Henry Kissinger: But a war over Taiwan would set back China's internal evolution substantially. So, at the end of the war, they might find themselves in the position of the winners of the first world war, who were afraid to enforce its provisions. The ambiguity of the nature of superiority now is an inherent flaw of the system. But the question we now face is that, whatever capabilities China has, technology accentuates it. So if we get into a trade war, if you take the views of the traditional hawks on this, it is that China really must be given no opportunity to develop itself. Under 19th-century principles, there will be some areas of special interest—Central Asia will always be an area in which China has a special geographic interest. And in fact, I've been told by pretty responsible people in China that an original motive for the Belt and Road policy was as an alternative to other Asian policies, which would lead to more confrontation with the United States.

To do what I believe needs to be done—and something towards which the administration is tacking—it's very close to what I'm describing. The only problem is, you can't just say it, you have to do it. And you have to do it with a series of intangibles. Because there is no certain answer. You know, in 1938, at the time of Munich, it was not an implausible argument to say that, if you thought you were going to get into conflict with Germany, you better yield – i.e. appease, than go to war then. But that's a complicated question and, having lived in Nazi Germany, I know that war was inevitable because Hitler needed it. I don't think the Chinese need it.

My perception of the Chinese is that they're more Confucian than Marxist in their basic thinking. And the strength of China has been historically that the selection of personnel through the educational system and through the appointment did bring forward people who were nationally trained. So, the Confucian system teaches two things: to achieve the maximum strength of which they are capable, and they want to be respected for it. But not personal respect in the Western sense, but respect in the sense that any negotiations should reflect some recognition of pragmatic capacities and accomplishments. It is of course possible that they drive it to a point, where the Chinese definition of respect is incompatible with our security. That will lead to conflict, but even then it would be better that the conflict be limited, rather than all-out.

The Economist: Is it the case that their goal—as so many in Washington say—is to supplant the US as the world's leading power?

Henry Kissinger: It is highly likely that a significant part of Chinese thinkers believe America is on a downward slope. And, therefore, as a result of a historic evolution, they will eventually supplant us. But if you believe that, then in your policies, you maintain the option of adversaries to assert themselves. So in the first phase of what I'm talking about, you need a kind of tacit agreement, which has all the dangers that the Washington people recommend, except they have no alternative to it. It has dangers. And there is a danger that, in America, we then will not keep up strategically. And there is a danger that our allies will start moving. It's uncertain that [they] will move [all the way] but near certainty at least some of them will start moving. While, if we pursue the course I recommend, we will always have more options. But I have great sympathy for the administration on this.

The Economist: So, let's imagine your approach is being followed. And you've already described how you think climate change may not be the right ground on which to build diplomatic engagement. What would you be looking to instead? What are the possible areas where the two presidents could sit down?

Henry Kissinger: I would probably do two things at the beginning. I would say, first of all, let's lower the rhetoric on Taiwan. And we don't need to make an announcement of it, we can just do it. And, secondly, on Taiwan we can deploy our forces in such a way that assures our intention. Because, realistically, I'm sure Taiwan can't be maintained in its present form in a war. So I think that's an achievable objective, if we don't state it as an announcement. And secondly, I think we have to begin exchanges on the impact of technology on each other. We have to take baby steps towards arms control, in which each side presents the other with controllable material about new capabilities. I had an experience in Russia once with Brezhnev, with whom I was negotiating arms control. We were discussing an agreement about technical capabilities. And Brezhnev said, "I'm going to assign [their execution] to the minister of production," who was at the meeting. So I began my discussion of the weapon capabilities—the minister of production had a hysterical fit. He made so much noise they took him out of the room; then they brought him back, I began speaking, and he again had a fit. So we couldn't go any further. And, later, when we thought about it, we weren't sure if Gromyko knew what the weapons' capabilities were, because he was only a foreign minister at that time - he wasn't yet in the Politburo. The basic problem was that their weapons had more throw weight, but ours had more accuracy—and we had more variety of weapons. So it was easy for the hawks to play with these disparities, and if you had the wrong people in office…

Now, we are in a world in which you invent technologies that will have huge and novel applications. And it isn't so easy to say, "Let me tell you what we think the consequences are." Because the people who develop LLMs [large language models] wanted to build office machinery, they sought to teach a computer how to complete sentences and then make that an imperative for American businesses. The newfound machines understand more than humans ever originally conceived. So that is something that affects the Chinese as much as us.

What I have in mind requires two leaders to have wisdom on each side and a domestic structure that can sustain it. Because the danger for the West is to say, "the danger is gone". That's the great danger.

The Economist: One more question on this idea of finding ways to coordinate. Is there scope to coordinate over, let's say, Iran and the Middle East? And let's say the war in Ukraine—and all these are things that look like threats—could they actually be opportunities to build confidence?

Henry Kissinger: We all have to admit we're in a new world…there is no guaranteed course.

My impression of talking to Chinese leaders is that what is grating on them is our assumption that we are on the right course, and that if they behave themselves, we will grant them certain privileges. And also when we speak of a world system, a rules-based system, we made all the rules. And they want to participate in whatever new rules emerge. There's another part that thinks that the Americans will never grant us that, so it's foolish to fall for it. But if that happens, if you look at the evolution of technology, the concept of these LLMs didn't exist before. They were inconceivable before.

Now, we have tremendous confidence feeding them information that, by definition, nobody else can get. It costs a billion dollars to build that learned information. So there can only be, perhaps, 10 in the whole world. And then you deal with another country by monopolising that knowledge. And if you then rely entirely on what you can achieve through power, you're likely to destroy the world. Because you will not know the consequences, fully. The people who started World War One thought it would end in six months.

So, the current leaders will have to be strong and, beyond that, understand that they cannot use the limits of this. And so, what are the limitations that you can achieve either by agreement, or by practice, or indirectly?

But I will admit, what I want to achieve requires above all confidence in oneself. But the alternative is worse.

The Economist: You've laid that out very clearly. And we'll talk in a little while about the context in which these decisions are being made. But firstly, another way in which the world is now more complicated and more dangerous is that it is not just the two players - we've been discussing the US and China—there are the emergent players. And then there are arguably the collapsing players; and I wanted to go next to Russia. You were just describing Putin, whom you know well. And let's start with where we are now. Russia has destroyed, I think, any chance of finding a way to live with Europe. In the short term, it's going to be a junior partner to China, even as it is sort of clinging to its imperialist dream, with the invasion of Ukraine. Was where we are now inevitable, was it a failure of Western diplomacy? Or was it a catastrophic failure of judgement by Putin?

Henry Kissinger: It was certainly a catastrophic mistake of judgement by Putin at the end. I wrote an article, which you've probably seen, in which I substantially predicted the evolution. I thought that the decision to leave open the membership of Ukraine in NATO was very wrong. It was unwise, because if you looked at it from the Russian point of view, in 1989, they controlled Europe up to the Elbe River. They then withdrew from there, under compulsion of their internal system, but still—they withdrew from it. And every square inch of what they withdrew from became part of NATO. The only territory that was left was the country they always considered the little brother closest to them organically and historically. And now it's going into NATO, too. So [that] was a big turning point, it was a final turning point.

And at that time Putin was even saying that he didn't object to Ukraine becoming part of an economic system with Europe, but not NATO. The year before the war, he made a proposal on NATO's long-term evolution. And we didn't take it seriously. It was not acceptable by itself but could have been a starting point. Our negotiator was a wonderful lady, I like her very much, but she hates Putin so totally.

Compare that with how the West reacted to the Berlin Ultimatum. Both Macmillan and Eisenhower used it to start long negotiations that went on for 20 years until Nixon and Brezhnev found the preconditions for a new Berlin agreement, which then lasted the rest of the cold war. We didn't do that with Ukraine. And in fact, our negotiators said at the negotiation, that one American basic principle is that any country that meets our membership qualification can join. So that meant Russia will be totally surrounded by NATO countries. What is Georgia doing in NATO? We have every right to defend it, but why as part of a multilateral institution? In the 19th century Britain might have defended for a strategic reason. But it wouldn't have brought in everybody else.

To Putin, Ukraine membership in NATO was an obsession. So now I'm in the weird position that people say, "He's changed his mind, now he's in favour of full membership of Ukraine in NATO." And my reason for that is twofold. One, Russia is no longer the conventional threat that it used to be. So the challenges of Russia should be considered in a different context. And secondly, we have now armed Ukraine to a point where it will be the best-armed country and with the least strategically experienced leadership in Europe. If the war ends like it probably will, with Russia losing many of its gains, but retaining Sevastopol, we may have a dissatisfied Russia, but also a dissatisfied Ukraine—in other words, a balance of dissatisfaction.

So, for the safety of Europe, it is better to have Ukraine in NATO, where it cannot make national decisions on territorial claims.

The Economist: So your argument for having Ukraine in NATO is an argument for reducing the risks of Ukraine to Europe rather than an argument about the defence of Ukraine?

Henry Kissinger: We've proved now the capability to defend Ukraine. What the Europeans are now saying is, in my view, madly dangerous. Because the Europeans are saying: "We don't want them in NATO, because they're too risky. And therefore, we'll arm the hell out of them and give them the most advanced weapons." And how can that possibly work? We shouldn't end it in the wrong way. Assuming the outcome is the probable outcome, that would be somewhere along the line of the status quo ante that existed [prior to February 24, 2022]. The outcome should be one in which Ukraine remains protected by Europe and doesn't become a solitary state just looking out for itself.

I want to avoid that. Before I wanted Ukraine to be a neutral state. But with Finland and Sweden in NATO it doesn't make sense. I want Russia to give up much of what it conquered in 2014, and it's not my job to negotiate a peace agreement. I can tell you the principles of an enhanced, independent Ukraine, closely tied to Europe and either closely tied under a NATO guarantee or part of NATO. It's not an ideal outcome. That would be my view on what will likely happen.

The Economist: And what about Russia? Is Russia now fated to be the junior partner or the vassal state to China? And what will be the consequences of that?

Henry Kissinger: Every student of history knows that Russia has been generally tied to Europe, at least since the 15th century. And so, much of the great history of Europe has involved Russia, and within Russia, there has always been this ambivalent feeling of living in unique danger from Europe but also having a unique cultural relationship to Europe. On the one hand, it has wanted to acquire European culture, but on the other it has [a view of itself] as the third Rome that will help define Europe. Putin has to be perceived as a character out of Dostoevsky, not as Hitler, and with all the ambivalences and the doubts about his own people.

So, that's my general view of Russia. I have never met a Russian leader who said anything good about China. And I've never met a Chinese leader who said anything good about Russia, they are sort of treated with contempt. And even when Putin is in China, he is not shown the kind of courtesies that they showed to Macron, [who] came to a special place that is tied to the history of the Chinese leader, and they don't do that for the Russians. Symbolism is very important in China, so it's not a natural alliance.

The Economist: Is it therefore a reasonable goal of US policy—and European policy, but particularly US policy—to try to split China from Russia to help to catalyse that process?

Henry Kissinger: Reintroducing Russia to Europe [is important]. If Russia isn't in Central Asia as an operating great power, it will become open to a Syrian-type civil war; all these many conflicts that are now in part restrained because they're inconvenient to Russia would then be open to some extent to Turkey, to Iran, certainly to China with great ambivalence on the part of India about all of this.

You know, the practising political leader that is quite close to my views is the Indian Foreign Minister. That's how I think he would analyse this situation. Which still makes them a block for China, and India is an important factor. But India doesn't need a NATO system for Asia to perform its role in the balance.

The Economist: So India will be playing a 19th century balance of power role in this?

Henry Kissinger: You may know Lyndsay Howard, she's working for Bloomberg, and she organised a meeting at which I was present. A former Indian Cabinet Secretary said that the international system should be based on non-permanent alliances geared to the immediate necessities, and foreseeable needs, rather than these huge multilateral structures which then tie you up.

Take Singapore. They share our view about dangers, but they certainly don't want to be in the permanent frontline. Or Japan. It has a pretty clear view of where they're going; they're heading towards becoming a nuclear power in five years. And they always want to be close to us. Except I wouldn't exclude their making deals inconvenient to us. But they will always be worried about China, and the power relationship between them. Similarly, I don't think Japan has any intention of being a permanent member of a global multilateral system that will constrain them.

The Economist: Let's come back to that one. But just a couple of questions on Europe because this seems the most difficult bit of the puzzle that you've described. So, first, you describe Ukraine in NATO, guaranteed by NATO. And secondly, a European framework—which also requires the Europeans [to act]. And I guess my question on Europe is, is Europe capable of that kind of strategic autonomy? Is it capable of that kind of strategic thinking? And which countries in Europe would do that?

Henry Kissinger: I would look to Britain and France to take the lead, partly because Britain and France are the two countries that have practised it before—France with relation to Central Europe, Britain with relation to Europe and the world. Germany has had no historically consistent global or historical experience. They had a very great leader in Bismarck, who did it for 20 years. But after that, they could never clearly decide among the various options. And now, they're only beginning with this kind of strategic reassessment. Because at the end of World War Two, they needed to link themselves [to the West] through people I admire greatly, and who were personal friends of mine. Now they are reassessing their new capacities and options.

Now, these issues—which were well-handled from that point of view—demand clarification in the post-Ukraine world. The young generation in Germany has been brought up on the history of the failures of their parents and grandparents. Germany will be a central part of that process and will always play a significant role, but I think the intellectual leadership in this next phase needs to come from both Britain and France.

The Economist: One of China's aims is to drive a wedge between Europe and America. How does that complicate this process?

Henry Kissinger: I would say a Russian and Chinese aim is to constrain [American] freedom of action. And in the Middle East, an American policy that had the elements that I mentioned before would complicate Russia operating in the Middle East; but at least we would attempt to put it into a joint effort so that it's not an anti-American effort.

Europe has to play a special role in American thinking. And there needs to be a special relationship. I have always been a believer in the special relationship of Britain to the United States, because it is a natural evolution of our history. [That] is what people really believe. So Britain can play that role—though it hasn't done it to the same degree in the recent years. As for France, de Gaulle believed that France could not act as it would have to if it didn't have an autonomous belief in itself. And I don't mean that America should require that its allies follow our lead in every tactical point. But we should have an agreement strategically; what are we trying to achieve? And what are we trying to avoid? Whenever a concrete issue arises like Iraq, there have been huge differences. But I could understand in a modified arrangement that Europe could play a more important role in some areas. I am not offended by autonomy in my definition of it.

The Economist: So you were not offended by Macron's recent comments, or his comments about NATO being brain dead? Are they the manifestation of an autonomy?

Henry Kissinger: NATO should be maintained. But it's not the spontaneous place to define our future in every area of the world. So much dedication has gone into NATO, and there are so many good people who believe in it and so many useful tendencies in its countries, but I don't think NATO is the place to develop creative policies for all the issues of the world you are asking me about. Its greatest utility is a defence of Europe. To the extent that European countries participated in, say, Iraq, it was to guarantee American support. The Eastern Europeans are different, but they feel the more immediate threat.

The Economist: Shall we turn now to America itself?

Henry Kissinger: Before we move to America, [let me say that] I don't want to challenge China more than it's essential. And I don't want to hurt German feelings more than it's essential.

The Economist: I understand your overriding view that in the long run, Russia and China, [their] underlying emotion is one of suspicion and contempt. But, for the time being, they're working together. What can they accomplish in the short run and the medium term, if they work together successfully? What should we be worried about them doing together?

Henry Kissinger: Theoretically, you could say that if they split the developing world between themselves, that would give them an even greater impact. And to the extent that they both believe the United States is threatening them, and looking for opportunities to isolate China as they may think we've done to Russia, they'll be more aligned.

But they're not natural allies. You don't find in Russian history or in Chinese history any leaders who have advocated basing their policy on alliances with each other, through all the turmoil that both of them have experienced. Of course, for a big part of the history, China was too weak for such a role.

When I was with Ford in Vladivostok, I peeled off to go to China to "brief them"—to show the Russians that we had a Chinese option. And Deng asked how I found Vladivostok, and I said that my overpowering impression of Vladivostok was the cold: "I've never known it could get so cold in this world." And then—tactlessly—I said, "Now I know why you Chinese never went up there." And Deng said, "What do you mean never went up there, it's ours! And it's called"—whatever it's called in Chinese—"and all the cities around there are all ours." And he gave me the names of all of them [in Chinese]. And it's only very recently, well after the period that we opened to China, that they accepted the 19th-century border. And most of these territories were acquired in the 19th century.

So, what could they work together on? India a little bit, through the Russian arms sales. The Middle East? It's not a natural alliance. Because really, if you've been to China, what do people look to Russia for? Anything?

The Economist: Contempt.

Henry Kissinger: Contempt, yes, is the basic attitude. And it's not wise for us to say we want to split them from China— but it's something which we should have in mind. And the prerequisite for it is, first of all, not to destroy Russia totally in the war.

And after the war, [we can] declare its membership in Europe an important objective. Though it will be impossible—and understandably—to get the Eastern Europeans to agree to something like that easily.

The Economist: Does China have any natural allies?

Henry Kissinger: You know, they haven't conceived of themselves [as a state needing allies]… When the first British ambassador came there in 1793, he was treated with exquisite courtesy. But it was made very clear to him that a permanent ambassador was out of the question. And if he wanted to stay dressed like a Chinese, he could stay—but he'd never be permitted to leave. That attitude [remains]. I don't think the Chinese are comfortable with the notion of sovereignty applied to them.

China has natural allies when they have common grievances. But this is all conjecture. I'm not worried about the Solomon Islands. The intention they reflect is worrisome. But the execution of it over a substantial period of time is not natural.

The Economist: So is the China that we will be dealing with one that would like to inspire awe rather than respect, or perhaps recreate its traditional notion of a tributary system with it at the centre? A different notion of dominance perhaps than we might think of in a Western view.

Henry Kissinger: I have no problem of saying we should be wary. I'm not saying we can teach mutual love. It is also very hard for Americans. Our notion of alliances is not the 19th-century [one]. Ours is to create a system of equal thinking and of substantial American contribution, but never quite equality. But compared to China, we think of it as a pragmatic burden sharing.

The Economist: So let's turn to America, which is the central actor in defining the world that we're discussing. And perhaps start with your reflection on where America is now, in its long-standing intellectual tension between its idealism, which is so essentially part of it, and the realism that tempers its idealism—or the sense of frustration about the failure, so to speak— –of its idealism. Where is America now on that pendulum you've written about?

Henry Kissinger: America is in a strange position politically, because normally you would expect the Democrats to be exponents of pure idealism and the Republicans to be asserting something that at least contains my point of view. But what has happened is they've turned upside down: the public perception is quite unified fear of the Chinese. And practically, there is a great conviction that we can master this like we did World War One and World War Two, by material superiority.

But if we look at the post World War Two history, the United States deserves huge credit for the generosity in which we ended the war with Germany. But we've messed up conflict in other regions with the same insight, starting with the Korean War. It was a good decision to enter the Korean war. It became a prelude of the Vietnam War, in the sense that the Chinese, after initially trying to defeat us, then were satisfied with showing the limits of American power. Our superiority was so great that I think the Chinese decided that they couldn't exhaust us [into defeat]. But in Vietnam there was no constituency that could play the role of a European bureaucracy, and on which we could establish a democratic state. We didn't analyse the premises of a democratic state.

So the division in America became absolute, with the realists and so-called idealists on opposite sides. But the people who got us into the war and who sent 550,000 troops, they weren't realists; they were the idealists who believed an absolute victory was possible. There is a point I made in an article that I published after I was already appointed NSA.

The Economist: But as you say, now, both sides have a concern about China, both the realist and the idealist, for different reasons. Is the US now less of an idealist power?

Henry Kissinger: The paradox is that the people who most loudly affirm the importance of power are the idealists, and the realists join them by instinct. But you already find now the Florida Governor saying we should be out of Ukraine, which traditional realists would never say.

The key question is, is the fear of China justified? And if it is justified, is our policy adequate to it? I don't believe that China, in its history, has ever aimed for world domination. They have aimed at the maximum evolution of their capacities, inspiring so much respect that other countries would adjust their policies to Chinese preferences. The European idea that domination means physical presence in the country derives from the fact [that] European history has been made by relatively small physical states. So they had a concept of domination that involved direct control.

In Chinese history, their biggest fear has been domestic upheaval. And they often tried to keep the foreigners out - they built the Great Wall [for that purpose]. So in the course of time, if they achieved superiority that can be genuinely used, would they drive it to the point of imposing Chinese culture? I don't know. My instinct is no, but I don't want to get to the test of that. I believe it is in our capacity to prevent that situation from arising by a combination of diplomacy and force. But if we fail in that, the first thing that would happen is the disintegration of our influence in the world.

The Economist: You say that both sides are motivated by a fear of China in the US, but one of the framings that the US is making is a very Wilsonian idealist one, which is the framing of democracies versus autocracies.

Henry Kissinger: The French Revolution certainly didn't turn out to be peaceful. Certainly, insofar as the public in democracies can have a big influence on decision-making, and decision-making can be framed in a meaningful way that is relevant to the problem, it is, of course, better to live in a democracy.

The difference is, I would think, that democratic power should be used, first of all, in the defence of the people who profess it. It should be used in some limited way for the benefit of others, but not to the point of begging the war and peace question. And also with a modesty. If your conduct is announced to be the overthrow of the opponent, that makes it a more intense conflict. And of course, it would be worthwhile if the result were good, but since at least the invention of nuclear weapons a relationship between military and political goals remains a prime and serious goal of American policy.

I differ with the people who make the military issue in terms of democracy against authoritarianism. It also disarms us, to some extent, from analysing the strategic dangers that can emerge. Those we must resist when they arise. But then it's in the nature of statesmanship that a judgement has to be made, whether you are able to bear whatever the burden is of that particular exercise. We solved that issue in Europe to a large extent. When we have encountered that test with respect to the region outside of Europe, our unity was [transitory].

The Economist: You mean, in Iraq?

Henry Kissinger: In Iraq, I was in favour of going in and overthrowing [Saddam], and then doing what we did after the Gulf War—letting a natural evolution take place, in which we could play a role similar to that of the great powers in Afghanistan. I even wrote an article calling for a Belgian-type solution of neutralisation, by which all the threatened countries could co-operate against terrorism…The curse of Afghanistan is that if you want to govern the whole country, no Afghan government can do so without an outside power to rally against.

The Economist: Just to be clear, this focus on democracies versus autocracies that is currently fashionable in Washington, do you think that is weakening America's ability to achieve the strategic goals that we've been discussing versus China? Does it make it less likely to have alliances, less likely to have support amongst emerging economies?

Henry Kissinger: No, though it makes it less likely to have the kinds of alliances which we favour, which are multilateral and permanent. I think [highly of] the Australian alliance; I'm very enthusiastic about close relations with India. I'm wary of the anti-Chinese definition of [American policy], but I'm not in favour of withdrawing from Asia.

The Economist: I was going to ask you whether India is a good test of this, in that there are all sorts of reasons why the interests of India and the interests of the US align, particularly over some aspects of China. But, in Wilsonian terms, the government of Modi is increasingly oppressive and anti-Muslim and constrains the press and interferes in the courts. So, I wanted to ask you whether you thought India was an interesting test case of whether the US is able to think through these tensions between Wilsonian principles and the overriding [national] interest. How do you think about that? And how would you assess US treatment of India at the moment, and how it should be in the future?

Henry Kissinger: I agree with strengthening India militarily with respect to its conflict with China, because I think a military victory of China over India would then raise all kinds of problems of civil war in India. So, I would help India for that specific purpose.

And in India, I think we could, partly because of the previous British educational system, give expression to a preference for democracy in the form of encouraging private institutions for various purposes. And between India and the United States, there's enough freedom of dialogue to express philosophical points.

When I was in government, the Indians were, by our standards, very difficult in stating their views in relation to some of our policies. But it never got us to the point of being hostile to India. In India today, there is scope for alignment. I have very high regard for the way the Indians conduct their foreign policy now, because it shows balance. So how would they actually decide in various circumstances? I don't know. Partly because of our history with India, it's still varied, and we have had so much dialogue already. We have a greater scope for being understood when we put democracy and power together into one. And the Indians have a great talent; they have survived thousands of years under foreign occupation, without having a government of their own, which shows a great social tenacity—a remarkable social tenacity.

The Economist: Can I ask you about the domestic context in which American strategy is being formulated, and how different that is now from the years when you were in office? Is it possible to have the kind of long-term strategic thinking that you've described in modern American political life?

Henry Kissinger: That's our big challenge which we must solve. If we don't, the predictions of failure will be proved true. I'm deeply worried at the kind of dialogue that goes on now… This has been going on for a long time, and, if you compare the charges against Nixon, he didn't fight them. I mean, he fought them legally, but he did not attack the motives of his critics. But now a comparable situation to Watergate could lead to civil war-type conditions, and that deeply worries me. The nature of a political debate is so different from when I first came to Washington, without any knowledge of the system. Joe Alsop—I don't know if you know who he was—he was a fantastic character. He gave a bipartisan dinner every Sunday night, with leaders of both parties. And they were intense but not acrimonious.

George McGovern and I were on friendly terms, which is unlikely today between a security adviser and a cabinet member from the opposing party. I met regularly with him. So even in the Nixon period with all its animosities, there was still a degree of unity. It started weakening in every administration, but I think Trump and now Biden have driven it over the top. You don't see that kind of discussion now in Washington.

And in order to get a strategic view, you need faith in your country. To some extent [the problem is] the teaching system, which makes the evils of the country the pre-eminent point. Of course, such evils are a special historical problem, there is no debate about it in my mind. But unless you educate people to have some faith in the future, then, in the difficult decisions of life, which are close - otherwise they wouldn't be difficult - they're confused about the real issues.

The Economist: And does that mean that American strategic thinking in the 1950s and the 1960s was predicated on a common perception of American strength? And that now -

Henry Kissinger: It was a common perception of America's worth.

The Economist: Has that perception of America's worth now been lost?

Henry Kissinger: In a way.

The Economist: That is what you hear in Beijing, that America is a declining power.

Henry Kissinger: It's very hard for Americans—it's hard for anybody—to learn the principles of coexistence in a world which is on the way to learning a dialogue with machines. Which is going to happen. And we don't know what we're going to learn there, through that process.

The Economist: That's the other element of the context that has changed so dramatically, technology. Let's talk about that, again, because you've written about it—a man approaching his 100th birthday is writing about a technology of the future. It's impressive. How worried are you that technology is going to make the kind of strategic thinking that we've been discussing even more difficult?

Henry Kissinger: I view this present period in technology [as] sort of comparable to the period after the invention of printing, in which the previous view of the world was challenged by a new technology. So it will affect everybody, but there will always only be a few in any generation that can handle its implications across the whole spectrum. And that is a huge problem for every society now. You know, Europe had to learn this when it went through a comparable experience, in the wars of the 16th and 17th century, which were extremely bloody and destructive, and which killed a third of the population of Central Europe with conventional weapons.

And it was only out of that war that the notion of sovereignty and international law emerged as a rallying concept. On China, some Americans think that if we defeated it, it will become democratic and peaceful. [But] there is no precedent for that in any part of Chinese history. The much more likely outcome is civil war between competing units, and civil wars fought about ideological principles will add a new element of catastrophe. It's not in our interest to drive China to dissolution. So, here's an interest principle that transcends the moral principle in the name of the moral principle. That's the ambiguity of it. And if you ask me, how are we going to handle this? Where do we find the Lincoln? Nobody knows that.

The Economist: How does modern media, the news cycle, and social media complicate this process of shaping US policy?

Henry Kissinger: My theme is the need for balance and moderation. Institutionalise that. That's the aim; whether it's always succeeded is a different issue. When I first came to Washington, I had never had a press conference in my life, so I had to learn all of this, and the media were hostile to Nixon. But there were in the largely print media about 15 to 20 people who thought in the categories of national unity, but who didn't always agree with me. But on Vietnam, it was possible to have a dialogue with them. I always took up to 15 journalists with me—I saw every day for an hour or so. I rarely answered very concrete questions, but that was understood. And they drove me nuts. For example, they would say things that provoked the Arabs during [shuttle diplomacy] that would complicate negotiations with the Israelis even more.

