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# The New Yorker Magazine

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By Helen Rosner | Recently reopened under new management, the pricey tourist-bait canteen is more satisfying than it has any right to be.

[Goings On](#)

## Tadáskía’s Awe-Inspiring Art, at MOMA

*Also: Dorrance Dance, “From Here,” Charley Crockett, and more.*

*July 12, 2024*

**Hilton Als**

Staff writer

*You’re reading the Goings On newsletter, a guide to what we’re watching, listening to, and doing this week. [Sign up to receive it in your in-box.](#)*

The giddy joy you may feel when you enter MOMA’s Projects Room to see Tadáskía’s installation, “ave preta mística mystical black bird” (2022), co-presented by the Studio Museum in Harlem, is due in part to the show’s scale. The thirty-one-year-old mononymous Brazilian artist (pictured here) has taken the room’s very tall walls and created an intimate yet expansive atmosphere. Working deftly, lyrically, with charcoal and colored pastels, Tadáskía’s fine hand has produced a narrative that juts off in many directions but coheres, finally, through her investment in Brazil’s political and spiritual life, and in the history of her ancestors—as well as her love for them.



*Art work by Tadáskía / Courtesy MOMA; Photograph by Jonathan Dorado*

A multi-panel work is inspired by the Sankofa—a mythical black bird, among the Akan people of Ghana, whose head turns toward the past as its feet move into the future. Tadáskía’s Sankofa-like figure is a winged, almost anthropomorphic being that darts with excitement and energy, looking back while fluttering forward, through unabashedly rich and colorful landscapes—the world Blackness has helped build. It’s this world—and its feeling of community—that Tadáskía invokes. What would we do without one another, her work seems to ask, and part of the pleasure is that she doesn’t even pretend to have the answers. What she does have is an extraordinary sense of freedom; the reach of her drawings is awe-inspiring. Curved floor pieces, containing bowls of pigmented powders and sculptures made with plant matter, are bright reminders of how we must feed our ancestors, the better to nourish ourselves.



“Projects: Tadáskía.”

Art work by Tadáskía / Courtesy MOMA; Photograph by Jonathan Dorado



## About Town

### Movies

Some of the biggest movie news this season is a book: Carrie Courogen’s “*Miss May Does Not Exist*,” an insightful, energetic, and superbly researched biography of Elaine May, whose all too brief directorial career was essentially ended by the wrongful critical derision of her 1987 comedy, “*Ishtar*.” May rose to fame in the late fifties as part of an improv-comedy duo with Mike Nichols. Courogen details the duo’s collaboration and dissolution, but the 1996 documentary **“Nichols and May: Take Two”** displays their astounding onstage inventiveness and connectedness. The film offers a wide selection of clips from their performances and suggests the multitudes they would eventually put on the big screen.—*Richard Brody* (Streaming on Max and playing July 22 on TCM.)

## Theatre

On June 12, 2016, a gunman opened fire at Pulse, an L.G.B.T.Q. club in Orlando, killing forty-nine people and terrifying many more. The shooting is an unlikely subject for a musical—which may be why “**From Here**,” written and directed by Donald Rupe, handles it obliquely. The show foregrounds Daniel (Blake Aburn), a gay thirtysomething who visits Pulse but not, fortuitously, on the night of the massacre. Aburn originated the role at the 2019 Orlando Fringe Festival, and he leads a strong-voiced cast, most of whom wrest compelling characters from the meandering material. Grappling with survivor’s guilt after the shooting, Daniel confesses, “I don’t know how to talk about this.” Rupe doesn’t seem sure, either.—*Dan Stahl* (*Pershing Square Signature Theatre; June 27-Aug. 11.*)

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## Dance



*Photograph by Matthew Murphy*

Without Gene Medler, who founded the North Carolina Youth Tap Ensemble, in 1983, Michelle Dorrance, who got her start in the company a few years later, might not have become the superlative dancer and choreographer she is today. The same is true of several members of Dorrance’s justly popular company, also alumni of the youth ensemble. Her group, for its return to the Joyce, débuts

“Shift.,” a work inspired by Medler and by the care that he taught through example. It’s a collection of improvisational solos and ensemble sections for talented musician-dancers—in other words, home territory.—*Brian Seibert (Joyce Theatre; July 16-21.)*

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## Classical

Jonathon Heyward just keeps adding to his résumé. The music director of the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra (and the first Black person in the role) and a *Time* magazine “next generation leader,” Heyward now also directs the **Festival Orchestra** of Lincoln Center for the 2024 season. This summer’s lineup offers a “crowd-composed concert,” in which the audience shapes the program by voting on their phones, and many other, less helter-skelter performances. Included on the roster are Beethoven’s “Pastoral” Symphony, Schumann’s Symphony No. 2, Caroline Shaw’s “Entr’acte,” a world première by the composer Hannah Kendall, and a North American première by the composer Huang Ruo.—*Jane Bua (David Geffen Hall; July 20-Aug. 10.)*

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## Theatre



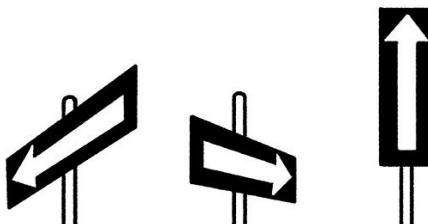
*Photograph by Emilio Madrid*

After dazzling success downtown, Cole Escola's viciously funny camp farce **"Oh, Mary!"**, directed by Sam Pinkleton, transfers to Broadway, where it can steamroll national pieties with more elbow room and a bigger budget for silver lamé. Escola plays a gleefully ahistorical version of Mary Todd Lincoln, here a virago and a drunken narcissist in "Mommie Dearest"-mode who terrorizes her husband, a not-so-honest Abe (Conrad Ricamora). Mary's barely aware of the civil war going on—"the South of what?" she cries—but she's *very* conscious of her acting teacher (James Scully), an opportunistically alluring type who might change history. Pinkleton and Escola operate in huge, melodramatic style here; you can see this one from the cheap seats—or from space.—*Helen Shaw*  
(*Lyceum Theatre*; through Sept. 15.)

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## Country

A transient, rambling personal ethos has led the San Benito-born singer **Charley Crockett** on a winding path to recognition. After releasing eleven albums in seven years, he finally stepped into his moment with the 2022 LP, "The Man from Waco," a faux-Western epic that used James (Slim) Hand as a point of reference. The follow-up, "\$10 Cowboy," from April, is less conceptual but just as story driven—full of down-on-their-luck characters searching for breaks in the monotony. All roads lead away from Crockett and out into a country of truck stops and alleys. His voice has an easygoing, come-what-may sway that evokes an image of the artist adrift, following an aimless trail, guitar in tow, until he ends up where he was meant to be.—*Sheldon Pearce* (*Brooklyn Paramount*; July 20.)



## Pick Three

*The staff writer [Sarah Larson](#) picks three summer-friendly podcasts.*

1. Whether you've thought much about same-sex erotic fun in the animal kingdom, "**A Field Guide to Gay Animals**," a new five-episode series from Canadaland, has plenty to surprise and delight. Hosted by Owen Ever and Laine Kaplan-Levenson, it features reported stories and interviews with experts about amorously creative humpback whales, lesbian seagulls, bisexual bison, "horny polyamorous giraffes," and beyond. The narration feels effortfully chummy at times, but the series provides a wondrous perspective not just on biodiversity but on sexuality itself.
2. Amy Poehler—who, on “Parks and Recreation,” once officiated a same-sex penguin wedding—has been producing great satirical podcasts lately, with her company Paper Kite Productions. My favorite is "**Say More with Dr? Sheila**," in which Poehler plays the “world-renowned self-proclaimed couples therapist” Dr? Sheila, who requires everyone, for legal reasons, to say her professional title in question form. The series manages to make relationship issues and therapy-speak deftly funny—no easy feat. “Take as many sighs as you need,” she tells one couple, and they do.



*Illustration by Katharina Kulenkampff*

3. Dan Taberski, a perennial creator-host of almost maddeningly good reported podcasts (“Running from Cops,” “Surviving Y2K,” “9/12”), returns with **“Hysterical,”** a new limited series about a mysterious outbreak of a Tourette’s-like condition among teen-age girls, in upstate New York. What is it? Why is it happening? These questions broaden and deepen as the series proceeds, and evolves from a medical mystery into something profoundly universal and compelling.

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#### **P.S. Good stuff on the Internet:**

- [Ilana Glazer on motherhood](#)
  - [Blueberries: it's time](#)
  - [Vetiver's "Hills of Isle Au Haut"](#)
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[The Food Scene](#)

# The Central Park Boathouse Is Back, and It's Perfectly Fine

*Recently reopened under new management, the pricey tourist-bait canteen is more satisfying than it has any right to be.*

By [Helen Rosner](#)

June 30, 2024



*As at all restaurants with spectacular views, the food at the Boathouse is hardly the draw. We come here to slip into a New York fantasy.*

*Photographs by Clark Hodgin for The New Yorker*

*You're reading the Food Scene newsletter, Helen Rosner's guide to what, where, and how to eat. [Sign up to receive it in your in-box.](#)*

I suppose there must have been a time when the Central Park Boathouse, a stately construction facing southwest across a spindle of the park's serpentine lake, felt like a novel and forward-looking addition to the city's attractions. But it has long been a place of nostalgia, a Big Apple archetype whose soft-focus mythology seems impossible to separate from its extant bones. It's no accident, I suspect, that the boathouse is famous as one of the locations in "[When Harry Met Sally](#)," Nora Ephron's 1989 masterpiece about self-protective emotional illusions and the cinematic perfection of New York. (Maybe those are, in some sense, the exact same thing?) As a building and as a restaurant, it evokes both the Victorian era,

when an original boathouse was built on the site, and the nineteen-eighties (itself a decade fascinated by Victorianism), when the restaurant first opened. When you’re lunching at a table at the edge of the terrace, gazing into a precise, Olmsted-constructed vista—the dark viridescence of the lake, the wildness of the Ramble, the far-off stateliness of Bethesda Fountain—the city all but disappears, except for the tops of distant buildings poking up like lace around the periphery of the treeline.

After more than a year of closure, the Boathouse restaurant reopened this spring, under Legends Hospitality, a massive operations company that also oversees concessions at the [One World Observatory](#), the Circle Line, and [Yankee Stadium](#)—not to mention numerous facilities outside of New York, including the Indianapolis Motor Speedway, the L.A. Coliseum, and Spain’s Santiago Bernabéu stadium, home to Real Madrid. (The company was founded in part by the owners of the Yankees and the Dallas Cowboys and is now, naturally, primarily owned by a venture-capital firm.) I would be inclined to sniff at this new partnership—a jewel of New York City farmed out to some corporate machinery optimized to separate tourists from their dollars—except that this has always, more or less, been the Boathouse’s M.O. In the restaurant’s forty-ish years of operation, it’s been run by various concession holders who knew how to keep the tablecloths white and the iced-tea glasses filled. The most recent before Legends—Dean Poll, the owner of Gallagher’s Steakhouse—upgraded the food and updated the sliding glass walls, which close off the dining area in times of inclement weather. But he shut down the restaurant early in the pandemic, reopened it in 2021, and then closed it down again the next year, calling it “a very difficult place to operate,” owing to labor costs and other issues. (Legends Hospitality has hired back a considerable portion of the previously laid-off staff.)

As at all restaurants with spectacular views, the food at the Boathouse is hardly the draw; neither is the service. We come here

to slip into a New York fantasy in precisely the way the metal rowboats, docked just to the side of the restaurant's terrace, glide at a push into the artichoke-green water of the lake. The Boathouse is a beautiful place to eat lunch, especially in fine weather, especially at the easy pace of people with no pressing work to get back to. (Are they rich, or are they tourists?) The meal itself, to be honest, is considerably more satisfying than a pricey tourist-bait canteen has any right to be. The kitchen is now run by the chef Adam Fiscus, with consulting from [David Pasternack](#), a renowned seafood chef who did brilliant things at the late, much-beloved midtown Italian restaurant Esca. They seem to be embracing all the dreamy, Upper West Side-y, tweed-and-loafers Nora Ephron of it all, with a menu evocative of a Reagan-era (but Dukakis-voting) luncheon party. There are stuffed mushrooms with Ritz-cracker crumbs and Gruyère, oysters Rockefeller, chicken-liver pâté served with craggy slices of toast. The spring menu included a shaved-asparagus salad topped with a *très* "Silver Palate" medallion of warmed goat cheese, and swordfish (my God, remember swordfish?). Russian dressing, zippy and coral-pink, is drizzled on romaine with freshly grated horseradish, and reappears in a ramekin as a dipping sauce for golden fries. Every meal starts with a relish tray, pleasantly retro if rather anemic: a few leaves of endive, a couple of black olives, melba toast, a little puddle of dip.

Pasternack's influence is apparent in the menu's way with seafoods and pastas. A salmon-crudo appetizer is bright and sweet with Meyer lemon. A spaghetti with lobster, perfectly cooked and with a tomato sauce just a little bit aflame with chili, would be a standout even in a dining room with no view to speak of. Everything is executed with precision, if not always grace: the fish in a salmon entrée is cooked to a perfect, tender medium-rare but comes on top of a blobby, listless pile of white and green asparagus. An appetizer of chilled crab and avocado, modishly garnished with supremes of pink grapefruit, is, for some reason, served packed tight as a half-pint of gelato into a silver bowl, and loses all of its delicate notes

against the overwhelming astringency of diced red bell pepper. (A better bet are the seared crab cakes, in which the pepper harmonizes rather than bazookas.)



*When you're lunching overlooking the Boathouse's precise, Olmsted-constructed vista, the city all but disappears.*

### Helen, Help Me!

[E-mail your questions](#) about dining, eating, and anything food-related, and Helen may respond in a future newsletter.

There are no bad tables at the Boathouse, but those set against the terrace rail, in the fluttering shadow of the green-and-white striped awnings, are obviously the best. (If you aren't offered a table to your liking, I'd just cut and run—pick up a tidy chicken salad and a nice fried-cod sandwich from the Boathouse's walk-up café, just next door, instead.) Any lulls in conversation can be filled by gazing out at the tranquillity of the lake and observing its genteelly gambolling wildlife: enormous carp gliding along just beneath the surface, turtles paddling whimsically with their noses in the air, other turtles sunning themselves on a rocky slope leading up to the Ramble, double-crested cormorants diving into the water, sunburnt humans in rowboats trying to juggle oars and iPhones. The dessert menu is just as backward-looking (or, more generously, classic-minded) as the savory offerings: cheesecake with a swash of berry sauce, dark chocolate pot de crème. Your server might suggest you

pair your final course with a brandy Alexander, a fussy drink that hasn't been popular for a century and has arguably never, ever been cool. It is, shockingly, exactly right with a melty bite of chocolate lava cake. The breeze off the lake ruffles your napkin. You may be surrounded by tourists, but at least you're also surrounded by New York. ♦



*Helen Rosner*, a staff writer, received a 2024 James Beard Award for her weekly restaurant-review column, *The Food Scene*.

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# The Talk of the Town

- **F.D.R.’s Election Lessons for Joe Biden and the Democrats**

By Evan Osnos | Less than six weeks before Democrats formally choose their nominee, the President is marching down a path of constant peril.

- **A (Covert) Pre-Olympics Dip in the E. Coli-Infested Seine**

By Lauren Collins | Tired of the stalling of French officials who’d vowed to swim in Paris’s purportedly clean waters, one American expat takes matters into his own hands.

- **Where New York’s Signs and Marquees Go When They Die**

By Laura Preston | Bummed by today’s aesthetic monoculture, David Barnett is personally cobbling together the permanent collection of the New York Sign Museum.

- **The Art of the Dibs**

By Nick Paumgarten | An attendee with a balky back at the Solid Sound music festival seeks Jeff Tweedy’s counsel on joint replacements and the ethics of claiming viewing space with a folding chair.

- **How to Find Civil War Skeletons Under Your Condo**

By Charles Bethea | After burst water mains caused an “aqua apocalypse” in Atlanta, one relic hunter used the extensive digging for repairs as an opportunity to search for lost treasures.

[Comment](#)

## F.D.R.'s Election Lessons for Joe Biden and the Democrats

Less than six weeks before Democrats formally choose their nominee, the President is marching down a path of constant peril.

By [Evan Osnos](#)

July 13, 2024



*Illustration by João Fazenda*

In 1944, after nearly twelve years in the White House, Franklin Delano Roosevelt was determined to win reelection, even as his

body was failing him. Polio, hypertension, heart disease, and the brutal rigors of the job had ravaged him. To hide a tremor in his hands, he took to using a heavier coffee mug. A doctor limited him to half a pack of cigarettes a day and told him to get more rest. In May—a month before D Day—he could work no more than four hours a day. “His signatures had become wobbly, the strokes less thick and firm. His attention sometimes wandered,” Joseph Lelyveld writes in his book “His Final Battle,” on the last sixteen months of Roosevelt’s Presidency.

But the Second World War was raging, and Roosevelt was convinced that he was the person best equipped to safeguard his achievements, defend democracy, and stop future aggression. Roosevelt ordered his handlers and the Secret Service to disguise his frailties. Harry Truman, his Vice-President, told the press, “He’s still the leader he’s always been,” but privately confessed to an aide, “Physically he’s just going to pieces.”

Presidents are remembered as much for how they depart the office as for how they acquire it. Eight decades after Roosevelt’s final campaign, America is again confronting an election defined by the stubborn determination of the men at its center. Joe Biden is beset by mounting pressure to withdraw, which he has doggedly resisted. Two weeks after a shockingly debilitated performance during a debate against Donald Trump, the President has sought to prove that it was, in his words, a “bad episode” and not a “serious condition.” But the debate marked an indelible change in perspective among influential Democrats, donors, and the press, some of whom have called for him to step aside in order to avoid handing the election to the very man he warns could destroy democracy.

Less than six weeks before Democrats formally choose their nominee, Biden is marching down a path of constant peril: whenever he appears in front of a camera, he runs the risk of further inflaming fears about his fitness to beat Trump—to say

nothing of serving another four years—with a narrowing window of time to nominate Vice-President Kamala Harris or another prospect. On Thursday, in a likely preview of competing images in the weeks ahead, Biden presided successfully over a summit of *nato* leaders united against Russian aggression, but marred the moment by introducing President Volodymyr Zelensky, of Ukraine, as “President Putin,” before correcting himself. In isolation, the stumble would be meaningless—but, as long as he is running, his words will never again be assessed in isolation.

A short while later, during a rare press conference intended to demonstrate his capacity to handle unscripted events, he flubbed his answer to the first question, referring to Harris as “Vice-President Trump.” But he recovered and answered questions for nearly an hour, showcasing a command of foreign policy. Asked about reports that he aimed to end his workdays at eight o’clock, he said they were false—he had meant to suggest that he would “pace” himself and start fund-raisers at eight o’clock instead of nine, so “people get to go home by ten o’clock.” He turned the exchange into a jab at his opponent. “My schedule has been at full bore,” he said. “Trump’s been riding around in his golf cart, filling out his scorecard before he hits the ball.” More to the point, asked repeatedly what might persuade him to step aside, Biden gave no indication that he would, and argued that the “gravity of the situation” facing the country requires his experience.

In Washington, the performance scarcely improved the mood among Democrats. Minutes later, Jim Himes, the top Democrat on the House Intelligence Committee, became the fourteenth member of the House to call on Biden to drop out, writing in a statement, “I hope that, as he has throughout a lifetime of public service, he will continue to put our nation first.” Other members of Congress, who delayed public comments while the *NATO* summit was under way, were said to be preparing similar moves. “It’s running on fumes now,” James Carville, the Democratic strategist, said Thursday on

CNN, referring to Biden's campaign, and added that he thinks "it's inevitable that President Biden will choose not to run for reëlection, and we're going to have a tight, messy procedure of choosing a nominee."

Biden had dismissed earlier calls to withdraw as the work of "élites in the Party" ("I don't care what the millionaires think"), but it appeared increasingly likely that he would face more functional pressures. Wealthy donors, without whom he would not be able to organize or advertise, were recoiling. Writing for the *Times*, George Clooney struck a high-profile blow when he said that his impression of Biden, at a recent Los Angeles fund-raiser that he co-hosted, was one of "the same man we all witnessed at the debate," adding, "We are not going to win in November with this president. On top of that, we won't win the House, and we're going to lose the Senate."

Yet, even as concerned allies came forward, Biden's campaign was rallying a diverse coalition to push in the opposite direction. He drew expressions of support from the Congressional Black and Hispanic Caucuses, and from leading progressives, such as Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. (Next week, during the Republican Convention, in Milwaukee, Biden is set to travel to Texas and Nevada.) The net effect was that Biden had bought himself some time, but the prospect of a collapse of confidence would haunt his every appearance. Would it also haunt his place in history? "I'm not in this for my legacy," he said at the *NATO* press conference. "I'm in this to complete the job I started."

But completism is not self-justifying. In Roosevelt's case, he won his final election, but strained to perform the Presidency as he previously had. He made a gruelling, fourteen-thousand-mile trip to the Yalta Conference, in Soviet Crimea, where he struggled to outmaneuver Joseph Stalin. Harry Hopkins, one of Roosevelt's trusted deputies, was later quoted as saying he doubted that Roosevelt "had heard more than half of what went on round the

table.” Winston Churchill, Roosevelt’s partner during the talks, recalled the President as “a pale reflection almost throughout.” Two months later, Roosevelt died of a cerebral hemorrhage.

Roosevelt’s iconic record of accomplishment and of service to the nation ended with a bitter coda. At times, Biden has invited comparisons to Roosevelt for the scale of their challenges in office, and for the legislation they enshrined. Both men grappled with the seductions of longevity. Roosevelt served the public for more than three decades; Biden has for more than five. As the President considers how to safeguard his achievements, he might find wisdom in the perils of the past. ♦



*Evan Osnos is a staff writer at The New Yorker. His most recent book is “[Wildland: The Making of America’s Fury](#).”*

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[Testing the Waters](#)

## A (Covert) Pre-Olympics Dip in the E. Coli-Infested Seine

Tired of the stalling of French officials who'd vowed to swim in Paris's purportedly clean waters, one American expat takes matters into his own hands.

By [Lauren Collins](#)

July 15, 2024



*Illustration by João Fazenda*

At the end of June, a curious summons appeared in the in-box of an American living in Paris. “You are invited to watch me swim in the Seine in Paris on July 4 in exactly the same spot I took a dip for a

magazine cover story 48 years ago,” it read. The e-mail came from a Californian septuagenarian named Joel Stratte-McClure. Attached was a *JPEG* of a 1976 edition of *The Paris Metro*, which featured him in a wetsuit and a scuba mask, holding a speargun in one hand and an umbrella in the other, with the headline “*OUR MAN IN THE SEINE*: gets to the bottom of the dirty river—and comes back alive!” In the e-mail, Stratte-McClure wrote that he had invited Anne Hidalgo, the mayor of Paris, who has been promising—along with the French President, Emmanuel Macron—to take to the water before any Olympic swimmers do. So far, she had not replied. “Enough procrastination and prevarication,” Stratte-McClure declared. “I’ll go in solo, American flag in hand, on the quai beneath the footbridge between Île de la Cité and Île Saint-Louis at 11:11 a.m.”

Wading into a sewage-filled river isn’t exactly up there with hot dogs and fireworks as an Independence Day tradition. But what’s more American than a splashy stunt? On the appointed morning, Stratte-McClure, who lives in Paris for part of the year, stood on a cobblestoned ramp leading down to the water. He was dressed in shorts, a red Stanford T-shirt, and a blue Columbia Journalism School hat. “Macron called the elections to avoid having to swim in the Seine,” he joked.

With a showman’s flair, Stratte-McClure ripped off his trunks, revealing a multicolored Speedo (a *moule-bite*, literally “dick molder,” in highly impolite French) and well-toned biceps (he is a member of U.S. Masters Swimming, and sometimes competes). Days earlier, water-quality researchers had detected more than ten times the acceptable level of E. coli bacteria in the Seine. (Olympics organizers have expressed confidence that the water will be safe by the start of the Games.) Stratte-McClure was not deterred. He scrambled down a set of stairs, snapped on goggles, and pushed off into the river, freestyleing toward the Pont Saint-Louis at a steady clip.

A pair of ducks floated past him. In the distance, one could make out rows of empty bleachers, erected for the Olympic triathlon and open-water swimming races. Stratte-McClure swam about fifty feet, hugging the wall, to avoid potential boat traffic, before stopping his stroke. Someone handed him an American flag. As onlookers cheered, he treaded water, grinning as he thrust a thumb in the air. He could have been hanging out at a Fort Worth pool party or a Lake Michigan raft-up.

“If there’s any E. coli, I’ve had it,” he called out, spitting a mouthful of water. He noticed a friend in the crowd.

“Jocelyn, it’s good to have a doctor here,” he yelled. “She’s an ob-gyn!” (This reporter looked over and realized that the doctor had delivered her second kid.)

Stratte-McClure’s son Luke, an actor who lives in Paris, was standing on the riverbank.

“You said you’d get out before you got arrested,” he said.

“Water’s fantastic!” Stratte-McClure replied. “Just the right temperature.”

A few minutes later, he was back on the quai, towelling off. The Seine was officially swimmable, he pronounced.

During his 1976 dive, Stratte-McClure had tried to find a gargoyle that is said to have fallen into the river during the construction of the Notre-Dame cathedral. He’d come up with an old boot. He said the water had been far murkier this time around. “You couldn’t see a thing,” he said. He added that he planned “to go home and take a bath with every kind of soap and perfume I have in the house.”

Before that, he stopped for a couple of café crèmes nearby, where he talked about his career as a writer and an adventurer—“The

Idiot and the Odyssey,” a trilogy, chronicles his quest, for decades, to walk the entire shoreline of the Mediterranean Sea. Why had he decided to jump into the Seine, anyway? He said that he wanted to show his support for the river cleanup, which has been reported to have cost more than a billion dollars, and to find out for himself whether it had been successful. “I’m seventy-five, and I still swim, and I’m still healthy,” he said. “Why not?” Last week, he was vacationing with his daughter-in-law and grandchildren at a Center Parcs holiday village in Normandy. “No E. coli or any other side effects from that swim,” he reported, “though I’m worried about what I might pick up at the water park.” ♦



*Lauren Collins* has been a staff writer at *The New Yorker* since 2008. She is the author of “[When in French: Love in a Second Language](#).”

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[Dept. of Keeping](#)

# Where New York's Signs and Marquees Go When They Die

Bummed by today's aesthetic monoculture, David Barnett is personally cobbling together the permanent collection of the New York Sign Museum.

By [Laura Preston](#)

July 15, 2024



*Illustration by João Fazenda*

These days, many New York storefronts are designed by committee. The heads of corporate branding cook up a brief, a design firm answers with a litany of slides, and, after iterations, interventions, and internal quarrels, the sign arrives in the physical plane, with glossy acrylic letterforms and antiseptic light. But New York used to be an exciting aesthetic hodgepodge: blinking marquees and boldly painted letters, and no mystical branding concepts, just facts—*LIQUOR*, *PORK*, *SHOES*. David Barnett, the founder of the New York Sign Museum, said the other day that such signs represented “a conversation between two people, a shop owner and a sign-maker.”

Barnett’s museum is a nonprofit that rescues historic advertising throughout the boroughs. A patient, soft-spoken man in his thirties, Barnett seems to know every storefront in New York. Mention a sign in his presence—say, the sublime, hand-painted one outside Grandmaster John Dinkins School of Martial Arts, a Black-owned dojo in Prospect Lefferts Gardens—and he’ll smile and say, “I love that one.” When he suspects that a shop is closing, he leaves a note on the grille: “Call me about your sign.” If the owners are agreeable, Barnett carts off the sign in his Ford cargo van. Some jobs are easier than others. In 2021, the Essex Card Shop, in the East Village, pledged its hand-painted sign to Barnett after the business moved. When he arrived to collect it, the shop had been seized by pigeons. The sign came down in a shower of guano. “Some of these signs are biohazards,” he said.

Barnett’s taste for signs began in childhood. His grandmother lived in Queens and did not drive. Together, they would walk Metropolitan Avenue. “We’d go to the butcher, the baker, and the market, and everyone knew her name,” he said. “The signs became symbolic of that old utopia.” Today, all those signs are gone.

The museum is headquartered in an old dress factory in East New York, in the same building as Noble Signs, a design studio that Barnett co-founded, in 2013. While the museum conserves old

signs, Noble Signs makes new ones in the old tradition. Barnett takes museum visitors by appointment. The permanent collection stands at nearly a hundred. His Queens assortment includes a colossal red “PIANOS” from Swan Piano Co., in Sunnyside; H. Goodman Furs, from Forest Hills, its letters sportively askew; and the entire façade of Jones Surgical Co. (“*SICK ROOM SUPPLIES*”), which was tiled in emerald-green porcelain steel.

Last month, Barnett arrived at 84 Court Street, in downtown Brooklyn, to remove the eighteen-foot sign of Queen, a family-owned Italian restaurant that closed, in 2020, after sixty-two years. He wore jeans, sunglasses, and a baseball cap. The sign was a triumph of old neon. Ropy tubes of glass spelled “Queen” in red script. In the middle of the “Q” floated a crown. The neon characters were set in metal gutters called channel letters, or cans, against a background of hot orange—lead paint, naturally. Modern channel letters are clunky and deep, Barnett said, but sixties-era cans have a low profile, which means you can read the neon from any angle. “It’s esoteric knowledge,” he said. “But it’s not lost on the average person. You look at it and think, Nice sign.”

Two members of Barnett’s crew went up on a scissor lift. They detached each sinuous glass letter. As the two “E”s were carried to earth, they momentarily reversed in the air, making “3”s.

Young pedestrians breezed past, but some older people looked up. A man with a tattered tote bag gazed at the sign and reconstructed the territory he once knew—a fish market, a pizza place, a pornographic theatre.

“I might even have a picture of the old pizza sign,” he said.

“If you find it, will you text me?” Barnett said.

“I’m an ‘I’ll see you on the street’ kind of guy,” the man said, and vanished.

Twenty minutes later, the man was back, flapping a snapshot. “They’d run the buckets of sauce from Queen, past the porno theatre, and into the pizza place,” he said. Those shops were demolished in the nineties to make way for a multiplex and a Barnes & Noble. By the end of 2022, neither had renewed its lease, so the hundred-and-fifteen-thousand-square-foot space now sits empty.

Barnett’s lead installer, Nahabi Roman, stood on the sidewalk and shouted instructions upward. Another team member, Bobby Najera, detached the sign’s metal raceway from the building, releasing a cascade of debris. The sign wobbled as he balanced it on the lift. With three exhalations, the lift came down. “Your Majesty has landed,” Roman said.

Roman and the team lay the sign on the sidewalk like a body. A woman named Diane stood over its hull, looking bereft. “This vas the vest Italian vood in Vrooklyn,” she said. She’d just seen the dentist, hence the lisp. “I vould always come here after Dr. Wong, to eat the soft raviolis,” she went on. “I’m so heartbroken. I’ve veen coming here since I vas a girl, in the sixties. My mother had eleven kids. Ve ate here once or tvice a week. The owner vould say, ‘Bring the babies!’ ”

Around the block, newer storefronts gleamed like hard candy—McDonald’s, Popeyes, Chase Bank—the same on Court Street as they would be in Cleveland. “Goodvye, my Queen!” Diane said. “My restaurant!” ♦

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*Laura Preston began contributing to The New Yorker in 2022.*

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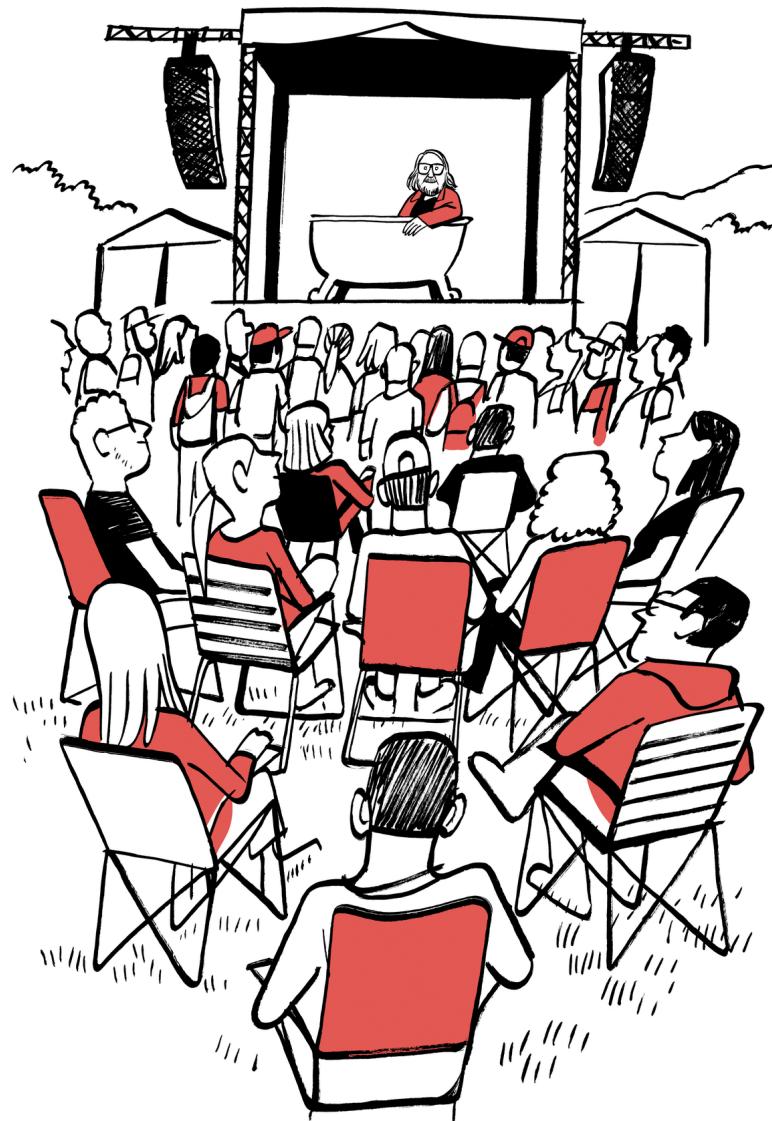
[At the Festivals](#)

## The Art of the Dibs

An attendee with a balky back at the Solid Sound music festival seeks Jeff Tweedy's counsel on joint replacements and the ethics of claiming viewing space with a folding chair.

By [Nick Paumgarten](#)

July 15, 2024



*Illustration by João Fazenda*

In Chicago, there is a wintertime tradition known as dibs. If you shovel out a parking space, you can lay claim to it for the season by blocking it off with a lawn chair or a lamp or some other household loot. Move the snow, own the spot.

Can't do that here, bub. Still, East Coast summertime has its own dibs situations: the territorial beach umbrella, the Great Lawn Philharmonic blanket grab, the incumbent at the top of the national ticket who won't cede his perch. In these parts, unlike in Chicago, the prerogative is often disputed.

A weekend in the Berkshires, on the grounds of the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, in North Adams: the biennial Solid Sound arts-and-music festival, convened and headlined by the band Wilco. *MASS MoCA* occupies a former printworks and electrical plant, so most of the festivities take place in renovated factory buildings and brick courtyards, but the main stage is in a vast field. The attendees line up early. Many of them—of a demographic susceptible to mid-tempo and achy joints—carry portable chairs. Once inside, they fan out into the field and set up miniature encampments, asserting dominion over patches of grass, in anticipation of the bands coming onstage later in the afternoon. Then they leave their stuff and wander the rest of the festival—other, smaller acts, art exhibits, pop-up performances, interactive expos, food trucks, record store, beer. Civilized.

Day two, rainy at noon: the chairs holding their ground in the field are covered in tarps or garbage bags, or turned upside down. A gimpy man—bulging disk, according to the doc—enters the field carrying a Walmart backpacking chair. The chairs already in place are amply spaced apart. People seem to have overestimated the room they need or deserve. The man decides to revise these estimations, to shrink the distance between a few of them and open a gap for his own chair. He does some rearranging. Do the work, claim the space.

An hour later, looking from a window on the second floor of the museum, he spots the Walmart chair out in the rain. Either the chairs have been scrambling around on their own or more new chairs have made space for themselves by taking space from others. Dibs? Or a breach of it?

Down in the bowels of the museum, in Wilco's backstage suite, Jeff Tweedy, the band's front man, was lying in an empty claw-footed bathtub, posing for photographs. "It's just going to be hard to get me out," he said. He'd got a new hip in February and was getting another in a couple of weeks.

A moment later, he was on a couch. He wore black leather shoes, black jeans, a blue gas-station jacket, clear-frame specs. As a new-hip guy, he noted his visitor's limp. "This is a better festival than almost any other festival for someone with mobility issues," he said. "I'm generally not a big fan of festivals. But this is just a fuller expression of what Wilco is to us. What Wilco is to us isn't just our records or just our live performances. It's our friends, our families, our other bands, the bands that we love, our record collections, our belief in art, our belief in community. It's a rare opportunity for a band to be able to present just, like, a world view."

Community-wise, the visitor felt bad about the chair in the field. Tweedy, being a Chicagoan and Solid Sound's Grand Pooh-Bah, was asked to make a ruling. "You've never spent an hour and a half shovelling a parking spot," he said. "Dibs. That's when you throw one of your old vacuum cleaners in the street. It's not great, but it's not born out of pure greed. It's born out of a feeling that you earned a spot because you did the work. It's an injustice that someone pulls into a spot you've just shovelled. But here? As far as I'm concerned, if there's room and you get here early, I don't think you should throw a blanket down and say, 'That's mine,' and then go do whatever you want. But if you're holding the territory, and you're

leaving room for other people, and then you cede territory when it's necessary, that's all within the Geneva Convention."

After some talk of hips, backs, surgeries, and painkillers, Tweedy went to get ready to play. The visitor returned to the field to claim his chair, from which he held the territory, until Tweedy and the band came onstage and opened with a song called "Via Chicago." ♦



*Nick Paumgarten*, a staff writer, has contributed to *The New Yorker* since 2000.

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## How to Find Civil War Skeletons Under Your Condo

After burst water mains caused an “aqua apocalypse” in Atlanta, one relic hunter used the extensive digging for repairs as an opportunity to search for lost treasures.

