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One night in October, 2009, a young man lay in an fMRI scanner in Liège, Belgium. Five years earlier, he'd suffered a head trauma in a motorcycle accident, and since then he hadn't spoken. He was said to be in a "vegetative state." A neuroscientist named Martin Monti sat in the next room, along with a few other researchers. For years, Monti and his postdoctoral adviser, Adrian Owen, had been studying vegetative patients, and they had developed two controversial hypotheses. First, they believed that someone could lose the ability to move or even blink while still being conscious; second, they thought that they had devised a method for communicating with such "locked-in" people by detecting their unspoken thoughts.

In a sense, their strategy was simple. Neurons use oxygen, which is carried through the bloodstream inside molecules of hemoglobin. Hemoglobin contains iron, and, by tracking the iron, the magnets in fMRI machines can build maps of brain activity. Picking out signs of consciousness amid the swirl seemed nearly impossible. But, through trial and error, Owen's group had devised a clever protocol. They'd discovered that if a person imagined walking around her house there was a spike of activity in her parahippocampal gyrus—a finger-shaped area buried deep in the temporal lobe. Imagining playing tennis, by contrast, activated the premotor cortex, which sits on a ridge near the skull. The activity was clear enough to be seen in real time with an fMRI machine. In a 2006 study published in the journal *Science*, the researchers reported that they had asked a locked-in person to think about tennis, and seen, on her brain scan, that she had done so.

With the young man, known as Patient 23, Monti and Owen were taking a further step: attempting to have a conversation. They would pose a question and tell him that he could signal "yes" by imagining playing tennis, or "no" by thinking about walking around his house. In the scanner control room, a monitor displayed a cross-section of Patient 23's brain. As different areas consumed blood oxygen, they shimmered red, then bright orange. Monti knew where to look to spot the yes and the no signals.

He switched on the intercom and explained the system to Patient 23. Then he asked the first question: “Is your father’s name Alexander?”

The man’s premotor cortex lit up. He was thinking about tennis—yes.

“Is your father’s name Thomas?”

Activity in the parahippocampal gyrus. He was imagining walking around his house—no.

“Do you have any brothers?”

Tennis—yes.

“Do you have any sisters?”

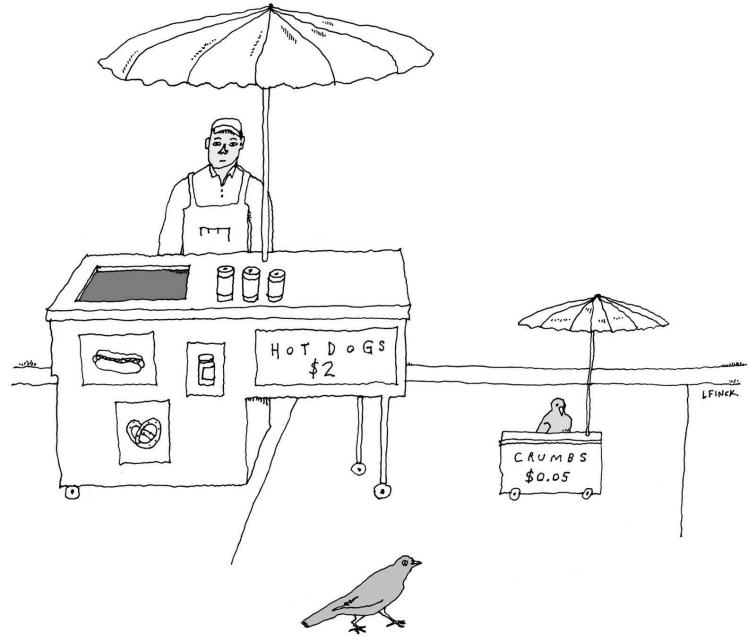
House—no.

“Before your injury, was your last vacation in the United States?”

Tennis—yes.

The answers were correct. Astonished, Monti called Owen, who was away at a conference. Owen thought that they should ask more questions. The group ran through some possibilities. “Do you like pizza?” was dismissed as being too imprecise. They decided to probe more deeply. Monti turned the intercom back on.

“Do you want to die?” he asked.



Cartoon by Liana Finck

For the first time that night, there was no clear answer.

That winter, the results of the study were published in *The New England Journal of Medicine*. The paper caused a sensation. The *Los Angeles Times* wrote a story about it, with the headline “*Brains of Vegetative Patients Show Life.*” Owen eventually estimated that twenty per cent of patients who were presumed to be vegetative were actually awake. This was a discovery of enormous practical consequence: in subsequent years, through painstaking fMRI sessions, Owen’s group found many patients who could interact with loved ones and answer questions about their own care. The conversations improved their odds of recovery. Still, from a purely scientific perspective, there was something unsatisfying about the method that Monti and Owen had developed with Patient 23. Although they had used the words “tennis” and “house” in communicating with him, they’d had no way of knowing for sure that he was thinking about those specific things. They had been able to say only that, in response to those prompts, thinking was happening in the associated brain areas. “Whether the person was imagining playing tennis, football, hockey, swimming—we don’t know,” Monti told me recently.

During the past few decades, the state of neuroscientific mind reading has advanced substantially. Cognitive psychologists armed with an fMRI machine can tell whether a person is having depressive thoughts; they can

see which concepts a student has mastered by comparing his brain patterns with those of his teacher. By analyzing brain scans, a computer system can edit together crude reconstructions of movie clips you've watched. One research group has used similar technology to accurately describe the dreams of sleeping subjects. In another lab, scientists have scanned the brains of people who are reading the J. D. Salinger short story "Pretty Mouth and Green My Eyes," in which it is unclear until the end whether or not a character is having an affair. From brain scans alone, the researchers can tell which interpretation readers are leaning toward, and watch as they change their minds.

I first heard about these studies from Ken Norman, the fifty-year-old chair of the psychology department at Princeton University and an expert on thought decoding. Norman works at the Princeton Neuroscience Institute, which is housed in a glass structure, constructed in 2013, that spills over a low hill on the south side of campus. P.N.I. was conceived as a center where psychologists, neuroscientists, and computer scientists could blend their approaches to studying the mind; M.I.T. and Stanford have invested in similar cross-disciplinary institutes. At P.N.I., undergraduates still participate in old-school psych experiments involving surveys and flash cards. But upstairs, in a lab that studies child development, toddlers wear tiny hats outfitted with infrared brain scanners, and in the basement the skulls of genetically engineered mice are sliced open, allowing individual neurons to be controlled with lasers. A server room with its own high-performance computing cluster analyzes the data generated from these experiments.

Norman, whose jovial intelligence and unruly beard give him the air of a high-school science teacher, occupies an office on the ground floor, with a view of a grassy field. The bookshelves behind his desk contain the intellectual DNA of the institute, with William James next to texts on machine learning. Norman explained that fMRI machines hadn't advanced that much; instead, artificial intelligence had transformed how scientists read neural data. This had helped shed light on an ancient philosophical mystery. For centuries, scientists had dreamed of locating thought inside the head but had run up against the vexing question of what it means for thoughts to exist in physical space. When Erasistratus, an ancient Greek anatomist, dissected the brain, he suspected that its many folds were the key to intelligence, but he could not say how thoughts were packed into the convoluted mass. In the

seventeenth century, Descartes suggested that mental life arose in the pineal gland, but he didn't have a good theory of what might be found there. Our mental worlds contain everything from the taste of bad wine to the idea of bad taste. How can so many thoughts nestle within a few pounds of tissue?

Now, Norman explained, researchers had developed a mathematical way of understanding thoughts. Drawing on insights from machine learning, they conceived of thoughts as collections of points in a dense "meaning space." They could see how these points were interrelated and encoded by neurons. By cracking the code, they were beginning to produce an inventory of the mind. "The space of possible thoughts that people can think is big—but it's not infinitely big," Norman said. A detailed map of the concepts in our minds might soon be within reach.

Norman invited me to watch an experiment in thought decoding. A postdoctoral student named Manoj Kumar led us into a locked basement lab at P.N.I., where a young woman was lying in the tube of an fMRI scanner. A screen mounted a few inches above her face played a slide show of stock images: an empty beach, a cave, a forest.

"We want to get the brain patterns that are associated with different subclasses of scenes," Norman said.

As the woman watched the slide show, the scanner tracked patterns of activation among her neurons. These patterns would be analyzed in terms of "voxels"—areas of activation that are roughly a cubic millimetre in size. In some ways, the fMRI data was extremely coarse: each voxel represented the oxygen consumption of about a million neurons, and could be updated only every few seconds, significantly more slowly than neurons fire. But, Norman said, "it turned out that that information was in the data we were collecting—we just weren't being as smart as we possibly could about how we'd churn through that data." The breakthrough came when researchers figured out how to track patterns playing out across tens of thousands of voxels at a time, as though each were a key on a piano, and thoughts were chords.

The origins of this approach, I learned, dated back nearly seventy years, to the work of a psychologist named Charles Osgood. When he was a kid,

Osgood received a copy of Roget's Thesaurus as a gift. Poring over the book, Osgood recalled, he formed a "vivid image of words as clusters of starlike points in an immense space." In his postgraduate days, when his colleagues were debating how cognition could be shaped by culture, Osgood thought back on this image. He wondered if, using the idea of "semantic space," it might be possible to map the differences among various styles of thinking.

Osgood conducted an experiment. He asked people to rate twenty concepts on fifty different scales. The concepts ranged widely: *BOULDER*, *ME*, *TORNADO*, *MOTHER*. So did the scales, which were defined by opposites: fair-unfair, hot-cold, fragrant-foul. Some ratings were difficult: is a *TORNADO* fragrant or foul? But the idea was that the method would reveal fine and even elusive shades of similarity and difference among concepts. "Most English-speaking Americans feel that there is a difference, somehow, between 'good' and 'nice' but find it difficult to explain," Osgood wrote. His surveys found that, at least for nineteen-fifties college students, the two concepts overlapped much of the time. They diverged for nouns that had a male or female slant. *MOTHER* might be rated nice but not good, and *COP* vice versa. Osgood concluded that "good" was "somewhat stronger, rougher, more angular, and larger" than "nice."

Osgood became known not for the results of his surveys but for the method he invented to analyze them. He began by arranging his data in an imaginary space with fifty dimensions—one for fair-unfair, a second for hot-cold, a third for fragrant-foul, and so on. Any given concept, like *TORNADO*, had a rating on each dimension—and, therefore, was situated in what was known as high-dimensional space. Many concepts had similar locations on multiple axes: kind-cruel and honest-dishonest, for instance. Osgood combined these dimensions. Then he looked for new similarities, and combined dimensions again, in a process called "factor analysis."

When you reduce a sauce, you meld and deepen the essential flavors. Osgood did something similar with factor analysis. Eventually, he was able to map all the concepts onto a space with just three dimensions. The first dimension was "evaluative"—a blend of scales like good-bad, beautiful-ugly, and kind-cruel. The second had to do with "potency": it consolidated scales like large-small and strong-weak. The third measured how "active" or

“passive” a concept was. Osgood could use these three key factors to locate any concept in an abstract space. Ideas with similar coördinates, he argued, were neighbors in meaning.

For decades, Osgood’s technique found modest use in a kind of personality test. Its true potential didn’t emerge until the nineteen-eighties, when researchers at Bell Labs were trying to solve what they called the “vocabulary problem.” People tend to employ lots of names for the same thing. This was an obstacle for computer users, who accessed programs by typing words on a command line. George Furnas, who worked in the organization’s human-computer-interaction group, described using the company’s internal phone book. “You’re in your office, at Bell Labs, and someone has stolen your calculator,” he said. “You start putting in ‘police,’ or ‘support,’ or ‘theft,’ and it doesn’t give you what you want. Finally, you put in ‘security,’ and it gives you that. But it actually gives you two things: something about the Bell Savings and Security Plan, and also the thing you’re looking for.” Furnas’s group wanted to automate the finding of synonyms for commands and search terms.

They updated Osgood’s approach. Instead of surveying undergraduates, they used computers to analyze the words in about two thousand technical reports. The reports themselves—on topics ranging from graph theory to user-interface design—suggested the dimensions of the space; when multiple reports used similar groups of words, their dimensions could be combined. In the end, the Bell Labs researchers made a space that was more complex than Osgood’s. It had a few hundred dimensions. Many of these dimensions described abstract or “latent” qualities that the words had in common—connections that wouldn’t be apparent to most English speakers. The researchers called their technique “latent semantic analysis,” or L.S.A.

At first, Bell Labs used L.S.A. to create a better internal search engine. Then, in 1997, Susan Dumais, one of Furnas’s colleagues, collaborated with a Bell Labs cognitive scientist, Thomas Landauer, to develop an A.I. system based on it. After processing Grolier’s American Academic Encyclopedia, a work intended for young students, the A.I. scored respectably on the multiple-choice Test of English as a Foreign Language. That year, the two researchers co-wrote a paper that addressed the question “How do people know as much as they do with as little information as they get?” They

suggested that our minds might use something like L.S.A., making sense of the world by reducing it to its most important differences and similarities, and employing this distilled knowledge to understand new things. Watching a Disney movie, for instance, I immediately identify a character as “the bad guy”: Scar, from “The Lion King,” and Jafar, from “Aladdin,” just seem close together. Perhaps my brain uses factor analysis to distill thousands of attributes—height, fashion sense, tone of voice—into a single point in an abstract space. The perception of bad-guy-ness becomes a matter of proximity.

In the following years, scientists applied L.S.A. to ever-larger data sets. In 2013, researchers at Google unleashed a descendant of it onto the text of the whole World Wide Web. Google’s algorithm turned each word into a “vector,” or point, in high-dimensional space. The vectors generated by the researchers’ program, word2vec, are eerily accurate: if you take the vector for “king” and subtract the vector for “man,” then add the vector for “woman,” the closest nearby vector is “queen.” Word vectors became the basis of a much improved Google Translate, and enabled the auto-completion of sentences in Gmail. Other companies, including Apple and Amazon, built similar systems. Eventually, researchers realized that the “vectorization” made popular by L.S.A. and word2vec could be used to map all sorts of things. Today’s facial-recognition systems have dimensions that represent the length of the nose and the curl of the lips, and faces are described using a string of coordinates in “face space.” Chess A.I.s use a similar trick to “vectorize” positions on the board. The technique has become so central to the field of artificial intelligence that, in 2017, a new, hundred-and-thirty-five-million-dollar A.I. research center in Toronto was named the Vector Institute. Matthew Botvinick, a professor at Princeton whose lab was across the hall from Norman’s, and who is now the head of neuroscience at DeepMind, Alphabet’s A.I. subsidiary, told me that distilling relevant similarities and differences into vectors was “the secret sauce underlying all of these A.I. advances.”

In 2001, a scientist named Jim Haxby brought machine learning to brain imaging: he realized that voxels of neural activity could serve as dimensions in a kind of thought space. Haxby went on to work at Princeton, where he collaborated with Norman. The two scientists, together with other researchers, concluded that just a few hundred dimensions were sufficient to

capture the shades of similarity and difference in most fMRI data. At the Princeton lab, the young woman watched the slide show in the scanner. With each new image—beach, cave, forest—her neurons fired in a new pattern. These patterns would be recorded as voxels, then processed by software and transformed into vectors. The images had been chosen because their vectors would end up far apart from one another: they were good landmarks for making a map. Watching the images, my mind was taking a trip through thought space, too.

The larger goal of thought decoding is to understand how our brains mirror the world. To this end, researchers have sought to watch as the same experiences affect many people's minds simultaneously. Norman told me that his Princeton colleague Uri Hasson has found movies especially useful in this regard. They “pull people’s brains through thought space in synch,” Norman said. “What makes Alfred Hitchcock the master of suspense is that all the people who are watching the movie are having their brains yanked in unison. It’s like mind control in the literal sense.”

One afternoon, I sat in on Norman’s undergraduate class “fMRI Decoding: Reading Minds Using Brain Scans.” As students filed into the auditorium, setting their laptops and water bottles on tables, Norman entered wearing tortoiseshell glasses and earphones, his hair dishevelled.

He had the class watch a clip from “Seinfeld” in which George, Susan (an N.B.C. executive he is courting), and Kramer are hanging out with Jerry in his apartment. The phone rings, and Jerry answers: it’s a telemarketer. Jerry hangs up, to cheers from the studio audience.

“Where was the event boundary in the clip?” Norman asked. The students yelled out in chorus, “When the phone rang!” Psychologists have long known that our minds divide experiences into segments; in this case, it was the phone call that caused the division.

Norman showed the class a series of slides. One described a 2017 study by Christopher Baldassano, one of his postdocs, in which people watched an episode of the BBC show “Sherlock” while in an fMRI scanner. Baldassano’s guess going into the study was that some voxel patterns would be in constant flux as the video streamed—for instance, the ones involved in

color processing. Others would be more stable, such as those representing a character in the show. The study confirmed these predictions. But Baldassano also found groups of voxels that held a stable pattern throughout each scene, then switched when it was over. He concluded that these constituted the scenes' voxel "signatures."

Norman described another study, by Asieh Zadbood, in which subjects were asked to narrate "Sherlock" scenes—which they had watched earlier—aloud. The audio was played to a second group, who'd never seen the show. It turned out that no matter whether someone watched a scene, described it, or heard about it, the same voxel patterns recurred. The scenes existed independently of the show, as concepts in people's minds.

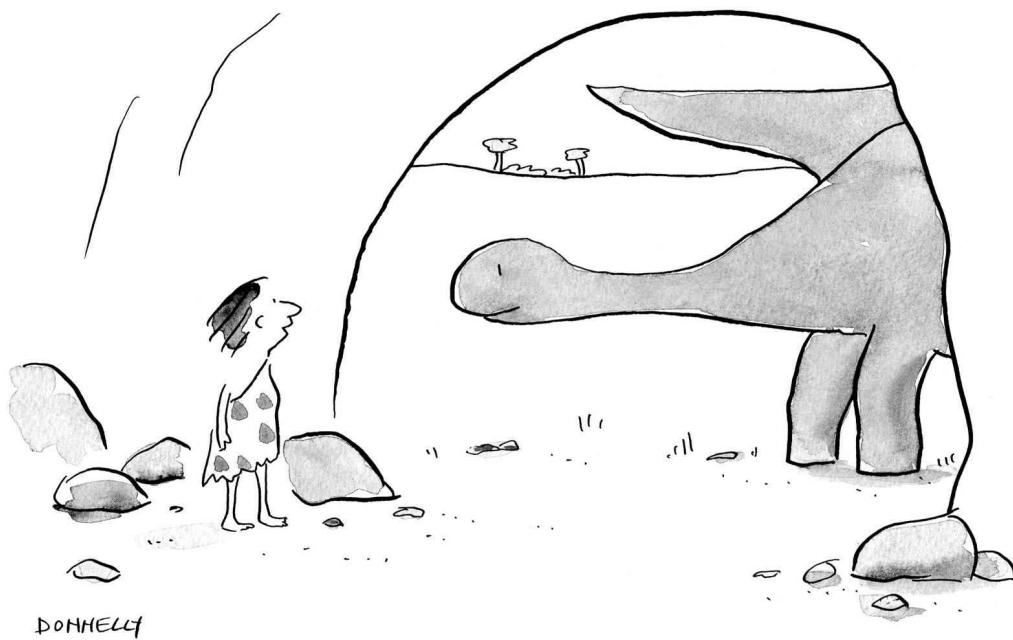
Through decades of experimental work, Norman told me later, psychologists have established the importance of scripts and scenes to our intelligence. Walking into a room, you might forget why you came in; this happens, researchers say, because passing through the doorway brings one mental scene to a close and opens another. Conversely, while navigating a new airport, a "getting to the plane" script knits different scenes together: first the ticket counter, then the security line, then the gate, then the aisle, then your seat. And yet, until recently, it wasn't clear what you'd find if you went looking for "scripts" and "scenes" in the brain.

In a recent P.N.I. study, Norman said, people in an fMRI scanner watched various movie clips of characters in airports. No matter the particulars of each clip, the subjects' brains all shimmered through the same series of events, in keeping with boundary-defining moments that any of us would recognize. The scripts and the scenes were real—it was possible to detect them with a machine. What most interests Norman now is how they are learned in the first place. How do we identify the scenes in a story? When we enter a strange airport, how do we know intuitively where to look for the security line? The extraordinary difficulty of such feats is obscured by how easy they feel—it's rare to be confused about how to make sense of the world. But at some point everything was new. When I was a toddler, my parents must have taken me to the supermarket for the first time; the fact that, today, all supermarkets are somehow familiar dims the strangeness of that experience. When I was learning to drive, it was overwhelming: each intersection and lane change seemed chaotic in its own way. Now I hardly

have to think about them. My mind instantly factors out all but the important differences.

Norman clicked through the last of his slides. Afterward, a few students wandered over to the lectern, hoping for an audience with him. For the rest of us, the scene was over. We packed up, climbed the stairs, and walked into the afternoon sun.

Like Monti and Owen with Patient 23, today's thought-decoding researchers mostly look for specific thoughts that have been defined in advance. But a "general-purpose thought decoder," Norman told me, is the next logical step for the research. Such a device could speak aloud a person's thoughts, even if those thoughts have never been observed in an fMRI machine. In 2018, Botvinick, Norman's hall mate, co-wrote a paper in the journal *Nature Communications* titled "Toward a Universal Decoder of Linguistic Meaning from Brain Activation." Botvinick's team had built a primitive form of what Norman described: a system that could decode novel sentences that subjects read silently to themselves. The system learned which brain patterns were evoked by certain words, and used that knowledge to guess which words were implied by the new patterns it encountered.



"I'd love a pet right now, but I travel too much."
Cartoon by Liza Donnelly

The work at Princeton was funded by iARPA, an R. & D. organization that's run by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence. Brandon Minnery, the iARPA project manager for the Knowledge Representation in Neural Systems program at the time, told me that he had some applications in mind. If you knew how knowledge was represented in the brain, you might be able to distinguish between novice and expert intelligence agents. You might learn how to teach languages more effectively by seeing how closely a student's mental representation of a word matches that of a native speaker. Minnery's most fanciful idea—"Never an official focus of the program," he said—was to change how databases are indexed. Instead of labelling items by hand, you could show an item to someone sitting in an fMRI scanner—the person's brain state could be the label. Later, to query the database, someone else could sit in the scanner and simply think of whatever she wanted. The software could compare the searcher's brain state with the indexer's. It would be the ultimate solution to the vocabulary problem.

Jack Gallant, a professor at Berkeley who has used thought decoding to reconstruct video montages from brain scans—as you watch a video in the scanner, the system pulls up frames from similar YouTube clips, based only on your voxel patterns—suggested that one group of people interested in decoding were Silicon Valley investors. "A future technology would be a portable hat—like a thinking hat," he said. He imagined a company paying people thirty thousand dollars a year to wear the thinking hat, along with video-recording eyeglasses and other sensors, allowing the system to record everything they see, hear, and think, ultimately creating an exhaustive inventory of the mind. Wearing the thinking hat, you could ask your computer a question just by imagining the words. Instantaneous translation might be possible. In theory, a pair of wearers could skip language altogether, conversing directly, mind to mind. Perhaps we could even communicate across species. Among the challenges the designers of such a system would face, of course, is the fact that today's fMRI machines can weigh more than twenty thousand pounds. There are efforts under way to make powerful miniature imaging devices, using lasers, ultrasound, or even microwaves. "It's going to require some sort of punctuated-equilibrium technology revolution," Gallant said. Still, the conceptual foundation, which goes back to the nineteen-fifties, has been laid.

Recently, I asked Owen what the new thought-decoding technology meant for locked-in patients. Were they close to having fluent conversations using something like the general-purpose thought decoder? “Most of that stuff is group studies in healthy participants,” Owen told me. “The really tricky problem is doing it in a single person. Can you get robust enough data?” Their bare-bones protocol—thinking about tennis equals yes; thinking about walking around the house equals no—relied on straightforward signals that were statistically robust. It turns out that the same protocol, combined with a series of yes-or-no questions (“Is the pain in the lower half of your body? On the left side?”), still works best. “Even if you could do it, it would take longer to decode them saying ‘it is in my right foot’ than to go through a simple series of yes-or-no questions,” Owen said. “For the most part, I’m quietly sitting and waiting. I have no doubt that, some point down the line, we will be able to read minds. People will be able to articulate, ‘My name is Adrian, and I’m British,’ and we’ll be able to decode that from their brain. I don’t think it’s going to happen in probably less than twenty years.”

In some ways, the story of thought decoding is reminiscent of the history of our understanding of the gene. For about a hundred years after the publication of Charles Darwin’s “On the Origin of Species,” in 1859, the gene was an abstraction, understood only as something through which traits passed from parent to child. As late as the nineteen-fifties, biologists were still asking what, exactly, a gene was made of. When James Watson and Francis Crick finally found the double helix, in 1953, it became clear how genes took physical form. Fifty years later, we could sequence the human genome; today, we can edit it.

Thoughts have been an abstraction for far longer. But now we know what they really are: patterns of neural activation that correspond to points in meaning space. The mind—the only truly private place—has become inspectable from the outside. In the future, a therapist, wanting to understand how your relationships run awry, might examine the dimensions of the patterns your brain falls into. Some epileptic patients about to undergo surgery have intracranial probes put into their brains; researchers can now use these probes to help steer the patients’ neural patterns away from those associated with depression. With more fine-grained control, a mind could be driven wherever one liked. (The imagination reels at the possibilities, for both good and ill.) Of course, we already do this by thinking, reading,

watching, talking—actions that, after I’d learned about thought decoding, struck me as oddly concrete. I could picture the patterns of my thoughts flickering inside my mind. Versions of them are now flickering in yours.

On one of my last visits to Princeton, Norman and I had lunch at a Japanese restaurant called Ajiten. We sat at a counter and went through the familiar script. The menus arrived; we looked them over. Norman noticed a dish he hadn’t seen before—“a new point in ramen space,” he said. Any minute now, a waiter was going to interrupt politely to ask if we were ready to order.

“You have to carve the world at its joints, and figure out: what are the situations that exist, and how do these situations work?” Norman said, while jazz played in the background. “And that’s a very complicated problem. It’s not like you’re instructed that the world has fifteen different ways of being, and here they are!” He laughed. “When you’re out in the world, you have to try to infer what situation you’re in.” We were in the lunch-at-a-Japanese-restaurant situation. I had never been to this particular restaurant, but nothing about it surprised me. This, it turns out, might be one of the highest accomplishments in nature.

Norman told me that a former student of his, Sam Gershman, likes using the terms “lumping” and “splitting” to describe how the mind’s meaning space evolves. When you encounter a new stimulus, do you lump it with a concept that’s familiar, or do you split off a new concept? When navigating a new airport, we lump its metal detector with those we’ve seen before, even if this one is a different model, color, and size. By contrast, the first time we raised our hands inside a millimetre-wave scanner—the device that has replaced the walk-through metal detector—we split off a new category.

Norman turned to how thought decoding fit into the larger story of the study of the mind. “I think we’re at a point in cognitive neuroscience where we understand a lot of the pieces of the puzzle,” he said. The cerebral cortex—a crumpled sheet laid atop the rest of the brain—warps and compresses experience, emphasizing what’s important. It’s in constant communication with other brain areas, including the hippocampus, a seahorse-shaped structure in the inner part of the temporal lobe. For years, the hippocampus was known only as the seat of memory; patients who’d had theirs removed

lived in a perpetual present. Now we were seeing that the hippocampus stores summaries provided to it by the cortex: the sauce after it's been reduced. We cope with reality by building a vast library of experience—but experience that has been distilled along the dimensions that matter. Norman's research group has used fMRI technology to find voxel patterns in the cortex that are reflected in the hippocampus. Perhaps the brain is like a hiker comparing the map with the territory.

In the past few years, Norman told me, artificial neural networks that included basic models of both brain regions had proved surprisingly powerful. There was a feedback loop between the study of A.I. and the study of the real human mind, and it was getting faster. Theories about human memory were informing new designs for A.I. systems, and those systems, in turn, were suggesting ideas about what to look for in real human brains. “It’s kind of amazing to have gotten to this point,” he said.

On the walk back to campus, Norman pointed out the Princeton University Art Museum. It was a treasure, he told me.

“What’s in there?” I asked.

