

TIME

AMANDA GORMAN

A CONVERSATION WITH
MICHELLE
OBAMA

THE BLACK RENAISSANCE

BY IBRAM X. KENDI



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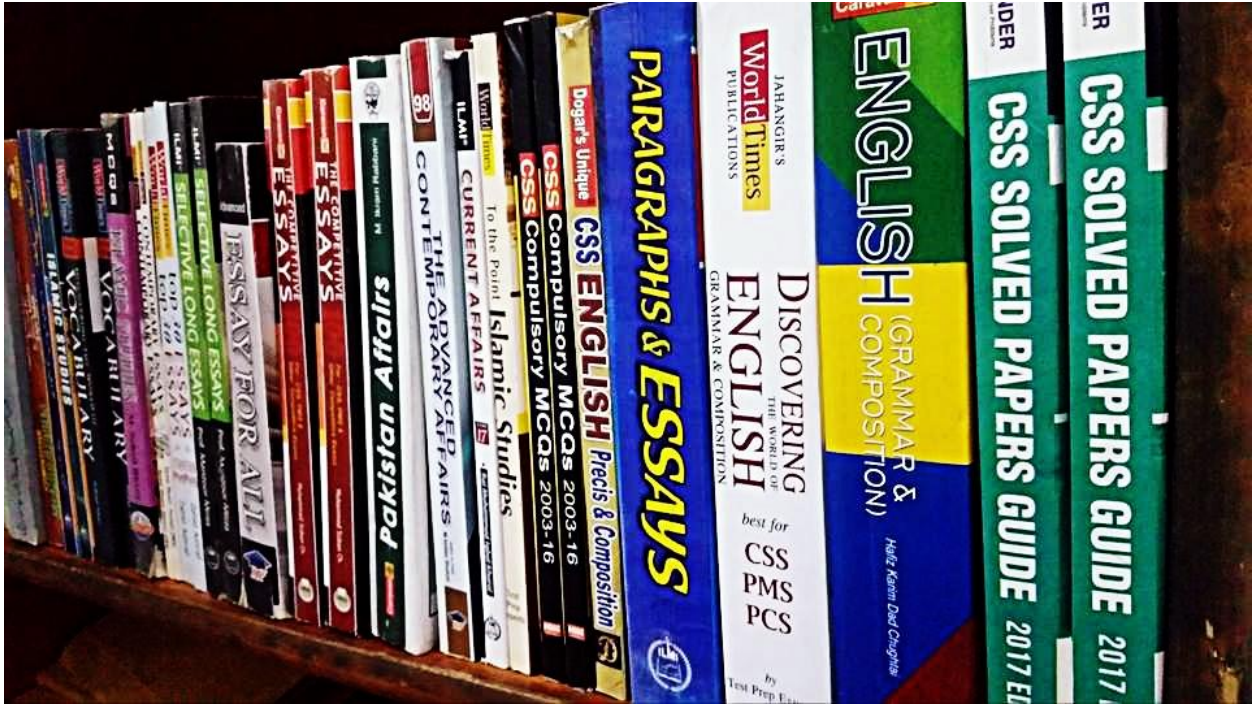


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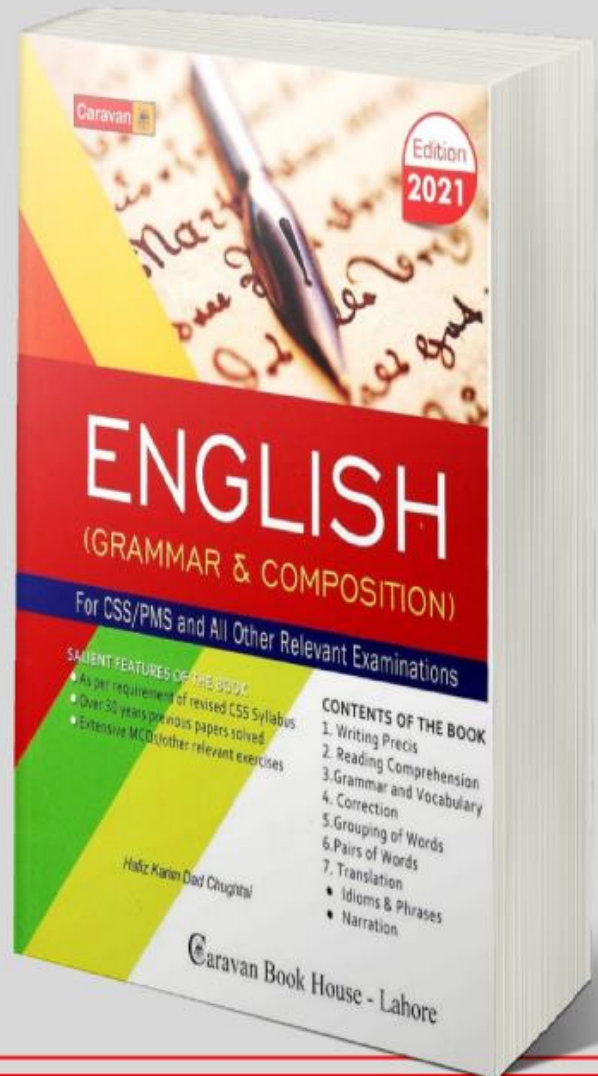
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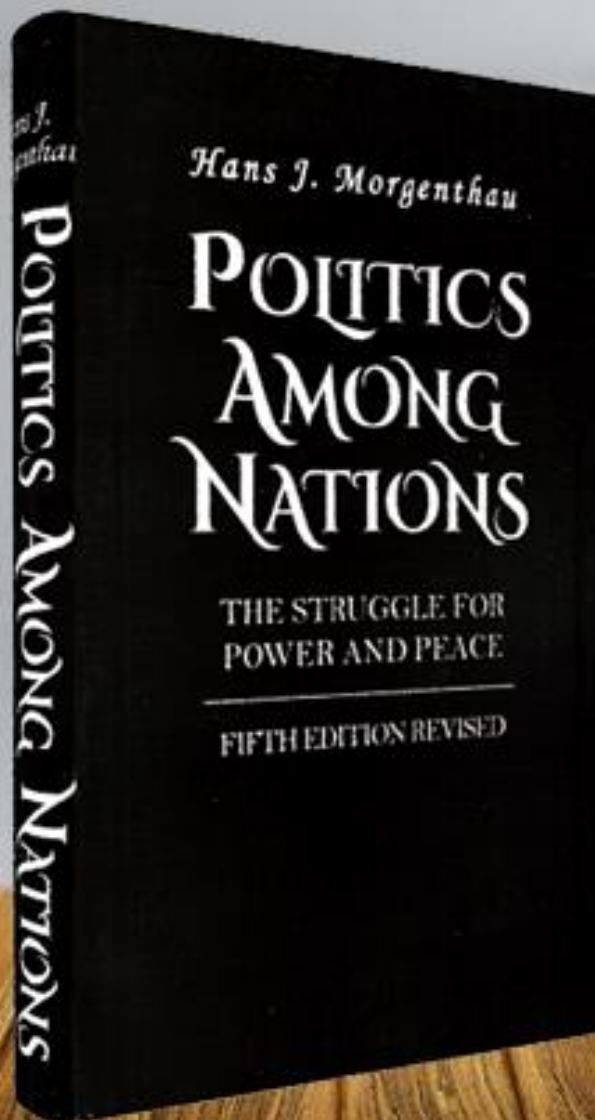
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COVID-19 has vulnerable workers looking to unions
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❑ The Black Renaissance

A profound cultural progression *By Ibram X. Kendi* 68
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ON THE COVERS:



Photograph by
Awol Erizku for
TIME

AMANDA GORMAN
FASHION STYLING
BY JASON BOLDEN,
MAKEUP BY AUTUMN
MOULTRIE—THE WALL
GROUP, DRESS BY
GRETA CONSTANTINE,
JEWELRY BY KHIRY



Illustration by
Brian Stauffer
for TIME

▲
A military
armored
vehicle patrols
Myitkyina in
Myanmar's
Kachin State
on Feb. 2

Photograph
by AFP/Getty
Images



Change agents,
welcome.

Change is happening all around us.
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or be a part of it.
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Lead it.

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From the Editor

Celebrating Black art

WHEN HISTORIAN, *TIME* 100 HONOREE AND *HOW TO BE AN ANTIRACIST* author Ibram X. Kendi approached *TIME* with the idea to partner on a project about marking this moment as a Black cultural renaissance, the most challenging question we faced was how to choose which of the innumerable artists and works—across poetry, film, television, music, theater and more—to highlight. In his incisive introductory essay, Kendi writes that during this rich period, spanning approximately the past six years, Black artists have forged a new path, casting off the pressures to consider the reactions of white people or to “represent” race by attempting to speak for all Black experiences.

This renaissance features works that directly explore the quest for racial justice, as well as art that mines the everyday realities of moving through the world as a Black person—finding the comedy and drama in work, relationships and family. Kendi ties this outpouring of creativity to past movements in art, suggesting that “if the Harlem Renaissance stirred Black

people to see themselves, if the Black Arts Movement stirred Black people to love themselves, then the Black Renaissance is stirring Black people to be themselves. Totally. Unapologetically. Freely.”

The package includes a conversation between former First Lady Michelle Obama and National Youth Poet Laureate Amanda Gorman, a young torchbearer of this renaissance who captivated the nation with her inspiring performance at the Inauguration of President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris. Three of today’s most accomplished novelists—Brit Bennett, Jasmine Guillory and Jacqueline Woodson—gather in a roundtable discussion with Rebecca Carroll about the difference between a renaissance and a trend

as well as the power of their storytelling. *TIME* staff writers Josiah Bates and Andrew R. Chow explore how Black creators in film and television are reclaiming aspects of U.S. history—from the Tulsa race massacre to the Black Panthers—that have been misrepresented or omitted entirely in our education system and media. And a panel of eminent artists including Oscar-nominated director Ava DuVernay, Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Lynn Nottage and National Book Award winner Jesmyn Ward help curate a list of the 25 defining works of the era. Special thanks to senior editors Eliza Berman, Lucy Feldman, Lily Rothman and international art director Victor Williams for shaping these multimedia projects.

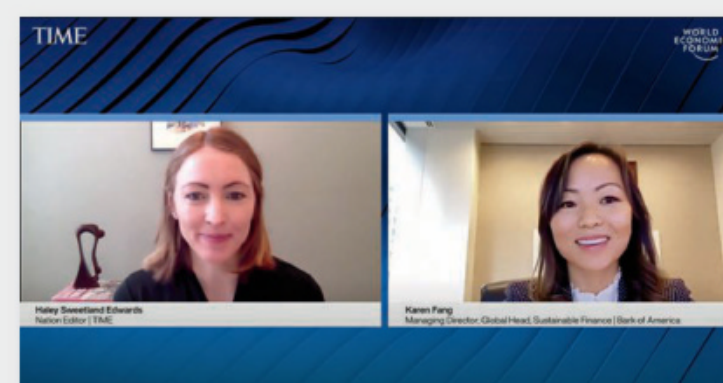
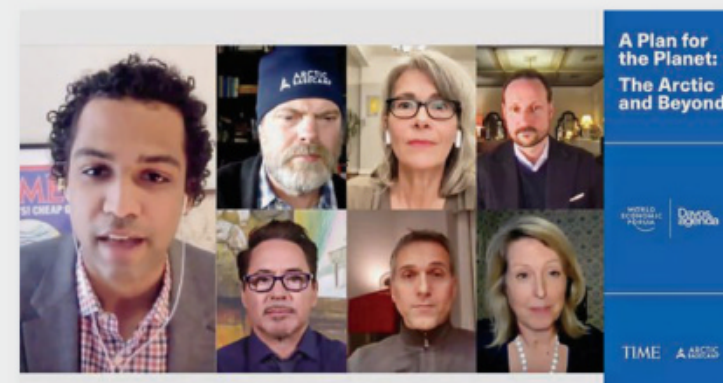
The portrait of Gorman that appears on the cover of this magazine was taken by another extraordinary young artist, Awol Erizku, whose art spans painting, photography, sculpture and film. Erizku rarely accepts commissions as a photographer, so we were thrilled he agreed to meet Gorman in Los Angeles on Jan. 29.

For the cover portrait of Gorman, he says, “I wanted to extricate her from the political dimension and immerse it in a more cosmic atmosphere to add to the weight of her words.” Erizku also directed one of the videos for this package, of Gorman reciting her stirring poem, “The Hill We Climb.” You can watch it at time.com/gorman

Edward Felsenthal,
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF & CEO
@EFELSENTHAL



Gorman, left, and Erizku at the cover shoot in L.A. on Jan. 29



Worland, top left, and Edwards, bottom left, lead virtual panels

TIME 2030

TIME leads Davos conversations

A week after debuting the *TIME* 2030 project to spotlight solutions to the challenges of a post-COVID world, *TIME* staffers continued that conversation at the World Economic Forum (WEF) virtual Davos conference, hosting panels on the health of the environment and the health of the global economy. Senior editor Haley Sweetland Edwards moderated a discussion on ocean economies with scientists and sustainable-finance experts, and senior correspondent Justin Worland hosted a talk on the Arctic and climate change that included celebrity environmental advocates Robert Downey Jr. and Rainn Wilson. Editor-in-chief Edward Felsenthal led a debate on the future of capitalism with WEF founder and executive chairman Klaus Schwab, Belgian Prime Minister Alexander De Croo, PayPal CEO Dan Schulman, economist Mariana Mazzucato and musician Angélique Kidjo. Find links to watch the full panels at weforum.org

WEF’s Schwab says companies should be measured by how well they are ‘going beyond just serving shareholders’

COURTESY AWOL ERIZKU



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"The History of Sampo Group" from here



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qbcc4csTygs>



<https://www.sampo-hd.com/en/>

Conversation

WHAT YOU SAID ABOUT ...

TIME 2030 Debuting in the Feb. 1/Feb. 8 issue, *TIME*'s new decade-long initiative exploring global progress for a post-COVID-19 world left readers looking forward—and back. Isaac Talmaciu of North Miami Beach, Fla., wrote of feeling “hopeful and optimistic about the world’s future for the first time in a very long time,” while Edmond Melkomian of Columbia, S.C., said he’s “not that optimistic” society will radically change by 2030, noting that experts have been talking about climate change for decades, “and nothing has been done.”

In particular, readers devoured Charlie Campbell’s feature on China’s booming plant-based-protein industry. “It’s heartening to see this tragic truth penetrating the collective at last,” wrote



‘Substantive and well written, offering valuable insights for our troubled world.’

JANE MCKINLAY,
New Orleans

Stephanie Bell, a self-declared “ethical vegan” in SeaTac, Wash., of what’s been called the animal-industrial complex, although Alois F. Kertz of St. Louis argued the story should have offered more details on nutrients in meat not found in plant-based alternatives. And Ingrid E. Newkirk, president of People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, called for the U.S. to take note: “As China leads the charge toward a sustainable vegan planet, the U.S. would be wise to show that we, too, are capable of creating a dietary revolution.”

Judith B. Hutchinson of Wenatchee, Wash., said she hoped the issue would inspire fresh thinking from young people. “As a late-stage octogenarian, I thank you for your coverage ... and for helping other generations, like the millennials, as we consider options for actions in this [next] decade.”

SPONSOR MESSAGE

Seeking positive change

EQUALITY IS NOT JUST A SOCIAL issue. We believe that equality is a foundation upon which businesses should be built. It requires ideas and conversation between individuals, but also leadership and action from companies willing to stand up for others and help create positive change for all.

The American Family Insurance story is shaped by courage but also by creativity and a commitment to our customers. It’s why we urge everyone to do something you might not expect from an insurance company—to dream fearlessly. Before that can

happen, we all must have access to opportunities that make those goals reachable. We must all be free to dream fearlessly.

Today, that means we must place extra attention on closing equity gaps and empowering our communities. American Family is committed to this work and to improving the quality of life for all communities. We’re also committed to doing our part to remove barriers and dismantle systemic confinements that impede equity in our society.

We’re putting our people and resources to work addressing five major societal challenges vital to accomplishing this: economic empowerment; education and health equity; climate resilience; criminal-justice reform; and workforce diversity, equity and

inclusion. This is a generation-defining moment, and the ideas we’re pursuing are at the core of American Family’s DNA.

I know it won’t be easy, and success will take time. But American Family wants to be a catalyst for change. We also know a new generation of fearless dreamers—our future leaders—are out there. It’s our role to encourage, nurture and support their ideas, creativity and leadership, providing a foundation for success.

We’re honored to partner with *TIME* to celebrate the stories of some of these fearless dreamers who are featured in this special issue.

—Jack Salzwedel,
chair and CEO of American
Family Insurance

SETTING THE RECORD STRAIGHT

In the Feb. 1/Feb. 8 issue, the profile of theologian Russell Moore misstated the circumstances around an investigation into the Southern Baptist Convention’s Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission in 2020. It occurred after reports that churches had withheld donations, but the number of churches that may have withheld donations remains unclear.

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The only future
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Nearly 20% of small businesses have been forced to close due to the pandemic. For minority-owned businesses, it's double.¹ To promote inclusive economic recovery, we launched **BMO EMpower** - a \$5 billion commitment over 5 years to provide increased lending and direct investment to support local communities.²

Find out more at bmo.com/empower

¹Double Jeopardy: COVID-19's Concentrated Health and Wealth Effects in Black Communities, Federal Reserve Bank of New York, August 2020.

²Banking products are subject to approval and are provided by BMO Harris Bank N.A. Member FDIC. © 2021 BMO Financial Group.

For the Record

‘Children need to have a say in the big topics of our day, like climate change or economic policy.’

FRANCISCO VERA,

11-year-old Colombian activist, in an interview with the BBC published Jan. 27. Vera received death threats after he called on the government to provide better access to education



\$55 million

Cost of a seat on the first fully private mission sending astronauts—in this case, three wealthy entrepreneurs—to the International Space Station for eight-day stays

‘As much as I still tap dance into the office, I’m excited about this transition.’

JEFF BEZOS,

announcing his intent to step down as Amazon’s CEO later this year, in a Feb. 2 statement. He plans to become executive chair

‘LIFE IS A GIFT—EVEN WITH ALZHEIMER’S.’

TONY BENNETT,

in a Feb. 1 tweet after revealing he was diagnosed with the disease in 2016

‘I’M THE HAPPIEST THAT I’VE EVER BEEN AND THAT’S WHAT MATTERS.’

JOJO SIWA,

speaking on Instagram on Jan. 23 after coming out as a member of the LGBTQ community

‘I really just felt ... if this is the plan for me, then people will be able to take it from here.’

ALEXANDRIA OCASIO-CORTEZ,

U.S. Representative, in a Feb. 1 Instagram Live video, about fearing for her life as rioters stormed the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6



GOOD NEWS
of the week

With her book *We Are Water Protectors*, illustrator Michaela Goade became the first Native American to receive the prestigious Caldecott Medal, awarded for artistry in a children’s picture book, on Jan. 25



6

Number of drivers who received COVID vaccinations while stuck in a snowstorm in Oregon, after doctors went door-to-door offering doses of the vaccine that were otherwise set to expire

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TIME HISTORY IS HAPPENING THE MARCH

A DIGITAL EXHIBIT

TRAVEL BACK IN TIME TO ONE OF THE MOST HISTORIC MOMENTS OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT AND WITNESS A REIMAGINING OF MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.'S ICONIC "I HAVE A DREAM" SPEECH.

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The Brief



IN CHARGE
A soldier
outside a temple
in Yangon,
Myanmar, on
Feb. 2, a day after
a military coup

INSIDE

WALL STREET THREATENED
BY THE MASSES

THE GENEROUS BEAUTY
OF CICELY TYSON

PHOTOGRAPH BY THE NEW YORK TIMES

The Brief is reported by Madeleine Carlisle, Suyin Haynes, Sanya Mansoor, Ciara Nugent, Billy Perrigo, Madeline Roache and Olivia B. Waxman

TheBrief Opener

WORLD

Taking down a tarnished icon

By Amy Gunia

THE NEWS THAT AUNG SAN SUU KYI HAD BEEN overthrown in a coup spread through Myanmar like a shock wave. “Most of the citizens 100% depend on her,” says Kyaw Kyaw, a 28-year-old LGBTQ activist who lives in Yangon, the Southeast Asian nation’s largest city. “Everyone was frustrated and scared.”

Myanmar’s de facto leader was idolized even before she came to office. During the 15 years that the junta kept her under house arrest, many secretly kept pictures of Suu Kyi in their homes. After her release, her party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), won elections in 2015, ending decades of military rule. The country’s struggle for democracy has always centered on Suu Kyi. Now that the military has her in detention again—reportedly facing trumped-up charges of violating import-export laws—there are few capable of uniting resistance to the generals’ emergency rule. “When she disappeared, nobody knew what to do,” says Kyaw Kyaw.

The truth is that the military never really lost control. Despite the reforms of recent years, the Tatmadaw—as the army is officially known—retained control of key ministries. A 2008 constitution guaranteed it 25% of the seats in parliament and a veto over any constitutional amendment.

But the NLD’s resounding victory in a Nov. 8 election, claiming over 80% of the vote, was too much democracy for the generals to bear. The military claimed widespread fraud and has now declared emergency rule until the election can be run again. It is not clear what form that vote will take. How far the military goes will hinge on how compliant civilian leaders are and the scale of popular resistance, says Dan Slater, director of the Weiser Center for Emerging Democracies at the University of Michigan. But the political future of the country’s most prominent leader looks uncertain at best, he says. “Banning Aung San Suu Kyi could very well be one of the military’s main wishes or demands.”

THE WOMAN ONCE CALLED a “beacon of hope” by President Barack Obama won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991 for her nonviolent resistance against the junta. After her release in 2010, she became an even greater icon of human rights, mentioned in the same breath as Gandhi or Mandela. With the help of the U.S. and other nations loosening economic sanctions, she helped usher her country through a series of reforms, including the historic 2015 vote.

All too swiftly came the fall. Suu Kyi’s defense of the military over 2017 atrocities committed against the Rohingya—a mostly Muslim minority in western Myanmar—made her an object of global scorn. U.N. investigators determined that the Tatmadaw’s campaign of arson, rape and murder had “genocidal intent.” Suu Kyi rejected the accusations, defending Myanmar against charges of genocide at the Hague in 2019.



Aung San Suu Kyi, pictured at the U.N.’s International Court of Justice in the Hague on Dec. 10, 2019, at the start of a three-day hearing on Myanmar’s treatment of the Rohingya people



To those in the outside world who once deified her, it was a breathtaking betrayal. Amnesty International had bestowed its highest honor on her, but revoked it in 2018 in light of her “shameful betrayal of the values she once stood for.” The portrait of her that once hung at her alma mater Oxford University was mothballed.

Wai Wai Nu, a Rohingya activist living in the U.S., says that in the eyes of the country’s more than 100 ethnic minorities, Suu Kyi’s defense of the military separated her from the quest for democracy. “We felt betrayed,” she says. If they oppose the coup, it’s not because they have changed their position on Suu Kyi. “We are standing up for what is right for the country.”

But Suu Kyi remains enormously popular in Myanmar. On Feb. 2, many Yangon residents stood at their windows banging on pots and pans, some chanting, “Long live mother Aung San Suu Kyi!” There are signs of popular resistance internally, with reports that doctors and nurses are refusing to work in protest. Some longtime Myanmar watchers say no one should be writing off Suu Kyi just yet. Even behind bars

PREVIOUS PAGE: REDUX; THESE PAGES: DEMONSTRATION: CARL COURT—GETTY IMAGES; AUNG SAN SUU KYI: KOEN VAN WEE—ANP/AFP/GETTY IMAGES



Readying posters of military chief Min Aung Hlaing for a demonstration against the military coup on Feb. 1 in Tokyo

she would be “one of the most powerful people in the country,” says Mark Farmaner, director of human rights advocacy group Burma Campaign U.K.

Yet ongoing COVID-19 restrictions make mass protests unlikely, and fear of reprisal is well justified; thousands were arrested and as many as 200 killed during 2007 demonstrations, according to advocacy groups. “There isn’t really [any protest going on here],” says Ye Yint Thu, a university student who lives on the Thai border. “I want to participate, but if I do it alone, I might be arrested.”

There are also signs that a return to military rule has been a dose of reality for those hoping for democracy. Youth activist Thinzar Shunlei Yi says he and others are tired of the “personality cult” of Suu Kyi. “We want a real democracy led by real people.” Kyaw Kyaw, the LGBTQ-rights campaigner, adds that Suu Kyi’s latest imprisonment has been a wake-up call: “A lesson learned is we should not depend on a person. We should depend on a political structure.”

—With reporting by EMILY FISHBEIN/FALMOUTH, MASS., KYAW HSAN HLAING/YANGON and SUYIN HAYNES/LONDON

THE RISK REPORT

How China stands to gain from the coup in Myanmar

By Ian Bremmer

ON FEB. 1, MYANMAR’S MILITARY arrested leaders of the country’s civilian-led government and declared a one-year state of emergency. After a decade-long experiment with limited direct democracy, the junta is firmly in charge, and a nation that once seemed to offer a road map for transition out of armed dictatorship is now once again under lockdown.

This is an ugly story of fragile democracy and brute force, but it is not a simple morality play. Aung San Suu Kyi is a complicated figure. The sacrifice of her freedom and the force of her personality made the 2011 power-sharing deal possible. But when the army murdered members of the mostly Muslim Rohingya minority in 2017 and drove 750,000 more from the country, Aung San Suu Kyi publicly defended the country.

Will international pressure reverse this coup? No. The Biden Administration, facing its first spontaneous foreign-policy test, will surely threaten, then impose, further sanctions. The Obama Administration worked hard to encourage Myanmar’s tentative steps toward democracy. The U.S. eased previous sanctions, to bolster Aung San Suu Kyi at the military’s expense, and President Obama visited Myanmar in 2012. But the Obama Administration largely ignored warnings from rights groups that a full lifting of sanctions should wait for better treatment of the Rohingya and other minorities.

U.S. and European financial penalties and restrictions on exports of military equipment to Myanmar in response to the

ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya have accomplished little. Continued military control of lucrative state properties ensures the generals will prosper even as their country buckles.

NOR WILL IT BE LOST on anyone in the Biden Administration that this is an especially awkward moment for the U.S. to defend democracy from attempts to seize power by those who claim election fraud. Myanmar’s neighbors will do nothing to further isolate the country. Japan and the Southeast Asian democracies will mind their own business. Thailand, where the military remains in power after a successful coup in 2014, will be only too happy to continue trade with Myanmar.

The winner is China, which will now become an ever more important source of financial help as Western sanctions take a toll. As part of Beijing’s Belt and

Road infrastructure investment project, the two countries have already signed deals for construction of a China-Myanmar Economic Corridor, a project that will boost commerce for Myanmar while giving China land access via highway and rail to a strategically valuable deep-water Indian Ocean port on Myanmar’s west coast.

When Myanmar’s generals made their democracy deal a decade ago, they hoped to open the country to both Western and Chinese investment. Now that they’ve clawed back full power, they’ll depend almost exclusively on China. Beijing is happy to do business with anyone in power in Myanmar, but the Western retreat will be welcome news.

Beijing is happy to do business with anyone in power in Myanmar

NEWS TICKER

Biden aims to reunify migrant families

In one of three immigration Executive Orders signed Feb. 2, President Biden directed a task force to **find the parents of roughly 611 migrant children who remain separated from their families** because of the Trump Administration's "zero tolerance" policy.

China and U.K. in Hong Kong passport spat

China will **no longer recognize British National Overseas passports** held by millions of Hong Kongers as valid travel documents or ID, the Foreign Ministry said Jan. 29. The snub came after Britain, the former colonial ruler of Hong Kong, said it would begin accepting the passports as the basis for U.K. residency applications.

Pakistan acquits Pearl's accused killer

Pakistan's supreme court **cleared a man of the 2002 murder of journalist Daniel Pearl**. Ahmed Omar Saeed Sheikh was convicted before 9/11 mastermind Khalid Sheikh Mohammed boasted of killing Pearl. U.S. prosecutors have indicted Sheikh for kidnapping him.



AMERICAN HERO Capitol Police officers pay tribute to fallen fellow officer Brian Sicknick, who received the rare distinction of lying in honor in the U.S. Capitol's Rotunda on Feb. 2. Sicknick, 42, died on Jan. 7 from injuries sustained a day earlier while he attempted to hold back rioters storming the Capitol. President Joe Biden and lawmakers also paid their respects before the late officer was laid to rest at Arlington National Cemetery on Feb. 3.

BUSINESS

Will the GameStop masses change Wall Street for good?

FOR YEARS, PROFESSIONAL MONEY MANAGERS and hedge funds have looked down on individual traders. They have dismissed them as "dumb money" and cautioned that so-called retail investors lack the necessary acumen and experience. That has often been the case, but then came the GameStop phenomenon: a tsunami of that so-called dumb money flooding parts of the stock market, leaving Wall Street professionals not just scratching their heads but badly wounded.

In just over two weeks, shares of the company GameStop rose more than seventeen-fold after its prospects were touted on a Reddit forum that has several million subscribers. GameStop, a retail chain that has struggled mightily in an era of streaming, was heavily bet against by Wall Street pros.

What happened on Wall Street is akin to what happened in the U.K. when voters chose Brexit and in the U.S. when Donald Trump was elected: a mass of people, left

feeling that the system was rigged to reward the elite and screw everyone else, coalesced into a potent phalanx that upended a status quo. And in similar fashion, the elites being challenged were caught off guard by the suddenness and intensity, and responded by denouncing those forces as misguided, misled and destructive.

These masses have revealed some uncomfortable truths about the investing world: anyone can play—and yes, retail investors have made money, as have pension funds and foundations. Even so, the most excessive profits have largely gone to a few thousand hedge funds, private-equity executives and professional investors.

It's right to be a tad worried when new forces are unleashed: splitting the atom can electrify a city or destroy it. But what we've seen on Wall Street is a surge unlike any other before it: the volatile emergence of individual investors—not rich, not privileged, not professional, but with the keen wisdom of the crowds able to spot an opportunity and ride it. It's vital to respect it, to be humble in the face of it, and to start adjusting to the democratization of the markets.

—ZACHARY KARABELL



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Milestones

CONFIRMED

Pete Buttigieg, as U.S. Transportation Secretary, the first openly gay person confirmed by the Senate to a Cabinet post, on Feb. 2.

EXTRADITED

Former school principal **Malka Leifer**, from Israel to Australia, to face charges of sexually abusing students, on Jan. 25, after a protracted legal battle.

BLOCKED

Twitter accounts linked to farmers protesting the **Indian government's agricultural policies**, on Feb. 1. Twitter unblocked the accounts later that day.

ACCUSED

Singer **Marilyn Manson**, of abuse, by five women, including actor Evan Rachel Wood, on Feb. 1. Manson has denied the allegations.

DIED

Corky Lee, photographer of Asian-American life, on Jan. 27, from complications related to COVID-19, at 73.

> **Dustin Diamond**, who played Screech in the sitcom *Saved by the Bell*, from cancer, on Feb. 1, at 44.

> **Hal Holbrook**, actor who spent 50-plus years playing Mark Twain onstage, on Jan. 23, at 95.

> **Ricky Powell**, photographer known for his work with the Beastie Boys, on Feb. 1, at 59.

> **Captain Tom Moore**, World War II veteran who raised millions for the U.K.'s National Health Service during COVID-19 lockdowns, on Feb. 2, at 100.



DIED

Cicely Tyson

Actor who opened doors, and worlds

ONE OF THE GREAT ACTRESSES OF THE 1970S DIDN'T HAVE many starring roles in film; she would find many of her most prestigious parts on television and in theater. But Cicely Tyson, who died on Jan. 28, at 96, was magnificent in any medium, even if Hollywood had no idea what to do with a Black woman possessed of such towering gifts.

Onscreen, onstage or off, Tyson was an enchanting presence. Her beauty was the generous kind, holding a mirror to other Black women; even without words, she urged them to see the same beauty in themselves. And in her refusal to play parts that debased Black people, her greatness lies as much in the roles she wouldn't take as in those she did.

Tyson won two Emmys for her stunning turn in the 1974 television movie *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, cast as a 110-year-old woman recalling her experience of slavery. In 2013, she became the oldest person to win a Tony, for her role in a revival of Horton Foote's *The Trip to Bountiful*. And if you saw her in *Sounder* (1972) upon its initial release—playing a sharecropper in 1930s Louisiana who holds her family together while her husband serves an unjust prison sentence—her performance has most likely stayed with you for close to a lifetime. With these roles, and many more, Tyson leaves behind not just a body of performances but a way of *being*, of living in the world, that it would do us all good to emulate. —STEPHANIE ZACHAREK

DIED

Sophie

Siren of sound

By Kim Petras

SOPHIE WAS WHOLLY unafraid to be herself. She wouldn't ever conform to expectations; she had such confidence in her aesthetic and complete disregard for what music is "supposed" to sound like. Sophie's sound could be violent and brutal but, with her high-pitched vocals, also so soft and tender and honest. I always felt like it was music from the future; I'd never heard anything like it before. But after meeting her, it made sense—struggling with yourself and your gender identity can be a dark subject sometimes.

As a musician and producer, Sophie, who died on Jan. 30, at 34, would be this flamboyant alien scientist onstage and then, in the studio, sweet and shy. Always genuine and passionate about her work. Working with her always felt like a fun music-nerd hangout. I'll miss her texts at 4 a.m., like, "Let's do this, I have an idea."

We would always hype each other up—two trans girls making cool music. We both had the same audacity about us. What I will take from Sophie is to remember to be wild and experimental when I want to be. —As told to SANYA MANSOOR; Petras is a recording artist



HOLBROOK: AMANDA EDWARDS—WIREIMAGE; TYSON: DJENEBBA ADUAYOM FOR TIME; SOPHIE: SCOTT DUDELSON—GETTY IMAGES FOR COACHELLA

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FRONTIERS OF MEDICINE

COVID-19 may lead to a heart-disease surge

By Jeffrey Kluger

PULMONOLOGISTS, EMERGENCY RESPONDERS and intensive-care teams have been the point of the medical spear in battling the COVID-19 pandemic in the U.S. over the past 12 months, but before long, expect another group of specialists to be more engaged than ever: cardiologists. Take a nation that already eats too much, drinks too much, exercises too little and fails too often to show up for regular checkups, put them in lockdown for a year or more, and those behaviors—all of which are drivers of cardiovascular disease—will only get worse.

In a recent survey in the journal *Circulation*, the American Heart Association (AHA) predicted a surge of cardiovascular death and disease in the months and years to come as a lagging indicator of the lifestyle changes forced upon the world by the pandemic. “We don’t have a lot of well-vetted data up to the minute on the cardiovascular impact of COVID because we are living through the pandemic now,” says Dr. Mitch Elkind, president of the AHA and a professor of neurology and epidemiology at Columbia University. “That new data will come in the next year or two, but we are anticipating that the pandemic will have a significant impact.”

