. Sensory pollution is the pollution of disconnection. It detaches us from the cosmos. It drowns out the stimuli that link animals to their surroundings and to one another. In making the planet brighter and louder, we have endangered sensory environments for countless species in ways that are less viscerally galling than clear-cut rain forests and bleached coral reefs but no less tragic. That must now change. We can still save the quiet and preserve the dark.

EVERY YEAR ON September 11, the sky above New York City is pierced by two columns of intense blue light. This annual art installation, known as *Tribute in Light*, commemorates the terrorist attacks of 2001, with the ascending beams standing in for the fallen Twin Towers. Each is produced by 44 xenon bulbs with 7,000-watt intensities. Their light can be seen from 60 miles away. From closer up, onlookers often notice small flecks, dancing amid the beams like gentle flurries of snow. Those flecks are birds. Thousands of them.

This annual ritual unfortunately occurs during the autumn migratory season, when billions of small songbirds undertake long flights through North American skies. Navigating under cover of darkness, they fly in such large numbers that they show up on radar. By analyzing meteorological radar images, Benjamin Van Doren showed that *Tribute in Light*, across seven nights of operation, waylaid about 1.1 million birds. The beams reach so high that even at altitudes of several miles, passing birds are drawn into them. Warblers and other small species congregate within the light

Female crickets struggle to find the best mates when noise pollution masks the males’ songs.



Manatee whiskers can detect currents in the water, but not quickly enough to dodge loud, fast boats.



SHAYAN ASGHARIYA FOR THE ATLANTIC

at up to 150 times their normal density levels. They circle slowly, as if trapped in an incorporeal cage. They call frequently and intensely. They occasionally crash into nearby buildings.

Migrations are grueling affairs that push small birds to their physiological limit. Even a night-long detour can sap their energy reserves to fatal effect. So whenever 1,000 or more birds are caught within *Tribute in Light*, the bulbs are turned off for 20 minutes to let the birds regain their bearing. But that's just one source of light among many, and though intense and vertical, it shines only once a year. At other times, light pours out of sports stadiums and tourist attractions, oil rigs and office buildings. It pushes back the dark and pulls in migrating birds.

In 1886, shortly after Thomas Edison commercialized the electric light bulb, about 1,000 birds died after colliding with illuminated towers in Decatur, Illinois. More than a century later, the environmental scientist Travis Longcore and his colleagues calculated that almost 7 million birds die each year in the United States and Canada after flying into communication towers. The lights of those towers are meant to warn aircraft pilots, but they also disrupt the orientation of nocturnal avian fliers, which then veer into wires or each other. Many of these deaths could be avoided simply by replacing steady lights with blinking ones.

"We too quickly forget that we don't perceive the world in the same way as other species, and consequently, we ignore impacts that we shouldn't," Longcore tells me in his Los Angeles office. Our eyes are among the sharpest in the animal kingdom, but their high resolution comes with the cost of low sensitivity. Unlike most other mammals, our vision fails us at night, so we crave more nocturnal illumination, not less.

The idea of light as a pollutant is jarring to us, but it becomes one when it creeps into places where it doesn't belong. Widespread light at night is a uniquely anthropogenic force. The daily and seasonal rhythms of bright and dark

remained largely inviolate throughout all of evolutionary time—a 4-billion-year streak that began to falter in the 19th century.

When sea-turtle hatchlings emerge from their nests, they crawl away from the dark shapes of dune vegetation toward the brighter oceanic horizon. But lit roads and beach resorts can steer them in the wrong direction, where they are easily picked off by predators or squashed by vehicles. In Florida alone, artificial lights kill baby turtles in the thousands every year. They've wandered into a baseball game and, more horrifying, abandoned beach fires. The caretaker of one property in Melbourne Beach found hundreds of dead hatchlings piled beneath a single mercury-vapor lamp.

Artificial lights can also fatally attract insects, contributing to their alarming global declines. A single streetlamp can lure moths from 25 yards away, and a well-lit road might as well be a prison. Many of the insects that gather around streetlamps will likely be eaten or dead from exhaustion by sunrise. Those that zoom toward vehicle headlights will probably be gone even sooner. The consequences of these losses can ripple across ecosystems. In 2014, as part of an experiment, the ecologist Eva Knop installed streetlamps in seven Swiss meadows. After sunset, she prowled these fields with night-vision goggles, peering into flowers to search for moths and other pollinators. By comparing these sites to others that had been kept dark, Knop showed that the illuminated flowers received 62 percent fewer visits from pollinating insects. One plant produced 13 percent less fruit even though it was visited by a day shift of bees and butterflies.

The presence of light isn't the only factor that matters; so does its nature. Insects with aquatic larvae, such as mayflies and dragonflies, will fruitlessly lay their eggs on wet roads, windows, and car roofs, because these reflect horizontally polarized light in the same way bodies of water do. Rapidly flickering light bulbs can cause headaches and other neurological problems in

humans, even though our eyes are usually too slow to detect these changes; what, then, do they do to animals with faster vision, like insects and small birds?

Colors matter, too. Red is better for bats and insects but can waylay migrating birds. Yellow doesn't bother turtles or most insects but can disrupt salamanders. No wavelength is perfect, Longcore says, but blue and white are worst of all. Blue light interferes with body clocks and strongly attracts insects. It is also easily scattered, increasing the spread of light pollution. It is, however, cheap and efficient to produce. The new generation of energy-efficient white LEDs contain a lot of blue light, and the world might switch to them from traditional yellow-orange sodium lights. In energy terms, that would be an environmental win. But it would also increase the amount of global light pollution by two or three times.

After talking with Longcore, I head home to Washington, D.C., on a red-eye flight. As the plane takes off, I peer out the window at Los Angeles. The twinkling grid of lights stirs the same primordial awe that comes from watching a starry sky or a moonlit sea. But as the illuminated city recedes beneath my window, that amazement is tinged with unease. Light pollution is no longer just an urban problem. Light travels, encroaching even into places that are otherwise untouched by human influence. The light from Los Angeles reaches Death Valley, one of the largest national parks in the United States, more than 150 miles away. True darkness is hard to find.

SO IS TRUE SILENCE.

It's a sunny April morning in Boulder, Colorado, and I've hiked up to a rocky hillside, about 6,000 feet above sea level. The world feels wider here, not just because of the panoramic view over conifer forests but also because it is blissfully quiet. Away from urban ruckus, quieter sounds become audible over greater distances. On the hillside, a chipmunk is rustling. Grasshoppers snap their wings together as they fly. A woodpecker

↓ Busy roads may drown out the alarm calls of songbirds like the tufted titmouse.



protected spaces like national parks, and increases them tenfold in 21 percent. In the latter places, “if you could have heard something 100 feet away, now you can only hear it 10 feet away,” Rachel Buxton, a former National Park Service research fellow, told me. Aircraft and roads are the main culprits, but so are industries like oil and gas extraction, mining, and forestry, which fill the air with drilling, explosions, engine noises, and the thud of heavy tires. Even the most heavily protected areas are under acoustic siege.

In towns and cities, the problem is worse, and not just in the United States. In 2005, two-thirds of Europeans were immersed in ambient noise equivalent to perpetual rainfall. Such conditions are difficult for the many animals that communicate through calls and songs. Scientists have found that noisy neighborhoods in Leiden, in the Netherlands, compel great tits to sing at higher frequencies so that their notes don’t get masked by the city’s low-pitched hubbub. Nightingales in Berlin are forced to belt out their tunes more loudly to be heard over the surrounding din. Urban and industrial noise can also change the timing of birds’ songs, suppress the complexity of their calls, and prevent them from finding mates. Noise pollution masks not only the sounds that animals deliberately make but also the “web of unintended sounds that ties communities together,” Frstrup says. He means the gentle rustles that tell owls where their prey is, or the faint flaps that warn mice about impending doom.

In 2012, Jesse Barber and his colleagues Heidi Ware Carlisle and Christopher McClure built a phantom road. On a ridge in Idaho that acts as a stop-over for migrating birds, the team set up a half-mile corridor of speakers that played looped recordings of passing cars. A third of the usual birds stayed away. Many of those that didn’t paid a price for persisting. With tires and horns drowning out the sounds of predators, the birds spent more time looking for danger and less time looking for food. They put on less weight and were weaker during their

pounds its beak against a nearby trunk. Wind rushes past. The longer I sit, the more I seem to hear.

Two men puncture the tranquility. I can’t see them, but they’re somewhere on the trail below, intent on broadcasting their opinions to all of Colorado. Then I realize I can also hear faraway vehicles zooming along a highway beyond the trees. Denver hums in the distance, an ambient backdrop that I had all but blocked out. I notice the roaring engines of a plane flying overhead. After my hike, I meet up with Kurt Frstrup, who says he’s been backpacking since the mid-1960s. In that time, aircraft emissions have increased nearly sevenfold. “One of my favorite parlor tricks when friends visit is to ask, at the

end of the hike, if they heard any aircraft,” he tells me. “People will say they remember one or two. And I’ll say there were 23 jets and two helicopters.”

Before he retired, Frstrup was a scientist at the National Park Service’s Natural Sounds and Night Skies Division, a group that works to safeguard (among other things) the United States’ natural soundscapes. To protect them, the team first had to map them, and sound, unlike light, can’t be detected by satellites. Frstrup and his colleagues spent years lugging recording equipment to almost 500 sites around the country, capturing nearly 1.5 million audio samples. They found that human activity doubles the background-noise levels in 63 percent of



arduous migrations. The phantom-road experiment was pivotal in showing that wildlife could be deterred by noise and noise alone, detached from the sight of vehicles or the stench of exhaust. Hundreds of studies have come to similar conclusions. In noisy conditions, prairie dogs spend more time underground. Owls flub their attacks. Parasitic *Ormia* flies struggle to find their cricket hosts.

Sounds can travel over long distances, at all times of day, and through solid obstacles. These qualities make them excellent stimuli for animals but also pollutants par excellence. Noise can degrade habitats that look idyllic and make otherwise livable places unlivable. And where will animals go? In 2003, 83 percent of the contiguous United States lay within about a kilometer of a road.

Even the seas can't offer silence. Although Jacques Cousteau once described the ocean as a silent world, it is anything but. It teems with the sounds of breaking waves and blowing winds, bubbling hydrothermal vents and calving icebergs, all of which carry farther and travel faster underwater than in air. Marine animals are noisy, too. Whales sing, toadfish

hum, cod grunt, and bearded seals trill. Thousands of snapping shrimp, which stun passing fish with the shock waves produced by their large claws, fill coral reefs with sounds similar to sizzling bacon or Rice Krispies popping in milk. Some of this soundscape has been muted as humans have netted, hooked, and harpooned the oceans' residents. Other natural noises have been drowned out by the ones we added: the scrapes of nets that trawl the seafloor; the staccato beats of seismic charges used to scout for oil and gas; the pings of military sonar; and, as a ubiquitous backing track for all this commotion, the sounds of ships.

"Think about where your shoes come from," the marine-mammal expert John Hildebrand tells me. I look; unsurprisingly, the answer is China. Some tanker carried my shoes across the Pacific, leaving behind a wake of sound that radiated for miles. From 1945 to 2008, the

global shipping fleet more than tripled, and began moving 10 times more cargo at higher speeds. And in the past 50 years, shipping vessels have multiplied the levels of low-frequency noise in the oceans 32-fold—a 15-decibel increase over levels that Hildebrand suspects were already 10 to 15 decibels louder than in pre-propeller seas. Because giant whales can live for a century or more, there are likely whales alive today that have personally experienced this growing underwater racket and now can hear only a small fraction of their former range. As ships pass in the night, humpback whales stop singing, orcas stop foraging, and right whales become stressed. Crabs stop feeding, cuttlefish change colors, damselfish are more easily caught. "If I said that I'm going to increase the noise level in your office by 30 decibels, OSHA would come in and say you'd need to wear earplugs," Hildebrand tells me. "We're conducting an

Above: As babies, clown fish use sounds to find their way to the safety of a coral reef. To avoid excessive noise, prairie dogs spend more time underground. *Opposite page:* The body clock of the barred tiger salamander is disrupted by artificial light at night.

experiment on marine animals by exposing them to these high levels of noise, and it's not an experiment we'd allow to be conducted on ourselves."