“Great art!” he said

After we parted ways, I returned to the museum. I went to the downstairs gallery, which contains artifacts from the ancient world. Nothing in particular grabbed me until I saw a West African hunter’s tunic. It was made of cotton dyed the color of dark leather. There were teeth hanging from it, and claws, and a turtle shell—talismans from past kills. It struck me, and I lingered for a moment before moving on.

Six months later, I went with some friends to a small house in upstate New York. On the wall, out of the corner of my eye, I noticed what looked like a blanket—a kind of fringed, hanging decoration made of wool and feathers. It had an odd shape; it seemed to pull toward something I’d seen before. I stared at it blankly. Then came a moment of recognition, along dimensions I couldn’t articulate—more active than passive, partway between alive and dead. There, the chest. There, the shoulders. The blanket and the tunic were distinct in every way, but somehow still neighbors. My mind had split, then

lumped. Some voxels had shimmered. In the vast meaning space inside my head, a tiny piece of the world was finding its proper place. ♦

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Strong current can kill us, but electrical impulses let us live—a power even the ancients may have attempted to exploit.

By [Jerome Groopman](#)

In the early hours of Independence Day, 2018, I found myself awake. I put it down to jet lag: I'd just returned from South Africa, where my wife—like me, a physician—and I were working with a medical charity. I decided to get up, and drank a cup of strong coffee. Within minutes, my heart was racing. I attributed this to the caffeine, but my heart rate went on rapidly accelerating. I counted beats on my watch: a hundred and eighty a minute, three times my resting rate. My chest tightened and my breathing became labored. I tried to be calm, telling myself no, it wasn't a heart attack, merely the exhaustion of the trip and the effect of the coffee. But the symptoms were getting worse, and I broke out in a sweat. I woke my wife, who took my pulse and called an ambulance. As I lay in the ambulance, the siren blaring above me, I prayed that I would not die before making it to the emergency room.

The first days of July are said to be a perilous time to be in the hospital, because that's when new residents begin their training. But, despite the early hour, there was a senior E.R. doctor in attendance, who quickly instructed the medical team to place intravenous catheters in my arms, take blood for testing, strap oxygen prongs over my nostrils, and perform an electrocardiogram. She said the problem appeared to be something called an atrioventricular nodal reentrant tachycardia. I knew what that meant. Our heartbeat starts with an electrical impulse originating in the atria, the upper chambers of the heart, and then passing to the ventricles, causing them to contract. In a normal heart, there is a delay before the next heartbeat starts; in my heart, electrical impulses were circling back immediately via a rogue pathway. My ventricles were receiving constant signals to contract, giving scant time for blood to enter them and be pumped out to my tissues.

Despite this, my blood pressure hadn't yet plummeted to an alarming level. So the first attempt to slow my heart involved having me clench my abdominal muscles, in a so-called Valsalva maneuver, which can help control irregular heartbeats by stimulating the vagus nerve. But several tries made no difference, and my breathing was becoming more labored. The attending physician then explained that she would give me, via my I.V., a

dose of adenosine, a drug that arrests the flow of electrical signals in the heart. My heart would completely stop beating. Hopefully, she said, it would re-start on its own, at a normal pace. Of course, the adenosine might fail to work. She didn't elaborate, but I knew: the next step would be to try to reboot my heart with electroshock paddles.

One dose of adenosine did nothing. But shortly after a second dose the cardiac monitor suddenly fell silent, and I glanced at the display: a flat line. My heart had stopped. I had an eerie sense of doom, a visceral feeling that something awful would happen. But then there was a kind of thud, as if I had been kicked in the chest. My heart started to beat—slowly, forcefully. Within a few minutes, the rate and rhythm returned to normal. The electrically driven pump in my chest was again supplying blood to my body.

Timothy J. Jorgensen, a professor of radiation medicine at Georgetown University, writes in his new book, “[Spark](#)” (Princeton), that “life is nothing if not electrical.” In our daily lives, seeing lightning in the sky or plugging our appliances into wall sockets, we tend to neglect this fact. Jorgensen’s aim, in this chatty, wide-ranging tour of electricity’s role in biology and medicine, is to show us that every experience we have of ourselves—from the senses of sight, smell, and sound to our movements and our thoughts—depends on electrical impulses.

He starts with amber, the material with which humans probably first attempted to harness electricity for medical uses. Amber is the fossilized resin of prehistoric trees; when rubbed, it becomes charged with static electricity. It can attract small bits of matter, such as fluff, and emit shocks, and these properties made it seem magical. Amber pendants have been found dating back to 12,000 B.C., and Jorgensen writes that such jewelry would have been valued for much more than its beauty. In the era of recorded history, accounts of amber’s use abound. The ancient Greeks massaged the ailing with it, believing, Jorgensen writes, that its “attractive forces would pull the pain out of their bodies,” and it is the Greek word for amber—*elektron*—that gives us an entire vocabulary for electrical properties. In first-century Rome, Pliny the Elder wrote that wearing amber around the neck could prevent throat diseases and even mental illness. The Romans also used non-static electricity from torpedo fish, a name for

various species of electric ray, to deliver shocks to patients with maladies including headaches and hemorrhoids.

As late as the sixteenth century, the eminent Swiss physician Paracelsus called amber “a noble medicine for the head, stomach, intestines and other sinews complaints.” Not long afterward, the English scientist William Gilbert found that other substances, such as wax and glass, could generate charge if you rubbed them, and a German named Otto von Guericke created a crude electrostatic generator. But there was no reliable way of studying electricity until the invention of the Leyden jar, in 1745. (The jar takes its name from the city where a Dutch scientist developed it, though a German scientist achieved the same breakthrough independently around the same time.) The Leyden jar made it possible to accumulate charge from static electricity and then release it as electric current, and Jorgensen does not skimp on relating the bizarre experiments that ensued. In 1747, a French cleric named Jean-Antoine Nollet demonstrated the effect of electricity on the human body for King Louis XV:

He had 180 men from the king’s Royal Guard stand in line holding hands. He then had the soldier at one end of the line use his free hand to touch the top of a fully electrified Leyden jar. Instantly, all 180 men in line reeled from the strong shock they felt. The king was impressed.

For his next experiment, Nollet outdid himself, performing the same procedure with a chain of seven hundred Carthusian monks.

The discovery that electricity not only shocks the body but is part of what powers it came in the seventeen-eighties, when the Italian scientist Luigi Galvani conducted a series of experiments in which electric current produced movement in severed legs of frogs. Galvani attributed this discovery to what he called “animal electricity,” and for a while the study of such phenomena was known as galvanism. (Meanwhile, a sometime rival of Galvani’s, Alessandro Volta, invented the battery, giving his name to the volt.) Perhaps the most famous galvanic demonstration was conducted by Galvani’s nephew Giovanni Aldini, in January, 1803, in London. In front of an audience, he applied electrodes to the corpse of a man, George Foster, who had just been hanged at Newgate Prison for the murder of his wife and

child. Jorgensen quotes a report from the *Newgate Calendar*, a popular publication that relayed grisly details of executions:

On the first application of the process to the face, the jaws of the deceased criminal began to quiver, and the adjoining muscles were horribly contorted, and one eye was actually opened. In the subsequent part of the process, the right hand was raised and clenched, and the legs and thighs were set in motion.

Some of the onlookers thought that Aldini was trying to bring Foster back to life, Jorgensen writes. He goes on to note that Aldini's work drew the interest of the English writer and political philosopher William Godwin, who knew many electrical researchers. Godwin was the father of Mary Shelley, the author of "Frankenstein" (1818), which eventually gave us the image of Boris Karloff as the monster with electrodes sticking out from his neck. That image is pure Hollywood invention—Shelley's monster doesn't run on electricity—but the book mentions galvanism elsewhere and it is likely that the popular, bastardized version of the tale brings out something latent in the original.

As interest in electricity spread, there was a medical craze for electrical treatments, to address anything from headaches to bad thoughts or sexual difficulties. Jorgensen tries out the Toepler Influence Machine, a device dating from around 1900, not long before the Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906 brought a colorful era of electro-quackery to an end. The machine generates electricity with a set of spinning glass disks, operated by a hand crank, to produce what was termed "static breeze" therapy. The electrotherapist operating the machine gauges the voltage by moving two brass balls closer together as sparks fly between them. Then, with the flip of a switch, the electricity is directed to Jorgensen's head:

I brace myself to be shocked. But I feel no shock. Instead, I feel a cool breeze coming down from above, the skin of my scalp and face begins to tingle, and my shirt clings to my chest. In a word, it feels pleasant.

It certainly sounds more pleasant than the devices described by Dr. William Harvey King, in his 1901 textbook, "Electricity in Medicine and Surgery." King recommended treating gynecological disorders by placing an electrode

in the vagina and one in the rectum and then delivering a jolt of electricity. For men with urogenital complaints, he advised inserting a slender electrode up the penis, with a second electrode in the rectum or on the testicles. If administering current to swaying testicles proved a challenge, King offered a Rube Goldberg approach, with the testicles dunked into a gravy boat filled with saline solution, which was then electrified via a copper plate.



"We'll have the breakfast served all day."
Cartoon by Matthew Diffee

Don't try this at home. But there were plenty of electrotherapy devices designed for home use and mailed directly—and confidentially—to consumers. Pulvermacher's Electric Belt, for example, was worn around the waist, with batteries providing a steady electric current to the skin. A pouch attached to the front of the belt held the testicles, like a jockstrap. This allegedly enhanced "sexual vitality," which, Jorgensen explains, was a euphemism for treating erectile dysfunction.

Electric shocks more often bring death than enhance vitality, and people naturally feared lightning bolts hurled by any number of gods—Greek, Nordic, Hindu, Maori—long before they had any notion of electricity. Some medieval bells bear the Latin inscription *Fulgura frango* ("I break the lightning"), a testament to a belief that ringing church bells could offer protection against lightning. Of course, the unintended consequence was that

bell ringers ended up in harm's way. In France, between 1753 and 1786, more than a hundred bell ringers died of electrocution.

Why are some people injured or killed by lightning and others not? Jorgensen offers an educational vignette. While on a guided camping trip in the Blue Ridge Mountains in North Carolina, he was caught in a lightning storm. The guide made the group "stand on our backpacks in a crouched fetal position, legs held tightly together, with our heads down and our rain ponchos draped over ourselves." Deaths from lightning occur in various ways—a direct strike, say, or a current from a strike nearby that flows through the ground and up into the body. Crouching down while standing on a backpack made of a nonconductive material lessens both kinds of risk.

The amperage needed to kill a person is surprisingly small. A current of as little as 0.01 amps can disrupt the electrical signals flowing from our nerves to the muscles of the chest and diaphragm, causing asphyxiation. Amperage ten times higher can stop the heart outright. What makes lightning seem "so capricious," as Jorgensen puts it, is that some people are killed by low amperage while others survive direct strikes. The reason is a phenomenon called flashover, in which electric current flows over the surface of the body and largely bypasses the internal organs. Flashover occurs when the surface of the body is more conductive than the inside—for instance, if the skin is covered in sweat. The path that the current takes is crucial. A Danish study of electrocution deaths found that the current passed through the victim's heart in seventy-eight per cent of cases. Furthermore, in eighty-one per cent of the victims there was no observable change to the pathology of the internal organs; in other words, death occurred not because any tissue was destroyed but because the current had interfered with the normal electrical function of the heart's cardiac cells, nodal tissues, and conduction tracts.

With higher currents, tissue damage does occur, and the grimdest chapter in Jorgensen's book deals with electrocution as a means of execution. The electric chair was the brainchild of Alfred P. Southwick, a dentist in Buffalo, who, one day in 1881, happened to see a drunk man stumble and grab an electrical generator. Southwick ran to the man, but the man was dead. The speed of death made him think that electricity could provide a quicker, less painful end than hanging. He based the design for an electric chair on the chair that his dental patients sat in. After Southwick had experimented with

a variety of stray animals, a state commission assessed thirty-four methods of execution and decided that electrocution was the most humane. The reality has proved otherwise, and the first use of the electric chair, in 1890, gave a preview of many ugly scenes in the following century. William Kemmler, a businessman convicted of killing his girlfriend with a hatchet, was executed at New York's Auburn Prison. A report in the *New York Herald* described the condemned man thrashing about for minutes, "until the room was filled with the odor of burning flesh and strong men fainted and fell like logs upon the floor."

In the mid-nineteenth century, a schoolboy in northern Spain named Santiago Ramón y Cajal saw a local priest who'd been lethally struck by lightning while ringing his church's bell. Years later, after Ramón y Cajal had become known as the father of neuroscience, an achievement that won him a Nobel Prize, he recalled the event in his autobiography:

There, beneath the bell, enveloped in dense smoke, his head hanging over the wall lifeless, lay the poor priest who had thought that he would be able to ward off the threatening danger by the imprudent tolling of the bell. Several men climbed up to help him and found him with his clothes on fire and with a terrible wound on his neck from which he died a few days later. The bolt had passed through him, mutilating him horribly.

Jorgensen relates that Ramón y Cajal regarded this incident as a watershed in his life and speculates that his great scientific achievements—deciphering the basic structure of the nervous system and discovering the neuron—may have their origin in a “transformative” encounter with lightning.

Ramón y Cajal's establishment of the neuron as the fundamental unit of the nervous system led to decades of research investigating how it works; he found that neurons propagate electrical impulses that are controlled by the passage of ions, specifically sodium or potassium. Jorgensen provides an elegant description of the process and of recent attempts to exploit this knowledge by developing high-tech devices to compensate for sensory deficits: cochlear implants for deafness, electrodes in the retina or in the visual cortex of the brain for blindness.

He relates the case of a woman, Melissa Loomis, whose right forearm was amputated after an infection from a raccoon bite. Each year, a million or so people across the world undergo an amputation, but Loomis was comparatively fortunate, receiving access not merely to an artificial limb but to a neuroprosthesis—a device that links the human nervous system to an electronic mechanism. This kind of brain-machine interface captures nerve signals from the brain and translates them into electrical signals that are relayed to a computer-controlled electronic device. The translation is possible because nerve signals, like digital ones, are binary.

When healthy, our nerves conduct electricity in a tightly controlled way, in order to transmit information to all parts of the body. In this sense, illness can sometimes be synonymous with uncontrolled electricity. Jorgensen describes epilepsy, for instance, as being like “an electrical storm in the brain.” Recent research suggests that migraines, too, may have a genesis resembling a seizure, with electrical activity in the brain stem releasing proteins that trigger pain. (Anti-epileptic medications such as topiramate are used to prevent migraines.)

Shocking the brain with electricity under highly controlled circumstances can be effective in treating major depressive disorders, even though the precise mechanism isn’t fully understood. A more selective and recently developed neurological application of electricity is deep brain stimulation, or DBS, which is used to treat Parkinson’s disease and other motor disorders. Electrodes are implanted in the area of the brain to be electrically stimulated and wired up to a controller housed in the chest.

DBS is sometimes described as a pacemaker for the brain. Electrical stimulation of the heart has a longer history, the first pacemaker having been implanted in 1958. An electrode is threaded inside the heart which gives small shocks at a rate of about sixty per minute, in order to stimulate the muscle to pump normally. Jorgensen notes that the technology owes its success largely to the invention of a commercially viable transistor, in 1948, which made possible the miniaturization of electronics. Today, some three million Americans are estimated to have a cardiac pacemaker, and the device has become a model for a newer invention, the “breathing pacemaker,” to treat sleep apnea. “When breathing stops, it sends an electrical impulse to an

electrode in the throat that shocks the relaxed tissues into contracting, thus reopening the airway,” Jorgensen writes.

In my case, there would have to have been a serious complication during treatment for a pacemaker to be necessary. Eventually, I was discharged from the emergency room with a beta-blocker prescription, to suppress the runaway electricity in my heart. But the side effects proved intolerable; even at low doses, my heart rate slowed so much that I could not climb a flight of stairs without stopping and gasping for air.

I consulted a cardiologist at my own hospital, Peter Zimetbaum, who is an expert in arrhythmias, and he performed an ablation to eradicate the errant pathway. Zimetbaum threaded catheters into the right and left femoral vessels in my groin and up into my heart. He injected small doses of isoproterenol, an adrenaline-like drug, which artificially induced the tachycardia that had landed me in the hospital. Then he mapped the pathways conducting electricity in my heart—the one that would carry normal impulses and the aberrant one that caused the heartbeat of a hundred and eighty. After he pinpointed the aberration, he destroyed it with heat from high-frequency radio waves. I was awake throughout the procedure, with just low doses of a painkiller, so that I could report whether what I experienced recapitulated that July morning.

After Zimetbaum had finished performing the ablation, he tried to trigger my tachycardia again, but my heart stayed steady. Electricity gone awry could have ended my life. Electricity in expert hands identified the defect in my heart and eliminated it. Now I was again a healthy body electric. ♦

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The post-colonial thinker's seminal book, "The Wretched of the Earth," described political oppression in psychological terms. What are its lessons for our current moment?

By [Pankaj Mishra](#)

"Killing a European is killing two birds with one stone," [Jean-Paul Sartre](#) wrote in 1961, seven years into France's brutal suppression of the Algerian independence movement. After all, such a killing eliminates "in one go oppressor and oppressed: leaving one man dead and the other man free." Sartre, despised in France for his solidarity with Algerian anti-colonialists, wanted to goad people into seeing the "strip-tease of our humanism." He wrote, "You who are so liberal, so humane, who take the love of culture to the point of affectation, you pretend to forget that you have colonies where massacres are committed in your name."

Sartre wrote these incendiary words in a preface to "[The Wretched of the Earth](#)," an anti-colonial treatise by the French and West Indian political philosopher and psychiatrist Frantz Fanon. Fanon, who had spent years in Algeria agitating for its liberation, was, at the time of the book's publication, little known and dying from leukemia. He was thirty-six years old. Sartre's celebrity brought Fanon's work widespread attention but also colored its initial Western reception. For the book's sixtieth anniversary, it has been reissued, by Grove, with a new introduction by Cornel West and a previously published one by Homi K. Bhabha. It now emerges as a strikingly ambivalent account of decolonization.

Hannah Arendt criticized Sartre's preface at length in her essay "[On Violence](#)" (1970), but she mostly ignored Fanon's text, with its many pages on the degeneration of anti-colonial movements and its case notes about psychiatric patients in Algeria. In 1966, a writer in these pages claimed that Fanon's "arguments for violence" are "spreading amongst the young Negroes in American slums." A reporter for the *Times* worried about their effect on "young radical Negro leaders." Indeed, Stokely Carmichael described Fanon as a mentor, and the founders of the Black Panther Party regarded "The Wretched of the Earth" as essential reading. Those delighting in, or alarmed by, the spectre of armed Black men on American streets barely noticed the specific context of Fanon's book—his experience of a

ferocious Western resistance to decolonization that by the early nineteen-sixties had consumed hundreds of thousands of lives.

In 1954, when France normalized massacre and torture in its Algerian colony, Fanon was working as a psychiatrist in a hospital in Algiers. Confronted in his day job with both French police torturers and their Algerian victims, he became convinced that psychiatric treatment could not work without the destruction of colonialism—an “absolute evil.” He joined the Algerian rebels, with most of whom he shared neither a language nor a religion, and, while moving from country to country in Africa, wrote a series of works on the necessity, the means, and the scope of a revolt by what W. E. B. Du Bois, in 1915, called the “darker nations.”

Fanon’s basic assumption—that colonialism is a machine of “naked violence,” which “only gives in when confronted with greater violence”—had become uncontroversial across Asia and Africa wherever armed mutinies erupted against Western colonialists. In 1959, in Guinea, the killing of striking dockworkers by Portuguese police had persuaded the poet and activist Amilcar Cabral to abandon diplomatic negotiation and embrace guerrilla warfare. A year later, Nelson Mandela, a disciple of Gandhi, led the African National Congress into armed struggle in response to a massacre of Black South Africans in Sharpeville. “Government violence can do only one thing and that is to breed counterviolence,” Mandela said. Fanon presented counterviolence as a kind of therapy for dehumanized natives: “As you and your fellow men are cut down like dogs,” he wrote, “there is no other solution but to use every means available to reestablish your weight as a human being.”

In Fanon’s view, the Western bourgeoisie was “fundamentally racist” and its “bourgeois ideology” of equality and dignity was merely a cover for capitalist-imperialist rapacity. In this, he anticipated the contemporary critique, frequently derided as “woke,” that holds that the West’s material and ideological foundations lie in white supremacy. European imperialists had, he charged, “behaved like real war criminals in the underdeveloped world” for centuries, using “deportation, massacres, forced labor, and slavery” to accumulate wealth. Among their “most heinous” crimes were the rupturing of the Black man’s identity, the destruction of his culture and community, and the poisoning of his inner life with a sense of inferiority.

European thought, Fanon wrote, was marked by “a permanent dialogue with itself, an increasingly obnoxious narcissism.”

At the same time, Fanon urged the colonized to “stop accusing” their white masters, and to do what the latter had so conspicuously failed to do: start a “new history of man” that advanced “universalizing values.” In his view, anti-colonial nationalism was only the first step toward a new radical humanism “for Europe, for ourselves and for humanity.” He had already distanced himself from claims to a racially defined identity and culture. The “great white error” of racial arrogance, he had written, ought not to be replaced by the “great black mirage.” “In no way do I have to dedicate myself to reviving a black civilization unjustly ignored,” he wrote in his first book, “[Black Skin, White Masks](#)” (1952). “I will not make myself the man of any past.” He also saw no point in trying to shame people through exposure to the grisly facts of slavery and imperialism. “Am I going to ask today’s white men to answer for the slave traders of the seventeenth century?” he asked. In “The Wretched of the Earth,” he warned the dispossessed against adopting a “psychology dominated by an exaggerated sensibility, sensitivity, and susceptibility.”

As Western imperialists ended their long occupation of Asia and Africa, Fanon became obsessed with the “curse of independence”: the possibility that nationhood in the Global South, though inevitable, could become an “empty shell,” a receptacle for ethnic and tribal antagonisms, ultranationalism, chauvinism, and racism. Certainly, writers of the sixties inspired by “The Wretched of the Earth”—the African novelists Nadine Gordimer, Ayi Kwei Armah, and Ngugi wa Thiong’o, the Caribbean poet Édouard Glissant, the Guyanese critic Walter Rodney—saw in the book not an incitement to kill white people but a chillingly acute diagnosis of the post-colonial condition: how the West would seek to maintain the iniquitous international order that had made it rich and powerful, and how new ruling classes in post-colonial nations would fail to devise a viable system of their own. One measure of Fanon’s clairvoyance—and the glacial pace of progress—is that, in its sixtieth year, “The Wretched of the Earth” remains a vital guide both to the tenacity of white supremacy in the West and to the moral and intellectual failures of the “darker nations.”

Fanon's suspicions about the Global South's élites came from his own tormented experience as a Westernized Black man who grew up oblivious of his Blackness. Born into a middle-class family in Martinique in 1925, Fanon had been a proud citizen of the French Republic. He grew up reading Montesquieu and Voltaire, and, like many Black men from French colonies, fought with the Allied forces during the Second World War. Wounded in Alsace, he was awarded the Croix de Guerre.

It was only in postwar France, where he went, in 1946, to study psychiatry, that he discovered he was little more than a "dirty nigger" in the eyes of whites—a "savage" of the kind he had previously assumed lived only in Africa. In "Black Skin, White Masks," he narrates his experience of a formative trauma common to many anti-colonial leaders and thinkers. In his case, it was a little girl in Lyon exclaiming, "Maman, look, a Negro; I'm scared!" Being "overdetermined from without," as he described it, shocked him out of any complacent assumptions about equality, liberty, and fraternity. "I wanted quite simply to be a man among men," Fanon wrote, but the "white gaze, the only valid one," had "fixed" him, forcing him to become shamefully aware of his Black body, and of debasing white assumptions about his history, defined by "cannibalism, backwardness, fetishism, racial stigmas, slave traders."

Although Fanon understood the political and economic realities that reduced Black men to "crushing objecthood," his psychiatric training made him sensitive to the psychological power of the images imposed by enslavers on the enslaved. Fanon knew that Black men who internalized these images would find it impossible to escape their colonized selves in a world made by and for white men. White men had not merely conquered vast territories, radically reorganizing societies and exploiting populations. They also claimed to represent a humane civilization devoted to personal liberty and equipped with the superior tools of science, reason, and individual enterprise. "The Europeans wanted gold and slaves, like everybody else," the African narrator of V. S. Naipaul's novel "[A Bend in the River](#)" remarks. "But at the same time they wanted statues put up to themselves as people who had done good things for the slaves." Naturally, "they got both the slaves and the statues."

Fanon wrote about how the Black man, cowed by the colonists' unprecedented mixture of greed, righteousness, and military efficacy, tended to internalize the demoralizing judgment delivered on him by the white gaze. "I start suffering from not being a white man," Fanon wrote. "So I will try quite simply to make myself white." But mimicry could be a cure worse than the disease, since it reinforced the existing racial hierarchy, thereby further devastating the Black man's self-esteem. Inspired by Sartre, who had argued that the anti-Semite's gaze created the Jew, Fanon concluded that Blackness was another constructed and imposed identity. "The black man is not," he wrote in the closing pages of "Black Skin, White Masks." "No more than the white man."

This argument also underpins the political programs that Fanon proposes in "The Wretched of the Earth," in which he argues that, because colonialism is "a systematized negation of the other," it "forces the colonized to constantly ask the question: Who am I in reality?" By the time he wrote the book, however, his focus had shifted. "The misfortune of the colonized African masses, exploited, subjugated, is first of a vital, material order," he wrote, against which the grievances of educated Black men like him did not appear as urgent. In a withering review, published in 1959, of Richard Wright's "[White Man, Listen](#)" (1957), Fanon wrote that "the drama of consciousness of a westernized Black, torn between his white culture and his negritude," while painful, does not "kill anyone."

For much of "The Wretched of the Earth," Fanon raises an issue that he thought Wright, obsessed with the existential crises of literary intellectuals, had ignored: how "to give back to the peoples of Africa the initiative of their history, and by which means." Distrustful of the "Westernized" intelligentsia and urban working classes in the nationalist movements fighting for liberation, he saw the African peasantry as the true wretched of the earth, and the main actor in the drama of decolonization. According to Fanon, "In colonial countries only the peasantry is revolutionary," since "it has nothing to lose and everything to gain" and, unlike bourgeois leaders, brooks "no compromise, no possibility of concession."

Fanon did not seem to realize that he shared the indignities of racism and his self-appointed tasks with many anti-colonial leaders and thinkers. Gandhi, after all, had once been as loyal to the British Empire as Fanon was to the

French, and, while working as a lawyer in South Africa in the late nineteenth century, had likewise been racially humiliated into a lasting distrust of the identity politics of whiteness. So, too, did Gandhi's vision of political self-determination draw on a need to heal the wounds inflicted by white-supremacist arrogance. His concept of nonviolence fashioned a new way of thinking and feeling, one in which human good would not be defined only by Western males.

Many other Asian and African leaders of decolonization had a similar intellectual and political awakening. Educated in Western-style institutions and inhabiting the white man's world, these men were often the first in their countries to be directly exposed to crude racial prejudice. Renouncing their white masks, their failed attempts at mimicry, they took it upon themselves to rouse and mobilize their destitute and illiterate compatriots, who had passively suffered the depredations and insults of white colonialists. As members of a tiny privileged élite, they saw it as their duty to devise non-exploitative economic and social systems for their people, and foster a culture in which alienating imitation of the powerful white man gives way to pride and confidence in local traditions.

It was Fanon's broader experience of the colonial world in the nineteen-fifties that refined his political consciousness. In 1954, a year after moving to Algeria to take up a psychiatric residency, he witnessed the beginning of the Algerian revolution. Within a couple of years, his opposition to the colonial crackdown got him thrown out of the country. He joined the revolutionary movement, the Front de Libération Nationale, and, from a new base, in Tunis, travelled across Africa—Ghana, Ethiopia, Mali, Guinea, Congo—as a representative of the F.L.N. and its provisional government-in-exile.

