## The Great Trespass.

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The signs on the gate at the entrance to the path and along the edge of the reservoir were clear. ''No swimming,'' they warned, white letters on a red background.

On a chill mid-April day in northwest England, with low, gray clouds and rain in the forecast, the signs hardly seemed necessary. But then people began arriving, by the dozens and then the hundreds. Some walked only from nearby Hayfield, while others came by train or bus or foot from many hours away. In a long, trailing line, they tramped up the hill beside the dam and around the shore of the reservoir, slipping in mud and jumping over puddles. Above them rose a long, curving hill of open moorland, its heather still winter brown. When they came to a gap between a stone wall and a metal fence, they squeezed through it, one by one, slipping under strings of barbed wire toward the water below.

On the steep grassy bank above the reservoir, coats and sweaters came off, revealing wet suits and swimsuits. Thermoses of tea and hot chocolate were readied for quick access; someone had brought along a banged-up trumpet with which to provide the appropriate fanfare. There were seasoned winter swimmers, people who had stories of breaking through ice for a dip, and complete newbies, deciding as they shivered whether this particular symbolic act was really for them. There was a 7-year-old who swam in a knit beanie with a purple pom-pom and a man with a Yorkshire accent who told his wife, in mock horror, ''I had to ask a strange woman to zip me up, Mary!''

Down on the shore, giggling and shrieking people picked their way across slippery rocks. Then, with a great deal of cheering and splashing, they took to the water en masse, fanning out in all directions. Some carried a large banner that read, ''The Right to Swim.''

The water was somewhere around 50 degrees Fahrenheit, but it felt, a 61-year-old swimmer announced after climbing out and wrapping up again, ''bloody wonderful.'' She handed her sister a Cheddar-and-Branston-Pickle sandwich and told me she usually hates encountering crowds when they go swimming but that this one was delightful.

More rounds of cheers went up as new waves of swimmers splashed into the water. An older woman wearing a pink floral swimsuit paused on the shore to turn to the crowd still on land. ''Don't be beaten down!'' she shouted, raising a fist above her flower-bedecked bathing cap. ''Rebel!'' Then she, too, flopped into the lake.

On the bank above the reservoir, a choir serenaded the swimmers:

''He said 'All this land is my master's,'at that I stood shaking my headNo man has the right to own mountains,any more than the deep ocean bed.''

The song, by the folk singer Ewan McColl, was about another mass trespass, one that took place 91 years earlier above this very reservoir, during which protesters were arrested for daring to walk on hills they were told to keep off. Over the decades that followed, the protesters' contention that people had some inherent rights of access even to lands they did not own -- which in England is most land, because the vast majority of the country is in private hands -- was enshrined in law, guaranteeing public access to this and many other parts of the countryside.

Lately, though, the swimmers told me, those hard-won gains had begun to seem both less expansive and less secure than they once imagined. During the pandemic, many took up open-water swimming or paddling or walking, only to be surprised at the number of places they weren't allowed to go. (The reservoir, owned by a private utility company even though it is inside the Peak District National Park, was one such place: England's national parks are full of land that is privately owned -- and inhabited, farmed, mined and hunted.) The government began to push to criminalize forms of trespass never before considered to be crimes. Then, in January, the High Court sided with a wealthy couple who wanted to keep the public from camping on an estate they bought inside Dartmoor National Park, in an area called the Commons, the only place in England where wild camping, what we would call backpacking, was still considered a right. Robert Macfarlane, the English nature writer, called the ruling a nationwide wake-up call: Only when ''the last relic of a long-lost openness'' was threatened did it become clear just how much was at stake.

Like the trespassers whose anniversary they were commemorating, the swimmers believed they were fighting for something bigger than the chance to walk up a hill or swim in a river -- something fundamental about their relationship to the land where they lived.

''It's not so much that we need to be granted permission,'' explained a woman with long gray hair and a sweatshirt that read, ''Kayaking Is Not a Crime.'' ''It's that we need it to be recognized that we don't need permission.''

Centuries ago, high moors like those of Kinder Scout, the plateau that stretched above the reservoir, were considered King's Land, uncultivated areas to which access was free. In the villages below, land was often claimed by the aristocracy and gentry, who collected taxes from the peasants who worked it, but many villagers, called commoners, held shared rights to ''common'' land, where they could graze their animals or plant crops or gather firewood.

This type of land disappeared rapidly during the enclosure movement of the 18th and 19th centuries, when the wealthy claimed wild and common lands -- lands that, as the jurist William Blackstone put it, previously belonged ''generally to everybody, but particularly to nobody'' -- as their own. The movement leaned on the work of philosophers such as John Locke, who argued that people could gain ownership of ''waste'' lands by working and improving them. But there were others who believed that separating people from the land was a gross injustice. ''What crimes, wars, murders, what miseries and horrors, would the human race have been spared,'' wrote Jean-Jacques Rousseau, ''by someone who, pulling up the stakes or filling in the ditch, had cried out to his fellow humans: 'Beware of listening to this impostor. You are lost if you forget that the fruits are everyone's and the earth's is no one's!'''

As enclosure spread, many former users of the land were pushed out. With no way to make a living, they drifted to cities. Kinder is not far from Manchester and Sheffield, two early centers of the Industrial Revolution, whose residents liked to escape the choking air by going on long walks in the countryside. But many of the landowners who controlled the hills weren't fond of having walkers, known as ramblers, exploring properties they used for raising sheep and hunting grouse. They hired armies of gamekeepers, who sometimes used attack dogs, to kick the ramblers out.

Some ramblers, in their city lives, were involved in trade unions and other labor movements, and they began to bring the same spirit of organization and protest to their weekend walks. (As the most shoutable line of the McColl song has it, ''I may be a wage slave on Monday/But I am a free man on Sunday!'') The land they were walking might be private property, they argued, but its owners weren't the only ones with the right to use it: English law acknowledges that a right can be established through long custom, and the walkers were following ancient paths and bridle ways onto upland that had only recently been privatized.

Some walkers began holding rallies and undertaking purposeful trespasses in places where they knew they would be ejected. This had been going on for decades when, in April 1932, a rambler named Benny Rothman alerted the press that he and others would be heading up past the reservoir to the plateau above it, an area owned by the Duke of Devonshire. Hundreds of ramblers tussled with keepers, making national headlines. Six were arrested and five sentenced to as much as six months in jail.

At the time, England was home to a number of groups working to protect commons, parks and walking trails as part of what the campaigner Octavia Hill, at an 1888 meeting of what eventually became the Open Spaces Society (O.S.S.), called ''a common possession we ought to try to hand down undiminished in number and in beauty.'' Most saw the trespassers' actions as counterproductive. Eventually, however, the Kinder Trespass became what the O.S.S. now calls ''a sacred event in rambling circles,'' and its leaders' beliefs were more widely embraced. Beginning in the 1940s, Parliament began to codify the idea that people had an inherent right to move across the landscape, culminating in the Countryside Rights of Way (CROW) Act, in 2000. The act recognized the right not only to use designated paths but also to roam freely on certain mountains, moors, heaths and downs mapped as ''open country'' or on land registered as common. In 2009, the Marine and Coastal Access Act designated the shore as access land as well and promised an additional 2,700 miles of coastal footpaths.

Today there are about 140,000 miles of legally protected paths in England, and the countryside is full of signs marking public footpaths or rights of way. I found them leading past fields of rapeseed or sheep, along a creek that flowed behind the walls of private gardens, through woods to a country pub. The first time I encountered such a sign, it marked a charming little trail leading over a brook at the end of the lane where I was staying in Little Hayfield. I had other plans for the morning and only meant to take a tiny walk, but suddenly I couldn't help myself: Having grown up in rural Tennessee, where the ''No Trespassing'' signs were so ubiquitous as to hardly be necessary, I was overcome by the mere fact of permission. Here was a path, to who knew where, on which I was decidedly welcome -- not just welcome, in fact, but entitled. It would have felt almost disrespectful to ignore it.

To an American, traversing the land in rural England can feel a bit like looking in a fun-house mirror -- a system just different enough that it forces you to see your own expectations in a new way. Some of the people I met in England had heard that the United States has a lot of public land, which is true. But access to it depends a lot on where you live; nearly all federal land is in just 11 Western states and Alaska. (And even there, the courts are still working out what ''public'' really means, mulling, for example, when anglers are allowed to walk on public streambeds that run through private property or whether hunters can cross ''private airspace'' by using a ladder to get from one checkerboard square of public land to another.) Others had heard that the United States is a warren of private lands, governed by threatening signs and stand-your-ground laws: The week of the swim trespass, the news back home was full of stories of people being shot after accidentally driving up the wrong driveway or knocking on the wrong door. Kate Rew, the founder of England's Outdoor Swimming Society, remembered with shock when she arrived at the Pacific, eager to swim, but couldn't find a beach that wasn't private property. Another activist, Owen Hayman, told some friends he was visiting in Montana that he was headed out for a walk and was surprised when they replied that they would first need to drive him somewhere. A farmer I met in Gloucestershire, who thought the English already had plenty of access to his land, nonetheless seemed to sympathize with my plight as an American: ''You can't go anywhere, can you?''

After following that first right-of-way sign, I stumbled on a spring full of plump tadpoles and followed a red-striped bumblebee from flower to flower. I thought about how nice the word ''ramble'' was, how it evoked wandering and whimsy and openness instead of the determined, point-to-point rush of the American ''hike.'' I navigated a brief standoff with a pair of rams, soaked my feet in a boggy cow pasture and skirted private houses. One resident nodded politely from behind a sign, ''Please respect our privacy,'' that I liked rather better than the sign one of my mother's neighbors in the United States displays on her mailbox: ''If you can read this, you're in range.''

I emerged at the top of a hill called Lantern Pike, said to have gotten its name because it once served as a place to light beacon fires. In one direction, I could see the buildings of Manchester, and in the other, the long brown line of Kinder Scout, notched in the middle where a waterfall tumbles down. Below it were fields of bright green pasture squared in by dark stone walls.

A little over a decade ago, a young illustrator named Nick Hayes was staying with his parents in West Berkshire, not far from London, while he worked on a graphic novel. One day, walking near a lightning-struck willow, he spotted a kingfisher, the first he ever saw. He hoped to show it to his mother, but as they approached the tree, a man on a four-wheeler raced over, announcing: ''You've no right to be here. You're trespassing.''

The pair immediately turned around. Hayes walked home, struck by the power of that single word. He typed ''trespass'' into a search engine, surprised to learn that his actions were merely a civil offense, typically punishable only in the case of property damage, and that trespass hadn't always been considered an offense at all. The more he read, the more Hayes began to believe that the building of a wall, not the climbing of it, was the bigger crime. He began working on a book about what he was learning, taking himself on small trespasses around the country, climbing over the walls of large estates or slipping past them by kayak. Sometimes there was shouting, sometimes threats. Everywhere he found reminders of a long, ever-evolving relationship with the land. It was in the land use (the fox hunts and deer parks of the wealthy) and in the literature (all that wide-open walking in Tolkien and Wordsworth) and in the language: ''Beyond the pale'' originates from the Middle English word for fence, and acre comes from the Old English for ''open field,'' though the word eventually stopped meaning unoccupied land and came to define standardized measures by which land could be bought and sold.

''You can chuck a stone in England, and there's a story of land dispossession wherever it lands,'' Hayes told me when I first spoke to him last year. Fencing people off from nature, he believed, caused each to suffer: People felt bereft and disconnected, and problems like pollution or biodiversity loss became less visible, harder to care about. Hayes became convinced that society put too much emphasis on the sacredness of private property and the accompanying threat of trespass. Kinder Trespass was evidence of that: ''To cheer a man for walking through heather and likewise to beat him up for it are both absurdly disproportionate to the act itself,'' he wrote. ''But inside the logic of the bubble, such an act is tantamount to anarchy, because it threatens the spell.''

In this context, even the CROW Act began to look less like a victory for the public and more like a consolation prize that disguised how much had already been lost.

The right of way officially applies only to movement; paths are for walking (and bridle ways for riding), not for camping or picnicking or drawing or hula-hooping. Paths and access land are concentrated in the least populated rural regions and are scarce where most people live. Many protected areas are difficult to navigate. (People who spend time in the countryside rely on detailed maps from the government to figure out where they are or aren't allowed to walk. Echoing their military heritage, they're called O.S., or Ordnance Survey, maps.) Some places offer no real access, because they are islands floating in a sea of private property -- you would need a helicopter or a parachute to get to them -- while others require constant vigilance to keep open. In one famous case, a company associated with the tycoon Nicholas van Hoogstraten, who was known for his involvement in the killing of a business rival and once referred to ramblers as ''scum of the Earth,'' erected buildings and fences that blocked a protected right of way in East Sussex. The path was closed for 13 years before Hoogstraten lost in court and Kate Ashbrook, a former chairwoman of the Ramblers and now general secretary of the O.S.S., reopened the path by taking a pair of bolt cutters to a padlocked gate.

The CROW Act was also time-limited; there is likely less than a decade left during which new access paths can be certified. But the process for adding them is byzantine. To certify a right of way, you have to prove that you've never asked a landowner for permission to walk there (which turns a right into a retractable handout); that you have used it for at least 20 years (an accepted stand-in for proof that a right has been earned by virtue of being exercised since ''time immemorial,'' a period which, because of quirks of English law, officially ended with the death of Henry II in 1189); and that you and others have used the path openly without your right to do so being challenged. Open-access land cannot have been ''improved'' by agriculture, proof of which often requires expensive certifications by botanists. This can lead to absurdity, says Ashbrook, who likes to walk up a hill near her house in the Chilterns. It looks the same all over, but because of what Ashbrook described as ''botanical issues of great detail,'' only one side qualified as access land, open for rambling. The other is closed.

To Hayes, it seemed as if all these technicalities undercut the rights that the CROW Act was supposed to enshrine. They made clear that the rules about who owned what and who could go where were cultural and historical artifacts, not laws of nature. They were just choices.

Another approach was visible just across the border. In 2003, the Scottish Parliament passed a land-reform bill that recognized the uncontested right to walk, camp, cycle, swim, canoe and perform any other form of nonmotorized exploration throughout the country. Known as the ''right to roam,'' it came with a code of responsibilities: Access didn't apply to private gardens immediately around houses or to fields in active cultivation, and people were expected to clean up their litter and dog poop, to cook on stoves instead of open fires, to avoid rock climbing near nesting birds, to close gates behind them and so on. But it was clear and direct and not even unique to Scotland. Similar systems had long been in place in other European countries, including Finland, Norway, Iceland, Austria, Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania, the Czech Republic and Switzerland. In some cases, the right was considered so old and so fundamental, so obvious, that for a long time no one bothered to codify it. In Sweden, the tourism board developed an ad campaign around the allure of what the country calls allemansrätten, or everyman's right. ''It's a right protected by the law that allows me to sleep and eat and walk pretty much wherever I want,'' the voice-over explains. ''Now you can, too.''

As Hayes began researching land ownership, he came across the work of Guy Shrubsole, an environmental campaigner who, in an effort to find out who owned the land whose management practices he was worried about, had spent years filing records requests and poring over maps, writing a blog and later a book called ''Who Owns England?'' In answering the question, Shrubsole painted a stark picture of inequality and secrecy: Only 5 percent of the country was owned by ordinary householders. Large chunks were held by corporations and by the aristocracy and gentry, often following boundaries that were relics of the land divisions and gifts made after the Norman Conquest in 1066. (The Land Registry does not track land using these categories.) ''A few thousand dukes, baronets and country squires own far more land than all of middle England put together,'' Shrubsole wrote. He cited a remark by the late Duke of Westminster, who advised aspiring entrepreneurs in Britain to ''make sure they have an ancestor who was a very close friend of William the Conqueror.'' If you wanted to know how much of England's land offered no right of access, even to ramblers, even after the CROW Act, the answer was 92 percent.

''Property,'' Shrubsole told me, ''isn't really a thing. It's a bundle of rights,'' a series of possible actions that are associated with tracts of land but that can be severed, bought, sold and expanded or curtailed by the specific legal codes that govern that land. This was why you hear people speak of mineral rights or surface rights or water rights or commoners' rights or treaty rights, which in the United States often include ongoing rights to fish, hunt and gather on land that tribes no longer control. ''Part of that bundle of rights in England for the last several hundred years has been the right to exclude other people from your land,'' Shrubsole says. ''The thing is, that's not always the case in every country, and even in other liberal, capitalist democracies.''

England had exported its view of private property to much of the world, but it also had its own long history of resistance to privatization. (Notable examples include the Diggers, who seized a hill in Surrey in 1649, planting crops and declaring to the gentry, ''The earth was not made purposely for you, to be Lords of it, and we to be your Slaves, Servants and Beggers, but it was made to be a common Livelihood of all.'') ''Sure, you can have private property,'' Shrubsole says. ''But does it always have to be on such extreme terms that you can't share it with anyone else?''

In late 2019, the Conservative Party was elected in a landslide and proposed charging unpermitted campers with criminal trespass. Hayes and Shrubsole started a petition opposing the idea. It received enough signatures to trigger a debate in Parliament, but the bill continued to move forward. Shrubsole remembers sitting with Hayes around a kitchen table in London, wondering what to do next -- how to convince their country that access to the land was a right worth fighting for.

Shortly afterward, Covid hit. Lockdowns were strict in England, where illicit parties were enough to eventually bring down a once-popular prime minister. Indoor gathering places shut down, and outdoor exercise, which was allowed only once a day and only in the area where a person lived, became precious. Catherine Flitcroft, of the British Mountaineering Council, told me that across the country, ''the outdoors became the new pub and the new playground,'' a lifeline for people who felt trapped and alone.

But many soon found that a frustrating amount of the countryside was closed off to them. Paths that people had assumed to be legal rights of way turned out to be only permissive paths; landowners, overwhelmed by the surge of eager walkers, some of whom left large messes behind, could and did revoke access. Swimmers, canoers, climbers and kayakers struggled to understand where they were allowed to go, because many landowners maintained that ownership of a lakefront or riverbed included a right to exclude people from ''their'' section of water. Though it was illegal to block public paths with gates or fences, or to hide signs designating them as such, or put up new ones threatening dangerous dogs or bulls, would-be walkers told me that they encountered all of this. And community leaders from marginalized groups pointed out that many barriers to access were invisible: People were often dissuaded from rambling at all because they had good reason to fear the outcome if they ended up somewhere they weren't allowed to be.

