

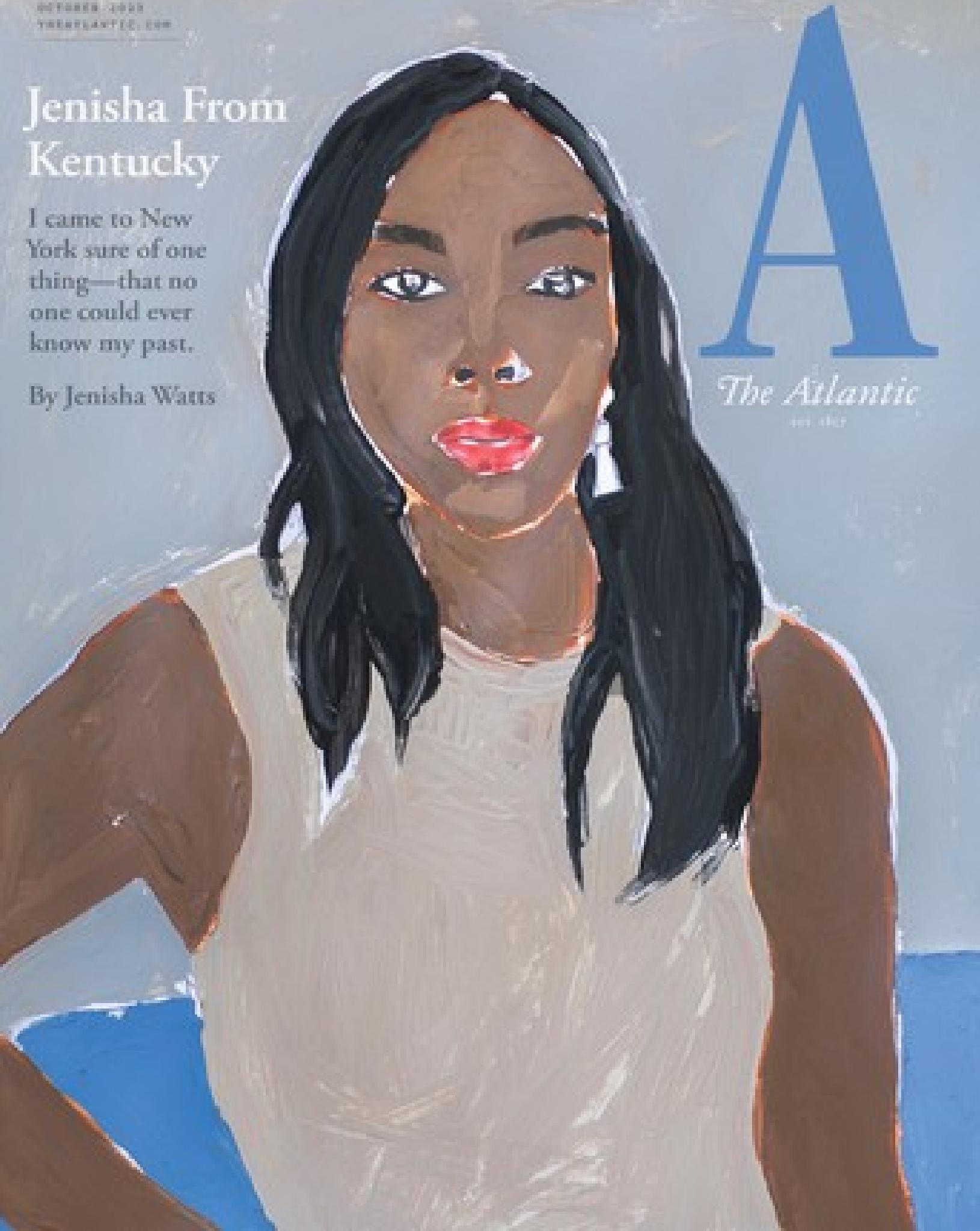
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Jenisha From Kentucky

I came to New York sure of one thing—that no one could ever know my past.

By Jenisha Watts

A
The Atlantic
160 years



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Hip-Hop's Fiercest Critic

The writer dream hampton thinks hip-hop is broken. But she can't stop trying to fix it.

by Spencer Kornhaber



One sunny day in 1995, the Notorious B.I.G. sat in the passenger seat of a black Mercedes-Benz, smoking joints and talking shit. Of course, Biggie did these things on many days during his short lifetime, but on this particular day, a neighborhood friend named dream hampton was in the back seat with a video camera. Wearing Versace sunglasses and a checked purple shirt, the 23-year-old rapper—whose breakout album, *Ready to Die*, had come out the year before—held a chunky cellphone to his ear. He was making plans and

talking about girls, riffing in his lisped woof of a voice. He laughed and brought a square of rolling paper, full of pot leaves, to his lips.

From behind the camera, hampton asked whether he intended to consume their entire bag of weed. Annoyed at the interruption, Biggie mocked her question. Hampton's voice turned sharp. "Why are you going at me today?" she asked. "What's the problem? Do we need to do something before we go on the road? Take this outside?" The video cut to static.

I watched the footage this past June in the basement of hampton's house on Martha's Vineyard. Hampton herself was upstairs. She'd said it would be weird to view her younger self with me; I was surprised that she was willing to show me the footage at all. Hampton is arguably the most significant music journalist of her generation. She started out writing for the hip-hop magazine *The Source* in the 1990s before becoming a contributor to *Vibe* and *The Village Voice*. As hip-hop ascended to global dominance, hampton—whose lowercase byline is inspired by the Black feminist critic bell hooks—challenged it from the inside, treating rap music with the seriousness it deserved while calling out its materialism and misogyny. She co-wrote Jay-Z's landmark 2010 memoir; she produced the 2019 documentary that is [widely credited](#) with landing R. Kelly, the R&B star who contributed many horny refrains to rap songs, in prison after decades of unpunished sexual predation.

Yet I'd arrived two days earlier thinking that the many artists who'd crossed her path would be mostly off-limits for discussion. She has publicly, repeatedly, broken up with hip-hop. She is now primarily a filmmaker and an activist. A profile of her focused on hip-hop, she'd texted me, would be her "nightmare"—a stance that had softened only slightly by the time we met.

Her reluctance is partly a reflection of the life she leads in her early 50s. Although she was born in Detroit, and made her name in New York City, she now spends much of the year on Martha's Vineyard. When she first visited friends there, shortly after the birth of her daughter, in 1996, she experienced a new kind of calm: "I didn't even know what it felt like for a place to bring you peace," she told me. Now wild turkeys wander past the rhododendrons in her yard. Her home thrums with indie rock and NPR news, not Kendrick

Lamar or Ice Spice. Though hip-hop celebrated its 50th birthday this year—commemorating a legendary August 1973 party in the Bronx—she realizes that the genre isn’t exactly courting middle-aged moms. “Even if I could get down on some kneepads and do ‘WAP,’ which I can’t, it’s not for me,” she said, referring to the raunchy choreography associated with Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion’s 2020 hit.

But her turn away from hip-hop is also rooted in pain and frustration. She and Biggie were so close that she asked him to be her daughter’s godfather; he gave his daughter the middle name Dream. She brought him to her film classes at NYU; he gave feedback on her writing. Hampton also hassled Biggie about the sexism of his lyrics while he, out of her view, abused his girlfriend and protégé Lil’ Kim. Maybe he would have evolved; maybe he wouldn’t have—hampton will never know. A drive-by shooter killed him when he was 24, likely because of a rap beef. “I watched someone get killed who would still be alive if it wasn’t for hip-hop,” hampton told me.

As she looks out on today’s hip-hop landscape, hampton still sees plenty of the violent machismo that shaped and endangered her friend—and that she has protested in various ways since she was 19. Hip-hop, in her view, has turned out to be a tool of the same unequal, exploitative system it once defied. In the beginning, she felt that the music had a certain joy and uplift, even as it was “grounded in the funk and the mire” of the country where it was born. Rap seemed to be “reaching for something,” hampton told me, but “maybe the sin was that it was reaching to be a part of America.”



Along with John Legend, hampton (in sunglasses behind him) visits a prison in 2015 while working as a consultant on Legend's campaign against mass incarceration. (Courtesy of dream hampton)

Gradually, over decades, she has focused on other ways of trying to make change: advocacy and film work, which she has [always believed were truer callings for her than writing](#). She's been a liaison between political causes and popular culture, helping John Legend, for instance, launch a campaign against mass incarceration in 2015. She has also directed, written, or produced activist-minded entertainment, such as *Finding Justice*, a 2019 BET documentary series about Black grassroots organizing, and *Freshwater*, a 2022 visual memoir about flooding in Detroit. These efforts have [shaped law](#), litigation, and the thinking of everyday people.

Lately, however, hip-hop has drawn her back in. The genre's 50th-birthday celebrations—a 12-minute Grammys medley, commemorative sneaker lines, a press conference at which New York City Mayor Eric Adams, an ex-cop, quoted Public Enemy's “Fight the Power”—have put a gauzy sheen on a difficult history, and hampton feels obligated to offer a more complicated

view. To that end, she reluctantly [helped produce and direct a new Netflix docuseries](#) about female rappers. And she has been revisiting her archives, including the Biggie footage I saw, with thoughts of how to correct unduly rosy public narratives about the dominant musical form of our time. Once again, she can't help but talk back.

Hampton's first editorial was so controversial that she says Spike Lee offered to lend her some bodyguards. [It ran in 1991 in *The Source*](#), where hampton had been hired as a photo editor, and called out the rapper Dr. Dre for assaulting the 22-year-old TV personality Dee Barnes. Hampton described an emerging pattern of misogyny in the lyrics and behavior of hip-hop's young male stars. In our present era of morally charged cultural criticism, the essay seems—as the Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Rachel Kaadzi Ghansah ([a former assistant of hampton's](#)) put it to me—like a “letter from the future.”

Hampton brought up the article on the first night we met, to mock it. We were standing in her kitchen. Hampton was searing salmon in a cast-iron skillet; a bag of superfood powder slumped on the countertop. The house is bright and airy, with white walls and sculptural furniture. Sitting on her mantel was a Kehinde Wiley bust of a Black boy posed like Louis XVI. One bookshelf featured an “ancestor altar” with black-and-white photos of lost loved ones, including Biggie. Though she lives alone, she has a 10-foot-long dining table both here and in the apartment she keeps in Detroit, for hosting.

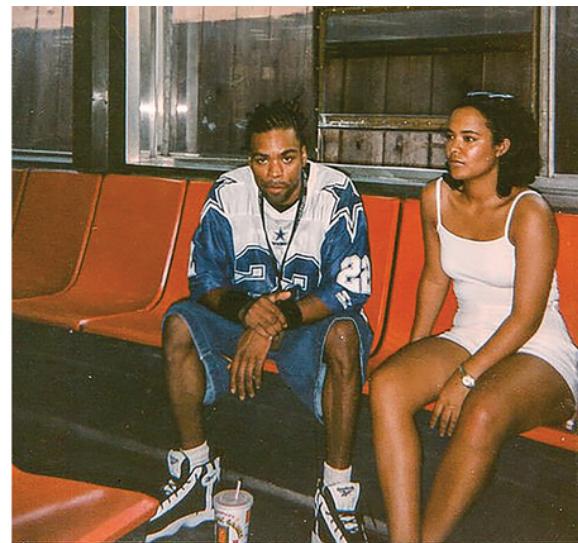
“I was ashamed of being poor,” hampton said. “And hip-hop made me not ashamed.”

Hampton called her Dr. Dre editorial “shrill” and “sanctimonious.” I recited its last line, an assertion that the abuse of Black women “has no place in revolutionary music.” Hampton laughed at her own naivete. “It’s so funny!”

Her youthful belief that hip-hop could upend society, she explained, was born from growing up on the east side of Detroit as the daughter of a mechanic father and a waitress mother. While the crack epidemic turned many of her neighbors into dealers or users, she stayed inside reading bell hooks—captivated by the way hooks fused politics and culture in her criticism, and the way she centered Black women, whose perspective had for

so long been sidelined. Hampton's teen years were spent taking a bus to a magnet high school full of rich kids who threw house parties straight out of a John Hughes movie. The classism of the Reagan era was in the air, but so was a stark counterpoint, the economic deprivation of Black and brown people in American cities. "I was ashamed of being poor," hampton said. "And hip-hop made me not ashamed."

Rap introduced rebellious ideas to hampton's own life. KRS-One's "Beef," an anti-animal-cruelty manifesto, turned hampton into a vegetarian. A Public Enemy lyric taught her about Assata Shakur, the Black Liberation Army activist living as a fugitive in Cuba after being convicted of killing a police officer. After hampton moved to New York to study film at NYU, she co-founded a chapter of the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement, an activist organization inspired by Black radical figures such as Shakur. Hampton began enlisting rappers to play benefit gigs.



Left: hampton on the roof of *The Source*'s offices in New York, 1991. *Right:* Method Man and hampton on the Staten Island Ferry, 1994. (Courtesy of dream hampton)

Journalism gave hampton a broader platform. *The Source* sought to document rap with the energy and ambition that *Rolling Stone* had brought to rock. Informed by the cool wit of Joan Didion and the cadences of rap itself, hampton filled her articles with color and incident, slang and exegesis. In [one 1993 feature](#), she wrote that the rapper Lil Malik, suspicious of what

she was scribbling in her notes, threatened to shoot her: “Gimme the gat, I’m gonna smoke this bitch.” Hampton was unfazed. “I’m not sure if this is the beginning of some new rhyme or if this little boy is trying to get a spanking,” she wrote.

In the male-dominated realm of hip-hop, female rap journalists had to contend with this kind of treatment from their subjects. Hampton came up among a group of “hip-hop feminists,” to use the culture writer Joan Morgan’s term—women who championed the genre while still sharply criticizing it. Even in that fearless cohort, hampton’s voice stood out for its boldness, recalls Kierna Mayo, a former editor in chief of *Ebony* and a longtime friend of hampton’s who also worked with her at *The Source*. “Dream had a certain kind of self-possession that was not easy to miss,” Mayo told me. “I remember being like, *Damn, this girl is not playing games.*”

Then there was her inimitable style. “Every story she wrote left an impression,” Questlove, the drummer for the Roots, told me. As a young musician, he thrilled to hampton’s work for its cinematic portrayal of a world he hoped to join—“I’m talking ’70s-Scorsese levels of description.” When a hampton column in *Spin* described Treach from Naughty by Nature as “one of about three people on the whole planet who gives real hugs,” Questlove made a promise to himself: One day, he’d become important enough to hug dream hampton.

Hampton really did get that close to hip-hop’s major players. She rode Jet Skis at Puffy’s house; Queen Latifah briefly hired her to work at her record label. (Hampton’s daughter, Nina, who is now in her late 20s, told me, “The only person I’ve ever seen her be starstruck about was the Property Brothers.”) A few blocks away from where hampton smoked with Biggie, the members of Digable Planets were recording jazz-inflected anthems about Black pride; hampton dated a rapper in that band, Ishmael Butler. He told me he found her “glamorous in a way, and a little aloof,” yet he was mesmerized by her patter of literary observations, political theory, and wisecracks. “She would say things to you about yourself that nobody else would. But it was always true.” He could feel their conversations seeping into his work. “She was already understanding what hip-hop was in a way

that even people participating in it weren't, in terms of social, economic, and historical context," Butler said.

Being so enmeshed in the culture might have sanded down another writer's edge, but hampton's intimacy with the scene she wrote about lent her a particular authority. She came off as concerned but not condescending, always alive to artists' intentions and environment. When commentators began to pit so-called street rappers such as Biggie against so-called conscious ones such as Digable, hampton took to *The Village Voice* to point out that both acts hailed from the "same hood" and voiced the same struggles. The artists' contrasting sounds, hard and smooth, were equally valid forms of Black self-expression; both artists were responding, in their way, to life in a racist society. As hampton put it in her review, "If they differ, it's hardly on theory."

By the mid-'90s, national politicians were regularly inveighing against rap's indecency, but hampton was developing a more nuanced, and bleaker, complaint. A [1996 double review of now-classic Nas and Jay-Z albums](#) (*It Was Written* and *Reasonable Doubt*, respectively) offered a sweeping sermon on the state of hip-hop. Aesthetically, the music was at its "absolute best and most sophisticated," but philosophically, it was stuck on "hyper-capitalism, numbness, cartoonish misogyny." These were, in her analysis, generational pathologies, instilled by the crack era. Drugs hadn't just brought death and incarceration to poor urban areas—they had created new classes of haves and have-nots. "My fellow tenth graders left for summer break aspiring breakdancers and returned that fall as ballers—dripping in gold," hampton wrote. She yearned for music "about land and liberation rather than suitcases full of Benjamins and ice," but she saw hip-hop as merely repackaging American greed and individualism.

[Read: What incarcerated rappers can teach America](#)

Jay-Z, then a 26-year-old who'd started dealing drugs at age 13, had rarely been written about with such rigor. He called up hampton to chat, sparking a friendship that continues today. In 1998, hampton wrote a masterful [Vibe cover story probing Jay-Z's "murderous, enterprising" persona](#). It culminated with her asking if he was haunted by "the little boys who just wanted to be him" and who ended up dead or imprisoned. Jay-Z

acknowledged some guilt but said, “I shake it off, you know?” Hampton wrote, “Well no, I don’t.”



Left: The Notorious B.I.G. and hampton, 1995. *Right:* Questlove and hampton in Rome, 2001. (Ernie Paniccioli; courtesy of dream hampton)

Rap’s body count was, by that point, a personal source of anguish. Hampton had spent six months profiling Tupac Shakur, the West Coast firebrand who’d been raised around the same Black radicals hampton admired, and they’d become good friends. He used to tease hampton for her unruly hair: “How you get pregnant?” he’d joke. When he was killed in a still-unsolved 1996 shooting, hampton felt a selfish anger: He’d never get to meet her newborn daughter. Six months later, Biggie was murdered in what many believe was a mistaken attempt at revenge for Tupac’s death—a sickening end to a relationship that began with hampton introducing the two men on a music-video set in the early ’90s.

Her *Village Voice* obituaries for both rappers seethed with frustration. [The Biggie essay](#) was an intimate account of grief: “I visit Big’s mother at his condo in Teaneck and she cries a lot. Her whole chest caves in and she can’t breathe.” Hampton’s [Tupac obit](#) was more of an elegy for an idea. She lamented that Tupac didn’t “get his shit together and articulate nationalism for our generation.” She also wrote a vow that she would break and renew for years to come: “I want to say that for me hiphop is dead.”

One morning, hampton took me on a driving tour of the curving, forested roads of the Vineyard, past shingled cottages and rocky bluffs, pointing out the island's various neighborhoods. (Over there, she said, "people wear lobsters on their pants, and they're serious about it.") She told me that she'd had an epiphany after we'd talked the night before. She'd been up late, thinking about Tupac, and suddenly she was thinking about her own brother, and the cowardice of men.

Tupac was on trial for sexual assault when hampton profiled him in 1994. A female fan said that the rapper and his friends had raped her in a New York hotel room; Tupac said that he'd been sleeping in another room while other men attacked her. Eventually Tupac would be convicted of groping the woman but not of raping her. At the time, hampton's speculation was that Tupac hadn't assaulted the accuser, but that he had been awake while the other men did, and he hadn't intervened. When hampton accused Tupac of this over lunch, she said, he went on a sexist tirade, causing the two of them to get kicked out of the restaurant.

What she'd realized the night before our Vineyard drive is that the story of Tupac in that hotel room echoes one of her most difficult memories of her own brother. Hampton's brother, who is one year younger than she is, recurs in her writing as an example of men absorbing hip-hop's messages.

Hampton's [1991 review of N.W.A.'s second album](#) of brutal gangsta rap—"When will this caveboy shit end?" she asked—closed with the image of him, "right hand on his nuts," cranking the volume. In 2012, he [appeared in a personal essay](#) she wrote about the time a group of neighborhood bullies tried to rape her when she was in eighth grade. He had let the boys into their house and, she wrote, stayed downstairs as she fought them off.



Dream Hampton in Los Angeles (Photograph by Erik Paul Howard for *The Atlantic*)

Hampton hasn't spoken to her brother in decades. But I called him, and he picked up on the first ring. "I feel bad for what happened," he said, of the night Hampton was attacked. He disagreed with some details of her account, saying that he entered the room a few minutes after the violence began, at which point the boys stopped. On the whole, he expressed a mix of sadness and resentment about his relationship with his sister. He's proud of her, he said, and has followed her career from afar. But he thinks she believes that "men are the villain."

When I told Hampton that I'd talked with her brother, she replied: "Oh good. He's alive then." She didn't want to relitigate the night of the assault. "I remember doing my own fighting," she said. But she had a strong response to the accusation that she vilifies men. "That's a Twitter-troll comment" about feminists, she said. "It's so reductive and it's so old."

She told me that she doesn't see her brother, who was a young adolescent then, as a "villain" for not fighting for her that night. In fact, she said, she

tries to have sympathy for him, and for Tupac. The male tendency to band together at the expense of women has been inculcated over generations, long before rap. “I always say, I didn’t learn about ‘bitches and hos’ from hip-hop,” she said. “I learned it from the Bible.” But she believes, as bell hooks argued, that little political progress for Black people, much less a revolution, can be accomplished without addressing sexism. Misogyny, hampton told me, is a gateway to other forms of intolerance. “If it’s possible for you to hate people in your own community,” she said, “then it’s possible for you to be corrupted in all these other ways.”

Although she has never really stopped trying to get men to rethink their programming, the effort can feel maddening. In 2012, the rapper Too \$hort made a video counseling young boys to put their hands down girls’ underwear. In a [dialogue published by Ebony](#), hampton explained to him why this was a disgusting thing to do. Too Short said he hadn’t known, until that controversy, what sexual assault really was. Coming from a then-45-year-old rap legend, this was a rather dispiriting sign of progress.

So when hampton was approached to direct a documentary about R. Kelly’s sex crimes in 2018, she had little reason to believe that the project would change anything. Kelly’s interest in underage girls had been infamous ever since he illegally married the 15-year-old singer Aaliyah in 1994. In 2008, he was acquitted in a trial over child-pornography charges involving a video that appeared to show him urinating on a 14-year-old girl. In 2017, the journalist [Jim DeRogatis reported](#) that Kelly had led a “cult” of women whom, through abuse and emotional manipulation, he kept in virtual captivity. DeRogatis’s article was widely circulated, and yet Kelly denied the allegations and remained a major-label ticket seller.

Although R. Kelly is finally in prison, hampton doesn’t see much evidence that Black women are now any more likely to be believed when they speak out about abuse.

Hampton agreed to make [*Surviving R. Kelly*](#) as a kind of penance. She had profiled Kelly in 2000, but she’d failed to look behind the closed doors of his studio. As she later [wrote in *The Hollywood Reporter*](#), “I’d been in Jeffrey Dahmer’s kitchen and not opened the fridge.” So she set about the grueling work of getting victims to tell their stories on camera, despite

Kelly's threats to blackmail those who spoke out. The singer's manager called in a threat to the theatrical premiere, warning that someone there had a gun and would start shooting. The event was canceled. But an average of 2.1 million people still tuned in as the six-part series aired on Lifetime in early 2019. Kelly's behavior had been widely treated as a punch line in the past, but now public sentiment turned toward horror and fury. One woman who watched the documentary was Kim Foxx, a Chicago-area prosecutor who issued a call for victims to contact her. Litigation around the country soon followed. In New York, charges were filed for sex trafficking and racketeering, and Kelly received a [30-year prison sentence](#) in June 2022.

The documentary, which arrived amid the #MeToo movement, is now invoked as evidence of what a well-formed provocation, timed to its moment, can achieve. W. Kamau Bell, who was inspired by hampton to film his own docuseries about the crimes of Bill Cosby, noted that *Surviving* uses long takes and in-depth interviews to depict its subjects as "fully functioning human beings, and not people who were defined by their experience with R. Kelly." Hampton's filmmaking transcended voyeurism by conveying an urgent message: "There's an active crime taking place right now, and I need your help to stop it," as Bell put it. Her uncompromising sensibility had, it seemed, made a difference.

Hampton, however, is focused squarely on what the documentary has *not* accomplished. Her speech, normally fluid and lively, stiffened whenever Kelly's name came up in our conversations. "*Surviving* gets held up as something that had impact, right?" she said. "What they mean is that there were consequences for R. Kelly. But I would argue this: If R. Kelly had apologized, if he had owned the harm that he caused, if he had made a real attempt at restitution, then ... it would have impacted the culture." Instead, he sobbed and screamed denials at Gayle King in a March 2019 TV interview.

Hampton thinks that America's legal system, so focused on punishment, discourages honest reckonings in cases of abuse. Kelly's victims have been left to process what happened to them while fending off harassment by the singer's supporters, who hampton says remain active enough that she retains a security manager. And although Kelly is finally in prison, she doesn't see

much evidence that Black women are now any more likely to be believed when they speak out about abuse.

[Read: R. Kelly and the cost of Black protectionism](#)



dream hampton, August 2023 (Photograph by Erik Paul Howard for *The Atlantic*)

When talking about R. Kelly, hampton brought up a seemingly unrelated incident: the shooting of Megan Thee Stallion by another rapper, Tory Lanez, in 2020. An abundance of evidence indicated that Lanez had fired a gun at Megan's feet during an argument, and he was convicted of assault in December. (He's since been sentenced to 10 years for the shooting.) But up

until that conviction, much of the hip-hop world had coalesced around a narrative that portrayed Megan as a jilted lover of Lanez's who had fabricated his attack on her. She wept on TV about the pain she'd experienced; [Drake made a song that seemed to call her a liar](#). To hampton, the way that men had circled up to discredit a Black woman felt like a repudiation of everything her work represented. "You do something like *Surviving* or you have a moment like #MeToo, and it's incredibly Sisyphean," she said. "The blowback is immediate and louder than any progress that was made. So it can have you retreat to your garden."

Hampton's dismay is not limited to hip-hop and the patriarchy. When we spoke, she also worried about climate change, Gen Z's mental health, and the popularity of the TV series *Yellowstone*. But she has a certain exuberance too, and even her darkest riffs are interspersed with jokes and recommendations. Listening to her talk, you get the feeling that great catharsis and truth are always just around the bend, after one more digression about poverty or shark attacks.

A little gloom can be useful in the idealistic world of left-wing activism. Hampton's longtime friend Monifa Bandele—formerly a head of Time's Up, the organization that fights workplace sexual harassment—said that hampton's pessimism has had an unusually constructive bent. She recalled that hampton would bemoan the futility of the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement's mission to free incarcerated Black activists, and then whip up a ferociously effective publicity campaign for the group. "She sees things for what they really are," Bandele said. "So that includes the cracks, the deficits."

