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Twenty Years Gone

One family's struggle to make sense of 9/11

By Jennifer Senior

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For months after the attacks, New York City firefighters and police officers and volunteers from around the country searched what they called “the pile” for human remains.

What New York Looked Like After 9/11

Photographs of New York After 9/11, by Eugene Richards

By Amy Weiss-Meyer

This article was published online on August 9, 2021.

Eugene Richards lives in Brooklyn, but was out of the country on September 11, 2001. When he returned to New York City four days later, he has written, he “metamorphosed into a bruise.” He stayed home, convinced that no one needed another photographer surveying the wreckage. But Richards’s wife and collaborator, Janine Altongy, insisted that they go see it. “You can’t avoid history, not when you’re so close to it,” he remembers her saying. Over the course of several months, Richards and Altongy traversed the city, recording scenes of loss from the long aftermath of the attacks. Their 2002 book, *Stepping Through the Ashes*, is a collection of

Richards's photographs and Altongy's interviews with survivors, bereaved family members, first responders, and others.

These days, Richards and Altongy almost never go back to Ground Zero. The memorial pools that now mark where the two towers stood, Richards says, are "so far, far away from the experience" of walking the smoke-filled streets that fall. If it were up to him, the site would be simpler, less polished —perhaps just the portions of the buildings' facades that remained after the attacks. Two decades on, his photos are a stark reminder of a time when those ruins were all that was visible, a time that already feels long past.

A bird flies by a building a block away from the World Trade Center. On September 25, the area was still shrouded in thick yellow air.

This article appears in the September 2021 print edition with the headline "Before the Smoke Cleared."

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How the Bobos Broke America

David Brooks Reconsiders ‘Bobos in Paradise’

By David Brooks

This article was published online on August 2, 2021.

The dispossessed set out early in the mornings. They were the outsiders, the scorned, the voiceless. But weekend after weekend—unbowed and undeterred—they rallied together. They didn’t have much going for them in their great battle against the privileged elite, but they did have one thing—their yachts.

During the summer and fall of 2020, a series of boat parades—Trumptillas—cruised American waters in support of Donald Trump. The participants gathered rowdily in great clusters. They festooned their boats with flags—American flags, but also message flags: Don’t Tread on Me, No More Bullshit, images of Trump as Rambo.

The women stood on the foredecks in their red, white, and blue bikinis, raising their Pabst Blue Ribbon tallboys to salute the patriots in nearby boats. The men stood on the control decks projecting the sort of manly toughness you associate with steelworkers, even though these men were more likely to be real-estate agents. They represent a new social phenomenon: the populist regatta. They are doing pretty well but see themselves as the common people, the regular Joes, the overlooked. They didn't go to fancy colleges, and they detest the mainstream media. "It's so encouraging to see so many people just coming together in a spontaneous parade of patriotism," Bobi Kreumberg, who attended a Trumptilla in Palm Beach, Florida, told a reporter from WPTV.

You can see this phenomenon outside the United States too. In France, the anthropologist Nicolas Chemla calls this social type the "boubours," the boorish bourgeoisie. If the elite bourgeois bohemians—the bobos—tend to have progressive values and metropolitan tastes, the boubours go out of their way to shock them with nativism, nationalism, and a willful lack of tact. Boubour leaders span the Western world: Trump in the U.S., Boris Johnson in the United Kingdom, Marine Le Pen in France, Viktor Orbán in Hungary, Matteo Salvini in Italy.

How could people with high-end powerboats possibly think of themselves as the downtrodden? The truth is, they are not totally crazy. The class structure of Western society has gotten scrambled over the past few decades. It used to be straightforward: You had the rich, who joined country clubs and voted Republican; the working class, who toiled in the factories and voted Democratic; and, in between, the mass suburban middle class. We had a clear idea of what class conflict, when it came, would look like—members of the working classes would align with progressive intellectuals to take on the capitalist elite.

But somehow when the class conflict came, in 2015 and 2016, it didn't look anything like that. Suddenly, conservative parties across the West—the former champions of the landed aristocracy—portrayed themselves as the warriors for the working class. And left-wing parties—once vehicles for proletarian revolt—were attacked as captives of the super-educated urban elite. These days, your education level and political values are as important

in defining your class status as your income is. Because of this, the U.S. has polarized into two separate class hierarchies—one red and one blue. Classes struggle not only up and down, against the richer and poorer groups on their own ladder, but against their partisan opposite across the ideological divide.

In June of last year, a Trump regatta was held in Ferrysburg, Michigan. A reporter from WOOD spoke with one of the boaters, a guy in a white T-shirt, a MAGA hat, and a modest fishing boat. "We are always labeled as racists and bigots," he said. "There's a lot of Americans that love Donald Trump, but we don't have the platforms that the Democrats do, including Big Tech. So we have to do this."

On a bridge overlooking the parade stood an anti-Trump protester, a young man in a black T-shirt carrying an abolish ice sign. "They use inductive reasoning rather than deduction," he told the reporter, looking out at the pro-Trump boaters. "They only seek information that gives evidence to their presuppositions." So who's of a higher social class? The guy in the boat, or the kid with the fancy words?

In 1983, a literary historian named Paul Fussell wrote a book called *Class: A Guide Through the American Status System*. Most of the book is a caustic and extravagantly snobby tour through the class markers prevalent at the time. After ridiculing every other class, Fussell describes what he called "X people." These were people just like Fussell: highly educated, curious, ironic, wittily countercultural. X people tend to underdress for social occasions, Fussell wrote. They know the best wine stores and delis. They have risen above the muck of mainstream culture to a higher, hipper sensibility. The chapter about X people was insufferably self-regarding, but Fussell was onto something. Every once in a while, in times of transformation, a revolutionary class comes along and disrupts old structures, introduces new values, opens up economic and cultural chasms. In the 19th century, it was the bourgeoisie, the capitalist merchant class. In the latter part of the 20th century, as the information economy revved up and the industrial middle class hollowed out, it was X people.

Seventeen years later, I wrote a book about that same class, *Bobos in Paradise*. The bobos didn't necessarily come from money, and they were proud of that; they'd secured their places in selective universities and in the

job market through drive and intelligence exhibited from an early age, they believed. X types defined themselves as rebels against the staid elite. They were—as the classic Apple commercial had it—"the crazy ones, the misfits, the rebels, the troublemakers." But by 2000, the information economy and the tech boom were showering the highly educated with cash. They had to find ways of spending their gobs of money while showing they didn't care for material things. So they developed an elaborate code of financial correctness to display their superior sensibility. Spending lots of money on any room formerly used by the servants was socially defensible: A $7,000 crystal chandelier in the living room was vulgar, but a $10,000, 59-inch AGA stove in the kitchen was acceptable, a sign of your foodie expertise. When it came to aesthetics, smoothness was artificial, but texture was authentic. The new elite distressed their furniture, used refurbished factory floorboards in their great rooms, and wore nubby sweaters made by formerly oppressed peoples from Peru.

Two years later, Richard Florida published *The Rise of the Creative Class*, which lauded the economic and social benefits that the creative class—by which he meant, more or less, the same scientists, engineers, architects, financiers, lawyers, professors, doctors, executives, and other professionals who make up the bobos—produced. Enormous wealth was being generated by these highly educated people, who could turn new ideas into software, entertainment, retail concepts, and more. If you wanted your city to flourish, he argued, you had to attract these people by stocking the streets with art galleries, restaurant rows, and cultural amenities. Florida used a "Gay Index," based on the supposition that neighborhoods with a lot of gay men are the sort of tolerant, diverse places to which members of the creative class flock.

Florida was a champion of this class. I looked on them pretty benignly myself. "The educated class is in no danger of becoming a self-contained caste," I wrote in 2000. "Anybody with the right degree, job, and cultural competencies can join." That turned out to be one of the most naive sentences I have ever written.

Over the past two decades, the rapidly growing economic, cultural, and social power of the bobos has generated a global backlash that is growing

more and more vicious, deranged, and apocalyptic. And yet this backlash is not without basis. The bobos—or X people, or the creative class, or whatever you want to call them—have coalesced into an insular, intermarrying Brahmin elite that dominates culture, media, education, and tech. Worse, those of us in this class have had a hard time admitting our power, much less using it responsibly.

First, we've come to hoard spots in the competitive meritocracy that produced us. As Elizabeth Currid-Halkett reported in her 2017 book, *The Sum of Small Things*, affluent parents have increased their share of educational spending by nearly 300 percent since 1996. Partly as a result, the test-score gap between high- and low-income students has grown by 40 to 50 percent. The children of well-off, well-educated meritocrats are thus perfectly situated to predominate at the elite colleges that produced their parents' social standing in the first place. Roughly 72 percent of students at these colleges come from the richest quarter of families, whereas only 3 percent come from the poorest quarter. A 2017 study found that 38 schools—including Princeton, Yale, Penn, Dartmouth, Colgate, and Middlebury—draw more students from the top 1 percent than from the bottom 60 percent.

Second, we've migrated to just a few great wealth-generating metropolises. Fifteen years after *The Rise of the Creative Class*, Florida published a reconsideration, *The New Urban Crisis*. Young creative types were indeed clustering in a few zip codes, which produced enormous innovation and wealth along with soaring home values. As Florida noted in that book, from 2007 to 2017, "the population of college-educated young people between the ages of twenty-five and thirty-four grew three times faster in downtown areas than in the suburbs of America's fifty largest metro areas."

But this concentration of talent, Florida now argued, meant that a few superstar cities have economically blossomed while everywhere else has languished. The 50 largest metro areas around the world house 7 percent of the world's population but generate 40 percent of global wealth. Just six metro areas—the San Francisco Bay Area; New York; Boston; Washington, D.C.; San Diego; and London—attract nearly half the high-tech venture capital in the world.

This has also created gaping inequalities within cities, as high housing prices push middle- and lower-class people out. “Over the past decade and a half,” Florida wrote, “nine in ten US metropolitan areas have seen their middle classes shrink. As the middle has been hollowed out, neighborhoods across America are dividing into large areas of concentrated disadvantage and much smaller areas of concentrated affluence.” The large American metro areas most segregated by occupation, he found, are San Jose, San Francisco, Washington, Austin, L.A., and New York.

Third, we’ve come to dominate left-wing parties around the world that were formerly vehicles for the working class. We’ve pulled these parties further left on cultural issues (prizing cosmopolitanism and questions of identity) while watering down or reversing traditional Democratic positions on trade and unions. As creative-class people enter left-leaning parties, working-class people tend to leave. Around 1990, nearly a third of Labour members of the British Parliament were from working-class backgrounds; from 2010 to 2015, the proportion wasn’t even one in 10. In 2016, Hillary Clinton won the 50 most-educated counties in America by an average of 26 points—while losing the 50 least-educated counties by an average of 31 points.

These partisan differences overlay economic differences. In 2020, Joe Biden won just 500 or so counties—but together they account for 71 percent of American economic activity, according to the Brookings Institution. Donald Trump won more than 2,500 counties that together generate only 29 percent of that activity. An analysis by Brookings and *The Wall Street Journal* found that just 13 years ago, Democratic and Republican areas were at near parity on prosperity and income measures. Now they are divergent and getting more so. If Republicans and Democrats talk as though they are living in different realities, it’s because they are.

The creative class has converted cultural attainment into economic privilege and vice versa. It controls what Jonathan Rauch describes in his new book, *The Constitution of Knowledge*, as the epistemic regime—the massive network of academics and analysts who determine what is true. Most of all, it possesses the power of consecration; it determines what gets recognized and esteemed, and what gets disdained and dismissed. The web, of course, has democratized tastemaking, giving more people access to megaphones.

But the setters of elite taste still tend to be graduates of selective universities living in creative-class enclaves. If you feel seen in society, that's because the creative class sees you; if you feel unseen, that's because this class does not.

Like any class, the bobos are a collection of varied individuals who tend to share certain taken-for-granted assumptions, schemas, and cultural rules. Members of our class find it natural to leave their hometown to go to college and get a job, whereas people in other classes do not. In study after study, members of our class display more individualistic values, and a more autonomous sense of self, than other classes. Members of the creative class see their career as the defining feature of their identity, and place a high value on intelligence. Usage of the word *smart* increased fourfold in *The New York Times* from 1980 to 2000, according to Michael Sandel's recent book, *The Tyranny of Merit*—and by 2018 usage had nearly doubled again.

Without even thinking about it, we in the creative class consolidate our class standing through an ingenious code of "openness." We tend to like open floor plans, casual dress, and eclectic "localist" tastes that are willfully unpretentious. This seems radically egalitarian, because there are no formal hierarchies of taste or social position. But only the most culturally privileged person knows how to navigate a space in which the social rules are mysterious and hidden.

Shamus Rahman Khan is a sociologist who attended and then taught at St. Paul, an elite New England prep school. As the meritocratic creative class displaces the old WASPs, he observes, what the school primarily teaches is no longer upper-crust polish or social etiquette, but "ease"—the knowledge of how to act in open environments where the rules are disguised.

A student who possesses ease can walk into any room and be confident that she can handle whatever situation she finds. She knows how to structure relationships with teachers and other professional superiors so that they are treated both as authority figures and as confidants. A student in possession of ease can comfortably engage the cafeteria workers with a distant friendliness that at once respects social hierarchy and pretends it doesn't exist. A student with ease knows when irony is appropriate, what historical quotations are overused, how to be unselfconscious in a crowd. These

practices, as Khan writes in *Privilege*, his book about St. Paul, can be absorbed only through long experience within elite social circles and institutions.

Openness in manners is matched by openness in cultural tastes. Once upon a time, high culture—the opera, the ballet—had more social status than popular culture. Now social prestige goes to the no-brow—the person with so much cultural capital that he moves between genres and styles, highbrow and lowbrow, with ease.

"Culture is a resource used by elites to recognize one another and distribute opportunities on the basis of the display of appropriate attributes," Kahn argues. Today's elite culture, he concludes, "is even more insidious than it had been in the past because today, unlike years ago, the standards are argued not to advantage anyone. The winners don't have the odds stacked in their favor. They simply have what it takes."

I wrote *Bobos in Paradise* in the late Clinton era. The end of history had allegedly arrived; the American model had been vindicated by the resolution of the Cold War. Somehow, we imagined, our class would be different from all the other elites in world history. In fact, we have many of the same vices as those who came before us.

I got a lot wrong about the bobos. I didn't anticipate how aggressively we would move to assert our cultural dominance, the way we would seek to impose elite values through speech and thought codes. I underestimated the way the creative class would successfully raise barriers around itself to protect its economic privilege—not just through schooling, but through zoning regulations that keep home values high, professional-certification structures that keep doctors' and lawyers' incomes high while blocking competition from nurses and paralegals, and more. And I underestimated our intolerance of ideological diversity. Over the past five decades, the number of working-class and conservative voices in universities, the mainstream media, and other institutions of elite culture has shrunk to a sprinkling.

When you tell a large chunk of the country that their voices are not worth hearing, they are going to react badly—and they have.

If our old class structure was like a layer cake—rich, middle, and poor—the creative class is like a bowling ball that was dropped from a great height onto that cake. Chunks splattered everywhere. In *The Great Class Shift*, Thibault Muzergues argues that the creative class has disrupted politics across the Western world. In nation after nation, the rise of the educated metro elite has led the working class to rebel against them. Trump voters listed the media—the epitome of creative-class production—as the biggest threat to America. "The more than 150-year-old alliance between the industrial working class and what one might call the intellectual-cultural Left is over," observes the Swedish political scientist Bo Rothstein. The working class today vehemently rejects not just the creative class but the epistemic regime that it controls. In revolt, populist Trump voters sometimes create their own reality, inventing absurd conspiracy theories and alternative facts about pedophile rings among the elites who they believe disdain them.

