THE Nation.
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SEPTEMBER 2025

THE *NATION* INTERVIEW

ZOHRAN MAMDANI'S NEW YORK

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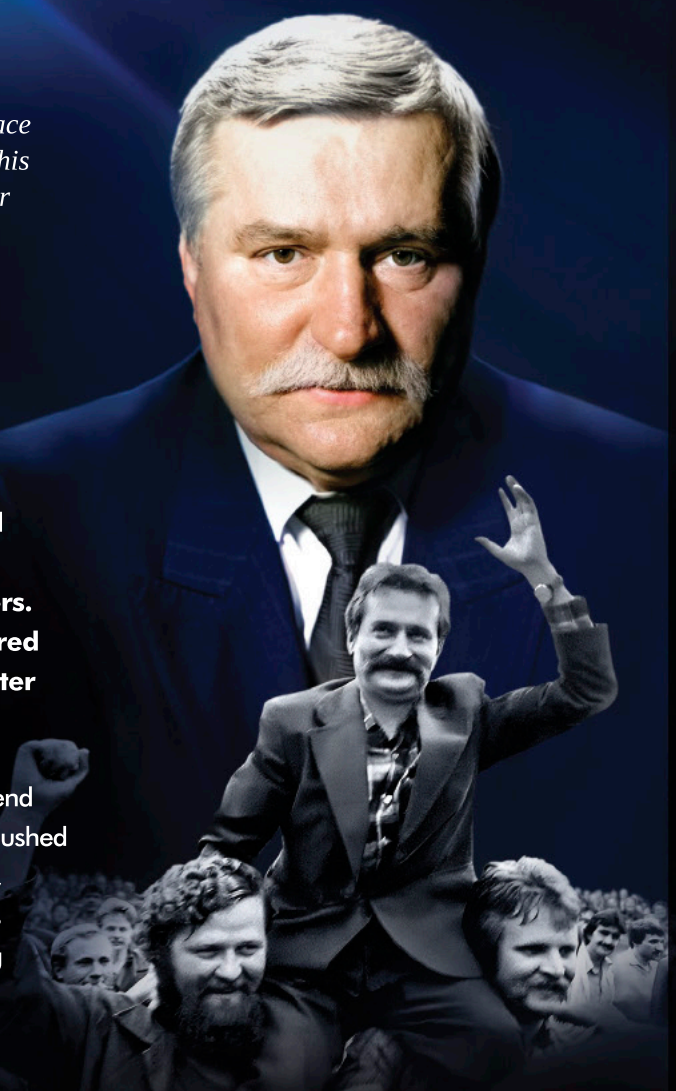

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Reichstag rainbow: LGBTQ rights activists demonstrate on Christopher Street Day in Berlin.

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FEATURES

Cover illustration: **TIM O'BRIEN**

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EDITORIAL / AI-JEN POO FOR *THE NATION*

What's Next Is Up to Us

It's been 60 years since President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Medicaid and Medicare Act into law, and those programs have built a safety net of care for American families. Sixty years since advocates, organizers, and families came together and refused to let our country abandon adults as they aged into poverty and low-income workers as they struggled to afford healthcare. But in the wake of the largest cut to Medicaid in history, this is no ordinary anniversary.

Today, nearly 80 million people rely on Medicaid for care. From covering 40 percent of all childbirths to nearly 70 percent of home care for older and disabled people, Medicaid is more than a line item. It has represented a promise that no matter the ups and downs of life, our ability to care for one another, from generation to generation, will be protected.

The $1 trillion in cuts included in the massive budget bill signed into law in July, however, put care for 17 million people at risk. The caregivers, the direct care workers, the disabled and chronically ill, and the families juggling it all will bear the brunt of the pain. This big, ugly bill tells us that our care, and our lives, are disposable.

The promise of Medicaid is being shattered. But in the wake of this devastation, the dream of something better is coming into view. We have the chance to shape the future by building a system of care that leaves no one behind. From healthcare to paid family and medical leave, from affordable, quality childcare to aging and disability care—a new system of care that reflects the true realities and pressures on our families is long overdue.

We have the chance to shape the future by building a system of care that leaves no one behind.

Even before these cuts, these programs were insufficient, underfunded, and inaccessible to far too many. Millions of us were already struggling to access the care we need and deserve. Family caregivers, sandwiched between raising a young child and supporting aging parents, are buckling under the weight of the financial and emotional cost. Care workers are taking second and third jobs, because they can't afford to support their own families on the poverty wages they earn. More than 700,000 eligible families are stuck on waiting lists for home care, and rural nursing homes are shuttering, without the workforce necessary to meet the demand.

With our existing care system on the brink and care for millions hanging in the balance, the question of what comes next is up to us to answer. Now is the time to build toward a future where no one is left to navigate illness, disability, aging, or parenthood alone. A future where families have the time and support they need to care for one another without sacrificing income or stability. A future where care workers are supported and recognized as essential, with good wages, strong protections, and dignity on the job. In this future, care is not expendable; it is prioritized as the foundation of a thriving society.

But this future doesn't come to us—we build it, together.

Just as generations before us fought for a guarantee of healthcare and economic security, delivering us Social Security, Medicaid, Medicare, and the Americans With Disabilities Act, now it's our turn. These programs didn't just happen; they were built by people who dared to demand more and organized to make it real. We must follow their lead and fight for more than just saving the bare minimum.

In late July, Caring Across Generations and our partners hosted hundreds of families on the National Mall for 60 hours, holding a vigil to mark the 60 years since Medicaid was created. We came together in our shared fear about what it means to lose Medicaid. We raised our voices to let our elected representatives know that we will not let their cruelty go unanswered. And we let our rage spark our commitment to ensure that the next 60 years of care are not like this.

We deserve policies that let us thrive. To get there, we have to keep coming together—not only in moments of crisis, but in our everyday lives. Each of us must commit to showing up and organizing others to demand change.

Only we can plant the seeds for what comes next: a future of care worth fighting for. **N**

Ai-jen Poo is the executive director of Caring Across Generations and the president of the National Domestic Workers Alliance.

COMMENT/BHASKAR SUNKARA

Yes, It's the Populism

Are workers drifting right? Not on economic issues.

Zohran Mamdani won New York's Democratic mayoral nomination with the most votes ever for a primary winner in the city. The democratic socialist did so with an agenda that spoke to the kitchen-table economic issues that, following the debacle of the 2024 election, Democrats generally acknowledge they have to get better at discussing. So what was the reaction of party leaders and the media echo chamber? A meltdown so severe that it has sparked widespread talk of a "civil war" within the party. On one side, the line goes, are younger, highly educated, pro-Palestinian progressives who embrace economic populism; on the other, older Democratic stalwarts who are pro-Israel, economically moderate, in tune with the working class, and cautious about rocking the boat. But that's not what the numbers say.

Advisers to House minority leader Hakeem Jeffries—who, like his counterpart in the Senate, Chuck Schumer, resisted endorsing Mamdani after the primary—referred to the city's rising wave of democratic-socialist-backed candidates as "Team Gentrification." Yet exit polls reveal a different reality: Mamdani attracted support from a broad swath of New Yorkers by running a campaign relentlessly focused on working-class cost-of-living concerns.

Unfortunately, top Democrats refuse to accept the notion that Mamdani's economic populism is the key to his success. Or that the appeal of a boisterous tax-the-rich message might extend beyond urban progressive enclaves. Some go as far as Michigan Senator Elissa Slotkin, who says that Democrats need to stop demonizing rich people. But a recent report by the Center for Working-Class Politics (CWCP) upends Slotkin's assertion. Analyzing data from three long-running national surveys, the report shows that working-class Americans have grown more progressive over the past two decades—not just on economic justice but also on immigration and civil rights. Today's working class stands farther to the left than when it helped elect Barack Obama in 2008.

Why, then, do so many high-ranking Democrats imagine that workers are reactionary? Because the middle and upper classes are moving leftward at a faster pace, creating a perception gap. As higher-income, college-educated voters embrace progressive positions on climate change, LGBTQ rights, and other issues, working-class voters—despite their own leftward shift—appear comparatively conservative. This distorted narrative misleads Democratic strategists and journalists alike.

Far from being unreachable, working-class voters remain ideal Democratic targets, provided the party emphasizes the bread-and-butter economic issues that most resonate with them. The CWCP report confirms that working-class Americans strongly support economically progressive policies like increasing the minimum wage, protecting jobs from outsourcing, boosting Social Security, and taxing the wealthy. There are nuances: Middle- and upper-class voters now surpass working-class voters in enthusiasm for progressive priorities like taxing the rich and national healthcare. And while workers favor redistributive policies, their support diminishes somewhat when the proposals involve tax hikes or expanded federal bureaucracy.

Nevertheless, working-class voters remain notably left-wing on economic issues. Even if they hold moderate views on cultural issues, they would likely support Democrats if presented with a compelling economic agenda—in 2026 and beyond.

To illustrate this point, the CWCP examined Trump's 2020 working-class supporters, finding an electorally meaningful segment with moderate to progressive social views and progressive economic positions. Over 20 percent of those voters backed increased spending on public schools and Social Security, higher taxes on the rich, and a higher minimum wage; roughly half of them also held moderate or progressive social views. In tightly contested elections, winning even a small portion of these voters could tip the balance.

Democrats ignore these voters at their peril. Kamala Harris struggled to engage working-class voters despite economic proposals that would have improved millions of lives. A key reason was her campaign's reluctance to turn up the volume on economic populism.

To rebuild a durable majority, Democrats need candidates who consistently prioritize egalitarian economics. This doesn't mean abandoning other social causes. But it does mean clearly emphasizing jobs, wages, housing, healthcare, and public services—making these the centerpiece of Democratic campaigns. It also means doing what Mamdani did: genuinely meeting working-class voters where they are, as economically progressive, skeptical of elites, and impatient for tangible results.

Surveying democracies worldwide in 1960, the sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset observed that "in virtually every economically developed country the lower-income groups vote mainly for parties of the left, while the higher-income groups vote mainly for parties of the right." This described the post–New Deal–era voting patterns that persisted until a decade ago in the US. But since Trump's 2016 victory, class has become largely dealigned from voting.

Democrats still have time to renew their fortunes by doing battle with economic elites both inside and outside their coalition. Mamdani proved that with his June victory, and he's working hard to expand the appeal to affordability in the general election—winning endorsements from unions that had backed former governor Andrew Cuomo in the primary. But it would be easier if Jeffries and Schumer looked around and recognized that voters get excited about Democratic nominees who embrace real economic populism, not the priorities of the donor class. N

COMMENT/RO KHANNA

Release the Files

We need justice for the survivors of Epstein's predations, and we need to restore public trust in our institutions.

On his podcast, Joe Rogan recently asked Senator Bernie Sanders a question that reflects a concern many Americans have today: Why should people pay more in taxes to "an incompetent, corrupt government" that lacks accountability? The truth is, we should be investing more in government programs for education, healthcare, and the creation of well-paid jobs. But decades of corruption and the unchecked influence of money in politics have fueled a deep distrust in our institutions.

Overcoming this distrust is one of our greatest challenges as a country. If we want to enact initiatives like a 21st-century Marshall Plan for America or Medicare for All, we need people to believe that government works for them—not just for the rich and powerful.

To rebuild trust, we need transparency, accountability, and a bold anti-corruption agenda. Progressives must lead the way and show Americans that our government can be good and effective.

One place to start is calling for the release of the Epstein files. The administration's refusal to release them is just the latest example of how a lack of transparency fuels distrust.

For at least a decade, Jeffrey Epstein and Ghislaine Maxwell trafficked and abused young women and children. There are more than 1,000 victims, according to the Justice Department. Lawsuits allege Epstein's criminal abuse of minors spanned over 30 years. These victims deserve justice, and the public deserves to know who was involved and who is still being shielded today.

Americans on both the left and the right are outraged by the government's failure to fully release this information; 79 percent of the public wants the files to be released, and a majority thinks the government is covering up evidence.

Releasing the full Epstein files—while protecting the privacy and safety of victims—must be a top priority. It is a simple question of whether our leaders stand with America's children and victims of abuse or with the wealthy and powerful who are being protected.

That is why I have spoken out since 2019 about this issue and supported then–House Oversight Committee chairman Elijah Cummings's investigation into Epstein's death. It's also why I am leading the current effort in Congress to release the files, first with an amendment that was blocked in the House Rules Committee and now with a bipartisan bill being co-led by Representative Thomas Massie.

Our bill, the Epstein Files Transparency Act, requires the attorney general to release the files within 30 days while ensuring that the victims are protected. Releasing the files should include information about individuals connected to Epstein's and Maxwell's criminal activities, to hold them accountable.

Congress should seek other evidence that could help shed light on who was enabling these crimes. I recently sent a letter requesting a copy of the "birthday book" from Epstein's estate—a collection of letters from Epstein's and Maxwell's friends and associates that could contain evidence about other individuals who were involved in their crimes.

Our first priority must be justice for the victims and their families. When Congress returns in September, I plan to convene survivors of Epstein's and Maxwell's abuse on Capitol Hill to share their stories and urge 218 members of Congress to sign the discharge petition that will force a vote on our bipartisan bill. Every American will see where their member of Congress stands.

Again, this fight is also about restoring public trust in our institutions. Today, only 22 percent of Americans have faith that our leaders will do what is right. The public is tired of leaders who put wealthy donors and special interests over ordinary people.

Releasing the Epstein files is just the start of rebuilding public trust. We need a sweeping political reform agenda to clean up Washington. That means reining in the influence of money in politics and tackling corruption head-on by passing my bill with Representative Summer Lee to abolish super PACs. That also means fighting for working-class people, including furthering Medicare for All, a free public college education, and an increase in the minimum wage.

We must also resist the Beltway voices that are trying to make this a partisan fight. This isn't about winning elections or scoring political points. We are building a coalition of Americans from across the political spectrum who are united behind protecting America's children, rooting out corruption, and ensuring that no one is above the law.

The refusal to release the Epstein files is just the latest example of how a lack of transparency fuels distrust.

The survivors of Epstein's and Maxwell's abuse have waited too long. The first day back in session, Congress must come together to sign the discharge petition and force the vote on our bill to show the American people we stand on the side of justice and transparency.

Our party and political system as a whole needs a rebirth. Our government must put ordinary people over the donor class. We must reject a system that protects the wealthy and shields them from accountability. This is how we build a stronger democracy where everyone can live with safety and dignity. N

Representative Ro Khanna (D-CA) is a vice chair of the Congressional Progressive Caucus.

COMMENT/SPENCER ACKERMAN

Escape From Fear City

How New York's standard post-9/11 playbook failed to work against Zohran Mamdani.

It's been a summer of fear like no other in New York. This time, the fearful include the city's richest residents, who see their dominance threatened by mayoral candidate Zohran Mamdani. Fueling their panic is the mounting realization that the War on Terror politics they sought to use against him—in a city reshaped by 9/11—didn't work.

The city's power elite now have few viable options to defeat Mamdani, a 33-year-old state assemblyman and member of the Democratic Socialists of America, as he campaigns against the vastly unequal living conditions they've created. Mamdani's 12-point victory over former New York governor Andrew Cuomo in the Democratic primary, the biggest political upset in the city's history, marked the first warning sign for the collapse of Islamophobic politics as usual. Megadonors seeking to exploit post–October 7 anxieties among the city's sizable Jewish community spent $20 million on nonstop attack ads and came up empty.

But the oligarchs are hardly the only New Yorkers experiencing fear. The city's immigrant communities fear for themselves and their loved ones as Immigrations and Customs Enforcement agents grab law-abiding people appearing at the city's immigration courts for their mandated check-ins. Muslim New Yorkers fear masked ICE agents snatching them in their apartment lobbies or off the streets for their nonviolent activism on behalf of Palestinians. And beyond the warrens of the wealthiest, there is a radiating fear that New York will forever be too expensive for a dignified life.

Since Mamdani's campaign began to gain momentum, the oligarchs and their allies in both parties have responded with more of the same 9/11 politics. Kirsten Gillibrand claimed that New Yorkers were "alarmed by [Mamdani's] past positions, particularly references to global jihad"—a pure fabrication for which the Democratic senator had to apologize. Donald Trump openly muses about denaturalizing and deporting Mamdani. With New York's one percent in disarray after Mamdani's primary win, November's mayoral election may herald a moment when the fearful politics of 9/11 is dealt its biggest blow yet. But if that proves to be the case, the president may turn his native city into the next domestic battleground of the War on Terror.

Capital's big problem in the race is that it lacks a single, viable champion. The hedge fund magnate, Trump ally, and anti-Mamdani fundraiser Bill Ackman posted a screed on X in which he offered "hundreds of millions of dollars of capital" to an imaginary "charismatic" and "centrist" Mamdani competitor—who at this stage of the election would have to run as a write-in. Former Bloomberg adviser Ester Fuchs lamented to *The Wall Street Journal* that the ballot box was "the only place in which people without money actually have the same influence in the outcome."

Former governor Andrew Cuomo, undeterred by the shellacking Mamdani gave him in June, wants to be that champion, having procured a ballot line to offset his potential primary loss. So does Curtis Sliwa, the Guardian Angels vigilante and GOP nominee, but the Ackmans of New York won't throw money at a beret-wearing weirdo. With Cuomo now seen as a loser, *Washington Post* columnist Kathleen Parker reported that "fundraisers are being held in the Hamptons and uptown" for Eric Adams, the once-indicted mayor whose popularity hit an almost 30-year mayoral low in March. Sure, Adams has done plenty of self-dealing, but, Parker smirked, "What's a little corruption in New York politics?"

Adams, whom federal prosecutors indicted last year, is the source of much more than "a little" corruption. In July, five former cops filed separate lawsuits against Adams for running a "coordinated criminal conspiracy" with the New York Police Department at its center. But more damning is how Hizzoner escaped prosecution. As soon as Trump was reelected, Adams rushed to curry favor so that his charges, which relate to illegal campaign donations from Turkish interests, would disappear. His overtures yielded a quid pro quo in which the mayor of the largest sanctuary city in the country agreed to cooperate with Trump's mass deportation agenda. Tom Homan, the White House "border czar," gleefully humiliated Adams on live television in February, saying that he would be "up your butt" if Adams obstructed ICE. Adams tried to laugh it off.

Mamdani has illuminated the way that the tools of the War on Terror are the tools of class war.

That corrupt bargain unleashed state terror against New York's immigrant communities. With Adams's explicit blessing, Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem, armored in a plate carrier, launched Trump's mass deportation initiative by accompanying ICE on raids in upper Manhattan and the Bronx in late January. "Nobody's in the streets," Brooklyn cab driver Pierre Jean told *The Haitian Times*. "They're afraid ICE will check their papers. And even with legal papers, they're afraid ICE will deport them."

These fears spread further after officers seized the Palestinian student activist Mahmoud Khalil in his Columbia University apartment vestibule. They gained renewed traction when Police Commissioner Jessica Tisch, herself a billionaire heiress, defended the department's collaboration with ICE in the detention of Leqaa Kordia, a Palestinian student at

Columbia who had attended the protests for Gaza there. And they reached a fever pitch once ICE, shedding the fiction of targeting violent criminals, began grabbing immigrants at their court check-ins, sending immigration arrests skyrocketing. In July, a baseball coach in Manhattan's Riverside Park had to fend off ICE agents asking if his middle and high school students were here legally. All of this suffering is invisible or acceptable to the real estate giants and financiers who are giving Adams a second look.

From its inception, Mamdani's campaign has focused on New York's affordability crisis. But the crisis created by mass deportation has prompted him to adopt a more militant anti-ICE posture than that of almost any other US politician. After Homan testified in Albany on Khalil's abduction, Mamdani yelled at him, "How many more New Yorkers will you detain?" and indicted the "cowardice" of city officials who "collaborate" with ICE. "ICE has no interest in the law," Mamdani said in June after ICE detained New York City Comptroller Brad Lander for escorting a migrant away from his check-in. "It only has an interest in terrorizing people."

Mamdani's confrontational stance is a departure not only from Adams's policy of accommodating Trump but from nearly 25 years of post-9/11 demagoguery in New York politics. It's been standard practice for the city's political leaders to embrace or acquiesce to law enforcement repression, first in the name of fighting terrorism and now in the name of fighting "illegal" immigration. Mamdani grew up in the New York they shaped.

During that reign of terror, the bureaucratic forebears of ICE slipped business cards under Pakistani immigrants' doors directing them to come in for interviews about what they might have known about 9/11—or about some unspecified future terror attack. The NYPD joined forces with a CIA officer to spy on entire Muslim neighborhoods. That sort of unfounded surveillance was so normalized that the NYPD sent an undercover agent on a whitewater rafting trip taken by Muslim City College students. The mayor who presided over all of this, Mike Bloomberg (now an anti-Mamdani megadonor), aggressively promoted gentrifying the city, touting the transformation of New York into what he called "a luxury product."

That luxury product, engineered to be so unfree and so unaffordable for so many, has now produced a Muslim socialist political leader determined to upend Bloomberg's legacy. A key element of Mamdani's success is his refusal to pay the typical Democratic fealty to the predatory political and economic order that grooms and vets New York's leadership caste. Because so few in power confronted the War on Terror as it preyed on Muslims, the mechanisms it created now prey on all immigrants. In practice, that has led to the detentions and renditions of restaurant cooks, delivery drivers, day laborers, and other members of New York's working class. Mamdani, without necessarily meaning to, has illuminated the way that the tools of the War on Terror are the tools of class war. And his victory in the primary illuminates the way to both end the War on Terror and triumph in a class war: organize.

It was inevitable that capital would go all out to portray Mamdani as an antisemitic apologist for jihad. Smears like that usually work, and the anti-Mamdani forces were confident they would succeed in the heavily Jewish city after October 7. Yet the accusations came off as panicky and desperate. Accurate numbers are hard to come by, but the Israeli site Ynet estimates that Mamdani won 20 percent of New York's Jewish voters.

What's happened since in the traditional sanctums of New York power is a case study in cognitive dissonance. Addressing a synagogue in late July, Cuomo simultaneously accused Mamdani of "fueling antisemitism" and lamented that "more than 50 percent of the Jewish people voted for Mamdani.... They are pro-Palestinian, and they don't consider it being anti-Israel." Cuomo's baseline confusion here, no less than his defeat, reveals how brittle the politics of 9/11 fearmongering has become.

The institutions of the War on Terror are stronger. In June, Trump—manufacturing a threat from anti-ICE "insurrectionists" in southern California—federalized units of the California National Guard. Then he deployed US Marines to backstop ICE raids in Los Angeles and further militarize the repression of dissent. Gleefully ignoring the objections of city and state elected leadership, he treated LA as an occupied territory.

Trump has signaled that he's eager to apply the precedent of the LA raids to New York.

Trump has already signaled that he's eager to apply that precedent to New York City. "If a communist gets elected," he said, "we have tremendous power…to run places when we have to." Making good on that threat, Trump has sued New York City for "interfering with enforcing this country's immigration laws." Homan has dared Mamdani to defy ICE raids, and when the New York City Council blocked ICE's access to local jails in late July, he threatened to "flood the zone" with ICE agents. And since Trump's "Big Beautiful Bill" triples ICE's budget, that flood could be biblical.

If Trump stages more brutal raids in New York in response to a Mamdani victory in November, he'll be ratcheting up the fear-driven politics of the city's anti-Mamdani power brokers. Suddenly, the lords of capital in New York are seeing that 9/11 politics are no longer enough to stop the multi-ethnic working class from winning power. They may find common cause with Trump to endorse new crackdowns using the tools of the War on Terror. But even such a violent show of force would likely do little to deter a newly galvanized coalition of working New Yorkers who are sick and tired of living in fear. **N**

Spencer Ackerman is the author of Reign of Terror: How the 9/11 Era Destabilized America and Produced Trump.

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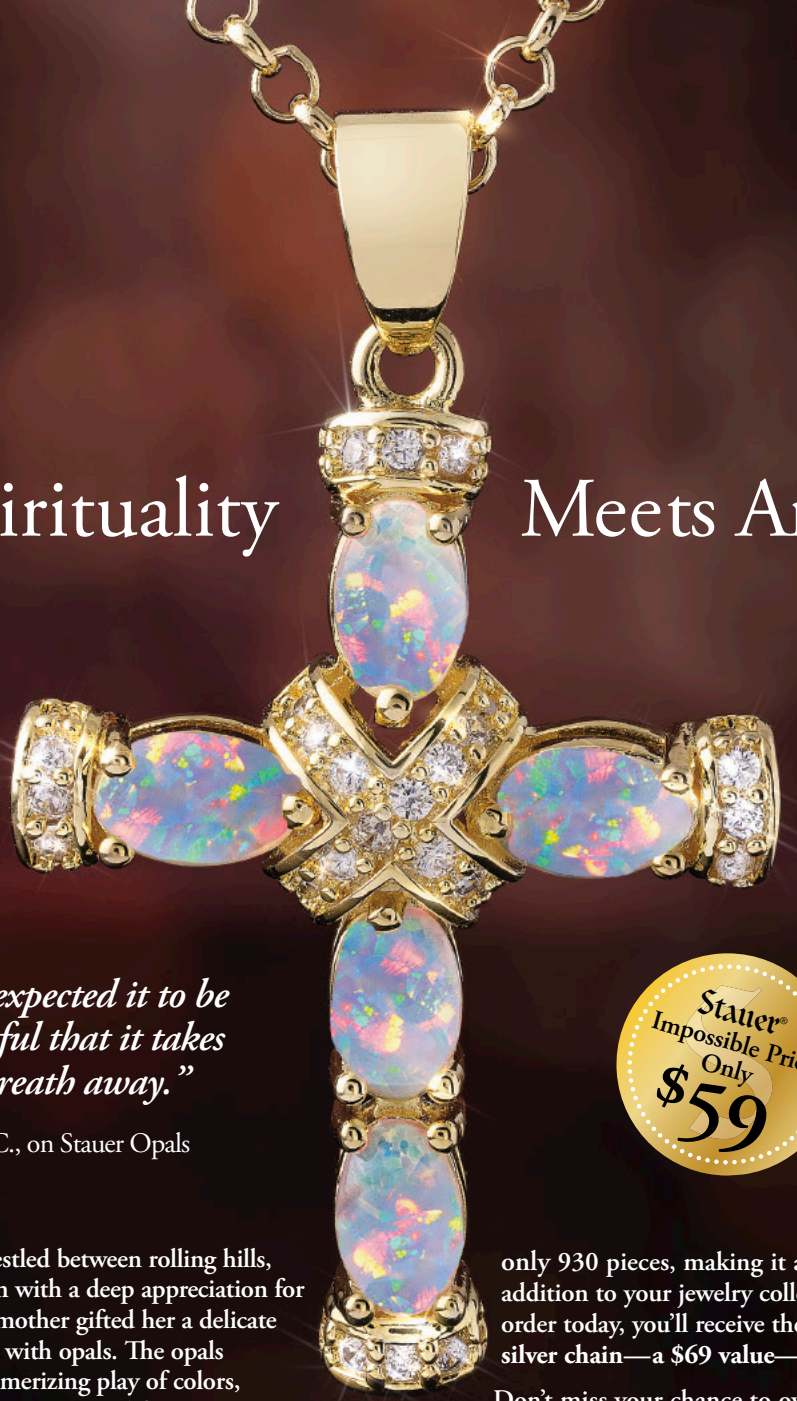

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Fear of the Future

MAGA conservatives don't just want to halt progress. They want to turn back the clock.

As pundits and political handicappers rallied to size up the impact of Donald Trump's signature tax-and-spending bill, one of its defining features eluded them: The legislation graced with the taunting moniker "One Big Beautiful Bill" was in almost every respect a retread. Not just in that it rolls out unmerited tax cuts uniquely unsuited to prevailing economic conditions as a snake-oil panacea. In almost all of its provisions, the massive bill codified the disposition summed up in the Trump movement's slogan "Make America Great Again": a basic phobia of the future.

It bears noting that MAGA is itself a retread—a directive that Trump cribbed from Ronald Reagan's 1980 presidential campaign. The postwar conservative movement has always been a decisive break with America's past, disowning the familiar image of the country as a frontier-driven agent of progress, dispensing massive outlays of resources to promote ambitious initiatives like the New Deal, the Marshall Plan, and the space program. True to that backward-spooling sentiment, the Trump spending plan eviscerates key federal efforts to confront pressing challenges of the future. Where the noted postwar conservative thinker William F. Buckley Jr. announced his ambition to stand athwart history and yell "Stop!," the Trump movement has done him one better by pulling a lever and reversing course.

These rollbacks are part of the horror that right-wing dogmatists experience before secular and skeptical inquiry.

Consider, for example, the greatest future-facing challenge before the planet: the existential threat of irreversible climate change. Trump's bill eliminates the critical subsidies to solar and wind power that the Biden administration had won when the Inflation Reduction Act of 2022 became the most far-reaching climate measure that any Western country has ever passed. In place of the desperately needed innovations Biden's bill would have encouraged, the new bill restores the leasing of federal lands for oil, gas, and coal production. A report from Princeton University's ZERO Lab and Evolved Energy Research calculates that by 2035, this reversion to traditional dirty energy sources will boost US carbon emissions by more than 1 billion tons—an increase of 20 to 25 percent over the totals projected under the Biden-era policies.

Then there are the bill's deeply regressive reversals of social spending—$1 trillion in cuts to Medicaid alone, as well as steep reductions in spending for health coverage under the Affordable Care Act and critical income supports such as SNAP. MAGA defenders of this cruel brand of social predation had trouble squaring it with the simultaneous extension of historic giveaways to the highest earners. They were left reviving the hoariest bootstrap exhortations to the non-wealthy, claiming that Medicaid work requirements, for example, will spur Americans to achieve great individual success. (Never mind that the vast majority of Medicaid recipients already work.) Faced with the material consequences of its own shoddy policymaking, the MAGA right has retreated further into the past, reprising a brand of discredited social mythology that crested in the late 19th century.

Meanwhile, the bill also declares economic war on one of the more reliable channels of social mobility in modern America: an affordable college education. It eliminates the Grad PLUS program, established in 2006, which lets lower-income students in graduate programs and professional schools use federal loans to cover the full cost of tuition. Undergraduate federal loans that parents can take out on behalf of their child are now capped at $20,000 per year, with an aggregate limit of $65,000—a pittance in the face of spiraling college costs, and again a burden that will fall disproportionately on students from lower-income backgrounds.

These rollbacks are part of the debilitating horror that right-wing dogmatists experience before the workings of secular and skeptical inquiry—the prospect that the ownership of their children (and hence control of the future) will be wrenched from their grasp.

The spending bill's draconian cuts are but a distilled version of the MAGA movement's broader future-phobia. The administration's authoritarian and increasingly unpopular mass deportation campaign seeks to conjure a principally white Anglophone workforce out of the ether, because that's how ghouls like Steve Bannon and Stephen Miller—along with Trump himself—envision a "real America" restored to its full and natural sovereignty.

The same goes for Trump's bedrock confidence that a restored tariffs regime—an outmoded economic palliative that also peaked in the 19th century—will magically revive American manufacturing when the country's transformation into a service-based economy is well-nigh complete. The administration's assaults on diversity programs, campus free speech, and public K-12 education all bespeak the same bid to conjure up an imagined community

of uncomplicated, white-dominated institutional life—and to fiercely repudiate any program or initiative that acknowledges the country's actually existing multiethnic makeup and multicultural future.

It was a fitting grace note to the spending bill's passage that, just a few days later, a leak from the White House confirmed earlier reports that the Trump administration is set to impose brutal cuts to the National Aeronautics and Space Administration—the signature program of New Frontier liberalism. Trump then named Sean Duffy—the hack reality-TV star he'd appointed, to disastrous effect, to head the Department of Transportation—as NASA's interim director, after realizing that his previous nominee to the post, the tech entrepreneur Jared Isaacman, was a close confrere of Trump's excommunicated former "first friend" Elon Musk and an occasional Democratic donor to boot. It was a perfect MAGA set piece: a petty ideological purge that delivered control of publicly funded space exploration to a minor TV celebrity who's afraid of riding the New York subway.

When Trump's insurgent 2016 campaign still looked to be a long-shot bid, his Democratic rival Hillary Clinton offered a typically anemic and unpersuasive rejoinder to his pet slogan, contending smugly that "America is already great." Now that we are living through the implementation of the full MAGA agenda, it's clear that her campaign would have been better off cribbing its riposte from the country's first Republican president, Abraham Lincoln: "You cannot escape the responsibility of tomorrow by evading it today." N

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Objection! Elie Mystal

Heroism in Small Acts

While large-scale resistance might feel futile right now, there are other ways to oppose, engage, and fight back.

RESISTANCE DOES INDEED FEEL FUTILE THESE DAYS. People who believe their individual efforts cannot stem the rising tide of fascism, MAGA, or the hostile billionaire takeover of our government, media, and society are not wrong. The bad guys are on the march, and they are winning. There is no one magical thing that can be done to stop them, and no set of actions any single person can take to halt the enshittification of our country.

But while despair is a legitimate, and even rational, response to the ongoing victory of white supremacy and bigotry over equality and decency, giving up is not. Inaction is not. Throwing up your hands and letting Jesus—or even political leaders—"take the wheel" is not.

