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Abortion as a Human Right

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June 20, 2024

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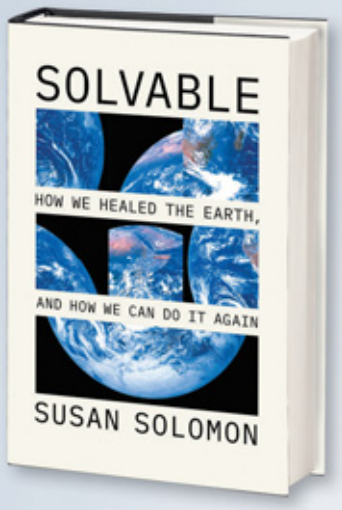

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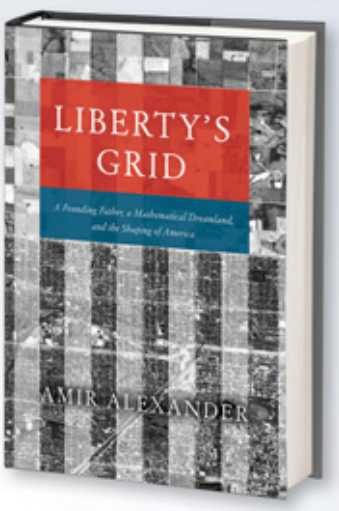

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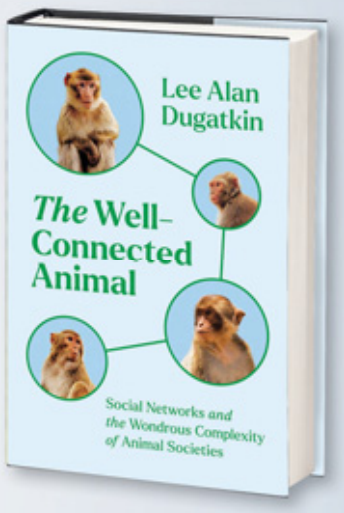

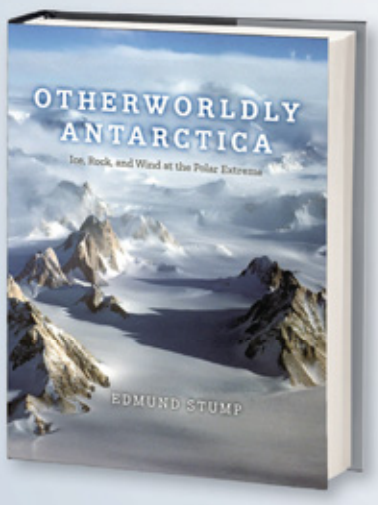

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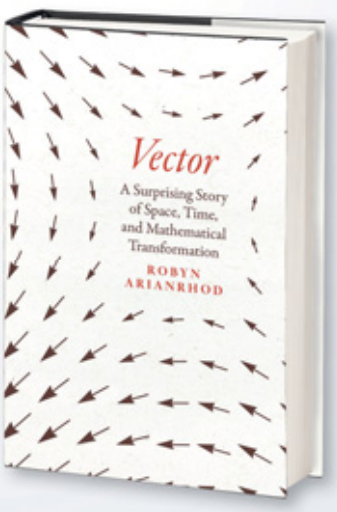

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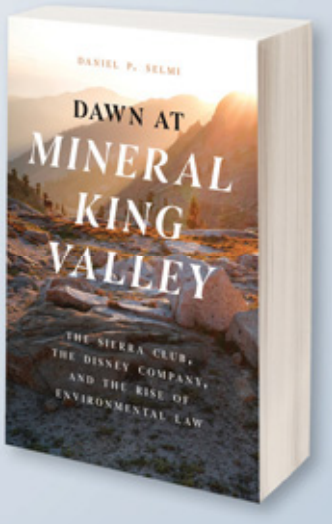

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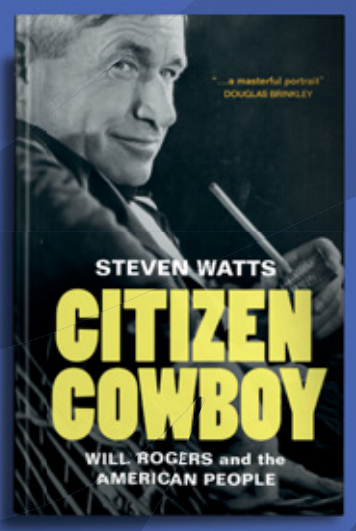

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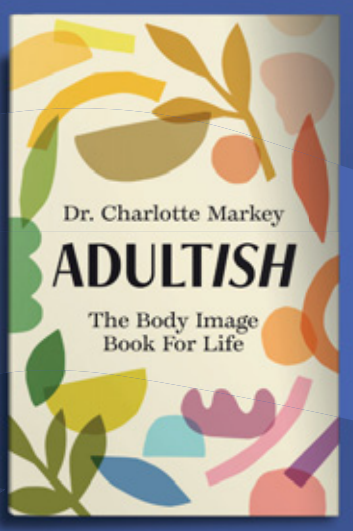

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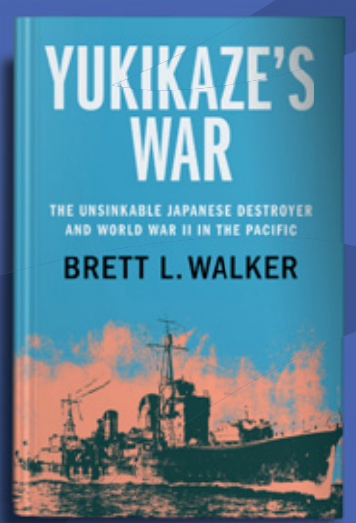

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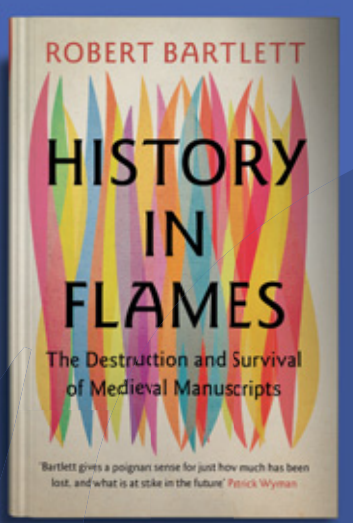

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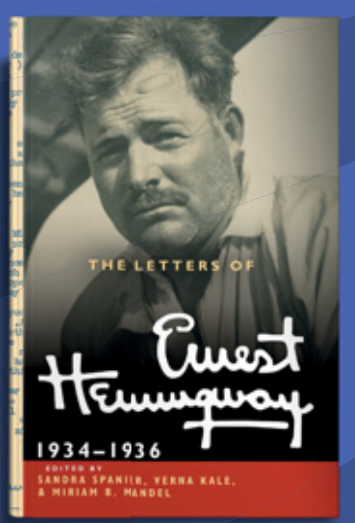

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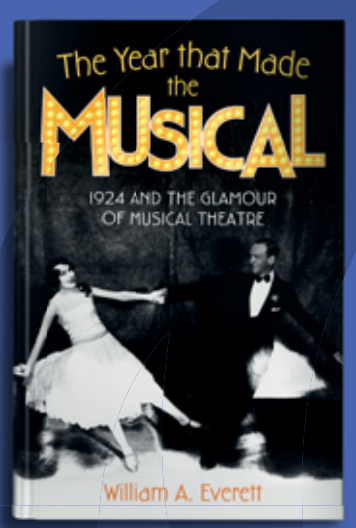

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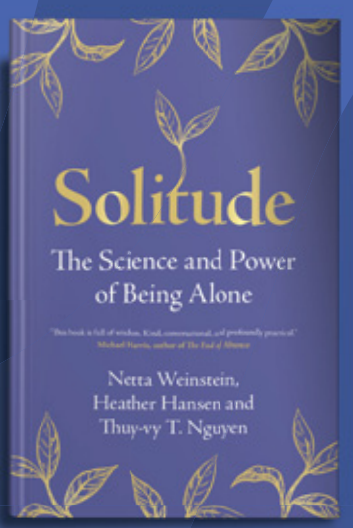

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Tim Flannery's books include *Among the Islands: Adventures in the Pacific*, *Europe: A Natural History*, and *Big Meg: The Story of the Largest and Most Mysterious Predator That Ever Lived*, which was published in February.

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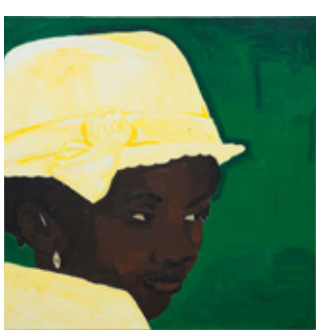
Brian Seibert is the author of *What the Eye Hears: A History of Tap Dancing*. He teaches at Yale.

Frederick Seidel's new book of poems, *So What*, will be published in June.

Ed Vulliamy has been a reporter for *The Guardian* and *The Observer* for over thirty years. He is the author of *Louder Than Bombs: A Life with Music, War, and Peace* and is now writing a book about music and musicians in Ukraine during wartime. **Pascal Vannier** worked as a journalist and documentary filmmaker for France TV for forty years. He recorded the testimonies of eighty survivors of Allied bombing for the Falaise Memorial of Civilians in the War. His grandfather was killed by the American bombing of Périers in 1944.

Jenny Xie is the author of two books of poems, *The Rupture Tense* and *Eye Level*. She teaches at Bard.



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Livelier Than the Living

Catherine Nicholson

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Harvard University Press,
246 pp., $39.95

Untold Futures:
Time and Literary Culture
in Renaissance England
by J. K. Barret.
Cornell University Press,
249 pp., $58.95; $34.95 (paper)

"I daily listen to your words with more attention than one would believe, and perhaps I shall not be thought impertinent in wishing to be heard by you," wrote the Italian poet Petrarch in 1348. His addressee was the Roman philosopher Seneca, who had died nearly thirteen centuries before. Petrarch's practice of writing to long-dead authors epitomizes—and helped to initiate—the essential double movement of humanist *imitatio*, the exchange by which schoolboys and scholars across late medieval and early modern Europe formed their ideas, values, images, tastes, and turns of phrase along the lines of an antiquity they were just beginning to regard (but had not yet begun to speak of) as "classical."

The American scholar Thomas Greene in *The Light in Troy*, his 1982 study of humanism's intimate relation to and sense of estrangement from the ancient world, called *imitatio* "a literary technique that was also a pedagogic method and a critical battleground." Whom to take as one's exemplars and how closely to follow them, which models to embrace and which to avoid or improve upon, were subjects of fervent debate. In theory, emulating the best of what had been written fostered expressiveness; "in practice," Greene allows, "it led not infrequently to sterility." But as Petrarch's letter to Seneca suggests, the rewards of *imitatio* were perhaps primarily emotional: a communion with other minds that fortified readers against the disappointments of the present. Of his library at Vaucluse, near the papal court at Avignon, Petrarch wrote:

> Here I have established my Rome, my Athens, and my spiritual fatherland; here I gather all the friends I now have or did have, not only those . . . who have lived with me, but also those who died many centuries ago, known to me only through their writings. . . . I am where I wish to be.

In *A Marvelous Solitude*, her new book on Renaissance humanists' romance with reading, the Italian scholar Lina Bolzoni channels the allure, for Petrarch and those who came after him, of a life in books, its pleasures "more intimate and more intense than the satisfaction afforded by other worldly goods." But such intimacy came at a cost: "A sense of being unsuited to one's times, a feeling, almost, of extraneousness and alienation."

There is often a whiff of misanthropy about Petrarch's passion for books. In the fourteenth century, before the invention of movable type, books were artisanal objects, and even the simplest were inscribed and bound by hand. But once acquired, Petrarch observes, they asked little of their possessors; with books, unlike houseguests, "there is no tedium, no expense, no complaints, no murmurs, no envy, no deceit. . . . They are satisfied with the smallest room in your house and a modest robe, they require no drink or food."

In what is perhaps his most famous letter, written to a former confessor in April 1336, Petrarch describes his ascent of Mont Ventoux, a nearby peak. Not wishing to journey alone, he rummaged through his mental Rolodex for a companion and found, he half-jokingly reports, "that hardly one among my friends seemed suitable":

> This one was too apathetic, that one over-anxious; this one too slow, that one too hasty; one was too sad, another over-cheerful; one more simple, another more sagacious, than I desired. I feared this one's taciturnity and that one's loquacity.

In the end he brought his younger brother, Gherardo—who indeed irritated him by climbing too swiftly and talking too much—and a pocket-size copy of Augustine's *Confessions*. Arriving on the summit at last, exhausted and out of breath, he opened the volume at random and read this from Book Ten: "And men go about to wonder at the heights of the mountains, and the mighty waves of the sea, and the wide sweep of rivers, and the circuit of the ocean, and the revolution of the stars, but themselves they consider not." It was a rebuke, and a revelation. "I was satisfied that I had seen enough of the mountain; I turned my inward eye upon myself," Petrarch writes, convinced that Augustine's words were "addressed to me and to no other."

Monastic libraries had long served as repositories for the keeping and copying of texts, but Bolzoni credits Petrarch with crafting what she calls a "highly fascinating myth" about reading as a dialogue with the dead, at once timeless and immediate. When a heavy volume of Cicero fell on his leg two separate times, leaving a mark just above the ankle, Petrarch was delighted: "My Cicero thus made an indelible note on my memory and on my body with a scar that never disappeared." To his friend Boccaccio he boasted:

> I have read what is said in Virgil, Horace, Boethius, and Cicero not once but countless times. . . . I have thoroughly absorbed these writings, implanting them not only in memory but in my marrow, and they have so become one with my mind that were I never to read them for the remainder of my life, they would cling to me, having taken root in the innermost recesses of my mind.

And when Boccaccio wrote in a panic following a visit from a Sienese Carthusian who urged him to renounce his worldly studies for the sake of his soul, Petrarch sent a bracing reply: "Did not all our forefathers whom we wish to emulate spend all their lives with literature, grow old with literature, meet their end with literature?" But should his exhortations prove fruitless, he added:

> If you desire to get rid of the very instruments of literature by selling your books and are utterly determined to do so, I am grateful, by heaven, that you have offered them to me before anyone else since . . . I am so greedy for books.

Again and again in his writing about dead authors, Petrarch emphasized their advantages over living people—or, as he scornfully put it, "those who think they are alive because they see traces of their stale breath in the frosty air." No doubt Virgil, Horace, Boethius, and Cicero had their own human failings—"they may have been difficult and stubborn"; they too may have suffered from halitosis—but in their writings "the flower and fruit of their intellect is undiluted and abounding." As Bolzoni observes, this is a significant alteration of

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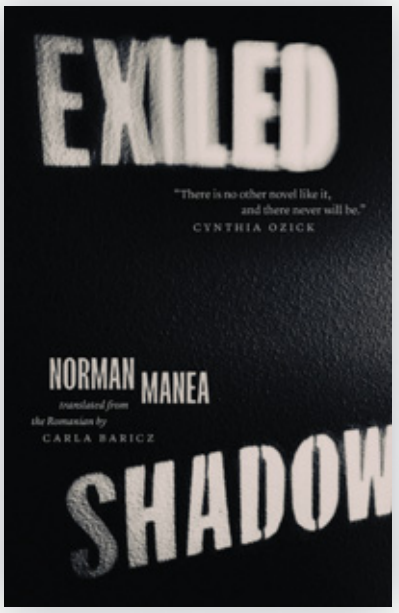

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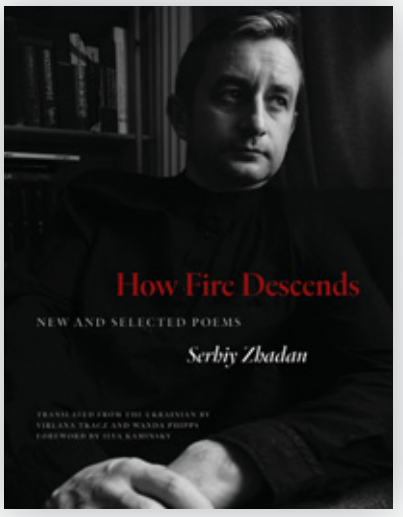

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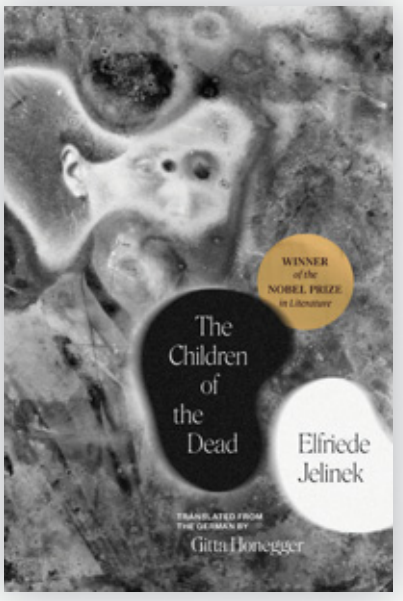

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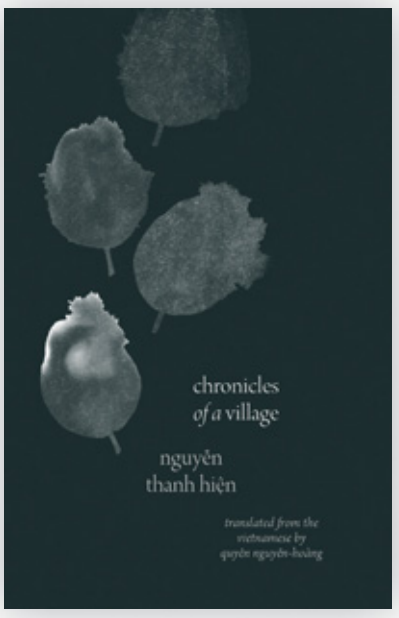

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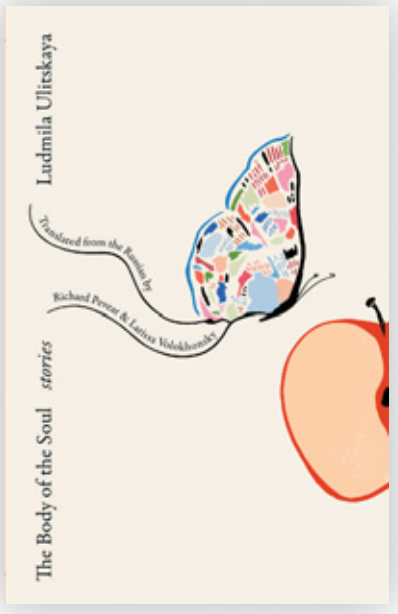

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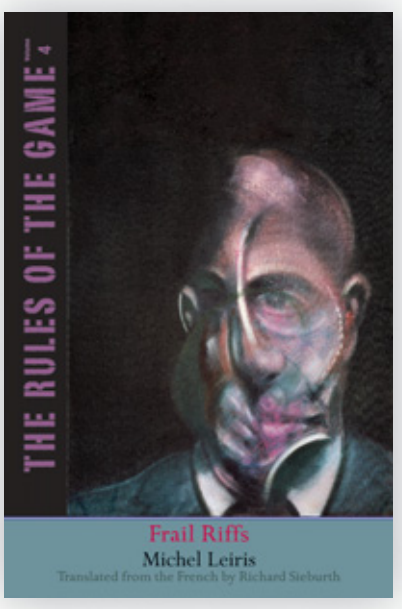

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—Marjorie Perloff, author of *Infrathin: An Experiment in Micropoetics*

"Chevillard is a virtuoso of the short form . . . [whose] favored medium is the subversively illuminating anecdote. . . . In this kaleidoscope of absurdities, indulgent glimpses of others' foibles come perilously close to reflections of our own inner lives."—Tess Lewis, *Arts Fuse*

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existing commonplaces about books as mirrors:

> The ghost one encounters through reading is *better* than the real person; the book remains the mirror of the soul, but it is a mirror that selects the best, that refines the image we see in it, cleansing it of all traces of mundane existence.

It was a refinement Petrarch craved for himself, the ultimate escape from the banality of the present. In the final, unfinished "Letter to Posterity" that concludes his *Seniles*, or "Letters of Old Age," he confesses:

> I have dwelt single-mindedly on learning about antiquity, among other things because this age has always displeased me, so that, unless love for my dear ones pulled me the other way, I always wished to have been born in any other age whatever, and to forget this one, seeming always to graft myself in my mind onto other ages.

In a letter to Giovanni Colonna he puts the matter more baldly: "Just as I am grateful to all those authors I have read . . . so do I hope that those who read me will be grateful."

Reading was a passion in early modern Italy, Bolzoni shows, but it was also a pose, an emblem of "aristocratic detachment" from the pursuits of wealth, power, and social connections, on which access to and ownership of books practically depended. Federico da Montefeltro, the fifteenth-century Duke of Urbino, was a mercenary by trade and a renowned military and political tactician, but when he commissioned a Flemish master (likely Justus van Gent) to paint his portrait, he appeared seated at ease, "fully absorbed in reading a book from his library," his helmet on a shelf and his scepter in the hands of his young son. That library was, according to Castiglione's *Il Cortegiano*, "the crowning glory of his great palace," filled with some nine hundred of "the finest and rarest books, in Greek, Latin and Hebrew." The renowned Florentine bookseller Vespasiano da Bisticci, who had helped assemble it, called it "the finest library since ancient times."

Federico's books were housed in a vast hall attached to the palace's main courtyard, and upstairs was a small, semiprivate room he dubbed his *studiolo*. Bolzoni calls it a "theater of reading," and the phrase helpfully captures both the splendor of the place and its uses. The walls of the *studiolo* were intricately carved and hung with twenty-eight portraits of "illustrious men," ancient and modern, all of them—with the exception of Ptolemy, who holds an astrolabe—with reading material in hand. The figures were philosophers, prophets, popes, saints, and poets. Moses holds the stone tablets of the Ten Commandments; Jerome pages through the Vulgate Bible; blind Homer uses his book as an armrest; and Euclid measures his with a compass.

More recent figures were present, too: Dante and Duns Scotus, Boethius and Thomas Aquinas. Petrarch was there, as was Federico's own teacher, Vittorino da Feltre. Most of the figures are in modern dress, more or less, and their gestures and expressions are lively; Plato seems grumpy (vexed, perhaps, about being conscripted into the celebration of a medium he famously mistrusted), while Aristotle leans forward, eager to press a point. The effect, as Bolzoni observes, was not simply to channel the authority of the past but to animate and incorporate it into "a two-way exchange" with the present. Beneath each portrait was an inscription, usually bearing the duke's own name, dedicating the image, taking credit for its placement, and suggesting how it should be interpreted—each of these saying, in effect, Federico was here, too.*

The practice of displaying portraits of venerated writers in libraries was itself ancient. In his *Natural History*, Pliny describes it as a Greek custom, newly imported to Rome, whereby "likenesses made, if not of gold or silver, yet at all events of bronze are set up in the libraries in honor of those whose immortal spirits speak to us in the same places." The tradition primed early modern readers to imagine an intimate connection between texts and writers, books and bodies. Petrach lamented that seeing a fragmentary copy of Quintilian's *Institutio Oratoria*, the foundational treatise on rhetoric, was like "seeing the dismembered limbs of a beautiful body." When in 1416 Poggio Bracciolini found a complete version of the *Institutio* in the basement of a monastery in what is now Switzerland, he compared the discovery to a lifesaving act of emancipation, as if the book itself were a condemned prisoner:

> He was sad and dressed in mourning, as people are when doomed to death; his beard was dirty and his hair matted with dust, so that by his expression and appearance it was clear that he had been summoned to an undeserved punishment.

From such melodramatic scenes, fueled by ancient myths of necromancy and marked (as Stephen Greenblatt has argued) with the violent impressions of contemporary heresy trials, emerged an unlikely heroic ideal: the learned philologist, whose powers of linguistic reconstruction allow him to resurrect the torn and battered corpus of ancient learning. As Leonardo Bruni wrote to Poggio, congratulating him on his discovery, "Quintilian, who used to be mangled and in pieces, will recover all his parts through you . . . Oh wondrous treasure! Oh unexpected joy!" In *Miscellanea*, a collection of essays on the art of criticism, the late-fifteenth-century scholar Angelo Poliziano writes in a similar vein about his own efforts to fashion an edition of Cicero's *De Natura Deorum*, a work surviving "in a state no less pitiful than that of Hippolytus, torn limb from limb by frightened horses":

> The story goes that Aesculapius gathered and recomposed the scattered pieces of his dismembered body, giving them new life, but was then struck down by lightning by the envious gods. But no envy, no lightning will sway me from my attempt to bring back to life the father of the Roman language and philosophy.

Occasionally, one senses some strain in the narrative—a hint of how the self-flattering mythology of reading might compensate, or fail to compensate, for the inability to find other sources of purpose and fulfillment. In Leon Battista Alberti's dialogue *Theogenius*, the old sage Genipatro tells the youthful Tichipedo that he regrets nothing of his former wealth and fame, having found a better existence in his books. For his part, however, Tichopedo urges his studious friend, Teogonio, not to waste his efforts "on supremely useless things":

> Will you ever allow yourself to desist from turning your pages day and night, day after day? What sweet friendship do these books of yours offer that you spend your time with them and become pale, exhausted, consumed, poor, and sickly?. . . You seek immortality by being not fully alive while still living, through this obstinate study of yours.

As Bolzoni points out, Tichipedo is Genipatro's "morally deficient" foil. But the point stands: reading is a distinctly vicarious experience. Indeed, a man might look to literature precisely "because there is nothing else/he can turn his sights to."

The author of those lines, from the prologue to a satirical drama called *La Mandragola*, was the former secretary of the Florentine republic, Niccolò Machiavelli. After the return of the Medici and the collapse of the republic in 1512, Machiavelli was removed from office, arrested, tortured, and finally released, retiring to a farm in Percussina, south of Florence. In a celebrated letter to Francesco Vettori, dated December 10, 1513, Machiavelli describes the nightly communion with books that helped him endure the privations and tedium of exile:

> On the coming of evening, I return to my house and enter my study; and at the door I take off the day's clothing, covered with mud and dust, and put on garments regal and courtly; and reclothed appropriately, I enter the ancient courts of ancient men, where, received by them with affection, I feed on that food which only is mine and which I was born for, where I am not ashamed to speak with them and to ask them the reason for their actions; and they and their kindness answer me; and for four hours of time I do not feel boredom, I forget every trouble, I do not dread poverty, I am not frightened by death; entirely I give myself over to them.
>
> And because Dante says it is no true knowledge unless we remember what we have understood, I have noted everything in their conversation which has profited me, and have composed a little work *On Princedoms*.

As Bolzoni observes, "The magic ritual of reading, its incantatory force, its pleasures and benefits are here described with an extraordinary vividness." But reading is merely a backdrop, no less carefully arranged than the portraits in Federico's *studiolo*, to the scene of writing—that is, the composition of the "little work" later titled *Il Principe*, which Machiavelli wrote in hopes of regaining a place at the Medici court, and which he needed Vettori's help in circulating. At the end of the letter, the pose of calm disinterest drops: "I am using up my money," Machiavelli confesses, "and I cannot remain as I am a long time without becoming despised through poverty." It is his wish, he says, "that our present Medici lords will make use of me, even if they begin by making me roll a stone." The labors of ambition are Sisyphean—arduous, grubby, and potentially pointless—but they are labors for which he frankly longs.

It isn't clear the gambit worked; Vettori was practiced at not taking Machiavelli's hints. And in some ways, as the historian John M. Najemy wrote in *Between Friends*, his 1993 study of the pair's correspondence, "the more successfully [Machiavelli's] letter creates and sustains the illusion of presence, of speech and of the recovery of the past, the more acutely does it impose the realization of absence and loss." But in harnessing the trope of recovery to his own ambitions, Bolzoni writes, Machiavelli also reorients it toward a future that is tantalizingly close. Reading becomes "a counterpoise to an opaque present, the sign of a change that is possible."

Change was, after all, in the air: the spread of print, the rise of vernacular literatures, the stirrings of religious reform movements. Humanism both thrived on those transformations and resisted them as threats to its cultural prestige. Of Federico da Montefeltro's library, Vespasiano da Bisticci said approvingly, "All the books are superlatively good, and written with the pen, and had there been one printed volume it would have been ashamed in such company." (In reality, there were some incunabula—early printed folios—mixed in with Federico's manuscripts.) In the second half of her book, Bolzoni looks north to see how those changes gradually worked on the humanist mythology of reading, turning it to new intellectual, spiritual, psychological, and—above all—practical ends.

Reading worked best, the Dutch scholar Desiderius Erasmus insisted, when it was conducted with pen in hand and notebook at the ready; the goal was not simply to commune with the past but to translate its idioms and ideas into one's own. Echoing Poliziano's celebrated retort to Paolo Cortesi—"Someone says to me, 'You don't express Cicero.' So what? I'm not Cicero! All the same, as I see it, I express myself"—he urged would-be scholars to range widely across "various writers," cultivating the true decorum of self-resemblance. "Since the entire scene of human activity has been transformed [since Cicero's time], the only speaker who can respond to it appropriately [*apte dicere*] is one who is very different from Cicero," Erasmus declared. "Wherever

*The *studiolo* remains open to visitors to the Ducal Palace of Urbino, although fourteen of the portraits are now housed at the Louvre. Closer to home, the beautifully inlaid walls of the duke's *studiolo* at Gubbio are on display at the Metropolitan Museum.

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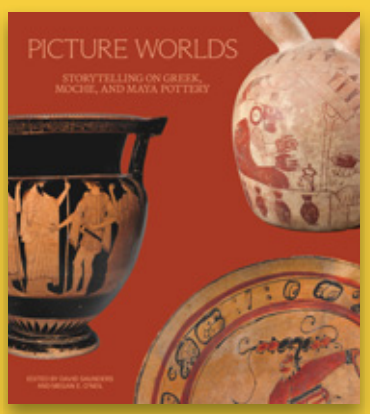
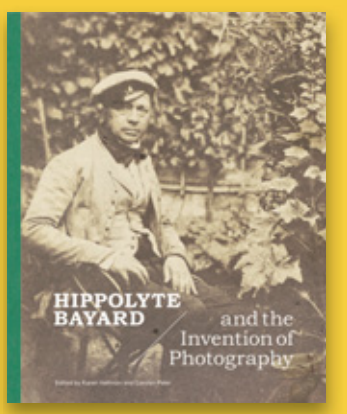
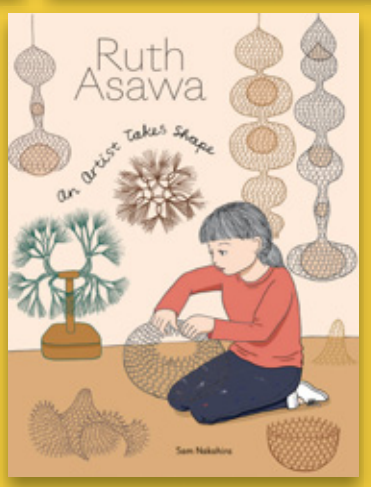
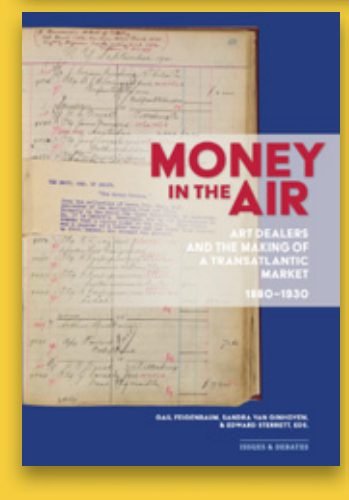
NEW & FORTHCOMING









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I turn I see everything changed, I stand on a different stage, I see a different theatre, a different world."

The essential difference was Christianity, that great and definitive rupture in time. The divine Word was, for Erasmus, the true and living exemplar of eloquence and the proper object of readerly devotion. "We preserve the letters written by a dear friend, we admire them greatly, we carry them about, we read them over and over again," he marveled. "Yet there are thousands and thousands of Christians who, although learned in other respects, have never even read the gospels and epistles in their whole life." Translation was one remedy, print publication another. Erasmus's own celebrity thrived on both: his translation of the Greek New Testament into Latin was a revisionary update of Jerome's Vulgate, and became the basis for Martin Luther's version in German and William Tyndale's in English, while his *Adagia*, an annotated collection of Greek and Latin proverbs, ancient wisdom repackaged for the present, was a best seller across Europe in the sixteenth century.

Extracting commonplaces from one's reading for reuse in one's writing was a crucial element of humanist *inventio*, a way of anchoring innovation in tradition and breathing fresh life into ancient texts. Montaigne had quotations from scripture and the works of Sophocles, Lucretius, and Pliny inscribed into the ceiling beams of his circular library at Dordogne, giving material form to the stabilizing presence of antiquity. But when he read, he paced constantly, saying, "My thoughts fall asleep if I make them sit down. My mind will not budge unless my legs move it." His *Essays*—"Of Idleness," "Of Constancy," "Of Cannibals," "Of Thumbs"—capture a mind in motion. The first two volumes were printed in 1580; a revised and expanded edition appeared in 1588, featuring marginal notes in which Montaigne amended, interrogated, and argued with himself. "I aim here only at revealing myself, who will perhaps be different tomorrow," he writes. "I cannot keep my subject still.... I do not portray being: I portray passing."

Studded with quotations and allusions, the *Essays* are also a continual display—indeed, an outgrowth—of Montaigne's reading. In the essay "Of Pedantry," he mocks those who "go pillaging knowledge in books and lodge it only on the end of their lips, in order merely to disgorge it," likening them to birds that "go in quest of grain, and carry it in their beak without tasting it." A marginal note, added in 1588, confesses to the hypocrisy of this: "Isn't it doing the same thing, what I do in most of my composition? I go about cadging from books here and there the sayings that please me." In fact, the analogy to birds is from Plutarch (though Montaigne doesn't say so), the ancient author who above all others attracted him. "When I write, I prefer to do without the company and remembrance of books, for I fear they may interfere with my style," he declares in the long and winding essay "Of Some Verses in Virgil," digressive even by Montaigne's standards.

> But it is harder for me to do without Plutarch. He is so universal and so full that on all occasions, and however eccentric the subject you have taken up, he makes his way into your work and offers you a liberal hand, inexhaustible in riches and embellishments. It vexes me.... I can scarce cast an eye upon him but I purloin either a leg or a wing.

Bolzoni writes that in Montaigne's essays, "next to memory, we find a powerful and instinctive *ars oblivionalis*." Claiming to lack stamina as a reader, he avers, "I leaf through books, I do not study them." The fruit of such desultory browsing was a paradoxical sense of authority:

> What I retain of them is something that I no longer recognize as anyone else's. It is only the material from which my judgment has profited, and the thoughts and ideas with which it has become imbued; the author, the place, the words, and other circumstances, I immediately forget.

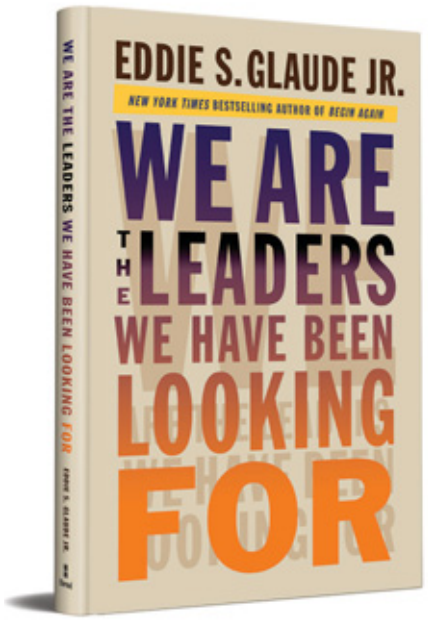
Petrarch would be aghast—or, perhaps, envious. To the regenerative cycle of reading and writing, imitation and discovery, Montaigne introduces an eddy of forgetfulness, an art of losing that makes presence and possession possible. On the other hand, a note added in 1588 observes, "I am so good at forgetting that I forget even my own writings and compositions no less than the rest. People are all the time quoting me to myself without me knowing it."

This, then, was the immortality promised by books: not a marmoreal fixity but a perpetual liveliness predicated on erasure, confusion, accident, and change. "Not marble nor the gilded monuments/Of princes shall outlive this powerful rhyme," boasts Shakespeare's Sonnet 55, channeling the confidence of Horace and Ovid in both a language (English) and a form (rhyming verse) neither would have recognized as poetry. Indeed, the potency of "rude beggerly rymˆing," as Roger Ascham termed it in *The Scholemaster*—his 1570 treatise on the "plaine and perfite way of teachyng" Latin—was a source of embarrassment to not a few English writers, a stigmatizing mark of the vernacular's distance and difference from classical antiquity as well as from the achievements of continental humanism. Humanist learning, culture, and pedagogy arrived late in England—some two centuries after its birth in Italy. "But now," Ascham insisted,

> when men know the difference, and have the examples, both of the best, and of the worst, surelie, to follow rather the *Gothes* in Rymˆing, than the Greekes in trew versifiyng, were even to eate ackornes with swyne, when we may freely eate wheate bread emonges men.

But not everyone felt England's belatedness, or its barbarity, as burdensome. "To say troth," Gabriel Harvey wrote in a 1580 letter to Edmund Spenser, "We beginners haue the start and aduantage of our Followers, who are to frame and conforme both their Examples and Precepts according to that President [precedent] which they

Harvard



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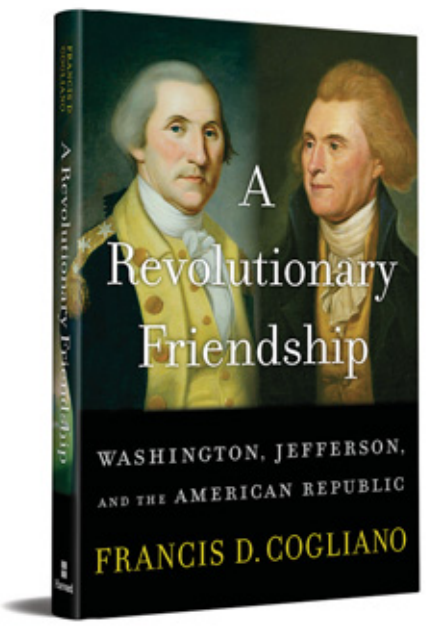

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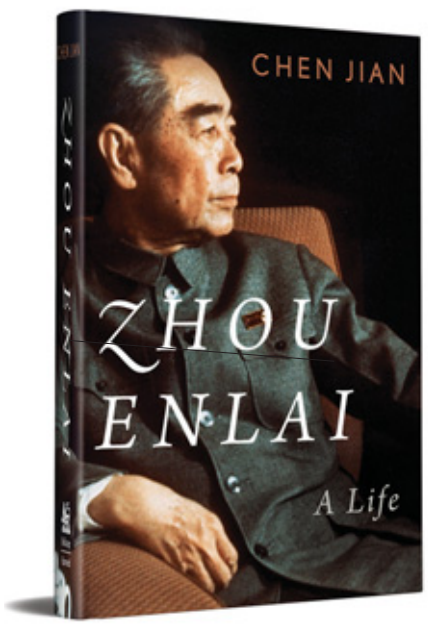

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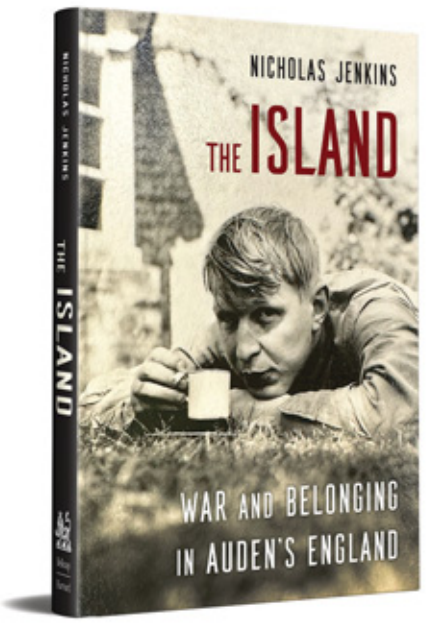

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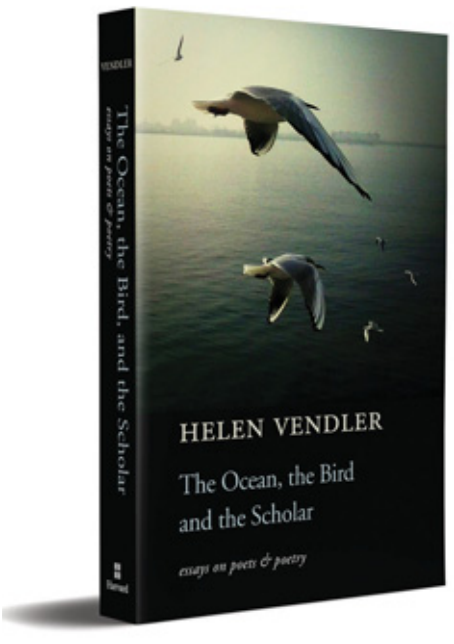

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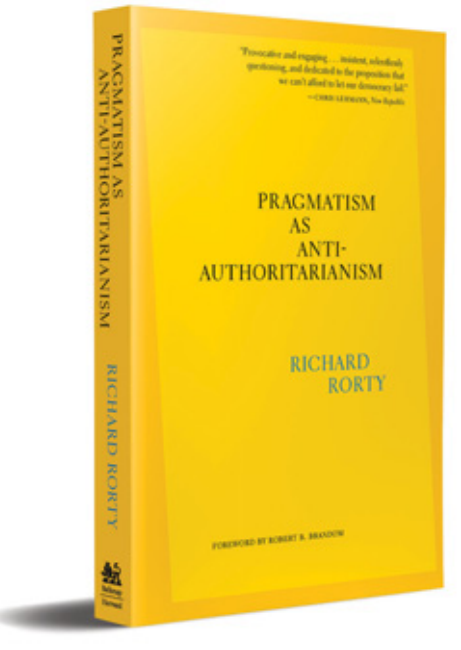

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haue of vs." In his poem "Musophilus," Samuel Daniel went further, imagining appreciative readers of English in lands unknown to any ancient writer:

> And who, in time, knowes
> whither we may vent
> The treasure of our tongue, to
> what strange shores
> This gaine of our best glory shall
> be sent
> T'inrich vnknowing Nations
> with our stores?
> What worlds in th'yet vnformed
> Occident
> May come refin'd with
> th'accents that are ours?

Like the opening lines of Sonnet 55, such speculations can seem self-congratulatory in hindsight—a triumphal foretaste of English's eventual global dominion. But in Daniel and Shakespeare's own time, as J. K. Barret observes in *Untold Futures*, the open-ended uncertainty of that "who . . . knowes" was the point: sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English poets worked in a linguistic medium whose survival and significance were anything but assured. That lack of assurance was a boon to literature, argues Barret. *Untold Futures* is an account of what becomes possible—poetically, dramatically, and even grammatically—when the dream of reviving antiquity founders owing to the unreliability of memory and the instability of the present.

What replaces that dream is a more modest-seeming aspiration; Barret calls it "looking forward to looking back." In this mood of anticipatory retrospection, present experience is legible from the vantage of a future that is neither immutably fixed nor apocalyptically transfigured but, precisely, imaginable: distant enough for speculation, near enough to be shaped with the tools at hand. Rhyme is one such tool, a predictive structure that cues the eye and ear for resolution; meter is another, as is genre. So is syntax—conditional clauses and future tenses—and so are vows, prophecies, wagers, and any linguistic formula that lays (necessarily tentative) claim to a future that is, practically speaking, still undetermined.

And it's a good thing, too. In Philip Sidney's *Arcadia* and Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, as in the imagined precincts of Shakespearean antiquity, knowing what's to come is often a liability. Prophecies fail or go quibblingly awry, promises break, and the pages of old books are riddled with holes. Those who thrive are not the most learned but the least burdened by expectation, being either untaught or, like Montaigne, good at forgetting: changeling princes in pursuit of fairy visions, new baptized knights, and impassioned youths. Those who suffer most cruelly—Spenser's Florimell and his Amoret, Shakespeare's Lavinia—are inevitably figured as thralls to history, victims of plots set down long ago.

To be remembered is, in this context, both an ambition and a source of anxiety—the anxiety of becoming an influence. On the eve of the Battle of Agincourt, Shakespeare's King Henry V rouses his troops with the promise of a future—what Renaissance grammarians called "the second future," or future perfect—in which deeds as yet undone "shall be remembered." But Shakespeare's Cleopatra dreads a future in which "quick comedians/Extemporally will stage us . . . and I shall see/Some squeaking Cleopatra boy my greatness/I'th' posture of a whore." Scholars have tended to take both speeches as straightforwardly self-referential: *Henry V* is the memorial to which Henry lays claim in advance; the youthful actor who plays Cleopatra is the embodiment of her fear. But as Barret points out, the skilled boy actors of the Jacobean stage were more than capable of playing women convincingly. The humiliating spectacle Cleopatra envisions is not the tragedy in which she appears but the extemporaneous fooling that followed theatrical performance, when clowns burlesqued the plot in rhyme, or broadside ballads were sold as souvenirs to be sung to popular tunes. Such improvised wit, more antic than antique, could easily efface the impression of the play itself; there is no telling what an audience, or a reader, will remember.

Reflections like these might inspire melancholy—or a sense of liberation. It's no coincidence that in the three Shakespearean dramas Barret examines closely—*Titus Andronicus*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *Cymbeline*—Roman antiquity is seen through the jaded eyes of so-called barbarians: captives and colonial subjects, Goths and Moors, Egyptians and Britons. English poets might benefit from alliances with such outsiders. "We are tolde . . . all Ryming is grosse, vulgare, barbarous," writes Samuel Daniel in his 1603 *A Defence of Ryme*. But, he insists,

> so naturall a melody is it, and so vniuersall, as it seems to be generally borne with al the Nations of the world. . . . Suffer then the world to injoy that which it knows, and what it likes: Seeing that whatsoeuer force of words doth mooue, delight, and sway the affections of men, in what Scythian sorte soeuer it be disposed or vttered, that is true number, measure, eloquence, and the perfection of speach.

