OCTOBER 2021
THEATLANTIC.COM

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The Atlantic

[Sat, 02 Oct 2021]

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  The unwritten rules of Black TV -- Hannah Giorgis

Not Enough Has Changed Since Sanford and Son

Most of Hollywood's Writers' Rooms Look Nothing Like America

By Hannah Giorgis

Carl Winslow, the protagonist of the '90s sitcom *Family Matters*, wore his badge with honor. On the show, about a middle-class Black household in Chicago, Winslow (played by Reginald VelJohnson) loved being a police officer almost as much as he hated seeing the family's pesky neighbor, Steve Urkel (Jaleel White), popping up in his home. Carl was a quintessential TV-sitcom cop, doughnut clichés and all. In one scene, he announces that he's just had the worst day of his life: "I was in a high-speed car chase and ran out of gas." The humor did not always break new ground.

The cast of *Family Matters* was predominantly Black, but the series was written and conceptualized mainly by white people. A 1994 episode, "Good Cop, Bad Cop," illustrates the degree to which a Black writer could be

sidelined, even on a show about a Black family. In the episode, Carl's teenage son, Eddie (Darius McCrary), storms into the house, visibly upset about a run-in with the police. Yet Carl insists that Eddie's account of being harassed and forced to the ground doesn't add up: "That's unusual procedure—unless you provoked it." Carl's response is jarring. He may be Officer Winslow when he's on duty, but he's still a Black father—one who ought to know how police in America often treat young Black men. Eddie walks away angry.

Felicia D. Henderson, a Black producer and screenwriter who worked on *Family Matters* from 1994 to 1996 before moving on to *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, *Soul Food*, and *Empire*, recalls the tension in the writers' room when the episode was being workshopped. Television shows are typically written by a staff that collaborates on scripts; trading ideas and criticism around a table is an integral and sometimes raucous part of the process. Yet there's a hierarchy in the room: The senior writers hold sway and the showrunner is ultimately in charge. *Family Matters* was no different. Then a junior writer, and one of only a few Black staffers on a team of more than a dozen, Henderson was at first hesitant to weigh in when a white writer tossed out the possibility of Carl responding the way he did. But the line felt wrong to her, and she spoke up. "I just said, 'Well, no Black father would tell his Black son that,'" Henderson told me recently. "And the room got silent. I mean, you can hear a pin drop." The white showrunner defended the line, and it went in. "It was clear in the room and in the moment that I had offended them," Henderson recalled. "Like, 'What, are you saying—we're racist?' No, but I *am* saying that's not realistic."

"Good Cop, Bad Cop" ends with Carl confronting the officer and reconciling with Eddie. Viewers get the kind of safe conclusion that wraps up a "very special episode": Eddie was right to be upset, because *some* police officers really are racists. Last year, a month after George Floyd was killed by a Minneapolis police officer, the *Family Matters* cast reunited on Zoom to look back at the story line from 25 years ago. "When they wrote the episode, we didn't realize it would be so revealing and telling today," VelJohnson said.

Revealing and telling, yes, but maybe not in the way he thought. For Henderson, working on *Family Matters* offered an introduction to a defining feature of her long career in Hollywood. *Negotiated authenticity* is the phrase she uses to describe what many Black screenwriters are tasked with producing—Blackness, sure, but only of a kind that is acceptable to white showrunners, studio executives, and viewers.

From left to right: Eddie Winslow (Darius McCrary), Steve Urkel (Jaleel White), and Carl Winslow (Reginald VelJohnson) in Family Matters. The sitcom's cast was predominantly Black, but the series was written and conceptualized mainly by white people. (ABC / Everett Collection)

The nature of the "negotiation" that Black writers must conduct has shifted over the years. Half a century ago, just getting Black characters on TV was a hurdle, and Black screenwriters were few. Today, as more networks and streaming platforms advertise the Black shows they've lined up—you'd be forgiven for thinking that every month is Black History Month—it is tempting to believe that Black performers and writers now have a wealth of opportunities, including wide creative latitude for those who make it to the top. This era of "peak TV," in which the entertainment landscape is saturated with more high-quality series than ever before, *has* been a boon in some respects. According to data collected in UCLA's 2020 "Hollywood Diversity Report," an annual study of the entertainment industry's progress,

or lack of it, nearly 10 percent of lead roles on TV were filled by Black actors, likely the closest the industry has ever come to proportional representation (which would be about 13 percent). Shonda Rhimes, as titanic as any creative figure in the industry, is the force behind several of the most successful series in recent memory, ratings juggernauts such as *Grey's Anatomy*, *Scandal*, and *How to Get Away With Murder*. Kenya Barris, the creator of *Black-ish*, has produced comedic series that take on deadly serious issues of race while appealing to a diverse group of viewers.

Yet for all the strides that figures like Rhimes and Barris have made, the power in the television industry still rests mostly in the hands of white executives. The UCLA diversity report revealed that less than 11 percent of broadcast scripted-show creators, less than 15 percent of cable scripted-show creators, and less than 11 percent of digital scripted-show creators come from *any* underrepresented racial group. (These groups, taken together, make up roughly 40 percent of the U.S. population.) At Netflix, for which Rhimes produces shows and Barris did until recently, only 12 percent of scripted-series creators are people of color—this from a study commissioned by Netflix itself. According to a 2017 survey of the industry as a whole, 91 percent of shows are led by white showrunners. Too often, as Henderson put it to me, "it's still white people determining what the Black experience is and then hiring Black writers to 'authenticate' it."

Listen to Hannah Giorgis discuss this story with the TV writer Susan Fales-Hill on *The Experiment* podcast.

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Since its invention, television has shaped this country's self-image. To the extent that we share notions of "normal," "acceptable," "funny," "wrong," and even "American," television has helped define them. For decades, Black writers were shut out of the rooms in which those notions were scripted, and even today, they must navigate a set of implicit rules established by white executives—all while fighting for the power to write rules of their own.

The history of significant Black representation on television is a short one. The medium's racial progress has been like that of most other American

industries: slow, cyclical, uneven. In the early years, Black Americans turned on their TV sets and found themselves written out of the American story—or, worse, appearing only as caricatures. Not long ago, I came across a photograph of the 1963 March on Washington that made clear how starved Black audiences were to see their lives depicted on TV. In the photo, a protest sign, referring to the popular program *Lassie*, reads: Look Mom! Dogs have TV shows. Negroes don't!!

That wasn't completely true. In the 1950s and '60s, African Americans like Nat King Cole and Sammy Davis Jr. headlined variety shows. But the discontent expressed in messages like that March on Washington sign spoke to something bigger than token representation: a belief, at least among the middle class, that most existing television shows didn't account for the political or cultural interests of Black people. At the time, comedies and dramas with Black writers and actors were virtually nonexistent. The few early roles available for actors of color drew on offensive stereotypes and outright minstrelsy—*Amos 'n' Andy*, which aired from 1951 to 1953, was the most notorious example. White television executives were reluctant to sign off on story lines that featured Black people in complex roles or depicted them as a central part of American society. TV advertising was aimed at the white middle class.

In 1968, NBC debuted *Julia*, starring Diahann Carroll as a single mother raising a son while working as a nurse. Julia was the first middle-class Black woman to be featured as the lead character in a prime-time series, and given the show's conceit—she had been widowed when her husband was killed in Vietnam—it might have offered a pointed commentary on the politics of the moment. In practice, however, the series stuck to easy laughs about family life, rarely touching on race except to make jokes that Carroll in a memoir characterized as "warm and genteel and 'nice.'" The show's creator, Hal Kanter, was white, and as he told *Ebony* in 1968, he wanted "entertainment," not "agony." In a cover interview for *TV Guide*, published eight months after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., Carroll acknowledged the show's shortcomings. "At the moment," she said, "we're presenting the white Negro. And he has very little Negro-ness." She would later tell Kanter that the stress of playing a role so far removed from the Black life she knew had made her physically ill.

Not until 1972 did a network attempt something more daring. That year, Norman Lear, the creator of the hit series *All in the Family*, and the producer Bud Yorkin launched *Sanford and Son*, an adaptation of the BBC's *Steptoe and Son*. The show starred the Black actors John Elroy Sanford (better known as Redd Foxx) and Demond Wilson as father-son junk dealers Fred and Lamont. The Sanfords were hardly the archetypal family next door. They lived in Watts, a Los Angeles neighborhood that existed to most non-Black viewers as the focal point of the 1965 police-brutality protests that escalated into a week of violence. The series regularly addressed the racism its characters faced as Black men navigating a post-civil-rights-era America, and the passage of time has not blunted its edge. In one episode, Lamont, who dreams of the stage, is preparing to act in *Othello*. He has the title role—the dark-skinned "Moor." A white woman plays Desdemona. When Fred stumbles on a rehearsal of the play's murderous climax, he pulls his Black son and the white woman apart. He isn't reassured when he's told that it's just a play. "Well you better have the National Guard standing by," he warns.

For many Black viewers, seeing that kind of exchange between father and son in prime time was thrilling, a fact that Lear picked up on when he looked out at his studio audience. By then, he had been working in television for two decades; he knew firsthand how white most of those audiences were. The live audience for *Sanford and Son* was different. "There's no experience like standing behind an audience composed like that—half Black, or half Black and brown, but all kinds of people—and watching them laugh hard, like, belly laugh," Lear, who is 99, told me recently. "I'm very confident that added time to my life."

Sanford and Son soared to the top of national ratings, challenging the long-held industry assumption that white audiences wouldn't tune in to a series about Black characters. To some degree, this was a function of Lear's earlier successes: Fred Sanford drew easy comparisons to Archie Bunker, the blue-collar patriarch of *All in the Family*. Both characters were cantankerous middle-aged men; both tossed around racial slurs and misogynistic commentary. Some of the humor has not aged well. Still, the later series, which ran for six seasons, exposed the prime-time audience to Black performers and Black modes of comedy. Foxx didn't regularly write

for the show, but *Sanford*'s incisive commentary on the indignities and joys of Black life in America worked so well thanks to his training as a stand-up comedian, with a style and sensibility the writers could channel. "He was a lounge act in Las Vegas, and we happened on him and couldn't get over how much he belonged on television," Lear recalled. *Sanford* brought the creative genius of Black comics to viewers who would never set foot in the kinds of clubs where Foxx and his peers performed. The show later pulled in the writing skills of other Black comics, including Paul Mooney and Richard Pryor, and employed Ilunga Adell, one of the first Black writers to work full-time on a network series.

Julia (Diahann Carroll, middle) was the first middle-class Black woman to be featured as the lead character in a prime-time series. The Norman Lear–produced shows Sanford and Son (top) and The Jeffersons (bottom) proved that series with predominantly Black casts could be hits. (Everett Collection; RGR Collection / Alamy; Columbia TV / Everett Collection)

Sanford and Son made possible the spate of Black sitcoms that followed, including others from Lear. *The Jeffersons* had a direct *All in the Family* connection: George (Sherman Hemsley) and Louise (Isabel Sanford) owned a dry-cleaning chain in Queens and had lived next door to the Bunkers. Their own series saw them shine, as business success allowed the couple to move from Queens to that "deeeeluxe apartment in the sky," on Manhattan's Upper East Side. Black writers on the series included Sara Finney-Johnson, who would go on to co-create the sitcom *Moesha*, and Booker Bradshaw, an actor who later wrote for *Good Times* and *The Richard Pryor Show*.*Sanford and Son* and *The Jeffersons* proved that series with predominantly Black casts could be hits. Yet white executives continued to view Black shows as too much of a gamble. They didn't want to risk losing a large, affluent white audience by appealing to what they dismissed as a smaller, poorer Black one. Television therefore remained almost entirely white; to be a Black writer or actor in the TV industry of the 1970s was to face exclusion at nearly every turn. When it came to staffing creative teams, the presumption was that white writers could write anything at all, but Black writers could contribute only to Black shows.The 1980s produced little programming that focused on Black performers, and few of the shows lasted more than a single season. At the time, *JET* magazine published a weekly list of every Black appearance on television, a list that generally showed African Americans playing "comic support" or "minority sidekick" roles. The August 13, 1984, issue included the following: Kim Fields as the precocious Dorothy "Tootie" Ramsey on *The Facts of Life*, Roger E. Mosley as the helicopter pilot T.C. on *Magnum P.I.*, Tim Reid as Lieutenant "Downtown" Brown on *Simon & Simon*, and Paula Kelly as the public defender Liz Williams on *Night Court*.

The lack of opportunities can partly be explained by the waning dominance of sitcoms, where Black writers and actors had made some inroads. Some of the explanation is cultural. Ronald Reagan was president. *Family Ties*, with its former-hippie parents raising a conservative son, was a reverse *All in the Family*, but there was no *Sanford*-style counterpart. On both *Diff'rent*

Strokes, which ran from 1978 to 1986 on NBC, and *Webster*, which ran from 1983 to 1989 on ABC, Black youngsters (played by Gary Coleman and Emmanuel Lewis, respectively) were essentially rescued from poverty by rich white families, a parable of trickle-down harmony. The Blackness of the two boys existed in opposition to the white affluence surrounding them.

The Cosby Show was the great exception. Today, Bill Cosby's name is synonymous with his crimes: The 84-year-old actor was convicted of felony sexual assault in 2018 and sentenced to a prison term of up to 10 years. (Earlier this year, he was released from prison after Pennsylvania's Supreme Court overturned the conviction.) But *The Cosby Show* remains a touchstone. It was one of the few television shows in the 1980s with a predominantly Black cast. It was also hugely successful—among the highest-rated shows in the history of the medium.

By the time he developed his eponymous show, Cosby was a beloved comedian, and had co-starred with Robert Culp in the 1960s drama *I Spy*, a show whose international settings provided a convenient topical distance from civil-rights protests and urban strife in the U.S. Given this background, Cosby had far more control than other Black creators and performers in the industry. He envisioned his new series as a portrait of a family that any American could relate to. "I want to show a family like the kind I know: children who are almost a pain in the neck, and parents who aren't far behind," he told *TV Guide* in 1984. The series presented a rare vision of upper-middle-class Black life on TV. Cliff Huxtable (Cosby), a doctor, and his lawyer wife, Clair (Phylicia Rashad), lived in a Brooklyn brownstone and guided their children toward aspirational excellence—television's very own Du Boisian "Talented Tenth."

Cosby's determination to depict an affluent Black family was radical in its way. For one, it challenged viewers who could only conceive of a Black household that looked like Fred and Lamont Sanford's junk-strewn living room—or, at best, the bootstrapping success of the Jeffersons. But it also pushed back on a pernicious idea that had taken hold among television executives and critics alike: that Black programs must not only be compelling creative productions—good TV shows—but also somehow manage to capture Black life in a way that white people deem "realistic."

Susan Fales-Hill, one of just a handful of Black writers on Cosby's creative staff, recalls a white Viacom executive dismissing the Huxtables as not representative of Black life: "Yeah, it's a good show, but this family is not Black; they're white." When Fales-Hill asked him what made them white, the executive said, "Well, look at that house they live in." Fales-Hill replied, "My mother grew up in Brooklyn in a house that looked a lot like that, taking violin lessons while her sister took piano lessons."

The writer John Markus, who is white and was an executive producer on *Cosby*, remembers the show's star explicitly pushing back against the expectation that his show be "Black" in a way that conformed to the perceptions of people who aren't. Cosby also resisted the demand that a series about Black Americans be about race. The characters occasionally made references to global events, such as anti-apartheid demonstrations in South Africa, but they were rarely seen having experiences with homegrown racism, despite living in a deeply segregated city. An episode that aired close to Martin Luther King's birthday didn't dwell on the politics of the holiday, instead marking the occasion more subtly: A squabble over borrowed clothing is exposed for its pettiness when the family becomes transfixed by King's "I Have a Dream" speech playing on the Huxtables' TV set. At the start of the second season, Markus told me, journalists "wanted an answer to the question 'When will the show get into issues like multiracial dating—like, when are these kids going to date a white; when are you going to do that story?' And at some point I said, 'I've got to go talk to Bill about this,' and I went to his dressing room. He didn't even hesitate. He looked me in the eye and he said, 'You go back to each one of them and tell them we're leaving all of the racial issues up to *Newhart*,' which was the whitest show on the planet."

White executives weren't alone in thinking that *Cosby* was an unrealistic representation of Black life. The series elicited barbed reactions from some Black critics as well. Ostensibly a "positive" image of a Black family, the show was criticized for inviting white viewers to believe that racial progress had already been achieved. "As long as all blacks were represented in demeaning or peripheral roles, it was possible to believe that American racism was, as it were, indiscriminate," the Harvard historian and literary critic Henry Louis Gates Jr. wrote in a 1989 column in *The New York Times*.

“The social vision of ‘Cosby,’ however, reflecting the minuscule integration of blacks into the upper middle class (having ‘white money,’ my mother used to say, rather than ‘colored’ money), reassuringly throws the blame for black poverty back onto the impoverished.”

Gates’s critique and the white executive’s incredulous reaction to the Huxtables’ lifestyle reflected the damned-if-you-do, damned-if-you-don’t dilemma that *Cosby* writers faced: Be Black, but not too Black. Or: Be Black, but not like that. White writers were never whipsawed this way. The characters on *Three’s Company* or *Cheers* were not expected to convey some universal white experience. As even Gates allowed, the problem was bigger than Bill Cosby: “It’s not the representation itself (Cliff Huxtable, a child of college-educated parents, is altogether believable), but the role it begins to play in our culture, the status it takes on as being, well, truly representative.” A television landscape with a single prominent Black series gave viewers a single perspective on Black life.

At first, the *Cosby* spin-off *A Different World* seemed unlikely to escape this bind. The show followed Denise Huxtable (Lisa Bonet) to Hillman College, the fictional historically Black institution that Cliff and Clair Huxtable had attended. When that series was first conceived, it focused just as much on a white student at Hillman (and the bias she experienced) as it did on Denise. Only later did the premise change, with Denise becoming the central character and her white roommate, an aspiring journalist played by Marisa Tomei, taking a supporting role. Throughout its first season, *A Different World* depicted a college atmosphere that failed to capture the spirit and nuances of HBCU life. Jasmine Guy, who played the snobbish Whitley Gilbert, remembers an early script in which students called professors by their first names. “My father taught at Morehouse,” Guy told me. “There’s just no way.”

The tone changed when Debbie Allen, an alumna of Howard University, was brought on as executive producer and director. “When Debbie came on board,” Susan Fales-Hill told me, “she was the one who really shook it up.” Allen was a formidable presence. While Cosby’s show largely ignored issues of race, Allen told Cosby that people on her show needed to talk

about Blackness and about the issues of the day. “I almost fell off my chair,” Fales-Hill recalled, “when he said, ‘Yeah, you’re right.’”

Whitley Gilbert (Jasmine Guy) and Dwayne Wayne (Kadeem Hardison) in the Cosby Show spin-off A Different World. Though it never occupied the place in popular culture that Cosby did, it was far more radical, exploring racism, AIDS, and homelessness. (Carsey-Werner Co. / Everett Collection)

Under Allen, *A Different World* went all the places its progenitor wouldn’t. The series never occupied the place in popular culture that *The Cosby Show* did. But it was far more radical, subtly altering the trajectory of television—both through its handling of race and through the opportunities it gave to Black writers who have shaped the industry in the decades since.

A Different World explored racism, AIDS, homelessness, and rape, grounding its treatment of these subjects in the experiences of characters who varied in personality, appearance, and social status. Denise, of course, came from a comfortably upper-middle-class family. Her other roommate, Jaleesa Vinson (Dawnn Lewis), had enrolled at Hillman at the age of 25, after a failed marriage; she was typically shown working at a job. Guy’s Whitley Gilbert was the daughter of well-to-do Hillman alumni; she had arrived at school with the express intention of finding a husband. Other characters included the playboy Ron Johnson (Darryl M. Bell), the

freewheeling activist Freddie Brooks (Cree Summer), the athletic graduate student Walter Oakes (Sinbad), and Whitley's eventual romantic interest, the lovable nerd Dwayne Wayne (Kadeem Hardison). "What I loved about doing *A Different World* was the diversity of Black people that we had on the show," Guy told me. "So none of us felt the burden of being all things to all people."

This isn't to say that the series avoided the scrutiny of white executives. Fales-Hill remembered an encounter with the network over a scene in which Whitley and Dwayne were arguing about the Amistad, the slave ship whose Black captives took control but were eventually apprehended and put on trial. She recalled, "The network came to us and said, 'You know, can't Whitley and Dwayne be arguing about their date on Saturday night?'"

In 1992, Allen and the show's writers wanted to take on the riots in Los Angeles that followed the acquittal of the police officers involved in the beating of Rodney King. For the white executives to whom Allen, Fales-Hill, and the other writers reported, the riots were dangerous narrative territory. The Los Angeles that the executives knew best looked very different from King's Los Angeles; they saw the riots as an ugly chapter in the city's history, something to get past, not memorialize. Eventually, Allen and Fales-Hill persuaded the network to let them write a two-part episode that directly addressed the riots. Fales-Hill remembered having an ominous feeling after the meeting—as if it had been a Pyrrhic victory. "They backed off, and she and I left that meeting going, 'Okay, Thelma and Louise—we've driven off the cliff here.'"

The two-part episode, "Honeymoon in L.A.," opened the show's sixth season. Whitley and Dwayne are on their honeymoon in Los Angeles, and the couple is separated just as the city erupts. Whitley, ever the sheltered southern belle, takes refuge in the luxury-goods section of a department store; at one point, she pretends to be a mannequin. Dwayne, meanwhile, unwittingly helps some looters. Thirty years later, some of the dialogue feels trite or didactic; Sister Souljah makes a guest appearance to inform Whitley that "they can beat us, kill us, do whatever they wanna do—and get off, just like they always have." But for Allen, the writers, and the cast, the episode was an important reflection of the reality that Black people,

especially young Black people, around the country were experiencing. Getting such raw material onto prime-time television meant affirming that pain—and showing white viewers how the verdict had reverberated across Black households. At the end of the sixth season, the series was canceled.

The writers who came through *A Different World* went on to create some of the most prominent Black sitcoms of the ’90s, a period that proved to be a golden era for the form. Among these alumni were Yvette Lee Bowser, the force behind *Living Single* (the first prime-time TV show created by a Black American woman), and Cheryl Gard, a producer of *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*. Those series ran on Fox and NBC, respectively, and won the wide audiences that more traditional broadcast networks could still command. Opportunities for other Black creators came from the newer networks UPN and The WB. An early example of the market fragmentation that was to come, these new outlets were less concerned with bringing as many viewers as possible to national advertisers. Rather, they were content —in their first few years, at least—to reach specific demographic groups and build intense loyalty.

By the late ’90s, UPN and The WB had evening slates full of Black shows and employed a disproportionate share of the writers of color in the television industry. In 1996, UPN debuted *Moesha*, starring the R&B singer Brandy Norwood. With her dark skin and braids, the title character of *Moesha* was—and still is—a rarity in the coming-of-age subgenre. (While *Moesha* was on the air, and for several years afterward, Brandy’s photo seemed to be tacked up on the wall of every Black beauty salon in America.) The WB was home to family shows such as *The Parent ’Hood* and *Smart Guy*, which mostly served up earnest lessons and tender moments, though they occasionally took on weightier issues such as substance abuse and racism in sports. In 1995, the network also picked up *Sister, Sister* from ABC, a teen comedy co-created by the writer and director Kim Bass.

For Black writers, especially those who’d previously worked only on series with white showrunners, these new opportunities were a revelation—a chance to learn the craft in a space where at least some of the others in the room understood the lives of the characters they were tasked with depicting.

During the season that they worked together on *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, Felicia Henderson and Larry Wilmore were the only Black writers on the show, which had been created by a white couple, Susan and Andy Borowitz. When we spoke, Henderson recalled that much of her job amounted to answering a single question: "Is that what Black people do?" She remembers white colleagues on another show looking her way and asking, "Does that sound right to you?," as though there were a single specific way to be, or to sound, Black. Henderson would reply, "I was at a meeting of the All Black Writers Who Know What All Other Black People Think just last night …"

Henderson later went to work on *Moesha*—a very different atmosphere. Working under the creators, Sara Finney-Johnson, Vida Spears, and Ralph Farquhar, Henderson at last felt the creative freedom that comes from not having to explain yourself: "They made the decision that the room would reflect the people who knew the experience of the star."

Working in such an environment required a trade-off, however. As the share of the audience claimed by the traditional Big Three networks continued to erode, TV was becoming less a single country than a collection of neighborhoods, and the neighborhoods where Black writers were welcome were shabbier than the white ones. The pay scale on many Black shows left something to be desired. A 2007 report released by the Writers Guild of America, West, found that the gap in median annual salary between white and Black writers was nearly $15,000 in 2005. The grim joke among Black writers and performers was that UPN stood for "Under-Paid Negroes."

By the late ’90s, UPN and The WB had evening slates full of Black shows like
 Sister, Sister (left) and Moesha (right). The short-lived networks employed a
 disproportionate share of the writers of color in the industry. (R. Cartwright / Paramount Television / Everett Collection; PictureLux / The Hollywood Archive / Alamy)

Black writers who tried to work on shows that weren’t pitched to Black audiences ran into a familiar double standard: White writers could—and did—work on Black shows. But Black writers on white projects remained rare. Kim Bass recalled being asked by a white executive to rewrite the screenplay of a buddy comedy—with the caveat that he touch only the Black character’s dialogue. Another executive once worried that Bass couldn’t “write white.”

In 2006, after years of struggling to make money and attract audiences, UPN and The WB were dissolved in a merger. The move coincided with the early days of peak TV, when cable networks, which by the turn of the century were reaching some 65 million homes, began producing an array of sophisticated series that have been compared to great cinema and even high literature. But few of these shows afforded more opportunities to Black writers or performers than many of the prestige broadcast series had. *The Sopranos* on HBO, *Dexter* on Showtime, *Mad Men* on AMC—these were shows created and performed primarily by white talent. Even HBO’s *The Wire*, which explored the drug trade in Baltimore and provided ample roles

for Black actors, was scripted primarily by white writers. (The series creator, David Simon, has said that the late writer David Mills referred to himself as the "lone Negro" in the writers' room.) Most Black writers didn't have the luxury of wringing their hands over "representation" or "authenticity," however. They were worried about their livelihood.

On a recent morning, I sat down with Kim Bass at the Four Seasons in Beverly Hills, where he sometimes meets with independent producers who have the power to finance his projects. We talked over breakfast about the ways in which Hollywood has shifted when it comes to Black America, a set of changes that Bass, 65, could not have imagined when he first broke into the business.

During the heyday of Black sitcoms, Bass created two multiseason series built around Black characters: *Sister, Sister* and *Kenan & Kel*, which made the young comedians Kenan Thompson and Kel Mitchell into beloved figures. (Thompson, long a fixture on *Saturday Night Live*, now also has his own series, *Kenan*, on NBC.) *Sister, Sister*, which ran from 1994 to 1999, revolved around twins who were adopted by different parents as infants and then encountered each other unexpectedly as teens. Bass recalled describing the character Ray (Tim Reid), the adoptive father of one of the twins, as a successful businessman whose name graced his company's headquarters. A white executive insisted that no one would believe a Black man could be a millionaire. Ray's corporate business would have to become a limousine service.

In part because of his landmark '90s productions, Bass told me, he hears from a lot of aspiring Black screenwriters, who at last have a significant cadre of Black creators they can reach out to for career advice. For Bass and for others who elbowed into the industry at a time when there were far fewer opportunities, mentoring a new generation of talent is both a responsibility and a challenge. "I feel for each and every one of them," Bass said. He tries to help as much as he can, but he noted another reality: "If I spent my time focused on what everyone is trying to get me to do, well, I wouldn't have time to do what I do."

Some of the biggest changes Bass has seen in the industry are tied to the success of one woman: Shonda Rhimes. Rhimes came to television from

the movies; she wrote her first TV pilot for ABC in 2003. The network didn't move forward with that series, about female war correspondents, but it did take an interest in her next idea: a drama set in a Seattle hospital. *Grey's Anatomy* became an immediate hit—it is still on the air after an astonishing 17 seasons—and one of the rare major network shows led by a Black showrunner. It follows a diverse group of doctors navigating chaos both medical and interpersonal. The staff of Seattle Grace Hospital rarely deals with capital-*I* Issues of race or gender; more often, they are just trying to keep their patients alive and their relationships afloat. *Grey's Anatomy* isn't a "Black show"—it is a mainstream hit that has made careers (Ellen Pompeo, Sandra Oh, Jesse Williams). By 2014 Rhimes had three shows airing back-to-back on Thursday evenings on ABC: *Grey's Anatomy*; the political drama *Scandal*, starring Kerry Washington; and the legal mystery *How to Get Away With Murder*, starring Viola Davis. For a time, Rhimes was producing roughly 70 hours' worth of television annually and generating more than $2 billion a year for Disney, which owns ABC.

Rhimes has spoken about her dislike of the word *diversity*, noting that her emphasis on creating complex characters of color, especially women, shouldn't be thought of as something out of the ordinary. It is merely a reflection of the world around her. But by television standards, Rhimes's approach—demanding a multiethnic ensemble in her writers' room as well as on-screen—was remarkable, and had observable consequences. In the years following her breakaway success, the industry green-lit a wave of new series by and about people of color, a seismic change that has been called "the Shonda effect."

One of those series was *Black-ish*, created by Kenya Barris. The show centers on Dre Johnson (Anthony Anderson) and his biracial wife, Rainbow (Tracee Ellis Ross), as they raise their children in a predominantly white, upper-middle-class neighborhood. If the milieu resembles that of *The Cosby Show*, the similarities end there. Its writers' room has been staffed mostly with people of color. And from its inception, in 2014, the series has tackled social issues head-on, mining family-friendly yet acerbic humor from subjects such as gun control, class inequality, and the question of who can use the N-word.

Peter Saji wrote for *Black-ish* and went on to co-create the spin-off *Mixed-ish*, about Rainbow's childhood. Earlier in his career, Saji had written for other series with less diverse writers' rooms, and he recounted for me an incident that typified the experience. On his first day on a series, a veteran white writer told a joke in which the punch line was a white woman calling a Black performer the N-word. To Saji, it felt like a test, as if his reaction would determine whether he'd be welcome in the room. "That was like my Jackie Robinson moment, right? Like, *I just got cleated—how do I take this?*" he remembered thinking. He didn't voice his discomfort. "In that moment, I felt like, *I understand psychologically what you're trying to do*. And as fucked-up as it is, the onus is on me to do well and not blow this opportunity for everyone that's coming behind me."

