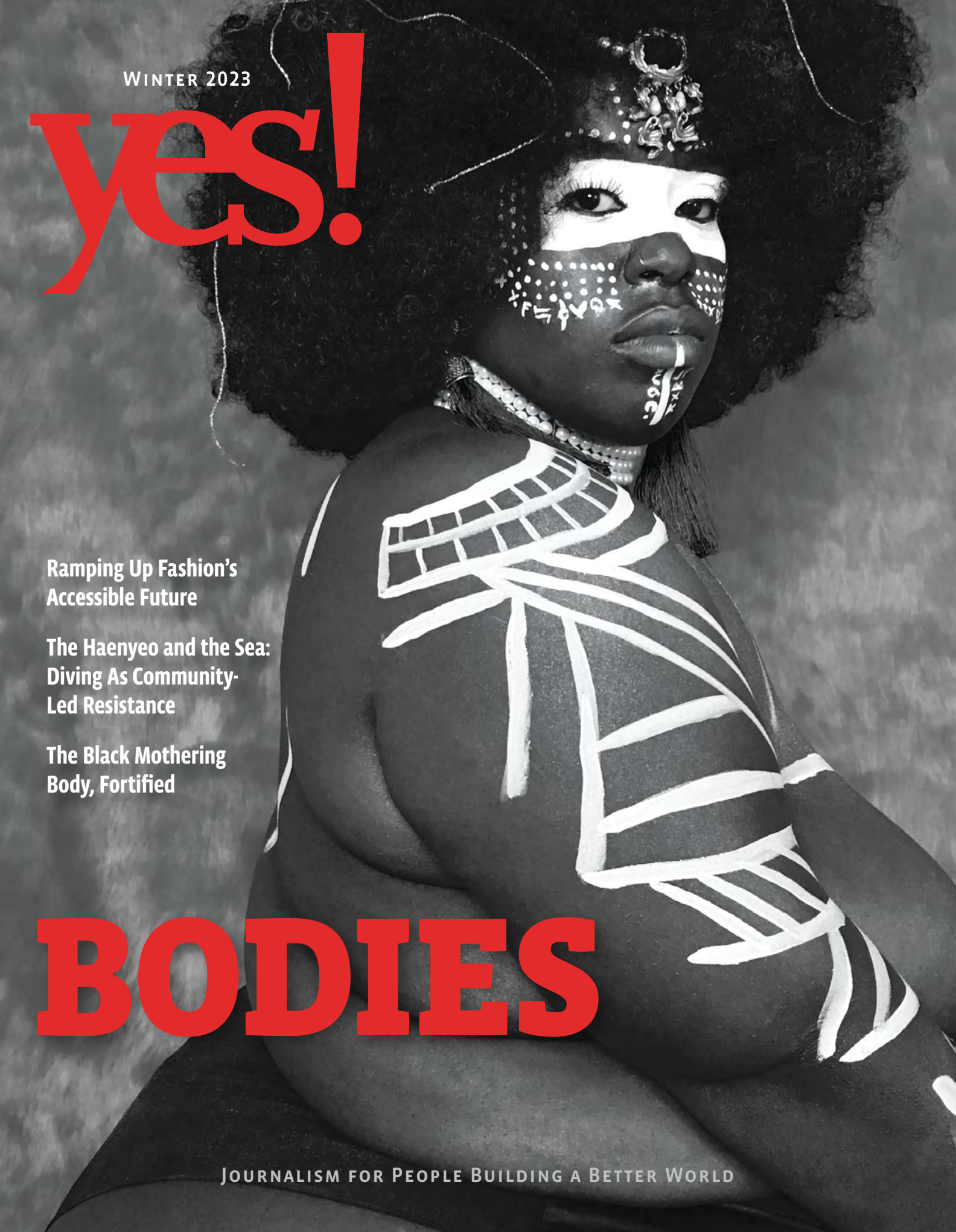


Winter 2023

yes!

Ramping Up Fashion's Accessible Future

The Haenyeo and the Sea: Diving As Community-Led Resistance

The Black Mothering Body, Fortified

BODIES

Journalism for People Building a Better World

Transforming Ourselves to Transform the World

Five activists share how shifting their relationships with their own bodies helped them build community.

Nicole Froio

The concept of *cuerpo-territorio* ("body-territory") around which the Xinka women in Guatemala organize themselves recognizes the interconnectedness between human bodies and all other living beings. Within this Indigenous philosophy, the body is understood as disputed political territory that is part of the land that has been colonized, exploited, and destroyed by a capitalist, patriarchal system. Both individual and collective subjugation are important pieces of this concept: The colonization of land is interconnected to the hierarchies placed on our bodies to maintain capitalism.

Our intersections—from gender and racialization to (dis)ability and sexual orientation—are what define our place in the hierarchy of capitalism. These predefined roles become even stricter in times of crisis. Take the COVID-19 pandemic—not only did it disconnect us from our communities and reveal the fragility of our bodies, but it also continues to disproportionately impact the most vulnerable among us. But what happens when we step into our autonomy and shed the trappings of heteropatriarchal capitalism? What is the ripple effect of that autonomy in the communities we're a part of?

These are deeply personal and potentially transformative questions, which is why it's helpful to learn from the lived experiences of activists who have shifted their relationships with their own bodies and discovered how embracing their autonomy helped them build community. Divorcing ourselves from harmful systems can usher in a collective, revolutionary vision that allows us to live as our most authentic selves without judgment, in community with others who are also free. It's only by owning the desires of our bodies outside the constraints of capitalism that we can begin building the world we desire.

As I write this, my country, Brazil, is choosing a new president. I move my body to the voting booth and cast my vote for the Workers' Party candidate, Luiz Inácio "Lula" da Silva, as adrenaline runs through my bloodstream. Thanks to extreme-right-wing President Jair Bolsonaro's neglectful management of the pandemic, Brazil has lost



ILLUSTRATION BY BROOKE DANAHER

more than 650,000 people. I'm grateful for my body and how alive it is. But at the same time, my body feels fragile because it's so intrinsically connected to a society that prioritizes capital production above well-being.

After the left wins the first round of the elections, my wife and I go to Pedra do Sal, the birthplace of samba. Enslaved Afro Brazilians created samba to resist repression and embrace joy. We move our bodies to the music being played by five women, who are singing a revolutionary song about Marielle Franco, a Black bisexual socialist councilor assassinated in 2018. We stretch our bodies in resistance with other bodies—bodies that are queer, Black, femme, and everything in between—and in that moment, we can almost feel the coming of a better world.



Lyz Lenz

LYZ LENZ HAD BEEN TAUGHT, LIKE MOST CISGENDER WOMEN, that she was destined to be a wife and a mother, but the exhaustion of balancing domestic work and her career goals finally came to a breaking point after 12 years of marriage. "I was talking to all my friends, and I was just like, how did we get here?" she says. "How did we decide that we were going to be equal, and yet here we are, married. We gave up our maiden names, we are doing all the labor, all the housework, in addition to trying to have careers. And it was this moment of like, 'I can't do this.'"

When her couples counselor suggested Lenz stop writing her first book to save her marriage, she immediately knew what she had to do. "I said, 'Fine, I quit my marriage.'" Lenz felt all the usual feelings that accompany divorce: sadness, embarrassment, a sense of failure. But other things bloomed too: relief, time to herself, self-discovery, and most importantly, freedom to live her life. "Those first couple of weeks when I had moved out, I was renting this house. I had no money," Lenz recalls. "And I remember being like, 'Why is this house so clean all the time?' I was told that being a single mother would be hard, and immediately I was like, 'This is so much fucking easier.'"

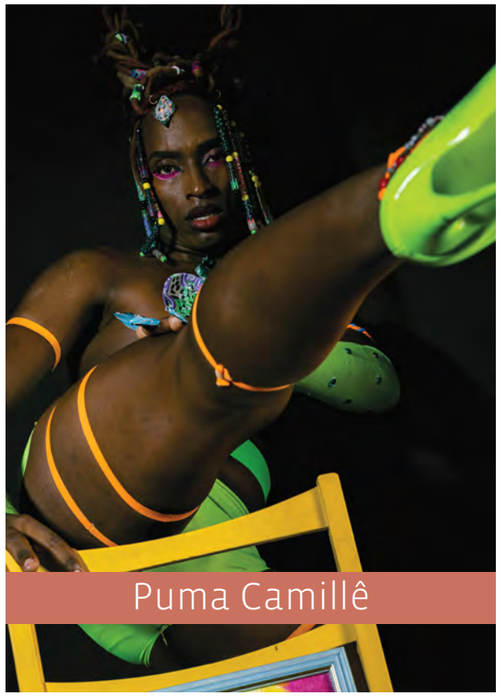
Since that realization, Lenz has been writing about the power of being a single mother who chooses to remain unpartnered. In her Substack newsletter, appropriately titled *Men Yell At Me*, she has written extensively about "finding power outside of the nuclear family." In a viral 2018 essay for *Glamour*, Lenz vowed to never again cook for a man. "I stopped cooking because I wanted to feel as unencumbered as a man walking through the door of his home with the expectation that something had been done for him," Lenz wrote. "I wanted to be free of cutting coupons and rolling dough and worrying about dinner times and feeding. I wanted to rest."

Lenz found that shedding the expectations society had of her body—cooking, cleaning, being a wife, while simultaneously succeeding at her career—was liberating, and it opened up a new world of options for her. Escaping the heteropatriarchal family allows for a world where women are encouraged to have functions other than wife and mother, and foster different kinds of partnerships—platonic, lesbian, nonmonogamous—to nurture their lives.

After liberating herself from those expectations, Lenz realized she desired a community different from the conservative one she grew up in. Writing has provided it to her. The experience of stepping into her own autonomy and inspiring others to do the same has taught her about the inherent interconnectedness of human beings—and how essential this awareness is for community building. "It's about learning how to be connected as human beings," Lenz said. "Our power is not our individuality. Our community is truly our power. How do I intentionally build community that is fulfilling and sustaining and outside of heteronormative bounds?"

PUMA CAMILLÊ FIRST FELT SOCIETY'S CONSTRAINTS WHEN SHE WAS 6 YEARS OLD. While dancing one day, Camillê moved in a way considered "too feminine" for the body she inhabited. Members of her family chastised her for transgressing an invisible line that Camillê never knew existed. From that moment on, she avoided certain gestures, trying to perform the gender she was assigned at birth.

"My body became stuck. It started giving into the stereotypes of Blackness imposed by society," she says. "My body started learning the performativity



Puma Camillê

of [Black] masculinity." At 14, when Camillê began practicing capoeira—a mixture of martial arts, dancing, and acrobatics that enslaved Afro Brazilians invented to defend themselves from their enslavers—she began reconnecting with movement. Despite capoeira's battle roots, the sport is also a kind of dance, one that allowed Camillê to move gracefully and expansively in a space that's demographically dominated by cisgender men.

At 18, she came out as a gay man and became homeless. As a result, she began having sex with men for money. Walking the streets of Campinas, Brazil, she met trans women and *travestis* (a trans femme identity specific to Latin America) who depended on sex work to survive. Capoeira became a practice of strength for Camillê, much like it was for her ancestors; not only did she practice the sport to reconnect with her body, she also used it as a tool for defense when things turned violent with her clients.

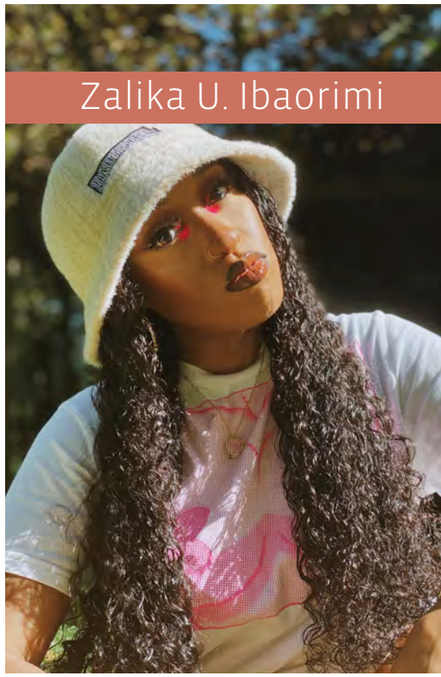
Then, in 2019, Camillê attended a ballroom event in Campinas. Watching people vogue made her heart flutter and reminded her that the movements were already inside her; she just needed to listen to how her body wanted to move, abandoning the masculine performance that was forced upon her. From that moment, Camillê became a pioneer of mixing vogue and capoeira, creating a new form that includes flips and acrobatics with whips. Today, Camillê's unique dance methodology is world-famous, and she has accrued more than 43,000 followers on Instagram. The dance she invented allowed her to better understand her gender identity. "Ballroom helped me understand myself as a femme queen, as a trans person, as a travesti," Camillê explains. "It helped me search for my own expression, for my marginalized, feminine body."

Camillê knows that not all communities are welcoming of a body like hers—after all, her own family tried to suppress her real essence. In the U.S., it's estimated that 40 percent of the homeless population is LGBTQ, a direct result of families rejecting their queer children. The ballroom community, however, helped her listen to her body. "More and more, I see my body as political communication," Camillê explains, emphasizing that she uses dance to challenge how people see her body—masculine, oppressed, nonexistent—and articulate how she wants her body to be seen—feminine, exquisite, solid, and real. "I tell my story and encourage people to listen to their bodies."

In 2022, Camillê founded Capoeira Para Todes (Capoeira for Everyone), a nonprofit collective that's inclusive of all bodies and genders. Camillê doesn't want kids to ever feel like she did, so she's advocating for more inclusion in her field. "I want to pierce the bubbles of masculinity and femininity that are imposed onto us," Camillê says. "Many people are attached to those rules, and when I show that I exist and share dance with them, they're more likely to liberate themselves."

PHILADELPHIA-BASED MULTIDISCIPLINARY ARTIST, SCHOLAR, AND EX-CAM GIRL ZALIKA U. IBAORIMI challenges the very concept of the human body in her work. As a Black queer femme born in a Christian family, she has always tried to make sense of the ways her body has been hypersexualized and adultified since age 15. On Instagram, under the handle @nohumaninvolved, Ibaorimi photographs her own body, dressed in Black femme aesthetics, as an exploration of the intersection of Blackness, desirability, and liberation.

"What even is Black bodily autonomy?" she wrote under a photo of her cleavage and lips. "[Bodily autonomy] is a principle and a promise of settler-colonialism. That is a principle and a promise within the confines of an anti-Black world. This



Zalika U. Ibaorimi

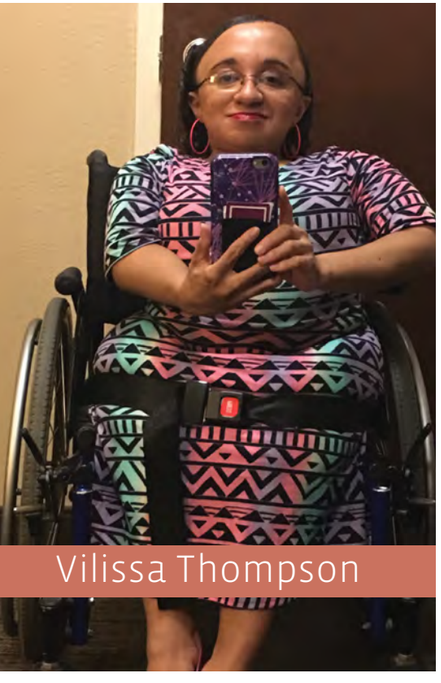
PHOTO (LEFT) SUPPLIED BY LYZ LENZ

PHOTO (ABOVE) SUPPLIED BY PUMA CAMILLÊ; PHOTO (RIGHT) SUPPLIED BY ZALIKA U. IBAORIMI

world revolves around our negation."

Ibaorimi's Instagram handle is a reference to the unofficial term used by members of the Los Angeles Police Department and other public officials to describe the murders of people of color who were considered "nonhuman." The term was often used to refer to sex workers killed by police. A doctoral candidate of African and African Diaspora Studies at the University of Texas at Austin, Ibaorimi is attempting to reclaim the term and think beyond the bounds of being human. "I'm not gonna wallow in the sadness of not being human," she says. "If being human means being like my oppressors—oh baby, I don't want it."

By exploring the body beyond humanity, Ibaorimi hopes to find novel ways of liberation that aren't compromised by anti-Blackness, tokenization, and misogynoir. If we invented another mode of existing, would it be easier to conceptualize a world beyond racial capitalism? Recently, Ibaorimi moved home due to a family emergency. She is now doing care work for a family member, which has resulted in a reckoning with her own limitations. "This body is committed to liberation for Black people and people who are oppressed by way of gender and sexuality, but I also think my body is trying to learn how to not overcommit to the things that we know we may not be able to carry as well."



Vilissa Thompson

This shift in energies has revealed to Ibaorimi how important it is to model transparency about capacity in organizing spaces. "People may feel like they're wearing themselves thin and down, and when they're honest about where they are, it helps you as a person, as a community with them, to be honest about where you are too," she said. An organizer for the Philly chapter of the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement, an organization focused on the liberation of Black people, and the Philadelphia Red Umbrella Alliance, a grassroots collective led by and for sex workers, she has found that being honest about how much she is able to do has encouraged others to do the same.

Being honest about capacity "teaches you to be graceful with one another," Ibaorimi says. "Being in principled struggle with your community is not about being punitive and disciplined. I think part of it is making sure that we're organizing within a framework of grace and understanding. It encourages folks to just be more genuine with one another." Ibaorimi is right to safeguard her mental health: A 2015 study found that 71% of racial justice activists have felt depressed and isolated. A politic of care that recognizes the limitations of organizers is essential to preserving a body that can work for the collective.

From that understanding, Ibaorimi believes it's possible to extrapolate the world we want to organize for: a world where care work isn't expected based on gender or race, but given according to our limitations, needs, and affections. This approach is particularly important for Black women and femmes, who often take on the bulk of both unpaid and paid domestic work. Resting to get ready for the next struggle against white heteropatriarchal capitalism is a necessity.

