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TO STOP A SHOOTER

By Jamie Thompson



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How a Playwright Became One of the Most Incisive Social Critics of Our Time

The subversive vision of Michael R. Jackson

by Thomas Chatterton Williams



In the summer of 2020, the playwright Michael R. Jackson received an unusual message from a fan of *A Strange Loop*, his musical about a gay Black man's path to creative self-awareness through the process of writing a musical about a gay Black man's path to creative self-awareness. "Can I buy you a bulletproof vest?" the fan inquired over Instagram.

Jackson, who had just [won a Pulitzer Prize](#) for *A Strange Loop* and lived on a perfectly safe street in Upper Manhattan, had no more conceivable use for body armor or handouts than the next man. He told me about the proposal several months ago, over *steak frites* at Soho House, stressing its absurdity and presumptuousness. “Ur life matters so much. Ur writing matters so much. This is the most available and direct way I can think of protecting ur life and ur future plays,” the fan had explained.

In person, Jackson at first seems unassuming and even shy. He does not reflexively generate small talk. But he responds candidly and at length when asked a question about almost anything, and he is wickedly funny. In Jackson’s diagnosis, the fan in question was haplessly inspired by the racial reckoning then gripping the nation; he felt compelled to “show up” in the name of white allyship and anti-racism. Jackson compromised with his would-be savior: For the benefit of the latter’s conscience, he’d accept the vest’s cash value of \$400. The man promptly sent this sum to Jackson via Venmo.

This bizarre exchange was emblematic of an entire constellation of assumptions, biases, and misunderstandings that has proliferated in recent years and altered the way Jackson thinks of himself, his work, and American society more broadly. “Once the pandemic and the protest began, I suddenly was like, *Oh God. This is a test of all of our characters. This is the existential thing that none of us have actually lived through before*,” he told me. He thinks the American elite failed that test, revealing the enormity of its disconnection from the real world.

Jackson can get animated when discussing the summer of 2020 and the way some artists, journalists, academics, and businesspeople exploited the killing of George Floyd to advance their career. “They’re like, ‘Oh, in the world where George Floyd is dead, we need to talk about our theater careers’—or academia, or whatever … It’s like, how can y’all just so casually use this man’s corpse to promote your bougie-ass class bullshit? It’s disgusting.” He found media coverage of this phenomenon to be particularly oblivious. “The *New York Times* theater section will say”—here he adopted a mock reporter’s voice—“‘Things changed after George Floyd was killed, and this artistic director was appointed to *blah blah blah*.’”

Jackson believes that social media, a gathering threat for many years, tore open our collective reality in 2020; it created “an alternate universe” in which identity-based suffering—or merely the claim to such, however implausible or vicarious—could be converted into social capital. “In the theater world in particular,” he said, “things got instantaneously even more dramatic because suddenly you had all these artists out of work. And all they had is the internet to do the most Shakespearean of performances about George Floyd and everything else. The number of people *in the theater world* who used George Floyd’s dead body to pivot to inequity in the theater world is the most hair-raising thing I’ve ever seen in my life.”

Many Black artists and thinkers, he said, live in this alternate universe: “They have made a home online where they can spread all of their influence and their clubbiness and cliquey-ness.” Here, the delusion that the lives of Black artists are urgently endangered can take on the false weight of conventional wisdom—and inspire a blessedly naive white man to believe that a Broadway writer is somehow in dire need of a bulletproof vest.

Jackson has long been preoccupied by questions of race and sexuality. He knows that he benefits from the interest generated by two of his identities, Black and gay. He also believes that the superficiality of that interest—the oversimplification of complex, ambiguous human reality—can create a stifling intellectual trap. The playwright Jeremy O. Harris [told *The New York Times*](#) in March that “theater is an act of community service.” But Jackson is wary of any social-justice consensus, which he believes encourages everyone “to look at art as a weapon to be used to get one’s way.”

“The number of people *in the theater world* who used George Floyd’s dead body to pivot to inequity in the theater world is the most hair-raising thing I’ve ever seen in my life,” Jackson said.

I began a series of conversations with Jackson in the autumn of 2022, as *A Strange Loop* was winding down its Broadway run and he was preparing to launch, off-Broadway, his highly anticipated sophomore effort, an idiosyncratic satire called *White Girl in Danger*. He was also reaching beyond the theater world, writing for Boots Riley’s [absurdist Amazon series](#), *I’m a Virgo*, which follows a 13-foot-tall Black teenager in Oakland, California. (It premiered in June 2023.) Now he is [writing a horror movie](#)—

about, in his words, “the psychosis of an overeducated white and Black bourgeoisie”—for the production company A24. He’s also working on a new play, called *Teeth*, about a Christian teen in a religious community, which will open off-Broadway in March.

Thomas Chatterton Williams: You can’t define *woke*

Jackson is typically regarded as a member of the social-justice left in good standing—as “woke,” [for lack of a better word](#). Yet such a reading of Jackson and his work is a projection that says far more about audiences and the critical climate than the artist himself. I immersed myself in both of Jackson’s plays, as well as his personal writing in published essays and on social media. And I became convinced that one of our era’s most surprising, ruthlessly self-aware, and incisive social observers just happens to write musicals.

Michael R. Jackson was born in 1981 in Detroit, into what he has described as an unexceptional middle-class setting, a “Black Mayberry” where “no one seemed to want anything and nothing of consequence ever seemed to happen.” His parents—“regular-ass Baby Boomers who have lived in the same house for 45 years”—are both southern transplants, his mother from Georgia and his father from Mississippi. “A lot of people think that being from Detroit means, like, ‘Oh, wow, you grew up in danger,’” he told me. “No, I grew up in a totally normal, regular neighborhood.” It was and still is a world of church outings and family reunions. A mostly Black world where “no one is talking about ‘I need to be *seen*, I need to be *seen*, I need to be *seen*—look, Mommy, I can *see* myself!’ They never say that … Their self-esteem is not managed by a digital world of digital managers and gatekeepers.”

If his family life was grounded and undramatic, his imaginative life was something like the opposite. When he was a very young child, his working parents would drop him off most days at his great-aunt’s house, where he would watch hours upon hours of daytime television: first cartoons, then game shows, and then, starting at lunchtime, soap operas. He recited the viewing order with relish: “12:30, *The Young and the Restless*; 1 o’clock is *Days of Our Lives*; 2 o’clock is *Another World*; 3 o’clock is *Santa Barbara*.” Once he reached school age, Jackson would watch soaps on days off and

over the summer, calling his great-aunt to catch up on missed plot developments. “It was this bond that we had over these stories, these fictional white people.” He said these shows and these people —“predominantly white women in peril”—taught him what the wider culture deemed important in storytelling.

Thomas Chatterton Williams: ‘Post-victimhood’ storytelling

At Cass Tech High School, Jackson studied creative writing and devoured *Soap Opera Digest* in his free time, fantasizing about becoming a writer on one of his favorite shows. The head of the English department encouraged him to participate in a [program that brought professional writers into the school](#), including the novelist [Peter Markus](#). Jackson studied privately with Markus. “He was the first adult in my life as an artist to challenge me to push the envelope,” he told me. “His whole thing was ‘Figure out what your obsessions are and write about them over and over and over again.’”

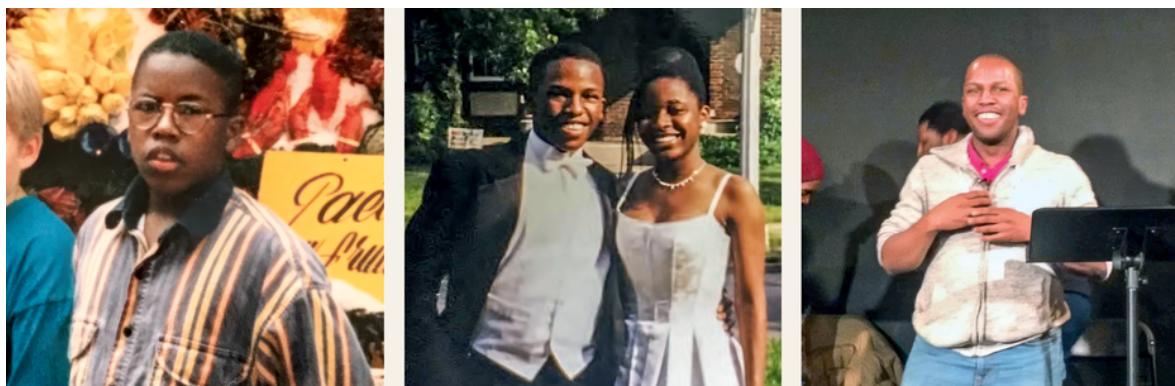
Markus advised Jackson to “stop imitating Maya Angelou” (Jackson’s words) and find his own perspective. Around this time, at the age of 15, Jackson began coming out as gay. And this emerging dual sense of his creative and sexual selves led him to want “to write dangerously and to step out of what I felt, in an abstract way, was this sort of box of being a Black writer who could only write about certain things and couldn’t be transgressive or emotional or whatever.”

Jackson has written frankly about his parents’ shock at his homosexuality and their subsequent acceptance. As he put it in [a 2021 essay](#) for *The Yale Review*:

My mother told me that God hated homosexuality and that being gay was worse than committing murder. My father asked me if being attracted to men meant that I was attracted to him. Everyone cried. I felt like a soap opera villainess who had destroyed the family. Like I was Vivian Alamain burying Carly alive. And though my family and I are closer than ever now, it took me many years of tending to the wound to heal it, and even after healing it there’s still a tiny scar.

For college, Jackson went to NYU, where his love of soap operas persisted, but he began to explore other dramatic forms as well. He interned on *All My Children* and took a playwriting class, where his teacher defined *story* for him: “A character wants something, is presented with obstacles, and either achieves, fails, or abandons it.” When Jackson attempted to write from his own perspective, however, the results were underwhelming.

His first full-length effort at NYU was a play called *DL*, “a title and premise I stole from an episode of *Oprah* about Black men with secret ‘down low’ gay sex lives,” he wrote in *The Yale Review*. “It was about a Black police lieutenant married to an outspoken southern born and raised accounting professional who had a secretly gay teenage son. The son was having a sexual affair with one of his father’s white subordinates, who was *also* having a secret sexual affair with the father. The play was not good.” It possessed the raw ingredients of something potentially powerful—identity, trauma, deception—but Jackson still did not know what to make of them or how to connect his characters’ desires and obstructions to a more compellingly universal narrative. “As a young artist,” he continues in the essay, “I was only interested in exploiting an unresolved familial conflict around my homosexuality and throwing it into a pot with whatever dramatic seasoning I could find in the cupboard.”



From left to right: Jackson as a teenager in 1995. Jackson with his cousin Nina before senior prom in 1999. Jackson at the first reading of *A Strange Loop* at New York’s Musical Theatre Factory in 2015. (Courtesy of Michael R. Jackson; Kisha Edwards-Gandsy)

Jackson began work on what would become *A Strange Loop* after graduating from NYU, in 2002, when he was 21. After a short internship at ABC

Daytime, he applied for an executive-assistant job at CBS Daytime but was turned down, so he went back to NYU for his M.F.A. in musical-theater writing. In grad school, he suffered a major heartbreak that sent him into a depression. He had unfulfilling sexual encounters that he funneled into his writing project. After he finished his degree, he kept writing. As his play—at the time titled *Why I Can't Get Work*—expanded and evolved, he staged a few small performances. Sometimes people walked out. Even as the play progressed, he admitted to me, it periodically also got worse. His professional stagnation mingled with personal setbacks that sent him to therapy—a move he views as pivotal in preventing outright despair. All the while, he had mind-numbing day jobs, including as an usher at *The Lion King* and *Mary Poppins*. Much of *A Strange Loop* was born from that experience, of “just standing in the back of the theater watching people watch the show.” *A Strange Loop* was finally produced off-Broadway in 2019 and opened on Broadway in 2022, when Jackson was 41. He had worked on it for two decades.

A Strange Loop is both the show the audience has filed into their seats to watch and the play that its protagonist, Usher, an usher at *The Lion King*, is writing. Most of the action occurs in his overpopulated headspace, where a supporting cast of Thoughts, such as Your Daily Self-Loathing and Fairweather (Usher’s projection of his agent), badger Usher to hurry up and finish writing. The supporting characters also reenact significant moments from Usher’s past, including botched sexual encounters and the day he came out to his working-class parents in Detroit.

The relentlessly polyphonic interior monologue makes for a frenetic, hilarious 100 minutes. In awarding Jackson its annual prize for drama in 2020, the Pulitzer board called *A Strange Loop* “a metafictional musical that tracks the creative process of an artist transforming issues of identity, race, and sexuality that once pushed him to the margins of the cultural mainstream into a meditation on universal human fears and insecurities.”

The play is rooted in its creator’s personal experiences. Yet Jackson was also documenting his exposure to the larger political climate over the years. Specifically, toward the end of the Obama administration, “these conversations started to bubble up in the culture, and in the theater world

particularly, about this thing called ‘diversity, equity, and inclusion,’” which he had never really thought about before.

In 2015, Brett Ryback, a white actor and theater writer whom Jackson had met at a writing residency, published [a blog post](#) titled “Race and the New Generation of Musical Theatre Writers.” In it, Ryback noted the lack of diversity in the industry. His critique was aimed at the show *Dear Evan Hansen*, a hit that had been written by two of Jackson’s friends. Ryback “was just saying, ‘Why are the shows all white, and everything’s all white?’ And then he mentioned me,” Jackson said. The post was widely shared. “There *are* writers in this generation who are taking us in a different direction,” Ryback wrote. “People like Lin-Manuel Miranda and Michael R. Jackson, who also happen to be writers of color.” Jackson [responded on his website](#), his first attempt to make sense of a debate he has returned to again and again:

Whether you are a white musical theater writer or a musical theater writer of color, I would advocate for something that is maybe a little less politically correct but definitely on the side of art in terms of what makes it onto the stage:

JUST TELL THE FUCKING TRUTH.

That’s the only edict I would issue at this point. If your cast is all white, is that the fucking truth? It may be! But you need to ask yourself the question each and every time and not only when you’re casting it but also as you’re writing it. Race is a *construct*, so in that regard, it is arbitrary, but racism is a *practice*—and one that is often subconscious or defacto. And it’s a practice that affects all people of color everywhere. It’s a practice that affects white people as well and I would argue … that it may even affect them worse.

In his response to Ryback, Jackson described his play-in-progress using conventional social-justice vernacular: “a piece that endeavors to force the hegemonic white gaze of the audience to lie dormant and see things as [Usher] sees things as a black, gay man.” *A Strange Loop* certainly contains traces of this progressive mindset, which, Jackson told me, “I no longer really align with, but I kept in because that’s where the character is.” But

more than anything, the play reveals “a changing mind, a mind that is not static.”

Jackson cited one example of his previous way of thinking, from a speech Usher delivers to his father in which he earnestly declares, “Black lust matters,” the implication being that Black people ought to find their romantic completion in partners of the same racial background. “I’m not there anymore,” Jackson told me flatly, noting that even though he would love to spend his life with a Black man, he has come to realize that “the homogeneity of thought” he often finds within his social class can make this a challenge. “Nobody’s going to fuck you if you don’t have an ideology they can agree with,” he said. “Maybe five years ago, I rocked with this homogeneous thought. But I don’t anymore.”

A Strange Loop also contains within it the seeds of its own subversion. Consider this line delivered by one of Usher’s inner voices in the guise of a guard in musical-theater prison: “Give them niggas a lil’ slavery, police violence, and intersectionality,” the voice advises the young artist. Usher has a clear lane to relevance and success should he content himself with paint-by-numbers renditions of stereotypical Black life. But what would be the cost? “To me, that line is a Rorschach test for people,” Jackson told me. Is it skewering theatrical tastemakers, white audiences, or Black creators? Or all of the above? “How they interpret that line tells me what their lens on the whole piece is.”

Eight years after the Obama era, Jackson says he has only grown more attuned to what he sees as the superficiality of the contemporary racial-justice discourse. “They are not really saying what the implication of some of this stuff is,” he told me with exasperation, “because there’s a dark side to it.” For one thing, he detects the presumption that “quality is a white-supremacy structure, and that we could chuck it out the window in favor of conformity and of reallocating wealth.” Here he was alluding to DEI materials that have circulated widely in the past few years—such as the [now-infamous anti-racist chart](#) published on the National Museum of African American History and Culture’s website in the summer of 2020. These newfangled guidelines sought to deconstruct “aspects and assumptions of whiteness and white culture.” Some problematic white

characteristics included “rational thinking,” “hard work,” and “meeting your goals.”

Jackson showed me a remarkable mission statement from the website of a DEI consultant who’d been hired by the Lyceum Theatre, in Midtown Manhattan, a rare example of saying the quiet part very loud: “To dismantle systemic oppression and usher in a new era of empathy by producing participatory action research, human resource initiatives and reallocating wealth to Black and Brown DEI consultants.” There is not even a glancing mention of artistic ambition or achievement.

Perhaps even more ridiculous, in Jackson’s view, is how a focus on surface-level diversity, equity, and inclusion can paradoxically stunt its beneficiaries artistically, even as it promotes their career. He expresses gratitude for the sheer amount of time he had to write and perfect *A Strange Loop*—an indispensable maturation process that he thinks many talented minority artists are being deprived of in society’s haste to discover and elevate nonwhite stories and voices. A play is not a blog post. During those long, lonely years that Jackson spent writing *A Strange Loop*, he was able to distance himself critically from his initial political beliefs and move beyond a purely polemical mode. By contrast, the effect of the recent professional fast-tracking, as he puts it, has been to emphasize the flash of political positions over the drudgery of creative development. “I’ve seen so many opportunities just handed out, doled out to all these people in the name of giving them these resources, but there’s nothing being done to help them develop and to make a quality product,” he said.

Not every work of art requires nearly two decades, but Jackson’s time investment in *A Strange Loop* made the play what it is: a rich palimpsest of viewpoints he’s recorded and effaced and written over again, arguments he’s waged against himself in all his previous iterations. This layeredness is one of the play’s great achievements; the vertiginous lack of authorial certainty constitutes a core strength.

Yet such layeredness can also be confounding to critics who now instinctively reduce works of art to political messaging. In a [scathing review](#) of *A Strange Loop* that ran in *National Review* in April 2022, for example, the writer Deroy Murdock dismissed Jackson’s play as mere “critical race

theater” and quipped that it “could have been composed by Robin DiAngelo (mother of *White Fragility*) with lyrics by Ibram X. Kendi (father of *How to Be an Antiracist*).” Murdock argued that “seemingly everyone Usher encounters bashes his race, sexuality, weight, and looks” and charged that Usher’s Manhattan is, therefore, absurdly unrealistic. “Having lived on Manhattan Island since August 1987, I can attest that people here do not attack each other to their faces this way … This is 2022, not 1962.”

Such a reading gets things exactly backwards. The dramatic battleground here is *not* the white-supremacist, homophobic society into which Usher may be thrust but his infinitely more daunting and complicated mental terrain. His identity traits—overweight, Black, gay—are obstacles to his success in large part because he believes they are. One of Jackson’s points is that our experiences, however varied they may be, in some very meaningful way amount to what we make of them.

Conservative critics were not the only viewers led astray by the play’s racial cues. In the autumn of 2022, I attended a sold-out performance of *A Strange Loop* at the Lyceum Theatre. Several seats to my left, an older white man positively squealed with delight at every utterance of “nigger.” The man cracked up even when there was no evident punch line on the horizon. I wondered if Jackson had ever had anything like a Dave Chappelle moment. Explaining his sudden departure from his legendary sketch series on Comedy Central, Chappelle [famously recalled](#) the abnormally long, loud laughter of a single white spectator that had left him profoundly uncomfortable. “My head almost exploded,” he told *Time* magazine—he worried he was actually propping up the stereotypes he’d meant to critique.

When I asked Jackson what he thought about this possibility, his response was generous and more detached than I’d expected. “When you buy a ticket to something, you’re invited to have whatever experience you want,” he replied. But if the white man’s behavior was bizarre and discomfiting, maybe even racist, Jackson found other, more frequent reactions anathema to the old idea that art is for everyone. “There were these Black people who would run up to me and say, ‘*This is for us*. Thank you for telling *our* story. *They* don’t get it. They don’t get it. They didn’t know what they’re laughing at. They’re clapping along. They don’t know what they’re doing.’ And they’d want me to *know* that they know what it is.” He shook his head. “And

then right after that, a white person will come up to me and go, ‘I know it’s not for me. I know it’s not for me. I know it’s not for me, but I loved it.’ They want me to *know* that they know that it’s not for them. And I just sort of have to calmly take all of that in, because this goes to the heart of the question: With all of this identity-marking and segregating and self-segregating and affinity groups and all these things, how do you know who is it for? If I wanted it to be for a group …” he trailed off. “When people tell me that it’s for us, that’s this weird thing where it seems like every Black person is the same.”

In conversation, Jackson repeatedly returns to the ways the evolving discourse around race, identity, and social justice fails to take into account the perspectives of flesh-and-blood Black people. Jackson’s best friend, Kisha, is a Black woman who runs a day-care center in South Carolina. The two of them talk constantly about how initially compelling concepts like intersectionality have turned into rhetorical class markers. “So many of these [concepts] don’t have any practical applications to anybody’s actual lives,” he told me. “I bet you a garbageman has never had to do a diversity training,” he said. “This only operates at a certain class level.” Jackson said his mother—one of eight children, who left the Deep South, moved to the North, held down a job, raised a family, made a home—“would never call herself a feminist, let alone an intersectional one.” Yet she is “one of the most powerful Black women I know.” The issue, as he sees it, boils down to the fact that *more school* is always required to make use of these terms, or even to understand them, and as a result they’re deeply exclusionary. “You have to read more … It’s endless working and reading and studying,” he said. “I feel like there’s a scam inside of it that’s meant to keep some people on top and some people on bottom.” He went on, “It’s all about these social-class associations, and you either have entrance into this country club or you don’t, based on whether you subscribe to a kind of thought or belief system.”

While still fine-tuning *A Strange Loop*, Jackson was also plotting a new show, one that would abandon inward-looking theatrical autofiction in favor of a more outward-looking critique. His second play, *White Girl in Danger*, is set in the realm of daytime television, and marks an attempt to bring his cultural observations to the stage—“to put on a canvas a sort of picture of a

world that melodramatizes itself daily.” Jackson’s allegory is ingenious: The American racial drama has become one giant, insular soap opera.

One afternoon last March, I watched a rehearsal of *White Girl in Danger* at the Tony Kiser Theater, in Midtown Manhattan. Jackson was sitting by himself, polishing off a Shake Shack hamburger in a neon-pink T-shirt emblazoned with the faces of Viki and Niki from *One Life to Live*. Recently back to work after attending the Grammy Awards in Los Angeles (“They don’t feed you; there was no food for 10 hours”) and *The New York Times’* annual op-ed party (“Eric Adams is sexy”), he was surprisingly relaxed and easygoing, considering the expectations following *A Strange Loop*, which, in addition to the Pulitzer, had [won the Tony Award](#) for Best Musical.



Jackson accepts the Tony Award for Best Book of a Musical for *A Strange Loop* in June 2022. (Theo Wargo / Getty)

His stage director, Lileana Blain-Cruz, swept into the room. She organized the cast and crew into an “energy circle.” A series of deep-breathing exercises quickly evolved into a dance-off as each member, including Jackson, rapped and produced a novel movement for the dozens of

participants to emulate. When the circle split up, the musicians took their seats, and the cast broke into subgroups, preparing to run through specific scenes in the second act of the three-hour production.

“If you are white, please leave my space!” announced the choreographer, Raja Feather Kelly, to much laughter. Brown-skinned members of the cast began marching in circles chanting, “Blackground matters!” while the pale-complexioned actors retreated into an imaginary town called Allwhite and retorted, “Allwhites matter!” “You’re not Allwhite, you bitch! *I’m Allwhite!*” the actor Alyse Alan Louis screamed several times, before settling on the proper enunciation.

“This is DEI theater!” Kelly shouted with a smile. Jackson asked me if I’d been following the recent [Roald Dahl controversy](#), in which members of the British author’s literary estate decided to posthumously cleanse certain texts, removing words like *fat* and *ugly*. “I don’t believe anyone actually *cares* about these words,” Jackson said. People, he said, are “just exerting power.”

The exertion of power—over others, over oneself, to surmount obstacles and chart a unique destiny, to “choose your own adventure,” so to speak—is an issue very much at the core of *White Girl in Danger*. In the soap-opera universe of Allwhite, a trio of white girls, Meagan, Maegan, and Megan, are all threatened by a serial killer who stalks their suburban town, depositing bodies in the surrounding woodland. Meanwhile, the girls deal with—among other afflictions—body-image issues, awful boyfriends, domineering mothers, and, of course, white privilege. One typical line, which had stayed with me since Jackson had first sung it to me months earlier, goes, “She doin’ drugs, but she won’t do her homework!” Whiteness, Jackson playfully suggests, can provoke the need to invent struggles that the world has otherwise failed to provide.

