States of Confusion

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Body

I heard it often, traveling around Europe as a journalist. I even heard it from an immigration officer at Gatwick Airport outside London, who teased me as he looked at my passport. I was an American abroad, which meant being held accountable for the strange and fevered state of my homeland, which meant facing some version of the question "What is going on in the United States?" Sometimes the query had an air of schadenfreude, but just as often there was a hint of real concern. The rest of the world already seemed to be going off the rails. It couldn't afford to have America follow.

I didn't really know how to respond. I hadn't lived in the United States since 2003, when The New York Times moved me to Beijing as a foreign correspondent, along with my wife and two kids. We assumed we would move back home soon enough, but it never happened. We lived for six years in China, where our third child was born, followed by four years in New Delhi, where my beat was South Asia. By the time we settled in Rome in 2013, we had drifted into the category of American expatriates. When we saw our countrymen around the city -- big, friendly tourists, a bit loud -- my kids referred to them as "the Americans."

We weren't completely cut off. Most summers, we visited family and friends in the States; the kids streamed the American shows; my wife listened to "Morning Edition." I worked for an American company, for American bosses, and I wrote articles trying to explain the world to a mostly American audience. All of this created the gentle illusion that we were still truly connected to home. Yet as the years passed, I realized that I had lost touch, that the country I left was no longer the same.

The year I moved away, George W. Bush stood beneath a "Mission Accomplished" banner on an aircraft carrier and declared an end to major combat operations in Iraq. Facebook hadn't yet been turned into a company. The iPhone did not exist. I left before Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans, before Detroit went bankrupt. I missed the Great Recession (though I am still living the European translation of it). I missed most of the last two presidencies. I missed Brangelina.

Instead, I witnessed from the other side the global forces that would bring profound changes to America. I visited industrial regions of southern China where the ground seemed to vibrate under the weight and bustle of all the countless new factories. Once iPhones had been invented, it was Chinese workers who assembled them. I watched

Bangladeshi seamstresses stitch clothes sold at Walmart. American consumers benefited from the cheaper goods, but American manufacturers did not. Between January 2000 and December 2014, the United States lost roughly five million manufacturing jobs.

Then I moved to Rome and watched the European Union grow ineffective and paralyzed, as the dream of a vibrant, unified Europe seemed to wither. Democracy was losing ground in Hungary and the Philippines; it had all but surrendered in Russia. Syria became a slaughterhouse. The Islamic State dispatched terrorists around the world. China's politics became more oppressive, as President Xi Jinping cracked down on dissent and nurtured a Maoist-style cult of personality. Economic globalization was supposed to accelerate political liberalization around the world, but instead authoritarianism appeared to be on the rise. The West, it seemed, had failed to anticipate the possibility that globalization could contribute to the destabilization of -- or pose a threat to -- democracy, even in the United States.

This summer, I decided I wanted to explore this place that had become a foreign country to me. I didn't understand what had happened since I left, why so many people seemed so disillusioned and angry. I planned a zigzag route, revisiting places where I once lived or worked, a 29-day sprint through 11 states (and four time zones). I knew I would be moving too fast to make any sweeping declaration about the state of America, and I wouldn't ask people which presidential candidate they were voting for. I was more interested in why they were so anxious about the present and the future. I wanted to find out why the country was fragmenting rather than binding together. Most of all I wanted to see with my own eyes what had changed -- and so much had changed.

By the time I arrived in Washington in late July, the notion that American democracy could come unmoored was not being easily laughed off. Before beginning my journey in earnest, I paid a visit to Patrick J. Buchanan at his white mansion near the headquarters of the Central Intelligence Agency in Northern Virginia. I'd thought of Buchanan often over the last year, as Donald Trump secured the Republican nomination. In 1992, I covered Buchanan during a campaign stop in Macomb County, outside Detroit, when he was a Republican insurgent running for president, the Trump of that era. He mocked Republican elites, denounced free trade and globalization, antagonized minorities and vowed to build a "Buchanan fence" along the Mexican border. Buchanan's nostalgia for the era of white-majority America was often interpreted, not without cause, as barely concealed racism. He lost in 1992, and again in 1996 and 2000, but he always predicted that his issues and his angry coalition would endure.