BECAUSE OF THE way we have upended the worlds of other animals, senses that have served their owners well for millions of years are now liabilities. Smooth vertical surfaces, which don't exist in nature, return echoes that sound like open air; perhaps that's why bats so often crash into windows. Dimethyl sulfide, the seaweedy-smelling chemical that once reliably guided seabirds to food, now also guides them to the millions of tons of plastic waste that humans have dumped into the oceans; perhaps that's one reason an estimated 90 percent of seabirds eventually swallow plastic. Manatees can detect the currents produced by objects moving in the water with whisker-like hairs found all over their body, but not with enough notice to avoid a loud, fast-moving speedboat; boat collisions are responsible for at least a fifth of deaths among Florida's manatees. Odorants in river water can guide salmon back to their stream of birth, but not if pesticides in that same water blunt their sense of smell. Weak electric fields at the bottom of the sea can guide sharks to buried prey, but also to high-voltage cables.

Some animals have come to tolerate the sights and sounds of modernity. Others even flourish among them. Some urban moths have evolved to become less attracted to light. Some urban spiders have gone in the opposite direction, spinning webs beneath streetlights and feasting on the attracted insects. In some Panama towns, nighttime lights drive frog-eating bats away, allowing male túngara frogs to load their songs with sexy flourishes that would normally attract predators as well as mates. Animals can adapt, by changing their behavior over an individual lifetime and by evolving new behaviors over many generations.

But adaptation is not always possible. Species that mature and breed slowly can't evolve quickly enough to keep pace with



levels of light and noise pollution that double every few decades. Creatures that have already been confined to narrow corners of shrinking habitats can't just up and leave. Those that rely on specialized senses can't just retune their entire Umwelt.

Our influence is not inherently destructive, but it is often homogenizing. In pushing out species that cannot abide our sensory onslaughts, we leave behind smaller and less diverse communities. And beyond polluting the world with unwanted sensory stimuli, we're also removing natural stimuli that animals have come to depend on, flattening the undulating sensescapes that have generated the wondrous variety of animal Umwelten.

Consider Lake Victoria, in East Africa. It is home to more than 500 species of cichlid fish that are found nowhere else. That extraordinary diversity arose

partly because of light. In deeper parts of the lake, light tends to be yellow or orange, while blue is more plentiful in shallower waters. These differences affected the eyes of the local cichlids and, in turn, their mating choices. The evolutionary biologist Ole Seehausen found that female cichlids from deeper waters prefer redder males, while those in the shallows are drawn to bluer ones. These diverging penchants acted like physical barriers, splitting the cichlids into differently colored forms. Diversity in light helped create diversity in vision, in color, and in species. But over the past century, runoff from farms, mines, and sewage filled the lake with nutrients that spurred the growth of clouding, choking algae. The old light gradients flattened in some places, the cichlids' colors and visual proclivities no longer mattered, and the number of species collapsed. By

With every creature that vanishes, we lose a way of interpreting the world.

turning off the light in the lake, humans also switched off the sensory engine of diversity, contributing to what Seehausen has called “the fastest large-scale extinction event ever observed.”

As those species go extinct, so too do their *Umwelten*. With every creature that vanishes, we lose a way of interpreting the world. Our sensory bubbles shield us from the knowledge of those losses. But they don't protect us from the consequences. In the woodlands of New Mexico, the ecologists Clinton Francis and Catherine Ortega found that the Woodhouse's scrub-jay avoids the noise of compressors used in extracting natural gas. The scrub-jay spreads the seeds of piñon pine trees, and a single bird can bury thousands of pine seeds a year. They are so important to the forests that, in quiet areas where they still thrive, pine seedlings are four times more common than in noisy areas they have abandoned, Francis and colleagues found in a later study.

Piñon pines are the foundation of the ecosystem around them—a single species that provides food and shelter for hundreds of others, including Indigenous Americans. To lose three-quarters of them would be disastrous. And because they grow slowly, “noise might have hundred-plus-year consequences for the entire ecosystem,” Francis tells me.

A better understanding of other creatures' senses can show us how we're defiling the natural world—and can also point to ways of saving it. In 2016, the marine biologist Tim Lamont (formerly Tim Gordon) traveled to Australia's Great Barrier Reef to begin work

for his doctorate. Lamont should have spent months swimming amid the corals' vivid splendor. Instead, a heat wave had forced the corals to expel the symbiotic algae that give them nutrients and colors. Without these partners, the corals starved and whitened in the worst bleaching event on record, and the first of several to come. Snorkeling through the rubble, Lamont found that the reefs had been not only bleached but also silenced. Snapping shrimp no longer snapped. Parrotfish no longer crunched. Those sounds normally help guide baby fish back to the reef after their first vulnerable months out at sea. Soundless reefs were much less attractive.

Lamont feared that if fish avoided the degraded reefs, the seaweed they normally eat would run amok, overgrowing the bleached corals and preventing them from rebounding. He and his colleagues set up loudspeakers that continuously played recordings of healthy reefs over patches of coral rubble. The team would dive every few days to survey the local animals. After 40 days, he ran the numbers and saw that the acoustically enriched reefs had twice as many young fish as silent ones and 50 percent more species. They had not only been attracted by the sounds but stayed and formed a community. “It was a lovely experiment to do,” Lamont says. It showed what conservationists can accomplish by “seeing the world through the perceptions of the animals you're trying to protect.”

Lamont's experiment was possible only because the team managed to record the sounds of the healthy reefs before

they were bleached. Natural sensescaples still exist. There is still time to preserve and restore them before the last echo of the last reef fades into memory. And in most cases, the work ahead of us is considerably simpler. Instead of adding stimuli that we have removed, we can simply remove those that we added. Radioactive waste can take millennia to degrade. Persistent chemicals like the pesticide DDT can thread through the bodies of animals long after they are banned. Plastics will continue to despoil the oceans even if all plastic production halts tomorrow. But light pollution ceases as soon as lights are turned off. Noise pollution abates once engines and propellers wind down. Sensory pollution is an ecological gimme—a rare example of a planetary problem that can be immediately and effectively addressed. And in the spring of 2020, the world did unknowingly address it.

AS THE CORONAVIRUS spread, public spaces closed. Flights were grounded. Cars stayed parked. Cruise ships stayed docked. About 4.5 billion people—almost three-fifths of the world's population—were told or encouraged to stay home. As a result, many places became substantially darker and quieter. With fewer planes and cars on the move, the night skies around Berlin were half as bright as normal. Alaska's Glacier Bay, a sanctuary for humpback whales, was half as loud as the previous year, as were cities and rural areas throughout California, New York, Florida, and Texas. Sounds that would normally be muffled became clearer. City dwellers around the world suddenly noticed singing birds.

In a multitude of ways, the pandemic showed that sensory pollution can be reduced if people are sufficiently motivated—and such reductions are possible without the debilitating consequences of a global lockdown. In the summer of 2007, Kurt Fristrup and his National Park Service colleagues did a simple experiment at Muir Woods National Monument, in California. On a random schedule, they stuck up signs that

↓ Barn owls track prey using stiff facial feathers that funnel sound toward their ears.



To perceive the world through others' senses is to find splendor in familiarity, and the sacred in the mundane.

declared one of the most popular parts of the park a quiet zone and encouraged visitors to silence their phones and lower their voices. These simple steps, with no accompanying enforcement, reduced the noise levels in the park by three decibels, equivalent to 1,200 fewer visitors.

To truly make a dent in sensory pollution, bigger steps are needed. Lights can be dimmed or switched off when buildings and streets are not in use. They can be shielded so that they stop shining above the horizon. LEDs can be changed from blue or white to red. Quiet pavements with porous surfaces can absorb the noise from passing vehicles. Sound-absorbing barriers, including berms on land and air-bubble curtains in the water, can soften the din of traffic and industry. Vehicles can be diverted from important areas of wilderness, or they can be forced to slow down: In 2007, when commercial ships in the Mediterranean began slowing down by just 12 percent, which saves fuel and reduces emissions, they produced half as much noise. Such vessels can also be fitted with quieter hulls and propellers, which are already used to muffle military ships (and would make commercial ones more fuel-efficient).

We could regulate industries causing sensory pollution, but there's not enough societal will. "Plastic pollution in the sea looks hideous and everyone is worried, but noise pollution in the sea is something we don't experience so directly, so no one's up in arms about it," Lamont says. And as we desecrate sensory environments, we grow accustomed to the results. Our blinding, blaring world becomes normal, and pristine wilderness feels more distant.

But the majesty of nature is not restricted to canyons and mountains. It can be found in the wilds of perception—the sensory spaces that lie outside our *Umwelt* and within those of other animals. To perceive the world through others' senses is to find splendor in familiarity, and the sacred in the mundane. Wonders exist in a backyard garden, where bees take the measure of

a flower's electric fields, leafhoppers send vibrational melodies through the stems of plants, and birds behold the hidden palettes of ultraviolet colors on their flock-mates' feathers. Wilderness is not distant. We are continually immersed in it. It is there for us to imagine, to savor, and to protect.

In 1934, after considering the senses of ticks, dogs, jackdaws, and wasps, Jakob von Uexküll wrote about the *Umwelt* of the astronomer. "Through gigantic optical aids," he wrote, this unique creature has eyes that "are capable of penetrating outer space as far as the most distant stars. In its *Umwelt*, suns and planets circle at a solemn pace." The tools of astronomy can capture stimuli that no animal can naturally sense—X-rays, radio waves, gravitational waves from colliding black holes. They extend the human *Umwelt* across the universe and back to its very beginning. The tools of biologists are more modest in scale, but they, too, offer a glimpse into the infinite. Scientists have used night-vision goggles to show that nocturnal bees can see in extreme darkness, clip-on microphones to eavesdrop on the vibrational songs of leafhoppers, and electrodes to listen in on the pulses of electric fish. With microscopes, cameras, speakers, satellites, and recorders, people have explored other sensory worlds. We have used technology to make the invisible visible and the inaudible audible.

No creature could possibly sense everything, and no creature needs to. Evolving according to their owner's

needs, the senses sort through an infinity of stimuli, allowing through only what is relevant. To learn about the rest is a choice. The ability to dip into other *Umwelten* is our greatest sensory skill. A moth will never know what a zebra finch hears in its song, a zebra finch will never feel the electric buzz of a black ghost knifefish, a knifefish will never see through the eyes of a mantis shrimp, a mantis shrimp will never smell the way a dog can, and a dog will never understand what it is like to be a bat. We will never fully do any of these things either, but we are the only animal that can try. Through patient observation, through the technologies at our disposal, through the scientific method, and, above all else, through our curiosity and imagination, we can try to step into perspectives outside our own. This is a profound gift, which comes with a heavy responsibility. As the only species that can come close to understanding other *Umwelten*, but also the species most responsible for destroying those sensory realms, it falls on us to marshal all of our empathy and ingenuity to protect other creatures, and their unique ways of experiencing our shared world. *A*

Ed Yong is a staff writer at The Atlantic and the winner of the 2021 Pulitzer Prize for explanatory reporting. This article has been adapted from his latest book, An Immense World: How Animal Senses Reveal the Hidden Realms Around Us.