SARS-COV-2, THE VIRUS that causes COVID-19, does on occasion infect and damage heart tissue directly. One study published over the summer in *JAMA Cardiology*, for example, found that of a sample group of 100 people who had recovered from COVID-19, 78 had some inflammation of myocardial tissue or other damage such as scarring. In another *JAMA Cardiology* study, researchers reported finding SARS-CoV-2 in the heart tissue of 61.5% of 39 patients who had died due to COVID-19. The sample groups in both studies were small, and in the overwhelming number of cases of coronavirus death, heart failure is not the proximate cause. But

there’s a related truth: the pandemic seems to be leading people into developing the very lifestyle factors that cause heart disease over the long term.

Consider a September 2020 study in *JAMA* that showed that alcohol consumption had increased 14% in a sample group of 1,540 adults during the pandemic. Or the study (from the same month) in *Psychiatry* of 3,052 adults showing a decrease in physical activity in 32.3% of adults who were previously physically active. Or the survey conducted by the COVID Symptom Study (again, from Sep-

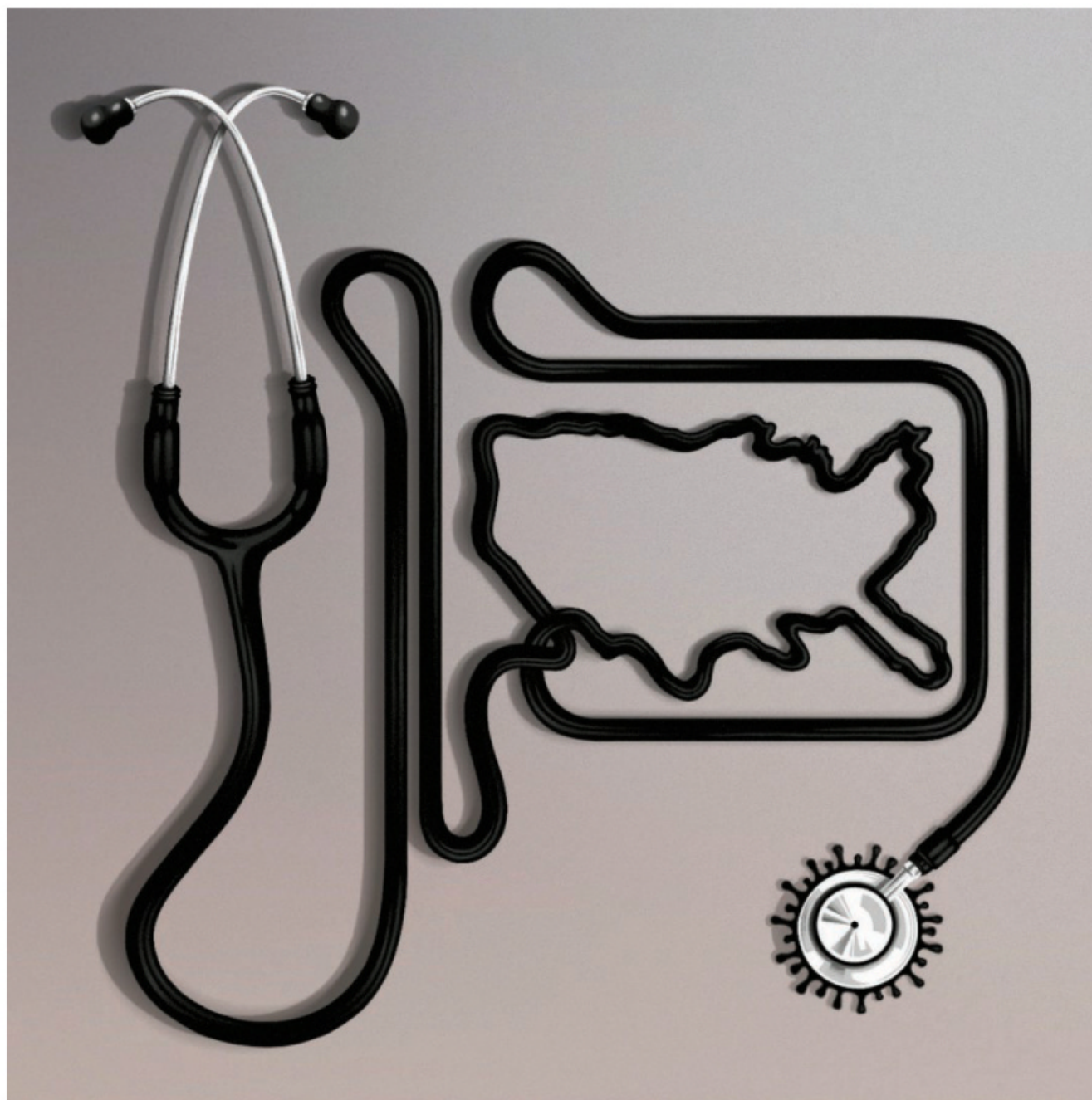
tember 2020) showing that 31% of adults had reported snacking more during lockdowns.

It’s not just eating, drinking and sitting still that can be killers. Elkind and the AHA also cite emotional stress caused by economic hardship, and depression as the isolation of quarantining drags on. When hospitals and doctors’ offices are seen as viral hot zones, people are less likely to show up for routine monitoring of hypertension, cholesterol levels and other chronic conditions that can have a cardiovascular impact. Acute cardiac events too are being ignored. “We know people have delayed getting care for heart attacks and strokes, which can lead to poorer outcomes,”

said Dr. Salim Virani, who chaired the committee that wrote up the AHA’s statistical update, in a statement.

In the U.S., about 655,000 people die of heart disease each year, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, a figure that outpaces the 360,000 reported to have died of COVID-19 in 2020. But those statistics don’t tell the whole story. Elkind estimates as many as 500,000 additional U.S. deaths in the past year due to people not getting prompt medical help for severe or emergency medical conditions, many of which were cardiovascular in nature.

The good news buried in the bad is that some of the cardiovascular dangers associated with COVID-19 can be controlled. Just as masks mitigate COVID-19 transmission, so can healthier lifestyle choices mitigate heart-disease risks. A pandemic is a ferocious challenge, but at least some aspects of it can—with effort—be surmountable. □



‘We’re less likely to be active. We’re likely to have worse eating habits.’

DR. MITCH ELKIND,
president of the
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Association

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An aerial photograph capturing a dramatic coastal scene. At the top, a paved road runs horizontally across the frame, with several vehicles including a white truck and a yellow construction vehicle. Below the road is a steep, rugged cliff face covered in sparse vegetation and exposed rock. At the base of the cliff, the ocean is turbulent, with large, foamy waves crashing against the shore. The water is a murky, brownish-yellow color, indicating significant sediment runoff. The overall scene conveys a sense of natural power and the aftermath of a major event.

LightBox

Rerouting

After a section of California's iconic Highway 1 was pushed into the Pacific Ocean on Jan. 28, the surf was still foaming brown three days later. The route along Big Sur's coastline has "historically been a battle between the ocean and the hillside," a California Department of Transportation spokesperson tells TIME. The 150-ft. chasm was caused when heavy rains carried down trees, rocks and mud from an area scarred by an August 2020 wildfire.

Photograph by Josh Edelson—AFP/Getty Images
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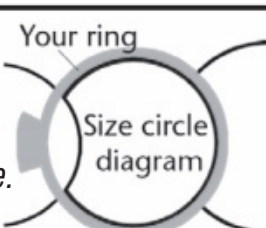
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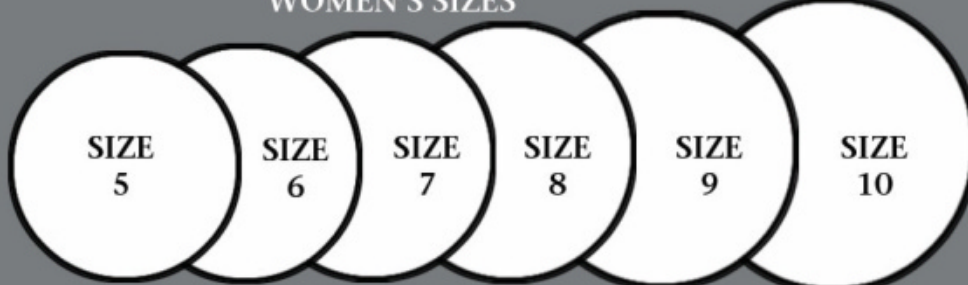
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WOMEN'S SIZES



The View

WORLD

PUTIN'S NEMESIS

By Michael D. Weiss

It was -61°F in Yakutsk, about 300 miles south of the Arctic Circle, on Jan. 23, but the people still came. The scene was like something out of a postapocalyptic movie: a queue of dimly visible figures against the whited-out backdrop of a snow squall. They had come to show solidarity with Alexei Navalny. ▶

INSIDE

THE CASE AGAINST
FACEBOOK'S OVERSIGHT BOARD

APPRECIATING THE
LUNAR NEW YEAR

A NEW THEORY
ON WHY WE DREAM

TheView Opener

Navalny, the detained leader of the Russian opposition, was arrested upon his return from Germany, where he had been recovering from an attempt on his life by Russian intelligence agents. He had called on social media for nationwide protests.

They were on rooftops in Vladivostok. Protesters thronged the city squares of Novosibirsk and Irkutsk, where they chanted, “We will not leave.” Authorities roughed them up, even the kids, in Moscow, where as many as 40,000 turned out, some to chant the common refrain “Putin is a thief!” Despite the dragnet of arrests and state harassment, the protesters were unbowed and returned to the streets across Russia a week later, on Jan. 31, all on behalf of one man.

To the Kremlin, officially, Navalny is a non-entity, a convicted fraudster, a dangerous CIA agent sent to foment regime change, or all of the above. To Westerners, he’s the dissident who survived a state assassination plot, then helped solve his own attempted murder. To millions of Russians, he is the country’s most famous and persistent gadfly, the vivisectionist of its crooked ruling class.

The videos his Anti-Corruption Foundation put out mix satire, pop culture and zippy animation with a connect-the-dots forensic approach to exposing the corruption among oligarchs, ministers and law-enforcement officials, who aren’t exactly hiding their ill-gotten gains when they show up in public with wristwatches worth many times their annual salaries. If there’s a theme to Navalny’s oeuvre, it is that Russia’s modern kleptocracy is the offspring of an unholy matrimony of former mid-level KGB officers and a post-Soviet *nomenklatura* of bandits in business suits.

The obvious question, then, was why Navalny chose to go back to Russia after proving just how much his enemies want him dead.

He has repeatedly ruled out becoming another exile of Putin’s regime because, as he explains, that would be its most sought-after outcome after his physical elimination. It’s easy to ridicule and dismiss a Kremlin opponent hurling invective from abroad, but much more difficult to do so when he does

so from within the lion’s den. By returning to Moscow, he conducted his own qualitative plebiscite: How much power does he really wield if tens of thousands across Russia are willing to defy truncheons, cages and below-freezing temperatures to set him free?

For one thing, Navalny, who was sentenced on Feb. 2 to more than 2½ years in a penal colony, has put Putin in an obvious bind: killing him now means creating a martyr and precipitating even more domestic unrest, not to mention incurring increased Western sanctions at a time when a new White House has shown a far greater willingness to confront Moscow.

Older ralliers in the protests said they hadn’t taken to the streets since the collapse of the Soviet Union. By one estimate, 42% of those who turned out are newcomers to political activism. Navalny’s suffering combined with his relentless exposure of corruption—something Putin’s own lieutenants have described as a pathology

eating away at the nation—have won him admirers in the unlikely precincts. A large segment of Navalny’s online fan base consists of those who were born after Putin became President in 2000.

None of this means Putin’s reign is in immediate jeopardy. It just means it’s found its most

effective opponent. Unlike so many other dissidents in recent years, Navalny is untainted by any past entanglement with the system he now opposes. He never served in the Russian government nor made a fortune by enabling, only to later repudiate, his former masters out of principle or opportunism or both. And he speaks in a 21st century, digitally savvy language: mordant, ironic and thoroughly unimpressed by authority. More important, he gets results.

At a virtual meeting with Russian university students, Putin was asked about his \$1.5 billion Black Sea pleasure dome, which was exposed by Navalny’s investigations. Although he couldn’t bring himself to utter Navalny’s name (he never does), he disclaimed ownership of the palace. So now the dictator is answering his prisoner’s questions.

Weiss is writing a history of Russian military intelligence

SHORT READS

► Highlights
from stories on
time.com/ideas

Not enough

Zucked author Roger McNamee and Rappler CEO and executive editor Maria Ressa are critical of Facebook’s plan for determining if Donald Trump is permanently banned: **“We should not pretend that the Facebook Oversight Board is more than a MacGuffin designed to distract us from serious issues.”**

Fixing what’s broken

Women have lost a disproportionate number of the jobs taken by COVID-19, but the system was not working for them long before the pandemic, writes NBCUniversal vice chairman Bonnie Hammer: **“To get women—and our economy—back to work, we have to change our culture.”**

Ongoing support

A onetime \$2,000 stimulus check is not enough to help American families, writes Natalie Foster, co-founder and co-chair of the Economic Security Project, who argues that the government should target recurring checks to people who need them most and who will spend them to spur the economy. **“It’s good economics and the moral thing to do,” she writes.**



Police detain a protestor at a Moscow rally in support of Russian opposition leader Navalny on Jan. 31



ESSAY

The comfort of Lunar New Year in isolation

By Beth Nguyen

LUNAR NEW YEAR MIGHT BRING TO MIND FESTIVALS AND fireworks, but I've always associated it with a kind of isolation. Long before the pandemic, long before the rest of America learned about sriracha and pho, I grew up in a Vietnamese refugee family in a mostly white town in Michigan.

We knew what it meant to be at once invisible and too visible. But at least once a year, on Tet, that racial isolation felt self-chosen; this holiday, the most important day of the year, seemed to be just for us. I could stay home from school, forget about homework and chores. Collect red envelopes filled with money. Eat fried spring rolls, sticky rice cakes, pickled leeks, dried coconut and persimmons, all kinds of treats. My grandmother would cook and prep for days. Sometimes we'd go to the Buddhist temple she helped establish; sometimes we'd visit one of the few other Vietnamese families nearby. Everyone we saw looked like us. I didn't talk to my white friends and classmates about this holiday, and they didn't ask. It's not that I felt ashamed; I just didn't feel like sharing.

Since then, I've watched Lunar New Year become known to most Americans as Chinese New Year. I've watched it become an activity in my kids' schools, a lesson in ethnicity by way of dumplings, fried rice, fortune cookies—whatever seems vaguely Asian, like that wonton font we can't seem to get away from. I wouldn't say that we Asians in America are used to being essentialized by food, but we're never surprised by it.

This is the second year in a row of canceled parades, the second Lunar New Year of looking for the comfort in being hidden away. And there is some. When you're Asian, it can be a relief not to have to see strangers staring at you.

I didn't talk to my white friends and classmates about this holiday, and they didn't ask

"Wuhan!" someone yelled in my direction last summer. I was in my car; he was on the sidewalk. I rolled up the window. I don't know if that's an extreme example; I would say it's a common one. A reminder of why it's important to have a holiday for us, to celebrate a new year when isolation is both imposed and chosen.

I REMEMBER REALIZING as a kid that the date of every Lunar New Year was determined by the actual new moon. It felt surprisingly literal, my first lesson in how calendars are made. This past year, most of us have had to re-evaluate how we spend our days. Maybe that's why I've been thinking so much about the arrival of the new year: how civilizations have relied on the moon to make sense of time and its passage; that we have a need to find order and start fresh.

So, what am I planning for Feb. 12, this quiet ushering in of the Year of the Buffalo, also known as the Year of the Ox? I can tell you that I'll be on Zoom with my extended family. I'll be talking with my kids about goals and wishes for this year. I might get some of the foods my grandmother used to get, make some foods she used to make. Though I don't follow many superstitions, I definitely won't cut my hair. I haven't done so for months anyway, and will wait months more. With any luck, I will remember to buy yellow flowers. And when my kids wake up on Tet, I know they'll feel the same excitement I remember feeling. They'll rush over to me and say, "*Chuc mung nam moi*," in order to receive the red envelopes they know are due to them. It's part tradition, part ritual, part ordinary way of life. Just for us.

On Lunar New Year, the moon is always invisible. That's what a new moon is. Impossible not to read meaning into that, so I do. And that's how I know that whatever is invisible is merely hidden; that light will always rise. We just have to wait. Think about all the times, alone at night, you've looked out a window to find the moon. We count the days, watching that light get bigger. We hope for a better year for everyone.

Nguyen is the author of the novels Short Girls and Pioneer Girl

How dreams defend our brains

By David Eagleman and Don Vaughn

WHEN HE WAS 2 YEARS OLD, BEN STOPPED SEEING OUT OF his left eye. His mother took him to the doctor and soon discovered he had retinal cancer in both eyes. After chemotherapy and radiation failed, surgeons removed both his eyes. For Ben, vision was gone forever.

But by the time he was 7 years old, he had devised a technique for decoding the world around him: he clicked with his mouth and listened for the returning echoes. This method enabled Ben to determine the locations of open doorways, people, parked cars, garbage cans and so on. He was echolocating: bouncing his sound waves off objects in the environment and catching the reflections to build a mental model of his surroundings.

Echolocation may sound like an improbable feat for a human, but thousands of blind people have perfected this skill, just as Ben did. How could blindness give rise to the stunning ability to understand the surroundings with one's ears? The answer lies in a gift bestowed on the brain by evolution: tremendous adaptability.

Whenever we learn something, pick up a new skill or modify our habits, the physical structure of our brain changes. Neurons, the cells responsible for rapidly processing information in the brain, are interconnected by the thousands—but like friendships in a community, the connections between them constantly change: strengthening, weakening and finding new partners. Neuroscience calls this phenomenon brain plasticity, referring to the ability of the brain, like plastic, to assume new shapes and hold them. More recent discoveries in neuroscience, though, suggest that the brain's brand of flexibility is far more nuanced than holding onto a shape. To capture this, we refer to the brain's plasticity as “live-wiring” to spotlight how this vast system of 86 billion neurons and 0.2 quadrillion connections rewires itself every moment of your life. The brain's livewiring allows for learning, memory and the ability to develop new skills.

Recent decades have yielded several revelations about live-wiring, but perhaps the biggest surprise is its rapidity. Brain circuits reorganize not only in the newly blind but also in the sighted who have temporary blindness. In one study, sighted participants intensively learned how to read braille. Half the participants were blindfolded throughout the experience. At the end of five days, the participants who wore blindfolds could distinguish subtle differences between braille characters much better than the participants who didn't wear blindfolds. Even more remarkably, the blindfolded participants showed activation in visual brain regions in response to touch and sound. In other words, the blindfolded participants performed better on the touch-related task because their visual cortex had been recruited to help.

But such changes don't have to take five days; that just happened to be when the measurement took place. When blindfolded participants are continuously measured, touch-related activity shows up in the visual cortex in about an hour.

What do brain flexibility and rapid cortical takeover have to do with dreaming? Perhaps more than previously thought. Ben clearly benefited from the redistribution of his visual cortex to other senses because he had permanently lost his eyes, but what about the participants in the blindfold experiments? If our loss of a sense is only temporary, then the rapid conquest of brain territory may not be so helpful. And this, we propose, is why we dream.

In the ceaseless competition for brain territory, the visual system has a unique problem: because of the planet's rotation, all animals are cast into darkness for an average of 12 out of every 24 hours. Our ancestors effectively were unwitting participants in the blindfold experiment, every night of their lives.

So how did the visual cortex of our ancestors' brains defend its territory, in the absence of input from the eyes?

We suggest that the brain preserves the territory of the visual cortex by keeping it active at night. In our “defensive activation theory,” dream sleep exists to keep neurons in the visual cortex active, thereby combatting a takeover by the neighboring senses. In this view, dreams are primarily visual precisely because this is the only sense that is disadvantaged by darkness. Thus, only the visual cortex is vulnerable in a way that warrants internally generated activity to preserve its territory.

IN HUMANS, sleep is punctuated by rapid eye movement (REM) sleep every 90 minutes. This is when most dreaming occurs. REM sleep is triggered by a specialized set of neurons that pump activity straight into the brain's visual cortex, causing us to experience vision even though our eyes are closed. This activity in the visual cortex is presumably why dreams are pictorial and filmic. The anatomical precision of these circuits suggests that dream sleep is biologically important—such precise and universal circuitry rarely evolves without an important function behind it.

The defensive activation theory makes some clear predictions about dreaming. For example, because brain flexibility diminishes with age, the fraction of sleep spent in REM should also decrease across the life span. And that's

**26
YEARS**

Amount of time
you will spend
asleep in an
average lifetime

21%

Proportion of
time sleeping
that we spend
dreaming

**4 to 6
CYCLES**

Number of times
most people
experience a
dream sequence
every night



exactly what happens: in humans, REM accounts for half of an infant's sleep time, but the percentage decreases steadily to about 18% in the elderly. REM sleep appears to become less necessary as the brain becomes less flexible.

Of course, this relationship is not sufficient to prove the defensive activation theory. To test it on a deeper level, we broadened our investigation to animals other than humans. The defensive activation theory makes a specific prediction: the more flexible an animal's brain, the more REM sleep it should have to defend its visual system during sleep. To this end, we examined the extent to which the brains of 25 species of primates are "preprogrammed" vs. flexible at birth. We looked at the time it takes animals of each species to develop. How long do they take to wean from their mothers?

***Dreams are
the strange
love child of
the brain's
plasticity
and the
rotation of
the planet***

How quickly do they learn to walk? How many years until they reach adolescence? The more rapid an animal's development, the more preprogrammed (less flexible) the brain.

As predicted, we found that species with more flexible brains spend more time in REM sleep each night. Although these two measures—brain flexibility and REM sleep—would seem at first to be unrelated, they are in fact linked.

Dream circuitry is so fundamentally important that it is found even in people who are born blind. However, those who are born blind (or who become blind early in life) don't experience visual imagery in their dreams; instead they have other sensory experiences, such as feeling their way around a rearranged living room or hearing strange dogs barking. This is because other senses have taken over their visual cortex. In other words, blind and sighted people alike experience activity in the same region of their brain during dreams; they differ only in the senses that are processed there.

We developed our defensive activation theory to explain visual hallucinations during extended periods of darkness, but it may represent a more general principle: the brain has evolved specific circuitry to generate activity that compensates for periods of deprivation. This might occur in several scenarios: when deprivation is regular and predictable (e.g., dreams during sleep), when there is damage to the sensory input pathway (e.g., tinnitus or phantom-limb syndrome) and when deprivation is unpredictable (e.g., hallucinations induced by sensory deprivation). Hallucinations during deprivation may in fact be a feature of the system.

Dreams have long perplexed philosophers, priests and poets. We suggest that dream sleep exists, at least in part, to prevent the other senses from taking over the brain's visual cortex when it goes unused. Dreams are the counterbalance against too much flexibility. Dreams may be better understood as the strange love child of brain plasticity and the rotation of the planet.

Eagleman, a neuroscientist at Stanford, is the author of Livewired. Vaughn is a neuroscientist at UCLA.



*A New York
City street,
on Oct. 3*

PHOTOGRAPH BY ELIZABETH BICK



Health

THIS IS WHAT THE FUTURE LOOKS LIKE

*We may never eliminate COVID-19.
But we can learn to live with it*

BY JAMIE DUCHARME

WHEN DOES A PANDEMIC END? IS IT WHEN LIFE REGAINS A SEMBLANCE OF NORMALITY?

Is it when the world reaches herd immunity, the benchmark at which enough people are immune to an infectious disease to stop its widespread circulation? Or is it when the disease is defeated, the last patient cured and the pathogen retired to the history books?

The last scenario, in the case of COVID-19, is likely a ways off, if it ever arrives. The virus has infected more than 100 million people worldwide and killed more than 2 million. New viral variants even more contagious than those that started the pandemic are spreading across the world. And though highly effective vaccines were developed and deployed in record time, it will be a mammoth undertaking to inoculate enough of the world's population to achieve herd immunity, especially with the new variants in hot pursuit. Already, in many countries with access to vaccines, logistical hurdles and vaccine hesitancy have proved to be formidable adversaries; meanwhile, many nations in the developing world don't have access to vaccines at all.

There have been, and will continue to be, global success stories. Israel has vaccinated a significant chunk of its population, enough to begin feasibly planning for a post-herd-immunity reality. New Zealand has effectively eliminated COVID-19 through a combination of domestic lockdowns and border-control measures, and Australia and multiple Asian countries have used similar tactics to dramatically tamp down the virus's spread. But in places like the U.S., where the virus continues to spread widely, elimination is at this point a far less attainable goal than management. In the U.S., as in many parts of the world, experts say COVID-19 is likely, at least for the foreseeable future, to become endemic—a disease that circulates

'Yes, there will be a disease among us, but there are many diseases among us.'

—Dr. Sandro Galea, Boston University School of Public Health

regularly, if not as catastrophically as it has over the past year. That doesn't mean it will be everywhere, all the time, but it may not disappear completely, either.

Our challenge in the U.S., then, may not be vanquishing the virus that has dominated the past year of our lives. It may be learning to live with it.

IMAGINE TODAY'S DATE is Sept. 1, 2021. You've received both of your vaccine doses. Your neighbors have been fully vaccinated too, so you're having them over for dinner tonight. COVID-19 cases have become rare in your town. You'll wear a mask when you go out to pick up groceries, just to be safe, and there are still signs up at the pharmacy counter advertising COVID-19 vaccination. For the most part, though, life feels pretty normal.

Your brother, who lives a few states away, is living in a different reality. Several clusters of cases related to a new viral variant have emerged in his area, prompting schools to delay their start dates. Masks are required in public, and restaurants are asking patrons to leave their information in case they need to start contact tracing. The health department is setting up public testing and vaccination sites, and health officials are on the news each night encouraging unvaccinated people to get their shots. You were planning to visit your brother for Thanksgiving, but you may scrap those plans if things get much worse in his area.

That's a hypothetical scenario, of course. COVID-19 is a new disease, and there's no road map for predicting its future. No one knows how long it will take the U.S. to reach herd immunity or whether we'll get there at all—if the virus mutates faster than vaccines can be administered, or if a significant share of the population opts not to get vaccinated, the window



may slam shut. Scientists don't know how many people need to get vaccinated to reach that threshold even if everything goes well, though recent estimates put the figure at well above 70% of the population. That's a daunting goal, since only about 8% of people in the U.S. have been vaccinated so far.

What does seem safe to say is that COVID-19 will become increasingly manageable as more people get vaccinated, slowing—if not stopping—the virus's spread through communities. Despite the sluggish start to vaccine distribution in the U.S., “if we [vaccinate] efficiently in April, May, June, July, August, we should have that degree of protection that could get us back to some form of normality” by fall, Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, said in January.

Even assuming the U.S. picks up the pace on vaccinations, there will still be gaps in protection. The two COVID-19 vaccines currently authorized in the U.S., made by Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna, are both about 95% effective at preventing disease, but there is a small subset of people for whom they will not work. It's also unclear whether being vaccinated means you cannot transmit the virus to others. And there will always be people who choose not to or are unable to get vaccinated. Plus, children younger than 16 are not currently eligible for vaccination, which

Shoppers
outside a
grocery store
in Livermore,
Calif., on
April 10

means the virus may keep spreading among young people until vaccinemakers complete studies on children, hopefully sometime this year.

All that means the U.S. is unlikely to eliminate COVID-19 in the near future, says Saskia Popescu, an assistant professor of biodefense at George Mason University. A country like New Zealand—an island nation with about 5 million residents—will have an easier time stamping out a virus than a global travel hub with 330 million citizens living across more than 50 states and territories. But even if elimination is far off, “I think we'll enter a phase of low-level prevalence,” says Dr. Sandro Galea, dean of the Boston University School of Public Health. “Yes, there [will be] a disease among us, but there are many diseases among us.”

Some current precautions, like wearing masks in public, will likely remain widespread throughout 2021, while more drastic measures—like school closures or stay-at-home orders—will hopefully become temporary and targeted, based on where case clusters emerge. If case counts in an area begin to tick upward, public-health departments should be ready to respond quickly with vaccination and testing campaigns, Popescu says.

Viral variants only complicate the equation. It's standard for viruses to mutate the longer they spread.

Health

As more people gain immunity to a virus, it adapts to the changing conditions, sometimes becoming more contagious—or even more virulent—in the process. Already, more-infectious variants of SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, have begun to spread around the world. Research suggests currently authorized vaccines will work against them, but there is always the frightening possibility that the virus will mutate enough that that's no longer true.

Jonna Mazet, a professor of epidemiology and disease ecology at the University of California, Davis, says the U.S. will need to set up a robust surveillance system to watch for new variants of the virus. That might mean future international travelers will also have to get tested upon arrival in the U.S., or that large employers and hospitals will have to regularly test their employees or patients to watch for new variants emerging in the population.

To enable this kind of surveillance, the World Health Organization (WHO) is working with countries around the world to strengthen their genetic-sequencing abilities. Maria Van Kerkhove, the WHO's technical lead on COVID-19, says that may mean leveraging labs already set up to detect the flu, HIV, tuberculosis and other diseases, and setting guidelines for which samples need genetic sequencing—prioritizing, for example, those that come from unusual case clusters or from patients with abnormal symptoms.

If concerning mutations do pop up, vaccine-makers may have to tweak their shots and offer new versions as boosters. Luckily, the mRNA technology used to develop both Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna's shots enables them to make this kind of adjustment in weeks. The shots use the virus's genetic sequence to teach the body how to make proteins that trigger an immune response, so scientists could just sub in the new genetic information where relevant. Van Kerkhove says it's possible vaccines will be tailor-made for certain geographical regions depending on how and where the virus mutates, but global travel means new strains won't stay contained for long.

That underscores wealthy countries' responsibility to help developing nations get access to vaccines, Mazet says—for the benefit of the people who live there, of course, but also for the rest of the world. Even if one country achieves herd immunity, that status could be threatened by new viral mutations emerging from areas without broad vaccine coverage.

The good news is we already know how to live with viruses, like seasonal influenza and the coronaviruses that cause the common cold. These diseases aren't harmless—the flu infects millions of people in the U.S. each year and kills tens of thousands—but we have learned to minimize their damage.

Flu shots are neither perfectly protective nor universally used, but the U.S. has honed the art of administering them. Each year, pharmacies, medical

offices, workplaces and public clinics vaccinate millions of people, often for free. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention also has a surveillance system designed to track where and how widely influenza strains are circulating—research that occasionally leads to targeted precautions, like temporary school closures. People also know to take extra disease-prevention precautions during flu season.

COVID-19 prevention may ultimately look similar. It's possible that COVID-19 vaccines will need to be administered yearly, like flu shots. A surveillance network will also be necessary, to watch for new variants or areas where case counts are creeping upward. But if countries stay vigilant about precautions like masking, and if coronavirus vaccines turn out to be fairly long-lasting and almost universally used, our approach to COVID-19 may someday mirror that of nearly eliminated diseases like measles.

The measles, mumps and rubella vaccine is required for most schoolchildren, and its protection usually lasts a lifetime. About 85% of the world's children have had at least one dose of the measles vaccine; in the U.S., about 92% of adolescents have received both recommended shots. That's an aspirational target when designing COVID-19 vaccination campaigns. Still, measles outbreaks do occasionally occur in the U.S., particularly among children who live in communities with high levels of vaccine skepticism. But because measles vaccination is so widespread and effective, such incidents are rare. Even in 2019, one of the worst years for measles in recent history, only about 1,300 people in the U.S. got sick.

It may never be possible to drive COVID-19 case counts down that low, especially since immunity from COVID-19, unlike measles, may not be lifelong. But Ralph Baric, a coronavirus researcher at the University of North Carolina, says he can envision a future in which, thanks to widespread vaccination, COVID-19 also becomes primarily a disease of childhood, and probably a mild one at that. Kids rarely develop severe cases of COVID-19, and such cases may become increasingly rare with time: as with other coronaviruses, children may be exposed to SARS-CoV-2 early in life and progressively build up immunity to it, taking it from a fearsome pathogen to a routine part of life. Of course, Baric cautions, predictions can be wrong.

CONTAINING THE VIRUS is difficult enough from a scientific and logistical perspective. But recovering from a pandemic also raises a number of ethical issues. What would the world look like, for example, if eligibility to work, socialize and generally live a public life were contingent on vaccination status?

About 50% of executives said in a recent poll they plan to require nonremote employees to get vaccinated, and vaccine-mandatory weddings and parties will almost certainly pop up on social calendars.

'The virus will adapt to its host, and we will adapt to the virus.'

—Steven Taylor,
pandemic-psychology
expert



Some countries, including the U.K., are already experimenting with “immunity passports,” which essentially mark those who are protected from COVID-19 infection and allow them to live and travel freely.

On their face, such systems make sense—but Nicholas Evans, an assistant philosophy professor at the University of Massachusetts, Lowell, says they’re a slippery slope. “An immunity passport constitutes a regulation on someone’s freedom of movement or freedom of association,” he says. Beyond that, immunity passports are not always productive, he says.

Travelers at
Los Angeles
International
Airport on July 4

Requiring such proof to travel internationally could encourage people to game the vaccine-prioritization system or, more dangerously, try to get sick to gain natural immunity.

A better solution, many experts believe, is investing in the public-health infrastructure that went neglected before the COVID-19 pandemic, thus improving our ability to contain, respond to and monitor coronaviruses and other pathogens. “We need to invest in creating a healthier country, so when there is another virus, we will not be as unprepared as we were for this one,” Galea says.

In COVID-specific terms, that could mean funding a network of free testing centers around the country, so experts can pick up on and respond to case clusters and new variants early. It could mean ramping up the U.S. biodefense program so that it is able to respond more nimbly to emerging pathogens. It could mean streamlining the vaccine production and distribution pipeline, so people are able to easily get not only their first round of COVID-19 vaccinations but also any boosters that become necessary in the future. As part of a proposed \$1.9 trillion relief bill, the Biden Administration has already asked for \$50 billion in funding for testing and \$20 billion for improved vaccine distribution. President Joe Biden in January also issued an Executive Order to establish a COVID-19 response coordinator and help prepare the U.S. for “future biological and pandemic threats.”

Recovering from the pandemic must also involve better science communication, to improve understanding of what must be done to curtail disease spread—and to persuade Americans to actually do it.

Part of coexisting with COVID-19 may mean recognizing the need for cooperation, whether it’s getting vaccinated to contribute to herd immunity; wearing a mask to prevent spreading the virus; consenting to regular testing or contact tracing to help with monitoring; or adhering to the guidelines set out by local health authorities if an outbreak emerges. Steven Taylor, author of *The Psychology of Pandemics*, says it’s possible for humans to adjust to such a scenario. Wearing masks felt bizarre to many in the Western world less than a year ago; now it’s second nature for most. “The virus will adapt to its host,” he says, “and we will adapt to the virus.”

Elected officials, scientists and public-health experts must continue pushing out clear, trustworthy guidance that will help people tailor their behavior moving forward. If U.S. leaders communicate the best science-backed information available, and transparently explain why certain precautions are required, that could go a long way, Taylor says.