When I asked if he had any concern about this election damaging American democracy, he said he didn't worry too much about that. He talked about the European Union as evidence of the political dangers posed by immigration and described "ethno-nationalism" and economic nationalism as potent political forces. "I look around the world, and I think all those countries are coming apart," he said. "And I think ours is going to come apart. The melting pot is not melting anymore."

I mentioned that I was leaving the next day to travel along the Texas-Mexico border. Buchanan grimaced for a moment and jokingly offered to lend me a shotgun. I thanked him, and later I flew off into the heat.

From the sky, there is no border. The helicopter thump-thumped above downtown El Paso as we passed over the concrete ditch through which the Rio Grande flows, dividing El Paso from the Mexican border city of Ciudad Juárez. If not for the ditch, you'd assume the two cities were one, a single urban sprawl blanketing a valley between two desolate mountain ranges. Only when we headed west did the border become distinctly visible, a straight brown line jutting into the scrub desert. I could see a metal fence that divided the two countries and, near it, the white S.U.V.s of the American agents on patrol. My colleague, the photographer Tomás Munita, leaned out of the copter to take pictures.

I had been in contact with United States Customs and Border Protection but never thought to mention my aerial tour. A few hours after we landed, an agency spokesman emailed me. He was friendly but anxious: Agents reported seeing someone taking photographs from a helicopter tracing the border. Was it us?

I had gone to El Paso often as a national correspondent for The Times, and I always liked the atmosphere there. Everybody seemed to know everybody else. El Paso is isolated from most of Texas, yet Juárez lies no more than a long baseball toss away. There is a fluid give and take between the two sides, even as the disparities are stark:

Juárez has frequently ranked among the most violent cities in the world, while El Paso routinely rates among the safest municipalities in the United States.

My helicopter ride had come about in typical El Paso fashion: I called a state senator, who connected me to the county judge, who nudged a local businessman to organize the trip. They saw it as a good opportunity to help rebut the 2016 election narrative that the border was a lawless, out-of-control sieve through which illegal immigrants flooded north and wreaked violence upon unsuspecting Americans. The county judge, Veronica Escobar, had grown wearily accustomed to the assumptions made in other parts of the country. "One of the first questions people frequently ask is, Will I be safe?" she told me. "You can tell people that deportations are up and that in-migration is down from Mexico. You can tell people that the border has never been safer. You can provide people with as many statistics as possible -- and it doesn't make a difference."

Escobar, a Democrat and El Paso County's highest elected official, grew up here and considers the city an unlikely oasis of tolerance. She is Mexican-American; the city's police chief is African-American. We had dinner my first night in El Paso, and when I mentioned something Pat Buchanan said to me -- he dared me to drive around El Paso with a Trump bumper sticker on my car -- she laughed. But she worried that El Paso was changing. Even some of her own relatives, people who had moved away from El Paso, have posted pro-Trump, anti-immigrant messages on Facebook. Fear and anger overcame the facts on the ground, she said.

"How did America get that way?" she asked. "I don't know. And it's heartbreaking."

I was starting my journey in El Paso because six months earlier I was across the border in Juárez, on the outside of America, looking in. As a correspondent based in Rome, I also cover the Vatican, so I traveled with Pope Francis' retinue on his trip to Mexico in February. His final stop was Juárez. As he prayed for migrants at the border's edge, I stared through the fence into the United States. Snipers were posted on rooftops; police cars with flashing lights blocked an overpass; agents watched from horseback or peered across the border with binoculars. Presumably some of this was to protect the pope, but I flew back to Italy startled by this show of force, this demonstration of American power and anxiety.

Soon after setting out in my rental car from El Paso, I saw just how thoroughly the Texas border had become militarized. Since I left, the number of Border Patrol agents nationwide had roughly doubled, to more than 20,000, a vast majority of them stationed along the 1,989-mile border with Mexico. They have motion detectors, helicopters, cameras, fixed-wing aircraft and drones at their disposal. Their boats ply stretches of the Rio Grande. Texas state troopers have also been dispatched to "secure the border."