By contrast, the *Black-ish* writers' room was, in Saji's words, his Hollywood HBCU. Saji felt he had space to hone his craft and to dramatize the challenges he and others in the room had faced in their personal and professional lives. The series also responded, in something like real time, to the world around it. In 2016, it aired an episode titled "Hope," in which the family learns of the shooting of a Black man by a white police officer. The incident is fictional, but the script evokes the real-life deaths of Tamir Rice, Eric Garner, and Sandra Bland; Barris has said that the episode was inspired by his struggle to explain the 2014 shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, to his own children. Dre and "Bow" differ over how to help their children process the shooting—and the eventual acquittal of the police officer. Dre insists that the police are an instrument of systemic racism, and the couple's children "need to know the world that they're living in" as young Black people. Bow tries to find a way to condemn the violence while preserving their children's innocence so they can "be kids for a little while longer." Barris's sensibilities are idiosyncratic, and the series doesn't always achieve its aims (or land its jokes). But "Hope" is a "very special episode" that manages, despite some awkward moments, to tackle a serious issue without making the entire viewing experience feel like a lesson, or a sermon.

Compared with the handling of police brutality in *Family Matters* two decades earlier, "Hope" looks like a great leap forward. Yet Saji noted that "Hope" could happen only because earlier shows had introduced white

viewers to the subject. Many of the writers of *Black-ish* were aware of the work that shows such as *A Different World* and even *Family Matters* had done to clear some of that space for their own series. The treatment of police violence in *Family Matters* may have been far from perfect, Saji observed, but "I know the kinds of fights they would've had to have to even do that."

Despite the acclaim *Black-ish* earned for its unflinching treatment of race—no less a TV critic than Michelle Obama told Anderson it was her favorite show—Barris felt constrained by ABC and its parent company, Disney. In one instance, he was asked—and agreed—to put aside a story line based on the arrest of Henry Louis Gates outside the Harvard professor's home. In 2017, Barris produced an episode—"Please, Baby, Please"—that explored the fear many Black Americans felt following the election of Donald Trump. The episode was shelved after a weeks-long battle that eventually involved Disney CEO Bob Iger himself. Barris and ABC framed the decision as an issue of "creative differences," but some in the industry believed the network objected to the episode's positive treatment of the quarterback Colin Kaepernick, who had been kneeling during the national anthem before football games to protest police violence against Black Americans. (ABC denied this explanation.) Barris ultimately left ABC for Netflix with three years left in his network contract.

Even Rhimes, the most successful showrunner of her generation, eventually came to feel stifled by network television. Last year, she told *The Hollywood Reporter* that her later years with ABC had been filled with conflict over content, budgets, and even her support of Hillary Clinton's presidential campaign. But the breaking point came in 2017, when a Disney executive balked at her request for an additional pass to Disneyland. "Don't you have enough?" he reportedly asked. Soon after, Rhimes signed a nine-figure deal with Netflix.

The success of Shonda Rhimes shows like Scandal (top) helped pave the way for series like Black-ish (middle) and later Insecure (bottom). Yet even as Black writers and producers have been afforded more opportunities, they continue to hit the same walls. (Danny Feld / ABC / Everett Collection; Kelsey McNeal / ABC / Everett Collection; Lisa Rose / HBO / Everett Collection)

There's a reason Black writers and producers are heading to Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, and other streaming platforms: The business model of streaming doesn't depend as heavily on ratings. In essence, these platforms are selling gift baskets of content; all they need is for subscribers to want one thing in the basket. Darnell Hunt is a professor and dean at UCLA and the lead author of the "Hollywood Diversity Report." "When you buy a subscription to Hulu or Netflix or Amazon Prime or whatever it is," he told me, "you get everything they offer. So from their perspective, the broader their portfolio of titles, the better. If they have a show that African Americans really, really like in a cultlike fashion, and no one else likes, the show may be retained anyway if it draws in enough Black subscribers who might not otherwise subscribe to the platform."

From Rhimes, of course, Netflix hoped for a demographic-spanning hit, which it got in the form of *Bridgerton*. The Regency-era romance series, based on the novels by Julia Quinn, is the platform's most popular original show ever, pulling in viewers from an astounding 82 million households in its first 28 days on the site. From other Black writers and producers, however, the company is happy to have a series that has the niche appeal of a '90s-era Black sitcom. Indeed, streaming services have been snapping up the distribution rights to series from that decade. Last summer, Netflix announced that it would be streaming a collection of Black sitcoms from the '90s, *Sister, Sister* and *Moesha* among them. Hulu put new emphasis on its "Black Stories" hub, which features shows such as *The Jeffersons*, *Living Single*, and *Family Matters*. In August 2020, the Disney-owned streaming service even aired the Trump-themed episode of *Black-ish* that had been too hot for ABC three years earlier.

And yet Black writers and showrunners say they still hit the same old walls. Issa Rae first attracted industry interest after her YouTube series *The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl* became an unexpected hit. In that low-budget comedy, which premiered in 2011, Rae plays a woman named J who makes it through the drudgeries of her post-college life in Los Angeles

in part by rapping to herself in a mirror for confidence boosts. The show was delightfully silly and drew a large, dedicated audience. Rae's J wasn't a hypersexual reality star; she wasn't the silent or sassy best friend of a white protagonist. She was, like the *Different World* and *Living Single* characters before her, just a young Black woman trying to figure herself out. But when Rae was approached about turning the viral hit into a television series, she was continually told by non-Black Hollywood executives that her stories weren't truly reflective of Black experiences. Perhaps they doubted that huge numbers of educated Black women existed (Rae is a Stanford graduate) or were worth catering to. Perhaps they wanted to stress just one facet of Blackness that resonated with them, rather than portraying fully rounded Black characters. At the time, Rae was "deathly afraid of losing an opportunity by being a bit too authentic"—too much the person she actually was.

In the end, Rae was able to portray those fully rounded characters; she had amassed enough influence by then. Her friendship-focused HBO dramedy, *Insecure*, which finished filming its fifth and final season earlier this year, follows two Black women in L.A. as they navigate the romantic and professional pitfalls of their late 20s and early 30s. The women certainly contend with racism and sexism in their lives, but, crucially, those issues aren't the focus of the series. Some of the best episodes came in the fourth season, when Issa (played by Rae) and Molly (Yvonne Orji) drift apart in the painful, all-too-common way of early-30s friendships. The show's emotional center of gravity is the love (and sometimes the enmity) they have for each other. Their falling-out sometimes feels more dramatic than most real-life disputes among friends—this is, after all, television—but *Insecure* accomplished the rare feat of being a series that depicts Black life without pathologizing or feeling burdened by it.

In some ways, Rae's early experience is typical for Black writers today. Many TV viewers first met Lena Waithe when she played Denise on Aziz Ansari's *Master of None*. Waithe wrote one of the show's most popular episodes, in 2017, based on her own coming-out story, and it would win her an Emmy. By then, she'd begun to produce *The Chi*, a drama for Showtime set in her native Chicago. It was a great opportunity, but like Rae, Waithe found that her vision was circumscribed by the executives to whom she had

to answer. “Nobody knew who I was, and there were still a lot of men—a lot of white men—who were in charge, and I just didn’t have any power,” Waithe says of her earliest days working on the show. “And then I won an Emmy and then all of a sudden they’re like, ‘Okay, you can be in charge now.’”

The creator of *Julia*, Hal Kanter, had demanded entertainment, not agony. Fifty years later, Black writers and producers are more likely to encounter the opposite problem. The Black stories that studios, networks, and streaming platforms feel most comfortable adding to their slates require writers to explore—and sometimes re-create—racial traumas. Following the killing of Michael Brown, a cottage industry of police-brutality dramas popped up. Fox had *Shots Fired*, which begins with a Black police officer shooting an unarmed white college student; in Netflix’s *Seven Seconds*, a white police officer fatally strikes a Black teen cyclist with his car. Rae relayed the experience of a fellow Black writer with a series in the works: “In the development process, they just kept on increasing the trauma to make it feel like it was worth watching,” she told me. Racist violence as a plot device hasn’t been restricted to realist dramas; it extends into genre works as well. The Spike Lee–produced Netflix sci-fi film *See You Yesterday* follows a young Black science prodigy who creates a time machine—in order to save her brother, who was killed by a police officer. And then there’s the new horror anthology series *Them* on Prime Video. The show follows a Black family that moves into a white neighborhood in the 1950s; its animating terror is the lengths white people will go to in order to preserve housing segregation. When the trailer was released in March, many Black viewers groaned. Why are Black characters always subjected to racism, even in genre productions? Can’t we have a Black *Jeepers Creepers*?

“When we’re still telling stories that are so focused on trauma, we’re actually still telling stories about white supremacy,” Tara Duncan, the president of Freeform, Disney’s young-adult-targeted cable network, told me when we met for coffee in New York City’s West Village recently. “We’re not talking about what our lives are like and how we see the world and our hopes and dreams and goals and imagination. We’re still talking about what life looks like in proximity to whiteness.”

In May, Duncan also became the president of Onyx Collective, Disney's new content brand for creators of color. She is one of the few Black executives in an industry that remains dominated by white men. A 2021 study by McKinsey found that the bulk of opportunities afforded to Black offscreen talent comes from shows with at least one Black person in a senior role. In other words, the work of bringing on people from historically marginalized groups routinely falls to people from those same marginalized groups. Black people who do make it into the business are shouldering the burden of diversifying the entire industry. Yvette Lee Bowser, who recently developed and produced the Harlem-centric ensemble dramedy *Run the World*, takes that responsibility seriously: "That's one of the reasons I started creating shows. I could actually create my own work environment and kind of dictate the DNA of the room and the experience that people were having in the room."

But for all the prominence of Shonda Rhimes and Kenya Barris, as well as Tyler Perry, who heads his own studio in Atlanta, only 5 percent of TV showrunners are Black, according to the McKinsey study. As for the executive suite, Duncan and the new chair of Warner Bros. Television Group, Channing Dungey, are the exceptions. "Most everywhere else you look, it's a white male," UCLA's Darnell Hunt observed. The handful of Black people with real power can't undo decades of inequity.

Perhaps for the first time, however, an alignment of forces may now be bending toward something better. Decades ago, Black visionaries were up against both market factors and corporate resistance—not a fair fight. But demographics have changed, and so have public opinion and popular taste. For cable shows in particular, ratings among all young viewers, not just those reflecting Black, Latino, or Asian households, are at all-time highs for shows with "majority minority" casts—shows such as *Insecure*, Donald Glover's *Atlanta*, and the Mindy Kaling–produced coming-of-age series *Never Have I Ever*. The television shows driving consistent interactions on Twitter and Instagram—a new coin of the realm in the industry, now that so much TV watching occurs on so-called second screens—are those with casts and writers' rooms that more closely resemble the diversity of America.

To succeed in the country as it's evolving, traditional networks and streaming platforms will need to do more than release statements about their commitment to principles of diversity and inclusion, or to aggregate their "Black Stories" or present viewers with a "Black Lives Matter Collection." For changes to last, executives and other industry power brokers need to continue investing in creative visions that don't match their own. They'll have to cede the terms of "authenticity," and any negotiations over it, to the Black creators whose voices have too long been ignored. Otherwise, they risk rendering themselves obsolete, a prospect that may motivate even those unstirred by the goodness of their hearts.

*This article appears in the October 2021 print edition with the headline "The Unwritten Rules of Black TV." *Lead image*: Illustration by Danielle Del Plato; sources: CBS / Getty; Elizabeth Sisson / Showtime / Everett Collection; ABC Photo Archives / Walt Disney Television / Getty; Carsey-Werner Co. / Everett Collection; Mitch Haaseth / ABC / Everett Collection; Globe Photos / Zuma Press / Alamy; Richard Cartwright / ABC / Everett Collection; NBCUniversal / Getty; 20th Century Fox / Everett Collection; NBC Productions / Photo 12 / Alamy; Everett Collection; Joe Viles / Paramount Television / Everett Collection; Andrew Semel / Warner Bros. Television / Everett Collection*

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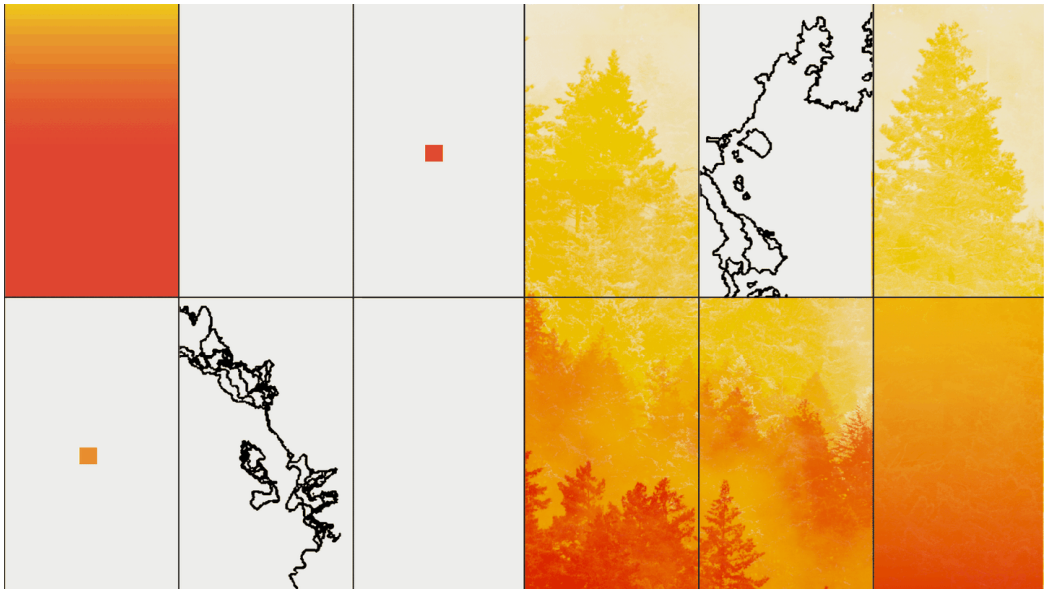
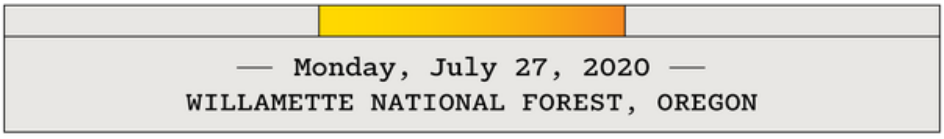


The Battle of High Hill

How Civilians Saved Their Oregon Town From Two Megafires

By Jeffrey E. Stern

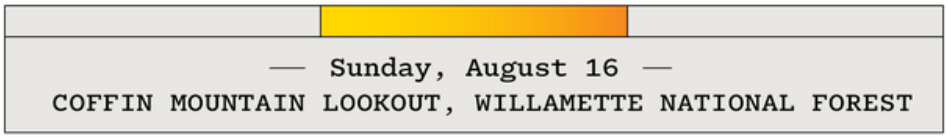


At 6:58 p.m., a network of ground-based triangulation sensors began registering electrical pulses near a watercourse known as Beachie Creek. An electrical storm was passing through. There would be nine lightning flashes in a 42-minute period. The surge of current when lightning strikes a tree instantly turns moisture and sap to gas. Trees can shatter. Fires can start. Pinpointing specific origins can be difficult, but the storm on July 27 is a likely cause of what came to be known as the Beachie Creek Fire. Whatever the explanation, the fire did not immediately make itself known.

In real time—for almost three weeks—no one was aware of it. The United States was in the midst of the most active wildfire season ever recorded, fueled by high temperatures and widespread drought. Global climatic conditions were unprecedented. More than 3 million acres would soon be burning across California. More than 1 million would be burning throughout the Pacific Northwest. All told, wildfires would claim 10 million acres in the U.S. in 2020, more than double the acreage of the previous year.

Many small fires never amount to much. Others hide, nesting underground in root systems and feeding on "duff," a layer of underbrush and leaves that have decayed and dried into slow-release fuel.

The Beachie Creek Fire was hiding. When it emerged, it became one of the biggest wildfires in the country—and was soon joined by another wildfire almost as big. The two megafires, angling toward each other, achieved maximum threat at a moment when most available firefighting resources were dispatched elsewhere. Left to oppose them were the citizens whose homes and towns stood in the fires' path.



At 11:30 a.m., a seasonal firefighter at a hilltop lookout station spotted the first small sign that something was wrong: a thin coil of smoke rising above Beachie Creek. The smoke looked delicate—like fine strands of cotton caught in the treetops. The firefighter called the U.S. Forest Service's dispatch center in Springfield, Oregon. "Smoke report," he said. "Looks like it's in the wilderness area," meaning Opal Creek Wilderness, within the national forest. That was a problem. "Wilderness area" meant that, under the provisions of the Wilderness Act of 1964, road access was limited. No clearing had been done. The Opal Creek Wilderness was thick with old-growth trees that had been left alone. Some had fallen. Others, still standing, were rotted or dead. The area was layered densely with underbrush. Beachie Creek was especially hard to reach.

A week after it was detected, the Beachie Creek smolder covered no more than 20 acres. Even so, officials at the Willamette National Forest worried that it had the potential to spread. They requested help, but little was forthcoming. The forest where the fire had ignited was too thick for "initial attack" firefighters to penetrate. A team of smoke jumpers mobilized in Redmond, Oregon, to parachute in, but a reconnaissance flight found no place for them to land: The canopy was too heavy, the ridge too steep. Next, a team of rappellers was called in. They planned to slide down lines dangling from helicopters into the wilderness area. This time the concern was as much getting out as getting in: No place nearby could be cleared for an emergency landing zone.

A team of hotshots arrived—the most experienced and fearless wildland firefighters. Team members each carrying 40 pounds of gear hiked to Beachie Creek from the nearest road. They spent two full days bushwhacking up and down ridges until they found the fire on the knife-edge of a hill. Fighting fire on an upward grade is something to avoid. Flaming treetops tend to break off and come screaming downhill. Fire kills plants, and dead plants loosen their grip on the soil, sending boulders rolling. The hotshots declined the assignment. For a time, helicopters did bucket duty, dropping water to cool things off. But by late August, firefighters all over the West were overwhelmed. A 20-acre smolder deep in the wilderness was not a top priority. Requests for special assistance came back with the response "Unable to fill." The helicopters were diverted to emergencies elsewhere.

Temperatures in western Oregon were rising at a time of year when they should have been starting to fall. The mountain snowpack, usually still melting in late summer—and feeding moisture into the forest—was already gone.

Ninety miles northwest of Beachie Creek, Dan Liechty watched a drone buzzing high above an excavation site. The company Liechty worked for, D+T Excavation, was grading a lot for a 244-unit subdivision in Willamette Valley wine country.

The drone was gathering topographical data to help workers move earth more efficiently. The brute excavation was done by bulldozers, backhoes, and retrofitted military-surplus trucks from the M809 and M939 series: massive six-wheel-drive vehicles, known as “five-tons,” that could traverse terrain at absurd angles on tires four feet in diameter. They carried water tanks and an assortment of hoses for mixing cement or moistening the soil so that it could be managed and shaped.

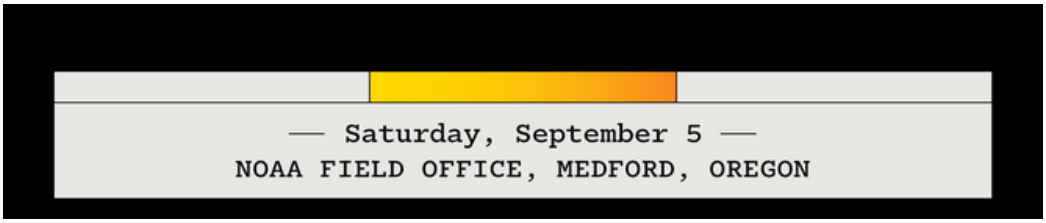
The company had more and more use for the five-tons, Liechty had noticed. In recent years, the soil seemed to be getting dry faster and earlier. The forests were, too. Liechty lived in a timber town called Molalla and spent much of his free time hunting and camping with his wife, Amanda, and their three children. He could sense the change. The smell of hemlock and fir was different—stronger, almost chemical. The snap of fallen branches underfoot was sharper. The air was so dry, it sometimes felt dusty.

Still, Liechty thought of his home environment more as rain forest than as fuel—the same lush ecosystem that had greeted pioneers on the Oregon Trail back in the 1840s. After struggling across the Cascades, most kept going farther west, toward the coast. But some laid eyes on the forests in the foothills and saw all they wanted. Molalla was named for the Native Americans the town largely displaced. Hemmed in by higher ground, it grew over the years, but not by much. The population only recently surpassed 9,500. Timber was king. People worked as tree fallers, or they drove logging trucks, or they turned fir into board at the mills.

But Molalla had begun to change. Conservation efforts had taken many forest tracts out of production. Several mills had shut down. Into the town came a trickle of people—blue-collar workers and coders and sportswear executives—who commuted every day to Portland, 40 miles north.

Dan Liechty in a burn area on public land south of Molalla, Oregon

As he watched the drone, Liechty was anticipating the Labor Day weekend ahead. He was not thinking about a fire in the wilderness. Beachie Creek was some distance away, on the far side of the slopes. Wildfires didn't happen in climates like Molalla's, in the wet, western shadow of the Cascades. Besides, the rainy season would soon blow in from the Pacific.



Hundreds of miles above the North Pole, a weather satellite picked up an anomaly: a mass of Arctic air that was no longer above the Arctic. In the previous weeks, a series of tropical depressions had formed in the western Pacific and grown into typhoons—three in the span of two weeks. They had struck the Philippines, Japan, and Korea, and after hitting the Asian landmass they had spun north toward the pole, knocking the jet stream out of sync and unsticking a disk of cold air that usually sits over the Arctic. It was now on the move, sliding down across Canada, where snow was falling in strange places.

A dish array picked up the satellite reading and relayed it to a National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration supercomputer. The computer combined the satellite's data with information coming in from thousands of other sources—balloons, ships, commercial aircraft, hobbyists tinkering in garages—and generated a weather model. This made its way to NOAA field offices all over the country, including one in Medford, Oregon, where a meteorologist named Brian Nieuwenhuis had just arrived at work for a weekend shift. At 3 p.m. he sat down in front of his five-monitor computer array, saw the latest weather model, and said out loud, "Oh no."

Nieuwenhuis was looking at a once-in-a-career extreme weather event. The model showed a cold-air system that would soon be due east of him. Cold air meant dense air: particles packed together. Dense air meant high pressure. And high pressure meant wind, as air rushed to low-pressure areas. But the problem wasn't just the abnormally high pressure to the east.

It was also the abnormally low pressure to the west. Months of drought and record-breaking temperatures had cooked the air along the Pacific Coast.

Meteorologists who knew the Pacific Northwest expected September to bring gentle wind off the Pacific. The region was about to get the exact opposite. The winds would not be gentle—they would be hurricane-force. They would also be very dry. And they would not be blowing off the coast. They would be blowing *toward* the coast.

Nieuwenhuis issued a "critical fire weather" alert—the highest alert possible—for all of western Oregon. He then started working his way down a call sheet. He called state foresters, the U.S. Forest Service, and the Bureau of Land Management. He called coordination centers that distributed firefighting equipment across the state. Most wildland firefighters in the Northwest—and across America—were fighting fires already. Stretched-thin agencies had canceled time off. On one conference call, a fire manager in Rogue Valley, in southwest Oregon, cut to the chase. If there's significant fire activity, he said, "no one is going to be able to come and help you."

Other fire managers had trouble registering the scale of the threat. After one briefing by Nieuwenhuis, a wildfire dispatch officer asked, "Where do you expect those winds to be?"

Nieuwenhuis replied, "Everywhere. They're going to be everywhere."

As the Labor Day weekend came to an end, an unfamiliar breeze picked up in northwest Oregon. It seemed to be coming from an entirely different climate. In the Cascades, gusts began curling over mountaintops and running downhill to the west, gaining speed and losing moisture as they squeezed through ravines and accelerated through canyons. Trees were soon bending under winds that rose to 50 miles per hour, then gusted to 75 or

more. In late afternoon, hot, dry, hurricane-force winds hit a patch of superheated forest floor near Beachie Creek. The smoldering fire detonated. It flattened and began to run. It threw up so much smoke from old-growth trees holding centuries of pitch that the fire itself disappeared under a smoke screen.

At the Coffin Mountain Lookout, a Forest Service employee was acting as a "human repeater," transmitting radio messages between teams on either side of a ridgeline. She knew that the Beachie Creek Fire was on the move—it now covered some 500 acres. But even though the fire was in front of her, she couldn't see the flames. All she could see was a thickening wall of smoke.

She was of no use up at the lookout. She hiked down to her Forest Service vehicle and drove to a ranger station in the town of Detroit as windblown branches clattered across the road.

At his home in Molalla, Dan Liechty was spending the end of the weekend with his 7-year-old son, the two of them tinkering with Liechty's 1976 Ford pickup. Liechty noticed the wind—from the east, oddly. Spots started to appear on his clothing. They looked like snowflakes. His son made a face. It took Liechty a moment to recognize the spots as fallen ash.

Drawn from various agencies, a government team had been set up to coordinate the response to the Beachie Creek Fire. Brian Gales, from the Fish and Wildlife Service, was the incident commander. The fire was still relatively small, and deep in the wilderness. Gales and the interagency team had found a place to set up headquarters in the town of Gates, along Highway 22, an east-west road through the Cascades. The site was a Christian camp called Upward Bound. The staff had moved in, tacked up their maps, and plugged in their computers and printers. The command post was 10 miles from the fire.

And then, suddenly, it wasn't. The wind became intense, knocking down trees and power lines all around the command post. Small blazes started everywhere. On the perimeter of the campus, the wind drove heavy debris into a chain-link fence. Wires sparked off the metal, and the debris caught fire. Members of the team put on their Nomex yellows, grabbed chain saws, and ran outside. They saw almost immediately that the task was hopeless.

Gales gave the order to evacuate. Staff members ran for their cars. Most had to abandon their equipment. The team fled west on Highway 22, intending to regroup in Mill City, three miles ahead of the fire. Before they could assemble, flames bore down on Mill City. The team fled farther west, to Stayton and then to Keizer. The fire followed, then slipped down into Little North Santiam Canyon, where residents who had gone to bed thinking danger was many miles away awoke to thumps on the roof. The fire was lobbing tree branches like mortar rounds. Embers lit the ground. The sky glowed orange. The fire was growing by nearly three acres a second, sucking oxygen out of the canyon.

Falling trees and whirling branches blocked escape by car. Those trying to run found the asphalt so hot that it burned through their shoes. Some people were overcome by lack of oxygen. The fire would soon claim its first lives. The state forestry office in Santiam Canyon was overtaken and destroyed. Up-to-date information was scant. The firefighters and Forest Service workers evacuating Detroit initially fled toward the fire rather than away from it.

The very nature of wind-driven fires added to the confusion. Although a satellite view might look almost orderly—Beachie Creek's progress was clearly aligned with the wind—to those on the ground, wind-driven fires can foil any sense of direction. Flames seem to move every which way. Trapped gases blasting through pores in the wood generate explosive noise. The wind itself is loud. People standing face-to-face have to scream to be heard.

The fire continued its surge northwest, traveling so fast that local sheriffs skipped two levels of warning and jumped right to Level 3: "GO NOW."

The Beachie Creek Fire spread to 100,000 acres in a matter of hours. And now a second catastrophe was developing.

At the Riverside Campground in Mount Hood National Forest, east of Molalla, sparks ignited the underbrush. No lightning strike had been recorded. The likely source was a human one—a fire left unextinguished by Labor Day campers. The Riverside Fire was out of control almost immediately. Driven by wind, it became a "running fire" with a well-defined leading edge and astonishing speed. Within minutes it was expanding west through the Clackamas River basin.

As the fire moved toward population centers, local fire departments deployed municipal crews to protect homes and businesses in their towns from spot fires. But few firefighters were available to fight the larger wildland fire. The Riverside Fire covered 40,000 acres within hours of ignition. It traveled nearly 20 miles in a single day. And it was heading for Molalla.

Meanwhile, to the south, the Beachie Creek Fire had by dawn grown to 130,000 acres. It, too, was heading for Molalla, pushing north into the foothills that marked a boundary zone between the town and the burning wilderness.

Matt Meyers was having a chaotic night when his cellphone buzzed. Normally he worked as a substation foreman for Portland General Electric, but the windstorm was wreaking havoc in Oregon's largest city. Trees were down, power lines were down, and tens of thousands of people were

without electricity. All of this was happening amid the months-long demonstrations in the city after the killing of George Floyd, in Minneapolis. Some clashes between protesters and counterprotesters, and between protesters and police, had turned violent. Federal officers had been deployed, over the objections of Oregon's governor and Portland's mayor. And then came the wind.

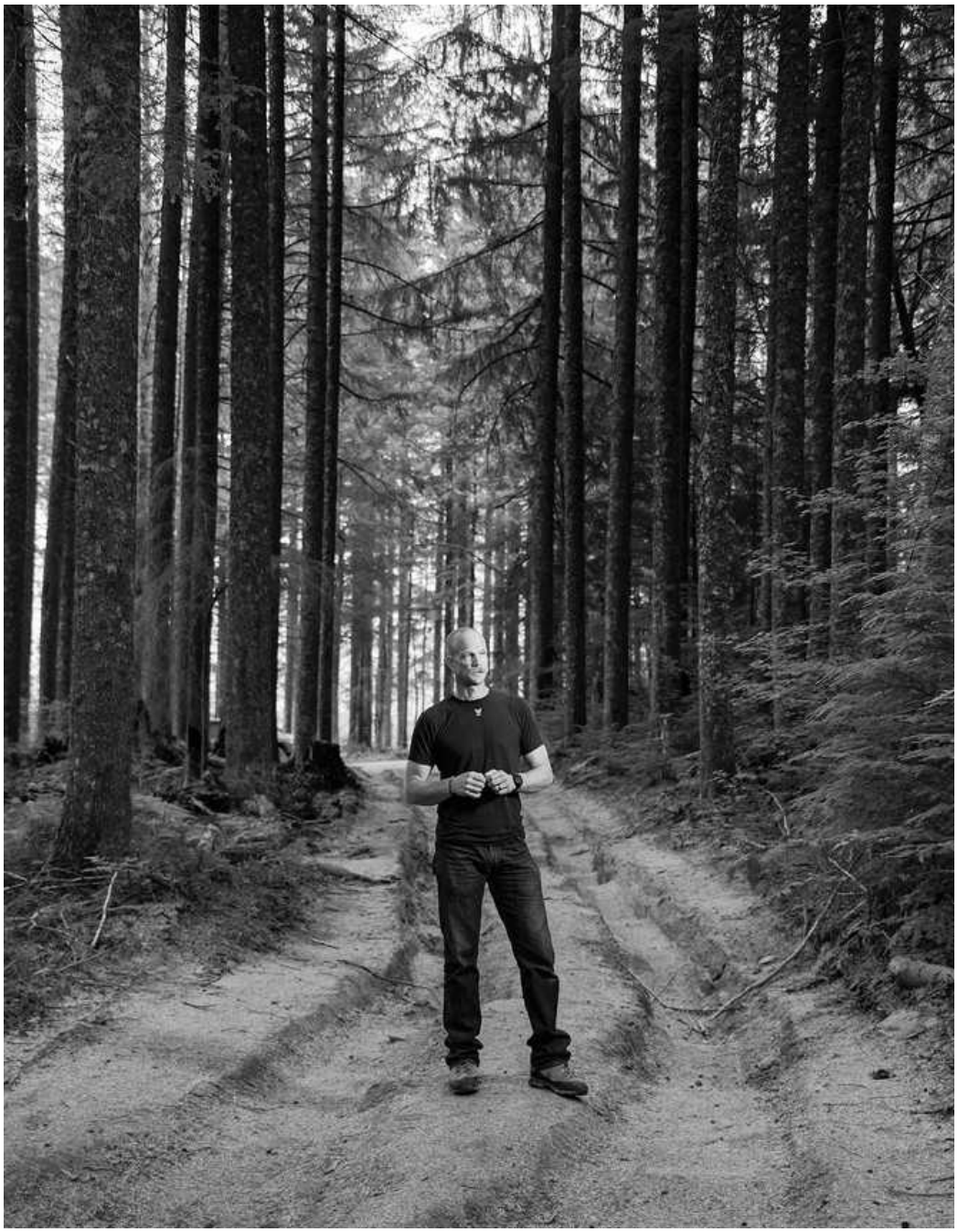
Portland General Electric had a storm center with a "wire down" desk, which forwarded reports to the field. Meyers led a team that took those calls. He was well suited to the work, with his orderly mind and instinct for organization. On the job, he had developed the habit of jotting detailed notes to keep track of his crew. There were a dozen ways to get hurt in an electrical substation, not to mention out in a windstorm with power lines coming down. He logged the problems and logged the personnel, and matched one to the other. He always knew where his people were.