Whenever the U.S. emerges from the pandemic, “normal” may not look like it did in 2019. But if we heed the lessons the pandemic has taught, it could set us up for a healthier world moving forward. —With reporting by ALICE PARK/NEW YORK

Profile

PUTTING FAITH IN SCIENCE

Francis Collins, the devout director of the National Institutes of Health, fights one virus while preparing for the next

BY BELINDA LUSCOMBE

IN MAY 2020, DR. FRANCIS COLLINS, THE LONG-time head of the National Institutes of Health (NIH), was called to the White House to meet with Jared Kushner, the then President's son-in-law and adviser, and Dr. Deborah Birx, the head of the White House Coronavirus Task Force. A few weeks earlier, Congress had given the NIH \$1.5 billion to try to speed up the process of developing new diagnostic tests for COVID-19, and the White House, which was dubious about increasing the rate of testing, wanted to know more about what the NIH was doing.

Collins is the boss of Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, but during the pandemic he has mostly taken a back seat when it comes to media. It's not that Collins isn't a great communicator; he's known for his ability to talk about science at any level. But he did not wish to become an object of White House attention. So when he met with Kushner, "I did my best to try to describe what we were doing in a way that it wouldn't attract a lot of desire on their part to interfere," says Collins. "It was really technical and really geeky."



Collins has been called “the best politician in D.C.” for his ability to charm research money out of both sides of the aisle

PHOTOGRAPH BY GABRIELLA
DEMCZUK FOR TIME

Profile

In June, Kushner visited the NIH to hear about the new plan, known as RADx (Rapid Acceleration of Diagnostics), from other points of view. This time Collins' engineering staff went into nerd-overdrive detail. "And that was the last we heard of White House interest in what we were doing for diagnostics," says Collins. "To this day I have never done a briefing about RADx in the White House task force. And that was just fine."

Collins believes in God and science, probably in that order, but over the past 12 months, science has been hogging his attention. (To get in time for prayer and Bible study, he says, he has been waking up before 4 a.m.) As the head of the U.S. government body responsible for funding biomedical research, he's the guy who has to figure out where to put the considerable resources of the U.S. purse to most effectively keep Americans healthy. The NIH runs 27 agencies and funds tens of thousands of research projects in universities around the country. As far as health research is concerned, the buck starts with Collins.

Bureaucrats are hardly ever the heroes of stories. It is hard to extol the virtues of the person who, when faced with a looming societal problem, figures out which of the many processes and regulatory frameworks available to him or her is the appropriate place to start. We understand the appeal of the guy who reinvents the wheel. We get the triumph of she who surpasses overwhelming odds. But the soul who liaises with stakeholders, who wields acronym-laced organizational charts, who crafts carefully worded and completely understandable memos, who knows whom to contact for the details of another contact? That soul is hard to romanticize. Is there anything less cinematic than forming a committee and sending a punishing number of emails?

Collins is known, however, for having an unusual combination of abilities. He's a well-respected scientist (he helped decode the human genome) as well as an impressive administrator (he has run the biggest biomedical funder in the world for 11 years and overseen a budget increase of 36% to, in 2020, \$41.68 billion). "There's not too many scientists that are very gifted at what they do in the laboratory and can do the kind of public articulation of science with politicians from across the political spectrum," says Nobel laureate biochemist Jennifer Doudna. He's also one of the few scientists who can speak credibly to people of faith, who in some circles have come to regard science as hostile to their beliefs.

KEEPING EXACTLY THE right height of profile is one of Collins' less-appreciated talents, the kind that has kept him at the head of a government agency through three presidential administrations, including the current one, to which he was reappointed in January. Republican Congressman Tom Cole of Oklahoma calls him "the best politician in D.C."



Collins has had to use every one of those abilities as he has tried to manipulate the levers of scientific mastery and money to confront the pandemic in the U.S. at a time of political instability. If Fauci and his team have been at the forefront of the fight against the coronavirus, Collins has been their staunchest supporter, championing Fauci as he kept hammering the facts home, and creating battle plans that may become the blueprints for the way the U.S. addresses its most besetting diseases in the future. He's drawn criticism for both his methods and his priorities, as well as his refusal to publicly challenge the Trump Administration, but his hope is that when COVID-19 is finally put in the column of things we know how to manage, alongside TB, measles and HIV, the U.S. will have a new set of tools and processes to more quickly mobilize around the next threat. "It would be really poor planning to imagine that this is the last coronavirus epidemic that we will ever see," says Collins. "We need to be prepared for whatever COVID-24 is going to look like. And along the way we might even cure the common cold."

Collins, 70, had an unconventional upbringing



From left: Collins illustrating the challenge of gene hunting in 1989; with family in 1951 and 2003; with his second wife Diane Baker in 2004

him,” says former Republican Senator Lamar Alexander. “He has a very plainspoken way of talking about the medical miracles that could happen over the next eight to 10 years if we properly funded the work.”

There’s a folksiness to Collins, who has an old-fashioned and formal way of speaking, in perfectly grammatically correct sentences punctuated by an occasional “oh boy” or “by golly.” He looks like the kind of distinguished elderly gentleman that *The Simpsons*’ next-diddly-door neighbor Ned Flanders would grow into if cartoon characters aged. This geniality, however, does not mask his drive. Even during the pandemic, he still has a research lab with postdocs, and in November the FDA approved a drug for a premature-aging condition known as progeria that was built on his research. He also plays guitar well enough to have at least once sat in at Nashville’s Bluebird Cafe, the jumping-off venue for such notables as Garth Brooks and Taylor Swift.

Despite the guitar chops, and his fondness for motorcycles, nobody is going to accuse Francis (never Frank) Collins of being anything but the squarest of the quadrilaterals. The hobbies are a way of disarming people. He often composes ditties to play at the farewell parties of staff members. At a meeting of the NIH advisory committee in 2020 (held online), he played guitar while the Gates Foundation’s Chris Karp played piano and sang a song about the virus to the tune of the Beatles’ “In My Life”: “With this virus all around us/ Through the whole world, our lives have changed . . .”

Collins studied chemistry at University of Virginia and did a Ph.D. at Yale before switching lanes to medicine and landing in the then nascent field of genetic decoding in the early ’80s. He developed an innovative method of gene finding, which led to the identification of the genetic sequences responsible for cystic fibrosis, Huntington’s disease and neurofibromatosis, among others. In 1993, he was asked to lead the government group that contributed to the Human Genome Project, creating a map of the 3 billion DNA base pairs that make humans human.

After he was made NIH director in 2009, he set about making the agency more focused on translational science—finding ways to convert scientific discoveries into medical advances. When Collins submitted his resignation letter to President Trump, as the NIH director generally does for each Administration, he got a one-line email stating that it was rejected. “He is my nominee for Most Unsung Valuable Player in health care during the last dozen years,” says Alexander, who advocated for the Trump Administration to make him one of the few Obama-era appointees who kept his job.

IT MAY HAVE BEEN HYDROXYCHLOROQUINE that set Collins on the path he’s taken during the pandemic. Trump was touting its efficacy in March, based on a

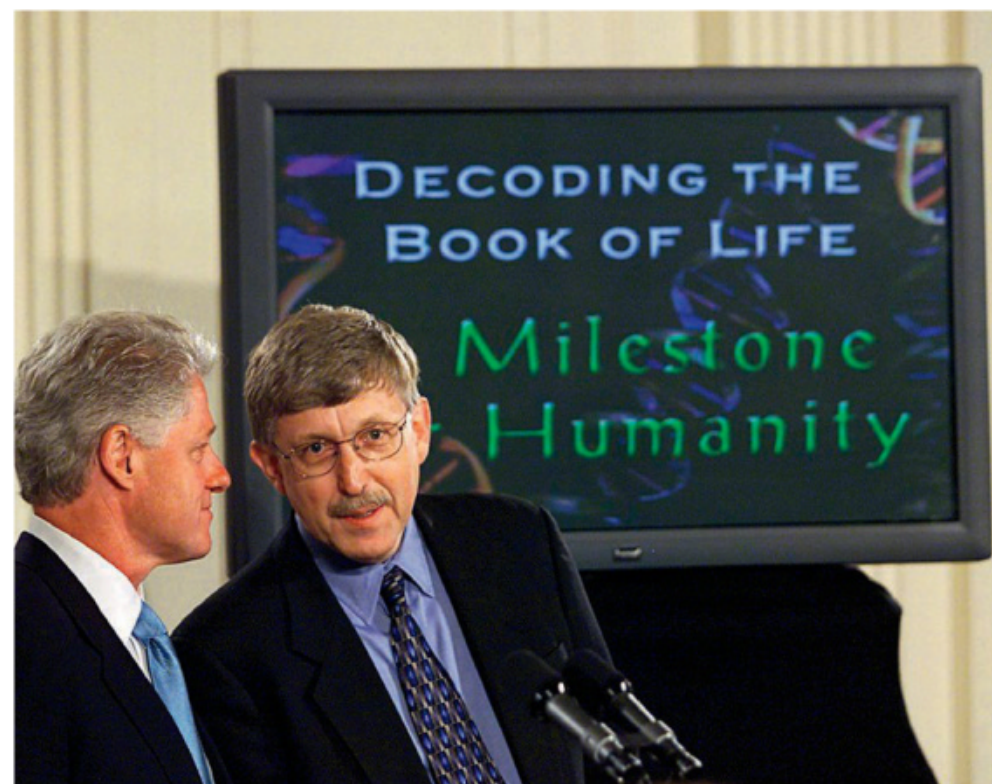
for a scientist. His parents were theater people who lived in a farmhouse in Virginia’s Shenandoah Valley. His father, a drama professor, and his mother, a playwright, would put on performances in a grove of oak trees behind the house every summer, in which young Francis performed. Collins was homeschooled by his mother until sixth grade, and what she lacked in training she made up for in enthusiasm. “I learned to love the experience of learning new things,” says Collins. “That has served me very well as NIH director, and particularly well this year,” when he might have two days to make a decision about an area of science “that was not exactly my sweet spot.” Collins had to dive into studies on subjects like immunology that before the pandemic he confesses he regarded as a “little bit woolly.”

The theater training has helped him in other ways too. Collins can read a room and adjust his level of discourse according to his audience. For academics, he uses more pure science. For politicians, it’s all about clearly articulated deliverables. “Everyone on our health committee—and they’re 23 different members from Elizabeth Warren to Rand Paul—trusted

Profile

2000
THE SEQUENCE OF THE
HUMAN GENOME IS
REVEALED ON JUNE 26

IN THE HALLS OF POWER



2000
BILL CLINTON HAILS THE DISCOVERY'S
"IMMENSE NEW POWER"

small French study later more or less disowned by the scientific journal in which it appeared, and what the then President said was “a feeling.” “I was frustrated, as was anybody in the scientific community, about the ways at times that science was neglected or overshadowed by political comments or just personal anecdotes,” Collins says.

Before he was a research scientist, Collins was a physician, and he diagnosed the country as in need of some scientific rigor. “It looked as if there were hundreds of trials on hydroxychloroquine, most of which were probably too small to give you a credible result,” he says. “And there were lots of other very small trials on compounds that people thought, ‘Well, maybe that will work,’ but there was relatively little in the way of systematic evidence and there was no prioritization going on. It was crazy.”

Over the next few weeks, Collins contacted the chief scientific officers of many of the pharmaceutical companies and began to float the idea of an emergency public-private partnership, like the ones that had been first created for HIV, then cancer, and were bubbling along for such diseases as diabetes and lupus, but bigger and faster. This network, which came to be called ACTIV (Accelerating COVID-19 Therapeutic Interventions and Vaccines), aimed to streamline and bring discipline to the development of treatments and vaccines for the virus. “It seemed like what we really needed to do was to get the academics and the government and industry all together and decide we’re going to do something that we’ve never quite done before in a crisis like this, and that is prioritize what needs to be done and then do it and not worry about who’s going to get the credit.”

“
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be really
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that we will
ever see.*
”

Mikael Dolsten, chief scientific officer of Pfizer, got a call about it while his wife was in the hospital with COVID-19. Even though Pfizer was going to run its own Phase 3 vaccine trials outside of the Collins plan, Dolsten encouraged his longtime friend to start the network. Dolsten sat on the executive committee and another Pfizer executive co-headed the vaccines working group. “Francis really brought the world of academia together to seriously look at how you do best practice for COVID pandemics,” says Dolsten.

On April 4, nine pharmaceutical companies—including Moderna, which was the second drugmaker to get emergency-use authorization from the FDA for its vaccine, and Johnson & Johnson, which hopes to apply for it soon—and five government agencies met to hash out the details. Within two weeks, they had mapped out the four areas that needed the most intense effort and set up teams for them all, each led by a representative of industry and of either academia or the government. “We had a hundred people who basically agreed they’re going to put their lives on hold for everything except this,” says Collins.

One of the groups worked on the vaccine, ensuring the trials were efficient while also being rigorous. It was decided, for example, that each trial needed to have at least 30,000 participants and they would be observed for negative side effects for at least 60 days. The same data-safety board monitored all the trials from the different vaccine makers, so the standards for measuring safety and efficacy were consistent.

Another group was looking at possible treatments, both existing medicines that might be adapted and new approaches that could be supercharged with funding. That group also had to es-

2007

GEORGE W. BUSH AWARDS
COLLINS THE PRESIDENTIAL
MEDAL OF FREEDOM



2020

TRUMP TAKES QUESTIONS
ABOUT VACCINES



2014

OBAMA VISITS THE NIH'S
VACCINE LAB DURING THE EBOLA CRISIS



establish the protocols for all the drug development. Dolsten says Pfizer is considering collaborating with the network on its antiviral treatments. “We have never run an antivirals study against coronavirus,” he says. “The spirit of ACTIV and what we have learned from all the trials now will be invaluable.”

The third group was tasked with figuring out how to do the staggering amount of testing it would take to get these drugs and vaccines to market, including finding organizations to monitor droves of volunteers and gather the relevant data. “You needed very quickly to set up clinical-trial networks that can enroll thousands of people,” says Collins, “and we don’t have that capacity ready to go unless you pull things together including networks that haven’t worked on infectious disease before.”

The fourth group was a kind of advance guard, which gathered and disseminated all the information that the other groups would need to get going before human trials began: any animal studies that had been done, how to gain access to the right sort of laboratories—those that can work with highly contagious viruses. It also made sure laboratories had cleared their decks and were ready to go.

While all this was under way, there was still the problem of diagnostic testing. You can’t fight a virus if you don’t know who has it. At the time, in mid-April, the U.S. was performing about 150,000 tests a day; to effectively monitor the population for the virus, the NIH estimated it would need 6 million.

RADx required Collins and his colleagues to add a new skill set to their résumés: venture capitalist. Collins dispatched Bruce Tromberg, director of the National Institute of Biomedical Imaging and Bio-

engineering (NIBIB), to help lure in businesses, tech companies and academic labs with novel testing approaches, and they created a kind of *Shark Tank* where those with ideas would get speedily reviewed by a team of experts, who would evaluate not just the science but also their capacity to scale it. Candidates who made it through that round spent a week in virtual intensive collaboration with industry experts, who tweaked and refined their innovations. Other projects that were further along were given an influx of cash.

“Within eight months they attracted proposals from 700 different people and pushed two dozen of them into the marketplace,” says Alexander, who was one of the champions of the project when the White House was skeptical about the benefits of testing. “That’s an incredible engineering and scientific achievement.” The first over-the-counter home test approved by the FDA, from Ellume, was developed using that process.

Has it been enough? Not nearly. Collins wishes he had included convalescent-plasma studies in ACTIV, to clarify if the blood of people who had recovered from COVID-19 could help those struggling with it. “I take that as a failure of our whole academic clinical research effort, and a failure of NIH, that we didn’t jump in and make sure that this was organized in a fashion that would give a rigorous answer,” he says. “It may help most with people who just got infected who haven’t made their own antibodies yet, but we don’t know for sure.” And there is only one FDA-approved COVID-19 medication, remdesivir—a repurposed Ebola drug. That’s not surprising to Collins—it takes three to five years to develop a new antiviral drug—but it still haunts

Profile

him. “I think we have actually moved at unprecedented speed in everything we’ve done,” he says, “but I’ve still felt this sense every day that people are losing their lives as a result of this, and I wish we could have gone faster.”

COLLINS CAME TO FAITH during the period when he worked as a physician. He noticed how many gravely ill people seemed to draw strength from their beliefs, and when one patient eventually asked him what he believed, he was disturbed that he didn’t have an answer. “Atheism for a scientist is really hard to defend because it’s the assertion of a universal negative,” he says. “And scientists aren’t supposed to be able to do that.” A minister directed him to every brainiac Christian’s favorite writer, C.S. Lewis. Eventually, Collins wrote a best-selling book of his own, *The Language of God*, in which he argues that scientific discoveries do not preclude the existence of a Deity. In 2020, he won the \$1.3 million Templeton Prize, which is given to those who investigate the metaphysical aspects of science.

One standing appointment Collins has kept during the pandemic is with his book club, made up mostly of members of the Christianintelligentsia. Theologians such as Russell Moore and Tim Keller, columnists such as Pete Wehner and David Brooks and the conservative author Yuval Levin meet monthly, usually to discuss books about weighty matters of faith. The theologian N.T. Wright, who’s also a friend of Collins’, visits when he has a new book out.

While Fauci has been medicine’s public face, Collins has been hitting the faith-based circuit, toting his “favorite pet rock,” a baseball-size 3-D printed model of a spiked protein, and preaching science to believers. One of his life goals is to address the “long-standing tension between evangelicals and rigorous science.” He insists that for a believer, science is a form of worship. “It’s a glimpse of God’s mind,” he says, “when you do a scientific experiment.” His foundation, BioLogos, tries to bridge the two. The pandemic has shown how much work it has to do.

FOR ALL COLLINS’ ACCOMPLISHMENTS and accolades—including the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2007 and the National Medal of Science in 2008—he is not immune from criticism. “What I think was disappointing is that science leaders did not step up to challenge the President more publicly,” says *Lancet* editor in chief Richard Horton. “The failure of the science community to act more robustly led to a collusion between scientists and politicians, a collusion that has needlessly cost the lives of hundreds of thousands.” Collins says Fauci did a better job at speaking out about this than anyone could and didn’t need anyone else to speak for him.

Under Collins’ watch, the NIH has established the position of Chief Officer for Scientific Work-

force Diversity and invested in outreach to under-represented communities in science, yet a recently published analysis by two researchers argues that the NIH’s own studies show little improvement has been made in funding bias. “What I’d blame Francis Collins for is his lack of taking [the NIH studies] seriously,” says professor Michael Taffe of the University of California, San Diego, psychiatry department, one of the authors of the paper. Not only does the NIH fund proportionally fewer Black-led research projects, the study suggests, but it also funds fewer projects that look at health issues that are more likely to affect Black communities. “Everything that’s not majoritarian culture is secondary,” says Taffe.

“I will be the first to say we have failed for the most part to have our workforce look like our country,” says Collins. With the lifting of Trump’s Executive Order banning training on structural racism in government agencies, he says he hopes as soon as February to begin meetings on the series of actions the NIH will be taking to address the imbalance.

The bigger problem, he says, is the racial disparities in the health of Americans. The coronavirus threw those into sharp relief. It was clear early on that people from underserved neighborhoods and communities of color were infected by the virus at a much higher rate and were more likely to be hospitalized and to die of it than those in wealthier and white communities. Collins notes that as a geneticist, he knew this had nothing to do with biology. So the NIH undertook a bunch of programs to redress the balance, including trying to figure out how to get more tests into minority communities, ensure that vaccine trials were testing as representative a cross section of the country as possible and, once the vaccines were approved, make them available and welcome in every neighborhood.

Given the history of medical interventions into communities of color, the NIH decided it needed to be proactive about building trust and communication before the vaccines arrived. Dr. Gary Gibbons, the director of the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute at the NIH, co-led an initiative called CEAL (Community Engagement Alliance), which built relationships and networks in minority communities to both hear their concerns and try to address misinformation about the vaccine and encourage participation in trials. “The NIH overall makes quite an investment in health-disparities research,” says Gibbons, “but it’s a work in progress.” Initial figures suggest that Black Americans are getting vaccinated at much lower levels than white Americans.

Taffe’s solution for the disparity within NIH—to fund a more diverse range of scientists—is echoed in other corners of academia. Because Collins has always favored big, bold plans, like curing diabetes or Alzheimer’s, some scientists say he overlooks the key ingredient for breakthroughs, which is funding innovative scientists. “He’s moved increasingly to-

“
*It’s a
glimpse of
God’s mind
when you do
a scientific
experiment.*
”



ward a command-and-control kind of model for science, specifying more than I think is healthy for the community what people are going to work on what kind of projects,” says Michael Eisen, a professor of genetics, genomics and development at the University of California, Berkeley. “It’s sucked the lifeblood out of American science in the process.” Eisen argues that the emphasis on moon shots erodes the foundation that makes those advances possible, which is long-term stable support of pure research.

Collins expresses a rare hint of impatience about these criticisms. “The vast majority of what NIH is doing is not those large-scale projects,” he says. “They get attention because if they achieve something they tend to make a splash.” He also points out that there are simply many projects, like his own Genome Project, that a single investigator could not take on. Currently about 1 in 5 proposals submitted to the NIH gets funding. If he wasn’t able to sell Congress on those moon shots, the NIH would receive less money overall, he suggests, and that number would surely go down.

THE CATASTROPHIC EVENTS of the past year have not shaken Collins’ beliefs. The wall next to the desk that he has rarely left is peppered with verses, and he has been hitting the Psalms pretty heavily. “As a Christian I don’t have to explain to God that suffering is a terrible thing because the God I worship suffered on a cross,” he says. But they have shaken his belief in some of his fellow Christians, who have insisted the virus is a hoax designed to take away their religious liberty. “It’s a source of great heartache for me as a

Vice President Kamala Harris joins Collins at the NIH to get her second dose of the Moderna vaccine in January

person of faith to see in a circumstance where I would have hoped that people of faith would be rushing to try to help, that some of them seem to have adopted views that are actually accomplishing the opposite,” he says. “People are dying because of our failure in this country to effectively utilize proven methods of stopping the spread of the disease, particularly mask wearing and not gathering in large crowds indoors.”

He is, however, optimistic about the moves the new Administration has made so far. “All of the efforts that relate to COVID have been much appreciated,” he says. “The requirement of masks in federal facilities and airports is long overdue.”

In bringing together the medical resources of the U.S. to fight COVID-19, Collins and his partners may have cut a clearer path to treating all sorts of diseases. It’s not that the NIH had never thought of any of these ideas before. It built RADx on an existing program within the NIBIB. The ACTIV network is the latest iteration in a decades-long series of collaborations. But the pandemic supersized the idea, and in the process made clear what was possible. “We have to plan ahead and be ready for this sort of family of viruses that we think might be the next big one,” he says.

Collins toys with the idea of leaving public service and returning to his other skill, working in a lab, but it seems obvious he’s not fooling even himself. “Overall, 2020 was a terrible year for our planet,” he said from his book-lined Chevy Chase, Md., office on New Year’s Eve. “It’s been a terrible year for our country. It’s been a tragic year for those people who lost their lives. But for science it’s been a phenomenal year of doing things.” The lab can probably wait. □



HOW CLOSE WE CAME THE SECRET HISTORY OF THE SHADOW CAMPAIGN THAT SAVED THE ELECTION

BY MOLLY BALL

A WEIRD THING HAPPENED RIGHT AFTER THE NOV. 3 ELECTION: nothing.

The nation was braced for chaos. Liberal groups had vowed to take to the streets, planning hundreds of protests across the country. Right-wing militias were girding for battle. In a poll before Election Day, 75% of Americans voiced concern about violence.

Instead, an eerie quiet descended. As President Trump refused to concede, the response was not mass action but crickets. When media organizations called the race for Joe Biden on Nov. 7, jubilation broke out instead, as people thronged cities across the U.S. to celebrate the democratic process that resulted in Trump's ouster.

A second odd thing happened amid Trump's attempts to reverse the result: corporate America turned on him. Hundreds of major business leaders, many of whom had backed Trump's candidacy and supported his policies, called on him to concede. To the President, something felt amiss. "It was all very, very strange," Trump said on Dec. 2. "Within days after the election, we witnessed an orchestrated effort to anoint the winner, even while many key states were still being counted."

In a way, Trump was right.

There was a conspiracy unfolding behind the scenes, one that both curtailed the protests and coordinated the resistance from CEOs. Both surprises were the result of an informal alliance between left-wing activists and business titans. The pact was formalized in a terse, little-noticed joint statement of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and AFL-CIO published on Election Day. Both sides would come to see it as a sort of implicit

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bargain—inspired by the summer’s massive, sometimes destructive racial-justice protests—in which the forces of labor came together with the forces of capital to keep the peace and oppose Trump’s assault on democracy.

The handshake between business and labor was just one component of a vast, cross-partisan campaign to protect the election—an extraordinary shadow effort dedicated not to winning the vote but to ensuring it would be free and fair, credible and uncorrupted. For more than a year, a loosely organized coalition of operatives scrambled to shore up America’s institutions as they came under simultaneous attack from a remorseless pandemic and an autocratically inclined President. Though much of this activity took place on the left, it was separate from the Biden campaign and crossed ideological lines, with crucial contributions by nonpartisan and conservative actors. The scenario the shadow campaigners were desperate to stop was not a Trump victory. It was an election so calamitous that no result could be discerned at all, a failure of the central act of democratic self-governance that has been a hallmark of America since its founding.

Their work touched every aspect of the election. They got states to change voting systems and laws and helped secure hundreds of millions in public and private funding. They fended off voter-suppression lawsuits, recruited armies of poll workers and got millions of people to vote by mail for the first time. They successfully pressured social media companies to take a harder line against disinformation and used data-driven strategies to fight viral smears. They executed national public-awareness campaigns that helped Americans understand how the vote count would unfold over days or weeks, preventing Trump’s conspiracy theories and false claims of victory from getting more traction. After Election Day, they monitored every pressure point to ensure that Trump could not overturn the result. “The untold story of the election is the thousands of people of both parties who accomplished the triumph of American democracy at its very foundation,” says Norm Eisen, a prominent lawyer and former Obama Administration official who recruited Republicans and Democrats to the board of the Voter Protection Project.

For Trump and his allies were running their own campaign to spoil the election. The President spent months insisting that mail ballots were a Democratic plot and the election would be “rigged.” His henchmen at the state level sought to block their use, while his lawyers brought dozens of spurious suits to make it more difficult to vote—an intensification of the GOP’s legacy of suppressive tactics. Before the election, Trump plotted to block a legitimate vote count. And he spent the months following Nov. 3 trying to steal the election he’d lost—with lawsuits and conspiracy

theories, pressure on state and local officials, and finally summoning his army of supporters to the Jan. 6 rally that ended in deadly violence at the Capitol.

The democracy campaigners watched with alarm. “Every week, we felt like we were in a struggle to try to pull off this election without the country going through a real dangerous moment of unraveling,” says former GOP Representative Zach Wamp, a Trump supporter who helped coordinate a bipartisan election-protection council. “We can look back and say this thing went pretty well, but it was not at all clear in September and October that that was going to be the case.”

This is the inside story of the conspiracy to save the 2020 election, based on access to the group’s inner workings, never-before-seen documents and interviews with

dozens of those involved from across the political spectrum. It is the story of an unprecedented, creative and determined campaign whose success also reveals how close the nation came to disaster. “Every attempt to interfere with the proper outcome of the election was defeated,” says Ian Bassin, co-founder of Protect Democracy, a nonpartisan rule-

of-law advocacy group. “But it’s massively important for the country to understand that it didn’t happen accidentally. The system didn’t work magically. Democracy is not self-executing.”

That’s why the participants want the secret history of the 2020 election told, even though it sounds like a paranoid fever dream—a well-funded cabal of powerful people, ranging across industries and ideologies, working together behind the scenes to influence perceptions, change rules and laws, steer media coverage and control the flow of information. They were not rigging the election; they were fortifying it. And they believe the public needs to understand the system’s fragility in order to ensure that democracy in America endures.



**THEY WERE NOT
RIGGING THE
ELECTION; THEY
WERE FORTIFYING IT**



not prepared for the two most likely outcomes”—Trump losing and refusing to concede, and Trump winning the Electoral College (despite losing the popular vote) by corrupting the voting process in key states. “We desperately need to systematically ‘red-team’ this election so that we can anticipate and plan for the worst we know will be coming our way.”

It turned out Podhorzer wasn’t the only one thinking in these terms. He began to hear from others eager to join forces. The Fight Back Table, a coalition of “resistance” organizations, had begun scenario-planning around the potential for a contested election, gathering liberal activists at the local and national level into what they called the Democracy Defense Coalition. Voting-rights and civil rights organizations were raising alarms. A group of former elected officials was researching emergency powers they feared Trump might exploit. Protect Democracy was assembling a bipartisan election-crisis task force. “It turned out that once you said it out loud, people agreed,” Podhorzer says, “and it started building momentum.”

He spent months pondering scenarios and talking to experts. It wasn’t hard to find liberals who saw Trump as a dangerous dictator, but Podhorzer was careful to steer clear of hysteria. What he wanted to know was not how American democracy was dying but how it might be kept alive.

The chief difference between the U.S. and countries that lost their grip on democracy, he concluded, was that America’s decentralized election system couldn’t be rigged in one fell swoop. That presented an opportunity to shore it up.

Biden fans in Philadelphia after the race was called on Nov. 7

THE ARCHITECT

Sometime in the fall of 2019, Mike Podhorzer became convinced the election was headed for disaster—and determined to protect it.

This was not his usual purview. For nearly a quarter-century, Podhorzer, senior adviser to the president of the AFL-CIO, the nation’s largest union federation, has marshaled the latest tactics and data to help its favored candidates win elections. Unassuming and professorial, he isn’t the sort of hair-gelled “political strategist” who shows up on cable news. Among Democratic insiders, he’s known as the wizard behind some of the biggest advances in political technology in recent decades. A group of liberal strategists he brought together in the early 2000s led to the creation of the Analyst Institute, a secretive firm that applies scientific methods to political campaigns. He was also involved in the founding of Catalist, the flagship progressive data company.

The endless chatter in Washington about “political strategy,” Podhorzer believes, has little to do with how change really gets made. “My basic take on politics is that it’s all pretty obvious if you don’t overthink it or swallow the prevailing frameworks whole,” he once wrote. “After that, just relentlessly identify your assumptions and challenge them.” Podhorzer applies that approach to everything: when he coached his now adult son’s Little League team in the D.C. suburbs, he trained the boys not to swing at most pitches—a tactic that infuriated both their and their opponents’ parents, but won the team a series of championships.

Trump’s election in 2016—credited in part to his unusual strength among the sort of blue collar white voters who once dominated the AFL-CIO—prompted Podhorzer to question his assumptions about voter behavior. He began circulating weekly number-crunching memos to a small circle of allies and hosting strategy sessions in D.C. But when he began to worry about the election itself, he didn’t want to seem paranoid. It was only after months of research that he introduced his concerns in his newsletter in October 2019. The usual tools of data, analytics and polling would not be sufficient in a situation where the President himself was trying to disrupt the election, he wrote. “Most of our planning takes us through Election Day,” he noted. “But, we are

THE ALLIANCE

On March 3, Podhorzer drafted a three-page confidential memo titled “Threats to the 2020 Election.” “Trump has made it clear that this will not be a fair election, and that he will reject anything but his own re-election as ‘fake’ and rigged,” he wrote. “On Nov. 3, should the media report otherwise, he will use the right-wing information system to establish his narrative and incite his supporters to protest.” The memo laid out four categories of challenges: attacks on voters, attacks on election administration, attacks on Trump’s political opponents and “efforts to reverse the results of the election.”

Then COVID-19 erupted at the height of the primary-election season. Normal methods of voting were no longer safe for voters or the mostly elderly volunteers who normally staff polling places. But political disagreements, intensified by Trump’s crusade against mail voting, prevented some states from making it easier to vote absentee and for jurisdictions to count those votes in a timely manner. Chaos ensued. Ohio

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shut down in-person voting for its primary, leading to minuscule turnout. A poll-worker shortage in Milwaukee—where Wisconsin’s heavily Democratic Black population is concentrated—left just five open polling places, down from 182. In New York, vote counting took more than a month.

Suddenly, the potential for a November meltdown was obvious. In his apartment in the D.C. suburbs, Podhorzer began working from his laptop at his kitchen table, holding back-to-back Zoom meetings for hours a day with his network of contacts across the progressive universe: the labor movement; the institutional left, like Planned Parenthood and Greenpeace; resistance groups like Indivisible and MoveOn; progressive data geeks and strategists, representatives of donors and foundations, state-level grassroots organizers, racial-justice activists and others.

In April, Podhorzer began hosting a weekly 2½-hour Zoom. It was structured around a series of rapid-fire five-minute presentations on everything from which ads were working to messaging to legal strategy. The invitation-only gatherings soon attracted hundreds, creating a rare shared base of knowledge for the fractious progressive movement. “At the risk of talking trash about the left, there’s not a lot of good information sharing,” says Anat Shenker-Osorio, a close Podhorzer friend whose poll-tested messaging guidance shaped the group’s approach. “There’s a lot of not-invented-here syndrome, where people won’t consider a good idea if they didn’t come up with it.”

The meetings became the galactic center for a constellation of operatives across the left who shared overlapping goals but didn’t usually work in concert. The group had no name, no leaders and no hierarchy, but it kept the disparate actors in sync. “Pod played a critical behind-the-scenes role in keeping different pieces of the movement infrastructure in communication and aligned,” says Maurice Mitchell, national director of the Working Families Party. “You have the litigation space, the organizing space, the political people just focused on the W, and their strategies aren’t always aligned. He allowed this ecosystem to work together.”

Protecting the election would require



an effort of unprecedented scale. As 2020 progressed, it stretched to Congress, Silicon Valley and the nation’s statehouses. It drew energy from the summer’s racial-justice protests, many of whose leaders were a key part of the liberal alliance. And eventually it reached across the aisle, into the world of Trump-skeptical Republicans appalled by his attacks on democracy.

SECURING THE VOTE

The first task was overhauling America’s balky election infrastructure—in the middle of a pandemic. For the thousands of local, mostly nonpartisan officials who administer elections, the most urgent need was money. They needed protective equipment like masks, gloves and hand sanitizer. They needed to pay for postcards letting people know they could vote absentee—or, in some states, to mail ballots to every voter. They needed additional staff and scanners to process ballots.

In March, activists appealed to Congress to steer COVID relief money to election administration. Led by the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, more than 150 organizations signed a letter to every member of Congress seeking \$2 billion in election funding. It was somewhat successful: the CARES Act, passed later that month, contained \$400 million in grants to state election administrators. But the next tranche of relief funding didn’t add to that number. It wasn’t going to be enough.