The El Paso County sheriff, Richard Wiles, who has criticized the buildup, told me that so many troopers were present that they often had little to do besides enforce traffic laws. "It is a waste of money," Wiles said. "It was a response to the rhetoric that the border is unsafe. And that is wrong." (A new study by the Border Network for Human Rights found that troopers have been disproportionately stopping Latino motorists in many border counties, including El Paso.) At a convention of the Texas Republican Party this year, Gov. Greg Abbott falsely stated that the Islamic State was "running through the border." In April 2015, the conservative watchdog group Judicial Watch asserted that the Islamic State had a training camp in Mexico, near El Paso. Again, there was no evidence to back up the claim.

Safety feels like a tenuous concept right now, when a malcontent can detonate a homemade bomb in Chelsea or suicide bombers can blow themselves up outside a soccer stadium in Paris. But so much of the safety rhetoric around the border blends legitimate concerns -- especially when it comes to smuggled drugs, money and weapons moving in both directions -- with political opportunism. The rate of people being apprehended while trying to cross the border from Mexico declined in 2015 and is now at its lowest point in more than 40 years. And even as President Obama pushed for immigration reform, his administration approved high numbers of deportations.

One afternoon, I pulled up to a checkpoint on Interstate 10, about an hour or so east of El Paso, near the town of Sierra Blanca, Tex. A Border Patrol agent in a bulletproof vest asked if I was an American citizen while a dog sniffed the rental car for drugs. Less than an hour later, a Texas state trooper pulled me over on State Highway 90 in Presidio County for failing to use my blinker while changing lanes. The road was so quiet that a jack rabbit

hopped across. The trooper asked if I was an American citizen, checked my passport and sent me on my way with a warning. Traffic enforcement.

I had forgotten how big the people are, how big the cars are, how much fried food can be stacked onto a single plate. Everything seemed larger than I remembered, even the night sky. Driving along the 610 Loop in Houston, I saw a cigar shop named SERIOUS CIGARS that was easily triple the size of my grocery in Rome.

"This country is huge," Tomás said one day. "It is like 50 countries all together."

Tomás, a Chilean, has traveled the world, but this was his first long tour across the United States. On seeing one rural road sign, he asked what it meant to "adopt a highway." Another day, another road sign: "Hitchhikers May Be Escaping Inmates." Tomás was startled by how thoroughly so many American cities emptied out at night. In Colorado Springs, we attended a rodeo where the announcer made a long soliloquy praising our military for defending our freedom at home. Tomás had embedded many times with American forces in Afghanistan. He liked the soldiers, but he didn't understand how sending troops to other countries, particularly Iraq, kept Americans free at home.

Before the rodeo, I met two ranchers, Rob Alexander and Bill Craig. The air smelled faintly of horse manure as we sat on a plastic cooler drinking Coors. Alexander, 53, explained that the rodeo was a fund-raiser for ranch hands, who often lacked health insurance or a safety net to help out in emergencies. Ranching families had taken a hit in the past two decades, in part because trade agreements led to the consolidation of many cattle operations and an increase in imported beef from South America. Craig, 35, is a fourth-generation rancher, but he said land is now so expensive and profit so meager that he could never afford to start a ranch from scratch today. They talked like men whose lifestyles and values were endangered.

"Something is wrong," Craig said. "Watch the TV. The moral compass is so far out of whack in our country right now."

At the University of Texas at Austin, I met Lisa Moore, a professor of English and women's studies who is one of three plaintiffs suing to overturn a new state law allowing students to carry concealed handguns on campus. Born in Canada but a resident of Texas for 27 years, Moore is a naturalized American citizen who is still a bit baffled by her new country. "That is the weirdness of the United States to me: Everybody is always talking about their rights," she said, while identity in Canada derives from the idea of the social compact.

Moore is a gay, married mother of two children who teaches courses on L.G.B.T. literature. "Campus carry" infringes on free speech, she argues, by inhibiting her ability to provide a safe learning environment. What if a student becomes enraged by the subject matter and pulls out a Glock?

American gun manufacturers produced 3.3 million guns the year I left for China, according to the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives. By 2014, the number was nine million (supplemented by 3.6 million guns imported into the country). According to some recent estimates, there are now roughly as many guns as people in the United States, maybe even more. To many foreigners, the American infatuation with guns is an inexplicable, if defining, national trait. On a taxi ride in Beijing once, the driver, upon discovering I was American, shaped his hand like a pistol and began shooting imaginary bullets.