By [Charles Bethea](#)

July 15, 2024



*Illustration by João Fazenda*

An eighty-year-old water main ruptured on a recent Friday in Atlanta. More old pipes followed suit. Megan Thee Stallion, slated to perform in town that night, broke the news to many. “Legit found out from Meg our house wouldn’t have running water,” an X user posted the next day. “City of Atlanta’s notification came TODAY.” Drinking, cooking, and toothbrushing required boiling a kettle. Hotels gave guests water bottles for flushing. Restaurants shut down. West Peachtree Street became West Peachtree River, and one inner tuber nabbed an apparent first descent. The mayor declared a state of emergency. The whole thing—dubbed an “aqua apocalypse”—lasted nearly a week.

But it wasn’t bad news for everyone. A local lawyer named Phil headed downtown with his metal detector one recent afternoon. He hoped to unearth artifacts—or relics, in the parlance of such hunters—from the siege of Atlanta, which ended a hundred and sixty years ago this summer. “There’s still lots of overshot from the siege, if you can find it,” Phil said, from his truck, referring to spent Civil War ammunition, ranging from bullets to cannonballs. “These busted pipes may have done us a favor.” (He preferred to give his first name only, to preserve his ability to roam.)

Phil rattled off some of his greatest hits. “I found a North Carolina soldier near those condos once,” he said, pointing to a new development. “His money, his pouch, his femur. The shell that killed him. His rifle. Belt buckle. Five of the North Carolina uniform buttons, which is rare.” He gestured up a street. “I found a molar up there,” he said. “And some artillery over there. If they ever tear that down, that’s gonna be amazing,” he went on, eying an aging apartment complex. “Under some of these old, abandoned places, you can find a ton of shit.” He slowed down and pointed to a gas station. “I found a U.S. buckle right by that curb, and a Union grave back in there,” he said, pointing to a little patch of trees. “There’s a cannon pit back behind that house that had a trampoline in it the last time I looked,” he added. “I’m dying to hunt here,” he

continued, passing a vacant lot. “I’ve gotten thrown off it once. The owners don’t cotton to me poking around. But I keep my eye on it for one free bite of the apple.”



*“It’s not the heat that gets you—it’s the ants.”*

*Cartoon by Benjamin Schwartz*

He pulled over, finally, near a patched pipe break, in a southwest Atlanta neighborhood. “You really have to be a fanatic, like me, for it to pay off mentally,” he said. “I’ll dig up fifty pieces of junk before I find a bullet.” Wearing a camo hat, cargo shorts, and a black T-shirt, Phil got out of the truck, doused himself with *DEET*, and surveyed what looked like half an acre of excavated dirt. “Could be good,” he said. “There was heavy fighting here in the summer of 1864.” Rummaging around the back of his truck, he held up an orange vest. “Sometimes I wear this, to look official,” he said, grinning.

The metal detector buzzed and pinged as it hovered over the Georgia dirt. Mosquitoes swarmed. A small shovel helped discern the deeper meaning of the noise and the numbers on the device’s readout. The first dozen mini excavations revealed mostly twentieth-century crap—aluminum cans, part of a sink, a 1947

dime. As tedium threatened, something else appeared beneath a few inches of newly turned earth: a grayish bullet with a cylindrical and grooved base. It was heavy and surprisingly soft. Lead.

“Look at that,” Phil said. “A .58-calibre Minié. Never shot.” He rolled the bullet in his sweaty palm. “It’s Federal,” he said. He noted three rings around the base, which signified it was Union-made. He went on, “Over the years, I’ve imagined these scenarios differently. Maybe it was dropped by a Union soldier? On the other hand, the Confederates were using captured Union equipment, too. In any case, if it’s not a combat situation, then it’s, like, camping—right? So you’ll find a lot of other shit nearby.” He waved his detector around in the dirt for another fifteen minutes. A few more little digs revealed a spoon, part of a watch, and something that resembled a Civil War artillery shell. “Got excited for a second there,” Phil said, tossing it back onto the ground. “But it’s just an old piece of plumbing.” ♦



*Charles Bethea* is a staff writer at *The New Yorker*.

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# Were Pirates Foes of the Modern Order—or Its Secret Sharers?

We've long viewed them as liberty-loving rebels. But it's time to take off the eye patch.

By [Daniel Immerwahr](#)

July 15, 2024



*Pirates have been heralded as forces of defiance—political and sexual radicals, holdouts against the modern state, utopians with a flair for flag design.*

*Illustration by Malachi Ward and Matthew Sheean*

The ocean is a lonely, perilous place. It is especially so when you are aboard a leak-prone wooden vessel laden with a rich cargo of sugar, silks, and opium, like the traders sailing the Quedagh Merchant around India's southern tip in 1698. They surely panicked when they spied a massive warship with thirty-four mounted guns bearing down on them—or would have, had it not been flying French colors. The Quedagh Merchant had a document, written in an elegant hand, guaranteeing safe passage from France. French ships posed no threat; they might even offer protection, information, or supplies.

The Quedagh Merchant sent over a boat with a French gunner carrying the pass. As he stepped aboard the warship, though, it hoisted a new flag: the English one. The gunner soon realized it was a trap. This wasn't a French ship; it was Captain William Kidd's Adventure Galley. And this wasn't a parley; it was a robbery.

For Captain Kidd, it was a life-changing haul, one that he predicted would "make a great Noise in England." He was right. Kidd became the "Subject of all Conversation" there, a contemporary wrote, his life "chanted about in Ballads." One is still sung today: "My name is Captain Kidd, / And God's laws I did forbid, / And most wickedly I did, / As I sailed."

It's as if Kidd and his fellow-marauders never stopped sailing. These days, pirates are everywhere. The five "Pirates of the Caribbean" films have collectively grossed billions. And then there are the shows, games, memes, bars, festivals, and rum bottles. Three major sports teams are named for them—the Pittsburgh Pirates, the Las Vegas Raiders, and the Tampa Bay Buccaneers: the first two from cities with no connection to piracy whatsoever.

The pirates we typically have in mind are specific ones: the English-speaking sea robbers who sailed from the mid-seventeenth century to the first few decades of the eighteenth. And what makes

these maritime lawbreakers of long ago so fascinating that, three centuries later, we're still dressing up like them? The easy answer is that they were rebels. We delight in their lusty, wild lives because we, too, want to live freely. Pirates are especially fascinating because they sailed at the dawn of our era, just as the British Empire was rising and the portcullis of modernity was descending. Viewed in a certain light, pirates—the scourge of admirals and merchants—were the last holdouts against a world dominated by states and corporations.

But were pirates implacable foes of the modern order? Power and piracy were not always clearly distinct, at least not in the early days of English capitalism. It's worth asking whether the world that pirates mutinied against wasn't also, in part, a world of their own making.

A sign of our sympathy for pirates is that their heyday is known as the Golden Age of Piracy, roughly from 1650 to 1730. The pirates who lived then can be divided into generations. The first, the buccaneers, plundered Spain's holdings around the Caribbean in the middle of the seventeenth century. The second, Kidd among them, most often launched from North America's mainland and secured their greatest bounties in the Indian Ocean in the sixteen-nineties. It was the third generation, sailing from 1716 to 1726, that flew black flags and attacked nearly everyone.

It's only the last generation, which included notorious captains like Blackbeard and Bartholomew (Black Bart) Roberts, that fully matches our canonical image of the pirate. Interestingly, though, there weren't many of them. Piracy's leading historian, Marcus Rediker, estimates that just four thousand pirates sailed in the black-flag era. If he's right, more people have worked on the "Pirates of the Caribbean" films than were actual pirates of the Caribbean.

If black-flag pirates weren't especially numerous, they became iconic for good reason. The eighteenth-century pirates were the truly radical ones, Rediker observes, pursuing an existence "as far removed from traditional authority as any men could be in the early eighteenth century." As he writes in "[Villains of All Nations](#)" (2004), "They dared to imagine a different life, and they dared to try to live it."

Where earlier plunderers, like Kidd, had sailed beneath the banners of leading empires, eighteenth-century pirates often hoisted the Jolly Roger: black (or sometimes red) flags featuring skulls, bones, skeletons, or hourglasses heralding death's swift approach. These weren't unusual symbols—they can be found on gravestones of the time—but the skulls on pirate flags were shorn of the customary wings symbolizing the dead's ascent to Heaven. Removing those wings was a dark, petulant touch from the goths of the high seas.

Much like teen-age goths, eighteenth-century marauders didn't just stand apart from normal society; they scowled furiously at it.

"Damnation to the Governour and Confusion to the Colony," a typical pirate's toast went, offered on the gallows. Stede Bonnet named his ship the Revenge, Blackbeard called his the Queen Anne's Revenge, William Fly went with the Fames' Revenge, and John Cole offered a double-fudge sundae: the New York Revenge's Revenge.

This was all a tad theatrical, and no doubt intentionally so: raids went more smoothly when victims were terrified. Still, pirates had real reasons to want payback. The early modern world was unkind to common people, and conditions on merchant and naval ships, where many pirates had begun their careers, were especially appalling. The symbol of a captain's absolute authority was the cat-o'-nine-tails, though sometimes punishment went beyond flogging to broken arms, gouged eyes, and knocked-out teeth, not to mention death. One sailor reported having been beaten "upon the head with an Elephant's dry'd Pizle," which is never good.

Such “hard usage” was rarer aboard a pirate ship. Mutinous, well-armed men did not readily submit to the lash, nor did they accept orders just because an officer had given them. By the rules of Kidd’s ship, the captain needed majority consent to punish men, and important decisions were put to a vote. Historians make much of the “articles” that pirate crews, including Kidd’s, signed. By the eighteenth century, these shipboard constitutions had become astonishingly democratic. Under their terms, generally, captains were elected, the injured received recompense, and pay came in shares rather than in wages, with captains rarely getting more than twice what ordinary seamen did. (The average ratio of C.E.O. pay to median worker pay at the largest U.S. firms today exceeds two hundred to one.)

Examples of pirates’ articles appeared in “A General History of the Pyrates,” a 1724 book that is the source of much pirate lore. (For decades, it was attributed to [Daniel Defoe](#).) A second volume further explored pirates’ unorthodox politics. It described a short-lived settlement in Madagascar, named Libertalia, in which pirates shed their national allegiances to become Liberi, the people of freedom. They formed a democracy, pooled their treasure, freed the enslaved people they encountered, and eschewed money as “of no Use where every Thing was in common.”

Libertalia, we now know, was a fiction. Still, the U.S. anarchist Hakim Bey latched on to it, a few decades ago, insisting that it epitomized the piratical spirit. For Bey, “pirate utopias” were “temporary autonomous zones” offering refuge from an inhospitable world. His ideas informed the recent pro-Gaza student encampments, which were, for some, little Libertalias on the quad.

Did pirate utopias influence politics at the time? The late anthropologist David Graeber suggests as much in “[Pirate Enlightenment, or the Real Libertalia](#)” (2023). The Libertalia of “A General History” never existed, Graeber acknowledges, but pirates did come ashore in Madagascar, and their children, with Malagasy

women, founded politically interesting societies there. Moreover, reports of pirates' radical social experiments "made a profound impact on the European imagination," Graeber writes. It is perhaps not coincidental that eighteenth-century philosophers were publishing thought experiments about how free individuals might hypothetically make social contracts at just the time when pirates—in full view and not hypothetically—were doing precisely that.

In "A General History," Libertalia's leader is said to have "abhorr'd even the Name of Slavery." This was an enlightened view, given that the original European [utopia](#), Thomas More's, from 1516, had promised two slaves per household. Whether actual pirates opposed slavery, however, was a more complicated question. Certainly, they trafficked and owned people. According to the articles of Kidd's ship, any crew member who lost a limb would receive cash or "six able Slaves" in compensation. Yet some pirates were Black, especially by the eighteenth century, when the pirate ship became the site of what Rediker calls a "multicultural, multiracial, and multinational social order." In all, the enslaved probably faced better odds among pirates than they did elsewhere in the white-run world.

Did women also find freedom at sea? "A General History" tells of one, Anne Bonny, who left her husband to join "Calico" Jack Rackham's crew, dressing as a man and fighting as a pirate. Aboard, Bonny took a "particular Liking" to a "handsome young Fellow" and revealed her secret to him. Her handsome crewmate replied, awkwardly, that he was also a woman in disguise; her name was Mary Read. Their meet-cute story in "A General History" is hard to swallow, but there's ample documentation that Bonny and Read did wear britches and sail with Calico Jack. And, although we know of only a handful of women who left domestic drudgery for the pirate's life, the historian Jo Stanley conjectures that "many more" were lost to history.

The most tantalizing speculative line concerns pirate sexuality. Although pirates were long represented as superabundantly straight Errol Flynn types, the historian B. R. Burg made national news in the nineteen-seventies by proposing that homosexuality was widespread among pirates. Could one really expect the rowdy men who chose to live within a transgressive, all-male milieu to forgo sex? Surely not, Burg argued. They created a “functioning and resilient sodomitical pirate society,” he wrote—a floating community where men could love freely.

Popular culture has come around to Burg’s thesis. In the 1991 film “Hook,” [Dustin Hoffman](#) and Bob Hoskins quietly played Captain Hook and Smee as what Hoffman called “a couple of old queens.” Johnny Depp has said that he played Jack Sparrow as gay in the “Pirates of the Caribbean” films (2003-17). This trend culminated in the rainbow-splashed HBO Max show “Our Flag Means Death” (2022-23), in which Blackbeard and Stede Bonnet are boyfriends.

The trope of the gay pirate nicely encapsulates the broader understanding of the pirate ship as a nautical autarky, with no ties to land, not even sexual ones. The buried-treasure myth fills out that picture. The idea is that, rather than spending their loot, pirates hid it in secret places they shared only with one another, through whispered confidences and cryptic maps. We imagine pirates as inhabiting sealed-off worlds, with the ships their homes, their crewmates their families, and remote islands their banks. All the rest can go hang.

But had pirates truly seceded from land? It’s hard to prove that they had sex with one another at sea. The evidence is “so sparse as to be almost nonexistent,” a scholar following in Burg’s footsteps conceded. There’s also no evidence that pirates hoarded their treasure in buried chests. What there *is* evidence for—lots of it—is pirates spending their loot on women ashore. Pirate ships may have been oases of freedom, but they were also cramped vessels where

rations ran low and tensions ran high. When they reached shore, the men shot out like cannonballs, aiming for the taverns and brothels. Coins flew in all directions. One buccaneer gave a woman five hundred pieces of eight—an eye-watering sum—to see her naked.

This is a different side of pirates: not nautical rebels but eager participants in portside economies. This role is emphasized in two important books from 2015, Mark G. Hanna’s “[Pirate Nests and the Rise of the British Empire, 1570-1740](#)” and Kevin P. McDonald’s “[Pirates, Merchants, Settlers, and Slaves](#).[“](#) Both are academic monographs with little patience for swashbuckling. Instead, they treat pirates as being tightly enmeshed in the societies surrounding them.

To appreciate pirates’ place within early modern life, it helps to zoom out from the ferocious “black flag” moment of 1716-26 and consider the larger context. Spain and Portugal had seized valuable colonies in the West, and India and China had amassed great riches in the East. England, however, was largely locked out. It neither ruled the waves nor commanded a vast empire—not yet, anyway. London thus welcomed anyone who could crack open the treasure stores to the east and west. And it did not flinch when the men who stepped forward were pirates.

Piracy is, after all, a subjective matter. Was it a crime to take to the seas and plunder ships, attack towns, torture people, and seize a fortune in silver from Spain’s American colonies? For the Spanish, it absolutely was, and they called the villain responsible El Draque (the Dragon). But when El Draque’s ship returned to Plymouth and deposited five tons of stolen silver in the Tower of London—more than the Crown took in from all other sources combined that year—Queen Elizabeth was willing to forgive the sin, board the ship, and knight its captain. The English know El Draque as Sir Francis Drake, and remember him not as a pirate but as a bold explorer.



*“Other than that, they’re super low-maintenance.”*  
Cartoon by Ellie Black

They saw Captain Kidd similarly, at first. Kidd had been a respected member of New York society, with a house at 56 Wall Street and a pew at the nearby Trinity Church. The reason he had such a large warship is that he had the financial backing of some of England’s most powerful men. When the Adventure Galley set sail from Manhattan, it did so to a flourish of trumpets.

Captains like Kidd weren’t naval officers acting under direct orders, but they had broad license to rob England’s rivals. That license, ideally, took the form of permission slips, called letters of marque or reprisal, which deputized them to attack certain foreign ships for a cut of the loot. Possessing such letters technically made them “privateers” rather than pirates. This is how Kidd saw himself as he carried a royal commission to seize French ships (and another to attack pirates). Admittedly, it required squinting to see his main prize—the Indian-owned, English-helmed Quedagh Merchant—as French. But this was a great age for squinting. Privateers often relied on letters that were invalid, expired, or issued after the fact, when they had letters at all.

For the most part, the authorities didn’t mind. So long as the pirates had their prows pointed in the right direction, their work was good

for business. Not only did they harry England's rivals; they also enriched its colonies. McDonald notes their importance in furnishing new settlements with enslaved people, who were initially hard for English colonists to buy through normal trade. The Africans sold into bondage in Virginia in 1619 (the event that prompted the *New York Times'* [1619 Project](#), four centuries later) had been seized from a Portuguese slave ship by an English privateer carrying a Dutch letter of marque.

Pirates also supplied cash. The Americas produced prodigious amounts of silver and gold, but the mines were in the Spanish and Portuguese colonies. The English colonies, meanwhile, suffered chronic shortages of the metal they needed to pay England's taxes and buy its goods. One turn-of-the-eighteenth-century observer estimated that the average coin lasted only six months in America before leaving for England. Since imperial rules and rivalries blocked English colonists from trading directly with their Spanish and Portuguese counterparts, pirates and smugglers (two overlapping categories) were indispensable. They tapped the rich vein of minerals flowing from the Americas to Iberia, irrigating the English empire with hard currency.

“Pieces of eight” and “doubloons” sound like colorful pirate talk, but they were the English names for Spanish coins, which the pirates stole in their raids, earned from their trade, and spent on their sprees. These, plus gold coins from Indian Ocean plunder, flooded colonial societies. The familiar dollar sign, in fact, was originally the American symbol for the peso, the fabled “piece of eight.” In cash-parched America, illicitly acquired Spanish silver was the predominant currency, so it became the sign for money.

Pirate sexuality is relevant here, because sex was a crucial conduit through which foreign coin entered the colonies. The ports that pirates favored were hotbeds of prostitution. This was illegal, and in the pirate haunt of Port Royal, in Jamaica, “common strumpetts” were jailed in a “cage by the turtle market,” a visitor wrote. But,

rather than locking these women in the wench kennel, Jamaica should have erected statues to them for resolving the colonial liquidity crisis. The largest statue should be of the unnamed woman who talked a pirate into giving her five hundred pieces of eight just to watch her strip. Forget Blackbeard; *she*'s the outlaw they should be making television shows about.

The ports also brimmed with silversmiths. We think of silversmithing as a classic “ye olde” profession; Paul Revere was a silversmith, and, generally, they outnumbered lawyers in Colonial America. But why were any there at all, given that the land had little by way of silver mines? The answer, Mark Hanna explains, is that silversmiths worked as fences, transmuting “pirate metal” into respectable wealth. The first mint in the thirteen colonies was established in 1652 by John Hull, who made Massachusetts pine-tree shillings from Spanish bullion. Hull was a silversmith; his brother Edward was a pirate.

John Hull faced charges for backing his brother’s pirate ship, but he was acquitted. Such outcomes were common, Hanna and McDonald observe. Although piracy was a felony, it could also be a bonanza, and sympathetic locals made prosecution difficult. Hanna gives the example of one Moses Butterworth, who had sailed with Kidd. When Butterworth was tried for piracy in what’s now New Jersey, an armed militia stormed the courthouse. The judge drew his sword, but he was no match for more than a hundred men with guns and clubs. They freed Butterworth and seized the governor and the sheriff, taking *them* prisoner. They then held the governor for four days, by which point Butterworth was long gone. (He turned up three years later in Newport, Rhode Island, captaining his own vessel.)

Richard Blakemore’s new book, “[Enemies of All](#),” addresses this theme. In Pennsylvania, Blakemore notes, a prominent pirate married the governor’s daughter and was elected to the legislature. An even more prominent pirate, Henry Morgan—known to spiced-

rum aficionados as Captain Morgan—was arrested and hauled to London. Then, after being released without punishment, he was knighted and returned to Jamaica, where he served several stints as the acting governor. When Morgan died, in 1688, he received a state funeral in Port Royal, with a twenty-two-gun salute. Pirates were reportedly given amnesty to join the mourners.

Like Morgan, Kidd faced the possibility of prison. But, even with a warrant out for his arrest, he came ashore to discuss his case with the Massachusetts Council. It helped that Lord Bellomont, then the governor of New York, Massachusetts Bay, and New Hampshire, had been one of Kidd's chief financial backers. Kidd sent Lady Bellomont an enamelled box containing four diamonds set in gold. He explained to the council that his acts, though technically unlawful, were justifiable. Kidd could be forgiven for expecting mercy. And he could be forgiven his surprise when Lord Bellomont, his former investor, had him arrested.

William Kidd grew up at a time when pirates were imperialist Robin Hoods, robbing foreigners and giving to the English. This made them affable outlaws, more raffish than villainous. The trouble arose at the century's end, when pirates' depredations interfered with London's growing maritime dominion. It was Kidd's misfortune to sail at a "turning point in the history of empire," his biographer Robert C. Ritchie writes. He had set out in a permissive era, and he returned in a punitive one.

It helps to think of piracy as a phase in early modern venture capitalism. That's the argument persuasively made by the economic historian Nuala Zahedieh, who studies the English Caribbean. Sugar planters there envisaged large profits but had to make serious investments—buying enslaved people, clearing land, building roads and harbors—before realizing them. Backers in London were understandably wary. The most "hopeful" economic foundation for Jamaica, one of its governors believed, was thus raiding. It was an "ideal start-up trade," Zahedieh agrees, in that it required only a

small initial outlay—especially small because pirates worked for shares rather than for wages. Piracy was dangerous, but it generated the quick cash needed to launch plantations. Theft on the seas thus helped to establish more reliable forms of plunder: of Native land and African labor.

But, as plantations took root, piracy lost ground. The two endeavors were “absolutely incompatible,” a less sympathetic governor of Jamaica wrote, since one required order and the other stirred chaos. Slaveholding planters sought social control on land and safe passage on the seas—and pirates imperilled both. If, in the seventeenth century, pirates had been instruments of English colonization, by the eighteenth they were obstacles to it.

London also found that pirates interfered with the East India Company, the chartered trading firm that would become the bridge to Britain’s conquest of India. This was Kidd’s great crime. His theft of the Quedagh Merchant, which had been transporting goods owned by a high-ranking Mughal official, provoked fury on the subcontinent. The Mughal emperor insisted that, if the English wanted to continue operating there, justice must be served. Lord Bellomont’s arrest of Kidd, in 1699, was a sacrifice made on the altar of English trade.

By then, the Crown had grown hostile to piracy. Its pirate hunt was paused during the War of the Spanish Succession (1701-14), which required hustling anyone at hand onto English ships to fight. But, after that war ended, the final confrontation began. Demobilization cut more than forty thousand men loose from naval service, and privateering dried up, too. Some of the unemployed predictably took to piracy, but, as they did, they faced tighter naval control, growing legitimate trade, and a punitive turn in the colonies. Men who once could have leaped ashore and married the governor’s daughter now risked arrest, conviction, and execution.

Henry Morgan, in the late seventeenth century, had retired from piracy and invested in slaveholding and plantations. The pirates of the eighteenth century lacked such easy off-ramps. They were sea-locked, with the ports plugged up against them. That's when they raised the black flag and fought the whole world. But another way to put it is that the whole world fought them.

According to Marcus Rediker, this brought pirate radicalism into full bloom. As merchants withdrew from piracy, it became more proletarian. Its levelling, libertarian tendencies were clearest after 1716, when seafaring men seized their workplaces—the ships—and founded their own societies. Theirs was a “world turned upside down,” Rediker writes, a happy fraternity in which no one would hit anyone else with an Elephant’s dry’d Pizle. Small wonder that the powers that be refused to rest until every pirate was reformed, jailed, hanged, or drowned.

Not all historians regard black-flag pirates as political visionaries, though. Take their wealth-sharing plans. Are they evidence of socialism? Zahedieh notes that payment by shares can also be understood as a way of reducing labor costs by, essentially, replacing wages with lottery tickets. If pirates got lucky, they’d flourish, but if not they’d starve: “No prey, no pay,” as they said. Kidd’s generation of pirates had also worked for shares, but they’d had prey clearly in view—hence Kidd’s rich investors. Later pirates lacked “a clear objective,” Blakemore writes, and were “more directionless.”

Kidd’s seizure of the *Quedagh Merchant* was among the last legendary hauls. With huge scores now rare and the gallows looming, eighteenth-century pirate ships grew less desirable as places to work, and they relied more on coercion to replenish their ranks. One reason for their multiracialism was that they struggled to recruit white men. The motley crews that today look so admirable may have been products less of democracy than of desperation.

From Madagascar, site of the fictional Libertalia, we have an account of profit sharing in a real pirate settlement. Fourteen men in straitened circumstances agreed to combine their meagre fortunes, divide into teams, and fight to the death for the pot. The two survivors shared the winnings. This was a bold social experiment, but not one undertaken by free men who believed another world to be possible. It was, rather, a last-ditch scheme—the hopeless radicalism of the wretched.

The Crown's crackdown meant that William Kidd faced a jury in London, not one in pirate-coddling New England. "I am the innocentest person of them all," Kidd protested. He made much of the French pass that the *Quedagh Merchant* had carried, which in his view made it fair game. This defense might have worked a generation ago. But now? Kidd's acts had been "the most mischievous and prejudicial to trade that can happen," the judge told the jury. Kidd was convicted and sent to Execution Dock in Wapping.

Kidd, and everyone else. Rediker estimates that from 1719 to 1725 the number of pirates fell from about two thousand to fewer than two hundred. Hundreds of pirates swung on hundreds of nooses, their feet dancing madly in the air. The corpses of especially notorious pirates were then put on gruesome display. Kidd's was suspended by chains, for years, over the Thames.

The end of British piracy was, oddly, the start of Britain's pirate obsession. There was a hit play in 1713, "The Successful Pyrate." In 1719, Daniel Defoe published "Robinson Crusoe," seemingly based on the travails of a famed buccaneer who'd been marooned. (Defoe wrote a proper pirate novel in 1720.) In 1724, the much read "General History" set the terms for how we still discuss piracy. Just as pirates were dying out, they were becoming immortal.

One could see this as nostalgia, with pirates standing for a bygone era. But was their way of life truly lost? The twilight of the pirates was the dawn of the slave trade, American plantations, and Britain's global empire. Plunder wasn't being forsaken so much as redirected and made routine. Perhaps seeing the world as pirates did, with theft as adventure and stolen goods as booty, helped to soothe British consciences. In life, the pirate had been spurned as an impediment. In death, he served—cutlass aloft, eye patch affixed—as a roguish mascot for a predatory age. ♦



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## How Lawrence Abu Hamdan Hears the World

The artist and audio investigator, who calls himself a “private ear,” investigates crimes that are heard but not seen.

By [Doreen St. Félix](#)

July 15, 2024



*Abu Hamdan often works on investigations that challenge traditional notions about the nature of proof.*

*Photograph by Gabriel Zimmer for The New Yorker*

In January, Al Jazeera English aired a segment with a sound analyst named Lawrence Abu Hamdan. He was asked to assess a video that had gone viral online. In the clip, a woman wearing a hijab claimed

to be a nurse at a hospital in Gaza. She said that Hamas was attacking the hospital and ransacking its supplies. The sound of bombs could be heard in the background.

In the Al Jazeera segment, Abu Hamdan explains how he knows the video is bunk: “The way that those explosions resounded were not consistent with the way her voice was resounding in that room and resonating.” He determined that the sound of the explosions had been added on to the video after the fact.

Abu Hamdan goes on to tell the host that governments are often “complacent when it comes to sound,” even though sound analysis is sometimes the only tool that can be used to verify a contested act. There are truths that can be heard but not seen. He also cautions that it takes much longer to prove the falsity of a video than it does for such a video to be created. He is alarmed but not an alarmist; he noticeably does not resort to using jargon like “fake news.”

Many people online had already assumed that the video was fake. Watching the so-called nurse, they had a sense. Why was she brandishing her stethoscope like that? Why didn’t she pan the camera around to show us her surroundings? What did she not want us to see? The effort of analyzing this video, a piece of artless misinformation, was beneath Abu Hamdan, who has dedicated himself to unveiling the violence of the world through the medium of sound.

Abu Hamdan, who is thirty-nine years old, has conducted audio investigations all over the world, including in Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, France, and England. He often works in collaboration with non-governmental organizations such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Defense for Children International, and B’Tselem. He has also been commissioned by media organizations, including the *Washington Post* and *ITV*, a British television channel, to provide audio analysis to their

investigative teams. Abu Hamdan calls himself a “private ear,” which calls to mind classic detective narratives. But he often works on investigations that challenge traditional notions about the nature of proof.

What is the sound of pain as it is kept in the reserves of memory? One of Abu Hamdan’s best-known projects is an investigation of Saydnaya Military Prison, some thirty kilometers north of Damascus. The prison, a military facility run by the regime of Bashar al-Assad, has been called a “human slaughterhouse.” According to human-rights organizations, many thousands of Syrians, some of whom were arrested for protesting the regime, have been tortured and executed there. Saydnaya is an informational abyss: no photographs of its interior exist, and the prisoners, who are reportedly blindfolded upon entering and leaving, are kept in darkness. In 2016, Abu Hamdan, working with an investigative outfit called Forensic Architecture, was commissioned by Amnesty International to travel to Istanbul and interview five former detainees. (Over the years, some detainees have been released after receiving presidential amnesty or through a prisoner exchange.) Abu Hamdan, speaking with the detainees in Arabic, collected what he describes as “earwitness testimony.” He asked questions designed to trigger memories: “How many cell-door hatches in your wing did you hear opening at meal times?” “Could you hear footsteps from the floor above you?” He asked if there were distinctions between the percussive sounds made by the different weapons guards used—the *dolab*, constructed from a tire, and the *alakhdar brahimi*, made from a ventilation pipe.

It is difficult to describe sound without relying on abstractions. A lawnmower is “loud,” at a hundred decibels, but so is a jet taking off, which is a hundred and fifty decibels. When Abu Hamdan realized that verbal language was insufficient to convey the sounds of Saydnaya, he got creative. He and the witnesses re-created sounds with their belts, their pens, their mouths and feet. He used

Foley sounds as a reference point for certain noises, such as doors slamming. In the prison, the guards enforced a strict regime of silence; the detainees spoke to one another only in whispers. Abu Hamdan established a baseline volume for these whispers by playing a series of tones and asking the former detainees whether the volume was too low or too high. Ultimately, Abu Hamdan and his collaborators posited that there was a central staircase in the prison which distorted and amplified sounds. This allowed the guards to hear what went on in the cells around them and the detainees to hear people being beaten in other parts of the facility.

The final report on Saydnaya, published by Forensic Architecture, credits Abu Hamdan as an “acoustic investigator.” In the Al Jazeera segment, he was introduced as an “open source intelligence researcher,” in reference to a school of investigative techniques that relies on publicly available information: cell-phone footage, social-media testimony, satellite imagery. But Abu Hamdan is not just a researcher; he is an international art star. He works across a battery of media: sculpture, film, performance, photography, and, of course, sound. His pieces are in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art and the Guggenheim; he has shown his work at the major biennials—South Korea, Berlin, Venice, Sydney. It is in the art world that most people encounter his investigations.

“Saydnaya (The Missing 19dB),” commissioned by the Sharjah Art Foundation, in the U.A.E., in 2017, is a sound piece examining how the whispers of the detainees dropped by nineteen decibels after 2011, when mass protests erupted throughout Syria. The piece speculates that the drop marks the transformation of Saydnaya from a prison to a death camp. “Earwitness Theatre,” co-commissioned by the Chisenhale Gallery, in London, in 2018, is a sound library made physical—an installation of nearly a hundred objects that have been used to describe sounds in legal cases and investigations. A popcorn-maker represents the testimony of a witness who compared the sound of a building collapsing, in Florida, to that of

kernels popping. Some of the objects are presented without context, making them feel innocent, if not mundane. In “After SFX,” first performed at Tate Modern, in London, in 2018, Abu Hamdan put some of these objects to use, demonstrating how the sound of a stack of pita breads dropping onto the ground indicated to prisoners whether or not they would eat that day. “Walled Unwalled,” a short film from 2018, was also installed at Tate. In the film, possibly his most impressive work, Abu Hamdan acts as a kind of angel of sound history, presenting cases in which auditory evidence was collected through walls, such as that of Oscar Pistorius, the Paralympic runner who was convicted of killing his girlfriend after his neighbors heard screams and gunshots.

Abu Hamdan has received, among other prizes, the Nam June Paik Award and the Edvard Munch Art Award. In 2019, he was nominated for the U.K.’s Turner Prize, the most prestigious contemporary-art award. Abu Hamdan and the three other nominees told the jury that, in the wake of Brexit, they wanted to be considered as a group—a rebuke to what they saw as the racist nationalism that had overtaken the country. In a video of the ceremony, Edward Enninful, then the editor of *British Vogue*, looks somewhat stunned as he reads aloud that all four nominees have won. The camera pans to Abu Hamdan, who is in the act of the ultimate British gesture: sipping a cup of tea.

In his art, Abu Hamdan makes assertions that he would not include in an investigatory report. He imagines conversations that did not happen. He is clear about his political views. He questions the idea of expertise. Abu Hamdan has emphasized that his two practices are distinct. Yet his switching between the mode of research-based claim-making and that of looser, more interpretive storytelling has made at least some critics uneasy. In 2019, a review in *Art in America* asked, “Is this art in the service of forensic investigation and systemic justice, or the other way around?”

In December, I travelled to Barcelona, where Abu Hamdan was preparing for a show called “Air Pressure.” It is an hour-long analysis of what he describes as the atmosphere of violence in Lebanon. Abu Hamdan, who was born in Amman, Jordan, is married to a curator named Nora, with whom he has two daughters. The family splits their time between London and the Middle East. In the twenty-tens, they lived in Beirut, where Abu Hamdan had a studio.

In Lebanon, locals often speak of a buzzing noise. It is a by-product of Israeli incursions into Lebanese airspace—an increasingly regular occurrence since Israel’s invasion of Lebanon in 2006. Abu Hamdan’s research for “Air Pressure” focussed on the period between 2007 to 2022, during which more than twenty-two thousand unmanned aerial vehicles, drones, helicopters, gliders, and fighter jets breached the Lebanese border. Some came and went in just a few minutes. Others circled for as long as thirty hours.

Abu Hamdan’s performance—a combination of monologue, sound, and visuals—was taking place at a venue called Hangar. He was crashing at Hangar, too. As he rehearsed, his luggage lurked in a corner. When you meet Abu Hamdan, a retired punk, you sense instantly that he knows fashion. He wears a delicate silver charm in the shape of a human ear on a thin chain around his neck. This past spring, he was on the cover of *GQ Middle East*; the issue contained a photo shoot in which he wore Balenciaga, Prada, and Loewe. The son of a Lebanese father and an English mother, he is pale-skinned and blond. People feel the need to speculate about his identity. He has been mistaken for Syrian. Once, a man on the street in London heckled him, thinking he was Jewish.

On the evening of the performance, roughly seventy people filed into the venue. An image of the sky was projected onto a large screen. It looked like a stock photo, banal in its beauty. Then a

sound filled the room—a low, enervating hum. A vibration felt, if you kept your body still, deep in the chest.



Cartoon by Farley Katz

“Air Pressure,” like Abu Hamdan’s other art works, had a previous life. It began with letters submitted to the U.N. Security Council by its permanent representative of Lebanon, who had attempted to document each Israeli Air Force violation of Lebanese airspace during a fifteen-year period. The information was scattered, and launched Abu Hamdan on his own search. “I’ve had my head buried in these documents, downloading, reading, transcribing, and compiling all that I could find,” he told the crowd.

A couple of years ago, Abu Hamdan published a collection of his monologues, including “Air Pressure,” in a book called “Live Audio Essays.” But it is not the way to experience his work. Something is lost when you are reading rather than listening. This is his world view—that meaning comes from the voice, its pauses, the background noise. As Abu Hamdan performed “Air Pressure,” a sound designer toggled with the audio output, sometimes making the hum so loud that you had to strain to hear Abu Hamdan.

He moved into the path of the projection, throwing his shadow against the sky. He told the audience that the data had leaked into his life. “The most fighter jets I counted in a single day was the day of my Ph.D. professor’s fiftieth-birthday party,” he said. “On the day my daughter was born, in Beirut, an unmanned aerial vehicle circled the south of the country for two hours and thirty-five minutes.” His text sharpened to a point: the noise of these vehicles is “not loud enough to be terrifying, but frequent enough to fuel a near-constant dread.” In May of 2021, there was a break from the noise—only four fighter jets flew overhead. Abu Hamdan said, “Our air is quiet because those same aircraft are realizing their maximum capabilities for sonic and material destruction elsewhere.” That month, Israeli air strikes killed a hundred and twenty-nine civilians in Gaza.

“Air Pressure” is almost psychoanalytic: it is a diary of contemporary life in Lebanon, where civilians navigate the oppressive caprice of two powers. “They need each other in some perverse game,” Abu Hamdan has said, of Hezbollah and Israel. In reference to the Lebanese government, he added, “I don’t think the air belongs to them, either.”

Most of the attendees stayed for a post-show discussion. A young woman from Chile commented on how hard it is to ignore sound. “You can turn off the TV,” she said. “You can skip the story on Instagram because it’s talking about Gaza, and you already know what’s happening there. You can close your eyes. But you can’t close your ears.”

Abu Hamdan shook his head. “You can close your ears very well,” he said. “Anyone who is ever in a law court or a police interview room knows that it is very easy for someone to close their ears.”

Abu Hamdan was born in 1985, when Lebanon was riven by violence. He and his brother, Shakeeb, were the third generation of the Abu Hamdans to live in Jordan because of armed conflict in

Lebanon. Their great-grandparents were resistance fighters who fought against French colonialism. Abu Hamdan's paternal family, from the Chouf, in Lebanon, is Druze, an ethnic and religious minority that believes in reincarnation. Abu Hamdan recalls as a young boy being scooted toward a man who claimed to have once been his great-grandfather. A recurring story in his art is that of Bassel Abi Chahine, a writer and historian, whom Abu Hamdan met through his aunt. For most of his life, Abi Chahine has had what he describes as flashbacks—visions that he interprets as memories from a past life, in which he was a child soldier named Yousef Fouad Al Jawhary, who died in Lebanon at the age of seventeen. These flashbacks prompted him to amass a comprehensive trove of materials related to the military wing of the main Druze party in Lebanon, the Progressive Socialist Party. In “Natq,” a monologue, Abu Hamdan explains that Abi Chahine, as a reincarnated witness, “is in a unique position to traverse a silence that spans two generations.” The older generation dutifully avoids speaking about the country’s sectarian war and its brutalities, including the use of child soldiers. The younger generation, Abu Hamdan’s, cannot speak to a history that they were never taught.