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Culture & Critics



The Book That Never Stops Changing

What I've learned about Dublin, and myself, in a lifetime of reading Ulysses

By Fintan O'Toole

When I was a kid, the axis around which Dublin revolved was a huge Doric column that had stood at the center of the city since 1809. On the top was a statue of the English naval hero Vice Admiral Horatio Lord Nelson. Even to a child, his presence seemed anomalous. It was as if Washington, D.C., were dominated by a giant memorial to King George III.

One day, when I was 8 years old, my father and his cousin Vincent led me and my brother up the 168 steps that wound through the hollow interior of the monument we Dubliners called Nelson's Pillar. I had never before seen the city from a vantage point so high that you could take in the whole place, the bay to the outlying mountains.

But there was, for me, an edge of unease. Vincent had bought half a dozen plums in a fruit shop. When we got to the top of the pillar, he opened the brown paper bag and gave us each one. He and my father started laughing about how they could spit the stones down on the people below. I found this deeply unsettling because I did not know my father could be like that, that he could joke about something I was sure would get us into big trouble. It was also darkly mysterious. The adults clearly thought there was some meaning in all of this—but what did plums have to do with Nelson?

More than a decade later, I found out. I was reading, for the first time, James Joyce's *Ulysses*. The centenary of the novel's publication is being marked in Dublin with official enthusiasm climaxing on Bloomsday, June 16. But back then it was still—as it

Back when I first read Ulysses, it was still—as it should be—a thrillingly strange and dirty book.

should be—a thrillingly strange and dirty book, full of provocations and subversions. I came to an episode in which the author's alter ego, Stephen Dedalus, is passing Nelson's Pillar with some other men. He tries to impress them with a story about two middle-aged Dublin women who save their money for a day out. They buy a lot of plums and climb the pillar. Then “they put the bag of plums between them and eat the plums out of it, one after another, wiping off with their handkerchiefs the plumjuice that dribbles out of their mouths and spitting the plumstones slowly out between the railings.”

Reading this took me back to my childhood and explained an incident that was both vivid in my memory and oddly obscure. Now I knew what my father and Vincent were joking about and why we were eating plums way up there above the streets of Dublin. The book was in their heads, and they were inhabiting simultaneously Joyce's comic parable and the present-day city. But if the passage in *Ulysses* illuminated a moment in my own past, I still could not understand Stephen Dedalus's story. Why were those apparently respectable women spitting the hard pits of a fruit down onto the heads of their fellow citizens?

What I wanted to do then was go back and climb the pillar again. Surely the best way to grasp what the women were doing was to retrace their steadily mounting steps. This was the great privilege of reading *Ulysses* as a native of the city it has immortalized: The fictional world of the book mapped onto the physical reality of the streets and buildings, so that each could radiate into the other.

Except that, by the time I was reading Joyce, the pillar had vanished. In 1966, not long after our family adventure with the plums, some members of an Irish Republican Army splinter group had planted a bomb under Nelson's statue that blew it off its plinth and shattered the top part of the column. The sad stump was then demolished by the authorities.

The bombers very deliberately erased one kind of memory—the idea of Dublin as a British city, visually dominated by a very English hero. But they also obliterated an important part of Joyce's city.

In *Ulysses*, the pillar is described as the “heart of the Hibernian metropolis.” That heart was ripped out. From that moment, a very specific experience became impossible—a visual and spatial sensation of hauling your bones up through the dark interior of a huge stone tube, emerging into the light and then seeing the city and its hinterland in every direction. Joyce undoubtedly did that, and the topography imprinted itself on his imagination. I had been lucky enough to do it once, but I was painfully aware that no one could ever do it again.

ONLY MUCH LATER, reading *Ulysses* for a second time, did I realize that in the book itself there is also an absent monument. If you know Dublin, you will be familiar with the obelisk just a few hundred yards up O'Connell Street from where Nelson's Pillar had stood. It commemorates a much more appropriately Irish hero: Charles Stewart Parnell, who drove the cause of Irish Home Rule to the very center of British politics in the 1880s. The statue of Parnell is the only monument by the great sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens in the artist's native city. For Joyce, it would have had a special significance—at the age of 9, he wrote a poem in praise of Parnell, his first published work; his proud father had it printed up as a broadside. The fall of the leader of Irish nationalism in the late 19th century, brought down by a scandal over his adulterous liaison with a married woman, was for him the most embittering event in recent Irish history. "Twas Irish humour, wet and dry," Joyce wrote later, "Flung quicklime into Parnell's eye."

The foundation stone for Parnell's monument was laid in 1899, but by 1904, when *Ulysses* is set, it had still not been built. Joyce saw this failure as emblematic of what he called the paralysis of Irish life. In a lecture in 1907, he noted sardonically that "in logical and serious countries, it is customary to finish the monument in a decent manner ... but in Ireland, a country destined by God to be the eternal caricature of the serious world ... they rarely get beyond the laying of the foundation stone."

In *Ulysses*, on the morning of June 16, 1904, as the protagonist Leopold Bloom is riding in a carriage to Glasnevin Cemetery for the burial of the hard-drinking Paddy Dignam, he passes an empty plinth at the top of O'Connell Street. His silent thought is: "Foundation stone for Parnell. Breakdown. Heart." This is the other heart of the Hibernian metropolis, the broken one. It marks a place so sunk in lassitude that it cannot even honor its lost leader.

The sour irony is that Nelson, too, had an affair with a married woman. Stephen Dedalus calls him the "onehanded adulterer." (Nelson had lost his right arm in battle.) Nelson's sexual transgression does not prevent him from being immortalized in Dublin—while Parnell's similar sin still clouds his memory. Because Parnell has not been properly memorialized, it is, in *Ulysses*, as if he has not been laid to rest at all. He is the unquiet ghost that haunts the book.

When Bloom is in the cemetery, one of his companions points to Parnell's tomb: "With awe Mr Power's blank voice spoke:—Some say he is not in that grave at all. That the coffin was filled with stones. That one day he will come again." This notion is made all the more real because at various points during the day, we encounter Parnell's living doppelgänger,

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his brother John Howard Parnell. ("There he is: the brother. Image of him. Haunting face.")

Joyce embeds in *Ulysses* a complex set of thoughts and feelings about these two monuments—what's there and not there, what is imposed on Ireland as official British memory and what has yet to be properly remembered at all. And all of this had become mixed up for me with my own memories of my family and my hometown. Nelson's now nonexistent pillar, that paradoxical monument to oblivion, was, for me, an image of both the evanescence of the past and the way that odd parts of it linger and persist—an image, too, that had a beautiful color and a sharp taste: plum.

I still didn't know, however, what Stephen Dedalus's parable was about. In the bizarre but very Joycean logic of association that makes *Ulysses* such a constantly changing book, the meaning came to me from an apparently unrelated source. The chapter in which the parable is told is largely about rhetoric, and the conversation that precedes it recalls a speech by a 19th-century Dublin lawyer that alludes to Moses leading the Jews out of Egypt. While I was rereading the section, I also read Martin Luther King Jr.'s staggering final oration, on the eve of his assassination, in Memphis: "I've been to the mountaintop ... And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you." King transforms himself into Moses, who gets to see Israel from the top of a mountain but at the same time is told by God that he himself will not live to enter it.

If I had read my Bible, which I had not, I would have known that the name of the mountain is Pisgah. In *Ulysses*, Stephen calls his odd story "A Pisgah Sight of Palestine or the Parable of the Plums." If I'd had one of the many annotated editions of the novel that have since appeared, or if the internet had been invented, I would have understood the allusion. But I thought that *Pisgah* was just a Joycean invention—it does, in my defense, sound like a plausible vulgar expression of disgust that might have been current in 1904.

Stephen's acrid joke is that the Moses who was supposed to lead Ireland to its promised land—Parnell—is unremembered; meanwhile, despite the expansive view, no Irish future can be seen from the top of the very British monument to Nelson. The women who take such trouble to climb it will not even be granted a sight of a new Ireland, let alone get to live in it. And why plums? Maybe just because they have the bittersweet tang of memory. *A*

Fintan O'Toole is the author of We Don't Know Ourselves: A Personal History of Modern Ireland.

Stodola goes scuba diving to explore the submerged half of the ancient city, with its intricately decorated geothermal baths and saunas and a nymphaeum, which she describes as “a sanctuary room dedicated to water.” During its heyday, Baiae was a debauched playground for emperors; it was, in fact, where the emperor Nero tried to murder his own mother, Agrippina, by putting her on a boat designed to self-destruct beneath her as it floated off. When she survived by swimming away, he had one of his henchmen finish the botched job later that night.

For a long time after the Romans, the concept of the luxury beach resort disappeared, resurfacing in altered form when the English upper classes, grown weary of their inland spas, began to be seduced by the curative properties of cold ocean water. In 1753 a doctor named Richard Russell moved to the old Saxon town of Brighton, on the south coast of England, and built a guesthouse for himself and his patients, setting off a little craze that spread across the channel to places like Trouville and Cabourg (which Marcel Proust reinvented in his fiction as Balbec). But these attempts at the beach resort were somewhat unpleasant and chilly. They offered very little luxury and relaxation, and encouraged drinking a great deal of seawater to purge bodily ills and leaping frequently into the frigid waves from horse-drawn bathing machines.

A more decadent understanding of seaside entertainment caught on in the mid-19th century, when the tiny principality of Monaco was nearly bankrupt, and Princess Caroline, the enterprising wife of the hapless Prince Florestan, of the ruling Grimaldi clan, had an idea. Amid rumors that gambling might soon be outlawed in the landlocked spa towns of Germany (as it had been for years elsewhere in Europe), she persuaded her husband to legalize it, and they hurriedly built a casino in Monte Carlo. Meanwhile, they took a different cue from the French Riviera, which for a time had been attracting the rich with the promise that the warm and salubrious Mediterranean airs would cure such ailments as “consumption, weak nerves, obstructed perspiration, languid circulation, scurvy, chest pain, general weakness, faintness, low spirits, fever, and loss of appetite.” Though the cover was health, vice was the true draw, no longer just a sport of the idle rich, but an aspirational avocation for ambitious men of the middle class. Monaco was soon thriving, and a new age of hedonism at the seashore had begun.

In the United States, summer resorts had been thickly established along the coasts of the Northeast since the early 19th century; Long Branch, New Jersey, was even touted as the “American Monte Carlo.” But the beach resort in its most romantic form—seared

into the public consciousness as a tropical wonderland of sea and surf and fruit and floral shirts—truly began in Hawaii, not long after a bunch of greedy American businessmen effected a coup d'état that removed the Hawaiian monarchy and claimed the archipelago for the United States in 1898. The deposed Queen Lili'uokalani lived by a breeze-swept bay called Waikiki, on the island of Oahu, where one of the first major resorts was built, the Moana.

Later, in 1927, a fever dream of a resort hotel opened, the Royal Hawaiian, a great pink hulk that ushered in the beach glamour and exoticism that we associate with luxury resorts today (where Joan Didion once fled, as she wrote in an essay, “in lieu of filing for divorce”). What was good for the economy of the gorgeous locale, however, was bad for its ecology—a trade-off that, though glaring, not surprisingly went ignored. The new buildings of Waikiki were constructed so close to the shore that they impeded the natural flow of sand, and the once-abundant beaches washed away. A tourist now sees sand that is replenished by machines and held in place by man-made barriers that stop its natural movement, which serves only to erode beaches farther down the current.