Now, suddenly, in the early-morning hours, he had to leave. His wife, Lacey, had called from their home on the outskirts of Molalla.

"There's a wildfire burning down the canyon from our house," she said.

That couldn't be right.

"You need to come home. They're evacuating the neighbors."



Matt Meyers, one of Molalla's firefighting volunteers. He stands in a bulldozed fire line that helped contain the Beachie Creek Fire.

That couldn't be right either. Fire near Molalla? Meyers had spent his whole life in the forest around the town. You didn't get wildfires in Molalla. Eight months of the year, you couldn't walk through the forest without coming away drenched. There was so much moss that the trees near his home seemed coated with tennis-ball fuzz.

Meyers made the 40-minute drive south, into the intensifying wind. He passed through Molalla's town center and continued up into the foothills, toward his home. Coming over a rise, he saw his property, and the threatening glow just beyond. How could there be fire here? Why was there no official guidance? Why had the only alert come from his wife?

He did not know that the incident-command team monitoring the fire was on the run. He did not know that the northwestern United States had virtually exhausted its firefighting capacity.

Before sunrise, Dan Liechty drove from Molalla to the D+T Excavation site in Newberg. He intended to spend the day on the job. Earlier, Liechty's wife, Amanda, had shaken him awake after receiving a text alert: "The mill's on fire." The mill was RSG Forest Products, a few miles away. Timber waiting to be milled was also burning—a massive pile, 30 logs high and a few hundred yards long. Smaller blazes flared around town, though the full force of the Beachie Creek and Riverside Fires remained some distance away. It did not occur to Liechty that his home was in danger. The mill fire was impressive, but an outlier. The spot fires seemed easy enough to control.

Liechty clocked in at work but couldn't get anything done—he was getting too many calls and text messages from friends back home tracking the fires in the area. Liechty left work before lunch. By mid-afternoon, the narrow road home would be swollen with traffic escaping the other way: tourists in RVs, locals with livestock. A woman who made artisanal cheese drove a Subaru full of goats, packed butt to snout. Some vehicles held prisoners: Local penitentiaries were evacuating inmates.

When Liechty got home, the calls and messages continued. Some people needed an extra truck to move livestock or valuables; others needed help

putting out small fires that threatened their homes or their timber. Liechty went to them.

Amanda called. “Where are you?” she asked. “We need to go.” Above the house, the sky had turned a wounded red. Amanda loaded the kids and the dogs into the SUV. Liechty went home to pack up items from the house. What to take: Food? Photo albums? Guns? He piled everything he could think of into his truck and met Amanda down at the elementary school, where evacuated families had begun to gather. Farmers brought animals to the parking lot, then went back to rescue more. An untethered horse galloped madly across the pavement.

Liechty checked his phone. Brock Ellis, a friend from a prominent Molalla family, was trying to reach him. The Ellis clan sold ranching and forestry equipment, and owned property all through the foothills. Brock explained that a fire was approaching the edge of his property. Liechty got into his truck and drove back up the road.

At his own home, also in the foothills, Matt Meyers, the power-company foreman, was packing a truck. Burning leaves fell to the ground around him. He felt helpless. Meyers called 911 and gave his location. The dispatcher said, “You absolutely need to get out of there.” Meyers sent his family to safety but stayed behind a little longer. If he was going to lose his home, he would at least bear witness.

He would later remember images of the area around his home. A forest tract that had been logged—now a prairie of stumps—had been flash incinerated. Heat from the fire had polished the stumps into onyx statuary. But Meyers’s house survived the night. In the morning, his phone rang. A voice said, “Meyers, this thing’s out of control.” It was Ben Terry, a friend from Molalla who now lived in Missoula, Montana, a nine-hour drive away. He and Meyers had been out of touch. But Terry still had family in Molalla. He also had a small flatbed truck with a 500-gallon water tank. And he had just bought some heavy-duty hoses. Terry said, “I’m loaded up. I’m headed your way. We’re going to fight this thing.”

As the Beachie Creek and Riverside Fires continued to grow, Oregon Governor Kate Brown held a press conference. "Let me start by bracing all of you for some very difficult news," she said. "We are currently facing a statewide fire emergency. Over the last 24 hours, Oregon has experienced unprecedented fire, with significant damage and devastating consequences across the entire state. I want to be up-front in saying that we expect to see a great deal of loss, both in structures and in human lives. This could be the greatest loss of human lives and property due to wildfire in our state's history." Then, later, more bad news: "We are not getting any relief from weather conditions. Winds continue to feed these fires and push them into our towns and cities."

Just out of view of the town, the Beachie Creek Fire had now surpassed 180,000 acres. It was at zero percent containment. The fire seemed to be pausing, as if to gather strength, on the far side of the foothills from Molalla, its leading edge sending fingers toward a summit outside town known as High Hill. The Riverside Fire, also just out of view, now covered 120,000 acres. It was also at zero percent containment.

High Hill became a natural point of convergence for Meyers, Liechty, and an initial group of about 20 other volunteers. They became aware of one another gradually and began to self-organize. To the south, the Beachie Creek Fire had already devastated five towns. Above them, smoke blotted out the sun. All around: ridges that fires could climb, government land laden with uncleared fuel, and timber-company tracts at the exact wrong moment in a 40-year rotation, densely packed with skinny trees not quite

ready for “pre-commercial thinning.” As Meyers saw it, all that stood between the two fires in front of him and the town behind him were, in effect, hundreds of thousands of vertical matches.

Trained wildland firefighters were still busy elsewhere. Helicopters and air tankers were grounded because of the smoke. In the course of the day, the number of volunteers on High Hill fighting the Beachie Creek Fire would rise from about 20 to about 30 and then keep growing as word began to spread through town about neighbors trying to hold a line in the forest. Groups of volunteers mustered in other towns as well, directing their efforts at the Riverside Fire or at different fronts of Beachie Creek. It wasn’t just Molalla that the volunteers were protecting. Only a few miles to the northwest lay Canby (population 18,000) and Wilsonville (population 25,000); only a few miles due north lay Oregon City (population 37,000).

The volunteers had hand shovels, chain saws, and utility vehicles. Bulldozers and excavators began showing up from area companies. But the only water they had was from the 500-gallon tank on Ben Terry’s truck, and that wasn’t going to be anywhere near enough.

Tom Sleight, a diesel mechanic and fourth-generation farmer, solved the water problem with a Facebook message.

During the days of fire, the morning sounds from Sleight’s property became those of a small factory: engines being repaired, pumps being tested, rusted machinery being scraped back to life. Sleight was an apostle of self-reliance, a large, lumbering man with nimble fingers and a gift for tinkering. He was frustrated with the government—not an unnatural sentiment in Molalla. Criticism of forest management was widespread. Sleight’s interaction with federal officials consisted of little more than watching them show up to fence off parts of the forest, then disappear, leaving the fuel load to itself.

The acres around Sleight's home resembled a steampunk sculpture garden. Some of the machines were semi-operational; some were losing a battle against nature. Sleight had a weakness for good deals on things he had no immediate use for: tractors, a bulldozer, tanker trailers, and a U-Haul long past its return-by date, a gift from a friend. Neighbors saw junk. Sleight saw independence.

As the Beachie Creek and Riverside Fires roared toward town, Sleight's brother, Jon, had joined the volunteers. He saw firsthand that, without water, they stood no chance. Jon called his brother. He said, "Those tankers you've got—can you get them on the road?"

Yes, he could. He could get two tankers he'd bought off an old employer, Willamette Egg, on the road right away. The 6,000- and 3,000-gallon vehicles had been used to transport liquid egg but could handle water just as easily. Sleight had a few other prospects out in his yard, but he couldn't reanimate them by himself. He got on Facebook and sent out a call for help. Then he climbed into the larger of the egg tankers, headed into town, broke into a fire hydrant, and drew water from the Molalla water main.

Sleight drove 10 miles south, into the hills, and found a staging area, a patch of gravel near Hansen's Christmas-tree farm. The second tanker would come later. A plan was forming. The tankers would serve as mother ships, feeding smaller vehicles that could take water right to the fire. Now Sleight just needed the smaller vehicles.

He left the tanker behind and rode with his brother back down the hill. Nearing his property, he saw that three service trucks and seven or eight pickups were gathered, idling. As he drew closer, he began to recognize the people inside. They were friends with skills: welders, machinists, fabricators. The Facebook message had worked.

He went to his safe, took out $12,000, and began handing it out. "Anyone who can," he said, "run down to Harbor Freight and buy pumps and hoses and valves." A friend from a farm nearby had dropped off at least a dozen large totes—pallet-size, 275-gallon bladders used for various purposes on farms. Sleight installed a bladder or two in the back of each pickup, hooked the bladders up to pumps and hoses, and sent the fleet of makeshift fire

trucks to the Christmas-tree farm. The trucks filled up at the tankers and then made for the fire.

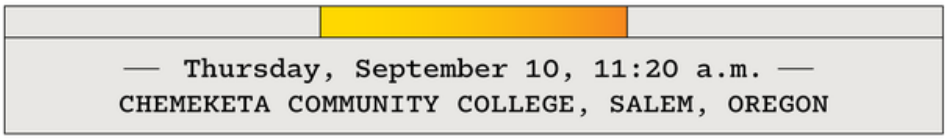
Matt Meyers with one of the makeshift fire trucks—cistern, trailer, generator, water pump, hoses—deployed by the volunteers

A continuous supply of water was going to take more than two tankers. Sleight made some calls. A local company, Molalla Sanitary, filled trucks with water and sent them up to the Christmas-tree farm. A friend of Sleight's had a 40-year-old fire truck that had been repurposed to pump liquid manure for his dairy. The pump wasn't working, but the truck had a tank. Sleight had a friend climb inside and fix the pump.

On High Hill, Matt Meyers had slipped naturally into the foreman role. He jotted down names of arriving volunteers and always knew who was where. As Sleight's makeshift fire trucks began to arrive, it was Meyers who knew where to send them.

A four-wheel ATV became his command post. He laid a map out on the seat. He had three radios. The smoke was so thick, the terrain so steep, and the forest in places so dense that he often couldn't see more than a few meters in any direction. But as volunteers radioed in their positions, he began to get a sense of the fire's shape. He could picture its leading edge, and he knew it had to be about three miles wide. He figured out which parts of the fire would be easiest to reach, thanks to old logging roads, and which parts would be hard or impossible to get to. His overall strategy was simple: Attack ground fire and flare-ups with water—a holding action—and put most of the muscle into digging fire lines. The idea was to block the entire three-mile front.

Most of the volunteers were familiar with the concept of fire lines: removing fuel in a fire's path. Some, like Dan Liechty, had spent a summer fighting wildland fires. Removing fuel meant clearing roots, underbrush, branches, and duff. It often meant felling trees. It meant clearing a path some 10 feet wide and several miles long, and then clearing another behind it as insurance, and sometimes even a third contingency line behind that one.



The interagency response team was at last back in business, having set up at a community college in the state capital. Brian Gales, the incident commander, got his fire-behavior analyst and his meteorologist on an urgent conference call with law enforcement and state officials.

On the call, Gales asked the meteorologist for the forecast. Computer models suggested that the wind, though beginning to ease, would persist for several more days. The fire-behavior analyst weighed in. He had been studying models of the fuel and the topography. The landscape offered no natural holding features. No body of water or clearing. No break in the fuel supply.

The two fire systems were not just moving on an unobstructed path. They were also moving toward each other. They were going to merge. When they did, convection would accelerate. Air and vapor would shoot upward until they reached the colder temperatures high above, possibly condensing into pyrocumulonimbus “fire clouds.” The merged fire could create its own lightning. It could create tornadoes. It could expand in every direction at once.

The experts on the call agreed that evacuation levels across northwest Oregon had to be raised immediately. They sent out a relay of alarms. One local fire chief received word from a state official, who warned of a “plume-driven fire event.” Asked to put that another way, the state official said, “Apocalyptic fire behavior.”

In Clackamas County, firefighters heard the alarm over the radio: “Disengage all firefighting activities.” In Portland, whose southeastern suburbs were potentially threatened by the wildfires, Mayor Ted Wheeler declared a state of emergency. In Molalla, the municipal fire department was evacuated. The state forestry department was evacuated. Police cars

rolled down Main Street, loudspeakers repeating a single message: “You need to evacuate the city. Evacuate now.”

Tom Sleight was calling again. As he worked to keep his water convoy up and running, he had found an ally in Ashley Bentley, asking her to find more pumps, hoses, and valves. Now he wanted a magnetic light to put atop his vehicle. Because of the smoke, up on the front lines, it was always dark.

Bentley had a powerful voice honed as a ministry singer, and a pragmatic and adaptable spirit. She and her husband, Brian, had taken the business his family had built for farm animals and turned it into one that could also meet the needs of suburbanites’ designer dogs. Just about everyone in Molalla had animals, whether livestock or pets. As the fire drew closer, the century-old Bentley Feed Store became a nerve center.

From her informal command post at Bentley Feed Store, in Molalla, Ashley Bentley supplied the firefighters with everything from chain-saw chaps to Visine.

Bentley learned that none of the volunteers had chain-saw chaps. A lot of them were working without hard hats. They were also going through boots fast, because the ground was so hot. She contacted a supplier called Coastal Farm & Ranch; with help from the people of nearby Albany, the supplier provided crucial protective gear. Bentley dispatched runners to other stores for supplies. She sent the volunteers energy drinks. Lotion for poison oak. Lip balm. Visine. Chewing tobacco.

Bentley used older people in town as delivery drivers. Some supplies came from far away. As time went on, donations seemed to arrive from everywhere. Once, several well-dressed women stepped out of a shiny black SUV. “From the LPGA,” one of the women said. The Cambia Portland Classic golf tournament had been cut short because of the fires. The women had hamburgers and boxed lunches to give away.

To keep track of what had to be delivered where, Bentley marked bins with the names of various battlefronts: Redhouse Road, Leabo Road, Ramsby Road, Maple Grove. She filled the bins with what the volunteers at each front needed.

The volunteers didn’t know about the merge threat. On High Hill, they were mostly out of cellphone range. But they were functioning like an experienced team: cutting down trees, digging out duff, and making their way onto federal, state, and private property. Matt Meyers couldn’t provide GPS devices, but he could speak in shorthand that drew on local lore. Meyers grabbed an old friend: “Remember where Brian Ferlan killed his first buck? I need you to take a crew and a truck over there.” He directed another team to “the second Port Blakely gate”—a timber-company tract —“right across from John and Barb’s.”

Meyers began to sense, from the changing map in his mind’s eye, that the team was making progress. Fingers of fire shot up everywhere, but the 30

volunteers had swelled to 60. The number would soon grow to more than 100. One early volunteer had shown up on a small bulldozer, her border collie riding shotgun. Another, a wildland firefighter from Molalla deployed elsewhere in the state, left his post to join the volunteers in his hometown. Meyers had everyone spread out along the hills to positions ranging more than two miles on either side of him. They cleared a dozen miles of fire lines in zigzagging paths in front of the fire's leading edge.

Tom Sleight's makeshift fire trucks—the pickups with the farm bladders—were getting into smaller and smaller patches. That was good. But they couldn't get into some of the most thickly forested areas or up and down the steepest grades. Those were the places where fighting fire was most dangerous, and thus places where fire was most likely to slip through. Volunteers with hoses and backpack sprayers did what they could.

Conditions were difficult. Meyers knew enough about wildfires to know that the greatest risks weren't always the obvious ones. It wasn't just entrapment—finding yourself suddenly overtaken by flames and having nowhere to go. There were gravity hazards to contend with: falling trees and branches, tumbling rocks. There was smoke inhalation, and the danger posed by extreme physical exertion under extraordinarily hot conditions. You have trouble staying hydrated. Your core body temperature rises. Your heart pumps faster. Wildland firefighters sometimes succumb to sudden cardiac events. Sustained physical exertion without rest can cause muscles to dump so much protein into the bloodstream that kidneys fail, and active young men and women end up on dialysis. One of the biggest dangers was simply riding in heavy vehicles off-road; getting to a fire can be as dangerous as fighting it.

Tom Sleight went gunning toward the front lines. He had just heard from his ex-wife, Dawn, who worked at a nearby state forestry office and said that the two fire systems were about to merge, right here, just outside Molalla. Sleight was desperate to warn the volunteers—he knew they'd likely have no idea. The first person Sleight ran into, a mile or so from the front line, was from the state forestry office, one of the few responders on the scene from any government office. Sleight asked if he'd heard that the fires were about to merge.

“That’s just Facebook crap,” the forester said.

“No, this is legit,” Sleight said. “This is from Dawn.” He persuaded the forester to go as far down the hill as he needed to find cellphone service and check with headquarters. The call changed the forester’s mind. Sleight set off to warn the volunteers. The forester set off to warn any official responders.

Eventually the two of them caught up with Meyers, who could reach almost everyone by radio. Meyers didn’t want to believe what he was hearing. He was convinced that the volunteers were finally beating this thing, that they had it under control. The state forester said, “You need to know that these fires right now are so big, and so hot, that there’s smoke they can see from satellite radar as far away as Hawaii. And then it circles up to the north and is dropping all the way into New York City.”

That penetrated. Particulate matter from these trees—his trees—was dropping onto Times Square. By early evening, when Meyers started moving everyone off High Hill, the Beachie Creek and Riverside Fires were only one mile apart. Smoke from the two fires was swirling into a single plume that rose miles above Molalla.

The ping of a voicemail message woke Meyers from a fitful sleep. He was at a friend’s house. He had barely slept in four nights. Still, he rose every half hour to see if flames had reached the town. He figured his home in the hills was gone by now.

Then came the voicemail message.

Dan Liechty, sleeping in a trailer, had received one too.

A few volunteers with homes near High Hill had stayed close to the fire. One of them had come down into cellphone range to report to the team. The fire lines they had dug were holding. The two fires had not yet merged. And it felt like the wind was doing something—changing, easing, just a little.

Left: A bulldozer used for cutting fire lines. Right: Spray-painted numbers marked remote roads to help orient volunteer firefighters.

The Riverside Fire now covered 130,000 acres. Beachie Creek was approaching 190,000. This was not the moment to stop. It was time for one more push.

Before sunrise, up in the foothills, the volunteers gathered.

— Friday, September 11, 5 a.m. —
HIGH HILL, MOLALLA

Meyers was back on his ATV, map spread out, the three radios connecting him to all parts of the operation. He sent local volunteers out to spray-paint

numbers on remote roads and landmarks—guidance for those less familiar with the terrain. There were more such people, as the ranks of volunteers continued to grow. Meyers would get on a radio: “Drive up the road ’til you see the 2 and go down about a quarter mile. You’ll find Brian. He’s on a four-wheeler, and he’ll tell you what he needs.”

On a four-mile stretch of High Hill, the length of fire lines dug by the volunteers grew to 30 miles. The Beachie Creek Fire kept trying to creep over the ridge, angling toward the Riverside Fire. The volunteers fought back. Another crew, on Ramsby Road, to the northeast, worked to contain Riverside’s aggressive reach. As the hours went by, the volunteers on High Hill protected their flank by driving fire lines progressively to the east, holding Beachie Creek in check where the threat of a merge with Riverside was greatest.

But the defenses had a weakness. On the steepest sides of the hills, the extreme grade made digging fire lines impossible. The makeshift fire trucks could not get close enough to direct water at the flames. In one area, volunteers tried going in with bulldozers, but the sector was so hot that one of the machines caught fire. Those steep sides represented a serious vulnerability. If the fire could break through there, none of the other work would matter.

Liechty was working near the crest of High Hill, in a cleared area, when he happened into a trace of cell service and his phone rang. It was Tim Ellis, Brock’s father. He was wondering about the six-wheelers in Newberg—those five-ton military-surplus trucks retrofitted with water tanks, spray nozzles, and hoses. Would D+T Excavation give them up? In all the chaos, Liechty hadn’t given the five-tons a thought. Standing inside that tenuous circle of cellphone service, Liechty called his boss. D+T agreed immediately to send two trucks and two drivers.

The company D+T Excavation sent five-ton military-surplus vehicles retrofitted as water tankers.

Within a few hours, they were on the scene. The five-tons trundled to life. The water tanks were filled. For the first time in their post-military lives, the five-tons had a frontline mission. They could follow the fire lines, wetting down trees and underbrush on either side. They could also bushwhack and make their own trails. Their giant tires and six-wheel drive took the trucks over downed logs and boulders, through the most thickly forested part of the hills, and up near-vertical ridges. The drivers could get the five-tons right up to the leading edge of the fire and into some of the hottest spots. From inside each cab, a lever was shifted that took the truck out of gear and diverted engine power to a water pump. The driver stepped on the gas and flipped a row of switches on a console. Water sprayed from nozzles on the front, sides, and rear. From a nozzle on the roof, it came blasting out as if from a water cannon, reaching nearly 100 feet into the maw of the fire.

The fire lines held. And over the next week, outside help finally started to show up in significant numbers: hotshot crews, state foresters, and U.S. Forest Service personnel. Private firefighting crews began to arrive, sent by insurance companies—a benefit many homeowners hadn't known they'd had. The crews cut burnable vegetation from around houses, sprayed fire retardant on walls and roofs, and filled gutters with water. Everyone relied on Tom Sleight's tankers. By the next week, upwards of 1,000 people were fighting fire on the slopes, in Molalla and other towns. Teams and equipment arrived from beyond Oregon; 260 firefighters even arrived from Canada.

At least as important, nature itself began to cooperate. Wildland firefighters can't "put out" a megafire. At best they can contain the fire until the weather changes or it runs out of fuel. That is what the volunteers had done. Now, at last, the winds were diminishing. Temperatures were dropping.

It would take another six weeks before the Beachie Creek Fire was declared fully contained. The Riverside Fire was not declared contained until December. The damage was without precedent. Over the previous five years, Oregon had lost 93 homes to wildfires. In the year 2020 alone, the state lost more than 4,000 homes, nearly all of them during those few days in September. Eleven people had perished. Many more would have died, and even more damage would have been done, if the Beachie Creek and Riverside Fires had merged. Miraculously, Matt Meyers's house in the hills escaped the blaze. So did Tom Sleight's junkyard. So did Dan Liechty's house in Molalla, along with the entire town.

When the incident-management team working out of Chemeketa Community College looked back at the event, its members understood that disaster had been averted with help from a band of private citizens. Fire officials are vocal in discouraging amateur firefighting—it puts lives in danger. They want people to evacuate when told to do so. But the circumstances involved in the Beachie Creek and Riverside Fires had been exceptional. So had the response. Fire officials explained as much to Governor Brown when she toured the devastation in northwest Oregon.

The governor held another briefing about the state's worst-ever wildfire season. She closed her remarks by highlighting the volunteers who had held fast on the high ground outside Molalla and elsewhere—"the real heroes of the Beachie Creek Fire." The governor's spokesperson later elaborated, citing the "many miles of containment lines" that were dug and hacked by volunteers "when all state and national firefighting resources were tapped out."

Two days after that press conference, Matt Meyers woke up to a morning as dark and gray as every smoke-filled day for the past two weeks had been. When he stepped outside, he noticed that the ground was wet. A month overdue, the rains had finally come.

This article appears in the October 2021 print edition with the headline "The Battle of High Hill."

The New Puritans

Mob Justice Is Trampling Democratic Discourse

By Anne Applebaum

“It was no great distance, in those days, from the prison-door to the market-place. Measured by the prisoner’s experience, however, it might be reckoned a journey of some length.”

So begins the tale of Hester Prynne, as recounted in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s most famous novel, *The Scarlet Letter.* As readers of this classic American text know, the story begins after Hester gives birth to a child out of wedlock and refuses to name the father. As a result, she is sentenced to be mocked by a jeering crowd, undergoing “an agony from every footstep of those that thronged to see her, as if her heart had been flung into the street for them all to spurn and trample upon.” After that, she must wear a scarlet *A*—for adulterer—pinned to her dress for the rest of her life. On the outskirts of Boston, she lives in exile. No one will socialize with her—not even those who have quietly committed similar sins, among them the father of her child, the saintly village preacher. The scarlet letter has “the effect of a

spell, taking her out of the ordinary relations with humanity, and enclosing her in a sphere by herself."

We read that story with a certain self-satisfaction: *Such an old-fashioned tale!* Even Hawthorne sneered at the Puritans, with their "sad-colored garments and grey steeple-crowned hats," their strict conformism, their narrow minds and their hypocrisy. And today we are not just hip and modern; we live in a land governed by the rule of law; we have procedures designed to prevent the meting-out of unfair punishment. Scarlet letters are a thing of the past.

Except, of course, they aren't. Right here in America, right now, it is possible to meet people who have lost everything—jobs, money, friends, colleagues—after violating no laws, and sometimes no workplace rules either. Instead, they have broken (or are accused of having broken) social codes having to do with race, sex, personal behavior, or even acceptable humor, which may not have existed five years ago or maybe five months ago. Some have made egregious errors of judgment. Some have done nothing at all. It is not always easy to tell.

Yet despite the disputed nature of these cases, it has become both easy and useful for some people to put them into larger narratives. Partisans, especially on the right, now toss around the phrase *cancel culture* when they want to defend themselves from criticism, however legitimate. But dig into the story of anyone who has been a genuine victim of modern mob justice and you will often find not an obvious argument between "woke" and "anti-woke" perspectives but rather incidents that are interpreted, described, or remembered by different people in different ways, even leaving aside whatever political or intellectual issue might be at stake.

There is a reason that the science reporter Donald McNeil, after being asked to resign from *The New York Times*, needed 21,000 words, published in four parts, to recount a series of conversations he had had with high-school students in Peru, during which he may or may not have said something racially offensive, depending on whose account you find most persuasive. There is a reason that Laura Kipnis, an academic at Northwestern, required an entire book, *Unwanted Advances: Sexual Paranoia Comes to Campus*, to recount the repercussions, including to herself, of two allegations of sexual

harassment against one man at her university; after she referred to the case in an article about "sexual paranoia," students demanded that the university investigate her, too. A full explanation of the personal, professional, and political nuances in both cases needed a lot of space.

There is a reason, too, that Hawthorne dedicated an entire novel to the complex motivations of Hester Prynne, her lover, and her husband. Nuance and ambiguity are essential to good fiction. They are also essential to the rule of law: We have courts, juries, judges, and witnesses precisely so that the state can learn whether a crime has been committed before it administers punishment. We have a presumption of innocence for the accused. We have a right to self-defense. We have a statute of limitations.

By contrast, the modern online public sphere, a place of rapid conclusions, rigid ideological prisms, and arguments of 280 characters, favors neither nuance nor ambiguity. Yet the values of that online sphere have come to dominate many American cultural institutions: universities, newspapers, foundations, museums. Heeding public demands for rapid retribution, they sometimes impose the equivalent of lifetime scarlet letters on people who have not been accused of anything remotely resembling a crime. Instead of courts, they use secretive bureaucracies. Instead of hearing evidence and witnesses, they make judgments behind closed doors.

I have been trying to understand these stories for a long time, both because I believe that the principle of due process underpins liberal democracy, and also because they remind me of other times and places. A decade ago, I wrote a book about the Sovietization of Central Europe in the 1940s, and found that much of the political conformism of the early Communist period was the result not of violence or direct state coercion, but rather of intense peer pressure. Even without a clear risk to their life, people felt obliged—not just for the sake of their career but for their children, their friends, their spouse—to repeat slogans that they didn't believe, or to perform acts of public obeisance to a political party they privately scorned. In 1948, the famous Polish composer Andrzej Panufnik sent what he later described as some "rubbish" as his entry into a competition to write a "Song of the United Party"—because he thought if he refused to submit anything, the whole Union of Polish Composers might lose funding. To his eternal

humiliation, he won. Lily Hajdú-Gimes, a celebrated Hungarian psychoanalyst of that era, diagnosed the trauma of forced conformity in patients, as well as in herself. “I play the game that is offered by the regime,” she told friends, “though as soon as you accept that rule you are in a trap.”

But you don’t even need Stalinism to create that kind of atmosphere. During a trip to Turkey earlier this year, I met a writer who showed me his latest manuscript, kept in a desk drawer. His work wasn’t illegal, exactly—it was just unpublishable. Turkish newspapers, magazines, and publishing houses are subject to unpredictable prosecutions and drastic sentences for speech or writing that can be arbitrarily construed as insulting the president or the Turkish nation. Fear of those sanctions leads to self-censorship and silence.

In America, of course, we don’t have that kind of state coercion. There are currently no laws that shape what academics or journalists can say; there is no government censor, no ruling-party censor. But fear of the internet mob, the office mob, or the peer-group mob is producing some similar outcomes. How many American manuscripts now remain in desk drawers—or unwritten altogether—because their authors fear a similarly arbitrary judgment? How much intellectual life is now stifled because of fear of what a poorly worded comment would look like if taken out of context and spread on Twitter?