During that first Covid summer, Hayes's account of his explorations, ''The Book of Trespass,'' was released. The book argued that the hard-won public paths, in enshrining some rights, forestalled others: ''They simultaneously legitimize the space that is off limits.'' It soon became a best seller. Hayes and Shrubsole set up a campaign website, encouraging people to make their own respectful trespasses into areas that were closed off to them. They also started to work with other organizers to call for a full, Scottish-style ''right to roam'' in England.

''Our desire to access nature,'' they wrote, ''should not be a crime.''

The first trespasses were small: groups of friends poring over local maps, considering the land around them in new ways. In Totnes, the town in Devon where Shrubsole lives, he and a few others explored Berry Pomeroy, a nearby estate owned by the Duke of Somerset. There was a permissive footpath through one section, but though the estate dominates the landscape and though it receives taxpayer subsidies, they had never seen the rest. The woods turned out to be full of pheasants -- nonnative game birds imported to Britain each year by the tens of millions for shooting.

In Devon, local people began holding trespasses every month. As Hayes did while writing his book, they stayed well away from houses and stuck to actions that would be considered trespasses in England but legal in Scotland. Lewis Winks, a researcher and environmental campaigner who helped organize the gatherings, told me that it felt like being a detective in your own backyard: You were figuring out who owned what and why and suddenly realizing that there was a great deal more land around than you ever visited or even really noticed. Moving in a group, you felt empowered, almost immune to signs telling you that you didn't belong. You also noticed, he added, that a country that some politicians liked to describe as full or overcrowded, and therefore in need of tighter borders, was full of open space.

''You realize,'' Winks said, ''that we basically exist in the corridors between these big estates.''

In 2022, Parliament passed the promised anti-trespassing bill. The core group of Right to Roam organizers continued to grow, while encouraging people to form their own local chapters. In Northumberland, organizers arranged buses to take children who live in light-polluted cities into the countryside at night, because so many English people now grow up without being able to see the Milky Way. In Gloucestershire, trespassers climbed a stone wall into an estate owned by the Duke of Beaufort, where botanists taught attendees about the native plants they found there -- the idea being that people who feel attached to a landscape will be inspired to protect it. The campaigners organized another trespass at Berry Pomeroy, this time with hundreds of people, who carried a banner that read ''Right to Roam'' and picked up litter as they went. They walked together to a sunny hillside, where they picnicked.

The wholesomeness was purposeful: an attempt to show that people could use land not just responsibly but also in a nourishing way. Though the campaigns received a fair amount of positive coverage -- even the right-leaning Daily Mail offered a friendly account of the Berry Pomeroy trespass, quoting Shrubsole's ''Less room for pheasants, more room for peasants!'' quip in their headline -- there were plenty of doubters. Some seasoned organizers worried that a call for a right to roam might jeopardize the right-of-way system they have worked so hard to create or that embracing trespass could give all ramblers a bad name. Landowners' associations argued that the current system was adequate and that expanding it would risk public safety: ''How many more wildfires will there be? How many more sheep will be attacked by dogs? What damage will be done to crops?''

In his book, Hayes argued that what he called ''the cult of exclusion'' was possible because it was undergirded by a powerful story of inevitability, including the belief that open access would mean disrespectful or ignorant people mistreating the land. (In the United States, this idea was most vociferously articulated in an essay called ''The Tragedy of the Commons,'' written in 1968 by the ecologist and eugenicist Garrett Hardin, who argued that it was the fate of any communally managed property to be mismanaged and destroyed. Hardin's work has since been widely debunked, including by the Nobel Prize-winning political scientist Elinor Ostrom, who showed that communities around the world are capable of managing shared resources sustainably.) Right to Roam organizers countered that another story was possible, one in which people were educated to appreciate and protect places they saw as partially their own.

Amy-Jane Beer, one of the core organizers, likes to point to a study by researchers at the University of Derby, which compared 14 European Union countries according to their biodiversity and their residents' felt connection to nature. In each case, Britain ranked lowest. ''Those things are not disconnected,'' Beer says. ''People are losing without being aware of what they're losing.''

And then came Dartmoor.

In England -- unlike in the United States or in parks in Africa and elsewhere that are sometimes accused of practicing ''fortress conservation,'' cordoning off nature at the expense of local people -- there's little illusion that a national park is, should or even could be a wild place untouched by human history. Dartmoor is full of ancient archaeological sites as well as mining scars, good-size towns, uncountable sheep and ponies, military practice ranges and even a large prison. You can't visit without understanding the land as a balance of uses.

One of those uses, today, is camping. For decades, Dartmoor was the only park in England that recognized camping among the forms of recreation to which users are entitled. Elsewhere, some people still camp, but they do so somewhat stealthily -- ''you just set up late and pack up early,'' as Winks told me -- or with the understanding that they may be moved along. To quote the leader of a group of backpackers I met: ''We just kind of walk until we hit somewhere we can't, and then we go somewhere else.'' Many youth groups, and those who aren't comfortable camping where it isn't allowed, stick to Dartmoor.

In 2022, the hedge-fund manager Alexander Darwall and his wife, Diana, who had purchased a 4,000-acre estate inside Dartmoor, announced that they would be suing the park to keep people from camping on what was now their land. At first, the big access organizations didn't believe that wild camping could really be under threat and paid little attention. A small group of local residents, including Winks, a walking guide named Gillian Healey and others who were organizing trespasses nearby, decided, over pints at a pub, to plan a rally on one of Darwall's moors, to be held shortly after the court was scheduled to rule on the suit. ''We thought there'd probably be about 15 of us,'' Winks says, but no matter which way the decision went, they figured they would either want to celebrate or protest. They came up with a name for their group: the Stars Are for Everyone.

A week before the planned gathering, in January 2023, the Chancellor of the High Court ruled that the long-assumed right to camp in Dartmoor didn't actually exist. Darwall, and any other landowner who wanted to, could kick campers out right away. Suddenly, thousands of people wanted to join the protest, which was set to depart from Cornwood, a tiny village clustered around narrow lanes on the edge of the park. Organizers rented 10 buses to shuttle the protesters in. To help feed everyone, residents of the village baked pasties and delivered them to the local pub.

A parade of people set off on a two-mile walk to Darwall's land, using a right of way flanked on either side by private security guards holding dogs. It was, said one participant, ''a conga line of humanity.'' Many people told Healey that they weren't campers themselves but that they saw the decision as part of a much bigger story about their country and where they fit inside it. Healey agreed: To her, the loss was like a new form of enclosure. That, too, had been a gradual but devastating winnowing of rights.

When the crowd arrived at the top of a hill, organizers were waiting with a surprise. Hiding just behind the crest were a group of musicians and a giant puppet they called Old Crockern, after a mythic figure from Dartmoor's past who is said to be the spirit of the moor; in one story, he warns a rich man who has come to plow the land with a steam engine, ''if you scratch my back, I'll scratch out your pockets!'' When the puppet crested the hill into the slanting winter sunshine, crowds of children ran toward it, dancing.

The Dartmoor National Park Authority appealed the ruling. In the meantime, it came to an agreement with some of the other landowners, paying them to continue to allow camping. What had been a right became a mere permission. Winks found himself camping less because he was no longer sure where it was actually allowed. ''They've stolen the goose and are selling us back the eggs,'' he said, ''and we're told to be grateful.''

The Labour Party, for its part, reacted to the news by promising to introduce a Scottish-style Right to Roam bill the next time it came to power.

One spring morning about a week after the swim at Kinder Reservoir, and five months after the Dartmoor ruling, I met another group of trespassers. This time they gathered on the village green of a tiny place called Ham, under the branches of a blooming horse-chestnut tree.

Most of the 70 or so people who arrived for the walk came from Bristol, 20 miles away, home to a particularly active group of right-to-roam advocates who meet twice a month and go on outings that members take turns designing.

On this day, the walk leader was Jim Rosseinsky, a member of a local choir, who brought along some of his choir mates. Rosseinsky said that ''The Book of Trespass'' moved him to act because ''it was just so reasonable.'' Before setting out, he warned the group to watch out for ''sharp-branch-related jeopardy'' and to take care with where they placed their feet: ''We want to show that we can care for the land that we're walking on.''

The group set off down a narrow lane, crossed a bridge and passed a field where horses grazed. A large stone castle appeared in the distance. A woman named Mary Stevens, who had read ''Who Owns England?'' told those gathered that it was still owned by the same family to whom the land was granted in the aftermath of the Norman Conquest. They were also given considerable land in Bristol -- where, many of the walkers told me, they could not afford to buy houses -- including in the neighborhood where the choir practices.

The long trail of people wound through fields and into a tiny scrap of woodland, where the choir leader, Sorrel Wilde, led the group in an old chant: ''Put your roots down/put your feet on the ground/you can hear the earth sing/if you listen,'' we sang, until the words lost their cheesiness and began to feel profound and peaceful. It took ages to enter another glen, because there were so many people stepping so cautiously over the bluebells.

As they walked, people told me what had brought them to spend their bank holiday Monday trespassing around a castle with strangers. Many spoke about wanting more access to nature, but they also framed the walk in grander terms. Maria Fernandez Garcia, a botanist who had become a leader of the group, said it was a balm ''to hear other people's deep and similar feelings'' about the ways the country wasn't working for ordinary people and how it could do better. Danny Balla listed a series of things that he wished were seen as commons, to be shared and stewarded, but which were instead enclosed, privatized and exploited: gathering places in cities, the air, the water, the climate. A mother of two young children told me that as a renter, struggling amid Britain's cost-of-living crisis, ''it would be very easy to feel that I had very little power,'' but trespasses like this helped. The more of them she went on, the more illusory the borders that constrained her life felt. ''It's an antidote to everything feeling divided and enclosed,'' she said.

A woman named Holly Marjoram told me that while walking is often a solitary activity, this version made it feel like part of something large and powerful, connected to a whole world of people who would fight for the land. She had also been to the big trespass at Berry Pomeroy and the protest on Dartmoor.

A few months later, in mid-July, the Royal Courts of Justice would hear the park's challenge to the ruling that favored the Darwalls. Inside the court, the two sides debated what the park's bylaws meant by allowing ''open-air recreation'' -- Was a tent open-air? Are you recreating when you're asleep? -- while protesters filled the sidewalk outside. A ruling is still pending.

In Ham, after the trespass, the group stopped in a churchyard for lunch, where more thermoses of tea emerged from backpacks. ''It's nice to imagine a world where we can walk farther and feel freer,'' said a woman in tall rubber boots. And then it was back to the village green, where some people taught a folk dance, some drifted off to the pub next door and some sang along to a final song:

Ours is a wild and beautiful land

much unknown to us.

We are the land.

And the land is us.

Another group arrived late and dripping, having been lured into the cool river by the first hot day of spring. People kept asking Rosseinsky which parts of the walk were trespasses and which parts were within their rights. It had been hard for them to tell.

## What's Past is Prologue.

Wyatt Mason | July 30, 2023 | NYTMag

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''The weird thing about growing up kidnapped,'' Shane McCrae, the 47-year-old American poet, told me in his melodious, reedy voice one rainy afternoon in May, ''is if it happens early enough, there's a way in which you kind of don't know.''

There was no reason for McCrae to have known. What unfolded in McCrae's childhood -- between a June day in 1979 when his white grandmother took him from his Black father and disappeared, and another day, 13 years later, when McCrae opened a phone book in Salem, Ore., found a name he hoped was his father's and placed a call -- is both an unambiguous story of abduction and a convoluted story of complicity. It loops through the American landscape, from Oregon to Texas to California to Oregon again, and, even now, wends through the vaster emotional country of a child and his parents. And because so much of what happened to McCrae happened in homes where he was beaten and lied to and threatened, where he was made to understand that Black people were inferior to whites, where he was taught to hail Hitler, where he was told that his dark skin meant he tanned easily but, no, not that he was Black, it's a story that's been hard for McCrae to piece together.

''My grandparents,'' McCrae explained in a somewhat gloomy, book-laden office at Columbia University, where he teaches poetry in its M.F.A. program, ''were so actively keeping my father away from me -- they didn't want me to investigate him at all -- it was just normal.'' Normal, McCrae explained, because the story he had been told by his grandparents was that McCrae's father, whose name he didn't even know, abandoned him before he was born. ''They had been doing it my whole life,'' McCrae said matter-of-factly. ''I didn't think of it as, Oh, this is pretty strange.''

McCrae paused. ''The aftereffects of all that,'' he continued, ''it took me until -- to really understand that I had been a kidnapped child -- probably my early 40s when it finally started to make sense and I really got it, and I was like, Oh, this is a big deal. I had used the phrase before -- 'growing up kidnapped' -- but somehow used it without it really sinking in. It was a thing that I was aware of as, This is technically true, but without really understanding what that means.''

McCrae's new book, the memoir ''Pulling the Chariot of the Sun'' -- it is being released on Aug. 1 -- is his attempt to construct, at a remove of four decades, an understanding of what happened and what it has come to mean. The memoir takes the reader through McCrae's childhood, from his earliest memories after being taken from his father to when, at 16, he found him again. Like many accomplished memoirs that have followed from St. Augustine's pioneering ''Confessions,'' McCrae's explores memory's uncertain contours, but like few memoirs before it, ''Pulling the Chariot of the Sun'' offers the experience, in prose, of that uncertainty. It's essentially a 250-page avant-garde prose poem that has more in common with Virginia Woolf's (excellent, difficult) novel ''The Waves'' than with Hua Hsu's (excellent, not difficult) memoir ''Stay True'' -- or any memoir you might name. McCrae's sentences are constantly stating and retracting, moving forward and retreating, establishing a perimeter around an event while trying to penetrate it, to enter the chalk outline drawn around a body long buried, that of the boy McCrae was before he was taken. At first, the mode can be off-putting; decisions and revisions that a minute can reverse, the reader left to wonder why the same story -- McCrae's birth, say, as it was reported to him -- is told multiple times. But it's not long before the initial aesthetic perplexity resolves for the reader into the recognition that this is how a mind works with the past: eternal return, compulsive attempts to make something hold over which you have no control. And then the reader begins to welcome -- need, in fact -- McCrae's multiplicities, that straining for resolution. The memoir accumulates a hugeness of feeling that puts a lie to the idea that difficulty in a piece of writing is necessarily cold or aloof or incompatible with the kind of intense emotion that McCrae's narrative uncommonly yields.

''Until I was 13, I slept with the light on,'' McCrae writes midway through the memoir, ''the main light in my bedroom, the light in the ceiling, sometimes still wearing the clothes I had worn that day, sometimes even wearing my shoes. Most of my childhood I felt I had to be prepared to be taken from my life at any moment.''

''Pulling the Chariot of the Sun'' is the story of an undoing, but it is no less a story of becoming. McCrae takes the reader to the house where he was made to live with his grandparents; documents how he was thrown, at age 3, into a wall by his grandfather, because he was crying for his father; how he was knocked unconscious; how the beatings continued as McCrae matured, until his grandmother divorced the grandfather when McCrae was 14. There are visits from his mother and his brief, failed period living with her as a teenager; time at multiple schools -- three in ninth grade alone -- where he sat at the backs of rooms, a middling student, largely friendless. But there is also the freedom and pleasure he experienced skateboarding, at which he excelled enough to be able to see, vividly, the fine line that separated his skills from those of skaters who became pros. And there's McCrae's revelation, as a 10th grader who would go on to repeat the year, that a standardized test put his writing at an eighth-grade level, the metrics of the world reporting that he was, contrary to his sense of himself, stupid. Seeded within that plausible sadness and loneliness and horror and hopelessness is the story of the strange concatenation of events that produced the moment when McCrae found his path to poetry, first as anchor to life and then as avenue to himself. His memoir is, therefore, and perhaps most memorably, a Bildungsroman, a portrait of a poet as a young Black man -- a boy raised in a particular crucible of capture that, as part of its power, enacts the American story of seizure and captivity of Black people by white tormentors.

McCrae dropped out of high school and got an equivalency diploma. By 19, he was on his own, married, father of a daughter, but without a clear path forward, only a clear ambition to write poetry. Through that period, he kept to a strict regimen of reading 200 pages a day -- eight books at once in rotation, 25 pages from each -- absorbing writing from every era, understanding that, beyond his need to make it, he knew nothing about poetry. What he did know, having been an excellent skateboarder, was that if you wanted to land a reverse ollie, you needed your 10,000 hours to get there. He entered community college at 21; after transferring twice, he graduated from a good local college, Linfield, at 26, with an acceptance letter from the premier M.F.A. program in the world, the Iowa Writers' Workshop. Graduating in 2004, he went straight to Harvard Law School, to get a J.D., thinking that he would briefly support himself as a lawyer. McCrae didn't like law school but completed it, and as he was doing so, because he could take courses elsewhere at the university, he applied for a place in the poetry workshop of a poet he had been reading for years, Jorie Graham.

''It seemed at the start that he didn't know if he should be there, if he wanted to be there,'' Graham wrote to me. ''But, as we say, 'he had an ear.' He wrote a slightly conventional poem, and his heart was tight, and his natural voice was through clenched teeth. I felt anger on his page, repressed anger. I felt he had been beaten down by some great force -- some injustice beyond the injustice of being Black in America. But I could not break through to it.

''At some point he came to me in my office with a strange draft where a few lines broke apart at what would have been prosodical caesuras, and as we spoke, he shared a great personal grief and burden. And -- I remember this vividly -- I looked back and forth from his broad open suddenly vulnerable face to the lines broken open by a kind of stuttering breath, or a breath taken to squelch a sob, and I thought: Here it is, here we go, his ear is released.

''The next week he had a handful of poems in that form. The form worked because it correlated to the griefs he was undergoing.''

Since 2009, McCrae has published 13 books of poetry, hundreds of pages of supremely accomplished verse. He has written, autobiographically, on the dissolution of marriage and the challenges of fatherhood; on the reality of racism as he has encountered it and as American history has fostered it; and on sin and its purgation and transcendence, not in some abstract mode but from a decidedly Christian perspective (McCrae is a practicing Episcopalian). But these are just themes; every poet has them, and they say nothing about what might make verse notable, durable. It is McCrae's own deep knowledge, and use, of the history of poetic form that has marked his work and made it, identifiably, his own. McCrae has written scores of sonnets with the form's standard 70 beats and its characteristic meter of iambic pentameter, and yet a reader encountering these poems for the first time on the page, where they do not look like sonnets -- the lines are ruptured, gapped, slashed, broken at the ''wrong'' places -- would be hard-pressed to see a sonnet's shape hiding there in plain sight. But as you not so much push through them as are pulled along by the currents in them, a freight of feeling accumulates and, by the end of his best poems, detonates in final lines that are often so aggressively felt that you hardly notice the rigor of the meter that has gotten you there.