Private philanthropy stepped into the breach. An assortment of foundations contributed tens of millions in election-administration funding. The Chan Zuckerberg Initiative chipped in \$300 million. “It was a failure at the federal level that 2,500 local election officials were forced to apply for philanthropic grants to fill their needs,” says Amber McReynolds, a former Denver election official who heads the nonpartisan National Vote at Home Institute.

McReynolds’ two-year-old organization became a clearinghouse for a nation struggling to adapt. The institute gave secretaries of state from both parties technical advice on everything from which vendors to use to how to locate drop boxes. Local officials are the most trusted sources of election information, but few can afford a press secretary, so the institute distributed communications tool kits. In a presentation to Podhorzer’s group, McReynolds detailed the importance of absentee ballots for shortening lines at polling places and preventing an election crisis.

The institute’s work helped 37 states and D.C. bolster mail voting. But it wouldn’t be worth much if people didn’t take advantage. Part of the challenge was logistical: each state has different rules for when and how ballots should be requested and returned. The Voter Participation Center, which in a normal year would have deployed



*Amber McReynolds,
Zach Wamp and
Maurice Mitchell*

studying this problem a few years ago. She piloted a nameless, secret project, which she has never before publicly discussed, that tracked disinformation online and tried to figure out how to combat it. One component was tracking dangerous lies that might otherwise spread unnoticed. Researchers then provided information to campaigners or the media to track down the sources and expose them.

The most important takeaway from Quinn's research, however, was that engaging with toxic content only made it worse. "When you get attacked, the instinct is to push back, call it out, say, 'This isn't true,'" Quinn says. "But the more engagement something gets, the more the platforms boost it. The algorithm reads that as, 'Oh, this is popular; people want more of it.'"

The solution, she concluded, was to pressure platforms to enforce their rules, both by removing content or accounts that spread disinformation and by more aggressively policing it in the first place. "The platforms have policies against certain types of malign behavior, but they haven't been enforcing them," she says.

Quinn's research gave ammunition to advocates pushing social media platforms to take a harder line. In November 2019, Mark Zuckerberg invited nine civil rights leaders to dinner at his home, where they warned him about the danger of the election-related falsehoods that were already spreading unchecked. "It took pushing, urging, conversations, brainstorming, all of that to get to a place where we ended up with more rigorous rules and enforcement," says Vanita Gupta, president and CEO of the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, who attended the dinner and also met with Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey and others. (Gupta has been nominated for Associate Attorney General by President Biden.) "It was a struggle, but we got to the point where they understood the problem. Was it enough? Probably not. Was it later than we wanted? Yes. But it was really important, given the level of official disinformation, that they had those rules in place and were tagging things and taking them down."

canvassers door-to-door to get out the vote, instead conducted focus groups in April and May to find out what would get people to vote by mail. In August and September, it sent ballot applications to 15 million people in key states, 4.6 million of whom returned them. In mailings and digital ads, the group urged people not to wait for Election Day. "All the work we have done for 17 years was built for this moment of bringing democracy to people's doorsteps," says Tom Lopach, the center's CEO.

The effort had to overcome heightened skepticism in some communities. Many Black voters preferred to exercise their franchise in person or didn't trust the mail. National civil rights groups worked with local organizations to get the word out that this was the best way to ensure one's vote was counted. In Philadelphia, for example, advocates distributed "voting safety kits" containing masks, hand sanitizer and informational brochures. "We had to get the message out that this is safe, reliable, and you can trust it," says Hannah Fried of All Voting Is Local.

At the same time, Democratic lawyers battled a historic tide of pre-election litigation. The pandemic intensified the parties' usual tangling in the courts. But the lawyers noticed something else as well. "The litigation brought by the Trump campaign, of a piece with the broader campaign to sow doubt about mail voting, was making novel claims and using theories no court has ever accepted," says Wendy Weiser, a voting-rights expert at the Brennan Center for Justice at NYU. "They read more like lawsuits designed to send a message rather than achieve a legal outcome."

In the end, nearly half the electorate cast ballots by mail in 2020, practically a revolution in how people vote. About a quarter voted early in person. Only a quarter of voters cast their ballots the traditional way: in person on Election Day.

THE DISINFORMATION DEFENSE

Bad actors spreading false information is nothing new. For decades, campaigns have grappled with everything from anonymous calls claiming the election has been rescheduled to fliers spreading nasty smears about candidates' families. But Trump's lies and conspiracy theories, the viral force of social media and the involvement of foreign meddlers made disinformation a broader, deeper threat to the 2020 vote.

Laura Quinn, a veteran progressive operative who co-founded Catalist, began

**THE GROUP HAD NO
NAME, NO LEADERS
AND NO HIERARCHY,
BUT IT KEPT
EVERYONE IN SYNC**

SPREADING THE WORD

Beyond battling bad information, there was a need to explain a rapidly changing election process. It was crucial for voters to understand that despite what Trump was saying, mail-in votes weren't susceptible to fraud and that it would be normal if some states weren't finished counting votes on election night.

Dick Gephardt, the Democratic former House leader turned high-powered lobbyist, spearheaded one coalition. "We wanted to get a really bipartisan group of former elected officials, Cabinet secretaries, military leaders and so on, aimed mainly at messaging to the public but also speaking to local officials—the secretaries of state, attorneys general, governors who would be in the eye of the storm—to let them know we wanted to

help,” says Gephardt, who worked his contacts in the private sector to put \$20 million behind the effort.

Wamp, the former GOP Congressman, worked through the nonpartisan reform group Issue One to rally Republicans. “We thought we should bring some bipartisan element of unity around what constitutes a free and fair election,” Wamp says. The 22 Democrats and 22 Republicans on the National Council on Election Integrity met on Zoom at least once a week. They ran ads in six states, made statements, wrote articles and alerted local officials to potential problems. “We had rabid Trump supporters who agreed to serve on the council based on the idea that this is honest,” Wamp says. This is going to be just as important, he told them, to convince the liberals when Trump wins. “Whichever way it cuts, we’re going to stick together.”

The Voting Rights Lab and IntoAction created state-specific memes and graphics, spread by email, text, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and TikTok, urging that every vote be counted. Together, they were viewed more than 1 billion times. Protect Democracy’s election task force issued reports and held media briefings with high-profile experts across the political spectrum, resulting in widespread coverage of potential election issues and fact-checking of Trump’s false claims. The organization’s tracking polls found the message was being heard: the percentage of the public that didn’t expect to know the winner on election night gradually rose until by late October, it was over 70%. A majority also believed that a prolonged count wasn’t a sign of problems. “We knew exactly what Trump was going to do: he was going to try to use the fact that Democrats voted by mail and Republicans voted in person to make it look like he was ahead, claim victory, say the mail-in votes were fraudulent and try to get them thrown out,” says Protect Democracy’s Bassin. Setting public expectations ahead of time helped undercut those lies.

The alliance took a common set of themes from the research Shenker-Osorio presented at Podhorzer’s Zooms. Studies have shown that when people don’t think their vote will count or fear casting it will be a hassle, they’re far less likely to participate. Throughout election season, members of Podhorzer’s group minimized incidents of voter intimidation and tamped down rising liberal hysteria about Trump’s expected refusal to concede. They didn’t want

to amplify false claims by engaging them, or put people off voting by suggesting a rigged game. “When you say, ‘These claims of fraud are spurious,’ what people hear is ‘fraud,’” Shenker-Osorio says. “What we saw in our pre-election research was that anything that reaffirmed Trump’s power or cast him as an authoritarian diminished people’s desire to vote.”

Podhorzer, meanwhile, was warning everyone he knew that polls were underestimating Trump’s support. The data he shared with media organizations who would be calling the election was “tremendously useful” to understand what was happening as the votes rolled in, according to a member of a major network’s political unit who spoke with Podhorzer before Election Day. Most analysts had recognized there would be a “blue shift” in key battlegrounds—the surge of votes breaking toward Democrats, driven by tallies of mail-in ballots—but they hadn’t comprehended how much better Trump was likely to do on Election Day. “Being able to document how big the absentee wave would be and the variance by state was essential,” the analyst says.

PEOPLE POWER

The racial-justice uprising sparked by George Floyd’s killing in May was not primarily a political movement. The organizers who helped lead it wanted to harness its momentum for the election without allowing it to be co-opted by politicians. Many of those organizers were part of Podhorzer’s network, from the activists in battleground states who partnered with the Democracy Defense Coalition to organizations with leading roles in the Movement for Black Lives.

The best way to ensure people’s voices were heard, they decided, was to protect their ability to vote. “We started thinking about a program that would complement the traditional election-protection area but also didn’t rely on calling the police,” says Nelini Stamp, the Working Families Party’s national organizing director. They created a force of “election defenders” who, unlike traditional poll watchers, were trained in de-escalation techniques. During early voting and on Election Day, they surrounded lines of voters in urban areas with a “joy to the polls” effort that

turned the act of casting a ballot into a street party. Black organizers also recruited thousands of poll workers to ensure polling places would stay open in their communities.

The summer uprising had shown that people power could have a massive impact. Activists began preparing to reprise the

THE PILLARS OF THE PLAN



VOTE BY MAIL

Nonpartisan advocates raised money for election administration and advised states on mail balloting, while campaigners coaxed skeptical communities to vote absentee.



PEOPLE POWER

Social-justice activists rallied to the polls but deployed protests strategically, standing down at key points to avoid dangerous clashes.



PUBLIC AWARENESS

A broad, bipartisan array of political leaders succeeded in getting the public to anticipate a potentially extended vote-counting period.



VOTING RIGHTS

Civil rights groups fought for ballot access while Democratic lawyers fended off Trump allies’ unprecedented volume of specious election lawsuits, before and after Nov. 3.



DISINFORMATION

To avoid amplifying lies about the election by disputing them, activists pressured social media companies to enforce their own rules and take down such posts.



BUSINESS BUY-IN

CEOs and corporate associations called for patience and nonviolence as the vote was counted and vouched for the fairness of the result.

demonstrations if Trump tried to steal the election. “Americans plan widespread protests if Trump interferes with election,” Reuters reported in October, one of many such stories. More than 150 liberal groups, from the Women’s March to the Sierra Club to Color of Change, from Democrats.com to the Democratic Socialists of America, joined the “Protect the Results” coalition. The group’s now defunct website had a map listing 400 planned postelection demonstrations, to be activated via text message as soon as Nov. 4. To stop the coup they feared, the left was ready to flood the streets.

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

About a week before Election Day, Podhorzer received an unexpected message: the U.S. Chamber of Commerce wanted to talk.

The AFL-CIO and the Chamber have a long history of antagonism. Though neither organization is explicitly partisan, the influential business lobby has poured hundreds of millions of dollars into Republican campaigns, just as the nation’s unions funnel hundreds of millions to Democrats. On one side is labor, on the other management, locked in an eternal struggle for power and resources.

But behind the scenes, the business community was engaged in its own anxious discussions about how the election and its aftermath might unfold. The summer’s racial-justice protests had sent a signal to business owners too: the potential for economy-disrupting civil disorder. “With tensions running high, there was a lot of concern about unrest around the election, or a breakdown in our normal way we handle contentious elections,” says Neil Bradley, the Chamber’s executive vice president and chief policy officer. These worries had led the Chamber to release a pre-election statement with the Business Roundtable, a Washington-based CEOs’ group, as well as associations of manufacturers, wholesalers and retailers, calling for patience and confidence as votes were counted.

But Bradley wanted to send a broader, more bipartisan message. He reached out to Podhorzer, through an intermediary both men declined to name. Agreeing that their unlikely alliance would be powerful, they began to discuss a joint statement pledging their organizations’ shared commitment to a fair and peaceful election. They chose their words carefully and scheduled the statement’s release for maximum impact. As it was being finalized, Christian leaders signaled their interest in joining, further broadening its reach.

The statement was released on Election Day, under the names of Chamber CEO Thomas Donohue, AFL-CIO president Richard Trumka, and the heads of the National Association of Evangelicals and the National African American Clergy Network. “It is imperative that election officials be given the space and time to count every vote in accordance with applicable laws,” it stated. “We call on the media, the candidates and the American people to exercise patience with the process and trust in our system, even if it requires more time than usual.” The groups added, “Although we may not always agree on desired outcomes up and down the ballot, we are united in our call for the American democratic process to proceed without violence, intimidation or any other tactic that makes us weaker as a nation.”

SHOWING UP, STANDING DOWN

Election night began with many Democrats despairing. Trump was running ahead of pre-election polling, winning Florida, Ohio and Texas easily and keeping Michigan, Wisconsin and Pennsylvania too close to call. But Podhorzer was unperturbed when I

spoke to him that night: the returns were exactly in line with his modeling. He had been warning for weeks that Trump voters’ turnout was surging. As the numbers dribbled out, he could tell that as long as all the votes were counted, Trump would lose.

The liberal alliance gathered for an 11 p.m. Zoom call. Hundreds joined; many were freaking out. “It was really important for me and the team in that moment to help ground people in what we had already known was true,” says Angela Peoples, director for the Democracy Defense Coalition. Podhorzer presented data to show the group that victory was in hand.

While he was talking, Fox News surprised everyone by calling Arizona for Biden. The public-awareness campaign had worked: TV anchors were bending over backward to counsel caution and frame the vote count accurately. The question then became what to do next.

The conversation that followed was a difficult one, led by the activists charged with the protest strategy. “We wanted to be mindful of when was the right time to call for moving masses of people into the street,” Peoples says. As much as they were eager to mount a show of strength, mobilizing immediately could backfire and put people at risk. Protests that devolved into violent clashes would give Trump a pretext to send in federal agents or troops as he had over the summer.

And rather than elevate Trump’s complaints by continuing to fight him, the alliance wanted to send the message that the people had spoken.

So the word went out: stand down. Protect the Results announced that it would “not be activating the entire national mobilization network today, but remains ready to activate if necessary.” On Twitter, outraged progressives wondered what was going on. Why wasn’t anyone trying to stop Trump’s coup? Where were all the protests?

Podhorzer credits the activists for their restraint. “They had spent so much time getting ready to hit the streets on Wednesday. But they did it,” he says. “Wednesday through Friday, there was not a single Antifa vs. Proud Boys incident like everyone was expecting. And when that didn’t materialize, I don’t think the Trump campaign had a backup plan.”

Activists reoriented the Protect the Results protests toward a weekend of celebration. “Counter their disinfo with our confidence & get ready to celebrate,” read the messaging guidance Shenker-Osorio presented to the liberal alliance on Friday, Nov. 6. “Declare and fortify our win. Vibe: confident, forward-looking, unified—NOT passive, anxious.” The voters, not the candidates, would be the protagonists of the story.

The planned day of celebration happened to coincide with the election

THE HANDSHAKE BETWEEN BUSINESS AND LABOR WAS ONE COMPONENT OF A VAST CAMPAIGN TO PROTECT THE ELECTION

Nation

being called on Nov. 7. Activists dancing in the streets of Philadelphia blasted Beyoncé over an attempted Trump campaign press conference; the Trumpers' next confab was scheduled for Four Seasons Total Landscaping outside the city center, which activists believe was not a coincidence. "The people of Philadelphia owned the streets of Philadelphia," crows the Working Families Party's Mitchell. "We made them look ridiculous by contrasting our joyous celebration of democracy with their clown show."

The votes had been counted. Trump had lost. But the battle wasn't over.

THE FIVE STEPS TO VICTORY

In Podhorzer's presentations, winning the vote was only the first step to winning the election. After that came winning the count, winning the certification, winning the Electoral College and winning the transition—steps that are normally formalities but that he knew Trump would see as opportunities for disruption. Nowhere would that be more evident than in Michigan, where Trump's pressure on local Republicans came perilously close to working—and where liberal and conservative pro-democracy forces joined to counter it.

It was around 10 p.m. on election night in Detroit when a flurry of texts lit up the phone of Art Reyes III. A busload of Republican election observers had arrived at the TCF Center, where votes were being tallied. They were crowding the vote-counting tables, refusing to wear masks, heckling the mostly Black workers. Reyes, a Flint native who leads We the People Michigan, was expecting this. For months, conservative groups had been sowing suspicion about urban vote fraud. "The language was, 'They're going to steal the election; there will be fraud in Detroit,' long before any vote was cast," Reyes says.

He made his way to the arena and sent word to his network. Within 45 minutes, dozens of reinforcements had arrived. As they entered the arena to provide a counterweight to the GOP observers inside, Reyes took down their cell-phone numbers and added them to a massive text chain. Racial-justice activists from Detroit Will Breathe worked alongside suburban women from Fems for Dems and local elected officials. Reyes left at 3 a.m., handing the text chain over to a disability activist.

As they mapped out the steps in the election-certification process, activists settled on a strategy of foregrounding the people's right to decide, demanding their voices be heard and calling attention to the racial implications of disenfranchising Black Detroiters. They flooded the Wayne County canvassing board's Nov. 17 certification meeting with on-message testimony; despite a Trump tweet, the Republican board members certified Detroit's votes.

Election boards were one pressure point; another was GOP-controlled legislatures, who Trump believed could declare the election void and appoint their own electors. And so the President invited the GOP leaders of the Michigan

legislature, House Speaker Lee Chatfield and Senate majority leader Mike Shirkey, to Washington on Nov. 20.

It was a perilous moment. If Chatfield and Shirkey agreed to do Trump's bidding, Republicans in other states might be similarly bullied. "I was concerned things were going to get weird," says Jeff Timmer, a former Michigan GOP chair turned anti-Trump activist. Norm Eisen describes it as "the scariest moment" of the entire election.

The democracy defenders launched a full-court press. Protect Democracy's local contacts researched the lawmakers' personal and political motives. Issue One ran television ads in Lansing. The Chamber's Bradley kept close tabs on the process. Wamp, the former Republican Congressman, called his former colleague Mike Rogers, who wrote an op-ed for the Detroit newspapers urging officials to honor the will of the voters. Three former Michigan governors—Republicans John Engler and Rick

Snyder and Democrat Jennifer Granholm—jointly called for Michigan's electoral votes to be cast free of pressure from the White House. Engler, a former head of the Business Roundtable, made phone calls to influential donors and fellow GOP elder statesmen who could press the lawmakers privately.

The pro-democracy forces were up against a Trumpified Michigan GOP controlled by allies of Ronna McDaniel, the Re-

publican National Committee chair, and Betsy DeVos, the former Education Secretary and a member of a billionaire family of GOP donors. On a call with his team on Nov. 18, Bassin vented that his side's pressure was no match for what Trump could offer. "Of course he's going to try to offer them something," Bassin recalls thinking. "Head of the Space Force! Ambassador to wherever! We can't compete with that by offering carrots. We need a stick."

If Trump were to offer something in exchange for a personal favor, that would likely constitute bribery, Bassin reasoned. He phoned Richard Primus, a law professor at the University of Michigan, to see if Primus agreed and would make the argument publicly. Primus said he thought the meeting itself was inappropriate, and got to work on an op-ed for Politico warning that the state attorney general—a Democrat—would have no choice but to investigate. When the piece posted on Nov. 19, the attorney

IT WAS TRUMP'S FINAL ATTACK ON DEMOCRACY, AND ONCE AGAIN, IT FAILED





sacked the building. As lawmakers fled for their lives and his own supporters were shot and trampled, Trump praised the rioters as “very special.”

It was his final attack on democracy, and once again, it failed. By standing down, the democracy campaigners outfoxed their foes. “We won by the skin of our teeth, honestly, and that’s an important point for folks to sit with,” says the Democracy Defense Coalition’s Peoples. “There’s an impulse for some to say voters decided and democracy won. But it’s a mistake to think that this election cycle was a show of strength for democracy. It shows how vulnerable democracy is.”

The members of the alliance to protect the election have gone their separate ways. The Democracy Defense Coalition has been disbanded, though the Fight Back Table lives on. Protect Democracy and the good-government advocates have turned their attention to pressing reforms in Congress. Left-

Trump supporters seek to disrupt the vote count at Detroit’s TCF Center on Nov. 4

wing activists are pressuring the newly empowered Democrats to remember the voters who put them there, while civil rights groups are on guard against further attacks on voting. Business leaders denounced the Jan. 6 attack, and some say they will no longer donate to lawmakers who refused to certify Biden’s victory. Podhorzer and his allies are still holding their Zoom strategy sessions, gauging voters’ views and developing new messages. And Trump is in Florida, facing his second impeachment, deprived of the Twitter and Facebook accounts he used to push the nation to its breaking point.

As I was reporting this article in November and December, I heard different claims about who should get the credit for thwarting Trump’s plot. Liberals argued the role of bottom-up people power shouldn’t be overlooked, particularly the contributions of people of color and local grassroots activists. Others stressed the heroism of GOP officials like Van Langevelde and Georgia secretary of state Brad Raffensperger, who stood up to Trump at considerable cost. The truth is that neither likely could have succeeded without the other. “It’s astounding how close we came, how fragile all this really is,” says Timmer, the former Michigan GOP chair. “It’s like when Wile E. Coyote runs off the cliff—if you don’t look down, you don’t fall. Our democracy only survives if we all believe and don’t look down.”

Democracy won in the end. The will of the people prevailed. But it’s crazy, in retrospect, that this is what it took to put on an election in the United States of America. —*With reporting by* LESLIE DICKSTEIN, MARIAH ESPADA and SIMMONE SHAH □

general’s communications director tweeted it. Protect Democracy soon got word that the lawmakers planned to bring lawyers to the meeting with Trump the next day.

Reyes’ activists scanned flight schedules and flocked to the airports on both ends of Shirkey’s journey to D.C., to underscore that the lawmakers were being scrutinized. After the meeting, the pair announced they’d pressed the President to deliver COVID relief for their constituents and informed him they saw no role in the election process. Then they went for a drink at the Trump hotel on Pennsylvania Avenue. A street artist projected their images onto the outside of the building along with the words THE WORLD IS WATCHING.

That left one last step: the state canvassing board, made up of two Democrats and two Republicans. One Republican, a Trumper employed by the DeVos family’s political nonprofit, was not expected to vote for certification. The other Republican on the board was a little-known lawyer named Aaron Van Langevelde. He sent no signals about what he planned to do, leaving everyone on edge.

When the meeting began, Reyes’s activists flooded the livestream and filled Twitter with their hashtag, #alleyesonmi. A board accustomed to attendance in the single digits suddenly faced an audience of thousands. In hours of testimony, the activists emphasized their message of respecting voters’ wishes and affirming democracy rather than scolding the officials. Van Langevelde quickly signaled he would follow precedent. The vote was 3-0 to certify; the other Republican abstained.

After that, the dominoes fell. Pennsylvania, Wisconsin and the rest of the states certified their electors. Republican officials in Arizona and Georgia stood up to Trump’s bullying. And the Electoral College voted on schedule on Dec. 14.

HOW CLOSE WE CAME

There was one last milestone on Podhorzer’s mind: Jan. 6. On the day Congress would meet to tally the electoral count, Trump summoned his supporters to D.C. for a rally.

Much to their surprise, the thousands who answered his call were met by virtually no counterdemonstrators. To preserve safety and ensure they couldn’t be blamed for any mayhem, the activist left was “strenuously discouraging counter activity,” Podhorzer texted me the morning of Jan. 6, with a crossed-fingers emoji.

Trump addressed the crowd that afternoon, peddling the lie that lawmakers or Vice President Mike Pence could reject states’ electoral votes. He told them to go to the Capitol and “fight like hell.” Then he returned to the White House as they





World

THE NEW NEIGHBOR

THE U.S. IS CEDING INFLUENCE IN LATIN AMERICA TO CHINA

By Ciara Nugent/London and Charlie Campbell/Beijing

*China's President
Xi Jinping and his
wife Peng Liyuan with
Panama's then President
Juan Carlos Varela and
First Lady Lorena Castillo
in December 2018*

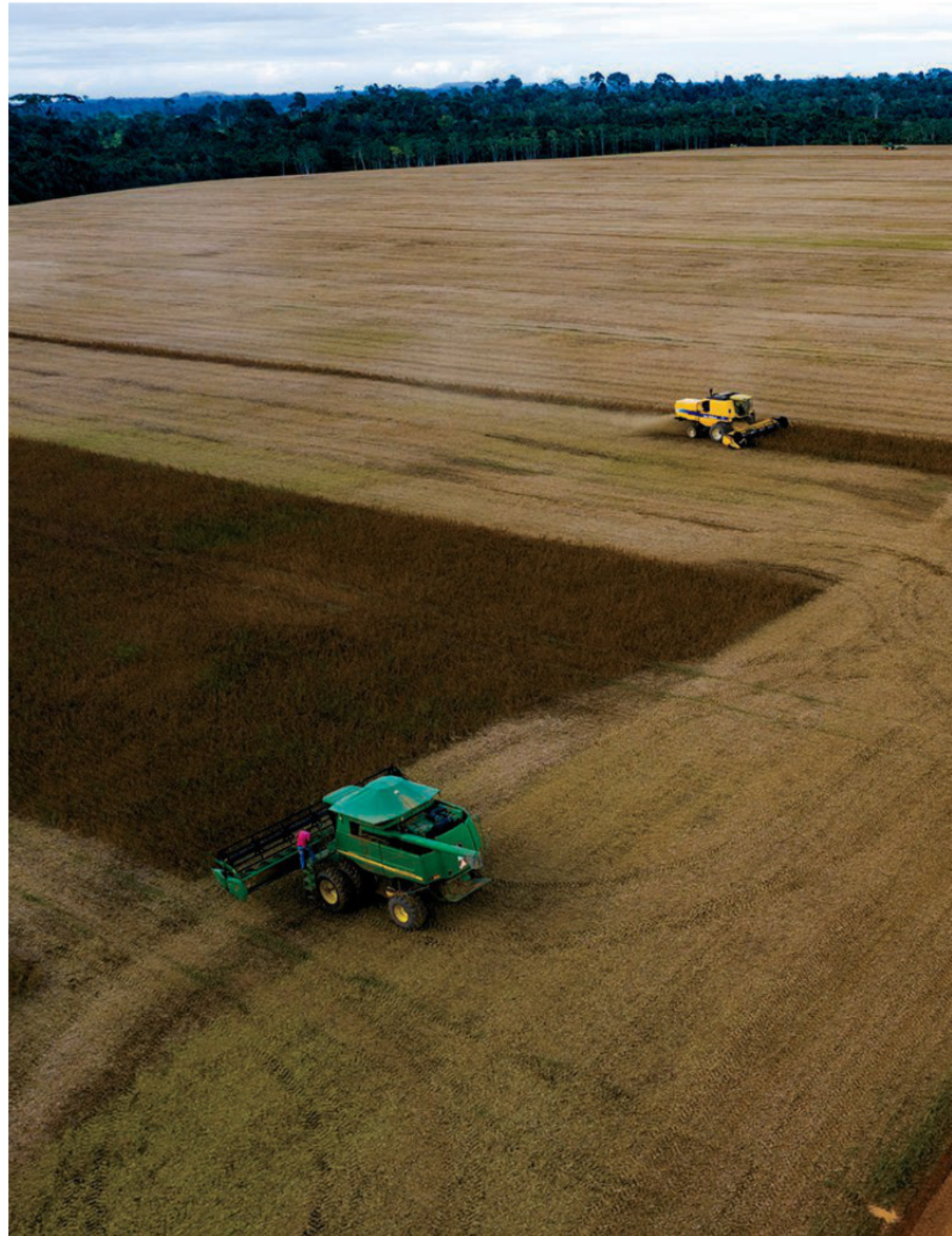
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WHEN ALEX ALMEIDA SURVEYS HIS FAMILY FARM IN A RURAL corner of landlocked Paraguay, he sees mainly fields, punctuated by small houses with sheet-metal roofs and, in the distance, native lapacho trees blooming with bright yellow flowers. But despite the isolation, there's only one place in the world the 23-year-old feels truly cut off from. Paraguayan exports of cows and sheep, like the 130 or so Almeida raises, are locked out of the second largest economy in the world, a source of frustration for an ambitious young farmer and student of agriculture. "The cell phone I'm speaking to you on now is from China," he tells TIME from Caaguazú, a town some 100 miles east of the capital, Asunción. "The shoes and clothes that I buy and wear, it all comes from China. So why can't we export food to China?"

The answer is that Paraguay is one of only 15 countries in the world—including nine in Latin America and the Caribbean—that still don't recognize the government in Beijing. In 1957, Paraguay's recently installed right-wing dictator Alfredo Stroessner recognized Taiwan—an island that politically split from the mainland following China's 1945–49 civil war, but which Beijing considers a breakaway province—as the "one true China." In response, China limits trade and diplomacy with Paraguay, just as it does with any country that recognizes Taiwan. "It's a political thing, and for many of us it's absurd, really," Almeida says. "Taiwan helps us a lot, sending donations and financing, but it doesn't serve us at a great scale."

In April 2020, as COVID-19 began to tear through Latin America, the leftist bloc in the Paraguayan Senate introduced a bill to open relations with Beijing—which would inevitably mean ending recognition of Taiwan. The Senators argued that the pandemic would make Chinese support—in the form of masks and ventilators, but also investment, trade and possibly a vaccine—crucial in the coming years. In the end, the proposal was voted down, 25 to 16, in a Senate still controlled by the right-wing party Stroessner founded. Still, opposition lawmakers have forged ahead in deepening their institutional ties with China, eliciting what they described as the first-ever Chinese humanitarian aid to Paraguay in June, and vowing to recognize the country if the balance of power in Congress shifts.

The political debate in Paraguay reflects a broader battle raging across Latin America about China's swelling influence. As countries in the region grapple with a cascade of challenges to their developing economies, they increasingly look not to the North but to the East. Today, China is South America's top trading partner. In 2019, Chinese companies invested \$12.8 billion in Latin America, up 16.5% from 2018, concentrating on regional infrastructure such as ports, roads, dams and



railways. Chinese purchases of minerals and agricultural commodities helped South America stave off the worst privations of the 2008 financial crisis.

And during COVID-19, Latin America is once again reliant on China, whose middle class drives demand for beef from Uruguay, copper from Chile, oil from Colombia and soya from Brazil. These are the commodities that will help Latin America weather the storm—and China will inevitably be the primary customer. "We'd rather not be so dependent on exports to China, but what is the alternative?" Paulo Estivallet, Brazil's ambassador to China, tells TIME. "It's just more profitable to sell here than anywhere else."

For China, the investment brings political returns. In the past four years, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador and Panama have each switched their recognition from Taiwan to China. Gaining these



▲
A soybean plantation in Rondonia, Brazil. The country exports 80% of its soybean crop to China

kinds of alliances in Latin America offers Beijing invaluable votes at the U.N. and backing for Chinese appointees to multinational institutions. It also empowers China to embed standard-setting technology companies like Huawei, ZTE, Dahua and Hikvision—all sanctioned by the U.S.—in regional infrastructure, allowing Beijing to dictate the rules of commerce for a generation.

Already, 19 governments across Latin America and the Caribbean have joined Xi Jinping's signature Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a \$1 trillion transcontinental trade and infrastructure network. Shanghai-based China Cosco

Shipping is building a new \$3 billion port at Chancay in Peru, while there are ambitious proposals for a transcontinental railway linking South America's Atlantic and Pacific coasts from Brazil to Chile.

COVID-19 presented another opportunity. By late October, China had provided over 179 billion masks, 1.73 billion protective suits and 543 million testing kits to 150 countries and seven international organizations around the globe. "The pandemic has opened up a diplomatic opportunity that China did not have before," says Benjamin N. Gedan, a former South America director on the White House's National Security Council, now with the Wilson Center. This has not gone unnoticed by Washington; the U.S. State Department's J-Bureau—charged with "elevating and integrating civilian security in U.S. foreign policy"—has been parsing China's mask diplomacy to decipher where Beijing is attempting to gain influence, sources involved tell TIME.

Globally, the lines of a new cold war are gaining definition: the U.S., Europe, India and Pacific allies on one side; China, Russia, Pakistan, Central and Southeast Asia on the other. It's not yet clear where the "silk curtain" will fall in Latin America. But Beijing's activity has Washington spooked. "China is a malign influence," a senior State Department official tells TIME on condition of anonymity. "This is part of the CCP's global plan to export Chinese ideals and bad practices beyond the Asia-Pacific," the official says, referring to the Chinese Communist Party. The question now—with a new occupant of the White House—is what the U.S. will do about it.

THE U.S. HAS LONG BEEN CHARY of interlopers in its southern neighborhood. In 1823, the Monroe Doctrine drew a red line regarding European influence in the western hemisphere, and for decades in the 20th century the U.S. fought the Cold War with Soviet Russia on the turf of Latin nations attracted to Marxism. But President Donald Trump viewed Latin America largely through a caustic lens of drug lords, immigrant caravans and gang violence. His sole visit to the region was the 2018 G-20 summit in Buenos Aires.

Now, with Joe Biden in the White House, the battle for influence is likely to flare up once again. As Vice President,

Biden visited the region a record 16 times, and he personifies the "good neighbor" approach to the region crafted by FDR. Biden was Barack Obama's point person on initiatives to combat violence and drugs in Colombia, political corruption in Guatemala and more. "Joe Biden brings a deeper knowledge of Latin America and the Caribbean to the presidency than any U.S. leader since the end of the Cold War," says Michael Camilleri, director of the Peter D. Bell Rule of Law Program at the Inter-American Dialogue.

U.S. ties run deep across Latin America, but perhaps deeper in Panama, where the U.S. dominated commerce and politics throughout the 20th century, and which has emerged as a battleground in the superpower contest.

The country's namesake canal, through which trade flows between the Atlantic Ocean and the Pacific Ocean, was completed by the U.S.

Army and controlled by Washington for almost the entire century. In the 1940s, the U.S. Department of Commerce helped set up a free-trade zone in Colón, a city near the canal's entrance. The Colón Free Trade Zone (ZLC) quickly became a gateway for American firms such as Gillette, Coca-Cola and Pfizer to enter the Latin American market.

Yet today, seven decades later, things have changed in the ZLC. Across its 1,000-hectare sprawl of ports, warehouses and offices, Chinese companies dominate. "China accounts for the largest share of imports that come into the zone, 40% of the total," says Giovanni Ferrari, manager of the zone. Ferrari says the surge of Chinese products began around 2010, and he expects it to grow as China seeks to boost its trade with the rest of the world in the wake of the pandemic. "China has identified the potential of Panama and [the ZLC] as a reference point for distribution."

\$100 BILLION

The value of bilateral trade between China and Brazil, the region's largest economy

19

The number of countries in the Americas signed up to China's Belt and Road Initiative

China's growing commercial presence in the ZLC reflects the enthusiasm it has long had for Panama, which remains a strategic linchpin for Washington. In 2017, China Landbridge Group broke ground on a new \$1 billion deep-water port and logistics complex on Panama's Margarita Island, where the Panama Colón Container Port will take over land once occupied by a U.S. military base. Less than a week after work began, the government of Panama suddenly switched diplomatic recognition from Taipei to Beijing, blindsiding—and infuriating—its Washington allies.

"The United States created Panama and then built one of the engineering wonders of the world and gave it to the Panamanians," says Thomas Shannon,

former Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs from 2016 to 2018 and briefly Acting Secretary of State early in the Trump Administration. "One would hope that was a level of a relationship that allowed them to have a conversation with us to try to understand our point of view. But that didn't happen."