To answer that question, I spoke with more than a dozen people who were either victims or close observers of sudden shifts in social codes in America. The purpose here is not to reinvestigate or relitigate any of their cases. Some of those I interviewed have behaved in ways that I, or readers of this article, may well consider ill-judged or immoral, even if they were not illegal. I am not here questioning all of the new social codes that have led to their dismissal or their effective isolation. Many of these social changes are clearly positive.

Still, no one quoted here, anonymously or by name, has been charged with an actual crime, let alone convicted in an actual court. All of them dispute the public version of their story. Several say they have been falsely accused; others believe that their “sins” have been exaggerated or misinterpreted by

people with hidden agendas. All of them, sinners or saints, have been handed drastic, life-altering, indefinite punishments, often without the ability to make a case in their own favor. This—the convicting and sentencing without due process, or mercy—should profoundly bother Americans. In 1789, James Madison proposed that the U.S. Constitution ensure that "no person shall be … deprived of life, liberty or property without due process of law." Both the Fifth and the Fourteenth Amendments to the Constitution invoke due process. Nevertheless, these Americans have been effectively deprived of it.

Many of the people described here remain unavoidably anonymous in this essay. This is because they are involved in complicated legal or tenure battles and do not want to speak on the record, or because they fear another wave of social-media attacks. I have tried to describe their current situations—to explain what price they have paid, what kind of punishment they have been handed—without identifying those who did not want to be identified, and without naming their institutions. Necessarily, a lot of important details are therefore excluded. But for some, this is now the only way they dare to speak out at all.

Here is the first thing that happens once you have been accused of breaking a social code, when you find yourself at the center of a social-media storm because of something you said or purportedly said. The phone stops ringing. People stop talking to you. You become toxic. "I have in my department dozens of colleagues—I think I have spoken to zero of them in the past year," one academic told me. "One of my colleagues I had lunch with at least once a week for more than a decade—he just refused to speak to me anymore, without asking questions." Another reckoned that, of the 20-odd members in his department, "there are two, one of whom has no power and another of whom is about to retire, who will now speak to me."

A journalist told me that after he was summarily fired, his acquaintances sorted themselves into three groups. First, the "heroes," very small in number, who "insist on due process before damaging another person's life and who stick by their friends." Second, the "villains," who think you should "immediately lose your livelihood as soon as the allegation is made." Some old friends, or people he thought were old friends, even

joined the public attack. But the majority were in a third category: "good but useless. They don't necessarily think the worst of you, and they would like you to get due process, but, you know, they haven't looked into it. They have reasons to think charitably of you, maybe, but they're too busy to help. Or they have too much to lose." One friend told him that she would happily write a defense of him, but she had a book proposal in the works. "I said, 'Thank you for your candor.'"

Most people drift away because life moves on; others do so because they are afraid that those unproven allegations might imply something far worse. One professor who has not been accused of any physical contact with anybody was astonished to discover that some of his colleagues assumed that if his university was disciplining him, he must be a rapist. Another person suspended from his job put it this way: "Someone who knows me, but maybe doesn't know my soul or character, may be saying to themselves that prudence would dictate they keep their distance, lest they become collateral damage."

Here is the second thing that happens, closely related to the first: Even if you have not been suspended, punished, or found guilty of anything, you cannot function in your profession. If you are a professor, no one wants you as a teacher or mentor ("The graduate students made it obvious to me that I was a nonperson and could not possibly be tolerated"). You cannot publish in professional journals. You cannot quit your job, because no one else will hire you. If you are a journalist, then you might find that you cannot publish at all. After losing his job as editor of *The New York Review of Books* in a #MeToo-related editorial dispute—he was not accused of assault, just of printing an article by someone who was—Ian Buruma discovered that several of the magazines where he had been writing for three decades would not publish him any longer. One editor said something about "younger staff" at his magazine. Although a group of more than 100 *New York Review of Books* contributors—among them Joyce Carol Oates, Ian McEwan, Ariel Dorfman, Caryl Phillips, Alfred Brendel (and me)—had signed a public letter in Buruma's defense, this editor evidently feared his colleagues more than he did Joyce Carol Oates.

For many, intellectual and professional life grinds to a halt. “I was doing the best work in my life when I heard of this investigation happening,” one academic told me. “It all stopped. I have not written another paper since.” Peter Ludlow, a philosophy professor at Northwestern (and the subject of Laura Kipnis’s book), lost two book contracts after the university forced him out of his job for two alleged instances of sexual harassment, which he

denies. Other philosophers would not allow their articles to appear in the same volume as one of his. After Daniel Elder, a prizewinning composer (and a political liberal) posted a statement on Instagram condemning arson in his hometown of Nashville, where Black Lives Matter protesters had set the courthouse on fire after the killing of George Floyd, he discovered that his publisher would not print his music and choirs would not sing it. After the poet Joseph Massey was accused of "harassment and manipulation" by women he'd been romantically involved with, the Academy of American Poets removed all of his poetry from its website, and his publishers removed his books from theirs. Stephen Elliott, a journalist and critic who was accused of rape on the anonymous "Shitty Media Men" list that circulated on the internet at the height of the #MeToo conversation—he is now suing that list's creator for defamation—has written that, in the aftermath, a published collection of his essays vanished without a trace: Reviews were canceled; *The Paris Review* aborted a planned interview with him; he was disinvited from book panels, readings, and other events.

For some people, this can result in a catastrophic loss of income. Ludlow moved to Mexico, because he could live more cheaply there. For others, it can create a kind of identity crisis. After describing the various jobs he had held in the months since being suspended from his teaching job, one of the academics I interviewed seemed to choke up. "I am really only good at one thing," he told me, pointing at mathematical formulas on a blackboard behind him: "this."

Sometimes advocates of the new mob justice claim that these are minor punishments, that the loss of a job is not serious, that people should be able to accept their situation and move on. But isolation plus public shaming plus loss of income are severe sanctions for adults, with long-term personal and psychological repercussions—especially because the "sentences" in these cases are of indeterminate length. Elliott contemplated suicide, and has written that "every first-hand account I've read of public shaming—and I've read more than my share—includes thoughts of suicide." Massey did too: "I had a plan and the means to execute it; I then had a panic attack and took a cab to the ER." David Bucci, the former chair of the Dartmouth brain-sciences department, who was named in a lawsuit against the college

though he was not accused of any sexual misconduct, did kill himself after he realized he might never be able to restore his reputation.

Others have changed their attitudes toward their professions. “I wake up every morning afraid to teach,” one academic told me: The university campus that he once loved has become a hazardous jungle, full of traps. Nicholas Christakis, the Yale professor of medicine and sociology who was at the center of a campus and social-media storm in 2015, is also an expert on the functioning of human social groups. He reminded me that ostracism “was considered an enormous sanction in ancient times—to be cast out of your group was deadly.” It is unsurprising, he said, that people in these situations would consider suicide.

The third thing that happens is that you try to apologize, whether or not you have done anything wrong. Robert George, a Princeton philosopher who has acted as a faculty advocate for students and professors who have fallen into legal or administrative difficulties, describes the phenomenon like this: “They have been popular and successful their whole lives; that’s how they climbed the ladder to their academic positions, at least in places like the one I teach. And then suddenly there is this terrible feeling of *Everybody hates me* … So what do they do? More often than not, they just cave in.” One of the people I spoke with was asked to apologize for an offense that broke no existing rules. “I said, ‘What am I apologizing for?’ And they said, ‘Well, their feelings were hurt.’ So I crafted my apology around that: ‘If I did say something that upset you, I didn’t anticipate that would happen.’” The apology was initially accepted, but his problems didn’t end.

This is typical: More often than not, apologies will be parsed, examined for “sincerity”—and then rejected. Howard Bauchner, the editor of *the Journal of the American Medical Association*, apologized for something he’d had nothing directly to do with, after one of his colleagues made controversial comments on a podcast and on Twitter about whether communities of color were held back more by “structural racism” or by socioeconomic factors. “I remain profoundly disappointed in myself for the lapses that led to the publishing of the tweet and podcast,” Bauchner wrote. “Although I did not write or even see the tweet, or create the podcast, as editor in chief, I am ultimately responsible for them.” He wound up resigning. But this, too, is

now typical: Because apologies have become ritualized, they invariably seem insincere. Websites now offer "sample templates" for people who need to apologize; some universities offer advice on how to apologize to students and employees, and even include lists of good words to use (*mistake*, *misunderstand*, *misinterpret*).

Not that everyone really wants an apology. One former journalist told me that his ex-colleagues "don't want to endorse the process of mistake/apology/understanding/forgiveness—they don't want to forgive." Instead, he said, they want "to punish and purify." But the knowledge that whatever you say will never be enough is debilitating. "If you make an apology and you know in advance that your apology will not be accepted—that it is going to be considered a move in a psychological or cultural or political game—then the integrity of your introspection is being mocked and you feel permanently marooned in a world of unforgivingness," one person told me. "And that is a truly unethical world." Elder's music publishers asked him to make a groveling apology—they even went so far as to write it for him—but he refused.

Even after the apology is made, a fourth thing happens: People begin to investigate you. One person I spoke with told me he believed he was investigated because his employer didn't want to offer severance compensation and needed extra reasons to justify his termination. Another thought an investigation of him was launched because firing him for an argument over language would have violated the union contract. Long careers almost always include episodes of disagreement or ambiguity. Was that time he hugged a colleague in consolation really something else? Was her joke really a joke, or something worse? Nobody is perfect; nobody is pure; and once people set out to interpret ambiguous incidents in a particular way, it's not hard to find new evidence.

Sometimes investigations take place because someone in the community feels that you haven't paid a high enough price for whatever it is you have done or said. Last year Joshua Katz, a popular Princeton classics professor, wrote an article critical of a letter published by a group of Princeton faculty on race. In response *The Daily Princetonian*, a student newspaper, spent seven months investigating his past relationships with students, eventually

convincing university officials to relitigate incidents from years earlier that had already been adjudicated—a classic breach of James Madison's belief that no one should be punished for the same thing twice. The *Daily Princetonian* investigation looks more like an attempt to ostracize a professor guilty of wrong-think than an attempt to bring resolution to a case of alleged misbehavior.

Mike Pesca, a podcaster for *Slate*, got into a debate with his colleagues on his company's internal Slack message board about whether it is acceptable to pronounce a racial slur out loud when reporting on the use of a racial slur—an action that, he says, was not against any company rules at the time. After a meeting of the editorial staff held soon afterward to discuss the incident—to which Pesca himself was not invited—the company launched an investigation to find out whether there were other things he might have done wrong. (According to a statement by a *Slate* spokesperson, the investigation was prompted by more than just "an isolated abstract argument in a Slack channel.") Amy Chua, the Yale Law professor and author of *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, told me she believes that investigations into her relationships with students were sparked by her personal connections to Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh.

Many of these investigations involve anonymous reports or complaints, some of which can come as a total surprise to those being reported upon. By definition, social-media mobs involve anonymous accounts that amplify unverified stories with "likes" and shares. The "Shitty Media Men" list was an anonymous collection of unverified accusations that became public. Procedures at many universities actually mandate anonymity in the early stages of an investigation. Sometimes even the accused isn't given any of the details. Chua's husband, the Yale Law professor Jed Rubenfeld, who was suspended from teaching due to sexual-harassment allegations (which he denies), says he did not know the names of his accusers or the nature of the accusations against him for a year and a half.

Kipnis, who was accused of sexual misconduct because she wrote about sexual harassment, was not initially allowed to know who her accusers were either, nor would anyone explain the rules governing her case. Nor, for that matter, were the rules clear to the people applying them, because, as she

wrote in *Unwanted Advances*, "there's no established or nationally uniform set of procedures." On top of all that, Kipnis was supposed to keep the whole thing confidential: "I'd been plunged into an underground world of secret tribunals and capricious, medieval rules, and I wasn't supposed to tell anyone about it," she wrote. This chimes with the story of another academic, who told me that his university "never even talked to me before it decided to actually punish me. They read the reports from the investigators, but they never brought me in a room, they never called me on the phone, so that I could say anything about my side of the story. And they openly told me that I was being punished based on allegations. Just because they didn't find evidence of it, they told me, doesn't mean it didn't happen."

Secretive procedures that take place outside the law and leave the accused feeling helpless and isolated have been an element of control in authoritarian regimes across the centuries, from the Argentine junta to Franco's Spain. Stalin created "troikas"—ad hoc, extrajudicial bodies that heard dozens of cases in a day. During China's Cultural Revolution, Mao empowered students to create revolutionary committees to attack and swiftly remove professors. In both instances, people used these unregulated forms of "justice" to pursue personal grudges or gain professional advantage. In *The Whisperers*, his book on Stalinist culture, the historian Orlando Figes cites many such cases, among them Nikolai Sakharov, who wound up in prison because somebody fancied his wife; Ivan Malygin, who was denounced by somebody jealous of his success; and Lipa Kaplan, sent to a labor camp for 10 years after she refused the sexual advances of her boss. The sociologist Andrew Walder has revealed how the Cultural Revolution in Beijing was shaped by power competitions between rival student leaders.

This pattern is now repeating itself in the U.S. Many of those I spoke with told complicated stories about the ways in which anonymous procedures had been used by people who disliked them, felt competitive with them, or held some kind of personal or professional grudge. One described an intellectual rivalry with a university administrator, dating back to graduate school—the same administrator who had played a role in having him suspended. Another attributed a series of problems to a former student, now a colleague, who had long seen him as a rival. A third thought that one of

his colleagues resented having to work with him and would have preferred a different job. A fourth reckoned that he had underestimated the professional frustrations of younger colleagues who felt stifled by his organization's hierarchies. All of them believe that personal grudges help explain why they were singled out.

The motivations could be even more petty than that. The writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie recently described how two younger writers she had befriended attacked her on social media, partly, she wrote, because they are "seeking attention and publicity to benefit themselves." Once it becomes clear that attention and praise can be garnered from organizing an attack on someone's reputation, plenty of people discover that they have an interest in doing so.

America remains a safe distance from Mao's China or Stalin's Russia. Neither our secretive university committees nor the social-media mobs are backed by authoritarian regimes threatening violence. Despite the right-wing rhetoric that says otherwise, these procedures are not being driven by a "unified left" (there is no "unified left"), or by a unified movement of any kind, let alone by the government. It's true that some of the university sexual-harassment cases have been shaped by Department of Education Title IX regulations that are shockingly vague, and that can be interpreted in draconian ways. But the administrators who carry out these investigations and disciplinary procedures, whether they work at universities or in the HR departments of magazines, are not doing so because they fear the Gulag. Many pursue them because they believe they are making their institutions better—they are creating a more harmonious workplace, advancing the causes of racial or sexual equality, keeping students safe. Some want to protect their institution's reputation. Invariably, some want to protect their own reputation. At least two of the people I interviewed believe that they were punished because a white, male boss felt he had to publicly sacrifice another white man in order to protect his own position.

But what gives anyone the conviction that such a measure is necessary? Or that "keeping students safe" means you must violate due process? It is not the law. Nor, strictly speaking, is it politics. Although some have tried to link this social transformation to President Joe Biden or House Speaker

Nancy Pelosi, anyone who tries to shoehorn these stories into a right-left political framework has to explain why so few of the victims of this shift can be described as "right wing" or conservative. According to one recent poll, 62 percent of Americans, including a majority of self-described moderates and liberals, are afraid to speak their mind about politics. All of those I spoke with are centrist or center-left liberals. Some have unconventional political views, but some have no strong views at all.

Certainly nothing in the academic texts of critical race theory mandates this behavior. The original critical race theorists argued for the use of a new lens to interpret the past and the present. You can dispute whether or not that lens is useful, or whether you want to look through it at all—but you can't blame critical-race-theory authors for, say, Yale Law School's frivolous decision to investigate whether or not Amy Chua gave a dinner party at her house during the pandemic, or for the array of university presidents who have refused to stand by their own faculty members when they are attacked by students.

The censoriousness, the shunning, the ritualized apologies, the public sacrifices—these are rather typical behaviors in illiberal societies with rigid cultural codes, enforced by heavy peer pressure. This is a story of moral panic, of cultural institutions policing or purifying themselves in the face of disapproving crowds. The crowds are no longer literal, as they once were in Salem, but rather online mobs, organized via Twitter, Facebook, or sometimes internal company Slack channels. After Alexi McCammond was named editor in chief of *Teen Vogue*, people discovered and recirculated on Instagram old anti-Asian and homophobic tweets she had written a decade earlier, while still a teenager. McCammond apologized, of course, but that wasn't enough, and she was compelled to quit the job before starting. She's had a softer landing than some—she was able to return to her previous work as a political reporter at *Axios*—but the incident reveals that no one is safe. She was a 27-year-old woman of color who had been named the "Emerging Journalist of the Year" by the National Association of Black Journalists, and yet her teenage self came back to haunt her. You would think it would be a good thing for the young readers of *Teen Vogue* to learn forgiveness and mercy, but for the New Puritans, there is no statute of limitations.

This censoriousness is related not just to recent, and often positive, changes in attitudes toward race and gender, and to accompanying changes in the language used to discuss them, but to other social changes that are more rarely acknowledged. While most of those who lose their positions are not "guilty" in any legal sense, neither have they been shunned at random. Just as odd old women were once subject to accusations of witchery, so too are certain types of people now more likely to fall victim to modern mob justice. To begin with, the protagonists of most of these stories tend to be successful. Though not billionaires or captains of industry, they've managed to become editors, professors, published authors, or even just students at competitive universities. Some are unusually social, even hyper-gregarious: They were professors who liked to chat or drink with their students, bosses who went out to lunch with their staff, people who blurred the lines between social life and institutional life.

"If you ask anyone for a list of the best teachers, best citizens, most responsible people, I would be on every one of those lists," one now-disgraced faculty member told me. Amy Chua had been appointed to numerous powerful committees at Yale Law School, including one that helped prepare students for clerkships. This was, she says, because she succeeded in getting students, especially minority students, good clerkships. "I do extra work; I get to know them," she told me. "I write extra-good recommendations." Many highly social people who are good at committees also tend to gossip, to tell stories about their colleagues. Some, both male and female, might also be described as flirtatious, enjoying wordplay and jokes that go right to the edge of what is considered acceptable.

Which is precisely what got some of these people into trouble, because the definition of *acceptable* has radically changed in the past few years. Once it was not just okay but admirable that Chua and Rubenfeld had law-school students over to their house for gatherings. That moment has passed. So, too, has the time when a student could discuss her personal problems with her professor, or when an employee could gossip with his employer. Conversations between people who have different statuses—employer-employee, professor-student—can now focus only on professional matters, or strictly neutral topics. Anything sexual, even in an academic context—for example, a conversation about the laws of rape—is now risky. The

Harvard Law School professor Jeannie Suk Gersen has written that her students "seem more anxious about classroom discussion, and about approaching the law of sexual violence in particular, than they have ever been in my eight years as a law professor." Akhil Reed Amar, a professor at Yale, told me that he no longer mentions a particular historical incident that he once used in his teaching, because it would force his students to read a case study that revolves around the use of a racial slur.

Social rules have changed too. Professors used to date and even marry their students. Colleagues used to drink together after work, and sometimes go home together. Today that can be dangerous. An academic friend told me that in his graduate school, people who are close to getting their doctorate are wary about dating people just beginning their studies, because the unwritten rules now dictate that you don't date colleagues, especially if there could be any kind of (real or imagined) power differential between you and the person you are dating. This cultural shift is in many ways healthy: Young people are now much better protected from predatory bosses. But it has costs. When jokes and flirtation are completely off-limits, some of the spontaneity of office life disappears too.

It's not just the hyper-social and the flirtatious who have found themselves victims of the New Puritanism. People who are, for lack of a more precise word, *difficult* have trouble too. They are haughty, impatient, confrontational, or insufficiently interested in people whom they perceive to be less talented. Others are high achievers, who in turn set high standards for their colleagues or students. When those high standards are not met, these people say so, and that doesn't go over well. Some of them like to push boundaries, especially intellectual boundaries, or to question orthodoxies. When people disagree with them, they argue back with relish.

That kind of behavior, once accepted or at least tolerated in many workplaces, is also now out of bounds. Workplaces once considered demanding are now described as toxic. The sort of open criticism, voiced in front of other people, that was once normal in newsrooms and academic seminars is now as unacceptable as chewing with your mouth open. The non-sunny disposition, the less-than-friendly manner—these can now be grounds for punishment or ostracism too. A relevant criticism of Donald

McNeil turned out to be that he was "kind of a grumpy old guy," as one student on that trip to Peru described him.

What many of these people—the difficult ones, the gossipy ones, the overly gregarious ones—have in common is that they make people uncomfortable. Here, too, a profound generational shift has transpired. "I think people's tolerance for discomfort—people's tolerance for dissonance, for not hearing exactly what they want to hear—has now gone down to zero," one person told me. "*Discomfort* used to be a term of praise about pedagogy—I mean, the greatest discomforter of all was Socrates."

It's not wrong to want a more comfortable workplace, or fewer grumpy colleagues. The difficulty is that the feeling of discomfort is subjective. One person's lighthearted compliment is another person's microaggression. One person's critical remark can be experienced by another person as racist or sexist. Jokes, wordplay, and anything that can have two meanings are, by definition, open to interpretation.

But even though discomfort is subjective, it is also now understood as something that can be cured. Someone who has been made uncomfortable now has multiple paths through which to demand redress. This has given rise to a new facet of life in universities, nonprofits, and corporate offices: the committees, HR departments, and Title IX administrators who have been appointed precisely to hear these kinds of complaints. Anyone who feels discomfort now has a place to go, someone to talk to.

Some of this is, I repeat, positive: Employees or students who feel they have been treated unfairly no longer have to flounder alone. But that comes at a cost. Anyone who accidentally creates discomfort—whether through their teaching methods, their editorial standards, their opinions, or their personality—may suddenly find themselves on the wrong side of not just a student or a colleague but an entire bureaucracy, one dedicated to weeding out people who make other people uncomfortable. And these bureaucracies are illiberal. They do not necessarily follow rules of fact-based investigation, rational argument, or due process. Instead, the formal and informal administrative bodies that judge the fate of people who have broken social codes are very much part of a swirling, emotive public conversation, one governed not by the rules of the courtroom or logic or the

Enlightenment but by social-media algorithms that encourage anger and emotion, and by the economy of likes and shares that pushes people to feel—and to perform—outrage. The interaction between the angry mob and the illiberal bureaucracy engenders a thirst for blood, for sacrifices to be offered up to the pious and unforgiving gods of outrage—a story we see in other eras of history, from the Inquisition to the more recent past.

Twitter, the president of one major cultural institution told me, "is the new public sphere." Yet Twitter is unforgiving, it is relentless, it doesn't check facts or provide context. Worse, like the elders of the Massachusetts Bay Colony who would not forgive Hester Prynne, the internet keeps track of past deeds, ensuring that no error, no mistake, no misspoken sentence or clumsy metaphor is ever lost. "It's not that everybody's famous for 15 minutes," Tamar Gendler, the dean of the faculty of arts and sciences at Yale, told me. "It's that everybody gets damned for 15 seconds." And if you have the misfortune to have the worst 15 seconds of your life shared with the world, there is nothing to guarantee that anybody will weigh that single, badly worded comment against all the other things you have done in your career. Incidents "lose their nuance," one university official told me. "So then what you get is all kinds of people with prearranged views, and they come in and use the incident to mean one thing or another."

It can happen very fast. In March, Sandra Sellers, an adjunct professor at Georgetown University Law Center, was caught on camera speaking to another professor about some underperforming Black students in her class. There is no way to know from the recording alone whether her comments represented racist bias or genuine concern for her students. Not that it mattered to Georgetown—she was fired within days of the recording's becoming public. Nor could one know what David Batson, the colleague she was talking to on the recording, really thought either. Nevertheless, he was placed on administrative leave because he seemed, vaguely, to be politely agreeing with her. He quickly resigned.

That conversation was captured inadvertently, but future revelations might not be. This spring, Braden Ellis, a student at Cypress College in California, shared a class Zoom recording of his professor's response when Ellis defended portrayals of police as heroes. Ellis said he did this in order to

expose a purported bias against conservative viewpoints on campus. Even though the recording by itself does not prove the existence of long-standing bias, the professor—a Muslim woman who said on the recording that she did not trust the police—became the focus of a Fox News segment, a social-media storm, and death threats. So did other professors at the college. So did administrators. After a few days, the professor was removed from her teaching assignments, pending investigation.

In this incident, the storm came from the right, as it surely will in the future: The tools of social-media mob justice are available to partisans of all kinds. In May, a young reporter, Emily Wilder, was fired from her new job at the Associated Press in Arizona after a series of conservative publications and politicians publicized Facebook posts critical of Israel that she had written while in college. Like so many before her, she was not told precisely why she was fired, or which company rules her old posts had violated.

Some have used Wilder's case to argue that the conservative criticism of "cancel culture" has always been fraudulent. But the real, and nonpartisan, lesson is this: No one—of any age, in any profession—is safe. In the age of Zoom, cellphone cameras, miniature recorders, and other forms of cheap surveillance technology, anyone's comments can be taken out of context; anyone's story can become a rallying cry for Twitter mobs on the left or the right. Anyone can then fall victim to a bureaucracy terrified by the sudden eruption of anger. And once one set of people loses the right to due process, so does everybody else. Not just professors but students; not just editors of elite publications but random members of the public. Gotcha moments can be choreographed. Project Veritas, a well-funded right-wing organization, dedicates itself to sting operations: It baits people into saying embarrassing things on hidden cameras and then seeks to get them punished for it, either by social media or by their own bureaucracies.

But while this form of mob justice can be used opportunistically by anyone, for any political or personal reason, the institutions that have done the most to facilitate this change are in many cases those that once saw themselves as the guardians of liberal and democratic ideals. Robert George, the Princeton professor, is a longtime philosophical conservative who once criticized liberal scholars for their earnest relativism, their belief that all ideas

deserved an equal hearing. He did not foresee, he told me, that liberals would one day "seem as archaic as the conservatives," that the idea of creating a space where different ideas could compete would come to seem old-fashioned, that the spirit of tolerance and curiosity would be replaced by a worldview "that is not open-minded, that doesn't think engaging differences is a great thing or that students should be exposed to competing points of view."

But that kind of thought system is not new in America. In the 19th century, Nathaniel Hawthorne's novel argued for the replacement of exactly that kind of rigidity with a worldview that valued ambiguity, nuance, tolerance of difference—the liberal worldview—and that would forgive Hester Prynne for her mistakes. The liberal philosopher John Stuart Mill, writing at about the same time as Hawthorne, made a similar argument. Much of his most famous book, *On Liberty*, is dedicated not to governmental restraints on human liberty but to the threat posed by social conformism, by "the demand that all other people shall resemble ourselves." Alexis de Tocqueville wrote about this problem, too. It was a serious challenge in 19th-century America, and is again in the 21st century.

Students and professors, editorial assistants and editors in chief—all are aware of what kind of society they now inhabit. That's why they censor themselves, why they steer clear of certain topics, why they avoid discussing anything too sensitive for fear of being mobbed or ostracized or fired without due process. But that kind of thinking takes us uncomfortably close to Istanbul, where history and politics can be discussed only with great care.

Many people have told me they want to change this atmosphere, but don't know how. Some hope to ride it out, to wait for this moral panic to pass, or for an even younger generation to rebel against it. Some worry about the costs of engagement. One person who was the focus of a negative social-media campaign told me that he doesn't want this set of issues to dominate his life and his career; he cited other people who have become so obsessed with battling "wokeness" or "cancel culture" that they now do nothing else.

Others have decided to be vocal. Stephen Elliott wrestled for a long time with whether or not to describe what it feels like to be wrongly accused of

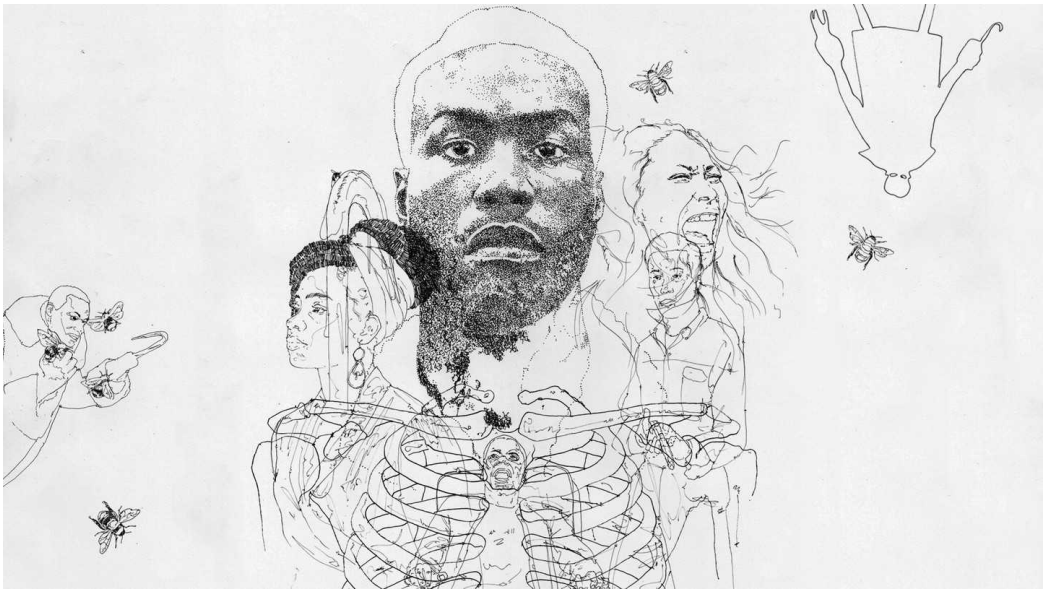
rape—he wrote something and abandoned it because "I decided that I wouldn't be able to handle the blowback"—before finally describing his experiences in a published essay. Amy Chua ignored advice to remain silent and instead has talked as much as possible. Robert George has created the Academic Freedom Alliance, a group that intends to offer moral and legal support to professors who are under fire, and even to pay for their legal teams if necessary. George was inspired, he told me, by a nature program that showed how elephant packs will defend every member of the herd against a marauding lion, whereas zebras run away and let the weakest get killed off. "The trouble with us academics is we're a bunch of zebras," he said. "We need to become elephants." John McWhorter, a Columbia linguistics professor (and *Atlantic* contributing writer) who has strong and not always popular views about race, told me that if you are accused of something unfairly, you should always push back, firmly but politely: "Just say, 'No, I'm not a racist. And I disagree with you.'" If more leaders—university presidents, magazine and newspaper publishers, CEOs of foundations and companies, directors of musical societies—took that position, maybe it would be easier for more of their peers to stand up to their students, their colleagues, or an online mob.