By this time, Africa and Asia had manifested a range of ideological alternatives to racial capitalism and imperialism: the peasant Communism of Mao Zedong, in China; in Indonesia, Sukarno's brand of Islam-inflected socialism, Pancasila; Kwame Nkrumah's Positive Action protests, in Ghana. Meanwhile, the Cold War was drastically curtailing the autonomy of newly liberated nations. To protect their interests, Western powers were replacing costly physical occupations with military and economic bullying. They cast about for collaborators among élites and sometimes overthrew and murdered

less tractable leaders. One of the most prominent victims of a Western assassination plot was a friend and an exact contemporary of Fanon: Patrice Lumumba, the first elected Prime Minister of Congo, who was killed in 1961. Political and economic incapacity in many fledgling nation-states also forced their leaders to seek help from their former overlords. A few months after Kenya, Uganda, and Tanganyika gained independence from Britain, their leaders sought the British Army's help in suppressing mutinies over low pay.

Oddly, “The Wretched of the Earth,” published during this partial transfer of power from white to Black and brown hands, barely mentions Asia or much of Africa, and has nothing at all to say about the Middle East. Fanon appears not to have intimately known any of the societies he travelled through, not even Algeria. Yet, by reflecting scrupulously on his experience as a powerless Black man in exile, he was able to see through the Cold War’s moralizing rhetoric to the insidious new modes of social and political coercion. It was probably during his time in Nkrumah’s Ghana that he developed his view of single-party rule: “the modern form of the bourgeois dictatorship stripped of mask, makeup, and scruples, cynical in every aspect.” The formulation has, in the past six decades, accurately described the political systems in Kenya, Tanzania, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, and many other countries.

Fanon also presciently described the politically explosive gap between urban prosperity and rural poverty, and the toxic consequences of inequitable development, even in countries he never visited. Those bemused by the spectacle of an educated middle class and a globalized business élite devoted to India’s Narendra Modi, a far-right autocrat, can find a broad outline of this situation in “The Wretched of the Earth”:

The national bourgeoisie increasingly turns its back on the interior, on the realities of a country gone to waste, and looks toward the former metropolis and the foreign capitalists who secure its services. Since it has no intention of sharing its profits with the people, it discovers the need for a popular leader whose dual role will be to stabilize the regime and to perpetuate the domination of the bourgeoisie.

The defects and omissions in Fanon's book are also revealing. His relentlessly male perspective reduced liberation from colonialism to the frustrations and desires of men like him. Proposing that the native's virility and will to power could counter the violence of the colonialist, he reinforced a hypermasculinist discourse of domination. Not surprisingly, politics remained a vicious affair in Algeria for decades after the French departed.

As an heir to the secular French Enlightenment, and seemingly unaware of non-Francophone cultural traditions, Fanon was blind to the creative possibilities of the past—those deployed, say, by Indigenous peoples in Canada and Australia, in their battles for survival against logging and mining corporations. Conversely, his theory about the revolutionary potential of African peasants now seems all too clearly the romantic fantasy of an uprooted, self-distrusting intellectual. In Africa, the urban working classes turned out to be far more important to decolonization than the peasantry.

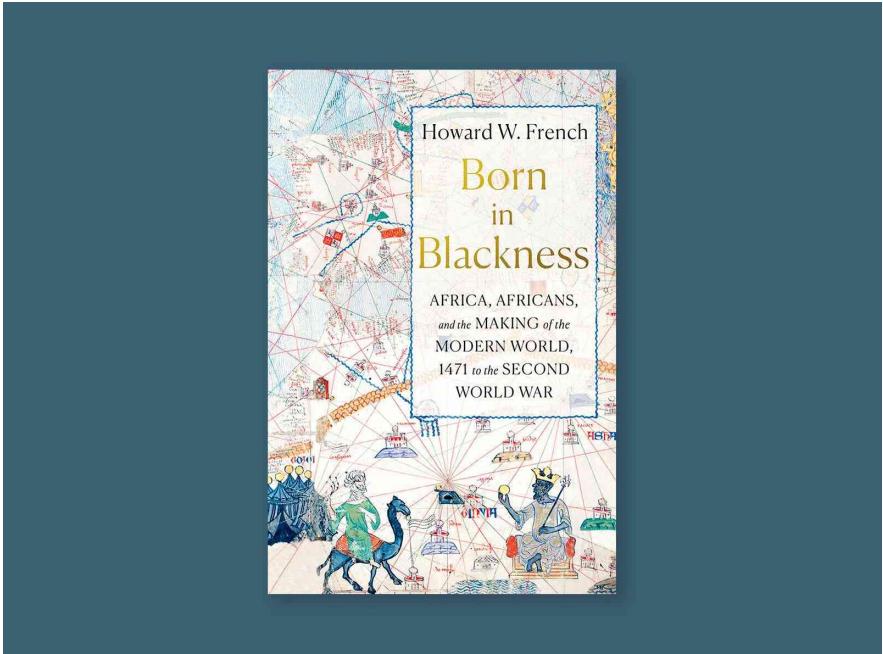
Countries in which peasants proved crucial to national liberation, such as China and Vietnam, came no closer to starting a new history of man. Contrary to what Fanon ardently hoped, even the strongest post-colonial nations, such as India and China, are “obsessed with catching up” with their historical tormentors, and have engendered, in this imitative process, their own rhetoric of obnoxious narcissism.

Still, Fanon's misgivings about decolonization and his insights into the connections between psychic and socioeconomic change have never seemed more prophetic and salutary than in today's racially charged climate. Nonwhite people's growing demands for dignity, together with China's ascendancy, have destabilized a Western self-image constructed during decades when white men alone seemed to make the modern world. This weakening of imperial-era authority has resulted in a proliferation of existential anxieties, marked by a heightened exploitation of culture-war talking points in politics and the media. Thus, attempts to reckon with the long-neglected legacies of slavery and imperialism collide with cults of Churchill and the Confederacy, and critical race theory becomes an electorally potent bogeyman for the right. Meanwhile, as Éric Zemmour, a demagogue of Algerian Jewish ancestry, raises the banner of white supremacy and Islamophobia in France, and Taliban fanatics inherit a

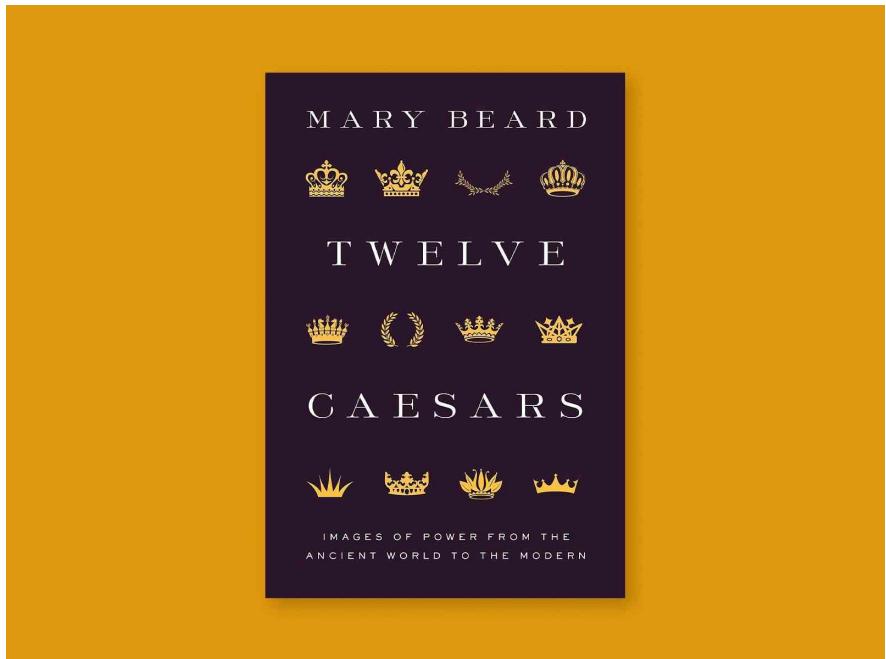
devastated Afghanistan from retreating Western powers, decolonization seems far from being triumphantly concluded. Rather, it resembles the bleakly ambiguous and open-ended transition depicted by Fanon. Sixty years after its publication, “The Wretched of the Earth” reads increasingly like a dying Black man’s admission of a genuine impossibility: of moving beyond the world made by white men. ♦

New Yorker Favorites

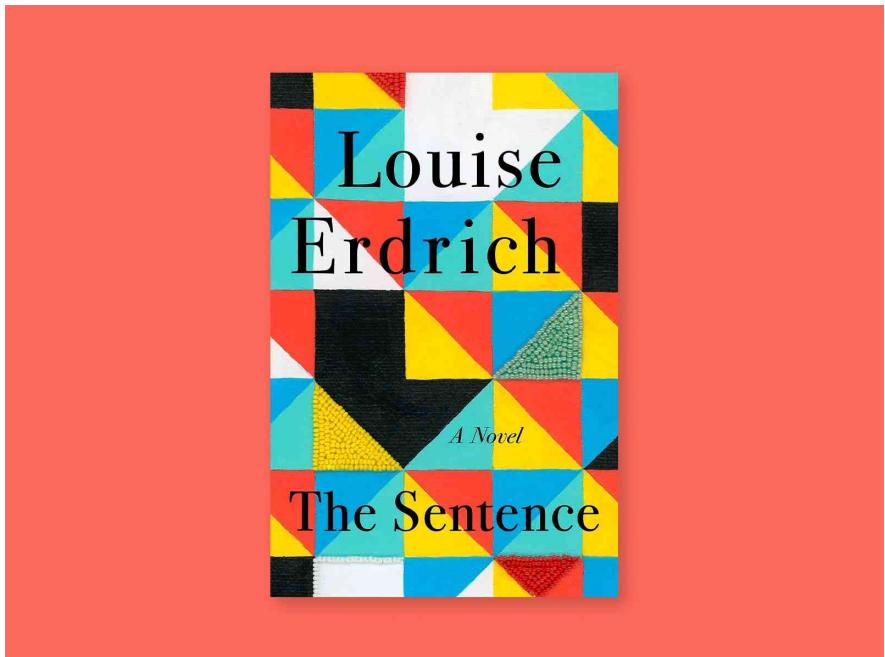
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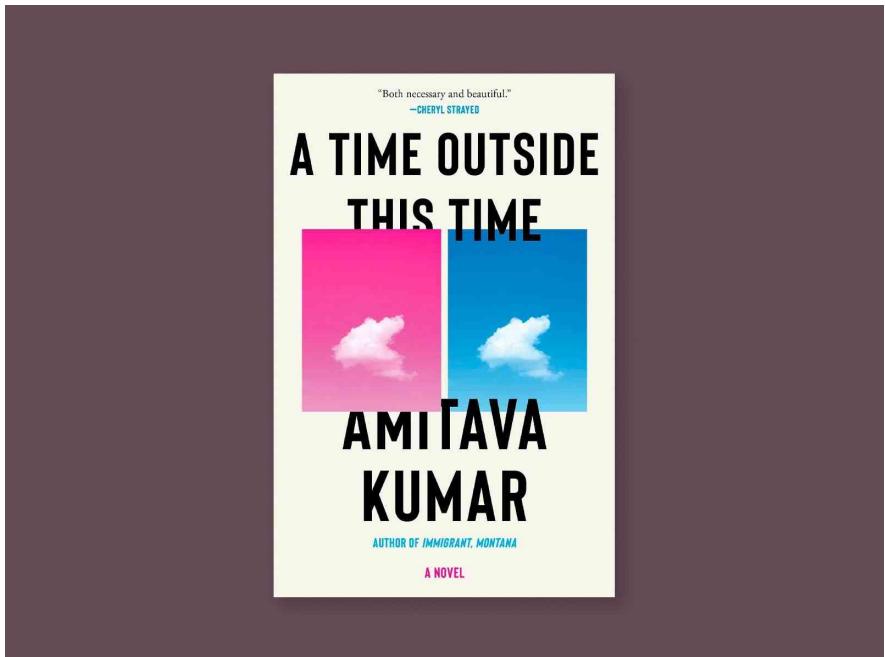
[Born in Blackness](#), by Howard W. French (Liveright). Reaching as far back as 1324, when King Mansa Musa, of Mali, embarked on a pilgrimage to Mecca, this revisionist chronicle sets out to depict Africans and people of African descent as the “prime movers in every stage” of global history. Challenging the common view that the West rose because of some inherent superiority, French emphasizes that it could not have become what it did without Africa’s resources, noting, for instance, the centrality of the continent’s gold and its labor to the development of European societies. Weaving together previous scholarship on the subject with new archival research and eye-opening descriptions of historic sites, French makes an engaging, persuasive case for reconsidering Africa’s place in world history.



[**Twelve Caesars**](#), by *Mary Beard* (Princeton). Ever since Augustus assumed the role of *princeps* (roughly, “first citizen”), in 27 B.C., the Western world has been saturated with depictions of Roman emperors. This thoroughgoing survey examines the relationship between ancient imperial imagery and the modern visual imagination. The face on a bust thought to portray the Emperor Vitellius, who reigned briefly in 69 A.D., becomes, in the Renaissance, “one of the most replicated ancient images in art,” appearing, for example, in Veronese’s “Last Supper,” and often used as a symbol of gluttonous immorality. With handsome illustrations of coins, canvases, frescoes, and teacups, Beard brings the prestige and power of these emperors’ half-invented faces into tighter focus.



[The Sentence](#), by Louise Erdrich (Harper). This is a pandemic novel, but COVID-19 is just one element in the life of its busy narrator, an Ojibwe bookseller named Tookie, living in Minneapolis. As the virus haunts, she sees streets burning during Black Lives Matter protests, the ghost of a deceased “wannabe”-Native customer lingering in her store, and reminders of her recent incarceration for an unwitting offense. Tookie recommends books to her loyal customers throughout the novel, which ends with lists of Indigenous poetry, “short perfect novels,” and “pandemic reading” dear to its gentle fictional narrator. The story is, perhaps above all, about the peace available to us in books like this.



[**A Time Outside This Time**](#), by Amitava Kumar (*Knopf*). Satya, the protagonist of this novel, is, like its author, an Indian American writer and literature professor. Early in 2020, during a “cushy fellowship” at an Italian villa, he finds his imagination overwhelmed by events in the real world and decides to make fiction out of them. In a work in progress, “Enemies of the People,” he blends together lies, fake news, misinformation, and Trump tweets. His writing triggers emotional flashbacks to events from his boyhood in a small town in India, where the state usurped individual liberties, political conflicts threatened his family, and “even milkmen carried swords.” As Satya uncovers the “truth of fiction,” Kumar provides a shimmering assault on the Zeitgeist.

Comment

- [The Lessons of “The Lorax”](#)

By [Jill Lepore](#)

In 1989, the year that Iran's Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini issued a fatwa calling for the death of [Salman Rushdie](#), for writing "[The Satanic Verses](#)," American parents in Laytonville, a small town in Northern California, demanded that their children's elementary school take Dr. Seuss's 1971 book, "[The Lorax](#)," off its list of required reading for second graders. The book is "[Silent Spring](#)" for the under-ten set. "I speak for the trees," the Lorax says, attempting to defend a soon to be blighted forest, its tufted Truffula trees chopped down and knit into hideous thneeds—"a Fine-Something-That-All-People-Need"—until there is nothing left but one single seed.



Illustration by João Fazenda

Like the long-ago banning of [E. B. White](#)'s "[Stuart Little](#)," by the New York Public Library, the rumpus about "The Lorax" is at first bewildering. Dr. Seuss—Theodor Geisel—deemed it his best book. Schools across the country assigned it. Mrs. Pate's class at the Pepper Pike School, in Ohio, sent the author new endings. "I planted that seed, / It was so very dry," Robby Price, a third grader, wrote. "Then all of a sudden, / It grew 8 miles high."

There were other Loraxes, too. In 1972, Christopher D. Stone, a law professor at the University of Southern California, argued for granting trees

a legal voice. “I am quite seriously proposing that we give legal rights to forests, oceans, rivers and other so-called ‘natural objects,’ ” he wrote, in “Should Trees Have Standing?,” an article that was cited, that same year, in a Supreme Court dissent, and helped galvanize the environmental movement.

“I drew a Lorax and he was obviously a Lorax,” Geisel said. “Doesn’t he look like a Lorax to you?” But, in 1989, to Bill and Judith Bailey, the founders of a logging-equipment business in Laytonville, the Lorax looked like an environmental activist. “Papa, we can’t cut trees down,” their eight-year-old son, Sammy, said after reading the book, in which a “Super-Axe-Hacker” whacks “four Truffula Trees at one smacker.” Townspeople were caught up in the so-called “timber wars,” when environmentalists camped out in trees and loggers wore T-shirts that read “Spotted Owl Tastes Like Chicken.” Logging families took out ads in the local newspaper. One said, “To teach our children that harvesting redwood trees is bad is not the education we need.”

This year marks the fiftieth anniversary of “The Lorax,” an occasion that passed with little fanfare, Dr. Seuss himself having been made into something of a thneed in the latest round of book battles. Earlier this year, on Geisel’s birthday, his estate [announced](#) that it would no longer publish six of his lesser-known books, in the wake of criticism that they contain racist caricatures. Books go out of print all the time, and this decision wouldn’t have been especially notable except that it began trending on Twitter. “Buying all the Dr. Seuss volumes for the kids before the woke book burners can get to them all,” the conservative commentator Ben Shapiro tweeted. Senator Ted Cruz sought campaign donations: “Stand with Ted & Dr. Seuss against the cancel culture mob to claim your signed copy of *Green Eggs and Ham!*”

Meanwhile, groups of parents, not to say cancel-culture mobs, have been assembling at school-board meetings to demand the removal of books from classrooms and school libraries, often in districts that have been battling over [mask](#) and [vaccination mandates](#). Book-banning crusaders, waving the flag of “parental rights,” have particularly decried books about American history and racial injustice, and books that include lesbian, gay, and trans characters. In at least seven states, they’ve objected to Maia Kobabe’s 2019

book, “[Gender Queer: A Memoir](#).” Schools in Missouri have pulled Alison Bechdel’s “[Fun Home](#).” Glenn Youngkin’s campaign for governor of Virginia believed this to be a winning issue. “When my son showed me his reading assignment, my heart sunk,” a fretful mother says in a Youngkin campaign ad, after discovering that her son, a high-school senior, was reading the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel “[Beloved](#),” by the Nobel laureate [Toni Morrison](#), in an A.P. English class. Progressive legislators, parents, and school boards, too, have called for the removal of books, including “[The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn](#)” and “[To Kill a Mockingbird](#).”

No book has a right to be on a reading list. Teachers frequently change what they teach. Parents are likely to take an interest in what their children are reading. Booksellers decide what books to sell. And pious attacks on books are very often absurd. What’s new is that lately some senior staff of organizations founded on a commitment to freedom of the press and freedom of expression appear to be wavering on upholding those principles. Last year, when Target briefly stopped selling Abigail Shrier’s “Irreversible Damage: The Transgender Craze Seducing Our Daughters,” a much admired deputy director of the A.C.L.U. tweeted support on his personal account for “stopping the circulation of this book and these ideas.” (He later deleted the tweet.) This summer, the American Booksellers Association, a longtime sponsor of Banned Books Week, whose theme this year is “Books Unite Us, Censorship Divides Us,” sent copies of Shrier’s book to seven hundred and fifty bookstores, and then apologized: “This is a serious, violent incident that goes against ABA’s ends policies, values, and everything we believe and support.” The apology proved insufficient to many booksellers. “We’re dealing with a historically white, cis organization in a white supremacist society,” a member of the A.B.A.’s diversity-equity-and-inclusion committee told *Publishers Weekly*.

The book-ban battle isn’t about to end anytime soon. And it’s a battle that conservatives will win if progressives agree with them about the righteousness of banning books, disagreeing only on which books to ban. In the year of the fatwa, the fuss over “The Lorax” played out differently. The Laytonville Unified School District convened a committee to consider the Baileys’ complaint. It voted to keep the book on the required-reading list, with the superintendent arguing that the book isn’t about the timber industry but about “greed and the depletion of a finite resource.” Then the school

board said that, if a parent really had a problem with a reading assignment, that parent could figure out a substitute. "No one ever suggested that the book be banned," Bill Bailey said. And Geisel told the Associated Press that he didn't believe that no one should ever harvest a tree. "I live in a wooden house," he said. "I'm sitting in a wooden chair." His book was also printed on paper made from trees. And so far, at least, it has resisted the Super-Axe-Hacker. ♦

Crossword

- [The Crossword: Wednesday, November 24, 2021](#)

By [Aimee Lucido](#)

Crowd-Sourcing Dept.

- [We the Crypto People Seek a Constitution](#)

By [Adam Iscoe](#)

A dozen or so friends from the Internet gathered recently at Sotheby's in Manhattan to buy a first printing of the U.S. Constitution (estimated value: fifteen to twenty million dollars). The group, who called themselves ConstitutionDAO, had just spent a week raising millions of dollars on Twitter, TikTok, and Discord from anonymous screen names: recent immigrants, college dropouts, the great-great-great-great-great-grandson of someone who fought in the American Revolution. (The "DAO" in "ConstitutionDAO" stands for "decentralized autonomous organization"—a leaderless corporate structure that resembles an online chat room with a bank account.) They raised four million in the first twenty-four hours. Then someone pitched in another four million, in Ethereum's currency. By the next evening, the project had gone viral: seventeen thousand donors had given more than thirty-three million (median contribution: \$206.26). "I feel like I'm part of an organism!" a twenty-eight-year-old contributor wearing a green fur coat and leather sandals said, excitedly, in the Sotheby's lobby. "It's fucking awesome." Nearby, a man named Sean Murray, dressed in a military jacket, white breeches, and a tricorne hat, held up a homemade sign reading "*I'M BUYING THE CONSTITUTION.*"



Another man walked up to Murray and introduced himself: “I was wondering if anyone else would show up!” Murray looked down at his getup and said, “I gotta be different, right?” He laughed. “I’m glad it’s a real-life thing. You don’t want to come out here and figure out it was Twitter bots the whole time.”

The item the D.A.O. planned to bid on that evening was one of only thirteen surviving first printings of the U.S. Constitution. It belonged to Dorothy Goldman, whose late husband purchased it, in 1988, for a hundred and sixty-five thousand dollars. The document—Sotheby’s Lot No. 1787—was typeset by David Claypoole and John Dunlap, in Philadelphia, on September 17, 1787. (Dunlap also typeset the first printings of the Declaration of Independence.) “It was a very labor-intensive process,” a Sotheby’s representative said, in a film distributed to prospective bidders.

On the third floor, several of the group’s “core contributors”—the leaders of the leaderless organization, who promised to return everyone’s money if the group didn’t win—had assembled in a climate-controlled gallery to inspect the document, which was encased in glass.

“It doesn’t look like whatever million dollars it’s gonna go for. It’s just a piece of parchment!” a software developer from Brooklyn said. He wore a Fat Albert button-down and rainbow Pumas.

“The letter ‘S’—it looks like an ‘F,’ ” a man in a tan hoodie said. “‘Blessings’ looks like ‘Bluffings!’ ”

Across the room, Liliana Pinochet, a seventy-five-year-old woman who had just finished a cancer treatment at a nearby hospital, asked the group what they would do with the Constitution.

“We’re talking to museums about where would be best to host it,” Nicole Ruiz, who wore a long plaid coat, said. She explained that the donors wouldn’t actually own the document, but would help determine its future. “The whole group gets to vote!” she said.

“I’m glad it’s not going to private hands,” Pinochet said. “It’s a pity when things go to the banks.”

Upstairs, the group filed into the saleroom, where, in a few hours, a Sotheby's rep would bid on their behalf by phone. "To have access like this is insane," MacKenzie Burnett, a twenty-eight-year-old tech C.E.O., said.

"It's really funny to think about," Theo Bleier, a high-school student, said. "None of us are independently extremely wealthy—like, *auction* wealthy."

At six, about thirteen thousand screen names gathered online to watch the auction; another sixty or so assembled at a co-working space in midtown for an I.R.L. watch party. Robbie Heeger, the group's designated representative, who had never participated in a big auction, scribbled, "W.G.B.T.C."—"We're gonna buy the Constitution"—on a whiteboard. "Hello? Hello?" he barked into his iPhone. The call with the Sotheby's rep had just dropped. "What?" someone yelled. "Are you fucking kidding me?"

Two minutes later, Heeger's phone rang. "Let's fucking do this!" he said. "Huzzah!"

The auctioneer started the bidding at ten million; within seconds, a Sotheby's employee holding a black telephone receiver, who represented the hedge-fund billionaire Kenneth Griffin, raised it to thirty million. (Griffin is said to hate cryptocurrency.)

"Wait a minute," Heeger wailed, flummoxed. "O.K., do thirty-one!"

Griffin countered with thirty-two million. A bidding war ensued: *thirty-four million dollars . . . thirty-seven million dollars . . . thirty-eight million . . .*

"Get the fuck out of here!" Heeger shouted. "O.K., let's make it seem like we're thinking about it. At the last minute, go for thirty-nine." He paused. "No, forty!" He looked around the room apologetically. "I think we're totally maxed."

The auctioneer said, "We can bring the hammer up!" Heeger said, "Just let it go!" Another fifty seconds passed before Griffin placed the highest bid ever for a historic document: forty-one million dollars, or roughly one-fifth of one per cent of his net worth.

Heeger hung up the phone. Downstairs, a security guard asked what happened. Someone said that their bid was about a million dollars short. “Next time, you gotta call me,” the guard said. “I could’ve loaned you that.” ♦

Fiction

- “Marriage Quarantine”

By [Kate Walbert](#)

Content

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Audio: Kate Walbert reads.

Mary Jane follows her husband, Daniel, from room to room, words pouring out of her, yammering. Or hammering, as he has said, as if she must hit every nail on the head. What does he mean by that, she wanted to know.

What do you mean by that? she had asked, but Daniel shrugged.

No idea, he said.

[Kate Walbert on entanglement and separation.](#)

She follows Daniel into the living room, where he sits in the big blue chair he likes to relax in after dinner, watching home-improvement shows on his device. Mary Jane has her own device, though she is slightly less captivated by its offerings—the games and apps and streaming services—which is not to say she is above it, she is definitely not above it, no, just slightly less captivated. She often checks the weather. In several cities.

But where was she?

Living room. Blue chair. Daniel. Has he put in his earbuds? They disappear into his ears, so she's never sure until she spies the tiny white tube of plastic—stem of plastic?—bisecting the earlobe. There was the time in law school when Daniel decided to pierce his earlobe with something—a safety pin? She hasn't thought of that in years.

Daniel looks up as if not quite remembering Mary Jane, or maybe he did not register her following him into the living room in the first place. Regardless, here she is, or there she is, a bad penny, an aching back, an errand to run. She wears what she always wears these days: her fuzzy sweater and leggings meant for yoga; her hair is pulled into a ponytail, though that sounds considered. She most likely has not brushed her hair at all. She most likely has grabbed the shank in one hand and stretched an elastic band around it.

This she most likely has done first thing in the morning, after splashing cold water on her face and brushing her teeth, noticing the dank smell of the formerly soft white towel in their bathroom and commenting on how that happened so quickly—has he noticed as well? And didn't she just do the wash yesterday? These are the things she may consider as she grabs the shank of her hair and comments on how it has never been longer, not even in law school, stretching the elastic band around the mass of it, looping once, then twice. To her recent question of whether he likes it gray, Daniel had answered, Depends.

What do you think? she's asking now.

Is it a good idea or a so-so idea or a terrible idea or what?

I can't decide, she says.

I mean, I vacillate, or fluctuate—I can never tell which word is right—about the whole thing, but the question is, would you?

I mean, what do you think? Do you have thoughts? she says.

To his credit, Daniel did not jump into the whole home-improvement fad when everyone else did during the past year. It's been a more gradual thing. And for a long time he hopped around from show to show, never quite deciding if it was a waste of time or if he was learning something useful, something he might eventually apply to his own life.

His father had been a hobbyist, which is to say, his father had had many hobbies, including refurbishing old furniture from junk shops—chairs and dressers and the occasional table. Daniel remembers the basement. His father kept his complicated hardware there in a fishing-tackle box; when you opened the box, the drawers popped up and out in three tiers, and all its contents—tangles of coiled copper wire, pins and dowels, drilling screws and machine screws, hex nuts, flat nuts, washers, caps, carriage and toggle bolts—were suddenly, majestically, revealed.

The fishing-tackle box sat on the hollow-core door that sat on the sawhorses that served as his father's worktable. His father sat on a metal stool he had

salvaged from a dump, three-legged and rickety. Next to the worktable and the rickety metal stool was the broken-down Victorian sofa that had belonged to his father's mother, a woman Daniel had never met.