The dominance of the bobos has also engendered a rebellion among its own offspring. The members of the creative class have labored to get their children into good colleges. But they've also jacked up college costs and urban housing prices so high that their children struggle under crushing financial burdens. This revolt has boosted Bernie Sanders in the U.S., Jeremy Corbyn in Britain, Jean-Luc Mélenchon in France, and so on. Part of the youth revolt is driven by economics, but part is driven by moral contempt. Younger people look at the generations above them and see people who talk about equality but drive inequality. Members of the younger generation see the Clinton-to-Obama era—the formative years for the creative class's sensibility—as the peak of neoliberal bankruptcy.

A third rebellion is led by people who are doing well financially but who feel culturally humiliated—the boubour rebellion. These are Mark and Patricia McCloskey, the rich St. Louis couple who waved their guns at passing Black protesters last year. These are the people who elected as mayor of Toronto the crude, brash-talking Rob Ford, who attempted to put a very non-bobo shopping mall, a suburban Disneyland, right in the center of the city. These are people who rebel against codes of political correctness.

As these rebellions arose, pundits from the creative class settled upon certain narratives to explain why there was suddenly so much conflict across society. Our first was the open/closed narrative. Society, we argued, is dividing between those who like open trade, open immigration, and open mores, on the one hand, and those who would like to close these things down, on the other. Second, and related, was the diversity narrative. Western nations are transitioning from being white-dominated to being diverse, multiracial societies. Some people welcome these changes whereas others would like to go back to the past.

Both these narratives have a lot of truth to them—racism still divides and stains America—but they ignore the role that the creative class has played in increasing inequality and social conflict.

For all its talk of openness, the creative class is remarkably insular. In *Social Class in the 21st Century*, the sociologist Mike Savage found that the educated elite tended to be the most socially parochial group, as measured by contact with people in occupational clusters different from their own. In a study for *The Atlantic*, Amanda Ripley found that the most politically intolerant Americans "tend to be whiter, more highly educated, older, more urban, and more partisan themselves." The most politically intolerant county in the country, Ripley found, is liberal Suffolk County, Massachusetts, which includes Boston.

If creative-class types just worked hard and made more money than other people, that might not cause such acute political conflict. What causes psychic crisis are the whiffs of "smarter than" and "more enlightened than" and "more tolerant than" that the creative class gives off. People who feel that they have been rendered invisible will do anything to make themselves visible; people who feel humiliated will avenge their humiliation. Donald Trump didn't win in 2016 because he had a fantastic health-care plan. He won because he made the white working class feel heard.

The reaction to the bobos has turned politics into a struggle for status and respect—over whose sensibility is dominant, over which groups are favored and which are denigrated. Political attitudes have displaced consumption patterns as the principal way that people signal class sensibility.

The new map of status competition is worth pausing over, because it helps explain the state of our politics today. Let's look first at the blue hierarchy.

Atop the Democratic-leaning class ladder sits the blue oligarchy: tech and media executives, university presidents, foundation heads, banking CEOs, highly successful doctors and lawyers. The blue oligarchy leads the key Information Age institutions, and its members live in the biggest cities. They work hard; as Daniel Markovits reported in *The Meritocracy Trap*, the share of high-income workers who averaged more than 50 hours of work a week almost doubled from 1979 to 2006, while the share of the lowest earners working long hours dropped by almost a third. They are, in many respects, solid progressives; for instance, a 2017 Stanford survey found that Big Tech executives are in favor of higher taxes, redistributive welfare policies, universal health care, green environmental programs. Yet they tend to oppose anything that would make their perch less secure: unionization, government regulation that might affect their own businesses, antitrust or anti-credentialist policies.

With their amazing financial and convening power, blue oligarchs move to absorb any group that threatens their interests, co-opting their symbols, recruiting key leaders, hollowing out their messages. "Woke capitalism" may seem like corporations gravitating to the left, but it's also corporations watering down the left. Members of the blue oligarchy sit atop systems that produce inequality—and on balance their actions suggest a commitment to sustaining them.

One step down from the blue oligarchy is the creative class itself, a broader leadership class of tenured faculty, established members of the mainstream media, urban and suburban lawyers, senior nonprofit and cultural-institution employees, and corporate managers, whose attitudes largely mirror the blue oligarchs above them, notwithstanding the petty resentments of the former toward the latter.

The bobos believe in human dignity and classical liberalism—free speech, open inquiry, tolerance of different viewpoints, personal autonomy, and pluralism—but our class has not delivered for the people outside it. On our watch, government and other public institutions have deteriorated. Part of the problem is that, steeped in an outsider, pseudo-rebel ethos, we never

accepted the fact that we were a leadership class, never took on the institutional responsibilities that go with that acceptance, never got to know or work with people not in our class, and so never earned the legitimacy and trust that is required if any group is going to effectively lead. According to the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture, 65 percent of Americans believe that "the most educated and successful people in America are more interested in serving themselves than in serving the common good."

One economic rung below are the younger versions of the educated elite, many of whom live in the newly gentrifying areas of urban America, such as Bedford-Stuyvesant in New York or Shaw in Washington, D.C. More diverse than the elites of earlier generations, they work in the lower rungs of media, education, technology, and the nonprofit sector. Disgusted with how their elders have screwed up the world, they are leading a revolution in moral sentiments. From 1965 to 2000, for instance, about 10 percent of white liberals favored increased immigration. By 2018, according to Zach Goldberg, a researcher at the Center for the Study of Partisanship and Ideology, it was more than 50 percent, thanks to the influence of a rising generation on the multicultural left.

Yet wokeness is not just a social philosophy, but an elite status marker, a strategy for personal advancement. You have to possess copious amounts of cultural capital to feel comfortable using words like *intersectionality*, *heteronormativity*, *cisgender*, *problematize*, *triggering*, and *Latinx*. By navigating a fluid progressive cultural frontier more skillfully than their hapless Boomer bosses and by calling out the privilege and moral failings of those above them, young, educated elites seek power within elite institutions. Wokeness becomes a way to intimidate Boomer administrators and wrest power from them.

On the lowest rung of the blue ladder is the caring class, the largest in America (nearly half of all workers, by some measures), and one that in most respects sits quite far from the three above it. It consists of low-paid members of the service sector: manicurists, home health-care workers, restaurant servers, sales clerks, hotel employees. Members of this class are disadvantaged in every way. The gap in life expectancy between those in the top 40 percent and those in the bottom 40 percent widened from 1980 to

2010—from five to 12 years for men and from four to 13 years for women. Only one in 100 of the children raised in the poorest fifth of households will become rich enough to join the top 5 percent.

This hardship requires a different set of traits and values than are found in more upscale classes. Researchers report that people who feel a weaker sense of personal control are quick to form mutual-support networks; their sense of community clashes with the creative class's valorization of individualism. Other research has found that members of this class are less likely to behave unethically than the creative class when put in tempting situations.

Surveys suggest that members of this class stay at some remove from the culture wars—they are much less likely to share political content on social media than other groups, and more likely to say they "avoid arguments." Many are centrists or detached from politics altogether, but as a whole they sit to the right of the bobos on abortion and LGBTQ issues and to the left of the bobos on issues like union power and workers' rights.

Atop the red hierarchy is the GOP's slice of the one-percenters. Most rich places are blue, but a lot of the richest people are red. A 2012 study of the richest 4 percent of earners found that 44 percent voted Democrat that year while 41 percent voted Republican. Some are corporate executives or entrepreneurs, but many are top-tier doctors, lawyers, and other professionals who aspire to low taxes and other libertarian ideals. This is the core of the GOP donor class, men and women who feel that they worked hard for their money, that the American dream is real, and that those who built wealth in this country shouldn't have to apologize for it.

Members of this class are in many ways similar to the conservative elite of the Reagan years. Yet they too have been reshaped by the creative class's cultural dominance. When I interview members of the GOP donor class, they tell me they often feel they cannot share their true opinions without being scorned. Few of them supported Donald Trump in the 2016 GOP primaries, but by 2020 most of the red one-percenters I know had swung enthusiastically pro-Trump, because at least he's scorned by those who scorn them. It turns out that having a large investment account is no protection against self-pity.

One step down are the large property-owning families, scattered among small cities and towns like Wichita, Kansas, and Grand Rapids, Michigan—what we might call the GOP gentry. (I've adapted the coinage from what the historian Patrick Wyman has written about the local elite in his hometown of Yakima, Washington.) This gentry class derives its wealth not from salary but from the ownership of assets—furniture companies, ranches, a bunch of McDonald's franchises. This wealth is held in families and passed down through the generations. Members of this elite stay rooted where their properties are and form the leadership class in their regions, chairing a community foundation or the local chamber of commerce.

Below them is the proletarian aristocracy, the people of the populist regatta: contractors, plumbers, electricians, middle managers, and small-business owners. People in this class have succeeded in America, but not through the channels of the university-based meritocracy, from which they feel alienated.

In other circumstances, the GOP gentry would be the natural enemies of the proletarian aristocracy, but now they are aligned. Both embrace the symbolic class markers of the sociologically low—pickup trucks, guns, country music, Christian nationalism. Both fear that their children may not be able to compete in the creative-class-controlled meritocracy. Both dislike sending their kids to schools that disdain their values, yet understand that their children will have to adopt creative-class values if they are going to be accepted in the new elite. As Thibault Muzergues writes, "The boubours and the provincial bourgeois thus have a common agenda: to unmake the Creative Class's societal transformation of the late 2000s and early 2010s."

A level below the people of the populist regatta, you find the rural working class. Members of this class have highly supervised jobs in manufacturing, transportation, construction. Their jobs tend to be repetitive and may involve some physical danger. As the Princeton sociologist Robert Wuthnow notes, many people in this class have an identity rooted in loyalty to their small town. They are supported by networks of extended family and friends, who have grown up with one another. Like the poorer members of the blue hierarchy, they value interdependence and are less individualistic.

Many members of the red-hierarchy working class feel totally forgotten. In her book *White Working Class*, Joan C. Williams shares the account of a woman who says she raised three children on $40,000 a year but "didn't get any assistance because we did not qualify." Their towns are not diverse. As Wuthnow notes, two of the most common statements you hear in these towns are "Everybody knows everybody else" and "We're all pretty much the same." If educated urbanites go out of their way to enjoy diversity and display their superior cultural taste, one-upmanship is despised in this class. Christmas Tree Shop sincerity is prized over academic, art-house pretentiousness.

By and large, members of the rural working class admire rich people who earned their wealth. Their real hatred is for "Washington"—a concept that encompasses the entire ruling class. "Those people up there in Washington, they think they know more than we do," one of them told Wuthnow. "They treat us like second-class citizens, like we're dumb hicks."

As the bobos achieved a sort of stranglehold on the economy, the culture, and even our understanding of what a good life is, no wonder society has begun to array itself against them, with the old three-part class structure breaking apart into a confusing welter of micro-groups competing for status and standing in any way they can. So, for instance, the bobos have abundant cultural, political, and economic power; the red one-percenters have economic power, but scant cultural power; the young, educated elites have tons of cultural power and growing political power, but still not much economic power; and the caring class and rural working class, unheard and unseen, have almost no power of any kind at all. Our politics, meanwhile, has become sharper-edged, more identity-based, and more reactionary, in part because politics is the one arena in which the bobos cannot dominate—there aren't enough of us.

Into this fraught, every-which-way class conflict walks Joe Biden. Weirdly, he stands outside it.

Biden is the first president since Ronald Reagan without a degree from an Ivy League university. His sensibility was formed not in the meritocracy but in the working-class neighborhoods of his youth. Condescension is alien to his nature. He has little interest in the culture-war issues that drive those at

the top of the hierarchies, and spent his 2020 campaign studiously avoiding them. Biden gets prickly when he is surrounded by intellectual preening; he's most comfortable hanging around with union guys who don't pull that crap.

Biden's working-class version of progressivism is a relic from the pre-bobo era. His programs—his COVID-relief law, his infrastructure bill, his family-support proposal—represent efforts to funnel resources to those who have not graduated from college and who have been left behind by the creative-class economy. As Biden boasted in an April speech to a Joint Session of Congress, "Nearly 90 percent of the infrastructure jobs created in the American Jobs Plan do not require a college degree; 75 percent don't require an associate's degree." Those are his people.

If there is an economic solution to the class chasms that have opened up in America, the Biden legislative package is surely it. It would narrow the income gaps that breed much of today's class animosity.

But economic redistribution only gets you so far. The real problem is the sorting mechanism itself. It determines who gets included in the upper echelons of society and who gets excluded; who gets an escalator ride to premier status and worldly success and who faces a wall.

The modern meritocracy is a resentment-generating machine. But even leaving that aside, as a sorting device, it is batshit crazy. The ability to perform academic tasks during adolescence is nice to have, but organizing your society around it is absurd. That ability is not as important as the ability to work in teams; to sacrifice for the common good; to be honest, kind, and trustworthy; to be creative and self-motivated. A sensible society would reward such traits by conferring status on them. A sensible society would not celebrate the skills of a corporate consultant while slighting the skills of a home nurse.

Some 60 years after its birth, the meritocracy seems more and more morally vacuous. Does the ability to take tests when you're young make you a better person than others? Does a society built on that ability become more just and caring?

This situation produces a world in which the populist right can afford to be intellectually bankrupt. Right-leaning parties don't need to have a policy agenda. They just need to stoke and harvest the resentment toward the creative class.

The only way to remedy this system is through institutional reform that widens the criteria by which people get sorted. For instance, we need more pathways to success, so those who are not academically inclined have routes to social leadership; programs like national service, so that people with and without college degrees have more direct contact with one another; and an end to policies like residential zoning rules that keep the affluent segregated on top. More broadly, changing this sorting mechanism requires transforming our whole moral ecology, such that possession of a Stanford degree is no longer seen as signifying a higher level of being.

The bobos didn't set out to be an elite, dominating class. We just fit ourselves into a system that rewarded a certain type of achievement, and then gave our children the resources that would allow them to prosper in that system too. But, blind to our own power, we have created enormous inequalities—financial inequalities and more painful inequalities of respect. The task before us is to dismantle the system that raised us.