I recently stumbled across a social media post in which somebody joked, "Call my representative? Why? They are evil, not ignorant." A follow-up poster added that calling your rep a "bad boy" would not make them decline "$2 million from the oil lobby." The somewhat obvious point of both was that calling your congressperson is useless in the face of the larger factors at play.

Protest, another favorite resistance pastime, also feels futile to lots of people. No Kings Day was an important, thrilling example of the visual and social power of protest. But Trump's spending bill passed not long after, despite mass disapproval. And the Supreme Court once again rubber-stamped his authoritarian powers. Trump remains, effectively, a king.

And yet the inability to stop Trump with one act or protest or lawsuit shouldn't diminish our efforts to try. We live in dark times. Our government is a force for evil, both domestically and abroad. At such moments, anything we can do, anything at all, to slow, frustrate, or sabotage our government's efforts—or to help another person who is being made to suffer by these people—has value. To do nothing is to be complicit in the horrors we are visiting upon the world.

While I continue to believe that collective action is the most powerful political force in human history, I also know that people tend to fetishize big, aggressive, large-scale acts of "Resistance™" without remembering that small, individual acts of noncompliance are also tools that can frustrate great and evil powers. We can save a life, can ameliorate the suffering of a person, or can change a mind. Right now, that has to be enough of a reason to try.

It has been for people in the past. Ida B. Wells didn't just cancel her subscriptions to white newspapers; she bought her own—and then published her own reports about lynchings. Oskar Schindler is perhaps

the most famous example of noncompliance from an actual Nazi Party member, and his individual efforts saved countless lives. Those people are well-known, but there are countless stories of people I've never even heard of who did what they could in the face of suffering: people who joined forces with drug dealers to hand out clean needles during the AIDS epidemic, soldiers who refused to carry out malicious orders, and ordinary citizens who are right now ignoring Texas's bounty-hunting laws to shuttle people in need of abortion services to a doctor.

At all points in history, there are people willing to "break the law" when the law is evil.

Near the start of the second Trump administration, a friend sent me a story I was not familiar with from World War II. I was dealing with my own issues of despair and feelings of futility and pointlessness, and my friend thought this might help. It concerns a B-17 pilot whose plane was shot up over Nazi Germany. The bomber was hit directly in the gas tank, not once but numerous times, but for some reason the tank did not explode. The pilot felt blessed by God. After an investigation, it was revealed that the shells that hit the gas tank had no explosive charge in them. Instead, inside one was a note, written in Czech. It read: "This is all we can do for you now."

Anything we can do, anything at all, to slow, frustrate, or sabotage our government's efforts—or help another person—has value.

It might be that all we can do right now is to harass and document ICE's goons as they try to kidnap and abduct people from our block, or courthouse, or house of worship. It might be that all we can do right now is to make sure the trans kid is invited to the birthday party, and cheer for them as loudly as we'd cheer for our own children when they get a hit in the game. It might be that all we can do right now is to call our congressperson so often that their constituent manager knows our name. But doing all we can do right now to oppose this regime is, frankly, the least that should be expected of us.

I know these kinds of individualized, person-to-person acts of political and social resistance work… because it's what the bad guys do. It's how the white-wing movement that Trump only recently has come to embody has been operating for my entire life. They're always doing whatever it is they can do, big or small, individually or collectively, to bring about more suffering. They don't sit around and say, "I hate gays and immigrants, but what can I do? I'll just cry myself to sleep on my American flag pillowcase and wait for things to work themselves out on their own." They call their congressperson. They call ICE. They boo and vote. They refuse to bake a cake. They buy guns. They harass and bully children. They do the worst thing they can think of, the moment they think of it.

And that is why they are winning. They don't let their individual feelings of powerlessness stop them from using what power they have maximally. They don't despair—they get angry.

I do not know if we will defeat the neo-Confederates and fascists currently running this joint, but every life saved, every person helped, is a victory over them. These people want us to give in to despair. They want us to give up. They want us to look at their scoreboard of victories and determine that the game is unwinnable.

So I'm playing a different game, one that is not about winning or losing, but helping or not helping.

That is all we can do… for now. **N**

AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

SNAPSHOT Kena Betancur

No More War

Anti-war protesters gather in New York City's Times Square on June 22, the day after the United States joined Israel's bombing campaign against Iran by striking three nuclear facilities. Tehran retaliated by launching missiles at Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar, the largest US military base in the Middle East.

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Washington's Dangerous China Consensus

Fantasies of national unity drive the bipartisan push for a new cold war.

THE UNITED STATES IS SO POLARIZED THAT IT OFten seems on the verge of civic breakdown, if not civil war. But one issue still has the power to unite the political elite: the shared desire among Democrats and Republicans to engage in a great-power competition against China.

Internal division and external warmongering frequently go hand in hand. Indeed, the alleged China menace offers policymakers a very convenient foe—one that has to be fended off not just for geopolitical reasons but because the only way to keep America from falling apart is by mobilizing for war. In 2019, Steve Bannon candidly reflected that "in a country so divided…the thing that pulls it together is China." In 2023, Joe Biden echoed this sentiment by asserting that "winning the competition with China should unite all of us." Or as Randolph Bourne remarked over a century ago, "War is the health of the state."

Although Donald Trump has reaped the greatest benefits from being a China-basher, the current policy shift started in the waning days of Barack Obama's administration. In 2016, Secretary of Defense Ash Carter announced the "return to great-power competition" between the United States and China—a reversal of the rapprochement between the two nations that began under Richard Nixon in 1972. However much they differ on other issues, both Donald Trump and Joe Biden have maintained and intensified this framework of global rivalry.

For Trump, being anti-China is a way of raising the salience of his signature issues: economic protectionism, xenophobia, and foreign policy unilateralism. However repugnant this policy cocktail might be, it has turned out to be more politically successful than the Biden administration's attempt to revive military Keynesianism by using anti-China rhetoric to build bipartisan support for a new era of spending on domestic rebuilding.

In 2022, then-Representative Stephanie Murphy (D-FL) reflected on the problems of this new consensus, noting that "no politician, Republican or Democrat, can be seen as soft on China, so that pushes us in the direction of not [discussing] smart policy, but politics." If you want to liberate yourself from this intellectually stifling consensus, you have to turn to voices free from rote thinking or mainstream politics. Fortunately, relief is at hand in the bracing new book *The Rivalry Peril: How Great-Power Competition Threatens Peace and Weakens Democracy*, by the international relations scholars Van Jackson and Michael Brenes.

The United States and China are the world's two most powerful countries and, unsurprisingly, have many areas of dispute. From the US point of view, China is militarily aggressive to its neighbors, a human rights abuser domestically, and a cutthroat economic rival. For China, the United States is a world-class hypocrite that talks up the liberal international order while repeatedly disregarding the principle of free trade and repeatedly waging or supporting wars of choice. Both sides have a point, but these are all issues that can be resolved through diplomacy.

Turning these policy disputes into a great-power competition has the same effect as the Cold War, raising the stakes on every disagreement via the risk of rapid escalation.

Jackson and Brenes persuasively demonstrate that the push to make rivalry with China the foundation of a unified domestic and foreign policy rests on an ill-informed nostalgia for the Cold War. For many in the policy elite, the Cold War was a blessed period of national cohesion and purpose during which a common enemy enabled the US to unite behind robust social spending, technological progress, and civil rights. It was the era of the interstate highway and the moonshot, of expanding universities and consensus politics—all conducted under the auspices of a Cold War that was effectively a long peace.

This halcyon view of mid-century America found expression in 2020 in the establishment journal *Foreign Affairs*. In an essay titled "The China Challenge Can Help America Avert Decline," Kurt M. Campbell and Rush Doshi—who went on to become major shapers of Asia policy in the Biden administration—argued that the "arrival of an external competitor has often pushed the United States to become its best self."

Jackson and Brenes do us all a service by reminding their readers that the actual Cold War—which saw 20 million dead in proxy wars as well as intense domestic repression under McCarthyism—was not, in fact, a happy period. Military Keynesianism only increased economic inequality, since it favored highly educated white workers and diverted the economy from a more broad-based

The first Cold War was a disaster. By delaying efforts to tackle climate change, the second one could be truly apocalyptic.

JOE CIARDIELLO

redistribution. Civil rights activists were constantly under siege by a surveillance state empowered by anti-communist ideology.

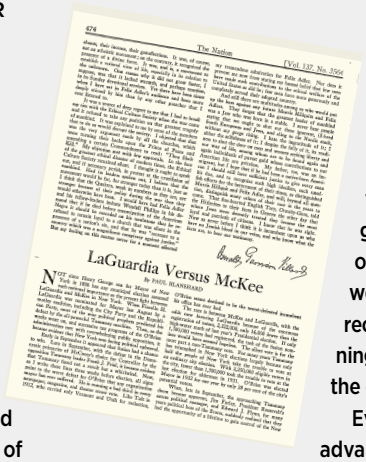
In 21st-century America, the new cold war has also fueled domestic repression and increased the risk of foreign wars—while not creating any progressive consensus in favor of domestic spending.

Wars give a license to xenophobia. It's hardly an accident that Trump, quick to blame China for everything from the fentanyl crisis to the Covid pandemic, is the dominant politician of the age. The current attack on pro-Palestinian students has its model in the ferocious purge of Chinese students that Trump launched in 2020. Nor is xenophobia exclusively a GOP vice. Early last year, Nancy Pelosi told Code Pink protesters calling for a cease-fire in Gaza to "go back to China where your headquarters is." The first Cold War was a disaster. The second cold war, which is delaying efforts to tackle the genuine existential threat of climate change, could be truly apocalyptic. N

OUR BACK PAGES/RICHARD KREITNER

La Guardia Revisited

Let a thousand little flowers bloom.


476 The Nation [Vol. 137, No. 3556

LaGuardia Versus McKee

By Paul Blanshard

When Fiorello La Guardia was first nominated for mayor, "most of the wise political prophets predicted his defeat by the all-powerful Tammany machine," the lawyer, humanist, and longtime *Nation* correspondent Paul Blanshard wrote in these pages in October 1933. But as the election approached, "it became evident that New York was facing political upheaval."

The first sign came in the primaries, which warned of "not a revolt but a whirlwind." Weeks later, that Depression-era whirlwind would send La Guardia to Gracie Mansion—just as a different kind of upheaval may do the same for Zohran Mamdani this fall.

Then as now, *The Nation* was excited about the insurgent candidate, while fully aware of the obstacles he faced: There was "still great prejudice in New York against Italian leadership," Blanshard noted, while newspaper baron William Randolph Hearst regularly attacked La Guardia as "the little red flower of communism." And if elected, he would have to find a way to unify "the many diverse elements that are now working for his success," Blanshard warned—not least those "Socialists" likely to look askance at any compromises that La Guardia might have to make with the city's powerful business elite.

Still, Blanshard felt convinced that "if he is sent to the City Hall he will exercise the vast powers of the Mayor of New York with economic insight and political independence."

Blanshard admitted that there were limits to what La Guardia might be able to achieve. "Within the framework of our State and federal governments what could a good Mayor accomplish? He could not, even if he were a Socialist...go very far in the direction of public ownership without running afoul of the State constitution and the conservative legislature at Albany."

Even so, La Guardia's election would advance political and economic democracy. "From the long-range point of view," Blanshard concluded, La Guardia's election could not only foster "new faith in the capacity of a city to use democracy intelligently," but even turn it into "a gigantic laboratory for civic reconstruction" that could lead to "a genuine new deal for a long-suffering metropolis."

It's a prediction that would prove astonishingly prescient. Working closely with President Franklin Roosevelt, La Guardia helped usher in an era of expansive public works and political reform that fundamentally reshaped New York.

It's little wonder that, nearly a century later, when asked to name the best mayor of New York City, Mamdani chose La Guardia. N

By the Numbers

BRENDAN SMIALOWSKI / AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

$3.4T
Amount that Trump's One Big Beautiful Bill Act will add to the federal deficit over the next 10 years

$4.5T
Amount of tax cuts in the law, which largely benefit the wealthiest individuals and corporations

$350B
Amount the law provides to supercharge the administration's immigrant detention, deportation, and border enforcement priorities

17M
Number of people expected to lose their health insurance because of the law

22.3M
Number of families who stand to lose some or all of their benefits from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or food stamps

CALVIN TRILLIN

DeadlinePoet

Republicans Look to Rename the Kennedy Center Opera House After Melania Trump

—Headline, *The New York Times*

The sycophant caucus is quick to encourage
Rebranding by Trump that's been truly Homeric.
So sooner or later we may get to see
The Statue of Liberty newly named Eric.

Q&A

Andréa Becker

Andréa Becker is a medical sociologist specializing in contested medical practices—"elements of medicine that are imbued with polarizing cultural meanings." Her new book, *Get It Out: On the Politics of Hysterectomy*, explores the ways in which both actual and perceived access to hysterectomy are stratified by race, age, and gender identity. I spoke with Becker, an assistant professor in the Department of Sociology at Hunter College–CUNY, about the perils of considering abortion, hysterectomy, and gender-affirming care as separate issues, and about how much has changed in American politics since she began writing her book.

—Sara Franklin

SF: In the opening paragraph of your book, you write, "Having a uterus is a relentless job.... Simply having a uterus is the shift that never ends." You're drawing a comparison to the idea of the "second shift" that women do with domestic labor—childcare and household duties—in general. There's also this interesting tension related to the way a person with a uterus is always seen as "potentially" in a position of childbearing and child-rearing. Tell me about the choice to frame the issue through that lens.

AB: I wanted to start the book by drawing attention to the labor that these organs produce or necessitate because of the way that healthcare has reduced them to reproductive. One of the things about endometriosis, for example, is that it's really difficult to get a diagnosis. But it's far easier to get a diagnosis if you're trying to get pregnant, because suddenly your doctors care about the functions of these organs, so the odds of getting diagnosed with these diseases goes up if you're trying to use them for a pregnancy. But if you're just trying to live a pain-free, happy life, they're minimized. We all live through this tension all the time. I want people to understand the labor that goes into having these organs, not only with menstruation but any sort of chronic issue that we have for preventing pregnancy, and that these organs produce social inequalities in these invisible ways. It's ironic, since I also focus on trans and nonbinary people, to begin it this way. But trans and nonbinary people are also navigating these highly gendered discourses in their healthcare. Especially if they're seen as women.

"I want people to understand the labor that goes into having these organs."

SF: You write about the "moral panics that emerge and proliferate around any health care that disrupts female reproduction" and ask, "If people can readily remove the very organ that society has used to denote their otherness, how will the gender order be maintained?" That word—*order*—really stuck with me, especially considering the rise of authoritarianism in the United States. How are you thinking about this new world order since the publication of your book?

AB: I began this work before *Roe v. Wade* was overturned—a lot has happened since. I think we could be slightly more precise and talk about the "ordering" logic of white supremacy and patriarchy. At the root of attacks on both trans health and reproductive health is eugenics, so I'm trying to bring attention to eugenics logic.

When we talk about eugenics, we tend to talk about, for example, the history of forced sterilization in the United States, of wanting to prevent the births of Black and brown people, of poor people. But we talk less about what's called positive eugenics, of wanting to increase births. So things like reducing access to fertility, limiting technologies like abortion and birth control—those are intended to increase white births. At the core of this chipping away at bodily autonomy is the desire to increase the fertility rates of some kinds of people and reduce the freedoms and fertility of other people. We see both of these things happening simultaneously.

SF: This is one of the most important things in your book—this reminder that regardless of the identity of the person with a uterus in their body, or who had a uterus in their body when they were born, eugenics is hovering in the air all around them. It is alive and well.

LIDEWIJ MULDER

AB: People think of eugenics as a historical practice, like when we had formal eugenics boards where people on these committees would decide who should or should not be forcibly sterilized. The Supreme Court, in *Buck v. Bell*, actually upheld the right of states to forcibly sterilize disabled people, and it's never been overturned.

We no longer have formal eugenics boards, but we see trickles of this eugenics logic continuing in healthcare and the carceral system. It's eugenics logic at play when migrant women in detention centers aren't seen as worthy of reproduction, and so forced hysterectomies were deemed acceptable. And then, when we see this growing pro-natalist movement among highly educated white billionaires to increase the birth rates of other white billionaires—abortion bans are fueled by eugenics—we're continuing to see this desire to repopulate the earth with the "right" kinds of people and to reduce the birth rates of other kinds of people.

"Something really beautiful is how resilient these communities are, and how... they rely on each other."

SF: It's also interesting that, in a very short space of time, the term *fascism* has become more commonly used and understood. Do you imagine that *eugenics* will assert itself alongside *fascism* as we move further into this moment?

AB: Definitely. Often, when people think of medicine and healthcare, they think of objective practices based on science. But in a lot of ways, doctors are practicing healthcare within ideologies. So when a cultural landscape normalizes something, it weaves into healthcare. When we normalize this idea that people don't have the right to bodily autonomy, then we see it trickling into individual healthcare decisions. I don't think it's a coincidence that abortion bans and gender-affirming healthcare bans are proliferating alongside this growing "trad wife" movement—this idea of wanting to return to "traditional" family values. You know, Hitler also wanted to bring back rigid gender roles and rigid ideas around gendered bodies. It's really key here.

That's why I focus on hysterectomy. Because when you focus on these individual stories around wanting to remove or not remove a uterus, you start to map onto this larger framework of controlling people's bodies, of wanting to redraw the boundaries around femininity, womanhood, motherhood. They exist alongside each other.

People who study trans health and those who study reproductive health tend to be separate, but they really inform each other. It's key to look at them together. It's the same discourses being used to limit access to both types of care.

SF: You also deal with the notion of women as "hysterical" and how, though the word *hysterics* has diminished in public discourse, all of these conditions of the uterus are said to "cause" women's fragility, inferiority, unfitness for making decisions about their own health, or even for receiving governmental support.

AB: Even if the language has changed, we haven't let go of the framework of hysteria. We see it reemerge every time a woman runs for office: All of a sudden, her fitness comes into question, and it tends to be around her body and her hormones. We are told that women aren't capable of making rational decisions for a country because of their body. And then we see it in healthcare. With abortion specifically, there was this legislative push to force women to view their ultrasound or to listen to the "heartbeat"—which is actually cardiac activity—in early pregnancy. The idea here was that women don't know what they're doing when they get an abortion, that women can't be trusted to know exactly what an abortion is. If they are shown what they're doing, they won't choose that. But there was a lot of research into this, and it didn't turn out to be true. Women who were forced to view their ultrasound were well aware of what was in their bodies and still actively and confidently chose an abortion.

In my research comparing the experiences of cis women to trans men, I found that the more masculine a doctor perceives you to be, the more agency you have in a medical space. If a medical provider views [the patient] as a more masculine person, doctors tend to give them more agency and will take their pain more seriously.

SF: In the realm of surgical gender-affirming care specifically, there is a tension around altering one's body. As it pertains to trans folks, people are working themselves into a panic about gender-affirming care. But for cis women who have a uterus, there isn't much talk about hysterectomy as a process of disfigurement. What do you attribute that to?

AB: A lot of this comes from mayhem laws. There was widespread fear that men would medically disfigure themselves to avoid being drafted. And so a lot of these rules came into play where doctors would be heavily punished if they harmed or destroyed otherwise healthy tissue. This translated into doctors not wanting to provide gender-affirming care, because they didn't want to be viewed as destroying healthy tissue. The way this power was wielded was based on ideologies. We don't call it "mayhem" anymore, but that kernel is still there.

SF: My favorite concept in the book is one you coined: the "rowdy patient." How might we make use of that language of rowdiness in the world at this moment?

AB: Something I found really beautiful through my interviewees' stories is how resilient a lot of these communities are, and how, because they can't rely on their doctors, they rely on each other. There are all sorts of groups forming to help get each other medical knowledge and medical tools. Even if your doctor doesn't know what's going on with your body, you can go to your communities, your networks, even on Google Scholar, and bring that research into a clinical space. There are ways to get around these horrible laws, much as with abortion. You don't really need a doctor to have a medication abortion. You can, oftentimes, have a safe abortion at home if you get the medicines yourself. You know, that was started through grassroots activism: Women in Brazil realized that misoprostol would induce a miscarriage, and they started distributing these pills among their networks and forming groups to accompany each other through their abortions.

There are so many ways that, even as this healthcare system is marginalizing or leaving people behind, communities can come together to take care of themselves and each other. The history of *Our Bodies, Ourselves* is really a testament to this: the power of women [spreading reproductive health literacy] and showing each other, "This is what your cervix looks like; this is how your vulva works." Just giving each other the knowledge and tools to be able to make healthcare decisions is really, really powerful.

DISPATCHES

SWEDEN / CECILIA NOWELL

Sweden's Abortion Lessons

The country shows how abortion pills can be used as late as 22 weeks, significantly expanding access to care.

One quiet weekday morning in Gothenburg, Sweden, Sandra Wallis, a 33-year-old mother of two, gives me a tour of the floor at Östra hospital's gynecological ward, where she oversees medication abortion care, which is available through much of the second trimester. A midwife dispenses the pills and monitors the patient throughout the experience. This process has allowed Sweden to safely expand access to care—even to rural regions—whereas in the United States, such care would require a provider with surgical training.

Sweden's use of abortion pills has important lessons for the United States, where recent bans are pushing many more patients into the second trimester before they are able to see a provider. Even as US advocates continue to raise awareness of how safe the medications are, in the face of attacks by the GOP-controlled federal government, few people are aware that the pills are also safely used much later in pregnancy in many parts of the world.

Entryway to care: Patients at Östra hospital can receive a range of reproductive healthcare services.

In Sweden, midwives provide abortion pills to terminate pregnancies through 22 weeks of gestation—after which the country limits abortion care. Pills are used in about 97 percent of the abortions performed in Sweden, compared with 63 percent in the US. The Swedish model suggests that there is a way to keep abortion accessible even under an administration that is hostile to reproductive freedom and bodily autonomy, if providers are willing to broaden how they provide care.

Here in Gothenburg, Sweden's second-largest city, Wallis and her team of fellow midwives manage three to four abortions every day with patients who are at least 10 weeks pregnant.

The experience of a second-trimester medication abortion "is a mix of having a miscarriage and a delivery," Wallis explains. "Some women, they abort really fast. They might only need one dose [of misoprostol, or four pills]. And for some women, it takes a few days."

That's not to say, however, that every patient prefers a medication abortion. It's why Nathalie Kapp, the chief medical adviser at the International Planned Parenthood Foundation, encourages countries to maintain a balance of procedural and medication abortion care, and to continue training obstetrician-gynecologists in both.

"Medication abortion is incredibly important," Kapp says. "It's really allowing a lot of things to happen as far as women being able to have abortions without doctors and without midwives and without providers in all kinds of settings. I think it's been transformative. But I do think it's not an experience that everybody wants to have."

According to Kapp's research, women report higher satisfaction after a procedural abortion, but being able to choose an abortion method is key. Research shows that when patients use pills to self-manage a second-trimester abortion before 16 weeks, they report fewer complications than they do after that period.

Whether a country offers procedural or medication abortion care generally depends on its economic and healthcare system, says Kristina Castell of the Swedish Association for Sexuality Education.

In the United States, "you have private care, you have private hospitals, [so] it's so much more lucrative to provide surgical abortions," she notes.

In Sweden, however, there is less focus on profit because of its universal healthcare system, Castell adds. The widespread availability of abortion pills has enabled Sweden to provide care for more patients, faster, in a largely rural country without accruing massive healthcare costs.

Medication abortion has allowed Sweden to "have abortion included in mainstream healthcare" that does not require traveling to a specialist, says Kristina Gemzell Danielsson, a leading abortion care researcher at the Karolinska Institute.

And in regions where access to procedural abortion care is increasingly limited, whether because of policy restrictions or a scarcity of trained providers, perhaps it's worth knowing that medication abortion care is not only safe but widely offered. N

Cecilia Nowell is a journalist covering reproductive health.

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VOICES / DUAA E ZAHRA SHAH

Not in Our Names

Israel and the US say their attacks on Iran are for the benefit of its women. Iranian feminists couldn't disagree more.

ON JUNE 14, THE DAY AFTER ISRAEL LAUNCHED a series of air strikes on Iran, Benjamin Netanyahu addressed the Iranian public. "As we achieve our objective, we are also clearing the path for you to achieve your freedom…. This is your opportunity to stand up and let your voices be heard.

"Woman, Life, Freedom," the Israeli prime minister continued. "*Zan*, *Zindagi*, *Azadi*."

The slogan that Netanyahu invoked originated in the Kurdish women's movement and spread widely in Iran after Jina (Mahsa) Amini died in state custody in 2022 after she was arrested for allegedly violating the government's veiling laws. The reports of her torture and death sparked a nationwide uprising, with people flooding the streets and posting on social media to protest the repression of women and minorities.

Israel claimed that the war would liberate Iranian women, but many who participated in the Woman, Life, Freedom movement say that it has instead set their movement back. The Israeli attacks killed hundreds of people, including women, and left widespread destruction and economic hardship, forcing many in the movement to focus on basic survival. At the same time, women's ability to protest has been further restricted as the Islamic Republic intensifies its repression, targeting activists and social media users. Yet even as progress is rolled back, new networks have emerged and old ones have been revived since the war's outbreak in June, with a growing emphasis on anti-imperialism.

Though Woman, Life, Freedom gained global attention in 2022, its roots go much further back, fueled by the everyday experiences of Iranian women that give the movement its urgency.

"E.," who was born and raised in Iran and later joined Iranians for Collective Liberation and co-founded the music empowerment group We Are Womxn Rising, said Iran's morality police began stalking and harassing her when she was 5 years old. Because she was tall for her age, the officers refused to believe that E. was so young and insisted that she should already be wearing a hijab, which becomes compulsory for girls in Iran at age 9. They attempted to drag her away to detention before E.'s mother intervened, pulling her to safety.

These brushes with state repression help explain why the movement resonates so widely in Iranian society. E. described how Iranians joined Woman, Life, Freedom regardless of political differences, "not because it was a trend or a choice, but a necessity." Given the movement's organic growth from such personal experiences, attempts by foreign countries to co-opt it feel all the more jarring to these women. "You cannot package Woman, Life, Freedom from the perspective of a nation-state or patriarchal power or geopolitical games, because Woman, Life, Freedom resists all of that. Its very core is about humanity and liberation for all," E. said.

The filmmaker Afsaneh Salari sees the war as a disruption. In the months before the strikes, she said, she had noticed that more girls in Tehran and other cities were choosing not to wear the hijab in public. "The taboo was gone. But then the war happened," Salari said, and now those hard-won civil gains could be reversed.

That reversal is playing out across the country, as the Islamic Republic escalates its crackdown on social media users, activists, and minorities. The regime is also pushing vague new criminal laws that could allow the death penalty for civic or even social media activity, according to Saeid Dehghan, a human rights lawyer and the director of the Parsi Law Collective. This climate of fear has left the Woman, Life, Freedom movement vulnerable, as organizing becomes harder and the capacity for dissent continues to shrink.

Israel claimed the war would liberate Iranian women, but many women say it has instead set their movement back.

The Israeli attack on Evin prison in Tehran, which killed 71 people, illustrates this dynamic. "Even before the strike, the Iranian state had planned to transfer women political prisoners to weaken their collective resistance and tighten surveillance. The

bombing gave authorities a pretext to relocate dozens of women detainees to Qar-chack Prison, a facility roughly 40 miles south of Tehran without adequate ventilation, lighting, clean water, healthcare, or sleeping space," said Nasim Mogharab and Mina Fakhravar, cofounders of the group FARA4Freedom—Feminist Voices Against War and Patriarchy.

The attack on Evin also made the intention of Iran's attackers clearer, E. said. The prison holds students, writers, activists, and dissidents, not military targets. To E., striking Evin wasn't about supporting democracy or challenging the regime. It was a deliberate attempt to silence the very people who might oppose the return of figures like Reza Pahlavi, the exiled son of Iran's last shah, who has a close relationship with Israeli officials.

Even before the prison was bombed, Reyhaneh Ansari, Sakineh Parvaneh, Verisheh Moradi, and Golrokh Iraee—four women who had been imprisoned because of their activism—smuggled out a statement condemning the Israeli strikes. "Our liberation…is only possible through mass struggle… not by placing our hopes in foreign powers," they wrote. "These powers—driven by exploitation, colonialism, warmongering, and mass killing—have always brought devastation to this region."

Their warning resonates as the full scale of the war's death toll comes into focus, with the Israeli strikes killing 935 people and injuring more than 5,000. Salari spoke of the emotional toll on Iranians as they process the destruction of homes and the names of the dead. "We don't even trust the ceasefire, because of how Israel has repeatedly violated ceasefires in Gaza and Lebanon," she added. With so many of the people who sustained and embodied Woman, Life, Freedom now killed or grieving those killed, the space for collective action has narrowed.

The economic dimensions of the conflict have created additional obstacles for grassroots movements like Woman, Life, Freedom. Nikoo Nooryani, an Iranian American activist based in Los Angeles, pointed to how the war has accelerated the inflation and unemployment that were already rampant thanks to international sanctions. "When you're hungry and can't feed your family, revolution isn't the first thing on your mind," she said. Nooryani believes that Western countries need to lift their sanctions and stop conducting business with the Iranian government; this approach would provide Iranians with both the economic freedom and the global access necessary to pursue democratic change on their own terms.

Meanwhile, Western countries claiming to act in the name of freedom, particularly for women, have instead left devastation. "How can you have experienced Iraq and Afghanistan and not learn from them?" asked Melina Rozehkhan, a political science student at Columbia.

The conflict has also exposed divisions within the Iranian opposition. According to Sahar Delijani, author of *Children of the Jacaranda Tree*, two vocal minorities supported the bombing: a politically oriented bloc hoping that the removal of the current regime might create space for the shah's family to return to power, and a group of ordinary citizens exhausted by decades of living under the Islamic Republic.

But many reject what they see as a false binary between support for the regime and support for foreign intervention. "Being anti-regime doesn't mean being pro-imperialist," said Daliah Lina, an Iranian Palestinian researcher and expert on migration and anti-racism.

Delijani has observed that people seek quick answers when discussing Iran, but argues that "there are no quick answers for anything anywhere." She described the tendency to reduce complex political situations to simple choices as "denying people their complexity," which amounts to "denying them their agency."

Still, in the face of foreign co-optation, the loss of lives, economic hardship, and intensified repression, Mogharab and Fakhravar said the achievements of Woman, Life, Freedom are so deeply rooted that even war cannot erase them. They believe that the movement is entering a new phase, sharpening its critique of all forms of domination—authoritarian, colonial, nationalist, and imperialist. "Anti-war discourses have become more prominent…and a renewed focus is emerging on building transnational alliances grounded in feminist ethics of care, solidarity, and political clarity," they said.

Artist and filmmaker Tara Aghdashloo noted how political differences dissolved as Iranians cared for each other amid war. People offered free accommodation to those fleeing bomb-struck cities and handed out free tea and water in the long lines for rationed fuel at gas stations. Shopkeepers sold products without making a profit. Communities built communication networks to help families abroad check on loved ones during Internet blackouts. "Such love and solidarity were reassuring and beautiful for us as a country, despite everything," Aghdashloo said.

E. finds this resilience particularly moving. "Iranians have endured, and endured while singing, dancing, loving, protesting, and dreaming of a world where we are liberated. Even if it was forbidden, even if it was criminalized, even if they were killed for it, even if they buried their loved ones. No imperialist power or authoritarian government can take that away."

It's this resilience and love that sustains movements like Woman, Life, Freedom. "It lives in the courage of Iranian women, in their daily actions and pushback against the government's restrictions," said Shiva Nazarahari, a cofounder of Zaagaah, a reproductive justice advocacy organization.

It also carries across generations. Just as her parents once brought her to protests, Lina now brings her 3-year-old son, who already knows the slogans by heart. At home, they talk about justice, Indigenous struggles, and standing up to oppression. Despite her son's age, she already sees what she's trying to cultivate within him: to be kind, critical, and never complicit. N

Duaa e Zahra Shah is a freelance journalist based in New York.

THE *NATION* INTERVIEW

ZOHRAN MAMDANI'S NEW YORK

KATRINA VANDEN HEUVEL AND JOHN NICHOLS

Zohran Mamdani's victory in New York City's Democratic mayoral primary in June made the 33-year-old state legislator from Queens more than just the party's nominee to lead the nation's largest city. For a Democratic Party desperate to reclaim political momentum, Mamdani's laser-like focus on affordability issues offered a clear path forward. The Ugandan-born immigrant who would be the city's first Muslim mayor also managed to overcome many of the wrenching, personality-based pitfalls of New York politics by projecting an accessible, enthusiastic, and joyful determination to open up conversations and heal past electoral divisions—an approach that starkly contrasts with Donald Trump's dark vision of an America at odds with the world and with itself. Mamdani still faces a tough November race, with his chief opponent in the primary, former New York governor Andrew Cuomo, reentering the contest as a third-party contender alongside the scandal-plagued incumbent, Mayor Eric Adams. Perennial Republican candidate Curtis Sliwa and independent Jim Walden round out the field.

On the day that Mamdani sat down with *Nation* editor Katrina vanden Heuvel and executive editor John Nichols for one of his first extended post-primary interviews, he had just secured the endorsement of 1199SEIU, the largest healthcare union in the country and a historic force in New York politics. At the same time, he's still looking to win the support of national Democratic figures—notably heavy hitters from his home state like Senate minority leader Chuck Schumer and House minority leader Hakeem Jeffries—who suggest that the proud democratic socialist is too progressive on both domestic and foreign-policy issues.