VILISSA THOMPSON, A BLACK DISABILITY RIGHTS CONSULTANT, ACTIVIST, AND WRITER, had a different body than most of her friends when she was growing up in Winnsboro, South Carolina. That created an obstacle to accepting her body, so she attempted to fit in instead. "When it [came] to embracing my body, I was doing so in comparison with other folks," Thompson says. "Now I really understand that this was due to ableism and how we view disabled bodies, how we engage with disabled people." Thompson was only able to embrace her body when she gave up on being like everyone else.

Even after finding her vocation as a disability activist, Thompson didn't feel like she fit in. Though she saw herself as a disabled person, she hardly saw Black women represented in the disability rights movement. So when she read an article on her Twitter timeline about beauty and disability that only included white disabled people, she created the hashtag #DisabilityTooWhite. "When you're bombarded with stories about disabled bodies, they're usually about white cis disabled women," Thompson says. "You don't see disabled bodies much in general, but when you do see them, they don't look like you. And so it's still about this connection, of connecting how your body is viewed versus those who are the majority."

It was this exclusion that inspired her to create spaces for disabled people of color. As a Black woman who is under 4 feet tall and uses a wheelchair, Thompson found that connecting with other Black disabled women helped her navigate the invisibility she always experienced. "Finding a community of Black disabled women helped me understand we aren't isolated, that we're all figuring this thing out," Thompson says. "When we find each other, we're not so alone. I think it reduces loneliness and that invisibility."

Founder and CEO of Ramp Your Voice!, an organization focused on promoting self-advocacy and strengthening empowerment among disabled people, Thompson is an expert in creating intentional community. "My work is about helping Black women, girls, and femmes to find a community sooner than most of us did," she says. "I think it makes a major difference, finding that community, increasing [your] sense of self and empowerment about your autonomy, your body expression. Being able to do that earlier means so much."

Thompson says that understanding you're not alone in fighting the -isms and -phobias of society helps articulate solutions to everyday ableism. She highlights intergenerational relationships as a cornerstone of this work. "It's critical to learn with older folks, not just on an activist, professional level, but also on a personal level, learn from the life lessons they have learned in relation to the disability and outside of that."



Sonya Renée Taylor

FOR SONYA RENÉE TAYLOR, AUTHOR, ACTIVIST, AND FOUNDER OF THE BODY IS NOT AN APOLOGY, radical self-love is essential to achieving collective liberation. Originally a renowned slam poet, Taylor began to delve into body-liberation work in 2010 during a conversation with her friend Natasha. Natasha, who has cerebral palsy, was hesitant to ask her sexual partner to use a condom. She thought she couldn't demand something from her sexual partners and that she should feel lucky to be having sex in the first place. Taylor responded quickly: "Your body is not an apology. You do not use it to say 'Sorry for my disability.'"

In July 2010, Taylor turned the phrase into a slam poem that reads, in part: "The body is not an apology. Let it not be common as oil, ash, or toilet. Let it not be small as gravel, stain, or teeth. Let it not be mountain when it is sand. Let it not be ocean when it is grass. Let it not be shaken, flattened, or razed in contrition." In 2011, Taylor posted a photo of herself on Facebook with a caption about society's insistence that she make her fat, Black body smaller. "For this one camera flash, I am unashamed, unapologetic," she wrote. People began sharing their own photos, showing off their racialized, disabled, queer bodies without shame. That was the birth of The Body Is Not an Apology, a global digital media and education company that Taylor says has now reached tens of millions across 140 countries who seek to learn about identity, liberation, and social justice.

Taylor's work focuses on what our bodies lose through capitalist white supremacist heteropatriarchal socialization and how we can get those things back. "I tell people all the time, you've never seen a self-loathing toddler," she explains, emphasizing that society teaches us the wrong lessons about our bodies. "And so the question has always been, how do we get radical self-love that dismantles these bodily hierarchies? What has happened to us that has disconnected us? What is it that has shown up in our lives—individually, interpersonally, socially, economically, politically—that has created the fissure between us and our radical self-love?"

If we can peel back the layers of our socialization, we can reconnect with our radical self-love. In turn, that self-love will help us see what needs to change in our communities and societies. Taylor says that after years of trying to be a desirable body in the Black community in Pennsylvania, and then years of activism in which she saw her body in opposition to white supremacy, today she is trying to simply exist. "If we were all able to reconnect to and re-embody the knowledge of radical self-love, then we will recognize that that external system is a lie," Taylor says. "And then we would divest from the system, we would decide that the [hierarchy this society operates on] is a lie, and a vicious, oppression-based entity. And what would it look like for us to collectively divest? When we collectively divest, then the world changes."

Nicole Froio is a Colombian Brazilian journalist, researcher, and translator based in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. She writes about liberation, feminism, the intersection of race and gender, pop culture, work, tech, and digital cultures. Twitter: @nicolefroio

PHOTO (LEFT) SUPPLIED BY VILISSA THOMPSON

PHOTO (RIGHT) SUPPLIED BY SONYA RENÉE TAYLOR

The Black Mothering Body, Fortified

In creating new life, Black mothers must overcome medical malpractice and social unsafety together.

Gloria Alamrew



Gloria Alamrew, 30 weeks pregnant.

Something strange happens to time when you become pregnant. Suddenly you understand how long a week really is. How short it is. I faithfully kept time as the weeks progressed: "Our baby is the size of a grapefruit!" "Their fingernails are fully developed!" You count time up and down, willing it to both slow and quicken. Even your heart beats faster, keeping yours and this new life on and in time. Prior to becoming pregnant, immersed in my successful communications and marketing career, with a flourishing freelance writing hustle, I decided to begin doula studies. The topic has always felt close to me, and I've long wanted to care for someone who came from me.

Back home in Ethiopia, my grandmother was the local midwife, and she taught me much about birthing babies *and* mothers. I was struck by a passage in my required reading: "Postpartum is forever." Society puts so much focus on recovering after birth, but can you ever really recover? Stitches will dissolve, tears will heal, and in due time, it won't feel like you've run three consecutive marathons. The hormonal acne will (hopefully) clear, the postpartum hair loss will ease, and your body will eventually reach its new homeostasis.

In creating new life, you are made new. You're initiated into a long line of life-givers, of people trying to make sense of their own bodies and souls while caring for the newest among us. But how do we separate the husk of Motherhood from the grain of our own respective interiorities? "There isn't really any 'going back,'" says Bee Quammie, a culture writer and mother of two daughters. "You enter a new physical and mental space, and that lasts forever."

My son, now 14 months old, is proudly planted in the toddler phase, and I still refer to myself as a new mom. My own mothering body feels like an ancient collision of the old and new, a magical tragedy that has repeated itself billions of times. Since becoming pregnant and giving birth, my body has been a source of near constant internal dialogue. I am in awe of its ability to sustain and nourish us both, and I mourn feeling at home in my own flesh and blood. Our bones move differently, our skin feels different, our blood has been made thicker by the weighty fact that we have produced the next link in history.

"There's a duality to my existence," says Yamri Taddese, a CBC Radio producer whose son is 2. "I am forever attached to someone else." I now look at the mothers around me through a different, more knowing lens—seeing and wanting to be seen. The mother guides I have been bestowed offer me different facets of the prism I now recognize Black motherhood to be. Being a Black woman raising a son in this world, I know that Black motherhood is itself a body. We share a language that can't be captured by the Instagram "momfluencers" who don't look like us or share our fears. *They* hope their children get into the best prep schools. *We* hope our children make it home safely each day. Our language is filled with footnotes and asterisks and choruses of our ancestors whispering in our ears, "It's different for us."

I've been regaled with countless stories from other mothers about our bodies being forgotten, mistreated, and ignored. Uncare and malpractice feast upon the Black mothering body. So how do we fortify it? Our mothering bodies may feel new, but motherhood isn't. Our model for Black motherhood in community has existed for as long as we have. "Physically, the Black mothering body is a place of inherent safety, comfort, and refuge," Quammie says. "I remember being upset as a child and feeling my heartbeat slow down in the arms of my mother. I know now how it feels when I hold my own children and feel their heartbeat slow into calmness as well. There's magic within that."

Being a mother is the most intimate and sacred thing I've ever experienced. I've found it difficult to describe the polarities I now exist between: new and old, confident and afraid, resistant and accepting, longing and looking forward. "Mothers or not, our bodies are so politicized—simultaneously made invisible and hyper-visible," Taddese says. "I had my first baby in a pandemic and have spent so much time at home. In this bubble, I feel safe and able to be who I am. Being out of that external gaze has been a balm in many ways."

Even outside of a pandemic, much of Black communal motherhood has taken place not so much in secret but in quiet. Quammie says the multigenerational moms that surround her "provide knowledge and wisdom, but also hold up a mirror to me to see myself as a mother and a child, and decide how I want to move forward." All of motherhood is an altar, our bodies the offering. We say goodbye to what we knew to make way for all there is to come. We shed old fears for new, sharper ones that extend beyond our own skin and blood. We pray to the Mother, to ourselves, and to each other—and the response is a realization that we are the answer.

"Black mothers stand in the gap for each other in so many bold and quiet ways," Quammie says. "I think of the phrase 'We all we got.'" Black communal motherhood is being a witness to each other's journeys. It's a promise we'll be a village not only for your children, but for *you* as well. We will protect your body with the same vigor and tenderness that we would our own. Because it *is* our own. Our cells dance around each other in joyful recognition of themselves.

If postpartum is forever, then so are we.

Gloria Alamrew is a freelance culture critic and writer with bylines in *Kindred by Parents*, *InStyle*, *Well + Good*, *Refinery29*, *CBC*, and *HuffPost*. Twitter: @gloriaalamrew



Alamrew with her son at 10 months.

PHOTOS BY KAT GILL

QUEERING THE GOOD DEATH

When it comes to protecting chosen family, LGBTQ couples face unique struggles.

Sara Harrison

Before he met Charles Koehler—and before he married a woman, got divorced, and came out—Dennis Hostetler was a college student who needed money. In the summer of 1962 he began working in the W.R. Grace mine, cleaning the tools used to drag vermiculite ore out of the ground. The shiny, flaky mineral would be refined at the plant, and when heated, it would balloon into puffs that could insulate buildings. Libby, a town in northwest Montana, was a beautiful place, but Hostetler had bigger ambitions, so he took the $1,443.72 he'd made and got the hell out.

But pieces of Libby stayed with Hostetler, buried deep in the outer lining of his lungs. He unwittingly carried toxic mineral fibers from the mine to college in Missoula, to the Peace Corps in Tunisia, to Paris' Left Bank, and to St. Louis, where one day, at age 67, he discovered he was dying. After experiencing fatigue, chest pain, and shortness of breath, Hostetler was diagnosed with mesothelioma, a deadly cancer probably caused by inhaling asbestos that tainted the vermiculite he mined. In 2009, a year after Hostetler's diagnosis, the Environmental Protection Agency declared a public health emergency in Libby and initiated a massive cleanup effort that's still ongoing. Hostetler had no illusions about what came next—he needed to put his affairs in order.

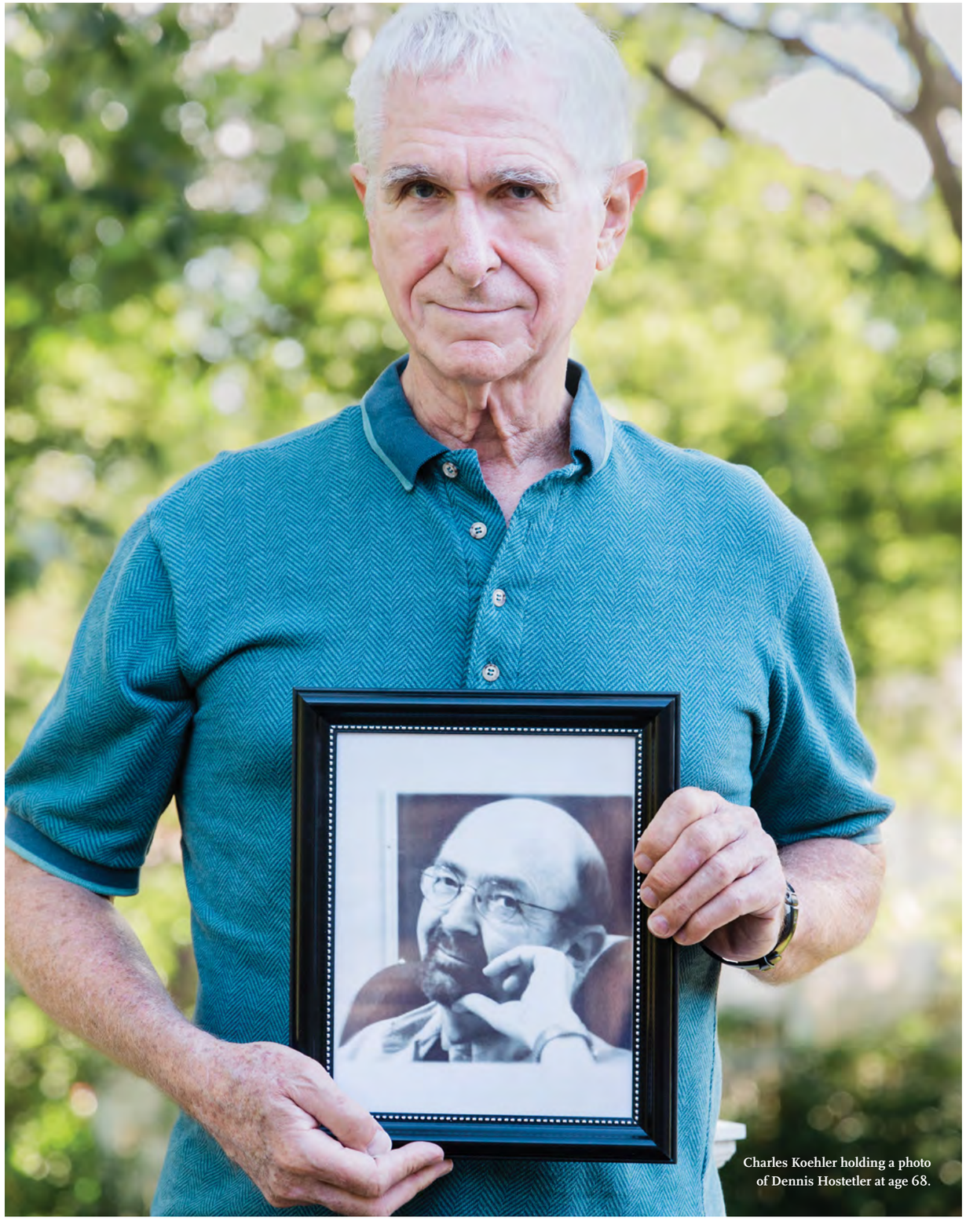
Death is an inevitable fact of life that most people prefer not to discuss. According to a 2012 survey by the California Health Care Foundation, 60% of Californians said that when they die, it's very important to them not to burden their families with tough decisions. Despite that, more than half of the respondents hadn't communicated their end-of-life plans with the people they wanted making decisions for them. Some were too busy with other things to think about it; others said thinking about dying made them uncomfortable. But having those conversations can make the experience better for the person dying. There's less regret about what might have gone unsaid, and less anxiety and confusion for caregivers because they know their loved one's wishes. Numerous studies have linked conversations about death to better, more peaceful deaths.

For members of the LGBTQ community, dying without the legal protections of a living will or power of attorney could mean spending their final days without the support of the people who love them. A 2010 study by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Policy Institute found that LGBTQ elders are twice as likely to live alone and four times less likely to have children than their straight counterparts. That means their caregivers are often friends, exes, or chosen family who aren't always recognized by the medical and legal systems. "There's no automatic protection in place to make sure that someone can choose the person that's going to be making their [end-of-life] decisions," says Kimberly Acquaviva, a professor of nursing at the University of Virginia who specializes in palliative and end-of-life care. "You have to put those things in writing." Before same-sex marriage was legal, there were horror stories about families swooping in and making medical decisions that didn't accord with people's wishes. "Those things still happen," she says.

A BETTER WAY TO DIE

Hostetler met his partner, Charles Koehler, in 1984. While the two could never have prepared for how their relationship unfolded over the next two decades, they always had a plan for death. Before Koehler met Hostetler, he'd read the 1969 bestselling book *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex* (*But Were Afraid to Ask)* and decided it would be better if he wasn't gay. The book told him gay people led awful lives, an idea affirmed in an abnormal psychology class where he learned that homosexuality was in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders.

If homosexuality was classified as a mental illness, then Koehler reasoned that it too must be a diagnosable



Charles Koehler holding a photo of Dennis Hostetler at age 68.

PHOTOS BY BEAUTIFUL MESS PHOTOGRAPHY FOR YES!



Charles with son Spencer, age 28.

Charles, age 45 (left) with Dennis, age 55 (right) holding their sons Connor, age 2 (left) and Spencer, age 4 (right) on Christmas 1997.

Charles, age 45, with Dennis, age 55.

Jocelyn, Dennis' daughter from a previous 12-year marriage, with her children.





Charles shares drinks with members of his local PrimeTimers social group, of which he was founding president, on the back patio of Just John Night Club in St. Louis, MO.

disorder. But then Koehler actually met some gay men and realized their lives were just as varied as anyone else's. Even then, it took years for Koehler to accept himself; when he did come out at age 27, he thought his life would remain solitary. "I had no idea what was possible," he says. "I assumed that I would be basically closeted." Both Koehler and Hostetler were hesitant when they met. Hostetler, who was older by a decade, had two daughters he still wasn't out to. When Koehler moved in, Hostetler told the girls he was just renting a room. But in time they came out to Hostetler's daughters and ex-wife.