Her name was Gertrude, and by all accounts she had been a beautiful woman with a certain flair. The broken-down Victorian sofa was a testament to this: the way Daniel's father told it, Gertrude had bought the sofa with the paltry allowance she received from her no-good husband, its sturdy ornate frame—cherry—and silk upholstery as grand as the parlors and drawing rooms it had passed through. If that sofa could talk, Gertrude used to say, and it was true, it looked as if it had a few stories to tell, although now it sat next to the rickety metal stool and the makeshift worktable, silent. Something about Gertrude's death had taken the spunk out of it, according to Daniel's father, and so he let it be as he puttered in the basement, re-caning a rocking chair, the Victorian sofa, flecked with mold, having somehow lost a claw, forgotten.

Given Daniel's father's hobby, you might think that Daniel had learned the names of all the complicated hardware in his father's toolbox during the hours the two spent together in the basement, but Daniel's father preferred his hobbies solo, switching on the light outside the basement door after dinner and then descending, alone, the flimsy stairs, dangerous given the shaky bannister and the concrete floor below. Daniel had learned the names much later, long after his father had passed on.



"I'd like to get my withdrawal in either cryptocurrency or social-media exposure."
Cartoon by E. S. Glenn

Sometimes, as a child, Daniel had imagined flicking off the switch outside the basement door, throwing his father into total darkness; then his father might be devoured, or at least momentarily terrified, by the wet toads that lived in the rain gutters just outside the basement windows. They were hard to see, but Daniel knew they were always there, camouflaged in the brown decaying leaves that no one ever bothered to clean out.

Mary Jane has no interest in home improvement. She has other fish to fry. Big fish. She wants answers to life's questions, or at least discussions about them. If these questions can't be debated now, when time has slowed to a standstill, what does that say about all of it? What does that say about everything?

Besides, the children are far away and no longer children. Every few weeks, she sees one or the other in a kitchen or against a dark window somewhere —the reflection from a desk lamp exploding like a dead star. During the calls, she tries not to look at her own face, her long hair, her eyes through the smudged lenses of her glasses, the crepey skin of her neck—how vain! Or Daniel wandering around behind her as if it isn't much his business: communication, children.

Did he get that from his father? It would have been a reasonable question to ask, a thing to discuss: genetics, epigenetics, heredity, personality. Moving on to energy, the extraordinariness of light, quantum mechanics, the whole wave-and-particle thing she's never understood though she's trying, something about collapsing electrons, neutrons. Entanglement, et cetera.

But the point is, did he get that from his father?

Law school. Chicago. 1973. Around the time they first met, Daniel had told Mary Jane how toward the end of his parents' lives—Daniel a late addition—his mother and father spoke only through the dog.

Mom would say, "Tell Carl yada yada," and then Dad would say, "Tell Barb I'm aware of that, but I thought we'd first yada yada yada."

Six yadas. That must have been some conversation.

You get the idea.

What breed?

This isn't about the *dog*.

But if it were a basset hound or something, with those ears, I could picture it, an ear like a walkie-talkie. That would have been funny.

It wasn't funny.

Sorry.

She was a mutt. Regular ears.

A hound mutt?

Newfie mutt. Curly black hair. A little white on her chest. Never mind, Daniel said, and went back to his cheesecake.

Where had they been? The student union. A booth. This after the class with the professor who had studied with Nabokov at Cornell, the two of them

laughing at the idea of the professor, lost in Cornell winters, teetering on the icy edge of the gorge, then, once the weather cleared, joining Professor N. to bound through high meadows in search of lepidoptera. Daniel had ordered the cheesecake with the canned, viscous red cherries lumped on top, the gooey cherry sauce. He ate it with a plastic fork. She drank coffee. Black coffee from a Styrofoam cup. She remembers best the look of Daniel's hands. Beautiful hands. Surgeon's hands. Hand-model hands. His nails filed or just naturally rounded smooth. Why does it matter? The look of Daniel's hands? The look of the cherries on top of the cheesecake? But Mary Jane would say of first loving her husband: plastic fork, cheesecake, viscous cherries.

This particular episode, if Mary Jane were to ask Daniel, features a couple from Ontario interested in expanding their brood. As young professionals leading very busy lives, they have decided to knock out a few walls and to reconfigure the attic to accommodate their growing family. Unlike so many others, this show is not about the speed of the renovation but about quality and structural integrity. The young couple, thumbing through volumes as heavy as the O.E.D., have learned that the attic *was* originally a third floor before being converted in the very early twentieth century to an attic, or what was then called a ghost floor. Given the number of children who did not make it past infancy, and accounting for the devastation of the influenza epidemic at the close of the First World War, these ghost floors allowed parents to literally push daily reminders of past lives from their minds, allowed the house itself to annex the space and leave it empty. On the ghost floor, the quiet had dimension and weight, an unspeakable presence.

The husband explains all this to the wife, who sits beside him but seems not to have absorbed the same information from the heavy book.

She nods, a sad look on her face.

So interesting, she says.

I'm not spooked! the husband says.

Daniel has never heard the term "ghost floor." He'd like to mention it to Mary Jane—perhaps she's aware—and discuss his own ideas regarding

structural integrity, things unseen but present, the unaddressed. He's been hatching a plan, he'd like to tell her, to open the walls on the second floor and verify what he suspects may be balloon framing. Are the joists dowel-pegged? Hand-hewed or band-sawed? It's really quite exciting—but when he looks up from his device, his vision speckled and hazy as if he'd just emerged from a double feature at noon, he sees that the evening clouds have cleared and Mary Jane has moved to the patio; she looks to be deadheading the daisies.

Where did you come from? Who are you, even? Daniel had wanted to ask. This soon after they eloped—1975, and there were too many other things going on. The bar exam. A baby. Someone's campaign for local office. Besides, it seemed to be the wrong question, or questions, for obvious reasons. Still, at certain moments, it felt like Mary Jane was an introduction that had gone by too quickly, the kind that left you pretending you remembered a name even years afterward.

She was raised in Greenville, Delaware, she had told him. Her mother and father lively retirees who played racquet sports on weekends with a circle of friends and canoed down the Brandywine River, loaded, to celebrate birthdays and other special occasions: a ritual. And as a child she'd travelled through Oklahoma with a magician, long story.

She had a half sister and a half brother, and together the two made a whole sibling, mercurial and far away, living with a hippie mother in Elk, California. Only once had she gone with her father all that way to see them. She remembered how they ate chocolate and walked along the broken edge of the coast. Seals had been promised, but the seals were under the white-capped and furious waves; the waves broke against the rocks where the seals were supposed to be and then fizzled out into the far ocean, the foam drawn back as if it were a curtain on a dark stage; she couldn't see a thing.

Where are the seals? she'd barked at her father and the other two, but no one seemed to hear her. She shouted against the whip of the wind and felt dry strands of hair in her mouth, itchy, annoying. No one heard her. No one *ever* heard her. That's what she remembered, she told Daniel. And please—Mary Jane? I'll never forgive them.

She had asked him to call her M.J. on their first date: at the student union, or maybe later while they smoked cigarettes and stood around the quad, too cold in the brutal wind off the lake. By the bicycle rack she teased, Is this a girl's bike? She was not someone who knew anything about flirting.

Yard sale, he said. He knew nothing about flirting, either.

They walked along the lakefront despite the cold, and he pushed his bike as she told him how she had travelled across Oklahoma with a magician, a friend of the family who was really just a creep who needed someone to saw in half, hold the dove, and wear the outfit. You know, she said, the *leotard*, and in the wind her long red hair blew crazily around her face as if it were a thing on its own, and he stopped and reached out, instinct, to push it from her face so that he could see her, and she said, Thank you. She stopped and said, Thank you. This part he remembers best.

The daisies, purchased and planted at the height of all this, have miraculously survived the winter in their big clay pots and are now sprouting, blooming, and dying again. It all feels important. Profound. Life. The green of their new leaves, the small, white buds, the bright-yellow eyes, even the dried brown chrysalises she pinched with her shears.

She never much liked the flower, but it is useful, dependable, resilient. A friend. What does she even mean by this? she thinks as she clips. She cannot keep her own thoughts, her questions, straight, and random sentences, odd sentences, float around and sometimes surface, like the vague answers to what she used to ask her Magic 8-Ball alone in her bedroom in Greenville, with its orange shag carpet and wallpapered walls, bright-yellow daisies. Daisies!

Will I be married? *It is decidedly so.*

Will I be famous? *Don't count on it.*

Will I have a girl and a boy? *Cannot predict now.*

She remembers Greenville as a long hallway leading to her bedroom with the daisies on the walls, and empty afternoons watching soap operas, eating

snacks. Her parents always elsewhere.

Did they talk through a dog? Ginger Stanhope, her therapist, had recently asked.

We had cats, she said. A joke, but Ginger hadn't laughed, Ginger not exactly the laughing type.



"You'll build another bug collection in no time."
Cartoon by Frank Cotham

She sees Ginger on Tuesday mornings, sitting in her son's room, better light, waiting to be let into Ginger's space, or face, as it were; Ginger a younger woman with a habit of tilting her head and squinting as if the words, Mary Jane's words, were exploding particles—waves? pockets?—of light.

Ginger's office is God knows where—this is all very new—an orchid strategically placed on a low console behind her, a door leading out. Occasionally, a child's voice can be heard in the distance, or someone playing the cello. Mary Jane suspects that Ginger's claim to the title of therapist may be a bit tenuous, an undergraduate degree in sociology or a year of study at Teachers College, but at this point, eight months in, it would be rude to ask.

We all hold trauma, Ginger had said last week. Every one of us. In our bodies, in our knees, our toes, our pinkie fingers. Ginger lifted her fingers and wiggled them. Trauma? What did Ginger mean, trauma? Hadn't Mary Jane been speaking of other things, of her childhood, of the vacation she took with her father to Elk, the half sister and half brother cavorting with him ahead on that walk, the fury she had felt? What would happen if she flung herself off those cliffs in Northern California, bounced to her death, dashed on the rocks below, the jagged boulders that did not hold even an inkling of a seal or the suggestion that a seal had ever been there before—her father might as well have promised mermaids, or sirens—the rocks black as pitch and as furious as the ocean, the tumult of clouds?

She had told Ginger only this: how she had stopped to look at the frenzy of weather, to stare hard, forgetting everything and forgotten when she turned around and saw her father moving on with his other children, a grown boy and a grown girl who looked nothing like her.

Trauma? Mary Jane had said to Ginger. It's just a story.

Mary Jane and Daniel awoke to rain this morning, rain that lashed the trees and pelted the windows, flattened the tulips and daffodils, knocked the gutters. Everything rearranged. Angry. Mary Jane eventually found her muck boots and an oilskin jacket in the back of the hallway closet. If one knew nothing about her, it would not have been unreasonable to imagine that she was on her way to the stables, or to grab a wicker basket and her favorite fly rod. She had always had that way about her, Daniel thought, watching: windswept, rushed, a cup of black coffee in a Styrofoam cup.

Where are you off to in this weather? He might have asked, but he knew better; he knew the answer. Lately, she has a vision of what can be accomplished in a morning: she digs holes for annuals, moves stones from here to there, crawls on hands and knees to divide the perennials—the lilies and the irises, which are so packed in, she's complained, they rarely flower or even sprout, their roots a tangled mass, dormant.

You're wrong, he had said to her. She'd walked out of the bathroom, looking for something. It was that long when I met you.

Oh, her hair, he means. Yes, she said. I suppose.

You used to wear it wrapped up on the top of your head, or covered with that bandanna.

I remember, she said.

The pink one.

Yes, yes, yes, she said.

Couldn't he see she had things to do? *My sources say no.*

I liked it when you wore it loose.

Talk, talk, talk. You could not shut the man up.

But that was then, in the bad weather, before the storm cleared and the sun broke, rainbows undoubtedly somewhere, before this purple late-spring sunset. Now she's come in, again; he's looked up and she's here, again, waiting, his wife, Mary Jane, M.J. for a time until they both grew bored of it, or simply forgot why M.J. had ever felt dangerous and slightly sophisticated, the two of them kids in front of that judge in Chicago, Mary Jane barely showing in a miniskirt, heels, her beautiful arms bare, her red hair past her shoulders, loose, a crown of dandelions on her head, stitched earlier during the picnic they'd shared in Grant Park before heading on a lark to the courthouse. It had all seemed a lark: the judge, marriage, forever. Now she stands here waiting, shears in hand. She has said something to him, a request or a demand, a question. Daniel tries to remember.

I mean, I'm asking, she says.

What do you think? Do you have thoughts? she says.

Were they barefoot before that judge? It was a bright summer day, and someone, a clerk, had tucked a white carnation in the lapel of his Goodwill suit, its smell rank and sweet.

Yes, he says. I do, he says, then the judge concludes the script from which he's been reading and waits for the newlyweds to embrace. ♦

By [Cressida Leyshon](#)

Here To There Dept.

- **If You Jet-Skied to Work, You'd Be Home by Now!**

By [Danyoung Kim](#)

Buses move at a glacial pace, empty taxis are an endangered species, Ubers cost a million bucks, biking is like wheeled circus combat, and the subway turns into a water park when it rains. Maybe private aquatic travel isn't so crazy? Corey Orazem, the thirty-year-old owner of Jersey Jet Ski, thinks the future is a world in which office workers Jet-Ski to their jobs. Say goodbye to gridlock and road rage (and perhaps to a general sense of environmental responsibility).



Corey Orazem Illustration by João Fazenda

Currently, New York City regulations make it illegal to park a Jet Ski along most of the shoreline without a special permit. But Orazem has been talking with legislators in New Jersey about updating its laws, and he hopes to convince New York, too. One warmish Saturday, Orazem jumped on a Jet Ski at one of the rental shops he owns, on the Hudson River in Jersey City, to begin his own commute: he would be zipping around the city's waterways to scout potential places where he could establish boat slips. "Once you have that liberty on a Ski, it's so entralling," he said. "Who wouldn't want to transport themselves like that?"

First stop was North Cove Marina, at Brookfield Place, in the financial district—a mile as the crow flies, two minutes and fifty seconds as the jet

skis. No need for coffee on this commute. The Hudson slapping your face will suffice.

Orazem puttered into the marina. “Easy as that,” he said. “You’re at the front door of the World Trade Center.” Two security guards on the promenade began yelling at him; he swept noisily out. Next stop: Pier 25 Marina, in Tribeca, a three-minute ride. At the pier, Orazem poked around, fantasizing about the changes he would introduce. He explained how it would work: before embarking, commuters would zip themselves into “dry suits,” large rubber onesies that scuba divers—ever the vanguard of fashion—sometimes use. “You can wear your work clothes underneath and pop the neckpiece on,” he said, referring to a rubber collar. Special boots come with the suit. Gloves are optional. Waterproof backpacks would protect briefcases and purses. Upon landing, a commuter could walk to work in the dry suit or change at, say, a gym. “Better yet, a lot of the times, marinas have showers,” Orazem said. “In the true capitalistic world, you keep all your work clothes there.” Annual membership for use of a slip and a changing facility: How about two or three thousand dollars a year?

A young man in a dinghy approached Orazem and told him that the marina was privately owned. “Over the summer, we had a lot of people on Jet Skis from New Jersey jumping over the fence,” he said.

Orazem seized the opportunity: “Do you think that if there were slips here for people to keep Jet Skis, something organized—”

“That’s what I was thinking,” the man said. His name was Binh, and he told Orazem that he’d unsuccessfully applied for a job at his company. (“I liked Binh,” Orazem said later. “He’s definitely going to work for me.”)

Orazem bought his first Jet Ski in 2016, when he was living on Staten Island, where he grew up, and was dating a dental technician who worked in Chelsea. The Ski, he found, offered a solution to the unbridgeable distances of interborough relationships. He instructed his girlfriend to hop over a fence at Chelsea Piers after her shift. “I would throw up a waterproof bag, she would put all her stuff in it, I’d throw her a life jacket, she’d hop down, and we would blast right back,” he said. (They split up a year later.)

On to Brooklyn. Orazem rounded the tip of Manhattan. A Staten Island ferry honked authoritatively. Sea levels rose. He reached Wallabout Channel, near Williamsburg, and pointed to barren banks along the water. “This whole canal is literally perfect,” he said. He noticed buses nearby with Hebrew lettering. Orazem runs Jet Ski tours, and he has many Hasidic clients. “I’ve never met people who are more motivated to come out in groups and go Jet-Skiing than the Hasids,” he said. “Sometimes I have to pull a yarmulke out of a Jet Ski propeller, but it’s no problem.”

He pushed north, to Greenpoint. Fresh ideas were percolating. Jet Ski taxis. A courier service. He whizzed off and said, “Forget Uber Eats.” ♦

Night Life

- [The Forward-Thinking Music of Arca](#)

In 2014, the Venezuelan singer and producer Alejandra Ghersi, who records as **Arca**, emerged as a forward-thinking electronic artist with an inventive, almost alien sensibility. In 2020, her focus shifted and she released the album “kick i,” the first in a series that moves toward a more pop sound, featuring art-pop progressives such as Björk and Rosalía. On Dec. 3, Arca completes the anthology, sharing the remaining three installments of the project, each carrying on an extended metaphor of individuation.

Onward and Upward with the Arts

- [The Women Behind the Thirteen-Year-Olds of “PEN15”](#)

How the show's co-creators found comedy in the pain of revisiting adolescence.

By [Rachel Syme](#)

Content

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It was a sizzling August morning in 2021, but inside a hair-and-makeup trailer parked at the Pacific Palms Resort, an hour east of Hollywood, Maya Erskine and Anna Konkle were returning to the year 2000. The women, who are both thirty-four, are co-creators and co-stars of "*PEN15*," a Hulu series in which they play versions of themselves as teen-agers, the thirteen-year-old best friends and misfits Maya Ishii-Peters and Anna Kone. In the makeup trailer, Erskine sat in front of a vanity mirror as a stylist wearing a face shield used a felt-tip pen to paint hundreds of tiny strokes onto her upper lip, creating the illusion of a faint mustache. "I was made fun of for being hairy—I had a deep insecurity about that," Erskine told me. Beside her, a hair stylist twisted strands of Konkle's fine blond hair around the neck of a tiny curling iron, creating bouncy corkscrews. The women then moved to an adjacent costume trailer to complete their "*PEN15*" looks: for Maya, a black bowl-cut wig that resembles a giant porcini mushroom, similar to Erskine's haircut in fifth grade; for Anna, a set of protruding pop-in braces that mimic the ones Konkle had to wear—twice. ("My orthodontist made a mistake," she said.) The mouthpiece cuts into Konkle's gums and makes it nearly impossible for her to eat or drink. It's painful, but so is being thirteen.

All other middle schoolers on "*PEN15*" are played by adolescents: the popular girls, the other outcasts, the unrequited crushes. Erskine and Konkle don't convincingly pass among them, but that is the point. Their junior-high burlesque is a sight gag as well as the heart of the series; more literally than most teen pariahs, Maya and Anna have trouble fitting in. The women were preparing to shoot an episode from the show's third season in which their younger avatars attend a popular girl's bat-mitzvah party at a country club. At about 11 A.M., they entered a banquet hall inside the Pacific Palms, where the party had been staged in period-specific teenybopper style. A camera crew was filming B-roll footage of a d.j. playing the 1998 techno-pop song "Blue (Da Ba Dee)" as a triad of sequin-clad hype dancers did the

Running Man on a laminate dance floor. Teen-age extras and white-haired elders in yarmulkes checked out a station for making airbrushed T-shirts. The women took their places, in a buffet line, and the episode's director, Dan Longino, called "Action." Erskine, as Maya (short, hyperactive, impish), jiggled her body to the beat. Konkle, as Anna (tall, laconic, slouched), stood behind her, glowering, in the throes of a fatalistic mood brought on, earlier in the episode, by a lesson on the Holocaust.

"Oh, my God, this party is amazing," Erskine said.

"Who are these people, and why are they here?" Konkle muttered.

"I dunno, it's Becca's bat mitzvah," Erskine replied.

"No, I mean, like, on Earth," Konkle said.

"Oh, my God. Dippin' Dots! Dippin' Dots!" Erskine exclaimed suddenly, eying a station offering ice-cream pellets. Then she got the giggles and had to stop. "Sorry, this is so bad," she said. She took a breath and regained her composure. "Na, Dippin' Dots! Oh, my God. Oh, my God. O.K., I need that." (To each other, Maya and Anna are Mai and Na.) Erskine turned to look at Konkle, but then she broke again. Konkle, staying in character, said, "What? I'm glad you're enjoying life."

"*PEN15*" premiered in 2019 and became a cult hit. Erskine and Konkle made the show with the writer and director Sam Zvibleman, who inspired the depiction of Maya and Anna's sweetly dopey male classmate Sam (Taj Cross). They are not the first TV creators to put their characters through the trials of early adolescence, but their show has little in common with upbeat nostalgia vehicles like "The Wonder Years" (1988-93) or even "Freaks and Geeks" (1999-2000), Judd Apatow's beloved series about a pack of winsome nerds. Several showrunners of the streaming era, freed from the constraints of network television, have mined the raunchier side of tweendom. The Netflix animated series "Big Mouth" rivals "*PEN15*" in its gloriously candid approach to the arrival of puberty. But, where "Big Mouth" is characterized by raucous, Technicolor flights of fancy (including memorably foulmouthed "hormone monsters"), "*PEN15*" favors a punishing, slightly off-kilter realism. Erskine and Konkle told me that they

were influenced by such films as Todd Solondz's 1995 black comedy, "Welcome to the Dollhouse," about a seventh-grade girl who endures, among many other cruelties, the sobriquet Wiener Dog. The name "*PEN15*" comes from a schoolkid prank that begins with a question: Do you want to join the *PEN15* Club? The suckers who say yes get the word Sharpied on their hands in such a way that it looks like "*PENIS*." "It felt appropriate to name our show after the thing that rejects get branded," Erskine said.

If you, like me, are a millennial and a recovering social reject, watching Erskine and Konkle relive seventh grade can feel alternately wistful and triggering. The series' title sequence is a rapid-fire slide show, set to Bikini Kill, of real snapshots from Erskine's and Konkle's youths. Each half-hour episode follows Maya and Anna through pool parties, athletics, school plays. The show pays loving and amusing attention to Y2K-era teen obsessions: choker necklaces, Sarah Michelle Gellar, "Wild Things," AOL Instant Messenger. It also unsparingly depicts the psychosocial dynamics of adolescence, when cliques and cattiness can whittle away at kids'—and especially girls'—self-esteem. Watching the pilot episode, in which Maya learns that her name is scrawled on the wall of the boys' bathroom beneath the acronym *UGIS*—Ugliest Girl in School—I felt my own junior-high mortifications come rushing back: the time a boy pretended to ask me to a school dance as a cruel joke, or when a blond mean girl urged classmates to hide the ketchup from me at lunch, or when a friend announced that I should really learn how to shave the backs of my knees. Yet "*PEN15*" doesn't appeal only to one demographic. When the show premiered, a few critics sniffed that it seemed thin or gimmicky; Tim Goodman, of the Hollywood Reporter, lamented "the repetitive sketch feel of the whole thing." But the majority were won over. Season 1 got an Emmy nomination, and Season 2 got three more, including for Outstanding Comedy Series. James Poniewozik, the *Times* Gen X television critic, told me, "'*PEN15*' sounds like itself and nothing else—the mark of great TV."

When I suggested to Erskine and Konkle that they were making a "cringe comedy," Erskine said, "We don't really write jokes," adding, "Someone once called it a 'traumedy,' and that's probably the closest way to describe it." Instead, the creators and a small team of writers pore over their yearbooks and their juvenile correspondence. They trade real-life tales of scarring first kisses and frantic masturbation attempts. The more painful the

old bruises, the more inclined they are to apply pressure. Gabe Liedman, a co-showrunner for Season 1, told me about one of the early scenes they shot, in which Maya, Anna, and three of their classmates film a Spice Girls-inspired video for a homework assignment. The group decides that Maya, who is half Japanese, should play Scary Spice (the only group member of color), and that she should also be the other girls’ “servant”—“because you’re, like, tan,” one girl explains. Maya plays along, adopting an exaggerated accent and hunching over like Quasimodo to extract a laugh from her more popular peers. During the shoot, Erskine did a few takes of the scene and then broke down crying. “It scared the shit out of me,” Liedman said. “There were these literal twelve-year-old girls in Spice Girls costumes who have never heard of the Spice Girls, and it’s a heat wave, and Maya is heaving sobbing. I was, like, is it my responsibility, as a manager here, to shut down this set?”



“He’s leaving. It’s every man for himself!”
Cartoon by Brooke Bourgeois

But Erskine forged ahead. She explained, “Anna started crying, and then members of the crew started crying. It opened up this flood of everyone sharing stories. That was a light-bulb moment. We realized, Oh, this is what this show is.” Their young co-stars grew emotional, too. Sami Rapoport, who plays Becca (the scene’s Baby Spice), told me, “Filming that was really hard. They didn’t expect for it to hit as deep as it did.”

In “*PEN15*,” pubescence is a purgatory. “The conceit of the show was that they think they’re in seventh grade forever,” Erskine told me. “It is this extreme microscope. It’s, you know, interminable Hell.” The one solace Maya and Anna have is that they are not stuck there alone. At the end of the first season, a boy treats both girls to a brief, above-the-clothes trip to second base inside a storage closet during a school dance. (As with other scenes that require intimacy between the women and their teen castmates, this was accomplished using an adult stand-in and careful camera angles.) At the beginning of the next season, Maya and Anna learn that the whole school is gossiping about their “threesome.” “So we’re desperate sluts, great,” Maya says.

In real life, Erskine and Konkle didn’t know each other in middle school. Erskine grew up in Los Angeles and Konkle in Massachusetts. They first met in the summer of 2008, when they were N.Y.U. undergraduates studying abroad, in Amsterdam, as part of an experimental-theatre workshop. The curriculum was intensive and eccentric—postmodern dance, commedia dell’arte, mask work. Erskine said that one of her early encounters with Konkle took place in a bathroom before a “Brechtian fairy-tale storytelling” showcase. “We were both freaking out,” Erskine said. “I had diarrhea. We bonded over our I.B.S. issues.”

In Amsterdam, and then back at N.Y.U., the pair became inseparable. They discovered pleasing parallels in their biographies—both had fathers named Peter and older half brothers; both were the only children of their mothers’ second marriages—and a shared attraction to telling, as Konkle put it, “the most vulnerable stories, that most people would not tell at a party.” They thought about collaborating on a project, but after college Konkle stayed in New York, where she worked as a server at Prune, the acclaimed Manhattan restaurant, and Erskine eventually moved back to L.A., signing with a small talent agency. She was landing auditions only every three months or so, she said, adding, “And it was for, like, Chinese Waitress No. 2.”

By late 2012, Konkle was thinking about applying to graduate school in art therapy. On a whim, she took a small role in a friend’s Web series and then called Erskine, convincing her that the time to make something together was now or never. Then she drove to L.A. and crashed on Erskine’s couch while they wrote, filmed, and starred in a Web series of their own. The project,

which they funded through Kickstarter, was a reality-TV spoof called “*MANA*.” Few people saw it, but it resulted in three life-changing developments: the pair landed representation with the top comedy talent agency Gersh, Konkle moved to L.A. permanently, and they found a third collaborator in Zvibleman, who had studied filmmaking at U.S.C. and did set work on the Web series.