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

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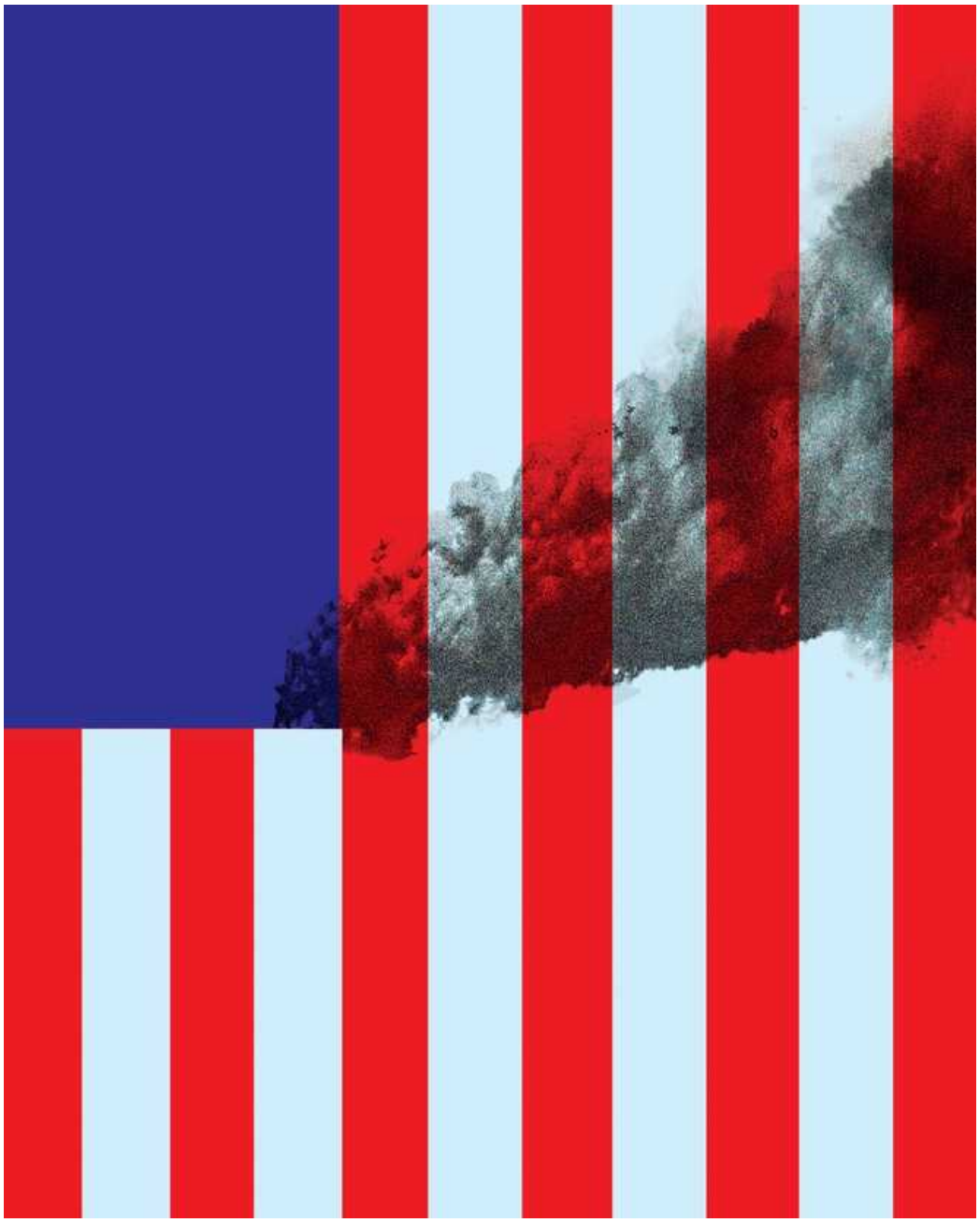
9/11 Was a Warning of What Was to Come

9/11 Was a Warning for the 21st Century

By George Packer



This article was published online on August 10, 2021.

September 11 is buried so deep under layers of subsequent history and interpretation that it's hard to sort out the true feelings of that day. But I remember one image with indelible clarity. It's the face of a young woman in a color photograph on a flyer that appeared at the entrance to my subway stop in Brooklyn, around my neighborhood, and then all over the city. WE NEED YOUR HELP, the flyer said.

The sign was posted right after the attacks and stayed up long after it stopped being an urgent request to locate a missing person who might be wandering through the ashes of Lower Manhattan, and became a tribute to a lost daughter. The early hours and days were like that. The facts were incomprehensible. How many people died, how many survived, did any survive? When would the next attack come? Who had done it, and why?

Through most of September 12 and 13, I waited to give blood with other New Yorkers in a long sidewalk line. "I volunteered so I could be a part of something," an unemployed video producer named Matthew Timms told me. "I've been at no point in my life when I could say something I've done has affected mankind. Like, when the news was on, I was thinking, *What if there was a draft? Would I go?* I think I would." A teenager named Amalia della Paolera was passing out cookies. "This is the time when we need to be, like, pulling together and doing as much as we can for each other," she said, not "sitting at home watching it on TV and saying, like, 'Oh, there's another bomb.'"

Only on the second day did we begin to understand that there would not be any need for our blood, and even then no one left the line until we were told to go home.

The presence of other people—vigils around melted candle wax on the Brooklyn Heights promenade, crowds at barricades on Canal Street offering foil-covered pots of food to rescue workers—was all that made the days bearable. Safe and hypercivilized people in cities like New York are generally embarrassed by expressions of strong feeling—irony comes more naturally. But right after September 11, strangers on the subway would fall into intense conversations for six minutes, embrace, then never see each other again.

I remember Gennie Gambale because of her smile, which was radiant. Its light exposed the enormity of the crime. The hijackers had set out to end her life as she went about her morning in the heart of a great city. If they could have killed 30,000 human beings, or 3 million, they would have done it greedily. She would be 47 years old today. The youngest victim, a toddler on United Flight 175, would be 22. The lives scarred, destroyed, or prevented from ever existing by the murder of 2,977 people must number in

the hundreds of thousands. It's impossible to understand what America got wrong after September 11—the panic, the hubris, the lies, the endless wars, the two decades of national deterioration—without first letting that knowledge jam hard roots into the psyche.

One-third of Americans alive today were children or not yet born on September 11, 2001. What, they must wonder, was it all about?

During the 10 years between the end of the Cold War and the terror attacks, the United States enjoyed a level of power, wealth, and safety that—except perhaps for Britain in the years before World War I—has no parallel in history. "Where do you want to go today?" asked a Microsoft commercial. Heady confidence and flabby comfort characterized a decade of rising stock prices and accelerating microprocessors. The information economy seemed to have repealed the business cycle. The U.S. could go to war with cruise missiles and without suffering casualties. Americans didn't have to worry that we might wake up one morning to rubble and corpses in our streets. The unipolar decade licensed us to waste an entire year on Oval Office sex. In the 2000 election, a lot of people voted, or failed to vote, as if it didn't really matter who was president. So much power, so little responsibility.

September 11 dissolved this dream of being exempt from history. It had been a childish dream, and its end forced many Americans, perhaps for the first time, to consider the rest of the world. That morning, an investment banker escaped Ground Zero and staggered uptown into a church in Greenwich Village, where he began to shake and sob. A policeman put a hand on his shoulder and said, "Don't worry, you're in shock." The banker replied, "I'm *not* in shock. I like this state. I've never been more cognizant in my life."

We had not been thinking about the hijackers, but they had been thinking about us. For almost a decade, radical Islamists had been trying to get America's attention—declaring war on U.S. citizens; bombing our embassies, ships, and the World Trade Center itself—with little success. President Bill Clinton lobbed long-range missiles at jihadist training camps, impressing almost no one; the phrase *wag the dog* entered the lexicon. When the name al-Qaeda surfaced on September 11, very few Americans

had even heard it before. The strategy of asymmetric warfare was unfamiliar, the enemy's goals opaque.

The late Lynne Stewart, a left-wing lawyer who defended clients accused of terrorism, before going to prison herself for providing them with material aid, once told me that the people in the towers "never knew what hit them. They had no idea that they could ever be a target for somebody's wrath, just by virtue of being American. They took it personally. And actually, it wasn't a personal thing … In a war or in an armed struggle, people die."

The attacks brought a new thing into the world. Americans, jolted into alertness, were given the burden of understanding it. "Everything has changed," the pundits said. But the challenge to think and act anew is daunting. When it came to interpreting and answering the attacks, most of our political and thought leaders took refuge in familiar scripts. Three were particularly influential.

One argued that the attacks were chickens coming home to roost, a punishment, maybe even cosmic justice, for American deeds abroad—in Susan Sontag's words of that same week, "a consequence of specific American alliances and actions." A new term, *blowback*, became popular. Stewart took it a heartless step further: All Americans were fair game in a war against imperialism. This view implied that, if the U.S. would just stop doing certain things, the attacks would also stop.

A second script saw America as the entirely innocent party. All that was evil (them) was trying to destroy all that was good (us). The conflict was indeed a war, a war over freedom; American military and moral power, both nearly boundless, would eventually vanquish freedom's sworn enemies. This was George W. Bush's view (who was president turned out to matter a lot). The key phrase was *moral clarity*, which in practice became a policy of belligerence that soon fractured our national unity and eventually alienated most of the world.

A third script fell between or outside the first two: America, for all its flaws, had an obligation to support democracy and human rights, even if this meant using the 82nd Airborne Division to attempt nation-building in Afghanistan and regime change in Iraq. September 11 gave rise to the idea

that security at home depended on the spread of democratic values in the Muslim world. This was the view of liberal interventionists—including me, before I began reporting from Iraq in 2003—and it suffered from the illusion that war and power politics could be fitted to humanitarian ends.

In one way or another, all three of these views continued the dream of the 1990s. They put America at the center of the story. They assumed that the U.S. could will peace or destruction—that other countries and people weren't quite real.

There were better responses, ones that showed intellectual modesty in the face of a new kind of war and a new kind of politics. As jihadist attacks became global and quotidian, in Madrid and Mumbai and Boston and Paris and Orlando, these responses warned against both overreaction and underestimation. They tried to comprehend radical Islamism on its own terms—not as a mechanical reflex against U.S. foreign policy, nor as the reincarnation of Nazi Germany, but as a potent ideology nourished by the repressive politics of a region with its own complex relation to both imperialism and modernity. These responses counseled that a contest of ideas would achieve more in the long term than air strikes.

They never got much of a hearing. Instead, American leaders fell into the jihadists' trap and embarked on an undefined, unwinnable War on Terror, while imagining, as Bush declared, that "it will end in a way and at an hour of our choosing."

The years after September 11 plunged us into the rough stream of history. Shock after shock followed that first one: the militarization of the homeland; the Iraq War, with its early arrogance and prolonged agony; the use of torture, which undermined Bush's every high-flown phrase; the financial crisis, which destroyed Americans' wealth and trust in the system; the return of the Taliban in Afghanistan, the emergence of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, and the rise of right-wing populism in America; Donald Trump's frantic assaults on democracy; and the coronavirus pandemic, which has killed well over 200 times as many Americans as the terrorist attacks did.

In light of this history, September 11 wasn't a sui generis event coming out of a clear blue sky. It was the first warning that the 21st century would not bring boundless peace and prosperity. Al-Qaeda was less a primitive throwback to the Middle Ages than an augury of the anti-liberal politics and virulent nationalism that would soon reach around the world, even to America, where the hijackers once aimed their blows.

And yet they didn't win. After dominating geopolitics in the years following September 11, radical Islamism has, for now at least, receded as a strategic threat. It is no longer normal to hear of mass-casualty suicide bombings in Baghdad and Peshawar, or East African shopping malls turned into shooting galleries, or vans driven into European crowds. Nothing close to the scale of September 11 has occurred on American soil in the past 20 years. During that period, the U.S. spent about $3 trillion on counterterrorism. Some of that money now seems well spent. Recognizing what truly protected us is as important as rejecting what only failed and shamed us.

Gennie Gambale is buried in Brooklyn's Green-Wood Cemetery. The remains of 78 others murdered on the same day lie near her. Two decades after September 11, we're no longer those Americans who believed such things would never happen to us, and who, when they did happen, went boldly overseas to rid the world of monsters. Experts now see white-nationalist terrorism as a greater domestic threat than Islamist terrorism. The new fight is for our own democracy. It will require all the restraint and purpose and wisdom that we struggled to muster when the enemy wasn't us.

This article appears in the September 2021 print edition with the headline "The 9/11 Century."

This Is the End of Affirmative Action

Affirmative Action Is Ending. What Now?

By Adam Harris

This article was published online on July 26, 2021.

One afternoon, during my freshman year at Alabama A&M University, my homework was piling up, and I was feeling antsy. I needed a change of scenery from Foster Hall. I'd heard that the library at the University of Alabama at Huntsville, 10 minutes away, was open three hours longer than our own. So I loaded up my backpack, ran down the stairs—the dorm's elevator was busted—and headed across town.

Founded in 1875 to educate Black students who had been shut out of American higher education, A&M was a second home for me. My mom had gone there; my uncle had been a drum major in the '80s; my sister was on the volleyball team. But when you're home long enough, you start to notice flaws: The classroom heaters were always breaking down, and the campus shuttle never seemed to run on time when it was coldest out. When I arrived at UAH, I was shocked. The buildings looked new, and fountains burst from man-made ponds. The library had books and magazines I'd never heard of—including the one for which I now write.

Something else quickly became obvious: Almost every student I saw at UAH was white. That day, a little more than a decade ago, was my introduction to the bitter reality that there are two tracks in American higher education. One has money and confers prestige, while the other—the one that Black students tend to tread—does not.

The United States has stymied Black education since the country's founding. In Alabama in the 1830s, you could be fined $500 for teaching a Black child. Later, bans were replaced by segregation, a system first enforced by custom, then by state law. Entrepreneurial Black educators opened their own colleges, but as a 1961 report by the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights pointed out, these schools were chronically underfunded. The report called for more federal money for institutions that did not discriminate against Black students. Nothing much came of it.

But as the civil-rights movement gained traction, white schools started reckoning with a legacy of exclusion. For the first time, they began to make a real effort to offer Black students an equal shot at higher education, through a strategy called affirmative action.

President John F. Kennedy had used the phrase in a 1961 executive order requiring government contractors to "take affirmative action to ensure that applicants are employed, and employees are treated during employment, without regard to their race, creed, color, or national origin." The goal was to diversify the federal workforce and, crucially, to begin to correct for a legacy of discrimination against applicants of color.

Colleges that adopted affirmative action in their admissions programs quickly faced challenges. White applicants filed lawsuits, claiming that to take race into account in hiring or education in any way discriminated against them. A long process of erosion began, undermining the power of affirmative action to right historical wrongs.

Today, race-conscious admissions policies are weak, and used by only a smattering of the most highly selective programs. Meanwhile, racial stratification is, in many places, getting worse.

Nearly half of the students who graduate from high school in Mississippi are Black, but in 2019, Black students made up just 10 percent of the University of Mississippi's freshman class. The share of Black students there has shrunk steadily since 2012. In Alabama, a third of graduating high-school students are Black, but in 2019 just 5 percent of the student body at Auburn University, one of the state's premier public institutions, was Black. While total enrollment has grown by thousands, Auburn now has fewer Black undergraduates than it did in 2002.

Over the past two decades, the percentage of Black students has fallen at almost 60 percent of the "101 most selective public colleges and universities," according to a report by the nonprofit Education Trust.

The Supreme Court may soon hear a case—*Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard*—that could mark the definitive end of affirmative action in higher education nationwide. If the Court takes the case, the plaintiffs will argue that under no circumstances should race be taken into consideration in college admissions. They will make this argument before a conservative majority that many observers believe is sympathetic to this view.

If the majority dismisses what remains of the nation's experiment with affirmative action, the United States will have to face the reality that its system of higher education is, and always has been, separate and unequal.

To understand the loss of race-conscious admissions, we must first appreciate what it accomplished—and what it didn't.

In 1946, President Harry Truman commissioned a comprehensive report on the state of American higher education. The study found that 75,000 Black students were enrolled in America's colleges, and about 85 percent of them went to poorly funded Black institutions. "The ratio of expenditures of institutions for whites to those of institutions for Negroes," it noted, "ranged from 3 to 1 in the District of Columbia to 42 to 1 in Kentucky."

Affirmative action jump-started Black enrollment at majority-white colleges. And the overall number of Black graduates boomed—more than doubling from the early 1970s to the mid-'90s. But the drive to reform higher education had slowed, and by the end of that period it was running on fumes.

Affirmative action was hobbled almost from the start, in large part because of a case brought against the regents of the University of California. In 1973, Allan Bakke, a white man in his early 30s, was rejected by the UC Davis School of Medicine. He was rejected by 10 other medical schools as well, and again by UC Davis in 1974, perhaps because he was considered too old to begin training for medicine. But that's not how Bakke saw it. UC Davis had apportioned 16 out of its 100 seats for applicants from underrepresented groups, and Bakke sued, arguing that the program violated his rights guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment, as well as Title VI of the Civil Rights Act, which bars entities receiving federal funds from discrimination. The California Supreme Court agreed, ruling that colleges could not consider race in admissions.

When the Supreme Court heard oral arguments on October 12, 1977, the courtroom was packed. Newspapers hailed *Bakke* as the most important civil-rights case since *Brown v. Board of Education*. The Court ultimately released six different opinions, a judicial rarity. Four justices agreed, in some form, with Bakke that the university's affirmative-action strategy

violated Title VI because it capped the number of white students at 84. Four other justices argued that the strategy was permissible. The decision came down to one man: Justice Lewis F. Powell Jr.