“I think of it as a musical that is a multiple-personality battle between woke and anti-woke,” Jackson told me.

Their world is contrasted with the constricted second-class milieu of the nonwhite characters, most notably the spectacular mother-daughter duo of Nell and Keesha. The pair, thanks to an enigmatic and omnipotent Allwhite writer—a kind of Oz figure within the play—are doomed to toil and dwell in

the “Blackground.” Here, identities are always contingent, ordered off a *prix fixe* menu: best friends, slaves, custodians, victims of police brutality. Jackson also suggests—as the keenest observers of American life never fail to do—that the white world might be even more mass-produced and lacking in originality by dint of its privilege. His white characters are stereotypes too; they just lack the self-awareness to do anything about it.

The engine of the story, which is teeming with jokes and inside jokes, critiques and self-critiques, as well as esoteric allusions, is Keesha’s desire to transcend the confines of the Blackground by securing her own autonomous plotline. When an Allwhite girl is killed by “the Allwhite killer,” the Allwhite writer announces that the role of best friend will henceforth be filled by Keesha. But she is no longer content as the sidekick. Keesha maneuvers to steal her Allwhite friends’ storylines, seducing their boyfriends in the process. As she becomes more successful, racking up ever juicier subplots, her hair turns blond and the Allwhite writer puts her in the killer’s crosshairs. The revelation of the killer’s identity, as well as that of the Allwhite writer, comes as a surprise. But the basic story here is as old as the Black experience in America: what happens when an ambitious individual belongs to a marginalized group, yet refuses the arbitrary limitations that come with their identity. This play also suggests, more coyly and controversially, that there can be real power in the victim posture. Keesha learns to manipulate her identity for personal advancement, becoming a kind of predator who feasts on the Allwhite writer’s indulgence.

White Girl in Danger is far stranger and more *sui generis* than I’d anticipated when I first began talking with Jackson—and he is even more seriously interested in soap operas than I’d initially gathered. Watching all three hours of the musical felt physically demanding to the point that, post-intermission, I wondered if the play’s form mirrored its content: American racial dynamics are *literally* exhausting. Of course Jackson knows this. He also knows that this show is even more vulnerable to misinterpretation than his previous one. “I think there’s a way in which people could look at the show and go, ‘This is an anti-woke musical,’” he told me. “But actually, I think of it as a musical that is a multiple-personality battle between woke and anti-woke. I have many targets, but I try, as much as I target them, to also have compassion for them.”

[From the March 2023 issue: Thomas Chatterton Williams on the French panic over *le wokisme*](#)

Contrary to Kelly's self-aware quip in rehearsal, *White Girl in Danger* is decidedly *not* "DEI theater." It is certainly inclusive of Black actors, stories, and perspectives. But it doesn't strictly adhere to or advance any particular contemporary political position: The "Special Thanks" part of the program cites, among other influences, "PC/un-PC/woke/anti-woke" storylines. This characteristic irreverence and anti-clubbishness is what makes Jackson such an incisive cultural commentator as well as an uncompromising artist.

White Girl in Danger's off-Broadway run ended quickly, after only 10 weeks. Audiences weighing in on social media tended to express exasperation and bewilderment. Ordinarily, the next goal for such a musical would be Broadway, but the show is still "very long and very expensive and got mixed-to-negative reviews—from the few I read, which was admittedly very few," Jackson told me. "It's possible it could have a regional life if I made some edits to make it a bit shorter and thus easier and less expensive to produce, but that would necessitate a whole process to develop that version that still had the integrity and vision I refuse to relinquish." Significant changes have affected the theatrical landscape since the pandemic, most noticeably a lack of appetite for artistic risk in general, let alone when the perspective on race is so unorthodox. "Being ultimately a Black show that pushes unique boundaries in its message and nuance in the current sociopolitical climate also challenges its economic viability," Jackson suggested, while holding out the possibility of developing *White Girl in Danger* for film or TV. In the meantime, he has recorded an album with the cast.

On the night I saw *White Girl in Danger*, Jackson seemed preoccupied with and possibly nervous about the question of whether people would *get* it. He may have genuinely been worried about being canceled, which he'd joked about in rehearsal. But when I met him several weeks later at Soho House, he was loquacious and relaxed, carrying a copy of *Black Bourgeoisie*, E. Franklin Frazier's 1957 analytical work, whose paperback tagline reads: "The book that brought the shock of self-revelation to middle-class blacks in America." Frazier's thesis holds that the Black bourgeoisie is "a class in search of a mission," alienated from the white mainstream in addition to

lower-class Black reality. “Cold, hard facts!” Jackson said, placing it on the table. He is not finished trying to hold a mirror to his own moment, and he isn’t finished laughing about it either, though the only detail he would reveal on the subject of his horror-movie script is that he finds it “terrifying.”

That night at Soho House, I mentioned my love of the character Nell in *White Girl in Danger*, who is a tremendous assortment of familiar and surprising Black female roles played to such effect by Tarra Conner Jones that she steals the show repeatedly. In an email, she told me that she was initially struck by “Michael’s audacity to be so bold and truthful about how black people experience, and are experienced in, a white world.” But ultimately, she just “laughed out loud a lot because the script was funny as hell.” Perhaps the most brilliant idea embedded in *White Girl in Danger* is that the way out of the loopy national melodrama will necessarily rely on humor. To this, Jackson replied that what he’s really interested in now is just giving actors—and, by extension, audiences—the space to laugh at themselves.

“Everything is not always about the legacy of slavery.”

This article appears in the [March 2024](#) print edition with the headline “The Radical Self-Awareness of Michael R. Jackson.” When you buy a book using a link on this page, we receive a commission. Thank you for supporting The Atlantic.

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Meet Me in the Eternal City

Silicon Valley has always dreamed of building its own utopias. Who's ready to move in?

by Kaitlyn Tiffany



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I.

The international airport serving the capital of Montenegro has only two arrival gates, and last spring they were busier than usual. I was there for the same reason many others were: The tiny Balkan state had become the unlikely center of a mostly American social and political movement.

Specifically, I had come to observe Zuzalu, a two-month co-living experiment that had been organized—and to some extent paid for—by Vitalik Buterin, a co-founder of the eco-friendly cryptocurrency ethereum. It was being hosted at a new resort and planned community on the Adriatic coast, not far from the village of Radovići. Part retreat and part conference, it was also a dry run for the more permanent relocation of tech-industry digital nomads to different parts of the world, where they could start their own societies and design them to their liking. Some 200 people had signed up for the full two months. Others, like me, popped in and out. The [slate of talks](#) for the days I was there was titled “New Cities and Network States.” European tourists smoked cigars on the promenade while Zuzalu attendees bounded around making plans for excursions and exercise and shuttles to a private Grimes show later on.

The network state is a concept first advanced by Balaji Srinivasan, a bitcoin advocate who is influential in tech circles. As he describes it in his book, [The Network State](#), self-published in 2022 on the Fourth of July, a network state starts with [an online community of like-minded people](#), then moves into the offline world by crowdfunding the purchase of land and inhabiting it intensively enough that “at least one pre-existing government” is moved to offer diplomatic recognition. There isn’t necessarily any voting; the best way to vote is by either staying put or “exiting” for another network state you like better.

Other than that, the model is choose your own adventure. Hypothetically, Srinivasan suggests network states for people who eat specific diets (kosher, keto), for people who don’t like FDA regulation, for people who don’t like cancel culture, for people who want to live like Benedictine monks, for people who might want to limit internet use by putting public buildings in Faraday cages. It doesn’t matter what the state is based on, but it has to be based on something—a “moral innovation” or a “one commandment.”

So, in Montenegro, inside a geodesic dome, presenters gave pitches for an array of proposed societies. The talks were of the friendly “no bad ideas in brainstorming” variety—propositions with enormous stakes presented one after another in an hour or less. Beginning as online communities, or as “decentralized autonomous organizations,” some would be [built from scratch](#) by people with a shared cause. Others would be start-ups in a more traditional sense—instigated by founders and run like businesses. For instance, Titus Gebel, a German entrepreneur, proposes the establishment of [free private cities](#), where citizens are customers who pay only for the government services they intend to use personally. A city operator and a small governing board would make every important decision. “The current Western legacy systems are not reformable,” Gebel said during a presentation. “They’re not really serving people’s needs any longer.”

[Jerusalem Demsas: Why don’t we just build new cities?](#)

Later, I listened to a Q&A with Dryden Brown, the 20-something CEO and [co-founder of Praxis](#), a venture-capital-funded group bent on escaping American democracy and all its flaws by building a new “eternal city,” also called Praxis, somewhere in the Mediterranean region. On the internet, Brown is combative and self-aggrandizing, but in person, he has the reflexive politeness of someone who is used to older adults referring to him as a “nice young man.” When he was in his early 20s, he posted a meme on Facebook identifying himself as “fiscally conservative and socially awkward.” He’d been avoiding me in New York, but when I appeared in Montenegro, he received me with surprising warmth (“You made it!” he said, after I sneaked into the Grimes show).

During his Q&A, he stuck mostly to oft-repeated talking points. His family fought in the Revolutionary War; he has wanted to start a new city since he was 15 or 16 years old; the important thing to know about Praxis is that everyone who lives there will be amazing. “If you’re able to get the next Elon to move to the city, that’s where the returns come from,” he said. Brown acknowledged the need to “attract and retain people who have that risk tolerance, that are talented, that have that high IQ.” He said the “high IQ” part twice.

On the second day of presentations, I had lunch with a biotech investor named Sebastian Brunemeier. (But he was fasting, so we only drank water.) Brunemeier, remarkably friendly and forthcoming, is a “longevity maximalist” who co-founded a venture-capital fund in 2021 to invest in something called LongBio. Now, he explained, he’s supporting a longevity-specific network state that would advance a cause he and others call “vitalism.” Death, they argue, is an option, not an inevitability. “The basic premise is: Well, if life is good and health is good, death and disease are bad,” Brunemeier explained. Citizens of this network state will be free to pursue a goal of longer, healthier lives outside the reach of U.S. regulation and its byzantine restrictions on medical experimentation. (Outside the reach of the U.S. tax code, too.) To start, they’re hosting a two-month pop-up city called [Vitalia](#) on an island off Honduras.

The time has come to “reopen” the frontier. It’s a tale as old as civilization: When you’re persecuted, you get out of town.

A smattering of other network-state-inspired projects are under way. There’s Itana, a new city in Nigeria marketed to entrepreneurs, which entices foreign business owners with tax incentives. The island off Honduras where the vitalism people are headed is home to an existing community called Próspera, whose settlers are already [offering experimental gene therapy](#). The venture capitalist Shervin Pishevar, a co-founder of Hyperloop One, is building what he calls a “[smart island](#),” in the Bahamas. So far it sounds like a planned community with its own airport, but Pishevar has promised that his ambitions are much larger. “One of our next projects is an island that is bigger than Manhattan,” he said at a Srinivasan-led network-state conference in Amsterdam this past October. He didn’t name the location, but said he is negotiating a “treaty, essentially,” a 99-year lease with a host government.

These projects are pitched with a sense of grandiosity and grievance: The twisted bureaucracy of democratic governance is constraining humanity. Decades ago, we went to the moon; why don’t we have flying cars? Centuries ago, we praised frontiersmen and pioneers; why are they vilified now? Why all this disdain for the doers and the builders? Why all this red tape in the way of the best and the brightest?

[Read: Tech is leaning all the way into dystopia](#)

Most of these projects are not yet real to the point of treaties and cement, but they are real enough in the minds of people who wield influence in a powerful, tight-knit industry. These people are energetic, creative, and sometimes charming. And they have their hearts set on a future that [belongs to them alone](#).

II.

The idea of the network state is not a totally original one. The United States has a long history of secessionist yearning, and the specific dream of libertarian settlements populated by Americans has been in the air since at least the 1970s, when the reactionary Nevada millionaire Michael Oliver determined that “the real cure for this country is for the productive people to leave, and let the moochers tax each other.” As recounted in Raymond B. Craib’s recent book, [Adventure Capitalism](#), Oliver first thought of building an artificial island in the South Pacific; his later schemes included invading some islands in the Bahamas and funding a right-wing separatist movement in Portugal.

The network-state idea also sounds a lot like [the Patchwork concept](#) proposed 15 years ago by Curtis Yarvin, a tech-world personality who is regarded as the father of neo-reactionary thought. In 2008, on his blog Unqualified Reservations, he wrote:

The basic idea of Patchwork is that, as the crappy governments we inherited from history are smashed, they should be replaced by a global spiderweb of tens, even hundreds, of thousands of sovereign and independent mini-countries, each governed by its own joint-stock corporation without regard to the residents’ opinions. If residents don’t like their government, they can and should move.

Like much of Yarvin’s writing, this post was heavily sarcastic and full of what one would hope is hyperbole. To rid San Francisco of the poor, he suggested “a little aerial bombing.” His tone could be why the idea languished for so long; that, and some of the things you’ll find in his Wikipedia entry under the headings “Alt-right” and “Views on Race.” Now, however, people who are tired of the messy reality of the United States are returning to Yarvin’s work with fresh appreciation. “He was just so early,”

William Ball, a co-founder of the venture-capital firm Assembly Capital, said in a podcast interview.

In hindsight, the network state is clearly the dream that Silicon Valley has been building toward since the very beginning. In a famous 1995 essay, “[The Californian Ideology](#),” the British academics Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron explained that the technologists of Silicon Valley looked forward to a future in which “existing social, political, and legal power structures will wither away to be replaced by unfettered interactions between autonomous individuals and their software.” The authors also observed, dryly, that California’s highways, universities, and extensive public infrastructure had all been built by complex bureaucracies and funded by taxes.

Two years later, the tech world produced its own version of the same thesis, without the analytical distance. [The Sovereign Individual](#), by the American investor James Dale Davidson and the British journalist Lord William Rees-Mogg, was published just as the tech industry in California was rising to power. It was a manifesto for the concept of “self-ownership,” and displayed utter disdain for any kind of reciprocal relationship with government. Davidson and Rees-Mogg at times make their case with metaphors so distracting that the impact is somewhat muted. (“The state has grown used to treating its taxpayers as a farmer treats his cows, keeping them in a field to be milked. Soon, the cow will have wings.”) But the book is still read today —Peter Thiel wrote [a new introduction for a 2020 reprint](#)—because it predicted the development of cryptocurrency. It also predicted that, as nation-states became unwieldy, the most stable mode of government might become the city-state—“the old Venetian model.”



In this new age, computers would alter every institution, the very structure of society, and the entire world economy. In doing so, they would imperil national governments by curtailing their power to control citizens and collect taxes. They would also create a permanently wealthy superior class, a “cognitive elite,” whose members may exist “in the same physical environment as the ordinary, subject citizen” but who would never again regard ordinary citizens [as their equals](#).

[From the March 2024 issue: Adrienne LaFrance on the rise of technο-authoritarianism](#)

Eventually, this elite would move, frictionlessly, all over the globe. As participants in a new, totally online economy, they could break free from the “tyranny of place” and go wherever they wished, pursuing maximum freedom and paying what they liked for commercialized versions of the services previously provided by the state. Objecting to any of this on moral grounds, Davidson and Rees-Mogg insinuated, was the province of Luddites and deluded nationalists.

“How do we build the Galt’s Gulch for the next generation? It’s got to seem fun. It’s got to seem like people you want to go join.”

Silicon Valley’s fixation on “exit” was arguably most visible (and most derided) in the late aughts and early 2010s, when Patri Friedman (the grandson of the free-market theorist Milton Friedman) and Thiel were working on the Seasteading Institute and hoping to build “[floating cities](#)” on the open ocean. That project, mocked as “Burning Man on the High Seas,” was doomed by its technical difficulty and inherent goofiness. When I spoke with Friedman on Zoom last summer, he was wearing a glittery pair of kitten ears and talked animatedly about what he saw as a moment of opportunity. Friedman’s investment fund, Pronomos Capital, is backed by Thiel and has money in projects on five continents. (It has helped fund Praxis, Próspera, and Itana, among other network-state ventures.) Friedman has been touting the idea of “competitive governance”—treating government like an industry, which can be disrupted by start-ups—for 20 years. “People take it much more seriously now,” he said.

The Network State was instantly popular among Silicon Valley thought leaders. It was endorsed by the investor Marc Andreessen, the Coinbase CEO and co-founder Brian Armstrong, and the AngelList co-founder Naval Ravikant, among others. Maybe most important, it was endorsed by Vitalik Buterin, who published [a blog post](#) taking issue with some of Srinivasan’s points but ultimately championing his basic premise.

Buterin and Srinivasan make for a contrast. Srinivasan is a brash Indian American who is all-in on bitcoin, the clunkier cryptocurrency with a notoriously bro-y, right-wing reputation. He fights with people on social media and refers to journalists as “dogs on a leash.” Buterin is younger, a Russian Canadian with an elfin look. He comes off as softer and kinder, and his cryptocurrency, ethereum, is favored by projects all across the political spectrum, including many on the far left. People who might shy away from a movement spearheaded by Srinivasan alone would feel comforted by Buterin’s participation, and vice versa. His biggest quibbles with Srinivasan’s concept, as originally written, were that network states could easily wind up as havens for the wealthy and that an all-powerful founder should be a temporary step, not a permanent condition. “Network states, with some modifications that push for more democratic governance and

positive relationships with the communities that surround them, plus some other way to help everyone else? That is a vision that I can get behind,” Buterin concluded.

With that more expansive definition, the idea has some broad appeal. As you’ve heard, the pandemic accelerated the movement of various aspects of life onto the internet. It is more common than ever to identify as a digital nomad or a remote worker—to take your American salary and move somewhere with a lower cost of living, to bop around wherever you want. It may also be more common than ever to feel like something about America is fundamentally wrong—that it’s on the brink of one or multiple crises that can’t or won’t be avoided.

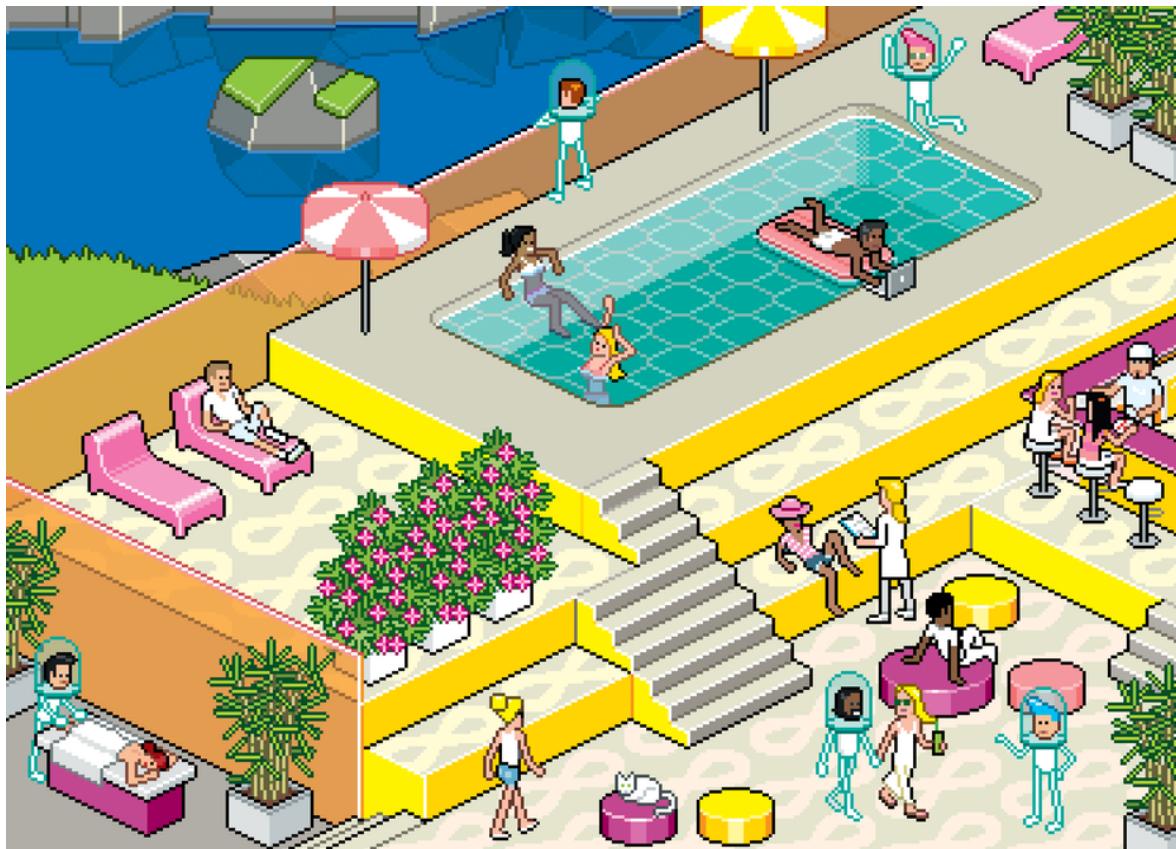
Most network-state advocates try to avoid talking too much or too negatively about the people and societies they’d like to leave behind. Still, it’s hard not to hear an undertone of bitterness when they do. Srinivasan’s book is as much about the culture war as it is about utopia-building. He argues that a “blue tribe” of “left-authoritarians” currently holds most of the power in the United States. For years, Srinivasan argues, this liberal cabal has been canceling, deplatforming, demonizing, and dominating. The time has come to “reopen” the frontier. It’s a tale as old as civilization: When you’re persecuted, you get out of town.

III.

Praxis first caught my attention because of its presence in New York City’s downtown. I had wandered into one of its parties out of curiosity. With roughly \$19 million in venture-capital funding—from sources including the Winklevoss twins (of Facebook fame); a fund run by OpenAI CEO Sam Altman and his brother Jack; a couple of crypto funds that recently collapsed in spectacular fashion; and industry heavyweights such as Paradigm and Bedrock Capital—the Praxis people had been throwing parties for years before Zuzalu. Models and artists and musicians and other cool kids were invited and given dog tags to wear, reading Meet Me in the Eternal City.

“The way you get people interested in this stuff is by making it culturally interesting,” Riva Tez, a venture capitalist and an Ayn Rand devotee, [explained in a 2022 interview](#) about her early investment in Praxis. “How do

we build the Galt's Gulch for the next generation?" she asked, referring to the secluded libertarian society built by disillusioned industrialists in *Atlas Shrugged*. "It's got to seem fun. It's got to seem like people you want to go join." To this end, Praxis has been wriggling its way into the seductive counterculture, born on the internet, that has coalesced in recent years to mock what it sees as the Millennial-liberal mainstream; a counterculture that flirts with some fairly right-wing talking points on racial politics and gender roles, among other things. Usually, participants in this scene maintain a playful level of plausible deniability, but not always. During a gathering last summer in its SoHo office, would-be future residents of Praxis split into groups to tackle various big questions, including this one asked by an attendee: "In an ideal society, to what extent should women be working or go to college or be trained the same as men?"



The best marketing for a new city is the troubled condition of the ones we already have. Last year, when distant wildfires turned the sky orange, and the news was saying that being outside in New York City for a day was the equivalent of smoking six cigarettes, Praxis hosted a weeklong series of

parties throughout Manhattan, including a black-tie gala. Afterward, I wrote to Olivia Kan-Sperling, a New York art-world figure and novelist whom I'd seen at one of the parties, and who had [written an article](#) for Praxis's online journal. I asked whether we could meet to talk about Praxis. She wrote back that she didn't know much, but doubted the motives of people—I had a feeling she was including me—who would reflexively dismiss it. “I find it interesting that critics of the project seem to have no problem living in a city where homeless people are allowed to die on their doorsteps, in a country that murders people at home and abroad every day.”

A central premise of Praxis—paradoxically, for a project built on shoot-for-the-moon wild-wishing—is that we have limited options if we dislike the way things currently stand. The problems in, say, New York are obviously the result of untold years of human failure and bureaucratic dysfunction. So what would you rather do if these are your only two choices: Try to accrue the political power to pull on just one tiny thread, or start over with absolute control?

Not long after the parties in the wildfire smoke, Dryden Brown posted in the Praxis Telegram chat that he would be on a plane for a few hours and would answer any questions the community had. He responded to the first several, explaining that Praxis would be governed by a “zone operator” (presumably himself), that he would like for the city to use nuclear and maybe geothermal energy, and that his favorite forms of transportation are walking and driving. Then the questions got harder. What kinds of industries would Praxis be supporting, and what kinds of regulatory concessions from the host country would it need? Who would do the farming, plumbing, and other “difficult specialized labor” in Praxis? How would “our ‘different’ view on democracy” read to Europeans? Brown didn’t answer these last few questions.