Seated at a small table in the Little Flower Cafe, an Afghan eatery that he frequents in the Queens neighborhood of Astoria, Mamdani sipped a pink sheer chai and spoke about the inspiration he takes from past New York progressives such as Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Fiorello La Guardia. He also discussed how he came to highlight affordability as the essential political issue of the moment, the future direction of the Democratic Party, and the legacy of "sewer socialism"—the breakthroughs achieved by socialist municipal governments in the past. Along the way, Mamdani highlighted key challenges for New York governance, such as protecting the city from the depredations of ICE and the vendettas of the Trump White House and navigating relations with the city's billionaire class. He also spoke about the punishing media landscape and his efforts to address "a caricature of myself that is a responsibility for me to correct," as well as his earnest hope—in a time of so much cynicism and despair—that democracy might finally deliver for working people. This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

ILLUSTRATION BY **TIM O'BRIEN**

The Nation: *In your victory speech on primary night, you quoted Franklin Delano Roosevelt, telling the crowd: "As FDR said, 'Democracy has disappeared in several other great nations, not because the people dislike democracy but because they have grown tired of unemployment and insecurity, of seeing their children hungry while they sat helpless in the face of government confusion and weakness.... In desperation, they chose to sacrifice liberty in the hope of getting something to eat.' New York, if we have made one thing clear over these past months, it is that we need not choose between the two." How did you come to adopt that quote and to link it to your governing vision?*

Mamdani: I was taken by this quote because it so eloquently speaks to the fact that for democracy to survive, it cannot be treated as simply an ideal or a value. It has to be something that has a resonance to the needs of working people's lives. And in this moment especially, there's a temptation to say that democracy is under attack from authoritarianism in Washington, DC, which it is. And it is also under attack from the inside, [because of] the withering of the belief in its ability to deliver on any of the needs of working people.

"I will be the first immigrant mayor of this city in generations, and I take that as an honor and as a responsibility."

Home turf: Mamdani at Astoria's Little Flower Cafe.

It's not that we must convince people to believe in democracy as a notion or as a political aspiration; it's that we have to convince them of its resonance in their lives. And it's a joy to be here with you at Little Flower, because that's the nickname of the greatest mayor in our history, Fiorello La Guardia, who took on these twin crises of anti-immigrant animus and the denial of dignity to working people, and did so with an understanding of what the fruition of democracy looked like—and even what the fulfillment of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness looked like—understanding it in the language of the urban sphere: of more parks, more beauty, more light. You cannot defeat this attack on democracy unless you also prove its worth.

The Nation: *FDR and La Guardia campaigned in difficult times—during the Great Depression, with fascism rising in Europe. They each captured the imagination of the people and used it to build electoral and governing coalitions. Is that something you were thinking about when you picked that quote?*

Mamdani: It is part of the inspiration for this campaign.

The Nation: *Roosevelt had a huge agenda, and he was a masterful politician. Yet he couldn't achieve all of it. The same with La Guardia. Today, as you seek to implement an equally bold agenda, there are people who say you're too inexperienced, that you won't be effective. That will, undoubtedly, be a theme of the fall election, in which your leading opponent is a former governor whose father, another former governor, famously said, "You campaign in poetry; you govern in prose." Tell us how you see governing, and how you intend to deliver on your campaign's promises.*

Mamdani: I only promise that which I intend to deliver. I will be judged at the end of my tenure as mayor—after I win this general election—by my ability to deliver on this platform. Most especially, I'll be held to account on the central planks of this platform: commitments to freeze the rent, to make the slowest buses in the country fast and free, to deliver universal childcare in a city where it costs $25,000 a year to provide that for a child. The challenge of politics is to meet each moment. What we've shown in this campaign is our ability to do so from the beginning, when I was managing two people, to this point where we now have more than 52,000 people [as campaign volunteers].

This is not to say that campaigning and governing are the same challenge, but it is to say that they both present you with an ever-developing landscape—one in which you can only succeed if you hire a team of the best, the brightest, and also the hungriest. What we did in this campaign was showcase our ability to do that, and what we'll do in governing is the same: hire on the basis of expertise, and trust our convictions, our commitments, to also hire those who are not characterized by the speed with which they say yes to an idea I come up with, but rather by the track record they can show in fulfilling a mandate such as this.

The Nation: *Might your administration include City Comptroller Brad Lander, one of your closest primary rivals, as deputy mayor or in some other key position?*

Mamdani: I have yet to make any personnel commitments. But I would say that it has been a joy to run alongside Brad and to work alongside him, and to see his leadership as both a colleague for years prior but also amidst this race, in showcasing what a new kind of politics can be. I know that many others felt the same. At a moment when the language of politics is so dour and so dark, it's important to understand that the tonic to the darkness is not imitating it, but rather to marshal the same lightness and joy that also characterizes our lives.

The Nation: *In your victory speech, you seemed to be trying not merely to claim an election win but to give people a deeper sense of your governing philosophy and focus. It didn't sound like you wrote it that night.*

Mamdani: No, the foundation of the speech was written before that evening. But we wrote the conclusion on election night. There was a sense of "Things look good—but it's too early." And then once I got the phone call from Andrew Cuomo, we realized that this was actually a victory speech. It was not too early to declare. And so we had to bring that clarity to what we had written.

JOHN NICHOLS

Showdown: Mamdani faces off against former governor Andrew Cuomo (left) and former hedge fund manager Whitney Tilson at the June mayoral debate.

YUKI IWAMURA / GETTY IMAGES

The Nation: *You promised to "govern our city as a model for the Democratic Party, where we fight for working people with no apology." That spoke to the circumstances of the Democratic Party, not just in New York City but nationally. Today there's this debate over how the party should reconnect with working-class voters. If you're elected mayor, your success or failure is primarily going to be measured by what you do for people in New York. But do you also see the potential for a model of a new politics in America?*

Mamdani: It has often felt as if we in the Democratic Party are embarrassed by some of our convictions—that at the first sign of resistance, we may back away. And what I have found as a New Yorker is that the thing New Yorkers hate more than a politician they disagree with is one that they can't trust. And so I have run a campaign that is unabashed about its commitments, its principles, its values—while always ensuring that that lack of apology never translates into a condescension, but rather a sincerity. It allows for an honest debate with New Yorkers, where even when I go and speak to hundreds of CEOs, we have a conversation all in the knowledge that my fiscal policy, as I state it in that room, is the same as I state it on the street: a desire to match the top corporate tax rate of New York to that of the top corporate tax rate of New Jersey, a desire to increase personal income taxes on the top 1 percent of New Yorkers by 2 percent. It's an honest desire, and it is also one that doesn't preclude me from sharing it with those who may be taxed by it.

There is a temptation, when you see how successful Republicans have been with their style of politics, to believe that we have to mimic it in order to compete with them. In fact, it is a challenge for us to showcase our alternate vision. It's not just a vision with regard to commitments, it's not just a vision with regard to ideals, but it comes across even with regard to the manner in which we share our politics with others. And I think sincerity is at the heart of that.

The Nation: *There's been a pressure—a good bit before the primary, more since—to get you to back off from things you've said on issues like the Israel-Palestine conflict and taxing the rich. You've responded by meeting with critics, explaining that these are the things you believe in and engaging in discussions of where you are coming from. That's different from how many candidates operate.*

Mamdani: If I've made policy commitments, I've made them because I intend to keep them. I want to be honest about them. That doesn't stop me from continuing to learn how to be a leader for this entire city. But that learning is not something that can come at the expense of the core of what this campaign is, which is a commitment to the very same policies we began with on October 23, the very same values we ran with for eight months prior to the primary. That marriage of consistency and growth is what I hope to show as the leader of this city.

The Nation: *If you are elected mayor, you will have to deal with political leaders in Albany and Washington. You've said that you want to use your power "to reject Donald Trump's fascism." How do you Trump-proof New York City? And how do you do that when the administration is directly attacking you? Just this morning, the White House spokesperson denounced you as "Zamdami."*

Mamdani: I hope they find that guy. [Laughs.]

"One in five New Yorkers cannot afford a $2.90 subway fare in the wealthiest city in the world's wealthiest country."

The Nation: *So how do you Trump-proof the city?*

Mamdani: There are a number of ways: You raise revenue, such that you not only are able to protect the city against the worst of the federal cuts that are to come, but also that you are able to pursue an affirmative agenda at the same time. It is not

enough to fight Trump's vision in purely a defensive posture. We must also have our own vision that we are fighting for—and that we deliver on.

And New York City [can also push back against Trump's White House] by enforcing and strengthening our city's existing sanctuary-city policies. This is a contest, also, of values that concern the fabric of our city and our country. And when I was saying that too often it feels as if we Democrats are embarrassed, just think about these policies, which have been spoken of by Eric Adams as if they are an attack on what makes us New Yorkers, when in fact they've been in existence for decades and have been defended prior to him by Republicans and Democrats alike. We know that these are the very policies that can prevent so much of the horrors that we are seeing in our own city.

Finally, we can fight by instilling hope in New Yorkers who are living through despair in this moment—be it a despair over how expensive the city that they call home has become, or despair watching in anguish as their tax dollars are used to kill civilians in Gaza, as was recently reported by NBC News, where the Israeli military killed 10 children waiting in line for a health clinic, one of whom was a 1-year-old child who had just spoken his first words. It is incumbent upon us, as Democrats, to fight back against that, and to also lift New Yorkers out of that despair with an affirmative vision.

Making workers matter again: Mamdani celebrates his win on election night with New York union members.

I am running to be the mayor of this city, and my focus will be on the welfare of New Yorkers across these five boroughs. I will lead with a vision of protecting these New Yorkers and ensuring that we do more than simply survive in this city—that there is also a language and a reality of aspiration in our city once again.

"Politics, to me, must be an act of making the principle into the possible. And you do so by extending your hand to all who are interested."

***The Nation*:** *The president recently questioned your citizenship and threatened to arrest you. Were you surprised by that? Do you have any capacity to be surprised by Donald Trump?*

Mamdani: Very little. He has spoken about how I look, how I sound, where I'm from, what I believe in, my naturalization status. I think much of it is to distract from who I fight for, because for all of the many differences between Donald Trump and me, we both ran campaigns on the cost of living, campaigns that spoke about the need for cheaper groceries. While he's betrayed those same commitments—most obviously through this recent legislation that will throw millions of Americans off their healthcare, steal food from the hungry, continue in his now well-known tradition of wealth transfers of trillions of dollars from the working class to the 1 percent—we will actually deliver on those commitments. And our delivery on them will throw his betrayal into stark relief. That is a threat to his politics, and it motivates so much of this language and this focus that he has.

***The Nation*:** *Instead of referring to you as a democratic socialist, Trump has claimed that you are a communist. So let's talk about what you are—a democratic socialist. How do you define the term?*

Mamdani: I think of it often in the terms that Dr. King shared decades ago: "Call it democracy, or call it democratic socialism. But there must be a better distribution of wealth within this country for all of God's children."

In a moment when income inequality is declining nationwide, it is increasing in New York City. And within the context of city government, I understand [democratic socialism as a way to honor] the responsibility to ensure that every New Yorker lives a dignified life. I often speak of Fiorello La Guardia—a Republican who once ran on the Socialist Party line and worked closely with the left—because he delivered that dignity through so much of what he did as the mayor of this city. This was a mayor

ANGELA WEISS / AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

who created the Parks Department, a mayor who built housing for 20,000 New Yorkers at a scale and pace which is considered unfeasible today, a mayor who understood what it meant to fight for working-class New Yorkers.

I am well aware of the immense responsibility that comes with this position, and I am also excited by the opportunity that it represents to deliver for those same New Yorkers for whom politics has seemed less and less relevant to the struggles of their lives.

The Nation: *When you talk about democratic socialism, you put it in an American context, which a lot of our media never even imagines. But there is a long democratic socialist tradition in this country, and one of the best examples of it is the "sewer socialists" of Milwaukee. One of the interesting things about the sewer socialists was that they championed small business. They fought to protect small businesses, often against chain stores and big business. You've done something similar.*

Mamdani: Yeah! And the extreme concentration of wealth and power hurts small businesses as well.

The example of sewer socialism is one that I think of often. What we have seen in recent years is that the language that should be identified with the left has become associated with the right: language of efficiency, of waste, of quality of life. To fight for working people must also mean to fight for their quality of life. Sewer socialism, to me, represents a belief that the worth of an ideology can only be judged by its delivery. That means improving the services and social goods that working people experience each and every day: the sewers, the clean drinking water, the parks. You win someone's trust through an outcome, and that is what I am working backward from: an outcome of an affordable city and a desire to show that government can in fact live up to its responsibilities to working residents.

The Nation: *So you're not the candidate of the billionaires?*

Mamdani: No. [Laughs.]

The Nation: *Yet you met recently with leaders of the business community—some of whom are billionaires. As mayor, how are you going to navigate relations with the business community?*

Mamdani: First, by showing that I see them as a part of this city, and that my vision for the city includes even the same corporations that I'm looking to increase taxes on. I know no matter what our disagreements are, there's a shared interest in the success of this city.

There are points of disagreement, no doubt. But also, I enter into those rooms [for meetings with business leaders] having been preceded by a caricature of myself that it is a responsibility for me to correct. I do not blame many New Yorkers for having that caricature, for they were subject to more than $30 million in television commercials, mailers, and radio hits with those very examples of smear and slander. I, too, would have questions if that was the only way I understood someone. I also go into those meetings making clear that, though we may—and likely, for many, will—leave with the same disagreements about fiscal policy and the tools we must use to deliver that affordability, agreement on those issues is not the basis by which I will determine who I'm willing to speak to about other issues. There are many conversations I've had that begin and end with disagreement about that fiscal policy, but also include shared areas of interest with regard to our parks or our streetscape, or thoughts of what this city could be. That is why I speak so often of partnership. Politics, to me, must be an act of making the principle into the possible. And you do so by extending your hand to all who are interested, not all who agree on every single idea that you have.

"When you see how successful Republicans have been with their style of politics, the temptation is to think we have to mimic it."

The Nation: *Do you think you're opening up imaginations that have been shut down? There are people living here in New York who are surprised when they learn that city universities were once free. So there's a tradition that has been lost in the past 40 or 50 years that you may be retrieving.*

Mamdani: I leave it to you to make the judgment. I will say that we have been very inspired by the tradition, in this city especially, of the campaigns that came before us. One of the many reasons that I was so excited by the idea of walking the length of Manhattan when it was proposed by a team member of ours was that it reminded me of the video I had seen a few weeks earlier of David Dinkins walking through the streets of Harlem. It reminded me of the photo I had seen of John Lindsay being lifted into the air by a crowd, and of an understanding among New Yorkers of the necessity of politics to take place in public. Much of our sense of politics is grounded solely in the now—when in fact we have to continue to connect to that which has existed before, because even in the mere act of knowing our own history, we are reminded of our own possibilities.

While it's tempting to think of the passage of time as innately meaning the arrival of progress, we know that in many ways we have had a fairer New York City in the past. That does not mean that we should engage purely in nostalgia, but that we are reminded of what we can accomplish and that, in doing so, we are honoring what this city has been.

ANDREW EPSTEIN

Politics past: Mamdani poses alongside a statue of Fiorello La Guardia.

The Nation: *Your campaign has focused on the fact that the city has become harder and harder to afford—perhaps more so than at any time in its history. How did you come to that as the focal-point issue for your campaign?*

Mamdani: If you speak to enough New Yorkers, you'll come to this conclusion. It's the difference in whether or not people can keep living in the city. People feel it in rent; people feel it in the job market; people feel it in groceries; they feel it in their MetroCard. One in five New Yorkers cannot afford a $2.90 subway fare in the wealthiest city in the wealthiest country in the history of the world. And it's offensive that we have allowed this to continue and that we consider ourselves witnesses or bystanders to it, as opposed to those with the choice of exacerbating it or bringing it to an end. We've seen exacerbation under Adams, and now it's time for a city government that actually uses the tools at its disposal to deliver a different kind of city.

"It has often felt as if we in the Democratic Party are embarrassed by some of our convictions—that at the first sign of resistance, we may back away."

The Nation: *Since the primary, you've met with a lot of people who did not back you. There are still some Democratic Party leaders who remain resistant to your candidacy, and you've been meeting with them. You've also put a lot of effort into meetings and direct campaigning that seeks to expand your coalition: seeking to win over older Black voters, union members, and others who were with Cuomo in the primary. You've gone to the neighborhoods, to Little Haiti and elsewhere, talked with people—and won endorsements. You've met with and won over unions that backed Cuomo in the primary. Isn't this what mayors need to do: to say to people who didn't back you, "Let's find our places to work together. Let's find our common ground"?*

Mamdani: You have a choice of what you want to do with your hand. Do you want to pat yourself on the back, or do you want to extend it to someone else? Your decision has to come from the question of "What is your goal?" My goal is to be the mayor of this entire city. It is not to settle scores and look to the past; it's to look to the future. Looking to the future means continuing to welcome people into a coalition, and not asking them why or when they joined, but knowing that they have just as much of a place in this fight for an affordable city as those who helped come up with the idea of the campaign in the first place. It's that same ethos that we practice as New Yorkers when we look to defend those who have been here for generations and those who got here the same day. It's the way that this city has raised me.

Their revolution: Mamdani and Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders.

The Nation: *There's a huge media story to this campaign. Some of New York City's legacy media has not exactly rolled out the red carpet.* The New York Times *editorialized that "We do not believe that Mr. Mamdani deserves a spot on New Yorkers' ballots." At the same time, you've created your own media. How do you think about media and communications in New York City?*

Mamdani: Oftentimes, the left is forced into a choice between the conventional and the creative, forced in part by financial realities when running a campaign. Thanks to the matching-funds system [which allows qualified candidates in New York mayoral races to get public funding], we were able to build a campaign that could do both. And we sought to do both throughout the entirety of the campaign, whether it meant our advertising strategy, our field strategy, but also as it pertained to our comms strategy. We wanted to engage and respect the longstanding institutions—newspapers and radio and television stations—and sought out opportunities to speak to them at every occasion, [while] knowing full well that more than 50 percent of Americans get their news from social media. So we wanted to both speak to those who tell the stories of this city each and every day and to tell our own story at the same time.

The Nation: *Was it frustrating when, for instance,* The New York Times *editorialized so aggressively against you in the primary?*

Mamdani: I took that editorial as the opinions of about a dozen New Yorkers—ones that they have a right to, and that I disagreed with, and ones that will not be a reason that I do not engage with them in the future. That's how I'll approach much of this, in telling the story of this campaign and in continuing to do so—and in ensuring that my disagreement with any piece of analysis will never extend into what too many politicians do today, which is seeking to clamp down on both the access they extend to the media and the media's ability to continue to do their jobs.

The Nation: *Will your focus on producing social media—which has gotten a lot of national notice—continue if you are elected mayor?*

Mamdani: Yes. There is much of this campaign that will, and must, continue into governing, and the way in which we communicate is one of those things. It is a critical part of ensuring that New Yorkers see themselves in their own democracy: that they actually hear from those whom they have elected through a medium that they actually use.

The Nation: *You could become mayor at a time when the president is openly attacking you and when politicians in Albany are saying there's no money for you. As you*

FRIENDS OF BERNIE SANDERS

struggle to deliver on the things you want to deliver on, is it important that you keep lines of communication open so that people can see how the process works—and what you are trying to accomplish?

Mamdani: The caricature of me will only grow, which means that our ability to reach New Yorkers must grow in the same manner. I take inspiration from many leaders who have sought to speak to their constituents directly, be it the examples I've seen of Senator [Bernie] Sanders and Congresswoman [Alexandria] Ocasio-Cortez through the use of digital media at a national scale, or [President] Claudia Sheinbaum in Mexico.

The use of digital tends to be described as if it is an optional part of our politics today. It is a necessity. [Mamdani campaign communications director Andrew Epstein's] idea was to place our donation link under Andrew Cuomo's relaunch video, and that raised more than $100,000. That is not an optional part of a campaign or of our politics. It is just as important and as necessary as so much of what we consider to be the building blocks of how we run a campaign and how we govern the city.

The Nation: *You just mentioned Claudia Sheinbaum. The mayor of New York is a global figure. If you're elected, how will you address national and international issues? How will you build those relationships?*

Mamdani: You have to keep your focus on the city. This city is its own gateway to the world. Almost 40 percent of the people who live in this city were born outside this country, myself included. I will be the first immigrant mayor of this city in generations, and I take that both as an honor and as a responsibility. Yet my focus is on the five boroughs, and if there are lessons and models for what we achieve here elsewhere, so be it.

The Nation: *You've acknowledged that people may have serious differences with you on particular issues, Middle East issues—Gaza, for instance. But you've made a point of talking about a commitment to make sure that everyone who lives in the city is safe.*

Mamdani: Yes. This is a city that each and every New Yorker belongs to. They belong to it not on the basis of their political beliefs, or their religion, or their race, but because of the fact that they are a New Yorker. And I will be each of those New Yorkers' mayor. Even amid a disagreement, there will always be an understanding of a shared sense of humanity and that shared sense of belonging.

Showtime: Mamdani and New York City Comptroller Brad Lander (left) appearing on *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert.*

SCOTT KOWALCHYK / CBS VIA GETTY IMAGES

The Nation: *Do you ever get mad?*

Mamdani: I do. I do get mad! You know, I was quite mad when I met [Trump border czar] Tom Homan in Albany. I am mad when I see the horrific consequences of this right-wing federal administration. It's an anger that I know many feel, and yet it is not one that we can let corrode our spirit and our soul.

The Nation: *Do you have a favorite film that captures the New York City ethos?*

Mamdani: I've often said [Spike Lee's] *Do the Right Thing*.

The Nation: *You seem like a guy who reads a lot.*

Mamdani: [Laughs.]

The Nation: *As a candidate, do you still read books?*

Mamdani: Not much.

"You cannot defeat this attack on democracy unless you also prove its worth."

The Nation: *Do you listen to music?*

Mamdani: I listen to music because it's something that I can do as I do something else. I listen to music as I get ready in the morning; I listen to music as I take the train, as I'm walking. Some mornings I listen to a song called "O Sanam" by Lucky Ali; some mornings I listen to soca music to wake myself up and get ready for the day. And I don't know that I could do this without that music. It either gives you that which you hoped you had already awakened with—the energy, the hope, the belief—or it takes you out of that which is consuming you.

The Nation: *Do you have a book that shaped you?*

Mamdani: You know, I read *American War* by Omar El Akkad many years ago, and there was a phrase within it: "What was safety, anyway, but the sound of a bomb falling on someone else's home?" And it has stayed with me for a long time and informed the way in which I not only see the world, but the world that I'm also trying to win.

The Nation: *Do you think much these days about not just making this a great city for working people to live in, but maybe even about how a mayor might make the world better?*

Mamdani: I try to keep my sights squarely focused. You know the *New Yorker* cartoon of a *View of the World from 9th Avenue*? That's how I try and wake up every morning. N

A FEW DAYS AFTER MY FAMILY and I left Gaza and began our lives as exiles, we found ourselves inside a dim immigration office in Cairo—the latest in a string of appointments for an entry stamp of approval to Egypt.

The fluorescent lights buzzed faintly, and everything about the room felt temporary yet interminable. It was the kind of place built to process people quickly but not kindly. Rows of hard plastic chairs lined the walls.

I was clutching a faded blue folder, creased and soft at the edges. Inside were the scraps I hoped would justify my presence on this side of the border: a birth certificate folded too many times, a college degree printed in both Arabic and English, visa forms half-completed, a utility bill with someone else's name crossed out and mine written in. Documents that felt less like proof of identity than reminders of how much of it had already been lost.

I am many things: a father, a husband, a son, a Palestinian, a Gazan, a journalist, a survivor. But in this room, none of that mattered; here, I was just another refugee reduced to a handful of papers, my life shrunk into a fragile scaffolding of dates and stamps.

The room smelled of bureaucracy—photocopier ink, recycled air, the faint trace of cheap perfume worn by someone behind the counter. A low murmur of voices, a soft chorus of Arabic dialects, filled the space. I recognized some of the accents instantly; others were still foreign to my ear. The Egyptian accent bent certain words in ways I wasn't yet used to. Occasionally, the sharp scrape of a chair dragged across linoleum would slice through the hush.

I glanced around the room and met the eyes of others also waiting. Some were holding folders like mine; others were simply sitting with nothing in their hands. They seemed like they had already surrendered everything. I didn't know their names; I couldn't recall their faces from home. But I recognized them all the same. There was something unmistakable in their stillness, in the way they stared at the floor or at nothing at all. It was a look I had seen in the mirror for weeks now: a quiet, precise, ever-present kind of grief.

They, too, were from Gaza.

My phone buzzed. I shouldn't have checked, at least not in this room, but the urge was too strong. The notification lit up the screen: "Breaking: Another air strike in Gaza City. A neighborhood leveled in the north, many casualties reported." The words swam for a moment. I blinked hard, trying to will them into coherence. A video,

Solidarity forever? Everyday Egyptians show their support for Palestinians, but Egypt's government has left them in a legal and political limbo.

Palestinians who escape the horrors of Gaza face a new trauma: the dislocation of exile from their homeland.

MOHAMMED R. MHAWISH

NAPART

In exile, we became a people without a place, without paperwork, without permanence, like bureaucratic ghosts.

grainy yet undeniably real, began to autoplay. Smoke billowed from a burning street as a man ran cradling a small, limp body in one arm. Another man shouted into the camera, trying to name the street and the dead. Somewhere off-screen, a child wailed. I leaned in, drawn against my will, as the waiting room dissolved.

A single child's shoe lay amid the broken rebar. It was too small to belong there, too intact and too innocent. I stared at it, and relief rose inside me: My son was safe and far from this. And then, just as quickly, shame followed—because his safety had come at the cost of someone else's child. Because it meant we had left.

The clerk's voice, flat and mechanical, jolted me back to the present. The normalcy of it all was disorienting. My mind reeled back to the day we left Gaza. The bus crossing the border was silent. My son clutched my hand so tightly it hurt, but I didn't let go. I told myself that I had a duty to deliver my family to something called safety. I couldn't bear to look back, so I told myself that we were only looking forward now, because we thought we were surviving.

Bearing witness: A protest in front of the Journalists Syndicate building in Cairo. Israel's campaign of slaughter has forced many reporters to flee Gaza.

But sitting in this quiet, indifferent room, I wasn't sure. Was this survival? Or just another kind of disappearance?

My name was called, or something like it. The immigration officer didn't even try to get it right.

"This document isn't enough," he told me, pushing the folder back without looking up. His tone was practiced and stripped of human weight, the voice of someone used to treating people like paperwork. I opened my mouth—I wanted to explain. Maybe to tell him how I had crawled through the remains of my home gathering proof that I existed. How I had spent the morning at another office to get the stamp he now said didn't count. But what would be the point?

I nodded instead. Picked up the folder. Walked out into a late afternoon sun so harsh it made my eyes sting. The chill of the office still clung to my skin.

Palestinians have endured the pain of exile for many generations. Now, almost two years into Israel's horrific war in Gaza, we are forced to write yet another chapter in this seemingly endless story.

For some of us, this exile has meant Egypt. Before May 2024, when Israel sealed the Rafah crossing—effectively the only way out of Gaza once the war began—more than 100,000 of us managed to flee. But once we reached the other side, survival took on a new shape: We became people without a place, without paperwork, without permanence, like bureaucratic ghosts. Our bodies walked Cairo's streets while our spirits still crouched at the Rafah crossing, waiting for the gate to open and to be let through—and waiting to be recognized as someone worth letting in.

Egypt was the only real option; other neighboring countries had effectively closed their doors. Yet even in Egypt, entry did not mean arrival. Egypt has refused to grant residency to refugees from Gaza. For them, there is no clear path to legal status.

Which is how I ended up in that government office, trying to make sense of what, if anything, might allow me to stay, work, or live without fear of deportation. But the answers were always shifting, and the questions themselves seemed designed to confuse, not clarify. Like the time I was told I needed proof of employment to apply for a visa, but couldn't legally work without one.

In Egypt, every step forward is a negotiation with invisibility. The forms are always missing a line, the requirements changing without warning. Our residency is temporary and fragile, like paper left out in the rain. One smudge, one missing stamp, and whole months disappear as though they had never happened.

Our fate in neighboring states is not much better. In many Arab countries—Lebanon and Jordan as well as Egypt—Palestinians remain barred by law or practice from dozens of professions, from engineering to medicine, while work permits are limited to the point of being effectively unusable. The Casablanca Protocol, a set of provisions agreed to at the 1965 Arab League summit, was meant to ensure certain legal rights for Palestinian refugees residing in the countries of the Arab world, including guaranteeing their right to work on par with citizens as well as their freedom of movement (i.e., the right to leave and to return, and the issuance of travel documents). But these provisions have since waned or been made obsolete by new policies that deny Palestinians the right of equal citizenship.

For war-displaced Palestinians, this bureaucratic squeeze turns the job market into a minefield. Even highly educated professionals are forced into precarious or informal work—if they find any at all. It's a reality grounded in statelessness, political exclusion, and shifting administrative rules, resulting in a denial of basic rights like healthcare, education, and property ownership.

One woman who also fled, Amal, left Gaza in May 2024. (She asked me not to name the country where she now lives.) But without legal status or residency, her life remains precarious. She moves from one under-the-table job to the next, always vulnerable to exploitation, always one step away from losing everything. Each job ends because her employers grow wary of her undocumented status or just stop calling.

"Every month, I wonder if I'll make rent," Amal told me. "I'm surviving, yes, but only just."

In Egypt, most Palestinian exiles rely on charity groups and community-run

Mohammed R. Mhawish, a contributing writer at The Nation, *is a journalist from Gaza who is now living in exile.*

PREVIOUS SPREAD: KHALED DESOUKI / AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES; THIS PAGE: MOHAMED ELSHAHED / ANADOLU VIA GETTY IMAGES

initiatives. At one distribution site I visited, women stood in long lines, their children tugging at their sleeves or chasing each other in circles. One woman balanced a baby in one arm and a bundle of supplies in the other. The weight of the diapers and canned goods seemed to drag her down, but she pressed forward. At the back of the room, a boy played with a toy truck he'd made from an empty plastic bottle, while a woman muttered to her toddler, "If we wait a little longer, maybe they'll call our name."

There was one moment that stayed with me. A child, no older than 6, approached me with a piece of bread in his hand. "Do you want some?" he offered. I shook my head, unable to speak.

EXILE FOR GAZANS IS AN UNRAVELING. We fled a place turned to ash, only to find ourselves facing a different kind of suffocation. No state, no passport, no one to speak our name—just a trail of e-mails unanswered, offices that close early, and state agents who look through us as if our very presence is a mistake.

Many days, it feels like I'm trapped in a limbo between a life I fled and another I haven't yet begun. The air is quieter here and the ground is still. But I walk like someone who's bracing for impact, as if the war might still find me in the creases of the day.

I left Gaza, but not completely. My body crossed the border; the rest of me stayed behind. In the half-light of morning or the hush before sleep, I still hear the war breathing and see the faces of friends I can't reach, colleagues filing dispatches between air strikes, and family counting the water bottles and hours without fuel.

Exile has taught me a strange math: Every safe night feels like a theft, every meal like a betrayal. I've learned how guilt settles in the lungs: quiet but heavy. I've learned how to live in two places at once and belong fully to neither.

Rebuilding a life in exile feels like trying to reassemble a shattered mosaic, the pieces scattered across distances that can't be bridged. We thought it would be easy to adjust to life in Egypt—a neighboring country, Arab and Muslim—but there were big differences in how we saw things and how we lived. The Egyptian dialect is vastly different from Palestinian Arabic. Sometimes it feels like speaking an entirely different language. Cultural differences compound the sense of displacement: Social norms, humor, and even food are foreign. And while the dishes can be delicious, they are not the flavors of home.

Some mornings, I'd wake to the soft hum of my son reciting the alphabet in Palestinian Arabic. Hearing him speak our language felt like a triumph. But it was also a reminder of the fragile threads of culture, history, and belonging that exile wears thinner with each passing day.

ALI MOUSTAFA / GETTY IMAGES

Our apartment walls, plain and unfamiliar, held little of Gaza, but we tried. Fruit stickers hung beside a map of Palestine, its contested borders tightly drawn, etched deep into our identity.

At night, I hummed the lullabies my mother once sang to me, hoping they would carry my youngest home even if he never set foot there.

ZAINAB IS A WRITER FROM GAZA FIGHTING HER OWN QUIET BATTLE against cultural erasure in Cairo. She organizes poetry readings and storytelling nights in a rented community hall, gathering Palestinians in exile to share fragments of their past.

"We have to keep telling these stories," she said. "If we don't, they'll fade, and so will we."

For Mohammed Rabee, a journalist who's now in exile in Turkey, the struggle is different but no less draining. "Western editors want stories that fit their narrative," he told me. "They frame us as either victims or militants, nothing in between. When I push back, they say I'm biased."

Frozen in place: Palestinian refugees in Egypt can only watch as Israel blocks humanitarian aid from reaching their loved ones back home.