When two of their lesbian friends asked them if they'd consider donating sperm so they could have children, both men obliged. At first the men agreed to just be "uncles" to the children, but eventually the moms wanted the boys to know who their fathers were. "We had to do DNA testing to find out who was whose," says Koehler. "The boys were really excited for about five minutes and then they wanted to go outside and play games." Koehler began volunteering in a program that provided support buddies to men living with HIV and AIDS. He watched a man die and then watched the man's partner get thrown out of the home they shared. Though the house was owned by the man who died, there was no will to ensure his partner could keep it. "The family came in, took everything, kicked the kid out on the street," Koehler says.

Afterward, Koehler and Hostetler—who were both healthy at the time—drew up documents specifying what should happen to their assets in case of death. Now, there are academics and organizations helping LGBTQ people make clear, concrete plans for death. In doing so, they're modeling a better way to prepare for, think about, and embrace death. Sherrill Wayland, who directs operations at the National Resource Center on LGBTQ+ Aging, saw many of their older friends struggle to get the care and support they needed at the end of their lives. "It was really personal for me," they say. "No one should die alone if they want support." In their role, Wayland has helped create a series of guides to help LGBTQ people plan for serious illness and caregiving.

Sage USA, an advocacy organization for LGBTQ elders, is also pushing for cultural competency training in long-term care facilities. Compassion & Choices, a group that champions the importance of end-of-life planning, has LGBTQ-focused programs like Pride in a Box, which encourages people to take time during Pride Month to talk about how they want to die. These conversations can seem at once ghoulish and mundane: Do you want to be cremated or buried? Do you desire an open- or closed-casket funeral? What clothes would you like to be buried in? What pronouns should appear in your obituary? "LGBTQ people have realized that if we don't make a plan, things are probably going to go sideways because other people won't be looking out for us," says Acquaviva, who helped develop an LGBTQ-inclusive curriculum for The Conversation Project, an organization that helps people discuss their end-of-life plans. "We have to figure out ways to look out for ourselves."

Because Hostetler had an amalgamation of chosen and genetic family members, he wanted to make sure everyone was on the same page. He organized his will and called his daughters, his ex-wife, the sons, and their mothers. Hostetler was adamant that he wanted to die at home, so he arranged for hospice care. Instead of hiding his identity, Hostetler informed his health care providers that he was gay and that Koehler was his life partner and caregiver. Koehler says that without exception, every single person was supportive and respectful of their relationship.

In the final two weeks of Hostetler's life, a hospice nurse suggested setting up his bed in the living room so he wouldn't be alone. His eldest daughter and her family moved in and traded shifts with Koehler and a hospice nurse. His nurses provided massage and music therapy to make him more comfortable. Hostetler was sedated, hovering at the edge of their everyday routines. Finally, on New Year's Eve 2010, his daughters and his life partner surrounded his bed and held hands as he took his last breaths. Koehler checked his pulse and said, "I think he's gone." Koehler describes the whole experience as peaceful. Having months to accept that Hostetler would die helped make the process less traumatizing for everyone.

"In a strange way it was both sad and yet somehow comforting at the same time knowing that he died being surrounded by us at his home, just as he wished," Koehler says. But not all LGBTQ patients receive such affirming care: A 2020 survey published in the *Journal of Palliative Medicine* found that nearly one-quarter of health care providers witnessed discrimination against LGBTQ patients in palliative care settings and nearly 30% of the respondents reported witnessing discrimination against LGBTQ spouses, partners, or people whom the patient had legally designated to make care decisions for them.

PREPARING FOR THE INEVITABLE END

Experts like Acquaviva and Wayland say that health providers need to take time to understand the barriers that create health inequities in the LGBTQ community and undergo cultural competency training to avoid making the same mistakes. Because LGBTQ families are more likely to be families of choice, providers need to be sensitive to those dynamics and spend time learning who is part of a patient's support system instead of automatically deferring to genetic family members. There are also simple ways to acknowledge the range of human gender and sexual identities, such as including nongendered pronouns on forms, asking for patients' pronouns and using them correctly, and including LGBTQ-affirming language in nondiscrimination clauses.

Those steps may seem like small gestures, but they're important signals. If an organization doesn't commit to doing something as minimal as adding inclusive language to a statement, says Acquaviva, then it's reasonable to expect that they won't treat a patient with the dignity they deserve. Acquaviva has both written about and experienced this discrimination: She and her wife talked extensively about their plans when her wife was diagnosed with ovarian cancer in 2019 and ultimately decided to use hospice care to help her die comfortably. But then they discovered that none of the hospice services near their Virginia home included LGBTQ-affirming language in their nondiscrimination statements. Despite the fact that both women were experts in end-of-life care, they faced death without the support of hospice because they felt they wouldn't receive respectful care. Acquaviva was the one managing her wife's pain meds, bathing her, and making sure she didn't get bed sores.

There's no single definition of a good death. Not everyone knows when their death is coming and not every death can follow a specific plan, but every death can be expected and discussed ahead of time. "We all want to imagine we're gonna live a really long time, and it's human nature to imagine that everything's gonna be OK, but the reality is 100% of us are going to die," Acquaviva says. Have the conversation—even if it's awkward, uncomfortable, and hard.

Now, more than a decade later, Koehler remains an active retiree. He's single but he isn't alone. He's the vice president of PrimeTimers Worldwide, a large social group for older gay, bisexual, and transgender men. On Sundays he catches up with Hostetler's daughters and their mom over Zoom, and when the younger daughter needed surgery, he helped with child care. "Having grandkids is something that I never dreamed of as even a remote possibility," he says. "It never even crossed my mind at all." His documents are in order and he encourages his peers to make end-of-life plans. But while he's still here, he's keeping busy, tending to the life and family he and Hostetler built together.

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Spring 2023

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ENDINGS

Visions Beyond an Apocalypse

The Imposition of Black Grief

Can We End Wealth?

Journalism for People Building a Better World

THE IMPOSITION OF BLACK GRIEF

Prolonged grief is normal—and even necessary.

NNEKA M. OKONA

When the pandemic dawned on our shores in early 2020, I neither panicked nor despaired. There was something eerily familiar about how quiet and still the world suddenly felt—how we were all living in a groundless, uncertain reality. I'd had countless experiences with personal losses in recent years, so I knew how isolating grief could feel. Though this time, we were all sitting in a darkened room, the heaviness of loss wrapped around us like a cloak and bonding us together in more ways than one.

Over time, we've developed the language to describe this shared experience—collective grief. This mourning is neither an individual expression nor an experience, but can be felt as an entity that impacts a group of people all at once. For Black people, collective grief has a particular shape, feeling, and shade.

Friends and family mourn the death of Conrad Coleman Jr. at his funeral service in New Rochelle, New York, on July 3, 2020. Coleman, 39, died of COVID-19 a little more than two months after his father, Conrad Coleman Sr., also died of the disease.



Friends and family attend Conrad Coleman Jr.'s burial service in Rye, New York. Early in the pandemic, Black Americans were not only disproportionately more likely to contract COVID-19 but more likely to lose a family member or friend to the disease as well.



Marcia Howard, a community member and activist in Minneapolis, Minnesota, straightens tombstones in Nov. 2022 in the Say Their Names Cemetery, an art installation that sat one block north of the George Floyd Memorial. The installation began with 100 names of Black lives cut short by police violence, and grew as the community requested more to add.

For Black people in the United States, grief and loss are intertwined with our very being. Our ancestors knew the trauma of loss intimately; many of us, myself included, are descendants of those enslaved. The institution of chattel slavery throughout this country—not just in the Southern states—depended upon breaking up families in order to use our Black bodies for labor. We lost so much then. Though we're generations removed from it now, those losses remain within us, embedded in our consciousness and our psyche, lying dormant in our bodies.

As a result, Black people have experienced the pandemic differently, beginning with the fact that we were disproportionately impacted by this deadly virus. And we have grieved deeply as a result. I released my debut book, *Self-Care for Grief*, on August 3, 2021. I began writing it in September 2020 when life still felt uncertain, but I wanted to give readers a soft place to land as they grieved. I wanted to remind people that they can grieve in their own way and that there aren't any rules for how that should look. But that was hard to do knowing the state of the world outside my front door. The seasons were changing, which meant another spike in COVID-19 cases, hospitalizations, and deaths. The hope of a vaccine seemed like a pipe dream at best.

While official messaging encouraged everyone to continue being cautious, many Black people knew this to mean that, once again, we had to save ourselves. Misinformation was high. There wasn't consistent or accurate reporting about how many people had contracted COVID-19. Guidance on how to protect ourselves—with masks, wiping down groceries, keeping a six-foot distance—varied depending on the day. We had to bind together to get through, something Black people have always done. If we were going to survive, we needed to grieve, process, and make meaning of our losses. We inherently knew these things, even if many of us couldn't recognize them at the time.

Grief requires tenderness. Demands it, even. As Black people, being rough or careless with our grief is more of the same indoctrination from Western culture and society. Trying to survive in this capitalistic society teaches us that we should not value stillness or rest. And racism always gives us a reason to be aggrieved and to fight for our humanity to be acknowledged and validated. Honoring our losses—and the grief that follows—means bowing to stillness. It then becomes necessary to have the courage to look at our grief and recognize it for what it is—not a nuisance to be gotten over as quickly as possible, but a force that will forever change us. Grief calls us to bend, to evolve, to integrate the losses that we're reeling from.

Loss encompasses more than the death of a loved one. We may need to grieve former states of being, old routines, a neighborhood or city we moved away from, a dream we have outgrown or had to let go of, a sense of safety or inner peace, or the end of a relationship with someone who is still alive. The list is nearly as endless as the ways that we can honor our grief.

A BLACK STORY OF GRIEF

In modern times, there are new things to grieve. Rather than only hearing about the violence of white-supremacist police brutality on news stations or seeing it splattered on the front page of the newspaper each morning, we have the ability to witness it happening in real time via social media. We now have more awareness and more investment in taking a stand against racial injustice, but seeing these old wounds with even older origins so often, so graphically, comes at a cost.

The murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis on the evening of May 25, 2020, was a catalyst for the anger bubbling underneath the surface for most Black Americans to emerge with power and force. We were so tired of soldiering on even when little losses constantly surrounded us; of having to be OK with the unwarranted deaths of our brothers, sisters, cousins, aunts, uncles, mothers, and fathers. We were so tired that "tired" no longer sufficed; we needed another word to encapsulate the full breadth of all it means to hold, all it means to live as a Black person. We wanted to feel safe and to not fall prey to the potential lethality of driving while Black, walking while Black, eating while Black, traveling while Black.

We wanted Blackness in this country to stop equating to a death sentence.

Living with this knowledge is not only heavy but tortuous. It impacts mental health, the ability to build and maintain interpersonal relationships, holding onto employment and performing well. As much as one might think it's possible to compartmentalize how structural and systemic racism affects Black people, that's not the case. Robert T. Carter, professor emeritus of psychology and education at Teachers College of Columbia University, pioneered research on the relationship between racial trauma and mental health.

In a 2007 study, Carter found that, as a result of racial discrimination, Black people can develop racial trauma profound enough to be considered a psychological trauma comparable to PTSD, according to the criteria in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (*DSM-5*). "Racism can and does create damage to one's psyche and personality in the same way that being subjected to community violence, being held captive, or being psychologically tortured can create emotional damage," Carter writes.

Though Carter was one of the first to codify the mental health impacts of racism, five years earlier, psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Hugh F. Butts used the term "racial trauma" to ground further research, study, and understanding in the topic. In a 2002 article, Butts notes that "responses to racial discrimination by African-Americans are often not viewed as severe enough to indicate that these blacks may have post-traumatic stress disorder."

PHOTOS: GETTY IMAGES



A day after the hate crime and mass shooting at Tops Market, Latisha Rogers is comforted by the community and support of True Bethel Baptist Church in Buffalo, New York, on Sunday, May 15, 2022. Rogers, a Tops assistant office manager, was not only present at the mass shooting, but she called 911 to report the gunman, only to be admonished by the operator for whispering.

And yet, more than two decades later, it's reported that 71% of Black Americans experience some form of racial discrimination in their lives. This number seems low, especially considering how racial trauma actively changes us and the way we live. PTSD from racial trauma can cause hypervigilance, depression, anxiety, and chronic stress, which forces our nervous systems to roar into overdrive. New research from the University of Arizona takes this one step further. In a study published in April 2022, researchers Da'Mere T. Wilson and Mary-Frances O'Connor explored grief and bereavement implicit in the racial trauma Black people live with.

Wilson and O'Connor assert that solely associating grief with the loss of a loved one makes the definition "too narrow in scope." Per the study, "This lack of representation, plus the prevalent universalist research framework in psychology, has led to a lack of understanding of how the specific contextual factors of living as a Black person, in a Western country like the United States, may differentially impact the experience of grief." Like Carter, the two also research how grief and loss can catalyze political and social action. They illustrate that the racial trauma, grief, loss, and bereavement that follow are interconnected in an interdependent web.

So, how can we care for ourselves in a world that doesn't recognize our pain and suffering—and doesn't want us to be well?

HOW WE REBUILD

Black Americans have created moving rituals to help us honor and process those losses. We are a communal people. The strength of the village, not just the heteronormative and very white nuclear family model, is what we lean upon.

When someone dies, Black Americans gather at funeral homes, at churches, at banquet halls. We gather in love. We cry, we eat, we honor their lives. Yet, during much of the pandemic, these beautiful grief rituals have been disrupted. Instead we had to grieve alone in our homes, isolated from our communities, behind a computer screen. Zoom funerals became the norm, shaky cellphones and iPads capturing our grief in unprecedented ways. Within the grief space, there are Black folks meeting the evolving needs of their communities. Breathworker and grief guide Naomi Edmondson lost her grandmother, whom she considered a mother figure, in 2019. "When I lost her, in a way I lost the center of my universe," she says. "Then having to handle that loss with COVID and the grief surrounding the pandemic, there were so many layers of grief that I was dealing with."

As a result, Edmondson created a virtual space called Black Folks Grieve as a safe container for both herself and others who look like her to discuss their losses and grief. Every Monday evening, she facilitates a sharing circle for anyone who signs up via her website. "Before I started the group, I was looking for places where I could be in and not only feel like my grief was validated, but I didn't have to do this intense labor to explain myself," she says. "The last thing you want to have to do is the work of trying to make someone understand where you're coming from."

Fellow grief guide Alica Forneret came into the grief space after

PTSD from racial trauma can cause hypervigilance, depression, anxiety, and chronic stress, which forces our nervous systems to roar into overdrive.

unexpectedly losing her mother in October 2016. Submerged in grief, Forneret channeled all she was feeling into Instagram missives about every aspect of grief. She also began consulting with companies on bereavement policies designed to make it easier for employees to cope with grief in the workplace. "How people treat you and your pain, the processing of pain, and your vocalization of that pain, I have found is the most interesting to talk to people about," Forneret says. "The difference between me showing up to work every day in June of last year and everyone else is very different. The way that we are supported and need care is very different too."

Now, she sees her work evolving. She's working on her first book and is building a nonprofit called Pause that will help Black people formalize (and in some cases professionalize) their grief work to support those who need it most. Edmondson and Forneret are part of a legion of Black people—many of them Black women—revolutionizing how grief can be tended to. There's Oceana Sawyer, a former transition guide, who uses Patreon to offer conversations and grief circles about honoring death as a rite of passage. She went from talking about grief on an individual level, before summer 2020, to now talking about collective grief.

She says she started looking at Resmaa Menakem's work on somatic abolitionism and applying it to grief. "That led me to a deep exploration around how bodies, specifically bodies of the African Diaspora, are metabolizing grief alongside all the other losses that we incur on a daily basis." This newfound curiosity fueled an expansion of Sawyer's offerings: In addition to the virtual death cafes she's led for Black and Brown people, she's also hosted joy-mapping workshops on Afrofuturism, womanism, the end of the world, and more.

In the realm of academia, Kami Fletcher, associate professor of American and African American history at Albright College, refers to herself as a death scholar. She found her way into death studies during graduate school when her chair told her about an opportunity to act as a researcher for Mount Auburn Cemetery, Baltimore's oldest African American burial ground. She spent years researching and writing about Mount Auburn and says, "It helped me to learn a lot about cemeteries, the records [that] this space keeps, and what that means to people who are supposed to be invisible in history."

"I don't think I realized that folks were using death studies—death, dying, bereavement, and grief—to mobilize and organize in really interesting ways," she says. In 2018, she co-founded the nonprofit Collective for Radical Death Studies with the implicit aim to decolonize death studies and radicalize death practice. Death work, the Collective's website states, is anti-racism work. They provide resources and information on death studies, death practices, and deathways, such as the Radical Death Studies Canon, which spans topics ranging from queer death and capitalism to colonialism and genocide. "Our mission is to decolonize death studies, and for us [that] really means to decenter whiteness," Fletcher says.

There's also author and end-of-life caregiver Breeshia Wade, who recently penned *Grieving While Black: An Antiracist Take on Oppression and Sorrow*, about living with racial trauma. And Sundari Malcolm, who hosts the BIPOC Dinner Party, an organization created with the goal of bringing people around (virtual) tables to talk about grief. Of course, there are countless others. The wide-ranging approaches to facing our grief and sitting with it, according to Forneret, is truly something to behold. It's also something that gives her hope. "The diversity of people doing this work, the different ways they approach their work, and the complexities are so different and deep," Forneret says. "It feels so rooted. And that's why I want to support the people in our community."

Nneka M. Okona is an Atlanta-based entrepreneur and author. The former journalist is now focused on building Those Who Soar, a travel media company for Black women, and writing books exploring her interests in travel, food, grief, loss, the American South, and the African Diaspora. Twitter: @afrosypaella

PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES



Could We End Wealth?

Billionaires are just one symptom of our upside-down economic system.

CHRIS WINTERS

In 2019, U.S. Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez made headlines at the MLK Now conference. When Ta-Nehisi Coates asked whether the world is moral when it allows billionaires to exist, she answered, "No. It's not."