In the end, Daniel reflects, both ancients and moderns are subject to the quicksand of culture; to boast of a humanist revival of letters is to betray "a most apparant ignorance, both of the succession of learning in *Europe* and the generall course of things." Consider Petrarch, he muses, who for all his learning and Latinity is better remembered for his (rhyming!) Italian sonnets—and who would wish it otherwise? So *imitatio* meets its match in "the law of time, which in a few yeeres will make al that for which we now contend *Nothing*." In *The Light in Troy*, Greene cites this realization as "a particularly bleak example" of humanist despair in the face of linguistic impermanence. But that mistakes Daniel's tone, missing its irony and levity. Like many of his compatriots writing in a language born of conquest and cultural hybridity, Daniel could not help seeing opportunity in the flux of times and tastes. Who knew what the future might bring? He was where—and when—he wished to be. ●

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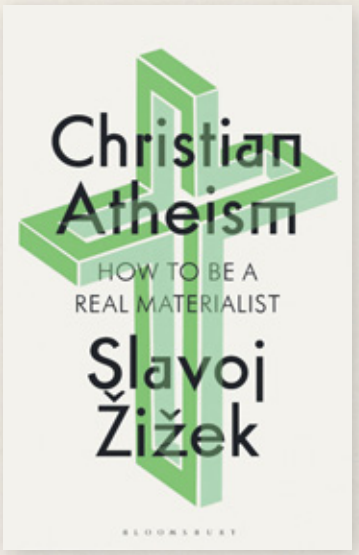
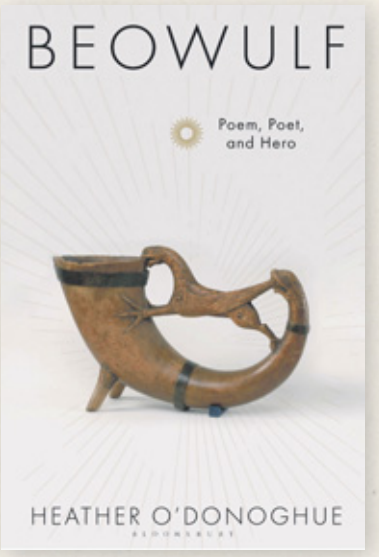
Analyzing established designers, regional brands and emerging talents, this book is essential for fashion enthusiasts and all who appreciate the history and visual culture of fashion and Latin America.



Drawing on traditions and subjects as broad as Buddhist thought, political subjectivity, quantum physics and AI, this is the first book-length articulation of Žižek's theology, offering unique insights into his materialist religious system.



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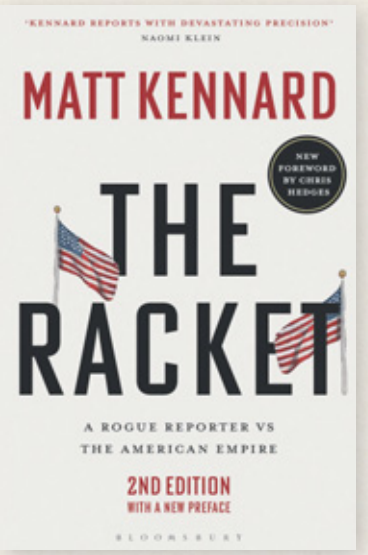

A classic of investigative journalism that exposes the rampant ethical and moral corruption at the heart of the global economic order—now with a new preface by the author and a new foreword by Chris Hedges.

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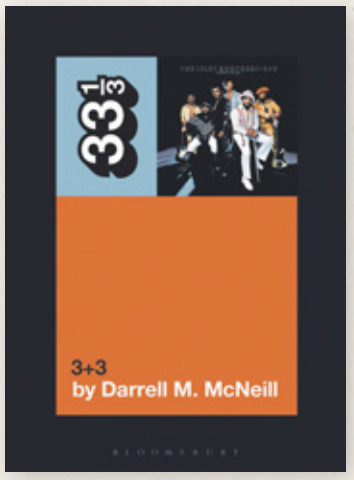
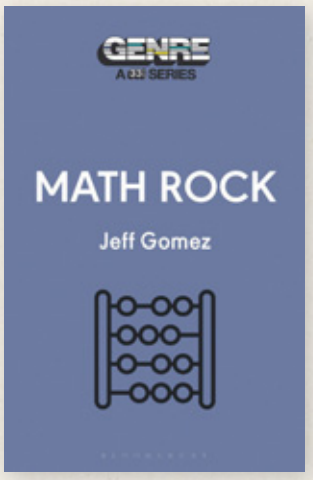
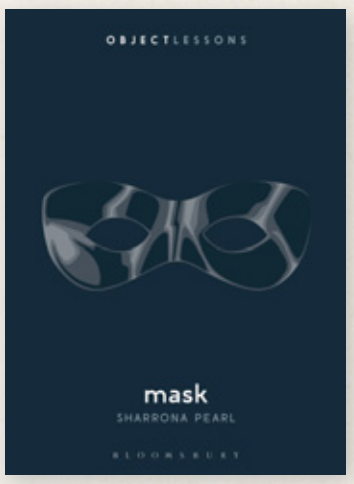




OBJECTLESSONS



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The Tower and the Sewer

Mark Lilla

Students leaving Mass at Benedictine College, Atchison, Kansas, December 2023

> When you go looking for what is lost, everything is a sign.
>
> Eudora Welty, "The Wide Net"

On an overcast morning in the late 1980s I visited the church across the way from my apartment in Paris. I was curious. The parish, St.-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet, was then the headquarters of Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre, a schismatic opponent of the Vatican II reforms who had just been excommunicated by Pope John Paul II. Conservative Catholics from all over the city squeezed into the church on Sundays to hear Gregorian chants and the Tridentine Mass recited in Latin—a beautiful, forbidden experience.

After the service a fair number of congregants gathered in the church's small courtyard to chat and leaf though some of the right-wing books and newspapers that had been laid out on folding tables. When I hovered over one of them, a young man behind it mentioned a shop where I could find more in the same vein. He tore off a scrap of paper and wrote down an address, telling me that the bookstore had no sign—there had been arson attempts at earlier locations—and that I should just knock on the door.

I went, I knocked, I was given the once over, then admitted. After passing through a thick crimson drape I discovered a jumble of overstuffed bookcases lining the walls of a good-size room. Despite appearances there turned out to be order in the disorder: the collection had been laid out chronologically according to the French right's conflicting historical obsessions.

The first bookcase was devoted to the neopaganism of the Nouvelle Droite (New Right), which since the 1960s has been inspired by the writer and editor Alain de Benoist; his *On Being a Pagan* (1981) is considered one of its foundational texts. This group is in a sense the most radical, if minuscule, force on the European right because it places Eden so far back in time that it blames the advent of Christianity two millennia ago for Europe's relentless decline. The next bookcase, though, contained histories extolling Christianity's victory over paganism and pining for the simple harmony of the monastic Middle Ages. Next to those I found lush volumes celebrating the unmonastic grandeur of the Catholic House of Bourbon. A few bookcases were then given over to the catastrophe of the Revolution, with hagiographies of the counterrevolutionary uprisings of the Chouans and the Vendeans.

Farther down the aisle were strongly anti-German books focused on the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–1871. After those, predictably, was a large collection of anti-Dreyfusard works, all supposedly proving that even if Alfred Dreyfus wasn't a German agent, then at least his supporters were. Yet in the bookcase next to it I found philo-Germanic biographies of Nazi generals like Erwin Rommel and of the heroic Vichy collaborators.

Angry books on French Algeria then followed, including memoirs by officers in the Organisation Armée Secrète who resisted the French withdrawal from its colony and in retribution tried to assassinate French president Charles de Gaulle in 1962. The last bookcase contained attacks on the student rebels of May 1968, who had also wanted to oust de Gaulle, though for very different reasons. And at the end, on the floor next to the cash register, was a wire bin filled with cassettes of racist heavy metal music by bands with German names.

A moveable feast of bitter herbs.

It has always been more difficult to make sense of the radical right than the radical left. Back when there were serious left-wing bookstores catering to active socialists rather than leisured graduate students, those, too, were a little helter-skelter. Utopian authors rubbed shoulders with Stalinists, anarchists with Trotskyists, interpreters of the wisdom of Chairman Mao with interpreters of the wisdom of the Albanian leader Enver Hoxha (a Seventies thing). Shelves were devoted to each and every postcolonial liberation movement then active, with many manifestos written by obscure revolutionaries destined to become infamous tyrants. Yet despite the intellectual and geographical variety, one always had the sense that the authors imagined they were aiming at the same abstract goal: a future of human emancipation into a state of freedom and equality.

But what ultimate goal do those on the radical right share? That's harder to discern, since when addressing the present they almost always speak in the past tense. Contemporary life is compared to a half-imagined lost world that inspires and limits reflection about possible futures. Since there are many pasts that could conceivably provoke a militant nostalgia, one might think that the political right would therefore be hopelessly fractious. This turns out not to be true. It is possible to attend right-wing conferences whose speakers include national conservatives enamored of the Peace of Westphalia, secular populists enamored of Andrew Jackson, Protestant evangelicals enamored of the Wailing Wall, paleo-Catholics enamored of the fifth-century Church, gun lovers enamored of the nineteenth-century Wild West, hawks enamored of the twentieth-century cold war, isolationists enamored of the 1940s America First Committee, and acned young men waving around thick manifestos by a preposterous figure known as the Bronze Age Pervert. And they all get along.

The reason, I think, is that these usable pasts serve more as symbolic hieroglyphs for the right than as actual models for orienting action. That is why they go in and out of fashion unpredictably, depending on changes in the political and intellectual climate. The most that can be said is that the further to the right one goes, the greater the conviction that a decisive historical break is to blame for the loathsome present, and that accelerating decline must be met with . . . well, something. That's when things get vague.

Rhetorical vagueness is a powerful political weapon, as past revolutionaries have understood. Jesus once likened the Kingdom of God to "leaven which a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, till it was all leavened." Not terribly enlightening, but not terribly contentious either. Marx and Engels once spoke of a postrevolutionary communist society where one could hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, and write angry manifestos at night. After that they let the matter drop. Maintaining vagueness about the future is what now allows those on the American right with very different views of the past to share an illusory sense of common purpose for the future.

How, then, is one to understand the radical right today? Prior to the election of Donald Trump, the instinctive response of American liberals and progressives was simply not to try. Journalists who embedded themselves in far-right groups, or scholars who engaged seriously with their ideas,

CHARLIE RIEDEL/AP IMAGES

Books Discussed in This Essay

Why Liberalism Failed
by Patrick J. Deneen, with a foreword by James Davison Hunter and John M. Owen IV.
Yale University Press, 225 pp., $19.00 (paper)

From Fire, by Water: My Journey to the Catholic Faith
by Sohrab Ahmari.
Ignatius, 214 pp., $22.95

Tyranny, Inc.: How Private Power Crushed American Liberty—and What to Do About It
by Sohrab Ahmari.
Forum, 252 pp., $28.00

Common Good Constitutionalism: Recovering the Classical Legal Tradition
by Adrian Vermeule.
Polity, 241 pp., $59.95; $19.95 (paper)

Regime Change: Toward a Postliberal Future
by Patrick J. Deneen.
Sentinel, 269 pp., $30.00

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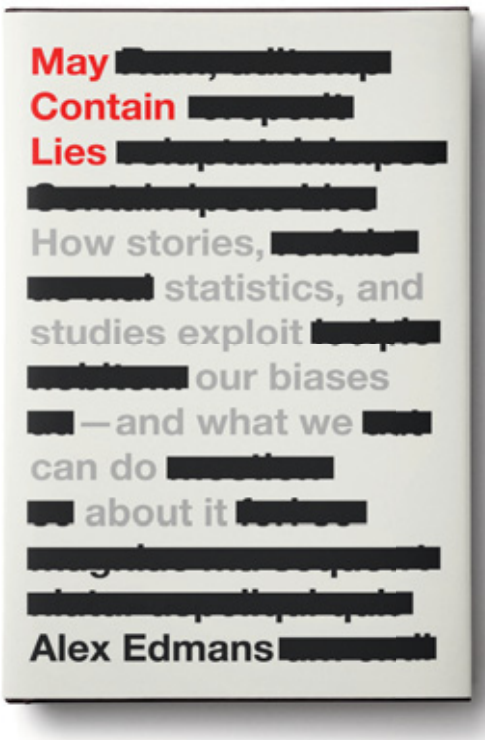

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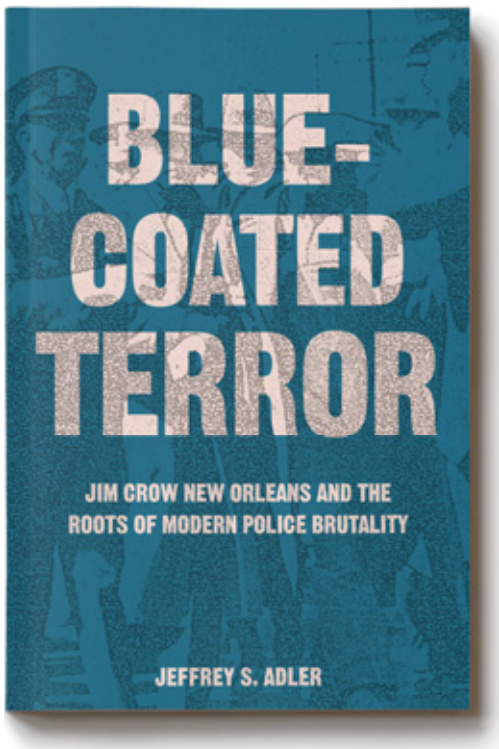
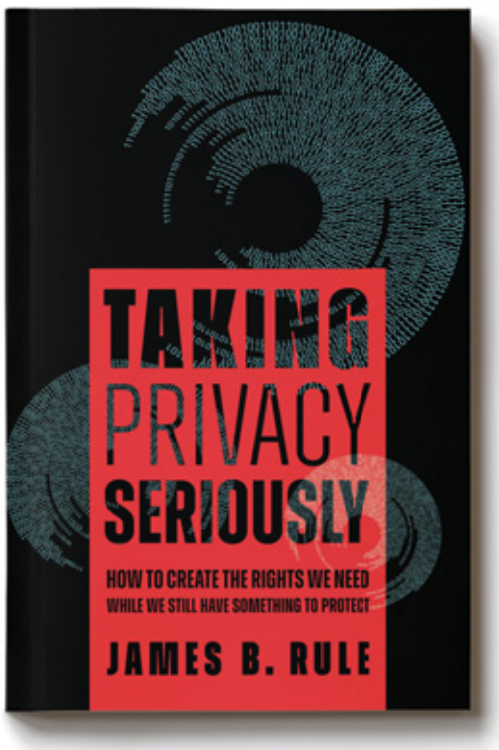


A searing chronicle of how racist violence became an ingrained facet of law enforcement in the United States.



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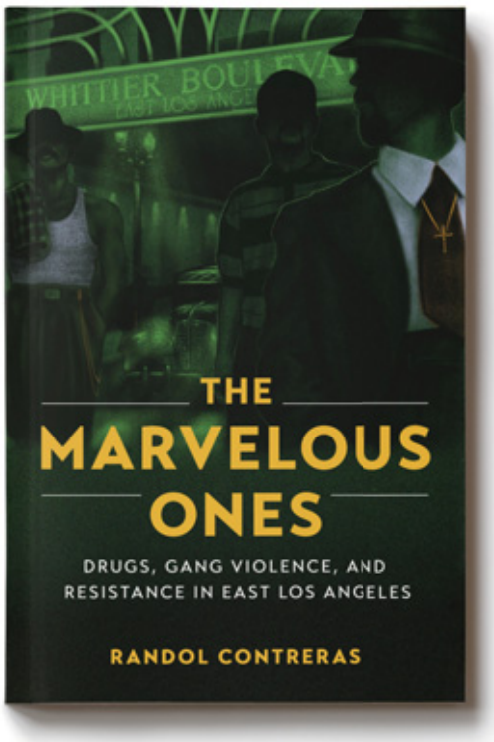
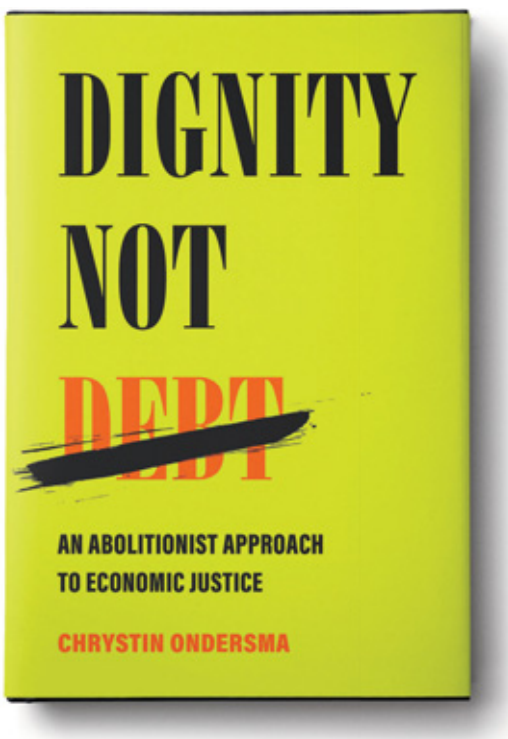


An intimate portrait of LA gang members turning to drugs, nostalgia, and religion as they age and fight to stay relevant in a new era.



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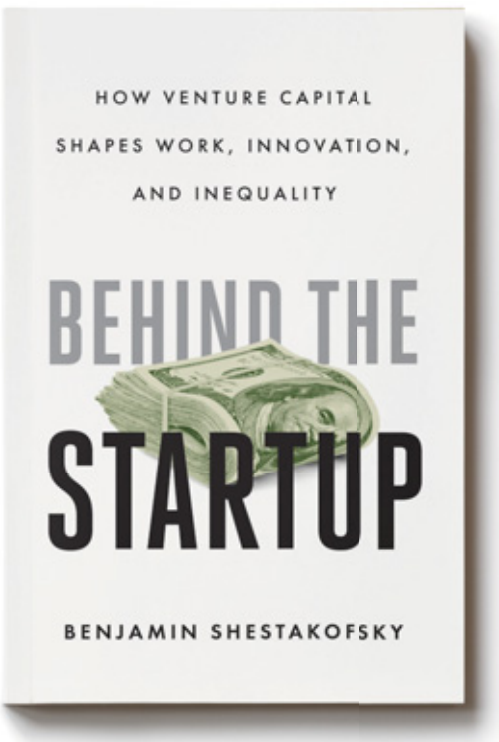

Dissects the logic of venture capital and its consequences for entrepreneurs, workers, and societies.

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were often greeted with suspicion as agents provocateurs (as I can attest). That has changed. Today journalists cover many of the important groups and movements, and do a fairly good job of plumbing the lower depths of right-wing Internet chatter. Anyone who wants to know what is being said in these obscure circles, in the US and around the world, can now find out.

But keeping up with trends is not the same as understanding what they signify. What so often seems lacking in our reporting is alertness to the psychodynamics of ideological commitment. The great political novelists of the past—Dostoevsky, Conrad, Thomas Mann—created protagonists who make coherent ideological arguments that other characters engage with seriously but that also reveal something significant about their psychological makeup. (A classic example is the intellectual jousting of Lodovico Settembrini and Leo Naphta in *The Magic Mountain*.) These authors wrote the way good psychoanalysts practice their art in the consulting room. Analysts do not dismiss the reasons we give for what we feel and believe, which might contain a good deal of truth. They are not just waiting for the *gotcha* moment when our "real"—that is, base—motives appear and our stated reasons can be dismissed (a common excuse for not paying attention to the right). They look at us through two different lenses: as inquiring creatures who sometimes find the truth, and as self-deceiving creatures whose searches are willfully incomplete, revealingly repetitive, emotionally charged, and often self-undermining. That is the skill required to begin understanding the leading ideological movements of our time, especially those on the right.

To my mind, the most psychologically interesting stream of American right-wing thought today is Catholic postliberalism, sometimes called "common-good conservatism." The "post" in "postliberalism" means a rejection of the intellectual foundations of modern liberal individualism. The focus is not on a narrow set of political principles, such as rights. It is on an all-encompassing modern outlook that postliberals say prizes autonomy above all else and that is seemingly indifferent to the psychological and social effects of radical individualism. Such an outlook is not only hostile to the notion of natural or socially imposed moral limits to individual action, which are also necessary for human happiness. It has also gradually undermined the preliberal intellectual foundations of Western societies that once made it easier to protect the common good against the claims of selfish individuals. The Catholic postliberals would like to establish (or reestablish) a more communitarian vision of the good society, one in which democratic institutions would in some sense be subordinate to a superior, authoritative moral vision of the human good—which for many of them means the authority of the Catholic Church.

In the past decade interest in Catholic ideas and practice has been growing among right-leaning intellectual elites, and it is not unusual to meet young conservatives at Ivy League institutions who have converted or renewed their faith since coming to college. These students often gather at new off-campus study centers funded by conservative foundations and Catholic donors, where they invite speakers and read classic works together. While not sharing their faith, I have had students such as these and I like them. Most are searching earnestly for meaning and direction, and at these centers they have found intellectual companionship. They remind me somewhat of American students in the early 1960s who wanted to escape the air-conditioned nightmare they felt trapped in and turned for spiritual nourishment to important religious authors of the time like Thomas Merton and Paul Tillich—a forgotten chapter in the canonical history of the Sixties.

Like them, the students I meet feel the hollowness of contemporary culture, which is now heightened by the ephemeral yet fraught online relationships they have with others. So one can understand their romantic infatuation with the notion of Catholic tradition and its intellectual heritage, which promise structure and spiritual depth. (Something similar is happening to Jewish students drawn to the Modern Orthodox movement.) It's also easy to see how they could be attracted to postliberals on the right, who claim to reveal that the source of their despair is not human existence itself—as Merton and Tillich thought—but rather the "liberal project of modernity." This makes them highly susceptible to dreams of returning to premodern Christian social teachings that would undergird a more decent and just society, and more meaningful personal lives for themselves. This is a vain but not contemptible hope.

The book that first crystallized the postliberal mood was Patrick Deneen's *Why Liberalism Failed*, which created a great stir when it was published in 2018 and received an endorsement from Barack Obama. The description of postliberal thinking I offer above is largely drawn from this book. Deneen focused in particular on how the idealization of autonomy has worked as an acid eating away at the deepest cultural foundations inherited from the Christian era, which he believes supported shared customs and beliefs that cultivated stable families, a sense of obligation, and virtues like moderation, modesty, and charity. Ross Douthat summed up his argument well:

> Where it once delivered equality, liberalism now offers plutocracy; instead of liberty, appetitiveness regulated by a surveillance state; instead of true intellectual and religious freedom, growing conformity and mediocrity. It has reduced rich cultures to consumer products, smashed social and familial relations, and left us all the isolated and mutually suspicious inhabitants of an "anticulture" from which many genuine human goods have fled.

How persuasive you find this description will depend on whether you share Deneen's bleak view of the way we live now.[1] Most on the postliberal right do. But they also bring into the picture concerns that typically animate the left, such as the political influence of capital, the privileges of an inbred, meritocratic elite, the devastation of the environment, and the dehumanizing effects of endless technological innovation—all of which Deneen interpreted as the fruits of liberal individualism. The postliberals see themselves as developing a more comprehensive view of the common good that integrates culture, morality, politics, and economics, which would make conservatism more consistent with itself by freeing it from Reaganite idolatry of individual property rights and the market.

Though Deneen is Catholic and teaches at Notre Dame, *Why Liberalism Failed* is not an explicitly Catholic book. To understand how distaste for the liberal present could make Catholicism psychologically appealing, it helps to read Sohrab Ahmari's political-spiritual memoir, *From Fire, by Water*. Ahmari, a friend and ally of Deneen's, was born a Muslim in Iran in 1985 and was brought to the United States by his educated parents at the age of thirteen. In his telling, he almost immediately came to disdain the "liberal sentimental ecumenism" in which he was being raised. He then became a serial converter, a type familiar to ministers. He was first an enthusiastic teen atheist, then an enthusiastic Nietzschean, then an enthusiastic Trotskyist, then an enthusiastic postmodernist, and finally a very enthusiastic neoconservative. (That's a lot of bookshelves.) It was about this time that his writings came to the attention of *The Wall Street Journal*, and he was soon working on its editorial-page staff.

Ahmari now sees his political flitting about as an unconscious search to fill a spiritual void. As generally happens in conversion stories, an epiphany arrives and things begin to change. Suffering from a drinking problem and very hungover, he wandered one day in 2008 into a Manhattan church where Mass was being celebrated. As the bells rang out for the Adoration of the Host, he melted: "Tears streamed from my eyes and down my face. These were tears neither of sadness nor even of happiness. They were tears of peace." It took eight more years for him to convert officially to Catholicism, and by his own account the decision was as political as it was theological. "I longed for stable authority as well as redemption," he writes, and the Church represented "Order. Continuity. Tradition and totality. Confidence." If gaining that meant having to accept even the obscure doctrine of the Incarnation, so be it: "Its very improbability to my mind counted in its favor."

Ahmari is a disarming writer. At one point in the book he asks, "Had I found in the Catholic faith a way to express the reactionary longings of my Persian soul, albeit in a Latin key?" He never answers that, though any fair reader could do it for him: *Yes*. But there was still one conversion to go: from neoconservatism to postliberalism.

He was initially critical of populists like Donald Trump and Viktor Orbán when they came on the scene, writing as late as 2017 that "the case for plunging into political illiberalism is weak, even on social-conservative grounds.... What commends liberalism is historical experience, not abstract theory." Within two years, though, he was preaching a different sermon directed as much against the neoconservatives as against the left. Today Ahmari presents himself as a cultural conservative who admires Orbán—the Enver Hoxha of American postliberalism—and an economic social democrat who admires Elizabeth Warren. His latest book, *Tyranny, Inc.*, is a scathing and fairly effective attack on neoliberal finance capitalism and Silicon Valley's "market utopianism," and a paean to unions, regulation, fixed-benefit pension plans, and many other good progressive things. Like Deneen, he sees left- and right-wing libertarians as evil twins spawned by a liberal overclass that must be overthrown in the name of human dignity and an ordered society that would work for the least well-off. His latest project is *Compact*, a lively online magazine he cofounded and edits where antiliberals of left and right—from Glenn Greenwald and Samuel Moyn to Marco Rubio and Josh Hawley—display their wares.

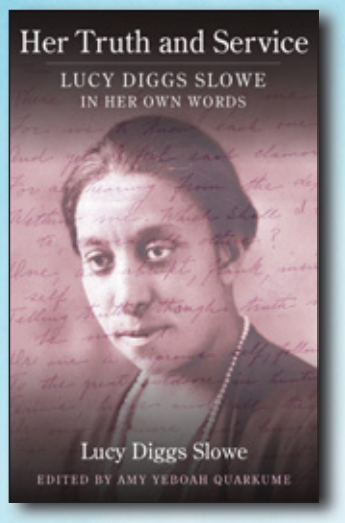
Adrian Vermeule, a Harvard law professor specializing in constitutional and administrative law, is cut from different cloth. He, too, converted to Catholicism in the past decade, convinced that "there is no stable middle ground between Catholicism and atheist materialism." The Virgin Mary was apparently important to his decision: "Behind and above all those who helped me along the way, there stood a great Lady."

Vermeule is both more penetrating and intellectually radical than his friends Deneen and Ahmari, which gives his writings a Janus-faced quality. His academic books are learned and well argued, and have a place in contemporary constitutional debates, including *Law and Leviathan: Redeeming the Administrative State* (2020), which he wrote with his liberal colleague (and NYR contributor) Cass Sunstein. When writing online, though, he lets his id out the back door and it starts tearing up the garden. A little like radical Islamists who speak of peace in English but of war in Arabic, Vermeule has learned to adjust his rhetoric to his audience.

His most recent book, *Common Good Constitutionalism*, makes a challenging case for abandoning both progressive and originalist readings of the American Constitution and returning to what he calls the "classical vision of law." This tradition, rooted in the works of the Roman jurists and Thomas Aquinas, took civil law to be a stable framework for pursuing the common goods of peace, justice, abundance, and solidarity for the community as a whole. Rights matter in such a system, but only derivatively as means to achieve these ends. Liberty, in Vermeule's view, is "a bad master, but a good servant" if properly constrained and directed. These are very old ideas, but Vermeule manages to breathe new life into them in a bracing way that will surprise conventional legal liberals and conservatives. For example, in a précis of the book's argument published in *The Atlantic*, he writes:

> Elaborating on the common-good principle that no constitutional right to refuse vaccination exists, constitutional law will define in broad terms the authority of the

[1] For a critical challenge to Deneen's view, see Robert Kuttner, "Blaming Liberalism," *The New York Review*, November 21, 2019.



Her Truth and Service

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LUCY DIGGS SLOWE

Edited by Amy Yeboah Quarkume

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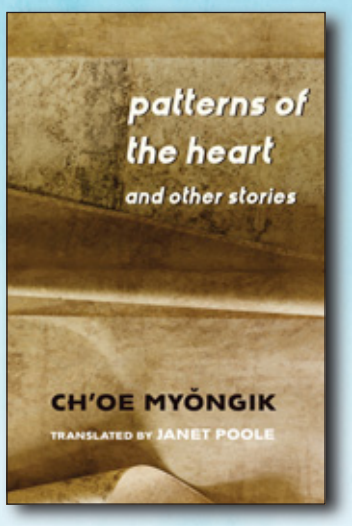

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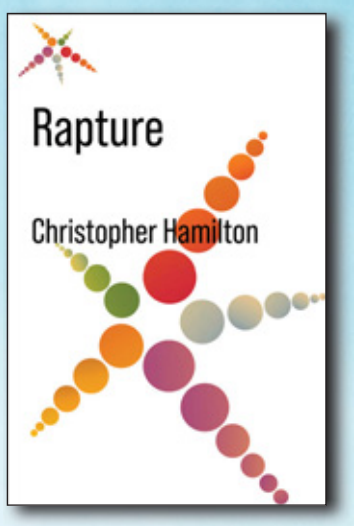

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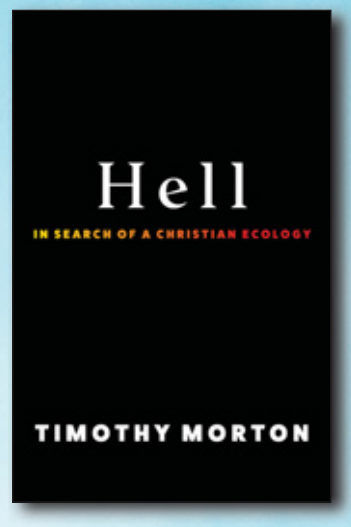

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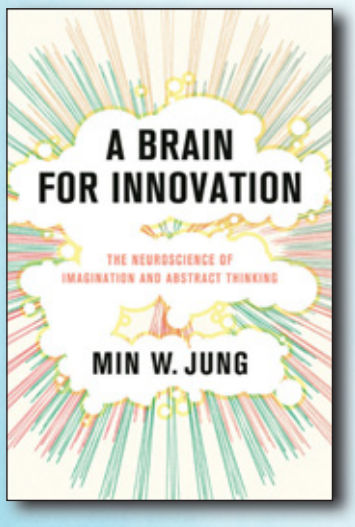

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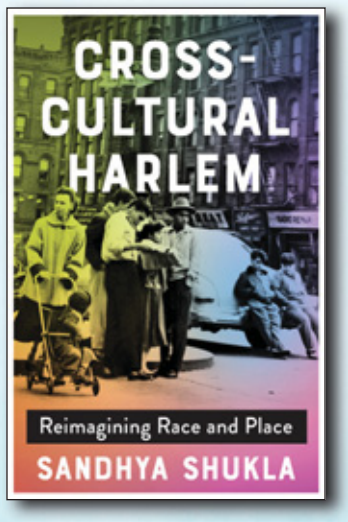

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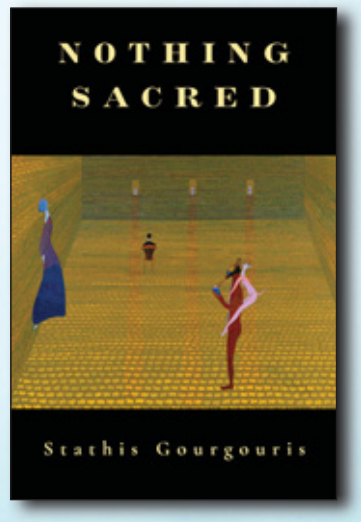

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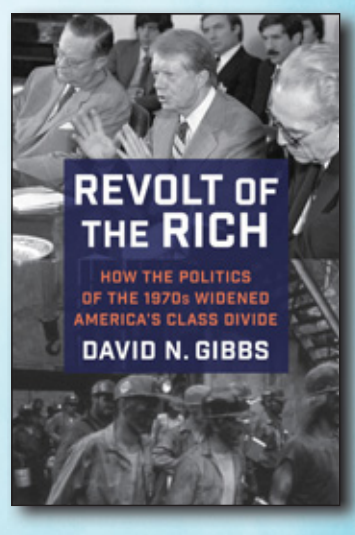

Revolt of the Rich

How the Politics of the 1970s Widened America's Class Divide

DAVID N. GIBBS

"Original and compelling ... A study that provides valuable insights about the recent past and critical lessons for today."

—Noam Chomsky, Massachusetts Institute of Technology

> state to protect the public's health and well-being, protecting the weak from pandemics and scourges of many kinds—biological, social, and economic—even when doing so requires overriding the selfish claims of individuals to private "rights."

This is a book worth engaging with.

Such is the mainstream Vermeule. An angrier character appears in right-leaning journals like *First Things* and obscure websites of the Catholic far right. There he operates according to a maxim borrowed from the Catholic reactionary tradition running from Joseph de Maistre to Carl Schmitt: "All human conflict is ultimately theological." In these writings, liberalism is not a mistaken political and legal theory, or even a mistaken way of social life. It is a "fighting, evangelistic faith" with an eschatology, a clergy, martyrs, evangelical ministers, and sacraments directed toward battling the conservative enemies of progress. Their fire must be fought with fire.

Vermeule is a tired man—tired of waiting for change, tired of right-wing "quietism," tired of merely being tolerated by the oppressive liberal order that says, "You are welcome to be a domestic extremist, so long as your extremism remains safely domesticated."[3] (Tip of the hat to Herbert Marcuse.) He wants a radical movement against liberalism that is "interested not merely in slowing its progress, but in defeating it, undoing it." To his mind, only a self-conscious political Catholicism that distinguishes temporal and spiritual power, but ultimately subordinates the former to the latter, can meet the historical challenge. He harbors the hope that a crisis and epiphany will provoke a revolutionary realignment:

> The hunger for the real might then make people so desperate, so sick of the essential falsity of liberalism, that they become willing to gamble that the Truth . . . will prevail—or at least willing to gamble on entering into coalition with other sorts of anti-liberals.

Vermeule is a recognizable psychological type in revolutionary movements: the Accelerator. Accelerators act as scourges to their comrades, whose cowardice, they claim, is all that stands in the way of the revolution. They have historically appeared on the radical left and right as enemies of social democrats and liberal reformers who spread the illusion that amelioration through democratic institutions is possible. Accelerators see themselves as the vanguard of the vanguard and mock their allies' refusal to "break shit," as the Silicon Valley mantra goes. Eventually they become mirror images of their imagined ruthless enemies.

Vermeule has not quite reached that point. Instead he has adopted the short-term strategy of encouraging people on the right to make a long stealth march through the institutions of government. (Tip of the hat to Rudi Dutschke.) "It is a matter," he writes, "of finding a strategic position from which to sear the liberal faith with hot irons, to defeat and capture the hearts and minds of liberal agents, to take over the institutions of the old order." And the best position from which to do that is within the executive branch, where it's sometimes possible to subvert the status quo without having to consult more directly representative institutions like Congress or state legislatures. Just as Joseph insinuated himself into the Egyptian royal court to protect the Jews, so postliberals should embed themselves in bureaucracies and start nudging policy in the right direction, presumably until an antiliberal pharaoh takes charge (again).

Vermeule floated these cloak-and-dagger ideas in a critical review of his friend Deneen's *Why Liberalism Failed* in 2018. In that book Deneen still hoped to redeem liberalism by shoring up the moral foundations of local communities and educating the young in the priority of the common good. Vermeule the Accelerationist called him out, saying he was entranced by the "mystification" of the liberal order. The counterrevolution is approaching; what are you afraid of?

Deneen took this challenge to heart and responds in his latest book, *Regime Change*, which reads like it was written by a different person. The tone of *Why Liberalism Failed* was one of regret, even mourning for something precious that had been lost. The new book tries to sound more radical but is so half-baked that at times it seems a parody of engagée literature, written in a kind of demotic Straussianism. Deneen echoes the old battle cry of counterrevolutionaries that "any undertaking to 'conserve' must first more radically overthrow the liberal ideology of progress." The good news is that "the many"—which he also calls, without a trace of irony, "the *demos*"—are achieving class consciousness, but lack the knowledge and discipline to refine their anger into a program for governing. What they need are leaders who are part of the elite but see themselves as "class traitors" ready to act as "stewards and caretakers of the common good." He calls this "aristopopulism" and its practitioners "*aristoi*." (Garbo laughs.) It is a very old fantasy of deluded political intellectuals to become the pedagogical vanguard of a popular revolution whose leaders can be made to see a glimmer of the true light. Imagine a Notre Dame professor taking a stroll around the stoa of South Bend, Indiana, explaining to the QAnon shaman the scholastics' distinction between *ius commune* and *ius naturale*, and you get the idea.

As far-fetched as the idea of right-wing *aristoi* making a long march through the institutions may seem, it is circulating at a time when Trumpian activists are using the same strategy to prepare for a battle against the "deep state" should Trump be elected again. The Heritage Foundation, for example, has contributed nearly a million dollars to Project 2025, which is amassing a database of roughly 20,000 trusted right-wingers who could be appointed to government positions immediately in a second Trump administration. The hope is not only to replace Biden's appointees, which often requires congressional approval, but to establish a new category of civil service positions (Schedule F) that could be staffed with loyalists, which is illegal under current law. Trump had established this category late in his presidency, and the Biden administration was quick to abolish it after the 2020 election. But Republicans could quite easily restore it after a Trump victory, and seem intent on doing so. As the Heritage Foundation puts it in the statement of purpose for Project 2025:

> It is not enough for conservatives to win elections. If we are going to rescue the country from the grip of the radical Left, we need both a governing agenda and the right people in place, ready to carry this agenda out on Day One of the next conservative Administration.

This notion of social change having to come from the top is, in the Catholic tradition, a very papal one. In this sense, the postliberals writing today are papists in spirit even if they are not entirely enamored of the current pontiff. What is striking in their works is that they almost never speak about the power of the Gospel to transform a society and culture from below by first transforming the inner lives of its members. Saving souls is, after all, a retail business, not a wholesale one, and has nothing to do with jockeying for political power in a fallen world. Such ministering requires patience and charity and humility. It means meeting individual people where they are and persuading them that another, better way of living is possible. This is the kind of ministering the postliberals should be engaged in if they are serious about wanting to see Americans abandon their hollow, hedonistic individualism—not hatching plans to infiltrate the Department of Education.

Jesus implored his disciples to be "wise as serpents and harmless as doves" as they went out into the world to preach the Word. Deneen counsels postliberal moles to adopt "Machiavellian means to Aristotelian ends" in the political sphere. This is a very different gospel message and brings to mind Montaigne's wise remark that "it is much easier to talk like Aristotle and live like Caesar than to talk and live like Socrates." Ahmari, ever the hothead, addresses the troops in more militant language, exhorting them to

> fight the culture war with the aim of defeating the enemy and enjoying the spoils in the form of a public square re-ordered to the common good and ultimately the Highest Good. . . . Civility and decency are secondary values. . . . We should seek to use [our] values to enforce our order and our orthodoxy, not pretend that they could ever be neutral. To recognize that enmity is real is its own kind of moral duty.

Faith may move mountains, but too slowly for these Horsemen of the Apocalypse.

Seen from a certain perspective, the postliberals do get a number of things right. There is a malaise—call it cultural, call it spiritual, call it psychological—in modern Western societies, reflected above all in the worrisome state of our children, who are ever more depressed and suicidal. And we do lack adequate political concepts and vocabulary for articulating and defending the common good and placing necessary limits on individual autonomy, from gun control to keeping Internet pornography from the young. On this many across the political spectrum could agree. What liberal or progressive today would reject Vermeule's argument that "a just state is a state that has ample authority to protect the vulnerable from the ravages of pandemics, natural disasters, and climate change, and from the underlying structures of corporate power that contribute to these events"? He, though, has a developed Catholic theory of government to explain why that is necessarily the case. Do liberals or progressives have one today? I know I don't.

But seen from another perspective, the postliberals offer just one more example of the psychology of self-induced ideological hysteria, which begins with the identification of a genuine problem and quickly mutates into a sense of world-historical crisis and the appointment of oneself and one's comrades as the select called to strike down the Adversary—quite literally in this case. As Vermeule puts it,

> Liberalism's deepest enmity, it seems, is ultimately reserved for the Blessed Virgin—and thus Genesis 3:15 and Revelation 12:1–9, which describe the Virgin's implacable enemy, give us the best clue as to liberalism's true identity.

He means Satan.

The postliberals are stuck in a repetition of mistakes made by many right-wing movements that get so tangled up in their own hyperbolic rhetoric and fanciful historical dramaturgy that they eventually become irrelevant. As long as their focus is on culture wars rather than spreading the Good News, these Catholics will inevitably meet with disappointment in post-Protestant secular America, where even the red-state *demos* demands access to pornography, abortion, and weed. The postliberals will perhaps get their own bookcase in the library of American reaction. But the rest of the American right will eventually be off in search of new symbols and hieroglyphs to dream its dreams.

My concern is for the young people drawn to the movement today. Their unhappiness with the lonely, superficial, and unstable lives our culture and economy offer them does them credit. But finding the true source of our disquiet is never a simple matter, for young or old. It's much easier to become enchanted by historical fairy tales and join a partisan political sect promising redemption from the present than it is to reconcile oneself to never being fully reconciled with life or the historical moment, and to turn within. If I were a believer and were called to preach a sermon to them, I would tell them to continue cultivating their minds and (why not) their souls together, and to leave Washington to the Caesars of this world. And warn them that the political waters surrounding their conservative Mont-Saint-Michels are starting to smell distinctly like a sewer.[2] ●

[2] See Walter M. Shaub Jr., "The Corruption Playbook," *The New York Review*, April 18, 2024; and Thomas B. Edsall's thorough reporting in "Trump's Backers Are Determined Not to Blow It This Time Around," *The New York Times*, April 3, 2024.

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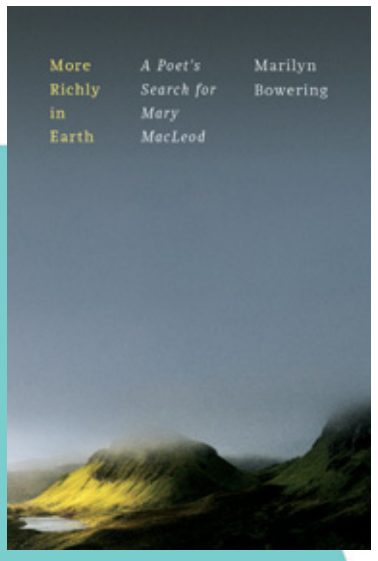

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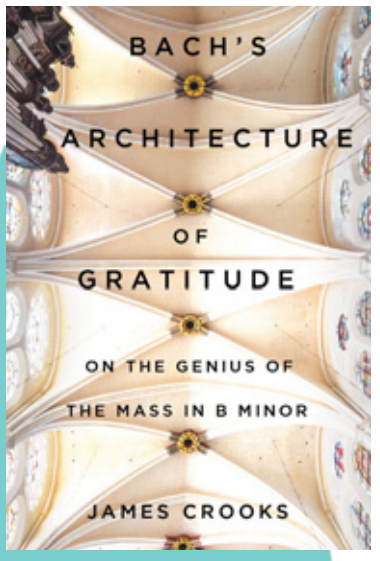

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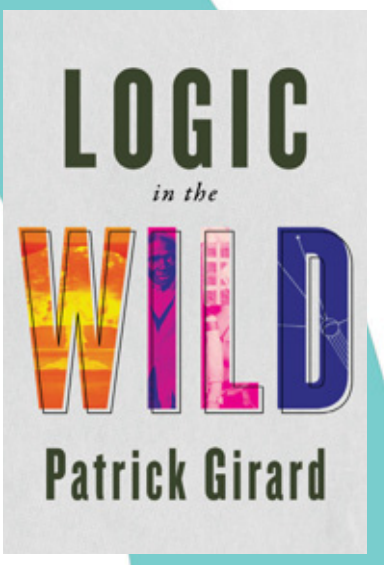

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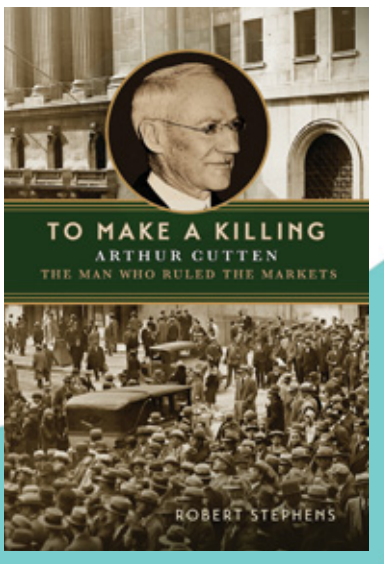

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Up on the Roof

Martin Filler

The rooftop of Charles de Beistegui's penthouse apartment, Paris, 1932; photograph by Marius Gravot

Machine à Amuser:
The Life and Death of the Beistegui Penthouse Apartment
by Wim van den Bergh.
MIT Press, 369 pp., $65.00

Few images in the history of modern architecture have exerted quite the same uncanny fascination as Marius Gravot's 1932 black-and-white photograph of a most unusual French decorating scheme. A severely outlined rectilinear space, so emblematic of the early International Style with its high, white-plastered walls devoid of any detailing or surface ornament, is incongruously interrupted by a white Baroque chimneypiece flanked by a pair of curvilinear iron garden chairs. On the floor in front of the fireplace, a cushion and an open book appear to have been left by a reader who has just wandered away.

This minimalist salon recalls one of René Magritte's enigmatic Surrealist compositions, in which familiar signifiers of everyday bourgeois life are given unnerving new connotations through visual non sequiturs that are as impossible to explain as they are to forget. One almost expects a small, puffing locomotive to emerge from the hearth, as in his painting *La Durée poignardée* (*Time Transfixed*, 1938). The odd dissociations continue. Instead of having a trompe l'oeil ceiling depicting the heavens dotted with clouds—an illusionistic conceit popular among grandees from the Renaissance onward—this enclosure is open to the sky. And although the floor at first looks as if it's covered with a deep-pile carpet, closer inspection reveals it to be planted with grass.