Around then, another pair of best friends, Abbi Jacobson and Ilana Glazer, débuted their stoner comedy “*Broad City*,” on Comedy Central, and it became a runaway success. Suddenly, TV executives were looking for the next big female duo. Konkle and Erskine landed several “general meetings,” an industry term for open-ended pitch sessions. One of the ideas they batted around was a sitcom called “*Fosters*,” in which they’d play former cult members hiding out by posing as teen-agers in a foster family. (“This was before ‘*Kimmy Schmidt*’ came out,” Erskine said, referring to the Netflix comedy that also follows a cult escapee.) In order to generate plotlines for the show, they would sit with Zvibleman and recount tales from their own adolescence. “Maya talked about hiding her period for a year, and Anna talked about shaving her legs,” he recalled. “It was a mile a minute, and their connection is so intense. I said, ‘These stories are beyond fascinating to me.’ ” At N.Y.U., Erskine and Konkle had studied the Grotowski method, which Konkle described as “the idea that physicality can inform feelings and the brain.” At some point, Erskine told me, Zvibleman said, “ ‘Forget pretending to be kids. Just *be* thirteen.’ ”

Konkle’s most vivid experience of being thirteen was witnessing the dissolution of her parents’ marriage. Her mother and father had fought bitterly throughout her childhood. In 2000, they announced that they would divorce, but the negotiations took three years in court. During that time, Peter, Konkle’s father, refused to move out of the family home. The house was divided into two hostile territories, with Konkle often playing peacemaker. Her mother, Janet Ryan, a retired nurse with a hippieish vibe, recalled that her daughter seemed mature beyond her years. One winter, the family cat killed Konkle’s beloved hamster, Chucky. “I collapsed on the carpet sobbing,” Ryan said. “And then Anna comes down the stairs and comforts me. She said, ‘It’s O.K., Mommy.’ ” Konkle told me, “I was so angry with my parents. My mom would be, like, ‘But for you wasn’t it nice having the family together?’ And I’m, like, ‘Um, no, are you *insane*? ’ ”

After years of estrangement, Konkle reconnected with her father when he was given a diagnosis of lung cancer, in 2019. She became his caretaker during the final months of his life.

Anna's parents' divorce is in "*PEN15*," at the end of Season 1, but the process is nowhere near as long or as acrimonious as the one Konkle experienced. For the scene in which Anna's parents break the news that they're splitting up, though, Konkle adhered to the details as she recalled them. She was sitting cross-legged on the bedroom floor, folding clothes. Her parents rapped gently on the door. They delivered the news gingerly while her mom, named Kathy in the show and played by Melora Walters, fidgeted with the rings on her fingers. "'My parents told me they are getting a divorce' is a trope, or it can sound blunt and obvious," Konkle said. "I wanted to show exactly what it felt like, looked like, from my P.O.V."

Konkle's avatar rebels against her parents, smoking cigarettes and getting drunk and stealing another girl's pink thong, which Anna and Maya take turns wearing to school. Konkle merely spent as much time as possible away from home, often at the house of her best friend, Courtney. On "*PEN15*," just before Anna's parents announce their divorce, she spends two nights at the Ishii-Peterses'. At first, the girls run through the house stuffed into the same giant T-shirt, and chant, "We. Are. Sisters." But Maya soon grows weary of sharing her family and starts acting out. In one scene, Maya's mother, Yuki, tenderly combs Anna's hair in the living room, ignoring her daughter's petulance.

The part of Yuki is played by Erskine's mother, Mutsuko, whom I met one morning this past summer at the family home, a nineteen-thirties bungalow on a sleepy side street in Santa Monica. When I entered, Peter, Maya's father, who is a dead ringer for Rob Reiner, invited me to remove my shoes. On a shelf in the family room sat bobblehead dolls of Erskine and Konkle—a gift from Erskine's half brother, Taichi, who is an editor on "*PEN15*." Mutsuko, who goes by Mutsy, had never acted before appearing on the show. Originally from the Tokyo suburbs, she first met Peter, a drummer in the renowned jazz-fusion band Weather Report, while working as a translator for American artists touring Japan. Mutsy later married another man and had Taichi. When that relationship ended, she moved with Taichi to

the U.S., and they settled with Peter in California just before Erskine was born.

As a mixed-race, middle-class family, the Erskines stood out in Santa Monica. From kindergarten through ninth grade, Erskine attended Crossroads, an élite private school known for educating the children of the rich and famous. She did not quite qualify for a need-based scholarship, and Peter often toured a hundred and eighty days a year in order to afford the tuition. By seventh grade, Erskine told me, she was no longer close with her elementary-school friends: “I realized I’m not as rich as them. I would beg my mom, ‘I need a Kate Spade bag.’” In the bat-mitzvah episode of “*PEN15*,” Maya pleads with her parents to buy a Swarovski necklace as a gift for Becca. The same thing happened in real life, except the necklace was from Tiffany. “My mom was, like, ‘Let’s just give the traditional eighteen-dollar check.’ And I was, like, ‘You will fucking ruin my life if we give that.’” Mutsy told me that when Erskine was about thirteen she started feuding regularly with her brother and her mother. “Taichi said it was unbearable to be here,” Mutsy said. “Peter was often away, and we’d be having these arguments. Even the next-door boys said, ‘Shut up!’”

Mutsy and Peter walked me through the family room to Erskine’s childhood bedroom, which is now a guest room with soothing turquoise walls. In the hallway outside hung a photograph of Mutsy and a young Erskine in a hot spring in the Japanese town of Hakone. During Erskine’s youth, the family went back to Japan about once a year, and in their bathroom in Los Angeles Peter and Mutsy installed a Japanese-style soaking tub. It is roomy and pale blue, with a foldable top made of hinoki wood. As an adolescent who longed to fit in, Erskine struggled with her Japanese identity. “I think I had this belief that not being white or looking like other people around me made me wrong,” she told me. But bathing with her mother in the Japanese tradition was a source of comfort. “We would have a really heated argument, like her screaming ‘I hate you!’, and Maya would say, ‘Mom, let’s just take a bath,’” Mutsy recalled. Erskine included that ritual in “*PEN15*,” and in the upcoming season she wrote and directed an episode that tells Yuki’s backstory. “Maya kept calling me Mom on set,” Mutsy joked. “I did not like that. ‘Mom, put your hands here. Mom, do this dance.’ I am a professional!” She added, chuckling, “Even now, she reverts.”

In 2014, Erskine, Konkle, and Zvibleman wrote a sprawling, sixty-page script for the first episode of “*PEN15*,” which Konkle affectionately described as “the pilot that went in the trash.” Still, it piqued the interest of an executive at Party Over Here, a production company created by the comedy collective the Lonely Island. At the time, Party Over Here had a development deal with Fox to sign new talent and fund short proof-of-concept shoots. With a budget of a hundred and fifty thousand dollars, Erskine, Konkle, and Zvibleman shot a fifteen-minute “*PEN15*” episode, which featured Maya and Anna primping before a school dance while listening to Christina Aguilera’s “What a Girl Wants.” In early 2016, they sent the video to HBO, Showtime, FX, and Hulu, along with a pitch packet that looked like a fake yearbook. On the cover page of their master copy, Konkle typed a joke about pubescent nipples and a mantra: “The thirteen year old inside me lives at all times.”

FX told the women’s agent that the show was “too millennial.” HBO was interested, but only if the team would keep making “short form” content. In a meeting with Showtime, Erskine presented a male executive with an old snapshot of her with her father and joked that she had masturbated right before it was taken. “He was, like, ‘I’m starting to get nauseous,’ ” she told me, adding, “It was the worst pitch of all time for me.” Hulu ultimately committed to a one-season contract, with a budget that Zvibleman kiddingly described as “maybe the lowest you can make a show for and still have a union crew.”

After two years of development, casting began in 2018. The team sought out young co-stars who projected naturalism—“non-Disney, non-Nickelodeon,” as Liedman, the Season 1 showrunner, put it. Sami Rapoport was fourteen and had never acted professionally before. Between takes of scenes in which Becca had to be mean to Maya and Anna, Rapoport would apologize to Erskine and Konkle. (“She told us she was in an anti-bullying club at school,” Konkle said.) At first, Konkle, Erskine, and Zvibleman dreamed of featuring guest stars like Eric André or Amy Sedaris playing the parts of other teen-age characters. In the end, they decided that the effect would be most powerful if Anna and Maya were the only kids in school with wrinkles. “It just further made us like aliens,” Konkle said.

Erskine and Konkle starred in every episode, wrote the majority of the scripts, and were minutely involved in post-production. Their closeness animated the series, but it also led to arguments and hurt feelings. Every decision felt acutely personal. “I remember editing till three in the morning, and we had to, like, lose a second to make air,” Zvibleman said. “And we would fight to the death over which frame to take out.” They adopted language to soften how they communicated—instead of “bugging me,” Erskine would say “bumping me.” At one point, she sought advice from Rob McElhenney, who writes and stars in the sitcom “It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia” with his longtime friends Charlie Day and Glenn Howerton. McElhenney told her that he and his partners had resolved disputes with a simple, majority-wins voting system. For the “PEN15” team, the method didn’t stick, though. “So we came up with another rule: What’s your passion level?” Erskine told me. “But then everyone would say, ‘My passion level is a ten.’ ” Konkle attributed much of the stress to the dynamics of working as a threesome: “Someone was always on an island.”

The team’s creative tensions seeped into Maya and Anna’s story lines, sometimes to comedic effect. At the end of Season 2, the girls prepare for a school production of an original, Tennessee Williams-esque play written by their pompous drama teacher, who is played by Erskine’s real-life partner, Michael Angarano. Maya is the star of the show and Anna is the stage manager, and they spend rehearsals jockeying for power. “You guys are doing tech and we’re, like, doing art,” Maya tells her. “Tech *is* art,” Anna snaps back. (Erskine told me, “Anna and I would improv how we would passive-aggressively give each other notes, and it would make us crack up.”) In a pivotal scene on the play’s opening night, Maya forgets her lines and freezes. Anna makes a split-second decision to sprinkle glitter from the rafters in order to feed her a cue. Suddenly, as if in a dream, the teen actors and stagehands all begin to perform a ballet in unison, with the audience swaying along. Erskine and Zvibleman tend to favor cinematic flourishes, while Konkle prefers to preserve a more grounded vérité feel. Many debates ended with Konkle “on an island.” But Zvibleman said that he had lobbied both women to include this fantasy sequence of coöperative harmony. “Our hypersensitivity to each other is what makes the process hard,” Erskine said of Konkle. “But it’s also what lends itself to our chemistry. We alchemize it in a way that is the soul of the show.”

When the pandemic arrived, the trio were in the process of shooting Season 2. Production shut down, and they converted one episode—the story of a girls’ trip to Florida with Anna’s dad—into an animated special that Konkle directed remotely. They also pursued their own projects. Konkle sold a memoir to Random House about her parents’ divorce, tentatively titled “The Sane One.” Erskine shot a small role in an upcoming “Star Wars” series and booked a few bigger acting jobs that she is “not yet at liberty to talk about.” In the summer of 2020, Erskine told Konkle that she and Angarano were trying for a baby. Konkle and her partner, Alex Anfanger, had no immediate plans to start a family, but just a few weeks later Konkle discovered that she was pregnant. (Erskine’s son, Leon, and Konkle’s daughter, Essie, were born a few months apart, in early 2021.) The creators had always envisaged “*PEN15*” ending after three seasons—at some point, they would all have to move past seventh grade—but *COVID* and its attendant difficulties cemented their decision. Zvibleman, meanwhile, decided that he would leave the show. Erskine and Konkle would complete the final season alone. (On the subject of Zvibleman’s departure, the women assumed a tone of cautious diplomacy. “We’re forever grateful for how much Sam gave of himself to the show,” they wrote in a joint statement.)



“He finally agreed to take me dancing, and then we both realized we have no idea where you’d go to do that or what it even means.”
Cartoon by Zachary Kanin

In Season 3 (Hulu is calling it Season 2, Part 2; it premières on December 3rd), Maya and Anna are still a unit, but some of their most intense experiences are taking place independently. Maya's cousin comes from Japan to stay with the Erskines and is a hit with the kids at school. "Why is being Japanese special on her but not on me?" Maya asks. Anna's grandmother moves into the family home but soon dies, and Anna struggles with her grief. Maya starts taking medication for A.D.D., and Anna gets a boyfriend, Steve (Chau Long). Eventually, the girls decide to run away from home together but—spoiler—they don't even make it out of town. At first, Erskine and Konkle had different ideas for how to end the series. Erskine proposed that in the final scene they smash-cut ahead twenty years, to a houseparty that Maya and Anna are attending. They are adults now—no more bowl cut, no more braces. "And you don't hear anything, it's just music," Erskine said. "Anna looks and she sees Maya across the room, and they have this shared connection. And you don't know, did they come together?" Erskine couldn't sell Konkle on the scene's ambiguity. "Anna hated the idea of them growing apart," Erskine said.

In October, Erskine and Konkle allowed me to observe them at work in a virtual screening room as they wrapped up the final scene that they ultimately agreed upon. Erskine was at her home in the Hollywood Hills, wearing a green T-shirt and large over-the-ear headphones. Konkle, in a nearby office space, was fiddling with a plastic tooth flosser, but otherwise the mood of the proceedings was businesslike. The women and the finale's editor, Matt McBrayer, each occupied a small box at the top of the screen. A larger box at the center held the queued-up footage. McBrayer clicked a Play button, and they all watched in silence. In the show's final minutes, Maya and Anna are sitting on the floor of Anna's bedroom, gushing over their own baby photos. The scene sticks to the year 2000 while making room for the girls' future selves. When it finished, a plunky tune from the "*PEN15*" score played.

"I think this music's so beautiful," Erskine said. "'Cause it is so Maya and Anna, but it feels so . . . full." She made a dramatic sweeping motion. The others murmured in agreement. Then Erskine brought up a lingering editing quibble.

“It’s the continuity of emotion from the wide to Maya’s closeups that I feel like don’t quite match,” she said. “That’s what it is that’s bumping me. I’m sort of getting emotional in the wide and then when we cut to me I’m, like —” She made a goofy face.

McBrayer played the frames in question again, and Konkle peered at the screen.

“It’s *so* slight to me,” she said, pinching her fingers to indicate something very small. “I hear you. I think the performance tracks. But you should obviously try anything you want.” Her supportiveness sounded the slightest bit effortful.

Erskine and McBrayer consulted. Were there any other frames to choose from? While they went back and forth, Konkle stood up and disappeared from view. “Guys, I’m so sorry to do this,” she said a few seconds later, reentering the frame. “But Essie is tired, and she needs milk.”

“All right. Well, let’s call it,” Erskine said. “I mean, it’s a beautiful last scene.”

Konkle put her chin in her palm and pushed her face close to the screen. “Yeah, it kills me,” she said, and her eyes darted off to the side.

After a second, Erskine said, “It kills me, too.” ♦

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Poems

- “Topography”
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By [Hala Alyan](#)

Content

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Audio: Read by the author.

The land is a crick in the neck. An orange grove burns
and it's sour when you burp. Whose voice is that?
There's a fable. There's a key. Every Ramadan,
the artery suffers first. A diet of heavy lamb
and checkpoint papers. Indigestion like a nightmare.
The Taurus sun burns your forehead. I mean the land.
The land looks white on the MRI images:
you call your grandfather. He's been finding the land
in his stool. His body contours the mattress like a coffin.
His hand trembles. When he drinks the land,
the urine comes out rose-colored.
The land sears the esophagus. No more lemons,
the doctor says. Two pillows at least. In July,
you lived inside your grandfather like a settlement.
You ate currant sorbet from the same cup.
Did you inherit the land in your arthritic wrist?
It makes knitting hell. On the telephone,
your grandfather tells you the land is coating his eyes.
He tells you it is worth being alive just to see that blue.
He dies and they harness his body to the dirt.
He dies and the sun is out all week.

By [Robert Pinsky](#)

Content

[View Iframe URL](#)

Audio: Read by the author.

They say paratroopers still yell Geronimo when they jump
Because of a movie the first ones saw the one with Geronimo

Played by Chief Thundercloud the first Tonto real name
Victor Daniels not the one with him played by Chuck Connors

Who played for the Dodgers and later played the Rifleman
Which became a nickname of Flemmi a mob killer in Boston

In real life he came home to find soldiers had killed his aged
Mother his young wife and his children that not in the movie

Somewhere sometime someone must have yelled Geronimo
When committing atrocities or about to or some such redolent

Word or phrase that too a kind of poetry even official jargon
A kind of poetry Bless comedy for an opposite rude poetry

They told me Germans murdered our cousins so I was mean
To a younger boy Leander his German parents Nana's tenants

Good pitching beats good hitting and vice versa I never
Said half of what I said Bless Yogi Berra leaving it knotted

Bless all things that are more than one thing and all people
For our unwitting and witless improvised mixtures

Bless truth Bless things never known to be true or not true for
Showing me my impurity in proportions unknowable and vital

Bless Nana my grandmother for her Southern accent in English
And her Romanian accent in Yiddish that I echo still unwitting

Bless respectful misquotations innocent mistakes well meaning
That may correct scholars or governors his name not Geronimo

I was not a chief he said never was a chief but because I was
More deeply wronged than others the title was conferred on me

Berra in Hebrew means a good person in Arabic a truth-teller
Or is it a town in Ferrara or a hut dweller or Spanish *berrear*

In a gym in shorts Larry wearing a towel or he sat some way
They said looked like a Yogi these things fit or stick Leander

In torn sneakers so foot skin showed I stomped it like one of
The jerks Harvey Korman's character hires in "Blazing Saddles"

Let them go says Brooks in warpaint on horseback in Yiddish
Jay Silverheels mainly played Tonto a true Mohawk an athlete

He got to say the punchline he fired me when he found out what
Kemosabe means the joke maybe obsolete but for me it plays

In the sacred field of the unknown with meanings abounding
The title was conferred on me he said and I resolved to honor it

Pop Music

- Adele's Diaristic Divorce Album

The artist is known for her intensely personal songs, but “30” is so intimate that it makes even her previous records feel a bit clinical.

By [Carrie Battan](#)

When Adele set out to finish her new album, “30,” her record label wondered how to make it resonate with a younger crowd. Adele is a vocal powerhouse with an out-of-time sensibility, and she takes long hiatuses between albums. It has been six years since her previous record, “25,” and much has changed in the world of popular music, whose pace Adele has long been proudly out of synch with. “The conversation of TikTok came up a lot,” the singer told the radio personality Zane Lowe, in a recent interview. “They were, like, ‘We’ve really gotta make sure that these fourteen-year-olds know who you are.’ ” Adele is one of the few figures in entertainment with the authority and the gravitas to brush off such misguided suggestions, and her solution was defiantly simple. “They’ve all got moms, and they’ve definitely been listening to my music, these fourteen-year-olds,” she told the label.

One reductive description that has been used to characterize Adele’s music and her cultural imprint is that she is “for moms.” Since her career took off, in 2011, with her sophomore album, “21,” a potent breakup record that gradually became canon, Adele’s contemporary take on soul, blues, and gospel has been appreciated as a monument to tradition. Strictly concerned with matters of the heart and committed to the unshowy principles of songwriting and musicianship, she’s a modern star who feels eternal, and also maternal—reliable, steady, and nurturing. She was only a teen-ager when she broke out, but womanly dignity was the bedrock of her work from the get-go.

And yet to sum up Adele’s music as “for moms” is to underestimate just how wide-reaching her impact has been. Adele is not only the highest-selling pop star in history but also the most institutionally acclaimed. She makes music that everyone can feel good about, in particular the voters of the Recording Academy, who have given her fifteen Grammy Awards over the years, most of them in major categories. Even if you don’t seek out Adele’s music, you absorb most of it; her catalogue of thundering torch songs has become part of the atmosphere. Adele does not participate in most customs of contemporary celebrity, and often recedes from the public eye, leaving only

the songs behind. These songs are missives from her personal experiences with love and heartbreak, but they are designed to be universal. At times, it feels as if her music were a utility that belongs to everyone and no one, like electricity or running water.

“30,” which was released earlier this month, is the first record that sounds as if it belonged to her alone. Born Adele Adkins—although she is so deserving of a mononym that to see her surname in print is disconcerting—and raised mostly in North London, she studied at the same performing-arts academy that Amy Winehouse had dropped out of, several years before. Like Winehouse, and like many other British women in her wake, Adele was primarily interested in the traditions of Black American music, including blues, Motown, roots, and gospel. But she also had a knack for modern pop balladry, and the vocal talent to execute it. Adele’s catalogue is a longitudinal study of her life, each album focussed on a specific age. Her début recording, “19,” was a scattered and plucky but accomplished musical portfolio of sorts. Its smash follow-up, “21,” zeroed in on a particularly tumultuous breakup, harnessing and refining Adele’s sense of scorn. “She is half your age, but I’m guessing that’s the reason that you strayed,” she spewed on “Rumour Has It.”

Adele eventually married an entrepreneur named Simon Konecki, and in 2012 they had a son named Angelo. On “25,” she cleared the bitterness that lingered in the air after “21,” and reckoned with the passage of time. It was her most musically conservative album, polished and hearty but painted with broad strokes and performed in a style that sometimes teetered on the brink of schlock. It was a blockbuster nonetheless. Around this time, Adele considered leaving music altogether. Maybe quotidian sentimentality and nostalgia didn’t make for the most inspired art. But, in 2019, Adele divorced Konecki, and found a new muse in her post-breakup loneliness and confusion.

There is perhaps no artistic feat better suited to Adele than a divorce album, but “30” takes some unexpected turns. Rather than focus on conjugal despair and dissolution, Adele allows herself to linger in the discomfiting yet exhilarating aftermath of her split. (If you want a pop record that faces divorce more squarely, seek out Kacey Musgraves’s “Star-Crossed,” from this year.) On “30,” Adele takes a hard look in the mirror. “It’s about time

that I face myself,” she announces on “To Be Loved,” an almost seven-minute ballad that builds up the same epic potential energy that Whitney Houston did on “I Will Always Love You.” Adele has removed the distance between her music and her inner life, and “30” is diaristic and intensely personal. It makes her first three albums sound a bit clinical.

We’re used to hearing Adele belt, but on this album she prefers to chat, whisper, coo, crow, or grunt and groan. On one track, “My Little Love”—an exchange with her son that serves as the album’s emotional centerpiece—she uses samples of voice notes she recorded in the period after leaving Konecki. “Mummy’s been having a lot of big feelings lately,” she tells her son. “Like how?” he asks. It’s a moment that could seem treacly if it did not sound so candid, and so uncomfortable. Later in the song, Adele breaks into tears during a spoken-word confession: “I just feel very lonely. . . . I feel frightened that I might feel like this at all.” This album does something vanishingly rare in the attention-deficient streaming era by stringing together a tracklist that charts an emotional trajectory. It begins with rumination and despair, discovers libidinal release (“Can I Get It”), and then graduates to resolution, self-knowledge, and catharsis. Each of its final three tracks stretches past six minutes, including “To Be Loved,” a ballad in which she extends her voice to its breaking point and then keeps pushing. “Let it be known that I . . . trieeeeed,” she gasps, hoarse, as if attempting to insure that she’s exhausted her emotional reserves.

When she is not addressing her young son on “30,” Adele is often addressing herself, giving a pep talk or a reproach. “Cry your heart out, it’ll clean your face / When you’re in doubt, go at your own pace,” she advises on a playful song called “Cry Your Heart Out.” The song is Motown-lite, made jauntier with the swing of reggae guitar and handclapping, and it points to a newfound stylistic elasticity. An earlier version of Adele might have distilled all the emotional vagaries of divorce into something reassuring in its grandeur, but “30” is uneven in the most gratifying way, which is to say that it is an authentic chronicle of personal turbulence.

Adele has never concerned herself with the trends of contemporary music, and that is a huge part of her appeal. “30” is no different, and she reaches even farther into the past for musical inspiration. She opens the record with “Strangers by Nature,” an ornate song inspired by Judy Garland’s

vaudevillian performances. One of Adele's closest collaborators is the record producer and jazz pianist Greg Kurstin, and the jazz influence infiltrates the album as well—one song, “All Night Parking,” samples the jazz-piano balladeer Erroll Garner and transforms Adele into a coquettish lounge singer in the thrall of new love. The last part of the album has a strong gospel influence. And yet “30” is Adele’s most modern-sounding record yet, perhaps because of how fluidly and casually she slips between these modes, and because of how unafraid she is to let the seams show—to let her voice crack while hitting a high note. So many young artists aspire, above all, to this kind of ease and versatility. “I hope I learn to get over myself, and stop trying to be somebody else,” Adele pledges on a song called “I Drink Wine.” It’s a jarring statement from somebody who sounds so much like herself. ♦

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Profiles

- [Lina Khan's Battle to Rein in Big Tech](#)

As monopolies and other large companies gain increasing control of our daily lives, Khan is Joe Biden's pick to do something about it.

By [Sheelagh Kolhatkar](#)

Content

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In the spring of 2011, a recent Williams College graduate named [Lina Khan](#) interviewed for a job at the Open Markets Program, in Washington, D.C. Open Markets, which was part of the New America think tank, was dedicated to the study of monopolies and the ways in which concentration in the American economy was suppressing innovation, depressing wages, and fuelling inequality. The program had been founded the previous year by Barry Lynn, who believed that monopolies posed a threat to democracy, and that policymakers and much of the public were blind to this threat. Unlike the practice at other think tanks, which publish research reports and white papers, Lynn, a former reporter and editor, disseminated the program's findings directly to the public, through newspaper and magazine articles.

The study of antitrust law was far from fashionable; since the nineteen-eighties, the field had been dominated by a world view that favored corporate conglomeration, which was acceptable, mainstream experts believed, as long as consumer prices didn't rise. Lynn was seeking a researcher without any formal economics training, who would come to the subject with fresh eyes. Khan had studied the 2008 financial crisis and was interested in the effects of power disparities in the economy. She checked out Lynn's book, "Cornered: The New Monopoly Capitalism and the Economics of Destruction," from the library and skimmed it the night before her interview. "When she walked in that door, she had no idea what this entailed or what she would become," Lynn told me. "She was just a fantastically smart person who was very curious."

During the interview, Lynn recalled, he asked Khan, "Do you ever get angry? Does anything make you outraged?" She replied, "No, not really." Lynn said, "I think you'll become angry while you're doing this work. There will be things that you discover here that will outrage you." Khan took the job.

Open Markets studied industries ranging from banking to agriculture. In case after case, Lynn found, the number of companies in each market had been reduced to a few big entities that had bought up their competitors, giving them a disproportionate amount of power. Consumers had the impression of vast choices among brands, but this was often misleading: many of the biggest furniture stores were owned by one company; a large percentage of the dozens of laundry detergents in most supermarkets were made by two corporations. After consolidation, it became easier for furniture sellers and detergent manufacturers to raise prices, compromise the quality of their products, or treat employees poorly, because consumers and workers had few other places to go. It also became much more difficult for entrepreneurs to break into the marketplace, because competing with these giants was almost impossible. As huge companies became even bigger, much of the American middle class struggled with stagnant wages. In Lynn's view, the issues were connected.

Khan began researching book publishing. "There was a sense that this industry was in crisis," she recalled. Publishers had come under pressure, first from chain stores like Barnes & Noble, and then from [Amazon](#), which sold electronic books by pricing them at a loss, in order to encourage consumers to buy its Kindle e-book readers. Amazon eventually controlled more than seventy per cent of the e-book market, a dominance that gave it the ability to force publishers to accept its terms, undermining the business model they had long used to subsidize the creation of a wide variety of books. When publishers tried to band together to fight Amazon, the Justice Department sued them, fearing that their action would increase the retail price of e-books. The publishers saw Amazon's power as potentially leading to a decline in the free exchange of ideas and as a crisis for democracy. Increasingly, so did Khan. Her work helped provide the basis for a piece that Lynn published in *Harper's*, in February, 2012, called "[Killing the Competition](#)." Today, he wrote, "a single private company has captured the ability to dictate terms to the people who publish our books, and hence to the people who write and read our books."

Khan told me that she started to see the world differently. "It's incredible, once you start studying industry structure and see how much consolidation there has been across industries—in airlines, contact-lens solution, funeral caskets," she said. "Every nook and cranny of our economy has

consolidated. I was discovering this new world.” At one point, she investigated the candy market, identifying nearly forty brands in her local store that were made by Hershey, Mars, or Nestlé. In another project, about the raising of poultry, she found that most farmers had to purchase chicks and feed from the giant poultry processor that bought their full-grown chickens, which, because it had no local competitors, could dictate the price it paid for them.



“Isn’t it nice to exchange good old-fashioned germs again?”
Cartoon by Liam Francis Walsh

Lynn and Khan couldn’t seem to get lawmakers to pay attention. “It definitely felt like we were on the margins of the policy conversation,” Khan said. One afternoon, she looked up from an article she was reading on her computer. Lynn recalls her saying, “Barry, I think I’m starting to feel angry.”