Over the years, hampton has adjusted to the idea that not all progress needs to be a full-on revolution.

But her candor can also alienate people who would otherwise be on her side. In both social and professional settings, "I have had to tell her to bring it down a thousand," Bandele told me. Mayo, hampton's friend and former colleague, told me that she's long admired that hampton was "born free—just came here without the rules, without the propensity to even understand the rules." Yet because of that wild honesty, people have at times "questioned whether she was kind—sometimes unfairly, sometimes fairly,"

Mayo said. “She is not absolved of her accountability to friends and relationships any more than any of us are.”

A few clashes have been public. In 2012, she caused a media vortex by tweeting that an album of protest music by Nas, one of the most vaunted lyricists of all time, had been largely written by the rappers Stic.man and Jay Electronica. She told me she just wanted to deflate hype around songs that aren’t as deep, politically, as they pretend to be. But in a genre where the myth of the lone genius reigns supreme, accusations of ghostwriting are explosive. The songwriting credits for the album included the artists she had named, but all three men publicly denied hampton’s claims, and rap fans tweeted that she was a “bitch” and a disgruntled “groupie.” Even though the backlash was clearly laced with sexism, friends wondered why she’d needed to poke this particular bear. Stic.man had been a close friend, she’d been an early booster of Jay Electronica’s music, and she’d first met Nas in the ’90s. None of them has talked to her since.

[From the November 2022 issue: Jack Hamilton on the cutthroat world of Atlanta hip-hop](#)

Surviving R. Kelly also tested her friendships. After the film premiered, she spoke openly about the fact that a number of celebrities, including Questlove and Jay-Z, had declined to be interviewed (the latter recorded two full albums with Kelly in the early 2000s). Some on social media accused these artists of tacitly supporting abuse. Jay-Z privately expressed bafflement that she’d thrown him into the controversy. Questlove tweeted that he’d decided against appearing in the documentary only because he’d been asked to attest to R. Kelly’s musical talent, a claim hampton denied. She told me she refused to apologize for truthfully responding to questions from reporters about the public figures who had turned down interviews. Even now, she believes that Jay-Z could have used his position of power to hold Kelly accountable: “I feel like what I did in six hours, he could have done in a 15-second verse,” she told me. Questlove, who’d sought out her friendship so long ago, still feels shaken by the episode. “The cooling-down of a really great relationship—I mourn that,” he told me.

Hampton tends to invoke being a perfectionist Virgo when discussing her propensity for confrontation. She’s trying to change: Moving from writing to

filmmaking—a medium that requires intense collaboration—has, she said, shown her the need to communicate more gently. Yet she also had a cutting take on people who can't handle harsh feedback. "There is an ego in having everything filtered through the lens of you and your feelings," she said.

Butler, the Digable Planets rapper, pushed back on the suggestion that she looks for conflict. "I would not say she challenges; I would say that she loves," he told me. "Because if she don't love you, she'll watch you do whatever you do and just be like, 'Oh well.'"

Hampton wanted to say "Oh well" when asked to help produce and direct the new Netflix docuseries *Ladies First: A Story of Women in Hip-Hop*. She'd prefer to spend time on her own creative ambitions—a TV comedy about white militias, an adaptation of writing by the South African author Bessie Head, a documentary dissecting the politics of police procedurals. But the production firm Culture House pitched her repeatedly, even after she declined. What finally pulled her in was her need to critique.

For decades, the list of household-name female rappers remained vanishingly small. But in the past few years, women have, by some measures, become the driving force in mainstream rap. This development, arriving around the 50th birthday of hip-hop, might seem like an occasion to celebrate. But hampton felt that the "Black-joy mafia" needed a reality check.

"They were telling a kind of triumphant story about representation," she said of the team at Culture House. "And I'm saying, 'In so many ways, the story of women in hip-hop is more *Game of Thrones* than it is *Sex and the City*.'" The horror stories are numerous: An unfair record deal left TLC penniless at the height of the group's success; early innovators such as Sha-Rock feel they've been driven out of the industry. As for today's boom in female rappers, "most of these women are putting the *p* in *patriarchy*." Cardi B, who has channeled marriage and motherhood into famously racy lyrics, is "incredibly conventional," hampton said. "She's like, 'I'm a ho for my husband.'"

Cardi B is an Afro-Latina ex-stripper and vocal Bernie Sanders supporter with a string of No. 1 hits—she has quite plainly broken a few boundaries.

In her unapologetic vulgarity, she is also part of a wave of artists arguably doing for the female libido what decades of music—not just hip-hop—have done for male lust. But hampton is asking that we not overrate symbolic victories; that we not let flashy displays of female empowerment distract from the very real problems women face.

Carri Twigg, one of the executive producers of the series, gave a wry smile when I relayed that hampton had described herself as a “pain in the butt” on the project. Twigg had sought hampton’s expertise precisely to give *Ladies First* some bite. “It’s really easy to tell a glitzy, happy version of hip-hop: *Hey, look at all these women; they made all this money,*” she said. “Dream was always the first person to be like, ‘And at what cost?’ Every single pass, dream was the first person to be able to spot compromise, inauthenticity.”



The hip-hop artist Bahamadia during the filming of *Ladies First* (Courtesy of dream hampton)

The resulting series doesn't shy away from showing tragedy and exploitation, and it smartly highlights a variety of sexist double standards.

But it also flaunts the sounds and fashions of artists such as Nicki Minaj, Doja Cat, and, yes, Cardi B to show how hip-hop really has opened up to female performers. Hampton admitted that even she was moved by some of the more celebratory material. Over the years, she has adjusted to the idea that not all progress needs to be a full-on revolution. “The creativity that we fight with is, like, life itself,” she said. “For me, hip-hop was one of those creative tools with which we fought. We weren’t always fighting systemic oppression. Sometimes we were just fighting respectability politics. And we didn’t even call it that, but we just knew that we wanted to wear shorts that cut our ass.”

The series also devotes a few moments to hampton herself. The now-middle-aged Dee Barnes, the TV host whom Dr. Dre attacked 32 years ago (an incident for which he offered only a [vague apology](#), to “the women I’ve hurt,” in 2015), expresses tearful gratitude that hampton defended her in *The Source*. Photos of hampton and snippets of her articles flash on the screen. Joan Morgan speaks of the importance of female rap journalists: “We love hip-hop enough to hold it accountable.”

In what were supposed to be my final hours on Martha’s Vineyard, wildfire smoke blanketed New York City, grounding my flight home, so I had time to sit on hampton’s back porch. Nina, her daughter, and a houseguest, the architect V. Mitch McEwen, were there for lunch. Nina shared a story about taking a nap at the house of some family friends: Jay-Z and Beyoncé. McEwen described hampton’s Detroit home as a kind of salon for the city’s promising minds. “You would hear about these young real-estate developers, or these amazing artists, or these queer activists, and then you’d go to dream’s dinner, and they’d all be sitting around the table,” she said.

Hampton came out with plates of shrimp and grits and explained why, after two days of telling me she was over hip-hop, she was now comfortable having me see the footage of Biggie that she hadn’t watched in years. She soon hopes to say a final farewell to the genre by editing her tape archives—including ’90s-era video of Snoop Dogg, Method Man, and Q-Tip—into a short feature. Tentatively titled *I Used to Love You*, the project will cut against 50th-anniversary hagiographies of rap greats. She says she has footage of Biggie lecturing Lil’ Kim that she needs to wear makeup in

public. Hampton says she also has tape of herself chewing out Biggie in the studio for lyrics about robbing pregnant women.

But the clips I watched that day mostly captured what hampton had called “life itself.” On a Brooklyn street, she and Biggie sat amid a fleet of double-parked cars filled with members of the rap crew Junior M.A.F.I.A. At one point, the rapper Lil’ Cease jumped into the seat next to hampton and flashed a grin. “I met this cutie and her name was dream,” he rapped. “Shorty was top choice, had golden brown eyes / def lips and fly thighs.” Biggie called for the windows to be rolled down—to “feel a nice little breeze, man”—and hampton’s camera followed a plume of pot smoke escaping into the daylight.

I turned from the screen to look around hampton’s basement. It is her working space, bedecked with Post-it Notes about projects and plans. On one wall hung a poster of Jimmy Carter, who is hampton’s favorite president. Tacked to a pinboard was a commemorative subway card with Biggie’s face on it, W. E. B. Du Bois’s farewell letter to the world, and a photo of Apache warriors. There was also a sign expressing, in block letters, a sentiment that hampton had never said out loud to me: BETTER IS POSSIBLE.

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The Final Days

Joe Biden was determined to get out of Afghanistan—no matter the cost.

by Franklin Foer



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August 1

August is the month when oppressive humidity causes the mass evacuation of official Washington. In 2021, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki piled her family into the car for a week at the beach. Secretary of State

Antony Blinken headed to the Hamptons to visit his elderly father. Their boss left for the leafy sanctuary of Camp David.

They knew that when they returned, their attention would shift to a date circled at the end of the month. On August 31, the United States would officially complete its withdrawal from Afghanistan, concluding the longest war in American history.

The State Department didn't expect to solve Afghanistan's problems by that date. But if everything went well, there was a chance to wheedle the two warring sides into some sort of agreement that would culminate in the nation's president, Ashraf Ghani, resigning from office, beginning an orderly transfer of power to a governing coalition that included the Taliban. There was even discussion of Blinken flying out, most likely to Doha, Qatar, to preside over the signing of an accord.

It would be an ending, but not the end. Within the State Department there was a strongly held belief: Even after August 31, the embassy in Kabul would remain open. It wouldn't be as robustly staffed, but some aid programs would continue; visas would still be issued. The United States—at least not the State Department—wasn't going to abandon the country.

There were plans for catastrophic scenarios, which had been practiced in tabletop simulations, but no one anticipated that they would be needed. Intelligence assessments asserted that the Afghan military would be able to hold off the Taliban for months, though the number of months kept dwindling as the Taliban conquered terrain more quickly than the analysts had predicted. But as August began, the grim future of Afghanistan seemed to exist in the distance, beyond the end of the month, not on America's watch.



July 30, 2021: Joe Biden speaks to reporters before departing the White House for Camp David. (Anna Moneymaker / Getty)

That grim future arrived disastrously ahead of schedule. What follows is an intimate history of that excruciating month of withdrawal, as narrated by its participants, based on dozens of interviews conducted shortly after the fact, when memories were fresh and emotions raw. At times, as I spoke with these participants, I felt as if I was their confessor. Their failings were so apparent that they had a desperate need to explain themselves, but also an impulse to relive moments of drama and pain more intense than any they had experienced in their career.

During those fraught days, foreign policy, so often debated in the abstract, or conducted from the sanitized remove of the Situation Room, became horrifyingly vivid. President Joe Biden and his aides found themselves staring hard at the consequences of their decisions.

Even in the thick of the crisis, as the details of a mass evacuation swallowed them, the members of Biden's inner circle could see that the legacy of the month would stalk them into the next election—and perhaps into their

obituaries. Though it was a moment when their shortcomings were on obvious display, they also believed it evinced resilience and improvisational skill.

And amid the crisis, a crisis that taxed his character and managerial acumen, the president revealed himself. For a man long caricatured as a political weather vane, Biden exhibited determination, even stubbornness, despite furious criticism from the establishment figures whose approval he usually craved. For a man vaunted for his empathy, he could be detached, even icy, when confronted with the prospect of human suffering.

When it came to foreign policy, Joe Biden possessed a swaggering faith in himself. He liked to knock the diplomats and pundits who would pontificate at the Council on Foreign Relations and the Munich Security Conference. He called them risk-averse, beholden to institutions, lazy in their thinking. Listening to these complaints, a friend once posed the obvious question: If you have such negative things to say about these confabs, then why attend so many of them? Biden replied, “If I don’t go, they’re going to get stale as hell.”

From 12 years as the top Democrat on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee—and then eight years as the vice president—Biden had acquired a sense that he could scythe through conventional wisdom. He distrusted mandarins, even those he had hired for his staff. They were always muddying things with theories. One aide recalled that he would say, “You foreign-policy guys, you think this is all pretty complicated. But it’s just like family dynamics.” Foreign affairs was sometimes painful, often futile, but really it was emotional intelligence applied to people with names that were difficult to pronounce. Diplomacy, in Biden’s view, was akin to persuading a pain-in-the-ass uncle to stop drinking so much.

One subject seemed to provoke his contrarian side above all others: the war in Afghanistan. His strong opinions were grounded in experience. Soon after the United States invaded, in late 2001, Biden began visiting the country. He traveled with a sleeping bag; he stood in line alongside Marines, wrapped in a towel, waiting for his turn to shower.

On his first trip, in 2002, Biden met with Interior Minister Yunus Qanuni in his Kabul office, a shell of a building. Qanuni, an old mujahideen fighter, told him: *We really appreciate that you have come here. But Americans have a long history of making promises and then breaking them. And if that happens again, the Afghan people are going to be disappointed.*

Biden was jet-lagged and irritable. Qanuni's comments set him off: *Let me tell you, if you even think of threatening us ...* Biden's aides struggled to calm him down.

In Biden's moral code, ingratitude is a grievous sin. The United States had evicted the Taliban from power; it had sent young men to die in the nation's mountains; it would give the new government billions in aid. But throughout the long conflict, Afghan officials kept telling him that the U.S. hadn't done enough.

The frustration stuck with him, and it clarified his thinking. He began to draw unsentimental conclusions about the war. He could see that the Afghan government was a failed enterprise. He could see that a nation-building campaign of this scale was beyond American capacity.

As vice president, Biden also watched as the military pressured Barack Obama into sending thousands of additional troops to salvage a doomed cause. In his 2020 memoir, *A Promised Land*, Obama recalled that as he agonized over his Afghan policy, Biden pulled him aside and told him, "Listen to me, boss. Maybe I've been around this town for too long, but one thing I know is when these generals are trying to box in a new president." He drew close and whispered, "Don't let them jam you."

Biden developed a theory of how he would succeed where Obama had failed. He wasn't going to let anyone jam him.

In early February 2021, now-President Biden invited his secretary of defense, Lloyd Austin, and the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Mark Milley, into the Oval Office. He wanted to acknowledge an emotional truth: "I know you have friends you have lost in this war. I know you feel strongly. I know what you've put into this."

Over the years, Biden had traveled to military bases, frequently accompanied by his fellow senator Chuck Hagel. On those trips, Hagel and Biden dipped in and out of a long-running conversation about war. They traded theories on why the United States would remain mired in unwinnable conflicts. One problem was the psychology of defeat. Generals were terrified of being blamed for a loss, living in history as the one who waved the white flag.

It was this dynamic, in part, that kept the United States entangled in Afghanistan. Politicians who hadn't served in the military could never summon the will to overrule the generals, and the generals could never admit that they were losing. So the war continued indefinitely, a zombie campaign. Biden believed that he could break this cycle, that he could master the psychology of defeat.

Biden wanted to avoid having his generals feel cornered—even as he guided them to his desired outcome. He wanted them to feel heard, to appreciate his good faith. He told Austin and Milley, “Before I make a decision, you’ll have a chance to look me in the eyes.”

The date set out by the Doha Agreement, which the Trump administration had negotiated with the Taliban, was May 1, 2021. If the Taliban adhered to a set of conditions—engaging in political negotiations with the Afghan government, refraining from attacking U.S. troops, and cutting ties with terrorist groups—then the United States would remove its soldiers from the country by that date. Because of the May deadline, Biden’s first major foreign-policy decision—whether or not to honor the Doha Agreement—would also be the one he seemed to care most about. And it would need to be made in a sprint.

In the spring, after weeks of meetings with generals and foreign-policy advisers, National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan had the National Security Council generate two documents for the president to read. One outlined the best case for staying in Afghanistan; the other made the best case for leaving.

This reflected Biden’s belief that he faced a binary choice. If he abandoned the Doha Agreement, attacks on U.S. troops would resume. Since the accord

had been signed, in February 2020, the Taliban had grown stronger, forging new alliances and sharpening plans. And thanks to the drawdown of troops that had begun under Donald Trump, the United States no longer had a robust-enough force to fight a surging foe.

Biden's speech contained a hole that few noted at the time. It scarcely mentioned the Afghan people, with not even an expression of best wishes for the nation the U.S. would be leaving behind.

Biden gathered his aides for one last meeting before he formally made his decision. Toward the end of the session, he asked Sullivan, Blinken, and Director of National Intelligence Avril Haines to leave the room. He wanted to talk with Austin and Milley alone.

Instead of revealing his final decision, Biden told them, "This is hard. I want to go to Camp David this weekend and think about it."

It was always clear where the president would land. Milley knew that his own preferred path for Afghanistan—leaving a small but meaningful contingent of troops in the country—wasn't shared by the nation he served, or the new commander in chief. Having just survived Trump and a wave of speculation about how the U.S. military might figure in a coup, Milley was eager to demonstrate his fidelity to civilian rule. If Biden wanted to shape the process to get his preferred result, well, that's how a democracy should work.

On April 14, Biden announced that he would withdraw American forces from Afghanistan. He [delivered remarks explaining his decision](#) in the Treaty Room of the White House, the very spot where, in the fall of 2001, George W. Bush had informed the public of the first American strikes against the Taliban.

Biden's speech contained a hole that few noted at the time. It scarcely mentioned the Afghan people, with not even an expression of best wishes for the nation that the United States would be leaving behind. The Afghans were apparently only incidental to his thinking. (Biden hadn't spoken with President Ghani until right before the announcement.) Scranton Joe's deep reserves of compassion were directed at people with whom he felt a

connection; his visceral ties were with American soldiers. When he thought about the military's rank and file, he couldn't help but project an image of his own late son, Beau. "I'm the first president in 40 years who knows what it means to have a child serving in a war zone," he said.

Biden also announced a new deadline for the U.S. withdrawal, which would move from May 1 to September 11, the 20th anniversary of the attack that drew the United States into war. The choice of date was polemical. Although he never officially complained about it, Milley didn't understand the decision. How did it honor the dead to admit defeat in a conflict that had been waged on their behalf? Eventually, the Biden administration pushed the withdrawal deadline forward to August 31, an implicit concession that it had erred.

But the choice of September 11 was telling. Biden took pride in ending an unhappy chapter in American history. Democrats might [have once referred to Afghanistan](#) as the "good war," but it had become a fruitless fight. It had distracted the United States from policies that might preserve the nation's geostrategic dominance. By leaving Afghanistan, Biden believed he was redirecting the nation's gaze to the future: "We'll be much more formidable to our adversaries and competitors over the long term if we fight the battles for the next 20 years, not the last 20."

August 6–9

In late June, Jake Sullivan began to worry that the Pentagon had pulled American personnel and materiel out of Afghanistan too precipitously. The rapid drawdown had allowed the Taliban to advance and to win a string of victories against the Afghan army that had caught the administration by surprise. Even if Taliban fighters weren't firing at American troops, they were continuing to battle the Afghan army and take control of the countryside. Now they'd captured a provincial capital in the remote southwest—a victory that was disturbingly effortless.

Sullivan asked one of his top aides, Homeland Security Adviser Elizabeth Sherwood-Randall, to convene a meeting for Sunday, August 8, with officials overseeing the withdrawal. Contingency plans contained a switch

that could be flipped in an emergency. To avoid a reprise of the fall of Saigon, with desperate hands clinging to the last choppers out of Vietnam, the government made plans for a noncombatant-evacuation operation, or NEO. The U.S. embassy would shut down and relocate to Hamid Karzai International Airport (or HKIA, as everyone called it). Troops, pre-positioned near the Persian Gulf and waiting at Fort Bragg, in North Carolina, would descend on Kabul to protect the airport. Military transport planes would haul American citizens and visa holders out of the country.

By the time Sherwood-Randall had a chance to assemble the meeting, the most pessimistic expectations had been exceeded. The Taliban had captured four more provincial capitals. General Frank McKenzie, the head of U.S. Central Command, filed a commander's estimate warning that Kabul could be surrounded within about 30 days—a far faster collapse than previously predicted.

McKenzie's dire warning did strangely little to alter plans. Sherwood-Randall's group unanimously agreed that it was too soon to declare a NEO. The embassy in Kabul was particularly forceful on this point. The acting ambassador, Ross Wilson, wanted to avoid cultivating a sense of panic in Kabul, which would further collapse the army and the state. Even the CIA seconded this line of thinking.

August 12

At 2 a.m., Sullivan's phone rang. It was Mark Milley. The military had received reports that the Taliban had entered the city of Ghazni, less than 100 miles from Kabul.

The intelligence community assumed that the Taliban wouldn't storm Kabul until after the United States left, because the Taliban wanted to avoid a block-by-block battle for the city. But the proximity of the Taliban to the embassy and HKIA was terrifying. It necessitated the decisive action that the administration had thus far resisted. Milley wanted Sullivan to initiate a NEO. If the State Department wasn't going to move quickly, the president needed to order it to. Sullivan assured him that he would push harder, but it would be two more days before the president officially declared a NEO.

With the passage of each hour, Sullivan's anxieties grew. He called Lloyd Austin and told him, "I think you need to send someone with bars on his arm to Doha to talk to the Taliban so that they understand not to mess with an evacuation." Austin agreed to dispatch General McKenzie to renew negotiations.

August 13

Austin convened a videoconference with the top civilian and military officials in Kabul. He wanted updates from them before he headed to the White House to brief the president.

Ross Wilson, the acting ambassador, told him, "I need 72 hours before I can begin destroying sensitive documents."

"You have to be *done* in 72 hours," Austin replied.

The Taliban were now perched outside Kabul. Delaying the evacuation of the embassy posed a danger that Austin couldn't abide. Thousands of troops were about to arrive to protect the new makeshift facility that would be set up at the airport. The moment had come to move there.

Abandoning an embassy has its own protocols; they are rituals of panic. The diplomats had a weekend, more or less, to purge the place: to fill its shredders, burn bins, and disintegrator with documents and hard drives. Anything with an American flag on it needed destroying so it couldn't be used by the enemy for propaganda purposes.

Wisps of smoke would soon begin to blow from the compound—a plume of what had been classified cables and personnel files. Even for those Afghans who didn't have access to the internet, the narrative would be legible in the sky.

August 14

On Saturday night, Antony Blinken placed a call to Ashraf Ghani. He wanted to make sure the Afghan president remained committed to the

negotiations in Doha. The Taliban delegation there was still prepared to agree to a unity government, which it might eventually run, allocating cabinet slots to ministers from Ghani's government. That notion had broad support from the Afghan political elite. Everyone, even Ghani, agreed that he would need to resign as part of a deal. Blinken wanted to ensure that he wouldn't waver from his commitments and try to hold on to power.

Although Ghani said that he would comply, he began musing aloud about what might happen if the Taliban invaded Kabul prior to August 31. He told Blinken, "I'd rather die than surrender."

August 15

The next day, the presidential palace released a video of Ghani talking with security officials on the phone. As he sat at his imposing wooden desk, which once belonged to King Amanullah, who had bolted from the palace to avoid an Islamist uprising in 1929, Ghani's aides hoped to project a sense of calm.

During the early hours, a small number of Taliban fighters eased their way to the gates of the city, and then into the capital itself. The Taliban leadership didn't want to invade Kabul until after the American departure. But their soldiers had conquered territory without even firing a shot. In their path, Afghan soldiers simply walked away from checkpoints. Taliban units kept drifting in the direction of the presidential palace.

Rumors traveled more quickly than the invaders. A crowd formed [outside a bank in central Kabul](#). Nervous customers jostled in a chaotic rush to empty their accounts. Guards fired into the air to disperse the melee. The sound of gunfire reverberated through the nearby palace, which had largely emptied for lunch. Ghani's closest advisers pressed him to flee. "If you stay," one told him, [according to The Washington Post](#), "you'll be killed."

[From the March 2022 issue: George Packer on America's betrayal of Afghanistan](#)

This was a fear rooted in history. In 1996, when the Taliban first invaded Kabul, they hanged the tortured body of the former president from a traffic light. Ghani hustled onto one of three Mi-17 helicopters waiting inside his compound, bound for Uzbekistan. *The New York Times Magazine* [later reported](#) that the helicopters were instructed to fly low to the terrain, to evade detection by the U.S. military. From Uzbekistan, he would fly to the United Arab Emirates and an ignominious exile. Without time to pack, he left in plastic sandals, accompanied by his wife. On the tarmac, aides and guards grappled over the choppers' last remaining seats.

When the rest of Ghani's staff returned from lunch, they moved through the palace searching for the president, unaware that he had abandoned them, and their country.

At approximately 1:45 p.m., Ambassador Wilson went to the embassy lobby for the ceremonial lowering of the flag. Emotionally drained and worried about his own safety, he prepared to leave the embassy behind, a monument to his nation's defeat.

Wilson made his way to the helicopter pad so that he could be taken to his new outpost at the airport, where he was told that a trio of choppers had just left the presidential palace. Wilson knew what that likely meant. By the time he relayed his suspicions to Washington, officials already possessed intelligence that confirmed Wilson's hunch: Ghani had fled.

Jake Sullivan relayed the news to Biden, who exploded in frustration: *Give me a break.*

Later that afternoon, General McKenzie arrived at the Ritz-Carlton in Doha. Well before Ghani's departure from power, the wizened Marine had scheduled a meeting with an old adversary of the United States, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar.

Baradar wasn't just any Taliban leader. He was a co-founder of the group, with Mullah Mohammed Omar. McKenzie had arrived with the intention of delivering a stern warning. He barely had time to tweak his agenda after learning of Ghani's exit.

McKenzie unfolded a map of Afghanistan translated into Pashto. A circle had been drawn around the center of Kabul—a radius of about 25 kilometers—and he pointed to it. He referred to this area as the “ring of death.” If the Taliban operated within those 25 kilometers, McKenzie said, “we’re going to assume hostile intent, and we’ll strike hard.”

McKenzie tried to bolster his threat with logic. He said he didn’t want to end up in a firefight with the Taliban, and that would be a lot less likely to happen if they weren’t in the city.

Baradar not only understood; he agreed. Known as a daring military tactician, he was also a pragmatist. He wanted to transform his group’s inhospitable image; he hoped that foreign embassies, even the American one, would remain in Kabul. Baradar didn’t want a Taliban government to become a pariah state, starved of foreign assistance that it badly needed.

But the McKenzie plan had an elemental problem: It was too late. Taliban fighters were already operating within the ring of death. Kabul was on the brink of anarchy. Armed criminal gangs were already starting to roam the streets. Baradar asked the general, “Are you going to take responsibility for the security of Kabul?”