These hardships are systemic, part of the architecture of dispossession, trauma, and uncertainty that shapes our lives. It's no wonder that mental health struggles are widespread.

"What we see most often is a deep sense of loss," said Dr. Hala, a therapist working with exiled Palestinians in Europe. "Loss of home, identity, and belonging. It shows up as anxiety, depression, profound fatigue. They're fighting on every front, for survival, dignity, and recognition."

I've learned how guilt settles in the lungs: quiet but heavy. I've learned how to live in two places at once and belong fully to neither.

Each night, as I tuck my son into bed, I wonder if I'm doing enough to give him a sense of home in a place that still feels foreign to me. The photos of Gaza, the stories I tell, the lullabies I sing—they're my attempt to build something enduring out of what exile has left behind. But the cracks always show. This life is both beautiful and fragile, real and imagined, rooted and uprooted all at once. And I know I'm not alone.

Palestinian exile stretches like a web linking those still in Gaza, those displaced, and those scattered across the world.

(Mhawish, continued on page 49)

WHEN HOSPITALS DO ICE'S DIRTY WORK

LISET CRUZ

An investigation into the strange, cruel world of "medical deportation."

JUNIOR FOUND HIMSELF FACING AN IMPOSSIBLE DECISION. One morning soon after Christmas in 2022, his wife, Soledad, had woken up feeling dizzy and nauseous; Junior hurried her to an emergency room in Allentown, Pennsylvania, where doctors determined that the 45-year-old had suffered a cerebral aneurysm and quickly ordered her to be transported to nearby Lehigh Valley Hospital, where she underwent a series of surgeries. The operations were successful, but there were complications. Soledad was left in a medically induced coma.

Eight weeks later, administrators at Lehigh Valley presented Junior with three options, none of them good: He could pay $500 a day to rent medical equipment so Soledad could continue treatment at home; he could find another facility to admit her; or he could agree to have her flown to a hospital in their home country, the Dominican Republic.

"My wife is still in a coma, and you're telling me she's ready for discharge?" Junior said he asked the hospital officials. (Because of their immigration status, both Junior and Soledad have been given pseudonyms in this article in order to protect their identities.) Before migrating to the United States in 2022, Soledad had worked as a psychologist and led a Bible study group. Junior described her as positive, easygoing, and determined. "She liked to work a lot," he said. In Allentown, Junior found a job as an industrial mechanic. Together they had raised two sons, now adults, who had traveled with them to the United States.

Junior is active and strong-willed, but he didn't have the money or the medical skills to care for Soledad himself. And he feared what would happen if she were transferred out of the United States. "If my wife boarded a plane," Junior said, "that's how she'll die."

As Soledad hovered near death, she had entered a hidden medical netherworld, one where the failures of our healthcare system meet the cruelties of our immigration system. Even before President Donald Trump made hospitals a locus of his mass deportation agenda, lifting the federal restrictions that had discouraged government agents from arresting undocumented immigrants in "sensitive areas" like schools, churches, and medical facilities, hospitals had become risky spaces for undocumented immigrants like Soledad—places where a serious illness, a slow recovery, or the need for long-term care could put them on a path to deportation.

The problem begins, as it so often does in the United States when healthcare is concerned, with money. Federal law requires hospitals to provide lifesaving care to anyone who enters an emergency room, regardless of their immigration status or whether they have health insurance. But hospitals have long sought to limit their costs by discharging patients as soon as they're in stable condition—particularly when

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ILLUSTRATION BY **ERIC DROOKER**


ICE
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Research suggests that medical deportation is a frighteningly common occurrence that has likely affected thousands of patients.

a patient doesn't have health insurance, as was the case with Soledad. In their rush to send patients on their way, hospitals have been known to pressure undocumented patients and their families to consent to transfers back to their home countries. Lawyers and immigrant rights advocates call this practice "medical deportation."

Now, as the Trump administration steps up its immigration enforcement measures, the number of people facing medical deportation is likely to grow.

"We have noticed that under the Trump administration, hospitals are getting more comfortable with threatening medical deportation," said Adrianna Torres-García, the deputy director of Free Migration Project, a Philadelphia-based nonprofit that provides legal assistance to immigrant communities and works to stop deportations. "Hospitals are taking this opportunity—this anti-immigrant climate—to become a little more bold about not wanting to work with immigrants who don't have health insurance."

First, do no harm? An outpost of the Lehigh Valley Health Network, a regional provider that treated, and then pushed to deport, Soledad.

The scale of the problem is not easy to track. Hospitals and the companies they hire to facilitate such removals are not required to report international transfers to state or federal regulators. However, interviews with patients, immigrant rights advocates, lawyers, and other experts, along with an analysis of news articles and academic studies, suggest that medical deportation is a frighteningly common occurrence that has likely affected thousands of patients. And given the current political realities, transfers that might once have been surreptitious affairs may now happen more openly.

"We know that it's a real problem," said Torres-García. "We've had people from Wisconsin, Indiana, and DC reach out to us for help."

Under Trump's presidency, undocumented immigrants have become more concerned about their safety in hospital settings. A recent survey by KFF, a health policy research nonprofit, found that many undocumented immigrants said they would avoid seeking healthcare out of fear of being detained by US Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents.

Yet even before Trump's return to the White House, the threat was significant. For Junior, the hospital's efforts to transfer Soledad left him terrified for her health and scrambling for a solution. "They gave me an ultimatum," Junior said. "They said, 'We send her to the Dominican Republic, or you take her home.'"

Even without the prospect of deportation, the treatment for Soledad's aneurysm was traumatic. Junior recalls surgery after surgery, during which doctors shaved her head, removed a piece of her skull, and placed her on a respirator so she could breathe. "She had so many devices connected to her," he said.

For three weeks, doctors kept her on a sedative in the hopes that it would allow her body to heal. At the end of January 2023, they gradually took her off the medication, but instead of waking up, Soledad remained unresponsive.

It was during this time, Junior said, that his meetings with hospital staff became increasingly fraught as they began to inquire about her immigration status. Then, during a meeting with Lehigh Valley administrators and staff from the medical transport company MedEscort in early February, Junior said they raised the possibility of transferring Soledad to the Dominican Republic.

For Junior, the idea was a nonstarter. He felt that hospitals in the Dominican Republic wouldn't be able to provide the level of care that Soledad needed. Indeed, the lack of adequate healthcare was one of the reasons they had sought a new life in the United States.

"I wasn't going to sign any kind of document to authorize it," Junior said of the transfer.

Medical records obtained by *The Nation* and Type Investigations suggest that Lehigh Valley continued to make plans for Soledad's transfer, however, despite Junior's repeated objections. According to these records, the hospital first documented its plan to send Soledad to the Dominican Republic on February 8, 2023, after meeting with MedEscort two days earlier. Over the next three weeks, doctors regularly evaluated whether Soledad's condition made her stable enough for discharge, while MedEscort worked to coordinate the transfer and connect with a hospital in the Dominican Republic that could accept her.

Lehigh Valley Hospital did not respond to multiple requests for comment on Soledad's case.

Under the federal Emergency Medical Treatment and Labor Act, passed in 1986, hospitals are required to ensure that medical transfers meet certain conditions designed to safeguard patients. Such transfers—whether to a domestic facility or an international one—must involve minimal health risks and be carried out via an appropriate mode of transportation, such as an ambulance or a private plane outfitted with medical equipment. The receiving facility must have both the space for the necessary treatment and personnel who are qualified to provide it.

Beyond these immediate requirements, discharge plans must be consistent with a patient's health goals and treatment preferences as well as designed to reduce factors that could lead to a preventable hospital readmission. In Pennsylvania, hospitals must also ensure that patients are informed about follow-up care and are given guidance on accessing financial assistance for their hospital bills.

Finally, the US Department of Health and Human Services' regulations dictate that patients, or their representatives, have a right to participate in "planning for care after discharge." And hospitals are required to provide information in a patient's native language. The idea is that hospitals must engage in

a process that allows for "informed consent." In Soledad's case, however, as in many cases of medical deportation, the question of consent soon gave way to pressure.

"That's the crux of the issue and what differentiates medical deportation from medical repatriation," Torres-García said. Patients may consent to medical repatriation for any number of reasons: An executive who falls ill while traveling abroad for business, for example, or a tourist on vacation who has an accident might prefer to receive medical care in their home country. These patients elect to be treated outside of the country where they were injured. But in cases of medical deportation, Torres-García said, "people are not given that choice."

Toward the end of February 2023, doctors determined that Soledad was medically stable, but they were not ready to sign off on sending her to another hospital in the Dominican Republic, according to her records. Then, at the beginning of March 2023, Lehigh Valley Hospital declared that Soledad's time was up and that MedEscort was moving forward to facilitate the transfer.

Founded in 1986 and based in Allentown, MedEscort says it has repatriated over 6,000 patients to more than 100 countries. And it expects the demand to increase. "As immigration policies and healthcare priorities evolve, American hospitals are likely to experience a higher volume of cases requiring tailored care discharge plans for uninsured and/or undocumented patients," MedEscort's website states. A 2022 version of the site put it more bluntly: MedEscort's services, it said, are designed to help hospital CEOs and CFOs who are "looking to solve the problem of unfunded Foreign Patients in American Hospitals." Top destinations for the company have included Mexico, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic.

"Hospitals have scarce resources. When a patient is stable or only needs custodial care, the hospital has an obligation to consider lower-cost settings," said Mark Weller, an attorney and spokesperson for MedEscort. "Perhaps that could be having a patient go back to their home country."

Weller said the company follows the American Medical Association's guidelines on safe discharges, including requiring that a patient is stable, that a discharge plan is in place, and that the receiving facility has the resources to meet the patient's needs. "We do not support or engage in involuntary discharges," Weller said. He said MedEscort relies on hospitals to obtain the necessary consent from patients.

Weller declined to discuss Soledad's case but said that MedEscort exists "to help hospitals do this the right way"—something, he acknowledged, that might not be true of other companies. "Unfortunately, some vendors remove patients from US facilities without any assurance of continued care, putting both patients and hospitals at risk," he said.

Family ties: Claudia Martinez and her uncle, who was threatened with medical deportation after he was struck by a motorcycle.

COURTESY OF CLAUDIA MARTINEZ

When Lehigh Valley Hospital decided it was time for Soledad to move on, it informed Junior, despite his repeated objections, that her transfer to the Dominican Republic would happen in less than a week. The date was set for March 8.

Alexandra Santos, an attorney with Free Migration Project, attended several meetings between Junior and hospital staff. She said that, despite state and federal regulations requiring informed consent from patients, hospital administrators told Junior, "We don't need your consent."

There is no official data on medical deportations, but researchers and immigrant rights advocates say the practice is surprisingly common. In 2012, researchers at Seton Hall University School of Law and New York Lawyers for the Public Interest released a report documenting more than 800 cases of successful or attempted medical deportation in the United States between 2006 and 2012. It remains one of the most significant reports on the practice to date.

The report is filled with horror stories: a 19-year-old girl who died shortly after being transferred from Arizona to Mexico; a victim of a car accident in Las Vegas who died after being left on the tarmac at a Guatemala airport; a baby, born with Down syndrome and a heart condition, whose transfer from an Arizona hospital to Mexico was halted at the 11th hour.

"He told me, 'If you don't sign for us to remove [your uncle], we're going to leave him on your doorstep.'"

—Claudia Martinez

In one case from 2008, a hospital in New Jersey, seeking to transfer a stroke victim to Guatemala, contacted the man's sister there. When she refused to give her consent, the hospital falsely led her to believe that her brother was near death in order to convince her to agree to his transfer. The following year, a man who suffered a stroke and brain hemorrhage in North Carolina was also transferred to Guatemala, where no arrangements for his continued care had been made. He spent one night in a hospital

before he was taken to his family's home, where he died about two weeks later.

The report is scathing in its assessment of hospital practices in the United States. "There is enough information to establish that the US is in systematic violation of its human rights obligations under a variety of treaties that the US has signed and/or ratified," the authors wrote.

John Sullivan, a former Fulbright scholar in Mexico, said he tracked nearly three dozen cases of medical deportation during a research project on the issue in 2013 and 2014. In one case, a 28-year-old man who had been left in a vegetative state after a physical assault was sent from Chicago to Mexico City, where medical personnel left him on a makeshift bed in his sister's apartment. Sullivan said he did not know what ultimately happened to the man, but the fact that he was not transferred to a healthcare facility shows how medical deportation can leave patients in dire straits. "Medical repatriation shifts the burden of care onto families with few resources," Sullivan said. "Patients and their families struggle to find adequate and affordable treatment."

Acting locally: Members of Free Migration Project demonstrate against medical deportations outside Philadelphia City Hall in 2023.

Sullivan also noted that, in the cases he studied, elderly parents typically, and unexpectedly, were the ones who took on the role of caretaker for their ill adult child, who had often been the family breadwinner. These children had traveled to the United States not only to secure their own livelihoods but also, in many cases, to support their families back home.

There have been more recent stories as well. In 2020, the case of an undocumented patient at Philadelphia's Jefferson Torresdale Hospital sparked a local outcry. The man, known as A.V., was walking from his apartment to a nearby grocery store when he was struck by a motorcycle, leaving him with multiple fractures and severe brain injuries. A few weeks later, A.V.'s niece, Claudia Martinez, received a call from a social worker at the hospital inquiring about his immigration status. When the worker learned that A.V. was undocumented, she informed Martinez that her uncle would be transferred to Guatemala later that month.

The Philadelphia law, which is the first of its kind in the country, prohibits hospitals from engaging in medical deportation.

"How is that possible?" Martinez recalls asking.

She said the hospital told her it had obtained the consent of A.V.'s wife, Juanita, an assertion that both women dispute. Juanita said she never received a call in 2020 regarding her husband's transfer.

"It's like they took advantage of the situation," Martinez said. "They could say they received authorization from his wife…but that was a lie." Martinez said that a hospital official continued to pressure her into agreeing to the transfer, threatening to simply drop her uncle off at her home. "He told me, 'If you don't sign for us to remove him, we're going to leave him on your doorstep. You'll wake up one morning and just see him outside your house,'" she recalled. "I didn't know what to do. It drove me crazy."

A.V.'s story might have ended there, like those of so many other seriously ill undocumented immigrants. But in June 2020, medical students at Jefferson Torresdale Hospital circulated a public petition highlighting the health risks that A.V. could face if he were transferred to Guatemala. "As healthcare professionals, we are taught to 'First, do no harm.' This much is egregiously clear—when you deport a medically at-risk, disabled individual to a country which may not have the means to care for them, you are doing harm," the petition said.

Free Migration Project also organized a protest to keep A.V. in the country. Dozens of people gathered outside the hospital to raise awareness of the case, linking arms and vowing to block any ambulance that attempted to take A.V. to the airport. Soon, local media arrived, putting Jefferson Torresdale in the spotlight.

Finally, in the face of this growing opposition, the hospital canceled the transfer and kept A.V. in its care until alternate plans could be made. He was eventually discharged to a nursing home.

Jefferson Torresdale Hospital did not respond to requests for comment about A.V.'s case.

At the nursing home, A.V.'s condition improved dramatically, but he still required help to perform daily functions. He remained at the nursing home for four years before ultimately consenting to an international discharge back to Guatemala last year. His care in the United States had allowed his health to improve to the point that he could manage the transfer, and in Guatemala he was able to reunite with his wife and continue his recovery.

A.V.'s story, and the advocacy around it, shattered the silence that had long surrounded medical deportations—and soon shook free other instances of families trying to keep their loved ones from being deported. Maripat Pileggi is a supervising attorney at Community Legal Services who worked on A.V.'s case. She said she's worked on about 10

COURTESY OF FREE MIGRATION PROJECT

similar cases since then. "Most of them have occurred since A.V.'s case was publicized so widely in 2020, which tells me that this likely happens a lot more often than anyone knows," Pileggi said. "People often don't realize they have any right or power to fight against it."

One of the people who'd heard about A.V.'s case was Junior. As his discussions with Lehigh Valley Hospital grew increasingly acrimonious, he connected with Free Migration Project and organized a local media campaign denouncing the attempted transfer. On March 2, 2023, dozens of protesters gathered outside the hospital's main entrance. A second demonstration was held less than a week later.

In response to the outcry, the hospital backed down and allowed Soledad to remain in its care.

"I wouldn't have thought another family was going to go through this again," said Claudia Martinez, who began working with Free Migration Project as a volunteer after connecting with the organization through a social worker. "Especially not so close to home."

To help make sure families are spared their own medical deportation horrors, Free Migration Project and other immigrant rights advocates came together to end the practice in Philadelphia. They drafted legislation to prevent hospitals from deporting patients without their consent, and the City Council passed it in December 2023.

The legislation, which is the first of its kind in the country, forbids hospitals to "engage in medical deportation, either directly or through a designated agent." To that end, it designates oversight of medical repatriation practices to the Philadelphia Department of Public Health and the City Committee on Public Health and Human Resources, and it requires hospitals to report patient data, enabling city officials and others to track the prevalence of international transfers. The law also gives the city the power to fine hospitals that engage in the practice, and patients have the right to sue hospitals for damages.

"I am very happy that this bill was passed, and I am hopeful that it will help many families," Martinez said.

Still, even as activists and lawmakers in Pennsylvania have succeeded in increasing protections for undocumented immigrants, the situation in other parts of the country is becoming more precarious. Trump has threatened to penalize states like California, New York, and Oregon, which offer health insurance to undocumented immigrants, by reducing the federal Medicaid match dollars that help hospitals and medical facilities offset their care costs. Without these matching funds, states will be forced to shoulder the entire cost of care for undocumented patients—a situation that could strain their budgets and lead some states to cut health coverage for undocumented patients. And in July, the Associated Press reported that ICE officials will be given access to the personal data of 79 million Medicaid enrollees—to help agents track down undocumented immigrants.

"You will see more medical repatriations and more attempted medical deportations," warned Charles Blatteis, a lawyer based in Tennessee who specializes in medical repatriation.

"Under the Trump administration, hospitals are getting more comfortable with threatening medical deportation."

—Adrianna Torres-García, Free Migration Project

Some states are even proposing changes of their own to try to appease the president and head off his punishment. In May, California Governor Gavin Newsom proposed freezing enrollment for undocumented immigrants, ages 19 and older, in Medi-Cal, the state's Medicaid program. All undocumented residents in the state would still be covered for emergency medical care—as is required under federal law—but adults who haven't enrolled by January 2026 would not have access to basic health coverage. Without this coverage, immigrant rights advocates suspect, medical deportations will continue to increase.

Flip-flop: In 2021, California Governor Gavin Newsom holds up a newly signed bill expanding medical coverage for undocumented immigrants—a position that he's since walked back.

ERIC PAUL ZAMORA / *FRESNO BEE* / TRIBUNE NEWS SERVICE VIA GETTY IMAGES

Back in Philadelphia, with the battle against Lehigh Valley Hospital behind him, Junior is optimistic about Soledad's recovery. At the end of May 2023, Soledad was moved into a nursing home, and she emerged from her coma shortly afterward. She is undergoing physical therapy to try to improve her condition and help her regain cognitive function and bodily autonomy.

"She's still there, slowly getting better," Junior said. "They've removed the endotracheal tube, and she's able to articulate more words."

Still, the danger for Soledad—as well as for Junior himself—has not disappeared: The Trump administration's anti-immigrant agenda has trickled down to the Lehigh Valley. An administrator at the nursing home "asked me about my immigration status and noted my situation and the new administration," Junior said. "I told them I wouldn't answer any of their questions—this isn't an immigration office. They told me my wife wasn't good for their business."

In Soledad's room at the nursing home, a shelf holds a small boombox, which Junior has tuned to a gospel music station. On a visit to see her last year, Soledad lay in bed alert and aware, smiling often. Junior brushed her salt-and-pepper hair tenderly and secured it into a ponytail. He visits her every day, he said, often twice a day on weekends. Together they celebrated their 25th wedding anniversary in April. Despite the challenges of the past two years, their connection remains strong. As Junior entered the room to greet her, Soledad reached out to embrace him, whispering softly into his ear and pulling him closer.

"She's the love of my life," Junior said. N

END OF THE L

The railroad once represented the American dream of expansion—and exploitation. But is train travel in the United States becoming a thing of the past?

JULIAN EPP

Full steam ahead: The *Southwest Chief* passes through the mountains near Trinidad, Colorado.

.INE?

No one is cheering for Amtrak's *43 Pennsylvanian*. I'm waiting for the train at Moynihan Train Hall in New York City, having been dispatched by *The Nation* to report on the national rail service by traveling its span across the country, and the trip is beginning without ceremony. When America's first steam locomotive with regular passenger service set out in 1830, it was cause for celebration. The engine, nicknamed the *Best Friend*, traveled six miles along the Charleston-Hamburg Railroad in South Carolina and back again on Christmas Day. "We flew on the wings of the wind," the *Charleston Daily Courier* remarked in its account of the trip, "before any of us had time to determine whether or not it was prudent to be scared." On one notable run a few weeks later, two "pleasure cars" were attached to the four-wheeled iron horse for the railroad's stockholders and other guests. At each stop, troops fired a cannon to the delight of spectators, who watched as the four-and-a-half-ton machine reached a breakneck speed of 25 miles per hour. Children tossed flowers onto the tracks and a band played, the *Courier* reported, as "great hilarity and good humour prevailed throughout the day."

No cannons are fired inside Moynihan Hall. No flowers descend on Track 13. No newspapers document the *Pennsylvanian*'s journey (though there's at least one magazine reporter). But like that first passenger service, this train is fully booked. "Scoot over. Make a friend," the conductor urges. "You might meet your future ex-spouse."

If you want to travel from New York City to Los Angeles, flying is usually a no-brainer: The trip is only six hours long, and the price is often half that of the train. Amtrak, on the other hand, is known mostly for short trips in the Northeast—in 2024, it carried three times more passengers between Washington, DC, and New York City than every airline combined. So why take a cross-country train? One reason is the perspective (what Amtrak's marketing calls "see level"): a better view of the nation than the one at 30,000 feet. Over the next few days, I'll be separated by a windowpane from warehouses, factories, water treatment plants, state parks, trailer parks, bridges, beaches, cemeteries, mountains, deserts, fields, and farms. But access to that panorama will come with certain costs on my side of the glass: spotty Wi-Fi, out-of-order bathrooms, crying toddlers, $6 microwaved hot dogs, $45 steak dinners, and, of course, delays.

The *43 Pennsylvanian* leaves every day at 10:52 AM, at least on paper, from an extension of Penn Station that still feels new. In 2021, the former mail-sorting room at the James A. Farley Post Office reopened as Moynihan Train Hall, named for Daniel Patrick Moynihan, the Nixon White House adviser turned

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“This is absolutely bizarre that we continue to subsidize highways [but not] a national rail system.”
—Joe Biden

Democratic senator, who spent years championing the expansion until his death in 2003. The $1.6 billion makeover is certainly glamorous, but it’s not clear how much of that funding went toward practical considerations for passengers. In the main concourse, beneath a vaulted glass roof supported by arched steel trusses and a 12-foot-tall Art Deco–inspired clock, there are no chairs. Instead, dozens of people in the busiest Amtrak station in the country wait for their trains while sitting on the gray marble tile floor, their backs against the glass panes enclosing the platform entrances. The hall’s façade still bears the Postal Service’s unofficial creed: “Neither snow nor rain nor heat nor gloom of night stays these couriers from the swift completion of their appointed rounds.” Of the eight trains scheduled to leave within the next hour, according to one of the small-screen displays scattered throughout the station, three are already running behind.

The world goes by: A train station on the Keystone Corridor in Downingtown, Pennsylvania, as seen from the window of a coach car.

“Amtrak is a sad situation,” said then–special government employee and noted hater of mass transit Elon Musk at Morgan Stanley’s Technology, Media & Telecom Conference in March, where he called for the privatization of “anything that can be privatized.” Along with the US Postal Service, Musk named Amtrak as a target, contrasting it with high-speed rail development in China. “If you’re coming from another country,” he said, “please don’t use our national rail. It can leave you with a very bad impression of America.” But privatization wouldn’t solve Amtrak’s problems, and every major passenger rail system in the world relies on public funding. The Chinese government, for instance, has reportedly spent more than $1.5 trillion on high-speed trains since the early 2000s.

“What China has done is not even remotely connected to privatized enterprise, but instead is the result of intense, sustained, policy-driven state involvement,” said Jim Matthews, the president of the Rail Passengers Association, an advocacy organization founded in 1967, speaking shortly after Musk’s comments. If the United States had likewise invested in Amtrak over the past two decades, Matthews argued, it would likely have “a world-class high-speed rail network reaching every corner of our country.”

“This is absolutely bizarre that we continue to subsidize highways…and we don’t want to subsidize a national rail system,” then-Senator Joe Biden said in February 2005, after President George W. Bush threatened to eliminate federal funding for Amtrak. Once he became president himself, “Amtrak Joe”—who had earned the nickname by commuting from Delaware to DC by train for decades—signed the Investment in Infrastructure and Jobs Act, which provided billions in funding for upgrades and expansions for both Amtrak and commercial freight trains. But with Donald Trump back in office, that progress has been erased.

During his first term, Trump called for slashing Amtrak’s budget by half. In May, as Musk’s Department of Government Efficiency was slashing and burning its way through the federal bureaucracy, Amtrak cut around 10 percent of its management jobs and closed hundreds of open positions. Two months after Trump’s second inauguration, Amtrak CEO Stephen Gardner, under pressure from the White House, abruptly resigned. Stepping down, he said, would help ensure that the company “continues to enjoy the full faith and confidence of this administration.” In July, Trump moved to cancel $4 billion in federal funds allocated for California’s high-speed rail project, gloating on Truth Social: “I am thrilled to announce that I have officially freed you from funding California’s disastrously overpriced ‘HIGH SPEED TRAIN TO NOWHERE.’”

The *43 Pennsylvanian* covers around 440 miles, with service to 18 stations in three states. I’ll be getting off in Pittsburgh, the last stop. Our electric locomotive will be swapped out for a diesel-powered one in Philadelphia. Shortly after the train starts moving, a conductor checks our tickets, writing the abbreviations for the respective stops on slips of paper left above our seats: TRE, HAR, LNC (Trenton, Harrisburg, Lancaster). On mine, she makes a check mark in red ink: end of the line.

A few hours later, an announcement in Altoona directs our attention to the left side of the train. We’re passing along Horseshoe Curve, a bent, 2,375-foot stretch of track carved out over the course of three years by hundreds of former miners from Ireland using pickaxes, shovels, and black powder. Upon completion in 1854, it was hailed as an engineering marvel, easing the slope through the Allegheny Mountains. It was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1966, and a small museum at the base of the curve attracts tens of thousands of visitors each year.

Unfortunately, I’m seated on the *Pennsylvanian*’s right side, where I’m treated to a view of an eastbound train run by Norfolk Southern, the company behind the East Palestine, Ohio, derailment disaster in 2023 and the owner of this section of the track. As the conductor describes the landmark to our left, my window flashes repeatedly with Norfolk Southern’s logo, a black-and-white silhouette of a horse, stamped on dozens of coal cars. Last year, the Justice Department sued the company for routinely hindering passenger service on Amtrak’s *Crescent* line from New York to New Orleans, which had an on-time performance rate of just 24 percent in 2023. Under federal law, passenger trains have the right of preference over freight, but it’s rarely enforced; the suit against Norfolk

PHOTOGRAPHS BY **JULIAN EPP**

Southern is the first such case against a railroad in more than 40 years, even though host railroads are responsible for around 65 percent of Amtrak's delays.

Although the United States has more miles of rail than any other nation, Amtrak is forced to share the lines with freight trains—and to pay the companies millions of dollars a year to do so. The freight trains' relationship with passenger trains resembles that of a horrible roommate: They're noisy, messy, and take up too much space. "There is no way we can run adequate passenger service on the existing track network designed to accommodate very heavy freight operations," said Alan S. Boyd, the then-president of Amtrak and a former president of the Illinois Central Railroad, speaking to the Wharton School of Finance's transportation club in 1980 about the future of passenger rail. That was less than a decade into Amtrak's existence. Forty-five years later, not much has changed.

I receive the first delay notice of the trip just after we round the Horseshoe Curve: An e-mail states that my next train, the Chicago-bound *40 Floridian*, will be late. The *Floridian* is a temporary route, combining the *Capitol Limited* and *Silver Star* while repairs are made to the East River tunnel in New York. No reason is given for the delay, but Amtrak's online tracker shows the *Floridian* at a standstill in Washington, more than 200 miles away. Frustrating, but not surprising.

AMTRAK WAS BORN OF A "grand bargain," a deal between the rail companies and a devil named Richard Nixon. That deal was brokered by Secretary of Transportation John Volpe, the second person to hold the office after Boyd. Before Amtrak, railroads had long neglected their legally required passenger service. Freight trains were getting longer and heavier in order to reduce operating costs and compete with the long-haul trucking industry. Many railroads stopped updating their equipment, rescheduled connections, pulled advertising, and otherwise degraded service for their remaining customers in the hopes of persuading the Interstate Commerce Commission to allow them to discontinue their passenger service and double down on freight operations. Washington worried that without intervention, both passenger and freight trains in the country would cease to exist. "Rail passenger service in the United States is declining so severely in amount and quality that it may soon disappear completely unless action is taken now," Volpe testified before Congress in 1970.

His solution was the Rail Passenger Service Act, which would create a quasi-public, for-profit National Railroad Passenger Corporation and release participating rail companies from their common-carrier obligations. In return, passenger trains would pay to continue chugging along the privately owned lines—which make up around 95 percent of Amtrak's route network today. White House officials had reservations, seeing the act as too expensive, but Volpe threatened to resign, reportedly meeting with Nixon directly to emphasize the sense of patriotism and nostalgia in the proposal. The strategy made sense: For better and for worse, the trains symbolized America, and public pressure showed that Americans weren't ready to give up on them.

Indeed, the story of the railroads is a quintessentially American one, a story of expansion, exploitation, disinvestment, and decay that starts long before Amtrak. In the beginning of the mid-19th century, the construction of railroads fueled white settlement along proposed routes in the West as rail companies and the US government violated treaties with Native Americans, defrauding them of millions of acres of land. At least 1,000 Chinese immigrants, their wages nearly half that of white workers, died building the transcontinental railroad, collapsing in the 120-degree heat or being buried beneath landslides. On the Charleston-Hamburg Railroad, the owners of the *Best Friend* used slave labor to run the line, including the fireman in charge of powering the engine. Six months after the locomotive's first trip, an explosion killed the fireman and injured several others, the first such incident recorded on an American railroad. Meanwhile, a handful of robber barons in the industry profited immensely, Cornelius Vanderbilt and Andrew Carnegie among them.

Romantic revival: The Moynihan Train Hall expansion in New York City's Penn Station tries to recapture a bygone grandeur.

Amtrak was born of a "grand bargain," a deal between the rail companies and a devil named Richard Nixon.

By 1916, the country was lined with more than a quarter-million miles of rail. But World War II left the system in disrepair, and the rise of newer forms of transportation, aided by federal financial support and modernization programs, heralded the end of the train's golden age. In the mid-1950s, President Dwight Eisenhower signed the Federal-Aid Highway Act, creating the Interstate Highway System, and commercial airplanes became the preferred form of long-distance travel in the United States. By 1968, passenger miles by train had fallen by 85 percent from their peak.

Nixon signed the Rail Passenger Service Act in October 1970. Passenger service from almost two dozen private railroads was taken over by the corporation Railpax, but

Admiring the aurora: A couple watches the sun rise over Colorado in the observation car of the *Southwest Chief*.

the copyright for a similar name had already been registered for waste disposal equipment, and Railpax quickly became Amtrak. "The purpose of this bill is to get passenger service off the backs of the railroads, run the wheels off the existing equipment, and then put an end to passenger trains in this country," said one official at the Department of Transportation at the time. Passenger rail, though thoroughly weakened, had survived, but the stipulation that Amtrak be operated and managed as a for-profit corporation left it open to further attacks from those who saw it as a waste of resources. (Congress would remove the for-profit requirement a few years later.)

THE *PENNSYLVANIAN* PULLS INTO PITTSBURGH AT 8 PM, RIGHT ON schedule. Completed at the turn of the 20th century, the city's Union Station, at 1100 Liberty Avenue, was designed by Daniel Burnham, whose initial, unused sketches would be the basis for Union Station in DC. Today, the 12-story brick and terra-cotta building touts "superior amenities," "resort inspired services," "round-the-clock concierge service," and a "fully equipped fitness center," but no train service. In 1986, the structure was closed for renovations, reopening later as a luxury apartment complex, with two-bedroom rentals listed this year for upwards of $3,500 a month. An escalator near the tracks takes us down to the real station, a small, plain annex to 1100 Liberty Avenue's east that serves just two routes, opening every day at 6 PM and closing at 7:45 AM. Here, our only amenities are four vending machines, one of which is out of order, and a bathroom.

The story of the railroads is quintessentially American—a story of expansion, exploitation, disinvestment, and decay.

With the *Floridian* running late, some in the station start seeking alternative transportation. An Uber driver cancels one passenger's ride to Cleveland after noticing that the destination is two hours away. A woman pleads with an Amtrak employee to rebook her connection to Missouri for later in the day, as we'll now be arriving in Chicago after its departure. I sit in one of the blue-and-gray metal chairs that line the Pittsburgh station (admittedly an improvement over Moynihan) and wait. The remaining passengers are finally escorted onto the *Floridian* shortly after 2 AM, its overhead cabin lights glowing. I drape my sweatshirt over my eyes and lean against the window.