The playfully disorienting ambiguity of this not-quite-indoor, not-quite-outdoor space is a sly subversion of the early Modern Movement's promotion of salubrious all-seasons living through buildings with fully retractable window walls in climates of every kind. These barrier-breaking experiments ranged in geographic suitability from Richard Neutra's flat-roofed houses beginning in the 1920s in sunny Southern California to Jan Duiker's four-story Openluchtschool (Open Air School) of 1929–1930 in Amsterdam, where the North Sea climate made alfresco teaching impractical for much of the year. Sometimes the International Style, alleged to be infinitely adaptable, was done in by local conditions.

Here, though, it's easy to locate oneself. Above the parapet peeps the unmistakable Arc de Triomphe, a few hundred feet away. The City of Light's spirit of place became even more pronounced when the dwelling's resident further embellished the space for parties—its principal intended function. His Baroque decorative flourishes included an oval mirror above the mantel, a stone replica of an eighteenth-century commode against one wall, and a gold-framed oil portrait of a lushly bewigged *grand seigneur* of the ancien régime. Surrounded by these totems of wealth and status, one could have no doubts about where one was—up on the roof of the house of a person with a great deal of money, a fertile imagination, and an offbeat sense of humor, at the epicenter of the civilized world.

Those attributes exemplified the apartment's tenant, Carlos de Beistegui y Yturbe, a fabulously rich, French-born, Old Etonian aesthete of Mexican and Basque heritage (whence his unusual surname). Exactly who was most responsible for the creation of his curious Paris aerie is the central focus of an exhaustively researched monograph, *Machine à Amuser: The Life and Death of the Beistegui Penthouse Apartment*, by the Dutch architect, educator, and scholar Wim van den Bergh. Primary credit for the apartment has most often been accorded to its architects, Le Corbusier (born Charles-Édouard Jeanneret), ranked by many as the most influential of all Modernist master builders, and his nearly decade-younger cousin and longtime collaborator, Pierre Jeanneret.

The three-level Beistegui penthouse was added between 1929 and 1931 atop a six-story limestone-clad hôtel particulier on the Champs-Élysées at rue Balzac, the original portions of which were designed by the architect Charles Gondoin for Beistegui's Mexican émigré grandmother in the 1870s. Awareness of the no-longer-extant scheme, an unclassifiable anomaly in Le Corbusier's oeuvre, has persisted mainly through photographs in his vast bibliography. Strangely, Le Corbusier's name appears in neither this book's title nor subtitle, a surprising omission given how salable he is among design aficionados. That lacuna reflects Van den Bergh's assertion that the true auteur of this "autobiographical house," as he calls it, was Beistegui, who put his personal imprint on the finished product so strongly that he must be seen as its presiding creator.

The book's clever title is a play on Le Corbusier's oft-misquoted dictum, first posited in his revolutionary polemic *Vers une architecture* (1923), that "une maison est une machine à habiter"—a house is a machine to dwell in. He did not mean—as has been widely misunderstood—that a house ought to resemble a mechanical device, however much the stripped-down, industrially based aesthetic he favored during the first half of his career reminded the general public of factories and other utilitarian structures. Rather, his intention was to stress that a successful residential design ought to operate with the same interdependent logic, efficiency, and productivity as a well-engineered machine.

Van den Bergh's titular twist instead emphasizes the self-indulgent way of life pursued by the hedonistic playboy who brought the endeavor into being and, to paraphrase a 1929 Noël Coward lyric, had a talent to be amused. It is axiomatic that creating a great building requires a great client. Yet regardless of how a control-freak architect might define that term, it does not mean a patron who acquiesces to every aspect of a scheme but rather one who participates in a mutually beneficial give-and-take with the designer. Either passively accepting or reflexively rejecting elements is unlikely to lead to a favorable outcome for either party. Conversely, architects are sometimes driven to distraction by their clients' excessive demands.

But such considerations meant little to the haughty, discriminating, and secretive Beistegui—incongruously known to his high-flown intimates as Charlie—who lived only for pleasure and led a nonstop quest for the next fashionable thing. Often mentioned in the published diaries and letters of the twentieth century's international beau monde, he is perhaps best remembered for Le Bal Oriental, the opulent masked gala he gave in 1951 at his Palazzo Labia in Venice, which he had just finished restoring. After six years of European postwar austerity, this convergence of a thousand revelers—which commingled the Aga Khan, Orson Welles, Barbara Hutton, Cecil Beaton, Salvador Dalí, and Christian Dior with titled French, Italian, British, and Russian nobility—was calculated to recommence the glittering entertainments that the host and his privileged coterie conjured with astounding frequency during the interwar *Années folles*.

The theme of Beistegui's now legendary extravaganza was Antony and Cleopatra, inspired by the palazzo's glorious cycle of Tiepolo frescoes representing the ill-fated couple. The elaborate period costumes this fancy-dress soiree inspired—its organizer came as a procurator of the Venetian Republic, with sixteen-inch platform shoes to amplify his five-foot, six-inch stature—make Truman Capote's 1966 Black and White Ball, often called the party of the century (as is Le Bal Oriental), look like a potluck supper. The main thing the two events had in common, besides masks and a celebrity guest list, was their diminutive hosts' supercilious snobbery. When the renowned British society beauty Lady Diana Cooper (on whom Beistegui bestowed the honor of portraying Cleopatra) asked him if she could be escorted

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Georgia O'Keeffe, Pink Dish and Green Leaves, 1928–29. Private collection. © Georgia O'Keeffe Museum. Photograph by Bruce M. White.

ART INSTITVTE CHICAGO

by US Secretary of Defense George C. Marshall, the father of the Marshall Plan that revived war-devastated Europe, he asked, "Is he from a good family?" (Though Marshall was related to the nineteenth-century US Supreme Court chief justice John Marshall, no invitation was forthcoming.)

In granular detail likely to be too much for the nonspecialist reader, Van den Bergh gives lengthy analyses of all seven successive design schemes by Le Corbusier and Jeanneret. Beistegui's family had sold the Champs-Élysées building after his grandmother's death, and it was broken up into apartments, with commercial spaces on the lower floors. In 1929 Beistegui rented the roof and immediately began to ponder how to turn it into a spectacular showplace. Le Corbusier and Jeanneret's initial plans were part of an invitational competition that the new tenant held to elicit proposals from three architectural offices, a practice sometimes thought to produce the best possible result by pitting professionals against each other. However, that strategy succeeds only when a commission is highly desirable or other work is scarce. Given the amount of time that goes into drawing up a speculative design, it is rarely worth the inadequate compensation usually provided (if there is any at all), and many established architects thus refuse to enter contests.

The second participant was André Lurçat, the architect of the Karl Marx School of 1930–1933, a bold concrete structure in the southern Paris suburb of Villejuif, one of France's first Communist-governed municipalities. The third was the young Armenian architect Gabriel Guevrekian, a former Le Corbusier employee who devised a highly mannered Cubist garden for the avant-garde art patrons Charles and Marie-Laure de Noailles, haute bohemian aristocrats and close friends of Beistegui's. Their sprawling hilltop villa in Provence near the Côte d'Azur, designed in 1923 by the middle-of-the-road Modernist Robert Mallet-Stevens, marked a turning point in the French upper class's acceptance of the new architecture.

Whatever one may say about Beistegui's taste as an interior decorator, he had an eye sharp enough to determine that the Le Corbusier–Jeanneret offering was by far the best of the lot. It possessed a buoyancy and elegance missing from the two other proposals, which by comparison were weighty and static. The client's compulsive need to control—most evident in his repeated attempts to impose Classical symmetries on his chosen architects' design, contrary to the Modernist preference for asymmetry—led to subtle pushback on their part as well as an exceptional number of reiterations. But if he was willing to pay, pay, pay, the architects were ready to revise, revise, revise, while at the same time never compromising their core principles.

As Van den Bergh convincingly argues, not only was the Villa Noailles the inspiration for Beistegui's exquisite cabin in the sky, but a number of its distinctive touches were the basis for ideas that Le Corbusier and Jeanneret were asked to adapt for the Champs-Élysées penthouse. These included a home cinema with a retractable movie screen that could be pulled down from the apartment's ceiling, an early built-in phonographic sound system, and a newfangled electric refrigerator.

Beistegui was especially taken with the Noailles's rooftop *chambre en plein air* (open-air room) and its carpet of grass, which when transposed to Paris would allow him the outdoor entertaining otherwise possible there only if one had a private garden. (He was envious of the urban fêtes champêtres thrown by a colorful couple in his inner circle, Cecil and Mimi Pecci-Blunt, at their eighteenth-century hôtel particulier on the Left Bank, which had more than an acre of walled gardens, among the largest in central Paris.)

Although Beistegui had to badger Le Corbusier into fulfilling several of his desiderata (including double-paned windows for extra sound insulation), the architect had no hesitation about the roof terrace. As he wrote to his patron at the outset,

> Your program interests us because it is a "star" program (Champs Élysées), and because it proposes a solution for the roofscape of Paris, something I have been talking about for fifteen years.

In fact roof gardens were one of Le Corbusier's essential "Five Points of Modern Architecture" (the others being open floor plans, free façades, piloti columns, and horizontal strip windows.)

The Noailles, who owned the building adjacent to Beistegui's rental on the Champs-Élysées, made Modernism chic, and he wanted to outdo them. Instead of the telescope they installed for stargazing in Provence, he specified a revolving rooftop periscope that could project views of the surrounding city onto a tabletop in a small, windowless ovoid chamber that served as a modern camera obscura. The landscaping of the apartment's exterior was no less unusual, with clipped boxwood hedges along the building's parapets in mobile concrete planters. These containers were set on tracks and could be moved at the press of a button to reveal breathtaking vistas down the Champs-Élysées. A tall columnar cypress added vertical punctuation, although plants had to be frequently replaced because of the windswept roof's less-than-optimal growing conditions.

Like Le Corbusier's houses of the 1920s, the Beistegui penthouse in profile resembled the superstructure of an oceangoing steamer, one of his industrial vernacular touchstones. Here, though, the nautical reference was less pronounced because abundant peripheral greenery supplanted the architect's customary use of ship railings on stairways, balconies, and roofs. To accord with city zoning regulations, the rooftop additions had to be set back from the parapet far enough to be minimally visible from the boulevard below. In addition, the unusual amount of glass used on the outer walls of the lowest of the apartment's three levels gave it a much more dematerialized feel than Le Corbusier's other houses of the 1920s, and thus the project's overall character derived mainly from the outdoor spaces it defined rather than from its enclosed elements.

The interiors were done up in a manner far different from the relatively simple way in which Le Corbusier's other clients inhabited their houses, which often included the innovative furniture designed by him, Jeanneret, and their young colleague Charlotte Perriand. Indeed, Beistegui's florid accoutrements for the apartment—notably a life-size "blackamoor" statue, a huge mirrored Hollywood Regency portiere, and a pyramidal tabletop centerpiece of deep blue Dresden porcelain studded with rhinestones—were so overwhelming that it takes considerable effort to discern the underlying architecture. Someone once said that the genius of advanced French design lies in its being so far ahead of prevailing modes that one cannot gauge how ridiculous it is until long afterward, once fashion has moved on. In retrospect, the interiors of Beistegui's penthouse could be cited as confirmation of that thesis.

Carlos de Beistegui and Ira von Fürstenberg, 1955

MAX SCHELER/SÜDDEUTSCHE ZEITUNG PHOTO/ALAMY

The penthouse was widely publicized through illustrated articles in glossy consumer magazines as well as more sober evaluations in the architectural press, and Van den Bergh's book reproduces several in their original layouts. The more breathless of those journalistic treatments, which struck some as galling during the hardships of the Great Depression, drew the scorn of the wholesomely American E. B. White, who parodied them in a 1934 *New Yorker* casual titled "Dusk in Fierce Pajamas," referring directly to the Parisian prodigy:

> It is the magic hour before cocktails. I am in the modern penthouse of Monsieur Charles de Beistegui. The staircase is entirely of cement, spreading at the hemline and trimmed with padded satin tubing caught at the neck with a bar of milk chocolate.

Others, however, looked upon such fantasies-made-real in much the same way that moviegoers at the time viewed the dazzling Moderne sets in Rogers-and-Astaire films—as marvelous but harmless escapism into an unattainable world that brought relief from the grim realities of daily life.

Machine à Amuser excels in its incisive delineation of the architect–client dynamic, one of the best I've read concerning the interactions of two strong-willed creative figures. Van den Bergh's research is based on letters and plans preserved at the Fondation Le Corbusier, which restricted access to the architect's papers for decades after his death in 1965 until it at last relented and gave permission to Nicholas Fox Weber to use them for his *Le Corbusier: A Life* (2008), the first full-dress biography of the architect.* The well-paced account in *Machine à Amuser*, enlivened by the gentlemanly but exasperated missives that passed between Le Corbusier and Beistegui, reads like an epistolary novel, almost comical at times in its evocation of two supreme egotists squaring off against each other. Each was self-assured in his own superiority—the master builder convinced of his artistic genius, the patron cocooned in his vast wealth, but alike in being used to having things done their way. They are at their most representative in this exchange—the client high-handed and unconcerned about others, the architect unsubservient but with his eye always on the main chance.

Beistegui to Le Corbusier, July 1, 1929:

> I would remind you that I would like to see another design inspired

*See my review in these pages, "Maman's Boy," April 30, 2009.

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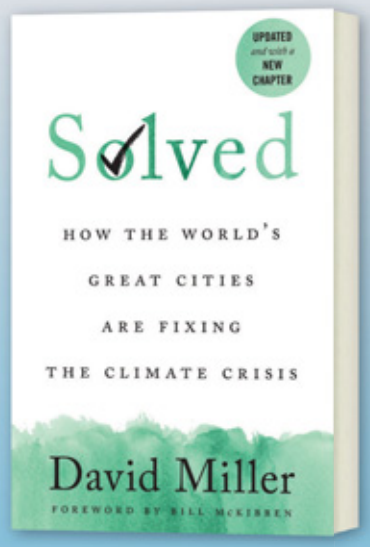

Solved
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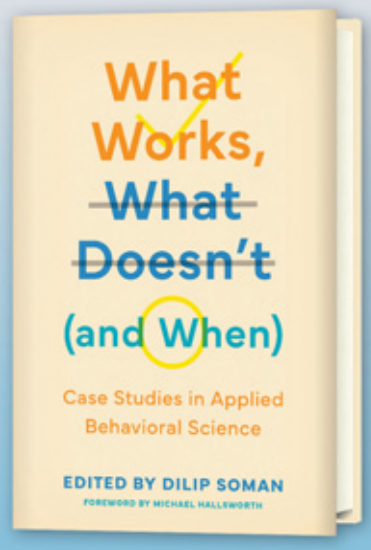
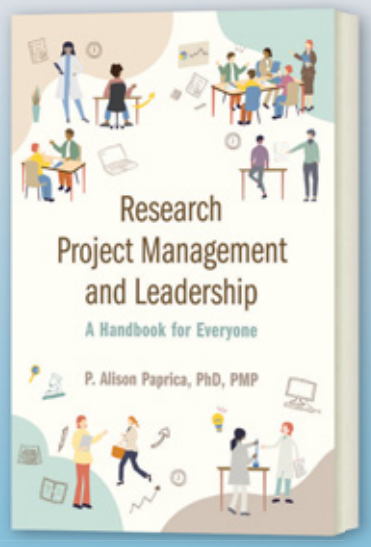


What Works, What Doesn't (and When)
Edited by DILIP SOMAN



Research Project Management and Leadership
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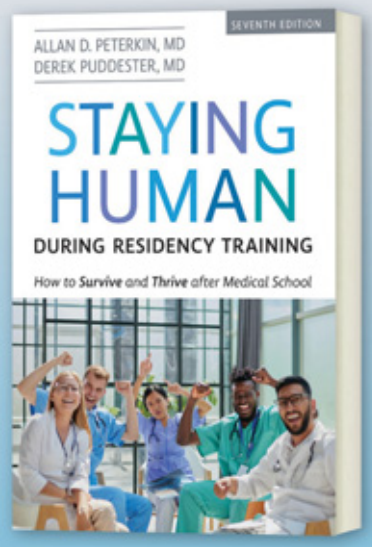
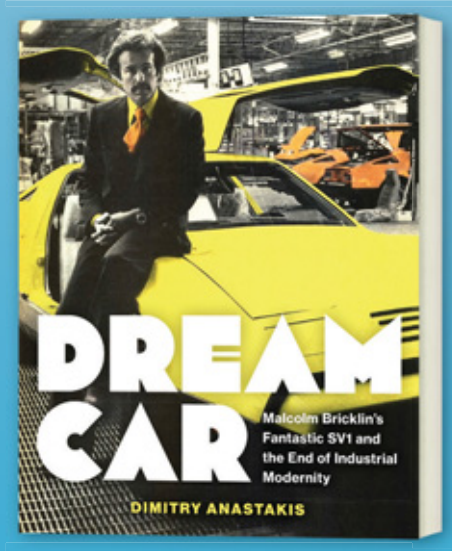
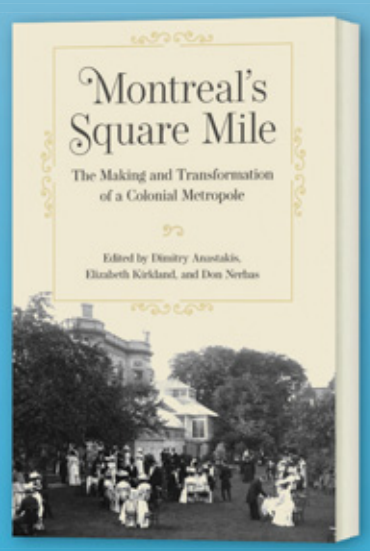


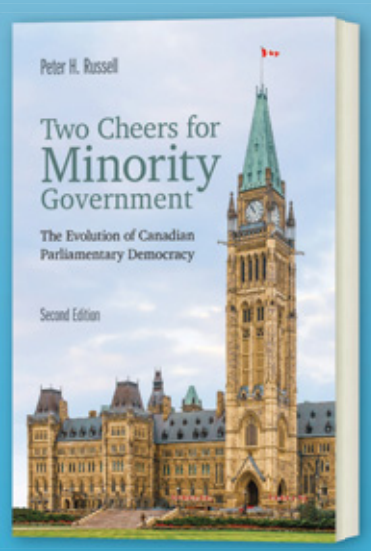
Staying Human during Residency Training
ALLAN D. PETERKIN, MD
and DEREK PUDDESTER, MD



Dream Car
DIMITRY ANASTAKIS



Montreal's Square Mile
Edited by DIMITRY ANASTAKIS, ELIZABETH KIRKLAND, and DON NERBAS



Two Cheers for Minority Government
PETER H. RUSSELL

Success in Graduate School and Beyond
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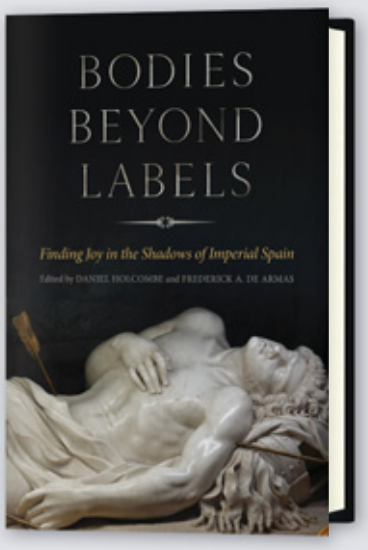
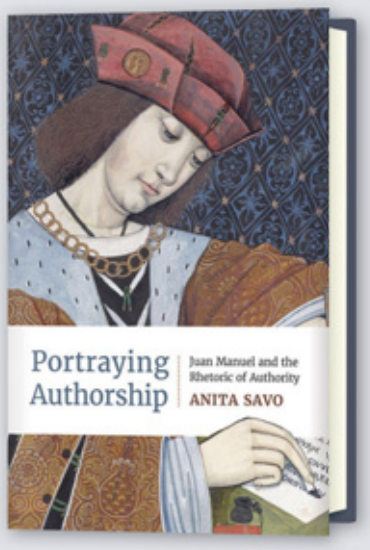
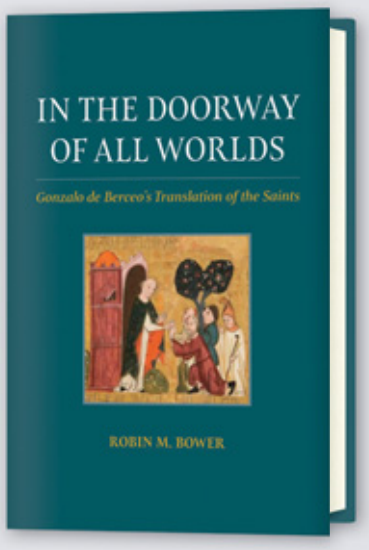
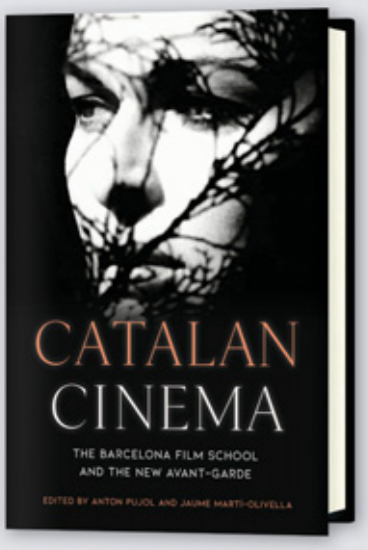
New in the Toronto Iberic Series









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by our conversation of yesterday and the little sketch that I made for you.

I will be in Paris on July 14th, in the evening to be precise. So, I will call you in the morning of July 15th to arrange a meeting with you on that same day, as I will have to leave for Italy on the morning of the 16th and will only return to Paris at the end of October.

Please let me know if I can count on you concerning the drawing and the meeting.

Le Corbusier to Beistegui, July 5, 1929:

I will make a little sketch for you for the 15th, to assure you of my goodwill. But this sketch will be practically meaningless, since one cannot make architecture from the outside…

The nub of the matter is this: I am the instigator of the modern architectural movement. All countries recognize this, apply my methods, exploit my ideas…

For those who have little work, or for whom architecture is a matter of external appearance, of fashion, of adapting to the vagaries of fortune, it is normal to seek out a flattering clientele, to play their game and take a chance on studies. But as for me, I've been playing my game for twenty years now. And today that game is won. I am recognized, people know what I do…

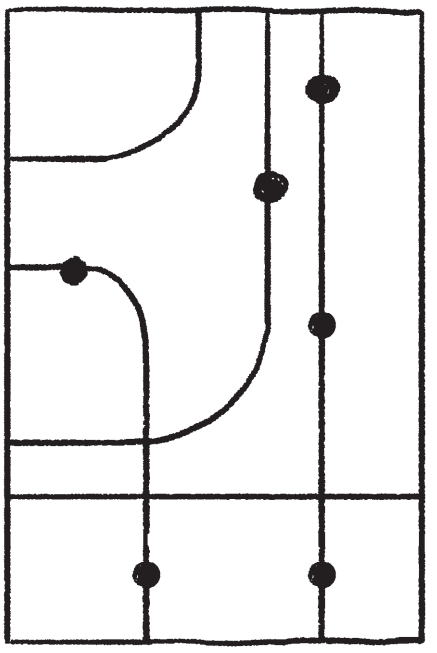
My clients come to me. And not one of them has left unsatisfied.

Not the least of their frictions stemmed from the peripatetic way of life they had in common, enabled by advances in transportation, from new passenger planes and record-breaking transoceanic liners to fast trains and motorcars. Although both were based in Paris, they seemed to be in perpetual motion and were seldom in the same place at the same time. They dashed among far-flung destinations, with Le Corbusier in search of commissions and global attention through his self-advertising lectures and Beistegui in no less strenuous pursuit of sequential social seasons in one gilded enclave after another.

The two repeatedly made and broke their appointments, as the client imposed unrealistic deadlines and his hireling blithely evaded them. They wrote or telegraphed to forwarding addresses the recipient had already left, further slowing the momentum. When Beistegui hectored Le Corbusier for plans on short order, the architect ignored him, left on a lengthy sea crossing to South America, and let Jeanneret do the work instead. These parries were conveyed with the utmost faux politesse that barely masked cynical wariness on both sides, though the principals shared a genuine desire to see their improbable enterprise through to a successful conclusion, if not within the same time frame. Le Corbusier was clearly an expert psychologist with a firm grasp on how to keep the upper hand with clients. His shrewd dealings with the unusually difficult Beistegui constitute a master class in how a major artist can maintain his integrity and still get the job done under trying circumstances.

The Beistegui commission coincided with the new vogue for living at the apex of an apartment house, which reversed the old French hierarchy according to which a building's second-story *bel étage* was the most prestigious, with each successive floor above it becoming less desirable and culminating in the uppermost *grenier*, or garret, the traditional abode of the poor starving artist or writer. The upending of this long-established practice began in New York City, where the very top of a dwelling, whether one-family or multiunit, was often used to house servants, as at Henry Hardenbergh's Dakota apartment building of 1880–1884. In 1924 Condé Nast, the socialite proprietor-publisher of *Vogue*, *Vanity Fair*, and *House and Garden*, took over the highest floor of a new apartment building at 1040 Park Avenue designed by the old-guard firm of Delano and Aldrich. He added another story on the roof, with the outer walls set back far enough from those of the building below to create capacious areas for outdoor entertaining, a novelty that captivated the smart set Nast cultivated and whose activities his magazines chronicled.

A penthouse quickly became a coveted Manhattan status symbol, as affirmed by Cole Porter's torch song about a lonely rich woman titled "Down in the Depths (On the Ninetieth Floor)," even though residences that high up would not become available in New York City until the advent of postmillennial supertall towers. By the mid-1930s a penthouse was a sought-after attraction in new apartment towers from Casablanca to Shanghai to Rio de Janeiro. Actually, the concept



had a Parisian precursor in Auguste Perret's Rue Franklin Apartments of 1902–1904. Although now best known for its pioneering exposed concrete framework, that structure ascended to a luxurious multilevel penthouse with several contiguous outdoor spaces, albeit rather small ones in comparison with the wraparound terraces of Nast's duplex.

After Beistegui had exhausted his novel apartment's publicity value, and with a low threshold for boredom—the most dreaded emotion among his sensation-seeking cohort—he set his sights on a bigger domestic design project: the Château de Groussay, an early-nineteenth-century country house some forty miles west of Paris. He bought the neglected property in 1938 and lavishly refurbished its rooms in a variety of historical styles with the help of the Russian artist Alexandre Serebriakoff and the Cuban-French architect and interior designer Emilio Terry, an eclectic antiquarian and the antithesis of Le Corbusier.

In 1952, by which time Modernism had superseded Classicism as the lingua franca of architecture, Beistegui expressed characteristically contrarian pride in going against the grain in both instances. He said in a *Connaissances des Arts* interview, "In 1929 my entire house was a bathroom. Now, my bathroom looks like a bedroom." Speaking of bedrooms, he was a lifelong bachelor who carried on numerous affairs, preferably with titled and often married women. Although none of this is touched on in *Machine à Amuser*, the art historian and peerless social observer John Richardson, who knew Beistegui personally, relates many piquant anecdotes about this seasoned roué in *Sacred Monsters, Sacred Masters* (2001).

World War II and the Nazi occupation barely fazed Beistegui, who held a diplomatic passport thanks to his sinecure as a cultural attaché at the Spanish embassy in Paris. (His father had been the Mexican ambassador to Spain and Portugal.) He used diplomatic immunity to facilitate a constant flow of foodstuffs and luxury goods from Franco's noncombatant Spain but remained oblivious to the privation and suffering around him. Cecil Beaton visited Groussay in 1944 and found its chatelain "utterly ruthless. Such qualities as sympathy, pity, or even gratitude are sadly lacking. He has become the most self-engrossed and pleasure-seeking person I have met," no small indictment from someone as self-absorbed as Beaton.

Astonishingly—given the thoroughness of his approach—Van den Bergh makes no mention of Le Corbusier's greatest exploitation of open-air living atop a building: the brilliant roofscape he created at his Unité d'habitation of 1945–1952 in Marseilles, the seventeen-story horizontal slab-sided apartment building designed to house 1,600 people, which he later replicated with minor variations at four other sites in France and Germany. To be sure, there are vast discrepancies in scale and access between the private Beistegui penthouse and the communal roof terrace of the original Unité. The latter measures nearly 3,200 square feet, and the architect loaded it with amenities for the tenants, including a gym, a running track, an open-air theater, and a day care center complete with a kiddie pool. Even without making use of all those improving appurtenances, the building's residents could appreciate the Unité's expansive crowning glory as a veritable Modernist sculpture park. Here Le Corbusier fully displayed his gift for imbuing architectural forms with a raw volumetric power unrivaled by any of his contemporaries.

The rooftop's rectangular concrete-and-glass pavilion, elevated on slender pilotis and originally conceived as a kindergarten, has an obvious antecedent in the Beistegui penthouse. In Marseilles, the juxtaposition of that rectangular element against the upwardly flaring, undulatingly contoured concrete exhaust funnel—which exudes the mysterious aura of an ancient Cycladic fertility idol—echoes the contrast between the vertical biomorphic accent of the periscope and the ovoid camera obscura on the Champs-Élysées roof deck. Ironically, the first Unité was going up just as the Beistegui penthouse was beginning to be taken down.

The demise of the apartment is far less well understood than its genesis, and as Van den Bergh concedes, "What happened to the penthouse after 1938 is difficult to determine." With remarkable forensic attentiveness, he resorted to unusual methods to determine a timeline. Apparently Beistegui relinquished his lease sometime after the war, as Groussay and the Palazzo Labia became his chief obsessions.

At the Musée Carnavalet, the archive of Paris history, Van den Bergh discovered the aerial photographer Roger Henrard's decades-long series of overhead views showing the environs of the Étoile. Through these minutely detailed images he could trace changes made to the Beistegui rooftop between 1935 and 1961. Step by step he followed the gradual alteration of one detail after another—the removal of hedges, the disappearance of the periscope, the closing off of the outdoor fireplace, the installation of multipaned fenestration in place of the sheet-glass window walls—until the original components completely vanished.

Much more so than the building art, interior design is susceptible to destruction in the short term, as fashions change and older trends become passé (until their inevitable revival). But when architecture is intimately interwoven with up-to-the-minute decorating, as it was in the Beistegui commission, that process is accelerated. Where this scheme remains most instructive, though, is in its demonstration of how the absence of the idealistic social program that motivated the Modern Movement in architecture at its finest reduced that revolutionary rethinking of domestic habitation to just another consumable, disposable style.

Although during his so-called heroic period of the 1920s and early 1930s Le Corbusier designed several houses for other rich people with commanding personalities, none of them was spiritually repurposed to the same extent as his Champs-Élysées commission, which Carlos de Beistegui transmogrified into the height of society chichi. The architect had incorporated private roof gardens in his Quartiers Modernes Frugès of 1924–1926 in Pessac, near Bordeaux, a low-rise working-class housing estate whose residents over the decades also altered his stucco-surfaced International Style row houses to suit their own tastes. Those modifications included lower-bourgeois decorative touches like Swiss chalet eaves, nonfunctioning shutters, sham half-timbers, and fake stone siding. (In recent decades the development has been meticulously restored to encourage architectural tourism to Pessac.) Nonetheless, such insensitive changes never diluted the strong communal values fostered over the past century by the architecture itself, unlike the solipsistic vagaries of one particular good-time Charlie. ●

Leaving the Fold

Meghan O'Gieblyn

Cloistered: My Years as a Nun
by Catherine Coldstream.
St. Martin's, 327 pp., $30.00

Catherine Coldstream; illustration by Maya Chessman

Like many contemporary memoirs, *Cloistered* opens in medias res, giving the reader a taste of the narrative intensity that belongs, chronologically, to the book's climax. The first paragraph plunges us into a cinematic escape scene—a young nun is bolting through the English countryside, fleeing a monastery under the cover of night:

> In my mind I am still running. Running toward the road. Running. Running. Running. The darkness is fresh around me, the air slicing across my face in wild, clean shafts. The rush of oxygen is fizzing, moonlit, completely unexpected. I'd forgotten what night tasted like, the great dome of it, just as I'd forgotten what it was—after ten years cloistered—to run cold and wild and wet, beyond enclosure. I'd forgotten what it was to stand under the sky and feel the far stretching of infinity.

Eventually the nun stops, catches her breath, and realizes with amazement that she is safe. She looks back at the monastery, a fortress looming against the sky. "I see it for what I now think it is," Catherine Coldstream recalls, "a place of danger and of dishonest murmurings."

The passage raises a number of questions—Who is pursuing her? Are nuns really not allowed outdoors at night? Can oxygen be moonlit?—that have no immediate answers; the curious reader must wait until she has, thus baited, slogged through the chapters of backstory and building action. Needless to say, anyone who's had even a passing encounter with the "nun content" produced over the past century has a decent idea of what's coming. This will be a story of religious corruption and tyrannical subjugation. There will be theological psyops, the twisting of Scripture to serve human power structures, furtive sapphic exploits, and women acting as accomplices to the dictates of patriarchy. But the opening fireworks are decoy flares; they are not quite representative of the story contained in these pages.

All religious autobiography hinges on a drama of escape. The convert speaks from a vantage of liberation, having been freed from the shackles of sin, looking back on the years he lived in bondage, a "prisoner of my own violence and my own selfishness," as Thomas Merton puts it in *The Seven Storey Mountain* (1948), his celebrated memoir about becoming a Trappist monk. The deconversion narrative relies on the same arc, but in reverse. The apostate wins her freedom by fleeing the prison of institutional religion. Each narrative is, of course, a lie. The believer, even after he has glimpsed eternity, must continue to live in the world with other fallen humans and his own wayward flesh. Anyone who has left the church finds, inevitably, that secular life has plenty of constraints and disappointments of its own. What drives the narrative impulse is that first, ecstatic taste of freedom—of having borne witness to something as formless and vast as the night sky.

Coldstream was raised in North London by two artists. Her father was the British painter William Coldstream, who served for years as the head of the Slade School of Fine Art. In the brief account of her childhood, she describes him as a kind of ascetic, one who observed "his morning vigils at the easel," as though they were a sacred liturgy. Her mother was an actress and Pre-Raphaelite beauty who served as William's model and muse, and was, by the time Coldstream reached adolescence, creatively frustrated, bitterly unhappy with her fate as a mother. She was always running off on tours, abandoning the family for the stage, shipping the children off to boarding schools. There's an echo here of Merton, also raised by artists who had the temperament of monastics. His mother and father longed after aesthetic perfection, but they too remained "captives" of the world and its limitations, a tension the artist shares with the saint. "The integrity of an artist lifts a man above the level of the world without delivering him from it," he writes.

Coldstream was an artist of sorts herself, a violist and choral singer. In her mid-twenties she was living in Paris and writing scores for a music publisher when her father died, a trauma that hit with seismic force. Although she and her siblings had not been raised religious—neither parent was a churchgoer—her grief succeeded in convincing her that she had (so to speak) a father in heaven. "If a universe without my father was inconceivable, and he was no longer in his mortal body, it followed (less the product of deductive reasoning than what seemed a lightning-flash of numinously tinged intuition) that he must be somewhere else, as disembodied spirit," she writes. "Overnight . . . I had become a believer in the afterlife."

She returned to London and began searching for a structure to hold her new faith in immortality. She read C. S. Lewis, Dostoevsky, and Kierkegaard, plus select books of the Bible. She worked at a soup kitchen in Kilburn and had a chance meeting on a train with a Dominican nun. Her hours of solitary prayer began to suggest the contours of a life given over to God, in a convent. All of this takes place in a matter of paragraphs. "The Life claimed me then, and I was happy of it," she writes.

Conversion experiences are always the least convincing part of a faith narrative. It would be easy to chalk this up to secularization, our loss of faith in the reality of faith itself, but the problem, I think, is broader than that. ("And then I realized—" the poet Robert Haas once observed, is "the part of stories one never quite believes.") Epiphanies, those watermarks of shifting internal states, consist of pure, untested potentiality. Coldstream's passages about her contact with the divine during those early years of prayer are, fittingly, vague to the point of meaninglessness:

> The afterlife is vital . . . and is both buoyant and serene. It has an overarching mind and a kind heart. And because it is not just an "after" but a "life," the afterlife is everywhere and always. It is alongside, all-encompassing and indivisible, which is why we nuns call it quite simply "The Life."

At the age of twenty-seven, shortly after her baptism, Coldstream entered Akenside, the (pseudonymous) Carmelite order in Northumberland where she spent the next twelve years. The vocation required "reconceiving your identity . . . as one of the group," and during her early days as a postulate, and later as a novice, she happily melted into that holy protoplasm, the Body of Christ. She recalls the deep satisfaction of hearing her voice merge with those of the other nuns in the choir, "to form a single monophonic stream," and the comfortable anonymity of the habit, in which she "floated around in a more or less safe and sexless haze." (Although Coldstream is modest enough not to mention it, her publicists have not been shy about flaunting her intense, otherworldly beauty. The photos of her from the late 1980s and 1990s make it clear that whoever adapts *Cloistered* will have a hard time finding an actress who is so perfectly, stunningly suited for the role.) Alone in her cell, Coldstream is visited by the "unseen spouse," who comes as a blinding light. She longs for her final vows, when she will at last be married to this divine abstraction: "On the farthest horizon was the beatific vision, the delightful union of the soul with God, and the happy basking in his presence for all eternity . . ."

The best passages in *Cloistered*, however, are those that capture the texture of monastic life: the wooden choir stalls that smell of wax and linseed oil, scattered with stray pencils, pairs of spectacles, and tuning forks. The double-diluted powdered milk set out in jugs each morning, along with blocks of cheese, eggs, and homemade yogurt. These still lifes bear the attention of a painter's daughter, though they are also the outgrowth of a theology that holds every crumb to be sacred. "Every least detail of our lives carried not only material but spiritual importance," Coldstream writes. "No mote of dust on a windowpane was without its significance . . ." There are some delightful digressions in these early chapters about the quirks of the Life and its adorable idioms (breakfast is called "Little Jug," crafts are dubbed "little works," the lavatory is the "humble office") and a fantastic passage about the difficulties of "tucking up," the elaborate task of securing the folds of one's habit in order to go to the toilet.

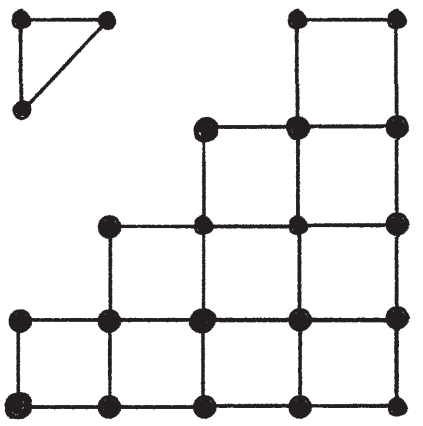
The nuns themselves are more hastily sketched, though one stands out

among the mass of interchangeable habits: Elizabeth, the long-standing novice mistress who soon becomes Mother Superior. She is fifty when Coldstream enters Akenside, and is glamorous and charismatic, with a "voice like a fine reed with just enough husk in it to make it viscerally compelling. (Slightly sexy, in truth, although we never would have used the term.)" She also has what passes in the nunnery for style. Her habit is of a slightly softer shade of brown, and she wears lace-up shoes and eyeglasses with sparkly frames. Elizabeth is a believer in the therapeutic effects of exercise and the spiritual rejuvenations of community life. She keeps the novitiate stocked with rubber balls and skipping ropes. She brings party poppers and chocolates to celebrations and encourages everyone to dance to popular tunes—luxuries that will be forgiven, she insists, because the sisters are "only human."

The reader intuits, thanks to the dramatic opening—with its allusions to "danger and dishonest murmurings"—that this leniency is obscuring a nest of corruption, and I was for a time convinced that Elizabeth was a truly masterful villain, one whose sinister side was softened (or perhaps even humanized) by these kind indulgences. But it turns out that for Coldstream, the indulgences *are* the corruption. She had come to Akenside to punish her flesh and pray in solitude only to discover that the nuns care more about maintaining a robust social life and relaxing after a day of singing and prayer. She's outraged by "the sheer excess and lack of balance" when it comes to pleasure and fun. She tirelessly lists the rules that Elizabeth breaks: calling off chores on a whim, allowing some nuns to phone their families during the Great Silence, secretly feeding feral cats that are not supposed to be let inside.

Her outrage peaks when she overhears Elizabeth telling another novice that she needn't bother reading Saint John of the Cross. ("Wasn't John one of the foundational teachers of the order?" Coldstream wonders. "Wasn't it simply required reading?") She is disappointed that none of the sisters wants to discuss theology, and comes to dread the mandated recreation, which "was ultimately not a relaxation but an exercise in restraint, listening to oft-repeated anecdotes, laughing at other people's jokes, and taking an interest in their crochet." When a sister notices that she seems to be finding the life "insufficiently radical," she has to hold her tongue to avoid speaking an unkind word.

Any bookish person can sympathize with the tyranny of leisure, and few things are more disappointing to the new convert than religious laxity. But Coldstream makes little effort to put these complaints in perspective, to see them as the follies of youthful purity, or to consider why her aloofness and superiority are so alienating to the other nuns, most of whom are cradle Catholics. Recalling how she was often chided for her "convert's enthusiasm," she writes: "You'd think they'd have been glad of it, given the order's motto—'With Zeal Have I Been Zealous of the Lord God of Hosts.'" She had hoped to discover in the convent



"a gathering of the like-minded or of the sympathetically attuned," but instead found "a motley crew." Elizabeth strives to correct this prejudice, reminding Coldstream that motley crews were favored by Christ himself: "Fishermen, Mother had once said. Fishermen. Remember the people Jesus chose as his first disciples."

There is more than a tinge of class tension behind this rebuke. In addition to being part of a minority of converts, Coldstream is also one of the few Akenside nuns who come from a "posh" family, another reason why, she claims, she has trouble fitting in. (She silently endures the playful jibes the other nuns make about "southerners" and London elites.) But more often she insists that she's disliked for her artistic temperament. The sisters chide her for how easily she cries and become visibly uneasy when she plays the viola and loses herself in ecstatic rapture. Elizabeth's catchphrase, "only human," didn't seem to apply, she laments, to those who tended toward passionate self-expression and intellectual engagement:

> The reality was that only certain people were allowed to be themselves, and only certain characteristics counted as "human enough" in Mother's book. Being sensitive, introspective, "artistic," emotional, creative, questioning or philosophically inclined, just didn't count.

Art and religion are callings so kindred, Coldstream suggests, that one might easily be mistaken for the other. As a young woman she'd believed that the monastic life could be as perfect as a work of artistic genius: "The lover of logic and symmetry in me, the lover of Bach, enjoyed the thought that my whole life could now become as integrated, as united and directed to one final cadence as the *Musical Offering*." Instead, she is forced to sing "Danny Boy" and dance the "hokey-cokey."

Cloistered has been widely characterized as a drama of venality and suspense, one that "reads like a thriller" (*The Financial Times*)—or a "spiritual thriller," as *The Guardian* has it, a memoir "in which the experience of being a nun unravels into a nightmare as the monastery's internal politics sour." That juxtaposition of the salacious ("a nightmare") and the banal ("internal politics") is telling, and aptly distills the underlying dissonance between the book's tone and its content. In Coldstream's mind, Elizabeth's indulgences are driven by a nefarious desire to manipulate the nuns and secure her own power. She holds secret tea parties, which are used "to foster cliques." She has favorites, preferring the nuns who have simple faith to zealots like Coldstream, and develops an inner circle that becomes known in the cloister as "the gang." Coldstream regards this as a cult of personality, though the putative abuses of power, at this point in the story, feel less like religious corruption than the popularity contests and sororal statecraft of an English boarding school.

Finding herself excluded from this coterie, Coldstream becomes convinced that she is being singled out and punished. Elizabeth pushes her vows back another year, claiming that the other novice she came in with is not yet ready and that it would be unfair to separate them. (The other novice is mentally ill.) When Elizabeth is reelected as prioress—a (seemingly common) violation of the order's protocol, which encourages rotation—Coldstream begins to fashion herself as a crusader, an outlier who is shunned because she alone is capable of speaking the truth. She is not merely an artist, but a "rebel and philosopher," and, crucially, a "prophet," someone chosen as the actual mouthpiece of God:

> Religious people tend either to be of the "club-minded" or the "heavenly-minded" sort, and a study of scripture and the history of the Church gives us exemplars of both. The prophets—literally a "mouthpiece for God"—are those concerned with the big-picture stuff, and building blocks like "eternity" and "transcendence," and are conscious of being called to speak for God. A prophet is concerned with uttering truth . . . and has the courage of their convictions, is prepared to speak truth to power. Many of the originators of and reformers within the great religions had a prophetic stance, which is why so few were popular with the higher-ups. The club-minded, on the other hand, speak primarily as approved by the human collective of which they are part. They may repeat truths learned or heard elsewhere, but there is always a cap on how far they can go in saying what they really think.

It's true that Christianity has always renewed itself through such dissatisfaction. As I read page after page of schoolyard bullying and mean-girl snubs, I could not help but long for a different storyline, one in which Coldstream fully embraces her prophetic megalomania and does what so many saints have done—disappearing into the desert, climbing to the top of some ragged mountain, calling on a complacent church to find its way back to its pioneering ideals. Instead, she rarely voices her grievances aloud. More often than not she holds her tongue, keeps her eyes downcast, and represses the voice of her inner Elijah.