Ocasio-Cortez explained that, while she doesn't necessarily think individual billionaires are immoral, "I think it's wrong that a vast majority of the country does not make a living wage; I think it's wrong that you can work 100 hours and not feed your kids; I think it's wrong that corporations like Walmart and Amazon can get paid—they can get paid by the government essentially, experience a wealth transfer from the public—for paying people less than a minimum wage. It not only doesn't make economic sense, it doesn't make moral sense, and it doesn't make societal sense."

Many politicians, activists, and commentators have voiced similar sentiments: No one should have a billion dollars. Yet there are now nearly 1,000 billionaires in the United States alone, according to Visual Capitalist, with a combined net worth of more than $4 trillion. When the COVID-19 pandemic triggered a global recession, the richest Americans saw their wealth increase by 40%. At the same time, as Ocasio-Cortez and others have pointed out, 37.9 million people in the U.S. live below the poverty line. Some researchers estimate that at least 27 million people earn less than $30,000 a year, or about $14.42 per hour for full-time work, the mean minimum amount a single adult with no dependents needs to afford food and rent in an average-sized city. The federal minimum wage hasn't been raised since 2009, and even then only to a paltry $7.25 per hour. One of the world's largest companies in both revenue and employees, Walmart pays thousands of workers so little that they need food stamps to buy groceries—often at the same store they work in.

Billionaires are a byproduct of an upside-down economic system. Wealth inequality is often seen as a problem that can be solved by spreading wealth more equally. But that solution bypasses the central problem of what

ILLUSTRATIONS: ELEANOR SHAKESPEARE FOR YES! MEDIA

wealth—as opposed to income, or just "lots of money in the bank"—really means in a consumer capitalist society. In such a society, wealth is not only the accumulation of economic power, but it is also a marker of importance, status, and privilege. It identifies the alpha dog in the pack and gives that dog freedom to do things—even abusive, illegal, or violent things—that would not be tolerated from anyone less wealthy.

Our modern conception of wealth insists that wealth corresponds to moral worth, a concept at odds with any society that believes all people are created equal. Inequality isn't the root of the problem, in this case. It's just a symptom of the real problem: wealth, and all the privileges and power attached to it. So let's put an end to it.



HOUSING IS THE FOUNDATION

There are several ways of eradicating the system that allows wealth to concentrate in the hands of fewer people. Attempts to stimulate economic growth—often through the tax code, but also direct investment by the government—usually benefit just the top 10% of household incomes, says Dedrick Asante-Muhammad, the chief of membership, policy, and equity at the National Community Reinvestment Coalition, an association of more than 600 community organizations working to increase the flow of private capital into traditionally underserved communities.

Housing is where most middle-class Americans begin to build their financial security, even if it doesn't lead directly to wealth. But the escalating cost of housing also prevents low-income people from rising out of poverty. Mechanisms that built the post-war middle class, like the massive construction of affordable and public housing in urban areas, were initially reserved for white workers. The large-scale movement of Black Americans into that housing also corresponded to a disinvestment in its maintenance and upkeep, which further increased the racial wealth gap in America.

"[Public housing] was a positive step, and a mixture of racism and economic marginalization made those [places] ghettos," says Asante-Muhammad. "But they don't have to be ghettos." Upgrading affordable housing and closing the gap between the need for housing and the available supply would require a massive government investment in urban and suburban areas. Rent subsidies in the form of vouchers, currently the most effective tool we have to help low-income Americans pay for housing, are only available to 24% of the households that need them, according to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities.

The 2023 budget approved by Congress would fund just 25,000 new rental vouchers, according to the National Low Income Housing Coalition. That's a fraction of what's needed to bridge the affordable housing gap: 5.3 million U.S. households receive federal support, including through vouchers, Section 8 project-based assistance, or public housing, but an estimated 16 million low-income households who need aid can't receive it because funding isn't available. And that doesn't even begin to address the lack of physical housing. The Urban Institute has estimated there are just 29 adequate and affordable housing units available for every 100 families that need one.

Foundations are sitting on approximately $1.1 trillion in assets, and federal law only requires they pay out 5% of their endowments each year, a rate that hasn't increased since it was enacted in 1976.

TAX IT BACK

Almost no economic reform program comes without incorporating a more progressive income tax. Ocasio-Cortez has advocated for a top marginal tax rate of up to 70% on families earning more than $10 million per year (the current rate on top earners for 2023 is 37%). For nearly two decades following World War II, a period corresponding to the U.S.'s greatest economic expansion, the top marginal rate was above 80% and often higher than 90%. The top rate didn't dip below 70% until 1981, when the Reagan administration suggested using tax cuts for the wealthy to spur economic growth. Today, after 40 years of these policies, there is no evidence they work.

Raising income taxes on the wealthy will only go so far, however. A 70% top marginal rate that kicks in at the 10,000,001st dollar would only net about $720 billion over a decade, according to a *Washington Post* analysis. That's because wealthy Americans derive most of their wealth from investment returns (a.k.a. capital gains), interest, and dividends, not from salaries. And investment income is taxed at a much lower rate than income is.

But a radical hike in income tax combined with other measures, such as reforming the estate tax, raising capital gains tax rates, and imposing a European-style wealth tax, could raise up to $3 trillion over a decade, according to the *Post*'s analysis. That amount, $300 billion per year, only amounts to about 4.8% of what the U.S. government spent in 2022. How that money is allotted would determine how much it affects the nation's wealth gap. But given the messy manner in which laws are enacted, it's likely that only a fraction of that amount would realistically be available.

REFORMING CHARITY

Charitable foundations are an enormous repository of wealth in the U.S., in particular the foundations whose initial endowments originated in big family fortunes—the Rockefellers, Fords, and Gateses, for example. Foundations distributed $90.9 billion in donations in 2021, according to Giving USA, often to causes that support the poorest of Americans. Big giving is loudly touted on corporate public relations missives, by major foundations, by wealthy individuals, and sometimes by the recipients themselves. But foundations also are sitting on approximately $1.1 trillion in assets, and federal law only requires they pay out 5% of their endowments each year, a rate that hasn't increased since it was enacted in 1976. Donor-advised funds, a newer form of philanthropic endeavor, aren't required to pay out anything, and they held an additional $159.8 billion in assets in 2020.

"The fact that you could start a foundation or start a donor-advised fund and those dollars get the tax benefits of doing that, and those resources potentially never see the light of day or have any public benefit, to me is ridiculous," says Edgar Villanueva, founder of the Decolonizing Wealth Project. On top of that, philanthropic endowments are often invested in the same economic structures and corporations that created the social problems that philanthropy is intended to address. Villanueva and others have pointed to the fact that this largely white sector often supports well-known charities with established connections to philanthropy instead of nonprofits led by Black, Indigenous, or other people of color working in those communities.

That's created a lopsided system in which nonprofits gear their operations around the needs of wealthy funders rather than the needs of communities. "We have created a system that allows for such massive concentration of wealth and resources to individuals, while at the same time underfunding infrastructure, social infrastructure, [and] social safety for working-class, low-income people," Asante-Muhammad says. "So then people are just begging to get a Bill Gates grant when, honestly, in the scheme of things, even Bill Gates or Elon Musk doesn't have the money to do what is needed to address these massive social issues."

The Decolonizing Wealth Project's reparative philanthropy framework, which Villanueva outlined in his book *Decolonizing Wealth: Indigenous Wisdom to Heal Divides and Restore Balance*, involves using money as a tool for healing, so that philanthropy doesn't perpetuate exploitative systems. "We have to be honest and transparent around what has transpired, how wealth has been built

in this country," he says. "The fact that we have a scarcity mindset is a byproduct of the history of colonization or the history of how wealth has been accumulated, where so many of us have internalized not having enough."

Philanthropy was set up not as a purely altruistic endeavor, Villanueva says, but one driven by wealthy industrialists giving themselves an image makeover. And U.S. tax policy rewards that behavior. "Not only are you becoming wealthier, your reputation is boosted as a person who is charitable, who is doing good in the world," he adds. Bill Gates famously declared in 2012 that he was going to give away all his wealth through his foundation. A decade later, he's nearly twice as rich as he was back then.

That's why the example of MacKenzie Scott, who has given away $14 billion to more than 1,600 nonprofit organizations since 2019 in no-strings-attached grants, is an outlier. Scott, the ex-wife of Amazon founder Jeff Bezos, has largely stayed out of the spotlight and eschewed the traditional application-based model of grantmaking. Her initiative, Yield Giving, plans an open-call type of application process in the future, and Villanueva appreciates her hands-off approach. "I think she is changing the game and probably making a lot of billionaires uncomfortable," he says. "But even she, as fast as she is giving her money away, it just keeps accumulating."



RETURNING THE COMMON WEALTH TO THE COMMONS

Ending the destructive effect of wealth on society requires interrupting the processes that started its accrual. The first thing white settlers did once they arrived in the Americas was claim ownership of the land, despite many Indigenous societies' beliefs that the land was a common charge. "There's a fair amount of what we call 'wealth' [that] is the commons extracted [and] privatized by individuals," says Chuck Collins, director of the Program on Inequality and the Common Good at the Institute for Policy Studies.

Europeans had a concept of "the commons," but by the time colonization of the Americas began, it had been shrinking relative to private land ownership. By the 20th century, the commons had largely disappeared. At that point, land ownership and inheritance had become powerful engines of wealth accumulation and consolidation of family dynasties. After this looting of the ecological commons created early fortunes, the wealthy protected their gains by eliminating competition and ensuring their business received favorable treatment from the government. And they ensured their wealth could be passed along to their heirs.

But the compounding effects of dynastic wealth were known even then. In 1891, the progressive economist Richard T. Ely noted that reforming inheritance laws was one of three key policies that would have the greatest positive effect on society. "If we're going to talk about reducing wealth inequality, not only do we want to tax and redistribute, but we also want to prevent, discourage, or tax the initial extraction," Collins says.

Only now, in the 21st century, are movements gaining some traction in returning land to its original stewards. The LandBack movement has grown in the U.S. and Canada, with Native tribes fighting to place more land in trust for reservations, and in some places, such as northern California, even receiving their historical land back. Collins sees Indigenous forms of collective land stewardship as a promising model for interrupting the amassing of wealth and redistributing it to those from whom it was originally taken. Another form of collective ownership growing in popularity are community land trusts, where removing housing from the speculative market is seen as a way of preserving both affordability and communities.

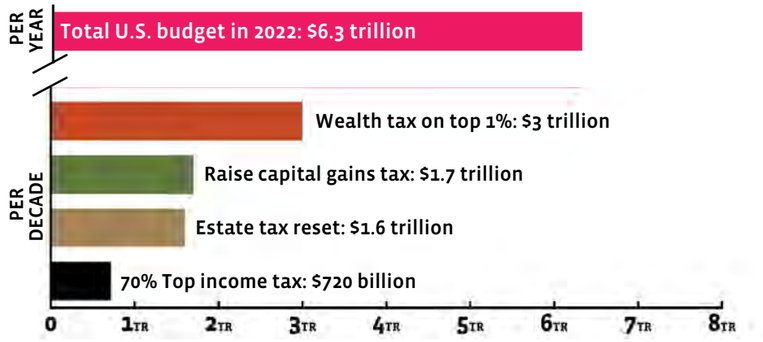
In response to various reparative approaches, some among the superrich have simply hidden their wealth from taxing authorities. In 2021, *ProPublica* used leaked IRS data to reveal that half of the 100 richest people in the U.S. were using the trust system to keep their wealth out of reach. "It's not a sideshow, it's the main stage," Collins says. "We know how little money the estate tax raises now, and it's sort of laughable how porous or almost voluntary it is."

The federal government brought in about $15.6 billion in estate taxes in 2019, according to the Tax Policy Center. State and local governments brought in another $5.4 billion in 2019, according to the Urban Institute. "But if you think about how much wealth transferred from one generation to the next among that super-wealthy group last year, 2021, it's probably more than $1 trillion," Collins says. "So it's capturing just a tiny, minuscule sliver." If we're really going to upset the accumulation and concentration of wealth in fewer and fewer hands, the people will need to find ways to capture a larger piece of that pie.

Chris Winters is a senior editor at YES! Twitter: @thechriswinters

JUST THE FACTS

Wealth inequality has skyrocketed in recent years; there are now nearly 1,000 billionaires in the U.S. alone. The wealthiest Americans have never been richer, while poor and working-class Americans have seen their incomes stagnate and fall. Radical government intervention in the economy to redistribute wealth could help bridge the gap. Here are several policies that could bring a much-needed infusion of cash into the public coffers.



A European-style tax on overall wealth on the top 1% would net about **$3 trillion** over a decade.

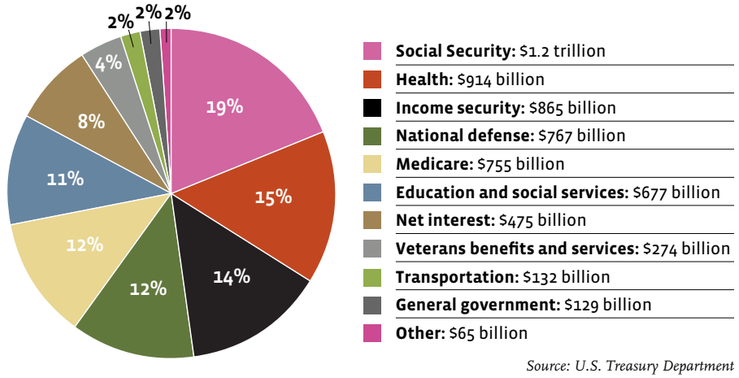
Raising capital gains taxes, currently capped at 20%, could raise anywhere from $104.9 billion to up to **$1.7 trillion** over 10 years.

Reverting the estate tax to 1982 levels, when the top rate was 65% and the exemption level was just $520,000, would collect about $169 billion per year, or **$1.7 trillion** over a decade.

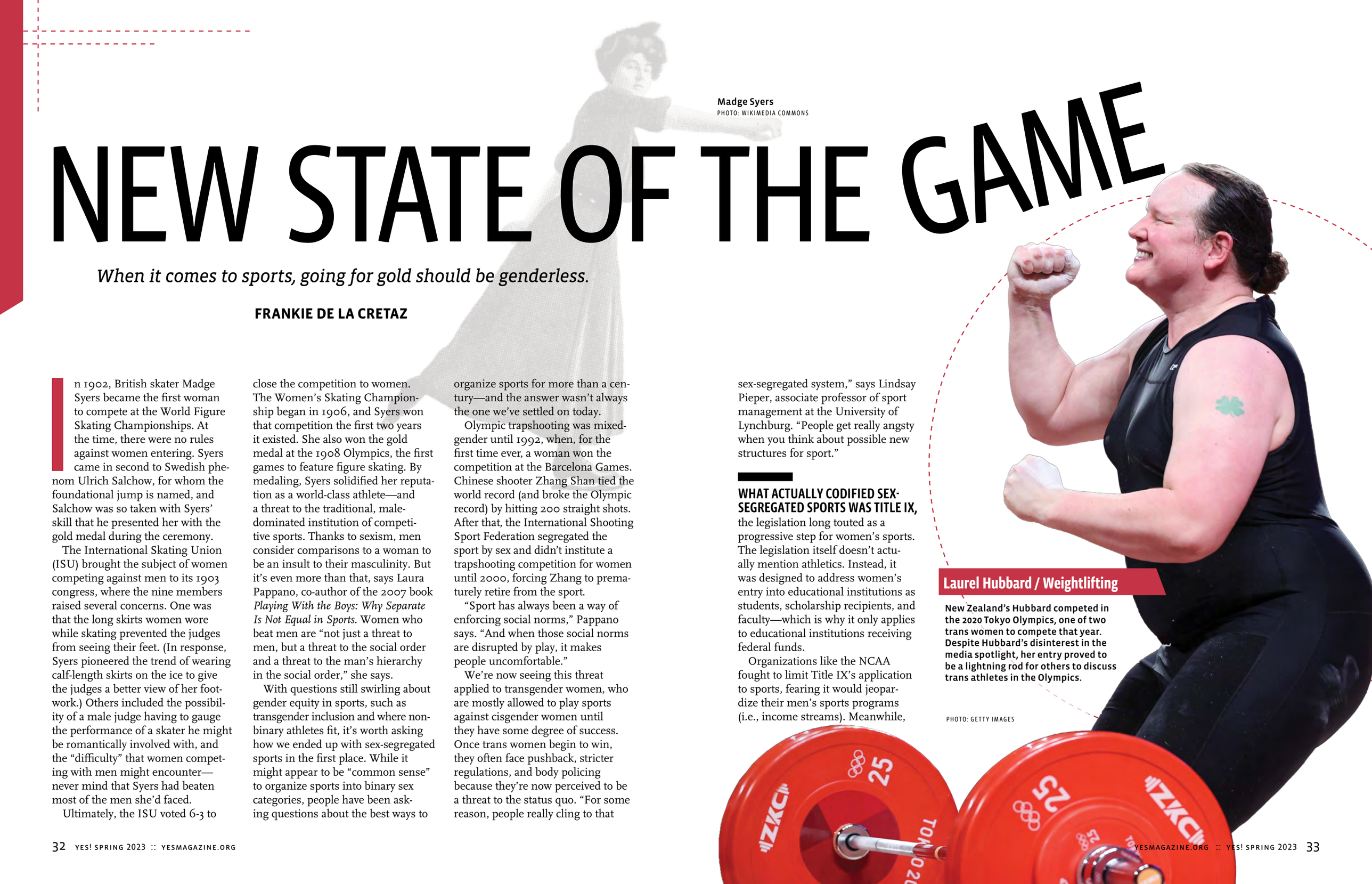
Imposing a 70% top marginal income tax rate on those earning more than $10 million could bring in **$720 billion** over 10 years.

Sources: The Washington Post, Brookings Institution

U.S. Government Expenditures by Categories, 2022



Source: U.S. Treasury Department



Madge Syers
PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

NEW STATE OF THE GAME

When it comes to sports, going for gold should be genderless.