Forty-five miles outside of South Bend, Indiana, I'm awakened by the *Avengers* theme song—the alarm of a cell phone belonging to another passenger who doesn't hit snooze for another eight minutes, presumably dreaming of superheroes. I'm unsure whether I've even slept. A woman in the next row confirms that I have. "You were passed out," she says (a polite way, I think, of telling me that I was snoring). We've received another delay notice during the night, stopping in Toledo, Ohio, because of "an earlier intermittent communication outage and a mechanical assessment of the train's equipment," and we arrive at Chicago's Union Station two hours behind schedule. The building is another Burnham creation, completed over a decade after his death. But unlike the one in Pittsburgh, it's still a train station—most of the time. The bright, cavernous Great Hall can be rented for private events starting at just $10,000. In 2023, a *Great Gatsby*–themed party took over the Beaux-Arts station for a night of "opulent, swanky ambiance" in an "ecstatic celebration of excess." An Amtrak traveler who had also visited the previous weekend tells me that a private wedding reception blocked the entrance to the hall that evening. "You know they've got *money*," she whispers.

Today is a more ordinary day for the station, which hosts both Amtrak and the city's commuter rail system, Metra. Tourists snap photos of the hall; couples reunite near the modest central clock; an Amish family in overalls and long-sleeved dresses bow their heads in silent prayer over sandwiches from the food court's Chick-fil-A. Most seats on the benches are taken.

Around 25 million Americans have aerophobia so severe that they're unable to fly, leaving Amtrak as their best option. It hasn't helped that the past few months have been plagued with news stories of planes falling from the sky. In April, a brief communications blackout and a shortage of air traffic controllers at Newark Airport led to hundreds of canceled flights. A few Amtrak passengers tell me that the collision between a Black Hawk helicopter and a jet at Reagan National Airport in January cemented their decision to ride the train. "I'll take my chances with Amtrak," one says.

After failing to find an outlet to charge my phone in the Great Hall, I am turned away in shame from the Metropolitan Lounge, which requires both a business-class ticket and a $35 day pass, a sleeper-car reservation, or, the attendant tells me, purchasing "points" on the official Amtrak app. As the imminent death of my phone

precludes the possibility of acquiring any, I wander over to an unmarked windowless room filled with sleeping people. Inside, a sign above a set of blocked double doors reads "American-European Express," a defunct luxury train line from the 1990s with mahogany-paneled walls and a formal dress code, its cars attached to the end of Amtrak's *Capitol Limited*. (It did not, in fact, travel to anywhere in Europe; rather, its name was meant to evoke the kind of lavish travel that was synonymous with the continent's Orient Express.)

In this quiet waiting room, away from the arrival-and-departure boards of the Great Hall, I fail to notice the last call for the *Southwest Chief*. Missing a train is significantly worse than missing a flight, especially when it's your fault: There are no refunds, and the route's once-a-day service means that the earliest booking is for 24 hours later. Before handing me tomorrow's ticket, a sympathetic Amtrak worker underlines the departure time.

I MAKE THE BEST OF MY UNPLANNED LAYOVER in the Windy City by freshening up at a friend's apartment in Rogers Park and eating a real meal. Amtrak's onboard communal showers are not quite communal, accessible only by those with a private room. As a coach passenger, I made other arrangements before the trip, ordering antibacterial wet wipes online. (The writer of a five-star testimonial on the site claimed to have bathed with them for 16 days as a bedridden hospital patient, adding: "I still use them occasionally at home.") I've brought two packs, which sit in the bottom of my camo-patterned duffel bag along with my provisions of beef jerky and smashed Nutri-Grain bars.

I arrive back at the station an hour early. The *Southwest Chief* is covered with dust from its 2,200-mile journey through canyons, cattle ranches, and red rock; a passenger has smudged "I'M FILTHY" on a lower-level window. Like many of the long-distance routes in the West, the *Chief* uses double-decker Superliners, which debuted in 1979 to replace the aging, mismatched fleet that Amtrak had received from the railroad companies. At the time, these cars—along with the earlier, single-story "Amfleet" design—were a much-needed technological upgrade. Many of them are still in service, and while Amtrak has promised new long-distance fleet deliveries "in the early 2030s," more than half of the nearly 500 Superliners are over 40 years old and nearing the end of their lifespan.

"I'm secretly jealous you got the window," says Gary, a transportation planner from New York assigned to the seat next to mine, as we pass cornfields and wind turbines. A self-proclaimed "train fanatic," Gary will wear the same outfit—a forest-green puffer jacket, jeans, and boots—for the entire journey. We break the ice by swapping travel stories and bits of train trivia. He tells me that if the train runs late enough, the staff serves complimentary beef stew. There's some excitement in his voice when he says it, as if he wants it to happen. He was on the *Chief* for a work trip, having persuaded his company to pay for a 10-leg rail pass rather than the round-trip airfare to California. It was cheaper to buy the pass in January, he says, when Amtrak briefly put it on sale for $299, than to buy an airline ticket, and when he's done with the current trip he can use the remaining segments for himself before the pass expires after 30 days. It suited him much better than a flight. "You don't appreciate it," Gary says of air travel. "You don't realize how big the country is."

Amtrak officials once imagined that live music, beauty parlors, and boutiques would win back passengers from the airlines.

For those comfortable with discomfort, the train is a vacation in itself. "On some trips, the plane may be more practical," admits an Amtrak advertisement from 1983. "But, on most trips, there are plenty of good reasons to consider the train." Shortly after Amtrak's creation, officials imagined that certain onboard conveniences—live music, beauty parlors, boutiques, and rentable private offices—could help win back passengers from the airlines. "The businessman will be able to have a drink, eat and watch a jazz combo," an early member of Amtrak's board told *The New York Times*. A 1972 brochure for the *Silver Meteor*, which runs between New York and Miami, offered "complimentary champagne punch and almonds" for those in the recreation car, followed by a game of bingo, an hour of color TV, and a fashion show.

Journey's end: A passenger disembarks from the *Southwest Chief* in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

Amtrak passengers today are largely responsible for their own entertainment. One group on the *Chief* huddles around a Pixar movie playing on an iPad. Others crochet, play card games, or do crossword puzzles. Those who aren't taking the train for the view scroll TikTok. But in the observation lounge, where Gary spends most of his time, everyone talks—about where they've been, where they're headed, and where they're going next. Most are pass holders, which makes me an anomaly of sorts; worse still is my plan to fly back rather than take another train. The *Sunset Limited* is beautiful this time of year, I am told, and so is the *California Zephyr*. If they're anything like this line, I don't doubt it, but even the *Chief*, they say, doesn't compare to those. One passenger tells us to look out the window: There's a dead horse lying near a fence, its flesh rotting off exposed bone. "Did you see it?"

AMTRAK'S MOST FREQUENT—AND MOST OVERLOOKED—TRAVELERS are the onboard service workers, who often ride the train for its entire journey. Customers trapped in close quarters for long stretches of time can be particularly demanding. In the *Chief*'s café car, a man berates an employee for being unwilling to pour coffee into a metal cup he's brought with him. The Amtrak-provided paper cups, the man says, release toxins when exposed to heat. When the employee explains that it is against policy to use any other cup, the passenger curses and shouts at her

(Epp, continued on page 49)

These cartoon pages won't add to the mountains of well-informed, or inane, or vituperative commentary about the depravity of October 7 and the appalling loss of tens of thousands of innocent lives in Gaza that followed. However, on a recent visit to Israel, where I lived during the aughts (working on an ill-fated animated feature whose funding was lost, rumor had it, between the lines of Bernie Madoff's fake account statements), I rediscovered something I'd learned previously about this place: There are people of goodwill on either side of the horror who continue to stand, in the face of overwhelming odds, for brotherhood.

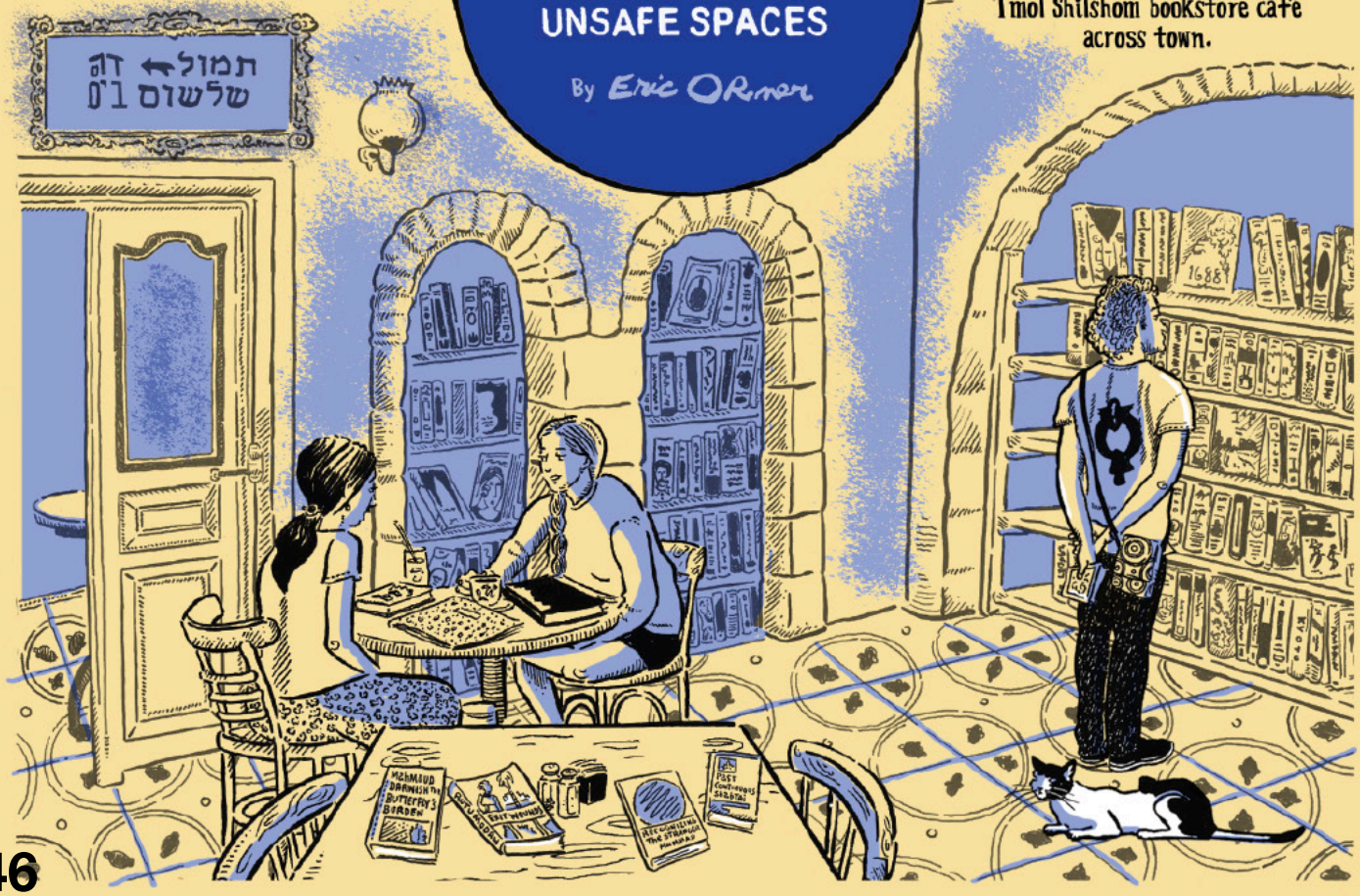
And nowhere more so than at my favorite bookshops in neighborhoods across the consecrated tinderbox that is Jerusalem, or within the traumatized bubble up the highway in Tel Aviv, or in Hebron, Acre, Ramallah, Netanya, Haifa, and so many other points in between.

The book swap at the Rakevet, Jerusalem's old train tracks, draws readers from communities across many divides.

מרחבים לא בטוחים
فضاءات غير آمنة
UNSAFE SPACES

By Eric Orner

As does the Tmol Shilshom bookstore café across town.




Ahmad Muna,
whose family owns the Educational Bookshop
on Salah Eddin Street in East Jerusalem,
corrected me recently when I expressed
surprise at finding the shop open.
We weren't closed—
we were *raided*. By the police.
Everything in our shop was
ruined. I was jailed for
two days.
PALESTINE
Jerusalem
MIDDLE EAST
Kawa
IRAN
JORDA
EGYPT
QATAR
MATCH
Monde
Frieze
THE ARAB OF THE FUTURE
SATTOUF
SATTOUF
SATTOUF
A VERY SHORT HISTORY OF THE ISRAEL-PALESTINE CONFLICT
ILAN PAPPÉ
ILAN PAPPÉ
The bust, ordered by
Israel's Ministry of Interior,
made global headlines when
it occurred in February 2025.

At Reading, a nicely curated shop in Tel Aviv, author Gal Lieber was preparing recently for an event with writer Omer Barak. Like the other locations depicted here, this shop offers stories, not ideologies; universality, not schism. At least that's what strikes me when I cross its threshold.

I thought the same thing farther down Allenby Street at Halper's, where you're more likely to find stuff from your grandparents' bookshelves—Herman Wouk, Erica Jong, or John le Carré—than messianic or jihadist ravings. The discerning browsers included several stray cats. If they were troubled by humanity's cataclysmic geopolitics, they were keeping it to themselves.

(Epp, continued from page 45)
until he's asked to leave the café car and, eventually, the train. But most interactions are more mundane. "Gotta wear shoes, folks. You have to wear shoes at all times walking about the train," says the conductor, a straightforward statement that is nonetheless ignored by some. As is this one: "I am asking you, please make sure you flush your toilet."

As we approach the station in La Plata, Missouri, Gary points to a camera mounted on a wall under the building's red-tiled roof. Hundreds of people are awaiting the *Southwest Chief*'s arrival, but not in person: A YouTuber named Virtual Railfan is broadcasting a video of the tracks. Later that night, hours after our train departs, more than 200 people are still watching the empty station on Virtual Railfan's YouTube channel, hoping to glimpse a freight train operated by BNSF Railway.

Despite what Amtrak's critics say, plenty of people still care about passenger rail—and not just the self-proclaimed railfans. This is never more apparent than when service is at risk. In 2018, Amtrak proposed replacing the *Southwest Chief* over part of its route, citing maintenance costs on a section of rail owned by BNSF. Rather than riding from Dodge City, Kansas, to Albuquerque, New Mexico, passengers would be kicked off the train and loaded onto a bus for an 11-hour trip. Rail advocates estimated that the change—a potential trial run for gutting the rest of the line and other long-distance routes—would reduce ridership on the *Chief* by 50 percent.

Legislators and their constituents who rely on the affected segment were livid. "This is the connection for a small, rural, agricultural community to the rest of the world, quite honestly," a city official in Lamar (population 7,687) told Colorado Public Radio. A meeting about the proposed cuts between a group of senators and Amtrak's then-president, a former airline executive appointed shortly after Trump's first election, reportedly turned into a shouting match. Congress and Amtrak eventually released the funds, and seven years later, we're riding the *Chief* instead of a bus.

On Gary's recommendation, I've been ordering the Hebrew National beef hot dogs from the café—one of the better offerings compared to the prepackaged sandwiches and cup noodles. But for our last night, we're celebrating with a trip to the dining car. The three-course meal is included for sleeping-car passengers, but it costs extra for us. The booths on each side of the car are identical, with tables draped with a white cloth and set with roses. Gary and I toast to a successful trip, clinking our rum and Cokes and enjoying the New Mexico landscape. But the best sights, as always, are just out of reach: The sun is setting on the other side.

Four days later and 3,000 miles from Moynihan, we arrive in an uncharacteristically cloudy Los Angeles. Gary's journey isn't over: He'll continue traveling south (on what mode of transportation—bus or train—he's not yet sure). As we disembark, I suggest that we might run into each other in New York. He laughs. More likely, it seems, we'd meet again on the rails.

On my flight back from California, the pilot announces that John F. Kennedy International Airport isn't permitting us to land. The storms over the East Coast are too severe; no flights are allowed in. The plane circles over Pennsylvania for more than 90 minutes before we're finally rerouted upstate. Everyone on the plane seems to be rethinking their travel plans, including me. I, at least, have the window seat again and try to enjoy the view. As we land at Syracuse's airport, more than 250 miles from our destination, I see a set of railroad tracks trailing off into the distance. I should have taken the train. N

(Mhawish, continued from page 33)
The thing about being Palestinian is that statelessness follows us, whether we live in Palestine or not. In Gaza, people long for freedom. In exile, we long for the same thing. For more than seven decades, occupation has entrenched our dispossession. Refugee camps have become generational homes. Lives are built around waiting for return, for recognition, and for justice.

Much as I sit to educate my son about home, my friend Noor tells her daughter a bedtime story in Gaza, a story about a tree that grew despite the stones thrown at it. Her grandmother told it to her during another war in the 1980s. That grandmother had been displaced in 1948.

Noor's world is shattered now, just like her grandmother's and mine. Like me, she and her daughter are at home and homeless all at once.

We've become the keepers of our own history. But even this task is fraught, constantly undermined by dominant narratives that frame our struggle as a relic of the past rather than a fight for survival.

In the face of erasure, grassroots solidarity has become a beacon. Across the diaspora, Palestinians are building informal systems of support that governments and institutions refuse to provide.

In Berlin, Amani, a refugee, runs a legal aid group for newcomers navigating the maze of asylum processes. "No one helped me when I arrived," she said. "I won't let that happen to anyone else." She translates documents, attends court hearings, organizes rights workshops.

In Turkey, a group of exiled journalists has launched a digital platform to amplify stories from Gaza, publishing testimonies, photos, and videos smuggled from inside.

"We can't be there," said Samir, one of the founders, "but we can make sure the world sees what's happening."

These efforts, however different, share one purpose: preserving the spirit of Palestine in exile. Through cultural festivals in Paris, political protests in London, and storytelling nights in Amman, Palestinians are holding on to who we are.

Exile may scatter us, but it cannot sever our connection. From Gaza to Berlin, Brooklyn to Beirut, and Istanbul to Amman, these stories draw a collective portrait of resilience in the quiet, powerful act of enduring.

LATE AT NIGHT, I WATCH GAZA THROUGH THE SCREEN OF MY phone. The footage, which is shaky at times, was filmed by a friend who's still there; it shows children managing to play on a rubble-strewn street, their laughter rising above the hovering drones.

Outside my window, the world is orderly and silent. It couldn't be more different.

I pause the video, close my eyes, and let the echoes of home wash over me. For a moment, I am back there—walking streets that no longer exist, in a world that survives only in memory. But when I open my eyes, I'm still here. Sitting in a space that still doesn't feel like mine.

I ask myself a question I've asked a thousand times before: How can we keep Gaza alive in our hearts while building a future elsewhere?

The answer never changes: We don't have a choice—we need to do both. Despite the distance and the silence of the world, Palestinians carry Gaza's story as a duty. Our existence is persistence, and our voices are a bridge connecting past to present, Gaza to the world, and despair to hope. N

THE EDUCATION OF A HISTORIAN

Freedom is neither a fixed idea nor the story of progress toward a predetermined goal.

ERIC FONER

My education as a historian began at home. My father, Jack D. Foner, was a historian, as was his twin brother, my uncle Philip. W.E.B. Du Bois and Paul Robeson were family acquaintances, and history was a frequent point of discussion around our dinner table in the suburbs of New York City.

But the history that my brother Tom and I absorbed was quite different from what we were taught at school. There, slavery and modern-day racism were rarely, if ever, mentioned. My parents, however, instilled in us the conviction that the Jim Crow system was a scandalous injustice and that radical dissenters such as Frederick Douglass—whose powerful speeches and writings my uncle collected and published in five influential volumes—were among the most heroic Americans. The only time I recall hearing my father use a common four-letter epithet was in 1955, when a radio news broadcast announced that an all-white Mississippi jury had acquitted the killers of the Black teenager Emmett Till.

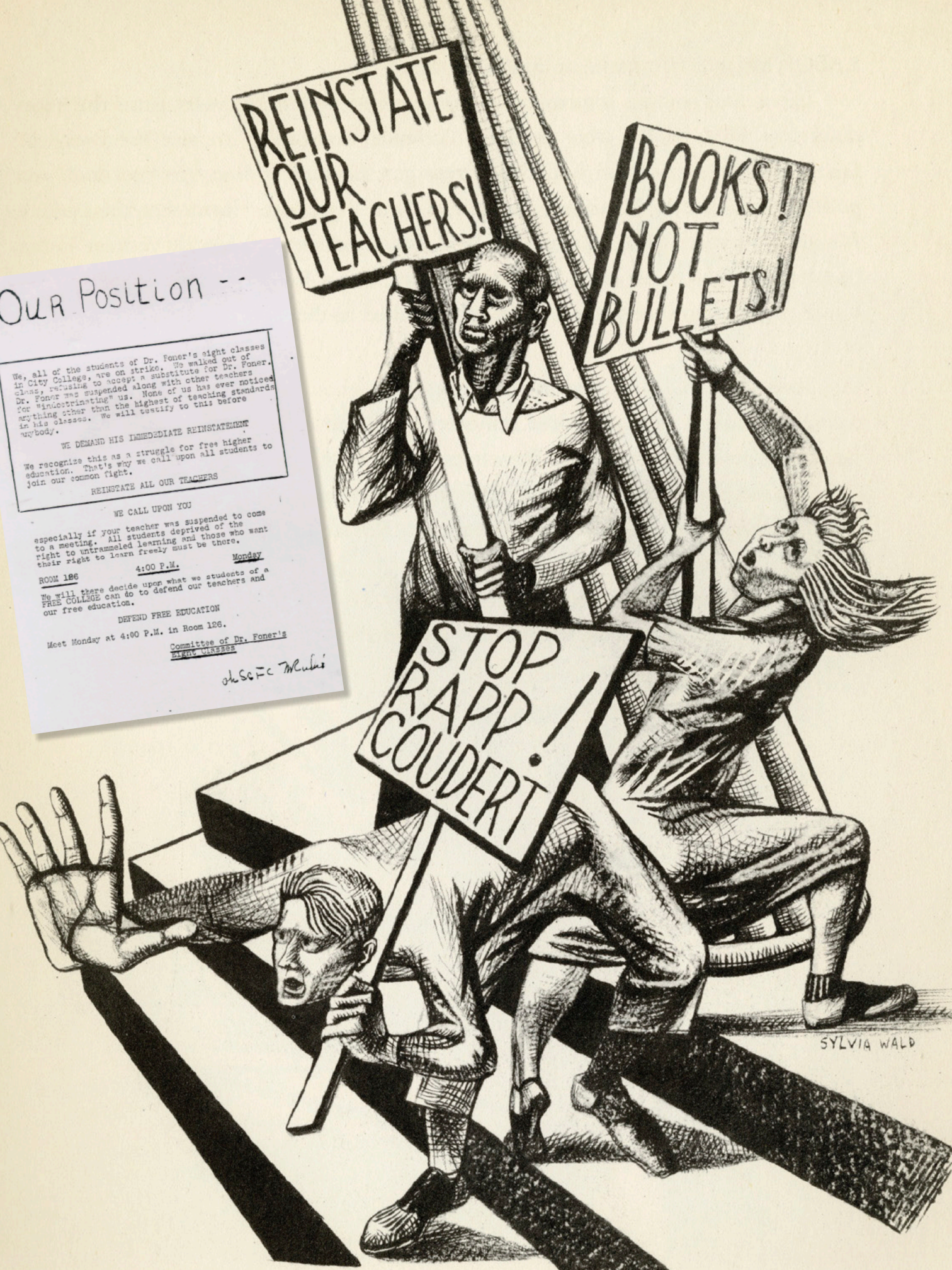
Long before the depredations of Senator Joseph R. McCarthy, the Rapp-Coudert Committee of the New York State Legislature in Albany launched an effort to purge the City University of New York of "subversive" elements. My father and uncle Philip lost their teaching jobs. Later, my mother, Liza, was dismissed from her job as a high school art teacher.

My uncles Henry and Moe, who were also blacklisted, went on to become key leaders of New York City's labor movement. Their experience taught me another important historical lesson: the fragility of civil liberties. Freedom of speech and the right to dissent were not ingrained in the American system from the outset. They grew in importance over time thanks in considerable measure to the actions of those outside the political mainstream—among them antislavery speakers who confronted proslavery mobs, members of the Industrial Workers of the World who demanded the right to deliver public speeches without prior approval from local authorities, and women's rights advocates who violated the law by disseminating information about birth control. It was through efforts like these that the words of the Bill of Rights were transformed from what James Madison called ineffective "parchment barriers" to become living principles in a reinvigorated American democracy.

I also learned—in part from my father, who established one of the first African American studies programs—that Black history is American history. This insight, a central theme of the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture, does not mean that other histories are of no importance, but rather that the Black experience has been central to the historic evolution of our politics and society and to our evolving understanding of freedom for all Americans. By inspiring other social movements that transformed our ideas about the meaning of freedom, African American struggles for justice played a major role in the emergence of the modern idea of universal human rights.

The work of all historians is shaped by the social, intellectual, and political environment in which they live. We see how the reputations of historical figures change over time as new standards of judgment emerge. Woodrow Wilson, for example, was once lionized for attempting to lay the foundation for a post–World War I international order based on the self-determination of peoples. But in retrospect, he has become the target of harsh criticism for presiding over the wartime suppression of civil liberties (one of the low points in the history of freedom in the United States) as well as his unwillingness to include African Americans and the colonial subjects of European empires in his pledge to make the world "safe for democracy." Our current political

FLYER: CONY ARCHIVES & SPECIAL COLLECTIONS; ILLUSTRATION: SYLVIA WALD



Our Position --

We, all of the students of Dr. Foner's eight classes in City College, are on strike. We walked out of class, refusing to accept a substitute for Dr. Foner. Dr. Foner was suspended along with other teachers for "indoctrinating" us. None of us has ever noticed anything other than the highest of teaching standards in his classes. We will testify to this before anybody.

WE DEMAND HIS IMMEDEDIATE REINSTATEMENT

We recognize this as a struggle for free higher education. That's why we call upon all students to join our common fight.

REINSTATE ALL OUR TEACHERS

WE CALL UPON YOU

especially if your teacher was suspended to come to a meeting. All students deprived of the right to untrammeled learning and those who want their right to learn freely must be there.

ROOM 126 4:00 P.M. Monday

We will there decide upon what we students of a FREE COLLEGE can do to defend our teachers and our free education.

DEFEND FREE EDUCATION

Meet Monday at 4:00 P.M. in Room 126.

Committee of Dr. Foner's Eight Classes

oh SoFc McCulloch

The fabulous Foner brothers: From left, Philip, Henry, Moe, and Jack Foner, the writer's father, whose students at the City College of New York produced the leaflet on the previous page protesting his firing in 1941 for refusing to testify before the Rapp-Coudert Committee.

alignments have directed new attention to the once obscure George Wallace—the father, so to speak, of Nixon's Southern strategy and the racial politics of the modern Republican Party.

Although historians are often warned to avoid presentism—that is, reading present-day values and concerns back into the past—many of us draw on a knowledge of history to illuminate our own times. My own work emphasizes the continuing relevance of the Reconstruction period to the world in which we live. In the past two generations, no era of American history has undergone a more complete revision of historical interpretation. I contributed to this transformation through my books, as well as by lecturing on Reconstruction to numerous nonacademic audiences, cocurating a major museum exhibition on the subject, serving as an adviser to a prizewinning public television documentary series, and initiating the process that led to the establishment of a national historical park in Beaufort, South Carolina, devoted to Reconstruction.

The study of Reconstruction has left a deep imprint on my scholarship more generally. Research on those years led me to appreciate that freedom has never been a single, fixed idea. As my work on Reconstruction made clear, in the aftermath of the Civil War, former slave owners, formerly enslaved African Americans, and millions of Northerners held radically different ideas about what freedom meant and how it might be achieved. The titles of many of my books include the words *freedom*, *free*, and *liberty*.

Long before Joseph McCarthy, New York's Rapp-Coudert Committee launched a purge of "subversives" at City College.

Of course, freedom has been an American preoccupation ever since the Revolution gave birth to a nation that identified itself as a unique embodiment of freedom in a world overrun by oppression. The Declaration of Independence includes liberty among mankind's unalienable rights; the Constitution announces at the outset the aim of securing the "blessings of liberty." As the educator and statesman Ralph Bunche wrote in 1940, "every man in the street, white, red, black, or yellow, knows that this is 'The land of the free…[and] the cradle of liberty.'"

Yet freedom is neither a fixed idea nor a story of progress toward a predetermined goal. The history of American freedom is a tale of debates and struggles. Often, battles for control of the idea illustrate the contrast between the "negative" and "positive" meanings of freedom, a dichotomy elaborated by Isaiah Berlin in an influential essay in 1958. Negative liberty defines freedom as the absence of outside restraints on individual action. Positive liberty is a form of empowerment—the ability to establish and achieve one's goals. While the first sees government as a threat to individual freedom, the second often requires governmental action to remove barriers to its enjoyment.

Freedom played an unexpectedly large role in the 2024 presidential election. The Democratic National Convention opened with a Kamala Harris campaign ad backed by Beyoncé's "Freedom." Nearly a century earlier, in the wake of the Great Depression, Franklin D. Roosevelt had linked freedom to economic security for ordinary Americans. This definition of freedom, a product of the New Deal, assumed an active role for the federal government. But since the 1980s, when Ronald Reagan effectively redefined freedom as limited government, low taxes, and unregulated economic enterprise, Democrats had largely ceded the word to their opponents. Now they wanted it back. Harris crisscrossed the country talking about freedom. The most frequently articulated demand of Democrats, a response to the Supreme Court decision of 2022 overturning the constitutional right to terminate a pregnancy, was for "reproductive freedom"—the ability to make intimate decisions free of government interference.

Yet the 2024 campaign was not the first time a presidential election became, in part, a contest to define the meaning of freedom. In 1964, the journalist Theodore White observed that *freedom* was the "dominant word" of both civil rights activists and supporters of the conservative Republican candidate for president, Barry Goldwater, although they meant entirely different things by it. The United States, White concluded, sorely needed "a commonly agreed-on concept of freedom."

No recent president employed the word more

COURTESY OF ERIC FONER

often—and more egregiously—than George W. Bush, who made it an all-purpose justification for the 2003 invasion of Iraq and the conflict that followed, dubbed by the president "Operation Iraqi Freedom." In his first inaugural address, Bush used the words *freedom*, *free*, or *liberty* seven times. In his second inaugural, a 22-minute speech delivered after the US invasion, those words appeared no fewer than 49 times. Bush's invocation of the ideal of freedom to justify an unprovoked war seemed to make his immediate successors wary of using the word at all. Barack Obama did not speak as much about freedom as he did about community, equality, and personal responsibility. Nor has freedom been a major theme of Donald Trump, who prefers to speak of raw military and economic power (although on the Internet you can buy T-shirts displaying the slogan "Trump Fighting for Freedom").

The only duty we owe to history, Oscar Wilde once remarked, is to rewrite it. New questions, new information, and the changing status of various groups of Americans will inevitably produce new historical insights. So will the changing composition of the historical profession. During my college and graduate student years, I was never once taught by a female or non-white historian—something all but impossible today. I look back with pride on the fact that the 75 or so historians whose dissertations I supervised during my own teaching career included numerous members of previously underrepresented groups, notably women and non-white men. Inevitably, changes in the historical profession have altered the ways we think about the American past.

Historical interpretation both reflects and helps to shape the politics of the moment in which the historian is writing. For decades, the Dunning School, named for Columbia University professor William A. Dunning and his students, dominated historical writing on Reconstruction. In their account, the post–Civil War era was a time of misgovernment caused by the supposedly misguided decision to grant political rights to Black men. The incapacity of Black people was a foundational assumption of historical scholarship at a time when the study of the past was becoming professionalized. The South's Jim Crow order required a historical foundation to support its claim to legitimacy—and for much of the 20th century, historians played a major role in providing it.

Today, the writing and teaching of history has been drawn into the vortex of the culture wars. Why is history so controversial? The French historian Ernest Renan had an answer. Historical analysis, he famously wrote in the late 19th century, has always been linked to broader ideas about the nation-state. National consciousness, or at least the sense of unity and patriotic pride that accompanies nation-building, he argued, rests in part on historical mythology. Indeed, Renan wrote, because "historical error" plays a significant role in the creation of a national consciousness, advances in the field of history—including the replacement of myth by accurate accounts of the past—are often seen as "a threat to the nation."

Over a century ago, the historian Carl Becker wrote that history is what the present chooses to remember about the past. We see this in recently enacted state laws barring the teaching of controversial or disturbing ideas and mandating a celebration of American history that gives short shrift to the less-than-praiseworthy realities of our past. These laws reflect our current cultural and political polarization, with each side embracing its own concept of what the United States has been, is, and should be.

> **"The one duty we owe to history is to rewrite it."**
>
> —Oscar Wilde

Un-American activities: Left, a cartoon by William Steig, the creator of Shrek, condemning the efforts of the New York Legislature to root out "subversive" professors at the state's public universities. Below, a May Day protest against the witch hunt at City College.