She was not alone in her idealistic fervor. At least one other nun, Lucy, also takes up the prophetic mantle, accusing a visiting bishop of failing to call the nuns to a higher level of religious commitment. A few days later, however, Lucy slides from her stall at lauds and begins thrashing on the floor. It's attributed to psychosis, and

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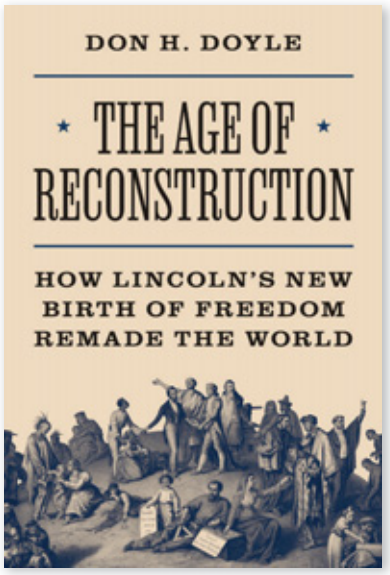

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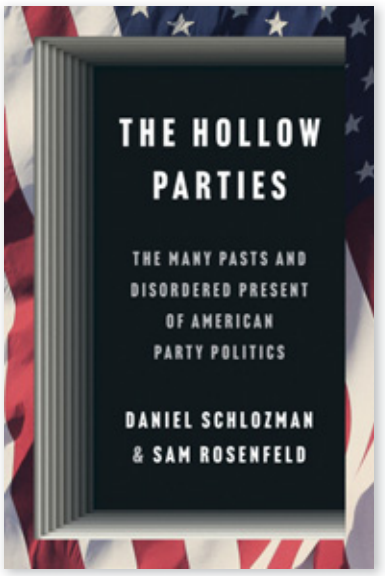

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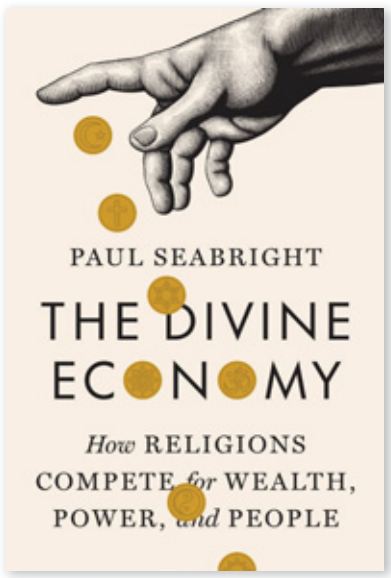

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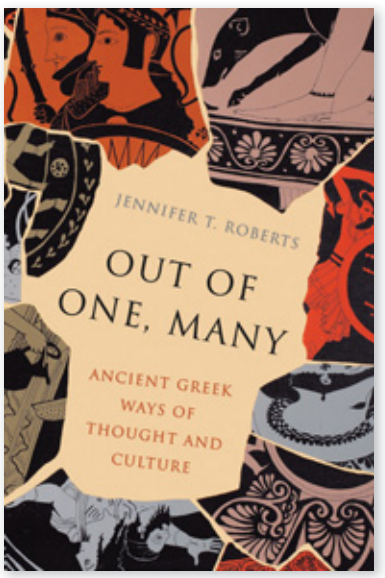

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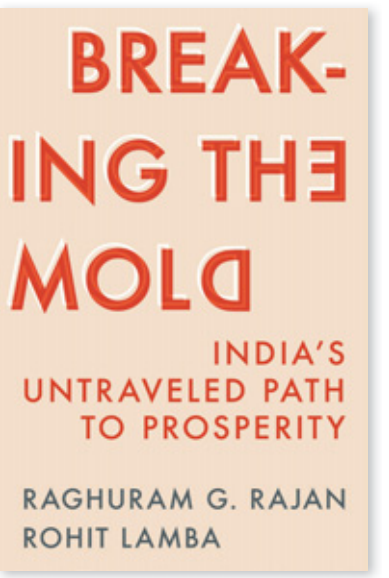

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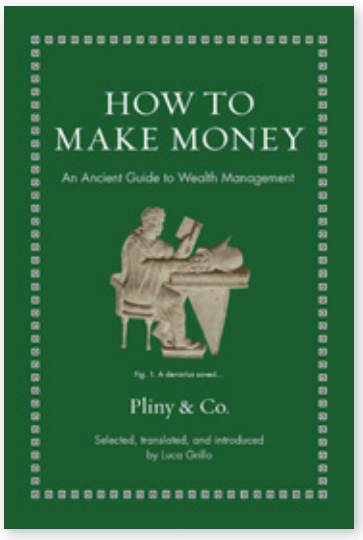

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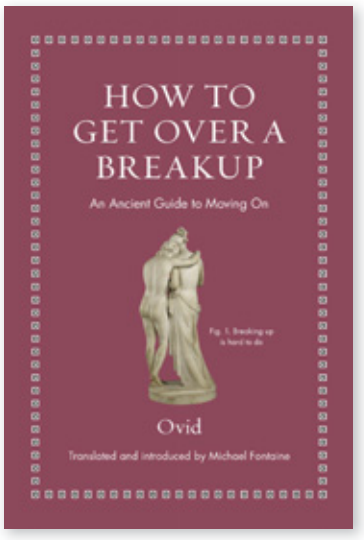

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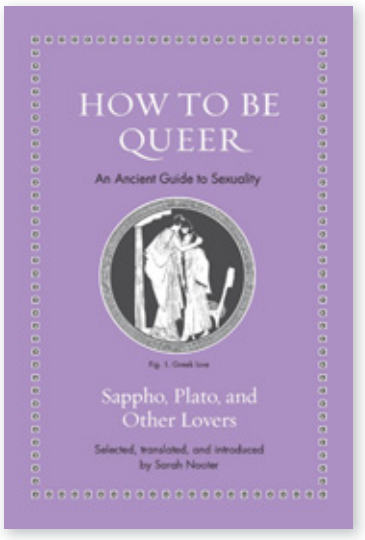

An irresistible anthology of ancient Greek writings that explore queer desire and love

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she leaves Akenside soon after, having had a mental breakdown. "The Life had got to her, had worn down her defenses," Coldstream explains.

Lucy is one of many nuns who over the years succumb to mental illness and are forced to leave the convent, a fact that Coldstream attributes to prolonged repression. The religious call to "self-immolation," the tireless effort to conquer temptation and suppress one's true feelings, is unnatural, she writes, because "the shadow side of the psyche . . . cannot be kept down for ever." This is an odd about-face, given her original complaints about religious laxity. She was the one who wanted *more* self-immolation. But in trying to account for the growing tension she experienced—her attempts to suppress her artistic, solitary, and prophetic nature—and the array of personal dysfunction she witnessed at the convent, she ends up concluding that the problem is the unnatural discipline of monasticism itself. The ascetic life that survived two millennia of Christianity had finally, at the dawn of the third, become untenable. She asks, "For my generation, those born after 1960, let alone anyone younger, could the hermetically sealed interpretation of the Life not be counterproductive?"

The final arc of the book traces a schism that emerges after another nun is made prioress, succeeding Elizabeth. The gang turns against the new Mother and shuns those who voted against Elizabeth (including Coldstream). Over time, however, Elizabeth reestablishes control over the convent, and the dissenting faction returns to her authority—a development Coldstream attributes to "gaslighting" or "bullying." It's here, briefly, that we see the familiar tropes of institutional decadence and religious hysteria that were promised in the opening sequence. There are internal tribunals during which Coldstream and the other dissenters are forced to publicly apologize for casting their lot against Elizabeth—or as Coldstream puts it, for their "truthfulness." "*Especially* for our truthfulness." There is one scene of physical violence.

As tensions mount, Coldstream retreats further into hermitude, but the unseen spouse no longer comes to her rescue, and her disenchantment finally gives way to a full-blown faith crisis:

> I'd come to Carmel to seek the highest things. What I was discovering now was that being "only human" didn't just mean needing to laugh and play and let off steam, it meant having a shadow side, it meant everything I thought was the opposite of Christianity. I was having difficulty reining in my indignation.

The "shadow side of the psyche," or what Jung called simply the shadow, emerges most violently when it has been adamantly repressed, a phenomenon known as enantiodromia. But it's hard to see how this intense self-denial originates with Elizabeth's lenient "only human" approach and not the more punishing standards Coldstream established for herself. This is the woman, after all, who admits that she "had always been drawn to strong solutions" and has a tendency to "take things to logical extremes," who prefers to lock herself up in her room to read Saint John of the Cross when the others are jumping rope outside, and who acknowledges—in a moment of honesty that is, frankly, exceedingly rare in this book—that her "own efforts at self-effacement were taking their toll."

It's hard to say when, exactly, something as amorphous as faith dissolves. This is as true of belief in God as it is of that tenuous trust between a narrator and her reader. It's clear that the spiritual conditions at Akenside were dismal and that Coldstream suffered unfair criticism and mistreatment from the nuns. But so many of the grievances she cites are obviously tinged with prejudice and persecution fantasies that by the time the more serious infractions emerge it's hard to fully believe her account. It doesn't help that the book contains long passages of direct dialogue, conversations that were clearly reconstructed with creative liberty, or that the members of "the gang" deliver an excessive number of sharp looks, cruel smiles, and smug, mocking glances that one can only picture on the faces of Disney villainesses.

The retrospective vantage is a great corrective to the insular subjectivity of memoir, but it is used sparingly, and when Coldstream does offer reflection or commentary from the writer's desk, it's only to marvel at the naiveté of her younger self. ("I was still so naive and deluded, expecting everyone to be as kind and gentle as my aunt, or as courteous and self-deprecating as my father," she writes. And later: "There was no reciprocal courtesy in this place. I should have known better, but still these realizations came as shocks.") More than anything, the memoir seems to bank on a readership who will recognize the outlines of a familiar story—Is there any trope more native to contemporary Catholicism than corruption?—and know instinctively which side to take and whose story to trust.

During her last night in the monastery, Coldstream cries out to the Lord, Mother Mary, Teresa, and Saint John of the Cross for help, but is met with silence. It's only when she looks to her innermost heart that she finds "a loving presence that would not budge, or change, or ever let me down." It's here that the book comes full circle, returning to the night of her escape—though the finality promised by that sensational opening is misleading. After finding her sister in Newcastle and spending a few weeks in a Scottish abbey, she returns to the monastery. "I lived another two years at Akenside," she writes, an acknowledgment so brief the inattentive reader might blink and miss it. One can only assume that those two years—before her final, official departure—were somewhat less dramatic than the ones preceding her escape.

Life after the convent is treated briefly, just as her life before it. She goes on to study theology at Oxford and devotes just one sentence to the end of her celibacy: "After years as a tutor and teacher, I made new vows, and am now something I never dreamed I would, or would ever want to be: a married woman." She now lives in an old, terraced house, plays in string quartets, makes marmalade, and cooks dal. She only occasionally attends Mass. While she has not totally abandoned her faith, she appears to have deconstructed, the voguish alternative to deconversion. She has come to see God as the "Ground of Being," not a deity who must be appeased and obeyed, but that internal voice she discovered the night before her escape—a concept that feels retroactively interpreted through the syncretic theology of Richard Rohr. It's in these last pages that there emerges, quite abruptly, a more sympathetic view of her fellow nuns. Elizabeth and the other sisters had simply been brainwashed, she concludes:

> They were just a group of people living a certain way by (perfect or imperfect) common consent. . . . I'd gone there blinded by my love affair with the divine. . . . I still had a lot to learn, especially about the diversity and fallibility of human nature.

It was a great disappointment to see this more balanced and humane narrator emerge only in the postscript, and for a few brief sentences. Where was this perspective throughout? Coldstream has said in interviews that she worked on the book for twenty years—at one point it was a novel—and it's possible that the bulk of the story was written earlier, fresh out of the cloister, before she possessed the more expansive wisdom that comes with distance and age. Another possibility is that she (or some market-savvy editor) realized that a memoir about ordinary human failings and the familiar disenchantments of religious life does not make for the kind of book that is classed as a "spiritual thriller."

While Coldstream acknowledges the mistake of seeking perfection in the convent, what she longs for today is an "Akenside of the imagination," a paradise that persists as a "spiritual heartland," and might even exist in "the pages of this book." It's a nice thought—institutional religion tends toward degeneracy, but the creative unconscious, the eternal Self, the deity within, will never let one down. Of course, anyone who's spent time with those fickle gods will recognize this as wishful thinking. The voice of inner truth is just as elusive as the unseen spouse, and art surely equals religion as a means of self-deception. While the imagination occasionally grants divine visions, it cannot, ultimately, deliver the artist from the fallen world.

And yet who would risk creating anything were it not for the persistent, irrational faith that it can? Like the mystic vision of God as unadulterated light, the transcendent purity of the blank page or the empty canvas is an unrealizable promise, an invisible ladder stretching into the clouds, a glorious horizon that is perpetually out of reach. In the closing pages of *Cloistered*, Coldstream remembers leaving the monastery, this time for good, a moment when she allowed herself for the first time to envision her future as an artist: "The wide, wide canvas of potential, together with the actuality of creativity and experiences I'd barely dreamed of, all of that and more was there. Those vistas, that excitement, that happy reality." ●

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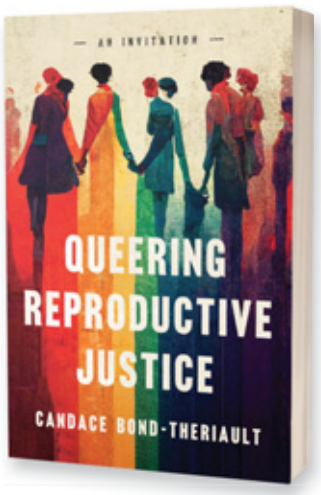

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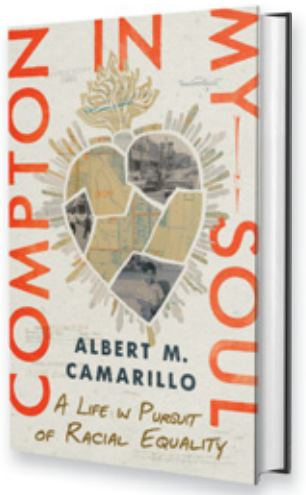

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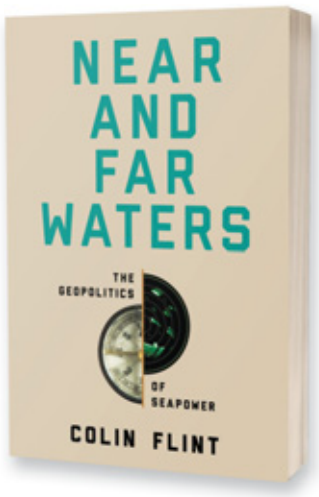

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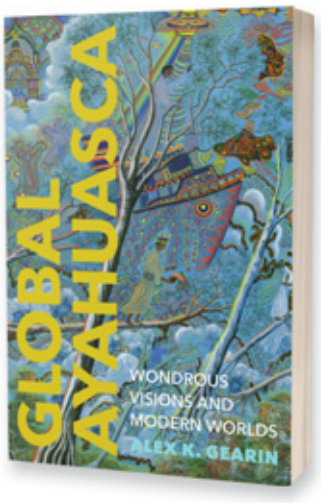

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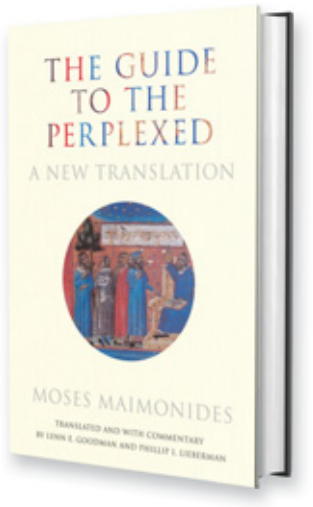

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Black Atlantics

Adom Getachew

Louis Chude-Sokei; illustration by Lorenzo Gritti

Floating in a Most Peculiar Way
by Louis Chude-Sokei.
Mariner, 240 pp., $15.99 (paper)

**The Last "Darky":
Bert Williams, Black-on-Black
Minstrelsy, and the African Diaspora**
by Louis Chude-Sokei.
Duke University Press,
277 pp., $102.95; $27.95 (paper)

**The Sound of Culture:
Diaspora and Black Technopoetics**
by Louis Chude-Sokei.
Wesleyan University Press,
267 pp., $27.95 (paper)

A little over a decade ago, while researching what became my first book, I spent two months in Trinidad conducting archival research at the University of the West Indies. I stayed in a guesthouse run by a Presbyterian Indo-Trinidadian family. When my hosts learned that I was Ethiopian, they told me about the Ethiopian Orthodox community on the island and introduced me to the archbishop who oversaw the congregations in the Caribbean and Latin America.

My visit to one of the churches was a bewildering and moving experience. Thousands of miles from Ethiopia, the rituals with which I was raised were taken up by Trinidadians with a fervor that I had never mustered. In both Ethiopia and the United States, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church still uses Ge'ez (a classical liturgical language, akin to Latin) in its proceedings. Not knowing this biblical language, I had only been dimly aware of the meanings of the chants. In Trinidad the liturgy had been translated into English, granting me new access to a faith I had been born into.

During my visits to Orthodox churches around the island, I befriended a woman named Semrete (a name she adopted after her baptism) and spent many weekends with her family. We talked about how she had come to the Orthodox Church from Rastafari because it offered her a Black Christianity untainted by the legacies of European colonialism. She shared her aspirations to travel to Ethiopia, an opportunity her husband had already enjoyed as a priest. And she made me promise to send her religious calendars and white cotton Habesha dresses and shawls for church once I returned to the United States. It's a commitment I still keep.

On my last Sunday in Trinidad, after church and then lunch, Semrete's husband drove us to the eastern edge of the island. There Semrete told me that if we left Trinidad and crossed the ocean, the next piece of land we encountered would be Africa. It was a poetic moment, one that brings tears to my eyes when I tell the story. But while I understood the wistfulness with which she looked across the ocean, I could not share it. Twelve years earlier my family had looked to the United States from the other side of the Atlantic. The church that represented Black Christianity for Semrete was the one my father had abandoned as a student after concluding that it was an instrument of domination in monarchical Ethiopia. I, too, wished to visit Ethiopia, but I was burdened by exile, guilt, and an awareness of impossible expectations.

I do not mean simply to juxtapose Semrete's imagined Africa with my "real" one. If Semrete had a romantic picture of Africa, I certainly had a rose-tinted view of African America, which I contrasted with Ethiopia's political conservatism and cultural insularity. The bond she and I shared looking out across the Atlantic was built on recognitions and misrecognitions; it involved both seeing each other and seeing past each other.

I moved to the United States at thirteen and started attending what was then Washington-Lee (now Washington-Liberty) High School in Arlington, Virginia. My classes, full of recent immigrants from Central America and East Africa as well as the children of African American families with long histories in the state, represented the growing diversity of Northern Virginia. I don't remember seeing any white students. In my sophomore year all of that changed when I was placed in advanced classes to prepare for the International Baccalaureate. Only halfway through the year did a second Black student join my math class.

It was clear that something called race was involved in this vertiginous experience, and I figured I should learn all I could about it. My classes offered few answers, but the Black History Awareness Society, a student group advised by the school's minority achievement coordinator, a graduate of Howard University, became my entry point. I threw myself into researching the Harlem Renaissance and codirected a play on the great personalities of the period for our Black History Month assembly. I learned about the political movement of Marcus Garvey and the poetry of Langston Hughes. Dressed in a faux fur coat, I played Zora Neale Hurston, relishing the role of a confident and outspoken writer, so distant from my own awkwardness and uncertainty.

At the encouragement of the society's adviser, I attended a summer program on international affairs at Howard. Two years later, when I arrived at the University of Virginia as an undergraduate, I chose a major—African American studies—and extracurricular commitments with the hope of immersing myself in Black politics, culture, and history. This was my effort to understand my new home and find a place within it. But ultimately, what I found in African American studies was a window onto the world, which brought me to Trinidad, and to Semrete.

In the United States we are prone to understanding race through the neat binary of the color line—Blackness against whiteness—even as our rapidly transforming demographics disrupt that opposition. The scholar Louis Chude-Sokei has made his subject the intraracial encounters, like mine and Semrete's, that shape the African diasporic experience. Across three books, Chude-Sokei, a professor of English and African American and Black diaspora studies at Boston University, has explored the everyday interactions through which people from differently positioned African diasporas negotiate their identities. *The Last "Darky"* (2006) is a study of the blackface performer Bert Williams. *The Sound*

FROM NATIONAL BOOK AWARD FINALIST

RAJA SHEHADEH

author of ***We Could Have Been Friends, My Father and I: A Palestinian Memoir***

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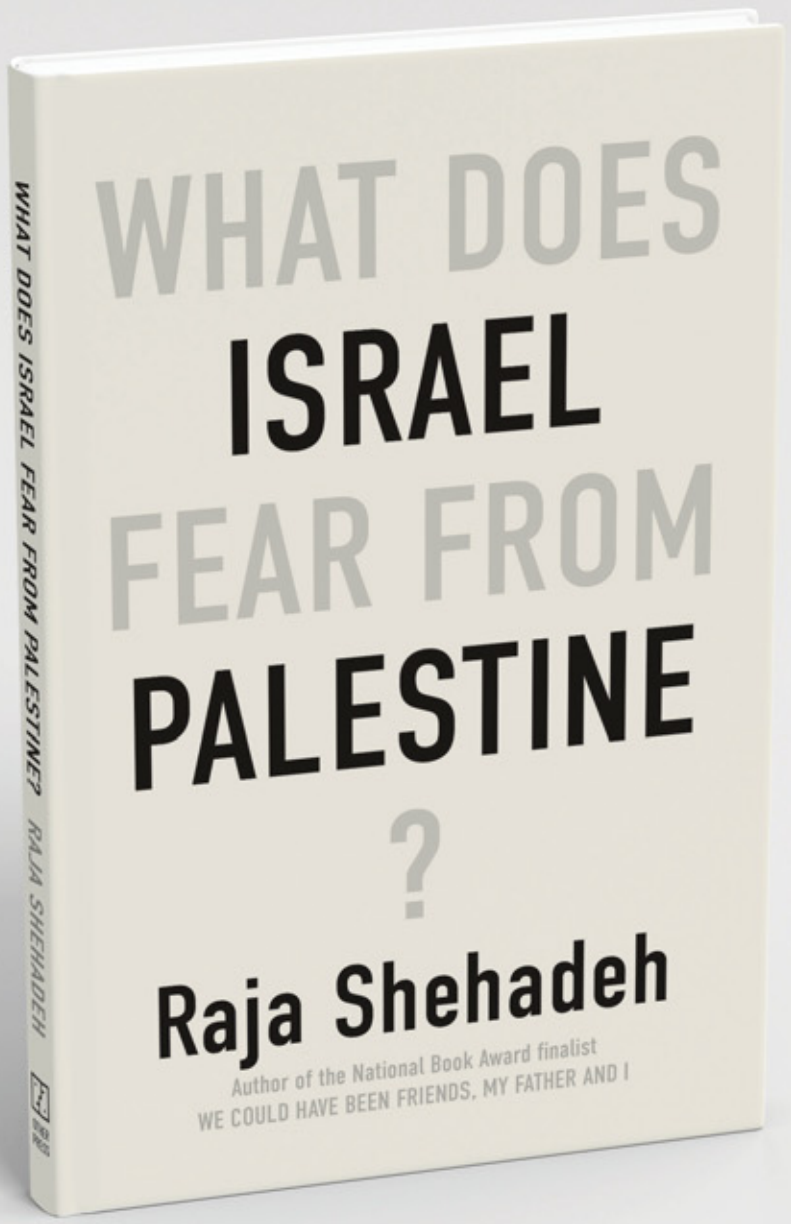

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with a tone that is vivid, ironic, melancholy, and wise." —COLM TÓIBÍN

"SHEHADEH'S WRITING IS CLEAR AND PARED-BACK; IT WEARS ITS POWER LIGHTLY.

But his masterly, remorseless selection and accumulation of detail builds an unanswerable case against Palestine's historic and current oppressors." —*THE GUARDIAN*

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of Culture (2016) examines race and technology through music and sonic expression. In these and especially in his memoir, *Floating in a Most Peculiar Way* (2021), Chude-Sokei focuses on the "intersubjective and micropolitical process" of diaspora.

To encounter Chude-Sokei's work is to come face-to-face with experiences that are often silenced—as either too painful to publicly discuss or unproductive to the political causes advanced by insisting on Black unity. He eschews grand moments of Pan-African solidarity, the kind that can demand a single united voice, and insists instead that conflict, contestation, hierarchy, and above all difference within Black communities be taken up centrally in African diaspora studies.

The task of reimagining the African diaspora as multiple diasporas is an urgent one. Reading Chude-Sokei's work helps us understand the fractious processes that shape the meaning of Blackness, and also offers a way to make sense of the shifting landscape of Black America due to African, Caribbean, and Latin American immigration.

Chude-Sokei writes, in *Floating in a Most Peculiar Way*, that he learned the word "diaspora" in Los Angeles, at his Aunt Pansy and Uncle Owen's Sunday dinners. Around the table were West Indians, Nigerians, and later South Africans and Ghanaians. Jamaicans made fun of Nevis for "being so small that you slept in your swimming clothes because if you turned over at night you might drown." (In response, the Nevisian auntie laughed loudest.) The Nigerians at the table avoided discussing the civil war that pitted Hausa and Igbo against one another. When it did come up, he writes, "it wasn't described as a national or personal or ethnic tragedy but an African or a colonial one. That way blame could be evaded and the experience shared."

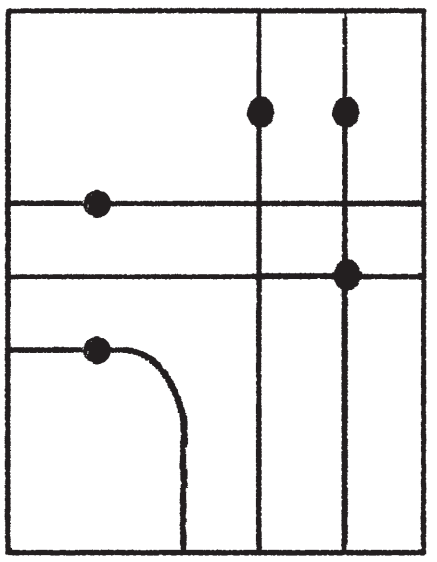
Eventually, in this group of Black immigrants, dinner conversation would turn to their relationship to African Americans; someone would relay a story of being mocked, or even threatened by a gang, because of their accent or foreignness. Chude-Sokei's mother, hearing any of this, would "employ the abstraction of Black people" to find a compromise. She stressed what Black people regardless of nationality had in common. By invoking an "imagined global community of Blacks," her son writes, she sought "to mediate the unpleasant details of personal experience." This dining table is a perfect encapsulation of Chude-Sokei's intellectual project: it preserved difference and plurality while also bringing people together. Bickering and bitterness were as constant as sustenance and fellowship.

Chude-Sokei was born on July 6, 1967, in Biafra, the short-lived breakaway republic in eastern Nigeria formed to realize an independent Igboland after a series of anti-Igbo pogroms. That same day war broke out between Nigeria and Biafra. According to family lore, while Chude-Sokei's mother gave birth, "she could hear the first fruits of the federal government's bombing campaign against Biafra, and when she'd given birth, there had been word of casualties nearby."

Chude-Sokei's father, who was Igbo, served as the commander of the Biafran air force and adviser to the Biafran leader Odumegwu Ojukwu. His mother, a nurse from Jamaica, cared for the wounded and malnourished while comforting those who lost loved ones during the war. Chude-Sokei's father was killed during the civil war. Just before the fledgling nation collapsed in 1970, Chude-Sokei's mother fled with him to Gabon. From there she made her way back to Jamaica but soon left for the United States, while Chude-Sokei remained in Montego Bay, having been adopted by family friends. He eventually joined his mother in the United States, first in Washington, D.C., and then in Los Angeles, where relatives from his mother's side already lived.

In his memoir Chude-Sokei narrates this journey, a personal cartography of decolonization and diaspora. It is a story that refuses the simple binaries of homeland and exile. The country of Chude-Sokei's birth is found on no map. He arrives in Jamaica with few links to Igbo culture. All that remains with him from his previous life, ironically, is a mysterious song about someone named "Major Tom" that was played on repeat by aid workers in one of the refugee camps in Gabon where he and his mother sheltered. After arriving in America as a schoolboy, he realizes that this was David Bowie's "Space Oddity," a line from which supplies the title of the book.

Out of place and struggling to understand his origins as a young child in Jamaica, he learns that "Africa," the place with which he is indelibly associated by his last name and his accent, is freighted with contradictory meanings. Associated with "darkness, magic and trauma," "'African' was still an insult."



And for Chude-Sokei, "being called [African] by Black people was the beginning of my consciousness of self."

At the same time, an older cousin exposed him to Rastafari teachings and reggae music, which idealized Africa as a historic homeland and a future site of redemption. This cousin took an interest in his Nigerian roots and was particularly enamored of Chude-Sokei's middle name, Onuorah, meaning "voice of the people." In exchange for her protection from neighborhood kids who called him "African bush baby," he satiated her interest in Africa by fabricating "exquisite" stories he passed off as memories.

Years later, while an undergraduate at UCLA, he dates an African American woman, a student of African history, with a similar investment in his Africanness. Until the moment he takes her home, his unplaceable accent, quirky taste in music, and other eccentricities are all signs of an endearing foreignness. As they drive through the streets of South Central Los Angeles, however, the young woman decides that what she had taken to be markers of Chude-Sokei's African identity were a mask, an elaborate subterfuge orchestrated to hide or reject his rather unremarkable "*ghetto* identity."

Long before they set foot in the United States, Africans and West Indians engaged Black America through cultural products that ranged from jazz, gospel, and hip-hop to fashion, gestures, and slang. In Jamaica, a young Chude-Sokei and his cousins acted out scenes from American TV shows that featured African Americans. They learned what "give me five" meant and honed elaborate handshakes. Above all they practiced their accents in the hope of "spend[ing] eternity sounding like Black Americans."

When he arrived in the United States at around the age of ten and began to come to terms with what he calls "America's unique relationship to skin," Chude-Sokei soon learned a different lesson: rather than mimicry, distinction from African Americans would protect Black immigrants from American racism and best serve their aspirations for mobility and security. He hears from the aunties who later become like family to him that "despite how others might see us we are not like them." One Gabonese auntie instructs his mother "to keep his accent strong. They must hear him before they see him. The whites have to know who we are so they won't treat us like them." Sounding different and reinforcing one's distinct history and culture were guards against the American tyranny of racism.

This advice is driven home in one of the book's funniest and most painful moments. When a white classmate calls Chude-Sokei the N-word at a Catholic school in Washington, D.C., and he relays the incident to his mother, the same auntie insists that this has happened because he has been mistaken for a Black American. She tells him that the next time this happens, he should declare, "I am not a slave. My father was not a slave. My grandfather was not a slave. My father's mother was not a slave.... We are not slaves. We came to this country by choice!" When the boy uses the N-word a second time, Chude-Sokei, now prepared, repeats this catechism to him. But rather than providing the vindication Chude-Sokei hoped for, it prompts the offending kid to break into tears—and Chude-Sokei is the one forced to go to the principal's office.

While the elders of Chude-Sokei's family insisted on establishing distance from African Americans, he sought identification and assimilation. In this, Aunt Pansy and Uncle Owen's son Brian—the "Black American" of the family—became his guide. Brian had lost his Jamaican accent, styled himself in fashionable streetwear, donned an Afro pick in his uncombed hair, and learned the codes of South Central LA.

For a time Chude-Sokei modeled himself on Brian, copying every word and gesture, lifting weights at the local YMCA, and subjecting himself to his cousin's beatings in an effort to harden up and exude street cred. This hypermasculine expression of Black identity was punctured only by Brian's love of Prince. From Brian's perspective, "only one black identity mattered in America." He told Chude-Sokei that

> accent doesn't matter, racism doesn't matter, white people don't matter. Nigerian, African, Caribbean don't matter either... We—our people—are stupid to hold on to those types of things. That's why people hate us.

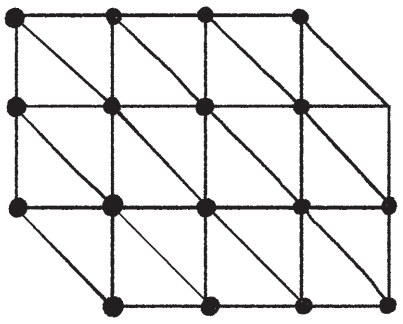
As a student at UCLA Chude-Sokei split the difference, joining both the Black Student Association and the African Student Association, relieved that no Caribbean Student Association existed at the time. Striking the balance became difficult when the BSA adopted the Afrocentrism in vogue at the time. "Radical students were no longer black but *African*, and the spelling wavered between the conventional spelling with a *c* or a more militant *k*," he remembers.

The BSA soon took the name Afrikan Student Association, leaving the Africans incapable of either claiming Blackness or Africanness. Yet this interest in constructing an African identity coincided with "an open and casual prejudice towards Africans," who, Chude-Sokei writes, were described by Black students in the association as smelly or dirty. These petty student politics, soon overshadowed for Chude-Sokei by the Rodney King riots—which reinforced the centrality of anti-Black racism in American life—indicated the sharp dissonance between Africa as an idea that played a significant part in Black political and cultural life and the actual, living, breathing Africans who were now present at the same campus cafeterias.

By the time I arrived in the US the Afrocentrism of the 1980s, itself a last gasp of an earlier Pan-African politics that looked to Africa's decolonizing nations as sources of inspiration and solidarity, had been eclipsed. No one I met in high school or college wanted to be *Afrikan*. Instead, classmates associated Africa with safaris or maybe *The Lion King*. I was asked frequently whether we kept lions as pets.

Still, Chude-Sokei's experience resembles my own. My family met my growing interest in African American history and culture with suspicion and sometimes derision. I was either in the midst of a juvenile rebellion that expressed itself as rejection of my own identity or else America had brainwashed me. As I applied to college, classmates wondered whether I, a new arrival on American shores, might unfairly benefit from affirmative action policies designed to redress America's history of slavery and Jim Crow. At the University of Virginia, when faced with a similar choice between Black student organizations and those tailored to African students, I chose the former, and was questioned about it by both Black American and African students. I reacted to this with deflection. I insisted that my Blackness was the most important thing about me. I swept the tensions under the rug.

Both Chude-Sokei and I are part of the wave of African immigrants to the United States made possible by the 1965 Hart–Celler Act, which removed the national quotas that had been in place since the 1920s and expanded pathways for Asian, African, and Latin American migration. This victory was only possible because of the civil rights movement's wider effort to abolish racial discrimination in the country's institutions. Opportunities for African immigration paradoxically increased in 1990 after the creation of the Diversity Immigrant Visa Program, which, in an effort to diversify the immigrant pool, grants about 50,000 visas annually to those who win a State Department–sponsored lottery. As the historian



Carly Goodman recently documented in her book *Dreamland: America's Immigration Lottery in an Age of Restriction*, the Diversity Immigrant Visa was initially designed to favor white, especially Irish, migration to the United States, but ultimately nearly half of those arriving in the US through this program have come from African countries.[1] In recent decades the number of African immigrants to the US has only swelled. In 2005 *The New York Times* noted that "for the first time, more blacks are coming to the United States from Africa than during the slave trade."

This rapid expansion of African presence in the US is transforming Black culture. African writers like Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Dinaw Mengestu have added the immigrant experience to the themes of Black literature. Afrobeats artists such as Burna Boy and Wizkid are shaping hip-hop, while African immigrants are increasingly represented on-screen as both characters and actors, as in LaKeith Stanfield's Darius, a first-generation Nigerian American on the hit show *Atlanta*, or Aida Osman, an Eritrean American who stars as half of a Miami rap duo in the more recent *Rap Sh!t*.

At the same time the new African presence in America is the source of anxiety and conflict. Africans, for whom American racism is not the crucible of political formation, resist and resent their conscription into American racial politics. They also fear the distance between themselves and their American-born children, who are more likely to identify with the historical and present political struggles of African Americans. For Black Americans, the growing presence of Black immigrants generates concerns about the distribution of already scarce resources and opportunities.

In 2017, for instance, student protesters at Cornell questioned the general practice of counting the children of recent immigrants as Black in the school's demographic accounting. They called on the university to "increase the presence of underrepresented black students," by which they meant "black Americans who have several generations (more than two) in this country." At its most extreme this might amount to the nativism of an organization like the American Descendants of Slavery, which supports more restrictive immigration policies and calls for reparations and affirmative action for Black Americans who can trace their ancestry to enslaved people in the United States—to the exclusion of opportunities for other ethnic minorities, including the descendants of people enslaved elsewhere.

What it is to be Black in the United States is changing as the country's composition changes and as we reexamine our history. Although some transformations of the meaning of Blackness are relatively recent, the constitution of Black identity through intraracial encounters goes back at least to the turn of the twentieth century, when West Indian immigrants slowly began to arrive in the United States, settling mainly in cities like New York and Miami. The historian Winston James has detailed how new West Indian migrants contributed to the radicalization of Black politics in the interwar period. Whether in Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association or in socialist and communist gatherings, West Indians had an outsize importance that was immediately recognized.

Chude-Sokei's memoir identifies the crosscurrents in his own life. In his first book, *The Last "Darky,"* he investigates "black-on-black" cultural contestation earlier in American history through the career of Bert Williams, a blackface performer from the Bahamas. Born in Nassau in 1874, Williams migrated to the United States at a young age and became one of the most successful minstrel performers of the early twentieth century. Chude-Soeki takes Williams's performances as an opportunity to consider assimilation and the construction of a universal "Negro" or Black identity—"a transcendental 'Negro,'" a figure who would represent the "emergent black counterglobalization that was pan-Africanism." For Williams, representing a universal figure of Blackness involved suppressing his Caribbean distinctiveness.

More than on the skin, this transmutation of a West Indian Blackness into an African American Blackness occurred through the voice. "The voice is the mask when the flesh looks the same," Chude-Sokei writes. Through careful study and imitation of southern dialects, Williams presented what many commentators, including African Americans, described as a "natural" performance of the "southern darky." Offstage, he maintained his native dialect and insisted that African American English was as foreign to him as Italian.

Through his close examination of this Black minstrel performer, Chude-Sokei argues that what passed for a universal Negro was merely one iteration of the figure of the African American. This has broader reverberations for the cultural politics of Pan-Africanism. Does the demand for unity and solidarity among Black people ultimately require the submersion of difference and the elevation of one particular experience of Blackness? If so, what determines which experience of Blackness comes to stand in for the whole? For Chude-Sokei, the predominance of African American voices and experiences is closely linked to America's geopolitical dominance, which grants those within its boundaries—even when marginalized—access to a world stage.

Something of this structure is visible in more recent history. The police murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis galvanized protests around the world, but similar movements against police violence in Brazil and Nigeria, the two countries with the largest Black populations in the world, have not inspired the same global solidarity. This is both because news from the United States is much more likely to travel elsewhere and because the African American quest for emancipation and equality has come to stand in for larger struggles of racialized and colonized peoples around the world. Cousin Brian's point that "only one black identity mattered" speaks to this disparity of attention.

The idea that the voice differentiates where the skin cannot is a through line of Chude-Sokei's work. It shows up in the discussion of accents in *Floating in a Most Peculiar Way*, and it is the focus of *The Sound of Culture*, which examines race, technology, and humanism.[2]

Black music, and especially Caribbean genres like dub, inspire this consideration. Dub, an offshoot of reggae, emerged in the 1970s and involves the remixing of original tracks by removing vocal performance, adding effects like echo, and emphasizing the drum and bass to produce a new electronic music style. This highly technologized sound from Jamaica and its diaspora "would mutate and infect many strains of British dance and popular music," Chude-Sokei writes. Jamaican sound culture also directly influenced hip-hop through one of the founding fathers of the genre, the Jamaican-born DJ Kool Herc.

The technologized sounds of the Caribbean are a counterpoint to the dominance of African American sound. Moreover, the reverberation and fragmentation of dub refuses the claims of racial authenticity that were central to reggae and have long shaped Pan-Africanism. Within its domain of echoes and repetitions, there can be neither one voice nor one universal experience. Dub is a sonic collage that reimagines the African diaspora as a kaleidoscopic and conflicting multitude rather than a singular whole. The same, across his books, can be said of Chude-Sokei's work. ●

[1]University of North Carolina Press, 2023.

[2]Chude-Sokei has worked with sound in other media as well, through what he calls his "sonic art/archiving project," Echolocution. Recently he completed a project in Nuremberg, Germany, titled "Sometimes You Just Have to Give It Your Attention," an acoustic "investigation" of the former Nazi rally grounds, which received a grant from the German Federal Cultural Foundation. He is collaborating with the choreographer Bill T. Jones to adapt parts of *The Sound of Culture* for the stage.

Grand Poobah of the Antigrandiose

Jonathan Lethem

Charles Portis: Collected Works
edited by Jay Jennings.
Library of America, 1,096 pp., $45.00

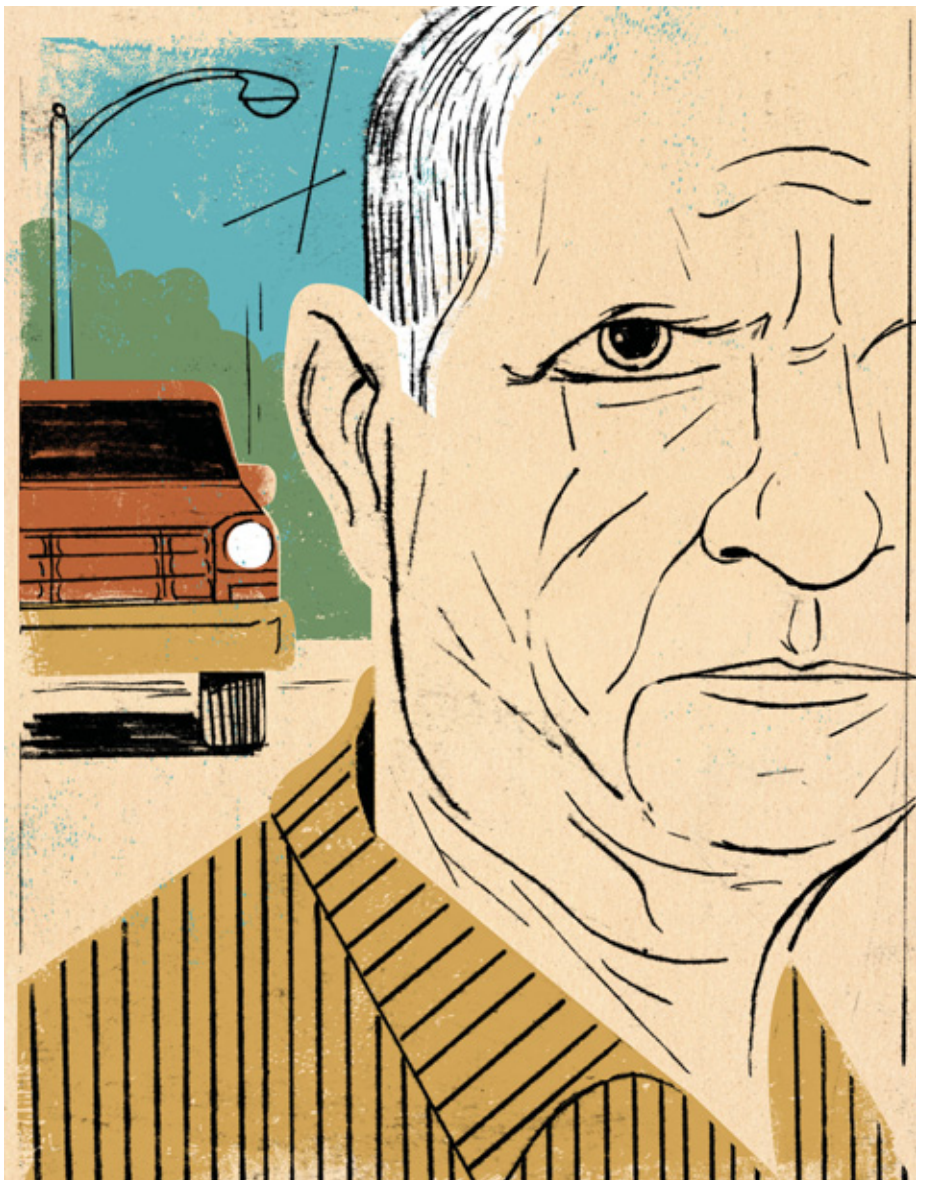
Haunted Man's Report: Reading Charles Portis
by Robert Cochran.
University of Arkansas Press,
224 pp., $39.95; $25.95 (paper)

The comedian George Carlin had a routine, in the 1970s, in which he offered up a series of fake headlines in a blustery newscaster's voice. "A man has barricaded himself inside of his house," one opens. After a beat: "However, he is not armed, and no one is paying any attention to him." I always think of that line whenever a famous novelist is praised for their reluctance to appear—for a refusal to give interviews, participate in public forums, be photographed for dust jackets, and so forth. A precious few have managed this inside-out publicity somersault: Thomas Pynchon, Harper Lee, J. D. Salinger, Donna Tartt, Don DeLillo, Cormac McCarthy. (Granted, varied circumstances and temperaments lie behind their Bartleby routines.) On the whole, though, it's rare that a writer is rewarded for squirrelliness in the face of publicity opportunities.

Charles Portis is anomalous, a writer force-fielded in a durable glamour of obscurity and frequently championed for revival—"America's most remembered forgotten novelist," as the writer Mark Dunbar quipped. Portis's diffidence about publicity rhymed with the self-effacing air of the novels, so richly aphoristic, rueful, and proportionate. Pigeonholed as a humorist, Portis eluded prize nominations, and his novels fell in and out of print; not one of the five, published between 1966 and 1991, was reviewed in these pages. Yet he has lately shrugged his way into the Library of America, ahead of such seriously regarded contemporaries as James Salter, Evan S. Connell, Russell Banks, and Norman Rush. (I've picked white guys to make this comparison vivid, not because I can't think of other-than-white-guys who deserve celebration.)

In this sense Portis's enshrinement by the Library of America is more of a piece with its recent embrace of twentieth-century writers who in their own time had been marginalized within genres: Shirley Jackson (horror), Elmore Leonard (crime), Ursula K. Le Guin, Philip K. Dick, and Joanna Russ (science fiction). It was among science fiction writers that I first heard Portis regularly cited as a standard of value, particularly in the circle around the beloved writer and editor Gardner Dozois, who died in 2018, though only one of Portis's novels comes remotely close to sci-fi.[1]

[1]My earliest experience with Portis fandom was at Bennington College, when the nineteen-year-old Donna Tartt and I, two bookish kids from incommensurable worlds, first talked and looked for common ground among our favorite books. I think Portis was the only living writer we both cared for.



Charles Portis; illustration by Edel Rodriguez

Jay Jennings, the editor of this new edition, warmed up for the effort with 2012's *Escape Velocity: A Charles Portis Miscellany*, while Portis was still alive. Functioning as both a rarities volume and a festschrift, the *Miscellany* gathered uncollected writings, including early journalism and late stories (which make it into the LOA book) and a play (which doesn't) together with several of the essays calling for a Portis renaissance by admirers like Roy Blount Jr., Ron Rosenbaum, Ed Park, Wells Tower, and Donna Tartt. Those efforts were influential: Rosenbaum's 1998 *Esquire* essay helped drag the novels back into trade paperback. Park's survey of the whole Portis landscape, published in *The Believer* in 2003, built on Rosenbaum's effort, alerting a younger generation of readers to Portis's work.[2] At his death in 2020 came another burst of tributes.