At a firing range outside Austin, I met six guys shooting semiautomatic rifles. Several of them worked for Defense Distributed, the open-source organization in Austin that came up with a plastic handgun whose design can be downloaded from the web and produced with a 3-D printer. The State Department ordered the company to remove the design code, but the company is challenging that order in court. For Benjamin Denio, at the time a 36-year-old who worked in desktop support and did product testing at Defense Distributed, being able to produce your own plastic gun is a safeguard against the tyranny of the state. "The term I would use to describe the level of vitriol in the country," Denio said, "is that it is the 'cold civil war.' "

I was running into so many disgruntled people that I began to worry, as I dipped in and out of places, that I was inadvertently being drawn to angry people. I figured I would get a taste of Middle America by stopping in Russell,

Kan., which I visited 20 years earlier when a local hero, Bob Dole, was the 1996 Republican presidential nominee. Walking along the redbrick Main Street, I saw a crowd streaming out of a local theater. Inside, Christina Fowler, a pastor, had just finished services for her nondenominational congregation. Today was her son's birthday, and she invited me to a potluck lunch with the congregation in her backyard.

Everyone sat at folding tables eating potato salad and lasagna. I sat with the associate pastor, Lonnie Whitten Jr., and a congregant named Cindy, who asked that her last name not be published. Whitten, who had a bushy ZZ Top beard and arms covered in tattoos, described himself as a reformed bad boy. This congregation, he said, was moving away from the culture of the "corporate church" and also opposed same-sex marriage. Cindy had been part of a local delegation taken to San Diego for the 1996 Republican National Convention as living proof of Dole's hometown values. "We were treated like royalty!" she said. Now 59, Cindy explained that too many ministers around the country watered down the true message of the Gospel, serving up baby food, not meat. And what was the real message? That homosexuality is a sin. That Islam is incompatible with Christianity.

"It's just a matter of time when someone gives the signal," she told me of Muslims living in America, "and we're all going to be beheaded."

I ate some potato salad, a bit stunned.

My iPhone broke in Baton Rouge, La. -- something to do with the "lightning port" -- so I headed to the Mall of Louisiana. I walked into the carefully engineered retail ecosystem of the Apple store, where a young, friendly, racially mixed staff in matching blue shirts circulated in the showroom. Apple products lay sparsely across the counters like pieces of art. I waited at the Genius Bar until an Apple employee gave me a replacement iPhone 6. Only later did I realize that the Mall of Louisiana had played a not-insignificant role in the continuing struggle over segregation in Baton Rouge.

Living in Louisiana in the 1990s, I regularly visited the capital for stories about state politics. I thought back to 1991, when the white supremacist David Duke made it to a runoff in his gubernatorial campaign against Edwin Edwards, the former Democratic governor who was perpetually under investigation for corruption. "Vote for the Crook: It's Important," his supporters' bumper stickers read. (Years later, he was finally convicted.) Now Duke is running for the Senate, and his re-emergence has coincided with the racial splintering of Baton Rouge.

On July 5, Alton Sterling was shot by the police as he sold CDs outside a convenience store. The police shooting of yet another black man, captured on video, became a national scandal. Twelve days later, a black veteran of the Marines shot six law-enforcement officers in Baton Rouge, killing three, including one who was black.

One afternoon, Lionel Bazile Jr. picked me up at my hotel for a tour of the neighborhood where Sterling was killed. Bazile, a 66-year-old retired postman, is a Roman Catholic and a member of an interracial, interfaith coalition called Together Baton Rouge. It was founded about six years ago, after a prominent black pastor, Lee T. Wesley, led an outreach effort to some white ministers and community leaders because he felt the city was dangerously, if silently, divided. That split became clear when a predominantly white group of organizers in southern Baton Rouge sought to create their own school system and, ultimately, incorporate their own city, St. George. They needed a new school system, they argued, because the East Baton Rouge Parish schools were struggling. But carving out a wealthy area of Baton Rouge as a new municipality would have drained tax revenues from the surrounding city and gutted the funding for Baton Rouge public schools. The new municipality was also laid out to include the Mall of Louisiana, a major source of sales-tax revenue. Bazile, along with others from Together Baton Rouge, helped defeat the St. George movement, but the underlying problems had hardly gone away.

"Now we are crossing Florida Boulevard," Bazile told me as we rode in his truck. "We call Florida Boulevard the Mason-Dixon line that divides Baton Rouge."