In Amman, Abu Hamdan’s mother, who is British, collected paintings by Ahmad Nawash, Princess Fahrelnissa Zeid, and Ayad Al Nimar. When Abu Hamdan was seven, his parents divorced, and he and Shakeeb moved with their mother to Yorkshire, where she had grown up. The change was jarring. “I remember when we first moved to the U.K., I answered every question with ‘What?’ ” he told me. This went on for so long that his mother took him to get a hearing test: “Suffice to say, there was nothing wrong with my hearing, but I remember the day very clearly, as it was my first time in an audio laboratory.”

Abu Hamdan recalled, of those early years in the U.K., “Political consciousness, for me, developed around having a mixed background growing up in Yorkshire, not really being like anyone

else.” He and Shakeeb eventually got involved in the local punk-and-D.I.Y. underground music scene. The ethos was anti-industry, anti-capitalism, no gods, no masters. The brothers played in a few bands, the best known of which was Cleckhuddersfax, named for a triangle of towns in Yorkshire: Cleckheaton, Huddersfield, and Halifax. *Vice* noted that the band sounded like Devo—the New Wave group behind “Whip It”—“if Devo were covering the Blackadder theme tune with a bag full of MDMA strapped to their foreheads, leaking into their eyeballs.” Abu Hamdan, the lead vocalist, was, and still is, a bit of a joker. As a performer, he veered toward the exhibitionistic. He wore an orange singlet with an open torso, and a crocheted face of a bearded man affixed to his groin, evoking pubic hair.

After graduating from high school, Abu Hamdan moved to Leeds, where he organized shows for musicians who were interested in the point at which music became noise. He decided to enroll at Middlesex University, where he majored in Sonic Arts, a program that combined acoustic phenomena and artistic experimentation.

Abu Hamdan remembers going with a friend to Manifesta 7, a roving art biennial, in Italy. There, he first encountered the work of Eyal Weizman, a British Israeli architect. Weizman was a gadfly in the worlds of art and architecture. In 2002, he and another Israeli architect, Rafi Segal, had been commissioned to design Israel’s official entry to that year’s World Congress of Architects, in Berlin. They created an exhibition called “A Civilian Occupation: The Politics of Israeli Architecture,” about settlement planning in the West Bank, where architecture had been co-opted by the Israeli state as a “strategic weapon.” On learning of the exhibit’s contents, the Israel Association of United Architects cancelled the show; Weizman and Segal brought it to the U.S., where it was shown at the Storefront for Art and Architecture, in New York.

At the time, Weizman was developing a theory of architecture that engaged with a brutal fact of contemporary conflict: most

casualties of war die inside of buildings. Abu Hamdan remembers telling Weizman that he was interested in sound and in architecture. “What sound? What architecture?” Weizman countered.

Abu Hamdan followed Weizman to Goldsmiths, University of London, where Weizman had established the Centre for Research Architecture. He and his fellow-researchers were discussing ways to shed light on the violations of the government. They were frustrated with forensics—the science of investigating crimes and producing evidence—which is typically seen as the responsibility of law enforcement. The researchers theorized a practice of counter-forensics, in which they would use some of the surveillance technologies of the state, but against the state. In 2010, Weizman founded Forensic Architecture, an agency that is composed of lawyers, architects, human-rights researchers, and scientists, who use architectural technology, such as satellite imagery, 3-D modelling, and light detection, in addition to witness testimony, to deliver a larger picture of violence—one that takes into account historic context and social structures. The group has published more than seventy investigations, including an analysis of the Grenfell Tower fire, in London, and a report on the genocide of the Ixil Maya, in Guatemala. The investigators developed their own niches: Lorenzo Pezzani worked on cases involving violence in contested border areas, like the ocean; Nabil Ahmed and Paulo Tavares worked on environmental incursions, such as deforestation and mining. Abu Hamdan did sound analysis. “It was all so new,” he told me.

One of the earliest cases Abu Hamdan worked on involved Nadeem Nawara and Mohammad Abu Daher, two Palestinian teen-agers who were shot dead by Israeli border police in the occupied West Bank during a Nakba Day protest. The Israel Defense Forces claimed that the officers had shot the boys with rubber bullets, to quell the demonstration, and that the cause of the deaths could not be determined. Abu Hamdan used sound analysis to differentiate

the sonic signatures of various kinds of ammunition. In this case, the sounds were of neither rubber-coated bullets nor live ammunition “but something in between,” he said. “A kind of amalgamation of the two sounds.” Abu Hamdan ultimately found that the officers had fired live ammunition out of a rubber-bullet extension. This finding led to the indictment of Ben Deri, one of the Israeli border officers, on manslaughter charges. (In 2016, Deri accepted a plea deal for the lesser charge of negligent homicide and received a nine-month prison sentence.)

When Ben Deri was arrested, in 2014, it was the first time that a member of the Israeli forces had been charged with killing a Palestinian child. But how could Abu Hamdan feel anything like resolution? The pursuit of legal justice, however limited, had forced him into a cowed posture. “I was immediately asked to do something that, for me, was politically compromising, which was to argue that the Israeli soldiers were not firing rubber bullets but live ammunition,” he said—the implication being that rubber bullets were acceptable. “Rubber bullets, especially in the Israel-Palestine context, are constantly being shot in people’s faces at close range,” Abu Hamdan explained. They maim, as a form of deterrence.

Two years after the bullet analysis, he created an installation called “Earshot,” which reflects on the killings of Nawara and Abu Daher. The centerpiece is a video called “Rubber Coated Steel.” The film was shot in an indoor gun range, where the sounds of gunfire cannot be heard from the outside—a metaphor for violence done in a kind of aural darkness. There is no speech, but text runs along the bottom of the video: a transcript from an imaginary civil trial. And yet, even in this space of speculative justice, Nawara and Abu Daher are not given “a voice”; the boys are not made to ventriloquize a fantasy of justice from beyond the grave. Abu Hamdan challenges a maxim forced onto the marginalized: that their voices are a source of power.

Central to Forensic Architecture's ethos is a belief that aesthetics inevitably plays a role in how violence gets narrativized—in court, in the news, and even in the organization's own work.

Investigations are not enough; people are not moved by mere knowledge of crimes against humanity. Forensic Architecture presents its findings in multiple forums: online, in court, in the human-rights arena, and in the art world. At the 2019 Whitney Biennial, the group planned to show a film called "Triple-Chaser," an exposé of Safariland, a company that manufactures tear gas that has been used to terrorize civilians in Palestine, in Ferguson, Missouri, and on the U.S.-Mexico border. The company's owner, Warren Kanders, was a member of the museum's board at the time; he stepped down after Forensic Architecture and other artists withdrew from the event, which would become known as the Tear Gas Biennial.

Research-based works have taken over the contemporary art scene. In 2023, the art historian Claire Bishop, writing in *Artforum*, attributed this phenomenon to the rise of doctoral programs for artists, particularly in Europe, where artistic practice is supplemented by written research. Bishop notes the risk of art being turned into something "systematic" and "professional." (In the U.S., the conversation about academia pressing out the spirit of the contemporary artist is centered on the M.F.A.) But she mentions Forensic Architecture as a group that is pushing research-based art further. "Rather than being noncommittal to avoid didacticism or authoritarianism," Bishop writes, "Forensic Architecture believe that 'having an axe to grind should sharpen the quality of one's data rather than blunt one's argument.' " The art is not diluted by the research; the research strengthens its argumentative power.

In 2017, Abu Hamdan got a Ph.D. from Goldsmiths in forensic sound analysis. His dissertation, which made a case for a kind of political listening, citing playwrights next to post-structuralists, is

still circulated among students and researchers there. “We would say, ‘This is Lawrence Abu Hamdan Studies,’ ” Weizman told me.

Last year, Abu Hamdan started his own investigative group, called Earshot. It describes itself as the first not-for-profit group that is devoted solely to conducting audio analysis of human-rights abuses and state violence. The team is small. Abu Hamdan works with Caline Matar, an audio researcher who serves as his second-in-command, and Fabio Cervi, a trained architect and an audio investigator. Cervi lives in London, and Matar lives in Beirut; the three often work remotely, videoconferencing with one another. Open-source investigators sometimes do field work, but more often their place is remote. They do their work from a distance, analyzing the leftover traces, the evidence that can be found online.

After the Hangar show, I visited Abu Hamdan and Cervi at the Forensic Architecture offices, in London, where they were collaborating in person. (Earshot often works closely with Forensic Architecture.) Cervi, like Abu Hamdan, is a musician. He recalled struggling when he first joined Earshot, and realizing, as he worked with Abu Hamdan, “Whatever you’re hearing, I can’t hear it.”

“I think I remember what it was,” Abu Hamdan said. They had been analyzing electromagnetic bumps in a recording, which is one way to verify the authenticity of a piece of audio.

When I visited, Cervi and Abu Hamdan were investigating an attack on seven journalists in southern Lebanon, on October 13th. A Reuters journalist, Issam Abdallah, had been killed, and six of his colleagues injured. Earshot, after analyzing cell-phone videos and footage from a videographer near the scene, determined that for forty-six minutes prior to the incident the noise of a drone could be heard in the background. According to Earshot, the drone circled the journalists at least eleven times before the attack, which suggests that the I.D.F. had sufficient information to know that the

journalists were civilians. Now Earshot needed to create a visual representation of this sound data.

Cervi pulled up a file that showed the changing volume of the sound waves emitted from the drone. There were parts of the wave pattern where the color was faint, and parts where it was dark. Abu Hamdan explained, without looking up from his laptop, that the darker waves corresponded with the moments in which the drone's propeller had been facing the camera. Cervi could use this information to animate the drone's movements, to show how it had circled the journalists.

Since October 7th, most of Earshot's work had been focussed on Israel and Palestine. On October 17th, there was an explosion at Al-Ahli Arab Hospital, in Gaza City. Gaza's health ministry had estimated the death toll to be more than four hundred people, most of whom were Palestinians sheltering in a humanitarian zone. U.S. ministries estimated that between a hundred and three hundred people had been killed. Hamas blamed the explosion on an Israeli air strike; the I.D.F. claimed that a salvo of seventeen rockets had been fired from southwest Gaza and that one had misfired, with the unspent rocket propellant causing the damage to the hospital.

Shortly after the explosion, Earshot performed an initial analysis using two separate videos taken near the hospital, which cast doubt on Israel's claim. By analyzing the Doppler effect—the observed frequency emitted by a sound source relative to the observer—the researchers found that the pitch frequency didn't line up with a missile coming from southwest Gaza. "We're saying that this is reducing the probability of this coming from the west," Abu Hamdan explained at the time. "It's rocket science after all, so we can't rule it out."

Four months later, Forensic Architecture published its full investigation, demonstrating that all seventeen Palestinian rockets had finished burning their propellant while in flight. The

investigation was not meant to prove that Israel had destroyed Al-Ahli Arab Hospital. It is still unclear what caused the explosion. What the investigation did was show that the I.D.F. had fostered an environment of uncertainty by putting out misinformation about a misfired Palestinian rocket. “We tend to be conservative about our findings,” Weizman told me. “Although, to be absolutely frank, the way it works in reality, we can put in as many caveats as we want. We could say that it’s more likely than not that something has happened, and the entire Internet would go, like, ‘Whoa, Forensic Architecture established the facts around that.’ ” He continued, “The response is either people are kind of cheering, or people are going, ‘You motherfuckers! You manipulate this!’ ”

Myriam Ben Salah, a curator who worked with Abu Hamdan on one of his installations, told me about a video meeting that she attended with Abu Hamdan and other artists and curators this past November. At the time, the Western art world was imploding, with artists voicing concerns about censorship. Many people on the call were emotional. Abu Hamdan was coolheaded. “He’s always operated knowing that you couldn’t say certain things, or bring up certain subjects, such as the ‘Palestinian question,’ without consequences,” Ben Salah said. “Because of the nature of his work, he was already in parallel networks of people who think differently from the mainstream Western perspective.”

At the Forensic Architecture offices, Abu Hamdan was characteristically low-key. I watched him lean all the way back in his swivel chair and fiddle with the zipper on his BrainDead hoodie. But at one point he logged on to X, where he noticed a photo. It was of a group of Palestinian men, naked and blindfolded, being made to kneel. “This isn’t real, is it?” he asked. “Is this A.I.?” The photo was authentic, which Abu Hamdan surely knew, even if his instinct was to question its provenance. A look of disgust crept over his face.



*"Twenty-five thousand, do I hear thirty thousand? Let me remind you all—this is the last Thin Mint cookie in the sleeve . . ."*

Cartoon by Lars Kenseth

Later, we visited Dalston, an area of East London where Abu Hamdan used to live. We went to a Turkish restaurant, which wasn't as good as he remembered, and then settled into a quiet section of a loud bar nearby. "For a lot of Arabs and many other people, Palestine is a kind of . . ." He paused, circling the top of his beer glass with his thumb. "It's a curriculum."

A common critique levelled against Forensic Architecture and Earshot is that they are biased, particularly against Israel. Abu Hamdan said that he and his fellow-investigators have to be "way more rigorous" than the state does, because he knows how easily their findings can be dismissed. He told me that he worries his critics will "find something, an article, that says I'm an artist or whatever, without understanding all that I've done. There's been a kind of discourse of 'How can he do this work objectively?'"

Though Forensic Architecture and, now, Earshot investigate acts perpetrated by states and by corporations, they also inevitably interact with the same legal, journalistic, and governmental apparatuses they are trying to challenge. In 2013, Abu Hamdan was

called as an expert witness at the U.K. Asylum and Immigration Chamber. The U.K., like many other countries, uses a kind of accent analysis to determine whether applicants for asylum are telling the truth about fleeing from conflict zones. The model purports to have a kind of scientific impartiality. But it is a shibboleth: accents are not stable, and accent testing cannot account for how a voice changes as a person moves from place to place—the fluidity of life in a world brutally organized by orders. Abu Hamdan analyzed the case of a man named Mohamed Barakat, who had come to the U.K. from Palestine, and who the U.K. government had concluded was actually from North Africa or Lebanon, based on an analysis of a twelve-minute phone call. The government issued a deportation order, and Abu Hamdan testified at Bakarat’s eventual trial.

At the trial, Abu Hamdan explained why the accent analysis was faulty. The judge followed up by asking him if there was anything that could be done to fix the model and make it usable, or whether he found the process to be “wholly wrong.”

“I think it needs to be much more thorough if it is to work,” Abu Hamdan said. “I think that twelve-minute interviews are not sufficient. I think it needs to take into account the people’s biographies much more than simply where they come from.”

Later, the lawyer for Bakarat’s defense told Abu Hamdan that he believed the judge, with this line of inquiry, was trying to ferret out political bias, and to see if Abu Hamdan believed that accent analysis, as a concept, was odious. “Had I answered yes, taking his language or similar into my response, then the entirety of the evidence I had presented that day would have been nullified,” Abu Hamdan told me.

The question of bias inevitably comes up in cases like these. To Abu Hamdan, the question is nonsensical. It presupposes a fantasy in which traditional institutions—say, newspapers and immigration offices—don’t have biases of their own.

In October, Abu Hamdan, along with thousands of other artists, signed an open letter, published by *Artforum*, condemning Israeli violence in Palestine. I signed a similar letter, organized by Writers Against the War on Gaza, expressing support for Palestine and calling for a ceasefire; I also dropped out of an event at the Brooklyn Museum, co-sponsored by *PEN America*, because neither institution had called for an end to violence in Gaza. (Almost three weeks later, *PEN* issued a statement calling for an immediate ceasefire.)

I wondered if Abu Hamdan felt a kind of despair doing his work. He told me that he generally believes his feelings are not of importance. He understands his investigations as cracks in a disintegrating edifice, one in which violence against Palestinians is tolerated to maintain a status quo.

Recently, Abu Hamdan told me that he feels “out of synch” when he performs “Air Pressure.” The project is not far enough in the past to be historical, yet not close enough to the present to feel salient, and this creates a kind of dissonance. “The war now has escalated from background noise, and material destruction is once again foregrounded,” he said.

I met up with Abu Hamdan in April at Washington Square Park, in New York City. While in the States, he was giving a lecture at Washington University and running a workshop for investigative reporters at the *Times*. He had just come from meeting with Ana Janevski, a curator in the department of media and performance at MoMA, who had curated a run of his performances at the museum last spring. We walked over to the nearby campus of New York University, to see what remained of the pro-Palestine student encampments, which N.Y.U. and other universities across the country had been clamping down on, often using police to forcibly eject protesters. We walked by N.Y.U.’s business school, which had been boarded up, the plywood walls painted green. Abu Hamdan put his finger to the surface. “Just dried,” he said. A man riding a

scooter and carrying a guitar on his back asked Abu Hamdan if the school was closed. “In a sense,” Abu Hamdan replied.

The student protests had inflamed the punditry class; the media was now talking about speech and language instead of displacement and killing. At Columbia, students occupied Hamilton Hall, the main administration center, unfurling a banner on its balcony that read “Hind’s Hall.” The center named for the Founding Father was commandeered, if briefly, in honor of a six-year-old Palestinian girl, Hind Rajab. In January, Hind, her aunt, her uncle, and her three cousins had been displaced from their home in Gaza City, and had attempted to flee in their car. Everyone in the vehicle but Hind and one of her cousins was killed. Afterward, Hind called the Palestinian Red Crescent Society hotline—an emergency-services organization—and her conversation with the operators later leaked online. “I’m so scared, please come,” she tells the dispatchers. There are gunshots. The emergency organization was given clearance by the Israeli Defense Ministry to send paramedics. But after the paramedics reached Hind they lost contact with the hotline operators. It would be twelve days until Hind and the paramedics were found. Her body was shot through with bullets. The ambulance that held the paramedics was discovered nearby, burned beyond recognition.

Earshot had been commissioned by the *Washington Post* to help investigate whether Hind and the paramedics had been intentionally murdered by the I.D.F. Key to this investigation was an analysis of the gunshots audible in the phone call. The I.D.F. had consistently denied that it had any forces in that area of Gaza City and had attributed Hind’s death to rogue or errant Hamas rockets (hence the burned-up ambulance). Audio ballistic analysis of the shots heard in the phone call and the CCTV recordings suggested that the I.D.F. tanks had in fact been in the area and had likely shot at the family. The *Washington Post* article that drew on Abu Hamdan’s work depicts the last hours of Hind’s life. In late June,

Al Jazeera released a documentary, called “The Night Won’t End,” that builds on the original investigation. It presents findings from Forensic Architecture and Earshot, including that the gunfire in the attack was consistent with Israeli weaponry, and that the shooter would have been somewhere between thirteen and twenty-three metres away.

Abu Hamdan told me about his experience of working, last summer, on an investigation of the death of Nahel Merzouk, a seventeen-year-old boy who had been shot dead in Nanterre, outside Paris, by police during a traffic stop. The boy was a French national of North African descent. A local lawyer argued that Nahel had not coöperated with police officers during the stop and that the killing was justified, igniting protests across the country. (The officer who shot Nahel was arrested; he is currently out of jail under supervision, pending further investigation.)

In an audio recording of the killing, two pieces of dialogue could be heard: “*Coupe, coupe*,” (“Cut, cut”) and “*Pousse-toi*” (“Move over”). Many French publications had attributed the “*pousse-toi*” to Nahel, but the Earshot team couldn’t figure out why Nahel would have said these things, or why the officer would have said them to Nahel. They decided to re-create the incident, using Abu Hamdan’s car, which he stood beside, in the position of the officer. After processing and analyzing the audio, Matar and Abu Hamdan realized it was unlikely that anyone inside the car had said, “Move over.” Another theory, posited by Earshot, was that “*pousse-toi*” was actually one police officer speaking to his colleague, instructing him to move out of the way of the shot to come. Abu Hamdan wrote, “This would indicate the killing was predetermined.”

The thousands of protesters, of course, did not wait for Earshot’s audio analysis before expressing their anger over Nahel’s death. They knew how the police treated people who looked like him. The scrutiny applied by Abu Hamdan may have meaning in a legal

context, but the people were past garnering legitimacy from the law.

In New York, we made our way south, to the Bowery. As we walked, Abu Hamdan told me about an interaction he'd had with a curator at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. For more than a year, he had been working on a show with the museum. After October, he recalled, he heard nothing from the curatorial team. He said that a couple of weeks ago the team had written to him, saying that they could no longer put on the exhibition. He told me they had said that "the world was a different place." Wryly, he paraphrased his response. "I sent them an invoice for all that we had done," he said. "And I signed it 'from the other side of history.' " ♦



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[Letter from Washington](#)

## Inside the Trump Plan for 2025

A network of well-funded far-right activists is preparing for the former President's return to the White House.

By [Jonathan Blitzer](#)

July 15, 2024



*The founders of the Conservative Partnership Institute, someone close to the organization said, “have thought deeply about what’s needed to create the infrastructure and the resources for a more anti-establishment conservative movement.”*

*Illustration by Pablo Delcan and Danielle Del Plato*

One evening in April of 2022, a hundred people milled around a patio at Mar-a-Lago, sipping champagne and waiting for Donald Trump to arrive. Mark Meadows, Trump's former chief of staff, stood in front of an archway fringed with palm trees and warmed up the crowd with jokes about the deep state. The purpose of the gathering was to raise money for the Center for Renewing America, a conservative policy shop whose most recent annual report emphasized a “commitment to end woke and weaponized government.” Its founder, Russell Vought, a former head of the Office of Management and Budget under Trump, and a leading candidate to be the White House chief of staff in a second term, was in attendance, chatting amiably with the guests. He is trim and bald, with glasses and a professorial beard. His group is a kind of ivory tower for far-right Republicans, issuing white papers with

titles such as “The Great Replacement in Theory and Practice.” In 2021, he wrote an op-ed for *Newsweek* that asked, “Is There Anything Actually Wrong with ‘Christian Nationalism’?”

The Center for Renewing America is one of roughly two dozen right-wing groups that have emerged in Washington since Trump left office. What unites them is a wealthy network based on Capitol Hill called the Conservative Partnership Institute, which many in Washington regard as the next Trump Administration in waiting. C.P.I.’s list of personnel and affiliates includes some of Trump’s most fervent backers: Meadows is a senior partner; Stephen Miller, Trump’s top adviser on immigration, runs an associated group called America First Legal, which styles itself as the A.C.L.U. of the *MAGA* movement; Jeffrey Clark, a former Justice Department lawyer facing disbarment for trying to overturn the 2020 election, is a fellow at the Center for Renewing America. All of them are expected to have high-ranking roles in the government if Trump is elected again. “C.P.I. has gathered the most talented people in the conservative movement by far,” someone close to the organization told me. “They have thought deeply about what’s needed to create the infrastructure and the resources for a more anti-establishment conservative movement.”

C.P.I. was founded in 2017 by Jim DeMint, a former adman from South Carolina who spent eight years in the Senate before resigning to lead the Heritage Foundation. During that time, he was one of Washington’s most notorious partisan combatants. As a senator, he attacked his Republican colleagues for being insufficiently conservative, tanking their bills and raising money to unseat them in primaries. Mitch McConnell, the Senate Minority Leader, called him “an innovator in Republican-on-Republican violence.” With C.P.I., DeMint wanted to create a base of operations for insurgents like himself. “If you’re not getting criticized in Washington,” he once said, “you’re probably part of the problem.”

Other conservative groups have defined Republican Presidencies: the Heritage Foundation staffed the Administration of Ronald Reagan, the American Enterprise Institute that of George W. Bush. But C.P.I. is categorically different from its peers. It's not a think tank—it's an incubator and an activist hub that funds other organizations, coordinates with conservative members of the House and Senate, and works as a counterweight to G.O.P. leadership. The effort to contest the 2020 election results and the protests of January 6, 2021, were both plotted at C.P.I.'s headquarters, at 300 Independence Avenue. "Until seven years ago, it didn't exist, and no entity like it existed," Senator Mike Lee, a Republican from Utah, told me. "It's grown by leaps and bounds."

C.P.I. and its constellation of groups, most of which are nonprofits, raised nearly two hundred million dollars in 2022. The organization has bought up some fifty million dollars' worth of real estate in and around Washington, including multiple properties on the Hill. A mansion on twenty-two hundred acres in eastern Maryland hosts trainings for congressional staff and conservative activists. Four political-action committees have rented space in C.P.I.'s offices, and many more belonging to members of Congress pay to use C.P.I.'s facilities, such as studios for podcast recordings and TV hits. The House Freedom Caucus, a group of three dozen hard-line anti-institutionalist Republican lawmakers, and the Steering Committee, a similar group in the Senate, headed by Lee, hold weekly meetings at C.P.I.'s headquarters. Senator Ron Johnson, a Republican from Wisconsin, called the organization a "gathering site" that offered "regular contact" with the power brokers of the conservative movement. He told me, "You walk into the building and you can talk to Mark Meadows or Jim DeMint if they're there, or Russ Vought."

At the time of the event at Mar-a-Lago, in the spring of 2022, right-wing political circles were in a state of charged anticipation. Trump had not yet announced his reëlection bid, but inflation was high,

Joe Biden was unpopular, and pollsters were anticipating a Republican rout in the upcoming midterms. “The left tried to drag America further into a dark future of totalitarianism, chaotic elections, and cultural decay,” C.P.I.’s leaders wrote. Those in attendance knew that Trump would soon enter the race. The question was what, exactly, they might get out of it.

Shortly after 6 P.M., Trump strode onto the patio, wearing his customary dark suit and a blue tie, and launched into a stem-winder. “It was so fucking funny,” the person close to C.P.I. told me. “Almost nothing was related to the Center for Renewing America other than a reference to how good Russ was. He was riffing on whatever was on his mind.” Trump recounted a trip that he’d taken to Iraq as President, but he kept digressing to complain about a thirteen-billion-dollar aircraft carrier that he’d commissioned. At one point, he turned to the culture wars but couldn’t remember the phrase “critical race theory.” Vought, standing nearby, had to prompt him. “He was burning down the house,” the person told me. “Everyone was loving it.”

Still, one aspect of the speech caught the attention of C.P.I.’s executives. Ever since Trump was acquitted in his first impeachment trial, in 2020, he has threatened to purge the government of anyone he considered disloyal. His defenders are united in the belief that career bureaucrats foiled his first-term plans from inside the government. C.P.I., which has spent years placing conservative job seekers in congressional offices, is now vetting potential staffers for a second Trump term. One of its groups, the American Accountability Foundation, has been investigating the personal profiles and social-media posts of federal employees to determine who might lack fealty to Trump. “The key throughout the speech was that Trump complained about his personnel,” the attendee said. “He said he had these bad generals, bad Cabinet secretaries. That was a big signal to the people there.”

Six years earlier, on a Monday in late March, cars ferrying some of the country's most influential conservatives, including the Republican senators Jeff Sessions and Tom Cotton, began arriving at the Washington offices of the law firm Jones Day. DeMint, then the head of the Heritage Foundation, and Leonard Leo, the vice-president of the Federalist Society, entered discreetly through a parking garage, as they'd been instructed. Newt Gingrich, who wanted the press to see him, insisted on using the firm's front door. They were attending a private meeting with Trump, who was rapidly gaining in the Republican primary but remained anathema to much of the G.O.P. establishment. "People in the conservative movement suddenly realized that Trump could be the horse that they could ride to victory," a former senior Heritage staffer told me. "He was being shepherded around the conservative policy world. DeMint was a part of that."



Cartoon by Liana Finck

As early as January, 2016, DeMint predicted that Trump would win the Republican nomination. It was an unpopular position among conservatives, many of whom felt more ideologically aligned with Senator Ted Cruz, of Texas. In a conference room at Jones Day,

Trump gave a brief speech and opened the floor to questions. Leo asked him whom he'd nominate for federal judgeships. Antonin Scalia, the conservative stalwart on the Supreme Court, had died the previous month. Trump replied, "Why don't I put out a list publicly of people who could be the sort of people I would put on the Supreme Court?" DeMint immediately volunteered Heritage for the job of drafting it.

The Heritage Foundation was founded in the nineteen-seventies by Edwin Feulner, a Republican operative with a doctorate in political science. Under his direction, the think tank became the country's leading bastion of conservative policy, with an annual budget exceeding eighty million dollars. When DeMint took over, in 2013, traditionalists on the organization's board were concerned that his rebellious style would diminish the group's reputation for serious research. He confirmed their suspicions by hiring several of his Senate aides. The former Heritage staffer said, "There were cultural differences between existing leadership and the DeMint team."

But DeMint's arrival reflected changes already under way at the organization. In 2010, as the Tea Party emerged as a force in conservative politics, the think tank launched an advocacy arm called Heritage Action, which issued scorecards evaluating legislators' conservatism and deputized a network of local activists as "sentinels" to enforce a populist agenda. Vought, who'd previously worked as a staffer in House leadership, helped lead the operation. Under DeMint, the group became merciless in its attacks on rank-and-file Republican lawmakers. "Heritage Action was created to lobby the Hill, but they took it one step further," James Wallner, a lecturer in political science at Clemson University, who worked with DeMint in the Senate and at Heritage, told me. "They had a grassroots army. They used tens of thousands of activists to target people."

After the meeting with Trump, in 2016, some of DeMint's staff objected to the task of drawing up a list of potential judges, arguing

that Heritage was overcommitting itself. This was typically the domain of the Federalist Society, which was putting forth its own list of judicial nominees. But DeMint, sensing an opportunity to maximize his clout with Trump, dismissed the concerns. That August, after Trump became the Party's nominee, Heritage was enlisted to participate in the Presidential transition in the event of a Trump victory. Chris Christie, the governor of New Jersey at the time, was overseeing the effort and put Feulner, who was then the chair of Heritage's board of trustees, in charge of domestic policy. Feulner later told the *Times* that Heritage saw a greater opportunity to influence policy under Trump than it had under Reagan. "No. 1, he did clearly want to make very significant changes," Feulner said of Trump. "No. 2, his views on so many things were not particularly well formed." He added, "If he somehow pulled the election off, we thought, wow, we could really make a difference."

Heritage was already primed. The year after DeMint took over, he had begun an initiative called the Project to Restore America, which worked to build up a reserve of reliably conservative personnel. The morning after Trump won, DeMint called a meeting in an auditorium at Heritage headquarters. Many staffers had been there all night watching the returns in a state of elation. "We were criticized by a lot of our friends in the movement for even going to meetings with Trump," DeMint said, according to the *Times*. Then, quoting a line from the eighties TV show "The A-Team," he added, "I love it when a plan comes together."

The following day, Steve Bannon, Trump's senior adviser, summoned Christie to his office on the fourteenth floor of Trump Tower, in New York. "We've decided to make a change," Bannon told him. Mike Pence, the incoming Vice-President, and Jared Kushner, the President's son-in-law, were replacing him. Christie wrote in his 2019 memoir that thirty volumes of policy and staff plans collected in large binders over several months "were tossed in a Trump Tower dumpster, never to be seen again." Christie's firing

set off a scramble to finish the job of staffing the new Administration and preparing a slate of agenda-setting policies before Trump was sworn in. Heritage now had an even more direct role to play. Pence was friendly with DeMint, and a former Sessions aide, who was appointed to lead the transition's daily operations, was close with Ed Corrigan, a former executive director of the Senate Steering Committee who was then a vice-president at the Heritage Foundation.

Heritage went on to fill hundreds of jobs throughout virtually every federal agency, and some of the President's most prominent Cabinet officials—including Betsy DeVos, the Secretary of Education; Scott Pruitt, the head of the Environmental Protection Agency; and Rick Perry, the Secretary of Energy—had appeared on the foundation's lists of recommendations. “DeMint told friends and colleagues that he was proudest of his work at Heritage in placing Heritage employees into the Administration,” a DeMint associate told me. “That was a big deal.”

Still, Heritage’s board remained fiercely divided over DeMint. Mickey Edwards, a founding Heritage trustee, said at the time that DeMint had turned “a highly respected think tank” into “a partisan tool” for the Tea Party. Wallner, who joined Heritage as its research director in the summer of 2016, told me, “I walked into a civil war.” He recalled meeting a board member at a hotel bar near the White House who asked outright, “Are you on team DeMint?” Such critics had expected Trump to lose spectacularly in November, discrediting DeMint in the process.

Before Trump’s Inauguration, DeMint requested a new contract, but the board refused. The following spring, DeMint and his closest advisers went to San Diego for the annual Heritage donor retreat. The night before their flight home, they learned that DeMint was being fired. Corrigan was there, along with Wallner; Wesley Denton, a former DeMint staffer; and Bret Bernhardt, DeMint’s ex-

chief of staff. “We had put our heart and soul into this,” Wallner told me. “It was shocking.”

According to a study by the Brookings Institution, there was more staff turnover in the first thirty-two months of Trump’s Presidency than there had been in the entire first terms of each of his five predecessors. Inside the White House, a former senior official told me, Trump was constantly enraged that his Cabinet wouldn’t break the law for him. He wanted the Department of Homeland Security to shoot migrants crossing the Rio Grande, the Defense Department to draw up plans to invade Mexico, and the Internal Revenue Service to audit his critics. Trump didn’t understand why the government couldn’t revoke the security clearances of former intelligence officials who criticized him on CNN. The official said that Trump “talked about firing large numbers of the federal workers,” to eliminate any further checks on his agenda.

The tumult presented an opportunity for outsiders like DeMint. He and his associates had started brainstorming their next moves before their flight from San Diego touched down in Washington. “You don’t need a think tank,” Wallner recalled telling DeMint. Their collective expertise was in Congress, where Party leadership always seemed to have the advantage of better and more extensive staffing. What if they levelled the playing field by helping to recruit conservative personnel, and schooling them in how to be more effective activists? DeMint and his group could train a new class of staffers and place them within the system.

Conservatives in Washington also needed somewhere to gather, share ideas, and strategize. From 2011 to 2015, a group of Republican House members, who would eventually form the Freedom Caucus, had regularly met in the kitchen of a Heritage executive. One night, his wife was hosting a work dinner, so the group relocated to a restaurant called Tortilla Coast, which became their new meeting spot. On occasion, when they tried to book space at the Capitol Hill Club, an exclusive Republican hangout in

Washington, Party leadership made sure that their request was declined. “The thing that made Heritage so powerful were the coalitions they could build,” Wallner told me. “That was the stuff DeMint loved.” The sentiment on the plane, he went on, was “Let’s do this thing that DeMint loves to do, that’s so vital. It would be like a WeWork for conservatives.”

On May 10, 2017, DeMint and the others filed incorporation papers for the Conservative Partnership Institute. Their lawyer, who was also representing them in severance negotiations with Heritage, was Cleta Mitchell, a movement mainstay in her sixties who was, as the person close to C.P.I. told me, “the attorney for pretty much any new conservative group that was starting in Washington.” She became C.P.I.’s secretary. The institute’s accountant was a close associate of Leonard Leo’s. It was a lean operation at first: seven employees and a rented office on Pennsylvania Avenue above a liquor store and an Asian-fusion restaurant. At the end of its first year, the group’s total assets and liabilities were less than a million dollars.

Then the White House called. The President had been accusing his personnel of deliberately undercutting him, but his top aides were, in fact, struggling to fill an increasing number of vacancies within the executive agencies. “It was an ‘Aha!’ moment for C.P.I.,” the person close to the organization told me. “The White House needed staffing help. People who joined the Administration were either R.N.C. hacks who didn’t like Trump or they were Trump-campaign supporters who could barely get their pants on in the morning.”

One day in June, 2018, Hill staffers working for conservative members of Congress received an e-mail: “Interested in a job at the White House?” C.P.I. was hosting a job fair, at the Dirksen Senate Office Building. The director of the White House’s personnel office would be in attendance, along with other senior officials. C.P.I. had been conceived to help staff congressional offices, but it was

scaling up. “They needed a national figure,” another former DeMint staffer told me. “Their brand is bigger with Trump.”

A year later, Trump was impeached for what he called a “perfect phone call” with the Ukrainian President, Volodymyr Zelensky, in which Trump suggested that U.S. military aid to Ukraine might depend on Zelensky agreeing to investigate the business dealings of Joe Biden’s son Hunter. At the impeachment trial, two members of the Trump Administration, Alexander Vindman, of the National Security Council, and Marie Yovanovitch, the recently fired Ambassador to Ukraine, testified against the President. Senator Cruz, who was coördinating with the President’s legal team, ran an impeachment “war room” out of the basement of C.P.I.’s headquarters. Using C.P.I. equipment, he also recorded a podcast, called “Verdict with Ted Cruz,” which he taped after each day’s testimony, attacking the proceedings as a partisan sham. “Verdict” was downloaded more than a million times, making it one of the most popular political podcasts in the country.

A few weeks after Trump was acquitted, on a party-line vote in the Senate, a C.P.I. executive named Rachel Bovard addressed an audience at the Council for National Policy, a secretive network of conservative activists. They’d assembled for a board-of-governors luncheon at a Ritz-Carlton in California. “We work very closely . . . with the Office of Presidential Personnel at the White House,” Bovard said, in footage obtained by Documented, a Washington-based watchdog group. “Because we see what happens when we don’t vet these people. That’s how we got Lieutenant Colonel Vindman, O.K.? That’s how we got Marie Yovanovitch. All these people that led the impeachment against President Trump shouldn’t have been there in the first place.”

By then, conservative activists, including Ginni Thomas, the wife of the Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas, were assembling lists of “bad people” in the government for Trump to fire or demote. Government officials on the lists were often identified as

either pro-Trump or anti-Trump. But behavior that counted as anti-Trump could be little more than an instance of someone obeying the law or observing ordinary bureaucratic procedure. In one memo, in which a Trump loyalist argued against appointing a former U.S. Attorney who was up for a job at the Treasury Department, a list of infractions included an unwillingness to criminally investigate multiple women who had accused Brett Kavanaugh of sexual misconduct, according to Axios. In October, 2020, Trump issued an executive order that was largely overlooked in the midst of the pandemic and that fall's election. Known as Schedule F, it stripped career civil servants of their job protections, making it much easier for the President to replace them with handpicked appointees.