Now comes the University of Arkansas English professor Robert Cochran's *Haunted Man's Report: Reading Charles Portis*, a loose portrait of Portis's life and times wrapped around a study of the work. Cochran repudiates "tedious anatomizing" and promises instead "as 'Portishead' a volume as possible—this is the aim. Appreciation, a fan's notes. Of a wiseacre sort." For all the disclaimers, Cochran's volume gathers a great deal of scrupulous research, and even some portion of psycho-biographical speculation, into a persuasive close reading of five novels, plus journalism, a short story, and Portis's single stage play. Cochran brings to light both the sidelong historical ruminations and the sorrowful depths of feeling that admirers have always sensed moving beneath the picaresque plots and the insouciant breezes of Portis's prose.

Portis, if he ever tipped his hand, seemed only to care that his books be delightful. They are. Yet what if they also sustain all the claims nervously advanced on their behalf, the comparisons to Twain, Dante, Nabokov, Gogol? TV cameras remain camped out in the front yard of the man barricaded inside his house.

[2]See also Wells Tower's passionate advocacy for Portis's final novel, *Gringos*, in *GQ* in 2011, and Elizabeth Nelson's for *The Dog of the South* in *The Ringer* in 2019. I am apparently a tiny part of this story as well, since in the introduction to *Escape Velocity* I'm quoted by Jennings as referring to Portis aloud as "everybody's favorite least-known great novelist." I don't remember saying it.

Charles Portis belonged to Arkansas. He'd lived elsewhere during the first third of his life, as a marine in the Korean War, as a newspaperman in the South (where he did vital reporting from the front line of resistance to the civil rights movement) and New York, and as a bureau chief for *The New York Herald Tribune* in London. But Arkansas was where in 1965 he did his barricading, which persisted nearly uninterrupted until his death. A beloved, even talismanic figure to his neighbors, the shy author was dragged out of the house to accept the first ever award for Lifetime Achievement in Southern Literature, given in 2010 by the *Oxford American* (which, despite its name, has for the past two decades been housed in Arkansas, under the auspices of the University of Central Arkansas). Yet he seems other than clearly a "southern writer," in the typically understood sense of that regional genre—the sense that defines the tradition of Flannery O'Connor, William Faulkner, Eudora Welty, Walker Percy, and Harry Crews. Southern writing, in that formulation, is rooted in legacies of place, engaged with agrarian or small-town pastoral yearning even if turned against itself in remorse or accusation, or rendered bleakly grotesque.

Portis's characters, by contrast, are defined by journeys, even if many of their journeys turn out to be circular. His tales are set in Mexico, Belize, Texas, Indiana, New York City, and, yes, passingly, Arkansas. Yet fundamentally it is in the wild or on the road that his people discover their purposes. Portis's temperament, when it locates a version of home, remains untethered and provisional: an RV makes a pretty good house; a few RVs circled together might make the best sort of small town. Despite his deep reservations about utopian projects, the families and alliances that give consolation, at road's end, are constructed rather than inherited ones, made out of recognitions and sympathies across type, nationality, and even species (see under: horses; chickens).

Portis was a perfectionist in his chosen style. His standard is precision and ease in recording the telling detail and transcribing the off-kilter cadence of his characters' speech. His signature quirk is abrupt outbursts of sentence fragments punctuated with exclamation points, like hail on a tin roof. A distinctive method! Surprising in its appeal! And weirdly infectious! Everywhere Portis is lucid and engaging; he's digressive without ever sowing confusion. His sense of the absurd exhibits itself in macro and micro levels, embedded in story, chapter, paragraph, and sentence. Like the cartoon about the scientists who examine dogs under the microscope only to find that they consist of other, tinier dogs, Portis's humor inhabits the smallest measurable unit. Each word in a Portis sentence seems amused to have been placed beside its neighbor.

Portis isn't much for "plot." With the exception of *True Grit*, he traffics in something that might be called permanent in medias res. The four other novels are concatenations of happenstance, hovering, stalling, and then, sometimes, precipitous outcomes. Yet Portis remains on point going nowhere in particular, driven by his fixity of attention to how the world declines to make sense. If he has a master plot it is one of deflation—a leaky narrative tire accompanied by the dissipation of conventional expectations. He's the Grand Poobah of the antigrandiose, the Senior Warden in the Lodge of the Shaggy Dog.

There's also a macroplot in Portis's oeuvre, an elegant alternation, though as cryptic as a code: books one (*Norwood*), three (*The Dog of the South*), and five (*Gringos*) are male-driven road movies; books two (*True Grit*) and four (*Masters of Atlantis*) both unrepeatable tours de force. To learn anything useful, better turn to the five, like fingers on a hand, in their particulars.

The debut, *Norwood* (1966), is his slightest, yet with that signature irreducibility that makes paraphrase feel futile. The title character is a marine released to his East Texas hometown on a hardship discharge to tend his delicate sister after their father's death. Norwood Pratt is also a wannabe country singer whose possession of musical gifts and overall perspective on his misadventures remain elusive to the reader. What's unmistakable, however, is Norwood's sweet sincerity and his boyish curiosity about others. After his sister marries, Norwood heads to New York City to collect a small debt owed him by a fellow marine. This microscopic plot hook drops on page one:

> Norwood took his discharge, which he felt to be shameful, and boarded a bus in Oceanside that was bound for his home town of Ralph, Texas—with, of course, many intermediate stops. The big red-and-yellow cruiser had not gone far when Norwood remembered with a sinking heart that in all the confusion of checking out he had forgotten to go by Tent Camp 1 and pick up the seventy dollars that Joe William Reese owed him. This was a measure of his distress. It was not like Norwood to forget money.

This leads in turn to the first of the great Portis non sequiturs:

> Thinking about it, on top of this discharge business, sent Norwood further into depression. He decided he would sit up straight all the way home and not look at the sights and not sleep and not push the Recline-o button and not lean back thirty or forty degrees the way he had planned.

It is that near horizon of his plans—to push the Recline-o button—in which the precision of Portis's absurdism lurks.

Once in New York, Norwood becomes a wise-fool hick in the city, akin to Joe Buck from *Midnight Cowboy*. That novel had appeared in 1965, the year before *Norwood* (the movie came out in 1969). This motif was popular in the late 1960s, other examples being the Don Siegel–directed Clint Eastwood vehicle *Coogan's Bluff* (1968) and the television series *McCloud* (1970–1977), where a country lawman is shown outwitting idiot New Yorkers on a routine basis. By bringing his guileless protagonist to the city, Portis—who'd in his journalistic career lived in Manhattan and even briefly dated Nora Ephron—might be seen as measuring his distance from a cosmopolitan knowingness in which he'd dabbled.

The way Norwood alternates gullibility and ethical doggedness might nowadays be associated with being "on the spectrum." This aligns him with another kind of literary character in vogue at the time: Jerzy Kosinski's Chauncey Gardiner, from *Being There*; Thomas Berger's everyman Carlo Reinhart (like Norwood, a returning veteran); Yossarian from Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*; even Slothrop from Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*. In their dampened or bemused affect, these protagonists become a rebuke to the cravenness and posturing that swirls around them—surrogates for readers who may find contemporary life a little much without having any way to quit the scene.

Two years after *Norwood*, Portis entered immortality with *True Grit*, the tale of a girl named Mattie Ross who enlists an alcoholic mercenary US marshal named Rooster Cogburn to avenge the death of her father. The title and image of the story have become lodged in our cultural lexicon. The book possesses a friezelike, mythopoetic density that might seem to emanate from a distant past—it takes place in 1878—yet it is narrated by Mattie fifty years later in an adamant, precise vernacular, one that often reminds readers of the pleasures of Twain. The book spent almost half a year on the *New York Times* best-seller list, which sets Portis apart not only from other "cult novelists" but from most novelists of any kind. It was filmed twice; the anodyne 1969 version, directed by Henry Hathaway, was a sentimental hit that earned John Wayne his only Oscar. The second, directed in 2010 by Joel and Ethan Coen, returns devotionally to details the earlier film had abandoned. It also returned the paperback to the *Times* best-seller list and dragged Portis back into a semigrateful spotlight ten years before his death.

While for some the literary western finds its apotheosis twenty years later in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*, for me Portis offers twice the value in senseless frontier violence without the concomitant price in Old Testament maunderings. In the most startling scene, Mattie and Rooster Cogburn capture two of the primary villain's wounded accomplices in a dugout shed. These minor characters, bearing the Beckettian names Quincy and Moon, are dim-witted, amoral clowns. In playing them against each other, Cogburn inadvertently sets off a hiccup of riotous nihilism:

> Rooster said, "Moon is coming around. A young fellow like him don't want to lose his leg. He is too young to be getting about on a willow peg. He loves dancing and sport."
>
> "You are trying to get at me," said Moon.
>
> "I am getting at you with the truth," said Rooster.
>
> In a few minutes Moon leaned over to whisper a confidence into Quincy's ear. "None of that," said Rooster, raising his rifle. "If you have anything on your mind we will all hear it."
>
> Moon said, "We seen Ned and Haze just two days ago."
>
> "Don't act the fool!" said Quincy. "If you blow I will kill you."
>
> But Moon went on. "I am played out," said he. "I must have a doctor. I will tell what I know."
>
> With that, Quincy brought the bowie knife down on Moon's cuffed hand and chopped off four fingers which flew up before my eyes like chips from a log. Moon screamed and a rifle ball shattered the lantern in front of me and struck Quincy in the neck, causing hot blood to spurt on my face. My thought was: *I am better out of this*. I tumbled backward from the bench and sought a place of safety on the dirt floor.... Quincy was insensible and dead or dying and Moon was bleeding terribly from his hand and from a mortal puncture in the breast that Quincy gave him before they fell.
>
> "Oh Lord, I am dying!" said he.

I admire this sequence even more than *True Grit*'s epic finale, involving Mattie and the villain Ned Pepper in a pit full of poisonous snakes, though that's pretty good, too. This would be the one time Portis delivered the whole goods, rather than deflating his plot's culminating scenes. In fulfilling the terms of its adventure, *True Grit* is its author's least characteristic work. Portis didn't publish a novel again for eleven years. It would seem that he spent some of the time and some of the dough road-tripping in Central America.

The Portis we fully recognize from his present veneration arrives in 1979. The first of what will be three novels that wander to international settings, *The Dog of the South* is also where Portis unveils an interest in conspiracy and revelation, and in arcane and suppressed texts—though, as usual, through an atmosphere of distraction and amusement. The non- or antiplot is narrated by one Ray Midge, who announces in the book's first line that his "wife Norma had run off with Guy Dupree"—along with his automobile and credit card—and that he plans to stalk the couple by the trail of receipts. The circumstances are intricate—Dupree is Norma's ex and Midge's frenemy at the newspaper where they've both worked—while Midge boasts a distractibility and a flatness that verge on dissociative disorder. He hits the road, in a pursuit that leads through Mexico to Belize, and to confrontations with Norma and Dupree. Yet Midge shows little interest in conventional vengeance; he seems to lavish more sensory and emotional attention on the functioning of a series of vehicles than on his wife or rival.

The precision of Midge's attention, combined with the opacity of his priorities, generates the hilarity. The folksy voice of Portis's first two novels here expands to incorporate a constant flow of goofy-erudite verbal prestidigitations, making Midge's narration evocative of early Thomas McGuane, or even Richard Brautigan or Terry Southern—a 1970s vibe one might call stonerish if it were anyone but Portis, whose distaste for hippie culture feels so absolute as to be a principle. The laid-back humor now comes at such a pace that the reader can't, in fact, lay back for a second. This creates a strange effect of loose density or lackadaisical sadistic tickling:

> I learned that he had been dwelling in the shadows for several years. He had sold hi-lo shag carpet remnants

> and velvet paintings from the back of a truck in California. He had sold wide shoes by mail, shoes that must have been almost round, at widths up to EEEEEE. He had sold gladiola bulbs and vitamins for men and fat-melting pills and all-purpose hooks and hail-damaged pears.

Midge is describing Dr. Reo Symes, the owner of a broken-down camper bus who hijacks both Midge's road trip and the book in chapter three. Symes is a great comic creation, a supremely American huckster who might be an outtake from Melville's *The Confidence-Man*, and whose speculative interests include hopes of bilking his mother out of the zoning rights to an island on which he plans to develop a luxury retirement home—or, alternately, "How about a theme park? Jefferson Davis Land. It's not far from the old Davis plantation…"

Along with his own bad ideas, Symes carries with him a secret source of bogus thinking. To quote Elizabeth Nelson, "Although he appears only in the marvelously unhinged ramblings of Dr. Symes, John Selmer Dix may be Portis's most crucial creation, the skeleton key that unlocks the trunk of the author's imagination." Dix is the fictional author of *With Wings as Eagles*, a treasured, tattered book that Symes claims "puts William Shakespeare in the shithouse," though when we're given snippets of this masterwork it appears more the sort of thing Willy Loman might have carted around—aphoristic wisdom for salesmen like "Always Be Closing." This gives a glimpse of Portis's dark view of the American character, where the chatter of self-deceiving conmen forms a kind of universal intoxicant to which only the puttering, driveless personality of Midge is immune. The presence of an author of patently idiotic secret books calls to mind Flann O'Brien's *The Third Policeman*, where the ravings of the insane philosopher de Selby provide the MacGuffin for an inane murder plot.

But *Jefferson Davis Land*? "The treatment of race," muses Robert Cochran, "may be in the current cultural climate a major obstacle to a wider appreciation of Portis's fiction generally and of *Norwood* and *The Dog of the South* in particular." Cochran then uneasily tabulates instances of the N-word—there are plenty.[3] It's a conundrum for twenty-first-century Portis boosters, especially any who'd want to place him on a syllabus. Though the word appears in four of the five novels, for me it is *The Dog of the South* where discomfort ramifies into something more disturbing. Certainly, in the era Portis published the book, that word appeared in popular songs by Bob Dylan, John Lennon, and Elvis Costello, as well as in books by white writers who were generally seen to have explicable political or documentary purposes—even if those purposes are no longer viewed as sufficient.[4]

Portis's use of the term is more enigmatic, throwing interpretation back into the reader's lap. The trick maybe isn't the word itself but rather how it reverberates in a text whose wise-fool narrator makes ambiguous remarks like "I'm white and I don't dance but that doesn't mean I have all the answers." Or consider this passage describing Midge's uneasiness at night in a crowd in Belize:

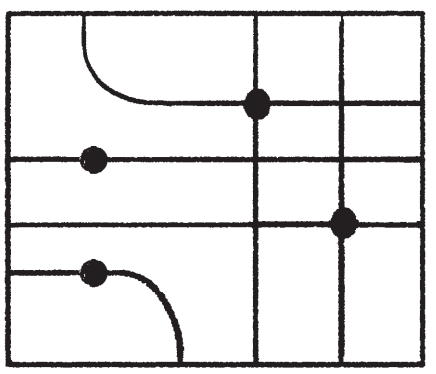
> I made my way through a sea of boisterous drunks. It was sundown. There would be no twilight at this latitude. The air was sultry and vapors were rising from the ground. The drunks were good-natured for the most part but I didn't like being jostled, and there was this too, the ancient fear of being overwhelmed and devoured by a tide of dark people. Their ancient dream!

In *Haunted Man's Report*, Cochran alertly flags the instability of that final pronoun. "Whose ancient dream?" he writes.

> Do light people endure white supremacist nightmares of a "great replacement"?… Or does Midge, by a sharp shift of perspective, ascribe to "dark people" an equally ancient revenge fantasy, a violent if long-delayed retribution for colonialist subjugation? This whole passage is either very adroitly or very clumsily phrased.

Portis may seem to be tonguing a sore tooth. When Ray Midge eventually locates and confronts Dupree in a jungle compound, Cochran compares him to Kurtz in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, but Dupree is more a depraved, druggy hipster than a villain. The scene's squalor recalls Hunter S. Thompson; Portis finds the counterculture as inhospitable as the culture. His sensibility wants to light out for the territory—to save itself, in the words of John Ford's *Stagecoach*, "from the blessings of civilization"—but it also suspects there is no viable territory. So it sits at home and grumbles.

The book is Portis's comic masterpiece, but the riffing bridges an abyss. Midge's incoherent blend of vision-



ary wit and shrugging obliviousness (has any protagonist of a cherished book ever seemed likelier to be dull if met in real life?) forms a screen for Portis to mull behind—the author having generated implications, in a first-person-narrated contemporary novel in a multicultural setting, that he wasn't quite ready to sort out.

Masters of Atlantis, Portis's fourth novel, is a compressed epic account of the conspiracy theories, con jobs, and self-deluding strategies of a fictional secret society called the Gnomons, a cabal of men devoted to exploring and disseminating esoteric teachings about powers shaping world history from behind the curtain. It is at once a vehicle for Portis's most extended deadpan jest, a fiction so disobedient to conventional notions of character or plot development that it almost qualifies as "experimental," and his most sorrowful cross-sectional view of delusion and waste in twentieth-century America.

The lead figure, Lamar Jimmerson, has his first brush with secret knowledge as an army corporal in post–World War I Europe, when he is approached by a mysterious man bearing a book called the Codex Pappus, pertaining to the lost continent of Atlantis. The scene is presented in an omniscient voice so direct as to be disconcerting—it takes a moment to adjust to how Portis's typical attitude trickles through it. Jimmerson will remain a cipher in the book, but his psychological key may be in the book's first lines: "Young Lamar Jimmerson went to France in 1917… serving first with the Balloon Section, stumbling about in open fields holding one end of a long rope…" France in 1917 is no joke: Could he in fact be a PTSD victim before the term was invented?

Jimmerson's spaciness might be infuriating, but it's leavened by his reverence for philosophy, meditation, and writing—even if this reverence is in every case applied to the most vacuous nonsense. Gnomonic wisdom consists of misunderstood shreds of history, geometry, astrology, and self-improvement gobbledygook, the kind of stuff that—if it could fool more than a scattering of gullibles every year—might qualify as a pyramid scheme, or cult, or start-up religion. As Portis portrays it, however, Gnomonism is barely more than a feeble social practice, conducted by such a tiny group of followers over six decades that the novel is able to offer an unforgettable character sketch of each and every convert. Maurice Babcock, for instance,

> ordered his shoes from England, his shirts from Baltimore and his small hats from a hat shop in Salt Lake City that catered to the needs of young Mormon missionaries. He wore these hats in a seasonal color sequence, from opalescent gray through black, high on his head and dead level with the horizon.… His introduction to Gnomonism came one Saturday morning when he was poking about in an old bookstore and ran across a cast-off trove of Gnomon pamphlets and books, including a copy of *101 Gnomon Facts*, one of the rare, unsigned copies.… *This is the stuff for me*. He knew it at once. *This is what I've been looking for. My search for certitudes is over.*

The book's magic is the fluency of its omniscient narration—which is partly to say it stems from the decision to take a wry author surrogate, like Norwood or Midge, off the table. Portis is sympathetic and merciless in equal measure as he shows us how this sub-subculture devotes itself to its feuds and fantasies, how its members enshrine one another in self-published monographs that nobody will ever care to read. As the decades grind on, we see the Gnomons sagging into despondency and dereliction, having never humbled themselves to the perspective age is meant to bestow. In its late stages, the book becomes something like an inside-out Barbara Pym novel—the Gnomon sages come to resemble Pym's preening clergymen, their vanities propped up behind the scenes by doting, capable women.

Jimmy Burns, the lead and narrator of 1991's *Gringos*, an American expat in the Yucatán, a tour guide with a sporadic side hustle in looted antiquities, is Portis's first middle-aged narrator. The third protagonist in Portis's odd-numbered novels of men on expeditions, Burns is like Norwood Pratt a Korean War veteran, and carries some of Pratt's sweet tolerance for human and animal variety; he also doubles down on Ray Midge's preoccupation with the maintenance of automobiles. Yet Burns is a significant advance on Pratt and Midge, and *Gringos* an authentic new leaf in Portis's fiction, because his creator has endowed him with greater competencies, not only in auto repair but in the sublime art of noticing that other human beings exist. Jimmy Burns is an appreciator. He performs routine acts of generosity—though he might call them "errands"—and by the end has become a surprisingly effective action hero, the only such in Portis's roster, if you put aside *True Grit*. (How often we have to say this!)

In this, *Gringos*'s main character is a decisive repudiation of the hapless wind-up-toy men who populate *Masters of Atlantis*. Then again, in one of those strokes of ambivalence that define Portis, Burns is a functioning element of the muck and bustle around him, and even a creature of the ideology of sales—that Dale Carnegie–Willy Loman hokum that had been sent up so extensively in the two preceding novels. Here he admires the efforts of a friend:

> Refugio was a good salesman, a natural closer, and he had the Dutchman right where he wanted him.… Refugio was going for the No. 3 close. This is where you feign indifference to the sale, while at the same time you put across that your patience is at an end, that you are about to withdraw the offer.… The farmer saw that the moment had come. The polyvinyl chloride pipe was as cheap as it was ever going to get. He gave in, with conditions. He would have to inspect the bargain PVC pipe and he wanted the slip couplings and elbow couplings thrown in and he wanted it all delivered. Agreed, said Refugio, but no cattle and no checks.

The point is that the farmer *wants* the pipe. Burns sees the paradox in sales: in an atmosphere of competence and keen listening, the genuinely competent salesman might offer

[3] Even that term he replaces with "*******," an innovation I admired, since with regular use the typical euphemism has more and more seemed to brandish that which it is meant to efface.

[4] Full disclosure: Last year I taught a course on westerns. Portis didn't appear, but ****** did, in Percival Everett's 1994 novel *God's Country* (a book that plays on *True Grit*) and in Kelly Reichardt's 2010 feminist western film *Meek's Cutoff*. Everett's and Reichardt's political purposes were, to me and my students, explicable. I used the word a few times in my own fiction, up to 2004. Though I hope my purposes then were also explicable, I wouldn't use it again.

what you don't yet know you require. Not everything is a shuck or a scheme. Burns exemplifies an attitude of provisional expertise, of tinkering with everything, including life, until it is at least slightly improved.

Portis's deepened investment in his character also gains from an enrichment in his character's surroundings. Presumably the writer had spent more time in Mexico by this point—he's swapped out his absurdist touches for a depiction with more emotional and sensory information. Best of all, the nonwhite characters have come to life. "The subalterns begin to talk back," as Cochran notes. "Notably obnoxious gringos occasionally get deported." Burns is, Cochran says, "that rare gringo who understands he's not in charge in Mexico."

Gringos's plot is several degrees less sublimated than those of *Dog* or *Masters*, and more conclusive, too. Burns multitasks: his runs into the jungle to rescue some starving anthropologists double as a chance to scout for a girl kidnapped by a sleazy mystic hippie, who resembles the scary villains in a Robert Stone or Denis Johnson novel. The girl needs rescue, and the hippie needs dispatching, and at some point Burns accepts that he's the one to do it. When violence comes, it is as quick as a glance and capped with one of Portis's greatest punch lines: "Shotgun blast or not at close range, I was still surprised at how fast and clean Dan had gone down.... I wasn't used to seeing my will so little resisted, having been in sales for so long."

In a book of noticing, first-time readers may or may not have sensed a second plot seeping through the welter of colorful characters: Louise Kurle, an interesting woman who's been visiting in intermittent scenes, abruptly makes her intentions clear, and delivers to Burns a sweet ultimatum—a sales pitch as admirable as Refugio's to the Dutch farmer. In the last chapters Burns and Louise marry, a development as natural as it is astonishing. Earlier renditions of Portis's man-in-car, though they technically engage and marry, have seemed distractible to the point of possible asexuality, and never could have prepared the reader for the reciprocal middle-aged tenderness that overtakes *Gringos*.

Professor Cochran: "Charles McColl Portis, it was alleged, had produced at least one Great American Novel (claims were advanced for up to three, an amazing feat given he'd written just five)." Let me advance my claim: the three are *True Grit*, *Masters of Atlantis*, and *Gringos*. Portis stuck the landing. ●

'I Still Would Have Had That Abortion'

Christine Henneberg

Photographs from Carmen Winant's book The Last Safe Abortion*, 2024*

Undue Burden:
Life-and-Death Decisions
in Post-*Roe* America
by Shefali Luthra.
Doubleday, 348 pp., $29.00

Two years after the Supreme Court overturned *Roe* v. *Wade*, I am starting to see women come back. They are crossing state lines for a second time, or a third. At the reproductive health clinic where I work in California, I recently met a thirty-two-year-old woman who was in tears, practically inconsolable, before her abortion. She'd had this done before, she said. It was a "bad experience."

When I asked her to tell me more, she began with the words I hear from many of my patients these days: "Well, see, I'm not from here. I'm from Texas." The last time she was pregnant she'd caught it early, at about five weeks, and was able to have a medication abortion at a local clinic. She had what she thought was the appropriate cramping and bleeding at home. But when she returned a few weeks later for her follow-up appointment, she learned that the abortion hadn't worked. She was still pregnant.[1] "But the law had changed in the meantime," she explained, "and this time they couldn't help me."

That was early September 2021, nearly ten months before the Supreme Court's *Dobbs* decision but just after Texas passed SB 8, a law prohibiting abortion after the detection of fetal cardiac activity, or around six weeks of gestation (two weeks after the first missed period). "So I came here," she said, "but by that time I was too far to get it done even in California. So I had to go to Colorado. And by the time I got to Colorado, I was so far that I had to deliver the baby in order to, you know, have the abortion."[2]

She was nowhere near this far along in her current pregnancy—about eleven weeks. "But I'm reliving it all over again," she said.

For supporters of reproductive autonomy, the fact that this woman had to make three trips out of her home state for two abortions will prompt outrage at draconian bans like SB 8 (which has since been joined in Texas by a stricter criminal ban). Why, they will ask, should anyone be forced to cross state lines to access what should be a basic human right?

Others—even among those who consider themselves broadly supportive of abortion—might ask a different question: Why did this woman need multiple abortions in the first place? From a review of my patient's medical record, I knew that the abortion in Colorado hadn't been her first. She had been pregnant ten times and had two living children; the rest of her pregnancies had ended in miscarriage or abortion.

In *Undue Burden: Life-and-Death Decisions in Post-*Roe *America*, the journalist Shefali Luthra examines the immediate and far-reaching consequences of the state abortion bans that directly preceded the June 2022 overturning of *Roe* v. *Wade* and those that followed it. Under *Roe* abortion was a constitutionally protected right, but in the language of *Planned Parenthood* v. *Casey*, a 1992 decision that upheld *Roe*, states were permitted to restrict abortion as long as the restrictions did not impose an "undue burden" on patients; they could not ban abortion outright until after the point of fetal viability (roughly twenty-four weeks). When Texas enacted SB 8, and when Oklahoma instituted its six-week ban in May 2022, they were in direct defiance of *Roe*. The Supreme Court, in an act of defiance of its own, declined to intercede. This was the period when my patient, like thousands of other women, found herself pregnant—and trapped.[3]

When the *Dobbs* decision was officially announced, it codified the reality

[1]Failed medication abortions are rare, occurring in less than 2 percent of cases at this gestational age.

[2]The legal limit for most abortions in California is the point of fetal viability, or approximately twenty-four weeks. Colorado has no gestational age limit. Induction termination is a protocol for third-trimester abortions in which, rather than removing the fetus with instruments, doctors give an injection through the woman's abdominal wall to stop the fetal heart, then administer medications to induce labor.

[3]A Johns Hopkins study using publicly available state birth counts found that nearly 10,000 additional live births occurred in Texas in the year following the passage of SB 8.

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already unfolding in Texas and Oklahoma, allowing other states to follow suit. Abortion is now banned or severely restricted in more than twenty states. Luthra focuses her reporting on the stories of four pregnant people[4] seeking abortions in two of these states: Texas and Florida. Along the way she interviews several other patients, as well as providers, clinic managers, and staff from both restrictive and permissive states, showing how and why, in appointment lines and waiting rooms from Florida to Oklahoma to Arizona, women were turned away, or brought in for an ultrasound only to be told they would need to travel elsewhere for care.

Well-meaning supporters of abortion tend to tell stories that focus on decisions rather than experiences, dwelling on questions of prevention (how she became pregnant in the first place) and justification (why she doesn't just "want" an abortion but "needs" one). This is the rhetorical legacy of a reproductive rights movement that has for too long focused on "choice" rather than "rights." It is the familiar, stern eyebrow raise implied by Bill Clinton's infamous slogan that abortion should be "safe, legal, and rare"—something the public will tolerate, but only once our questions have been answered, our standards met.

It is immediately and refreshingly apparent in Luthra's reporting that she is uninterested in questions of prevention. Her stories begin with a positive pregnancy test, or sometimes a bit earlier: "Her period was a few days late, and she was starting to worry." This is Tiffany ("Tiff"), a sixteen-year-old from Texas who, "like so many teenage girls," has "had pregnancy scares and near-misses before." So, Luthra writes,

> she did what she'd always done. She went to the bathroom. She peed on her test . . . hoping to put her mind at ease. One pink stripe appeared. That was good. It was just a sign the test worked, and that she'd taken it correctly.
>
> But then came the second one—the one that meant her luck had finally run out.

Few of Luthra's interview subjects mention—or Luthra chooses not to emphasize—the use of birth control. Again and again they encounter pregnancy as a surprise, even when it's not their first. In Texas in April 2023, twenty-nine-year-old Kaleigh, who'd had an abortion once before, was nauseated, and her period was "weeks late"—but when her pregnancy test came back positive, "it felt like a gut punch." Kelly, a twenty-six-year-old in Houston, tells Luthra that she felt her "heart sink" at the positive test. She'd had an abortion just seven months earlier.

After a few stories like this, questions about prevention might begin to nag at even the most sympathetic reader. *If she wasn't doing anything to prevent pregnancy, how could she be so surprised? And why wasn't she more careful?* It's a culturally primed response that leans heavily on the idea that individuals—specifically, those who can become pregnant—are the ones responsible for preventing unintended pregnancies. But as I often tell my patients, "It takes two people, *minimum*, to make an unintended pregnancy." Other responsible parties include politicians who legislate abstinence-only sex education in schools, a health care system that creates enormous gaps in birth control coverage, and a patriarchal society that aids and abets intimate partner violence and reproductive coercion.

To be clear, as a doctor I care very much about helping people prevent pregnancy when that is their goal. But as a rule I do not ask my abortion patients whether they were using contraception—or whether they plan to use it in the future.[5] For me, as for Luthra, a woman's abortion story begins with a positive pregnancy test. How she came to be pregnant in the first place is not my concern.

Photograph from Carmen Winant's book The Last Safe Abortion*, 2024*

It is human instinct to try to explain our own and others' behavior, to tell stories about why we make the decisions we do. The problem occurs when we—readers, writers, doctors, voters—assign a moral weight to those reasons, consciously or unconsciously. Luthra rightly criticizes a tendency in the national debate

> to speak about abortion in only the starkest terms . . . focusing on the people who would die without an immediate abortion, or, on the flip side, characterizing every abortion as a mistake people regret forever.

In *Undue Burden*, she resists such simplistic storytelling. "People of all circumstances get abortions for all sorts of reasons," she writes. "They relate to those experiences differently, and those different stories are all equally valid and deserving of our attention."

Tiff, the teenager from Dayton, Texas, is the subject of the first of Luthra's in-depth profiles. She has no partner (the boy who got her pregnant stops speaking to her soon after she shares the news) and a complicated home life: she lives with adoptive parents, of whom we learn little other than that her father drinks a lot. Tiff's parents, like those of many of Luthra's subjects, seem fundamentally opposed to abortion. Some families cite religious beliefs; in others, like Tiff's, abortion is apparently so taboo that it simply isn't up for discussion. When Tiff tells her parents she's pregnant, they promise her they'll help raise the baby.

But Tiff herself resists the idea of becoming a mother. She "was supposed to finish her own childhood first, finish school," Luthra writes. Tiff has a history of severe depression, and as the pregnancy progresses, she spends more and more time alone in her room, researching self-managed abortion online. Eventually, at nearly five months pregnant,

> Tiff snapped. She cut herself again. It was something she hadn't done in years.
>
> In a way, she said, it wasn't that scary. The blood was the sign she was waiting for—the indication that this was one of the bad times when she needed real help, the kind that only professionals could give.

She turns to her mother, and spends a little less than a week in a psychiatric hospital, where she receives a prescription for a mood stabilizer—but she remains pregnant. Ultimately she develops preeclampsia, a complication of pregnancy involving high blood pressure, and is induced three weeks before her due date. She spends two and a half days in labor before giving birth to a healthy son, Mateo. "As much as I love this baby, I would wish this on absolutely no one," Tiff says a few days after his birth. "I still ideally would have had that abortion."

More than half of Americans who seek abortions already have at least one child at home. This statistic often surprises people, because early antiabortion strategists successfully portrayed women who seek abortion as young, unmarried, and irresponsible—an image at odds with our idealized notions of motherhood as selfless and sacrificial. "I love my kids," my patients often tell me. "I can't believe I'm doing this. I feel so selfish." To which I often reflexively reply: "But it's not selfish! You're doing this for the kids you already have." This may be true—but even as I say it, I realize it could be misconstrued as an indictment of women seeking abortion who are *not* already mothers.

Two of Luthra's main subjects—Angela and Darlene—have children at home. Angela, a twenty-one-year-old in San Antonio, is raising her infant son when she learns in the fall of 2022 that she is pregnant again. Her parents are Catholic immigrants from Guatemala and are staunchly opposed to abortion. Angela has a tenuous relationship with her mother, and Luthra alludes to heavy alcohol use in her past, but in many ways Angela seems to be thriving: she has a stable partner, rents an apartment with him, and works a contract job that pays "decently." Nevertheless, she and her boyfriend struggle financially. In addition to other debts, she is still paying off nearly a thousand dollars in medical bills from her son's birth.

Angela hopes to get a degree and become an accountant or a nurse, to give her son a good life with a bigger home, instead of barely getting by on each month's paycheck. In order to afford the trip to an abortion clinic in New Mexico (a nine-hour drive), she and her boyfriend are forced to cut back however they can—limiting trips outside their apartment to save on gas money, even "buying less formula for her baby." Angela needs an abortion "for a million reasons," writes Luthra, "but most importantly, getting an abortion would help her be the parent she wanted to be. She needed to do this so she could take care of the baby she already had."

Darlene also lives in Texas. At forty-two, she "loved being a mom," and she and her husband "would have been thrilled at the prospect of their daughter getting a younger sibling." In January 2022 Darlene had surgery to remove uterine fibroids—a procedure that can improve fertility for women who want to have children in the future. Because of the incisions on her uterus, her doctors gave her the standard advice not to attempt pregnancy for three to six months following her procedure.

Two weeks after the operation Darlene began to feel familiar symptoms of nausea and fatigue. By the time her doctors took her seriously enough to perform an ultrasound, they found that she was eleven weeks pregnant. Although she'd taken multiple preoperative pregnancy tests, all of which had been negative, the only possible explanation was that Darlene had already been pregnant—just under five weeks—at the time of her surgery, and that somehow the surgeon's scalpel had managed to remove her fibroids while leaving the tiny, invisible embryo untouched.

A pregnant uterus that has been previously cut open—in a Cesarean section or a surgery like Darlene's—is at risk of a complication called uterine rupture. When the uterus is stretched to maximum capacity and then subjected to extreme contractile forces, as occurs during labor, its muscular walls can split. This is

[4] Although Luthra and I both encounter some trans and nonbinary patients, the vast majority of the patients I see are women, and thus I often use the word "women" to describe them.

[5] In one study only 30.8 percent of patients having a first-trimester abortion wanted contraceptive counseling as part of their visit; however, 70.8 percent wanted to leave with a contraceptive method in place. (These patients already knew what method they wanted to use; they just needed the prescription.)

an obstetric emergency, immediately life-threatening to both mother and fetus. Though exceedingly rare, uterine rupture can also occur earlier in pregnancy. This was the fear for Darlene, who was nearing the end of her first trimester with Texas's six-week abortion ban in effect.

In a chilling moment, the physician who first identifies the pregnancy on ultrasound mutters to himself, "I can't intervene. I can't intervene." Darlene quickly puts the pieces together:

> She knew that here in Texas abortions were largely illegal. And she could see what course of action her physician clearly wanted to recommend, and what the laws wouldn't allow him to say. What she didn't know—what she couldn't fully understand in that moment—was how grave the threat to her life was.

After a series of "vague, even timid" responses from her doctor, Darlene travels to see a specialist in Houston. He tells her that he doesn't think she can safely carry her pregnancy to term, but when he asks his supervisors to approve an abortion, "he was shocked to learn that the answer was no. Because she wasn't literally about to die, they didn't believe Texas's medical exceptions to its abortion ban would apply here."

"Weeks of uncertainty" follow, until at about twenty weeks pregnant Darlene travels to California for the abortion she is "fairly sure she would need"—only to learn from doctors there that her scars appear to be well healed. Based on an MRI and measurements of her uterine walls, they determine that "the odds of rupture seemed quite low: maybe around 4 or 5 percent." If she doesn't want to get an abortion, they tell her, she and the fetus are very likely to make it through the pregnancy without complication. Ultimately Darlene decides to keep the pregnancy and gives birth to a healthy girl via Cesarean section.

Darlene's case is an excellent illustration of how simply having the *option* of abortion—whether or not a woman takes that option—allows health care providers to offer patients truly informed consent, meaning a full discussion of the risks and benefits of a medical intervention as well as its alternatives. In the case of abortion, the alternative is to remain pregnant, which, even in the best of circumstances, entails some health risks.[6]

But Darlene's case is also an extremely unusual clinical scenario, and not representative of the decisions most women will face. (The Texas doctor who diagnoses the pregnancy tells her that "in all his years of providing ob-gyn care, he'd never seen something like this.") Luthra also plays a bit loose with terms like "grave," "threat," and "danger." She seems to want very much to present Darlene's case as one of life or death.

Elsewhere Luthra takes similar liberties with the language of medical risk. In the case of a twenty-eight-year-old woman named Amber, whose unplanned, undesired pregnancy is complicated by a short cervix, Luthra states: "It was a pregnancy dangerous for herself and for the fetus growing inside her." This is not accurate. Cervical insufficiency is strongly associated with severe prematurity and pregnancy loss, but it does not in itself pose serious health risks to the pregnant person. Here Luthra falls into exactly the trap she aims to avoid, of speaking about abortion "in only the starkest terms"—as though she feels the need to explain or justify something to us.

Luthra's last case study is Jasper, a nineteen-year-old trans man from Florida—and his abortion is the only one she makes no effort to justify. Perhaps we are to infer that being a trans man is self-evident justification—although some trans men can and do conceive intentionally, and others with unintended pregnancies decide to become parents.

Despite a somewhat tumultuous relationship with his family after coming out as trans, Jasper lives with his parents and has a mostly stable life. He has a job and a loving romantic relationship, and is working toward a college degree. His pregnancy comes as a shock; he "never even considered that he might be pregnant" when he became troubled by back pain and fatigue. His absent period "didn't even register": he'd started taking testosterone about six months earlier, as part of gender-affirming care, and as a result (or so he believes) he "barely menstruated."

In fact, Jasper had had irregular periods since menarche, and testosterone therapy, even when it results in the cessation of menses, is not considered a reliable form of birth control. After doctors run multiple rounds of tests for his mysterious symptoms (but not one pregnancy test), an ultrasound technician discovers Jasper's pregnancy while scanning his kidneys. It is August 2022. He is twelve weeks pregnant—just three weeks shy of Florida's fifteen-week ban, which went into effect the week after the *Dobbs* decision (and has since been replaced with a six-week ban).

At moments during the harried and emotional process of scheduling his abortion, Jasper finds himself imagining that "he would give birth to a healthy baby, that he'd be able to do a good job being a dad." He describes to Luthra the feeling that "his body wanted to protect the being that was growing inside him, which he'd begun to think of as a baby." It is a tender ambivalence I often see in my own patients, who can struggle visibly with the meaning and value of the pregnancy inside them, even as they affirm their decision to end it. Jasper's case is in this regard quite typical, even unremarkable—and in some ways the most instructive of all of Luthra's examples. He is a person with a uterus who is pregnant and doesn't want to be. This is the one common story beneath all abortion stories—and yet it can be the hardest story to accept.

In the opening line of *Undue Burden*, Luthra calls the end of *Roe* a "public health crisis," and it is one. Noting Angela's concerns about contributing to the state's "overrun" foster care system ("It seemed wrong to have a child if you couldn't take care of it yourself"), Luthra cites deeply disturbing reporting by *The Texas Tribune* about the state's foster care system, including its "inability to account for hundreds of children who go missing each year." She also effectively uses public health data to highlight disproportionate racial impacts of abortion bans; she notes, for example, that "in Texas, as is true nationally, Black people are more than twice as likely to die from pregnancy compared with white people."

But it is when discussing abortion as a human right that Luthra makes her most powerful points: about the limitations of *Roe*, which was "never enough to ensure that everyone could easily, safely access legal abortions"; the injustices of legislation like the 1977 Hyde Amendment, under which no federal health insurance dollars can be used to pay for abortions; and the vulnerable and marginalized individuals in this country who have always been left behind, or left out entirely, in conversations about "choice." She writes that the individual stories in *Undue Burden* "reinforce what should be obvious: abortion access is a story of economic inequality, a story of health care, and a story of human rights." Denying people abortions treats them "as second-class citizens" and "denies them ownership over their own bodies."

Yet it is not obvious that a view of abortion as a human right follows from these stories. The troubled teenager, the struggling young mother, the woman whose desired pregnancy is complicated by an ostensibly life-threatening complication, the trans man "confused" in his pregnant body—these read as types, not by any fault of Luthra's, but because this is what abortion rights advocates have turned them into, largely for purposes of legislative persuasion. They have been designed to appeal to our sympathy, to persuade us that abortion can, at least in some cases, be justified.

It is up to the reader to ask whether we can summon the same level of sympathy for anyone seeking an abortion—without knowing their reasons, without asking whether they were using birth control or whether they plan to use it in the future. Conversely, can we extend this same compassion to individuals who decide to continue a pregnancy, planned or unplanned, despite circumstances or risks others might view as reasonable cause to terminate? When we trust anyone who is pregnant to make such a complex and personal decision for themselves, then we—politicians, health care providers, all of us—have to accept that they don't owe us any explanation. ●

[6]Darlene's case reads as an instructive counterexample to Stephania Taladrid's "The Life of the Mother" (*The New Yorker*, January 15, 2024), a devastating piece about a Texas woman with a high-risk pregnancy and multiple comorbidities whose doctors never talked to her about abortion as an option, and whose pregnancy ended with the death of both her and her baby.

People Walk Around

People walk around
With people in their head.
What some lovely person did.
What some lovely person said.
Heartthrob in the head.

I float to 86th Street with you in my heart.
I'm a pigeon cooing to a crumb of bread,
Except I'm kind of floating instead—
And it's not a crumb but a whole loaf of bread.
I feel I'm in an ambulance and you're about to save me

With a Kit Kat
And a Reese's Peanut Butter Cup.
I'm in an ambulance
With my teeth comically chattering.
And when I get inside your shop

I have to stand in line and you're behind a counter
That sells the new and does repairs.
And everybody stares.
I stand there for years.
I can remember when I first walked in the store,

When aeons ago I first opened the door
To feathered dinosaurs turning into birdsong,
And you began to sing along,
The first step to being human,
But the planet continued to go wrong.

—Frederick Seidel

No Place Like Home

Tim Flannery

Jonathan Kingdon's sketches of an agama lizard and a Nsenene bush cricket, 1954

Origin Africa: A Natural History
by Jonathan Kingdon.
Princeton University Press,
472 pp., $39.95

Jonathan Kingdon is one of Africa's most celebrated artists and naturalists. His paintings and sculptures have been exhibited from Cambridge to the Smithsonian and beyond, and adorn skyscrapers in Nairobi, rock shelters in KwaZulu-Natal, and churches in Kampala, Uganda, to mention just a few examples. Kingdon's distinctive paintings—sometimes abstracts composed of blocks of bright color that fill the entire canvas—draw their inspiration from Africa's extraordinary biodiversity, which, as he constantly reminds us, includes our own species.

Kingdon is perhaps best known globally as a naturalist and writer. His books fill entire shelves of my library, with the comprehensive six-volume *Mammals of Africa*, the authoritative guide to the continent's 1,160 species of land mammal, taking up most of one by itself. More portable and better known, *The Kingdon Field Guide to African Mammals* is an indispensable reference while on safari.

Kingdon's zoological research is inseparable from his art. Indeed, some of his artworks are summaries of his scientific findings, working in much the same way that an abstract of a scientific paper does. This is well illustrated by his painting *Visual Geometry in African Monkeys*, which appears in *Origin Africa* and depicts the colorfully marked patches of skin and fur on the faces, posteriors, and chests of cercopithecoid monkeys. By doing so, it provides both a key to identification and a summary of Kingdon's discussion of the evolutionary drivers of such ornamentation.

Currently based in Oxford and Rome, Kingdon was born in 1935 to English parents in colonial Tanganyika, now Tanzania. Integrated thinking—which takes into account time, place, sounds, organism interactions, and details of morphology—is the cornerstone of his research. His account of the Saharan locusts that swarmed around his childhood home beside Lake Victoria gives a sense of how this works. As the swarm arrived, he writes,

> the whirr of their wings mixed with the crackle of their legs and the squeaking of their jaws as they descended indiscriminately on every plant from tree to shrub, weed to grass.

The insects ate everything, leaving behind "a leafless landscape and a sludge of excrement." Flocks of wattled starlings followed, "all of them energetic consumers of locusts," their calls a mimicry of the locusts' "squeaks, screeches, rustles and bursts of hissing." Kingdon saw that each male starling had a slightly different arrangement of fleshy wattles and bald skin around its beak, jiggling like "animated insect puppets." He surmised that in their efforts to attract females, the male starlings have become caricatures of their favorite prey.

I know of no other living naturalist capable of such astonishing insights. Kingdon's work on the wattled heads of birds, for instance, from vultures to turkeys and cassowaries, makes it clear that the favored food of each species is reflected in the fleshy protuberances on their heads. Were we like birds, men going on dates would adorn their faces, heads, and necks with vivid simulacra of steak frites, kung pao chicken, or tacos al pastor.