Once we entered North Baton Rouge, the historically black section of the city, the road immediately became bumpier. According to Bazile, the neighborhood received only a small slice of the money from the citywide road-improvement project. "You are not going to see too many shopping centers around here," he said as we passed

dilapidated strip malls. We drove by a hospital where the emergency room had been closed down. During our drive, I did not see a single national chain store.

North Baton Rouge had apparently died from gradual abandonment. Most politicians ignored the neighborhood. When crime began to rise, Bazile's home was burglarized four times, and the value of his property began to depreciate. He and his family moved out, as did many middle-class black families. The Mall of Louisiana opened in the late 1990s near the city's predominantly white southern suburbs and soon became a magnet for more public and private investment. ''North Baton Rouge was dying,'' Bazile said, ''but southern Baton Rouge was booming.''

Bazile and I pulled into the parking lot of the Triple S Food Mart, where Sterling was killed. Someone had painted Sterling's image on the side of the store, and soggy bouquets of flowers and tributes lay piled on the pavement. Veda Washington-Abusaleh, one of Sterling's aunts, stood nearby with a protest poster rolled up in her hands. She told me she was out there every day. When I explained that I was a journalist, she began shouting. ''Ain't nothing changed!'' she said. ''It is still the same. I can tell you what needs to change! White police officers need to be better trained.'' She pointed to the spot in the parking lot where activists and political leaders erected a stage in the days after the killing. ''Right where his blood stained the street,'' she shouted. ''It is a political thing for them. But I want justice.''

A lot of people did. Today, Baton Rouge is a reminder of the entrenched racial and economic segregation in many American cities. Nationally, stubborn disparities remain between whites and blacks as far as income, college-graduation levels and employment. The median adjusted income for white households was roughly $71,300 in 2014, compared with $43,300 for black ones. The median net worth of white households is about 13 times as high as that of black ones, according to the most recent figures from the Pew Research Center. John Logan, a sociologist at Brown University, told me that racially biased economic development is one reason these disparities remain entrenched. Black communities have been routinely passed over for commercial projects, like shopping malls, which attract other development projects and lift property values.

On my last morning in Baton Rouge, I met Gary Chambers Jr., a black civil rights advocate and journalist who was a leader of the protests over the Sterling killing. We met at an IHOP, which Chambers picked because the franchise was black-owned. Chambers had become an outspoken advocate for North Baton Rouge and a blunt critic of the city's racial status quo. He blamed the police and politicians, including the city's black mayor. Chambers described his own agenda as being unabashedly ''pro-black.'' ''We are supposed to live in this society where we want everybody to be a part of what we're doing,'' he told me. ''And we do. But I live in Baton Rouge, and it's just not the case.''

To Chambers, the Sterling killing was as much about economics as bad policing. ''Why is Alton Sterling selling CDs in the middle of the night, outside a convenience store in the hood?'' he asked. ''Because we don't have economic opportunities in North Baton Rouge.'' When I mentioned Together Baton Rouge and the efforts to build deeper relationships between whites and blacks, Chambers chuckled softly and then paused a moment. ''They are all right,'' he said. ''They are trying.''

But I could tell he was skeptical. He told me that it was time for the older generation to simply get out of the way. ''I'm 31,'' he said. ''So if you've been in office since the '80s and my community looks like this, then you have some blame. My generation is inheriting this. We didn't create this. So don't tell us how to feel about it.''

A week or so after I left Baton Rouge, the city flooded; some areas were inundated with six to eight feet of water. Parts of the region were declared disaster areas. After I sent a sympathy note to Broderick Bagert, an organizer of Together Baton Rouge, he wrote back: ''We'll invite you back when the plague of locusts arrives, which I understand is expected to be next week.''

I lived in the Bay Area as a teenager, and while it was affluent then, the levels of wealth, along with the cost of living, are magnitudes greater today. Tomás and I arrived in San Francisco late at night after searching for hotels online. A basic room at a Holiday Inn was more than $300. Finally, we found one advertised at $217 a night that turned out to be in the Tenderloin, the neighborhood that has long absorbed new immigrants but has also become the catch basin for the city's poorer residents. One reason for this is that churches, nonprofit groups and city

agencies operate soup kitchens and subsidized housing programs in the neighborhood. But another is the tech money driving up property values in neighborhoods like SoMa, the Mission and Bayview.

