

SURGE AT THE ICU ||

COLLEEN M. FARRELL

J.M. COETZEE'S STATES OF EXILE

SIDDHARTHA DEB

THE Nation.

JULY 27/AUGUST 3, 2020

HOW TO DEFINE A PLAGUE

The way we talk about contagion matters. It shapes how our society responds—and how many of us will survive.

SONIA SHAH





Join the conversation,
every Thursday,
on the **Start Making
Sense** podcast.



))) **Subscribe** wherever you get your podcasts or go to **TheNation.com/StartMakingSense** to listen today.

→ **STACEY ABRAMS**

MARGARET ATWOOD CHARLES M. BLOW SHERROD BROWN NOAM CHOMSKY GAIL COLLINS MIKE DAVIS ELIZABETH DREW BARBARA EHRENREICH DANIEL ELLSBERG FRANCES FITZGERALD ERIC FONER THOMAS FRANK HENRY LOUIS GATES JR. MICHELLE GOLDBERG AMY GOODMAN CHRIS HAYES MARGO JEFFERSON DAVID CAY JOHNSTON NAOMI KLEIN RACHEL KUSHNER VIET THANH NGUYEN NORMAN LEAR GREIL MARCUS JANE MAYER BILL MCKIBBEN WALTER MOSLEY JOHN NICHOLS LAWRENCE O'DONNELL LAURA POITRAS KATHA POLLITT ROBERT REICH JOY REID FRANK RICH ARUNDHATI ROY BERNIE SANDERS ANNA DEAVERE SMITH EDWARD SNOWDEN REBECCA SOLNIT MARGARET TALBOT CALVIN TRILLIN KATRINA VANDEN HEUVEL YANIS VAROUFAKIS JOAN WALSH AMY WILENTZ GARY YOUNGE —Hosted by **Jon Wiener**

Letters

@thenation.com

A Family Legacy

Re “The Outrage Must Not End” by Elie Mystal [June 29/July 6]: I recall growing up in the 1960s and ’70s in central Texas and hearing conversations about equality, the NAACP, and civil rights. My father believed in speaking out for what was right. He taught his children the same. On June 9 my 16-year-old granddaughter and I went to downtown Atlanta to protest police brutality disproportionately against people of color—and not just brutality but death. Her protesting and standing up for equality with me has made civil rights a family legacy, one that I hope all my grandchildren pass on to their children.

We must have the sincere belief that all people are entitled to live without the fear of being targeted because of the color of their skin. For a country founded on democracy, we are morphing into a dictatorship.

SHARON BENNETT
MARIETTA, GA.

The Beef With Red Meat

Eamon Whalen in his article “Meat-heads” in the June 29/July 6 issue describes the beef industry’s opposition to a diet without beef. But he fails to note that red meat is a carcinogen. A diet high in red meat can shorten life expectancy, according to researchers at Harvard Medical School. A study of more than 120,000 people suggested red meat increased

the risk of death from cancer and heart problems.

Whalen should have noted that neither the low price of red meat nor its being part of the standard American diet should lead humans to risk exposing themselves to heart disease or cancer.

FRANK BELCASTRO
DUBUQUE, IOWA

Taxing Efforts

Jane McAlevey [“Taxes: From Wishful Thinking to Power,” June 15/22] is right that progressive taxes are essential to reversing austerity and funding a livable future. But she—no doubt unintentionally—disses three out of the four leaders of the coalition that made taxing the rich in California possible.

The campaign was jump-started by Reclaiming California’s Future, a coalition anchored by four organizations. McAlevey gets right that one of them was California Calls. However, she doesn’t get the role of the California Federation of Teachers, lumping it in with other unions that came in later and initially attempted to dissuade the CFT from participating in the millionaire tax and go with then-Governor Jerry Brown’s hodge-podge loser ballot measure instead.

Anthony Thigpen was and remains a key leader in the progressive tax movement in California. But to call him “the brains behind the millionaire tax and its extension” wrongly

(continued on page 26)

The Nation (ISSN 0027-8378) is published 30 times a year (four issues in February; three issues in March, April, June, and November; and two issues in January, May, July, August, September, October, and December) by The Nation Company, LLC © 2020 in the USA by The Nation Company, LLC, 520 Eighth Avenue, New York, NY 10018; (212) 209-5400. Washington Bureau: Suite 308, 110 Maryland Avenue NE, Washington, DC 20002; (202) 546-2239. Periodicals postage paid at New York, NY, and additional mailing offices. Subscription orders, changes of address, and all subscription inquiries: *The Nation*, PO Box 8505, Big Sandy, TX 75755-8505; or call 1-800-333-8536. Return undeliverable Canadian addresses to Bleuchip International, PO Box 25542, London, ON N6C 6B2. Canada Post: Publications Mail Agreement No. 40612608. When ordering a subscription, please allow four to six weeks for receipt of first issue and for all subscription transactions. Back issues, \$6 prepaid (\$8 foreign) from: *The Nation*, 520 Eighth Avenue, New York, NY 10018. If the post office alerts us that your magazine is undeliverable, we have no further obligation unless we receive a corrected address within one year. *The Nation* is available on microfilm from: University Microfilms, 300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to *The Nation*, PO Box 8505, Big Sandy, TX 75755-8505. Printed in the USA.

Stop the Death March

Let's face it. We're on a Covid-19 Republican death march heading into the rest of the summer and fall. We cannot wait for January 2021 to shift course. Our lives depend on disruption *now*. Indeed, our survival hinges on making it impossible for our leaders to ignore us: We have to shift the political

terrain ourselves. We have to be the earthquake. We simply cannot "live with" the virus—as the Trump administration suggests—nor simply accept the hundreds of thousands of cases coming over the next six months.

There are tactics like the ones we used years ago in ACT UP to fight HIV/AIDS—like swarming institutions from New York's City Hall and the New York Stock Exchange to the National Institutes of Health, the Food and Drug Administration, and the offices of pharmaceutical executives. Or putting a giant condom on the late Senator Jesse Helms's home in Virginia. However, these tactics were possible because there was a large group of people capable of pulling them off. They were also linked to a deep strategy about how to end the AIDS epidemic and a national and international mobilization against the disease, with ACT UP chapters all over the world.

But we don't have to look back decades for inspiration. The Black Lives Matter protests, which have now become the largest movement in US history, with 15 million to 26 million people participating in demonstrations around the country, are pointing a way forward for all of us to survive both this pandemic and the epidemic of police violence in our communities. Nadine Bloch from Beautiful Trouble and Folabi Olagbaju from Greenpeace write in *Waging Nonviolence* that "the unfolding insurrection has been a master class in creative protest," racking up reforms that just a few months ago would have seemed impossible and serving as a model for us all.

Bloch and Olagbaju point out that such massive demonstrations could happen only because "Black-led organizations and networks were already in place and ready to lead." Movement building doesn't happen overnight, but we've got no choice and have to figure out a way to jump-start an upris-

ing right now on Covid-19. Because as ACT UP co-founder Larry Kramer reminded us all those years ago about political inaction and apathy in the face of HIV/AIDS, "We are in the middle of a fucking plague!... Until we get our acts together, all of us,... we are as good as dead!"

With no time to lose, we need to find the organizations that are ready to lead, those that have the DNA of protest in their genes, those that aren't afraid of making beautiful trouble and are doing so right now. They may be small groups like New York City's Rise and Resist and the Center for Popular Democracy, which have already been organizing on health, or big ones like the unions representing teachers, nurses, and Stop & Shop workers, which have turned to direct action over the past few years. Meanwhile, some of the millions of dollars being spent on electoral politics between now and November needs to be channeled into an

immediate, massive, sustained, and coordinated national emergency campaign of disruption targeting politicians who tell us to "live with" the virus and the corporations, media, and other institutions that prop them up. If activists are going to take risks in direct action and civil disobedience, they need the resources and support to take them safely—legally, physically, and epidemiologically. Each day that our politicians refuse to do what's right on Covid-19 should be met with resistance, defiance, and creativity to keep them off-balance, on the defensive, and uncertain about what we'll do next. Get your friends together. Find groups near you that are already organizing. Find out how to help. If nothing is happening locally, start planning and plotting on your own.

Civil resistance works. It just may be what saves us from this pandemic. So wear your masks, wash your hands, maintain social distance, and get ready to act up.

GREGG GONSALVES FOR *THE NATION*

UPFRONT

- 3 **Stop the Death March**
Gregg Gonsalves
- 4 **Playing the Long Con**
Elie Mystal
- 5 **The Score**
Bryce Covert
- 6 **Reasoning About Abortion**
Rachel Rebouché
- 8 **In Memoriam: Milton Glaser**
Victor Navasky
- 38 **Getting to Liberation**
Josué Rivas

COLUMNS

- 7 **The Liberal Media**
Ad Nauseated
Eric Alterman
- 10 **Mic Drop**
Black Trans Lives Matter
Kali Holloway
- 11 **Deadline Poet**
Donald Trump: Confederate From Queens
Calvin Trillin

Features

- 12 **How to Define a Plague**
Sonia Shah
The cause of an epidemic is more than just the pathogen.
- 16 **Learning to Heal, Learning to Mourn**
Colleen M. Farrell
A report from the Covid-19 front line.
- 20 **Lost Without the Senate**
John Nichols
A Joe Biden win will be insufficient unless Mitch McConnell is defeated.

Books & the Arts

- 27 **A Form of Exile**
Siddhartha Deb
- 31 **Doing a Coup**
Sophie Pinkham
- 34 **Saviors** (poem)
Allan Peterson
- 35 **Coming Forward**
Stephen Kearse
- 36 **How Becoming a Mother Is Like Space Travel** (poem)
Catherine Pierce

VOLUME 311, NUMBER 2,
JULY 27/AUGUST 3, 2020

The digital version of this issue is available to all subscribers July 14 at TheNation.com



BY THE NUMBERS

1.5M

Number of people in the US who are cared for in nursing homes

54K

Minimum number of nursing home residents and employees who have died from Covid-19 in the US, as of June 30

43%

Share of US Covid-19 deaths that took place in nursing homes by the end of June

24%

Share of nursing home workers who were tested or presumed positive for Covid-19 in New York state from March to early June

24

Number of states in which the majority of Covid-19 deaths are linked to nursing homes

\$13

Median hourly pay of a certified nursing assistant at a nursing home

70%

Share of nursing homes in the US that are for-profit

—Rima Parikh

Playing the Long Con

Despite his recent abortion ruling, Roberts is no friend.

On June 29, Chief Justice John Roberts sided with the Supreme Court's liberal justices to defend abortion rights in a case called *June Medical Services v. Russo*. That surprise ruling followed his decision to temporarily uphold the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program and his decision to uphold gay and transgender rights under the Civil Rights Act. Even in the big end-of-term decision in which he sided with conservatives, Roberts ruled that the president could fire the director of the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, but he did not rule that the CFPB was unconstitutional, as conservatives had hoped.

Is Roberts becoming a moderate? Is he turning into another "failed conservative," like former justices John Paul Stevens, David Souter, and Anthony Kennedy, three Republican appointees who ended up siding with progressive majorities in key cases? Has Roberts, at long last, recognized a woman's right to determine the fate of her own body?

No. Roberts is the same hard-core Republican in robes he's always been. He has not shifted to the left; rather, the cases he's being asked to decide have lurched so far to the right that he cannot follow where the conservatives want to go.

If you read only the mainstream media's legal coverage—the kind that touts good points on both sides—it's easy to miss how entirely unhinged conservative legal theories have become. The cases that conservative lawyers have felt empowered to bring to the Supreme Court since the installation of alleged attempted rapist Brett Kavanaugh as the fifth conservative justice are madness.

After Kavanaugh arrived, every right-wing zealot with an obsession and a law degree decided to shoot his or her shot. The way to understand this term is to imagine Roberts banging a gavel and yelling "Order!" while his conservative colleagues try to rewrite the Constitution with a Sharpie.

Roberts is entirely willing to adopt the hard-line Republican agenda; he's just unwilling to embrace harebrained conservative legal theories to get there. His decision in *June Medical* bears that out. At issue in the case was a so-called TRAP law (for "targeted regulation on abortion providers") in Louisiana that required abortion providers to have admitting privileges at nearby hospitals. TRAP laws are designed to go after a woman's right to choose by attacking the availability of abortion services. What good is having the right to get an abortion if nobody has the right to provide one?

The problem with the Louisiana law was that the Supreme Court struck down a nearly identical one in Texas in 2016. That case was called *Whole Woman's Health v. Hellerstedt*. I cannot emphasize enough that coming to

the Supreme Court with the same law it struck down four years earlier is ludicrous.

In 2016 the court overturned the Texas TRAP law by a vote of 5-3. There were only eight justices at the time because Antonin Scalia had died but Senate majority leader Mitch McConnell had refused to hold confirmation hearings for Merrick Garland, Barack Obama's choice for the position. Although Roberts dissented from Justice Stephen Breyer's majority ruling in the case, then—Justice Kennedy joined it.

In going to the court with *June Medical*, conservatives argued the facially ridiculous position that the 2020 Louisiana TRAP law was somehow legally different from the one in Texas—but the only difference was that, by 2020, Neil Gorsuch had replaced Scalia, and Kavanaugh had replaced Kennedy. That's it. The only reason this case came before the Supreme Court was that conservatives assumed they had enough votes to ignore precedent.

They did not. Roberts still believes the majority opinion in *Whole Woman's Health* was wrong. But he was unwilling to ignore the precedent set by his own court just four years earlier simply because conservatives now had Gorsuch and Kavanaugh on the court. That's not

how the court is supposed to work. That's not how law is supposed to work. As Roberts showed in the US census case last year, he is willing to look the other way on a lot of conservative claptrap. But don't pee in his ear and tell him it's raining. Roberts simply ruled that a law had to meet the same fate in 2020 that its twin did in 2016.

Roberts was willing to defend the principle of Supreme Court precedent even though he thinks a particular precedent is wrong.

But don't count on his commitment to precedent in the future. In his concurring opinion, Roberts mentioned that he might have been willing to overturn *Whole Woman's Health*. In fact, he even suggested that he'd be willing to look at the constitutionality of *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*, the 1992 case that defines the limits on a woman's right to choose. That's his way of inviting a frontal challenge to abortion rights. His decision in *June Medical* is not a victory for reproductive freedom so much as a warning.

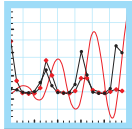
June Medical does not show that Roberts is a secret defender of women's rights; it shows that the other four conservatives on the court are ideologically dedicated to ending abortion by any means necessary. When Kavanaugh said during his confirmation hearings that he respected Supreme Court precedent, he was lying. Senator Susan Collins defended her vote for him by saying, "He believes that precedent is 'not just a judicial policy, it is constitutionally dictated to pay attention and pay heed to rules of precedent.'" She was also lying—or, to put it more charitably, she lacks the discretion needed to vote in the US Senate or determine the difference between bleach and medicine.

All Roberts did was show a modicum of patience. Unlike his conservative colleagues, Roberts, who is only 65 years old, understands that he will wield power for

(continued on page 6)

June Medical does not show that Roberts is a secret defender of women's rights.

COMMENT



THE SCORE/BRYCE COVERT + MIKE KONCZAL

Budgets in a Sorry State

The coronavirus crisis has pushed state and local governments to the edge of a budget cliff; some have already started their tumble into the abyss. State tax revenue dropped by almost 50 percent in April compared to a year earlier as businesses shuttered and people delayed paying taxes. Meanwhile, these governments are spending vastly more to meet residents' increased health and economic needs.

The hole left by a loss in revenue coupled with higher spending is going to be very, very deep. The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities projects that the recession caused by the pandemic will create a \$615 billion shortfall over this fiscal year and the next. The most difficult year will be 2021, as states

tion of state and local budgets. But they'll still be on the chopping block, which means the paramedics who have been responding to Covid-19 cases will get hit, too.

Meanwhile, states spent a combined \$660 billion on schools in 2017, or more than a fifth of their budgets. This funding pays for public school teachers who have scrambled to keep their students connected and educated as the pandemic pushed us all into our homes. If schools reopen in September, it will be with even higher costs for extra nurses to ensure students are healthy, support staff for those who fell behind, and equipment needed to comply with new health protocols.

The job losses are already piling up. State and local governments have fired or furloughed nearly 1.5 million people since February. That's nearly twice as many as during the entirety of the Great Recession.

The loss of revenue from elective procedures has been hammering hospital budgets, leading 266 facilities to furlough or lay off thousands of employees. As of early May, fire departments had laid off 935 people, including emergency medical technicians and paramedics, and a survey by the International Association of Fire Chiefs projected 30,000 jobs lost this year and next. Chiefs have been asked to propose budget cuts of 10 to 25 percent for their departments, often including emergency medical services.

Teachers are feeling the deepest pain. Local education jobs—most of which are filled by educators who have had to put in extra work to reconfigure the way they teach—have fallen by almost 670,000 since February. The nearly 450,000 lost in April alone were more than those lost over the entire Great Recession.

So far, the aid that Congress has sent to states pales in comparison with the need. The Treasury Department has said that \$110 billion in relief funding can't be used to make up state revenue shortfalls, which means all they've gotten for that purpose is \$65 billion.

In March, Senate majority leader Mitch McConnell praised frontline health care workers, EMTs, and teachers as "American heroes." But a month later, he opposed giving federal

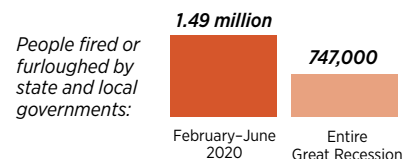
aid to states, calling it a bailout for those with large pension obligations. The need has nothing to do with poor financial planning, and it's a problem afflicting red and blue states alike. Without help from Congress, the very people who have uprooted and sometimes risked their lives to care for and support the rest of us will be the hardest hit.

Bryce Covert

Covid-19 Crisis Sends State Budgets to the Edge



Deep cuts and layoffs have already begun.



Sources: Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, June 15, 2020; Bureau of Labor Statistics, July 2, 2020. Infographic by Tracy Matsue Loeffelholz

State cuts will fall the hardest on those who have been on the front lines of the crisis.

face a \$315 billion deficit. That's worse than in 2010, the height of the Great Recession, when states had to grapple with a \$230 billion loss.

Given what happened during the last downturn, we can predict what is going to take place. In the wake of the Great Recession, many states pulled back sharply on spending, leading to public sector layoffs just as the economy was trying to recover. States are legally required to balance their budget every year, so they will have to compensate for coronavirus-related expenses somehow. Most will turn to devastating cuts, and those cuts will fall the hardest on those who have been on the front lines of the crisis.

Nurses and doctors fighting the pandemic have received nightly applause across the country and thanks on TV. But as their states retrench to deal with the fiscal crisis, they'll get pink slips and benefit cuts. In 2017, state and local governments spent \$294 billion on health and hospitals, or 10 percent of all spending. It's the fourth-largest category of spending, after elementary and higher education and public welfare.

Fire departments make up a smaller por-

(continued from page 4)

another decade or more. As such, he rules like a man who plans to be here when the current president is off somewhere hawking “America used to be great” hats at the Donald J. Trump MOST Presidential Library and Bigly Golf Course. Roberts’s recent rulings do not reflect a moderation of his philosophy; they reflect an unwillingness to be caught up in the lawlessness of this moment.