The U.S. may have "built" the Panama Canal, but Chinese migrant labor helped

hew the 51-mile marvel of engineering from the earth, bestowing Panama with a significant ethnic-Chinese population and opportunities for CCP engagement. Even before the 2017 diplomatic switch, "Panama featured very prominently in Ministry of Commerce and other documents [produced by China] to guide Chinese companies to the region," says Margaret Myers, director of the Asia and Latin America Program at the Inter-American Dialogue.

After 2017, there was a surge in Chinese investment and commercial deals in Panama amid a visit by Xi, with some 16 significant deals put on the table,

including grand infrastructure projects. Eddie Tapiero, a Panamanian economist who worked on the negotiating team for the Panama-China free-trade agreement (FTA), says the aim was to leverage Panama's strategic position to boost regional trade. If they could persuade the large Neopanamax boats that deliver goods from China to the U.S. to pass back through the Panama Canal—which can cost \$1 million to traverse—instead of taking cheaper return routes via Europe while empty, they could assemble exports from across the continent in large quantities for dispatch to China. "We saw a big opportunity," says Tapiero. "All that created a lot of enthusiasm, and we advanced rapidly in our relations."

But in 2018, the U.S. woke up to what was happening in its backyard and began ratcheting up pressure on Panama. The revelations in the 2016 Panama papers, which exposed the shadowy offshore financial dealings of an elite Panamanian law firm, prompted the U.S. Treasury to place Panamanian businessman Abdul Waked on its "Clinton list" of individuals and businesses banned from dealing with Americans, leading to his bankruptcy. In June 2019, the U.S. Financial Action Task Force added Panama to its "gray list" of countries not sufficiently tackling money laundering. The next month, a new government took office in Panama and adopted a warier stance on China. At least five of the 16 major Chinese infrastructure projects have since been nixed, according to Myers.

Evan Ellis, a professor of Latin American studies at the U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, who has advised Congress on China's expansion in the region, says U.S. pressure helped slow Panamanian engagement with China. "It's never been pressure to say, 'You are not allowed to engage with China.' It's always been, 'It's important you maintain transparency, strong institutions, commitment to the rule of law and equal opportunity,'" he says.

The U.S. may have succeeded in putting a pause on the growth of Panama-China ties, but American diplomats say these kinds of setbacks won't deter China from further geostrategic needling. "For China, the United States has its navy in the South China Sea, a military ally in Taiwan and has been harassing [them]

about Hong Kong," says Shannon. "So isn't it great to have a dominant position in the greater Caribbean? That way China can show the United States that we can play in your neighborhood just how you play in ours."

IT WASN'T LONG after the embarrassment of Panama's diplomatic switch that the Dominican Republic and El Salvador followed suit. Alarmed American officials in El Salvador, including U.S. Ambassador Jean Manes, began to speak out about what they described as China's predatory, coercive dealings with the region. U.S. diplomats helped expose deals that had been secretly negotiated between Chinese officials and the Salvadoran government, including plans for a special economic zone that would cover 14% of the nation's territory and half of its coast, but which effectively excluded U.S. companies. When antiestablishment candidate Nayib Bukele won El Salvador's February 2019 presidential election, he criticized his predecessor's planned deals with China and renegotiated a much smaller package, according to analysts.

According to Ellis, the pushback in El Salvador had a chilling effect on the rest of the region, which until that point "hadn't realized how much Washington cared" about deepening ties with China. Washington has also been amplifying criticism of Beijing's early COVID-19 cover-up, faulty PPE and issues like illegal Chinese fishing off Chile, Peru and Ecuador.

Yet China has won influence not by wielding sticks but by deftly distributing carrots. In Brazil, the region's largest economy, bilateral trade with China rose from \$2 billion in 2000 to \$100 billion last year. Today, Brazil sends 30% of all exports to China, including 80% of its soybean crop and 60% of its iron ore. These entanglements are typically tightest with nations with goods to sell; China has supplied over \$17 billion in financing to Argentina since 2007, according to Inter-American Dialogue, and is the world's top importer of Argentine soybeans and beef.

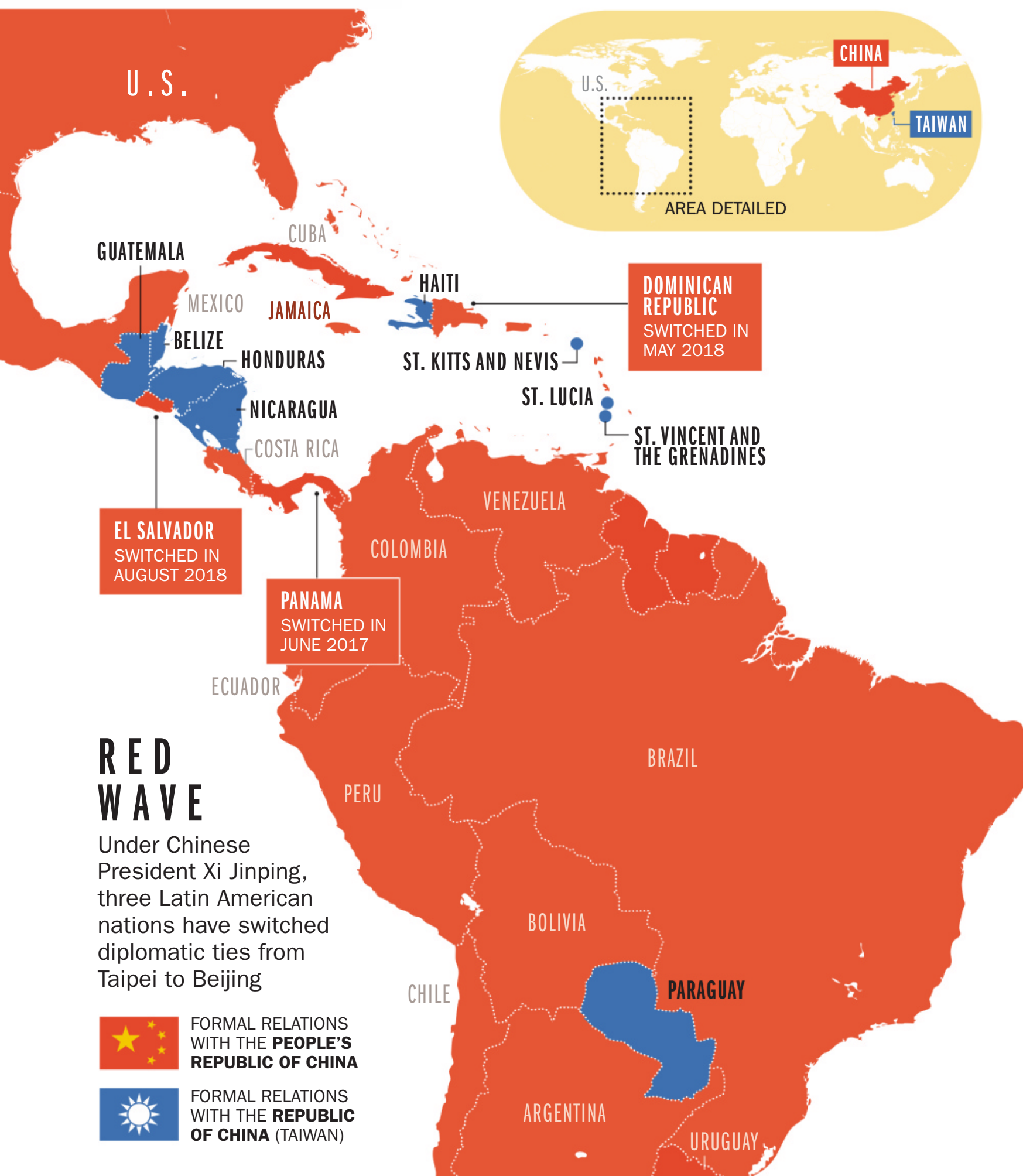
China is also now a preferred lender across the region. It hosts two international development banks—the Beijing-led Asian Infrastructure Development Bank (AIIB) and the New Development Bank (NDB) in Shanghai—that are both expanding their remit across the region.

11

The number of Latin American and Caribbean countries visited by Xi Jinping since he became President in 2013

1

The number of Latin American countries visited by Donald Trump during his four years as President



RED WAVE

Under Chinese President Xi Jinping, three Latin American nations have switched diplomatic ties from Taipei to Beijing



FORMAL RELATIONS WITH THE **PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA**



FORMAL RELATIONS WITH THE **REPUBLIC OF CHINA (TAIWAN)**

“Infrastructure development has shrunk the distance between Asia and Latin America,” AIIB president Jin Lique tells TIME in his Beijing headquarters.

That said, plenty of Chinese-backed infrastructure projects have left host countries with regrets. In Costa Rica, a \$1.5 billion project to modernize and expand an oil refinery in Moín was canceled in 2016 after local officials highlighted that environmental-impact and feasibility studies had been performed by a subsidiary of the Chinese partner, a clear conflict of interest that led to several arrests. In Ecuador, a hydroelectric dam built by China’s Sinohydro Corp., with help from a \$1.7 billion loan from China’s Export-Import Bank, turned into an environmental disaster after it

opened in 2016 as upstream erosion from the dam’s basin contributed to oil spills from shifting pipelines. Most of the Ecuadorean officials involved in the project have been convicted of bribery, including a former Vice President, a former Electricity Minister and even a former anticorruption official.

But China’s clout in renewable energy has mostly won it advantages. “No country has put itself in a better position to become the world’s renewable energy superpower than China,” says a recent report by the Global Commission on the Geopolitics of Energy Transformation, chaired by former Iceland President Ólafur Grímsson. In Brazil, China’s State Grid Corp. is the largest power-generation and -distribution company, while China

Three Gorges (CTG), the world’s largest hydropower provider, controls 17 out of a total of 48 hydro plants as well as 11 wind farms. “This is a country that has 200 million people, but energy consumption per person is still very small,” says CTG Brazil CEO Li Yinsheng. “So we see huge potential in terms of demand.”

The U.S. is not taking this lying down. In 2018, it launched its América Crece initiative as a direct competitor to Belt and Road. It helps countries attract private investment by establishing transparent rules according to international best practices. In January, the U.S. International Development Finance Corp. unveiled a \$1 billion injection into Guatemala’s private sector to spur investment and create jobs, with the aim of catalyzing an additional \$4 billion in private investment.

In September 2019, Ivanka Trump traveled to Paraguay to launch a trilateral commitment under the U.S. Overseas Private Investment Corp.—now the U.S. International Development Finance Corp.—that doubles an existing \$500 million pledge of support for women and small and medium-size enterprises (SMEs), including a \$138 million commitment from Taiwan.

To be sure, the U.S. also has over a century of trade, aid and investment to fall back on. Latin America has historically been the part of the world with the highest approval rating for the U.S., rooted in foreign assistance, law-enforcement cooperation, education and cultural ties. In 2019, China’s trade with the western hemisphere stood at \$330 billion, with FDI stock at \$180 billion. The U.S.’s was \$1.9 trillion and \$250 billion, respectively.

But perception is reality, and plenty were skeptical of the previous White House’s outreach in the last two years of Trump’s term. “The only way the Trump Administration saw Latin America is

179 BILLION

The number of masks China has provided in aid to over 150 countries during the COVID-19 pandemic

100 MILLION

The number of doses of China’s Sinovac COVID-19 vaccine Brazil’s government has agreed to buy



Taxi drivers in Mexico City protest on Oct. 12 over the rise of foreign ride-share apps including Uber and DiDi

through the prism of competition with China,” says Gedan, of the Wilson Center. Trump’s more controversial moves also had deleterious side effects. Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernández in 2018 criticized U.S. cuts to Central American aid over migration policy, while saying he welcomed the “opportunity” China presented.

If, under Biden, the U.S. continues to push regional players into a corner, it’s no sure thing whom they would choose. “If you press these countries too hard, beware,” says Enrique Dussel Peters, an expert in China–Latin America relations at the National Autonomous University of Mexico. “They might say, ‘Huh, O.K., then I stick with China.’”

THE PANDEMIC HAS OPENED UP new avenues in the struggle for influence. Latin America and the Caribbean have only 8.2% of the world’s population but, as of late January, 18.2% of COVID-19 cases and 26% of fatalities. Shipments of Chinese

aid have elicited fawning praise from previously China-skeptic leaders like Argentina’s President Alberto Fernández, who wrote a letter in January that “thanked China for supporting Argentina’s fight against COVID-19” and backed “building a community with a shared future for mankind, a notion put forward by Xi,” according to China’s state newswire Xinhua.

The U.S. State Department is engaged in its own counter-operation, sources tell TIME. By cross-referencing pure numbers of PPE dispatched by Beijing and private Chinese entities like the Jack Ma Foundation with medical need and existing cordial ties, Washington is learning where China is placing strategic bets and deciding where to send its own coronavirus aid to compete most effectively.

Of course, the prospect of a vaccine

would be “an extraordinary diplomatic tool anywhere in the world, especially in Latin America,” says Gedan. China currently has at least four vaccines in advanced development, including SinoVac’s CoronaVac, which is undergoing Stage 3 trials in Brazil. “We will share our vaccine with the world,” SinoVac CEO Yin Weidong tells TIME in his Beijing office. Yet as the Chinese government is a key investor, it gets a say regarding distribution, Yin says.

In theory, every nation in Latin America could access the World Health Organization global vaccination pool known as COVAX (operated locally through the Revolving Fund of the Pan American Health Organization, or PAHO). But on Jan. 18, WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said the world is on the brink of a “catastrophic moral failure” over COVID-19 vaccine distribution as he bemoaned how rich countries had hoarded supplies at the expense of equitable distribution schemes like COVAX. The U.S.’s refusal



▲
A grocery near a satellite-tracking station China opened in Argentina in 2018

to join COVAX means the program may lack the necessary funds to meet its goal of 2 billion doses to distribute worldwide by the end of 2021.

China also declined to join COVAX, though it is instead using vaccines to build bridges where it feels most valuable. In September, São Paulo Governor João Doria said Brazil's federal government had also agreed to buy 60 million doses of CoronaVac, later telling reporters it "is the safest, the one with the best and most promising rates." On Jan. 6, Peru's President Francisco Sagasti announced the purchase of 38 million vaccine doses from state-run Chinese firm Sinopharm. Mexico has signed an advance-purchase agreement with another Chinese developer, CanSino Biologics, for 35 million doses of a single-dose immunization under development. Admiral Craig S. Faller, who leads the U.S. military's Southern Command, told a video meeting with members of the Defense Writers Group in December that China

is actively making "deals to try to get the vaccine deployed and employed" around the globe, while Washington's Operation Warp Speed is "looking at taking care of the U.S. first."

Given delays and doubts regarding COVAX supply, Paraguay in January approved Russia's Sputnik V vaccine for emergency use, despite questions over the rigor of testing, and it is currently in negotiation with two unnamed pharmaceutical firms about buying supplies directly. Whether or not a Chinese vaccine makes it into Paraguay will intensify arguments about the merits and pitfalls of politically sidelining Beijing, not least as China starts rewarding its closest allies. On Jan. 21, Pakistan's Foreign Minister revealed that China has agreed to provide his nation with half a million doses of

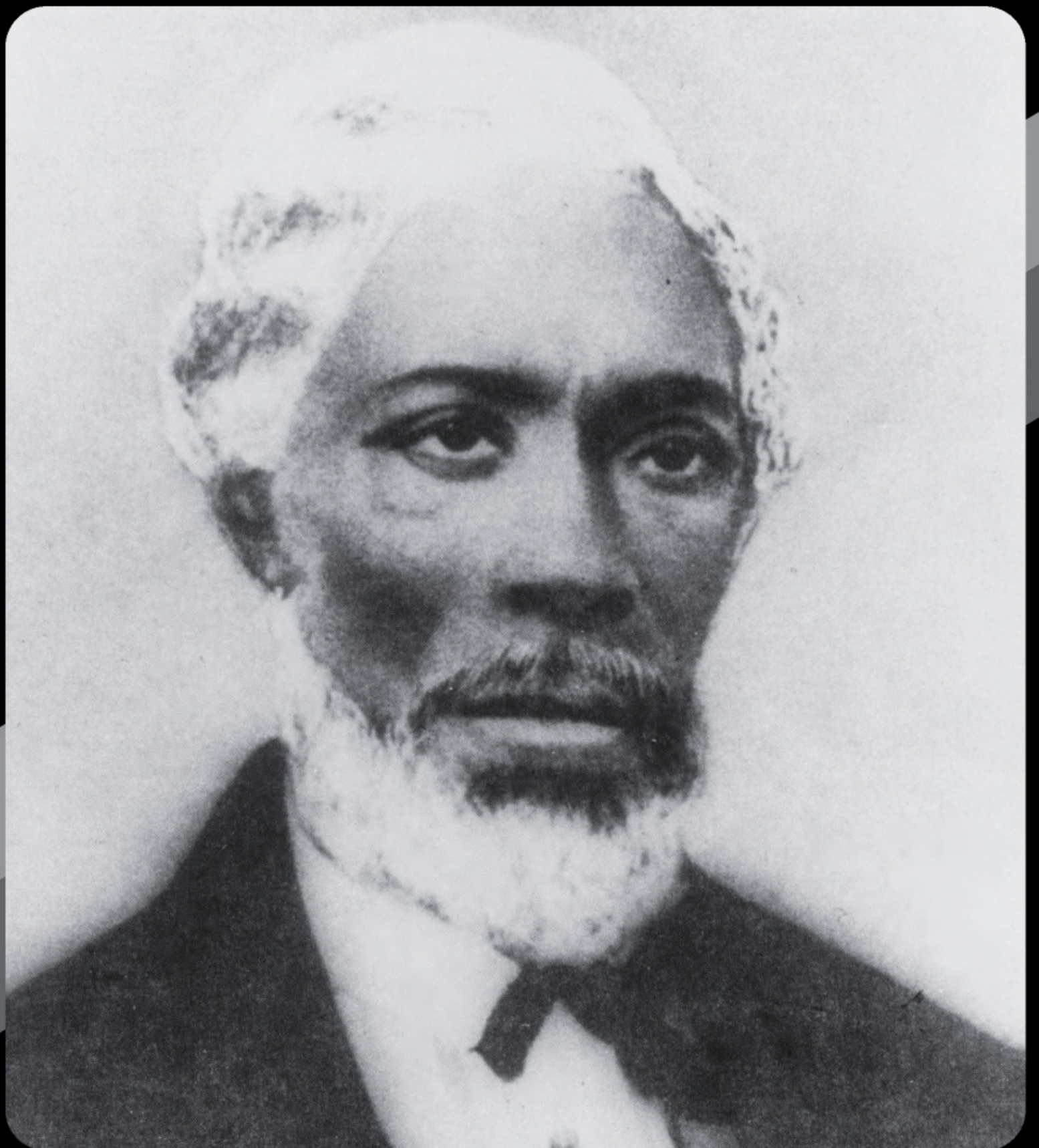
Sinopharm's vaccine free of charge, with further supplies promised.

That generosity won't go ignored in Latin America as the human and economic toll from the pandemic mounts. In January, Sixto Pereira, an opposition Senator in Paraguay who earlier coordinated the Chinese donation of PPE, accused the country's government in local media of bowing to U.S. pressure in rejecting offers of vaccine support from China. "We must overcome political and ideological barriers if we're going to fight the evil of the pandemic," he says. It may be a simple reading of geopolitics, but it's a frustration that many in Latin America are feeling as the region navigates not only its path out of COVID-19, but also its road to future trade and development in the emerging world order. "The Berlin Wall fell, the Cold War finished," Pereira says. "In this globalized world, we don't want to be any country's backyard." —With reporting by MADELINE ROACHE/LONDON □



THE Y: ADVANCING INCLUSION FOR ALL

ANTHONY BOWEN
Founder of the first
Black YMCA in 1853



Born into slavery, Anthony Bowen purchased his freedom and went on to become the first Black clerk in the U.S. Patent Office. Bowen first heard of the YMCA from a white co-worker who was associated with the YMCA in Washington, D.C. But this was the early 1850s, and even as a free Black man, Bowen was barred from membership in many organizations, including the YMCA. Bowen decided that a "Black YMCA" was needed, and so he founded it in 1853.

In 2015, I had the honor of becoming the first Black President and CEO of YMCA of the USA, which supports and leads over 2,600 Ys across the country, serving more than 21 million people of every race, ethnicity and creed. I stand on the shoulders of pioneers like Anthony Bowen, who had the determination and bravery to demand belonging in a society that excluded them.

The history of the YMCA—like the history of America—is a story of incremental progress toward greater inclusion and equity for all. At the Y, we have been on this journey for nearly 170 years, and we still have a long way to go. We envision a society of inclusive communities, where everyone feels that they truly belong and can access the support they need to reach their fullest potential with dignity.

Join us on this journey.

Get involved with your local Y today.

www.ymca.net

KEVIN WASHINGTON,
President and CEO,
YMCA of the USA



KEVIN WASHINGTON
First Black President and
CEO of YMCA of the USA

Workers On the Line

DEEMED 'ESSENTIAL,' SOME TURN TO
UNIONS FOR PROTECTION FROM COVID-19

By Abigail Abrams

CERUE COTTON NEVER EXPECTED TO FIND HERSELF on a picket line. As a forklift operator for Cash-Wa, a regional food distributor in Fargo, N.D., she enjoyed the physical challenges and responsibility of her job, and was used to working overnight hours. Then COVID-19 arrived.

The coronavirus, which had seemed like a far-away problem last spring and summer, began spiking in her community in September. Cotton had a newborn baby and two older children at home, both of whom have asthma. She no longer felt safe going to work. For months, Cash-Wa had failed to require masks in its warehouses, enforce social-distancing rules or screen employees. The company's only precautions, she says, were handing out cloth masks and placing two bottles of hand sanitizer in the break room. By late November, Cotton and her fellow workers—all deemed “essential” under guidance from the federal government—had reached a breaking point. They banded together and refused to work for 24 hours.

“I was super nervous because it was my very first time doing a strike,” Cotton says.





**PATIENTS
OVER
PROFITS**

**NURSES
NEED 15 MIN
BREAKS**

**SAFE
STAFFING
SAVES LIVES**

**NURSES
UNITED!**

*Medical professionals picket
at Los Robles Regional
Medical Center in Thousand
Oaks, Calif., on Nov. 30*
PHOTOGRAPH BY AL SEIB

The American labor movement is having a moment. As the federal government designated millions of Americans as essential workers during the deadly pandemic, people like Cotton, who have never gone on strike or considered themselves activists, have been moved to organize protests, sick-outs and strikes. Grocery stores, warehouses, hospitals, nursing homes, restaurants, schools and health clinics all saw walkouts last year. Now labor organizers and union leaders hope the spotlight that COVID-19 has put on workers' rights will give the struggling labor movement a new—and perhaps lasting—momentum. “Anytime workers participate in collective action and succeed, they learn a lifelong lesson,” says Rebecca Givan, a professor of labor studies and employment relations at Rutgers.

Motivating workers to organize is a grim reality: with certain exceptions, such as doctors and nurses, those deemed essential during the pandemic tend to be the workers valued least of all, earning relatively low wages and lacking access to employer benefits, like paid sick leave or hazard pay. While the shortage of personal protective equipment (PPE) eased at larger hospitals by the end of 2020, many essential workers not directly in the medical field still struggle to consistently access masks or face shields.

The new wave of worker interest has not reversed organized labor's long-dwindling numbers. Overall union membership continued its decades-long decline as the pandemic swept the country. In 2020, the total number of workers in unions across the U.S. dropped by 321,000 to reach a low of 14.3 million as national employment fell and companies pressed legal advantages to deter employees from organizing.

But help may be on the way. After four years of employer-friendly decisions under Donald Trump, the Biden Administration has reset the tone in a flurry of moves hailed by labor. President Joe Biden picked Boston Mayor Marty Walsh, a former union leader, as his Labor Secretary, and fired the Trump-appointed general counsel of the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), the agency tasked with enforcing private-sector labor laws, and his deputy within his first two days in the White House. Biden signed Executive Orders aimed at increasing collective-

‘THEY’RE BEING FORCED TO GO OUT THERE. BUT NOBODY’S PROTECTING THEM.’

—*Kim Cordova, United Food and Commercial Workers Local 7*

bargaining rights, minimum wages and protections, and called on the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) to issue new guidance on protecting employees from the pandemic—a step the agency quickly took on Jan. 29.

There is a lot of work to do. Until now, the federal government has, for the most part, declined to erect any safeguards for the workers it says should keep working during the pandemic. While Congress included paid sick leave in its first coronavirus-relief package last spring, large loopholes left millions of essential workers ineligible. Lawmakers passed no federal hazard-pay requirements. The Trump Administration's NLRB rolled back and weakened worker protections, while OSHA was criticized for its lax treatment of worker complaints in 2020. “They’re being forced to go out there,” says Kim Cordova, president of the United Food and Commercial Workers Local 7, which represents 25,000 workers in Colorado and Wyoming. “But nobody’s protecting them.”

Meanwhile, many essential workers' employers, including Walmart, Amazon, Kroger and Costco, have raked in record profits. The Brookings Institution found that 13 of the largest retail companies in the country earned a total of \$16.7 billion more in 2020 than they did in 2019, while raising workers' pay an average of just \$1.11 per hour since the start of the pandemic. “The billionaires have gotten much, much richer over the course of the pandemic, and workers are still struggling,” says Givan. “All of those factors coming together has created a moment with a lot of potential.”

The choice to strike is never easy. But giving up a paycheck and benefits during a global pandemic, when hundreds

of thousands of businesses are shuttering and tens of millions of workers are being laid off, is a huge risk—especially when the work you’re leaving is deemed vital.

In March, when COVID-19 cases were first rising, Tonia Bazel, an infectious-disease nurse at Albany Medical Center in New York, put off talk of a strike, and so did her co-workers. “The nurses were like, ‘This is a serious time. We’re needed. We can’t be striking,’” she recalls.

But by November, after months of workers' sharing ill-fitting and sometimes dirty PPE, and raising concerns about other infection-control failures at the hospital, Bazel's union filed an OSHA complaint and voted to strike. “Not only our hospital, but the CDC and everyone else around us were decreasing the standards so that we could work in these horrible conditions,” she says.

WHEN WORKERS DO CHOOSE to strike, it tends to have an add-on effect, labor experts say. Over the past year, unionized workers across the country say they have seen an increase in outreach from nonmembers interested in joining their ranks. Joe Crane, a representative for the Union of American Physicians and Dentists, says that during the first month of the pandemic alone, his union heard from as many doctors reaching out to learn about organizing as it does in a typical year. In Albany, Bazel also saw a surge in union membership among nurses who didn't previously think the union was necessary. “A lot of them are now right with us,” she says.

Matthew Carey, a physician assistant in Lacey, Wash., didn't know his union existed when he took the job at the MultiCare Indigo Urgent Care clinics, and he wasn't excited about joining. But in 2020, after MultiCare management repeatedly refused to provide N95 masks or address providers' other concerns, Carey stood on the strike line with his colleagues.

For Carey, the decision was driven not only by concerns about his own safety, but the safety of his community—a sentiment dozens of workers and labor activists expressed. “If drivers come in contact with somebody in the warehouse who is infected, and they take this back out to their customer, that affects



▲
*Cerue Cotton, a forklift operator
 for Cash-Wa Distributing in
 Fargo, N.D., on Jan. 2*

our community,” says Brian Nowak, who works for the union representing the 75 Cash-Wa workers who went on strike in North Dakota. “This could in essence become a hub” for the coronavirus.

His point is borne out in research.

In September, Adam Dean, a professor of political science at George Washington University, co-authored a study in *Health Affairs* showing that unionized nursing homes were associated with a 30% lower mortality rate at the height of the first coronavirus surge compared with nursing homes without unions. The unions were also associated with greater access to PPE and a lower COVID-19 infection rate. “Labor

unions provide protections that not only benefit workers in the union, but have broader benefits for society,” Dean says.

IN SOME PLACES, organizing during COVID-19 has paid off for workers. In West Virginia, Kroger employees’ strike threat earned them raises and limits on health care premium increases. When the MultiCare Indigo providers in Washington went on strike in November, the company ignored their demands for weeks. But after finding itself under scrutiny, it reversed course and started rolling out N95s to urgent-care providers on Dec. 14.

Yet in much of the country, labor activists say, progress has been sluggish. The patchwork system of coronavirus-inspired relief, combined with the government’s lax enforcement of workers’ right to organize, has weakened what might have been more robust national momentum, says Dean. “Even if there’s an increase in individual interest to join unions, there’s still major obstacles in American labor law that make it difficult for workers to actually form or join a union,” he says.

Labor organizers are hopeful that even incremental progress portends a changing landscape. In February 2020, the House passed legislation that would make it easier for workers to organize, limit employers’ antiunion tools and increase penalties for companies that interfere. Biden supports that bill, and his host of other actions could start making a difference soon.

And if workers didn’t win every fight in 2020, Rutgers’ Givan says even unsuccessful attempts at organizing can have a lasting impact. “By starting to understand the big picture, and how hard they’re working and where the profits are going, they’re more likely to engage in fighting for fairness in the future,” Givan says.

When Cotton, the forklift driver, returned to work after the November strike, nothing much had changed. The only difference, she says, was a box of disposable gloves by the kitchen sink and a prickly attitude from her supervisor. But she doesn’t regret joining the picket line. It was important to show the company that she and her co-workers know they deserve to be treated fairly. “I knew what I did was the right thing,” she says. □

An ornate, black, three-dimensional frame surrounds the text. The frame features intricate floral carvings at the corners and along the sides, with a central diamond-patterned section in each of the four quadrants.

THE RENAIS IS

An ornate, black, three-dimensional frame surrounds the text. The frame features intricate floral carvings at the corners and midpoints, with a central rectangular panel containing a diamond lattice pattern. The overall style is reminiscent of classical or Art Deco decorative elements.

SANGE BLACK

ESSAY

BY IBRAM X. KENDI

A

young woman came up to the microphone after another student had had his turn. I was book touring for *Stamped From the Beginning* at a historically Black university in Dover, Del. Looking freshman young, her darker skin curled around a nervous face. Or a curious one?

“Have you ever thought about cutting your hair?” she asked matter-of-factly.

My locs hung down my back as still and suspended as the room. I sensed the question had less to do with my hairstyle and more to do with my lifestyle choices. Locs after all—like cornrows and huge Afros—make some white people uncom-


fortable. Not considered professional. Considered rebellious. I didn’t think twice about my answer.

“No,” I replied.

Time paused in the silence. She smiled. An approving murmur shot through the room like a tremor from her smile. They felt my hair love. It was as if she had asked, “Do you worry about what white people think about you?” And I responded, “No.” She was glad I had escaped. Her classmates were glad I had escaped.

I had escaped what Toni Morrison called the “white gaze.” When internalized by Black people, the white gaze functions as a pair of glasses binding our eyes—and thereby our very being. To see the world through the white gaze—no matter one’s identity—is to center white people and their looks, their ways, their perspectives and their actions. A real-life *Get Out*.

The white gaze positions white people as the perpetual main character of Black life and thought. It colonizes imaginations. It becomes hard to create without what white people think about the creation ever present. That’s because the white gaze situates white people as the audience and deports the rest of us illegal aliens. No Latinx or Asian or Native or Middle Eastern people in the audience. No Black people in the audience even in an auditorium filled with Black students



at Delaware State University. It is as if “our lives have no meaning, no depth without the white gaze,” Morrison once said. “And I have spent my entire writing life trying to make sure that the white gaze was not the dominant one in any of my books.”

In this first Black History Month after the racial reckoning of 2020, I feel impelled to do what historians rarely do: mark history while the story is still being written. We are living in a time when the white gaze remains ever present in American life, but is hardly dominant among today’s assemblage of courageous Black creators. We are living in the time of a new renaissance—what we are calling the Black Renaissance—the third great cultural revival of Black Americans, after the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, after the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Black creators today were nurtured by these past cultural revivals—and all those brilliant creators who sustained Black Arts during the 1980s and 1990s. But if the Harlem Renaissance stirred Black people to see themselves, if the Black Arts Movement stirred Black people to love themselves, then the Black Renaissance is stirring Black people to be themselves. Totally. Unapologetically. Freely.

As Beyoncé wrote in 2018, “I like to be free. I’m not alive unless I am creating something.”

A renaissance does not emerge on its own. Structures must be built to allow creativity to truly flourish. During the past six or so years, Black artists formed mechanisms to lift up their own work and that of their peers: Lena Waithe created a mentorship program, and Ava DuVernay a film distribution and resource collective. Leaders in the publishing industry, like Tracy Sherrod and my own editor, Chris Jackson, are running their own imprints and delivering the mighty literature of Ta-Nehisi Coates and the late great Cicely Tyson. Numerous creators are following in Oprah’s and Spike Lee’s footsteps and building their own entertainment and production companies, signing and managing and inspiring young superstars like Chloe x Halle. And all of this has coincided with a moment when white executives, out of shame or guilt, goodwill or good (money) sense, began to seek out our stories and storytellers in greater numbers.

BLACK NOVELISTS, POETS, filmmakers, producers, musicians, playwrights, artists and writers got the white judge off our heads. We are no longer focused on making white people comfortable or uncomfortable. We also got the Black judge out of our heads. We refuse to carry the race on our shoulders. We are tired of being race representatives. We’ve escaped the shaming politics of respectability. We are

showing that our Black lives have meaning and depth beyond white people.

At the height of the Harlem Renaissance in 1926, Langston Hughes expressed a similar sentiment to the one inspiring creators today: We “now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame . . . We know we are beautiful. And ugly too.”

Black people, like all racial groups, are knowledgeable and ignorant, law-abiding and lawbreaking, secure and insecure, hardworking and lazy. The racial groups are equals, and what makes the racial groups equals is our common humanity; and our common humanity is imperfect and complex.

The creators of this new renaissance have been expressing their own humanity in myriad ways. Cardi B, Megan Thee Stallion and the hosts of *The Breakfast Club* are modeling our freestyling posture. Issa Rae told our stories about dating and sex and work and friendship in *Insecure*. Jesmyn Ward shared a story of familial bonds in southern Mississippi in *Sing, Unburied, Sing*. Kerry Washington, Michael B. Jordan, Billy Porter, Lupita Nyong'o, Daveed Diggs, Danai Gurira, Regina King and Viola Davis have played familiar and unfamiliar—but always unforgettable—Black characters on the stage and screen. In *I Am Not Your Negro*, Raoul Peck breathed new life into an unfinished work of James Baldwin's. These creators are constantly breathing new life into Black history—and not breaths of constant woe and pity. Scholar Imani Perry evoked Zora Neale Hurston when writing last summer, “I do not want pity from a single soul. Sin and shame are found in neither my body nor my identity. Blackness is an immense and defiant joy.”