But that was part of the game, they weren't unfair. So people like Scotty Reston, who was a consistent critic of Nixon, and Walter Lippmann—these were people with whom it was possible to have a dialogue. I don't see many like this today. There's no reward for reflective media thinking and no incentive for it. I think it's a big problem.

The Economist: So if you put that together with what you were saying about educational problems and a sort of pessimism about America's worth, what has that done to American soft power in the world, if you accept that category of analysis? And if so, what are the consequences of that?

Henry Kissinger: Look, no matter what media we had, we'd be in an age of transition now. You can't blame it all on the media. We would need great leaders—or good leaders, like Gerald Ford, who inherited an administration in dissolution. He did decent things. And his opponents could also rely on him to do decent things. You don't find that drive as a typical characteristic now; any means that can [start the unilateral] are acceptable. But what I don't want to do is to sound pessimistic.

The Economist: You're doing a very bad job in that case.

Henry Kissinger: I know I'm doing a poor job, but this is the problem that has to be solved. And I believe I've spent my life trying to deal with it. It's not a problem easily solved right now. And I don't necessarily know how it's going to be solved. And in this book, I tried to show what six different leaders did to solve substantial problems. Can we do that today? We must.

The Economist: In your [latest book] you've looked back at historical figures and the nature of their leadership. When you look at it today, point to some of the characteristics of leadership that you've identified in the past that would be useful today.

Henry Kissinger: Identify where you are, pitilessly. So, this kind of analysis is useful for constructive things. Define objectives that can enlist people, find means, describable means, of achieving these objectives. Link all of these to your domestic objectives, whatever they are.

I really do believe that if our leaders can find the courage to [articulate a vision], the American public—without understanding all the details—would go along with it. But what becomes hard to bear is an endless source of scandals as the conduct of debate. Bipartisanship, [too, is important]. A senator I knew from Mississippi, Senator Stennis, told me that on weekends he would go to courthouses to see law [practised], which bound all of America together. That was a very moving statement to me. Or Senator Jackson on the Democratic side.

The Economist: Henry Jackson?

Henry Kissinger: Yes. He often criticised me, but if he were here, he would consider this a valid discussion. Today, most presidential advisors would say, don't waste your time on this. Let's find some phrases that can be move people right away. Worry about being president once you're president. But who can unify? The security adviser can, if the president backs him; the secretary of state can't, he has clients in 160 countries. And in the British system, it's almost automatic, if you get four or five first-class cabinet members.

The Economist: I don't want to sound frivolous here, there's a serious point to this question. But earlier, you talked about one of the steps to try and improve things between China and America is to get a group of people together who would sit and study and speak to each other. Now, if you could pick that group, anybody dead or alive, who would sit on that committee? Who would be your committee to save the world? Picking people dead or alive, from history, or people you knew?

Henry Kissinger: Three people to do this Chinese discussion, I think we can find. Among contemporaries I would pick Bill Burns for sure. Then I'd find some academic. And one great technical guy. I could name 10 who could contribute to that.

The Economist: You mean someone who understands the technology?

Henry Kissinger: Yes, somebody from the technology world. Somebody that I liked among [them was] the head of Microsoft…

The Economist: Satya Nadella?

Henry Kissinger: Yes, Nadella. I think it can be done well, on the technology side—we'll be forced to deal with it. When the public understands that it is surrounded by machines that act on a basis that is not understood, there will need to be an expanding dialogue about it.

And I don't know whether you know Winston Lord. When we intervened in Cambodia, he wanted to quit. And I told him, "You can quit and march around this place carrying a placard. Or you can help us solve the Vietnam War." And he decided to stay. And he became head of the policy planning staff, then ambassador to China.

I think that what we need [is] people who make that decision—that they're living in this time, and they want to do something about it, other than feel sorry for themselves. I'm not saying it can always be done dramatically. But we don't often in history arrive at a point where a real transition is occurring, not just a visual one. This one is real, in the sense that amazing things are happening. And they're happening to people who are not aiming for them. Necessarily, I'm talking about the technology [here]. And at the same time, if you look at military history, you can say, it has never been possible to destroy all your opponents, because of limitations of geography and of accuracy. [Now] there are no limitations. Every adversary is 100 percent vulnerable.

So there's no limit to this, and simultaneously with this destructiveness, now you can create weapons that recognize their own [targets]. So destructiveness becomes practically automatic. Though it is a standard doctrine that there must always be a human being in the chain, it is not always possible in practice. Theoretically, it's possible. But when you have all of this happening, and then you keep building more and more destructiveness without trying to limit the framework. The only trouble is that all the demonstrators in the various squares in the world say that too. And they want to solve it by feeling sorry for themselves and bringing pressure [onto governments]. They have two illusions. First, you cannot abolish this technology. Second, there needs to be an element of force in international politics. That is the essence of the issue.

The Economist: The other thing, I think, that comes through your writing is a sense of restraint. And I don't think we live in a world where people are good at restraint.

Henry Kissinger: That's inherent also in the media, and in the multiplicity of media. We may well wind up destroying ourselves. And a point is now quite reachable where the machines can refuse to be shut off. I mean once the machines recognised this possibility, they can build it into their advice prior to the contingency. Many genius scientists believe that—and they know more than I do.

The Economist: But just to bring this fascinating conversation together, there are the risks that come from both the US and China acting incautiously.

Henry Kissinger: You have to blame the Chinese too. It's not that they are doing well and we're doing badly and need to change.

The Economist: There are the risks that come from technology. Together with your careful assessment of risks that you've spent your career doing, how much time do we have?

Henry Kissinger: Look, probably not enough to give a perfect answer. And there's never been a period where you can say that these objectives have in fact been reached. But our first step has to be mitigation of them. I think the technology will become more and more dangerous when combined with the other factors, within five years.

[Demis] Hassabis [is] one of the key scientists who understands where it's going. So more and more scientists will become convinced of the stakes… The scientists are not strategists, but they have been affected by the turmoil of their times. And by the fact that, if you want to make any progress, you need to go down certain routes that are not necessarily popular. To stand apart and do well has become harder.

The Economist: Two questions to end on. One is that, if you look throughout history, as you have done, progress has been made—but it has often been made in the aftermath of prolonged and terrible conflict.

Henry Kissinger: Exactly. After the Napoleonic Wars, after the Thirty Years War, after World War Two, in the construction of Europe. But then when it became global, new factors complicated it, and then the people who had done a wonderful job in the post-World War Two period became too absorbed in immediate issues.

So progress has been made. I think it's possible that you can create a world order on the basis of rules that Europe, China and India could join, and that's already a good slice of humanity. So if you look at the practicality of it, it can end well—or at least it can end without catastrophe, and we can make progress through it. But it will require vision and dedication.

The Economist: When I read your books, on diplomacy and on world order, and on China, a common theme at the end of these books is to appeal to a more clear-sighted sense of the balance between America's interests and its enduring values. And reading particularly Diplomacy, and your analysis of how Russia might behave after the collapse of the Soviet Union, it looks really prescient now. Because actually, Russia has pretty much behaved like that, [and] the things you predicted have come to pass. And when I read your recommendations on how the US should think about its relations with China, and what would happen if it failed to do that, it looks like your warnings about there are also coming to pass. The calculation that balances between interests and principles that you're asking of the US—is the US is actually capable of doing that?

Henry Kissinger: That's our big challenge. I don't know… Many great things in American history derive from commitment to principles. On the other hand, it hasn't occurred to any country to try to reform every other. At the height of its power, that has never occurred to anyone [else]. And that reflected American optimism that it's possible. And you read it even today with the crisis in Sudan. The progressive newspapers will say if we put enough resources into it [we can fix it].

Is that possible? On present evidence, I'd say no. But if I look at it for the future, if I say what should our task be, I would say the task of leaders is to make it possible to inspire small groups and build on it. That's what I would say if this were a student discussion, and you can totally quote that if you want to. How optimistic am I about that?

If you look at the leaders whom I've respected, they didn't ask that question. They asked, "Is it necessary?" And I think it's possible in America. It is possible in countries in Europe. Is it possible in China? Over the years I have met Chinese leaders, who I thought would understand what we are talking about, and would even be sympathetic, as long as they are granted their cultural identity within it. In India it's clearly possible. But how do you get to it for the next 10 years? It's going to be a big challenge, because we're now busy indicting the son of a president on top of all the other indictments already being pursued. You can say these were bad people to begin with. But a really effective system would eject them quietly and not make them symbols. It is dangerous to weaponize politics with the criminal process.

We have problems now.

The Economist: For almost 100 years you've been in a world where on balance, optimism [has been validated and] progress has been made.

Henry Kissinger: But after some very terrible periods.

The Economist: After some very terrible periods. Now, as you look forward, I think, actuarially, there are probably not another 100 years of you surveying this world. Are you—and we'll close on this—are you fundamentally optimistic or pessimistic?

Henry Kissinger: Look, my life has been difficult, but it gives ground for optimism. And difficulty—it's also a challenge. It shouldn't always be an obstacle. So, I think, to inspire the young generation, they need a demonstration of faith in the future. And that can be done. For example, de Gaulle. In 1968, there was a student uprising in France that took over Paris. The prime minister was Pompidou, whom de Gaulle had appointed. [Pompidou] was already starting conversations about who would replace de Gaulle, when de Gaulle disappeared for a day and went to the military headquarters of the French army in Germany.

And he talked to the commander there, whom he had fired in Algiers, who therefore had every reason to hate him, and said, "I want to know your attitude when I resign." The commander said: "You have no right to resign. You're needed." Which meant he supported him. So de Gaulle went back and called for a public meeting in the Place de la Concord and then called an election. He gained the only majority election in the French Republic history. And that shows what an inspired leader can do, because all the evidence was against it, every telegram within our government thought he was finished. And once he had done that, he resigned a year later, a little more than a year later, [without pressure, because he thought his task was completed.

The Economist: So individuals can do that.

The Economist: That may be an apposite place to end, given the announcement today. [Referring to announcement by President Biden that he was running for reelection]

Henry Kissinger: We've done actually pretty well on that, when it happened, in this country. But in the conduct of presidents to their vice presidents, I have never seen an exception to this rule that they keep the vice president in a [lower] position; it's always limited to some particular job rather than a continual one, because they can't fire him or her.

The Economist: So the one subject we've barely mentioned is climate change. It struck me that you talked about inspiring the younger generation. Is that subject, which so animates the next generation, something that should be a greater part of the calculus?

Henry Kissinger: But it requires no sacrifice by them. That's something they can observe and ask others to do. I'm all for [responding to climate change]. I just don't think that in the Chinese mind, and in the American mind, it will create enough of a balance to the strategic mind. But I'm for it in principle, even quickly.

The Economist: I'm ending this conversation, I think on balance, somewhat pessimistic. But inspired that hopefully your committee of three people Bill Burns, Satya Nadella and Winston Lord—

Henry Kissinger: Well, Kennedy had that inspirational quality. So you need something like that first. And then you can, in various fields, implement it in this generation. We need it immediately in the China field. But we need it also in the technology field. And we need it in the weapons field. Because the builders of technology and weapons don't understand their implications, necessarily. But if you use them in a systematic way, you will lose control over them, and much quicker than in World War One.

But even in World War One, look at the discussions that were going on between Britain, Germany, and France, in 1916. And basically, the people talking agreed on peace without victory. But they didn't know how to tell the people how to do that, when they had already lost a million casualties. At the same time, the Germans had prepared the Verdun offensive, the British had prepared the Somme offensive, and both of them thought they might win with this. So both offensives were carried out. Another million and a half people died, close to two million. And then they never got it together again. And they never had a strategy either, anymore, until we came in and overwhelmed it. We can't afford to be in that position. I think if people in 1916 had understood that, they would have found a way to end it. It may not be demonstrable. But it's not beyond conception. I think there are enough good people around who would know how to do this.

The Economist: We were putting a time [-frame] on this, and five to 10 years was the horizon. Well, five years takes us to 2028—in the next presidential term. And it looks as though the next presidential term is going to be between Biden and possibly Trump, and that's not renewal. That's not a Kennedy coming in, who can inspire something different. That's a continuation.

Henry Kissinger: I don't think Biden can supply the inspiration, and I'm hoping that Republicans can come up with somebody better. Look, it's not a great moment in history, but the alternative is total abdication.

The Economist: And potential annihilation.

Henry Kissinger: You know, it's not inconceivable that the discussion of how to handle machines, when we've developed qualities in them which we now cannot yet fully foresee, will be a totally new subject of conversation.

The Economist: Maybe that will be the catalyst to the kind of thinking that should have happened in 1916, or indeed in 1930. And it will be the catalyst to waking everyone up to the need for the kinds of approaches you're describing.

Henry Kissinger: I think thinking people have to start from that assumption. I do not like the way many of these discussions are going, but I think that's a phase like others we've had as humans.

The Economist: Well, let's hope they change direction in time. Dr Kissinger, thank you.

Henry Kissinger: I won't be around to see it either way. Thank you for the way you've conducted this conversation.

**DAY TWO**

Henry Kissinger: The Chinese have called the Ukrainians and begun to be mediators.

The Economist: Yes.

Henry Kissinger: When you read over the statements that we make to the Chinese, it is to [ask them to] wake up and call it "Russian aggression." That is not how the Chinese think. They don't think in moral terms, but about the national interest. Ukraine is now a major state. The Chinese talk about joint relations. But for China and the Communist philosophy, joint is not NATO. They are creating their own world order, in so far as they can.

On the entry of China [into Ukraine conflict diplomacy], if I were Ukrainian, I would think about the nature of the upcoming offensive. It is one thing if you conduct it to punish Russia, another to stay within the principles that the Chinese have laid down. It is the same for Israel. It used to be an axiom that if Iran reached a level of weapons-grade material, they would risk an Israeli preemptive strike. I'm not saying how to conduct the strategy, but they need to consider the interests involved.

The Economist: Yesterday, you discussed China as a dominant power. Today, you have elaborated that China has a conception of world order. Is China trying to play a global strategic role [in Ukraine conflict diplomacy]? What does that mean for the United States?

Henry Kissinger: It is trying to play a global role. We have to assess at each point if the conceptions of a strategic role are compatible. In principle, I would like a permanent dialogue with China, where the outcomes are on the table, and my hope is a consideration of outcomes that are compatible. If that fails, strategic decisions on both sides have to be taken. Then, there is the question of technology and what kind of assurances you can achieve. Those are the questions, in my view, to educate on all sides. The fact is that China is interested in Europe exclusively from its interest. I would have preferred to put the date [of China's involvement] off a bit. But when you read the statements on the Western side, which say, "have the Chinese ever called it Russian aggression?"—I wouldn't expect that they ever would, with the background of their "partnership without limits." If China plays a constructive role, it would be, first, presumably compatible with their limits, and we will see if it is compatible with NATO.

The Economist: China sees its strategic rivalry with the United States—

Henry Kissinger: To which we have contributed mightily.

The Economist: You say about the Ukrainian counteroffensive—

Henry Kissinger: No, the Ukrainians want the relationship. Zelensky has proven an extraordinary leader, and it is an exercise in wisdom on his part, because they could have thought, after the pledge of the "partnership without limits," that China would never enter on a diplomacy parallel to NATO. That could not happen. That doesn't mean that one couldn't distil an outcome that would contribute to peace. That's what I tried to do in my first Davos remarks. The war needs some political limits.

To the extent that the Chinese participate, their views need to be considered. It can't be identical with ours. They have not expressed their views. The offer to participate is a big step. It is important to put limits on Russia. From my point of view, I would not have gone down this road, but settled on NATO basically taking political steps. Chinese participation in this instance is a new challenge. But what we should not do is celebrate China joining us, because relative to an agreement with China, it is very complex and important. China does this, in part, because they do not want to clash with the United States. If Russia is totally defeated—two years of Chinese and Russian evolution cannot end in a total Russian defeat with Chinese acquiescence. In this new reality, China wants an independent Ukraine. And I'm impressed with the Ukrainian wisdom in being one step ahead of us on that road when they had to know how it would turn out. They couldn't have expected China to be a NATO ally. But China can support the outcome of having a strong and independent Ukraine.

The Economist: You argue that Ukraine should be in NATO.

Henry Kissinger: My basic position was not to open NATO to Ukraine, and the NATO [expansion] debate was a basic mistake, because it challenged the perceptions of Russia fundamentally. Many Russians, including liberal Russians like Solzhenitsyn, who was a great opponent of the Soviet system, believe that Ukraine was a special case. I've never met a Russian in a leading position who did not believe that. [NATO] took a chunk of Russia-dominated Europe and did not leave it there, but pushed it into a permanent military alignment with joint plans with other countries. [NATO pursued] it ideologically, because in statements released afterwards, we said that any country that met our domestic structure could join NATO. Any country in the Caucasus or Central Asia. That made security an issue. I don't say that justified the Russian action of trying to return Ukraine to a satellite status or the means used. I wrote an article before the crisis that Ukraine should be a bridge and not an outpost.

The Economist: Yesterday, you said –

Henry Kissinger: If the war had ended with the present major participants, I would have said that Ukraine is not safe, because the nationalist aspect would never be calm. Ukraine is safer in NATO, where it has the guarantee of allies and needs their approval for military initiatives.

Zelensky must have known the Chinese perspective was not incompatible with his survival. But China's affection for NATO is not compatible with ours. Western statesmanship needs to take that into account. If we want China to back our outcome, it will not be a NATO outcome.

The Economist: If Ukraine is safer in NATO, how can it be a safer Europe if Chinese involvement precludes NATO in Ukraine?

Henry Kissinger: Until the agreement between Putin and Xi at the Olympic Games, when Xi stated his opposition to NATO expansion—I don't think any Chinese leader had expressed a view on European evolution before this. Xi must have known that Putin would go into Ukraine. That is a serious Chinese commitment. They will not go to war for that. They're not heading for world domination in a Hitlerian sense. That is not how they think or have ever thought of world order. [To them,] world order means they are the final judges of their interests. What they want is participation in how the rules are made. Not agreeing on the rules does not mean war, but it is a greater possibility. I haven't seen the details of what the Chinese said. But what they say is usually invariably said after extensive meetings done in the Confucian way. Whether that is hopeful or not depends on what happens next. They might acquiesce in Ukraine in NATO. I wrote in 2014 that Ukraine should be a bridge. If it is an outpost of NATO in the east, it is within 300 miles of Moscow. If it is on the west side, it is within 300 miles of Warsaw and Budapest and 600 miles of Berlin. So, I thought that it would be better to have a Finnish type of neutrality in Ukraine. Now that Finland and Sweden are joining NATO, that is not possible. And it is not possible to say that you cannot select Ukraine for NATO membership, because it is in the most vulnerable position [geographically]. America should make that argument. The Europeans don't want Ukraine in NATO. They want to give Ukraine as many arms as they want, but make them defend themselves. That won't work. That is why, reluctantly, I have come to support Ukraine being in NATO. But China won't make their view depend on where the borders are. They will probably throw their negotiating weight in favour of something like my first Davos speech.

The Economist: Do you think this could be a building block for US-China relations?

Henry Kissinger: It can be, in my opinion. When you've been in my position, I feel great compassion for my successors, but I don't want to prescribe tactics. My general principle is that the United States and China should establish dialogue for these unprecedented circumstances. They are two powers of the type where, historically, a military confrontation was inevitable. But this is not a normal circumstance, because of mutually assured destruction and artificial intelligence. We are at the very beginning of a capability where machines could impose global pestilence or other pandemics—not just nuclear, but any field of human destruction. The circumstances require responsible leaders, who at least make an attempt to avoid conflict.

The Economist: Have you discussed this with your successors, the idea of finding common ground? We met many people in Washington but did not see it.

Henry Kissinger: I know what they think. They say China wants world domination. They now seem to want dialogue. The answer is that they [in China] want to be powerful. So far, they have not sought a military confrontation on order-threatening issues. We must try to bring China into some international system. I prefer a democratic system, on historical experience and my own life experiences. Our domestic system now must relearn [to reduce] domestic conflicts.

The Economist: Yesterday and today, you said that China and the United States should sit down and discuss their interests. What is the role of human rights and the Uyghurs in Xinjiang? American values impose an obligation to crusade for it.

Henry Kissinger: Yes. It makes a difference whether you approach it as something that is to be imposed or as something that is bound to affect their relationship but leaving the decision to them. I've always handled it in that manner and succeeded on individual issues. That does not mean that it would always succeed—by showing in individual cases that they might adjust their views. My formula is not to contest legality but to [have them] release the individual as an act of grace.

The Economist: Is [playing domestic politics] what the United States is doing now?

Henry Kissinger: The idea is that the United States can affect China's domestic approach, but we cannot redo the world on our domestic basis. We tried that in Sudan—look at Sudan now—Vietnam, Iraq. Our perception is based on the Western experience. Of course, having lived in a totalitarian system, I prefer democracy. But [we live] in a world of unprecedented destructiveness, and machines that do not have feeling have to be considered. What to do case to case? China has adjusted to our preferences, even in the Mao era and substantially under Deng [Xiaoping], but that has to be worked out in practice.

The Economist: Is it fair to summarise that the United States oscillates between realism and idealism?

Henry Kissinger: And each side believes their conviction is absolute. People who rely on power do not think of limits. The missionary part also does not think of limits. Recognition of limits is imposed now.

The Economist: Should the world today be more realist?

Henry Kissinger: No. We have to begin with the correct assessment of the range [of outcomes] in each of these spheres, and we have to get the security right, because if not, you're at the mercy of the most irresponsible group. Where to draw the line, I don't want to say, because you have to learn it in practice.

The Economist: On your style of diplomacy: it depended on secrecy, and that seems hard today with social media.

Henry Kissinger: That is true. Yes, absolutely. I don't think the president today could send an envoy with the powers that I had. I had the right to settle it on my trip [to China]. That couldn't be done. But the substance could still be achieved.

When Ukraine wants to move with some diplomatic flexibility in the current situation, they have to get out of the NATO framework to a limited extent. I believe they recognize it.

The Economist: Are you sure that Ukraine will give up on NATO [membership]?

Henry Kissinger: It would be ironic if I became the defender of it. But I think the situation has changed. If I talked to Putin, I would tell him that he, too, is safer with Ukraine in NATO.

This is not about my legacy as such. But the idea is, I have tried to implement [my view] from the perspective of having seen the challenges of societies in Europe.

The Economist: Yesterday was like recreating the last chapter of Diplomacy for the present day.

Henry Kissinger: [Immanuel Kant] said peace would either occur through human understanding or some disaster. He thought that it would occur through reason, but he could not guarantee it. That is more or less what I think. It is the duty of the leaders that now exist. It is an unprecedented challenge and great opportunity. We are at the beginning of the challenge but are not living up to it right now. But I've seen leaders in my lifetime, and it is possible even in the United States.

'We Have Only Our Pens to Defend Ourselves'.

Citation metadata

Author: Nicholas Casey

Date: Oct. 8, 2023

From: The New York Times Magazine

Publisher: The New York Times Company

Document Type: Article

Length: 7,307 words

Lexile Measure:

980L

Document controls

Translate

Decrease font size

Increase font size

Display options

Listen

Send to Google Drive™

Send to Microsoft OneDrive™

Email

Download

Print

Main content

On Oct. 19, 2021, Armando Linares López was writing up notes from an interview when his cellphone buzzed with an unknown number. Linares, 49 and stocky with black hair that was just starting to show gray streaks, ran an online news site in a small Mexican city called Zitácuaro; he knew his beat so intimately that calls from unfamiliar phone numbers were rare.

But the man on the other end spoke in a way that was instantly familiar. Linares had come to know that pitched, menacing tone from years of run-ins with every kind of Mexican gangster.

''This is Commander Eagle,'' the voice said. ''I'm from the Jalisco New Generation Cartel.''

Zitácuaro, in the hills of the state of Michoacán, had for years mostly been known for its fertile avocado orchards and the pine-oak forest where tourists came to see the annual arrival of the monarch butterflies. But its central location had made it increasingly attractive to the drug trade. Farmers grew marijuana and opium poppy, the source of heroin, in nearby mountains, and in recent years international drug cartels had been using Michoacán as a way station for methamphetamine and fentanyl shipments. Linares's rise as a journalist coincided with the drug boom, and he watched its devastating effects on Zitácuaro: severed heads dumped in front of a car dealership, business owners kidnapped for ransom and a government that seemed unwilling or unable to do anything about it.

If Mexico ever hoped to escape the violence that was devouring it, Linares often said, the press would need to pursue the politicians who enabled the crime. And so in 2019, he and a few friends founded a news site called Monitor Michoacán, publishing it downstairs from a law office. As the city's main (and perhaps only) muckraker, Linares quickly came to dominate the local conversation, typically publishing big reports on Monday or Tuesday -- contract fraud, bribes and police shakedowns -- and spending the rest of the week posting supporting documents on Twitter and Facebook. On Fridays, he would retreat to a little studio at the back of the newsroom to talk live with his sources for his weekly webcast.

The big story in 2021 was Juan Antonio Ixtláhuac Orihuela, Zitácuaro's boyish and popular mayor, who 12 years earlier was arrested by federal agents after his name appeared on the payroll of a local drug cartel. The case against the mayor fell apart, and he stayed in politics, heading off to various federal jobs. He had recently made a successful bid to take back the mayor's office, this time with men toting high-power rifles, their faces covered in ski masks, standing watch at campaign events. Linares's sources said the men were from the Jalisco New Generation Cartel.

And now, a commander of that cartel was on the other end of his cellphone, wanting to speak.

Linares put two fingers over the receiver and gestured to another reporter in the newsroom to come over quickly; he needed him to tape the call. Linares grabbed a notebook and pen, putting the phone on speaker. ''Who's this?'' he said.

The caller got straight to his point: Monitor Michoacán needed to stop ''taking shots'' at the local government and the prosecutor's office. Linares interrupted. He said the outlet didn't take sides; his job was to document events, nothing more. But the caller did not want to debate the role of journalism in a democracy. He said Linares would hear from him again and then hung up.

Two weeks later, Linares was at home when his phone buzzed, this time with a much more direct message on WhatsApp. ''You were told to stop trashing the government,'' the text said. ''I'm trying to be your friend, but if I can't, you're going to have problems with us. Stop trashing the prosecutor.''

Linares stared at the message on his phone, unsure of what to do next. The Monitor was investigating claims that the city government was overpaying crony contractors for municipal lighting projects and had also done reporting that showed ties between the Jalisco cartel and the prosecutor's office. He knew that the threat was serious and that the promised ''problems'' almost certainly meant death -- as another local reporter told me, ''Killing a journalist is very easy and very cheap.''

Linares also knew the government was likely to do little to protect him and his colleagues. Attacks on reporters in Mexico were almost never solved by investigators, who were often themselves either terrified of or in league with the killers. The journalists were on their own. There was a phrase the editor had long repeated in the newsroom: ''We have only our pens to defend ourselves.'' He set his phone aside.

The Monitor would keep publishing, just as it always had.

'Who's Who in Lies'

The world has become an increasingly dangerous place for reporters, but -- outside the war in Ukraine -- no place is more deadly for them than Mexico. Since the central government began its brutal and chaotic war on drugs in 2006, at least 128 reporters have been killed there, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists, 13 of them last year alone, a chilling record.