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STODOLA IS, like me, skeptical about the beach idyll, constantly seeing the darker forces of environmental and cultural degradation amid all the luxury she describes. She is at her most incisive when she calmly, clearly lists what is lost when beach resorts take over a place. For instance, she describes the Fijian village of Vatuolalai, where two clans used to live as equals, one owning the beach where they fished, the other the acres inland where they grew crops such as taro, coexisting according to *solesolevaki*, which means that “everyone in a community is obliged to work together toward common ends.” Then, in the 1970s, the resort developers crept in, renting the land from the beach owners, who now had the funds to buy nontraditional foods and goods. The Polynesian chestnut trees were ripped out and non-native coconut palms put in. Fiddler crabs and the golden plovers that ate them disappeared; turtle-nesting on the beach became rare. Silt built up in the local river and blocked the trevally fish from swimming and spawning there, and the coral reefs were damaged first by river silt flowing into the bay and then by the fertilizer runoff from the golf course, as well as by the sunblock that washes off tourist bodies.

Diminished coral reefs meant far fewer fish. Faced with scarcity, Vatuolalai's inhabitants started working for themselves, not for the collective good. Ninety-two percent of them became involved in tourism. The knowledge of how to make oil and traps and mats was

lost, as were traditional dances, supplanted by those from other nations in the Pacific, which young people performed for tourists. The provisions that since time immemorial had been saved up in case of emergency were no longer there for the villagers. When Cyclone Kina hit in 1993, the residents had to rely on the government to survive, instead of on their own stores. Diabetes became endemic, the result of a new diet of processed foods. Stodola watches happy families from Australia in the resort's pools, the adults bellied up to the bars set into the water, and feels certain that none of them sees any of the trade-offs that went into making the resort they're enjoying.

Stodola's careful critique of the invasive species that is the luxury resort helped clarify my beach-hater's reflexive outrage. And yet, as she piled on her profiles of resorts all over the world—and Tulum blended into Sumba, which blended into Barbados, which blended into Bali, which blended into Acapulco, their high-priced cocktails and corrosive effects becoming a repetitive blur—I felt dizzy and exhausted. Luxury can swiftly glut. I also felt morally queasy about her pursuit. Her travels officially counted as research, I understood. But I began to wonder how someone so perceptive, intelligent, and ethical could so studiously anatomize the pervasive harm wreaked by these places, and yet take long-haul flights around the globe to spend time at many (many!) more of them than nailing her argument required. She recognizes the ways in which she is complicit—she makes that clear in *The Last Resort*—and still she kept choosing to be complicit.

Is it enough of an excuse that Stodola overindulged in luxury with the aim of writing this book? I'm not sure. I recognize that part of her point is to convey the mad hedonism of the resort world. Still, I felt better on arriving at her penultimate chapter, in which she brings the purpose of the book back into focus by suggesting ways to rethink the luxury resort. Stodola gathers a slate of proposals from environmentally minded people she meets during her travels, and does her best to stick to the practical, mostly avoiding the sweepingly wishful.

Among the items on her list are regrowing mangroves to protect coastlines from erosion and high winds; getting resorts to discourage long-haul flights by offering discounts to visitors who avoid them, thus nudging people toward more regional travel; serving local cuisine and drink instead of wastefully importing goods from afar; making resorts responsible for maintaining their beaches (which, in one case that especially inspires her, involves a machine that turns discarded beer bottles into sand); building more wisely and limiting tourist numbers; and saving the coral reefs that ensure the health of the resorts'

waters. High-end ecotouristic enterprises already make sustainability part of their enlightened allure—at a price, of course—but Stodola optimistically imagines the spreading appeal of basking not just in the sun but in conscientious stewardship, even as sea levels inexorably rise.

I AM GLAD that *The Last Resort* exists, because it gives me ammunition to shoot down the next island-vacation proposal. (Let's do a family hike! Better yet, a staycation where we all read books in separate rooms!) At the same time, I am afraid that I am the book's custom-built audience, given my wariness of beaches. The people who might most benefit from this book—those who have bought into the myth of paradise with an ocean view, deleterious impact be damned, and have the means to regularly experience a version of it—don't want their illusions destroyed. If they were to receive *The Last Resort* as, say, a (passive-aggressive) birthday gift, they might well immediately fling it into the giveaway bin.

I don't say this to condemn those who hesitate to listen to the climate Cassandras among us, or who at any rate fail to act on warnings to desist from this or that treasured activity. I also choose to ignore many inconvenient truths, and the sacrifices that they should inspire but that would dampen my own pleasure in living: Forswearing fancy beach resorts just happens to be no skin off my sun-blistered back. If I can't help feeling that Stodola tries to have it both ways, which I read as a kind of hypocrisy, the reason I find it hard to swallow is that I so often do the same.

Or, rather, we all share in the hypocrisy, save for those few Earth angels who live off the grid and use no plastics. If we all paid attention to what is happening to the planet in the Anthropocene, we'd be running around with our heads on fire. Instead, we churn on in our lives, ordering stuff for next-day delivery when we could shop locally, driving to the grocery store only half a mile away instead of biking, and flipping the radio dial when another instance of extreme weather strikes, because we just can't bear what another fire or hurricane portends. All the while, we're nagged by conscience, which slowly drags our spirits down. Perhaps we need a nice beach vacation to recover! And so we go on, with our tidal cycles of unbearable guilt and panicked complicity, in and out, just like the ocean, where we sit and watch the sunset in our near-nakedness, drinking mai tais, in order to forget all the ways we are failing the Earth, in our vicious circularity, in our infinite regress. *A*

THE LAST
RESORT:
A CHRONICLE
OF PARADISE,
PROFIT, AND
PERIL AT
THE BEACH

Sarah Stodola

ECCO

Lauren Groff is the author, most recently, of *Matrix*.



BOOKS

A White Author Fails Her Black Characters

Geraldine Brooks has sympathy for her protagonists. That's not enough.

By Jordan Kisner

It's 2019 in Washington, D.C., and Theo is changing his art-history dissertation after finding a painting of a horse in his neighbor's giveaway pile. He is 26 years old, a Black Londoner (his mother is Yoruba, his father Californian) and a former star polo player. He left the sport for academia because of relentless racist harassment, and now studies stereotypes of Africans in British painting. The working title for his dissertation is *Sambo, Orbello, and Uncle Tom: Caricature, Exoticization, Subalternization, 1700–1900*. He jogs with his dog for exercise, careful to wear his Georgetown shirt because “his favorite run took him through lily-white Northwest Washington and Daniel, his best friend at Yale, had instructed him that a Black man, running, should dress defensively.” Because he's from the U.K., he may not understand all the nuances of American racism, but he understands enough. When the lady across the

street, from whom he got the horse painting, flinches as he approaches to help her, he feels “the usual gust of anger” and takes a deep breath, saying to himself: “Just a White woman, White-womaning.”

Theo might be chagrined to find himself a protagonist in *Horse*, Geraldine Brooks’s latest work of historical fiction, which braids his story with the narrative of Jarret, an enslaved groom of the horse in the 19th-century painting Theo finds. For one, Theo is skeptical of white artists taking on Black subjects. The original hypothesis of his dissertation is that the Africans in British portraits were rendered less as people than as objects: “His argument mirrored Frederick Douglass’s caustic essay, arguing that no true portraits of Africans by White artists existed; that White artists couldn’t see past their own ingrained stereotypes of Blackness.”

This is a self-conscious—and bold—inclusion for a novel with not one but two young Black male protagonists written by a 66-year-old white Australian woman. Brooks is a skilled journalist and an acclaimed novelist, and *Horse* is not her first foray into historical fiction set in part during the American Civil War. Her novel *March* is narrated primarily by the father in *Little Women*, and tells the story of Mr. March’s years as a chaplain for the Union Army. That novel won the Pulitzer Prize in 2006. Neither is this her first time writing across cultural divides. Her first nonfiction book, *Nine Parts of Desire* (1994), was about the “hidden world of Islamic women.” Her 2011 novel, *Caleb’s Crossing*, is about a young white Puritan girl’s friendship with Caleb Cheeshahteamauk, a character inspired by a Wampanoag man of the same name who was the first Native American to graduate from Harvard, in 1665.

This kind of venture has become trickier in the past 10 years. The publishing world has been racked by overdue debate about cultural appropriation and whether and how white authors should write characters from other racial or ethnic backgrounds. Five years after Brooks published *Caleb’s Crossing*, the white American writer Lionel Shriver gave a notorious keynote speech—briefly donning a sombrero—at a Brisbane literary festival, ranting about the “clamorous world of identity politics” and the threat she felt it posed to literature: “The kind of fiction we are ‘allowed’ to write is in danger of becoming so hedged, so circumscribed, so tippy-toe, that we’d indeed be better off not writing the anodyne drivel to begin with.” Retorts and replies followed. “It is possible to write about others not like oneself, if one understands that this is not simply an act of culture and free speech, but one that is enmeshed in a complicated, painful history of ownership and division,” the novelist Viet Thanh Nguyen observed. More recently, the blockbuster turned critical conflagration *American Dirt* (a novel about migrant trauma, for which its white author was paid a seven-figure advance) set off months

of heated articles. Some pointed out that immigrants remain under-published and underpaid for their own stories in the American media market; others objected to the implication that any identity-based limits should be placed on a fiction writer’s license.

In putting Douglass’s argument so early in the book—on page 57—Brooks signals to us that she enters her latest project knowingly. She’s read up on the Discourse. A gauntlet has been thrown—white artists can’t do justice to Black subjects—and she will take it up. Despite her evident efforts, the book does not turn out to be the counterexample she might have hoped.

HORSE STARTED with a real horse: Lexington, who was one of the great racehorses of the 19th century and a prolific sire. When Lexington died, his skeleton became an exhibit but was later forgotten in the attic of the Smithsonian’s National Museum of Natural History. Brooks, a horsewoman herself, grew fascinated with the painter Thomas J. Scott, who did several portraits of Lexington, and she was especially curious about one of Scott’s portraits that remains missing. A description of that painting in a July 1870 issue of *Harper’s* magazine describes Lexington being led by “black Jarret, his groom.” Nothing else is known about the real Jarret, and *Horse* grew out of Brooks’s imaginings of the life he might have lived. She had wanted to write about horses, she admits in her afterword. But as she researched horse racing in the antebellum South, “it became clear to me that this novel could not merely be about a racehorse; it would also need to be about race.”

The structure of the novel is poly-vocal, occupying a loose, floating third person as its short chapters jump among its cast of characters. The story is bounded historically by 2020 in Washington, D.C., where Theo’s find is identified as a lost 19th-century portrait of Lexington, and the 1850s at several southern horse-breeding farms, where Jarret, a gifted and reserved young horse trainer, develops a spiritual, even psychic connection with a newborn foal named Darley, who will later become famous as Lexington. The boy and the horse become best friends and deeply bonded partners. “That horse about the only one thing I care for,” Jarret declares. Though his father, also a horse trainer, has bought his own freedom, Jarret remains enslaved, and his story line is fraught with vulnerability: Jarret and Lexington are sold together from one wealthy landowner to another, to another.

Occasionally, the book swerves to the 1950s in New York, where Jackson Pollock and Lee Krasner make an appearance: Their friend, an art dealer named Martha Jackson, acquires one of the lost Lexington paintings from her maid, who seems to have inherited it from an ancestor connected to Jarret. (This third

Brooks signals that she enters her latest project knowingly. A gauntlet has been thrown, and she will take it up.

era's plot, which is also based in historical fact, is notably less developed than the other two.) Sometimes Jarret's perspective dominates in the novel; other times Scott's or Theo's vantage prevails—or that of Jess, a young white Australian woman who's pursuing her fascination with zoological research at the Smithsonian in 2019; or that of Mary, the young daughter of the white emancipationist Cassius Clay and a frequent presence at the Meadows, the farm where Jarret and his father work. Intermittently, Brooks serves up a mix of multiple viewpoints over the course of a single chapter.