McKenzie replied that his orders were to run an evacuation. Whatever happens to the security situation in Kabul, he told Baradar, don’t mess with the evacuation, or there will be hell to pay. It was an evasive answer. The United States didn’t have the troops or the will to secure Kabul. McKenzie had no choice but to implicitly cede that job to the Taliban.

Baradar walked toward a window. Because he didn’t speak English, he wanted his adviser to confirm his understanding. “Is he saying that he won’t attack us if we go in?” His adviser told him that he had heard correctly.

As the meeting wrapped up, McKenzie realized that the United States would need to be in constant communication with the Taliban. They were about to be rubbing shoulders with each other in a dense city. Misunderstandings were inevitable. Both sides agreed that they would designate a representative in Kabul to talk through the many complexities so that the old enemies could muddle together toward a common purpose.

Soon after McKenzie and Baradar ended their meeting, [Al Jazeera carried a live feed from the presidential palace](#), showing the Taliban as they went from room to room, in awe of the building, seemingly bemused by their own accomplishment.



August 15: Taliban fighters take control of the presidential palace in Kabul.
(Associated Press)

They gathered in Ghani's old office, where a book of poems remained on his desk, across from a box of Kleenex. A Talib sat in the president's Herman Miller chair. His comrades stood behind him in a tableau, cloth draped over the shoulders of their tunics, guns resting in the crooks of their arms, as if posing for an official portrait.

August 16

The U.S. embassy, now relocated to the airport, became a magnet for humanity. The extent of Afghan desperation shocked officials back in

Washington. Only amid the panicked exodus did top officials at the State Department realize that hundreds of thousands of Afghans had fled their homes as civil war swept through the countryside—and made their way to the capital.

The runway [divided the airport into halves](#). A northern sector served as a military outpost and, after the relocation of the embassy, a consular office—the last remaining vestiges of the United States and its promise of liberation. A commercial airport stared at these barracks from across the strip of asphalt.

The commercial facility had been abandoned by the Afghans who worked there. The night shift of air-traffic controllers simply never arrived. The U.S. troops whom Austin had ordered to support the evacuation were only just arriving. So the terminal was overwhelmed. Afghans began to spill onto the tarmac itself.

The crowds arrived in waves. The previous day, Afghans had flooded the tarmac late in the day, then left when they realized that no flights would depart that evening. But in the morning, the compound still wasn't secure, and it refilled.

In the chaos, it wasn't entirely clear to Ambassador Wilson who controlled the compound. The Taliban began freely roaming the facility, wielding bludgeons, trying to secure the mob. Apparently, they were working alongside soldiers from the old Afghan army. Wilson received worrying reports of tensions between the two forces.

The imperative was to begin landing transport planes with equipment and soldiers. A C-17, a warehouse with wings, full of supplies to support the arriving troops, [managed to touch down](#). The crew lowered a ramp to unload the contents of the jet's belly, but the plane was rushed by a surge of civilians. The Americans on board were no less anxious than the Afghans who greeted them. Almost as quickly as the plane's back ramp lowered, the crew reboarded and resealed the jet's entrances. They received permission to flee the uncontrolled scene.

But they could not escape the crowd, for whom the jet was a last chance to avoid the Taliban and the suffering to come. As the plane began to taxi, about a dozen Afghans climbed onto one side of the jet. Others sought to stow away in the wheel well that housed its bulging landing gear. To clear the runway of human traffic, Humvees began rushing alongside the plane. Two Apache helicopters flew just above the ground, to give the Afghans a good scare and to blast the civilians from the plane with rotor wash.

Only after the plane had lifted into the air did the crew discover its place in history. When the pilot couldn't fully retract the landing gear, a member of the crew went to investigate, staring out of a small porthole. Through the window, it was possible to see [scattered human remains](#).

Videos taken from the tarmac [instantly went viral](#). They showed [a dentist from Kabul](#) plunging to the ground from the elevating jet. The footage evoked the photo of [a man falling to his death](#) from an upper story of the World Trade Center—images of plummeting bodies bracketing an era.

Over the weekend, Biden had received briefings about the chaos in Kabul in a secure conference room at Camp David. Photographs distributed to the press [showed him alone](#), talking to screens, [isolated](#) in his contrarian faith in the righteousness of his decision. Despite the fiasco at the airport, he returned to the White House, stood in the East Room, [and proclaimed](#): “If anything, the developments of the past week reinforced that ending U.S. military involvement in Afghanistan now was the right decision. American troops cannot and should not be fighting in a war and dying in a war that Afghan forces are not willing to fight for themselves.”

August 17

John Bass was having a hard time keeping his mind on the task at hand. From 2017 to 2020, he had served as Washington’s ambassador to Afghanistan. During that tour, Bass did his best to immerse himself in the country and meet its people. He’d [planted a garden with a group of Girl Scouts and Boy Scouts](#) and hosted [roundtables with journalists](#). When his term as ambassador ended, he left behind friends, colleagues, and hundreds of acquaintances.

Now Bass kept his eyes on his phone, checking for any word from his old Afghan network. He moved through his day dreading what might come next.

The situation was undeniably bizarre: The success of the American operation now depended largely on the cooperation of the Taliban.

Yet he also had a job that required his attention. The State Department had assigned him to train future ambassadors. In a seminar room in suburban Virginia, he did his best to focus on passing along wisdom to these soon-to-be emissaries of the United States.

As class was beginning, his phone lit up. Bass saw the number of the State Department Operations Center. He apologized and stepped out to take the call.

“Are you available to talk to Deputy Secretary Sherman?”

The familiar voice of Wendy Sherman, the No. 2 at the department, came on the line. “I have a mission for you. You must take it, and you need to leave today.” Sherman then told him: “I’m calling to ask you to go back to Kabul to lead the evacuation effort.”

Ambassador Wilson was shattered by the experience of the past week and wasn’t “able to function at the level that was necessary” to complete the job on his own. Sherman needed Bass to help manage the exodus.

Bass hadn’t expected the request. In his flummoxed state, he struggled to pose the questions he thought he might later regret not having asked.

“How much time do we have?”

“Probably about two weeks, a little less than two weeks.”

“I’ve been away from this for 18 months or so.”

“Yep, we know, but we think you’re the right person for this.”

Bass returned to class and scooped up his belongings. “With apologies, I’m going to have to take my leave. I’ve just been asked to go back to Kabul and

support the evacuations. So I've got to say goodbye and wish you all the best, and you're all going to be great ambassadors."

Because he wasn't living in Washington, Bass didn't have the necessary gear with him. He drove straight to the nearest REI in search of hiking pants and rugged boots. He needed to pick up a laptop from the IT department in Foggy Bottom. Without knowing much more than what was in the news, Bass rushed to board a plane taking him to the worst crisis in the recent history of American foreign policy.

August 19–25

About 30 hours later—3:30 a.m., Kabul time—Bass touched down at HKIA and immediately began touring the compound. At the American headquarters, he ran into the military heads of the operation, whom he had worked with before. They presented Bass with the state of play. The situation was undeniably bizarre: The success of the American operation now depended largely on the cooperation of the Taliban.

The Americans needed the Taliban to help control the crowds that had formed outside the airport—and to implement systems that would allow passport and visa holders to pass through the throngs. But the Taliban were imperfect allies at best. Their checkpoints were run by warriors from the countryside who didn't know how to deal with the array of documents being waved in their faces. What was an authentic visa? What about families where the father had a U.S. passport but his wife and children didn't? Every day, a new set of Taliban soldiers seemed to arrive at checkpoints, unaware of the previous day's directions. Frustrated with the unruliness, the Taliban would sometimes simply stop letting anyone through.



August 24: Afghan families hoping to flee the country arrive at Hamid Karzai International Airport at dawn. (Jim Huylebroek)

Abdul Ghani Baradar's delegation in Doha had passed along the name of a Taliban commander in Kabul—Mawlawi Hamdullah Mukhlis. It had fallen to Major General Chris Donahue, the head of the 82nd Airborne Division, out of Fort Bragg, to coordinate with him. On September 11, 2001, Donahue had been an aide to the vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs, Richard Myers, and had been with him on Capitol Hill when the first plane struck the World Trade Center.

Donahue told Pentagon officials that he had to grit his teeth as he dealt with Mukhlis. But the Taliban commander seemed to feel a camaraderie with his fellow soldier. He confided to Donahue his worry that Afghanistan would suffer from brain drain, as the country's most talented minds evacuated on American airplanes.

In a videoconference with Mark Milley, back at the Pentagon, Donahue recounted Mukhlis's fears. According to one Defense Department official in the meeting, his description caused Milley to laugh.

“Don’t be going local on me, Donahue,” he said.

“Don’t worry about me, sir,” Donahue responded. “I’m not buying what they are selling.”

After Bass left his meeting with the military men, including Donahue, he toured the gates of the airport, where Afghans had amassed. He was greeted by the smell of feces and urine, by the sound of gunshots and bullhorns blaring instructions in Dari and Pashto. Dust assaulted his eyes and nose. He felt the heat that emanated from human bodies crowded into narrow spaces.

The atmosphere was tense. Marines and consular officers, some of whom had flown into Kabul from other embassies, were trying to pull passport and visa holders from the crowd. But every time they waded into it, they seemed to provoke a furious reaction. To get plucked from the street by the Americans smacked of cosmic unfairness to those left behind. Sometimes the anger swelled beyond control, so the troops shut down entrances to allow frustrations to subside. Bass was staring at despair in its rawest form. As he studied the people surrounding the airport, he wondered if he could ever make any of this a bit less terrible.

Bass cadged a room in barracks belonging to the Turkish army, which had agreed, before the chaos had descended, to operate and protect the airport after the Americans finally departed. His days tended to follow a pattern. They would begin with the Taliban’s grudging assistance. Then, as lunchtime approached, the Talibs would get hot and hungry. Abruptly, they would stop processing evacuees through their checkpoints. Then, just as suddenly, at six or seven, as the sun began to set, they would begin to cooperate again.

Bass was forever hatching fresh schemes to satisfy the Taliban’s fickle requirements. One day, the Taliban would let buses through without question; the next, they would demand to see passenger manifests in advance. Bass’s staff created official-looking placards to place in bus windows. The Taliban waved them through for a short period, then declared the placard system unreliable.

Throughout the day, Bass would stop what he was doing and join videoconferences with Washington. He became a fixture in the Situation Room. Biden would pepper him with ideas for squeezing more evacuees through the gates. The president's instinct was to throw himself into the intricacies of troubleshooting. *Why don't we have them meet in parking lots? Can't we leave the airport and pick them up?* Bass would kick around Biden's proposed solutions with colleagues to determine their plausibility, which was usually low. Still, he appreciated Biden applying pressure, making sure that he didn't overlook the obvious.

At the end of his first day at the airport, Bass went through his email. A State Department spokesperson had announced Bass's arrival in Kabul. Friends and colleagues had deluged him with requests to save Afghans. Bass began to scrawl the names from his inbox on a whiteboard in his office. By the time he finished, he'd filled the six-foot-by-four-foot surface. He knew there was little chance that he could help. The orders from Washington couldn't have been clearer. The primary objective was to load planes with U.S. citizens, U.S.-visa holders, and passport holders from partner nations, mostly European ones.

In his mind, Bass kept another running list, of Afghans he had come to know personally during his time as ambassador who were beyond his ability to rescue. Their faces and voices were etched in his memory, and he could be sure that, at some point when he wasn't rushing to fill C-17s, they would haunt his sleep.

“Someone on the bus is dying.”

Jake Sullivan was unnerved. What to do with such a dire message from a trusted friend? It described a caravan of five blue-and-white buses stuck 100 yards outside the south gate of the airport, one of them carrying a human being struggling for life. If Sullivan forwarded this problem to an aide, would it get resolved in time?

Sullivan sometimes felt as if every member of the American elite was simultaneously asking for his help. When he left secure rooms, he would grab his phone and check his personal email accounts, which overflowed with pleas. *This person just had the Taliban threaten them. They will be shot*

in 15 hours if you don't get them out. Some of the senders seemed to be trying to shame him into action. *If you don't do something, their death is on your hands.*

Throughout late August, the president himself was fielding requests to help stranded Afghans, from friends and members of Congress. Biden became invested in individual cases. Three buses of women at the Kabul Serena Hotel kept running into logistical obstacles. He told Sullivan, “I want to know what happens to them. I want to know when they make it to the airport.” When the president heard these stories, he would become engrossed in solving the practical challenge of getting people to the airport, mapping routes through the city.

[From the September 2022 issue: “I smuggled my laptop past the Taliban so I could write this story”](#)

When Wendy Sherman, the deputy secretary of state, went to check in with members of a task force working on the evacuation, she found grizzled diplomats in tears. She estimated that a quarter of the State Department’s personnel had served in Afghanistan. They felt a connection with the country, an emotional entanglement. Fielding an overwhelming volume of emails describing hardship cases, they easily imagined the faces of refugees. They felt the shame and anger that come with the inability to help. To deal with the trauma, the State Department procured therapy dogs that might ease the staff’s pain.

The State Department redirected the attention of its sprawling apparatus to Afghanistan. Embassies in Mexico City and New Delhi became call centers. Staff in those distant capitals assumed the role of caseworkers, assigned to stay in touch with the remaining American citizens in Afghanistan, counseling them through the terrifying weeks.

Sherman dispatched her Afghan-born chief of staff, Mustafa Popal, to HKIA to support embassy workers and serve as an interpreter. All day long, Sherman responded to pleas for help: from foreign governments’ representatives, who joined a daily videoconference she hosted; from members of Congress; from the cellist Yo-Yo Ma, writing on behalf of

musicians. Amid the crush, she felt compelled to go down to the first floor, to spend 15 minutes cuddling the therapy dogs.

The Biden administration hadn't intended to conduct a full-blown humanitarian evacuation of Afghanistan. It had imagined an orderly and efficient exodus that would extend past August 31, as visa holders boarded commercial flights from the country. As those plans collapsed, the president felt the same swirl of emotions as everyone else watching the desperation at the airport. Over the decades, he had thought about Afghanistan using the cold logic of realism—it was a strategic distraction, a project whose costs outweighed the benefits. Despite his many visits, the country had become an abstraction in his mind. But [the graphic suffering in Kabul](#) awakened in him a compassion that he'd never evinced in the debates about the withdrawal.

After seeing the abject desperation on the HKIA tarmac, the president had told the Situation Room that he wanted all the planes flying thousands of troops into the airport to leave filled with evacuees. Pilots should pile American citizens and Afghans with visas into those planes. But there was a category of evacuees that he now especially wanted to help, what the government called "Afghans at risk." These were the newspaper reporters, the schoolteachers, the filmmakers, the lawyers, the members of a girls' robotics team who didn't necessarily have paperwork but did have every reason to fear for their well-being in a Taliban-controlled country.

This was a different sort of mission. The State Department hadn't vetted all of the Afghans at risk. It didn't know if they were genuinely endangered or simply strivers looking for a better life. It didn't know if they would have qualified for the visas that the administration said it issued to those who worked with the Americans, or if they were petty criminals. But if they were in the right place at the right time, they were herded up the ramp of C-17s.

In anticipation of an evacuation, the United States [had built housing at Camp As Sayliyah](#), a U.S. Army base in the suburbs of Doha. It could hold 8,000 people, housing them as the Department of Homeland Security collected their biometric data and began to vet them for immigration. But it quickly became clear that the United States would fly far more than 8,000 Afghans to Qatar.

As the numbers swelled, the United States set up tents at Al Udeid Air Base, a bus ride away from As Sayliyah. Nearly 15,000 Afghans took up residence there, but [their quarters were poorly planned](#). There weren't nearly enough toilets or showers. Procuring lunch meant standing in line for three or four hours. Single men slept in cots opposite married women, a transgression of Afghan traditions.

The Qataris, determined to use the crisis to burnish their reputation, erected a small city of air-conditioned wedding tents and began to cater meals for the refugees. But the Biden administration knew that the number of evacuees would soon exceed Qatar's capacity. It needed to erect a network of camps. What it created was something like the hub-and-spoke system used by commercial airlines. Refugees would fly into Al Udeid and then be redirected to bases across the Middle East and Europe, what the administration termed "lily pads."

In September, just as refugees were beginning to arrive at Dulles International Airport, outside Washington, D.C., [four Afghan evacuees caught the measles](#). All the refugees in the Middle East and Europe now needed vaccinations, which would require 21 days for immunity to take hold. To keep disease from flying into the United States, the State Department called around the world, asking if Afghans could stay on bases for three extra weeks.

In the end, the U.S. government housed more than 60,000 Afghans in facilities that hadn't existed before the fall of Kabul. It flew [387 sorties from HKIA](#). At the height of the operation, an [aircraft took off every 45 minutes](#). A terrible failure of planning necessitated a mad scramble—a mad scramble that was an impressive display of creative determination.

Even as the administration pulled off this feat of logistics, it was pilloried for the clumsiness of the withdrawal. *The New York Times'* [David Sanger had written](#), "After seven months in which his administration seemed to exude much-needed competence—getting more than 70 percent of the country's adults vaccinated, engineering surging job growth and making progress toward a bipartisan infrastructure bill—everything about America's last days in Afghanistan shattered the imagery."

Biden didn't have time to voraciously consume the news, but he was well aware of the coverage, and it infuriated him. It did little to change his mind, though. In the caricature version of Joe Biden that had persisted for decades, he was highly sensitive to shifts in opinion, especially when they emerged from columnists at the *Post* or the *Times*. The criticism of the withdrawal caused him to justify the chaos as the inevitable consequence of a difficult decision, even though he had never publicly, or privately, predicted it. Through the whole last decade of the Afghan War, he had detested the conventional wisdom of the foreign-policy elites. They were willing to stay forever, no matter the cost. After defying their delusional promises of progress for so long, he wasn't going to back down now. In fact, everything he'd witnessed from his seat in the Situation Room confirmed his belief that exiting a war without hope was the best and only course.

So much of the commentary felt overheated to him. He said to an aide: *Either the press is losing its mind, or I am.*

August 26

Every intelligence official watching Kabul was obsessed with the possibility of an attack by ISIS-Khorasan, or ISIS-K, the Afghan offshoot of the Islamic State, which dreamed of a new caliphate in Central Asia. As the Taliban stormed across Afghanistan, they [unlocked a prison at Bagram Air Base, freeing hardened ISIS-K adherents](#). ISIS-K had been founded by veterans of the Pakistani and Afghan Taliban who had broken with their groups, on the grounds that they needed to be replaced by an even more militant vanguard. The intelligence community had been sorting through a roaring river of unmistakable warnings about an imminent assault on the airport.

As the national-security team entered the Situation Room for a morning meeting, it consumed an early, sketchy report of an explosion at one of the gates to HKIA, but it was hard to know if there were any U.S. casualties. Everyone wanted to believe that the United States had escaped unscathed, but everyone had too much experience to believe that. General McKenzie appeared via videoconference in the Situation Room with updates that confirmed the room's suspicions of American deaths. Biden hung his head

and quietly absorbed the reports. In the end, the explosion killed 13 U.S. service members and more than 150 Afghan civilians.

August 29–30

The remains of the dead service members were flown to Dover Air Force Base, in Delaware, for a ritual known as the dignified transfer: Flag-draped caskets are marched down the gangway of a transport plane and driven to the base's mortuary.

So much about the withdrawal had slipped beyond Biden's control. But grieving was his expertise. If there was one thing that everyone agreed Biden did more adroitly than any other public official, it was comforting survivors. The Irish journalist Fintan O'Toole once called him "the Designated Mourner."



August 29: President Biden watches as the remains of a Marine killed in the attack on Hamid Karzai International Airport are returned to Dover Air Force Base. (Associated Press)

Accompanied by his wife, Jill; Mark Milley; Antony Blinken; and Lloyd Austin, Biden made his way to a private room where grieving families had gathered. He knew he would be standing face to face with unbridled anger. A father had already turned his back on Austin and was angrily shouting at Milley, who held up his hands in the posture of surrender.

When Biden entered, he shook the hand of Mark Schmitz, who had lost his 20-year-old son, Jared. In his sorrow, Schmitz couldn't decide whether he wanted to sit in the presence of the president. According to [a report in *The Washington Post*](#), the night before, he had told a military officer that he didn't want to speak to the man whose incompetence he blamed for his son's death. In the morning, he changed his mind.

Schmitz told the *Post* that he couldn't help but glare in Biden's direction. When Biden approached, he held out a photo of Jared. "Don't you ever forget that name. Don't you ever forget that face. Don't you ever forget the names of the other 12. And take some time to learn their stories."

"I do know their stories," Biden replied.

After the dignified transfer, the families piled onto a bus. A sister of one of the dead screamed in Biden's direction: "I hope you burn in hell."

Of all the moments in August, this was the one that caused the president to second-guess himself. He asked Press Secretary Jen Psaki: *Did I do something wrong? Maybe I should have handled that differently.*

As Biden left, Milley saw the pain on the president's face. He told him: "You made a decision that had to be made. War is a brutal, vicious undertaking. We're moving forward to the next step."

That afternoon, Biden returned to the Situation Room. There was pressure, from the Hill and talking heads, to push back the August 31 deadline. But everyone in the room was terrified by the intelligence assessments about ISIS-K. If the U.S. stayed, it would be hard to avoid the arrival of more caskets at Dover.

As Biden discussed the evacuation, he received a note, which he passed to Milley. According to a White House official present in the room, the general read it aloud: “If you want to catch the 5:30 Mass, you have to leave now.” He turned to the president. “My mother always said it’s okay to miss Mass if you’re doing something important. And I would argue that this is important.” He paused, realizing that the president might need a moment after his bruising day. “This is probably also a time when we need prayers.”

Biden gathered himself to leave. As he stood from his chair, he told the group, “I will be praying for all of you.”

On the morning of the 30th, John Bass was cleaning out his office. An alarm sounded, and he rushed for cover. A rocket flew over the airport from the west and a second crashed into the compound, without inflicting damage.

Bass, ever the stoic, turned to a colleague. “Well, that’s about the only thing that hasn’t happened so far.” He was worried that the rockets weren’t a parting gift, but a prelude to an attack.

Earlier that morning, though, Bass had implored Major General Donahue to delay the departure. He’d asked his military colleagues to remain at the outer access points, because there were reports of American citizens still making their way to them.

Donahue was willing to give Bass a few extra hours. And around 3 a.m., 60 more American-passport holders arrived at the airport. Then, as if anticipating a final burst of American generosity toward refugees, the Taliban opened their checkpoints. A flood of Afghans rushed toward the airport. Bass sent consular officers to stand at the perimeter of concertina wire, next to the paratroopers, scanning for passports, visas, any official-looking document.

An officer caught a glimpse of an Afghan woman in her 20s waving a printout showing that she had received permission to enter the U.S. “Wow. You won the lottery twice,” he told her. “You’re the visa-lottery winner and you’ve made it here in time.” She was one of the final evacuees hustled into the airport.

Around 7 a.m., the last remaining State Department officials in Kabul, including Bass, posed for a photo and then walked up the ramp of a C-17. As Bass prepared for takeoff, he thought about two numbers. In total, [the United States had evacuated about 124,000 people](#), which the White House touted as the most successful airlift in history. Bass also thought about the unknown number of Afghans he had failed to get out. He thought about the friends he couldn't extricate. He thought about the last time he'd flown out of Kabul, 18 months earlier, and how he had harbored a sense of optimism for the country then. A hopefulness that now felt as remote as the Hindu Kush.



August 31: President Biden delivers remarks on the end of the war in Afghanistan. (Chip Somodevilla / Getty)

In a command center in the Pentagon's basement, Lloyd Austin and Mark Milley followed events at the airport through a video feed provided by a drone, the footage filtered through the hazy shades of a night-vision lens. They watched in silence as Donahue, the last American soldier on the ground in Afghanistan, [boarded the last C-17](#) to depart HKIA.

Five C-17s sat on the runway—carrying “chalk,” as the military refers to the cargo of troops. An officer in the command center narrated the procession for them. “Chalk 1 loaded … Chalk 2 taxiing.”

As the planes departed, there was no applause, no hand-shaking. A murmur returned to the room. Austin and Milley watched the great military project of their generation—a war that had cost the lives of comrades, that had taken them away from their families—end without remark. They stood without ceremony and returned to their offices.

Across the Potomac River, Biden sat with Jake Sullivan and Antony Blinken, revising a speech he would deliver the next day. One of Sullivan’s aides passed him a note, which he read to the group: “Chalk 1 in the air.” A few minutes later, the aide returned with an update. All of the planes were safely away.

Some critics had clamored for Biden to fire the advisers who had failed to plan for the chaos at HKIA, to make a sacrificial offering in the spirit of self-abasement. But Biden never deflected blame onto staff. In fact, he privately expressed gratitude to them. And with the last plane in the air, he wanted Blinken and Sullivan to join him in the private dining room next to the Oval Office as he called Austin to thank him. The secretary of defense hadn’t agreed with Biden’s withdrawal plan, but he’d implemented it in the spirit of a good soldier.

America’s longest war was now finally and officially over. Each man looked exhausted. Sullivan hadn’t slept for more than two hours a night over the course of the evacuation. Biden aides sensed that he hadn’t rested much better. Nobody needed to mention how the trauma and political scars might never go away, how the month of August had imperiled a presidency. Before returning to the Oval Office, they spent a moment together, lingering in the melancholy.

This article was adapted from Franklin Foer’s book [The Last Politician: Inside Joe Biden’s White House and the Struggle for America’s Future](#). It appears in the [October 2023](#) print edition with the headline “The Final Days.” When you buy a book using a link on this page, we receive a commission. Thank you for supporting The Atlantic.

