THE Nation.
EST. 1865
JULY 24/31, 2023

THE DESTRUCTION OF MASAFER YATTA

Israel wants their homes for target practice. And the country's Supreme Court says that's perfectly legal.

BASEL ADRA & YUVAL ABRAHAM

WHITENESS WINS AGAIN

ELIE MYSTAL

THE WORLDS OF JUAN DE PAREJA

RACHEL HUNTER HIMES

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WAR MADE INVISIBLE

Norman Solomon

"With an immense and rare humanity, Solomon insists that we awaken from the slumber of denial and distraction and confront the carnage of the U.S.'s never-ending military onslaughts. A staggeringly important intervention."
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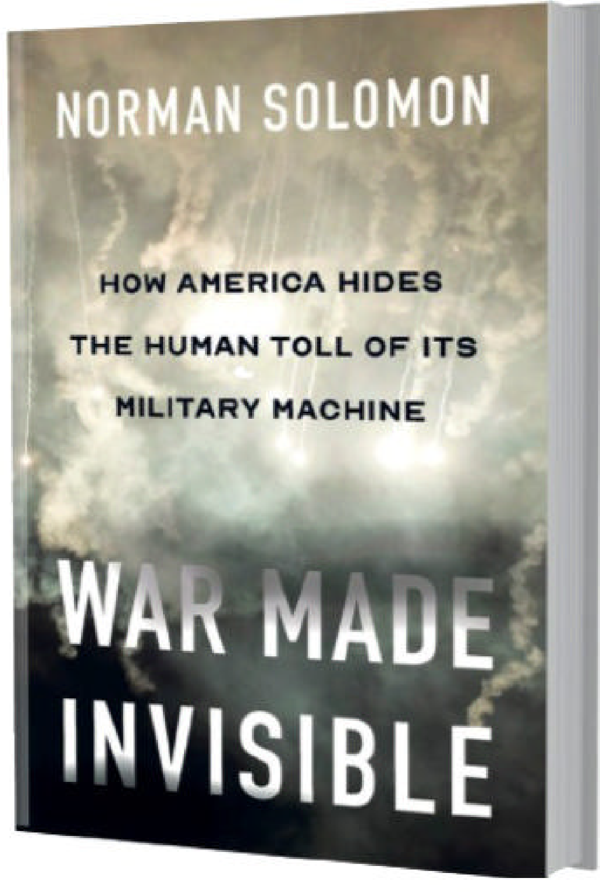
"A powerful, necessary indictment of efforts to disguise the human toll of American foreign policy."
—***Kirkus Reviews***
(starred review)

"*War Made Invisible* will provide the fresh and profound clarity that our country desperately needs."
—**Daniel Ellsberg**,
Pentagon Papers whistleblower and author of *The Doomsday Machine*



"The great African writer Chinua Achebe recounts an African proverb that holds that 'until the lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter.' In Norman Solomon's gripping and painful study of what the hunter seeks to make invisible, the lions have found their historian, who scrupulously dismantles the deceit of the hunters and records what is all too visible to the lions."
—**Noam Chomsky**

"I couldn't put it down. This book, written in an easy-to-read style, gets to the heart of the matter."
—**Ben Cohen**, co-founder, Ben & Jerry's

"Solomon exposes the cant and lies that underpin the global war on terror, indicting the policymakers, functionaries, and media propagandists who perpetuate this 'political license to kill.' Read it to understand how Americans were deceived."
—**Charles Glass**, former ABC News chief Middle East correspondent and author of *Soldiers Don't Go Mad*

"Cutting through this manufactured 'fog of war,' Norman Solomon eloquently casts sunlight, the best disinfectant, on the propaganda that fuels perpetual war."
—**Amy Goodman**, *Democracy Now!*

thenewpress.com

Colors: Participants wave a rainbow flag in the annual Pride Parade on June 25 in Santiago, Chile.

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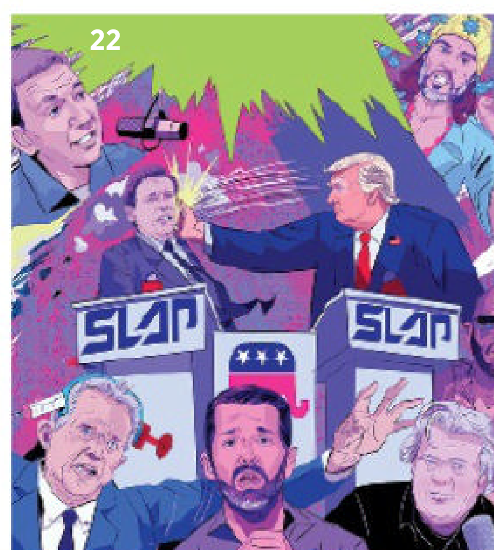

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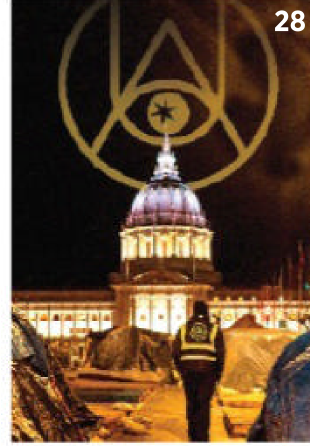

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Cover photograph: **KEREN MANOR**

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EDITORIAL/ELIE MYSTAL FOR *THE NATION*

Whiteness Wins Again

IT HAS BEEN A LONG GOODBYE. THE SUPREME COURT'S DECISION TO OVERturn the constitutional right to affirmative action in college admissions achieved a long-standing conservative policy goal through the fiat of six unelected justices. But affirmative action wasn't just killed by Republican lawyers. It was made vulnerable by the soft bigotry of parents. If you want to see a white liberal drop the pretense that they care about systemic racism, just tell them that their privately tutored kid didn't get into that "elite" school they wanted. Some of the most racist claptrap I've had aimed at me had to do with affirmative action. It's used by a certain kind of underachieving white person as an excuse to denigrate any Black person's credentials. Then those same people use their own racial hang-ups as an argument to get rid of affirmative action. And some Black people—like Clarence Thomas, who joined Chief Justice John Roberts's majority opinion—fall for it.

Thomas considers himself a *victim* of affirmative action. He has written that his Yale law degree meant less because of it, and that it made white employers doubt his intellectual merits. Any successful Black person in this country, including myself, knows the feeling. But Thomas has decided to take his hurt feelings out on one of the most effective social justice policies in American history, while most Black people just learn to step over the low-account white folks clawing at our ankles.

The astute reader will note that I haven't thus far mentioned the majority's arguments against affirmative action. That's because they're embarrassing.

The actual cases involve lawsuits brought by the white conservative legal gadfly Ed Blum, who has made it his life's work to destroy affirmative action, on behalf of a group of Asian American students.

The plaintiffs argue that affirmative action policies discriminate against AAPI students. But that's simply wrong. A district court found in 2019 that universities do not intentionally discriminate against AAPI students—and that there's no evidence that affirmative action is hurting them. (I think Harvard *does* discriminate against AAPI applicants, but not because of affirmative action.) The argument against affirmative action is thus based on some students' feeling that they would have gotten into these schools if the schools had admitted fewer Black and Latino people. But California saw Black and Latino enrollment plummet right after it banned affirmative action in 1998. AAPI enrollment went up a little bit, and whites seized the remaining opportunities.

Of course, boosting whites at the expense of Black and Latino students is precisely what conservatives want. This doesn't make it a constitutional argument. The court's conservatives claimed that the 14th Amendment's equal-protection clause prevents the use of race-conscious admissions because it discriminates against AAPI students. But as Justice Sonia Sotomayor noted in her dissent, this argument is a bastardization of the amendment. Policies like affirmative action were first enacted in this country during Reconstruction. Any good-faith "originalist" argument would have to acknowledge that the authors of the 14th Amendment contemplated affirmative action. But the conservatives are not interested in good faith. They ended affirmative action because college admissions are maybe the only place in American life where being white isn't an automatic benefit.

Affirmative action was killed because anything that doesn't primarily benefit white people is anathema to this country.

That has always been affirmative action's true sin. Anything that isn't seen to primarily benefit white people is anathema to this country. To wit, *men* are now getting a boost in college admissions because they're not keeping pace with women. Yet the court did not ban gender consciousness in admissions, only race—because race is the card white people use that never gets declined.

Affirmative action was one of the few policies that pierced that privileged veil. Now it is gone. But I do wonder whom the people who successfully killed it will blame the next time a rejection letter comes in the mail.

I suppose that as long as there is one Black college student, a white kid will think they had some unfair "advantage." That is small solace: Even without affirmative action, a lot of white rejects out there will still die mad. **N**

COMMENT/KATRINA VANDEN HEUVEL

Putin, Prigozhin, and Russia's Future

Caution should be our guiding principle.

SOON AFTER THE NEWS BROKE, A RUSSIAN FRIEND e-mailed me, "What I'm most concerned about is Russia in chaos with nukes, and someone worse than Putin coming to power."

The endgame remains murky, but the (barely) two days that rocked Russia posed the most serious challenge to President Vladimir Putin's authority in his 23 years in power. Yet however weakened, he's still in power, and Ukraine's counteroffensive is, by many accounts, a slow slog through minefields and trenches.

The time line is well-known. Yevgeny Prigozhin, leader of the Wagner mercenary group, launched a "march of justice" following allegations that Russia's army had attacked a Wagner encampment. Prigozhin's forces sliced through Russia's south to Rostov-on-Don, heading toward Moscow. With his private army (largely recruited from the country's prisons), and his furious public criticism of Russia's war-fighting ability and the corruption of its elites, Prigozhin seemed to be positioning himself for a succession struggle, going so far as to say he would defy the July 1 deadline for private militias to sign contracts with the Defense Ministry in order to be fully integrated into Russia's regular forces.

Prigozhin had long been critical of Russia's military leadership, lashing out at its incompetence and corruption, and contrasting its purported passivity with what he touts as Wagner's patriotism and bravery in defending the interests of the "motherland" in Ukraine, Syria, and beyond. But in a May video posted on the Telegram app, Prigozhin broadened his line of attack to include the conduct of the war in Ukraine, which he later described as a "colossal" failure.

More recently, Prigozhin accused the children of the elite of "shaking their tails on beaches" while the children of ordinary Russian families are dying. "You sons of bitches," he continued, "gather your kids, send them to war, and when you go to their funerals, then people will say, 'Now everything is fair.'" His fury both stokes and is fueled by widespread anger—especially among the families whose boys have been engaged in World War I–style trench warfare with 21st-century weapons, whose towns have been emptied by conscription, and whose cemeteries seek more gravediggers. (Putin's determination to avoid a second mobilization also empowered Wagner.) Yet the beleaguered families of Russia's soldiers would also be enraged at Prigozhin if they knew that, according to the Discord leaks, he offered to provide Russian troop locations to the Ukrainians if they pulled back from the city of Bakhmut. He also bet (wrongly) that a significant portion of Russia's forces would turn against their commanders and join the rebellion.

Meanwhile, the regime's internal troubles may be even deeper than they appear. Though the agreement quickly brokered by Aleksandr Lukashenko, the president of Belarus and a staunch Putin ally, to disarm Prigozhin seems to be holding, Putin faces ongoing divisions in the regime's power centers. He has built his legitimacy on the lack of (or the suppression of) alternatives to his rule. Prigozhin himself may be neutered—by taking the amnesty deal and slithering off to Minsk and potentially losing Wagner, the source of his power, he has removed himself as a rival to Putin. But given the recent reports of the detention of Gen. Sergey Surovikin, former top commander in Ukraine—a close ally of Prigozhin and an architect of Russia's brutal Syrian campaigns—the mutiny could lead to a wider purge of the armed forces' high command as Putin looks to assert clearer control.

As the coup quickly unfolded, Twitter and cable news offered up a bipartisan passel of pundits openly celebrating the possibility of violent, destabilizing conflict in a country with the world's largest nuclear stockpile. Their barely muted support for a quasi-fascist strongman was a running subtext. There was far too little attention paid to the grave risks that would be posed by the Russian state's disintegration: the terrifying possibility of Russia's losing control of its nuclear weapons. We should also be urgently worried about the stability of the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant, the largest in Europe. Then there is the humanitarian catastrophe of a new refugee crisis. And as Russian friends warn, we're likely to see new waves of repression: shutting down Internet access, more censorship, adding new groups to the foreign-enemies list.

> **Little attention has been paid to the grave risks that would be posed by the Russian state's disintegration.**

The aftermath of the showdown presents President Biden and NATO with both opportunities and dangers. Caution should be the watchword—and the guiding policy principle. Washington must avoid fueling the deeply held Russian suspicion (not without considerable cause) that the West will seek to exploit the situation. At the July 11–12 NATO summit in Vilnius, it would be wise to remember—even amid the laser-like focus on military tactics—that while the immediate cause of this disastrous, brutal war was Russia's 2022 invasion, the repeated moves to expand NATO to Russia's borders provoked Russian fears. This makes it all the more important to try to prevent overreaction in Moscow, to make a genuine effort to stabilize relations with Russia, and to use this perilous moment to seek a peaceful end to the Ukraine war. And to recall that a failure of diplomacy led to this conflict. Tough, informed, and smart diplomacy is urgently needed now to find a humane resolution to it. N

COMMENT/D.D. GUTTENPLAN AND BHASKAR SUNKARA

Is Cornel West Serious?

If he wants to go beyond preaching to the converted, he needs to take his socialist politics into the Democratic primaries.

CORNEL WEST IS A VERY SERIOUS MAN. An intellectual superstar from the moment he graduated from Harvard (where he majored in Near Eastern languages and civilization), West was the first African American to be awarded a PhD in philosophy at Princeton. Though he wrote his doctoral dissertation on "Ethics, Historicism and the Marxist Tradition," West also came under the influence of Richard Rorty and the American pragmatist revival during his time at Princeton. He has since taught at Yale (where he held a joint appointment with the college and the Divinity School), Harvard (where he taught in both the Department of African and African American Studies and the Divinity School, and was named a University Professor), Princeton (where he helped found the Center for African-American Studies), and the Union Theological Seminary, where since 2021 he has held the Dietrich Bonhoeffer Chair.

The author of numerous books—including the best-selling *Race Matters*—West has also recorded his own albums, performed on others with artists ranging from Terence Blanchard to Bootsy Collins, and even appeared in two of the *Matrix* films. He has also been arrested numerous times—including in Ferguson, Mo., where he was knocked down by the police—as part of a long and distinguished career as a leader in the fight for social justice and human rights. An adviser to Bill Bradley's presidential campaign in 2000, a supporter of Barack Obama in 2008, and a key surrogate for Bernie Sanders in 2016 and 2020, West has also served as honorary chair of the Democratic Socialists of America. Aside from Noam Chomsky, it's hard to think of another public intellectual with West's breadth of engagement or political experience. Unlikely though he is to win the White House, we believe West could make a terrific—even a historic—president.

Which makes it all the more unfortunate that instead of waging a campaign designed to push Joe Biden—and the country—in the direction of justice and compassion, West seems not just resigned but determined to remain on the margins.

He announced his campaign as a nominee for the tiny and scandal-plagued People's Party, which has ballot access only in Florida. Then he moved his candidacy to the Green Party, but the Greens—who seem to have welcomed West with open arms—aren't much of an improvement, with ballot access in only 15 states. Though the party does have a long history in Europe, the US Green Party reached its peak in 2000, when Ralph Nader won almost 3 million votes for president (and has been blamed by mainstream pundits ever since for the failure of Al Gore's dismal campaign).

The reason for West's choice is clear: In our hardly democratic two-party system, acting as a spoiler in a close race is the closest a third-party candidate can come to relevancy. And if Donald Trump remains in serious contention next year, that is a risk no progressive can dismiss.

The fact that Biden's first term has matched every success with disappointment doesn't change that calculus. He expanded pandemic relief and health coverage with the American Rescue Plan—but then let many of those measures lapse. He advocated climate and industrial policy initiatives with the Inflation Reduction Act—but also approved a massive new drilling project in Alaska. The choice between four more years of Biden or Trump is not difficult. But if ever there was a president in need of a left opposition, it's the longtime centrist now in the White House.

There is, however, an available arena where West could still provide useful pressure by laying out the left alternative to Bidenism: the Democratic primaries. On the debate stage, at campaign rallies, and in national media coverage, West, with his prophetic voice and moral clarity—like Sanders in 2016 and 2020—could accomplish a great deal.

Instead of taking his bat and ball and retreating to the margins, we believe West should seek out the truly national stage that running as a Democrat would bring. Instead of letting Robert F. Kennedy Jr. leverage his family name—and his following as an anti-vaccine crusader—into an ersatz challenge from the left, West should mount a real one, offering the radical solutions he's always championed, including on war and peace, and which we believe this country desperately needs.

Instead of taking his bat and ball and retreating to the margins, West should seek out the truly national stage that running as a Democrat would bring.

Such a campaign would be good for the country—and for the Democratic Party, which, in the absence of such a contest, risks ceding the national spotlight to the Republicans. Running as a Democrat would transform West's candidacy from a sterile exercise into a vehicle for redeeming our politics from the corporate complacency and soul-crushing cynicism about democratic politics that serves only those already in power. In short, it would be the act of a serious man. N

DISPATCHES

PITTSBURGH/AMY LITTLEFIELD

Reality Check

At a major anti-abortion convention, some activists acknowledged how unpopular abortion bans are.

ALMOST A YEAR TO THE DAY AFTER THE SUPREME Court ended the legal right to abortion nationwide, one of the main architects of the strategy behind the decision stood at a podium in a Pittsburgh airport hotel. James Bopp Jr. had worked toward the defeat of *Roe v. Wade* as general counsel for the nation's largest anti-abortion group, the National Right to Life Committee (NRLC), since 1978. Nearly half a century later, he still serves in that role. Now Bopp, dressed in a salmon-pink polo shirt and a blazer, was about to admit that his life's work wasn't panning out the way he'd planned.

The Supreme Court's decision to reverse *Roe* in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* had been "a monumental event that required enormous effort," Bopp said during his panel at this year's annual National Right to Life Convention. Still, the results had been disappointing. "We have 20-some states who have substantive, significant restrictions on abortion," Bopp said. "We would have expected, like, 300,000 fewer abortions."

But thanks in large part to the herculean efforts of abortion funds and providers, the bans are not having the effect Bopp expected. A survey by the Society for Family Planning (SFP) found that in the nine months after *Dobbs*, the number of abortions provided by clinicians had dropped by just 25,000 compared with the average monthly number of abortions in April and May 2022. Bopp paused, letting the audience absorb the number in stunned silence. Somewhere in the beige-paneled room, someone let out an audible "whew."

A year after the *Dobbs* decision, the anti-abortion movement is contending with two unexpected results. Not only did the SFP survey of reported abortions find a smaller decrease than abortion opponents had anticipated, but its figures don't account for the untold number of people who are accessing abortion medications through overseas or peer-to-peer suppliers, even in states where abortion is banned. Meanwhile, other states and localities are taking historic steps to improve abortion access. On the day that Bopp spoke in Pittsburgh, New York Governor Kathy Hochul signed a law to protect abortion providers in the state who are openly planning to provide telemedicine abortions in states where they are banned.

The second result is that these bans have come at a profound political cost for the anti-abortion movement. Since *Dobbs*, abortion rights supporters have not only won all six of the abortion-related ballot measures that have come up for a vote in the country, but they stifled a "red wave" in the 2022 midterms and clinched a key Wisconsin Supreme Court seat. In the National Right to Life Convention's host state, Pennsylvania, outrage over *Dobbs* helped Democrats flip the state House, elect a Democratic governor, and send Democrat John Fetterman to the US Senate. Sitting in his booth in the convention hallway, Christopher Pushaw, executive director of the Pennsylvania Pro-Life Federation, told me he wasn't sure that *Dobbs* had been worth the price. "I don't think as a country we were ready for this," Pushaw said. "To me it's an imperfect, somewhat of a Pyrrhic, victory."