He barely responded to [a *Mother Jones* report](#), published in September, in which former Praxis employees said that he had white-supremacist and fascist leanings, expressed in casual conversation and evident in the reading lists he had given to new hires. (“We won’t let gossip stop us,” Brown said in a statement to *Mother Jones* at the time; he more recently characterized the claims in that article as “false” and “unsubstantiated,” and added that Praxis had “never promoted” any far-right talking points.) In late October,

Brown announced that he had gotten an offer from a country that would give him land, infrastructure, and a “regulatory sandbox” in exchange for some kind of equity in his project. He is now offering a silver membership card he calls a Steel Visa—“your entry point to the Praxis community”—and posting mock-ups of postage stamps (which depict men in suits of armor). In 2026, he says, you’ll be able to live and work, legally, in whichever mystery country will be home to Praxis. (Brown is also partnering with a start-up that says it can help him control the weather.)

By my count, Galt’s Gulch had an identifiable population of about 25, including two women, one an unnamed “fishwife,” considered to be a stand-in for Rand herself. It wasn’t even a town. In the book, it’s described as “a cluster of houses scattered at random.” Everybody who lives there has exactly the same views about life and industry, and about their responsibilities to one another, which are zero. Residents were selected to maintain the settlement’s ideological purity. This is, of course, radically anti-American, in the sense that the American project has been to allow different constituencies and interests to coexist and share power (and responsibility), however imperfectly. Galt’s Gulch residents were required to take an oath: “I swear by my life and my love of it that I will never live for the sake of another man, nor ask another man to live for mine.”

This is one model for something like Praxis. Brown has said that the residents will be like-minded. They will have to apply for the right to become residents and to buy property. As he once explained, “If you live in a society with people who have radically different, really foundational values, they’re not able to architect a harmonious path toward a better future, because they disagree as to what a better future is.”

IV.

Montenegro’s government seems to be amenable to network-state projects, which is why both Praxis and Vitalia have considered it as a building site. The country launched a visa program for digital nomads in 2021 and [granted Vitalik Buterin citizenship](#) in 2022. There has been talk of creating further incentives to lure in Silicon Valley defectors, possibly by creating a digital currency backed by the country’s central bank. But this is all politically fragile. The country’s prime minister—who made an appearance at Zuzalu—

has been subject to insinuations of corruption because of alleged coziness with the crypto industry. No potential host country offers a truly blank slate.

That was a point made by Patrick Lamson-Hall, an urban planner who was at Zuzalu to give the “straight man” presentation, as he put it, about how cities really work. He was there only for the weekend. (“I’m, like, a normal person,” he said, when I asked if he’d be staying for the full two-month experiment.) Over breakfast one morning, Lamson-Hall brought up the glamorous Próspera settlement in Honduras, which was built as a sort of enhanced special economic zone with all kinds of jurisdictional powers. The government that had signed off on this deal had recently been voted out, in favor of a new regime that had campaigned specifically on a platform of rescinding such privileges. Now the Delaware-based corporation behind the project was suing the Honduran government for more than \$10 billion, roughly two-thirds of the country’s total annual budget. “They ran ahead of the will of the people,” Lamson-Hall observed. Who’s to say the same thing won’t happen in Montenegro? Or Palau? Or Costa Rica or Nigeria or any of the other places where plans are being hatched?

He wasn’t opposed to the general premise of new urban centers, and said he applauded the ambition he’d seen on display at Zuzalu. He liked some of these network-state people, and he liked that they wanted to test new solutions. Nevertheless, he added, as he cut into an elaborate meat pastry, “in practice, I think it would be a dystopian nightmare.”

The whole point of network states is to discard messy processes, he said. That seems expedient on its face but is actually shortsighted. Even if you manage to get your way, you can’t control how people will then react to what you’ve done. “Development stems from consensus within society,” he said. You have to tolerate plodding. “You aren’t always going to get there the fastest, but when you get there, you’re there.” The young people at Zuzalu, in his opinion, were moving too fast to even consider their own future thoroughly—they weren’t building as if they might someday have families, or might age, or might desire a different lifestyle than that of gourmet meals and high-end recreation in a secluded coastal paradise. “They can’t really imagine their own preferences might change.”

Lamson-Hall gestured around at the resort and the hundreds of apartment-villas behind it, which he took to be a good model of what a lot of these network-state projects could look like. “This is a Potemkin city. You couldn’t have a business. You couldn’t get your car fixed.” The locals change bedsheets and make coffee and speak passable English. What would the network state offer them? Maybe some jobs; possibly designation as a permanent underclass. Though most of the network-state pioneers talk about the value they’ll provide to local economies, they haven’t thought much about the details, if at all.

“I’m not a class warrior by any means,” Lamson-Hall emphasized. But he was struck by the elitism of some of the presenters at Zuzalu. Many of them seemed to want to avoid responsibility for other people. More than that, they seemed offended by the idea that anyone would even *ask* them to bear that responsibility. “People with that mindset having the powers of a sovereign state, which are considerable, really freaks me out,” he said.

V.

At Zuzalu, there seemed to be consensus among presenters that American cities had created enormous cultural value, but were now outdated and horribly mismanaged. “I don’t know anybody who lives in New York City for the governance,” Colin O’Donnell, the founder of a “van life” network project called Kift, observed. *That’s true*, I thought at the time. *I hate our mayor*. But I now realize it wasn’t true, really. I live in New York because I couldn’t stand to live anywhere else and because I’m in awe of the puzzle: It doesn’t work well … but how does it work as well as it does?

When I got back from Montenegro, I had [a birthday party to go to](#) in Queens, but I was early, so I sat in Flushing Meadows Corona Park to watch the neighborhood men play soccer. This park was once a salt marsh. Then it was a trash heap, 30 feet high in most places. The mixture of wet coal debris and street sweepings attracted rats, mosquitoes, and a famous Long Island alcoholic, F. Scott Fitzgerald, who in [The Great Gatsby](#) described the mess as “a fantastic farm where ashes grow like wheat into ridges and hills and grotesque gardens.” It’s thanks to a dysfunctional bureaucracy that the trash heap became a park with 100 soccer teams playing in it every weekend. The polarizing city planner Robert Moses commissioned the park’s [140-foot-tall](#)

Unisphere, the unofficial Statue of Liberty of Queens: a big steel sculpture of the Earth that people hated when it was built. It was corporate crap—uninspired, trite, reminiscent of “an ad for Western Union,” as *Newsday* put it. In his 1978 book, *Delirious New York*, the architect Rem Koolhaas wrote that the metal continents hung off the globe’s skeleton “like charred pork chops.” Yeah, but on a day when the sky is very blue?

A recent report found that half of working-age New Yorkers, almost 3 million people, can’t afford to live here. Yet they do live here. The city, with all its complexities and cruelties, is rife with small miracles. Like 100 soccer teams on a weekend. Or the fact that, in 1964, Michelangelo’s *Pietà* was exhibited in this park, and the people who couldn’t afford to live here lined up to look at it and weep. On this day, teenagers were standing around and flirting before the Mets game. The public golf course would be open until one in the morning. The subways would run all night. While I sat there, families passed around pieces of barbecued chicken and birthday cake. Old men sat on the sidelines and drank Gatorade. This park may be underwater in my lifetime, people say, possibly by 2050, when I will be just 57 years old. Someone promises you an eternal city? Nothing is eternal.

Nothing is perfect, either. No city, and no life led in one. No matter how meticulously planned or sumptuously mocked-up, any utopian enclave will become a stage for human drama that nobody can script or predict. Suddenly, I thought of the question that I’d been neglecting to pose to every one of these people, which had been lingering at the back of my mind. I wanted to ask: “Have you ever heard the expression ‘Wherever you go, there you are?’”

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Uncancel Woodrow Wilson

**Despised as a racist by today's left
and a tyrant by today's right, the
28th president championed a set of
values that our politics sorely lack.**

by David Frum



Updated at 11:15 a.m. ET on February 27, 2024

February marks a century since the death of Woodrow Wilson. Of all America's presidents, none has suffered so rapid and total a reversal of reputation.

Wilson championed—and came to symbolize—progressive reform at home and liberal internationalism abroad. So long as those causes commanded wide support, Wilson’s name resonated with the greats of American history. In our time, however, the American left has subordinated the causes of reform and internationalism to the politics of identity, while the American right has rejected reform and internationalism altogether. Wilson’s standing has been crushed in between.

In 1948, and again in 1962, [surveys of American historians rated Wilson fourth](#) among American presidents, lagging behind only Abraham Lincoln, George Washington, and Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Wilson’s fellow presidents esteemed him too. Harry Truman wrote, “In many ways, Wilson was the greatest of the greats.” Richard Nixon admired Wilson even more extravagantly. He hung Wilson’s portrait in his Cabinet room, and used as his personal desk an antique that he believed—mistakenly, it turns out—had been used by Wilson.

Arthur S. Link, who edited 69 volumes of Wilson’s papers and wrote five volumes of biography, paid Wilson this tribute: “Aside from St. Paul, Jesus and the great religious prophets, [Woodrow Wilson was the most admirable character I’ve ever encountered in history.](#)”

Yet over the past half decade, Wilson’s name has been scrubbed from schools and memorials across the country. Wilson’s own Princeton, which he elevated from mediocrity to greatness in his eight years as university president, has removed his name from its school of public policy and a dormitory. “We have taken this extraordinary step,” the university announced in June 2020, “because we believe that Wilson’s racist thinking and policies make him an inappropriate namesake for a school whose scholars, students, and alumni must be firmly committed to combatting the scourge of racism in all its forms.”

These acts of obloquy are endorsed across the spectrum of liberal and progressive opinion. The *New York Times* editorial board had urged the renaming and damned Wilson as “[an unrepentant racist.](#)” In his recent history, [American Midnight](#), the eminent liberal writer Adam Hochschild accuses Wilson of culpability for the unjust imprisonment, illegal abuse, and

outright murder of trade unionists and anti-war dissenters. Here at *The Atlantic*, the historian Timothy Naftali [described Wilson](#) as “an awful man who presided over an apartheid system in the nation’s capital.”

[Tim Naftali: The worst president in history](#)

Unlike other historical figures criticized by American progressives, such as Robert E. Lee and Christopher Columbus, Wilson has found few countervailing defenders among American conservatives. If anything, contemporary conservatives revile Wilson even more than progressives do.

Wilson broke four decades of conservative domination of U.S. politics to lead the most dramatic social-reform program since the 1860s.

The columnist George Will splices his speeches with a favorite joke about Wilson’s trajectory from the loser in an academic fight at Princeton to the president who “ruined the 20th century.” In his 2007 book, [Liberal Fascism](#), Jonah Goldberg (then an editor at *National Review*) condemned Wilson as “the twentieth century’s first fascist dictator.” Glenn Beck regularly fulminated against Wilson on his Fox News show in the early 2010s. Beck called Wilson an “evil SOB” and a “dirtbag racist.” He summed up: “I hate this guy. I don’t even want to show his picture.”

Anti-Wilson animus has even swayed the conservative jurists of the U.S. Supreme Court. In 2022, the Court delivered a ruling in *West Virginia v. Environmental Protection Agency* that dramatically curtailed greenhouse-gas regulations in the United States. To support his concurrence with the decision, Justice Neil Gorsuch [devoted a footnote entirely to damning Wilson](#) as an antidemocratic bigot. Wilson was one of the first American scholars to study the emerging administrative state, and conservatives like Gorsuch imagine that if they can discredit him, they can discredit it as well—and doom environmental regulations by association.

Wilson’s bigotries were very real. As a historian, he made the case that freedmen had [too hastily been given the franchise](#) following the Civil War. All his life, he accepted a subordinate status for Black Americans. As a politician, he enforced and extended it. In private, he told demeaning jokes in imitated dialect and delighted in minstrel shows. He was said to have

praised D. W. Griffith's film *The Birth of a Nation*—originally titled *The Clansman*—as “like writing history with lightning,” though this at least is almost certainly untrue: Wilson viewed the movie in silence, according to a witness at the time. He may have been annoyed because an inter-title within the movie quoted Wilson's *A History of the American People* as seeming to praise the Ku Klux Klan. The relevant section had in fact rebuked the Klan for its lawless violence. But Wilson objected only to the Klan's means, not its ends. He wholeheartedly endorsed the extinguishing of Reconstruction-era reforms by state legislatures and white-dominated courts.

From the December 2023 issue: What *The Atlantic* got wrong about Reconstruction

Wilson's bigotries were shared by his predecessors and immediate successors in the presidency. In his 1909 inaugural address, William Howard Taft repudiated equal voting rights for Black Americans and justified the exclusion of immigrants from China. Taft's predecessor, Theodore Roosevelt, enthusiastically promoted the pseudoscience of racial hierarchy that placed white Europeans at the top. The segregation of the federal civil service that Wilson's administration instituted was maintained by the four presidents who followed him: Warren Harding, Calvin Coolidge, Herbert Hoover, and FDR.

My point is not to acquit Wilson of the charges against him, nor to minimize those charges by blaming the times, rather than him. Historical figures are responsible for their beliefs, words, and actions. But if one man is judged the preeminent villain of his era for bigotries that were common among people of his place, time, and rank, that singular fixation demands explanation. Why Wilson rather than Taft or Coolidge?

It is hard to avoid the conclusion that Wilson must be brought low because he stood so high. He is scorned now because of our weakening attachment to what was formerly regarded as good and great.

Here's the story that once would have been told about Wilson by the liberal-minded.

After winning the presidential election of 1912, Wilson broke four decades of conservative domination of U.S. politics to lead the most dramatic social-reform program since the 1860s.

He and his party's majority in both houses of Congress lowered the tariffs that had loaded the cost of government onto working people. In place of those high tariffs, Wilson and the Democrats enacted an income tax, a first step toward a more redistributive fiscal policy in the United States—and among the gravest of his sins in the eyes of conservative critics.

They also gave the U.S. a central banking system, the Federal Reserve, to counter the deflationary effect of the gold standard, which often favored lenders at the expense of borrowers. They ensured that the Fed would represent the interests of the public, and not be controlled by large private banks, as many Republicans of the day preferred. They introduced the [first federal regulation of wages and hours](#) in the United States. Wilson and his congressional majority passed laws against abusive corporate practices and created the Federal Trade Commission to enforce those laws.

Wilson came to support women's suffrage during his presidency. He opposed alcohol prohibition, albeit with less success. He twice vetoed literacy tests for immigrants, which were an early harbinger of the ethnically discriminatory immigration restrictions of the 1920s. He nominated the first Jew to serve on the Supreme Court, Louis Brandeis. (Earlier, as governor of New Jersey, Wilson had also appointed the first Jew to that state's supreme court.) After the U.S. entered the First World War, Wilson's administration nationalized the country's railway system. It simplified the route network, streamlined operations, and improved pay and working conditions in the huge and crucial industry—then rapidly returned the rails to private ownership.

Wilson's most impressive innovations came in the realm of foreign affairs. He granted substantial autonomy to the Philippines, America's largest colonial possession, and opened a path to full independence. Wilson negotiated payment to Colombia for the loss of Panama in a revolution that had been fomented by Theodore Roosevelt. He resisted military intervention in the Mexican Revolution, and he tried to mediate a negotiated end to World War I. When at last forced into that war, Wilson sought a generous

and enduring peace for all of the combatants. He put his hopes in the League of Nations; even if that project largely failed, it paved the way for the more successful forms of collective security created after 1945. Sumner Welles, perhaps FDR's most trusted foreign-policy adviser, wrote in 1944 that Wilson's vision of world order had excited his own generation "to the depths of our intellectual and emotional being."

Even at the zenith of Wilson's repute, his most sophisticated admirers attached important caveats to their story. Wilson had wanted to stay out of the war in Europe. He failed. He then tried to negotiate peace. He failed again. His commitment to self-determination did not apply to the small countries of this hemisphere: A U.S. intervention he ordered in Haiti in 1914 extended into a 20-year occupation.

Wilson's admirers also could not deny that each of those failures was in great part [his own fault](#). In his earlier academic writings, Wilson had praised compromise and concession. As president, his early concessions to white southerners cost him the support of some northern African Americans who had flipped from the Republican Party to back him in 1912. One of those who endorsed Wilson was W. E. B. Du Bois. The next year, Du Bois lamented his decision in an editorial for *The Crisis*, the magazine of the NAACP: "Not a single act and not a single word of yours since election has given anyone reason to infer that you have the slightest interest in the colored people or desire to alleviate their intolerable position." Wilson met with disillusioned Black former supporters once in 1913, then again in 1914. That second meeting ended in a rare eruption of Wilson's temper. He ordered his visitors out of his office and never received them again. As he settled into the presidency, Wilson became more rigid, more convinced of his own righteousness and his adversaries' wickedness.

[From the May 1993 issue: Wilson Agonistes](#)

Wilson's offenses multiplied after a disabling stroke in 1919. He clung to office, barely able to move or communicate, his condition concealed by his wife and his doctor. (The Twenty-Fifth Amendment, ratified in 1967, offered a solution to the Wilson problem—a president who cannot do his job but will not resign.) Many of the darkest acts of his administration occurred during this period of feebleness: mass deportations of foreign-born political

radicals; passivity in the face of the murderous anti-Black pogroms that flared across America's big cities; a de facto granting of permission to the most repressive and reactionary tendencies in U.S. society.

In the era of liberal academic hegemony, historians sought to weigh Wilson's errors and misdeeds against his administration's accomplishments, reaching a range of conclusions. But that era has closed. We live now in a more polarized time, one of ideological extremes on both left and right. Learned Hand, a celebrated federal judge of Wilson's era, praised "the spirit which is not too sure that it is right." Our contemporaries have exorcised that spirit. We are very sure that we are right. We have little tolerance for anyone who seems in any degree wrong.

In our zeal, we refuse to understand past generations as they understood themselves. We expect them to have organized their mental categories the way we organize ours—and we are greatly disappointed when we discover that they did not.

Today, we tend to think of economic and racial egalitarianism as closely yoked causes. One hundred years ago, this was far from the case. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, many of those Americans most skeptical of corporate power were also the most hostile to racial equality, while those Americans who most adamantly rejected economic reform hoped to mobilize racial minorities as allies.

The leading proponent of racial segregation in Wilson's administration was his postmaster general, a Texan named Albert Sidney Burleson. Before 1913, [about 4,000](#) of the Post Office's more than 200,000 employees were Black. Burleson dismissed Black postmasters across the South. At postal headquarters, in Washington, D.C., he grouped the facility's seven Black clerks together and screened them off from white employees. Burleson segregated dining rooms and bathrooms too. When the U.S. declared war against Germany, Burleson used his powers to bar dissenting magazines and newspapers from the mail, for most small periodicals their only way to reach their audiences—no hearings, no appeals, just his whim and will.

From this sorry history, you might infer that Burleson was an all-around reactionary. But no.

Elected to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1898, Burleson immediately showed himself to be a progressive and a reformer. He fiercely opposed the use of federal injunctions against striking trade unionists. He advocated for lower tariffs and a redistributive income tax. He rejected the gold standard. Burleson and his wife, Adele, were ardent proponents of women's suffrage in the state of Texas. One of their daughters, Laura, was elected to the Texas legislature in 1928, only the fourth woman to reach that chamber.

The leading men and women of America's past were frequently tainted by bigotries that appear repulsive now. Yet if repulsion is all we feel, we do a great injustice to them and to ourselves.

The seeming contradiction between Burleson the white supremacist and Burleson the social reformer recurred again and again in Wilson's administration. Wilson's Navy secretary, Josephus Daniels, was an even more virulent racist than Burleson. As a newspaper editor in Raleigh, Daniels incited the 1898 insurrection that crushed the vestiges of Black political rights in North Carolina. Daniels supported railroad regulation and greater investment in public education. FDR would later appoint him ambassador to Mexico. In that post, Daniels opposed U.S. action to undo the Mexican nationalization of the oil industry and sympathized with the anti-Franco side of the Spanish Civil War.

The disconnect between race and reform operated in reverse, too. Wilson's most effective and hated political rival was Henry Cabot Lodge, the leader of the Senate Republicans after 1918. Lodge was in most respects deeply conservative: a champion of corporate prerogatives, the gold standard, and high tariffs. Lodge, an enthusiastic imperialist, had called for the annexation of the Philippines and Puerto Rico. Lodge despised and distrusted the new immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe. When 11 Italian immigrants were lynched in New Orleans in 1891, he published an article justifying and excusing the crime. Yet Lodge was also the author and lead sponsor of an important 1890 House bill to protect Black voting rights in the South, the last such effort in Congress until the modern civil-rights era.

In the time of Woodrow Wilson, issues and ideas were clustered very differently from today. Champions of Black political rights could display bitter animosity toward Catholic immigrants. Many exponents of women's

suffrage also held racist views. Some defenders of labor rights also supported bans on teaching evolution. Heroes of free academic inquiry were fascinated by the project of eugenics. Early advocates of sexual autonomy were attracted to fascism or communism or—as George Bernard Shaw was—both.

What are you to do with this information once you have it? The leading men and women of America's past were frequently tainted by bigotries and misjudgments that appear repulsive now. Yet if repulsion is all we feel, we do a great injustice both to them and to ourselves. The good and great country that you inhabit today was inherited from imperfect leaders such as Wilson, as uncomfortable as that may make some on the left. And the gradual progress that the U.S. has made since 1787 has all depended on the respect Wilson and other leaders had for the original plan, as much as some on the right insist that they betrayed it. Demand that Americans preserve their collective past unchanged, and you doom the whole structure to decay and ultimate collapse. Teach Americans to despise their collective past, and their future will hold only a struggle for power, pitting group against group, without rules or restraints.

“It would be the irony of fate if my administration had to deal chiefly with foreign affairs.” Woodrow Wilson spoke those famous words to a friend shortly before his inauguration. That irony of fate of course came true.

Wilson is one of the very few presidents to have bequeathed an ism. There is no Washingtonism, there is no Lincolnism, there is no Rooseveltism, but there is “Wilsonianism.” Wilsonianism is almost universally regarded in a negative light—as, at worst, bad and dangerous or, at best, sweetly naive but sadly unrealistic.

But Wilson was far from naive. He grew up in the ruined landscape of the post–Civil War South. His prepresidential writing often cautioned against too much confidence in human beings and too much certainty about human institutions.

[From the April 1886 issue: Woodrow Wilson on responsible government under the Constitution](#)

In his message to Congress on April 2, 1917, when he called for a declaration of war, Wilson insisted that “the world must be made safe for democracy.” Modern-day Americans commonly interpret those words as a vow to convert the whole world to democracy. What Wilson meant, however, was that the nation could no longer hope to find security in the “detached and distant situation” of its geographic location, as Washington described it in his farewell address. The United States had grown too big; distances of time and space had narrowed too much for it to be unaffected by the actions of once-remote countries. The menace to “peace and freedom,” Wilson saw, “lies in the existence of autocratic governments backed by organized force which is controlled wholly by their will, not by the will of their people.” Not all nations would or could be democratic, but from then on, American peace and freedom would be safeguarded not by geography but by “a partnership of democratic nations.”

Recoiling from Wilson’s vision of mutual international benefit, many of his present-day critics yearn for a foreign policy that relies on dominating a small number of client states and ignoring the rest of the world from behind border walls and trade protections.

People who take this view call themselves “America First,” perhaps unaware that Wilson himself seized the phrase as a campaign slogan in 1916 to condemn both the ethnic lobbies he regarded as too pro-German and the industrial and financial interests he mistrusted as too pro-Allies. In the 1930s and early ’40s, the slogan was [appropriated by the isolationists and Axis sympathizers](#) of the America First Committee. The outrage of Pearl Harbor and the horror of Auschwitz then discredited “America First” for a long time —but not forever.

Now, in the 21st century, we see the strange sight of political partisans using Wilson’s own “America First” phrase to attack Wilson’s highest ideals. In February 2023, one of the harshest critics of U.S. support for democratic Ukraine spoke at the Heritage Foundation. At the core of Senator Josh Hawley’s remarks was an attack on Wilson:

Woodrow Wilson, as you may remember, was a dedicated internationalist. He was a dedicated globalist on principle, by the way. I mean, he thought that “we should make the world safe for democracy.”

That was his line that he famously used. And I think what you saw is after the Cold War, you had a whole generation of American policy makers who said the Wilsonian moment has now arrived. Borders don't matter. American uniqueness doesn't matter. We're going to make all of the world more like America and we're going to make America more like the world and there'll be this great global integration.

Wilson believed almost none of those things. What Wilson *did* believe was that American security had become inseparable from the security of others, and that American power would be accepted only if guided by universal values. Wilson argued this case most explicitly in a January 1918 address to Congress. The speech is famous for the 14 points he enumerated as U.S. war aims. But more important than any specific aim was the logic undergirding them all:

What we demand in this war, therefore, is nothing peculiar to ourselves. It is that the world be made fit and safe to live in; and particularly that it be made safe for every peace-loving nation which, like our own, wishes to live its own life, determine its own institutions, be assured of justice and fair dealing by the other peoples of the world as against force and selfish aggression. All the peoples of the world are in effect partners in this interest, and for our own part we see very clearly that unless justice be done to others it will not be done to us.