One of the most striking aspects of Kingdon's writing and thinking is the way he deals with animals and humans as living individuals, rather than types. The closer an animal species is to our own, the more evident this becomes. Kingdon is especially enamored of gorillas, as the astonishing montage of gorilla faces he includes early in his new book, *Origin Africa*, makes clear. Each face is individual, and each clearly expresses a different emotion.

Kingdon has known one gorilla family in western Uganda for over thirty years, and its members have provided much of the raw material for his gorilla work. Their patriarch, before Kingdon first met them, was Ikimuga, a great silverback who had lost the fingers of one hand to a snare. One night, as he slept, Ikimuga was killed by an unusually large leopard. The big cat ate only his testicles, "as if to register contempt for such a feeble victim," Kingdon writes. While this may seem anthropomorphizing, it fits the facts, and I can think of no better explanation. As I read the sentence, I felt that I had entered the mind of a leopard, one of humanity's most feared predators, at the height of its powers.

Years later Kingdon, while in the company of a European guide named Mike, met another dominant male gorilla, Rugabo. Rugabo was fascinated by Mike's very prominent (and very ungorilla-like) nose. He sat down beside the man, reached out an enormous fist, and held the nose between his index and third fingers before bringing his knuckles to his own nose for a sniff. Then, "as the two primates looked momentarily into each other's faces, Mike thought he saw the corners of Rugabo's mouth turn up in the shadow of a smile."

Kingdon seems to be able to connect even with species that are distant from us in evolutionary terms. When he was very young, his family adopted a baby elephant, and the two played with an understanding and intimacy that has stayed with him ever since. The elephant "would come and wrap his trunk around my head," he writes,

> and, with its fingered tip, probe with gentle yet insistent movements into my ears, nose, mouth, even, very gently, my eyes. We watched one another continuously because our eyes seemed to be our greatest commonality.

And as they tickled each other, wrestled, and explored the world together, they would, in a glance, catch each other's moods.

In these and the many other anecdotes that pepper *Origin Africa*, the boundaries between the human species and other animals soften, then simply disappear. An image of the head of a female Sumatran orangutan alongside a self-portrait represents the apogee of the process. The distribution of facial hair is strikingly similar in both, as are the nose and the hair on the head, while the intelligent look in the orangutan's eyes seems to confirm Kingdon's opinion that apes may see us as "aberrant, comical, certainly disagreeable versions of themselves."

Origin Africa is a twinned biography of the author and his natal continent. The project had a long gestation (Kingdon had been talking about it for decades); the pandemic finally provided the time for him to complete it. The profusely illustrated and exquisitely written book rests on three pillars: Kingdon's prodigious research, his art, and an extraordinary bequest of notes, papers, and letters left to him by his mother, Dorothy, which details verbatim his words and childhood experiences, and includes his childhood sketches (she also saved a baboon skull that he had transformed into a toy racing car). Dorothy's papers are of particular interest because they provide many vignettes of life in colonial East Africa, as well as insights into the young Jonathan's intensely curious mind.

The papers record that Kingdon entered the world in the city of Tabora, where his father, Teddy, was stationed as a colonial officer in the British territory of Tanganyika. But the circumstances of his birth were extraordinary, almost resembling the nascence of the founder of a classical civilization. One of the Kingdons' neighbors had raised a leopard cub known as Nippy. By the time Dorothy was about to give birth, the animal was three-quarters grown and hunting independently, though still returning daily to the neighbors' house to rest.

The young leopardess seemed to recognize Dorothy's pregnancy, and the

JONATHAN KINGDON

two female mammals formed a tight bond. After Jonathan was born, Nippy entered the room, and an apprehensive Dorothy watched as the big cat licked the infant all over, as if Jonathan were her own cub. (Kingdon's reputation is such that when I related this extraordinary incident to a colleague, he sat still for a few moments before responding, "Would we expect anything less from the great man?")

For the first seven years of his life Jonathan's world was defined by three authorities—his mother, his father, and Saidi, a Nyamwezi man who acted as Jonathan's "tutor, sentry and buddy." As a result, Jonathan grew up speaking Swahili and English with equal facility, and the worldview he formed was likewise both European and profoundly African.

Saidi encouraged Jonathan to observe nature carefully, his folk stories bridging the gap between the human and animal worlds. One of Kingdon's earliest memories is of watching a pair of horned chameleons copulate, which he brought to Saidi's attention. "Little brother," Saidi said,

> we are very, very lucky to witness this act. These are messengers from ancient days. They say, "One day your skin will wrinkle all over, like us, you will move very, very slowly, like us, but you and your *watoto* will live long, like us . . ." Never forget this day.

From an early age Kingdon was a natural mimic, and his mother's writings provide abundant examples of him encountering animals and imitating their calls, even before he learned their names. It's an ability that has stayed with him his entire life: it is fascinating to watch Kingdon tell a story involving animals or other human beings, not only because of the vocal mimicry involved but because his posture, facial expressions, and movement produce an exceptional simulacrum of his subject. I once saw him imitate a silverback: the tall, muscular human completely transformed into the awe-inspiring sight of a terrifying male gorilla. It was impossible not to be intimidated.

Origin Africa provides the most riveting account of the evolution of the African continent, and the animal life on it, that I have read. Africa's most ancient extant lineages stretch back to around the time when it was incorporated into the supercontinent of Pangaea, among the most venerable being the lungfish, the killifish, and the frogs. These are the animal "nobility" of the African fauna, and the stories these travelers from deep time have to tell are extraordinary.

The delicate spookpadda, or Table Mountain ghost frog, is a prime example. The creature grows slowly in its bleak environment on the upper slopes of Table Mountain overlooking Cape Town. Its ancestors have been living in this challenging environment, clinging to life among the inhospitable rocks and spiny bushes, for around 140 million years. These frogs are so delicate, yet so perfectly adapted to the rocks they live among, that they have survived countless droughts, deluges, and other dramatic changes in climate—even the asteroid strike that destroyed the dinosaurs 66 million years ago.

Only a few major types of mammals have Africa as their point of origin, but this select group includes both elephants and humans. Kingdon argues that Africa's unique properties—including its unsurpassed biodiversity and regions of long-standing fertility such as the Great Rift Valley—assured that human evolution could not have occurred anywhere else on Earth. And as he states, it is a scientific fact that every human outside Africa is a colonist, for Africa is our species' homeland. Yet paradoxically Africa is, according to Kingdon, "an unimaginable place" for many people alive today, our "center stage" not even ranking as a sideshow in their thinking. It is this attitude that *Origin Africa* was written to change.

If there is a fault with the book, it is that though it broadly condemns racism, examples hardly feature. The only one Kingdon gives us in detail concerns himself:

> One morning, while I was buying fruit in Mbeya's open market, a gang of youths swanked past and one called out, "*Tazama huyu nyani zeru, mweupe kama usaha, ninajaa na karaha,*" ("Look at that albino baboon, white like pus, how disgusting.") A market woman turned to me. "Don't listen to them, brother, they're just hooligans."

I would have thought that during his long life Kingdon would have encountered other instances of racism that were worth reporting.

Africa has changed profoundly over Kingdon's lifetime. In 1930 there were estimated to be around 10 million elephants and around 166 million people on the continent, but today there are fewer than half a million elephants and 1.45 billion people. As Kingdon writes:

> Africa is the most misrepresented continent on Earth, with the most dehumanized and abused of histories. . . . In concert with the degradation of our people, we watch the annihilation of our fauna, our flora and the natural communities they form—assaults driven by global anarchy. Likewise, domineering industrial nations have stolen the dignity and reduced the worth of human beings, while turning the world's climate against us in what feels more and more like an implacable rampage.

Having lived through and been part of these processes (Kingdon confesses with great regret to shooting elephants in his youth), he is the perfect guide to Africa's recent natural history, and his book provides many examples of the dilemmas faced by those seeking to balance animal and human needs. When writing of the baby elephant his family fostered, Kingdon relates:

> The elephantlet had been orphaned by his mother's enlarged appetite for vegetables—her last meal had been an entire plot of millet, the precious reward for a human family's labour following a fierce famine. Her long white incisors were auctioned and the proceeds entered the treasury that issued famine food for the farmer's family and a portion of my father's salary.

Other examples of the desecration of nature related by Kingdon are fiercer and crueler. "I was once taken to a site not far from Nairobi," he writes, "where an entire herd of tame and much-loved giraffes was encircled and machine-gunned by young soldiers." But it is the rapine of global corporations that Kingdon reserves his greatest vitriol for:

> In the last forests, corporations eat trees as if they were chainsaw-voiced death-watch beetles. . . . Trawlers . . . hoover up seas and lakes . . . like rampaging aquatic dragons.

Kingdon clearly fears for the future of Africa's biodiversity, but it is anger—a will to fight back—rather than despair that characterizes these parts of the book.

Overall, though, the mood of *Origin Africa* is joyful. It brims with exuberant creativity. In Kingdon's youth, the mood of the continent was optimistic. He recalls that as a student at Makerere University in Uganda he lived

> among many fervent Pan-Africanists, all of us convinced that the aggressive, racist, exaggerated nationalism that had culminated in two World Wars and one Cold one should have been enough to invite unity among thinking people and especially among young Africans. Then the brutal political murder of our most charismatic Pan-Africanist, Patrice Lumumba, in 1961 so enraged all Africans that by 1963 Kwame Nkrumah and Haile Selassie had huge support and a done deal in founding the Organisation of African Unity.

Still today, it is to the organization's successor, the African Union—with its focus on health, peace, and the promotion of democracy—that Kingdon looks for hope.

The octogenarian African even dares to speculate that in the future Africa will lead the world. "Now is the time to break decisively with our still all-too-colonial past," he writes, asserting that if Africa was humanity's nursery, then it will one day be recognized as the world's university. The continent, he believes, is well suited to this role because of its extraordinary diversity, natural riches, and intact ecosystems, an understanding of which is vital if we are to repair our world. If and when that day arrives, humanity will have come full circle. ●

A Legacy of Plunder

Francisco Cantú

Seeing Red:
Indigenous Land,
American Expansion,
and the Political Economy
of Plunder in North America
by Michael John Witgen.
Omohundro Institute of Early
American History and Culture/
University of North Carolina Press,
366 pp., $24.00 (paper)

Growing up in the southwestern United States, I often heard stories from my stepfather about people who enriched themselves by stealing from Natives. These were not tales from the past, but ongoing stories taking place on the reservation lands where he was employed and later lived. My stepfather spent much of his career working to preserve land and water rights for tribes and their members, and he spoke to me frequently of the businesspeople, corporations, lawyers, and federal and tribal officials who routinely tried to defraud Native people. Though my stepfather is white, he grew up with extended family who were enrolled members of western tribes, and he became invested from an early age in understanding the bureaucratic machinations that denied people land and money that was rightfully theirs. As a boy I imagined the predatory individuals and entities he described as simple villains, and even as I grew older and began to comprehend the shape and design of their trickery, they remained faceless, the means of their duplicity hidden and incomprehensible.

The institutional lineage of indigenous dispossession is at the center of Michael John Witgen's *Seeing Red*, which was a finalist for last year's Pulitzer Prize in history. It is neither a popular history nor a polemic, offering instead a deeply researched look at the ideological and legal foundations of the systems that have despoiled Native nations. Witgen's subtitle, "Indigenous Land, American Expansion, and the Political Economy of Plunder in North America," reveals the scope of his history, which examines the ways, both sweeping and quotidian, that early American settlers, traders, diplomats, and politicians stole and expropriated land. The Native people in Witgen's account, however, are recognized not for their victimhood, but for their adeptness at reasserting their rights, dignity, and sovereignty against the supposedly insurmountable power of the state.

Witgen's first book, *An Infinity of Nations: How the Native New World Shaped Early North America* (2011), told the history of the first encounters between Natives and white explorers in the Great Lakes region. Witgen emphasizes how the Native people of this region and beyond, contrary to popular mythology, remained unconquered and unassimilated well into the nineteenth century, living in a "Native New World" that endured and thrived for hundreds of years after European contact. Through his reexamination of entrenched narratives, Witgen has joined a flourishing group of Native writers, including Nick Estes, David Treuer, Jacqueline Keeler, and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, whose work is helping to change how Native people are situated in the arc of North American history.

An advertisement for the sale of Indian land by the US Department of the Interior, 1911. The man pictured is Padani-Kokipa-Sni of the Yankton Indian Tribe; photograph by DeLancey Gill.

In *Seeing Red* Witgen maintains his attention on the Great Lakes but shifts his focus to the nascent days of Manifest Destiny, when the region was imagined as part of a northwestern frontier preordained to be incorporated into a rapidly expanding nation. Witgen writes about this region for a reason: he is a citizen of the Red Cliff Band of Lake Superior Ojibwe, whose modern-day reservation is located in the far north of Wisconsin. The Red Cliff Band forms part of the Great Lakes people known as the Anishinaabe, whose ancestral homelands span both sides of what is today the US–Canada border, including swaths of Quebec, Ontario, Michigan, Wisconsin, and Minnesota, encompassing peoples often referred to as the Odawa, Chippewa, Potawatomi, or Algonquian. With the arrival of Europeans this vast area became an early American borderland where Native life converged with the interests of various colonial powers, newly formed governments, and a shifting array of immigrant and American-born settlers.

The colonists who arrived in North America understood the indigenous people they encountered as "a primitive form of humanity that had failed to advance beyond the state of nature," writes Witgen, inhabitants of "an uncivilized continent waiting to be settled." This notion, inherited from the Catholic Church's fifteenth-century "Doctrine of Discovery," meant that even as the newly independent United States forged a new government that supposedly rejected colonialism, it held fast to the principle that non-Christian Natives could not truly possess their land. The expansion of an American settler state was further supported by the prevailing belief that Natives were destined to diminish before an inevitable tide of white settlers. "The construct of the vanishing Indian," Witgen writes, "was a central trope of the ideology that imagined North America as the New World and was meant to rationalize what US citizens would now recognize as ethnic cleansing."

As the United States entered the nineteenth century and sought to dominate the continent, its gaze became increasingly fixed on its periphery. The terrain beyond its newly established boundaries was understood to be *terra nullius*, land owned by no one. That phrase evoked the romance of exploration while also functioning as a legal term of enormous consequence: "Declaring North America terra nullius," Witgen writes, "implied that the land had never been properly cultivated or truly settled. It remained, in effect, in a state of nature, the condition in which it existed at the beginning of time." Under this principle, inherited from the same European laws that supported the establishment of the original thirteen colonies, such land constituted an expansive commons that could be converted—through settlement, cultivation, and other forms of development—into private property owned by the individuals who "improved" it.

Early presidents like Thomas Jefferson liked to imagine the United States as different from the foreign powers it had fought against and replaced. After sending the newly formed Corps of Discovery west into the Louisiana Territory, Jefferson recounted his philosophy to Native leaders who traveled to meet him:

> We are descended from the old nations which live beyond the great water but we and our forefathers have been so long here that we seem like you to have grown out of this land: we consider ourselves no longer as of the old nations beyond the great water, but as united in one family with our red brethren here.

Jefferson was quick to clarify that the Republic's vision of family relations was subject to unambiguous hierarchy: "We are now your fathers," he proclaimed, "and you shall not lose by the change."

Jeffersonian Indian policy flowed naturally from the idea of Natives as children; living in an uncivilized state of nature, they could not be legally entitled to anything that belonged foremost to their civilized parents. Americans in the new republic had always understood their national boundaries to be temporary, and in short order the US established a system to designate the lands at its periphery as territories that would be gradually incorporated into new states as their white populations grew. The first of these was the Northwest Territory, founded in 1787 and made up of the land between the southern shore of the Great Lakes, the Upper Mississippi, and the Ohio River. While removing indigenous people to make way for settlement became an immediate priority of territorial governments elsewhere on the frontier, here, Witgen writes, "this process proved to be most lucrative, not when Native peoples were eliminated, but when they remained in place as part of an ongoing colonial project."

Something that set the Northwest Territory apart from the industry-fueled North or the plantation-powered South was the presence of the fur trade, which remained a dominant economic force in the region for around two hundred years. Here indigenous people's intimate knowledge of the geography and their unmatched skill in hunting and trapping beaver, fox, otter, mink, muskrat, and marten were essential to meeting demand in eastern and European fur markets, which meant less pressure for removal. Thus Natives continued to outnumber white settlers in the Northwest Territory well into the nineteenth century, giving them a degree of political and social power

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seldom acknowledged in the annals of Western expansion.

Witgen often pauses his scholarly account to capture the rhythms of Anishinaabe life, describing the movement of people through boreal forests and across treeless expanses of plains and prairies. He describes, too, the ebb and flow of harsh winters and bountiful summers, the seasonal gatherings to hunt and harvest and make sugar from maple, and the bustling villages and outposts connected by networks of alliance, marriage, gift-giving, and trade. The freedom the Anishinaabe maintained in these lands, Witgen asserts, "forced the United States to negotiate place and belonging with the Indigenous inhabitants of a land they wanted to imagine as an empty wilderness."

Gradually, however, the fur trade in the Northwest began to wane, and soon new infrastructure like the Erie Canal, completed in 1825, facilitated travel to the region and made the removal of lumber and other resources more profitable. This opened the door to what Witgen calls "the political economy of plunder—the extraction of wealth from colonized Indigenous subject nations through the treaty process." These deals were usually engineered by government negotiators to extinguish the limited rights Natives had to their ancestral lands. Under US law, Natives were not recognized as outright owners of their land, but they could claim a lesser legal "title" established through occupancy. Under these treaties, Witgen writes,

> Native peoples ceded title to their lands to the federal government, which then converted this territory into the public domain of the United States. The federal government, acting as the sole proprietor over this land base, made it available for purchase as private property to settlers. These settlers were almost exclusively white, and they took possession of this land at a subsidized price in exchange for settling Native homelands and making them part of the US Republic.

The tribal land ceded during the treaty-making process was sold off not only to individual settlers who converted parcels into private homes, farms, and ranches, but to agents of industry who reaped enormous profits from the terrain through logging, fishing, mining, and transportation. Even as it became clear that everyone except the Natives was earning money from the cession of their territory, US agents continued to present these measly deals as tribes' "only chance for compensation," turning the signing of these treaties, Witgen argues, into "an involuntary or coercive process."

Most of these treaties also included agreements by the government to pay cash annuities and supply yearly provisions to the tribes. These forms of compensation were usually stipulated to sunset after several decades, in line with the idea of the "vanishing Native." Though the payouts were supposedly "designated for Native peoples," Witgen explains how they "mostly wound up in the hands of traders, territorial officials, and local merchants." In one memorable passage, he describes how large portions of the benefits agreed upon in the 1837 Treaty of St. Peters were diverted into the pockets of white settlers. During negotiations, Wisconsin governor Henry Dodge ultimately agreed to pay annuities of $30,500 for twenty years. However, this was subdivided into a mere $9,500 in actual cash payments to the tribe, with $19,000 coming in the form of trade goods and another $2,000 as yearly provisions to be supplied by the region's white traders—thus guaranteeing them two decades' worth of annual pay from the government.

Of the cash designated to flow directly to the tribes, more than a third was earmarked by the government to pay off debts supposedly owed to white traders. Two of the region's most prominent merchants received payments as large as $25,000 and $28,000 from this arrangement—nearly six years' worth of the tribe's cash annuity. White traders and merchants were also notified in advance of when and where Natives would receive their annuities, and were even advised which goods could be most easily sold to them as they emerged from the government office with cash in hand.

Further muddying the waters was the fact that treaties were rarely negotiated solely between government agents and tribes and usually involved a plethora of middlemen. While some were allies, many more were the same kind of opportunistic criminals who would a century later perpetrate the Reign of Terror against the Osage (as depicted in David Grann's and Martin Scorsese's *Killers of the Flower Moon*), or the same kind of modern-day thieves and schemers I heard about from my stepfather growing up. "These white interlocutors," Witgen writes, "who most often had Native wives and mixed-race children, facilitated the negotiation of treaties by acting as interpreters, counselors, and debt collectors to the leadership of Indigenous nations." The services of these men rarely came free, and they usually laid claim to some portion of the negotiated settlements, payouts, and even, in some cases, land grants.

During treaty negotiations special benefits and privileges were often arranged for those known in that era as "half-breeds"—the children of intermarried white and indigenous parents. The unique in-betweenness of mixed-race Natives meant that if they spoke English and were willing to conform to "American" behaviors and customs, they could often enjoy access to American privileges while benefiting from the economic compensations available to them as Natives. Witgen explains:

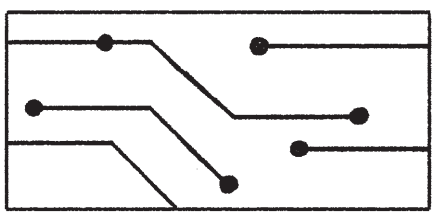
> To make good on these connections and claim their place in the civil society of the US Republic, the half-breeds of the Northwest would have to embrace their identity as a civilized people, denying or at least denigrating their Indigenous identities and selling out their Indigenous nations as part of the bargain.

At times this bargain backfired: in some negotiations—such as the 1836 Treaty of Washington and the 1837 Treaty of St. Peters—their mixed identity ended up shutting them out of rights to land that were reserved exclusively for full-blooded Natives. In these instances, Witgen writes, "they were Indian enough to be compensated for the extinction of Native title to their ancestral lands but not Indian enough to be granted a reserved homeland." This led certain groups, such as the "Council of the Half Breeds" of the Chippewa Nation, to insist upon full incorporation into American society by petitioning the US for all "the privileges and immunities of free White Citizens of the United States."

Among the Anishinaabe and many other Native groups, race and national identity were largely ambiguous notions, and many refused American attempts to impose categorizations based on blood, adoption, or citizenship.* Much more important for most Natives, Witgen writes, was kinship. White settlers grew to understand and exploit this, too—many missionaries and traders, for example, took Native wives with the expectation that they would serve as domestic laborers, translators, and interpreters who could also provide access and influence in matters of tribal decision-making. While marriage allowed many of these women to be included in American civil society, Witgen is careful to cite the historian Lucy Eldersveld Murphy, whose work describes how wedlock "drew Native wives into the US body politic, subjecting them, their children, and their property to the control of their husbands and to the new government and its courts."

As *Seeing Red* nears its end the Anishinaabe seem to be hurtling toward the grim outcome readers have been conditioned to expect. In his closing chapters Witgen reveals how government agents sowed discord among tribal members during treaty negotiations, and he gestures toward a Native world that had been "disavowed and dismembered." Then, on February 6, 1850, President Zachary Taylor issued a removal order nullifying previously negotiated treaties and calling for the Anishinaabe "to move onto lands not yet ceded to the federal government."

This order severely underestimated the degree to which the Anishinaabe



had ingrained themselves into the local economy of the Great Lakes, and was quickly met with petitions, protests, and a deluge of letters and editorials by the area's prominent white missionaries, legislators, and journalists. The removal, they declared, was "uncalled for by any interest of the government or the people of the United States." But their concern, Witgen writes, was more economic than altruistic:

> In the last states to be forged out of the Northwest Territory, Native peoples as well as Native land had become a source of wealth creation for American settlers. Native peoples were no longer obstacles in the way of US immigrants as they had been in Ohio, Illinois, and Indiana. Rather, the presence of Native peoples, stripped of virtually all their land, denied citizenship in the Republic, and legally deemed wards of the federal government, represented a source of cash income.

As white citizens of the Wisconsin and Michigan territories petitioned the government for a reversal of the removal order, Gichi-Bizhiki, the principal leader of the Lake Superior Ojibwe traveled to Washington to request an audience with President Millard Fillmore, who had succeeded Taylor following his unexpected death. As Gichi-Bizhiki made his way to Washington in the company of his American son-in-law, who chronicled the trip, he was met with Army officers, Indian agents, and US marshals who attempted again and again to turn his party back.

Upon arrival in Washington Gichi-Bizhiki was ordered to return home by none other than the Commissioner of Indian Affairs and the Secretary of the Interior. However, a chance encounter with a friendly senator at a Washington hotel finally landed him his long-hoped-for audience, in which he steadfastly demanded that the US honor its previously negotiated treaties. President Fillmore ultimately agreed, leading to the creation of permanent reservations in Wisconsin where several bands of Lake Superior Chippewa still live to this day. "Gichi-Bizhiki and the Anishinaabe people throughout the Great Lakes region refused to vanish," Witgen writes. Instead they insisted "that the United States allow them to remain in their homelands and continually negotiate the terms of their colonization."

At the conclusion of *Seeing Red*, the downfall of the Anishinaabe that many readers will have braced for never comes, elucidating Witgen's overarching point about the false inevitability of Indigenous disappearance. Even as he meticulously recounts the construction of a political mythology that infantilized and diminished Native peoples—laying bare the inner workings of the policies, business dealings, and treaty negotiations that perpetuated ever-increasing forms of dispossession—he also reveals all the ways tribes of the Northwest Territory subverted and outlasted the engines of their demise.

In the book's final pages Witgen brings us into the modern era by offering a brief account of his grandmother, a direct descendant of Gichi-Bizhiki whose extended family lived on the very same reservations Gichi-Bizhiki forced the United States to establish in the 1850s. Finishing Witgen's book, I began to wish that the accounts I heard from my stepfather, about the people and policies that still pilfer Native wealth and resources, could have more often been paired with images like these, of indigenous permanence and ongoing lineages of cunning resistance. But even more, I wish I had been taught to recognize exactly how the heroes of the stories told again and again about our past—those quintessentially American pilgrims and settlers, traders and trappers, governors and presidents—participated in plundering and expropriating an infinity of indigenous nations in the creation of our own. ●

*For more on the role of mixed-descent Natives in American history, see Anne F. Hyde, *Born of Lakes and Plains* (Norton, 2022).

Russian Decency

Zhenya Bruno

A child driving a miniature tank at the Army International Games, organized annually by the Russian Ministry of Defense, near Moscow, August 2022

I Love Russia:
Reporting from a Lost Country
by Elena Kostyuchenko, translated from the Russian by Bela Shayevich and Ilona Yazhbin Chavasse.
Penguin Press, 363 pp., $30.00

On February 25, 2022, the front page of *Novaya Gazeta*, Russia's acclaimed independent newspaper, ran the headline "RUSSIA IS BOMBING UKRAINE." People reading *The New York Times* or watching the BBC already knew this. But it was news to most people in Russia. In those last days of February I asked people around me in St. Petersburg—friends, acquaintances, strangers working the counters at diners and stores—"What do you think, are we shelling Ukrainian cities? Are we shelling Kyiv?" Those who had friends or family abroad typically said yes. Those who didn't said no, of course not, what a crazy idea.

And although the dissemination of "unreliable information" about the Russian Armed Forces was not criminalized until March, some people already took the question as a moral transgression. One older woman I work with overheard my conversation in line at the office coat check and confronted me about it hours later. No, she said, we are not shelling Kyiv. The TV would have reported it if we had been. There was a flash of confidence in her eyes, a claim that certain lines should not be crossed. Elena Kostyuchenko gives us a term for this certainty. She calls it decency: "A decent person follows established rules," she explains. "They obey their elders. They don't insist on their rights."

Kostyuchenko is an investigative journalist. Her new book, *I Love Russia*, is about power in Russia, and about the media. It is also a love letter of sorts to *Novaya Gazeta*, where she worked for seventeen years. Founded in 1993, *Novaya Gazeta* has received numerous prizes for the courage and quality of its coverage. Its journalists have been threatened, assaulted, and murdered.

Once, the paper came out in print three times a week. It was available by subscription, at newsstands all over Russia and for free online. Then, in mid-March 2022, after its truth-telling about the invasion of Ukraine, newsstands stopped carrying it. Website traffic surged—to 23 million unique monthly visitors—just before new censorship laws forced the newspaper to suspend publication. It continues today, online and in exile, from Riga, Latvia, as *Novaya Gazeta Europe*, but has become hard to access in Russia. The state censorship agency, Roskomnadzor, blocks its web pages.

Kostyuchenko was born in 1987. Her book opens around the time *Novaya Gazeta* was founded, with her childhood in impoverished post-Soviet Yaroslavl, some two hundred miles northeast of Moscow. As a little girl, she writes, in a characteristically attentive phrase, she was captivated by the TV screen: touching the dust on its surface "felt like touching a moth's wings, ever-so-gently." She would watch cartoons, and her mother would watch the news. But the quality of their old television set kept getting worse, until "it became hard to make out the faces in the black-and-white static."

She turned her attention to newspapers. At fourteen she looked through the public library's collection of *Novaya Gazeta* and realized that "I didn't know anything about my country. TV had lied to me." Three years later she was in Moscow studying journalism and working at *Novaya* as an intern.

I Love Russia collects twelve of the investigative articles Kostyuchenko published in *Novaya Gazeta* between 2008 and 2022, interspersed with shorter autobiographical essays. "Justice vs. Decency" is one such essay, about the attempted deportation of Manana Dzhabeliya from Moscow in 2006 for a lapsed passport registration. (Dzhabeliya, a fifty-year-old refugee from Georgia, had gotten caught in a bureaucratic mistake: her passport was at the embassy, awaiting renewal.)

"You're an adult woman," Kostyuchenko relays the words of a police inspector chastising Dzhabeliya. "Why are you torturing yourself and your loved ones? It is indecent." Dzhabeliya's misdeed was refusing to sign a ruling that would have had her deported. Formally, she did not need to; her status in the country was legal. But "Manana was being indecent," Kostyuchenko writes, meaning that she was conspicuously demanding her legal rights. "She starved herself, got on the nerves of her jailers, attracted attention from human rights activists and journalists, she insisted on her rights instead of accepting her lot."

Kostyuchenko had become involved in Dzhabeliya's case through her activist friend Irina Bergalieva, who founded the Moscow Dormitory Movement on behalf of impoverished residents in meager housing. "We were also behaving indecently," she continues. "The human rights activists held press conferences. I wrote stories." Dzhabeliya at last got a court date. It was a clear-cut case. The deportation was canceled. But the judge's decision came at the end of the workweek, so her release was postponed to the following Monday. She never made it out. Dzhabeliya died in prison that Saturday.

This stinging essay is followed in the book by an investigative report that takes us into a police station where Kostyuchenko spent twenty-four hours undercover as an intern in 2009. (She got in after a police officer she'd never met tracked her down to thank her for one of her articles, which, unbeknownst to her, had gotten him out of hot water. Call me, he told her, if you ever have any unresolved problems, if I can help. Two years later, she did.)

One person inside the police station knew that she was a journalist. The others conducted themselves as usual: drunk and stoned at HQ, watching cop shows on television, wielding their considerable power over helpless people whose crimes they made up to cover their monthly work plan. The officers worked together to fabricate these reports. This, too, is a feature of what Kostyuchenko calls decency: giving moral credence to the illegal actions that are carried out to support one's colleagues.

The British historian Geoffrey Hosking writes that the Russian tradition of *krugovaia poruka*—of holding an entire community liable for the misdeeds of its individual members—gives Russian law "the form of command from above, reinforced by peer pressure."[1] This structure encourages people to cover for each other, to protect each other from top-down commands. "An officer will do anything for another officer," Kostyuchenko explains. "He'll take a bullet, stick up for him in front

[1] "Patronage and the Russian State," *The Slavonic and East European Review*, Vol. 78, No. 2 (April 2000), p. 308.

NANNA HEITMANN/MAGNUM PHOTOS

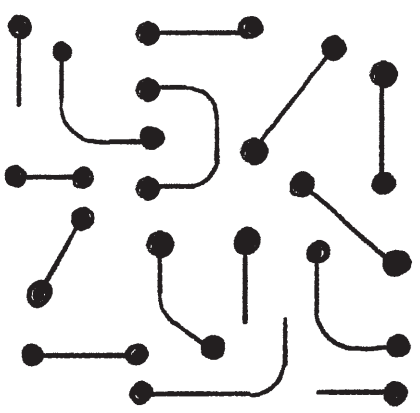
of the administration, sign a phony report, get his son into college."

"Detectives have to send forty cases to court every month, or else they'll lose their bonuses," she writes. And bonuses are a big deal here, whether formal or informal, taxed or untaxed, recorded or not. Police officers, firefighters, metallurgical workers, medical workers, janitorial staff: everywhere it's the same structure. People say that bonuses make up 30 to 50 percent of their income, and that they can get docked for minor infractions.

Kostyuchenko brings us inside a psychiatric institution whose patients are kept in conditions worse, an employee tells her, than prison. Some patients are classed as nonverbal, primitive, vegetative (sometimes mistakenly, it turns out: one woman writes poetry). "Not enough nuance in the system for them all," a doctor tells Kostyuchenko, who recedes into the background of such articles and lets her subjects speak instead.

The institution's staff members are horribly overworked. Before the pandemic, each psychiatrist had one hundred patients—then it was four hundred. Nurses speak of endless reports to fill out: "If I miss filling in one line, I get docked all of my pay," one says. Janitorial staff speak of subsistence wages docked for failures beyond their control, of early retirement plans denied by bureaucratic sleights of hand. "We're scared, all the time," the cleaning woman tells Kostyuchenko. "We bring everything from home—Mr. Clean, Fairy, some stronger stuff to get the rust out. The stuff they give us doesn't cut it. And if you don't get it clean, you'll lose your bonus."

The cleaning woman did not make it into the English translation. (The original essays are long and were



edited down for the book.) But this story, also about the importance of bonuses, did: drinking at work with his colleagues, a senior officer recounts how he was once reprimanded for disobeying a superior and dropping his holster on the ground to jump into a freezing river where a woman was drowning. He saved her, just before passing out. Both wound up hospitalized. He recalls:

> They told me that she survived, but I don't know—she never came in to see me, maybe she was embarrassed.... They ended up taking my bonus away.... That's my very best memory.

The world Kostyuchenko describes is "a lot of Russian roulette—you could end up in jail if a cop didn't like you." But by the same token, personal contacts can also help get you out. Publicly opposing state-backed networks of power rarely ends well: protesters are beaten, arrested, harassed; journalists are killed. But personal relationships with people within these power structures might help you move around them. This is how everything works in Russia.

It is how journalism works, too. In 2021 Dmitry Muratov, *Novaya Gazeta*'s cofounder, was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts to safeguard freedom of expression. (A year later he auctioned the medal to raise $100 million for Ukrainian refugee children.) Interviewing him for *The New Yorker*, Masha Gessen explains that he managed to keep *Novaya* open because "he knows many of the men who, through the years, have wielded power in Russia.... Other opposition journalists are an abstracted enemy to these men, but not Muratov—he drinks with them."

The state itself also works this way, around its own laws. "We do not have a law for private military organizations," President Putin explained in July 2023, and so Wagner, the private military company widely celebrated in Russia for brutal efficiency, "simply does not exist." Yet he also insisted that Wagner was entirely state funded. And everyone knew all about them. When Wagner troops marched on Moscow in full battle formation that June, shooting down the military planes and helicopters that were sent to stop them, people came out to greet them with flowers. The FSB, the Federal Security Service, brought criminal charges against Yevgeny Prigozhin for having organized this armed insurrection. But then Wagner pulled back and all charges against Prigozhin were dropped.

Laws, juridical norms, "are written by people to protect order and stability in the country," Margarita Simonyan, editor-in-chief of RT, reassured TV viewers. "And if in some exceptional, critical, cases they stop performing this function, then they can go take a hike." Prigozhin's private jet went down in flames two months later, en route to St. Petersburg from Moscow. Putin explained that the plane had blown up from the inside: fragments of hand grenades were found in the passengers' bodies. "Unfortunately," he said, "no tests were carried out for the presence of alcohol and drugs in the victims' blood. In my opinion, it would've been important to do that analysis."

Nine years earlier, in 2014, state spokesmen insisted that meeting foreign demands for Russia to stop its military intervention in eastern Ukraine was "impossible, because we are not there." So when a freezer truck crossed from Ukraine into Russia carrying the bodies of men killed in combat, this was somewhat problematic—and the bodies seemingly vanished, leaving no paper trace. Those people who managed to retrieve their loved ones did so not through legal or bureaucratic means but thanks to the people they happened to know.

Investigating the story, Kostyuchenko met Lyana, a sales clerk who learned that her husband's body had been in the truck and who wanted desperately to give him a proper

burial. "I went to work, but the girls could see the state I was in," she said. "They started looking for him too, through their acquaintances. Some knew people in the police, some in the FSB—everywhere, nothing." The FSB outranks the police, its power vast and clandestine. A connection in a veterans' organization got Lyana into the hospital where the bodies were kept, but there again the door closed. Security officers gave her an FSB phone number. In the English translation, the guard says,

> Just calm down and explain everything to this FSB officer. He'll issue orders to the head of the hospital, and then you . . . If it were up to me, but it's not. I was told: don't let them in.

It sounds friendlier in the Russian original. I would translate it as:

> Just quietly explain it all to this FSB guy, he'll give the hospital director the go-ahead, and you . . . My heart goes out to you, but it's not up to me. I was told: don't let them in.

The FSB officer they contact does not seem forthcoming, but then mysterious people start calling. They offer to release Lyana's husband's body in a sealed casket. But she wants to open it. She calls local morgues. The people she talks to can't help her, but some try to find a solution. One morgue worker tells her:

> Try to understand, this is a Russian citizen, who died in combat. And our country is not conducting any combat operations. Listen to my advice, I've been in the business 25 years. You've got to get an official identification, with a protocol, and not open the casket yourself. You don't know who's inside. What do they say? "We haven't received any bodies." Your other option is to just bury what you have. We won't hold him, it's very risky for us. FSB guys appear out of nowhere in such stories. It might even be some kind of provocation . . .

In the English text, parts of this quote are misattributed. Lyana herself gets the first line: "This is a Russian citizen who died in a combat operation," she says. To which the morgue worker answers: "But our country is not involved in any combat operations." Again, the English translation is less friendly than the original Russian; the worker's tone is harsher, more official, less like a stranger trying to help. But strangers do help, especially if some personal relation can be established. This is how Lyana gets to bury her husband: a friend finds a connection to a general, who promises that if the body is not released "he will personally accompany them to [the army morgue]. 'But only one body, you got it?' the general says. 'Don't ask me for any more relatives. I can only get one body out!'"

Differences in tone and emphasis are inevitable in translations—a translation creates a new text, after all. Still, it's interesting to track the changes: characters and situations become less ambiguous, descriptions of economic constraints thin out. Perhaps this is reasonable. Anglophone readers might welcome a more clear-cut narrative, in line with traditional images of the totalitarian Russian state. But Kostyuchenko's writing overflows all such easy divisions. The world that she shows us is not easily parsed into state and society, villains and victims. It is structured by top-down commands and animated by informal relations all the way through. These relations involve people breaking orders, regulations, and laws to help others. Sometimes they solidify into networks of personal power; other times they are isolated ethical acts.

Investigating an oil spill in an FSB-controlled company town, Kostyuchenko finds most people unwilling to talk. "I'd talk to you," people say, "but I'd lose my job."

> The city says: Those who aren't friends with the [mining company] aren't friends with common sense.
>
> The city says: If there is no Complex, there is no us.
>
> The city says: Why did you even come here?

But she also finds people who help her. A boat captain takes her, along with two Greenpeace activists and their photographer, to collect water samples under the cover of darkness: "He knows that the other captains were fined, that they were threatened, but he is still taking us. Why? 'I love these places. And I know them very well.'" When a man known locally as "FSB Sasha" descends on them in the tundra in a little red helicopter, accuses them of minor infractions, and confiscates their diesel, the locals give them fuel, "which is like gold here. They say, 'The helicopter has been looking for you for two days.'"

The state and the mining company blend into one extra-juridical muddle of power: "It's a factory town and nobody needs a revolution," Kostyuchenko writes. FSB Sasha helicopters in alongside the head of the company's security department, which is itself staffed by former police and FSB officers. Staffing decisions reflect more personal interests as well, "like when the wife of the deputy head of the local FSB used to work there. 'She'd always get very good bonuses.'" FSB Sasha waves an expired warrant around while confiscating their diesel. He doesn't need a fresh one. The FSB uses the image of law, but need not obey it.

Nor need the state obey borders. Russia does not border Ukraine, explained Viktor Zolotov, head of the National Guard, at a National Security Council meeting held on February 21, 2022, in the Kremlin. "This is the Americans' border, because they are the masters in that country."

I Love Russia ends on the other side of this border, with Kostyuchenko reporting from Mykolaiv, Ukraine. She speaks with residents whose children have been killed by Russian shelling, whose houses have been destroyed, who have been gunned down in their cars and survived. It's painful to read.

The article wasn't up on *Novaya Gazeta*'s website very long. By March 2022 the new law criminalizing the "discrediting [of] the Russian armed forces" came into force. It carries a maximum sentence of fifteen years. Kostyuchenko's essays were taken down, and then *Novaya Gazeta* was shut. (Kostyuchenko's reports from Ukraine can still be read on other platforms: they were quickly republished by *Meduza*, in the original Russian, and in English by *n+1*.) A source informed Kostyuchenko's colleagues that a Russian battalion stationed in Mariupol had orders to kill her. Muratov told her to leave immediately. She traveled to Germany and planned to reenter Ukraine as a reporter for *Meduza* but fell ill, apparently poisoned.

Kostyuchenko survived, but she cannot go back to Russia. As she wrote in a recent essay in these pages, she cannot even go to the embassy to participate in Russia's "election ritual," in which people vote, but they do not choose.[2] After Kostyuchenko began to attend gay rights protests in her twenties—at one Pride parade in Moscow, she was hit in the temple and her girlfriend arrested—an elderly Jewish neighbor told her mother, "Stop your daughter. She doesn't understand what it means to be an enemy of the state." Now, she might.

This year Putin won again—by a landslide. He was running virtually unopposed, but nonetheless people came out to vote, driven to the polls by the same informal mechanisms of economic and social pressure Kostyuchenko writes about. In some places they were reportedly asked to provide photographs of their cast ballots, in others to vote electronically and provide a screenshot. "No one is irreplaceable!!!" one manager at a navy shipbuilding plant wrote to his subordinates in a private Telegram chat, ordering them to cast their ballots for Putin. "It's our obligation!"

The state projects an image of unified strength through its violence, censorship, and informal pressure. But it cannot hold a monopoly on the extra-juridical realm of personal ethical action. In a 2023 interview Yury Dud asked Kostyuchenko whether people within the Russian state's security forces ever help her. Yes, she said, "these people saved my life." They alerted her colleagues about the planned assignation. Why would they do that? "Perhaps," she said, "because they don't think it's right to kill journalists. Perhaps they know my work, perhaps they are patriots of their country." To be a patriot here is to take responsibility for protecting others from the state, despite the law, against the bosses' commands—by your own initiative, because it's the right thing to do. And it is this ethic that keeps Russia lively. It is the general helping Lyana retrieve her husband's body no less than the boat captain taking Greenpeace volunteers into the tundra.

The world that Kostyuchenko describes is a terrible one in many ways. I caught myself groaning aloud as I read. But the book is called *I Love Russia*. So I also kept thinking about what there is to love. Because, I realized, I love Russia, too. I love it, I think, for the courage with which people break orders and laws to help others, knowing that the swords of law and "decency" are raised over their heads. They do so clandestinely, without attracting unneeded attention, because it is right. Perhaps this is decency, without the scare quotes. ●

[2] "Russia's Election Ritual," translated by Bela Shayevich, nybooks.com, April 1, 2024.

I Can't Stop

rubbing the filters back and forth
through a knob on the screen that's coded
to brush glaze and bury echoes
on photographs my oiled finger pads never once touched
So much past arrives on my screen
coupled with soft pings in the pocket
strange temple bell
And in these images pass chords of faces
of which I know next to nothing
while all fall I ride the 63 line from Moynihan to Rhinecliff
alongside passengers slumped with buds in their ears
as the river rises to meet what rips past
the morning's stiff posture
And so I continue to shepherd things into the land of *done*
punching *send* repeatedly with my dominant finger
Welcome nothing, refuse nothing
My one tab is opened to the Tao Te Ching
and the other to meals machine-diced and packed
in miniature plastic jars that will arrive
ringed with sodium polyacrylate before tomorrow's noon
With no sign of the ligature that binds hours
I sleep to seal myself off from the future
and waking try to keep death within earshot
so days remain, in a manner of speaking, rough
with openings in every hair and between
And like this, my life passes, almost wet to the touch

—Jenny Xie

The Constant Presence of Fear

Linda Greenhouse

Sito: An American Teenager and the City That Failed Him
by Laurence Ralph.
Grand Central, 297 pp., $30.00

Illustration by Michelle Mildenberg

We learn in the opening pages of Laurence Ralph's new book that Luis Alberto Quiñonez, known as Sito, was shot to death nearly five years ago while sitting behind the wheel of his car on a residential street in San Francisco's Mission District. Soon enough we learn who killed him. It is Ralph's challenge to extract meaning from a killing that was at once senseless—the shooter most likely believed that Sito was responsible for a murder when he was in fact innocent—and almost perfectly predictable.

Murder is second only to accidents as the leading cause of death in the US for Latino males between the ages of fifteen and twenty-four; it is the leading cause of death for young Black men. When he died on the evening of Sunday, September 8, 2019, Sito was on his way to have dinner with his girlfriend and her mother. At that moment, Ralph writes with an air of inevitability, "death caught up to Sito." He was nineteen.

Sito is the latest book to depict how violence shapes, permeates, and all too often ends the lives of young men of color. In *Between the World and Me* (2015), Ta-Nehisi Coates is haunted by the death of his Howard University classmate Prince Carmen Jones, killed by a Black police officer in an unforgivable instance of mistaken identity that was nonetheless promptly forgiven by the legal system. Danielle Allen writes in *Cuz: The Life and Times of Michael A.* (2017) of how her cousin, arrested at fifteen and released eleven years later into a world he was unable to navigate, was "ensnared" by gangs and murdered at twenty-nine. In *The Short and Tragic Life of Robert Peace* (2014), Jeff Hobbs recounts the murder at age thirty of his Yale College roommate, who grew up in a troubled family in Newark and could solve complex math problems in his head but whose drug dealing precluded a safe and stable adult life.

Each of these lives was profoundly different, and I don't mean to suggest otherwise. Prince Jones, who had never been in trouble with the law, was the son of a prominent doctor. Robert Peace's father was in prison for murder. But what links all such accounts, including those of people who, like Coates himself, managed to prevail, is the constant presence of fear. "When I was eleven my highest priority was the simple security of my body," Coates tells his son in *Between the World and Me*. "My life was the immediate negotiation of violence—within my house and without." In an earlier memoir, *The Beautiful Struggle* (2008), which is in some ways more powerful than the book that made him famous, Coates writes of his older brother Bill's friends, who were from a nearby neighborhood that was just rough enough to be tantalizing:

> They did not live in squalor. Their mothers tried their best. But still they had to confront the winds of the day. The most ordinary thing—the walk to school, a bike ride around the block, a trip to the supermarket—could just go wrong.