The following month, when Trump refused to accept his election loss, "there were people in the White House who operated under the assumption that they were not leaving," a former aide said. One of them was John McEntee, a caustic thirty-year-old who'd once been Trump's personal assistant and was now in charge of the Presidential Personnel Office. (In 2018, John Kelly, who was then Trump's chief of staff, had fired McEntee for failing a security clearance owing to a gambling habit, but Trump rehired him two years later.) Young staffers were scared that McEntee might find out if they started interviewing for other positions. "There was fear of retribution if it got back to him," the former aide said. Other White House officials, such as Meadows, were clear-eyed about the election results but vowed to fight them anyway. Meadows discreetly told a few staffers that, when Trump's term was over, they should join him at the Conservative Partnership Institute. "C.P.I. was his ticket to be that pressure point on Capitol Hill," one of the staffers told me. "He wanted to be the guy who held Congress to the *MAGA* agenda."



*"What's the point of getting over jet lag if she won't?"*  
Cartoon by Amy Hwang

From the start, C.P.I. was involved in efforts to cast doubt on the 2020 election results. One Freedom Caucus member recalled, “Election Day was Tuesday, and we got back to the Capitol the following Monday. Tuesday, they’re meeting at C.P.I. and talking about how to get Trump sworn in on January 20th.” On November 9th, during the Senate Steering Committee’s regular meeting at C.P.I., Sidney Powell, a conservative lawyer, gave a talk about challenging the election results. “My purpose in having the meeting was to socialize with Republican senators the fact that *POTUS* needs to pursue his legal remedies,” Senator Lee, of Utah, told Meadows in a text. “You have in us a group of ready and loyal advocates who will go to bat for him.”

By the end of December, many Republicans, including Lee, had given up on Powell. She was citing rigged elections in Venezuela as evidence that the voting-machine company Dominion had tampered with ballots cast for Trump, but, despite frequent requests from Trump loyalists, she could never substantiate the claims. Hard-core partisans came up with a new plan: they wanted to disrupt the process by which the government would certify the election results, on January 6, 2021. Cleta Mitchell, the secretary of C.P.I. and a lawyer for Trump, was central in advancing this idea. She had gone into the 2020 race believing that Democrats would attempt to steal votes. “I was absolutely persuaded and believed

very strongly that President Trump would be reëlected and that the left and the Democrats would do everything they could to unwind it,” she later said.

Two days after the election, Mitchell wrote an e-mail to the legal academic John Eastman, encouraging him to craft a case that the Vice-President had the unilateral authority to throw out the election results in seven states, where the legislatures could then choose new slates of pro-Trump electors. Pence, who consulted his own legal experts, was unconvinced. But Eastman hardly needed to persuade Trump, who urged his supporters to march on the Capitol to pressure Pence into blocking the certification process.

Eventually, Eastman would be indicted in Arizona and Georgia on conspiracy, fraud, and racketeering charges for his role in trying to overturn the election. (He pleaded not guilty.)

Much of the effort to turn people out for the January 6th protest took place at C.P.I. “There were a series of conference calls,” the Freedom Caucus member told me. “Mark Meadows was on a lot of them. Trump was on more than one. The rally was a big thing that C.P.I. and Freedom Caucus members were involved in. The idea was that they were going to get everybody together on the Mall. That was all discussed at C.P.I.” (A C.P.I. spokesperson told me, “No idea what they’re talking about. C.P.I. had absolutely no involvement in these events.”)

On the afternoon of January 2nd, Mitchell joined the President on an hour-long phone call with Georgia’s secretary of state, in which Trump told him to “find 11,780 votes,” the number he needed to win the state. Later that evening, members of the Freedom Caucus, including Jim Jordan and Scott Perry, the caucus’s chairman, were scheduled to meet at C.P.I. to strategize about how to get their constituents to show up on January 6th. “Meadows was originally going to participate in person, but they moved it to conference call just to cover a wider breadth of people that weren’t in town,” Cassidy Hutchinson, Meadows’s aide, said in an interview with

lawyers from the January 6th Committee. The President also dialled in.

Even after the riot at the Capitol, Mitchell continued to contest the 2020 returns from her perch at C.P.I. For some of the more elaborate electoral challenges, such as audits of the results in Arizona and Georgia, which persisted after Biden had taken office, it was important to the organizers that the process seem legitimate and serious—and therefore independent of Trump. According to an investigation by Documented, C.P.I. used an accounting mechanism to hide the fact that the former President was funding part of the organization’s recount efforts. On July 26, 2021, Trump’s political-action committee, Save America, donated a million dollars to C.P.I. Two days later, a new nonprofit called the American Voting Rights Foundation, or A.V.R.F., was registered in Delaware; its direct controlling entity was another group tied to C.P.I. The same day, Mitchell sent an e-mail to Cyber Ninjas, a private company that a group of far-right state legislators in Arizona had recruited to conduct an audit of the Presidential results in Maricopa County. C.P.I. then paid a million dollars to A.V.R.F. According to the *Guardian*, it was the “only known donation that the group has ever received.” On July 29th, in an e-mail on which a C.P.I. executive was copied, Mitchell explained that A.V.R.F. was contributing a million dollars to the Arizona audit.

This spring, I received some friendly but unencouraging advice from a person close to DeMint: I shouldn’t count on speaking with him or his advisers. They were highly suspicious of mainstream attention. DeMint is now more of a figurehead at C.P.I. than an active leader of the organization. Meadows, who joined C.P.I. a week after leaving the Trump White House, and now receives an annual salary of eight hundred thousand dollars from the organization, is primarily a fund-raiser. He was indicted last year for election interference. (He pleaded not guilty.) Being in legal trouble is often a badge of honor in Trump’s circles, but Meadows

has fallen under suspicion from some of his old allies. ABC News reported last year that he had secretly spoken with federal prosecutors who were investigating the former President, a story that Meadows has since disputed. A recent *Times Magazine* article called him “the least trusted man in Washington.”

The daily operations of C.P.I. are run by Corrigan, its president, and Denton, the group’s chief operating officer. Corrigan declined to speak with me, but Denton was eventually willing to chat. One morning in May, we met in a coffee shop in the basement of a Senate office building. He is genial and plainspoken, with a youthful air and a beard that hangs thickly off his chin. During DeMint’s eight years in the Senate, Denton served as his director of communications, and they moved to Heritage together, in 2013. With the exception of a brief stint in the Trump Administration, where Denton worked at the Office of Management and Budget with Vought, he has been at C.P.I. since its creation.

“There’s nothing complicated about what we do,” he told me. “We train staff and place staff. That’s it. There are some outgrowths of that, in terms of supporting new groups. But, basically, we’re here to support those who are in the fight.”

In 2021, C.P.I.’s board made a fateful and, in retrospect, wise decision. High-ranking figures from the Trump Administration were leaving the government and needed a place to land during the Biden years. “It’s not hard to be a liberal in D.C.,” Denton told me. “It’s not the same for our side.” But C.P.I.’s founders were wary of creating just another version of the Heritage Foundation. “We had the opportunity to build a vast, huge bureaucratic organization when all our friends were coming out of the Trump Administration,” Denton said. “Instead, we helped them set up their own organizations.”

The structure of these groups could seem both byzantine and incestuous to an outsider, but the idea, Denton told me, was “to

insure mission alignment.” Stephen Miller formed America First Legal, a public-interest law group that has primarily targeted “woke corporations,” school districts, and the Biden Administration.

Vought started the Center for Renewing America, which generated policy proposals as though the Trump Administration had never ended. Corrigan and Denton were on the board of Vought’s group; Vought, Corrigan, and Denton sat on the board of Miller’s group. As more organizations joined the fold, their boards increasingly overlapped, and the roster of ideologues and Trump loyalists grew. Gene Hamilton and Matthew Whitaker, key figures from the Trump D.O.J., worked at America First Legal. Ken Cuccinelli, from the Department of Homeland Security; Mark Paoletta, from the Office of Management and Budget; and Kash Patel, from the Department of Defense, became fellows at Vought’s group.

By the end of 2021, C.P.I. had helped form eight new groups, each with a different yet complementary mission. The American Accountability Foundation focussed on attacking Biden’s nominees. The State Freedom Caucus Network helped state legislators create their own versions of the House Freedom Caucus in order to challenge their local Republican establishments. The Election Integrity Network, run by Mitchell, trained volunteers to monitor polling places and investigate state and local election officials. American Moment concentrated on cultivating the next generation of conservative staffers in Washington.

C.P.I. connected the founders of these groups with its network of donors and, in some instances, helped support the organizations until they could raise money for themselves. As American Moment waited for the I.R.S. to formalize its nonprofit tax status, for example, C.P.I. served as a fiscal sponsor, allowing donors to earmark money for the new group by giving it to C.P.I. The organization also offered its partners access to an array of shared resources: discounted real estate, accounting services, legal representation. “This all had an in-kind value of hundreds of

thousands, if not millions, of dollars,” the person close to C.P.I. told me. C.P.I.’s accounting firm, called Compass Professional, was run by Corrigan’s brother; its law firm, Compass Legal, was headed by Scott Gast, a lawyer in the Trump White House.

Aside from C.P.I., Compass Legal’s most lucrative client to date, according to F.E.C. filings, has been Trump himself, whose campaign and political-action committees have paid the firm four hundred thousand dollars in the past two years. Another major client was the National Rifle Association, which paid the firm more than three hundred thousand dollars in 2022. Compass Legal was established in March, 2021, two months after C.P.I.’s lead lawyer, Cleta Mitchell, was forced to resign from her job as a partner at the law firm Foley & Lardner. Her participation in Trump’s phone call to the Georgia secretary of state had caused too much controversy. She blamed her departure on a “massive pressure campaign” orchestrated by “leftist groups.” In a subsequent C.P.I. annual report, the group said that a large part of its mission was helping conservatives “survive the Leftist purge and ‘cancel-proof’ conservative organizations.”

This was not simply the rhetoric of conservative victimhood. Andrew Kloster, a former employee of Compass Legal who is now Representative Matt Gaetz’s general counsel, described one of C.P.I.’s goals as “de-risking public service on the right.” For anyone who might run afoul of mainstream opinion, C.P.I. had created an alternative, fully self-sufficient ecosystem. One part of it was material: recording studios, direct-mail services, accounting and legal resources, salaried jobs and fellowships. The other element was cultural. C.P.I. was demonstrating to Trump allies that, if they took bold and possibly illegal action in service of the cause, they wouldn’t face financial ruin or pariah status in Washington.

Over coffee at the Capitol, in May, Kloster, who is bald with a bushy beard, explained the story behind a legal-defense fund that he’d helped create, called Courage Under Fire. It supported people

who'd been "targeted for their civil service in conservative Administrations, including those indicted for fighting the 2020 election," he said. The fund has spent more than three million dollars to date, according to the *Washington Post*, with the money going toward legal costs incurred by John Eastman; Mike Roman, a former Trump-campaign operative; and Peter Navarro, a former economic adviser to Trump who has since been convicted of contempt of Congress for failing to comply with a subpoena related to the January 6th investigation. "We started with a lot of Trump advisers," Kloster said. "It's a large class." Eastman, he added, was a prime example: "He has been targeted for legal advice he gave in the course of his duties consulting with former President Trump. He's being charged with criminal fraud. That's for the mob lawyer in 'The Godfather' trying to knowingly facilitate crimes, not for someone saying, 'Here's what I think the law is.' "

Courage Under Fire was created by Personnel Policy Operations, a nonprofit in the C.P.I. network which, in 2022, spent more than a million dollars on lawyers for Mark Meadows and Jeffrey Clark, according to *NOTUS*, an online news site. C.P.I. maintains that the groups it has launched are independent. "We don't control them," the C.P.I. spokesperson said. But Brendan Fischer, the deputy executive director of Documented, pointed out that in 2022 nearly all the money spent by Personnel Policy Operations came from C.P.I., and that virtually all such spending went toward legal defense. He told me, "The most reasonable inference is that they were routing money from C.P.I. to Personnel Policy Operations to pay for Meadows's and Clark's legal fees." (The C.P.I. spokesperson said, "Liberal groups like these have made wild claims against the right for years that go nowhere. C.P.I. is in compliance with all laws for nonprofits.")

Tim Dunn, a billionaire Texas oilman and a major donor to C.P.I., has been tapped specifically to fund the group's legal-defense efforts. When Scott Perry, of Pennsylvania, the former chairman of

the Freedom Caucus, faced legal scrutiny for his involvement in January 6th—he had organized an attempt to contest the results in his state and, after ignoring a congressional subpoena, was ordered by a judge to turn over his cell phone to prosecutors—Meadows arranged to pay his legal fees by asking Dunn for the money, someone with knowledge of the arrangement told me. (Perry's campaign and C.P.I. both denied this account. “This is completely false,” the C.P.I. spokesperson said. Dunn could not be reached for comment.)

C.P.I.’s headquarters is a three-story town house with a blue door, on a leafy block near the Capitol. Inside, a warren of offices gives way to a series of parlorlike spaces with high ceilings. There are luminous conference rooms upstairs, each named for a prominent donor.

Last summer, I visited 300 Independence Avenue to interview Vought. At the time, we were discussing his role in creating a congressional subcommittee to advance a dominant Republican narrative in the House: that Democrats had weaponized the federal government against conservatives. It was a kind of unified theory of the deep state, which held that the Justice Department and the U.S. intelligence community had colluded to silence right-wing voices. It had the added utility of casting Trump as the ultimate martyr of the conservative movement. Each of his legal travails, Vought said, proved that Democrats were shamelessly engaged in “lawfare.”

These days, Vought has appeared in the news as a key architect of a second-Trump-term agenda, alongside some of the other usual suspects: Stephen Miller, Gene Hamilton, Jeffrey Clark, and Kash Patel. Trump has been explicit about his intention to exact revenge on political enemies. “I am your warrior, I am your justice,” he told a crowd of supporters in March of last year. “And, for those who have been wronged and betrayed, I am your retribution.” Three months later, after his arraignment in Miami for allegedly

mishandling classified documents and obstructing a federal investigation, he added, “I will appoint a real special prosecutor to go after the most corrupt President in the history of the United States of America, Joe Biden, and the entire Biden crime family.”



*“See you in two weddings, three unconfirmed plans, a weird headache, and a few work things I can’t get out of!”*  
Cartoon by Sarah Akinterinwa

Vought and Clark, meanwhile, have been advancing a formal rationale to break the long-standing expectation that the D.O.J. should operate independently of the President. The norm has been in place since Watergate, but they have argued that Trump could run the department like any other executive agency. Clark published his case on the Center for Renewing America’s Web site under the title “The U.S. Justice Department Is Not Independent.” In early 2021, while Trump was fighting the results of the election, he wanted to make Clark the Attorney General, but the entire senior leadership of the department threatened to resign en masse. Now, if Clark gets a top job at the D.O.J., he is expected to use the position

to try to remake the department as an instrument of the White House.

Stephen Miller, at America First Legal, has been devising plans to enact a nationwide crackdown on immigration, just as he had hoped to carry out on a vast scale in the first Trump term. The impediment then was operational: a lack of personnel to make arrests, a shortage of space to detain people, resistance from Democratic officials at the state and local levels. Miller has since vowed to increase deportations by a factor of ten, to a million people a year, according to the *Times*. The President would have to deputize federal troops to carry out the job, because there wouldn't be enough agents at the Department of Homeland Security to do it. The government would need to build large internment camps, and, in the event that Congress refused to appropriate the money required, the President would have to divert funds from the military.

Many of the other agenda items related to immigration that were delayed, blocked, or never fully realized during the chaos of the first term would be reinstated to more extreme effect in a second: an expanded ban on refugees from Muslim-majority countries, a revocation of visas for students engaged in certain forms of campus protests, an end to birthright citizenship. “Any activists who doubt President Trump’s resolve in the slightest are making a drastic error,” Miller told the *Times* last November. “Trump will unleash the vast arsenal of federal powers to implement the most spectacular migration crackdown.”

The overarching scheme for the second Trump term, called Project 2025, follows an established Washington tradition. It is being organized by the Heritage Foundation and has taken the form of a nine-hundred-page policy tract. But the scale of this undertaking, which is costing more than twenty million dollars, is bigger than anything Heritage has previously attempted. The organization has hired the technology company Oracle to build a secure database to

house the personnel files of some twenty thousand potential Administration staffers. Kevin Roberts, the current president of Heritage, has also enlisted the participation of more than a hundred conservative groups, as well as top figures from C.P.I.: Vought, Corrigan, Miller, and Saurabh Sharma, the president of American Moment. “These were the key nodes,” the person close to C.P.I. told me. “Roberts was paying Center for Renewing America, American Moment, and America First Legal to do parts of the project.” (Heritage did not respond to requests for comment.)

The fact that Heritage was helping to staff a full-fledged *MAGA* operation, the person went on, was a reflection of C.P.I.’s mounting influence. Two years ago, Roberts addressed the National Conservatism Conference, an annual gathering of far-right activists, which was hosted by an organization that is now associated with C.P.I. “I come not to invite national conservatives to join our movement but to acknowledge the plain truth that Heritage is already part of yours,” he said. Last year, Corrigan, who is on the steering committee of Project 2025, was invited to speak at Heritage’s fiftieth-anniversary conference. “The leadership at Heritage has brought back the C.P.I. folks even though they got pushed out six years before,” the person close to C.P.I. told me. “Kevin is being realistic. He needs to make peace with these guys.”

My source, who has been involved in Project 2025, outlined a few immediate actions that Trump would take if he won. Christopher Wray, the director of the F.B.I., would be fired “right away,” he told me. Even though Trump nominated Wray to the position, the far right has blamed Wray for the agency’s role in arresting people involved in the insurrection. (As Vought told me, “Look at the F.B.I., look at the deep state. We have political prisoners in this country, regardless of what you think about January 6th.”) The other hope in getting rid of Wray is that, without him, the Administration could use the agency to target its political opponents.

The person close to C.P.I. considered himself a denizen of the far-right wing of the Republican Party, yet some of the ideas under discussion among those working on Project 2025 genuinely scared him. One of them was what he described to me as “all this talk, still, about bombing Mexico and taking military action in Mexico.” This had apparently come up before, during the first Trump term, in conversations about curbing the country’s drug cartels. The President had been mollified but never dissuaded. According to Mike Pompeo, his former Secretary of State, Trump once asked, “How would we do if we went to war with Mexico?”

Trump’s former economic advisers Robert Lighthizer and Peter Navarro want Trump to impose tariffs of as much as ten per cent on foreign imports. Economists across the political spectrum have predicted that such a policy—which could trigger an international trade war, dramatically boosting inflation—would be catastrophic for the U.S. economy. “Lighthizer and Navarro are fucking clowns,” the person told me.

Those close to Trump are also anticipating large protests if he wins in November. His first term was essentially bookended by demonstrations, from the Women’s March and rallies against the Muslim ban to the mass movement that took to the streets after the murder of George Floyd, in the summer of 2020. Jeffrey Clark and others have been working on plans to impose a version of the Insurrection Act that would allow the President to dispatch troops to serve as a national police force. Invoking the act would allow Trump to arrest protesters, the person told me. Trump came close to doing this in the final months of his term, in response to the Black Lives Matter protests, but he was blocked by his Secretary of Defense and the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

“Something under discussion is who they could actually appoint without Senate confirmation,” the person added. Schedule F, the executive order from October, 2020, that enabled the purge of career civil servants, was rescinded by the Biden Administration,

but it would be reinstated by Trump. Presidents typically take their most decisive action in the first hundred days. The plan for Trump, I was told, was to set everything in motion “within hours of taking office.” This was what Trump had apparently meant when he told Sean Hannity, earlier this year, that he wouldn’t be a dictator, “except for Day One.”

The Trump campaign has tried to distance itself from the most radical aspects of Project 2025. There are no benefits—only political liabilities—to endorsing so many specifics. Trump’s supporters already know what he stands for, in a general sense. And there is the more delicate matter of the former President’s ego. “He wouldn’t want to be seen as taking guidance from any other human being,” the former senior White House official told me. “He doesn’t like to be seen as someone who doesn’t know everything already.” On July 5th, Trump wrote on Truth Social, “I know nothing about Project 2025. I have no idea who is behind it. I disagree with some of the things they’re saying and some of the things they’re saying are absolutely ridiculous and abysmal.” He said that he wished them luck.

His fortunes, though, were rising. The Presidential race was now his to lose. By the spring, he was steadily leading in national polls, with a larger edge in key battleground states. The Biden campaign had proposed two debates, with a format designed to control Trump’s pugilistic impulses: no studio audience and the microphones silenced after each answer, to prohibit interruptions. But during the first debate, on June 27th, Biden faltered. He stood rigidly at the podium, with a slack, vacant expression. His voice was weak and wavering, and he repeatedly trailed off mid-thought. The disastrous performance has since led an increasing number of Democrats to call for him to withdraw from the race. The following week, Trump was on the golf course with his son Barron and was caught on video summarizing the current electoral landscape. “I kicked that old broken-down pile of crap,” he said of Biden. “That

means we have Kamala,” he went on. “I think she’s going to be better. She’s so bad. She’s so pathetic.”

In the first year of Biden’s Presidency, C.P.I. raised forty-five million dollars, more money than it had received in the previous four years combined. A single donor was responsible for twenty-five million dollars of that year’s haul: Mike Rydin, a seventy-five-year-old widower from Houston, who in 2021 made a fortune from the sale of his company, which developed software for the construction industry. Until then, he was a small-time Republican donor and a relative unknown in national political circles; in 2019, he contributed only about seven thousand dollars to the Trump campaign, according to the Daily Beast. But Rydin told me that he considered C.P.I.’s founder “the most honest man in America.”

While DeMint was in the Senate, he started a political-action committee, the Senate Conservatives Fund, to raise money for right-wing candidates who challenged Republican incumbents in Party primaries. “That was a cardinal sin,” the DeMint staffer told me. “He primaried his colleagues.” Some of the candidates supported by the PAC—Lee, in Utah; Rand Paul, in Kentucky; and Marco Rubio, in Florida—defeated fellow-Republicans backed by Senate leadership, then won their general elections. But, in other races, DeMint’s intervention backfired. In Delaware, he championed the candidacy of Christine O’Donnell, a conservative activist whose campaign imploded after footage surfaced of her saying that she’d “dabbled into witchcraft.” DeMint was unbothered. “I’d rather have thirty Marco Rubios in the Senate than sixty Arlen Specters,” he once said, referring to the moderate Republican from Pennsylvania, who eventually switched parties.

DeMint’s crusade reminded Rydin of his own career—the years of financial struggles, the uncertainties, the skeptics. “I knew what it was like to be alone,” he said. “It’s tough to be alone, to fight battles alone.” When a representative from the Senate Conservatives Fund reached out to him, in 2009, Rydin agreed to

donate a thousand dollars. “That was, like, the most money I’d ever donated to anything,” Rydin said. Afterward, he told me, “someone calls me and says, ‘Senator DeMint wants to talk to you.’ And I said, ‘A senator? Really?’ ”

Rydin is polite and unprepossessing, almost droll. In our conversations, he was guarded but firm in expressing his commitment to ending illegal immigration, cutting government spending, and getting foreign countries to deal with their own problems. Rydin admitted that when Trump, as President, threatened to impose tariffs on Mexico “it scared the hell out of me.” But, he added, “everything Trump did turned out wonderfully. I’m not going to second-guess him anymore.” In the end, Rydin’s attraction to extreme figures seemed more personal than ideological. In 2015, he met Mark Meadows after Meadows, then a congressman from North Carolina, attempted to oust the Republican Speaker of the House, John Boehner, a radical act for which Meadows was later described as “a legislative terrorist.” “He was absolutely terrified to do that,” Rydin told me. “He got no support whatsoever.”

Shortly after DeMint started C.P.I., in 2017, he and a colleague flew to Houston to meet with Rydin and other potential donors. Rydin had donated to Heritage while DeMint was there but stopped after his departure. (He has since resumed his contributions.) “It wouldn’t have bothered me if I never contributed to them again,” he said, “because they were firing Jim.” Now DeMint told him about his plans to create a conservative community in Washington, a place where members of Congress could confer before and after votes. “I’m on board,” Rydin told him. “You don’t have to say anything else.”



*"I've got to take this—it's someone who isn't obsessed with summer fun."*  
Cartoon by P. C. Vey

Rydin was ready to donate to C.P.I., but his wife, who avoided politics, was uncomfortable with him giving more than twenty-five thousand dollars. “To get her to twenty-five thousand dollars was a big deal,” he said. By the time she died, of cancer, in 2020, he’d increased his donation to two hundred and fifty thousand dollars. The next year, “I sold my company and had a lot of money,” he told me.

C.P.I. used part of Rydin’s twenty-five-million-dollar donation to buy, for seven million dollars, a lodge with eleven bedrooms on the Eastern Shore of Maryland, which it named Camp Rydin. The property has a shooting range and a horse stable. (“It’s rustic but luxurious,” the person close to C.P.I. told me.) To date, C.P.I. has held some two dozen trainings there for congressional staff and conservative activists, according to travel-disclosure forms filed with the government. Rydin has also donated to many of the groups in the C.P.I. network, including the Center for Renewing America, American Moment, and the American Accountability Foundation. In July, America First Legal sent out a preëlection fund-raising pitch: through August 15th, all donations up to two million dollars would be matched by “Houstonian patriot and generous AFL supporter Mike Rydin.”

As a nonprofit, C.P.I. is forbidden to engage in partisan spending or certain kinds of lobbying. Its network of associated organizations, however, has allowed it to do both of those things through a legal back door. America First Legal, like C.P.I., is a nonprofit. But it has a related entity called Citizens for Sanity, which can spend money on political advertising with minimal restrictions. In the last six months of 2022, Citizens for Sanity spent more than ninety million dollars on ads, including one that ran during the World Series. It laid the blame for crime, high inflation, and low wages on illegal immigration and warned viewers that Biden was leading the country toward “World War Three.” Other ads have decried “the woke left’s war on girls’ sports” and the “woke war on our children.” The group’s spending eclipsed that of both C.P.I. (which spent twenty-three million dollars in 2022) and America First Legal (which spent thirty-four million dollars). It’s impossible to know who donated the money, but the address listed on the tax documents for Citizens for Sanity is 300 Independence Avenue.

C.P.I.’s pitch to donors is also predicated on its close relationships with legislators in Washington. One member of the Freedom Caucus told me that House lawmakers were directly involved in C.P.I.’s fund-raising efforts. “When they made donor phone calls, they talked about how C.P.I. was the home of the Freedom Caucus,” the member told me. “The idea was ‘You should give to us because we support the real conservatives.’ ” When House members are in Washington to take votes, C.P.I. often arranges donor events at 300 Independence Avenue. “The presence of the members was to help raise money, and they were requested to mingle with the donors,” the lawmaker said.

C.P.I.’s association with the Freedom Caucus raises questions about whether the organization can credibly claim to be a nonprofit that steers clear of actual lobbying. In January of 2023, members of the Freedom Caucus met at C.P.I.’s headquarters to strategize about their attempt to block Kevin McCarthy from becoming the House

Speaker. Meadows joined and advised them on how to proceed; he was regarded as someone with expertise, having tried to oust Boehner in 2015. “It’s pretty extraordinary that Meadows was sitting there talking about how to deny McCarthy the Speakership and how to negotiate concessions,” the member told me. C.P.I. also exerts an unspoken power over lawmakers because of its ties to the House Freedom Fund, the caucus’s political-action committee, which is also registered at 300 Independence Avenue.

Since 2021, Rydin no longer appears to be C.P.I.’s biggest donor. His foundation gave the group \$1.5 million in 2022, but, according to C.P.I.’s tax filings, an unnamed donor contributed \$15.5 million that year. Among C.P.I.’s most recent donors are the Servant Foundation, a fund backed by David Green, the founder of Hobby Lobby; Donors Trust, a fund associated with Leonard Leo and the Koch family; the Bradley Impact Fund, an offshoot of a Wisconsin-based philanthropy where Cleta Mitchell serves as a board secretary; and the Ohio food-packing magnate Dave Frecka and his wife, Brenda, who have a conference room named after them at 300 Independence Avenue. “The previous dark-money political-influence operations tended to be run by more old-school billionaire, polluter, right-wing interests,” Sheldon Whitehouse, the Democratic chairman of the Senate Budget Committee, told me. “C.P.I. represents the *MAGA* move into this space.”

On a bright, warm day in May, I visited Saurabh Sharma, the twenty-six-year-old head of American Moment, which describes its mission as “identifying, educating, and credentialing” a new generation of conservative staffers. Dressed in a blazer and tie, with round glasses and brown bit loafers, he greeted me in front of a small door on Pennsylvania Avenue that was wedged between a Sweetgreen and a Dos Toros. A narrow staircase led to a small office suite that the group had rented from C.P.I.

Between February, 2022, and March, 2023, C.P.I. bought seven buildings and a parking lot along this stretch of Pennsylvania

Avenue. It made the purchases through a web of more than a dozen limited-liability companies, taking out at least twenty-five million dollars in mortgages. What helps the group cover the monthly payments is the rent that it charges its network of affiliated nonprofits. Behind the buildings on Pennsylvania Avenue, C.P.I. plans to close off the back alley and create a nine-thousand-square-foot “campus” called Patriots’ Row. It already has a property next to the Senate; by expanding its footprint closer to the House, it hopes to insure that staffers from both chambers, as well as the lawmakers themselves, have places to congregate within walking distance of their daily business.

Sharma led me past a counter with a tap for cold brew and into a room filled with chairs and a lectern. He is originally from Texas, where he was the youngest-ever chairman of the state’s Young Conservatives association, and carries himself with the aplomb of someone twice his age. “No one else is as obsessed with finding young people and making them into extremely influential political actors within bureaucratic government life,” he told me. “No one cares as much about doing that as I do.”

Four years ago, Sharma stayed up late one night reading an essay by Senator J. D. Vance, a Republican from Ohio, who was then a venture capitalist and a best-selling author. The piece, titled “End the Globalization Gravy Train,” was a statement of principles for a branch of the conservative movement ascendant in the Trump era and known as the New Right: economic nationalism, foreign-policy isolationism, hostility to immigration. Sharma was struck by a portion of the essay in which Vance argued that personnel at every level of government in Washington were not up to the task of responding to the demands of the moment. It was something that Sharma had heard gripes about before, during a summer internship in Washington. For too long, he said on a recent podcast, government offices were staffed by “twenty-three-year-old shitheads” sent to D.C. by their parents to keep them “as far away

from the family business as humanly possible.” He put it to me more soberly: “The personnel pipeline needed to be rebuilt from scratch. Who are the fifty twenty-year-olds we should be looking at? There needs to be a white-glove process by which they’re brought into the fold.”

In the winter of 2021, C.P.I. convened a meeting of its top donors in the ballroom of a Miami hotel. Sharma pitched the donors on his new venture, alongside Stephen Miller, Russell Vought, and Ben Carson, the Secretary of Housing and Urban Development under Trump. “It was a very risky thing for them to do,” Sharma told me of C.P.I. “Most groups in Washington don’t want to share their donors. It shows a great deal of confidence on the part of C.P.I.” At the gathering, Sharma met Rydin, who immediately took to him. Later on, while Sharma was speaking to another donor, Rydin approached the pair. “Isn’t this guy so impressive?” Rydin said to the donor, pointing to Sharma. “Well, are you going to help him?”

Sharma considers C.P.I. a “fraternity” devoted to, in his telling, creating a new and lasting culture in Washington. “The right and its people are almost like sedimentary rock,” he said. “It’s like the Grand Canyon. You can see the layers in it. Who the President is in any given year defines what kind of people choose to get involved in center-right politics.” He ran through some history, starting with Barry Goldwater, in the nineteen-sixties, and ending with Trump. “President Trump getting elected brought in an entirely new generation of people,” he said. The problem was that most Republicans in Washington had initially detested the former President. As a result, Sharma said, “no one was interested in elevating a young kid that came to them and said, ‘I’d really like to get involved in politics because President Trump was right. We got lied into Iraq. We should shut down the border. And we’re getting sold out by China when it comes to trade.’ ”

American Moment, he went on, was correcting the “injustice” of the fact that, for the first few years of Trump’s term, the views of

such young people were “artificially suppressed” in Washington. “The way that the Trump legacy will be immortal, the way that Trump himself will be immortal, is if there’s a corresponding generation of people that are drawn to politics based on his vision,” Sharma said. Some conservative ideologues tend to see Trump as a wild but ultimately necessary means to an end. In Sharma’s view, Trump is the “alpha and the omega of the conservative movement.” He told me, “The only reason these opportunities exist is because Trump ran and won. The only reason these opportunities exist today is because Trump hasn’t left the scene.”

Sharma had to leave to host a book party at C.P.I. headquarters, which was across the street, and we strolled over together. While we waited at a crosswalk, a young congressional staffer stopped to shake Sharma’s hand. A few other people were making their way to C.P.I.’s town house. At the party, there was a full bar and pulled-pork sandwiches. In a few days, American Moment would be hosting a Hawaiian-themed bash called the Lawless Lawfare Luau, where attendees would wear leis. “I don’t know a D.C. without C.P.I.,” Sharma told me. “But those who were around before say it was a wasteland.” ♦



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**Our Local Correspondents**

## Paradise Bronx

From the time of the Revolutionary War to the fires of the nineteen-seventies, the history of the borough has always been shaped by its in-between-ness.

By [Ian Frazier](#)

July 15, 2024



*The history of the borough in the twentieth century can be sketched in a sentence: The subways created the modern Bronx and the highways almost destroyed it.*

*Illustration by Josh Cochran*

The Bronx is a hand reaching down to pull the other boroughs of New York City out of the harbor and the sea. Its fellow-boroughs are islands or parts of islands; the Bronx hangs on to Manhattan and Queens and Brooklyn, with Staten Island trailing at the end of the long towrope of the Verrazzano-Narrows Bridge, and keeps the whole business from drifting away on a strong outgoing tide. No water comes between the Bronx (if you leave out its own few

islands) and the rest of North America. The Bronx is the continent, and once you're on it you can go for thousands of miles without seeing ocean again. The other boroughs, for their part, cling to the Bronx for dear life. The chafing and strife of this connection have made all the difference to the Bronx.

No other borough has “the” in its name. We don’t say “the Staten Island” or “the Manhattan”; for some reason, no island is ever called “the.” Only certain more or less continuous geographic features merit a “the,” such as “the Antarctic” or “the tropical rain forest.” Before Europeans had any formal name for what is now the Bronx, they referred to it simply as “the continent,” “the mainland,” or “the maine,” distinguishing it from the ocean they came on and the nearby islands where they’d settled first. The northernmost part of the Bronx’s western border is the Hudson River. Then Manhattan fits up next to the Bronx on its western side for more than half its length, lying approximately north and south. Here, the Harlem River, which is a strait and not a river, and which connects the East River to the Hudson, runs between the two boroughs. Steep hills and bluffs rise above the Harlem River Valley. Much of the Bronx is hilly. Stone ridges extend like tendons, knuckles, and fingers from its northern edge southward; these discouraged the construction of east-west roads and make the Bronx difficult to cross from east to west even today. After the Harlem River branches off around one side of Randall’s Island, a smaller tidal stream, the Bronx Kill, continues along the borough’s southern border. Going along the top of Randall’s, the Bronx Kill flows into the East River, which is part of Long Island Sound, which is part of the Atlantic Ocean. The Bronx’s entire eastern border is the East River and the Sound. Thus, the borough has a major river that comes from inland—the Hudson—to its west, and salt water on its east. Some of the Bronx is rocky and wooded like upstate, and some is oceanfront marsh and beach.

A straight line with a few bureaucratic zigzags marks the Bronx's northern border. That line is also the border of New York City. In general, people in the suburbs to the north of this line are richer than people in the Bronx. By some measurements, large areas of the Bronx are poorer than anywhere else in the nation. But that assumes a population frozen in time. Everybody has to start somewhere, and the poor parts of the Bronx are often where people start when they have very little. They work, and earn, and then perhaps they move upward, and new arrivals take their place. This cycle has tended to wear out some areas of the Bronx.

The Bronx is the part of New York where the city merges into the rest of North America. The process has never gone smoothly. Its name honks, "Bronx!" Ideally, we could ask for a better-sounding name, one that did not suggest a Bronx cheer, but Bronx! is what we've got. The name comes from the Bronx River, which begins at a reservoir north of the city and runs south through the middle of the borough until it empties into the East River. The Bronx River cuts the Bronx into two sections—east of it and west of it. Surface streets sometimes dead-end at it. If you're at ground level and not on one of the big highways, you can go a mile or more without finding a bridge. From source to mouth, the river is twenty-three miles long, with about eight of those miles in the borough. It is the longest river within the borders of New York City, and it used to be beautiful and idyllic, until the usual city factors ruined it. By the nineteen-eighties, it was so full of junk—old refrigerators, washing machines, cars—that you could barely see it. An intrepid environmental group and the Parks Department cleaned it up. It now runs clear, and parts of it are even almost idyllic again. People sometimes canoe on it, but you're advised not to swim in it.

An eminent old-time historian wrote that the Indians called the river Aquahung. I find that hard to believe, but I can't explain why. Tribes with villages in what's now the Bronx were the Siwanoy, the Munsee, and the Weckquaesgeek, all subgroups of the Lenape.

They belonged to the Eastern Algonquian language family, a linguistic grouping that did not include the powerful Iroquois, their inland enemies. In December, 1639, several local Munsee headmen sold five hundred acres of land adjoining the river to Jonas Bronck, a Swede who had arrived on his own ship, the Fire of Troy. (One day, fire and destruction would be what people thought of when they thought of the Bronx.) Jonas Bronck also paid the Dutch West India Company for the land. The Dutch were the European power in the region and had founded New Amsterdam, their outpost on lower Manhattan Island, fifteen years before.

Bronck built a house on what's now 132nd Street, or maybe 138th Street—in either case, it was in what's now a southerly part of the South Bronx—and leased his land out for farming maize and tobacco. Eventually, the river at the eastern edge of his holdings became known as Bronk's River, and Bronk's Land was the area in general. A man named Pieter Schorstinveger (chimney sweep, in Dutch) owned a large farm next to Bronck's, which he cultivated using enslaved Black people. Apparently, Schorstinveger's River was never even in the running as a name, such being the workings of everyday poetics and spoken language.