The alternative, for our cultural institutions and for democratic discourse, is grim. Foundations will do secret background checks on their potential grantees, to make sure they haven't committed crimes-that-are-not-crimes that could be embarrassing in the future. Anonymous reports and Twitter mobs, not the reasoned judgments of peers, will shape the fate of individuals. Writers and journalists will fear publication. Universities will no longer be dedicated to the creation and dissemination of knowledge but to the promotion of student comfort and the avoidance of social-media attacks.

Worse, if we drive all of the difficult people, the demanding people, and the eccentric people away from the creative professions where they used to thrive, we will become a flatter, duller, less interesting society, a place where manuscripts sit in drawers for fear of arbitrary judgments. The arts, the humanities, and the media will become stiff, predictable, and mediocre. Democratic principles like the rule of law, the right to self-defense, the right to a just trial—even the right to be forgiven—will wither. There will be

nothing to do but sit back and wait for the Hawthornes of the future to expose us.

This article appears in the October 2021 print edition with the headline "The New Puritans." When you buy a book using a link on this page, we receive a commission. Thank you for supporting The Atlantic.



Don’t Go in the Basement

‘Candyman,’ Horror, and the Cinema of Black Pain

By Carvell Wallace

At one point in the long-awaited new film *Candyman*, billed as a “spiritual sequel” to the 1992 cult horror flick by the same name, a character is heading toward an inevitable confrontation with the monster. We’ve seen this moment a thousand times. The character knows now that evil is afoot. She knows that it’s of a supernatural variety. Blood has been shed. Her every step is measured and cautious. We can hear the creaking. We are tensed, ready for the jump scare. She comes upon a door, slowly opens it. On the other side is a long stairwell leading down to an eerie cellar. We know that she must go down there. *She* knows that she must go down there. She considers the dark path before her for a moment before gently but decisively shutting the door.

“Nope,” she says.

Watching a screener, I imagined audiences losing it at this particular moment. How many times have we watched horror films in which the protagonist makes the inexplicable choice to go further into danger *just to find out what's down there*? For Black viewers, this habit is racialized: This is white-people shit, the joke goes. They obviously don't have enough to be afraid of in real life, so they go around looking for dangerous situations, opening the door, releasing the curse, unsealing the tomb. There's a reason "Fuck around and find out" and its cousin, "Play stupid games, win stupid prizes," are Black proverbs. The protagonist and the creators of the new *Candyman*—co-written by Jordan Peele, Win Rosenfeld, and Nia DaCosta, who also directs—are not here to play stupid games.

The original *Candyman*, an adaptation by the British filmmaker Bernard Rose of the British writer Clive Barker's short story "The Forbidden," was explicitly conceived and directed through a white gaze. The new *Candyman* is the first horror feature distributed by a major studio to be directed by a Black woman, DaCosta. During the making of it, she was intensely conscious that Black pain has always been a lucrative source of content for Hollywood but is rarely handled with enough consideration to keep it from effectively and constantly re-traumatizing Black viewers. "My concern is really getting into what the film is about and who the film is for," she told me via email. "With a film like this, that traffics in Black pain and trauma, it's imperative that it is told from a Black POV; it's imperative that we consider the audience for whom this film could be harmful, and that we are very careful about execution."

DaCosta and her collaborators had their work cut out for them. In the original *Candyman*, Rose imports Barker's tour de force of mood and shiver—a story that works as both a chiller and a meditation on class in Barker's native Liverpool—to America, swapping in race for class. In the short story, a white academic traipses into the "drear canyons" of council housing to study graffiti, and residents there begin to tell her tales of horror that they say no one else has believed. In Rose's film, a white academic traipses into Chicago's Cabrini-Green projects, where Black families report being terrorized by a Black serial killer who returns from the dead when his name—Candyman (he comes bearing candy)—is invoked five times in front of a

mirror. Racially speaking, the results can most generously be described as cringeworthy.

The projects in Rose's *Candyman* are an apocalypse, home to an egregious liberal fantasy of an oppressed and impoverished underclass. Kindhearted single mothers who work low-wage jobs deliver monologues in a theatrical Ebonics. Orphaned children roam the streets. The mass of Black families is treated as a nameless, faceless, childish people prone to superstitions and living under the shadow of an unforgiving god. The film offers up a racialized poverty Kabuki in which pain is the chief characteristic of Blackness. It doesn't help that the imagined backstory for Candyman, dreamed up by Rose, is that he was violently murdered for lusting after a white woman, as if even in our victimization, proximity to whiteness remains a forbidden prize.

The irony, of course, is that the film makes a half-hearted attempt to castigate its protagonist for approaching Blackness in precisely this way. The character of the white academic, named Helen Lyle and played by Virginia Madsen, is a proto-Karen, motivated by righteous feminism and yet completely willing to exploit Black trauma as a tool for personal and career advancement. The film comments on this, only to follow suit; it knowingly nods to Lyle's racist voyeurism, all the while indulging it. Such was the state of racial politics in the '90s, when white people felt that all a work needed to qualify as progressive was one Black character with a college degree, in this case Lyle's best friend and fellow graduate student, Bernie Walsh, played by Kasi Lemmons. (She hangs back when Lyle, flaunting her arrogant bravery, steps through a hole in a crumbling apartment wall: *Nope*, says Walsh, which doesn't mean that she makes it to the end.)

I hadn't seen the original *Candyman* since I was about 17 years old, and rewatching it, I was struck not only by the absurd and condescending treatment of Black people but, more frighteningly, by how easily I had overlooked this treatment when I was younger and more impressionable—how readily I had accepted that this was just how Black people were portrayed in films. The movies and shows I watched as a kid had

thoroughly trained me to see Blackness through the dehumanizing and exploitative lens that white filmmakers applied to it.

In much of the fare I grew up on, that filter meant that Black characters were either throwaway figures or people who had no identity outside of poverty and struggle. Today such racist notions have become more nuanced, but they still serve as a fairly sure guide to which Black screen ventures get produced and how they are developed and marketed. The popular liberal vision of the Black experience is that it is centered on pain—the enduring of it, the overcoming of it—which translates into an endless appetite and funding stream for films and series devoted to the suffering of Black people. The result for me is that my pain and the pain of people I love is endlessly and cruelly capitalized on.

H*orror Noire*, the 2019 documentary on Black horror based on Robin R. Means Coleman's book of the same title, proposes that one of the first mainstream films in the genre was not billed as one. D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*, released in 1915, dramatizes the heroic—in its view—formation of the Ku Klux Klan, which rides to the rescue of white people everywhere when a libidinous Black man named Gus (portrayed in blackface) assaults a fragile white woman. If horror plays on the audience's fears as a means of entertainment, *The Birth of a Nation* would have done so in entirely opposite ways for the country's Black and white viewers. For white people, the character of Gus functioned as something like a predecessor to Jason Voorhees in *Friday the 13th* and Freddy Krueger in *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, an unrepentant monster who is coming for you and all that you love unless he is stopped. The film depicts the ultimate lynching of Gus as a valiant and noble act. Shortly after its release, the movie was screened at the White House for President Woodrow Wilson and his Cabinet. *The Birth of a Nation* is still considered path-breaking, one of the most important films in early American cinema. Therein lies the horror for the country's Black population.

Over the next half century, if horror movies had Black characters, we were often comic relief, there to perform racist punch lines as petrified servants or ludicrously startled groundskeepers. Not until 1968 did a Black person feature as the lead in a commercially successful horror film. That year saw

the theatrical release of George A. Romero's *Night of the Living Dead*. The movie, shot in stark black-and-white, is about a motley group of Pennsylvanians who are hunkered down in an abandoned farmhouse fighting off an invasion of cannibalistic zombies. Their leader is a stalwart, practical man named Ben, who takes control of the situation and cares fiercely for the assembled group. Ben is played by Duane Jones, who is thought to be one of the first Black actors in the history of American cinema chosen for a leading role that wasn't explicitly created to be filled by a Black person. Romero maintained until his death that Jones's casting was not meant as a political statement but happened simply because he gave the best audition.

Nevertheless, Jones playing Ben in the role of champion helped elevate the film, which would have stood on its own merits as an ensemble disaster flick, into a sharp political allegory. Ben's chief antagonist inside the house is the small-minded Harry Cooper (Karl Hardman), a white man who connives to hoard resources for his family and dethrone Ben. The anxieties of a white middle class resisting integration and Black empowerment are easy to read into his character. "We luck into a safe place," Cooper yells at Ben, "and you're telling us we gotta risk our lives just because somebody might need help?" The closest the script comes to directly addressing the racial aspects of the power struggle between the two men is when Ben asserts himself in an oft-quoted scene. "Now get the hell down in the cellar. You can be the boss down there," he hollers at Cooper. "I'm boss up here."

For Black people in the '60s, as militant opposition to the specter of white supremacy inexorably formed, Ben's words spoke powerful truth. The film is rife with images recalling real-life horrors that Black people faced. Armed rural citizens, all white, assemble to fight off the zombie hordes and remind us of roving gangs of white men who terrorized Black communities. Nighttime fire scenes with torches evoke Klan rallies. And in the film's most direct allusion to violent reality, after Ben fights off all the zombies and emerges as the only survivor, he is killed in the final scene by local police, who throw his body on a bonfire like so much trash. (In the final scene of his directorial debut, *Get Out*, Peele provides a satisfyingly flipped version of that memorable close.) Assuming that Jones's casting was indeed sheer coincidence, Romero's film highlights another truth about horror in

American cinema: The most terrifying things that Romero dreamed up happened to look exactly like the things that Black people confront. And yet the film was not written about race. It is about people fighting off flesh-eating monsters, and doing so in an intensely racialized society.

Top: Duane Jones plays the leader in a fight against zombies in Night of the Living Dead. Bottom: Jurnee Smollett in Eve’s Bayou, about the mysterious death of an abusive father. (Moviestore Collection / Alamy; Allstar Picture Library / Alamy)

Among the many reasons I love *Night of the Living Dead* is that it is a rare case study in the ways a white lens can treat a Black character as a Black human being without lapsing into either racist tropes or dismissive color blindness. I have in mind a Pat Parker poem called "For the white person who wants to know how to be my friend." "The first thing you do is to forget that i'm Black," Parker tells the reader. "Second, you must never forget that i'm Black." The fact that Parker sets out an impossible pair of instructions is not quite the point; the instructions, contradictory though they seem, function as commentary. They are also delivered clearly and in good faith. To treat Black people as humans under the circumstances of our collective social and political oppression requires white people to strike this seemingly impossible balance, which explains why so many of them are so bad at it. My experience is that most white people I've met do these two things at precisely the wrong times. They obsess over, fetishize, and exploit my Blackness when the situation does not call for it, and they forget that my Blackness matters precisely when it matters most. I don't hold out much hope at this point; I'm nearly 47 years old. But when someone, anyone, treats me correctly as a human being, and also as a Black human being, the relief is tremendous.

How Romero managed this remains a mystery to me. Perhaps growing up in a diverse neighborhood helped, or having produced short segments for *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*, a show with a legendarily humane perspective on race. Maybe he was just largely immune to the racist assumptions of the time. Whatever accounts for his feat, the film's arrival in theaters in 1968, a pivotal moment in America's racial history, bolstered the cultural impact of *Night of the Living Dead*. The preceding year is often remembered for the Summer of Love, but it was also the year when scores of racial uprisings took place across the country, leading to U.S. military deployment in Detroit. More than 80 people died in the racial violence.

Romero recalled that he was in the car driving to New York to show the film to potential distributors when Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination was announced on the radio. *Racial reckoning*, the remarkably empty phrase of 2020–21, may not have been in the air then, but amid the outpouring of racialized news, it could have been. Part of what gives Romero's film its enduring power is the way it speaks to these issues

without obsessing over them. Whether or not you believe Romero's tale of color-blind casting (I'm not sure I do), he succeeded in making a work that allows race to exist fully within the universe of his film rather than using it as a pretext to project white fantasies. The film forgets that Duane Jones is Black, but never allows the viewers to do so.Such relatively insightful treatment of Black characters was still a rarity, though, and the '70s saw Black filmmakers forging their own path, starting with, some would argue, the 1971 blaxploitation film *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*. A new wave of directors sought to integrate a Black Power worldview into cinema to counter decades of stock portrayals of Black people as mammies, butlers, and other servile individuals lacking any semblance of interiority. Working in a variety of genres—comedy, horror, crime, noir—the films shared the goals of homing in on Black communities, featuring Black protagonists and antagonists, and usually foregrounding a struggle against some form of collective racial oppression.

By now, blaxploitation themes and conventions have been so assiduously recycled and referenced by white filmmakers that the cartoonish aspects of the form—preposterous fight sequences, gratuitous sex scenes, pistols hidden in Afros—have eclipsed its contribution to American cinema at the time. *Blacula*, released in 1972, can be considered the first blaxploitation horror film to carry forward the genre's defining focus on the quest for Black self-determination: The story begins with a Nigerian prince asking Count Dracula to help stop the slave trade. Dracula refuses, transforming the prince into a vampire and then locking him in a coffin. But 1973's *Ganja & Hess*, written and directed by Bill Gunn, is the complex and beautiful high point of Black-directed horror in its early phase.

The film, lumped in with blaxploitation only because no other category exists for 1970s Black cinema, stars Duane Jones as Hess, an isolated, wealthy archaeologist who is stabbed by an unstable assistant (played, in a truly mesmerizing performance, by Gunn himself). The weapon is an ancient dagger that turns him into a vampire. The assistant commits suicide, and Hess is imprisoned in an undead fate, a reclusive and forsaken figure. When the assistant's wife, Ganja (Marlene Clark), arrives looking for her (now dead) husband, she and Hess fall in love, and she chooses to submit to vampirism partially as a way of outmaneuvering the demons of her own

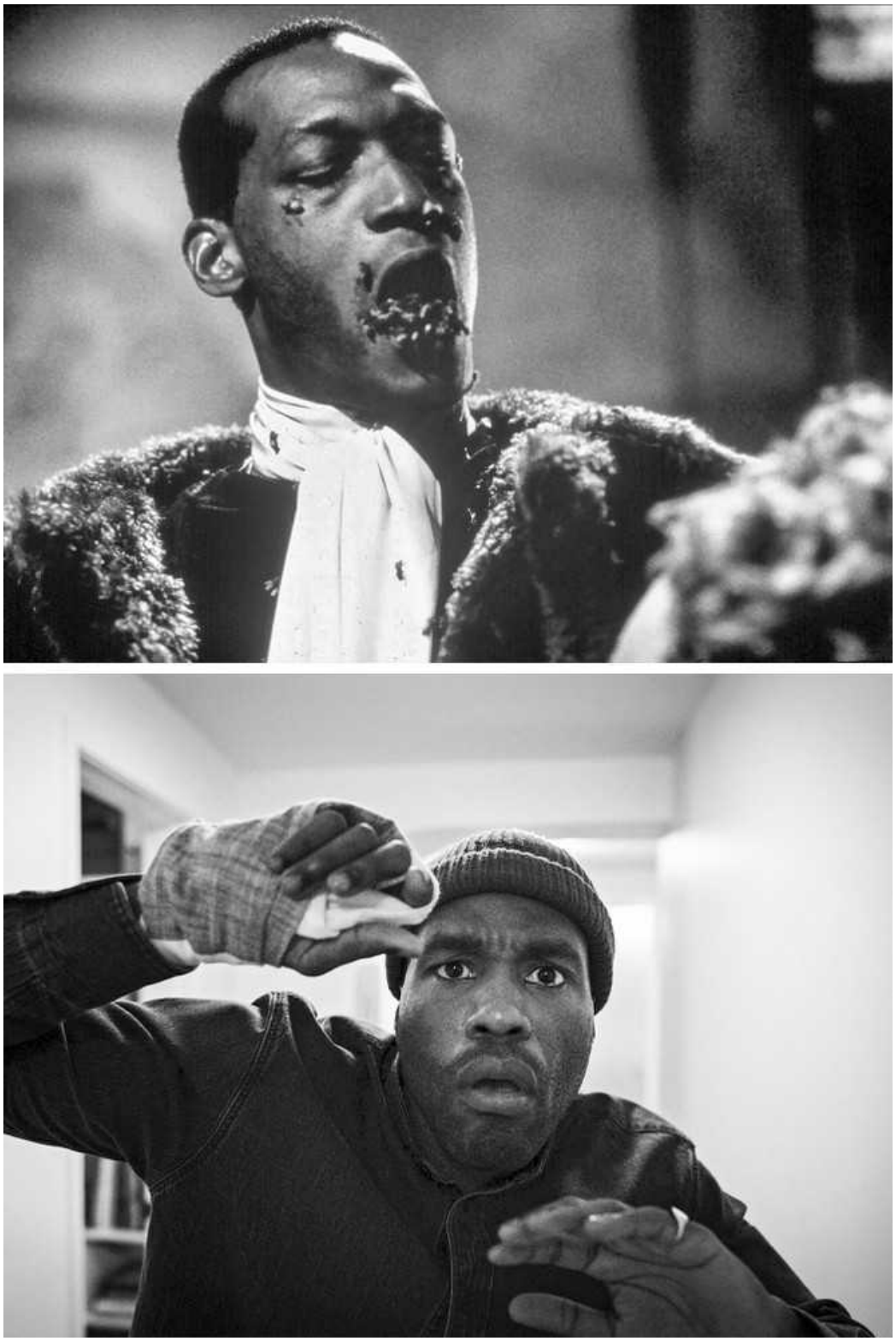
past. “It was as though I was a disease,” she recalls of her childhood abuse at the hands of her mother, “and I think that day I decided that I was a disease, and I was going to give her a full case of it.”

The vampire life proves exquisite, and also grim and lonely, for the couple trying desperately to maintain a hold on their love. Hess ultimately decides to repent for his sins, but Ganja refuses to go back to the mortal world. The film uses vampirism as a metaphor for any number of problems that Black Americans faced—addiction, assimilation, brutal casualty rates in Vietnam—and is surreal, thoughtful, gorgeous, and at times delightfully deranged. Watching it, I found myself transported to a dreamlike state that mirrored the film’s disjointed translucence: Like Ganja, I was desperately willing to be sucked into Gunn’s abstruse and gossamer vision, a welcome relief from the assault that mainstream films often conduct on Blackness.

Despite a screening during critics’ week at Cannes in 1973, *Ganja & Hess* was not widely seen by American audiences at the time. Its producers, Kelly-Jordan Enterprises, were so displeased by the art-house direction of Gunn’s final product that they halted distribution and sold it to another production company, Heritage Enterprises, which hastily recut it into a lame and nonsensical flick, *Blood Couple*, that Gunn disavowed. In short, Gunn’s original cut of *Ganja & Hess* didn’t do enough exploiting to ride the wave of blaxploitation.

During the ’90s, filmmakers who had grown up on blaxploitation began developing their own projects, seeking to move beyond the form’s predictable plots and stereotypical figures while still addressing Black realities for the enjoyment of Black audiences. In the horror genre, Kasi Lemmons’s 1997 work, *Eve’s Bayou*, stands out for me as among the most expertly crafted and meaningful films of the decade—and as, at least in part, a personal corrective to the original *Candyman*, in which Lemmons’s character is slain halfway through. In *Eve’s Bayou*, all of the Black women survive. The film is told from the point of view of Eve, an adult woman recalling her mysterious role, as a 10-year-old (Jurnee Smollett), in the death of her philandering and abusive father (Samuel L. Jackson). The catalytic incident of abuse is refracted intricately through multiple perspectives: Is it real or is it imagined? Does it matter? With its southern-

gothic aura and its centering of Black female relationships, Lemmons's debut effort feels more like a descendant of the work of Julie Dash (whose *Daughters of the Dust* in 1991 was the first feature by a Black woman to receive a nationwide release) than of anything from the urban horror stream. For me, the joy in watching Lemmons's work lies somewhere beyond her cinematic achievements, in the nearly spiritual level of care she takes with our relationships and trauma.



Top: Tony Todd in the role of Candyman in the 1992 movie. Bottom: In the new film, Yahya Abdul-Mateen II plays a Black painter obsessed with the Candyman legend. (AF Archive / Alamy; TCD / Prod.DB / Alamy)

Hollywood continued to mine the Black-film revival of the ’90s, pasting its elements (and sometimes its actors) into white films, but not until Peele’s *Get Out*, in 2017, did a Black horror film made for Black audiences enjoy such widespread popularity. A multilayered film, *Get Out* is race horror (as opposed to horror happening in a racialized world) and directly uses white racism (particularly the liberal variant) as the primary horror element. The twist is that the film allows its Black characters a hitherto rare level of both agency and redemption. *Get Out*’s stunning cultural and financial success—it has grossed $255.4 million to date against a $4.5 million budget (principal shooting took a mere 23 days)—predictably sent the industry scrambling after any script that turned Black trauma into genre-film fodder.

We currently find ourselves amid a deluge of projects—*Lovecraft Country*, *Them*, *Queen & Slim*, *Antebellum*, and others—that leverage, with varying degrees of success, Black pain for drama and entertainment value, at precisely the moment when Black trauma is proving among the most popular forms of non-Hollywood spectacle. Video of George Floyd’s murder in Minneapolis was viewed by enough people that it prompted as many as 26 million protesters to take to the streets in the U.S. in June 2020. And more than 23 million Americans watched the reading of the verdict in the Derek Chauvin trial, which exceeds the number that tuned in to the Tokyo Olympics’ opening ceremony.

Nia DaCosta’s *Candyman*, too, probes Black trauma as a source of dread, but its approach is infinitely more informed and nuanced than the perspective that guides the original film. Set in the present day, the story plays out on the former site of the Cabrini-Green housing projects that served as the ghoulish setting for Rose’s film. Those towers have been torn down, the neighborhood thoroughly gentrified. Living in a luxurious condo that now dominates the site are a Black painter, Anthony McCoy (Yahya Abdul-Mateen II), and his girlfriend, Brianna Cartwright (Teyonah Parris), an ambitious gallery director. Both are navigating the thorny terrain that comes with selling Black art to white buyers, and in an adroit bit of self-referencing on the filmmakers’ part, McCoy is frustrated by the callous appetite for Black pain, an experience to which I suspect any Black creative working in 2021 can easily relate.

He finds himself uninspired and resentful, at an artistic dead end. That is, he's blocked until he learns, at a swank dinner party, about the urban mythology of the Candyman, an undead serial killer who murdered people in the projects—including the white graduate student Helen Lyle, the protagonist in the first *Candyman*. A terrifying obsession grips him. He pursues the story to its source, dreadfully transforming both his art and himself in the process, and he is drawn into the clutches of the feared mythical slasher. His girlfriend, in the role of a rare Black "final girl" (that horror-film figure who lives to confront the killer at the end), is forced to venture into the catacombs in order to save him, confronting her own personal demons along the way.

DaCosta's film acutely acknowledges the role that racism plays in the lives of its characters, expertly interweaving it into their motivations for chasing the monstrosity in the first place. McCoy is deeply ambivalent about turning Black horror into grist for sale to white audiences. Cartwright must keep a certain distance from the emotional realities of racism in order to do her job and rise in the art world. She has a big stake in her boyfriend not falling apart, so she avoids acknowledging his unraveling for far too long; her delay leaves time for the monster to do more damage. Ultimately, DaCosta's Candyman character becomes a cipher that the film's characters, and by extension its audience, have no choice but to live with—the absence upon which anything can be projected, bequeathed by centuries of Black trauma. This is perhaps where the film hews most faithfully to the Clive Barker short story upon which it is based. "I am rumor," his monster reminds his victim, and us, in "The Forbidden." "It's a blessed condition, believe me. To live in people's dreams; to be whispered at street corners; but not have to *be*. Do you understand?"

Happy endings (or at least efforts to grasp at happiness) are of course the most persistent myth of American cinema, and the original *Candyman* ends the way most horror movies do—with one survivor, in this case a lone infant child, who was kidnapped by the monster and is rescued by Helen Lyle. Lyle herself dies in saving the baby, and in the final twist, her story becomes part of the urban lore that she was studying. When I would watch horror movies growing up, what always struck me about the final scenes was the obvious fate that awaited the survivor: The person who weathered

the attack of the undead—the figure who, covered in blood, lived to see the sunrise—would be phenomenally and permanently scarred. I would think about how that person had seen friends and loved ones impaled, dismembered, beheaded; how the survivor would be unable to form healthy relationships, would suffer from phobias and anxieties; how, for the one who lived on, the nightmare would continue forever.

Perhaps I thought about this because even as a child I felt like a survivor of my own horrors, the horrors of this country, its history, its disfigurement of my soul and spirit, and of the souls and spirits of my family, my community, the people I loved. Maybe I was haunted because even as a child I knew that once you have survived horrors, you are never, ever free of them. There is no happy ending. To tell an honest tale of horror, one that acknowledges the humanity of its subjects, is to acknowledge this fact. This is where DaCosta's *Candyman* begins, and by recognizing fully and truthfully what it means to have survived what Black people have had to survive, she has made a work in which, for just a few moments, I feel the rare and life-changing experience of being seen by a film and maybe even loved.

This article appears in the October 2021 print edition with the headline "Don't Go in the Basement."

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How to Persuade Americans to Give Up Their Guns

Responsible Gun Ownership Is a Lie

By David Frum

When the coronavirus pandemic struck last year, people throughout the developed world raced to buy toilet paper, bottled water, yeast for baking bread, and other basic necessities. Americans also stocked up on guns. They bought more than 23 million firearms in 2020, up 65 percent from 2019. First-time gun purchases were notably high. The surge has not abated in 2021. In January, Americans bought 4.3 million guns, a monthly record.

Last year was also a high-water mark for gun violence—more people were shot dead than at any time since the 1990s—though 2021 is shaping up to be even worse. There was one bright spot in 2020. When Americans self-

isolated, mass shooters were denied their usual targets. But as America began to return to normal, so did the mass shootings: 45 in the single month between March 16 and April 15.

The shock and horror of mass shootings focus our attention. But most of the casualties are inflicted one by one by one. Americans use their guns to open fire on one another at backyard barbecues, to stalk and intimidate ex-spouses and lovers, to rob and assault, and to kill themselves. Half of the almost 48,000 suicides committed in 2019 were carried out by gun. All of this slaughter is enabled by the most permissive gun laws in the developed world.

You know this. You've heard it before. Maybe you have even gotten sick of hearing it. Yet the problem continues to get worse. The Biden administration is developing strategies to try to decrease gun violence—to crack down on rogue gun dealers, to "keep guns out of the wrong hands." That's a worthy project, of course, but it, too, may sound wanly familiar. Over the past decade, many states have relaxed their gun laws, making these weapons even easier to get.

This fall, the Supreme Court will hear a case, *New York State Rifle & Pistol Association v. Corlett*, that could expand gun rights even further. Thirteen years ago, in *District of Columbia v. Heller*, the Court for the first time recognized people's constitutional right to *own* firearms as individuals, not just as members of a "well regulated Militia." Now lawyers for the New York affiliate of the National Rifle Association will argue that the Second Amendment should be interpreted as granting a constitutional right to *carry* firearms in the streets, parks, playgrounds. If the NRA prevails, the nearly 400 million guns in the United States will show up in even more places than they do now.

The legalistic approach to restricting gun ownership and reducing gun violence is failing. So is the assumption behind it. Drawing a bright line between the supposedly vast majority of "responsible," "law abiding" gun owners and those shadowy others who cause all the trouble is a prudent approach for politicians, but it obscures the true nature of the problem. We need to stop deceiving ourselves about the importance of this distinction.

Pre-pandemic, about 30 percent of American adults owned a gun, according to a Pew Research Center survey. Another 33 percent rejected the idea of gun ownership. The remainder, about 36 percent, did not happen to own a gun at the time they were asked the question—but had either owned a gun in the past or could imagine owning a gun in the future. In 2020, the future came, and millions of them queued at gun shops, pandemic stimulus dollars in hand.

They were not buying weapons for hunting. Only about 11.5 million Americans hunt in a given year, according to the latest Department of the Interior survey, fewer than the number who attend a professional ballet or modern-dance performance.

Nor were they buying weapons to play private militia. Fewer than 10 percent of Americans amass arsenals of five weapons or more. And for all the focus on assault rifles, they make up a small portion of the firearms in private hands: approximately 6 percent of all guns owned.

The weapon Americans most often buy is the modern semiautomatic handgun—affordable, light, and easy to use. This is the weapon people stash in their nightstand and the glove compartment of their car. This is the weapon they tuck into their purse and shove into their waistband. Why? Two-thirds of American gun buyers explain that they bought their gun to protect themselves and their families.

And here is both the terrible tragedy of America's gun habit and the best hope to end it. In virtually every way that can be measured, owning a firearm makes the owner, the owner's family, and the people around them *less* safe. The hard-core gun owner will never accept this truth. But the 36 percent in the middle—they may be open to it, if they can be helped to perceive it.

The weapons Americans buy to protect their loved ones are the weapons that end up being accidentally discharged into a loved one's leg or chest or head. The weapons Americans buy to protect their young children are years later used for self-harm by their troubled teenagers. Or they are stolen from their car by criminals and used in robberies and murders. Or they are grabbed in rage and pointed at an ex-partner.

The record shows case after case of guns escalating ordinary disputes into homicides or attempted homicides. In March 2020, a man was fatally shot in the head after an altercation over a parking space at an Atlanta shopping mall. In August 2020, a 75-year-old Nashville homeowner reportedly shot and wounded a landscaper for not properly hauling brush from his property. In November 2020, a gun owner shot and killed a teenager for playing music too loudly in the parking lot of the motel they were both staying at, police said.

These incidents are unusual in only one way: The victims were all men. A frequent use of guns in American life is to dominate and terrorize women. According to a 2017 study, some 4.5 million American women have been threatened by a gun-wielding partner or former partner. Almost 1 million American women have survived after a gun was used by a partner against them.

Put moments of rage or malice aside, and catastrophes still keep happening, due in part to Americans' collective overconfidence in their gun-handling skills.

Altogether, about 500 Americans a year die from unintended shootings. That's four times the rate of deaths from unintended shootings in peer nations. Yet this grim statistic still understates the toll of Americans fooling around with weapons. Unintended shootings tend not to be lethal. They account for only about 1 percent of all U.S. gun deaths. But they account for more than one-third of American gun injuries—injuries that can leave people disabled or traumatized for life. A majority of gun owners fail to store their weapons safely, according to research by the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. That's why the annals fill with so many heartrending stories of children shooting themselves or others.

Above all else, guns are used for suicide. In any given year, twice as many Americans die by suicide as by homicide. Suicide is the second-leading cause of death among teenagers and young adults, behind only accidents. The good news is that suicide is highly preventable. Most suicide attempts are impulsive, an act of depression or panic. If a person survives an attempt, he or she will almost certainly survive the suicidal impulse altogether. A

gun in the house massively raises the likelihood that a suicide attempt will end in death.