Powell's opinion was a compromise. Yes, institutions could consider race, but only for the sake of general diversity. In Powell's view, affirmative action was not a way of righting historical—and ongoing—wrongs against Black people; it was a way to achieve diversity, a compelling state interest because it benefited all students.

Time and again, courts have upheld Powell's rationale. As a result, schools have not been able to design affirmative-action programs to redress discrimination against Black students, or to systematically increase their share of the student body. Wary of running afoul of the law, schools that have enacted affirmative-action programs have done so too timidly to make a real difference. Only in rare cases have these programs accomplished much more than keeping the Black share of the student body at pre-*Bakke* percentages.

Perhaps the best that can be said for this neutered version of affirmative action is that, in states where the practice has been banned, the picture is even bleaker. In 2006, Michigan prohibited the consideration of race in admissions at public colleges and universities. Black students made up 9 percent of the University of Michigan before the ban, and 4 percent a few years after it went into effect. The number has hovered there ever since.

Affirmative action has been a veil obscuring the truth about American higher education. It has never been that hard to see through, for those who tried, but removing it could force the nation at large to recognize the disparities in our system, and to search for better mechanisms to make college equitable.

One way to make a real difference would be to support the institutions that Black students have historically attended, and that still produce an outsize share of Black professionals.

Black colleges do more with less for those who have always had less. But their finances are precarious. A 2018 report by the Government

Accountability Office found that the median endowment at Black colleges was half the size of median endowments at comparable white colleges. In some cases, states are supposed to match federal funds to historically Black colleges and universities, but they often simply choose not to. From 2010 to 2012, one report found, Black land-grant colleges were denied more than $56 million in state money. A bipartisan legislative committee in Tennessee showed this year that the state had shorted Tennessee State University, the Black college in Nashville, by hundreds of millions of dollars in matching funds since the 1950s.

There are 102 HBCUs—many with stories like Tennessee State's. The scale of harm is devastating. Wealth accumulates, and Black colleges have been blocked from building it.

Philanthropists have recently stepped in to fill some of the gaps. MacKenzie Scott, Jeff Bezos's ex-wife, donated hundreds of millions of dollars to 22 HBCUs last year. In several cases, the gift represented the largest single donation the school had ever received. But even some of those largest-ever donations were relatively small—$5 million or $10 million. These are sums that would not merit press releases at some predominantly white institutions.

Perhaps those institutions—the ones that, for years, barred Black students' entry while profiting from slavery and Jim Crow; the ones that were lavished with state funding denied to Black colleges—now have a responsibility to provide that aid to HBCUs.

Some colleges are already examining their legacies of slavery and discrimination. In 2003, the president of Brown, Ruth Simmons (the first Black person to lead an Ivy League school), appointed a committee to explore the university's relationship with the slave trade. After Brown learned that it had profited from the infernal institution, the question became: What should be done? Could the school go beyond the inevitable campus memorial and conferences on slavery?

In 2019, Georgetown students voted to tax themselves—in the form of a $27.20 fee, in honor of the 272 people the university sold in 1838 to save itself from financial ruin. The money would go to benefit those people's

descendants. But symbolic reparations that depend on student initiatives—including contributions from Black students—are not the best way to make amends. A few months later, the university said it would provide the funding itself.

These schools should make a bigger sacrifice, by redistributing some of their own endowment funds—the unrestricted bequests, at least—to Black colleges, or to support Black students. Flagship state institutions—places like the University of Mississippi, which just reported a record endowment of $775 million—could share some of the wealth they accumulated during the years they denied Black students enrollment.

The primary responsibility for repairing the legacy of higher education, however, lies with the government. It could set up scholarship funds and loan-forgiveness programs for Black students. States could redistribute endowments themselves, or give institutions that enroll more minority students a greater share of the education budget.

The United States has never atoned for what it has done to hamper the progress of Black people. The country has provided again and again for white students. Now it must do the same for those whom it has held back.

This spring, I traveled home—back to Alabama A&M. The campus looked sharp. I was impressed to see that the old shuttles had been replaced with three new electric buses. I asked my wife to snap a picture of me just as a landscaper pulled up to manicure some flower beds.

We drove across town to UAH, where the campus was bustling and the students were still mostly white. There was a new building I didn't recognize. Instead of three electric buses, there were six charging stations for electric vehicles in front of the library. They can be used free of charge by all students, faculty, and staff.

For every step forward at A&M, UAH was taking two.

This article has been adapted from Adam Harris's new book, The State Must Provide: Why America's Colleges Have Always Been Unequal—And How to Set Them Right. *It appears in the September 2021 print edition with the headline "This Is the End of Affirmative Action."* Lead image: Illustration by Dakarai Akil; images by H. Armstrong Roberts / ClassicStock / Getty; Pictorial*

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Why So Many Millennials Are Obsessed With Dogs

Why Millennials Are Obsessed With Dogs

By Amanda Mull

This article was published online on July 29, 2021.

Since the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic, I have asked one question more than any other. It's come up time and again, day and night, as frequently in my post-vaccination spring and summer as it did in the dark moments of the pandemic's first wave: Are you my booboo?

The question is never answered by Midge, my agoraphobic chihuahua, but the answer is obvious. She's been my booboo since 2018, when I brought her home from a cat shelter, where she had been stashed by a Long Island dog rescue after her foster family gave her back—she didn't like them, or anyone, and cats aren't looking for new friends. At 12 pounds, she is twice as big as the most desirable chihuahuas, and she has a moderately bad personality, which is maybe why the puppy mill where she spent the first year of her life decided it didn't want any more of her robust and extremely rude babies. Now almost five years old, she has grown to tolerate me. I ask her questions she doesn't answer—if she's my booboo (yes), if she's a big girl (relatively speaking), if she has a kibble tummy (a little bit).

Since last March, Midge and I have been testing the bounds of what it means to live in my very small apartment together. In many ways, she's been a perfect pandemic pal: She hates interacting with others; she loves to sit on the couch; she long ago assessed sneezes as an existential threat. Whether she was sitting on a blanket in the kitchen while I cooked, frowning at me from a safe distance while I did yoga, or watching me do chores from beneath the leaves of her favorite enormous tropical houseplant, she bore witness to a year I spent otherwise alone. Every day, she climbed up the back of the couch to snooze atop its rear cushions, her face pointed toward mine at eye level while I worked at the kitchen table.

In a year when time felt slippery, Midge kept track of it—waking me up for breakfast, waging a nightly campaign for dinner, huffing and snorting and pacing until I got up from work to play fetch with her stuffed crocodile for a few minutes. Many days, she was the only living thing I spoke to, and the only one I touched. She tolerated most of my hugs, and once, when I was in the depths of late-winter depression, she let me pick her up and hold her tiny, warm chest to my forehead for a few seconds. Her big brown eyes look dismayed and embarrassed after these displays of affection, which is

usually enough to make me laugh. I tell her she's a good girl and try not to think about how much worse the past year would have been without her.

Or, for that matter, the past three years. The 2020 pet-adoption surge was sharp: Shelters emptied and rescue groups ran out of dogs as the work-from-home set welcomed new companions for themselves and their kids. Among adults under 40, who accounted for the majority of pet adoptions, the pandemic-era spike in demand was anomalous in its intensity, not its trajectory. Millennials recently overtook Boomers as the largest pet-owning cohort of Americans; by some estimates, more than half of them have a dog. The pet-ownership rate is even higher among those with a college education and a stable income—the same people who are most likely to delay marriage, parenthood, and homeownership beyond the timelines set by previous generations. Dogs, long practical partners in rural life or playmates for affluent children, have become a life stage unto themselves.

That dogs' roles are changing isn't itself so surprising. Humans and canines have been molding themselves to each other's needs for tens of thousands of years, helping ensure the mutual survival of both species. The question is why the relationship is changing so quickly right now. For America's newest adopters, a dog can be many things: a dry run for parenthood, a way of putting down roots when traditional milestones feel out of reach, an enthusiastic housemate for people likely to spend stretches of their 20s and 30s living alone. An even more primary task, though, is helping soothe the psychic wounds of modern life.

Midge's adoption was both planned and impulsive. In 2017, I went apartment hunting for my first place of my own in New York, looking only at buildings that allowed dogs, even though I didn't have one. Then, I waited. How do you know if you're ready to keep another mammal alive? I had no idea, but I found myself at a party in early 2018, in a professional rut and at the end of a relationship. A friend notorious for her flakiness showed up late, and when she arrived, she had in tow both her own happy mutt and another that she was watching for the weekend. A little bomb exploded in my head—if she could avoid killing two dogs simultaneously, surely I could manage one. I spent the next few days perusing Petfinder.com. Midge was on my lap on the B48 bus the next weekend.

I would have denied it at the time, but I got a dog because I was frustrated with everything else. The benchmarks that I was raised to believe would make me a real, respectable adult seemed foreign, even though I was 32, the same age when my mother, already a married homeowner working for the employer she'd have for the rest of her career, became pregnant with me. This particular Millennial sob story is familiar by now: Thanks to wealth inequality and wage stagnation and rising housing and child-care costs and student loans and all the rest, we're the first generation to do worse than our parents. People like me, who grew up middle-class, don't tend to suffer the most severe economic fallout. But the existential crisis provoked by these changes can still feel acute. All your life, you were told that if you worked to follow a particular path, you would be rewarded. Then the path was bulldozed to make room for luxury condos.

When I adopted Midge, I had no clear view of a future beyond my one-bedroom apartment, let alone a future involving a family of my own, and I still don't. As I looked around for an opening through which to push my life forward, the gap that was available to me was roughly the size of a hefty chihuahua. Dogs are, for some of us, a perfect balm for purgatorial anxieties. If you have time and care to give, they love freely, they put you on a schedule, they direct your attention and affection and idle thoughts toward something outside yourself. The desire to turn outward and spend energy nurturing others is a mark of emotional maturity, but that nurturing needs a vessel.

People without kids adopt pets not only as a dry run for eventual children but for lots of other reasons, too, including as an outlet for caring impulses that have nothing to do with parenthood. They also lavish their dogs with privileges that, in America, have historically been reserved for other people: Dogs now sleep in the same bed as their humans at night; they have birthday parties; they go see their friends at day care.

But for the particular rung of the American socioeconomic ladder that has pursued dog ownership most fervently in recent years—young, urban professionals, especially white ones—dogs serve yet another purpose: They're a class marker and a way of coping with deep status anxiety. Dogs broadcast stability—Midge is not nearly as expensive as a child or a single-

family home, but she is an indicator that I have mastered enough elements of my own life to introduce some joyful chaos into it.

Yet while dogs can be an effective therapy for the stresses of modern life, especially as it grows lonelier and more precarious, their friendship isn't always available to those who could use it most. For people clawing to maintain basic stability (instead of signaling that they've attained a middle-class version of it), the barriers to dog ownership are larger than simply having the disposable income to feed another mouth. A lot of subsidized and low-income housing refuses pets or limits the type and number that residents can have, and homeless shelters generally require people to abandon their pets to get a place to sleep. Companionship, whether with a pet or other people, is elemental to human dignity; in America, it's easier to come by if you have money.

According to Pat Shipman, a paleoanthropologist and the author of the forthcoming book *Our Oldest Companions: The Story of the First Dogs*, humans and dogs have been living together for about 40,000 years, though for almost all that time, the relationship was primarily practical; we gave dogs food and heat from fire, and dogs helped us spot approaching danger and track prey.

As humans shared their hunting spoils, dogs had less need for their lupine ancestors' brutality, and more need, evolutionarily speaking, to appeal to people. As a result, long before we started breeding them, dogs shrank, their ears flopped, their tails curled—they became cute. They also acquired eyebrow muscles that gave them a much larger range of expressions than wolves, allowing them to better communicate with humans.

In *A Dog's History of the World: Canines and the Domestication of Humans*, Laura Hobgood shows how, along the way, dogs became vital players in humans' emotional lives. As smaller dogs suitable for in-home pest control (and companionship) emerge in prehistoric fossil records, their burial sites reflect a high level of care: Dogs weren't just useful to humans; they were beloved. Still, the concept of a pet—a companion animal that plays no functional role in a household—is far more recent, dating back only about 3,000 years. The first pets tended to be tiny, manicured lapdogs, and were an extravagance of the wealthy; the ancient Pekingese breed, for

example, was once legally reserved for members of the Chinese imperial court. For everybody else, the human-canine bond continued to be not only emotional but practical. (Many of the breeds now slotted into the working, sporting, hound, herding, and terrier groups at dog shows were in fact developed to perform specific tasks for agrarian families.)

Industrialization was the beginning of the end of that era for most dogs. Over time, as people left rural areas for cities, more of them began departing the home every day for work or school—and much of daily life suddenly took place where dogs weren't allowed to go. But if dogs were with humans less, that didn't mean that humans no longer needed their companionship—in some ways, we may have needed it more. "Having pets helps people physically and psychologically," Shipman told me, rattling off research findings. Mental illness, incarceration, isolation, grief, post-traumatic stress disorder, autism—virtually all modern trials can be eased, in measurable ways, by the companionship of a dog.

Seen this way, it makes perfect sense that so many isolated, stressed-out people brought dogs into their life during the pandemic. Dogs pull us out into the world, make us get some sun on our face, give us an opening to chat with our neighbors. After a year when serendipitous social interaction was hard to come by, it returned to my life in the form of Cowboy, a then-14-week-old puppy who moved into an apartment on my floor in February. While waiting for his vaccinations to be complete (same, buddy), Cowboy's owners ran him up and down the empty hall a couple of times a day to work out some of his puppy energy. That's how I met him, and after a few encounters, he would scratch at my door every day to say hi.

At some point soon, Cowboy's dads will go back to in-person work, and so will I. Visions have danced in my head of loading Midge into a BabyBjörn and carrying her everywhere I go, like a real asshole. Some minority of pet owners may be able to do just that, as anxious employers try to cajole people back into the office and prevent them from jumping ship with promises of pet-friendly work spaces. But many people—even many dog lovers—will likely balk at these reverse-engineered solutions. Contemporary offices are barely hospitable to humans, let alone a new population of four-legged co-workers.

What if, instead of forcing dogs to fit our modern lives, we set about making modern life more hospitable to pets? Doing so would require us to acknowledge that our connection to other living things—and to the natural world at large—isn't a luxury, but an essential element of what makes us human. Fittingly, virtually all of the changes that would make having a pet easier would make life more humane for people too: flexible working conditions, for example, and affordable housing, and more public green space. (That the list of dog-friendly circumstances is basically identical to the things that would make it easier for more Americans to have kids isn't a coincidence. Dogs aren't children, of course, but their popularity among those of childbearing age is indicative of the deep emotional commitments that people rush toward when given the chance.)

I often look down at Midge—as she weaves between my feet while I cook, or when she's sprawled in a sunny spot, tongue hanging out—and marvel at the little animal that lives in my apartment. She knows what bedtime means, and she has somehow learned to tell whether I'm opening the fridge to get a drink or to get food, even before I touch anything. She doesn't know how she got here, or who I am, beyond the fact that I care for her, and she takes care of me.

This article appears in the September 2021 print edition with the headline "Why Millennials Are So Obsessed With Dogs."When you buy a book using a link on this page, we receive a commission. Thank you for supporting The Atlantic.