John Roberts is not a failure of the conservative movement. He’s a rock-ribbed Republican jurist who is doing the long and patient work of defending corporate America and the white patriarchy. He’s just not a raging fanatic. Conservatives should stop asking him to adopt outlandish positions. They’d win more if they showed up to the Supreme Court without the clown makeup. ELIE MYSTAL

Reasoning About Abortion

Even the liberal justices could do better.

In the Supreme Court’s recent ruling in *June Medical Services v. Russo*, five justices struck down an abortion restriction that would have made the procedure almost impossible to obtain in Louisiana. The law—which was, as Justice Stephen Breyer put it, “almost word-for-word identical” to a law struck down by the court in a 2016 decision, *Whole Woman’s Health v. Hellerstedt*—required abortion providers to obtain admitting privileges at a hospital within 30 miles. In its 5-4 decision, the court held that the Louisiana law must also be struck down because the requirement, which would have closed all but one clinic in the state, was a significant obstacle to people seeking abortions.

Breyer, writing for himself and Justices Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Sonia Sotomayor, and Elena Kagan, found that the Louisiana law provided not a single health benefit to patients and inflicted only burdens by forcing clinics to close. As he held in *Whole Woman’s Health*, a restriction on abortion that accomplished none of its purported benefits—improving patient safety, for example—may not stand if it imposed even a modest burden.

Chief Justice John Roberts, in a separate opinion, concurred that the law was unconstitutional but did so under the principle of *stare decisis* (Latin for “let the decision stand”). Because the court, applying the “undue burden” standard established in *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*, ruled a nearly identical restriction unconstitutional in 2016, Roberts argued that precedent mandated the same outcome here. However, he did not join Breyer’s opinion because he believes *Casey* requires a different test. Rather than balance the benefits and burdens of the Louisiana law, as Breyer did in his opinion, Roberts focused on the law’s burdens: Restrictions that create substantial obstacles to abortion access and are not reasonably related to a legitimate state purpose are unconstitutional.

His opinion suggests that the next abortion case the court hears will apply the chief justice’s version of *Whole Woman’s Health*—that is, assessing the impact of the restriction at issue and not evaluating whether the law offers any health benefit. As commentators have noted, that shift matters. It could allow states to adopt laws in the name of health but without any measurable value for patients. Under a narrow reading of Roberts’s concurrence, abortion restrictions are constitutional as long as they do not decimate abortion services in the state.

So no one would argue that Roberts has become a fan of abortion rights. But the way in which he applied his refashioned test for con-

stitutionality deserves more attention. At the center of *June Medical Services*, like *Whole Woman’s Health*, is the court’s discussion of what the landscape of abortion care would look like if the law had taken effect: After all but one clinic closes because providers cannot gain admitting privileges, how many miles will patients have to travel to get an abortion? For all his allegiance to precedent and his ambivalence about assessing the law’s health benefits, Roberts’s concurrence takes up the law’s operation in the real world. He cited the findings of the trial court that “the Louisiana law would result in ‘longer waiting times for appointments, increased crowding and increased associated health risk.’” He reiterated that “Louisiana women already ‘have difficulty affording or arranging for transportation and childcare on the days of their clinic visits’ and that ‘[i]ncreased travel distance’ would exacerbate this difficulty.” And he emphasized the scale of that distance—over 300 miles for some Louisiana women.

Roberts could have easily omitted these references to the district court’s record, writing only of precedent and explaining a scaled-back constitutional test. So if there is anything to celebrate about his opinion, it is his recognition of the evidence that connects clinic closures to adverse health consequences for pregnant people.

When people do not have access to local abortion services, they will travel long distances, self-induce terminations, or carry pregnancies to term. Each option has short- and long-term costs. A dissent written by Justice Samuel Alito points to any number of reasons that the effects of inaccessible abortion are not the state law’s fault. But Roberts acknowledged that when clinics close and a law requires those closures, there is a constitutional question at stake.

Public health research has made this case. The research on which the trial court relied was generated, in part, by scholars and advocates. Their work provides empirical evidence that state laws shuttering clinics have negative consequences for the well-being of individuals and of populations at large. Even if one does not believe that Roberts adopted a public health perspective, such an approach has promise. Both Breyer’s and Roberts’s opinions read like simple math problems—counting clinics, providers, and miles across the state. But the restrictions are pernicious because they compound the stress on many people’s already scarce resources for health care, child care, or transportation.

Although Breyer acknowledged that the burdens of the Louisiana law “would fall disproportionately on poor women,” the court’s language suggests low-income women are a minority rather than the majority of people who seek abortion. The reality, however, is different. About half of abortion patients live below the federal poverty line. People seek abortion to alleviate financial or economic stress.

Delayed or denied abortion deepens poverty and results in physical and mental injury. When striking down such restrictions, the court could better express how abortion is crucial to improving a person’s health and livelihood. Seen in this way, abortion is not only a constitutional right; it is a matter of personal and public health. That kind of reasoning could thwart laws that seek to eviscerate abortion rights under the guise of health concerns. Or it could encourage laws with exceptions for people who bear the brunt of the law’s effects, though this is admittedly a partial solution. That either of these approaches seems presently out of reach speaks to how far we have to go.

RACHEL REBOUCHÉ

Rachel Rebouché is a professor of law and the associate dean for research at Temple University School of Law.

Chief Justice Roberts could have ignored public health concerns. But he didn’t.

Eric Alterman



Ad Nauseated

Facebook narrows its users' interests and fuels their ignorance with lies.

You'd have had to be some kind of evil genius to imagine something as terrible for the world as Facebook. With an estimated 2.6 billion users and \$70 billion in annual profits, it is the most effective purveyor in history of right-wing hate, lies, and incitement against vulnerable people and the planet.

Is Facebook's malevolence driven by a thirst for profit or politics? As with Fox News, alas, that's a false choice, as the two reinforce each other. Facebook makes its money—as newspapers used to—by selling eyeballs to advertisers. But before local news started collapsing, thanks partly to the advertiser exodus to Facebook and Google, newspapers used this model to fulfill their responsibilities to educate readers and hold those in power to account. Facebook does the opposite: It narrows its users' interests and fuels their ignorance with lies and misinformation.

Every so often, Mark Zuckerberg will issue a statement that implies he is sorry and that Facebook will try to do better. Of course, it never does. According to a study reported by the watchdog website *Popular Information*, during the first 10 months of 2019, “politically relevant disinformation was found to have reached over 158 million estimated views, enough to reach every reported registered voter in the US at least once.” That pace was accelerating, and guess what: “Most negative misinformation (62%) was about Democrats or liberals.” The incitement of violence remains on Facebook and on the company's other apps as well. Just recently, *BuzzFeed News* reported that an ad on Instagram, which is owned by Facebook, showed clips from action movies of cops being killed and invited people to “join the militia, fight the state,” to a soundtrack of “We ain't scared of no police / We got guns too.”

This is no accident. Yaël Eisenstat, Facebook's former head of global elections integrity, explained in *The Washington Post* that the company “profits partly by amplifying lies and selling dangerous targeting tools that allow political operatives to engage in a new level of information warfare. Its business model exploits our data to let advertisers custom-target people, show us each a different version of the truth and manipulate us with hyper-customized ads.”

Ask yourself: Why does Facebook refuse to apply its gentle fact-checking apparatus to political advertisements?

Why does it include the racist, sexist, anti-Semitic *Breitbart* as one of its “trusted” news sources?

Why does it continue to allow Holocaust deniers onto its site, and why does Zuckerberg choose to define their poison as mere opinion?

Why did Facebook create a “newsworthiness” category in 2016 when dealing with President Donald Trump's lies, racism, and hate speech?

Why did Zuckerberg tell employees that a possible Elizabeth Warren presidency represented an “existential” threat to the company? And what will that mean if Joe Biden picks her as his running mate?

Why in May 2019 did Facebook refuse to take down an obviously doctored video that falsely portrayed Nancy Pelosi as acting like a drunk?

“And why, of all things,” asked Bill McKibben in *The New Yorker*, “did the company recently decide to exempt a climate-denial post from its fact-checking process?”

Here's one reason offered by Tim Wu, a professor at Columbia Law School: “Facebook can, by tinkering with its rules for political ads, give itself a special, unregulated power over elections. Just that possibility gives Facebook political leverage and politicians reasons to want leverage over Facebook.” David Thiel, a former Facebook security engineer quoted in the *Post*, said, “The value of being in favor with people in power outweighs almost every other concern for Facebook.”

Deploying their traditional working-the-refs playbook, Trump and the Republicans have turned truth on its head by casting themselves as victims of the site's biases. “Facebook was always anti-Trump,” the president has whined, and congressional Republicans and the Department



offered by Tim Wu, a

Trump and the Republicans have turned truth on its head by casting themselves as victims of the site's biases.

COVID-19

Trump's Killer Lies

Over the July 4 weekend, President Donald Trump shamelessly claimed that 99 percent of coronavirus cases were “totally harmless.” This lie could—and almost certainly will—have devastating consequences.

Anyone who follows the news should know that Covid-19 has killed more than 133,000 people and that many sufferers need hospitalization, often in ICUs and sometimes on ventilators; many also face long-term diminution of their lung function and other serious health complications. Anyone who follows the news should also know that even individuals with “totally harmless” asymptomatic cases can still spread the virus to more vulnerable people.

The president's attempt to score political points is made worse by the inability of the government's scientific advisers to hold the line against his mendacity. When CNN asked Food and Drug Administration commissioner Dr. Stephen Hahn about Trump's claim, Hahn would say only that cases were surging and that he wasn't going to say who was right and who was wrong about the numbers.

No disrespect, Dr. Hahn, but your refusal to respond to Trump's claims is an act of cowardice at a moment when the country is crying out for accurate public health information.

Totalitarianism is, at least in part, about using the might of the government to bend people and institutions to a leader's will. It is about shaping not just how people behave but also how they perceive reality.

—Sasha Abramsky



Mark Zuckerberg attended a secret dinner with Trump, Jared Kushner, and the right-wing entrepreneur Peter Thiel.

of Justice have threatened legal action to continue this campaign of Orwellian doublespeak.

Facebook's desire to kowtow to Republicans has been evident at least since 2011, when it hired GOP operative Joel Kaplan as its vice president for global public policy, along with Katie Harbath, a former aide to Rudy Giuliani, and Kevin Martin, a former Republican-appointed FCC chairman, to support Kaplan's efforts. Kaplan declined to intervene in Facebook's decision to invite politicians to lie in their paid advertisements. And he has stood in the way of efforts designed to police misinformation because, according to anonymous sources quoted in the *Post*, he correctly perceived that it would "disproportionately affect conservatives." Zuckerberg also attended a secret dinner with Trump, Jared Kushner, and the right-wing entrepreneur and early Facebook investor Peter Thiel.

In the wake of the Black Lives Matter protests and thanks to efforts by the NAACP, Color of Change, and

the Anti-Defamation League, we've seen a Facebook advertising pause by more than 970 companies, including Unilever, Coca-Cola, Pfizer, and Starbucks.

The social sanction is helpful. It may inspire employees to try to change policy from within, and as Trump sounds more malignant by the day, it also puts pressure on those at the top to protect their reputations from the poison of his presidency.

Still, the company's top 100 advertisers provide only 6 percent of its income, while small businesses account for more than 70 percent. And they do not have nearly as many alternatives. Most people I know, myself included, do not want to quit Facebook, especially during a socially isolating pandemic.

So here's my idea: Let's just boycott the ads. Don't click on them. That way, even the small advertisers will have to find new outlets unless Facebook changes its policies. Spread the word... via Facebook. ■



Milton Glaser, 1929–2020

Milton Glaser, the world-famous graphic designer and longtime friend of *The Nation*, died last week at the age of 91. As *The New York*

Times noted in its obituary, he was someone who "changed the vocabulary of American visual culture" over the course of his storied career.

Luckily for me, when I became editor of *The Nation* in 1978, I lived on West 67th Street in Manhattan, right down the block from Milton, and we knew and liked each other. And luckily for *The Nation*, as Milton told an audience in London many years later in a talk titled "Ten Things I Have Learned," his first rule was "You can only work for people you like."

We invited Milton to redesign the magazine so that every issue had some articles beginning on the cover. As he and Walter Bernard, his longtime design partner, recalled in their book *Mag Men: Fifty Years of Making Magazines*, they "wanted to give *The Nation* a more distinctive visual identity.... Back then, the magazine had little money and no art department. We designed a tight but simple type template that editors could manage without the help of a graphic designer. We restored the period at the end of the logo and created icons for the regular columns."



Richard Lingeman, then *The Nation's* executive editor, recalls a typical experience working with Milton: "We ran a story on Iran (under the shah) about the secret police torture-murders of a number of dissidents. Somehow we had [obtained] pictures of the corpses of the tortured men. We decided to run those pictures and asked Milton to design a spread. We went to his atelier, and he looked at them without blinking an eye and did his layout, coolly and efficiently, without any comment."

Katrina vanden Heuvel, *The Nation's* editorial director, called Glaser "a great friend of *The Nation*, always generous with his time and ideas. He believed in *The Nation's* mission and values. Milton and Walter Bernard created compelling covers for many of our important stories and special issues and gave valuable creative input on our 150th anniversary issue. Milton loved political buttons, and after 9/11 and the launch of the Iraq War, he made several for *The*

Nation: 'He lied, they died' (sadly reusable today) and 'Dissent is patriotic.' His heart always seemed as big as the one he designed for his beloved 'I ♥ NY' logo. I will miss Milton."

As Lingeman says, "Milton was a pro, a brilliant designer, and a master of his profession." He was also a nice guy, and we miss him more than we can say.

VICTOR NAVASKY



Luckily for *The Nation*, Milton's first rule was "You can only work for people you like."

From Library to Legacy

“I’ve been reading *The Nation* since I was in college. It helped me with my political education. At that time I didn’t have a dime for any donations.... I got my copy at the library. Now I’m much older, retired, and can help groups such as *The Nation*. I’ll keep supporting *The Nation* as long as I can, in the realization that it can educate others and younger members of society.”

—Pat Allen, Calif.



Support what you believe in.

Bequests are by far one of the most popular and simplest ways to leave a lasting personal legacy. A gift in your will is a remarkably easy way to preserve *The Nation* as a fierce voice for truth. In as little as a single sentence, **let your legacy reflect your deep commitment to principled dissent** and ensure *The Nation's* ability to hold the powerful to account for future generations.

THE Nation.

Visit legacy.thenation.com to get started.

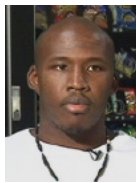
SPORTS & JUSTICE

Freedom for Irons

After 23 years behind bars for a crime he says he did not commit, Jonathan Irons is a free man. Irons, 40, was sentenced in 1998 to 50 years in prison for a burglary and assault when he was 16. Despite a lack of evidence linking him to the crime, an all-white jury in St. Louis convicted him as an adult.

What makes this also a sports story is that WNBA All-Star, MVP, and champion Maya Moore gave up two years in the prime of her career to fight for his freedom.

Their connection came through a member of Moore's family, her great-uncle, who had been doing prison ministry for close to 30 years. As a first-year student and star hoopster at the University of Connecticut, she was introduced by him to Irons and forged a bond with the imprisoned man. Moore, as tenacious off the court as she is on



it, vowed to see Irons breathe free, no matter the cost.

Joyous though the news is, Irons's

release is actually an example of the system failing. Or perhaps working exactly in the racist manner in which it was intended. How many Jonathan Ironses are there in our nation's prisons who don't have a superstar athlete/guardian angel to secure their freedom? Consider everything Moore had to sacrifice—money, fame, and prime years of her career—to see justice done in only this one case. It's a humbling reminder of how much work still needs to be done.

—Dave Zirin



Black Trans Lives Matter

Racist policing takes a particular toll on Black trans and gender-nonconforming people.

In June 2011, a Black transgender woman named CeCe McDonald was walking with friends to a grocery store in her Minneapolis neighborhood when a group of white bar patrons began hurling racist, homophobic, and transphobic slurs, calling them “bitches with dicks,” “faggots,” and suggesting they “go back to Africa.” A white woman in the group became physically violent, throwing a glass at McDonald's face that sliced open her salivary gland, requiring 11 stitches. When a male attacker lunged at her as she attempted to flee, McDonald, fearing for her life, grabbed a pair of scissors from her purse to defend herself, fatally stabbing her assailant in the chest. Despite a clear claim to self-defense, McDonald was the only person arrested at the scene. A Minneapolis court—after ruling her white male attacker's swastika tattoo, meth intoxication, and assault rap sheet inadmissible—convicted her on a reduced charge of second-degree manslaughter and sentenced her to 41 months in a prison for men. Amid the worldwide outcry over criminal justice abuses against Black lives, it's worth recalling that the same police department and prosecutor's office that dragged their feet on arresting and charging George Floyd's white police officer murderer acted swiftly in their punishment of a Black transgender woman who had defended her own life.

Multiple studies demonstrate the outsize damage done by racist and transphobic policing. While a quarter of white trans and gender-nonconforming people report being treated disrespectfully during interactions with police, that figure skyrockets to 47 percent among Black trans and gender-nonconforming people, according to a 2011 report by the National Center for Transgender Equality. Across the board, 22 percent of trans and gender-nonconforming people report law enforcement harassment, versus 38 percent for those who are Black. (One 2008 report noted that Black and Latinx trans women had a name for their constant police profiling as sex workers: “walking while trans.”) Six percent of trans and gender-nonconforming people overall report physical abuse by police, and 2 percent report sexual abuse by them. Those numbers climb to 15 percent and 7 percent, respectively, among Black trans and gender-nonconforming people.

As in Floyd's case, McDonald's treatment by the

cops and the courts reveals a problem that lies not just with the Minneapolis Police Department but with the American criminal justice system. While trans and gender-nonconforming people are arrested at disproportionate rates to cisgender people, transphobic and racist policing has resulted in nearly half—47 percent—of Black trans and gender-nonconforming people spending time behind bars. After arrest, trans people are particularly susceptible to various forms of violence because they are often placed in facilities based on their gender assignment instead of their gender identity. Nearly one-third of Black trans and gender-nonconforming people who

have spent any time in jail or prison report being physically assaulted there, and 32 percent report being sexually abused in custody. Because of biases in sentencing, while just 2 percent of white trans and gender-nonconforming people have served five or more years behind bars, 10 percent of Black trans and gender-nonconforming people have been incarcerated for five to 10 years. Five percent remained in prison

for a decade or more.

There are many more stories like McDonald's. In 2006, Mariah Lopez, a Black Latinx trans woman, reported that New York City police officers sexually and physically assaulted and humiliated her, then jailed her with male inmates whose physical attacks left her with “broken cartilage in her nose, a broken tooth, and abrasions and bruises to her face and body,” according to an Amnesty International report. A 2019 video of cops in Kansas City, Mo., arresting Breona Hill, a Black trans woman, shows them slamming her head into the concrete twice before kneeling on her head and neck “in contrast to the officers' statements,” according to the local prosecutor.