Gun advocates counter this tally of unnecessary bloodshed by generating piles of studies on successful "defensive gun use." Estimates of defensive gun use vary wildly, from as few as 60,000 incidents a year to as many as 2.5 million. The higher estimates are distorted by a crucial error: They rely heavily on self-reporting by gun owners themselves, with a huge risk of self-flattering bias. If an argument spirals until one person produces a gun and menaces the other into shutting up, the gun owner might regard that use as "defensive." A third party, however, might perceive a situation that only spiraled in the first place because the gun owner felt empowered to escalate it. Whose perception should prevail?

But there's a larger absurdity to the project of counting "defensive gun uses." For decades, the world has witnessed a colossal natural experiment in gun laws. With one exception, virtually all developed countries strictly regulate firearms, especially handguns. If there were any merit to the "defensive gun use" argument, you'd expect that one permissive nation to boast much greater safety. Instead, the one outlier nation—the United States—suffers the deadliest levels of criminal violence. Guns everywhere engender violence everywhere.

In national debates, America's gun carnage is often blamed on the National Rifle Association. That group is indeed highly blameworthy. But the NRA has been mired in scandal and bankruptcy since 2019, without any notable alteration in the political balance of power on the gun issue. America has a gun problem because so many Americans are deceived by so many illusions about what a gun will do for them, their family, their world. They imagine a gun as the guardian of their home and loved ones, rather than the standing invitation to harm, loss, and grief it so much more often proves to be.

It would be good to reverse the permissive trends in gun law. It would be good to ban the preferred weapons of mass shooters. It would be good to have a stronger system of background checks. It would be good to stop so many Americans from carrying guns in public.

But even if none of those things happens—and there is little sign of them happening anytime soon—progress can be made against gun violence, as progress was once made against other social evils: by persuading Americans to stop, one by one by one.

Drunk driving has been illegal in the United States since automobiles became commonplace. Yet laws against drunk driving went lightly enforced until the 1980s. Police and courts treated drunk drivers leniently. The offenders seemed so remorseful. Had they not suffered enough?

That practice of leniency began to change in 1980, with the founding of Mothers Against Drunk Driving by one determined woman, Candy Lightner, who had lost her daughter to a repeat hit-and-run driver. From Fair Oaks, California, MADD spread across the nation. Before it pressured politicians to amend laws, before it persuaded courts and police to enforce those laws, it *enabled* those reforms by working directly on public attitudes. MADD convinced American drivers that they were not weak or unmanly if they surrendered the car keys after drinking too much. MADD empowered the families and friends of those drivers to insist that the keys be surrendered.

That kind of cultural change beckons now. The mass gun purchases of 2020 and 2021 have put even more millions of weapons into even more hands untrained to use and store those weapons responsibly.

Today, a new generation of determined women are emulating MADD, this time fighting against gun violence. The day after the Sandy Hook gun massacre, a Colorado mother of five, Shannon Watts, launched a group that now numbers 6 million: Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America. After the large Republican gains in the state elections of 2014, Moms Demand Action fought mostly on defense, helping prevent Tennessee from restoring gun rights to violent felons, for instance, and Alaska from compelling state universities to allow guns to be carried on campus. In the 2020s, Moms Demand Action and allies could reshape the national gun debate more fundamentally. It's the kind of effort that should be much more widely embraced, and not only by mothers.

The gun buyers of 2020–21 are different from those of years past: They are more likely to be people of color and more likely to be women. They are not buying guns to join a race war, or to overthrow the government, or to wait for Armageddon in a bunker stocked with canned beans. They just want to deter a burglar or an assailant, should one come.

Those dangers are real, and it's understandable that people would fear them and seek to avert them. But like the people who refuse lifesaving vaccines for fear of minutely rare side effects, American gun buyers are falling victim to bad risk analysis.

They need to meet the grandparents who stuffed a gun beneath a pillow while cooking—and returned to their granddaughter's dead body. They need to see the man in prison because he lost his temper over a parking space. They need to listen to the parents whose teenager found a suicide weapon that had not been locked away. They need to know more about the woman killed in the electronics aisle at an Idaho Walmart when her 2-year-old accidentally discharged the gun she carried in her purse.

They need to hear a new call to conscience, aimed not at the paranoid and the extreme, not at the militiamen and the race warriors, but at the decent, everyday gun owner.

You want to be a protective spouse, a concerned parent, a good citizen, a patriotic American? Save your family and your community from danger by *getting rid of* your weapons, and especially your handguns. Don't wait for the law. Do it yourself; do it now. Do it because you just bought your first home, do it because you just got married, do it because you just had the baby you cherish more than anything in this world. The gun you trust against your fears is itself the thing you should fear. The gun is a lie.

As more Americans recognize the lie, they may notice a powerful new possibility. Once emancipated from the false myth of the home-protecting gun, they will find it easier to write laws and adopt policies to stop the criminals and zealots who carry guns into the streets. Win enough elections, and the federal courts will retreat from their sudden gun advocacy—and return to their historic deference to state regulation of firearms.

None of this will be easy, but it is not impossible. Over the past half decade, we've seen American society changed for the better through mass movements such as #MeToo. Now we need a new moral reckoning.

Twenty-five hundred years ago, the Greek writer Thucydides described the progress of civilization. It began, he said, when the Athenians ceased carrying arms inside their city, and left that savage custom to the barbarians. It's long past time for Americans to absorb this first lesson from the first democracy.

This article appears in the October 2021 print edition with the headline "Responsible Gun Ownership Is a Lie."

The Nicest Man in Stand-Up

Nate Bargatze Is the Nicest Man in Stand-Up

By Tim Alberta

Lauren Tamaki

Once the limousine door closed, a dozen of Nate Bargatze's closest friends and family members began reciting their favorite jokes from the sold-out show he'd just finished in Reno, Nevada. There was the one about never

asking a fitness junkie for advice on losing weight, lest they warn you about eating too much fruit. (“Let’s get to that point, all right?” Bargatze had said. “I don’t think I’m at where I’m at because I got into some pineapple last night.”) And the one about his hometown of Old Hickory, Tennessee, being named after Andrew Jackson, and a reporter informing him that the seventh president had been a bad person. (“You know, we didn’t know him or anything,” he’d deadpanned.)

As we rode through Reno on a 100-degree July night, I asked Bargatze what moment from the show stood out to him. It was the bit, he said, about the woman at a comedy club in Grand Rapids, Michigan, whose siren of a laugh was so distracting that the staff had to ask her to keep silent for the rest of the show. The joke skewered her parents for not correcting this when she was young, then segued into Bargatze’s lament about carrying his own bad habits into adulthood. It was one of the high-decibel points of the show, but that’s not why Bargatze brought it up.

“I just need to be super careful with anything that could be seen as making fun of someone,” Bargatze said. “Maybe she had a disability or something.” In fact, as his joke tactfully made clear, she did not appear to have a disability—just an unbearable laugh. And yet he seemed nervous. “I’ve seen shows where comedians cracked about someone not clapping, then realized they’ve only got one hand, or joked about someone wearing sunglasses inside, then realized they’re blind,” he said. “I never want to put myself in that situation. I never want to be mean.”

Bargatze, 42, who spent years toiling in front of single-digit crowds, had just kicked off the biggest headlining tour of his career. He was on his way to board a chartered plane to Las Vegas for two more sold-out shows. Some of his dates were selling out 10 months in advance, and he and a team of Hollywood writers were in discussions with Netflix about an eponymous sitcom. Yet here he was, spending his post-launch limo ride worrying that he may have inadvertently offended someone who wasn’t there with a story that was meant to highlight his own deficiencies.

The legends of stand-up, from Lenny Bruce to Richard Pryor to Dave Chappelle, were subversive, antagonistic, troublemaking. Bargatze is none of those things. He worries constantly about alienating his audience or

hurting someone's feelings. His act is slow, almost soothing, as he plods through nonthreatening tales of his own mediocrity. He comes across as a walking Xanax, helping audiences slow down and, as he says, "shut off their brains for an hour."

If comedy is a proxy for the mood of American society, Bargatze's sudden popularity suggests that he's tapped into something powerful: the discontent with our discontent. He insists that stand-up can be a great unifier, bridging the divides that have emerged within families, among friends, between red states and blue states. "People are worn out," he told me. "It seems like every form of entertainment these days has to have a message, and it's gotten old."

Bargatze broke out during Donald Trump's presidency with the first of two hour-long Netflix specials. A college dropout who insists he's too dumb to make informed decisions for himself, let alone lecture anyone else, he never talks about politics. He goes nowhere near race or identity issues. He maneuvers so gingerly around other subjects—religion, gender roles, the fracturing of America—that they feel untouched.

The comedian to whom Bargatze is most often compared is Jim Gaffigan, the churchgoing family man from Indiana whose punch lines revolve around parenting and food. But even Gaffigan picked a side in the summer of 2020, when he called Trump a fascist on Twitter and suggested that his voters were part of a hapless cult. Gaffigan was denounced in the *Wall Street Journal* opinion section and sworn off by countless fans across Red America.

When I mentioned this episode to Bargatze, he exhaled hard and gazed skyward, like a bystander asked to describe a car wreck. "I don't have the stomach for that stuff," he said. "I don't have it in me to make people uncomfortable."

Instead Bargatze takes his audiences on strange, circuitous journeys that rarely conclude with an obvious punch line. He tells stories about sleeping in a hotel room with the lights on because he couldn't find the switch, and being intimidated by his 9-year-old daughter's homework, and accidentally ordering coffee with whipped cream instead of "with cream."

Gaffigan told me that from the first time he saw Bargatze perform, he was impressed that Bargatze could be so unhurried, so inoffensive—and yet also rollickingly funny. “Comedy is all about authenticity and point of view,” he said. “Nate is your buddy from a small town. Being so unaware, and discovering through his observations, that’s what makes Nate funny. His jokes don’t make a judgment.”

Raised by strict Southern Baptist parents, Bargatze was the class clown who never got in trouble, the life of the party who never went to parties. But he was never academically inclined, either. After high school, he bounced from job to job. He worked construction. He sold cellphones at a Walmart kiosk. He delivered furniture. He put on drunk-driving simulations at high schools. Finally, he did some remedial coursework at a community college, then enrolled at Western Kentucky University. He promptly flunked every course—even bowling, despite having once rolled a 266. “He just didn’t show up,” his father, Stephen, told me.

When he came home, Bargatze told his parents that he wanted to pursue comedy. (They took the news well; his father made a living as a clown and a magician, a source of material for his son’s future act.) At his first open-mic event, Bargatze squirmed watching his parents sit through hours of expletive-laden acts before he went on. “I knew then and there I was going to be clean,” Bargatze told me. “I just couldn’t imagine my parents coming to watch a show and I’m up there being dirty.”

He spent two years in Chicago without landing a single paid gig, then moved to New York, where he caught a break at the famed Boston Comedy Club. He was a “barker,” handing out flyers in Greenwich Village, compensated with free stage time at night’s end. (He walked dogs and drove a FedEx truck during the day to pay the bills.) For years, Bargatze would take the stage after 1 a.m., when only four or five people were left in attendance. But he got to watch stars like Dave Chappelle and Louis C.K. hone their craft, and he studied up-and-comers such as Bill Burr and Patrice O’Neal.

Bargatze also began drinking hard, and his act became edgier. He started swearing from the stage, and told stories about getting blackout drunk. He

poked fun at overweight people, and introduced an eyebrow-raising bit about sex workers being murdered in New York City.

Bargatze told me he "got very close to that edge" of sabotaging his career because of alcoholism. He no longer drinks, and he hasn't cursed onstage in more than a decade. And the bit about sex workers? It became something of an inflection point. "I had a girl message me on Twitter. She was a prostitute. And she was really, really hurt by it," Bargatze told me. "And I just felt horrible. Like, here's this person who's really sad because of something I said. You know? I told myself I would never do that again."

Before every performance, in the dressing room backstage, Bargatze pulls out an index card and writes down his set list. The one- or two-word prompts spill down in columns from left to right, usually 30 to 40 in total. The habit reinforces his memorization while also offering a final chance to reshuffle the act.

On his last night in Las Vegas—as his father warmed up the crowd with a magic act—Bargatze told me there would be some changes to the show. His joke about a scientific proposal to dim the sun, one he'd giddily previewed just before the Reno show, was out. Instead, he was inserting new material —at the very top of the show, something his comedy hero, Jerry Seinfeld, calls "a rookie mistake"—that he'd written hours earlier while bleeding money at a blackjack table. The gist was that Vegas dealers flipped cards too fast, so rather than trying to keep up, he would watch their facial expressions the way someone studies a flight attendant's reactions on a bumpy flight: "Am I going to be okay here?"

The blackjack bit won roaring approval. Blackjack dealers *do* move too fast, and he *does* seem too dumb to do such speedy math. The sun-dimming joke had failed for the very reasons the blackjack joke succeeded. Bargatze was roasting the scientists floating the idea, rather than turning the joke inward, suggesting that it's the kind of solution to climate change you'd expect *him* to come up with.

What makes Bargatze so effective during these fraught times, Gaffigan told me, is his embrace of "victimless comedy." But this isn't quite right. What

Bargatze does is make himself the victim of his jokes, turning anecdotes into uncharitable assessments of his own intelligence.

The irony is that his comedy is really smart. His yarn about driving past a dead horse lying on the side of the road, which sent him racing down mental side streets—*How heavy is a dead horse? Would friends help move it? Which body part is easiest to lift?*—is so entertaining that it distracts from the joke's ultimate destination. The horse was alive, Bargatze discovered on the drive back. He just didn't know horses could lie down to sleep.

Burr, one of the most successful comics working today, told me that Bargatze's humor stems from his capacity to embody a certain type. "There's always the stereotype of the southern guy with the thick accent and they're not smart. It's such a dumb stereotype," Burr said. "But Nate knew how to make that work for him."

Burr recalled how he and Bargatze bonded years ago over their shared disdain for New York's cultural self-importance: "Some of these badasses from Brooklyn used to make fun of the South, and Nate would take them on and destroy them. It was just amazing to watch."

That might sound out of character for the understated comedian. But if there's one subject that gets Bargatze worked up, it's coastal condescension. In the time I spent with him, he kept flashing irritation with how places like his hometown are portrayed in popular culture. "I do hate the way people in New York and L.A. talk about the South—we're all a bunch of rednecks running around screaming the N-word," he said.

It was a hint that Bargatze does have strong opinions about divisive subjects—opinions that would undermine his unifying image and, very possibly, damage his commercial appeal if he expressed them onstage. Reading my mind, he added: "I'm trying to ride the line here. Because I want to be able to sell out a theater in San Francisco one week and Mobile, Alabama, the next week. You know?"

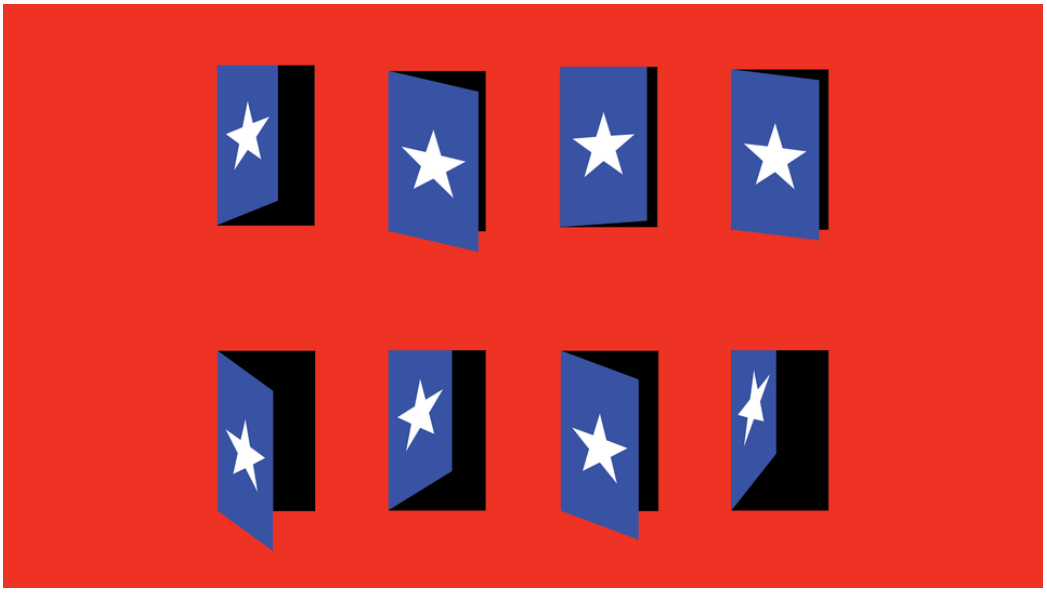
After his show, as we looked out across the shimmering Las Vegas skyline, I asked Bargatze whether he worried that his onstage persona as an aw-

shucks southerner might contribute to a caricature of the people and places he loves. He seemed puzzled by the question. “Look, I *am* dumb,” he said. “That’s not the South being dumb; that’s just me.”

Maybe he is dumb. Or maybe, I suggested, he’s smart enough to see how coming across as simpleminded could work to his advantage.

Bargatze allowed a knowing smirk. “I just want to be funny,” he said. “That ought to be enough.”

This article appears in the October 2021 print edition with the headline “The Xanax of Stand-Up.”



Plan Z for Immigration

Congress Can't Solve Immigration. Maybe the States Can.

By Jonathan Rauch

"A moral failing and a national shame." During his 2020 campaign, that was how Joe Biden characterized America's immigration policies in the Trump era. On his first day in office, the new president announced an ambitious reform. The U.S. Citizenship Act of 2021 would include a pathway to citizenship for undocumented immigrants. It would raise caps on legal immigration. It would increase aid for Central America. It touched all the progressive erogenous zones.

And it was dead on arrival. "It's such a progressive wish list that it's almost counterproductive," a pro-immigration lobbyist told me. By summer, the reform effort had stalled, migrants were flooding the border, the Democrats were divided, and the Republicans were demagoguing. Just like always.

For the country, as well as for immigrants and their families and employers, the cost of our never-ending immigration crisis has been very high. Among

its consequences was the presidency of Donald Trump, who could not have reached the White House without the disruptive energy that immigration unleashed. In fact, if you had to pick a date when America launched itself toward Trumpism, June 28, 2007, would be a good choice.

Immigration was on the floor of the Senate. A bipartisan coalition had revived what was then—and still is—the logical compromise: stricter controls at the borders and at job sites, more legal immigration (especially of skilled workers), and a path to citizenship. Had the compromise passed, "it would have changed the politics," Jim Kolbe, who was then a House Republican representing an Arizona border district, recently told me. "It would have been seen as putting the immigration issue behind us."

Instead, the bill failed, badly. A disappointed Mitch McConnell, then the Senate minority leader, said, "I had hoped for a bipartisan accomplishment, and what we got was a bipartisan defeat."

Before 2007, immigration had been a controversial issue but also a normal one—susceptible to bargaining and compromise. Congress had passed major reform under President Ronald Reagan in 1986, and then a series of tune-ups in the '90s. After 2007, paralysis set in. For conservatives, the stalemate became emblematic of the country's inability to secure its borders and enforce its laws. For liberals, it was emblematic of the country's inability to deal humanely with millions of immigrants. And for moderates, it was a symbol of congressional incompetence. According to the Pew Research Center, two-thirds of the public wants a pathway to citizenship and better border control. "Everyone knows what has to be done," Kolbe told me, "but no one has the will to do it."

This dispute has now inflamed our whole body politic. "I think the immigration debate is a bigger problem for the country than any of the failures of the immigration system," Yuval Levin of the American Enterprise Institute told me. In other words, the country needs a resolution to the political crisis around immigration at least as much as it needs a solution to the policy mess. As long as voters believe Washington is too incompetent and venal to handle immigration, they will not trust it to do anything else, and the door will stay open to demagogues and nihilists.

So now what? Plan A, comprehensive progressive reform, will not work. Plan B, comprehensive conservative reform, will not work. Plan C, compromise, should work but has failed time and again. That leaves Plans D, E, and F: piecemeal reforms for groups such as "Dreamers" and farmworkers, and the kinds of patchwork changes that congressional Democrats were seeking to include in their budget-reconciliation package this fall. They may be the best we can do.

But there is one piecemeal proposal that deserves special attention. I think of it as Plan Z, because it reframes the whole problem.

In 2019, Representative John Curtis, a Republican from Utah, introduced what he called the State-Sponsored Visa Pilot Program Act. It would have allowed a new avenue for immigration by authorizing states to sponsor people for three-year, renewable work visas. The bill found no co-sponsors and never came up for debate, but Curtis told me he intends to reintroduce it in the current Congress.

Delegating immigration authority to the states is not a new concept; Senator Ron Johnson, a Republican from Wisconsin, introduced a similar plan in 2017. According to Alex Nowrasteh of the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank, bills seeking authority to issue work visas have been introduced in 11 state legislatures since 2008, and three such bills have been voted into law. But the federal government has ignored them.

One problem is that people just can't get their mind around letting someone other than the federal government decide who comes and stays. You can't have individual states picking immigrants for the whole country! What about security? What about fairness? Could a conservative state discriminate on the grounds of, say, race or religion?

But the idea is not really that dramatic. This proposal wouldn't encroach on the existing federal systems for visas, refugees, or family reunification. Any state-sponsored work permits would be in addition to the current number. The federal government would still vet the applications and control permanent residency and citizenship. Federal law and the Constitution would still forbid discrimination.

When I asked Mitch Daniels, the president of Purdue University, in Indiana, and a former Republican governor of the state, whether policy makers there would participate in such a program, he replied with a prompt yes. “The one thing” keeping Indiana from economic competitiveness, he said, “is that we don’t have enough people with the right skills.” Besides, he added, universities and businesses can already sponsor immigrants for visas; why shouldn’t states have the same authority?

How would state-sponsored visas work? In Curtis’s 2019 version, every state would have the option of sponsoring 5,000 work visas a year, plus an additional allotment based on its population, up to a nationwide total of 500,000. No state would be obligated to sponsor anyone, so states could shut their doors if they chose to. They could favor tech workers, farmworkers, family members; they could even use their visas to temporarily legalize undocumented workers already living there. The only requirements would be that the visas couldn’t be employer-specific (so bosses couldn’t use them to blackmail workers with deportation threats) and that the immigrants holding them live and work in the state that sponsored them.

How would the plan prevent immigrants from moving out of state? Each state would be required to report where its visa holders live and work, and if it couldn’t account for them, it would lose visas the next year. States that administered their programs well would be rewarded with more visas.

In any case, immigrants who settle into jobs and communities are not all that inclined to move. In Canada, which has allowed its provinces to sponsor immigrants since 1996 and which does not restrict where visa holders reside, more than 80 percent of them stay put for more than 10 years. “The vast majority,” a government report on the program said in 2017, “have become established economically, with high employment rates and earnings that increase over time.”

Even if this system isn’t perfect, the politics would be healthier than at present, when the federal government is making decisions, or nondecisions, and the states have no voice. “We’ve been so wrapped around the axle on immigration law and policy for so long that it might be very constructive to look at it through a different lens,” Janet Napolitano, a former governor of

Arizona and secretary of homeland security in the Obama administration, told me. “Maybe it avoids some of the hard lines that both sides have drawn.”

State-sponsored immigration is not a cure-all. It would not remedy Congress’s deficiencies or resolve difficult questions about border control, asylum, or citizenship. What it would do is make American communities feel that they have some influence. It might dispel the rancid air that has suffocated reform. And it might begin to free our national politics from the curse of immigration gridlock.

This article appears in the October 2021 print edition.

How Netflix Made Americans Care About the Most European of Sports

Netflix's 'Drive to Survive' Made Me a Formula 1 Fan

By Amanda Mull

As recently as June, I had never heard of Daniel Ricciardo. The fault was mine, not his: Ricciardo is a world-famous Formula 1 race-car driver with millions of Instagram followers and a zillion-watt smile, whereas I am from the United States—a nation traditionally standoffish to international sports, and to anything that seems suspiciously European.

F1 and most of its drivers run afoul of these sensibilities. The last time an American had notable success in the series was in the late 1970s, the heyday of the Italian-born immigrant Mario Andretti, who won his only

championship seven years before I was born. In the decades that followed, F1's American potential was squandered, and the sport remained a niche pursuit. But Ricciardo is Australian, a spiritual plane closer to Americanness than, say, being Finnish or Dutch. His driver number is 3, an homage to the NASCAR legend Dale Earnhardt and an exhilaratingly American choice in a sport that reeks so intensely of European aristocracy that true fandom requires a basic understanding of Monaco's whole conceptual deal.

I don't know if that's why Ricciardo is the first driver viewers meet in *Formula 1: Drive to Survive*, the ultra-compelling Netflix docuseries that began its third season this spring, but his goofy-jock charms are very popular among new American fans (or at least among the female ones I know). In the weeks between starting the show and writing this sentence, I've developed a detailed set of opinions about Danny—that's what those of us in the know call him—and the three teams he's raced for since 2018. I have theories on tyre (yes) strategy; fears about the Eau Rouge corner at Spa; and thoughts on the Red Bull Racing team principal, Christian Horner, who is sometimes the Greek chorus and sometimes the villain but always very handsome and married to a literal Spice Girl. I would protect the 21-year-old British phenom Lando Norris, Ricciardo's current McLaren Racing teammate, with my life. On the weekends when there is no Grand Prix for me to watch while groggily drinking coffee on my couch at 9 a.m., I now feel a bit disoriented.

For me, *Drive to Survive* worked like a trapdoor directly into F1 fandom, and it seems to have done the same for lots of previously indifferent Americans. Netflix is averse to releasing viewership numbers, but a spokesperson told me that the third season was the show's most popular yet; it was also the platform's seventh-most-watched series in March. Circumstantial evidence of its influence abounds: ESPN, which broadcasts Grand Prix events in the United States, says race ratings are up 50 percent over 2020. The Circuit of the Americas, which hosts the United States Grand Prix in Austin, Texas, plans to add 20,000 more seats for its sold-out October race. Zak Brown, the CEO of McLaren Racing and a periodic presence on *Drive to Survive*, told me that the show has had an enormous impact on the sport. For people like him, who weren't previously among

F1's most public faces, that means getting recognized in airports and while out to dinner. "If it wasn't for *Drive to Survive*, I don't think I would have had Michael Strahan coming to give me a fist bump in a restaurant in New York," Brown said.

In *Drive to Survive*, F1 has found a way to convert Americans to a sport they have traditionally ignored. In the process, it may have hit on something even more valuable, something every American sports league is desperately seeking: a recipe for building and sustaining interest at a time when sports, facing all manner of new competition, are losing their grip on the nation's psyche. Already, the teenagers and early-20-somethings who make up Gen Z are much less likely than Millennials to identify as sports fans or watch live sports. To head off disaster, the major American sports leagues need better answers to the questions that already haunt every licensing deal and marketing initiative: How do you get people who grew up with the entire internet's worth of entertainment to care about sports? How do you make a new fan?

Before I became suddenly consumed by Formula 1, I knew only one way to become a sports fan, and that was to be born into it. That's how I came to college football, and specifically to the University of Georgia Bulldogs. My dad went to UGA; I was still in the womb when I attended my first game at Sanford Stadium. College football is part of the Deep South's culture and factors into millions of southerners' familial relationships—the only time I've ever heard my dad swear at another family member was when my Uncle Joey suggested one Thanksgiving that he might bring me a University of Tennessee shirt at New Year's. My understanding of myself as a Georgia fan is approximately as integral to my identity as my understanding of myself as an American.

This is not as extreme as it might sound: Sports fandom is one of the primary organizing principles of American social life. Daniel Wann, a psychologist who studies the topic at Murray State University, in Kentucky, once administered a survey asking students to make a list of important things about themselves. Several University of Kentucky basketball fans mentioned their team allegiance before their Christian faith. But that's not so surprising when you consider that the two things were likely passed

down to them around the same time, by the same people. I know plenty of young parents who, somewhat jokingly but also very seriously, began encouraging their babies to say “Go Dawgs” as soon as they began talking.

Generational transfers of fandom don’t take for everyone—kids, Wann noted, love to rebel—but childhood is key to determining whether someone will follow sports later in life. And that doesn’t just mean watching sports growing up: “The best predictor of being a sports fan as an adult is having played that or another sport as a child,” he told me. Youth-sports participation is more closely correlated with fandom than any other trait he’s looked at, including gender and personality type and even whether you’re a good player. Spending just a season or two in Little League makes a person more likely to eventually become a sports fan—even if the eventual gateway is a Patrick Mahomes–obsessed college friend, and the result is an NFL habit rather than an MLB one.

For generations, these factors played to sports franchises’ advantage. Teams sewed themselves into the social fabric of their cities until they seemed closer to a civic organization than a corporation owned by a local baron. Their product was also difficult to avoid—a few generations ago, most families had a single television, and it got just a handful of channels, one or two of which probably ran sports on any given night or weekend afternoon. Kids had fewer activities to choose from, and most boys were expected to play sports—if not on organized teams, then to pass the time with their neighbors before dinner.

Virtually everything about how children entertain themselves has changed. Youth-sports participation has been declining pretty rapidly as playing has gotten more competitive, expensive, and time-consuming. If you’re a working- or middle-class kid with no real chance of a profitable athletic future, playing a sport might not make sense. For football, still the most popular spectator sport in the United States, fears about the game’s safety have contributed to a particularly steep decline in youth involvement.

Where sports have receded from childhood, other sources of entertainment have flooded in. Video games and social media are popular bogeymen in tales about the laziness of Kids These Days, but they are a much less expensive way to keep your children occupied than travel soccer. Parents

are also less likely than those before them to send their kids out to roam the neighborhood and put together pickup games themselves, a change precipitated by the various panics—satanic, stranger danger, gang—of the ’80s and ’90s.

As children who lack much firsthand experience with sports reach adulthood, Wann said, converting them into sports fans will be difficult. “How can you grow a fan base,” he asked, “that has already spent all of their life basically telling you that they don’t care about your product?” Unless something changes, a self-perpetuating cycle is likely to set in: Kids who feel little connection to sports that are too expensive to play and too boring to watch grow up to be adults who don’t take their own children to baseball games or give them team-logo hoodies on their birthdays.

Everyone involved in big-time American sports knows that something must be done. They have invested in developing large audiences on social-media platforms, in creating real-life “fan experiences,” in tying themselves to social values that might shore up their shaky reputation as cultural leaders. During last season’s playoffs, the NFL simulcast a game on Nickelodeon, which overlaid slime graphics onto the field while announcers, some of them kids, explained the rules and answered questions about the action. Some sports leagues dabbled in reality television long before *Drive to Survive* was a twinkle in a Formula 1 executive’s eye—the HBO docuseries *Hard Knocks*, which premiered in 2001, follows a different NFL team’s preseason training camp every year.