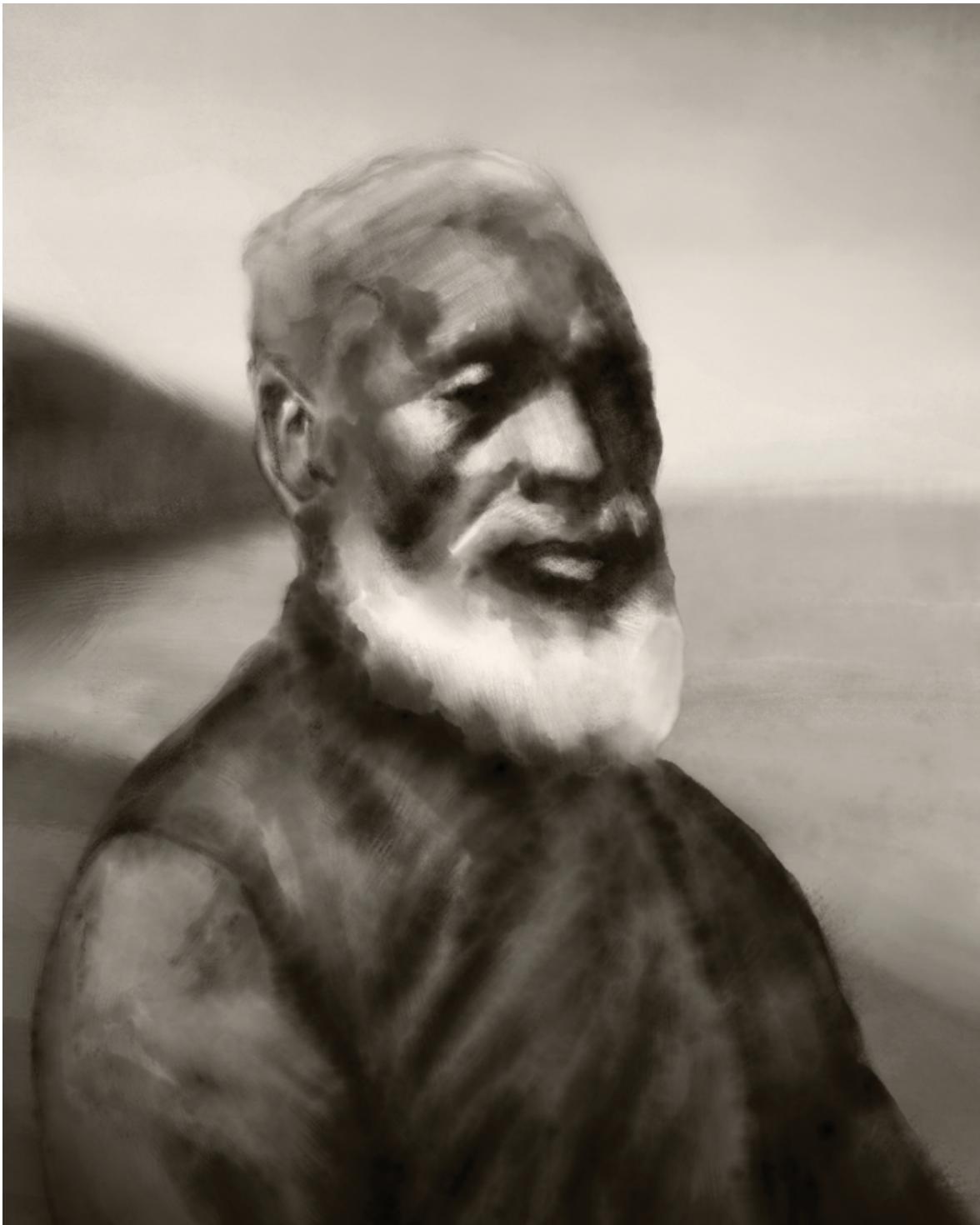
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The Man Who Became Uncle Tom

Harriet Beecher Stowe said that Josiah Henson's life had inspired her most famous character. But Henson longed to be recognized by his own name, and for his own achievements.

by Clint Smith



“Among all the singular and interesting records to which the institution of American slavery has given rise,” Harriet Beecher Stowe once wrote, “we know of none more striking, more characteristic and instructive, than that of JOSIAH HENSON.”

Stowe first wrote about Henson's 1849 autobiography in her 1853 book A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin, an annotated bibliography of sorts in which she cited a number of nonfiction accounts she had used as source material for her best-selling novel. Stowe later said that Henson's narrative had served as an inspiration for Uncle Tom.

Proslavery newspaper columnists and southern planters had responded to the huge success of Uncle Tom's Cabin by accusing Stowe of hyperbole and outright falsehood. Benevolent masters, they said, took great care of the enslaved people who worked for them; in some cases, they treated them like family. The violent, inhumane conditions Stowe described, they contended, were fictitious. By naming her sources, and outlining how they had influenced her story, Stowe hoped to prove that her novel was rooted in fact.

A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin was an immediate success; its publisher reported selling 90,000 copies by the end of 1854. Abraham Lincoln himself may have read the book, at a crucial turning point in the Civil War: Records indicate that the 16th president checked it out from the Library of Congress on June 16, 1862, and returned it on July 29. Those 43 days correspond with the period during which Lincoln drafted the Emancipation Proclamation.

Who was Josiah Henson? Born in 1789, according to his autobiography, he was enslaved in Maryland and Kentucky and served as an overseer before escaping to Canada in 1830. By 1862, when Lincoln checked out the *Key*, Henson had helped found a 200-acre settlement in Ontario, known as Dawn, which provided a refuge for hundreds of free Black people who had fled bondage in America. He had also made numerous return trips to the American South to help guide enslaved people to freedom. In total, Henson said, he freed 118 people; by comparison, Harriet Tubman is believed to have freed about 70.

Why weren't American students being taught about Henson when they learned about Harriet Tubman, or assigned his autobiography alongside Frederick Douglass's?

I first learned about Henson's remarkable life a year or so ago, as I was doing research for a different story. I wondered why I hadn't heard of him sooner. He was one of the first Black people to be an exhibitor at a World's

Fair. He met with President Rutherford B. Hayes and Queen Victoria. He built businesses that gave Black fugitives a livelihood after years of exploitation. Why weren't American students being taught about Henson when they learned about Tubman, or assigned his autobiography alongside Frederick Douglass's?

One reason might be that Henson chose, after escaping the United States at age 41, to spend the rest of his life in Canada, the country that gave him his freedom and full citizenship. And perhaps educators have been reluctant to spend too much time on a man known as "the original Uncle Tom" when that term has become a virulent insult.

But Henson was not Uncle Tom. Despite being forever linked with the fictional character after Stowe revealed him as a source of inspiration, he longed to be recognized by his own name, and for his own achievements. And he publicly wrestled with the role he had played, as an overseer, in abetting slavery's violence and cruelty.

Henson's biography and legacy, I came to see, defy easy categorization. His is not a linear story of triumph over hardship. Rather, it is a story that reflects the complexity and moral incongruence that animated the lives of enslavers and shaped the lives of the enslaved. It is a story of how a man who was at once a victim and a perpetrator of slavery's evils tried, and failed, and hoped, and evolved, and regretted, and mourned, and tried again. It is a story that reveals the impossibility of being a moral person in a fundamentally immoral system.

"*Uncle Tom's Cabin* is a very bad novel," James Baldwin wrote in his 1949 essay "[Everybody's Protest Novel](#)." Published when Baldwin was just 24 years old, the essay helped establish the young writer as one of America's fiercest social critics. Baldwin writes that Stowe's book was gratuitous, overly sentimental, and two-dimensional, "not intended to do anything more than prove that slavery was wrong." He concludes: "This makes material for a pamphlet but it is hardly enough for a novel."

In many ways, the book did serve as a pamphlet; abolitionists saw it as a means for laying bare the horrors of slavery to white northerners. (Supporters of slavery saw it as a threat. One minister in Maryland [was](#)

[arrested and imprisoned for owning a copy](#), along with other abolitionist literature.) *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is said to have been, aside from the Bible, the best-selling book of the 19th century. Originally [serialized in a newspaper](#), *The National Era*, over the course of 44 weeks, the complete book was published in March 1852. It sold an estimated 300,000 copies in the U.S., and more than 2 million worldwide, in its first year.

Uncle Tom's Cabin is indeed, as Baldwin suggests, filled with stereotypes. “In order to appreciate the sufferings of the negroes sold south, it must be remembered that all the instinctive affections of that race are peculiarly strong,” Stowe writes. “Their local attachments are very abiding. They are not naturally daring and enterprising, but home-loving and affectionate.” When describing the songs enslaved people sang together, Stowe explains that “the negro mind, impassioned and imaginative, always attaches itself to hymns and expressions of a vivid and pictorial nature.”

The scholar Jim O’Loughlin, who has written extensively about the literary and cultural implications of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, refers to Stowe’s posture as one of “romantic racialism.” Even when the writer is ostensibly celebrating or sympathizing with Black characters, O’Loughlin told me, she posits an essentialist view of them.

Worse, Stowe’s Black characters venerate whiteness and disparage themselves. “Now, Missis, do jist look at dem beautiful white hands o’ yourn, with long fingers, and all a sparkling with rings, like my white lilies when de dew’s on ’em,” Aunt Chloe, an enslaved woman, says to her white mistress. “And look at my great black stumpin hands. Now, don’t ye think dat de Lord must have meant *me* to make de pie-crust, and you to stay in de parlor?” As Baldwin puts it: “Here, black equates with evil and white with grace.”

Still, when I read it recently, sections of the book took me by surprise. My understanding of Uncle Tom, I came to see, had been informed less by the character in the book than by the distortions of the character that followed in the succeeding decades, when he came to be known as a lackey and a traitor. The Tom of the novel, while not as fully realized as some of Stowe’s white characters, was kind, thoughtful, and brave—a tragic hero who sacrifices his

own life rather than give up information about where two enslaved Black women are hiding. This was not the Tom I thought I knew.

Harriet Beecher Stowe: Women, unite against slavery

I was also fascinated by some of the exchanges between the white characters on the morality of slavery, as exemplified by a conversation between Miss Ophelia and her cousin Augustine St. Clare. Miss Ophelia, a white woman from the North who has come to stay with the slave-owning St. Clare and his family down South, doesn't understand how her cousin—who she believes to be a kind, good-hearted man—can participate in such an egregious institution.

“I say it’s perfectly abominable for you to defend such a system!” said Miss Ophelia, with increasing warmth.

“*I defend it, my dear lady? Who ever said I did defend it?*” said St. Clare.

“Of course, you defend it,—you all do,—all you Southerners. What do you have slaves for, if you don’t?”

“Are you such a sweet innocent as to suppose nobody in this world ever does what they don’t think is right? Don’t you, or didn’t you ever, do anything that you did not think quite right?”

“If I do, I repent of it, I hope,” said Miss Ophelia, rattling her needles with energy.

“So do I,” said St. Clare, peeling his orange; “I’m repenting of it all the time.”

The exchange is perhaps the most human and morally complex in the novel. It serves as a reminder to contemporary readers that slavery was not perpetuated simply by malevolent caricatures of evil, but also by ordinary people who suspected that slavery was wrong yet were unwilling to surrender the social and economic benefits it brought to their life.

In his 1849 autobiography and in subsequent editions of the book, Josiah Henson similarly contended with the fact that he'd been both a victim and an instrument of the institution's brutality. As a teenager, he'd craved his master's approval. "One word of commendation from the petty despot who ruled over us would set me up for a month," Henson reflected. "My pride and ambition had made me master of every kind of farmwork." (All of the quotes I am using are drawn from [the 1881 edition of the book](#), generally considered the most complete version.) He soon became an overseer, attempting to cultivate both the trust of his enslaver and the respect of his fellow enslaved workers.

In 1825, when Henson was 35 and married with two children, his enslaver, Isaac Riley, came into his cabin with a request. Riley was in serious financial trouble; he told Henson that a court was threatening to liquidate his assets, including his enslaved workers. "They've got judgment against me," Riley said, "and in less than two weeks every nigger I've got will be put up and sold."

Rather than sell his property, Riley decided to hide it from the authorities, and enlisted Henson to help him. He told Henson he needed him to take 21 enslaved people from his plantation in Maryland to his brother's plantation in Kentucky: a 700-mile journey.

Henson had never been outside the Washington, D.C., area, and the notion of the trip was daunting. But the alternative was devastating in its own right. He remembered watching his mother being separated from five of her six children at an auction when he was a boy. He could still recall the indelible image of his father being tortured for a transgression against a white overseer. His father's ear had been severed from his head before he was ultimately sold down South. For Henson, the prospect of being separated from his own wife and children, or being even partly responsible for other family separations, was too painful to consider. He told Riley that he would go to Kentucky.

Henson's mother stayed behind. This was perhaps a way of discouraging Henson from trying to escape after leaving the plantation—even if he was not caught, his mother could be punished in his stead, a common tactic among enslavers.

By asking whether Henson's decisions were right or wrong, we focus more on individual actions than on the larger system of barbarity in which those decisions had to be made.

On a cold night in February, Henson led the group away from the plantation, with a travel pass provided by Riley in hand. Children rode in a horse-drawn wagon. Adults walked. When they reached the Ohio River, Henson sold the horse and wagon for a boat, and he and his charges began making their way down the river.

In Cincinnati, they encountered a group of free Black people who told them they should stay in Ohio instead of continuing on to Kentucky. Ohio was a free state; Henson and his traveling companions could make a new life—a free life. “They told us we were fools to think of going on and surrendering ourselves up to a new owner,” Henson recounted in his autobiography, “that now we could be our own masters, and put ourselves out of all reach of pursuit.” The possibility was tantalizing. But as much as he desired freedom, he had never imagined that escape would be the means by which he gained it.

Henson was a preacher on the Riley plantation, and his hesitancy stemmed in part from his religious conviction. “The duties of the slave to his master as appointed over him in the Lord, I had ever heard urged by ministers and religious men,” Henson said. Believing that God wanted him to be a man of his word, Henson told the other enslaved people in his party to get back on the boat—he had made a promise to bring them to Kentucky.

In *A Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Stowe, a devout Christian herself, wrote about how this decision was part of what had inspired her to draw on Henson’s story for her novel:

Those casuists among us who lately seem to think and teach that it is right for us to violate the plain commands of God, whenever some great national good can be secured by it, would do well to contemplate the inflexible principle of this poor slave, who, without being able to read a letter of the Bible, was yet enabled to perform this most sublime act of self-renunciation in obedience to its commands.

Henson was so committed to what he understood as the will of the lord that he sacrificed his own freedom—in a sense, his own life—to follow it. How many people, Stowe contemplates, would have done the same in his position?

I take issue with Stowe's assertion; I find it impossible to disentangle what motivated Henson's decision from its outcome. I cannot admire his devotion to God without confronting how his understanding of God's will had been manipulated by enslavers. I cannot admire the fidelity behind his choice without confronting its insidious implications.

As I read the scene in Henson's autobiography, I thought about the way in which Black people were routinely conscripted to enact the violence of slavery upon one another even as they experienced it themselves. To be enslaved, Henson understood, was to be constantly presented with a series of impossible choices, never knowing whether you'd made the right one. (Had he remained in Ohio, would his mother, still living on Riley's Maryland plantation, have suffered the consequences?) Henson later described his regret over this fateful decision:

Often since that day has my soul been pierced with bitter anguish, at the thought of having been thus instrumental in consigning to the infernal bondage of slavery, so many of my fellow-beings. I have wrestled in prayer with God for forgiveness.

Isaac Riley kept falling further into debt, and eventually sent an agent to Kentucky to sell all of his enslaved property on his brother Amos's plantation—except for Henson and his family. Henson watched as the people he had led from Maryland to Kentucky were sold. He watched them cry. He watched them beg. He watched them get hauled away. He knew that this would not have happened but for his decision to leave Ohio. This was the price of the piety that Stowe so admired.

Two years later, accompanying Amos Riley's 21-year-old son on a trip to New Orleans, Henson stopped in Vicksburg, Mississippi. He saw many of the people from Maryland whom Riley had sold. "It was the saddest visit I ever made," he later said.

Four years in an unhealthy climate and under a hard master had done the ordinary work of twenty. Their cheeks were literally caved in with starvation and disease. They described their daily life, which was to toil half-naked in malarious marshes, under a burning, maddening sun, exposed to poison of mosquitoes and black gnats, and they said they looked forward to death as their only deliverance. Some of them fairly cried at seeing me there, and at the thought of the fate which they felt awaited me. Their worst fears of being sold down South had been more than realised. I went away sick at heart, and to this day the remembrance of that wretched group haunts me.

I met Lauren Bokor, an archaeologist and museum educator, in her office at the top of the house where Isaac Riley once lived. The house is [now part of the Josiah Henson Museum and Park](#), which opened in North Bethesda, Maryland, in 2021—one of several signs of renewed public attention for Henson. In recent years, his story has been told in books and in a [documentary](#) directed by Jared Brock, who wrote [The Road to Dawn: Josiah Henson and the Story That Sparked the Civil War](#) (2018).

Bokor showed me a map of the land that had once belonged to Riley. I looked out the window at the homes lining Old Georgetown Road and asked Bokor if their inhabitants knew that they were living on a former plantation.

“No, I really don’t think so,” she said. Bokor, who is white, grew up and attended high school nearby in Montgomery County in the 2000s. She read *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in class but, like many of her colleagues, had never heard of Henson before she applied to work here. (Bokor has since left the museum.)

Joyce Greene, a Black woman who became a docent at the museum after she retired, told me she lives up the street. Greene considers herself a deeply engaged student of Black history, but she told me that before her first visit to the museum, she also had never heard of Henson. “I had friends of mine that didn’t even believe that Maryland was a slave state,” Greene told me.

In Riley’s former living room, I told Mark Thorne, the site manager for the museum, that I was having trouble overcoming the emotional hurdle of Henson’s choice to bring his group to Kentucky from Ohio. Thorne, who is

Black, said some Black visitors have a hard time forgiving Henson, even if they know that he never forgave himself.

But Thorne believes that Henson's experience watching his friends get sold, separated, and sent to plantations farther south served as the motivation for his later work helping enslaved people escape to Canada.

"I think that is what gave him the drive. That's what made him be like, 'I've got to make this right,'" Thorne told me. "If he hadn't done that, would he have been so determined to do good?"

Henson had been unsure, before he set out on that trip to New Orleans, about its purpose, but he soon realized that he was going to be sold. He was furious, and decided to kill the young Riley in his sleep. But just as he was about to bring down the axe, the same Christian conviction that had prevented him from staying in free Ohio prevented him from striking the deadly blow. (This was another moment that Stowe describes as being deeply moving to her.) Instead, in an unexpected turn of events, Henson saved Riley's son's life.

Some days after Henson had nearly killed him, Riley's son became gravely ill with malaria. Henson nursed him back to health. "If I had sold him I should have died," the young Riley said. To thank Henson, he decided not to sell him.

When Henson returned to Kentucky and was reunited with his family, he vowed not to leave the question of whether he'd be separated from them again to the health or economic circumstances of the Rileys. He was going to escape, and he was going to bring his family with him.

On a moonless Saturday night in September 1830, Henson and his family left the Riley plantation. Sundays were rest days, and on that Monday and Tuesday, he was supposed to work on a farm many miles away; he hoped that they might gain a head start before anyone noticed his absence. For an enslaved person, running away carried enormous risk—most fugitives were caught and returned or died in the process. Running away with a child made a successful journey to freedom all the more improbable. Running away with *four* children would have seemed like a suicide mission. But Henson

was determined. His wife, Charlotte, made him a knapsack that he could use to carry their two youngest children on his back.

For two weeks, the family traveled through insufferable cold, with meager rations, always by night to avoid detection. They were aided by people who were sympathetic to the cause of abolition. After more than a month of travel, Henson came upon a schooner at the edge of Lake Erie. He told a worker on the schooner who he was and what he was doing, and asked for help getting his family across the water to Canada. The ship's captain, a Scottish man, agreed to bring them to Buffalo, New York, where they could take a ferry across the border.

In Buffalo, the captain arranged and paid for the ferry. Henson was overcome with emotion and thanked the man for his kindness. Before the ferry pushed off from the shore, Henson promised the captain, "I'll use my freedom well."

Upon arriving in Canada, Henson fell to the ground, grabbed handfuls of sand, and kissed them as the grains dribbled through his fingers. The 600-plus-mile journey had taken a month and a half. Henson was 41 years old. His family was with him. He was finally free.



He soon found work on a farm and made a home for his family in a shanty that had previously been occupied by pigs. He used a shovel to get rid of the thick membrane of manure that lined the floors. Over time, as he saved money, he was able to purchase some pigs of his own, a horse, and a cow.

He took seriously the vow he had made to the captain before he crossed into Canada. "After I had tasted the blessings of freedom," Henson recounted in his autobiography, "my mind reverted to those whom I knew were groaning in captivity, and I at once proceeded to take measures to free as many as I could." After establishing himself in Canada, Henson traveled back to the American South to help others make their way to freedom.

On one trip to Kentucky, in order to prevent white people from thinking that he was a fugitive, he pretended to be mentally ill:

To this end I procured some dried leaves, put them into a cloth and bound it all round my face, reaching nearly to my eyes, and pretended to be so seriously affected in my head and teeth as not to be able to

speak . . . To all their numerous inquiries I merely shook my head, mumbled out indistinct answers, and acted so that they could not get anything out of me; and, by this artifice, I succeeded in avoiding any unpleasant consequences.

The return trip was even more treacherous. At one point, a young boy in the caravan became violently ill. The other members of the group began to take turns carrying him on their back, but his condition worsened. The boy asked to be left in a secluded place to die alone; he didn't want to hold back the group. It was another impossible choice: care for the boy and risk the entire group being caught, or abandon him? Reluctantly, they left him behind, only for the boy's brother to soon lament the decision and run back to his sibling. A stroke of luck spared the travelers from further deliberation: They met a Quaker man whose family offered to care for the boy until he recovered, while the rest went on.

The group eventually reached the Canadian shoreline. Henson watched as they crossed the border and experienced a deep sense of pride. "They danced and wept for joy, and kissed the earth on which they first stepped, no longer the SLAVE—but the FREE."

I wondered whether Henson felt that he had paid his moral debt. Could he ever? Did the 118 people he said he saved from slavery justify the 18 who were sold after his failure to let them stay in Ohio?

At the museum in Maryland, Mark Thorne told me that he believes spending too much time considering what Henson should or shouldn't have done misses the point. By asking whether his decisions were right or wrong, we focus more on individual actions than on the larger system of barbarity in which those decisions had to be made. As one of Thorne's colleagues at the museum puts it, "He was trying to be an honorable man in a dishonorable system."

Or as Henson put it: "Before God I tried to do my best, and the error of judgment lies at the door of the degrading system under which I had been nurtured."

When Henson was about 50 years old, his son, who had begun a bit of schooling, started teaching his father how to read. The confidence that this skill gave Henson inspired him to imagine a new set of possibilities, both for himself and for those around him. Starting around 1833, Henson worked with a group of other Black refugees to search for land they could call their own. He was chosen to select the location for the group, and soon he came across an area east of Lake St. Clair and the Detroit River—a township named Dawn. Here, a group of people who had once been tasked with sustaining the land for others might be able to sustain some for themselves.

Henson worked hard to raise money for Dawn. “I have made many journeys into New York, Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Maine,” he later reflected, “in all of which States I have found or made many friends to the cause.” On a trip to Boston in the 1840s, he met and befriended a politician named Samuel Atkins Eliot. Eliot was moved by Henson’s life story, which he soon decided to write down and read back to Henson for his approval. *The Life of Josiah Henson, Formerly a Slave, Now an Inhabitant of Canada, as Narrated by Himself* was published in 1849.

The slave narrative was by then an established genre in American literature. These books played an essential role in bringing the experiences and interior lives of formerly enslaved people—almost all of whom had escaped to freedom—to the attention of a wide audience. Because most enslaved people were legally or socially prevented from learning how to read and write, some authors dictated their stories to white abolitionists. Others, like Frederick Douglass, wrote their own stories. The first edition of *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave: Written by Himself* was published in 1845 and became the most famous of the American slave narratives.

From the March 2021 issue: Stories of slavery, from those who survived it

In her book, *Sharp Flashes of Lightning Come From Black Clouds: The Life of Josiah Henson*, Jamie Ferguson Kuhns, a historian who has worked closely with the Josiah Henson Museum in Maryland, writes that Henson’s autobiography sold decently in its first few years. But after the 1853 publication of Stowe’s *A Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Henson’s name became widely known, and sales of his own book exploded. It became one of the

three most popular slave narratives in the world, alongside Douglass's and [Olaudah Equiano's](#), which was first published in England in 1789.

Scholars have debated when, exactly, Stowe first encountered Henson's story, when she met Henson, and whether she may have distorted these facts to support the veracity of her book. (Scholars have also noted other figures and slave narratives she likely drew upon for inspiration when creating the character of Uncle Tom. In his book [Mightier Than the Sword: Uncle Tom's Cabin and the Battle for America](#), David S. Reynolds cites "Stowe's insistence that no individual source yielded any character." Reynolds names several other possible sources for Tom, including a freedman named Thomas Magruder, who lived in a cabin in Indianapolis known as Uncle Tom's Cabin.) According to Henson, Stowe invited him to meet her at her home in Andover, Massachusetts, in 1849. Stowe, he said, was "deeply interested in the story of my life and misfortunes, and had me narrate its details to her." But the scholar Marion Starling, in her 1981 book, [The Slave Narrative: Its Place in American History](#), suggests that Stowe's explicit linking of Henson to Uncle Tom was "an afterthought and a publicity stunt." In this version of events, Stowe did not meet Henson until 1853, a year after *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was published. Only by 1858, Starling argues, did Stowe begin emphasizing the importance of Henson's story as a way of providing further legitimacy to her own. That year, Stowe wrote [a preface to a new edition of Henson's autobiography](#).

Read: [Atlantic articles by Harriet Beecher Stowe](#)

Stowe's novel was so popular that it spawned a [cottage industry](#): There were Uncle Tom toys, games, [handkerchiefs](#), even coffee mugs. [As Jim O'Loughlin has written](#), "It was perhaps the most influential cultural text in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America not despite its varied incarnations, but because of them." But it also sparked a backlash. Before the Civil War, at least 29 "anti-Tom" novels were published, according to Reynolds, many portraying life for enslaved people in the South as better than it was for free Black people in the North.

In a glass case holding tools of torture from Amos Riley's Kentucky plantation, I saw a pair of handcuffs so small that they could only have been used on children.

Anti-Tom minstrel shows also became popular; these performances riffed on the novel's characters and plot in order to defend slavery. ([Stowe could do nothing](#) to stop these performances; federal copyright law did not give authors the right to control adaptations of their work until 1870.) In Stowe's novel, Tom is a strong, Christian martyr. By contrast, some of the anti-Tom novels and plays present him as weak and docile, in need of, and grateful for, the protection of a white master. Many more people saw Uncle Tom plays than ever read the book. The proliferation of anti-Tom works meant that, over time, the idea of "Uncle Tom" shifted in the public consciousness.

Henson himself was, understandably, ambivalent about the association. "I have been called 'Uncle Tom,' and I feel proud of that title," he reflected in his autobiography. "If my humble words in any way inspired that gifted lady to write such a plaintive story that the whole community has been touched with pity for the sufferings of the poor slave, I have not lived in vain." In 1876, Henson went on a speaking tour of Great Britain. To draw in audiences, his talks—arranged by John Lobb, a white Englishman who edited the edition of his book published that year—were marketed as an opportunity to see the "original" Uncle Tom. According to Lobb, Henson, then in his late 80s, spoke to more than half a million people during his time in Britain. He even met Queen Victoria, at Windsor Castle in early 1877.