This has pushed some low-income people onto the streets, or out of the city, and intensified the pressure on street people to move on, often to the Tenderloin and other commercial neighborhoods downtown. After three days in the city, Tomás and I were dazed by what we had seen: drug addicts shooting up; two people engaging in oral sex, in broad daylight; a young woman vomiting on the sidewalk, unable to digest a donated pastry; homeless people camping on streets that reeked of urine; two old men, wheeling their possessions in dueling grocery carts, fighting midday on Market Street near the offices of Twitter, with one man waving a steel rod and the other swinging a bear knife until the police arrived.

"Homelessness issues are very real, but they are also very symbolic of so many other inequities and stressors that are happening in the city," Peter Cohen, an affordable-housing advocate, told me one morning. "You say, What's the problem? The tech economy is booming. Employment is up. It only becomes apparent when you drill down to the level of the neighborhood. We are struggling in San Francisco, to some extent, with the excesses of wealth that have concentrated here."

In the November elections, San Francisco has multiple local ballot initiatives related to homelessness (which has been a woefully nonexistent issue in the presidential campaign). There is also a battle over the rapidly expanding sharing economy, some of whose largest companies were started in the area. Airbnb, which is based in San Francisco, markets thousands of units in the city and spent heavily to defeat a local ballot initiative last November that would have severely restricted short-term rentals. In June, the city's Board of Supervisors approved some restrictions anyway, prompting a lawsuit from Airbnb. Whatever the outcome, the usual parameters of housing issues -- say, tenants versus landlords -- seem forever changed.

Dale Carlson, a consultant who has played a central role in the political fight against Airbnb, said the sharing economy has contributed to the rise in rents and has encouraged some landlords to evict tenants and convert apartments to short-term rentals. (Advocates for house-sharing platforms say the rentals are vital in helping people make extra money to afford the high cost of living in the city.)

"It's essentially, Who gets to live here?" Carlson said of the political fight. "And who is squeezed out?"

One day, I drove down Highway 101 to Silicon Valley to meet Reid Hoffman, a partner at the venture-capital firm Greylock and the chairman of LinkedIn, the professional-social-networking company, which was then in the process of being sold to Microsoft for $26.2 billion. Hoffman founded LinkedIn the same year I left for Beijing; now he was a billionaire. He is politically active, having supported and advised Obama and raised money for and donated money to Hillary Clinton. I mentioned how the election had become a referendum of sorts on globalization and trade, yet there had been little discussion about the next big earthquake -- artificial intelligence, or the approaching world of ***self-driving cars***, smartphones that can diagnose a melanoma and much more. Globalization may have ravaged blue-collar America, but artificial intelligence could cut through the white-collar professions in much the same way.

Hoffman said the reactions to artificial intelligence range from utopian to dystopian. The utopians predict huge productivity gains and rapid advances in medicine, genetic sequencing, fighting climate change and other areas. The dystopians predict a "Robocalypse" in which machines supplant people and, possibly, threaten humanity itself. "My point of view," he said, "is that it is a massive transformation and does really impact the future of humanity, but that we can steer it more toward utopia rather than dystopia with intelligence and diligence."

Either way, another major economic shift is coming, perhaps sooner than people realize. Hoffman said that many of the jobs in today's economy will change fundamentally during the next 20 years. On the same day I met with Hoffman, Uber announced a pilot program to test ***self-driving vehicles*** in Pittsburgh. It also bought a company developing self-driving trucks. "We have to make sure that we don't have a massive imbalance of society by which you have a small number of people that own the robots and everyone else is scrambling," he said.

Back in the Tenderloin, I met with Del Seymour, a former drug dealer who runs a nonprofit organization called Code Tenderloin, in which he trains local low-income people for the job market. In recent years, the city had granted

major tax breaks to companies that opened offices in the area, and Seymour offered tours to show tech workers their new neighborhood. I joined a small group from Zendesk, a cloud-based customer-service software company founded in Denmark whose headquarters are in the Tenderloin. Its employees had already done volunteer work with a local nonprofit organization, distributing clean syringes to local drug users to prevent the spread of AIDS. It was not the usual tech job.