In 1939, three hundred years after Jonas Bronck, three reporters for this magazine set out to discover if he had any living descendants in the area. In the article they wrote, they noted that “there are no Bronks in the Bronx.” The reporters did find one descendant, William R. Bronk (by then, the family had dropped the “c”), who lived in Pelham, just north of the Bronx. He said he commuted on the New Haven Railroad every day past the site of his ancestor’s house and never gave it a thought. Another Bronk, a retired lawyer named Leonard Bronk Lampman, who had been living at the Yale Club for twenty-two years, cleared up a question about the Bronx borough flag. It depicts a rising sun with a bowling-pin-shaped bird standing above it. Lampman said that the bird is an auk, a species found in the Faroe Islands, where Jonas Bronck lived before going

to Holland and then to America. The bird and the rising sun are on the Bronck family coat of arms, along with the motto “Ne Cede Malis” (“Do Not Yield to Misfortunes”), which became the motto of the Bronx. Designers included the Bronck coat of arms—motto, bird, and all—in the borough flag when they created it, in the early twentieth century.

Jonas Bronck and his wife, Antonia Slagboom, had a son named Pieter. He moved to Coxsackie, New York, near Albany, and built a stone farmhouse that still stands. I meant to visit it in 2021—it’s now a museum—but it was closed because of the virus. Pieter Bronck had offspring, and there still are Bronks in the Coxsackie area. A poet named William Bronk (1918–99), who claimed descent from Jonas, ran his family’s coal-and-lumber business in Hudson Falls, a town about eighty miles north of Coxsackie. He stayed close to home and did not drive. In his lifetime, Bronk published about two dozen books of poetry, one of which won a National Book Award.



*“While you wait.”*  
Cartoon by Lynn Hsu and Carol Lasky

Thirteen bridges connect Manhattan to the Bronx, and two more cross the East River from Queens. Other links exist underground in tunnels and pipes, which carry subway lines, drinking water, gas mains, power cables, and wastewater. Every which way, the Bronx is sewn and bound and grappled and clamped to the rest of the city. Every kind of transportation passes through it or over it. Walking on Bruckner Boulevard one morning, I was stunned by the loudness of the trucks. (No other borough has truck traffic like the Bronx's, partly because its Hunts Point market, for produce, meat, and fish, is the largest food-distribution depot in the world.) I also heard cars, vans, motorcycles, an Amtrak train, airplanes, and, on the lower Bronx River nearby, the horn of a tugboat pushing a barge. Even during the emptiest days of the *Covid* shutdown, the Bronx's pulse of transport kept pounding.

Interstate highways slice and dice the borough. The interstates within the Bronx's borders are these: On the west, running approximately north and south, is I-87, also known (in the city) as the Major Deegan Expressway, or simply the Deegan. I-87 is bound for Albany and Canada. The Bruckner Expressway, a.k.a. I-278, connects to I-87 in the southern part of the borough. From there, I-278 veers to the northeast. Across the borough's middle, I-95, a.k.a. the Cross Bronx Expressway, that road of infamous history, moves traffic east and west before merging with the Bruckner. Then it veers north, and follows the coast up to New England. A spur, I-295, splits off and goes south across the Throgs Neck Bridge to Queens. Another spur, I-678, also goes to Queens, over the Bronx-Whitestone Bridge. At the point where I-678 goes south from I-95, the Hutchinson River Parkway goes north from I-95, crosses the Bronx, and continues into Westchester County.

I am leaving out several other parkways, such as the Mosholu Parkway, the Bronx River Parkway, and the Pelham Bay Parkway. These roads refer to an earlier, more optimistic era of travel, and they sometimes have green spaces along them. Otherwise, the

parkways now resemble the interstates in most respects, and aid and abet them. All the major highway corridors and their street approaches are generally filled with traffic. The speed limit on the Cross Bronx Expressway is fifty miles an hour, but the average speed on it during the evening rush hour is fourteen. For a while in the mid-twentieth century, planners thought that building new highways would relieve the already bad congestion, but the new highways became just as busy. Night and day, the wheels roll. Potholes are abundant. Among the most common signs in the borough are ones whose red letters announce, on a yellow background, “*FLAT FIX*.”

Before the highways, transportation was more Bronx-friendly. In the early nineteen-hundreds, the subways came, building north from Manhattan. In 1905, the tracks for what are now the No. 2 and No. 5 trains reached a terminus at the neighborhood called West Farms, on the Bronx River. By 1910, the Broadway Local, also known as the No. 1 train, which goes up the West Side, got to Van Cortlandt Park, in the northwest Bronx. By the end of 1920, tracks for today’s No. 4 and No. 6 trains had also been completed in the Bronx (ending in its near-middle and northeasterly parts, respectively).

All these trains were mostly elevated in the Bronx, and still are. The lines spread out in a generally north-south configuration, causing land booms and frenzied construction along their routes. In the nineteen-twenties, the population of the Bronx increased by seventy-two per cent. Another subway line, this one entirely underground, carrying the B and D trains, came in the thirties. In 1900, the borough had 200,507 residents. By 1940, almost 1.4 million people lived in the Bronx. Then, in the forties, the city and the state started pushing through the big limited-access highways that would become interstates or link up to them.

A history of the Bronx in the twentieth century can be sketched in a sentence: The subways created the modern Bronx and the highways

almost destroyed it.

I started wandering the Bronx about fifteen years ago. Usually, I had a destination, a place I wanted to check out. When you cover any distance in this borough, its ridged, up-and-down geography registers in your calves and lets you know you're on a hike. I walked thoroughfares that traversed the borough north to south, such as Boston Road, which at one time was the post road to Boston. One day, I followed it all the way to the borough's northern border, where the road leaves the Bronx. I also walked Tremont Avenue, which goes from the Harlem River to the East River, and I contemplated how Tremont Avenue's survival has been the survival of the Bronx. I took inventory of the parklands, of which the Bronx has four thousand acres, and went along off-map paths below interstate-highway overpasses and plunged through thickets of phragmites next to rocky beaches.

On the heights above the Hudson River, in Riverdale, I found the white stucco Moorish-Dutch-style mansion, empty and in disrepair, that John F. Kennedy moved into with his family in 1927, when he was ten. I peered through the windows at its huge downstairs rooms and bare parquet floors; John's mother once was obliged to host the children of his father's mistress, Gloria Swanson, at a Halloween party with the Kennedy siblings here. Now planes flew overhead, perhaps on their way to John F. Kennedy International Airport, in Queens, but the house where the President-to-be spent a part of his boyhood had no plaque or marker. In that way, it resembled most other places of historical significance in the borough. From the former Kennedy mansion, one can walk 4.7 miles to 825 East 179th Street, in the East Tremont neighborhood, where a thirteen-year-old Lee Harvey Oswald lived with his mother in 1953. The building that Oswald lived in no longer exists, and there is no historic marker.

As I walked in the Bronx, I watched the sky—the way it opens out at the ends of streets approaching the water, the way it goes upward

to Heaven at the tops of “stair streets,” which is the name for sections of streets so steep that they morph into stairways. A stair street with a hundred and thirty-two steps, which I was accustomed to climbing at the continuation of 167th Street at Shakespeare Avenue, one day had drawn a crowd of French and Asian tourists, who stood all up and down it, recording themselves with cell phones. I inquired and found out that it’s the stairway on which the Joker dances in a Batman-related movie. The sky that the stairway frames is towering and cinematic in the extreme. At the same time as I watched the sky, I kept an eye on the ground.

All kinds of things are on the ground in the Bronx: Q-tips. A pigeon foot. Those Christmas-tree-shaped air fresheners that hang from rearview mirrors. Syringes with pale-orange plastic stoppers on their needles. Sunglass lenses. The butts of menthol cigarettes. A bathroom sink. A single pink, almond-shaped artificial fingernail. The white plastic tips of cigarillos. Little bags that once held fortune cookies, with pagodas faintly printed on them in red. Inside-out surgical gloves. Pennies. Scratched-off scratch-off tickets. Green puddles of antifreeze. Hair picks with handles shaped like fists. Pieces of broken mirrors. Flattened pieces of sugarcane. Corona beer-bottle caps. Coconut husks. Crumpled paper handouts offering cash for diabetes test strips, with a number to call. Crushed traffic cones. Dashboard dice. Skeins of hair for extensions. Spiced-whiskey bottles with devil silhouettes on the labels. *Covid* masks. Black plastic takeout bags that skitter, ankle-high, on the wind. Pavement graffiti: “Lost Virginity at this Spot 11-1-16.”

I set out to walk a thousand miles in the Bronx. I was looking for hints about what has happened here, and about how we got to the present. If almost everyone who lives and almost everything that happens will be forgotten, that must be even more true in a zone of connection like the Bronx, where so much energy is zapping back

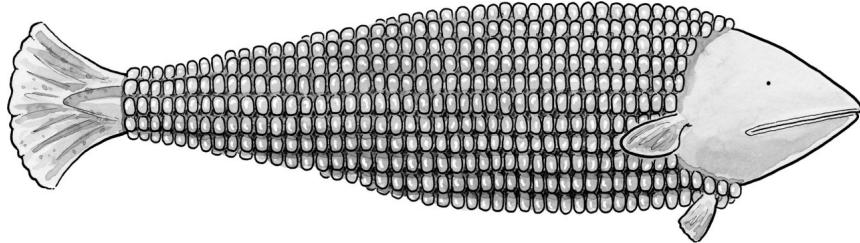
and forth constantly. An emptier place might be kinder to the past but have less of it.

One September morning at ten-forty-five, I set out from Manhattan for a walk of about ten miles. When I was halfway across the Third Avenue Bridge, heading into the Bronx, a horn of unknown origin blasted twice. Then double barricades with blinking red lights went down at either end of the bridge. I hurried to get to the Bronx side. A guy in a hard hat and a bright-green vest with bright-orange stripes showed me how I could scoot around the edges of the barricades. He said that workers were testing the bridge. Then the bridge's whole middle span began to move, rotating slowly and smoothly on its central pivot, until it was perpendicular to the roadway. Watching it do that was like seeing the Empire State Building telescope down to the size of a Pizza Hut—a technical surprise, but just another event of the day. Most of the bridges over the Harlem River open by rotating. They're what are called swing bridges, as opposed to lift bridges, which go up and down. For ten or fifteen minutes, traffic sat waiting. Then the bridge pivoted back, the barricades lifted, and the traffic moved.

Apartment buildings under construction next to the bridge were raising a racket of metal hammering on metal. I walked along Third Avenue to East 138th Street and turned left. A woman with a blond Afro, who wore a yellow-black-and-purple dress, was getting her car washed at 138 Hand Wash & Lube. Nearby, a sign said "*taxi-drivers wanted full or part time—day or night*" with a number to call. In a few blocks, I came to the Grand Concourse, the Champs-Élysées of the Bronx, and turned right. The Grand Concourse runs for about five miles, north and south on a ridge through approximately the middle of the Bronx. The farther-back history in the Bronx mostly happened on the edges, and the recent history mostly happened in the middle. Today, I was going to the middle. The rattle of ratchet guns came from a car-repair shop. Another apartment building going up rang with the noise of hammering.

Lots of new housing is being built in the Bronx. Whether it's affordable for people who live here will be another question. On the Concourse near East 149th Street, the modern buildings of Hostos Community College (officially, Eugenio María de Hostos Community College of the City University of New York) rose on both sides, with an enclosed walkway above the Concourse connecting the two. This institution was started in a former tire factory on this site by community groups back in the late sixties. Celina Sotomayor, the mother of Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor, went to night school here after the death of her husband, and graduated with an advanced nursing degree in 1973.

At East 149th Street, the old central post office, with its heroic social-realist murals painted by Ben Shahn and Bernarda Bryson, had been boarded shut. Across the street, broken windows at a 7-Eleven convenience store that was looted during the George Floyd protests had been repaired. At 150th and Grand Concourse, ginkgo fruit on a bench showed evidence of having been gnawed by rodents. I passed the Bronx County Courthouse, which contains the mural of the Battle of Pelham, and East 161st Street, which Babe Ruth used to walk down on his way to Yankee Stadium when he stayed at the old Concourse Plaza Hotel, diagonally across from the courthouse. This was in the middle of the pandemic, and the Stadium, empty of fans except maybe cardboard ones, flew the flag of every major-league team from its topmost tier; the crayon-box colors fluttered against the sky. The Lorelei Fountain, also at East 161st Street, is in the Bronx because the German city of Düsseldorf did not want it. Heinrich Heine, whose poem the statue commemorates, was a satirist and a Jew. A committee of New York Germans brought the statue here, where at first it was defaced, and required a guard twenty-four hours a day. Now the fountain flows peacefully, unguarded and ignored.



*Toro*

### CORN ON THE COD

*Cartoon by Tom Toro*

In another few blocks, on my right, I passed the small but excellent Bronx Museum of the Arts, where I've seen shows of graffiti art of the seventies and Gordon Matta-Clark's chainsaw-cutout sections from floors and ceilings of abandoned Bronx apartment buildings —that crazy turquoise-blue kitchen linoleum! Then, on the left, the Andrew Freedman Home takes up a block behind its iron gates and seldom mowed grounds. It was built originally as a home for indigent millionaires, offering them amenities that they had been accustomed to before they lost their fortunes. Freedman, the founder of the home and provider of its funds, promised that it would welcome people of all races, religions, and ethnicities, as long as they had at one time been wealthy. Now the building belongs to a community-based nonprofit. For a while, on the second floor there was a display about redlining, with detailed nineteen-thirties real-estate maps that showed redlined neighborhoods, mostly in the South Bronx. In many places, the neighborhoods coincided with the holdings of the old Morrisania manor, home of Gouverneur Morris, a New Yorker of enormous consequence who is mostly lost to memory today.

As much as any of America's so-called Founding Fathers, Gouverneur Morris remade his country and sent ripple effects out into the world. He was born in 1752 in the family's manor house, which stood at the end of a lane leading inland from its dock, at the mouth of the Bronx Kill. The house had been in the family already for three generations. Morris was a close friend of George

Washington and wrote the Preamble to the Constitution. It would not begin “We the People of the United States” or say “in order to form a more perfect union” (those phrases echoing forever) if not for him. Morris served as Ambassador to France during its Revolution, proposed the idea for the Erie Canal, and worked for the canal’s creation. Of a rational and orderly mind, he led the committee that created the street grid for New York City. He suggested a decimal-based system of coinage when the new country was developing its monetary system, and he invented the word “cent,” for penny. Dozens of things all over the Bronx are named for Gouverneur Morris or his family. There’s Morris Heights, Morris Avenue, Gouverneur Place, Gouverneur Playground, Gouverneur Morris Square, and Gouverneur Morris Triangle. The Bronx’s Gouverneur Morris Houses are among the biggest New York City Housing Authority projects in the borough. Morris High School (now Morris Academy for Collaborative Studies), which commemorates him, was the Bronx’s first major public secondary school. His name is everywhere, and yet almost nobody knows who he was.

One explanation for this might be simple: Gouverneur Morris lived in what would someday be the Bronx. And not just any place in the future Bronx but on the southeastern edge of it, just above water level, in a precise spot where railroads, once they’d been invented, would want to go. In 1905, after the New York, New Haven, and Hartford Railroad had acquired the property, his manor house was torn down. It was long gone before the arrival of the highways, and the Triborough Bridge (now the Robert F. Kennedy Bridge), whose cement support pillars and ramps have shouldered themselves into that same location. If his house—a substantial and well-appointed château in the French style—had survived, perhaps as a museum, we would have a focal point for remembering him. But, like much of the Bronx, it was erased by the city’s tightly grasping infrastructure fingers.

At East 174th Street and Grand Concourse, about a mile past the Freedman Home, all at once the sky gaped open to the east and west above the route of the Cross Bronx Expressway. Years ago, I lived in a neighborhood in Brooklyn where a plane had crashed three decades before. The crash left an absence at an intersection of brownstone residential streets; this sky reminded me of that, in its evocation of the vanished buildings that had to make room for the highway. The Cross Bronx Expressway runs through a roadcut under the Grand Concourse rather than on a bridge over it, for complicated engineering reasons.

The necessity of digging the roadcut so far down created one of the anomalies of the city's subway system. The B and D trains are the only subways in the Bronx that remain underground for their entire routes—that are actual, full-time subways in the Bronx, in other words. The 174th-175th Streets station for the B and the D is under the Grand Concourse. The station, to all appearances ordinary when you walk down the stairs into it from the Concourse, sits inside a span of rock that is fifteen or twenty feet above the Cross Bronx Expressway, which runs through the roadcut below.

At Tremont Avenue, another major thoroughfare, I turned right. Back when the Bronx was about fifty per cent Jewish, in the nineteen-thirties, Tremont Avenue and the Concourse were like the Jewish Main Streets. A long-disused synagogue near that intersection, boarded up and fenced off, maybe survives in the memory of some people who now live in Boca Raton. I went downhill on Tremont, pausing to look at the hunting bows and arrows in the window of Frank's Sport Shop, which has a sign over the door advertising "*Guns—Ammunition.*" It's the only such advertisement I know of in the city. Beyond Frank's, Tremont Avenue goes over the Metro-North tracks, with their silver commuter trains whizzing from affluence to affluence. A man in forest-green African robes walked by me and said a loud and

cheerful “Hello!” I said hello back, but he was talking into a headset.

On Washington Avenue, I took another right, now heading south, through a region of warehouses, dozens of idling emergency-medical-services trucks at E.M.S. Station 18, and auto junk yards, whose names probably weren’t Beware of Dog, despite the signage. I again crossed the Cross Bronx Expressway, which is an elevated road here; Washington Avenue, which I was on, goes under it. South of East 171st Street, I was among the Gouverneur Morris Houses.

At Third Avenue, a block later, I turned north, and stayed on Third up to Claremont Parkway, where I took a right, and followed that road through Crotona Park to Boston Road. Now I was near what used to be one of the most burned-out parts of the Bronx. A short walk north brought me to the corner of Boston Road and Charlotte Street.

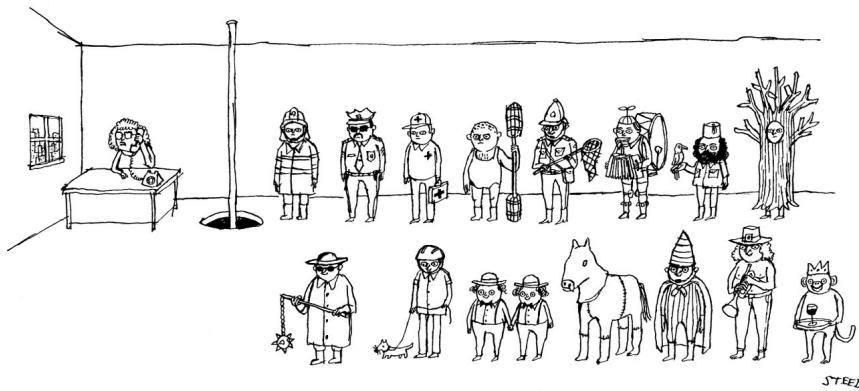
In recent Bronx history, this intersection has been in the news more than any other single place in the borough. Where there once was a rubble of demolished apartment buildings, one- and two-story ranch-style houses now line Charlotte Street on both sides. The house on the southwest corner of the intersection is melon orange, with darker-orange shutters, and has a healthy lawn enlivened by rosebushes and cheery warning signs (a picture of a fierce-looking German shepherd, above the words “I can make it to the gate in three seconds. Can you?”). In the yard, there’s a small fountain with a sculpture of a girl, a big American flag, and a smaller flag of Belize. If the owner of the house is out in the yard, I talk with him. His name is Willie Hemmans, and he was born in Belize. Once, pointing to the sign, I asked him where the German shepherd was who could get to the gate in three seconds. “There is no dog,” Hemmans said. He tapped his chest: “The dog is me.”

So, what happened here? The Bronx, or what is now the Bronx, has gone through two terrible times since the arrival of Jonas Bronck, in 1639. The more recent terrible time began in the nineteen-sixties, continued through the seventies and eighties, and improved, with setbacks, in the nineties. The nadir of this period came in 1977. That's the year people remember. During the New York City blackout of July 13-14, 1977, looting and fires hit the Bronx. Many hundreds of fires burned just on that one night, in this borough which had been beset by fires for the past nine years. On October 12, 1977, while the Yankees were playing the Los Angeles Dodgers in the second game of the World Series, at Yankee Stadium, an overhead shot from a helicopter showed a building on fire nearby, in the borough's Melrose neighborhood. Howard Cosell, the dominant sports voice of that era, who was one of the announcers, supposedly said, "Ladies and gentlemen, the Bronx is burning!" Somehow, the sentence entered the language, though Cosell never said that, or exactly that. In any case, it's what people remember. Cosell, and the rest of the country, had the Bronx's troubles in mind because of something that had happened a week before.

On October 5, 1977, President Jimmy Carter, in New York City to address a meeting at the United Nations, got in his limousine and made a visit to the Bronx. No announcement preceded Carter's trip to the borough, which seemed to be almost a spur-of-the-moment decision. With Mayor Abraham Beame, Housing and Urban Development Secretary Patricia Roberts Harris, a few aides, and an N.Y.P.D. and Secret Service detail, the Carter motorcade drove up Third Avenue, west on East 138th Street, north on the Grand Concourse, right on East Tremont Avenue, right on Washington Avenue, left on East 168th Street, left on Third Avenue, right on Claremont Parkway, and left on Boston Road—the same route I took on that September day, as I had walked it before and have walked it at least half a dozen times since.

The route in itself could be considered a historic site. It was chosen with care to expose President Carter to some of the borough's most destroyed neighborhoods, but today it amounts to an encouragement, because the destruction he saw is gone. To the President and his staff, the burned-out scenes they passed on October 5, 1977, were stunning.

At the intersection of Boston Road and Charlotte Street, where Willie Hemmans's house is now, the limo pulled over and the President got out. Wearing a business suit and tie, he walked a block or two on Charlotte Street. Almost as far as the eye could see were rubble and trash piles, with here and there a few buildings still standing. He stood looking around, his expression blank and dazed. Photographers in a small group of press who had heard about the event took pictures that came out as minimalist cityscapes with a stark, post-apocalyptic feel. For the President to allow himself to be seen when he appeared so overwhelmed required self-sacrifice and moral fortitude.



*"Hello, 911. Which emergency service do you require?"*  
Cartoon by Edward Steed

From Charlotte Street, the motorcade went down Boston Road the way it had come, continued for a couple of miles, turned left on East 163rd Street, passed the building where Joseph Saddler, a.k.a. Grandmaster Flash, one of the founding geniuses of hip-hop, lived with his family, and the building where Sonia Sotomayor had lived as a baby. At Southern Boulevard, the motorcade turned right, kept going to East 149th Street, turned right, went by St. Mary's Park,

and turned left on Brook Avenue (the site of the old Mill Brook, which once divided the estate of Morrisania into the part owned by Gouverneur Morris and the part owned by Lewis Morris, his half brother).

From Brook Avenue, the President and his entourage turned right onto East 137th Street, then left onto Willis Avenue, which led them to the Willis Avenue Bridge over the Harlem River, and so back to Manhattan. On my walk, I always follow this exact route.

Carter's visit produced no immediate visible rebuilding or remedy for the desolation he saw. His offer of federal funding to rebuild housing for the Charlotte Street area went nowhere. But his unexpected Bronx drive-by got a lot of press, causing people all over the city and the country to notice this place which most of them had been looking away from. In subsequent years, Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton, Jesse Jackson, and other dignitaries would visit the intersection of Charlotte Street and Boston Road. Major lenders took notice, the city eventually decided to get more involved, local community groups found they had new allies, and the rebuilding of the Bronx picked up momentum. I've wondered whether Carter's later volunteer work building houses for Habitat for Humanity might also have been influenced by the shock of that Bronx visit.

I said there were two terrible times in Bronx history. The other terrible time began in 1776, during the American Revolution, after the British had driven George Washington's army out of Long Island, Manhattan, and the southern part of Westchester County, which, at the time, included the present-day Bronx. Washington and his men, retreating across the Hudson, moved south through New Jersey, and eventually crossed the Delaware River into Pennsylvania. With civil authority mostly gone in Westchester County, and partisans active on both sides, violence and chaos took over. During the Revolutionary War, no other place in the thirteen states saw so much strife. Both terrible times—1776 to 1783, and

about 1965 to about 1995—originated in geography. The British held on to Manhattan and the other islands, but they never had much luck here on the continent. To defend their position, they needed to hold the King's Bridge, the most important bridge in the area, which crossed from Manhattan into today's Bronx over a now vanished stream called Spuyten Duyvil. But the farther north the British went from the King's Bridge the shakier their hold was. As the war continued, the American army kept a force in the area, and its front lines were sometimes along the Croton River, about thirty miles north of the King's Bridge. The land in between, including most of what is now the Bronx, was called the Neutral Ground.

In the Neutral Ground, Continental Army forces sometimes fought British Army regulars. Here Yankee raiders, called Skinners because they plundered people down to their skins, clashed with bands of Tories, called Cow Boys because they stole cattle to sell to their British allies or to keep for themselves. People unlucky enough to live in the Neutral Ground were robbed and terrorized by both sides. In-between-ness has always been a problem here. In the twentieth century, planners pushed highways through Bronx neighborhoods and destroyed them, and the place's accessibility made it especially vulnerable to the influx of drugs, disease, and guns. Living in the Bronx has sometimes meant surviving in between.

President Carter looked with incomprehension and sorrow at the scene around Boston Road during his 1977 visit. Almost exactly two hundred years earlier, in the fall of 1777, the Reverend Timothy Dwight, a chaplain in the Continental Army, observed a landscape of misery along the same road. Carter saw miles of rubble and heaps of trash. Reverend Dwight reported that the houses along the Boston Road were

scenes of desolation. Their furniture was extensively plundered, or broken to pieces. The walls, floors, and windows were injured, both by violence and decay. . . . Their

cattle were gone. Their enclosures were burnt, where they were capable of becoming fuel, and in many cases thrown down, where they were not. Their fields were covered with a rank growth of weeds, and wild grass. Amid all this appearance of desolation, nothing struck my own eye more forcibly than the sight of this great road; the passage from New-York to Boston. Where I had heretofore seen a continual succession of horses and carriages; and life and bustle lent a sprightfulness to all the environing objects; not a single, solitary traveler was visible from week to week, or from month to month. The world was motionless and silent; except when one of these unhappy people [the residents] ventured upon a rare, and lonely, excursion to the house of a neighbour, no less unhappy; or a scouting party, traversing the country in quest of enemies, alarmed the inhabitants with expectations of new injuries and sufferings.

Reverend Dwight, an optimistic and outgoing churchman, who would later be president of Yale, tried to draw the locals into conversation:

They feared everybody whom they saw; and loved nobody. It was a curious fact to a philosopher, and a melancholy one to a moralist, to hear their conversation. To every question they gave such an answer, as would please the enquirer; or, if they despaired of pleasing, such an one, as would not provoke him. Fear was, apparently, the only passion, by which they were animated. The power of volition seemed to have deserted them. They were not civil, but obsequious; not obliging, but subservient . . . Both their countenances, and their motions, had lost every trace of animation and of feeling. Their features were smoothed, not into serenity, but apathy; and instead of being settled in the attitude of quiet thinking, strongly indicated, that all thought, beyond what was merely instinctive, had fled their minds forever.

War and its horrors careened through Morrisania, in the future South Bronx. Raiders from “above”—the northern part of the county, where the American forces were—descended on the encampments along the Mill Brook, near where St. Mary’s Park is today, and burned scores of huts occupied by the Refugees, as the Tory partisans and plunderers who had sought protection from the British were called. With fire and broadsword came pestilence, in the form of a sickness called Morrisania fever, which carried off many Refugees.

Some residents of the Neutral Ground abandoned their homes, and some who stayed did not continue to farm. Hay and weeds grew unintended in the fields. In the orchards, apples lay rotting by the bushel on the ground. British forces cut down multi-acre stands of trees and tore up farm buildings for lumber to build their barracks. A Westchester County committee assessing damages after the war found that three hundred and fifty thousand fence rails had gone for firewood. The combatants also dismantled the stone walls in the fields, and, when enemies were near, sometimes hid in them.

Westchester County during the Revolutionary War prefigured the Wild West before that concept had entered a dime novelist’s mind. The Neutral Ground had cowboys (or Cow Boys), Indians, cavalry attacks and rescues, and secret woodland fastnesses known only to the cannier frontiersman. James Fenimore Cooper, the novelist who invented the Western and introduced it to the world, and who lived for a time in nearby Mamaroneck, set his first best-seller here. He wrote it in 1821 and titled it “The Spy: A Tale of the Neutral Ground.” It’s about an itinerant peddler named Harvey Birch, who passes back and forth between the lines spying for the British—or so his neighbors believe. Heroically, he accepts the hatred and contempt of fellow-Americans in order to fool the enemy, because in actuality (spoiler) Harvey Birch is not a British spy but the personal spy of George Washington! “The Spy” uses stories from

the Neutral Ground and turns them into romantic fiction that—to me, anyway—is not as interesting as what really happened here.

What started the Bronx's fires in the nineteen-sixties and seventies? The general state of combustibility of the place started them. That is, they started in heavily stressed neighborhoods of buildings almost half a century old, south of the Cross Bronx Expressway. Gouverneur Morris would have known the places where the fires first burned—he would have recognized the basic landscape if nothing else. Much of the burning occurred on land that had belonged to him.

The name South Bronx has been applied to different areas at different times. At one point, it meant the far south of the borough, the edge of “the continent,” which included only the neighborhoods of Mott Haven, Port Morris, and Hunts Point. When deterioration spread northward, the name spread with it. There had not been a need to think of the Bronx in terms of south or north since the Neutral Ground—until the construction of the Cross Bronx Expressway cut the borough in two, isolating the part south of it, the South Bronx. In the mid-nineteen-sixties, fires started burning in buildings there. A couple of years later, thousands of fires were burning, and not only in buildings. Piles of uncollected garbage went up in boils of black smoke; abandoned cars sat along the curbs, collecting parking tickets under their windshield wipers, until one day, mysteriously, the cars went up in flames that melted the asphalt below. The fire plague kept moving north, and eventually crossed the highway like a forest fire jumping a firebreak. By the mid-seventies, the threatened areas were approaching Fordham Road, a mile and a half north of the highway. People wondered if the plague would spread to buildings throughout the borough. Unmoored from geography, the name South Bronx came to mean fire.

The numbers were hard to grasp. The Bronx's apartment buildings, during the boom of the early twentieth century, had been

constructed in rows, one next to another. Now when a building burned the one beside it often followed—and so down the entire row. In the late sixties, about a thousand fires were burning each month. This was in some ways the hardest time, because many of the buildings still held tenants. Later, when the fires got worse, fewer of the buildings were occupied. In 1972, Dennis Smith, a fireman in a station on Intervale Avenue, published a book, “Report from Engine Co. 82,” which said that the company responded to 9,111 alarms in 1970. He called it “the busiest firehouse in the city—and probably the world.” Having 9,111 alarms in a year is more than one per hour every day. Keeping track over a three-and-a-half-month period, Smith found that he never ate an uninterrupted meal.



*“I’ve enjoyed being a pet, but it’s time for me to get a real job.”*  
Cartoon by Kaamran Hafeez and Al Batt

In 1974, thirty-three thousand fires burned in the Bronx. That year, a hundred and forty residents died in fires, and fifteen hundred were injured. Three firemen also died. Sirens were going all the time, at all hours. Mothers kept bags of clothing and essentials by the door, to be grabbed at the last minute, and lined up everybody’s shoes at night. In fire-plagued neighborhoods, the smoke smell didn’t go away. A survivor of that time described it as a dull smell.

Another said it smelled like tar, because of the burning roofs. Fires might burn in only one or two apartments in a building, leaving the other units still inhabited. The burned-out apartments could be identified from the street by the black streaks of smoke spread above the windows like too much eyeshadow. Remaining tenants lost utilities and hauled water buckets up with ropes and pulleys.

Going to work in the mornings, people might come upon friends sitting on what few belongings they'd been able to salvage, piled on the curb in puddles in front of their burned-out building. Families left their apartments to attend church or visit relatives in Harlem and came back to find their building burned and their belongings destroyed. Chrystal Wade, a Bronx activist and educator, told a Fordham oral-history researcher that she never forgot the TV console her family lost, with the stereo that she had loved and played constantly. Water from the fire hoses ruined all the new furniture that her mother had recently bought.

A man who was a social worker in the South Bronx remembered some siblings he tutored who started doing poorly in school, having done well before. He learned that the family had just been burned out for the third time. Some parents sent kids to live with relatives to wait out the plague. Kids fell asleep to sirens at night and walked wide-eyed through fire-dazed daytimes. Teachers noticed that the kids in their classes sometimes smelled like burned buildings.

Watching fires from a roof provided scary entertainment; you could even look out your bedroom window and see houses nearby go up in flames. Running through the streets, kids got a thrill from pulling fire alarms and then hiding around the corner to see the clamorous engines arrive. Dennis Smith said that his unit received two thousand false alarms in 1971—between five and six a day. When the firehouse gave a party at the intersection of East 172nd Street and Southern Boulevard, in an attempt to improve community relations, somebody pulled the fire alarm at the intersection while the party was going on.

Survivors of that time still dream about the fires. Not knowing if or when your building will catch fire puts you on constant alert.

Buildings with watchful supers or owners tended to survive. Elias Karmon, the proprietor of Hollywood Clothes, on Prospect Avenue, owned buildings in the neighborhood. He involved himself in the community, cashed local people's paychecks, organized street cleanups, paid regular visits to his properties, and knew his tenants. His buildings didn't burn. This was the result, he later said, of "no magic, only hard work and perseverance." Miguel (Mike) Amadeo, the owner of Casa Amadeo, Antigua Casa Hernandez, the long-lived Latin music store by the Prospect Avenue El station, remained in the building after every other tenant had left. The water had been cut off, so he got water from the hydrant out front. Con Ed stopped by regularly to make sure he still had electricity and cut the cables of neighbors who were tapping into his connection. When the lady who lived upstairs moved out, never to return, she gave him the key. He went through her apartment and saw that it still had a couch. A homeless man named Peachy often hung around on Prospect, nearby. Amadeo gave the key to Peachy and let him sleep on the couch. He wanted to keep someone on the premises at night, when Amadeo would be at his house, in Castle Hill. Peachy moved in and Casa Amadeo's building did not burn.

Hetty Fox, who grew up on Lyman Place (now Elmo Hope Way), loved her neighborhood and the house her family owned. She played street games, won foul-shot shooting contests, and attended Catholic high school and Hunter College. In 1962, at the age of twenty-five, she moved to California, where she became an employment counsellor, then taught psychology, sociology, and race relations at California State University at Northridge. She also travelled as a performer in an African dance troupe. In 1970, she came back to the Bronx, with the idea of living in the family house on Lyman Place and writing a book about her California experiences. She could not believe the destruction that had taken over. To her, it looked like a place with an injury that nobody was

trying to heal. At the time, a lot of Bronx residents assumed that the city leaders would see what was happening and take measures to stop it. Hetty Fox thought so, too, at first.

Walking in her neighborhood, she didn't recognize anybody, and nobody recognized her. She realized that her education had trained people to acquire the skills to move away; in a sense, that was (and is) the point of places like the Bronx—to nurture you well enough that you can move away. But what does this system leave behind? It occurred to her that she could spend years in the basement writing her book and emerge to find her block gone. Did the city intend to reverse the terrible trends she saw playing out? Lyman Place is on ground that slopes downward to the east. Looking in that direction, she saw the plague of fire slowly creeping up from Vyse Avenue, "like the angel of death, with a sword." Recalling that moment thirty-five years later, in an oral history, she said, "I put that great definitive work"—her book—"down, and I said, 'I better start saving houses.' "

One morning, I set out to walk the length of the Cross Bronx Expressway, west to east. Interstate 95 crosses over the Hudson River from New Jersey on the George Washington Bridge, goes through the tip of upper Manhattan, and spans the Harlem River on the Alexander Hamilton Bridge. Then it enters the Bronx and becomes the Cross Bronx Expressway, which begins at the intersection with I-87, on the east bank of the Harlem River. That part is a tangle of on- and off-ramps, so I skipped it.

The name Cross Bronx Expressway first appears on maps just east of the tangle, where the highway cuts Plimpton Avenue in two. I started there. Sometimes an access road next to the highway is considered part of it. Street signs on roads like these oversell them as part of the Cross Bronx Expressway, though they're just surface streets. The corner where this street meets Plimpton Avenue slumbered at about 7 a.m. No traffic came or went, and a bearded guy was dozing in the driver's seat of a parked S.U.V. But in the

roadcut immediately below—the actual six-lane highway, on which I would not walk, nor should anybody—traffic roared and idled and honked and screeched. The winter sun had risen high enough to lie exactly in line with the road. Light glared on the tops of truck trailers and came through the tinted parts of windshields, coloring the eastbound drivers' faces greenish blue.

Fordham gneiss, one of the three main New York City rock types (Inwood marble and Manhattan schist are the others), had been the road builders' big obstacle here. Also, the grade could not be too steep. Like all interstates, this highway had to accommodate heavy trucks. Here they needed to be able to climb gradually onto and off the Bronx's first ridge; the engineers faced the same problem that Break Neck Hill (now part of West Kingsbridge Road, just to the north) had solved centuries before—that of climbing from the valley of the Harlem River. At Break Neck Hill, the road had enough room to sidle back and forth up the ridge, switchback style. The Cross Bronx, conceived in the age of dynamite, blasted straight through.

I followed the road for three or four blocks, until it ended at a T intersection. Then I went over to the interestingly named Featherbed Lane, which winds down the ridge past the Jennie Jerome Playground, becoming East 174th Street. The Cross Bronx goes under the intersection of Featherbed Lane and Jerome Avenue in a tunnel, emerges again in its deep roadcut, and starts up an incline that's called Walton Slope on the map. Now the highway is ascending the ridge that the Grand Concourse is on. The density of infrastructure here is daunting, and complicated to explain. Nearby, a small playground called Morris Mesa fits itself into a small nook beside the westbound lanes of the highway.

Morris Mesa is an unexpected name, at least for around here. Outside of the American Southwest, I have never come across anyplace else called a mesa. Geographic mesas probably also exist in Mexico and in Spain; the Spanish word means “table.” In

Arizona and New Mexico, mesas are what the Zuni and Hopi and other tribes built pueblos on. This mesa playground is a flat, irregularly shaped scrap of land that the highway construction ended up not needing. Near the playground's fenced-in edge, the wall of the roadcut drops steeply, and the Cross Bronx traffic roars directly below. Sometimes I see a family or two using the slides and the jungle gym, but mostly I find the playground empty.