''I tend to think that poems,'' McCrae told me, ''they're smarter than the people who write them, and they're smarter than the people that read them. A poem that is successful is a poem that you can never entirely possess. It will always resist you through its sort of fathomless difficulty. That there's always going to be some new thing with the poem -- because you haven't gotten the whole thing.''

Many of McCrae's poems have addressed the pain in his own biography. The first poem, ''The Cardinal Is the Marriage Bird,'' in his first major book, ''Mule,'' ends with the word ''wound.'' A suite of poems follows in which McCrae takes on the role of the book's title animal, sired Black, dammed white -- poems set in the Texas to which he was taken, among them three different poems all called ''Mulatto,'' a word the Spanish root of which means ''young mule,'' capturing a boy's awareness of the rupture at the center of his nature; or ''Niggers on TV,'' a harrowing, but also strangely tender, poem that captures the effects of his grandfather's racism on a little boy who liked to dance along with the Huxtables, when ''The Cosby Show'' came on, with his grandmother (''I only ever saw her dance with me''-- which, not at all incidentally, dances along in iambic pentameter), a complicated act of love nesting within the horror.

Over the years, McCrae has burrowed into the ugliness of how whites have treated Blacks, imagining the voices of historical figures like Jim Limber, a mixed-race orphan adopted by the family of Jefferson Davis at the end of his time as president of the Confederacy, irreconcilable depictions of violence and love. All the while, McCrae has nudged closer to exploring the grotesquerie of his own treatment, earlier poems using the word ''taken'' before the newer poems incorporated, finally, the word that McCrae knows to be true: ''kidnapped.''

I wondered why McCrae felt he needed, now, to approach this history, already glimpsed in his mature work, through narrative.

''Up until that point,'' McCrae told me, ''I wrote stuff that I figured one would write: Being as how I was kidnapped, what is the sort of thing a person who was kidnapped would say? In a lot of my poems, that's the way I was thinking about it. But it wasn't until I wrote the memoir that I started to understand that it wasn't like being kidnapped was someone running up to you every day and shouting, 'Hey, you're kidnapped!' -- which is what the moment of the poem kind of feels like: a dramatization. Being kidnapped is just ... you're living your life, and no one is telling you what the premise is.''

''I used to think that there was something wrong with my emotional life,'' McCrae told me later, ''because I had difficulty conjuring up feelings about, like, when my grandmother died'' -- from complications of Alzheimer's, while he was in law school -- ''I was like, OK, well, here's something I'm supposed to feel. And I couldn't. I was aware that being taken from my father when I was, and my subsequent experiences, really broke something in my ability to connect with family that is generationally before me. What I feel is the absence of feeling things that I should.''

As I sought to fill in McCrae's early years, I felt I needed to speak with his mother and father. He expressed some hesitation, however, and before he ultimately said it would be fine with him and with them if I did, I spoke with one of McCrae's high school teachers, who shifted those conversations in an unexpected direction. The day after we spoke, she texted yearbook photos from when McCrae would have been in ninth and 10th grade. There he was, in two adolescent shots a year apart. His name was listed not as McCrae but as Baker.

''Oh, yes, that's right,'' Denise Baker, McCrae's mom, told me on the phone from her home in Portland, Ore. ''Baker was Shane's last name.'' Baker was the name of her stepfather, Morris, whom everyone called Morrie and whom Denise called, during our conversations, ''the monster.'' He was her mother's fifth and final husband; they married when Denise was 5. Denise says that when she was still small, he kicked her down a hallway so hard that it felt as if he broke her tailbone. When she became a teenager, they fought outright. He was a racist, and she had Black friends. Things got bad. Her mom and Morrie called her fat, worthless, stupid. She repeatedly ran away; when she was around 14, her parents told the state that she was out of control, and she was remanded to juvenile detention for a year. After she got out, she was emancipated from her parents. ''They didn't want to have to take care of me anymore,'' Denise told me.

Denise talked about meeting McCrae's father, Stanley, about which McCrae writes in the memoir -- how his eventual father ''approached her slowly from an impossible distance, somehow both in and beyond the Kmart, dressed, she would say, 'like Super Fly.' She would have been 15; he was most likely 17 or 18. She never told me what he ordered; she never told me what they talked about.''

As to why, three years later, Shane was born a Baker, and not a McCrae, as Denise tells it, a hospital staff member said that because she and Stanley weren't married, he wouldn't be able to put his name on the form. If he wanted to claim paternity, he could within six months if he filed a formal application. Soon after she was released from the hospital, she and Shane joined Stanley in Salem.

''We hung out and talked,'' Stanley told me from his home in San Diego. ''I'm like, When do I need to sign the birth certificate? And she was like, Well, actually, I wanted to talk to you about that because my dad'' -- Morrie -- ''can't have kids. And he was saying that if you let him put Shane in the Baker name, when he passes, everything he has will go to Shane. And I'm like, Really? Because I'm not a rich man. She said yes. And I'm like, OK, he can be in the Baker name. When he gets older, if he wants to change it, he can change it. So this is to me where the story began. All of a sudden, he's in the Baker name.''

It wasn't long after the birth that Denise and Stanley were no longer in a romantic relationship. Shane was initially with Denise in Portland. Sometimes she stayed with her parents, who were living there. By the time McCrae was nearing 3, Denise began to feel overwhelmed by the responsibility of being a parent -- afraid that she was going to be abusive to Shane the way her parents had been to her. Not long after, Stanley took Shane to Salem to live with him.

On June 2, 1979, Stanley's grandfather died. He told Denise he wanted to take Shane to the funeral in Arizona. Denise said that was fine. ''Probably that same day,'' Stanley recalled, ''the grandmother came over. I had bought Shane this little tricycle. And he just loved it. We were outside playing, he's riding on the tricycle, the grandmother pulls up and says, I'd like to see him before he leaves. I'm like, Yeah, absolutely. We're not leaving for a couple of days. And she says, Well, can he spend the night? I'm like, No problem, no problem. And she's like, I'll bring him back tomorrow. I thought nothing at all. But then the next day came, and he wasn't back. That morning. That evening. And I'm like, What the heck? She knows that I'm leaving. So I went over to her house. Now, I hadn't been to her house in several years, but I knew where she lived. And I went to the house, and the house was empty. The house is up for sale.''

I asked Denise about the house, a detail that didn't make sense to me, and she explained that her parents had moved before Shane was born, to a house in Portland where Stanley had never been. Naturally, I wanted to know what Stanley did when he saw the empty house. He said that he called Denise and that she said she told her mother that Stanley was taking Shane to Arizona for a funeral -- but that she had not told her mother to take Shane. Stanley was in touch with Denise for a week by phone, but nothing became clearer to him about where Shane was, only that Denise said he must be with them. And then, along with the grandparents and Shane, she disappeared.

Here's the part of the story that no one can clarify, but it seems that the essential sadness and horror is this: Denise's parents convinced her that they could give Shane a better life, and absolutely a better life than he would have with Stanley. At some point, Denise agreed that her parents could take him to Texas, where Morrie had a new job, and that once she got herself together she would come get Shane. Precisely when they moved, and precisely what degree of involvement Denise had in that move -- it's clear that she didn't tell Stanley what was happening. ''I don't know what I was thinking,'' Denise told me, clearly in tears, on several calls. ''I was so young. I was not ready to be a mom. And I will regret that for the rest of my life.''

Denise did try to take custody of Shane a year after her mother and stepfather moved to Texas. When she went down, Morrie threatened her. ''Well, if you try to take Shane,'' Denise told me Morrie said, ''we'll take him to Mexico, and you'll never see him again.'' Denise believed him. ''I was just scared to death,'' she said, ''but I have no idea why I didn't just take him.''

I asked Stanley what he did to try to find Shane.

''You know, at that particular time, back in the '80s, I'm in Salem, Ore., which is basically white,'' under two percent Black. ''I was Black, and his name was Baker.'' Stanley continued, ''The stuff I had been through with police in my life -- I didn't trust police.'' Stanley said he did speak with one white officer he knew, who said that without his son having his name, there wasn't going to be any chance of getting him back.

It felt like a stupid question, but I asked Stanley how he felt after Shane disappeared. ''Shane was my world,'' Stanley said. ''I was raised in church to believe that everybody had good in them. When I lost Shane, I totally turned to God. I'm like, I've evidently been messing up in my life, and I'm being punished. I became a deacon in the church and would pray on my knees and ask for my kid to show up and for me to be able to find him.''

When Shane would have been about 8 or 9, Stanley's sister, Carol, ran into Denise in Salem, and Denise went over to their mother's house to talk. ''I'm like, Where is Shane? And she was like, Well, he's at my parents'. And I'm like: Look, I agreed that your dad could use his name because he didn't have anybody carrying on his name. And I'm trying to be a good person. But now you guys have taken my kid and disappeared. I want Shane in my name now, and I want him.'' Stanley paused. ''So Denise is like, OK, well, yeah, we can put him in the McCrae name. She gave me a phone number for Shane, but it was a wrong number. And that was the last time I heard from Denise.''

Some eight years after that, 13 years after his abduction, Shane found his way back to his father. One day, Stanley recalled, he ''had been at work, and I was with my now-wife'' of more than 30 years, Kandace, ''and I got to my door, and I was like, Weird. And she's like, What? I'm like: I feel Shane. His scent seems to be around me. I haven't had that since he was 3 years old.''

''Everybody that I know,'' Stanley said, ''I'd always told about Shane. I mean, he's my first kid. We did everything together. We'd be riding down the road, and he'd go: That's a '56 Chevy! At 3 years old! That's a '57 Chevy! I'm like, Man, look at my smart kid. I was just so proud of him, watching the way that he grew, and then they just ripped him out of my life.''

A couple of weeks after he sensed Shane, Stanley told me, ''my wife called me and said: Hey, guess what? Shane called! I'm like, What?'' McCrae had gotten his father's name from his grandmother a few years earlier and, at a certain point, reached a moment in his life when he sought that name in a phone book and dialed the number next to it. ''So we made an appointment to pick him up. And when I got to him, I'm like: Dude, I told Kandace I got your scent. It seemed like you had been at my door.'' Some years later, McCrae changed his last name to match his father's.

Some people go through the worst in life, and it destroys them; others, no less beset, see it move through them. ''Some people think that I am troublingly optimistic,'' McCrae told me back in his office. ''I don't know if that's true. But it's rather more that I tend to believe, for reasons I can't fully explain, the good, or at least the least-complicated version that would fall on the side of good.''

It seemed to me that McCrae's optimism might be called faith. ''I got this tattoo when I was in law school,'' McCrae said, rolling his left forearm over to reveal a large, black Latin cross. ''When I did my very first reading, for my first chapbook, 'One Neither One'''-- from 2009, its cover a sketch of shackles that can look like a pair of eyes, staring at the reader -- ''I made sure to wear a jacket so nobody would see it. Because I was afraid.'' Growing up, McCrae continued, ''there was this kind of feeling that if you had a Christian belief, you can't believe in God and be smart. That was the feeling I got in the circles I ran in. And I felt really weird about it, really insecure, because I did believe.'' McCrae laughed. ''So when I was first trying to be a poet, I didn't want anybody to know I was a Christian. It was a source of worry for a pretty long time. I'm also really ashamed of how, at least the Christians that get attention in America, how a lot of them act. It fills me with dismay. And I didn't want to be associated with that.''

McCrae told me how, at 19, he'd asked God to give him a sign. If God did, McCrae would believe in him. The next day, McCrae went up to the Mount Angel monastery, a half-hour out of Salem, and there was a storm, thunder and lightning, and when he was getting ready to leave, the road out was blocked by two fallen trees. McCrae says he didn't feel that God would waste his time knocking down trees so a kid would believe, but he had asked for a sign, and there one was. McCrae tried Islam; Daoism, but eventually came around to Christianity. He was baptized a Christian at 29 while at Harvard Law. He had also been taking classes at the Episcopal divinity school -- had imagined, still imagines, another path for himself as a priest -- but after a term, he learned he wasn't eligible to take more. And yet, since then, the two things -- belief in art and faith in God -- have come together.

Fractured through McCrae's work, then, is what could be read as a very long poem that has appeared in parts through four books. There's a purgatory, a heaven, and a hell. McCrae is long done with purgatory and heaven, but ''The Hell Poem,'' which first appeared in 2019, keeps getting bigger. A few weeks before I wrote this article, he sent me the whole poem -- or rather all of it minus two sections he has yet to write. It's harrowing and strange and also extremely funny in moments; it completes what I can't help seeing as a kind of Commedia, written by someone who believes equally in the word and the Word.

I asked McCrae about the process by which he came to understand that Christ was God's son, and how the pain that God allowed to be brought upon Jesus, the wounds inflicted on his body, ended up making sense to him. In that context, I asked him why we suffer. ''It's actually a question that I don't think about all that much,'' he said, ''which feels terrible, because I'm so often on the verge of tears thinking about the suffering of others.'' He paused. ''It's God's universe. God can do what God wants. Which is kind of what St. Augustine said: God doesn't owe us happy lives.''

Throughout June and into July, I ended up going back and forth between McCrae's parents many times, trying to reconcile their individual versions of events. One day I got a text from Stanley. ''Denise contacted me on Facebook a couple hours ago. We ended up talking on the phone and she remembers a lot but, just like me she's forgot a lot. She does remember how upset she was when her mother lied to me and came and got Shane. I believe she was really hurt regarding that whole situation, and she seems to be struggling with how everything went down.''

I called Denise to ask her about the conversation with Stanley. ''It's ... it's really painful for me what Shane went through, and I feel extremely at fault. And it's something that I'll probably deal with forever. But I wanted to help change part of that. So I looked up Oregon laws to see if Stanley could get on his birth certificate even now, and it sounds like he could. So I reached out to Stanley.''

As Stanley understood it, the only thing he had agreed to, 47 years earlier, was that his son would have the Baker name. He had not known that the birth certificate would make no mention of him as the father. But now he had seen the evidence for himself. I asked if I could see it. He texted it along.

The Certificate of Live Birth shows that on Sept. 22, 1975, a child, in Box 1, Shane Alan Baker, was born at 6:59 p.m., to mother, in Box 6a, Denise Alynne Baker. Box 8a, for father, is blank. It is as if no such person existed.

Though McCrae says he was kidnapped from his father when he was 3, he is, in a way, wrong. It took place on the day he was born.

''I'm glad that's happening,'' McCrae said of adding Stanley's name to his birth certificate. ''Me changing my name to his last name when I was in my very early 20s was really important, and that was very meaningful to me. The public acknowledgment of him as my father had felt as if I was doing some small thing to right a wrong. It was emotional. I felt driven to do it. So whatever emotions would go with it were emotions that I already felt decades ago.''

On the first of July, Stanley and his wife, each on their separate Harley-Davidsons, began the 21-hour ride from San Diego to Oregon. Stanley wanted to take the forms in himself. Too much for too long had gone wrong; he wasn't about to let anything happen now.

If, in life, McCrae has met this advent with what might seem like a mildness of feeling, in art he has shown a fierce commitment to inventing forms that express significant emotion. The title of McCrae's memoir, ''Pulling the Chariot of the Sun,'' alludes to the Greek myth of a son seeking his father -- Phaethon, a mortal boy; Helios, a god. Phaethon had been told that his father was a god but had never met him. So he went on a journey to find him; did; and asked that the god give him proof of his patrimony. The god said, Anything you ask of me I will grant. The boy asked to drive the chariot of the sun, the one that Helios drove each day to make the sun rise, pulled by four horses of enormous power. The god knew that the boy was no match for the task, and yet he had given himself no choice but to say yes. So Phaethon took the reins at dawn; rose; and of course fell, literally dying to learn that his father's name was his own.

McCrae's version of the story inverts that myth. At his memoir's end, he finds his father, learns his name, and lives.

## Plastic Fantastic

Willa Paskin | July 16, 2023 | NYTMag

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The moment Greta Gerwig knew for certain that she could make a movie about Barbie, the most famous and controversial doll in history, she was thinking about death. She had been reading about Ruth Handler, the brash Jewish businesswoman who created the doll -- and who, decades later, had two mastectomies. Handler birthed this toy with its infamous breasts, the figurine who became an enduring avatar of plastic perfection, while being stuck, like all of us, in a fragile and failing human body. This thought sparked something for Gerwig. She envisioned a sunny-minded Barbie stumbling upon a dying woman in her barbecue area. Then Gerwig kept going. It was the beginning of the pandemic. Maybe no one would ever go to the movies again. Maybe no one would ever see what she was working on. Why not go for broke?

Why couldn't the movie begin with a methodologically faithful riff on the opening of Stanley Kubrick's ''2001: A Space Odyssey,'' with little girls bashing in their insipid baby dolls' heads after beholding the revelation that is Barbie? Why couldn't Barbieland be full of Barbies and Kens but free of wind, except when it made the dolls' hair look good? Why couldn't Barbie be overcome by irrepressible thoughts of death in the middle of a choreographed dance number? Why couldn't there be a dream ballet inspired by 1950s musicals and a recurring joke about the lyrics of a Matchbox 20 song? Why couldn't Gerwig love Barbie and criticize Barbie and try to make people feel something new about an object that has been making people feel things for nearly 65 years? Why couldn't she make a movie that would delight Barbie's protective corporate guardians at Mattel, the people at Warner Brothers who bankrolled the roughly $145 million production, the people who hate Barbie, the people who adore Barbie and also herself?

''There's a point in the movie where the Kens are riding invisible horses from their beach battle to the Mojo Dojo Casa Houses,'' Gerwig told me -- a Mojo Dojo Casa House is like a Barbie Dreamhouse, but for Kens -- ''and I think to myself, every time: Why did they let us do this?'' It was late May, less than two months until the movie's theatrical release, and Gerwig was putting in long hours on finishing touches, shuttling between postproduction facilities in Manhattan. Still, the very fact of the movie's existence continued to puzzle and delight her. Why did they let her do this?