FRANKIE DE LA CRETAZ

In 1902, British skater Madge Syers became the first woman to compete at the World Figure Skating Championships. At the time, there were no rules against women entering. Syers came in second to Swedish phenom Ulrich Salchow, for whom the foundational jump is named, and Salchow was so taken with Syers' skill that he presented her with the gold medal during the ceremony.

The International Skating Union (ISU) brought the subject of women competing against men to its 1903 congress, where the nine members raised several concerns. One was that the long skirts women wore while skating prevented the judges from seeing their feet. (In response, Syers pioneered the trend of wearing calf-length skirts on the ice to give the judges a better view of her footwork.) Others included the possibility of a male judge having to gauge the performance of a skater he might be romantically involved with, and the "difficulty" that women competing with men might encounter—never mind that Syers had beaten most of the men she'd faced.

Ultimately, the ISU voted 6-3 to close the competition to women. The Women's Skating Championship began in 1906, and Syers won that competition the first two years it existed. She also won the gold medal at the 1908 Olympics, the first games to feature figure skating. By medaling, Syers solidified her reputation as a world-class athlete—and a threat to the traditional, male-dominated institution of competitive sports. Thanks to sexism, men consider comparisons to a woman to be an insult to their masculinity. But it's even more than that, says Laura Pappano, co-author of the 2007 book *Playing With the Boys: Why Separate Is Not Equal in Sports*. Women who beat men are "not just a threat to men, but a threat to the social order and a threat to the man's hierarchy in the social order," she says.

With questions still swirling about gender equity in sports, such as transgender inclusion and where nonbinary athletes fit, it's worth asking how we ended up with sex-segregated sports in the first place. While it might appear to be "common sense" to organize sports into binary sex categories, people have been asking questions about the best ways to organize sports for more than a century—and the answer wasn't always the one we've settled on today.

Olympic trapshooting was mixed-gender until 1992, when, for the first time ever, a woman won the competition at the Barcelona Games. Chinese shooter Zhang Shan tied the world record (and broke the Olympic record) by hitting 200 straight shots. After that, the International Shooting Sport Federation segregated the sport by sex and didn't institute a trapshooting competition for women until 2000, forcing Zhang to prematurely retire from the sport.

"Sport has always been a way of enforcing social norms," Pappano says. "And when those social norms are disrupted by play, it makes people uncomfortable."

We're now seeing this threat applied to transgender women, who are mostly allowed to play sports against cisgender women until they have some degree of success. Once trans women begin to win, they often face pushback, stricter regulations, and body policing because they're now perceived to be a threat to the status quo. "For some reason, people really cling to that sex-segregated system," says Lindsay Pieper, associate professor of sport management at the University of Lynchburg. "People get really angsty when you think about possible new structures for sport."

WHAT ACTUALLY CODIFIED SEX-SEGREGATED SPORTS WAS TITLE IX, the legislation long touted as a progressive step for women's sports. The legislation itself doesn't actually mention athletics. Instead, it was designed to address women's entry into educational institutions as students, scholarship recipients, and faculty—which is why it only applies to educational institutions receiving federal funds.

Organizations like the NCAA fought to limit Title IX's application to sports, fearing it would jeopardize their men's sports programs (i.e., income streams). Meanwhile,

Laurel Hubbard / Weightlifting

New Zealand's Hubbard competed in the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, one of two trans women to compete that year. Despite Hubbard's disinterest in the media spotlight, her entry proved to be a lightning rod for others to discuss trans athletes in the Olympics.

PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES



Lia Thomas / Swimming

Thomas, the first trans athlete to win an NCAA Division I championship, originally competed on the UPenn men's swimming team. After transitioning, she competed on the women's team her senior year. Conservative lawmakers have used Thomas as a poster child for anti-trans legislation across the country. "People will say, 'Oh, she just transitioned so she would have an advantage, so she could win,'" Thomas told ESPN. "I transitioned to be happy, to be true to myself."



CeCe Telfer / Hurdles

As a college student, Telfer initially ran on the Franklin Pierce men's track team, despite identifying as a woman. When she was welcomed onto the women's team, she cried in relief. Later, as Telfer trained for the Olympics, she struggled to find a coach, adequate training facilities, and even housing because of her identity.

women's rights groups were asking legislators to consider every angle before applying Title IX to athletics. "NOW is opposed to any regulation which precludes eventual integration," the National Organization for Women wrote in 1974. "Regulations that 'protect' girls and/or women are against NOW goals and are contradictory to our stand on the [Equal Rights Amendment]."

Both the Supreme Court's 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling, striking down "separate but equal," and the Civil Rights Act of 1964 informed reactions to the passage of Title IX in 1972. Groups like NOW had a long-term vision for a co-ed or integrated system, which would have been easier to implement because it required a single division for each sport, as opposed to creating separate divisions and facilities for each sex. But because Title IX formed its protections on the basis of a sexual binary, all federal legislation based on Title IX had to adopt this binary structure as the primary way to organize federally funded activities, including public sports. In doing so, Title IX not only failed to challenge assumptions of girls' athletic inferiority, but the legislation actually reinforced it by codifying separate divisions that further entrenched the idea.

"I think we need to take a hard look at the messages that we send when we create restrictions, especially at the school and recreational level," Pappano says. While Title IX itself permits sex-segregated sports, the courts have overwhelmingly suggested that the equal protection clause in the U.S. Constitution does not. In all five prominent cases in which girls have sued for the right to try out for a boys' football team, courts have ruled that they must be permitted. In one case, the court said that classifications must not reflect "archaic and stereotypic notions" about sex differences.

Legally, however, boys attempting to gain the right to play on girls-only teams have not been as successful. Courts have decided that since Congress intended Title IX to be a remedy for historical discrimination against women, individual boys could be denied the right to play on girls' teams. The asymmetry of athletic opportunities offered to men and women is what legal scholar Jamal Greene refers to as the best justification for the "one-way ratchet that allows women to participate in male-only sports without extending the same opportunity to males who wish to participate in female-only sports."

But for all the social reasons that coercive sex segregation is an unfair way to organize sports, there are more serious issues at play. Sex isn't actually a binary, which remains the most obvious reason why sports shouldn't be organized by binary gender categories. People aren't neatly organized into "male" and "female"—intersex, nonbinary, and transgender people exist and are always going to present a challenge to any system that insists on separating people into two gender categories. "[Many things have] a biological range and we're trying to create this dichotomy that's very sharp," Pappano says. "Michael Phelps has a really long wingspan and really long feet that allegedly operate [like] flippers. And yet, we're not saying [if] your feet are bigger than this, you can't compete. We're creating a set of parameters that, if we were to step back, don't make sense, may not be fair, and I think can be hurtful to the people who play."

Layshia Clarendon / Basketball

Clarendon, currently a free agent, was most recently a guard for the Minnesota Lynx. The WNBA's first openly nonbinary player, Clarendon has said that basketball has always been a safe space. Their teammates, and even the uniform, affirmed their identity, even before they were openly trans.



IT'S HARD TO KNOW EXACTLY HOW MANY PEOPLE ARE INTERSEX OR TRANSGENDER, but an estimated 1% of the U.S. population is intersex and about 0.5% of adults in the U.S. are transgender, though these numbers are rising among younger generations. While there has been plenty of scholarship about the benefits of integrated teams, there has been little research about what desegregating sports would mean for trans athletes. Experiences on integrated sports teams can prove formative and affirming for trans young people, even before they know they are trans.

Connor, a 33-year-old transmasculine person, played on a boys' hockey team from the age of 12. (Connor is withholding their last name for privacy reasons.) Not everyone was happy they were there. After Connor's coach held a meeting and explained that Connor, who was living as a girl at the time, would be the team's goalie, two boys were pulled off the team by their parents.

PHOTOS: GETTY IMAGES

If people could choose which category they felt safest competing in, perhaps coercive sex segregation wouldn't be as traumatic as it is for those who fall outside of binary sex categories.

Yet Connor's coach continued to support them, a rarity in many sports. "It was probably the first time in my life I felt like I had someone on my side," Connor says. Even still, their presence caused waves. "When I made the team, I knocked a returning goalie off the team roster," they explain. "He was offered the backup spot and turned it down and transferred schools to play for a different team."

Despite this opposition, Connor's connection with their teammates remained strong, even as adults, when they came out as trans. "I didn't have language for how I felt," Connor says. "But I did know that when I was on that [boys'] team and I pulled on my helmet, I felt the most 'me' I could." When Connor told their best friend from the team that they were trans, his response was that nothing changed, as long as he could keep calling them goalie. "[But] not everyone gets a positive experience being the only girl or perceived girl on a team," Connor says.

Sara Hovda, a 30-year-old trans woman, grew up playing basketball, football, and track on boys' teams in Minneapolis. She says that despite being one of the best players on the football team, she was "never really 'one of the guys.'" Indeed, trans kids playing on teams that align with their assigned gender at birth—even if those kids don't yet know they are trans—can feel alienated or experience increasing dysphoria.

"There was always this strange disconnect between me and any other person on my teams, especially in football where it's a little more hypermasculine," Hovda says. "There is this narrative about trans women as having 'male socialization,' but it is an inherently traumatic experience," she says, citing how uncomfortable she was, especially around the sexualized "locker room talk" from her teammates. "If I had come out when I was younger, I probably would not have done any sports and I probably would have been happier for it, as opposed to doing sex-segregated sports [with boys]," says Hovda.

If people could choose which category they felt safest competing in, perhaps coercive sex segregation wouldn't be as traumatic as it is for those who fall outside of binary sex categories. When, toward the end of high school, Connor transferred to an elite girls' hockey team to try to have a better chance of getting a college scholarship, they "had a terrible time of it." There was an assumption that the team environment would be better for Connor because they were finally going to be on a team of girls, but that wasn't the case. "All I could think was 'I am not like you at all,'" they recall. In short order, they switched back to the boys' team—and were still able to get a scholarship to play Division I girls' hockey.

The current push by anti-trans groups to weaponize Title IX to exclude trans girls from girls' athletics is "such a misrepresentation" of the legislation, says Pieper. The Biden administration has affirmed that Title IX protects LGBTQ students, which includes transgender athletes. "Transgender youth should be able to play with people based on their joy of movement and athletic interest and ability and not feel this pressure based on social norms," says Pappano.

Both Connor and Hovda agree that the environment for young trans athletes today is particularly hostile, given the spate of legislation in states around the country targeting trans people's medical care, public accommodations, and athletic participation. "If I were 15 now and trying to play sports, I would have thrown in the towel," says Connor. Hovda agrees: "With how things are now I would rather just not do sports."

This sex-segregated system would be less of an issue if the sex categories in athletics weren't so heavily policed. Sports participation at the collegiate and professional levels is often regulated by testosterone levels, and bills are being passed across the U.S. that would subject students suspected of being trans to intrusive body and genital exams.

"Sports officials are trying to uphold this false binary and keep turning to medical and scientific practices to do so," says Pieper, who wrote the 2016 book *Sex Testing: Gender Policing in Women's Sports*. "And every time, it's being shown that that's not a way you can divide people because people can't be divided neatly into just two categories." And yet, Pappano says, "Sports are only becoming more entrenched" in the gender binary.

"I do think a lot of young people, because [physical education] has been desegregated, they grow up playing with everyone, and you learn a lot about yourself and about others when you're playing sports with everyone."

— Laura Pappano

THERE ARE PLENTY OF REASONS TO INTEGRATE SPORTS: Boys can learn to respect and befriend the girls on their team, while girls can access the same social benefits as their male counterparts. Inclusion also chips away at the overarching narrative that women's and girls' sports are second tier, and therefore women and girls, as athletes, are inferior to men. And yet, it's often an uphill battle for girls who play on boys' teams. Some are harassed to the point that they're forced to drop out, while others persist even when it takes a negative toll on their self-confidence or mental health. "So much of sports is psychological," Pappano says. "How do you play when you are constantly told that you don't belong somewhere, that you shouldn't be there? It's a psychological burden."

That burden was intensified for Alexa van Sickle, 38, who played baseball as a child. When she joined her team at age 9 or 10, she was assumed to be a boy on the first day and she never corrected her coaches or teammates. "The impact of hiding was the concern of being found out, for my gender to be any factor at all in my experiences with the team," she says. "I don't remember it as a negative experience, but it also fundamentally sucks that I felt I had to."

In sports like baseball, where there's no infrastructure for girls' baseball past high school, girl players may receive less investment and development from their coaches because they're seen as having no future in the sport. As a result, girls—especially those playing sports that don't have women's collegiate or professional teams to aspire to—must constantly prove that they deserve to be on the team. "I had to be so good that the coaches would want me to play," Connor says. "I wanted to keep playing on the boys' teams, and [being the best] was the way to do it, and that was how I did it."

Prior to Title IX, physical education was sex-segregated. Victoria Jackson, clinical assistant professor of history at Arizona State University, sees that as a model for moving forward. "That, I think, is where we really saw the potential transformative power of Title IX in a school setting," Jackson says. "I do think a lot of young people, because [physical education] has been desegregated, they grow up playing with everyone, and you learn a lot about yourself and about others when you're playing sports with everyone."

Some club-level sports, like quadball (formerly quidditch) and Ultimate are already integrating their divisions to allow athletes to self-select where they compete. And, at the youth level, many sports are co-ed until the kids hit puberty. Some people, like law professor Nancy Leong, have suggested organizing sports based on things like height or weight class, rather than gender. Ultimately, however, until society is ready to have complicated conversations about gender, it's going to be difficult to integrate sports.

"It may be a while before we get to the most elite competition at the highest levels, but let's start creating a new norm around playing together recreationally and at school levels," says Pappano.

"There are all kinds of barriers to girls' participation in ostensibly segregated sports," says van Sickle. "Blending in with the boys was how I was used to doing things, but for other girls at that age, that might not be comfortable. I saw myself as equal and therefore I felt I was, and I'm sure that helped me on the field. But that's not the message most girls internalize, and that starts at a young age."

Hovda wonders what sports could have been like for her if they had been integrated when she was growing up. "If there's a potential for it to be even slightly better with desegregated sports, it's worth the fight," she says. "It's worth the conversation."

Frankie de la Cretaz is the co-author of *Hail Mary: The Rise and Fall of the National Women's Football League*. Their work at the intersections of sports and gender has been featured in *The New York Times*, *Sports Illustrated*, and more. Twitter: @thefrankiedlc



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REBIRTH OF A TRUE DEMOCRACY

To live up to its stated ideals, the United States must finally cede power to the people.

SONALI KOLHATKAR

Democracy is a simple concept: People exercise their collective agency to rule themselves so they can ensure their own well-being. Democracy is the opposite of autocracy, serving as a disavowal of monarchs and militarists claiming the right to govern people without their consent.

Not surprisingly, democracy is a very popular idea. A Pew Research Center survey of people in 24 nations in 2023 revealed that 70% of people support direct democracy, with the percentage rising to 77% support for representative democracy. However, since democracy is designed to equalize power among people, it tends to be a work in progress. Even in functioning democracies, the powerful may subvert democracy and use it to their ends, while those who have less power struggle for their fair share.

America has yet to deliver on its promise of a true democracy. In March 2016, Senate Democrats and members of the Congressional Black Caucus, including Rep. John Lewis (D-Ga.), urged Senate Republicans to meet with Pres. Barack Obama's Supreme Court nominee and hold hearings and a vote. The Republicans refused, an act deemed grossly unconstitutional.

PHOTO: MARK WILSON/GETTY IMAGES

The United States—the world's second-largest democracy—was once regarded as a shining example of that form of government. But now, people around the world are disappointed in the nation's approach to democracy. A 2024 Pew Research Center survey of people in 34 nations concluded that only about 21% of those surveyed believe the U.S. offers a good model of democracy for the world, while 40% believe the U.S. used to be a source of inspiration but is no longer. The view from within is hardly better: Most people in the U.S. tend to distrust the government, with only about one-quarter of Americans trusting it at any given time since 2007.

Their suspicions are justified, as Bastian Herre, a researcher at *Our World in Data*, explains: "The data suggests that the U.S. is less democratic now than it was a decade ago, even though it remains much more democratic than it was for most of its history."

Because of the incredible promise it holds, democracy is fraught with contradictions and often triggers deep dissatisfaction when it doesn't live up to its ideals. Indeed, democracy is declining all over the world. Herre found that the number of people living in democracies fell from 3.9 billion in 2016 to 2.3 billion in 2023, and that more people are living in countries that are autocratizing.

To understand why democracies are in decline, it's worth examining how systems are enacted. The devil is often in the details. In the space between our decision-making and the enactment of those decisions, nefarious and power-hungry actors can hijack processes and sow the seeds of autocracy.

There are many ways to strengthen democracy amid a rise in authoritarianism. It begins with voters making wise choices: "People can work toward making [the U.S.] more democratic by voting for pro-democracy candidates," Herre notes. Indeed, we tend to equate democracy with voting—the most tangible way representative democracy is enacted and a critical step in choosing the public servants who make decisions on our behalf. Beyond that, Herre suggests that to make democracy more inclusive, what's needed is "supporting pro-democracy organizations, and expressing their support for democracy in protests and conversations."

Unfortunately, contemporary systems of representative democracy have become popularity contests in which participants are called upon every couple of years to pick between exceedingly narrow choices. In the U.S. especially, the question of *who* gets to vote—and therefore participate in democracy—has been debated and legislated for centuries.

Further, there are structural obstacles to voting baked into the U.S. Constitution, which is the definitive document laying out the rules of democracy, within which are embedded those devilish details that determine the responsiveness of the system. Even after adding various amendments to right historical wrongs, the Constitution still references "electors" rather than individual voters when it comes to electing a president, and allows for the undemocratic, racist, and complicated Electoral College system. The Constitution also specifies the undemocratic makeup of the Senate, a powerful body that allows smaller, whiter states to have the same power as larger, more racially diverse ones.

In other words, as Elie Mystal, justice correspondent for *The Nation* and author of *Allow Me to Retort: A Black Guy's Guide to the Constitution*, told YES! in 2022, the U.S. Constitution is "a flawed document that needs to be perfected in order to achieve a level of fundamental fairness and equality that was ... missing from the initial draft of it."