The 250th anniversary of American independence is fast approaching. But rather than playing a unifying role, the study of history reinforces our society's divisions. So does the clash between two definitions of freedom—one exclusionary and linked to ethno-cultural identity, the other inclusive and egalitarian—both rooted in the American experience.

Heated controversy over what history books students and interested adults

(Foner, continued on page 59)

NEW YORK'S BAD ASS AG

The state's attorney general, Letitia James, has emerged as a North Star in the chaos of the second Trump administration.

JOAN WALSH

ILLUSTRATION BY **VICTOR JUHASZ**

On a rainy spring night, about 30 miles north of Manhattan, New York Attorney General Letitia James marched onto the stage at Westchester Community College. Standing nearly six feet tall and dressed in a drapey black suit (not unlike a judicial robe), she smiled broadly. Four of her comrades in legal arms—Minnesota Attorney General Keith Ellison, California's Rob Bonta, Illinois's Kwame Raoul, and New Jersey's Matt Platkin—followed closely behind, as a multiracial crowd of hundreds rose and cheered raucously.

Since January, these AGs have challenged the Trump administration 30 times (and counting). But James has stood out, not only from the other AGs but also among top Democrats in the Empire State. This crowd was here for her.

New York City is home to the most powerful Democrats in Congress: Senate minority leader Chuck Schumer and House minority leader Hakeem Jeffries. But the most effective and popular Democrat representing New York is the Brooklyn woman known as Tish—a former Legal Aid attorney, legislative aide, City Council member, and New York City public advocate—who was elected attorney general in 2018. She's a savvy politician, endorsing Zohran Mamdani right after he won the June Democratic mayoral primary, when other party leaders kept their distance.

But James's biggest claim to fame is as a fierce fighter against Trumpism.

No attorney general in the country is battling President Donald Trump more proficiently—and drawing more of his fire—than James. When Trump was out of office, she brought the successful civil case charging him and his company with business fraud for alternately inflating and deflating the value of his assets in order to reduce property taxes and obtain favorable rates from banks and insurance companies. The case resulted in a $454 million fine, which Trump is appealing.

Since Trump's reelection, James has emerged as a North Star in the chaos, inspiring progressives in New York and nationally. "Tish James and the other state AGs on the front lines of this fight are not only defending a Constitution and federal laws against a Supreme Leader and lawless autocrats," says Representative Jamie Raskin (D-MD). "They are also showing the country what real attorneys general do by acting for the people and the rule of law instead of a right-wing political putsch."

James and her partner AGs have hit the president with a barrage of lawsuits that have temporarily halted some of his worst orders in the past seven months. Their cases blocked efforts to freeze federal funding; stopped the termination of federal workers fired illegally; blocked Elon Musk's DOGE from access to sensitive US Treasury material; halted Robert F. Kennedy Jr.'s efforts to decimate Health and Human Services staffing; and temporarily restored $11 billion in health grants to states and cities. In early June, a court blocked the Trump administration's move to shutter the AmeriCorps program after New York and 24 other states joined a lawsuit to protect the popular federal community-service initiative.

But while James is proud of the work of the AGs, she is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honest about the fact that it isn't nearly enough given Trump's all-out assault on democracy. Congressional Republicans, James says, "have just handed over their authority to the executive. They, too, are afraid of MAGA. And they've just conceded their constitutional authority.… And so our job [as attorneys general] is obviously trying to make change with these lawsuits, but also to organize and to have events like we had in Westchester."

"People are discouraged and unsure how to fight back. But Tish breaks through the noise, and that's important."

—Eileen O'Connor, NYCD16/15-Indivisible

Whether their legal actions will help to permanently blunt the worst of Trump's agenda remains to be seen, given that major cases remain pending in the Supreme Court. But they are certainly getting people's attention. Eileen O'Connor, a nurse practitioner and leader of the NYCD16/15-Indivisible group, attended the town hall and thanked James for her work protecting the Trump-threatened funding for Medicaid, Medicare, public safety, and public education. "In terms of the pro-democracy movement, it's important that she's continuing to stand up to Trump. People are really heartened by that: 'Oh, yeah, Tish, she's doing it!'" Too many people are discouraged and unsure how to fight back during this second Trump regime, O'Connor says. "But Tish breaks through a lot of the noise, and that's important."

"Ms. Tish" is thanked by several attendees at the Westchester town hall, including 9-year-old Kory Skipper-Miller.

That ability to break through the noise has earned James praise—and a hefty boost—among much of her state's otherwise disgruntled Democratic base. "It's my great pleasure to introduce… our badass attorney general, Tish James!" Westchester County Executive Ken Jenkins said to the excited town hall crowd.

The evening was billed as a "hearing" to gather information on Trump's assault on the entire public sector, but James likened it to a "road show" that she and her AG colleagues were taking around the country. They're not just gathering evidence; they're also trying to buoy the resistance to the second coming of Trump.

"This isn't a community meeting, this is a damn rally," Tom Hart, the president of Local 94 Operating Engineers in New York City, told the crowd as he praised James and others for at least temporarily restoring healthcare for disabled 9/11 survivors and first responders. Nine-year-old Kory Skipper-Miller wowed the crowd by explaining to "Ms. Tish" and the others the importance of maintaining the social and veterans' benefits that his mother, grandmother, and brother rely on. In addition to Kory, others talked about their worries over veterans' services that have already been declining and are slated for more cuts, while other speakers lamented the coming educational cuts.

While it may seem as though James and her fellow AGs emerged as legal freedom fighters overnight, in reality their efforts were months in the making. As James told me, the AGs—often working collectively under the umbrella of the Democratic Attorneys General Association—began meeting to discuss fighting a second Trump administration before the 2024 election.

"It was not the outcome that we expected, but it was something that we had to prepare for nonetheless," James told me three weeks after the Westchester town hall. We had met for coffee at a café in Brooklyn's Fort Greene neighborhood, where waitstaff and constituents warmly interrupted us. "And so we analyzed Project 2025 based on subject matter," she continued. "We looked at jurisdiction, we looked at standing, we looked at past practices, we looked at who had been active in certain areas, and we decided to assign our staffs different responsibilities based on possible cases. And we started preparing complaints and briefs." California Attorney General Rob Bonta, who sued Trump more than 120 times in his first term, told *The Hill* that the group even wrote briefs in advance of Trump's orders, so officials "just need to cross the Ts, dot the Is, and press print and file it."

They gathered mainly on Zoom, with as many as 23 Democratic AG offices participating in the calls, Ellison told me. New York and California "are significantly bigger than the rest of us," he noted, and that made collaboration essential. "They have more resources at their command and are in a position to do things that nobody else is really able to do. [James has] chosen to be maximally generous and work with all the rest of us who are much smaller, sharing resources, sharing herself."

James laughed at that. "When I was elected," she said, "I discovered after attending a National Association of Attorneys General meeting that the previous attorneys general of New York, who I will not mention, had not cooperated."

"It was shocking when I walked into a conference and someone yelled, 'New York is here!'" James continued. "I'm like, 'So?' But New York had never been there, and that's sad. My approach is to share the vast resources of the New York State Office of the Attorney General with smaller states, particularly at a time when we're all under attack and when it's going to take all of us to stand up."

The New York attorney general's office employs 1,700 people, 700 of them lawyers; California's has 5,400 workers, including 1,100 attorneys. By contrast, Ellison employs 440 staffers, 193 of whom are attorneys or attorney managers, and Rhode Island's office—run by Peter Neronha, one of the Democratic AGs in this alliance of 23—employs 257 people and 103 attorneys.

"So Tish could devote three or four staffers on an issue, whereas I might be able to spare one or two and some states, none," Ellison said. Their efforts have been a lifeline to other state leaders. "Many of us in state governments, not

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just New York, literally get up every morning saying, 'Our only hope is the court system,'" said New York state Senator Liz Krueger, a longtime ally of James. "We need an attorney general to stand up and say, 'This isn't legal—we're going to go to court.' And that's exactly what Tish James is attempting to do on many critical issues."

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IN THEIR QUEST TO HOLD TRUMP accountable, James and her fellow Democratic AGs have become arguably even more important today than they were during Trump's first term, when they boasted an 83 percent win rate in cases challenging the administration's agenda. Since January, they have become the main actors holding the line against the administration's unprecedented lawlessness.

The Democratic AGs don't always win. But they often delay and complicate Trump's agenda, and they are establishing a legal record for eventually upending it. Just as important, they are taking the fight to Trump and the administration with a boldness that is often missing on Capitol Hill.

For instance, James and her partner AGs were ready for Trump's executive order ending birthright citizenship the day he announced it. "Of 23 Democratic AGs, two are birthright babies," James said with a chuckle. (They are Illinois's Kwame Raoul and William Tong of Connecticut.) Several federal judges immediately blocked Trump's order, but the Supreme Court ruled in June that district courts have far less power to impose national injunctions, though the court didn't rule on the constitutionality of birthright citizenship itself. As of publication time, a third court has blocked the birthright citizenship order from going into effect.

Likewise, when anti-deportation protests escalated in Los Angeles, and Trump sent in the National Guard against the wishes of the state's governor, California AG Rob Bonta sued him and Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth in federal court. James quickly filed an amicus brief, but a federal district court panel ruled against Bonta, allowing the administration to continue controlling the National Guard troops.

Even when there are setbacks, James says she isn't discouraged, citing the AGs' consistent victories in the lower courts. "The courts have held up," James told me. "They've been one institution that has held up against fascism, against this consolidation of executive power, this reorganization of government. They've held up despite the threats and the harassment to the courts—to the point where judges have to get private security."

JUDGES AREN'T THE ONLY ONES FACING THREATS. SINCE CHALLENGING Trump, James has received death threats and has had to strengthen her security detail, telling *Pod Save America* in 2023 that she fears a "lone wolf." But she does her job anyway. In April 2024, 26-year-old Tyler Vogel of upstate New York pleaded guilty to charges that he sent text messages threatening James with "death and physical harm" if she did not "cease action" against Trump in the courts. "Listen, my security folks, they worry about me all the time, but I still walk the streets of Brooklyn," she told me.

Trump himself regularly vilifies James, calling her a "low IQ individual." The president has a habit of demeaning women of color with that slur, from James to Vice President Kamala Harris to Representatives Maxine Waters, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, and Jasmine Crockett, a rising Democratic star. In May, Trump moved from insults to threats, unleashing his Justice Department on James over issues related to her cosigning of mortgage documents to help a niece buy a home in Virginia in 2023, four years after she became New York attorney general. One of many documents stated, incorrectly, that James would use the home as a primary residence.

"New York is here": James has made it a point to share her office's vast resources with her AG colleagues in smaller states.

"They're accusing me of engaging in all types of badassery around these mortgage docs," James said. "They found a power of attorney that was prepared by someone else that I signed, which basically said that I was a resident of Virginia. But prior to that, I had indicated that I was not going to be a resident of Virginia. I put it in all-caps in the mortgage documents! But nonetheless, they're making this out to be something it is not."

James's attorney, Abbe Lowell, told the Justice Department that the administration had "cherry-picked an August 17, 2023 power of attorney that mistakenly stated the property to be Ms. James' principal residence…. The broker understood this, and that Ms. James was not a Virginia resident."

Even when there are setbacks, James says that she isn't discouraged: "The courts have held up despite the threats."

The Justice Department is also investigating charges that James understated the number of units in her Brooklyn home, again for mortgage advantages.

Trump revoked James's security clearance and also denied her other "federal privileges"—but she says she doesn't even know what that means: "I go into federal buildings all the time."

Trump insists that James is "a total crook" and promises that his Justice Department will pursue the charges against her to the fullest. James doesn't want to minimize the threats. "I'm more afraid for my family members in Virginia," she told me. "Individuals have driven by the house in these big eight-wheel trucks with Trump flags. On some of these right-wing websites, they post their addresses and their pictures. And these are women and children, and absolutely private citizens."

Liz Krueger laughs at the charges against James, but not at the potential danger to her. "Do I actually think the attorney general of the state of New York signed documents saying 'my primary residency is going to be in another state?'" she said. "No, I do not. I do not. But he really is going after her."

"Republicans are just outperforming us every time. We have to stop believing or following the rules. Break the rules." —Letitia James

James endorsed Mamdani even as other party leaders kept their distance, praising the movement that propelled his campaign.

Another sideshow James has had to deal with this year was the reemergence of disgraced former governor Andrew Cuomo, who was the front-runner to be New York City's mayor until his lifeless, cynical campaign was upended by the landslide primary win of the democratic socialist state Assembly member Zohran Mamdani. Cuomo has since announced plans to run as an independent in the November general election.

James and Cuomo had once been allies. When he was governor, Cuomo appointed James—who had run alongside him as the attorney general candidate in 2018, to the disappointment of her admirers and the progressive Working Families Party, which had been her political home—to investigate the sexual harassment accusations against him by current and former staffers. For a while, it seemed that Cuomo was hiding behind James. "Let the attorney general do her job," he told reporters at a March 2021 press conference. "She's very good, she's very competent, and that will be due process and then we'll have the facts."

Many of James's supporters worried about her independence from the governor. "I was very concerned," said Lindsey Boylan, a former employee of the governor's office who made an early claim of harassment. "I was concerned because of the power he still seems to exert over other powerful people. Obviously, my fears were unfounded."

Ultimately, James released a 165-page investigative report in August 2021 finding that Cuomo had sexually harassed 11 women. (In the years since, the number of accusers has risen to 13.) Cuomo was livid, filing an ethics complaint against James that has so far gone nowhere, and running up close to $20 million in taxpayer-funded legal fees going after his accusers. He has since characterized James as practicing "a brand of ugly politics I had never seen before" and says that she was driven by political ambition.

James dropped her own bid for governor in late 2021. "There was no way that I could manage the office, stay on top of investigations and litigation, and at the same time run for governor," she told a reporter at the time. "I decided to withdraw and also recognize that my heart really wasn't in it."

These days, it's clear where her heart is—and her energy.

In the weeks since I began writing about James and her fellow AGs' crusade, the Trump administration's abuses of power have only escalated. In July, Trump managed to secure

ADAM GRAY / GETTY IMAGES

congressional support, along strict party lines, for his "One Big Beautiful Bill," which features the largest cuts to social-safety-net programs in history, as well as a budget-busting tax cut for the wealthy. These cuts—some of which will be enacted immediately, and others that won't be enacted for years—are being imposed by Congress, not through presidential executive orders, and it is unclear whether there is anything that James and her team of AGs can do to stop them, let alone the mass deportations that the legislation supercharges.

"American democracy will not be saved in a court of law," Keith Ellison told the Westchester crowd. "It will be in a court of American opinion. We need you to keep coming to meetings like this. Go to those [upcoming] rallies."

Ellison knows that mass protest, and massive anti-Trump voting, will ultimately do more to dislodge the autocrat from power than attorneys general can. On the day we learned about the shootings of two Minnesota lawmakers and their spouses—Ellison was also on the alleged assassin's hit list—an estimated 5 million Americans turned out for the No Kings rallies nonetheless.

James shares the view that protests are going to be a crucial part of pushing back against Trump. I asked her if she thinks the nation's top two Democratic leaders, Schumer and Jeffries, are doing enough to meet the moment. James chose her words carefully: "I love them both," she said. "They're close friends of mine, but they're not into performative politics. They're very cerebral. And they're very deliberate. They always have been, they always will be."

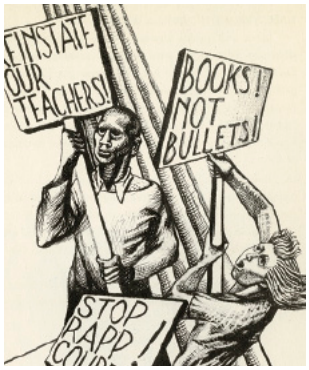
James believes that the Democratic leadership "needs to bring in more young people. They need to take their cues from AOC and from Jasmine Crockett and Maxwell Frost and Greg Cesar. They need to be on the ground. They need to do things that are different. Republicans are just outperforming us each and every time. We have to stop believing or following the rules. Break the rules. Stop coloring inside the lines."

Though her preferred candidate in the New York mayoral primary, City Council Speaker Adrienne Adams, didn't win, James quickly embraced Mamdani after his victory. She went to his party on election night and praised the youthful, multiracial movement that propelled his campaign. "Tonight represents a resounding win," James told the crowd.

By endorsing Mamdani even as Schumer and Jeffries kept quiet, and by marching joyfully with him in June's New York Pride parade, James solidified her standing with the city's progressive movement.

The unifying role she's playing is stirring speculation that James, who is 66, could yet be a 2028 US Senate prospect or a 2030 gubernatorial contender. People approached her to run for mayor this year, James admits. But she wasn't about to step away from the fight against Trump and Trumpism. "I was focused on protecting our democracy, and I didn't want to get distracted," she told me. "Once that job is done…?" That was classic Tish James: focused on the job at hand, ready to sacrifice in order to complete her tasks, and certain that, once she has prevailed, there will be more opportunities for New York's badass attorney general. N

(Foner, continued from page 53)



should encounter has a long history. In 1923, the historian James Truslow Adams warned that the "forces of reaction and obscurantism" were on the march, seeking to determine how history was taught. At around the same time, the United Daughters of the Confederacy were successfully demanding the removal of history textbooks from Southern classrooms if they failed to present slavery as a benign institution and the war for Southern independence as a gallant struggle for liberty. A different memory survived in Black communities, a remembrance of the 200,000 Black men who served in the Union army and navy during the Civil War and of the tragedy of enslaved children separated from their families. Remembering history at a time when others distort or seek to forget it can itself be a form of resistance.

During the McCarthy era, works by supposedly disloyal historians—including a seemingly uncontroversial history of Jews in the United States by my uncle Philip—were removed from the State Department's overseas libraries. In the 1990s, national history standards designed by a partnership of both educators and historians at the behest of the National Endowment for the Humanities became the subject of controversy for, in the eyes of detractors, devoting excessive attention to the roles of women, African Americans, and other groups whose experiences had previously been slighted by historians. Too much Harriet Tubman, critics complained, not enough George Washington.

Whatever the outcome of current controversies, the teaching and public presentation of history have changed considerably since I became a historian. Textbooks now offer a far more nuanced and bittersweet portrait of the American past than when I was in school. The National Museum of African American History and Culture has attracted millions of visitors—a powerful rebuke to the belief that the historical narratives students and the general public encounter should reinforce traditional lessons, assumptions, and prejudices rather than challenging them. Today, one can also visit the International African American Museum in Charleston, located on the site where many thousands of Africans disembarked from ships carrying them into American bondage. Another fairly recent historical venue is the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama, which opened in 2018 and whose unsparing exhibits commemorate the more than 4,000 victims of lynching during the Jim Crow era. In Jackson, the exhibits at the Museum of Mississippi History and the adjacent Mississippi Civil Rights Museum offer a surprisingly candid account of that state's unsettling history. But the very dissemination of new historical perspectives has produced a countervailing reaction: laws that seek to limit what students are allowed to read and learn.

"The past is the key of the present and the mirror of the future." Robert G. Fitzgerald, an African American who fought in both the Union army and navy during the Civil War, wrote these words in his diary in the early days of Reconstruction. As our country confronts a troubled present, perhaps a candid account of our history, the mirror of a future we cannot yet know, will help lay the foundation for a more equal, more just nation and a reinvigorated American democracy. N

The War at Home

Red Scares in the American past and present

BY DAVID COLE

"THE PAST IS A FOREIGN COUNTRY: THEY do things differently there." So begins L.P. Hartley's masterful novel of love and memory, *The Go-Between*. The line might serve as a motto for historians. The historian's challenge is to understand just how different an earlier period of human existence was, and to resist drawing parallels with contemporary times.

Clay Risen's *Red Scare: Blacklists, McCarthyism, and the Making of Modern America* remains true to this principle. Providing a wealth of engaging detail that underscores how different the mid-20th century was from today, he tells his subject's riveting and shameful story from its origins after World War II

JOSEPH MCCARTHY AND ROY COHN AT A HUAC HEARING (GETTY IMAGES)

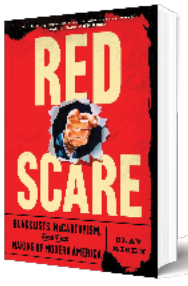
to its demise in the late 1950s. And he expressly declines to draw analogies to the current moment.

That may have been easier to do because he wrote *Red Scare* before the reelection of Donald Trump and the train wreck that is already Trump 2.0. But even if he studiously avoids delineating the similarities, for anyone reading it now the parallels are too stark to ignore. Because it shows how populist scapegoating can take hold of a nation and pose real dilemmas for the many who get caught in its web, *Red Scare* is essential reading today.

There have actually been multiple Red Scares in American history. The first one, which began shortly after World War I, featured most prominently the Palmer Raids, in which the federal government responded to a series of bombings by rounding up thousands of foreign nationals and deporting more than 500 for their suspected associations with anarchist or communist groups. The roots of many anti-communist laws, in fact, date back to that period. That Red Scare ended in 1920.

The second Red Scare, the subject of Risen's account, emerged almost as soon as World War II ended. Winston Churchill was one of the first to predict the Cold War in a speech he delivered in Missouri in 1946. That war quickly came home, taking root in Hollywood four months later, when the founding editor of *The Hollywood Reporter*, Billy Wilkerson, published the names of 11 suspected communists in Hollywood's ranks. Others promptly joined in the call to rid Hollywood of reds, including Ronald Reagan and the novelist Ayn Rand. The House Un-American Activities Committee, born in 1938 out of a committee that investigated Nazis, turned its attention to communists and soon subpoenaed countless writers, directors, and actors to testify about their alleged ties to the Communist Party.

By 1947, President Harry Truman had announced a "loyalty program" for federal employees. The program, which reviewed the background of every current and new federal employee, screened 4.76 million people over five years, searching for "any evidence of 'disloyalty,' a term that was left ominously undefined," Risen writes. Truman also directed his attorney general, Tom Clark, to compile a list of "subversive organizations," which eventually included hundreds of groups, including the National Lawyers Guild, a progressive lawyers' organization. Association with any group on the list could land you in an FBI file or cost you your job. Most people survived the Truman loyalty screens, but nearly 7,000 people resigned or withdrew their applications, and 560 were fired. The loyalty program discovered not a single spy.



Red Scare
Blacklists, McCarthyism, and the Making of Modern America
By Clay Risen
Scribner.
480 pp. $31

Prominent trials of alleged communist spies Alger Hiss and Julius and Ethel Rosenberg divided the country—and ended in convictions of all three and the death penalty for the Rosenbergs. Congress passed laws making it a deportable offense and a crime to be a member of the Communist Party or to advocate its positions, and countless foreign nationals were deported and citizens convicted for their political beliefs.

At its height, virtually every part of society was in on the project. Congress enacted anti-communist laws and held hearings to reveal communist sympathizers and fellow travelers. Federal prosecutors tried people for their association with the party and for refusing to name names. The courts, including the Supreme Court, upheld the convictions. The FBI developed extensive files on suspected reds, including many Americans who simply advocated for racial justice or workers' rights. Hollywood, universities, and other private organizations cooperated in the suppression, barring suspected communists from their employ.

State governments extended the scheme to the local level, enacting their own loyalty oaths and anti-subversive laws. Chicago barred suspected communists from public housing; New York State denied fishing licenses to members of any group on the attorney general's subversive organizations list, and New York City fired even high school math teachers for suspected communist ties.

The parallels to what is happening today are hard to miss. Consider, for example, the origins of the Red Scare. Risen attributes it to a backlash against the New Deal, further fueled by the fear of a nuclear-armed communist adversary in the Soviet Union. The New Deal, he writes, had upended the old order and ushered in, albeit tentatively, "a new America—egalitarian, diverse, tolerant." But not everyone was on board. Businessmen objected to regulations that protected consumers and workers, as well as to the higher taxes needed to fund a bigger government. And then, as now, the resentment extended far beyond the wealthy:

> The progressives of the 1930s claimed to stand up for the Forgotten Man, but there were many Americans who felt that the New Deal had in fact forgotten them: the small-town middle class, the religious fundamentalists, the avowed white supremacists who continued to insist that America was a country founded by and for northern Europeans. They saw an America that was increasingly urban and cosmopolitan, industrialized and regulated, diverse and tolerant, run by what they believed was a detached elite unsympathetic to the average white American.

In a fundamental sense, the right is still fighting the New Deal, and it's using a very similar strategy—one that stokes the grievances of Americans who believe they have been left behind by economic and cultural developments and are eager to find fault in elites and migrants. It is for this reason that, while most Americans are uncomfortable with the irresponsible haste with which Trump, with the help of Elon Musk, began tearing down the federal infrastructure that many rely on, his core supporters are not all that troubled.

David Cole teaches law at Georgetown University and previously was the national legal director of the ACLU.

Meanwhile, the Supreme Court's majority, composed of six Republican-nominated justices, espouses a deep skepticism about the administrative state. Last year, it overturned a 40-year-old precedent that required courts to defer to the expertise of agencies. And it has increasingly insisted that the president must have unchecked authority to remove any executive branch official he wants for any reason, calling into question measures that safeguard the independence of government agencies. In May, the court signaled in a temporary ruling that it is likely to overturn a 1935 precedent that permits Congress to rein in the President's ability to fire the heads of independent agencies absent malfeasance or neglect.

And where New Deal progressives prized expertise and science as the basis for solving social problems, Trump has aggressively sought to suppress any evidence or research that might contradict his ideological commitments—including, most catastrophically, critical research on healthcare and climate change.

In both periods, anti-elite resentment was galvanized by politicians who had no respect for fundamental norms of fairness and decency, were willing to lie brazenly, and were deft at exploiting dissatisfaction and anxiety for personal and partisan gain. Joseph McCarthy, like Donald Trump, was an uncouth outsider to the Republican establishment who became so powerful that few in the party dared cross him. One difference: McCarthy was only a senator, so his power to shape American society was necessarily indirect. He could hold hearings and hurl accusations, but he had to rely on other parts of the government and society to deliver material punishments.

What are the parallels between the Red Scare of the 1950s and today?

And where Truman required "loyalty" from federal employees, Trump has instituted a different sort of loyalty program altogether—firing anyone he deems insufficiently faithful to him (never mind the country) and appointing people to high office whose only qualification is their fealty to the boss. His administration resembles not so much a security state as an organized crime gang. And for that reason, among others, it is unlikely that Democrats will be co-opted by Trump the way many were by anti-communism.

Risen's multi-textured account of how McCarthyism came to pervade every aspect of American life also reminds us that the current hysteria is, at least thus far, in no measure as deeply woven into the fabric of American life. The Red Scare lasted for more than a decade (and, if one includes the first Red Scare, even longer). It permeated every aspect of public and private life, and its investigations directly affected millions of Americans.

By contrast, apart from the "Big Beautiful Bill," Trump's initiatives thus far have largely been limited to unilateral executive orders and actions. Trump won reelection with less than a majority of the vote, and his poll numbers, historically low to begin with, are dropping. Red states are complicit, but blue-state attorneys general have challenged many of his initiatives in federal court, whereas Risen identifies only a handful of government officials who defied McCarthyism.

Moreover, thus far the courts have ruled against Trump on a wide range of his initiatives. A Bloomberg Law study counted more than 200 rulings against the administration. By contrast, the courts during the Red Scare did nothing to stop McCarthyism, and instead affirmed many dubious convictions and firings for mere political association. Only after the political tide had turned and the Senate censured McCarthy did the Supreme Court begin to dismantle the legal architecture of the Red Scare.

The legal turning point came on June 17, 1957, when the court issued four decisions against anti-communist measures. It overturned the contempt conviction of a union leader who refused to name names before HUAC. It reversed a New Hampshire decision that had held a Marxist professor in contempt for refusing to answer questions about his lectures. It reinstated a State Department employee who had been fired for disloyalty. And it vacated a conviction under the Smith Act, which criminalized Communist Party membership.

It was not until a decade later that the court went farther, ruling that one could not be punished for associating with the Communist Party unless one specifically intended to further its illegal ends, and could not be prosecuted even for advocating the violent overthrow of the US government unless one's speech was intended and likely to incite imminent lawless action. These decisions remain good law to this day and are an important cornerstone of our First Amendment freedoms. But by the time the court issued these rulings, McCarthyism had become, as Dwight D. Eisenhower put it, "McCarthywasm," and countless lives had already been ruined.

The most poignant parallels between the Red Scare and today involve the question of compliance or resistance. The Red Scare was very much a public-private partnership. McCarthy relied heavily on private institutions, including the entertainment industry and universities, to fire or blacklist those his committee contended were communists. A whole industry parasitic on anti-communism arose, first outing suspected communist sympathizers and then facilitating their "rehabilitation" through confessions, naming names, turning informant, and the like.

Many citizens were more than willing to go along. Out of 110 Hollywood figures called to testify before HUAC in 1951 alone, 58 cooperated, offering up 902 names. Much like some of the law firms that preemptively struck deals with Trump, some in Hollywood did not even wait to be called and instead reached out on their own initiative to name names. One such volunteer was the actor Sterling Hayden, who regretted it for the rest of his life. Even labor unions were complicit: The National Education Association expelled communist members in 1949, and the American Federation of Teachers voted not to defend teachers accused of communist associations.

The few who refused to go along suffered for their actions at the hands of both the federal government, which

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BY CHANDRA TALPADE MOHANTY

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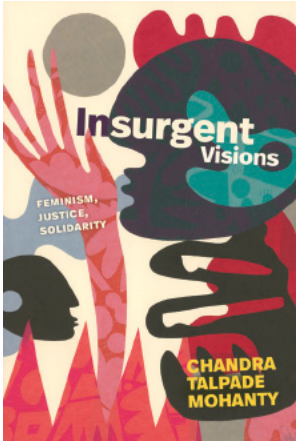

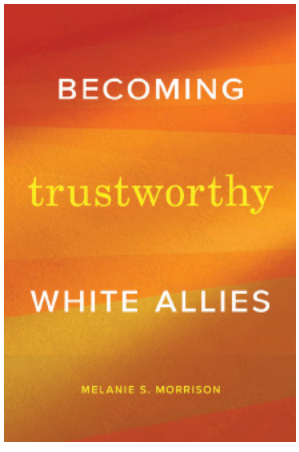

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BY MELANIE S. MORRISON

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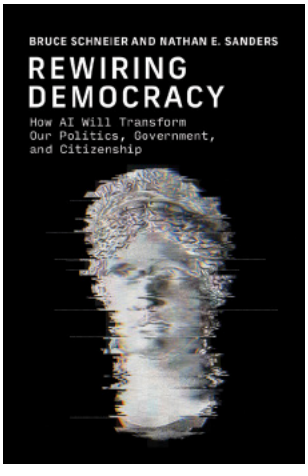

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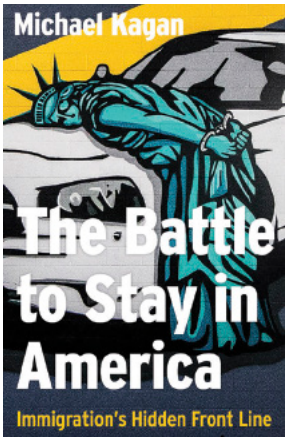

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BY MICHAEL KAGAN

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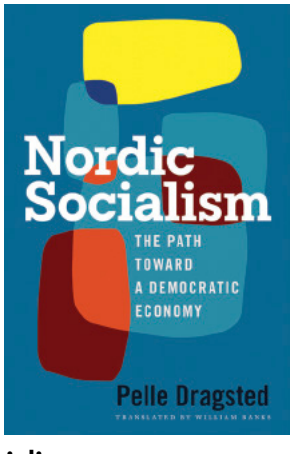

Nordic Socialism

The Path Toward a Democratic Economy

BY PELLE DRAGSTED
TRANSLATED BY WILLIAM BANKS
FOREWORD BY MATT BRUENIG

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could prosecute them for contempt of Congress, and private industry, which refused to hire them. Dalton Trumbo, one of Hollywood's most successful writers, refused to name names, served time in prison, and could find work only under pseudonyms. The noir author Dashiell Hammett served six months in prison for refusing to identify contributors to a bail fund. Gale Sondergaard, who won the first Oscar awarded for Best Supporting Actress, refused to name names and did not get another screen role for 20 years. Others were more fortunate. The playwright Arthur Miller declined to name names and was convicted of contempt, but his conviction was reversed on appeal. The Harvard physicist Wendell Furry refused to cooperate, but Harvard stood by him and, unlike others, he kept his job. Most of those who resisted suffered at the time; but in retrospect, they are the period's heroes.

The same dynamic is in operation today, as some law firms and universities capitulate to Trump's illegal demands, while others, such as the Perkins Coie law firm and Harvard University, courageously fight back. Here, too, history will likely look positively on those who stood on principle while condemning those, like Paul, Weiss and Columbia, that have chosen to comply with blatantly illegal orders.

In the first weeks of the second Trump administration, I appeared on a webinar with Ellen Schrecker, a historian of the Cold War. She began her remarks by saying that she had spent her career studying McCarthyism and the Cold War, and "this is worse." I have my doubts. The Cold War, after all, lasted nearly half a century, spawned the modern surveillance state, and had the complete buy-in of federal, state, and local governments. Abroad, it led to millions of deaths in proxy wars; at home, it sent many people to prison for nothing more than exercising their right to association, subjected millions more to loyalty investigations, and led to the firing or blacklisting of countless innocent Americans.