Wilson was the first world leader to perceive security as a benefit that could be shared by like-minded nations. Until then, each great power had clambered over others to field bigger armies, float bigger navies, and accumulate more colonies. This competition had culminated in the disastrous outbreak of the Great War. Wilson glimpsed the possibility of a different way: that shared values might provide a more stable basis for peace among advanced nations than the quest for military dominance.

Only the U.S. possessed the wealth and power to make the vision work. Tragically, neither the U.S. nor the world was ready for this vision in Wilson's lifetime. The president himself lacked the skill, expertise, and tact to realize it. But the vision lay dormant, waiting for a future chance.

[From the December 1902 issue: Woodrow Wilson on the ideals of America](#)

I am not personally a thorough admirer of Wilson's. A famous quip attributed to Winston Churchill (about another political moralist) might have applied to Wilson's austere personality: "He has all the virtues I dislike and none of the vices I admire." An evening with Theodore Roosevelt would have been fun, but most of us would have wished to bid an early good night to Wilson—especially once he'd revealed that his favorite form of humor was mildly smutty limericks.

Wilson's bigotry was as chilly as his wit. He started his teaching career at Bryn Mawr. One of his associates there, the daughter of an abolitionist minister, remarked to an early biographer that Wilson was the first southern white man she'd ever met with no personal warmth for any individual Black person.

Wilson's tariff, banking, and regulatory reforms were driven more by a quest for rationality and efficiency than by empathy and compassion. The British Liberal governments that held power from 1905 to the outbreak of World War I introduced that country's first old-age pensions and unemployment insurance. In the United States, broad programs of social insurance would have to await the New Deal of the 1930s.

As a war leader, Wilson deferred absolutely to professional soldiers' advice, even though those soldiers had learned their trade in small wars against weak enemies. That approach cost many American lives when the top U.S. military commander, John Pershing, rebuffed British and French efforts to teach American troops the painful lessons they had learned from prior years of Western Front experience. Americans went into battle in 1918 still using the human-wave tactics that had cost the British and French so dearly.

Wilson's gravest failures were in his chosen mission as a peacemaker. As the former U.S. diplomat Philip Zelikow details in his damning book *The Road Less Traveled*, Wilson personally bungled a real opportunity to reach peace in the second half of 1916. All of the principal combatants yearned for such a peace, but none dared be the first to ask for it. All were looking for the U.S. to lead, as it had led the peace negotiations after the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–05. Wilson fatally hesitated to apply such leadership, nor did he delegate the task to anybody who might have succeeded.

When the war instead ended with the German collapse in 1918, Wilson never grasped or even paid much attention to the problems of postwar economic recovery, domestic or international. He was a man of ideas and ideals, not one of ledgers and accounts; of words, not numbers. The United States plunged into a severe economic depression in 1920. War-scarred and hungry Europe suffered even more. Voters emphatically rejected Wilson's party in the 1920 elections.

Wilson was the first American president to perceive and explain how American power could anchor the peace of a future democratic world.

The Republican congressional majorities of the 1920s returned to the high-tariff policies of the 19th century, dooming any hope that Germany, Britain, France, Belgium, Italy, and other former combatants might export their way to economic normality. Instead, the United States insisted on collecting war debts from former allies. To repay the U.S., the former allies were left no choice but to squeeze Germany for reparations. To finance reparations, Germany massively borrowed from U.S. private-sector lenders. This cycle of tariff-driven debt helped set in motion the catastrophe of the Great Depression.

The post-Wilson Democrats bitterly split along regional and cultural lines. It took them 103 ballots to nominate a presidential candidate at their convention in New York City in 1924. The Republicans would win that year's election decisively, and 1928's too, by running against Wilson's war and the depression that followed. Only after another war, even more terrible than the one that came before it, was Wilson's foreign-policy legacy at last rehabilitated. As Americans and their allies developed institutions of collective security, free trade, and global governance after 1945, Wilson's best ideals were realized at last.

This is the Wilson who remains to this day the founder and definer of American world leadership. Henry Kissinger, who despised Wilson and (I suspect) inwardly hoped to displace his intellectual primacy, ultimately had to admit in his 1994 book, *Diplomacy*: "It is above all to the drumbeat of Wilsonian idealism that American foreign policy has marched since his watershed presidency, and continues to march to this day." I very much believe that the United States has been a force for good in the world in the

20th and 21st centuries. If you do also, then our appreciation must begin with the foundational achievement of the president who first exerted that force.

You do not need to withhold any single criticism of Woodrow Wilson, the man and the president, to regret the harm done by the unbalanced and totalizing censure that has been heaped upon him over the past decade. Wilson was a great domestic reformer. He was the first American president to perceive and explain how American power could anchor the peace of a future democratic world.

His ideas and ideals still undergird American foreign policy at its most generous and successful. His words still reverberate more than a century later, long after those of his contemporary critics have lapsed into obscurity. When the United States rallies to the defense of Ukraine against Russian invasion or of Guyana against Venezuelan threats, when it seeks peace through free-trade agreements and joins with allies to deter aggression, it is speaking in the language originally chosen by Woodrow Wilson.

So how should we comprehend the people of bygone times when their principles and prejudices diverge from those that now prevail? In [a speech delivered in 1896](#), Wilson declared:

Nothing is easier than to falsify the past. Lifeless instruction will do it. If you rob it of vitality, stiffen it with pedantry, sophisticate it with argument, chill it with unsympathetic comment, you render it as dead as any academic exercise ... Your real and proper object, after all, is not to expound, but to realize it, consort with it, and make your spirit kin with it, so that you may never shake the sense of obligation off.

Modern America owes just such an obligation to Wilson. He showed the way to the modern world. He did not reach his hoped-for destination, but neither yet have we. Cancel Wilson, and you empower those who seek to discredit the high goals for which he worked. Those are goals still worth working toward. To realize them, supporters of American global leadership cannot dispense with the practical and moral legacy of Woodrow Wilson.

Acknowledge his flaws and failures. Then restore Wilson's name to the places of honor from which it was hastily and wrongly purged.

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‘The Magic of Raina Is Real’

How the cartoonist Raina Telgemeier, the author of *Smile*, *Sisters*, and *Guts*, turned the anxious kid into a hero for the 21st century

by Jordan Kisner



If you do not have a child under the age of 16, or are not yourself under the age of 16, you might have no idea who Raina is. So it was with me. I called a friend with kids and said, “Have you heard of an author named Raina Telgemeier?”

“Of course,” she said, sounding bemused, as if I’d asked whether she was familiar with the automobile.

“Like the Beatles for children,” another parent friend explained.

Last spring, standing in the theater at the Billy Ireland Cartoon Library & Museum in Columbus, Ohio, surveying the hundreds of kids and teenagers who had come to meet Raina, I realized the scale of my ignorance. Half an hour earlier, her fans had been standing on their seats, jumping up and down, waving their arms in the air, but now the long wait for autographs had begun. Everyone had been assigned a number and organized into subgroups so they could approach the signing table in shifts. Nobody seemed to mind especially—many were plunked down on the floor, contentedly rereading her books, as an hour passed, then an hour and a half.

One mother and her 8-year-old daughter had come from Philadelphia. Another family had driven up from Tennessee. “We would go anywhere to see Raina,” one parent said.

“The magic of Raina is real,” confirmed a school librarian who’d brought her daughter to meet Telgemeier here, at a public event celebrating the author’s first retrospective. Every spring, the librarian told me, she runs a report to determine which of the library’s books have been checked out the most. It was June, so she could share that, once again, “four out of the top five are Raina books. Children reread those books over and over and over.”

Telgemeier, a smiley yet somewhat shy 46-year-old with glasses and dangly earrings, has almost accustomed herself to being known mononymically, like Cher. She has boxes and boxes of fan mail in her basement, more than she can open, and there are boxes more at her publisher’s offices in New York. It’s wonderful, she told me, and unnerving. She got her break in her mid-20s, when Scholastic commissioned her to create graphic-novel adaptations of books from [*The Baby-Sitters Club* series](#). Her editor took an interest in a web comic she was self-publishing at the time, which became her first graphic memoir, [*Smile*](#). Scholastic published the book in 2010 as a kind of experiment. At the time, the market for middle-grade comics was dominated by superheroes and fantasy. Would kids want a nonfiction comic about a [normal sixth-grade girl’s tricky journey with braces](#)? Publishing

executives had doubts about whether enough girls could be persuaded to read comics at all. (It was assumed that a comic with a girl protagonist would require an audience of girls.)

Smile's first print run [sold out in four months](#), and the book spent 240 weeks on the *New York Times* best-seller list. In 2014, Telgemeier published [*Sisters*](#), and in 2019, [*Guts*](#). This trio of graphic memoirs has made her, like Roald Dahl and Judy Blume, the kind of author who [defines a generation of children's literature](#), and whose books, in turn, have helped define a generation's experience of childhood.

[From the April 2023 issue: Amy Weiss-Meyer on why we still need Judy Blume](#)

Telgemeier's books are well plotted, heartfelt, and [beautifully drawn](#). She has a keen eye for the texture of kid life. In *Smile*, she devotes an entire page to the frantic and cruddy work of cleaning a retainer in a school bathroom after eating an ill-advised peanut-butter sandwich—and the satisfying click of popping it back into place. But what set her books apart are her vivid, candid portraits of her childhood angst: her orthodontia-induced shame; her growing awareness of her parents' fractious marriage; the serious anxiety disorder that emerged when she was in elementary school.

The popularity of these books has overlapped with years during which clinical anxiety among American children and adolescents has reached new heights—so much so that multiple organizations, including the American Academy of Pediatrics, noting a rise in depression too, declared a state of emergency in 2021. Telgemeier's success—she's sold more than 10 million books in the United States alone, according to Circana BookScan—is driven by her ability to describe experiences that many kids struggle to articulate and feel powerless to change.

The story of Telgemeier's career is also the story of a transformation of the children's-book industry. Graphic novels now have their own shelves in the kids' section of many bookstores. A group of cartoonists—Kayla Miller, Jerry Craft, Betty C. Tang—has made hits in the pattern of *Smile* and *Guts*, about awkward crushes and first-day-of-school nerves and wobbly

friendships. The superhero has been joined in the comic-book canon by another archetype: the anxious kid.

From the time she could hold a crayon, Telgemeier, who grew up in San Francisco, began and ended every day by drawing. Her parents set up her bedroom with a table and an array of art supplies; next to the table was a little record player. She would wake up in the morning and go straight to her table, put on her headphones, and draw, Telgemeier's mother, Sue, told me.

At one point, when Raina was 3 or 4, Sue decided to surprise her by turning the drawings into a child-size quilt. Sue took white fabric and cut it into squares, then traced the drawings she found especially interesting in fabric paints and stitched over them in the right colors. But when Raina saw the finished quilt, she backed away whimpering. She wouldn't touch it.

The books that made Telgemeier famous recount the worst, most miserable moments of her young life in painful detail.

"It was a while later before I understood what had happened," Sue said. "Raina had been drawing her nightmares. And the best artworks were her nightmares, her monsters." Telgemeier had never mentioned the nightmares aloud, Sue said. "She would draw it and then it would get put away."

Telgemeier has never stopped drawing her monsters. All through grade school, middle school, and high school, she'd sit down in the afternoon and draw what had happened that day, sometimes amending what she had actually said into what she wished she'd said. In 1999, at 22, she left San Francisco to attend the School of Visual Arts in New York, where she started a minicomic (the comic equivalent of a zine) called *Take-Out*, full of short pieces about her childhood as well as her 20-something life: squabbling with roommates, struggling to get out the door on a bad hair day, scrounging under the bed for change to buy a \$1.25 slice of pizza.

Take-Out was self-published. Telgemeier made copies herself and sold them at comics fairs. She noticed that the comics that received the most positive feedback featured her childhood. Over time, kid Raina became the star of Telgemeier's work. Her comics articulate the emotions of childhood with an intensity faithful to reality: the high highs of being included in a middle-

school sleepover; the queasy low of realizing that your friends are playing a mean practical joke on you at the sleepover.



An issue of Telgemeier's self-published mini-comic, *Take-Out* (*Take-Out* No. 6 cover art. Self-published mini-comic, 2004. © Raina Telgemeier. Blue pencil and ink on Bristol board.)

The books that made her famous recount the worst, most miserable moments of her young life in painful detail. *Smile* begins with an accident: In sixth grade, she fell on her face while running with her friends, knocking one front tooth out entirely and jamming the other so far into her gums that it took years of excruciating orthodontia to give her a normal-looking mouth. *Sisters* scrutinizes her fraught childhood relationship with her younger sister, Amara, and tells the story of a long road trip she took with her mom and younger siblings shadowed by the realization that her parents were considering separating. (Sue and Denis Telgemeier eventually divorced.) In *Guts*, 9-year-old Raina develops debilitating anxiety—in particular, a fear of throwing up.

I had been skeptical, at first, that a graphic novel for elementary and middle schoolers could approach the topic of mental illness without sugarcoating or melodramatizing it. But reading *Guts*, I recognized why Telgemeier's books command such loyalty. The book devotes whole pages to her panic attacks: the feeling that she's frozen, falling down and down and down. As someone who also had anxious middle- and high-school years, I was especially struck by one panel, placed in a scene where Raina sees that one of her friends and classmates has had to rush to the bathroom in the middle of class. Raina's anxiety spikes. Is Jane throwing up? They'd shared lunch! The panel shows Raina caught in ripples of sickening green that radiate outward from her head to fill the whole frame. Her teeth are gritted; her hands grip her hair tightly, but a curl escapes. Her own thought balloons swim around her, choking off any view of where she is or whom she's with. "What if I'm next?" one reads. The next three, swelling in size: "What if? WHAT IF? WHAT IF!?"

I'm transfixed by this frame—the pea-green energy waves, the choking thought bubbles, the feeling that the room has faded away until the only thing left is *WHAT IF?* This is exactly what it's like.

"I think probably the most important contribution to comic storytelling that Raina has pioneered is the notion of emotion as action," says Scott

McCloud, a cartoonist who wrote the landmark book [Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art](#). Telgemeier studied McCloud's books when she was a teen; now they are friends and collaborators. "This is something that my generation of superhero cartoonists didn't fully understand," McCloud told me. "I mean, emotion was something that you crammed into a word balloon while people were fighting each other. But in Raina's case, there's a small difference in a line showing that, let's say, a smile is beginning to disappear. A bit of anxiety is creeping into an expression ... And Raina understands that each of those deserves its own panel."

McCloud said he's fascinated by a moment in Telgemeier's graphic novel [Drama](#), loosely based on her time [doing theater in high school](#). (In addition to her memoirs, and her work on the first four volumes of the graphic *Baby-Sitters Club* series, Telgemeier has written and illustrated [two graphic novels](#).) The protagonist, Callie, is looking for the boy she's recently kissed for the first time, but he's told his brother to tell her that he can't walk her home after school because of baseball practice. Here, Telgemeier draws an entire spread with no words. The left-hand page has three frames: Callie running out of the school doors, looking concerned; Callie arriving at a chain-link fence, a little puff of her breath condensing in the chilly air around her; Callie's face seen through the chain link, eyes wide. The right-hand page pulls back to show the whole diamond and a stand of trees beyond it. Callie, looking small, is clutching the fence with both hands. She's alone; the field is empty. Her crush lied about baseball practice.

"You know, from a superhero-artist standpoint, nothing is happening," McCloud told me. "But from the standpoint of a middle-school kid feeling one of those first moments of disappointment and abandonment, everything is happening, and it deserves that full page."

Young Raina navigates the tension between her desire to feel loved and her craving for privacy—she needs space away from others to feel her big feelings and to process them into art.

"I call this the cozy nerd house," Telgemeier told me, handing me a blanket and a cup of tea. She lives in a quiet, spacious trilevel 45 minutes east of San Francisco. It's woodsy out there, with citrus trees, old oaks, and long

driveways. In her living room, we each settled into a corner of her plush, oversize sectional with cups of tea, and a cat came to sit on my lap.

“I think what I wanted more than anything was a house,” Telgemeier told me. “From the time I was a small child: *Someday, I’ll have a house with a backyard.*”

The problem of domestic space features prominently in Telgemeier’s memoirs. I’d seen where she grew up, or at least the comics version, in *Sisters*: a San Francisco apartment with two bedrooms and a single bathroom. Perfectly nice, but not roomy for a family of five. In *Guts*, Raina’s anxiety seems related to, or at least exacerbated by, the fact that she struggles to get her own space at home. Her toddler brother catches a stomach flu, and Raina, panicked that she’ll catch it, begs her mom to let her sleep outside. No dice. In *Sisters*, Amara plays records over and over in their shared room when Raina wants silence. Raina is afraid of snakes; Amara gets a pet snake. Raina loves to draw; Amara does too. “She very quickly eclipsed me,” Telgemeier told me. “Her 2-year-old drawings and my 7-year-old drawings were almost on par.” Young Raina navigates the tension between her desire to feel loved by and connected to others and her craving for privacy—she needs space away from people to feel her big feelings and to process them into art.

These days, Telgemeier’s inclination toward quiet and privacy can be confounded by her professional ambitions. She never expected to have the profile she now does. The release of *Sisters*, in 2014, marked a turning point: She went from being a successful author to something more like an icon. “That was when, like, I became ‘Raina,’” Telgemeier said. “They made a poster of my face that said Raina’s back.” Her eyes went wide, as if she was overwhelmed and incredulous just at the memory of it.

ANATOMY of a ROAD TRIP



A drawing from *Sisters*, which recounts a road trip Telgemeier took with her mother and younger siblings (*Sisters*, page 28. Published by Scholastic,

2014. © Raina Telgemeier. Blue pencil and ink on Bristol board.)

Telgemeier now represented two people: herself, the adult with the career and retirement savings, and Raina, the kid in her memoirs. This version of who she used to be remains alive and vivid to millions of people—more real, in some ways, than her adult self is. “It’s like suddenly I was the main character of a book and I’m the writer of the book *and* I’m a real person.” She sensed that fans now met her and reeled at the possibility of encountering, in one person, their fictional best friend and their favorite author. “I was standing on stages and people were just interested in me—the character, the author, the everything.” This kind of fame can strain. A number of Raina’s family members and friends felt uncomfortable with having their real lives depicted in books that now had an audience of millions. Telgemeier had been thoughtful about how publishing might affect her relationships before—she’d shown *Sisters* to Amara in advance, for example—but she became more protective as curiosity grew, and more cautious about hurting people close to her.

Before *Sisters*, Telgemeier had been used to attending comic-cons and festivals alongside her indie cartoonist friends, selling her work copy by copy, but now she was managed by Scholastic, taking pictures with hundreds of kids at ticketed events. The emetophobia and fear of illness that Raina develops in *Guts* were the beginning of an anxiety disorder that Telgemeier continues to manage. Despite having real affection for her fans, she finds touring challenging—being around crowds of germy kids, flying on airplanes, using strange bathrooms. She started going to therapy in elementary school, an experience she depicts in *Guts*, then stopped by middle school, but she went back shortly after the publication of *Sisters*; her anxiety was making it difficult for her to leave the house or sleep through the night. One of the primary reasons she decided not to have children, she told me, was that she wasn’t up for morning sickness. Her career and her anxiety took a toll on her marriage to the cartoonist Dave Roman; the two divorced in 2015.

When the pandemic hit, Telgemeier found herself home alone, not traveling for the first time in recent memory. Social distancing came easily to her—she’d been doing it for years during flu season. “Because I wasn’t seeing other people, it completely removed the part of my brain that was always

worrying: *Hmm. Was that person sneezing? Was that person coughing? Did I touch somebody at the grocery store? ...* It was one of the best experiences of my life.”

Nowadays, she is back on the road. Telgemeier is enthusiastic in her interactions with the people who stand in line to talk with her, though I noticed that her signing tables were arranged to ensure that a few feet remained between her and her fans. In Columbus, people were instructed to remain on the opposite side of the table, even for photographs.

The most common question children ask her at public appearances is “Did this really happen?” Telgemeier tries to head off this line of inquiry by making a blanket statement: Yes, she announces cheerfully. These books are based on my life, which means that everything that happens in the books really happened to me. We really had a pet snake. I really did lose my two front teeth. If it’s in the book, it really happened. The questions tend to continue anyway.

Telgemeier isn’t surprised by this, she told me. Kids have a reasonable impulse when confronted with the middle-aged author—great teeth, smiling, famous—to double-check that she went through everything young Raina did, the indignities and fears and crises they themselves experience.

I understand wanting that kind of reassurance. I had my first panic attack when I was 11 or 12 and had absolutely no idea what was happening—at the time, none of the books aimed at my age group dealt with this stuff, at least none that I saw, and so I worried that there must be something terribly wrong with me; that I might be uniquely doomed to an unhappy, lonely life. Telgemeier’s books offer an antidote to that kind of isolation. By making anxiety the obstacle faced by a compelling, sympathetic hero, these books reveal the possibility that a reader with her own psychological struggles—panic attacks or emetophobia or hair pulling or big sadness—might wind up okay, or even great.

“I wish I’d had that,” I told Telgemeier over tea in her living room.

“I know,” she said, half-smiling. “I wish I’d had it too.”

[From the January/February 2014 issue: Scott Stossel on coming to terms with America's most common mental illness](#)

After we finished our tea, Telgemeier took me upstairs to see her studio, and then downstairs, where she stores her archives: all of her old journals, childhood sketches, costumes she made for school plays, pen cases, favorite markers, photographs, stuffed animals. A piece of paper upon which her first-grade teacher had written, “Dear Raina, What is the baby’s name? Do you help your mom at home?” and Telgemeier had drawn herself as a rudimentary stick figure, hollering NO!

Shortly after Telgemeier’s retrospective, “[Facing Feelings](#),” opened in late May, she flew her parents out to Columbus for the public reception. The day before the event, Telgemeier, her parents, a college friend, and I took a tour of the exhibit. On the way to the gallery, we passed a decal of 11-year-old cartoon Raina running full tilt, as if she were dashing up the stairs to see her own show. In the lobby downstairs, dozens of cookies with young Raina’s face on them waited to be handed out at the reception.

In one room of the show, Telgemeier and a curator had assembled a selection from the Raina archives, including pages from her journals, school assignments, and family photos. Telgemeier’s parents lingered here, exclaiming at familiar objects. Her father, Denis, paused at a display of Telgemeier’s most treasured childhood books. “It’s *Barefoot Gen*!”

[Barefoot Gen](#) is a manga series by Keiji Nakazawa based loosely on his experiences as a child in Hiroshima in 1945. Denis had given Telgemeier his copy of the first volume when she was 9, and she zoomed through it on a camping trip, totally absorbed. The comic is unsparing about the details of World War II in Japan: It shows poverty and violence and people ending their own lives to escape their circumstances. Still, Telgemeier was caught off guard when the bomb dropped about 30 pages before the end and nearly every character (except for Gen, his pregnant mother, and a handful of others) was killed. The illustration of the mushroom cloud is chilling; in the aftermath, Gen watches people’s flesh melt off their bones. This was Telgemeier’s first exposure to the depths of human cruelty and suffering. She cried and cried for days, and later made anti-war posters that she pasted all over school.

In her 20s, Telgemeier drew about her experience reading *Barefoot Gen* in *Take-Out*; the issue was on display at the museum. Young Raina runs out to her parents, wailing, “They all DIE!” A few frames later, it’s evening and Raina is looking up at the stars miserably. “I think that book ruined my life,” she says. “And I mean, jeez—it was just a comic book.” A speech balloon enters from out of frame, her mother’s voice: “Raina, there’s no such thing as ‘just a comic book.’”

I looked at the text Telgemeier had written for this display. This, she wrote, “has sort of become my career philosophy. Art is important and comics are important. So is sitting with anxiety, discomfort, and confusion, hopefully in the presence of caring individuals!”



Telgemeier’s father gave her *Barefoot Gen* when she was 9. (Courtesy of Raina Telgemeier)

Telgemeier had intended for her next book to be about *Barefoot Gen* and her twin childhood epiphanies that the world can be truly awful and that art can be a meaningful intervention in that awfulness. She drafted the manuscript, but her editors at Scholastic suggested that it needed serious edits. The material was heavier, darker, and more political than her previous work, and could be too risky, given the politically volatile climate of children's publishing. What's more, the manuscript told a story that extended beyond Raina's childhood into Telgemeier's adult life as an artist—would readers want that? Telgemeier agreed to put the manuscript in a drawer for a little while.

When we talked about this in California, I pushed her on the decision. Just because she has become known writing books for young children, is she obligated to write for that demographic forever? Might not her material age as her readers age?