But in spirit, the book belongs to Jarret and Theo, with complementary foils in the form of the two young white women. (While there are several Black female characters in the book, none is granted complex interiority.) In 2019, Theo begins to date Jess, despite some ambivalence. In 1850, Mary likes to hang around the barns and talk to Jarret (who is two years older) while he works. Brooks has taken pains to make both women flawed: Whereas Jarret and Theo are carefully dressed, meticulous, and possessed of “impeccable manners,” these women are often careless, unkempt, emotionally fragile—and racist without quite knowing it. Jess and Theo meet because she assumes he's stealing her bike. She's then so embarrassed by her behavior that she tells him she found the incident traumatic. (“Typical, Theo thought. He'd been accused, yet she was traumatized.”) When Mary is angry, she reminds Jarret that he's enslaved, and then feels hurt later when she tells him that she considers them friends and he is too incredulous at the idea to reciprocate.

BROOKS CLEARLY ATTEMPTS to demonstrate self-awareness, to preemptively deflect any criticism that she has favored the characters whose life experience most resembles her own—but the dynamic she creates between Theo and Jess and between Jarret and Mary flattens all the characters. Theo and Jarret are described, at every turn, as exemplary, socially and spiritually. They are handsome, tall, gifted, and educated (Jarret takes an opportunity to learn how to read). Animals instinctively trust them (Theo and his dog are exquisitely attuned). They are constantly swallowing their rage. They are always patiently explaining something. Where others stumble, they are steady. Theo tells Jess at one point that he wants to help his old-lady neighbor even if she's racist, because “whatever *she* might be, it doesn't mean that *I* won't do what I know to be right.” Jess sighed, defeated, and smiled at him. “You're just a better person than me, I guess.”

Theo is a better person than Jess, no doubt, but Brooks grants Jess something that she denies Theo—and to a degree Jarret. Jess gets to fail; Jess gets to change. By contrast, Theo is static. Sometimes he reads

like a caricature: “He was his own man long before any of his peers even realized that was an option. He'd embraced life as a rootless loner, at home in the world but belonging nowhere in particular. Comfortable with a wide range of people, close to very few.” He remains angry but patient, smart, gentlemanly, and gentle to the end.

Jarret, the most rounded of the many characters who take turns narrating *Horse*, changes less than you would expect given that the story tracks him from adolescence into his late 30s. His spiritual evolution is condensed into two formative episodes. In the first, he is saved by Mary and her father from an ill-conceived escape attempt, and he learns thereafter to control his anger and work within the constraints of his enslavement. The second leap forward—which is presented as his real moral maturation—comes when he is briefly forbidden to care for Lexington and is sent to labor in the fields, where he is whipped.

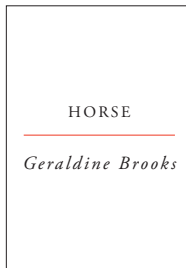
Startlingly, this is framed as a blessing:

He conceived, in those hard days, a renewed gratitude toward his father, who had endured hardship to rise to a measure of dignity that had extended its protective cloak over Jarret's childhood. He learned, in those fields, what he had been spared. He felt a new understanding for the folk who bore it, and an admiration for those brave enough to risk everything to run away from such a life. An empathy grew in him. He began to watch people with the sensitive attention he'd only ever accorded his horses . . . Even as his world contracted and pressed in upon him, in equal measure his heart expanded.

When Jarret finally reunites with Lexington and leaves that plantation, he reflects that “he wasn't sorry to have seen what he'd seen, and learned what he learned. Not just the book learning. He felt larger in spirit. There was a space in his soul for the suffering of people. He resolved to take account of their lives, the heavy burdens they carried.”

These passages call to mind the history of white people insisting that whippings under chattel slavery were an experience of moral training upon which the enslaved might reflect with sanguine gratitude—a history that Brooks is aware of but nevertheless echoes here. Jarret, an emotional teenager who doesn't seem to lack empathy in the first place, is turned into a saint, floating somewhat above the action.

I keep thinking about Parul Sehgal's elegant panning of *American Dirt*, in which she joins the novelist Hari Kunzru in arguing that “imagining ourselves into other lives and other subjectives is an act of ethical urgency.” Transracial authorial imagining, she writes, is a profound undertaking. “The caveat is to do this



HORSE

Geraldine Brooks

VIKING

work of representation responsibly, and well.” Brooks’s attempt is made earnestly, but not well. In keeping with the character construction, the plot itself veers toward formula. *Horse* relies on ungainly cliff-hangers to pull the reader from chapter to chapter. (In one, Jess inspects Lexington’s skeleton in 2019 and concludes, “Something had happened to this horse when it was alive. Something dreadful.”) The romance is bland. (“Was it the wine, or was she becoming infatuated with this man?”) The details occasionally inspire a flinch (describing an enslaved young man as a “dusky youth”), and the moments when Brooks addresses racism more directly can read as self-conscious and pedantic. (“Look. It’s not your fault you get to move easy in the world,” Theo’s friend Daniel tells Jess after an act of violence. “We just can’t afford to.”)

Brooks is an accomplished writer, and many of her gifts are evident amid the clumsiness of the overall effort. The relationship between Jarret and Lexington is intimate and compelling. When they are briefly separated, the uncertainty of their reunion feels like an existential crisis. Brooks has a talent and passion for research that is fully expressed here—she writes beautifully about the anatomy of horses and the delicate work of “articulating” their skeletons, arranging every bone in its proper place. The descriptions of 19th-century horse racing, when the animals were bred differently and raced much longer tracks, are thrilling. Brooks has attended with equal care to the quotidian details of each era (corn pone in the antebellum South, bebop for Jackson Pollock, mid-century-modern furniture for Theo).

I read to the end wanting *Horse* to right itself, to be one of those books that achieve the creative and ethical intersubjectivity that signals great fiction. Brooks gives Jarret and Theo just enough spark to make us wish she’d also given them a more deeply imagined, nuanced, and substantial portrayal. Each ends as a trope: one a man who triumphs against all odds, the other a martyr. Brooks’s sympathies are evidently with them, and so are ours. But sympathy seems like an inadequate achievement in a project like this, which takes as its subject the worst consequences of white Americans’ failure to recognize the full humanity of Black people. Sympathy has a way of falling short, aesthetically as well as politically—it is a frail substitute for the knotty, vital insight that can emerge from sustained immersion in another psyche, another soul. If readers feel sorry for Theo and Jarret without really needing to believe in them as whole beings, what exactly do their portraits accomplish? *A*

Jordan Kisner, an Atlantic contributing writer, is the author of Thin Places: Essays From In Between.

Invitation

By Jane Hirshfield

It was not given me to write in the primary colors.

I did not recognize the 350,000 species of beetle.

I loved what was spare but could not draw it.

My luck and errors equally mostly escaped me.

My eyes faltered, but found their way to different windows.

The fate-souk bartered my shapes and sounds between stalls.

When the keyboard offered an incomprehensible symbol,

I reached my hand out, as if to a Ouija board’s invitation

or a stair’s polished handrail—because it was

incomprehensible,

because my hand could add its own oils to that railing.

Jane Hirshfield’s most recent collection is Ledger (2020). Her New & Selected Poems is expected to appear next year.



Why Is Dad So Mad?

A father dares to explore his rage.

By Daniel Engber

For dads, 2015 was a clarifying year. A glorifying year. Fatherly.com—a website described in *The New York Times* as a father-focused mashup of *Vice* and *BuzzFeed*—came online in April with a plan to serve men at the most “blindly inquisitive and acquisitive moment of their lives.” Celebrities were getting in on daddy culture, too. Ashton Kutcher pushed his audience of millions to agitate for diaper-changing stations in men’s rooms. Jimmy Fallon came out with a best-selling, father-forward picture book, *Your Baby’s First Word Will Be DADA*. And a klatch of daddy bloggers was trying to cajole the nation’s leading online retailer into making its parent-discount program more inclusive for men. By year’s end, Amazon Mom had become Amazon Family.

But 2015’s most telling fatherhood trend was the one that captured dads’ confusion. In the spring, just before the launch of Fatherly, a Clemson University student’s viral essay introduced the world to the phrase and image of the *dad bod*: “a nice balance between a beer gut and working out,” as she put it. Soon *dad bod* was the subject of hundreds of newspaper stories, including five in *The Washington Post* alone. But as the phrase’s popularity increased, so did debates about its meaning. Was the *dad bod* hard or soft? Was it imposing or forgiving? Was it just a state of mind, or was it—as *Men’s Health* suggested—a dangerous reality? (“Face it: The *dad bod* is just a precursor to *dead bod*,” the magazine’s editor proclaimed.)

In its partial lack of definition, the *dad bod* could stand in for dads’ self-image on the whole. Everybody knew that dads used to earn a living; that they used to love their children from afar; and that when the need arose, they used to be the ones who doled out punishment. But what were dads supposed to do today? “In former times, the definition of a man was you went to work every day, you worked with your muscles, you brought home a paycheck, and that was about it,” the clinical psychologist Thomas J. Harbin would explain

to Fatherly a few years later. “What it is to be a man now is in flux, and I think that’s unsettling to a lot of men.” Indeed, modern dads were left to flounder in a half-developed masculinity: Their roles were changing, but their roles hadn’t fully changed.

A Pew Research Center survey, carried out the autumn after *dad-bod* fever, found that men cared just as much about their parental identity as moms did about theirs (57 percent described it as being “extremely important,” versus 58 percent of women). But all of that caring served as fuel for newfound insecurity: Most of the moms surveyed—51 percent—said they did “a very good job” of raising their children; among the dads, just 39 percent said the same.

Fatherly tried to help with this conundrum. The lack of clear-cut standards for successful masculinity, Harbin said, “causes a lot of dissatisfaction that gets expressed as anger.” Men who defined themselves as modern fathers, more nurturing than their own dads had been, could be flummoxed by that rage. An early series on the site, called “Why I Yelled,” interviewed a different father for each installment about a time he’d lost his temper. Many columns ended with the man’s regrets. “I instantly felt like the world’s biggest asshole and just about started crying,” one father said. “Here I am losing my shit when my little girl is just having some anxiety issues about starting first grade.” Another dad, whose son had hit him in the shoulder with a baseball, said he’d yelled “because sometimes it needs to happen,” then ended up apologizing. The injury wasn’t that bad, he admitted. “Honestly, I was being a bit of a pussy.”

Fatherly had promised from the start to expand its readers’ minds and maybe turn them into “super-dads.” One of the site’s first-ever featured super-dads—an al-Qaeda-fighting former Navy SEAL—offered his advice: “To paraphrase Ralph Waldo Emerson, who you are will speak more loudly to your children than anything you say.” But as a tip for dads, this shirked the hardest question. Who *are* they, really? Nurturers, enforcers, role models? Or are they somehow all of those at once?

A father’s superpower, it emerged, would be self-knowledge. Dr. Spock once reassured mothers with his famous mantra: “Trust yourself. You know more than you think you do.” Now Fatherly does the same for dads. “Don’t sweat what you don’t know,” the site’s editors wrote in *Fatherhood*, their omnibus of dad advice, published last year, “because if you know yourself, you know fatherhood.”

IN 2015, the journalist and novelist Keith Gessen had a son. His memoir of early parenthood, *Raising Raffi: The First Five Years*, starts off as so many dad books do—with a nod to parenting’s great transition, and dads’ uncertain duties. “I was part of the first generation of men who, for various reasons, were spending more time

with their kids than previous generations,” Gessen writes in the introduction. “That seemed notable to me.”