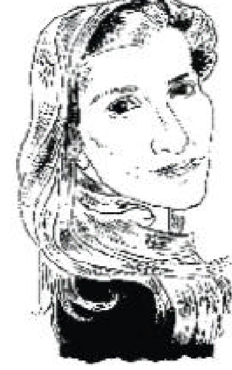
The victory seemed more genuine for activists in the 14 states, including Louisiana, Oklahoma, and South Dakota, that have banned abortion since *Dobbs*. But Bopp had an agenda for them, too. He wanted states to implement radical measures to make enforcement of their bans more effective. Those measures could include removing enforcement authority from local prosecutors, many of whom have declined to enforce abortion bans, and giving it to state attorneys general; allowing citizens to enforce abortion bans with civil lawsuits; applying RICO laws to abortion providers; and weaponizing anti-trafficking laws to make it harder to leave the state to obtain an abortion—as Idaho has done, on Bopp's advice.

> **These bans have come at a profound political cost for the anti-abortion movement.**

But these measures could face "enormous opposition," he acknowledged. How politically feasible would such changes be? For one thing, Bopp and the rest of the NRLC were coming to terms with the fact that very few people support their position that rape and incest victims should be forced to carry a pregnancy to term. (All but four of the current total abortion bans make no exception for rape or incest.) "We have not moved the needle on rape and incest in 50 years," Karen Cross, the NRLC's political director, said in a panel earlier that day.

So, Bopp suggested, rape and incest exceptions would sweeten the deal for state lawmakers reluctant to beef up enforcement. Of course, exceptions for rape and incest are meaningless in states where abortion clinics have closed. But to the NRLC, that doesn't matter. They're part of a new marketing strategy that includes ditching what Bopp called "the big 'ban' word." In polls, Cross noted that the word "ban" seemed to make policies that ban abortion at various stages of pregnancy less popular. "We want to talk about 'protections' and not 'bans,'" Cross advised. So far, the 61 percent of Americans who think *Dobbs* was a "bad thing" haven't been fooled. N

Back Talk
Alexis Grenell



What Makes a Man

Lucas Kunce's campaign for the US Senate is a rebuke to Josh Hawley's toxic vision of masculinity.

WHOSE PENIS IS BIG ENOUGH TO BE PRESIDENT? That's the high-stakes issue animating the Republican primary right now, with former president Donald Trump's advisers urging him to challenge Florida Governor Ron DeSantis to a literal dick-measuring contest. According to *Rolling Stone*, they want Trump to call DeSantis "Tiny D" for the clever double entendre of it all: "He's also short but…yes of course it's about his penis, that's why we're doing it," one Trump team member said. Trump already previewed this strategy in 2016 against "Little Marco" Rubio, who then zinged Trump's suspiciously small hands (we all know what *that* means), prompting him to reassure the public on a national debate stage about the size of his manhood: "I guarantee you, there's no problem. I guarantee." It's been a steady descent for the entire Republican Party ever since.

The thorny question of what manhood means is also the focus of Lucas Kunce's latest campaign ad against Missouri Senator Josh Hawley. Voiced by Missouri native Jon Hamm, aka Don Draper—whose own penis once brought him unwelcome attention—it opens with a direct refutation of Trumpism: "Manhood. You'd hope that means courage." Hawley is the author of the book *Manhood: The Masculine Virtues America Needs*, which urges American men "to become free men, as your fathers and grandfathers were." You know, before women, immigrants, gays, and Black people ruined this country by demanding rights. Seeing Hawley fist-pump the insurrectionists on January 6 and then flee from them when they breached the Capitol may tell you everything you need to know about his manhood. But Kunce—a working-class kid with degrees from Yale and the University of Missouri School of Law as well as a 13-year stint in the Marines—is running a full-blown campaign that deconstructs all the ways in which Hawley's politics undermine actual men. It seems like common sense, but Democrats have mostly sidestepped the issue.

"I feel like people shy from responding to that because [Hawley's obsession] is weird and creepy and we don't want to talk about gender," Kunce told me in a recent interview. "But as the dad of three boys, I cannot let that be the only message out there. We have to have an alternative. We have to push back on that."

Masculinity itself is not toxic—just the Republican version of it—and Kunce is making the rare attack that comes with an affirmative case. Rather than discussing biology or body parts, he talks about the courage to fight back against the corporatization of the body politic that's stripped American communities for parts. His vision includes union jobs, strengthened collective bargaining laws, more investment in neighborhoods than in foreign wars, the freedom for people to make their own reproductive decisions, and a truly competitive marketplace that serves the public instead of propping up monopolies. A self-described populist, he's all about empowering people to control their own lives. To be clear, Kunce is not talking about rugged individualism, pulling yourself up by your bootstraps, or other personal-responsibility-fetish nonsense. When he was growing up, his family faced bankrupting medical bills and survived thanks to the neighbors who cared for them. "My belief is, if you give everyday people the resources to live their lives, they're going to make generally good decisions," Kunce says, "and our communities are going to be stronger.… This is the front line in the fight for a society that is losing its ability to take care of itself."

If recent ballot initiatives are any indication, it's what Missourians want too, as they voted to increase the minimum wage, expand Medicaid, and overturn the state's "right to work" laws. Abortion will be on the ballot in 2024, after neighboring Kansas overwhelmingly beat back an effort to ban it just last year.

Kunce's arguments about masculinity are grounded in the reality of what's good for society, rather than in any abstract notion of manhood. The core of that idea is "doing the right thing when no one is looking and expecting nothing in return," he says. It's about being of service to others. In contrast, Hawley's performance of masculinity for the Fox News audience of aggrieved men is a self-serving distraction in what Kunce calls a fake "culture war" that includes knocking over rainbow T-shirt displays at Target and freaking out about trans people. It's a reciprocal relationship: The men who are least secure in their own masculinity and fear losing status need to disparage the masculinity of others as a way of fortifying themselves. This turns manhood into something that must be constantly proved and, in turn, validated by external forces. As Kunce puts it, in Hawley's "creepy" view, "The path to being a man is

Kunce's arguments are grounded in the reality of what's good for society, rather than in any abstract notion of manhood.

ANDY FRIEDMAN

Secrets of a Billionaire Revealed

"Price is what you pay; value is what you get. Whether we're talking about socks or stocks, I like buying quality merchandise when it is marked down."

– wisdom from the most successful investor of all time

We're going to let you in on a secret. Billionaires have billions because they know value is not increased by an inflated price. They avoid big name markups, and aren't swayed by flashy advertising. When you look on their wrist you'll find a classic timepiece, not a cry for attention— because they know true value comes from keeping more money in their pocket.

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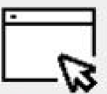
to be more like him. He's a man who wants to control everything. He tries to control what it means to be a man with his book."

Or as Hamm says in the ad, "It's not sitting on the sidelines while others sacrifice." (Hawley never served.) "Or denying help to those who did." (He voted against certain benefits for vets.) "It isn't putting people down or trying to control them" (like opposing abortion). "Or using your own power for profit or ambition." (Hawley wrote an amicus brief supporting his wife's efforts to outlaw Plan B.) The ad ends with a broadside against selfishness: "If you want to be told about manhood, some guy wrote a book about it. But if you want someone to show you courage, send Lucas Kunce to the Senate." Somehow, the ad—and by extension Kunce's entire framing—manages to be both completely explicit about and also unimpressed with the whole conceit of masculinity, because it's beside the point.

Those least secure in their own masculinity disparage the masculinity of others to fortify themselves.

Senate majority leader Chuck Schumer is someone else who is less than impressed by the right's obsession with manhood. Asked at a recent street fair in Brooklyn about what makes a man, Schumer cut to the chase: "Lucas Kunce is a good candidate, and we can beat Josh Hawley."

At the end of the day, that's really the only question that matters anyway.



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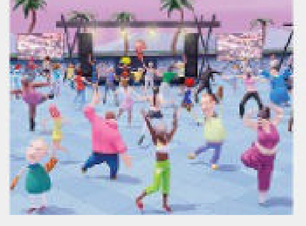

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KATE WAGNER

› Pakistan's Crackdown Is "Unprecedented," Says Imran Khan
HASAN ALI

Morbid Symptoms
Jeet Heer

The Other Kennedy Curse

Reckoning with a family's mythology.

WE ALL LIVE IN THE SHADOW OF DEATH, BUT THE gloom of mortality envelops some lives with a special darkness. President Joe Biden, the pillar of the Democratic Party establishment, is the polar opposite in most ways of his unconventional primary challenger, Robert F. Kennedy Jr. Yet the two men share a bond of grief.

In 1972, just weeks after his upset win in the US Senate race in Delaware, Biden lost his first wife and infant daughter in a car accident. In 2015, while serving as vice president, he had to bear an excruciating witness to the brain cancer that consumed his eldest son, Beau. In 1963, when Kennedy was 9, his uncle, President John F. Kennedy, was assassinated. In 1968, when he was 14, his father and namesake, Senator Robert F. Kennedy Sr., was also felled by an assassin. In 2012, Kennedy's second wife, Mary Richardson Kennedy, whom he was then in the process of divorcing, committed suicide.

These deaths are not just biographical data: They shape the public identity of both Biden and Kennedy. In Biden's case, his famous ability to form intense friendships across the political divide and to console people in moments of pain is surely rooted in his awareness of the unfair precariousness of existence, which the president likes to evoke with the beautiful phrase "the Irishness of life."

Biden's rival—and fellow Irish Catholic—has some of the same gift for translating private grief into public empathy. There's much to criticize in Kennedy, particularly his role in popularizing anti-vaccination sentiment. Yet to listen to Kennedy talk, it's impossible not to be struck by his piercing earnestness and gravity. Even at his most absurd, he carries the weight of someone who has been acquainted with suffering.

In a profile in *The Atlantic*, John Hendrickson reports that "Kennedy maintains a mental list of everyone he's known who has died. He told me that each morning he spends an hour having a quiet conversation with those people, usually while out hiking alone. He asks the deceased to help him be a good person, a good father, a good writer, a good attorney. He prays for his six children. He's been doing this for 40 years. The list now holds more than 200 names."

This anecdote shows Kennedy at his most human, carrying his suffering with a dignity that is difficult not to respect even if one rejects his politics. It also explains his unique appeal. The Kennedy name, with all the connotations of public martyrdom that it carries, still has some talismanic potency, despite all the tabloid gossip that is also part of the family's legacy.

LEFT FROM TOP: GETTY IMAGES; BETSY JOLES / *BLOOMBERG*; ILLUSTRATION: JOE CIARDIELLO

After Kennedy announced his campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination on April 19, he started doing surprisingly well, especially considering that he has never held public office. A CNN/SSRS poll of Democratic and Democratic-leaning voters showed Kennedy with 20 percent, against Biden's 60 percent and Marianne Williamson's 8 percent. On June 16, *Axios* even suggested that Kennedy had a shot at winning the early primaries in Iowa and New Hampshire, which Biden was neglecting because of a decision by the Democratic National Committee to give priority to South Carolina in the new primary calendar.

Listen to Kennedy talk, and it's impossible not to be struck by his piercing earnestness and gravity.

By the end of June, however, the Kennedy bubble already showed signs of bursting. After an intense round of national media scrutiny, Kennedy's skepticism of vaccines received a much wider public airing. Suddenly Kennedy was not just someone with a romantic and historic last name who was offering a needed liberal challenge to Biden; he was also someone with many strange, unsupported beliefs about Wi-Fi causing cancer and antidepressants fueling mass shootings.

Kennedy's openness to crank science came with a political price. By late June, a survey by Saint Anselm College showed him polling at only 9 percent in New Hampshire, against 68 percent for Biden and 8 percent for Williamson.

Whatever the fate of Kennedy's candidacy, there's no doubt that the main factor that made him plausible at all was his last name. Journalists often use the shorthand phrase "the Kennedy curse" to describe the family's long list of tragedies. That's always been an unhappy expression, since it suggests supernatural causes for what are historical events.

The real Kennedy curse is the hold the Kennedy name has on the public imagination. The power of the name conjures expectations and hopes out of thin air. It also gives believers in the Kennedy cult an excuse to forgive behavior that would otherwise be condemned if committed by someone from another family.

My colleague Joan Walsh wrote a brave piece for *The Nation* on her role in publishing a 2005 article by Kennedy—carried jointly by *Salon* and *Rolling Stone*—which asserted that childhood vaccines contribute to autism. The piece was later retracted by both outlets in 2011. In explaining her decision to publish it, Walsh wrote, "I also fell for the Kennedy magic: I grew up in a family that revered Democratic President John F. Kennedy and Senator Robert F. Kennedy, both murdered by assassins. As I do whenever I meet one of my father's heroes, I warm up. And Kennedy had become a progressive star in his own right, for his environmental rights legal work with the Hudson River Fishermen's Association and Riverkeeper."

Walsh's piece illuminates how the "Kennedy magic" can so easily serve bad ends. For Americans of a certain generation and political cast, the Kennedys belong not to history but to mythology. Like the Greeks and Trojans whose deeds and deaths were recorded by Homer, the Kennedys are avatars of a lost golden age of heroism and sacrifice. This mythology is bad history, bad politics—and perhaps as unfair to the living Kennedys as to anyone else.

The best thing one can do for a Kennedy is to just treat them as any other citizen. The worst thing one can do is to burden them with the task of not only mourning their dead but also of living up to the impossible expectations that come with murdered legacies. N

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CHRIS LEHMANN

Armageddon Time

Confronted with a long-overdue legal reckoning, Donald Trump has gone apocalyptic.

As he prepared for his second criminal arraignment of 2023, Donald Trump duly loaded up his Truth Social account with all-caps messages to his followers bemoaning his legal martyrdom at the hands of a corrupt and thuggish Biden Justice Department. Most of those exhortations, though, felt phoned in. Perhaps Trump was all too aware that he'd only reached the midpoint in his pending series of legal crucibles and needed to conserve his sloganeering energy. While he's now been arraigned in Manhattan and Miami, he's facing a likely indictment in Fulton County, Ga., this August as well as in another federal case, both stemming from his efforts to overturn the result of the 2020 election and reassume the presidency via a coup.

Whatever the reason, Trump was left barking out semaphoric versions of his usual grievances on the morning of his arraignment for Espionage Act violations and obstruction of justice: "WITCH HUNT!" "ELECTION INTERFERENCE!" "AMERICA FIRST!" "MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN!" The cumulative effect was a bit like seeing a series of greatest-hits song titles scroll by during an infomercial for a vintage CD box set.

Against this pro forma backdrop, one post-arraignment Truth Social message stood out in especially high relief. "NOW THAT THE 'SEAL' IS BROKEN…," the outburst read in part, "I WILL APPOINT A REAL SPECIAL 'PROSECUTOR' TO GO AFTER THE MOST CORRUPT PRESIDENT IN THE HISTORY OF THE USA, JOE BIDEN, THE ENTIRE BIDEN CRIME FAMILY, & ALL OTHERS INVOLVED WITH THE DESTRUCTION OF OUR ELECTIONS, BORDERS & COUNTRY ITSELF!" Journalist Jeff Sharlet, a close student of religious movements on the American right, noted that the broken-seal reference echoed the language of the Book of Revelation, which was sure to resonate with Trump's fundamentalist or conspiracy-minded base. Following his earlier invocation of the approach of World War III and a pledge that he was the "only one" who could reverse America's rapid plunge into the cosmic abyss, Trump's vow of legal vengeance on his Democratic persecutors doubled as a "claim to divinity," Sharlet wrote.

For all the procedural intrigue surrounding Trump's escalating legal woes, the former president's ongoing apocalyptic makeover is likely to be the most troubling and enduring legacy of his tour through the justice system. Even before he left office in January 2021, Trump had increasingly adopted the messianic imagery and rhetoric of the QAnon movement, which foretells an imminent eliminationist purge of liberals for their coordinated sexual predation and sacrifice of children, among other ghastly trespasses. Trump all but formalized his alliance with QAnon forces during the 2022 midterm campaign. As claims of persecution and deep-state martyrdom have become his main line of defense against increasingly unanswerable criminal charges, the chiliastic phase of the Trump movement will likely dominate right-wing messaging in the coming presidential election.

And the QAnon and militant white-nationalist elements of the evangelical world are heeding Trump's call. After his arraignment, Trump walked into a Miami cafe, where supporters swarmed to lay hands on and pray for him. That same evening, a group called Pastors for Trump hosted former national security adviser Michael Flynn, himself having pleaded guilty to lying to FBI agents about trafficking in classified intelligence, in a Twitter Spaces event devoted to national prayer and unity—which of course translated into more biblically themed vows of retribution for Trump's political enemies. (Sample Flynn homily from the digital gathering: "We want to pray for President Donald J. Trump, his entire family, and all those that are part of this war we're involved in, this spiritual war we're facing…. This is good versus evil—an America First, if you will, versus a globalist elite.")

Trump all but formalized his alliance with QAnon forces during the 2022 midterm campaign.

Trump's own televised statement that night hammered away at the same points, railing against "the misfits and Marxists" engineering his indictment and denouncing special prosecutor Jack Smith as a "deranged lunatic," a "thug," and "a raging, uncontrolled Trump hater." He decried federal agencies for "running illegal psychological warfare campaigns against the American people" before he built to the revival-style climax: "We have a nation in serious decline. If the communists get away with this, it won't stop with me. They will not hesitate to ramp up their persecution of Christians and pro-life activists, parents attending school board meetings and even future Republican candidates, which they do. We must end it permanently and we must end it immediately."

And he once more pledged to appoint a special prosecutor to target Biden "now that the seal—so important—the seal is broken by what they've done.... When I'm reelected—and we will get reelected, we have no choice, we are not gonna have a country anymore—I will totally obliterate the deep state." To send off his crowd of ardent supporters, Trump again invoked Revelation to offer himself as a propitiatory sacrifice for a nation of despised and persecuted believers.

This is more than just a split-screen ideological divide or an alternate timeline tracing the prerogatives of executive power; it's a cult of personality morphing into a hard-core formation of divine messengers firmly convinced they are standing at Armageddon. Far from being defeated by subpoenas and indictments, the Trump movement draws an endlessly renewable sense of righteous retribution from the fable of its own persecution. Unless and until we're able to recognize these basic truths, Donald Trump's legal travails will produce no better outcomes in our politics. **N**

SNAPSHOT
Jabin Botsford

The End of Affirmative Action

Protesters outside the US Supreme Court rally in support of race consciousness in college admissions, which the court ended with its June 29 decision. In her dissent, Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson called the ruling "a tragedy for us all."

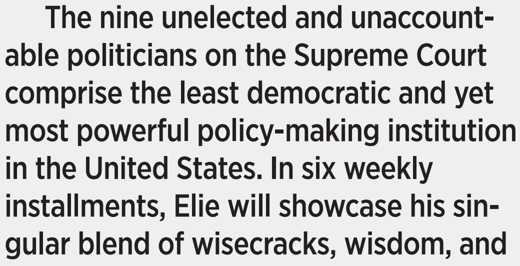
NATION NEWS

New Podcast Alert

Elie Mystal takes on the Supremes.

Introducing *Contempt of Court* with Elie Mystal, a new podcast featuring the latest musings from the brilliant legal mind of *The Nation*'s favorite justice correspondent.

The nine unelected and unaccountable politicians on the Supreme Court comprise the least democratic and yet most powerful policy-making institution in the United States. In six weekly installments, Elie will showcase his singular blend of wisecracks, wisdom, and legal expertise to address six problems with the court and six ways to fix it. New episodes air every Tuesday; subscribe wherever you get your podcasts or visit TheNation.com/Contempt.



CALVIN TRILLIN
DeadlinePoet

Chris Christie Declares

Chris Christie, who's not given much of a chance,
Has joined the Republican crowd.
At least there's now someone who isn't afraid
To utter the Trump name out loud.

TOP: *THE WASHINGTON POST* VIA GETTY IMAGES

Is It Useful to Analyze Politics in Terms of Generations?

The Debate

Yes!

KEIR MILBURN

MOST CONTEMPORARY ARGUMENTS on the left about the usefulness of generational analysis are really disagreements about the functioning of class politics. Generational analysis can't be reduced to class, but in conjunctures such as ours, it can add a useful temporal dimension to our understanding of class divisions. The point of identifying divisions within the working class is, of course, not to exacerbate them but to understand their causes, so that we can better strategize how to overcome them.