The answer seems so obvious now. Mattel, Warner Brothers and the producers let Greta Gerwig make ''Barbie'' so that exactly what is currently happening would happen. So that the fizzy marriage of filmmaker and material would break though the cacophony of contemporary life and return a retirement-age hunk of plastic to the zeitgeist. So that Mattel, in particular, could rocket-launch its grand ambitions to become a proto-Disney and announce the activation of its entire intellectual-property back catalog with a fuchsia splash. So that Barbie stans and Barbie agnostics alike would find themselves bombarded by paparazzi snaps of Margot Robbie, as Barbie, and Ryan Gosling, as Ken, dressed in matching, radioactively vivid Rollerblading outfits -- plus ''Barbie'' trailers, #Barbiecore TikToks and wall-to-wall Barbie tie-ins. They wanted Gerwig, with her indie bona fides, feminist credentials and multiple Oscar nominations, to use her credibility to make this multibillion-dollar platinum-blond I.P. newly relevant, delivering a very, very, very pink summer blockbuster that acknowledges Barbie's baggage, unpacks that baggage and, also, sells that baggage. (The designer-luggage company Béis now offers a Barbie collection.) They wanted Gerwig to burnish Barbie. But why, exactly, did Gerwig want to do that?

Inquiries like this fluster Gerwig. She has been thinking about Barbie, nonstop, for years. But at the time, it had been a while since she'd talked it over with anyone who wasn't already immersed in the project. Suddenly, at the end of a long day, she was being asked to justify the fascination that possessed her the moment Margot Robbie, also one of the movie's producers, asked her about writing the script, which she would do with her partner, Noah Baumbach. ''I kept thinking: Humans are the people that make dolls and then get mad at the dolls,'' Gerwig explained. ''We create them and then they create us and we recreate them and they recreate us. We're in constant conversation with inanimate objects.''

She wanted in on that conversation. Yes, Barbie is a polarizing toy and a juicy hunk of I.P., but Gerwig leaped right to what else Barbie is: a potent, complicated, contradictory symbol that stands near the center of a decades-long and still-running argument about how to be a woman. If there is a kind of earnestness that once would have precluded a director from ''selling out,'' it is the same earnestness that now precludes them from thinking about that notion at all. (What is Barbie but a superhero in heels, older than Spider-Man and Iron Man?) Instead of aiming for a product you might grade on a curve as ''relatively thoughtful, for a Barbie movie,'' Gerwig devoted herself to threading a needle slimmer than the eyelashes painted on the doll's face. The movie is a celebration of Barbie and a subterranean apologia for Barbie. It is a giant corporate undertaking and a strange, funny personal project. It is a jubilant, mercilessly effective polymer-and-pink extravaganza whose guiding star turns out to be Gerwig's own sincerity. ''Things can be both/and,'' she said. ''I'm doing the thing and subverting the thing.''

Gerwig, who turns 40 this summer, loved playing with dolls so much that she did it until she was about 14. In hindsight, this seems like the behavior of a future director, but at the time she felt it was ''too late -- people were already drinking at parties.'' Some of her dolls were Barbies. She can remember, as a little girl, standing in a Toys ''R'' Us, gazing upon a display of Barbies in their really big boxes, wearing their really big dresses, their really big hair fanned out for maximal glamour, and she has tried to hold onto her feeling of never having seen anything more beautiful. While preparing the movie, her creative team considered hundreds of shades of pink, but Gerwig arrived one day convinced that they had let their adult sensibilities lead them astray: The pink had gotten too tasteful. They needed something supersaturated, bold and bright -- not salmon. Nothing about the movie should feel ''like an adult telling a little kid: 'Don't talk too loud. Don't chew with your mouth open.' You wanted it to be that exuberance of using the brightest color in the box.''

But it is not just a child's sensibility at play in ''Barbie.'' Gerwig's mother was not wild about the dolls, so they mostly trickled into the house as hand-me-downs. Even as she was gathering the intimate Barbie experience that's all over this film -- one character is constantly doing splits, as if enacting a sense memory of how ably the dolls hit 180-degree leg extension -- she was also imbibing the critique. ''The one that always felt the most pointed to me was that if she was a human being, she wouldn't be able to hold her head up,'' she recalls; Barbie's neck is, by most estimations, too thin to support her cranium. (The one that always stuck with me was the legend that if Barbie were real, she would have to crawl on all fours, weighed down by her massive mammaries.) ''If you're walking around,'' Gerwig says, ''congratulations, you don't look like Barbie.''

Gerwig understands both the love and the loathing for Barbie, but for many others, the doll remains an either/or proposition: Either she's feminist or she's really, really not. Arguments that she is feminist include the fact that she has had her own Dreamhouse since 1962, when women were routinely denied mortgages and credit cards. She went to the moon years before Neil Armstrong, and unlike any real-life American woman, she has been president. But a couple of years after becoming a homeowner, a Slumber Party Barbie came with a scale locked at 110 pounds and a ''How to Lose Weight'' manual, with the directions ''Don't Eat.'' (Perhaps the most famous Barbie movie before this one was Todd Haynes's breakout short ''Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story,'' which used dolls to stage a biopic about the singer, who died in 1983 of complications from anorexia.) Over the decades, there has been a persistent release of other Yikes Barbies, like the memorable Teen Talk Barbie that was programmed to say, ''Math class is tough!''

More holistically, Barbie was abhorred by second-wave feminists as an inescapable, white, blond, impossibly thin, impossibly stacked, glammed-up personification of the male gaze being pushed on generations of girls as the woman they should aspire to be. Gloria Steinem has said Barbie ''was pretty much everything the feminist movement was trying to escape from.'' A chant rang out at a women's-equality march in 1970: ''I am not a Barbie doll.''

When Robbie approached Gerwig about writing the film, the parameters were extremely broad: She could do anything she wanted. (One thing she really wanted to do was work with Robbie, who, she says, finishes meetings by asking, '' 'Does anyone have anything that they just really hate or want to bring up right now that's really bothering them?' She just, like, runs at danger.'' When Gerwig is quoting Robbie, she puts on an Australian accent, which she is good at.) But even though Mattel was involved, the film couldn't just be Barbie propaganda. It would have to deal with the whole scope of the conversation. ''People say, 'Well, what's the story of Barbie?''' Gerwig recalls. ''The story of Barbie is the fight that's been going on about Barbie.''

As the movie begins, Robbie's Barbie wakes in her Dreamhouse and cheerfully waves to all the other Barbies in their Dreamhouses, which she can do because none of the Dreamhouses have walls. (Barbies have nothing to hide, and nowhere to hide it if they did.) Barbieland is a multicultural Barbiarchy: The president is a Barbie and so are the Supreme Court justices, Nobel Prize winners, pilots, doctors and construction crews. The Kens, in contrast, have one job, the frustratingly ill-defined ''Beach,'' where they cheerlead and jockey in hopes of being noticed. The Barbies know that they are dolls -- that Mattel created them, that there is a real world where little girls play with them -- but they are otherwise blithely incurious. In Barbieland, every day is a good day, and every night is a girls' night. They imagine that the real world is just like Barbieland and that they have helped us solve all our ''problems of equal rights and feminism.''

Then come those pesky intimations of mortality. Later, a patch of cellulite appears on Barbie's thigh. Her naturally high-heel-ready feet fall flat. These ''malfunctions,'' Barbie is told, are probably a result of someone in the real world playing with her too hard -- and though she does not want to leave Barbieland to investigate, she really does not want cellulite. So with Ken and his Rollerblades in the back seat, and the radio blaring the Indigo Girls' 1989 acoustic anthem ''Closer to Fine'' (a song Gerwig has loved since growing up among ''hippie Christians'' in a Unitarian church), she drives her pink convertible toward reality, expecting a hug and a thank you from the women of America. Instead, a haughty teenager serves her the whole brutal read: Barbie, the plastic personification of ''unrealistic physical ideals, sexualized capitalism and rampant consumerism,'' has been making women feel bad about themselves since she was invented.

''I really thought of it like a spiritual journey,'' Gerwig says. The Barbies live in a world that has ''the comfort of fundamentalism''; there is no death, aging or shame, and ''you never have to wonder what you're meant to do.'' Then cellulite slithers into paradise. The idea that ''you're not going to follow a path that's been laid out for you,'' Gerwig says, ''comes with a fair amount of terror.'' The resonances aren't just religious: This is, as in much Gerwig material, the arc of growing up.

Gerwig brims with references and influences, many of which she marshaled to make the movie ''authentically artificial,'' with everything ''fake, but really fake'' -- make-believe and yet tangible, tactile, like playing with an actual toy. She called Peter Weir, the director of ''The Truman Show,'' to ask how to ''execute something that's both artificial and emotional at the same time.'' She tried to channel musicals like ''The Umbrellas of Cherbourg'' and ''Singin' in the Rain,'' which she says do the same. Many of the special effects were based on the analog techniques of 1959, a year chosen because that's when Barbie debuted. The mermaid Barbies we see splish-splashing behind Jeff Koons-esque plastic waves are being hoisted by a rig like a seesaw. The blue expanse hovering over Barbieland is not green screen; it's a vast backdrop of painted sky.

''Barbie'' has a bigger scope, budget and potential audience than any of Gerwig's previous work. This was part of its appeal: Gerwig has been scaling up, intentionally. And yet she remains focused on characters' baby-stepping into adulthood. (Her next project is a Netflix adaptation of the Narnia universe.) The protagonists she played in ''Frances Ha'' and ''Mistress America'' -- collaborations with Baumbach -- would probably make arch remarks about a Barbie I.P. blockbuster, but they, too, were figuring out who they were. So were the heroines of Gerwig's directorial debut, ''Lady Bird,'' loosely inspired by her own Sacramento childhood, and her follow-up, ''Little Women,'' based on her favorite childhood book.

''Barbie,'' too, is a coming-of-age story; the figure coming of age just happens to be a full-grown piece of plastic. ''Little Women'' would have been a fine alternate title for it. Same with ''Mothers & Daughters,'' a working title for ''Lady Bird.'' For Barbie, as in both those other films, growing up is a matriarchal affair. It is something you do with your mother, your sisters, your aunties. Or, in Barbie's case, with the women threaded through your product history.

In the beginning, there was Ruth Handler, eavesdropping on her daughter, Barbara, playing with paper dolls. As little Barbie Handler and a friend dressed the cutouts in different outfits, they imagined their careers and personalities. Her mother's quite feminist-sounding insight was that there were no three-dimensional dolls that let girls explore being grown women, only baby dolls that encouraged them to practice motherhood.

Handler and her husband, Elliot, were already running Mattel, a toy company they founded in their California garage in 1945. She ran the business, and he came up with the toys. Her proposal for a non-baby doll stalled until, traveling in Switzerland, she came upon a potential prototype. The Bild Lilli was a novelty toy, modeled on a blond vixen from a West German comic strip, that could be used to accessorize a grown man's car, like Playboy-silhouette mud flaps. Handler brought some home as proof of concept. Manufacturers, retailers and even Mattel weren't sure mothers would buy their daughters a toy with such a va-va-voom figure, but the company was advised by a famous Freudian marketing consultant that moms could be neutralized if they thought Barbie was teaching proper comportment. They might not like her sexual precocity, but they would put up with it to have her model mainstream femininity.

In 1959, Barbie, a ''Teenage Fashion Doll'' for 8- to 12-year-old girls, debuted in a black-and-white bathing suit. Soon she would be a fashion editor, nurse, flight attendant, ''executive career girl'' and astronaut, each in an exactingly crafted outfit, down to miniature zippers. Customers wanted her to have a boyfriend, and in 1961, Ken was introduced, named after the Handlers' son. (Wedding dresses had been on sale since 1959.) Now customers wanted Barbie to have a baby.

Little girls can make Barbies play mothers quite seamlessly; almost any toy will do, including Mattel's own Skipper, even though she's supposed to be Barbie's little sister. In all the hundreds of Barbie play sets that have been made, would one with her own child really have upended the fantasy? But Handler was a businesswoman with a complicated relationship to being a housewife -- ''Oh, [expletive], it was awful!'' is a direct quote -- and with what seems like the insistence of someone intimate with the stultification of child-rearing, she put her foot down. In 1963, the same year ''The Feminine Mystique'' was published, Mattel released a ''Barbie Babysits!'' play set instead. That Barbie has never had a child remains one of the most radical things about her.

Mattel had its troubles over the years -- Ruth Handler resigned after financial improprieties that would lead to charges from the Securities and Exchange Commission (she had a second act manufacturing breast prostheses for cancer survivors), and in the 1980s the company took a cash infusion from the junk-bond king Michael Milken -- but it was in the new millennium that Barbie faced existential threats. Namely, mothers began to defect. First a genuine competitor emerged: Bratz dolls dressed provocatively, mostly cared about shopping and had their own bizarre proportions, but they were sassy, fun and multiethnic. (Barbie had introduced Black, Hispanic and ''Oriental'' Barbies by 1981, but these remained secondary to the blond ''close your eyes and picture a Barbie'' Barbie.) By some estimates, Bratz took about a third of Barbie's market share before being hamstrung by Mattel's litigation.

By 2015, after years of declining figures, Barbie hit its lowest sales volume in a quarter century. A psychological study found that after playing with Barbies, girls thought themselves less capable of various careers than they did after playing with a control Mrs. Potato Head. Mattel's own findings were dire: Customers thought the doll was shallow, materialistic, too perfect and not reflective of the world around her. Mothers didn't feel comfortable giving Barbie as a gift at a birthday party. There had never been such fear, among the people who safeguard her, that Barbie might be staring down irrelevance.

So Mattel did something it had never needed to: It changed. In 2015, it began rolling out 100 different skin tones, hair textures, face shapes and eye colors, and four different body types for the flagship doll, which now comes in original, curvy, petite and tall. There has since been the introduction of a Barbie with vitiligo, a Barbie with Down syndrome, a bald Barbie and many others, plus a series modeled on inspiring women like Rosa Parks, Maya Angelou and Billie Jean King.

As Mattel changed, it became clear that the world around Barbie had changed, too. Years of corporate feminism, girl bosses and girl power had defanged the second-wave critique; now feminists could look like anything, and some chose to look like Barbie. The classic blond doll remains a megaseller, but once she was inclusive and aspirational, appearing in animated shorts to tell young girls that overapologizing ''is a learned reflex, and every time we do it, we take away from our self-confidence,'' the whole high-femme thing wasn't such a problem. Mothers started returning to the fold.

When Gerwig visited Mattel's very pink headquarters in El Segundo, Calif., in October 2019 for ''brand immersion,'' she learned about these changes for the first time. She also learned that, unlike when she was a child, there were no longer friend characters in the Barbie Universe. ''All of these women are Barbie, and Barbie is all of these women,'' she remembers the executives telling her. The same went for Ken. ''But this is extraordinary!'' Gerwig remembers thinking. ''This is a very high spiritual work that they've done! You can sort of stumble into poetry, that selfhood is contained amongst all these people.''

She laughed when she told me this, but she was not laughing at it, which is precisely the tone of ''Barbie.'' When working on the sequence in which Barbie's high-heeled foot falls flat, Robbie asked Gerwig how to play that moment: Is it a jolt? Is it painful? Gerwig told her: ''You know that feeling where you're like, 'Huh, did I just get my period?' Make that face.'' Robbie, like everything else in the movie, is perfectly artificial and thoroughly genuine at the same time, flabbergasted by her misbehaving body and the gnarly emotions that come with it. When she shows her feet to her friends, one bellows, ''Flat feet!'' like a panicked bullfrog, and the Barbies all begin to operatically dry heave, with intense, hilariously over-the-top disgust. (The only reason they aren't spewing vomit is that Gerwig and her colleagues decided there are no liquids in Barbieland.) ''If we made fun of it, it falls apart,'' Gerwig says. ''We have to be totally sincere.''

Someone more cynical than Gerwig might have been less moved by Mattel's corporate epiphany, 60 years into existence, that Barbie could sustain being a size 6, but cynicism is clearly not Gerwig's way. After watching ''Tiny Shoulders: Rethinking Barbie,'' the 2018 documentary chronicling Barbie's transformation from the inside of Mattel, she was taken by how anxious the female employees were in the run-up to the public reveal of the doll's updates. ''It's so amazing that they made these strides and yet there's just this impossible gantlet of contradictions you have to be walking all the time,'' she says. ''Did they change it in the right way? Did they do it right? Was it good enough?'' She wanted to home in on this feeling -- that modern womanhood is the perpetual experience of not meeting someone's standards, including your own -- and flip it. ''If Barbie has been a symbol of all the ways we're not enough, the only thing that made sense to me to tackle in the movie was: How could we turn it to be enough?''

After Barbie is eviscerated by that real-world teenager, she's way more distressed than when she left Barbieland. She thought she was adored, but in fact she is disdained, objectified, powerless. This is a lot for a doll, but the movie's gambit is to point out that it is table stakes for a woman. The movie sidesteps whatever role Barbie might play in perpetuating a narrow, idealized femininity; instead it gives this particular Barbie a crash course in modern misogyny. After decades of fretting about girls' wanting to be as perfect as Barbie, Gerwig serves up a Barbie struggling to be as resilient as us. This is the movie's brazen magic trick. Barbie is no longer an avatar of women's insufficiency, a projection of all we're not; instead, she becomes a reflection of how hard -- but worth it -- it is to be all that we are.

Helping Barbie navigate her topsy-turvy new existence are other women. Some are already embedded in her history: Ruth Handler (Rhea Perlman); a mother who used to play with Barbie (America Ferrera); the daughter those Barbies were passed on to (Ariana Greenblatt). But one is a stranger, a woman she notices while she sits on a bench, gathering herself. It's a type of woman she has never seen before, because there are no old women in Barbieland. This woman is played by the 91-year-old, Oscar-winning costume designer Ann Roth, a friend of Gerwig's. (''Do you have many friends who are, like, 90? I do, weirdly. I have three real friends, not pretend friends, who are now 91, 90 and 91.'') When Barbie looks at her, she finds her beautiful and tells her so. The woman already knows. Suddenly Barbie, the fraught aspirational figure, has beheld someone she might aspire to be, and it is a radiantly content nonagenarian, reading a newspaper on a Los Angeles bench, who knows what she's worth.

''The idea of a loving God who's a mother, a grandmother -- who looks at you and says, 'Honey, you're doing OK' -- is something I feel like I need and I wanted to give to other people,'' Gerwig says. When it was suggested that this scene, which Gerwig calls a ''transaction of grace,'' might be cut for time, she remembers thinking: ''If I cut that scene, I don't know why I'm making this movie. If I don't have that scene, I don't know what it is or what I've done.''

Midway through ''Barbie,'' a Mattel employee receives a phone call from the F.B.I.: A Barbie is on the loose. One thing leads to another, and Barbie finds herself racing, action-comedy style, through Mattel headquarters, with the company's entire executive corps in hot pursuit, eager to stuff her back into a life-size version of the pink box new Barbies come in.