But his book proceeds as so many dad books don’t: with a father’s careful, piercing introspection, and a deep analysis of anger. “You’re a bad dada and I’m never going to listen to you again!” his 3-year-old son says to him in one scene, after getting yelled at during bedtime. “I felt he was right,” Gessen says. “I was not a good dada. But I didn’t know what else to do.”

I didn’t know, I don’t know, I still don’t know—these are the modern dad’s refrains, and the subject of the book. “You don’t know anything about yourself until your baby gets older,” Gessen writes. Parenting is self-discovery. On that principle, *Raising Raffi* and *Fatherly* agree. But in Gessen’s case, self-discovery can be a brutal process, revealed not just through intense engagement in the work of child-rearing but also, more particularly, through the bouts of rage that a child may inspire. “You don’t know anything about yourself until the day your adorable little boy looks you in the eye, notices that your face is right up close to him, and punches you in the nose.”

Gessen writes about his temperamental, trying son with a depth that can only come from years of loving observation. But his son is watching, too. Again and again, Raffi tests his father’s temper—pinching, kicking, scratching, throwing—and then provides his own assessments. “Dada’s not nice,” he says. And: “Dada, I love you even when you do something bad to me.” And: “Dada, superheroes never get mad.” When Raffi gets a sticker chart, at one point, to encourage good behavior, he insists on making another for his parents. Theirs has fields for getting dressed, for eating dinner, and for “not hitting” him. (Those are Raffi’s words, not Gessen’s.)

If knowledge comes, in part, through Raffi’s provocations, Gessen pays them close attention. “I would find myself yelling or hissing or reprimanding,” he observes, like a clinician making rounds. Elsewhere he says he keeps a diary of incidents in which he’s lost control. In one, he finds his tempest veer from simple yelling into slapping Raffi’s wrist; in another, a push turns into an unintentional rap on the head. “These were the low points,” he says. “But scarier to me were the times when Raffi drove me so out of my mind with anger that I would imagine hitting him for real.”

Gessen’s tendency to lose control reappears throughout the book. In a chapter on whether Raffi should be raised bilingual, the father’s fury folds into a question of identity. Gessen himself was born in Russia, and immigrated to the U.S. when he was 6. Teaching Raffi to speak Russian would tie him to his past, but also to “a culture and a history,” as Gessen puts it, “that most of us, for various reasons, had wanted to escape.” He wonders whether he could or would ever bring Raffi on a trip to “Putin’s Russia,” the aggressive fatherland, to help him learn the language.

Naturally, that country’s language is the one Gessen uses when he’s blowing up. “I turned out to be more of a yeller in Russian than I was in English,” he writes.

I found I had a register in Russian that I don’t in English, wherein I made my voice deep and threatening and told Raffi that if he didn’t right away choose which shirt he was going to wear that morning, I was going to choose it for him.

That self-splitting has some benefits. Whenever Gessen fumes at Raffi somewhere near their home in Brooklyn, he knows he’ll have some privacy. “At least I did it in Russian,” he writes, in reference to a bout of yelling in the park.

It must be nice to have a secret channel for your angry self, hidden even from your wife. To Raffi, though, Gessen’s Russian rages seem duplicitous. “Dada,” he says astutely at one point, “if people understood Russian, they would say, ‘That guy is not nice.’” Then Raffi calls his dad a liar, for claiming that he won’t get mad, and for always getting mad again anyway. “This was true,” Gessen says. “I did promise that, and then I always broke that promise.”

The memoir ends as *Fatherly* suggests, with Dada at last confronting his identity. One day at the playground, Gessen spots a kind and patient man over by the jungle gym, whose daughter is in the process of losing her mind. “The entire time I thought that the father was doing a remarkable job of staying calm, of not yelling, of not asserting his authority,” Gessen says. “I envied his patience. But I could not do what he was doing—and, I suddenly realized . . . *I would not want to*. It wasn’t in me to do.”

WHEN MY DAUGHTER was born (not long after Gessen’s son), and for most of the next three years, I marveled at the fact that she didn’t make me angry. How could she make me angry? The idea was just absurd. I’d never felt so beset and (I’ll admit it) bored by daily life—and yet I’d also never felt so placid. The baby needed almost everything that I could give, and she seemed to need it all the time. But nothing was her *fault*.

In those early, foggy days of fatherhood, I pitched a podcast to my editor. It would be called *When Will I Get Angry at My Daughter?*, and it would explore the cognitive and moral development of infants and toddlers, as well as the philosophy of moral agency and culpable ignorance. In other words, I was scared of yelling at my daughter, and I tried to quarantine that fear inside a shell of wonder and abstraction. But the anger would be coming just the same, as it does for every parent at some time. My parents had been mad at me, sometimes spanking mad. Their parents had been mad at them. I knew that fathers, in particular, could be very angry, and that angry fathers, in particular, could be very scary. And I didn’t like to think that one day soon I’d lose my temper, too.

*As a father,
I’m concerned
less about the
sound of
yelling than its
spirit—what
the yelling
means, where
the yelling
might end up.*

“Yelling turns out to be a pretty gendered issue,” reports an article in Fatherly’s official “Guide to Anger Management.” If testosterone can help you throw a baseball harder, a child psychiatrist says, then it can also make you “hurl your voice” with greater volume and velocity, which is “extra scary” for a kid. “It’s not that moms don’t yell, it’s that fathers yell with more force.”

As a father, though, I’m concerned less about the sound of yelling than its spirit—what the yelling means, where the yelling might end up. Some fathers are afraid of being angry. Others are afraid of being stony. We’re all afraid of causing pain to our children or, much worse, giving them a lasting wound. Michael Chabon, in his memoir *Pops: Fatherhood in Pieces*, laments his “latent dickitude” around the house. The book describes one time when Chabon’s 14-year-old daughter had just gotten a new haircut and looked to him for approval. His mind was somewhere else and he failed to muster a response. “For a moment her eyes went wide with fear and doubt,” he writes, before turning the narration on himself: “What a dick!”

The harm that he’s inflicted can’t be more than subtle disappointment. (I fail tests like these several times a week.) But Chabon’s fretting is unhinged. “She had a crack in her now, fine as a hair but like all cracks irreversible,” he writes.

I was shocked by my own thoughtlessness, and ashamed of it, but the thing I felt most of all was horror. Horror is the only fit response when you are confronted by the full extent of your power to break another human being.

It’s unhinged, but relatable—parenthood unhinges people. I’m sure that every mom and dad has known the fear of messing up their kid. That tension isn’t gendered. But a father’s fear of power—his sense that he might cause some catastrophic damage—may have its own distinctive vibration, one that tweaks the limbic nerve. (Perhaps he worries that, however hard he tries, he’ll never match a mother’s skill at patching wounds.) “I felt this possibility inside me. I was capable of doing it,” Gessen writes of hitting Raffi, *really* hitting him. This fantasy of transformation, from dad bod to the Hulk, elevates the stakes.

Discipline used to be the dad’s domain—his solid ground, the site of male authority at home. Now it’s just the opposite: a quicksand of confusing implications, where the angry dad exerts control but also loses it. Gessen’s book maps out this terrain. In a scene outside a restaurant, where Raffi has spilled his water and thrown his hot dog on the floor, Gessen ends up shaking his son upside down, to make the boy stop hitting him. Raffi cries and whines and then dissolves into fearful, desperate peals of laughter. “I was angry—and he was scared,” Gessen writes. Surely the converse was also true.

RAISING RAFFI:
THE FIRST FIVE
YEARS

Keith Gessen

VIKING

Memoirs of fatherhood are rarely so honest or so blunt. Chabon gestures at the same horrible potential—father as destroyer—but sublimates it in theatrics. Other dad books hide behind an image of bumbling befuddlement, as if a modern father couldn’t break his kids if he wanted to. Even Fatherly, today’s proponent of “Father, know thyself,” turned out to be an accidental billboard for toxic masculinity. When the site debuted with counsel from the former Navy SEAL, that dad was Eric Greitens. Greitens, who went on to serve as governor of Missouri, has been accused by his former hairdresser of sexual assault, and by his ex-wife of physical abuse. In a sworn affidavit, the latter told a judge that he’d hit their 3-year-old son and yanked the boy around by the hair. (Greitens has denied all of these allegations, and was not formally charged with assault; the article about him is no longer on Fatherly.)

I don’t mean to say that every dad has darkness in his soul, but rather that the darkness now hangs above us all, shading a father’s quest for self-discovery with dread. My daughter was born into an atmosphere of male aggression. I bottle-fed her through Election Night in 2016. The Harvey Weinstein story broke around the time she turned 1. At her second-birthday party, the kids ate cupcakes while the parents whispered about Christine Blasey Ford’s congressional testimony. By the time she turned 3, Bill Cosby—“America’s Dad,” and the author of an early book on what it means to be a modern father—was appealing his conviction on three counts of aggravated indecent assault. (His conviction was overturned last year.)

“If you know yourself, you know fatherhood,” Fatherly’s advice book says. But for me, and perhaps for Gessen and the other fathers of our micro-generation, this promise comes off as a threat. We were told, not so long ago, that dads had reached the cusp of something new—that they could start “embracing what they’ve become,” as Fatherly suggested in 2015, without “giving up on who they are.” It feels as though evidence against this claim has been mounting ever since. What if I don’t want to know the ways my identity will be inflicted on my children?

Near the end of *Raising Raffi*, Gessen offers up a route around this snare of anger and self-doubt. A father’s journey with his child, he observes, involves “pass[ing] through a terrible struggle” for independence and connection, which ends only when he’s no longer needed. This is the “tragedy of parenthood,” he says: To know yourself as a father is to understand the limits of your role. “You succeed when you make yourself irrelevant, when you erase yourself. Parents who fail to do that have failed.”

So embrace what you’ve become. But then you have to learn to let it go. *A*

Daniel Engber is a senior editor at The Atlantic.

ESSAY

The Vindication of Jack White

*An obsessive protector
of rock's past could hold
the key to its future.*

By Spencer
Kornhaber

Something preposterous was happening the night I visited Third Man Records in Nashville. The label and cultural center founded by Jack White, of the White Stripes, generally strives for a freak-show vibe; you can pay 25 cents to watch animatronic monkeys play punk rock in the record store, and a taxidermied elephant adorns the nightclub. On the March night when I showed up, Bob Weir of the Grateful Dead was performing. Through



a pane of blue-tinted glass at the back of the stage, another curiosity in White's menagerie could be glimpsed: a 74-year-old audio engineer in a lab coat who calls himself Dr. Groove.

In a narrow room behind the stage, Dr. Groove—his real name is George A. Ingram—stooped over a needle that was etching Weir's music into a black, lacquer-coated disc called an acetate. This is the first step in an obsolete process for producing a vinyl record. The lathe he used was the very same one that cut James Brown's early singles, in the 1950s.

Observing this process intently was White himself. Thanks to the endurance of early-2000s White Stripes hits such as "Seven Nation Army" and "Fell in Love With a Girl," the guitarist and singer is one of the few undisputed rock gods to emerge in the 21st century. On this evening, White, now 46, wore half-rim glasses and flannel, the only hint of rock coming from the Gatorade-blue tinge of his hair.

Listeners generally want a record to sound as loud as possible, White told me as Dr. Groove continued his work. But "you can have a mellow song like this"—the Dead's downbeat "New Speedway Boogie" drifted in the air—and then, all of a sudden, the drummer hits the effects pedal and pumps up his volume. If Dr. Groove isn't prepared, "the needle will literally pop out of the groove from the jolt," rendering the recording useless.

For so finicky an operation to take place in 2022 is, from one point of view, absurd. The music industry largely stopped cutting performances directly to disc 70 years ago, with the advent of magnetic tape. A few minutes before taking the stage at Third Man, Weir—a septuagenarian cowboy who spoke in a low mutter—had visited the back room and marveled that not even the Grateful Dead, those ancient gods of concert documentation, had captured a show in this fashion. "Cat Stevens said the same thing," White told me.