Generational analysis provides clues to the operation of class today, because generational political divisions have arisen out of the key structural crises and trends of our times: climate change, secular stagnation, the drawn-out collapse of the neoliberal consensus, and an aging population in the wealthy nations. Although these crises operate along different timelines, it is our misfortune that they've all come to a head at this moment. The 2020s will be among the most pivotal decades in the history of humanity. Inaction on the climate has brought us to a point of absolute crisis. Unfortunately, the long-term trend of falling birth rates—which means that there are proportionately more older people now than ever before—has coincided with a dramatic move to the political right among that demographic. Great inertia has been added to our political systems just when fundamental transformation is most required.

Not all conceptions of generations are compatible with a class analysis. Indeed, our current generational categories—boomers followed by Gen Xers followed by millennials followed by zoomers, with each group culturally unique—are arbitrary and incoherent. Typically, when people talk about generations in reference to societies rather than families, they're referring to all those born within a roughly 20-year period. If we assume that a person's child-rearing years encompass a similar span (let's say from 18 to 38) and note that the time from one's birth to one's child-rearing years is roughly similar in length, then the logic is easy to see. But there's a problem: Births take place each and every day, so how do you determine when one generation ends and another begins?

We'd do better to recognize that discrete generations don't come along cyclically in tidy bundles every 20 years. Instead, they form when conditions

No!

ADOLPH REED JR.

I'VE NEVER LIKED ANALYZING POLITICS in generational terms, and I can produce witnesses who would affirm that I didn't like it even when my own age cohort was supposedly inventing a 1960s "youth movement." Generational categories are simplistic and ideological. The idea that swaths of people across class, race, and geography will have the same characteristics should elicit a big "Says who?" That is, who decides what the definitive attributes of a generation are and what the formative events that made it were? For instance, my father, who was a veteran of the Normandy invasion and the Battle of the Bulge, detested the "Greatest Generation" label and the orgy of "Can you top this?" spectator patriotism that surrounded the 50th anniversary of D-Day. He insisted that if his generation were to be associated with anything, it should be Social Security, the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), and the New Deal.

Generational understandings of politics can seem to resonate with experience because they're bromides, and that's the nature of bromides: They placate with trite comforts. The notion that there are characteristics that separate age-graded populations derives most immediately from offshoots of opinion polling and the advertising industry and its relentless project of creating taste communities—markets—for discrete products by concocting and appealing to a self-image or sensibility. (It's worth noting that opinion polling, advertising, and the discipline of psychology evolved in relation to one another in the 1920s and '30s.)

Generational categories are fictions that reflect shared human experience in the banal way that daily horoscopes do. For example, one description of Generation X's defining features has it that they are independent, flexible, and self-reliant as well as critical thinkers. Apparently, generations also have different approaches to dental hygiene (millennials are supposedly more afraid to go to the dentist). This is shallow bullshit, of course. Generational thinking of this sort rests on a taxonomic fallacy: It treats abstract categories as if they were coherent groups and imputes just-so stories and stereotypes to them as supposedly common sensibilities. In that way, generational

The Debate

are right: Generational distinctions become important when they coalesce around events and periods of sudden, accelerated change that alter what seems politically possible. It is at these times that the ways a society makes sense of itself—the stories it tells itself—get disrupted in an uneven manner.

The structuring event of our time is the 2008 Great Recession; ever since then, we have been in a protracted political and economic crisis. For many, the pre-2008 world proceeded based on a particular view of the future—a future that would offer steady, uneventful improvements in living standards. Such a prospect was never believable for all, and the looming climate crisis meant that it was always an illusion, but the last 15 years have made a mockery of that faith. We've lurched from one unpredicted event to another: Brexit, Trump, Covid-19, etc. But that pre-2008 vision of the future didn't just exist in our heads; it also formed the basis for the debts and financial instruments with which our lives are entwined. Those instruments, and the institutional logics that go with them, have not gone away. If anything, our lives are now even more tied up with them.

For older generations, who are more likely to own property, these financial instruments might still seem to accord with a viable future, but for most young people, they don't. The intrusive monitoring and rent extraction that go along with their debts, from student loans to credit cards, are impositions that constrain the lives they hope to lead. This, along with young people's reliance on ever-diminishing incomes from work, encourages them to see the structural forces conditioning their lives. Conversely, the material circumstances of most older and retired people can result in their viewing themselves primarily as asset holders rather than retired workers. In this way, their interests align with the performance of the financial sector. To paraphrase Stuart Hall, age is a modality through which class is lived.

The material circumstances of older people can lead to their viewing themselves as asset holders.

This kind of generational analysis is compatible with a class analysis, but it might not fit neatly into a strategy based on abstract conceptions of class unity drawn from an abstract conception of interests. Material interests are not given; they are formed. Any assessment of what's in your interest necessarily includes a conception of the probable future—the future in which those interests will be enacted. The last 15 years have seen generational divides emerge not just in terms of wages, working conditions, access to welfare, and asset ownership, but also in ideas of what the future might look like. But as we exit the low-inflation, low-interest era that kept asset prices high, opportunities to ameliorate those divisions may open up to us. N

Keir Milburn is the author of Generation Left *and a codirector of the think tank Abundance.*

The Debate

thinking is like race thinking or gender stereotyping.

Of course, there are experiences that are broadly shared by age cohorts. Those of us who lived through the Vietnam War may be more responsive to specific images and tropes than others are. That particular sensibility, however, doesn't seem to have diminished support for the United States' proxy war in Ukraine or its military adventurism in the Middle East, the Balkans, or elsewhere.

Most important, generational understandings of politics obscure the significance of historically specific social relations, especially regarding political economy. For example, during a multi-campus tour for Bernie Sanders's 2020 campaign, I was among a half-dozen surrogates who participated in a meeting with a handful of national and local reporters. The first question concerned how we would explain young people's enthusiasm for the septuagenarian Sanders. Each of my colleagues took the bait and responded, seriatim, with the predictable, called-for bromides, suggesting that the not-yet-jaded young could detect his sincerity and so forth. I said that at the campus rallies, the students' most enthusiastic responses were to his calls for Medicare for All, free public college, student debt relief, a living wage, and full employment.

So college students in 2019 liked Sanders not because they were "Generation Z" or even generic "youth," but because they were concerned about finding jobs that paid decently; having access to good-quality, affordable health care; and getting out from under the burdens of student debt and escalating tuition costs—in other words, concerns involving their material circumstances. Similarly, "baby boomers" are disproportionately concerned about Medicare and Social Security not because of some shared generational essence, but because they are, at this point, disproportionately likely to depend on those programs.

Like so much else, the generational frame of reference is a product of pollsters and consultants.

Like so much else in our contemporary political discourse, the generational frame of reference is a product of pollsters and consultants who have a political service to sell that is an alternative to organizing durable constituencies around issues, programs, and political vision—the approach through which political movements actually take shape. The generational approach, by contrast, depends on advertising gimmicks that carve up the population into arbitrary age sets; imputes values, attitudes, and dispositions to them; and then tries to appeal to those characteristics to put together an electoral majority. This strategy will never help us advance a broadly egalitarian agenda. N

Adolph Reed Jr. is a columnist for The Nation *and the coauthor, with Walter Benn Michaels, of* No Politics but Class Politics.

THE DESTRUCTION OF MASAFER YATTA

Israel wants their homes for target practice. And the country's Supreme Court says that's perfectly legal.

BASEL ADRA & YUVAL ABRAHAM

Home on the range: Israeli forces conduct a training drill near Masafer Yatta in February 2021.

So'ed Od, a 13-year-old girl, is one of around 1,000 Palestinian residents of the eight villages in Masafer Yatta—a small region of rugged hills at the southern edge of the occupied West Bank. So'ed now spends her days helping her mother look after their flock of sheep and make cheese in the small village of Sfay, whose name comes from the Arabic word for "pure."

So'ed stopped attending class after Israeli bulldozers crushed the village school. That day, So'ed told us, she helped young children, the students of lower grades, to escape through the windows. "We were in English class," she said. "I saw a Jeep approaching through the window. The teacher stopped the class. Soldiers arrived with two bulldozers. They closed the doors on us. We were stuck in the classrooms. Then we escaped through the windows. And they destroyed the school."

The destruction of the elementary school took place in November 2022 and was documented on video. Children in the first, second, and third grades can be seen in one of the classrooms, screaming and sobbing. Israeli soldiers surrounded the school, where 23 students were enrolled, and threw stun grenades at villagers who were attempting to block the path of the bulldozers. The sound of the explosions terrified the trapped students even more. In the videos, mothers can be seen pulling children out through the classroom windows. Representatives from the Israeli Civil Administration, the arm of the military that governs the occupied territories, entered the emptied school, removed the tables, chairs, and boards from the classrooms, and loaded them onto a truck, confiscating the items. The Civil Administration did not respond to our request for comment.

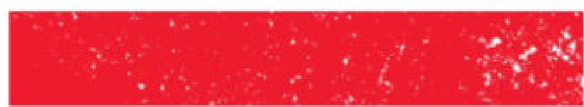
In 1980, the army had declared 30,000 dunams (nearly 7,500 acres) of the residents' land to be a "firing zone"; the stated purpose was to remove Palestinians from the area, which Israel designated for Jewish settlement because of its strategic proximity to the Green Line marking the border. In May of last year, a three-judge panel of the Supreme Court rejected the residents' appeal against the firing zone, effectively giving the army permission to continue to displace the Palestinians from their land. The judge who wrote the controversial ruling, David Mintz, lives in a West Bank settlement called Dolev, about a 20-minute drive from Ramallah.

The mass expulsion of Masafer Yatta's residents has not yet been carried out, but the lives of all the people of these villages have changed beyond recognition in the months since the ruling. Soldiers have begun detaining children at impromptu checkpoints they've erected in the middle of the desert under the cover of night; families watch as bulldozers raze their homes with increasing frequency; and, right next to the villages designated for expulsion and demolition, soldiers are already training with live fire, racing tanks, and detonating mines.

Army officials have stated that plans to carry out the expulsion order have already been presented to politicians. This year, with the most right-wing government in Israel's history in power—and with its ministers openly calling for mass population transfers and the erasure of Palestinian villages—it's very likely that the mass expulsion will actually take place. If it does, it will be the largest single act of population transfer carried out in the West Bank since Israel expelled thousands of Palestinians in 1967, in the early days of the occupation.

KEREN MANOR / ACTIVESTILLS.ORG

Both of us have witnessed the struggle in Masafer Yatta from up close. Basel, a journalist and activist, was born in one of the villages there. His mother started taking him to demonstrations against the expulsion when he was 5. He grew up without electricity in his home because the military ordered a blanket ban on construction and access to infrastructure for Palestinians in the area. Over the past decade, he has been documenting the erasure of his community on video, and his posts have reached millions of people around the world.

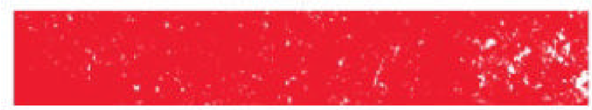


The Supreme Court judge who wrote the opinion giving permission to displace the Palestinians lives in a West Bank settlement.

Yuval was born in the city of Be'er Sheva, a 30-minute drive from Basel's house, on the Israeli side of the Green Line. For the past five years, he has been reporting on the expulsion and apartheid in both Hebrew and English. The two of us work as a team, mostly for *+972 Magazine* and the news site *Local Call*, and this article is a product of our collaboration.

Since the court's ruling last May, Israel has made the lives of the families in Masafer Yatta even more unbearable, to the point that it's unclear whether they will be able to survive there. This process, however, has been going on for more than four decades—in what can best be described as a slow-moving expulsion. The primary tool Israel uses is the systematic denial of building

Basel Adra and Yuval Abraham are reporters for +972 Magazine *and* Local Call.



“We want to build regular houses, to live aboveground. Sleeping in a cave is like sleeping in a grave.”

—Fares Al-Najar

permits. Because Palestinian residents cannot possibly live in a village without houses and other basic infrastructure—and because anything they build is deemed “illegal” and summarily demolished—over time this policy has forced the residents to leave their land.

Seven days after the ruling, the military razed the homes of nine families in Masafer Yatta; 45 people were left homeless. “It was one of the worst acts of destruction I have ever seen,” said Eid Hadlin, a local activist who lives in a house that has no running water or electricity and is facing a demolition order.

This article is a collaboration between The Nation, +972 Magazine, *and* Local Call.

The bulldozers arrived at Al-Merkaz, one of the villages designated for expulsion. The soldiers let the residents clear out their homes. The women carried their personal belongings outside and gathered them into a pile: mattresses, backpacks, underwear and shirts, shampoo bottles. An inspector in the Civil Administration looked on until the houses were emptied. Then he gave the go-ahead, and the bulldozers wrecked it all.

Najati, a young teenager, sat with his grandmother next to the pile of debris that was once their home. He was furious. “The officer told me, as he was demolishing our house: ‘Why bother building? That’s it, finished—this area is now the army’s for training,’” he said.

One morning, the residents of his village discovered that soldiers had posted warning signs on their houses overnight. “You are in a firing zone,” the signs read, in Arabic that was so riddled with errors that they seemed to have been written with the help of Google Translate. “Entrance is forbidden. Anyone breaking the law can be arrested, fined, lose their vehicle, which will be confiscated, or can face any other punishment deemed fitting.” In the following weeks, soldiers built a checkpoint between the villages and confiscated vehicles that passed through it, under the pretext that driving through a firing zone is prohibited. And so, gradually, most of the residents were deprived of their ability to move freely.

Najati said his family slept outside that night, under the open sky, and the next day they cleared the debris and took out a loan to build another house, in the same spot. “I’ve lived in Masafer Yatta my whole life, herding sheep,” said Safa Al-Najar, Najati’s grandmother, her voice slightly hoarse but her smile that of a young woman. Her home was demolished that same day as well. And so, she said, she’ll sleep in the family’s cave.

“At first, my husband and I lived in this cave,” she said. “This was our bedroom, and living room, and kitchen—everything together. The sheep lived next to us in the second cave. But 20 years ago, when my children were grown, we built a house for them. Everything we built—destroyed.”

According to data from the Israeli human rights group B’Tselem, since 2016, soldiers have demolished the homes of 121 families in Masafer Yatta and have left around 384 people without shelter, many of them children. And it’s not only houses that are at risk, but all buildings and infrastructure. Pens for the sheep were also destroyed, water pipes cut, trees felled; even the access roads, which connect the villages to one another, were destroyed by a huge bulldozer.

At a time when two separate legal proceedings are being brought against Israel at The Hague—in the International Criminal Court and the International Court of Justice—Israel seems eager to avoid the harsh international condemnation that would inevitably follow from a brazen population transfer. By expelling the residents of Masafer Yatta house by house, Israel can achieve the same goal at a much smaller cost to its image.

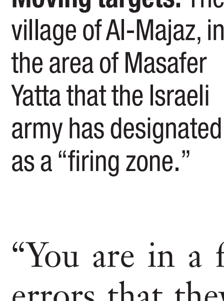
Since the destruction of their school, children in Sfay have been attending class in a crumbling trailer parked on the outskirts of the village. There are holes in the roof through which rainwater leaks, and the bathroom door is a piece of curtain. The army has forbidden any renovation of the trailer—or the building of a new school.

So’ed’s village is fairly typical for Masafer Yatta. Most of its residents are farmers and shepherds who plant wheat, barley, and olive trees, make goat cheese, and wake up early in the morning to bake bread. The area is full of ancient caves, carved out of the soft white rocks in the hilly desert by residents many generations ago. So’ed’s parents lived in the caves, but they eventually built a house for her and her siblings.

Families whose homes are demolished by military bulldozers are forced to live in the caves, which quickly become overcrowded and suffocating. Yet the residents are also forbidden from renovating the caves, some of which are already uninhabitable.

“We want to build regular houses, to live aboveground. Sleeping in a cave is like sleeping in a grave,” said Fares Al-Najar, a resident of Al-Merkaz. Families who don’t have a cave or who refuse to accept such living conditions are forced to either leave their community and lose their land—or build a new house that will inevitably be demolished. “It’s an unending cycle,” Fares said.

Both the scope and the frequency of such demolitions have increased since the Supreme Court’s decision, which made it much easier for Israeli judges to deny the appeals submitted by the families’ lawyers. And while those appeals, too, were often denied in the past, the legal proceedings went on for years, buying the residents time to remain in their villages



Moving targets: The village of Al-Majaz, in the area of Masafer Yatta that the Israeli army has designated as a “firing zone.”

OREN ZIV / ACTIVESTILLS.ORG (2)

and organize their community struggle.

Masafer Yatta is part of Area C, a designation under the Oslo Accords, which covers 61 percent of the West Bank and is under full Israeli military and civil control. Out of the hundreds of requests for building permits the army received between 2000 and 2020, it has denied over 99 percent of requests in Area C, according to data provided by the Israeli NGO Bimkom—Planners for Planning Rights.

In the 15 months since the Supreme Court ruling, the army has imposed a curfew on Jinba, the village where Nidal was born. Soldiers built two checkpoints next to the village: At one, there is a black tent; at the other, a tank. Both are used to detain residents, to confiscate their vehicles, and to block visitors from entering the village.

The court's ruling in May "cut us off from the other villages," Nidal said. "Every time we want to leave, to visit our family members, to go shopping, the soldiers detain us for at least two hours. That's the best case-scenario. One time, they held me up for seven hours."

People are afraid to drive to the villages for fear of losing their vehicles. In recent months, residents testify, soldiers have confiscated the cars of humanitarian workers, schoolteachers, and lawyers providing legal assistance to the residents. This policy also has a chilling effect on journalists, who are less able to come and report on the region. Cutting Masafer Yatta off from other communities is expected to make it easier for the army to carry out the population transfer with as few witnesses as possible.

The day before the start of school last year, soldiers refused to let the teachers of Jinba's elementary school enter the village to prepare the classrooms. The soldiers at the checkpoint confiscated their car, explaining that they were in a firing zone. These decisions are made arbitrarily: The following day, the soldiers let the teachers through.

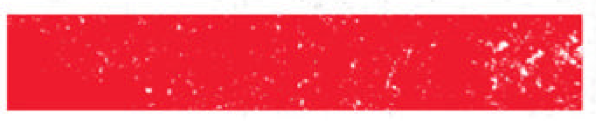
Royda Abu Aram, from the village of Al-Halawah, is a student in 12th grade, the year students take the *tawjihi* exams—the Palestinian equivalent of the SATs. "Yesterday I missed all my classes because there was no way for me to get there without a car or transportation," she said. "My friend Bisan, who tried to get to school by car, was delayed by the soldiers for an hour and a half, in the sun."

In a video recording of the checkpoint from August, a soldier, his hand resting on his gun and a large tank behind him, explains to a group of several adults and school-age children, backpacks slung across their shoulders, that "this area is designated as a firing zone, the army closed this area, and we are conducting searches here."

Holding the line: A demonstration near al-Tuwani in the South Hebron Hills protesting against the expansion of Avigail, an Israeli settlement.

Every school in Masafer Yatta has received a demolition order. "I really want to work in education. I'm interested in studying at university and becoming a language and English teacher," Bisan, also a 12th grader, said. "But I'm worried I won't do well on the *tawjihi* exam in these circumstances. It's hard to learn when you know that you may wake up tomorrow and bulldozers will come to demolish your school."

THE SUPREME COURT ruling also granted permission to the Israeli military to start training with live fire in the area. Tanks have been roaring through the area between the villages while soldiers fire live rounds and detonate explosives; helicopters have been practicing landing and taking off. All these loud noises join the buzzing of the drones that the soldiers, and sometimes the nearby settlers, use to monitor whether residents are building new houses after their homes have been destroyed.



"It's hard to learn when you know that you may wake up tomorrow and bulldozers will come to demolish your school."

—Bisan, a 12th-grade student

"Our entire village went outside to look at them," said Jinba resident Issa Younis, after a day of tank training that took place next to the village last June. "The noise of the tanks was deafening. The mine detonations started before

Murder by tow truck: The funeral of Hajj Suleiman Hathaleen, run over in his village by an Israeli tow truck sent to confiscate Palestinian vehicles.

sunrise, right by our houses. All the walls shook, like we were in an earthquake."