Mexican journalists have faced phone hacks, death threats, beatings, torture and, in one case, grenade attacks on their newsroom. They face these perils in part because the authorities whose job it is to protect them have in many instances long been infiltrated by the cartels: Genaro García Luna, Mexico's former secretary of public security, for example, was convicted in the United States this year for taking millions of dollars in bribes from the Sinaloa Cartel in the early 2000s, when he was head of the Mexican equivalent of the F.B.I. And in 2014, police officers in the rural city Iguala kidnapped 43 students on buses headed for a march in Mexico City and handed them over to a drug cartel that mistakenly assumed they were part of an attack from a rival. This year, a trove of text messages showed that nearly every branch of government in the region -- including soldiers, the police and a local mayor -- were communicating with the cartel, which killed the students and incinerated some of them in a crematory.

Unable to protect journalists where they work, Mexico resorted to hiding them in safe houses across the country. After years of increasing entanglement with criminal groups, the Mexican government is in some sense in a battle with itself, with case after case in which the government is, or at least appears to be, as involved in the crime as in the punishment. Sometimes the connection is clear. In 2017, Miroslava Breach Velducea, a journalist in Mexico's northern state Chihuahua, was shot dead by a drug gang after years of reporting on corruption and criminal groups. A former mayor Breach had reported on, Hugo Amed Schultz Alcaraz, later admitted to passing along recordings of the journalist to members of the gang that killed her and was sentenced to eight years in prison for his role in her death.

But concerns about government complicity often fall on deaf ears. In 2014, Rubén Espinosa, a 31-year-old photographer, began receiving threats after the newsmagazine Proceso published a picture he took of Javier Duarte de Ochoa, then governor of the state of Veracruz, in an article declaring it a ''lawless state.'' In 2015, after fleeing Veracruz, Espinosa was shot to death with four others in an apartment in Mexico City. At least 17 reporters from Veracruz were killed while Duarte held office, a gruesome record. The former governor is now in prison on organized-crime charges, but he has never been indicted in connection with any of the killings. Of 105 investigations of killings of journalists in Mexico since 2010, only six resulted in homicide sentences, according to Human Rights Watch.

Far from defending journalists, some of the country's most prominent officials have turned on them. In 2021, President Andrés Manuel López Obrador added a new weekly segment to his morning press briefing called ''Who's Who in Lies.'' In December, he took aim at three reporters, including Ciro Gómez Leyva, a prominent television anchor, saying that ''if you listen to them too much, you could even get a brain tumor.'' The next day, Gómez Leyva was driving home from his broadcast when two men on a motorcycle opened fire on his car. The anchor survived only because the car was equipped with bullet-resistant glass windows.

Armando Linares knew that investigating the local government could be risky on many levels. At his last news outfit, a daily broadsheet called El Despertar, he had spent months looking into connections between the state prosecutors' office and the drug gangs it was supposedly pursuing. His colleagues had warned him that the newspaper was dependent on ads from the local government. Soon enough, the state attorney general called a meeting with the newspaper's owner seeking to shut down the reports. When Linares heard about the meeting, he confronted the owner and soon left the paper, several of his colleagues told me, though it was unclear if he had been fired or resigned out of protest.

One former colleague described Linares to me as the kind of street reporter who was so plugged in that he sometimes showed up at crime scenes before the police. But he also had had drinking problems and years before went to rehab for drug addiction. He was married but hadn't lived in the same house as his wife and three children in years. Joel Vera Terrazas, his colleague at Monitor Michoacán, told me that reporting ''is what saved Armando from Armando, from his demons.'' When Vera, a prominent attorney in Zitácuaro, spotted Linares at a traditional Mexican sweat lodge on the outskirts of town after he parted ways with El Despertar, he said he could see the toll the last months had taken on his friend. And so Vera made Linares a proposal: He would bankroll a new outlet in town with Linares at the helm.

On a Monday morning in 2019, the staff of Monitor Michoacán gathered in its newsroom, a small office downstairs from Vera's law firm. Among those there was Roberto Toledo Barrera, a former bus driver who signed up to work as the outlet's cameraman and photographer. Wilberth Sebastián Joven, a lawyer in Vera's office, was hired as a part-time researcher. Vera would take care of the business end and write his own weekly column. And Linares, as Vera had promised, was now the outlet's editor and lead writer. Vera eventually bought a suit and matching shoes for Linares and insisted that he wear them to interviews. But other than that, Vera told Linares, he wouldn't interfere with his work.

Linares now had a type of freedom he hadn't felt before, something few journalists in Mexico have ever enjoyed: He was in charge of his own outlet and was editorially independent. ''No vendas tu pluma,'' he told the newsroom. Don't sell your pen.

'I Fear for My Life'

In the two years that Monitor Michoacán had been publishing, over the course of dozens of investigations, Linares had never received such a direct threat as the ones leveled by the mysterious call and WhatsApp message. Vera decided to seek help from the authorities, but no one in the newsroom trusted officials in Zitácuaro. Instead, Vera traveled with Linares to Mexico City, where they met officials from the federal prosecutor's office devoted to crimes against free speech. The unit sits under Mexico's attorney general's office, which has broad powers to help protect journalists, including offering referrals for ''extraction'' into the government safe houses.

For an hour, Vera explained to an official the work The Monitor had been doing and the threats they had received; he provided a list of nine politicians, among them Zitácuaro's mayor and local prosecutor, who the newsroom believed could have been behind the threat. But the official, Vera told me, seemed unmoved by the story, saying such threats happened often and the matter would probably blow over. Vera and Linares left the office empty-handed -- no referral for extraction or any other protective measure.

Linares told no one else in Zitácuaro about the threats, not even his wife. He continued his investigations, publishing stories about the inflated municipal lighting contracts and a detective who, Linares's sources claimed, was charging crime victims up to 10,000 pesos, roughly $480 at the time, to investigate. ''If there's no money, there are no investigations,'' he wrote.

Soon the situation with the Eagle escalated: The cartel boss called again to demand ''a little support payment'' to the group, and then again and again. The requested amount varied with each call, but the Eagle eventually settled on the sum of 500,000 pesos, roughly $24,000. Linares and Vera realized that they were now trapped in the same kind of extortion scheme that they had spent years reporting on.

They stalled for time, and Vera called an acquaintance who was a martial-arts instructor for some security advice; the instructor suggested installing video cameras, as well as a second door at the entrance of the newsroom, which could be opened by a buzzer only after arrivals passed through the first. The doors would be made of steel, reinforced to withstand bullets. Even if intruders made it past the first door, they would find a locked door between themselves and the newsroom.

Vera knew the payment couldn't be avoided if he wanted the newsroom to remain safe. He and his wife withdrew money from their savings, and some of the staff set up a collection from friends. In mid-December, Linares settled on a day to make the handoff. But the location of the rendezvous was unusual: The Eagle wanted to meet at the plaza in front of the mayor's office. The wads of money didn't fit into an envelope, and so Linares found a paper bag to stuff 500,000 pesos into. At 10 a.m., Toledo arrived with the bag of cash as Linares watched from a corner and Sebastián from a parked car. Two men from the cartel arrived, parking in slots reserved for government employees. Their faces were covered, and it was impossible to tell whether the Eagle had come or sent two of his lieutenants.

Whatever the payment achieved, it did not prevent the arrival of another, far more menacing threat. A fake Facebook account posted Linares's WhatsApp profile picture, which showed him standing with a woman. That was somewhat worrying. Even more worrying was that the post claimed that the woman in the photo was related to a leader of Carteles Unidos, a rival of the Eagle's cartel, and that Linares was in league with them. The danger was immediately clear to everyone in the newsroom: In the past, before deadly hits against journalists, mysterious messages often surfaced linking reporters to cartel groups. Sometimes Mexican officials even played up the supposed connections with little evidence. This allowed the killing to look like another hit among cartel members and offered an easy excuse to avoid an investigation.

Vera sat with the other members of the newsroom for a moment, deliberating about what to do. Linares headed to the transmission room. Toledo followed him in, flipping on the switches of the camera as the two prepared a Facebook Live broadcast. Linares was wearing a yellow puffer jacket and a face mask, which he pulled off before he began to speak. ''Good evening, friends of Monitor Michoacán,'' he began. He explained the mysterious Facebook post and said the woman had nothing to do with any criminal group. The fake online profiles were meant to spread disinformation and distract from the actual news that they were publishing. ''Using the usual logic, we know these attacks come directly from our public officials.''

Linares continued, ''In the last days and weeks, there have been killings of journalists who have exposed corrupt governments,'' he said. ''The same thing could happen here in Zitácuaro.'' He added, ''Today I can tell you this: I fear for my life, and I will be seeking federal protection.''

Mexico has very strict gun laws, but many people do carry them illegally. That fall, Vera had gotten a pistol from a friend. First he tried to give the gun to Linares, who turned him down. He approached Toledo next.

''Take it, Roberto,'' Vera said. ''You carry it, you're the one on the streets.'' But Toledo declined, too; he shot photos, he reasoned, not bullets.

''No, boss, you keep it,'' he said, handing the gun back to Vera. ''If they come, then I will take the bullet for you.''

'We're Here From City Hall'

Toledo started the morning of Jan. 31, 2022, with a stop at the prosecutor's office. The Monitor had a running tally of surprise visits it made to various municipal buildings to see if workers were present during their posted office hours. As usual, there wasn't much to see, so Toledo took a photo of the empty desks. His cellphone rang, and it was Vera on the line with a request: Could Toledo bring a couple of bottles of Coke back to the office? The photographer stopped at a corner store, then headed back in the direction of the newsroom.

At the same time, several men on motorcycles approached Monitor Michoacán and parked on a side street with a view of the entrance. Two of the men walked up to the building as Toledo, Cokes in hand, rang the buzzer. Speaking through the intercom, Vera asked the strangers why they were there. ''We're here from City Hall,'' one of the men said. But this looked nothing like an official visit: One of the men wore a gray hoodie with the hood pulled down low, and the other was in a baseball cap. Only their eyes could be seen above their face masks. Vera buzzed Toledo through the first door, and the two men came in behind him.

Sebastián cracked open the second door -- then shut it immediately when he saw guns. Hágale, hágale, called the man in the hoodie. Do it.

Gunfire rang out. Toledo raised his arms out of instinct, as though he could block the bullets. They tore through his forearms and pierced his torso.

Vera watched all this, petrified, through the closed-circuit video cameras. Then he shook himself and grabbed his gun from his desk, heading to the front of the newsroom. He crouched down, taking a firing position with his finger on the trigger. Another volley of bullets rang out, hitting the door several times. The door held. There were more words outside, then the sound of a motorcycle speeding away. Finally, Vera put down his gun.

Someone called an ambulance. Sebastián rushed outside. For a second, Toledo still seemed very much himself: his black running shoes still on his feet, his cigarettes and Bic pen still in his pocket. Yet he was in a pool of blood. There were three bullet holes in his stomach and others in his arm, his sternum and his shoulder. Bullet fragments were lodged in his heart, liver and intestines. He was saying something, but no one could hear him. Vera drew closer. ''They got me,'' was all he heard. ''They got me.''

Paramedics rushed Toledo to the hospital. For a moment, there was only silence in the newsroom. Linares walked in the door, having rushed back from an interview in another part of town. Except for him and Toledo, everyone was at their desks when the gunmen arrived. Vera's pistol would have been no match for them, Vera thought; if they had broken through, the entire newsroom would have been dead. It was the only hopeful thought that Vera could muster at that moment. But even that bit of solace was shattered when the phone rang: Toledo had died on his way to the hospital.

Then came another blow. Detectives from the prosecutor's office -- the very people Linares had made his career denouncing as corrupt -- were now setting up crime-scene tape and collecting shells. The officials asked for a statement, and Linares refused, saying he didn't trust them. Then he went into his office, cried, collected himself and, finally, approached Vera.

''We can do a broadcast,'' he said in a low voice.

Vera looked at Linares. Announcing the shooting online felt like a terrible idea. ''No, leave it be,'' he said. ''They've finished us. They've finished us, old man. No broadcast -- this will only bring us problems.''

But Linares didn't care. He went into the transmission room and started flipping on the switches to the computers and microphones. It came so naturally to him, a process so rote that for a moment he forgot that his camera operator was dead. ''The lights, Roberto,'' he called out, before he realized his mistake.

''My friends, we're going to broadcast now, and it will be brief,'' he said into the camera. ''Today a member of our team has been assassinated.'' His website had investigated the city's political elite and had received death threats in return, he said. Now the newsroom had paid the price. But they would not stop work, he said; they had a list of names of those behind the attack and soon, he warned, ''information will be flowing.''

''We're not armed, we don't carry weapons, our only defense is a pen, a pencil and a notebook,'' he said, raising the spiral pad that sat next to him. ''I regret this is how things are, that there are attempts to destroy freedom of expression and the right to true and timely information. I have pointed the finger at some people and some politicians. And today I will say it again: I will keep reporting; I will keep after these people.''

And he added: ''We will take this to the bitter end.''

'The People Will Protect Me'

Linares's broadcast had barely begun to circulate on social media when another report emerged: Investigators on the scene had found two notes, written on colorful poster board, left beside Toledo's body. One of them, signed by the Jalisco New Generation Cartel, said, ''This is what happens to lawyers who take on the cases of La Familia Michoacana,'' a rival cartel.

Vera found himself suddenly on the defensive. Many lawyers throughout Mexico had worked with drug traffickers -- at times legally, by defending members in court against charges, but sometimes illegally, by setting up shell companies to launder drug proceeds, for example. Vera had represented a number of business interests in Zitácuaro over the years, including one of its bus companies, but never, he said, anything affiliated with organized crime. If there had been any links, he told me, it would have been apparent to the journalists at The Monitor -- their newsroom shared an office with his firm.

It became clear to Vera that the notes were part of a broader campaign that evening, when Ixtláhuac himself gave an interview to reporters on Milenio Televisión, a national cable news network. ''I'd like to first make some clarifications,'' the mayor said of the killing. ''The preliminary information that we have is that this wasn't a journalist.'' As the mayor spoke, he repeated several times that the attack had occurred at a legal office, and he never mentioned The Monitor by name. Héctor Zamarrón, one of the reporters, looked skeptical, saying that Toledo had worked at The Monitor. The mayor replied that he hadn't found Toledo's name registered with the journalists' guild.

The other reporter, Paola Barquet, pointed out that Toledo had received death threats for the work he had done. ''I don't know if he got threats or not,'' the mayor replied.

Reporters from Mexico City began to call Vera for comment. Had Toledo not been a journalist after all? What did Vera make of the messages that seemed to have been left for him by the cartel? The questions angered him: If these journalists in the capital had covered Zitácuaro before this, they would have seen Toledo at work when he was alive. But The Monitor had been one of the few outlets on the ground and the only one investigating the mayor's office. If Ixtláhuac and his city officials had in fact ordered the attack to stop the negative coverage, then claiming Toledo wasn't a journalist was simply a means to obscure the motive.

Vera thought about the messages left by the attackers. Crime-scene evidence in Mexico was typically confidential before a trial, yet many reporters now seemed to know about the notes claiming that Vera was working with a drug cartel. Vera suspected it was the prosecutor's office that was leaking the information to discredit them. The Monitor, rudderless in the hours since the attack on its newsroom, was no longer in control of the news cycle in Zitácuaro. The government was. And the narrative was this: The attack on the newsroom had nothing to do with its journalism.

The story seemed to be solidifying at the highest level. That afternoon, Jesús Ramírez Cuevas, the spokesman for López Obrador, had condemned ''the assassination of the journalist Roberto Toledo'' in a statement from the president's office. But that evening, he issued a new statement: ''According to judicial investigations, the citizen Roberto Toledo, who was assassinated today, worked as an assistant in a lawyer's office, not as a journalist.''

Vera decided that he would have to leave the task of correcting the record for another day. So long as he and his team were in Zitácuaro, their lives remained in danger. He called Linares and said they needed to leave town immediately.

''We would be letting them win,'' Linares said. By then, the federal government had offered Linares the possibility of extraction into a safe house. But putting himself in the hands of one branch of government to protect himself from another seemed not just absurd but like a potentially deadly gamble.

Vera was insistent: Whoever attacked the newsroom had already won. Monitor Michoacán could no longer safely publish, he said. No story was worth their lives. But Linares argued that his life wasn't in danger. ''Don't be a fool,'' Vera replied. He was yelling now.

''What would I do?'' Linares asked. ''How would I make my living?''

Vera, realizing that his friend would be crushed if he lost his work, backed down. Linares lived alone with two dogs; on some days, his sources were his only human contact. Vera and Sebastián left Zitácuaro, deciding they would try to persuade Linares to join them later.

Linares -- acting on his vow to ''take this to the bitter end'' -- had spent the afternoon lining up a long series of television and radio interviews in which he linked the local government to the killing. In one, Linares repeated his claim that the mayor's office had been behind the threats, adding that just a half-hour before, his phone rang with another one. He did not hide the fact that he had decided to remain in Zitácuaro. ''Some people of our team decided to leave today, but some of us have to stay to continue this battle,'' he said.

As the days passed, Vera persuaded Linares to make a statement to the federal authorities in Mexico City. It would be to the same federal officials who sent them back empty-handed after the previous threats, but Linares realized there were few other options. For about an hour, he gave his statement to investigators at the free-speech crimes unit, offering a list of officials in Zitácuaro who he said were behind the threatening messages. He noted that the cartel had been clear in every call that the threat had come because The Monitor was ''screwing the government.'' And Toledo, he said again, was a journalist.

''I want to state that I am scared, that I fear that they will come and attack me,'' he concluded. ''That's all I wish to add.''

The authorities, again, seemed unmoved. Linares was offered a referral to leave Zitácuaro, but when he turned it down, he was not given other measures, like a government bodyguard or a panic button, typically provided to journalists who choose to stay in their hometowns. The officials thanked him for his testimony and said they would be in touch if they had more questions.

After the interview, Linares and Vera, who had come along to support him, went to a coffee shop near the prosecutor's office. Vera tried one more time to persuade him to leave Zitácuaro. Linares said he would make it where he was. He had a following there, especially in the Indigenous community. ''The people will protect me,'' he said.

Later that month, investigators released Toledo's remains from custody, and Vera paid the expenses for them to be returned to his home state, Morelos, about a four-hour drive from Zitácuaro. Vera, in hiding, watched over a Zoom call as a mariachi band played. Toledo's son lifted his phone so Vera could see the coffin of his friend lowered into the ground.

Alone in the newsroom, Linares tried to create a semblance of normalcy. He did a broadcast from the central plaza in the nearby town Ocampo, to interview the mayor about remodeling the roof of the town hall. He drove to the north of Zitácuaro to report from the crime scene of a nighttime shooting. But he remained scared, and Vera remained frightened for him.

Finally, in March, a friend managed to change Linares's mind. It would take just a few days to put together the money, and then he would flee.

'No One Will Thank You'

On March 15, two men on a motorcycle began to prowl the area around Linares's home. It was just before lunchtime, and a nearby food vendor was hawking tacos and corn. The motorcycle headed one direction, slowly, along North Dr. Emilio García Street and then a minute later doubled back. The man riding on the back stepped off. He was looking for Linares, he said to one of the neighbors. He was a soccer fan and wanted to publish something in Monitor Michoacán. Someone must have pointed to Linares's door.

At around 6 p.m., Linares posted an article about a motorcycle accident, then headed home. As he approached his door, a man walked toward him wearing a black suit and a red tie. The man greeted Linares, who looked up and greeted him back. They shook hands, then spoke for a moment before heading inside Linares's apartment. About five minutes later, the man in the suit was seen running from the building.

We'll never know what the two men discussed. We'll never know exactly when the man in the red tie drew the gun he was hiding and fired it at Linares. The police found his body riddled with eight rounds. It was 43 days after Toledo's murder.

Now in hiding, Vera felt helpless. He had been told by the police not to speak out about The Monitor to avoid attracting attention from criminal groups. Yet he needed somewhere to put his anger. So many times, he and Linares had discussed the importance of reporting done in the public interest. They once called themselves ''soldiers of journalism and civil rights.'' They thought there had been an understanding that should The Monitor come under threat, those whom they had stood up for would come to their defense. There would be marches. Signs hung at the mayor's office. There would be something, they thought. And yet, at his moment of need, Linares died alone and scared, himself accused of ties to drug traffickers.

''You can write an article, and give your life, and no one will thank you,'' Vera told me. ''Is it worth publishing if it puts your life at risk? I'm still thinking about that question. We said, 'Let's do it,' 'Let's go.' But now I wonder: Was this worth two dead colleagues?'' The day after Linares's death, Vera decided to close Monitor Michoacán. There would be no more visits to town hall and no more broadcasts from the transmission room. There would be no website, beyond a Facebook page. The years of investigations in Zitácuaro would disappear from the internet. Those who had attacked them had won.

News was spreading about the murder of Linares. Another local journalist began to hear rumors that more reporters would be killed. After seeing motorcycles circling the neighborhood, the journalist fled. Soon afterward, another local journalist did the same. The press corps in Zitácuaro was dwindling.

Linares's funeral was held the day after his killing, at a funeral home a few blocks from the municipal cemetery. It was a hot day for March, and the scent of roses and lilies hung in the air. Most of the seats in the chapel were empty. Vera sent a wreath; he and Sebastián, once again, watched a livestream from their government safe houses. Linares's wife, Rosa Elena Pedraza, attended along with their children. When a cameraman from a national news station approached her for an interview, she said she would talk, just not on camera. ''He knew that his life was in danger, but his passion for speaking the truth pushed him never to shut up,'' she said.

The few people who had arrived didn't remain long, filing out to allow Linares's family one last moment with his coffin. They, too, left, leaving a handful of reporters who had come to cover the funeral.

Minutes later, four unknown men arrived at the funeral. One wore a leather jacket and a ski mask to cover his face. Holding a gun, he approached the reporters and said: ''If you don't get out of here in two minutes you're going to be sorry.''

He didn't fire. The journalists left the funeral home.

'I Was Not the Mastermind'

In February, just after the anniversary of Toledo's death, I met Vera in Mexico City. I had been talking to him for several months; we would meet over Zoom after he had breakfast and talk for an hour or two before making plans to speak again. We sent each other Christmas greetings, asked after each other's families. But when I asked him if we could meet at his safe house, he said he preferred to travel to the capital. Vera wanted his location to remain unknown, even to me.

The buzzer rang at the office where we had agreed to meet, and Vera walked in, holding a large stack of legal documents. In the year since he fled Zitácuaro, he had become a kind of private investigator, trying to gather what information he could about the deaths of Linares and Toledo. He was forced to live in the shadow of incredible uncertainty. On one hand, he said, he believed it was Zitácuaro's local government officials who orchestrated the killings of his colleagues. On the other hand, the federal government was running the safe house that he was living in now.

Vera insisted that neither could be trusted to solve the murder cases; there had been no arrests and little sign of an investigation. ''I want to show you whose side the government is on,'' Vera said. He pulled out a document, sliding it across the table: a judicial decision about a wiretap that federal investigators asked for before Linares's death. But the authorities hadn't only asked to listen to the phones of the cartel man who had threatened them. They wanted to tap the phones of Vera and Linares. A judge rejected the request, saying the victims of a crime shouldn't be surveilled this way.

Vera was convinced the investigators were trying to gather dirt on him and Linares that would undermine them somehow. ''We've been victimized twice now. First, directly by the attack, the deaths, everything. And then the state is trying to cast doubt on us,'' he said. ''They should be investigating these politicians, not Armando and me.''

The next morning, I took a bus to the special prosecutor's unit in charge of crimes against free speech, the same office where Vera and Linares filed their original complaints. Much had changed since their initial visit, when they returned to Zitácuaro empty-handed; with two journalists killed at the same outlet, The Monitor's case had become one of the most notorious to reach the office in years.

Ricardo Sánchez Pérez del Pozo, the young prosecutor who heads the office, greeted me formally and offered a description of the inner workings of his unit. The department had been charged with, among other tasks, taking over investigations of attacks on journalists when local investigators or elected officials might themselves be complicit. He said that in this particular case, a group of experts had reviewed the work of Monitor Michoacán, the threats and the evidence from the crime scene. What came next took me by surprise. ''We determined that we are not taking on the case,'' he said of Toledo's death. ''Our analysis determined that nothing he published, wrote or gave an opinion on as a journalist was linked to the circumstances of his homicide.'' It was the same for Linares.

I stopped the prosecutor for a moment. I told him I had a copy of the state prosecutor's case file, and it contained page upon page of threats from an alleged cartel commander saying The Monitor needed to stop criticizing the government or there would be consequences. There were screenshots of Linares's phone with the WhatsApp messages. Sánchez seemed surprised that I had the documents and warned that they were confidential. He said again that there was little evidence the crime had to do with journalism and no need for him to take over the case. Michoacán's state prosecutor was handling the case instead.

That appeared to conclude the conversation. But as he packed up to head to a hearing, I reminded Sánchez that the threats against The Monitor were sent to stop the corruption investigations of the same prosecutor's office that was now assigned to solve their killings. The office investigating the case had repeatedly been named as one of the suspects in the attacks by Linares. Could they really be trusted to solve a crime that the newspaper had accused them of being behind?

Sánchez said he was only following the law. ''I can't change what's in the Constitution,'' he told me on his way out.

The state prosecutor's office never replied to my requests for an interview. But Ixtláhuac, the mayor, agreed to answer my written questions about Linares's accusations that he had ordered the attacks. ''I was not the mastermind or the man behind the threats against Monitor Michoacán, or any other media outlet, and for that matter I have no relationship with any person who calls himself 'The Eagle,''' Ixtláhuac wrote. In fact, he wrote, no investigator had ever questioned him in the case.

Ixtláhuac offered his condolences to the victims and said Monitor Michoacán's criticism of the local government had on occasion pointed to legitimate problems he tried to fix as mayor. (His office later sent a statement calling most of the claims made by the outlet ''a lie.'') As for the armed cartel gunmen who were seen at events during his campaign, Ixtláhuac wrote, the election had been a fair one, and ''if such an assertion about links to armed groups carried any weight, the election would have gone the other way.'' He had long been a target of dirty politics by his opponents, he wrote, including during his initial arrest for supposedly working with a cartel in 2009. The former secretary of public security who spearheaded his arrest was now being detained in the United States for his collaboration with cartel groups, the mayor wrote, referring to the case of Genaro García Luna, while he himself remained a free man.

I knew the mayor's statement was true in at least one regard: Mexico's government had been corrupted at almost nearly every level. Mexico is a hall of mirrors to any journalist. It is so hard to tell who is telling the truth because the line between crime fighter and criminal has become so blurred it often ceases to exist. The people who were supposed to clarify that line were the local reporters at Monitor Michoacán, but of course, they, too, were gone.

'Zitácuaro Is a Zone of Silence'

The recent months have only left more cases piling up. On July 8, the body of Luis Martín Sánchez Iñiguez, a correspondent for the newspaper La Jornada, was found dead with ''signs of violence,'' according to authorities in the state of Nayarit. A week later, Nelson Matus Peña, a photographer and editor in Acapulco, was shot dead in his car. I knew Matus from when he shot photos for an article I wrote about drug-gang hits in 2011.

One afternoon in August, I was scanning the local papers in Mexico when I came across a headline: The police had captured a suspect in Linares's killing. It appeared to have happened somewhat by accident. He was caught with two other gang members when their truck was seen speeding in front of a police station. When the police ran his name -- Carlos Gerardo Sánchez Mendoza -- through the system, they found an arrest warrant from the Michoacán prosecutor's office, seeking him in connection with the murder. The authorities said he had gone by the alias 02 as a member of the Jalisco New Generation Cartel.

Not long afterward, I received a message from Sebastián, the researcher at Monitor Michoacán who was on the other side of the door when Roberto Toledo was shot. We had been in communication several times during my reporting, and I wanted to know if the news had given him any sense of calm. It hadn't. Maybe Sánchez had pulled the trigger, he said. But if he was the hit man, then who ordered the attack?

The arrest wasn't the only reason Sebastián had asked to speak that evening. He wanted to tell me that the government agency in charge of the safe house that he was staying in had notified him that he would no longer need the protection. The decision had happened before Sánchez's arrest, so it was far from clear how the government concluded that the threat was gone.