Ever since White installed a lathe at Third Man, a stream of acts has come to teleport to the time before Pro Tools. Unlike a recording made with contemporary equipment, a performance etched into an acetate can't be easily remixed or otherwise reengineered. Flubs, flaws,

and interference instead become selling points—evidence of a recording's authenticity. "People who know, audiophiles—they see 'live to acetate,' they know the circumstances under which it was made, and it's exciting," White said. "There were no overdubs on that guitar. That solo really happened at that moment." A sticker on one acetate-derived record for sale in Third Man's store, by the dance-punk band Adult, promises "such detail in this live recording, you can even hear the fog machine!"

White is the sort of listener who appreciates such detail. This spring, a clip made the rounds online in which White demonstrated his uncanny ability to identify any song in the Beatles' catalog in one second or less. This keen sense of the past helped the White Stripes—the Detroit band he formed in 1997 with his then-wife, Meg White—revive classic-rock rawness in an era of plastic pop and space-age hip-hop. After the band's breakup, in 2011, his solo records earned consistent if narrower acclaim. Lately, though, his obsession with the antique has made him an unlikely power broker in what was supposed to be the digital age.

Streaming, the cheap and convenient format that came to rule the industry in the past decade, has begun to grate on a diverse range of artists and listeners. Musicians' foremost gripe is about money: Spotify, the dominant platform, reportedly pays a fraction of a cent whenever a song is played. When, more or less overnight, the pandemic made touring impossible, the difficulty for most acts to make a living from such an arrangement became painfully clear.

The virus also spurred a public reckoning with Spotify earlier this year. A number of artists, including Neil Young and Joni Mitchell, pulled their catalogs from the platform to protest its exclusive deal with the podcaster Joe Rogan, who had aired misleading information about COVID-19 vaccines on his show. In the eyes of those dissenters, Spotify's unwillingness to remove Rogan reinforced the idea that it views music as just another offering in a buffet of content.

The devaluing of music as an art form, many artists worry, is hardwired into the streaming format. The old ways of building relationships between act and audience

(liner notes, audio quality) are subordinated by the new: algorithmic curation, which invites endless listening but not active engagement. This may seem like the way of the future, our tastes intuited and satisfied by strings of code. But while the medium continues to attract new users, some listeners are showing signs of streaming burnout.

One way to measure this sentiment is by looking at the popularity of the physical media that White has long championed—and that ought, in a streaming-enabled world, to have gone extinct. After languishing for years, vinyl sales began a steady climb around 2007 and then exploded during the pandemic. Last year's 41.7-million-unit, \$1 billion gross for the medium represented 61 percent year-over-year growth, and this after a 28 percent spike in 2020. Limited-edition records—sold for upwards of \$30 a pop at retailers such as Target and Amazon—have become integral to release strategies for the likes of Taylor Swift and Adele, who last year sold 318,000 vinyl copies of her most recent album within two months of its release. The same direct-to-acetate ritual Weir and Dr. Groove performed at Third Man's shrine to music past also produced the first live album by Billie Eilish, the 20-year-old Gen Z phenomenon known to eat spiders on YouTube. Maybe White had been onto something.

WHITE'S THIRD MAN label got serious about reviving vinyl in 2009. Even his friends wrote it off as a vanity project in keeping with his other willfully retro larks, such as his upholstery hobby (don't throw away the old; make it new) and his co-ownership of a company that manufactures baseball bats ("Built to spec ... for the athlete that competes with a warrior's mentality"). He was full of grand pronouncements in defense of the old, hard ways of doing things. "Technology is a big destroyer of emotion and truth," he declared in the 2008 documentary *It Might Get Loud*.

Today, in conversation, White has an innocent, almost surfer-dude affect, though his appetite for discussing outmoded forms of technology has hardly waned. While we were hanging out with audio engineers, he proposed a guessing game about when 8-track cartridges were

last on the market. (White doesn't own a smartphone, so a member of Weir's entourage looked it up. The answer, per Wikipedia, was late 1988, vindicating White's memories of seeing such tapes as a teen at Harmony House Records in Detroit.) Later, in Third Man's lounge, he described waiting months to see Paul Thomas Anderson's *The Master* on 70 mm, only to have the experience ruined by a screaming baby in the row in front of him. The point of the story wasn't that someone had brought an infant to a psychosexual thriller about a cult leader—it was that White had really wanted to enjoy the movie on celluloid.

I'll admit that I arrived in Nashville skeptical of White's nostalgist views. Some of my most crucial music memories include pirating Green Day on Napster and spacing out to Sufjan Stevens through Bluetooth speakers. Analog obsessives, I've found, can be dismissive of the powerful relationships that streamers form all the time with new artists. And some vinyl heads treat music mainly as an acquisitive hobby, like sneaker collecting. The records remain safely in their sleeves, lest their value as commodities be diminished by taking them out to play.

But White is less doctrinaire about these matters than I feared. With Third Man now a cultural fixture, he seems less like a strident iconoclast than a peacemaker between the streaming economy and the stuff economy. He insists that he never wanted to stop the march of progress; he only wanted to make sure the past didn't get torched along the way. As he put it, "It's hard to inspire only with one set of ways—only with the digital part, only with the vinyl part."

White told me he listens to 90 percent of his music digitally. He appreciates the way that streaming helps new acts find wide audiences. (Olivia Rodrigo, whose debut single made a swift transit to No. 1 thanks to Spotify, is one of the young pop artists he admires—which is cute because she herself is a White Stripes obsessive.) "I know it's not amazing money on streaming, but if vinyl hadn't blown up over the last few years, it would be a lot more dire," he said.

I gave White the chance to take a victory lap for saving vinyl from what seemed like certain doom, but he was quick to credit the figures who sustained the format in the '90s and 2000s: house DJs, punk

bands, Pearl Jam. Still, he acknowledged that Third Man had played an outsized role. At first, the company focused on kooky innovations, including records that projected 3-D images when spun. (Disney borrowed the same hologram artist for a 2016 *Star Wars* soundtrack, which shot up an image of a TIE fighter or the Millennium Falcon.) "I never minded the gimmicks," White said. "If it turns a kid on to music that they would have never gotten into, then whatever."

Today, Third Man has the makings of an old-media empire. Divisions in Nashville and Detroit master music, publish books and rock-focused magazines, and

*Day and night,
White's record-
processing plant
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BTS, and Beyoncé.*

develop photography. Last year, the company opened its third record store/rock club/wonder emporium, in London. But Third Man's greatest source of influence may be the record-processing plant White opened in Detroit in 2017, which has tripled its manufacturing capacity since then. Day and night, the facility whirs along, not only pressing Third Man's work—such as the record that will result from Weir's gig—but also filling contract orders from behemoths such as Paul McCartney, BTS, and Beyoncé.

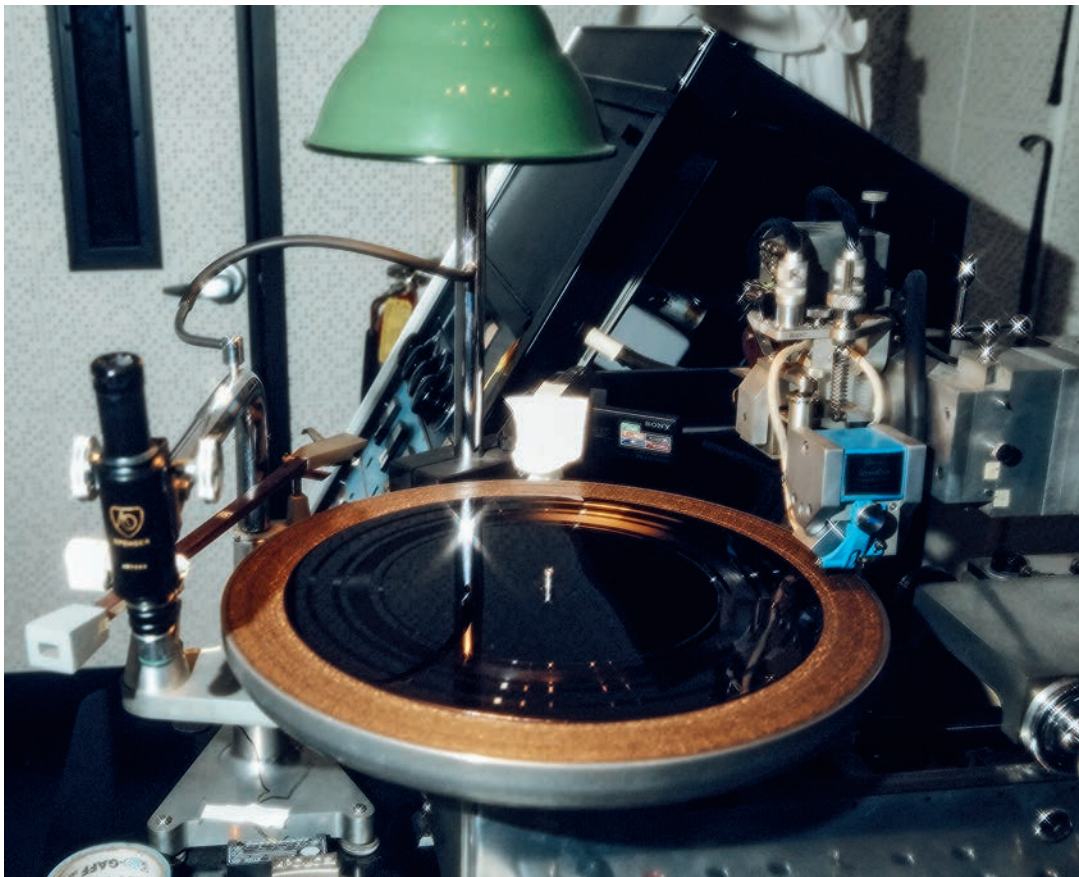
White's forays into the future haven't always been as successful as his treks to the past. In 2015, he joined a group of

superstars—including Jay-Z, Beyoncé, and Madonna—with an ownership stake in the Spotify competitor Tidal. A press conference about the virtues of an artist-driven platform was met with skepticism. Tidal was, specifically and flagrantly, a *celebrity*-driven platform. The service did tout higher audio quality and better payouts to artists than competitors, but user sign-ups were slow, and the service never found its footing. White, who was not involved with running the company, said the backlash was eye-opening. "I don't think [Tidal] was promoted properly from the get-go," he said. "It quickly became a lesson: Maybe people don't like it when the artists own the art gallery . . . It sort of gets to 'Eat the rich' kind of stuff."

White winced when I asked about an even more contentious attempt at revolution in the music world: non-fungible tokens, or NFTs. As the pandemic wore on, some record-industry figures argued that giving fans the ability to purchase digital assets—interactive album art, or even ownership rights to a song—would fulfill the same yearning for collectibility that has helped drive the vinyl boom. Others—White now among them—see NFTs as a way to get listeners to pay for things they can generally get for free. "It gives off a vibe of 'Well, if people are stupid enough to give me money for this, I'll take it.'"

But in 2021, the White Stripes—a legacy brand more than a band at this point—hawked some NFTs, animations tied to a 10-year-old EDM remix of "Seven Nation Army." White said that those had been pushed by the defunct band's management. "I don't want to come out and say 'I had nothing to do with this,'" he told me. "It is my band. We allowed it to happen. But it didn't really interest me. It's not something we'll be doing very much of."