During one of these training sessions, in the village of Al-Majaz, soldiers placed targets on the windows of the houses, on a tractor, and on a car. Jabar, a 15-year-old boy, left his house to see what was going on. A sand cloud swirled around him—the result of a tank driving through the desert region. "The soldiers hung targets on the window of our house and on the haystacks," Jabar said. "They wrote that they would be returning soon to shoot, but I took the targets down."

The military promised the court that it would take precautionary measures when conducting any exercises with live fire, and that the soldiers would not endanger the lives of the residents. The reality has been different. In July 2022, Leila Dababsa was sitting in her home when she heard an explosion above her. The ceiling began to crumble. "The living room was filled with the sound of gunfire, and my daughter screamed," she said, pointing to the holes in the tin roof. Most of the houses are built from cheap materials, out of fear that they will be destroyed. Leila and her daughter escaped and hid in a nearby cave.

"A second before they shot our house, I was picking tomatoes in the garden," said Sa'ud Dababsa, whose house was targeted. "This is the first time that a bullet entered our home, into the living room. Before, we were in danger of being expelled. Now my family and I are in danger of being killed."

Historically, the expulsion process in Masafer Yatta can largely be traced back to two men: Ariel Sharon and Ehud Barak, both of whom were senior military figures who later became Israeli prime ministers. They represent competing camps in Israeli politics: Sharon headed the Likud party, which is identified with the Zionist right, and Barak led the Labor Party, which is affiliated with the Zionist left. But on issues related to Masafer Yatta, the two worked together in harmony.

"We must quickly create a buffer strip…to drive a wedge between the bedouins in the Negev and the Arabs in Hebron." —Ariel Sharon

After leading the conquest of the West Bank in 1967, Sharon, then a military official, began the process of declaring various areas as military firing zones, first in the Jordan Valley and later in Masafer Yatta. "As one of the people who initiated the firing zones in 1967, everyone was aware of one goal: to enable Jewish settlement in the area," Sharon testified in 1979. "Back then, I sketched out these firing zones, reserving our land for settlement."

The locations of the firing zones weren't chosen randomly. They perfectly matched the Allon Plan, which was submitted to the Israeli government a month after the occupation began by Yigal Allon, another future prime minister, and which determined that the areas should be permanently kept under full Israeli control. With their relatively arid climate, these areas had few Palestinian villages compared to the crowded northern West Bank, which made them appealing for Jewish settlement.

A map commissioned by the state in 1977 designates part of the Masafer Yatta region for such settlement. Three years later, in 1980, firing zones were declared in the same area.

In a secret meeting of the Ministerial Committee for Settlement Affairs held in July 1981, Sharon offered the army the firing zone that was declared in Masafer Yatta and reaffirmed that his goal was to remove Palestinians from the area, according to the official transcript. "We have a great interest in being there, given the phenomenon of Arabs from the villages spreading toward the desert [in the south]," he explained to the army chief of staff.

During the same period, the Israeli government worked to establish Jewish settlements in the region. Settlements like Susya, Ma'on, and Carmel were part of the state's policy of cutting off the Palestinian population in the Negev, which is inside Israel, from the Palestinian population in the southern West Bank, like the residents of Masafer Yatta.

"For many years, there was a physical connection between the Arab population of the Negev with the Arab population in the Hebron hills. A situation was created in which the border extends inside our territory," Sharon told the settlement committee. "We must quickly create a buffer strip of [Jewish] settlement, which will distinguish and separate the Hebron hills from Jewish settlement in the Negev. To drive a wedge between the bedouins in the Negev and the Arabs in Hebron."

Sharon's words are particularly relevant today, as not only the residents of Masafer Yatta but also the Bedouins in the Negev are

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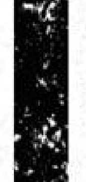
being dispossessed of their land through the systematic denial of building permits and the declaration of military firing zones.



IN 1999, EHUD BARAK WAS ELECTED PRIME minister. These were the days of the Oslo Accords, four years after Yitzhak Rabin's assassination—when there was still hope among Israelis and Palestinians that a peace deal might come. But Barak's government decided to permanently remove the residents of Masafer Yatta. Under his watch, in November 1999, soldiers moved through all the villages, loaded 700 people into trucks, and expelled them. They became refugees in nearby villages.

"I remember that day vividly," said Safa Al-Najar, now 70. "Soldiers came inside, while outside there were two big trucks waiting. They lifted us onto them by force, with all of our belongings. The sheep escaped on foot. They threw us into another village."

Barak's ethnic cleansing, carried out by a government that included the left-wing Meretz party, inspired protests in Israel led by intellectuals, among them famous authors like David Grossman. The protesters met with the general of the Central Command to express opposition to the operation, but they were told that it had to be carried out because, in preparation for further negotiations with the Palestine Liberation Organization, Israel had a major interest in keeping the region part of its sovereign territory.

The talks between Israel and the PLO for a final peace resolution, which took place in 2000 at Camp David, apparently led Barak to accelerate the dispossession efforts in Masafer Yatta. The thinking was that if there were no Palestinians living there, it would be more likely that the region would ultimately remain under Israeli control.

This is one reason why the "peace process" in the 1990s was in fact deeply destructive for many Palestinians: It galvanized rather than tamed Israeli colonialism. In those years, the number of Palestinian home demolitions grew significantly, while Jewish settlements were quickly populated and roads leading to them were rapidly paved.

A few months after Barak ordered their displacement, the residents of Masafer Yatta petitioned the Israeli Supreme Court against the firing zone. Palestinians living in the West Bank are subject to military law—they don't have the right to vote and so are unable to influence the legal system that rules over them—and the Supreme Court has expanded its jurisdiction to encompass the occupied territories.

Their petition remained before the court for more than 22 years. Instead of making a decision, the judges issued an interim order allowing the displaced Palestinians to temporarily return to their homes. In 2012, while Barak was defense minister, the state declared in court that its demand for forced transfer was still active, and that the army was prepared to allow residents access to work their land only during Israeli holidays and on the weekends, when no military exercises took place.

"Outside there were two big trucks waiting. They lifted us onto them by force, with all of our belongings."
—Safa Al-Najar

Even this temporary reprieve came to an end last May, when the judges finally rejected the residents' petition. In the ruling by Justice David Mintz, the court accepted the state's claims that when the firing zone was declared over 40 years ago, the people of Masafer Yatta were not "permanent residents" of the area, but rather "seasonal residents." That is, they used to move between two places, depending on the shepherding season: They had one house in a village in Masafer Yatta and another in the city. According to the letter of the military law, the declaration of a firing zone does not apply to permanent residents in the territory, but since, as the state claimed, the residents of Masafer Yatta were only "seasonal," their expulsion should be permitted. The Supreme Court agreed.

On the same side: Armed Israeli settlers stand near a policeman during a protest by Palestinians in Masafer Yatta.

SUCH LEGAL ARGUMENTS DON'T IMPRESS HALIMA, WHO WAS BORN IN A cave in Al-Merkaz in 1948 and has lived there her whole life. "That's their court, not ours," she said, "and they use the law in order to expel us."

The names of the Masafer Yatta villages are all over old maps that predate the Israeli state, including one by British surveyors from 1879. Another can be found in a 1931 book by a geographer named Nathan Shalem, who visited homes in Jinba and noted that human settlement there "had never ceased." Aerial photographs from 1945 testify to the existence of the villages. Even the official documentation of the State of Israel shows that in 1966, the Israeli military blew up 15 stone structures in Jinba, then under the control of Jordan, later compensating the residents through the International Red Cross.

The Supreme Court rejected this historical evidence, which was attached to the residents' petition. "The existence of the stone houses in the ruins of Jinba, in 1966, has nothing to teach us about the situation of things in 1980," Mintz explained in his ruling. He gave evidentiary weight only to the area's status in the year in which the military's firing zone was declared.

In their decision, the judges relied on the work of an Israeli anthropologist, Ya'akov Habakkuk, who lived in the region in the 1980s, for their claim of "seasonality." Habakkuk wrote that during the grazing season, in winter and spring, the families lived in Masafer Yatta, but in the dry months of summer, they

(continued on page 33)

ARE YOU READY TO
RUMBLE?
SLAP
SLAP

JACOB SILVERMAN

"I have been living with a proverbial boot on my neck for going on years now."

On a recent spring day, Steven Crowder, the star MAGA commentator who broadcasts with a gun on his desk, opened his show on the right-wing digital platform Rumble with a confessional monologue about his failed marriage and impending divorce. Crowder said he was addressing tawdry Internet rumors but soon pivoted to a policy-adjacent lament, depicting his wife's ability to divorce him as an abridgment of his rights.

"No, this was not my choice," Crowder said. "My then-wife decided that she didn't want to be married anymore, and in the state of Texas, that's permitted."

The lonely-dude soliloquy then broke off, and business resumed with more standard culture-war fare. "Now on with the reason you're all actually here," Crowder said, introducing a segment mocking a queer family.

Welcome to the world of Rumble, the anything-goes digital outpost of right-leaning discourse and disputation, where the personal and the political weave in and out of focus in an orgy of branding for tinnitus relief, Fortnite, and deals on gold. The site serves as an all-purpose video forum for MAGA-era grievances, bringing together conspiracy-minded influencers, Christian nationalists, anti-vax activists, and fervent Trump apologists under the pretext of defying political correctness and "cancel culture."

Crowder's down-on-his-luck trad-guy shtick got him an initial burst of puzzled virality, but it soon went even more haywire. A video cropped up showing Crowder verbally berating his wife, Hilary, who at the time was eight months pregnant with twins. "I don't love you, that's the big problem," he told her, after his wife said she didn't want to handle dog medication that might be toxic to her unborn children. Hilary Crowder's family released a statement calling her husband "mentally and emotionally abusive." Former employees of *Louder With Crowder*—the show Crowder had hosted at *The Blaze*—also came forward to talk about how the rigidly Christian family man was controlling and abusive and had exposed himself to staffers.

Crowder devoted more airtime to denying the reports and dismissing the video as misleadingly edited. The ploy seems to have placated his core audience; *Louder With Crowder*, which the histrionic host moved to Rumble after claiming that he'd turned down a $50 million contract offer from *The Daily Wire*, continues to attract millions of views at its new home. Rumble didn't respond to questions about Crowder's allegedly abusive behavior—or about a range of other issues—but the company seems pleased with the traffic brought in by his sweaty mixture of the personal and the political, bragging on Twitter about the size of his audience.

But the digital lords of Rumble are gambling on a lot more than Crowder's online clout. With the older monopoly platforms of Silicon Valley facing a battery of new challenges from regulators, and with mainstream news networks like Fox and CNN floundering between legal or personnel crises, they're reckoning that this could be the ideal time to sell suggestible tech investors on a moderation-resistant media platform. If site producers can somehow manage to play down the explicit ideological messaging of its lead content creators and promote controversy for its own sake, they can continue harvesting clicks and views, while stolidly shrugging off any criticism or calls for moderation as digital censorship. The recent recruitment of the conspiracist, anti-vax Democratic presidential candidate Robert F. Kennedy Jr. to the platform helps superficially bolster this pitch, particularly in view of Kennedy's wide support among the tech industry's power elite.

Yet like other such ostensibly high-minded launches—Bari Weiss's *Free Press* site, and a cluster of high-profile Substacks from cancel-culture baiters like Andrew Sullivan and Glenn Greenwald—Rumble turns out, on closer examination, to be firmly in the MAGA mold of reactionary politics. That's no doubt a big reason why the Republican National Committee announced that the platform would be the streaming partner for next month's GOP presidential debate, the first of the 2024 campaign cycle.

That lurch into establishment respectability is a bit hard to square with the gladiatorial appeal of the emerging Rumble brand, which extends well beyond its stable of melodramatic MAGA pundits. Take, for example, its entertainment series

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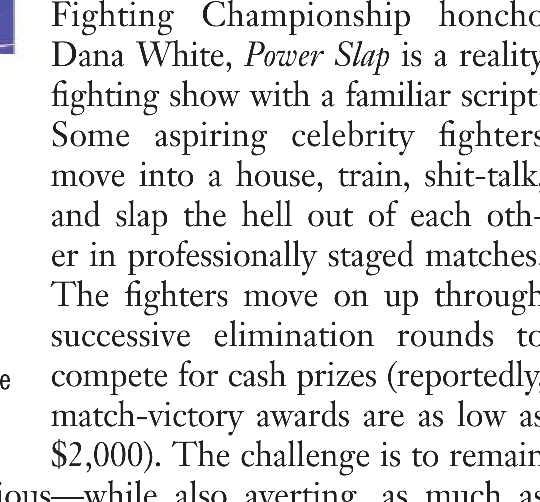
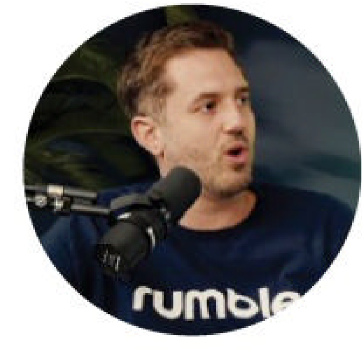
ILLUSTRATION BY RYAN INZANA

"I was not kidding when I said the #RumbleTakeover has begun. I'm not finished, either."

—Chris Pavlovski, CEO of Rumble





Merchants of grievance: Above, Rumble founder Chris Pavlovski; below, sad-trad guy Steven Crowder soliloquizes from his Rumble perch.

Power Slap. Hosted by Ultimate Fighting Championship honcho Dana White, *Power Slap* is a reality fighting show with a familiar script: Some aspiring celebrity fighters move into a house, train, shit-talk, and slap the hell out of each other in professionally staged matches. The fighters move on up through successive elimination rounds to compete for cash prizes (reportedly, match-victory awards are as low as $2,000). The challenge is to remain standing—and conscious—while also averting, as much as possible, the onset of direct brain damage.

The matches are short, violent, and irritatingly well produced, as one fighter, after a painfully slow choreographed windup, slaps the other, who then has 30 seconds to regroup in time to slap back. Competitors have hokey stage names like Slap Jesus, tragic backstories, and a reliable complement of personal demons to exorcise. A single powerful slap often leads to a knockout—which is then replayed in ultra high-def slow motion, over and over again, so that you can see the facial flesh rippling and the disorientation setting in. Victorious fighters are ushered back to the Slap House, while losing fighters sometimes have to be attended to by a doctor before being carted off, perhaps to be rendered into glue.

Like all reality TV, *Power Slap* feels bad to consume, a fatty indulgence. It also has some unpleasant real-world resonance: On New Year's Eve last year, Dana White was filmed slapping his wife. Shamelessly exploiting its participants' desperate hunger for fame, it might be the most original thing on Rumble, which says a lot about a platform that has spent tens of millions courting perpetually red-faced millionaire MAGA influencers like Steven Crowder.

What allows content like *Power Slap* to thrive in Rumble's house of punditry is the same cultural logic that helped elevate former WWE host and reality TV star Donald Trump to the American presidency: a canny ability to market standard white-guy belligerence and personal dysfunction as rebellious, novel, and brash. For all the platform's high-flown invocations of the noble traditions of free speech in the face of the "woke" censorship now practiced by monopoly digital platforms, Rumble is little more than a digital version of the marriage of convenience that GOP leaders endorsed when they made Trump the head of the Republican Party. Indeed, you don't have to dig very deep into Rumble's rapid ascension on the right to see that the tech/MAGA alliance is baked into the company's business model.

It's a top-line entry in the site's investor pitches: One such presentation from 2021 highlighted "increasing adoption from top creators," including Donald Trump, who has 1.9 million followers on the platform, along with support from conservative media firebrands like Dave Rubin and Dan Bongino. Next to Elon Musk's Twitter, Rumble has become perhaps the most successful social media company catering to the political right, and in the past few years, it's become deeply enmeshed in Trumpworld, from video talent to investment to its management and board.

With a claimed audience of 48 million monthly users and several hundred million dollars in cash on hand, Rumble has the potential to be both an instrument and a shaper of conservative politics. That viewership has made Rumble a top stop for MAGA celebrities (or those willing to play one online) seeking a lucrative content deal. Numerous Republican politicians have folded it into their social media strategy, maintaining accounts on the site. "I was not kidding when I said the #RumbleTakeover has begun," tweeted Chris Pavlovski, Rumble's founder and CEO, after the site announced its plan to broadcast the first GOP presidential debate. "I'm not finished, either."

The problem is that #RumbleTakeover will yield decidedly diminishing returns if it deviates from the standard playbook of right-wing culture warfare. Rumble is morphing into something interesting and politically significant, but it's not the free-speech haven that its promoters claim. Besides business and talent deals that link it closely to the political right, Rumble maintains content policies that read like they were written by a Tucker Carlson intern. The platform forbids material that "promotes, supports or incites individuals and/or groups which engage in violence or unlawful acts, including but not limited to Antifa groups and persons affiliated with Antifa, the KKK and white supremacist groups and/or persons affiliated with these groups." The effort to equate antifa with the Klan is a classic both-sides feint of right-leaning media in the Trump age—a bid to collapse sharp moral distinctions into a plague-on-both-your-houses stance that conceals the actual alignment of Rumble with the extremely online white nationalist right.

The company's disingenuous view of politics also sits alongside a less-than-forthright business model. While Rumble gives 60 percent of its ad earnings to video creators, the site also grants itself broad latitude to copyright much of the content it airs, claim ownership of it, and pay creators a maximum of $1,000 in compensation. In other words, if your video goes viral on Rumble, the company suits might decide that it should be theirs. As on other platforms, the company is sovereign: "Rumble reserves the right, in its sole discretion, to terminate your access to the Rumble Service, with or without notice, for any

reason…." So much for protecting freedom of speech.

In-your-face engagement: *Power Slap* contestants have at it.

When I signed up for a Rumble account recently, my own user-generated content was not at risk—I just planned to lurk. Once I logged in, the site wasted no time in prodding me into the fever swamps of Trumpian grievance. I was invited to subscribe to *Bannon's War Room*, where the concentrically shirted former Trump White House adviser Steve Bannon regularly holds forth. On the home page, a QAnon livestream promised a new dispatch about the movement's ever-shifting prophecy of a fast-encroaching political apocalypse. A few dozen people were watching Mike Lindell, the election-denying pillow impresario, rant from the far side of the conspiratorial moon. Rounding it out were some gaming videos, extreme sports highlights, Covid denialist footage, and endless bigoted riffs on the latest object of viral outrage. If *Power Slap* comes across as a particularly unsettling form of gladiator theater, the main run of Rumble punditry suggests a *National Review* cruise hijacked by QAnon pirates.

Many of the most popular shows on Rumble fall into the crudely produced genre of angry-dude-in-front-of-a-mic. On a recent livestream, Dan Bongino, who regularly tops Facebook's roster of high-performing political commentators and had 2.78 million followers on Rumble as of late June, told 51,000 live viewers that an economic crisis was coming. He also counseled viewers to "be very, very careful about narratives coming out in the coming days about this Tucker Carlson thing," referring to the former Fox News personality's abrupt firing. Bongino paused dramatically to point to his eyes and then the camera: "There's something going on here behind the scenes."

Then came another pause for Bongino to introduce the episode's first sponsor, a nutritional supplement that, he promised, wasn't based on junk science—it had helped him recover from a surgery. Below his video was a banner ad for easy concealed-carry gun permits. After finishing his endorsement, Bongino returned to his warning about an "orchestrated campaign…to destroy and decimate Tucker Carlson's credibility."

These streams, which can run for hours and feature running text commentary from viewers, are staples of MAGA video. They are now core Rumble offerings. They don't include much in the way of polished entertainment or analysis—actual news or reporting is a rare event. They might best be described as rambling struggle sessions, providing company for alienated conservative men as they drive to work, exercise in the gym, or putter around the house—conspiratorial Muzak for reactionary misogynists. They veer between odd confessions of masculine insecurity, outright bigotry, deep-state paranoia, bad jokes, and right-wing bromides about wokeness.