Layleen Xtravaganza Cubilette-Polanco, another Black trans woman from New York City, died last year in solitary confinement at Rikers Island, where she was being held on misdemeanor charges. Video shows that as she lay unresponsive in her cell,



Black and Latinx trans women have a name for their constant police profiling as sex workers: “walking while trans.”

officers stood outside the door laughing before seeking medical assistance that might have saved her life. And on May 27—two days after Floyd’s killing—a Black trans man named Tony McDade was fatally shot by Florida police who repeatedly misgendered him in subsequent reports.

In its conspicuous disregard for the safety of Black trans and gender-nonconforming people, the criminal justice system is complicit in an epidemic of violence that has seen at least 21 trans or gender-nonconforming people killed in the United States this year alone. Those deaths occurred against a backdrop of the Trump administration’s unstinting assault on transgender rights. There are also long-standing disparities in areas like employment and housing, undergirded by anti-trans and anti-Black discrimination. Even before the coronavirus crisis, Black trans folks were twice as likely to be unemployed as Black cis people, 38 percent were living below the poverty line, and

42 percent had experienced homelessness at some point. Those numbers have likely worsened during the pandemic.

It’s critical that the fallout from racist and transphobic policing receive greater attention—and that conversations around defunding bloated police budgets and reinvesting in communities highlight how that money can benefit Black trans and gender-nonconforming folks. More attention has been given to those issues of late, as with the Brooklyn Liberation march last month, which drew 15,000 people, and the recent Queer Liberation March for Black Lives and Against Police Brutality. But emphasizing the particular devastation that policing does to Black trans lives and the focus on mitigating those issues should be consistently front and center.

We’re at a crucial moment in which all Black lives need recognition. And erasure, we should remember, is yet another form of violence. ■

At least 21 transgender or gender-nonconforming people in the United States have been killed this year alone.

SNAPSHOT / PATRICK SMITH

Say Her Name

Seen from a drone, a portrait of Breonna Taylor with the text “Black Lives Matter” takes shape at Chambers Park in Annapolis, Md., on July 5. The painting honors Taylor, who was shot and killed in her home by members of the Louisville Metro Police Department in March 2020.

Calvin Trillin
Deadline Poet

DONALD TRUMP: CONFEDERATE FROM QUEENS

Trump says he will fight efforts to remove Confederate statues and to change the names of military bases named after Confederate generals. —news reports

No matter that they fought to keep folks slaves,
He says they are our heritage, our genes.

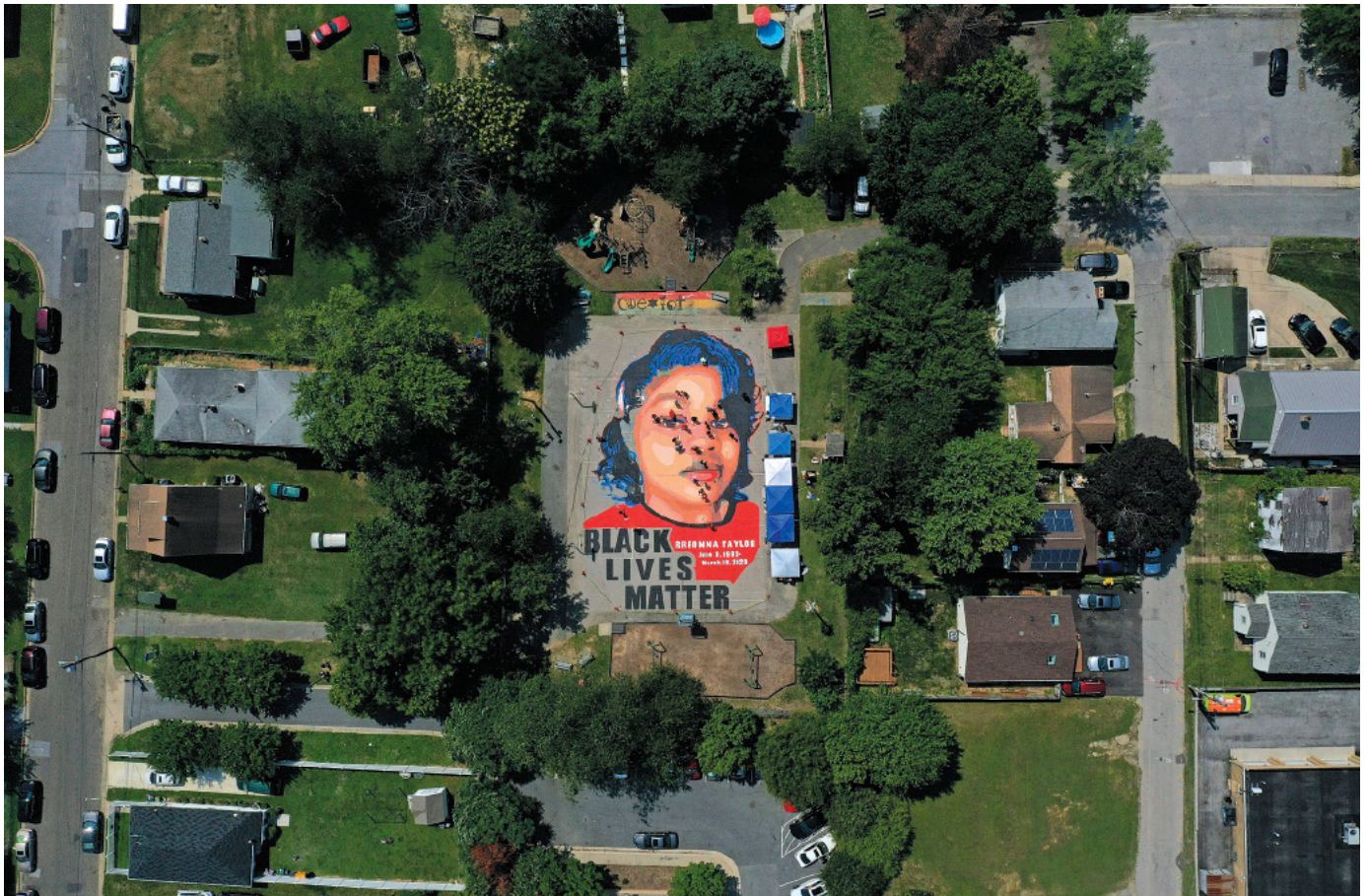
It’s true about his heritage at least:

He is the rare Confederate from Queens.

Now Mississippi’s dropped Old Dixie’s flag,
Acknowledging just what that symbol means.

He still will always fight for what is white.

He is the rare Confederate from Queens.



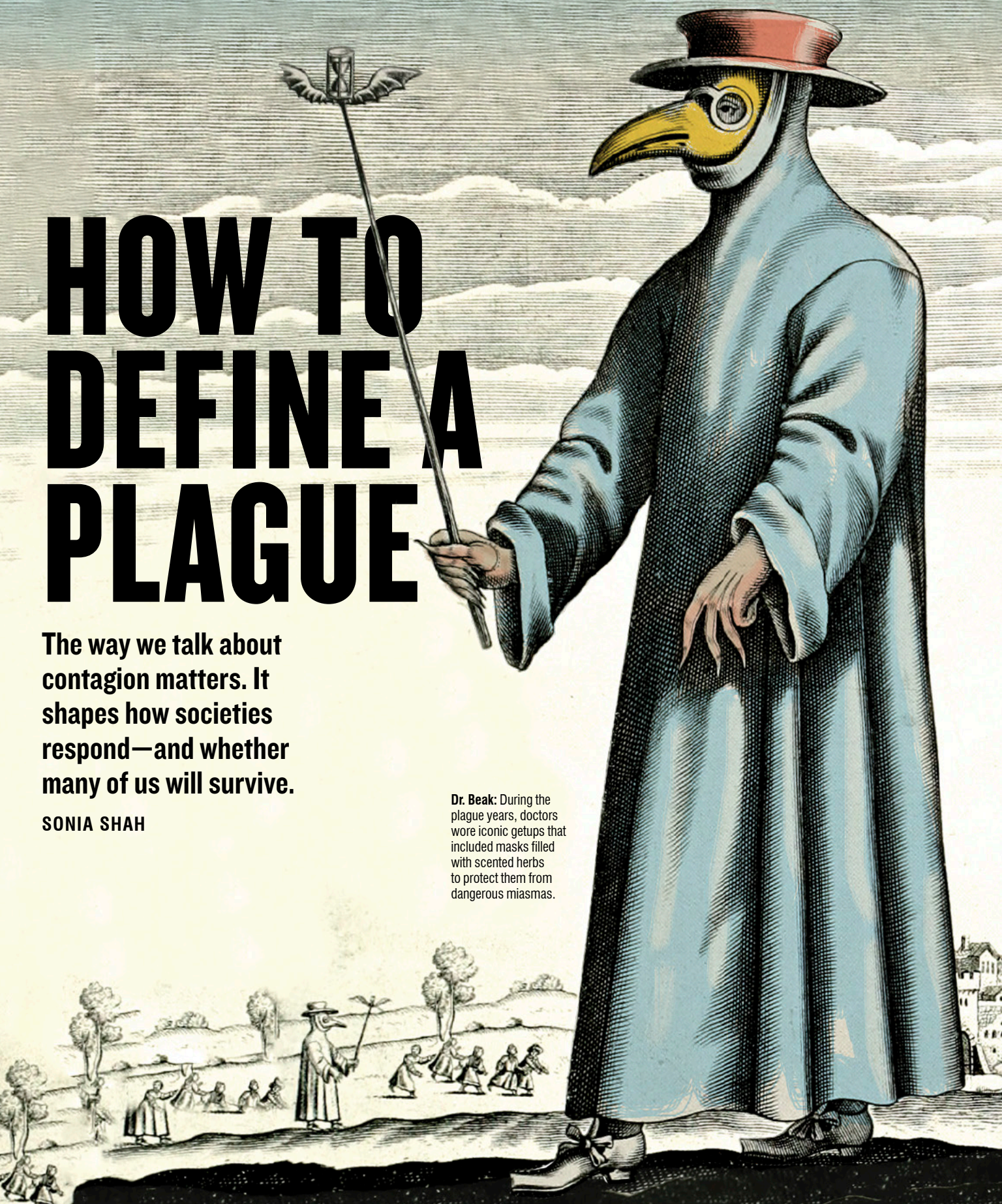
GETTY IMAGES

HOW TO DEFINE A PLAGUE

The way we talk about contagion matters. It shapes how societies respond—and whether many of us will survive.

SONIA SHAH

Dr. Beak: During the plague years, doctors wore iconic getups that included masks filled with scented herbs to protect them from dangerous miasmas.



The Nation.

IN THE SUMMER OF 1832, A MYSTERIOUS SCOURGE THAT HAD COME ALL THE WAY FROM ASIA LOOMED OVER THE CITY OF NEW YORK, HAVING ravaged London, Paris, and Montreal. Medical officials collected data showing that the disease—cholera—was spreading along the newly opened Erie Canal and the Hudson River, heading straight to New York City. But New York’s leaders did not attempt to regulate traffic coming down the waterways.

The demands of commerce were part of the reason for their failure to act; officials knew that shutting down the routes would have disrupted powerful commercial interests. But no less powerful was the belief that they didn’t need to. According to the reigning paradigm, contagions like cholera spread through clouds of smelly gas called miasmas. Cholera, one expert said at the time, was “an atmosphere disease...carried on the wings of the wind.” To protect themselves from these deadly gases, people burned barrels of tar and strung up large pieces of meat on poles, which they hoped would soak up the cholera vapors. In London they attempted to rid their homes of stinky miasmas by dumping human waste into the river, which also served as the city’s drinking water supply.

The stories people told about the contagion in their midst sealed their fate. Outbreaks of cholera plagued London, New York, and many other cities for the better part of a century, killing millions of people.

Paradigms—the obscure, unspoken conceptual frameworks that shape our ideas—are powerful. They bring order and understanding to our observations about the messy, changing world around us. Without them, the philosopher Thomas Kuhn said, scientific inquiry is impossible: We would not know which questions to ask or what facts to collect. But paradigms blind us, too, as during the cholera pandemics of the 19th century, elevating certain narratives and serving particular interests, sometimes to our peril.

Today we once again face a virulent, fast-spreading pathogen. Our scientific understanding has advanced since the time of cholera, but it’s nonetheless constrained by paradigms that shape how we respond to this outbreak—and to future ones. As we navigate this moment, it is therefore essential that we ask ourselves whether we have narrated SARS-Cov-2, the virus that causes Covid-19, in a way that provides constructive insight into how we can survive its appetites. Have we framed it effectively? Or, like the New Yorkers of old, do we continue to misunderstand the pathogens in our midst?

In the case of Covid-19, the story we have told from the beginning has been one of a passive population suddenly attacked by a foreign being. The pandemic, in popular discourse, is an act of external aggression, an assault by an “invisible enemy” that “attacks people so savagely,” as one physician put it in *The Baltimore Sun*. In *The New York Times*, Steven Erlanger compared the virus to an act of terrorism or a natural disaster. The writer Michael Lind likened it to “an alien invasion.”

In accordance with these martial metaphors, the response has been framed as a form of combat against an invasive intruder. France declared itself “at war” with the infection. China launched a “people’s war.” And Donald Trump hailed himself a “wartime president.” Nations grounded flights and closed borders. In the earliest weeks of the outbreak, when cruise ships full of sick passengers drew near, countries waved them away, their pleas for medicine, food, and care be damned.

While the scale of the response has been unprecedented, the ideas framing the outbreak emanate from an old paradigm about contagion. According to that paradigm, contagion is a problem of microbial invasion, a foreign incursion into domestic bodies to be repelled with military might. Consider the history of how the Western biomedical establishment has named contagions. For decades, they named them based on where they were discovered or first erupted when those places were distant but not when they were local. For example, Ebola was named after a

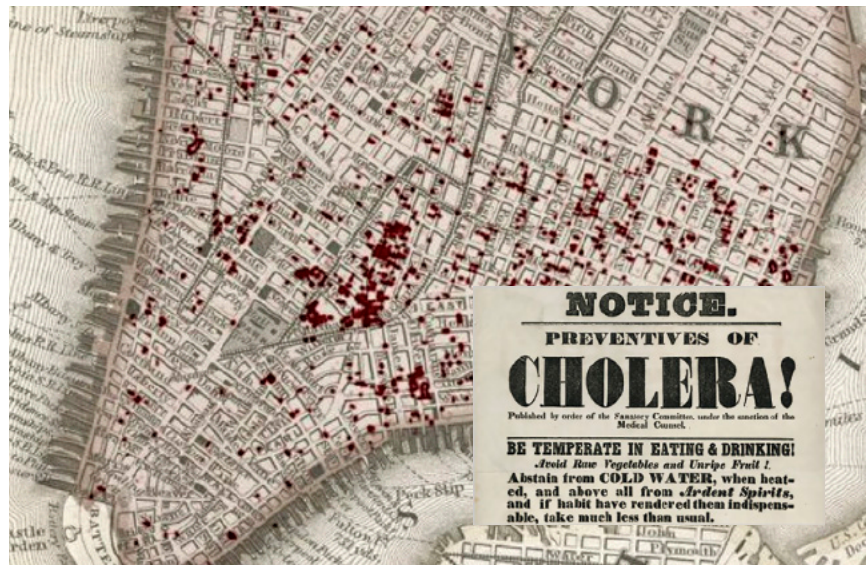
We’ve long narrated contagion as a problem of microbial invasion, a foreign intrusion into domestic bodies to be repelled with military might.

Outbreak: In the summer of 1832, cholera erupted in lower Manhattan, killing nearly 3,000 people.

river in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and the 1918 influenza was dubbed Spanish flu, although it didn’t originate in Spain. But HIV, whose emergence was first charted in California and New York in the 1980s, was not the “LA virus” or “NYC-1,” and the antibiotic-resistant MRSA infection, which exploded in Boston in 1968, is not known as “the Boston plague.” Infectious diseases were so often named in ways that emphasized their otherness and provoked stigma that the World Health Organization issued more-neutral naming guidelines in 2015.

Our paradigm of microbial invasion has its origins in the dawn of germ theory in the late 19th century, when the chemist Louis Pasteur discovered the microbe responsible for causing a disease in silkworms and the microbiologist Robert Koch identified the microbe that causes anthrax. For centuries before then, Western medicine described contagions in terms of a dynamic interplay between miasmas (which were shaped by environmental conditions, such as the climate and the local geography) and the interior qualities of individuals (from their morals to the unique balance of “humours” in their bodies). Pasteur and Koch produced evidence that suggested a more tangible process: that disease was not the result of complex disequilibria but an outcome of the simple presence of identifiable microbes.

The germ theory of disease forged a whole new way of thinking about and acting against contagion. Instead of untangling the web of social relations, environmental factors, and human behaviors that promoted disease,





microbes, not the microbes' actions themselves.

The paradigm of invasion casts microbial pathogens as invisible enemies full of incipient violence, but more recent discoveries have revealed that even those responsible for deadly outbreaks can be strangely quiescent in certain environments. *Helicobacter pylori*, for example, causes gastric ulcers in some while lounging harmlessly inside the stomachs of others. Strains of *Lactobacillus* that lead to sepsis in some are popped by others as “probiotics.” Meanwhile, microbiologists have discovered that many pathogens live in the bodies of other animals by the fistful

and cause them no problems whatsoever. Zooplankton encrusted with cholera bacteria, for instance, float unperturbed by their microscopic guests in warm coastal waters; wild waterfowl, teeming with influenza viruses, fly blithely through the skies; and bats, their tissues full of Ebola, flit unharmed through the nighttime air.

All of which is to say that, contrary to the central plotline of the paradigm of invasion, today's pathogens don't arrive in untouched territory as invaders do. Rather, if there is any invasion underway at all, it is spearheaded by us. The majority of pathogens that have emerged since 1940 originated in the bodies of animals and entered human populations not because they invaded us but because we invaded their habitats. By encroaching on wetlands and cutting down forests, we've forced wild animals to crowd into ever smaller fragments of habitat, drawing them into intimate contact with human populations. It's that proximity, which we force through our destruction of wildlife habitats, that allows many animal microbes to find their way into human bodies.

But the paradigm of microbial invasion obscures these inconvenient facts. Despite the growing scientific acknowledgment of the complexity and nuance of the disease process and our own complicity within it, the biomedical establishment focuses most of its attention and resources on finding magic bullet cures for contagion rather than addressing the underlying drivers. This is true despite the fact that we've rarely been able to develop drugs and vaccines for emerging pathogens fast enough to save us from their toll. As a 2018 *Lancet* study reported, developing a single vaccine “can cost billions of dollars, can take over 10 years to complete, and has an average 94% chance of failure.” It took dedicated researchers more than a decade to develop effective therapies for AIDS, and to this day, there is no effective HIV vaccine. Drugs and vaccines for a wide range of other newly emerged pathogens, from the West Nile virus to Ebola and MRSA, have proved similarly elusive.