Sebastián paused on the other end of the line, as though the news needed to sink in for him as well. He had been in hiding for the better part of two years, and his wife and 3-year-old son were leading the same precarious life with him. He had felt a higher calling to be a journalist, but that vanished long ago, replaced now by a simple desire for survival. In many ways, it was the same in Zitácuaro itself now. A few reporters had stepped in to fill the vacuum left by those who fled, and someone had even started posting regularly again on Monitor Michoacán's Facebook page. But the tone was different: ''The pigeons of Zitácuaro also form part of the image of our city'' was what ran over a series of photos of birds in the city's main square. There were no signs of the muckraking the outlet was known for. ''Zitácuaro is a zone of silence now,'' Sebastián said.

Sebastián was no longer a reporter, but he retained the gallows humor that has become so common among journalists in Mexico. He would challenge the decision to end most of his protection, he said. But even if he lost his safe house, he would still have his government-issued panic button. ''When the hit man comes and wants to kill me again, I'll tell him: 'Just give me a minute, please, hit man. Let me press my panic button.'''

Patrick Leger is an illustrator in Brooklyn. His work is inspired by dramatic film shots.

-----------------------------------

The Betrayal.

Citation metadata

Author: Dashka Slater

Date: Aug. 20, 2023

From: The New York Times Magazine

Publisher: The New York Times Company

Document Type: Article

Length: 10,479 words

Lexile Measure:

1040L

Document controls

Translate

Decrease font size

Increase font size

Display options

Listen

Send to Google Drive™

Send to Microsoft OneDrive™

Email

Download

Print

Main content

Earlier this summer, Melisa Pfohl, an elementary school principal in Albany, Calif., was sitting cross-legged on a friend's couch drinking coffee and scrolling through the emails that had accumulated while she was on a brief, end-of-the-school-year vacation, when she opened a message from her school district's superintendent. It was short and to the point. On June 20, the U.S. Supreme Court had declined to hear the last remaining appeal from the last remaining lawsuit stemming from an Instagram account that convulsed Albany High School in 2017.

When the account was discovered, Pfohl was in her first year as a high school assistant principal after spending a decade teaching elementary school. A biracial Asian and white woman with wavy silver hair, expressive brown eyes and a silver hoop in one nostril, she had known many of the students embroiled in the Instagram account since they were in third grade and had been personally named in some of the ensuing lawsuits. Now she put down her coffee and began to cry. ''It was a huge relief that this whole thing is done,'' she says.

Done, and yet also not done. Because Albany, a liberal, affluent town of around 20,000 people in the Bay Area, is still struggling with the aftermath. It was a private Instagram account with barely more than a dozen followers. Few people saw it when it was live. Yet its discovery derailed lives, shredded relationships and caused families to flee both the town and its public schools. What happened in Albany happened online, but the repercussions played out everywhere people gathered: in homes and classrooms, at supermarkets and on sports fields, on Facebook and Nextdoor.

Part of the injury was to the town's self-regard. Albany is so tiny that people who live there call it Smallbany. Bordered by Berkeley to the south and east, by the gray-blue waters of San Francisco Bay to the west and by El Cerrito to the north, Albany is just under two square miles. It isn't one of those fancy suburbs with gated communities and sprawling McMansions. It feels like a funky little backwater. The homes are mostly stucco bungalows or shingled with wood, the yards and porches festooned with rainbow flags and Black Lives Matter signs.

Almost half the residents are white, and more than a quarter are Asian. Thirteen percent are Latino. You could call it ''diverse,'' and you probably do if you're white, but it doesn't feel as diverse to Black residents, who make up just over 4 percent of the population. It isn't that diverse economically, either; median household income is above $113,000 (nationally the figure is about $70,000). Parents shoehorn themselves into Albany's modest dwellings for one key reason: the schools. If you're one of Albany's roughly 1,200 high school students, you know you're lucky to be there.

That's one reason the Instagram account was so painful. The schools -- three elementary schools, one middle school and one traditional four-year high school -- are what bind Albany together. After the account's discovery, they were also what wedged it apart. The divisions remain in place.

At the town's middle school graduation in June, parents whose children had been on opposite sides of the chasm opened by the account sat two rows apart from one another and didn't speak. At the high school, where disciplinary policies and much of the curriculum have been revamped in the account's wake, teachers deployed competing narratives about how exactly the events should be interpreted, with some seeing them as a calamity that occurred despite Albany's particular virtues (small, liberal, educated, interconnected) and others as a consequence of Albany's particular shortcomings (too white, too insular, too wealthy, too obsessed with academic achievement).

The questions that the account raised -- about fighting bigotry, about the impacts of social media and about the best way to respond when young people in your community fail so utterly to live up to the values you thought you shared -- had no simple answer. Whatever you believed about Albany, about America, about teenagers, racism, sexism, social media, punishment and the public discourse on each of these topics, the story of the Instagram account could be marshaled as evidence. It was the incident that explained everything and yet also the incident that couldn't be explained. But I have tried: I spent more than five years reporting on what happened, conducting hundreds of hours of interviews and reviewing thousands of pages of legal documents, as well as police reports, social media posts, letters, diaries, photographs, text messages, videos and public testimony.

''It's like the event that tore apart our city,'' says Kim Trutane, who was on the school board at the time and now works as the district's spokeswoman. ''More than that, it kind of ripped our hearts. Because everyone was just like: How could this have happened? How could such a hurtful and damaging thing have happened in Albany?''

For A., it all started a little before 11 a.m. on March 20, 2017. A junior at Albany High School, she had just left her third-period culinary arts class when she was met by a group of girls, most of them Black. ''OK, we've got to tell you something,'' one of them said. ''Like we have to tell you.''

A. waited impatiently. It was probably just some kind of boy drama. But it wasn't -- not the kind of boy drama she was expecting, anyway. There's a racist Instagram account, the girls told her. A bunch of people are following it. And there are pictures of you on it.

Everyone at school, it seemed, had at least two Instagram accounts -- the curated one that your relatives and people from other schools could see, and a more informal ''spam'' or ''finsta'' account for posting memes, rants and candids for your inner circle. But this account was something else.

Two of the girls in the hallway, one of them Black and one Asian, were the ones who had seen it. Over the weekend, they had been hanging out with one of their close friends, a biracial white and Mexican boy whose nickname was Murphy. (Because they were minors at the time, all the young people in this article are referred to by their initials, middle names or nicknames.) Murphy and the two girls had gone to see the movie ''Get Out,'' and afterward, he had shown them a private account created by another friend, a Korean American boy whose middle name was Charles. It featured memes about Black girls' hair, about slavery, about lynching.

Most of the girls gathering around A. were in tears. They had known Charles and many of the account's 13 followers for years. A multiracial group of extended friends, they had slept over at one another's houses, hung out together in class and at lunch, lounged around after school watching movies. Several of them were even planning to go to prom together.

A. was the only one of the girls who wasn't surprised. She slammed her fist into a wall. I should have listened to my mom, she thought. I should have done something to prevent this.

A. remembers feeling out of place in Albany from the time she transferred into the school district, in the third grade, and the feeling intensified when she went to high school. She had a Black father and a white mother, and it seemed clear to her that she wasn't the kind of girl that Albany boys liked. Those girls wore Lululemon leggings, tossed their long, straight hair over their shoulders, laughed when boys teased them or put them down. Those girls were smart enough to get into a good college but not outwardly so smart that they made people uncomfortable. A. was never going to be one of them. It wasn't just her brown skin or her curly hair or her low voice. It was something in the way she held herself. Her friends described her as ''strong,'' ''funny,'' ''sarcastic'' and ''straightforward,'' but beneath the confident exterior she was on shaky ground. Her father had died suddenly just before she started high school, and she had been struggling with depression ever since.

The problems with Charles and his friends had started a couple of months before. She was in Algebra 2, deep in her own thoughts, when she felt a hand in her hair. It belonged to a white boy she sort of knew; they had friends in common. She swatted the hand away. Being pawed like this wasn't unusual: Whenever she changed her hairstyle, someone's hands would be in it. She wasn't about to make a big deal about it -- it was the middle of class, and anyway if she got into it with everyone who tried to touch her hair, she would be exhausted.

Then a friend showed her a video of the entire interaction that Charles had posted on his finsta. He had captioned it, ''Touching the Nap.''

She confronted Charles on Snapchat, and after some back and forth, he deleted the video. But a few days later, she heard that Charles had posted another classroom photo of her on the same account. This one just showed the back of her head: her bun, her ear, the hood of her sweatshirt. The caption asked whether the photo was of her or another Black girl in the junior class, as if they were impossible to tell apart.

This time she confronted Charles in person and made him delete it. ''Don't post anything else,'' she told him. ''We are not cool. Don't talk about me.''

But the feeling of being watched lingered. It made it hard to go to school. Eventually, at her mother's urging, she talked to Melisa Pfohl, then assistant principal, about what had happened, but she insisted that she didn't want the school to take any action. ''I didn't want more repercussions,'' A. told me during one of many interviews over the ensuing years. Pfohl remembers wanting to respect the autonomy of a teenager who said she preferred to handle the situation on her own because the people involved were part of her social circle. While it seemed like ''a messed-up'' thing, Pfohl says now, ''I didn't know it was forecasting anything at the time. I sure wish I would have.''

By noon, the girls' distress had attracted the attention of the school's administration. Pfohl and the school's other assistant principal, Tami Benau, ushered them into a conference room. Everyone was talking at once; many were crying. The chaos made it hard to piece together a narrative. Eventually, Benau went to interview Murphy, the boy who revealed the existence of the account, while Pfohl distributed photocopied forms for recording student complaints. Only a couple of them had seen the account firsthand, but now the others remembered the questionable comments and racist jokes they had shrugged off in the past. Everything looked different today.

The problem was, they didn't have any evidence. Already the 10 or so girls in the conference room were starting to feel hopeless. It would be their word against the boys', and then everything would go on as normal. Still, they wrote down what they could on the forms:

Private Instagram account of disgusting racist images about multiple black girls in my grade making my very close friends ball their eyes out and have fits of rage.

I've heard multiple racist comments made to my friends.

This also affects me b/c I am a Black Girl, already am selfconscious of my self.

One girl, Kerry (a version of her nickname), hadn't gone into the conference room. She was close friends with both A. and Charles. The daughter of immigrants from Thailand, she was known for being such a good sport that her friends teased her constantly, particularly about her refusal to say anything bad about anyone. Now she was thinking about how she could get copies of what the other girls had seen on Murphy's phone.

As she walked to her fifth-period class, she pulled out her phone and found the Instagram account the girls had been talking about. It was private, so she couldn't see the posts, but the app listed the people she followed who also followed it. One name stood out: a boy of mixed Asian, white and Latino descent who would later be identified in litigation as John Doe. Kerry hardly knew him -- they had spoken only once or twice -- but they were mutuals on Instagram, and another friend of hers, Rosie (a version of her middle name), had dated him briefly. Both of them were in psychology, her next class. When she walked into the classroom, she asked Rosie to borrow Doe's phone and then meet her in the restroom.

Doe and Rosie have different memories of what Rosie said when she approached him. Rosie, who is white, says she asked him straight up: ''Kerry says there's this weird racist Instagram account you're following. Can I look at your phone?'' Doe remembers her offering a made-up excuse, something like, ''Hey, my phone just died, and I need to call my parents.'' They agree that he unlocked his phone and handed it to her.

Minutes later, Kerry and Rosie were standing in the middle of the girls' bathroom, their heads bent over the borrowed phone. Kerry took pictures of the screen with her own phone as Rosie scrolled through the account. Some of the posts were the kinds of things you might see on any other high schooler's account -- memes, guys roasting each other, the regular kind of dumb. But the rest were shocking: a half dozen posts mocking different white and Asian girls at the school for their weight or other aspects of their appearance. Worst of all was the overt, unfiltered racism: Black men being lynched or beaten. Jokes about the Ku Klux Klan and racist slurs. A screenshot of the Snapchat conversation between Charles and A. about the hair-touching video that was captioned, ''Holy [expletive] I'm on the edge of bringing my rope to school on Monday.'' A photo of another Black girl and her Black basketball coach with a noose drawn around each of their necks and the caption, ''twinning is winning.''

''It was so much worse than I anticipated,'' Kerry says. ''I didn't think I would react that badly, but I was physically shaking.''

They didn't have much time. If they were gone for long, their teacher would notice. Rosie scrolled; Kerry photographed. She took pictures of the most offensive posts, roughly two dozen -- about half of the total. She took pictures of the comments and the list of followers. Then she sent them via AirDrop to Pfohl and some of the girls.

As A. sat in the conference room, going through the images, she had trouble taking in what she saw. Then she saw a familiar photo. It had been lifted from her own Instagram account -- her favorite picture from a trip to Lake Tahoe with her best friend. It had been paired with a photo of a gorilla. ''I just got this stomach feeling of like, Wow, basically anything I do is not going to be good enough for these people,'' A. told me. ''I can't even take a picture of myself in the snow, looking how I look, and post it on Instagram.''

That night, Charles, sobbing, called his sister, who was away at college. She wasn't that alarmed at first, because he had called her in tears plenty of times, usually after getting into a fight with their mother, who had divorced their father a few years earlier. Compared with his sister, who had been both an academic and an athletic superstar in high school, Charles was kind of a slacker -- smart enough to take advanced classes like A.P. computer science and A.P. physics but not motivated enough to get better than B's and C's. He had a close group of male friends that he had hung out with since middle school or even earlier, most of them white or Asian, and he also was tight with a couple of groups of Black and Asian girls. With the girls he tended to let his guard down more, allowing them to glimpse the depression that had dogged him since the collapse of his parents' marriage. His stepfather, who is white, would send him emails brimming with spiritual advice. ''Depression is one bad habit you cannot afford,'' he wrote in one. ''You may have every reason to be depressed, but accepting those reasons will only deepen your depression. Do not give in to the dark side. ... Choose not to be depressed!''

This time, however, Charles wasn't calling to complain about the usual family conflicts, which were often about his mother's frustration with his passivity, his lack of drive, the amount of time he spent playing video games. ''It's really bad,'' Charles told his sister. ''I did something really bad.''

It took him a long time to tell her what. ''We're going to figure this out,'' she assured him when he finally choked out a description of the Instagram account. She suggested he start by taking responsibility. He remembers writing his apology with her on the phone, the two of them editing it together. He posted it on Instagram that night:

I completely betrayed people who considered me a friend and I cannot even begin to explain how disgusting I feel. All things that were portrayed on the account do not actually portray my true feelings about people of color. I want to be someone with integrity, someone who cares about all people and someone who people can trust. I have not lived up to that at all. There's no way for me to rationalize why I did what I did. It was all just my stupid judgment of what would entertain my friends. I cannot express enough that no one but me deserves any hostility or consequences. I don't expect forgiveness because my actions are unforgivable.

Then, exhausted from crying, he fell asleep.

The account had started at a chain restaurant called the Melt that was known for its grilled-cheese sandwiches. Charles was sitting in a booth with three friends, two of them the children of first-generation immigrants from China and the third a white boy who carried the cachet of also being friends with the high school's popular kids. It was a winter weekend day sometime late in 2016 or maybe early in 2017, and the four boys, as they later explained in interviews and court documents, were doing what they always did when they were together: trying to make one another laugh. As they waited for their food, Charles scrolled through pictures on his phone -- memes he had made, photos he had saved for future memes. His model was the stuff he saw online, in YouTube videos and subreddits, material that seemed funny precisely because it was offensive. Charles didn't think too deeply about the morality of that kind of thing. What mattered was that these memes made his friends laugh.

Humor was the glue of their friend group. They were the class clowns and the envelope pushers. The ones far more focused on cracking one another up in class than on whatever they were supposed to be learning. Put-downs, roasts and pranks were how they jockeyed for status.

Charles showed the other boys a photo of his friend Ana (a version of her first name) wearing a little black dress and a white coat. Ana, who has a Black father and a white mother, had posted it on Instagram with the caption, ''i wanna go back to the old way.'' ''Does she really, though?'' Charles said. When we talked about this moment more than a year later, he wasn't sure if he had made the joke more explicit: If they really went back to the old way, Ana would be enslaved.

Whatever he said, the others laughed. So he turned the joke into a meme, right there at the Melt, stitching Ana's post to an old-fashioned engraving of a naked Black man hanging from a tree while being beaten by a white man. He captioned it, ''Do you really tho?''

''You should post these somewhere,'' his white friend said, then suggested Charles make an Instagram account expressly for this kind of ''edgier'' content. They all said they would follow it if he did.

So Charles made a new private account and called it @yungcavage, a play on ''young savage.'' By March, it had 14 followers, including Charles himself. The first few followers were Charles's close friends, all juniors, like him. The remaining six weren't in Charles's inner circle. Three were juniors he was friends with but didn't spend a ton of time with outside of school, and three were sophomores he knew casually because one of them was in his Mandarin class and had introduced him to the others. Six of the followers were white; the rest were Asian, Latino or Middle Eastern.

Looking back, Charles traces his offensive humor to video games, because if you played a single game of League of Legends online, you were almost guaranteed to hear a barrage of racist terms and homophobic slurs from the other players. In the online kingdom where the edgelords reigned, you gained citizenship by signaling approval. On Reddit forums there were memes that had been ''upvoted'' by a lot of people, and in 2017 a lot of those memes found humor in things that objectively weren't funny, which was kind of the point. Racist jokes. Jokes about suicide, pedophilia, rape, incest, mass shootings, the Holocaust, people with disabilities.

It was easy to laugh at those things when they weren't about you -- and you could prove you belonged in the kingdom by laughing even if they were. ''Like with all these jokes, in the back of my mind, I know it's wrong,'' he says. ''It's offensive. That's part of what the humor comes from.''

Something about the surprise of it. Something about it being transgressive, shocking, not meant to be said or even thought. Which meant that the worse it was, the funnier it would be. ''I guess the humor just got darker and darker as I explored more of the internet,'' Charles says.

Ironic racism could feel like something that just happened, hatched in the peculiar incubator of inside references, digital gags and detached exaggeration that is Gen Z culture, although there is evidence that white supremacist and neo-Nazi groups have actively pushed this kind of humor into the mainstream. (Because Reddit has improved its enforcement abilities since 2017, much of what Charles and his friends used to see there has migrated to platforms like 9GAG and iFunny and Discord or has been transformed into videos on platforms like TikTok and Instagram.) In 2017, offensive humor was pretty commonplace at Albany High School, at least among white and Asian boys. Shortly after the account was discovered, a senior wrote ''What Does It All Meme?'' in the Albany High School newspaper. ''The constant exchange of offensive memes breeds a vicious competition where the jokes get increasingly more shocking until the initial jokes are no longer very outrageous,'' she wrote. ''If every time we open our social media accounts we are met with offensive memes, it's only natural for us to get used to that type of media.''

Today Charles says that if he saw the account as an outsider, he would conclude that the person who made it was filled with hate. Not just because of the content of the pictures, which were bad enough, but also because he targeted specific people, including his Black friends. Ana, in particular, had been one of his closest friends since eighth grade. ''The fact that it was people that I had interactions with on a daily basis definitely made it look like I hated these people,'' he says. ''Which I don't.''

He knows this is hard to believe and that it sounds as if he's making excuses. ''All the pictures are super messed up,'' he says. ''It's definitely racist. I'm not in denial about that, but the way I explain it, I feel like it still makes it seem like I am.''

During the period when Charles was posting racist images on his @yungcavage account, he also wrote a thoughtful essay about racism that connected the hypocrisy of the founding fathers with the failures of Reconstruction and the present-day prison system. Perhaps the essay was written just to get a good grade. Or perhaps these two parts of his brain had found a way to coexist inside his skull, like neighbors who take the same elevator to side-by-side apartments in the same building but never engage in conversation.

The evening of the account's discovery, John Doe, the boy whose phone Rosie had borrowed, went to see the movie ''Kong: Skull Island'' with two of his closest friends, a white boy and an Asian girl who were also sophomores. In the middle of the movie, one of their phones began to buzz. ''Guys,'' the girl whispered. ''Come on. You have to see this.''

Out in the lobby of the theater, she showed them. Her phone was blowing up with questions, comments and accusations. Racist, they said. Is this your account?

The same thing was happening to all three of them. It had something to do with an Instagram account they followed, @yungcavage. People seemed to think the three sophomores were intimately involved, which none of them could figure out. They barely knew Charles, who was a grade above them. The girl whose phone was blowing up was in the same Mandarin class as Charles, and he had suggested she follow the account. The other two sophomores followed it as well, because the three of them did almost everything together.

None of them could remember much about what was on the account, and when they went to look, it had already been deleted. Doe was following more than a thousand accounts, and he says it was only later, when he saw photos of the posts, that he realized he'd interacted with @yungcavage at all. (In fact, he had liked many of the posts and commented on two of them.) But that night at the theater, he couldn't remember much other than that it had seemed ''edgy,'' in the same vein as YouTubers like iDubbbz and Filthy Frank, whose accounts he followed and who were known for their provocative antics, which included everything from using racial slurs to baking cakes made of hair or vomit.

''It was never anything that I'd ever actively look up and peruse through or honestly thought about deeply,'' Doe says now. He was a default double-tapper, who scrolled and liked, scrolled and liked. Later, he asked himself why that was. ''I've wondered why, back then, I didn't recognize that as problematic,'' he says, referring to the account. ''Why did I entertain that? Why did I not say anything?''

But on March 20, 2017, he was thinking only about how to control the damage. At 15, he was a self-described social butterfly, a talented dancer and stylish dresser with a combination of sweetness and coolness that made him appealing to both teachers and peers. ''I was trying to save my perceived popularity and public image,'' he says. ''This was directly attacking that -- and me as a person.''

When he got home after the movie, he posted a message to the 1,200 or so followers on his main Instagram account. ''I did not create this account,'' he remembers writing. ''I do not condone what was posted on this account.'' It went on, a paragraph-length defense against the accusation that he was racist.

If anything, his post, which he labored over for hours, made things worse. ''By knowing about it and not saying anything about it, you are condoning this,'' someone replied.

That night, he paced in his room, unable to sleep. It was still a child's room, the walls covered with book-fair posters from elementary school. He circled the bed -- a mattress on the floor so that his blind and elderly cat, one year older than he was, could climb in easily -- his steps powered by self-loathing and anxiety.

He thought, What have I done? He didn't want to tell his parents, didn't want to risk their seeing him as he suddenly saw himself. ''I was scared that they were going to think I was racist,'' he says. ''In my self-reflection, that was a big question: Am I racist? What makes someone racist?''

Tuesday-night school-board meetings usually didn't draw a big crowd, but on March 28, 2017, eight days after the account's discovery, every chair was taken. Some people sat on the floor; others spilled into the hallway. Less than a week earlier, KTVU, a local evening-news channel, had aired a story about the Instagram account that featured partly blurred pictures of some posts and an interview with the mother of one of the Black girls who had been targeted. The town was in an uproar.

Seated on a curved dais beneath the city seal, the members of the school board moved through the mundane items on their agenda until it was time for public comment. Over the next three hours and 20 minutes, some 45 speakers shared their grief and rage not just about what happened at Albany High School in the past week but also about what happened over previous years and even decades. Many Black and Latino speakers said that they had grown up in Albany or raised children and grandchildren there and had experienced racism or sexism or bullying that went unaddressed. ''This stuff is part of Albany's history, and for you to say that it is some isolated incident says more about you than it does about the history of this city,'' one speaker charged, addressing the school board.

A Black Albany parent who had a daughter in second grade talked about growing up nearby in Oakland, where he said he went to at least as many funerals as birthday parties. That's why he and his wife chose to raise their family in Albany, where his daughter would be safe. His voice thrummed with sorrow and fury. ''What is the point of working hard in school and doing the things you have to do and then growing up and getting a good job and making enough money to send your kids to school in a place that's great if they're going to get treated like this?''

Over and over, speakers advocated for the harshest possible punishment. ''Heads need to roll,'' one parent said. ''Somebody's got to be expelled over this.'' Another speaker, a student, said she hoped the account followers' lives would be ruined.

About two hours into the meeting, Ana's father stepped up to the lectern. He had first moved to Albany while getting his mechanical-engineering degree at U.C. Berkeley, and he had an air of authority that had quickly established him as a spokesman for the families of the affected girls. Discipline must be meted out, he told the board, and the appropriate discipline in this case was expulsion. He raised a warning finger. ''And one last thing. I'm going to say this one time, and I'm going to say it real slow: If we don't get the right decision here, may God have mercy on this city.''

At this point, the school's top administrators already seemed to have lost interest in sorting through the levels of culpability among the account's different followers, likers and commenters. Some students who followed the account at first received two-day suspensions, but those were soon increased to the maximum suspension allowed under state regulations -- five days -- regardless of how much he or she interacted with the account. That decision would end up having lasting repercussions for both the students and the school district. Because most of the followers received the same punishment, it was easy for teachers, students and parents to conclude that everyone had been involved to the same extent. According to subsequent lawsuits, school officials soon began referring to the account followers collectively as the ''harmers.''

The day after the school-board meeting, A. stood on the floor of the high school gymnasium in gray leggings and a green Army jacket, holding a microphone in one hand and her phone in the other. Students in the bleachers leaned forward, straining to hear her trembling voice. It was the school's annual diversity assembly, and A. was reading something she had written called ''I Will Not Stand.'' She described a young boy of color who had come into the ice-cream parlor where she worked and whose mother had asked if Albany High School would be a good place for him. She noted how sad she felt when she realized she couldn't answer in the affirmative. ''So I will not stand for it,'' she said. ''I will not stand for feeling unsafe in your own school/I will not stand for being shamed for something so strong and beautiful/I will not stand for being belittled and beat down/I will not stand for people trying to shove me into their perfect little stereotype.''

After she uttered the final ''I will not stand'' in her list, she sat down, cross-legged, on the gym floor. By the end of the assembly, most of the students in the bleachers were on the gym floor, too, called down by a student speaker who asked for a show of solidarity.

By now, Charles was facing expulsion, as was one of his close friends, a Chinese American account follower whose racist comments on the posts indicated a higher level of involvement than the others. (That second expulsion was later blocked by a judge.) A third student, the one who touched A.'s hair, had agreed to go on independent study for the rest of the year. But the others were returning to school, and as their suspensions drew to a close, administrators found themselves confronting another problem: Somehow the kids who followed the account and the Black girls who were affected by it were going to have to go to school together.

Eventually school administrators hit upon a plan. A local nonprofit called SEEDS (Services that Encourage Effective Dialogue and Solutions) would hold a mediation session between the two groups of students on the day the 11 followers, likers and commenters were due to return to school.

The mediation was optional, but the 11 followers agreed to attend. Their motivations and expectations varied. Some wanted a chance to apologize to the girls in person or to deliver the apology letters they had written. Others just wanted to get back to school. ''I was kind of looking forward to this, in a weird sense,'' Doe says. ''Because I thought this was going to be an opportunity to explain myself.''

He had spent days trying to understand why he hadn't said something when he first saw the account. Various explanations presented themselves: He had thought of himself as peripheral, a sophomore eavesdropping on conversations among a group of juniors. If someone was going to say something, shouldn't it be someone inside the group? But what if those circumstances made him more responsible instead of less so? What if the fact that he didn't really know the account creator made him uniquely qualified to blow the whistle on the whole thing -- or at least to separate himself from the situation? Why was he thinking it over only now? ''I felt like I had a lot of opportunities to unfollow this account that I didn't take,'' he says.

The day before the mediation session, someone associated with the Albany High School Feminist Club sent out a text about a protest planned by two other student clubs, the Black Student Union and the school's chapter of Amnesty International. The protest would coincide with the suspended students' return to school and begin at the midmorning break with a sit-in in the main lobby. ''Please share this with basically anyone you know who also believes these 'harmers' should not be let back into our school,'' the text instructed.