Pavlovski, Rumble's CEO, is a Canadian serial tech entrepreneur in his early 30s. In 2011, he founded an IT start-up called Cosmic Development. The company became a success, establishing offices in Canada, Serbia, and Macedonia, where Pavlovski's parents are from. In a 2016 tech conference speech, Pavlovski talked about learning from his failed start-ups, including a financial services firm he established in India that he called a "big mistake," admitting he knew nothing about financial services or Indian law and business. Like many entrepreneurs steeped in Silicon Valley pop philosophy, he practically celebrates market failure—it's a chance to move on to the next new thing, something that delivers the holy trinity of clicks, brand identity, and buzz.

That, as much as anything, appears to be the aspiration powering Rumble. In 2013, Pavlovski launched the company as a video platform designed to be a YouTube alternative that would focus on monetizing video on terms favorable to creators. Ryan Milnes, Pavlovski's cofounder at Cosmic, joined the company's board.

Rumble puttered along until 2020, when it started attracting interest from MAGA World. The narrative of Big Tech as a tool of state censors began to gain real steam, as well as a degree of mangled credibility. Tech platforms started enforcing content policies against Covid-19 misinformation, the *New York Post*'s thinly sourced Hunter Biden laptop story, and, after the January 6 riot, the president himself. With the same platforms adding new policies against anti-trans bigotry and hateful language, many conservative social media users found that their political expression was running up against the buzz saw of content moderation.

The main run of Rumble punditry suggests a *National Review* cruise hijacked by QAnon pirates.

For years, leading figures in conservative media maintained a dual identity, leveraging the existing tech platforms—and developing huge, profitable audiences in the process—while also claiming to be victims of their policies. There had always

Contrarian TV: Russell Brand and Glenn Greenwald in Rumble mode.

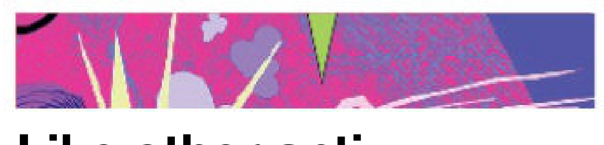
Another Trump-connected mogul became a Rumble investor: Darren Blanton, a Texas horse semen collector (he breeds the animals for racing) who runs an investment firm called Colt Ventures. Blanton is an established name among the moneyed MAGA political elite: an associate of Peter Thiel, Michael Flynn, and Steve Bannon. Blanton and Bannon were both directors of GTV, a media venture started by longtime Bannon crony Guo Wengui, a now-indicted fraudster and rumored Chinese intelligence asset who became enmeshed in Trumpworld. During the 2016 campaign, Blanton, along with Flynn and one of his associates, participated in an alleged voter suppression campaign targeting Black voters. He was later paid $200,000 by the Trump campaign.

been a nascent "alt-tech movement," which fostered social networks and hosting services with overtly libertarian or right-wing policies. But establishment Big Tech firms like Facebook employed plenty of Republicans, and their lobbying was bipartisan. Many tech CEOs retained their chummy relations with the Trump White House, sometimes privately so. Still, as conservative influencers and politicians saw themselves banned from YouTube and Twitter, the need for safe digital spaces—where free speech might be allowed to veer into hate speech—became a matter of strategic political importance.

This was Rumble's big opening. In 2020, Devin Nunes, then a member of the House of Representatives, went over to Rumble, as did longtime libertarian icon Ron Paul. Bongino also bought an equity stake, giving the platform the imprimatur of the MAGA pundit-industrial complex. As the company stockpiled right-wing talent and board members, Pavlovski began promoting Rumble as a studiously "neutral" platform: a bulwark against Big Tech's encroachment on free speech.

And sure enough, the site took off, going from 1 million monthly users in early 2020 to more than 36 million a year later. For many conservatives, it remained a sort of backup outlet—a place to syndicate content that was still allowed on YouTube and elsewhere, as well as a possible future refuge should the "woke" Silicon Valley authorities ban the accounts they relied on. Pavlovski began telling interviewers that the site was creating digital infrastructure that would be "immune to cancel culture." Regardless of the pitch that drew users in, the site's rapid growth in the year of political reckoning for the Trump movement showed potential.

As MAGA World began to discover Rumble, so did its allies in tech and finance. Elite Wall Street firms like Guggenheim Securities offered their consulting services. Rumble signed tech and video deals with Trump Media & Technology Group, the ex-president's newly established company, which was led by Nunes. In May 2021, Rumble announced a round of investment led by J.D. Vance's Narya Capital and Vance's financial angel, PayPal cofounder Peter Thiel. Ethan Fallang, a partner at Narya, joined Rumble's board. Rumble made its first acquisition: Locals, a Substack-like subscription blog service with a conservative user base. Rumble also established a US headquarters in Longboat Key, Fla.



Like other anti–"cancel culture" launches, Rumble turns out to be firmly in the MAGA mold of reactionary politics.

By the end of 2021, Rumble was ready to go public in a proposed IPO navigated through a special purpose acquisition company. The deal valued the new public company at more than $2 billion. In a signal of the firm's rising stature—and access to mainstream financing—Rumble was merging with a shell company run by Howard Lutnick, the billionaire CEO of Cantor Fitzgerald. On September 19, 2022, Rumble began publicly trading its stock on Wall Street, making Pavlovski a paper billionaire and reaping huge windfalls for the company's investors and executives. A few days later, Pavlovski rang the opening bell at NASDAQ. After Cantor Fitzgerald, Rumble's top shareholders included investment colossus the Vanguard Group and David Sacks, a venture capitalist, friend of Thiel, Twitter war-room consigliere to Elon Musk, and major Republican donor. (Rumble would later buy Callin, Sacks's podcasting start-up, and add him to the company board.)

Buoyed by new financing, Rumble turned on the money spigot, signing creators, influencers, pundits, gamers, rappers, and assorted online personalities to six- and seven-figure deals—people who, the company claimed, "challenge the status quo." Journalist Glenn Greenwald, a fierce critic of liberal groupthink on cable news, agreed to do a cable-news-style evening show. Anti-vax celebrity Russell Brand, the louche comedian and actor, became a featured attraction as a contrarian political commentator. Donald Trump Jr. was brought aboard to do a show called *Triggered*. Kimberly Guilfoyle, Trump Jr.'s fiancée, signed on as well. After men's rights

cultist Andrew Tate was banned from platforms like YouTube that supplied most of his revenue, he agreed to a deal with Rumble for $9 million a year, according to CNN. Soon after, Tate was arrested in Romania for crimes including rape and human trafficking. Rumble hasn't flinched in its support for the popular misogynist: In June, the site hosted a livestream special for Tate, now under house arrest, that attracted several hundred thousand simultaneous viewers. Pavlovski celebrated the event as a technological triumph for a site that doesn't depend on Amazon's digital infrastructure.

The rapid ascent of Rumble has provoked some skepticism in the finance and tech worlds. In late April, a short-selling firm called Culper Research released a report on the company, saying it was "short Rumble"—meaning that it was betting that Rumble's stock price would fall. According to the report, Rumble had inflated its traffic numbers, and its actual growth has been stagnant. The Culper team further noted that Rumble was relying on bad ad technology (hence the ads for weight-loss hacks and shady supplements). The report estimated that 37 percent of Rumble traffic was malware-driven—essentially fake traffic directed to the site via pop-up ads and the like.

Rumble's not the first right-aligned digital platform to try to crash its way past the Big Tech cartel, which with the notable exception of TikTok has effectively kept out upstarts, either by buying them outright or kicking them out of app stores for tolerating extreme content. Other social media challengers have fallen apart on their own. Gettr, headed by Trump adviser Jason Miller, who in February returned to work for the former president's 2024 campaign, was hacked the day it launched and can barely be counted as a going concern. Truth Social still exists—exiled "Twitter Files" journalist Matt Taibbi recently signed up—and is nominally Trump's digital home base. But the full-stack tech and social media company promised in Trump's original pitch is nowhere near materializing.

Other right-leaning digital properties are either already dead or circling the cemetery; 4chan and 8chan—the cesspool discussion boards that have launched as many harassment campaigns and mass shooters as they have Pepe the Frog memes—have been challenged by activists, with the latter forced offline entirely. Gab, a social network run by a Christian nationalist who refuses to talk to Jewish reporters, continues to build out its own tech infrastructure (a payments system, an AI chatbot, etc.) in service of the CEO's vision for a separate, parallel economy. But given that Gab is flooded with racists and QAnon believers, it seems unlikely to scale.

Parler had a decent run of viral attention, but it was kneecapped by Google and Apple, which removed it from their app stores for its rampant bigotry and association with the January 6 riot. After the artist formerly known as Kanye West failed to execute a promised purchase of Parler, the company was sold to another tech firm, which then shut down the social network and began pillaging the company for parts (or user data). "No reasonable person believes that a Twitter clone just for conservatives is a viable business any more," read a note from Parler's new owner on its now-defunct website.

With a claimed audience of 48 million monthly users, Rumble could be an instrument and shaper of conservative politics.

The recent dark horse entrant in the race for MAGA attention and cash is Elon Musk's Twitter. Laden with debt, its value and revenue plummeting, and besieged by frequent technical snafus, Twitter seems like a rolling disaster. The company may be headed for bankruptcy, and Musk's reputation sinks lower daily as he's tweeted misinformation about the assault on Nancy Pelosi's husband, mocked a disabled employee, and embraced far-right conspiracy theories about vaccines.

Dudes gone wild: Above, new Rumble recruit Robert F. Kennedy Jr.; below, pundit at large Andrew Tate broadcasts while under house arrest in Romania.

TOP: JAMIE MCCARTHY / GETTY IMAGES

Musk has succeeded in one sense: By giving reactionaries, transphobes, and Nazis the run of the place, he has ideologically aligned Twitter with the online right. There's no pretense, nothing hidden. Musk can often be seen tweeting with some of the site's most obnoxious right-wing influencers, acknowledging their complaints or seemingly banning accounts at their request. His florid warnings about "the woke mind virus" appear to be in earnest.

Rumble is taking a different path toward similar political ends. The company is politically connected and well financed, as well as suitably bold in its stated ambitions. By throwing money at a long roster of influencers, podcast hosts, journalists, actors, DJs, and professional bigots, Rumble seems to hope that it can summon the kind of mass audience that has eluded other right-wing platforms.

It also helps that Rumble's lingua franca is video, the Internet's most monetizable medium. Rumble is not an "anti-woke" bank or dating app—two other failed Thiel-sponsored ventures. Its reliance on video means that it can be anything its owners want it to be. And right now, they seem to want it to become the locus of entertainment and viral political commentary for the online MAGA set.

S RUMBLE GREW, PAVLOVSKI AND SOME OF HIS ORIGINAL EXECUTIVE TEAM remained in charge, but they were augmented by new arrivals. One key appointment, in the role of general counsel and corporate secretary, was Michael Ellis, a former Devin Nunes aide and Republican political operative. Ellis had formerly worked on the House Intelligence Committee and the National Security Council. Late in his administration, Trump attempted to install Ellis—an administration loyalist closely aligned with

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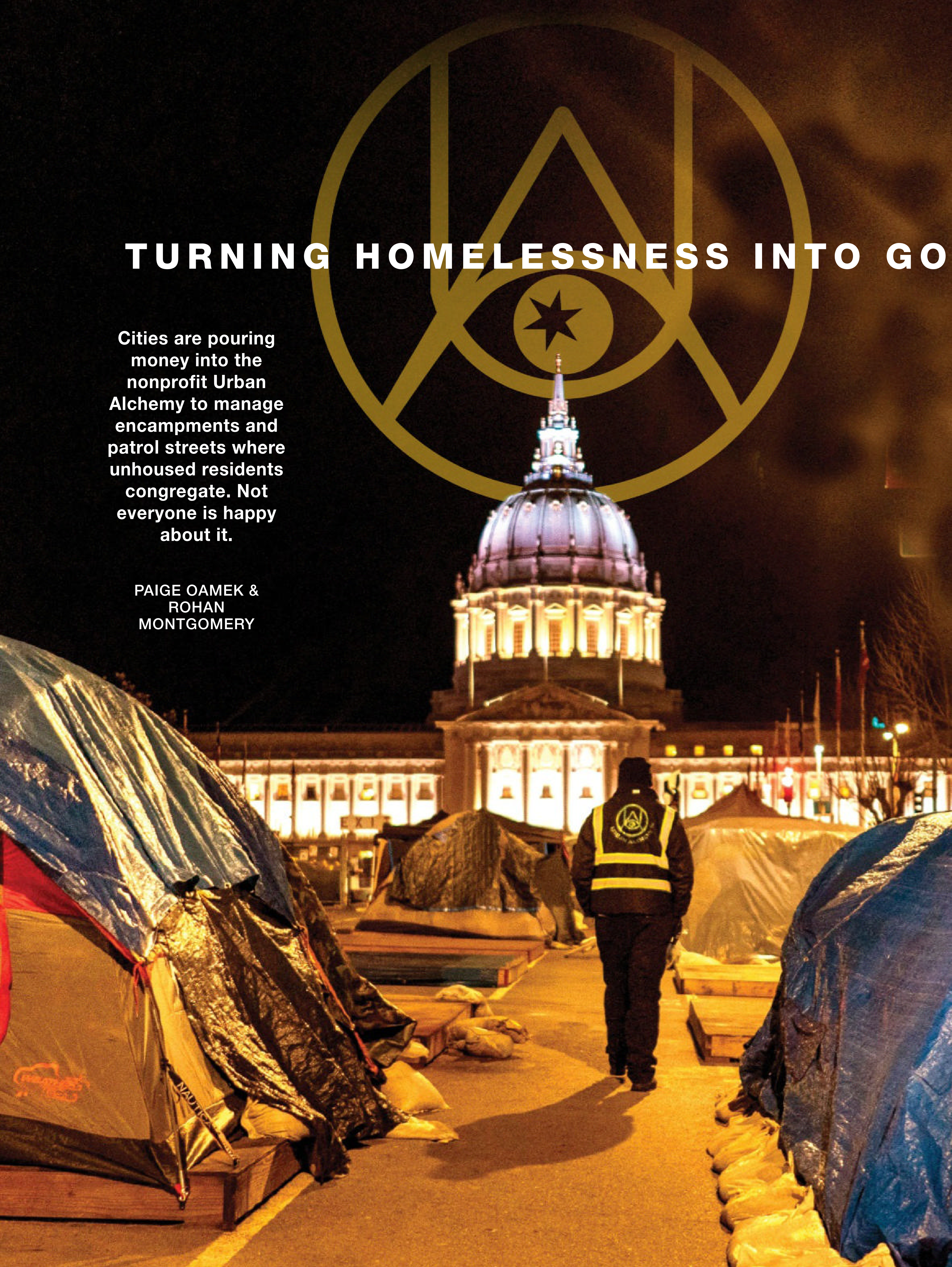


TURNING HOMELESSNESS INTO GO

Cities are pouring money into the nonprofit Urban Alchemy to manage encampments and patrol streets where unhoused residents congregate. Not everyone is happy about it.

PAIGE OAMEK & ROHAN MONTGOMERY

LD

San Francisco

THE HEADQUARTERS OF URBAN ALCHEMY IS ON THE GROUND FLOOR OF A LUXURY building between a shuttered Whole Foods and a Supreme store near the city's Tenderloin district. Its windows display a decal with one of the nonprofit's catchphrases: "Once you see us, you can't unsee us."

UA "practitioners" or "ambassadors" guard corners and patrol Market Street, respond to emergency calls relating to homelessness, and monitor tent encampments and shelters. Some wear sunglasses and balaclavas with their uniform: a camouflage jacket emblazoned on the back with the group's all-seeing-eye logo.

That eye, according to UA, represents the "inner wisdom" and "powerful spirit" that every UA practitioner "must be armed with" to survive the "dark places" that they enter doing their work. UA promises to treat people with compassion, to "de-escalate" and ensure that "people are no longer at risk of being assaulted," and to foment a "spiritual and social transformation" that is "no less miraculous" than the alchemical transformation of base metals into gold.

"Instead of lead," UA says on its website, "we seek to transmute human suffering. Instead of gold, we create peace."

Urban Alchemy describes itself as a job-creation program for formerly incarcerated people. It was cofounded in 2018 by Lena Miller, a PhD in psychology who has spent decades on a mission to heal the affliction of violence in urban communities. She says that the traumas that the formerly incarcerated have experienced increase their emotional intelligence, giving them a unique ability to combat the homelessness crisis facing American cities. "The harsher the circumstances," Miller told us, "the more you hone that ability." Individuals with these emotional skills "stop using [their] cerebral cortex" in stressful situations and instead use "that middle part of your brain, or I would even say spirit," to "analyze and communicate with people."

> **"It's a security force that can bully people [whenever] they want—but it's OK, because it's not the police."**
>
> —Couper Orona, street medic

Miller started the nonprofit with $36,000 and a contract to manage public toilets in San Francisco. "You can't polish a turd," she says. "Well, we polished that turd."

In five years, Urban Alchemy has amassed at least $62 million in contracts, mostly with cities—San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Sausalito in California and Austin in Texas. UA boasts that its budget has increased some 500 percent in the past two years. It says it employs 870 practitioners, 94 percent of whom have been incarcerated or unhoused. And UA wants to take its model nationwide. "We're the Google or Instagram of social services," Miller says.

She envisions the group going "from city to city," revolutionizing the industry. Until recently, UA's website said it planned to expand to three more cities by summer 2025—including Portland, Ore., where it's at the center of a plan to corral the unhoused population into massive city-sanctioned encampments.

Miller attributes UA's success to the effectiveness of her model. "We should be excited," she says. "You got long-term offenders who've done 30, 40 years in prison. They're the alternatives to the police. And furthermore, the police and the police unions are with it."

But not everyone is pleased with Urban Alchemy's explosive growth.

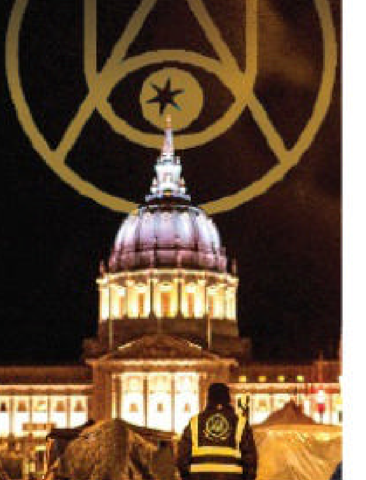
THE NUMBER OF PEOPLE sleeping on streets in the United States continues to increase. Between 2015 and 2020, the unsheltered population surged by 30 percent, and San Francisco has one of the highest rates of people sleeping in the streets. In 2022, there were more than 580,000 unhoused people in the US, 40 percent of whom were unsheltered. In San Francisco's 2022 point-in-time count, a kind of census of homelessness, volunteers tabulated nearly 4,400 unsheltered residents in the city.

Like many other cities, San Francisco deals with visible homelessness by "sweeping"—in other words, dismantling tent encampments and forcing unhoused residents to move to another area. There's a shortage of shelter beds across the region, and it is illegal in West Coast states to sweep anyone for whom no bed is available. The Coalition on Homelessness sued San Francisco over this, and a judge temporarily banned sweeps. Still, unhoused people say they are routinely coerced into moving by city officials, police, and Urban Alchemy ambassadors, and they tell us that sweeps remain the main technique that the city uses to manage its unsheltered population. In 2018, after Leilani Farha, the United Nations special rapporteur

Tent cities: An Urban Alchemy ambassador patrols an encampment in front of San Francisco's City Hall.

MELINA MARA / THE WASHINGTON POST VIA GETTY IMAGES

Paige Oamek is a writer and fact-checker based in New York. Their writing appears in In These Times, The American Prospect, *and elsewhere. Rohan Montgomery is a writer and fact-checker whose work has appeared on the BBC and in* The New Republic *and* In These Times.



on adequate housing, visited San Francisco, she determined that this approach constituted "cruel and inhuman treatment" that violated multiple human rights.

It's no wonder, then, that civic leaders in San Francisco and elsewhere are looking for new ways to confront—or at least to appear like they're confronting—the homelessness crisis. UA skeptics like Kaitlyn Dey, a Portland-based homelessness researcher, argue that politicians use nonprofits to keep their promises to reduce interactions between police and homeless people without substantially changing the system. And to the average liberal city dweller, having a nonprofit administer the sweeps makes that work appear more humane than when armed cops do it. Working with groups like UA also reduces transparency—internal UA e-mails, for instance, are not subject to FOIA requests—insulating local officials should problems arise.