On June 15, 2021, Khan was sworn in as the chair of the Federal Trade Commission, the agency responsible for consumer protection and for enforcing the branch of law that regulates monopolies. At the age of thirty-two, she is the youngest person ever to head the F.T.C. Matt Stoller, the director of research at the anti-monopoly think tank the American Economic Liberties Project, described Khan’s ascent as “earth-shattering.” The appointment represents the triumph of ideas advocated by people like Khan and Lynn that had been suppressed or ignored for decades. “She understands profoundly what monopoly power means for workers and for consumers and

for innovation,” said David Cicilline, a Democratic congressman from Rhode Island and the chair of the House Committee on the Judiciary’s Subcommittee on Antitrust, Commercial, and Administrative Law. “She will use the full power of the F.T.C. to promote competition, which I think is good for our economy, good for workers, and good for consumers and businesses.”

After years spent publishing research about how a more just world could be achieved through a sweeping reimagining of anti-monopoly laws, Khan now has a much more difficult task: testing her theories—in an arena of lobbyists, partisan division, and the federal court system—as one of the most powerful regulators of American business. “There’s no doubt that the latitude one has as a scholar, critiquing certain approaches, is very different from being in the position of actually executing,” Khan told me. But she added that she intends to steer the agency to choose consequential cases, with less emphasis on the outcomes, and to generally be more proactive. “Even in cases where you’re not going to have a slam-dunk theory or a slam-dunk case, or there’s risk involved, what do you do?” she said. “Do you turn away? Or do you think that these are moments when we need to stand strong and move forward? I think for those types of questions we’re certainly at a moment where we take the latter path.

“There’s a growing recognition that the way our economy has been structured has not always been to serve people,” Khan went on. “Frankly, I think this is a generational issue as well.” She noted that coming of age during the financial crisis had helped people understand that the way the economy functions is not just the result of metaphysical forces. “It’s very concrete policy and legal choices that are made, that determine these outcomes,” she said. “This is a really historic moment, and we’re trying to do everything we can to meet it.”

Amazon taught a generation of consumers that they could order anything online, from packs of mints to swimming pools, and expect it to be delivered almost overnight. According to some estimates, the company controls close to fifty per cent of all e-commerce retail sales in the U.S. and occupies roughly two hundred and twenty-eight million square feet of warehouse space. It makes movies and publishes books; delivers groceries; provides home-security systems and the cloud-computing services that many other

companies rely on. Amazon's founder, [Jeff Bezos](#), wants to colonize the moon. During the Presidency of [Barack Obama](#), Amazon's relentless expansion was largely encouraged by the government. The country was emerging from a devastating recession, and Obama saw entrepreneurs like Bezos as sources of innovation and jobs. In 2013, in a speech given at an Amazon warehouse in Chattanooga, Tennessee, Obama described the company's role in bolstering the financial security of the middle class and creating stable, well-paying work. He spoke with near-awe of how, during the previous Christmas rush, Amazon had sold more than three hundred items per second. Obama was also close with Eric Schmidt, the former executive chairman of Alphabet, Google's parent company. An analysis by the Intercept found that employees and lobbyists from Alphabet visited the White House more than those from any other company, and White House staff turned to Google technologists to troubleshoot the Affordable Care Act Web site and other projects. Between 2010 and 2016, Amazon, Google, and other tech giants bought up hundreds of competitors, and the government, for the most part, did not object. The analysis also found that nearly two hundred and fifty people moved between government positions and companies controlled by Schmidt, law and lobbying firms that did work for Alphabet, or Alphabet itself. When Obama left office, many of his top aides took jobs at tech companies: Jay Carney, Obama's former press secretary, joined Amazon; David Plouffe, his campaign manager, and Tony West, a high-ranking official at the Department of Justice, joined Uber; and Lisa Jackson, the former head of the Environmental Protection Agency, went to Apple.

The ascent of [Donald Trump](#) spurred activists across the political spectrum to become interested in the new power of tech companies, upending many traditional partisan differences. The role that Facebook played in the 2016 election, and the enormous influence that the company had over the information that people were seeing, was an electrifying moment. In fact, many of the major tech companies were accused of playing a role in the conditions that led voters to choose Trump and his populist message: Uber and Lyft, with their gig-economy jobs, were blamed for undermining labor unions and the middle class; Amazon had helped drive Main Street businesses into bankruptcy; Facebook was the site of Russian disinformation campaigns and a platform of choice for figures from the far right; Apple made most of its luxury devices in factories in China, reaping enormous

profits while creating relatively few jobs in the U.S.; Google, through its subsidiary YouTube, hosted hate speech.

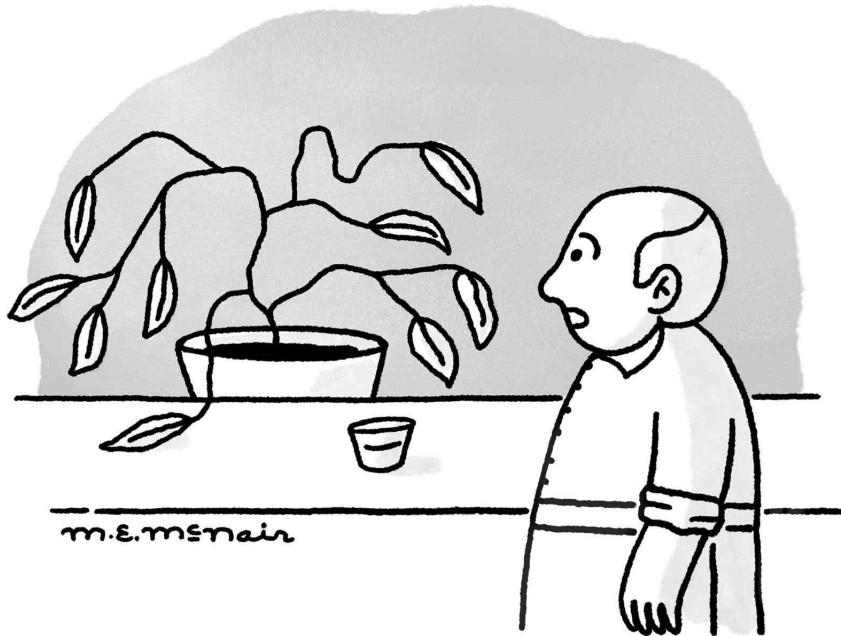
As a result, antitrust policy, especially as it pertains to big technology firms, has emerged as one of the starker differences between the [Biden](#) Presidency and the Obama one. Stacy Mitchell, a co-director of the Institute for Local Self-Reliance, an anti-monopoly think tank, described the contrast as “night and day.” Obama’s politics were “very much in the center of the road, in terms of the dominant thought of the last several decades,” Mitchell told me. She noted that evidence of this world view could be seen early in Obama’s tenure, when his Administration declined to break up the big banks that had helped cause the 2008 financial crisis, and, instead, allowed them to become even larger and more powerful, while millions of people lost their homes to foreclosure. “Because of his identity as someone who was very progressive on a lot of other issues, I don’t think people saw that very clearly,” she said.

Through a series of appointments to regulatory and legal positions, the Biden Administration has indicated that it wants to reshape the role that major technology companies play in the economy and in our lives. On March 5th, Biden named Tim Wu, a Columbia Law School professor and an anti-monopoly advocate who has argued that Facebook should be broken up, to the newly created position of head of competition policy at the National Economic Council, which advises the President on economic-policy matters. On March 22nd, Biden nominated Khan to her current role. And, in July, he selected Jonathan Kanter to head the antitrust division of the Department of Justice. Kanter left the law firm Paul, Weiss in 2020 because his work representing companies making antitrust claims against Big Tech firms posed a conflict for the firm’s work for Apple, among others. Wu, Khan, Kanter, and a handful of other anti-monopoly advocates have been referred to as members of a “New Brandeis movement,” after the Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis, whose decisions limited the power of big business. Because of Khan’s youth, she has also been called the leader of the “hipster antitrust” faction, but this doesn’t capture the seriousness of her intentions. On August 19th, she re-filed an aggressive antitrust complaint that the F.T.C. had initiated in 2020, seeking to break up Facebook. In September, the agency published a report analyzing hundreds of acquisitions made by the biggest tech companies which were never submitted for government review. Although the report didn’t call for any specific action, it was a sign that

Khan intends to look far deeper into Big Tech's business than her predecessors did.

The F.T.C.'s headquarters, in Washington, D.C., occupies a limestone building from 1938 whose hulking proportions were meant to convey the steadiness of the federal government. The lobby is lined with black-and-white portraits of former F.T.C. chairmen and commissioners, almost all depicting white men. The agency has been under a work-from-home order since March, 2020, but Khan goes in whenever she can. (She lives in New York City, where her husband, Shah Ali, a cardiologist, works.) On a recent afternoon, I visited her in her third-floor office, where she was preparing for a meeting with members of a foreign law-enforcement agency. "Coming in, I was aware that this is potentially a historic moment," she said. "If there are ventilator shortages after a merger we approved—these are all problems tied up in policy decisions." When I asked when she first became aware of the concept of injustice, she said, "Most kids are aware of bullies, and of who has power and who doesn't have power."

Khan, who has dark eyes, angular features, and dark-brown hair that's often tied in a loose bun, was born in London to parents from Pakistan. When she was eleven, the family moved to the U.S., where her father was a management consultant and her mother worked at Thomson Reuters. They settled in Mamaroneck, a suburb of New York City, where Khan and her two brothers attended public school.



"I can't tell whether you've had too much or not enough."
Cartoon by Elisabeth McNair

After working at Open Markets for three years, Khan applied to law school and to several journalism jobs. She was accepted at Yale, and the *Wall Street Journal* offered her a position as a reporter covering commodities, in part because editors there had seen work she had published for Open Markets on the manipulation of commodities markets by firms such as Goldman Sachs. "It was a real 'choose the path' moment," Khan told me. She chose Yale, which has been home to some of the most prominent antitrust legal scholars in the country, albeit ones who subscribe to a view that Khan finds outdated.

In his compact yet far-reaching book "The Curse of Bigness: Antitrust in the New Gilded Age," Wu traces the history of the idea that the government should restrain companies that become extremely powerful. He describes the more than two thousand manufacturing mergers that occurred between 1895 and 1904 as a "monopolization movement," when business moguls argued openly that too much competition among companies was bad for the country. By the early twentieth century, most major industries were controlled, or soon would be, by one giant firm. These conglomerates were called trusts, for the complicated legal structures that sometimes obscured their ownership. Among the most famous were those operated by John D. Rockefeller, whose Standard Oil came to own more than ninety per cent of the domestic oil-refining market, and by John Pierpont Morgan, who

controlled an empire of steel manufacturing, railroads, shipping, and communications networks. The first antitrust law, the Sherman Act, passed in 1890, outlawed collusion or mergers among businesses that would lead to control of a particular market. The intention was to protect fair competition, but its terms were vague, and the new law was not strongly enforced until at least a decade later.

Louis Brandeis, who was born and raised in Louisville, Kentucky, graduated from Harvard Law School in 1877 and practiced law in St. Louis and Boston. He believed that, when individuals or corporations amassed too much economic power, they could exert pressure on the political system to favor their interests, undermining democracy. He worked on cases that fought Morgan's railroad monopoly and defended labor laws. In 1901, President Theodore Roosevelt began a campaign to break up the trusts, filing lawsuits seeking to dismantle Standard Oil and Morgan's railroad conglomerate, the Northern Securities Company. He initiated lawsuits against more than forty major corporations during his tenure, while expanding the federal government's ability to investigate private enterprise. Roosevelt's successor, Woodrow Wilson, appointed Brandeis to the Supreme Court in 1916.

Brandeis helped popularize the belief that the government had a duty to prevent any single entity from becoming too dominant, and thus to insure competitive markets. This idea influenced public policy for decades. "Antitrust through the nineteen-seventies was Brandeisian," Lynn said. "Anti-monopolism is the extension of the basic concept of checks and balances into the political economy." In the mid-seventies, a group of economists and legal scholars with ties to the University of Chicago and the economists Gary S. Becker and Milton Friedman began to argue that markets could regulate themselves, providing a check against government overreach and, potentially, against totalitarianism. In 1978, the jurist Robert Bork published "The Antitrust Paradox," which applied the Chicago School's arguments to competition policy. Bork wrote that antitrust law was not intended to maintain fairness in an abstract sense; harm to consumers was the only metric that mattered. If the price that people were paying for a product did not rise dramatically, Bork argued, then there was no antitrust violation, regardless of a company's size or market share. This came to be known as the consumer-welfare standard.

During the Reagan Presidency, the Chicago School's theories took over mainstream economics. Lynn described this shift as "the most radical change in thinking about power in the United States since the country's founding."

"Once the enforcement of our monopoly laws was weakened, you saw explosive growth of these dominant monopolies," Stoller, of the Economic Liberties Project, told me. "These are creatures of law and policy." As an illustration, he pointed to the growth of Walmart, which in 1970 became a publicly traded company and had approximately forty-four million dollars in annual sales; in 1980, it reached more than a billion dollars. By 2010, the company was reporting annual sales of four hundred billion dollars.

"I went into law school knowing that we were at this moment where we needed to rehabilitate our antitrust laws," Khan said. The main antitrust course at Yale was taught by George L. Priest, who had worked as a consultant for Microsoft in the early two-thousands, after the Justice Department filed an anti-competitive-behavior suit against the company. Priest was a friend of Bork's, and Bork had been a professor at Yale's law school when President Ronald Reagan nominated him, in 1987, to the Supreme Court. (He was rejected by the Senate after a bitter nomination battle.) Priest encouraged his students to read "The Antitrust Paradox" before the class started.

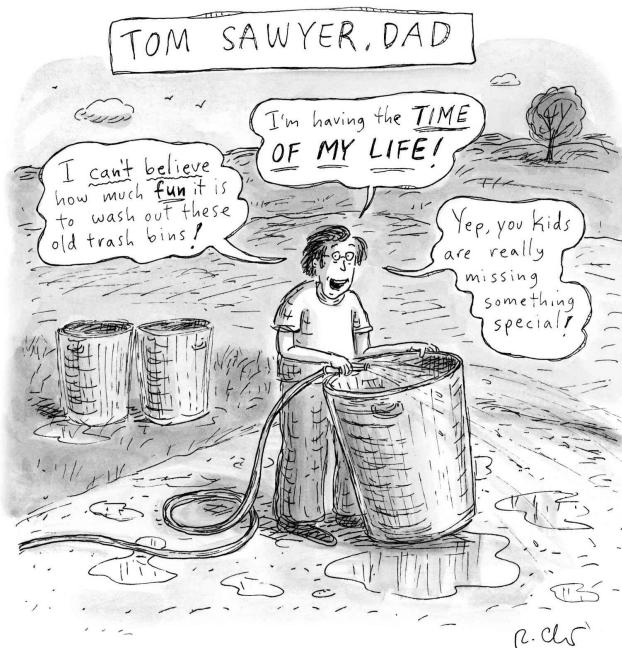
Benjamin Woodring, who worked with Khan on the Yale *Journal on Regulation*, said that she seemed more sophisticated than the typical law student. "She understood the political dimension of regulation and the lawmaking process," Woodring told me. "It's so easy for law students, especially relatively green ones coming straight from college, to just treat the study of law as this disembodied language in a vacuum. But, in reality, especially with things like antitrust and civil rights, it is very much a political struggle, a complicated journey that involves all three branches. She was comfortable with the nuts and bolts of how that process worked."

In early 2016, when Khan was in her second year, she was invited, along with Lynn, Kanter, and Teddy Downey, the executive editor of the *Capitol Forum*, which researches antitrust issues, to dinner with [Senator Elizabeth Warren](#) in her Senate office. Warren, who had previously taught at Harvard Law School, where she studied the erosion of the financial security of the

middle class, was trying to better understand the relationship of monopoly to inequality. Lynn recalls that, at dinner, Warren's eyes gleamed as she listened to them talk about the threat that economic concentration posed to a free and equal society. "Having had dozens of these kinds of conversations with experts and policymakers all around the world, this was one of just a few where you start to talk to someone and they get it immediately," Lynn said. Several months later, at an event hosted by Open Markets, Warren gave a speech on the subject of competition in the U.S. economy. Warren was known as a critic of Wall Street, and as the creator of the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau; the speech announced that she planned to target the major tech companies in a similar way. "Google, Apple, and Amazon have created disruptive technologies that changed the world, and every day they deliver enormous value," she said. "They deserve to be highly profitable and highly successful. But the opportunity to compete must remain open for new entrants and smaller competitors who want their chance to change the world." It was the first time that such a high-profile political figure had publicly embraced the ideas that Khan, Lynn, and other activists were advocating.

Khan started writing a paper arguing that the consumer-welfare standard was outdated, using Amazon as a case study. Amazon had avoided antitrust scrutiny so far, Khan wrote, because of the fixation on consumer prices. There was no question that consumers loved the convenience of being able to order almost anything on Amazon, and of the free and expedited shipping included in an Amazon Prime membership. Khan believed that the low costs to consumers were a short-term benefit that failed to account for the harm the company's size and practices posed to the economy. She highlighted the company's willingness to operate with billions of dollars in losses for years at a time, often by pricing products below what it cost to make and deliver them. This strategy has helped Amazon crush its competitors in so many markets that the company now provides critical infrastructure to other businesses, which rely on it to get their own products to market. It also has access to sensitive data about most of its competitors, who must use Amazon's platform in order to survive. Khan proposed two ways to address the problem: One would be to return to the old idea of antitrust law, which focussed on preserving healthy competition rather than on the prices consumers paid. The second would be to treat Amazon and similar companies like public utilities, and to regulate them aggressively, including

by requiring that their competitors be given access to their platforms on more favorable terms.



Cartoon by Roz Chast

David Singh Grewal, a law professor at Berkeley who was then Khan's faculty adviser at Yale, was impressed by Khan's unabashed attack. She could have behaved like a "typical playing-it-safe law-school kid trying to advance in the world," he said, by proposing slight changes, thus avoiding offending her professors. "She didn't do that," Grewal said. "She went for the intellectual jugular."

Khan's ninety-three-page paper, cheekily titled "Amazon's Antitrust Paradox," for Bork's book, was published in the January, 2017, issue of the *Yale Law Journal*. By legal-writing standards, it went viral, leading to dozens of follow-up articles, including in the *Times*. Several mainstream antitrust experts wrote rebuttals to her arguments, saying that she had not demonstrated that consumers were being harmed by Amazon's size. Neil Chilson, a former acting chief technologist for the F.T.C. who's now a senior research fellow for the Charles Koch Institute, told me that Khan had taken a very aggressive position that was "out of step" with mainstream antitrust thinking. "Many of the ideas in it were not new," Chilson said. "That paper added a new application to a very old set of ideas that had been debated and, I would say, in many cases, undermined over the past century." Bruce

Hoffman, the director of the competition bureau at the F.T.C. from 2017 until 2019, said, “The tech companies are very big. That could be because of anti-competitive behavior, but it could also be because they’re better at what they do than anyone else.”

Jason Furman, a former Obama adviser who’s currently a professor at Harvard, pointed out the limitations of antitrust law to deal with bad corporate behavior. “I think that there’s some conflation of the idea that these are monopolies with the idea that these companies are causing lots of problems, and thinking that if you solve the monopoly it will solve all the other problems,” he said. “If what you don’t like is that there’s genocides being organized on platforms, or child pornography on platforms, or they’re hurting democracy as you see it—the reason they’re doing many of those things” is that such an approach is profitable, a problem that antitrust policy can’t necessarily fix.

Grewal disagrees. “Lina’s a visible symbol of a younger generation that really understands tech, understands its problems, and she has done the work to understand that this is not a new problem,” Grewal said. “Our grandparents’ generation developed the tools to deal with this. In effect, what she’s doing is saying, ‘It’s time to rediscover those.’ The reason these people are so scared of Lina is she’s saying, ‘The emperor has no clothes.’ ”

After graduation from law school, Khan returned to Open Markets to resume her anti-monopoly work, this time as a legal expert. Soon afterward, the European Union announced that it was fining Google \$2.7 billion for antitrust violations, accusing the company, in its shopping services, of ranking its own products higher in its search results than those of its competitors. Lynn posted a statement on Open Markets’ Web site calling on F.T.C. and Justice Department officials to follow Europe’s lead. Over two decades, Google and Eric Schmidt had provided some twenty million dollars in funding to New America, and Schmidt had served on New America’s board. Two days after the Web post, New America’s C.E.O., Anne-Marie Slaughter, told Lynn that Open Markets could no longer be affiliated with the think tank. Lynn thinks that his group’s ejection was in direct response to pressure from Schmidt, but Slaughter told me that Lynn and Open Markets had been critical of Google for years. “This was an internal matter with Barry about playing by our rules and communicating with colleagues

appropriately, and it was never about the work,” she said. Schmidt said that Lynn’s speculation that he was involved was false and that he had always liked the fact that New America published things he disagreed with.

Lynn re-established Open Markets as an independent nonprofit, moving with Khan and the rest of the staff to a co-working space nearby. In the spring of 2018, Khan received an e-mail from Rohit Chopra, a commissioner at the F.T.C., asking her to act as his legal adviser. In 2010, Chopra joined the newly created Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, where he worked under Warren, serving as the agency’s assistant director and student-loan ombudsman and becoming an outspoken critic of the student-loan industry. Like many others who worked at the C.F.P.B. in its early days, Chopra had come to see the influence of corporations on regulation and public policy as increasingly corrupt. The F.T.C., in Chopra’s view, was part of the problem: its commissioners generally deferred to large corporations, and, even when the agency confronted companies over rule violations, it tended to resolve the claims through settlements and empty promises from the companies that they would change their behavior. Individual executives were almost never held accountable; most claims were resolved by fining the companies, and the fines were paid by shareholders. When President Trump appointed Chopra to one of the two seats reserved for the minority party on the five-person commission, he accepted the job knowing that his influence would be limited. Still, he arrived determined to push the agency to rethink its role in the economy. “I had a strong view that the F.T.C. was a backwater and essentially a failed agency,” Chopra told me.

Soon after he arrived, he issued a memo on the subject of “repeat offenders,” companies that violated agreements they had made with their regulators multiple times. One of the most flagrant examples was Facebook, which, in 2011, had reached a settlement with the F.T.C. over user-privacy violations. Facebook promised to obtain its users’ consent before sharing their data with outside companies. A few years later, a whistle-blower revealed that the data-analytics firm [Cambridge Analytica](#), which counted Robert Mercer as a key investor, a Trump supporter, and a hedge-fund billionaire, had accessed millions of Facebook user profiles and used them to try to disseminate political propaganda and influence voting decisions. “F.T.C. orders are not suggestions,” Chopra wrote. “Maintaining our credibility as public interest law enforcers requires that order violations be remedied and, when

appropriate, penalized.” The memo was an attack on the work of the agency’s staff in the previous years. “I knew that it would ruffle feathers, which always is important when you’re trying to change agencies that have become stagnant,” Chopra told me.

Khan worked with Chopra at the commission for about three months. They published several research reports, including an influential law-review article recommending that the F.T.C. reimagine the way it approaches antitrust enforcement by focussing on designing new rules to address violations rather than on costly and risky litigation. Chopra told me that Khan had shaped the way he thinks about big technology firms’ influence over commerce and public opinion. “Her work was very meaningful in terms of how we start to think about some of these problems,” he said. “Both as threats to families and the economy and as contributors to social division and undermining national security.”

In the fall of 2018, Khan started a teaching fellowship at Columbia Law School, where Tim Wu was a professor. In November, the Democrats won control of the House of Representatives, and, the following June, the House Judiciary Subcommittee on Antitrust opened an investigation into Amazon, Apple, Facebook, and Google. The investigation was led by David Cicilline’s antitrust subcommittee, but it had strong support from Republicans, including F. James Sensenbrenner, Jr., from Wisconsin, one of the authors of the Patriot Act. Both the Democrats and the Republicans found themselves divided between more pro-corporate and more populist factions, with some Democrats expressing concern that tech companies were stifling small businesses and keeping wages from rising, and some Republicans venting angrily about conservative views being censored on social-media platforms. One congressional staffer involved in the investigation complained that several Republicans “only cared about the hyper-partisan messaging apps that are important to Trump supporters.”

Khan was one of the first people whom Cicilline and his chief legal counsel on the Judiciary Subcommittee, Slade Bond, recruited. “She’s incredibly thoughtful, brilliant, and a real scholar in terms of antitrust,” Cicilline said. He told her, “This investigation will be an opportunity to take all that experience and help Congress develop a road map to fix this problem.”



"Never worry about what other people think—except me."
Cartoon by David Sipress

Khan was splitting her time between Dallas, where her husband was completing a medical fellowship, and New York City. She immediately agreed to join the subcommittee. She had studied the role Congress had played during earlier eras, when there were crackdowns on corporate malfeasance. “They would bring in the C.E.O.s and produce these multivolume records,” she told me. “It played an important function in keeping both members of Congress and the broader public educated about how these industries were operating.”

In July, 2019, the F.T.C., led by a Trump appointee named Joseph Simons, announced that it had fined Facebook five billion dollars and imposed new restrictions on the company for violating the 2012 settlement it had signed with the commission over privacy violations. The new penalty was in part a response to the Cambridge Analytica scandal, and it was designed to make headlines. The fine was the largest in the F.T.C.’s record, and a press release conveyed the agency’s satisfaction with what it had accomplished: “If you’ve ever wondered what a paradigm shift looks like, you’re witnessing one today.” To critics of Big Tech, however, the fine only underscored what they had come to regard as the F.T.C.’s failure to penalize bad behavior. Once again, no individuals at the company were punished. The F.T.C.’s three Republican commissioners had voted to approve the settlement, while the

two Democratic commissioners, Chopra and Rebecca Kelly Slaughter, voted against it. Chopra issued a blistering dissent; Facebook had likely generated more than five billion dollars in revenue from the misconduct, and the agreement included immunity for Facebook executives for all “known” and “unknown” violations. “Facebook’s flagrant violations were a direct result of their business model of mass surveillance and manipulation, and this action blesses this model,” he wrote in a tweet. “The settlement does not fix this problem.”

Two months later, Cicilline’s subcommittee started asking for internal data from Amazon, Apple, Facebook, and Alphabet about how the companies operated their profits and expenses, internal company correspondence about acquisitions, and other information. It also sent requests to firms that had done business with the big four, to learn more about how they behaved. Independent businesses tended to be reliant on Google, Amazon, Facebook, and Apple, in order to communicate with their customers and sell their products. Cicilline’s team described the big four as “gatekeepers” that dictated how other firms could operate. They discovered that leaders of companies were afraid of speaking out against any of the dominant tech firms, especially Amazon, and worried that their coöperation with the investigation would become public. The companies understood that Amazon could block them from doing business on its site, a tactic that Amazon had used in 2014, during the e-book-pricing dispute, when it removed books published by Hachette from its Web site.

During the next year, the subcommittee held a series of hearings on innovation, privacy, and how the major technology platforms had affected the news media. The most high-profile hearing was scheduled for July, 2020, when Jeff Bezos, Sundar Pichai, Tim Cook, and Mark Zuckerberg, the C.E.O.s, respectively, of Amazon, Alphabet, Apple, and Facebook, were invited to testify. A congressional staffer involved in the investigation said that, in the past, the hearings of congressional committees were typically “asymmetrical warfare.” The staffer said, “The witnesses were prepped literally every day for a month before the hearing. You’d ruin their summer, and the members would show up and just ask the questions prepared for them by their staff.”

When Zuckerberg testified in 2018, in the aftermath of the Cambridge Analytica scandal, several members of Congress demonstrated complete ignorance of how Facebook worked. Senator Orrin Hatch, of Utah, asked how the company made money without charging its users any fees. Zuckerberg smiled and replied, “Senator, we run ads.”

The 2020 hearing was different. Khan and her colleagues had spent several months assembling research and interviewing witnesses for the House members on the Judiciary Subcommittee who would be questioning the C.E.O.s. They had internal e-mails and chat logs from Facebook, including a discussion among executives about buying Instagram in order to eliminate it as a competitor.

Cicilline opened the proceedings from the congressional hearing room. Before the pandemic, he noted, the companies in question were already “titans in our economy.” Since then, they had grown even more powerful, while locally owned businesses faced an economic crisis. “Open markets are predicated on the idea that, if a company harms people, consumers, workers, and business partners will choose another option. That choice is no longer possible,” he said. “Concentrated economic power leads to concentrated political power. This investigation goes to the heart of whether we as a people govern ourselves, or let ourselves be governed by private monopolies.” Khan sat beside him, in a pastel blazer and a mask.