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Joseph Campbell's Woman Problem

'The Heroine With 1001 Faces,' by Maria Tatar

By James Parker

*This article was published online on August 4, 2021.*It's one of the darkest and bloodiest episodes in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. King Tereus of Thrace, having lusted after his sister-in-law, Philomela, inveigles her away from her father's protection, takes her to a forest dungeon, and rapes her. Philomela, towering in eloquence, vows to tell the world what Tereus has done; her raised voice, she promises him in Arthur Golding's 1567 translation, will "make the stones to understand." So Tereus cuts her tongue out. Ovid, characteristically, zooms in: The wound pours; the severed tongue bounces and mutely spasms—"as an adder's tail cut off doth skip a while," in Golding's version. More modern retellers of *The Metamorphoses* have been similarly transfixed. From Ted Hughes's *Tales From Ovid* (1997): "The tongue squirmed in the dust, babbling on—Shaping words that were now

soundless.” From Nina MacLaughlin’s *Wake, Siren* (2019): “Please imagine how it continues to wriggle, how it twitches and moves on the dirt floor.”

It barely qualifies as mythic, the story of Philomela. A sexual assault, a silencing, a mutilated testimony—there is nothing supernatural about any of this. The germ of hope in the tale is that Philomela is not silenced; still trapped by her abductor, the speechless princess secretly weaves her denunciation of Tereus into the imagery of a tapestry, which she then sends to her sister.

For the distinguished folklorist Maria Tatar, Philomela’s resourcefulness—literally, her craftiness—places her in a secret lineage of truth-telling women. “Silenced women are not without tools,” Tatar writes in her new book, *The Heroine With 1001 Faces*, “and Philomela reminds us that so-called women’s work—weaving, sewing, and working with coverings—provides an opportunity not just to create but also to communicate.” Female *telling*, however hopeless or subterranean, is a fairy-tale motif, as Tatar shows us: There’s the Goose Girl in the Brothers Grimm, who opens her heart to an iron stove, and the Armenian tale of Nourie Hadig, mistreated and betrayed, who confides in the sympathetic Stone of Patience. (This stone really does understand; hearing Nourie’s story, it swells with pity.) Dimensions converge in Tatar’s book: deep, shimmering, archetypal time and the urgency of the present moment. “From Myth to #MeToo” is the subtitle of one of her chapters. “Telling your story,” she writes—“revealing injuries inflicted and harm done—has come to be invested with unprecedented weight.”

The Heroine With 1001 Faces is not exactly a rebuttal to Joseph Campbell’s 1949 classic, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*—but it is a counter-book. Campbell famously and rather rapturously identified the “monomyth”: the single great life-giving story that expresses itself in endless variations through the legendarium of every tribe and culture. The Call to Adventure, the Ordeal/Initiation, the Trouble in the Third Act, the Return—this is the Hero’s Journey, schematized by Campbell and unblinkingly cloned in a zillion Hollywood screenplays. We all use it, to a degree, writers and nonwriters. The voyage, the pilgrimage, the vision quest are part of our mental circuitry. “It’s difficult to avoid the sensation,” wrote Christopher

Vogler in his best-selling *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers*, "that the Hero's Journey exists somewhere, somehow, as an eternal reality, a Platonic ideal form, a divine model." But what if the divine model excludes women? Tatar is decisive: "Driven by conflict and conquest, this narrative arc utterly fails as a model of women's experience."

It's not like there are *no* women in *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*. Look, there she is in the index: *woman*, right between *wolf image* and *womb-image*. The problem is, of the hero's 1,000 faces, 999 are male. Aeneas, the Buddha, Taliesin, Cuchulainn … Campbell's prose, often wonderful, never less than sonorous, actually goes a bit demented when he writes about "woman": "Woman is the guide to the sublime acme of sensuous adventure." She may be the muse, the grail, or the goddess. She may be the source of being, or she may be bottomless death. But the adventure itself, with its conquering of monsters and quelling of demons—that's for the blokes. It's linear, phallic, acquisitive. "The woman is life, the hero its knower and master."

Tatar has had enough of this. "Suddenly," she writes in the introduction to her book, "I understood the rage of one of my undergraduate students, who described her journey into the world of folklore and mythology as a crusade against Campbell." The genial Campbell might have been surprised to discover himself, in this particular heroic journey, playing the role of dragon/ogre. Then again, he was all for transfiguration. Things change; it's a precondition for the great quest. "The familiar life horizon," as he wrote in *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, "has been outgrown; the old concepts, ideals, and emotional patterns no longer fit; the time for the passing of a threshold is at hand."

I had hopes that Tatar would do for the Hero's Journey and its tropes what Hannah Gadsby did for stand-up comedy in her special *Nanette*—lay bare its essentially male mechanism and then, with great precision, blow it up. What gorgeous organic form might the Heroine's Journey take? A wave, a spiral, a magnetic field?

But *The Heroine With 1001 Faces* is not that kind of book. Not a guide to gynocentric plot-building—more of a roaming miscellany of heroines across the ages. Tatar sent me on a superb binge of reading and rereading:

Angela Carter's daredevil retellings and renewals of Little Red Riding Hood and Puss in Boots in *The Bloody Chamber*, her language running wild over the material; Anne Sexton's *Transformations*, whose jolting, funny/horrific poems are a kind of biological absorption and mutation of the cruel old tales. "It's not the prince at all, / but my father / drunkenly bent over my bed, / circling the abyss like a shark …" As Marina Warner observes in her indispensable *Fairy Tale: A Very Short Introduction*, in these poems, "you can glimpse the broken trust in families, as well as the suffocating limits on women's horizons. You can hear the desperation that drove women mad."

And when, primed by Tatar and her heroines, I picked up Sinéad O'Connor's new memoir, *Rememberings*, my head—in a manner of speaking—exploded. O'Connor has left a unique imprint on pop-cultural memory: the unnervingly transparent gaze, the hyperborean wail, the songs. And of course, the trouble. In October 1992, as a protest against the Catholic Church's culture of child abuse, O'Connor went on *Saturday Night Live*, performed—in a voice as keen as the stroke of an ax—an a cappella version of Bob Marley's "War," and then ripped into pieces a photograph of Pope John Paul II. The vilification was instantaneous; her sanity was questioned; her career was generally assumed to be over. Thirteen days later, she took the stage at Madison Square Garden to perform in a Bob Dylan tribute concert. She was met by a noise she had never heard before, deafening, undifferentiated crowd-roar—half love, half hate, with hate in the ascendant. "Like a sonic riot," she writes in *Rememberings*, "as if the sky is ripping apart." We pass here into the mythic. The Church, classic rock, American manhood—all arrayed howling against her, like terraces of burning angels. Was this the Ordeal/Initiation, or the battle with the dragon itself? Looking back, we know she was right. In the moment, she faced the storm alone. Transformations and metamorphoses have been undergone since then; reckonings and vindications have occurred. But the wages of heroism, real heroism—they don't change.

This article appears in the September 2021 print edition with the headline "The Heroine's Journey."

The Would-Be Savior of Patagonia

Review: ‘A Wild Idea’ and the Conservationism of Douglas Tompkins

By Michael O’Donnell

Douglas Tompkins reached the summit of Mount Fitz Roy on December 20, 1968. (Chris Jones)

This article was published online on August 5, 2021.

Patagonia as many of us imagine it was born in 1968. That year, the vast region of South America became an exotic destination for outdoor adventure. Of course, residents of Chile and Argentina did not need their backyard discovered any more than Native Americans needed Christopher Columbus. But to a group of young men in California, the landscape held a

mystical appeal. That summer they set out by van to drive 16,000 miles southward, drawn by the peak of Fitz Roy, a forbidding mountain that no American had ever summited. Despite weeks of storms, they succeeded. The five men returned home with film footage of breathtaking terrain at the ends of the Earth. Their 1968 expedition has enjoyed a romantic legacy, inspiring countless adventurers—and, in a way, outfitting them as well. One member of the party, Yvon Chouinard, later founded the apparel company Patagonia. The instigator of the trip, Douglas Tompkins, had already launched The North Face.

Tompkins, the group's alpha male, traveled in search of achievement and discovery, but his journey was also an abandonment. The six-month trip stranded his wife, Susie Tompkins, with two very young children as she attempted to start her own clothing business, Plain Jane. Tompkins tossed her some cash and wished her luck (returning for a brief stint of troubleshooting, and then leaving again). She found herself in fearful limbo when the group was months overdue in returning from the dangerous ascent. A film of the expedition, called *Mountain of Storms*, elides these tensions. It shows Tompkins having his fortune read in a Central American city and being told that his family is thinking of him. The film then cuts to gauzy scenes of domestic life accompanied by guitars and flutes. Two children play happily with their father as his wife cradles his head and feeds him crackers. In a voice-over, Tompkins marvels at his own freedom of movement: "You never really thought about the motives."

One adventurer's selfish act more than 50 years ago might not bear emphasizing—except that Tompkins later became a famous altruist who renounced the business world and moved to a cabin in Patagonia. There he used his wealth to become what his biographer, Jonathan Franklin, calls "among the greatest conservationists of his generation." From the early 1990s until his death in 2015, Tompkins led a campaign to preserve more than 10 million acres of wilderness in Patagonia, helping build or expand more than a dozen national parks throughout Chile and Argentina. In *A Wild Idea*, Franklin compares him, in his mercurial zeal and undaunted ambition on multiple fronts, to Bill Gates and Steve Jobs.

By now, we're accustomed to the spectacle of visionary entrepreneurs who don't excel in empathy, and literature reminds us of the long lineage of philanthropic myopia. Think of Mrs. Jellyby in Dickens's *Bleak House*, fervently dedicated to a mission in Africa while her own brood goes neglected. Tompkins's story reveals a new incarnation of the type, the imperious progressive as global savior. In the era of climate change, he is a figure who should prompt questions along with admiration. "It doesn't matter," he said of the bad publicity he accrued. "In fifty years they will be building statues of me." In the half decade since his death, he has indeed been lionized as a giant of the environmental movement. But is relying on crusaders like Tompkins what's best for the planet?

Raised in the Hudson Valley in a Mayflower-pedigreed family, Tompkins grew up watching his father acquire museum-grade pieces of antique furniture. In this way the young Tompkins cultivated his own eye for perfection. He was a star athlete in prep school, bound for the Ivy League until he crossed paths with Chouinard on a rock-climbing trip. Thus began a lifelong friendship between entrepreneurial rebels; one of the pleasures of *A Wild Idea* is Franklin's patient chronicling of the connection, and the contrasts, between the two men over the years. Tompkins fell in with the dirtbag crowd and got himself expelled from high school in 1960, weeks before his graduation. He adopted an itinerant life of well-paid gigs logging and baling hay in Montana, then skiing and climbing in Colorado, South America, and Europe. (His parents refused to support him.) Within a few years, he was trying his hand at business, dabbling in mountain-guiding and selling camping equipment. Chouinard, who was forging climbing hardware in his own shop, offered inspiration and advice.

In the mid-'60s, Tompkins moved to the San Francisco Bay Area and founded The North Face, a company that produced and sold outdoor gear and apparel. The hallmark of his genius, visible even in his early 20s, was fanatical attention to detail, evident in his remarkable skill at marketing and presentation. The brand stood out for the ambience of its retail stores, which became places for hip outdoor types to hang out, and for its beautifully printed catalogs dotted with feel-good aphorisms ("Pack less and enjoy more"). Stunts and gags drew attention to the hot new company just as the counterculture took off. A North Face employee rappelled down a San

Francisco skyscraper for a cup of coffee. The Grateful Dead headlined a party launching the 1966 winter season.

Yet in 1967, just a few years after starting the company, Tompkins grew tired of being an equipment expert and cashed out, soon leaving on his Patagonia expedition. After that trip, he continued to disappear for months at a time on almost comically dangerous adventures, ignoring his children. But the entrepreneur was busy as ever on his return. The most fruitful of Tompkins's subsequent business enterprises was the clothing company that became Esprit, founded with Susie and another partner in 1968; he went on to serve as "image director," a title he preferred to CEO. The company's bold colors and patterns made it the label for cool teens and young 20-somethings of the 1970s and '80s.

Tompkins overflowed with ideas; obsessed over details as small as tags, buttons, and hangers; and created a progressive corporate campus with trampolines, green policies, and organic food. His thoughts on design influenced Jobs, who directed his own team to buy copies of Tompkins's book *Esprit: The Comprehensive Design Principle*. But if Tompkins's energy and vision drove the enterprise, Susie's sharp decision making boosted sales. She pushed Esprit's striking use of color and promoted marketing all their apparel properties under one brand name (an idea Tompkins initially opposed).

Their marriage and business partnership lasted 25 years but ended in acrimony. The interpersonal tension infected the company, which by the late '80s was struggling financially. Tompkins had also begun to grow disillusioned with the fashion industry and the effects of consumerism on the planet. "I found myself caught up in the marketing. I lost track of the larger picture. I was creating desires that weren't there. I was making products that nobody needed." Tompkins recognized his own talents but felt he had put them in service of waste. He spent more and more of his time on environmental concerns, particularly deforestation, and found his eye wandering back to South America. He immersed himself in books about deep ecology, which called for a broader understanding of ecosystems and a less human-centric view of nature. Inspired by the youthful energy of

activists in radical organizations such as Earth First and Greenpeace, he dedicated his life to conservation.

Here Tompkins's path diverged from his friend Chouinard's. You might call them the extremist and the pragmatist of green activism. Patagonia integrated sustainability into the ethos of the company by making clothing out of recycled and low-impact materials, discouraging customers from buying new products when old ones could be repaired, and donating 1 percent of sales to environmental causes. Its example led other firms to reduce their own carbon footprint while still prospering. Yet Tompkins seemed to see things in binary terms: He was either a businessman or an environmentalist. He left Esprit, selling his 50 percent stake for approximately $150 million and turning to philanthropy. He never looked back. His efforts, as they unfolded, revealed both the opportunities and the limitations of private conservation. When saving the planet relies not on law or policy but on the whims of idiosyncratic multimillionaires, we all have to live with their flaws.

Tompkins's high-handedness at Esprit carried over into his reincarnation as a conservationist. Chouinard's company has made fair working practices a hallmark of its identity, but Tompkins had fought bitterly with labor. When workers at Esprit's San Francisco factory tried to unionize, he harassed and threatened them. After they went on strike, Tompkins locked them out and had strikers arrested. Promises made to end the strike turned out to be false.

In South America, Tompkins was as assertive as ever. He picked fights in a bold display of wealth and power. His ventures included 54 lawsuits against his neighbors and local governments in Argentina, fierce turf battles with the fishing industry, and controversial campaigns to protect endangered species. He used his marketing skills to help prevent a series of dams from being built, spearheading a national ad blitz that mocked the dams' corporate backers. The project was abandoned in 2014. These moves made him influential enemies in the energy industry and the Argentinian and Chilean governments. But the heart of Tompkins's decades-long Patagonia project, jointly led with his second wife, Kris Tompkins, was to buy as much land as possible, protect it from development, and donate it to South American governments to be used as national parks.

Although Franklin portrays Tompkins as humbler after remarrying, he made little effort to acquaint himself with the expectations and traditions of the area he had staked out to preserve. Locals could not believe that a gringo furiously buying up acreage would simply give it all away. Their skepticism was understandable in a region that had experienced colonialist abuses, property disputes, and military dictatorships. Ignorant of this history, Tompkins pressed ahead with plans for low-tech "pioneer villages" abutting and supporting his parks, their economy based on manual labor and sustainable agriculture. In one proposal, he suggested teaching beekeeping to local residents. The notion that Patagonia's residents might aspire to a more modern existence—or that they simply preferred to choose their fates for themselves—did not slow him down.