But Henson, it seems, may have also grown weary of being tied to the character of Uncle Tom, and perhaps of being overshadowed by him. In a speech in Glasgow, Scotland, Henson made a point of proclaiming that he was his own man—not the character from Stowe's books or any of that character's countless popular depictions and distortions. "Now allow me to say that my name is not Tom, and never was Tom," he said, "and that I do not want to have any other name inserted in the newspapers for me than my own. My name is Josiah Henson, always was, and always will be."

In the early 20th century, "Uncle Tom" became an epithet used to describe Black people who supported white efforts at segregation. During the civil-rights movement, it was employed as a term of derision among activists—Malcolm X used it frequently in his speeches. As Kuhns notes, he directed it with particular venom toward Martin Luther King Jr. "Just as Uncle Tom, back during slavery, used to keep the Negroes from resisting the bloodhound, or resisting the Ku Klux Klan, by teaching them to love their

enemy, or pray for those who use them spitefully, today Martin Luther King is just a 20th-century or modern Uncle Tom,” [Malcolm said](#)—not a hero, but a traitor.

Dresden, Ontario, in early spring was layered with intermittent patches of snow that had fallen in the days before, and the sky was covered in a blanket of silver clouds signaling that another snowstorm was imminent. I had come to visit the site of Henson’s Dawn settlement, a community that covered 200 acres and became a refuge for hundreds of free Black people. Henson’s home still stands here, as does a museum dedicated to his life. Until recently, it was known as Uncle Tom’s Historic Site.

Local members of the Black community had tried to change the museum’s name since the 1990s, but their efforts always fell short. “There were members of the community that were concerned that we’re going to lose that name recognition of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. So the decision was made to keep it as it was,” Steven Cook, the curator of the museum, told me. Cook is a fifth-generation descendant of refugees who escaped to Canada from Kentucky.

Finally, in 2022, the museum [decided to rename the site the Josiah Henson Museum of African-Canadian History](#). Some community members complained that the change amounted to rewriting history. “It soon became apparent to us that they believed that Uncle Tom was an actual person that lived on this road,” Cook said, shaking his head. “So we had that battle against us, to educate the public as to why the fictitious character had taken over Josiah Henson’s real story.”

[From the September 1896 issue: The story of Uncle Tom’s Cabin](#)

Cook brought me into a room called the Underground Railroad Freedom Gallery. To our right were two glass cases holding some of the tools of torture and control used on Amos Riley’s plantation in Kentucky.

There was a bullwhip with tight, tan coils, its leather tip tied in a knot at the end to intensify the violence of the lash when it struck the backs of the enslaved. There was a speculum oris, whose long black prongs were used to hold open the mouths of enslaved people who refused to eat. There was a thumbscrew, used to crush the fingers of someone who, for example, failed

to provide information about the whereabouts of a runaway. There was a billy club, shackles connected to a ball and chain, and a pair of handcuffs so small that they could only have been used on children.

In an adjacent case was an item that I had read about but had never seen in person—an iron collar that would be placed around the neck of an enslaved person to either prevent them from running away or punish them for having already done so. It looked so heavy, so menacing, gleaming under the museum lights.

I was beginning to feel overwhelmed by the presence of these tools, imagining how they had been used to punish and torture. But Cook has a different way of thinking about them. “When I’m in this section,” he said, “I always talk about *This is why our people resisted.*” Enslavers “had to create these devices and keep adapting them, because we kept escaping. We kept trying and resisting.”

I looked at the iron collar and imagined it wrapped around the neck of an enslaved woman. Maybe she had been trying to escape with her child and was caught in the woods by dogs and men on horses. I thought of how unwieldy the collar would be, how she wouldn’t have been able to bend down and hug her child. I thought about Josiah Henson, and how a collar like this might have been worn by some of the people around him on the Riley plantation. As an overseer, Henson himself had been responsible for ensuring that the other enslaved workers did all that they were supposed to do.

There is value in reading a slave narrative in which the central protagonist makes morally dubious decisions, regrets them, struggles with them.

“I often wonder, in that position, did he have to dole out punishment?” Cook said.

Had Henson ever placed someone’s finger in a thumbscrew? Had he ever whipped someone? Had he ever shackled someone to a ball and chain? Had he ever been the one to turn the key that locked an iron collar around a neck? Henson never mentioned an instance like this in his autobiography, but that doesn’t mean it didn’t happen. Some historians have estimated that as many

as two-thirds of overseers were Black. Even Uncle Tom, at the end of Stowe's novel, is beaten to death by two Black slave drivers.

The job of every overseer, Black or white, was the same: Control. Production. Punishment. Perhaps this is a reason Henson is excluded from the pantheon of well-known fugitives from slavery; it is difficult to tell a wholly inspiring story about someone who might have, even reluctantly, inflicted the torture themselves.

Cook and I made our way outside, where the temperature had begun to drop as the sun started its slow descent behind the trees. I examined the remnants of the community that Henson had built, and thought about what a loss it is that he has not been part of our collective understanding of the history of slavery. Not every enslaved person was Frederick Douglass. Not every enslaved person was Harriet Tubman. And even those two individuals, as celebrated as they are, were not the morally unadulterated characters that we sometimes make them out to be. Which is to say, they were human. So was Josiah Henson. There is value in reading a slave narrative in which the central protagonist makes morally dubious decisions, regrets them, struggles with them. For the 250 years that the institution existed, generations of people were forced to make a series of impossible decisions within it.

We walked to the far end of the site, where a wooden cabin stood: Josiah Henson's home. It was here that, on August 1, 1854, he sat with Douglass, who had come to visit the settlement for Canada's Emancipation Day, commemorating the end of slavery in the country 20 years prior.

[From the January 1867 issue: Frederick Douglass's "Appeal to Congress for Impartial Suffrage"](#)

I looked around and imagined the moment. These two men had, each in his own way, become giants of the antislavery movement. Henson, then in his 60s, was almost 30 years older than Douglass. By this time he had seven children and at least 10 grandchildren. I wondered if they spoke about how unlikely such a meeting would have felt to them all those decades ago, when they were both boys born into bondage in Maryland. I wondered if they traded stories of meeting the sorts of people—presidents, queens, archbishops—who once seemed to exist in a different world. I wondered if

they spoke about their books, having both written memoirs that shaped the consciousness of a nation. I wondered if they commiserated over those they had lost. I wondered if they laughed together, remembering something their children or grandchildren had done that had filled their bellies with delight. I wondered if they felt a sense of peace. I hoped so.

This article appears in the [October 2023](#) print edition with the headline “The Man Who Became Uncle Tom.” 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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Editor's Note

- [**A Warning From Another Time**](#)

A Warning From Another Time

**We would all do well to remember
Newton Minow's prescience about
the dangers of new technology—
and his optimism, too.**

by Jeffrey Goldberg

Elon Musk and Mark Zuckerberg, two men apparently starving for both attention and meaning, have lately been promising to fight each other in a “cage match.” Charlie Warzel, *The Atlantic*’s in-house expert on this relationship (he has other responsibilities as well), [recently wrote](#), “As the result of an inexplicable series of firing neurons, Musk managed to not only type but also send the following two-sentence tone poem: ‘I will be in Palo Alto on Monday. Let’s fight in your Octagon.’”

“At a sentence level,” Charlie explained, “these words, strung together in this order and seemingly without irony, are hilarious. From the standpoint of being a human, the Musk-Zuck cage match is an offensive waste of time—the result of a broken media system that allows those with influence and shamelessness to commandeer our collective attention at will.”

[Read: The Musk-Zuck rivalry isn’t worth your time](#)

Charlie’s acid commentary reminded me of our colleague Megan Garber’s [March 2023 cover story](#), “We’re Already Living in the Metaverse,” which argued that reality has become distorted by our pathological need to be entertained. Megan examined society’s addiction to illusion and trivia and

cited the great dystopian writers of the recent past, who warned that “we will become so distracted and dazed by our fictions that we’ll lose our sense of what is real.” The result, Megan wrote, “will be a populace that forgets how to think, how to empathize with one another, even how to govern and be governed.”

I’m fascinated by Megan’s work, and the work of thinkers who have come before her, including Neil Postman and Newton Minow, the former chair of the Federal Communications Commission who argued in a 1961 speech that TV was being turned into a “vast wasteland.”

Megan’s story prompted me to visit Minow in Chicago earlier this year. He was 97 when we met. I’d heard that Minow was, unaccountably, an optimist, and I wanted to understand how someone who thought that the television programming of 1961 was noxious and stupid could look at our culture today—a culture shaped by people like Mark Zuckerberg and Elon Musk—and not feel despair.



Newton Minow, chair of the Federal Communications Commission, testifies before the Senate Small Business Subcommittee. (Associated Press)

We had lunch in his apartment, the same apartment in which he hosted the very first political fundraiser for one of his law firm's former summer associates, Barack Obama. Minow was sharp, talkative, and wryly humorous. He was pleased that his 1961 speech—certainly one of the most consequential ever delivered at the intersection of culture and politics—had prompted the television executive Sherwood Schwartz to [name the boat](#) in *Gilligan's Island* after him. Minow explained that, at his age, he was counting on God to watch over us, and that he believed in the dictum, widely

attributed to Churchill, that Americans will do the right thing after trying everything else. More to the immediate point, he took comfort from watching every minute of the televised January 6 hearings. He noted, “They brought in a television producer to communicate to the American people.” This gave him hope that the tools at our disposal could be used for good as well as bad. “I’m still appalled that so many Americans don’t take January 6 seriously,” he said, but added that it means something that many millions of them watched, and learned, from the medium he once criticized.

I spoke for several hours with this prophet, who died a couple of months after our meeting. We discussed the fairness doctrine, the wisdom of Eleanor Roosevelt, the history of the BBC. As I was leaving, he praised magazines like this one for holding the line, for believing that Americans are capable of sober, focused, complicated, and informed thought. At *The Atlantic*, we try to talk up to our readers, not down, and Minow reminded me that this is a worthy cause.

This month, we publish one of the most heartbreakingly insightful, and emotionally resonant stories in recent memory, “[Jenisha From Kentucky](#),” by our senior editor Jenisha Watts. I cannot summarize it for you. I can only say that it is a beautiful and transcendent story, one that takes time to read and absorb. The support of readers like you is what allows us to publish the work we do, and I am in your debt. In a time of foolishness, of billionaire cage matches and political idiocy, I am all the more grateful.

This editor’s note appears in the [October 2023](#) print edition.

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Dispatches

- [**The Courtroom Is a Very Unhappy Place for Donald Trump**](#)
 - [**Nixon Between the Lines**](#)
 - [**Confronting the Unbelievable**](#)
-

The Courtroom Is a Very Unhappy Place for Donald Trump

But don't expect the justice system alone to save democracy.

by Quinta Jurecic



No one wants to appear before a judge as a criminal defendant. But court is a particularly inhospitable place for Donald Trump, who conceptualizes the value of truth only in terms of whether it is convenient to him. His approach to the world is paradigmatic of what the late philosopher Harry Frankfurt defined as *bullshit*: Trump doesn't merely obscure the truth through strategic lies, but rather speaks "without any regard for how things really are." This is at odds with the nature of law, a system carefully designed to evaluate

arguments on the basis of something other than *because I say so*. The bullshitter is fundamentally, [as Frankfurt writes](#), “trying to get away with something”—while law establishes meaning and imposes consequence.

The upcoming trials of Trump—in Manhattan; Atlanta; South Florida; and Washington, D.C.—will not be the first time he encounters this dynamic. His claims of 2020 election fraud floundered before judges, resulting in a series of almost unmitigated losses. In one ruling that censured and fined a team of Trump-aligned lawyers who had pursued spurious fraud allegations, a federal judge in Michigan made the point bluntly. “While there are many arenas—including print, television, and social media—where protestations, conjecture, and speculation may be advanced,” she wrote, “such expressions are neither permitted nor welcomed in a court of law.”

But only now is Trump himself [appearing as a criminal defendant](#), stripped of the authority and protections of the presidency, before judges with the power to impose a prison sentence. The very first paragraph of [the Georgia indictment](#) marks this shift in power. Contrary to everything that Trump has tried so desperately to prove, the [indictment asserts](#) that “Trump lost the United States presidential election held on November 3, 2020”—and then actively sought to subvert it.

[David A. Graham: The Georgia indictment offers the whole picture](#)

Although Trump loves to file lawsuits against those who have supposedly wronged him, the courtroom has never been his home turf. [Records from depositions](#) over the years show him to be [sullen and impatient while under oath](#), like a middle schooler stuck in detention. Timothy L. O’Brien, a journalist whom Trump unsuccessfully sued for libel in 2006, [recalled in Bloomberg](#) that his lawyers forced Trump to [acknowledge that he had lied](#) over the years about a range of topics. Trump has seemed similarly ill at ease during his arraignments. When the magistrate judge presiding over his arraignment in the January 6 case asked whether he understood that the conditions of his release required that he commit no more crimes, he [assented almost in a whisper](#).

Court is a particularly inhospitable place for Trump, who conceptualizes the value of truth only in terms of whether it is convenient to him.

All of this has been a cause for celebration among Trump's opponents—because the charges against him are warranted and arguably overdue, but also for a different reason. The next year of American politics will be a twin drama unlike anything the nation has seen before, played out in the courtroom and on the campaign trail, often at the same time. Among Democrats, the potential interplay of these storylines has produced a profound hope: Judicial power, they anticipate, may scuttle Trump's chances of retaking the presidency, and finally solve the political problem of Donald Trump once and for all.

It has become conventional wisdom that nothing can hurt Trump's standing in the polls. But his legal jeopardy could, in fact, have political consequences. At least some proportion of Republicans and independents are already paying attention to Trump's courtroom travails, and reassessing their prior beliefs. A [recent report by the political-science collaborative Bright Line Watch](#) found that, following the Mar-a-Lago classified-documents indictment in June, the number of voters in each group who believed that Trump had committed a crime in his handling of classified information jumped by 10 percentage points or more (to 25 and 46 percent, respectively).

And despite Trump's effort to frame January 6 as an expression of mass discontent by the American people, the insurrection [has never been popular](#): Extremist candidates who ran on a platform of election denial in the 2022 midterms [performed remarkably poorly in swing states](#). Ongoing criminal proceedings that remind Americans again and again of Trump's culpability for the insurrection—among his other alleged crimes—seem unlikely to boost his popularity with persuadable voters. If he appears diminished or uncertain in court, even the enthusiasm of the MAGA faithful might conceivably wane.

[Quinta Jurecic: The triumph of the January 6 committee](#)

Above all of this looms the possibility of a conviction before Election Day, which has no doubt inspired many Democratic fantasies. If Trump is found guilty of any of the crimes of which he now stands accused, [a recent poll shows](#), almost half of Republicans say they would not cast their vote for him.

But that outcome is only one possibility, and it does not appear to be the most likely.

Americans who oppose Trump—and, more to the point, who wish he would disappear as a political force—have repeatedly sought saviors in legal institutions. The early Trump years saw the lionization of Special Counsel Robert Mueller as a white knight and (bewilderingly) a sex symbol. Later, public affection turned toward the [unassuming civil servants who testified against Trump](#) during his first impeachment, projecting an old-school devotion to the truth that contrasted with Trump’s gleeful cynicism. Today, Mueller’s successors—particularly Special Counsel Jack Smith and Fulton County District Attorney Fani Willis, who is leading the Georgia prosecution—are the subjects of their own adoring memes and merchandise. One coffee mug available for purchase features Smith’s face and the text Somebody’s Gonna Get Jacked Up!

Perhaps this time will be different. With Trump out of office, Smith hasn’t been limited, as Mueller was, by the Justice Department’s internal guidance prohibiting the indictment of a sitting chief executive. Willis, a state prosecutor, operates outside the federal government’s constraints. And neither Bill Barr nor Republican senators can stand between Trump and a jury.

The indictments against Trump have unfolded in ascending order of moral and political importance. In April, the Manhattan district attorney, Alvin Bragg, announced charges for Trump’s alleged involvement in a hush-money scheme that began in advance of the 2016 election. In June came Smith’s indictment of Trump in Florida, over the ex-president’s [hoarding of classified documents at Mar-a-Lago](#). Two months later, the special counsel unveiled charges against Trump for his [attempts to overturn the 2020 election](#). Willis’s indictment in Georgia quickly followed, employing the state’s racketeering statute to allege a widespread scheme to subvert the vote in favor of Trump. (He has pleaded not guilty in the first three cases and, as of this writing, was awaiting arraignment in Georgia. The Trump campaign released a statement calling the latest indictment “bogus.”)

But each case has its own set of complexities. The New York one is weighed down by [a puzzling backstory](#)—of charges considered, not pursued, and

finally taken up after all—that leaves Bragg’s office open to accusations of a politically motivated prosecution. The indictment in Florida seems relatively open-and-shut as a factual matter, but difficult to prosecute because it involves classified documents not meant to be widely shared, along with a jury pool that is relatively sympathetic to Trump and [a judge](#) who has [already contorted the law in Trump’s favor](#). In the January 6 case, based in Washington, D.C., the sheer singularity of the insurrection means that the legal theories marshaled by the special counsel’s office are untested. The sweeping scope of the Georgia indictment—which involves 19 defendants and 41 criminal counts—may lead to practical headaches and delays as the case proceeds.

Trump’s army of lawyers will be ready to kick up dust and frustrate each prosecution. As of July, a political-action committee affiliated with Trump had [spent about \\$40 million on legal fees to defend him and his allies](#). The strategy is clear: delay. Trump has promised to file a motion to move the January 6 proceedings out of Washington, worked regularly to stretch out ordinary deadlines in that case, and tried (unsuccessfully) to move the New York case from state to federal court. The longer Trump can draw out the proceedings, the more likely he is to make it through the Republican primaries and the general election without being dragged down by a conviction. At that point, a victorious Trump could simply wait until his inauguration, then demand that the Justice Department scrap the federal cases against him. Even if a conviction happens before Americans go to the polls, Trump is almost certain to appeal, hoping to strand any verdict in purgatory as voters decide whom to support.

Currently, the court schedule is set to coincide with the 2024 Republican primaries. The Manhattan trial, for now, is scheduled to begin in March. In the Mar-a-Lago case, Judge Aileen Cannon has set a May trial date—though the proceedings will likely be pushed back. In the January 6 case, Smith has asked for a lightning-fast trial date just after New Year’s; in Georgia, Willis has requested a trial date in early March. But still, what little time is left before next November is rapidly slipping away. In all likelihood, voters will have to decide how to cast their ballot before the trials conclude.

The pileup of [four trials in multiple jurisdictions would be chaotic](#) even if the defendant were not a skillful demagogue running for president. There’s

no formal process through which judges and prosecutors can coordinate parallel trials, and that confusion could lead to scheduling mishaps and dueling prosecutorial strategies that risk undercutting one another. For instance, if a witness is granted immunity to testify against Trump in one case, then charged by a different prosecutor in another, their testimony in the first case might be used against them in the second, and so they might be reluctant to talk.

In each of the jurisdictions, defendants are generally required to sit in court during trial, though judges might make exceptions. This entirely ordinary restriction will, to some, look politically motivated if Trump is not allowed to skip out for campaign rallies, though conversely, Trump's absence might not sit well with jurors who themselves may wish to be elsewhere. All in all, it may be hard to shake the appearance of a traveling legal circus.

Attacking the people responsible for holding him to account is one of Trump's specialties. Throughout the course of their respective investigations, Trump has smeared Bragg (who is Black) as an "animal," Willis (who is also Black) as "racist," and Smith as "deranged." Just days after the January 6 case was assigned to Judge Tanya Chutkan, Trump was already complaining on his social-media site, Truth Social, that "THERE IS NO WAY I CAN GET A FAIR TRIAL" with Chutkan presiding (in the January 6 cases she has handled, she has evinced little sympathy for the rioters). Anything that goes wrong for Trump during the proceedings seems destined to be the subject of a late-night Truth Social post or a wrathful digression from the rally stage.

The justice system can't be fully separated from the ecosystem of cultural and political pathologies that brought the country to this situation in the first place.

However damning the cases against Trump, they will matter to voters only if they hear accurate accounts of them from a trusted news source. Following each of Trump's indictments to date, Fox News has run segment after segment on his persecution. A [New York Times/Siena College poll released in July](#), after the first two indictments, found that zero percent of Trump's loyal MAGA base—about 37 percent of Republicans—believes he committed serious federal crimes.

And beyond the MAGA core? A [recent CBS News poll](#) showed that 59 percent of Americans and 83 percent of self-described non-MAGA Republicans believe the investigations and indictments against Trump are, at least in part, attempts to stop him politically. Trump and his surrogates will take every opportunity to stoke that belief, and the effect of those efforts must be balanced against the hits Trump will take from being on trial. Recent poll numbers show Trump running very close to President Joe Biden even after multiple indictments—a fairly astonishing achievement for someone who is credibly accused of attempting a coup against the government that he's now campaigning to lead.

The law can do a great deal. But the justice system is only one institution of many, and it can't be fully separated from the broader ecosystem of cultural and political pathologies that brought the country to this situation in the first place.

After Robert Mueller chose not to press for an indictment of Trump on obstruction charges, because of Justice Department guidance on presidential immunity, the liberal and center-right commentariat soured on the special counsel, declaring him to have failed. If some Americans now expect Fani Willis or Jack Smith to disappear the problem of Donald Trump—and the authoritarian movement he leads—they will very likely be disappointed once again. Which wouldn't matter so much if serial disappointment in legal institutions—*he just keeps getting away with it*—didn't encourage despair, cynicism, and nihilism. These are exactly the sentiments that autocrats hope to engender. They would be particularly dangerous attitudes during a second Trump term, when public outrage will be needed to galvanize civil servants to resist abuses of power—and they must be resisted.

Trump's trials are perhaps best seen as one part of a much larger legal landscape. The Justice Department's prosecutions of rioters who attacked the Capitol on January 6 seem to have held extremist groups back from attempting other riots or acts of mass intimidation, even though Trump has called for protests as his indictments have rained down. Michigan Attorney General Dana Nessel recently [announced criminal charges](#) alleging that more than a dozen Republicans acted as “fake electors” in an effort to steal the 2020 election for Trump—and as a result, would-be accomplices in Trump's further plots may be less inclined to risk their own freedom to help

the candidate out. Likewise, some of those lawyers who worked to overturn the 2020 vote have now been indicted in Georgia and face potential disbarment—which could cause other attorneys to hold back from future schemes.

[Alan Z. Rozenshtain: The First Amendment is no defense for Trump's alleged crimes](#)

This is a vision of accountability as deterrence, achieved piece by piece. Even if Trump wins a second term, these efforts will complicate his drive for absolute authority. And no matter the political fallout, the criminal prosecutions of Trump are themselves inherently valuable. When Trump's opponents declare that "no one is above the law," they're asserting a bedrock principle of American society, and the very act of doing so helps keep that principle alive.

None of this settles what may happen on Election Day, of course, or in the days that follow. But nor would a conviction. If a majority of voters in a handful of swing states decide they want to elect a president convicted of serious state and federal crimes, the courts can't prevent them from doing so.

Such a result would lead to perhaps the most exaggerated disjunction yet between American law and politics: the matter of what to do with a felonious chief executive. If federal charges are the problem, Trump seems certain to try to grant himself a pardon—a move that would raise constitutional questions left unsettled since Watergate. In the case of state-level conviction, though, President Trump would have no such power. Could it be that he might end up serving his second term from a Georgia prison?

The question isn't absurd, and yet there's no obvious answer to how that would work in practice. The best way of dealing with such a problem is as maddeningly, impossibly straightforward as it always has been: Don't elect this man in the first place.

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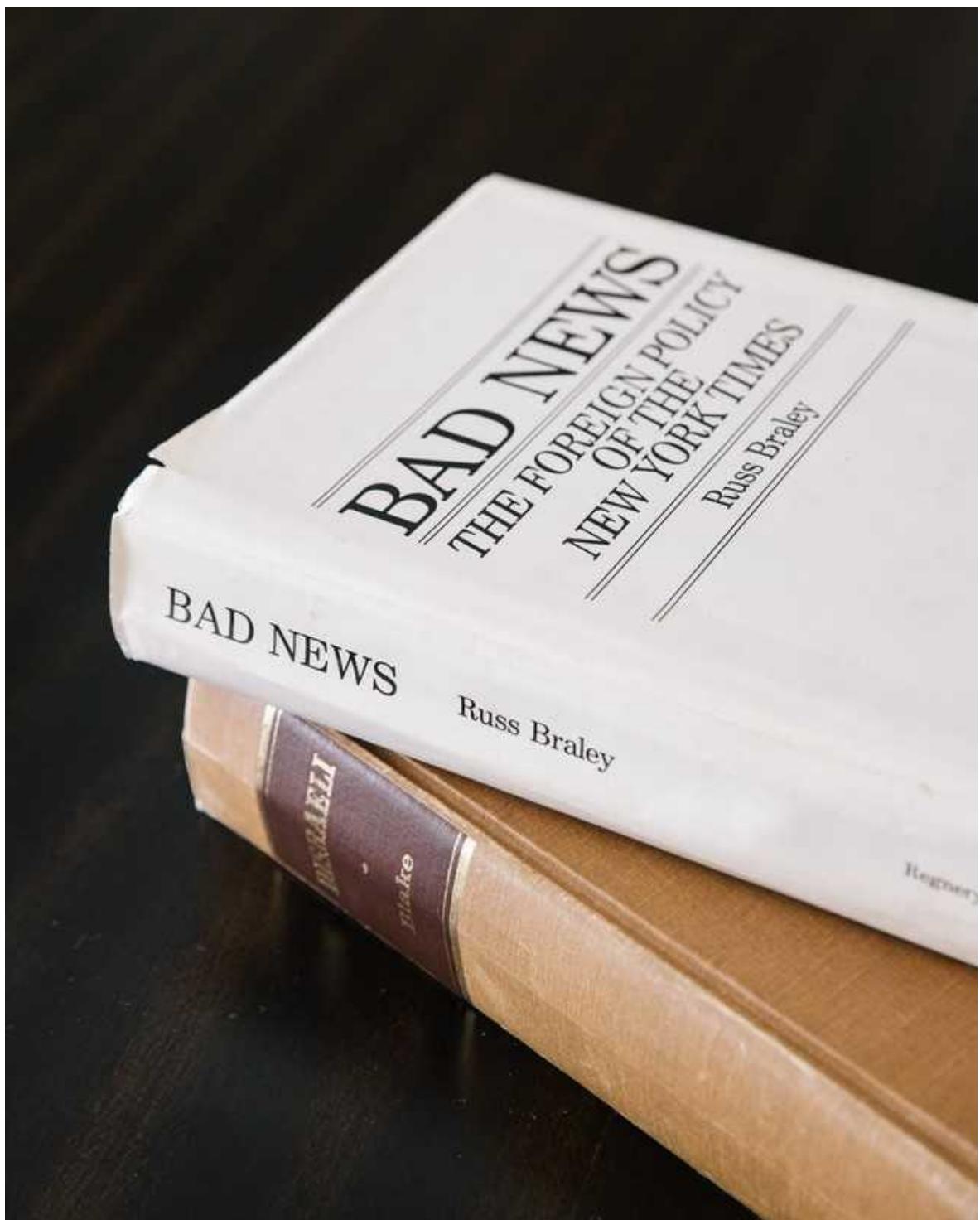
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Nixon Between the Lines

Alone in his study, ballpoint pen in hand, the president revealed himself in the margins of his books.

by Andrew Ferguson



Call it coincidence, serendipity, an aligning of the planets—whatever the term, the moment was creepy and amusing all at once. I was beavering away in the basement research room at the Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, in Yorba Linda, a suburb of Los Angeles, when Henry Kissinger

twice came into view—in the flat, cursive form of Nixon's scrawl in the margins of the book I was reading, and then in the rounder corporeal form of the man himself, in the hallway outside the door.