Even in the case of older pathogens, vaccines that provide full immunity and treatments that deliver us from illness are the exception, not the rule. Smallpox is the only human pathogen that we've eradicated through a purposeful campaign of vaccination, yet it ravaged human populations for centuries before we succeeded. The best treatment for influenza, a pathogen that annually infects a billion people, can do little more than reduce the duration of illness

Pipette dream? Lab technicians research Covid-19 at Janssen Pharmaceutica, a Johnson & Johnson subsidiary in Beerse, Belgium, in June.

A new story would allow us to see contagions as more than purely biomedical phenomena and instead as the dynamic social phenomena they are.

Sonia Shab is a science writer and the author of Pandemic: Tracking Contagions From Cholera to Ebola and Beyond.

by a day or two. And despite a massive and expensive annual effort to research, develop, and distribute flu vaccines, they're only partly effective, leaving some half a million people to perish every year.

Nevertheless, six months into our current pandemic, hype and desperate anticipation surround the development of drugs and vaccines. But with treatments and vaccines still months away, the fact is that we must face SARS-Cov-2—as well as the next coronavirus, influenza virus, or other novel pathogen—bereft of medical weaponry. Our only hope to stave off the worst damage is to alter our behaviors to reduce opportunities for the pathogen to spread.

IT'S TIME FOR A NEW STORY, ONE THAT MORE ACCURATELY captures the reality of how contagions unfold and why. In this story, pandemics would be cast as both a biological reality and a social phenomenon shaped by human agency. And the coronavirus, if cast as any kind of monster at all, would be a Frankenstein's monster: a creature of our own making. We, after all, created the world in which SARS-Cov-2 evolved, one in which our industry has swallowed up so much of the planet that microbes from wild animals easily slip into livestock and humans. We created the society of overcrowded prisons and nursing homes staffed by underpaid employees who must work in multiple facilities to make ends meet; in which employers force their workers to labor on meatpacking lines even if they're sick; in which asylum seekers are crammed into detention centers; and in which people living in hard-hit cities like Detroit lack access to clean water with which to wash their hands.

A narrative that elevates these realities would compel us to consider a much wider range of policy responses to counter the threat of pandemics. Instead of blaming outsiders and waiting for magic bullet cures, we could work to enhance our resilience and reduce the probability of pathogens reaching us in the first place. Instead of reflexively demanding that killing chemicals be slathered across the landscape to destroy mosquitoes infected by the West Nile virus and ticks infected with Lyme disease bacteria, we could restore the lost biodiversity that once prevented their spread. We could protect the forests where bats roost, so that Ebola, SARS, and other viruses stay in them and don't find their way into human populations.

A new story would allow us to see contagion as more than a purely biomedical phenomenon to be managed by biomedical experts and, instead, as the dynamic social phenomena they are. It would necessitate new alliances among public health advocates and environmentalists, between doctors, epidemiologists, wildlife biologists, anthropologists, economists, geographers, and veterinarians. It would shift the meaning of human health itself. Instead of thinking of good health as the absence of pathogenic contamination, we would understand it as a complex lattice-work linking the health of our livestock, wildlife, and ecosystems to the health of our communities.

When pathogens emerge, we could scrutinize our social and economic relations to find ways to reduce transmission opportunities as attentively as we screen pharmaceutical



Germ theorists: French chemist and microbiologist Louis Pasteur (top) and German physician and microbiologist Robert Koch.

The "war" on Covid-19: A National Guard member stops traffic in New Rochelle, N.Y., a hot spot for the novel coronavirus in early March.

compounds to create new pills and potions. When we encounter respiratory pathogens that spread silently in crowded places, we could empower our workers with hazard pay, sick leave, and fair wages. When faced with viruses ferried around by mosquitoes, we could work to improve drainage and housing so that people aren't regularly exposed to their bloodthirsty bites. Rather than prop up a drug industry that profits from our sickness, we could work to prevent the conditions that lead to contagions.

Progress toward this new paradigm has already begun, thanks to a new approach called One Health, which considers human health in the context of the health of wildlife, livestock, and ecosystems. As a theoretical approach, One Health has been endorsed by the WHO along with a wide range of high-level agencies in public health and veterinary medicine. It's been operationalized, on a more limited basis, as well. After a 2005 outbreak of avian influenza, USAID used it to launch the Predict program, which sought to identify viruses that could slip from animals into humans. The New York City-based EcoHealth Alliance used a One Health approach to discover a reservoir of SARS virus in bats, opening up new ways to understand the coronaviruses that afflict humans. And in the Netherlands, it's been used to tackle the spread of antibiotic-resistant pathogens in people, by addressing the use of antibiotics in livestock.

These still-nascent efforts could go much further to address the social, political, and environmental phenomena that drive the emergence of infectious disease, but they are already under attack. The Trump administration canceled the Predict program in 2019 and recently pulled EcoHealth Alliance's government funding. Still, there are signs that policymakers are awakening to the value of the approach. Just last year, bipartisan legislation to establish a national One Health framework to prevent and respond to disease outbreaks was introduced in Congress.

We can write a new story for this pandemic and the next ones. We must if we hope to survive a future punctuated by outbreaks. In this new story, the microbial other will fade into the background, and the nature of our relationships to one another and the environment will claim the foreground. Instead of being the passive victims of microbial invaders, we can emerge as the makers of our own destiny who can rebuild the postpandemic world anew. ■



LEARNING TO HEAL LEARNING TO MOURN

Bellevue:
The nation's oldest public hospital is known for its responses to scourges like yellow fever, TB, and AIDS.

**A report from the
Covid-19 front
line at Bellevue.**

COLLEEN M. FARRELL

“**T**HIS WILL DEFINE YOUR LIFE,” MY ATTENDING PHYSICIAN SAID. IT WAS THE middle of an April night in the intensive care unit. Covid-19 was surging through New York City, overwhelming hospitals. Earlier that evening, another of our patients died. Our team had worked desperately to save his life. When I called his wife to give the news, she wailed into the phone in horror and disbelief.

During a rare lull in our work, my attending, a pulmonary and critical care physician, asked how I was holding up. I’m a resident physician in internal medicine, still training to practice medicine independently. I rely on my attendings to guide me through uncertainty. “I’m OK,” I told him, hoping that saying it would make it true.

Before Covid came, I had accepted a three-year fellowship position, which begins this July, to specialize in pulmonary and critical care medicine. PCCM physicians are meant to be experts in lung diseases, procedures like intubation, and ventilator management. The field’s foreseeable future—and therefore mine—is largely devoted to the sickest Covid patients.

My experience in this crisis has been shaped not only by my field and the fact that I am in New York City but also by the hospital where I work. Bellevue in Manhattan is the nation’s oldest public hospital, known for its response to prior scourges like yellow fever, tuberculosis, and AIDS. Today it is one of 11 public hospitals that make up NYC Health + Hospitals, including Elmhurst Hospital in Queens, Lincoln in the Bronx, and Woodhull in Brooklyn. Like the rest of H+H, Bellevue provides care to anyone who comes through its doors. Among its patients are some of the most marginalized New Yorkers: the homeless, incarcerated, impoverished, and undocumented.

It was Bellevue’s history that drew me to train here. That it has been at the forefront of epidemics and in the care of the marginalized is no accident. Infectious diseases have a long history of preying on the neglected and oppressed. When the Covid pandemic began, there was talk of it being a great equalizer. But as history would have predicted, that turned out not to be the case. Black and Hispanic New Yorkers 45 to 64 have died from Covid at about three times the rate of their white counterparts. Among the younger population, the disparity is even more stark: Black and Hispanic New Yorkers 18 to 44 have died at nearly five times the rate of their white counterparts. While wealthy New Yorkers have sought safe haven in home offices and vacation homes, the virus has spread rapidly through the city’s essential workplaces, jails, and homeless shelters.

Colleen M. Farrell, MD, recently completed her internal medicine residency at Bellevue Hospital and is now a fellow in pulmonary and critical care medicine.

Our tools are inadequate to mend the harm done by racism, mass incarceration, inadequate housing, poverty, and cruel immigration policies.

As I tend to my patients in the Covid ICU, I struggle to process reality. The attending physicians who are my teachers have few answers; this disease is new to all of us. Faced with so much uncertainty and devastation, history is the closest thing I have to a guide.

I GREW UP ABOUT A THREE-HOUR CAR ride north of Bellevue—but a world apart. Saratoga Springs was comfortable and homogenous. We had a backyard pool, a wood-paneled station wagon, and a golden retriever. The youngest of six siblings in a big Irish Catholic family, I was under the impression that my great-aunt’s marriage to an Italian Catholic made our family multicultural. My grandfather, a signals officer on a Navy ship in World War II, referred to New York City as “the zoo,” conjuring in my

mind a wild and dangerous place.

As a teenager, I knew I wanted to become a doctor. I spent the summer after my freshman year in college in a lab injecting messenger RNA into zebra fish embryos. I was terribly bored and not very good at it. Realizing that if I wanted to someday care for patients, I needed to learn about health care at the human level, the next summer I persuaded the staff at a small HIV/AIDS advocacy organization in San Francisco, Project Inform, to take me on as an intern.

Project Inform was founded in 1985 by AIDS activist Martin Delaney to expedite the development and distribution of potential AIDS treatments. He said the 1980s in the Castro neighborhood, the hub of San Francisco’s gay community, was like “walking in the graveyard.” As he and his friends faced the devastation of this new disease, they were met with government silence. President Ronald Reagan didn’t give a major public address on the crisis until 1987, after nearly 21,000 Americans had died of AIDS. Looking back on the crisis, Delaney estimated that he’d lost 80 percent of his friends to the disease.

He died of liver cancer in 2009. Over his years of AIDS treatment advocacy, he had



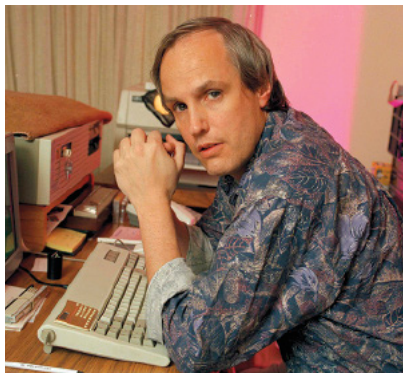
found an ally in Dr. Anthony Fauci, who was appointed head of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases in 1984 and remains in that position. Fauci said of Delaney, “Without his tireless work and vision, many more people would have perished from HIV/AIDS.... He was a formidable activist and a dear friend.”

As a 19-year-old intern at Project Inform in 2008, more than a decade after the peak of the AIDS crisis in the United States, I didn’t see young gay men dying from AIDS with little hope of treatment. By then, effective treatments had been developed; the critical issues were lack of access to treatment and prevention. (HIV/AIDS still disproportionately affects people of color and the poor—the same groups disproportionately affected by Covid.) Nonetheless, the legacy of those desperate early years was palpable there. The middle-aged gay men I worked with, whether they had been infected by the virus or not, were all survivors of a plague.

That summer I met with a seasoned HIV/AIDS physician so I could learn about her career in medicine. In a conference room in her clinic, the gray-haired doctor told me that she had lost over a thousand patients to AIDS. I recall sensing that her soul was tired. Talking with her, I realized how little I knew of the devastation and destruction of disease. I wondered if I could ever do such heartbreaking work but also longed to have such a sense of purpose.

When I started my biology and chemistry premedical courses, I thought becoming a good doctor involved a straightforward formula of studying science and wanting to help. What I learned about AIDS, beginning with my time at Project Inform, added vital complexity to that formula. I learned that like a virus, neglect and oppression can kill and that like medication, activism can save lives. I realized all the medical training in the world can still leave doctors powerless in the face of disease. I came to believe that sometimes the most important work a doctor can do is to be present with her patients in their fear and sorrow.

ON JULY 1, 2017, A MONTH AFTER GRADUATING from medical school, I started my three-year internal medicine residency at Bellevue. These years have been an education in the bodily manifestations of inequality. Though my colleagues and I strive to provide excellent medical care, our tools are inadequate to mend the harm done by racism, mass incarceration,



Martin Delaney: The AIDS activist and founder of Project Inform, who died of liver cancer in 2009.

I find myself longing for the horror and devastation of this crisis to be seen and acknowledged for what it really is.

Essential: Emergency medical workers outside Bellevue, which provides care to anyone who comes through its doors, in New York City in April.

inadequate housing, poverty, and cruel immigration policies.

In my primary care clinic, I struggled for months trying to help an undocumented immigrant manage his diabetes. Through a phone interpreter, I suggested he inject insulin multiple times a day because once a day didn’t seem to be working. He told me that wasn’t possible at his workplace—a low-wage job with few protections. So I proposed plan B, and when that wasn’t possible, plan C. We worked together within the constraints of his life to try to prevent the

complications of diabetes, like blindness, amputations, and kidney failure. In the back of my mind, I feared we were delaying the inevitable.

With just four months remaining in my residency, the Covid pandemic was declared. As my friends with office jobs began working from home, I worried about people like my primary care patient, who wouldn’t have that option. Would information on the new virus be available in his language? If he lost his job, what source of income would he have as an undocumented immigrant? If he got infected, how could he maintain social distance in overcrowded housing to keep his family and neighbors safe? If he became ill, would he face a higher chance of death because of his poorly controlled diabetes, itself largely the product of his difficult circumstances?

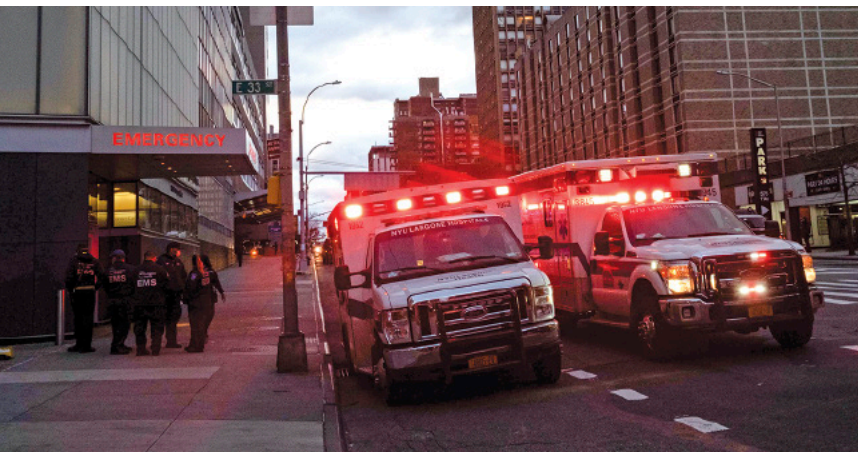
By the end of March, I was caring for patients with Covid in the ICU. Nearly all of them were intubated and on ventilators because their lungs were so severely damaged from the virus. A necessary but unfortunate consequence of this was that I couldn’t talk to my patients and get to know them. Which may be why the memory of one patient with whom I did speak stands out in my mind.

Mr. Perez (I have changed his name to protect his privacy) was a middle-aged man with diabetes who came to the hospital with a fever and cough. His oxygen levels were normal when he tested positive for Covid. However, his blood work came back with severe electrolyte derangements, likely triggered by the disease.

Perez diligently covered his mouth with a face mask, only briefly revealing a gentle smile when the nurse checked his temperature. When I told him that he had Covid and needed to be in the ICU, I wondered if he realized he was on a precipice. I hoped that my mask and face shield concealed my fears and that my voice conveyed optimistic competence. “*Gracias, doctora,*” he said, steady-ing his gaze straight ahead.

Our 54-bed ICU was overflowing with Covid patients, so we wheeled Perez to a satellite unit, a part of the hospital that had been temporarily converted into an ICU to manage the surge. The satellite ICU had several beds in an open arrangement. No walls or curtains separated the patients. Aside from Perez, all the other patients had breathing tubes in their mouths and their eyes closed. I worried what he would think of his own fate, seeing the others.

I assured him that while all the other patients had Covid, his case was different, as he needed just medications, not a ventilator. “*Va a estar bien,*” I told him. It’s going to be OK.



The AIDS Memorial
Quilt: Mourning
is necessary, life-
sustaining work.



Not long after we arrived in the ICU, Perez's heart rate skyrocketed, and his blood pressure plummeted. Alongside an attending physician volunteer from the West Coast and an agency nurse from the South, I pushed fluids and medications into his veins to control his heart rate. He shook with chills as I wrapped him in blankets and rubbed his back. Sweat dripped down my back under my plastic gown as I whispered to my attending, "I don't have a good feeling about him."

Eventually, we stabilized him. His heart rate and blood pressure came back to normal. He was warm and comfortable. "*Va a estar bien,*" I said again, hoping he might get some rest.

I was about to leave the satellite ICU when I saw my attending on the other side of the room with another patient. He was standing over a bed alongside two nurses, his head bent down in thought. I approached to ask if they needed help. But before I could open my mouth, I saw that the nurses were zipping shut a white bag that held the patient's body.

After my first shifts caring for people with Covid, I braced myself for a deluge of patient deaths unlike anything I had ever experienced. By the time I met Perez, hundreds of New Yorkers were dying each day. Through our efforts, we saved many lives. But so many of my patients died, including Perez. Though we corrected his electrolyte issues and stabilized him for the night, Covid blossomed in his lungs. Despite medicine's best tools, he did not survive.

PEOPLE COPE WITH THIS CRISIS IN DIFFERENT ways. I understand the need to focus on the silver linings. Bellevue began playing Journey's "Don't Stop Believin'" on the overhead speakers whenever patients were discharged. Colleagues post on Instagram the chalk messages on sidewalks that tell us we are heroes. These gestures bring some people real joy, and I don't want to take that from them. But for me, they are like cupcakes on an empty stomach—though temptingly sweet, they ultimately leave me feeling starved for real sustenance.

I find myself instead longing for the horror and devastation of this crisis to be seen and acknowledged for what it really is. I don't want to be soothed so much as believed. During the surge, when I had a few days off, I started to question myself and what I had seen with my own eyes. Was it really that bad? Are you sure you're not exaggerating this? And then a text from a friend working in the hospital, grieving the death of another patient, brought the visceral memories rushing back.

"We grew accustomed to watching our AIDS patients die amid all the glitter of medical technology.... We could offer them only comfort, sympathy, and palliation."

—Dr. Abigail Zuger

During the surge, when every patient in our ICU had Covid, I would sometimes walk a long lap around the unit. I wanted to see all the patients through their glass doors not to check on their vital signs or assess their breathing but to acknowledge them as human beings. That private ritual allowed me to hold in my mind both the individual tragedy of this disease and the massive scale of the crisis.

Since Covid came to New York City, I have been thinking of my time working in HIV/AIDS that so deeply shaped my outlook on medicine more than 10 years ago. Dr. Abigail Zuger was, like me, a resident physician in internal medicine at Bellevue. From 1981 to 1984, she cared for scores of people with AIDS. "We grew accustomed to watching our AIDS patients die amid all the glitter of medical technology," she wrote in 1987. "We could offer them only comfort, sympathy, and palliation." Reflecting on his experience, Fauci said, "With AIDS in those days, I saved no one. It was the darkest time of my life." For me, it is a balm in this crisis to remember an earlier generation of doctors who witnessed so many patients die of a new disease while they themselves felt powerless. Their example gives me strength to face our new reality.