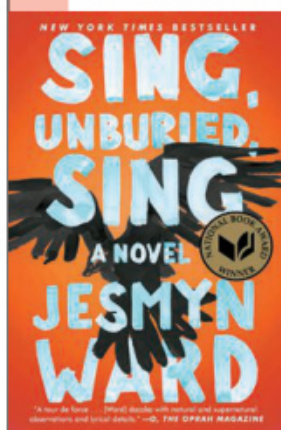
We are creating our immensity. No creator should have to tone down their individuality in the chorus of Blackness. We are telling America to tone down its anti-Black racism; and its sexism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, classism and nativism; and all the ways those isms intersect; and all their violence. So, we can live and be trans and cis and queer and disabled in the moonlight. Because, as Alicia, Patrisse and Opal put it: All Black lives matter.

“FOR GENERATIONS in the mind of America, the Negro has been more of a

THE NEW CANON



I AM NOT YOUR NEGRO Raoul Peck's documentary revisits James Baldwin's unfinished book about his friendships with Medgar Evers, Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr.



SING, UNBURIED, SING

Jesmyn Ward's novel follows three generations of a Mississippi family on a road trip haunted by ghosts



CODE SWITCH Co-hosts Gene Demby and Shereen Marisol Meraji tackle race and identity head-on in an insightful, often personal podcast



INVASION OF PRIVACY On Cardi B's debut album, the Bronx rapper brings her blend of humor, swagger and vulnerability to songs about success and self-doubt

formula than a human being—a something to be argued about, condemned or defended, to be ‘kept down,’ or ‘in his place,’ or ‘helped up,’ to be worried with or worried over, harassed or patronized, a social bogey or a social burden,” scholar Alain Locke wrote in his signature essay marking the Harlem Renaissance in 1925, published in *Survey Graphic* magazine. “By shedding the old chrysalis of the Negro problem we are achieving something like a spiritual emancipation.”

In this new Black Renaissance, we are once again shedding what and who do not serve us. Our plays, portraits, films, shows, books, music, essays, podcasts and art are growing in popularity—are emancipating the American consciousness, and banging on the door of the classical canon. The audience for our work is Black people—or people of all races. Black people are appreciating what J. Cole and Janelle Monáe and John Legend and Jason Reynolds are creating because they see their complex selves. Non-Black people are appreciating the podcasts *Code Switch* and *The Nod*, the poetry of Amanda Gorman and Jericho Brown, the novels of Colson Whitehead, the illustrations of Kadir Nelson and Vashti Harrison, and the television shows *Watchmen* and *Lovecraft Country*, because they do not see themselves, at the same time that they see themselves in our common humanity. Black creators have inspired Native, Asian, white, Latinx and Middle Eastern creators just as they inspired us. Black creators in the U.S. have inspired Black creators abroad just as those creators abroad have inspired us. Around the world we are becoming.

But our Wakanda, our 1619 Project, our antiracism is facing resistance. Mobs have amassed in front of our Capitol and told us we are stealing their country, and told us to go back to our “sh-thole” countries, which caused us to lean in and create more unapologetically. When the violence and intimidation did not work, the discrediting began, saying we hated white people since we didn't worship white people; saying we hated America because we didn't worship America as exceptional. Because in racist minds Black people either worship white people or hate white people. In racist minds, white people can't just be people like we are. Black people

can't just be ourselves, like they are.

In the end, the racism has not knocked us out. Our chins are steel like Adonis Johnson's in *Creed*, like our real-life fighter, Tarana Burke. In the end, as Kendrick Lamar put it, "we gon' be alright." Toni was like our Harriet Tubman before she passed away in 2019. She guided us, willed us to escape the white gaze, until we did.

WHEN I WAS YOUNGER, I often saw myself and other Black people through the eyes of white people. I worried about what white people thought about me; how I was appearing, speaking, acting, being in their world. When I looked in the mirror sometimes, I did not see myself, for myself. I saw what the white gaze saw and felt inadequate or proud; and changed myself or rebelled—and apologized for conforming or rebelling—thus apologizing for being Black. I was not alone.

But by the time I stood before those Black students in October 2016, on the eve of Donald Trump's election, we were no longer apologizing for who we were. This is our world too. We were calling ourselves "unapologetically Black" like writer Damon Young of the *Very Smart Brothas*. Whether that was the right phrase or not isn't important now. Our collective sentiment was important.

Who knows when the Black Renaissance actually started? Perhaps 2015, with a long pregnancy. It was the year that Black Lives Matter, which originated with a Facebook post in 2013, expanded into a movement. In April, Freddie Gray was killed by police officers and Baltimore exploded. On June 16, Trump announced his presidential bid, and the very next day, a white supremacist murdered nine Black churchgoers in South Carolina after praying with them. "Our mourning, this mourning, is in time with our lives," wrote poet Claudia Rankine soon afterward. "There is no life outside of our reality here." There was no reality outside of the death of Sandra Bland that July. There was no reality outside of us saying her name.

As Childish Gambino declared: "This is America."

But nothing baked our Black Renaissance quite like the heat of the first Black presidency. Barack Obama's

Administration was akin to the Great Migration for the Harlem Renaissance; akin to the civil rights bills for the Black Arts Movement. Our raised expectations collided with the racism of the emerging Tea Party. We witnessed the rising opposition to the first Black presidency, day after day, year after year. We came to know full well that the more Black people uplift themselves, the more we will find ourselves on the receiving end of a racist backlash like Obama was.

As writer and director Tonja Renée Stidhum explained to CNN, "He was the respectable Negro. He was biracial, wasn't dark-skinned, spoke the King's English, was smart, married and the head of a nuclear family. But still that wasn't enough."

Every cheap shot at Obama shot down our worry about what white people thought. Not because we universally adored him or agreed with all his policies. The lesson was clear: If Obama wasn't enough, then we would never be enough.

Many of us were taught to protect ourselves through the white gaze—knowing any off-beam move in this America could

be our downfall or death. But over the past six years we've come to protect ourselves from the white gaze—knowing we could be shot at any point for no reason. So why not live freely and create freely before our downfall or death? Why can't we be anti-racist to prevent our downfall or death?

When I say *we*, I'm not saying all Black creators have been thinking this way. I, for one, am not always thinking this way: my scholarship flows from research and evidence, which can lead me anywhere. But there do seem to be mainstream currents driving the Black Renaissance, that many of us swim in and out of, or follow like a stream of consciousness.

I cannot speak for the entire renaissance and all Black creators. I am not a representative. Indeed, we chafe at the idea that anyone can represent us. But just as there are many ideas we disagree upon, there are ideas many of us likely share, or are sympathetic to, antiracist ideas rooting our art, or watering our art, or weeding our art. Escaping the white gaze is one. Rejecting the politics of respectability is another. Confronting racism while silently kneeling or standing loudly is another. Being our genuine selves is still another. Maintaining an inclusive and complicated view of Blackness is yet another.

I could be wrong. I could be way off. After all, we don't like to be put into boxes. Our stories often escape categories. Our lives are complex and heavy and thick, like our humanity.

But we can be captured by painters Awol Erizku and Amy Sberald. We can be described by 2 Dope Queens in their podcast, or by Roxane Gay in print. Part of the job of creators is to describe ourselves, and our cultures, and our nations, while recognizing we are not bound by ourselves, or our cultures, or our nations. We are not bound by anyone or anything or any gaze. Our imaginations are not bound by racism. The Black Renaissance cannot be bound. The Black Renaissance is fighting for the freedom of being. The Black Renaissance is the freedom of being.

We are free.

Kendi is the National Book Award-winning author of seven books. His latest is Four Hundred Souls: A Community History of African America, 1619–2019

Our plays, portraits, films, shows, books, music, essays, podcasts and art are emancipating the American consciousness, and banging on the door of the classical canon

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WORDS ARE
POWER***



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‘UNITY WITH PURPOSE’

INAUGURAL POET **AMANDA GORMAN** IN CONVERSATION
WITH FORMER FIRST LADY **MICHELLE OBAMA**

Amanda Gorman captivated the world when she read her poem “The Hill We Climb” at President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris’ Jan. 20 Inauguration ceremony. Sitting just feet away from the 22-year-old that day was former First Lady Michelle Obama, who had met Gorman twice before—in 2016 at a White House event for the National Student Poets program and again at a 2018 event for Black Girls Rock!,

**PHOTOGRAPH BY
AWOL ERIZKU
FOR TIME**

His portrait of Gorman is an “indirect nod” to Maya Angelou. “It needed a layer of depth that only poetry can explain,” he says. “I was interested in allowing her to own the space that she’s in right now.”



an organization that seeks to empower women and girls. Gorman, who was named the first National Youth Poet Laureate in 2017, emerged in an instant as the latest inspiring young artist of the renaissance. Her three upcoming books shot to the top of Amazon's best-seller list, and the NFL soon announced plans for her to recite an original poem at Super Bowl LV. In a remote interview, Gorman and Obama covered topics ranging from the role of art in activism to the pressures Black women face in the spotlight.

MICHELLE OBAMA: We're here to talk about the current renaissance in Black art—this surge of creativity we've seen over the past six years or so. What do you make of calling this period a "renaissance"? And where do you see yourself within it?

AMANDA GORMAN: We're living in an important moment in Black art because we're living in an important moment in Black life. Whether that's looking at what it means politically to have an African-American President before Trump, or looking at what it means to have the Black Lives movement become the largest social movement in the United States. What's been exciting for me is I get to absorb and to live in that creation I see from other African-American artists that I look up to. But then I also get to create art and participate in that historical record. We're seeing it in fashion, we're seeing it in the visual arts. We're seeing it in dance; we're seeing it in music. In all the forms of expression of human life, we're seeing that artistry be informed by the Black experience. I can't imagine anything more exciting than that.

Like the rest of the country, I was profoundly moved as I watched you read your poem "The Hill We Climb" at last month's Inauguration. The power of your words blew me away—but it was more than that. It was your presence onstage, the confidence you exuded as a young Black woman helping to turn the page to a more hopeful chapter in American leadership. I have to say I felt proud too; you've always had so much poise and grace, but seeing you address the



Gorman and her mother Joan Wicks with the Obamas at the Inauguration

whole country like that, I couldn't help thinking to myself: Well, this girl has grown all the way up. It made me so happy. How did you prepare yourself for a moment like that?

Every time we meet, I secretly hope you forget me because then I get a clean slate. But you being the amazing person you are, you always remember. When I first wrote the poem, I was thinking that in the week leading up to the Inauguration I would be rehearsing every day. But everything was moving so quickly, I actually didn't get to really sit down with the text until the night before. Most of my preparation was stepping into the emotionality of the poem, getting my body and my psyche ready for that moment. There was a lot of the

night-before performing in the mirror.

You are part of a rising generation that isn't afraid to call out racism and injustice when you see it. Your generation was out front at the Black Lives Matter protests last summer, and you were using your voices long before that to demand change. How do you think art fits into these larger social movements? Do you think about these things as you write?

Absolutely. Poetry and language are often at the heartbeat of movements for change. If we look to the Black Lives Matter protests, you see banners that say, THEY BURIED US BUT THEY DIDN'T KNOW WE WERE SEEDS. That's poetry being marshaled to speak of racial

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justice. If you analyze Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech, it’s a great document of rhetoric that’s also a great document of poetry, of imagery, of song. Never underestimate the power of art as the language of the people.

Tell me about the poets who came before you. Where do you draw inspiration—and do you draw inspiration from artists working in other forms?

I love Black poets. I love that as a Black girl, I get to participate in that legacy. So that’s Yusef Komunyakaa, Sonia Sanchez, Tracy K. Smith, Phillis Wheatley. And then I look to artists who aren’t just poets. While I was writing the Inaugural poem, I was reading a lot of Frederick Douglass, a lot of Winston Churchill, a lot of Abraham Lincoln. I was also listening to the composers who I feel are great storytellers, but they don’t use words so I try to fill in that rhetoric myself. A lot of Hans Zimmer, Dario Marianelli, Michael Giacchino.

“The Hill We Climb” mentions your being a descendant of slaves. What role does poetry have to play in helping you make sense of our history?

I wanted to give the American people some access to myself. A lot of the inspiration for that came from your speech at the DNC in which you said, “I wake up every morning in a house that was built by slaves.” Poetry is the lens we use to interrogate the history we stand on and the future we stand for. It’s no coincidence that at the base of the Statue of Liberty, there is a poem. Our instinct is to turn to poetry when we’re looking to communicate a spirit that is larger than ourselves. Whenever I’m writing, I’m looking at the history of words. The specific history of words in the Inaugural poem was: We have seen the ways in which language has been violated and used to dehumanize. How can I reclaim English so we can see it as a source of hope, purification and consciousness?

No matter how many speaking engagements I do, big audiences always trigger a little bit of impostor syndrome in me. Can you talk about how you’ve learned to deal with that, not just for the Inauguration but in recit-

ing work that is so close to your heart?

Speaking in public as a Black girl is already daunting enough, just coming onstage with my dark skin and my hair and my race—that in itself is inviting a type of people that have not often been welcomed or celebrated in the public sphere. Beyond that, as someone with a speech impediment, that impostor syndrome has always been exacerbated because there’s the concern, Is the content of what I’m saying good enough? And then the additional fear, Is the way I’m saying it good enough?

You’ve spoken a lot about your speech difficulty, something you share in common with President Biden and the legendary poet Maya Angelou—who made such an impact on me at a young age. What does it mean to you to have overcome it?

President Biden has talked about having a stutter. Maya Angelou was mute for several years. I could not say certain sounds, like *r*, so I would be saying things like *poetwee* or *dolla*. My last name is Gorman, and I could not say that really until three years ago. For a long time, I looked at it as a weakness. Now I really look at it as a strength because going through that process, it made me a writer, for one, because I had to find a form in which I could

‘Poetry is the lens we use to interrogate the history we stand on and the future we stand for.’

communicate other than through my mouth, and two, when I was brave enough to try to take those words from the page onto the stage, I brought with me this understanding of the complexity of sound, pronunciation, emphasis.

What was your experience of the Inauguration itself? Were you able to listen to the performances and speeches, or were you just focused on what you came to do?


I was living in two spheres of my mind. There was the “Wow: Joe Biden’s speech was amazing. Lady Gaga just killed it.” But at the same time, 66% of my brain was dedicated to questions: “How am I going to get up to the podium without tripping? My hands are cold. Am I going to be able to flip these pages because my fingers are going numb?”

Oh, I can relate to that. If I’m speaking in a big venue, my nerves are less about the words I’m about to say than about those concrete things—How many stairs are there? How even is the ground? Sometimes the biggest worries are about the littlest things. Thankfully for all of us, you made it through in one piece and then some. And your poem hit such a nerve, especially after the chaos and violence we’d experienced leading up to the Inauguration. After so much division, hearing your call for unity was something of a balm. Can you talk a bit more about what unity means to you?

I’ve been meaning to clarify that. To me, unity without a sense of justice, equality and fairness is just toxic mob mentality. Unity that actually moves us toward the future means that we accept our differences—we embrace them and we lean into that diversity. It’s not linking arms without questioning what we’re linking arms for. It’s unity with purpose.

It seemed like the Inauguration hadn’t even ended before folks were calling you a symbol of hope. I know a thing or two about having that kind of pressure put on you, and it isn’t always easy. How are you handling it?

I remember in *Becoming* when you were talking about becoming the partner of someone running for public office, the pressure that was on you.

A man with a beard and glasses, wearing a white cap and a blue t-shirt, is shown from the chest up. He is holding a wooden brush and applying a dark sauce from a glass bowl onto several large pieces of ribs cooking on a grill. The background is slightly blurred, showing an outdoor setting.

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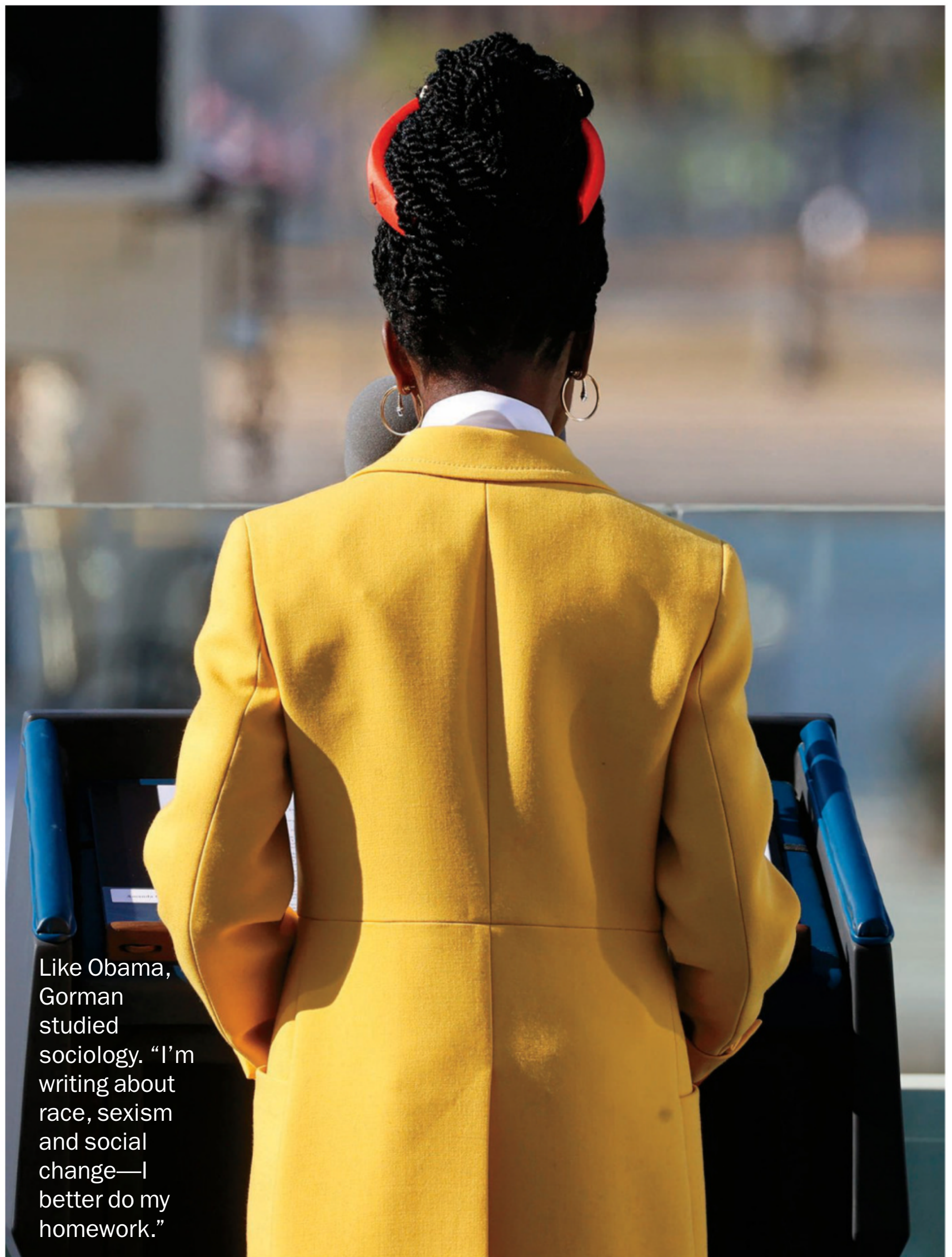
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There was one moment that spoke to me: the experience of Barack being on the campaign trail and you flying in with maybe one or two members of your team, rushing to an event, you all doing your own hair and makeup. There have been times where to speak I've taken the train, had to do my makeup and hair in a Starbucks, walked myself to the venue, and then I'm performing in front of 1,000 people. When you're first rocketed into a type of visibility, you're trying to represent your best self without having the best resources. For Black women, there's also the politics of respectability—despite our best attempts, we are criticized for never being put-together enough; but when we do, we're too showy. We're always walking this really tentative line of who we are and what the public sees us as. I'm handling it day by day. I'm learning that "No" is a complete sentence. And I am reminding myself that this isn't a competition. It's me following the trajectory of the life I was meant to lead.

I'd love to hear more about your family. As you know, I have two daughters around your age, and their bond was always strong, but I'd be lying if I said they didn't have their ups and downs here and there. They're sisters—What do you expect? You're a twin, which is a different ball game in some ways. What does sisterhood mean to you and your twin?

As twins, we're actually pretty dissimilar. But what bonds us isn't our personalities; it's our values. We've been raised like you, by a strong Black woman who taught us to value our ideas and our voices. It's really interesting when you have two daughters, especially two Black daughters close in age, because they're kind of operating as—I don't want to say each other's mothers but—sisters and then some. If I act out of line, the first person who's going to know about it is my sister, and vice versa.

Oh, I hear that—not just as a mother but as a sibling myself. My older brother Craig and I have been close since the day I was born. I know he's got my back, but he's going to make sure I keep my head on straight too. And when I start to feel down, he's



Like Obama, Gorman studied sociology. "I'm writing about race, sexism and social change—I better do my homework."

there to help me keep my chin up. I wonder: Do you consider yourself an optimist? And if so, how do you hold on to that in hard times?

Definitely. Optimism shouldn't be seen as opposed to pessimism, but in conversation with it. Your optimism will never be as powerful as it is in that exact moment when you want to give it up. The way we can all be hopeful is to not negate the feelings of fear or doubt, but to ask: What led to this darkness? And what can lead us out of the shadows?

One last question: Do you have any advice for young girls, and Black girls in particular, who earn their way into the spotlight?

My question is do they have any advice for me. I'm new to this, so I'm still learning. I would say anyone who finds themselves suddenly visible and suddenly famous, think about the big picture. Especially for girls of color, we're treated as lightning or gold in the pan—we're not treated as things that are going to last. You really have to crown yourself with the belief that what I'm about and what I'm here for is way beyond this moment. I'm learning that I am not lightning that strikes once. I am the hurricane that comes every single year, and you can expect to see me again soon.

Obama is a former First Lady and the author of Becoming



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WE HAVE ALWAYS BEEN STORYTELLERS

NOVELISTS **BRIT BENNETT**, **JASMINE GUILLORY** AND **JACQUELINE WOODSON** DISCUSS ART AND IDENTITY IN A CONVERSATION MODERATED BY **REBECCA CARROLL**

BLACK WOMEN HAVE BEEN HONORING AND lifting our voices, sharing our strengths, broadening our revolutionary scope since we got here. We tell stories that come through our hair and our hips, our shoulders and our ride-or-die stride as we walk alongside one another, tethered to our tropes, ever strong, mammified, over-sexualized but ultimately free together. Brit Bennett, Jasmine Guillory and Jacqueline Woodson are three of our finest novelists in America today. They tell narrative stories with grace and nuance, humor and curiosity, and with characters who exist because Black women called them to live. The four of us spoke about the long-standing contributions of Black women writers, who holds the power in publishing and the notion of a renaissance. —R.C.

Rebecca Carroll: You’ve all had books on the *New York Times* best-seller list—that’s pretty remarkable. My first book was a collection of interviews with Black women writers because it was the first time that three Black women were on that list: Toni Morrison, Terry McMillan and Alice Walker. Now that has changed. What do you attribute that shift to?

Jasmine Guillory: It’s not that suddenly Black women are writing more or buying more books. It’s that the books are in the marketplace, and they’re getting the power behind them so that the whole world can see how great we are.

Carroll: The power is a really important piece of this. Talk a little bit about what it feels like to be part of this moment when there are so many Black women on the mainstream lists.

Jacqueline Woodson: I remember when I wrote *Autobiography of a Family Photo* back in the ’90s, it was the White Boy Club: white boys were getting invited to the parties, getting the film contracts, getting the big advances. Publishers were saying, “Well, Black folks don’t buy books.” Out loud. The

time has shifted, and that white-boy voice is much quieter—and our voices are amplified. There was one reviewer who asked me when I won the National Book Award, “What does it feel like to win such a big award?” And I was like, “Are you talking about the Coretta Scott King, or are you talking about the NAACP Image Award?” I love being on the *New York Times* best-seller list, but it means nothing if a Black kid in Brownsville doesn’t know my name.

Carroll: The power has shifted not organically, so that makes me nervous about the relative quickness that it could revert. What are your concerns about the power in publishing turning its focus on Black women writers?

Brit Bennett: I think of last year as the most recent surge of attention on Black writers. My book came out in the

middle of that, and I kept having people ask me, “Have things changed for good? Was this a turning point?” I was always extremely skeptical of that idea. As Jasmine and Jackie have said, Black women have always been doing this work. I grew up in the ’90s, so I grew up in a world where I saw Morrison, Walker and McMillan. The idea that as a Black woman I could write something about Black women and achieve some type of mainstream success was never foreign to me. But at the same time, I agree that our work suddenly has been conferred this additional value because white people are now paying attention. It was very strange sitting in the contradiction of that as my book was published during the summer of antiracist reading lists: of being glad to see my book and grateful readers were flocking to it, but also understanding that it was all external to the book.

Carroll: Jasmine, your genre has also been busted open and is getting new attention and love. What do you think about how people are responding to romance?

Guillory: I write romance novels for and about Black women. And I am grateful that a lot of people who are not Black women have bought my books and have appreciated them. But it’s interesting [to see] the different kinds of reactions I get from people who maybe don’t understand the things that I talk about, who don’t think about the ways in which Black women have not gotten that kind of love in media or throughout life. Someone said that one of my books “missed an opportunity to educate” them about racism.

Carroll: People want a list—they want a workbook, right? But whenever anybody asks me what they should be reading, I continue to say Toni Morrison, James Baldwin, Jackie Woodson, Brit

‘I love being on the New York Times best-seller list, but it means nothing if a Black kid in Brownsville doesn’t know my name.’

—JACQUELINE WOODSON



Bennett. Even though we're not spelling it out for you, what you need to know about Blackness and living within a white-supremacist country, it's right there. You do the work ... Bringing it back though to this idea of a Black creative renaissance, I wonder what the difference is between a cultural renaissance and a trend.

Woodson: A renaissance is a continuum. We're here because of the Harlem Renaissance. All of our work has come before in some way, shape or form. As our country shifts racially, the creative work is shifting too. And I don't ever expect to see that white-boy narrative again. I don't ever expect to not be invited to somebody's wiener roast in the way that we were in the '90s.

NOVEL WOMEN

THE AUTHORS' CHARACTERS STICK WITH THEM:

Guillory wonders what her protagonist, written to live in her neighborhood, would think of the new pizza shop. And Woodson warns, "Don't kill a character off. They will haunt you forever."

Carroll: Really?

Woodson: Yes, there's no way of going back from here. We come from a people who were not allowed to learn to read and write, and here we are. We're not going to unlearn. We also come from a people who were storytellers, and that was oppressed forever, and now that has broken open. We know our stories matter because the writers who came before us have showed us how we've been silenced and we have a right to speak. We're not going to shut up. And in this, in the writing, we're teaching our daughters.

Carroll: We just came off of a really tough year. But in that latter half of the year was this chorus of "Listen to Black women. Trust Black women." What would it look like to truly listen to and trust Black women in this country?

Bennett: There was a way in which it rang pretty hollow to me. It falls into these various cultural expectations of what white people demand from Black women, whether it is wanting a mammy who cares for you emotionally and endlessly sacrifices herself, or a Black superwoman. These various tropes kept cropping up—Black women are swooping in to save America from itself. It's like, no, we're trying to save ourselves. A vision of America that is fair to Black women would by necessity also be better for a lot of other types of people, a vision of America that pushes back against misogyny and racism and classism and all these other isms.

Guillory: After the Georgia election, there was a lot of "Put Stacey Abrams in charge of the vaccine rollout." You know, she should take a vacation first. She's just had a pretty busy year.

Carroll: The expectation very quickly went from her being capable to her being supercapable to her being absolutely other. And that's what happens with Black women in this country: it starts with the trope, and then it ends with a hyperversion of the trope.

Woodson: Our work is to take care of ourselves in some way. I'm tired of explaining to white people. If 2020 taught me anything, it's that: it's not my job.

Carroll is a writer, cultural critic and host

RECLAIMING BLACK HISTORY ONSCREEN

BY JOSIAH BATES AND ANDREW R. CHOW

Twenty-seven years ago, two films depicting the Black Panther Party were released 10 months apart. The first, *Forrest Gump*, needed

only two minutes to reduce the movement to nameless, arrogant militants in allegiance with a domestic abuser. The film won Best Picture at the Oscars, earned \$680 million and became part of many high school history curriculums.

The second film, Mario Van Peebles' *Panther*, portrayed the group as a grassroots organization of idealists systematically stifled and imprisoned by an unjust legal system. The film drew vicious attacks from conservatives and skepticism from critics, with one Baltimore *Sun* story citing detractors who linked its antigovernment ideology to that behind the recent Oklahoma City bombing. *Panther* took in \$6.8 million before fading from view; it's currently unavailable on any streaming platform.

Those two films and their fates can be read as an object lesson in Hollywood's relationship with Black history. While cinema has long had a love affair with historical narratives—reverently re-creating the lives of scientists, gangsters, pilots and kings—very few of those figures have been Black. In movies about the civil rights era like *The Help* and *Mississippi Burning*, Black activists are sidelined in favor of white do-gooder protagonists. Elsewhere, Black figures are thrust into a few reductive tracks: “a slave, a butler or some street hood,” as the character Jesse sums up in Robert Townsend's 1987 satire, *Hollywood Shuffle*. Black filmmakers who attempted to reframe Black history in projects like *Malcolm X*, *Panther* and *Rosewood* described overcoming years of stony industry resistance to put those movies in front of audiences.

Over the past few years, however, a growing number of Black filmmakers have found opportunities to tell history-based stories, determined to

reject white-savior narratives and center Black interiority. They have grieved anew alongside the Central Park Five (*When They See Us*) and taught many about the buried history of the Tulsa race massacre (*Watchmen*). They've instilled compassion and unruly texture into stories of 1980s drag ball performers (*Pose*); a titan of the blues (*Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*); and the first Black female presidential candidate for a major party, Shirley Chisholm (*Mrs. America*)—celebrating not just greatness or injustice but also parts of Black life that had previously unfolded offscreen.

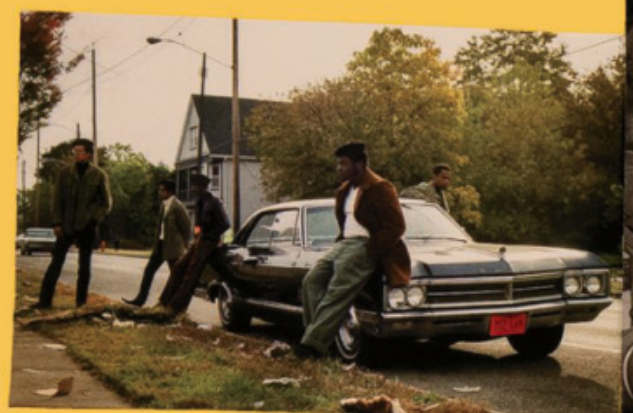
These works are not just a matter of representation but of history itself. Research has shown that powerful narrative can subsume previous memories; films can indelibly shape public understanding of historical events. “There's a responsibility to understand that if you do your job right and enter the public consciousness, you will have overwritten actual history with your own imagination,” Trey Ellis, a filmmaker and film professor at Columbia University, says.

This month, the Black Panthers will get a new appraisal in Shaka King's *Judas and the Black Messiah*, which is already receiving acclaim and Oscar buzz far more in line with *Forrest Gump* than *Panther*. The film, which hits theaters and HBO Max on Feb. 12, portrays Chicago Panthers, including charismatic leader Fred Hampton (Daniel Kaluuya), not as cold-blooded vigilantes but as community organizers with ideological rigor and deep interpersonal bonds, while the FBI embarks on a ruthless quest to silence them—even if that requires putting bullets in their sleeping bodies.

The challenge for King and other Black creators is both providing remedial education and speaking to a present

still rife with prejudice. “I'm not trying to erase what's there, because that will never be accomplished in my lifetime. This is generations of oppressive, calculated misinformation,” Ava DuVernay (*When They See Us*, *Selma*) says. “But I can assert truth and fact and say, ‘This is information that is missing from that narrative. This is a point of view that was never considered.’”

AMERICA'S MISEDUCATION in Black history starts in school systems and the media. A 2014 report by the Southern





Poverty Law Center gave D's and F's to the majority of states' approaches to teaching the civil rights movement, with five states neglecting the subject altogether. Black history lessons often focus on slavery and even then can downplay the atrocity of the slave trade: five years ago, a ninth-grade geography textbook made headlines for describing enslaved Africans as "workers." Figures like Ida B. Wells and James Baldwin are chronically undertaught. Some editions of the textbook *The American Pageant*, which has been used for decades

in AP History classes, reduced the Black Panthers to two sentences: "With frightening frequency, violence or the threat of violence raised its head in the black community. The Black Panther party openly brandished weapons in the streets of Oakland, California."

Hollywood, with its primacy in the American imagination, has played a significant role in upholding a certain vision of American history; indeed, that impulse is baked into its origins. The first American blockbuster, D.W. Griffith's 1915 *The Birth of a Nation*,

BLACK PANTHERS, TAKE TWO

MORE THAN A QUARTER-CENTURY after the Black Panthers were portrayed in *Forrest Gump* as gun-toting ideologues, a new film, *Judas and the Black Messiah*, seeks to delve into their humanity and community-based activism. Daniel Kaluuya, at lectern, says researching the role of Fred Hampton for the film "taught me about me."

portrays African Americans—played by white actors in blackface—as predators or simpletons unfit for freedom, and the Ku Klux Klan as saviors of the antebellum South. The movie was instrumental to the Klan’s revival and the flourishing of Jim Crow laws.

Over the following decades, mainstream films like *Song of the South*, *Gone With the Wind* and the Shirley Temple–starring *The Littlest Rebel* would confer nostalgia upon plantation life and portray the enslaved as grateful to their protective owners. Later, when white filmmakers tackled America’s original sin or the civil rights movement, they often made Black characters ancillary to rousing white allies (*Amistad*, *Glory*); white audiences left the theater with no inkling of complicity in racist structures. “We’ve been treated as objects as opposed to subjects,” Ellis says. “Even in the well-intentioned, liberal movies in the ’80s and ’90s, Hollywood just couldn’t get its head wrapped around the Black experience.”

In a lily-white industry, a few Black filmmakers, including Spike Lee and John Singleton, were able to break through and portray Black stories with richness and depth. But attempting to expose more shameful parts of American history proved difficult. Lee’s *Malcolm X*, released in 1992, was saved financially only after he solicited prominent Black donors like Michael Jordan and Oprah Winfrey. Singleton said that *Rosewood* (1997), which recounted the 1923 massacre of a predominantly Black Florida town at the hands of a white mob, received scant studio support, which contributed to its commercial failure.

Also in the ’90s, *New Jack City* filmmaker Van Peebles began shopping around a script for a movie that cast the Black Panthers in a new light. He knew history books and mainstream media had reduced them to their militance, and he wanted to highlight their efforts to feed and protect their communities and combat police brutality—and their treatment by the FBI. But Van Peebles couldn’t get studios to greenlight a project with a significant budget.