The message was forwarded from person to person, eventually reaching the ''harmers'' themselves. School administrators got wind of the protest, too, but they decided to go forward with the mediation, which would be held in the same building where the protest was planned.

Room 104 is a classroom big enough for a couple of saggy couches and an oversize armchair pushed up against the windows. On the day of the mediation, the 11 Instagram followers sat in red-seated chair-desks on the side of the room closer to the door. The targets and a group of their supporters sat across from them. The moderators sat at either end. The girls had been in high spirits before the session began, snapping photos, buoyed by both jitters and hopefulness. But now the tension in the room was palpable.

''I could feel the angry, anxious, nervous energy everyone was feeling,'' Ana remembers.

According to a timeline created by SEEDS and later filed in court, the moderators started with what was supposed to be a neutral, low-impact question -- something like, ''What are some of the things you really like about Albany High School?'' They passed a rock around the room to signal each person's chance to reply. That part went well enough, although a number of the girls on the targeted side of the room opted to pass the rock along without speaking.

Then the moderators asked the people who had been affected by the account to talk about how they felt when it was discovered and how they had been impacted since. A. recalls saying that her sister had asked her why she was so sad all the time. ''I shouldn't have to tell an 8-year-old that I'm being bullied and I can't feel good about myself,'' she said. ''I shouldn't have to say that!''

The girls cried. Some of them yelled. They explained how deeply betrayed they felt. After everyone had a chance to speak, the Instagram group was asked to respond.

That's when things began to go terribly, horribly wrong. The first problem was that the main culprits weren't in the room. The mediation was for students who were returning to classes, so the three students who were considered most culpable hadn't been invited. The 11 followers who came to the mediation kept wanting to explain the limits of their involvement, to point out that they weren't the ones who had actually made the posts. One boy had only just started following the account. Another hardly ever went on Instagram and said he had never interacted with the account. A couple of others said they had liked the posts without really taking in the contents.

It wasn't me, they each wanted to say. I'm not the one who did this. I'm not a racist.

But the distinctions that felt so important to the account followers meant little to the people who had been targeted. Who cared which one of them drew the noose or compared A. to a gorilla? The point was that the people in that room had seen those things and had given them their approval, whether overt or implied.

''I really thought they would own up to what they did and, you know, kind of apologize,'' A. later told a news crew that covered the sit-in. ''And a lot of it was them defending themselves and constantly saying, 'Well, I didn't really add to it by liking and commenting, I didn't really think I was a part of it.' And none of them were like, 'I'm so sorry, I'm taking full responsibility, I hate what I did, I don't agree with it.' I didn't hear that.''

According to interviews with people who were there, the individual responses of the account followers varied significantly. Some were remorseful and contrite. Others were cocky or disengaged. All were desperately uncomfortable. Many wouldn't look up or meet the eyes of their accusers. The more emotional the targeted girls and their friends were, the more some of the followers focused on their own level of culpability rather than on the pain and hurt in front of them. ''Bro, chill,'' is how A. characterizes their attitude. ''Why are you taking it so seriously?''

It would have been different if they had been able to talk one on one, says Murphy, the boy who initially showed the account to the girls. Then he wouldn't have been so worried about what his male friends thought of him. ''I think it's because we're guys,'' Murphy says. ''Where it's like we don't want to show weakness, almost.''

As the morning wore on, Kerry felt as if she were part of a collective panic attack. The emotions that had been building inside her since the day she stood in the bathroom photographing the posts with Rosie now burst out of her mouth in a kind of howl. ''I thought I knew you guys!'' she remembers yelling. ''I was going to go to prom with you!''

By 11 a.m., a couple of hundred student protesters, most of them in the upper grades, had gathered on the floor of the main building, just yards from Room 104, where the mediation session was still underway. They sat cross-legged on the red-and-white-checked floor, taking up every inch of space. More protesters had taken over the bright red staircase that led to the upper floors. Some held signs that said things like ''I will not stand for racism'' and ''We are the human race.''

''It was silent,'' says one teacher, who requested anonymity because she feared retribution for talking to the press. ''And the expression on their faces was just fierce. Like, 'You can't intimidate us.' It was powerful.''

A few minutes earlier, Val Williams, the district superintendent, had sent out a communitywide email announcing that a ''rope that looked like a noose'' had been found hanging from a tree at a park next door to the high school. It turned out to be a rope swing, but by the time Williams sent out a correction about an hour later, tensions inside the mediation session, already at a peak, had reached a boiling point. The girls and their friends were certain the followers had hung the noose; given what they'd seen on the account, it wasn't hard to believe. Some of the followers were infuriated by the accusation and skeptical that the noose was even real. Their dismissiveness further incensed the girls, some of whom stormed out of Room 104. There, a few strides away, were the protesters.

''You guys need to see what you've caused at the school,'' one of the targeted girls said when she returned to the room. ''It's time to get out in the hallway and stand in front of that crowd so everyone can see your faces.''

In declarations filed in court, school administrators say that the roughly 250 students at the sit-in ''remained quiet and respectful'' when the account followers came out of the room. But others who were there -- students, parents and staff -- say that the protesters didn't stay completely silent for long. Ned Purdom, then an English and journalism teacher at the school, recalls hearing a rumble move through the crowd as the perpetrators came out. ''For a few seconds it was very quiet,'' he says. ''Just this silent standoff.'' He adds, ''Then the shouting started.''

''Everyone was hurling insults at us,'' Murphy says. ''Everyone was just bashing on us.''

As John Doe stood in front of everyone, his body buzzed with adrenaline. But his mind was utterly blank. He kept asking himself, Is this really happening right now?

''I was just completely shut off, very disassociated, detached from the whole thing because it didn't feel real,'' he recalls. ''That's easily the most surreal experience I've had in my life, because these are all people that I've known forever, some since kindergarten. People that I thought knew me, that I thought I knew.''

His teachers were there. Even his friends. (Later these friends would tell him that they had tried to go to class but had been told by their instructors to attend the protest instead.) And, adding to the weirdness of the moment, his mother had arrived. She had come to the school to pick him up at the end of the mediation and had witnessed the whole thing.

She pushed through the crowd until she stood between her son and the protesters with her arms thrown wide, as if to shield him with her body. ''You're the bullies,'' she told the crowd. Later, Doe would feel grateful to his mom for sticking up for him, but in that moment his only thought was, This is my mom in front of the whole school, embarrassing me.

''Get them out of here!'' she yelled to the teachers and administrators who were watching the scene unfold. ''This isn't safe!''

Then one of the account-affected girls was on her feet, yelling at Doe's mother. ''Shut up, bitch! You don't know what you're talking about! Racism is not the same as getting yelled at, OK?''

''You hung that noose,'' somebody yelled. ''Whose mom are you?''

Just as things seemed ready to spin even further out of control, the followers were hustled back into Room 104.

By early afternoon, somewhere between 300 and 700 students were out of class. The bulk were at the sit-in, but a sizable number were milling around in groups, intoxicated by the intense emotions of the day and the sudden absence of restrictions. Outside, the news vans were lined up in front of the school. A news helicopter circled overhead.

Most of the people targeted by the account had joined the protest along with their friends. After an administrator told them that they had to clear a path so as not to create a fire hazard, the protesting students had moved outside. They sat on either side of a long strip of pavement that extended from the school steps to the curb. The Instagram followers were meant to walk this gantlet, which was being described as a ''walk of shame.'' The protesters insisted no harm would come to them if they did. They just wanted the account followers to see how hurt they were, they told the school administration.

The parents of the account followers were trying to figure out another way to get their kids out of the school. Some of them, including Doe's mother, had been sequestered in a storeroom for hours while school administrators tried to determine their next move. Student protesters were looking in or banging on the windows of both the storeroom and a conference room to which the account followers had been moved after the collapse of the mediation.

At 2:22 p.m., the Albany Police Department was contacted by an unidentified caller who then handed the phone to the school's principal, Jeff Anderson, who is white. Anderson wanted to report ''a disturbance'' at the school and said they ''needed some support.'' School officials told the police that they were concerned about how to get the Instagram followers out of the school safely. According to a Police Department report, ''all available A.P.D. resources'' were immediately deployed to the area around the high school, including some officers who had been scheduled to attend a training outside the city. A nearby intersection was blocked off.

The police recommendation was for two plainclothes officers who were already on campus to escort the involved students outside via the back exit, a complicated route that involved crossing a courtyard, then going through the lobby of the school gym to reach the sidewalk. Two marked patrol cars would be waiting for them.

At around 2:50 p.m., a physical-education teacher arrived to accompany the Instagram followers alongside the two plainclothes detectives. When they got the signal, the students in the conference room shot across the hall to meet up with the parents who had been waiting in the storeroom and slip out through a back door into the courtyard. Then everyone just ran.

Outside, the protesters were still waiting for the Instagram followers to walk the gantlet. Then someone shouted from inside the building, ''They're going out the back!''

By the time the Instagram followers and their parents reached the gym lobby, a large crowd of students had gathered outside, phones out, filming, yelling. An empty water bottle flew through the air and struck one of the mothers on the head. As the Instagram followers remember it, their police escorts drifted out of sight.

It was too crowded to run, so the account followers had to shuffle single file. Suddenly Murphy felt a sharp tug on his back. The P.E. teacher had his hand on Murphy's backpack to keep him from getting sucked into the crowd, and he had been pulled backward himself. The next thing Murphy knew, someone had flipped him around and was punching him in the face. The blows broke his nose. Blood gushed onto his shirt and his white Vans, pooling on the ground. Another account follower was also hit.

Doe and the other sophomores and their parents made it to a minivan driven by his father, but the van was soon surrounded by students. ''We're trapped,'' one of the parents recalls. ''We can't move. We can't drive. They start shaking the car, pushing the car, and we're all sort of bouncing around inside, and I just don't understand what the hell is happening.'' The parent says, ''I don't know how to describe how terrifying it was.''

The first lawsuit was filed a month later by four of the Instagram followers and their parents. Named as defendants were both the Albany Unified School District and Superintendent Val Williams; the principal, Jeff Anderson; and Melisa Pfohl. The lawsuit argued that both the Instagram posts themselves and the likes and comments were expressive or political speech, which is protected by the First Amendment, and that because @yungcavage was a private account, created and interacted with outside school, the school district had no authority to punish the students for engaging with it. The students who had participated in the mediation session also argued that the school had placed them in harm's way ''with reckless indifference'' during the sit-in, by riling up the crowd with the erroneous email about the noose and by failing to find them a safe way to leave the school.

The second lawsuit came a little over a week later, filed on behalf of the three sophomores and another account follower who hadn't interacted with any of the posts. The second suit included a slightly different First Amendment argument: The district might have the right to discipline students because of hateful speech, but ''liking'' a post and following an account were not hateful in and of themselves and thus were constitutionally protected. But free-speech issues were not the primary focus. Instead, the lawsuit argued that by exposing their identities and treating them as if they were responsible for the creation of the account, the district had made it impossible for these minimally involved students to safely return to school, thus depriving them of their right to education. By the end of June, Murphy and Charles would each file lawsuits of their own, on free-speech and other grounds, bringing the total of litigating students to 10.

Almost as soon as the first lawsuits were filed, the parents of the account's targets began investigating whether they could sue the parents of the account followers. Most of the firms they approached weren't interested in the case, perhaps because the families they wanted to sue didn't have the kind of deep pockets the school district had. A.'s mother, though, eventually found a lawyer who would take A.'s case: Elizabeth Riles, a Black woman who specialized in workplace discrimination and personal injury.

But A. wasn't interested in investing more of her time and energy thinking about the incident. She just wanted the whole thing to go away. Fewer than half of the Instagram followers had ever returned to school after the failed mediation session, but running into those who had was a source of daily tension. ''Just working on not being fazed by them being there was hard,'' she says.

The followers had been punished as much as they could be, yet the impact of the account lingered. At school, she felt scrutinized both for being Black and also for having been victimized. ''People that I didn't talk to would be way too nice to me or just kind of assume that I was like some type of like politically correct bomb that was about to go off and correct you,'' she says. Often, she stayed home. Her mother worried about the way her once-fearless child seemed to have lost the ability to climb out of bed in the morning. She gave A. a Chihuahua puppy to lift her spirits. But that too was a challenge. A. made a point of walking the dog during school hours, when she knew she wouldn't run into any of her peers. ''I didn't want to go outside,'' she recalls. ''I didn't want people to see me.''

Over the course of the following school year, A.'s mother kept bringing up the prospect of a lawsuit. With the one-year anniversary of the account's discovery coming up, they were running out of time to sue. ''You'll have no options after that,'' A. remembers her mother telling her. ''You're limiting a plethora of opportunities for yourself if you don't do anything.''

The word ''limiting'' hit hard. Because A. did feel limited. She was a senior now and hadn't applied to any four-year colleges. But some of those followers were going to college, weren't they? They were going to go on with their lives. ''I already felt limited in certain aspects by my social class,'' she says. She decided to go ahead with the lawsuit.

In March 2018, Elizabeth Riles filed a complaint in Alameda County Superior Court against Charles and the two other boys who were considered most responsible, along with their parents, for violation of A.'s civil rights, intentional infliction of emotional distress, negligent infliction of emotional distress and invasion of privacy. One of the boys was also accused of battery (for touching A.'s hair).

A month later, the school district settled with seven of the 10 Instagram followers who had sued. For four of those students, the settlements, to be paid by the district's insurance, were meant to cover any medical costs, counseling and moving expenses or private-school tuition. Three boys who had returned to the high school each received $80,000 cash settlements, after the court found that the district had violated their First Amendment rights because they had never indicated any approval, via a like or comment, of the posts that targeted individual students.

At a school-board meeting soon after, parents of some of the targeted girls took to the microphone, huddled together at the lectern. A.'s mother wore a black leather jacket over a striped turtleneck, her long blond hair spread over her shoulders and her arms folded across her chest. ''How could you not have even said no?'' she demanded, tearfully. ''What you have done has been like putting salt in a wound. And our girls still have to go to school because they want to graduate. They have to go to school and hear these boys talk about how they're going to have a victory party?''

Slowly, the last of the lawsuits made their way through the courts. By the fall of 2020, there were just two people suing the district, one of whom was Charles. The same two were also among the last remaining defendants in A.'s lawsuit. Charles sat for deposition after deposition, not really clear about which case he was being interviewed for. ''I definitely, objectively think, OK, I'm in the wrong,'' and his classmate was in the right, he told me. ''She didn't really do anything wrong.'' Even so, he allowed the lawsuits to keep going, fighting on two fronts, as plaintiff and as defendant.

A trial date for A.'s lawsuit was set for the end of November. Three years and eight months had passed since the account was first discovered, but many of the students on both sides of the story were still struggling to get on with their lives. The pandemic shutdown intensified the feeling that they were stuck in an endless loop. A. described her life as ''purgatory'' and fantasized about having the resources to leave town.

John Doe had continued the soul-searching journey that began after the account's discovery. By his sophomore year in college, he found that he was grateful for the way the experience had changed him. He was more serious now than he'd been as a 15-year-old social butterfly, plagued by both anxiety and depression. Still, he thought he had gained more than he had lost. ''Had I just continued that trajectory at Albany, how I would be as a person -- I think I would be worse off,'' he says. ''I would probably be less introspective, less critical. I would think less. Because I question things now in a way that I don't think I could have before, had I not gone through the experience like this.''

Charles wasn't quite as resolved. He wanted to settle A.'s case, but he was having trouble coming to terms with the fact that he would have to hand over his own money. Funds were tight. He was still working a retail job, still going to community college. He hadn't gotten anything from his own lawsuit, which his lawyer continued to appeal. ''It's hard,'' he says. ''It's not like I don't want them to get something out of it. It's just, I don't want them to take it from me.''

On Nov. 30, 2020, the day the trial was scheduled to begin, Elizabeth Riles told the judge that a settlement had been reached. Riles would not confirm the amount, but Charles remembers agreeing to pay $15,000. Combined with settlements from the other defendants, some of them confidential, the amount going to A. was meaningful, even if it wasn't quite as much as the $80,000 awarded to some of the account followers.

Afterward, she sounded more relieved than jubilant. ''I'm very glad that this chapter is over in my life,'' she said. Now she had a little money, a little freedom. ''I've been battling with myself about whether I should play it safe or travel and take bigger leaps that have been presenting themselves to me,'' she said. ''This is just kind of affirming to me that I should keep taking leaps. Because it's working.'' Shortly afterward, she moved to the highlands of Guatemala to study meditation, metaphysics and yoga at a retreat center by Lake Atitlán. She has been traveling the world ever since.

Charles's lawsuit kept going, his lawyers appealing to a higher court with every loss until finally, this June, the U.S. Supreme Court declined to hear the last appeal.

Darren McNally, who is now the principal of Albany High School, has a bald pate, a bushy reddish beard and an implacable demeanor that belies his interest in the emotional lives of his students and their families. In 2017, when the @yungcavage account was discovered, he was a first-year administrator. Today most of the students involved are 23, around the age he was when he first started teaching. When he thinks about them, which is often, he thinks about the importance of teaching empathy and interpersonal connection, of helping students connect the dots between the more abstract lessons about injustice they receive in the classroom and the immediate impacts of their own actions on the human beings sitting in the desks next to them. ''These kids had been instructed that these things are bad on an intellectual level,'' he said, referring to the racism and sexism of the @yungcavage account, ''but not on a deeper interpersonal and emotional level. And so they knew it would be transgressive, it would be edgy to do this, but didn't understand the harm that could come from it.''

Schools can bridge that gap, McNally suggests, by building a capacity for reflection among young people who may not be in the habit of thinking deeply about their own or other people's emotions. But doing so requires moving beyond the conventional calculations of school discipline, in which the menu of responses to bullying or hate speech is limited to three choices: ignore, suspend or expel. When the Albany community demanded the harshest possible retribution, it was in part because few people could imagine an alternative that didn't amount to shrugging it off or sweeping it under the rug. ''We live in a society that is so punishment-focused, that is so focused on turning people into right and wrong and then punishing wrongness, that it's incredibly difficult to get people out of that mind-set,'' he says. ''It makes me think about how we as a society have actually trained everybody that exclusion is what you do to people that are not right.''

Like McNally, Melisa Pfohl has found herself in a contemplative frame of mind since the resolution of the lawsuits. Back in 2017, she interviewed every student she knew was involved on both sides of the account. Each of their stories was different; many were heartbreaking. It is those overlooked particularities that she mourns now, the complexities that were lost in the rush to respond to the community's desire for immediate action and stern retribution.

Back then, it felt as if she were in the middle of a conflagration. ''It was a fire line,'' she says. ''And so everybody was passing the buckets.'' Her eyes fill with tears at the recollection. ''Some of us, me included, accidentally picked up some gas. We didn't know it, right? We were just passing the bucket. And I'm sorry that it was gasoline. I didn't mean to do any harm. I tried to pick up plenty of buckets of water. But when it's all moving so quickly like that, it all looks the same.''

This article is adapted from ''Accountable: The True Story of a Racist Social Media Account and the Teenagers Whose Lives It Changed,'' published this month by Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Dashka Slater is a writer in California with a focus on teenagers and criminal justice. Her book ''The 57 Bus,'' a New York Times best seller, was based on an article she wrote for the magazine in 2015 and went on to win a 2018 Stonewall Book Award from the American Library Association. Pola Maneli is an illustrator in South Africa whose work has a narrative, cinematic style.

-----------------------------------------

Bring the Noise.

Citation metadata

Author: Alia Malek

Date: Aug. 6, 2023

From: The New York Times Magazine

Publisher: The New York Times Company

Document Type: Interview

Length: 6,445 words

Lexile Measure:

1200L

Document controls

Translate

Decrease font size

Increase font size

Display options

Listen

Send to Google Drive™

Send to Microsoft OneDrive™

Email

Download

Print

Main content

In mid-March, weeks after a ship wrecked on Italy's Calabrian coast, the waters of the Mediterranean Sea were still releasing ashore what remained: planks of wood, engine parts, children's shoes, bodies. The season of drowning migrants had come early this year.

Two hundred and fifty miles away in Sicilian waters off Trapani, in preparation for the crossings and tragedies yet to come -- which always come, and yet which rich countries greet each time as if they are new crises -- people from all over Italy and beyond were volunteering their weekend to learn how to perform rescues at sea. At the training were first-timers and veterans, people who in their ordinary lives were teachers, paramedics, students, commercial sailors and even a chef.

On Sunday a special visitor joined them; he would have blended in, dressed like the others in the same royal blue helmet and windbreaker, except for the glances continually directed his way, some openly gawking -- the price of being so famous in his native Italy, which knows him by his first and by now household name: Ghali, Arabic for ''precious.''

The previous summer, Ghali, a rapper, donated to Mediterranea Saving Humans, the nonprofit group running this training exercise, an RHIB -- a rigid-hull inflatable boat, the kind of orange dinghy that can be rapidly deployed to ride out to those imperiled at sea to transport them back to the mothership. Ghali, who was born in Milan to Tunisian parents, has repeatedly called his purchase of the boat ''the most rap thing you can do.'' He also says, repeatedly, ''It's not enough.''

He named it after a song on his most recent album, ''Bayna'' -- ''It is clear'' in Arabic. Though Bayna was meant to be deployed in late September, it had yet to see a single mission, caught instead in the currents of Italian politics. Since last October, the country has been led by Giorgia Meloni, the head of the hard-right Brothers of Italy party (its logo includes the flame adopted by Mussolini's supporters after his demise). Before becoming prime minister, she said that rescue ships, which she called ''ferries'' and likened to human traffickers, should be sunk. Her government has worked actively to limit the time at sea of the roughly 20 search-and-rescue ships patrolling the water. Mediterranea's ship, the Mare Jonio, is the only one to sail under an Italian flag, subjecting it to Italian oversight.

The tragedy off Calabria -- 94 bodies were recovered and 11 more are presumed dead -- reignited debate around the country's approach to migrant sea crossings. Ghali's trip to Trapani to inaugurate Bayna was scheduled in hopes that the publicity might help galvanize public opinion and jump start the stalled recertification of the Mare Jonio so that it could be in the water by spring, when the crossings would resume in earnest.

After securing his life jacket, Ghali lowered himself into one of Mediterranea's two older orange RHIBs, collapsing his 6-foot-4 frame to take a seat. The volunteers were split into two teams, with one boat assigned the role of desperation, the other salvation. Ghali was in the boat of those in need of rescue. The other sped away.

What they were about to rehearse -- approach and first contact -- can be extremely dangerous. It requires rescuers to establish trust with those on the other boat as quickly as possible while asserting authority firmly but nonthreateningly. After days at sea, often adrift, migrants can rush to get off their (often flimsy) vessel, potentially capsizing it.

The volunteers on Ghali's RHIB, who had been training all weekend, spotted the rescue RHIB approaching. On cue, they became agitated, shouting in English: ''Hello! Hello! We are here!'' A friendly ''Hello!'' was volleyed back from the rescue boat. ''We are an Italian ship, we are here to help all of you,'' said a volunteer named Gabriele Mantici, a professional skipper and a free diver. ''But you have to stay calm.''

A chorus of ''Come, come,'' answered from Ghali's boat, which began to bob with more force.

''Sit down,'' Mantici said in an even tone. ''We are here to rescue. We will bring you to that ship over there,'' he said, gesturing to the Mare Jonio. ''But you have to stay calm and sit down.''

''Please, please,'' they interrupted, and Ghali, who had caught on, suddenly rose and waved his arms. Again the boat rocked.

Fabio Gianfrancesco, Mediterranea's deputy rescue coordinator, who is by day a philosophy professor in Rome, took a moment to explain things to Ghali. ''His position is important,'' he said, indicating Mantici. ''The one who is talking is standing tallest, with his foot on the edge. It gets those about to be rescued to focus on that person.''

''OK, I'm going to pass you a life jacket,'' Mantici said. ''You're gonna wear the life jacket and close it with the belt,'' he continued, miming passing around, slipping the jacket overhead and clicking the belt closed. ''When all of you have the life jacket, we're gonna bring you one by one aboard. But you have to stay calm.''

Gianfrancesco leaned over and quietly interjected, ''Communication by gesture is the only way to be sure to get meaning across.''

The ''migrants'' surged to grab for the life jackets, and the RHIB, even in these easy waters, jolted.

''Go back, go back,'' Mantici told his crew, and their RHIB retreated. To Ghali's group, he said: ''If you do that, we cannot help. OK? You have to stay calm and listen. OK?''

Ghali's RHIB settled, and the rescue RHIB approached close enough to distribute the life vests. Once everyone had secured the belt, the transfer began.

Back on board the Mare Jonio after the drill, Ghali saw that Bayna had been inflated. The idea to donate it had been hatched more than a year earlier. Now, finally in its presence, he ran his hand across it and declared, ''Che bomba!''

Barely anyone came to the uppermost deck to watch Ghali inscribe ''Bayna'' on its hull. People were heading back to their regular lives; there were flights to catch. But those who were there applauded. Ghali himself seemed lost in thought.

When asked who he imagines will be saved, he responded: ''These volunteers are saving my friends, their families, my siblings. I feel gratitude. My siblings that save my other siblings.'' He went on, ''They are saving me.''

In the Chorus of one of Ghali's biggest hits, ''Cara Italia'' (''Dear Italy''), he sings: ''When they say to me 'Go home,' I answer, 'I'm already here.' I love you dear Italy.''

It's not only xenophobic Italians who are unable to grasp that Italy is home for someone like Ghali. Fans who profess their love for him still ask, ''When did you come to Italy?'' The persistent perception of Ghali as foreign stems in part from how Italy understands itself: as a country of epic emigration -- its diaspora is spread throughout the Americas, Europe and Australia -- not immigration.

Ghali has upended that insular national self-image by narrating his reality as the son of Tunisian immigrants, in songs so wildly popular they have been heard in advertisements for BMW, McDonald's and Oreo; ''Cara Italia'' was used in a ubiquitous Vodafone campaign.

Though Ghali was born in Italy, he didn't become a citizen until he was 18, after what he describes as a complicated process, made so by Italy's now decades-old citizenship law, which was meant to keep the diaspora connected to Italy, not to integrate newcomers. Italy recognizes Italian heritage as grounds for citizenship even if an individual's family has not lived in Italy for generations. But in contrast to the United States, for example, there is no automatic citizenship granted to those born in Italy to parents who are not Italian. This is the difference between ius sanguinis and ius soli: belonging by blood versus belonging by territory (of birth).

In Ghali's song ''Flashback,'' he says: ''Interviewers ask me, 'Ius soli?' I just think we're more soli,'' playing on how while in Latin ''soli'' means soil, in Italian it means alone.

Those born in Italy to stranieri -- or foreign -- parents are known as the seconda generazione, as in second-generation immigrants. (Children born of immigrant parents in the United States are considered ''first generation'' Americans.) In a looser definition, it also refers to individuals who arrived younger than 18, as well as those who, like Ghali, have gained Italian citizenship. As of 2018, Italy had roughly 1.3 million second-generation minors in that broader sense, three-quarters of whom were born in Italy. They made up 13 percent of Italy's under-18 population.

Ghali's mother left Tunisia at 20. As Ghali tells the story, his father came years later and, after becoming a drug trafficker, was in and out of prison and Ghali's life until he was gone altogether, back to Tunisia. With his father's second arrest and the end of what Ghali calls haram flus -- ill-gotten money -- his mother took work as a janitor, cleaning hospitals and houses. It was Ghali and his mother against the world or, as he sings in ''Flashback,'' ''in the guerrilla'' together.

She was the one who took him, in 2003, to see the American film ''8 Mile,'' featuring the rapper Eminem. He was instantly smitten with this ''American thing,'' rap. An older Tunisian boy soon introduced Ghali to the work of Joe Cassano, a rapper who died young in 1999, and gave Ghali a mix CD of Italian rap. He devoured it whole. To learn that rap could be done in Italian too -- a language he loved -- was a revelation.