"Middle grade has been where my sensibilities sell the best," she said, looking conflicted. "But the question is: If I write another book that's about older people, but it's still drawn in my art style, is that going to alienate my readers? Is that going to confuse them, or are they going to be out of their depth? Are they going to be upset by the kinds of things, like the subject matter, that I'm writing about?"

The truth is, little kids read her books no matter how they're labeled, she pointed out to me—they pick them up from older siblings, or they simply grab them because they recognize her name. This requires care: She posts only PG-rated content on social media, and she never speaks in interviews in a way not suited for kids as young as 5. Maybe, she admitted, it would be too far outside her brand to let young Raina become grown-up Raina. (Even the benign crushes featured in *Drama* have [caused controversy](#); the book is frequently banned and targeted by conservative activists for its depiction of LGBTQ characters.) Still, she hasn't given up on the *Barefoot Gen* project.

As she spoke, I was thinking of a friend of mine whose 7-year-old had just learned from someone else at school about the climate crisis and now can't sleep through the night. And about another friend whose kid can't stop worrying about an active shooter coming to school. Telgemeier had read

Barefoot Gen at age 9. What do we know about what kids can handle? Or what they are already handling?

On the day of the museum event, I floated around the lobby, interviewing the kids who looked especially rapturous. “What do you like about Raina books?” I asked Cassie, the 8-year-old from Philadelphia. She paused for a second, then smiled sheepishly. “I like everything about them. They’re funny and, like, I’ve been through a lot of the stuff that she’s been through … A bunch of the stuff in *Guts*—like the anxiety and needing therapy.” She spoke so softly that I had to bend down to hear her.

“What did it feel like when you read *Guts* for the first time?” I asked.

“Like I finally fitted in. Like there was someone else in the world who felt like me.”

“This is a big splurge for us to make a trip,” Cassie’s mom said. “But I got the tickets, and I didn’t tell her about it until a couple weeks ago. She was like, ‘We’re going on an airplane?!’ She’s never been on an airplane.”

A 16-year-old named Charlotte told me that she’d experienced a really terrible period of anxiety a few years back, and *Guts* was the first time she’d understood that she wasn’t alone. “I didn’t think anyone else got it,” she said. Her mother, standing next to her, started crying. “She was going through some really deep stuff, and then *Guts* hit,” she said. “I remember taking the book into her therapist and being like, ‘*This*. It puts words to what we’re going through.’ Nobody was talking about that.”

One of the primary emotions expressed in Telgemeier’s memoirs is loneliness—young Raina feels like she’s all by herself with her anxiety, her embarrassments, her jammed teeth. Sue told me that though there are scenes in the books of Raina confessing her fears to her mother, the real Raina didn’t tell her parents much of what was going on—they learned the extent of her struggles only later, when they read her books.

Scott McCloud writes in *Understanding Comics* that comics are often defined by what they leave out—by the gap left between the lines and shapes on the page and the full, detailed reality that the reader creates with

their imagination. The more realistic particulars you add in drawing a face, the more that face is understood by the reader as a specific individual; the more detail you omit, the more that face takes on the quality of an avatar—allowing the reader’s mind to bridge the gap with its own associations and ideas and subjectivity. Young Raina—with her large, oval eyes; dashed-off nose; and single-line eyebrows—has plenty of personality while remaining a relatively neutral protagonist in whom kids can see themselves.

Hers is a different model of courage to hold up for children, though superheroic in its own right. In *Guts*, when Raina is in the middle of the pea-green panic attack, alone in what seems like an enormous, dark well, she tells her therapist that she feels frozen, unable to move or think or talk, to express herself at all. “When I’m in this space, I feel like I can’t get out,” she says. “I feel like I won’t survive it.”

Her therapist’s response is simple: “Try.”

“I feel like I can’t even try,” Raina protests.

“Try anyway.”

So she tries. The page shows Raina falling through a green-and-black dark space headfirst. In the next panel, we see her sitting—presumably on the therapist’s couch, gripping its edges—but the waves of panic are so intense and she’s hyperventilating so hard that everything else around her is obliterated.

“Concentrate on your feet. Touching the floor.”

Slowly, slowly, Raina’s breathing begins to ease. She is willing to try, and it is horrible, but she survives. The next thing her therapist does is telling: She asks if Raina would find it helpful to explain to other people what she’s going through.

At the end of *Guts*, Raina hasn’t cured herself of her phobias, but she’s found more foods she can eat without fear. She’s worked up the nerve to tell her friends that she goes to therapy and been surprised to learn that other people go too. She’s not so weird after all. She redoes an oral presentation—

one she was too anxious to complete on her first try—and this time makes it a lesson on anxiety, teaching her classmates some of the techniques she's learned for calming down. In other words, she's connected and happier—trying, not perfect.

This concept of being bravely in progress still resonates for Telgemeier. She is only in her 40s—young for a retrospective, and too young to speak with certainty about the arc of her own story. When I asked her, on the day of the reception, how she thinks about the bigger picture, she laughed, looking overwhelmed again.

Writing beyond the middle-grade demographic, if it's something she wants to do, won't be simple. "I feel like I want to spread my wings in different directions, but I've sort of created a box for myself. The industry, the market, whatever—they're really good with where I am," Telgemeier had told me when I visited her at the cozy nerd house. "I'm trying to push; I'm trying to expand ... But it's been tricky to land on just the right thing." Still, tricky doesn't mean it's not worth trying. She'd have a better sense of it all, once she went home and had time to reflect. She'd draw her way through it.

This article appears in the [March 2024](#) print edition with the headline "Raina Telgemeier Gets It." When you buy a book using a link on this page, we receive a commission. Thank you for supporting The Atlantic.

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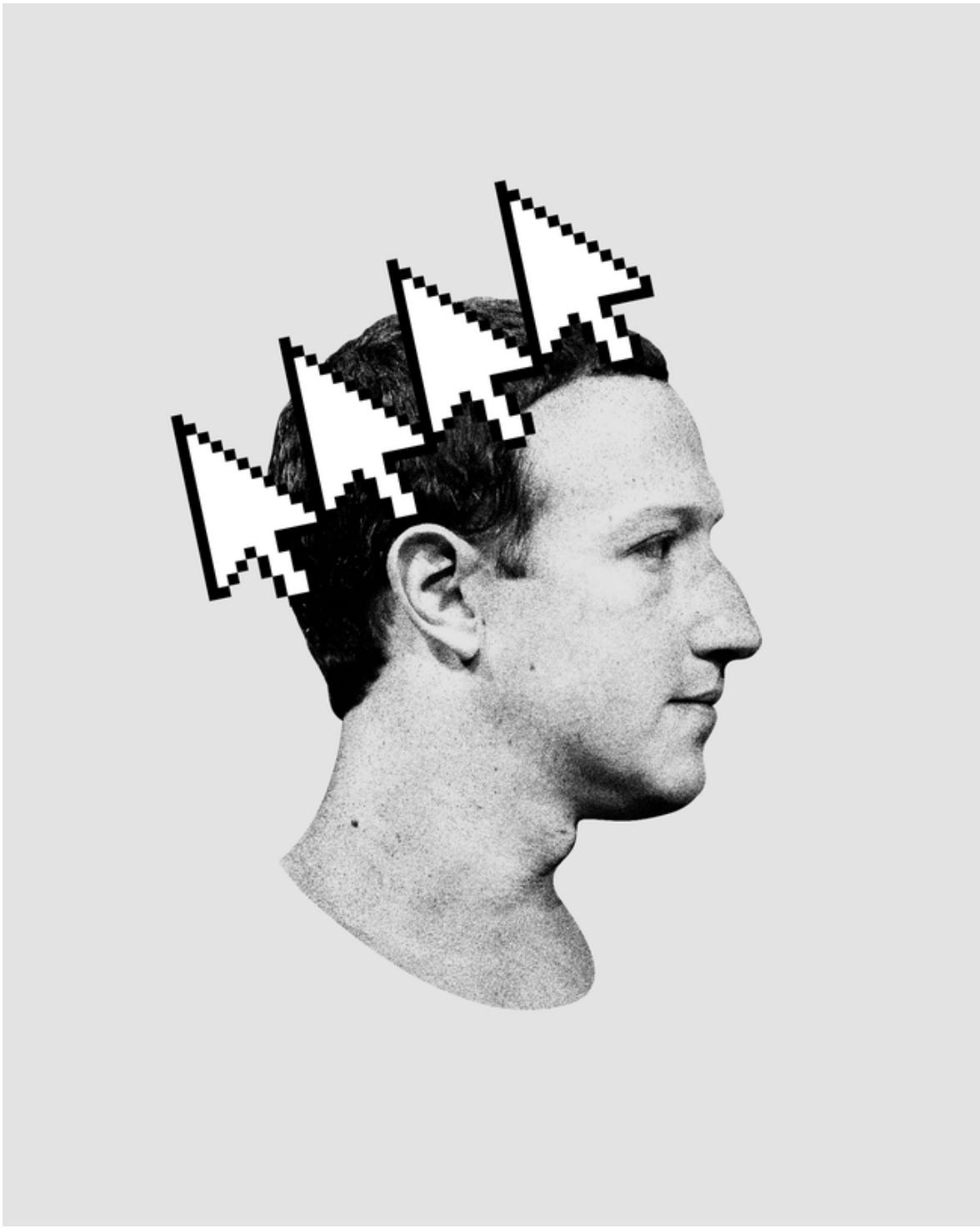
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The Rise of Techno-authoritarianism

Silicon Valley has its own ascendant political ideology. It's past time we call it what it is.

by Adrienne LaFrance



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If you had to capture Silicon Valley's dominant ideology in a single anecdote, you might look first to Mark Zuckerberg, sitting in the blue glow of his computer some 20 years ago, chatting with a friend about how his new

website, TheFacebook, had given him access to reams of personal information about his fellow students:

Zuckerberg: Yeah so if you ever need info about anyone at Harvard

Zuckerberg: Just ask.

Zuckerberg: I have over 4,000 emails, pictures, addresses, SNS

Friend: What? How'd you manage that one?

Zuckerberg: People just submitted it.

Zuckerberg: I don't know why.

Zuckerberg: They "trust me"

Zuckerberg: Dumb fucks.

That conversation—later revealed through leaked chat records—was soon followed by another that was just as telling, if better mannered. At a now-famous Christmas party in 2007, Zuckerberg first met Sheryl Sandberg, his eventual chief operating officer, who with Zuckerberg would transform the platform into a digital imperialist superpower. There, Zuckerberg, who in Facebook's early days had adopted the mantra "Company over country," explained to Sandberg that he wanted every American with an internet connection to have a Facebook account. For Sandberg, who once told a colleague that she'd been "put on this planet to scale organizations," that turned out to be the perfect mission.

Facebook (now Meta) has become an avatar of all that is wrong with Silicon Valley. Its self-interested role in spreading global disinformation is an ongoing crisis. Recall, too, the company's secret [mood-manipulation experiment](#) in 2012, which [deliberately tinkered](#) with what users saw in their News Feed in order to measure how Facebook could [influence people's emotional states](#) without their knowledge. Or its participation in [inciting genocide in Myanmar](#) in 2017. Or its use as a clubhouse for planning and executing the January 6, 2021, insurrection. (In Facebook's early days, Zuckerberg listed "revolutions" among his interests. This was around the time that he had a business card printed with I'M CEO, BITCH.)

And yet, to a remarkable degree, Facebook's way of doing business remains the norm for the tech industry as a whole, even as other social platforms (TikTok) and technological developments (artificial intelligence) eclipse Facebook in cultural relevance.

The new technocrats claim to embrace Enlightenment values, but in fact they are leading an antidemocratic, illiberal movement.

To worship at the altar of mega-scale and to convince yourself that you should be the one making world-historic decisions on behalf of a global citizenry that did not elect you and may not share your values or lack thereof, you have to dispense with numerous inconveniences—humility and nuance among them. Many titans of Silicon Valley have made these trade-offs repeatedly. YouTube (owned by Google), Instagram (owned by Meta), and Twitter (which Elon Musk insists on calling X) have been as damaging to individual rights, civil society, and global democracy as Facebook was and is. Considering the way that generative AI is now being developed throughout Silicon Valley, we should brace for that damage to be multiplied many times over in the years ahead.

The behavior of these companies and the people who run them is often hypocritical, greedy, and status-obsessed. But underlying these venalities is something more dangerous, a clear and coherent ideology that is seldom called out for what it is: [authoritarian technocracy](#). As the most powerful companies in Silicon Valley have matured, this ideology has only grown stronger, more self-righteous, more delusional, and—in the face of rising criticism—more aggrieved.

The new technocrats are ostentatious in their use of language that [appeals to Enlightenment values](#)—reason, progress, freedom—but in fact they are leading an antidemocratic, illiberal movement. Many of them profess unconditional support for free speech, but are vindictive toward those who say things that do not flatter them. They tend to hold eccentric beliefs: that technological progress of any kind is unreservedly and inherently good; that you should always build it, simply because you can; that [frictionless information flow](#) is the highest value regardless of the information’s quality; that privacy is an archaic concept; that we should welcome the day when machine intelligence surpasses our own. And above all, that their power should be unconstrained. The systems they’ve built or are building—to rewire communications, remake human social networks, insinuate artificial intelligence into daily life, and more—impose these beliefs on the population, which is neither consulted nor, usually, meaningfully informed.

All this, and they still attempt to perpetuate the absurd myth that they are the swashbuckling underdogs.

[From the October 2018 issue: Yuval Noah Harari on why technology favors tyranny](#)

Comparisons between Silicon Valley and Wall Street or Washington, D.C., are commonplace, and you can see why—all are power centers, and all are magnets for people whose ambition too often outstrips their humanity. But Silicon Valley’s influence easily exceeds that of Wall Street and Washington. It is reengineering society more profoundly than any other power center in any other era since perhaps the days of the New Deal. Many Americans fret—rightfully—about the rising authoritarianism among MAGA Republicans, but they risk ignoring another ascendant force for illiberalism: the tantrum-prone and immensely powerful kings of tech.

Related Podcast

The Shakespearean drama that unfolded late last year at OpenAI underscores the extent to which the worst of Facebook’s “move fast and break things” mentality has been internalized and celebrated in Silicon Valley. OpenAI was founded, in 2015, as a nonprofit dedicated to bringing artificial general intelligence into the world in [a way that would serve the public good](#). Underlying its formation was the belief that the technology was too powerful and too dangerous to be developed with commercial motives alone.

[From the August 2019 issue: Henry Kissinger, Eric Schmidt, and Daniel Huttenlocher on AI](#)

But in 2019, as the technology began to startle even the people who were working on it with the speed at which it was advancing, the company added a for-profit arm to raise more capital. Microsoft invested \$1 billion at first, then many billions of dollars more. Then, this past fall, the company’s CEO, Sam Altman, was fired then quickly rehired, in a whiplash spectacle that signaled a demolition of OpenAI’s previously established safeguards against

putting company over country. Those who wanted Altman out reportedly believed that he was too heavily prioritizing the pace of development over safety. But Microsoft's response—an offer to bring on Altman and anyone else from OpenAI to re-create his team there—started a game of chicken that led to Altman's reinstatement. The whole incident was messy, and Altman may well be the right person for the job, but the message was clear: The pursuit of scale and profit won decisively over safety concerns and public accountability.

Silicon Valley still attracts many immensely talented people who strive to do good, and who are working to realize the best possible version of a more connected, data-rich global society. Even the most deleterious companies have built some wonderful tools. But these tools, at scale, are also systems of manipulation and control. They promise community but sow division; claim to champion truth but spread lies; wrap themselves in concepts such as empowerment and liberty but surveil us relentlessly. The values that win out tend to be the ones that rob us of agency and keep us addicted to our feeds.

The theoretical promise of AI is as hopeful as the promise of social media once was, and as dazzling as its most partisan architects project. AI really could cure numerous diseases. It really could transform scholarship and unearth lost knowledge. Except that Silicon Valley, under the sway of its worst technocratic impulses, is following the playbook established in the mass scaling and monopolization of the social web. OpenAI, Microsoft, Google, and other corporations leading the way in AI development are not focusing on the areas of greatest public or epistemological need, and they are certainly not operating with any degree of transparency or caution. Instead they are engaged in a race to build faster and maximize profit.

[From the September 2023 issue: Does Sam Altman know what he's creating?](#)

None of this happens without the underlying technocratic philosophy of inevitability—that is, the idea that if you can build something new, you must. “In a properly functioning world, I think this should be a project of governments,” Altman told my colleague Ross Andersen last year, referring to OpenAI’s attempts to develop artificial general intelligence. But Altman was going to keep building it himself anyway. Or, as Zuckerberg put it to

The New Yorker many years ago: “Isn’t it, like, inevitable that there would be a huge social network of people? … If we didn’t do this someone else would have done it.”

Technocracy first blossomed as a political ideology after World War I, among a small group of scientists and engineers in New York City who wanted a new social structure to replace representative democracy, putting the technological elite in charge. Though [their movement](#) floundered politically—people ended up liking President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal better—it had more success intellectually, entering the zeitgeist alongside modernism in art and literature, which shared some of its values. The American poet Ezra Pound’s modernist slogan “Make it new” easily could have doubled as a mantra for the technocrats. A parallel movement was that of the Italian futurists, led by figures such as the poet F. T. Marinetti, who used maxims like “March, don’t molder” and “Creation, not contemplation.”

The ethos for technocrats and futurists alike was action for its own sake. “We are not satisfied to roam in a garden closed in by dark cypresses, bending over ruins and mossy antiques,” Marinetti [said in a 1929 speech](#). “We believe that Italy’s only worthy tradition is never to have had a tradition.” Prominent futurists took their zeal for technology, action, and speed and eventually transformed it into fascism. Marinetti followed his *Manifesto of Futurism* (1909) with his *Fascist Manifesto* (1919). His friend Pound [was infatuated with Benito Mussolini](#) and collaborated with his regime to host a radio show in which the poet promoted fascism, gushed over *Mein Kampf*, and praised both Mussolini and Adolf Hitler. The evolution of futurism into fascism wasn’t inevitable—many of Pound’s friends [grew to fear him](#), or thought he had lost his mind—but it does show how, during a time of social unrest, a cultural movement based on the radical rejection of tradition and history, and tinged with aggrievement, can become a political ideology.

In October, the venture capitalist and technocrat Marc Andreessen published on his firm’s website a stream-of-consciousness document he called “[The Techno-Optimist Manifesto](#),” a 5,000-word ideological cocktail that eerily recalls, and specifically credits, Italian futurists such as Marinetti. Andreessen is, in addition to being one of Silicon Valley’s most influential

billionaire investors, notorious for being thin-skinned and obstreperous, and despite the invocation of optimism in the title, the essay seems driven in part by his sense of resentment that the technologies he and his predecessors have advanced are no longer “properly glorified.” It is a revealing document, representative of the worldview that he and his fellow technocrats are advancing.

The world that Silicon Valley elites have brought into being is a world of reckless social engineering, without consequence for its architects.

Andreessen writes that there is “no material problem,” including those caused by technology, that “cannot be solved with more technology.” He writes that technology should not merely be always advancing, but always accelerating in its advancement “to ensure the techno-capital upward spiral continues forever.” And he excoriates what he calls campaigns against technology, under names such as “tech ethics” and “existential risk.”

Or take what might be considered the Apostles’ Creed of his emerging political movement:

We believe we should place intelligence and energy in a positive feedback loop, and drive them both to infinity ...

We believe in *adventure*. Undertaking the Hero’s Journey, rebelling against the status quo, mapping uncharted territory, conquering dragons, and bringing home the spoils for our community ...

We believe in nature, but we also believe in *overcoming* nature. We are not primitives, cowering in fear of the lightning bolt. We are the apex predator; the lightning works for us.

Andreessen identifies several “patron saints” of his movement, Marinetti among them. He quotes from the *Manifesto of Futurism*, swapping out Marinetti’s “poetry” for “technology”:

Beauty exists only in struggle. There is no masterpiece that has not an aggressive character. Technology must be a violent assault on the forces of the unknown, to force them to bow before man.

To be clear, the Andreessen manifesto is not a fascist document, but it is an extremist one. He takes a reasonable position—that technology, on the whole, has dramatically improved human life—and warps it to reach the absurd conclusion that any attempt to restrain technological development under any circumstances is despicable. This position, if viewed uncynically, makes sense only as a religious conviction, and in practice it serves only to absolve him and the other Silicon Valley giants of any moral or civic duty to do anything but make new things that will enrich them, without consideration of the social costs, or of history. Andreessen also identifies a list of enemies and “zombie ideas” that he calls upon his followers to defeat, among them “institutions” and “tradition.”

“Our enemy,” Andreessen writes, is “the know-it-all credentialed expert worldview, indulging in abstract theories, luxury beliefs, social engineering, disconnected from the real world, delusional, unelected, and unaccountable —playing God with everyone else’s lives, with total insulation from the consequences.”

The irony is that this description very closely fits Andreessen and other Silicon Valley elites. The world that they have brought into being over the past two decades is unquestionably a world of reckless social engineering, without consequence for its architects, who foist their own abstract theories and luxury beliefs on all of us.

[From the May 2022 issue: Why the past 10 years of American life have been uniquely stupid](#)

Some of the individual principles Andreessen advances in his manifesto are anodyne. But its overarching radicalism, given his standing and power, should make you sit up straight. Key figures in Silicon Valley, including Musk, have clearly warmed to illiberal ideas in recent years. In 2020, Donald Trump’s vote share in Silicon Valley was 23 percent—small, but higher than the 20 percent he received in 2016.

The main dangers of authoritarian technocracy are not at this point political, at least not in the traditional sense. Still, a select few already have authoritarian control, more or less, to establish the digital world’s rules and cultural norms, which can be as potent as political power.

In 1961, in his farewell address, President Dwight Eisenhower warned the nation about the dangers of a coming technocracy. “In holding scientific research and discovery in respect, as we should,” he said, “we must also be alert to the equal and opposite danger that public policy could itself become the captive of a scientific-technological elite. It is the task of statesmanship to mold, to balance, and to integrate these and other forces, new and old, within the principles of our democratic system—ever aiming toward the supreme goals of our free society.”

Eight years later, the country’s first computers were connected to ARPANET, a precursor to the World Wide Web, which became broadly available in 1993. Back then, Silicon Valley was regarded as a utopia for ambitious capitalists and optimistic inventors with original ideas who wanted to change the world, unencumbered by bureaucracy or tradition, working at the speed of the internet (14.4 kilobits per second in those days). This culture had its flaws even at the start, but it was also imaginative in a distinctly American way, and it led to the creation of transformative, sometimes even dumbfoundingly beautiful hardware and software.

For a long time, I tended to be more on Andreessen’s end of the spectrum regarding tech regulation. I believed that the social web could still be a net good and that, given enough time, the values that best served the public interest would naturally win out. I resisted the notion that regulating the social web was necessary at all, in part because I was not (and am still not) convinced that the government can do so without itself causing harm (the European model of regulation, including laws such as the so-called right to be forgotten, is deeply inconsistent with free-press protections in America, and poses dangers to the public’s right to know). I’d much prefer to see market competition as a force for technological improvement and the betterment of society.

But in recent years, it has become clear that regulation is needed, not least because the rise of technocracy proves that Silicon Valley’s leaders simply will not act in the public’s best interest. Much should be done to protect children from the hazards of social media, and to break up monopolies and oligopolies that damage society, and more. At the same time, I believe that regulation alone will not be enough to meaningfully address the cultural rot that the new technocrats are spreading.

Universities should reclaim their proper standing as leaders in developing world-changing technologies for the good of humankind. (Harvard, Stanford, and MIT could invest in creating a consortium for such an effort—their endowments are worth roughly \$110 billion combined.)

Individuals will have to lead the way, too. You may not be able to entirely give up social media, or reject your workplace's surveillance software—you may not even want [to opt out](#) of these things. But there is extraordinary power in defining ideals, and we can all begin to do that—for ourselves; for our networks of actual, real-life friends; for our schools; for our places of worship. We would be wise to develop more sophisticated shared norms for debating and deciding how we use invasive technology interpersonally and within our communities. That should include challenging existing norms about the use of apps and YouTube in classrooms, the ubiquity of smartphones in adolescent hands, and widespread disregard for individual privacy. People who believe that we all deserve better will need to step up to lead such efforts.

[From the July/August 2023 issue: Adrienne LaFrance on defending humanity in the age of AI](#)

Our children are not data sets waiting to be quantified, tracked, and sold. Our intellectual output is not a mere training manual for the AI that will be used to mimic and plagiarize us. Our lives are meant not to be optimized through a screen, but to be lived—in all of our messy, tree-climbing, night-swimming, adventuresome glory. We are all better versions of ourselves when we are not tweeting or clicking “Like” or scrolling, scrolling, scrolling.