Trump's initiatives, as devastating as they have been, do not yet come close to matching the range and depth of the Red Scare. But then again, he's only getting started. N

Missed Connections

The labyrinthine fiction of Catherine Lacey

BY ALANA POCKROS

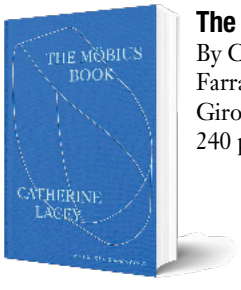
The characters in Catherine Lacey's fiction are always running away from themselves. In her first novel, *Nobody Is Ever Missing*, we meet a woman named Elyria as she's about to leave for New Zealand with few plans other than abandoning her husband in Manhattan. In *Pew*, a genderless, ageless, and nameless person quite literally appears one day out of the blue, having spent the night sleeping in a church in a small Southern town, mystifying its members. In *The Answers*, we follow a woman by the name of Mary Parsons, who in a desperate search for a cure to her mysterious ailments, enrolls in expensive "neuro-physio-chi bodywork" sessions called Pneuma Adaptive Kinesthesia and then takes part in a 24/7 "income-generating experience" in order to pay for them. As we get to know her, we discover that she is not even Mary Parsons but a woman named Junia Stone, who grew up in a religious household in the South from which she's now estranged.

Biography of X, Lacey's most recent work of pure fiction, also revolves around a mercurial figure, or really two, on the run from themselves as much as from others. Upon entering the novel, we learn that we are reading a biography by a writer named C.M. Lucca, who has set out to uncover the details of her

ILLUSTRATION BY LILY QIAN

mysterious, recently deceased ex-wife's past and to correct the record left by a competing biography writer. Aptly inscrutable, Lucca's *Tár*-esque ex-wife is best known as the famous visual artist "X." Who is this elusive woman? By the book's end, her mask has been torn off: We learn that she had up to 18 different names in her various incarnations, each attached to a distinct career and place of residence. These places, too, are not so familiar: In the novel's alternative history, the Southern states seceded from the nation in 1945. X was born in Mississippi as Caroline Luanna Walker and lived the rest of her life as a fleeing "refugee."

Is escaping danger any different from escaping ourselves? And if we manage to do either, do we know where we are going? These are the kinds of questions that animate almost all of Lacey's fiction, including her newest genre-bending work, *The Möbius Book*. Billed as a "memoir-cum-novel," it is Lacey's first explicitly personal book, though it is a work of universal exposition as much as biographical recollection. Meditating on her life after a divorce, recalling her fraught religious childhood, and sorting through the reasons that she writes fiction in the first place, Lacey offers us an experiment in form but also in ideas. As the first half of *The Möbius Book* tells a fictional story about a friendship in which not all secrets are revealed, and the second half serves as a vehicle to reflect on the dissolution of a romantic relationship, Lacey presents us with a work that functions like a maze: Where exactly the exit is, and how we might navigate the abrupt, unexpected turns, will always remain a mystery.



The Möbius Book
By Catherine Lacey
Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
240 pp. $27

If we can compare writing books to painting, then Lacey has always viewed the practice as something akin to performance art. *The Answers* switches tenses halfway through the novel, and *Biography of X* uses real people's photographs as well as names and places. Meanwhile, *Pew* is told via a strange, ambiguous, mute narrator, so seemingly inanimate that many critics have called the book a fable.

Like Lacey's earlier work, *The Möbius Book* breaks many of the rules of contemporary fiction. The first half is a work of fiction, the second half a memoir; and by including both but keeping them separate, the book belongs to neither genre. Each half has its own set of identical opening pages featuring a list of previous works and publisher information, and yet the two cannot really be read as separate entities: Each is one-half of the same whole.

The Möbius Book begins by introducing us to Marie. The resident of an unnamed city and a woman of an unspecified age, Marie gets a call from her friend Edie, who is coming over for a surprise visit on Christmas evening. Though the book otherwise has all the markers of a story set in the present day, Marie communicates exclusively on a landline and a payphone—the proximity to the latter in fact was a reason she chose her apartment: She wanted to be close to "something so irrevocably stuck in the past."

But things only get stranger after this disclosure: On her way back to her apartment, Marie passes a neighbor's door and sees a pool of blood. Most people might stop to find out what's going on, but Marie walks right past; nor does she mention it to Edie when she arrives. The two of them, after all, have plenty of things to discuss. Marie, we learn, has recently gotten a divorce from her wife, whom she cheated on and with whom she has twin children that she no longer sees. Edie, meanwhile, has been through a rough break-up with a manipulative man so domineering that "around him she felt like a child."

While the two women compare and contrast their relationships, their conversation, almost script-like, is occasionally punctuated by philosophical musings about how things that break can sometimes be repaired; the ambiguity of attraction; and the fleeting, specific nature of memory. But Marie still can't shake what she saw and has brief moments of private panic: What happened to the couple who lives next door? Did a murder transpire right under her nose?

What actually happens is more bizarre. Toward the end of Marie and Edie's story, the police appear at Marie's door and ask her to go down to the station with them. "The story about her weird affair hadn't made it seem like Marie was truly guilty of anything," Edie tells the reader as she watches her friend skulk out of the building with her hands behind her back. "But the sight of her getting into a police car does."

But why is Marie being questioned at all? And how does this relate to her and Edie's romantic failings? These are questions that we don't ever get the answers to, even if the analogous stories offer fodder for guesses. Yet when this story "ends," and after we peruse the acknowledgments and the "works consulted" page—the latter featuring everything from Maggie Nelson's *Bluets* to the musician Bad Bunny's reggaeton album *Un Verano Sin Ti*—we have no choice but to flip *The Möbius Book* on its head, open the back cover, and begin again.

In the second half of *The Möbius Book*, a new character appears: Catherine Lacey herself. We learn about how her relationship with her partner of six years ended suddenly; how she was forced to sell her house and split the mortgage; and, ultimately, how she lost herself along the way. "What do you call it when a man emails you from the other room to explain that he met another woman last week and now it's over?" Lacey asks the reader.

She begins this story by telling us how her marriage came undone: One day, we learn, Lacey's husband, a writer and professor with a proclivity for anger, ends their relationship in a flash. "The Reason," as Lacey refers to her ex-husband throughout the story, tells her that she has clearly "stopped loving him" and that the reason they weren't having "as much sex as he would have liked" is because she was, "most likely, just a lesbian." Lacey is surprised by these declarations, but she also feels as if she has no agency to argue against them, for "later it became clear—The Reason had the right to explain my feelings to me because he'd spent six years telling me who I was, and what I should want or do."

For the remainder of this second book, we follow Lacey's thinking as she becomes unmoored, starves herself thin, and jolts herself into

quick-and-hot rebound relationships that leave her feeling "emotionally shrink-wrapped." That Lacey refers to her estranged partner only as The Reason, while most other figures receive real names or at least monikers, is germane here: It is one signal among others that this book isn't so much a personal history of a relationship as it is about how a relationship can change one's sense of reality.

How else should we interpret a book that moves not chronologically or even logically, but betwixt itself? Part of the magic of *The Möbius Book* is that new metaphors and meanings emerge and come into focus as one reads its two different parts. As one reads book two after completing book one, for example, it becomes clear that Lacey shares much with Edie in the earlier tale.

Once that association has been made, the reader can connect the dots to form a clearer picture of Lacey, how she was raised, and what misdeeds have followed her from one relationship to another. In book one, we learn about a betraying parent who closely resembles Lacey's father. It is him that she thinks of when she recalls The Reason, who, during their marriage, punches walls so hard he breaks his hand. An enraged father followed by an even angrier husband—such are the patterns of life and fiction.

The Möbius Book, as its title might suggest, is full of these associations: clues from real life that shed light on its metaphors and hints in the fiction that elucidate Lacey's own past. There is also a lot of talk about feeling guilt even though you haven't committed a crime; about finding and losing faith; about hearing messages from species who can't speak any human tongue; and even, at one point, about an exorcism that a friend performs on her in Oaxaca.

How else should we interpret a book that moves not chronologically or even logically?

None of these supernatural references will surprise her longtime readers: In addition to formal invention, Lacey's earlier novels abound with allegory, religious trauma, and spirituality. Yet one mystery remains unsolved in *The Möbius Book*: Amid its shocking, beguiling tales is that pool of blood. While we do eventually learn its likely cause, the explanation is so strange as to muddle our understanding of interpretation itself. But that, too, seems to be intentional. For if most of Lacey's fiction is about running away from something or someone, in *The Möbius Book* we also get a study of how ignoring the past nearly always results in loss: not only of one's tangible identity, but also of one's coherence, orientation, and sense of meaning.

In this way, *The Möbius Book* is reminiscent of work by writers like Sheila Heti, Leslie Jamison, and Maggie Nelson. But in another way, the book is also something novel: While Lacey sets out to write both fiction and memoir tinged with universalisms, she resists combining the two genres explicitly; each has its own separate place in the work. As one of Lacey's many lovely poetic bromides reads (in this case, taken from a jar of peanut butter): "Separation is natural."

Separation *is* natural, but when a heartbroken person searches for connection, she is struggling to fill a void. In the book's memoiristic section, Lacey tells us about her escapades with various people in various locales. She goes hiking with strangers, considers energy healing, and does "anything I had previously believed myself not to be the type of person to do." She moves from Chicago to Los Angeles, from Los Angeles to a hotel room in Manhattan, from a beach in Mexico to a cabin in Switzerland, each time not quite finding what she is after.

At one point while she's in New York City, Lacey takes a trip to the Museum of Modern Art with her friend Avery. Admiring Matisse's *Red Studio*, the two women commiserate over how neither of their writing projects is going very well. "Our trouble was a shared one," Lacey observes. "We were looking for endings, but all we could find was more middle. It was hard, we agreed, to find satisfying conclusions to stories that weren't exactly stories but rather a set of prompts that resisted completion, a Möbius strip of narrative."

Most of the author's platonic and romantic relationships after The Reason amount to nothing permanent, while most of her attempts at closure come to even less. But eventually—or perhaps inevitably—she does find something meaningful. In Mexico, Lacey meets a man named Daniel, with whom she splits a tab of acid. They go to a mutual friend's house for food, where they are offered a jar of artichokes. Connections compound; separation is not the only natural experience. That summer evening with Daniel turns into months, then seasons, until Lacey finds herself in love with him. On the story's final page, she asks Daniel a question about their future while they sit in a library. Outside, she sees tourists taking pictures with "out-of-commission payphones." She is bringing us back to Marie and Edie and some of the unsolved mysteries that opened the book.

Catherine Lacey is much more interested in the questions than the answers, and so the circular nature of *The Möbius Book* seems fitting: It turns out that the maze she sends us into has no exit and no end. Just like a Möbius strip, we might be sliced down our middles, even split in half. But the bind that holds us together will always stay intact. **N**

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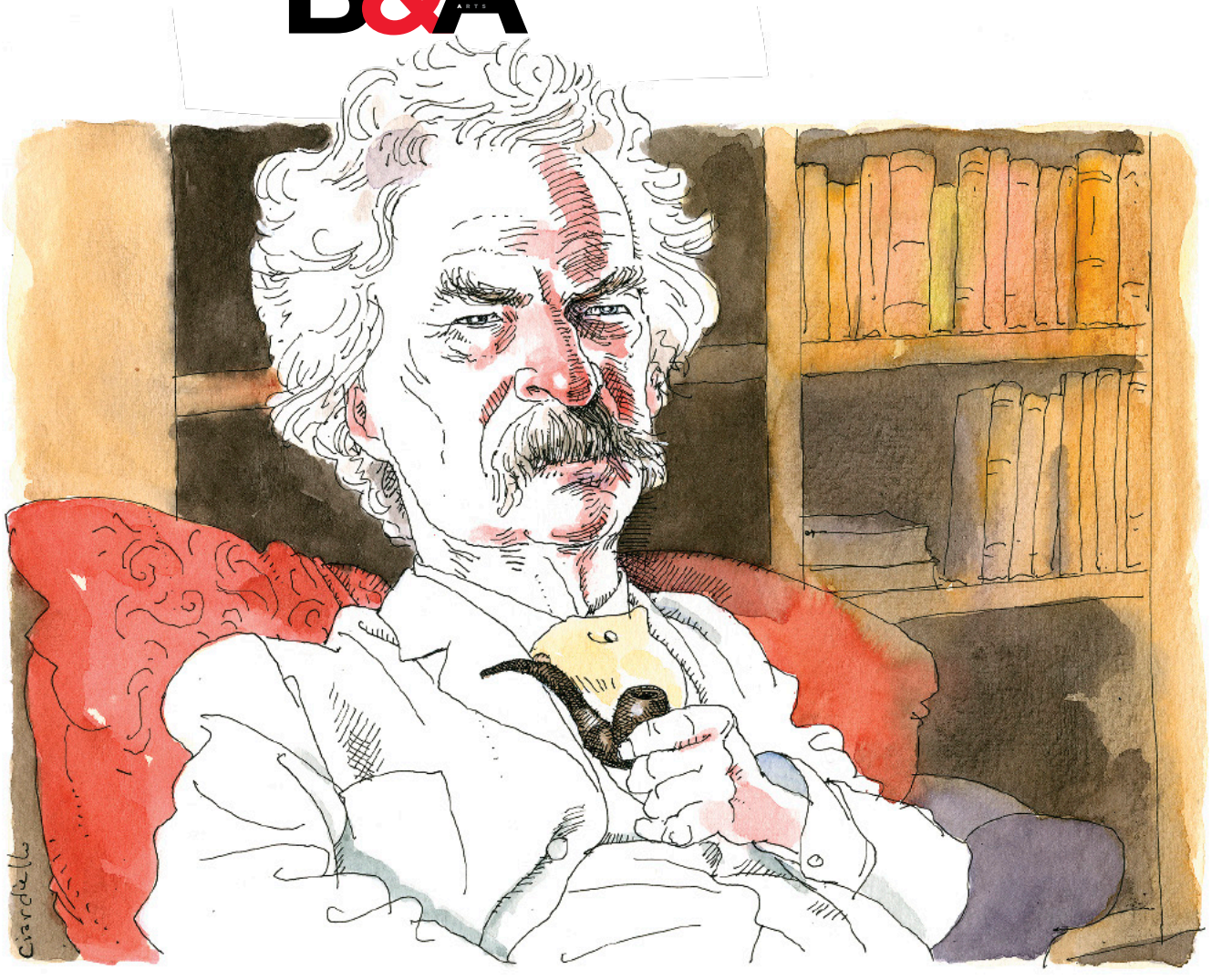


The Adventures of Samuel Clemens

Mark Twain's many lives

BY ADAM HOCHSCHILD

SOME PEOPLE LIVE SEVERAL LIVES. MARK TWAIN LIVED half a dozen. As a boy in Hannibal, Missouri, he saw his family reduced to living in cramped quarters above a drugstore. As a world-renowned author, he and his wife built an 11,500-square-foot home with 25 rooms, balconies, turrets, and marble floors. In Twain's impoverished 20s, he traveled to Nevada by stagecoach, sleeping atop mailbags. Decades later, he hired private railway cars. Before writing the books that made him famous, he served in a Confederate militia, searched for gold in the Sierra Nevada, and worked as a newspaper reporter in San Francisco and what today is Hawaii. By the end of Twain's life, the czar of Russia and several other monarchs would happily receive him, Andrew Carnegie would invite him for dinner, and Woodrow Wilson (then the president of Princeton University) would play miniature golf with him. To borrow a line from his contemporary Walt Whitman, Twain's life truly contained multitudes.

Multitudinous as well was the geyser of his work. Twain left some 30 books and pamphlets, thousands of newspaper and magazine pieces, as well as notebooks, unpublished manuscripts, and a mountainous three-volume autobiography whose mixture of fact and fancy have kept scholars busy for decades. Not without reason did one editor title an anthology *Mark Twain in Eruption*. Furthermore, much of Twain's work happened onstage: One of his marathon speaking tours featured 103 appearances in the United States and Canada; another took 15 months and a zigzagging 53,000 miles to circle the globe.

Ron Chernow's massive but highly readable new biography, titled simply *Mark Twain*, covers the entire volcano, but three phases of this extraordinary

ILLUSTRATION BY JOE CIARDIELLO

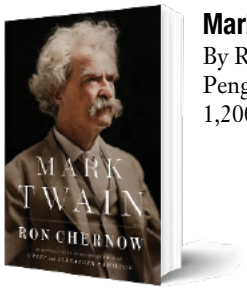
life stand out. First is Twain the writer, particularly the author of his two finest books, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *Life on the Mississippi*. The great river flows through their pages, filled like life itself with treacherous bends, hidden snags and currents, and unexpected joys. With a few exceptions, such as *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, the rest of his work today has a whiff of the archaic. Would we still read *The Prince and the Pauper* or *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* if they'd been written by someone else? When it comes to princes and kings, no one outshines the Duke and the Dauphin, the fake royalty in *Huckleberry Finn*.

The second Twain is the world-famous celebrity, who basked in applause on almost every continent. And the third is the author in his final years, multiply bereaved, enduring sorrows of which the public knew little, and manifesting a strange and revealing fixation.

He was born Samuel Clemens in 1835, in the small village of Florida, Missouri. When he was 3, the family moved to the nearby Mississippi River town of Hannibal, the "St. Petersburg" of his novels. His father managed to run one small business after another into the ground, accumulating debts that forced him to take a job as a grocery clerk and his wife to take in boarders. He died when Sam was 11. The boy had only a few years of school, did various odd jobs, became a printer's apprentice, and worked briefly for his brother Orion, who owned a small newspaper. At 17, he left home for several years as a wandering printer and typesetter, living briefly with a married sister in St. Louis and plying his trade as far away as Philadelphia and New York.

At 21, he started training as a riverboat pilot, a post he had long dreamed of, the profession from which he would take his pen name. Licensed two years later, he would at one point pilot the largest steamboat on the Mississippi, one of the marvelous machines—belching smoke, sparks, and flaming embers from their high twin stacks—that had reduced travel time on the country's great central artery from weeks to days. No wonder Twain hoped to "follow the river the rest of my days, and die at the wheel." He enjoyed only two more years of life as a member of what Chernow calls "the undisputed royalty of this floating kingdom" before the Civil War brought that magical existence to an end.

Then came Twain's brief spell fighting for the Confederacy—he took part in only one skirmish—before he and his brother took that stagecoach westward. Already he had published a few sketches in newspapers, and by his late 20s in California, he was making a living from his pen, writing both fact and fiction. The breakthrough that ignited his renown was *The Innocents Abroad*, published in 1869, when Twain was 33.



Mark Twain
By Ron Chernow
Penguin Press.
1,200 pp. $45

Despite the imposing length of Chernow's book, he deals too swiftly with this crucial early period, especially Twain's childhood in Hannibal and his career on the Mississippi River, the years that gave birth to his two masterworks. In this biography of well over 1,000 pages, Twain has left Hannibal by page 41 and his riverboat pilot's job by page 64.

Twain's own autobiography provides far more pages on his childhood, recounting, for example, his forays into the forbidden, such as his account of skating, "probably without permission," on the frozen Mississippi under the winter moonlight, as ice floes break up and separate him and a friend from land. And beyond Twain himself, what lay behind his peerless picture of American con men in the Duke and the Dauphin, who try temperance preaching, patent medicines, and phrenology before posing as fallen nobility and famous actors? Are there traces of the small-town swindlers passing through Hannibal, or working the river's steamboats, who might have been raw material for them?

To be fair, Chernow does tell us about the later experiences that profoundly changed how Twain thought about something he had taken for granted as a child—slavery. Many people in Hannibal owned slaves, including, before his business reverses, Twain's own father. By contrast, Twain's wife, Olivia, or Livy, whom he married in 1870, came from a wealthy clan of abolitionists who had financially supported a stop on the Underground Railroad. The writer also had several memorable encounters, such as a long conversation in 1874 with his sister-in-law's Black cook, who told him how, two decades earlier in Virginia, she had seen her husband and seven children auctioned off in chains; only one child did she ever see again. It was then that Twain began to fully realize what was in the hearts of the dozen shackled slaves he once saw as a child, on the dock in Hannibal, waiting to be shipped downriver. Without this broadening of his awareness, we might never have had the figure of the runaway Jim.

As much as any white American writer of his time, Twain came to see slavery and its aftereffects as the country's original sin. Beyond that, he put his purse where his principles were by devising, Chernow writes, "his own form of racial reparations": Once Twain was wealthy, he financially supported many Black people, among them one of the first such students to enter Yale Law School. Warner T. McGuinn would later become a Baltimore city councilman and a successful lawyer who, long after Twain's death, mentored and referred cases to another Black lawyer just starting his career: Thurgood Marshall.

The second Twain we meet in the book is the man who, as Chernow writes, "fairly invented our celebrity culture." If Huck Finn was the archetypal outsider, Mark Twain the celebrity was the consummate insider, the ultimate riposte to his ne'er-do-well father. His fame crossed class boundaries in a way that's hard to imagine today. No other American writer could appear in a New Orleans saloon, a Kentucky general store, or at the Metropolitan Opera and have everyone instantly know who he was. It's hard to imagine his close contemporary Henry James, for example, deigning even to set foot in New Orleans or Kentucky, much less being

Adam Hochschild is the author, most recently, of American Midnight: The Great War, a Violent Peace, and Democracy's Forgotten Crisis.

recognized there. When Twain arrived in England in 1907, dockworkers cheered as he got off the ship—as did the students at Oxford when he received an honorary degree there. For his 70th birthday, his publisher gave him a dinner with a 40-piece orchestra, 172 guests, and, as a party favor for each, a foot-high bust of the author. (Note to my publisher: I have a birthday coming up.)

His was not, however, an empty celebrityhood like that of, say, the older Hemingway, the blustery "Papa" who posed with the lions and leopards he'd shot after his best work was behind him. Rather, starting with Twain's first lecture at the age of 30, performing was central to his work. Sadly, he died in 1910—too early to leave any recordings of his performances.

No one knows the full total of his readings, lectures, commencement addresses, and after-dinner speeches, but at least 835 of them produced enough of a written record to count. Whether he was speaking at Carnegie Hall or in a California mining town or before 850 convicts at a prison, Twain kept his listeners enthralled. All of this helped hone his writing, just as Shakespeare's time onstage did his. Chernow quotes one observer noting that Twain read each audience as closely "as a lawyer scans his jury in a death trial." He learned timing and the value of a raised eyebrow or a calculated pause, and discovered that the best humor can be deadpan. (He turned down invitations to speak in churches, where people were "afraid to laugh.")

At a banquet of Union Army veterans in 1879, after the famously impassive Ulysses S. Grant had sat through 14 speeches "like a graven image," Twain felt triumphant that he made the general laugh "till the tears came." When beginning a new tour, he had his lecture agents start him out in smaller towns so he could perfect his material before hitting the big-city halls. "For an hour and fifteen minutes," he wrote after one triumphant appearance, "I was in paradise."

Furthermore, Twain put his celebrity status to use by speaking out for his beliefs. His reckoning with slavery led to a passionate rage at other injustices. He wrote, spoke, and lobbied, for example, against the ruthless forced labor system that King Leopold II of Belgium imposed on the Congo. And against the grain of American public opinion, he vigorously protested the brutal colonial war that the United States waged in the Philippines. "I am opposed," he said, "to having the eagle put its talons on any other land."

Unlike most Twain biographies, however, nearly half of Chernow's behemoth is devoted to the last, increasingly difficult decade and a half of the writer's life—and it is in these pages that we meet the third Twain. It is a haunting and memorable portrait, because his private life in this period was so different from the second Twain, which the public continued to see, the magisterial white-haired luminary with a brilliant quip for any occasion.

Twain and Livy had lost one child in infancy and now had three daughters. The eldest, Susy, seemed to be having a same-sex love affair that the family, worried about its public image, did its best to ignore. In 1896, Susy, who was particularly close to her father, sickened and died of spinal meningitis in a matter of days. Always quick to lacerate himself, Twain felt that he had unduly neglected her. Then Livy's fragile health worsened, leading to unending rounds of new doctors, spas, rest cures, and warm climates. For several stretches, doctors bizarrely insisted that, to avoid straining her heart, the two should not see each other for days or even weeks at a time. In 1904, when they were far from home, in a palatial rented villa in Florence, Italy, Livy's heart failed.

Some people live several lives. Mark Twain lived half a dozen.

Twain lived out his final years in a restless circuit between Connecticut, Bermuda, New York City, and a summer retreat upstate, fretting constantly about his youngest daughter, Jean, who suffered from epilepsy. Anyone who has ever lived with an epileptic in the years before today's treatments knows the strain of fearing and helplessly watching a grand mal seizure. While keeping Jean's illness a secret, the author and his other surviving daughter, Clara, embarked on a long search for the right physician or sanatorium.

To manage the household and help with his ocean of correspondence, Twain hired a young live-in secretary, Isabel Lyon. Rivalries soared. Jean feared, correctly, that she was being exiled because of her epilepsy. The unsteady Clara—who at one point had a breakdown that put her in a sanatorium—was fiercely jealous of Lyon, whom many suspected of scheming to marry Twain. Lyon referred to him as "the King" and took on wifely duties such as cutting his hair.

The whole quarrelsome entourage restlessly moved from one grand mansion or vacation spot to another. There arose among Twain, Lyon, Jean, Clara, and a few other hangers-on a constantly changing web of alliances and feuds more complicated than you would think a mere handful of people could create, all of it recorded in thousands of pages of letters and diaries. The tensions wore the author down.

He never ceased writing, however, or giving speeches, or meeting visiting notables, from Booker T. Washington to Maxim Gorky to the young Winston Churchill. In New York, he would periodically emerge from his house to stroll down Fifth Avenue in his famous white suit, puffing a cigar (he smoked up to 40 a day), recognized by everyone. He was resurrecting the second Twain—the celebrity—as a refuge from the increasingly painful third phase of his life.

Strangely shadowing these final years was Twain's increasing need to have on hand one or more of what he called his "angelfish"—young girls, ideally between 10 and 16. Daughters of friends or acquaintances, or met on his endless travels, they would come for visits, carriage rides, or reading-aloud sessions, often chaperoned by their mothers. It was all very chaste, but his was an obsession with creatures of imagined innocence, before they grew to the age of the complex, troubled adult women in his household.

Although Twain dearly loved his daughters, it was a love that wanted them to stay forever as near as possible to childhood. In his autobiography is a revealing passage: "Susy died at the right time, the fortunate time of life; the happy age—twenty-four years. At twenty-four, such a girl has seen the best of life." Nor could Twain gracefully stand aside as Clara tried to pursue a career as a singer. She was always frustrated that audiences

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They are the single richest source of a vital "brain food" that 250 million Americans are starving for, according to a study published in the British Medical Journal.

It's a safe, natural compound called DHA – one of the building blocks of your brain. It helps children grow their brains significantly bigger during development. And in adults, it protects brain cells from dying as they get older.

Because DHA is so important, lacking enough of it is not only dangerous to your overall health but could be directly related to your brain shrinking with age.

With more than 16 million Americans suffering from age-associated cognitive impairment, it's clear to a top US doctor that's where the problem lies.

Regenerative medicine specialist Dr. Al Sears, says thankfully, "there's still hope for seniors. Getting more of this vital brain food can make a life changing difference for your mental clarity, focus, and memory."

Dr. Sears, a highly-acclaimed, board-certified doctor— who has published more than 500 studies and written 4 bestselling books — says we should be able to get enough DHA in our diets… but we don't anymore.

"For thousands of years, fish were a great natural source of DHA. But due to industrial fish farming practices, the fish we eat and the fish oils you see at the store are no longer as nutrient-dense as they once were," he explains.

DHA is backed by hundreds of studies for supporting razor sharp focus, extraordinary mental clarity, and a lightning quick memory… especially in seniors.

So, if you're struggling with focus, mental clarity, or memory as you get older…

Dr. Sears recommends a different approach.

THE SECRET TO A LASTING MEMORY

Research has shown that our paleo ancestors were able to grow bigger and smarter brains by eating foods rich in one ingredient — DHA.

"Our hippocampus thrives off DHA and grows because of it," explains Dr. Sears. "Without DHA, our brains would shrink, and our memories would quickly fade."

A groundbreaking study from the University of Alberta confirmed this. Animals given a diet rich in DHA saw a 29% boost in their hippocampus — the part of the brain responsible for learning and memory. As a result, these animals became smarter.

Another study on more than 1,500 seniors found that those whose brains were deficient in DHA had significantly smaller brains — a characteristic of accelerated aging and weakened memory.

PEOPLE'S BRAINS ARE SHRINKING AND THEY DON'T EVEN KNOW IT

Dr. Sears uncovered that sometime during the 1990s, fish farmers stopped giving their animals a natural, DHA-rich diet and began feeding them a diet that was 70% vegetarian.

"It became expensive for farmers to feed fish what they'd eat in the wild," explains Dr. Sears. "But in order to produce DHA, fish need to eat a natural, marine diet, like the one they'd eat in the wild."

"Since fish farmers are depriving these animals of their natural diet, DHA is almost nonexistent in the oils they produce."

"And since more than 80% of fish oil comes from farms, it's no wonder the country is experiencing a memory crisis. Most people's brains are shrinking and they don't even know it."

So, what can people do to improve their memory and brain function in the most effective way possible?

Dr. Sears says, "Find a quality DHA supplement that doesn't come from a farmed source. That will protect your brain cells and the functions they serve well into old age."

MEMORY-RESTORING SENSATION: The memory-saving oil in this Antarctic squid restores decades of lost brain power starting in just 24 hours.

Dr. Sears and his team worked tirelessly for over 2 years developing a unique brain-boosting formula called **Omega Rejuvenol**.

It's made from the most powerful source of DHA in the ocean, squid and krill — two species that cannot be farmed.

According to Dr. Sears, these are the purest and most potent sources of DHA in the world, because they haven't been tampered with. "**Omega Rejuvenol** is sourced from the most sustainable fishery in Antarctica. You won't find this oil in any stores."

MORE IMPRESSIVE RESULTS

Already, the formula has sold more than 850,000 bottles. And for a good reason, too. Satisfied customers can't stop raving about the memory-boosting benefits of quality-sourced DHA oil.

"The first time I took it, I was amazed. The brain fog I struggled with for years was gone within 24 hours. The next day, I woke up with the energy and mental clarity of a new man," says Owen R.

"I remember what it was like before I started taking **Omega Rejuvenol**… the lack of focus… the dull moods… the slippery memory… but now my mind is as clear as it's ever been," says Estelle H.

"My mood and focus are at an all-time high. I've always had trouble concentrating, and now I think I know why," raves Bernice J. "The difference that **Omega Rejuvenol** makes couldn't be more noticeable."

And 70-year-old Mark K. says, "My focus and memory are back to age-30 levels."

These are just a handful of the thousands of reviews Dr. Sears regularly receives thanks to his breakthrough memory formula, **Omega Rejuvenol**.

WHERE TO FIND OMEGA REJUVENOL

To secure bottles of this brain-booster, buyers should contact the Sears Health Hotline at **1--888-358-8105.** "It takes time to manufacture these bottles," says Dr. Sears. "The Hotline allows us to ship the product directly to customers who need it most."

Dr. Sears feels so strongly about this product, he is offering a 100%, money-back guarantee on every order. "Send back any used or unused bottles within 90 days and I'll rush you a refund," says Dr. Sears.

The Hotline is taking orders for the next 48 hours. After that, the phone number may be shut down to allow for inventory restocking.

Call **1-888-358-8105** to secure your limited supply of **Omega Rejuvenol**. Readers of this publication immediately qualify for a steep discount, but supplies are limited. To take advantage of this great offer use Promo Code **NATOM925** when you call.

were less interested in her voice than in the fact of her being Mark Twain's daughter, and he certainly didn't help matters. At one concert, when she generously invited him to join her onstage after the recital was over, he proceeded to talk for 15 or 20 minutes, charming everyone as usual: "I want to thank you for your appreciation of [Clara's] singing, which is, by-the-way, hereditary." Small wonder that she refused to pose with him for photographs afterward.

In a way, this third phase of Twain's life illuminates the first, reminding us that both in fact and in fiction the early world he so loved was almost entirely male: the man's domain of the riverboat pilothouse, or the raft on which Huck and Jim float down the river together, leaving Aunt Polly and Miss Watson far behind.

Finally, in one agonizing year, things in the writer's household came to a climax. He decided that Lyon and another assistant were embezzling from him and fired them, a dispute that spilled into the press. Clara got married and moved to Europe. Jean came back to live at home, to her joy, and be mistress of the house at last. But while taking a bath, she had a seizure that triggered a fatal heart attack. Her bereft father wrote to Clara: "Of my fair fleet all ships have gone down but you."

By now he was 74, and his own ship was about to go down. Clara rushed home just in time to be with him in his last several days. He joked to the end, when shortness of breath made him lose "enough sleep to supply a worn-out army." One of his last pieces was titled "Etiquette for the Afterlife." "Leave your dog outside," he advised. "Heaven goes by favor. If it went by merit you would stay out and the dog would go in." Headlines mourned the death of the great "humorist." Chernow's achievement is to show us how much more complicated than that his life was.