Some of my colleagues describe what we have seen as war. Others call it a mass casualty event. I am still struggling to find the words to name it. But whatever we call it, I do not want to rush to heal from it. I need time to sit in the darkness and tend to the sorrow. When my patients are on the precipice, I want the strength to look down into the abyss with them. I know how tempting it is to reach for comforting platitudes: I told Perez he would

be OK. But we can't address this crisis, individually or societally, unless we see things as they really are, not as we wish they were.

Our country alone has lost more than 120,000 lives to this pandemic. That number grows daily. Even as we work to treat the sick and prevent Covid's further spread, we must also remember the dead. From the AIDS Memorial Quilt to ACT UP die-ins, AIDS activists showed us that mourning and memorial are necessary, life-sustaining work. Without it, the dead suffer a second death of erasure. They become data points devoid of individuality and meaning. When we neglect to honor those we have lost, our commitments to protect the living ring hollow.

As I walked the halls of our ICU during the April surge, I remembered the words of Prior Walter, the protagonist of Tony Kushner's two-part play about the AIDS crisis, *Angels in America*. Prior knows the precipice between life and death. He has stared into the abyss and come back to tell us, "This disease will be the end of many of us, but not nearly all, and the dead will be commemorated and will struggle on with the living.... We won't die secret deaths anymore. The world only spins forward." ■

IT'S LOOKING PRETTY GOOD FOR JOE BIDEN. POLLS HAVE BEEN PUTTING THE PRESUMPTIVE Democratic nominee well ahead of President Trump in the 2020 campaign, and a New York Times survey in late June saw Biden opening up a comfortable lead in each of the half-dozen battleground states that will decide things in November. But before Democrats start making too many plans for undoing the damage done by four years of Donald Trump, let alone for the “big structural change” that Massachusetts Senator Elizabeth Warren, Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders, and other progressives propose, they need to consider an unfortunate truth.

If Biden is elected but Republicans maintain control of the Senate, he will enter office as a lame-duck president. After the inaugural celebrations are done, Biden will settle into a dysfunctional relationship in which Senate majority leader Mitch McConnell will determine precisely how ambitious his agenda can be. “If we remove Trump but we don’t remove McConnell, people need to understand how frustrating that will be,” says People for the American Way president Ben Jealous. “What good will a new president be if we can’t get new laws passed?”

This prospect is so depressing that Democrats do not rush to discuss it. They focus on the feel-good politics of a presidential race that seems to be going well rather than the stark reality that ending mass unemployment, expanding health care, addressing the climate crisis, and implementing genuine criminal justice reform will be all but impossible with a Republican-led Senate.

Democrats need to confront this reality. In a moment of tremendous instability and potential for progress, old expectations about what is possible have to be discarded

in favor of a sense of mission that seeks to mobilize new voters and increase turnout everywhere. A winning strategy for November has to be grounded in a deep recognition of the fact that the combination of a Democratic president and a Republican Senate is fraught with peril. “A capable Senate minority leader who is opposed to the president can cause a lot of problems for that president,” says Rebecca Katz, who served as a top aide to former Senate majority leader Harry Reid. “A capable Senate majority leader can stop almost anything.”

Like it or not, McConnell is capable. The most honest political history of the 2010s would be a biography of the Kentucky Republican, whose mastery of the Senate’s rules and politics has enabled him to disempower an honorable Democratic president and to empower a dishonorable Republican one. McConnell is the reason Judge Merrick Garland is not on the Supreme Court, while Brett Kavanaugh is busy tipping the balance to the right on 5-4 decisions. And the high court is just the tip of the iceberg. When McConnell appeared on Sean

LOST WITHOUT THE SENATE

A Biden win will be insufficient unless Democrats take the chamber and displace McConnell.

JOHN NICHOLS

ILLUSTRATION BY STEVE BRODNER





BRODNER



Hannity's Fox News show last year, the two men talked about the federal courts. "I was shocked that former President Obama left so many vacancies and didn't try to fill those positions," Hannity said. McConnell chortled in response. "I'll tell you why," he said. "I was in charge of what we did the last two years of the Obama administration." The Senate majority leader maintained his grip on power after Trump's inauguration, steering the new president's rogues' gallery of judicial picks through the confirmation process and then ensuring that Trump had nothing to fear even after Democrats took control of the House and made a credible case for impeachment. "Let's be very clear," says Robert Reich, a labor secretary under Bill Clinton, "Mitch McConnell and Senate Republicans are sacrificing the world's greatest deliberative body to serve their Dear Leader."

If Trump is defeated while McConnell retains his seat and remains majority leader, the Kentuckian will no longer have to provide cover for an erratic president, but that doesn't mean proper order—as least as it is understood in civics books—will be restored. Even before Trump began remaking the Republican Party in his image, McConnell had remade the Senate GOP as a fully owned subsidiary of the corporate interests and billionaire donors that fund campaigns. That's not going to change if Biden is elected, despite the dim-witted fantasy the former vice president entertains about sitting down with a former Senate colleague to work things out.

McConnell and the Senate Republicans will put the brakes on every meaningful policy initiative that Biden advances. Hundreds of measures that have been approved by the House since the Democrats took over in January 2019—including the Heroes Act package of Covid-19 relief measures that House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and her colleagues passed in May—have been laid to rest in what Senate minority leader Chuck Schumer describes as "Leader McConnell's legislative graveyard." The Republican lawmaker and his cadre of obedient partisans have made it perfectly clear time and again that they will not be moved by the fact that a legislative initiative is essential.

The challenges that a President Biden will face

Inauguration

Day: The Capitol is prepared for the swearing-in of Donald Trump in 2017.

"I am absolutely trying to send the message that all the things we're campaigning on won't happen if we don't win the Senate."

—Senator Jeff Merkley (D-Ore.)

liberties, Jealous says, requires not just the election of a president who will make sound appointments but also "the firing of Mitch McConnell."

To disempower McConnell, Democrats need a clear-eyed political calculus that recognizes that the fight for control of the Senate matters just as much as the battle between Biden and Trump—perhaps more. They must fully embrace an understanding expressed by the Rev. Raphael Warnock, a leading Democratic contender in the special election for one of two Georgia Senate seats up this year. In order to "restore moral leadership to our government," says the pastor, it is necessary to "flip the Senate." Democratic candidates, strategists, donors, volunteers, and voters all talk about the need to fundamentally alter the direction of our governance and our country. If fundamental change is the point, winning the Senate has to be understood as the defining struggle of a definitional election year. To that end, even as he mounts his own reelection bid this year, Oregon Senator Jeff Merkley is fundraising and campaigning for Democratic challengers nationwide with a message that pulls all the pieces together: "Dump Trump. Ditch Mitch. Save America."

"That's my six-word mantra. It ends with 'Save America' for a reason," says Merkley. "I am absolutely trying to send the message that all the things we're campaigning on won't happen if we don't win the Senate." To do that, the chamber's Democratic caucus must grow.

It currently has 47 members (45 Democrats plus two independents, Sanders and Angus King of Maine). If Biden wins, the party will need at least three more seats to take charge of the chamber in a 50-50 scenario, with a Democratic vice president casting the deciding vote. Ideally, the party would gain a clear majority. But even a 51-49 split would remain problematic, as it could hand outsized influence over the party's agenda to more socially or economically conservative Democrats, such as West Virginia's Joe Manchin and Virginia's Mark Warner. So what progressives are looking for is a substantial shift of five or more seats. That's a tall order in any election cycle, and on paper at least, it's even more challenging this year.

Thirty-five Senate seats are up for grabs in 2020. Twenty-three of them are held by Republicans, while just 12 are held by Democrats. That sounds good because, in a moment of tremendous turbulence, when unemployment numbers could rival those of the Great Depression, the Republicans have to defend a lot more seats than the Democrats. The trouble is that most of the Republican seats are in deep-red states where Trump won in 2016, where he will probably win again in 2020, and where incumbents like Arkansas Senator Tom Cotton—whose Democratic challenger quit the race, leaving the party's ballot line empty—won't be defeated. At the same time, there is at least one Democratic seat, Alabama Senator Doug Jones's, that could well fall to the Republicans. Another Democrat, Michigan's Gary Peters, was once considered vulnerable, but a late June *New York Times* poll had him up by 10 percentage points.



Crucial vote: The Senate acquitted Trump on February 5, 2020, after the third presidential impeachment trial in US history.

SO WHERE WILL THE DEMOCRATS FIND THE SEATS they need? And what's the best strategy for winning them?

In what are frequently identified as red states. Unless Biden scores a victory along the lines of Lyndon Johnson's thumping of Barry Goldwater in 1964 or at least Barack Obama's defeat of John McCain in 2008, some of the Democratic victories needed to flip the Senate are going to have to come in states where Trump prevailed in 2016 and might do so again this year.

Of the five Republican-held seats that *The Cook Political Report* labels as toss-ups in 2020, two are in states that Biden is likely to win: Colorado and Maine. Two more are in battleground states where he also could prevail: Arizona and North Carolina. The last is in Montana, a state that went for Trump by 20 points in 2016 and where the president's ahead this time. But there's a twist: Montana voters have shown a penchant for supporting Democratic candidates—like three-term Senator Jon Tester and this year's Senate nominee, popular incumbent Governor Steve Bullock—even when they back Republicans for president.

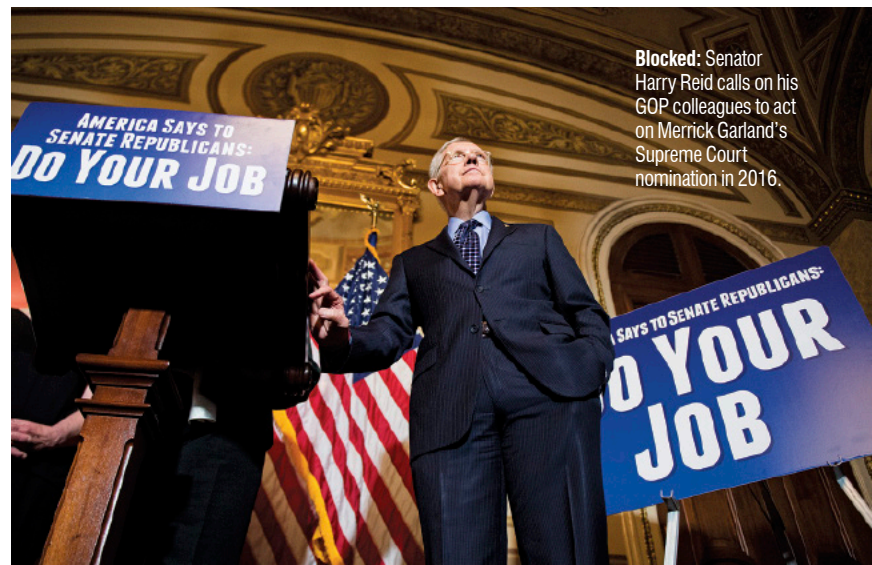
The Democrats need to win the toss-up seats before they can entertain the prospect of governing in a meaningful way. Right now, there's a chance: Polls have Democratic contenders like former astronaut Mark Kelly in Arizona and state House Speaker Sara Gideon in Maine ahead, respectively, of Republicans Martha McSally and Susan Collins. The two incumbents have long been seen as vulnerable, as has another senator who joined Collins in the ill-fated 2018 vote to confirm Kavanaugh, Colorado's Cory Gardner, who trails Democrat John Hickenlooper. What's notable is that, as of now, Democrats can point to polling advantages in all five toss-up states. In Montana, for instance, Bullock, who made his name as an attorney general who took on corporate interests and

crusaded for campaign finance and ethics reforms, leads Republican incumbent Steve Daines by seven percentage points in the latest Montana State University survey. With the president's personal approval rating tanking amid widespread frustration with his dangerous response to the coronavirus pandemic and the protests over police violence, CNN reported in late May that "Republican strategists are increasingly worried that Trump is headed for defeat in November and that he may drag other Republicans down with him."

Even if things are going very well for Biden, it's unlikely Trump will lose a state like Montana, which last backed a Democrat for president in 1992. But if Biden can gain more than 40 percent of the state's vote, as Obama did in 2008 and 2012, then it is realistic to suggest that Bullock can take things the rest of the way. However, if Biden gets stuck in the mid-30s, as Hillary Clinton did in 2016, the climb gets steeper. To get a Democratic-controlled Senate, Biden has to do what Clinton did not in 2016: run an aggressively progressive national campaign that expands its focus beyond a small group of traditional battleground states. By mobilizing voters and expanding Democratic turnout in red states and red regions of swing states, Biden can increase his national popular vote—which is important for claiming a mandate—and grab back battlegrounds such as Wisconsin, Michigan, and Pennsylvania for the Electoral College win. But the benefit of a 50-state strategy, of the sort then-Democratic National Committee chair Howard Dean implemented when the party was at the top of its game during the 2006 and 2008 election cycles, is that the Democrats can still win Senate seats even in toss-up states where they fall short in the presidential race.

The same goes for states that *The Cook Political Report* labels as leaning Republican or in some cases likely Republican—such as Georgia (with its two 2020 contests), Iowa, Kansas, South Carolina, and Kentucky (where former

The Democrats can still win Senate seats even in toss-up states where they fall short in the presidential race.



Blocked: Senator Harry Reid calls on his GOP colleagues to act on Merrick Garland's Supreme Court nomination in 2016.

Marine fighter pilot Amy McGrath won a close primary with progressive legislator Charles Booker and will now take on McConnell). All of these states went for Trump in 2016. If the current polling numbers hold, they'll be more competitive in 2020, and states such as Iowa and Georgia could back Biden. Even more important, all of them could back Democrats for the Senate, thus empowering a Biden presidency.

LET'S START WITH SOUTH CAROLINA, WHERE NO DEMOCRAT HAS WON A presidential race since Jimmy Carter in 1976 or a Senate race since Fritz Hollings in 1998. Trump won there by 15 points in 2016, but he was up by only 10 points in a May Civiqs poll. The big news from that survey had to do with the state's Senate race. Jaime Harrison, the former chair of the South Carolina Democratic Party, was tied 42-42 with Republican Senator Lindsey Graham. Yes, tied.

Harrison is one of a number of Black candidates who are out to change assumptions about what is possible in Southern states. Others include former secretary of agriculture Mike Espy in Mississippi and Georgia's Warnock, the senior pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, who is challenging the appointed and scandal-plagued Republican Senator Kelly Loeffler.

Jealous, a former president of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, argues that Democratic strategists and commentators need to recognize the potential of these African American candidates to expand turnout and forge new coalitions. "Pundits who dismiss the ability of Black candidates to win US Senate seats south of the Mason-Dixon Line should consider whether the bigger issue is not the bias they see in voters but the bias in their own hearts," he says.

In South Carolina, Harrison has benefited from a turn against Graham, who once dismissed Trump as "a race-baiting, xenophobic religious bigot" but now serves as the president's most ardent defender in the Senate. Harrison isn't making the mistake of trying to run to the right of Graham. Rather, he is running against Graham's blatant hypocrisy and hoping to attract at least some swing voters. But the key to states like South Carolina, Kentucky, and Georgia is not so much swing voters as new ones. "Harrison's campaign knows where it has to boost turnout across the board, citing 400,000 unregistered people of color in South Carolina who need to get on the books to vote for Harrison along with white, college-educated voters who are starting to shift to the left politically and constitute the fastest-growing demographic in the state," reads a recent analysis of the race by *The State*, South Carolina's second-largest newspaper.

Boosting turnout is part of the strategy for a number of candidates who are challenging suddenly vulnerable Republican senators. In 2018, Democratic congressional candidates made some of their most important gains in states where Trump won in 2016 but where a surge in participation by women, people of color, and young voters tipped

the balance. That's something Iowa Democratic Senate nominee Theresa Greenfield is talking about in her bid to unseat Republican Senator Joni Ernst. Noting that Democratic voter registration numbers are now higher than those for Republicans—and that Democratic turnout in the state's June primary significantly exceeded that of Republicans—Greenfield says, "There's a lot of momentum here." She argues voters understand the need for a politics that recognizes "health care is a right, not a privilege" and that is resolute in taking on corporate special interests. A June *Des Moines Register* poll put Greenfield ahead of Ernst, drawing attention to a race that remained off the radar until recently. Greenfield is stressing her family farm roots and making a big deal about the need to defend the United States Postal Service, declaring, "Continued attacks on USPS are an attack on the people who depend on its services, especially those living in rural areas where other delivery services don't reach."

An emphasis on issues that are important to the states where the candidates are running is vital, says Katz, the former Reid aide, who argues that "voters in these states don't want a cookie-cutter approach." Instead of sending talking points from D.C., party leaders must recognize that "you need candidates who are grounded in the experience of their states, who actually understand what is happening on the ground and are ready to talk about it."

Merkley gets it. Twelve years ago, he was a state legislator bidding to dislodge Republican Senator Gordon Smith from a seat no Democrat had held since 1967. Merkley trailed Smith until the fall race heated up and then—with a progressive campaign that challenged the incumbent's stances on the Iraq War, tax policy, and climate change—began to close the gap. In November, with a boost from Obama's landslide win in Oregon, Merkley narrowly upset Smith.

This year, Merkley looks to candidates like Warnock, Greenfield, and Kansas's Barbara Bollier to be among the winners who build a meaningful Democratic majority. Of course, says Merkley, those are tough races. But in years that go well for the top of the Democratic ticket, prospects for Senate wins open up in unlikely places. The key is to provide the resources and the support necessary for those candidates to seize those openings—as he did in the 2008 elections, which saw eight Senate seats flip from Republicans to Democrats. "Everything I care about depends on winning the Senate. Unless we win it in November and then reform it so the minority cannot block action on the issues that matter, the Senate will continue to be rigged for the powerful," says Merkley. "We've seen that movie way too many times before. We've got to change the script."

"We've seen that movie way too many times before. We've got to change the script."

—Merkley

Ditch Mitch: Senate majority leader Mitch McConnell is running against Democratic candidate Amy McGrath in November.



GREAT READING, GREAT COFFEE



BOTH DELIVERED TO YOUR DOOR



Start your day off right with a choice of four premium sets of beans from Peru, Colombia, Uganda, and Mexico – all fair trade and organic.



Doing It Right

Our single origin gourmet coffees are sourced from the finest fair trade coffee cooperatives in the world using sustainable methods and paying fair wages.



THE Nation SHOP

Available at shop.thenation.com or by calling (844) 549-5528.



Just For You

Our coffees are roasted exclusively for *The Nation* by Big Gear Coffee of Vermont to bring out each one's distinctive character.
12 oz. bag whole-bean coffee

The Nation.