But *Hard Knocks* has never converted many new fans. The most notable American-sports docuseries, such as ESPN’s *30 for 30* and *The Last Dance*, which chronicled Michael Jordan’s final NBA championship, tend to lean on nostalgia more than on current action. Live sports broadcasting, as ubiquitous as it is, tends to presume knowledge of a sport. If you don’t know anything about baseball, I’m not sure you’d come away from a televised game with any inkling of why you should care about it, even if you were looking for reasons.

While watching *Drive to Survive*, I wondered whether a series about an American sports league could replicate its appeal, and what exactly made it so effective to begin with. The show is fun and loose, two things that

tradition-weighted, heavily sanitized American sports entertainment often isn't. The drivers and team principals can be petty or rude or a little too honest. F1 and its governing bodies have not required that their visages be polished to an unblemished sheen. Drivers and execs complain about the uneven application of penalties, and, when they think it will get them an advantage, they form alliances and narc on one another openly. The series is frank about how, in 2019, F1 let Scuderia Ferrari, its most storied team, escape public censure for an allegedly illegal fuel system, and about how mad that made everyone else.

Drive to Survive has its detractors—some of F1's longtime fans think it's too dramatized, and takes too many liberties. Yes, the show is clear and unapologetic propaganda for the sport—but compared with what American leagues make public, it's practically cinema verité. It is a shortcut around fandom's gatekeepers, and once you get past them, you can judge the sport for yourself. It helps that Formula 1 teams don't seem to think of themselves as pillars of their communities; they're named not after places, but after the companies underwriting them. Cheering for a company can feel weird, but only until you remember that all professional sports teams are companies. American sports franchises, by contrast, want fans to believe in their purity and goodness. They seek to model certain values about hard work and tradition and achievement while also merging their identities with those of the cities or states they inhabit. This is a useful reputational sleight of hand, one that benefits the teams when it's time to dip their hand into public coffers to build a new stadium. But their stated ideals are hard to reconcile with the barely obscured and often bleak reality of big-money sports.

Formula 1 isn't as shy about its petrochemical and tobacco ties, its aristocrats and oligarchs, its demonstration of what bored money buys. The centrality of cash isn't masked with queasy invocations of meritocracy—it is thrillingly explicit. The drivers are generally young and handsome, and many grew up wealthy. The sport has a long history of "pay drivers," whose seats in Formula 1's two-person teams are bought—either with their own money, or with that of an interested sponsor, usually from their home country. In the case of the Canadian driver Lance Stroll, who races for Aston Martin, his billionaire father bought the whole team.

The teams with the most cash generally win, because building rocket ships that function on dry land is very expensive, and carting them around the world to race in occasionally deadly fashion is even more so. Some of the series' newer races are held in countries with abysmal human-rights records whose authoritarian regimes apparently thought it would be cool to host a race. The whole thing is soaked in champagne and decked out in luxury watches, and it always feels as though it's coming to you live from the French Riviera, no matter its actual location that week.

I feel conflicted about these things—and other *Drive to Survive* converts I spoke with described their new obsession as, at best, problematic. But I also find F1 a refreshing change from American sports, which for all their lofty self-descriptions fare at least as poorly under the microscope. The NFL, for example, just spent a season marketing itself as an opponent of racism while defending in court its use of "race norming," which assumes that Black players naturally have lower cognitive abilities than their white counterparts, and therefore should be paid less when football harms their brains. (The league announced in June that it will eliminate the norms but continued to deny they were discriminatory.) The difference is that Formula 1 assumes you're smart enough to understand that nothing involving this much money is likely to be morally sound.

If American professional sports wanted their own *Drive to Survive*, they wouldn't just have to let in a film crew; they'd have to be more honest about their product, and less controlling of how other people speak about it. If you haven't already bought in, the hypocrisy and stodginess you have to get past to find the fun in every major American league—except for maybe the NBA, which embraces personalities and interpersonal drama more readily—is enormous.

Formula 1 doesn't try so hard to paper over the uncomfortable realities of its business with nostalgia, or with old-fashioned notions of grit and determination and selflessness. It wants to be loved not because it's good, but because it's fun.

This article appears in the October 2021 print edition with the headline "How I Fell for Formula 1."

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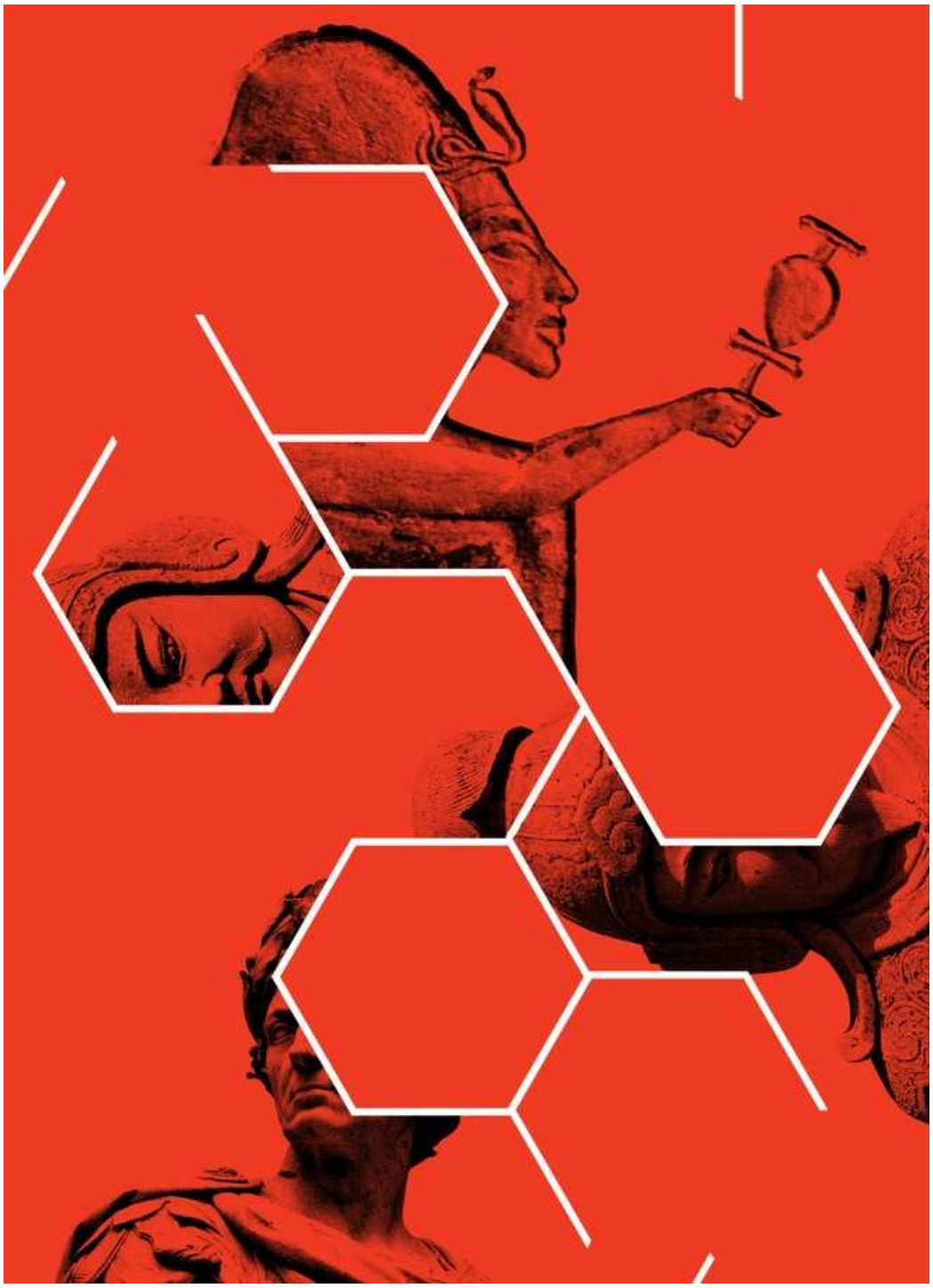
Confessions of a Sid Meier's Civilization Addict

How Sid Meier's Civilization Conquered Gaming

By Spencer Kornhaber



If the point of life was simply to enjoy the moment that you're in, we'd all be playing video games constantly. The likes of Minecraft and Zelda turn the drag of time into a silvery chute you drop into and emerge from after hours in a state of flow. No other activity, it becomes clearer every year, can compete in delivering kicks per second—and gaming's magnetic pull is

bending civilization itself. The $179 billion gaming industry is by now bigger than the global movie business and North American professional sports combined, and its decades-long rise has been credited with declines in reading, TV viewership, workforce participation, and even sex.

Much of my childhood was spent in that silvery chute, where I commanded alien armies and cast spells. But then one week during my sophomore year in high school, a realization hit me: Spending so much time questing on a screen might get in the way of other quests—for a driver's license, a social life, a career. I quit gaming outright, and I mostly stayed away as adulthood unfolded—until the boring horror of 2020's shutdowns arrived. Netflix and novels couldn't distract me from scrolling through the news or counting the fibers in my couch pillows. A friend in another city suggested that we game together remotely, and I felt a pang. The real world was out of control, but here was an opportunity for me to play emperor.

That opportunity came in the form of Sid Meier's Civilization VI, the latest in a legendary computer-game franchise that started in 1991. A digital variation on nerdy board games like Risk, Civilization emulates the span of human history: Over hundreds of turns (often filling days, if not weeks, of playtime), a player chooses a culture (the Romans, say, or the Zulu) and then embarks on a long evolution from nomadic settlers to hegemony-seeking, space-exploring empire. Whether fellow players are friends or strangers or artificial intelligence, the action of the game is propelled not by hand-eye coordination or fantastical role-playing but by deliberation. How will your people worship? Whom will they trade with? What type of government will they have? And how will their government influence their trade and religion, and vice versa? The decisions cascade, enabling so many combinations of strategies that not even Reddit could ever document them all.

Perhaps this sounds dry, especially if you're someone who associates gaming with blasting beasts and eating Mario's magic mushrooms. But in *Sid Meier's Memoir!: A Life in Computer Games*, published last year, Civilization's creator—who spent his early career working on simulating fighter-pilot combat—nails the unexpected feeling of wonder he got when playing Will Wright's groundbreaking urban-planning game of 1989,

SimCity: “It was about creating, rather than destroying … and it was a game,” Meier writes. “The objective was dominance over one’s own limitations, rather than a morally inferior antagonist … and it was a game.”

That improve-and-prosper ethos has since animated other behemoth franchises such as Animal Crossing, FarmVille, and Wright’s The Sims, but Civilization—which, to be clear, does involve some razing and pillaging—may be the most immersive of them all. Meier knew he had come up with a hit, he reports, when an early Civ prototype hypnotized his brother for a full six hours. I’ll never forget encountering Civilization II in fifth grade after a day at the beach. Still sandy and damp, I sat up past my bedtime watching a friend, who was playing as the mighty Aztecs, defeat America. As he dispatched chariots across pixelated peat bogs, I dug into the thick, textbook-like manual, whose pointers—press the “I” key to irrigate—remain needlessly lodged in my brain today.

For my first outing as a 30-something Civ VI player, I picked the Aztecs too, and got to work building a resource-rich theocracy. In the decades since I’d sworn off the game, the graphics had improved and the rules had grown knottier in a series of new editions and expansion packs. Yet the game’s essential pull remains the same. Turn after turn, bafflement at complex systems gives way to a sense of mastery: Capturing a city is fun, but have you ever harmoniously curated a dozen art museums? Meanwhile, granular details accumulate into a grand narrative that you feel you’ve written. Once, playing as Scythia, I gloated as my horsemen, fighting over generations, eventually upgraded to helicopter fleets. Fresh accomplishments—the discovery of aluminum, the completion of the Pyramids—continually beckon, too. I went to bed late after that first Civ VI round and lay awake thinking of tactics to use next time. *Next time* came to engulf long weeknights, full weekends, and even poolside afternoons during a California escape from the East Coast winter.

For a game so inspired by the real world, the miracle of Civilization is total escapism: Nuking a city or burning so much coal that the sea level rises brings consequences for your populace, but not really for your own psyche. Earth’s actual history does not so much constrain players—part of the fun lies in the possibility of making Genghis Khan a dovish diplomat—as it

does guide them through tricky questions. For example, as a beginner, you're helped by having a preexisting sense that selecting a fascist government will help fortify your population for wartime while cutting off the commercial dynamism afforded by democracy. Some academics and journalists have taken issue with such gamification of humanity's ugly history, and over the years Civ has done a good job of both addressing criticisms (later editions are not nearly as Western-centric as earlier ones) and shrugging them off. As my Montezuma dispatched evangelists to spread a feline-themed religion to Russia, I reflected on the social-studies fever dream of it all only in passing. I was mostly preoccupied with building grander houses of worship without leaving myself militarily vulnerable to more scientifically advanced rivals.

What I couldn't kick, though, was the twinge of shame I'd long felt about hours spent gaming. As news of vaccines rolled in, another anxiety emerged: What if I ended up re-addicted, for good? The Civilization aces I watched on YouTube (yes, I was that hooked) were hyping a new game that I knew I would have to try. Called Humankind, it was rumored to be "the Civ killer."

Humankind, a turn-based strategy game created by the Sega-owned French studio Amplitude, differentiates itself in its title: Our species, not our stuff, is the point. Civilization encourages you to quickly establish a capital, but Humankind's early turns are all about communing with nature as your wandering tribe of hominids hunts and gathers. The bigger twist is that once you do settle down, you don't stick with one civilization for the millennia to come. You instead get periodic chances to pick a new culture, creating a hybridized society: Your Bronze Age towns may be strewn with the colossal stone heads of the Olmecs, but you might later evolve in an Austro-Hungarian direction, with opera halls and Evidenzbureau agents. The buzz among gamers was that this mixing and matching could enable a richer, even more unpredictable historical simulation.

Curious to discover how far my new gaming habit would extend, in June I accessed Humankind's "closed beta"—a prerelease trial version made temporarily available to solicit feedback. I was immediately struck by the visuals: serene and painterly, with loping hills and wandering deer.

Civilization has well-drawn terrain too, but I mostly perceived its map as a nifty chessboard. Humankind really feels like a world, and other aesthetic details—illustrations, text narratives—encourage imaginative engagement. Every so often, highly specific scenarios crop up: a destabilizing rumor spreads through your population, or refugees accumulate at your borders. Choosing how to react (suppress dissent or allow it; integrate outsiders or expel them) jangled my sense of ethics in a way Civ rarely did.

The most important divergence between the games lies in their answers to an impossible question: What would it mean to "win" the world? Civilization VI has multiple discrete paths to victory, including conquering your enemies' capitals, colonizing another planet, or converting the globe to your faith. This vision of progress is about determinedly working toward a capstone before anyone else achieves greatness. Smart players apply ruthless cost-benefit logic to every decision, which sometimes means sacrificing present-day prosperity while building toward future dominance.

By contrast, the structure of Humankind rewards societies that steadily flourish: A broad range of accomplishments—influence attained, cities booming, wonders constructed, skirmishes won—feed into one ledger of "fame" points, which eventually determine the winner. The goal is to cultivate some ineffable melange of impact and happiness over time—a theoretically uplifting answer to the question of what gives a society, and the people in it, a sense of value and purpose.

But as I played through my first Humankind game as a science-focused civilization (blending Babylon, Greece, and the Korean kingdom of Joseon), the hunt for legacy came to feel more like gardening than gaming. I built schools, researched technologies, and watched my score climb like a thriving vine. In life, it's healthy to feel that every endeavor, large and small, has intrinsic value. In a game, conniving toward one ambitious goal—inviting a continual drip of intrigue and risk—is more fun.

As a result, Humankind didn't glue me to my spot in the way that Meier's franchise did, and I lost only a little sleep pondering my next moves. Then again, I was playing a limited demo during early-summer balminess as mask mandates began to be lifted. When the world resumed doling out its own points—novel experiences, consequential encounters—I didn't exactly

stop feeling the computer's pull. Instead, the vividness of reality made me realize that gaming could be part of my life without running my life.

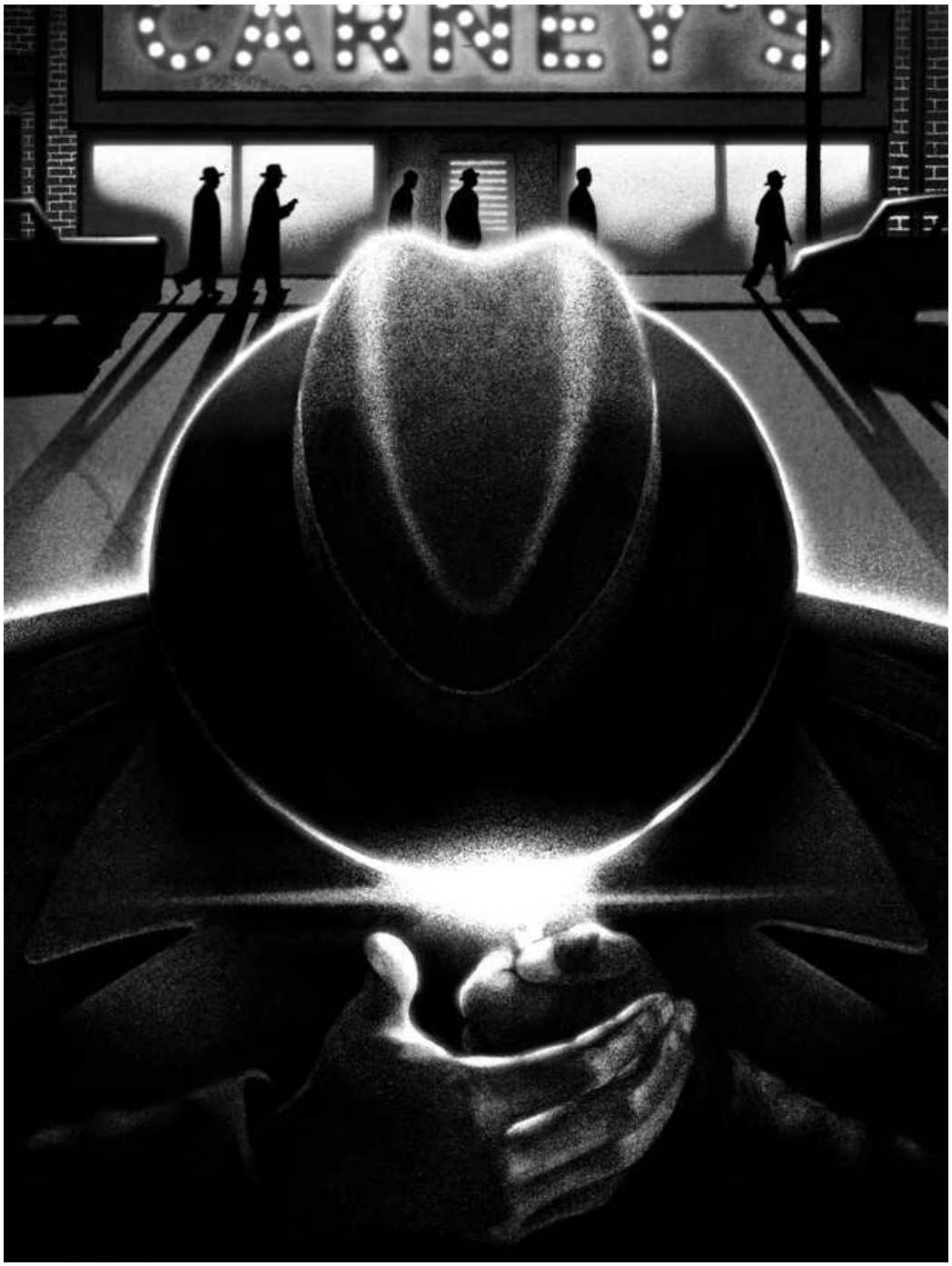
One recent night, arriving home after a reunion with colleagues, I fired up Civilization for the first time in a few weeks. The French had my capital surrounded, but I fended off the siege and counterattacked. By the time I took Paris, it was 1 a.m. I didn't know when I'd resume my conquest, but I did know that until then, I could count on a warm hum of anticipation in my brain, more motivating than distracting. I also thought of something Meier said in his book: "A bad game strands you in the past (as in, 'What just happened?') while a mediocre one keeps you in the present ('Sure, this is cool.'). But a really good game keeps you focused on what's yet to come."

This article appears in the October 2021 print edition with the headline "Everybody Wants to Rule the World." When you buy a book using a link on this page, we receive a commission. Thank you for supporting The Atlantic.

What Is Crime in a Country Built on It?

Review: ‘Harlem Shuffle,’ by Colson Whitehead

By Jennifer Wilson



When I was 7 years old, I went with my friends to a nearby corner store after school. I remember the outing vividly—even the brands of chocolate-chip cookies I was torn between buying. Just when I had settled on Famous Amos, I felt a hard push, then heard the words “Get out! Get out!” We were stealing, the shop owner said. “Don’t come back!” Not long after, I recall being inside a stuffy car with my grandmother. We were on our way to one

of the tax-free outlet malls in Delaware, but not to shop. When we arrived, my cousin was sitting on the edge of the pavement by the parking lot, waiting for us. “I swear she didn’t steal anything,” she said, crying, her head in her hands. My aunt was being held by the mall police for shoplifting.

People are sometimes asked, “When did you become aware of your race?” This was not that moment for me, though around this time, I certainly realized that my race marked me as a thief. I know I should be offended, but I have always found robbery glamorous: In a kind of defiance, I have preferred to associate theft with high-end getaway cars and wads of cash stuffed into suede jewelry pouches, soft to the touch. I imagined myself, and still do, in league with the slinky cat burglar Selina Kyle (also known as Catwoman), Audrey Hepburn in *How to Steal a Million*, and En Vogue on the *Set It Off* soundtrack. I am far from alone. Everywhere you turn, the world of thievery is inhabited by sleek and sexy heroines and dapper playboys who can pick locks and crack safes. Even Helen Mirren wants to be in a *Fast and Furious* movie.

Colson Whitehead, too, seems to have fallen for the seductive allure of the thief in his newest novel, *Harlem Shuffle*. When he sat down to work on it, he had just finished *The Underground Railroad* (2016), and hoped that this next book, the story of a reluctant fence in early-1960s Harlem, would offer a reprieve. “*The Underground Railroad* was so heavy that I thought the crime novel might be a good choice for my sanity,” he told *The New York Times* in 2019. All that fun, however, would have to wait. Exasperated by the endless cycle of police shootings of Black teenagers, Whitehead decided to pursue another idea he had been working on, a darker tale that became *The Nickel Boys* (2019), a fictional account of the real-life Dozier School for Boys, a reform school in Florida whose inmates were subjected to brutal beatings, sexual abuse, and murder. Renaming it the Nickel Academy in his novel, Whitehead follows two teenage boys who hastily hatch an escape attempt.

Whitehead’s Harlem caper may seem a dramatic departure from its two sobering predecessors. Yet in their own way, *The Underground Railroad* and *The Nickel Boys* were also crime novels, devoted—much like *Harlem*

Shuffle—to the odyssey of the fugitive. Whitehead's latest features a young furniture dealer named Ray Carney who is caught up in a jewel heist that forces him to wrestle with the impossible terms confronting him as a Black man trying to get ahead in life. To escape his circumstances, will he fare best simply by following the straight and narrow? Is there such a thing when Black shopkeepers like him cannot secure bank loans? Or should he rely on the world of criminals to get what he wants, what he needs? After all, their ends and means feel no less amoral than what he sees being practiced by businessmen and the moneyed elite. "Crooked world, straight world, same rules," Ray thinks. "Everybody had a hand out for the envelope."

Set against a backdrop of the 1964 Harlem race riots, looting, gentrification, and corrupt Black capitalists, *Harlem Shuffle* is a story about property and the vexed relationship that African Americans have with it. Indeed, what is theft for a people who were themselves once property ("stolen bodies working stolen land," as Whitehead wrote in *The Underground Railroad*), and for whom their very freedom was the ultimate heist?

We first meet Ray Carney, the proud purveyor of Carney's Furniture on 125th Street, in 1959 during the civil-rights movement, but the progress he is most interested in is his own. With his name spelled out in large letters on Harlem's main thoroughfare, he feels confident that he has finally overcome his ignominious family origins. His father, Mike Carney, was a local hustler and petty thief who was gunned down by police while stealing cough syrup from a pharmacy. Early in the novel, Ray recalls being teased in school and, following his father's advice, hitting one of his bullies in the face with a pipe. He vowed at that moment, he remembers, to chart a new course: "The way he saw it, living taught you that you didn't have to live the way you'd been taught to live. You came from one place but more important was where you decided to go." His store, "scrabbled together by his wits and industry," marks a new chapter for the Carney name, an honest and legitimate one (though he has just launched a "gently used" section full of secondhand items, some of dubious provenance). So when his cousin, Freddie, asks him if he can fence some stolen jewelry, Ray balks. "I sell furniture," he insists, to which Freddie, who recently brought in a "gently used" TV set, responds, "Nigger, please."

Ray refuses to see himself as a crook. He does not traffic stolen goods so much as simply recognize "a natural flow of goods in and out and through people's lives, from here to there, a churn of property." What, then, to make of the discovery that Ray got the money for the furniture store by finding $30,000 in cash in the spare tire of his late father's truck? The murky distinction between legality and illegality sits at the core of *Harlem Shuffle*. Ray encounters two paths: He can follow Freddie into further criminality or try to become an upstanding member of Harlem's Black business elite.

Yet the distinction between the two slowly starts to blur as Ray realizes that he may need both the scoundrels with guns and the scoundrels with business cards to get what he wants, namely an apartment on Riverside Drive. In time, his sense of right and wrong—and by extension his sense of himself as the son of Mike Carney—is upended. Is Leland, his wife's father and "one of black Harlem's premier accountants," any less of a crook than he or Freddie is? Leland, after all, is always bragging "about his collection of loopholes and dodges," about how he can "get you off the hook."

Ray's desire to be taken seriously as a legitimate businessman is not just about shaking off the reputation of his father; he also wants to stick his self-made success in the face of his wife's family. Owners of a townhouse on Strivers' Row in Harlem and descendants of Seneca Village, a community of Black landowners in Manhattan that was razed to make Central Park, Leland and Alma Jones regard their daughter's choice of husband with a disdain that borders on shame, referring to him as "some sort of rug peddler." When Freddie presents Ray with the opportunity to fence stolen articles from safe-deposit boxes at the Hotel Theresa, the "Waldorf of Harlem" and host to the Black bourgeoisie, it feels less like robbery and more like a revenge fantasy.

When he gets an opportunity to join the Dumas Club, an elite association of Black businessmen that Leland belongs to, that fantasy only intensifies. A member of the club board, a well-known banker named Wilfred Duke, presses for $500—what Ray considers "a sweetener"—to make the deal happen. When it doesn't, a furious Ray concocts an elaborate plot involving a drug dealer, a pimp, and a crooked cop to bring down Duke, who sees nothing wrong with the transaction: It was an investment that fell through,

in the eyes of a man busy "at the bank snatching back loans, foreclosing on hope."

In the moral universe of *Harlem Shuffle*, the *honest* in *honest work* is literal. The novel privileges the perspectives of its avowed criminals—thieves, mobsters, and prostitutes, all candid about the nature of their profession—over those who have convinced themselves that their dubious machinations are ethical, which is to say bankers, real-estate developers, and the suits who work to find them loopholes. When looting breaks out during the riots, Leland deplores the "shiftless element" that has infiltrated the more respectable student protest movement. Whitehead juxtaposes Ray's view: When he sees signs protesting eminent domain where extended construction of the World Trade Center is set to begin, he thinks back to the looting. That "devastation had been nothing compared to what lay before him," he thinks. "If you bottled the rage and hope and fury of all the people of Harlem and made it into a bomb, the results would look something like this." Can theft really be a crime, the novel asks us, in a country built on it?

Ray's insights are part of what makes him bewildering as a character. Though himself a professional fence—by the novel's end he's stopped trying to think otherwise—he never gives up on the prosperity gospel or the promises of Black capitalism. When the looting dies down, he is relieved; his primary concern isn't the fate of Black teenagers like James Powell (whose shooting sparked the riots), but his business and those of his fellow Black store owners. Indeed, none of the criminals whom the novel holds up as having profound moral clarity about the hypocrisy of the ruling classes shows any interest in Black protest or even Black history (which feels especially significant, given Whitehead's recent dedication to the historical novel). "How am I supposed to get a motherfucking sandwich with all that going on?" Freddie fumes when the riots close down restaurants. The Hotel Theresa heist occurs on Juneteenth. The organizer of the robbery, a gangster named Miami Joe, doesn't know it is Juneteenth, but welcomes the coincidence, hoping someone will think it was a racially motivated hit and get thrown off the scent.

Ray displays a pessimism not unlike that of Jack Turner in *The Nickel Boys*. Turner is the foil to Elwood Curtis, an idealistic young Black man who

throws himself into the civil-rights movement and writes pieces about social justice for the *Chicago Defender*. Despite the brutal unfairness Elwood suffers, he has faith in the innate goodness of people and is convinced that if he can just get a letter to the state inspectors, they will shut down the school. Jack is incredulous. "The key to in here is the same as surviving out there," Jack says. "You got to see how people act, and then you got to figure out how to get around them like an obstacle course." Jack sees Black survival as something that has to be seized when those in power are looking the other way; in short, it must be stolen.

Jack and Ray both recognize justice and injustice as a false binary. Jack was sent to a reform school that was itself run by criminals, and the people who steal most brazenly from Ray do not see themselves as crooks, but as legitimate businessmen. Jack's experience turns him into a realist, not an activist. Frustratingly, Ray likewise remains a pragmatist, never fully disavowing the charms of the Black bourgeoisie—a choice that is of course his right, just as it is Whitehead's to write a novel devoid of prescriptions. In fact, his refusal might even be considered radical at a moment when readers are turning to Black writers for answers rather than for art.

Whitehead follows in a long tradition of Black writers who employ crime fiction subversively, using the genre against itself to expose the hypocrisies of the justice system, the false moral dictates set by capitalism, and the very fact that America itself was born of a theft that we are all complicit in. Indeed, what good is a standard whodunit when the answer is "everyone"? Walter Mosley's Easy Rawlins series, which follows a conflicted Black private eye as he reluctantly works for the police, acknowledges the richness of African American life in Los Angeles, often neglected in classic L.A. noir stories. Pauline Hopkins, whose *Hagar's Daughter* (1901) is considered one of the first works of African American detective fiction, employs the genre's devices to make a thriller out of Civil War–era Black life, using passing to satisfy the trope of mistaken identity. The satirist Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972) has been called by some an "anti–detective novel" in the sense that it eschews the classic figure of the white detective as empiricist (Holmes, Poirot, etc.) in favor of PaPa LaBas, an "astrodetective" who conjures clues with the help of "jewelry, Black astrology charts, herbs, potions, candles, talismans."