He points out that none of the original authors of the Constitution or its amendments were women."[T]he same goes for LGBTQ communities. The same goes for racial, ethnic, and religious minorities in this country."

If U.S. democracy is exclusionary by design, is it even a democracy at all?

DEMOCRACY FOR SOME

The U.S. Constitution was inspired not only by ancient Greek ideas of democracy, but also by formations that had greater physical and temporal proximity to the nation's modern founders. A 1987 Senate resolution acknowledged how the "original framers of the Constitution ... are known to have greatly admired the concepts, principles and government practices of the Six Nations of the Iroquois Confederacy," which today is referred to as the Haudenosaunee Confederacy.

"Our 'Founding Fathers' based the U.S. Constitution on the Haudenosaunee Law of Peace," says Fern Naomi Renville, an enrolled member of the Sisseton-Wahpeton Dakota and Omaha nations, and a Seneca-Cayuga storyteller from Minnesota. Renville adds that Benjamin Franklin's 1791 memoir acknowledges this debt to the Indigenous peoples of the land.

"At the time when all of the 'Founding Fathers' were having conversations, there were Native people at the table who were consulting ... [and] giving input to the colonists, who weren't all getting along, and they were being advised to come together in the way that the Haudenosaunee Tribes had," Renville says.

Through their experience, Indigenous advisers showed the power in forming a union of disparate groups and modeled how settler colonialists could do the same to counter the power of the British Crown. However, Renville says some of the differences between the U.S. Constitution and the Haudenosaunee Law of Peace were deliberately designed to preserve power for those who already had it: wealthy white men.

"When people learn about the actual inspiration for the U.S. Constitution, it changes how we think about inclusion in those rights," says Renville. "It changes how we might think about the Bill of Rights, which enshrines what are basically Haudenosaunee principles for good

AROUND THE WORLD, MORE COUNTRIES ARE FALLING TO AUTOCRATIC RULE


Viktor Orbán — Hungary


Benjamin Netanyahu — Israel


Donald Trump — United States


King Salman — Saudi Arabia


Kim Jong Un — North Korea

PHOTOS: GETTY IMAGES



More than 200,000 people participated in the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in Washington, D.C., on Aug. 28, 1963, demanding equal voting and civil rights. In March of 2022, demonstrators crossed the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Ala., commemorating the 57th anniversary of Bloody Sunday, when civil rights protesters led by John Lewis were attacked by state troopers. The 2022 marchers were also supporting the John Lewis Voting Rights Act, which would strengthen the hard-won Voting Rights Act of 1965. The act has yet to pass.

governance. ... Just learning that might prompt people to do some growing around how we include everyone ... men and women, rich and poor."

Tribes centered women in their democratic structures, and did not operate as capitalists or enslavers. In contrast, the Constitution's framers imported European ideas of women's disenfranchisement, human enslavement, and even landownership and property rights.

When white women in the U.S. eventually won the right to vote in 1920, they were strongly influenced by Indigenous women who enjoyed political power and decision-making authority over land and food. In 2016, women's studies historian Sally Roesch Wagner told *The Washington Post* that early white suffragists such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton "believed women's liberation was possible because they knew liberated women, women who possessed rights beyond their wildest imagination: Haudenosaunee women."

"The Haudenosaunee Law of Peace that the Constitution is based on relies on the power of the clan mothers as the ultimate authority," says Renville. "That is the one piece that got left out in the application of these ideas on the U.S. Constitution and so that might be a part of why these ideas haven't been as successfully applied in our country that we have now."

For example, the U.S. Constitution does not enshrine reproductive justice or the right to an abortion because, according to Mystal, "the Constitution did not treat women as full people."

People of color and especially Black people were also excluded from the writing and passage of the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments to the U.S. Constitution, which ended enslavement, granted citizenship to African Americans, and legalized voting rights for Black men, respectively. And yet, white supremacist forces continued to curb the democratic rights of people of color until the civil rights movement forced passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act.

Calling it "the most important piece of legislation ever passed in American history," Mystal attributes Barack Obama's 2008 presidential win to the Voting Rights Act. "Forty years after the civil rights movement, we end up with the first Black president," he says.

U.S. democracy has suffered from constant push-and-pull factors, with excluded communities fighting for and winning rights, and reactionary forces working to undo those gains. Mystal laments how, after Obama's election, the U.S. Supreme Court "eviscerated" the Voting Rights Act in 2013 and spawned a slew of Republican-led efforts to disenfranchise voters of color and dilute the impact of their votes.

The exclusionary nature of U.S. democracy remains one of its central problems. Today, mass incarceration is seen as a continuation of slavery, with millions of people who are disproportionately Black and Brown forced to work for little to no compensation and nearly entirely excluded from voting.

History offers many lessons in strengthening democracy: After the U.S. incorporated the poll tax, a pay-to-play patchwork system that required people to pay taxes in order to vote, women, people of color, and low-income people overcame the corruptive power of money. Eventually, Annie E. Harper, a retired domestic worker, successfully challenged the poll tax through the 1966 *Harper v. Virginia Board of Elections* Supreme Court ruling.

And yet, the overrepresentation of wealth in politics remains one of the greatest challenges to U.S. democracy. A 2023 survey by the Pew Research Center found that 83% of Republicans and Republican-leaning people in the U.S. and 80% of Democrats and Democratic-leaning people in the U.S. feel that big-money donors and special interest lobbyists "have too much influence on decisions made by members of Congress."

What Renville considers "most terrifying" today is "the rulings that recognize corporations as equal to people, so that economic structures have more legal weight than a human being."

Gerald Horne, who holds the Moores Professorship of History and African American Studies at the University of Houston, agrees money has too much influence in politics. He offers a salient piece of advice to those seeking to strengthen democracy: "You would have to democratize the economy to begin with," he says. "When you don't democratize the economy, the malefactors of great wealth—as [Theodore] Roosevelt used to say—are able to use their economic strength to put a thumb on the scale with regard to politics." A weighing scale is an apt metaphor for who has influence in U.S. democracy: The political power of historically marginalized people has been outweighed by the nefarious power of wealth and capital.

Labor unions are microcosms of democracy and offer useful examples of how direct democracy via inclusive decision-making can counter the power of money.

Horne says in the early part of the 20th century, the American Federation of Labor (AFL) tended to organize skilled workers but not low-wage workers such as secretaries in their quest for labor rights and better wages and benefits.

In contrast, the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) "was organizing across the board, from top to bottom" in auto plants, Horne adds. "Obviously the CIO model was more democratic than the AFL model." Ultimately, McCarthyism eroded the CIO, which was then absorbed by the AFL. "We have not learned that much from unions," says Horne.

Furthermore, unions are relatively small formations in which direct democracy is a more viable prospect than in nation states. Most of the world's democracies are representative, which means that people choose leaders to make decisions on their behalf rather than making every decision themselves. In contrast, direct democracies allow people to directly choose policies that govern them.

DIRECT DEMOCRACIES LEAD THE WAY

When it comes to large nations in particular, representative democracy seems more efficient than, say, how a small nation such as Switzerland—one of the world's



The Hyde Amendment, which bars federal funds from being used for abortion care, was first introduced in 1977, four years after *Roe v. Wade* and was the first major blow to legal abortion in the U.S. Rep. Pat Schroeder (D-Co.) lent her voice to an anti-Hyde rally on the Capitol steps in 1977. Today, reproductive rights advocates protest against the Supreme Court's 2022 decision *Dobbs vs. Jackson Women's Health Organization*, which overturned *Roe v. Wade*.

PHOTOS: GETTY IMAGES (TOP LEFT); AP IMAGES (TOP RIGHT)

PHOTOS: GETTY IMAGES



Activists from the American Indian Movement occupied San Francisco's Alcatraz Island for 19 months, starting in 1969, demanding that unoccupied federal land be returned to its Indigenous stewards. Today, #LandBack has become a rallying cry from North America to the South Pacific for Indigenous communities to reclaim their ancestral lands.

only direct democracies—is run. A nation of fewer than 9 million, the Swiss elect seven councilors every four years to carry out the day-to-day functioning of the government and participate in popular votes up to four times a year on specific measures. It is the closest to a direct democracy the world has today.

At more than 333 million people, the U.S. is the third most populous nation on the planet, behind India and China. It is also the third-largest in size, behind Russia and Canada. By virtue of its sheer population and geographic size, U.S. democracy is complicated. A republic of 50 states and various territories, the federal government shares sovereign power with state governments. It makes little sense for residents of, say, Maryland, to vote on an issue that disproportionately impacts Oregonians.

About half of all states have some form of Switzerland-like direct democracy, allowing residents to regularly cast votes on ballot measures—a sound approach, at least on paper, to ensuring state-level governments remain responsive to their voters. But there is no direct democracy at the federal level, even for something as simple as choosing the president.

The Electoral College, where citizens vote for state-level delegates, is arguably one of the biggest tools used to dilute the power of democratic federal representation. Those delegates in turn cast ballots for the president. This is one step removed from representative democracy and could even be considered democracy by unfair proxy.

The complexity of the Electoral College system becomes most apparent every four years, when adults attempt to explain to the children around them that the path to the White House winds its way through a handful of so-called "swing states." Watch the face of a young person contort in confusion over the fact that a Michigan ballot is far more consequential than one from California, and try to explain why such a system is allowed to define itself as democratic.

The fact that the Electoral College makes it possible for a presidential nominee to win office even if they lose the popular vote—which has happened five times in U.S. history, including twice in the past 25 years—has prompted many to call for its abolition. After all, minority rule is a hallmark of autocracy. About two-thirds of all people in the U.S. favor ending the Electoral College and want direct democracy—at least when it comes to choosing the president.

"We don't have to get into these complicated arguments about economic democracy and the power of billionaires," says Horne. "You can just start with the Electoral College. It's obvious that the Electoral College reflects a belief on the part of the framers of the Constitution that those small percentages of a potential electorate that could vote were not trustworthy and so therefore you needed this intervening force ... to 'correct' any 'mistakes' that voters had made."

There are efforts underway to end the Electoral College system, the most promising of which is the National Popular Vote Interstate Compact, a state-by-state effort to end the winner-take-all electors system practiced by 48 out of 50 states. Although the Constitution specifies the use of electors, it doesn't require states to award all electoral votes to the winner of the statewide popular vote. Each state can therefore pass a law switching to proportional apportionment of electors and, as of April 2024, 17 states and the District of Columbia—representing 209 Electoral College votes—have done so. When states representing the majority of electoral votes—270—pass such laws, the Electoral College will effectively become a popular vote.

PHOTOS: GETTY IMAGES (TOP LEFT); AP IMAGES (TOP RIGHT)

DEMOCRACY IS HEALTHIEST WHEN THERE IS GREATEST PARTICIPATION AND POWER SHARING, ESPECIALLY AMONG THOSE WHO HAVE BEEN HISTORICALLY EXCLUDED.

DEMOCRATIZING THE SUPREME COURT

Another obstacle to people's ability to rule themselves is the increasingly unaccountable U.S. Supreme Court, where only nine people with lifetime terms make decisions affecting hundreds of millions—a dynamic veering uncomfortably close to autocratic rule.

The Court is prone to financial corruption, with justices having been found to accept lavish gifts from wealthy friends and then rule in their favor. It is also severely exclusionary in terms of race and gender—out of 116 justices since the nation's founding only eight have not been white men. Moreover, justices are increasingly setting policy instead of interpreting laws—in effect becoming proxy legislators.

"One of the reasons why Republicans prefer to do certain things through the Supreme Court is that they can't actually get them done at the ballot box, because they're unpopular," says Mystal, who sees the Supreme Court as one of the biggest counterbalances to U.S. democracy. "People support women's rights. People, now, support gay rights. Taking those away politically is difficult. That's why they want the courts to do it."

There are numerous ideas around reforming the Supreme Court, including setting term limits for justices—a popular idea—and creating a binding code of conduct. President Joe Biden has backed both these ideas, but so far, none of these efforts appear likely to come to fruition.

INDIGENOUS DEMOCRATIC PRINCIPLES

"I believe that how we treat land is how we treat people," says Renville. The sentiment captures another major difference between the U.S. form of democracy and the Indigenous democratic principles on which the U.S. Constitution was loosely based: Landownership, which is the root of individual financial accumulation and capitalism, had no place in the Haudenosaunee Great Law of Peace.

Per Renville, "the recognition of the 'rights of nature'" is a critical piece of inclusion in the U.S. political system that can strengthen democracy. Humans exist within the context of their environment and consequently thrive when their environment is respected. Modern-day democratic systems tend not to consider the rights of nature. Yet, as Renville asserts, we need to begin incorporating "the right of a river or a forest or a mountain or so forth to exist and to be preserved and protected for the future" into our democratic system, as the Haudenosaunee did.

There is precedent for such an idea. In 2008, Ecuador became the first nation in the world to vote on a new Constitution that centered the rights of nature and of natural systems to "exist, flourish, and evolve." Remarkably, the idea originated in the U.S. and was pushed by a grassroots organization from San Francisco called the Pachamama Alliance, and drafted with the help of the Community Environmental Law Defense Fund, which is based in Pennsylvania. Today, the Global Alliance for the Rights of Nature is leading a worldwide effort to incorporate similar clauses in the constitutions of all democracies.

Indigenous principles centering women and nature offer a pathway toward stronger democracy in the U.S. Renville cites the leadership of Frances Charles, the chairwoman of the Lower Elwha Klallam Tribe in the Northwest U.S. Charles was "a huge part of the force that brought down that Elwha Dam successfully and restored their ancestral beach, and restored the salmon run" so that people could sustain themselves, according to Renville. "That kind of female leadership, I see it as being very connected to the ability to advocate for land and water, and to take care of our lands and people." After all, care for people and the land is the ultimate measure of success in any democracy.

Democracy is healthiest when there is greatest participation and power sharing, especially among those who have been historically excluded. Or, as Herre concluded in a 2022 analysis of democracies globally, "People turned previous autocratic tides by advocating relentlessly for governing themselves democratically. We have done it before, and can do it again."

Sonali Kolhatkar is a senior editor at YES! Media and host and executive producer of YES! Presents: Rising Up With Sonali.

A RETURN TO LEFTIST SELF-DEFENSE

Communities targeted by escalating right-wing violence are learning from their own histories how to keep each other safe.

SHANE BURLEY

"We heard there are some antifa over here!"

The shout came from a group of Proud Boys, a far-right street gang, while they approached a picket line organized by the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) in September 2018. While the IWW, a radical labor union that unionized a fast-food chain in Portland, Oregon, and Washington State, is certainly anti-fascist, this was a union action—not an "antifa" protest. But those facts mattered little to the right-wing agitators who had made Portland a flash point in political violence. As the Proud Boys sought to instigate, one IWW member, Sinead Steiner, remembers union activists pivoting in an attempt to de-escalate.

IWW members engaged the Proud Boys in mundane discussions about labor law while other demonstrators began using silly chants to lower the emotional temperature. The method was effective, no one faced harm, and the union action continued. This was not the first time the far right had threatened the IWW, so members knew they needed to walk into any protest with a nimble plan that included employing some form of community self-defense.

As Donald Trump ascended to power, there was dramatic growth in hate crimes as well as far-right and racist groups such as the Proud Boys, Oath Keepers and militias, and other neo-Nazi formations. They stormed U.S. cities, often holding rallies intended to provoke counterprotesters whom they could attack. As a result, there was a rise in left-wing formations, including the John Brown Gun Club and the Socialist Rifle Association, that say armed community self-defense may be a necessary component of safety, which in this case means protecting activists from racist militants.

The threats that the far right presented to Portland's left—along with the historical repression of unions by racist foot soldiers—are why unionists were prepared in Portland that



Since 2017, Portland has become a target for far-right militant groups courting altercations with anti-fascist activists, like this counterprotester who donned protective gear before approaching a Proud Boys rally in September 2020.

PHOTO: ANADOLU/GETTY IMAGES

1. When former President Trump hosted a rally on Aug. 22, 2017, in Phoenix, Ariz., members of the John Brown Gun Club and Redneck Revolt protested outside.

2. The Jewish Labour Bund gathers in 1917 in Moscow, Russia. Their placard reads "Hail the Russian Social Democratic Workers Party! Hail the General Jewish Workers Union!"

3. Oakland police seized a cache of firearms from the Black Panther Party after a confrontation April 7, 1968.


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afternoon. In the 1910s and '20s, IWW members, who were called "Wobblies," invited coal miners and others to join "industrial unions" to win power by organizing as many workers as possible. Meanwhile, mine owners hired "Pinkertons," private security contractors whose job was to disrupt strikes with force in the 19th and early 20th century.

The Ku Klux Klan, which, like later fascist groups, despised the anti-capitalist and multiracial implications of the IWW, also showed up to crush labor. In June 1924, members of the Ku Klux Klan attacked IWW members in San Pedro, California, injuring 300 members while kidnapping, tarring, and feathering others. To be a unionist, and a leftist, was to be a target.

Amid this rise in brutality and repression, some IWW members created the IWW General Defense Committee (GDC) in 1917 as a separate organization to support activists facing reprisals. Nearly a century later, IWW members in Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minnesota—some of whom had been involved in anti-fascist organizing across the 1980s and '90s—re-engaged the GDC as an anti-fascist auxiliary to the IWW. GDC chapters then popped up around the country, including in Portland, to fight the fascist insurgency and to defend communities against a rash of street violence.

These kinds of threats were nothing new. Historically, wherever working-class social movements grow, fascists see them as distinct threats both because of their politics and the marginalized communities they represent. To guard against this, self-defense projects—organized efforts where people from these communities are trained, and often armed—are formed to ward off these outside threats. Whether the appearance of self-defense squads is enough to scare off fascist attacks or if actual force is necessary to fight far-right militants back, these kinds of formations have been a reasonably common feature of how communities maintain their autonomy during escalating right-wing violence.