What does interest White is the internet's broader music landscape—despite the fact that he isn't the most fluent participant in it. He appreciates how underground scenes and subcultures, which might seem like logical casualties of streaming, haven't quite died out: "You almost get a neighborhood feel in the TikToks and—what is it?—the Bandcamps and SoundClouds," he said. (Witness the recent wave of chatty, droll post-punk bands such as



Left: *The lathe at Third Man Records in Nashville.*

Right: *The Third Man store.*

Wet Leg, a favorite new find of White's.) He even had a kind word for social-media platforms such as Twitter and Snapchat, not that he uses them. In their character counts and time limits, he sees proof of one of his favorite theories: Constraint is the mother of creativity. "There's inspiration to be taken from all of that stuff," he said.

WHITE HAS always thrived within constraints, many of them self-imposed. The White Stripes famously had no bassist, and White originally composed his 2018 solo album, *Boarding House Reach*, with the same reel-to-reel recorder he used when he was 14 years old. For the two records he's released this year, April's *Fear of the Dawn* and July's *Entering Heaven Alive*, White didn't need to dream up new limitations. The pandemic did that for him.

When the coronavirus made studio sessions with other instrumentalists a risk, White, a consummate collaborator (besides the White Stripes, he has formed two other successful bands over his career, the Dead Weather and the Raconteurs),

did something he'd rarely done: He played all the parts on his songs. This in turn required another previously unthinkable step: using software to arrange drums, guitars, keyboards, and even samples into a coherent whole. Once, the *enfant terrible* of the White Stripes had routinely denounced computers for their deadening effects on rock. But the technology has improved since Nickelback's heyday, and White now believes that, in the right hands, it can stoke the life of a song rather than sap it. "It's like, CGI in movies is so much better than it was in the early 2000s," he said.

As social distancing loosened up and White brought in other musicians to record the songs he'd been writing, the resulting work fell into two categories: thrashing, Deep Purple-inspired rock and roll, and sweet, "Maybe I'm Amazed"-style love songs. His past solo albums had been mishmashes of styles, and he had assumed that this time he'd end up with another eclectic collection. But, he explained, instead of fitting together

naturally (he knitted his fingers), the loud songs and the soft ones now seemed to repel each other (his fingers then made a crosshatch). The muse was pushing him toward two separate albums—though not a double album, which he knows screams *filler*. ("People even say that about *The White Album*, which seems shocking.")

Both the mosh-worthy *Fear of the Dawn* and the brunch-friendly *Entering Heaven Alive* are among the best albums of White's solo career. The lead single on *Fear of the Dawn*, "Taking Me Back" (which spent a few weeks at No. 1 on rock radio), has guitar jolts so menacing that they almost trigger a fight-or-flight reflex. White likes that the title phrase can be heard a few different ways. "Maybe the pandemic has made everybody ask the world, 'Will you take me back as we emerge from our caves?'" he told me. The lyric is also a way for White, the father of two teenagers, to link his generation to the next. "When you kids do that," went White's alternative reading, "it takes me back to when I was a kid."



A RENEWED APPRECIATION for the tangible should be a boon for musicians who have struggled in the streaming era, a period in which rising profits for the industry as a whole have only incrementally benefited most individual artists. But demand for vinyl now exceeds manufacturing capacity by astonishing margins. A record that would have once taken three months to go from recording to the shelves today requires eight months or a year. Even White has been a victim of the lags; he'd originally considered releasing his new albums on the same day, but with his plant at capacity, he decided to stagger them. He has dubbed his present concert series the Supply Chain Issues Tour. As he tries to expand production at his Detroit factory, White finds himself more and more preoccupied by “regular manufacturing-plant kind of problems,” he said. “How many shifts do we have? Once you start the machines, how many hours do you keep them going?”

But Third Man can only do so much: In 2021, an unnamed industry executive speculated to *Billboard* that global

It's the sort of paradox that has animated White's entire career as a songwriter and businessman: romance leading to frustration, frustration leading to romance.

pressing capacity would need to at least double to meet present demand for vinyl. Some indie figures blame the bottleneck on the pop stars who have bought up time at small pressing facilities. The real problem, White argues, is a lack of manufacturers. He recently filmed a plea for the three major record labels—Universal, Sony,

and Warner—to build their own factories. Vinyl is “no longer a fad,” he said, standing amid the hazmat-yellow equipment of his pressing plant. “As the MC5 once said, you're either part of the problem or part of the solution.”

In the meantime, artists are stymied by scarcity. Some commentators in the music industry see this as a sign that musicians need to focus on reforming streaming services or advocating a return to paid downloads. Others say that less unwieldy formats, such as the humble cassette tape, would be a more sustainable medium for collectors (sales of tapes have indeed begun rebounding recently). White has always wanted all of the above. When he launched Third Man's first store, he had dreams of iPads packed with MP3s next to 1940s recording booths, and of customers accessing both a record-of-the-month club and an online streaming library of live music. While not all such plans have come to fruition, when I visited the Nashville location, I was amused to find a rotating rack displaying CDs for sale, as if at a Tower Records in 2005.

Yet there is no doubt that the very things that make vinyl a chore to replicate—the bulkiness, the frameable album art, the fingerprint-like grooves that differentiate one record from the next—are part of why vinyl is surging right now. It's the sort of paradox that has animated White's entire career as a songwriter and businessman: romance leading to frustration, frustration leading to romance.

IN THE BLUE ROOM, Third Man's concert venue, Weir and his band Wolf Bros preached between songs. The bassist, Don Was, who is also the head of the legendary jazz label Blue Note Records, gave a spiel about the glory of "authentic," Auto-Tune-free music. Weir recalled his teenage vinyl experiences. "You'd go to a friend's house, and you'd put records on and you'd listen to music all night," he said. "People don't do that anymore, because you can't. You can't listen to digital music for very long, because it makes your brain tired."

The crowd whooped, but I felt a defensive pang. We all fetishize our formative listening experiences—whether they were dancing to jug bands on vinyl 'til sunup or vibing to Frank Ocean on an iPhone while riding the subway. Still, maybe Weir was right: Whose brain doesn't feel tired these days? What if I've been addicted to musical fast food since first downloading MP3s at age 11? What if entire generations have been?

Looking around at the audience offered a less declinist narrative. Many of Weir's followers were 20-somethings in flannel; they twirled alongside a few grizzled, Merlin-looking guys who no doubt had been attending shows like this one for decades. The legendary, highly physical subculture of the Dead—an ecosystem of bootleg recordings, concert tailgates, and tie-dye merch—appears to still be going strong. Indeed, it has provided a model that many of today's acts are embracing. Live ticket sales have surged in recent months. Rappers and indie singers alike are moving branded



Third Man's record-pressing plant, in Detroit. White recently filmed a plea for the three major record labels to build their own factories. Vinyl is "no longer a fad," he said.

hoodies and hats faster than they can manufacture them. Even in the slick, futuristic world of K-pop, fans express their devotion by snapping up CD bundles laden with such delights as key chains and postcards. Fans download and stream, but they still thirst for a connection with artists that isn't mediated through a screen.

I circled backstage to find White hanging out with staff. As we watched Dr. Groove gingerly turn over an acetate, White described the layers of quality control in the process of making Weir's record. "You know that show *How It's Made*?" he asked. "I get so jealous: *Oh, they make razor blades, how hard!* They just build the machine and it pumps it out. But we have to make something that sounds good when you put it on your turntable. There's magic dust in there."

Weir finished up "Saint of Circumstance," the last of the songs that Dr. Groove had planned to capture. His assistant marked the record with a pen, and then placed it into a cardboard container. "Vinyl is final!" White shouted.

Weir wasn't finished playing, though. As his encore of "China Cat Sunflower" and "I Know You Rider" stretched past the 10-minute mark, Third Man's reel-to-reel recorder—striped red and white in the White Stripes' classic aesthetic—ran out of material with which to record backup. Loose tape flapped and jangled. "This machine was not built for this type of jamming," Bill Skibbe, White's longtime audio engineer, said. Someone suggested ripping the rest of the show from YouTube, but audiences at Third Man are typically asked not to film concerts. White prefers that the only glow come from the electric candles that flicker from wall sconces, not iPhones held aloft. The encore would not be lost, however. White's team had yet another device capturing the show for posterity: a digital recorder. *A*

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The Atlantic (ISSN 1072-7825), recognized as the same publication under *The Atlantic Monthly* or *Atlantic Monthly* (The), is published monthly except for combined issues in January/February and July/August by The Atlantic Monthly Group, 600 New Hampshire Ave. NW, Washington, DC 20037 (202-266-6000). Periodicals postage paid at Washington, D.C., Toronto, Ont., and additional mailing offices. Postmaster: send all UAA to CFS (see DMM 707.4.12.5); NONPOSTAL AND MILITARY FACILITIES: send address corrections to Atlantic Address Change, P.O. Box 37564, Boone, IA 50037-0564. Printed in U.S.A. Subscription queries: Atlantic Customer Care, P.O. Box 37564, Boone, IA 50037-0564 (or call +1 855-940-0585). Privacy: We occasionally get reports of unauthorized third parties posing as resellers. If you receive a suspicious notification, please let us know at fraudalert@theatlantic.com. Advertising (646-539-6700) and Circulation (+1 855-940-0585): 600 New Hampshire Ave. NW, Washington, DC 20037. Subscriptions: one year \$69.99 in the U.S. and poss., add \$10.00 in Canada, includes GST (123209926); add \$20.00 elsewhere. Canada Post Publications Mail Agreement 41385014. Canada return address: *The Atlantic*, P.O. Box 1051, Fort Erie, ON L2A 6C7. Back issues: For pricing and how to order, see TheAtlantic.com/Backissues or call 410-754-8219. Vol. 330, No. 1, July/August 2022. Copyright © 2022, by The Atlantic Monthly Group. All rights reserved.

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Or they'll treat you as a mere lexical resource. A vocabulary expander. A ThighMaster for out-of-condition prose. I mean, we've all done it. Reached for you, that is, when the words arriving in our forebrain, from the charred and private little glossary that we keep in our backbrain, seem ... insufficient. Don't say "in a shitty mood." Say "captious."

But that's not how, or when, to use you. That's not who you are. You, my friend, are a vision.

You're a shamanic trip into the essence of words: a shimmering, unfolding, occasionally scarifying million-petaled experience, a miraculous nest of emergent relationships, and the writer who abuses your nature, who exploits your abundance, will pay. He will pick the wrong word, and he won't sound clever at all. He'll sound like an ass. He'll sound like a *silly Billy*, a *twerp*, a *stooge*.

A thesaurus—here it comes—is for increasing one's aliveness to words. Nothing more and nothing less. By going into the buzzing and jostling hive of words *around* a word, we get a purer sense of the word itself: its coloration, its interior, its traces of meaning. I looked up the verb *excite* just now and found the word in its affective (*touch*, *move*) and mechanical (*electrify*, *galvanize*) aspects. Which gets at who we are, as humans, doesn't it? Feelings and circuitry.

Lewis Carroll made up *chortle*, and you absorbed it, placing it snugly between *chuckle* (benign and big-bellied) and *cackle* (witchy and weird). Ken Dodd, the great English comedian, made up *tattifoliarious*. ("Now," he told an interviewer as an old man, "now is reality. And it's wonderful. By Jove, it's tattifoliarious!") You have not, as yet, absorbed that. I'd float it in there somewhere between *bittersweet* and *custard-pie*.

As for you, blessed Mr. Roget, they say you had OCD. Of course you did. You were hooked, hung up, haunted by the hidden life of words: their selves, their stories, as told by the words they are closest to. You gave us a great gift. May you rest eternally among your synonyms. *A*

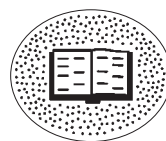
James Parker is a staff writer at The Atlantic.

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