Harlem Shuffle strikes me as doing a bit of each of these things, and more. What we call a crime and whom we label a criminal are clearly issues very much on Whitehead's mind—and his added twist is to leave out the figure of the detective altogether. The cops are all paid off; the characters fear payback, not jail time. Some readers may find the absence of a real police presence in the novel a missed opportunity for social commentary, but others—I'm among them—can appreciate that Whitehead's omission allows the people in his book to savor the delight that transgression brings. Understanding all too well how little the world has to offer his characters—Black men and women who scrounge so they can buy a piece of furniture from Ray's store on a payment plan—he cannot bring himself to deprive them of a small part in a caper. Few of his crooks get off entirely free (the gangsters and the businessmen they represent eventually come knocking). Still, many are given a brief moment to revel in the high of the heist, which is close enough.*This article appears in the October 2021 print edition with the headline "Colson Whitehead Subverts the Crime Novel."*

The Problem With Being Cool About Sex

Feminism Still Hasn’t Figured Out Porn and Desire

By Helen Lewis

Tracy Clark-Flory's memoir, *Want Me*, is subtitled *A Sex Writer's Journey Into the Heart of Desire*, and it begins with an arresting anecdote: Two male porn actors on a set in Los Angeles are complaining to her about "girls these days." One actor is called Tommy Gunn, because where would pornography be without puns? The other uses his birth name, Charles Dera.

Both agree that their love lives have suffered because too many women watch their films and demand a live-action replay, expecting to be choked, gagged, and slapped around. But who wants to take their work home with them? "It's, like, not even my cup of tea," Dera tells Clark-Flory, who covered the sex beat for *Salon* and is now a senior writer at *Jezebel*. "I want to go to dinner and have a fucking *nice meal* and take it from there. Where the *ladies* at anymore?"

The scene is irresistibly bathetic, in the vein of Tarantino hit men bitching about junk food, but it's also revealing. For many people under 40, the tropes of internet porn have saturated our lives and colored our expectations of sex. For "YouPorn natives"—the 20-somethings for whom abundant free porn has always existed, on smartphones as well as computers—the effect is even more extreme. Their first glimpse of sexual activity was probably not the descriptions in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, the hippie illustrations in *The Joy of Sex*, or (as it was for Clark-Flory) the glamorous Jenna Jameson adult movies of the '90s, but the rough, dirty, extreme porn of the free internet. Some of them no doubt saw a digital gang bang before having their first real-life kiss.

Porn consumption is now such a fixture of modern life—there is no chance the American government will take your smut away—that space has opened up to question its effects without being dismissed as a wannabe censor. Which isn't to say that admitting to reservations about current sexual trends is easy. For Clark-Flory's 30-something generation (which is also my generation), being Cool About Sex is a mark of our impeccable social liberalism. If two or more adults consent to it, whatever it is, no one else is entitled to an opinion.

Yet here is the conundrum facing feminist writers: Our enlightened values —less stigma regarding unwed mothers, the acceptance of homosexuality, greater economic freedom for women, the availability of contraception, and the embrace of consent culture—haven't translated into anything like a paradise of guilt-free fun. The sexual double standard still exists, and girls who say no are still "frigid" while those who say yes are still "sluts." Some men still act with entitlement, while others feel that, no matter what they do, they are inescapably positioned as the "bad guys" by the new sexual

rules. Half a century after the sexual revolution and the start of second-wave feminism, why are the politics of sex still so messy, fraught, and contested?

Relitigating the sex wars of the 1970s and ’80s is hardly where young feminists expected, or want, to be. In *The Right to Sex: Feminism in the Twenty-First Century*, Amia Srinivasan confesses her reluctance to cover second-wave criticisms of porn in the feminist-theory course she teaches at Oxford. She is Cool About Sex, after all, and assumed that her students would be bored by the question of whether porn oppresses women. She also assumed that the reputation of “anti-porn feminists,” such as Catharine A. MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin, had been fatally damaged by their alliance with the religious right to pass laws restricting access to pornography. What self-respecting member of Generation Z would want to line up alongside Jerry Falwell Sr. and Phyllis Schlafly, particularly when the other side is selling a fantasy of libertine pleasure?

Yet her class was “riveted,” she observes in “Talking to My Students About Porn,” the longest essay in her collection. Their enthusiasm was so great that it made her reconsider her own diffidence. The exchange is worth quoting at length:

Srinivasan’s students echo the porn actors: poor old Tommy Gunn and friends, desperate to enjoy a romantic evening of pizza and small talk, and instead feeling obligated to try fisting. Having grown up with the all-you-can-eat buffet of internet porn, these young people pine for romance and intimacy—experiences that require the full and enthusiastic participation of another human being. That theme is taken up by another contemporary feminist author, Katherine Angel, in her book *Tomorrow Sex Will Be Good Again: Women and Desire in the Age of Consent*. The “rubric of consent,” Angel writes, is not “sufficient for thinking about sex.” We also need to consider the cultural scripts we have all absorbed, she argues—including the ubiquitous images of porn, the choreographed moves and expectations, the power relations. A narrow focus on consent assumes too much of us, because “we don’t always know and can’t always say what we want.”

Clark-Flory also voices disappointment when she realizes how thoroughly the tropes of porn sex have wormed their way into her head. Even when she

is fulfilling her greatest fantasy—real-life sex with her favorite porn star, whom she meets in a bar—she feels like a spectator of her own experiences, which clouds her ability to get lost in the moment. Susan Sontag once wrote that photography had become a way of "refusing experience"; porn has become a way of refusing intimacy. Its keenest consumers are so steeped in performative sex that they can't just look at their partner. The imaginary audience won't leave the bedroom.

The chasm between what we say and what we do has always made sex an irresistible topic. These books have been written in the shadow of #MeToo, and their authors dwell on the contradictions surfaced by that movement: Being available for sex is the mark of a liberated woman, but so is the ability to refuse it. Srinivasan observes that, for all our permissiveness, our language still lacks the words to describe the many varieties of bad sex that do not rise to the criminal standard of rape or assault. "A woman going on with a sex act she no longer wants to perform, knowing she can get up and walk away but knowing at the same time that this will make her a blue-balling tease, an object of male contempt: there is more going on here than mere ambivalence, unpleasantness and regret," she writes. "There is also a kind of coercion … the informal regulatory system of gendered sexual expectations."

Those expectations inflect a woman's "yes" as well as her "no." Like Clark-Flory, Angel begins her narrative with a vignette from the world of porn. A young woman—Girl X—arrives at the home of the porn actor James Deen to participate in "Do a Scene With James Deen," a reality-television-style stunt in which the porn actor solicits applications from his fans to have sex with him on camera. "It is mostly a long, flirtatious, fraught conversation, which circles repeatedly back to whether or not they are going to do this: have sex, film it, and put it online," Angel writes. The young woman's reluctance is only partly feigned. She is deciding, right then and there, if she wants to be seen naked on the internet, forever, an object of desire as well as derision. Some men will masturbate to her; others will despise her. Some will do both. In a sense, as Angel notes, the scene dramatizes "the double bind in which women exist: that saying no may be difficult, but so too is saying yes."

What's more, desire makes hypocrites of us all. Srinivasan reports that some of the feminists who watched the hard-core slideshows prepared by Women Against Pornography as part of its tours of Times Square in the 1970s were turned on, rather than repulsed, by the abhorrent filth they were there to condemn. Clark-Flory recounts taking refuge from the horror of her mother's terminal cancer in rough, degrading sex, uncomfortably aware that she was enacting everything those dried-up old second-wavers claimed was true about BDSM—that only people who hate themselves hurt themselves. In a similar vein, Srinivasan quotes the transgender theorist Andrea Long Chu, who has confessed that she transitioned in part to wear tight little Daisy Duke shorts and experience the "benevolent chauvinism" of being bought dinner. "Now you begin to see the problem with desire," Chu has written. "We rarely want the things we should."

But how much do culture and politics shape those wants? Porn-aggregator sites, to take one example, use algorithms, just like the rest of the internet. Pornhub pushes featured videos and recommendations, optimized to build user loyalty and increase revenue, which carry the implicit message that this is what everyone else finds arousing—that this is the norm. Compare porn with polarized journalism, or even fast food: How can we untangle what people "really want" from what they are offered, over and over, and from what everyone else is being offered too? No one's sexual desires exist in a vacuum, immune to outside pressures driven by capitalism. (Call it the invisible hand job of the market.)

Little wonder, then, that these writers are all interested in how malleable sexual desire might be, and that they veer away from tidy prescriptions to fix "problematic" sex. Even as the cerebral Srinivasan subtly unpacks the public meaning of private acts, she sees "no laws to draft, no easy curriculums to roll out." In a raw, gonzo style, Clark-Flory asks how she can pursue "the right to be sexual" in a world where "women's desire is narrowed to being desired." Meanwhile, Angel borrows her ironic title from the great theorist of power Michel Foucault, joining him in mocking the idea that political liberation will usher in a world of angst-free sex. United by a refusal to offer sweeping answers, these writers are honest about the clash between our political pronouncements and our revealed preferences.

We are well used to the idea that today's sexual scripts aren't working for women, who feel under pressure to be as waxed and compliant as the MILFs of Pornhub. But what about men? "Surely we have to say something about the political formation of male desire," Srinivasan writes. In different ways, these books explore the idea that, while the traditional model of heterosexual-sex-as-domination might work for the alphas—the Silvio Berlusconis and Donald Trumps and Hugh Hefners (although even that is arguable)—it has caused widespread discontent among other men. Most people are not sociopathic slaves to their libido, and most men, when having sex with a woman, would like her to enjoy it too.

Yet sex involves physical and psychological exposure, which brings with it the possibility of rejection, or ridicule, or failure to perform. Masculinity is associated in our culture with strength and invulnerability, so if sex makes some men afraid, it shouldn't be surprising that they also struggle to recognize and deal with that fear, and that such emotions are sublimated into the tropes of pornography. "Heterosexual men get to work out, here, the aggression they feel towards their own weakness, towards their own vulnerability to desire," Angel writes.

The most misogynistic porn is a displacement of anxiety into a fantasy of control: Guys who choke bitches don't secretly worry that they can't get it up.

That fantasy of control raises a question addressed by Srinivasan in the title essay of her book. Do we have a right to sex—a question implicitly understood to mean *Do men have a right to sex?* (Few women pay for sex, and even fewer carry out mass murders because they feel they are denied it.) She discusses the case of Elliot Rodger, who went on a shooting spree in Isla Vista, California, in 2014. Rodger was a mixed-race nerd, and his violence was driven by his internet-fueled belief that he was, in the words of his manifesto, "cast out and rejected, forced to endure an existence of loneliness and insignificance, all because the females of the human species were incapable of seeing the value in me."

Srinivasan believes "that no one is obliged to desire anyone else, that no one has a right to be desired," but she tries to feel empathy for Rodger, or at least for "the kind of diagnosis Rodger offered, in which racism and the

norms of heteromasculinity placed him beyond desirability." She is right to observe that our beauty standards reflect other inequalities. The dating site OkCupid reported in 2014, for example, that Black women received far fewer matches than white women did from white, Asian, and Latino men, a disparity driven presumably by what Srinivasan calls "sexual racists."

Yet the difficulty of reconciling her two positions—sexual boundaries are sacrosanct at an individual level, but racist (or transphobic, or ableist) at a population level—is one of the reasons Srinivasan appends a 30-page "coda" to her 19-page original essay. At times, you sense her utopian yearning to dissolve these contradictions: If only good liberals found everybody equally attractive. "Must the transformation of desire be a disciplinary project (willfully altering our desires in line with our politics) —or can it be an emancipatory one (setting our desires free from politics)?" she asks. A more fundamental question might be: To what extent is that transformation even possible? Sexual desire has an evolutionary purpose; we don't know how susceptible it is to conscious rewiring.

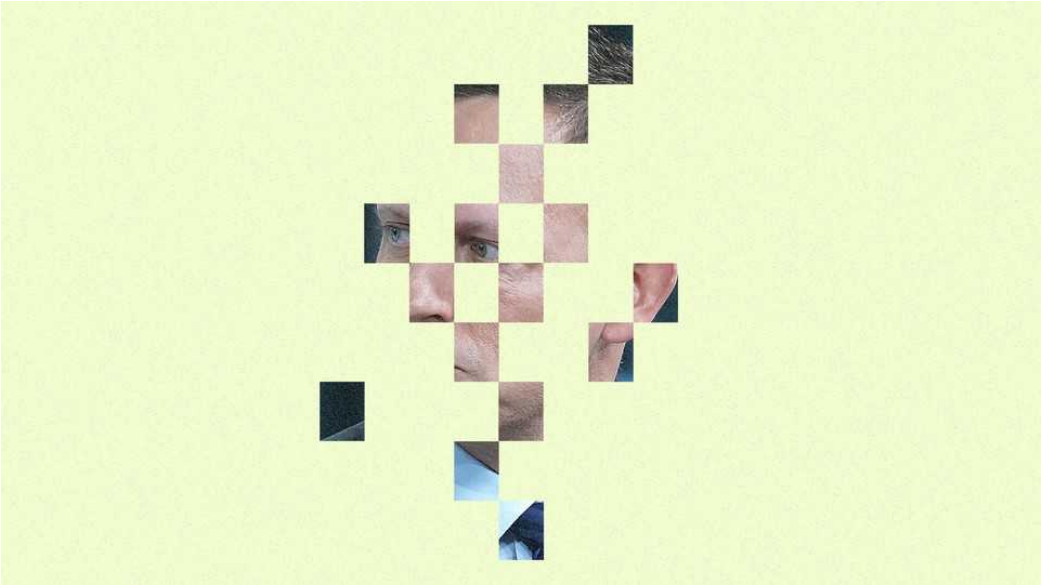
All three writers focus largely on sex between men and women, because analyzing the power differences and historical baggage involved strikes them as important. And they write unashamedly from a female perspective: Aside from its biological and cultural meanings, *woman* now often stands in for "person who talks openly about sex." On social media, women cheerfully objectify the hot duke from *Bridgerton* and members of the Korean boy band BTS, while a man talking about female tennis players in similar terms would get pilloried as sexist. The Updike/Roth era is truly dead: We are primed to dismiss discussion of male desire as either locker-room vulgarity or pathetic neediness.

Yet sex is something we need to talk about honestly, and seriously, without shame or awkwardness, because it is tied up with fundamental questions about the relationship between the individual and society. What should another person, or society as a whole, tolerate to make us feel good? Can we shape our sexualities to match our politics, or are we condemned to perpetual hypocrisy once the bedroom door is closed? Is sex most usefully thought of as a physical need, like breathing; as a human right, like freedom of speech; as a spiritual connection that takes on full meaning only if it's

part of a relationship; or even, as Clark-Flory describes her night with the porn star, as simply like “bungee jumping, an adrenalizing physical feat”? Can rules made by believers in one of these frameworks be applied to those operating under another?

No, tomorrow sex will not be good again. As long as some people have more money, options, and power than others do; as long as reproductive labor falls more heavily on one half of the population; as long as cruelty, shame, and guilt are part of the human experience; as long as other people remain mysterious to us—and as long as our own desires remain mysterious too—sex will not be good, not all the time. We will never simply want the things we should.

This article appears in the October 2021 print edition with the headline “Where Is Our Paradise of Guilt-Free Sex?”



Peter Thiel Hates a Copycat

Review: ‘The Contrarian,’ Max Chafkin’s Biography of Peter Thiel

By Sebastian Mallaby

This fall, Peter Thiel will celebrate his 54th birthday. He has already lived more lives than most mortals can imagine. He has been a Wall Street lawyer, a hedge-fund trader, a Silicon Valley entrepreneur, and a fabulously successful venture capitalist. The team he led at PayPal, the online-payments company he co-founded in 1998, is so influential in the Valley that its alumni are known as the “PayPal Mafia.” *Zero to One*, his provocative 2014 manifesto on innovation and start-ups, has sold more than 3 million copies globally. He was the most prominent tech titan to back Donald Trump in 2016 and remains a lavish supporter of Trumpish Senate candidates. Ambitious to avoid death, or at least postpone it, he has flirted with ideas for freezing brains for future reanimation and for transfusing the middle-aged with the blood of the young.

Thiel is, in other words, a gift to a biographer. Yet he also presents challenges. For one thing, he is a fierce guardian of his privacy: After the

scurrilous blog *Valleywag* outed him as gay, Thiel financed a lawsuit that bankrupted its parent company, Gawker Media. For another thing, the profiler must decide which Thiel is the salient one—which of his many and varied pursuits cut to the essence of his character. And because biography aspires to capture not just the figure but the landscape—the life, but just as crucially the times—the author must also judge which of Thiel's projects matter to the rest of us. Max Chafkin, a *Bloomberg* journalist, wrestles with these choices in *The Contrarian: Peter Thiel and Silicon Valley's Pursuit of Power*. The title hits the mark. The subtitle causes difficulties.

In the first part of his book, Chafkin presents Thiel's immigrant roots as the key to his contrarianism. The young Peter's German parents moved from Frankfurt to Cleveland, then to South African–controlled Namibia, then back to Cleveland, then eventually to California. Thiel bounced between schools, including a German-language *Grundschule* in the desert town of Swakopmund, unsurprisingly emerging as a self-contained loner. When the family settled in a San Francisco suburb, Thiel remained aloof from his peers, seeking solace in academic superiority. He immersed himself in science-fiction and fantasy novels, later bragging that he had memorized the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, Chafkin writes. Slender and small as well as brainy and haughty, he was a target for bullies. In high school, his classmates amused themselves by stealing for sale signs from neighborhood front yards and planting them outside Thiel's house.

Upon enrolling at Stanford in 1985, Thiel fit in no better. The residence halls had sundecks filled with half-dressed students. Thiel rose early, dosed himself fastidiously with vitamins, and achieved a perfect grade point average his first semester. Perhaps inevitably, the bullying continued. Chafkin unearths a story about a roommate who, following an argument with Thiel, taped a mock commemorative sign to the ceiling: under this spot, peter thiel first said the word *fuck*. Only at the end of the semester did someone point out the sign to its victim. Mutely, Thiel moved his desk into position, climbed up, tore the sign down, and went home for the summer.

Thiel eventually figured out a way to get even with his persecutors. He bulked up by lifting weights, and found a circle of friends who were similarly outside the hedonistic mainstream. He joined the College

Republicans and discovered the libertarian writings of Ayn Rand. He co-founded a combative conservative monthly, *The Stanford Review*, which ripped into the liberal consensus on campus. A typical *Review* diatribe denounced a faculty plan to add nonwhite authors to a course on Western culture. Another railed against supposedly Marxist professors—years later, Thiel would insist that universities were "as corrupt as the Catholic Church of 500 years ago." His provocations were especially caustic, one imagines, because they came from a place of pain. Hard-edged conservatism was not just an undergraduate game. It was a survival strategy.

Thiel's conservative awakening converged with a subtler discovery. He came under the influence of the Stanford philosopher René Girard, who placed the imitative instinct at the center of human behavior. In Girard's telling, imitation generated conflict, as people fought for the same things—the same jobs, schools, and material possessions—even though such trophies would fail to make them happier. Life, Thiel eventually would come to realize, could be cast as a struggle to escape the false siren of copycat cravings. To be free, you had to carve your own path. You had to be a contrarian.

After completing his undergraduate studies, Thiel was not yet ready to live by Girard's philosophy. He chose the easy path to affirmation for a superstar student: He excelled at Stanford Law School, clerked at a federal appeals court, then joined the Wall Street law firm Sullivan & Cromwell. But again he had difficulty settling in. Prickly, self-certain, and contemptuous of mainstream views, he quit the firm after less than a year. Thiel's next stop was the derivatives-trading desk at Credit Suisse. He walked out after a few months, saying that he planned to take up independent hedge-fund trading. Suffering what he later called a "quarter-life crisis," he fell back on the polemics of his *Stanford Review* phase, co-writing a book called *The Diversity Myth: Multiculturalism and Political Intolerance on Campus* and taking aim at, among other targets, "militant homosexual activists." Later, though only after he was outed, Thiel made peace with his sexual identity, marrying in 2017 and becoming a father. But his early struggles with his personal life may have fueled his restless appetite for provocation.

Despite his limited access to Thiel, Chafkin succeeds in shedding light on his subject's formative experiences. But then he faces the hard choice: Which of the mature Thiel's multifarious exploits deserve emphasis? Somewhat dutifully, Chafkin covers the rise and fall of Thiel's hedge fund and the creation of PayPal, which anticipated today's digital-money boom and which Thiel sold to eBay in 2002, exiting with $55 million. But the theme that commands Chafkin's keenest attention is the one promised in his subtitle. He aims to demonstrate that Thiel's goal is "real power, political power." This, Chafkin insists, is what makes his subject special—and frightening.

Chafkin's choice is understandable. Thiel comes closer than other Republican moneymen to articulating an alt-right worldview: hostile to open trade, supportive of anti-immigration candidates, hawkish on Communist China, and furiously critical of liberal political correctness. As early as 2009, several years before populist authoritarianism had darkened the horizon, Thiel wrote, "I no longer believe that freedom and democracy are compatible," lamenting that "the vast increase in welfare beneficiaries and the extension of the franchise to women—two constituencies that are notoriously tough for libertarians—have rendered the notion of 'capitalist democracy' into an oxymoron." At the time, with Barack Obama in the White House, Thiel proposed to evade the alleged threat of big government by leaving politics behind. "By starting a new Internet business, an entrepreneur may create a new world," he suggested. But by 2016, when Trump secured the Republican nomination, Thiel was ready for partisan combat. Seeing in Trump a vehicle to destroy the liberal political establishment, he donated $1.3 million to the candidate's campaign and related groups, and delivered a prime-time address at that year's Republican convention. Given the costs of Trumpism, past and probably future, Thiel's politics present rich terrain for a biographer.

There is a catch, however. At least as of now, showing that Thiel's political machinations have made a difference is hard. His $1.3 million donation pales next to the tens of millions spent by the hedge-fund billionaire Robert Mercer on the Trumpian right during the 2016 cycle. As Chafkin points out, Thiel's efforts to advise on personnel choices after Trump's election—he proposed about 150 candidates for administration jobs—were mostly

rebuffed. Only a dozen or so of his picks were accepted, none for positions senior enough to require Senate confirmation. Later, once Trump was in the White House, Thiel's ties to him gradually withered. By 2020, frustrated with the bungled response to the coronavirus and sensing that Trump's chances were dim, Thiel declined to give money to the president's reelection bid and didn't speak at the convention.

Seeking nonetheless to build a case for Thiel's political salience, Chafkin takes a fateful turn. He tortures the evidence to make it scream louder. His first gambit is to amplify Thiel's role at Facebook, whose failure to police fake news aided Trump's 2016 victory. Citing unnamed critics of Facebook's chief, Mark Zuckerberg, the author floats the theory that Thiel was behind the company's refusal to restrict Trumpian posts. Thiel was "the puppet master: pushing a younger, ideologically uncertain founder toward an alliance with an extremist wing of the Republican party." Thiel was indeed the first professional investor in Facebook and remains a Facebook board member, but neither connection lends plausibility to the notion that the headstrong Zuckerberg behaved as his puppet.

Journalists with good access to Zuckerberg's circle, such as the former *Fortune* writer David Kirkpatrick, have documented the entrepreneur's fierce independence. Thiel, for his part, is famous in the Valley for *not* influencing start-up founders, preferring to give them a free rein. "Just don't fuck it up" was his main advice to Zuckerberg when he invested. Besides, even if Thiel had wanted to sway Zuckerberg, as Chafkin's sources contend, he would have been playing a weak hand. Most of Facebook's other directors at the time were Trump critics, and in any case, because of Facebook's share structure, Zuckerberg enjoys near-total control over his company. The truth is that Facebook was slow to police misinformation on its platform for reasons independent of Thiel. Zuckerberg believed strongly in the principle of free speech—and even more strongly in maximizing profits.

Chafkin is also determined to assert that Thiel's support for Trump served his broader drive for power—that it explains the rise of Palantir, a Thiel-backed software provider with ties to the defense establishment. But this too is implausible. Founded in 2003, Palantir was already flourishing before

Trump's election. During Obama's second term, its revenues multiplied 3.5-fold and it attained a valuation of $20 billion, making it the world's fourth-most-valuable private tech company. Under Trump, however, Palantir's revenues and valuation grew more slowly. As the then-chair of Palantir, Thiel doubtless sought to help the company win government contracts. But when Palantir went public in the fall of 2020, it had yet to turn a profit.

Chafkin's exaggerations are doubly unfortunate. Thiel is indeed a financier of the Republican right, and perhaps he will emerge as a kingmaker with real power in some future political cycle. This year, he has increased his donations to conservative Senate candidates and invested in Rumble, a video-sharing platform that has become a safe space for right-wing voices. But drawing dubious connections does nothing to advance this point, and meanwhile Chafkin's political emphasis obscures another part of his subject. Thiel's approach to venture capital gets short shrift in his book. Yet venture investing is where Thiel's contrarianism has yielded the clearest rewards—and where his impact on the world is arguably strongest.

Even by the contrarian standards of Silicon Valley, Thiel's investment style is bracing. Perhaps because of René Girard's influence, he draws an especially stern distinction between copycat start-ups, which he disdains, and truly original moonshots, many of which will fail but some of which will open up a whole new industry. The easy path for any company founder is to do more of something familiar (as even Thiel has been known to do—with Rumble, for example, a YouTube imitator). By contrast, there is no certain formula for generating novel technologies or products, but Thiel has hit upon a playbook that evidently works, and that undoubtedly derives from his years at Stanford. He rails against established wisdom. He reasons from first principles. He embraces headstrong misfits. As he argues in *Zero to One*, entrepreneurs who aren't radically unusual will create businesses that fall into Girard's trap. They will come up with sensible plans, which, being sensible, will have also occurred to others. They will not break the mold or deliver new social value. Facing competition, they will fail to extract profits.

Thiel's greatest start-up hits share no particular industry theme, but most reflect this appetite for radical outsiderism. The early PayPal employees

were proud rebels. Facebook was led by an arrogant, taciturn 20-year-old and his sidekick, a pitchman named Sean Parker who had been in trouble with the law and had been ousted from his previous company. Palantir represented a bet that a start-up born with the Valley's superior coding DNA could win business from the Pentagon, despite the defense establishment's habit of awarding nearly all lucrative "program of record" contracts to old-line members of the military-industrial complex. Meanwhile, the SpaceX founder Elon Musk had a mile-wide crazy streak that Thiel had experienced firsthand. One time, with Thiel in the passenger seat, Musk crashed his McLaren sports car, then admitted that he had failed to insure it. Undeterred, Thiel gave the go-ahead for his fund to buy about 4 percent of Musk's company.

Thiel's improbable bets have earned him a personal fortune of almost $5 billion, according to *Forbes*. They have also made him a spokesperson for a special way of coming at the world, in which the expert consensus is continuously assailed by mavericks. Some of the resulting innovation has had mixed social effects: Facebook has fostered screen addiction as well as fake news, segmenting society into like-minded groups (and encouraging the unthinking conformity that Thiel rails against). But the weight of academic evidence leaves no doubt that Thiel's moonshot mentality is a desirable tonic. Only a fraction of 1 percent of firms in the United States receive venture-capital backing, but this tiny minority accounts for fully 47 percent of the nonfinancial companies that do well enough to stage an initial public offering, not to mention 89 percent of R&D spending by all nonfinancial companies that go public. Other research confirms that more venture investment leads to more patent filings, and that VC-funded patents are more significant than average. A remarkable 22 percent of VC-backed patents are in the top 10 percent of the most-cited patents.

Silicon Valley's moguls fell from grace some years ago, for understandable reasons. Thiel stands as an invitation to critics who want to turn the heat up even more, to argue not merely that Big Tech is monopolistic and tax-evading and invasive of our privacy, but that it is a threat to democracy. Yet as the geeks come to be seen as villains, we should also remember that they remain simultaneously heroes; the surest way to break Facebook's power is for a venture capitalist to back an entrepreneur who comes up with a better

kind of social networking. Thiel's contrarianism may be alarming in its reactionary *Stanford Review* guise. But an aversion to imitation and a willingness to commit capital to long-shot ideas are also the special forces that drive the most dynamic part of our economy.

This article appears in the October 2021 print edition with the headline "Peter Thiel Hates a Copycat."

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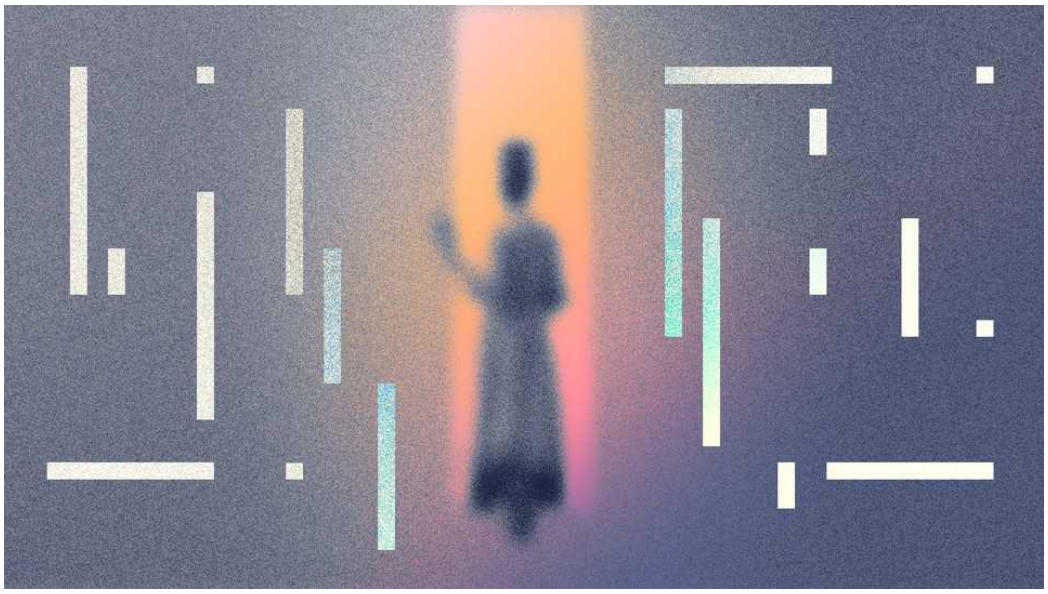
  -- Andrea Cohen



Ghosting

Andrea Cohen: ‘Ghosting’

By Andrea Cohen

How cavalier
people are—

with language
and with silence.

Any ghost will
tell you—

the last thing
we mean

to do
is leave you.

This poem appears in the October 2021 print edition. When you buy a book using a link on this page, we receive a commission. Thank you for supporting The Atlantic.