For that reason, Bill and some of his friends, still teenagers, began carrying guns.

The fear these narratives depict is all-consuming and corrosive. Academically gifted boys quickly realize that they can't be both smart and safe. If academic success takes work, so does masking its evidence by projecting a streetwise attitude. "Newark-proofing" himself, Robert Peace called it. Cedric Jennings, the young man from inner-city Washington, D.C., profiled by Ron Suskind in *A Hope in the Unseen* (1998), avoided the honor assemblies at his high school, where half the students failed to graduate, rather than endure the jeers of "nerd," "geek," and even "whitey" that accompanied the frequent calling of his name from the stage.

Growing up in Atlanta and Baltimore, Laurence Ralph, the son of immigrants from Guyana, learned early that he should be afraid of both gangs and the police. "As a teenager, I felt that fear constantly," he writes in *Sito*.

Ralph is now a professor of anthropology at Princeton, where he and his wife, Aisha Beliso-De Jesús, also an anthropologist, direct the multidisciplinary Center on Transnational Policing. He calls himself a "gang scholar," his field of expertise the role of gangs in the lives of inner-city Black youths. As a graduate student at the University of Chicago, he spent nearly all his time for three years among gang members, with a focus on the disabled survivors of gang violence in a neighborhood on the city's west side.

Ralph's professional perspective is one element that distinguishes *Sito* from similar books by journalists and others. His first book, the product of his graduate school project, was *Renegade Dreams: Living Through Injury in Gangland Chicago* (2014). A "renegade dream," in Ralph's telling, is "an aspiration rooted in an experience of injury that reimagines the possibilities within injury." The young men whose stories he relates, consigned to wheelchairs by bullet-inflicted spinal cord injuries, find meaning in preaching against gang culture and its violence to vulnerable boys no different from the frightened children they themselves once were, "when just walking home" required "a certain vigilance in order to stay alive."

References to *Renegade Dreams* run through *Sito*, which might in fact almost be read as an afterword to the earlier book. Sito first came under a gang's seemingly protective wing at fourteen. Protection was something every young boy needed in the Mission District, where he grew up spending alternate weeks with his mother and his father, a former gang leader who had done time for drug dealing and eventually devoted himself to trying to turn young men away from gangs. The Mission was a violent place where numerous gangs controlled precise, if unmarked, territories that outsiders entered at their peril. When Sito wandered into unfriendly territory, he had to fight his way out. He was quick to anger, perhaps as a mask for the fear that was his daily companion.

By the end of his short life he was physically whole but deeply wounded emotionally by the five months he had

spent in juvenile prison on a murder charge that was dropped when a surveillance video showed that he was not the killer. He knew the killer's identity but refused to cooperate with the authorities, knowing he could not survive prison as a "snitch." Sito was a natural suspect because the murder victim was a schoolmate with whom he had fought regularly. The real killer, by contrast, was a visitor to the neighborhood who quickly disappeared. Once the case against Sito fell apart, the police lost interest and stopped looking for anyone else; almost a year later, in the wee hours of the morning of December 9, 2015, the actual killer was gunned down in what Sito's father describes to Ralph as "street justice"—violence begetting violence.

Was Sito's injury, like the spinal cord injuries of *Renegade Dreams*, irreparable? Quite possibly. "His experience in juvenile hall shaped the rest of his life," Ralph reports, noting that PTSD is common among young men who have spent time in juvenile prison. Sito went through the days following his release in a haze, searching for a goal and feeling that he had no purpose. He drank heavily. Toward the end he found something he believed in: the prison abolition movement. Communities United for Restorative Youth Justice, an abolition organization that welcomed him, became a "lifeline," Ralph writes.

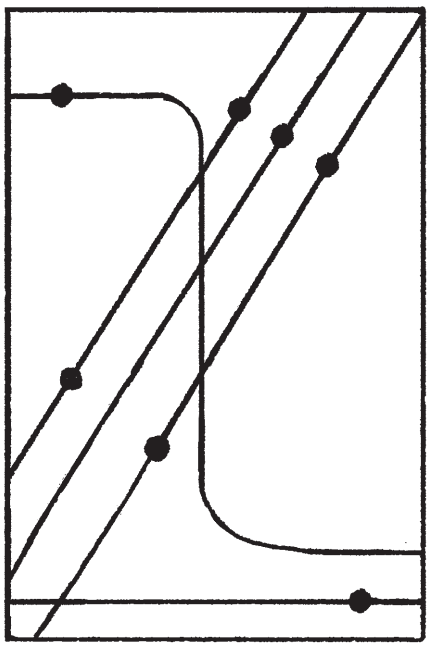
Months before Sito's death San Francisco became the first major city in the country to close its juvenile prison, replacing it with "home-like and rehabilitative centers," according to an ordinance passed by the city's board of supervisors. It was a renegade dream fulfilled, perhaps, but too late for Sito, and not without irony. His death was a twisted act of revenge by Julius Williams, the younger brother of the boy he had been wrongly accused of killing five years earlier. Williams is serving a four-year juvenile sentence in the "less punitive" facility provided for by the prison reform that Sito championed.

In both these books and in another that came between them, *The Torture Letters: Reckoning with Police Violence* (2020),[1] Ralph has been notably concerned with the search for meaning in lives beset by conflict and crisis. An unexpected dimension to *Sito*, both for reader and—it seems safe to say—author, is that one of the seekers turns out to be Ralph himself. As he follows the trail of calamity that was Sito's life, Ralph begins to wonder about his own utility as a scholar-witness. "I sometimes think my scholarship is only suitable for analyzing problems," he writes. "I was finding it increasingly hard to be an objective third party to grief."

What propels these doubts is that Sito was not a randomly chosen ethnographic subject. He was, in a sense, family: the half-brother of Ralph's stepson, related neither to Ralph nor to his wife by blood or marriage, but part of a blended Black and Latino family tightly bonded across differences of class and achievement. Ralph had met Sito only once, but he knew his story well.

[1]Reviewed in these pages by Peter C. Baker, July 2, 2020.

As a young teenager Ralph's wife had given birth to a son by an older teen who had offered her protection from San Francisco's gangs and whose family took her in after learning that she and her mother, who struggled with drug addiction, had been evicted from their apartment. The relationship ended after a few years, and with her son, Neto, in tow, she embarked on a path that led eventually to a Ph.D. and marriage to a fellow Ivy League



professor. Her former partner, Rene, remained involved with Neto's upbringing, and when he had a second son, Sito, the family circle simply grew to encompass the new baby and the baby's mother. Eventually Ralph became part of the circle as well.

Sito's murder and the years that led up to it affected the family deeply. Trying to be helpful, Ralph meets with the district attorney and attends Julius Williams's sentencing hearing. Sito's family had hoped the seventeen-year-old Julius would be tried as an adult, permitting a much longer sentence than the four years allowed for juveniles under California law. To his dismay, Ralph found himself in sympathy with that wish. "I was overcome, once again, by the feeling that my ideals were betraying me," he writes.

> I never saw myself as someone who would sit in an ivory tower and produce my work in isolation from everyday people's problems. . . .
>
> Even though I was always careful to question my own authority, the way I understood social problems still revolved around my identity as a professor. At Julius's sentencing hearing, that barrier no longer existed—or at least not to the same extent. I was watching the hearing as Neto's stepfather, Aisha's husband, and Rene's confidant. Without a professional shield to protect me, I felt naked, exposed—especially when Julius's advocates took the stand. All of them noted that his life had been transformed by his older brother's murder, which had implicated Sito.

It was disorienting, nearly shattering. A book about a murdered nineteen-year-old becomes the cri de coeur of a scholar in his early forties at the peak of a successful career:

> For a long time, I thought my mission as a researcher was to show that so-called bad kids weren't born that way, which meant that a mistake they might've made shouldn't scar them for life and dim their prospects. I wanted my work to speak to the beauty and brilliance of who I knew they could be. Back then, I wouldn't let myself believe that those teenagers' time in juvenile hall would hover over them like a dark shadow. But perhaps that optimism served my interests—not theirs. *Did my research really reflect the hardships that they, and their loved ones, were living through?*
>
> Today, I can't be sure.

What seems to trouble Ralph is that he had expected to tell Sito's story as one of redemption: bad things happened to a boy who nonetheless managed to emerge with understanding and purpose. But as Ralph looked closer, what he saw was stigma and pain:

> Ever since Sito died, I've realized that the narratives I once cherished often failed to acknowledge the consequences of being at the epicenter of a moral panic. When society labels young people as criminals, then turns its back on them, that label follows them like a shadow they can never shake off.

Ralph quotes a speech during the 1996 presidential campaign by Hillary Clinton, then the first lady of a president who was busy triangulating and appeasing the right. Read today, her words are shocking. Clinton said that the 1994 Crime Bill, a signature piece of legislation from her husband's first term, would protect the public from "the kinds of kids that are called superpredators—no conscience, no empathy. We can talk about why they ended up that way, but first, we have to bring them to heel." (Twenty years later, running for president herself, Clinton said she regretted using the term "superpredator.")

I think Ralph is being too hard on himself. Of course stories of individual lives need to acknowledge the broader social and political forces that contributed to shaping them, or to deforming them. But individual narratives can have great power and raise deep questions. How did Ralph's wife and fellow Princeton professor, homeless at the age of twelve and pregnant at fourteen, prevail against such odds? She has published an academic book about Santeria, the Afro-Caribbean religion in which she was raised, and her new book focuses on race and police violence.[2] I hope she will publish the story of her own life someday.

How might Sito's life have turned out differently? He was first arrested at age twelve, when he grabbed a cell phone a woman had left on a restaurant table and ran off with it, the woman's scream of "Thief!" alerting a nearby police officer. Sito was sent to a group home for a month. Might a different sort of intervention have set him on a different path?

[2]Aisha M. Beliso-De Jesús, *Excited Delirium: Race, Police Violence, and the Invention of a Disease* (to be published in August by Duke University Press).

Nicholas Dawidoff's *The Other Side of Prospect: A Story of Violence, Injustice, and the American City* (2022) is an account of another boy arrested for a murder he didn't commit. Unlike Sito, Bobby was convicted at age seventeen on the basis of a false confession and spent nine years in prison before an energetic lawyer got the conviction overturned; the state even paid a substantial financial settlement that included "life restoration" money for health expenses, education, and job training. But like Sito, Bobby had great difficulty finding his footing after his release. He was still the boy who observed that by sixteen he had attended "fifty funerals and one school graduation."

The book's title refers to Prospect Street in New Haven, Connecticut, the dividing line between the comfortable residential neighborhood that extends out from Yale's campus on one side and, on the other, the Newhallville neighborhood—a remnant of what had been a solid Black working-class community during New Haven's now-vanished industrial past. Dawidoff's portrait of the forces of dysfunction that swept up an innocent teenager is a powerful one. While the adult Bobby survives, his post-release life is tentative and disordered. A happy ending eludes Bobby and the readers who hope, as Ralph did for Sito, to see redemption in action.

And then there is Ron Suskind's *A Hope in the Unseen*, now standard reading in many high schools. While Cedric Jennings's journey from a failing inner-city high school through Brown University is, of course, inspiring, what stands out are the many points along the way at which the journey could easily have ended in failure. Cedric, who after graduation became a clinical social worker, was determined to succeed, but determination didn't easily overcome the educational and cultural gulf that separated him from many classmates. Nor did it shield him from the reality of his life back home, where his father was in prison on drug charges and his mother was barely a step ahead of eviction from the apartment she and Cedric shared. Strength of character made a great difference, and a few helping hands at crucial points did the rest.

The thin, permeable line that separates success and failure, safety and danger, for those who have few resources of their own is a theme that runs through these books. For these young men, there are rarely second chances. This ultimately is the lesson Laurence Ralph takes from Sito's short life.

Early in *Sito* he refers to an episode in *Renegade Dreams* in which a sixteen-year-old boy named Derrion was brutally beaten and killed by a group of other Chicago teenagers. "The notion that there is an innate difference between Derrion and his assailants, I argue, hinders our ability to understand urban violence," Ralph writes. "We must come to terms with the fact that youth of color are both highly susceptible to experiencing violence and therefore extremely likely to enact it." *Sito* invites us to regard the Sitos of the world with a bit less judgment and a good deal more humility. ●

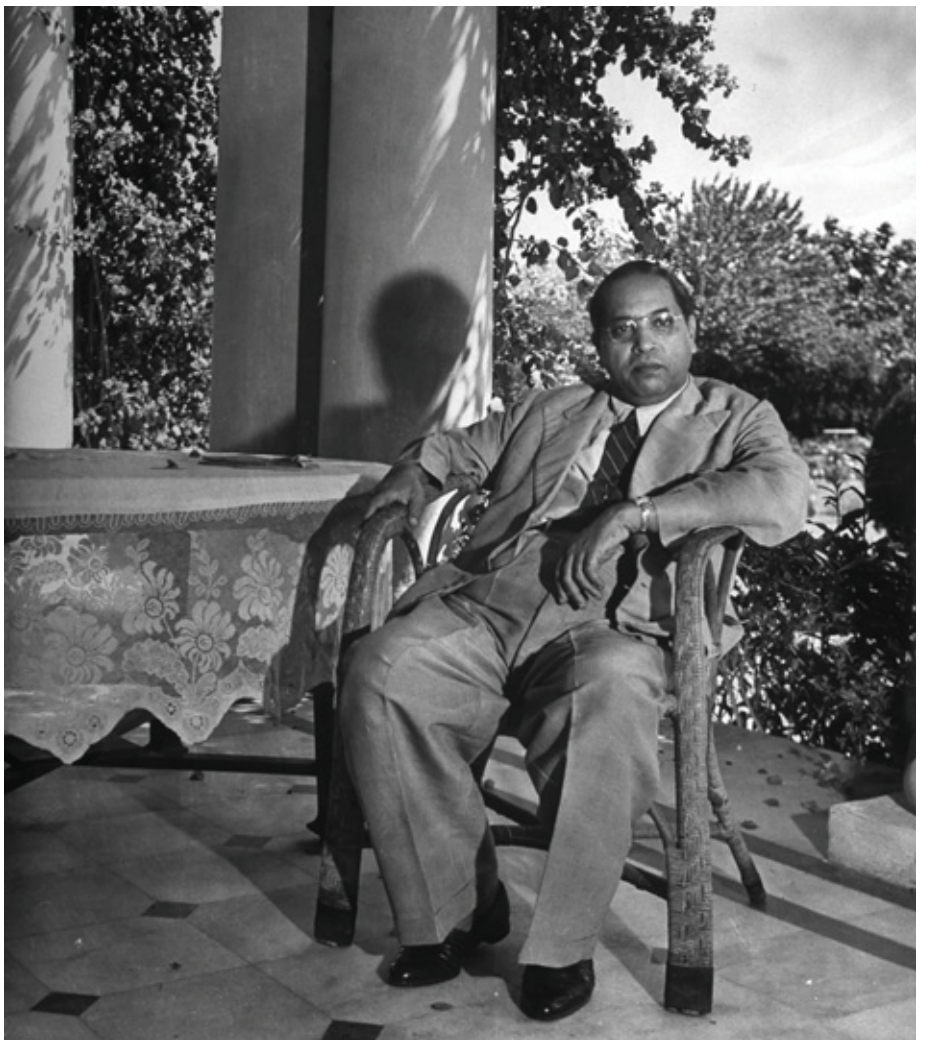
A 'Life of Contradictions'

Gyan Prakash

A Part Apart:
The Life and Thought
of B. R. Ambedkar
by Ashok Gopal.
New Delhi: Navayana, 863 pp., $50.00

B. R. Ambedkar:
The Man Who Gave Hope
to India's Dispossessed
by Shashi Tharoor.
Manchester: Manchester
University Press, 226 pp., £16.99

The Evolution of Pragmatism
in India: Ambedkar, Dewey, and
the Rhetoric of Reconstruction
by Scott R. Stroud.
University of Chicago Press,
302 pp., $99.00; $29.00 (paper)



B. R. Ambedkar, Delhi, India, May 1946; photograph by Margaret Bourke-White

On January 17, 2016, Rohith Vemula took his own life. A twenty-six-year-old Ph.D. student at the University of Hyderabad, he was a Dalit (the caste formerly called "untouchables") and a member of the Ambedkar Students' Association, which combats caste discrimination. The university had suspended his stipend following a complaint by the leader of the student wing of India's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) that Rohith had physically assaulted him. The suspension made him despondent and unable to make ends meet, leading to his death. Rohith left a poignant suicide note in which he wrote of his dashed hopes of becoming a science writer like Carl Sagan. But he also called his birth a fatal accident, a reminder that the caste system had determined his status as a Dalit for life.

The word "caste" (*jati* in Hindi) is derived from *casta*, used by the Portuguese centuries ago to describe the divisions in Hindu society according to *varna* (literally translated as "color" but meaning "quality" or "value"). Ancient Sanskrit texts prescribed a four-varna social order: Brahmins (priests) at the top, followed by Kshatriyas (warriors), Vaishyas (merchants and artisans), and Sudras (agricultural classes) in descending order of ritual purity. Hindu society actually consists of thousands of castes, each with its place in this hierarchy. There is also a fifth group, which is viewed as so impure as to be outside the varna order. These are the "untouchable" castes—Dalits, as we call them now. They perform jobs, such as manual scavenging and the disposal of dead animals, considered so unclean that the very sight of them is deemed polluting.[1]

This ordering system is hereditary. Hindus are born into a caste and remain in it until death. Some castes belonging to the varna order have historically achieved mobility and moved to a higher varna by adopting "Sanskritizing" practices, like vegetarianism. But even this limited mobility is closed to "untouchable" castes, which remain stigmatized for generation after generation and find the doors of economic and social mobility shut tight.

Rohith's suicide note sparked debates across India. How was such social inequality still practiced in the world's largest democracy seventy years after independence from British rule? Attention turned to B. R. Ambedkar, not just because Rohith belonged to an organization bearing his name but also because Ambedkar, who died in 1956, has been increasingly recognized for his writings about caste as an entrenched instrument of social, economic, and religious domination in India. As he famously said in 1948, "Democracy in India is only a top-dressing on an Indian soil, which is essentially undemocratic."

Now popularly addressed with the honorific Babasaheb, Ambedkar has long been known as a political leader of Dalits. He popularized the use of "Dalit"—meaning broken or scattered, first used in the nineteenth century by an anticaste reformer—as a term of dignity for "untouchables." He is lauded as the chief draftsperson of the Indian constitution, which legally abolished untouchability. But few recognized him as a major thinker on the relationship between social and political democracy. This changed with the 1990s anticaste movement and the introduction of reserved slots for "backward castes"—the intermediate castes belonging to the Sudra varna—in public service jobs and universities. Political activists and academics turned to Ambedkar's work to explain everyday discrimination against the lower castes, such as their relegation to menial jobs, humiliation in workplaces and housing, denial of entry into temples, separate wells in villages, and segregation from upper- and intermediate-caste neighborhoods.[2] His rediscovery as a political philosopher led to the publication in 2014 of a new edition of his book *Annihilation of Caste* (1936), with an introduction by Arundhati Roy. It dwelled on his clash with Mahatma Gandhi, who opposed his argument that caste was the social bedrock of Hinduism.

Caste remains a contentious subject, and scholars disagree on the institution's nature and history. British colonialists interpreted it as evidence of Indian society's basis in religion and its lack of a proper political sphere, which was filled by the colonial state. Marx adopted this view, writing that the subcontinent knew no real history until its conquest by Britain, only a succession of wars and emperors ruling over an unchanging and unresisting society. Colonial writing and practice drew on Brahminical texts to understand and rule India as a society organized by its predominant Hindu religion.

The French anthropologist Louis Dumont's *Homo Hierarchicus* (1966) gave this understanding the imprimatur of scholarship by arguing that *Homo hierarchicus*, rather than the Western *Homo aequalis*, undergirded Indian society. Following Dumont, anthropologists studied castes and their hierarchical ordering according to the Brahminical principles of purity and pollution. It was not until 2001 that Nicholas Dirks persuasively argued that the British were crucial in institutionalizing caste as the essence of Indian society—though they did not invent it, they shaped caste as we know it today.[3] In place of a range of precolonial social orders based on a variety of factors, including political and economic power, society across India became defined by castes, with Brahmins at the top and Dalits at the bottom.[4]

As a system of inequality, caste has met with criticism and protests for centuries. Today activists demanding the dismantling of caste privileges in employment, education, housing, economic mobility, and social respect come up against the Hindu nationalist BJP government led by Narendra Modi, which advocates ignoring caste difference in the interest of Hindu unity. The BJP is the political arm of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a paramilitary Hindu cultural organization that since its founding in 1925 has campaigned for an organicist Hindu unity, expressing admiration for the national unity model advanced by fascism and Nazism.[5] The RSS calls for reforming the most extreme aspects of caste, such as the practice of untouchability, but like most reformers, including Gandhi, does not challenge the four-varna order, regarding it as a divine organization of society in accordance with Hindu ideals. For the RSS, focusing on the differences in caste access to wealth and social status fractures the unity of Hindus; it instead calls upon castes to unite for a nation-state that guarantees Hindu supremacy. Accordingly the Modi government has systematically persecuted minority and Dalit activists as antinational elements. Hindu nationalist mobs have also assaulted and lynched Muslims, Christians, and Dalits.

Against this background of threats to democracy, Ambedkar acquires a new significance. The Indian politician Shashi Tharoor's lucid biography is addressed to a general audience. But to appreciate the depth, complexity, nuances, and changes in the Dalit leader's thought and politics, one should read *A Part Apart* by the journalist Ashok Gopal. He has pored over Ambedkar's writings and speeches in English and Marathi, and the result is a stunning, comprehensive, and thoughtful account of Ambedkar and his times. The title is drawn from a comment Ambedkar made in 1939:

[1] See Ratik Asokan, "The Long Struggle of India's Sanitation Workers," nybooks.com, August 24, 2023.

[2] See, for example, Gopal Guru and Sundar Sarukkai, *The Cracked Mirror: An Indian Debate on Experience and Theory* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012) and *Experience, Caste, and the Everyday Social* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2019).

[3] *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* (Princeton University Press, 2001).

[4] Divya Cherian's *Merchants of Virtue: Hindus, Muslims, and Untouchables in Eighteenth-Century South Asia* (University of California Press, 2022) shows that a caste order that regarded both Dalits and Muslims as "untouchables" was taking shape even prior to British rule in an eighteenth-century regional state.

[5] See Christophe Jaffrelot, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement and Indian Politics, 1925 to the 1990s* (London: C. Hurst, 1996), pp. 32–33, 50–52.

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"I am not a part of the whole, I am a part apart."

What emerges in *A Part Apart* is a portrait of a minoritarian intellectual committed to building a society based on the principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity. This entailed resolving the gap between the political principles set forth in the Indian constitution drafted and introduced in 1950 under his leadership, and the reality of social inequality. In an often-quoted speech before the Constituent Assembly on November 25, 1949, he said:

> On the 26th of January 1950, we are going to enter into a life of contradictions. In politics we will have equality and in social and economic life we will have inequality. In politics we will be recognizing the principle of one man one vote and one vote one value. In our social and economic life, we shall, by reason of our social and economic structure, continue to deny the principle of one man one value. How long shall we continue to live this life of contradictions?

Gopal's account meticulously charts Ambedkar's attempts to grapple with this "life of contradictions." First, he confronted anticolonial nationalism and clashed with Gandhi on whether caste inequality was intrinsically connected to Hinduism. Second, he engaged with constitutional democracy and developed his view of politics as an instrument of social change. Third, his concern with establishing the equality of all human beings is observable in his approach to religion and his eventual turn to Buddhism.

Ambedkar was born in 1891 in the British colonial cantonment town of Mhow, now in Madhya Pradesh in central India. He was the fourteenth and last child of a family belonging to the Dalit Mahar caste. The Mahars were not allowed to draw water from public wells; upper-caste Hindus considered even their shadow polluting. The British colonial army in which his father had served recognized military rank but not the practice of untouchability. This perhaps explains why Ambedkar did not have an entirely negative view of British rule. For him self-rule was not intrinsically better than foreign rule; what mattered more than freedom from colonial domination was freedom from upper-caste domination.

The colonial army offered a modern education to soldiers, even training and recruiting them as teachers. Ambedkar recalled that his father developed a zeal for education, ensuring that all his children learned to read and write. In 1904 the family moved to a two-room tenement in a working-class Mumbai neighborhood where Ambedkar continued his education. He graduated from Bombay University in 1912 and left the next year for Columbia University, supported by a scholarship from the ruler of the princely state of Baroda.

At Columbia, he studied economics, sociology, history, philosophy, and anthropology. In 1915 he wrote a thesis for his MA in economics. While still working on his Columbia doctoral dissertation, he enrolled at the London School of Economics in 1916 for another MA in preparation for a second doctoral degree. He also enrolled in Gray's Inn to become a barrister. He left for Mumbai a year later when his scholarship ran out, returning to London in 1920 to obtain an MSc (in economics) in 1921. He was called to the bar in 1922. A year later he submitted his dissertation and received a doctoral degree from the LSE. In 1927 he obtained his second doctorate in economics from Columbia.

By any standard, Ambedkar's education was extraordinary, and even more so because of his stringent financial circumstances. In the years between his return to India and his Columbia doctorate, he started journals that launched his career as a public figure while teaching at a Mumbai college to support his family. In Gopal's book he emerges as an intellectual intent on transforming Indian public discourse. This commitment came out of experiencing caste bigotry while growing up, such as being told to sit at the back of classrooms and being denied access to the water faucet unless a school employee opened it for him. Even his considerable academic achievements did not exempt him later from several humiliations, including being denied accommodations. In this respect, his time in the US and the UK provided a welcome relief.

New York also introduced Ambedkar to pragmatism, the philosophy of his teacher at Columbia, John Dewey. Several scholars have noted Dewey's influence on his ideas on democracy and equality,[6] as did Ambedkar himself. (He was hoping to meet with his former teacher in 1952 when Columbia invited him to New York to accept an honorary degree, but Dewey died two days before his arrival.) The philosopher Scott R. Stroud's *The Evolution of Pragmatism in India* is a magnificent study of Ambedkar's complex engagement with Dewey's ideas, which he reworked to address India's specific political and social conditions. Stroud calls this creative use of Dewey's philosophy Navayana pragmatism, named after Ambedkar's Navayana, or "new vehicle" Buddhism.

Pragmatism's impact on Ambedkar is evident in his 1919 memorandum to the Southborough Committee, appointed by the British government to consider the implementation of constitutional reforms. Ambedkar rejected the claim that Indians formed a community, which was the basis of the nationalist demand for political reforms. He cited a passage from Dewey's *Democracy and Education* that the existence of a community required its members to be like-minded, with aims, aspirations, and beliefs in common. But while Dewey suggested that like-mindedness was fostered by communication, Ambedkar argued that in India it came from belonging to a single social group. And India had a multitude of these groups—castes—isolated from one another. With no communication or intermingling, Hindus formed a community only in relation to non-Hindus. Among themselves, caste-mindedness was more important than like-mindedness. Divided between "touchables" and "untouchables," they could become one community only if they were thrown together into "associated living," a concept from Dewey.

Above all, Ambedkar's memorandum demanded an end to caste inequality. In 1924 he established an organization to represent and advocate for all Dalit castes with the slogan "Educate, Agitate and Organise," which he drew from British socialists. This advocacy took on a sharper tone by 1927, when his organization arranged two conferences that catalyzed what came to be known as the *Ambedkari chalval* (Ambedkarite movement). The actions it took included Ambedkar and other Dalits drinking water from a public tank and symbolically burning the *Manusmriti* (the Hindu scripture authorizing caste hierarchy). The reaction of upper-caste Hindus was ferocious. Dalits were assaulted, and rituals to "purify" the "defiled" spaces were performed.

Ambedkar compared the second of these conferences to the French National Assembly in 1789 and their symbolic actions to the fall of the Bastille. For him the deliberate violation of caste taboos was an assertion of civil rights. He still spoke of Dalits as belonging to Hindu society but warned that if *savarnas* (castes belonging to the four varnas) opposed change, Dalits would become non-Hindus. What angered him the most was the purification ceremonies, which he saw as an attack on the humanity and sanctity of the Dalit physical body.

Ambedkar's demand for social justice put him at odds with the nationalist movement and eventually with Gandhi. In a 1920 editorial he acknowledged that Indians were denied self-development under the British Raj, but that the same could be said of Dalits under the "Brahmin raj." He wrote that they had every right to ask, "What have you done to throw open the path of self-development for six crore [60 million] Untouchables in the country?" He described the Gandhi-led Indian National Congress as "political radicals and social Tories" whose "delicate gentility will neither bear the Englishman as superior nor will it brook the Untouchables as equal."

Clearly the disagreements were deep. Gandhi, like other nationalists, believed that freedom from British rule was the primary goal and that Hindu society could address untouchability after independence had been achieved. Ambedkar, drawing on Dewey's ideas on associated life, argued that India was not yet a nation and could not become one without addressing caste injustice. The purpose of politics, in his view, was to enact social change that Hindu society was too caste-ridden to accomplish on its own.

The conflict between the two men came to a head at the Round Table Conferences (RTC) in London, organized by the British to discuss political devolution. Several Congress Party leaders had denounced Ambedkar as a government puppet when he was appointed in 1927 as a nonelected representative of Dalits (whom the British called Depressed Classes) in the Bombay Legislative Council. Their criticism escalated at the second RTC when Ambedkar demanded that Dalits be granted separate constituencies to elect their own representatives to provincial legislatures. The Congress saw this as falling for the classic colonial ploy of divide and rule. It was willing to concede separate electorates for Muslims but not for Dalits. Gandhi was especially opposed to Ambedkar's stand because he saw the Dalits, unlike Muslims, as part of Hindu society. He went on a fast to oppose the 1932 Communal Award, an electoral scheme announced by the British government that accepted separate representation for both Muslims and Dalits.

The standoff was resolved only after Ambedkar, Gandhi, and upper-caste leaders signed the Poona Pact that September. Ambedkar dropped his demand for separate electorates and accepted the principle of reserved seats for Dalits elected by joint electorates. From later writings by Ambedkar, in particular *Annihilation of Caste* and *What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables* (1945), the Poona Pact appears to have been a breaking point between the two men, a view that historians have accepted. But Gopal shows that the picture was more complicated in 1932.

Gandhi saw himself as a champion of Dalits, whom he called Harijans ("children of God"). He was loath to concede that they were outside Hinduism, like Muslims, and required separate representation. He wanted savarnas to abandon the practice of untouchability by a change of heart. Though Ambedkar appreciated Gandhi's efforts, he wanted separate electorates because joint electorates for reserved seats meant that only those candidates acceptable to savarnas would win. But he signed the Poona Pact and accepted the outcome, even if it amounted to a concession.

This, Gopal argues, indicates that the Poona Pact was not a moment of irremediable split. With meticulous research, he shows that Ambedkar was satisfied with it. Though his attitude changed in his later writings, Gopal conclusively demonstrates that he initially regarded the pact's achievements as substantial. He also believed that Gandhi's commitment to eliminating untouchability was genuine, even as he disagreed with his methods. He wrote, "Gandhiji should be now called 'our man,' because he is now speaking our language and our thoughts." This is at odds with Tharoor's contention that ungenerosity toward Gandhi was one of Ambedkar's flaws. If anything, it was Ambedkar who showed generosity and political flexibility.

But this amity barely lasted a year. There was a fundamental difference in their respective understandings of caste and its relationship to Hinduism. Gandhi regarded untouchability as an ugly corruption of a basically benign varna system. He called himself a "Harijan by choice" and turned his attention to uplifting Dalits rather than to the elimination of untouchability or any fundamental change in Hinduism. Ambedkar intensely disliked the "Harijan" moniker, believing it concealed the real cause of oppression, which was the Hindu varna system. At a conference in 1935 Ambedkar declared that though he was born a Hindu, he would not die as one. A year later he published *Annihilation of Caste*, the text of an undelivered speech, which argued that caste, along with social hierarchy and

[6] See, among others, Meera Nanda, *Prophets Facing Backward: Postmodern Critiques of Science and Hindu Nationalism in India* (Rutgers University Press, 2003); Eleanor Zelliot, *Ambedkar's World: The Making of Babasaheb and the Dalit Movement* (New Delhi: Navayana, 2013); and Anand Teltumbde, *Republic of Caste: Thinking Equality in the Time of Neoliberal Hindutva* (New Delhi: Navayana, 2018).

untouchability, was essential to Hinduism as a religion.

It was a stinging critique, one that Gandhi did not accept. Tharoor, who also wrote *Why I Am a Hindu* (2018), regards it as too sweeping, ignoring the religion's plural traditions and closing the possibility of any rapprochement. But Tharoor fails to appreciate Ambedkar's aim, which was to force Hindus to confront what their religion had wrought. Ambedkar wrote that Hindus treated Dalits horribly not because of some malice in their hearts but because they were religious and were simply following their scriptures. The problem was deep-rooted. At least slaves could hope for emancipation. But there was no hope for Dalits: it was the fatal accident of their birth.

If this religiously sanctioned system of inequality was resistant to emancipatory change, what could be done? This question opens the second theme in Ambedkar's preoccupation with a "life of contradictions": constitutional democracy and the use of politics to achieve social change. From the start of his public activities, he had used constitutional methods, submitting memoranda to various British committees to recommend reforms and participating in the RTC. Mindful of his standing as a Dalit leader, the Congress Party chose Ambedkar as the chair of the committee to draft the constitution of independent India, which affirmed equality irrespective of caste, religion, language, or birthplace.[7] Untouchability was abolished, and seats in the Parliament were reserved for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (the official name for historically disadvantaged groups since 1935). Inspired by the Irish constitution, the Indian constitution also included a section called Directive Principles of State Policy, which outlined broad measures of social welfare. But these did not establish legally enforceable rights; the expectation was that constitutional guidance would result in policies that would realize the goals of equality and fraternity.

Ambedkar observed in 1949 that adopting constitutional democracy meant that "we must abandon the bloody methods of revolution." Liberty, equality, and fraternity were to be instituted through constitutional means. Although he had used these tactics himself in the past, he now showed little patience for the "stampede" of civil disobedience, which he called a "grammar of anarchy." Gopal does not provide any explanation for this apparent contradiction. We are left to conclude that Ambedkar was so convinced of Hindu society's resistance to equality that he could place his faith only in the state to transform power relations.

Tharoor criticizes him for this "statism," but it was born of Ambedkar's experience of upper-caste resistance to fundamental change. Accordingly, he drafted a constitution that equipped the state with vast powers to carry out an expansive social project. The constitution granted fundamental rights, but it also included provisions under which the state could circumscribe them, unencumbered by substantive judicial scrutiny.[8] Ambedkar and other framers of the constitution had hoped that "constitutional morality" would guide state leaders in the future to use these provisions sparingly. But Indira Gandhi used them in 1975 to impose a national Emergency and suspend basic rights, and today the Modi government systematically deploys them to pursue critics and activists it calls "anti-national."

Ambedkar was invited by Jawaharlal Nehru in 1950 to join his government as law minister, and he accepted. As minister, he introduced the Hindu Code Bill, which included women's marriage and inheritance rights. The RSS and the Congress Party savarnas opposed it bitterly, especially as a Dalit was proposing a law involving Hindu women. Nehru dithered, the bill stalled, and Ambedkar resigned. He dabbled in politics for a time, though not very successfully. His last years were increasingly devoted to establishing colleges for Dalits, writing, and promoting Buddhism.

His interest in Buddhism developed out of his conviction that religion provided the "social conscience" without which any rights provided by law remained dead letters. Hinduism could not do this because of its commitment to caste. In his interpretation of Buddhism, called Navayana or Neo-Buddhism, Ambedkar believed he had found a religion for the modern age for three reasons: it upheld reason and experience over the divine word; its moral code recognized liberty, equality, and fraternity; and it refused to ennoble or sanctify poverty as a blessed state. Unlike traditional religions that were concerned with God, the soul, and rituals, Buddhism had no concept of God or the soul, and the Buddha shunned rituals, advocating an inclusive path of righteous and moral living. Ambedkar expressed these ideas in *Buddha and His Dhamma*, a posthumously published treatise on Buddha's life and philosophy. On October 15, 1956, he took the oath to accept Buddhism in a public meeting with a mass of his followers. He died two months later on December 6, having fulfilled the pledge made in 1935 that he would not die a Hindu.

Although many Dalits did convert to Buddhism, most did not. In any case Ambedkar never clarified how conversion would address conditions of material deprivation and oppression by savarnas. Most Dalits remain poor. They work as agricultural laborers, perform menial jobs, and are housed in settlements separated from savarnas. The political theorist Gopal Guru, quoting V. S. Naipaul, suggests that Dalits continue to be treated as "walking carrion." But Ambedkar did help raise Dalits' consciousness of their rights. Thanks to Ambedkar, the overt practice of untouchability in public life is frowned upon. The constitutional abolition of untouchability and the provision for reserving positions have changed the political landscape. Democracy has helped members of intermediate and lower castes, including Dalits, climb the ladders of power in government. In many states, particularly in the south, this has resulted in more inclusive governance and welfare. But the Dalits' share of wealth and access to professional careers remain minimal, and the experience of social indignity and humiliation persists.

Ambedkar's ambition for achieving democracy as a daily practice of equality remains a distant goal, but these books establish the depth and ambition of his ideas and their global relevance. Theorists of democracy and those worried about its crisis around the world could learn from his idea of it as something that goes beyond procedural norms, as a dedication to the free and equal association of all human beings. His frequent invocation of the principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity was not formulaic but purposeful. To realize this ambitious ideal, he wished to mobilize the combined forces of law, politics, the state, and religion as morality. Despite their differences, Ambedkar and Gandhi shared an understanding of the importance of conscience in effecting social change—realizing in practice what is written in law.

But there is little hope of this occurring under Modi, whose Hindu nationalist rhetoric has been amplified in the six-week national elections that end on June 1. Modi's vitriolic anti-Muslim demagoguery hopes to unite Hindus as a solid voting bloc, but he maintains a deafening silence on Dalit demands for equality. To ensure victory, he imprisons opposition leaders. Political rivals are coerced into joining the BJP following raids on their homes by tax authorities. The BJP's election coffers are flush with corporate donations. Television networks and newspapers, controlled by friendly owners, regularly sing Modi's praises and attack the opposition. Critical journalism has been forced to operate precariously on YouTube, in the face of government censorship and the BJP's army of social media bots.

Modi is leaving nothing to chance. The election results, to be announced on June 4, will determine if his government, in power since 2014, will secure a third term. Opposing the BJP is an alliance headed by the Congress Party, which led India to independence and ruled it for nearly sixty-five years. In its election manifesto it warns the country that the BJP is a danger to democracy and promises that it will undertake a caste census to determine the magnitude of economic and social inequality and introduce ameliorative policies. It thereby hopes to overcome Modi's appeal to Hindu unity.

India's democracy and Ambedkar's vision of social equality are at stake as Indians vote. Meanwhile Rohith Vermula's mother continues fighting to hold the authorities legally accountable for his death.[9] The election will have a significant impact on whether she will get a measure of justice for the young man who fought for Dalit rights and wrote poignantly about the "fatal accident" of his birth. ●

—May 23, 2024

[7]Aakash Singh Rathore's *Ambedkar's Preamble: A Secret History of the Constitution of India* (New Delhi: Vintage, 2020) suggests that Ambedkar was responsible for inserting justice, liberty, equality, and fraternity in the constitution's preamble.

[8]On Ambedkar's involvement in and approach to constitution framing, see my *Emergency Chronicles: Indira Gandhi and Democracy's Turning Point* (Princeton University Press, 2019), pp. 38–74, 377–378.

[9]Deepa Dhanraj's *We Have Not Come Here to Die* (2018) is a riveting documentary on the movement sparked by Rohith Vermula's suicide and provides a poignant account of his mother's fight for justice.

‘You’ve Got to Be Carefully Taught’

Brian Seibert

Richard Rodgers, Julie Andrews, and Oscar Hammerstein II in rehearsals for the televised production of Cinderella*, 1957*

Oscar Hammerstein II and the Invention of the Musical
by Laurie Winer.
Yale University Press, 356 pp., $32.50
(to be published in paperback in August)

Shy: The Alarmingly Outspoken Memoirs of Mary Rodgers
by Mary Rodgers and Jesse Green.
Farrar, Straus and Giroux,
467 pp., $35.00; $20.00 (paper)

In the middle of the twentieth century Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II were kings of American culture. Almost two thirds of the country tuned in on March 31, 1957, to watch the live broadcast of their made-for-television musical *Cinderella*—expanding the dominion they had established over the previous fourteen years on Broadway with *Oklahoma!*, *Carousel*, *South Pacific*, and *The King and I*. Critically acclaimed, popular, and obscenely lucrative, these shows effected a sea change in American musical theater from musical comedy (songs, jokes, and dance loosely collected around a plot) to the musical play (character-driven songs and sometimes dance integrated into a coherent story) that Rodgers and Hammerstein invented.

But by the time of their final work together—*The Sound of Music*, which debuted in 1959, the year before Hammerstein died of cancer—a critical backlash had begun. Hammerstein’s plainspoken lyrics, centered on love and optimism, full of raindrops on roses and sometimes as corny as Kansas in August, were derided as unsophisticated, sentimental, square. The Rodgers and Hammerstein model was soon usurped by new modes, especially those of the more jaded, ironic, and formally adventurous work of Hammerstein’s protégé, Stephen Sondheim. The American musical became less widely popular. More recently, the art and lives of Rodgers and Hammerstein have undergone the scrutiny applied to many other once-revered white men and their once-central work. Their musicals are still frequently performed, still seen and heard and loved, but in this censorious era their reputations have been unsettled.

This is why Laurie Winer’s recent biography, *Oscar Hammerstein II and the Invention of the Musical*, starts on the defensive. In an introduction titled “An Unfashionable Take on an Unfashionable Man,” Winer, a critic who calls theater her religion, swings somewhat wildly at various criticisms of her subject: that his lyrics are artless; that he was a naif, blind to dark truths; that he was villainously greedy; that he was dully inferior to Rodgers’s first lyricist partner, Lorenz Hart. These are mostly straw men, and as Winer gets needlessly entangled in the “great man” theory of history and the philosophical pragmatism of William James, the strain makes for an anxious and off-putting start to what turns out to be a smart and insightful book.

Clearly, Winer has read all the other books on the subject, studied all the shows, pored over the reams of letters Hammerstein left behind.[1] Compared with a more foursquare take like Todd Purdum’s well-researched, well-organized *Something Wonderful: Rodgers and Hammerstein’s Broadway Revolution* (2018), Winer’s is digressive and scattershot. But she has an intuitive grasp of Hammerstein’s aesthetic and character. She gets him. Looking back at his old-fashioned virtues and failings from a distance, like a wised-up but affectionate grandchild, she helps us see, as she puts it, “the mortal who made the immortal work” as “a man of his time, if not entirely for ours.”

Winer presents Hammerstein as “a classic fortunate son…petted and loved almost from the cradle to the grave.” His paternal grandfather and namesake, Oscar Hammerstein I, was a “flamboyant impresario,” a German immigrant to New York who made money in cigars and spent it all on opera and opera houses. His father managed a major vaudeville theater. Oscar II, born in 1895, was close to his mother, who died from an infection following a botched abortion when he was fifteen. “From then on Hammerstein opposed grief as a matter of principle,” Winer writes. His life and work were about looking past that kind of pain, walking through the storm with your head up high.

At Columbia University in the 1910s, Hammerstein was already writing for the Varsity Show, and soon he quit law school to join the family business as a playwright and librettist. The libretti, or books, of the musical comedies of the time were slapdash. “What counted was the music and the jokes and the talents of the cast,” Hammerstein explained in an interview. “We accepted the book as a device for leading into songs.”

Working with the more experienced librettist Otto Harbach, Hammerstein learned the conventions of the day, but Harbach also taught him to construct his stories with care. They worked mainly in operetta, then a popular mode, with plots and manners imported from Europe, and found much box office success. But Hammerstein longed for something else, more operatic than musical comedy but more believable than opera, and American in theme and style. That’s what he created in 1927 with the composer Jerome Kern: *Show Boat*.

Winer calls *Show Boat* “the most revolutionary show in the history of the genre,” which isn’t hyperbole but a standard judgment. In its epic scope, realist treatment of a weighty American subject (one of the weightiest, race), and sophisticated intertwining of music and story, *Show Boat* radically expanded the aesthetic possibilities of the American musical. Winer illuminates Hammerstein’s achievement by explaining how deftly he adapted Edna Ferber’s thick novel about the white and Black employees of a Mississippi River showboat, finding ways for the story to be coherent *and* songful, partly by choosing scenes in which the characters have reasons to sing. For the first hour, she writes, “a listener may be hardly aware of the difference between music, lyrics, and dialogue.” Hammerstein’s altered ending, “a deeply emotional masterpiece of theatricality,” tilts toward redemption by reuniting the estranged central couple and reprising the score’s deepest song, “Ol’ Man River.”

How to account for this leap in artistry? Winer, in the spirit of her subject, pegs it to falling in love. In March 1927, on the deck of a luxury liner bound for London, the thirty-one-year-old Hammerstein, traveling without his wife, Myra, met and felt an instant connection to the twenty-eight-year-old actress Dorothy Jacobson, already on her second marriage. It was some enchanted morning. During the two years it took for them to detach from their spouses, Hammerstein learned that Myra had been unfaithful, news that sent him into a sanatorium for a few weeks. But by 1929 he and Dorothy were wed, and he had found a version of matrimonial contentment a little more complicated than what he would depict in his shows but nevertheless true and lasting.

The achievement of *Show Boat*, however, did not immediately lead to professional satisfaction. He spent much of the 1930s in Hollywood, subject to the whims of studio producers, cycling through ambitious hope and disillusionment. “Because his gift was for narrative integrity, Hammerstein was destined to be ground up by the filmmaking process,” Winer writes astutely. He returned to Broadway, but with a flop. Quoting Hammerstein’s advice-filled letters to colleagues and family members, Winer shows him staying determinedly buoyant. That whistle-a-happy-tune buoyancy, Winer writes,

[1] See *The Letters of Oscar Hammerstein II*, compiled and edited by Mark Eden Horowitz (Oxford University Press, 2022).