The tour ended inside the Cadillac Hotel. Jerry Garcia once lived there in the early 1960s, Muhammad Ali once sparred there, and it now has many subsidized rooms for low-income residents. Seymour asked the Zendesk employees to sit in the lobby and praised the company for its volunteer work. But then he pointed out that tech companies hire more than just techies -- about 30 percent of the jobs, he said, did not require technical training. He told them how he was once one of the biggest dope dealers on Taylor Street. He had changed, however, and other people in the Tenderloin could, too. ''Let us in your back door,'' he said, his voice rising like that of a preacher. ''We don't want your food. We don't want your sympathy. We want jobs.''

I was in Detroit, in the August heat, and it was just so weird. Downtown was coming back, but so much else was strangely empty. Entire neighborhoods were practically abandoned, and arsonists had torched hundreds of houses. Wildflowers grew on the empty lots. It was as if the city had fragmented into mismatched pieces. One street was a ghost town. Another was a construction site for a new Red Wings hockey stadium.

''There will be fires tonight,'' Elaine Cromie said as we drove through the city streets. ''That is for sure.''

Cromie, a freelance news photographer, was giving me a tour of the city. Even though Detroit was out of bankruptcy and downtown boosters were pushing a resurgence narrative, the arson fires were still happening often enough that the local media had to pick and choose which ones to cover. ''It's really only news if it is a hazardous-materials fire,'' she said.

We turned onto Goldengate Street and parked near a few vacated houses. Trees still shaded the rotting homes where middle-class families once lived, before many of them walked away from bad mortgages. The emptiness of some streets reminded me of photographs of the depopulated, decaying buildings left behind after the nuclear disaster at Chernobyl. That part of Ukraine has been largely without people for 30 years and is now known as the Zone of Alienation, which seemed like a fitting phrase to describe parts of Detroit too.

Five years back, the organizers of Occupy Detroit spent the winter on Goldengate, but the anticapitalist movement fizzled and the street today is mostly populated by hippies and squatters. It is, in fact, a counterculture oasis, known as Fireweed Universe-City. Cromie was looking for a guy who was supposed to connect us with a community leader, Doctor Bob, but instead we bumped into Zack Zduniak. Zduniak, 26, had simply checked out of mainstream America, which today's Detroit made possible.

Zduniak grew up in suburban St. Clair Shores in an era of diminished prospects, while the local auto industry declined. He liked living off the grid, but it wasn't easy; he was sleeping with his cat in a friend's delivery truck. He worked part-time at a restaurant, sometimes foraged for berries and knew which churches gave out free food. Visitors turned up, often Europeans, some via couchsurfing.com, for a binge of partying or a voyeuristic taste of life on the antimaterialist fringe. ''We just don't want to be involved in this crazy, consumerist society,'' he told me.

Zduniak thought Doctor Bob could better represent the community, so we knocked on his door. Bob Pizzimenti is a chiropractor, urban farmer and the proprietor of the healing center and vegetarian cafe down the street, which was the only nearby outpost of private enterprise that I spotted. Everyone called him Doctor Bob. He bought his two-story brick house six years ago for $1,400 when others were fleeing. He liked that there were seemingly no rules in Detroit. He bought several empty lots around his house and planted corn and other vegetables on them. He wanted a different type of community, something new. He thought America had lost its way.

''We've bought into a system that nobody believes in, but everybody walks around like something real is going on,'' he told me. He added: ''This is real.'' He was pointing to a stalk of corn.

http://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/06/magazine/an-american-in-a-strange-land.html

Graphic

PHOTOS: Downtown Detroit. (MM34-MM35)

Top: A moment of prayer at a lunch gathering of a nondenominational church in Russell, Kan.

Bottom: A campaign event for Donald Trump in Youngstown, Ohio. (MM36)

Top: One of Alton Sterling's aunts, Veda Washington-Abusaleh (left), and Frankie Smith in Baton Rouge, La., near the site where Sterling was shot and killed by the police.

Bottom: The Tenderloin neighborhood of San Francisco. (MM37)

A shooting range near Austin, Tex. (MM39)

Top: The National Mall.

Bottom: A house in St. Clair Shores, northeast of Detroit. (MM40)

Top: An abandoned building in Detroit.

Bottom: A field in Kansas. (PHOTOGRAPHS BY TOMÁS MUNITA FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES) (MM41)

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