As much as this set-piece owes to Gerwig and Baumbach's sly imaginations, it owes something to Mattel too. This is a corporation that has historically been so protective of Barbie that it sued the band Aqua over the pop smash ''Barbie Girl.'' Now there is a Nicki Minaj and Ice Spice collaboration that samples ''Barbie Girl'' on the ''Barbie'' soundtrack. How does a company go from dispensing cease-and-desist letters to gamely lampooning itself?

As with the great Barbie makeover of 2015, the answer has to do with survival. After Barbie's pivot, the brand was on better footing, but its parent company was not. In 2018, Mattel lost $533 million. Revenue had plunged $2 billion in five years, and the company had churned through three chief executives. The fourth was Ynon Kreiz, an Israeli-born businessman with a gleaming white smile, total message discipline and a history working in entertainment, not toys. Kreiz had a vision for a turnaround: Mattel would restructure, cut costs and stop being a toy company. ''We used to think of ourselves and present ourselves as a manufacturing company,'' he told me. ''The specialty was: We make items. Now we are an I.P. company that is managing franchises.''

If these are business-speak talking points, they are also the reason ''Barbie'' exists. Mattel has previously made the kind of predictable entertainments a toy company makes -- straightforward pro-Barbie material like successful animated shows for kids. But when Kreiz took charge, that kind of propaganda was not working broadly enough. He and his colleagues now say the same things over and over. That Barbie is not a toy; she is a pop-culture icon. That she does not have customers; she has fans. If you take that seriously, it outlines how to proceed. An icon who wants to stay at the center of the culture can't keep putting out the same old thing and suing anyone who riffs on it. She has to stay current.

So, six weeks into the job, Kreiz met with Margot Robbie, who had been keeping an eye on the Barbie rights and whose production company had a relationship with Warner Brothers. He also hired a veteran film producer, Robbie Brenner, who had made movies like ''Dallas Buyers Club,'' to head up Mattel films. Brenner has since assembled a master list of 45 Mattel properties that could be adapted, including Hot Wheels, He-Man, Polly Pocket and Uno; a number are currently in development, with talent including Tom Hanks, Daniel Kaluuya and Lena Dunham.

As Kreiz is quick to point out, using I.P. to drive a business is not an original strategy. Look at Disney, an I.P. company that sells loads of toys. (Mattel, despite no longer thinking of itself as a ''manufacturing company,'' has the contract to produce Disney Princess toys.) Look at the closest thing ''Barbie'' has to a blueprint: ''The Lego Movie,'' which has grossed $468 million. (It, too, features toys reckoning with the ways in which they're being played.) Look at Hasbro and the ''Transformers'' franchise (while averting your eyes from ''Battleship''). Look, even, at Mattel, back before Kreiz came aboard. A Barbie movie had been in development, with Universal and then Sony, since 2009, around the time Mattel allowed Barbie to appear in Pixar's ''Toy Story 3.'' But the project always fell through, even with talent like Anne Hathaway and Amy Schumer attached. In Schumer's script, Barbie was an inventor kicked out of Barbieland for not being perfect enough. Schumer has said she knew the Sony project wouldn't work after she got a note suggesting that the invention that gets Barbie exiled ought to be Jell-O high heels.

Despite Mattel's attempt to adopt a cucumber-cool corporate attitude for Gerwig's ''Barbie,'' it still did plenty of internal white-knuckling. There was consternation over the innuendos about Ken's sexual orientation, and it's not as if they didn't notice the film joking about the company's male leadership. (Will Ferrell, playing the chief executive, defends himself as ''the nephew of a female aunt.'') ''Oh, my God, did I have anxiety,'' says Richard Dickson, the president and chief operating officer, who has been at the company for almost 20 years. When he read the part of the script where the teenager eviscerates Barbie, he says, he was sure it needed to be different. They had done so much work to put this critique behind them; why bring it up? After weeks of discussion, he reached out to Gerwig. He and a group of executives flew to London, where the movie was being filmed. His attitude on arriving, he says, was, ''like: 'This page is changing! We can rewrite it right here!''' But after watching Gerwig and Robbie read the scene, he says, ''I was so embarrassed.'' Acknowledging the critique and co-signing the critique, he saw, were not the same. It's one thing to insult a plastic doll sold by a giant corporation, but it's quite another to throw those words into Margot Robbie's wide-eyed face. Gerwig has, literally, humanized Barbie. And Barbie, the big-hearted naïf, is brought to tears by all the unexpectedly harsh things humans think about her.

Everyone at Mattel adores the movie. They are using it to slather Barbie -- the icon, not just the product -- across the globe. This movie is full of lovingly showcased dolls, accessories, outfits, speedboats and tandem bicycles; there is a parade of short-lived dolls from Barbie history, like Earring Magic Ken, and the Barbie with a TV embedded in her back, and the Skipper whose breasts grew when you moved her arms. Yet many of these items are not available anywhere but eBay. The movie is dream product placement, but you cannot buy many of the products it places. It is Barbie the concept that is inescapable: Barbie pink, ''Barbie'' merch, Barbie tie-ins, Barbie licensing partnerships for rugs, candles, nail polish, frozen yogurt, pool floats, insurance and video-game consoles.

This is the bet: that a good movie will drive near-infinite brand synergies. It will make other talent keen to work in the Mattel Cinematic Universe. It will expand Barbie's demographic appeal. It will launder the doll and her content universe for naysayers and those still on the fence. It will make Barbie so omnipresent that children will turn to the adults in their life and say, ''I want a Barbie doll,'' and the adults will not wince. Kreiz is very clear on this: If the movie works, it will sell toys. That just couldn't be the starting point. People would see through it. So Mattel let Gerwig toy with its crown property, teasing the corporate mothership and winking at Ken's sexual orientation, and in exchange it got a movie that should serve its purposes better than any advertisement ever could.

We have come this far without attending to Ken, which is the predicament of Ken. While I was working on this article, I had Barbie books scattered around the house, and whenever my 6-year-old daughter saw a picture of Ken, she would push the book away in disgust and say, ''EWWWWW, KEN!'' When Gerwig first spoke with Ryan Gosling about playing the role, he told her that his daughters had a Ken and that he once found it beneath a rotting lemon. Both of these things are very Ken.

In the funhouse-mirror world that is Barbieland, Barbies have all the power, and the Kens are their accessories. Not to put too fine a point on it, but: Kens are the women of Barbieland. It's just that no one is objectifying them, because no one has the genitalia to make lust a thing. Ken would like a chaste good-night kiss anyway, but Barbie would prefer he leave, so he always does. When Ken hitches a ride into the real world, his experience is as eye-opening as Barbie's. She learns how difficult it is to be a woman. He learns how great it is to be a man. Ken gets red-pilled on patriarchy.

Gosling spent a year demurring about the role. ''There were times where I was sure I wasn't doing the film,'' he recalls. ''I would call my agent and ask who was playing Ken. And they would say, 'Greta says you are.''' Eventually he committed: ''She was just, in the end, more confident that I should play him than I was that I shouldn't.'' During that year of talking and the preparation that followed, it became clear that Ken needed an additional beat, some catharsis that wasn't in the script. If you are making a movie that is trying to take the contradictions of modern womanhood seriously and you have a character in your movie who cannot define himself or understand his own worth -- a character who kicks sand all day hoping just to be looked at by someone with power -- you have to take that plight seriously, even if the character is male. You don't have to do this because Mattel or Warner Brothers is insisting. You have to do this because the movie is insisting.

So it became clear: Ken needed a dream dance number. (Gerwig shrugs: ''I like dream ballets, and I like mothers.'') She has a habit of referring to ''Barbie'' as a musical, and that's not wildly inaccurate: It has a soundtrack, overseen by Mark Ronson, of original pop songs, and another big choreographed dance number besides Ken's. Gerwig screened musicals for the entire cast, and she thinks of the Mattel executives in the movie as being something like tuxedo-clad 1930s tap dancers. But there is only one character who breaks out into a power ballad, and it is Ken. ''I'm just Ken/Anywhere else I'd be a 10,'' Gosling wails as he heads to a Ken-on-Ken beach battle that leads to a Ken-and-Ken dream ballet that ultimately allows Ken to realize that he is ''Kenough.''

It is not a coincidence that the moment Gerwig singled out as always surprising her -- the one that makes her think, ''why did they let us do this?'' -- is the one that involves the Kens riding their invisible horses to their Mojo Dojo Casa Houses, after the dream ballet, after they have stormed the Barbieland beach and fought with lacrosse sticks and suction-cup arrows. It is in those moments that the movie has most completely slipped the bounds of anything a Barbie movie needed to do, shooting past the critique, and the subversion of the critique, and the upending, sidestepping, teasing and embracing of the critique, to go off into its own orbit. Liftoff has been achieved. Ken has momentarily run away with the picture.

''Barbie'' is a gigantic endeavor with hundreds of stakeholders and thousands of details, every single one of which has been obsessed over. (I haven't even told you about Barbieland's seven suns, so no one is ever in shadow, or Ken's black leather fringe vest and fanny pack with ''Ken'' emblazoned on it in the Metallica font!) This movie is a big, honking summer tent pole that has been finessed into a gulp of delectable entertainment that hits every single one of its marks. But the surprising thing about ''Barbie'' is not that it pulls off the difficult task of doing everything it needed to do; it's that it does something it didn't need to at all: It feels as if it was made by an actual person.

Yes, that person has her cake and eats it, too, dozens of times over, in this film. It's in how ''Barbie'' name-checks ''rampant consumerism'' as a sin and then makes every piece of plastic gleam so gorgeously that it feels as if the Pacific Garbage Patch might be worth it. It's in how Barbieland is full of insidious flaws -- it's literally a panopticon -- and yet it's going to sell a billion Dreamhouses. It's in how the movie insists that everyone is beautiful but contains no one even slightly plain. It's in how the movie speaks directly to women, mothers in particular, about the impossibility of perfection, so we can feel great about buying perfect Barbies for our babies. But maybe the most unexpected is that at the end of this movie, which will most likely glorify this doll for generations to come, Barbie finds herself echoing with her critics. Like those 1970s feminists, she does not want to be a perfect, plastic doll, however difficult it may be to live outside a box.

Gerwig loves Barbie, but she knows Barbie has made people feel bad, as if they don't measure up. And so she has made this 113-minute love letter to Barbie that is also an earnest attempt to make amends. This is the most subversive thing about the movie, this extratextual notion that Barbie might have things to make amends for. There is no reason Gerwig in particular should be the one trying to make those amends, except that she wanted to -- to take an immense, divisive toy brand and bend it to the heartfelt and counterintuitive purpose of making women feel good.

It's a testament to Gerwig's singular earnestness -- a level of sincerity unavailable to many of us -- that using Barbie to affirm the worth of ordinary women feels, to her, quasi religious. She told me that when she was growing up, her Christian family's closest friends were observant Jews; they vacationed together and constantly tore around each other's homes. She would also eat with them on Friday nights for Shabbat dinner, where blessings were sung in Hebrew, including over the children at the table. May God bless you and protect you. May God show you favor and be gracious to you. May God show you kindness and grant you peace. Every Friday the family's father would rest his hand on Gerwig's head, just as he did on his own children's, and bless her too.

''I remember feeling the sense of, 'Whatever your wins and losses were for the week, whatever you did or you didn't do, when you come to this table, your value has nothing to do with that,''' Gerwig told me. '' 'You are a child of God. I put my hand over you, and I bless you as a child of God at this table. And that's your value.' I remember feeling so safe in that and feeling so, like, enough.'' She imagines people going to the temple of the movies to see ''Barbie'' on a hot summer day, sitting in the air-conditioned dark, feeling transported, laughing, maybe crying, and then coming out into the bright heat. ''I want people to feel like I did at Shabbat dinner,'' she said. ''I want them to get blessed.''

Stylist: Valentina Collado; prop stylist: Ariana Salvato; hair: Rutger; makeup: Francelle Daly; clothing: Isabel Marant, the Row, Proenza Schouler.

## The Renters' Utopia.

Francesca Mari and Luca Locatelli | May 23 | NYTMag

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When Eva Schachinger married at 22, she applied for public housing. Luckily, she lived in Vienna, which has some of the best public housing in the world. It was 1968. Eva was a teacher, and her husband, Klaus-Peter, was an accountant for the city's public-transportation system. She grew up in a public-housing complex in the center of the city, where her grandmother, who cared for her from 6 in the morning until 6 at night, lived in one of five buildings arranged around a courtyard. Eva played all day with friends from the complex.

Her mother, who was renting on the private market after a divorce, had recently applied for public housing, too, and she was offered a unit first, in 1971. By then, Eva had a young daughter, and her mother decided Eva needed the spot more and offered it to her. The available unit was in the 21st District, on the northeastern edge of the city. Eva's father-in-law warned her -- not entirely jokingly -- that out there, they would be the first to be occupied by the Russians. But she and Klaus-Peter liked the floor plan: Although the apartment was an economical 732 square feet, it had two bedrooms, a living room, a dining room, a toilet and washroom and a balcony. The rent was 700 schillings. (That's about 55 euros, though the currency wasn't introduced until 2002.) Eva transferred her teaching job to the 21st District, to a school a 15-minute walk from her new apartment.

When I met Eva late last year, she looked smart in a jean jacket with a neatly tied silk scarf around her neck, small dangly earrings and cropped curly hair. Over the course of the last 44 years, as she continued to teach English to fifth through eighth grades, Eva's rent increased almost fivefold, to 270 euros from 55, but her wages increased more than 20-fold, to 3,375 euros a month from 150. Viennese law dictates that rents in public housing can increase only with inflation, and only when the year's inflation exceeds 5 percent. By the time she retired in 2007, Eva's rent was only 8 percent of her income. Because her husband was earning 4,000 euros a month, their rent amounted to 3.6 percent of their incomes combined.

That's about what Vienna was aiming for back in 1919, when the city began planning its world-famous municipal housing, known as the Gemeindebauten. Before World War I, Vienna had some of the worst housing conditions in Europe, Eve Blau notes in her book, ''The Architecture of Red Vienna.'' Many working-class families had to take on subtenants or bed tenants (day and night workers who slept in the same bed at different times) in order to pay their rent. But from 1923 to 1934, in a period known as Red Vienna, the ruling Social Democratic Party built 64,000 new units in 400 housing blocks, increasing the city's housing supply by about 10 percent. Some 200,000 people, one-tenth of the population, were rehoused in these buildings, with rents set at 3.5 percent of the average semiskilled worker's income, enough to cover the cost of maintenance and operation.

Experts refer to Vienna's Gemeindebauten as ''social housing,'' a phrase that captures how the city's public housing and other limited-profit housing are a widely shared social benefit: The Gemeindebauten welcome the middle class, not just the poor. In Vienna, a whopping 80 percent of residents qualify for public housing, and once you have a contract, it never expires, even if you get richer. Housing experts believe that this approach leads to greater economic diversity within public housing -- and better outcomes for the people living in it.

In 2015, before they bought an apartment on the private market, the Schachingers were making about 80,000 euros ($87,000) a year, roughly the income of the average U.S. household in 2021. Eva and Klaus-Peter paid 26 percent and 29 percent in income tax, respectively, but just 4 percent of their pretax income was going toward rent, which is about what the average American household spends on meals eaten out and half a percentage point less than what the average American spends on ''entertainment.'' Even if the Schachingers got a new contract today on their unit, their monthly payments would be an estimated 542 euros, or only 8 percent of their income. Vienna's generous supply of social housing helps keep costs down for everyone: In 2021, Viennese living in private housing spent 26 percent of their post-tax income on rent and energy costs, on average, which is only slightly more than the figure for social-housing residents overall (22 percent). Meanwhile, 49 percent of American renters -- 21.6 million people -- are cost-burdened, paying landlords more than 30 percent of their pretax income, and the percentage can be even higher in expensive cities. In New York City, the median renter household spends a staggering 36 percent of its pretax income on rent.

To American eyes, the whole Viennese setup can appear fancifully socialistic. But set that aside, and what's mind-boggling is how social housing gives the economic lives of Viennese an entirely different shape. Imagine if your housing expenses were more like the Schachingers'. Imagine having to think about them to the same degree that you think about your restaurant choices or streaming-service subscriptions. Imagine, too, where the rest of your income might go, if you spent much less of it on housing. Vienna invites us to envision a world in which homeownership isn't the only way to secure a certain future -- and what our lives might look like as a result.

Writing about housing in the United States, I've become depressed. I'm the scold at the dinner party, revolted by big investors speculating in the housing market, yes, but also by the thousands of small-time investors -- including some of my own friends -- who are pooling money to buy homes in states they've never seen or buying rental properties in gentrifying neighborhoods. But the math is hard to argue with. Buying a home near work is more lucrative than working. The growth of asset values has outstripped returns on labor for four decades, and a McKinsey report found that a majority of those assets -- 68 percent -- is real estate. Last year, one in four home sales was to someone who had no intention of living in it. These investors are particularly incentivized to buy the sorts of homes most needed by first-time buyers: Inexpensive properties generate the highest rental-income cash flows.

Real estate is a place where money literally grows on tree beams. In the last decade, the typical owner of a single-family home acquired nearly $200,000 in appreciation. ''Another word for asset appreciation is inflation,'' the academics Lisa Adkins, Melinda Cooper and Martijn Konings write in ''The Asset Economy,'' ''an increase in monetary value without any corresponding change in the nature of the good itself or the conditions of its production that would make it scarcer or justify an increased demand for it.'' That inflation is creating a treacherous gulch between the housing haves and have-nots. Harvard's Joint Center for Housing Studies found that, in 2019, the median net worth of U.S. renters was just 2.5 percent of the median net worth of homeowners: $6,270 versus $254,900. Last year, as higher interest rates slowed home sales and caused prices to plateau (and even soften in some overheated cities), the asking price of the median U.S. rental reached $2,000 a month, a record high, according to Redfin. Inflated rent prices line the pockets of landlords while preventing renters from saving for a down payment and ever getting off the treadmill.

The astronomical pace of appreciation is the culmination of decades of policy aimed at encouraging home buying. The fixed-rate, 30-year mortgage is a particularly American invention, possible only because the federal government insures the debt -- if a borrower defaults, the government is on the hook. (Only one other country, Denmark, offers the same instrument.) Then there's our tax code, which allows those affluent enough to buy homes and itemize their deductions to write off the interest they pay on their mortgages: the bigger the mortgage, the bigger the deduction. Homeowners can deduct up to $10,000 of their property taxes from their federal taxes too, and if they sell their primary residence, they may be able to avoid paying capital gains on profits of up to $250,000 per person ($500,000 for couples). As housing activists like to point out, everyone who has a mortgage is living in subsidized housing.