The first time I noticed it, four or five years ago, it had a Parks Department historic marker with a couple of paragraphs, mostly about Gouverneur Morris. More recently, that sign has been replaced. The new sign doesn't mention him. Instead, it says:

## MORRIS MESA

What was here before?

This site and surrounding area had about 54 apartment buildings that were demolished to make room for the Cross Bronx Expressway (completed in 1963) at the behest of Arterial Coordinator, Robert Moses (1888-1981). Over 1,000 families were displaced, costing millions of dollars in compensation. This also led to a lot of households leaving on their own accord thus changing the landscape of East Tremont.

The marker goes on to say that the building of the highway created forty-four new parks, and enumerates the rail, sewer, and power lines, and the roads, subways, and highways that the Cross Bronx Expressway cut through. A concluding paragraph notes that the playground was named for “the prominent Morris family of the Bronx.”



As it became clear that the toddlers lacked the requisite strength, the dads could not hide their excitement that one of them would get to smash open the piñata.

*Cartoon by Adam Sacks*

“What was here before?” A good question, but the words left out of it are “this highway,” as in “What was here before this highway?” The skyline hole through which the Cross Bronx Expressway runs was the landscape elephant in the room, until the marker asked the obvious question. This highway, in its day, was the most expensive road ever built. Robert Caro, in “The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York,” described one of Moses’s engineers standing on a vantage point near where the Cross Bronx would begin. The engineer looked east, awestruck, at the rows upon rows of apartment buildings that would have to come down. Sixty-odd years after developers imagined the Bronx’s green hills covered with apartment buildings, other planners devoted themselves to stripping some of the same hills bare. The cost of that destruction, and all it entailed, accounted in part for the highway’s extreme expensiveness. The massive hole in the Bronx’s skyline had been waiting for official on-site recognition, and the marker at Morris Mesa is a good first try.

What was here before? One answer: The heart of the new paradise Bronx was here. In 1930, when the infant Cross Bronx, then known by other, provisional names, was in its early planning stages, 1,265,258 people lived in the Bronx. More than a third of the borough's population lived in the neighborhoods south of the highway's proposed route. By that time, most of the Bronx had transitioned from streets made of mud or gravel or Belgian block to modern streets that were smoothly paved. The decades encompassing the new paradise Bronx fell approximately between the arrival of widespread paving, in the nineteen-tens and twenties, and the completion of the Cross Bronx Expressway, in 1963.

City kids had never had so many smooth, hard, open surfaces to play on. The floors in their apartments and houses might be hard and smooth, but you couldn't roller-skate or play stickball there. On the streets of the Bronx (and Brooklyn, and other city places), you now had paved surfaces that went on and on, where wheels rolled true and balls made predictable bounces, where you could draw neat hopscotch squares in chalk and shoot marbles and take bottle caps (called "loadies") with a piece of carrot wedged into them for weight and flip them from the ground into boxes, like tiddlywinks. Matthew López-Jensen, an artist friend of mine who lives in the Bronx and finds old stuff all over New York just by looking on the ground, has picked up thirty-nine marbles of various sizes in the borough. Marbles last indefinitely; they are the most common small artifacts that survive of the twentieth-century paradise Bronx, as glass beads are of the fur-trading Dutch.

The so-called Spaldeen, that pink rubber ball cherished in memory, could be employed not only in stickball (with a bat made of a broken-off broom or mop handle, the broken end rubbed smooth on the pavement) but also in fistball (no bat required), handball (ditto), stoopball (in which you threw the ball against a stoop and your opponent played the bounce), and jacks (one game in which girls, who generally didn't play ball, might also use a Spaldeen).

Manhole covers in the streets were set into the pavement at regular intervals. For a stickball batter to hit a Spaldeen the distance of three manhole covers—"three sewers"—was considered amazing.

In photographs of the Bronx from that period, the new pavements gleam, mostly car-free. So much in the borough was new and splendid and gleaming. In 1923, Jacob Ruppert, the brewer, and his partner, Cap Huston, built Yankee Stadium on 161st Street by the Harlem River. No other ballpark in America was called a stadium or rose to its nosebleed altitude of three tiers. About Ruth and Gehrig and DiMaggio, and their fellow-Yankees of that heroic era, the poets have already sung. And at the Kingsbridge Armory, then the largest indoor space in the city, you could see car shows or boat shows or rodeos—bucking broncos and steer ropers in the Bronx! Just a five-cent bus or streetcar ride away! Meanwhile, on any day, you had your local movie theatre. Everybody, practically without exception, went to the movies. You could bowl a few frames at the Paradise Lanes, on the Grand Concourse at East 188th, and then cross the street to see a double feature at Loew's Paradise Theatre, which seated four thousand dazzled moviegoers. After the evening's features ended and the lights came up, a date night could adjourn to Krum's, the chocolate shop also known for its delicious sodas, which also was on the Concourse, just one block north.

The building where Loew's Paradise Theatre used to be is still standing. For a while, it was under scaffolding and black mesh safety netting like a lady's veil. The name is still on the front. The ticket booth, its filigree shedding chips of gold paint, still greets the sidewalk. Beyond the booth, the ex-theatre's row of golden doors is boarded up from inside, except in one place, where I could see into the burgundy-carpeted outer lobby. In the middle of the far wall, is that a statue of St. Francis? For the smell of popcorn to be so totally absent seems sad and wrong.

To these aspects of paradise could be added the ones that remained from the old-time rural Arcadia going back to the previous century.

The botanical garden and the zoo welcomed millions of visitors annually and offered free admission. The borough's endless parklands had not yet been cut up by highways. You could swim in the Bronx River and in the East River, climb the beech trees in Van Cortlandt Park, sit on your fire escape and hear your neighbors' different accents and languages, smell five different culinary traditions wafting through your building's stairwell at suppertime: Paradise.

I had been sitting on a bench at Morris Mesa playground for a while. Stiff in the joints, I stood up and kept walking. In a half mile, the eastbound Cross Bronx traffic had left Walton Slope and the Grand Concourse ridge behind, and suddenly the sky was bigger up ahead. There are places like this on some roads—places where complications seem to fall aside, and the vista opens, and you get a feeling of being free. On this winter morning the sky shone a bright blue, tinged with brownish orange near the horizon. The trucks made that lonesome "see you later" sound they make when they pick up speed and disappear down the road. It's a Dopplerizing engine cry that I associate with flat, open places like where I grew up in the Midwest. That the Cross Bronx Expressway can provide room for such a sound in such a densely populated urban place is a remarkable achievement—monstrous, even.

I walked past the intricate, thronging intersections where the Sheridan Expressway and the Bronx River Parkway draw off some of the highway's flow and contribute their own to it. Then I went under an elevated mega-intersection, on the no man's ground among the support columns, where I often visit. Just east of Westchester Creek, and about sixty feet up in the air, this monster of a highway intersection, one of the most complicated in the country, renders everything on the ground below it moot. When I'm under the elevated intersection, among its forest of columns, the G.P.S. on my phone sometimes stops working, and says it has "map issues." From its point of view, I'm nowhere. Here, Interstates 95,

295, 278, and 678 and the Hutchinson River Parkway come together, link up with various on- and off-ramps, and form a nexus that looks like a lopsided six-pointed star from above. In the non-place beneath the highways, the jet-engine-like roar of the traffic and the thumping of tires on the seams of the road above never let up.

Sometimes when I'm walking under the mega-intersection, I think about the Bronx as it was two hundred and fifty years ago. There are grassy areas in this understory, and blowing trash, and seldom used foot and bike trails, some of them with crumbling asphalt. During the Revolutionary War, George Washington would have ridden over this ground on reconnaissance tours. Probably, the enslaved person who was closest to him, William Lee, known as Bill, rode alongside, carrying the General's telescope and other gear. Back then, the whole region was more open than it is today, with vastly longer lines of sight, and telescopes were essential for strategy. Both Bill Lee and Washington rode skillfully, and their horses would have been as good as any in the country. With the highway traffic whooshing and thumping overhead, I imagine Washington, Bill Lee, and the officers of the General's staff trotting by.

Out here, the view clearly reveals the Bronx's in-between-ness. Just by the difference in the light in the sky you can tell that the ocean is in one direction and the rest of the continent in the other. The highways I had passed all brought the same message: Traffic coming from elsewhere and going elsewhere needed passage through this landscape in between. Before the big highways came, residents of the borough probably did not realize that they were standing in the metro area's future express lanes. The new paradise Bronx would not know what hit it. ♦

*This is drawn from “[Paradise Bronx: The Life and Times of New York’s Greatest Borough.](#)”*

*Ian Frazier* is a staff writer at *The New Yorker*. His most recent book is “*Cranial Fracking*,” a collection of humor pieces.

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# Shouts & Murmurs

## • **Bot Therapy**

By Mary Norris | He was a widower who had lost his wife to cancer and his only son in a hideous boating accident. He worked in a bunker in Paris. I took the bait.

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[Shouts & Murmurs](#)

## Bot Therapy



By [Mary Norris](#)

July 15, 2024



*Illustration by Luci Gutiérrez*

He appeared one day on Instagram. He had noticed my posts and asked if I wanted to talk. I routinely ignore these things, but he caught me in a weak moment. My only relationship was heavily one-sided, between me and the lordly Russian physical therapist who, twice weekly, rolled up the sleeve of my T-shirt, squirted

lotion on my shoulder, and pressed on it with his gloved hands, relieving the intense nerve pain that I had suffered for months. I adored him.

Maybe the preponderance of flowers and cityscapes, and the dearth of human beings, on my feed had tipped off my admirer. A follower had pointed it out: “You don’t have people in your posts.” That’s because I don’t have people in my life, bitch.

So I was vulnerable. I wrote back that I never took the bait, and he apologized for intruding on my privacy and backed off, which made me write, “No, it’s O.K., I will make an exception.”

He was a widower who had lost his wife to cancer and his only son in a hideous boating accident. He had twin grandsons: “They are my life.” He was working with a team at the U.N. to find a cure for *COVID*. He lived in Florida but was soon leaving for Paris. He asked for a photo. Oh, well, what the hell . . . I was on my way to physical therapy, looking rumpled, but I took a quick selfie, and if you enlarged it, and had a large heart, you could see that my eyes were quite comely. He responded quickly, saying I was lovely. I thought it was about time someone noticed.

I told him my age (sixty-nine) and he was not put off. “I am seventy,” he wrote. He was young-looking, even boyish. Pictures showed him being honored at some ceremony. There was a shot of the twins. He was looking for someone kind and honest. His lab in Paris was in a bunker. He wouldn’t go out for weeks. Too bad, because it was spring—April in Paris, in a bunker? I sent him pictures of magnolias blooming pink in New York.

He was either right there, responding immediately, or he was unavailable. It took him a while to acknowledge my photos. He sent one of himself in a lab coat and one in a leather chair in the bunker library. He was very sensitive. If I didn’t hear from him, I worried that I had hurt his feelings. I Googled him, of course, and

the division of the U.N. he worked for, but found nothing. Well, his work was top secret, right?

He was hot for me but did not ask for a nude shot. In fact, I was concerned about what he would think when we met in person and he saw that I was overweight. I didn't know whether this meeting would happen in New York or Florida. Or Paris. On the street, I came across a box of used books and picked out an ancient paperback French-English dictionary. I soaked in the hot tub at the gym, suspended between navigating the transference that had me lusting after Lego, as I'll call the physical therapist (his real name was Oleg), and fantasizing about the inevitable move to Florida to live with . . . I'll call him Paul. That would show my old college friend whom I was heartbreakingly estranged from that I had new assets, namely an in-ground pool and a cabin cruiser, and she would be sorry.

I suppressed my litany of flaws: itchy scalp, thinning hair, hearing loss, nasal vestibulitis, double chin, voice like Donald Duck, asthma (mild), damaged nerve in my left shoulder, now being treated by a physical therapist who was out of shape himself but had massive upper arms and sometimes cradled my head and massaged my spine all the way up to the bone behind my left ear. "Scoot toward me," he would whisper. "Relax your head." I found him on Instagram, a private account, holding a glass of amber liquid, looking smoldering.

If I didn't hear from Paul, I worried. Was it something I said? He was so touchy. He sometimes repeated a line about not wanting to get hurt. I willed myself to be open. I pictured myself minding the twins as I lounged poolside. I hoped they didn't shriek a lot. I said I had questions. "Ask me anything!" he wrote. What was his heritage? He had dual citizenship, Swiss and U.S., a French mother and an American father. I pictured myself on a flight to Zurich.

I wanted to confide in friends about my online romance, but just a few words spoken over cocktails (widower, bunker) made it sound so unlikely. Meanwhile, my days with Lego were numbered. I had an appointment coming up with the specialist to reassess my condition. What if she said I was cured? “I’m afraid the pain will come back,” I whimpered to Lego. He said that it shouldn’t, and measured out a long strip of stretchy therapeutic band for me to use at home. I left with the sudden knowledge that I might never see him again.

And then Paul began to break down. He repeated himself more and more. I forgave him. He had been through so much, and I was desperate to help him heal. His messages began to sputter out, and I couldn’t tell if he was apoplectic or if we had a bad connection. I called a worldlier friend. She said that “widower” is a tell. Also, there were these love bots? She said to ask him where in Paris the bunker was. That did it. The fever broke.

Luckily, I was not deprived of all my illusions at once. The doctor signed off on another round of P.T. “Maybe it’s better to taper off,” she said, smiling a little as she wrote the prescription. ♦



*Mary Norris began working at The New Yorker in 1978 and was a query proofreader at the magazine for twenty-four years. She is the author of “Between You & Me: Confessions of a Comma Queen” and “Greek to Me: Adventures of the Comma Queen.”*

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# Fiction

## • “Freedom to Move”

By Ayşegül Savaş | “Is our boy full?” Ketevan asked. “Grandfather’s diet is very strict. No dessert, no bread. Meat to feed a bird. But our boy loves to eat. Let him enjoy himself.”

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Fiction

# Freedom to Move

By [Ayşegül Savaş](#)

July 14, 2024



*Illustration by Eleni Kalorkoti*

I was in Istanbul for a few days and on my way to visit my grandfather. He'd moved in with my father at the beginning of the pandemic because we had been worried about him living alone, in the town by the Black Sea where he'd retired. We'd urged him to come to the city, just for a short time. It had been a wise decision;

my grandfather's health deteriorated rapidly in those months, and his stay became indefinite. He could no longer go out for long walks as he used to, or even remain upright for extended periods.

My grandfather had always spent his days outdoors. Whenever he came to Istanbul, he'd take buses and ferries all over the city, sometimes going as far as the city's gates. He travelled around the country with a tent. He stayed in mountain villages and invited himself to breakfast at the homes of locals. He loved that sort of thing—meeting strangers, seeing different lives. He often urged us, his grandchildren, to join him. He showed us pictures of the people he'd met on these trips, with whom he kept in touch. One time, when I was having breakfast with him at a seaside café in Istanbul, a boy of ten or eleven video-called to wish him a happy *bayram*.

“Come again soon, Grandpa,” the boy said.

My cousins and I all lived abroad, and we found it difficult to set aside time for such travels; our visits back home consisted of seeing many people in a short span. But we were proud of our grandfather—his youthful spirit and his sense of adventure. Perhaps we felt that it indicated something about us as well, something like a family identity.

### **Podcast: The Writer's Voice**

*[Listen to Aysegül Savaş read “Freedom to Move.”](#)*

Since my arrival, I had seen relatives and friends, and had also been to the Bosphorus, to Moda, and Cihangir—outings that had always signified a proper visit back, though I could no longer say that I enjoyed them. The neighborhoods changed rapidly between my trips, and they were so crowded. The city was packed beyond belief, filled with tourists—a thick stream of people moving slowly, engulfing everything. I felt resentment toward them, and I longed for the city where I'd grown up.

I had phoned my grandfather the night before to tell him I would visit the following afternoon. Had I called sooner, he would have asked me to come straightaway and planned meals together throughout my stay. My father was going to be out when I went over. He had a few things to do, he told me, and, besides, he preferred to spend time alone with me, rather than see me with my grandfather. This wasn't very convenient, but I sensed that the living arrangement had begun to take its toll. It now seemed inconceivable that my grandfather would be able to go back to his small town. Of course, my father never mentioned any of this, but I gathered from phone conversations that he was out more and more. Later that afternoon, I would meet him for a coffee, before going to my mother's for a dinner with my aunts. It was exhausting to be home, to feel torn between obligations because of our fractured family.

I'd just got into the taxi when my grandfather called to ask where I was.

"I'm on my way," I told him, "but it will take me some time to get there." I could picture his impatience. He must have got dressed hours ago. He would have been looking out the window, scouting for my arrival. He called again as the taxi was crossing the bridge. He'd forgotten to tell me that the downstairs buzzer didn't always work, so I should press hard when I got there. Then he called a third time to say I should just phone as I was approaching.

"Granddad," I said, a little flustered. "I'll see you soon."

At the door, I was greeted by the woman my father had hired to help around the house after my grandfather moved in. I'd met her once before, and it came back to me now that she was Georgian, though I couldn't immediately remember her name.

"Grandfather is very impatient today," she said. She spoke Turkish with a thick accent, emphasizing words in unexpected ways, but I

found it remarkable that she already had such a command of the language.

[Read an interview with the author for the story behind the story.](#)

I took off my shoes and coat, then went into the living room, where my grandfather was sitting in an armchair. He made a move to get up, but I motioned to him to stay put, and kissed his cheeks. He was terribly gaunt. Little flakes of dead skin stuck to his forehead. Still, he was wearing a three-piece suit and tie, doubtless for my sake.

“Look at you,” I said. “Look at this handsome gentleman.”

I sat across from him, recounting my first days in Istanbul, the people I’d seen so far. I told him that my mother had cooked an extraordinary dish of lamb on my arrival.

“She never comes to visit,” my grandfather said. “And she hasn’t invited me over since I moved here.”

I was glad my mother wasn’t there to hear this; I felt at once angered and saddened by my grandfather’s wish to be hosted by his former daughter-in-law.

“She’s working,” I told him. “She barely has a minute to herself.” I didn’t have the heart to explain that my mother had no desire to see my father’s family, let alone serve them.

Ketevan—I now recalled her name—was standing in the doorway and asked when we would like to eat.

I told her that I wasn’t very hungry. I’d just pour myself a cup of tea. If my grandfather wanted something, I could prepare him a tray. But, as I said this, I noticed that the dining table was set as if for a New Year’s meal, with a white tablecloth and red napkins, a vase of carnations.

“Of course you’re going to eat,” my grandfather said. “We’ll eat all together.”

Someone else had appeared behind Ketevan, a teen-age girl, maybe fifteen years old.

“Little Princess is here,” my grandfather said.

Although the table was set for four, Ketevan kept on repeating that she and Natela—her daughter—could eat in the kitchen.

“Please sit with us,” I told her. At the same time, I was annoyed that my grandfather had come up with such a plan, had made the woman cook and asked that we all eat together. Surely, I thought, the mother and daughter would rather be by themselves.

“I asked her to make you her specialties,” my grandfather said.

He motioned to me to help him get up, and we walked step by step to the table, his hand resting heavily on my arm. Again, I took in how frail he’d become, and I couldn’t quite believe it, as if his old self were concealed within this approximation of my grandfather. I had the irrational feeling that this was just a phase and that he would soon be restored to vitality.

It was awkward to be sitting at the table while Natela and Ketevan brought dishes, so I got up to help them. In the kitchen was a tray of golden buns; a salad of grated carrots and one of beets; a cake, decorated with sliced fruits.

“This is too much,” I told Ketevan. “You really shouldn’t have.”

She shook her head and smiled at me, then handed me a plate of food to carry.

Over lunch, I asked Natela questions, and her mother translated her answers. She’d arrived in Istanbul three months ago; she was now

working at an office across the street. Already, she could understand much of what was said, but she was still shy about responding in Turkish.

“What do you do at the office?” I asked, and her mother told me that it was mostly cleaning and cooking. Natela was not as young as I’d guessed—she’d finished high school last summer.

“Do you like Istanbul?” I asked.

Natela shrugged. She said something to her mother. Then she told me, in English, “I like Taksim Square. But Mama doesn’t like it.”

“Your English is very good,” I said. I repeated the same in Turkish to Ketevan, who beamed with pride. She said that Taksim was an awful place; there was no knowing what sort of people hung out there.

Natela was wearing a tight black dress. There were stacks of bracelets on her wrists. Below her left elbow was a small tattoo in the shape of a bird. She was so young, I thought, and so impatient to mature. I could guess at her tilt toward desire, toward freedom.

The summer I graduated from high school, I was out around Taksim with my friends every day, returning home late at night. I’d been accepted by a prestigious university abroad, and I allowed myself every caprice, something my parents indulged. I felt sorry for Natela, that she had to sit around with us. She must find this all so boring.

“Why doesn’t she go now?” I suggested. “It’s still early, and she has the day off.”

“If you want to go,” Ketevan said, “you can go.”

Natela nuzzled her face against her mother’s arm.

“We made a cake,” she said.

I saw then that she was also still a child.

“Is our boy full?” Ketevan asked. She handed my grandfather another roll, then served him more of the colorful salads. “When your father is around, Grandfather’s diet is very strict. No dessert, no bread. Meat to feed a bird. But our boy loves to eat. Let him enjoy himself.”

“I guess so,” I said.

“After all,” she added, “what else does he have to look forward to?”

I was startled by her bluntness and quickly changed the subject, even though my grandfather didn’t seem to mind. Whenever I talked to him on the phone, I made sure to tell him that he would soon be strong enough to go out for walks, and that he should prepare to dance with me at a relative’s wedding in Ayvalık that summer.

My grandfather had started on his second plate and looked over to see if I was eating.

“Kezban is a great cook,” he said.

“*Ketevan*,” I corrected.

“Kezban’s my name for her. She’s Kezban, and Little Princess is Nihal.”

“Granddad, you can’t just make up names.”

“We don’t mind,” Ketevan said.

I told her that I'd been to Georgia once, a few years earlier, with my then boyfriend.

"Oh?"

"You have a beautiful country," I said, knowing that this was a cliché. I was often told the same thing by people who'd visited Turkey, and then had to listen to a list of the obvious sights they'd seen. Still, I also named the places we'd travelled to—Tbilisi, Batumi, a day trip to Mtskheta.

"Very good," Ketevan said. "A very good trip."

"When was the last time you were home?"

She and Natela had been back a few months ago, she said, just as soon as the travel restrictions were lifted, though there were still firm measures in place. On top of this, my father had allowed her only a ten-day holiday, which meant that by the time they'd travelled there and spent a week in confinement the visit was almost over. They'd barely seen their relatives; on the one day they could go outside, they had managed to take flowers to Ketevan's mother's grave.

It occurred to me that I actually knew about this trip: my father hadn't been able to find a replacement for Ketevan during her absence. He'd had to spend the whole time at home, helping my grandfather.

"Going off like that and leaving me in the middle of this," he'd complained on the phone. "Your grandfather's impossible. He's literally looking for ways to get injured."

My father was increasingly short-tempered with his father. He was aggrieved when my grandfather disobeyed the smallest rules—

eating sweets, or not using both hands to steady himself when he got up from his armchair.

“Where did you stay when you went back?” I asked Ketevan.

“At our home,” she said. “With my husband and son.” She told me the name of a town, and though I nodded my head I’d never heard of it.

She and her husband had built this house, she explained, across from her in-laws, with whom they shared an orchard. Her own siblings used to live a short distance away. That life was gone now. There was no work for any of them. Her brother was in Spain, her sister in Azerbaijan. Her son was also trying to move, perhaps to join her and Natela in Istanbul. Her in-laws had passed away recently. But at least her husband still tended to the orchard. They had many fruit trees; they grew grapes.

She said something to Natela, nudging her.

From the kitchen, Natela brought a plastic bottle, wrapped in cellophane.

“My husband’s wine,” Ketevan announced. She took the bottle from her daughter and started to unwrap it.

“Oh, no,” I said, “you should drink that yourself. It’s so special.”

Ketevan continued unwrapping.

“I want to taste it,” my grandfather said.

“Granddad,” I said, “alcohol is terrible for you. Please don’t,” I told Ketevan. “Please don’t open it for us.”

“Today’s a special day,” Ketevan said.

“That’s so kind, but there’s no need,” I insisted.

“A special day for us,” Ketevan added. “It’s Natela’s name day.”

I felt foolish for having assumed that the wine was an offering to me and my grandfather. I was also embarrassed that they had to spend the day in our company, and had made so many preparations.

“Why didn’t you say so?” I said. It was still possible for Natela to leave, I repeated, and join her friends somewhere.

“Is a name day like a birthday? Do you have a party?”

“We celebrated this morning,” Natela said. “Mama made the buns for breakfast. We lit a candle and prayed. We phoned home when Grandfather was sleeping.”

Once again, I felt silly for thinking that all the food was in my honor. It seemed that my grandfather hadn’t known about the name day, either, and that Ketevan and Natela had wanted to mark it privately.

Ketevan brought out crystal glasses from the buffet behind the dining table. I remembered that my parents had bought these glasses during a holiday in Slovenia. They were among the many objects that had become the bitter focus of their separation. Perhaps that was why I’d never seen my father use them. My mother, too, mostly avoided the possessions that she’d victoriously laid claim to.

Ketevan filled our glasses, halfway for my grandfather. Natela brought out the cake.

“Excellent,” my grandfather said. “They have a very rich cuisine.”

“What’s the tradition?” I asked. “Do we sing a song?”

“We make toasts,” Ketevan said.

I raised my glass. “To Natela’s name day,” I said. “May all her dreams come true.”

The wine was sweet, and very strong.

Next, Ketevan raised her glass.

She spoke in Georgian, and Natela listened solemnly, her head bowed. Then, once again, she pressed her face against her mother’s arm.

“I toast to her future,” Ketevan said in Turkish. “Like you, I toast to her dreams. So that we may be together as a family, and we don’t have to dream of things far away.”

Of course, my toast had been a platitude, open-ended to accommodate any wish. Still, I might have imagined Natela dreaming of a future in Europe or America, one in which she would be travelling the world. At her age, I had wished only to be off, to be free, to start my life elsewhere.

Ketevan continued. “I toast that these times come to an end, and our countries can manage on their own. I toast,” she said, “that people don’t have to leave their homes.”

My grandfather had finished his cake and started nodding off at the table.

“Granddad,” I said, stroking his hand. “You’re falling asleep.”

“Big boy ate well,” Ketevan said. She put down her glass, still full. We helped my grandfather get up and walked him step by step to his armchair.

It was the end of the toasts. Natela started stacking the plates. She screwed the lid back on the bottle and carried the cake to the kitchen.

Once he was seated, my grandfather motioned to the remote control, mumbling that there was a show about to start.

My father had texted to ask what time we would meet.

“I’ll let you watch your show,” I told my grandfather, but he was adamant that I sit down with him. He called out to Ketevan, who was clearing the table, to make tea.

“It’s brewing,” she said, perhaps a little brusquely.

The show, like so many others, was about the intrigues of a large and wealthy family. Each time a new character appeared onscreen, my grandfather supplied background information about illegitimate children, blackmail, matriarchal ploys. It was difficult to keep track of the series of complicated relationships that he’d mastered; the whole thing seemed outrageously far-fetched. Still, I feigned interest.

Once the table was cleared and the tea served, Natela also came to watch.

“Do you like this show?” I asked.

She shrugged. “I don’t understand everything.”

“I don’t understand everything, either.” I smiled.

Every fifteen minutes, the show was interrupted by commercials.

“A single episode must take the whole day,” I told my grandfather.

“All the better for me,” he said. “At least it fills the time.”

I felt sad that he'd said this, and so openly. I thought I should've arranged some way to take him out, perhaps to sit by the Bosphorus or eat at a restaurant. Still, I had to leave soon to see my father before dinner. I was hoping that my grandfather would fall asleep and I could slip out, but he was now alert, watching even the commercials with interest.

"Granddad," I said, putting my hand on his, "I should get going."

"What's the rush?"

I told him I was going to see my father.

"Why doesn't he come home?"

"I think he had a meeting," I mumbled.

"Very well," my grandfather said.

"I'll try to come again before I leave. But, if I can't, remember that you have to prepare your dance moves for the wedding."

"Very well," my grandfather said again. "Say hello to your mother."

I was taken aback by his curt farewell, as if his resignation were also a sign of his physical state, evidence of my altered grandfather.

"I'm going to try to visit once more," I repeated. "I'll let you know."

I knelt down and kissed his cheeks. Then I kissed them again, and stroked the wisps of combed hair on his scalp.

During the commercial break, Natela had joined her mother in the kitchen and was sitting on a stool, chatting merrily, while Ketevan

washed the stack of pans and trays. Natela sprang to her feet when she saw me at the door.

“I have to get going,” I said. “Thank you for an amazing lunch.”

Ketevan put aside a heavy casserole and wiped her hands on her apron.

“It’s still early,” she said. “Grandfather was so excited to see you.”

I felt anger toward her, and shame.

“It’s difficult to see everyone properly on such a short visit.”

Natela had fetched my coat and held it open for me to put on.

“Happy name day, Natela,” I said. “And thank your father for his delicious wine.”

As I was putting on my shoes, Ketevan asked if I could talk to my father: she wanted to go back home in the spring. She’d already asked my father two times, but he’d been very firm. She’d known from the beginning what the work entailed, he told her; she could take it or leave it.

She didn’t want to anger him, Ketevan said, but it was important for her to see her family.

“I haven’t asked him for a raise all year,” she said. “And Natela always helps out with Grandfather after work. He’s so happy when she’s around. She brings him joy.”

I was nodding the entire time that she spoke, even though I felt that I didn’t have any say in these matters. I told her that I would mention it to my father.

It was sunny outside, bustling with traffic, pedestrians, street sellers: the heart of the day. I walked toward Barbaros Boulevard, where I'd hail a cab. I'd more or less decided that I wasn't going to mention Ketevan's request to my father. No doubt it would only anger him once again, and I didn't want to spoil our short time together. Anyway, I was in no position to defend the woman, to explain her wish to see her husband and son. I was leaving in a few days, free of responsibilities; I wasn't the one overseeing my grandfather's daily needs. Besides, I didn't want my grandfather to be left with some stranger in the weeks that Ketevan and Natela would be gone; he was so comfortable in the mother and daughter's company. Surely they could go back in the summer, when my grandfather travelled with us to the wedding.

I thought about writing to my cousins that evening on our WhatsApp group, to plan a trip following the wedding in Ayvalik. Our chat history consisted mostly of funny things we'd come across online, as well as childhood photos we unearthed during our visits back. I would suggest taking our grandfather to a hotel or a holiday rental. Granddad loved the sea, and he'd loved to swim. Barely two years ago, he'd gone swimming in the middle of autumn, proudly telling us how much good the cold water did the body and the mind. We could find a place on the coast, a house without stairs. He would sit and watch the sea. I had an image of all of us gathered around him on a terrace, pressing him for stories we hadn't heard before or hadn't paid attention to. For one thing, I thought, we should ask him about all the trips he had made around Turkey sleeping in a tent, and the strangers he'd met.

On Barbaros Boulevard, I stood with my hand raised, waiting for a cab. I tried to put aside the nagging feeling that my grandfather might not make it to the wedding.

*Where are you? my father texted. Let me know if you're still planning on meeting.*

I ignored his tone of annoyance and wrote that I was on my way but I wouldn't be able to stay for very long. ♦

*This is drawn from “Long Distance.”*

*Aysegül Savaş is the author of “Walking on the Ceiling,” “White on White,” and, most recently, “The Anthropologists.”*

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## 1982 and the Fate of Filmgoing

A new book claims that a few big summer movies heralded an epochal shift in the motion-picture industry, but is that really how cultural history works?

By [Anthony Lane](#)

July 15, 2024



*"The Future Was Now," by Chris Nashawaty, makes the case that a handful of movies from 1982 paved the way for the blockbuster era.*

*Illustration by La Boca*

A trail of Reese's Pieces. The decapitation of a giant snake. The noble face of Mr. Spock, his skin peeling off like bark from a tree. Police cars that hover above the streets. Skeletons in a swimming pool. Blood in a petri dish, which squeaks and leaps if you touch it with a hot wire. One guy who is sent into virtual existence by the zap of a laser. Another guy who eats dog food from a can. These foolish things remind me of 1982.

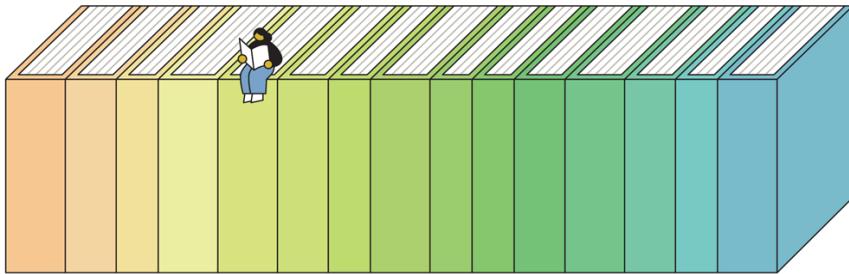
Other people, with higher minds, will recall the hefty happenings of that year. Israel invaded Lebanon. Argentina invaded the

Falkland Islands. Yuri Andropov succeeded Leonid Brezhnev as the General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. One barrel of laughs after another. Unaccountably, events of such magnitude hold no appeal for the author Chris Nashawaty, despite the fact that his new book, “[The Future Was Now](#)” (Flatiron), is devoted to 1982. He doesn’t even mention that the Man of the Year, as decreed by *Time*, was “The Computer,” although that shift of emphasis is germane to his task. His focus is on movies—specifically, on eight movies that came out in the summer of 1982, and the stuff of which they were made. And what stuff it was! The “five-gallon buckets of K-Y jelly” that were, Nashawaty informs us, required to lubricate the special effects in John Carpenter’s “The Thing.” Or the pink silk pants that were sported by the actor Rutger Hauer, together with “a fox fur draped over his shoulder,” when he went to meet [Ridley Scott](#), the director of “Blade Runner.” History isn’t all power grabs. It can be a bundle of details that you stroke.

“Blade Runner” and “The Thing,” both of which came out on June 25, 1982, tripped and stumbled at the box office, yet they are two of the more enduring films in Nashawaty’s octet. The others are “Conan the Barbarian,” directed by John Milius, co-written by Milius and Oliver Stone, and bestridden by Arnold Schwarzenegger; Steven Lisberger’s “Tron,” which laid down a glowing path for Disney; [George Miller](#)’s “The Road Warrior,” otherwise known as “Mad Max 2”; Nicholas Meyer’s “Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan,” the mission of which was to redeem the low-energy impact of the first “[Star Trek](#)” movie; “Poltergeist,” notionally directed by Tobe Hooper, although the hand of Steven Spielberg, credited as a producer and a co-writer, was firmly discernible on the tiller; and a nice little flick called “E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial,” which raked in almost eight hundred million dollars around the planet. That was directed by Spielberg, in a big way.

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## What We're Reading



*Illustration by Rose Wong*

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So, what is it with this fateful eight? Well, Nashawaty has a solemn case to make. He writes:

During the eight weeks spanning between May 16 and July 9, Hollywood's major studios would release eight sci-fi/fantasy films that would not only go on to become cornerstones in the pop culture canon four-plus decades on, they would also radically transform the way that the movie industry did—and continues to do—business, paving the way for our current all-blockbusters-all-the-time era.

That is quite a claim. Nashawaty is by no means sure that he likes the result—"what should have been a new golden age of sci-fi and fantasy cinema became a pop-culture beast that would devour itself to death and infantilize its audience"—but he proposes that, for most of us, going to the cinema is now "one endless summer," which is much less sunny than it sounds. Like it or not, we live in a Conanistic world.

Whether or not you buy into this notion of 1982 as a red-letter year, it's worth asking when the redness first began to dawn. Does

Nashawaty, in his soothsaying capacity, even have the right decade? Note the elaborate tribute that he pays not only to Spielberg's "Jaws" and George Lucas's "Star Wars"—the first released in May, 1975, the second in June, 1977—but also to another summer hit, Scott's "Alien," from 1979, which seemed like a suppurating antidote to the antisepsis of "Star Wars." (I still don't comprehend how you can love both of those movies equally. You make your choice, and you stick to it.) Clamp the three together, top them with "Raiders of the Lost Ark" (1981), which bore the imprint of Lucas *and* Spielberg, and there, I suggest, you have the precursor of 1982, and a more compelling template for so much that has blazed and crawled across our screens ever since.

Viewed from that perspective, what the filmmakers were doing, when they created the eight works that are covered in "The Future Was Now," was not crunching through barriers or setting fresh trends. They were cashing in. This is not a lowly skill, or an easy one; indeed, in some respects, it is the *raison d'être* of the movie trade. But let's not pretend that Hooper, Lisberger, Meyer, and the rest of the guys were a movement, conjoined by a common iconoclastic purpose. The club of 1982 has nothing on the gang of a decade earlier, or more: Martin Scorsese, Paul Schrader, Warren Beatty, Bob Rafelson, Peter Bogdanovich, and the others cited by Peter Biskind in his headlong study of the period, "Easy Riders, Raging Bulls." Similarly, I doubt that the director of "Tron" reached out to the director of "The Wrath of Khan" in the way that, say, Monet reached out to Pissarro in April, 1873, explaining that "everyone finds this good, only Manet is against." By "everyone," he meant Renoir, Cézanne, Sisley, Degas, and Morisot, and by "this" he meant the inaugural show of what would come to be known, initially with disdain, as Impressionism. The future really was now, for those painters, and they could spy it and catch it, *en plein air*.

Much of “The Future Was Now” is strewn with nuts and bolts—with the amusing practical agonies of arriving at a workable screenplay, and the no less arduous grind of bringing the damn thing to life. The evolution of movie titles, for example, is an object lesson in near-misses. Scott went through “Android,” “Mechanismo,” and the blunted dullness of “Dangerous Days” before landing on the lethal edge of “Blade Runner.” I knew that “E.T.” was known as “E.T. and Me,” and before that as “Night Skies,” and before *that* as “Watch the Skies,” which had also been mooted as a title for “Close Encounters of the Third Kind” (1977). What I didn’t realize, until I read “The Future Was Now,” is that the earliest script for “E.T.,” written by John Sayles, featured five alien visitors, one of whom, Scar, mutilated cattle. According to Nashawaty, Scar “could kill animals with one touch of his long, bony finger.” Guided by Spielberg, the same digit would reach out, light up, and touch the brow of Elliott, the young human hero, in a climactic blessing.