"The guards are constantly making it hard on us living there. They steal from us…they bully us."

—Kelsey, an unhoused San Francisco resident

Critics say Urban Alchemy is policing public space, while UA says its workers, who are not state-licensed private security guards, "provide complementary strategies to conventional policing and security." Even if UA calls them "ambassadors" or "practitioners"—and even if, according to one former employee, the nonprofit stressed to the ambassadors that they were not "security guards" in internal communications—a search on LinkedIn shows employees describing themselves as security guards.

"It sounds good on paper," says Couper Orona, a street medic who was unhoused in San Francisco from 2016 until recently, but the reality is that UA is "another Band-Aid instead of fixing the actual problem" of homelessness. "It's a security force that can bully people into doing what they want—but it's OK because it's not the police."

Kirkpatrick "KP" Tyler, UA's chief of governmental and community affairs, says that this was not the case. "We treat people with dignity and respect," he says. Unlike existing encampments and shelters, which are often filled with abuse, Urban Alchemy provides a "safe space."

Miller predicts that "at some point, this whole shelter service is going to evolve to where it gets to be competitive, where shelters are competing to be the best—like a Yelp review."

Since its founding, Urban Alchemy has faced dozens of allegations and at least six lawsuits alleging civil rights violations, physical and sexual harassment, and wage theft. Critics, including homelessness advocates, unhoused people, and former employees, allege that some of the practitioners have exacerbated the trauma of homelessness by dealing hard drugs, making sexual advances on vulnerable individuals, and harassing and assaulting people on the streets.

Most recently, in December 2022, a UA shelter employee named Joseph Perry was charged with attempted murder after he shot a man during a 15-minute break, after which he went back to work. He was fired for not showing up to work the next day. UA says it became aware of the crime only later; Tyler told us that the incident was drug-related and "probably still would have happened…maybe sooner" if Perry hadn't had his job with the nonprofit.

Earlier this year, Orona sat down with Kelsey, an unhoused man who had spent time living in a tent city run by UA next to the main branch of the San Francisco Public Library, for the first of a series of video interviews with unhoused individuals to record stories of Urban Alchemy's maltreatment of unhoused people in San Francisco. "The guards are constantly making it hard on us living there," Kelsey says on camera. "They steal from us. If anyone tries to speak up, like I'm doing, they bully us. There've been accounts of violence against people from the workers."

In one such story that Orona recorded, a visibly shaken woman named Autumn Keller describes being harassed by UA employees after she and her boyfriend sat down to rest on a flight of stairs. She says UA ambassadors told them to "get the fuck upstairs." When Keller and her boyfriend complained about their treatment as they were getting up to leave, one of the men "punched me in the face," Keller says, "and completely annihilated my boyfriend," who can be seen in the video with a bloody lip. "All the other Urban Alchemy people [were] watching—laughing at us."

In another video testimony, a man who says his name is Zachary recounts being confronted by two UA employees as he was going up the stairs into the UA-run Ansonia Hotel, where he was sleeping. One of the employees, he says, grabbed him around the throat and threw him off the stairs, causing him to sprain his finger.

Another interview, with an older man named Angel Hamador, had to be filmed under a freeway far from any UA presence, because he said was afraid of the practitioners. "I have been in multiple situations with Urban Alchemy where they have bullied me, aggressively, in gang-like tactics," Hamador says. He stresses that he had already "been physically assaulted twice" by UA ambassadors before the incident he was about to describe happened.

On January 28, Hamador was near the Whole Foods at Eighth and Market—which has since been closed, with the company citing worker safety—when he saw a UA ambassador telling a couple eating lunch in a taped-off section of the sidewalk that they had to "move right away." The ambassador was "one of the biggest men I've ever seen in my entire life, 300 pounds at least and 6-foot-something," he recalls. Hamador says he told the couple they legally did not have to move. The "Urban Alchemy gentleman" then began to "aggressively address" Hamador, getting "as close as you can to somebody without

Police approval: San Francisco Police Chief Bill Scott (right) smiles as Mayor London Breed announces additional UA ambassadors.

SCOTT STRAZZANTE / *SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE* VIA AP

[their] having to move" and telling him he needed to back up. When he didn't, Hamador says, the UA ambassador "headbutted" him—"and it was not a love tap." His nose started to bleed, and Hamador began "freaking out," shouting about his rights and pleading for someone to call the police. But the police, he adds, "drove by me while I was screaming in the street, bleeding from my nose, no shoes on. The police drove right past me."

The UA ambassador, Hamador says, hit him again before being stopped by another Urban Alchemy employee, who calmed Hamador down while the first man continued to lob insults. "Even when it was the good guys," Hamador says, "all I could see was those [UA] coats all around me."

"I couldn't sleep for two days," Hamador continues, "because I [thought I] had a concussion and was seeing double." He eventually went to a hospital, where he says he asked to make a police report but was told to leave before he could do so. The ambassador "attacked me in the streets in broad daylight in front of everybody," he says, crying.

The UA staffer who beat him was suspended, Hamador says, but he remains terrified of the ubiquitous camo-jacketed ambassadors. "I don't want to tell on nobody, get nobody in trouble. But this can't keep happening."

Orona says that "at least nine or 10" women have complained to her about sexual harassment by UA employees. And Ty Kyser, a former policy director of the Coalition on Homelessness, says she's consistently harassed by UA employees: "There's not a day that I walk through the Tenderloin that I don't get catcalled by an Urban Alchemy person."

UA's Tyler told us that he wished more people would come to the nonprofit with their specific complaints, "because then it would make it easier to respond." But he doubted the veracity of these claims. If most of the allegations against UA practitioners were true, Tyler says, there would be a paper trail of reports filed with the city, but there isn't one. The police would also speak up, but, Miller says, they are "the main ones" asking for more of a UA presence. Without Urban Alchemy, she adds, "there would be uprisings where we are."

Tyler and Miller dismiss much of the criticism of their organization as part of "a serious campaign" by a "national network" to "undermine" UA, motivated by racism and classism and "rooted in folks who benefit from keeping things the way that they are."

When pressed as to who that national network might be, Miller and Tyler refused to answer, saying the organization wanted to avoid spreading negativity. "You name me one person or group who ever did anything that changed society that didn't get their ass kicked in the process," Miller says. "Who am I to complain? Look what happened to Jesus."

Some advocates say that Urban Alchemy doesn't provide adequate training for its workers. UA's website says it provides class instruction in emotional intelligence, harm reduction, self-care, and de-escalation as well as in CPR, first aid, and the use of naloxone, in addition to on-the-job supervision.

Tyler says UA continues to engage with and assess its ambassadors once they're "in the field." Each person is supposed to be paired with another, more experienced partner, and workers are "surrounded with the community of support of other practitioners."

But one former Urban Alchemy employee—who asked to remain anonymous—reported receiving just three days of virtual training before starting as an ambassador in Los Angeles in 2021. "You can't just take anybody and train them on a video and then stick them out there and expect that they're going to be fine," the former employee says. "Watching people fall apart in front of your eyes, day in and day out—some people forget that they're supposed to be a positive influence.… I've seen [workers] selling drugs to the [unhoused] people, assaulting people, sitting there drinking and smoking while they're on the job."

"You're representing something that's supposed to be great," the former UA employee adds, "but you become part of the problem."

Controversial cleanups: Urban Alchemy crews tidy up a street in San Francisco's Tenderloin neighborhood.

MELINA MARA / *THE WASHINGTON POST* VIA GETTY IMAGES

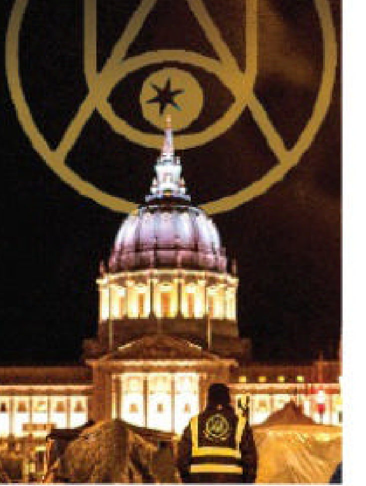
The former employee says that Urban Alchemy also needs to do a better job screening its employees—something made more difficult by the nonprofit's rapid expansion—and pay better than the "pennies" many workers earn in high-cost-of-living areas. (UA says its practitioners are paid at least $21 an hour.) The former employee—who quit UA after only a few months but still works in homeless outreach—says the unhoused people that they interact with "have nothing good to say" about Urban Alchemy.

Joe Wilson, the executive director of Hospitality House, a community center and shelter serving the Tenderloin, Sixth Street Corridor, and Mid-Market neighborhoods, worries about compounding trauma if workers are thrown into conflict without the skills they need. "The training you may have gotten on the yard at San Quentin stands you in good stead in that environment—[but] that's not a community-building model, that's a survival model."

"You name me one person who ever did anything that changed society that didn't get their ass kicked."

—Lena Miller, CEO of Urban Alchemy

Hospitality House, Wilson says, builds trust and relationships over time by running over 300 hours of training per year for its staff—many times more than UA provides. "Any community-based organization," he adds, "must at its core have a fundamental obligation and allegiance to the community in which it exists."



Since 2019, the Coalition on Homelessness—alongside other advocates, service providers, and unhoused individuals—has worked to create an alternative response for 911 calls related to homelessness.

From 2015 to 2020, Bay Area police killed 110 people. In almost half of these cases, there was no evidence that the victim had been committing a crime, and none of them resulted in an officer being prosecuted. Over that same period, the number of people killed by police across the US rose to record levels. The roughly 30 percent of chronically homeless individuals with mental health conditions are especially vulnerable to police violence; between a quarter and a half of all fatal police encounters involve an identifiable mental illness, according to the Treatment Advocacy Center.

"Every year, we watch various bureaus serving essential functions begging for scraps."

—Kaitlyn Dey, homelessness researcher

What the Coalition on Homelessness and its partners came up with was the Compassionate Alternative Response Team, or CART, which would respond to complaints involving unhoused people and could transport individuals to services using community-based teams of mental health professionals and people who have experienced homelessness, all without involving the cops.

The funding was supposed to come from the budget of the San Francisco Police Department, a diversion that would have aligned with Mayor London Breed's unfulfilled post–George Floyd promise to reallocate $120 million from the SFPD's budget. But Kyser and others who pushed for CART say that Breed let the $2.75 million needed for the program sit unspent for over a year and even "refused to acknowledge CART publicly."

Then, on January 31, the city awarded the contract to implement CART to Urban Alchemy and not the coalition of nonprofits that helped develop the program. Wilson, of Hospitality House, was livid: "It's incredibly frustrating to land here after several years of planning" meant to "lift up a different model of what public safety could mean in communities that are often under siege and frankly enslaved by this law enforcement model." Upon hearing the news, Laura Valdéz, the executive director of the nonprofit Dolores Street Community Services and part of the coalition that did not win the contract, told the *San Francisco Chronicle* that UA had a "history of triggering and inflicting trauma on unhoused people."

Urban Alchemy believes it was chosen to take on the challenge of CART because of its experience running a similar program, Crisis and Incident Response Team Through Community-Led Engagement, or CIRCLE, in Los Angeles, which launched in 2021.

Not so diplomatic: Angel Hamador says that an Urban Alchemy ambassador bullied and head-butted him.

Urban Alchemy seems set to continue its rapid expansion. Having established a presence throughout California, in September UA opened up shop in Texas, where it took over management at the Austin Resource Center for the Homeless after the previous contractor "essentially collapsed," according to Austin City Council member José Vela. Despite Urban Alchemy's scandals, the city took what Austin's homeless strategy officer, Dianna Grey, calls a "calculated risk" and gave the group more than $4 million to run the shelter for around a year.

Next, UA is expanding into Portland, Ore., where Mayor Ted Wheeler is pushing through a controversial plan to combat unsheltered homelessness.

In early 2022, the city proposed sweeping all unhoused residents into several huge encampments, with up to 500 people in each, managed by the National Guard. Following widespread criticism, the city then "spent the year tailoring the plan and working on their rhetoric to ultimately make [it] politically viable," says Dey, the Portland-based homelessness researcher. Now the plan is to create six encampments, each holding up to 150 unhoused people. At the end of last year, Urban Alchemy submitted a bid to operate as many as five of them; in March, Wheeler announced the location of the first site, which UA will run. The city plans to ban unsheltered outdoor homelessness except for these government-sanctioned encampments.

Advocates, experts, and unhoused people in Portland have expressed concerns about the prospect of UA-run megacamps. Andy Miller, the head of Our Just Future, a local shelter provider, says operating a shelter on that scale is "difficult work." Maintaining a healthy environment while navigating the trauma of those sheltering there, he says, is no easy task.

"There's going to be chaos," predicts Vince Masiello, an unhoused resident of Right 2 Dream Too (R2D2), a safe rest site founded during the Occupy movement that eventually found its way to the corner of the parking lot near the Moda Center, where the Portland Trail Blazers play.

At R2D2, around two dozen longer-term residents stay in tiny homes, with additional communal shelter space for 40 more unhoused folks to bed down for the night. The village is autonomous, which means the residents—who have received de-escalation training—set their own rules and resolve conflicts democratically in weekly general meetings. "Even in our humble space," Masiello says, "conflicts come up." Trying to "scale that up" to a camp with more than 100 people, he continues, will be a disaster—one that he and other unhoused people at R2D2 say they fear.

"The idea that they're actually going to successfully manage all the sanctioned encampments and force every single homeless person into them? I don't think that's going to happen," Dey says. Such an approach, compounded by UA's lack of training, is "going to implode."

There's also the question of cost. In its bid, UA predicted that it would cost over $5 million a year to operate a single 150-person encampment—or about $34,000 per person per year.

That's still cheaper than some UA-run projects. UA ambassadors monitor San Francisco's first tiny-home village, which had its lease renewed for another two years in February. Each cabin at the UA-patrolled site costs the city just shy of $80,000 a year. (In contrast, Portland's R2D2 is run by an independent nonprofit without any city funding, in large part because the residents police themselves.)

Dey calls these expenditures "ridiculous." "Every year," she says, "we watch various bureaus serving essential functions begging for scraps. Meanwhile, the city is [doling] out hundreds of millions for the police and contracts like this, which serve a very similar function: to control the use of public space, remove homeless people, and attempt to sweep the problem out of sight. But homelessness will not go away, and people will continue to suffer."

UA's Tyler readily admits that "we're not building enough permanent housing and affordable housing," but Lena Miller says that what UA has "done is we've risen to the call that cities have had."

She jokes that "maybe at some point, Urban Alchemy will get big enough and powerful enough where we make a bunch of developer friends and we buy up a bunch of land and we become permanent housing developers."

Until then, Urban Alchemy plans to "stay in their lane," which critics say is tantamount to a private police force targeting the homeless. That lane, according to Kyser at the Coalition on Homelessness, continues to widen as Democratic mayors find ways to abandon their promises to defund the police while shrouding their policing measures in social justice language.

As Kyser puts it, Urban Alchemy is "obviously not an alternative to policing—it is alternative policing." N

(continued from page 21)
lived in the adjacent city of Yatta. This describes the lifestyle of many families living in the region in the past, though not all of them.

Habakkuk himself is adamantly opposed to the court's interpretation of his work. He told us he had no idea his research was being used to justify the expulsion. "It was obvious to everyone around that this is their village," he said. "The families came there consistently, always to the same cave, and when they weren't here, no one else would enter."

International law explicitly forbids population transfers in occupied territory, with almost no exceptions. But in their ruling, the judges claimed that if there is a conflict between international law and Israeli law, "Israeli law decides." In the decision, they wrote that the section of the Geneva Conventions forbidding population transfers is intended "only to prevent acts of mass expulsion of a population in occupied territory in order to destroy it, to perform forced labor, or to achieve other policy goals," and therefore there is no connection with the Masafer Yatta displacement, which was only ordered so that the military could train there.

The ban on population transfers is found in the Fourth Geneva Convention, in Section 49: "Deportations of protected persons from occupied territory to the territory of the Occupying Power or to that of any other country, occupied or not, are prohibited, *regardless of their motive*" (emphasis ours).

The story of Masafer Yatta thus represents the cornerstone of Israeli settler colonialism throughout Israel-Palestine. On both sides of the Green Line, Palestinian displacement is largely achieved by way of the law: the systematic denial of building permits, the denial of Palestinian ownership rights to the land in question, the declaration of expansive firing zones, the designation of national parks, and the establishment of new Jewish settlements to "drive a wedge" and cut villages off from one another.

"Everything that lies behind the process is the theft of our land and the expulsion of our communities," said Nidal Abu Younis, the head of the Masafer Yatta village council. "Destroying our homes, confiscating our vehicles, destroying our roads and schools—it's all one massive crime. They can expel us at any moment. Now more than ever, we are in need of international solidarity." N

(continued from page 27)
Defense Department official (and future Trump Media & Technology Group board member) Kash Patel—as general counsel of the National Security Agency. Ellis was poised to assume a civil service posting, which would make him more difficult to remove—a MAGA tick latching itself onto the heart of the deep state. The battle over Ellis's nomination soon devolved into a farrago of bureaucratic and political bickering about his qualifications, whether he had mishandled classified documents, the appointment process itself, and Ellis's Trumpworld dealings on behalf of Nunes. In the midst of a Department of Defense Inspector General investigation, Ellis nominally became the NSA's general counsel, but he was put on administrative leave at the start of the Biden administration and soon resigned. Within months, Rumble scooped him up and made him a millionaire.

Politics may make strange bedfellows, but the quest for a movement-driven digital media fortune has upgraded those raw alliances of convenience into something like a lavishly appointed honeymoon suite at Mar-a-Lago. Rumble may still be fine-tuning its brand as a woke-resistant media platform for the right, but it has already proved itself as a ready-made dispenser of MAGA World cachet. Thus it has brought together Glenn Greenwald, whose journalistic reputation rests on helping to break the Edward Snowden surveillance story, with Ellis, who helped produce the 2016 House Intelligence Committee report on the Snowden leaks. Meanwhile, Palantir, a company founded by early Rumble funder Peter Thiel, had once plotted to sabotage Greenwald's career for his support of WikiLeaks. And financial backer Darren Blanton is a purveyor of voter suppression schemes against Black voters. Somewhere in there, self-styled revolutionary anarchist Russell Brand enlisted alongside enthusiastic MAGA autocrats like Dan Bongino and Steve Bannon. All are feverishly recording and posting their political wisdom, vying for ever-greater margins of online clout—or just to be seen above the Sean Hannity ads imploring Rumble's users to buy silver.

It's no wonder, in short, that Rumble has been entrusted with the streaming rights for the first GOP presidential debate of the 2024 cycle. This is what big-tent politics on the right looks like in the age of Trump. Who knows—if Rumble keeps evolving into a legitimate source of revenue and influence on the right, the 2028 primary debates might include a round of *Power Slap*. N

VELÁZQUEZ, *JUAN DE PAREJA (CA. 1608–1670)*, 1650 (METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART)

A Painter Himself

Juan de Pareja and the entangled histories of art and slavery

BY RACHEL HUNTER HIMES

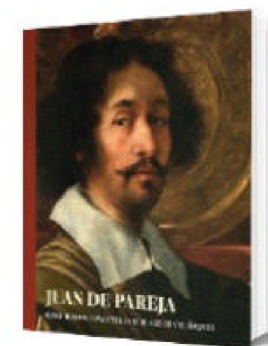
THE BLACK FIGURE IS CURRENTLY IN A sustained spotlight. For some time now, curators, scholars, and critics have wrestled with the representation of people of African descent in art, grappling with the interpretive problems and possibilities presented by subjects who were once objects, cargo, and commodities. The rise of a Black figurative turn in contemporary art reflects this interest. In the past six years, Kehinde Wiley, Mickalene Thomas, Kerry James Marshall, and Toyin Ojih Odutola—all of whom have made Black

figures their central subject—have each had a solo exhibition at a major museum.