At the same time, the police—ostensibly defenders of peace and order—often have links to far-right organizations and rarely keep activists safe from right-wing assaults. For abolitionists who prefer transformative justice to incarceration, police are not the answer to community safety. "To me, community self-defense can be ... an alternative to the police and courts, but it would depend on the situation—and for that matter the community," says Daryle Lamont Jenkins, founder of the anti-fascist One People's Project and its news website, *Idavox*. "It means you do as much as you can to handle a situation as a community when one arises."

Community self-defense has become central to contemporary social movements. Just as their predecessors did, activists today seek a safety model that understands the threats they face and doesn't reproduce the problems of the justice system.

DEEP ROOTS

Social movements have historically had a self-defense component. Many earlier left-wing political parties or organizations had a militant wing, in which members were trained as a defensive force that could keep their growing membership safe from violent right-wing countereforts.

In the early 20th century, the Jewish Labour Bund, a Jewish socialist movement involved in organizing labor unions and Yiddish schools around Eastern Europe and Russia, created self-defense squads to protect Jewish communities from racist attacks, known as "pogroms," which were escalating during that time.

By 1905 there were Jewish self-defense groups in 42 cities, and they were often a collaborative offshoot from various leftist groups. Because many left-wing revolutionaries saw both modern nation states and reactionary political movements as their enemies, they believed they had to take measures to keep themselves safe from both entities.

Much of the postwar left emerged directly out of the need for community safety. Take, for instance, the Black Power movement, which formed in the 1960s and '70s and considered resilience and empowerment to be central to their work. "I have asserted the right of Negroes to meet the violence of the Ku Klux Klan by armed self-defense—and have acted on it," wrote Robert F. Williams in 1962. Williams was an organizer who took control of the Monroe, North Carolina, chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, grew it by hundreds, and chartered it with the National Rifle Association to teach members how to defend themselves against Klan terror.

In 1966 the Black Panther Party was founded first and foremost as an organization to monitor and intervene on police violence, a project the party eventually saw as part of a "united front against fascism." That slogan became the name for the Panthers' 1969 conference that convened a range of other radical groups including Students for a Democratic Society, the Young Patriots Organization, and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

In 1966, Panthers began armed patrols of Oakland neighborhoods as a message to local police not to threaten the rights and safety of Black residents. They held rallies when police refused to investigate police killings, such as the 1967 killing of construction worker Denzil Dowell. The Panthers used these opportunities to teach community members how to build armed self-defense squads as both an alternative to the police and a deterrent against police violence. The Panthers inspired other self-defense efforts, including the Lavender Panthers (sometimes known as Purple Panthers), an armed defense group formed by the Gay Activist Alliance in 1973 to defend San Francisco's LGBTQ community against homophobic attacks.

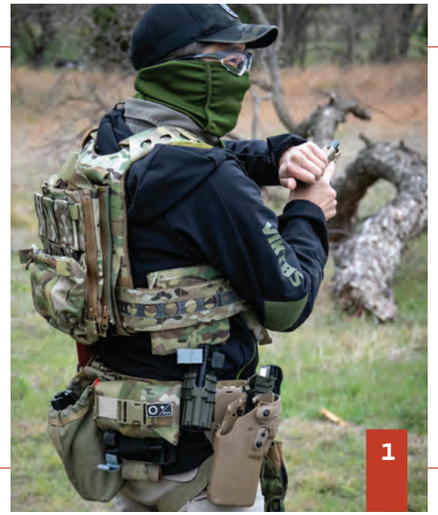
"Something that the Black radical tradition tells us ... is that we can't organize in just one mode," says Jeanelle Hope, Ph.D., an associate professor of African American Studies at Prairie View A&M University who studies Black anti-fascist movements. Along with legal pathways, self-defense, and more radical anarchist tactics, Hope points to the myriad mutual aid programs the Black Panther Party organized to meet people's daily needs, including offering free breakfast to children and running the Black People's Free Store.

This history creates what Ejeris Dixon described as a movement lineage, whereby she and others come from a tradition of radicals "who have dedicated our lives to our community safety." This communal resiliency inspired Dixon to co-write "Get in Formation," a community safety tool kit she created alongside the anti-racist organization Vision Change Win. The guide offers a number of ideas, including how to create effective protest formations.

When people on the right talk about security, it often simply means firearms. But for those on the political left, community self-defense is a much bigger idea. "The most

PHOTO: MATT YORK/AP PHOTO

PHOTO: PUBLIC DOMAIN (LEFT); OAKLAND TRIBUNE VIA GETTY IMAGES (RIGHT)



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1. A member of Yellow Peril Tactical, an Asian American self-defense group, leads a training session.
2. Fights broke out between the Proud Boys and leftist protesters in Portland, Ore., on Aug. 22, 2021, a year after similar fights broke out.
3. After a Kentucky grand jury did not bring charges against the police officers who killed Breonna Taylor in September 2020, protesters in Louisville, Ky., showed up ready to defend themselves against police aggression.

important part of how you frame community defense is to acknowledge that you provide something the state cannot ... when you build a culture of community defense around you ... you have a lot more protection from violence," says Lucas Hubbard, communications director for Socialist Rifle Association, which does not advocate for forming militias but does support working-class people learning firearm skills and developing mutual aid networks.

But as Hubbard notes, self-defense projects are only an alternative to the status quo if they match the community's expressed desires. "First thing you do in providing community defense ... is to ask what that means to them," says Hubbard, pointing to issues like food insecurity and housing access as frontline threats. Community defense could mean developing strong bonds between affected people to better address their needs, employing armed security at queer youth events, or securing resources for those facing eviction, but it is just as likely to involve getting people the resources they need during a COVID-19 spike.

"If you want to help a community, they have to trust you," says Snow, a founding member of the Asian American self-defense group Yellow Peril Tactical (YPT) who goes by one name. The organization works to demystify community self-defense, including gun ownership and mutual aid organizing, in part by creating an alternative media infrastructure to shift perception about who owns firearms and why.

"In moments where I have seen [community defense], it's always been something that has been asked for explicitly," says Snow. YPT formed in 2020 amid a slew of anti-Asian hate crimes. Organizers from around the U.S. met through activist networks and began supporting each other not just in learning self-defense and firearms skills, but also in creating more visible networks of care and connecting their ideas about community empowerment to international struggles such as supporting anarchists fighting Russian aggression in Ukraine.

YPT helped create educational programs around responsible firearm ownership and started a podcast, *Tiger Bloc*, that demystifies disaster preparedness and community defense in terms that avoid adventurism and right-wing cynicism. As Snow points out, firearms themselves are often less important to community safety than, for example, "good digital hygiene," which means using security protocols in digital communication and taking measures to remove personal information from the internet, locating good de-escalators to intervene in tense protest interactions, and ensuring demonstrations have trained street medics who can save lives if needed.

Community self-defense is directly intertwined with other social movements because all political causes—and their solutions—are tied with intersecting issues of race and class. Effective safety plans bring together a community's struggles, identify what creates cracks in safety, and consider all movements to be potential tools for repair.

A TRUE SAFETY PLAN

Because many potential harms and threats are distinct, a complete plan for community safety has to be broad enough to address everything from racist violence to incursions with the police. An expansive vision of community safety does not stop at the most immediate threats but offers some vision of an alternative to existing carceral options.

Vision Change Win's guide says a comprehensive vision of community safety includes "security, office and organizational safety, verbal de-escalation, physical de-escalation, personal safety, transformative justice processes, community safety neighborhood strategies, bystander intervention, and cop watch." It helps to outline the different questions you need to ask about events you are holding, what roles are necessary to keep attendees safe, and how to align every security choice with the community's values.

While police often play similar social roles in repressing movements, they have different legal leeway and require different responses. This is why Vision Change Win's training focuses on a range of situations, including what to do when police attempt to enter activist spaces and how to de-escalate nonpolice threats.

An example is Vision Change Win's section on dealing with Rebellion Containment Agents, "less lethal" weapons such as chemical gas or pepper spray that are used by police against protest crowds. While often presented by law enforcement as relatively safe, these containment agents were tied to major injuries during the 2020 racial justice uprisings. The guide instructs demonstrators on how to deal with incoming projectiles, how to care for someone who has been exposed to caustic chemicals, and how street medics and those providing on-site care can make medical remedies from common materials.

In addition to responding to police arrests and ensuring people know their legal rights, community defense also includes strategies to mitigate COVID and other pandemics. Good safety plans take into account both a community's values and COVID transmission so as not to replicate many of the harms activists are hoping to mitigate.

"I think having vulnerable relationships with people ... where if there is somebody in your life you can talk [to] about both survivorship and harm, I think that makes us safer," says Dixon. This also points to what are often called transformative justice programs designed to, as Dixon describes, "prevent and intervene in violence, and repair and heal from harm without the use of prisons."

These can take the form of "accountability processes" that combat harm by addressing the behavior, demanding change and the admission of culpability, and supporting both the survivor and the perpetrator in their journey. This kind of vulnerability can exist in many kinds of communities, but especially those that are bonded. "Transformative justice is relying on the relationships ... to leverage them into better behavior and accountability," says Dixon.

These are big, radical ideas—and that is part of the point: Community self-defense is not a singular solution but part of an ongoing project that seeks to address the fundamental unsafety of the society we currently inhabit. Through overlapping systems of inequality and oppression, many people feel isolated, targeted, and forced to face huge hurdles alone. But when members of a community see their struggles as interconnected and their issues as systemic, then modest responses become insufficient.

Community self-defense is a piece of the larger work of building an equitable society, but it will only be truly realized if a larger mass movement confronts the entire system of structural inequity. "You have to believe in something bigger," says Dixon. "You have to believe in transformation."

Shane Burley is a journalist based in Portland, Oregon. He is the author of several books on fighting fascism, and recently the co-author of *Safety Through Solidarity: A Radical Guide to Fighting Antisemitism* from Melville House. He has been published by NBC News, *Al Jazeera*, *Jacobin*, and other outlets. Twitter: @Shane_Burley1

PHOTO: COURTESY OF YELLOW PERIL TACTICAL (LEFT); GETTY IMAGE NEWS (RIGHT)

PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES



This poster by Venezuelan artist-activist Kael Abello is one of the hundreds that are free to share and distribute from Artists Against Apartheid, which issued a public call for art created in solidarity with Palestine.

TOOLS OF LIBERATION

Artists, writers, and cultural workers are fighting the genocide in Gaza on another front.

JULIA LUZ BETANCOURT

Nasreen Abd Elal vividly remembers a time when the Palestinian struggle against the state of Israel was not widely recognized as resistance to settler colonialism and genocide. Now a graphic designer, Elal first became active in the movement as a Columbia University student in 2016. "The language the student movement uses has shifted tremendously [since then]," she says. "As Palestinians within the movement, we have understood and had this analysis for decades. It seemed so far off that people would accept this framework."

Now, one year since the world started watching the genocide in Gaza—a reality Palestinian journalists have been trying to broadcast for generations—the general public is finally sharing in the Palestinian resistance. People around the globe have blocked highways, chained themselves to weapons carriers, rallied despite violent assaults by police, and orchestrated legal campaigns to call for the liberation of Palestine. "Israel can no longer coast on this idea of being this beacon of democracy in the Middle East," Elal says. "People understand intuitively [that] this is a colonial situation."

But as solidarity with Palestinians grows, so too does repression. In the United States, lawmakers have tried charging protesters with domestic terrorism, while university administrators have made "Zionist" a protected class, fired professors who've advocated for Palestine, and banned protest encampments. Mainstream media outlets publish inaccuracies dehumanizing Palestinians, while politicians maintain the claim that Israel has a "right to exist" and "defend itself."

Yet as those in power continue to attempt to crush the Free Palestine Movement, artists, writers, and other cultural workers are using creative practices to resist. They've organized to fight censorship, exposed the propagandist nature of mainstream media, and asserted Palestinians' rights to their land and lives. They've refused to accept genocide and colonialism as normal. "That, I think, is actually what preserves your humanity and your sanity," Elal says. "The fate of Palestinians is bound up in your own, whether you like it or not."

NARRATIVE RESISTANCE

Since Israel's inception 76 years ago, government and media institutions have continuously worked to control the public's collective memory of Palestine. In 1969, Israel's prime minister denied that Palestinians existed before their land was violently colonized. After Hamas carried out Operation Al-Aqsa Flood in October 2023, tearing down walls that helped make Gaza an open-air prison, media outlets described the attack as "unprovoked." When Israel's defense minister announced its food and water blockade on Gaza days later, he called it a fight against "human animals," further dehumanizing Palestinians and their resistance against occupation.

POSTER ART: KAEL ABELLO @AGAINSTAPARTHEID.ART





LEFT: Visualizing Palestine is a data design nonprofit that creates infographics, interactive visuals, and posters. "Ongoing Expulsion" juxtaposes historical violence against Palestinians with the Israeli state's current actions.

RIGHT: Visualizing Palestine published "74 Elders" in early November 2023, representing the 74 Palestinians who were born before the creation of Israel but died in the first two and a half weeks of Israel's 2023 attack on Gaza. They wrote, "We have lost 74 souls who will no longer share their memories of a Palestine less fragmented and scarred by colonialism."

"Narratives are used to justify systems of domination," Elal says. "Palestinians want liberation, freedom, the right to live in their homes and return to their homes, just like any other people. It requires this enormous apparatus of narrative to dehumanize and delegitimize Palestinian claims to the right of return, sovereignty, living free from violence, on a land where they aren't second-class citizens subjected to genocide."

But now that Israel has killed more than 42,000 Palestinians, according to the Gaza Health Ministry—while scholars estimate total deaths to be in the hundreds of thousands—attempts to rationalize the Israeli government's murderous impulse are proving ineffective. Polls across the West show that an increasing number of people disapprove of their governments sending weapons to Israel, and young people in the U.S. are more likely to sympathize with Palestinians than older generations are. "This didn't start last October," says Elal. "The roots of what we're seeing now with this genocide are structural, historical, and political."

Since 2021, Elal has worked as the information designer for Visualizing Palestine, an organization founded in 2012 that uses data imagery to communicate the experiences of Palestinians and disrupt colonial narratives. The organization's infographics, interactive visuals, and posters have been circulated all over the world, published by major media outlets, posted on subway billboards, and translated into multiple languages.

"We see our role in the movement in terms of how we can intervene in narrative and media discourse around Palestine," says Elal. "Especially since the start of the genocide, we've seen how rampant this dehumanization is, how distorted the Palestinian narrative is, how there's not a lot of grappling with the deep history of the legacy of colonialism in Palestine."

Visualizing Palestine works with partner organizations, including some in Palestine, to turn research reports into accessible visual resources. For instance, its "Ongoing Expulsion" infographic presents side-by-side images from the 1948 Nakba and the current genocide in Gaza to show how the latter is an extension of the previous catastrophe. Another project called "Stop Killer AI" demonstrates how Israel uses artificial intelligence programs to surveil and kill Palestinians.

Other visuals aim to expand the documentation of Israel's brutality beyond statistics, including its impact on those who survive. "Four Wars Old" takes the form of a child development chart that illustrates how children born in Gaza in 2007 have lived through four wars before turning 18, suffering compounded trauma. "74 Elders" memorializes Palestinians who survived the 1948 Nakba to later be killed by Israel in 2023. "These people are older than the state that is killing them," Elal explains. "[Palestinians] aren't numbers. Each one of these people who has been killed [is] an entire world."

The collective's new book, *Visualizing Palestine: A Chronicle of Colonialism and the Struggle for Liberation*, spotlights more than 200 visuals created in the past decade, alongside essays on humanizing data and provoking narrative change. Elal believes putting this resource in people's hands can help organizers, advocates, and educators "build the kind of people power we need."

THE ROLE OF THE ARTIST

When Israel began bombing Gaza in October 2023, Hannah Priscilla Craig was among the group of artists who decided to launch Artists Against Apartheid, a movement using art and culture as "tools of liberation in the struggle for sovereignty, dignity, and self-determination." They released a solidarity statement, which received more than 8,000 signatures in the first few days. Soon after, Artists Against Apartheid transformed into a network that encourages artists to embed themselves in organizing and activism. "It's not just we as individuals [who] are dedicating ourselves to Palestine," Craig explains. "It's actually a recognition of the practice of the artwork as part of the overall strategy toward liberation."

"PEOPLE ARE CONSUMING CULTURE ALMOST EVERY MOMENT OF EVERY DAY. ... IT'S IMPORTANT FOR US, ON THE SIDE OF JUSTICE [AND] LIBERATION, TO TAKE UP THAT TOOL."

—HANNAH PRISCILLA CRAIG

Craig, who serves as the director of arts, culture, and communications for the People's Forum—the community space in New York City where Artists Against Apartheid originated—sees how integral cultural production is to raising awareness about the plight of Palestinians. "People are consuming culture almost every moment of every day ... whether we consciously realize it or not," she says. "It's important for us, on the side of justice [and] liberation, to take up that tool—and take it more seriously than our enemies."

Artists Against Apartheid offers six toolkits to help artists create banner drops, public art installations, film screenings, street theater, and more to bring the Palestinian liberation movement into their communities. Artists have performed the *Gaza Monologues* (theatrical testimonies written by Palestinian youth), created protest puppets of President Joe Biden and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu for the annual March on Washington, and developed more than 6,000 poster designs. Craig says the posters have been pasted around Barcelona, Spain; exhibited in galleries in Arizona; and made into stickers circulated throughout the U.S.

Artists Against Apartheid draws inspiration from the Medu Art Ensemble, a group of cultural workers who organized against apartheid in South Africa in the 1970s and later inspired an international boycott that helped undo apartheid policies. Craig also highlights the John Reed Clubs, which were first formed in 1929 by artists, writers, and journalists to advocate for better working conditions during the Great Depression.

"Those histories are often ignored, forgotten, and left out of the history books because they are so dangerous to the ruling class," Craig says. Artists Against Apartheid works to "reinvigorate and bring back to the forefront the way that artists and cultural workers are part of political [and liberation] movements."