Ghali came to Italian rap at a time when, like Eminem, emerging Italian rappers were embracing the genre to narrate their own personal struggles, often as societal outsiders. Andrea Bertolucci, a journalist who covers Italian rap, contrasts that approach to an earlier period in the 1980s and '90s, when rap in Italy was adopted by members of leftist movements, their lyrics expressing broader political ideas. Cassano, Bertolucci says, was ''a real lyricist and pioneer'' in that he spoke about himself with great introspection. But in both phases, he says, ''because major record labels weren't paying attention, rap had no censorship; it was a subversive genre, a free genre.''

And Ghali, who spent childhood summers in Tunisia, then under the rule of a repressive regime that took power in 1987, felt that freedom viscerally. He would be reminded, listening to American and Italian rappers fearlessly denouncing the police, that in Tunisia the same act could lead to jail.

The year that Ghali discovered rap, he and his mother moved into public housing in Baggio, on the periphery of Milan. Rap became his entrée with his peers; to this day, his inner circle is largely made up of people he met in Baggio. ''Even before becoming famous, Ghali was famous for us,'' says his friend Nathan Bonaiuti, whose mother immigrated from Eritrea. Soon Ghali was quietly recording tracks in his room, so his mom wouldn't hear the bad words, and passing out demo CDs around Baggio. ''Rap gave sense to it all,'' he says. ''No one could stop me from saying what I think.''

The freedom he found in rap, though, contrasted with his reality. Ghali says he always felt Italian: ''In kindergarten, with the nuns, I prayed Ave Maria!'' But his ID document was clearly different from a regular Italian ID card, an effective reminder that they were ''guests.'' That rejection was compounded by the media. ''There was never a moment the TV news said 'Tunisian' as a positive thing,'' he says. ''Only 'a Tunisian raped.' 'A Tunisian arrested.' 'ISIS members were three guys of Tunisian origins.' I was even ashamed of my name.''

While still a teenager, Ghali became the hype man onstage for some of Italy's biggest rap acts. ''It was swag to have an Arab,'' he says. Eventually, he went solo, certain that he could succeed. ''I was telling a story that hadn't been told, and I knew that there were other people like me,'' he says. ''I fell in love with Italian rap but didn't feel represented; they weren't talking specifically about me. And I knew that the children of immigrants were starting to exist in Italy but that no one was telling their story.''

And so he told his own story, using the mix of languages that are his daily vernacular. In Ghali's lyrics, a single sentence's subject, verb, objects and adjectives might all be in different languages. He deployed irony more than aggression. Of course he was angry about a lot, but, he says: ''If I said these things, I wouldn't have found a chance. I was already penalized for being Arab; I had to be liked. I didn't want to be accepted only by 'kids who hang in the street'; I wanted to be accepted by Italian families. I wanted to be recognized as a national artist.''

His exaltation of his own mother likely helped win over many an Italian mamma, a perhaps unexpected demographic for a rapper. (In ''Wily Wily,'' he calls himself ''son of Ma and her sacrifices.'') In 2018, his sold-out show at the Mediolanum Forum in Assago was broadcast live. The camera panned the crowd singing along even as Ghali moved between languages. The audience went into true rapture when he brought his mother, carrying the Italian flag, up onstage.

His love for Italy, meanwhile, has sometimes blinded Italians to his criticism of it. Many Italians seem to interpret the song ''Cara Italia,'' whose official video has more than 100 million views on YouTube (Italy's population is roughly 60 million), as a pure love letter, when it is actually a critique:

But what kind of politics is this?What is the difference between left and right?They change the ministers, but not the soup The toilet is here on the left, the bathroom is at the bottom on the right. ...Some people are closed-minded and left behind, like the Middle AgesThe newspaper abuses it, talks about the foreigner as if he were an alienWithout a passport, looking only for money.

''They say: 'Look at him, how much he loves Italy. He wrote a song for Italy,''' Ghali says with frustration. '' 'What a good boy. What a good foreigner! Foreigner but he's good.' I'm neither good nor a foreigner.''

But it's not only his own belonging that he is asserting. As Italy debates whether to embrace or somehow reverse its burgeoning multiculturalism, second generationers are mostly excluded from the national conversation. Yet in his music, Bertolucci says, Ghali ''gave voice finally to a community that never had political, social, religious or even linguistic representation.'' Bertolucci points to how, in addition to using cultural references common to many second-generation youth, Ghali's groundbreaking mixing -- or even ''contaminating'' -- the Italian language with Arabic, French, Spanish and English ''created a territory of linguistic claim for those who, like him, felt excluded from the rights of citizenship and integration.''

But with its references to universal emotions and a '90s and '00s adolescence -- Justins Timberlake and Bieber, Pixar and Pokémon -- Ghali's music is also what Bertolucci calls ''an engine of cultural approach'' for all Italians.

As Ghali sings in ''Bayna'': ''You dream America, I dream Italy. The new Italy.''

In Ghali's life and music, the Mediterranean Sea is eternally present -- an acknowledgment that it both binds and separates the fortunes of those on either side of it. During his many summers in Tunis visiting family, Ghali was constantly aware of its siren appeal. Many Tunisians leave Tunisia in search of a better life, but for those who cannot obtain legal visas to seek opportunities elsewhere, there has always been the crossing, an option both expensive and perilous. Ghali often overheard adults in the parlor crying because someone -- friends or relatives -- had drowned trying to make it to Italy. ''It was there, always, always, each year,'' he says.

In Tunisia and other North African countries, those who make the journey are known as harraga, or ''burners,'' because when they reach the other side, they have been known to set their identifying documents alight so that European authorities cannot know who they are nor where to deport them to. An entire body of music exists about the harga, the crossing. The songs revolve around recurring themes: the desire to leave; the dangers of the crossing; the suffering of the exiled and the family left behind; the acceptance of divine will. Those on the boats seeking to calm their nerves in rough waters sometimes sing the songs together. Ghali eventually wrote one himself.

One summer vacation, when he was 16, Ghali arrived from Italy and began talking up life in Milan to his Tunisian cousin. Shortly after that, the cousin, only a few years older than Ghali, disappeared. The family looked for him for hours. He finally returned late at night, covered in engine grease. He had been caught trying to stow away on a boat to Italy.

For years, Ghali carried guilt that his youthful boasting could have cost his cousin his life. He wrote the words to the song ''Mamma'' based on the experience. In the video, a young Tunisian in an Italian national soccer team jacket plans to take off in the middle of the night. Ghali sings:

He looks at me, my Nike Airs, and thinks thatIt's easy to make cash but he doesn't know it's not like thatAnd he will end up like the others doing wesh wesh, bang bang

But Ghali knows he won't convince him, because Ghali knows that had he too been born in Tunisia, he would make the same choice to leave. He instead addresses the sea:

Sea o sea, don't become roughPlease, take him to safetySea o sea, please don't become rough or I'll drownMake sure he arrives, take him safely to shore

If Ghali was acutely aware of the crossings and drownings, that generally wasn't the case for Italians, let alone Europeans in countries farther from the Mediterranean. But then the crossings, which include refugees fleeing war and persecution as well as economic migrants, more than tripled in 2014, partly because of the Arab Spring. The large influxes caught Europe off guard, as if it had forgotten that many of these countries were just across the Mediterranean. Eventually, the sea would become both a political battleground and a graveyard. Since 2014, more than 27,000 people have died or gone missing attempting to cross, in large part because Europe has seen the Mediterranean as a border to be enforced, not a search-and-rescue zone to be actively patrolled, a vacuum that ships like the Mare Jonio try to fill.

To pre-empt the arrivals, the European Union has focused on stopping departures from the jumping-off points, essentially turning off the faucet, while the pipeline remains. To do so, it has effectively outsourced some of its border enforcement to countries with much less stringent human rights standards on the other side of the sea. The E.U. pioneered this approach following the 2015 migrant crisis, when nearly a million people -- roughly 80 percent of them fleeing Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq -- arrived in Europe by sea. Most had departed from Turkey, but after a 2016 deal with the E.U. for six billion euros, Turkey stopped people from leaving its shores in large numbers. (The deal also simultaneously strengthened the hand -- domestically and internationally -- of Turkey's increasingly authoritarian leader, Recep Tayyip Erdogan.)

The following year, Italy signed an E.U.-sponsored deal with Libya, its former colony, to reduce sea crossings originating there. Human rights groups continue to denounce the deal, having documented the use of murder, enforced disappearance, torture, enslavement, sexual violence and other acts committed by the Libyans against people who sought to make the crossing to Italy.

While the center-left Democratic Party concluded the Libya deal, the Italian politician most associated with anti-migrant sentiment is Matteo Salvini, the leader of the far-right League party. In June 2018, Salvini, who is bombastic and media-relishing, became both deputy prime minister and interior minister. During his 14-month tenure, he decreed a series of hard-line measures that abolished key protections for migrants, making it easier for them to be deported, and closed Italian ports to rescue ships. He argued (as Meloni does today) that these ships are a ''pull'' factor compelling people to cross, more so than the ''push'' factors of the situations they are leaving. He refused docking permission to more than one rescue ship, stranding them at sea. Salvini is currently on trial for his actions in one such case, with prosecution witnesses including the actor Richard Gere, who visited the migrants onboard.

On a July 2019 remix of the British rapper Stormzy's ''Vossi Bop,'' Ghali took aim at Salvini, painting him as a ''fascist politician'' who says that ''those who arrived by rubber raft cannot stay.'' Ghali imagined a scene at an AC Milan soccer match (both Ghali and Salvini are Milanisti, fans of AC Milan) and rapped about Salvini's presence there ruining the vibe. ''I am an artist, and politics is not necessarily my job,'' Ghali said in an interview published the day the track was released. ''My music tells my story, and rap, which began as a social complaint and has always been my bread and butter, was the best medium to fulfill my need to take a stand against those who exploit fear to create an enemy.''

Salvini, perhaps the most powerful man in Italy at the time, took to Twitter to spar with the rapper. Linking to a VICE Italy article with the headline ''Ghali Attacking Salvini in a Song With Stormzy Is Pure Joy,'' he quoted Ghali's lyrics before adding, ''He insults me but I don't mind his music, is that bad???'' with the cool sunglasses emoji.

The next month, Salvini overplayed his hand attempting to become prime minister. Instead, the ruling coalition changed, and the new government stopped enforcing Salvini's decrees.

Around the corner was the pandemic, and as the world went into lockdown and travel plummeted, the sea crossings dropped as well. Italy, particularly in the north, was hard hit by Covid. Salvini railed against mask requirements and other restrictions. The mayor of Milan, Giuseppe Sala, later recruited Ghali to pen the words for the video accompanying the city's post-lockdown campaign. ''We wanted to give a face and a voice to the city that would be able to represent a new generation of Milanese, an emblem of an intercultural and engaged society,'' Sala says. ''Ghali found the words to speak to everyone.''

One Friday night at the restaurant Bice, a Milan institution frequented by professionals and bourgeois families, a skirt-suited woman who looked to be approaching 60 was walking out as Ghali walked in. She immediately recognized him. ''I thought you were in Morocco,'' she said, genuinely surprised. His most recent Instagram post was indeed from Marrakesh.

Ghali had no reservation, and the restaurant was crowded. He looked ready to wait, but the hostess excitedly found him a table in the corner. Bice is in the quadrilatero della moda, the heart of the Italian fashion world, which has embraced Ghali. Whether the other diners knew who he was or not, they likely understood he was someone famous. Whether they understood him to be Italian is another thing.

That quality of Ghali's -- the sense that he could be from many places -- is what drew Italian fashion to him, says Federico Sarica, head of content at GQ Italy, who put Ghali on the magazine's cover for a second time, in May 2022. ''The industry liked Ghali right away because he was the Italian artist that looked most like the rest of the world,'' Sarica says. The reason this gap existed for Ghali to fill is simple, he says: ''Italy is always very behind.''

It only made it easier that Ghali is handsome and tall and wears clothes well. The United Colors of Benetton chose him as its 2021 brand ambassador because ''he embodies its founding values of multiculturalism and integration,'' calling him ''one of the most influential artists of his generation.'' He designed a collection for them for the fall of 2021, which included hijabs for men and clothing with Arabic writing on them.

''Ghali was absolutely new for Italy,'' says Roberto Saviano, the journalist and essayist perhaps best known outside Italy as the author of ''Gomorrah.'' For Saviano, Ghali comes across as utterly Italian -- ''He's a Milanista!'' -- while also never hiding his Tunisian origins. That easy synthesis, he says, allows Ghali both to normalize the second generation and to humanize those taking to the sea. Saviano cites the song ''Mamma,'' saying that it ''relayed the drama of the sea departures far more than any news story, book or film, because it tells about how and why a boy decides to leave and does not hide the contradictions.''

Karima Moual is a Morocco-born Italian journalist who writes about those contradictions -- including the ongoing obstacles to integration and opportunity -- for national publications like La Stampa and La Repubblica and as a pundit for Mediaset, the country's largest commercial broadcaster. Despite these very Italian credentials, she says, ''I forever remain 'the journalist of Moroccan origins.''' For her, there is a failure to ''take this step forward, of recognizing that there is a generation, fully Italian, that has a migration background but is integrated, doesn't want to 'return' -- who sees its future here.'' Speaking of Ghali, she says: ''Finally, there is a second generationer, a 'straniero,' who transcends. He is no longer 'the Tunisian.' Ghali is Ghali.''

Sarica, at GQ, cautions against making Ghali into a symbol or thinking that Italy ''looks more like Ghali than Meloni.'' Moual is measured on that question. ''Today belongs to Meloni,'' she says, simply because Meloni is prime minister. But what won the election, Moual says, was fear, as well as the desire to deny the existence of a generation that ''for all intents and purposes is Italian.'' It's a vision that is, she says, ''untied to reality -- and that reality is Ghali's.''

For those living that reality, rap music remains one of the few avenues to share their version of it. In doing so, a new wave of rappers -- for whom Ghali paved the way, and some of whom he signed to his label, Sto Records -- are confronting, often angrily, an Italy that remains unable to reconcile with its demographic future.

In Summer 2021, the number of people coming across the sea began to climb again. In November of that year, Ghali's earlier rapped scenario came to life: He and Salvini were both at San Siro Stadium cheering for AC Milan, seated near each other. When a Black player on their team scored, Salvini began to cheer. In a video that went viral, Ghali is seen yelling at Salvini, as Ghali's friends restrain him. ''Murderer!'' he shouted. ''Why the [expletive] are you rejoicing? A Black guy scored, a Black guy like me, like many, and like many of those you decide to make die at sea! Shame on you!''

Soon after that, Ghali began to discuss with Mediterranea supporting their work beyond the small donations he had already made. On July 19, 2022, Ghali announced on Instagram, ''I bought myself a boat.'' The post's photo carousel included a video clip from ''Mamma'' and excerpts from songs across his career in which he referenced or narrated the crossings, the last being from ''Bayna.''

As it happens, the next day Italy's government unraveled; national elections were scheduled for September. Meloni made migration, which she had in the past likened to racial replacement, a key issue in her campaign, promising a naval blockade. On election day, Ghali voted at his old school in Baggio, posting pictures of his ballots and Italian passport on Instagram with this message: ''Your distrust of Italian politics and your right to vote are two separate things. The right to vote is one of the most important forms of individual freedom we have, and there are those before us who have fought a lifetime to get it. Don't be lazy and don't make excuses.''

Meloni won with 26 percent of the vote, forming a governing coalition with parties led by Salvini and the former prime minister Silvio Berlusconi (who died in June 2023). As the new year arrived, she kept her focus on the sea crossings, issuing decree 1/2023, aimed at minimizing rescue ships' time at sea. At the end of January, she presided over the signing of an $8 billion gas deal with Libya that included the pledge of an additional five boats to stop attempted crossings.

Ghali responded on Instagram: ''It is absurd to think that a portion of the taxes we pay as Italian citizens is given to Libyan coast guards to imprison, torture, enslave and deprive of all human rights thousands and thousands of refugees in Libyan concentration camps. ... [They say] that they don't know what happens in Libya once we send back these people. All lies, they have known everything all along and continue doing it.''

Meloni was also pursuing a similar deal with Tunisia. She had an opening for such a deal because Tunisia's president, Kais Saied, who in 2021 dismissed the country's prime minister and later dissolved Parliament, was able to act more unilaterally.

Then, on Feb. 21, Saied gave a speech offering his version of racial-replacement theory: that there is a conspiracy to replace Tunisians with sub-Saharan Black migrants, whom he called ''hordes'' bringing crime. The violence his speech unleashed set off panicked departures. Business boomed for the traffickers.

''I am ashamed of him as I am ashamed of Salvini,'' Ghali says.

Despite the cold winter sea, a smuggler's boat set out from Turkey on Feb. 22. Each of the at least 185 people on board -- mostly Afghans, but Iranians, Syrians, Pakistanis and Iraqis as well -- had paid about 8,000 euros. (A one-way flight from Istanbul to Rome would have cost around 200 euros.) Meloni's new laws targeting search-and-rescue ships went into effect the next day, and Italian authorities impounded a ship operated by Médecins Sans Frontières. The Mare Jonio, with Bayna onboard, was still confined to a dock in Trapani.

By the night of Feb. 25, Frontex, the E.U. border-control agency, alerted Italy that the boat from Turkey was on course for the Calabrian coast. But before dawn, within sight of shore, it broke apart. Fishermen saw its passengers signaling with their cellphone lights and ran to help. They found bodies already splayed on the sand.

These were the beaches of Steccato di Cutro, a modest village of 450 in the off season. Its streets are named for far-flung cities and countries -- Via Oslo and Via Zurigo, vias Atene, Dublino, Praga, Barcellona, Tibilisi, Tirana, Niger, Etiopia -- as if calling out to tourists around the globe. The world's problems washed up instead.

The tragedy sparked an outpouring of grief. In nearby Crotone, a city of 60,000, where survivors and the dead had been transferred, Italians paid their respects, filing through a gymnasium where donated coffins were laid out, leaving offerings of stuffed animals at the ones sized for babies and toddlers. Family members who had come from other European countries draped themselves across caskets. Anguish mixed with anger as news emerged that Italian authorities knew of the boat's imminent arrival and sent out the Financial Police instead of the Coast Guard, treating the ship as a law-enforcement matter rather than a rescue. Because of the rough seas, the police returned to shore, and Italy took no further action.

Instead of saving lives, local, regional and national agencies were marshaled by sea, air and land in a much larger and more expensive operation to recover the bodies still missing. On the beach, near a memorial made of shipwreck detritus, cadaver tents were set up, and helicopters hovered above the waves, looking.

Speaking nearly a month after the wreck, the mayor of Crotone, Vincenzo Voce, said of those involved in the operation, ''Everyone is asking for psychological support.'' He added, ''It's not easy to go and retrieve the remains of a body that's now been in water for days.''

When what to do with those remains became an issue, the mayor and town council of the tiny municipality of Marcellinara realized that even if families wanted their relatives buried in Calabria, there were no cemeteries that provided Muslim rites. They set aside part of the town cemetery for Muslim burial. Vittorio Scerbo, the mayor, called it ''a small act.'' Repeating what has become a motto among the Marcellinara leadership, he said, ''We did it for the dead; we can do it for the living.''

Meloni blamed the loss of life on smugglers. She vowed to end such tragedies by ending departures, and said she would do so ''by demanding maximum cooperation from the departure and origin states.'' She concluded a deal on border enforcement with Tunisia in April.

Her government also signed off on an emergency decree proposing measures that included establishing harsher punishments for smugglers and traffickers, curbing integration programs and creating more detention facilities and new migrant centers to house those waiting on asylum applications (which can take up to two years). The proposal became law in May.

Ghali's trip to Trapani in the wake of Cutro generated some buzz for Mediterranea, but the Mare Jonio was no closer to conducting rescues. For Laura Marmorale, the president of Mediterranea, Ghali's advocacy is nonetheless remarkable. ''Not many public figures have come forward in support of civil-rescue operations, addressing difficult and divisive topics such as immigration or sea rescue,'' she says. ''When someone does, they are then the target of hate comments and insults online and attack articles in the right-wing press. Putting himself out there for us means putting his career on the line too.''

Ghali acknowledges the backlash but says he accepts it as inevitable. What disappoints him, he says, is that he hasn't found much support for his backing of Mediterranea among those he calls influential Italians. When he donated Bayna, he also set up a crowdfunding campaign to buy a second boat. Those who contributed generously and those who have amplified his message on social media, he says, are ''only people like me -- children of immigrants. That's what's most troubling. What I ask myself is: Do you have to live this in your own skin to be able to see it?''

As summer approached, the crossings, rescues and drownings resumed; in June, the migrant ship Adriana capsized and sank off the coast of Greece, killing more than 600 of the roughly 750 people onboard. So, too, returned the debates, recriminations and ultimately inadequate solutions. In mid July, Meloni, Ursula von der Leyen, the head of the European Commission, and Prime Minister Mark Rutte of the Netherlands traveled to Tunisia to announce with Saied yet another deal in which the E.U. will essentially pay Tunisia to prevent migrants from setting to sea, amid ongoing reports documenting Tunisian authorities' abuses of Black migrants.

The Mare Jonio had yet to return to sea.

Ghali recently turned 30 and has, he says, been using 2023 to recalibrate. In ''Pare,'' he sings, ''Sometimes you have to be reborn, to leave behind things that I then destroy because they don't destroy me.'' He is deepening his knowledge about Islam and during Ramadan traveled to Saudi Arabia for the first time, making Umrah with his mother; he included Mediterranea in his prayers.

He is quick to note, though, that he has always believed in God. What is different is that after feeling for years he had to ''suffocate my origins, traditions, beliefs to integrate into a society that does not accept you for who you are,'' he is sharing them much more publicly. He wishes there had been even a single famous Italian doing the same when he was a child: ''Some days would have been much better.''

In July, he traveled to Tunisia for the first time since the start of the pandemic. In the early-morning hours before he left, still awake after performing at another rapper's concert in Milan, he scrolled through his long-ignored direct messages on Instagram. He was stunned at all the messages he had received over the previous several months from Tunisians begging for his help to fund the crossing. In a surreal twist, among the DMs was one from the young man who played the protagonist in the video for ''Mamma.''

Speaking from a cafe in Tunisia perched above the turquoise waters of the Mediterranean, Ghali said, ''Despite all the bad news that comes, despite how dangerous it is, people are crossing more and more and are asking me to help them.''

Ghali said the argument he hears all the time -- that, because they are not fleeing war, North Africans have no legitimate reason to leave -- misses the point entirely.

''In Tunisia, you learn at a very young age that you can't dream,'' he said. ''They disabuse you of dreaming right away. What does a person do, a person who is resigned to have no more dreams here, who maybe even stops dreaming? If in Italy, you can dream, then for a young Tunisian who wants to do something in life, they leave to at least dream, to have the right to dream.''

Alia Malek is the author of ''The Home That Was Our Country: A Memoir of Syria.'' She directs the international-reporting program at CUNY's Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism. Andrea Frazzetta is a photographer from Milan. He has worked on many of the magazine's Voyages Issues, documenting places like the Danakil Depression in Ethiopia and the first long-distance hiking trail in Kurdistan.

-----------------------------------------------

The Great Trespass.

Citation metadata

Author: Brooke Jarvis

Date: July 30, 2023

From: The New York Times Magazine

Publisher: The New York Times Company

Document Type: Article

Length: 6,573 words

Lexile Measure:

1250L

Document controls

Translate

Decrease font size

Increase font size

Display options

Listen

Send to Google Drive™

Send to Microsoft OneDrive™

Email

Download

Print

Main content

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.

Brooke Jarvis is a contributing writer for the magazine. She last wrote a feature about droughts and floods in California. Muir Vidler is a photographer based in London and Edinburgh. His portraits include images of Ai Weiwei, Molly Goddard and Stephen Hawking.

---------------------------------------------------

What's Past is Prologue.

Citation metadata

Author: Wyatt Mason

Date: July 30, 2023

From: The New York Times Magazine

Publisher: The New York Times Company

Document Type: Interview

Length: 5,429 words

Document controls

Translate

Decrease font size

Increase font size

Display options

Listen

Send to Google Drive™

Send to Microsoft OneDrive™

Email

Download

Print

Main content

''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.

Wyatt Mason is a contributing writer for the magazine and teaches at Bard College. He last wrote about the writer Akhil Sharma. Ruven Afanador is a Colombian-born photographer based in New York. He has worked on numerous portraits for the magazine, including Viola Davis, Denzel Washington, Jane Campion and Sharon Olds.

---------------------------------------------

Moment of Truth.

Citation metadata

Author: Jon Gertner

Date: July 23, 2023

From: The New York Times Magazine

Publisher: The New York Times Company

Document Type: Article

Length: 6,537 words

Lexile Measure:

1240L

Document controls

Translate

Decrease font size

Increase font size

Display options

Listen

Send to Google Drive™

Send to Microsoft OneDrive™

Email

Download

Print

Main content

In early 2021, a Wikipedia editor peered into the future and saw what looked like a funnel cloud on the horizon: the rise of GPT-3, a precursor to the new chatbots from OpenAI. When this editor -- a prolific Wikipedian who goes by the handle Barkeep49 on the site -- gave the new technology a try, he could see that it was untrustworthy. The bot would readily mix fictional elements (a false name, a false academic citation) into otherwise factual and coherent answers. But he had no doubts about its potential. ''I think A.I.'s day of writing a high-quality encyclopedia is coming sooner rather than later,'' he wrote in ''Death of Wikipedia,'' an essay that he posted under his handle on Wikipedia itself. He speculated that a computerized model could, in time, displace his beloved website and its human editors, just as Wikipedia had supplanted the Encyclopaedia Britannica, which in 2012 announced it was discontinuing its print publication.

Recently, when I asked this editor -- he asked me to withhold his name because Wikipedia editors can be the targets of abuse -- if he still worried about his encyclopedia's fate, he told me that the newer versions made him more convinced that ChatGPT was a threat. ''It wouldn't surprise me if things are fine for the next three years,'' he said of Wikipedia, ''and then, all of a sudden, in Year 4 or 5, things drop off a cliff.''

Wikipedia marked its 22nd anniversary in January. It remains, in many ways, a throwback to the Internet's utopian early days, when experiments with open collaboration -- anyone can write and edit for Wikipedia -- had yet to cede the digital terrain to multibillion-dollar corporations and data miners, advertising schemers and social-media propagandists. The goal of Wikipedia, as its co-founder Jimmy Wales described it in 2004, was to create ''a world in which every single person on the planet is given free access to the sum of all human knowledge.'' The following year, Wales also stated, ''We help the internet not suck.'' Wikipedia now has versions in 334 languages and a total of more than 61 million articles. It consistently ranks among the world's 10 most-visited websites yet is alone among that select group (whose usual leaders are Google, YouTube and Facebook) in eschewing the profit motive. Wikipedia does not run ads, except when it seeks donations, and its contributors, who make about 345 edits per minute on the site, are not paid. In seeming to repudiate capitalism's imperatives, its success can seem surprising, even mystifying. Some Wikipedians remark that their endeavor works in practice, but not in theory.

Wikipedia is no longer an encyclopedia, or at least not only an encyclopedia: Over the past decade it has become a kind of factual netting that holds the whole digital world together. The answers we get from searches on Google and Bing, or from Siri and Alexa -- ''How old is Joe Biden?'' or ''What is an ocean submersible?'' -- derive in part from Wikipedia's data having been ingested into their knowledge banks. YouTube has also drawn on Wikipedia to counter misinformation.

The new A.I. chatbots have typically swallowed Wikipedia's corpus, too. Embedded deep within their responses to queries is Wikipedia data and Wikipedia text, knowledge that has been compiled over years of painstaking work by human contributors. While estimates of its influence can vary, Wikipedia is probably the most important single source in the training of A.I. models. ''Without Wikipedia, generative A.I. wouldn't exist,'' says Nicholas Vincent, who will be joining the faculty of Simon Fraser University in British Columbia this month and who has studied how Wikipedia helps support Google searches and other information businesses.