Galleries, too, have capitalized on the Black figure's new presence in the public eye. Business has been particularly brisk among art institutions seeking to remediate the relentless whiteness of their holdings. And many museums have followed suit, mining their own collections for Black subjects and engaging with paintings, prints, sculptures, and works of decorative art anew in their efforts to bring to light the histories of race, slavery, and colonialism. Such attention has been a long time in coming.

At the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, a portrait by Diego Velázquez has served as a starting point for a new exhibition and catalog exploring the tangled history of art production, race, and enslaved labor. The portrait, completed in 1650, shows a man named Juan de Pareja. Captured in a dignified pose, he meets our gaze with a sensitive regard. The fluid and shimmering brushwork of Velázquez evokes the light gleaming on Pareja's brow and glinting from his dark eyes. He appears in the dress of a Spanish nobleman, with a broad lace collar and a sash across his chest. Yet while nothing in the painting would suggest it, the power that Velázquez holds over Pareja exceeds the typical relationship of artist to subject or portraitist to sitter. Velázquez, the Old Master, is a master in another sense: the master of the man he has painted, who is his slave.

In their 2013 book *Slave Portraiture in the Atlantic World*, Agnes Lugo-Ortiz and Angela Rosenthal ask: If the Western visual tradition insists on portraiture's affirmation of the subject, can there really be a portrait of a slave? Or do portraits of enslaved individuals intrinsically undermine the objectifying project of slavery? Pareja's dignified presence here stands as a visual counterpoint to what typically turns up in the search for Black figures in collections of European art: fantastically attired blackamoor pages, sometimes with silver slave collars, crouching at the knees of the white subjects of European portraiture, offering a tonal contrast between ethereal whiteness and inky blackness, and a conceptual contrast between power and subservience, dominance and subjugation. Unlike these anonymous Black figures, however, Pareja has a history. He was a painter himself. After his manumission, he went on to found his own workshop as a free man, executing paintings that were displayed in the private and ecclesiastical spaces of Madrid. Several major examples of his work appear in the Met's exhibition alongside paintings attributed to Velázquez, many of which reflect Pareja's contributions to the Old Master's output. Also in the exhibit are polychrome sculptures, metalwork, and ceramics that further reveal the breadth of enslaved and emancipated artistic labor in 17th-century Spain. Together, these works allow us to glimpse the milieu into which Pareja entered, first as enslaved assistant and then as independent artist.



Juan de Pareja
Afro-Hispanic Painter in the Age of Velázquez
By David Pullins and Vanessa K. Valdés
Metropolitan Museum of Art.
156 pp. $50

We don't know a great deal about Juan de Pareja—but then again, we know more about him than we do many other European artists of the early modern period, some of whom we can name only with epithets like "Master of Ávila" or (a personal favorite) "Master of the Drapery Studies." In his catalog essay, David Pullins, a curator of the exhibition alongside Vanessa K. Valdés, lays out what we do know of Pareja's life. Born around 1608 in Antequera, a small city about 90 miles west of Seville, he was perhaps the child of a Spanish man and an enslaved African woman, or then again maybe a Morisco, a descendant of the North African Muslims who were forcibly converted to Catholicism after the end of Muslim rule on the Iberian Peninsula. He was a member of a substantial population of enslaved men, women, and children of African descent living and working in Spanish urban centers, where it was common for households to own one or two, but usually not more than three, slaves. His duties in Velázquez's workshop would have included grinding pigments and preparing canvases—but as the show reveals, he also made far more significant contributions to the paintings that today bear his master's name.

What does it mean for a slave to make art? Can a person who has been designated the property of another exercise creative genius? These questions animate early accounts of Pareja's life. In a narrative published in 1724, Antonio Palomino, Pareja's first biographer, has him laboring on his own paintings in secret while enslaved in Velázquez's workshop. "His Master," Palomino writes, "(for the Hour of the Art) wou'd never suffer him to meddle with Painting or Drawing." According to Palomino's account, which would be repeated in countless other sources, Pareja, after contriving to have his paintings gain the attention of Velázquez's patron, King Philip IV of Spain, immediately fell upon his knees and begged for his freedom. A man "who had such a Talent," the king proclaimed, "cou'd not be a Slave." In reality, this story was almost certainly fabricated—Pareja was manumitted in Rome in 1650 while traveling with Velázquez to acquire works of art for the king's collection.

Other myths have sprung up around Pareja. One account alleges that he married Velázquez's daughter following his manumission. In another, he dies in a duel defending the life of his former owner's son. These evocations of the trope of the faithful slave, bound to his master by ties of love and gratitude, are central to the figure of the enslaved artist, a popular character in the literature of the 18th and 19th centuries and one that still holds our attention today. Similar tropes have yielded a misshapen understanding of the work of another enslaved artist, the South Carolinian David Drake, also known as "Dave the Potter," whose monumental earthenware pots, many inscribed with his own verse, were also featured in a recent Met exhibition. Drake's vessels, which attest to his artistry, literacy, and technical skill, have been read as evidence of the benevolence and permissiveness of his owners. It is an unfortunate fact that art produced under conditions of enslavement is vulnerable to such troubling co-optations. Even more quotidian forms of expression did not escape a similar fate: As pro-slavery histories, newspapers, and pamphlets show, the song and dance of the enslaved were reconfigured to signify their health and happiness under the beneficial reign of the plantocracy.

As this exhibition and its cat-

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alog unravel the fictions surrounding the figure of the enslaved artist, they also challenge the myth of the Old Masters, Velázquez in particular. Today, painting is regarded as a noble practice, an unimpeachable art whose products reflect the impassioned artistic labor and prodigious talents of an individual genius. Yet it has enjoyed this position only since the 18th century. In Velázquez's era, the status of painting was more fraught. His own career reflects his attempts to secure for his profession the status of art. Then and now, the presence of slaves in the painter's workshop complicates the possibility of a clear distinction between artistic and manual labor. In one of the exhibition catalog's most illuminating essays, Luis Méndez Rodríguez demonstrates the centrality of enslaved labor to the production of both fine art and luxury goods in Spain in the 16th and 17th centuries. Indeed, he writes, the artistic or artisan workshop was the most common context for slavery in early modern Spain, a fact that has gone unacknowledged in art histories of this golden age of painting. Juan de Pareja's presence in Velázquez's workshop represented the rule, not the exception.

Identifying enslaved labor as a condition of production for paintings in this period helps return these works of art to the realm of the commodity. As if to underscore this point, the exhibition displays several objects of luxury manufacture—a silver basin and ewer, an example of the large footed platter known as a tazza—alongside work by Velázquez, Pareja, and other Spanish painters. Such wares, like painting, represent a high level of technical skill and material facility, and they were also brought into being through slave labor (a catalog entry notes that silversmiths were among the most likely to own slaves of all the members of the artisan trades). The inclusion of these luxury goods, which need no conceptual assistance to be considered commodities, levels the received hierarchies between the fine and decorative arts. Yet their presence alongside the exhibition's paintings raises other questions having to do with valuation. How should we reevaluate Velázquez's oeuvre in light of Pareja's contribution to it?

Such reflections might lead us to more literal questions about the value, or price, of Pareja's work. In 1970, Velázquez's portrait of Pareja broke art world records as the first painting to sell for over £1 million. A year later, it sold for well beyond that when the Met acquired it for $5.5 million ($41 million in today's dollars). Pareja's paintings have fetched orders of magnitude less. Following this exhibition, however, any privately owned works are sure to appreciate considerably in value. The market is good for Black figures and the work of certain Black artists. In 2017, decades after his death, a painting by Jean-Michel Basquiat became the most expensive American work of art ever sold at auction when it brought $110.5 million. And in this moment of reevaluations and accompanying revaluations, there has been something of a run on David Drake's pots. Crystal Bridges, the Arkansas museum founded by the Walmart heiress Alice Walton, acquired an especially large example for $1.56 million in 2021, which became a record for the sale of American pottery at auction. It is surely significant that museums are willing to shell out to bring the work of Black artists into their collections, and that many such works are leaving private hands to enter public institutions, even while it is troubling to reflect on where the profits end up (not with Drake's descendants). Maybe it's not surprising or even remarkable that slavery continues to produce profit today, as the fact of an artist's enslavement now attaches significant value to their work. But it feels poignant.

Painting is regarded as a noble practice, but it, too, relied on enslaved labor.

So what about Pareja's work? Was he a good painter? *New York Times* critic at large Jason Farago judged the paintings that appear in the Met's exhibition "fine if not remarkable specimens of the later Spanish Baroque," adding that "in Velázquez's company, just about anyone else will look second-tier." Fair enough. But is aesthetic evaluation perhaps beside the point, given the remarkable facts of Pareja's biography? For this exhibition's curators, the answer is no. Up to this point, Pareja's paintings have only rarely been considered as anything other than curiosities—paintings by a former slave—or mere evidence of his artistic practice. Our task now is to see them as works of art in their own right.

At nearly 11 feet, *The Calling of Saint Matthew* is a substantial painting. Although little is known about the circumstances of its commission, it is unlikely that Pareja would have produced such a massive work on speculation; someone hired him to make it. The Spanish art market was lively at the time, due in no small part to the influx of silver from colonial mines in Central and South America. The painting is compositionally dense and displays the alternating vibrant jewel-like tones and somber shadows of Spanish art. Amid the luxuries of a contemporary Madrid interior, the biblical Levi, a tax collector, sits with equally richly dressed compatriots at a long table covered in a Persian rug too precious for the floor. From the left enters Christ, who beckons to Levi, calling him into discipleship as the apostle Matthew. At the far left, a figure in the dress of a Spanish aristocrat gazes out at us. It is Pareja, who has represented himself here in a full-length self-portrait that is both in dialogue with and a departure from his former master's earlier painting. His presence in this room, his confident demeanor and casual stance, his assertion of authorship as he displays a piece of paper bearing his signature and the date of the painting's execution—all suggest that he has secured the right to self-representation.

It may be more complicated. Scholars writing as far back as 1888, comparing Velázquez's painting and Pareja's self-portrait, have suggested that in the latter, the former slave's features appear more European—the nose and lips narrower, the skin tone lighter. Does this represent an assimilationist, racial self-fashioning on Pareja's part? Or, as the scholar Carmen Fracchia has suggested, might this change echo the conversion that is the subject of this painting: the transformation of the Jewish Levi into the Christian Matthew? When it debuted in Rome, Velázquez's portrait of Pareja was marveled at for its verisimilitude. Indeed, the portrait's first viewers were invited to directly compare the representation with its original. Velázquez ordered Pareja to carry his own portrait to potential patrons, enlisting his slave in his project of self-promotion. According to a contemporary source, the portrait "received such universal acclaim that in the opinion of all the painters of different nations everything else looked like painting, this alone looked like truth." And yet

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Pareja's own self-portrait looks different—and we are not left with a clear answer as to why. Any claim that the former slave "Europeanized" his features in his self-portrait runs the risk of positioning the master Velázquez, the more celebrated painter by far, as the authority on Pareja's appearance, rather than Pareja himself. Without additional images of Pareja, nothing conclusive can be said here. Except perhaps that when we compare these portraits, we ourselves, without meaning to, enter a kind of racializing thinking through this identificatory attempt. To treat the surface and form of the body, even as it appears in art, as a legible document from which information about identity can be extracted—this is at the heart of the racializing project.

If, in racist thought, the appearance of the Black body is evidence of inferiority, the work of Black artists and the appearance of the Black figure in visual art have served as a kind of counter-archive evincing dignity, beauty, talent, and skill—personhood, in short. "I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda," W.E.B. Du Bois wrote in 1926. "Until the art of the black folk compels recognition they will not be rated as human." Both historical and contemporary art have been enlisted in this counter-archive.

In the 1960s, in the midst of the civil rights movement, the collector and philanthropist John de Menil and his wife, Dominique Schlumberger de Menil, began assembling records of Western artworks featuring Black figures. They conceived of their archive as an anti-racist undertaking, deploying examples of Black figures in painting, sculpture, and decorative art against the segregationist political project.

Such moments in art history document the unique pressures under which Black art operates. It seems that works of art by Black artists or representing Black figures cannot simply be, but instead must do something, either by serving as an argument in the struggle against racism or by pointing the way toward a liberated future. Yet we must also understand Black art as objects worthy of aesthetic contemplation. At the Met and in her catalog essay, co-curator Vanessa K. Valdés tries to balance these dual tasks by inviting us to encounter Pareja alongside the historian and archivist of Black culture Arturo Schomburg, whose essays on Pareja and the broader history and significance of Black art appear in the first gallery of the exhibition and whose approach to the artist suggests a middle ground between the demands of the Black political movement and the impossible ideal of Black art for its own sake.

Born in Puerto Rico when it was still a Spanish colony, Schomburg moved to New York in 1891, where he began to collect books and documents attesting to the artistic, literary, and political history of Black people. His was a truly critical project. It was not enough to simply name and celebrate Black artists and writers and political leaders from the past—such attempts, he noted, were "pathetically over-corrective, ridiculously over-laudatory," "apologetics turned into biography." Instead, Schomburg sought to create an archive that would lay a foundation for considered engagement with the Black past as a path toward an emancipated future.

Pareja was among the artists Schomburg focused on. His essays describe Pareja as a member of a school, active within a network of patronage, and with a style that had national and international precedents. In treating Pareja's career as a matter for serious art-historical inquiry, Schomburg asserted that the artist's life and work were of as much significance as those of any number of other Western painters—even if they also held a particular meaning and special poignancy for Black people. The Met carries on this quietly radical project, building on Schomburg's research and treating his encounter with Pareja as an authoritative source for contemporary interpretations of the artist's work. The exhibition's catalog is an entry into the storied tradition of the artist's monograph—a text dedicated to the life and career of a single artist—and includes the first-ever catalogue raisonné, or complete listing, of works by Pareja. Such texts are essential for meaningful engagements with art and artists, for the complex, rigorous investigation that painters like Velázquez have received. But essential as well is the simple act of looking, of opening oneself to aesthetic experience—and in many ways, the Met show comes full circle in this regard. When, in 1926, the New York Public Library acquired Schomburg's archive, he used the proceeds to travel to Europe, where, arriving in Spain, he sought out *The Calling of Saint Matthew*, sat, and gazed at Pareja's work.

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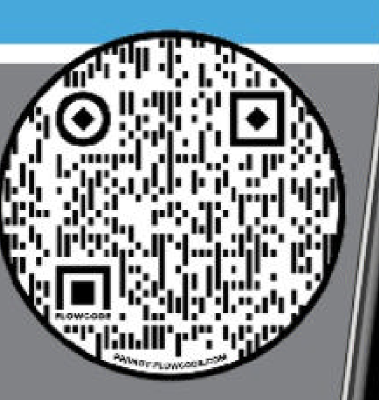
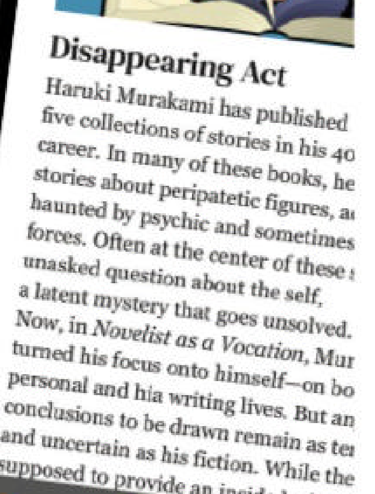




Living Ghosts

Aleksandar Hemon's kaleidoscopic fiction of war and peace

BY ADAM KIRSCH

If Americans remember one thing about Sarajevo, it's that the city was besieged for almost four years during the Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s. If they know a second thing, it's that Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria-Hungary was assassinated there in 1914, lighting the fuse for the First World War. Born in Sarajevo in 1964, Aleksandar Hemon spent the first part of his literary career coming to terms with the more recent tragedy, writing novels and stories that dramatized his own experience as a Bosnian exile in the United States.

Now, in *The World and All That It Holds*—Hemon's first novel since 2015, and his biggest in size and historical sweep—he turns to the earlier tragedy. The story of a Bosnian doctor swept up in the Great War and its aftermath, *The World and All That It Holds* naturally includes many scenes of violence and suffering. Oddly, however, it ends up feeling less challenging than Hemon's earlier, more autobiographical work, which is set far from the battlefield and deals with the psychological complexities of emigration. *The World and All That It Holds*, by contrast, reads like a historical romance novel, in which even misery can't escape becoming picturesque, and a succession of historic horrors serves to reinforce the message that all you need is love.

Hemon's own story has been told in many profiles and interviews over the past quarter-century. He arrived in the United States at the beginning of 1992 on an exchange program for young journalists, able to speak English but not yet write it. Yugoslavia had already begun to break apart, and in April of that year Serbian forces besieged Sarajevo, the capital of Bosnia and Herzegovina, shelling civilians from the hills around the city. Suddenly, Hemon found himself stuck in Chicago as a refugee with no money and no job. Cut off indefinitely from his native language and readership, he taught himself English over the course of three years, and he soon became one of America's leading young fiction writers, publishing two novels and two collections of

ILLUSTRATION BY **LIAM EISENBERG**

stories in the first decade of the new century. Hemon has received a Guggenheim and a MacArthur fellowship, was a finalist for the National Book Award, and now teaches creative writing at Princeton.

It is only when you turn to his work that you get a sense of the toll of Hemon's heroic transformation. His 2002 novel *Nowhere Man: The Pronek Fantasies* moves from Chicago to Sarajevo to Kiev, then back to Chicago, before ending with a surprise coda in Shanghai. It is largely about a Bosnian refugee named Jozef Pronek, but the outlines of Pronek's story blur together with those of Hemon himself and with yet a third narrator, named Victor. Pronek is a "Nowhere Man" not just because life takes him across the globe, and not just because he played in a Beatles cover band as a teenager, but because we don't know quite where to look for him in his own novel. Even Pronek doesn't know. At the end of the novel, he gets into a fight with his American girlfriend, who can't understand his sudden rage. "I love you! What did I do to you?" she cries. In response, he starts "ripping his pajamas apart, the buttons flying like ricocheted bullets," and banging his chest "as if trying to break it open" while shouting at her: "You want to see me? You want to see the real me? Here! Here!" It's like something a ghost would say while trying to prove that he is tangible, even as he fears he actually isn't.

The work that followed was suffused with a similar anxiety. In his 2008 novel *The Lazarus Project*, Hemon projected himself into two protagonists separated by a century. One is Vladimir Brik, a Hemon-like novelist who introduces himself as "a reasonably loyal citizen of a couple of countries," a Bosnian native who now lives in "America—that somber land" and whose marriage to a level-headed American woman dissolves under the pressure of his writerly bohemianism and immigrant resentments. The other main character is a real-life historical figure, Lazarus Averbuch, a Jewish immigrant who was shot dead by Chicago's chief of police in 1908 on suspicion of being an anarchist assassin. The points of connection between Brik and Averbuch are clear enough: Both are immigrants undone by America, one by violence, the other by love. As in *Nowhere Man*, however, the doubling blurred the novel's shape. The 21st-century plot was bitterly satirical, the 20th-century plot sanctimoniously political, and neither seemed sure of where it wanted to end up.

This uncertainty made Hemon a perfect writer for the early 21st century, when literary fiction was turning the classic immigrant tale inside out. Stories of immigration have always acknowledged the heavy toll of forging a new American identity. In Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep*, the Jewish father becomes violently insane in New York City; in Willa Cather's *My Ántonia*, the Czech father commits suicide in Nebraska. But in these stories, whatever the price paid by the parents, the children are destined to grow up as Americans. In the novels of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Jhumpa Lahiri, and Gary Shteyngart, by contrast, Americanization isn't guaranteed or even desirable. These writers don't draw a clear distinction between immigration, which aims at creating a new identity, and exile, which remains oriented toward the old one. That is certainly the case in Hemon's fiction, which makes sense for a writer who became an American more by accident than by choice. In *The Lazarus Project*, Brik can't help resenting his American wife, Mary, whose confidence and competence are a birthright he can never share: "I told her that to be American you have to know nothing and understand even less, and that I did not want to be American. Never, I said."