EDITORIAL DIRECTOR & PUBLISHER: Katrina vanden Heuvel

EDITOR: D.D. Guttenplan **PRESIDENT:** Erin O'Mara

EXECUTIVE DIGITAL EDITOR: Anna Hiatt

LITERARY EDITOR: David Marcus

SENIOR EDITORS: Atossa Araxia Abrahamian (*on leave*), Roane Carey, Madeline Leung Coleman (*acting*), Emily Douglas, Shuja Haider (*acting*), Lizzy Ratner, Christopher Shay

MANAGING EDITOR: Rose D'Amora

CREATIVE DIRECTOR: Robert Best

COPY DIRECTOR: Jose Fidelino

RESEARCH DIRECTOR: Miguel Salazar

COPY EDITOR: Rick Szykowny

MULTIMEDIA EDITOR: Francis Reynolds

ENGAGEMENT EDITOR: Annie Shields

ASSOCIATE LITERARY EDITOR: Kevin Lozano

ASSISTANT COPY EDITORS: Lisa Vandepaer, Haesun Kim

WEB COPY EDITOR/PRODUCER: Sandy McCroskey

ASSISTANT TO THE EDITOR: Ricky D'Ambrose

DC CORRESPONDENT: Ken Klippenstein

INTERNS: Emily Berch, Daniel Fernandez, Meerabelle Jesuthasan, Taliah Mancini, Rima Parikh, Jessica Suriano • Cindy Lee (*Design*), Sara Baig (*Business*)

NATIONAL AFFAIRS CORRESPONDENTS: Jeet Heer, John Nichols, Joan Walsh

JUSTICE CORRESPONDENT: Elie Mystal

EDITOR AT LARGE: Chris Hayes

COLUMNISTS: Eric Alterman, Laila Lalami, Katha Pollitt, Patricia J. Williams

DEPARTMENTS: *Art*, Barry Schwabsky; *Civil Rights*, Rev. Dr. William J. Barber II, *Defense*, Michael T. Klare; *Environment*, Mark Hertsgaard; *Films*, Stuart Klawans; *Legal Affairs*, David Cole; *Music*, David Hajdu, Bijan Stephen; *Poetry*, Stephanie Burt, Carmen Giménez Smith; *Sex*, JoAnn Wypijewski; *Sports*, Dave Zirin; *Strikes*, Jane McAlevey; *United Nations*, Barbara Crossette; *Deadline Poet*, Calvin Trillin

CONTRIBUTING EDITORS: Robert L. Borosage, Stephen F. Cohen, Mike Davis, Bob Dreyfuss, Susan Faludi, Thomas Ferguson, Melissa Harris-Perry, Doug Henwood, Naomi Klein, Sarah Leonard, Maria Margaronis, Michael Moore, Eyal Press, Joel Rogers, Karen Rothmyer, Robert Scheer, Herman Schwartz, Bruce Shapiro, Edward Sorel, Jon Wiener, Amy Wilentz

CONTRIBUTING WRITERS: James Carden, Zoë Carpenter, Wilfred Chan, Michelle Chen, Bryce Covert, Liza Featherstone, Laura Flanders, Julianne Hing, Joshua Holland, Greg Kaufmann, Stephen Kearse, Richard Kreitner, Julyssa Lopez, Dani McClain, Marcus J. Moore, Ismail Muhammad, Erin Schwartz, Scott Sherman, Mychal Denzel Smith, Jennifer Wilson

EDITORIAL BOARD: Emily Bell, Deepak Bhargava, Kai Bird, Barbara Ehrenreich, Frances FitzGerald, Eric Foner, Greg Grandin, Lani Guinier, Richard Kim, Tony Kushner, Elinor Langer, Malia Lazo, Richard Lingeman, Deborah W. Meier, Walter Mosley, Khalil Gibran Muhammad, Victor Navasky, Pedro Antonio Noguera, Richard Parker, Elizabeth Pochoda, Rinku Sen, Waleed Shahid, Zephyr Teachout, Dorian T. Warren, Gary Younge

ASSOCIATE PUBLISHER, SPECIAL PROJECTS: Peter Rothberg

VICE PRESIDENT, COMMUNICATIONS: Caitlin Graf

ASSOCIATE PUBLISHER, CONSUMER MARKETING: Katelyn Belyus

CONSUMER MARKETING MANAGER: Olga Nasalskaya

CIRCULATION FULFILLMENT MANAGER: Vivian Gómez-Morillo

E-MAIL MARKETING ASSISTANT: Will Herman

ASSOCIATE PUBLISHER, DEVELOPMENT: Sarah Burke

DEVELOPMENT ASSOCIATE: Guia Marie Del Prado

DEVELOPMENT ASSISTANT: Yubei Tang

ASSOCIATE PUBLISHER, ADVERTISING: Suzette Cabildo

ADVERTISING ASSISTANT: Kit Gross

DIGITAL PRODUCTS MANAGER: Joshua Leeman

IT/PRODUCTION MANAGER: John Myers

PRODUCTION COORDINATOR: Duane Stapp

DIRECTOR OF FINANCE: Denise Heller

ASSISTANT MANAGER, ACCOUNTING: Alexandra Climciuc

HUMAN RESOURCES ADMINISTRATOR: Lana Gilbert

BUSINESS ADVISER: Teresa Stack

PUBLISHER EMERITUS: Victor Navasky

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR: E-mail to letters@thenation.com (300-word limit). Please do not send attachments. Letters are subject to editing for reasons of space and clarity.

SUBMISSIONS: Go to TheNation.com/submission-guidelines for the query form.

Each issue is also made available at TheNation.com.

Letters

@thenation.com

(continued from page 2)

obscures the roles played by Amy Schur of the Alliance of Californians for Community Empowerment, Rick Jacobs of the Courage Campaign, and especially CFT president Joshua Pechthalt and their respective organizations.

FRED GLASS
BERKELEY, CALIF.

We are dealing with an emergency. California government leaders are currently asserting the state has a \$54 billion deficit and are responding by imposing more austerity.

Instead of addressing how this deficit should be filled by passing an emergency tax on the rich, McAlevey focuses on only one proposal, a necessary reform to Prop 13. If this proposal is passed by voters in November, it will result in corporations paying \$12 billion more a year in property taxes, but that money will not be raised right away.

She points out that any new taxes passed by the legislature require at least a two-thirds vote, but she fails to state that the Democrats, the supposed alternative party, now hold every executive office and have more than two-thirds of the seats in both legislative houses. That means they could immediately pass a wealth tax on California's billionaires, some of whom have seen their assets swell during the Covid-19 pandemic and who obviously do not need their billions.

I can't imagine such a tax would be anything other than overwhelmingly popular. Unfortunately, the Democrats in charge are sending the message that they prefer the billionaires keep their billions and that many others increasingly suffer.

RICK BAUM
OAKLAND, CALIF.

McAlevey Responds

Yes, there were other key leaders, including those Fred Glass mentions. It was a movement with a core of good labor and community leaders. As the communications director for the CFT during the ballot initiative, I hope readers can appreciate the difference in analysis an author can give in a 1,500-word article versus a book chapter or book. When I do the latter, all the very able and very smart people Glass lists will be sufficiently credited for their great work. I should have simply referred to Thigpen as "one of the brains" versus "the brain," as everyone Glass cites deserves heaps of credit, though I do mention the CFT and the other organizations he names.

My article never suggests that merely passing the Schools and Communities First ballot initiative was the only solution needed. It says that ending the corporate loophole in 1978's Prop 13 is, however, key. I couldn't agree more with Rick Baum about needing a billionaire tax, a millionaire tax, and more. Baum's complaint is with the Democratic leaders of California. Please take it up with them. Hell, yes, they should do what Baum says. The unions I work with are all supporting and demanding further taxes on the rich.

JANE MCALEVEY
NEW YORK CITY AND THE BAY AREA

Correction

"How to Make 'Defund the Police' a Reality" by Bryce Covert [July 13/20] incorrectly stated that the New York Police Department's budget was \$7 million in 1981. Its budget was \$714 million that year.

letters@thenation.com
Please do not send attachments

Books & the Arts



A FORM OF EXILE

J.M. Coetzee's late style

by **SIDDHARTHA DEB**

A man and a boy arrive before a low, sprawling building, hurrying to enter before it closes for the day. The place is a government office of some kind, a Centro de Reubicación in a fictional town called Novilla. Speaking in halting Spanish and unfamiliar with the word *reubicación*, the man asks the clerk for help. He is seeking employment and

Siddhartha Deb is the author of The Beautiful and the Damned: A Portrait of the New India and the novels The Point of Return and An Outline of the Republic.

a place to live. "We are new arrivals," he tells the functionary. "I have a child with me."

So begins *The Childhood of Jesus*, the first in a trilogy of novels by J.M. Coetzee that continues with *The Schooldays of Jesus* and comes to a perplexing climax in *The Death of Jesus*. What is it like to start life anew? the first novel asks. The two that follow extend this line of inquiry, working into it questions of education and labor, of parenting and love, even if the overall conclusion remains ambiguous. The novels offer no definitive answers, although they do suggest

that within this trilogy-length puzzle of what it means to begin, one might find the even bigger question of what the art of the novel means for Coetzee at this stage of his prolific career.

The opening lines of the first novel, with their sparse but carefully chosen details, prepare the reader for a kind of stripped-down realism. The Spanish relocation center is inspired, one assumes, by the global refugee crisis in Southern Europe. The reader is primed, almost by force of habit, to think of overcrowded camps along the Mediterranean, of displaced humans making their slow,

painful way north, hoping against hope to secure the benefits reluctantly offered by the residual welfare states of Europe. And because the series bears the aura of Jesus's name, one also expects a touch of allegory, the kind of symbolism beloved of the dominant writers, artists, and human rights campaigners of our time. A liberal message about Jesus resurrected and retrofitted for our contemporary turbulence, one thinks. What could be a more apt response to authoritarian demagogues and their border walls? Jesus, after all, was a refugee.

Yet as we make our own uncertain way through the trilogy, we begin to realize that the contemporary refugee crisis provides little more than a rudimentary scaffold for the questions Coetzee is interested in pursuing. We see the occasional obtuseness of the city bureaucracy, the generosity of the stevedores among whom Simón, the man, finds work carrying sacks of grain, and the eccentricity of the neighbors encountered by David, the child, at the housing complex where the new arrivals are assigned an apartment. Throughout, we look for the clues that might give us insight into the trilogy's titles, the signs that might be portents. And yet steadily, almost every element of the novels' interpretive schema crumbles, before it completely falls apart.

Simón, it turns out, is not David's father but a fellow refugee met on their boat. His mother is believed to be somewhere in Novilla, but they have no name or description for her, even though Simón believes he will recognize her by instinct. And as he and David go about their existence, life in Novilla turns out to be safe but dull. The diet is composed mostly of bread, the labor largely manual, the interactions among adults more or less devoid of erotic charge. Workers can attend philosophy classes, and all the buses are free. We begin to realize that Coetzee has led us into—rather than an allegory of our contemporary world or a representation of Jesus's—an in-between nowhere place, a mildly oppressive utopia or a relatively humane dystopia, a paradoxical realm where human beings arrive, no matter their age, as if they had just been born.

Readers of Coetzee have been in such a world before, although it may take them a while to realize it. In 2003, the year he received the Nobel Prize, he published the beguiling *Elizabeth Costello*. Structured as a series of lectures delivered by its eponymous protagonist, a writer and fierce campaigner for animal rights, the novel features talks that had

The Childhood of Jesus

By J.M. Coetzee
Penguin Books. 288 pp. \$16

The Schooldays of Jesus

By J.M. Coetzee
Penguin Books. 272 pp. \$16

The Death of Jesus

By J.M. Coetzee
Penguin Books. 208 pp. \$27

been delivered by Coetzee, a vegetarian who has written about animal rights. And if this metafictional slippage is insufficient, *Elizabeth Costello* goes even further: It includes a dazzling chapter, "At the Gate," that is a reworking of the "Before the Law" episode in Kafka's *The Trial*.

In contrast with the realist locations where Costello delivers her lectures, mostly colleges and universities in the West, this final chapter presents her disembarking from a bus in a town that has not much specificity to it and whose minimalist features (cafés, a windowless dormitory for new arrivals, and a bandstand on which the musicians play Strauss waltzes) seem to belong to "an obscure Italian or Austro-Italian border town in the year 1912." Costello, otherwise our contemporary, has, it seems, slipped into a time that is not historical so much as an amalgamation of the literary and the metaphysical. Beyond the gate lies the great unknown, visible to her—when a guard allows her a peek—only as a flash of blinding light. "The journey that brought her here, to this country, to this town, that seemed to reach its end when the bus halted and its door opened on to the crowded square, was not the end of it all."

One wonders if her arrival is a gesture toward the afterlife. Many of the novel's lectures, after all, are concerned with questions of aging, physical decline, and death. But if so, this gesture comes with a twist: When asked by the authorities in charge of the gate to write a statement of her faith, Costello has trouble articulating this in a manner both truthful and emotionally satisfying to her. God has failed in her world, as has socialism; she cannot even quite believe in art anymore. And so the novel ends, leaving us with a question: What is the afterlife for those who do not believe in one?

This question of belief and its absence—*aesthetic and metaphysical*—animates the *Jesus* trilogy as well. Like *Elizabeth Costello*, the novels take place in a world that veers

away from realism as well as allegory. Even if a Kafkaesque realm circa 1912 is not quite the setting, Novilla and Estrella, where Simón and David move later, are cities that deliberately deny the contemporary. There are televisions but no cell-phones, cars but no aircraft, soccer but no Internet. Yet what makes the *Jesus* novels even more disorienting, perhaps, is that their rejection of realism and contemporary reality comes not at the end point of a life, as with *Elizabeth Costello*, but is instead inserted into an existence that is both at its beginning and its end, where the arc of a life flashes by so quickly that one might wonder if it existed at all.

Five years old in *The Childhood of Jesus*, David is 10 by the time the trilogy comes to a close. In those five years of living, the questions about art, God, morality, and politics that so troubled Costello abound. Now, however, they are inflected with an even greater ambiguity. Seen largely through the eyes of Simón, one of a series of father figures encountered in the novels, David is an unsettling character for the reader. In the first novel, he is initially portrayed as an ordinary child, understandably bereft in his new, bewildering surroundings, his metaphysical questions only as troubling as those encountered from the lips of anyone that age. Yet Coetzee is only sporadically interested in interiority and relationships, and the trilogy takes the first of its many perverse turns when Simón, against the desperate protestations of David, hands him over, along with the apartment he has been allotted by the Novilla bureaucracy, to a woman called Inés.

Even though Inés is clearly not David's biological mother or particularly maternal—her days until then involved playing tennis with her two brothers in the company of a German shepherd called Bolívar—Simón is certain that this is the mother David was destined to have. At first reluctant to assume such a role, Inés eventually accepts this responsibility, even as David's behavior puts him at odds with a series of educational institutions. Although this leads at the end of the first book to Inés and Simón's fleeing with David, his resistance to all but the most unconventional forms of pedagogy persists in *The Schooldays of Jesus*, where David, now nearly 7, has enrolled in what is called the Academy of Dance. There he falls under the tutelage of a mysterious musician, Señor Arroyo, and his charismatic wife, Ana Magdalena, and can finally

THE Nation.

Explore *The Nation* Online

Make the most of your subscription

Activate your online access on your phone or computer to get all that *The Nation* has to offer: [TheNation.com/register](https://www.thenation.com/register)



IN YOUR
INBOX

Subscribe to our newsletters

DAILY

WEEKLY

OPPART



ON YOUR
HEAD-
PHONES

Listen to our podcasts




IN OUR
ARCHIVES

Over 150 years of truth-telling journalism



ATHENA PHEROMONES™


INCREASE AFFECTION



Created by
Winnifred Cutler,
Ph.D. in biology from
U. of Penn, post-doc
Stanford. Co-
discovered human
pheromones in 1986

*Author of 8
books on wellness
and 50+
scientific papers.*

PROVEN EFFECTIVE IN 3 DOUBLE-BLIND STUDIES



ATHENA PHEROMONES™
increase your attractiveness.

Athena 10X™ For Men \$99.50
10:13™ For Women \$98.50
Cosmetics Free U.S. Shipping

♥ **Maggie (NY)** “When I have the Athena on, people will stop me and say ‘oh my god, you smell so good.’ The UPS man was the real clincher. For years this man would come in, nod hello and leave. But once I put on the 10:13 he walked in, stopped, turned around and stared. ‘Has anyone told you you are so beautiful?’”

Not in stores **610-827-2200**
Athenainstitute.com

Athena Institute, Braefield Rd, Chester Spgs, PA 19425 NTN

indulge his singular epistemology, which revolves around the notions that the only book worth reading is *Don Quixote* and that numbers are connected to the stars. When he performs his special “dance of Seven” at an academy gathering, the effect is uncanny: “As if the earth has lost its downward power, the boy seems to shed all bodily weight,” Simón observes, “to become pure light.”

As we make our way through *The Schooldays of Jesus*, we begin to realize there is more than just the ethereal to David. His resistance to learning and his difficult relationship with adults contain something other than trauma, something that seems to be almost a thought experiment on Coetzee’s part, a dismissal of theories of both nature and nurture in relation to the development of a child. Characters flit in and out of David’s penumbra, the other children reduced mostly to bit parts. Toward Simón, who often comes across as pedantic and affectless, David is willful and dismissive. Inés, he treats as his follower.

Then there is Dmitri, encountered first as a doorman at the Academy of Dance, a large, slovenly figure given to showing

pornography to the children and fixated on Ana Magdalena. David, who seems strangely drawn to him, becomes even more interested after Dmitri sexually assaults and murders Ana Magdalena. A long, confusing trial leads not so much to Dmitri’s incarceration as to frequent encounters between him and David, whom Dmitri considers his “king.”

The Death of Jesus picks up their stories after the trial. With the Academy of Dance temporarily shut down, David takes to soccer. Revealing himself to be a gifted winger on the field, he is scouted by a man who runs an orphanage. David moves there, abandoning Simón and Inés, but his tenure as a player at the orphanage proves to be brief, and soon he is reacquainted with Dmitri: A mysterious ailment leads to a long hospitalization for David, and Dmitri resurfaces as a hospital worker. The doctors are unable to diagnose David’s illness, and midway through the novel comes the death signposted in the title. This is a bold move for any novelist, but David’s death brings no closure. Instead, the mystery continues, as Dmitri believes himself to be the sole recipient of a message from David, even if the content of that message, he writes in a long letter to Simón, “is still obscure.” For Simón, struggling with sorrow after David’s death and leafing through their copy of *Don Quixote* as if it were “a relic,” there is no message at all or at least none that can ever be known. The question of faith and its absence that we saw in *Elizabeth Costello* returns but in even more contradictory fashion, leaving us with almost nothing beyond the fact of the labor that has produced this puzzling trilogy.

Writing about the works produced in the twilight of an artist’s career, Edward Said marked out for special scrutiny those in which the artist’s “late style” was expressed “not as harmony and resolution but as intransigence, difficulty, and unresolved contradiction.” Building on a phrase and idea taken from Adorno, Said used Ibsen to make his point. Ibsen’s final plays—in particular *When We Dead Awaken*—offer, in contrast with Shakespeare, not harmony, Said explains, but only “an occasion to stir up more anxiety, tamper irrevocably with the possibility of closure, and leave the audience more perplexed and unsettled than before.” As description, this seems quite apt for Coetzee’s *Jesus* trilogy, which raises so many questions and offers almost no definitive answers.

One wonders, for instance, in spite of the intermittent allegorical elements, whether the problem being wrestled with here is art rather than religion. It is an interpretation given some weight by the recurrent, quasi-talismanic status of *Don Quixote* and by the possible reading of David as a variation on its archetypal fictional protagonist as much as a version of Jesus of Nazareth, a boyish echo of the late knight of La Mancha. If David is adrift, it is perhaps also because he is traveling through a form that, while new to Cervantes, is undeniably worn some four centuries later in the hands of Coetzee.