Yet as bots like ChatGPT become increasingly popular and sophisticated, Vincent and some of his colleagues wonder what will happen if Wikipedia, outflanked by A.I. that has cannibalized it, suffers from disuse and dereliction. In such a future, a ''Death of Wikipedia'' outcome is perhaps not so far-fetched. A computer intelligence -- it might not need to be as good as Wikipedia, merely good enough -- is plugged into the web and seizes the opportunity to summarize source materials and news articles instantly, the way humans now do with argument and deliberation.

On a conference call in March that focused on A.I.'s threats to Wikipedia, as well as the potential benefits, the editors' hopes contended with anxiety. While some participants seemed confident that generative A.I. tools would soon help expand Wikipedia's articles and global reach, others worried about whether users would increasingly choose ChatGPT -- fast, fluent, seemingly oracular -- over a wonky entry from Wikipedia. A main concern among the editors was how Wikipedians could defend themselves from such a threatening technological interloper. And some worried about whether the digital realm had reached a point where their own organization -- especially in its striving for accuracy and truthfulness -- was being threatened by a type of intelligence that was both factually unreliable and hard to contain.

One conclusion from the conference call was clear enough: We want a world in which knowledge is created by humans. But is it already too late for that?

Back in 2017, the Wikimedia Foundation and its community of volunteers began exploring how the encyclopedia and its sister sites like Wikidata and Wikimedia Commons, with their offerings of free information and images, could evolve by the year 2030. The plan was to ensure that the foundation, the nonprofit that oversees Wikipedia, could protect and share the world's information in perpetuity. One outcome of that 2017 effort, which included a year's worth of meetings, was a prediction that Wikimedia would become ''the essential infrastructure of the ecosystem of free knowledge''; another conclusion was that trends like online misinformation would soon require far more vigilance. And a research paper commissioned by the foundation found that artificial intelligence was improving at a rate that could change the way that knowledge is ''gathered, assembled and synthesized.''

For that reason, the rollout of ChatGPT did not elicit surprise inside the Wikipedia community -- though several editors told me they were shocked by the speed of its adoption, which needed just two months after its release in late 2022 to gain an estimated 100 million users. Despite its stodgy appearance, Wikipedia is more tech-savvy than casual users might assume. With a small group of volunteers to oversee millions of articles, it has long been necessary for highly experienced editors, often known as administrators, to use semiautomated software to identify misspellings and catch certain forms of intentional misinformation. And because of its open-source ethos, the organization has at times incorporated technology made freely available by tech companies or academics, rather than go through a lengthy and expensive development process on its own. ''We've had artificial-intelligence tools and bots since 2002, and we've had a team dedicated to machine learning since 2017,'' Selena Deckelmann, Wikimedia's chief technology officer, told me. ''They're extremely valuable for semiautomated content review, and especially for translations.''

How Wikipedia uses bots and how bots use Wikipedia are extremely different, however. For years it has been clear that fledgling A.I. systems were being trained on the site's articles, as part of the process whereby engineers ''scrape'' the web to create enormous data sets for that purpose. In the early days of these models, about a decade ago, Wikipedia represented a large percentage of the scraped data used to train machines. The encyclopedia was crucial not only because it's free and accessible, but also because it contains a mother lode of facts and so much of its material is consistently formatted.

In more recent years, as so-called Large Language Models, or L.L.M.s, increased in size and functionality -- these are the models that power chatbots like ChatGPT and Google's Bard -- they began to take in far larger amounts of information. In some cases, their meals added up to well over a trillion words. The sources included not just Wikipedia but also Google's patent database, government documents, Reddit's Q. and A. corpus, books from online libraries and vast numbers of news articles on the web. But while Wikipedia's contribution in terms of overall volume is shrinking -- and even as tech companies have stopped disclosing what data sets go into their A.I. models -- it remains one of the largest single sources for L.L.M.s. Jesse Dodge, a computer scientist at the Allen Institute for AI in Seattle, told me that Wikipedia might now make up between 3 and 5 percent of the scraped data an L.L.M. uses for its training. ''Wikipedia going forward will forever be super valuable,'' Dodge points out, ''because it's one of the largest well-curated data sets out there.'' There is generally a link, he adds, between the quality of data a model trains on and the accuracy and coherence of its responses.

In this light, Wikipedia might be seen as a sheep, caught in the jaws of a wolfish technology marketplace. A free site created in achingly good faith (''Sharing knowledge is by nature an act of kindness,'' Wikimedia noted in 2017, on a page devoted to its strategic direction) is being devoured by companies whose objectives -- like charging for subscriptions, as OpenAI recently began doing for its latest model -- don't jibe with its own. Yet the relationships are more complicated than they appear. Wikipedia's fundamental goal is to spread knowledge as broadly and freely as possible, by whatever means. About 10 years ago, when site administrators focused on how Google was using Wikipedia, they were in a situation that presaged the advent of A.I. chatbots. Google's search engine was able, at the top of its query results, to present Wikipedians' work to users all over the world, giving the encyclopedia far greater reach than before -- an apparent virtue. In 2017, three academic computer scientists, Connor McMahon, Isaac Johnson and Brent Hecht, conducted an experiment that tested how random users would react if just part of the contributions made to Google's search results by Wikipedia were removed. The academics perceived an ''extensive interdependence'': Wikipedia makes Google a ''significantly better'' search engine for many queries, and Wikipedia, in turn, gets most of its traffic from Google.

One upshot from the collision with Google and others who repurpose Wikipedia's content was the creation, two years ago, of Wikimedia Enterprise, a separate business unit that sells access to a series of application programming interfaces that provide accelerated updates to Wikipedia articles. Depending on whom you ask, the enterprise unit is either a more formalized way for tech companies to direct the equivalent of large charitable donations to Wikipedia -- Google now subscribes, and altogether the unit took in $3.1 million in 2022 -- or a way for Wikipedia to recoup some of the financial value it creates for the digital world, and thus help fund its future operations. Practically speaking, Wikipedia's openness allows any tech company to access Wikipedia at any time, but the A.P.I.s make new Wikipedia entries almost instantly readable. This speeds up what was already a pretty fast connection. Andrew Lih, a consultant who works with museums to put data about their collections on Wikipedia, told me he conducted an experiment in 2019 to see how long it would take for a new Wikipedia article, about a pioneering balloonist named Vera Simons, to show up in Google Search results. He found the elapsed time was about 15 minutes.

Still, the close relationship between search engines and Wikipedia has raised some existential questions for the latter. Ask Google, ''What is the Russia-Ukrainian War?'' and Wikipedia is credited, with some of its material briefly summarized. But what if that makes you less likely to visit Wikipedia's article, which runs to some 10,000 words and contains more than 400 footnotes? From the point of view of some of Wikipedia's editors, reduced traffic will oversimplify our understanding of the world and make it difficult to recruit a new generation of contributors. It may also translate into fewer donations. In the 2017 paper, the researchers noted that visits to Wikipedia had indeed begun to decline. And the phenomenon they identified became known as the ''paradox of reuse'': The more Wikipedia's articles were disseminated through other outlets and media, the more imperiled was Wikipedia's own health.

With A.I., this reuse problem threatens to become far more pervasive. Aaron Halfaker, who led the machine-learning research team at the Wikimedia Foundation for several years (and who now works for Microsoft), told me that search-engine summaries at least offer users links and citations and a way to click back to Wikipedia. The responses from large language models can resemble an information smoothie that goes down easy but contains mysterious ingredients. ''The ability to generate an answer has fundamentally shifted,'' he says, noting that in a ChatGPT answer there is ''literally no citation, and no grounding in the literature as to where that information came from.'' He contrasts it with the Google or Bing search engines: ''This is different. This is way more powerful than what we had before.''

Almost certainly, that makes A.I. both more difficult to contend with and potentially more harmful, at least from Wikipedia's perspective. A computer scientist who works in the A.I. industry (but is not permitted to speak publicly about his work) told me that these technologies are highly self-destructive, threatening to obliterate the very content which they depend upon for training. It's just that many people, including some in the tech industry, haven't yet realized the implications.

Wikipedia's most devoted supporters will readily acknowledge that it has plenty of flaws. The Wikimedia Foundation estimates that its English-language site has about 40,000 active editors -- meaning they make at least five edits a month to the encyclopedia. According to recent data from the Wikimedia Foundation, about 80 percent of that cohort is male, and about 75 percent of those from the United States are white, which has led to some gender and racial gaps in Wikipedia's coverage. And lingering doubts about reliability remain. For a popular article that might have thousands of contributors, ''Wikipedia is literally the most accurate form of information ever created by humans,'' Amy Bruckman, a professor at the Georgia Institute of Technology, told me. But Wikipedia's short articles can sometimes be hit or miss. ''They could be total garbage,'' says Bruckman, who is the author of the recent book ''Should You Believe Wikipedia?'' An erroneous fact on a rarely visited page may endure for months or years. And there continues to exist the ever-present threat of vandalism, or tampering with an article. In 2017, for instance, a photo of the speaker of the House, Paul Ryan, was added to the entry on invertebrates. As a Wikipedia editor whose first name is Jade put it to me: ''We have a number of, I would say, almost-professional trolls who must dedicate just about as much time to creating spam, creating vandalism, harassing people, as I dedicate to improving Wikipedia.''

Several academics told me that whatever Wikipedia's shortcomings, they view the encyclopedia as a ''consensus truth,'' as one of them put it: It acts as a reality check in a society where facts are increasingly contested. That truth is less about data points -- ''How old is Joe Biden?'' -- than about complex events like the Covid-19 pandemic, in which facts are constantly evolving, frequently distorted and furiously debated. The truthfulness quotient is raised by Wikipedia's transparency. Most Wikipedia entries include footnotes, links to source materials and lists of previous edits and editors -- and experienced editors are willing to intercede when an article appears incomplete or lacks what Wikipedians call ''verifiability.'' Moreover, Wikipedia's guidelines insist that its editors maintain an ''N.P.O.V.'' -- neutral point of view -- or risk being overruled (or, in the argot of wiki culture, ''reverted''). And the site has a bent toward self-examination. You can find long disquisitions on Wikipedia that explore Wikipedia's own reliability. An entry on how Wikipedia has fallen victim to hoaxes runs to more than 60 printed pages.

As difficult as the pursuit of truth can be for Wikipedians, though, it seems significantly harder for A.I. chatbots. ChatGPT has become infamous for generating fictional data points or false citations known as ''hallucinations''; perhaps more insidious is the tendency of bots to oversimplify complex issues, like the origins of the Ukraine-Russia war, for example. One worry about generative A.I. at Wikipedia -- whose articles on medical diagnoses and treatments are heavily visited -- is related to health information. A summary of the March conference call captures the issue: ''We're putting people's lives in the hands of this technology -- e.g. people might ask this technology for medical advice, it may be wrong and people will die.''

This apprehension extends not just to chatbots but also to new search engines connected to A.I. technologies. In April, a team of Stanford University scientists evaluated four engines powered by A.I. -- Bing Chat, NeevaAI, perplexity.ai and YouChat -- and found that only about half of the sentences generated by the search engines in response to a query could be fully supported by factual citations. ''We believe that these results are concerningly low for systems that may serve as a primary tool for information-seeking users,'' the researchers concluded, ''especially given their facade of trustworthiness.''

What makes the goal of accuracy so vexing for chatbots is that they operate probabilistically when choosing the next word in a sentence; they aren't trying to find the light of truth in a murky world. ''These models are built to generate text that sounds like what a person would say -- that's the key thing,'' Jesse Dodge says. ''So they're definitely not built to be truthful.'' I asked Margaret Mitchell, a computer scientist who studied the ethics of A.I. at Google, whether factuality should have been a more fundamental priority for A.I. Mitchell, who has said she was fired from the company for criticizing how it treated colleagues working on bias in A.I. (Google says she was fired for violating the company's security policies), said that most would find that logical. ''This common-sense thing -- 'Shouldn't we work on making it factual if we're putting it forward for fact-based applications?' -- well, I think for most people who are not in tech, it's like, 'Why is this even a question?''' But, Mitchell said, the priorities at the big companies, now in frenzied competition with one another, are concerned with introducing A.I. products rather than reliability.

The road ahead will almost certainly lead to improvements. Mitchell, who now works as the chief ethics scientist at the A.I. company Hugging Face, told me that she foresees A.I. companies' making gains in accuracy and reducing biased answers by using better data. ''The state of the art until now has just been a laissez-faire data approach,'' she said. ''You just throw everything in, and you're operating with a mind-set where the more data you have, the more accurate your system will be, as opposed to the higher quality of data you have, the more accurate your system will be.'' Jesse Dodge, for his part, points to an idea known as ''retrieval,'' whereby a chatbot will essentially consult a high-quality source on the web to fact-check an answer in real time. It would even cite precise links, as some A.I.-powered search engines now do. ''Without that retrieval element,'' Dodge says, ''I don't think there's a way to solve the hallucination problem.'' Otherwise, he says, he doubts that a chatbot answer can gain factual parity with Wikipedia or the Encyclopaedia Britannica.

Market competition might help prompt improvement, too. Owain Evans, a researcher at a nonprofit in Berkeley, Calif., who studies truthfulness in A.I. systems, pointed out to me that OpenAI now has several partnerships with businesses, and those firms will care greatly about responses' achieving a high level of accuracy. Google, meanwhile, is developing A.I. systems to work closely with medical professionals on disease detection and diagnostics. ''There's just going to be a very high bar there',' he adds, ''so I think there are incentives for the companies to really improve this.''

At least for now, A.I. companies are focusing on what they call ''fine tuning'' when it comes to factuality. Sandhini Agarwal and Girish Sastry, researchers at OpenAI, the company that created ChatGPT, told me that their newer A.I. model, GPT-4, has made significant improvements over earlier models in what they called ''factual content.'' Those advances stem mainly from a process known as ''reinforcement learning with human feedback'' to help A.I. models differentiate between good and bad answers. But ChatGPT clearly has a way to go, both to fix hallucinations and to provide complex, multilayered and accurate answers to historical questions. When I asked Agarwal whether OpenAI's systems could ever be completely accurate, or offer 400 footnotes, she said that it was possible. But there might always exist a tension between a model's ambition to be factual and its efforts to be creative and fluent. As an A.I. developer, she explained, the goal was not for a chat model to ''regurgitate'' data it had been trained on. Rather, it was to see patterns of knowledge it could relate to users in fresh, conversational language.

In the future, Sastry added, A.I. systems might interpret whether a query requires a rigorous factual answer or something more creative. In other words, if you wanted an analytical report with citations and detailed attributions, the A.I. would know to deliver that. And if you desired a sonnet about the indictment of Donald Trump, well, it could dash that off instead.

In late June, I began to experiment with a plug-in the Wikimedia Foundation had built for ChatGPT. At the time, this software tool was being tested by several dozen Wikipedia editors and foundation staff members, but it became available in mid-July on the OpenAI website for subscribers who want augmented answers to their ChatGPT queries. The effect is similar to the ''retrieval'' process that Jesse Dodge surmises might be required to produce accurate answers. GPT-4's knowledge base is currently limited to data it ingested by the end of its training period, in September 2021. A Wikipedia plug-in helps the bot access information about events up to the present day. At least in theory, the tool -- lines of code that direct a search for Wikipedia articles that answer a chatbot query -- gives users an improved, combinatory experience: the fluency and linguistic capabilities of an A.I. chatbot, merged with the factuality and currency of Wikipedia.

One afternoon, Chris Albon, who's in charge of machine learning at the Wikimedia Foundation, took me through a quick training session. Albon asked ChatGPT about the Titan submersible, operated by the company OceanGate, whose whereabouts during an attempt to visit the Titanic's wreckage were still unknown. ''Normally you get some response that's like, 'My information cutoff is from 2021,''' Albon told me. But in this case ChatGPT, recognizing that it couldn't answer Albon's question -- What happened with OceanGate's submersible? -- directed the plug-in to search Wikipedia (and only Wikipedia) for text relating to the question. After the plug-in found the relevant Wikipedia articles, it sent them to the bot, which in turn read and summarized them, then spit out its answer. As the responses came back, hindered by only a slight delay, it was clear that using the plug-in always forced ChatGPT to append a note, with links to Wikipedia entries, saying that its information was derived from Wikipedia, which was ''made by volunteers.'' And this: ''As a large language model, I may not have summarized Wikipedia accurately.''

But the summary about the submersible struck me as readable, well supported and current -- a big improvement from a ChatGPT response that either mangled the facts or lacked real-time access to the internet. Albon told me, ''It's a way for us to sort of experiment with the idea of 'What does it look like for Wikipedia to exist outside of the realm of the website,' so you could actually engage in Wikipedia without actually being on Wikipedia.com.'' Going forward, he said, his sense was that the plug-in would continue to be available, as it is now, to users who want to activate it but that ''eventually, there's a certain set of plug-ins that are just always on.''

In other words, his hope was that any ChatGPT query might automatically result in the chatbots' checking facts with Wikipedia and citing helpful articles. Such a process would probably block many hallucinations as well: For instance, because chatbots can be deceived by how a question is worded, false premises sometimes elicit false answers. Or, as Albon put it, ''If you were to ask, 'During the first lunar landing, who were the five people who landed on the moon?' the chatbot wants to give you five names.'' Only two people landed on the moon in 1969, however. Wikipedia would help by offering the two names, Buzz Aldrin and Neil Armstrong; and in the event the chatbot remained conflicted, it could say it didn't know the answer and link to the article.

The plug-in still lets ChatGPT get creative -- but in limited ways. The following week, when I asked it for updates about the OceanGate submersible, I got a three-paragraph rundown of how the tragedy unfolded, including the deaths of five passengers. Then I asked it to formulate its answer in five bullet points, which it did instantly. Could it then adapt those five bullet points, I asked, so that a 7- or 8-year-old could understand? ''Here's a simpler version,'' ChatGPT said instantly, and offered just what I asked for, noting that the Titan was ''a special underwater vehicle'' and its implosion was ''a sad event.''

It wasn't perfect. I told ChatGPT that its bullet points seemed to overlook how Stockton Rush, OceanGate's chief executive, had been criticized for ignoring safety standards. ''You raise a valid point,'' it responded. ''Here's a revised version that addresses your concern.'' Its fix took only a few seconds.

Within the Wikipedia community, there is a cautious sense of hope that A.I., if managed right, will help the organization improve rather than crash. Selena Deckelmann, the chief tech officer, expresses that perspective most optimistically. ''What we've proven over 22 years now is: We have a volunteer model that is sustainable,'' she told me. ''I would say there are some threats to it. Is it an insurmountable threat? I don't think so.'' The longtime Wikipedia editor who wrote ''Death of Wikipedia'' told me that he feels there is a case to be made for a good outcome in the coming years, even if the longer term seems far less certain. The Wikimedia plug-in is the first significant move toward protecting its future. Projects are also in the works to use recent advances in A.I. internally. Albon says that he and his colleagues are in the process of adapting A.I. models that are ''off the shelf'' -- essentially models that have been made available by researchers for anyone to freely customize -- so that Wikipedia's editors can use them for their work. One focus is to have A.I. models aid new volunteers, say, with step-by-step chatbot instructions as they begin working on new articles, a process that involves many rules and protocols and often alienates Wikipedia's newcomers.

Leila Zia, the head of research at the Wikimedia Foundation, told me that her team was likewise working on tools that could help the encyclopedia by predicting, for example, whether a new article or edit would be overruled. Or, she said, perhaps a contributor ''doesn't know how to use citations'' -- in that case, another tool would indicate that. I asked whether it could help Wikipedia entries maintain a neutral point of view as they were writing. ''Absolutely,'' she says.

For the moment, as the Wikipedia community debates rules and policy, article submissions entirely written by L.L.M.s are heavily discouraged on English-language Wikipedia. Still, there remains a kind of John Henry problem with A.I. The chatbots, unlike their human counterparts, have a formidable ability to churn out language like a steam-driven machine, 24/7. ''I suspect the internet is going to be filled with crud just all over the place,'' Chris Albon told me. And with the A.I. models getting better at mimicking people's writing styles, it may be increasingly difficult to detect chatbot-written submissions. One Wikipedia editor whose first name is Theo sent me links in early June to show how he was in the midst of fending off a barrage of edits involving suspect citations formulated by A.I., including one to an article about Lake Doxa, in Greece.

Often, I got the sense that Theo and other Wikipedians were worried that their human abilities to scrutinize new content and citations, stretched to the limit already, might soon be overwhelmed by an avalanche of A.I.-generated text. Certainly, new tools that were themselves A.I. would help. But even if the editors won in the short term, you had to wonder: Wouldn't the machines win in the end?

Three years ago, in anticipation of Wikipedia's 20th anniversary, Joseph Reagle, a professor at Northeastern University, wrote a historical essay exploring how the death of the site had been predicted again and again. Wikipedia has nevertheless found ways to adapt and endure. Reagle told me that the recent debates over A.I. recall for him the early days of Wikipedia, when its quality was unflatteringly compared to that of other encyclopedias. ''It served as a proxy in this larger culture war about information and knowledge and quality and authority and legitimacy. So I take a sort of similar model to thinking about ChatGPT, which is going to improve. Just like Wikipedia is not perfect, it's not perfect -- it's never going to be perfect -- but what is the relative value given the other information that's out there?'' The future as he saw it would be a range of options for information, caveat emptor, including everything from ChatGPT to Wikipedia to Reddit to TikTok. A dedicated plug-in could meanwhile improve the chatbots' answers to questions about, for instance, health, weather or history.

At the moment, it goes against the grain to bet against A.I. The big tech companies, wagering billions on the new technologies and largely undaunted by their shortcomings or risks, seem intent on forging ahead as fast as they can. Those dynamics would suggest that organizations like Wikipedia will be forced to adapt to the future that A.I. has begun to create, rather than exert influence over A.I. or mount an effective resistance to it. Yet many Wikipedians and academics I spoke with question any such assumption. Impressive as the chatbots may be, A.I.'s apparent glide path to success may soon encounter a number of obstacles.

These could be societal as well as technical. The European Union's Parliament is presently considering a new regulatory framework that, among other things, would force tech companies to label A.I.-generated content and to disclose more information about their A.I. training data. Congress is meanwhile considering several bills to regulate A.I. Legal scrutiny may be coming, too. In one closely watched lawsuit, Stability A.I. is being challenged for using pictures from Getty Images without permission; a California class-action suit accuses OpenAI of stealing the personal data of millions of people that has been scraped from the internet. While Wikipedia's licensing policy lets anyone tap its knowledge and text -- to ''reuse and remix'' it however they might like -- it does have several conditions. These include the requirements that users must ''share alike,'' meaning any information they do something with must subsequently be made readily available, and that users must give credit and attribution to Wikipedia contributors. Mixing Wikipedia's corpus into a chatbot model that gives answers to queries without explaining the sourcing may thus violate Wikipedia's terms of use, two people in the open-source software community told me. It is now a topic of conversation inside the Wikimedia community whether some legal recourse exists.

Data providers may be able to exert other kinds of leverage as well. In April, Reddit announced that it would not make its corpus available for scraping by big tech companies without compensation. It seems very unlikely that the Wikimedia Foundation could issue the same dictum and close its sites off -- an action that Nicholas Vincent has called a ''data strike'' -- because its terms of service are more open. But the foundation could make arguments in the name of fairness and appeal to firms to pay for its A.P.I., just as Google does now. It could further insist that chatbots give Wikipedia prominent attribution and offer citations in their answers, something Selena Deckelmann told me the foundation is discussing with various firms. Vincent says that A.I. companies would be foolhardy to try to build a global encyclopedia themselves, with individual contractors. Instead, he told me, ''there might be an intermediary stage here where Wikipedia says, 'Hey, look at how important we've been to you.'''

Such an entreaty could be an effective reminder too, that the chatbots are made from us. Without ingesting the growing millions of Wikipedia pages or vacuuming up Reddit arguments about plot twists in ''The Bear,'' new L.L.M.s can't be adequately trained. In fact, no one I spoke with in the tech community seemed to know if it would even be possible to build a good A.I. model without Wikipedia.

It may require the equivalent of a death in the family before the tech companies realize that they exist in a world of mutual dependency. Already, according to the computer scientist working in the A.I. industry, some technologists are concerned that new A.I.s are compromising the health of a website for programmers called Stack Overflow -- a popular platform that the models have been trained on to answer coding questions. The problem seems to have two distinct aspects. If those with coding inquiries can go to ChatGPT for help, why go to Stack Overflow? In the meantime, if fewer people are consulting Stack Overflow for answers, why continue posting helpful suggestions or insights there?

Even if conflicts like this don't impede the advance of A.I., it might be stymied in other ways. At the end of May, several A.I. researchers collaborated on a paper that examined whether new A.I. systems could be developed from knowledge generated by existing A.I. models, rather than by human-generated databases. They discovered a systemic breakdown -- a failure they called ''model collapse.'' The authors saw that using data from an A.I. to train new versions of A.I.s leads to chaos. Synthetic data, they wrote, ends up ''polluting the training set of the next generation of models; being trained on polluted data, they then misperceive reality.''

The lesson here is that it will prove challenging to build new models from old models. And with chatbots, Ilia Shumailov, an Oxford University researcher and the paper's primary author, told me, the downward spiral looks similar. Without human data to train on, Shumailov said, ''your language model starts being completely oblivious to what you ask it to solve, and it starts just talking in circles about whatever it wants, as if it went into this madman mode.'' Wouldn't a plug-in from, say, Wikipedia, avert that problem, I asked? It could, Shumailov said. But if in the future Wikipedia were to become clogged with articles generated by A.I., the same cycle -- essentially, the computer feeding on content it created itself -- would be perpetuated.

Ultimately, the study concluded that the value of data from ''genuine human interactions'' will be increasingly valuable for future L.L.M.s. At least for today's Wikipedians, that seems like encouraging news, insofar as it suggests our new machines will need us, at least for a while, to keep them honest and functional -- and dependent on us. Ensuring that an A.I. system is doing what's in the best interests of humanity involves a theoretical concept known as alignment. Alignment is viewed as both an enormous challenge and an enormous priority for A.I., because a system out of sync with humans might create terrible damage. If A.I. ruins or compromises a mostly reliable system of free knowledge, it's difficult to see how that aligns with our best interests. ''One of the things that's really nice about having humans do the summarization is that you get some sort of basic level of alignment by default,'' Aaron Halfaker pointed out to me. ''And if you appreciate the editors of Wikipedia are human, they have human motivations and concerns and that their motivations are providing high-quality educational material to align with your needs, then you can essentially put trust in the system.''

You can grasp the alignment argument better when you talk to people who devote their lives to the idea. When I asked Jade, who has more than 24,000 edits to her credit, why she spends her free time -- typically 10 to 20 hours a week -- editing Wikipedia, she said she believed in sharing knowledge. ''Plus, I'm just a big nerd,'' she said. We were speaking by Zoom, late in the evening, and it was a conversation that had little resemblance to other long evenings of dialogue I'd had with ChatGPT. Some of Jade's work spoke to her personal interests in nature and birds, like an entry she wrote on the vermilion flycatcher, which got about 21,000 page views in the past 12 months. She also told me she works regularly on the Wikipedia entry on the American Civil War, which had 4.84 million views over the same period. Her goal was to continue to work toward completeness and greater accuracy in that Civil War article so that it achieves ''featured'' status on Wikipedia, a rare recognition (usually marked by a star) of an article's quality that is awarded by Wikipedia's editors to about 0.1 percent of English-language entries. ''My calculations in the past are, you know, more than 10 million people read my work in a year,'' Jade said, ''so it's an honor to have people reading all that.