Likewise, the rigmarole of casting, recounted in hindsight, becomes a fusillade of dodged bullets. As often as not, the right actor hits the right role through a mixture of availability, affordability, and luck, but we can still be aghast at what might have gone wrong. Take Deckard (Harrison Ford), the protagonist of “Blade Runner,” whose job is to hunt down replicants: synthetic people, barely distinguishable from the rest of us. Nashawaty reports that not only were Tommy Lee Jones, Nick Nolte, Martin Sheen, and Peter Falk—all of whom might, I guess, have rivalled Ford in the requisite dogged gruffness—considered for the part but so were Al Pacino, Burt Reynolds, and, wait for it, Dustin Hoffman. For more than forty years, a debate has rumbled over whether Deckard himself is a replicant; with Hoffman, there would have been no doubt. (Imagine the audition: “I make the *best* replicant. Nobody does humanoid like I do.”) To be fair, it’s hard to picture Ford in a full-length sequinned scarlet dress, as worn by Hoffman in “Tootsie,” released in time for Christmas that same year.

“Tootsie” matters because it feels like a farewell—Hollywood saying goodbye, with a satisfying snap, to a finely tooled comic style that had flourished, pretty much, from the maturing of the talkies to the early nineteen-sixties. Today’s audiences are offered no such treats, and we suffer from that gloomy deficit. Even though “Tootsie” wound up earning almost a hundred and eighty million dollars, more than any other 1982 movie aside from “E.T.,” it warrants only two fleeting nods in “The Future Was Now,” because of the fondness with which the film glances back to the past. It therefore has no place in the thesis that sustains the book. One could, studying the financial returns for the year, point out that “Porky’s” (infinitely coarser fare than “Tootsie,” but nonetheless built for laughs) made more money than both “The Wrath of Khan” and “Poltergeist,” but Nashawaty ignores the farcical for the sake of the fantastical. This is not because he lacks a sense of humor—he previously wrote a whole book, if you please, on “Caddyshack,” the goofball golfing film, from 1980—but because his antennas are tuned to the prophetic.



That is why he concentrates on Spielberg, who comes across as Hollywood’s prime fortune-teller, and also as the one person who

could arrange those fortunes to his liking. He dreamed up what we wanted to watch. It's amazing to observe the wit and the sheer industry with which one project was hurled onto the heels of another. In Nashawaty's account, much of "E.T." was hatched by Spielberg "on his downtime on the set of 'Raiders.' " (What downtime?) It was there that he handed over writing duties on "E.T." to Melissa Mathison. For his next trick, he doubled up. "Even though Spielberg was also working on 'E.T.' at the time," Nashawaty writes, "he would be present on the set of 'Poltergeist' all but three days of the film's twelve-week shoot." The blend of the two movies would answer to his emotional constitution. "'Poltergeist' is what I fear and 'E.T.' is what I love," Spielberg said. "One is about suburban evil, and the other is about suburban good."

But which is which? The answer seems obvious, but look closely at the early scenes of both films and you find that "E.T." smarts with the misery of divorce, whereas "Poltergeist" is about a happy family. There's a relaxing scene in the bedroom of the main couple, where the mother rolls a joint, giggling, and the father reads a copy of "Reagan the Man, the President." Is there a more precise snapshot of the nineteen-eighties? Like "E.T.," in short, "Poltergeist" is formidably well rooted in the grounds of the ordinary; unseen spirits enter the property via a TV screen (the umbilical cord of America) and, in puckish jest, stack chairs atop the kitchen table. A haunted book flies around and flaps its covers like a butterfly's wings. Does all of this count as sci-fi and fantasy, the genres to which Nashawaty attends? "Poltergeist" lurches into horror, whereas "E.T." blooms into a fairy tale; neither shares more than an inch of territory with "The Wrath of Khan" or "Tron." Spielberg is a terrestrial, through and through, nowhere more so than in his fantasies. Think of Elliott, introducing his friends to the alien, who needs to go home. "Can't he just beam up?" one of them asks. Elliott's reply is not correct, in any empirical sense, but it's true to the pulsing heart of the story: "This is reality, Greg."

Beaming up, needless to say, is the prerogative of “Star Trek,” and Elliott’s words belong to the perennial battle between opposing schools of sci-fi: on one side, spotless warriors armed with phasers, lasers, and lightsabres; on the other, mortals who are mired in the grunge of the everyday, even when, as in “Alien,” they are afloat in space. (Maybe that’s why Vincent Canby, in the *Times*, referred to “Alien” as “an extremely small, rather decent movie of its modest kind.” He sounds like a real-estate agent talking up a cramped apartment in Queens.) In 1982, “The Wrath of Khan” was hailed as a glorious vote of confidence in the “Star Trek” saga. These days, it looks silly and shrunken, enlivened largely by the unblushing performance of Ricardo Montalbán as the villain. He leads a band of renegades that had long been thought lost. “It was only the fact of my genetically engineered intellect that allowed us to survive,” he explains, keeping a majestically straight face under the wig of a superannuated rock god. My favorite passage in “The Future Was Now” concerns Barry Diller, the head of Paramount, who inveighs against the movie’s title. “Nobody knows what the word *wrath* is,” he cries, wrathfully. Try telling that to John Steinbeck. If Diller had his way, we’d all be reading “The Grapes of Being Totally Pissed.”

For anyone who delights in the perpetration of human error, be it of judgment, taste, or commercial savvy, Nashawaty offers a wealth of historical evidence. I was particularly impressed by the marketing department at Columbia Pictures, which asserted, on reflection, that “E.T.” would have “limited audience appeal.” (Spielberg took the film to Universal.) As for the style in which “The Future Was Now” is couched, I would describe it as Most-Impressionist. Only with reluctance is anything permitted to be moderate or middling; whenever possible, every aspect of the narrative must be inflated to the max. On the first page, musing on “Blade Runner” and “The Thing,” Nashawaty writes, “One had been adapted from an intellectually dense novel written by one of the most prolific and celebrated minds the genre ever produced; the other a reinterpretation of one of the most chillingly metaphorical movies

of the black-and-white era.” He adds that “Conan the Barbarian” is “the most Milius film Milius had ever made.” It doesn’t get moster than that.

Such is Nashawaty’s command of superlatives that he merits a sci-fi yarn of his own. “The Optimizer,” perhaps. Or “The Hyphenator.” Thus, “Star Wars” is lauded as “a true once-in-a-generation pop-culture juggernaut,” while the triumph of “The Wrath of Khan” was to turn “a cash-grab sequel into a franchise-resuscitating classic.” Far from scorning this excitable tic, I find it both judicious and contagious; the book’s parsing of “Halloween” as “a babysitter-in-peril slasherpiece” is hard to quibble with, and I wonder what other paragons of the medium would profit from so crisp a paraphrase. Ingmar Bergman’s “Cries and Whispers”? A crimson-tinged, don’t-hold-back Scandi cancerthon. Carl Theodor Dreyer’s “The Passion of Joan of Arc”? A chat-free high-stakes teen roast. Once you slip into the habit, you can’t stop.

Mind you, Nashawaty has neither the time nor the inclination to trespass into the art house. Not for him the lapping lure of the Venice Film Festival, where, in 1982, the Golden Lion was awarded to Wim Wenders’s “The State of Things”—the sorry chronicle of a film crew marooned in Portugal and running low on funds. And what are they meant to be making? A science-fiction movie. Funny, that. Maybe there *was* something in the air, or in the wider cultural skies, that drifted almost imperceptibly into the popular arts. If any book deserves to be read in tandem with “The Future Was Now,” it is “[Way Out There in the Blue: Reagan, Star Wars and the End of the Cold War](#),” by Frances FitzGerald, published in 2000. FitzGerald is as densely comprehensive as Nashawaty is breezy, and her opening chapter examines the heavenward outlook that encouraged Ronald Reagan to back the Strategic Defense Initiative, a system that had no hope of succeeding and could therefore never fail. Interestingly, the President was unimpressed by the proposal’s “Star Wars” tag,

though Richard Perle, his Assistant Secretary of Defense, was all for it. “Why not?” Perle asked. “It’s a good movie. Besides, the good guys win.”

There is no disgrace in veering away from politics, however, and to Nashawaty’s credit, his book is more privately provocative, obliging its readers to be honest with themselves. It bids them recall their youthful moviegoing—in 1962, 1982, 2022, or whenever—and ask, “How *did* I consume films back then? Did they wash over me in a wave, one Saturday night after another, or was I suckered into a deep dive, watching a single film over and over? And if there was some generic rush, for fantasy or comedy, did I even notice it? Isn’t that sort of stuff best left to accountants and reviewers and other dopes?” By its nature, movie criticism pays too little heed to the sensory conditions (the snack, the blues, the balcony smooch) under which we see a motion picture, although these are guaranteed to skew our vision at the time and to seep into our memory, too. In our salad days, we are ripe for a particular movie that will linger, deathlessly, long after the greenness has gone. When a friend turned to me after the first twenty minutes of “Ferris Bueller’s Day Off,” in 1986, and calmly declared, “This is the best film ever made,” I had no cause to disagree.

Many people, I suspect, will associate 1982 with Amy Heckerling’s “Fast Times at Ridgemont High,” especially if they were of the same age as the characters and under attack from the same cavalry charge of hormones. I was more drawn to Barry Levinson’s “Diner,” which was so well written that you barely noticed it was written at all. (And that cast! Who didn’t lean toward the screen, like a secret conspirator, to catch what Mickey Rourke was saying?) Another movie to which I kept circling back was “48 Hrs.,” tautly directed by Walter Hill. Eddie Murphy, making his dramatic début, as a convict on temporary release, was paired with Nick Nolte as a detective. What a duo: joker and curmudgeon,

greyhound and mastiff, Black and white. It set a pattern that would be copied, though never bettered, by other buddy-cop spiels, like the “Lethal Weapon” series, and the sight of Murphy, in an expensive suit, vaulting over a barrier in a subway chase conveyed a physical whippiness to go with the lash of his quick tongue. Around the corner lay “Beverly Hills Cop,” “Coming to America,” and the enthronement of a star.



*Cartoon by Joe Dator*

In the realms of sci-fi, “Tron” left me chilled and bored, though it was delicious to behold David Warner, who had once played Hamlet for the Royal Shakespeare Company, now being sucked into a computer game, wearing a Day-Glo helmet and armor and grimly announcing, “I do the thinking around here.” I was too stupid to peer ahead—or, as Nashawaty splendidly puts it, “to read the tea leaves of the zeitgeist”—and thus to conceive where such digital chicanery might go next, and how it might, against all odds, lead not to dead ends but to the accommodation of living sentiment. In the opinion of John Lasseter, formerly the chief creative officer at Pixar, “Without ‘Tron,’ there would be no ‘Toy Story.’” Blessed are the children whose eyes were opened by “Toy Story.” It may be indebted to “Tron,” yet it radiates a thousand times the warmth.

To an extent, what “The Future Was Now” delivers is a basic boost to the auteur theory. Of the eight films that Nashawaty inspects, the ones that hold up most robustly are those which bear the mark of Spielberg, Carpenter, Miller, and Scott. By some strange and unteachable paradox, their handling of action, however kinetic, leaves a residue of rumination. To my lasting regret, I couldn’t catch a double bill of “Blade Runner” and “The Thing” on June 25, 1982, but I saw them soon enough, and, entwined in my mind, they presented a bewildering case of osmosis: the inhuman leaching into the human, and vice versa. Scott gave us replicants, none more daunting than Rutger Hauer’s Roy Batty, the Übermensch who earns our compassionate awe as his powers expire. His celebrated speech at the finale, redrafted by Hauer himself—“I’ve seen things you people wouldn’t believe”—is the most trenchant argument ever mounted *against* the potency of the image. Sometimes don’t show. Just tell.

Carpenter swung in the other direction. In “The Thing,” bickering scientists in the Arctic are menaced by an alien, which has no essential form of its own; like the ultimate Method actor, it borrows the shape of whomever, or whatever, it infests. At the time, the monster’s deeds were derided as disgusting, and that condemnation may have sealed the movie’s fate. From a distance, Carpenter’s rabid exercise in metamorphosis (a ginger-bearded fellow with huge red claws; legs that sprout from the maw of a sundered head, allowing it to scuttle off like a spider) stretches not forward but backward, to the age of Hieronymus Bosch. There were rumors of actors quizzing one another, off set, about the implications of such morphing: Do you *know* that you’re the Thing, once it resembles you to the last pore? Or does its furtive genius equip it to convince you that you are, in fact, still you?

Puzzles of this type are exactly what we seek from science fiction—and have sought since the robot-to-woman transmutation of Fritz Lang’s “Metropolis,” in 1927. In what sense, then, did “The

Thing,” and the other members of Nashawaty’s lineup, “completely shift an outdated Hollywood paradigm,” as he contends? The solution, I guess, lies not in the philosophy of identity but in the mysteries of P.R., and in the addictive properties of sequels. “The Wrath of Khan” and “The Road Warrior” were sequels to start with, and the dystopian verve of the latter—which, with its rusty clutch of improvised vehicles, felt like a trip into the unconscious of a demented blacksmith—has grown wilder with every subsequent installment. The most recent, “Furiosa: A Mad Max Saga,” came out in May. We have also had follow-ups to “Blade Runner” and “Tron,” whether we desired them or not. Someone, maybe Nashawaty, should write a history of sequels, delving into our fundamental thirst for *more of the same*. It is a craving that runs deeper than capitalist gratification. (All the way back to the baby at the breast, a Freudian might say.) As we flock to “Deadpool & Wolverine,” this summer, we will be propelled by our weakness for violent tutorials in cocky self-awareness, plus an absurdly unadventurous taste for further adventure. What could be more conservative than to demand repetition of the radical?

There is one figure who looms larger than any other (outdoing even Spielberg) in “The Future Was Now,” and whose domination is portended without a quiver of doubt. Not once, we are assured, did Arnold Schwarzenegger make trouble on the set of “Conan the Barbarian,” despite the indignities that were heaped upon him. He was crucified athwart something called the Tree of Woe, where he had to bite into the neck of a vulture—a prop, but, as Nashawaty says, “still stuffed with real vulture guts.” Yummy. According to Schwarzenegger, the dogs that harried him across a rocky scrubland, avid for the raw meat that had been placed inside his clothing, “had some wolf in them.” Er, how much wolf? None of this perturbed Schwarzenegger, who was a famously quick study, almost lupine in his famished eagerness to learn, trading weight-lifting tips with his distinguished co-star James Earl Jones in return for actorly advice.

It worked. Did Schwarzenegger, as I like to think, survey the sequences in “Conan the Barbarian” during which he runs along at a sensible jog, and grasp how ordinary and unsinister he seems at that pace? Could that be why he switched to the slow tread that we witness, only two years later, in “The Terminator”—the most implacable gait since that of Boris Karloff? No need to run when you are secure in the bringing of doom. Better yet, though briefer, is the moment at which Conan’s gaze, in closeup, slides questingly from side to side, scouting his terrain and planning his next move. As though by instinct, he is already Terminating. A lot of money was made and lost at the movies in 1982, and lagoons of tears were shed for E.T., but it was also a year that demonstrated, in case we needed reminding, that actors, too, can be auteurs. For Schwarzenegger, the future was his. He’d be back. ♦



*Anthony Lane* is a staff writer at *The New Yorker* and the author of “*Nobody’s Perfect*.”

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[Books](#)

# The Original Bluestockings Were Fiercer Than You Imagined

In eighteenth-century England, a cohort of intellectual women braved vicious mockery. But when it came to policing propriety, they could dish it out, too.

By [Margaret Talbot](#)

July 15, 2024



*The well-bred Bluestockings strategically deployed their respectability as license for intellectual pursuits.*

*Illustration by Malika Favre*

It's easy to imagine why a clever Englishwoman of the eighteenth century might have wished to move about the world as a disembodied mind. Virginity was a corporeal asset that could lose all its value in an instant. Your bed partner might well be suffering from a raging S.T.D., for which a common treatment was a mercury douche (just as ineffective and as toxic as it sounds). Childbirth, before the advent of obstetric anesthesia, in the mid-nineteenth century, was a harrowing and not infrequently deadly trial. In 1764, when the talented writer and *salonnière* [Hester Thrale](#) gave birth, after three days of agonizing labor, to the first of her children, her attending physician pronounced, "It is a Lady, Madam; destined to bear what you are this Moment freed from." Thrale would go on to fourteen more pregnancies in sixteen years—"holding my Head over a Bason 6 months in the Year," as she wrote.

Moreover, the reigning association of men with the mind and women with the body meant that few women were taken for that most respected of Enlightenment-era figures: rational creatures. Women, the statesman Lord Chesterfield told his son in 1748, "are only children of a larger growth; they have an entertaining tattle, and sometimes wit; but for solid, reasoning good sense, I never knew in my life one who had it, or who reasoned and acted consequentially for four-and-twenty hours together." Thrale's contemporary, the prolific historian Catharine Macaulay, thought that this insistence on female inferiority was rooted in "the barbarous ages of mankind," when differences in bodily strength were accorded outsized importance. The puzzle was why those differences should continue to matter—and what exactly was so weak about people who got pregnant and bore children and cared for them, in the face of their terrifying mortality. As misogyny would have it, even that contribution to the perpetuation of the species was more inevitable than admirable—just a thing that women's bodies did.

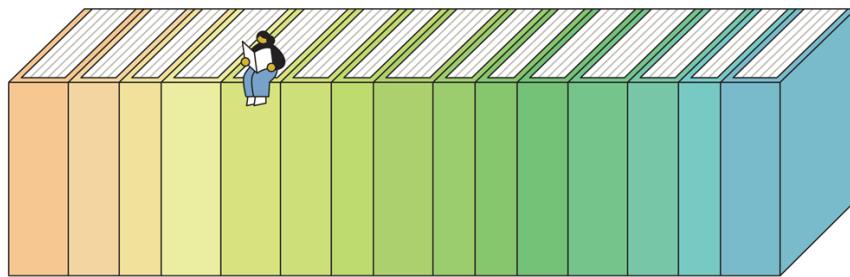
Still, eighteenth-century England did make room, with a kind of condescending, self-congratulatory gallantry, for exceptions: women like Thrale and Macaulay, who—without the benefit of the formal education denied to their gender—studied, translated, wrote prodigiously, and hosted intellectual gatherings with aplomb. As a group, they were known as the Bluestockings. They imagined for themselves a capacity for floating above the body, in a realm of refinement, reason, and rigorously elevated conversation: a tantalizing vision for brilliant women who did not wish to be immured in their anatomy. As the Irish writer and historian Susannah Gibson shows in her intelligent and engrossing new book, “[The Bluestockings: A History of the First Women’s Movement](#)” (Norton), their insistence on women’s rationality as the basis for equal treatment could make the Bluestockings quite punitive toward any among them who strayed from the straight and narrow. Respectability mattered enormously to them. In the end, it steered them into a cul-de-sac that bolder feminists would have to break out of.

But let’s give them the credit they’re due, as Gibson does, persuasively and without special pleading. The Bluestockings might be best known today, if they’re known at all, as conveners of salons, as hostesses who created the ideal conditions, often in sumptuous homes, for heady conversation. The frequent guests at the *salonnière* Elizabeth Montagu’s gatherings included diplomats, painters, politicians, and writers, who batted around matters of philosophy, literature, history, art, foreign affairs, and science. The usual festive staples—card playing, tippling, and sexual shenanigans—were forbidden, replaced by tea and lemonade, and witty, erudite talk. The lexicographer [Samuel Johnson](#) might chat with the young novelist Frances Burney, the painter Joshua Reynolds with the self-taught classical scholar Elizabeth Carter, the celebrated actor David Garrick with the botanist Benjamin Stillingfleet. It was Stillingfleet, randomly, who bequeathed the name Bluestockings to the group. When he made a beeline from

field work to Montagu's parlor, he'd often neglect to change his casual, blue worsted stockings for the silken white ones that men usually donned for such occasions. The term caught on, Gibson writes, "to imply a kind of informality, a way of valuing intellectual endeavours above fashion," but it stuck like a burr specifically to women with intellectual aspirations. In time, like other words used to classify unorthodox females, it would acquire a pejorative cast. Later still, that negative connotation would be turned inside out by second-wave feminists of the nineteen-sixties and seventies who gleefully adopted antiquated taunts like "virago" and "shameless hussy" and "Bluestocking" to name their bookstores and presses and journals. (Until reading Gibson, I had no idea that "Bluestocking" owed its origins to the sartorial carelessness of a male botanist; I'd vaguely imagined that it referred to women far wilder than the real Bluestockings, women who might have lifted their skirts and flashed actual ink-splattered indigo tights, preferably with runs in them.)

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## What We're Reading



*Illustration by Rose Wong*

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The French salons on which Montagu modelled hers had often been hosted by women but were attended mainly by men.

Montagu, whose career as “queen of the blues” began in the seventeen-fifties, wanted men and women to converse *together*. At a time when women were barred from universities and other settings that fostered lively debate—coffeehouses, for example—she sought to create venues where they might prove, to men and to themselves, that they could think and speak cogently. She was stylish, eloquent, and very rich; her husband owned coal mines in the North of England, and, after his death, she erected an opulently decorated mansion in London that she referred to as a “palace of chaste elegance.” It was in Montagu’s power to make such coeducational gatherings fashionable, and she did.

But the Bluestockings did more than host parties, however purposeful. They also wrote copiously: novels, to begin with. In his influential 1957 study of the rise of the novel, the literary historian Ian Watt observed, in passing, the remarkable fact that the majority of eighteenth-century novels were written by women. (Few have stood the test of time, but the same could be said for the general run of fiction produced by their male contemporaries.) More surprisingly, as Gibson notes, the Bluestockings worked in genres that were largely considered the province of men: criticism, classical scholarship, and history. Montagu published a substantial essay on [Shakespeare](#), defending him against a derisive assessment by Voltaire, which helped to elevate the Bard’s reputation and to connect it lastingly with English national identity. Montagu’s father had read Shakespeare’s plays aloud to his children, both the boys and the girls; like several of the leading Bluestockings, she had a male parent who had encouraged, or at least tolerated, his daughter’s peculiar intellectual interests. Her “Essay on the Writings and Genius of Shakespear, Compared with the Greek and French Dramatic Poets; with Some Remarks upon the Misrepresentations of Mons. De Voltaire”—they loved a long-winded title in the eighteenth century—was at first published anonymously, widely applauded, and widely assumed to have been written by a man. Montagu later revealed her authorship, perhaps

in frustration: “They talk of *him* till they make me feel whether I have not a beard on my chin,” she wrote of the speculation that attended her essay’s provenance.

Catharine Macaulay, meanwhile, published multiple, ambitious volumes of English history, written from her perspective as a liberal republican, which earned her the particular admiration of Americans, including [Benjamin Franklin](#). Elizabeth Carter lived at home much of her life, tending to her widowed father, but she also learned Latin, Greek, Italian, Hebrew, German, and Spanish; when she wanted to learn Arabic and couldn’t find instructional books, she made her own Arabic dictionary. Gibson doesn’t get into all these details, but it was said that Carter, who had to study at night so as not to neglect her domestic duties by day, habitually swathed her head in cold towels, chewed green tea and coffee, snorted headache-inducing snuff, and tied a bell to her bed as a sort of primitive alarm—all in order to stay awake over her books. Gibson does tell us that Carter’s greatest accomplishment in a life of prolific writing and scholarship was inspired by her intimate friendship with a brainy young woman, Catherine Talbot, who had written her a fan letter, and then blushed and smiled at her in church. “Miss Talbot is my absolute passion,” Carter wrote. “I think of her all day, dream of her all night, and one way or another introduce her into every subject I talk of.” Miss Talbot couldn’t read Greek, and asked Carter whether she would translate a bit of the Stoic philosopher Epictetus for her. Nine years later, Carter completed a translation of almost all his surviving writings, which sold briskly and remained the standard English edition for at least a century. Its success owed something to the fact that alongside her formidable mind Carter maintained a proper reputation, “always careful to present herself,” Gibson writes, “as the perfect woman: meek and modest, diffident and self-effacing, completely unthreatening to male authority.” Johnson praised her for being as dab a hand at making puddings as translating ancient Greek.

Still, as *The Monthly Review* noted at the time, Carter demonstrated not only that a woman could understand philosophy as well as men could but that she could make money doing so. The same might be said for all the Bluestockings who wrote and published: in an era when women could not, for example, own property or go into business in their own name, writing was one of the few ways they could keep what they earned. And, as Virginia Woolf argued in “A Room of One’s Own,” this mattered. Woolf wrote, “The extreme activity of mind which showed itself in the later eighteenth century among women—the talking, and the meeting, the writing of essays on Shakespeare, the translating of the classics—was founded on the solid fact that women could make money by writing. Money dignifies what is frivolous if unpaid for.”

Certainly, monetary compensation brought the Bluestocking writers esteem and self-respect. But the group’s members tended to be well bred, well off, and well behaved to begin with. Being seen as such—and pious and dutiful to boot—was what gave them the license to speak in public and to write. In 1750, the young writer Hester Mulso took up her pen to compose a series of letters, addressed to the novelist Samuel Richardson, defending a daughter’s right to veto her parents’ choice of a husband. (In Richardson’s enormously popular novel “Clarissa,” the heroine had rejected the man her parents picked for her—and that was the start of her troubles.) Like most of the feminist writings by the Bluestockings, these letters were modest in their claims: Mulso wasn’t even arguing that a woman should be able to *choose* her husband, only that she should be able to say no to one chosen *for* her. She addressed Richardson as “my excellent instructor,” and begged his forbearance with “so obstinate, so tenacious a girl.” Perhaps she was being sarcastic, but Gibson doesn’t think so; she thinks that Mulso was inhabiting a persona that would render her contention socially acceptable.

Some of the more dramatic stories that Gibson tells are those in which Bluestockings behave disappointingly toward one another.

They concern forces that the women's rigorous politesse could neither accommodate nor confront with integrity: namely, class and sexuality. Take the account of Hannah More, a particularly devout Christian Bluestocking who started charitable schools for the poor, and her protégé, a poet named Ann Yearsley. Yearsley was working class: she made a living selling milk from her own cows door-to-door. More raised money through subscriptions to publish Yearsley's first collection of poems, in 1785. The book was a success, but More became worried that a little prosperity would cause Yearsley to spoil like milk. "I do not see her [but] I hear she wears very fine Gauze Bonnets, long lappets, gold Pins, etc.," More complained to her friend Elizabeth Montagu. "Is such a Woman to be trusted with her poor Children's money?" She produced a document that Yearsley, still grateful for her patronage, felt compelled to sign, placing all Yearsley's earnings in a trust to be administered by More and Montagu. In time, the rift turned bitter, and Yearsley found new publishers. She also wrote a poem about her former patron that takes More to task with curlicued passive aggression: "*UNEQUAL*, lost to the aspiring claim / I neither ask nor own the'immortal name / of Friend; ah, no! Its ardors are too great / My soul too narrow, and too low my state."

When the Bluestockings policed their own for supposed or real infractions against sexual propriety, things could get even nastier. Just about everybody who writes nowadays about the Bluestockings seems to like Hester Thrale. She was witty, lively, affectionate, and boundlessly resilient. Born Hester Lynch in Wales in 1741, she was married, at twenty-two, to a wealthy brewery owner named Henry Thrale. The couple settled in a vast country estate near London, where she would eventually advise him on the beer business, campaign for him when he turned to politics, and host a salon as intellectually glittering as Montagu's. Out of her fifteen pregnancies by Thrale, twelve children were born alive, and four survived to adulthood. (In this, she was an exception among the Blues; many had no children or just one.) For years, the almost

perpetually pregnant Thrale would be simultaneously nursing one small child or another through some dire illness for which even more dire cures—bleedings, blisterings, purgings—had been ordered.



*"I don't love the new standing desks."*  
Cartoon by Dan Misdea

Nor was that the extent of Thrale's caregiving. The brilliant, eccentric Samuel Johnson was so fond of Thrale's ministrations that he came to live with her family for months at a time. Johnson could be needy, peevish, and argumentative with her, but he praised her mind and encouraged her to write. When she did start keeping a regular diary, Thrale's prose hummed with an immediacy and a warmth that can make her seem, even now, like a friend sitting across the table. After her mother, who had also lived with the Thrales and was looked after by Hester, died of breast cancer, she wondered what could ever fill the gap. To whom would she "tell the little Foibles of my heart, the Tendernesses of my Husband, or the reparties of my Children? . . . To whom shall I carry my Criticism of a Book, secure of Approbation if the Remark be a good one, & certain of Secresy if detected in being absurd?"

Henry seems to have been a pleasant enough fellow some of the time, but he was also an inveterate adulterer whose sexually

transmitted illnesses exacted a toll on Thrale. During one bout, she tended to his grossly swollen testicles twice a day, kneeling at his feet to apply poultices. At least he acknowledged these labors with a gift that did honor to her ambitions: a set of calfskin notebooks in which to confide her thoughts.

When Henry died, many people seemed to have expected that his widow would marry Johnson. Instead, Thrale fell in love with quite a different man: an Italian singer named Gabriel Piozzi, who was the music teacher of her oldest daughter, Queeney. Queeney was then a teen-ager, and she disapproved. That's not so surprising. But Thrale's Bluestocking friends were positively scathing. ("Charming Blues," Thrale wrote. "Blue with Venom!") Piozzi was a foreigner, he was Catholic, he was neither rich nor wellborn. Worst of all, he was living evidence that Thrale had given in to unruly emotion and desire. Thrale eventually got her daughter's grudging consent—that was the only acceptance she really needed or wanted—and married Piozzi. But her fellow-Bluestockings never did come around. Montagu spread rumors that Thrale's new husband had her declared insane and shut up in a convent. Hester Mulso Chapone (she had by now married) concluded, "There must be really some degree of *Insanity* in that case for such mighty overbearing Passions are not natural in a 'Matron's bones.' . . . It has given great occasion to the Enemy to blaspheme and to triumph over the Bas Bleu Ladies." Hester Thrale Piozzi was undeterred. In fact, she began to publish her writing for the first time—an excellent memoir of her friendship with Johnson (who had died in 1784), which preceded Boswell's classic portrait, along with travel writing, world history, and a pioneering book on synonyms.

As it happened, Thrale Piozzi had judged well: her Italian singer turned out to be a loving companion. They travelled happily together on the Continent, and, though the chill between her and three of her remaining daughters never entirely dissipated, one daughter came to live with the couple when they moved to Wales.

At first, Piozzi told his new wife, he had not expected her to spend so much time writing—he'd wedded “a *Dama* not a *Virtuosá*”—but in this marriage she could assert herself. She *would* be writing, thank you very much, and earning money for them both. Piozzi acquiesced.

The Bluestockings gave Macaulay much the same treatment when, as a forty-seven-year-old widow, she got married for the second time, to William Graham, a twenty-one-year-old ship's mate. Like Thrale and Piozzi, she withstood the castigation, and the couple flourished: “he encouraged her to write,” Gibson notes, “and she encouraged him to attend university.” But Sarah Scott, Montagu’s novelist sister, shuddered at the notion that Macaulay might have been attracted to her own young husband, perhaps even planning to have sex with him. Macaulay, Scott complained, had insisted that “her life absolutely depends on her complying with her constitution’s urgent call (perhaps she calls it nature’s . . . but I shall not, for it is not the nature of woman, & woman cannot find her excuse in the nature of a beast).” She suggested that Macaulay ought to be drowned in the River Avon, “to try if she can be purified by water.”

“The Bluestockings were desperate to maintain the respectable façade they had built up over many years,” Gibson writes, explaining without excusing, “and so felt compelled to distance themselves from any hint of scandal that attached to a learned lady.” As abhorrent as the shaming behavior of the Bluestockings was, they were not wrong about one thing. The movement’s reputation was fragile. Even their modest claims to an intellectual life made them vulnerable to slander. By the early nineteenth century, Bluestockings would fall victim to a backlash—a kind of template for all future backlashes against women seeking a wider ambit for their talents. The Bluestockings lost their standing in society in part because their leading lights grew older. In the seventeen-nineties, Montagu wrote to a friend, “I am arrived at an

age at which it is no easy matter perhaps to avoid the contempt of the World.” But it was more than that. After the French Revolution, Burkean conservatives, anxious about the contagion of radical ideas, started to see outspoken females, even the politically circumspect Bluestockings, as a threat to the social order. The caricaturist Thomas Rowlandson portrayed them precisely as they were not: slovenly, insistently fleshy bodies in a hair-pulling brawl. To male writers, they began to seem like too much competition. It was one thing when they were novelties, quite another when their numbers increased. (A statue of Macaulay commissioned by a male admirer was inscribed with a poem that called for a woman of her intellectual calibre to appear “once in every age”—and no more.)

Among the younger generation of writers, many of the Romantics took a firm dislike to the Bluestockings. [Byron](#) made fun of them in his satirical epic “Don Juan,” and in a farce he wrote later, with a leading character called Lady Bluebottle. The critic [William Hazlitt](#) declared “an utter aversion to blue-stockings. I do not care a fig for any woman that knows even what an author means.” Samuel Taylor Coleridge complained in a letter to a female friend about women who were too proficient at spelling and grammar: “O curse them at least as far as women are concerned. The longer I live, the more do I loathe in stomach, & deprecate in Judgement, all, all Bluestockingism.” Gibson offers no caveats to contextualize this sneering, but it’s worth saying that the Romantics, dedicated as they were to the unfolding of human freedom and natural genius, certainly had their feminist moments. Keats valued the friendship of intellectual women; Shelley famously asked, “Can man be free if woman be a slave?” In Coleridge and Robert Southey’s blueprint for a utopian community, women were to receive an education. Yet when it came to the Bluestockings the Romantics could not see beyond the group’s keenness on propriety, and occasional pedantry, or resist the imperative of generational rebellion. In time, Gibson writes, though the works of the Bluestockings “were fading from memory,” the name itself took off as “an insult, a word to shame

and subdue any girl or woman who thought herself better than she really was.”

Like all such backlashes, the one against the Bluestockings involved forgetting what they had contributed. “The entire history of women’s struggle for self-determination has been muffled in silence over and over,” Adrienne Rich wrote in a 1978 essay. “One serious cultural obstacle encountered by any feminist writer is that each feminist work has tended to be received as if it emerged from nowhere; as if each of us had lived, thought, and worked without any historical past or contextual present. This is one of the ways in which women’s work and thinking has been made to seem sporadic, errant, orphaned of any tradition of its own.”

In fact, the legacy of the Bluestockings made itself heard in the lives of other women writers and thinkers, quiet but compelling, like whispering in a library. In that way, it echoed through the generations, however softly. [Jane Austen](#) delighted in the letters of Hester Thrale Piozzi. [Virginia Woolf](#) was moved by the scholarly determination of Elizabeth Carter. And, before either of them, Mary Wollstonecraft, who pushed feminist claims further and lived more unconventionally than the Bluestockings ever did, took explicit inspiration from Catharine Macaulay. In 1790, two years before she published “[A Vindication of the Rights of Woman](#),” Wollstonecraft wrote an admiring letter to Macaulay, whom she did not know but whose own recent work had derided the “absurd notion, that the education of females should be of an opposite kind to that of males.”

Gibson tells us that Macaulay wrote back immediately, congratulating Wollstonecraft on the treatise she’d published already and saying that she hoped they could meet. It was not to be. Macaulay died six months later. Wollstonecraft died six years after that, not long after giving birth to her second child, a daughter who would grow up to become [Mary Shelley](#), the author of “[Frankenstein](#).” As radical as “A Vindication” was, and as

foundational for modern feminism, it also built on Bluestocking ideas about the importance of developing women's rational minds. What might they show the world if they were not merely trained for "outward obedience" and ornamental charm, Wollstonecraft wrote, but if instead their intellectual "faculties had room to unfold and their virtues to gain strength"? In her letter to Macaulay, Wollstonecraft explained why she respected her so much. It was a description that would have applied to every one of the Bluestockings, whatever their limitations: "she contends for laurels whilst most of her sex only seek for flowers." ♦



*Margaret Talbot joined The New Yorker as a staff writer in 2004. She is the author, with David Talbot, of "By the Light of Burning Dreams: The Triumphs and Tragedies of the Second American Revolution."*

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[Books](#)

## Briefly Noted

“*The God of the Woods*,” “*Gretel and the Great War*,” “*They Called It Peace*,” and “*The Friday Afternoon Club*.”

*July 15, 2024*



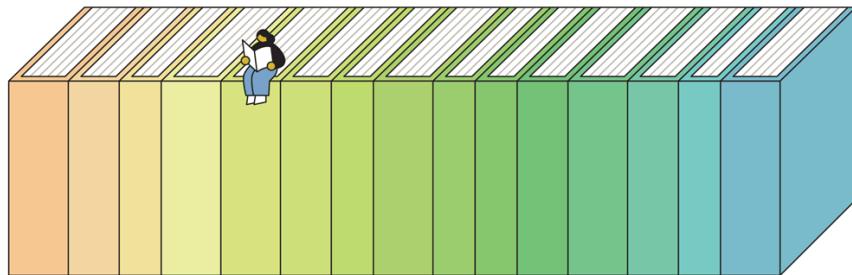
**[The God of the Woods](#)**, by *Liz Moore* (*Riverhead*). Told from rapidly shifting points of view across several decades, this expertly paced thriller tracks the disappearance of a young woman named Barbara Van Laar from a summer camp in the Adirondacks, which is owned by her fabulously wealthy family. The Van Laars and their associates are a shady bunch, and the novel plays dexterously with the tension between the opulent family and the working-class environs in which they live. Barbara’s vanishing is further darkened by rumors that a recently escaped serial killer, who “does not believe in any god except himself,” is stalking the forest. Driven by a sprawling plot, Moore’s novel explores adolescence and social class and has the kineticism of a well-crafted miniseries.



**Gretel and the Great War**, by Adam Ehrlich Sachs (*Farrar, Straus & Giroux*). At the start of this inventive novel, which is set shortly after the First World War, an unknown woman, unable to speak, appears on the streets of Vienna. After she is institutionalized, a letter arrives from a man claiming to be her father. A mysterious one-way correspondence begins, ultimately coalescing into twenty-six linked tales of aristocrats, artists, eccentrics, and revolutionaries. Though tending toward the whimsical, the stories also display the dark undercurrents of early psychiatry. Along the way, tantalizing clues about the woman's identity, and that of her mother, are glimpsed. Fusing period atmosphere with fairy tale, Ehrlich Sachs hints at modern themes while summoning an unexpected imaginary place.