The World and All That It Holds
A Novel
By Aleksandar Hemon
MCD.
352 pp. $28

Hemon's early novels, along with his 2009 story collection *Love and Obstacles*, attempted to come to fictional terms with the rupture and rebirth that defined his own life. Having worked through this central experience, he largely turned away from fiction in the 2010s. Hemon published just one novel in the ensuing decade: *The Making of Zombie Wars*, a comedy about an aspiring screenwriter who teaches English as a second language. He would also go on to cowrite the screenplay for *The Matrix Resurrections*, the 2021 sequel to the sci-fi trilogy.

The protagonist of *The Making of Zombie Wars*, Joshua Levin, bears a looser relationship to Hemon than his earlier alter egos did, but it's notable that, like Lazarus Averbuch, he is Jewish. Hemon is not, but it is understandable why a writer whose themes are exile, alienation, and the violent history of Eastern Europe would use Jewish characters to explore his own freighted past. Thus, in *The Lazarus Project*, Hemon dramatized the Kishinev pogrom of 1903, the notorious massacre that drove Lazarus Averbuch to America, rather than writing about, say, the 1995 massacre of thousands of Bosnian Muslims.

In *The World and All That It Holds*, Hemon's protagonist is again Jewish. When we first meet Rafael Pinto, he is running an apothecary shop in the Bosnian capital, an old family business where magical herbs are still for sale alongside modern medicines. Pinto, too, is trapped between two eras. While his vocabulary is peppered with the Ladino words used by his Sephardic Jewish ancestors, he writes poetry in German and pines for his medical school days in Vienna, where life was modern and free—above all, sexually. Pinto is not only Jewish; he is gay, and in Vienna there were plenty of opportunities for him to indulge what he calls his *jetzer hara*—the Hebrew term for "evil impulse," one of many foreign phrases Hemon uses without translating. Stuck in provincial Sarajevo, Pinto muses, "Oh, we could live so much better!"

But it doesn't take long for Pinto to learn that, as Hemon writes in the opening paragraph, "it could be much worse, this world and all that it holds." Leaving his shop in pursuit of a handsome soldier, Pinto finds himself in the thick of a crowd gathered to see the Archduke Franz Ferdinand and becomes an eyewitness to the assassination: "The shots rang, louder than a cannon salvo, and then the world exploded." Soon he finds himself serving as a medic in the Austro-Hungarian Army, where he is "fully cured of the desire to write poetry. Once you had to scrub brains off your hands, once you saw a man shit himself to death, once you put your finger inside a man's neck up to your second

Adam Kirsch is an editor at The Wall Street Journal*'s Weekend Review section and the author, most recently, of* The Revolt Against Humanity: Imagining a Future Without Us.

knuckle to stop him from bleeding to death, the passion for poetry evaporates like a tear in the sun," Hemon writes.

Like many of the aphorisms and musings in the novel, this sounds impressive but isn't built to withstand scrutiny; in fact, some of the most famous poems of the period were written about precisely such experiences. Again, when Pinto sees a dead man on the battlefield, he muses, "Everything that lives wants to keep on living. But why? Why not die right now? Why keep going?" The old question doesn't prompt any new insights, just as the novel's brooding on God's providence doesn't get any further than "You cannot fathom my rules," which Job learned long ago.

Pinto concludes that the universe is nothing but *la gran eskuridad*—"the great darkness" in Ladino—"into which we were spilled, alive, to die." Fortunately, he finds one light in that darkness: his fellow soldier Osman, with whom he falls instantly and rapturously in love. Not for a moment does Hemon try to convince us that he is writing about a relationship that could have plausibly existed between two men in a crowded trench under conditions of constant misery and terror. Rather, this is a Hollywood romance, in which Pinto and Osman say things like "As long as I live you will never be cold again" and "I want to live with you. Other than that, I have no reason to be alive," between stolen kisses and nights of passionate lovemaking.

Theirs is a love more powerful than death—literally. After being parted and then reunited, which take the lovers from the battlefield to a POW camp in Tashkent, Osman finally disappears for good in the chaos of the Russian Civil War. Pinto assumes he is dead, yet he continues to hear Osman's voice in moments of danger or despair, telling him things like "It's not your time to go yet." "Osman's voice, calm and loving, would guide him through all the difficulties and troubles," Pinto reflects.

The lovers also remain connected by Rahela, a daughter conceived by Osman with a woman he meets in Tashkent. She falls into Pinto's custody as an infant, and he cherishes her as a link to the man he loved, keeping her alive during a years-long trek from Central Asia to Shanghai. By the time World War II brings a new round of dangers and partings, Rahela is grown up enough to fall in love herself, though Pinto fears she is making a big mistake by going for that most detestable of creatures, a rich American—whom Hemon describes as rather more villainous than any of the novel's violent Cossacks. Father and daughter are parted by World War II, but afterward Rahela returns to extricate Pinto from Shanghai, promising to take him back to Sarajevo at last. Pinto dies on the ship carrying him home, but it is a sweet death, lulled by the reappearance of Osman's loving ghost.

In *The Lazarus Project*, Hemon told the stories of the present and the past side by side. In *The World and All It Holds*, he tries to merge them, with odd results. While much of the action takes place in Eastern Europe and Central Asia a century ago, some of the novel's themes are conspicuously contemporary. Meanwhile, the epic scope and melodramatic plot hark back to an earlier age of popular fiction, when novels like *Gone With the Wind* and *Forever Amber* used history as a grand backdrop for stories of romance and survival. The result is much more colorful and wider in scope than the books that made Hemon's name, but *The World and All It Holds* also feels less characteristic and insightful. It's a trade-off that Hemon seems to have made willingly, as he writes in a brief first-person coda: "All I could ever do about the past, or any experience that was not immediately mine, was to imagine it and then dare tell stories about it, but only if I accept the inevitable failure of the project, because history is a matter of experience, of being, and not a structure, not a story." N

iPoem

Now there are mini-moons, I read,
primordial crumbs. Or rather
there always were but now our instruments
are sensitive enough to register.

It probably means I'm dead. Or dying.
How I spend all day staring into a screen,
or typing, or reloading. Not a mirror, not a window,
a screen I hold in my hand, endlessly reach for,

sleep next to. Photogenic instead of
poetogenic: I like to think
the poem's resistance to be about you
is poetry's critique of you

and of how I cling to you
as though you were the world.

JENNIFER GROTZ

Freebird

Alison Mills Newman's novel of Black bohemianism

BY STEPHEN KEARSE

LISON MILLS NEWMAN'S 1974 NOVEL *FRANCISCO* BEGINS and ends in a bed. In its opening scene, the unnamed narrator, a Black actress and poet, is with her eccentric lover Francisco, a filmmaker. They spend the morning "layin round, rollin round… huggin round," acts they gleefully go on to repeat atop numerous mattresses and couches throughout the story. The narrator says that she and Francisco are just friends, but as the pair drift through parties, hangouts, movie screenings, and road trips in a state of romantic bliss, their relationship reveals itself to be intimate and devotional. By the time the novel ends, in a hotel room, the narrator has found another bed and another friend for "layin round, rollin round, tossin and turnin round," but the callback is ambivalent. That "friend" turns out to be herself, a shift that troubles the innuendo of the repeated imagery and setting. Has the narrator discovered the joys of self-pleasure and solitude in a breakup? Or has she lost her identity and resigned herself to loneliness?

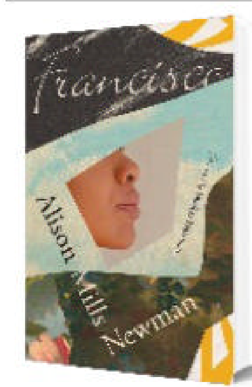
Self-possession and dispossession often blur in Mills Newman's tale of romance. Written in a casual, digressive style that channels the rhythms and grammar of African American vernacular, *Francisco* turns 1970s California into an arch Black idyll that's glamorous and grimy all at once. Mills Newman's couple lack money and steady employment, but their precarity emboldens them to seek pleasure in their bodies and their art. They commit themselves to leisure rather than upward mobility, exploring forms of Black security and sanctum that are untethered from building and maintaining wealth. They don't move on up to get their piece of the pie; they forage so that they may bake their own.

Now republished by New Directions, *Francisco* had fallen into obscurity after a small initial run in the 1970s. A television and stage actor at the time, Mills Newman wrote it during road trips with the real-life Francisco Toscano Newman, her eventual husband. She found an early supporter in Ishmael Reed, whose independent press Reed, Cannon & Johnson published the book. An earlier

ILLUSTRATION BY ANDREA VENTURA

version was excerpted in the literary magazine *Yardbird Reader* (another Reed venture) as a slice-of-life story set in San Francisco and the margins of Hollywood, the full novel uses the settings to explore Black womanhood and Black love. Mills Newman's playful and racy storytelling departs from the tradition of social-realist and protest novels that dominated much of Black literature at the time by foregrounding desire over politics. But even in romance, a genre of escapism and wish fulfillment, politics pokes through, as Mills Newman's narrator experiences inequities within what appears to be a fulfilling and liberating relationship.

F*rancisco* coincided with second-wave feminism and the Black Power and Black Arts movements, and the content and style of the book draw on those currents. The novel's defining traits are its experimental structure and its vernacular syntax. Mills Newman writes in lilting first-person sentences that lurch and flow like a jazz vamp. She also makes frequent use of lowercase spellings, slang, and run-on sentences, attributes that give the book a conversational and spontaneous feel. In this way, *Francisco* is a novel that is very much of the Black Arts Movement, whose artists prioritized theater, spoken word poetry, and music because they were seen as more responsive to audience needs. "Theatre is potentially the most social of all of the arts," wrote the poet Larry Neal, a key movement figure. "It is an integral part of the socializing process. It exists in direct relationship to the audience it claims to serve." Mills Newman's own aesthetic insists that the novel is also immediate and interactive.



Francisco
By Alison Mills Newman
New Directions.
128 pp. $14.95

The formal experimentation belies a straightforward plot. Francisco spends it filming, editing, screening, and soliciting distributors for his independent film about the Black Panther Party. As the film comes together, the narrator shadows Francisco and chronicles the racial and sexual dynamics of the many milieus they move through, tucking her own thoughts and feelings into the margins of the text.

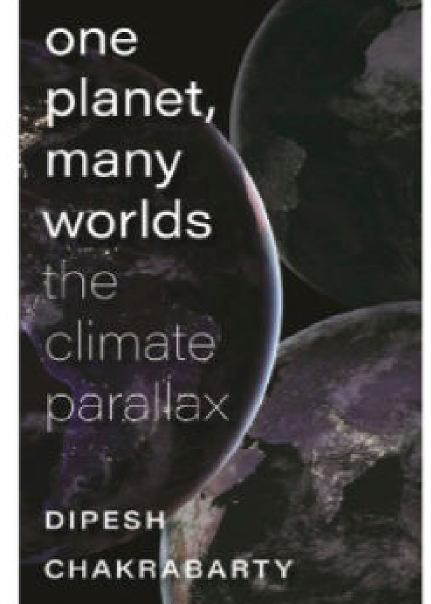
Her favorite subject is Francisco, who is charismatic, wily, and often tender. Above all, however, he is intensely dedicated to his craft. He's so focused on his film that the narrator exalts his ambition even when it comes at her expense. "i get highly frustrated," she laments, "flyin back and forth from l.a. to s.f. and not gettin none from this fine black specimen ceptin now and then. but he works hard. i can feel it: when he gets into bed at night he's dead almost before he closes his eyes and manages a few goodnight words."

The narrator and Francisco first meet at a dinner party, which is detailed in a flashback. As the narrator is being scolded by the host for her idleness, Francisco swaggers in like a prince and leaves her astonished:

> Here comes one nigga who thinks he can change the world. he was tall and dark brown with a conquistador moustache with some blue corduroy pants on, some kind of yellow and red striped sweater—and those shoes. he had on some blue shoes that had this yellow tongue stickin out of a red mouth with thick wooden heels, and i loved those shoes.

The slippage between awe and desire becomes a fixture of how the narrator depicts Francisco. Though they don't immediately hit it off—and the narrator's description of him is as mocking as it is smitten—she comes to idolize him as both an artist and a lover.

At times, their relationship sounds heavenly. The narrator and Francisco crack jokes about each other's smells and outfits, dance to James Brown and Pharoah Sanders, fuck, collaborate on his film, and entertain a rotating cast of fellow oddballs. Crucially, the narrator casts them as partners in crime and friends in addition to being lovers. This wild and fun domestic life is worlds away from the harsh realism of Donald



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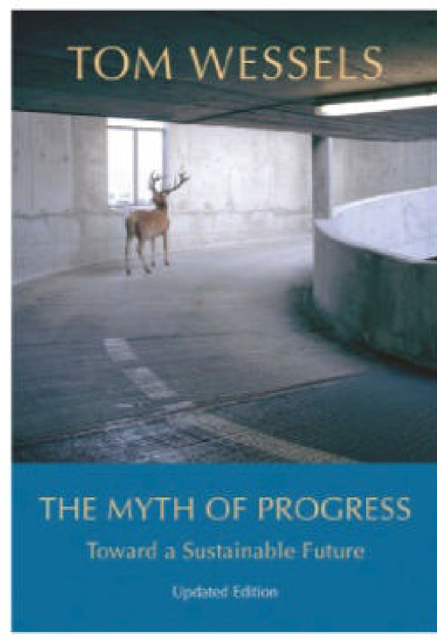

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We think we let the world in—
how oxidation slowly turns the avocado
dimple by lovely dimple
from green to brown to black; O oxygen
how you react to polyphenols, how
enzymes love us too much, too wanting
wringing with desire, slick & wet & biochemical
so we must breathe in the soot & we must
exhale our own toxins; *the way of any living*
thing is to live, they say; what if all the *theys*
are wrong? what if the living never came
easy in the first place? what if I keep
removing pieces of you: shuck of appendix,
shuck of gallbladder, shuck of knee, now,
shuck of breast, shuck of nodes? cenotes
of us: carved from our tissues, our fluid-filled ____;
where we must & always swim—but we were wrong.
We world, wholly; planet of flesh, ripening.
Let wind, let sun consume; fruit of us
to elements; let's engulf & gulp in remembering
w/holes: the whole world claws & thunders inside
these vessels, this lymphatic system to make us
immune—*as if, as if*—immune to what? Parts of us
let go into stars beyond this planet: call these *petri-dish bound*, call these *cancer evictions*; what I know
of never returning: a star before super nova senses
the future rupture: premonition echoes: *transform*.

FELICIA ZAMORA

Goines's *Black Girl Lost* and James Baldwin's *If Beale Street Could Talk*, two other novels from the early '70s about Black women and their fraught search for security within love and sex.

The duo also depart from the refined middle-class cool advertised in Black magazines like *Jet* and *Ebony* at the time. They are emphatically anti-respectable, qualities manifest in their blue humor and the annoyed responses they receive from more buttoned-up Black folks. The narrator takes pride in her louche lifestyle, shunning popular culture's commodification of Blackness: "the white man cannot give my life sudden acceptance, or glorification by puttin me or somebody like me on the cover of some magazine wearin some high fashion clothes, or african clothes," she says. "i existed before the media pretended to discover me." Though the narrator and Francisco exude the glow of a celebrity couple, they would never receive an NAACP Image Award.

Their peers and the world around them respond to their happiness with skepticism. An *Essence* article that the narrator encounters early on and refers to throughout the novel slowly deflates the couple's mirage of equality. The article, based on a real essay by M. Marie Simmons, argues that successful Black men depend on Black women and encourages Black women to strive for their own success and independence. The narrator reluctantly agrees with the article's argument but then dismisses it: "that's true i guess. but then i don't know no man that got just one woman. i mean most of these men must have passed through lots of could-be successful women. so what does that mean?" Though her response is partly in jest, she clearly resents the suggestion that she should work harder on her own behalf when she's already so content.

The article comes up again as the narrator and Francisco head to a screening of his film. "i don't know i think it's not so much behind every great man is a great woman. as much as a great man is a great man and a girl is a girl," she says. This time her response is fatalistic rather than peeved. She doesn't just reject ambition; she says she can't be ambitious. It is not entirely clear whether the narrator

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is sincere or ironic here, whether she intends it as a critique or another joke, but in either case, her pragmatism is clear: In a man's world, a woman who chases greatness will lose. So she chases a man destined for greatness.

Though bleak, the narrator's resignation is understandable. Her family and friends scold her for her lack of ambition. But the advice she gets is often sexist. One friend asks the narrator what her plans are and tells her it looks like she's "just trippin, wastin time," dating Francisco. But his counteroffer isn't to support her or help her get on a better track; he tells her he's going to be a big shot in five years and will rescue her after she's single. A family friend tells the narrator that her decision to not go to college is "breakin [her] father's heart" and offers a "young black man, rich and all not your regular run of the mill man of these times," who would be willing to marry her on the spot. In this context, her decision to lollygag with Francisco is a tiny exertion of independence, even if the equality they share is fleeting. If she must have a man, shouldn't she get to choose the schmuck? Francisco is broke, but at least she likes his shoes and career, and he treats her right.

This line of thinking might be convincing if *Francisco* were a traditional romance in which the heroine consciously weighs her suitors, their pitches, and the risks and rewards of her choice. But Francisco has no competition, nor does he really court the narrator: He just overwhelms her with his charm, his outsize personality slowly obscuring the narrator's own personal ambitions. She constantly cleans, cooks, and drives—labor that explicitly helps sustain their daily lives. Yet she declines to foreground her own work or creativity, mentioning her occasional acting gigs and her interest in singing and writing poetry only as asides. And she rarely speaks of these activities with the rapture with which she discusses Francisco's film. She presents this self-erasure as her duty: "i guess he loves me…occasionally he's very cold to me—distant. at first it upset me but i am learnin for it not to. i think of nothin but francisco's success, our love."

> **Self-possession and dispossession often blur in Mills Newman's tale.**

Unfortunately, this one-sided devotion and the narrator's doubts about it are confined to the subtext. Though the narrator seems to finally recognize that her relationship with Francisco is unequal, Mills Newman doesn't explore the source of that dynamic, a choice that limits the weight of her narrator's revelations and percolating anxieties. Kept inside or mentioned in passing, her thoughts and feelings amass without having an impact on their relationship. She has a distinct voice and an engrossing inner life, yet no authority or agency. The disconnect registers abstractly as a critique of bohemian living, but in practice it undermines the storytelling. The narrator is so passive that she barely feels like a participant in her own life.

While Mills Newman's style shares sensibilities with the radical poetry of Nikki Giovanni and Audre Lorde, the postmodern satire of Ishmael Reed and Fran Ross, and the gothic blues fiction of Toni Morrison, Gayl Jones, and Toni Cade Bambara, her main interest turns out to be quite traditional: monogamy. The narrator's love of Francisco is fiery and all-consuming, an inferno of fidelity. He is the mechanism through which she understands her autonomy and self-worth. The couple's present and future are determined entirely by the fate of his film.

After the publication of *Francisco*, Mills Newman's output stalled. One other book, *Maggie 3*, another autobiographical novel that follows an artist's coming of age, was published in 2007, but Mills Newman became primarily a filmmaker and minister. Her films feature religious themes and are explicitly "devoted to spreading the gospel of the good news of Jesus Christ," as her company's website explains.

The new edition of *Francisco* acknowledges this pivot. In an afterword, Mills Newman—who has called homosexuality a "sin" and queer people "scum" in interviews and sermons—says she hesitated to allow the book's rerelease because she no longer endorses its "lifestyle of fornication." She relented because she now views *Francisco* as a convert's testimony. "i tenderly let go," she writes, "in the hope that the knowledge of my encounter with Christ…can somehow give Glory to Yahweh and encourage others in their search for truth."

The addendum is conspicuous and technically noncanonical, but its call to submit to Christianity differs from the narrator's supplicant yielding to Francisco only by degrees, a continuity worth considering. Beneath all the joys and subversions of *Francisco* lurks a more conventional story of a heterosexual woman's identity dissolving into that of her man's.

One can even hear these themes at the end of the novel. When the narrator and Francisco break up, the story sputters out of energy. The Bohemian parties cease; sores and bumps inexplicably sprout across the narrator's body. Her father kicks her out of his house. Without Francisco, her muse, the narrator's drive and sense of self-worth wither. As she idles alone in a hotel bed, the freedom she's enjoyed leading up to that moment is revealed to be conditional. All along, she seems to realize, she and Francisco were a party of one. N

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