Last year, troubled by the seeming intractability of these problems, I began looking for solutions outside the United States. Could the answer be rent control, as in Berlin? It might have seemed that way a decade or so ago, before investors and new residents began pouring into the city, causing land values to quintuple; now, despite rent-stabilization laws, even the apartments that no one else wanted to buy 15 years ago are huge moneymakers. Many residents with affordable rental contracts are locked into them because it would be too expensive or competitive to move. Frustrated by the housing squeeze, tenant organizers recently put forth an ''expropriation'' measure, which called for landlords with more than 3,000 units to sell their holdings back to the government at below-market prices. In a 2021 referendum, 59 percent of Berliners voted in favor of it, but it's not clear whether it will ever be implemented.

Could the answer be loosening zoning restrictions, as Tokyo did in 2002? That has certainly helped. In 2014, there was more home construction in the city than in all of England. Since then, home prices have stabilized. Tokyo is largely celebrated as a model by YIMBYs (members of the ''yes, in my backyard'' movement) because they like its market-driven approach to housing abundance. They often point out that the city builds five times as much housing per capita as California. But Japan is a very different market because of its earthquake risk: Because regulatory codes and mitigation technologies are ever improving, structures often fully depreciate within 35 years. Older homes are often undermaintained because there's little expectation that any investment might be recaptured upon resale; they're thought of like used clothing or cars -- you resell at a loss.

Auckland, New Zealand, might seem like a more applicable example. In 2016, the city, which has one of the most expensive housing markets in the world, ''upzoned'' 75 percent of its residential land, increasing its legal capacity for housing by about 300 percent in an effort to encourage multifamily-housing construction and tamp down prices. In areas that were upzoned, the total number of building permits granted (a way of estimating new construction) more than quadrupled from 2016 to 2021. As intended, the relative value of underdeveloped land increased, because it could suddenly host more housing, and the relative value of units in densely developed areas decreased, tempering sky-high prices. But there are limits to what upzoning can do. Often the benefits of allowing greater density are captured by developers, who price the new units far above cost. It doesn't offer renters security or directly create the type of housing most needed: affordable housing.

That's what differentiates Vienna. Perhaps no other developed city has done more to protect residents from the commodification of housing. In Vienna, 43 percent of all housing is insulated from the market, meaning the rental prices reflect costs or rates set by law -- not ''what the market will bear'' or what a person with no other options will pay. The government subsidizes affordable units for a wide range of incomes. The mean gross household income in Vienna is 57,700 euros a year, but any person who makes under 70,000 euros qualifies for a Gemeindebau unit. Once in, you never have to leave. It doesn't matter if you start earning more. The government never checks your salary again. Two-thirds of the city's rental housing is covered by rent control, and all tenants have just-cause eviction protections. Such regulations, when coupled with adequate supply, give renters a level of stability comparable to American owners with fixed mortgages. As a result, 80 percent of all households in Vienna choose to rent.

The key difference is that Vienna prioritizes subsidizing construction, while the United States prioritizes subsidizing people, with things like housing vouchers. One model focuses on supply, the other on demand. Vienna's choice illustrates a fundamental economic reality, which is that a large-enough supply of social housing offers a market alternative that improves housing for all.

One afternoon last fall, I walked through central Vienna, past ornate buildings with lacy balconies, balustrades and porticos -- private apartments from the 19th century. They were interspersed with social-housing blocks from the 1920s and 1930s -- the Gemeindebauten, which stood out not only for their modernist architecture but also for the triumphant red block lettering on their facades, announcing: Erbaut von der Gemeinde Wien in den Jahren 1925-1926 aus den Mitteln der Wohnbausteuer. (''Built by the municipality of Vienna in the years 1925-1926 from funds from the housing tax.'') A stroke of political genius, I thought, as I waited for the tram: explanation and advertising. Half an hour later, I was in the 21st District, the ''Russian territory'' where Eva Schachinger used to live. Wohnpartner, the city agency that tries to foster community within the Gemeindebauten and helps resolve tenant conflicts, was having an open house at her old building, a flat, minimalist complex with orange elevator shafts.

Following Wohnpartner signs, I found the glass-walled community center and entered. Most of the attendees were mothers with small children or retired people. There was a painting station, table tennis and a plant exchange. People had brought their secondhand goods to give away, and a millennial Wohnpartner staff member offered tech help, which, surprisingly, no one seemed to need. Among the permanent fixtures was a library filled with free books and a play area with an array of wooden toys.

I took a seat with Eva in the communal kitchen, where someone had made a large pot of butternut-squash soup. (Some of Red Vienna's planners had hoped to centralize cooking in communal facilities with industrial-strength machines, but the fascists came first, and then, under capitalism, Austrian families quickly became accustomed to shelling out for their own KitchenAids, Vitamixes and Nespresso machines.) Since retiring, Eva has been collaborating with Malyuun Badeed, the building's caretaker, on a twice-yearly magazine for the complex that includes a recipe and a crossword, along with the latest community news. Badeed, who joined us in the kitchen, wore a black hijab with pearls and waved her hands as she spoke of leaving Somalia as a single mother in the 1990s. When she first arrived in Vienna, she hawked newspapers on the street; now she helped produce one.

Eva told me she often came back to the Gemeindebau to tutor students from the complex with a woman named Edith, an elderly neighbor who lived in a nearby Gemeindebau. Edith's next-door neighbors help buy and deliver her groceries, which she has difficulty carrying. In exchange, she watches over their three children. When Eva called to wish her a merry Christmas, Edith was busy wrapping 40 presents for the three kids; she hid them around her apartment so they wouldn't be found before Santa came to visit. ''The Gemeindebau is where socialization happens,'' Eva was fond of telling me, and this is what socialization looks like across the generations.

I learned that the average waiting time to get a Gemeindebau is about two years (at any given moment there are 12,000 or so people on the waiting list, and each year about 10,000 or more people are housed). Vienna residents -- anyone who has had a fixed address for two years, whether they are a citizen or not -- may apply, and applications are evaluated based on need. Florian Kogler, a 21-year-old university student, was considered an urgent case because he lived in an overcrowded two-bedroom apartment with his mother, stepfather and two siblings. He shared a room with his brother, while his parents slept in the living room. He also got priority because he was moving into his own apartment for the first time. Kogler was offered an apartment in about a month. ''That's unusually fast,'' he told me.

Applicants may decline up to two units; if they decline a third, they have to apply again. Kogler took the first flat offered to him, a 355-square-foot studio drenched in light overlooking a playground in the central 12th District. It cost 350 euros a month; his monthly income from working part time at a museum is about 1,000 euros. Those who need extra assistance to pay their rent receive individual subsidies. Students under 25, like Kogler, can qualify for 200 euros a month.

Every few years, there is a debate about whether the affluent should be forced to give up their Gemeindebau leases -- that is, whether the units should be means-tested. The face of this debate, for some, is Peter Pilz, a former member of Austria's Green Party in Parliament. Pilz lives in Goethehof, one of the largest Gemeindebauten by the Danube River. He moved into a unit as a university student to live with his grandmother, who had been there since the building opened in 1932. Before she died, he took over her contract. (He was, one might say, grandmothered in.) Pilz was elected to Parliament in 1986 and eventually started making more than 8,000 euros a month.

Even in Vienna, Pilz's tenancy raised eyebrows, making headlines in Austria's conservative paper, Ùsterreich, which claimed in 2012 that he was paying only 66.18 euros a month in rent. (Pilz says he was paying, including building costs, closer to 250 euros a month.) ''Given that Pilz's income is well over the usual tariff for social housing, it does look like we're talking about social fraud here,'' said the general secretary of the conservative Freedom Party of Austria.

Pilz did nothing illegal. Once in a Gemeindebau, you never have to leave. But is it unethical for the wealthy to stay? City housing officials point out that having wealthier tenants in the Gemeindebauten helps thwart the problems that accompany concentrated poverty, creating a more stable, healthier environment for everyone. Unlike in the United States, where public housing is only for the poorest -- the average resident's annual household income was $15,219 in 2019, well below the federal poverty line of $16,910 for a family of two -- the relative integration of the Gemeindebauten means that they are not stigmatized.

That's not to say they are problem-free. Noomi Anyanwu, the 23-year-old founder of Black Voices Austria, told me that she grew up in a Gemeindebau with an Austrian mother and a Nigerian father. When she wasn't more than 5, a white boy in the complex who was a bit older called her brother a racial slur while everyone was playing in the courtyard. Overhearing the spat, the fathers descended into the courtyard. But the white father didn't apologize; he doubled down, repeating what his son said. Just a few years later, Anyanwu said, her father left the country because of employment discrimination and racist treatment by the police.

So I was surprised when Anyanwu told me that, on the whole, her experience with social housing was positive. The Gemeindebau was its own village within the city, she said. She estimated that 50 percent of her Gemeindebau neighbors were immigrants -- ''it reflected society,'' she told me. (Vienna actually has a slightly higher percentage of foreign-born residents than New York City.) A girl her age named Safiya lived in an apartment across the hall from hers and would become her best friend. Safiya's father was also from Africa -- from Somalia -- and he, too, left because of racism. But the affordability of the Gemeindebau allowed the girls' mothers to maintain stability.

Esra Ozmen, the daughter of Turkish immigrants, grew up in Sandleitenhof, one of the largest Geimendebauten, which has villa-like courtyards and stonework. As an adult, she moved into her own Gemeindebau studio. Ozmen says affordable housing gave her the stability to study for a Ph.D. in fine art while also pursuing a rap career. She makes 1,000 to 2,000 euros a month from her shows and from organizing cultural events. ''I have a car,'' she told me. ''A Mercedes A-Class from the '90s. I eat out. I drink one coffee out every day. I don't have a lot of money. But I live rich.''

Social housing like Vienna's might seem inconceivable in America. But American politicians seriously considered it in the 1930s. After the stock-market crash of 1929, the U.S. housing market also collapsed; half of mortgage debt was in default by 1933. Both the right and the left agreed that the government needed to intervene. The question was how. According to the historian Kenneth T. Jackson in his book ''Crabgrass Frontier,'' at the time, the typical mortgage ranged from five to 10 years, and borrowers paid interest only until the end of the term, when full payment was due or a borrower refinanced. When President Franklin D. Roosevelt took office in 1933, Congress created the Home Owners' Loan Corporation to buy underwater mortgages and stabilize the housing market. Within two years, the H.O.L.C. restructured more than a million mortgages, covering 10 percent of all owner-occupied homes. Principal and interest were bundled together so that over about 20 years of manageable payments, borrowers became outright homeowners.

But that wasn't enough to salvage the real estate market or the economy. During the Great Depression, one-quarter of all Americans were unemployed, and the construction industry was hit particularly hard. The United States needed the same things as Vienna at the time: employment and better housing conditions for workers. Housing is ''the wheel within the wheel to move the whole economic engine,'' said Marriner Eccles, Roosevelt's Federal Reserve chairman. The Federal Public Works Administration, an emergency jobs program, funded construction of about 50 new public-housing complexes, including the Harlem River Houses in New York City, a project seemingly straight out of Vienna, with Beaux-Arts-inspired buildings along a central courtyard with a nursery school, health clinics and a public library.

Although this housing was admired, it was costly and mired in controversy, writes the historian Gail Radford, who chronicles the New Deal-era debate over social housing in her book, ''Modern Housing for America.'' Roosevelt sought a housing plan that didn't require the government to keep footing the bill. At a time when Communism was gaining traction, he preferred to wed Americans to capitalism. The best way to do that? Broaden the base of homeowners -- increase the number of Americans with a personal investment in property.

Congress's National Housing Act of 1934 would rescue the housing market and establish the housing policy that defines America today. It made permanent the fixed-rate, long-term mortgage that the H.O.L.C. had helped introduce. Banks were reluctant to assume risk over decades, so the act created the Federal Housing Administration (F.H.A.) to insure mortgage debt with the full backing of the U.S. Treasury as long as loans conformed to standards it set -- for instance, homes had to appraise for the purchase price and had to be in a stable-enough neighborhood, which meant a white-enough neighborhood, to make sure the government wouldn't lose money if a borrower defaulted. On its maps, the F.H.A. colored the neighborhoods deemed too risky for mortgage insurance in red -- a form of ''redlining,'' a policy that did a great deal to create the grave racial disparities in wealth that persist today. ''No agency of the United States government has had a more pervasive and powerful impact on the American people over the past half-century,'' Jackson writes.

But the Federal Housing Administration had no plan to address low-income housing needs. So Senator Robert Wagner, a New York Democrat, introduced a second bill, inspired by what the housing scholar Catherine Bauer had seen in Vienna and other European cities. As proposed, the Housing Act of 1937, which Bauer helped write, would have included financing for the construction of both limited-profit housing and public housing. Faced with fierce opposition from the real estate industry, Wagner and Bauer accepted five fatal compromises in order to pass the bill. First, support for nonprofit and limited-profit cooperatives was eliminated. Second, location decisions were left to local governments, many of whose constituents greeted public housing like the bubonic plague, as one commenter put it. Third, a provision was added for an ''equivalent elimination'' of slum property, meaning that for each new unit built, a slum dwelling had to be cleared. (That way, public housing wouldn't dampen landlords' profits by increasing the overall supply of units.) Fourth, public housing would be eligible only to those so poor that they could never secure decent housing in the private market.

Fifth and finally, construction costs were severely limited. The problem with America's public housing today isn't just that it's underfunded and poorly maintained. It's that it wasn't built well to begin with. Doors were left off closets; interior walls were thin and cheap. At a public-housing complex in Red Hook, Brooklyn, the elevator only stopped on every other floor. As Radford writes, ''Those who hated public housing remained hostile, while the minimal buildings produced by the [United States Housing Authority] attracted no new allies and discouraged some of the old ones.'' Indeed, America's public housing was designed to fail: to be unappealing to anyone who could afford to rent.

As Bauer predicted early on, housing programs targeting only the poor would lack the political support necessary to thrive. Only an integrated program, one that welcomed the majority like the Gemeindebau of Vienna, would be sustainable. But the U.S. government prioritized support for banking rather than construction. The 30-year mortgage was a huge economic boon for the millions of Americans who took one out, benefiting from the federal subsidies and the nation's long upward trajectory in home prices; the instrument leveraged many a renter and public-housing resident into homeownership and ''turned many a former dependent of the public sector into a small-time fiscal conservative,'' as Adkins, Cooper and Konings write in ''The Asset Economy.''

This constituency of middle-class homeowners is what the Dartmouth emeritus economist William A. Fischel calls ''homevoters'': a coalition of Americans who -- consciously or not -- vote to protect the value of their property. They tend to oppose local development and favor exclusionary zoning -- which ensures maximum appreciation and prevents their tax dollars from extending to poorer neighborhoods. This tendency, alongside stagnant wages, has transformed the nation's housing stock into an ever-scarcer and ever-more-expensive class of speculative asset. It's almost impossible to ''cater to the expectations of an existing constituency of middle-class homeowners without raising the barriers of entry for the rest of society,'' Adkins and her colleagues write. ''A middle-class politics of asset democratization has ended up undermining the conditions of its own viability.''

I wasn't the only American looking to Vienna for possible answers to America's housing crisis. I was there following a delegation from New York that had come to study the city's housing system -- 50 policymakers, researchers and activists invited by Housing Justice for All, an alliance of housing organizers across the state, and the Action Lab, a social-movement hub. One afternoon, I joined them on a tour of Karl-Marx-Hof, one of the largest housing complexes in the world.

Ever since Karl-Marx-Hof opened in 1930, it has been a sort of Rorschach test -- a domineering socialist monstrosity or a pioneering communitarian stronghold, depending on your political perspective. Exiting the subway station, the building shot up before me, seven stories tall and three-quarters of a mile long, a perimeter block that looks like a citadel. The core of the building is cream-colored, but its sandstone red elements draw the eye -- red balconies and red towers topped by staffs that can fly enormous banners that are visible miles away. Its six huge arched passageways, also red, give the complex the civic stature of an aqueduct.

Julia Anna Schranz, a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Vienna and our guide, wore Converse, jeans and a long red wool coat. She pointed out four grim ceramic figures mounted on top of the archways, explaining that they were personifications of enlightenment, freedom, welfare and physical culture. These embellishments -- commissions to increase employment during the period between the world wars, were also seen as an investment in the aesthetics of the Gemeindebauten and a tribute to its tenants.

Schranz opened the thick, thorny iron gates spanning one archway, and we passed into a grassy courtyard -- nearly two football fields in size. Painted an off-white that glowed in the morning sun, the interior was a striking contrast with the more formidable exterior.

''These are the projects,'' India Walton, a community organizer from Buffalo, said wryly. There was a rose garden. Children -- Black, brown, white -- were running and shrieking in a playground attached to an on-site kindergarten. Walton, now in her 40s, had twins when she was just 19 and raised them while working as a nurse. Decades later, she became politically active, and in 2021 she won the Democratic nomination for mayor of Buffalo, only to be defeated by a write-in campaign by the Democratic incumbent. Where would she be now if she had the option of living in a place like this? She would have left her marriage sooner, Walton told me. ''I might not have been a nurse, but a doctor.'' A child in the kindergarten waved at her, and she waved back.

When Karl-Marx-Hof opened, it housed 5,000 people in 1,400 apartments. These apartments were coveted. ''It had two central laundries, two communal bathing facilities with tubs and showers, a dental clinic, maternity clinic, a health-insurance office, library, youth hostel, post office, and a pharmacy and 25 other commercial premises, including a restaurant and the offices and showroom of the BEST, the city-run furnishing and interior-design advice center,'' Blau writes.

Now fewer than 3,000 tenants live in Karl-Marx-Hof -- not because it's undesirable but because living standards have improved and, in response, Vienna has allotted tenants more space. Vienna's housing authority believes that a family of four needs around 1,100 square feet, so it combined some of the units to create larger ones.

A bobblehead nodded from a balcony with potted plants and cairns. An older Austrian man waved. State Assemblywoman Emily Gallagher, a Democrat who had recently unseated the incumbent Democrat in the 50th Assembly District, which includes parts of Greenpoint, Williamsburg and Fort Greene, live-tweeted the tour on her phone. State Senator Julia Salazar, a Democrat representing the 18th State Senate District, which covers Bushwick, took notes with a gold pen on a notebook with black paper. Renette Bradley, a tenant organizer, wore a Nickelodeon shirt, overalls, a black New York beanie and lavishly long fake lashes. ''Can you be paroled here?'' she asked, her voice husky and direct. This affected many of Bradley's friends and relatives who, upon release from prison, were left homeless because they weren't allowed to join family living in public housing.