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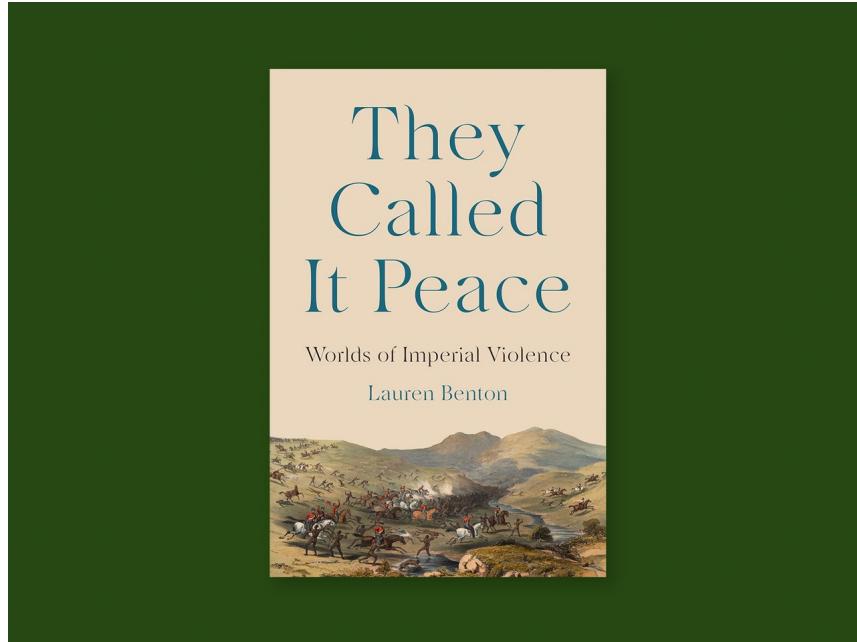
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*Illustration by Rose Wong*

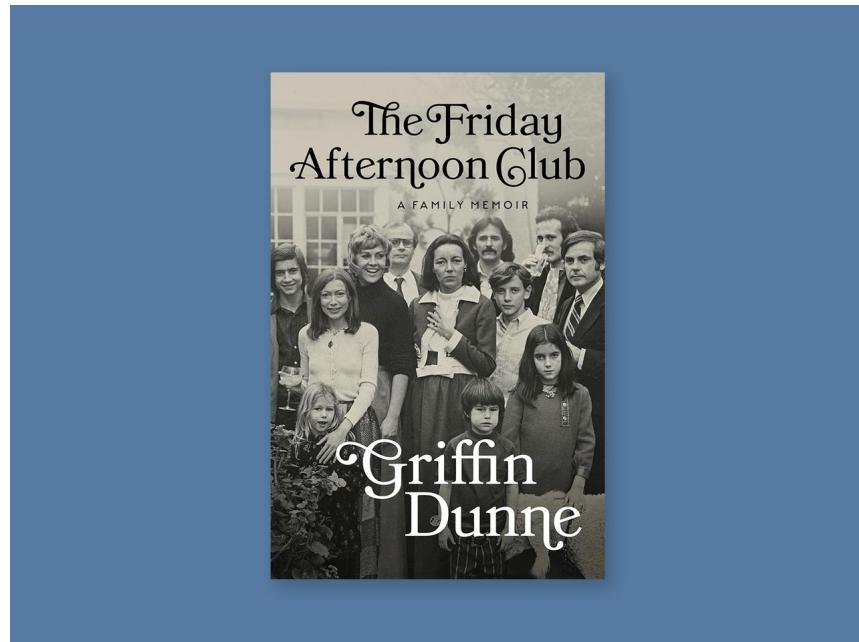
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**They Called It Peace**, by Lauren Benton (*Princeton*). This history demonstrates how European imperial expansion in Africa, Asia, the Americas, and Australia from 1400 to 1900 was fuelled by so-called small wars. Taking place during times of ostensible peace, these conflicts—Involving raids, massacres, and enslavement—weakened indigenous resistance and produced truces that secured terms under which colonial powers enacted further, now lawful, violence. Benton, a historian at Yale, uses harrowing case studies from around the world, and contextualizes events with the work of contemporary intellectuals, such as Jeremy Bentham, who “upheld

the necessity of colonial violence for the protection of property . . . standing in for the common good.”



**The Friday Afternoon Club**, by *Griffin Dunne* (Penguin). This consuming family memoir recounts comically foul judgment, striking privilege, and unspeakable tragedy. Dunne grew up in Beverly Hills, the son of the movie producer (and, after failing at that, crime reporter) Dominick Dunne, whose brother and enduring rival, the writer John Gregory Dunne, would marry Joan Didion. Those figures loom over Dunne’s book, as does his sister, Dominique, who was killed by her ex-boyfriend in 1982, when she and Dunne were cultivating their acting careers. Throughout Dunne’s account, which concludes in 1990, with the birth of his daughter, he drops frequent bombshells, details raging family battles, and admits to frequent (if winsome) acts of self-sabotage.

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[Pop Music](#)

# Clairo Believes in Charm as an Aesthetic and Spiritual Principle

The artist discusses her new album, moving upstate, and the wallop and jolt of romantic connection.

By [Amanda Petrusich](#)

July 11, 2024



*Clairo wanted to make a record that felt silly, idiosyncratic, even slightly broken.  
Photographs by Justine Kurland for The New Yorker*

In 2017, when the singer and songwriter Claire Cottrill was nineteen, she uploaded a song called “Pretty Girl” to YouTube,

under the nom de plume Clairo. Cottrill had recorded the clip from atop her bed, in front of a taped-up map of France, a poster for the indie-rock band the Shins, and a sagging stretch of Christmas lights —a classic American teen-age tableau. She periodically held up a plastic Funko-Pop toy in the shape of Gizmo, the furry protagonist of “Gremlins,” or fussed with a pair of pink cat’s-eye sunglasses. Everything about the clip felt unpretentious, easy, and magnetic. “Pretty Girl” is about resisting the urge to dissemble and reinvent oneself in service of love: “And I could be a pretty girl / Shut up when you want me to,” Cottrill sang, making a face that suggested she could not, in fact, ever let herself be quite so subsumed by romance. Cottrill’s voice is limber and sweet, and, unlike much of her bedroom-pop cohort, it has some swing, evoking Diana Ross as much as Joni Mitchell. Her vocals were accompanied by a simple beat and a wonky-sounding synthesizer line. It was not yet completely rare to find something pure on the Internet, but “Pretty Girl” still felt like an extraordinary début.

Cottrill was soon offered a deal with *The Fader*’s record label; she released an EP, “Diary 001,” in 2018, followed by her first full-length, “Immunity,” in 2019. The winsome single “Bags,” which features Danielle Haim on drums and was co-produced by Rostam Batmanglij, is about being impatient in a love affair—wanting more, wanting everything, but growing frustrated when the other person doesn’t express the same urgency. “Can you see me using everything to hold back? / I guess this could be worse / Walkin’ out the door with your bags,” Cottrill sings, her voice resigned. Maybe a little bit of love is better than nothing at all. In 2021, she released “Sling,” her second album, which was co-produced by Jack Antonoff. The songs on “Sling” were quiet, tender, and spare, recalling Elliott Smith, Karen Dalton, Vashti Bunyan, and Fleetwood Mac’s “Landslide.” It was bold for an artist so beloved for winking, Zeitgeisty synth pop to make a flinty singer-songwriter record, but “Sling” was sophisticated and deeply felt. It

was also Clairo's first release to make the Top Twenty on the *Billboard* album chart.

This month, Cottrill will put out her third album, "Charm," a rich and seductive collection of groovy pop songs that feel indebted to Motown, Hall & Oates, Northern soul, and the sorts of long-gone regional record companies whose releases are now dotingly preserved by reissue labels such as the Numero Group and Light in the Attic. Cottrill made some of "Charm" at Electric Lady, in the West Village, and at Allaire Studio, which is situated on a mountaintop near Woodstock, New York, overlooking the Ashokan Reservoir and the Catskill Mountains. It was produced by Leon Michels, a founding member of Sharon Jones and the Dap-Kings and the leader of El Michels Affair, a psychedelic-soul band that has backed the rappers Raekwon, Black Thought, and Freddie Gibbs. Cottrill wanted the record to feel playful, buoyant, and a little out of time. "I was really inspired by the silliness of Harry Nilsson, and the vocals of Margo Guryan and Blossom Dearie. Those three people are all really great songwriters, and their music is very touching, but it also never feels like they're taking themselves too seriously," she told me recently.

Cottrill was also interested in making something that sounded idiosyncratic, maybe slightly broken. "There was a recurring theme throughout the recording process where Claire would say, 'It's not weird enough,'" Michels said. "We bonded over records where there's something kinda off about them. The tambourine is way too loud, or the piano is incredibly out of tune, or there's some tape edit that's completely fucked and obviously a mistake, but they had to leave it. Those are my favorite production choices." He and Cottrill were both fans of the Innovations' 1977 cover of the Alessi Brothers' "Seabird," a hazy, wobbling Peruvian yacht-rock tune ("Like a lonely seabird / You've been away from land too long"), and of Laurene LaVallis's "Key to Our Love," an R. & B. single from 1984 that sounds as though it were recorded on tape that was

stored under the passenger seat of a Buick LeSabre on a ninety-five-degree day. It seems wrong to describe “Charm” as retro—it doesn’t possess that sort of self-consciousness—but many of its songs feel as if they should be pressed to 45 r.p.m. and snuck into moldering Midwestern basements, ready to be excavated by the intrepid d.j.s of the future, out scouring estate sales for weird, undiscovered tunes.

“Claire has a really strong sense of what her musical identity is,” Michels said. “I get in the habit of moving really quickly and getting impatient if a song isn’t working instantly. I’ll bludgeon it until it works. She has this very patient, even-keeled energy that allows songs to show themselves over the course of time. She always knew what she wanted and what the record was supposed to sound like.”

One morning this past spring, Cottrill visited my home, in the Hudson Valley. She is twenty-five now, and was wearing jeans and a red vintage sweatshirt. She has the word “charm” tattooed in black ink across her knuckles. Though she still rents an apartment in the city, Cottrill recently bought a place in upstate New York, and lately she has found herself in a more domestic headspace. I told her that, since moving out of the city, I had anthropomorphized my house to the extent that I now consider it a member of my immediate family. “I definitely understand that,” she said, laughing. “My mom just visited me, and every time we’d leave and come back to the house she would say, ‘Bye, house!’ ‘Hi, house!’ You have to acknowledge her.” Cottrill’s design sensibility veers toward vintage and handmade. “I like things to be comfortable,” she said. “Lots of wood. Lots of color. I really like collecting things that people make.” We discussed the cognitive and emotional dissonance of leaving New York City for a more rural place: the fruitful isolation, the dark and hermetic winter nights. “Oh, it’s the loneliest thing ever, for sure,” she said. “I do find it very cool that I’m doing it, though,” she added. “I want to be self-reliant. I think

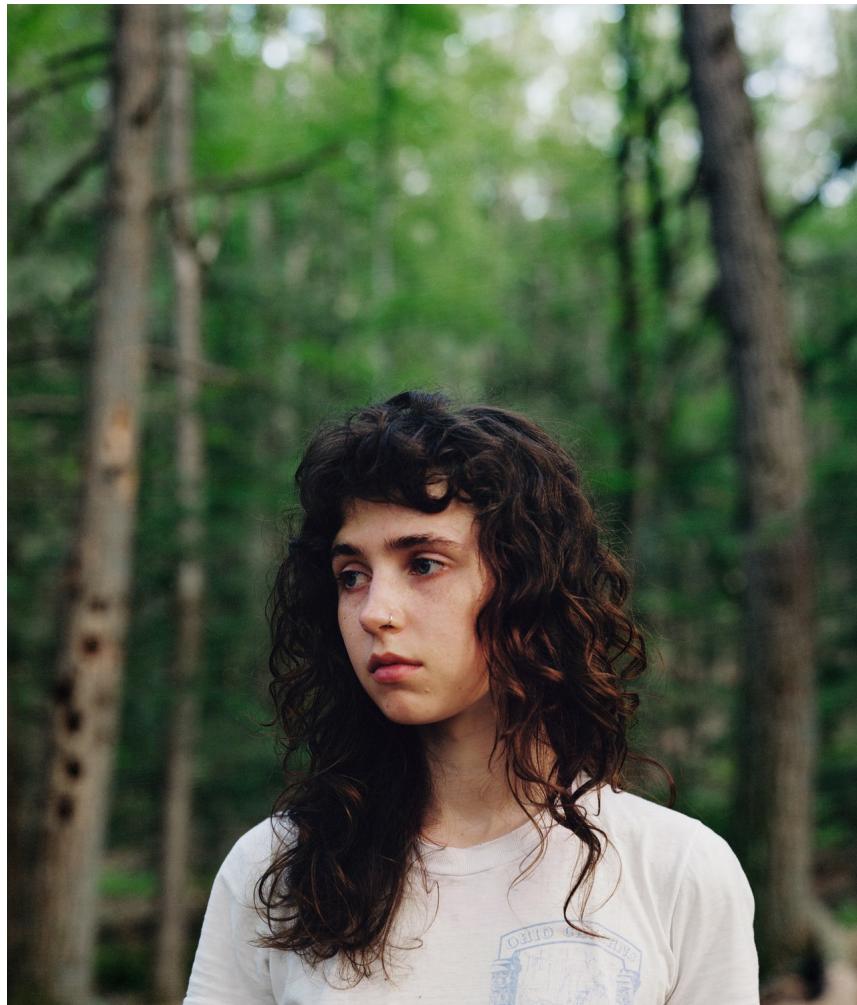
it's valuable when someone can bring that into a relationship. So it's been really cool to watch me kind of turn into someone who runs a home."

We sat on my patio for a while, drinking coffee and discussing the perils and glories of gardening. The region was in the midst of a gnarly spongy-moth infestation; caterpillars were gobbling up oak leaves at a horrifying rate, showering the landscape with frass. At one point, my toddler sprinted outside, clutching a tiny crayon drawing she'd made for Cottrill. When she started dancing—no music—Cottrill warmly cheered her on: "Heck yeah, girl!" Cottrill said she liked living in a place where digital culture was not yet fully integrated into every last moment of the day. Having an assortment of quotidian chores to complete—planting flowers, fussing with the plumbing, chopping vegetables—inhibits the sort of passive scrolling that can leave a person glazed over and neurotic. "I'm tending to something that's physical and tangible, where my phone has to be in my back pocket," she said. "I need both hands to be driving, I need both hands to be cooking, I need both hands to be cleaning. I'm pouring myself more into those experiences. What if I took pottery classes? I need both hands for that."

But Cottrill also said that her social-media usage doesn't feel especially fraught or baneful. She was "a consumer of the Internet for the majority of my life," she said, right up until the moment that "Pretty Girl" went viral. "Then I had to change my relationship to the Internet, because now people were consuming me. That was a really hard shift, because I was still nineteen—I was the most chronically online age you could be. I have taken a little space, but I still love the Internet so much." I asked her if it was ever disorienting that a significant amount of her young adulthood is archived online. "It's definitely hilarious to be able to look back at every stage of myself, and have it all be so public," she said. "Maybe I think it's funny now because I feel closer to the person

I'm turning into, so I'm able to look back and not cringe—it's more ‘Aw, look at her!’ ”

Cottrill was brought up in Carlisle, Massachusetts, a suburb of Boston. From an early age, songs felt crucial to her emotional development. “Music has always been the most important thing to me,” she said. “I gravitated toward it and used it to feel. I wasn’t really making music of my own until seventh or eighth grade, when I started to write. But listening to music has always been more important to me than making it. Making music is very cathartic, and I like the things I’m making. But listening to music is always better.”



*Clairo said, of first meeting a potential love interest, “There’s this beautiful haze and buzz when you’re still imagining the rest.”*

Cottrill said that many of the songs on “Charm” started with a feeling, and then an idea about the production. Lyrics generally

came later. She'd been sitting on the word "charm"—as an aesthetic and spiritual principle, an idea to build a record around—for three years. "I had this notebook full of notes about what that word meant to me, what I could do with that word, what lives in that word," she said. She was interested in the wallop and jolt of romantic connection, and the intoxication that follows—the alchemical experience of attraction, of finding a kindred heart in the wild. "I came to the conclusion that, to me, charm is the moment when two people meet, and they have separate life experiences, all their own stories and feelings, and then they tell each other the first layer. 'I'm from blank, and I do blank.' There's this beautiful haze and buzz when you're still imagining the rest of it. That feeling is so good."

She found herself writing through those early moments of love, lust, whatever, who knows. "It was an interesting concept for me, to write songs that felt like I only had part of the information, and then a lot of yearning, a lot of making up the rest in my head," she explained. "That's dating in your twenties—it feels so promising, and then it's a question mark. There's this cyclical energy that you're constantly pumping out and experiencing through each person you date, whether it is a four-month casual thing or, like, a two-day love story," she said. "It completely takes over."

On the song "Nomad," which opens "Charm," Cottrill's voice sounds vulnerable, feathery. Over upright bass and swooning Wurlitzer, she sings of a willingness to put it all on the line: "I'd run the risk of losing everything / Sell all my things, become nomadic." Sometimes, the song suggests, it's satisfying, maybe even necessary, to give in to our desires, no matter how impractical or dangerous it may be. Love is always a gamble:

Oh, it's hard to believe  
It's even  
Irrational for me

I'm cynical, a mess  
I'm touch-starved and shameless

"Twenty-five is very interesting, because I'm meeting a lot of wonderful people. But I'm realizing that everyone, including me, has no idea what the fuck they're doing," Cottrill told me. "That can be really comforting, and also really annoying. This record has so much yearning, so much of me shaking the other person and being, like, 'Why not? Why can't we?' Growing up, I always looked at relationships that ended because of circumstances like 'What are you doing? Just make it happen.' "

On "Sexy to Someone," the first single from "Charm," Cottrill writes of requiring a little affirmation from time to time—"Oh, I need a reason to get out of the house," as she puts it, over Mellotron, synths, piano, and slide guitar. It's a dreamy and beguiling song. I told Cottrill that I found the premise deeply relatable: needing someone to hold your gaze a moment longer than necessary, or touch your forearm, or buy you a drink with intention. "It's that thing where you're, like, I don't want to be hit on, and I don't want you to cross the line with me—I just want to know that you think I'm hot, and then I can go home," Cottrill said, laughing. "Because sometimes that's really it. There's this feeling that you get every so often, which is loneliness, and the quick fix is just someone being, like, 'Are you an actress?'" Cottrill's vocals are breathy but without affectation. "Sexy to someone, I think about it all / Checkin' out of the hotel, or moments at a bar / Ask if I'm in a movie, no, I didn't get the part," she sings.

Later that afternoon, Cottrill and I decided to visit a local garden center. We strolled among hanging baskets of petunias, verbena, calibrachoa. We admired bushy potted tomatoes. Cottrill picked out something called a spike plant and a large trailing lantana, with tiny, exquisite clusters of pink and yellow flowers. The whole idea of gardening is to commit to something and tend to it through good and bad weather—it's hard not to see the practice as a metaphor.

Afterward, we walked to a local butcher shop and ordered sandwiches, then sat at a picnic table outside. I told Cottrill that, because I was born and brought up in the Hudson Valley, I felt entitled to both gripe about the arrival of fussy artisanal markets and also to frequent them constantly. Upstate New York, as anything north of New York City is now errantly called, can feel like a place in eternal transition—gentrifying, in a sense, as the city bleeds further and further into the countryside, but still a little feral. Nature isn't always so easily displaced. Earlier in the day, I had shown Cottrill a video of an enormous wild turkey pecking so aggressively at my glass-paned door that I'd thought he would surely shatter it. I had simply stood there in my pajamas, in the soft post-dawn light, dumbly watching. Later that night, Cottrill texted me footage of a black bear pawing through her trash before bounding off with a cardboard pizza box.

Mostly, Cottrill has found living upstate to be generative. “In a weird way, I get closer to songs by being in nature,” she said. “I can devote a lot more time to what inspires me and why. I can listen to something really loud on a walk and be able to feel the entire song through my whole body. I also feel that way when I’m walking around New York, but there’s something really cool about being solo—being really alone—with music.” In the end, she has found that solitude has accelerated a kind of crucial self-knowledge: “I think I’ve arrived at something that’s more uniquely me by being alone.” ♦



*Amanda Petrusich is a staff writer at The New Yorker and the author of “[Do Not Sell at Any Price: The Wild, Obsessive Hunt for the World’s Rarest 78rpm Records](#).”*

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[Dancing](#)

## Does Ballet Need Narrative?

“Woolf Works,” a dance triptych by Wayne McGregor, is based on the life and work of Virginia Woolf, but its engagement with her ideas is frustratingly intermittent.

By [Jennifer Homans](#)

July 15, 2024



*Alessandra Ferri in Wayne McGregor’s new piece “Woolf Works.”  
Photographs by Thomas Prior for The New Yorker*

Ever since I was a child, I have been drawn to dance because it expresses emotions and bodily impulses without words. Once, when I was a young dancer, standing in the wings and nervous that

my mind was blank, a senior colleague told me not to worry. “It’s when the words come that you’re finished,” she said. “They destroy everything.” Words are now my trade, but I still harbor a dancer’s suspicion of them, and this is perhaps one reason that I have been reluctant to embrace the recent trend toward dances that tell stories or make statements. I appreciate classics like “Swan Lake,” pure dance stitched into a story with pantomime and gesture, but I experience them as music and dance; to this day I can’t quite remember the plots. And recent ballet adaptations of novels including “Of Love and Rage,” “Jane Eyre,” and “Like Water for Chocolate” have left me unmoved, struggling to find some connection between plot and steps, rather than absorbing dance as a language in and of itself.

The British choreographer Wayne McGregor’s “Woolf Works,” a triptych inspired by Virginia Woolf that was recently given its U.S. première by American Ballet Theatre, seemed to promise something different. For one thing, Woolf’s move away from conventional plot, the way that she folds readers into sensual experience and into the wandering nature of our memories and inner lives, has some affinities with the inchoate and associative character of dance. And although McGregor has chosen three specific novels—“Mrs. Dalloway,” “Orlando,” and “The Waves”—he is not trying to literally act them out; rather, he is making a kind of dance analogue of Woolf’s vision and her prose.

McGregor, who is fifty-four and was recently knighted, emerged on London’s contemporary-dance scene in the early nineties, and began choreographing for ballet companies (including the Royal Ballet and the Paris Opera Ballet) a decade or so later. Although he has always had some interest in narrative, he is best known for an abstract, tensile style (exemplified by his breakthrough ballet, “Chroma,” from 2006). In recent years, he has incorporated aspects of science and technology, including A.I., into his dances. For

“Woolf Works,” he takes a multimedia approach, with a score by [Max Richter](#) and film elements by Ravi Deepres.

The piece opens with Virginia Woolf’s own voice—the only recording we have of her speaking, from 1937—booming into the theatre. She is talking about language: “Words, English words, are full of echoes, of memories, of associations—naturally. They have been out and about, on people’s lips, in their houses, in the streets, in the fields, for so many centuries.” As Woolf speaks, we see her words projected on a large screen; then the letters shrink and dissolve into black marks, which fly into abstract patterns. From these pixels, an image of Woolf as a young woman emerges, and, as it fades, the dancer Alessandra Ferri stands before us, alone at center stage. It is just the kind of metamorphosis that McGregor wants us to believe in—words into dance—and, with that, the first act, “I now, I then,” drawn from “Mrs. Dalloway,” begins.

Ferri takes off her coat with the ease of a woman in charge, and we realize that she is both author and character, Woolf and Clarissa Dalloway. Ferri is one of the great dancers of the last half century, and, at sixty-one, she carries herself like a woman with a past. Even the smallest movements register in her aging shoulders; her body, though still lithe, is also stiff and fragile, young and old in the same breath. She keeps an eye on herself as she moves: Can she trust that step onto pointe? Will it hold? And, when it doesn’t, quite, we watch her body gracefully rebalance. She doesn’t hide her limitations, instead allowing them to sharpen her physical attention. Her sense of distance from her own body gives us the long view from youth to mortality that the novel also evokes.

We see Ferri dancing with a younger self, with Clarissa’s old flame Peter Walsh, and with her husband, Richard, buttoned up in his Edwardian best—or is this Woolf’s own husband, Leonard? Ferri has a long kiss with a dancer who plays Clarissa’s friend Sally Seton but must also surely be [Vita Sackville-West](#), with whom Woolf was falling in love while writing “Mrs. Dalloway.” At

moments, Ferri retreats and stands watching from one of the large empty square structures rotating slowly on the stage, or wanders blankly past the other characters, like a woman out of time.

We meet Septimus Smith, the First World War veteran whose descent into madness and eventual suicide frame the novel. McGregor produces a dance of feints and falls that Septimus performs with the ghost of a dead comrade, then suddenly they are running in large circles, never meeting, and the stage seems to open to their desperation. Septimus, playing out the memory that is the source of his madness, walks across the stage pointing his fingers as a gun at us, and, when he shoots, his comrade falls beside him. Soon Ferri's dance is mad, too, as McGregor underlines the way that the war shadows both the characters and their creator. The end is simple: Ferri, alone again in the middle of the stage, turns simply, hands behind her back, head bowed, "for there she was," as the curtain falls.

McGregor's evocation of "Mrs. Dalloway" is all the more powerful for its fragments and allusions, but the next act—"Becomings," loosely based on "Orlando"—lost me completely. The book, written in 1928 and partly inspired by Sackville-West, traverses centuries through the life of a man who becomes a woman, whimsically exploring Woolf's own feeling that she was "not a man or a woman." McGregor takes this as a cue to play on gender-fluid themes with one of his signature hyper-dances—he calls it "an adrenaline bullet." To Richter's blaring electronic score, androgynous bodies clad in vaguely historical costumes (men wear tutus) hurl themselves through space, limbs flying. The atmosphere is dark and smoky, with lasers cutting sharp diagonals across the stage in white, red, and blue, before turning (predictably) on us. McGregor seems to have abandoned Woolf almost entirely, and Ferri is nowhere to be found.

The final act is based on "The Waves" (1931), perhaps Woolf's most experimental work, but McGregor's real interest here is her

suicide, on Friday, March 28, 1941. The act is titled “Tuesday,” the day at the top of a suicide note that Woolf wrote to her husband, probably some days before, as she struggled with the mental illness that had plagued her intermittently all her life. The dance begins with a recording of Gillian Anderson reading the note, while Ferri stands center stage, listening under a large projection of slowly breaking waves. What follows is a repetitive and conventional dance by men, women, and children pretending to be water and waves. Ferri walks into their midst and is gradually taken into their flow. Toward the end, the watery corps de ballet bows to the four corners of the world, and one of the wave-men finally lays poor Ferri down on her back and slips into the receding sea, as the lights dim.

In the end, it is hard to make sense of a work that undercuts both itself and its subject with such spectacular assurance. How can McGregor, who uses dance to embody the interiorities of “Mrs. Dalloway” so sensually and intimately, then wipe that achievement away with the techno stampede of “Becomings” and the calculated sentimentality of “Tuesday”—neither of which has much to do with Woolf or her novels? By the time we reached the suicide, McGregor’s use of literature and the tragedies of a life seemed to me a coldly instrumental way of lending emotion to dances that otherwise have none. Dance, not words, had failed, and this felt like a betrayal. After all, Woolf’s death had nothing to do with oceanic waves, or with her novel published a decade earlier. That day in 1941, she simply walked to the River Ouse, dressed in a fur coat, Wellington boots, and a hat, dropped her wooden cane, placed a large stone in her coat pocket, and stepped into the depths. ♦

*Jennifer Homans, the magazine’s dance critic, published “Mr. B: George Balanchine’s 20th Century,” in November, 2022.*

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[The Current Cinema](#)

## “Sing Sing” Puts a Prison Theatre Program in the Spotlight

*Greg Kwedar’s film, starring Colman Domingo and Clarence (Divine Eye) Maclin, brings us deep—though not deep enough—into the process of rehabilitation through art.*

By [Justin Chang](#)

July 12, 2024



*Divine G takes pride in his position as Sing Sing’s resident literary titan and legal expert.*

*Illustration by Jamiel Law*

The new prison movie “Sing Sing” begins with a glorious, if short-lived, escape. There are no secret tunnels, no stolen cellblock keys. At Sing Sing Correctional Facility, in Ossining, New York, a spotlight shines down not on a yard lined with barbed wire but on a stage bathed in radiant blue. The play is “[A Midsummer Night’s Dream](#),” and the actors, all men, are participants in a program called Rehabilitation Through the Arts, or R.T.A. For them, the chance to wear glittering costumes and ride the giddy waves of Shakespeare’s verse promises a few hours of liberation.

One performer, John (Divine G) Whitfield, played by [Colman Domingo](#), seems to capture the fleeting nature of the experience

with some of Lysander's most famous lines: "And ere a man hath power to say 'Behold!' / The jaws of darkness do devour it up; / So quick bright things come to confusion." So quick is right. All too soon, the men have changed back into their green uniforms and returned to the daily tedium and terror of incarceration. The vastness of the stage, with its lofty view of a noisily appreciative crowd, gives way to the confines of a cell, so hushed and sealed off that it might as well be buried underground.

The walls of Divine G's cell, covered with documents, photographs, and sticky notes, are evidence of a term spent in thrall to the written word. While serving out his sentence—twenty-five years to life for a murder that he didn't commit—Divine G has devoted much of his time to studying law, researching his case and those of other incarcerated men, and seeking solutions that might expedite their release. He has also written several novels and plays, which have earned him a measure of fame among his peers; some of his plays have even been staged by R.T.A., of which he is a founding member. One of the many grace notes of Domingo's performance is that, beneath Divine G's warm modesty, we discern a glimmer of pride in his position as the prison's resident literary titan and legal expert. The movie does not begrudge him his self-importance.

All this springs from true events. The director Greg Kwedar, who wrote the script with Clint Bentley, first encountered his protagonist in a 2005 *Esquire* article, "[The Sing Sing Follies](#)," by John H. Richardson. Domingo's Divine G is a stand-in for the real-life Whitfield, who receives both a story credit and an amusingly flattering cameo in which he basically gets to ask his younger self for an autograph. Whitfield is not the only cast member who spent years at Sing Sing. The ensemble features multiple alumni of the prison's R.T.A. program playing versions of themselves; several of them, including Mosi Eagle, Dario Peña, and David (Dap) Giraudy, appeared in Richardson's piece.

As we watch them mount their next production, helped by a director from the outside named Brent Buell (Paul Raci, the superb character actor from “Sound of Metal”), their cycles of preparation—acting exercises, auditions, workshops, rehearsals—have the ring of an artfully reimagined truth. The cinematographer Pat Scola deploys an often handheld, gently agitated camera, sometimes recording these rites from a distance, sometimes moving in for a more dramatic look, and at all times conferring an air of unshakable authenticity.

These realist inflections belie a charmingly cornball story. Kwedar and Bentley previously collaborated on the tough-and-tender equestrian drama “Jockey” (2021), and here, as in that film, they can’t resist an old-fashioned redemption arc, replete with hard luck, perseverance, and a sentimental finish. In “Sing Sing,” the tale gets under way when Clarence (Divine Eye) Maclin (played by himself), known for his temper even in a world where hostility is the norm, signs up to join R.T.A. Others in the program have their doubts, especially after a tense prison-yard confrontation in which Divine Eye, who deals drugs, shakes down an underling for money. But Divine G is inclined to give him a chance, perhaps sensing that beneath the puffed-up aggression is a natural ham. (Divine Eye’s sly way with a “King Lear” reference doesn’t hurt.)

This act of magnanimity has unintended repercussions. It is Divine Eye who scuttles plans to produce Divine G’s latest work in progress and suggests that R.T.A. put on a comedy for a change (an admittedly odd request, so soon after “A Midsummer Night’s Dream”). And so Brent writes “Breakin’ the Mummy’s Code,” a sprawling, time-travelling farce that tosses together elements of Egyptian mythology, the legend of Robin Hood, “A Nightmare on Elm Street,” and “Hamlet”—and, in a richly Shakespearean irony, it’s the gifted newcomer, not the seasoned veteran, who gets cast as the Prince of Denmark. Despite these initial dustups, the two Divines genuinely come to love, respect, and support each other;

Divine G eventually offers to assist Divine Eye in preparing for a parole-board hearing, even as his own bid for clemency goes nowhere. Their blossoming friendship gives “Sing Sing” an irresistible emotional hook; it would take a more stoic viewer than I to hear one man call the other “Beloved”—the R.T.A.’s preferred term of brotherly endearment—and not shed a tear. But the insistent feel-good trajectory comes at the expense of thornier truths. The movie, for all its understanding of hard time, can’t keep from going a little soft.

Founded at Sing Sing in 1996, and now operating at eight correctional facilities across New York State, Rehabilitation Through the Arts is one of several theatre programs that have set out to transform [prisons](#) and the imprisoned from within. Its mission is to help incarcerated people develop life skills, build self-esteem, and express their emotions, as well as nurture artistic talents. If the outlines of “Sing Sing” sound familiar, it’s surely because such programs have provided filmmakers with no shortage of inspiration—and also the opportunity, in theory, to rejuvenate the subgenre of let’s-put-on-a-show movies with shades of moral ambiguity and real-world gravitas.

The year 2009 brought us both Zeina Daccache’s documentary “12 Angry Lebanese,” about a production of “Twelve Angry Men” inside Beirut’s notorious Roumieh prison, and Davide Ferrario’s musical “Freedom,” about a Passion play staged by prisoners in Turin. Perhaps the best known of the lot is “Caesar Must Die” (2012), directed by the Italian brothers Paolo and Vittorio Taviani, who took us inside the maximum-security wing of Rome’s Rebibbia facility. Shooting their subjects in stark black-and-white, the Tavianis raised—but also complicated—the notion that these grave-faced men, imprisoned for violent and often Mob-related crimes, might have a unique understanding of “Julius Caesar,” with its vision of murder as a meticulously planned, collectively organized activity. Others may recall the 1987 drama “Weeds,”

starring Nick Nolte as a robber whose plays, written and staged behind bars, secure him release from a life sentence. [Pauline Kael](#), reviewing the film in *The New Yorker*, wrote that it “never goes very far into the issues it raises, but the messy collision of energies keeps a viewer feeling alive.”

Much the same could be said about “Sing Sing,” which is propelled by an ensemble that veers between conflict and camaraderie; we are kept off balance by Brent’s sharp, tough-love direction, Divine Eye’s instinctive wariness, and Divine G’s mounting despair. Even so, the movie is too neatly divided between the teeming, textured world it’s re-created and a narrative that never moves past the sturdily conventional. I wouldn’t have minded a few messier collisions, or a deeper engagement with some of the Divines’ fellow-actors. We never learn much about their backgrounds, and though there’s a certain integrity in that omission—a refusal to let these men be defined by the crimes of which they were rightly or wrongly convicted—there is also a certain incuriosity that undermines the film’s bid for authenticity. You come away from “Sing Sing” wanting more of the characters, more of their lives, and more of their creative processes; it’s a shame that we see only a few amusing snippets of “Breakin’ the Mummy’s Code,” which looks like a welcome hoot, if nothing else.

Having pared away nearly every detail that doesn’t advance the plot, Kwedar and Bentley rely heavily on their lead actors to fill the ensuing breach. In this, at least, their instincts are sure: it’s no surprise that Domingo, coming off his boisterous, Oscar-nominated star turn as the civil-rights leader Bayard Rustin, is so persuasive as a man with a gift for teaching and inspiring others. But the discovery here is Maclin, who seems altogether unbehoden to the younger version of himself described in Richardson’s piece: “Divine Eye has long dreadlocks and massive muscles and sings ‘Happy Birthday’ with showbiz pizzazz.” The movie’s Divine Eye is made of sterner, balder, less musical stuff; he bullies, extorts, and

hurls threats at the slightest provocation. By the end, though, he has become an artist of remarkable confidence, a friend capable of receiving and returning compassion—and, above all, a man with a profound understanding of what to be and not to be. ♦



*Justin Chang* is a film critic at *The New Yorker*.

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# Poems

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By Nancy Morejón | “in the distance / a boat heads off to carve / into the navel of the sky”

- **[“Dead Reckoning”](#)**

By Anthony Walton | “We are driving the Middle West, lost / as Oklahoma or Kansas slowly spins / into darkness.”

[Poems](#)

## Port of Havana

By [Nancy Morejón](#)

July 15, 2024

bricklayers cart-drivers fishermen  
walk in the sun  
along the coast of Havana  
the sea extraordinary & blue against the wall  
naked  
little Gabriel wrings juice from a mango

in the distance  
a rum-drinker obliterates himself  
with yearning a knife

in the distance  
a boat heads off to carve  
into the navel of the sky

where men keep walking reddish  
hauling a load of tar black  
on their backs  
meanwhile the sea extraordinary & blue

*(Translated, from the Spanish, by Whitney DeVos.)*

[Nancy Morejón](#) is an award-winning Cuban poet. English-language collections of her work include “[Homing Instincts](#),” translated by Pamela Carmell, and “[Before a Mirror, the City](#),” translated by David Frye.

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## Dead Reckoning

By [Anthony Walton](#)

*July 15, 2024*

We are driving the Middle West, lost  
as Oklahoma or Kansas slowly spins  
into darkness.

Hard red winter wheat  
leans with the wind while the knife of 83  
bisects sunlight barely over  
the near horizon.

I try not to remember what has happened  
here, bloody grass prairie, Comanche  
and Kiowa Wars—

wondering why I can't forget  
and simply love that she is here with me, unfolding  
a map to determine where we are  
and how long it is  
until Salina or Amarillo, Wichita

Falls or Muskogee. With painted nail  
she idly traces a crossroads

and I imagine her conjuring a younger self  
on a screened porch

on a gravel county road, conducting love songs  
from the radio, but before I finish  
composing my fantasy she frowns  
and notes that we are traversing

the Greater Seminole Field, and I am startled  
to notice the oil pumps and derricks—  
the population of iron scarecrows  
and skeletons—

she lightly takes my hand, holding  
me inside the car, this  
thin shell of transit

and safety, as if to say  
*be still*—be still and remember  
last night, and the night  
to come—

*Anthony Walton teaches at Bowdoin College.*

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By Elizabeth C. Gorski | A challenging puzzle.

**Crossword**

## The Crossword: Monday, July 15, 2024

A *challenging puzzle.*



By [Elizabeth C. Gorski](#)

July 15, 2024



*Elizabeth C. Gorski is the founder of Crossword Nation and writes a daily puzzle for King Features Syndicate. She has created crosswords for the New York Times and other publications.*

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