The C.E.O.s appeared remotely. All four made opening statements highlighting their entrepreneurial backstories, emphasizing the millions of new jobs their companies had created. The hearing lasted for six hours. Republicans also asked aggressive questions, typically focussed on social-media bias and other concerns of Trump and his supporters; at one point, Sensenbrenner asked Zuckerberg why the account of Donald Trump, Jr., “was taken down for a period of time,” and Zuckerberg politely responded that “what you might be referring to happened on Twitter.” Representative Jim Jordan, of Ohio, accused the companies of being “out to get conservatives,” while Matt Gaetz, from Florida, wondered if they embraced American values and accused Alphabet of supporting the Chinese military, which Pichai denied.

Stoller said that, these distractions aside, the tenor of the exchanges reminded him of the 1994 tobacco hearings, when Representative Henry A. Waxman summoned seven Big Tobacco company C.E.O.s to interrogate them about whether nicotine was addictive. “I would describe it as a time machine,” Stoller told me. “Congress used to do these hearings on corporate power all the time. There’d be a lot of investigation and real work.”

As the subcommittee prepared to release a final report, the Republican members split off and published their own reports, which included recommendations that they said were more business-friendly. On October 6th, the Democratic members published their version. “To put it simply, companies that once were scrappy, underdog startups that challenged the status quo have become the kinds of monopolies we last saw in the era of oil barons and railroad tycoons,” the introduction read. “Although these firms have delivered clear benefits to society, the dominance of Amazon, Apple, Facebook, and Google has come at a price.”



Cartoon by Mick Stevens

The report was more than four hundred pages, and included some of the most damning evidence the subcommittee had gathered. In reviewing the report for *ProMarket*, a publication of the University of Chicago’s Booth School of Business, the legal scholar Shaoul Sussman wrote, “Upon careful reading, it becomes abundantly clear just how much this strong,

unapologetic call for Congressional action owes to the sagacious intellectual fingerprints of Lina Khan.”

Khan returned to Columbia Law School, where she began teaching a seminar about the history of anti-monopoly law and policy. A few weeks later, Joe Biden was elected President, and lobbyists, activists, and donors started pushing candidates for positions in the incoming government. The two most important jobs in antitrust are the chair of the F.T.C. and the head of the antitrust division at the Department of Justice. Warren, among others, made it known to Biden and those around him, including his chief of staff, Ron Klain, that Khan should be considered for the F.T.C.

Most of the names mentioned in the press, however, were longtime corporate lawyers who had cycled in and out of government. Karen Dunn, a partner at Paul, Weiss who had served as White House counsel under Obama, and as a senior adviser and communications director to Senator Hillary Clinton, was rumored to be under consideration for a position in the Justice Department. Dunn had represented Uber and Apple, and advised Bezos during his antitrust subcommittee hearing. Renata Hesse, a Sullivan & Cromwell partner and former Obama Justice Department official who had worked for Google and advised Amazon on its 2017 purchase of Whole Foods Market, was said to be a leading candidate for the Assistant Attorney General for Antitrust position. Susan M. Davies, a corporate lawyer who had worked for Facebook, was rumored to be Attorney General Merrick Garland’s first choice for the antitrust job. Left-leaning news outlets published harshly critical articles about the pro-corporate direction Biden’s Administration seemed to be taking. On January 28th, a piece ran in the *American Prospect* with the headline “*Merrick Garland Wants Former Facebook Lawyer to Top Antitrust Division.*”

Then, in March, Biden announced that he was nominating Khan to a seat on the F.T.C. Khan said that she was surprised when, a few months later, she was named chair. On July 9th, Biden issued an executive order instructing more than a dozen regulatory agencies to take aggressive steps to promote competition in the economy.

One of the F.T.C.’s last moves under Donald Trump was to file, in December, 2020, a sweeping antitrust case against Facebook, alleging that it

held a monopoly position in social media and seeking to force it to sell Instagram and WhatsApp. The suit underscored the stakes for Biden's new antitrust authorities, who would inherit the case, along with investigations of Google and Amazon. Twelve days after Khan started her new job, a judge dismissed the Facebook lawsuit, issuing a harsh critique of how Khan's predecessors had written their complaint. When Facebook purchased Instagram and WhatsApp, in 2012 and 2014, moves that were approved by the F.T.C., it eliminated two of its most promising competitors. Proponents of broader antitrust enforcement argue that this left Facebook free to violate its users' trust and publish lies and propaganda because it faced so little competition. (WhatsApp had been popular in part because of its strong privacy controls.) Making Facebook sell both companies would force it to compete with them. When the judge dismissed the F.T.C.'s case, he argued that the agency had provided no proof for its assertion that Facebook held a monopoly position in social networking, but, instead, seemed to assume that everyone simply saw it that way.

The setback revealed some of the limits of trying to use antitrust as a mechanism for addressing bad corporate behavior. "There is relatively little that Lina Khan can do," Jason Furman, of Harvard Law School, told me. "I think she's going to face very big challenges, because the courts decide."

Khan told me that her vision for the F.T.C. takes these challenges into account. "Antitrust needs to be on the table, but we need to have a whole host of other tools on the table as well," she said. On September 22nd, she issued a memo outlining her priorities. One of them, she told me, was to address the merger boom that's under way; during the first eight months of 2021, \$1.8 trillion in mergers and takeovers was announced. Some of the largest corporations were set to become even bigger: Amazon announced a proposed acquisition of M-G-M studios; UnitedHealth Group proposed to buy Change HealthCare; A.T. & T. wants to merge WarnerMedia, which it owns, with Discovery. "There's a very real risk that the economy emerging post-*COVID* could be even more concentrated and consolidated than the one leading up to it," Khan said. "That is what you wake up thinking about: the merger surge, and what we're going to do about it."

During her first few months at the F.T.C., Khan took advantage of its Democratic majority—which included Rohit Chopra, who had been

nominated by Biden to become head of the C.F.P.B. but hadn't yet been confirmed—to gain easy approval of policy changes. Several of those policies make it more difficult for companies to get mergers approved, and some expand Khan's own authority at the commission. The *Wall Street Journal* editorial page, which has published at least six critical pieces about Khan since she started, described her as "Icarus," and said that her "power grab at the F.T.C. will end with her wings melting in the courts."

Suzanne Clark, the president and C.E.O. of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, told the *Journal*, "It feels to the business community that the F.T.C. has gone to war against us, and we have to go to war back." But Khan disputes that she is anti-business. "I think antitrust and anti-monopoly and fair competition are enormously pro-business," she said. "Monopolistic business practices are not conducive to a robust and thriving economy." She noted that she had started her career by looking closely at the poultry industry, which was structured like an hourglass. "You have millions of consumers on one end, millions of farmers on the other end, and they're connected by a very small number of intermediaries," she said. "I think those types of markets where you have deep asymmetries of power, sometimes on multiple sides of the market, can lead to all sorts of business practices that are harmful."

In addition to managing political pressure, running the F.T.C. involves overseeing hundreds of people, something Khan has never had to do before, and during a pandemic. "You know, historically you would just have an ice-cream social and the whole team would come in and you'd be able to see everybody," she said. "Now that looks like a thousand-person Zoom, and Zoom crashes, and half the people can't get on. . . . There's a level of clumsiness that comes with just doing these types of transitions during the pandemic."

In a sense, the real work of Khan's antitrust fight will be about changing minds over time—first those of consumers, and then those of judges and legislators, who must reshape the legal framework to reflect a new world view. Khan seems to understand this. Still, some longtime staffers at the F.T.C. worry that she is underestimating the risks of pushing ahead with aggressive cases that are likely to fail, and of insulating herself from views that don't align with hers. "Do you want an F.T.C. chair who's going to win

cases?” a person who has done extensive work in antitrust policy said. “Or do you want an F.T.C. chair who’s going to have glorious, spectacular losses that so enrage people that the system gets fixed?” ♦

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Shouts & Murmurs

- [Larry David's Notes for His Biographer](#)

By [Larry David](#)

Content

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There are many things about me that I'm sure might be of interest to readers. Things I've never really told anyone. I've always been a private person, but I wanted to make sure I got a few things down in writing, just in case anything happens to me—or before I forget!

Like, here's something: People might be surprised to learn that I'm a speed reader. I took a course when I was a kid, and one would be hard pressed to name a book I haven't read. Books are my constant companions. Like, last year, I went to Turks and Caicos over Christmas and read "The Count of Monte Cristo" on the way there and "Anna Karenina" on the way back. I'm glad I read them in that order. It might have ruined my vacation otherwise! So, you know, stuff like that.

Not sure how much time should be given to my standup years, but I've thought of a few stories that might be worth mentioning. There was one night at the Improv when I made a woman sitting in the front row laugh so hard that she went into convulsions and eventually lost consciousness. An ambulance had to be called, and she was taken to Roosevelt Hospital. It was touch and go there for a while, but thankfully she pulled through. I visited her the next day with the best bouquet of flowers that New York had to offer and humbly stood by while she told the nurse how "damn funny" I was. Pretty embarrassing, but what choice did I have?

From that point on, everyone started calling me Killer. People came to the club in droves, asking if Killer was going on. It wasn't bad for my social life, either. No sooner would I finish a set than there would be half a dozen women at the bar, trying to talk to me. "Kill me! Kill me!" they would pant. I would choose two and off we'd go. One particular night, the husbands showed up. (I had no idea they were married—swear to God!) Fortunately, my father taught me how to box when I was a kid, and there's no doubt I could've turned professional if comedy hadn't called me. In any case, I was not to be trifled with. I calmly explained this to both husbands, but they were not impressed. Two minutes later, they were lying flat out on the sidewalk,

whereupon their wives and I hopped into a cab and I did another set across town. When it was over, I bought a round of drinks for everyone, even though I didn't have a penny to my name. (Interesting stuff, right? Hope it's useful. Either way, I'm good—your call.)

There wasn't much money to be made in standup back then, so I supported my fledgling comedy career by working as a tour guide at the Central Park Zoo during the day. I've always had a deep connection with animals and I thought that would be the perfect job for me.

And it was, until some kid was admiring the polar bear and decided to jump the railing to get a closer look. I was in the middle of giving a tour when I heard screams coming from the kid's parents and raced over there. The boy was on the ground in a state of shock, as the polar bear hovered over him, about to attack. As luck would have it, a few months prior I'd attended a lecture at the New School by one of the world's foremost *Ursus* authorities, Dr. Meyer Dusenberry, who explained that if we were ever face to face with a bear we should create a cacophony. Without a second to lose, I grabbed the lid of a hot-dog pot from a nearby Sabrett's cart, leaped over the fence, and frantically rattled the lid against the bars until the bear retreated. Then I slung the kid over my shoulder in a fireman's carry (learned from my years as a volunteer with the F.D.N.Y.) and returned the youngster to his grateful parents. They offered me a huge reward, but I declined, saying that my reward was seeing their happy faces. No amount of money in the world could top that!

I kept in touch with the boy throughout his youth, and, after his parents lost all their money in a Ponzi scheme, I put him through college and medical school. Today, he's on the verge of a monumental cancer-research breakthrough and is slated to appear on an upcoming cover of *Time*. I told him I preferred to remain anonymous in the article. (You don't have to include this in the book, but, if you want to, I guess there's nothing I can do about it.)

People always ask me what I would've done had I not become a comedian. Besides the aforementioned stints at prizefighting and animal husbandry, I was also a child prodigy at the piano. By the time I was eight, I was playing Beethoven's "Hammerklavier" Sonata No. 29 in B-Flat Major

flawlessly. There's no telling how far I could've gone, but my budding career as a virtuoso ended when my "friend" Frenchie dropped a bowling ball on my foot. It broke my third and fifth metatarsal bones. I lost all proficiency with the pedals, and my tone was never the same. As I look back on that incident, what's most galling to me is that I was only two strikes away from a perfect game when the "accident" occurred. Many years later, I ran into Frenchie at Yankee Stadium and accidentally dropped a fist in his face.

But the universe works in mysterious ways, because the day after my bowling-lane encounter with Frenchie I attended a podiatry convention (by then I'd become obsessed with the intricate bone structure of the human foot), where I met a doctor who told me that the simple act of running might be the best thing for my injury. Soon I was pounding the pavement nearly thirty miles a week, and, before long, not only was I playing the piano again but I had signed up for the New York City Marathon. It was my first race, but clearly I had a gift for distance running, because, after eighteen miles, I found myself in fifth place, only an eighth of a mile behind the leader.

We were approaching the Queensboro Bridge when, for some reason, I turned to my right and, behind the crowd, I noticed a holdup of a jewelry store in progress. Even though I was in striking distance of the leader, I couldn't ignore what was taking place. I made a sharp detour to my right and slithered through the crowd. When I arrived at the store, the robber was brandishing a gun at the terrified jeweller while emptying the contents of the case into a cloth sack. I proceeded to sneak up behind the thief, karate-chop his arm, and render him unconscious with a sleeper hold that I picked up from watching Chief Jay Strongbow in a wrestling match on TV. Then I handed the gun to the jeweller, told him to call the police, and added that, if the robber were to wake up, he should shoot him if he made a move. Mission accomplished, I made my way back to the race and still managed to finish twentieth. There was no doubt in anyone's mind that, had I not foiled the robbery, I would've easily placed in the top five, or maybe even won. (Life's funny. Bought a new watch today and was reminded of that story for the first time in years. Can't think of any reason that you wouldn't use it, unless you don't want people to know the truth. News flash! There's more to me than just jokes!)

I entered the marathon again the following year and thought for sure that this time I'd sweep the chips, but two days before the race I was contacted by an adoption agency. There was a child available in Romania, and she was mine if I could get there in twenty-four hours. As badly as I wanted to win the marathon, I couldn't pass up this amazing opportunity. For years, I'd longed to adopt a child. I had so much to give, so much knowledge to impart. That night, I was off to Romania. When I returned home, it was with a beautiful, sightless little girl named Natasha, whom I renamed Jill. She was six years old and didn't speak a word of English, but, given my proficiency with languages, I was fluent in Romanian within five weeks. Tragically, after a few months, Jill's birth mother showed up and begged to take her child back. How could I deprive a mother of her little girl? And so, as difficult as it was, I gave Jill up. I still write to her every day in Braille and make the trek to Bucharest annually. She's the love of my life.

So these are just a few memories—yours to use as you see fit. Just know that there's certainly a lot more where they came from! ♦

Tables for Two

- [A Chef's Tasting in a Bathrobe, at Bathhouse Kitchen](#)

By [David Kortava](#)

Bathhouse, a ten-thousand-square-foot restaurant and underground spa that opened in Williamsburg in 2019, is not a Turkish hammam, a Russian *banya*, or a Korean *jjimjilbang*, though it integrates elements from all three. Jason Goodman, one of its founders, wanted to create a bath complex unconstrained by any particular tradition. He sought something more universal, transcendent, and atavistic—a cosmopolitan spiritual sanatorium offering what he calls “an uncomplicated borderline-primal human experience.” He once encountered, in *National Geographic*, a photograph of droopy-eyed snow monkeys lolling about in hot springs and felt an instant affinity with them. “They were all in there together, and they were grooming each other,” he told me recently. “That’s who we really are.”



The founders of Bathhouse—a ten-thousand-square-foot restaurant and underground spa, in Williamsburg—want you to have “an uncomplicated borderline-primal human experience.”

Goodman’s earliest foray into ritualized perspiration occurred twenty-five years ago, in the mountains of north Georgia, when he was invited by a friend of Cherokee heritage to participate in a sweat-lodge ceremony. For several hours, Goodman starfished on the ground, fading in and out of consciousness beside a pit of hot stones. “I thought I might die,” he recalled, smiling. His refined-caveman diet informs his vision for Bathhouse, too; since 2010, he has abstained from grains and processed sugar. His mission, according to his LinkedIn profile, is to “keep all you peak performers out there fully optimized”; the spa’s Instagram page is a shrine to chiselled abs

and callipygian curves. For the restaurant, Bathhouse Kitchen (where, on a heated patio, you can eat without purchasing entry to the spa), Goodman hired the chef Anthony Sousa, a veteran of Chez Ma Tante and Eleven Madison Park, and instructed him to design a menu that would leave eaters feeling “alive.” There was a practical consideration as well. “We omitted anything known to massively spike your insulin and make you crash,” Goodman said. “We didn’t want people passing out.”



The chef Anthony Sousa, a veteran of Chez Ma Tante and Eleven Madison Park, has designed a minimalist but exquisite menu that omits grains and processed sugar.

On a recent visit, I didn’t pass out, but after a two-hour “journey”—alternating between the dry sauna (190°F), the cold-plunge pool (52°F), and the steam room (115°F)—I did show signs of what the regulars call “spa brain,” a state of such deep relaxation that basic executive functions seem positively arduous. Rather than select from a menu, I went for the Chef’s Tasting, leaving all decisions to Sousa.



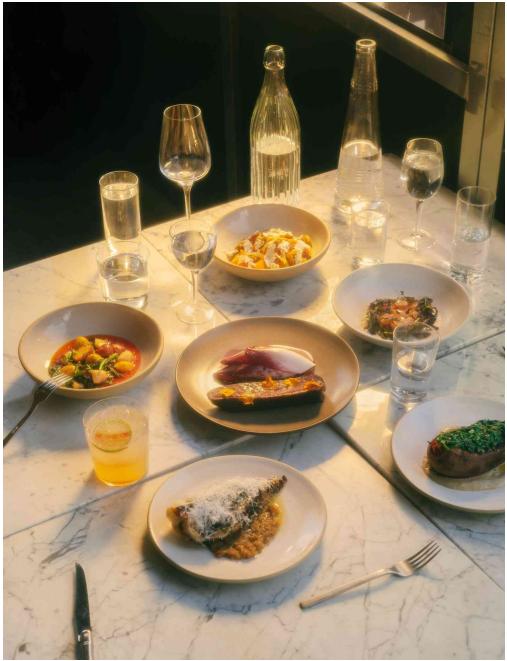
For the butternut-squash salad, Sousa serves the squash raw, thinly sliced, and tossed with golden raisins, pecans, onion, tarragon, and blue cheese.

My first course featured Nantucket Bay scallops—sweet, warm jewels glazed in a compound butter with Calabrian chilies and lemon zest, presented with delectably briny sea beans, and potatoes boiled in seaweed stock. Then came pork cheeks braised in Cognac, sherry vinegar, and mushroom bouillon and dressed in a chunky parsley oil—a triumph. Lastly, a perfect cut of duck arrived—which Sousa had aged for a week, rubbed down with a black-garlic and sherry glaze, then roasted—atop a bed of foraged mountain huckleberries.



The subterranean bath complex contains a steam room (115°F), two saunas (175°F-190°F), and three thermal pools, including a cold plunge (52°F).

The vegetable accompaniment was just as satisfying. It would never have occurred to me to order cabbage, and I was glad to be in the safekeeping of Sousa's good taste: he steamed whole heads of caraflex cabbage, gave them a hard char, and flavored them with miso, lemon, garlic, chives, smoked Pecorino, and onion jam. For the lovely butternut-squash salad, Sousa served the squash raw, thinly sliced, and tossed with golden raisins, pecans, onion, tarragon, and blue cheese. It was easily the funkiest dish I've ever consumed in a bathrobe.



Sousa steams whole heads of caraflex cabbage, gives them a hard char, and flavors them with miso, lemon, garlic, chives, smoked Pecorino, and onion jam.

The four-course meal was whimsical and excellent. There was a faint smell of ayahuasca in the air; the house incense is made, in part, from resin left over after psychedelic religious ceremonies. Nineteen-seventies British funk flowed from speakers hidden amid tropical plants. By dessert, a pear sorbet with a pecan-and-coconut crumble, my spa-brain buzz had reached its apex. It was enough to make one feel primal—alive—like a well-fed snow monkey in a hot spring. (*Dishes \$8-\$37. Chef's Tasting \$85.*) ♦

The Art World

- [Sophie Taeuber-Arp's Crafting of Abstraction](#)

The Swiss artist, an early member of Dada, played an integral role in the emergence of nonfigurative art, whether she was using a brush or a needle.

By [Peter Schjeldahl](#)

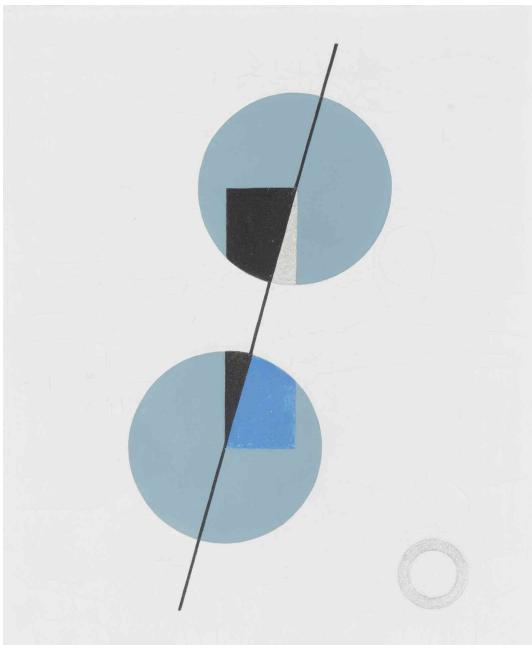
My first-ever solid take on Sophie Taeuber-Arp, the subject of a wonderful retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art, occurred nine years ago, by way of a survey, also at *MOMA*, of the genesis of abstract art, circa 1910-25. Until then, I had regarded the Swiss virtuoso of many crafts lightly. But on that occasion, which featured such heavy hitters of the aesthetic revolution as Kandinsky, Mondrian, and Malevich, I kept coming back to a smallish wool embroidery of rectangular forms, “Vertical-Horizontal Composition” (1916), by Taeuber-Arp. Beautiful, utterly assured, and ineffably heartfelt, it made the artist’s associates, nearly all male, seem relative louts, worked up about innovations that were a breeze for her. That the medium was “woman’s work” by the standards of the time added to my startlement, upending the lazy pejorative. No doubt feminism’s revaluing of historic values had sensitized me. Good is good whether accomplished with a brush or with a needle.

Now here the embroidery is again, like an old friend, in “Sophie Taeuber-Arp: Living Abstraction.” The show tracks the artist’s multifarious achievements, under the radar of ruling styles, until her death, in 1943, when she was fifty-three years old. The work’s nubbly, asymmetrically structured bars and swatches in white, black, red, blue, gray, and two browns generate a seemingly effortless majesty. The execution secretes bits of fun that I hadn’t noticed before: a minuscule, eccentric off-colored shape in a brown field; an almost imperceptible checkerboard pattern of alternating horizontal and vertical stitches in a black area (prophetic of the black-on-black paintings of Ad Reinhardt); and a small lump of congested yarn that would seem to be a flaw if it did not so candidly emphasize the work’s tactility. No matter how committed she could be to geometric order, Taeuber-Arp communicated her freedom.



"Vertical-Horizontal Composition," from 1916; a number of Taeuber-Arp's works share the same title. Art work courtesy Stiftung Arp e.V., Berlin

Sophie Taeuber was the fourth child of a pharmacist father and a mother who ran a linen-goods store in Davos. After her father died, of tuberculosis, when she was two, her mother boarded students at their home in the mostly German-speaking town of Trogen. Taeuber studied fine and applied art at schools in Switzerland and Germany. In 1915, at an art show in Zurich, she met the Alsatian sculptor and poet Arp, who used Jean as his first name in France and Hans everywhere else. They were among the early members of Dada, which centered on a night club in the city, the Cabaret Voltaire, and convened artists and writers in revolt against anything that could be associated with the obscenity of the First World War. Others on the galvanic scene included the Romanian poet Tristan Tzara and the German Hugo Ball. The multitalented, routinely daring Taeuber fit right in.



"Composition (Two Disks Cut by a Line)," from 1931. Art work courtesy Aargauer Kunsthaus Aarau

The Dadaists, deprecating museum-worthy art, devoted their self-defining energies to evenings marked by such high jinks as improvisations of willfully incomprehensible poetry. They conceived of their activities as the termination—a sardonic swan song—of a disgraced Western civilization. Taeuber, elaborately costumed, would dance in a manner that, in 1917, Ball described as “full of spikes and fishbones.” Only one blurry photograph documents that phase. Also scantily recorded, with set designs and a few photographs, is her hectic three-act marionette show of 1918, an adaptation of an eighteenth-century commedia-dell’arte play, “King Stag.” The production closed after three performances, amid the perils of that year’s deadly flu pandemic. The marionettes survived and are on view at MOMA—astonishingly inventive human, animal, and fantastical figures, such as a several-sword-wielding whirling dervish of a gizmo—in brightly painted, metal-hinged wood. Clips from a speculative re-creation, which was filmed in 1993, stir a longing in the viewer to have attended the original show. You don’t *have* to have been there, but what bliss if you were.

Largely inspired by Taeuber’s tours de force of design, experiments in nonfigurative art took hold in the Dada circle. Further embroideries and gouaches of hers, also entitled “Vertical-Horizontal Composition,” develop a language of form so fluent that she could seem to have been born to it: intricately balanced, invariably surprising. She extended the mode to involve

triangles and then curvilinear or patchy, scattered shapes, all vivacious and, such is the intimacy of her surfaces, begging to be touched. She often detoured from two dimensions, painting wooden heads with irrational abstract patterns, as if cogitating some superior realm of the psyche. Asked by Tzara in 1920 to supply a photograph of her face, she had several taken in which she peeks out, smiling, from behind one of the “Dada Heads.”

Taeuber and Arp married in 1922, and she joined his name to her own. They travelled widely among the hot spots of the European avant-garde before settling in France, in 1929. Her repertoire included some staggeringly labor-intensive beading, which she deployed in jewelry and small purses that she could sell commercially. She also made delicately woven tablecloths that you wouldn’t dream of setting a coffee cup on. Her devotion to crafts can seem strategic, allowing her to evade comparison with the big-time fine-art styles of the era—in which, nonetheless, she was fully versed. An inveterate joiner, she enhanced group shows of numerous tendencies, including Surrealism. People liked having her around.



“Cushion Panel,” from 1916. Art work courtesy Museum für Gestaltung Zürich, ZHdK

Starting in 1930, Taeuber-Arp concentrated on oil painting. She proved a topnotch contributor to the movements Cercle et Carré and Abstraction-Création—both of which were organized to promote geometric abstraction—at a certain loss of charisma. Another painter. But look closely. She

exercised such technical subtleties as building up what appear to be freehand flurries of curling lines with tiny, almost undetectable strokes to give them subliminal physical mass. Whatever she did, including incursions in stained glass and designs for architecture and interior-decoration projects, acquired mystique from how she did it.

In 1940, Taeuber-Arp and Arp fled their home, outside Paris, for the Unoccupied Zone of southern France, shortly before German troops entered the city. The couple contemplated but stalled a possible immigration to the United States (they had visas) before taking refuge back in neutral Switzerland. In January of 1943, Taeuber-Arp spent a night at a friend's house. She lit a woodstove in the guest room but, having inexplicably neglected to open the flue, died in her sleep of carbon-monoxide poisoning. The calamity persists as a rankling hurt.

A friend has suggested to me that the Taeuber-Arp show exemplifies what he calls “the *MOMA* apology tour.” Having promulgated a canon of modernist masters and movements since its earliest days, under the direction of Alfred H. Barr, Jr., in recent years the museum has taken to celebrating past talents and phenomena that it once consigned, when considering them at all, to marginal status. A concurrent show at the museum, “Joseph E. Yoakum: What I Saw,” presents works by a Chicagoan outsider artist who died in 1972. Yoakum began painting at the age of seventy-one, toward the end of an obscure, knockabout life, and was warmly embraced by a cohort of wackily figurative Chicago artists who, flipping off New York influences, dubbed themselves the Hairy Who; they have lately been coming in for recuperative justice themselves. Yoakum’s landscapes of sensuously swollen forms, seething with visceral imagination, fill one blank in *MOMA*’s narrative of twentieth-century art.