A Wild Idea outlines the controversies surrounding Tompkins's crusade. Still, Franklin could have offered a more nuanced (and better sourced) consideration of the white man's burden that Tompkins carried in South America. Doug and Kris Tompkins ultimately did give their land away; they were not amassing it for some nefarious purpose as many had feared. But that end result shouldn't eclipse the means employed or the response they elicited. In September 2014, Diana Saverin reported in depth for *The Atlantic* on the mistrust, anger, and resentment that local residents felt toward the strident American who swooped in and out on a plane and bought up the land. Some of it belonged to absentee landowners and had been leased to or claimed by campesinos and indigenous communities, who were abruptly evicted. One café owner pointed out that the large stone visitors' centers the Tompkinses had built in the parks looked like they belonged in London rather than Patagonia. Critics said that turning grazing land into parkland eliminated the animal-husbandry jobs that the locals preferred, and that the pumas and other predators he'd reintroduced killed their livestock. Kris Tompkins batted away these critiques, arguing that the soil was overfarmed and that in 100 years, no one would be able to imagine the land as anything other than national parks.

The point is not that the locals were right and Tompkins was wrong. History may well thank him for preserving as much wilderness as he could before it was too late. Yet history isn't complete without taking account of the way that his single-mindedness and confidence in his own righteousness blinded

him to the needs of others, whether Patagonians, business subordinates, climbing buddies, or family members. His merciless altruism comes through with particular poignancy in a story his elder daughter recounted about Christmas when she was 4 years old. Thrilled to be greeted by a big pile of presents bought by her father, she and her sister opened them up—only to be told by him that they would each keep one and donate the rest to an orphanage. Generosity and anti-consumerism are noble values, but the encounter left the searing message that Tompkins cared more about his own dogma than his children's joy. The same harsh paternalism informed his dealings with the people of Patagonia: *I'm going to take this land of yours and show you how it ought to be used*. Imagine how much more effective he might have been had he arrived with an open hand rather than a pointed finger. He might even have set a template for durable conservation, replicable elsewhere.

Chouinard wrote a well-received memoir about "the education of a reluctant businessman" in 2005 and gave it a fitting title: *Let My People Go Surfing*. The book captured the community-minded spirit of its author and his largely successful attempt to balance leadership, freedom, and conscientious stewardship. Tompkins, who died while kayaking in Patagonia with Chouinard and others nearly 50 years after the 1968 journey that changed both their lives, did not have a chance to publish a memoir of his own. It's a shame, because he was a unique figure of wide-ranging cultural influence, and a bit more self-reflection might have done him—and us all—good.

This article appears in the September 2021 print edition with the headline "The Would-Be Savior of Patagonia."

Sally Rooney Addresses Her Critics

Review: Sally Rooney's 'Beautiful World, Where Are You?'

By Caleb Crain

This article was published online on August 10, 2021.

In her first two novels, *Conversations With Friends* (2017) and *Normal People* (2018), the young Irish writer Sally Rooney resurrected the depressive, evacuated style that Ernest Hemingway made his signature. “The hills across the valley of the Ebro were long and white,” he famously

wrote in his short story “Hills Like White Elephants,” and in much the same deadpan way, Rooney has Frances, the narrator of her debut, look around a college library and think, “Inside, everything was very brown.” Ridiculous in isolation, Rooney’s line makes sense in context: Frances has just received an email from her lover’s wife, and while she waits for the courage to read it, she tries, unsuccessfully, to distract herself by focusing on her surroundings. At least, that’s what I imagine is going on in Frances’s head. With a writer so chary of detail, the reader rushes to fill in.

Rooney also resembled Hemingway—and Raymond Carver, a renovator of Hemingway’s minimalism whom Rooney has cited as an influence—in her ability to write dialogue that sounds unpremeditated but has a neutron-star density of drama and emotion. Here are Connell and Marianne, the teenage lovers of *Normal People*, after their first kiss:

Rooney showed mastery of point of view as well. Her control was so fine that she was able to convey Connell’s arousal during a reunion with Marianne by slowing down his perception and amping up its sensuousness: “She’s wearing a white dress with a halter-neck and her skin looks tanned. She’s been hanging washing on the line. The air outside is very still and the laundry hangs there in damp colors, not moving.” Rooney’s respect for the limits and biases of her characters’ minds was strict. Frances, young and unsophisticated, has never tasted a fresh avocado before, fantasizes about seeing her name printed in a magazine “in a serif font with thick stems,” and describes the torso of her first male lover with an almost generic simile: “like a piece of statuary.”

The rigor with which Rooney conformed narrative voice to the shape of her characters’ consciousness won her praise as a portraitist of her Millennial generation—and also left her vulnerable to political critique. Many of her characters are college-age leftists of an idealistic sort and, like tyro intellectuals since the dawn of time, are deadly earnest without altogether knowing what they’re talking about. They are besotted with theory but literally haven’t done the homework. At a performance of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, Frances catches sight of the washing-instruction label on the lead actor’s slip, and the spell of the performance is broken: “I concluded that some kinds of reality have an unrealistic effect, which made me think of the

theorist Jean Baudrillard, though I had never read his books and these were probably not the issues his writing addressed." A whole essay could be written about this sentence's simultaneous knowingness and not-knowingness, but as a snapshot of a young person who knows which names to invoke but not (lucky for her) their actual work, it can't be bettered. And in fact, Frances's insight is a good one—whoever thought it up first.

Rooney told interviewers that she, like some of her characters, was a Marxist, and American critics—many of them her Millennial contemporaries—drafted her into the war over tone of voice, ideological purity, and evidentiary standards that has been raging in progressive political circles since at least the run-up to the 2016 presidential election. In *The New York Review of Books*, Madeleine Schwartz complained that "the politics are mostly gestural" in Rooney's books, pointing out that her protagonists, far from being rebels, "are all good students." Becca Rothfeld, writing in *The Point*, also saw the leftism as fashionable posturing and seemed sorry that Rooney hadn't more explicitly punctured it. In a follow-up essay in *Liberties*, Rothfeld went so far as to dismiss Rooney's fiction as "sanctimony literature": "full of self-promotion and the airing of performatively righteous opinions."

I agree that the leftism of Rooney's characters is shallow, and that their worldview is to a great extent undermined by the novels' plots. "The whole idea of 'meritocracy' or whatever, it's evil, you know I think that," Marianne tells Connell, a working-class boy from a single-parent home who, thanks to hard work and native talent, gets into an elite university, where he becomes "rich-adjacent"—the epitome of a meritocrat, in other words (though never, as befits a romantic lead, an entitled one). Frances, meanwhile, is described as a Communist by her sometime girlfriend, Bobbi, but once Frances's writerly ambition awakens, she expropriates Bobbi's life story as literary grist, which Bobbi only discovers from a third party, just as the revealing story is about to appear in print. I don't find that the inconsistency compromises the novels, maybe because I'm what the internet calls an old, who thinks of politics and literature as different endeavors. Plenty of young people do think and talk like Rooney's characters, and I like reading novels that look at their world from a sympathetic but significant distance.

At least as salient as the nod to radical politics in Rooney's first two novels was a troubled longing for traditional relationships, which struck many of the same critics as unexamined, if not ill-advised. The union of a strong man and a submissive woman seemed to fascinate Rooney, the way faith in God once fascinated Matthew Arnold: She could no longer bring herself to believe, but she also couldn't stop mourning the shape and meaning that such a union once gave to life. In the lives of her heroines, the mourning sometimes took the form of masochism. Frances tears open the skin in the crook of an elbow after she learns she hasn't been made pregnant by her married lover, whom she later asks to hit her. Marianne lets a boyfriend beat her up and lets another lover tie her wrists and tell her she's worthless, and she, too, ends up asking the love of her life to hit her.

I find I don't need Rooney to condemn or fully explain here either; a novelist's role is to notice and explore. It would be unnatural if characters as young as Rooney's had already worked out what to do with such impulses. Frances tries to soften her urge to punish herself—tries to tame and socialize it—by submitting herself to a partly homemade Christianity, a wider communion that she seems to hope will dilute the guilt she has incurred in romantic couples and triangles. She starts reading the Gospels and, while sitting in church, has a vision of the world, including herself, as created by the work of many different human beings. "Now I see that nothing consists of two people, or even three," she writes to Bobbi. Toward the end of *Normal People*, Marianne tries to transcend her masochism by making her choice to surrender to Connell, who has refused to hurt her in bed, a conscious one, and her rationale echoes Frances's communal vision: "No one can be independent of other people completely, so why not give up the attempt, she thought, go running in the other direction, depend on people for everything, allow them to depend on you, why not." Unfortunately, an impulse to abase oneself isn't resolved by a recognition that human life is a collaboration. Rooney's characters never quite work through the conflicts they've been acting out.

Rooney seems to have been aware that she left the puzzle uncompleted: Submissive impulses, homemade Christianity, and an ethos of mutual care return in her new novel, *Beautiful World, Where Are You*. The book takes its title from a poem of Friedrich Schiller's praising a mythic past when

contact with the divine was part of daily life. Like *Conversations With Friends*, the new book tells the story of two Irish couples. The first consists of Alice Kelleher, a young Dublin novelist who has moved to the west of Ireland after a nervous breakdown in New York, and Felix Brady, a taciturn, hard-drinking warehouse picker she meets through an app. Rooney loans Alice the shape of her own career: Only 29, Alice has become rich and famous for writing two novels that won a lot of attention from the press —"mostly positive at first," Rooney writes, "and then some negative pieces reacting to the fawning positivity."

The loan gives Rooney an opportunity to reply to her critics, with whom, it turns out, she agrees that while a novelist may be Marxist, novels rarely are. "The novel works by suppressing the truth of the world," Alice writes in one of the meditative emails that she and her best friend, whom she's known since college, exchange over the course of the book; fiction soothes readers into feeling at liberty to care about such trivial matters as "whether people break up or stay together." The problem is more general than novels, the friend responds, noting that most people, on their deathbeds, keenly aware that time is precious, talk about close personal relationships rather than human justice in the abstract.

The novel's second couple consists of Eileen Lydon, Alice's email correspondent, and Eileen's childhood friend Simon Costigan. Eileen works at a literary magazine and thinks of herself as socially awkward. Simon—five years older and strikingly beautiful—works as a political consultant for high-minded left-wing politicians, is a communicant in the Roman Catholic Church, and has considered joining the priesthood. His father accuses him of having a messiah complex, and no one in the novel much dissents from the diagnosis. The morning after Simon and Eileen renew a romance that started almost a decade earlier, Eileen accompanies him to Mass, where they hold hands, and ideas about religion and morality soon become integrated into the gentle dominance-and-submission games they play in bed. "I think I enjoy being bossed around by you," she tells him, and he tells her, when she obeys, with a couple of his fingers inside her, that she's being "good." Sexual worldliness, a whiff of incense—it's all very Muriel Spark, except in pastel.

Alice and Felix, meanwhile, seem charged with menace on their first date—she appears capable of mockery and condescension, and he of scorn or even violence. Indeed, he goes on to ghost her, stand her up, ask her for sex while drunk and high, and tell her no one cares about her. Rooney stage-manages the scenes so that Alice retains much of her dignity—at the cost, I think, of Felix's coherence as a character. The same man, the reader is told, asks which terms for sex acts she prefers in bed. Rooney claims Felix is bisexual, a claim that goes largely unsubstantiated, and makes his outlines even blurrier. I came to think of his bisexuality as a bay leaf that was said to have been added to the soup but hadn't been.

Chasing her ideas about love, Rooney hasn't sufficiently incarnated them. Unlike the wayward human beings of her earlier novels, the foursome in *Beautiful World* seems carefully planned and a little static, like figures in an allegory. Rooney's efforts to introduce romantic suspense feel added on. I couldn't manage to believe that Alice and Felix would ever make a couple except briefly and painfully, and I couldn't see why Eileen and Simon weren't settled lovers from Chapter 3 onward.

I suspect that many readers will miss the ruthless speed and economy that Rooney displayed in her first two books, but she remains a great talent. Among the considerable pleasures here are her bold variations in perspective. Interspersing the long emails between Alice and Eileen is narration from a third-person omniscient point of view, the first time Rooney has tried this in a novel, and I felt the excitement of watching a serious artist try out a new tool. One of her chapters, for example, begins with a description of Simon's living room before anyone has entered it and ends with a description of the same room after he and Eileen have gone into his bedroom and closed the door. Elsewhere, Rooney describes Felix's warehouse-picking in tandem with Alice's performance of publicity duties, even though the two actions are taking place at a distance from each other. I loved this playfulness.

And then there are the ideas themselves. As the riff about realism and clothing labels in Rooney's first novel demonstrated, a powerful intellect beats beneath her underdressed prose. Like every thinking person, she has felt driven to come up with new theories about the world during the crises

of the past few years, and in the emails between Alice and Eileen, she ruminates on capitalism, the fall of communism, beauty, plastic, minority identities (Eileen seems to be a class-first socialist), the role of art in the Trump era, and the abrupt degradation and collapse of several Mediterranean civilizations during the Late Bronze Age.

The emails come to seem less like chapters in a novel than like installments of a discursive essay. The central question that Eileen and Alice keep returning to is how to make a community out of loving interdependence. Selflessness, in the name of some higher unity, seems necessary. Eileen admires the way congregants at Mass earnestly lift their hearts to the Lord. Alice quotes a sentence of Proust's suggesting the existence of a single intelligence in the world, which everyone looks at from their own body, the way members of an audience look at a single stage from many different seats.

But structure seems necessary too. The substance that makes up relationships is "soft like sand or water," Alice writes, and without a vessel to contain it, people can only "pour the water out and let it fall," leading not to utopia but to waste. Although Alice, like Rooney characters before her, is disenchanted with traditional marriage, "it was at least a way of doing things," she writes, sounding less Marxist than Burkean. Rooney hints that friendship might be the shapeless vessel needed for a shapeless substance. When Alice and Eileen reunite in person after a separation, Rooney wonders if they glimpse "something concealed beneath the surface of life, not unreality but a hidden reality: the presence at all times, in all places, of a beautiful world."

There's something a little 18th-century about *Beautiful World*, with its philosophical tone and its abstractly conceived characters who can't stop talking about how to reconcile romantic liberty with love's responsibilities. It reminds me of Goethe's *Elective Affinities*, and like that book, it has held my attention more strongly than is easy to explain. In her new novel, Rooney hasn't quite found the right vessel for her vision, any more than her characters have found the ideal sociopolitical structure for channeling human connectedness. Rooney could have taken the safer route of repeating

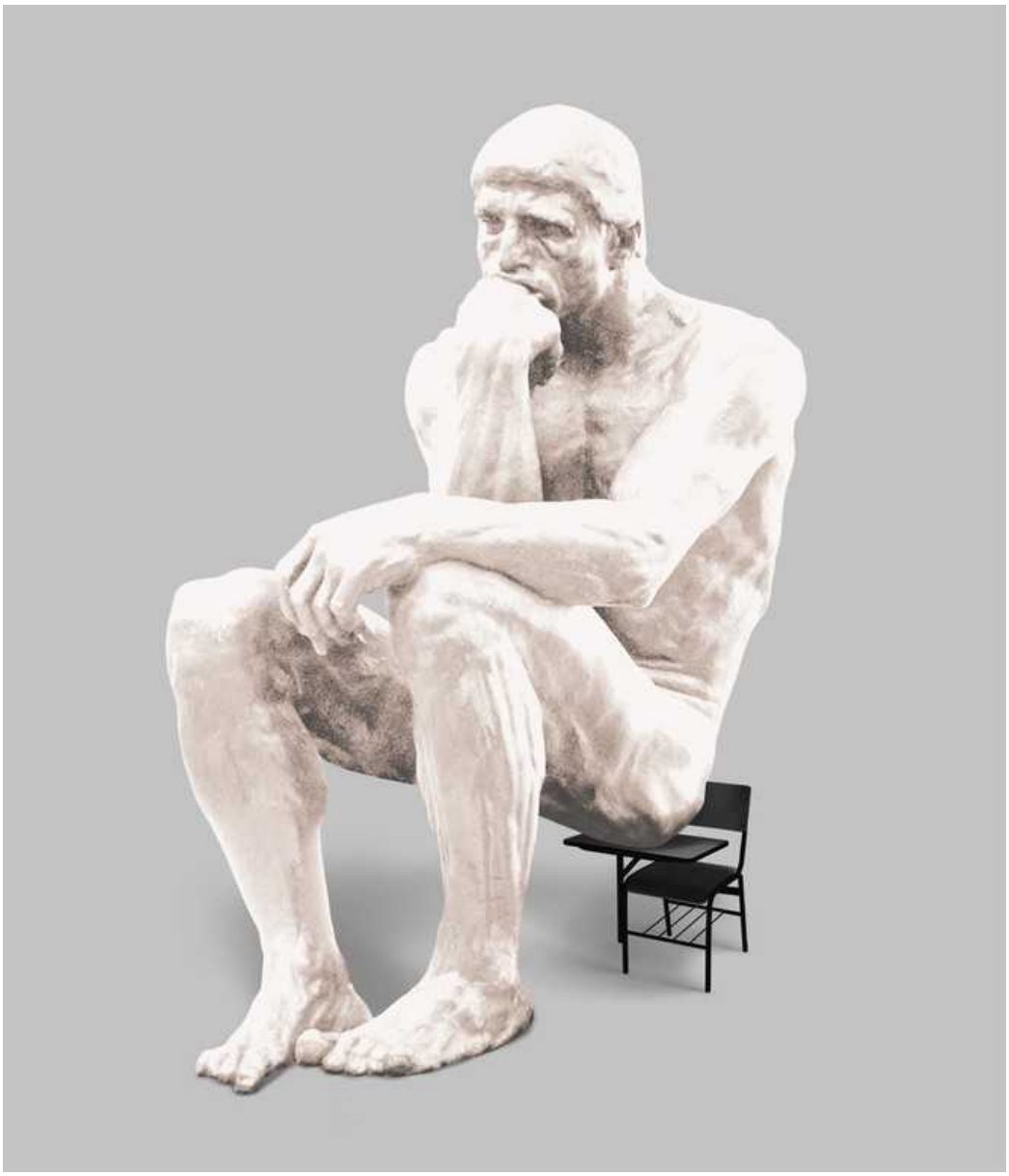
herself, but she seems to have an Enlightenment idea of the artist's calling: She experiments.