Much of Coetzee’s career has, in fact, tilted at the windmills of literary realism. The struggle is there in his first book, 1974’s *Dusklands*, with its twinned but stylistically quite different novellas that take on the Vietnam War and colonialism in southern Africa. The campaign is continued in anti-apartheid works like *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Life and Times of Michael K*. Only in his most popular novel, *Disgrace*, does he offer us something of an exception, one that comes across as the norm only because its thematically freighted realism—of white masculinity in postapartheid South Africa—was rewarded by prize committees, winning its author the Booker for a second time as well as reliable placement in liberal arts curricula everywhere.

Coetzee’s angular relationship with realism has grown only more acute after he was awarded the Nobel and moved from South Africa to Australia. His subsequent fictional works appear to campaign against realism with even greater intensity. *Elizabeth Costello* was followed by *Slow Man*, another novel about the aging body that also features Costello, who appears a third of the way through, claiming that its protagonist is a character in a novel she is working on. Coetzee’s challenge to the realist form found its most singular expression in 2007’s *Diary of a Bad Year*. Riffing on Defoe’s *A Journal of the Plague Year*—a work that suddenly has its own ominous valence—Coetzee produced not so much a novel as an extended set of essays on the modern state. The narrative element reduced mostly to footnotes, the main text of the novel involved a series of treatises by Señor C, a writer who, like Coetzee, has just immigrated to Australia from South Africa and who excoriates Anglo-American democracy for its self-congratulatory rhetoric even as it

leaves in its wake the wreckage of the Iraq War, Abu Ghraib, and Guantánamo.

If not realist, though, there was no doubt that Coetzee was addressing the moment in *Diary of a Bad Year*. There was no escape or evasion here, only a fiercely moral intelligence that has been in operation since his earliest works of fiction, a courage to take on the same liberal Anglo-American world that has, by and large, celebrated his status as an artist. The *Jesus* trilogy, however, while rejecting realism, seems also to jettison the contemporary world. Readers must make their way through a series of novels that do not seem to pose political questions and whose metaphysics often appear to pertain to a realm far removed from that of humanity. There are barely any reference points, only a bewildering succession of Spanish names in a land that could be anywhere vaguely European and where all the characters—other than perhaps David, the boy knight-king—are devoid of memories.

So, just as the past is more or less absent, the present in the *Jesus* novels (and in particular the final one) is not fully substantial, either. In spite of the housing and work and food provided to new arrivals, everyone is in some deep sense unhoused. Different as the adult characters Simón, Inés, and Dmitri may be from one another, they all give the impression of wandering through the fragmentary remnants of modernity—the state, the novel, and realism. They are in exile in a manner that sidesteps the contemporary questions we thought in the beginning they were intended to examine: border control regimes, displaced people from the Global South, the new authoritarianism.

There is no reason to believe, given Coetzee's long writing career, that he is not opposed to the latest manifestations of cruelty expressed by the modern state. But the *Jesus* novels also suggest that the estrangement felt by their characters—and by us as readers—while disquieting and profound, occupies an uneasy relationship to our alienation from the contemporary. In *Diary of a Bad Year*, Señor C talks about a helpless “quietism” that has become the norm for citizens of modern Western democracies, an “inner emigration.” But in writing an allegory that is barely an allegory and a trilogy of novels that are often not novels, Coetzee appears to have made his own literary displacement total, external as well as internal. Drawing on Adorno, Said spoke of difficult late works as constituting, for the intransigent artist, “a form of exile.” Coetzee's late work is exemplary in that regard. ■



DOING A COUP

The many lives of Catherine the Great

by SOPHIE PINKHAM

Popular protest has been raging around the world for years now, but the streaming services and networks are still churning out shows about monarchs. Absolute power never loses its appeal, at least where television is concerned. *The Last Czars*, *The White Princess*, *Victoria*, *The Spanish Princess*, *Versailles*, *Reign*, *The White Queen*, *Wolf Hall*—take your pick. Female rulers have proved especially alluring, giving screenwriters a chance to hash out contemporary anxieties

Sophie Pinkham holds a PhD in Slavic languages and literature from Columbia and is the author of Black Square: Adventures in Post-Soviet Ukraine.

about women and politics against a palace background.

Catherine the Great, one of history's most accomplished and longest-reigning female monarchs, is the imperial star of the moment. In 2019, HBO released *Catherine the Great*, a Helen Mirren vehicle that focused on Catherine's long relationship with her minister Potemkin. The show had lots of sex—in one scene, Catherine watches Potemkin get a hand job at the opera from her best friend—but it also emphasized her famous workaholicism and interest in science, and it devoted significant attention to her smallpox inoculation campaign. (Catherine had herself and her son inoculated by a Scottish doctor in 1768 and

arranged for inoculations across Russia.) The series was a fairly traditional period drama, jewel-toned and sticking more or less to the facts.

Now Hulu offers us *The Great*, a very different approach to Catherinology. Scripted by Tony McNamara, who cowrote 2018's *The Favourite*, *The Great* declares itself only "an occasionally true story." Beginning with the arrival of the teenage Catherine (Elle Fanning)

in St. Petersburg, the show condenses the events of nearly two decades—her introduction at court, her painfully long betrothal to the German duke who would become Peter III, their eventual marriage, and her successful coup against him—into just a few months, with countless jokey anachronisms along the way.

The Great begins with the delicate, flaxen-haired Catherine hoping to be the heroine of a happy love story. She soon realizes that her destiny lies not with a husband but with Russia itself. She aspires to enlighten the barbaric Russians by introducing universal education, the printing press, freedom of speech, and modern medicine and to put an end to pointless war. And yet with its odd combination of demeaning sex jokes, would-be screwball comedy, and winks to liberal feminism, *The Great* makes Catherine look much less capable than she truly was. Turning away from the political aspects of her romantic liaisons, the series pretends that sex and power can be isolated in the story of a woman who was summoned to Russia to bear an heir to the throne.

Catherine began her life as a minor German princess, Sophia Friederike Auguste of Anhalt-Zerbst. She was plucked from obscurity when she was chosen as a bride for Peter, a grandson of Peter the Great. Accompanied by her difficult mother, the 14-year-old Sophia traveled to St. Petersburg, where she became Grand Duchess Ekaterina Alekseyevna, or Catherine.

The childless Empress Elizabeth had retrieved her nephew Peter from his native Holstein years earlier, in the hope that this new heir would promptly father a son

and thus fortify her claim to the throne. Peter was a terrible disappointment—undersized, unprepossessing, and resistant to all attempts at education. Orphaned early and later brutally abused by his German tutor, he was emotionally and physically damaged. He despised everything Russian and worshipped the Prussian king Frederick the Great, forcing his servants to perform Prussian-style military drills for his amusement.

Elizabeth took an immediate shine to the tactful, attractive, and eminently educable Catherine, who seemed to have enough good qualities to compensate for Peter's many flaws. Canny and ambitious even as a teenager, she did everything she could to please the empress.

Catherine stayed up late into the night studying Russian, soon mastering the language; embraced Russian Orthodoxy, at least in public; and professed her Russian patriotism early and often. Although she was hardly enchanted by Peter, she knew that love was not the aim of marriages like hers and did her best to be pleasant. This became even harder when Peter told her about his infatuations with various other ladies of the court and after his face was disfigured by a bout of smallpox. Nevertheless, she persisted.

Elizabeth was desperate for the young pair to be married and produce a child, but for years the court doctor insisted that Peter wasn't ready to become a father. The exact reasons for the doctor's concern are unknown, but there are abundant possibilities. Malnutrition may have delayed Peter's puberty; some have speculated that he had a tight foreskin that inhibited sexual activity. His excruciatingly traumatic childhood probably didn't set him up for a lifetime of healthy relationships, and it was becoming clear that he was insane.

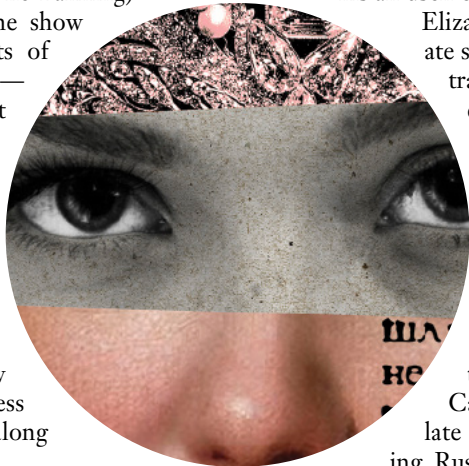
When the pair finally married in 1745, neither, it seems, had any knowledge of the nature of the sexual act. On their wedding night Catherine lay alone in bed for hours, waiting for Peter to show up and do something to her, but she had little idea what that something might be. When he did arrive, he was very drunk (he'd been boozing since childhood) and promptly fell asleep. It seems likely they never consummated

their marriage. Peter spoiled Catherine's rest by playing with toy soldiers late into the night, weighing down the bedspread with his regiments.

Dismayed by the fruitlessness of the union, Elizabeth had the unhappy couple confined and surveilled for evidence of unfaithfulness. Peter was eventually assigned an experienced widow to teach him the ways of love (or at least sexual intercourse), and he proceeded to take up with various ladies-in-waiting, though he remained demonstratively indifferent to Catherine's charms. She began her own sexual career at age 23, when she was seduced by a handsome, rakish nobleman named Sergei Saltykov. Their affair became common knowledge at court, and no one was much troubled by it. When Catherine became pregnant, it was cause for celebration. Without making any fuss, Peter claimed paternity for the infant, Paul. Elizabeth took the baby at birth and raised him as her own, smothering him with affection and furs.

Catherine's next lover was the gallant, cosmopolitan Stanislaus Poniatowski, a Polish prince resident at the Russian court. A virgin when they fell in love, he was something of an ideal boyfriend for her. As the biographer Robert Massie puts it, "He expressed admiration not merely for her title and beauty but also for Catherine's mind and temperament, which both he and she recognized as superior to his own." She had a daughter, Anna, from this relationship. Snatched by Elizabeth at birth, the child died in infancy.

When Elizabeth died of a stroke in 1762, Peter became emperor. During his disastrous six-month reign and despite all his experience with toy soldiers, he managed to enrage the military, the church, and much of the Russian elite. With the help of her third lover, the dashing war hero Grigory Orlov, Catherine took the throne in a coup d'état. She donned a soldier's uniform, mounted a white stallion, and led 14,000 troops from St. Petersburg to arrest her husband at the royal residence at Oranienbaum. It wasn't very hard: As Frederick the Great observed, Peter "allowed himself to be dethroned like a child being sent to bed." A few days later, Grigory Orlov's brother Aleksei Orlov strangled Peter, supposedly after they drank too much at lunch. His death was declared the result of colic, and his injuries were concealed at his open-casket funeral. Catherine was now the empress, autocrat of all the Russias.



In *The Great*, we meet Catherine as a starry-eyed teenager arriving in St. Petersburg implausibly alone, full of romantic illusions. Unlike his historical prototype, the show's Peter (Nicholas Hoult) is tall and handsome. More realistically, he is also fatuous, ignorant, vulgar, and given to idiotic pranks. At their first meeting, he pretends to reject Catherine and then tells her she smells funny. She chalks his bad behavior up to "cultural issues" and remains certain that they will soon be as one. Rather than waiting two years for her wedding and many more for the consummation of their marriage, Fanning's Catherine is immediately subjected to Peter's attentions, such as they are. As she waits for him on their wedding night, she tells her maid what she expects from the sexual act: "You float for a time in ecstasy, before waves of pleasure push and pull you back into your body." Peter strolls in, gives her a casual kiss, pushes her onto the bed, and ejaculates without interrupting his conversation with a male friend, who waits for him at the door. The scene is played for laughs, but it's disturbing.

Depictions of Catherine have focused disproportionately on her sex life. Sometimes this is in the service of torrid biographical drama; in other cases, sex is used to deride her. More negative portrayals have often cast her as sexually insatiable. This is the case with many female rulers—as if a woman's political ambition were a variety of nymphomania. But Catherine's long list of lovers makes her a particularly easy target for this trope. After Peter's death, she took on a succession of favorites, mostly handsome military men in their 20s. (To be the favorite was a quasi-official post, complete with chambers, a sign-on bonus, and a roster of official duties. The usual term was two years.) An aging emperor's enthusiasm for beautiful young lovers would hardly have attracted notice, but empresses were held to other standards. As Catherine got older and her favorites remained the same age, tongues wagged. Obscene caricatures and jokes about her circulated in Russia and across Europe, uniting misogyny with Russophobia. After the 67-year-old Catherine died of a stroke, a scurrilous rumor circulated that she was killed in an accident while having sex with her favorite stallion.

The Great makes frequent references to this rumor, which yields plenty of ribald jokes. Here the story of her dalliances with a horse is invented by the ladies of the Russian court, who think Catherine is a "bitch." She keeps telling people the

rumor isn't true, but as the Swedish queen tells her, "the first lie wins." What's striking is that despite the show's often tiresome raunchiness, it sanitizes Catherine's sex life, erasing the children she had with her lovers and giving her nothing more than the wholesome sexual appetite of your average rom-com heroine. While this negates the vicious, misogynistic rumors about her sexual insatiability, it also denies simple historical realities by decoupling her sexual relationships from her rise to power.

Though Fanning's Catherine is resolutely optimistic about her prospects for marital bliss, she loses her composure when Peter burns down her school for girls, hits her, and kills her pet bear. Noting their incompatibility and her lack of sexual enthusiasm for him, Peter proposes a kind of open marriage and presents her with a lover. According to Peter, the handsome, compact Leo is smart, can recite sonnets, is conveniently sterile, and "has a pretty big cock." Catherine rejects Leo at first but takes him back when Peter brutally beats him for failing to please her. It's not that she wants Leo, particularly; she's just a nice girl who doesn't like to see a man kicked to death before her eyes. In time, she claims her sexual agency and has sex with him. He confesses that he has minimal sexual experience. The sex is good, and she and Leo fall in love.

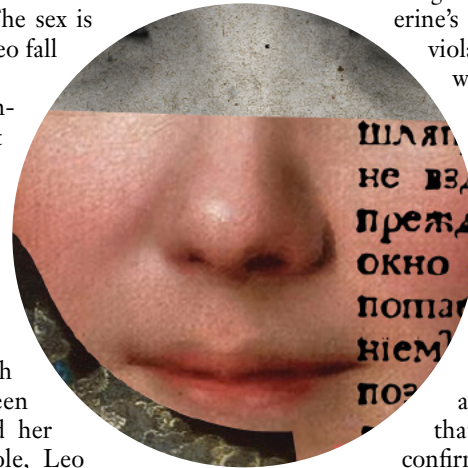
Now that Catherine has sorted out her love life, *The Great* turns to the burning question of her work-life balance. Like so many ambitious women, she soon finds herself struggling with the tensions between her relationship and her career. On the whole, Leo is a supportive partner, smiling approvingly when she outlines her plans for universal education just before she has an orgasm. (She's on top.) But she hasn't been entirely honest with him. She's been concealing her plans for a coup. When Leo gets sulky about all her work meetings and threatens to leave, she realizes that secrecy is imperiling her relationship. Her helpful maid tells Leo the truth. It turns out that Leo is fine with being Mr. Catherine the Great, even if he doesn't have much to contribute conspiracywise. However, as if reminding us that Catherine really can't

have it all, the show produces, at the end of the season, another reason for her to choose between relationship and career. She chooses her coup.

The Great's divergence from historical fact is not, of course, a fault in itself. Any anachronism is acceptable, as long as the artistic results are good. But in the name of lean-in feminism, *The Great* disentangles sex and power, even though this nexus is an essential part of the real Catherine's story. The show has nothing perceptive to say about how Catherine navigated the dangerous straits of sex and politics during a period when her position at court was extremely precarious. Rather than being her lover and the father of her child as well as her coconspirator, the show's version of Orlov, Count Orlo, is comically sexless, a kind of intellectual eunuch whom she gets to know thanks to their shared love of reading clever books. When Catherine is advised to secure Orlo's cooperation by seducing him, he flees in horror at her clumsy attempt. The show's revisions manifest a modern conviction that sex and work occupy separate realms and that a smart woman will choose a high-powered job over a love affair. But historically women's lives have not been so simple.

Though *The Great* shows Catherine's bodily integrity being violated in a wide variety of ways, it offers no insight into how it feels to be treated as a public vessel. Shortly after she arrives at the Russian court, the grossly ahistorical archbishop (played by the gawky, baleful Adam Godley) licks his fingers with a flourish, announcing that he will personally confirm her virginity. Catherine is strangely unfazed. Later,

a fat, drunk, old general tackles her, tries to rape her, and then loses control of his bladder while on top of her. We learn later that the general will help her with the coup, but there is never any consideration of the relationship between these two events. She isn't even safe in the company of women: She fields a proposal from her husband's daffy, sex-crazed Aunt Elizabeth (here not an empress) to boost her fertility by inserting Chinese bamboo sticks into her vagina. Watching these distasteful episodes, I was puzzled about their intention. Are we



meant to admire Catherine's imperviousness to sexual assault? Or were these scenes just misguided slapstick?

The *Great* invites us to sympathize with Catherine. She is presented as a highly intelligent, ambitious, competent woman in a patriarchal system. She is a helper, a reformer who wishes to bring freedom, goodness, and light to a barbaric land. Also, she's young and pretty. What's not to like? The show makes no allusion to her backsliding on Enlightenment ideals or her endless appetite for self-celebration—fair enough, since it deals only with the years before she was empress. But the show fails to make you like Catherine, because her character is terribly unconvincing. We're reminded

at every turn that she's really, really smart, but she does things that don't make her look very smart at all. She tries to mail herself home in a trunk, and she keeps the details of her coup plot on a large bulletin board in her bedroom. Her supposed intelligence is indicated mostly through frequent mentions of abstract and proper nouns. She never stops reminding us that she loves books! And ideas! Plus she's met Descartes. (Never mind that in reality, he lived a century before her.)

Catherine educates Peter about the virtues of modern medicine. After rejecting a plan to quash a smallpox outbreak by burning sick servants alive, she leaps up on a table and announces to the court that she has procured some smallpox-infected pus from the court doctor. "If we place it in

the bloodstream, a tiny amount, our body learns to accommodate it, so it will not kill us," she explains. "It is not unlike freedom. We absorb a small amount, knowing it is not dangerous.... The press freed us, did it not?" (She previously introduced the printing press to Russia, arguing that the free exchange of ideas could only strengthen the country.) She cuts herself and dabs pus into the wound. To the court's surprise, she never becomes ill. Take that, anti-vaxxers!

In another heavy nod to the zeitgeist, the show includes many jokes about women's innate superiority. On a peacemaking expedition, Catherine chats with the Swedish queen. As the two women speak wisely about matters of state, their husbands get drunk and make lewd jokes. Later, Elizabeth tells Catherine, "Most women die with an unsaid better idea in their hearts." The rape jokes have subsided, and we're on safer, more familiar ground. Run for office! Kill your incompetent emperor! Huzzah!