Schranz looked at her blankly.

''Can you come out of prison and live here?'' Bradley repeated.

''Of course,'' Schranz said. ''Why not? If you're out, you're out.''

The New Yorkers murmured. Schranz continued to look at us questioningly.

''There's like four or five problems baked into that question that they just don't understand,'' Joseph Loonam, a housing campaign coordinator with VOCAL-NY, said as we walked toward the laundry facilities. He told me that a member of his organization had been arrested more than 40 times because whenever he visits his family in the Gowanus projects, he violates the terms of his plea deal.

At the museum store, I bought a red potholder crocheted by a local women's co-op: a Red Vienna-era schema of the ''three evils'' seizing Europe (Nazism, Communism, monarchism), each represented by white arrows. Several organizers and state legislators bought one, too. When the college student working at the museum shop said he was all out, a lawmaker suggested that he could sell the potholders in the display case. ''We aren't used to this,'' the college student said, unlocking the case, by which he seemed to mean American patterns of consumption. The American need to own.

Vienna has succeeded in curbing the craving to own. It has done it by driving down the price of land through rezoning and rent control. In general, the beneficiaries of these land-use policies are less the Gemeindebauten (they stopped building from 2004 to 2015 and now only produce some 500 units a year) and more the limited-profit housing associations, the origins of which preceded Red Vienna and have built 3,000 to 5,000 units a year for the last four decades.

Today limited-profit housing accounts for half the city's social housing. Limited-profit housing associations are restricted to charging rents that reflect costs. Investors -- banks, insurance funds -- may buy shares of the limited-profit housing associations, generally to help fund initial construction. They are paid a low rate of annual interest on their shares. Any profits beyond that must be reinvested in the construction of new social housing. ''It creates a revolving flow of financing for social housing,'' said Justin Kadi, a professor in planning and housing at the University of Cambridge. Vienna's main outlay toward housing is now providing low-cost financing for construction -- and the government gets that money back.

On a gray Friday, Wilhelm Andel, a tall 84-year-old wearing jeans and a leather jacket, greeted me at the Alt-Erlaa tram stop to show me the limited-profit complex where he had lived for 40 years. Alt-Erlaa is one of the largest limited-profit complexes in Vienna, with 3,181 units in 18 futuristic towers, 23 to 27 stories tall, built between 1973 and 1986. As we approached, I saw that the towers had aged surprisingly well, maybe because greenery is timeless, and vegetation seemed to cascade off the tiered balconies. Willie had chosen a unit on the sixth floor. His rent for a nearly-1,200-square-foot apartment was 824 euros -- an amount that would be reasonable for Amarillo, Texas, or Shreveport, La., but out of the question in any of the 50 largest American metro areas.

Living in Alt-Erlaa, Willie enjoyed access to seven rooftop swimming pools, seven indoor swimming pools, tennis courts, gyms and acclaimed art. When the rest of the delegation joined us, he led us toward one of his favorite aspects of the buildings: two murals in the lobby of the second building meditating on the role of the news media and labor in society. They were by the Austrian artist Alfred Hrdlicka. ''They remind me of Orozco,'' said Dorca Reynoso, an employee at Verizon, referring to the political murals of the Mexican painter José Clemente Orozco. Reynoso's rent in Manhattan doubled in 2014 to $1,250. When her landlord proposed a 50 percent increase again in 2022, she was unable to pay and ratcheted up her organizing campaign against her landlord. ''They're so beautiful,'' she said, gazing at the paintings.

For this very reason, Vienna's limited-profit and nonprofit units were many of the delegates' favorites. Art and aesthetics matter. We visited a small nonprofit building, a co-op, that was successfully designed and developed by strangers who responded to a newspaper ad. The top floor had an expansive roof deck, a communal kitchen, a playroom and a sauna. ''You mean I could be in the sauna when my kids are in the playroom?'' said Julie Colon, a Bronx organizer who told me she gave birth alone while in the shelter system. ''This is crazy.'' Shanti Singh, a tenant-rights activist from the Bay Area with short, asymmetrically cropped hair, lingered in the sunny library with its tall windows and honey wood walls. ''I never want to leave,'' she said.

The spiral of overvaluation in housing, which makes the housing-haves rich and the have-nots desperately poor, has brought us to a point where only something radical can solve it. The problem with housing in the United States is that it has been locked in as a means of building wealth, and building wealth is irreconcilable with affordability. The housing crisis in the United States is proof. Even in 2017, before the pandemic, around 113 million Americans -- some 35 percent of the nation's population -- were living with a serious housing problem, such as physically deficient housing, burdensome costs or no housing at all, notes Alex F. Schwartz, an urban-studies professor at the New School.

Calls for a federal social-housing plan in America might sound far-fetched, but make no mistake: The United States government intervenes heavily in the housing market. It's just a two-tiered system, as Gail Radford, the historian, argues. There's generous support for affluent homeowners and deliberately insufficient support for the lowest-income households. In 2017, the United States spent $155 billion on tax breaks to homeowners and investors in rental housing and mortgage-revenue bonds, more than three times the $50 billion spent on affordable housing.

That $50 billion isn't nothing. In fact, in many U.S. cities, public spending per capita on housing and community-development subsidies is higher than in Vienna. But it seems clear that much of this money is misspent, whether through inefficient private-public partnerships like the low-income-housing tax credit; or through distortionary vouchers; or, most dubiously of all, through subsidizing homeowners, the people who need it least. ''If you give everyone demand-side subsidies, like vouchers, and there's a supply shortage, it's going to drive up prices,'' Chris Herbert, the managing director of Harvard's Joint Center for Housing Studies, told me. It costs the state more, and landlords often wind up pocketing the profits.

Though the Gemeindebauten represented a large initial government outlay, Vienna's social housing is now self-sustaining. Guess how much of the residents' salary goes toward the program. One percent. Social housing drives down rents in the private market by as much as 5 percent. Vouchers may appear cheaper in the short term, but directly financing well-regulated public and limited-profit construction is the only way to mitigate speculation and hedge against ever-increasing housing costs. In 2020, New York and California spent $377 and $248 per capita, respectively, in housing development, while Vienna spent just $124 -- and approximately half of Vienna's spending is on low-interest financing that will be repaid and then re-lent.

Social-housing programs have existed in America before, and they exist in America to this day. Local social-housing programs, many of them inspired by Vienna, are underway in Montgomery County, Md.; Seattle; and California. And they have a long legacy in New York, which built 66,000 affordable apartments and 69,000 limited-profit co-op apartment units from 1955 to 1981 under the Limited-Profit Housing Companies Law, also known as Mitchell-Lama, after the two legislators who introduced it. In combination with public housing, Mitchell-Lama units are a main reason economic diversity remains in the Lower East Side, Williamsburg and Chinatown.

Housing expense has been a staggering burden for so many of us, for so long, that it's hard to even contemplate what it would mean to have it recede in our minds. When I spoke to Peter Pilz, the politician who took over his grandmother's unit in Goethehof, I asked him, as I asked every Viennese tenant of social housing, what he did with all the money he saved thanks to his cheap rent. ''I haven't invested a single penny in the stock market,'' he told me. ''I would consider it an enormous waste of time to sit in front of my computer and study what the stock market is doing. I prefer to use my time writing, editing an online newspaper supporting interesting initiatives and having fun.''

Pilz was staying in Tuscany when we spoke, and he had spent the day bicycling. He stopped in Pienza to admire the small purple cathedral and sample the famous pecorino. Then he cycled on to Montalcino, where he sipped some Brunello, before returning to Bagno Vignoni to go swimming. ''That's my hard life,'' he told me. ''If people don't have to struggle all day long to survive -- if your life is made safe, at least in social conditions -- you can use your energy for much more important things.''

## Between Drought and Deluge

Brooke Jarvis | June 4, 2023 | NYTMag

*Brooke Jarvis is a contributing writer for the magazine. She last wrote about people stepping between the police and Black men.*

The shadows were long and the wind across the flatlands fierce as trucks and ATVs began pulling into Chepo Gonzales's yard one afternoon this March. ''Did you double up your socks today?'' Gonzales teased one of the arrivals, a man who complained about cold feet during the previous night's patrol. Another man leaned out the window of his truck and offered a more serious status report: ''There's a lot of water out there, but it's flowing north.''

There was so much water, in fact, that across the state it was spilling over the banks of rivers and bursting the walls of levees. For more than a week, Gonzales and his neighbors had been doing their rounds three to four times a day, looking for signs of danger along the various creeks and canals that surrounded Allensworth, a small town of houses, trailers and barns tucked amid the vast, flat farms of the San Joaquin Valley in central California. They had been ordered to evacuate -- the roads into the town were officially closed -- but here they still were. ''I'll live here till the day I die,'' Gonzales said. He loved the quiet and open spaces. If the water came high enough, he laughed, he would just move onto the roof of his house with a tent, a cooler and a grill.

Everyone knew the town was built on what had once been the shore of an enormous inland lake, called Tulare for the tules, or reeds, that grew around it. But the lake, once the largest west of the Mississippi, was long ago reduced to a memory: It was drained in the late 1800s to make way for wheat fields and orchards and dairies. Dust storms became a problem. So strong was the valley's thirst for water that even the groundwater beneath the lake's historical beds was rapidly disappearing, drawn by so many wells that the ground itself crumpled downward, in some places sinking by nearly 30 feet. In Allensworth, dwindling groundwater meant that the town well often drew water made toxic by high concentrations of agricultural runoff, and residents were advised to boil it. Creeks were marked blue on maps, but they were usually more like dusty ditches, Gonzales's 21-year-old son, Chepito, told me. Until this winter, the only way he really thought about them was as tracks for racing ATVs. But this winter had changed how people thought about a lot of things.

Since New Year's, storm after storm had pummeled the state, dropping epic quantities of water and snow. The water made its way toward the bottom of the valley, as it always had, coursing through waterways held in by earthen levees that, during drought years, grew desiccated and weak, pocked with squirrel burrows. In some parts of the valley bottom, the water wasn't really contained at all. Deanna Jackson, the executive director of the local agency that manages groundwater in the Tulare Lake Hydrologic Region, described the flooding to me as ''vagrant flows, wild flows,'' nearly unmanageable water sheeting across the landscape. Houses and farms and dairies flooded, and people were using excavators to hastily build earthen dikes around their properties. Some of these, around houses and small dairies, were a few feet tall; others, around the lands of the largest and richest agriculture companies, were towering and miles-long. Sometimes these fortifications enraged neighbors, whose land the water found instead. In a valley where powerful interests had long jockeyed for access to water, the arguments were now about who would bear the flood.

A few days before, a canal wall along a train track just north of Allensworth, visible from Gonzales's yard, began to crumble. A froth of brown storm water started to spread toward the houses. Neighbors grabbed shovels and came running; Gonzales and his son brought over the tractors that Gonzales usually uses to muck out paddocks. When they ran out of sandbags, their neighbor Ruben Guerrero, who rushed from work at a nearby elementary school to join the emergency response, had an idea: to fortify the canal wall with the help of a roll of sheet plastic he was planning to use for a house-painting project. The men finally forced the water back with a fix that was part berm, part sand burrito. As the flood pulse receded, they celebrated their victory. But it turned out to be another case of competing interests: The railroad company that owned the land dismantled their work, saying that by protecting their houses, they had threatened the company's property. So hour by hour, they patrolled the levee, watching the water flow through, quick and deep.

Shortly after, another alert went through town: A different levee, this one along Deer Creek, had given way. Floodwater was again flowing toward Allensworth. First, though, the water surged into a pistachio orchard, where it threatened to uproot trees and drown them in sediment. A video that later went viral captured the farmer's response: He drove two pickup trucks to the top of the levee, filled their beds with soil to weigh them down and then revved the engines and propelled the trucks straight into the flooded breach where the levee wall used to be. (One, fittingly, was a Chevy.) Heavy equipment and helicopter loads of sandbags from Cal Fire completed the job, but rumors swirled about why the breach had occurred. Jack Mitchell, the head of the local flood-control district, reported that it looked as if a cut had been made with machinery. Had someone intentionally cut the levee, jeopardizing Allensworth, not to mention someone else's farm, to save his own? ''I can't see how a tree, or a product, a vegetable, is more important than a life,'' Guerrero said, shaking his head. ''Tomatoes are not the only ones that matter. Our lives matter, too.''

Around town, houses were marked with what looked at first like little streamers but were really bits of caution tape, placed by a swift-water rescue team, as a preparatory measure, to mark which houses were still occupied: red if a house was empty, yellow if it wasn't. ''It's rare to see red ones,'' said Kiara Rendon, an Allensworth resident. Her car was packed with supplies, for herself and the younger siblings she cares for, but she had yet to leave: ''A lot of people didn't evacuate because this is all they have.'' A community leader in Allensworth named Denise Kadara told me the same thing. Allensworth was the first town in California to be established by African Americans. It is named for Col. Allen Allensworth, who escaped slavery by fleeing behind Union lines and then joined the Navy before making his way to California. It later became a home for farmworkers and people who couldn't afford to live elsewhere. Kadara felt certain that if residents had followed the order to evacuate, Allensworth would have been sacrificed to save other places deemed more valuable.

A few days earlier, Rendon came home to find her sister, five months pregnant and alone with a 3-year-old, shoveling mud as water rose in the field behind their house. Rendon took me to see the spot where a crew from Cal Fire helped the family make a small drainage ditch and where water was finally running away from their home. Her gaze kept drifting east, where the other legacy of the storms, a record-setting snowpack, 50 feet in places, glistened white on the distant mountains. All of that water, she knew, would have to find its way to low ground. She didn't know what would happen then.

''A lot of people would say, You live out in the desert,'' she said thoughtfully, as water rushed past her feet. ''But look at it now.''

In recent years, it is the dry side of California that has captured headlines: dwindling reservoirs where boat ramps lead only to sand, almond orchards ripped up for lack of irrigation water, catastrophic wildfires that rage through desiccated forests and into towns. In the longer view, though, the state's water problems have come just as often from deluge as from drought. Other parts of the country can count on reasonably steady precipitation, but California has always been different, teetering between drenching winters and blazing summers, between wet years and dry ones -- fighting endlessly to exert control over a flow of water that vacillates, sometimes wildly, between too much and too little.

As we've learned more about how humans are transforming the planet's systems, these swings have grown only more pronounced, leaving experts to wonder how the state will face a future balanced ever more precariously between wet and dry. Can it find ways to better handle -- to steward, even -- the overwhelming water when it does come? And will those measures be sufficient for it to withstand the times it doesn't? These questions matter not just to California and those who live there, but to anyone who eats the food the state produces, who is affected by the fluctuations in its economy or who lives in a place trying to manage its own climate-fueled ''extremification'' -- in other words, all of us.

California's very first biological survey began amid extremes. A botanist on that expedition described contending with clouds of dust and struggling to find enough water to keep the mules going. Then, on Christmas Eve in 1861, the rain began to fall, and it didn't stop for 43 days. In the floods and mudslides that followed, uncountable homes were swept away, and thousands of people (as well as hundreds of thousands of cows) died. ''Nearly every house and farm over this immense region is gone,'' the botanist wrote to his brother. Floodwater covered the Central Valley for 300 miles. In Sacramento, under 10 feet of muddy water, the new governor took a rowboat to his inauguration. But soon the young Legislature simply gave up and moved to the coast for six months while the capital dried out. It took another year before the bankrupted state was able to pay its employees again.

This founding story of statehood proved prophetic. The state's shifts into abundance or drought were often so complete that it became easy to believe, at least for a while, that you could live -- and build -- in one reality as if the other didn't exist. ''Even with geology functioning at such remarkably short intervals, people have ample time to forget it,'' John McPhee wrote in 1988, about why rich people in Los Angeles kept building homes on mountainsides that frequently collapsed in heavy rain. John Steinbeck described a similar amnesia among farmers in the Salinas Valley, where sometimes ''the land would shout with grass'' and other times it would crack and scab and the cows would starve. ''It never failed,'' he wrote, ''that during the dry years the people forgot about the rich years, and during the wet years they lost all memory of the dry years. It was always that way.''

But farming and cities depend on predictability, and as its population and industries grew, California sought to take control of its water destiny. The state built a vast plumbing system, in the form of dams and reservoirs and canals and aqueducts and levees and pumping stations, that could collect water and move it around, keeping it out of the places where it wasn't wanted and moving it to the places where it was. ''Everything depends on the manipulation of water,'' Marc Reisner wrote in the 1986 book ''Cadillac Desert.'' ''On capturing it behind dams, storing it and rerouting it in concrete rivers over distances of hundreds of miles.''

The system strained to adapt to what nature offered and was far from equitable, with the state's poor suffering the most during both flood and drought alike. In wet years, there were floods big enough to overwhelm levees and mad scrambles to get rid of water that quickly went from precious to perilous. The trucks in the Deer Creek levee were not an anomaly but part of a tradition: A few hundred yards from where Gonzales and his neighbors repaired the canal wall north of Allensworth, Gonzales pointed to the spot where he believes his father's '39 Plymouth still resides after being pushed into a different breach during a flood when he was a child. The elder Gonzales might have gotten the idea from J.G. Boswell, a land baron and farmer whom the journalist Mark Arax called ''the king of California'' and whose company was among those now throwing up impressive new earthenworks around the orchards it cultivated in and around the old lake bed. In 1969, when a key levee threatened to burst and flood his land, Boswell sent workers with pocketfuls of cash to every wrecking yard in the San Joaquin Valley. ''Using cranes, they laced eight miles of the big, curved levee with Chevys, Cadillacs, El Dorados, Pontiacs and Thunderbirds,'' Arax wrote. ''A bumper-to-bumper bulwark'' against the ghost of a lake.

In dry years, there were fights over how much water to leave flowing through rivers and the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta, where fish and other species desperately needed it, but which looked to some farmers like waste. Year after year California borrowed heavily from its future, pulling from its groundwater as if overdrawing from a bank account, which caused new problems. The water left behind was increasingly unsafe to drink, and when the land above the extracted groundwater sank, the elaborate infrastructure atop it sagged and struggled to deliver water. When groundwater was depleted near the coast, it allowed seawater to intrude, turning coveted freshwater brackish.

Still, the system worked well enough for the state's population and farms to explode in size, and for some to make a rich living while riding the whiplash between wet and dry.