Technocrats are right that technology is a key to making the world better. But first we must describe the world as we wish it to be—the problems we wish to solve in the public interest, and in accordance with the values and rights that advance human dignity, equality, freedom, privacy, health, and happiness. And we must insist that the leaders of institutions that represent us—large and small—use technology in ways that reflect what is good for individuals and society, and not just what enriches technocrats.

We do not have to live in the world the new technocrats are designing for us. We do not have to acquiesce to their growing project of dehumanization and data mining. Each of us has agency.

No more “build it because we can.” No more algorithmic feedbags. No more infrastructure designed to make the people less powerful and the powerful more controlling. Every day we vote with our attention; it is precious, and desperately wanted by those who will use it against us for their own profit and political goals. Don’t let them.

This article appears in the [March 2024 print edition](#) with the headline “The Despots of Silicon Valley.”

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Lost Photographs of Black America

A trove of images from the 1960s and '70s, discovered in a Swedish bank vault, offers new perspectives on the past—and the present.

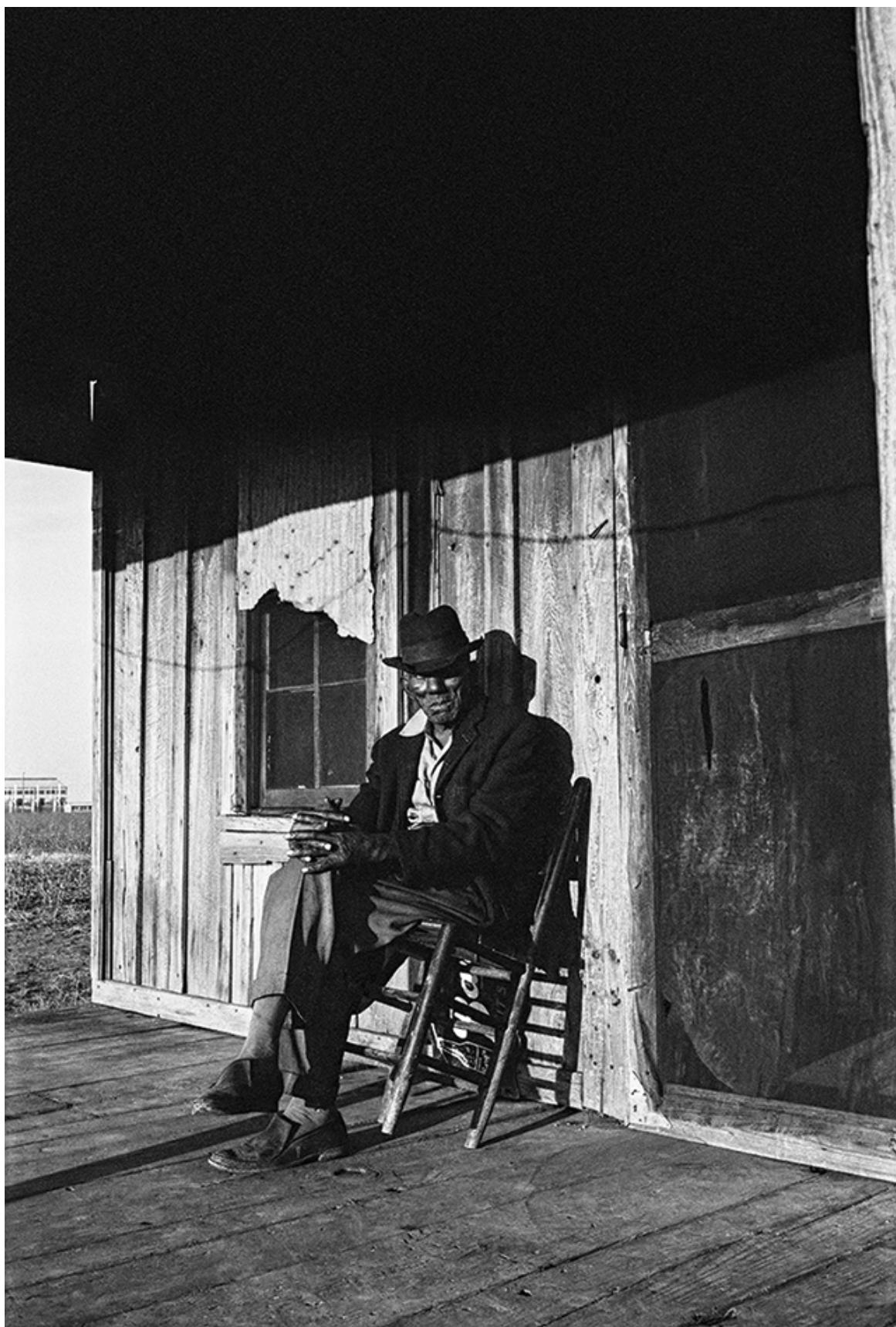
by Vann R. Newkirk II



Ernest Cole was born in 1940 to a Black family in the Eersterust township, near Pretoria, South Africa. As a child, he witnessed the formalization of the apartheid regime. When he was a teenager, he began working for *Drum*, a South African magazine geared toward Black readers. He later changed the spelling of his surname from Kole to Cole, which—along with straightening

his hair—helped reclassify him as “Coloured,” a formal designation that gave him more freedom of movement in the country’s [calcifying racial hierarchy](#). He became one of South Africa’s first Black freelance photographers, earning the ire of apartheid enforcers by capturing the human costs of the regime.





But Cole wanted to have a wider reach, and in 1966, he arrived in the United States, having smuggled enough photos out of South Africa to publish a book. *House of Bondage* introduced many people around the world to the horrors of apartheid. *Those images* of malnutrition and ritual humiliation were also the last he'd take of his country. He was soon banned from South Africa, and after sojourns in Sweden, he faded into obscurity on the streets of New York City. Cole, who died in exile in 1990, never published another book.

Then, in 2017, a member of Cole's family was mysteriously invited to Stockholm at the behest of a Swedish bank. There, in three safety-deposit boxes, were *tens of thousands of negatives*, many taken during Cole's years in America. *The True America*, released by Aperture in January, showcases this collection, much of which had not been previously published. Cole did not leave behind detailed information about these photos, which means that today's viewers must infer from context what they depict. We do know that the American series began with a grant he received from the Ford Foundation to essentially replicate his work on apartheid in the urban ghettos and on the rural plantations that dominated Black American life. He must have been ambivalent about the project: Cole had come to America hoping to broaden his portfolio, and he did not want to be pigeonholed as someone who captured only oppression. Still, there's an insurgent air about this collection. In the Black communities Cole visited in the late 1960s and early '70s, he found people smiling, lounging, dancing, and worshipping. At a time when interracial marriage was *intensely controversial*, he captured a Black man and a white woman embracing on a New York subway. Cole paid attention to the media that Black people created and consumed: newspapers from the Nation of Islam, ads for Ultra Sheen Creme Satin-Press, adult magazines. He covered major historical events, traveling to Lowndes County, Alabama, *during its famed freedom struggle*, and to the *funeral of Martin Luther King Jr.* in Atlanta, on April 9, 1968. His photographs are inversions of the authoritative images ingrained in our collective memory from those moments. Cole's world is front porches and vanity plates and processed hair: history, from below.





Cole saw South African apartheid and American institutional racism in their full power, with all of their teeth. These systems were intended to be eternal machines, creating and re-creating order for as long as each nation lasted. But Cole also bore witness to the possibility of a different outcome. Through the stoic faces of Black South African miners and the signs of Garveyites on parade in New York, he documented the people who dreamed otherwise.



Masterpieces find their moment, and the rediscovery of these photographs comes at a time when they are once again sorely needed. The historical memory of slavery and Jim Crow is [under threat in America](#), and globally, the far right agitates for a return to white domination. *The True America*, as a belated bookend to *House of Bondage*, reinforces the interconnectedness of all forms of state oppression, and reminds us that the present always has to do with the past.

All images: Ernest Cole, Untitled, 1967–72, from [Ernest Cole: The True America](#) (Aperture, 2024). © 2024 Ernest Cole Family Trust.

This article appears in the [March 2024](#) print edition with the headline “Lost Photographs of Black America.”

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The James Bond Trap

**Ian Fleming created the superspy—
and then couldn't get rid of him.**

by James Parker



The next Bond movie should be called *Libido of Secrecy*. It should be called *Marmalizer, Mercuryface, Die to Tell the Tale*.

Actually—and I’m quite serious—it should be called *The Black Daffodil*, after Ian Fleming’s only book of poetry. Nicholas Shakespeare, in his walloping new biography, [Ian Fleming: The Complete Man](#), describes this slim volume, bound in black and self-published in 1928, as “the holy grail for Fleming collectors.” He was 20. He was arty. Shakespeare includes a contemporary sample from Fleming’s journal: “If the wages of sin are Death / I am willing to pay / I have had my short spasm of life / now let death take its sway.” We have to rely on the sample, because *The Black Daffodil* itself is gone. “He read me several poems,” Fleming’s friend and sometime business partner Ivar Bryce remembered, “the beauty of which moved me deeply.” But then something went wrong, or some other presence moved in. “He took every copy that had been printed,” Bryce continued, “and consigned the whole edition pitilessly to the flames.”

Rather Bondlike, that “pitilessly.” Bondlike, too, is the “short spasm of life” in the little poem. In fact, although he wouldn’t be born for another 24 years, if you squint at the *Black Daffodil* episode, at this tiny debacle in the artistic life of Ian Fleming, you can indeed make out the wriggling germ of James Bond.

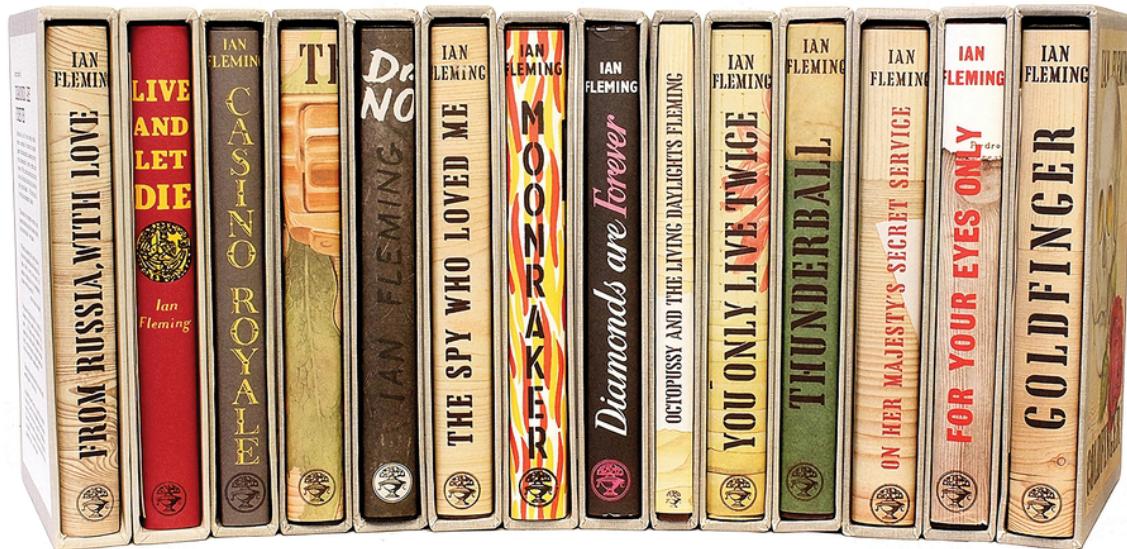
Fleming worried that his youthful verses “aped [Rupert Brooke](#),” the golden young man who wrote “[The Soldier](#)” in 1914 and who probably would have been killed at Gallipoli had he not been carried off en route by an infected mosquito bite: “If I should die, think only this of me: / That there’s some corner of a foreign field / That is for ever England.” And isn’t there a corner of James Bond that vibrates forever with this perfumed, Georgian strain of romantic English fatalism and mystical chauvinism? Although routed now through the circuits of a sleek 20th-century killing machine. A killing-and-shagging machine, who likes scrambled eggs for breakfast and smokes fancy-pants blended cigarettes. Maybe we can put it like this: Ian Fleming wrote the poetry, and James Bond—that bastard, that black daffodil—burned it.

As he sprang from his author’s head in the early months of 1952, with a .25 Beretta in his left armpit, Bond was in many ways a product of psychic necessity. Fleming—in his mid-40s, and against everybody’s advice—was about to get married. His bride, Ann Charteris, was [aristocratic and reckless](#). “We are, of course, totally unsuited,” Fleming wrote to his new brother-in-

law. "I'm a non-communicator, a symmetrist, of a bilious and melancholic temperament ... Ann is a sanguine anarchist/traditionalist. So China will fly, and there will be rage and tears." On the morning of the wedding, which was held down the road from [Fleming's Goldeneye estate](#) in Jamaica, the happy couple were jarred awake by the croaking of an unknown bird. Doom! He had already finished the first draft of [Casino Royale](#).

Bond is an odd character, an odd and very modern hero. An automaton and a sybarite.

He was quite an interesting man, Ian Fleming. Born into great wealth and great expectations, he sequentially disgraced himself at Eton (general loucheness) and Sandhurst (gonorrhea), clanging about in the shadow of his older brother, Peter, an acclaimed author-adventurer. His father had been killed in the First World War; his mother was a nightmare. Redeemed by a spell at a [private educational establishment in the Austrian Alps](#), where he was introduced to the work of the psychologist Alfred Adler (he took the Adlerian concept of the inferiority complex very much to heart), he returned strengthened to the world. The Foreign Office didn't want him, but journalism did: Shakespeare's account of the Stalinist show trial of six British engineers, which Fleming covered in Moscow in 1933 for Reuters, is riveting.



And he had an interesting war. The weird thing about the Bond books (it may be their secret) is that they read like the work of a gifted and faintly sociopathic fantasist-researcher—somebody with no actual experience of espionage, geopolitics, money, travel, fighting, or, indeed, humans. In fact, Fleming was worldly to a degree and, if anything, overqualified to write spy novels. From the late 1930s to 1945, he worked at the top levels of Naval Intelligence, liaising between the Admiralty and Downing Street, and was closely involved with—among other things—operational planning and target selection for two elite intelligence-gathering units: 30AU and T-Force.

These were his glory days. Shakespeare uses the journalist Alan Moorehead's line about soldiers at war to describe Fleming: "He was, for a moment of time, a complete man, and he had this sublimity in him."

From the October 2013 issue: James Parker on the inner life of James Bond

But now it was the '50s, and that was all over. The empire was suffering postwar contractions, and Fleming was no longer running his quasi-private armies. And at Goldeneye, he faced the shutdown of decades of swinging bachelordom. "I was in a terrible state," he explained to his confidant Maud Russell, "& appalled at the thought of getting married. I sat down at the typewriter ..."

Casino Royale is an odd book: oddly written, oddly paced, and suffused with an obsessive, almost sickly sensuality. "He watched carefully as the deep glass became frosted with the pale golden drink, slightly aerated by the bruising of the shaker." The action is mostly bungled—until the famous torture scene, when Bond gets his "underpart" flogged with a carpet beater and the prose snaps into rapturous focus. "Bond's flesh cringed as the cane surface just touched him." (Fleming and Ann liked whipping each other.)

Senator John F. Kennedy, a huge fan, sought Fleming's counsel about Cuba.

And Bond is an odd character, an odd and very modern hero. An automaton and a sybarite. He is mentally efficient, almost clinically so, with an emptiness of head that anticipates Jack Reacher: "He closed his eyes and his thoughts pursued his imagination through a series of carefully constructed scenes as if he was watching the tumbling chips of coloured glass in a kaleidoscope." But he's also extremely fussy, *American Psycho*-style—

about drinks, cars, what to wear in bed. “Bond had always disliked pyjamas and had slept naked until in Hong Kong at the end of the war he came across the perfect compromise. This was a pyjama-coat which came almost down to the knees.” (Detailed description of the pyjama-coat follows.)

Read: Was James Bond the result of Ian Fleming’s midlife crisis?

The point is that all the elements—the nastiness, the daintiness, the vacancy, the improbability, and the creepy voluptuousness—were present from the beginning, and it wouldn’t take long for Fleming to perfect the mixture (1957’s *From Russia, With Love*, for example, is an excellent read). The writing mostly got done at Goldeneye, at high speed, sometimes on a gold-plated typewriter. From Jamaica, he would send his manuscripts to his friend Clare Blanchard in New York. Blanchard, a devout Catholic, was always appalled: “The only explanation I have,” she says in *Ian Fleming*, “is that he wrote [the books] uninhibitedly and that the forces of evil … came through them as water comes through a tap.”

Fame as the creator of James Bond, in combination with his old elite connections, would project Fleming back into the center of events. Senator John F. Kennedy, a huge fan, sought his counsel about Cuba. Massive success was Fleming’s at last. But the black daffodil was upon him. By 1960, he was sick of Bond and wondering how he could kill him off. “How the keys creak as I type,” he complained in a letter to the novelist William Plomer. Bond, however, “was as impervious to death as was Dracula,” Shakespeare writes. The last chapters of *Ian Fleming* are dark, Bond taking over the world as his creator staggers through heart attacks toward a premature death. Fleming succumbed at age 56: The short spasm, shortened further by 70 cigarettes a day and lashings of booze, was over. The journalist Malcolm Muggeridge, writing in 1966 to Fleming’s first biographer, John Pearson, had a warning: “Don’t you get destroyed by Bond’s ghost as Ian did by his creation. Remember, he’s the Devil.”

This article appears in the [March 2024](#) print edition with the headline “The James Bond Trap.”

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A Big-Box-Store Allegory

A satirist of literary Brooklyn now explores life in an upstate shopping warehouse.

by Jordan Kisner



Probably all of us have been inside a place like Town Square location #1512, the fictional big-box store that provides the setting for Adelle Waldman's new novel, *Help Wanted*. It's the kind with colorful seasonal displays and wide aisles, the kind that in the '80s and '90s came to signify the peak of American commerce: the convenience of being able to buy baby food, a lawn mower, and a plastic Christmas tree all in one brightly lit, airplane-hangar-size space.

It's surprising, really, that such stores, emblematic of American capitalism as they are, don't feature prominently in more novels. Waldman's Town Square seems almost too obviously allegorical. At #1512, empty shelves pockmark the aisles, giving the store a dilapidated feel. "Corporate" (a vague presence) wants store managers to prioritize low budgets above all else, so the managers have concluded that empty shelves are preferable to spending money on workers to stock items. Business has faded, stolen by an unnamed online retail giant. This image of shrinkage evokes the mood of the novel, which takes place in fictional, hollowed-out Potterstown, in upstate New York, its infrastructure now outsize, dating to a time of more prosperity, more people, more life. The big companies that once had local factories have departed for cheaper workforces, and the residents who didn't leave with them scramble to assemble enough employment to pay their bills.

A generation ago, Potterstown fostered a solid working class, but its current young adults have few prospects for stability. Half the people working on Town Square's Movement team (formerly Logistics, and based in the store's adjoining warehouse) live, as 23-year-old Nicole did until recently, with their mother or grandmother. Nicole's mother likes to remind her that, in *her* 20s, she was already married and a homeowner, markers of security that held steady even when the local job market tanked. For Nicole, who has a baby and a fiancé, prospects feel more limited.

She couldn't wait tables, she just couldn't. Not after listening to her mother complain all these years. Her mother had been at the diner for twenty-five years, ever since the company she'd worked for before Nicole was born, the one that made keyboards for IBM, moved to Mexico ... And it wasn't like she and Marcus could just up and move to a different place with more jobs. They relied on both her mom and his for babysitting. They couldn't afford day care. And Nicole didn't even have a car of her own.

All employees at Town Square, except managers, have been reduced to part-time, so that the company doesn't have to offer benefits or a guaranteed number of hours. During the holidays, Town Square hires temporary part-time workers to avoid giving their year-round staff enough hours to qualify for health care. One store veteran complains that 15 years ago, when their branch opened, "working full-time, forty hours a week, wasn't some big

privilege—something you had to beg for. It was standard. That meant you could work here and live on what you made. You wouldn’t be rich, but you could live. If you wanted to make more, you could work overtime. Not anymore.”

At this point in her speech, two men interject, ready to start their own rants about, respectively, undocumented immigrants and China. She cuts them off:

Used to be, corporate cared about getting things done right. Every night, before the closers left, everything in the store was put away, all clothes were properly zoned. Didn’t matter how much it cost as long as it was done right. I was proud to work here. Now look at this place. It’s a dump.

This is what it is like to work in Movement, a name with the empty ring of forward motion, organizing, progress, flow. Occasionally, the workers forge a sense of camaraderie and shared purpose—bursts of solidarity and friendship that give the book warmth—but one senses that these are furtive victories over Town Square’s culture.

Help Wanted is Waldman’s second book. Her debut, *The Love Affairs of Nathaniel P.*, was rightly hailed as an incisive comedy of manners when it was published in 2013. Like *Help Wanted*, *Nathaniel P.* offered [a detailed, anthropological investigation](#) of an insular slice of society governed by its own procedures, lingo, and power struggles: the literary scene of New York around that time. Her subjects were Harvard-educated writers concerned predominantly with getting laid, getting published, and performing the correct kind of liberal politics at parties.

Waldman is attracted to characters whose flaws are fluorescently obvious to the reader but remain invisible to the characters themselves.

Its protagonist, Nate, is an ambitious and occasionally charming young writer who lives in an apartment he rarely cleans, prides himself on being a sensitive and ethical man, and systematically mistreats every single woman in his path. Like many novels of manners, *Nathaniel P.* seems at first blush to be a niche book about small things—its world is as narrow as a railroad apartment—but the fine-tuned way that Waldman [captures the breathtaking](#)

sexism and intellectual hypocrisy of the New York literary world of that era pushes the book toward something more muscular and political.

Nate's world is as far as can be from the warehouse workers' grinding precarity in *Help Wanted*, but Waldman's approach to both is driven by a common set of questions: What lies do people tell themselves to justify their own quest for power, security, and affirmation? Whose needs—or material realities—do they have to see as less than real? And where do they grasp or stumble into moments of connection?

Waldman's strength is dramatic irony, and she is attracted to characters whose flaws are fluorescently obvious to the reader (and, often enough, the character's friends and family) but remain invisible to the characters themselves. How painful it is to inhabit Nate's point of view while he uses his "progressive" politics as a cover to treat the people around him badly, or deftly converts his own insecurity or guilty conscience into a rationale for punishing the woman he's mistreating. Nate is such a pathetic, second-rate guy, but always, in his mind, the good guy, the victim, the noble protagonist.

This same agility with characters' psychology is key to the polyvocal *Help Wanted*, which rotates among the roughly dozen characters who work in Movement at Town Square. The warehouse is full of personalities, and Waldman gives each its due. Val, a lesbian on the cusp of 30 with a wife and child, lived in her car after running away from home in her teens and is now aching to establish both her financial stability and her respectability as an upstanding middle-class American. Diego, a Black man who emigrated from Honduras as a teenager, now lives in a basement apartment with his girlfriend, who struggles with bipolar disorder. Without a car, he walks to work along a highway in the early-morning dark and hopes not to get hit. Milo is an emotionally labile man with a slight victim complex, amplified by his thwarted creative aspirations. He "throws" the truck every morning, which means that he unloads boxes onto the processing line, and he uses his role to create little art "shows." One morning, he does the human life cycle: First he unloads boxes of baby food and a stroller, then a play kitchen and a kid's bike; then a gaming console and cans of Red Bull for adolescence, laundry detergent and an alarm clock for adulthood, and denture cleaner and a walker for senescence. The American life, cradle to grave, in products—it's maybe a higher-concept art piece than Milo intends.

From the January/February 2023 issue: ‘That’s just like *White Noise*.’

Joyce, the old-timer who remembers when all the employees got benefits, will retire soon. Raymond, who lives with his mother, desperately hopes to afford a party at Chuck E. Cheese for his son’s sixth birthday. Big Will, the store manager, who went to college, wears a mustache to make himself look older. And Meredith, the aggressively incompetent and hostile middle manager who oversees Movement and the warehouse, utterly lacks the people skills she’d need to ascend the corporate ladder, which she intensely desires to do.

If this sounds like a large cast to keep track of, it is. But under Waldman’s management, the book remains relatively nimble thanks to a straightforward plot setup: Big Will is getting promoted and transferred to another location. That means an internal candidate will be moved up to fill his job. Meredith seems favored for the promotion, but corporate is coming to interview the warehouse workers before making the decision. The warehouse workers can sink Meredith, whom they hate, or they can push for her promotion and get her, at least in the most immediate sense, out of their department. If Meredith becomes store manager, her well-liked No. 2 in Movement will move up to her former spot, leaving an available management position for one of them.

The workers, led by Val, are galvanized as a group when they decide to try to throw the job for Meredith, even though her competition, a Black woman named Anita who runs a different department, is far and away the better, kinder, more capable candidate. Many of the plotters privately dream of being chosen for the management job, with its guaranteed hours and benefits, though that dream is more realistic for some of them than others.