''We are going to have to create processes, we are going to have to have hard conversations,'' she said, about the ethics of using A.I. to create Wikipedia articles. When I asked her whether chatbots would soon eliminate her opportunities for volunteer work, she replied, ''I don't ever -- maybe not never, but certainly not in this century do I see robots fully replacing humans on Wikipedia.''

I wasn't as sure. The allure of a chatbot conversation, despite its factual shortcomings, already seemed too irresistible and too enchanting to too many millions of people. In fact, my own hours spent with ChatGPT had chipped away at my own neutral point of view -- not because the informational exchange was so rigorous and detailed (it wasn't), but because the interaction was so captivating and effortless. Nevertheless, Jade was resolute. ''I'm an optimist,'' she said.

Jon Gertner has been writing about science and technology for the magazine since 2003. He last wrote about new ways of searching the universe for intelligent life. Erik Carter is a graphic designer and an art director in New York. His work often plays off an internet aesthetic and mixes media to create humorous juxtaposition.

--------------------------------------------

Plastic Fantastic.

Citation metadata

Author: Willa Paskin

Date: July 16, 2023

From: The New York Times Magazine

Publisher: The New York Times Company

Document Type: Article

Length: 6,712 words

Lexile Measure:

1110L

Document controls

Translate

Decrease font size

Increase font size

Display options

Listen

Send to Google Drive™

Send to Microsoft OneDrive™

Email

Download

Print

Main content

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.

Willa Paskin is a writer and the host of the Slate podcast ''Decoder Ring,'' a narrative series about cracking cultural mysteries. Inez and Vinoodh are art and fashion photographers who have been working together for 37 years.

-------------------------------------------

The Renters' Utopia.

Citation metadata

Authors: Francesca Mari and Luca Locatelli

Date: May 28, 2023

From: The New York Times Magazine

Publisher: The New York Times Company

Document Type: Article

Length: 6,868 words

Lexile Measure:

1220L

Document controls

Translate

Decrease font size

Increase font size

Display options

Listen

Send to Google Drive™

Send to Microsoft OneDrive™

Email

Download

Print

Main content

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.''

Video at the top from Luca Locatelli

Francesca Mari is a contributing writer for the magazine and an assistant professor of the practice in the literary-arts department at Brown University. She writes about all aspects of housing. Luca Locatelli is a photographer whose work focuses on environmental images and solutions to the climate crisis. He has been working on ''The Circular Economy,'' an immersive project premiering in September at the Gallerie d'Italia museum of Turin, Italy.

-------------------------------------------

Between Drought and Deluge.

Citation metadata

Author: Brooke Jarvis

Date: June 4, 2023

From: The New York Times Magazine

Publisher: The New York Times Company

Document Type: Article

Length: 6,525 words

Lexile Measure:

1310L

Document controls

Translate

Decrease font size

Increase font size

Display options

Listen

Send to Google Drive™

Send to Microsoft OneDrive™

Email

Download

Print

Main content

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.

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

------------------------------------------

Let the Body Do The Talking.

Citation metadata

Author: Daniel Bergner

Date: May 21, 2023

From: The New York Times Magazine

Publisher: The New York Times Company

Document Type: Interview

Length: 5,195 words

Lexile Measure:

1080L

Document controls

Translate

Decrease font size

Increase font size

Display options

Listen

Send to Google Drive™

Send to Microsoft OneDrive™

Email

Download

Print

Main content

After requesting my permission, Emily Price, the therapist on my laptop screen, spoke to my feet. She thanked them, saying that they probably had a lot to tell us.

I had been describing a looming fear about my writing, about encroaching failure. Price sat in front of a dangling plant in her home office in Austin, Texas. With her red-blond hair pulled back in a ponytail, her delicate features communicated a mix of candor and vulnerability that created a sense of shared space, of intimacy, even by Zoom. She listened, took notes and, with a gesture of her hand, suggested that we leave my account of the situation off to the side.

''So you've got this thing churning within you,'' she said. She informed me that we were ''just going to be curious and explore'' and guided me down into my body, encouraging an awareness of physical sensation.

We concentrated silently, my eyes closed, birds chirping outside her office window. Then she asked that I report back. My shoulders were vaguely weak and watery, I said, and my calves and feet were much more than vaguely consumed by an uneasy feeling that was familiar but hard to put into words -- a feeling halfway between an electrical current and paralysis.

Price was giving me a demo session in an unconventional type of therapy called somatic experiencing. S.E. belongs to a growing movement of somatic -- body-based -- means for healing emotional wounds. In therapy, whether we're troubled by low-grade suffering or besieged by forces more powerful and unrelenting, we tend to expect that talking our way toward insight will lead us to become at least somewhat better, less burdened, even happier beings. The mind is the way in and the way out. But a core S.E. principle is that, though we may assume otherwise, we live ''from the bottom up,'' as S.E. practitioners say, and the content of emotional states ranging from common anxiety and depression to the onslaught of full-blown post-traumatic stress disorder arrives in our brains from the neural circuitry running throughout our bodies. S.E. upends beliefs about the mind as the origin and essential locus of our feelings.

After addressing my feet, Price asked, ''What are you noticing?'' I said that I wished I were the kind of person who could give myself over to having my feet spoken to. ''They might be telling us something really important,'' she replied. ''It's hard when that's uncomfortable or inconvenient.'' I speculated aloud about what their message might be. She drew me away from reflection and returned me downward.

Price, who is 40, has a master's degree in social work and added S.E. training seven years ago. ''With clients who've been to insight-oriented therapy,'' she explained during one of our many conversations, ''the minute they get in their head and try to make meaning, they're not in their body. I'll say: 'We're giving your head a break. Let's give that person time off.''' The mind, ideally, recedes, shifting out of the way, ''letting the body do what it needs to do.''

In our session, she soon ''reframed'' my feet and calves into a ''resource,'' as she later put it, using an S.E. formulation; that is, she created a bodily place of refuge out of a zone of anxiety. To do this, she tried a few techniques; she had me tap my feet steadily and asked me to keep them still and imagine that they were like the roots of a tree, pulling nutrients from the soil. I fended off thoughts that this was all hokey, that my feet were just feet. But the roots were effective. With each slow intake of breath, I found myself pulling calm up from my heels toward my knees. My keen sensory discomfort was temporarily displaced, and throughout the rest of me, on up to my head, there was a lightness and a possibility of clarity.

What Price had just led me through was a variation on what S.E. terms ''pendulation.'' In S.E., the therapist guides the client, session after session, in a repeated back and forth between acute physical instability and the body's capacity to stabilize itself, between the unsettling and the tranquil. Usually this involves two separate bodily areas. The pendulation might be between constriction in the upper chest, say, and respite in the hands. The movement between states is a key part of the therapy. The practitioner is teaching the client to somatically process and diminish the hold of destructive energy. It can either defuse within the body's zones of sanctuary or dissipate by flowing outward from our physical selves.

Not all of Price's clients want to try somatic methods. For some, there's a dread that feelings lodged in the body will rush out of control, that they're better left dormant. For those who do end up working somatically, Price isn't a purist. She may interweave S.E. with cognitive behavioral therapy, which identifies self-defeating patterns of thought and tries to replace them with constructive ones. The mind matters even as the body is primary. At the outset, Price might incorporate S.E. techniques for only a few minutes in a 45-minute session. Eventually, meetings can be devoted almost entirely to the sensations that accompany a tormenting memory or undermining emotion or unremitting dilemma. ''People get sweaty,'' Price said about her clients when they are immersed. ''They feel freezing. They shake. Or they might feel parts of their body completely disappear.''

S.E. practitioners sometimes provide the aid of their own touch -- or, since the pandemic, with a great number of therapists now practicing virtually, an approximation of contact. ''I get a vibe,'' Price said. ''I feel kind of like a magnet.'' Heeding her intuition, and after establishing the client's consent, she might, in person or by way of computer screens and the imagination, place one open hand between a client's shoulder blades and her other palm on a deltoid muscle, or one hand on the forehead and the other on the base of the neck. Or she might sit directly in front of the client and set her feet atop theirs. ''I am offering myself as support for whatever their body needs to do,'' she said. ''The craziest thing is that if my hand is in a helpful place, my hand will feel hot, really hot, and when I put it down, they will say, 'I feel like your hand is still there.' They will say this years later.''

I asked whether this physical communication was impeded when she and her client were in distant rooms. She answered that when, at an earlier moment, she lifted her hand toward me on our screens, she noticed that I took a long, deep breath. There had been a physiological interaction that could, if we were really therapist and client, help in our somatic work. Between her and her clients, she added, there is frequently ''a connection, a oneness,'' a mutual signaling and ''surrender'' that is ''spiritual, sacred.''

When things go well, Price said, clients ''feel intense relief.'' She remembered clients' saying that their damaging energy ''was radiating into the carpet, or dripping off their fingertips. They understand how important the body is, and they can use this for the rest of their lives. It can prevent future suffering.'' Taking care to avoid identifying details about the case, she spoke about a client who consistently undercut relationships, at work, at home. The client had ''never done anything like this treatment,'' she said. ''Something within was ready.'' The client was liberated from self-destructive fears. ''Seeing how much better someone can feel -- it can be like watching magic.''

Judging by my talks with a dozen somatic therapists, demand for their services is surging. Most said they were fully booked. I didn't doubt it, partly because mental-health practitioners of all types seem to have been under a mounting pressure of need since the start of the pandemic. But there is also a lurking dissatisfaction among many people who've undertaken more traditional therapies and found that probing and trying to redirect the mind hasn't accomplished nearly as much as they hoped. I heard this lament expressed in multiple ways, as I spoke with clients and as I joined 60 trainees for their first module of online S.E. training, with four full days of lectures and practice sessions.

''I came from a psychoanalytic background,'' Maureen Gallagher, an S.E. practitioner, trainer and client, told me, recalling her doctoral education, her early practice and the 13 years of Jungian analysis she herself went through. ''My analysis was very, very successful. I understood myself better, I understood my upbringing. But I still had anxiety, I still had panic attacks.'' She sensed something missing in her treatment. ''I regularly asked my analyst, 'What about this body that I live in?' And being a good analyst, he would say, 'Why don't you talk about it?''' She came to believe that because he worked in the realm of words and the intellect, he couldn't take her where she needed to go. ''The neocortex'' -- the frontal area of our brains associated with complex cognition -- ''can disconnect us from the primacy of being,'' Gallagher says. From S.E., she learned that her body contains harbors of calm and can manage her anxiety, that ''I am the space that is big enough for all of this.''

The basic ideas behind somatic therapy have become most widely known, nowadays, through the psychiatrist Bessel van der Kolk's book ''The Body Keeps the Score.'' After a few years in the Top 15 on The Times's paperback best-seller list, it soared to No. 1 during the pandemic and has stayed around there ever since. It has sold over three million copies globally and teaches that our ''trauma is encoded in the viscera.'' The book features van der Kolk's work with capital-T trauma sufferers -- combat veterans, rape victims, people severely abused in childhood -- yet it seems to have caught on among readers whose trauma is lowercase and more universal: the failings of parents, the emotional batterings, the fears and feelings of isolation that life inevitably brings. In explaining our psychological troubles, van der Kolk highlights the role of what can loosely be labeled the primal regions of the brain, along with that of the body. Elaborate human responses are linked to underlying, animalistic fight-or-flight instincts. The book has a certain kind of romantic appeal; it restores us to the natural world, to the animal kingdom.

But while van der Kolk's readership is vast, he is probably not the most essential figure in the somatic therapy movement. Peter Levine is the founder of Somatic Experiencing International, a training institute that, along with its affiliates, has graduated tens of thousands of practitioners, who have come from fields as diverse as addiction treatment, acupuncture and the clergy, as well as traditional therapy. Levine, who has doctorates in medical biophysics and psychology, began to develop S.E. in the late 1960s, as he pursued his biophysics Ph.D. at the University of California, Berkeley, and as he taught at the Esalen Institute, a New Age retreat center in Big Sur. (Pat Ogden, who started out as a yoga and dance teacher, and whose sensorimotor psychotherapy technique is similar to Levine's approach, also has claim to the movement's formative ideas. And beyond modern credit for its concepts, somatic therapy owes a debt to timeless practices like mindfulness and meditation.) Each year, rising numbers of students complete S.E.'s program. Based on first-quarter figures for this year, annual applicants for training have more than doubled since 2020. Van der Kolk's best-seller-dom and Levine's legion of new practitioners speak to a current yearning for the holistic.

Levine, who has feathery silver hair and, at 81, a voice at once resonant and slightly frail, told me about a series of revelations early in his career. One realization was inspired in part by Nikolaas Tinbergen, a Dutch biologist, who shared a Nobel Prize in 1973 for his study of the relationship between external stimuli and innate animal behavior. In his Nobel speech, he veered toward human topics. He spoke of ''psychosocial stress'' and inadequate ''adjustability.'' Levine soon sought out Tinbergen's counsel and then hit upon what became one of S.E.'s crucial lessons, derived from innate animal responses.

Under extreme threat, some animal species will freeze, playing dead. It's their final ploy as a predator is about to kill them. And if somehow, as occasionally happens, the prey is passed over and survives, if, say, the cheetah becomes distracted from the gazelle lying immobile on the ground and leaves the scene, the gazelle quivers violently for a short while before getting to its feet, its body quaking spasmodically before it bounds away.

We watched an example of this quaking in a video during the training I participated in. Biologists had taken the video from their helicopter as they chased a polar bear, who fled in terror across the snow. From the chopper, the bear was shot with an anesthetic so the biologists could examine it, and when the animal woke, it contorted for long seconds before running off into its white habitat. To my unexpert eyes, the writhing looked excruciating, but according to Levine, such contortions are the animal's healthy way of expelling the dire stress of being stalked. The animal shudders and returns to a perfectly functional life. As for us humans, our bodies store plenty of fear and despair, rage and helplessness, shame and a host of other debilitating emotions, whether stemming from capital-T or quotidian trauma, but we lack the reflexive outlet. Our trauma gets stuck within. S.E. is about giving us the means of release.

Levine's foundational logic contains a major leap. He assumes that the animal shakes off mortal trouble and hurries away in good health. But for all we know, it has terrible PTSD and its health is merely our wishful projection. There's also a much bigger imaginative leap within S.E.'s origin story. As Levine worked on his biophysics dissertation about stress and on his formulation of S.E., he was encouraged, in Berkeley, by Albert Einstein. Though Einstein had been dead for almost 20 years, he sat down with Levine and engaged him in weekly Socratic dialogues, helping him develop his thoughts over the course of a year, at Levine's favorite restaurant, the Beggar's Banquet. There, Levine insisted that the waitress bring Einstein a bowl of the same soup Levine was having, always ''a green vegetable purée,'' he recalled nostalgically.

''The scientific part of me,'' Levine went on, ''the clinical part, knew this was what Carl Jung called active imagination'' -- a way of delving into the unconscious -- ''and that Einstein wasn't really there. But to tell you the truth, it seemed like he was, and anyhow, I didn't have to answer whether I was imagining it or not -- being with him was so important.''

Einstein not only joined him for soup; he led Levine to a nearby pond for a discourse involving pebbles, ripples and intergenerational trauma. Later, Levine's mother told him that when she was eight months pregnant with him and on vacation with his father, the canoe they were paddling capsized in the middle of a lake. They couldn't right the boat. But two strangers, Einstein and his stepdaughter, happened along in a sailboat and saved them. Thus, as Levine understands things, Einstein's beneficent visitations in Berkeley were cosmically foreordained. In Levine's telling, a vivid, affirming dream starring a Tibetan lama was also involved in S.E.'s beginnings. ''I know this sounds airy-fairy,'' he says, ''and I don't want to seem woofy-woofy, but these nonordinary things, as happened with Einstein, are more ordinary when you're looking from a shamanic standpoint.'' Levine spoke about avoiding false boundaries among the scientific, the clinical and the spiritual and said that the combination is ''the direction that healing modalities will take in the future.''

On the scientific side of things, Levine and his institute teach that S.E. is substantiated by ''polyvagal theory.'' The theory, shaped by Levine and the neuroscientist Stephen Porges in the early 1990s, concerns the vagus, a major nerve channel that regulates unconscious responses in the body and runs to the base of the brain stem. Within the vagus, the theory posits, there is a discrete tract that is supposedly responsible for particular adaptive emotions. The theory lends anatomical ballast to S.E. ideas, but critics argue that it is full of unproven notions. Francine Kelley, the lead teacher at the training I joined, seemed to acknowledge its tenuousness even as she defended it and led us through graphics about our polyvagal anatomy. ''It's a theory -- maybe 10 years from now we'll have a different understanding of the nervous system,'' Kelley told us, ''but right now this really makes a lot of sense.''

Polyvagal theory aside, there is research to back S.E.'s efficacy, though it is only fledgling. The studies aren't large enough or, for the most part, rigorously constructed enough to be conclusive. But then, definitive research regarding treatments isn't easy to come by throughout the infinitely complex fields of psychology and psychiatry. In the world of somatic therapy, belief and science are tightly, blurrily intertwined.

Ife Kehinde has wrestled with anxiety and depression for much of her life. Her Nigerian family -- her father a physician, her mother an attorney -- moved to the United States when she was 4, and she grew up ''a Black kid in really white spaces,'' she says, alluding to years in the Iowa City area and in well-off neighborhoods of Nashville. Her parents are Christians, and in religious settings, she remembers, she internalized an ''overlap between purity and blond hair and blue eyes.'' It didn't help that ''I developed before my white female counterparts.'' And it didn't help that, at the time, her immigrant family wasn't big on exploring feelings, that her parents were much more intent on her succeeding in school and going on to a high-status career. The attitude was ''you just get it done.'' Full-blown anxiety attacks -- trouble breathing, uncontrollable crying -- began in high school, spurred by racial alienation and parental ''expectation that was both explicit and implicit; you need to perform well.''

Seven years ago, when she was in her mid-20s, a friend recommended a therapist who practiced S.E. as well as eye-movement desensitization and reprocessing, a technique that is often categorized as somatic and that aims to loosen the clutch of distressing experiences through carefully directed side-to-side movements, usually of the eyes. ''That's when I started to do the embodied work that shifted my life,'' Kehinde says. S.E. gave her the understanding that ''there was space, that my body has more capacity than I'd known, that I could let my feelings expand rather than white-knuckling it.'' There were places within where her emotions could safely pool and slowly decrease.

By then, Kehinde was working as a therapist herself, and eventually she enrolled in S.E. training with a cohort dedicated solely to people of color. ''There's a way that people of color can settle in a nonwhite space,'' Kelley, the lead teacher at my training, who is Jamaican-born and who is also Kehinde's teacher, says, explaining why the institute has this training option. ''There's all the transgenerational history people are bringing. In mixed spaces, there can be a vulnerability experienced by someone whose body is not the accepted norm. There's an anticipatory protectiveness, a sympathetic charge,'' she says, referring to the sympathetic nervous system, the network associated with fight-or-flight instincts.

Kehinde was in the program's first year when the pandemic hit and George Floyd was murdered, at which point, she recounts, Black people were desperate for a Black therapist. ''My inbox was flooded; I couldn't keep up. You could feel the helplessness in the messages people were leaving and at intake. It was, 'I don't know what therapy is, but I know I can't keep doing what I'm doing.' It was, 'I want to talk to someone who knows what it is to walk through the world in a body like mine.''' After the killing, some of her clients -- almost all of whom are people of color or Indigenous -- felt themselves to be in emotional overdrive and couldn't sleep; others felt they were trapped in quicksand.

Kehinde herself had an ''intense somatic response,'' she says, in the days following Floyd's death. ''There was something about the pandemic and then this racial trauma. My nervous system -- it felt like a low-grade fire, a tingling electric sensation, like what I imagine as the aftermath of putting a fork in an electrical socket. And there was exhaustion. I couldn't formulate sentences. It was brain fog. A feeling like I was sinking beneath the floor.''

In her virtual sessions with clients, Kehinde struck a ''delicate balance, because the body can be the scariest place to be present,'' and she worried that on Zoom she might miss signs that ''someone was far past their threshold.'' She taught clients that, on waking, they should scan their bodies for regions of sanctuary. She taught supportive S.E. self-holds, like the one Price described, with hands to the forehead and the back of neck, or hands layered on the upper chest. She advised lying under a weighted blanket. For herself, she did much the same, with the scans and the holds, and by having her roommate lie like dead weight on top of her. Floyd's killing, Kehinde says, left many Black people feeling devoid of agency and profoundly endangered, ''dysregulated'' and ''hypervigilant.'' With her somatic work, she says, she could infuse a measure of internal control.

The span of troubles being treated by S.E. is wide, from utter devastation to ordinary obsessiveness. Alyssa Petersel is a social worker and the founding owner of a website that matches clients to its long roster of therapists, so she is well acquainted with a range of practices. For herself, she chose a practitioner with S.E. in her repertoire, because, she says, her ''anxiety, perfectionism and workaholism'' can lead to ''activated states of panic'' and ''cognitive loops'' that can't reliably be quieted by asking ''the mind to reorient.''

Last year, as her wedding neared, she was overwhelmed by the question of whether or not to take her husband's last name. Night after night, unable to sleep, she made lists of pros and cons. ''I spiraled into rabbit holes of 'What does it mean?' If I keep my name, I'm a feminist; if I don't, I'm letting down all the women who --.'' She went on, ''My maiden name was rational, boss bitch, concrete. The other side was more woo-woo: You're vowing to be each other's person, and you can't change your name? What's wrong with you?'' With her therapist, she learned to focus on ''superhelpful data'' from her body, as Petersel put it, to ''trust the visceral. It was clarifying.''

On the spectrum of suffering, Lauren (she asked that I use only her first name to protect her privacy) is far from Petersel. Lauren stepped into Emily Price's office in 2016, three years after being raped and strangled unconscious and almost to death on a path leading to her door in her home city, Indianapolis. She woke in the hospital with no memory of the assault. The whites of her eyes were bright red from all the popped blood vessels. A talk with a sex-crimes detective brought home the magnitude of what had happened, yet she still couldn't access the memory. No one was ever caught. Lauren had some counseling and tried to return to her previous life. And outwardly, she was successful. Three months after the assault, she was promoted at her company. Less than a year later, she moved to New York City, where she had long wanted to live. She traveled widely for her job.

In New York, Lauren started working with a therapist. At their first session, Lauren raised a number of issues she wanted to address, not mentioning the rape and strangling until the last few minutes and seeing nothing strange in that. ''I was completely numb,'' she told me. ''It was shocking, for such a self-aware person as I believe I am, how disconnected I was, how dissociated.''

That therapist soon referred Lauren to Price, who was, before the pandemic, based in Manhattan and seeing clients in person. Proceeding in calibrated increments, Price elicited Lauren's awareness of the somatic effects of her assault, effects long repressed yet ever-present. There was a keen sense of suffocation, a feeling of gasping for air. There was, as Lauren spoke in brief bits to Price about what happened, a vibrant flushing beginning at her neck, at the line of strangulation, and rising up to her hairline. Price handed her a mirror so she could see the physicality of what she carried. ''This wasn't just rosy cheeks,'' Lauren said. The color was violent. ''There was a thousand-ton elephant on my chest,'' she continued, then laughed sharply at herself. ''I know elephants don't weigh a thousand tons. But a significant weight. A large-ton rock.'' She struggled to put words to the sensations Price helped her to confront.

Early on, Price guided Lauren to identify physical resources -- in this case, places beyond as well as within the body to counterbalance what seemed ungovernable and threatening. Again and again, Price led Lauren to intersperse bodily terror with attention to the solidity of the floor and to a framed print opposite the couch where she sat, an image containing an expanse of sky, which Lauren focused on while stating to herself, ''The sky in that picture is blue, the sky in that picture is blue.'' She also learned to visualize wearing Viking chest armor as an antidote to all that felt menacing.

None of the S.E. practitioners I spoke with use only somatic methods, and with Lauren, Price included exposure therapy. This entailed riding the subway while safeguarded by her imaginary iron chest plate. It involved wearing clothing that was brightly colored, because this simple choice, Lauren said, meant that more people might look at her. She managed to walk on the New York streets, ''where there's always someone behind you,'' and where her body constantly felt ''as if a bear was chasing me,'' by reminding herself in a silent recitation, ''My feet are on the concrete, the sky is blue, be aware of the trees, my feet are on the concrete, the sky is blue. ...''

The physical counteracted the physical. Heightened somatic states of 90 or a hundred, she recalled, were lessened to 40 or 50. But they would probably never diminish to a 10. Frequently, as we talked, she spoke at high speed, on the brink of breathlessness, as if the monstrous were right behind her. Her voice caught and tears welled as she spoke about how hard it was, 10 years after the attack, to ''absorb the grief of time lost in trying to live the life I want to live while working on the most basic forms of existing as a human being. I am just closer.''

Price and I had talked several times, and I had been speaking to people about somatic therapy for a few months, when she emailed to ask if we could talk again.

''There's something I want to name,'' she said. She worried that S.E. has an ''emperor-has-no-clothes situation.'' She didn't mean to suggest anything fraudulent, only that S.E.'s founder, teachers and perhaps some therapists run a risk of overpromising or putting out a message of ''a magical fix'' -- that ''it's in the body, and once you just learn to tap into it,'' all will be better. I thought back to something Kelley told her trainees, using an S.E. catchphrase: ''We're saving the world, one nervous system at a time.'' A luminous optimism suffused her presentations. ''The results are nothing short of miraculous,'' a psychologist proclaimed in a banner on S.E.'s website. I thought too about Levine's talk of the supernatural and what a recent S.E. graduate said to me about a video on the institute's site that claimed to demonstrate Levine's powers. In this film, he healed the debilitating PTSD of an Iraq War veteran. ''He's like a shaman,'' the graduate said.

Price spoke about a hovering danger. Over the past few years, sometimes new clients didn't want to hear that Price used other approaches as well as S.E., that she employed cognitive behavioral offshoots like acceptance and commitment therapy and dialectical behavior therapy. Some clients wanted to talk only about how Price would help them through somatic work. They said that they had been to therapists who tried all those other ways. They grew angry. There was, Price said, ''a common theme of, 'You don't understand; I've been suffering; no one has helped me; are you saying you can't help me?' There's so much pain and fear behind this. There's something about what S.E. is offering that leads to these kinds of conversations. There can be insane expectations.'' It can be a way, she added, for clients to avoid accountability. It can be ''extra attractive to someone who can't look at who they are, who's just looking for the thing that will magically change them and fix them.'' The lure of the somatic could sometimes come from a desire to escape the work the mind needs to do.

I asked Price why she had put off mentioning this for so long.

''I haven't been saying this to anyone, even to myself,'' she answered. ''This is the first time I've talked this issue through.''

She explained her avoidance by saying that the prospect of her own impact, through S.E., had a seductive appeal. In the field of therapy, where even minor breakthroughs can be stubbornly elusive, the possibility of working wonders was a promise difficult to deny.

The promise wasn't entirely illusory. I'd felt it myself. What I should do, I sometimes thought, is draw tranquillity up from the soles of my feet every morning and commit myself to working with one of the somatic therapists I'd met. The attraction is strong. Romanticism and the return to nature, the holistic and the spiritual, are all part of the longing. There's the hope for release in the primal and salvation in the mystical. The allure may be strongest for those of us who live mostly in our minds, even as our minds whisper back skeptically, protesting the irrational and warning of self-deception. But aren't our minds, all too often, quick to put up resistance, so quick that we can barely recognize the reaction? Aren't our minds adept at defense? Below may lie the possibility of healing.

Daniel Bergner is a contributing writer for the magazine and the author of ''The Mind and the Moon: My Brother's Story, the Science of Our Brains and the Search for Our Psyches.'' Daniel Barreto is an artist based in Mexico City who works in a variety of media, including animation, film, visuals, murals and music. His work is known for its dreamlike quality, often incorporating light and plants to encourage a sense of calm and reflection.

----------------------------------------