CBS PHOTO ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES

would "become the standard engine of the musical play."

Richard Rodgers didn't have to learn the same lessons. A few years younger than Hammerstein, he teamed up with Lorenz Hart while an undergrad at Columbia in 1920. Almost immediately they started creating a large portion of what became the American Songbook, Rodgers's fecund musical gifts ("He pees melody," quipped Noël Coward) married to Hart's rueful wit. Though in 1930s Hollywood they faced frustrations similar to Hammerstein's, their return to Broadway produced hit show after hit show—*Babes in Arms*, *Pal Joey*—packed with hit songs like "My Funny Valentine." The trouble was Hart, a closeted gay man who drowned his self-loathing in booze. Rodgers wanted a more stable partner and a librettist-lyricist of greater substance. Hammerstein, despite his recent failures, fit the description.

With *Oklahoma!*, they picked up on the precedent of *Show Boat* and popularized the kind of musical that followed Hammerstein's maxim: "The song is the servant of the play." Where most musicals had opened with pretty chorus girls, this one started with a lone cowboy singing about a bright golden haze on the meadow. Hammerstein's simple lyrics, much less sparkling when read than Hart's or Cole Porter's, took flight on Rodgers's lilting, instantly memorable melodies. Integrating words and music into a dramatic form more like a play, the team produced a show that would prove much more durable than most of the flimsy musicals that preceded it.

Winer retells the usual story of this period, during which the team pushed their style further in the unlikely *Carousel*, with its unpromising subject matter (theft, spousal abuse, parental neglect) and sustained musical scenes. She registers their aesthetic retreat after the unpopular experiment *Allegro*—which follows a doctor from birth and childhood through marriage, medical school, and middle age, using abstract sets and a Greek chorus—and notes the way their partnership came to resemble a corporation. More originally, she addresses now troubling aspects of each major Hammerstein work by describing and discussing recent productions, like Nicholas Hytner's 1992 *Carousel*, which helped revive the team's reputation, and the darkly revisionist *Oklahoma!* that Daniel Fish directed on Broadway in 2019, demonstrating that the shows still find audiences while examining how directors adjust to contemporary mores.

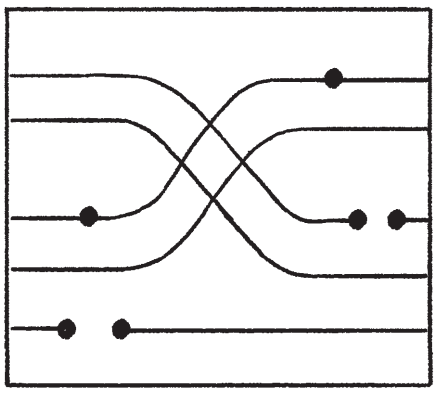
Winer doesn't go easy on Hammerstein. She recognizes the pervasive orientalism in his stories and songs. She's forthright about *Carmen Jones*, the all-Black adaptation of the Bizet opera *Carmen* that he made without Rodgers, flagging "racism of which he is entirely unaware," a condescension that "bleeds into the show in all kinds of ways." She calls out the absurdity in *Allegro*—"so blithe in its assumptions about gender roles that it could have been written before the author was born"—quoting the lyrics that suggest a fellow needs a girl "To sit by his side/And listen to him talk/And agree with the things he'll say." Winer sees her subject as a man who "never conceived of or condoned a life lived outside the system, for he was too much a beneficiary of it."

Recognizing Hammerstein's limitations, Winer is better able to help us appreciate his gifts. She accurately identifies him as "a poet of the anticipation of joy." This is the special meaning of one of the most common words in his lexicon: *dream*. In "A Kiss to Build a Dream On," "When I Grow Too Old to Dream," "I Have Dreamed," and many more songs, the important pleasure is proleptic, imagined in advance. *If you don't have a dream, how you gonna have a dream come true?*

Despite the gender assumptions in *Allegro*, Winer sees the other social commentary in the show, poking fun at the sped-up shallowness of modern life, as the kind "at which Hammerstein excelled: recognizably true and spooned out softly enough so that each member of the audience can be sure it's about someone else." She similarly appreciates the calibration of criticism and comfort in *South Pacific*, whose white American characters have to confront their own racism, as in the then-controversial song "You've Got to Be Carefully Taught," which locates the origin of racial hatred in the indoctrination of children. The show, she writes, "brilliantly reassures us of our essential decency, and only then does it make its statement—that, unless we are vigilant about the enemy within, our decency as well as our democracy can be lost." Hammerstein, she says, "knew how to challenge with one hand and give tribute with the other."

While Winer's book isn't hagiography, it is, like its subject, in favor of redemption. About *Carousel*, which Winer calls "a treatise on the messiness of forgiveness," she writes that "our tears fall as an answer to the ever-evolving question: Can we forgive ourselves, each other, and the artists who still have something to say, no matter how imperfect we all might be?" She's careful to emphasize Hammerstein's late-life advocacy against housing discrimination and she stresses, over and over, that his work "appeals to the best in human nature."

Throughout, Winer keeps Hammerstein in a more flattering light by contrasting him with Rodgers. Yes, both were complicit in cheating the director Joshua Logan out of author royalties for *South Pacific*, which they wrote together, but Winer spends pages detailing Rodgers's cruelty to Logan, who



worshiped him, and his minimization of Logan's contributions even decades later. Yes, Hammerstein seems to have had a late-career dalliance with Temple Texas, a chorus girl half his age, but what's that in comparison to the ever-randy Rodgers, who, as the choreographer Agnes de Mille memorably phrased it, used women "like a piece of toilet paper"?

Winer gives attention to the men's wives, both interior designers named Dorothy, and to their parenting. Yes, Hammerstein "practiced the noblesse oblige style of 1940s upper-class fathering," and according to his son Billy could express love only in his work. But such fault-finding pales next to that of Rodgers's daughter Mary. Here she is on the time her father was having an affair with an actress in *The King and I*, in a room at the theater he always had reserved for such purposes, when he made that actress late for rehearsal: "He promised to cover for her but didn't and she was fired. Shitty way to treat someone you supposedly cared about. To say nothing of your wife."

There's a lot more where that comes from in *Shy: The Alarmingly Outspoken Memoirs of Mary Rodgers*. Where Winer's book starts on defense, Rodgers's kicks off on the attack, scoring points while describing an ear-training game that her father played with her and her sister, Linda:

> I later learned that this was a routine exercise in elementary music theory classes, universally considered boring. But Linda and I liked it because Daddy seemed to like us when we answered correctly. And to like himself for having taught us so well. Neither of which likings we saw much evidence of otherwise.

"What I wanted, desperately, was my parents' affection, but it wasn't there to be gotten," she says. Her father "hated having his time wasted with intangible things like emotions." Her mother, "even more fanatical about appearances than he," was "frozen," a pampered and antisemitic Jew, a controlling hypocrite who hid secrets like her husband's infidelity and alcoholism behind an elegant façade. "Pretense, lies, hypocrisy," Rodgers writes. "Put it in Latin and you've got a family crest."

This is the sound of *Shy*: pull-no-punches, punch line after punch line. It is essentially an edited transcript of Rodgers, who died in 2014, recounting her life to Jesse Green, the chief theater critic for *The New York Times*. Green arranged the results and added footnotes that identify people and keep a parallel stream of jokes flowing along the bottom of the pages. One self-aware bit down there proposes alternative titles for the book. "Where Was I?" mocks the conversational rambling that is part of the book's charm. "What Do You Really Think?" is a deadpan comment on what Green calls Rodgers's "knee-jerk transparency."

Shy is much more than a daughter's memoir. Mary Rodgers was herself an accomplished musical theater composer. The ironic title comes from an ironic song in *Once Upon a Mattress*, her popular 1958 musical adaptation of *The Princess and the Pea*. (The recent City Center *Encores!* revival of this terrific show, headed to Broadway this summer, is a reminder of her abundant talent.) Rodgers describes the show's heroine, a breakout role for Carol Burnett, as

> a big, awkward, loudmouth princess, born to royalty but nevertheless a misfit, likable but unsure of herself. Despite her exalted

provenance, she has to outwit a vain and icy queen to get what she wants and live happily ever after.

The kicker: "Story of my life."

The sections about the creation of that show have all the excitement, all the love of theater and theater people, that you find in classic showbiz memoirs, except that the frazzled artist finding her voice and struggling to get her songs heard is a divorced mother of three who needs a babysitter. Along with the dryly delivered insider dish on the sex, drugs, and secrets of her milieu, much of the fascination and import of *Shy* lies in the exceedingly rare perspective of a woman in an industry dominated by men like her father (who always encouraged her composing).

Compared with the story of her father's career, hers is a struggle all the way through, with more bombs and never-produced projects than successes. Her version of Hammerstein's fortunate-son buoyancy is "learning to swerve." That's how she found a second career as a writer of children's books, including *Freaky Friday*, a swerve that led to another—writing screenplays in Hollywood, an episode she calls the "most mortifying" part of her tale. At least that she had in common with Hammerstein (whom she calls kind, generous, principled, but "no saint").

Hers is the messy, affecting story of a woman in the postwar period, "a woman who tried everything," stumbling to find "more honest ways to live." She married a closeted gay man ("everyone should marry a gay man at least once") and divorced him after he started hitting her. She slept around (her phrase) and almost married some other gay men. She, who considered childhood "the most miserable punishment exacted upon anybody," had a total of six children.[2] When, more than halfway through the book, she settles into a lasting second marriage, to the film executive and theater producer Henry Guettel, she aptly describes it as "like finding your way home in a song, after the bridge."

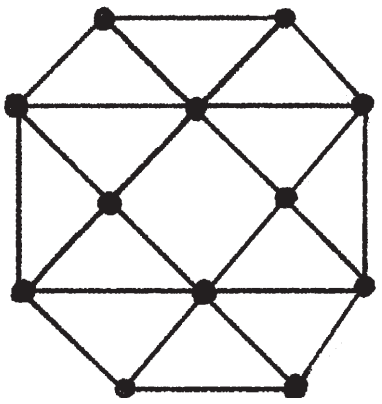
In her eighties, armed with hindsight and wisdom, she's as tough on herself as she is on everyone else, calling out her own bad behavior, delusions, and complicity. But she's also forgiving, or at least understanding. She acknowledges that her parents generally did the right thing during the big crises in her life, even if "it doesn't even out" because "there weren't as many big things as little."

Shy puts on the page a person in full, and its cumulative message is what Green says Rodgers wanted it to be: "You could have a good life without being dull and without being perfect or great." Still, the book has a special spark whenever it touches on a certain male genius of musical theater. Not Richard Rogers. Stephen Sondheim.

"The love of my life" is what she calls Sondheim. They met in 1944 at the Hammersteins' farm in Pennsylvania, where Sondheim, who lived nearby and was friends with one of the Hammerstein boys, spent so much time that he was practically adopted.[3] He was fourteen, Mary thirteen. Watching the brilliant boy beat her at chess and show off on the piano, Mary was enchanted. "I thought I would never be as infatuated with anyone again. Which turned out to be true."

As young adults, they became friends and wrote music together. They were gossiping under her father's piano when Sondheim told her he was probably gay. As she married and divorced and played the field, she found other men wanting because they weren't him. Eventually, when they both were around thirty, she wrote him a "shit-or-get-off-the-pot letter," and they entered what she calls a trial marriage.

This is no doubt the juiciest revelation in the book, and it is a sad, painful episode: the two of them, side by side in bed, doing nothing; Mary sneaking home in the morning before her kids



woke up. He wasn't in love with her, she says. She wasn't physically attracted to him. "I just loved him, thoroughly enough for nothing else to matter. Do you not believe in that? Have you never seen *Carousel*?" It couldn't work. She swerved on with her life.

But they stayed friends. It was she who pushed Sondheim together with her father after the death of Hammerstein, who had been Sondheim's surrogate father and most important mentor. A Rodgers–Sondheim collaboration was also Hammerstein's expressed wish. It turned out to be acrimonious, and the resulting show, *Do I Hear a Waltz?*, was middling, but it did occasion from Sondheim some wickedly cynical, Hart-like lyrics about falsity in marriages like that of the Rodgerses.[4]

Soon after, when Sondheim was writing a show about marriage and commitment, he needed to learn from someone with experience, so he talked with Mary and took notes. Her attitudes toward marriage—hers, her parents', and maybe whatever she and Sondheim had, the attitudes we hear in *Shy*—are all over his acerbic lyrics for *Company*, which was to the 1970s concept musical what *Oklahoma!* was to the musical play.[5]

Which is to say that all this gossip about marriages, including the metaphorical marriages of lyricists and composers, and all this griping about parents—all this illuminates the development of the American musical. One of the best chapters in Winer's book about Hammerstein is mainly about Sondheim, whose "responses to Hammerstein's work," she writes, "constitute the most productive Oedipal impulse in the history of musical theater." As she notes, there are many echoes of the poet of anticipation and community in the poet of ambivalence and alienation: Sondheim's "No One Is Alone" speaks to Hammerstein's "You'll Never Walk Alone"; "You've Got to Be Carefully Taught" is a father of Sondheim's "Children Will Listen."

Sondheim famously called Hammerstein a man of limited talent and unlimited soul, and Rodgers the reverse. But Sondheim was also, in later years, the chief advocate for Hammerstein's artistry—arguing that he should be seen as an experimental playwright; that his painstaking lyrics, despite diction and sentimentality left over from operetta, have weight.

"The most important ingredient of a good song is sincerity," Hammerstein advised in his "Notes on Lyrics." For him, sophistication was a false pose. "If you *do* find something exciting," he advised his daughter in a letter, "it is silly to make believe you *don't*." He preferred characters that he considered "primitive"—cowboys, carnival barkers, Black and Asian people—because he thought that they say what they mean. "There's nothing wrong with sentiment," he said, "because the things we're sentimental about are the fundamental things in life." That earnestness is easy to mock.

Or to distrust. For Mary Rodgers and Sondheim and many of their generation, afraid of sentimentality, the happy talk that Hammerstein considered sincere could sound like pretense, lies, hypocrisy. But her knee-jerk transparency—"Make it funnier," she told Green, and "make it meaner"—is equally a kind of sincerity. "The real reason to tell the truth, or truth within reason, is that it's healthier for everyone," she says.

There's something here at the heart of many debates about musical theater, whether Hart versus Hammerstein or Hammerstein versus Sondheim, debates about what to believe and what to make believe. As Winer puts it, defending her love of Hammerstein, "One woman's profundity is another's useless sentimentality." One generation's sincerity is another's artifice. Sophistication isn't always a pose. It can be a condition: the old pathways to the heart are closed and new ones must be found. Each generation, searching for more honest ways to live and make art, mocks its biological and artistic parents, resolving to be their opposite and failing.

Then again, to dwell on these debates about language might be to miss the point, like reading "Oh, What a Beautiful Mornin'" without the transfiguring tune. Speaking for herself—but not only for herself—Mary Rodgers explains why she always forgave her father: "It was all about his music; everything loving about him came out in it, and there was no point looking anywhere else. It's also true I didn't have any choice—but it was enough." ●

[2] One died at three. Another, Adam Guettel, took up the family business as composer-lyricist. His music for *The Light in the Piazza* won the 2005 Tony Award for Best Original Score. His *Days of Wine and Roses* was on Broadway earlier this year.

[3] Sondheim also had a narcissistic mother to flee, one who later wrote him that her only regret was giving birth to him.

[4] Dorothy Rodgers, in her daughter's words, "sniffed a satire too close to home" and turned her husband against the song, which Sondheim then self-bowdlerized. Sondheim includes both versions in the first of his two invaluable books about his lyrics, *Finishing the Hat* (Knopf, 2010).

[5] It's also surely not a coincidence that the lovelorn "best pal" character in Sondheim's growing-up-in-showbiz musical *Merrily We Roll Along* (now on Broadway) is named Mary.

D-Day's Forgotten Victims Speak Out

Ed Vulliamy and Pascal Vannier

A French woman and a British soldier in liberated Caen, July 10, 1944

At lunchtime in the small Normandy town of Évrecy, men gather in the tabac-café-bar to wager on the next harness race through the PMU betting network. With coffee or beer in hand, they focus on the screen; a young barmaid mops the floor. Up the road toward Caen, the tall, imposing church, dating from the thirteenth century but heavily damaged during World War II, has been rebuilt, apart from a vault and a turret extending from the north wall. Every other building in town is modern.

In the early morning of June 15, 1944, Évrecy—along with nearby Aunay-sur-Odon—was targeted by 223 Lancaster and 100 Halifax heavy bombers plus 14 Mosquito light bombers from Britain's Royal Air Force as part of the campaign to liberate France that began with the Allied invasion on June 6. At Évrecy the headquarters of the Wehrmacht's Twelfth Panzer Division was destroyed, and 130 out of 430 civilians were killed, the highest proportion in any community during the Battle of Normandy. At Aunay, where there was no military target, 200 civilians were killed—more than a tenth of the population.

"There were sixteen of us, in a farmer's barn," recalls Jaqueline de La Fuente, now ninety-two. They were in Évrecy as refugees from Caen, after a British bombing raid on June 6 destroyed their house and its surrounding neighborhood:

> We spent some days sheltering in a cellar, then left in the exodus, hoping to find safety in the villages. The road was so frightening—planes above us. And when we got there: more bombing. On the night of June 15, more planes: at first distant, then closer, right above the barn. We ran across a field to foxholes and trenches that had been dug for shelter. But the planes were faster than us, low and loud—then the bombs fell. There was such noise and confusion that I still have nightmares and cannot believe it was real—a horror of explosions and pain.

She was wounded in the forehead and right leg by shrapnel, but her father and three of her four older sisters—Micheline, a nurse; Carmen, a hairdresser; and Marie-Thérèse, a seamstress—were killed. Separated from the rest of her family, she was taken back to ruined Caen for emergency surgery. Only later was she reconnected with her mother by the Red Cross.

This June 6 world leaders, thousands of tourists, and some families of liberating troops will gather for the eightieth anniversary of D-Day. It will be either the last major commemoration attended by veterans of the war or the first without any. But few will know the darkest part of D-Day's story: the slaughter of French civilians by a British and American carpet-bombing campaign considered by historians and even some of its commanders to have been of little or no military purpose.

During the three months that followed D-Day, nearly 18,000 French civilians were killed by British and American bombers—nearly two fifths of at least 51,380 killed by Allied bombing during the war. That is

Books Discussed in This Article

L'Enfer du Havre, 1940–1944
by Julien Guillemard.
Paris: Éditions Médicis (1948)

Le Havre 44: À feu et à sang
by Eddy Florentin.
Paris: Presses de la Cité (1976)

Forgotten Blitzes: France and Italy Under Allied Air Attack, 1940–1945
by Claudia Baldoli and Andrew Knapp.
Continuum,
296 pp., $47.95 (paper)

Les Français sous les bombes alliées, 1940–1945
by Andrew Knapp.
Paris: Tallandier,
631 pp., €12.50 (paper)

Les Civils dans la bataille de Normandie
by Françoise Passera and Jean Quellien.
Bayeux: OREP,
255 pp., €29.90 (paper)

Le Calvados dans la guerre, 1939–1945
by Jean Quellien.
Bayeux: OREP,
448 pp., €24.50 (paper)

Les Normands dans la guerre: Le temps des épreuves, 1939–1945
by Françoise Passera and Jean Quellien.
Paris: Tallandier, 797 pp., €27.90

Villes normandes sous les bombes (Juin 1944)
edited by Michel Boivin, Gérard Bourdin, and Jean Quellien.
Caen: Presses Universitaires de Caen (1994)

Bombardements 1944: Le Havre, Normandie, France, Europe
edited by John Barzman, Corinne Bouillot, and Andrew Knapp.
Mont-Saint-Aignan: Presses Universitaires de Rouen et du Havre,
485 pp., €25.00 (paper)

low compared with the 420,000 Germans estimated to have been killed by Allied bombs, but roughly equivalent to the 60,000 British civilians killed in the Blitz. (The same number of Italian civilians were also killed by Allied bombing, two thirds of them after the armistice was signed in September 1943.)

Yet while the Blitz is a cult in British historical memory, these French victims of Allied bombs were almost invisible for five decades after D-Day and have occupied a marginalized corner of the war's history in the years since. They are absent not only from official British and American accounts but from French ones, too—it was considered ungrateful to offend the liberators, and the Norman economy is significantly reliant on D-Day tourism. Visitors come to hear about victory, not a massacre of innocents by their own air forces.

One of the first books to recount the Allied bombing was Julien Guillemard's *L'Enfer du Havre, 1940–1944* (The Hell of Le Havre, 1940–1944; 1948), which concludes with a vivid account of the carpet-bombing of Le Havre in September 1944, after the rest of Normandy, and even Paris, had been liberated. Its final chapter is entitled "La Ville Assassinée" (The Murdered City). "What are they doing, these allies!" Guillemard fumes. In 1977 Eddy Florentin, who also survived the bombing, published another account, *Le Havre 44: À feu et à sang* (Le Havre 44: Fire and Blood), the last line of which reads: "But what liberation of Le Havre?"

Yet the bewildered anger in these books vanished from view until the 1980s, when two initiatives converged. One was the construction of the Caen Memorial, which opened in 1988. The other came when survivors studying in a program for mature students at the Inter-Age University at Caen wanted their voices heard. The connection between the two was the historian Jean Quellien, who was asked by the Caen Memorial and Caen University to lead the Center for Quantitative Historical Research on the university campus. Quellien and his team of researchers counted and named the dead in five huge volumes published between 1994 and 1997: 4,158 in Upper Normandy and 13,632 in Lower Normandy, a confirmed total of 17,790, plus the missing, who went unnamed.

The bombing of French civilians accounted for a few pages of Antony Beevor's best seller *D-Day: The Battle for Normandy* (2009). Beevor encountered hostility for suggesting that bombing Caen was "very close to a war crime." By then another British historian, Andrew Knapp at the University of Reading, was working specifically on the Allied bombing of France. He and Claudia Baldoli wrote the first account in English of the Allied bombing of France and Italy, *Forgotten Blitzes: France and Italy Under Allied Air Attack, 1940–1945* (2012), which Knapp followed up with a longer book in French, *Les Français sous les bombes alliées, 1940–1945* (France Under the Allied Bombs, 1940–1945; 2014).

But apart from Beevor's, these books did not reach a wide readership; they are missing from bookshops in Normandy and even from the Caen Memorial's shop. Of Quellien's many volumes, only one—*Les Civils dans la bataille de Normandie* (Civilians in the Battle of Normandy, 2014), written with Françoise Passera—was available there when we visited, alongside hundreds of other titles on Allied military victory, plus D-Day souvenirs and merchandise.

French presidential silence on the bombing was baffling, starting with that of Charles de Gaulle. "His memoirs give an idea of how damaged France was, but none that the British and Americans did it. To my knowledge, he never protested," says Knapp. "De Gaulle never came to the D-Day beaches or commemorations," says Stéphane Grimaldi, the director of the Caen Memorial, "or paid tribute to his compatriots killed by bombing."

Finally, in 2014, at Grimaldi's urging, President François Hollande referred to civilian casualties in his speech commemorating the seventieth anniversary of D-Day. President Emmanuel Macron is expected to pay tribute to the dead in a speech this year at Saint-Lô, though reportedly not at the beach commemorations. But when the rhetoric resounds this June 6, how many speakers will echo the words of Jean Quellien?

> Hundreds of men, women and children never got to see the end of that historic day; which dawned in hope, and ended in consternation and tears. In total, raids by the US Air Force left a thousand dead and very many wounded. Aerial photographs reported in Britain showed the destruction—but it was judged insufficient. They had to do it again!... The combined bombardments of the June 6 and night of June 6–7 cost the lives of about three thousand civilians.

No American or British leader has ever made reference, let alone paid homage, to the French dead on any public occasion.

The bombing of Norman cities, towns, and villages was initially part of the Allies' Transportation Plan to destroy German rail and road connections. Churchill had reservations about the strategy, as did even the head of RAF Bomber Command, Air Marshal Arthur Harris, infamous for his enthusiasm for carpet-bombing, and his American counterpart General Carl Spaatz. But President Franklin D. Roosevelt vetoed all objections. "However regrettable the attendant loss of civilian lives is," he directed on May 11, 1944, "I am not prepared to impose ... any restriction on military action." From D-Day onward, says Knapp, "the politicians had washed their hands of whatever carnage, warranted or not, the military leaders were prepared to unleash."

The doctrine of "carpet" or "area" bombing was not new. Britain had bombed civilians in Iraq and Afghanistan and what was then British India, where the keen young Harris had served in the RAF. The Italian military theorist General Giulio Douhet had foreseen during the 1920s that the winner of the next "frightful" war would be the combatant best able to bomb civilians from the air. By early 1944 the RAF had 863 Sterling, Halifax, and Lancaster heavy bombers at its disposal. The American Eighth Air Force was formidably equipped with a fleet of B-17 Flying Fortresses and B-24 Liberators. But area bombing was supposed to be directed against enemy populations, not civilians of allied nations yearning to be liberated.

The cathedral city of Rouen bore the opening salvo, beginning on April 19, 1944, when the outlying suburb of Sotteville-lès-Rouen was bombed and over 850 civilians were killed. Knapp found documents showing that Churchill wanted commanders to ensure that French civilian victims of the Transportation Plan not exceed 10,000 and asked Air Chief Marshal Arthur Tedder to keep him informed of "the score." On May 23 Tedder reported 6,062 dead, leaving what he called a "Credit Balance Remaining" of 3,938 civilians who could still permissibly be killed.

With D-Day, the main onslaught began. In *The Bombing War: Europe, 1939–1945* (2013), the historian Richard Overy writes that

> the weight of attack that could now be employed by the bomber commands was out of all proportion to the nature of the ground threat and on balance did little to speed up the course of the campaign.

Quellien's *Le Calvados dans la guerre, 1939–1945* (Calvados During the War, 1939–1945; 2019) calls the bombing "the programmed destruction" of Norman communities: "The raids launched from the morning of June 6 were imprecise, and had no [military] impact." The British bombed low by night, the Americans from on high by day. In Le Havre 85 percent of buildings were destroyed, in Saint-Lô 77 percent, in Lisieux 75 percent, in Caen 73 percent, and in Rouen 42 percent. Destruction in many villages was even worse.

Quellien received us twice at his home in Feuguerolles-Bully, near Caen. "The justification was military," he reflected.

> The Allies wanted, rightly, to destroy the German enemy. There was concern: "We don't want to bomb our friends," the British and Americans told one another. But reservations were put aside, and they did it anyway. The discussions only demonstrate that they knew exactly what they were doing.

However, Quellien said,

> there was silence on the matter for forty years. We started work during an atmosphere of taboo, even hostility. There had been some immediate disbelief: "Why did you do this to us?" People could not believe what had happened. But then they did not talk about it openly, not even people who had suffered. The atmosphere was: "What are you saying? It was liberation, not bombardment." The important thing was D-Day, and that's all that mattered. The Germans were gone, and if you asked, "But who killed us?" no one would answer.

The hurt was always there, though, said Quellien. "In private, Normans pointed a finger at the British and Americans, but only within the home." The silence, he said, was partly due to "diplomatic difficulty" during the cold war:

> "Do not offend our liberators, who are also our Atlantic allies." A difficulty arose between our true history and the interests of our politicians and international allies. So only much later did we do, shall we say, "the accounts," and when our work appeared, it was not well received.

Passera, who has worked closely with Quellien, explained that "what interests me is not military history but intimate history, the everyday experience of citizens during wartime." As their book *Les Normands dans la guerre: Le temps des épreuves, 1939–1945* (The Normans During the War: The Time of Trials, 1939–1945; 2021) shows, she is concerned with "everyday life in the ruins. Thousands of people trying to live in the rubble of their destroyed houses, or other extreme conditions." A related, almost untold story is the exodus of people in flight from bombing. "Survivors fled their towns en masse, heading for surrounding villages," she told us. "We estimate one hundred thousand" after the first night of bombs, "welcomed by peasants and farmers." Passera and Quellien recount how "a certain social life" was forged, with newborn babies living "the first weeks of their lives in apple baskets and vegetable crates" beneath the bombers.

Yet all this was buried history. "When the D-Day industry began during the 1950s," said Passera,

> no one talked about people killed by the Allies, or the lives of survivors.... The idea of D-Day commemoration was pilgrimage: at first families and veterans came, rightly, to visit their dead in the cemeteries. And after them came the tourist business. The local population was thus obliged to transfer its duty of memory to the fallen British and Americans, and thereby to the British and American people.... The survivors had a different history—a victim history that was not glorious, and that challenged the economic opportunities of victory.... Resentment built up. It became a conversation around the kitchen table. Until the early 1980s, when retired students at the Inter-Age University said: "Enough—we want the dead counted, and our story told."

At Allassac, in the Vézère valley of south-central France, Simonne Leterreux lives in a nursing home near her daughter Sophie Collet. Now ninety, Leterreux lost her mother in 1940 at the age of six in the Norman town of Lisieux, just as the war began. Lisieux was later destroyed, but by then Simonne and two of her elder sisters, Denise and Genviève, had been placed by their father at a convent boarding school in Caen run by "the good sisters" of St. Vincent-de-Paul, where Simonne stayed throughout the Nazi occupation. Then came the night of June 6, 1944, when

> although we saw nothing, we heard the planes overhead, and the terrible noise around, of bombs falling. The noise was continuous; we were right underneath the planes. The

good sisters told us to lean against the walls for protection.

The school was not hit, and the nuns arranged for the children to join the exodus from Caen to hide in a quarry at May-sur-Orne about nine miles away. "As we walked in line," remembered Leterreux,

> we saw everything around us in ruins. A bomb had hit a butcher's store in the rue d'Auge, and the flesh of the victims was mixed in with the meat—it was impossible to distinguish which was which. Everything was bombed, everything destroyed, and we walked through the rubble and corpses of those who had not survived—covering the ground, dead and some wounded.

The children hid for forty days in the quarry while the battle for Caen raged. When they went back to town after liberation, "and we told people we had been in the quarries all that time, they said it was not possible. I told them, 'If you were born stupid, you'll die stupid!'" Leterreux repeated that phrase many times, laughing. "*Si tu nais con, tu meurs con.*"

How did Leterreux feel about the liberators bombing them? "We didn't know who it was! We were bombed by the British, later the Americans, but the good sisters said nothing about that. We learned long afterward who did it. For months we knew nothing about who did this. It was liberation, but that is not the same thing as being bombed by your friends."

Some two thousand civilians were killed in the bombing of Caen, during a battle that lasted five weeks longer than the British general Bernard Montgomery had planned. Passera and Quellien, in *Les Civils dans la bataille de Normandie*, cite the account of Bernard Michel, who watched "the mass of planes flying toward Caen" with his friend Jean, from the village of Venoix.

> To our stupefaction, we watched them unleash the bombs, in great clusters. I was stunned. It's not possible, we told ourselves. Jean knew I was an Anglophile, and said, "Now look what your friends are doing!"

Stéphane Grimaldi became director of the Caen Memorial in 2005. "We conducted a major survey," he said,

> and found that one in three respondents had someone in their extended family who had been killed or wounded by bombing. For the vast majority, the Battle of Normandy was "extremely important"—this is our history.

But, he cautioned,

> it's a question of how we structure memory of the battle. Official memory on one level, and domestic memory on another; public heroic memory versus victim memory behind closed curtains. Heroic memory became official memory; there were only heroes, and the full story was considered embarrassing because it was a tragic history, not a heroic one. But there comes a point when society has to question itself and people want to understand what really happened.

Two things occurred: First came an effort to secure official public mention, at least, of civilian victims. In 2014 Grimaldi was at the beachhead site of Arromanches, planning the seventieth-anniversary commemorations with the historian Jean-Pierre Azéma and advising President Hollande, to whom he said, "There's no public acknowledgment of what happened to the civilians." Grimaldi recalled that "Hollande reacted, and paid tribute to civilian victims in his speech. I hoped that this would begin to change the perception." Second, also on Grimaldi's initiative, was the opening in 2016 of a museum and memorial to civilian victims in the Norman town of Falaise. "But when I initially raised this," Grimaldi said, "I was called a revisionist!—yes, the same word used for deniers of the Holocaust—by officials from the state and region."

Falaise was bombed to rubble by the Allies, in part by incendiary phosphorous bombs; the "Falaise pocket" was held by the Germans until August 16. The museum is the definitive public record, in exhibits and videotaped testimony of how Norman civilians lived under both the German occupation and Allied bombing. The testimony is searing. Pierre Savary, then a student, recalls losing both parents, four brothers, and a sister to bombs falling on his home in Lisieux: "We were trapped under rubble. I remember the cries and moans of the people. I was amazed to be alive, but I lost everybody else."

Pressure for the Falaise museum came, says its director, Emmanuel Thiébot,

> from the public. Things changed because of the Inter-Age University, and then Quellien's work. But the publications were scientific—it takes a long time for research to seep into the open, even though the witnesses were still alive.

This is why the museum

> puts the civilians at the heart of the story. France was not an enemy, yet we were subjected to both strategic and psychological bombing. And this is our challenge here: to represent the French public as grateful to our liberators, but also as victims of countries that liberated us.

As a result, he says, "when foreigners do come, we've had Americans saying: 'Did we do this?' And we say, 'Well, yes, you did.' And they're almost in tears sometimes—they have no idea."

Much of the heaviest bombing by the US Army Air Forces was of the Manche département, whose capital, Saint-Lô, was described by Samuel Beckett in his essay "The Capital of the Ruins," based on his experiences there as a volunteer for the Irish Red Cross. The senior researcher for Manche on Quellien's original team was Michel Boivin. In their first collection of testimony, *Villes normandes sous les bombes (Juin 1944)* (Norman Cities Under the Bombs, June 1944), published in 1994, they quote Jean Roger of Saint-Lô celebrating at first as American bombers flew overhead: "They've arrived! A sentiment of intense joy augmented by the long wait." But then:

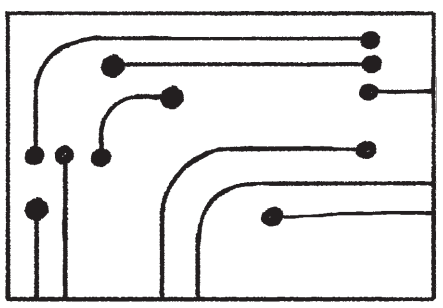
> They're bombing!... Are we dead? Are we alive? Is this the end?... I had the chance to cast an eye over the town: horrible. Everything in flames, an inferno... all ablaze, cries for help.

"It was difficult to gather the information we needed to establish the cost of liberation," said Boivin, who received us at his home in Blainville-sur-Mer.

> A lot of people had wanted to talk but felt they shouldn't. Including... firemen who had hauled bodies from rubble, and medics treating the wounded. A nurse treated a woman with a baby in her arms: she was alive, but the child was dead. I saw many people break down in tears—it was as though we had opened up their trauma.... Officials said to us, "How dare you?" It was considered anti-American to talk about how many people were killed in Saint-Lô.

(According to the definitive count, 352.)

Normandy is the most pro-American and Anglophile corner of Europe. US and British flags fly everywhere, and cafés in Bayeux have window paint-



ings of British Tommies offering afternoon tea. "Some seven million people, mostly English-speaking, visit D-Day sites each year," said Grimaldi.

> It's essential to the regional economy. So you construct a memory that ignores the rest, a heroic story that saturates the public space for tourists to celebrate: thank you England and America, with some mention of Canadians, but almost none of the Poles, and others.

Thiébot uses the term "memory tourism":

> But like the commemorations, it is limited to D-Day, not the Battle of Normandy—a circuit of emblematic locations to do with landings and liberation, recounted as a successful military operation with extraordinary logistics, and sacrifice by men in uniform. Nothing to do with the civilian cost, no mention of bombing. Everyone knows, but don't mention it in front of the tourists!

The British bombing of Le Havre between September 5 and 11, 1944, took the lives of some two thousand civilians, while one report by an RAF officer counted nine German dead. "One cannot commemorate the liberation of Le Havre as one might the other towns," said Mayor Antoine Rufenacht on its sixtieth anniversary.

In Knapp's recounting of the battle, two men faced each other: Colonel Hermann-Eberhard Wildermuth, ordered by Hitler to defend Le Havre to the last, and Lieutenant General Sir John Crocker of British First Corps, under pressure from what Knapp calls "victory fever" to take it. Wildermuth had urged an evacuation of civilians on August 21, yet only 10,000 left, while 50,000 stayed.

For decades historians could not verify Guillemard's assertion in 1948 that Crocker refused a further German proposal to evacuate civilians before the bombing; Guillemard reports citizens' confusion at announcements that "the evacuation is suspended." Florentin writes that "the conditions proposed by the German commander to let civilians leave on the 5th and 6th were rejected by Lt. Gen. Crocker." In Crocker's family papers, Knapp found a letter to his wife that contained conclusive evidence:

> [Wildermuth] requested an armistice for two days to evacuate the (large number) of civilians in the place. It wasn't an easy or a nice decision to make but I had to refuse as it was obviously to his advantage to get rid of them—he would gain time, have none to feed and would get rid of the French agents and active resisters.

Yet the ensuing devastation was not inflicted on Wildermuth's defenses. Knapp cited Allied intelligence detailing where Germans troops were positioned, down to such particulars as a horse exercise ground. "If you want to go for German command and control, these are the addresses," he said, showing us the original map. "The British had a reliable repertoire of tactical targets, each marked by a letter. It's a pity they didn't use it." At a meeting on September 3,

> Crocker gave the coordinates, and they weren't the German targets. I don't understand why, given the information he had, Crocker bombed the parts of town he did. German troops were already on the periphery, and Crocker hit the city center. It just doesn't make sense.

In Le Havre on the night of September 5, 781 people were killed and 289 disappeared. The following night another 655 were killed, of whom 174 were buried and asphyxiated, trapped in the worksite of the future Jenner road tunnel; seven survived, "using their fingertips to try and clear the earth, a pitiful struggle for life," writes Guillemard. By September 11, 9,790 tons of bombs had killed 1,397 identified dead and 139 unknown dead with 517 disappeared—a total of 2,053 killed in less than a week. Florentin describes

> smoke, the smell of sulfur invades the cellar... We're suffocating... In the darkness we collide with each other... A head, with singed hair and wild eyes, sometimes appears in a crack, tortured voice imploring: "Help! I'm burning! Get me out of here!" But we can do nothing for this dying man, already perched on a pile of corpses, because the road is also hell, a chaos of smoking ruins between which we stumble, people seeking refuge, collapsing, one after the other.

On September 11 Crocker wrote to Harris, "Nobody could have been given

a better start than we were by Bomber Command. All ranks unanimous in their praise of absolute accuracy of bombing and timing on every occasion." But even Harris, whose name is synonymous with mass slaughter of civilians from the air, had regrets: Knapp found a telephone message from Harris dated October 1944 in which he lamented that "many French civilians were killed, and much damage done which did not materially help our army to take the port." An RAF public relations officer, the future playwright and novelist R. F. Delderfield, wrote in a report for the First Canadian Army: "The bombing only killed about 8 Germans and did not fall on that quarter of the town where the Germans were assembled." Whatever the calculation, said Quellien, "the British knew perfectly well they were going to massacre Le Havre."

Le Havre was rebuilt so successfully, to a design by the celebrated architect Auguste Perret, that it is designated a UNESCO World Heritage site. But there was silence on the bombing until very recently.

At the Tourneville fort, high above the docks, some two hundred people turned out in March for a lecture organized by the Havre Center for Historical Research and given by an academic from the Université Le Havre Normandie, Thomas Vaisset, on the official management of corpses and body parts after the bombing. The detail was forensic, the audience enthralled. The fort, completed in 1860, was a headquarters for German occupying troops, then briefly the British. "When the English arrived," said Le Havre's municipal archivist, Sylvie Barot, in the audience, "they were pleased to find the German cellar: cognac, champagne, fine wine—and took full advantage!"

Also present was the local historian Claude Malon, who has written on Le Havre's economy during the occupation and the fortunes made, especially from building the Germans' defensive Atlantic Wall. Malon coined the unpopular description of Le Havre as "Vichy-sur-Seine" and posits what he calls a "memory screen," whereby the memory of the bombing conveniently hides that of collaboration.

Yet neither the conservative mayor Pierre Courant (one of the very few to govern a municipality both under the occupation and after it) nor the Communists who ran Le Havre from 1965 to 1995 officially commemorated the bombing. Le Havre, says Barot, "was urged to focus on reconstruction, present and future." An imposing solid granite memorial to its World War I dead (almost the only structure to survive the bombing of the city center) rises in the rebuilt Place du Générale de Gaulle. Civilian victims of bombing are remembered by Perret's towering church of St. Joseph, completed in 1958 and conceived in their memory but not formally dedicated until a ceremony and the affixing of a small plaque in 2019.

After the war, "people either didn't know what happened to us or they didn't want to know," said La Fuente. When she was reunited with her mother,

> there was silence between us; she cried all the time. Afterward she was unable to speak about any of this—if she had done so, she would have wept for the rest of her life. To lose your husband is much to bear, but to also lose three children is unbearable. She never forgave the English; she couldn't speak of England. But she said almost nothing.

Until her mother died in 1968, La Fuente said, "she avoided driving through Évrecy"—nine miles from Caen—"and I still do."

"They were our liberators, whatever," says Leterreux. "I rarely hear anyone talk about 'British bastards' or 'damned Americans,'" says Boivin. "In almost all places, infantrymen were greeted as liberators," says Knapp,

> apart from the extreme case of Le Havre, where they were tolerated at best. People risked their lives to hide airmen who had been shot down, and helped them escape, even though moments beforehand, those same airmen were dropping bombs on those who rescued them.

Delderfield, in his report for the Canadian army, noted that "the people of Le Havre had previously been very pro-British," but now

> some of them failed to respond to a greeting and I felt that if they had been certain I was RAF (I wore a raincoat all the time) there might have been some unpleasantness.... They were glad to be liberated but this was a terrible price to pay.

Even Guillemard concludes, "What predominated among us was our ferocious, implacable hatred of Hitler and his gang."

Throughout 2004 the Caen Memorial, in partnership with *Ouest France* newspaper, organized a remarkable series of public hearings called "The Vigils" across twenty-four bombed locations, at which survivors told their stories. Most, says Thiébot,

> agreed that bombing was the price to pay for liberation; it wasn't a discourse of vengeance, but they wanted their voices heard, and they wanted an answer to the question: Why? You killed my family, you destroyed my town—but did you have to?

Knapp divides bombings of civilians into three categories.

> One: militarily useful with minimal casualties. [He cites targeting an aerospace factory in Limoges.] Two: You can see the military justification, but did it have to be done with so much damage to people and buildings? Three: Why do that? Heavy civilian casualties for little or no military gain.

Le Havre, he says, definitely fits into category three, and after decades of research on Normandy, he cannot cite a single example in category one: "Too many civilian casualties, every time."

On the beachfront at Saint-Aubin-sur-Mer is a memorial to Canadian soldiers who died landing there and a panel with a picture of three young ladies, one of whom is Paulette Mériel, reportedly the first Norman to shake hands with a liberating soldier: a French-speaking Canadian from the North Shore Regiment. Mériel died on May 18, three months after we interviewed her, aged one hundred, at a care home in nearby Douvres-la-Déliverande.

After a gripping account of the occupation, with gossip about collaborators and black marketers and Germans threatening to shoot her for shrimping, Mériel's recollections reached D-Day:

> We were young—we had heads full of fog, more curious than afraid—but we knew something special was happening. My grandmother was terrified—she thought the Canadians were going to shoot her! But our house was by the beach: we went down and met them, and they spoke to us in our language!

Then the bombs fell:

> On the first day, our house was completely destroyed—luckily no one was there. A mix of sounds: planes, bombs, artillery. We hid in the dike, then the cellars—a dozen of us. We ventured out by night: the houses around us all destroyed. It was misery, but we got accustomed to it, sleeping on mattresses—and the Germans were gone at last.

Mériel's family was not so lucky:

> My sister had a farm, and her husband and his brother were killed by the bombing just after D-Day. We were happy to be liberated, but what followed was not so happy. I'm not timid on the matter: they liberated us, but we didn't expect to have to pay that price.

"The Normans," she reflected,

> lived many different D-Days. Different experiences in different places. There was a D-Day of liberation, and then there was the D-Day of losing our homes, and all those thousands of our people.

●

Letters

Counting the Dead in Gaza

To the Editors:

My article "Is Israel Committing Genocide?" [*NYR*, June 6] cited numbers of the dead and wounded in Gaza, including the number of women and children killed, as reported by the United Nations. Shortly after the article went to press, reports circulated that the UN had changed the source on which it relies for fatality statistics in the territory. The total number of deaths reported remained the same, but the UN stated that the Gaza Health Ministry had not yet established the full names and identity numbers of more than 10,000 of those killed. It therefore distinguished between the total death toll (35,233 people as of this writing) and the number of identified victims (24,686 people), only specifying the number of women and children included in the latter. The ministry is still trying to collect information about the remaining victims from morgues and hospitals across the territory.

Given the circumstances in Gaza, it is understandable that collecting this information is very difficult. Many hospitals in the territory are not functioning. It will take time to see whether there is a significant disparity between the information initially reported and the final figures.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu also entered the discussion about numbers by asserting that Israeli forces had killed roughly 14,000 Hamas combatants and 16,000 civilians. He did not say how he obtained this information. In most armed conflicts, at least two or three times as many people are wounded as are killed. That is reflected in the figures reported by the ministry, and that is what one would expect in a war in which many deaths are attributable to the bombing raids that have devastated Gaza. If Netanyahu is correct about the number of Hamas combatants Israel has killed, the combined number of dead and wounded combatants would probably exceed the number that Israel has claimed are in the territory. Israel should declare victory, and the war would be over.

That Israel has decided to continue the war raises questions about Netanyahu's figures. His use of such figures evokes memories of the Vietnam War, during which American military commanders, including General William Westmoreland, regularly claimed that Vietnamese who were killed, including many civilians, were Viet Cong combatants. This helped to create the illusion in some circles that America was winning the war, until it was lost.

As I pointed out in my article, Israeli, Palestinian, and international human rights groups have been barred from operating in Gaza during the conflict by the Israel Defense Forces. Their exclusion has substantially limited our knowledge of what is taking place in Gaza. One of them, the Israeli organization B'Tselem, has provided what I believe to be reliable statistics on past conflicts. Its inability to operate in Gaza during the current conflict has eliminated that source of information.

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