Kissinger, the last surviving member of Nixon's Cabinet, was in Yorba Linda last fall for two reasons: to speak at a [fundraising gala for the Richard Nixon Foundation](#) and to promote a book he had published earlier in the year, at the improbable age of 99. The book, *Leadership*, contains an [entire chapter in praise of Nixon](#), the man who had made Kissinger the 20th century's only celebrity diplomat.

I was there to gather material for a Nixon book of my own. I had been nosing around in a cache of volumes from Nixon's personal library. I was particularly interested in any marks he may have left in the books he'd owned. From what I could tell, no one had yet mined this remarkably varied collection, more than 2,000 books filling roughly 160 boxes stored in a vault beneath the presidential museum. Taken together, they reflect the broad range of Nixon's intellectual curiosity—an underappreciated quality of his highly active mind. To give an idea: One heavily underlined book in the collection is a lengthy biography of Tolstoy; another is a book on statesmanship by Charles de Gaulle; another is a deep dive into the historiography of Japanese art. Several fat volumes of *The Story of Civilization*, Will and Ariel Durant's mid-century monument to middlebrow history, display evidence of attentive reading and rereading.

Every morning a friendly factotum would wheel out a gray metal cart stacked with dusty boxes from Nixon's personal library. On the afternoon Kissinger arrived, I had worked my way down to an obscure book published in 1984, a decade after Nixon left the White House. A significant portion of *Bad News: The Foreign Policy of The New York Times*, by a foreign correspondent for the New York *Daily News* named Russ Braley, is a blistering indictment of the *Times'* coverage of the Nixon administration. In Braley's telling, the *Times'* treatment swung between the unfair and the uncomprehending, for reasons ranging from negligence to malice.

The book had found its ideal reader in Richard Nixon. The pages of his copy were cluttered with underlining from his thick ballpoint pen. It occurred to

me, as I followed along, that Nixon was being brought up short by his reading: Much of the material in *Bad News* was apparently news to him.

From the May 1982 issue: Kissinger and Nixon in the White House

My reading was interrupted by a commotion outside the research room. I stuck my head out in time to see Kissinger and his entourage settling into the room across the hall. A group of donors and Nixonophiles had gathered to hear heroic tales of Nixon's statecraft.

I dutifully returned to Braley. When I got to a chapter on Daniel Ellsberg and the Pentagon Papers, I found an unmistakable pattern: Most of Nixon's markings involved the man holding court across the hall. And Nixon wasn't happy with him. Kissinger, Braley wrote, had actually invited Ellsberg to Nixon's transition office in late 1968 to explicate his dovish views on Vietnam, more than two years before the Papers were released. Nixon's pen came down: exclamation point! Kissinger gave Ellsberg an office in the White House complex anyway, for a month in 1969—a stone's throw from the Oval Office. Slash mark! Kissinger spent his evenings “ridicul[ing]” Nixon “in private conversations with liberal friends.” This last treachery summoned the full battery of Nixon's marginalia: a slash running alongside the paragraph, a check mark for emphasis, and a plump, emphatic line under “liberal friends.”

fall of Saigon and the Scourging of Nixon 121
e should have instead of hating Vietnam. No 48

in: that it's over and that we didn't go back again. My Vietnam was a film that would just keep running and forwards and would never end [an image often recches by Ellsberg]. Then dismay that people talk of Vietnam or the fall of Vietnam. That country has not fallen, didn't have it to lose. Vietnam will now be independent.

cess: very exciting and tragic moment at the same time. Excusing use no more lives will be wasted, because the people of Vietnam will be able to determine their lives without foreign interference. Tragic because one can't forget the needless death and destruction. For 25 years the United States has tried to control 25 million people on a tiny strip of land and we couldn't do it and we should never try to do it anywhere else.²³

The Times editorial showed neither anguish nor the satisfaction that might have been expected, but a continued peckish irritation at the anti-Communist Ambassador Martin:

The United States left Vietnam with the same confusion and lack of direction that took this country there in the first place.... There is still no convincing explanation why the administration and Ambassador Graham Martin allowed thousands of American personnel to remain on the spot in Saigon long after their functions had become superfluous. Even when evacuation had started, a thousand American officials remained and became by their presence a force to obstruct the political bargain that might have prevented a final rout.... What could have been an orderly transfer of power by procedures internationally agreed upon in the Paris accords of 1973 now appears to have become a simple takeover by force.... Why this (American) change of heart came about is another question which cannot now be answered.²⁴

The Times editorialists still had one or two balls left to juggle: Ford and Kissinger had warned that U.S. credibility was at stake with other allies, and that the defeat would send the United States into isolationism.

In a series of editorials the Times rebutted both themes. Ford confounded U.S. credibility with allies and with the "discredited and infatual clients" Lon Nol and Thieu. The United States was not

Page 551 from *Bad News: The Foreign Policy of The New York Times*, by Russ Braley (Photograph by Joel Barhamand for *The Atlantic*)

Still, Braley went on, when the Pentagon Papers were leaked, their publication alarmed Kissinger, because they posed a “double threat” to national security and to the conduct of foreign policy. “And to K!” Nixon wrote in the margin.

The contrast between Nixon’s bitter hash marks about Kissinger from the 1980s and Kissinger’s present-day celebration of his old boss offered a lesson in the evolving calculation of self-interest. It also conjured the image of a solitary old man in semireirement, learning things about a now-vanished world he’d once thought he presided over. It happened often in the reading room in Yorba Linda: With unexpected immediacy, the gray metal cart carried the past into the present, in small but tangible fragments of Nixon himself.

The task of a marginalia maven is at right angles to the task of reading a book: It is an attempt to read the reader rather than to read the writer. For several decades now, scholars have been swarming the margins of books in dead people’s libraries. Those margins are among the most promising sites of “textual activity,” to use the scholar’s clinical phrase—a place to explore, analyze, and, it is hoped, find new raw material for the writing of dissertations. Famous readers whose libraries have fallen under such scrutiny include Melville and Montaigne, Machiavelli and Mark Twain.

A book invites various kinds of engagement, depending on the reader. Voltaire (whom Nixon admired, to judge by his extravagant underlining in the Durants’ *The Age of Voltaire*) scribbled commentary so incessantly that his marginalia have been published in volumes of their own. Voltaire liked to argue with a book. Nixon did not. He had a lively mind but not, when reading, a disputatious one; he restricted his marginalia almost exclusively to underlining sentences or making other subverbal marks on the page—boxes and brackets and circles. You get the idea that he knew what he wanted from a book and went searching for it, and when he found what he wanted, he pinned it to the page with his pen (seldom, from what I’ve seen, a pencil).

[From the April 1973 issue: The president and the press](#)

In his method, Nixon resembled the English writer Paul Johnson. I once asked Johnson how, given his prolific journalistic career—[several columns and reviews a week in British and American publications](#)—he managed to read all the books he cited in his own very long and very readable histories, which embraced such expansive subjects as Christianity, ancient Egypt, and the British empire. His reaction bordered on revulsion at my naivete. “Read them?!” he spat out. “Read them?! I don’t read them! I fillet them!” As it happens, Nixon was an avid reader of Johnson, whose books he often handed out to friends and staff at Christmastime.

John Adams, another busy producer of marginalia, liked to quote a Latin epigram: *Studium sine calamo somnium*. Adams translated this as: “Study without a pen in your hand is but a dream.” Nixon acquired the pen-in-hand habit early, as his surviving college and high-school textbooks show, and he kept at it throughout his life. For Nixon, as for the rest of us, marking up books was also a way of slowing himself down and attending to what he read. He was not a notably fast reader, by his own account, but his powers of concentration and memorization were considerable. Going at a book physically was a way of absorbing it mentally.

A line, a check mark, a circle—why Nixon deployed one notation and not another for any given passage is as unanswerable as “Why didn’t he burn the tapes?”

One of the most heavily represented authors in Nixon’s personal library is Churchill, whom Nixon revered not only as a statesman but also as a historian and an essayist. Nixon’s shelves sagged with Churchill’s multivolume histories and biographies: [The World Crisis](#), [Marlborough: His Life and Times](#), [The Second World War](#), [A History of the English Speaking Peoples](#). Churchill’s [Great Contemporaries](#), a series of sketches he wrote in the 1920s and ’30s sizing up roughly two dozen friends and colleagues, was clearly a favorite. When I retrieved Nixon’s copy from a box, I found it dog-eared throughout.

Nixon’s tastes ran heavily toward history, but he could be tempted away from the past to a book of present-day punditry, if the writer and point of view were agreeable. According to a report in *Time* magazine, when half a million citizens descended on Washington, D.C., in November 1969 to

protest the Vietnam War, Nixon holed up in his private quarters with a book called *The Decline of Radicalism: Reflections on America Today*. The book, slim and elegant, had been sent to Nixon by its author, the historian Daniel Boorstin.

Judging by his notations, Nixon was interested less in Boorstin's turgid cultural analysis of "consumption communities" and more in his thesis that the ragged protesters gathering outside the White House fence constituted something new in American history: They were not radicals at all but nihilists. Nixon brought out the pen, and in Yorba Linda, a continent and decades away from his White House hideaway, I could still feel the insistent furrow of his underlining on the page. He marked several consecutive paragraphs in a section called "The New Barbarians," in which Boorstin criticized protesters for their "indolence of mind" and "mindless, obsessive quest for power."

People read books for lots of reasons: instruction, pleasure, uplift. This was Nixon reading for self-defense.

The book I most wanted to see in Yorba Linda was Nixon's copy of [Robert Blake's biography *Disraeli*](#) (1966). A re-creation of Nixon's favorite room in the White House was one of the Nixon museum's prime exhibits when it opened, in 1990, a few years before Nixon's death. (It has since been redesigned.) Nixon himself chose *Disraeli* to rest on his desk for the public to see. The book was given to him during his first year in the White House, in 1969, by Daniel Patrick Moynihan, a Harvard professor, prominent Democrat, and future U.S. senator from New York. To the surprise of just about everybody, the year he took office, Nixon made Moynihan his chief domestic-policy counselor, a counterpart in those early days to Kissinger as head of the National Security Council. Despite Nixon's enduring image as a black-eyed right-winger, his political ideology was always flexible, if not flatly self-contradictory.

[From the November 1974 issue: The friends of Richard Nixon](#)

Moynihan the liberal hoped to persuade Nixon the hybrid to take Benjamin Disraeli, the great prime minister of Victorian Britain, as his model. Disraeli was a Tory and an imperialist, and at the same time a social reformer of

vision and courage. According to Moynihan, Nixon read the book within days of receiving it. Soon enough, the president was calling himself a “[Disraeli conservative](#).” The precise meaning of the tag was clear to Nixon alone, but we can assume it underwent a great deal of improvisation and revision as his presidency wore on.

Disraeli’s appeal to Nixon went beyond his light-footed ideology. Speaking to his Cabinet at a dinner one evening in early 1972, Nixon called Disraeli a “magnificent” politician. Now, he went on, the “fashionable set today would immediately say, ‘Ah, politicians. Bad.’” As he saw it, the “fashionable set”—the epithet, suffused with reverse snobbery and class resentment, is pure Nixon—believed that politicians disdain idealism and think nothing of principle. “But,” Nixon said, “the pages of history are full of idealists who never accomplished anything.” It was “pragmatic men” like Disraeli “who had the ability to do things that other people only talked about.” Nixon, who had never shied away from calling himself a politician, wanted to see himself in Disraeli, or at least in Blake’s *Disraeli*—this “classic biography,” to which, he told his Cabinet, he often turned for inspiration on sleepless nights. And here the book was, Nixon’s own copy, at the top of my growing stack in Yorba Linda.

Disraeli is packed with observations about political tradecraft. They are penetrating, specific, and cold-blooded. The little dicta come from both the biographer and his subject. “He was a master at disguising retreat as advance,” Blake wrote approvingly. Nixon underlined that sentence, and then this one from Disraeli’s contemporary Lord Salisbury: “The commonest error in politics is sticking to the carcasses of dead policies.”

A line, a check mark, a circle—why Nixon deployed one notation and not another for any given passage is a question as unanswerable as “Why didn’t he burn the tapes?” But it was politics that always caught his eye, and activated his pen. Disraeli, Blake wrote, “suffered from a defect, endemic among politicians, the greatest reluctance to admit publicly that he had been in the wrong, even when the fault lay with his subordinates.” Another from Blake: Successful politicians “realize that a large part of political life in a parliamentary democracy consists not so much in doing things yourself as in imparting the right tone to things that others do for you or to things that are going to happen anyway.”

Should we take marked passages like these, with their ironic acceptance of the fudging and misdirection called for in the political arts, as a gesture toward self-criticism on Nixon's part? Probably not: Nixon knew himself better than psycho-biographers give him credit for, but self-awareness is not self-criticism. In his chosen profession, he took the bad with the good, and his casual, creeping concessions to the seamier requirements of politics are what eventually did him in.

[From the October 2017 issue: How the Vietnam War broke the American presidency](#)

If you go looking for them, you can see reflections of Blake's *Disraeli* throughout Nixon's presidency, encapsulated in enduring phrases here and there. It was in Blake that Nixon came across Disraeli's famous description of "exhausted volcanoes." Disraeli coined it to disparage the feckless time-servers in William Ewart Gladstone's cabinet after they had been in office a few years. Nixon underscored not only "exhausted volcanoes" but the rest of the passage from Blake's text: The phrase, Blake writes, "was no mere gibe ... For the past year, the Government had been vexed by that combination of accidents, scandals and blunders which so often for no apparent reason seem to beset an energetic administration in its later stages."

Nixon feared the same fate for his second term—a loss of energy and direction. The day after his landslide reelection, in 1972, he called together his Cabinet and senior staff. He told them of Disraeli's warning about "exhausted volcanoes." And then, with his chief of staff, H. R. Haldeman, serving as the lord high executioner, he demanded their resignations en masse.

Not everything in Blake's *Disraeli* caught Nixon's interest; certainly not everything was useful to him. As I paged through, I saw there were many longueurs, stretches of several dozen pages, sometimes more, where no filleting of any kind happened. And then—inevitably, suddenly—Nixon the reader is seized by passages of sometimes thunderous resonance, and the pen is again called into play.

"Disraeli," Blake writes, "really was regarded as an outsider by the Victorian governing class." One can almost see Nixon sit bolt upright and pick up his

pen. This is the same ostracism that Nixon himself felt keenly throughout his personal and professional life, in fact and in imagination. The following page and a half, discussing the disdain of the “élite” for Disraeli, is bracketed nearly in its entirety. Some sentences are boxed. Some passages, like this one, are underlined as well as bracketed:

Men of genius operating in a parliamentary democracy … inspired a great deal of dislike and no small degree of distrust among the bustling mediocrities who form the majority of mankind.

The antagonism of the elites was not the determining fact of Disraeli’s career, but both biographer and subject perceived its profound effects, and so did the man reading about it 90 years after Disraeli’s death. As president, Nixon felt himself similarly situated: the political leader of an imperial nation, highly skilled, aching for greatness, yet in permanent estrangement from the most powerful figures of the politics and culture that surrounded him, nearly all of whom he judged, as Disraeli had, “bustling mediocrities.”

When reading about the elites, Nixon pressed the ballpoint deep into the page. We marginalia mavens, tracing our fingers across the lines today, can only guess, of course. But it may be that in 1969, sitting in the reading chair in his White House hideaway, he already sensed that this was not bound to end well.

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Confronting the Unbelievable

A photograph that dramatizes the power of nature

by Amy Weiss-Meyer



Irina Rozovsky. "Untitled," 2018. In "A Long Arc: Photography and the American South" (Aperture).

When the photographer [Irina Rozovsky](#) moved from Boston to Athens, Georgia, she began taking walks around her new neighborhood. She'd push her daughter's stroller to a nearby wooded path, trying to get the baby to sleep, and photograph what she could along the way. One day in 2018, after a storm, the path was flooded. A young girl stood in the bright sun at the edge of the murky water, observing the strange new scene before her

—“confronting the unbelievable,” as Rozovsky puts it. The image reminded Rozovsky of the fairy-tale trope of a child getting lost in the forest. “It’s both a romance and a nightmare,” she told me.

Rozovsky’s untitled photograph will be on display this fall at the High Museum of Art in Atlanta, as part of the exhibition “[A Long Arc: Photography and the American South Since 1845](#). ” In an introduction to [an accompanying book](#), the *Atlantic* contributing writer [Imani Perry](#) reflects on the 21st-century photographers who capture the region’s distinctive landscapes with compositions that evoke a 19th-century sense of the sublime. In the South, Perry writes, “nature takes over everything that humans create and destroy.”

Rozovsky insists that the work is not making an environmental statement. As a mother, she worries about the role that humans have played in [warming the world](#) her daughter will inherit. But as a photographer, she told me, she was drawn to this particular scene for its “serene and surreal” beauty, its unsettling scale.

A relative newcomer to the South, Rozovsky has been struck by the high drama of its nature. “It can be so wild,” she said, even just down the street in Athens. She’s not religious—but when trees fall, or a path floods like this, Rozovsky said, it can feel almost biblical. “There’s something larger than us.”

This article appears in the [October 2023](#) print edition with the headline “Confronting the Unbelievable.” 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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Culture & Critics

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The Undoing of a Great American Band

Sly and the Family Stone suggested new possibilities in music and life—until it all fell apart.

by James Parker



Is there a way to look at Sly Stone—a musical genius and, for a couple of years, an avatar of spiritual freedom—that isn't dualistic, split-brained, one thing in opposition to another? That isn't about light versus darkness, up versus down, Logos versus Chaos, good drugs versus bad drugs, having it all

versus losing it all, and on and on? “Without contraries is no progression,” [William Blake said](#), but still—I find myself groping for another plane of understanding. I want to see him as the angels do. We might need to evolve a little bit to get a handle on this man.

To the binary American eye, certainly, he soared and then he smashed. Sly Stone [held the '60s](#) in the palm of his hand. He had the plumage and vibration of Jimi Hendrix and the melodic instinct of Paul McCartney. His music married ballooning hippie consciousness to the tautest and worldliest and most street-facing funk: Its end product, its neurochemical payload, was an amazing, paradoxically wised-up euphoria. A rapture petaled with knowingness, with *slyness*.

Live, he could bend time to his will like James Brown. His band Sly and the Family Stone—[polyracial, polygendered](#), poly-freaking-phonic (you could never quite tell which voice was Sly’s, and he himself had several)—was a crucible of joy, a crucible of possibility, an experiment that took on the character of a proof: People *could* live together. America *could* work. Love and justice were real. For about a minute. “I can’t imagine my life without Sly Stone,” Cornel West says in the 2017 documentary [*On the Sly: In Search of the Family Stone*](#). “Sly created a music that became a place where we could go to have a foretaste of that freedom, of that democratic experience. Even though we couldn’t live it on the ground.”

[Read: The inimitability of Sly Stone](#)

And by 1975 it was essentially over: his creativity squandered, [his reputation in tatters](#), cocaine and PCP and [paranoia](#) everywhere. [Decades of obscurity](#) followed, punctuated by occasional failed resurrections. Plenty of people, upon hearing about his new memoir, [*Thank You \(Falettinme Be Mice Elf Agin\)*](#), written with Ben Greenman, will be surprised to learn that he is still alive.

But Sly lives. And the resourceful Greenman, whose publishing credits include the [co-writing of a memoir by George Clinton](#), has coaxed, wheedled, massaged, used God knows what processes of titration and palpation to extract a fascinating book from him. “I have some questions, not too many,” he tells his subject in the moody snippet of transcribed

conversation that prefaces *Thank You*. “We don’t have to do them all.” “We don’t have to do them at all,” answers Sly.

He had the plumage and vibration of Hendrix and the melodic instinct of McCartney.

Pretty much the definition of an unreliable narrator, Sly nonetheless has some clear memories. Young Sly, at home in Vallejo, California, watches the cowboys on TV: “I liked Roy Rogers and Gene Autry. My favorite was Lash LaRue. There was no one cooler. He wore all black and used a whip. What for? To keep himself from shooting a motherfucker.”

Middle-school, churchgoing Sly is mesmerized by the high-energy soul singers—Sam Cooke, Jackie Wilson—who come out of gospel. “They kept what was holy and added in what was earthy … I wanted to sing like them, control the stage like them.” Student Sly, at Vallejo Junior College, [has a great teacher](#): Mr. Froehlich, who explains music theory to him with vision-inducing clarity. “I could see the melodic lines, watch them intertwine. It’s wrong to say that it was like shoelaces but it’s also wrong to say that it wasn’t at least a little like that.”

He also has some memory holes, or some places he’d rather not go. “Drugs came in. There were reasons … I was trying to write, trying to play, trying to record. All of that needed to be fueled. But how did that fuel make me feel? A drug is a substance and so the question has substance. A drug can be a temporary escape and so I will temporarily escape that question.”

Career-building Sly [was a radio DJ in San Francisco](#), honing his patter, and also [a record producer](#), bedding down in the acid wisps of Haight-Ashbury, tweaking the beat music of the Beau Brummels, tuning up the thumping psych-pop of the Mojo Men, cracking the whip like Lash LaRue. (He forced the Great Society, Grace Slick’s pre-Jefferson Airplane band, [through 50 takes](#) of “Somebody to Love.”) The Family Stone, he tells Ben Greenman, was “a concept—white and black together, male and female both, and women not just singing but playing instruments. That was a big deal back then and it was a big deal on purpose.”

Woodstock was a peak. Just past four in the morning, Sly and the Family Stone played “I Want to Take You Higher,” and Sly initiated a call-and-response routine that was like heaven talking to Earth: “Just say *higher* and throw the peace sign up,” he exhorted a rained-on, worn-out, crawling-around-in-its-sleeping-bag crowd. “It’ll do you no harm.” From the darkness came the answer, thousand-voiced, in a wall of affirmation: *Higher!* After Woodstock, Sly remembers in *Thank You*, “everything glowed.”

From the September 2009 issue: Woodstock Nation

Entropy was already at work. As beautifully as he had realized and organized the Family Stone, Sly was also an arch-orchestrator of turmoil: the control of no control. Endless brinkmanship—Would he show up for the gig or not? And in what condition?—pitched his band into despair. There was a devouringly out-of-it appearance on *The Dick Cavett Show*. Gangsterhood enveloped his household: guns, drugs, sketchy people. At the center of *Thank You*, like a gyre of disruption, is the image of Sly’s as-good-as-feral pit bull, Gun, whirling around in pursuit of his own tail. “He was my best friend. He was crazy. He would chase his tail in circles, not for a minute or for an hour but forever.” Gun ends up mauling Sly’s toddler son, Sylvester Stewart Jr.

For some people, *There’s a Riot Goin’ On*, Sly’s itchy, woozy, drum-machined bummer of a 1971 album, is a masterpiece. For me the drug vibes are too heavy, the flashes of self-awareness too sour and fleeting, the music too much like Gun chasing his own tail. It was certainly groundbreaking: through the crust and downward. The two albums that followed it—*Fresh* (1973) and the insufficiently listened-to *Small Talk* (1974)—were probably better records, better art, but with *Riot*, Sly had cast a long, evil spell on himself and his audience. The Family Stone was falling apart. A disastrous showcase at Radio City Music Hall, in January 1975, had the smell of the end.

So what is it, the Sly Stone story? Utopia colliding with reality? Not that, because Sly was his own kind of realist all along. The slow death of the ’60s? Not that either. The ’60s were about conflict, and conflict, as far as we can tell, never dies. The space created by Sly and the Family Stone, the blast radius of delight—that, too, will never die. Genius undone by addiction,

then: Is that it? Too small, way too small. Look on him rather as a supreme artist, elected and condemned to expand actuality, and thereby to experience himself fully and on the grandest scale—his flaws writ large, his glory almost dazzling, all simultaneous, all one.

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Fiction on Trial

Zadie Smith's ambitious new novel asks: Do we expect the genre to do too much?

by Jordan Kisner



Is there anything worse than a novel? Is there anyone more vain, more laughable, more exploitative yet morally self-serious than the novelist? Or, as the protagonist of Zadie Smith's sixth novel puts it: “‘Oh what does it

matter what that man thinks of anything? He's a novelist!' Without meaning to, she had spoken in the same tone with which one might say *He's a child.*"

The Fraud opens with an uneasy meeting on a novelist's doorstep in 19th-century London. A "filthy boy" stands at the entrance to a respectable home in Tunbridge Wells, face-to-face with a formidable, black-haired Scottish woman. She is Eliza Touchet, the cousin of William Ainsworth, the novelist, and she has called the boy to fix a crater that has opened up in the house. The second-floor library has caved in under the weight of an absurd number of books, dumping plaster and volumes of British history all over the downstairs parlor.

Inspecting the damage, the boy is disapproving: "The sheer weight of literature you've got here, well, that will put a terrible strain on a house, Mrs Touchet. Terrible strain." When Eliza readily agrees, the boy feels a flicker of anxiety. "Was she laughing at him? Perhaps 'literature' was the wrong word. Perhaps he had pronounced it wrong." He says no more and kneels to measure the size of the hole.