From the January 1905 issue: The country store

It is a credit to Waldman that although none of these characters is especially charismatic, you nevertheless find yourself wishing at one point or another that each of them could get the promotion. Each wonders, as Nicole does, what it would be like to have an income “large enough so that her bank balance didn’t fall precipitously close to zero between paychecks.” For her, it would mean getting her own car, and no longer worrying about whether

she could feed her baby if something went wrong yet again with her food-stamp card. For Diego, it would mean being able to move out of the basement and into a home with more light and fresh air, and maybe being able to afford a car. For Val, it would mean finally achieving the security she never thought she'd have as a gay woman.

A plot that turns on a dozen people dreaming, scheming, and competing for a single shot at the basic dignity of earning a decent living is depressing. Waldman is faithful to reality: The relentless grind in which these characters find themselves won't change. There's little opportunity for any real transformation, hope, or happy ending. And yet this is the plot that guides the lives of millions of Americans. Whereas Waldman went narrow in the cultural purview of her first book, she has gone wide now.

Maybe that's why the visceral psychological acuity of her debut feels slightly lacking in *Help Wanted*'s *dramatis personae*. The novel is a portrait of an ecosystem rather than a profile of an individual type, and so she necessarily handles more characters with less depth. But her real subject, the human network within a big-box store, receives a minute and thoughtful rendering that reflects Waldman's signature sensitivity to how people seek a sense of control and self-determination within the parameters they are given. Thorough research clearly went into the descriptions of the warehouse production line, the process of restocking items on shelves, the different protocols for creating attractive merchandise displays, the dispiriting corporate-speak used to manipulate employees into feeling good about situations that should, and do, make them feel bad. (For example, management demands a week of overnight shifts to mask the results of Meredith's incompetence, framing the need as a generous offer of extra hours.) The power dynamics are carefully elaborated: the politics of who wears what kind of shoes; who's got their GED and why; the reason the in-store staff call the warehouse workers "roaches" (they scatter when the sun comes up).

Consider the attention Waldman pays to the taxonomies of lingerie display:

Underwear wasn't so bad. Except for packaged sets, which were hung on racks, they were laid out on display tables or tossed in baskets that customers could root through themselves. Bras were a different story.

They came off the truck already on hangers, but in transit their straps were always getting tangled with the hangers of other bras. They had to be unspooled carefully—if you yanked too hard, their delicate, birdlike hangers snapped in two. Moreover, there were a million types: strapless bras, bras with demi cups, push-up bras, padded bras, underwire, wire-free bras, sports bras, nursing bras—to say nothing of the different brands and colors. Each bra type had its own tiny rack, above which Plan-O had printed out and posted a label, but even when you had found the right rack, you weren’t done. The bras were supposed to be zoned on the racks: arranged from smallest to biggest by bust measurement, then within that by cup size.

This goes on. It’s numbing. One assumes that effect is intended: to impress upon the reader the banal endlessness of the labor required to make something like underwear shopping pleasing for the consumer, a banality that takes on a surreal, malevolent quality when set against the struggle for survival in the life of the worker.

If *The Love Affairs of Nathaniel P.* was a comedy of manners, *Help Wanted* is a tragedy of circumstance. Everyone is compromised in a situation like this, and almost no one is getting out of the trap. (Except the store manager, who was always going to be okay. He went to the University of Connecticut.) The novel takes on the tone of a morality tale: As Movement pursues the plan to give one of them a chance at a full-time job, they commit to sabotaging Anita, whom they respect. Each supplies their personal justification for this betrayal, which quickly hardens into a belief that they have no choice. Val, who champions the plan, has a brief pang of conscience, remembering an earlier moment when she came across Anita crying because she couldn’t afford to send her children to the gymnastics class they’d begged for. Suddenly, she sees “Anita as a person—this time as a single mother, trying to give her kids a decent childhood.” This flash of humanity doesn’t persuade Val to change course—her loyalties are to herself and to her Movement co-workers, allies in her plot. It just makes her feel like a bad person, a feeling she quickly rationalizes away.

Help Wanted is a less sexy book (lingerie taxonomy notwithstanding) than its predecessor, but the decade that has elapsed since that satirical coming-of-age debut justifies a shift in focus from the witty-but-wretched bourgeois

intelligentsia to the drama of systems collapse. As ever, Waldman is a sharp observer of the world, a writer whose attention to particulars only sharpens the big picture.

This article appears in the [March 2024](#) print edition with the headline “Shelf Life.”

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The Disorienting Beauty of ‘Africa & Byzantium’

A landmark exhibition offers a new history of art.

by Susan Tallman



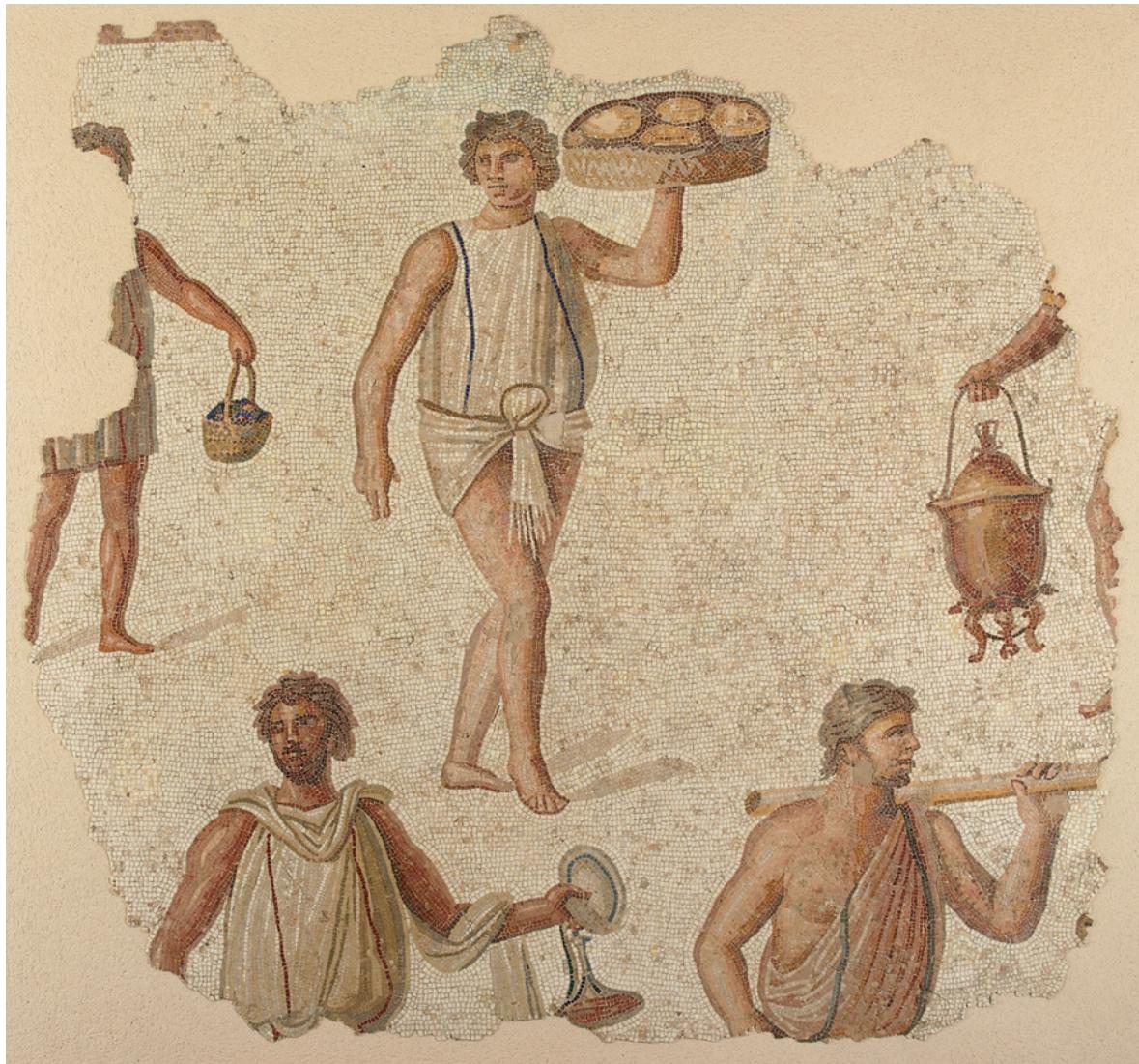
One of the earliest-known icons of the Virgin and Child, second half of the sixth century, from the Holy Monastery of Saint Catherine, probably made in Constantinople (Holy Monastery of Saint Catherine, Sinai)

Viewed benignly, the encyclopedic art museum is a great public library of things, illuminating the brilliant variety and shared impulses of our species, and promoting intercultural understanding and admiration. Viewed less benignly, it has been cast as the well-spoken child of imperialist [shopaholics and kleptomaniacs](#) who appropriated the art of other people to tell flattering tales about themselves.

Museums have long contested this characterization on grounds both pragmatic (their ability to protect and care for the world's treasures) and high-minded—the belief that convening things from everywhere enables them to tell a sweeping, global story about what it is to be human. The 2002 “Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums,” signed by the directors of 18 world-famous institutions, put the claim succinctly: “Museums serve not just the citizens of one nation but the people of every nation.” It’s a fine sentiment, but the fact that every one of those 18 museums is in Europe or North America raises obvious questions about just how those peoples of other nations are being served. This geographic lopsidedness has led critics to challenge not only the museums’ rights to the objects in their care, but also the histories those objects have been arranged to illustrate.

From the January/February 2020 issue: The fight to decolonize the museum

If “every traveller is necessarily the hero of his own story,” as the Scottish novelist John Galt observed in 1812, then so is every culture. The encyclopedic museum as we know it, like the academic disciplines of art history and archaeology that underpin it, first flourished in the 19th century. Intentionally or not, it has tended to [convey a particular worldview](#), described by the Senegalese philosopher Souleymane Bachir Diagne as a “unilinear path, leading from Athens to Rome, and from Rome to London, Paris, or Heidelberg … Everything else outside of it is a curiosity.” There is a center and a periphery. All roads and grand marble staircases lead to us.



A floor mosaic in a villa near Carthage depicting preparations for a feast, late second century (© RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY. Photograph by Hervé Lewandowski.)

“[Africa & Byzantium](#),” the unexpected and revelatory exhibition now at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (it travels to the Cleveland Museum of Art in April), presents an alternative to that unilinear path—something more like a transit map, where different lines run in parallel, loop, diverge, and offer various points of transfer. Organized by Andrea Myers Achi, the Met’s associate curator of Byzantine art, the show and its catalog share an ambitious goal: “to present a narrative of Africa unconnected to colonialism and its legacies.”

Having thus dismissed the dominant framework that Western institutions have used to understand Africa (a framework that serves to keep the West at the center of the conversation, as perps if no longer heroes), this densely packed show surveys roughly 1,500 years and millions of square miles, telling viewers something about empire, something about religion, and a good deal about the human compulsion to make beautiful things. It offers no simple takeaway—no coherent tale of splendor and decline (or vice versa), no commanding center and fawning periphery. Instead it demonstrates how [an encyclopedic museum can be part of the solution](#), rather than just a metonym for the problem.

Cleopatra and Mark Antony notwithstanding, one might forget that the Roman empire's encirclement of the Mediterranean included its African shores. That those African provinces remained more or less united under Byzantine governance for three centuries, from Emperor Constantine the Great's reign (306–37 C.E.) onward, may come as complete news. The [1,000-year history of Byzantium](#)—the predominantly Greek-speaking continuation of the Roman empire, whose capital Constantine relocated to what is now Istanbul—has been the subject of previous game-changing exhibitions at the Met, but the current show is not really concerned with goings-on in Constantinople. Its purview is the swath of Africa that once lay within Byzantium's sphere of influence—largely Christian territories that stretched from Ethiopia (which was never part of the empire) to Morocco (which was).

Visitors to the exhibition would do well to leave at the door any contemporary assumptions about the geography of wealth, power, religious animosity, and ethnic identification.

The opportunity presented by “Africa & Byzantium” is not just to see how African artists made things that are easy to admire using our usual standards, though those abilities are demonstrated fulsomely. It is also to stretch those standards in new directions. After all, for generations, Byzantium itself was seen as an error, extraneous to the triumphant saga of European civilization from Greco-Roman antiquity through the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, and eventual global domination. The 18th-century English historian Edward Gibbon thought Byzantium “a tedious and uniform tale of weakness and misery.” In the following century, the historian W. E. H. Lecky went further,

calling it “the most thoroughly base and despicable form that civilisation has yet assumed.” Its gilded icons, with their sad eyes and balletic limbs, may have been necessary stepping stones to Giotto and Botticelli and all the rest, but to many they appeared crude, repetitious, and more than a little blingy. Those earlier exhibitions at the Met played no small part in turning this perception around, and “Africa & Byzantium” extends the effort both chronologically and geographically.

The African provinces were important to Rome and Byzantium not just as pieces of some proto-Great Game strategy, but because they were rich. The breadbasket of the empire, North Africa and Egypt were home to vibrant, cosmopolitan societies and diverse economies. For Romans of Constantine’s era, [Britain was a hardship post](#); Africa was a plum. A century after Constantine, Saint Augustine, a Berber from what is now Algeria, asked: “Who now knows which peoples in the Roman Empire were what, since we have all become Romans?” Two centuries after that, Emperor Heraclius considered moving the capital from Constantinople to Carthage, in present-day Tunisia. Visitors to the exhibition would do well to leave at the door any contemporary assumptions about the geography of wealth, power, religious animosity, and ethnic identification.

[From the September 2006 issue: The road from Ravenna](#)

The curators have scored an impressive array of loans, and the exhibition opens with [a spectacular mosaic sent by the Louvre](#). In tesserae that once graced the floor of a villa near Carthage, life-size, remarkably individuated servants wander about portaging food and drink, each casting his own abbreviated shadow on the floor he is built into. Display cases nearby abound with further evidence of the good life: gold jewelry chockablock with pearls and gems; intricate textiles adorned with mounted warriors, dancing maenads, and a vision of Artemis hovering in midair. A woman is shown on a painted shroud dressed in a simple shift and fetching red socks of translucent silk, probably imported from India.

Another large mosaic, known as the “Lady of Carthage,” portrays a female figure holding a scepter and raising her right hand in benediction. A nimbus illuminates her updo, but over her shoulders she wears a man’s cloak, fastened with an imperial pin. This mash-up of allusions—imperial

authority, Christian divinity, male and female—has never been decisively resolved: It has been read as [a portrait of Empress Theodora](#), a personification of the city of Carthage, an allegory of imperial power, and perhaps an archangel.



Mosaic of the “Lady of Carthage,” Carthage, fourth–fifth century (© Musée National de Carthage)

For all its visual dazzle, this is a measured and scholarly show, and the three dozen experts who contributed to the exhibition catalog are forthright about

how little is known. Given the geographic expanse of Byzantine trade, even basic information about where and when an object was produced can be uncertain. Found in one place, it might have been made thousands of miles away, and slapdash archaeology in the 19th and early 20th centuries makes it hard to date things with any accuracy.

All of this complicates interpretation. The exhibition includes mosaics from a site in the Tunisian town of Hammam-Lif. Discovered by French soldiers in 1883, the building's elaborate floor mosaics were hacked into sections and sold off. The ones in the exhibition, on loan from the Brooklyn Museum, include a lithe date palm and an affable lion amid flowers that could have adorned many different kinds of buildings, but also two menorahs. These identified the building as a synagogue and not, as originally assumed, a church, though scholars question the presumption of "strict aesthetic differences between so-called Jewish, Christian and Pagan symbols." Nor is it clear how worshippers would have used this floor. As the art historian Liz James points out in the catalog, many floor mosaics included sacred imagery and patron portraits. "Were these also walked over, brushed and scrubbed clean, or overlaid with tables and chairs? Did they offer the enslaved a chance to grind their heels into the slaveholders' face"? It would be nice to know.

What is clear is that over the centuries, imitation and invention ebbed and flowed across these expansive territories as Egyptians and Greeks, Latin-speaking Jews and Berber-speaking Christians came and went. The elites, at least, were multilingual, and religious artifacts could be surprisingly interdenominational. A Nubian pot from the first centuries of the Common Era is decorated with a stamp that seems to split the difference between an Egyptian ankh and a Christian cross; an oil lamp bears the image of a menorah as well as Christ stomping on the head of a serpent. The face of the "Lady of Carthage," whoever she is meant to be, has the same oversize eyes, strong brows, long nose, and pursed lips as the goddess Isis in a second-century Egyptian panel painting. Having made her way from the Egyptian pantheon to Greco-Roman cult status, Isis—often shown with her infant son, Horus, in her lap—then provided a smooth segue to the imagery of the Virgin Mary.

Christianity came early to Africa. Mark the Evangelist established the See of Alexandria in the mid-first century, and Christian monasticism originally flourished in the Egyptian desert. The remains of the Egyptian martyr Saint Menas were the focus of a thriving pilgrimage route centuries before Santiago de Compostela, and flasks stamped with his image, meant for holding oil or water that had touched the relics, have been unearthed as far afield as Cheshire, in the north of England. Four appear in the exhibit.

The Holy Monastery of Saint Catherine, in Sinai, was another popular site of pilgrimage (despite her frequent blondness in European painting, Catherine was also Egyptian), and its remoteness was crucial to the preservation of early Christian art during the iconoclasms that swept through Byzantium in the eighth and ninth centuries. Most of the icons that survived were (and still are) in its collection. Several have been loaned to this exhibition, including a [famous sixth-century painting of the Virgin and Child](#), perhaps the oldest such image in existence. Flanked by standing soldier-saints, a somber Mary holds her baby in her lap. Behind her, a pair of angels lean left and right to make room for the small hand of God reaching down from the top edge, as if to adjust a bit of drapery. The arrangement is regimental in its symmetry, yet the faces are subtle and expressive, and the infant far more natural in attitude than the wizened homunculi that crop up in so many European pictures. In turning her large eyes upward and to the left, looking beyond us to something we cannot see, Mary, too, echoes that second-century Isis.

By the time of the iconoclasms, Africa had slipped from Byzantine control. The Alexandrian Church broke away in 451, and the arrival of Islamic armies in the seventh century eventually expelled the empire from the continent. Roughly a third of “Africa & Byzantium” postdates African Byzantium itself. Religion replaces imperial oversight as the connecting thread: Manuscripts and icons from monasteries within Islamic Egypt attest to enduring Christian communities. There’s a wonderful Saint George with a head of pom-pom-like curls, painted centuries after the Islamic conquest. But the exhibition turns south to the Christian kingdoms of Nubia (now southern Egypt and northern Sudan) and Aksum (contemporary Ethiopia and Eritrea), never ruled by Byzantium but part of Byzantine Africa’s cultural and religious milieu.

Both were early adopters of Christianity, and both were wealthy and well connected, controlling trade routes that stretched from the Sahara to the Indian Ocean. Nubia, which once supplied pharaohs to Egypt, later oriented itself to Hellenistic Greece and then to Byzantium. For more than 1,000 years, Greek was its lingua franca, and its kings were known by the Greek word *basiliskos*. The exhibition includes pottery painted with delicate vines in a Greek manner, silver crowns with allusions to Horus and Isis, and an astonishing bridal chest, in the form of a multistory building, its 21 pedimented windows fitted with ivory panels. Its mythological decoration mixes Aphrodite-like naked women, tumbling men, and satyrs (penises prominently featured). Abjuring gold and glittering glass mosaics, these beautifully constructed artifacts are less flashy than much of what precedes them in the show.



Wall painting of Bishop Petros protected by Saint Peter, Nubia, late tenth century (© National Museum, Warsaw)

The most commanding presence in “Africa & Byzantium” is a tenth-century Nubian bishop, Petros, portrayed in a wall painting with his namesake, Saint Peter. Resplendent in his liturgical robes, Petros stands in front of the saint, who places paternal hands on his shoulders. Facing forward, larger than life, Petros and Peter look out at us with serene and sober assurance. The bishop’s densely patterned robe, brown hands, and dark head stand out sharply against Peter’s pale cloak, white skin, and beard, which are set against the saint’s dark nimbus and crown.

What this attention to skin color signifies is an open question. Might it be an attempt at realism—distinguishing a saint native to the Levant from a local clergyman? Or perhaps a way to distinguish the spiritual realm from the material one? (Saint Peter is so wan, he’s almost see-through.)

Contemporary instincts—to construe attention to skin color, for example, as an assertion of racial or ethnic hierarchies—offer little guidance for images made centuries before colonialism’s heyday. Egyptian textiles used black silhouettes for figures that might be intended to be Nubians or “black Indians,” as well as for the flying Artemis. The servants in the spectacular mosaic from the Louvre might be the cast for a Benetton ad: light-skinned, dark-skinned, curly-haired, straight-haired, all impressively buff—though all most likely enslaved.

The last of the Nubian kingdoms collapsed in 1504, having outlived Byzantium by half a century (Constantinople [fell to the Ottomans](#) in 1453). Ethiopia, the second-oldest Christian state in the world (after Armenia), remained the last Christian empire in Africa. It took this status to heart: “As the sun is greater than the moon … so the faith of Ethiopians is greater than that of other Christians,” the 15th-century emperor Zara Yaqob is said to have proclaimed. Though distinct in many practices, the Ethiopian Church received its patriarchs from Alexandria and shared its appreciation of devotional images. But while Egyptian Christians now resided within Islamic caliphates, medieval Ethiopia thrived as a dynamic entrepôt.

Trade and travel would have brought Ethiopian artists face-to-face with Byzantine-style icons, Western European painting, Islamic decorative objects, and Indian textiles. A Venetian painter, Nicolò Brancaleon, worked in the Ethiopian court around 1500. When the Jesuits arrived in 1557, hoping to convert the empire to Roman Catholicism, they brought European

engravings, and though their conversion effort eventually failed, the engravings left their mark, especially one depicting a Virgin and Child icon in the basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore, in Rome.

The central panel of a large 17th-century Ethiopian triptych mimics the distinctive pose of the Roman icon—the child is leaning back in Mary’s crossed arms to gaze at her as he makes a gesture of blessing—but everything else is different. In place of the engraving’s black and white, there is bold color. In place of the studious proportions and stony mien, we get oversize heads with theatrical eyes, sidelong glances, and dynamic gestures. Pattern enlivens clothing, backdrops, even nimbus. Stasis gives way to vibrant action.

The degree to which Ethiopians were open to new ideas while remaining utterly self-assured in their own aesthetic is manifest in a pocket-size diptych that ties together (literally, with cord) an Ethiopian Saint George and a Virgin and Child, probably painted in Crete. With her gold backdrop, elongated fingers, and complex drapery, the Virgin follows a typically Byzantine model. The mounted Saint George, in contrast, comes to life in animated outline, his cloak airborne behind him, taut as a bat wing, rather than falling in soft pleats. Bypassing the naturalism that tethered Byzantine art to Hellenistic Greece at one end and the Renaissance at the other, Ethiopian images invite the viewer’s eye to dance across a surface, leaping from point to point.



A diptych of Saint George and the Virgin and Child, Ethiopia, c. 1500 (Saint George), and possibly Crete, 1480–90 (Virgin and Child) (Courtesy of the Met)

This is not what European painting has taught us to expect from reverential art, and it raises the vexed question of what constitutes greatness in a world not our own. About 600 years ago, Western Europeans developed a taste for illusionistic depictions of figures in space. Even now, Liz James notes in the catalog, this preference influences the evaluation of antique mosaics, awarding favored status to those that look most like paintings created centuries later. “We might do better,” she proposes, “thinking about ‘good’ and ‘poor’ mosaics in terms of the technical skill involved.”

Much of art history, however, is predicated on the idea that style can be a proxy for a worldview. Knowing something about the one may change how we see the other. In the case of Ethiopia, a continuous, well-documented religious tradition is here to help. In his catalog essay, Jacopo Gnisci, a lecturer at University College London, reproduces two 14th-century crucifixion scenes: a gilded Byzantine icon of the contorted Christ, dead on the cross between two grieving mourners, and an Ethiopian parchment painting in which the two thieves crucified with Jesus turn startled eyes on

an empty central cross, while the Lamb of God floats above. These divergent portrayals illuminate the pivotal theological dispute about the nature of Christ that had [separated the African Church from its parent](#) in 451. The Byzantine artist, believing Christ to be both human and divine, emphasizes corporeal suffering. The Ethiopian artist, viewing Christ as entirely divine, pictures only the transcendent spirit. Where the first aims “to evoke a sense of mourning,” Gnisci writes, the other frames “the episode in triumphal terms.” Sprightliness of style, it turns out, can be another form of reverence.