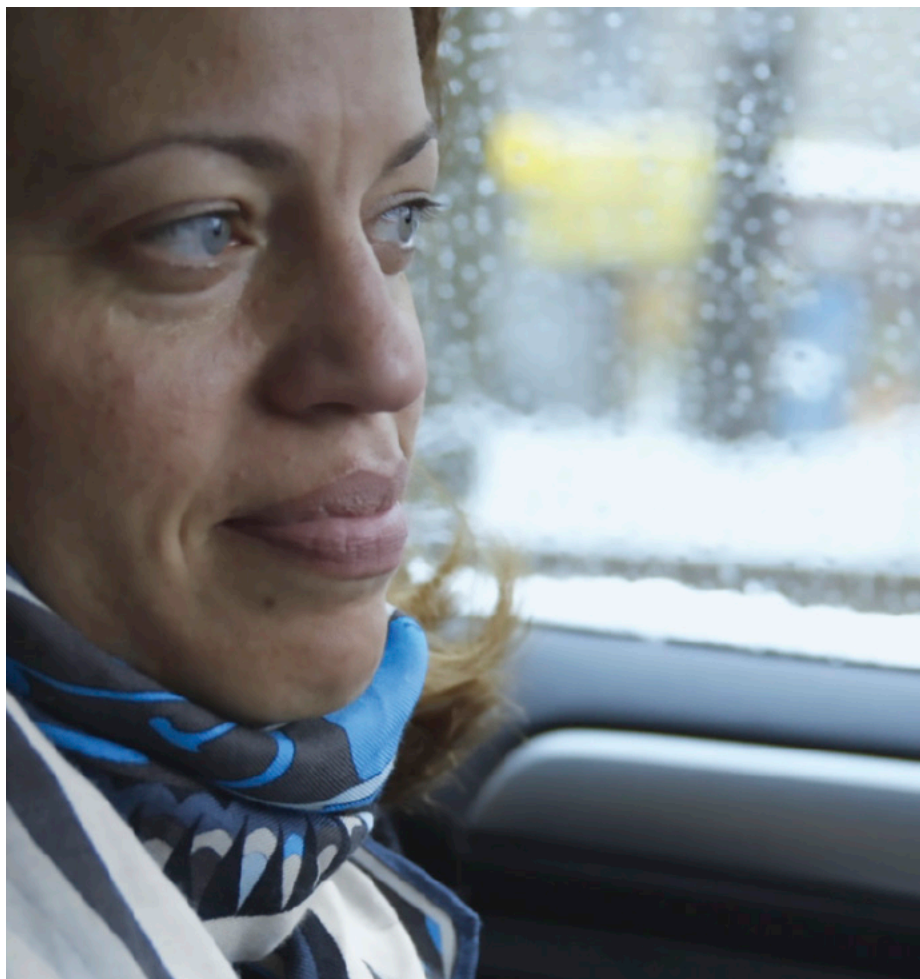
But a belief in the moral superiority of women makes it harder to stomach the real-life Catherine's complicity in her husband's murder. (Though she doesn't seem to have ordered it or known about it in advance, she certainly helped create its preconditions.) *The Great* ties itself in knots as it tries to cope with this dilemma. There are jokes from the very first episode about Catherine killing her husband, and we see plenty of reasons she might want to murder him. But the show is also sure to remind us that if she is "doing a coup," it's for the good of Russia, not for her own advancement. She proclaims that she wants "a coup of ideas, not bloodshed." Just as you can't silo sex and power in the real Catherine's story, you can't disentangle power and violence. This is a story about an autocrat, after all.

What do we want from the famous women we admire? *The Great's* answer is that someone like Catherine should be sexy but not manipulative or voracious, feisty but not tormented or prone to rage, well read but in a fun way. Her hair and skin should be flawless, she should love art and believe in science, and she should understand that women deserve to have orgasms. She should be smarter and more competent than her husband, and she should dispense with her lover if she's summoned to a greater destiny—but she shouldn't land the fatal blows herself. *The Great* makes Catherine's rise to power into a naughty, frothy empowerment tale, albeit one with lots of dark humor. But history isn't a rom-com, and an empress isn't a girlboss. ■

Saviors

Spiders under the furniture
cut loose the papery drained bodies
as simple testaments
of just how valuable they have been
how surrounded we were

ALLAN PETERSON



COMING FORWARD

HBO's *On the Record*

by STEPHEN KEARSE

When accusing powerful men of sexual assault, women of color anticipate a higher burden of proof and a slimmer margin for error. *On the Record* seethes at this plight. In frank detail, the documentary recounts the multiple sexual assault and rape allegations against hip-hop mogul Russell Simmons and his accusers' struggles to go public. Codirected by Kirby Dick and Amy Ziering, documentarians who previously chronicled sexual assault on college campuses (*The Hunting Ground*) and in the military (*The Invisible War*), the film uses the harrowing

accounts of Simmons's accusers to examine Black women's double jeopardy when it comes to making such accusations. Drew Dixon, who once worked as an A&R executive at Simmons's famed Def Jam label, serves as the film's lodestar. She was interviewed before, during, and after she agreed to participate in a *New York Times* story on the accusations against him, and her difficult choice to go on the record becomes the heart of the film.

In content and form, *On the Record* departs from the growing catalog of exposés on sexual abuse in the entertainment industry. Whereas works like *Surviving R. Kelly* and *Leaving Neverland* are organized around the tabloid allure of mighty figures plummeting from grace, *On the Record* holds Simmons at

a distance, focusing on his alleged actions rather than his mythos. When he does appear in photographs and archival footage, his behavior and demeanor are mostly casual and unexceptional. Instead of a uniquely monstrous figure, he comes across as an archetypal workplace harasser. No matter how extraordinary a life Simmons has led or how critical he has been in turning hip-hop into a global force, in *On the Record*, he's just a sexual predator.

The willingness to depict Simmons in this fashion elevates the film from true crime to something more probing. As *On the Record* helps give voice to the women's stories, it also becomes clear that for Black women in particular, the public and the record are fraught resources. While the film, frustratingly, never defines what "on the record" means for journalism, it excels at laying out the mental calculus women perform when choosing between silence and disclosure. For the women in this film, to seek accountability is to risk victim blaming, professional retaliation, and ugly accusations of betraying the Black community, outcomes that many of them expect even in the age of Me Too. As a result, the case of Simmons—who now has 20 named accusers, as well as a documented history of harassment at his yoga studio—calls on us to build new systems of accountability and to question the existing ones.

Before landing at HBO Max, *On the Record* faced a vexed path to release. The film was originally supposed to be distributed by Apple's streaming service, Apple TV+, with Oprah Winfrey as its executive producer, but two weeks before its premiere at the Sundance Film Festival, Winfrey and Apple dropped out of the project. In a statement to *The Hollywood Reporter*, Winfrey said, "In my opinion, there is more work to be done on the film to illuminate the full scope of what the victims endured and it has become clear that the filmmakers and I are not aligned in that creative vision." A week later it was reported that she had been lobbied to abandon the film by Simmons himself as well as by his supporters, among them 50 Cent, who suggested that Winfrey had a vendetta against Black men because of her support for *Leaving Neverland*, which recounts the sexual abuse allegations against Michael Jackson. It was also revealed that before Winfrey's departure, the film went through multiple cuts due to her concerns that Dick and Ziering, who are white, lacked sufficient knowledge of hip-hop and Black history.

Stephen Kearsse is a contributing writer for *The Nation* and has also written for *The Baffler*, *Pitchfork*, and *The New York Times Magazine*.

These production woes can be felt at times in the film's brisk pacing, but they do not undermine its core strengths.

By detaching itself from Simmons's legacy, *On the Record* centers the women's

stories. Alongside Dixon, the activist and former model Sil Lai Abrams and the author and singer Sheri Sher speak about their encounters with Simmons. Each woman recalls the professional and personal con-

sequences of her alleged assault, how workplaces and intimate relationships became poisoned as a result.

The film gives the most time to Dixon's derailment. After her alleged assault, she quit her job at Def Jam despite her quick advancement there, which had been painful, she says, because Simmons harassed her throughout her employment. She found another position at Arista Records for a few years, but after the man who hired her left, his replacement, L.A. Reid, harassed her as well, she says. (In 2017, Reid left his position at Sony Music after her accusations against him came to light.) That Dixon's work experience was one of recurrent harassment is an indictment of not merely the perpetrators but the recording industry as a whole.

How Becoming a Mother Is Like Space Travel

The astronaut told us
he didn't look out the window
for eight and a half minutes
as the rocket launched him
beyond our atmosphere.
Terrifying things happened—
ground vanished, boosters
exploded, day became
night—and he did not look.
He was focusing,
he said, on his job.

He was up there
a long time. He learned
to sleep suspended. He learned
how the sunrise looks
when you watch it every morning
from the soft dark mouth
of space. Many things,
he told us, were different
than he'd once expected.
There's no space ice cream,
he said. *That's a big boax.*
His vision blurred.
His body became a study:
blood, appetite, cognitive function.

He took many pictures.
All of them were beautiful.
None of them showed
what it was like to float.

When the astronaut returned
to earth, more tests were run.
Scientists discovered that
seven percent of his genes
had changed in space.
He left the planet
as himself. He came back
as himself, rearranged.

The symmetries in the women's accounts are as powerful as the individual tellings. Abrams, like Dixon, left the fashion industry after her alleged assault, and Sher, a member of the pioneering all-women rap group Mercedes Ladies, found herself clearly conflicted. Because Simmons was funding the group's demo, making her accusations against him public would mean potentially sabotaging Mercedes Ladies' chances for success. Those kinds of power imbalances played into Simmons's behavior, which allegedly often involved luring women to his apartment to discuss their careers.

While detailing the accusers' stories, Ziering and Dick zoom out to consider the wider context of hip-hop during Simmons's reign. In the film's telling, the machismo that drove much of hip-hop's ascent in the late 1980s was couched in a sense of Black power and Black cool that implicitly excluded women, laying the groundwork for casual and explicit misogyny. The film does not scapegoat rap, however, and in a punchy montage linking rock, blues, and punk songs, the filmmakers make it clear that misogyny is a music problem, not just a rap problem. Rather than putting hip-hop on trial, *On the Record* is interested in exploring Black women's particular stake in the genre as listeners and participants and, in the case of Simmons's accusers, as workers.

The film's commentators widen that view even further. Through interviews with experts like Tarana Burke, the activist who helped start Me Too; the cultural critic Joan Morgan; and the legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, the film connects the dismissal of Black women's accounts of sexual assault to slavery, police brutality, and Eurocentric

beauty norms. The interviews also describe the tightrope that many Black women walk when it comes to sexual crimes perpetrated by Black men; they know that to point to the Mike Tysons and Bill Cosbys of the world can also invoke the specter of the Emmett Tills and Mack Charles Parkers. Between the grim history of such crimes being trumped up and falsified by racist fears and the grim reality that they do happen, Black women are left adrift. They feel as if they are forced to choose their community or themselves, with neither choice ensuring their safety and both being unfairly restricted.

Dixon in particular notes that the public censures of Anita Hill and Desiree Washington informed her decision to remain silent about her accusations—a comparison that communicates not only how much power Simmons wielded at the time but also how one miscarriage of justice has consequences for others. The film would have benefited from digging further into the history of conflicts between Black men and women. From former Black Panther Elaine Brown leaving the party over its internal chauvinism to rapper and reporter Dee Barnes getting disparaged by N.W.A for going public about her alleged assault by Dr. Dre, the precedent for Dixon's experience runs deeper than

the movie suggests. Despite this, however, the film's overall message is clear. When deciding how to handle their alleged assaults, Simmons's accusers found themselves caught in an impossible place.

Almost every Black woman who participates in the documentary describes a forced self-reliance due to the history of Black women being silenced. *On the Record* concludes that this outlook is born of the sad reality that Black women's pain rarely has an audience, even in Black communities. The film opens with many of its participants expressing an alienation from Me Too as it gained momentum, and that anxiety resounds every time a Black woman appears on the screen, culminating with Dixon asserting, "I am a living crime scene." Her statement channels the mantra of activists who protested the national backlog of rape kits and the historic erasure of Black women's personhood.

In these moments it becomes clear that *On the Record* necessarily has different goals from the directors' previous work. Institutional hypocrisy has long been Dick's focus, from his meticulous critique of the Motion Picture Association's flawed rating system in 2006's *This Film Is Not Yet Rated* to the skew-

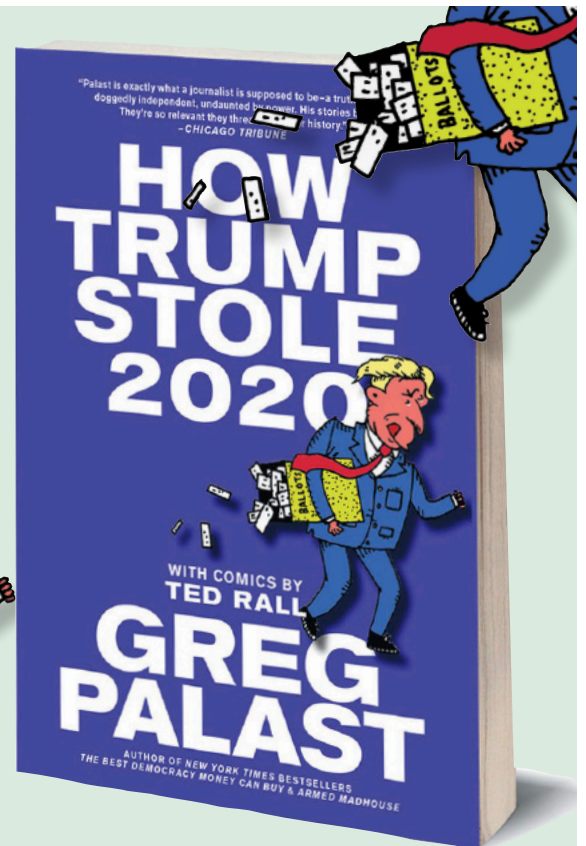
ering of the Food and Drug Administration in *The Bleeding Edge*, his 2018 study of the poorly regulated medical device industry. Whereas these earlier films proposed some kind of institutional reckoning or at least exposed the systemic flaws that prevented one, *On the Record's* ambit is depressingly more diffuse. Black women have been failed by numerous institutions—workplaces, police departments, courtrooms, and the press—driving home the infuriating sense that their only resource is themselves.

On the Record ends with Dixon cautiously navigating life after coming forward. Newly divorced, seemingly considering a return to making music, and now acquainted with fellow survivors from the film, she has obviously been changed by her disclosure. What resonates in the aftermath of her experience is that neither she nor the filmmakers attempt to fit these shifts into a tidy frame. Rather than retribution or empowerment or resolution, Dixon expresses gratitude—to herself and to the women who helped her tell her story. The relief in that tiny thank-you is fleeting, and the herculean effort it took to make it possible is damning, but that's the film's gutting last impression. If this is the reward for challenging powerful men, what does it say about the punishment? ■

“Greg Palast is a real American hero trying to save our democracy. Read his work. It might just save us.”

JOSH FOX,
author and director of
The Truth Has Changed
and director of *Gasland*

SEVEN STORIES PRESS
sevenstories.com



PORTFOLIO / JOSUÉ RIVAS

Getting to Liberation

When my city exploded with demonstrations for Black lives, I asked myself, “How do I fit in as an Indigenous photographer?” I believe strongly that my work should give rather than take, so I went to the marches and listened, talked to activists, and

slowly started making images that I thought could be helpful for the movement. And I realized that ultimately, our sovereignty as Indigenous peoples is interwoven with Black liberation. When their image is honored, we are all honored. *Read more at [TheNation.com/invisible-frontline](https://www.thenation.com/invisible-frontline).*

Portland, Ore.



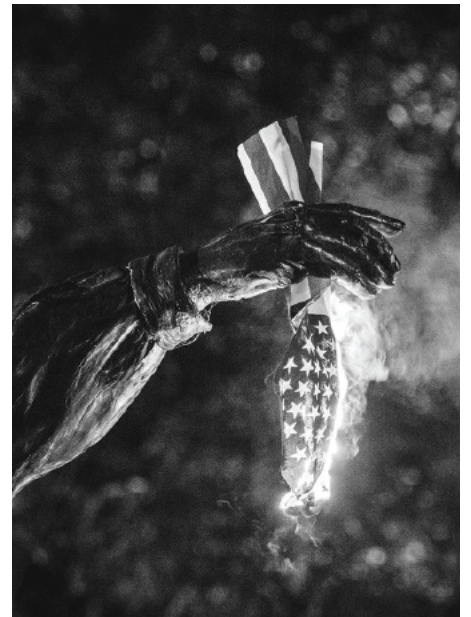
A Black Lives Matter demonstration.



A man raises his fist at a protest.



Handprints at a BLM rally.



A flag hangs and burns from a statue.



INTRODUCTORY SPECIAL:
**4 EXCEPTIONAL
WINES FOR \$30**
AND ONLY 1¢ SHIPPING!

Each wine comes with a detailed tasting note from our buyers featuring insights into what makes the wine unique, the stories behind the wine, a rundown of its flavors and aromas, and delicious food-pairing suggestions.

Your membership supports *The Nation's* indispensable, one-of-a-kind journalism.
The Nation Wine Club sources wines that reflect progressive values.



World-Class Wines That Support Progressive Journalism

Each month you'll receive a new shipment of four captivating wines for just \$15 per bottle plus \$9.99 delivery. Cancel anytime.

**ORDER NOW AT [THENATIONWINECLUB.COM/NAPA](https://thenationwineclub.com/napa)
OR CALL 800.946.3568**

Stand Up Straight and Feel Better

Discover the Perfect Walker, the better way walk safely and more naturally



It's a cruel fact of life, as we age, gravity takes over. Our muscles droop, our bodies sag and the weight of the world seems to be planted squarely on our shoulders. We dread taking a fall, so we find ourselves walking less and less—and that only makes matters worse.

Well, cheer up! There's finally a product designed to enable us all to walk properly and stay on the go. It's called the Perfect Walker, and it can truly change your life.

Traditional rollators and walkers simply aren't designed well. They require you to hunch over and shuffle your feet when you walk. This puts pressure on your back, your neck, your wrists and your hands. Over time, this makes walking uncomfortable and can result in a variety of health issues. That's all changed with the Perfect Walker. Its upright design and padded elbow rests enable you to distribute your weight across your arms and shoulders, not your hands and wrists. Helps reduce back, neck and wrist pain and discomfort. Its unique frame gives you plenty of room to step, and the oversized wheels help you glide across the floor. The height can be easily adjusted with the push of a button to fit anyone from 5' to over 6'. Once you've reached your destination you can use the hand brakes to gently slow down, and there's even a handy seat with a storage compartment. Its sleek, lightweight design makes it easy to use indoors and out and it folds up for portability and storage.



Easy Folding Compact Design

Why spend another day hunched over and shuffling along. Call now, and find out how you can try out a Perfect Walker for yourself... in your own home. You'll be glad you did.

Perfect Walker

Call now Toll-Free **1-888-432-7790**

for more information visit www.ThePerfectWalker.com

Please mention promotion code 113155.