This article appears in the September 2021 print edition with the headline "Sally Rooney Addresses Her Critics."

Robin DiAngelo and the Problem With Anti-racist Self-Help

Review: New Books by Robin DiAngelo and Courtney E. Martin

By Danzy Senna



This article was published online on August 3, 2021.

Last March, just before we knew the pandemic had arrived, my husband and I enrolled our son in a progressive private school in Pasadena, California. He was 14 and, except for a year abroad, had been attending public schools his whole life. Private was my idea, the gentle kind of hippie school I'd sometimes wished I could attend during my ragtag childhood in Boston-area public schools amid the desegregation turmoil of the 1970s and '80s. I wanted smaller class sizes, a more nurturing environment for my artsy, bookish child. I did notice that—despite having diversity in its mission statement—the school was extremely white. My son noticed too.

As he gushed about the school after his visit, he mentioned that he hadn't seen a single other kid of African descent. He brushed it off. It didn't matter.

I did worry that we might be making a mistake. But I figured we could make up for the lack; after all, not a day went by in our household that we didn't discuss race, joke about race, fume about race. My child knew he was Black and he knew his history and … he'd be fine.

Weeks after we sent in our tuition deposit, the pandemic hit, followed by the summer of George Floyd. The school where my son was headed was no exception to the grand awakening of white America that followed, the confrontation with the absurd lie of post-racial America. The head of school scrambled to address an anonymous forum on Instagram recounting "experiences with the racism dominating our school," as what one administrator called its racial reckoning began. Over the summer, my son was assigned Ibram X. Kendi and Jason Reynolds's *Stamped: Racism, Antiracism, and You* and Angie Thomas's *The Hate U Give*. When the fall semester began, no ordinary clubs like chess and debate awaited; my son's sole opportunity to get to know other students was in affinity groups. That meant Zooming with the catchall category of BIPOC students on Fridays to talk about their racial trauma in the majority-white school he hadn't yet set foot inside. (*BIPOC*, or "Black, Indigenous, and people of color," was unfamiliar to my son; in his public school, he had described his peers by specific ethnic backgrounds—Korean, Iranian, Jewish, Mexican, Black.)

He made us laugh with stories about the school at the dinner table. His irony and awareness were intact. But his isolation in the new school, under quarantine, was acute; he missed his friends, who were all going to the local public high school, albeit on Zoom. How could he meet kids who shared his interests in graphic novels, film, debate, comedy, politics? I expressed my concern and was told that our son would surely soon make some friends through that weekly BIPOC affinity group. This year of racial reckoning, one school official said, was about healing. At every meeting I attended, I kept bringing up the importance of recruiting more Black families. Administrators, almost all of them white, kept emphasizing the need for

more outside DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) specialists to heal the school's racial trauma.

I thought of our experience at the school recently as I read Courtney E. Martin's memoir about trying to live a "White moral life." In *Learning in Public: Lessons for a Racially Divided America From My Daughter's School*, she shares her experience of deciding to send her kindergartner to the majority-Black and academically "failing" neighborhood public school she's zoned for in Oakland, California. Martin is a writer on social-justice issues who is in demand on the college-lecture circuit. In spirit, her book is an extension of her popular Substack newsletter, called The Examined Family, written "for people who get all twisted up inside about the brokenness of the world, and wonder how to actually live in it, loving and humble, but brave as hell." In other words, her memoir is aimed at fellow upper-middle-class white progressives eager to confront their "white fragility," the phrase coined a decade ago by the white educator Robin DiAngelo, whose 2018 book by that title (subtitled *Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism*) is the bible of many of those DEI specialists I kept hearing about.

DiAngelo diagnosed what has never not been obvious to Black people (to be Black in America is to hold a Ph.D. in whiteness, whether you want to or not): that white people, when their "expectations for racial comfort" get violated, go into a defensive crouch, and vent some blend of guilt, anger, and denial. White privilege turns out to be a kind of addiction, and when you take it away from people, even a little bit, they respond just like any other addict coming off a drug. The upper-middle-class thin-skinned liberals among them are also very willing to pay for treatment, of which DiAngelo offers a booster dose in a new book, *Nice Racism: How Progressive White People Perpetuate Racial Harm*, aware that the moment is ripe.

The word *brave* gets used a lot in Martin's book, and the idea of bravery gets performed a lot in DiAngelo's book, as she time and again steps in as savior to her Black friends, who apparently need a bold white person to take over the wearisome task of educating unselfaware, well-meaning white people. In a curated space and for an ample fee, she heroically takes on a

job that Black people have been doing for free in workplaces and at schools and in relationships over the centuries. As she acknowledges, she also "could not articulate the dynamics of white fragility without … reading the work of Black writers who came before my time." Indeed, everything she notices about whiteness has been noticed by Black writers before her. DiAngelo's whiteness is her not-so-secret sauce, giving her crucial entrée to audiences who, as she puts it, "are more likely to be open to initial challenges to [their] racial positions … from a fellow white person."

How we have wished that white people would leave us out of their self-preoccupied, ham-fisted, kindergarten-level discussions of race. But be careful what you wish for. To anyone who has been conscious of race for a lifetime, these books can't help feeling less brave than curiously backward.

Martin, ensconced in a hotbed of just the sort of racial self-delusion that DiAngelo feels is crying out to be challenged, wants very badly to be good. "We, White progressives, *love* Black Oakland," she writes, self-mockingly. "We just don't actually know anyone who is Black who is from Oakland." Setting out to change that, she is more than ready to break the "ubiquitous, maddening, and problematic pattern" of "white silence"—one of 18 "moves of white progressives" to maintain the status quo that DiAngelo enumerates. Right in step with *Nice Racism*'s edicts, she is also eager to "take risks and make mistakes in the service of learning and growth" by speaking up—not just in a workshop, but between the covers of a book.

The project Martin proudly chronicles is learning by actually doing. Rather than finagling to snag a spot in either of the two highly rated, whiter public schools nearby, as her quasi-enlightened Oakland friends do—or considering the progressive private school in the area—she agonizes about her choices, then bucks the trend. Her account is cringey in its many blind spots. She's also hyperaware that it has blind spots. Does that mean we are not allowed to cringe?

Martin is most at ease in moments when she is describing her own white tribe and the "inequity and hypocrisy" rife in a hip enclave like hers. She's acerbically self-deprecating, sharp in her observations. "I love this little experiment with White parents. If you say your kid isn't gifted, it's like you've shit on the avocado toast in the middle of the table." When she

meets another white mother, she captures the texture of social advantage with a vividness you won't find in DiAngelo's books: "Shared culture is the water—cool, soothing, and invisible. It's our food (those salty dried-seaweed packets, those squishy bags of organic goop), our persistent, performative friendliness … our thirty million words." These moments of "white double-consciousness"—of awareness of how deep her ties are to the insular world she aims to escape—suggest a more interesting and less mawkish book than we get.

But in her interactions with Black people, Martin gets tripped up by the paradox of anti-racist self-help: the challenge, as DiAngelo puts it, of "decentering ourselves as white people," while also being constantly and humbly focused on white ignorance, complicity, built-in advantages, unshared experiences. Avoiding signs of unearned racial confidence ("credentialing," "out-woking," and "rushing to prove that we are not racist" are on DiAngelo's list of white-progressive moves), all the while striving to be a model anti-racist, creates a double bind for the white ally. Martin strains to be transparent about her own "mistakes and shortcomings." She even includes as footnotes the comments of her sensitivity reader and Black friend, an educator named Dena Simmons, as a way of "showing my work." When Martin describes a Black man she meets as a "gentle creature," for example, Simmons suggests, "Maybe let's not call him a creature, especially from a White narrator."

Martin admits all her wrongdoings before we can get to her (those footnotes, of which there are surprisingly few, seem to be reserved for glaring missteps). And yet, despite the mea culpas and disclaimers and self-deprecating acknowledgments of all the ways she fails, she goes ahead and writes a book about race barely more than a year into her real-world odyssey of wokeness. And she continually reverts to a binary and reductive racialized shorthand—a sign that she is having a harder time shaking off her white blinders than she realizes.

When Martin finally arrives at the promised land of Black public school and surrounds herself and her child with actual Black people, they come across as flat, kindly stock figures—props who serve to illustrate whatever anti-racist point she's trying to make. Whereas the white characters in her

book come to life as types I recognize, the Black characters are afflicted with the problem that James Baldwin points out in his seminal 1949 essay "Everybody's Protest Novel," commenting on *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. "Uncle Tom … [Harriet Beecher Stowe's] only Black man," he writes, "has been robbed of his humanity and divested of his sex. It is the price for that darkness with which he has been branded." At first sight, Martin sums up her daughter's kindergarten teacher, Mrs. Minor, with snap judgments that are the flip side of white suspicion, the kind of romanticized projection onto Black people that can be equally erasing: "She seems totally in command of her craft, like someone with a passion for teaching, someone who grew up pretending to be a teacher to all her stuffed animals all day long."

Martin is aware of her own white-gaze problem, as when she duly reports that she had "reveled in the unearned familiarity" of her initial "reading" of Mrs. Minor, and she presses to learn more. Martin's daughter has thrived in her class; she's learned about Harriet Tubman, and Black friends come for a playdate. But Mrs. Minor is restless. When she leaves her teaching job to start a preschool for Black children in her own home, Martin won't let her go. She begins showing up for visits, sitting in Mrs. Minor's kitchen during the preschool's nap time, peppering her with questions in an effort to enrich her own white moral life.

That the arrangement is forced and one-sided, beneficial to her, the white parent-writer, isn't lost on Martin, yet she doesn't stop. "It's naptime again," she writes from Mrs. Minor's kitchen table on yet another visit. "Mrs. Minor is trying her best to answer my question. Which was: 'What would you do if you were in my shoes?'" Martin wants Mrs. Minor to tell her what to think of a white person's desire to believe that her own and her daughter's presence in the mostly Black school will magically improve the place. After Mrs. Minor gives her a halting, irritated answer about gentrification and power, Martin decides it is she who has been of use to Mrs. Minor—that by asking these questions, she's helped Mrs. Minor think through the problem. "I realize that Mrs. Minor is sort of interviewing herself. And I'm here for it. Better her than me." In the footnotes, the barely-there sensitivity reader is pricked enough by these last two sentences to cross them out and write, "I do not think you need to say this. It feels very colonial or taking-advantage-of."

Martin's impulse to idealize Black people as fonts of needed wisdom has a counterpoint: She can't seem to help pathologizing Black people as victims awaiting rescue. Her account implicitly conflates class and race; *Blackness* is a blanket term that somehow comes to equal poverty, as though wealthy and highly educated Black people don't exist. Martin recognizes the problem—that the fearful white imagination has trouble seeing Black people as individuals—but she continually reinforces these ideas in her narrative. "Black kids—poor Black kids especially—still seem, and this feels very hard to force my fingers to write, less human. Less textured. Less known. Less real. They are subjects of a new report." By admitting to her own latent racism, she evidently feels she comes that much closer to a life of recovery.

Martin just can't shake her patronizing belief that Black people need her to save them. Her effort to build on a friendship between her daughter and the son of a single Black father at the school unfolds like a salvation fantasy. She starts by pushing, awkwardly, for a playdate and, when the pandemic closes the school, loans the pair a laptop and tries to line up tutoring. Having learned that the father is picking up free lunches from the school, she fights the urge to drop a bag of groceries on his doorstep, afraid that will seem like insultingly blatant charity. Instead, she pretends she's made too much pasta for her family, and offers to leave a container at his door, hoping it will seem neighborly, neutral—but hears nothing back. She gets that the dad may be rejecting her role as helper-with-the-resources. Or rather, Martin gets that she doesn't really get it: "His silence speaks. I don't know what it says."

Black people in these books are oppressed. White people are clueless and privileged. And never the twain shall meet, unless it's under the auspices of arranged workshops or, if the cross-racial experiences happen in real life, in interactions so consciously and unconsciously freighted that, as DiAngelo puts it, "we end up engaging disingenuously." Or, as Martin shows, falling into age-old antebellum-tinted dynamics as she yearns to confirm her place in a morally clean white universe. Baldwin writes that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is "activated by what might be called a theological terror, the terror of damnation"—which in DiAngelo's case is not literal hell but an endless purgatory, no absolution in view, and no real political action, either. She is

not interested in police brutality, hate crimes, the criminal-justice system, drug laws, or even what Martin touches on, the failure of public schools to educate all children.

Interracial worlds, friendships, marriages—Black and white lives inextricably linked, for good and for bad, with racism and with hope—are all but erased by Martin and DiAngelo, and with them the mixed children of these marriages, who are the fastest-growing demographic in the country. I found nothing of my own multiracial family history in these books; my husband's Black middle-class family is nowhere to be found either, inconvenient for being too successful, too educated, too adept over generations to need Martin's handouts or DiAngelo's guidance on dealing with white people. The world these writers evoke is one in which white people remain the center of the story and Black people are at the margins, poor, stiff, and dignified, with little better to do than open their homes and hearts to white women on journeys to racial self-awareness.

As our semester at the progressive private school trudged on, my son refused to go to any more affinity-group meetings. They depressed him in ways he couldn't articulate. I worried that all the racial healing was breaking him, and started to feel nostalgic for the big, chaotic public school where he had friends. I went to one parent diversity meeting after another. I wrote an administrator, and she wrote back, telling me about a "Witnessing Whiteness" class she was taking, and asking if she might "lean on" me for help in her ongoing education. We decided to leave. Our son wanted his friends back. It was as basic as that. But it was also more complicated. My husband and I didn't want him to be part of the school's great white awakening anymore. Teachers and staff were acting out their anxieties about past failings on kids who were living in an upside-down world and deserved better than bewildered platitudes. The school did not see my son, only what he represented on its journey.