The metaphor is not subtle. This will be a book about the dead weight of literature; the saggy, impractical, possibly elitist enterprise of revering it; the ambivalences and frustrations involved in making it; the embarrassing excess of it all. This will also be a novel about the fear of using the "wrong word," or the right word the wrong way, and what happens when that fear curdles into resentment.

These are topics of the moment, at least in the world of literary criticism. "Siri, what was the novel?" the *New York Times* critic Dwight Garner [asked in a recent review](#) "advancing an argument that's been plausibly made for centuries: that literature is dead." (Garner states that Smith's first novel, *White Teeth*, published in 2000, was probably the last novel that "mattered.") Smith, a literary critic herself, asked, "[Do we know what fiction was?](#)" in an essay for *The New York Review of Books* in 2019, wondering how viable the enterprise remains. *The Fraud* poses this question in the contested genre itself.

Eliza Touchet, as it happens, wasn't making fun of the boy—she's revolted by the pursuit of literature herself. Since being widowed in her early 20s, she

has functioned as factotum and housekeeper for her writer cousin, originally helping his wife, Frances, care for their children whenever he had the itch to run off to Europe to “see beauty and write.” After Frances died, Eliza moved in to help finish raising the children, and she has become Ainsworth’s right hand: his first reader, his lover, the hostess of the literary salons he throws for his friends Charles Dickens, William Makepeace Thackeray, George Cruikshank, and so forth. Ainsworth, whose career thrived during his younger years, is charming and prolific, but also conceited, out of touch, and a mediocre talent. By the time the ceiling caves in, he’s a has-been in denial, churning out historical fiction—a genre Eliza considers regrettable—that no one wants to read.

Eliza sits down to comment on Ainsworth’s latest manuscript, which is as she expects it to be: boring, badly written, and completely unoriginal. “Everything had been used before or was lifted from life … From such worn cloth and stolen truth are novels made. More and more the whole practice wearied her, even to the point of disgust.” Ainsworth, anxious, demands to know what she thinks. Eliza declares it a triumph.

Both Ainsworth and Touchet are based on real people—William Ainsworth was a [popular novelist of the Victorian era](#), more successful than even his friend Dickens in their early careers. His work has been largely forgotten, and very little is known about his cousin by marriage, Eliza Touchet, whom Smith adopts as the protagonist for this book. In other words, *The Fraud* is historical fiction, the regrettable genre. There are echoes of George Eliot, whose [Middlemarch](#) Eliza admires. The obsession with social mores and manners, alongside extended scenes of drawing-room gossip, recalls Jane Austen. This is not merely a novel; it is a pastiche of the Great English Novels. (This is a familiar feature in Smith’s fiction: [On Beauty](#) was a riff on E. M. Forster’s [Howards End](#); [NW](#) is in fairly explicit dialogue with the work of Virginia Woolf.)

Are novelists effective or reliable enough to be tasked with representing the political and social realities around them? Zadie Smith seems unsure.

Presiding over it all is the specter of Dickens. In the world of *The Fraud*, Dickens’s ascension to the role of Great Novelist is a thorn in Ainsworth’s side. Eliza objects to Dickens on ethical grounds: Though he is renowned as

a kind of genius-saint, credited with surpassing sympathy for the plight of the working man, Eliza knows him to be something closer to a vulture—or a pickpocket. He and Ainsworth hang around the working poor not out of any humanitarian impulse but in search of material. They want to appropriate their language and sell it to the middle class as entertainment. “Keep stealing, my friends! From life for fiction, and from fiction for life. What a terrible business,” she thinks. “At least William did it clumsily, with benign incompetence. Whereas his friend Charles had done it like a master—like an actor. That was precisely what was so dangerous about him.”

Smith herself wrestles, as she [recently wrote in a *New Yorker* essay](#), with the legacy of Dickens’s mark on the genre. Dickens adapted the novel into a mode of social commentary, which transformed it into a political tool—and elevated the novelist to a new moral and political stature. He didn’t only write great stories; he critiqued the poverty, hypocrisy, greed, and inhumanity of British society. He did what novelists today are under pressure to do: He was brilliantly entertaining, incisively political, wildly best-selling, and *world-changing*.

But are novelists effective or reliable enough to be tasked with representing the political and social realities around them? Smith seems unsure. She called fiction “[our indefensible art](#)” in her 2019 essay about the genre’s purposes and methods, wading into the controversy over writers inhabiting subjective positions different from their own—white American women writing Mexican-refugee characters, say, an example that soon stirred debate. Is this appropriation and parasitism, or is it imaginative empathy? “Has fiction, over the centuries, been the creator of compassion or a vehicle for containment? I think we can make both cases.” Either way, Smith argues, occupying other consciousnesses is inescapable for the novelist. She recalls seeing, when she was young, a cartoon of Charles Dickens:

The image of contentment, surrounded by all his characters come to life. I found that image comforting. Dickens didn’t look worried or ashamed. Didn’t appear to suspect he might be schizophrenic or in some other way pathological. He had a name for his condition: novelist. Early in my life, this became my cover story, too.

Portrayed this way, the novelist is not just an individual but a chorus of humanity, many distinct selves held within and expressed by a single mind. Smith's understanding of herself as a writer is related to a desire to air "all the other voices inside me, serving to make the idea of my 'own voice' indistinct." This is a lovely notion of what fiction can be: an art form in which the self operates as a gateway into a realm of other selves, enabled by "a kind of awareness, attended by questions. What is it like to be that person? To feel what they feel? I wonder. Can I use what I feel to imagine what the other feels?"

This conception of fiction also suggests that the novel is inescapably a kind of self-portraiture, one that may contain insights about society and contemporary politics and ideology and all the rest, but in a terribly limited way. What Dickens is doing in a work like *Oliver Twist*, Eliza insists, isn't benevolent fabrication or ethical social commentary; he's merely reflecting his own obsessions, desires, ego. These conflicting truths happen to coexist, Smith suggests: The novelist is ideally expansive beyond the self; the novelist is always blinkered by the self. Whether the work is defensible has less to do with this double bind than with the writing itself, she argues. "Belief in a novel is, for me, a by-product of a certain type of sentence ... If the sentences don't speak to me, nothing else will."

The central irony of *The Fraud* is that the professional novelist writes bad sentences and ignores the greatest plot of the age. Ainsworth works away on his historical novels while London raptly follows the Tichborne trial. The trial ([a real sensation in the early 1870s](#)) features a man claiming to be the long-lost heir to the Tichborne baronetcy. The heir, Roger Tichborne, was supposed to have disappeared at sea as a 25-year-old; now, 10 years later, a butcher from Wagga Wagga, Australia, has appeared in England claiming to be Roger. Most of the family insists that he's an impostor, and not a very good one. The Claimant, as he is called, bears little resemblance to Roger Tichborne. He doesn't recognize family members. He doesn't speak any French, which was Roger Tichborne's first language. And so on.

Still, the trial becomes a flash point for social tensions. The working classes take to the Claimant, seeing him as a symbol of their own social and economic oppression. The educated classes and aristocracy regard him as a fraud, a laughingstock, and a threat. The divide surfaces in the Ainsworth

household as well. Ainsworth's new and very young bride, Sarah, his former maid whom he impregnated, is a passionate fan of the Claimant. Ainsworth and Eliza consider him ridiculous. Still, Eliza agrees to accompany Sarah to watch the trial.

There, she is entranced by Andrew Bogle, the formerly enslaved Jamaican man who served Roger Tichborne's father and insists that the Claimant is the real heir. Even before Eliza hears him speak, Bogle's posture and demeanor inspire in her a new kind of awareness, along with questions. She wants to know his story. She wants, in spite of herself, to write about him. Against her better judgment, she begins working on a novel.

“The Fraud” is the title of the manuscript that Eliza embarks on as she attends the trial, and putatively it refers to the figure at the center of that case, though of course—wink!—the book has any number of frauds worth laying bare or laughing at. There is Ainsworth, still parading as a literary titan. Dickens instrumentalizes the people he is beloved for humanizing. Eliza herself is a fraud of many descriptions: a woman with an unorthodox sexual history (she has carried on affairs with both Ainsworth, whom she dominates sexually, and his first wife, whom she loved) masked as an upright Catholic spinster; a woman who scorns novelists and yet finds herself becoming one in secret.

Smith positions language as the instrument by which all of this fraud is committed. Language is a commodity, a weapon, and a disguise. Sarah cosplays at being a lady of highborn status by abandoning the vernacular of her class and using the word *naturally* as much as possible. Unfortunately, she can't remember when to pronounce her H's. She has no chance: She will never pass.

Smith has long been fascinated by, and is expertly attuned to, the authority and status conferred on those who can wield language entertainingly or persuasively. This is the novelist's prowess—and the politician's and the swindler's. Philosophically, she seems uneasy about the indistinct boundary between the person who uses words to make art and the one who uses words to manipulate others for power. (Is there a difference?) This anxiety plays out in every corner of the novel.

The Claimant himself is suspected of lying because he speaks with a cockney accent, not with the elevated inflections of the Tichbornes. One of the primary debates surrounding the trial is how great a linguistic transformation is possible—a proxy for a more foundational cultural debate happening in Great Britain about who gets to decide what class you belong to or can rise to. You or the state? You or society? How would you need to sound—what words would you need to say—to be believed?

Smith also dwells on what it means to be a poor stylist, showcasing Ainsworth's hilariously bad sentences as evidence of an aesthetic and intellectual deficiency but also a moral one. "He was besotted with his project, especially the 'flash songs,' sung by the criminal and cockney underworld characters, and written in the 'cant' slang he had picked up somewhere," Eliza notes. Where? she asks him. He stole it from someone else's memoir.

Eliza, who functions in part as an avatar for Smith's ideas and concerns as a novelist, is initially set up as Ainsworth's foil—the true novelist, preoccupied with the problem of interiority, and the challenge of genuinely accessing it in others. "What world did they live in, and what unknown and perhaps unknowable mental landscape formed it?" she wonders at the sight of "strange strangers" as she walks down the street. "Could it be deciphered? Guessed at? What can we know of other people?"

If this sounds a little sophomoric, that's because Eliza's moral imagination and curiosity are only barely more sophisticated than Ainsworth's. Despite the revelation that she—a woman who feels herself a social outsider—might share a deep sensibility with someone like Bogle, she is ill-equipped to perceive his full humanity or subjectivity, a fact that becomes clear as *The Fraud* progresses. She doesn't even take seriously the humanity of the other woman she lives with, Sarah, whom she dismisses as a vulgar idiot until, finally, Sarah demands her dignity: "'No, you'll let me speak,' said Sarah, with a new authority. 'I say: I know what you think of me. But where I've come from you can't imagine.'"

Over and over, *The Fraud* insists on the duty of the novelist to deeply imagine the other—a project that may be doomed to fail but remains worth attempting. Smith was a convincing mouthpiece for this argument in *The*

New York Review of Books not simply because she's a persuasive critic but because she has made a career writing novels that do this well. *White Teeth*, whether or not you agree that it's the last novel that mattered, garnered early fame for Smith precisely because of the kaleidoscopic (somewhat Dickensian) array of humanity she captured in her characters. Through her subsequent fiction, especially her novel *Swing Time* and her story collection *Grand Union*, this has remained a strength of Smith's.

And yet her characters this time around—Eliza, Ainsworth, Sarah, and the rest—feel more like archetypes than like people. They do not come alive in the sentences, many of which read like wooden imitation (or unsteady satire) of 19th-century literary argot. *The Fraud* works perhaps better as a meta-novel, an allegory that advances ideas *about* the novel, than as a novel itself. It doesn't quite offer the pleasure of sinking into the consciousness of another person, or even, despite the Victorian particulars, into the texture of a different place and time. The book explicitly signals that this would be a desired effect: In one scene, a younger Eliza looks into a stereoscope that shows three-dimensional images of Ceylon. She's dismissive at first. Why invent a device for seeing the world in three dimensions when you can just look at the world with your own eyes, right in front of you?

This made everybody laugh, but when it was her turn to put her eyes to the strange machine Mrs Touchet lost her sense of humor. A view of Ceylon. A distant mountain, a lake, three mysterious people in a curious boat. All framed by unknown trees she would never see, not for herself, not in this lifetime.

She is immersed. She is beyond herself. This is what a novel can do. This is what *The Fraud* does not quite do, perhaps because—although the book, at more than 450 pages, is long—Smith is trying to deliver so much else: a rendering of London culture in the 19th century, a commentary on the recently abolished British colonial slave trade, a dramatization of a years-long court case, a Victorian BDSM queer romance. Smith is testing just how much the form can convey about the machinations of empire, gender, creativity, self-determination, and power—and how much the form can convey about itself. The weight of fictional ambition flattens her characters. The book seems, in moments, like a contest between Smith the novelist and Smith the critic, and the critic proves stronger.

Eliza herself acts from motives that are left vague. What drives her, for example, to write? How does she understand what she's doing as she ventures into the creative and ethical territories she has disparaged others for treading on? What would artistic success in this form look like to her? More than once, I puzzled over what she wanted. But then, maybe Eliza doesn't fully know what she wants, or why she does what she does. We are mysteries to ourselves, first and foremost—even, or especially, novelists.

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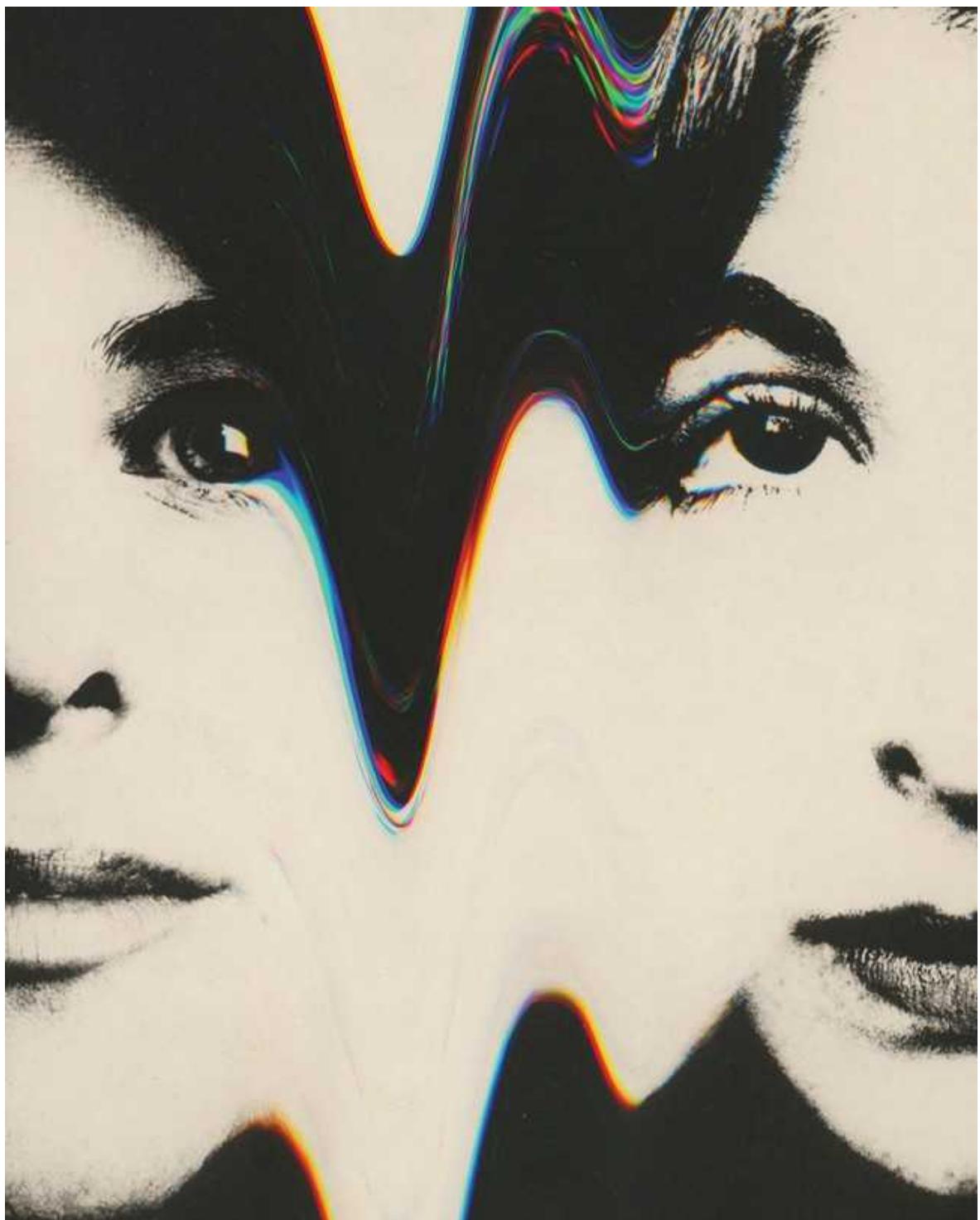
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From Feminist to Right-Wing Conspiracist

What Naomi Wolf's odyssey can teach us about seeing patterns where they don't exist

by Helen Lewis



In 2019, a mnemonic began to circulate on the internet: “If the Naomi be Klein / you’re doing just fine / If the Naomi be Wolf / Oh, buddy. Ooooof.” The rhyme recognized one of the most puzzling intellectual journeys of recent times—Naomi Wolf’s descent into conspiracism—and the collateral

damage it was inflicting on the Canadian climate activist and anti-capitalist Naomi Klein.

Until recently, Naomi Wolf was best known for her 1990s feminist blockbuster [*The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women*](#), which argued that the tyranny of grooming standards—all that plucking and waxing—was a form of backlash against women’s rights. But she is now one of America’s most prolific conspiracy theorists, boasting on her Twitter profile of being “deplatformed 7 times and still right.” She [has claimed](#) that vaccines are a “software platform” that can “receive ‘uploads’” and is mildly obsessed with the idea that many clouds aren’t real, but [are instead evidence](#) of “geoengineered skies.” Although Wolf has largely disappeared from the mainstream media, she is now a favored guest on Steve Bannon’s podcast, *War Room*.

All of this is particularly bad news for Klein, for the simple reason that people keep mistaking the two women for each other. Back in 2011, when she first noticed the confusion—from inside a bathroom stall, she heard two women complain that “Naomi Klein” didn’t understand the demands of the Occupy movement—this was merely embarrassing. The movement sprang from Klein’s part of the left, and in October of that year she was invited to speak to Occupy New York. Was it their shared first name, their Jewishness, or their brown hair with blond highlights? Even their partners’ names were similar: Avram Lewis and Avram Ludwig. Klein was struck that both had experienced rejection from their peer groups (in her case, by fellow students when she first criticized Israel in the college newspaper).

Klein had once admired *The Beauty Myth*, but she realized to her horror that Wolf had drifted from feminist criticism to [broader social polemics](#). When she picked up Wolf’s 2007 book, *The End of America: Letter of Warning to a Young Patriot*, her own book, out the same year, came to mind. “I felt like I was reading a parody of *The Shock Doctrine*, one with all the facts and evidence carefully removed.” To Klein, the situation began to seem sinister, even threatening. She was being eaten alive. “Other Naomi—that is how I refer to her now,” Klein writes at the beginning of her new book, [*Doppelganger: A Trip Into the Mirror World*](#). “A person whom so many others appear to find indistinguishable from me. A person who does many

extreme things that cause strangers to chastise me or thank me or express their pity for me.”

I began to wonder whether Wolf might be a natural conspiracy theorist who had merely lucked into writing about one conspiracy, the patriarchy, that happened to be true.

The confusion was particularly galling because *No Logo* (1999), Klein’s breakout work, was a manifesto against branding. And yet here she was, feeling an urgent need to protect her own personal brand from this interloper. Klein asserts that she didn’t want to write *Doppelganger*—“not with the literal and metaphorical fires roiling our planet,” she confesses with a hint of pomposity—but found herself ever more obsessed by Wolf’s conspiracist turn. How do you go from liberal darling to *War Room* regular within a decade?

Like Klein, I loved *The Beauty Myth* as a young woman, and then largely forgot about Wolf until 2010, when Julian Assange [was arrested](#) for alleged sex offenses (the charges were later dropped), and [she claimed](#) that Interpol was acting as “the world’s dating police.” Two years later, [she published](#) *Vagina: A New Biography*, which mixed sober accounts of rape as a weapon of war with a quest to cure her midlife sexual dysfunction through “yoni massages” and activating “the Goddess array.” In one truly deranged scene, a friend hosts a party at his loft and serves pasta shaped like vulvae, alongside salmon and sausages. The violent intermingling of genital-coded food overwhelms Wolf, who experiences it as an insult to womanhood in general and her own vagina in particular, and suffers writer’s block for the next six months. (I suspect that the friend was just trying to get into the spirit of Wolf’s writing project.) I remember beginning to wonder around this time whether Wolf might be a natural conspiracy theorist who had merely lucked into writing about one conspiracy—the patriarchy—that happened to be true.

Her final exile from the mainstream can probably be dated to 2019, when she was humiliated in [a live radio interview](#) during the rollout of her book *Outrages: Sex, Censorship, and the Criminalization of Love*. She had claimed that gay men in Victorian England were regularly executed for sodomy, but the BBC host Matthew Sweet noted that the phrase *death recorded* in the archives meant that the sentence had been commuted, rather

than carried out. It was a grade A howler, and it marked open season on her for all previous offenses against evidence and logical consistency. The *New York Times* [review of *Outrages*](#) referred to “Naomi Wolf’s long, ludicrous career.” In the U.K., the publisher promised changes to future editions, and the release of the U.S. edition [was canceled outright](#).

Klein dwells on this incident in *Doppelganger*, and rightly so: “If you want an origin story, an event when Wolf’s future flip to the pseudo-populist right was locked in, it was probably that moment, live on the BBC, getting caught—and then getting shamed, getting mocked, and getting pulped.” If the intelligentsia wouldn’t lionize Wolf, then the Bannonite right would: She could enter a world where mistakes don’t matter, no one feels shame, and fact-checkers are derided as finger-wagging elitists.

“These people don’t disappear just because we can no longer see them,” Klein reminds any fellow leftists who might be enthusiastic about public humiliation as a weapon against the right. Denied access to the mainstream media, the ostracized will be welcomed on One America News Network and Newsmax, or social-media sites such as Rumble, Gettr, Gab, Truth Social, and Elon Musk’s new all-crazy-all-the-time reincarnation of Twitter as X. On podcasts, the entire heterodox space revels in “just asking questions”—and then not caring about the peer-reviewed answers. By escaping to what Klein calls the “Mirror World,” Wolf might have lost cultural capital, but she has not lost an audience.

[Helen Lewis: Why so many conservatives feel like losers](#)

Klein notes that this world is particularly hospitable to those who can blend personal and social grievances into an appealing populist message—*I am despised by the pointy-heads, just as you are*. She ventures “a kind of equation for leftists and liberals crossing over to the authoritarian right that goes something like this: Narcissism (Grandiosity) + Social media addiction + Midlife crisis ÷ Public shaming = Right wing meltdown.” She is inclined to downplay “that bit of math,” though, and feels uncomfortable putting Wolf on the couch. Nonetheless, I’m struck by how narcissism (in the ubiquitous lay sense of the term) is key to understanding conspiracy-theorist influencers and their followers. If you feel disrespected and overlooked in

everyday life, then being flattered with the idea that you're a special person with secret knowledge must be appealing.

Klein's real interest, as you might expect from her previous work, tends more toward sociology than psychology. Her doppelgänger isn't an opportunist or a con artist, Klein decides, but a genuine believer—even if those beliefs have the happy side effect of garnering her attention and praise. But what about the culture that has enabled her to thrive?

At first, I thought what I was seeing in my doppelganger's world was mostly grifting unbound. Over time, though, I started to get the distinct impression that I was also witnessing a new and dangerous political formation find itself in real time: its alliances, worldview, slogans, enemies, code words, and no-go zones—and, most of all, its ground game for taking power.

To explore this ambitious agenda, the book ranges widely and sometimes tangentially. At one point, Klein finds herself listening to hours of *War Room*, hosted by [a man who has built a dark empire of profitable half-truths](#). Why does Klein find Bannon so compelling? Here *Doppelganger* takes a startling turn. The answer is that, quite simply, game recognizes game. Klein's cohort on the left attacks Big Pharma profits, worries about "[surveillance capitalism](#)," and sees Davos and the G7 as a cozy cabal exploiting the poor. Understandably, she hears Other Naomi talk with Bannon about vaccine manufacturers' profits, rail against Big Tech's power to control us, and make the case that Klaus Schwab of the World Economic Forum has untold secret power, and she can't help noting some underlying similarities. When Bannon criticizes MSNBC and CNN for running shows sponsored by Pfizer, telling his audience that this is evidence of rule "by the wealthy, for the wealthy, against you," Klein writes, "it strikes me that he sounds like Noam Chomsky. Or Chris Smalls, the Amazon Labor Union leader known for his EAT THE RICH jacket. Or, for that matter, me."

[From the July/August 2022 issue: Steve Bannon, American Rasputin](#)

This is *Doppelganger* at its best, acknowledging the traits that make us all susceptible to manipulation. In [a 2008 New Yorker profile of Klein](#), her husband described her as a "pattern recognizer," adding: "Some people feel

that she's bent examples to fit the thesis. But her great strength is helping people recognize patterns in the world, because that's the fundamental first step toward changing things." Of course, overactive pattern recognition is also the essence of conspiracism, and a decade and a half later, Klein expresses more caution about her superpower. When 9/11 truthers turn up at her events—drawn perhaps by her criticism in *The Shock Doctrine* of George W. Bush's response to the tragedy—their presence leads her to conclude "that the line between unsupported conspiracy claims and reliable investigative research is neither as firm nor as stable as many of us would like to believe."

We live in a world where the U.S. government has done outlandish stuff: The Tuskegee experiment, MK-Ultra, Iran-Contra, and Watergate are all conspiracies that diligent journalism proved to be true. QAnon's visions of Hollywood child-sex rings might be a mirage, but the Catholic Church's abuse of children in Boston was all too real—and uncovering it won *The Boston Globe* a Pulitzer Prize. Klein worries about whether a political movement can generate mass appeal without resorting to populism, and about how to stop her criticisms of elite power from being co-opted by her opponents and distorted into attacks on the marginalized.