“One studio executive said, ‘I dig the script; I was a radical and love the Panthers. But we have to make the lead character white,’” he recalls. The execu-

tive suggested casting “a Bridget Fonda type” who teaches a group of Black men to read, leading to their becoming the Black Panthers. Van Peebles eventually got to make *Panther* the way he wanted, for \$9 million. It failed to recoup its costs.

RECENT STRUCTURAL CHANGES in Hollywood have led to more Black creators’ getting their own platforms to tell Black stories. The Black Lives Matter and #OscarsSoWhite movements put pressure on white gatekeepers, while box-office successes like *Moonlight*, *Get Out* and especially the Marvel epic *Black Panther* showed that Black stories of all stripes could draw audiences. The advent of streaming has widened the conception of what an “average” theatergoer looks like. And Black executives, like Warner Bros.’ Channing Dungey, finally started to get promoted into decisionmaking positions. The result has been a flurry of Black stories across genres, from romance (*If Beale Street Could Talk*) to horror (*Us*) to comedy (*Girls Trip*).

Given Hollywood’s obsession with true stories, it’s not surprising that Black creators would use these opportunities to reclaim forgotten chapters of history. These films and TV shows serve both as validation for Black audiences—who have long had to protect their stories themselves—and as civic lessons for those less informed. And these projects have already started to make an impact on the nation’s collective memory. DuVernay’s *13th*, for example, has been added to high school and college curriculums for its incisive exploration of mass incarceration’s ties to slavery. Her series *When They See Us* was Netflix’s most watched series in the U.S. every day for two weeks upon its release—and led to Central Park Five prosecutor Linda Fairstein’s being dropped by her publisher and resigning from the board of Vassar College amid public outrage.

“For years, our stories have been told and commodified in a way that reduced us in other people’s eyes and in our own eyes,” *When They See Us* screenwriter Julian Breece says. “It’s important for us to rescue our narrative—because that’s what rescues our humanity.”

In 2019, after its depiction in HBO’s



HISTORY IN THE REMAKING

Clockwise from top: Scenes from *Mrs. America*, *When They See Us* and *Pose*. “It’s a mission of mine to give life, nuance and intimacy to those stories that most people are less aware of,” Tanya Barfield, a playwright and a writer for *Mrs. America*, says. She guided the show’s depiction of 1972 presidential candidate Shirley Chisholm.



Watchmen, a flurry of research and writing emerged online about the Tulsa race massacre—when an officially sanctioned white mob attacked a flourishing Black Tulsa neighborhood in 1921, killing possibly hundreds and destroying its entire business district. Show-runner Damon Lindelof (*Lost*) had the idea to tell the story after reading about it in Ta-Nehisi Coates’ “The Case for Reparations”—and brought it to life with a majority-Black writers’ room to shape the narrative. The massacre is rarely taught in schools: show writer Christal Henry says she didn’t learn

about it until college and was deluged with incredulous messages after the show aired. “I got responses from white friends, like, ‘This is crazy. I thought you made it up,’” she says.

Watchmen was HBO’s most watched new show of 2019. Since then, there has been a heightened interest in new developments related to the massacre, including the discovery of a mass grave that likely holds its victims and Human Rights Watch’s demands for reparations for survivors and descendants. “This is the worst thing that’s ever happened in our city, and you had generations grow up here not knowing that it happened,” Tulsa Mayor G.T. Bynum says. “When you have a show with that much visibility shine a light all of a sudden, it’s incredibly powerful.”

Now it’s the Black Panthers’ turn for a mainstream reclamation. Negative connotations of the group—“reduced to leather peacoats and shotguns”—as *Judas* director King puts it, still linger, thanks to decades of fearful or sensationalist coverage. In 2016, when Beyoncé performed at the Super Bowl with her dancers sporting Pantheresque black berets, the executive director of the National Sheriffs’ Association accused her of “inciting bad behavior.”

This reputation made it extremely difficult for *Judas* and *the Black Messiah* to get made. Forest Whitaker and Antoine Fuqua tried for years to kick-start a project; so did Warner Bros. executive Nijja Kuykendall. A24 and Netflix passed on the initial pitch for *Judas*, created by the Lucas Brothers writing team. In the end, it took a massive effort from some of the biggest names in the business: producer Ryan Coogler, coming off the \$1.3 billion-grossing *Black Panther*; powerhouse producer Charles D. King, who financed half the film himself; two newly bankable stars in Daniel Kaluuya and LaKeith Stanfield; and Kuykendall, who, as executive vice president of film production at Warner Bros., is one of the few Black women in a Hollywood executive role.

The filmmakers hope that *Judas* deepens the public perception of the Panthers, calling attention to free breakfast programs that fed thousands of children, free legal aid, health clinics, and peace pact negotiations between Chicago

gangs. Kaluuya, who plays Hampton in the film, is particularly excited to educate people about Hampton’s Rainbow Coalition, which united disenfranchised Hispanic, white and Black organizing groups in Chicago, flying in the face of the Panthers’ reputation as antiwhite. “It showed me the importance of union and understanding where we share core values—and putting aside what they want us to fight over,” he says.

Crucially, the film documents FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover’s war against the Panthers, which for years was dismissed as conspiracy theory. Congressional investigators and others found that Hoover’s agents spread disinformation and dissent, planted informants, forged documents, harassed members and even, in the case of Hampton, assassinated them.

“There will be those who say the film is pro-Panther propaganda and that we’re making things up,” Shaka King says. “But they won’t have any evidence to support that.”

OTHER PROJECTS from Black creators will burrow even deeper into Black history in the years ahead. Questlove’s *Summer of Soul* unearths buried footage from the 1969 Harlem Cultural Festival. *Genius: Aretha* and *The United States vs. Billie Holiday* re-examine two iconic and oft misunderstood musicians. *When They See Us*’ Breece is writing a biopic of the legendary dancer Alvin Ailey, while Van Peebles has a follow-up to his groundbreaking 1993 Black cowboy film, *Posse*, reminding the world that 1 in 4 cowboys during the golden age of westward expansion was Black. “Kids want to be the success they see. They want to sit tall in the saddle,” he says.

King hopes that Hollywood, after exploring what he terms a “Black excellence industrial complex,” will enter into a “Black radical industrial complex,” championing stories that challenge the hegemonic narratives of America. He’s also hopeful that stories across ethnicities that have likewise been ignored by Hollywood will come to light. “When it comes to Hollywood and Latinos or Asians in the U.S., that history is completely absent too,” the director says. “I think that the possibilities are endless.” □

THE YEAR BLACK MUSIC TURNED INWARD

BY MARCUS J. MOORE

AMERICA WAS IN PERIL IN 2016: unarmed Black people were being killed by police at an alarming clip, and Donald J. Trump's presidential campaign revealed stark ideological divides. None of this was new; law-enforcement officers have always harassed minorities, and U.S. citizens have long been split along racial and political lines. But not since the late 1960s had the tension been so palpable. Between social media and the 24-hour TV news cycle, viewers could see bullets penetrate Black skin on a continuous loop, or watch anti-police protests unfold in cities like Atlanta, Los Angeles and New York. The music responded in kind; from Solange and Beyoncé to Frank Ocean, Black artists were using their work to address the cultural landscape. And as the world grew louder, the music took on a more meditative tone.

But these weren't protest songs in the traditional sense. While tentpole songs like Marvin Gaye's "What's Going On" and James Brown's "Say It Loud—I'm Black and I'm Proud" set the template for Black protest music, this new generation sought to redefine what protest could entail. In 2016, dissent could be outward-looking and personal; to sing about marital strife, the journey of motherhood and one's upbringing was also revolutionary. This music was fearless: in a society that constantly denies Black humanity, these artists were reclaiming their stories—for themselves and the community as a whole.

THE BEGINNINGS of this renaissance go back to December 2014 and a trio of politically charged albums that shifted the tenor of Black music. First was *Black Messiah*, the third and most political studio album from R&B singer D'Angelo, on which he discussed war, climate change and the emotional toll of racism. Three months later, lyricist Kendrick Lamar released *To Pimp a Butterfly*, an avant-rap opus with traces of jazz, funk

and spoken-word poetry, that unpacked the trappings of fame along with his own depression and survivor's guilt. On "The Blacker the Berry," Lamar delved into the rage he felt when he saw the news of Trayvon Martin's death. "Alright," with its uplifting chorus and optimistic rhymes, became the unofficial anthem of the Black Lives Matter movement. In May, Lamar collaborator Kamasi Washington put out *The Epic*, a whopping, nearly three-hour jazz album, at a time when the mainstream marketplace wasn't interested in the genre. It spoke to the healing that needed to happen, evoking the calm and fire of civil-rights-era protest anthems. These artists tapped into the prevalent hurt, joy, anger and sorrow coursing through the Black community—and forged a path for their peers to follow.

The year 2016 wasn't just about big names making their most resonant work; it saw the rise of a new voice coming to the fore. Anderson .Paak, an Oxnard, Calif.-born singer, rapper and drummer, released two contrasting albums—*Malibu*, a solo LP, in January and *Yes Lawd!*, a '70s-soul-leaning record as one-half of NxWorries with producer Knxwledge, in October. .Paak was 2016's breakout star, a charismatic performer who looked like a Venice Beach skater and had the old spirit and voice of a Memphis soul crooner. These weren't, by definition, political albums, but committing to tell his own story—as the child of a farmer and mechanic with a strong will to succeed, and a budding celebrity with a penchant for slick talk—was its own form of protest. He was betting on himself, and the bliss exuded through his work.

The same went for Rihanna and Beyoncé, two of the world's biggest pop stars, whose respective albums were equally rooted in dissent and introspection. Rihanna's *ANTI* was a pensive and methodical work that confused longtime listeners used to her up-tempo

island-themed tracks. On this, her eighth album, she seemed less inclined to release another record of danceable cuts made for Top 40 radio. For Beyoncé's sixth studio album, *Lemonade*, she got more personal than usual, expressing candidly the then rumored (and since confirmed) infidelity of her husband Jay-Z over an assortment of rock, R&B and electronic soul. It was a brazen tour de force and a stark thematic shift from stellar pop anthems that skewed somewhat safe. *Lemonade* thrived as a heartbreak album with political inflections. "Freedom," featuring Lamar, wasn't so much an activist's hymn as an inward-looking reflection that connected with the public at large.

Perhaps no album did that more than Frank Ocean's *Blonde*, the down-tempo follow-up to 2012's *channel ORANGE*,



MALCOLM X: MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES



A DIFFERENT KIND OF PROTEST MUSIC

FROM RIHANNA to Beyoncé, Frank Ocean to Solange and Anderson .Paak, 2016 saw Black artists at the peak of their creative powers responding to the world around them by getting more introspective. Albums on which they asserted their humanity, in a society seemingly determined to deny it, took on a new kind of political meaning.

partially inspired by a picture Ocean found of a young girl in a car with her hands covering her face and “a mop of blonde hair.” Taking cues from this image, *Blonde* simulated the feeling of cruising in a car, the sun nearly set as wind drifts through open windows. There was a stillness to the album, quieter than *ORANGE* but no less socially active. “Pour up for A\$AP [Yams], RIP Pimp C,” he sang on “Nikes,” honoring two fallen hip-hop artists. “RIP Trayvon, that ni**a look just like me.”

All of these albums arose as Black Americans still struggled to reconcile the senseless deaths of Eric Garner, Sandra Bland, Tamir Rice, Mike Brown and Freddie Gray, and in the summer of 2016 we had two more souls to mourn: Alton Sterling and Philando Castile. Black people were rightfully furious.

So when Beyoncé’s sister, the equally powerful yet more reserved Solange, doubled down on this notion for her remarkable third studio album, *A Seat at the Table*, it soothed like balm to raw skin. *Seat* was an expansive mix of scant soul, a for us, by us record with the beauty of Black womanhood squarely at the center. “Cranes in the Sky” was, among other things, about her transition into motherhood. “Don’t Touch My Hair” wagged a finger at the white gaze. It arrived just over a month before Trump’s stunning win. And while many predicted dark days ahead, no one could envision the endless lowlights to come.

NOW THERE IS A PERCEPTION that a sense of calm has returned to the Oval Office. But just last month we witnessed a white-supremacist insurrection at the nation’s Capitol, and we’re not far removed from the racial reckoning of last summer, seeking justice for George Floyd, for Breonna Taylor, for Ahmaud Arbery. This time, the furor in the street made for a timeline of great singles rather than albums: .Paak’s “Lockdown,” Alicia Keys’ “Perfect Way to Die,” SAULT’s “Wildfires.” Some of the artists of 2016’s renaissance and the run-up to it have gone quiet in the intervening years. D’Angelo is in the den again, as are Lamar, Ocean, Rihanna and Solange. Beyoncé’s latest release, *Black Is King*, was as much a visual work as a musical one, about the beauty and elegance of African culture.

Time has only heightened the magnitude of these musicians’ work, which showcased the broad spectrum of Black culture and creative freedom. They portrayed our diversity, proving once more that we have rights to the same range of outward expression that others are afforded. The musical renaissance of 2016 wasn’t just a moment in Black history; it was a sea-changing event for American history overall. There’s no telling when these luminaries will return with their latest offerings, or what tone they’ll assume. But we can trust that the raw emotion of the past five years will make for rich new works.

Moore is the author of *The Butterfly Effect: How Kendrick Lamar Ignited the Soul of Black America*

25 DEFINING WORKS OF THE BLACK RENAISSANCE

"I'M ROOTING FOR EVERYBODY Black." So said Issa Rae on the red carpet at the 2017 Emmy Awards, capturing the electricity of a moment when "everybody Black" referred to quite a large group of ascendant voices—not only those up for awards that night, and not only those in Hollywood, but artists across the cultural landscape. While there has never been a shortage of Black artists making great work, the past six or so years have seen these creators claiming the spotlight as never before.

In fact, the hardest part of compiling this list of 25 works that have defined the current Black Renaissance was coming to terms with what had to be left out: vital films, series, albums, books, plays and more. For guidance, TIME assembled some of the era's most influential figures—artists who have also become advocates, mentors and changemakers—to help curate the list, along with members of the Black Employees at TIME employee resource group. Panelists voted on hundreds of works to reach a compilation of original, ambitious art, from paintings that will live in perpetuity in the National Portrait Gallery to music that became the soundtrack to a movement; books about marriage and memory and TV series as weird as they are wise.

The works of this new canon are defined by their breadth and diversity—a movement of pop stars and public intellectuals, superheroes and screwups, horror and ecstasy, individuality and unity. Collectively, they are a trove of epochal masterpieces that have revolutionized their mediums and shaken the culture at large—and whose influence we have only just begun to see take hold.

THE PANEL



MATTHEW A. CHERRY
Oscar-winning filmmaker



FKA TWIGS
Singer-songwriter, dancer and actor



IBRAM X. KENDI
National Book Award-winning author and historian



DESUS NICE
Author, comedian and late-night host



TESSA THOMPSON
Award-winning actor and producer



AVA DUVERNAY
Oscar-nominated filmmaker and distributor



DREAM HAMPTON
Emmy-nominated filmmaker and writer



THE KID MERO
Author, comedian and late-night host



LYNN NOTTAGE
Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright



JESMYN WARD
Two-time National Book Award-winning novelist



THE TELFAR SHOPPING BAG

In 2014, Liberian-American designer **Telfar Clemens** introduced his signature shopping bag: a boxy vegan-leather tote with top handles and shoulder straps that retails for under \$260. Many luxury labels bank on exclusivity to keep their products in demand, which drives up prices. So after Clemens' bags appeared at high markups on resale sites, he introduced the brand's "Bag Security" program: customers can preorder or "secure" bags in advance. This move epitomized the Telfar motto, "Not for you—for everyone," confirmed demand for the bag and predicted a more inclusive future of fashion.



Black Panther

Although **Ryan Coogler**'s 2018 *Black Panther* is technically part of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, it's more apt to consider it a universe of its own. The late Chadwick Boseman stars as T'Challa, the noble king of an isolationist nation called Wakanda, a land of great scientific, economic and artistic riches. T'Challa has another guise too: that of superhero Black Panther, a graceful and dazzling protector of justice.

This performance is astonishing, reverberating with grace, warmth and grandeur; it's painful to think that we've lost this superb actor for good. But it's a consolation to know that Boseman's spirit is forever embodied in Black Panther, and in the vision of Wakanda Coogler has so carefully crafted for us. This is a place—fictional but nevertheless symbolic—built by Black people, representing an arcadia of achievement and unity. The look of the film alone—particularly Ruth E. Carter's dynamic Afro-futuristic costumes and Hannah Beachler's luminous production design—marks it as a work of bold originality, a detailed landscape of an ideal republic come to life. Wakanda seems so real that it's hard to reckon with the fact that it doesn't actually exist. But even so, it gives us something solid: a dream to walk toward, one that feels more achievable with every step.

I May Destroy You

True to its title, *I May Destroy You* shot straight to the heart of 2020's pandemic-stricken cultural conversation with its story of Arabella, a young writer in London who suddenly realizes she was drugged and raped in the course of a night out. While the #MeToo movement flooded popular entertainment with relatively sensitive depictions of sexual assault, multitalented British auteur **Michaela Coel**, who created and starred in this semi-autobiographical HBO series, had no interest in retreading old ground. In 12 episodes that repurposed the fearless sense of humor that fueled her TV debut, *Chewing Gum*, Coel brought the full force of her incandescent intelligence to bear on an interrogation of how to exist as a sexual being—one who is also a Black, millennial woman artist—at this moment in time.

Where other onscreen treatments of sexual violence have reduced survivors to their victimhood and shied away from exposing character flaws or even a minor lapse in judgment for fear of any perception of victim blaming, *I May Destroy You* embraces its protagonist's complex humanity. Subplots involving Arabella's friends introduce an array of realistic scenarios in which the boundaries of consent are blurred and complicated. As Arabella examines the way she's constructed a narrative around her own life, the series raises thorny questions about identity, creativity, social media and how childhood experiences shape adult relationships. This is intersectional Black feminist art at its most ambitious.

When They See Us

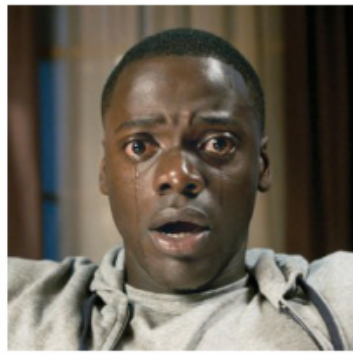
Ava DuVernay dissected the racist American criminal-justice system in her groundbreaking documentary *13th* before making *When They See Us*, a Netflix miniseries that dramatizes one of the most egregious examples of that system's failure. In 1989, a white woman jogging in Manhattan's Central Park was brutally beaten and raped. Despite a glaring lack of evidence, five Black and Latino boys—some of them just 14 years old—were convicted of the crime and spent years behind bars before the real assailant confessed in 2001. Thanks in large part to a brilliant young cast led by *Moonlight* breakout Jharrel Jerome, DuVernay's account did more than bear witness to their needless suffering. It illuminated how systemic racism destroys families and futures, and how criminal records and bigoted media narratives (this one championed by a certain Donald Trump) can ruin lives that have barely even begun. And it reminded us that, beyond the headlines, the figures tarred as the Central Park Five were really just children robbed of their innocence.





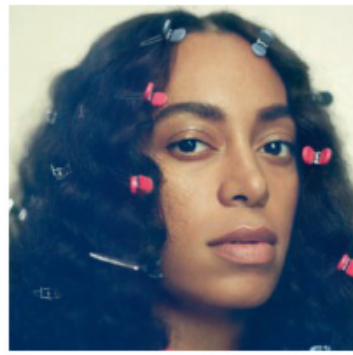
Heavy

In his 2018 memoir, writer **Kiese Laymon** uses his upbringing to weigh the cost of loving honestly even when believing in long-standing lies holds a deeply familiar comfort.



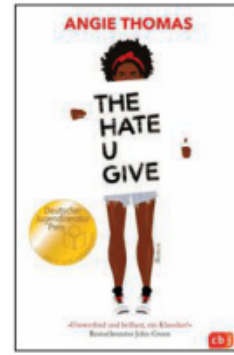
Get Out

Jordan Peele's directorial debut, which skewers white people's appropriation of Black culture, is one of the funniest and most original horror films of a generation.



A Seat at the Table

A serene affirmation of Black identity and art, **Solange**'s album bears witness to her personal growth—the pain, pleasure and joy of being a Black woman, on her own terms.



The Hate U Give

In **Angie Thomas**' debut YA novel inspired by the Black Lives Matter movement, a teen witnesses a police officer fatally shoot her childhood best friend, propelling her into activism.



O.J.: Made in America

Ezra Edelman's Oscar-winning 2016 documentary examines the athlete's rise and fall in the wider context of entrenched racism in Los Angeles and the country at large.



Sweat

Lynn Nottage won a Pulitzer for this 2015 play about struggling factory workers, both Black and white, in Reading, Pa.—a cry of anguish for a fractured America.



The Obama Portraits

Since their unveiling in 2018, **Kehinde Wiley**'s portrait of former President Barack Obama and **Amy Sutherland**'s portrait of former First Lady Michelle Obama have drawn more than 4 million people to make the pilgrimage to the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C.

The paintings are significant for what they represent: the first Black First Couple in the gallery, displayed beside portraits of slaveholders and rendered by

the first Black artists given the official commission.

But even without the weight of history, the portraits are remarkable. The President's intensity—his brow furrowed as he leans off the edge of his seat—is softened only slightly by Wiley's floral background, rife with symbolism: chrysanthemums for Chicago, jasmine for Hawaii, African lilies for Kenya.

The First Lady, in elegant repose and pictured in Sutherland's signature gray scale, exists in and out of time and tradition, her

dress influenced both by the quilts woven by the women of Gee's Bend—an artist collective made up of the descendants of slaves in Alabama—and by the crisp modernism of Piet Mondrian.

The portraits became a social media sensation, with one viral photo capturing a toddler gazing up in awe at Sutherland's depiction of the First Lady. Since the two works were unveiled, Sutherland and Wiley have shot to artistic stardom, and Black portraiture has only continued to explode in popularity.



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LEMONADE

A maelstrom of rumors swirled around **Beyoncé** in the first half of 2016: that she was antipolice; that she had stolen footage for her “Formation” video; that her marriage with Jay-Z was on the rocks. But on April 23 of that year, Beyoncé absorbed all of the chaos and became the hurricane. Her visual album, *Lemonade*, played off these headlines to become something so much more: a clever blend of autobiography and myth; an audiovisual experiment that conjured imagery out of both real American tragedy and the glorious Black imaginary; and a hero’s arc spanning infidelity, depression, bargaining and self-actualization. To add richness and texture, Beyoncé called on a phalanx of voices from across the decades and the diaspora, including Malcolm X and the young British poet Warsan Shire. And she placed Black women from the South like herself at the heart of the story, showing their perseverance in the face of marginalization. *Lemonade* ends with “Formation,” which she performed at the Super Bowl, drawing the ire of many who perceived it as anti-law enforcement. The show, song and video served as a rejoinder to other pop stars who might have been wary of wielding their platforms for political purposes. After “Formation” and *Lemonade*, it was no longer an option to just shut up and sing.



A SUBTLETY, OR THE MARVELOUS SUGAR BABY

At first glance, *A Subtlety* looked like anything but. Like all of **Kara Walker**’s art, the 35-ft.-tall sugar sphinx—installed in Brooklyn’s historic Domino Sugar Factory just before it was demolished to build luxury condos—confronted painful stereotypes by exaggerating them. With startlingly prominent sexual characteristics and a kerchief tied around its head that evoked the offensive mammy archetype, the nude figure memorialized the enslaved Black people who once harvested sugarcane, daring audiences to witness generations’ worth of humiliation and abuse. The project stirred controversy for offering crowds of white gentrifiers the spectacle of a giant, naked, hypersexualized Black woman’s body to violate with crude jokes and lewd selfies. But Walker was steps ahead of her critics. Predicting that the installation



would attract bad behavior, she surveilled visitors via social media and video. In doing so, she expanded a work that reckoned with America’s original sin to make a potent argument that the country’s shameful past is still with us.

Time

In her documentary *Time*, **Garrett Bradley** examines the long-term and deeply personal effects of the prison system by focusing on one family’s fight to be reunited with a loved one. The film centers on Sibil “Fox Rich” Richardson, and her 21-year campaign to free her husband Rob from a 60-year sentence in the Louisiana State Penitentiary, while raising their six sons by herself. The title becomes not only a reference to time served but also to time lost: the tender intimacies of everyday life that Rob was deprived of, moments Fox faithfully captured as grainy home videos. This warm archive of

family life juxtaposed against Bradley’s footage of Fox and her sons in the present day serves as a constant reminder about the cost of mass incarceration. And Bradley’s tight focus on Rob’s harsh sentence and its impact on his family challenges viewers to think about why they might be more concerned about the details of a crime than they are with the lived experience of the Richardson family. Bradley, who became the first Black woman to win Best Director for Documentary at Sundance for *Time*, asks us to consider the resilience and love of the Richardson family as much as we consider their loss.

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Pose

An elaborate fusion of dance, drag, fashion and nightlife, ball culture emerged out of the Black and Latinx LGBTQ community in New York City, where chosen families called houses compete and, more crucially, provide a support system for young queer men and trans women of color. But when the subculture burst into the mainstream in the early 1990s, it was filtered through the white gaze: Madonna's "Vogue," Jennie Livingston's film *Paris Is Burning*, high-end

fashion marketing.

Pose is different. Set in the '80s ball scene, the FX drama counts mega-producer Ryan Murphy among its creators, but it's a collaborative effort that foregrounds Black queer and trans storytellers such as co-creator **Steven Canals**; writer, director and executive producer **Janet Mock**; and real ballroom icons like choreographer Leiomy Maldonado. *Pose* has made a household name of Broadway stalwart Billy Porter. And it has cast trans

women actors including Indya Moore, Mj Rodriguez and Dominique Jackson in starring roles, as characters defined by more than their gender identity. While it tackles wrenching subjects, from appropriation and bigotry within the white gay community to sex work and the AIDS crisis, the show also revels in glamorous fantasies made reality on the dance floor. It has made ball culture pop culture again—this time, on its own terms.

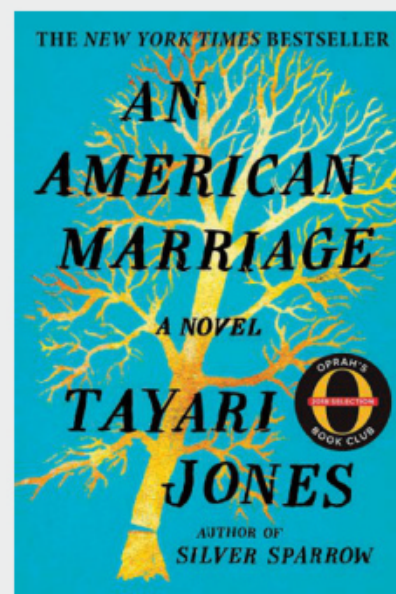


SAVAGE X FENTY SHOW, VOL. 1

Rihanna's status as a cultural icon only grew after she became a fashion and beauty mogul. Her entrepreneurial ventures—which range from makeup to luxury goods—are characterized by her larger-than-life persona, but they're made revolutionary by her commitment to inclusivity. The most outstanding example of this is Savage X Fenty Show, Vol. 1, a runway show for her lingerie brand that set a new standard.

Although the presentation boasted a bevy of high-profile appearances, it was the groundbreaking casting that stole the show. Rihanna's empowering embrace of models of all shapes, sizes, genders and races served as a stark contrast to the beauty standards presented by other brands. The event was also available to stream, making its body-positive celebration available on demand.

AN AMERICAN MARRIAGE



In her devastating dissection of a marriage, **Tayari Jones** reinvents the contemporary American love story. Her 2018 novel follows newlyweds Roy and Celestial, a young couple who are just beginning to build their life together when everything falls apart. After he's accused of a crime Celestial knows he didn't commit, Roy is sentenced to 12 years in prison. Five years later, his conviction is overturned and Roy's ready to return to his life, but Celestial is already on to her next chapter.

While Jones' narrative is rooted in the tragedy of Roy's wrongful

imprisonment, it's not centered on the American legal system. Jones, who studied race and criminal justice during a fellowship at Harvard, instead examines how these two people have to learn to navigate such turmoil. The result is a quiet and unnerving meditation on time as Jones reveals all that was lost in the years Roy and Celestial were forced to spend apart.

The novel, a commercial and critical success that made President Barack Obama's 2018 summer reading list, is an intimate, bruising account of a couple who fall out of love. Jones flips between their voices and includes letters they write to each other during and after Roy's incarceration, revealing their innermost thoughts and worries. These letters, captured in piercing and raw prose, reveal the fissures in Roy and Celestial's relationship. It's a breakdown illustrated in heartbreaking specificities.



Atlanta

There aren't many TV shows that you can switch on every week and encounter something wholly unexpected. **Donald Glover's** wildly imaginative, generally hilarious and often profound FX series *Atlanta* is the exception. Casting Glover as Earn, a down-on-his-luck dad who dropped out of Princeton and is scrambling to reinvent himself as the manager of his up-and-coming rapper cousin Alfred, a.k.a. Paper Boi (Brian Tyree Henry), the show exists at the intersection of surrealism and harsh reality. One standout episode is a mini horror flick drawn from the cautionary tales of Black pop stars like Michael Jackson, while another offers the thought experiment: What if Justin Bieber were Black? An especially haunting half hour flashes back to a tragedy from Earn's and Alfred's childhoods,

examining both the roles they've played in each other's lives and the outsize importance of status symbols within Black culture.

Along with giving free rein to one of the most innovative creators of our time, the show has brought richly deserved attention to co-stars Henry, LaKeith Stanfield and Zazie Beetz. It has analyzed cornerstones of African-American culture, from Juneteenth to BET. And like another high-profile collaboration between Glover and *Atlanta's* most frequent director, Hiro Murai—the provocative video for “This Is America” by Glover's musician alter ego Childish Gambino—it conveys a deep, multifaceted understanding of race, violence, the entertainment industry and a nation in which those subjects have always been intertwined.

To Pimp a Butterfly

In early 2014, the rapper **Kendrick Lamar** traveled to Africa after suffering a mental breakdown related to the stress and guilt brought on by his newfound fame. There, visiting Nelson Mandela's jail cell on Robben Island, he was hit with a startling clarity. He decided to throw out several albums' worth of material and instead get to work on a new concept album.

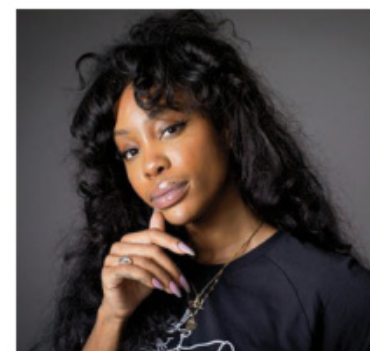
And it might take decades for the world to fully digest all the ways that album, *To Pimp a Butterfly*, has shaped culture. It opened up new cross-pollinations between hip-hop, jazz and R&B; it spurred interrogations about the corrosive nature of celebrity; and it elevated 21st century oral storytelling to dizzying new heights. *To Pimp a Butterfly* is an

epic in every sense of the word. It sprawls across 80 minutes, building a deeply personal narrative about grappling with survivor's guilt while racing through biblical allegory, musings about colorism and vivid imagery of Compton swap meets. Lamar stuffs so many words, cameos and musical tangents into the album, there's something new to be discovered upon the first, 10th and 100th listen.

But we won't have to wait to understand the impact of at least one

aspect of the album: the single “Alright.” Upon its release, the song was embraced as a rallying cry by Black Lives Matter protesters in marches across the country and around the world. Since then, “We gon' be alright” has been a defining phrase of the movement, signifying resistance to police brutality, solidarity with those fallen, or simply a self-motivating mantra to make it through the day.

This is the genius of Lamar: to communicate in ways both complex and simple, scathing and euphoric, folksy and avant-garde, memoiristic and universal. His ability to span and interrogate these dichotomies makes *To Pimp a Butterfly* one of the most vital American works ever created.



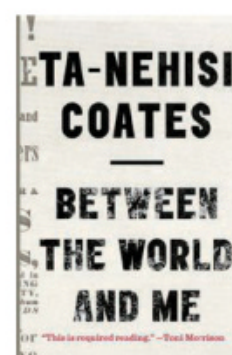
Ctrl

SZA's spellbinding lyrical honesty and stripped-back musical approach made the R&B singer's debut album a landmark record for an anxious young generation.



Insecure

Issa Rae created and stars in this witty show about best friends building their lives. Her characters read as true individuals, in a world that often fails to perceive them as such.



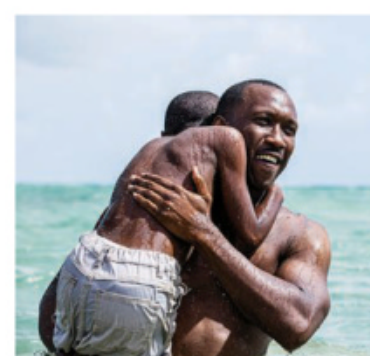
Between the World and Me

Declared “required reading” by Toni Morrison, **Ta-Nehisi Coates'** potent work of nonfiction, a 2016 Pulitzer Prize finalist, takes the form of a letter of warning to his son on being Black in America.



Citizen

Through poems, monologues and photographs, **Claudia Rankine** conveys the everyday weight of oppression and the psychological toll of the ways, large and small, anti-Black racism has pervaded all parts of society.



Moonlight

Barry Jenkins' Oscar-winning 2016 film is a coming-of-age drama, a tender love story and the gorgeous result of Jenkins' mission to celebrate the beauty of Black skin.



Slave Play

In his Broadway debut, playwright **Jeremy O. Harris** reckons with the legacy of slavery and its lingering effects on sex and power. With 12 Tony nods, it's the most-nominated play in history.

—JUDY BERMAN, ANDREW R. CHOW, ANNABEL GUTTERMAN, CADY LANG and STEPHANIE ZACHAREK



THE COST OF OPPORTUNITY

AS CREATIVE INDUSTRIES SEEK OUT MORE AND MORE BLACK STORIES, ARTISTS FACE A COMPLICATED CHOICE

BY CHAD SANDERS

WHEN I WROTE MY FIRST movie script 10 years ago with a close friend, he and I argued about whether or not the main characters should be Black. I believed then that we wouldn't be able to sell a movie with Black protagonists.

Things are different now. In the past few years, while publishers, film studios, streamers and networks have shown a surge of interest in Black stories, I've sold a book, *Black Magic: What Black Leaders Learned From Tragedy and Triumph*; a movie, *One and Done*, a story about a Black high school basketball phenom who commits a crime and resuscitates his dream at a historically Black university; and a television series, *How to Survive Inglewood*, about a suburban Black teenager who comes

of age and comes to terms with his people after his parents' ugly divorce.

See a pattern? I don't go out pitching only Black projects. But it's clear that today, the word *Black* is trendy in media marketing and boardrooms. It's a buzzword. Blackness has become its own niche vertical for highbrow liberals. And within that vertical, there's a window of opportunity for Black people to tell and sell our stories. But seizing it comes at a cost.