Chernow ends his biography soon after Twain's death, but this seminal American author has had a contested afterlife. Both his daughter Clara and Albert Bigelow Paine, his authorized biographer and first literary executor, energetically sanitized Twain's legacy, portraying him as the kindly, white-maned sage of Hannibal. In his three-volume biography, Paine never mentions that Twain was a vice president of the Anti-Imperialist League, and both there and in the many collections of Twain's writings he edited, he censored or omitted many of the author's comments on events like the Philippine-American War waged by President William McKinley. Typically, where Twain once wrote to a friend, "I am going to stick close to my desk for a month, now, hoping to write a small book, full of playful and good-natured contempt for the lousy McKinley," Paine ends the sentence with "hoping to write a small book."

What would Twain make of his country now, headed by an ardent admirer of McKinley whose daily torrent of flummery makes the Duke and the Dauphin look like pillars of the Better Business Bureau? In *Huckleberry Finn*, that pair's fraud catches up with them, and they are tarred and feathered while a crowd, "whooping and yelling, and banging tin pans and blowing horns," carries them out of town on a rail. I wish we still had Mark Twain here to imagine a similar fate for today's con man in chief. **N**

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—Claudia Sole, Calif.

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In Touch With the Galaxy

The art and genius of Lorna Simpson

BY RACHEL HUNTER HIMES

LORNA SIMPSON'S WORK UNFOLDS SLOWLY. THROUGHOUT a career that has spanned nearly four decades and encompasses photography, conceptual practices, collage, sculpture, and now painting, Simpson has created works of art that resist quick and easy reads. Instead, she requires us to reconsider our readiness to assign a secure interpretation to what we see. In her work, past and present, Simpson walks us through the dominant codes of meaning, then takes us beyond them to encounter the singular, the private, and the utterly individual.

A new exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, "Lorna Simpson: Source Notes," presents a group of paintings and related works created by Simpson during the past decade—and offers an opportunity to reflect on the conceptual practice she developed during the 1980s and '90s. While Simpson's earlier work asked viewers to draw connections between the photographs, text placards, and objects she staged in carefully composed ensembles, the paintings on view at the Met offer single images, monumental and silent: a meteorite hovering in space, an Arctic landscape locked in ice, a woman's face and body breaking forth from a crashing waterfall. These newer works lend themselves to meaning perhaps even more hesitantly than Simpson's early work did. Although they offer little in the way of immediate insight, there are significant rewards for those who are willing to take the time.

A former documentary photographer, Simpson harnessed the medium in her early practice to develop a body of work that explores how meaning is assigned to the body and its images. Her ensembles from this period link cryptic snatches of text with crisp and composed photographs of individuals, usually Black women. Yet although she made photography central to her practice, Simpson subverted the medium's traditional aims. Photography is celebrated for its unique capacity to render individual personhood indisputable. By their nature, photographs insist that their subjects were present at the making of the image (although AI has since changed that). While the documentary and street photography of the 1970s—the milieu into which Simpson entered as a photographer—doubled down on the medium's capacity to capture and preserve the candid singularity of everyday existence, Simpson ultimately went in the opposite direction:

LORNA SIMPSON, *FOR BERYL WRIGHT*, 2021 (COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND HAUSER & WIRTH); PHOTO: JAMES WANG

Her early work challenges both the claims that photography makes to truth and the supposed power of photographic images to render their subjects knowable to viewers.

Simpson's photographs from this period stage their subjects against blank grounds. Almost universally, these women are clothed in a plain white shift dress, a nondescript but evocative garment—a modern nightgown that somehow also smacks of the 19th century, of the plain and shapeless clothing of the enslaved. The women are seen from behind or cropped at the neck, so that their faces—that privileged locus of personhood in the Western image-making tradition—never appear. Instead, as we seek to understand these images, we are forced to turn to the language that Simpson has appended to them. These cryptic texts are not captions; they do not narrate the image or reinforce its claim to truth. Instead, they conjure dominant codes of meaning and frameworks for knowing only to demonstrate their dubious applicability. They ask, in the end, whether we can make any claims to knowledge at all.

In *You're Fine*, an ensemble from 1988, we see a woman lying on her side, her back to the viewer. She is bracketed, left and right, by text engraved on gold plastic plaques and, top and bottom, by text composed of ceramic letterforms. On the left, there's a list of the body parts and bodily functions assessed during a physical exam: "heart," "reflexes," "abdomen," "urine," "height," "weight." On the right, there's the hoped-for outcome dependent on the data gained from these tests: "Secretarial Position." Above and below appear the twinned statements "You're Fine" and "You're Hired."

The work is based on Simpson's experience of undergoing a medical exam as a condition of employment. Suspended within a grid of meaning, the Black female body in this ensemble is transformed first into a suite of medical data and then into an employee, an experience of depersonalization that is both particular and universal. In this photograph, Simpson reworks the odalisque, the reclining female nude of 19th-century European art, yet deflects the erotic gaze to suggest different forms of penetration, instead framing the Black woman as the subject of medical probing. Beneath this ensemble's surface of intelligibility, histories of racialized medical violence lie concealed—the unanesthetized tests on enslaved women that provided a foundation for modern gynecology, for example. By staging her subject in a pose that suggests, but ultimately evades, the aesthetic of female sexual availability, Simpson points to other forms of exploitation. This female subject, fitted with a clean bill of health, may sell her labor on the free market—but what conditions met the Black woman professional who took up a "Secretarial Position" in the 1980s? What was her experience, both of the medical examination and of employment? Simpson's strategy is to leave such questions open, forcing viewers to arrive at the answers themselves.

If, in *You're Fine*, Simpson stages the individual within a broad grid of intelligibility, in another work, 1989's *Dividing Lines*, she reveals the leaps we take to arrive at meaning. Confronted by a photograph and its seeming caption, we expect language and image to elucidate one another, to form a cohesive and legible whole. Yet which of the fragments of text in *Dividing Lines* should we bring to bear on Simpson's side-by-side and seen-from-behind photographs of a Black woman with short, braided hair? Plastic plaques, engraved with red words, offer us associative play on the term *line*: "Out of line," "Silver lining," "Same ol' line," "Color line." Is the Black female figure before us the subject of "red lining" or a suspect in a "line-up"? Or is this the "same ol' line," the allegation of racism? Why does it take an act of cognitive will to associate her with the phrases "line one's pockets" and "actor's lines"? The duplication of the figure and the subtle differences between the two images further confound attempts to establish a secure meaning. There are subtle but unmissable differences—the muscles of the figure on the right are visibly tensed, as if the subject has squared her shoulders or even more resolutely turned her back to the viewer, rejecting each and every attempt to read the text of her body.

In *You're Fine* and *Dividing Lines*, Simpson's language invokes authority, testing its own power to prescribe a reading of the depicted bodies. Elsewhere, however, her text is strangely candid, cryptic only in the way of overheard fragments of conversation. In 1991's *Myths*, Simpson presents us with three images of what seem to be African masks, seen from the inside, as if we ourselves were about to don them. These appear alongside another image of a Black woman with her back turned to us. The ensemble is unsettling in its total facelessness, yet the accompanying text is strangely quotidian. One of the six engraved plaques reads: "said that Stevie Wonder wrote My Cheri Amour for her older sister." Others: "they said they were related to them/ they had the same name" and "swore that those were the same sling-backs worn by Dorothy Dandridge in Carmen Jones."

The cryptic texts Simpson includes in her art are not captions but codes.

If the three masks evoke identities one might take up or put on, these stray fragments of text suggest attempts to cohere a sense of personal identity out of disparate references and experiences. This weaving of lies or partial truths into the fabric of the self feels familiar to me, reminds me of how I once told my middle-school classmates that Barack Obama was a distant cousin. It's a broadly shared experience, yet Simpson carves out space for its particular expression here: Only some people (Black people) can persuasively claim that Stevie Wonder wrote a song for their older sister, or that they are related to the first Black president. As she does elsewhere, Simpson here bridges the particular and the universal, exploring the human experience of self-fashioning by inhabiting the specific space of a selfhood constructed out of the signifiers of Black American identity.

Raised in New York City, Simpson studied at the School of Visual Arts and then at the University of California, San Diego, whose MFA program she graduated from in 1985. Her work was immediately recognized as significant. Following her first solo show at Just Above Midtown, or JAM, a gallery dedicated to showing the work of contemporary Black artists, Simpson

Rachel Hunter Himes is a writer, museum worker, and PhD student at Columbia University.

became, in 1990, the first Black woman artist to be featured in a solo exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art.

Simpson's photography-based conceptual art shares strategies with the work of the artists who came to be known as the Pictures Generation. From the 1970s to the early '90s, members of this loosely affiliated group investigated the construction and fragmentation of gender and class identities in the moment of mass media. Barbara Kruger's aphorisms, Cindy Sherman's restagings, and Sherrie Levine's postmodern questioning of photographic authority and authorship open onto similar territory as Simpson's explorations.

Simpson's work did not appear in the major Pictures Generations exhibitions; nor is it engaged alongside the work of these artists today, perhaps because, then and now, the work of Black artists is often seen to form a distinct category. The difference in the critical reception of Simpson's work and that of the artists of the Pictures Generation makes clear the distinct expectations for "Black" art. While artists like Kruger and Richard Prince were celebrated for their detachment, for the cool and critical distance they maintained from their subject matter, critics wondered why Simpson—a Black artist ostensibly making work about racial injustice (for what else could it possibly be about?)—was not more angry.

In the years since she debuted her breakthrough photography-and-text ensembles, Simpson has continued to explore representation, meaning, and the ways that language informs our understanding of images. Her practice is wide-ranging: She works with film and video and draws on techniques that include printmaking and collage. In 2014, she also started painting. Her solo exhibition at the Met shares with us this most recent decade of her practice.

The immediate sensation, upon stepping into the exhibition's single gallery, is of being drenched in cool ultramarine. The watery hue saturates most of the works on view, which feel touched or worked in ways that Simpson's almost clinical photographic ensembles do not. These paintings are massive—and silent. The textual strategies that characterize Simpson's earliest work have been set aside for the time being. Instead, the paintings rely on found photography, the "source notes" of the exhibition's title, reworked into monumental painted compositions.

Around 2010, Simpson started to assemble an archive of images, mostly gathered from *Ebony* and *Jet*. Established in the mid–20th century, the magazines, in the words of their founder, "dealt with the whole spectrum of black life," from politics and culture to fashion and celebrity. Simpson began by working clippings from these magazines into small-scale collages, several of which accompany her large-format paintings in the Met exhibition. In most of these collages, Simpson relies on a single, striking transposition. In one, a barefoot Black man strides forward into a flurry of snowflakes, magnified to a massive scale. In another, a reworking of a photograph published in *Jet*, the face of a woman wearing a cheetah print is swapped with that of her leashed pet cheetah. This tiny and surreal collaged image is reprised on a grand scale in one of the show's paintings, in which Simpson, re-creating her own collage in brushy strokes of black paint, homogenizes her cut-and-pasted referent into a single incredible image.

In Simpson's new work, the tiny and surreal are now reprised on a grand scale.

Jet was famed for its "Beauty of the Week" feature, which displayed a self-submitted photograph of a Black woman in each issue. These women—aspiring models, waitresses, college students, paralegals—appeared accompanied by a few lines about their interests and hometowns. It was perhaps from these pages that Simpson pulled the cat-eyed and carefully coiffed figures that gaze out from many of the paintings in the show. Extracted from magazines, these anonymous women have been scaled up, reproduced in dot-matrix tonality, and screen-printed onto fiberglass panels. Simpson has merged photographs of individual women, blending and layering their features to create composite portraits. Ink, brushed on in broad swathes, both enhances and obscures their features. The effect is a little uncanny: What at first seems a unitary portrait of a single individual is revealed as an amalgam.

Although their faces are turned toward us, the anonymous women that appear in Simpson's recent paintings are as opaque as the subjects of her earlier work. Any writing that might have informed us of their identity lies sealed within decades-old magazines. The exhibition's sole sculptural work drives this point home: Piled atop a stool, with what appears to be a block of ice beneath it, a stack of *Jet* and *Ebony* magazines, many encased in plastic sleeves, are surmounted by a peeling bust of a Black woman with braided hair. The sculpture is one in a series of similar stacks that Simpson began creating in 2017. They stand as monuments to an expression of Black culture rendered defunct by the end of *Jet*'s and *Ebony*'s publication in print and the bankruptcy of their parent enterprise, the Johnson Publishing Company. By erecting these monuments and rendering her source material unreadable, Simpson seems to de-mediate and untether the women that formerly populated the pages of these Black periodicals, leaving us simply with the fact of human presence.

The unmelting ice that rests beneath Simpson's sculpture is echoed in another group of paintings. We gaze out across vast landscapes of glaciers, ice floes, and snowy mountains. These images have been constructed from vintage photographs of the Arctic. Scaled up and screen-printed, they have been reworked with ink overlays that in some places reveal the artist's hand and her energetic brushwork, and in other places the random contingency of the dripping and spattered medium. Simpson has linked these paintings and their seemingly endless vistas to the Black navigator and explorer Matthew Henson. The child of sharecroppers, Henson accompanied Robert Peary on seven voyages to the Arctic, including the expedition in 1909 that Peary claimed was the first to reach the North Pole (though later calculations revealed that the party may have been some 30 miles short of the destination).

What did it mean to turn a Black gaze upon the Arctic? In these works, Simpson is thinking with Robin Coste Lewis, who in her poem "Using Black to Paint Light: Walking Through a Matisse Exhibit Thinking About the Arctic and Matthew Henson" writes:

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> The unanticipated shock: so much believed to be white is actually—strikingly—blue. Endless blueness. White is blue. An ocean wave freezes in place. Blue. Whole glaciers, large as Ohio, floating masses of static water. All of them pale frosted azuls. It makes me wonder—yet again—was there ever such a thing as whiteness? I am beginning to grow suspicious. An open window.

Henson himself reflected on the conjunction of identity and place in his 1912 memoir, *A Negro Explorer at the North Pole*. Simpson invites us to look through Henson's eyes into a vast silence. Slivers of illegible text—babbling columns of letters—rise out of the ice like signal flares or pins plunged into a map, suggesting both speechlessness and the effort to fix the landscape, or its memory, in language.

Speechlessness, or language's inadequacy, is also suggested by one of the show's smaller and most intriguing paintings. Within a border formed by a screen-printed magazine page evacuated of all content, a set of abstract marks suggest faded or rain-washed writing. These stranded serifs and ligatures, commas and quotation marks, veer so close to legibility that to not be able to read them is genuinely frustrating. Smaller script at the bottom tells us that the screen-printed surface began its life as the 16th page of an issue of *Ebony* magazine from April 1979, then notes that its content may be further perused on page 18. In Simpson's earlier work, photographed figures were seen from behind. Now, text and writing itself have turned their back to us.

In Simpson's earlier work, text established a range of inquiry, providing an open-ended framework for engagement. In these new paintings, silence safeguards their inscrutability. Some messages might get lost. You could drown in these works, in the pleasures of scale and hue, in the grandeur of the Black female figure, without critical reflection. There is freedom here: Simpson's freedom to experiment with image and medium, the viewer's freedom to associate freely—although I myself miss the gridded networks of meaning that structure other areas of Simpson's practice.

Simpson has long spoken of her desire to make works of art that deploy the Black figure as a universal subject—and of her frustration with critical viewpoints that block such readings. While the work of other artists "is interpreted as speaking universally about the body," she once noted, "when I do it I am speaking about the black body." Simpson's paintings about Matthew Henson and the Arctic explore this territory. By establishing Henson, a Black man, as a point of identification for viewers gazing into the icy vastness of these paintings, Simpson invites us into the universal experience of the sublime—but holds fast to the particularities of Black experience. It's as though the figure looking out across the abyss in Caspar David Friedrich's *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* (also recently on view at the Met), who stands as the proxy for the viewer's experience of transcendental distance and depth, were a Black woman.

Other paintings in the exhibition also bring Black figures into contact with the expansive, the vast, and the sublime. Two of the exhibition's most towering works merge the bodies of Black women with a crashing waterfall and the rocky earth. Another enormous painting, the monumental *did time elapse*, shows a chunk of rock hovering in the composition's center. It is a meteorite, eternally halted in its course. The work reflects Simpson's musing on a historical episode that she came across in a vintage science textbook: In 1922, a Black sharecropper named Ed Bush (though his name did not appear in the text) saw a meteorite strike earth mere feet from where he was standing, on Mississippi farmland owned by a white judge and landlord named Allen Cox. From his particular position within American post-slavery labor regimes, Bush briefly came to share coordinates with a conglomeration of rock and metal shot out of endless space. Silently, this single massive image unites the tenant farmer's plot with the galaxy, his personal experience with vaster orders of time and space. It is Simpson's talent, honed across decades, to show the particular and the universal at once, to those willing to take the time to see it. **N**

Die-off Off Vancouver

The heat wave killed—baked—the mussels
in the shallow Pacific tides. Peace, muscle:
metaphors I guess, offering up
ironic wince, real grief—
our longings in conflict with each other
leave a stink. Withered sea star,
with your broken purple arms (or points)
no one intended this. And mostly
no one sees what even happened,
our imaginations hardly bother,
you could be a cookie lying there,
photographed not on a beach but in a pastry case:
delicacy, intimacy, apostasy, emcee
lega, pira, falla, immedia

SALLY BALL

COURTESY OF DISNEY+

The Empire's Shadow

The revolutionary politics of Andor

BY JORGE COTTE

STAR WARS MADE IT TOO EASY TO BE ANTI-FASCIST. IN 1977, the film's iconic opening crawl situated its viewers in a galaxy "far, far away," one defined by the battle between a rebel alliance and an evil empire. Despite this backdrop for Luke Skywalker's heroics, the original *Star Wars* boiled political ideology down to a battle of good versus evil. The bad guys were dressed in easy-to-spot uniforms, and the good guys just needed to search within themselves and trust their seemingly magical powers. And thanks to the original film's many sequels, prequels, spin-offs, and expansions, galactic rebellion has now been subsumed into a personal hero's journey that is practically synonymous with the franchise itself.

But what was the rebellion against the Empire like before its first appearance in *Star Wars: A New Hope*, with its hive of activity and sophisticated military operations? Over recent years, a series of prequels have attempted to answer this question, including 2016's *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story*, which introduced us to the character of Cassian Andor (Diego Luna), and culminating in the current Disney+ series *Andor*, which takes *Star Wars* back into the heart of revolution. A show about how a petty thief becomes a rebel intelligence officer who will give up his life for a cause he believes in, *Andor* depicts the nascent rebellion against the Empire—a senator secretly funding rebel activity, a spymaster orchestrating events behind the scenes, the towns and planets where the slow burn of oppression finally boils over into outright struggle—as well as the imperial counter-intelligence officers seeking to stymie and manipulate this revolutionary energy.

Unlike the first three *Star Wars* prequels, which labored under their infamously sluggish dialogue and obtuse pseudoscience, *Andor* is a TV series that requires no caveats. Created by Tony Gilroy, whose credits include *Michael Clayton* and the Jason Bourne movies, the series is more indebted to John le Carré than George Lucas at the level of tone and plot: There are no Jedis, lightsaber duels, or members of the Skywalker family. And at the level of craft—writing, acting, production design, and editing—*Andor* is impressive. It is as thoughtful about the fashions that people wear on the silk-producing planet of Ghorman as it is about their efforts to arm themselves against imperial occupation. Rather than caricaturing state-sanctioned oppression and resorting to a planet-level view of the costs of resistance, *Andor* looks them squarely in the face. Regardless of how you feel about *Star Wars*, it might be the best series you'll watch this year.

When we first meet Cassian Andor (again played by Diego Luna), he is searching and lost. Orphaned and dispossessed at a young age, he's found a family and a new home on Ferrix, a planet running on a salvage economy, ruled by the Empire but controlled by private security. Cassian hates the Empire but is politically detached, cynical and disconnected. He's a smuggler, like Han Solo, but without the quips and smirking, and he definitely would shoot Greedo first. By the time of *Rogue One*, however, Cassian will have become a leader and a mentor who teaches Jyn Erso that "rebellions are built on hope." But his road to get there is long.

Cassian's journey begins when his exploits leave two security guards dead, bringing the Empire's fist down on Ferrix. Cassian is thrust into the employ of Luthen Rael, who poses as a dealer in antiquities looted by the Empire but who really fancies himself the underground puppet master of the rebellion. Played with relish by Stellan Skarsgård, Rael is one of the show's most delectable creations. He serves as

Imposter Ghazal for Forugh

Time is my enemy. I have so much to say, but Forugh-jaan, I am not a poet.
The watch hands whir. I must be precise, eloquent. But how, when I am not a poet?

My private shame: I only read your work in translation. Is it enough to merely speak a language?
All I can write is انان‌دام. I am inauthentic, a facade. And I will never be a poet.

You were born six months before my mother. You died a year after I was born.
Does dimensional translucence connect us, even though I am not a poet?

If I whisper your name three times over, will you come at the gloaming? I'll brew my mother's tea and
serve ایبلوز, faltering over what I have no words for, proving that I am no poet.

What use is structure if our souls are stifled by the forms they are forced into?
This is not a ghazal, and I am not a poet.

Aziztarin Forugh, I carve odes to poets, but like a moth hovering at the candle,
I am not-never the fire itself. I don't, can't, belong: متسی‌نی ر ع‌اش من.

It falls apart anyway. Forugh, I struggle to find a voice.
Forugh, do you think that we have as many lives as there are branches on trees?

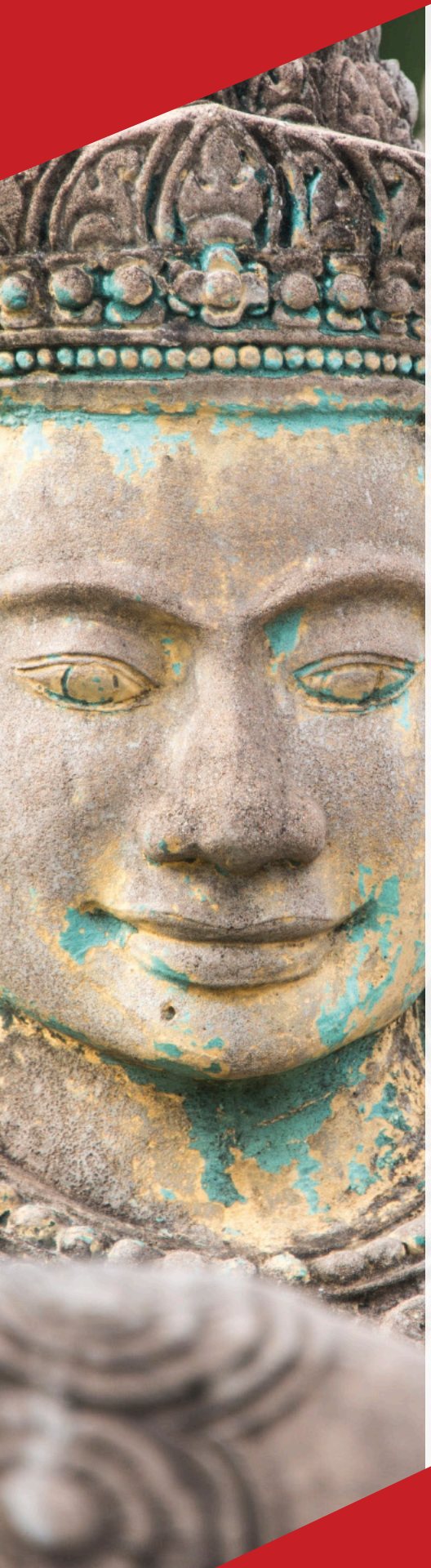
That every lightning strike makes us forget *before*?
That in another dimension, you survive, and we don't leave Tehran, and I become your student?

Or in another, I surrender to my darkness? In pre-dawn insomnia, if I unfocus my eyes, I can see the widening rift, the before place, the after place, and all the geographies in between, where I am I or not I, fractured from reality or perhaps free of it.

Forugh, I am not a proper Iranian woman, nor a good American one. I, cobbled together not with gold but with carbon and failing words, with memories—mine, others'—with raging dreams—mine, others'—fractured from reality, or perhaps free of it. This house is black, Forugh. دم‌ش گم من. I am neither here nor there. I am old enough to be your maman, but I am barren.

No one will mourn me, and I am no poet.

MANDANA CHAFFA



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the Empire's dark twin—there's no line he won't cross, no asset he'll preserve if he sees an advantage for his cause or a disadvantage for the Empire. Rael initially spots Cassian's potential and skills and decides to recruit him, but his own ruthlessness and willingness to exploit others also pits the two against each other.

In his efforts to keep the rebellion growing, Rael collaborates with the militant radical Saw Gerrera (Forest Whitaker), handles a source embedded in the Imperial Security Bureau (the galactic version of the Gestapo), and manages Mon Mothma (Genevieve O'Reilly), the senator introduced in the original trilogy, who struggles to live a double life as a genteel liberal politician and a financier of insurgent activity. But Rael's foray into Ferrix draws the attention of a rising star at the ISB, Dedra Meero (Denise Gough), who begins piecing together evidence of an organized resistance network she calls "Axis." Along with Cassian's journey, *Andor* follows Meero's efforts to expose and eventually target Axis. With every small victory the resistance claims, Meero gains more evidence, and the noose tightens around Rael and Cassian.

If the first season of *Andor* is about conversion, then the second is about the cost of commitment. The series' episodes are clustered into arcs following Cassian's adventures: In season one, there's a heist, a prison break, and a homecoming, and it all ends with Cassian, once more orphaned and dispossessed, submitting to Rael's tutelage. Season two accelerates the timeline, with each three-episode arc propelling us forward a year until the season ends just before the events of *Rogue One*. Cassian no longer questions whether rebellion is right, but he still struggles against the demands placed on him by everyone who sees how important he is to the cause.

The urgency of resistance is explored in *Andor* with a painstaking granularity. The series tracks the ways in which the Empire subjugates those under its rule: the cultural and ecological genocide on Aldhani, the imperial occupation of Ferrix, the use of enslaved prison labor and arbitrary sentences, the charade of checking papers and documentation, the people being dragged out of their homes, the highly targeted propaganda, the imperial armories situated in town squares, and, of course, the fabricated and contrived justifications for military destruction and the loss of human life.

Andor's attention to detail stands out, especially in Luke Hull's inventive production design. Adding to that detail is the horror of a politics not far removed from our own: The primary theme of season two is the Empire's murderous violence and its ecological violation of a people and a planet to extract the resources necessary for a secret project run by Director Orson Krennic, whom we will meet again in *Rogue One*. Ghorman was once a prosperous world, a planet key to the textile industry and united by the organizing efforts among its inhabitants, all new to resisting the Empire. In the first season of *Andor*, the Ferrix uprising surprises the imperial forces, but on Ghorman the Empire goads the rebels into a situation where it can justify their massacre.

Andor asks how ordinary people become revolutionaries.

Though *Andor* is a series where the main character's fate is already known, the individual efforts within and outside the resistance keep us absorbed from one episode to the next. As the years pass, the rebel alliance grows in numbers and stature and organizing capabilities. Soon the more moderate vision of the former senators in its leadership govern what the rebellion will or will not do. Rael, whose efforts kept the embers of resistance alive in earlier years, now becomes an outsider, with methods and attitudes that seem outdated. His style doesn't fit the careful deliberations of a rebellion that now has something major to lose.

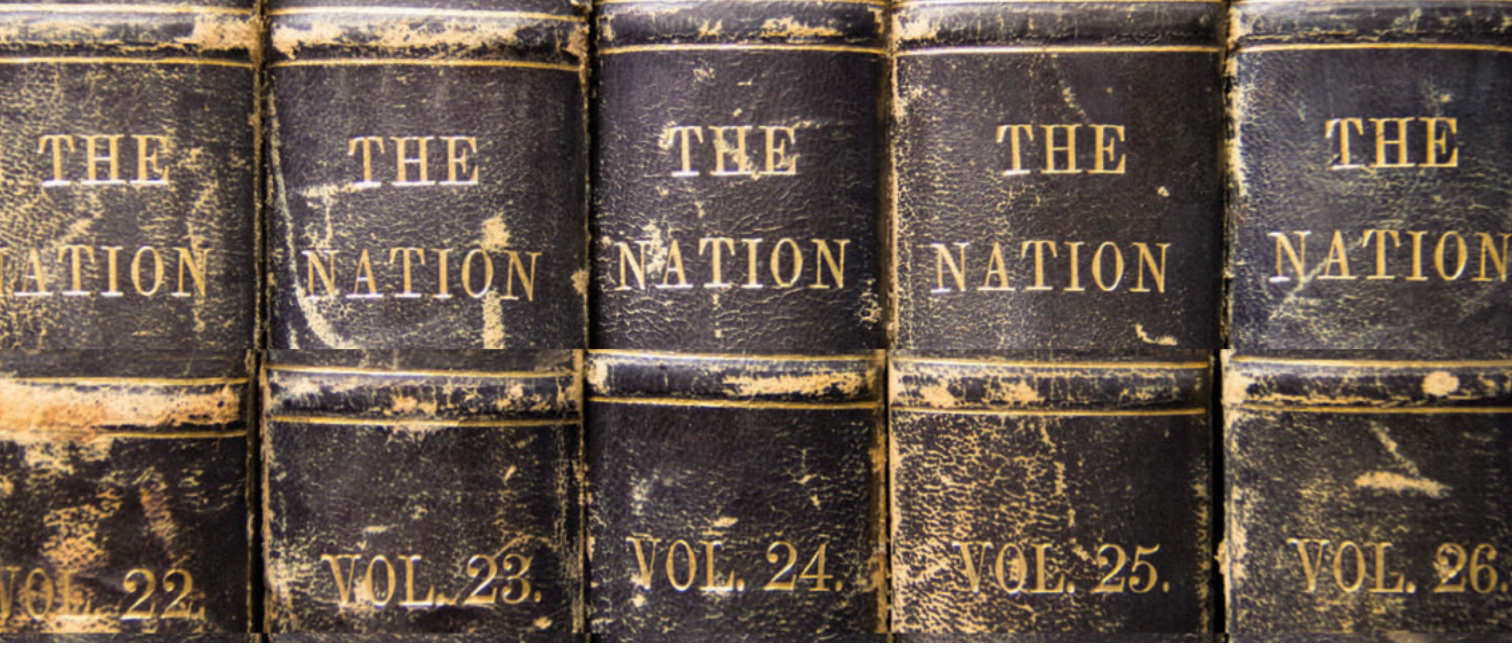
If there are drawbacks to season two (other than composer Nicholas Britell's reduced involvement), they are the moments when the story becomes overly dependent on the events of *Rogue One*, and you can feel the show's rudder shifting so that its ending can also be the set-up for a film. Cassian's destiny is explicitly discussed, perhaps as a way for the series to acknowledge that we all know how this ends. As the series draws closer to the iconic events of the original *Star Wars*, the rebellion becomes sanded down, more respectable, and the franchise's tropes sift to the surface. As a prequel to a prequel, *Andor* gets to be messier, dirtier, more ambivalent and more honest—until it can't. The Death Star is always looming.

In both of *Andor*'s season finales, there is a dispatch, an excerpt from a manifesto, that plays over pivotal scenes. The manifesto was bequeathed by Nemik, its author, to Cassian after his very first mission for the rebels. When Cassian receives it, he is merely a hired hand, someone not ready to hear its message—but by the end of the series, that message will have spread, despite the Empire's efforts to contain it, across the galaxy.

This catalyzing message is broadcast, passed like a blueprint for the kind of hope that makes rebellion possible. Within it is not the power to lift ships out of swamps or to wield a particular weapon in battle, but instead an idea for our own world as much as for another: "Random acts of insurrection are occurring constantly throughout the galaxy.… Remember that the frontier of the Rebellion is everywhere. And even the smallest act of insurrection pushes our lines forward."

The dispatch is significant not just for its content but for its transmission. *Rogue One* took a line from *Star Wars*' famous opening ("Rebel spies managed to steal secret plans to the Empire's ultimate weapon, the Death Star") and turned it into a movie about making the ultimate sacrifice to obtain and transmit information. *Andor* takes just the phrase "rebel spies" and asks how ordinary people become revolutionaries. We know going into the series that Nemik is right, that the day will come when "one single thing will break the siege." *Andor* sets out to depict those moments of defiance, resistance, and insurrection that make such a break possible. It is about the costs of building an insurgency, but also about how empire chews up its own faithful and how the spirit of rebellion foments and passes between people. It is the rare prequel to a prequel that, in its ingenuity, its seriousness, and its artful expression, redeems its descendants. N

Jorge Cotte, a writer and filmmaker based in Chicago, is a frequent contributor to Books & the Arts.



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A Victor Navasky Memorial Fund Event

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Featuring former *Nation* interns Katrina vanden Heuvel, Ari Berman, Luis Feliz Leon, and D.D. Guttenplan. Plus Eric Foner, Michele Willens, Bhaskar Sunkara, and more to be announced soon!

NYC 160th Event

October 30, 2025. Venue to be announced.

Featuring Judy Collins, John Nichols, and more to be announced. Hosted by Katrina vanden Heuvel.

San Francisco 160th Event

November 4, 2025. The Gray Area's Grand Theater.

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