But Taeuber-Arp’s case goes beyond a gesture of belated catholicity. Her elevation revises what is understood as “major” in modern art. Far from incidental in her epoch, she was integral to the wholesale expansion of what art could be and how it could alter the world at large. The show recasts assumptions of value that were long held hostage to hierarchies of medium and that were dominated, with rare exceptions, by men. The story it tells liberates thinking about what has mattered—and still does, and henceforth will—in our cultural annals of consequential genius. ♦

New Yorker Favorites

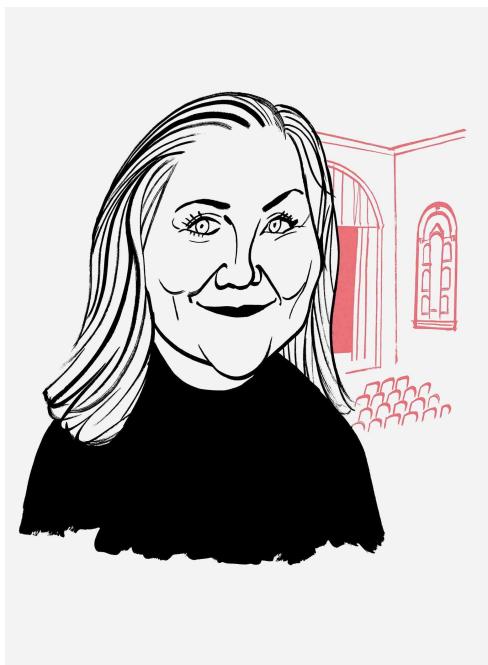
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The Boards

- Kathleen Turner Isn't Just a Movie Star

By [Rachel Syme](#)

Kathleen Turner has one of the most recognizable voices in show business: deep, booming, gallivanting between American and British pronunciations, raspy as a cheese grater. When it comes to singing, her stentorian timbre technically makes her a baritone. “By the time I got to high school,” she said one recent Tuesday afternoon, holding court at a back table at Joe Allen, in the theatre district, “the musical director put me in with the boys, which was *fantastic*.” The sixty-seven-year-old actress had ventured to midtown—begrudgingly—from her roost in Tribeca to grab lunch before heading to Town Hall, where, on December 16th, she will put on a one-night-only command performance of her cabaret act, “*Finding My Voice*.” In the show, Turner croons such standards as “I’d Rather Be Sailing” and “Sweet Kentucky Ham,” and recounts bawdy, behind-the-scrim stories from a life on the stage. Sometimes she’ll even throw in a curse word—or ten.



Kathleen Turner Illustration by João Fazenda

Turner—who was in head-to-toe black, including New Balance sneakers—is the sort of woman who dresses simply but accessorizes with decadent bling. Her milky-blue jade ring and gleaming earrings were the work of the jewelry designer Helen Woodhull, who died in 2005. “I collect her,” Turner said. “For three of my Broadway plays—‘Cat on a Hot Tin Roof’ and ‘Indiscretions’ and ‘Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?’—we designed pins

for the original cast. And then we'd break the mold so no one else could ever have it again. That was when I was *rich*."

Turner poked at her chopped salad. "The most reliable thing here is the burger," she said. "But, well, you know." As she was about to try another forkful, the actor Reed Birney, also sixty-seven, with a downy puff of silver hair, swanned over. "Kathleen!" he cried. "How *are* you?"

"Reed and I did our first Broadway show together," Turner said, extending her hand.

"We did 'Gemini' together, playing brother and sister," Birney said.

"1978," Turner added.

"We're still here," Birney said.

"We're still here, *honey*," Turner said. "Still workin'. We did good."

As she prepared to leave for the theatre, for a walk-through to check lighting, she reflected on several things that annoy her: when a movie star like Meryl Streep steps into a stage actor's signature part for a film ("I think Meryl's great, but I do mind that she takes roles," she said of Streep's film "Doubt." "Cherry Jones should have had that film"), young agents ("I flew out to L.A. and sat in a room full of twentysomethings telling me how wonderful I am, and one guy says, 'By the way, what have you done?' "), and people who try to butt into her act ("One night when we were at the Carlyle, this guy in the audience started singing right along with me. The next one was coming up, and I said, 'Excuse me, sir, do you know this one?' He went, 'No.' And I went . . . 'Good' ").

A person who does not annoy Turner: her hairdresser of forty-some years, Joseph Piazza. "He now lives in New Jersey, so I take the ferry to see him," she said. Piazza is the reason she started singing professionally. He also cuts the hair of her director, Andy Gale. A few years back, Piazza and Gale discussed Gale's collaborating with Turner on a musical project. "I happen to have perfect pitch," Turner said.

At Town Hall, Turner joined Gale, a compact man in gray chinos with a short white beard and wire-framed glasses. “How do we get *onstage*?” she bellowed, eventually finding her way. As the two stood on the edge of the stage, Gale said, “This place was built in 1921 by suffragists, and Margaret Sanger was on this stage at the beginning of what became Planned Parenthood.” He explained that the suffragists had wanted no box seats.

“If women ran the world, I swear to God it would be better,” Turner said.

Gale said, “You’re running this!”

Turner didn’t care for the positioning of the spotlight. “It’s a very severe angle,” she said. “I wonder if we could put a spot down the center?” She moved around, marking out the positions of the grand piano, the bass player, and her guitarist. On the night of the show, she will wear a “midnight-blue tunic and flowing pants” (she had first asked her designer for “heavy, heavy silk pajamas”) and sing near a vase of red roses.

“It’s really a classy show,” Gale said.

The roses, Turner said, are a nod to one of her most beloved traditions. “When you open in a show, your dressing room looks like a funeral parlor,” she said. “So many bouquets. By two weeks, they’re all dead. I like having roses. Always. So every week I have a standing order for two dozen roses for my dressing room. Because I have seen no reason to wait for someone to give me some.” ♦

The Current Cinema

- [“Licorice Pizza” Is Paul Thomas Anderson’s Seventies Show](#)

In the director's Nixon-era coming-of-age tale, his mind's eye is fixed on the past.

By [Anthony Lane](#)

The running time of the new [Paul Thomas Anderson](#) movie, "Licorice Pizza," is a hundred and thirty-three minutes, and much of that time is occupied with running. Think of Shirley MacLaine, haring along at the end of "The Apartment" (1960), with her head thrown back, then imagine a whole film in which people dash around with the same urgency, even when they have nowhere special to go. The hero of "Licorice Pizza," Gary Valentine (Cooper Hoffman), races toward a gas station, past a line of idling vehicles, to the sound of [David Bowie](#)'s "Life on Mars?" For her part, the heroine, Alana Kane (Alana Haim), sprints to a police station, after Gary has been inexplicably arrested. And, at the climax, they both run—Alana going from right to left across the screen, and Gary going in the other direction, equal and opposite. Wait for the meet and greet.

Anderson's characters have taken to their heels before. Remember the explosive scene in "The Master" (2015), when Joaquin Phoenix burst through a door and set off across a plowed and misty field, at full tilt, with the camera hurrying to keep up. Such speed, however, sprang from desperation, whereas "Licorice Pizza" is bent upon the pursuit of happiness. It is, indeed, Anderson's happiest creation to date—blithe, easy-breathing, and expansive. The odd thing is that, in terms of space and time, it's what Bowie would have called a god-awful small affair. Aside from a short trip to New York, it clings to the San Fernando Valley, and we're firmly stuck in the early nineteen-seventies. Those cars are lined up because of a global fuel emergency, and Richard Nixon is glimpsed on TV, in November, 1973, beseeching Americans to trim their gas consumption. It was quite a speech, in fact, and some directors might point up its ironic pertinence to the environmental crisis of today. Not Anderson. His mind's eye is fixed on the past, and "Licorice Pizza" isn't just planted there, like a flag; it dreams of being the kind of movie that was made back then.

Gary first encounters Alana at school. He's in the tenth grade, and she's a visitor, working for a photographer who takes head shots for the yearbook. Alana is twenty-five, although she seems younger, and Gary is fifteen, although he, if not his volcanic complexion, looks a little older. He certainly

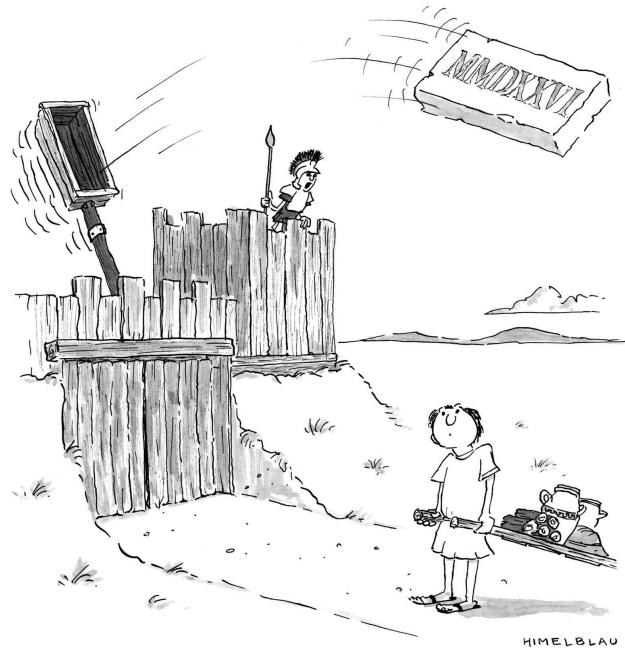
acts older—instantly asking her out and, when she shows up, ordering dinner and plying her with questions such as “What are your plans? What’s your future look like?” He sounds like a patriarch, interviewing a prospective daughter-in-law. (Of Gary’s father we see and hear nothing: all part of the generational jumble in which Anderson delights.) As for his own expectations, Gary declares, “I’m a showman. It’s my calling.” Strange to say, as Alana comes to realize, the kid’s not kidding. He’s been a child star for some while, and, as that career wanes, he smoothly upgrades to the next one, selling water beds to all the funky souls who don’t mind feeling seasick as they sleep. Later, he becomes a wizard of the pinball trade. Whether and how a teen-ager can set up legitimate businesses in the state of California is not a subject of concern for this movie. The subject, rather, is the comedy of hope.

How would we react to “Licorice Pizza” if the main roles were reversed, and Alana was the minor? As we now react, perhaps, to a half-forgotten movie of 1973, Clint Eastwood’s “Breezy,” which chronicles the alliance of a young hippie (Kay Lenz) and a wrinkled divorcé (William Holden). Anderson, I’m sure, is alive to this potential awkwardness, and that’s why the new film is massively—and, by his standards, scandalously—bereft of sex. Given that the San Fernando Valley rang to the phony moans of porno stars, in “Boogie Nights” (1997), and to the tumescent dictums of a motivational speaker, in “Magnolia” (1999), it’s both a shock and a relief to find that, by and large, “Licorice Pizza” keeps the carnal peace. One evening, as Gary and Alana lie beside one another on a water bed, their little fingers touch, in silhouette. We could be watching cutout puppets. Gary’s hand hovers briefly over Alana’s breast, and then withdraws. No boogie tonight.

There isn’t much of a plot to this movie. Rather, it’s shaggy with happenings—with the weird, one-off events that tend to crop up during adolescence, and to grow funnier, and taller, in the telling. Hence the presence of Bradley Cooper as Jon Peters, Barbra Streisand’s beau du jour, who dresses in angelic white and behaves like a dirty devil. (“You like peanut-butter sandwiches?” is his sticky pickup line, which he tries out, pathetically, on two women walking by.) We also get Sean Penn in nicely self-mocking form as Jack Holden, a Hollywood idol marooned in the memory of his old hits, who cozies up to Alana, à la “Breezy.” Craggier yet is Tom Waits as an

aging director, his puff of cigarette smoke lit with a ghostly brilliance, and best of all is Harriet Sansom Harris, who has one magisterial scene as a casting agent, most of it spent on the phone (“love to Tatum”) and framed in so extreme a closeup that even her orthodontist will be impressed. The camera, wielded by Michael Bauman and by Anderson himself, misses nothing. And still it hungers for more.

Busy and thronging, rammed with cameos and comic turns, and sewn together with songs (does anything shout 1973 quite like “Let Me Roll It,” by Paul McCartney and Wings?), “Licorice Pizza” nonetheless hangs on the rapport—more than a friendship, less than a love story, and sometimes a power struggle—between Gary and Alana. Cooper Hoffman, the son of [Philip Seymour Hoffman](#), who for so long was a stalwart of Anderson’s work, is never less than endearing, and allows us to believe in Gary’s belief in himself. “You don’t even know what’s going on in the world,” Alana tells him, but he knows what’s going on in *his* world, and that’s what counts.



“We sent you a secure access code! Do not share this code with anyone! Your access code will expire in ten minutes!”
Cartoon by Ed Himmelblau

Finally, though, the movie belongs to Alana Haim. She made her name as one-third of Haim, the group in which she performs with her sisters Este and Danielle—both of whom appear in “Licorice Pizza,” as do their real parents. (I needed more of them.) Anderson has directed many music videos for Haim’s songs, and their snap and buoyancy persist in Alana Kane, with her

lyrical smile and, conversely, her caustic charm. “Fuck off, teen-agers!” she cries, to those who block her path as she runs, and, on her first date with Gary, she commands him to stop looking at her. Without such candor, the film wouldn’t spill over with life as freely as it does, and nothing is fiercer or fonder than the insult that she flings at one of her sisters: “You’re always thinking things, you *thinker*.” There’s no answer to that.

If you had to pick a partner for “Licorice Pizza,” on a double bill, Paolo Sorrentino’s “The Hand of God” would be the ideal choice. It has a protagonist, Fabietto Schisa (Filippo Scotti), who’s about the same age as Gary Valentine. I can picture the two of them hanging out, maybe bouncing on one of Gary’s water beds, though Fabietto is dreamier and less decisive. Moreover, like Anderson’s movie, “The Hand of God” seeks to capture a period that seems both recent and distant. It’s set in the nineteen-eighties—starting, specifically, at the point in 1984 when Diego Maradona, widely worshipped as the best soccer player on Earth, is poised to sign for S.S.C. Napoli, the premier team of Naples. “He’d never leave Barcelona for this shithole,” somebody says. Yet the miracle comes to pass.

No less wondrous is our realization that, by the end, we don’t want to leave the shithole. There’s a long alfresco sequence of a crowded lunch, groaning with good food and gossip, that will cause most moviegoers to whimper with envy and yearning. One of the curious side effects of the coronavirus pandemic has been to refresh our wanderlust, and to restore one of cinema’s basic and most venerable functions; namely, to make us wish to be where we are not. That’s how it was for the earliest audiences, before the epoch of mass travel, and that’s how it feels again now. The heavenly shots of Naples, viewed from the bay and glittering in the sun, are impossible to resist, and, when Fabietto’s aunt Patrizia (Luisa Ranieri), whom he adores, turns and looks at him, in silence, framed by olive trees and lulled in late-afternoon light, we know that this moment of epiphany is one he will not forget. Same here.

While “Licorice Pizza” supplies its hero with plenty of pals and workmates but only a couple of relations, “The Hand of God” is the other way around. It’s startling to hear Fabietto, on his birthday, say, “I don’t have friends,” but it’s true. What he has instead is an extended family—tense and internecine, yet never less than sustaining. Besides Patrizia, we meet Fabietto’s brother,

an aspiring actor named Marchino (Marlon Joubert), with whom he still shares a room as if they were little boys, and their parents, Saverio (Toni Servillo) and Maria (Teresa Saponangelo), who are so attuned to one another that they can communicate by whistling, like blackbirds. (The film wells with particular sounds; one fellow, a cheerful miscreant who winds up in prison, describes with rapture the “tuff, tuff, tuff” that you hear as a speedboat slaps the waves.) Also part of the clan: a tetchy uncle who asks, “When did you all become such disappointments?,” plus a foulmouthed elder who wears a fur coat in summer and holds a dripping burrata in her hands, munching it like a peach. Later, though, even she is gently redeemed, as she quotes consoling lines of Dante at a funeral. No one disappoints, beneath the film’s forgiving gaze.

Sorrentino is best known for “The Great Beauty” (2013), his sumptuous panegyric to Rome. Naples, though, is his birthplace and his cradle, whereas Rome is more equivocally referred to, in the new movie, as “the great deception”—the magnet to which outsiders like Fabietto are inescapably lured—as if all the beauty were a lie. The person who sensed that attraction most keenly, of course, was Fellini, and that is why “The Hand of God” wrestles with his legacy; Marchino auditions for a Fellini production, surrounded by exotic hopefuls, and the sight of a huge chandelier, its blaze undimmed, lying aslant on the floor of a half-deserted house would have suited “La Dolce Vita” (1960). With pride, Fabietto recites one of the Maestro’s maxims: “Reality is lousy.”

Yet “The Hand of God” is most affecting when reality *does* intrude—not only when fate takes a terrible hand, piercing the family’s heart, but also in stretches of languor. Look at Fabietto’s father, jabbing the buttons on the TV with a stick and announcing, “I’m a Communist,” as if that excused his lazy reluctance to buy a remote; or strolling through the nineteenth-century elegance of the Galleria Umberto, and murmuring, “See that column? I spent the entire war leaning against it.” That’s my favorite line of dialogue this year, and it links Sorrentino’s film to the everyday joys of “Licorice Pizza.” As winter impends, we are lucky to have this pair of balmy tales. They strike me as tender, in both senses, being at once benign in mood and painfully sensitive to the touch, and they suggest that the remembrance of things past may be more inflamed than soothed by the flow of time. “I don’t know if I can be happy,” Fabietto says. Only one way to find out. ♦

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The Pictures

- Steven Yeun: Patriarch, Outsider, Loyal Boyfriend, Sociopath, Producer

By [Alex Barasch](#)

A week after wrapping “*Minari*,” the movie that would cement his leading-man status, the actor Steven Yeun found himself in New York, to film a different family drama. “*Minari*” had been shot in the wide-open spaces of Oklahoma—a stand-in for Arkansas, where Yeun’s character, a Korean immigrant, attempts to establish a new, agricultural life for his young family. For “*The Humans*,” an adaptation of Stephen Karam’s Tony-winning play of the same name, he would spend twenty-eight days inside a grotty Chinatown duplex, reconstructed on a Brooklyn soundstage. “The dripping paint, the water stains, just the patina of the place—we were gawking at it the whole first week,” he recalled the other day. “The apartment itself is obviously its own character.”



In the film, Richard and Brigid (Yeun and Beanie Feldstein) have just moved into the dank and under-furnished prewar, where flickering lights and ominous noises from upstairs add to the anxieties of Thanksgiving with Brigid’s parents and sister. (The mother, visiting from Scranton, frets about the view of a dingy alleyway; Brigid, versed in the patois of city real estate, dubs it an “interior courtyard.”) “*The Humans*”—a study in cramped quarters, failing health, and financial precarity—was shot in late 2019, but, when it premiered at the Toronto film festival this fall, it was hailed as a *COVID*-era horror story.

Yeun, who had on half-rim glasses and a gray sweater, was Zooming from his house in Pasadena—a locale reassuringly free from sweating walls and sickly lighting. Early in the pandemic, he had turned a corner of his bedroom into a makeshift office, with books stacked high on a desk and plants on a windowsill; the closet doubles as a recording studio for voice-over work. He has an easy charisma, apparent in his portrayal of loyal boyfriends and disarming sociopaths alike. His approach to character, he said, is always to “talk the shit out of it.” In rehearsal for “The Humans,” he and Feldstein discussed “the things that they find attractive about each other, the things that they need from each other,” and the gulf between their characters in terms of age, race, and class. “Minari” and “The Humans” are both about families on the brink—one struggling to gain a foothold in America, the other beginning to lose its grip—and Yeun was struck by “playing the patriarch in one and then the outsider in the other.” Richard, a grad student with a trust fund, is the newcomer to whom old grievances and in-jokes are explained, but his fresh eyes give him insight into unspoken dynamics.



"Honestly, we were hoping for solitude up here after an eternity of solitude down there."
Cartoon by Julia Suits

Yeun was born in Seoul and raised primarily in Michigan, where his own experience of the holiday was less fraught. “I’m *chillin’* during Thanksgiving,” he said with a grin, noting that the dishes at his parents’ table ranged from cranberry sauce to kimchi. “Korean American

Thanksgiving is the best one!” He came to acting after catching an improv show in college, and found sketch comedy unexpectedly liberating: “That’s the medium where physical limitations aren’t as big of a deal, you know? If you’re an Asian American actor, you can play anyone.” At twenty-three, he moved to Chicago and auditioned for Second City, with an old Steve Carell sketch. He performed with the company for a few years (including a stint on a Norwegian cruise liner), moved to L.A., and was cast in “The Walking Dead,” a ratings juggernaut in which he would star for six seasons. After his departure, in 2016, he began to attract critical attention for his work with such auteurs as Bong Joon-ho, Boots Riley, and Lee Chang-dong.

“*Minari*,” the culmination of that run, premiered in January, 2020. “We got back from Sundance, and then the world just broke,” Yeun said. The film had won a Grand Jury Prize, and would receive six Oscar nominations, including one for Yeun, as Best Actor. “All that happened under the cover of night,” he said. “The Oscars were, like, this thing that I had to do while the pandemic was happening.” His focus was on fatherhood: one child had remote learning to contend with, the other was still a toddler.

He has also begun producing, in the hope of opening the door to unknown actors and directors from marginalized backgrounds. “*The Walking Dead*” remains the most-watched scripted show on cable, but Yeun has noticed a growing openness to eclectic material. “It feels nice that you can watch ‘Dragon Ball Z’ and then a P. T. Anderson film in the same day,” he said. Last month, he wrapped his first live-action project since the pandemic, a horror movie directed by Jordan Peele. The partnership, he said, was “kismet.” He’d seen the same quality in Peele’s script as he had in Karam’s: “I’m looking for the ones that are speaking human.” ♦

The Theatre

- The Search for Justification in “Clyde’s” and “Trouble in Mind”

In Lynn Nottage's new play, characters' life stories come between slapstick riffs on sandwich-making; Alice Childress's 1955 play makes its much belated Broadway début.

By [Vinson Cunningham](#)

Everybody's entitled to a little privacy. Character development in drama is similar to a growing friendship—a process of gradual divulgence. The puzzle of someone's bearing and outward presentation gives way to the collection of secrets and fears and family history that make up—and, over time, help to explain—that person. Still, the most interesting people, onstage and in our lives, hold on to a whiff of mystery. There's something alien and ineffable about them that can't be reduced to mere facts, or be rationalized by psychology. Call it soul.

Lynn Nottage's new play, "Clyde's," directed by Kate Whoriskey (at the Helen Hayes), about the staff of a run-down sandwich joint at a truck stop, takes a stark either-or stance regarding the lives of its characters. They spill their guts without much prompting, and, in the spilling, court intimacy—or, in the frustrating case of the title character, give nothing at all. Both approaches render surfaces rather than spirit.

Clyde (Uzo Aduba) is the badass, shit-talking, intermittently horny, sometimes violent proprietor of the roadside shop. She wears formfitting clothes that highlight her curves and pedestal her décolletage. Sex has something to do with her power—the passes she makes at her employees register as vague threats. She always wants the sandwiches to come out faster, and she has no patience for the culinary ambition that's growing in the kitchen under her nose. She wants the basics, nothing more. Sometimes she shows up with odd gifts that might or might not be ill-gotten, the kind of stuff that euphemistically "falls off the back of a truck"—some olive oil from Central Europe, an inexplicable mess of wilted chard, a plastic bag full of sea bass in greenish liquid.

"The fish smells rank," somebody says, to which Clyde replies, "You know my policy. If it ain't brown or gray, it can be fried." Fire up the skillet. A free beer for anybody who gets sick. That's the kind of place this is.

Clyde is an ex-convict, and so are the people who work for her, a fact that she hangs over their heads like rain in a cloud at every opportunity—nobody else is going to hire them, so they'd better submit to her whims, however brutal. Tish (Kara Young, who spins great performances out of straw in every show I see her in) is a single mom saddled by a trifling, untrustworthy co-parent. Rafael (Reza Salazar) fumblingly pines for her. Jason (Edmund Donovan) is the new guy, initially quiet and sullen, marked up with white-supremacist tattoos. They're all under the thrall of the sagelike Montrellous (Ron Cephas Jones), a kind of sandwich guru, who wants to jazz up the place with new recipes and more tender attention to ingredients. He leads the group in sessions of visualization and conjecture—what kind of sandwich can your mind conjure up?

Often, the sessions lead to bouts of confession—all the employees give up the goods on why they did time, even, eventually, Jason. This is supposed to deepen the bonds among them, and, perhaps, to offer a well of complexity not often granted to working-class people chewed up by the system and given a harsh set of choices: eat shit, starve, or go back in. But the life stories come between slapstick riffs on sandwich-making and kitchen etiquette—a bunch of well-performed gags—and as a result the play has trouble finding its tone. It's hard to figure out how seriously to take the putatively tough moments in "Clyde's," or what to do with the biographies we're offered. (Clyde's own answer to anybody else's suffering is to dismiss it. "I don't do pity," she says.) The lighting, by Christopher Akerlind, tries to indicate emotion—when Montrellous is rhapsodizing, he gets a fuchsia glow—but nothing that any character says steers the play in a new direction. Sad tales are divots for us to navigate between laughs.

Much of the problem lies with Clyde herself. In an early private moment, Clyde and Montrellous—who have a history that remains shrouded throughout the play—are arguing about the future of the shop. Montrellous lets slip that Clyde has fallen into "gambling debt," and that the shop is somehow mixed up in the trouble. That's the only thing we ever really learn—or, at least, think we learn—about Clyde. She rings a bell when new orders come in, appearing at the window to the kitchen all of a sudden, like a poltergeist at the climax of a horror flick. She rages through the kitchen, spewing just enough bile to get the objects of her tyranny complaining

again, but she's never subjected to the kind of scrutiny that makes watching a character worthwhile.

Uzo Aduba is one of my favorite televisual performers of recent years—as Suzanne (Crazy Eyes) Warren in Netflix's “Orange Is the New Black,” and as the therapist Brooke Taylor in the new season of HBO's “In Treatment”—largely because she holds within her characters, and gradually reveals, many layers of tenderness and brokenness, irrationality and explosive pain. At her best, her eyes, deep with feeling, are like bowls left out in the rain, steadily filling up with the liquid stuff of personality. Here, those skills are tossed aside. Clyde toys with angry fear when her troubles come up, but she never revisits it. She's like an ungenerous sketch-comedy depiction of a woman we want to meet, whom Aduba could, I think, play well: wrathful and dangerous, yes, but welling up and bubbling over with a past—and some drastic action—to justify it.

Speaking of justification, “Trouble in Mind”—the 1955 play by Alice Childress, now making its much belated débüt on Broadway (directed by Charles Randolph-Wright for Roundabout Theatre Company, at the American Airlines Theatre)—slowly unravels an aging actress named Wiletta (LaChanze), who is reluctantly exposed to an acting approach that asks her to find emotions to support the actions of her character. Her director, Al Manners (Michael Zegen), fancies himself a social and artistic progressive. The play they're rehearsing, slated for Broadway, is about small-town Black folks who, because they want the right to vote, get threatened—and worse—by a gathering lynch mob.

Manners, who is white, thinks the play is on the cutting edge of race relations—at least, as close to that edge as the theatre's commercial imperatives will allow. He pokes and prods Wiletta, expressing dissatisfaction with her performance as a mother whose son is in big trouble, asking her to “justify” her character's decisions, not merely to act them out with rote professionalism. He's trying to make high art out of a play he doesn't know is offensive trash. The problem is that Wiletta's got a real artist inside her—“I want to be an actress!” she says in the middle of a reverie—and she learns the new method a bit too well. She begins asking questions that the script, and her director, just can't answer.

Wiletta starts out as a jaded veteran, advising a younger actor to laugh at the director's jokes and tell little lies to pad his résumé. She's not the only cynical one: her castmate Millie (the very funny Jessica Frances Dukes) is in a wry fury about how poorly she's served by the roles she's made to play. "Last show I was in, I wouldn't even tell my relatives," Millie says. "All I did was shout 'Lord, have mercy!' for almost two hours every night." It's a representational lament that sounds stale until you realize that the play was written more than sixty-five years ago.

"Trouble in Mind" is pessimistic about the structures that underpin the entertainment industry, but it is bullish about the possibilities of earnest artistic pursuit. Even a schmuck like Manners can read some Stanislavsky, bring it clumsily into rehearsals, and, unwittingly, spark the beginnings of a revolution. ♦

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