By the 1990s, scientists modeling the future impacts of the world's changing climate were predicting that one of the major problems for California would be the intensification of its already considerable precipitation extremes: a future of ever wilder swings between deeper droughts and more dangerous storms. It didn't take long for it to become clear that the shift was already underway. Although California's average precipitation stayed fairly steady, the averages masked important changes in the way water arrived. Less of it fell as snow, which was a problem because slowly melting snowpack acted as a natural reservoir -- a much more capacious one than anything the state could possibly build to replace it -- safely storing winter wetness and then meting it out in the dry summer. It came less often, which stretched out the time that plants and animals and soils and farmers had to suffer through drought. And when water did come, it was more likely to do so suddenly (so that parched and fire-scarred landscapes were less prepared to absorb it), with greater intensity (so that it caused flash floods and burst levees) and with overwhelming quantity (so that water managers ran out of safe places to put it).

By the 2010s, a decade in which so many forecast climate disasters began to arrive that the climate scientist Kate Marvel called it ''the decade we knew we were right,'' California was already beginning to seem like a different state -- or, put another way, more itself than ever before. The driest four-year stretch since the state began keeping records killed more than 100 million trees, fueled horrific wildfires and left taps dry -- and then gave way, in 2017, to California's second-wettest year ever. Flooding caused more than $1 billion in damage just to roads and highways; in Big Sur, landslides buried Highway 1 under more than 65 feet of rock and dirt. On the northwestern edge of the Central Valley, 180,000 people had to evacuate downstream from Oroville, California's second-largest dam, as it threatened to give way. And then came yet another whipsaw, back to drought.

The speed and severity of the transitions were sometimes dizzying. Paradise, the town where 85 people were killed by a drought-fueled wildfire, is less than 20 miles from the dam that nearly failed during the deluge the year before. And just weeks after the fire, some evacuees had to relocate again: Intense rain was battering the fire scars, and the camp they'd moved to was now in the path of flash floods.

The storms that pummeled the state in 2017 arrived, like much of California's rain, in the form of atmospheric rivers, great currents of water vapor that form over the tropics and flow through the sky, often turning to rain and wind when they collide with land. (This is true of the West Coast in general, and Oregon, Washington and British Columbia are all facing their own versions of future water whiplash.) The average such river, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, carries the same amount of water as the Mississippi does at its mouth, but a large one can carry 15 times as much. Sometimes the rivers arrive one after another, crashing like so many waves against a shore. The 1862 flood was this sort of event. The storms that caused it have since been estimated to be 100- to 200-year events, meaning that under historical conditions they would have a 0.5 to 1 percent chance of occurring in a given year -- rare enough that we could, like Steinbeck's farmers, allow ourselves to forget about the risk, but not nearly so rare that we should.

Of course, our present reality is such that historical conditions, and the risks and constraints associated with them, are becoming less and less relevant. In 2011, a team of more than 100 scientists, engineers and other experts convened by the U.S. Geological Survey modeled what a similar storm -- they called it the ARkStorm, for Atmospheric River 1,000 -- would do to the California of today, with its much larger population and expansive, vulnerable infrastructure. The answer included hundreds of landslides, millions of people evacuated and financial damages more than three times as high as what even a severe earthquake might bring. But that assessment looked only at the potential impacts of a storm of historic proportions. Climate change is not only making events like the 1862 catastrophe more likely to occur (by 300 to 400 percent, according to one estimate); it is also creating the conditions for storms that will make the 1862 flood look small. The two atmospheric rivers that led to a near catastrophe at Oroville, one study found, carried 11 to 15 percent more rain than would have been possible if humans had not altered the atmosphere. And the largest rivers of the future will be even bigger, last longer and carry water at a much higher density. They will also arrive more often.

When the climate scientists Xingying Huang and Daniel Swain modeled ARkStorms based on California's predicted conditions, they found that future storms would be able to douse California with a load of water 45 percent greater than anything that has been possible under historical conditions. Because the precipitation is likely to fall quickly and be tilted toward rain instead of snow, peak runoff would mean between two and four times as much water racing across the landscape as during the largest floods of the past.

That updated analysis was published in August 2022, when California was once again parched: More than 99 percent of the state was officially in drought, and large swaths were considered extreme or exceptional. ''The apparent irony of publishing research on the growing risk of a California megaflood in the midst of a severe drought is not lost on the authors,'' Swain wrote on his blog. At the time, forecasts called for the dry trend to continue, but Swain cautioned that California should not make the old mistake of forgetting the wet times during the dry ones. The research suggested, he wrote, that ''it's only a matter of time before this latent increase in severe flood risk becomes 'unmasked' in the Golden State.''

The months that followed were no ARkStorm but quickly offered a startling reminder of how unprepared the state is even for smaller events. By the end of March, 31 atmospheric-river storms, including six classified as strong and one as extreme, hit the West Coast. Near Sacramento, the Cosumnes River broke out of its levees. Three people died, and an evacuation order had to be rescinded when floods made the roads too dangerous for escape. A creek outside Planada filled the town with waist-high water, destroying houses and cars. In the Bay Area, high winds shattered the glass of skyscrapers, blew a couch from a high-rise apartment onto the sidewalk below and killed five people in a single day. Tornadoes touched down outside Los Angeles, and snow fell as low as the Hollywood sign. In the San Bernardino Mountains, the snow drifts piled so high that roofs collapsed, natural-gas lines fractured and caused fires and the Sheriff's Department had to airlift rations to people who were stranded. Water managers worried that the disaster some had started to call the Big Melt was just beginning.

Driving over the coastal mountains during one of this spring's weaker atmospheric rivers, I had to pull over to wait out blinding rain and a fusillade of flying tree branches. I was on my way to visit Pajaro, a town south of Santa Cruz. Nearly two weeks earlier, the Pajaro River broke through a levee at midnight, prompting a hurried evacuation of 8,500 people, many of them workers in the valley's berry and salad industries. Families were still sleeping in cars or in hotels or in the makeshift shelter at the county fairgrounds, their debts mounting while their homes sat empty and the fields were too flooded to be worked. Every day people gathered on the edge of the closed bridge leading to town, where the river still ran high and brown and tents dotted the riverside, to ask when they would be allowed to resume their lives. On the day they were permitted to re-enter town, nearly two weeks after the flood, I watched shopkeepers mucking out buildings and residents wheeling home bottles of donated water. The public water system was still inoperable.

Andrew Fisher, a professor at the University of California, Santa Cruz, who has studied the Pajaro River watershed since the 1990s, told me that he regards it as a microcosm of the problems and possibilities of California's water future. For decades, it has been known that the levees on the river were dangerously out of date, designed for the more moderate California of the past. By the time of this year's floods, the levees were prepared for only an eight-year flood, or one with about a 12 percent chance of happening in any given year -- hardly the contingency that infrastructure should be built to address. ''That's kind of putting up a flimsy garden fence around your property to keep out wildebeests,'' one hydrologist told me. Although federal funds were available, the towns in the valley weren't rich and never had the money to pay their share for a replacement. Decisions about levee updates -- which are sorely needed in much of the state but are currently governed by a hodgepodge of regulations and funding schemes -- are prioritized in part according to the value of the property to be protected. This too often leaves low-income areas high and dry, or, more accurately, low and wet. ''It's not the same as redlining,'' Fisher said, pausing as if to consider whether he agreed with his own statement. ''But it is a systematic problem if you have a decision process that essentially writes off poor people.'' To protect the most vulnerable communities, water experts have begun pushing the state to set much higher minimum standards for all levees. But that would take billions of dollars, and the political will to spend them.

The Pajaro Valley isn't attached to the large canal system on the other side of the coastal mountains. (The idea of building a connection was floated, but local critics saw the cost as a public subsidy for corporate farms and defeated it.) This means that there's already no infusion of water from outside the natural watershed, unlike in Southern California, which for decades has pulled large quantities of water from the hugely overdrawn Colorado River and is beginning to face a future of difficult cuts. There's also no access to snowpack from the Sierra -- a reality that will eventually and painfully come for the rest of the state as Sierra snowpack declines precipitously over the coming decades. ''That's more water than is stored behind all the dams in the state!'' Fisher said.

Because the Pajaro Valley already has to make do with its own limited water budget, farmers and water managers have learned to make some of the hard choices that are still pending in other regions. Statewide groundwater conservation has been required by law since only 2014. The valley still overdraws its groundwater, but by less than it used to, thanks to the recycling of wastewater, conservation measures and proactive efforts to recharge its aquifers. Withdrawals of groundwater in the valley are tracked, which isn't the case in most other places, and they are very expensive. Fisher believes that a lot more can be done to expand on these ideas and implement them elsewhere, but that any lasting solution will require a deeper understanding of what he calls hydrological services: the way that different parts of a healthy watershed can support the resilience of the whole if allowed to do so.

Before California was developed, rivers that coursed down from the mountains slowed as they reached the valley floor, then meandered across a landscape rich with oxbows and seasonal wetlands. Here, habitat for fish and other animals developed, and areas of slow water offered places for microbes, mussels and arthropods to clean pollutants out of water and for water to trickle down into aquifers, recharging them. A lot more of the land was porous, full of native plants and spongy soil instead of pavement and sunbaked agricultural fields, which meant that more water could be absorbed. (When researchers built a model of the predevelopment Pajaro Valley and then virtually rained on it, they found that significantly less water ran off as floodwater because so much was sucked into the landscape.) Groundwater was generally high enough that water was able to flow back and forth between rivers and aquifers, which helped regulate river temperatures and kept aquifers from filling with salts and pollutants. Today this connection has largely been severed.

In a future in which snowpack dwindles and good dam sites are already in use, the best place for water storage will be underground. The potential is enormous. While California's reservoirs can hold about 40 million acre-feet of water, the state has emptied three times that amount from its groundwater basins. But first the water needs an opportunity to penetrate those basins. Not all soils are good for groundwater recharge; you need areas with deposits of gravel, sandy soil instead of clay. Because rivers drop different sizes of sediments depending on how fast they are moving, finding these areas requires uncovering the historical hydrology below California's surface. Fisher showed me maps produced by electromagnetic survey that reveal the composition of soils. The places he wanted to target for recharge stood out in dark relief, snaking like the curves of long-forgotten rivers, which is exactly what they were.

''I see it as replumbing California for the future climate,'' said Julie Rentner, director of the conservation nonprofit River Partners. It was a bright, chilly day near Modesto, and Rentner was showing me some farms that were once typical of the Central Valley: laser-leveled fields sown in alfalfa and wheat. On that day, though, the land looked more like the valley of a couple of centuries ago. The San Joaquin and Tuolumne Rivers had broken their banks and flooded the fields -- which were no longer fields so much as copses of carefully planted trees and other native plants sitting four feet deep in water. Everywhere there were birds; a river otter darted across the top of a levee. Six months earlier in this spot, Rentner told me, you could ''ankle wade'' across the San Joaquin, a river once fed by the waters of Tulare Lake, back when the lake was sometimes high enough to overflow its banks. Now a little rill of wavelets across the surface of the flood was the only thing that marked the river's usual borders.

This land had flooded before, most notably in 1997, when levees broke in 17 places. River Partners later worked to buy the farmland from its frustrated owners, hoping to turn it into habitat for threatened native species. But soon, Rentner said, the group started hearing from flood-management people and groundwater-recharge people who were excited about how many different benefits a reimagined version of the property could provide for the state and for local residents, who had little access to natural spaces. The restoration project at the confluence of the two rivers, known as Dos Rios, appeared on the cover of the most recent Central Valley Flood Protection Plan, a template of what was possible. It is slated to become California's newest state park.

In Grayson, a town near Modesto that came close to flooding in January, a group of residents explored a different floodplain, where high waters now lapped against yards at the town's edge, that River Partners is helping to restore. John Mataka, who has lived in Grayson for almost 50 years, told me that he considers the restoration ''a form of reparations for the community.'' The San Joaquin, on which Grayson was once a stop for steamboats, supported a rich salmon fishery before dams and agriculture transformed the river. Today Grayson depends on groundwater, but the water supply has so much agricultural runoff that it requires advance treatment to meet safety standards for drinking. Mataka hoped that the restored floodplain would provide more and cleaner water. He was convinced that it had already protected his house from recent floodwaters that had entered the town. ''We would have been like Planada,'' he said.

After decades of delays, a plan to improve flood control on the Pajaro River finally received enough funding to move forward last September, months before the levee was breached in the middle of the night. The repairs will come too late for the displaced people of Pajaro, but Fisher and other experts and planners still see them as an opportunity -- a chance to rethink how water will flow in the valley and in the California of the future. Instead of containing the river within narrow walls, the new plan makes room for the water to begin to meander and spread as it once did. The group is pushing to design areas that can be allowed to flood when waters run high that can serve as wildlife habitats and places for water to re-enter the earth.

Fisher is also partnering with local landowners to set up experimental catchment and infiltration basins -- including some lined with wood chips or almond shells, whose carbon helps microbes remove pollutants -- for recharging groundwater. One farmer called Fisher after seeing him give a talk, determined to make sure the valley still had groundwater when it was his grandchildren's turn to farm. This, Fisher noted, was an all-too-rare motivator in a state where much of the land is owned by pension funds and other distant investors.

In the Central Valley, Helen Dahlke, a hydrologist at U.C.-Davis, is working with farmers to experiment with diverting floodwaters to their vineyards, fields and orchards: Where does it infiltrate best? What crops are most capable of handling it? She told me that when she first came to California 10 years ago, the primary goal for floodwaters was to get rid of them: to confine them to narrow channels, to move them off the landscape as quickly as possible. When she tried to push farmers to hold floodwater on their cropland so it could recharge the groundwater below, most thought she was nuts. Why deal with sediment or crop damage when there was an irrigation system that still pulled from reservoirs or aquifers? But the intervening decade of floods and droughts had made it difficult to ignore the role of floodwaters -- as potential resource and threat alike -- and farmers are growing more interested. This year, in particular, she said, ''I think a lot of people are finding that this land used to serve as spreading ground for flood retention every spring.''

Similar projects, using flooding and wastewater to replenish groundwater basins, are spreading -- but still tiny compared with the state's future needs. To really scale up, the state will have to tackle various regulatory and infrastructural hurdles, including dealing with California's complicated system of water rights and finding ways to move water where it needs to go despite inadequate canals. Planners and politicians will also need to get serious about the aspects of climate risk that are still under our control, such as whether we continue to build in the most dangerous places or grow the most water-intensive crops. Water experts also recommend taking large swaths of farmland out of production, because saving aquifers will require both reduced pumping and space for increased recharge. Floods and droughts, historically managed separately, will need to be tackled holistically, balancing, for example, the need to keep empty space in reservoirs for flood control and the need to use that space to capture as much moisture as possible to recharge groundwater basins.

It took nine different funding programs and more than a decade of work just to buy the Dos Rios land, Rentner told me. Negotiations to breach the levee that ran across it, keeping floodwaters off half the reserve, were still going on; decommissioning a federal levee can require an act of Congress. And the Dos Rios land is only a couple of thousand acres. Estimates suggest that California needs to retire hundreds of thousands of acres of agricultural land, at a minimum, to make way for a more resilient water system. In the fall of 2022, the state allocated $40 million for the restoration of natural floodplains, but then abruptly cut that funding when the economy sputtered and projections for state revenues ran low. The cuts were announced the same day that Planada was evacuated.

Still, the sun was sparkling off the water, and the levee was dotted with deer prints. The leaves of the submerged trees were turning the fresh green of spring. Rentner confessed herself to be ''hopelessly hopeful'' that, despite everything, a different sort of state was still possible.

To the south, in the basin that once held Tulare Lake, the floodwater was still coursing through rivers and canals toward the old lake bed. There had been so much land subsidence since the last flood that no one knew quite what the contours of this one would be: The low places and danger zones would be discovered as the waters arrived to fill them.

One morning, not far from Allensworth, I met up with Frank Fernandes, a third-generation dairy farmer in the valley, and Kathy Wood McLaughlin, a biologist and water consultant who sits on the board of the Tule Basin Land and Water Conservation Trust with him. Fernandes had spent the last week in a frenzy, checking on the cattle he raises with his brothers and clocking long nights helping his neighbors evacuate their herds to higher ground. (The trickiest part was not the evacuation itself, he explained, but finding places where the cows could continue to be fed and milked on their inflexible schedule.) Now he finally had a moment to take in the transformation of a world he'd known all his life.

It was a startling and confounding new geography. Helicopters buzzed in the skies above us, ferrying ever more sandbags into ever more breaches. Farmers in pickup trucks kept flagging Fernandes down -- he seemed to know everyone -- eager to trade news about whose land was flooding and where the latest breaches were and to offer tips about navigating this new world. ''Down this road,'' one advised, ''you just have to watch out for the sinkhole and then climb the hill from 'Dukes of Hazzard.''' We drove over a steep new embankment and past ruined cars abandoned in high water. At one point, we had to stop at a destroyed bridge, where a pair of beekeepers from Utah were stranded, puzzling over how to recover their hives, which they'd rented out to pollinate almond trees on the other side. Fernandes, who proved game to push his truck through impressive mud pits, offered to guide them the long way around.

It was still March, and the air was chilly, a small blessing. With so many canals already failing, no one wanted the record snowpack to melt into the valley any quicker than it had to. But water managers knew that they could only do their best to manage the water's arrival; nothing would stop it from coming. By mid-May, there would be hundreds of thousands of acre-feet of standing water, and the state would be scrambling to save the city Corcoran, as well as the large prison there, from the part of the flood that had yet to arrive. After weeks of flooding, the governor did an about-face on the flood budget, putting back the $40 million for floodplain restoration and adding $250 million for emergency response, including flood control on the Pajaro River, and raising the levees around Corcoran by four feet. But the region's thick clay soils, remnants of a lake far more ancient than Tulare, meant that the water would most likely take years to fully drain away.

Fernandes drove through fields of winter wheat that were revisiting their past as wetlands, thick with birds that Wood McLaughlin delightedly identified as coots and avocets and black-necked stilts, and onto a piece of land that the land trust bought to turn into restored floodplain and habitat. Flocks of white-faced ibises flew overhead, their long beaks and legs stretched elegantly against the sky.

A few wrong turns and levees later, we arrived at a place, just south of Corcoran, where we could finally go no farther. The water had risen over the road, over the land, up the sides of houses and abandoned vehicles, as far as we -- and the others who'd gathered to gawk at this astonishing sight -- could see. The old hydrology was reasserting itself, the lake bottom transmuted back into a lake.

At the site of yet another levee breach, Fernandes stopped to chat with a pipeline technician he knew, until he looked back and realized that the road we'd driven in on had disappeared under the rising water. ''We've got to go!'' he yelled, and we all scrambled back into the truck. We'd have to find a different way out.