This article appears in the September 2021 print edition with the headline "White Progressives in Pursuit of Racial Virtue."

Departments

- **The Commons: ‘We Proudly Wore Confederate Symbols’**
  Readers respond to our June 2021 cover story and reflect on their own experiences reckoning with history and memory. --
- **An Ode to Not Being a Morning Person**
  Morning people fizzle. Non-morning people get stronger as the day wears on. -- James Parker

‘We Proudly Wore Confederate Symbols’

The Atlantic September 2021 Issue: The Commons

This article was published online on August 10, 2021.

I am a southern white male. I was born in 1953, so I am old enough to remember my paternal great-grandmother, born in 1877 in Langley, South Carolina; my paternal grandfather, born in 1900 in Augusta, Georgia; my paternal grandmother, born in 1898 in Blakely, Georgia; and many other southern kinfolk from a bygone era. My parents taught us that hate was a sin and that Jim Crow was wrong. So I grew up thinking I was not bigoted or racist in any way.

Your article was something of a slap in the face, a wake-up call to recognize how embedded in the world of white privilege and power I actually am.

My father and I got interested in family genealogy in 1998, and we quickly discovered that one of his ancestors had served as a private in the 20th

South Carolina Volunteer Infantry from 1863 to 1865. We thrilled at finding microfilm records documenting his service, and learned that he had been taken prisoner at the Battle of Cedar Creek in Middletown, Virginia, on October 19, 1864, and spent the remainder of the war at a prison camp in Point Lookout, Maryland. We also learned that a large Civil War reenactment takes place on the third weekend of October in Middletown. We attended the reenactment every year from 1999 to 2011 and took my son (now 28) and his best friend many of those years. We proudly wore Confederate symbols so that folks would know which side we were on.

My wife had an uncle, now deceased, who was active in a Texas branch of the Sons of Confederate Veterans; circa 1999, he talked me into attending a meeting of a chapter near Atlanta. The members discussed their ongoing projects of placing or maintaining monuments and historical markers at old skirmish sites or rumored grave sites. I did not feel at all comfortable with the clannish, secret-handshake vibe and never went again. But I look back now and say, *Oh my God! I attended an SCV meeting! Good old progressive, liberal me.*

It is startling to me to come to terms with the fact that I am not where I thought I was on the racial-awareness spectrum.

Jimmy Hair
Charlotte, N.C.

“Confederate history is family history, history as eulogy, in which loyalty takes precedence over truth,” Clint Smith writes. Perhaps the Sons of Confederate Veterans should consider this advice from Voltaire: “We owe respect to the living; to the dead we owe only truth.”

George Kovac
Miami, Fla.

My great-great-great-grandfather’s second cousin was a Confederate general. I don’t loathe him. He did what was expected of him in his time. But I would be embarrassed to honor him at his grave site.

Richard Sibley
Phoenix, Ariz.

I was raised as a first-generation Cuban American in Miami in the 1960s and ’70s, with limited exposure to southern Confederate history. I moved to Jacksonville, Florida, in 1994 and within a few years visited the Olustee Battlefield Historic State Park to witness a reenactment of the 1864 conflict where the Confederacy defeated the Union soldiers. I will never forget sitting in the bleachers with my then-5-year-old son and his best friend, who were not particularly interested in watching all these men in wool uniforms strutting about with bayonets amid cannon fire. There were two white men in their 50s near us, passionately discussing how, if General Robert E. Lee had done this maneuver or conducted that battle differently, “we could have won the war.” I was in total shock to realize that, more than 130 years after the horrific Civil War, there were still Southerners (white, of course) who tried to envision another outcome. I left that battle reenactment in disgust.

We still have a ways to go to right the wrongs of this mythology.

Leo Alonso
Jacksonville, Fla.

More than 20 years ago my family went to Charleston, South Carolina. We saw a brochure for Middleton Place plantation and thought it might be instructive to see how a working plantation, well, worked. The grounds were immaculate and the guides enthusiastic.

It became too much as we were being shown the gorgeous back lawn leading down to the river. I looked to our guide for more information. With a smile she said, “It took 100 slaves 10 years to do this work!”

I will never look at a beautiful plantation again without wondering in anger and sadness who built the home, who planted and tended the garden, who wept at night over the forced labor, and who made southern life possible by being brutalized daily. I look forward to visiting the Whitney Plantation with my eyes and heart open to listen to the stories told there.

James A. Gibson
Pittsburgh, Pa.I'm so appreciative of the letters and emails I've received in response to "The War on Nostalgia." The article is adapted from my new book, How the Word Is Passed*, in which I explore how different historical sites reckon with or fail to reckon with their relationship to slavery. Sometimes, an article or a book arrives in a moment when the topic you've explored for years is a central part of the public discourse. Today, we are having a national conversation about how we should study, remember, and account for the shameful parts of this country's history. Many people are asking: How different might our country look if all of us, collectively, understood the full truth of what has happened here? I hope that this story, and my book, can continue to help those attempting to make sense of this question and others like it.*

In this month's cover story, Jennifer Senior looks back on a national tragedy through the lens of one family's loss. After Bobby McIlvaine was killed on 9/11, at 26, police returned his debris-covered wallet to his father, who kept it sealed in a biohazard bag. The wallet is a symbol of an individual life cut short, and a stand-in for the enduring grief of thousands of families who, like the McIlvaines, are still struggling to make sense of what happened that day.

Luise Strauss, *Director of Photography*
Christine Walsh, *Contributing Photo Editor*

In 2011, a collapsing storefront in Money, Mississippi, became the first stop on the state's Freedom Trail, which commemorates civil-rights history. A sign was unveiled outside the former Bryant's Grocery, where, in 1955, 14-year-old Emmett Till whistled at a white woman; later, he was murdered by the woman's husband and his accomplices. In the right-hand corner of the sign was a quotation attributed to Rosa Parks: "I thought of Emmett Till and when the bus driver ordered me to move to the back, I just couldn't move." This oft-cited quotation lent credence to the idea that Till's murder sparked the civil-rights movement. Six years later, however, the quotation was removed from the sign because its origin could not be determined.

There seems to be no record of Parks uttering these exact words. But historical evidence suggests that Till's murder was on her mind when she

refused to give up her seat on the bus, as Wright Thompson notes in his article about Till. According to the scholar Dave Tell, the idea can be traced back to the 2003 book *Death of Innocence*, by Till's mother, Mamie Till-Mobley. She describes meeting the activist for the first time in 1988: "Rosa Parks would tell me how she felt about Emmett, how she had thought about him on that fateful day when she took that historic stand by keeping her seat." Others, including the Reverend Jesse Jackson, have since noted that Parks privately told them the same thing.

Stephanie Hayes, *Deputy Research Chief*

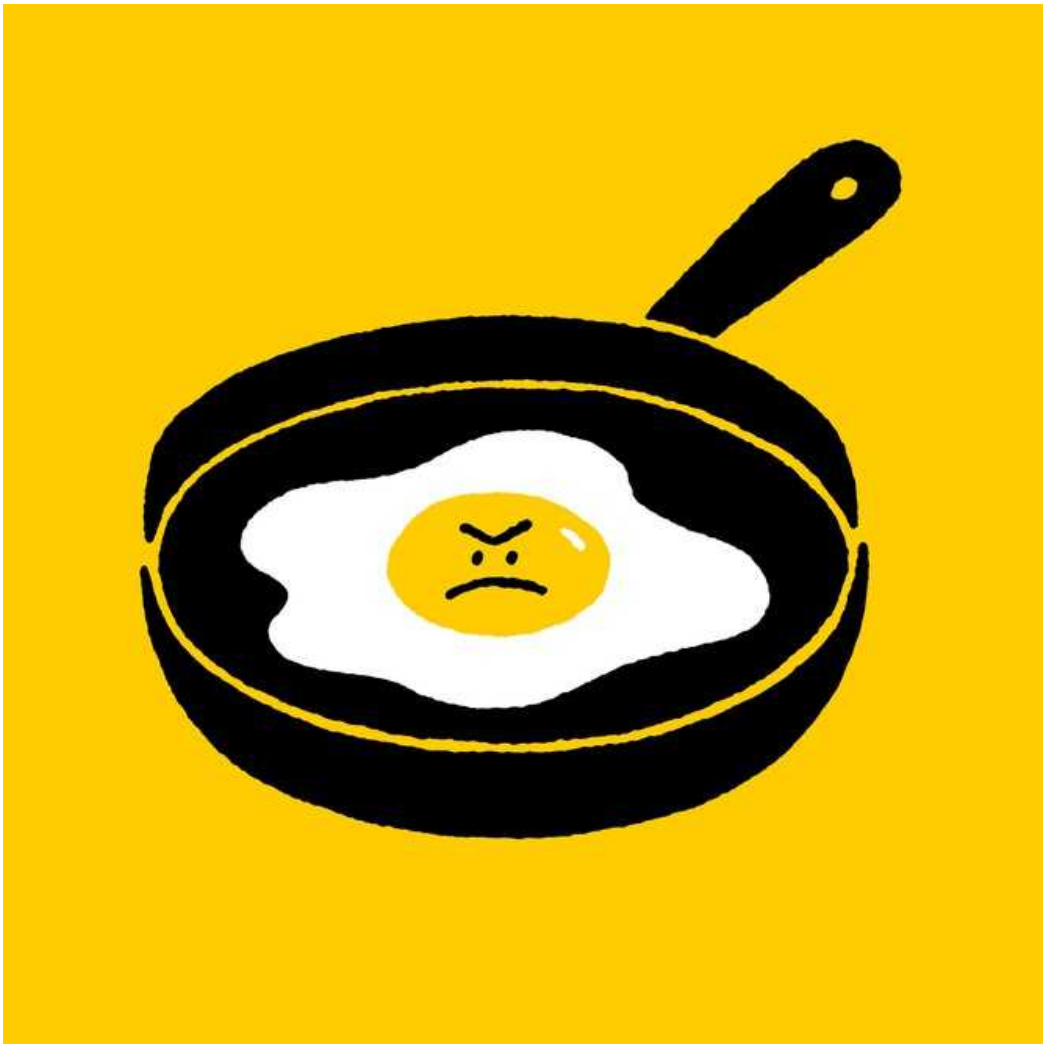
"Bust the Police Unions" (July/August) misstated the duration of the video showing George Floyd's death. The article also incorrectly stated that George Wallace sought the Democratic presidential nomination in 1968. In fact, Wallace ran as a third-party candidate that year. "Can Bollywood Survive Modi?" (July/August) misstated the nationality of a suicide bomber in Kashmir. Though a Pakistan-based extremist group claimed responsibility for the attack, the bomber was not Pakistani.

This article appears in the September 2021 print edition with the headline "The Commons."

Down With Morning People

It’s Okay to Not Be a Morning Person

By James Parker



This article was published online on July 30, 2021.

Me, I can fake it.

Stale as I may be from the night before, one foot—one leg—stuck in the underworld, I can still crank up the sociability. I can manufacture perkiness at an early hour. Good morning! Good morning! Am I even faking it? Perhaps not. It *is* good to wake up. I *do* rejoice in the restoration of consciousness, the grand democracy of daylight. Yes! Good morning!

You, on the other hand … No faking for you. You're condemned to a splendid and groaning authenticity. Waking is suffering, humans are intolerable, and you cannot, you will not, hide it. You wince, you flinch, you shuffle around. Should you happen, by some mischance, to encounter another person before you've gotten yourself together, you rear back like a scalded troll. The hours of sleep, it appears, have not refreshed you—they have *flayed* you.

And that's what I like about you, non–morning person: your fastidiousness. Your great delicacy of being. You don't bounce giddily from oblivion to wakefulness, taking it all for granted, confident of finding things more or less as you left them at bedtime. No, no, it's a change; it's arduous; it's *real*. Deflector shields: gone. Resilience: none. The world is upon you as a pressure, an aesthetic offense, a ghastly payload of noise and glare and babbling, galumphing people. You'll be okay, you'll get there, but you need time. Complex operations of personal reassembly are required. There's an essential, existential honesty to what you're doing: Every morning, out of old socks and empty bottles of ibuprofen, you build yourself anew.

Morning person versus non–morning person. It's a classic duality, isn't it? It's Hardy versus Laurel. It's McCartney versus Lennon: *Woke up, fell out of bed, / Dragged a comb across my head* versus *Please don't wake me, no, don't shake me, / Leave me where I am*. And, this being America, we're heavily weighted in favor of productivity and go-get-'em-ness. What politician will confess to having trouble waking up? You're a bit countercultural, non–morning person, sunk in your vibes, crowned with your bedhead. You're a subversive.

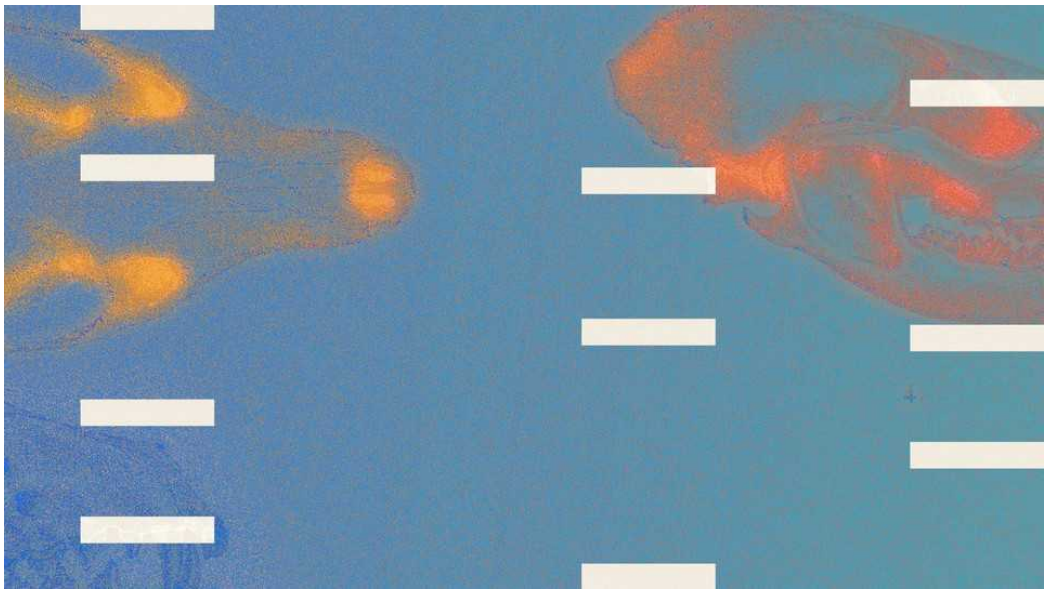
And here's a truth: Morning people fizzle. They front-load the day, they burn all their energy before 10 o'clock, and the remaining hours are just a kind of higher zombiedom. By mid-afternoon, a morning person is wan and sugar-starved. But you non–morning people get stronger: Like Antaeus,

whose power increased every time Hercules took him down, you are nourished by contact with the Earth. You run on heavy fuel. You draw your strength from the slumbering core of the planet, where morning never breaks.

This article appears in the September 2021 print edition with the headline "Ode to Not Being a Morning Person."

Poetry

- **Squander**
  -- W. J. Herbert



Squander

W. J. Herbert: ‘Squander’

By W. J. Herbert

I’m still a magpie. If it glitters,
I want it, no matter
the cost—

I don’t connect the bangle
I buy online to a gold
mine’s cyanide heap

leaching, or the made-
with-fracked-gas plastics
that I throw in the trash

to the survivor in an as-yet-
unnamed epoch
who’ll sniff the fossil

bones of a predator
        unknown to it, though
                the skull that it licks

will likely be ours,
        and even if this creature
                resembles the rat-size

mammal that evolved when
        dinosaurs died, by what blood
                chemistry will it breathe?