In my work as a writer, the cost is wedging my projects featuring Black protagonists through development processes run by white executives. To make it to greenlight, I'm asked to incorporate notes that dilute the tone and shorthand I use to reflect and resonate with Black





A CHOICE THAT FEELS LIKE FALLING

← **GIONCARLO VALENTINE**

PHOTOGRAPHER

NOW THAT WHITE EDITORS, producers and agencies have discovered that Black people exist and that they are impossibly talented and brilliant, we are witnessing a scramble to inauthentically correct racist histories. Often, this scramble feels like progress to those outside of marginalized communities. Inside, however, we are just waiting for this fad to come to an end and for the work to dry up, as has been the case across nearly all mediums when it comes to Black

talent. We are treated as interchangeable, as if our work is not special. There can be no real revolution, no substantial change inside of institutions pretending that they want it, until white people in power relinquish it. This photograph feels like a dialogue around a double consciousness, a mediation around the difficulty of choice between two outcomes. Do you accept this deluge of attention and use it for what it's worth, or do you turn down these opportunities that feel disingenuous? Sometimes, this choice feels like falling.

people. The execs, of course, never tell me straight up to make my project more appealing to white folks. Instead they ask, for example, if I can “incorporate more levity to let in a broader audience.” The most common note I receive to whitewash my art is to “make the main character more likable.” In other words: reduce her confidence, edge and defiance, and inflate her gushy kindness and vulnerability. It’s a way of softening Black characters to fit preapproved roles, in a world where white characters can be real, cunning and cutthroat. Tony Soprano, Cersei Lannister and Walter White were kind and vulnerable at times. But their resilience and arrogance made them dynamic and even relatable. Why shouldn’t the same apply for my characters?

HOW DID WE GET HERE, to this moment of conflicted opportunity for Black creators? There’s no one answer—it’s a blend of factors. One reality is that, in sports and music, Black athletes and artists have made boatloads of money for white executives for decades. Why wouldn’t anyone in the entertainment industry put their chips on Black? Another is the leverage Black creators have been able to build, thanks to technologies like smartphones and platforms like YouTube, Vimeo, TikTok, Twitter and Instagram. Those tools have made content creation and distribution more accessible for Black writers and filmmakers so they can prove their work comes with a built-in audience before going to corporations for buy-in. A third reason, though cynical, could be the high volume of clicks and views generated by traumatizing videos of our brutalization by police and neighbors. Hollywood has been profiting on stories of Black suffering since the entertainment industry began. But these viral videos might, subconsciously or overtly, be leading media executives to lean toward producing more of that content. And yet another factor, one that feels particularly current, is those same executives feeling the pressure of the moment to perform inclusion. Or maybe they just genuinely want to support our work. Maybe.

Regardless of why, there is a feeding frenzy now for Black creatives, and we need to move fast. Because moments pass. A few weeks ago, a family friend in her 60s called me. She’s seen this cycle before. She called to tell me she was doing her best to get her employer to buy my book in bulk while the company was working to show efforts to educate its employees on Black experiences. As our phone call concluded, she warned, “Hurry up and send me the preorder link, young Chad. You know this window won’t be open for long.” I believe her.

It feels like every 10 to 15 years, the floodgates of Black opportunity open. We’re trendy once per decade like baggy pants, tie-dye and the actual color



black. Michael Jordan, Whitney Houston, Mariah Carey and Eddie Murphy defined international pop culture in the early '90s while the L.A. riots simmered. In 2008, Barack Obama was elected as the first African-American President of the United States two years before Kanye West's *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy* announced hip-hop's transition from an important Black musical genre to the defining sound of the early 21st century.

Each of these moments seemed primed to solidify opportunities for Black creators and permanently elevate conversations about equality in our country. Instead we got Donald Trump as our President. The current moment of opportunity for



WE ARE ALL WE HAVE

← **ALEXIS HUNLEY**
PHOTOGRAPHER

HOW AM I SUPPOSED TO RECONCILE navigating the dehumanization of my racial identity “trending” with the sobering reality that trends end? Am I only deserving of care, of opportunities, when my pain can be easily commodified? Some days, I endure the tokenization and move confidently. Other days, I give myself permission to choose peace and decline. Much of my documentary work acts as an unconscious mirror into my emotional state. Throughout 2020, photography allowed me to process my personal trauma as well as the collective trauma so many Black people experienced. This image represents the self-awareness that when the public outcry softens to a whisper, we will have each other to call on; when the police terrorize us, when employers tokenize us, when doctors ignore our pain, when elected officials fail us time and again: we are all we have.

Black artists could be seen as a product of Trump’s presidency, which boldly highlighted the centuries of crimes against Black people in the U.S. that continue today. But now Joe Biden is President, and Kamala Harris, a Black woman, is Vice President. And the Wicked Witch is gone. Does that mean we’ve achieved racial equality?

Hell the f-ck no. The societal failures that led to Trump’s election in the first place remain. But the symbolic healing of Biden’s victory may reduce the appetite for Black voices and ideas. Every time I received a HAPPY INAUGURATION DAY text on Jan. 20, I wondered, Will those book deals and greenlights all soon fade away?

Maybe. So what does that mean for me, now, as a creator? It means I have an urgent choice. I can license my experiences and culture while the opportunity exists. Or I can pass. If I choose the former, I have to know that corporate interest in my stories will fade when attention diverts, and that the experience of selling off pieces of my stories will hurt. It's uncomfortable and humiliating to sit in rooms full of white people and explain our pain over and over again. It's demeaning to take notes on my screenplays and stories from white executives at studios and networks who encourage me to change my voice for "mainstream" audiences. If I take the money, those are the taxes I pay.

BUT THE CHOICE IS MINE. I can take the money, or leave it. I can think of these opportunities as some form of reparations, because I know no actual reparations will come, or I can reserve myself and leave that money on the table. That is a choice for each Black creator—and each Black person—to make right now.

It's the choice we face when companies invite us to speak to rooms full of white employees about our experiences as Black people in corporate America. It's the choice of affirmative action. It's the choice of accepting or declining a promotion or new job that feels like a representation grab, and risking being demeaned and devalued as such. Every Black employee is faced with that choice when given the mic in a meeting to speak as the voice of "diversity." Each person must make that choice with the strength of their own stomach and their own bills in mind.

But I'm going to seize the moment. After all, I'm a subject-matter expert. I've been Black for 300,000 hours. (Which means I've reached my 10,000 hours of master training 30 times over, thank you very much, Malcolm Gladwell.) I'm a creator and an entrepreneur, and money is leverage. I choose to seize that leverage to do what I can to keep this window open for myself and others when the day comes that Blackness is no longer trending. For me that means creating more, partnering with Black producers, hiring Black production crews and investing in fellow Black artists. It means telling my story—the story of a Black creative and entrepreneur—right now, while it's happening, so others like me can stand beside me to hold this window open.

But make your own choices. That's freedom.

Sanders is a screenwriter and author

A DISAPPEARING ACT

LYNSEY WEATHERSPOON

PHOTOGRAPHER

THE SUDDEN URGENCY FOR BLACKNESS within the arts has propelled many of us to believe that it's a one-time activity that will eventually fade. There's a feeling that we're being asked to churn out much more work in order to remain relevant. Anything that pertains to the Black experience is now en vogue, and that becomes inherently tiring. S. Darius Parker, with whom I collaborated for this image, has seen this increased desire for his work. He and I share the concern that our work will eventually disappear, which is why we made this portrait in an open and desolate space. As we make more and more work, will it remain

in demand? Will Black creatives still receive work to compensate for the times we were overlooked? The last few years, it has felt as if there wasn't much space for Black women, and especially Black queer women, to have a voice in the commercial and editorial field. I've seen that small amount swell significantly since the racial reckoning of 2020. I've found a family in the field of photography. We know that we can communicate our triumphs and angst in a steadily growing field. Talking to my partner, who is also a creative, keeps me grounded and provides another window into what it means to be a Black creative during the time of the current uprising.

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CHINA WATCH

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Refuge for bookworms and the broken-hearted

A migrant worker's 12-year relationship with a local institution underscores the social importance of libraries

BY YANG YANG

It was dusk in late November in subtropical Guangdong province. Cool winds had dispersed the perennial humidity.

In the well-lit sitting room of a bungalow in an alley in Nancheng town of Dongguan, Wu Guichun, 54, was eating a 15-yuan (\$2.3) takeaway dinner on a desk. It consisted of steamed rice, vegetables and three kinds of stir-fried meats as well as a pickled duck egg.

The place belonged to a shoe factory owner whom Wu had known for 17 years since he arrived. Normal rent was 500 yuan a month, but Wu lived here temporarily free of charge.

The only furniture in the sitting room was a desk and a stool. Under the desk were a pair of dark navy blue plastic slippers and a pair of canvas shoes of the same color, all the shoes he owned besides the black leather ones on his feet, he said. For years, Wu had been a minimalist with his belongings, given that he was always having to move, he said.

The most expensive clothes he had ever bought was a 600-yuan suit he wore when going on a reading show on China Central Television in October.

Standing against the right side of the desk was a jar of liquor, inside which swollen scarlet wolf berries were soaking. "All through these years, my only partner has been this drink," he said.

In June, Wu, one of 6 million



TOP: The Dongguan Library started offering services 24 hours a day in 2005, and also organizing free lectures and classes that help migrant workers pick up professional skills, courses that are now also available online.

ABOVE: Wu Guichun stands in front of Dongguan Library.

PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

migrant workers in Dongguan, became an instant celebrity nationwide after working there for 17 years because of comments he had made about the

city's main library, comments that millions found both touching and inspirational after they made their way onto the internet.

Wu, of Xiaogan, Hubei province, said he first came to Dongguan to look for opportunities in 2003 after his wife left him.

Dongguan, which many know as "the Factory of the World", was attracting young people from all over the country, many working in the city when labor-intensive light industries held sway.

Wu, 37 at the time, was deemed too old for these manufacturing behemoths and had to look for opportunities in small shoe factories, where his job was to put glue on shoe parts.

In those days Wu's monthly salary was 3,000 yuan, which grew to more than 10,000 yuan in busy periods. In recent years he has been happy to receive 5,000 yuan a month.

At first he bought cheap books, but in 2008 started going to Dongguan Library.

The conditions were pleasant, there was access to water, you could read anything you liked and, best of all, it was free.

Over the past 20 years, as

Dongguan's importance as a manufacturing center has grown, its GDP has risen 20-fold to nearly 950 billion yuan in 2019. As the economy has grown the city has tried to improve people's cultural lives.

In 2002 a library covering 45,000 square meters (484,400 sq. ft.) was built, the largest of its kind for a prefecture-level city in China.

Two years later the city set about building an extensive library network, opening branches around the city. A bus library delivers books to different towns every day so that workers in factories can borrow or return books without traveling long distances.

In 2005 Dongguan Library started offering services 24 hours a day, believed to be a first in China.

It also began organizing free lectures and classes that help migrant workers pick up professional skills such as lathing and milling, courses that are now also available online.

Six years after this great literary adventure began, the American Library Association bestowed on Dongguan Library

the International Innovation Award for its services, the first time it was given outside the United States.

Wu, who ended his formal education as a primary school student in grade three, was one of the library's hundreds of thousands of registered members at the time of the international accolade.

At the start he was barely literate, having to look up characters in a dictionary to understand newspapers, fiction and history books, he said. He eventually finished reading ancient classics such as *A Dream of Red Mansions* and *Record of States in the Eastern Zhou Dynasty*, two of his favorites books.

Gradually, his vocabulary grew, and after 12 years he is a quick reader, devouring at least six books a month.

In most of his years in Dongguan, adhering to his thrifty ways, Wu, unlike hundreds of millions of other Chinese, did not return to his hometown for Spring Festival.

Asked if he was lonely, Wu blushed after downing half a cup of his curative liquor.

"My son's all I've got. I earn money for him or I die. Forget about loneliness; it's no big deal. Of course there's *meifeng jiajie beisiqin* (a poetic line referring to missing one's family, especially during festivals). But no matter how hard life is, I just need to get on with it so I can save money for my son."

Then, as his eyes watered up, Wu added: "After all, books teach me that loneliness is my fate."

In January last year Wu unusually went back home for the Spring Festival. He did not return until June because of the COVID-19 lockdown. On June

24, aware that he might never return to Dongguan, went to the library to return his 12-year-old library card and get his 100 yuan security deposit back.

When Wu went to the reception desk his long-relationship with the library, its books and its staff loomed large in his mind. Taking out the card and rubbing it against his shirt, he thought again about what he was about to do. One hour passed before he finally made his decision.

A librarian, Wang Yanjun, sensing his hesitancy as she took care of the paper work, took out the library's comments book and asked Wu to leave a comment.

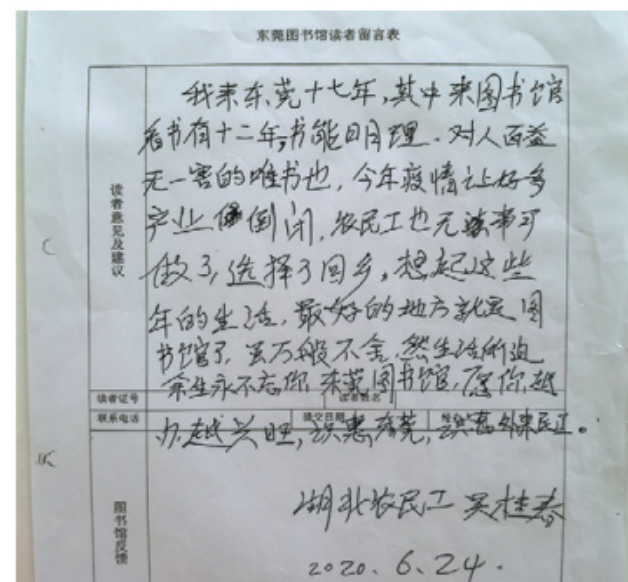
"I've worked in Dongguan for 17 years, and been reading at this library for 12 years," he wrote. "Books enlighten people. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, a lot of factories have closed, migrant workers cannot find jobs, and we choose to go back to our hometowns. Thinking about all my years in Dongguan, the best place for me has been the library. As much I want to stay, I cannot, but I will never forget you, Dongguan Library."

Another librarian took a photo of the comment and posted it online, and before long it was doing the rounds of the internet.

"Before long many more people were using the library and applying for membership," Wang said.

In October he returned to his hometown and found that although his granddaughters wanted to read books, there was no book available. So he cashed in a 6,000 yuan book coupon he had received and mailed all the books.

"My goal is to build a small library for my hometown," he said.



LEFT: The comments Wu Guichun left at Dongguan Library that moved millions of people online. **RIGHT:** People read in Dongguan Library.



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CHANGING COUNTRY

Brothers Osborne
front man
T.J. Osborne
hopes to see
Nashville become
more inclusive



INSIDE

THE PLEASURES OF
A MORE GLOBAL STREAM

IN FIREFLY LANE,
FRIENDSHIP REIGNS

A STEWING STORM
IN MALCOLM & MARIE

PHOTOGRAPH BY KRISTINE POTTER FOR TIME

Time Off is reported by Mariah Espada and Simmone Shah

MUSIC

A country star charts his own course

By Sam Lansky

PEOPLE KEEP ASKING T.J. OSBORNE HOW HE'S feeling, which makes sense, given the thing he's about to do, but it's making him uneasy, hearing that question over and over again from so many people—his friends, family and even me. Now, at a photo shoot in Nashville, he insists that he's feeling good. "I'm ready to put this behind me," he says, slipping on a jacket.

T.J. is tall and friendly, with a twangy, sonorous voice that often crests into deep, warm laughter. He's the lead vocalist of Brothers Osborne, the duo he formed in 2012 with his brother John, a guitarist; together they make soulful country-rock that sounds just as good on the radio as it would filling an arena. Since signing to EMI Records Nashville, they've released seven singles and three studio albums, including their swoony, rollicking platinum hit "Stay a Little Longer," which has crossed over to mainstream radio. (Have you ever fallen in love in late summer, gazing out at an orange-and-purple sunset from the bed of a pickup truck? Well, me neither, but this song will make you feel like you have!) The duo has won four CMA Awards, been nominated for seven Grammys, and collaborated with country contemporaries such as Dierks Bentley and Maren Morris.

What may come as a surprise to the band's fans is the news that T.J., 36, is gay. This isn't a recent revelation for him; he's known since he was a kid, and he's been out to family and friends in his tight-knit Nashville community for years. In some respects, he says, coming out publicly is no big deal. "I find myself being guarded for not wanting to talk about something that I personally don't have a problem with," he says later. "That feels so strange."

But country music has long been one of the last bastions of mainstream conservatism in America; liberal Hollywood might be notorious for pushing a progressive agenda, but country continues to provide a safe space for "family values." Never mind that many country artists, like Nashville as a city, lean blue: they're savvy enough to know that their primary market, like the state of Tennessee itself, is red. The country-music business generates \$5.5 billion to Nashville's economy, according to RIAA, and there's a history of artists getting exiled for refusing to toe the line: the tale of the Chicks, who were shunned by the industry after speaking out against the Iraq War, had a chilling effect on superstars like Taylor Swift, who cited the band's ouster as a reason she remained publicly apolitical for so long.

With this news, T.J. becomes the first openly gay artist signed to a major country label—a historic moment for the genre. Openly queer artists, from Grammy-winning singer-songwriter Brandi Carlile to viral hitmaker Lil Nas X, have found success by integrating country influences, and less widely known queer country singers like Chely Wright and Billy Gilman have developed fan followings. But T.J. may



T.J., right, with his brother John, left, performing during a 2019 NFL game in Detroit

be the first to come out with his feet so firmly planted in both the sound and machinery of mainstream country.

What happens next remains to be seen. "I don't think I'm going to get run off the stage in Chicago," he says. "But in a rural town playing a county fair? I'm curious how this will go." The professional risks he's taking in coming out feel worth it; country music is about storytelling, and that means T.J.'s identity is inextricable from his music. Maybe, he says, country isn't the most popular genre among gay people. "But is that just because they've never had the opportunity to relate to it?"

GROWING UP IN DEALE, MD., a blue collar town on the Chesapeake Bay, T.J. and his siblings were always musical,



performing alongside their dad's blues band in local shows. But being closeted was painful. "It was so lonely and isolating," T.J. says. A first heartbreak in his early 20s crushed him all the more because he felt like he couldn't tell anyone.

After moving to Nashville, T.J. and John signed a publishing deal and, eventually, a record deal. It was around that time, when he was in his mid-20s, that T.J. first told his brother that he is gay. "He was very candid, and I was emotional, because my brother was finally able to be honest with me about who he was," John remembers.

As Brothers Osborne began to grow more popular, they made gestures toward inclusion, starting with the video for "Stay a Little Longer," which features gay and interracial couples. For

the most part, the response was overwhelmingly positive. "And then," T.J. says, "there were people who were like, 'Faggot lovers!'"

Coming to grips with his own need for greater honesty was an unexpected by-product of a year in lockdown. "I spent so much time this year around my friends and family, being myself," T.J. says. It made him realize the perfect moment to come out would never arrive; he had to create it for himself. "I want to get to the height of my career being completely who I am," he says.

As they continue making the same sort of music they've always made, there's also a chance it will widen the field for new fans. "Others will now feel invited to the country-music party for the first time," says T.J.'s close friend Kacey Musgraves, the singer-songwriter. "Country music deserves a future even more honest than its past."

WHEN ELLEN DEGENERES came out on the cover of this magazine in 1997, it was shocking to many. Now, the tides have turned toward quieter declarations of identity, particularly as young people embrace more fluid expressions of sexuality and gender.

In pop, it's become more advantageous to be perceived as a provocateur. That isn't the case in country, which remains a risk-averse business that runs on the established machinery of radio and touring, and trades on more traditional tropes in its lyrics and soundscapes. It's starting to change: Black artists are more visible in country than they were a decade ago, and much of country radio now sounds like pop and hip-hop, just with a little twang. But the homogeneity of the artists in the genre as a whole is still striking—as if country's gatekeepers are afraid that keeping pace with the broader culture would alienate the fraction of its consumers who maintain bigoted worldviews.

Will conservative radio programmers and rural concertgoers be as eager to play and tailgate a gay artist, even one they already know? Both brothers

want to believe the answer is yes. T.J.'s reasons for doing this now, he says, have nothing to do with wanting to be loved or hated. "I just want to move on," he says again, and it's here that I crack.

Because what I want to tell T.J. is that there is nothing to move on from, because that's not how this works. I want to tell him that I believe his gayness is not something to be tolerated or accepted but something to be celebrated, that he spent all those years of life alone and confused so he could transcend that pain and use his voice here. And this moment of genuine bravery he's about to have, of owning who you are in a place where some people would prefer you don't exist—isn't that something to embrace, instead of something to endure?

"Don't get me wrong," T.J. says. "When I say I want to put it behind me, I want to put the coming-out behind me. Because ultimately it's a very small detail about me."

But what if it's not a small detail? I ask. What if it's the most important thing about you?

T.J. nods. "There are times when I think I've marginalized this part of me so that I feel better about it," he says. "And I realize that it is a big part of who I am: the way I

think, the way I act, the way I perform. God, think of all the times that we talk about love, and write about love. It's the biggest thing we ever get to feel." He sighs. "You know, 'Stand for something, or you'll fall for anything'?" he says. "That sounds like something someone in country would say. But if you stand for something and it's not what they stand for, then they hate it."

It's almost dark by the time we get back to his house, north of Nashville on the banks of the Cumberland River, and it's a sticky evening, so warm it almost feels like summer. Along the river through the darkness, I can see where herons have built their nests in the tree-tops. Standing outside, I ask T.J., for the 10th time that day, how he's feeling.

He hugs his arms around himself. "Good, man," he says. "I'm feeling good." I believe him. □

'I don't think I'm going to get run off the stage in Chicago. But in a rural town playing a county fair? I'm curious how this will go.'

T.J. OSBORNE



TELEVISION

A whole world worth watching

By Judy Berman

FORGET *THE UNDOING*. TV'S BEST MARITAL THRILLER IN years is *Losing Alice*, a psychologically rich drama about a filmmaker, her actor husband and the young writer who wants them to bring her first screenplay to life. It premiered on Apple TV+ in January, to little fanfare, and I've been talking it up ever since.

It's a shame the show hasn't gotten more buzz, but the fact that Americans have a chance to see it at all is worth celebrating. In Hebrew with English subtitles, *Alice* comes to us from Israel—it's the kind of title that once struggled to find a home in the States. While generations of Americans have had access to British period dramas on PBS, Canadian teen soaps on cable and other Anglophone imports, traditional TV shied away from subtitled fare. But the rise of streaming in the early 2010s remade the television landscape. Amid plenty of troubling consequences for the industry, the vast catalog of foreign-language shows now available in the U.S. via streaming platforms might be the best side effect of the new paradigm.

The reasons for this influx are many. While over-the-air broadcasters and cable companies served geographically or linguistically distinct audiences, streaming was built to scale. Netflix, whose first exclusive offering was bilingual Norwegian import *Lilyhammer*, is currently available in more than 190 countries. In addition to licensing shows and movies in dozens of languages, it now produces them; last year, the service launched its first African original, the multilingual *Queen Sono*. Multinational conglomerates like AT&T subsidiary HBO Max have stocked their freshly launched streaming



The troubled psyche of a filmmaker (Ayelet Zurer) fills the frame in thriller Losing Alice

services with programming from international sister stations. Peacock has shows from corporate parent Comcast's Spanish-language property Telemundo.

SO FAR, the internationalization of TV has been a resounding success. Netflix announced in January that *Lupin*—a propulsive crime drama that reimagines the classic French “gentleman thief” as a Senegalese immigrant plotting to avenge his late father—was on track to reach more viewers than *Bridgerton* or *The Queen's Gambit*. And as a vital part of the long-tail economy that is Peak TV, shows from abroad have won over Americans who've dropped cable and now stuff their streaming queues with romantic Korean dramas or chilly Nordic thrillers or kinetic Japanese anime.

What has made Americans—who are notorious for failing to learn second languages and for avoiding subtitled films—embrace this stuff? For one thing, with megacorps like Disney pouring funds into TV-development strategies driven by existing franchises, foreign-language television is starting to feel like a refuge from brainless big-budget Hollywood spectacles. (It probably also has to do with the English dubbing that Netflix, among others, makes default.)

Yet even dubbed versions have something unique to offer. Scripted series aren't documentaries, of course. But they do reflect cultural norms; they capture how people halfway around the world talk about politics, work or love. German period dramas like Netflix's *Babylon Berlin* and Cold War thriller *Deutschland 83*, streaming on Hulu, suggest how that country has processed a dark 20th century. *Gomorrah*, a gritty gangster saga on HBO Max, explores the Italian criminal-justice system.

On top of the many benefits good art bestows on its beholders, stories from faraway lands illuminate the blind spots in our perspectives. In a country where provincialism too often metastasizes into nationalism, at a time when international travel is virtually impossible, the best thing our screens can do is open us up to the world beyond them. □

Stories from faraway lands illuminate the blind spots in our perspectives



Heigl, left, and Chalke go '80s

TELEVISION

The passionate friends

Two 14-year-old neighbors become fast friends. Tully is wild, driven, gorgeous, magnetic, but fundamentally sad, with a burned-out hippie mom who sleeps all day. Awkward, nerdy Kate has a loving family and an innocent sweetness that follows her well into adulthood. *Firefly Lane*, adapted from Kristin Hannah's best-selling 2008 novel, traces their relationship from junior high in the 1970s to middle age, when Tully (played as an adult by Katherine Heigl) is a famous, lonely talk-show host and Kate (Sarah Chalke) tries to restart her journalism career as her marriage falls apart.

Like the book, this drama is unabashedly sentimental—think *This Is Us* but for friendship, complete with frequent tears and story lines set in decades past. If you're looking for objects of ridicule, you'll easily find them: bad wigs, mawkish needle drops, obvious plot twists. Yet despite its limitations, the show pairs nicely with a glass of wine; lead performances that avoid histrionics help, as does the genuine warmth of the material. *Firefly* may not be a sharp, dazzling Tully, but sometimes a tender, unpretentious Kate makes better company anyway. —J.B.

FIREFLY LANE arrives on Netflix on Feb. 3

MOVIES

Who's afraid of *Malcolm & Marie*?

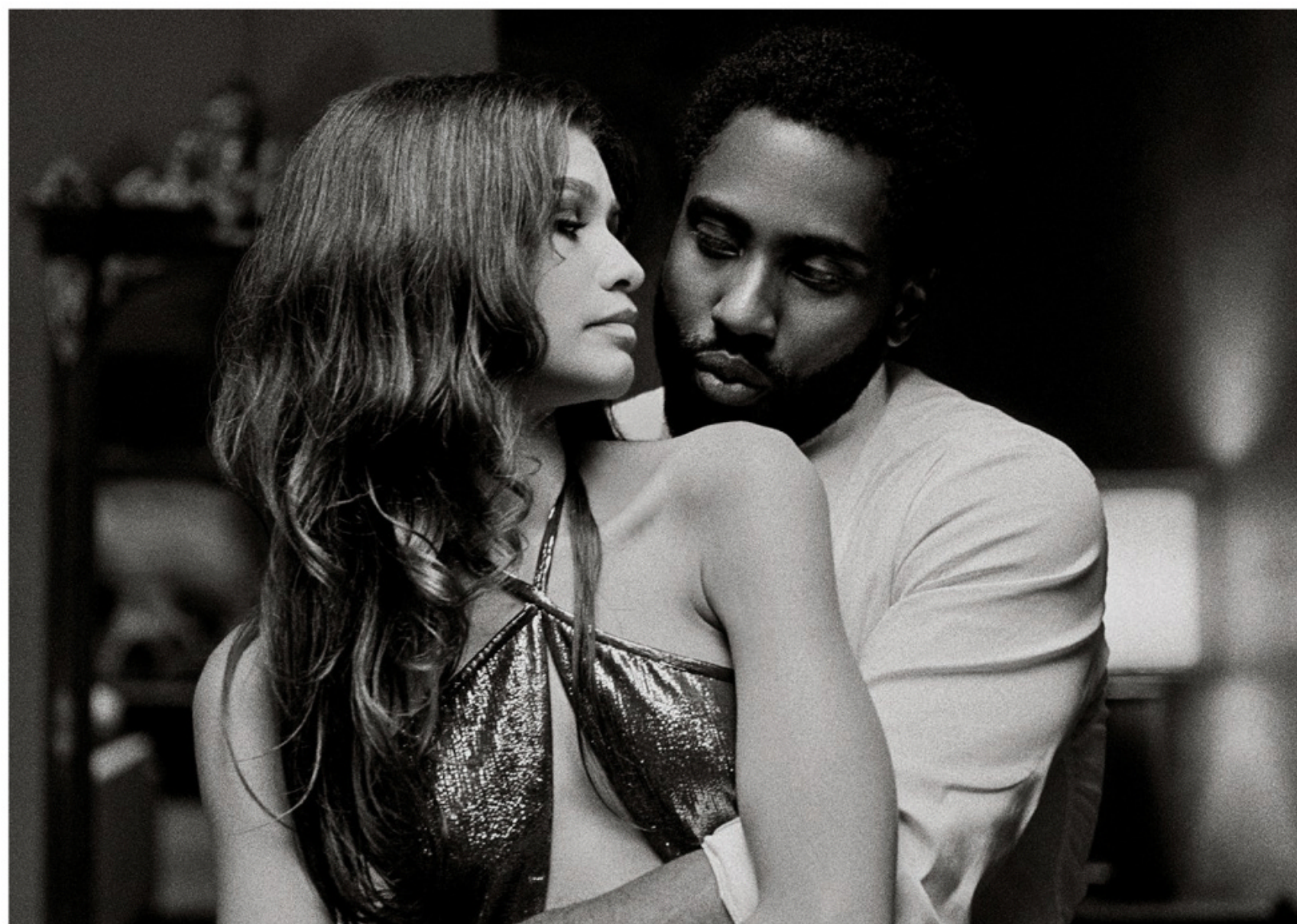
MALCOLM & MARIE LOOKS FANTASTIC, a black-and-white retro-mod reverie as cushiony as an Eames lounge chair. It features terrific actors—Zendaya and John David Washington—who also happen to be movie-star gorgeous. And one scene, set against perhaps the most romantic piece of music ever performed, the Duke Ellington and John Coltrane version of Ellington's "In a Sentimental Mood," radiates a sensual elegance that's rare in movies today. How could a picture with so much going for it go so terribly wrong?

Written and directed by Sam Levinson (creator of HBO's *Euphoria*), *Malcolm & Marie* takes place over a few nighttime hours as an arrogant but perhaps talented filmmaker, Malcolm (Washington), fields the unruly anger of his girlfriend Marie (Zendaya) as he waits for the reviews to roll in following the premiere of his latest chef d'oeuvre. The minute the two set foot in their hip, minimalist (rented) Malibu house, you know there's trouble in paradise. Malcolm, still high on the evening's festivities, prattles on about his prodigious talent and complains about white critics who twist themselves in knots to see racial politics in every movie he makes. Meanwhile, Marie—still draped in the

slinky column of a dress she wore to the premiere—drifts to the stove like an exquisite zombie and starts rustling up some late-night mac 'n' cheese. Before she opens her mouth, you see the fury behind her eyes. She's about to let Malcolm have it, and it won't be pretty.

The first third of *Malcolm & Marie* has some wit and verve, but that bliss is short-lived. The heart of Marie's complaint is that Malcolm has stolen her story for his movie—she's a recovering drug addict who has struggled with mental-health issues. Levinson has ripped quite a few rock 'em—sock 'em pages from John Cassavetes as well as *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, but the couple's fighting is circular in a way that courts only boredom. Zendaya is saddled with the tedious role of the brainy beauty who's also "difficult"—yet men can't resist her! Somehow, though, Zendaya still dazzles. As she surveys Malcolm through her half-lowered mermaid lids, her storm-cloud mood seems perfectly reasonable. She speaks a subterranean truth that the movie just can't reach with its words. —STEPHANIE ZACHAREK

MALCOLM & MARIE streams on Netflix starting Feb. 5



Zendaya and Washington: The course of true love never did run smooth

9 Questions

Laurent Duvernay-Tardif The Kansas City Chiefs lineman on missing the Super Bowl to fight COVID-19, feelings of regret and next season

You're a medical-school graduate who opted out of the NFL season to fight COVID-19 on the front

lines, doing everything from changing patients to administering IVs at a long-term-care facility near Montreal.

What was today's shift like? We're going through a third outbreak. It's hard, because people that work here, they've been working full-time, no vacations, overtime, in order to care for their patients. And don't get any breaks. I feel like we're getting at that point where it's like, O.K., can we see the light at the end of the tunnel? There's the vaccine and a lot of hope. But at the same time, we know it's probably going to get worse before it gets better.

Do you wish at all that you were going to Tampa for the Super Bowl? Of course I want to be down there. But at the same time, when I made the decision to opt out, one of the questions I asked myself was, If the Chiefs go to the Super Bowl and win it, am I going to be at peace with my decision? And I still feel like the answer is yes.

Why do you have no regrets? No regrets is different than being at peace. We saw it with the right-to-vote movement and racial equality, so many athletes took the microphone and promoted a cause they believe in. My cause is health, is medicine. So I felt it made sense to make that decision, in order to look back at 2020—five, 10 years from now—and be proud of myself. I've said no to money and the NFL season in order to care for patients.

Should the NFL have played this season? Yes. Regarding the impact of sport when it comes to community transmission, I don't know and I'm sure a lot of people still don't know either. My decision was personal. I'm going to be evolving in the medical community the rest of my life.

**“I HAD TO
BE CAUTIOUS
AND FOLLOW
MY GREATER
CONVICTION”**



I had to be cautious and follow my greater conviction.

You've said you plan to return to the NFL next season. Why? I feel like something was taken a little bit away from me. I still have some football left in me. I can be a doctor for the next 40 years. I still have the passion, and that's why I'm working out on my patio at -15°[C] .

What have you learned about COVID-19 that those of us not on the front lines can't really see? You see firsthand how contagious it is. People work so hard, washing their hands and changing masks 20 times a day. But one little slip, and boom, it's over.

About a year ago, you were sipping beer from the Super Bowl trophy at the Chiefs' very socially undistant victory parade. Do you think COVID has traumatized us so much that we won't see these sorts of gatherings anytime soon, if ever? When I focus too much on what's going to be the new normal, I get anxious. I don't know the answer. And that's freaking me out a little bit.

Where do you see yourself in 10 years? I'm either going to be an emergency physician doing a little bit of sports medicine or a public-health figure working for I don't know what exactly. But for sure not politics.

You've talked about the need to find positives in the frontline experience in order to cope. What have you been able to take away? It's subtle. You're able to pick up your phone and FaceTime your patient's daughter. Then you realize your patient is talking to their daughter for the first time in three months. Everybody is crying because they're so happy to see each other. That gives you hope. At the end of the day, when you see those reactions, those emotions, it gives you a purpose.

—SEAN GREGORY



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