“Africa & Byzantium” contains much that will capture attention and immediately impress, and it’s also full of things that won’t—tiny coins and shards of pottery inscribed in languages few visitors will be able to decipher. But this is inherent in the mission of the encyclopedic museum as well—a reminder that not everything can be yours at a glance. Finding the magic may require real work.

And yet, how can you not warm to the ratty, [place-mat-size papyrus bearing a Coptic spell](#) (the label explains) for acquiring a beautiful voice, with its swift sketch of someone waving their arms with the frantic energy of a Roz Chast character? Bishop Petros’s image may inspire awe, the Virgin and Child from Saint Catherine’s may stop us in our tracks with the intensity of its devotion, but the papyrus reaches out like a hand across time. We may no longer write spells on papyrus, but a Google search returns more than 30,000 hits for videos on how to acquire a beautiful voice.

Empire makes for compelling narratives, in art as in movies, and museums have long structured themselves in various heliotropic halls—Egypt, Greece, Paris, New York—each with its own shining cultural sun toward which the outer bits turn, recipients of light rather than instigators. But we all know that cultural production is less like a solar system or an org chart than a boisterous Venn diagram.

[From the April 2021 issue: No, really, are we Rome?](#)

Passing through the Met’s Greek and Roman galleries after “Africa & Byzantium,” I found that artworks that had gone unnoticed on the way in now popped out with a fresh “I think you’ve met my cousin” semi-familiarity. Upstairs, the museum has reopened its European-paintings

galleries with an entirely new hanging. Echoing Souleymane Bachir Diagne, the text that greets visitors acknowledges, “Art has often been enlisted to promote a unified idea of Europe, a ‘Western tradition’ contrasted with the rest of the globe,” and promises to draw out “the inconsistencies and tattered edges of long-dominant storylines.” The Raphaels and Rembrandts are still there, but so are 18th-century paintings made in South America and 21st-century ones made in North America. And at the center of the medieval hall that functions as the nave of this cathedral of art stands a display of elaborate Ethiopian metalwork crosses. Behind them, in December, stood the Met’s enormous Christmas tree.

This article appears in the [March 2024](#) print edition with the headline “The Disorienting Beauty of ‘Africa & Byzantium.’”

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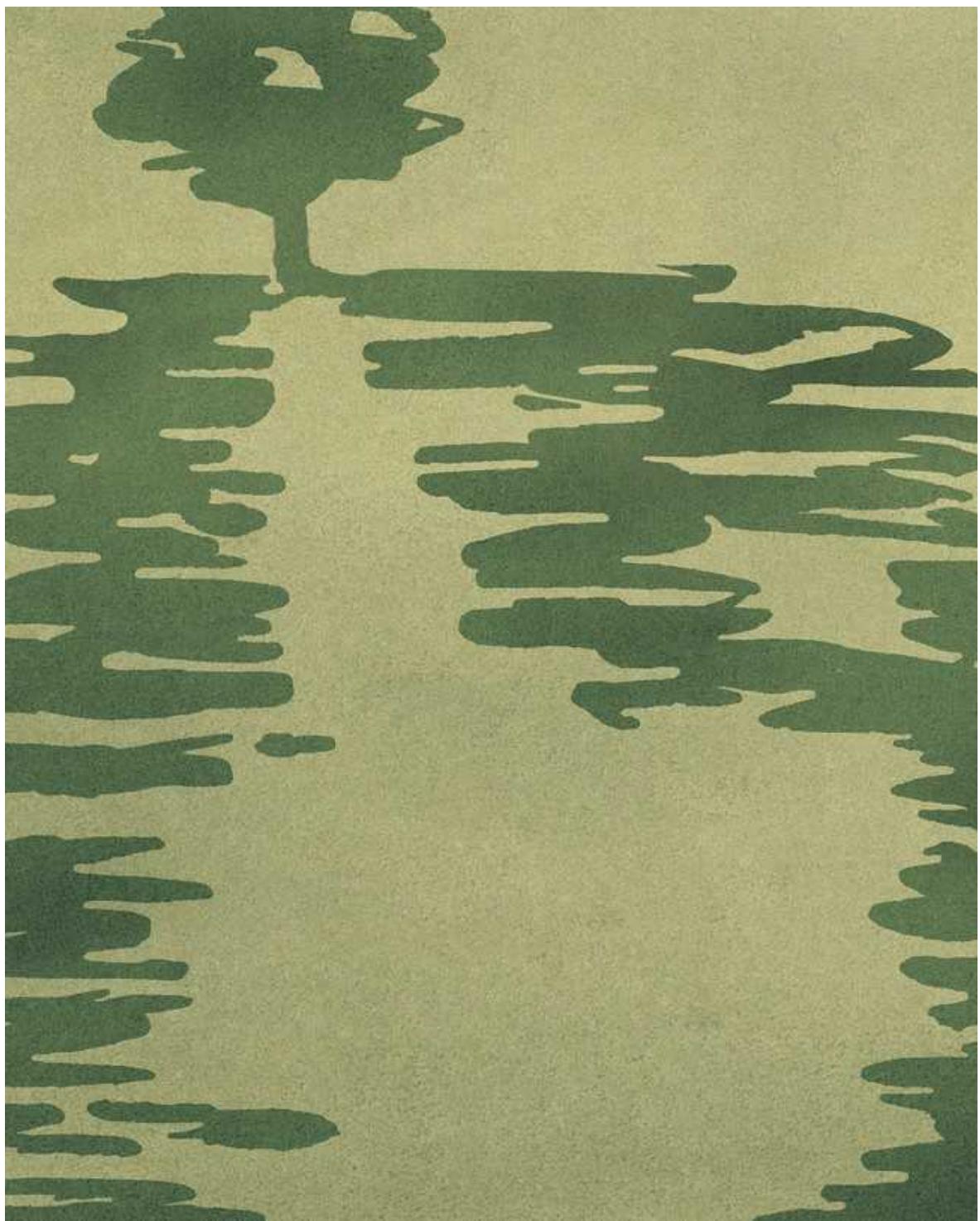
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Marilynne Robinson Makes the Book of Genesis New

In her hands, scripture becomes a precursor to the novel.

by Judith Shulevitz



Marilynne Robinson's novels always leave me with a visceral impression of celestial light. Heavenly bulbs seem to switch on at climactic moments, showing a world as undimmed as it was at Creation. "I love the prairie! So often I have seen the dawn come and the light flood over the land and

“everything turn radiant at once,” writes John Ames, the narrator of *Gilead*, an elderly preacher approaching death as if returning to the birth of being. “And God saw the light, that it was good,” the Bible says, and Ames sees that it’s good, too: “that word ‘good’ so profoundly affirmed in my soul that I am amazed I should be allowed to witness such a thing.”

A primordial sun also shines upon Jack Boughton, the prodigal son of Robinson’s *Gilead* quartet (*Gilead*, *Home*, *Lila*, and *Jack*). In *Home*, Jack restores the broken-down family car, an old DeSoto, buffing its chrome detailing to its former resplendence. It’s the only time we ever see the shame-riddled Jack truly at ease. He proudly slides the DeSoto out of the barn and “[floats] away, gentling the gleaming dirigible through the shadows of arching elm trees, light dropping on it through their leaves like confetti.” He’s bathed in grace, and when he takes his sister and father for a ride in the countryside, the drab Iowa fields have become an Eden, bright and fertile: “The terraced hills glittered with new corn.”

From the October 2020 issue: Marilynne Robinson’s prodigal son

Robinson is one of the greatest living Christian novelists, by which I don’t just mean that she’s a Christian—though she is an active one—but that her great novels (five so far) and her versatile, morally stringent essays (four collections and a book of lectures, on subjects including Darwinism and the Puritans as well as her own childhood) reflect a deep knowledge and love of Christianity. Robinson, who has taught Bible classes and preached at her church in Iowa City, Iowa, is a learned lay theologian of the Calvinist variety. In many of her essays and particularly in *Gilead*, she makes us aware of a John Calvin who does not at all conform to his reputation as a dour ascetic.

An aesthetic appreciation of the Bible doesn’t diminish its holiness, Robinson says; on the contrary, artistry is divine.

Robinson’s Calvin revels in creaturely delights. This Calvin says that we discover God’s goodness through the pleasures of the senses: “We see, indeed, the world with our eyes, we tread the earth with our feet, we touch innumerable kinds of God’s works with our hands, we inhale a sweet and pleasant fragrance from herbs and flowers,” he writes in his *Commentary on*

Genesis. Calvin says that Moses—traditionally understood to be the author of the Bible’s first five books—makes a good artistic choice when he begins his narrative by conjuring up God’s dazzling cosmos ex nihilo, rendering him “visible to us in his works.” Calvin’s Moses, like Robinson, knows how to light God.

Now Robinson has written her own exegesis of the first book of the Bible, called *Reading Genesis*. It follows Calvin’s in treating scripture as art. She knows that such literary analysis may offend modern-day literalists: “To suggest craft in the making of sacred text disturbs some people, as if the Holy Spirit would never descend to the strategies of nuance and emphasis that heighten the intelligibility of a story.” But an aesthetic appreciation of the Bible doesn’t diminish its holiness, she says; on the contrary, artistry is divine. Robinson derives this lesson from Genesis 2:9, finding it in the second story of Creation. God, designing Eden, puts in trees. The first thing the verse tells us is that they’re “pleasant to the sight.” Only after that are we told that they provide good things to eat. Robinson notes that God gave us the gift of enjoyment—which was “nothing less than a sharing of His mind with us.”

This is the stuff of sermons—the kind I’d willingly sit through. But Robinson is also up to something that should interest her secular readers. She’s working out a poetics. In her deft hands, Genesis becomes a precursor to the novel—the domestic novel, as it happens, which is the kind she writes. Perhaps I’m making her sound self-glorifying. She’s not. She makes her case.

Robinson’s main claim is that Genesis invented a kind of realism—this-worldly, nonmythological—remarkably akin to our understanding of the term. This is outrageous, impossible to defend—if you’re a literary historian. But she’s not doing history. She’s writing an essay about biblical style and its implications. She wants us to see how radical scripture is compared with its sources. For one thing, it’s human-centered. The Babylonian epics that the Bible recasts—the Enuma Elish, the *Epic of Gilgamesh*—tell the origin myths of a passel of quarrelsome gods. The Enuma Elish’s gods created people so that they would serve their Creators—build their temples, grow their food. “There is nothing exalted in this, no thought of enchanting these nameless drudges with the beauty of the world,” Robinson writes. In

Genesis, by contrast, humankind is made in God's image; all the sublimity of biblical Creation seems to be meant for its benefit. We move from gods indifferent to our well-being to a God obsessively focused on us.

Why that happens is not immediately clear. The protagonists of Genesis are unlikely candidates for God's solicitude. One innovation of the Western novel is to shift the emphasis from great men and women to ordinary people in ordinary circumstances. But the biblical author is also interested in unexceptional folk. The founding fathers and mothers of Israel aren't kings or warriors or, like Moses, a former prince who rescues an enslaved nation. The patriarchs raise sheep. Indeed, God seems to pick his covenantal partner, Abraham, at random. Why bind himself to a son of idolaters "drifting through the countryside, looking for grazing for his herds," in Robinson's words? Why not the next guy?

Apologists wave away that theological conundrum—the apparent contingency of election—by claiming that Abraham is unusually righteous, Kierkegaard's exemplary "knight of faith." But if Abraham is indeed thoroughly good, he's the exception. Every other major character in Genesis has an unsavory side. God made a covenant with Noah, too, for instance, and although he is chosen to survive the flood because he is a righteous man, he isn't afterward. He gets dead drunk, and his son Ham sees him naked in his tent. Ham tells his brothers; they enter the tent backwards, averting their eyes, and cover him with a blanket. Noah wakes up, feels humiliated, blames Ham, and lays a curse—not on Ham but on Ham's son Canaan, who is condemned to be a slave to Ham's brothers. The Bible offers no excuse for Noah's cruelty, or for many other misdeeds committed by its chosen people. "There is nothing for which the Hebrew writers are more remarkable than their willingness to record and to ponder the most painful passages in their history," Robinson writes.

[Read: Marilynne Robinson on democracy, reading, and religion in America](#)

That history, with its providential arc, works itself out through family dramas of this kind, more than it does through cosmic events like the flood. At first, both share the stage: The glorious tale of Creation segues to Adam and Eve nervously fobbing off responsibility for eating the apple. Their son Cain commits fratricide, and his descendants bequeath lyres, pipes, and

metallurgy to humankind. The genealogies culminate in Abraham, the first patriarch, whose household is made turbulent by rivalry among wives and among siblings.

Then the tone grows hushed. Everything in the background fades, leaving only God, Abraham, Sarah, their household, and their occasional journeys. “As soon as the terms are set for our existence on earth,” Robinson writes, “the gaze of the text falls on one small family, people who move through the world of need and sufficiency, birth and death, more or less as we all do.” Of course, unlike us, they speak with God, but that, Robinson adds, in a sneaky homiletic twist, is “a difference less absolute than we might expect.”

Robinson thus redefines realism to encompass the encounter with the divine. Furthermore, if she can bring us to acknowledge that biblical characters are realistic, that they portray us, then we should probably admit that we may, like them, be God’s interlocutors, whether we know it or not.

The genius of *Reading Genesis* lies in its collapse of the space between the holy and the mundane, the metaphysical and the physical. God resides in commonplace things; his sublime purposes course through the small-bore tragedies of unremarkable people, to be revealed in the fullness of time. God is himself and the world is itself—we are not speaking of pantheism here—but they are also one. This is a very Christian mystery that Robinson’s ushering us into, and the proper response is awe at the hallowed world she shows us, at the loveliness—and shrewdness—of the idea of divine indwelling. She does a lot with it. For one thing, it allows her to dismiss scientific skepticism of religion as not only reductive but unimaginative. How can “sacredness in existence” be disproved? Sanctity is immanent, not quantifiable.

Above all, Robinson’s God-infused theory of reality is also a theology of realistic fiction—of *her* brand of realistic fiction, in which the physical may suddenly be revealed as numinous and the spirit inheres in the flesh. I want to be clear: At no point in this book does Robinson talk about herself, her novels, or the novel as a form. That’s not the sort of thing she’d do. This is me reading her reading. I see Robinson in her depiction of the biblical author, who in turn sometimes seems to merge with God. What she has in common with both the writer or writers of the Bible and God, as she depicts them, is a deep tenderness toward the subjects of their concern. “The

remarkable realism of the Bible,” she writes, “the voices it captures, the characterization it achieves, are products of an interest in the human that has no parallel in ancient literature.” Nor, I would add, in a great deal of modern literature. This boundless and merciful interest in the human is what distinguishes her.

Two characters seem to inspire the most pity and love in Robinson: the patriarch Jacob and her own creation, Jack Boughton. Both sin greatly and suffer greatly. As a young man, Jacob tricks his older brother, Esau, into selling him his birthright (the right to lead the family, and a double portion of the estate), and then straight-up cheats Esau out of their father’s blessing. A lifetime of exile and intermittent misfortune follows. Jacob matures into a more thoughtful, mostly penitent man, but his punishment does not end there. Ten of his 12 sons turn out to be worse than he ever was. At one point, they collude in slaughtering the men of a village and carrying off its women. Jacob commits the offense of favoring one son, Joseph, over the others, and in retribution, they throw the boy into a pit, from which he is kidnapped and sold into slavery in Egypt. The brothers present their father with Joseph’s bloodied coat, the implication being that he’d been killed by a wild beast. Jacob never recovers from the blow.

[From the October 2014 issue: Marilynne Robinson, *Lila*, and the power of grace](#)

Jack, like Jacob, is born into a family rich in blessings. His father is a minister who truly tries to do right by him, and Jack’s seven siblings—good, kind people—love and worry about him. Nonetheless, as a child and young man, he commits senseless crimes—mostly petty thefts—seemingly “for the sheer meanness of it,” the Reverend John Ames says in *Gilead*. Then Jack impregnates a very young girl, which tests his all-forgiving father to his limits, and he leaves town, staying away for 20 years. In *Jack*, we learn of his bitter life as a vagrant, and in *Home*, he tries to go home, with mixed success. His presence makes his father anxious, and Jack can’t bear the feeling that everyone mistrusts him. Insofar as forgiveness is on offer, he seems unable to accept it. At one point in *Gilead*, he asks his father and Ames, “Are there people who are simply born evil, live evil lives, and then go to hell?”

The Bible, Robinson declares in the first line of *Reading Genesis*, is “a theodicy, a meditation on the problem of evil.” So are the stories of Jacob and Jack. Why do they do what they do? Were they predestined to hurt others? We know how Jacob’s story ends: Joseph becomes the most powerful man in Egypt after Pharaoh and is in a position to rescue his family from starvation. *This is why you did what you did*, Joseph tells his brothers: *God sent me ahead of you to ensure your survival.*

Robinson, however, is more interested in what happens afterward, when Joseph brings Jacob to meet Pharaoh. His father is curiously querulous. “The great man asks him,” she writes, “How old art thou? Jacob answers that he will not live as long as his fathers did.” Robinson comments:

He has grown very old in fewer years, enduring a life of poverty and sorrow. He is the third patriarch, the eponymous ancestor of the nation Israel, which at that time will not exist for centuries. He has received the great promises of the covenant, including possession of the land he will only return to as an embalmed corpse.

This is the patriarch at his most self-pitying. God’s pact is with Jacob’s children’s children more than it is with him; it doesn’t compensate for his sorrows. Jacob cannot reconcile the double perspective that may be the Bible’s greatest literary achievement: the view from heaven, “with an eye toward unrealized history,” as Robinson puts it, and the view from “a nearer proximity” of the human agent of that history. He has been told the future, but that hasn’t blunted his grief, hasn’t reached “the level of ‘innermost’ feeling.”

Jack, too, struggles with the meaning of his affliction, less certain of vindication than Jacob. In *Home*, he waits for a letter from his estranged wife, whom we sense he sees as his salvation. Robinson torques the suspense: Jack has earned our sympathy—more, to be honest, than Jacob has—and on Jack’s behalf we want answers to his questions. Will the evils he has inflicted, and his terrible loneliness, be shown to have a larger purpose? Will the ways of God be known to men—to *this* poor man?

We get answers, up to a point. It’s not clear that he does. Maybe he has missed his chance; maybe he’ll get another one. Not knowing breaks the

heart, but knowing would be cheating. Besides, as Jacob comes to show, knowing doesn't necessarily help. "The Lord stands back," Robinson writes in *Reading Genesis*; his "divine tact" lets his characters achieve their "full pathos and dignity." Robinson does the same. The Bible was not given to man to simplify complexity, she says, but to speak of it with "a respect and restraint that resists conclusion." Therein lies its beauty, and that of the literature it has inspired. The realism of Genesis, as she says, is "by itself a sort of miracle."

This article appears in the [March 2024](#) print edition with the headline "How Marilynne Robinson Reads Scripture."

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The Nation Still Needs a New Birth in Liberty

Readers respond to our December 2023 issue.



To Reconstruct the Nation

In the December 2023 issue, The Atlantic [revisited Reconstruction, America's most radical experiment.](#)

I've just finished reading "To Reconstruct the Nation" from cover to cover. I found it poignant, inspiring, and a necessary corrective to [the 1901 series](#),

which drowned out the sagacious words of Frederick Douglass with those of Woodrow Wilson and the naysayer historians of the Dunning School.

The articles illuminate a side of American history not covered in many contemporary textbooks; they detail the pernicious aftereffects of slavery and the creation of so-called Black Codes. [Anna Deavere Smith's *This Ghost of Slavery*](#) made a compelling case about the racist roots of America's juvenile-justice system. Few know the history of how Elizabeth Turner was taken from her mother through legal means, or how the Orphans' Court favored slavers and often found emancipated Black parents incapable of taking care of their children.

This issue should be read in schools. It's been more than 161 years since Abraham Lincoln read his Gettysburg Address, but his speech still rings true today. "The nation shall have a new birth of freedom," Lincoln proclaimed. Today, the struggle to protect our democracy from usurpers and confederates trying to suppress democracy continues a second time.

Rafael Castillo
San Antonio, Texas

I am one of "today's Reconstructionists" [whom Peniel E. Joseph envisions](#). As we continue to struggle to advance the values that evince the American ideal, I often think about the lessons of Reconstruction. Many working today for racial and economic progress, as I am, encounter the same white fatigue that Ida B. Wells knew firsthand. The ending of affirmative action; the backlash to diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts; and a shifting philanthropic landscape leave us without many valuable tools as we grasp for new ways to complete the unfinished work of Reconstruction. I can only imagine how daunting it must have felt for Wells to tell "America a story it needed, but did not want, to hear." In many ways, we as a country still need to hear that story.

Jennifer Njuguna
West Orange, N.J.

I write in praise of your December 2023 issue. Rarely has there been journalism this insightful, educational, enjoyable, and compelling. How remarkable to learn about Woodrow Wilson's [outrageous views](#) in *The Atlantic* in 1901, the [wonders of the Fisk choir](#), and the [tears in the eyes](#) of Lonnie G. Bunch III. And then to reflect on the waves of progress and patterns of setbacks that have brought us to the current turmoil in this nation. Perhaps future generations may see the Obama and Biden years as having been, to use Yoni Appelbaum's phrase, an "excess of democracy," followed by an era when a new Redemptionist narrative held sway.

Frank Vogl

Washington, D.C.

I taught seventh- and eighth-grade history and English for 42 years. It was so poignant to read of Lonnie G. Bunch III's [realization](#) that the very "baker tins" his grandmother used for making the crescent- and heart-shaped cookies of his childhood might have been ones used by his enslaved great-great-grandmother Candis, whom Bunch discovered while searching for ancestors in the National Archives. His article underscores how much America owes to institutions dedicated to the preservation of history. Without the Freedmen's Bureau's methodical documentation and the National Archives' careful curation, Bunch's thrilling discovery may never have happened.

Perry Degener

Silver Spring, Md.

Reading the December issue, I was especially moved by how written language can almost compete with music. As Vann R. Newkirk II ended [his article](#) on the Fisk Jubilee Singers' tour that saved the university back in 1871, he chose a recent moment in Drew, Mississippi, when the Mississippi Valley State Singers performed "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing" in such a way that Newkirk, "in that room, blanketed in Mississippi heat ... felt chills."

I was reminded of the time I heard Bernice Johnson Reagon—a founding member of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee's Freedom

Singers and, later, the a cappella ensemble Sweet Honey in the Rock—talk about African American music. When it's "done right, you can get up on it and walk out!" she said. Language like Newkirk's goes a long way toward making one eager to hear the singing itself.

Margaret Earley Whitt
Denver, Colo.

Vann R. Newkirk II's [article](#) "The Years of Jubilee" brought me back to when another group of singers came to my private school in 1939, when I was 9. These were the Hampton Singers, from the Hampton Institute, a historically Black college in Hampton, Virginia. Like the Fisk Jubilee Singers, the Hampton Singers were founded to raise money for their institute. The whole school was in attendance, and we sat cross-legged on the floor of the only room big enough to hold us all. I was a new student, and I had never heard the Hamptons before. But the other students were enthusiastically calling out favorites that they remembered. The group sang "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" and "Deep River." But the song my classmates called for most eagerly was "Juba," more of a spoken-word poem, delivered rapidly with the slapping of thighs, hips, chests, and arms. If my memory still holds, it recounted how white people oppressed African Americans: "We grow the corn, / They give us husk. / We bake the bread, / They give us crust." My classmates and I did not know what oppression was. We just loved the song.

Inviting the Hampton Singers was a sign of how progressive our school was in 1939, compared with many other private schools. And looking back, the school was progressive in other ways; we accepted many Jewish students at a time when other private schools either had a quota or did not accept any. But my school did not have any African American students; they attended the public school in town. As progressive as it was, my school did not dare recruit African American students, lest white parents remove their children. I didn't meet an African American student until I attended Radcliffe College, where my class of 230 young women had just one African American. Schools and universities have come a long way in the 85 years since 1939. But there is still a long way to go. Perhaps the next step is educating the Supreme Court!

Maida Barton Follini
Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada

Behind the Cover

In this month's cover story, “[American Cowardice](#),” Jamie Thompson reports on the case of Scot Peterson, the sheriff's deputy who in 2018 stood outside Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School during one of the deadliest school shootings in American history. Why didn't Peterson act, and what would it take to train police to confront active shooters? For our [cover image](#), we asked the photographer Timothy O'Connell to capture the school from a distance, as it could have initially appeared to a responder. The result is this ominous, arresting image of a site of unspeakable violence.

— **Bifen Xu**, Senior Photo Editor

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Poetry

- [Two Apricots](#)

Two Apricots

by Ama Codjoe



In Kadıköy market, their money already
mingled, someone fished for coins
and handed a small few to the grocer; the other
inspected the apricots and kept the one
less beautiful. Each revealed, at their fingertips,
a pink moon. The firmament tasted like
an insatiable kiss. They held each other's hands—
dirty from money, sticky with juice.

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