[Read: A 2014 interview with Naomi Klein about climate politics](#)

However, Klein's (correct) diagnosis of American conspiracism as a primarily right-wing pathology prevents her from fully acknowledging the degree to which it has sometimes infected her own allies and idols. In *Doppelganger*, Klein notes that anti-Semitism has served as "the socialism of fools"—stirred up to deflect popular anger away from the elite—but she does not discuss [the anti-Jewish bigotry](#) in the British Labour Party under its former leader Jeremy Corbyn, whom [she endorsed](#) in the 2019 election. (Corbyn once [praised a mural](#) of hook-nosed bankers counting money on a table held up by Black people, and his supporters suggested that his critics were Israeli stooges.) The party [has since apologized](#) for not taking anti-Semitism seriously enough.

At times, this can be a frustrating book. Near the end, Klein says she requested an interview with Wolf, promising that it would be "a respectful debate" about their political disagreements. She also hoped to remind Wolf

of their original meeting, more than three decades earlier—when Wolf, then 28, captivated the 20-year-old Klein, showing her the possibilities of what a female author could be. But Wolf never responded to the request, and the doppelgängers have not met face-to-face since then.

Still, Klein emerges with a sense of resolution. She writes that the confusion between the two of them has lately died down, now that Other Naomi has become an “unmistakable phenomenon unto herself.” Even better, the situation has introduced “a hefty dose of ridiculousness into the seriousness with which I once took my public persona.” Not that the zealous Klein has disappeared: The next few pages are a paean to collective organizing, worker solidarity, and “cities in the grips of revolutionary fervor.”

Doppelganger is least interesting when Klein returns to her comfort zone, but her brutally honest forays into self-examination are fascinating. The book is also a welcome antidote to the canceling reflex of our moment and a bracing venture across ideological lines. Klein successfully makes the case that the American left is more tethered to reality than the right—not because it is composed of smarter or better people, but because it has not lost touch with the mechanisms, such as scientific peer review and media pluralism, that act as a check on our worst instincts. Exposed to many of the same forces as her conspiracist doppelgänger—fame, cancellation, trauma, COVID isolation—this Naomi stayed fine. That has to offer us some hope.

This article appears in the [October 2023](#) print edition with the headline “The Other Naomi.”

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George Eliot's Subversive Vision of Marriage

Unlike Jane Austen, the novelist was most interested in what happens after “I do.”

by Ann Hulbert



“Marriage is so unlike everything else. There is something even awful in the nearness it brings.” George Eliot wrote those sentences in her 1872 masterpiece, *Middlemarch*, an examination of marriage unmatched by any other. She scrutinized the relationship—its intimate secrets and its public contours—with rare imaginative and moral intensity in her other fiction too.

But that fearsome declaration, uttered by her protagonist Dorothea Brooke, stands out. It was meant to disorient a reader, and still does.

It definitely sounds un-Victorian, framing marriage as the antithesis of a demurely conventional arrangement. Does it sound contemporary? The shudder at suffocation might seem familiar—I need some space. That “awful,” though, isn’t just a way of saying *dreadful*; it surely also means awe-inspiring, which delivers a jolt. Americans may marvel at the romantic spectacle of lavish weddings and wonder at the endurance of an institution that has weathered so many rounds of criticism, calls for redefinition, and diagnoses of crisis. But we appear to be more wary than awed. A quarter of 40-year-olds in the United States (where the surgeon general recently issued an advisory on “our epidemic of loneliness and isolation”) have never been married—a new milestone. Who knows whether they’ll change their mind. To those holdouts—as well as the rest of us—Eliot’s sentences say: Don’t take marriage at face value or assume you understand it.

Eliot’s own marital trajectory was anomalous, and not just by the standards of her time. Marian Evans, as she was known when she arrived in London from the Midlands in 1851 to help edit the liberal journal *The Westminster Review*, had long despaired that “the bliss of reciprocated affection” was out of reach for the homely, brooding misfit she felt she was. In 1854, soon to turn 35, she eloped to live with a married man, and became a social pariah. Evans called him her “beloved husband,” and George Henry Lewes—editor, biographer, philosopher, critic, scientific writer—called her the “best of Wives,” though he never divorced the legal wife with whom he had three children. Evans credited their “blessed union,” and “the happiness which his love has conferred on my life,” with allowing her to discover “my true vocation, after which my nature had always been feeling and striving uneasily without finding it.” George Eliot was born.

Eliot’s own marital trajectory was anomalous, and not just by the standards of her time.

By the time Lewes died, in 1878, Eliot was renowned (thanks in part to his promotional efforts) as a novelist-oracle dispensing wisdom to anchor humanity in a godless cosmos. A year and a half later, now 60, she took the surprising step, in an era when many frowned on second marriages, of

getting legally married at last—to a friend and devoted admirer two decades her junior, John Cross. She was dead within eight months. Cross spent the next four years editing and arranging her letters and journals into the pious “autobiography” of a sententious paragon. Scrubbed of all traces of humor and pointed opinion, it was designed, as the Eliot scholar and biographer [Gordon S. Haight put it](#), “to perpetuate the fame of the Victorian Sibyl.” A more subversive Eliot has been struggling to get out ever since.

For several decades, Eliot has been enlisted as a guide in women’s quest for fulfillment in love and work. The biographer and critic Phyllis Rose, in her now-classic [Parallel Lives: Five Victorian Marriages](#) (1983), pronounced Eliot and Lewes “my favorite couple.” Her Eliot, dovetailing with second-wave feminism, knew what she wanted and secured it with Lewes: a partner dedicated to loving her, reading and talking constantly with her, writing alongside her, and excelling as the ultimate helpmeet and literary agent. For women critics a generation after Rose, Eliot has supplied quieter encouragement on their paths to emotional and vocational maturity. A decade ago, the *New Yorker* writer Rebecca Mead, in her memoir [My Life in Middlemarch](#), [wrote of returning again and again to the novel](#), valuing Eliot’s vision of the ongoing growth of a soul. The writer and *Harper’s* editor Joanna Biggs takes a similar personal approach in [A Life of One’s Own: Nine Women Writers Begin Again](#), out this past spring. She is especially heartened, in the aftermath of her early divorce, by Eliot’s rebirth in her mid-30s.

[Read: An interview with Rebecca Mead on what *Middlemarch* taught her about love, marriage, and journalism](#)

A more unnerving Eliot, drawn to the sometimes-terrifying but also transformative depths of marriage, emerges in a fascinating new biography, [The Marriage Question: George Eliot’s Double Life](#), by Clare Carlisle, a philosophy professor at King’s College London. As her title suggests, Carlisle approaches Eliot’s life and art as a quest to go beyond the most entrenched of marriage plots: the courtship-centered drama, with its happily-ever-after closure, that [Jane Austen mastered](#) and that has indelibly marked not just literature but life. For Eliot, “marriage, which has been the bourne of so many narratives,” became a beginning—one in theory without an end, other than death.

Eliot and Lewes read Austen together early in a relationship that hardly fit the comic Austen script. Eliot had just been spurned by the philosopher Herbert Spencer, with whom she had fallen in love (“The lack of physical attraction was fatal,” he later said). Before that, she had been briefly entangled with *The Westminster Review*’s young publisher, who already had a wife and a mistress. Lewes, for his part, was in a nonmonogamous marriage that wasn’t going well: His wife also had two children by his best friend, and soon she was pregnant with another. In an 1852 essay for the *Review* titled “[The Lady Novelists](#),” which Eliot assigned and edited, Lewes extolled Austen’s “exquisite art” and called her world “a perfect orb, and vital.” But he also observed that “there are heights and depths in human nature Miss Austen has never scaled nor fathomed, there are worlds of passionate existence into which she has never set foot.”

[From the May 1885 issue: Henry James on George Eliot’s life](#)

Four years later, Eliot was poised to give fiction a try, now settled into her “double life, which helps me to feel and think with double strength.” (The pressure was on: In deciding to unite, she and Lewes vowed to support his lawful wife and her many children.) Surveying “Silly Novels by Lady Novelists,” Eliot the critic especially derided the vogue of “oracular” gibberish, fiction that waded into theories of right and wrong, offering pat Christian solutions. Her ideal woman novelist “does not write books to confound philosophers, perhaps because she is able to write books that delight them.” Fortified by Lewes’s faith in her gifts, she was mustering courage to aspire to such a goal.

Indeed, Carlisle credits Eliot with “creating a new philosophical voice” in her fiction as she feels and thinks her way into the most intimate of relationships. Carlisle is an empathetic and ambitious interpreter. She delves beneath the surface of marriage in Eliot’s novels, finding a world that hums with big questions—about “desire, freedom, selfhood, change, morality, happiness, belief, the mystery of other minds.”

Eliot’s genius lay in her acute awareness of how little we reveal to others about what churns inside our heads and hearts—and how little we may perceive about ourselves. As she wrote in her last novel, [Daniel Deronda](#) (1876), “There is a great deal of unmapped country within us which would

have to be taken into account in an explanation of our gusts and storms.” “It was she,” D. H. Lawrence said, “who started putting all the action inside.”

Carlisle calls attention to just how much of that action in Eliot’s novels transpires in “very dark marital interiors … with their recurring scenes of ambivalence, brutality and disappointment.” The best-known entrant into that shadowed place is vibrantly idealistic Dorothea in *Middlemarch*, who misjudges pedantic Edward Casaubon so wildly and marries him so quickly. She is devastated to discover his shrunken heart, and instead of “large vistas” in his mind, “winding passages which seemed to lead nowhither.” For other protagonists, “wifely relations” entail a more violent, pathological struggle. Janet Dempster is beaten by her drunken husband and driven to drink herself in Eliot’s debut, *Scenes of Clerical Life* (1857). In *Daniel Deronda*, headstrong Gwendolen Harleth is soon haunted by murder fantasies about the cold tyrant, Henleigh Grandcourt, she felt compelled to marry: “That white hand of his which was touching his whisker was capable, she fancied, of clinging round her neck and threatening to throttle her.” She is in turn appalled by her own murderous wish: “My heart said, ‘Die!’—and he sank.”

From the April 1873 issue: A review of George Eliot’s *Middlemarch*

The contrast between the private agonies of Eliot’s couples and their public displays of composure is striking: Out of pride, they suppress signs of misery at the isolation and subjection that ambush them. The contrast between her characters’ hidden suffering and Eliot’s own radiant marital interior is even starker. In her letters and journal entries, she was effusive in her gratitude for “a life of perfect love and a union that every year makes closer.” She evoked a haven of “thorough moral and intellectual sympathy,” and marveled at “my warm, enthusiastic husband, who cares more for my doing than for his own.”

Pride surely was at work for Eliot too: She chose to flout Church and state, which meant going for years without social invitations, rarely receiving visitors, and being cut off by her brother. She had a stake in saying to anyone who would listen—and in proving to herself and Lewes—that the two of them prized their marriage as a “sacred bond,” legal or not. Why risk embarking openly, as a woman in Britain, on an illicit relationship unless the

reward was a loving fidelity, and rare marital equality, that brought “the deepest and gravest joy in all human experience”?

Still, memories of turmoil and loneliness shadowed the idyllic portrayals of what clearly was an exceptional union: a combination of “turbulent, self-critical sensitivity and steady cheerful good sense,” as Carlisle sums up the Eliot-Lewes pairing—plus hard-driving ambition on both sides. Eliot “had not chosen to remain alone for so long,” Carlisle emphasizes, “but all those years without a husband produced a more varied experience of her own heart than most women gained before they married”—and a haunting recognition of how differently things could have gone. Her happiness, after what she referred to as “the long sad years of youth,” was so unexpected, and she had found it in a marriage that ought not to have been possible. In Lewes’s company, Eliot could dare imagine that “all the terrible pain I have gone through in past years has probably been a preparation for some special work that I may do before I die.”

Eliot’s special work lay in giving her characters marital struggles that occasion a “questioning of self and destiny”—something she believed happened too rarely in women’s lives. She resisted simply doling out the tidy fates prescribed for unhappy couples in [the conventional Victorian novel’s wedlock plot](#): spouses wisely reawakened to romantic love (the comic version) or else sundered, having transgressed accepted standards of wifely subservience or master-of-the-house dominance (the tragic version). Eliot wasn’t interested in confirming the prevailing ideal of marriage as a patriarchal, insular bulwark in a troubled world.

She focused instead on inner transformation and growth through the experience of crisis in those desolate marital interiors. Carlisle usefully highlights Eliot’s idea of the “imagined ‘otherwise’” as a key to her understanding of how a mind thinks, how a self can be opened to change. By that phrase, as Eliot explains it in *Middlemarch*, she means the universal human habit of conjuring up alternative possibilities along life’s path —“what if?” visions about the past and future that swirl with mistaken choices, missed chances, suppressed desires.

Eliot understands marriage as a ready incubator of that sort of imagining: It is such a far-reaching commitment, inadequately prepared for by courtship

and inevitably subject to unforeseen flux and stress. How could its daily reality—two partners in constant proximity, with competing needs and expectations—not sometimes fuel fantasies of other prospects, both threatening and alluring? Yet escapism isn’t what Eliot has in mind.

[From the February 1883 issue: Maria Louise Henry on the morality of Thackeray and of George Eliot](#)

In *Middlemarch*, she distributes the what-if impulse generously. Her readers are invited to contemplate destinies for her various couples other than the ones that play out: What if, we wonder, Dorothea had not already been engaged to Casaubon when Tertius Lydgate, the idealistic young doctor who looks like a perfect match for her, arrived in town? Or what if Will Ladislaw, Casaubon’s artistic young cousin with “bushy light-brown curls” but “no property, and not well-born,” had won her heart right away? These other fates glimmer like mirages while couples stumble through “pain and weakness and sheer limitation,” as Carlisle writes, and the “unmapped country” within acquires new markers.

Eliot has a way of leaving her women characters with their souls expanded, yet somehow chastened. You would not, in other words, mistake them for Jane Austen characters.

Dorothea and Ladislaw unite in the end (after Casaubon’s death), more maturely compassionate for having endured psychic turmoil. Even so, the match stirs comment. In the novel’s finale, the narrator records Dorothea’s friends lamenting that so “rare a creature should have been absorbed into the life of another, and be only known in a certain circle as a wife and mother.” But Eliot telegraphs the error of such a verdict. Dorothea never becomes a wife who feels eclipsed, nor are the Ladislaws what we now call “smug marrieds,” their backs turned to the world. Dorothea, devoted at home, is also quietly but ardently joined with Will, who has been elected to Parliament, in the uphill pursuit of social reform.

Daniel Deronda leaves Gwendolen Harleth facing a far more disconcerting prospect. Unromantic and willful, she resists getting tied down by marriage and at first spurns Grandcourt’s proposal. (“I wonder how girls manage to fall in love,” she says. “It is easy to make them do it in books. But men are

too ridiculous.”) Yet sudden family financial troubles change her calculus. She tells herself that at least the supremely aloof Grandcourt won’t crowd her—only to find that she is his captive.

She turns in desperation to Daniel Deronda, a man who possesses “perhaps more than a woman’s acuteness of compassion,” and an imagined otherwise—a sense of much-needed intimacy—starts to take shape in her consciousness. But no rescue awaits, even after Grandcourt abruptly drowns. She learns in the novel’s final pages that Deronda plans to marry someone else and go in quest of a Jewish homeland. Though strengthened by his prediction that she “may live to be one of the best of women,” she has no idea “how that can be.” Gwendolen is alone, “dislodged from her supremacy in her own world” for the first time.

Eliot never aimed to set forth a philosophy of marriage. In her art, she found room for a many-layered, tension-infused conception of it that can feel at once capacious and stifling, daring and intimidating—marriage as a suspenseful adventure and an arduous endeavor. She has a way of leaving her characters, her women especially, with their souls expanded, yet seeming somehow chastened. You would not, in other words, mistake them for Jane Austen characters. Austen’s comic ideal is of “spirited, rights-holding individuals living in social concord,” as the Columbia professor and critic [Nicholas Dames has written](#); her women—left on the threshold of marriage—thrive and take joy in “the very idea of having a self.” Eliot’s protagonists flourish differently. Their youthful defiance and assertive independence may ebb, but they have been jolted into seeing beyond their own needs, desires, and delusions—into recognizing an “equivalent centre of self” in another person. Marriage, in Eliot’s pages, unfolds as a challenge unlike anything else.

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-

‘Baseball, the Eternal Game, Shouldn’t Be Shortened’

Readers respond to our July/August 2023 cover story and more.



How Baseball Saved Itself

For the July/August 2023 issue, [Mark Leibovich went inside](#) the desperate effort to rescue America’s pastime from irrelevance.

Thank you for the fantastic article on baseball. During the 1960s, I was a Ph.D. student in the College of Engineering at the University of Michigan. About the time baseball season began one year, I participated in a robust argument over America's favorite pastime with my colleagues. I felt that it was an incredibly boring way to spend time, and I wanted to debate the subject with empirical evidence. As engineers, we agreed to define "action" as any time the ball or a player was moving. I then used a stopwatch to determine the ratio between "elapsed time" and "action" in a typical game.

I applied this definition to a game the following Saturday. Unsurprisingly, the ratio was 20 to 1—for every hour of elapsed time, one would see just three minutes of action. Professional football and basketball have far more action per hour than baseball under the same definition, which I think explains their relative popularity.

It wasn't solely the analytics revolution that slowed down the sport—baseball's always been like that! The question now is whether I should analyze another game to determine if the new rules changed it for the better.

David M. Carlson
Fountain Valley, Calif.

Baseball, the eternal game, shouldn't be shortened—if anything, it ought to be lengthened, after the model of classical cricket. Live in the moment. Each pitch presents the entire history of the universe. The pitcher rotates the ball in his hand, feeling ever so sensitively for the contours, the stitching, the seams that might yield an advantage, before hurling it to the plate with the force of Zeus's thunderbolt.

But how will the baseball travel? Will it sink or curve, go high or low, flutter in or out, changing speed as it continues to its destiny? Breathing in, the umpire concentrates on the ball speeding toward him. Breathing out, he calls a ball or a strike, with thousands of eyes cast upon him and his judgment. The loneliness of the umpire, the batter, and the pitcher sets them outside time. At that fateful moment of contact between ball and bat or mitt, all existence is suspended.

To shorten that momentary dance with eternity is to miss the meditative profundity of a baseball game. No, Mark, it is we who are at fault for wanting to speed up the game, with designated batters, virtual walks, limits on mound visits, pitch clocks, and rigid placement of the fielders.

David Glidden

Riverside, Calif.

I wanted to read Mark Leibovich's article on baseball's updated approach, but found it difficult when I ran across another dusty relic that needs to go: Red Sox worship among the media elites.

I grew up a Yankees fan, but somewhere along the line, sportswriters began looking at the Yankees–Red Sox rivalry as if it were the defining narrative of baseball. As they cast the Yankees as the bad guys who were always trying to buy the World Series, and the Red Sox as the good guys who represented the nobler, purer defenders of the sport, they seemed to forget that many people in other parts of the country don't care for either team. If anything, they tend to hate both teams because the sports media spend too much time writing and talking about them. After all, other teams have equally storied pasts. Speeding up the game and giving the rules a hard look will certainly improve the experience for fans, as Leibovich writes. But it's long past time for the sports media to recognize their part in holding the game back by ignoring more interesting narratives.

Eric Reichert

West Milford, N.J.

I share Mark Leibovich's joy over the new baseball rules to speed up the game. But baseball isn't that much slower than other sports. The average basketball game lasts anywhere from 135 to 150 minutes. There are constant interruptions precipitated by fouls, time-outs, and halftime. And the final two minutes on the clock can take 15 minutes.

Most unsettling for those of us who love baseball is the constant complaint from football fans that our sport is slow while football is fast. Their favored

60-minute romp takes more than 180 minutes to complete. And, as a wise observer once pointed out, to make matters worse, football combines two of the most detestable facets of American life—violence and committee meetings.

Perhaps someday the NBA and the NFL will take lessons from MLB and learn how to shorten their games.

Dennis Okholm

Costa Mesa, Calif.

I agree with Mark Leibovich's conclusions regarding the benefits of baseball's new pitch clock. The pitch clock is the greatest innovation the sport has seen in ages, and it may well save the game. But the gradual slowing-down of games was not the only thing that drove fans away from baseball.

Consider the 1994 strike, which canceled approximately a third of the season and the World Series and was seen by many as millionaires fighting over lucre, fans be damned. Or consider the over-the-top salaries, even for subpar players, as ticket and concession prices have skyrocketed. Baseball once sold itself as the best buy for family entertainment in America—but it hasn't been that for quite some time.

Finally, the cheating that has gone on for decades has put off many fans, and the lack of any meaningful accountability has surely only made it worse. Players who were known to use banned substances—Barry Bonds, Mark McGwire, Sammy Sosa—still lead the league's counts for most home runs in a single season, accolades that should have been expunged from the books. And Leibovich barely touches on perhaps the worst of these scofflaw violations: The Houston Astros were caught cheating in the 2017 and 2018 seasons, including the 2017 postseason, which netted the team a World Series victory. Nonetheless, they were permitted to keep the championship title, and none of the players who cheated was disciplined—they are still playing now. When several Chicago White Sox players conspired to throw the 1919 World Series, by contrast, they were barred from baseball forever. For some fans, these problems are more serious than the length of games.

Allen J. Wiener
Clearwater Beach, Fla.

Mark Leibovich Replies:

Thanks to all those who took the time to reply to my article; I hope it was at least more engaging than the baseball of years past. Major League Baseball certainly has no monopoly on potentially league-destroying scandals. Each major sport has faced its share of drug, gambling, and cheating catastrophes over the years, and no league has cornered the market on bad leaders, clueless commissioners, or idiotic owners either. Sports fans have shown themselves to be willing to forgive a lot—but not necessarily boredom. Of all the sports, baseball is uniquely slow. No matter how many stoppages there might be at the end of a basketball game, the clock guarantees that very few NBA contests surpass two hours and 30 minutes. Football games rarely take more than 3:20, and the fact that teams play only once a week buys a great deal of spectator leeway. Last, I'll apologize for indulging my Red Sox compulsion. I've always assumed that the Sox-Yanks thing was off-putting to nonpartisans, even when the rivalry was at its most compelling (not recently, in other words, unless you count this season's epic battle for last place in the American League East). In the spirit of fellowship, I'll concede that some of my favorite baseball friends are Yankees fans. We are more alike than not—beyond just insufferable.

Behind the Cover

In this month's cover story, "[Jenisha From Kentucky](#)," the *Atlantic* senior editor Jenisha Watts reflects on how her mother's addiction shaped her childhood in Lexington. She describes finding escape and empowerment in literature and narrates her struggles as a young writer and editor in New York, determined to hide her past. Our cover image is a portrait of her painted by the Ivorian artist Didier Viodé. With a minimalistic color palette and broad, acrylic brushstrokes characteristic of his style, Viodé strove to capture Jenisha's self-possession.

— **Elizabeth Hart**, *Art Director*

Corrections

“[The Resilience Gap](#)” (September) misidentified Richard Friedman as the former coordinator of Cornell’s mental-health program instead of its former medical director. After publication, “[Killer Apps](#)” (September) was updated online to clarify YouTube’s policy for removing videos, which excepts artistic content such as music videos from its prohibition on harassment.

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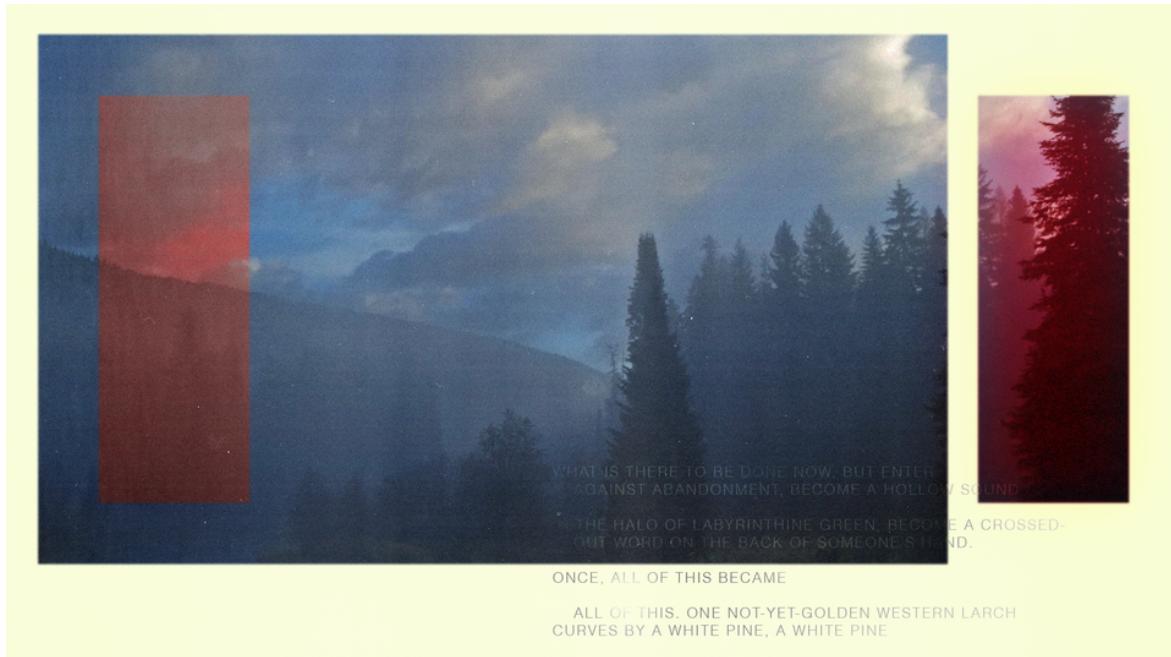
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Poetry

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The Origin Revisited

by Ada Limón



—After a visit to the Yaak Valley in Kootenai National Forest, Montana, where the U.S. Forest Service has announced a logging project called Black Ram

What is there to be done now,
against abandonment, become a hollow sound

in the halo of labyrinthine green, become a crossed-out word on the back of someone's hand.

Once, all of this became

all of this. One not-yet-golden western larch
curves by a white pine, a white pine

curves by a western hemlock, no one here
is heroic. To enter here is to enter

magnitude, to feel an ecstatic somethingness,
a nothingness of your own name.

All words become wrong. A whole world exists
without us. But who is us?

Lichen, moss, grizzly scat, moose hoofprint like two
exclamation points by the drying frog pond.

How do you know you're alive? What evidence
will you leave? So many myths

are unraveling; a yellow swallowtail glides by over
the sinless creek bed. A storm

wets the skin and we are surprised we have
skin. Woods' rose, white-flowered rhododendron,

nothing here is unfinished. What it gave me? I saw
a new tree emerge out of a ground made of ancient trees

on top of more ancient trees, on top of more ancient trees,
on top of more ancient trees, and understood then

that this was how the Earth was made.

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