The number of signatories on Artists Against Apartheid's statement has nearly doubled in the year since it was released, with prominent musicians including Kehlani, Macklemore, and Noname signing on and using their art to raise money for Palestinian organizations. "Musicians are ready to take on the charge and the task of speaking clearly and with conviction about the need to take seriously the political situation in the world," Craig says. "It's really showing that these cultural spaces, these social spaces, are also spaces of political struggle."

Ultimately, Artists Against Apartheid calls on artists of all media to use creative intervention as a strategy for mobilization. "The reality is that struggle happens everywhere," she explains. "We have to fight back in all of the spaces that are available to us."

DO NOT CONSENT

While artists continue to envision an end to the U.S.-backed genocide, Writers Against the War on Gaza (WAWOG) are disrupting the media apparatus that defends it. After releasing an open letter in October 2023, the coalition of media, cultural, and academic workers has engaged in a series of actions to call out national media outlets over their coverage of Israel and Palestine, including *The New York Times*.

"The [*Times*] is considered the paper of record in the U.S. [and] in the West," says Nour, a writer and member of WAWOG. (Nour requested to be identified by first name only and emphasized that the coalition acts as a collective.) But *The Times* has been "manufacturing consent for a genocide."

Some writers resigned from their positions at *The Times* after it cracked down on its own journalists for publicly supporting Palestine. Others, including Nour, occupied the lobby of the outlet's New York headquarters in November 2023 to protest its coverage, carrying agitprop newspapers titled *The New York War Crimes*. "*The*

INFOGRAPHICS: COURTESY OF VISUALIZING PALESTINE





LEFT: Illustrator and graphic designer Hazem Asif's colorful illustrations have appeared on magazine covers, children's books, and the Google Doodle. He has created several posters about Palestine, including this one for Artists Against Apartheid.

RIGHT: Chicago-based collage artist Shahzaad Raja often uses his posters to raise money for humanitarian causes. "Stand With Palestine," available at his personal website and Artists Against Apartheid, is just one of his posters addressing the current genocide.

Times is equivalent to an arms manufacturer, but in the cultural space," says Naib, a journalist and writer who is also part of WAWOG and has asked to be identified by first name only out of concern for retaliation. The paper represents, in theory, "both objectivity [and] the high-minded, liberal elite of America."

Following the protest, the coalition evolved the agitprop into a digital and print movement newspaper, debunking the false notion of objectivity and critiquing and analyzing *The Times*' coverage of Israel. In the article "There's a Word for That," the paper provides a style guide demonstrating how *The Times*' word choice, syntax, and passive voice push the narrative that Israel is fighting a "just war." Another *New York War Crimes* article revealed that *The Times* quoted Israeli and American sources following Oct. 7, 2023, more than three times as often as Palestinian sources, and U.S. officials more than all of its Palestinian sources combined. *The New York Times* did not respond to a request for comment.

Naib says mainstream reporters use other rhetorical tools to "create empathy amongst American audiences for Israel and not for Palestine." For example, when a story describes occupational violence against Palestinians, it doesn't specify that it was done by Israel or the Israeli military. "It's '[an air] strike killed Palestinians,' not an 'Israeli strike,'" he explains. "In almost all media, any discussion of Palestine will always come with, 'These events started on October 7.' ... We always have to acknowledge what happened on October 7, [but never what happened] before October 7."

WAWOG is also committed to shining a light on the humanity of Palestinians. Through more than a dozen issues of *The New York War Crimes*, the coalition has published the words of Palestinian writers and organizations; spotlighted Black, Kashmiri, and queer solidarity; and uplifted the voices of those participating in the student *intifada* (uprising). They've also inspired the birth of similar publications such as *The Harvard Crimeson*.

The coalition also encourages audiences to collectively hold establishment media accountable. "We think so much about what is happening in the writing itself, but being an observer, a reader, [or] in the audience is not a passive activity," Naib says. "You are actively legitimizing the organization by consuming what they're producing."

Nour adds that audiences can "refuse to be part of the *New York Times* narrative" by boycotting publications complicit in their coverage of Palestine, while motivating media workers to organize within their workplaces. "If we refuse to write the way they want us to write, we can actually do something," she says.

The network's plan to build a "cultural front for a free Palestine" also includes a course syllabus that covers organizing history in both Palestine and the U.S., touching on the Black Panther Party as well as movements formed during the Vietnam War and the AIDS crisis. "Culture is oftentimes the strongest tool in maintaining the status quo," Naib says. "Our role as cultural workers isn't only to produce culture; it's to take action."

A DANCE FOR PALESTINE

"It is the right of children in Gaza to be joyful," says Bashar Al-Bilbisi, a 24-year-old Palestinian dancer, theater artist, pharmacist, and head of the Al-Fursan Arts Ensemble. Since 2016, the troupe of young people has performed and trained others throughout Gaza in *dabke*, a traditional and Indigenous Palestinian dance.

POSTER ART: HAZEM ASIF (LEFT); SHAHZAAD RAJA (RIGHT) @AGAINSTAPARTHEID.ART



Since 2016, the youth-led Al-Fursan Arts Ensemble dance troupe has trained children throughout Gaza in dabke, a traditional and Indigenous Palestinian dance. This photo was taken Sept. 5, 2024, at the Al Amal Camp in Khan Younis.

When Al-Fursan first launched, Al-Bilbisi used dance to address issues such as COVID-19, gender-based violence, and youth emigration. The group performed at the Palestine International Festival and toured around France. Their performances even contributed to the registering of dabke as "intangible heritage" to be protected under UNESCO guidelines.

But everything changed when Israel began relentlessly bombing Gaza and destroying theaters and cultural spaces. Now, Al-Bilbisi and his fellow dancers mainly teach dabke to children in displacement camps across the region. "We face lots of trauma, lots of wars, and we need a tool such as dance to get that out," says Al-Bilbisi, whose responses have been translated from Arabic to English.

Sometimes that means encouraging children to "forget about the external world and to enjoy themselves" during training. Other times, it's leaving space for them to grieve. During one exercise, a young girl suddenly began to cry. Her two brothers had been taken by Israeli forces, and she no longer knew where they were or if they were alive. "I left her alone to cry as much as she wanted," Al-Bilbisi says. Afterward, she began talking more openly about her brothers' capture and became more involved with the group. "That's why I would work on the training of dabke. It helps them express themselves," he adds. "It's not just about movement or choreography; it's what's beyond the performance."

Al-Fursan trainers are located throughout the Gaza Strip, including in heated war zones where, Al-Bilbisi says, "the only thing between them and death is a coincidence." Two trainers were bombed by Israel at the Church of Saint Porphyrius; another in North Gaza trained children whose parents were killed in yet another Israeli bombing, Al-Bilbisi says. "Whenever we go to train children, there is always somebody targeted and killed as we go."

At the time of this writing, Al-Bilbisi is based in a supposed safe zone. He plans to continue the work, saying, "The risks are enormous ... but we believe in a mission and a vision, and we would like to fulfill it."

Though the genocide has yet to end, he is firm in the role the ensemble will play in rebuilding Gaza and all of Palestine. "If houses are demolished, they can be rebuilt," he says. "What's more difficult is to rebuild people psychologically and to rebuild humanity."

That's why the ensemble also works to deepen the world's understanding and awareness of what it's like to be a Palestinian in Gaza. In 2023 the group released *Trying to Survive*, an award-winning film directed by Al-Bilbisi that focuses on how artists' lives changed throughout the last year of occupation. It has been shown at film festivals across the world. "The message—as a group, as an ensemble, as trainers, as artists, as children whom we work with, and as a community in Gaza—is that we would like war to stop and that we love life," Al-Bilbisi says.

Underneath it all, he believes it is his duty to create not only artists, but human beings who belong to their land."When we are in one line, holding each other's hands, it gives the sense of solidarity, that we are all together," he continues. "It also shows how rooted we are, touching the land or the floor. We're there, strongly. We're there."

Julia Luz Betancourt is YES! Media's audience development specialist and an independent journalist with bylines in *Truthout* and *GEN-ZiNE*. Instagram: @JuliaLuzBetancourt

PHOTO: JEHAD SHARAFI/COURTESY OF AL-FURSAN ARTS ENSEMBLE

Evette Dionne



Rest as Resistance

Tricia Hersey's new book insists we have the power to refuse capitalism's grind culture and instead prioritize rest.

IN 1835, as legal slavery flourished in the South, abolitionists—who morally opposed the institution and sought to end it—began circulating pamphlets. Abolitionist organizations filled these pamphlets with information and woodcut illustrations about the albatross of slavery, and mailed them to random addresses in Southern states that enslaved people. Their goal, it seems, was to use material then considered inflammatory to appeal to the conscience of enslavers and encourage them to see those working their land as human beings deserving of freedom.

While enslaved people were intentionally kept illiterate, the abolitionist movement still treated these pamphlets—and antislavery newspapers—as signposts, signaling that even amid their suffering, enslaved people were being fought for. Their human condition wasn't being disregarded in favor of profit; instead, there was a growing movement advocating for their freedom and for their right to lead a self-determined life.

In her new book, *We Will Rest!: The Art of Escape*, Tricia Hersey calls upon some of these same abolitionist tools, including pamphlets, hymnals, poetry, and imagery, to convey a similarly urgent message: If we do not take rest seriously and divorce ourselves from capitalism, we will die much sooner than we should. While that might feel alarmist, it's a message Hersey has been conveying for years as the shepherd of the Nap Ministry. The "Nap Bishop" uses her own life as a model for how we can collectively escape "grind culture" and embrace rest as a spiritual practice.

> Birthing a creative renaissance requires rest that isn't reliant on productivity.

"I thought I would die," Hersey writes in *We Will Rest!*, an unconventional manifesto and meditation about how she learned to care for herself in a world that doesn't allow us to slow down. "I thought the exhaustion of capitalism would crush me. Rest saved my life." As Hersey often reminds us: Rest is a matter of life and death.

Rest is essential to our long-term survival as individuals and a collective. Birthing a creative renaissance requires rest that isn't reliant on productivity. Hersey's book calls upon our ancestors, including Harriet Tubman, the Underground Railroad conductor who helped people escape enslavement, to become escape artists ourselves—to help unchain our imaginations from the bounds of capitalism and embrace new possibilities. "Anyone in this culture who believes and feels they are enough right now has begun the escape artist transformation," Hersey writes. "To know in the deepest parts of your soul that your birth grants you divinity, rest, care, and power is a seed planted in fertile ground."

Much like those abolitionist pamphlets, *We Will Rest!* serves as a guidepost for those who seek rest but are unsure if it's available to them. The book begins with a thought-provoking question: "How do you find rest in a capitalist, white supremacist, patriarchal, ableist system?" This system teaches us that rest must be earned through work, and received with humble gratitude. But Hersey offers an alternative: If we become "escape artists" or "tricksters" who defy systems that discourage us from rest, then we can prioritize our needs.

For Black people, in particular, Hersey accurately argues that rest is our ancestral inheritance, and must be protected at all costs. "The first step for morphing into an escape artist is belief," she writes. "You must believe you have the power to refuse. You must believe you have been gifted with everything necessary. You must be a trickster. No matter what, you must not show fear. We are abundant."

Once we believe we're entitled to rest and our ancestors have paved the way for us to claim this birthright, then we must imagine the life we desire for ourselves. "Create community," Hersey writes. "Be community. Community care can seem impossible when you are exhausted. It is possible." It is only through crafting this community—day by day, moment by moment, and person to person—that change can come.

It's not as complicated as we might make it out to be. The world we imagine will come to us through silence, through daydreaming, and through unwavering belief. "Every day, morning or night, or whenever you can steal away, find silence," she writes. "Even if for only a few minutes."

We don't need to have it all figured out to begin this personal and collective rest revolution. "Capitalism has a choke hold over our lives right now," Hersey writes. "The next second, the next minute, the next hour, is ours to refuse the grind. We can craft and build temporary spaces of joy and freedom here now."

Like those abolitionist pamphlets, *We Will Rest!* offers encouragement in times of uncertainty—a reminder of our fundamental humanity, and affirms the truth that rest is ours for the taking. And we've already done all we need to do to "deserve" the freedom it brings.

Evette Dionne is the executive editor at YES! Media. Find her across the web @FreeBlackGirl.

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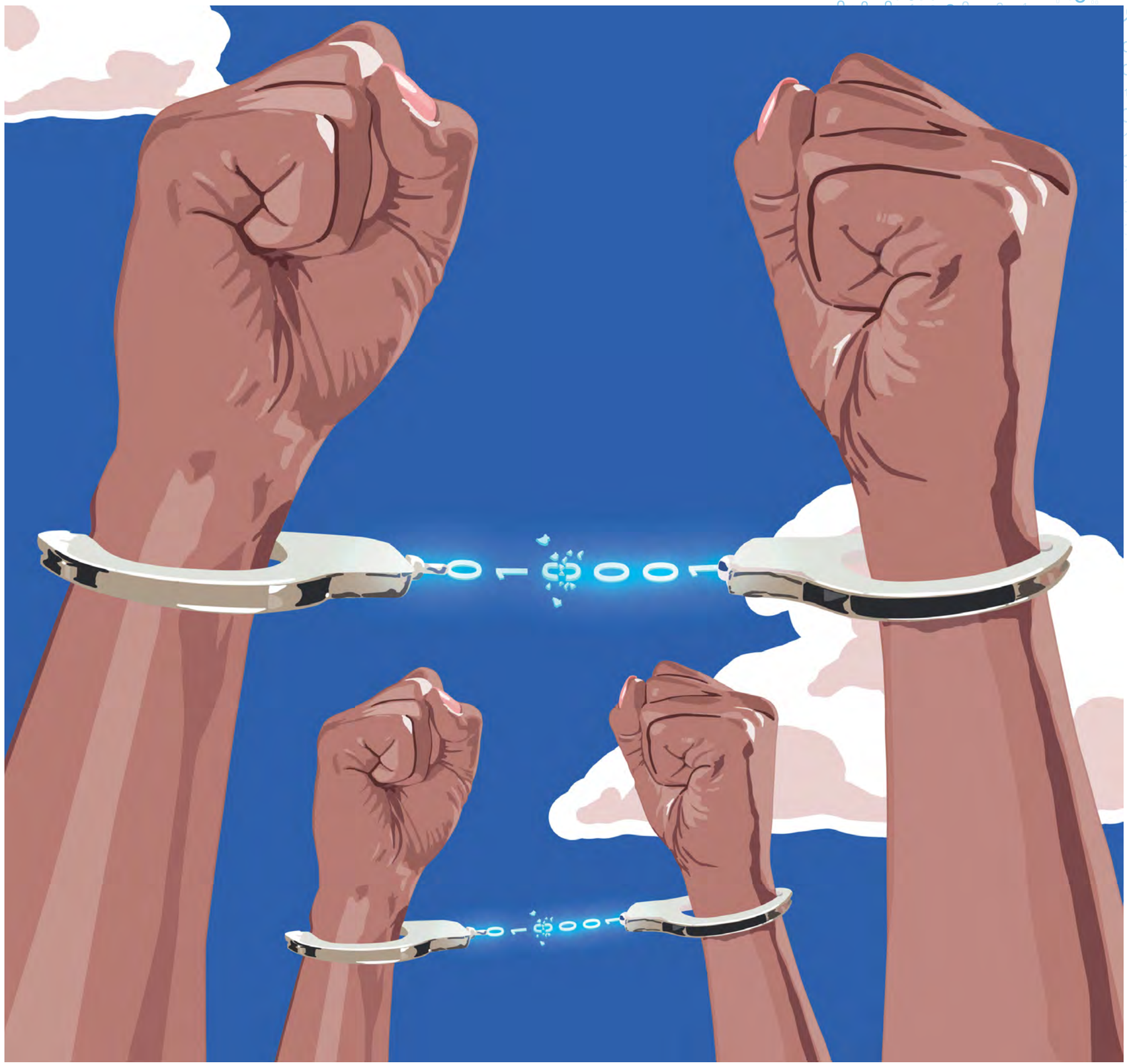
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WE KEEP OUR DATA SAFE

Resisting biometric surveillance requires more than opting out.

JULIET KUNKEL

Having data about our bodies tracked is so much a part of our daily lives that we sometimes forget it can be used against us. When the Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade* in 2022, a deluge of articles warned people to delete their menstrual tracking apps. While these technologies can be useful for those seeking (or avoiding) pregnancy, these apps have come under fire in the past for selling intimate data to social media sites. With the changing legal landscape, privacy experts pointed out that this data could be used to criminalize people seeking abortions. Proponents of forced birth also recognize this potential, and are working to ensure that menstrual data remains open to search warrants. Turning this data into a site of political contestation raises questions of collective response beyond the limits of bodily autonomy.

It's become normalized for data about our bodies and actions to be collected, quantified, and sold on the market. Facial recognition and body scans have become necessary to travel. Employer health insurance can require divulging health information from blood pressure to sexual activity in order to access care. Colleges and universities are subjecting students to e-proctoring and glorified spyware, while Amazon requires delivery drivers to sign "biometric consent" forms. Even attending a sports event or concert can subject us to facial scanning and data mining. Given this landscape, the notion of "opting out" is starting to feel impossible.

So many of these systems have become necessary, and it can be useful to have this type of information about ourselves. At some point the cost of having our behaviors predicted by an algorithm can start to feel worth it. For someone struggling to get pregnant or desperate to avoid it, the exchange of privacy for the information needed to manage their reproduction may make a lot of

ILLUSTRATIONS BY SUSANNA GENTILI FOR YES! MEDIA

We are highly entangled with each other, our histories, our environments, and the more-than-human world; we are affected by and affect each other beyond the scope of what is legible to variables in a tracking software.

sense. During these sharp moments of political crisis, however, we start to feel how thin the membrane can be between the benefits and the criminalizing potential of these technologies.

New technologies aren't simply neutral tools; they're created by and for existing power structures. Predictive policing, for example, uses existing data sets of past crimes to predict where crime will occur and who is likely to be a perpetrator. The existing data is extracted from those already criminalized, creating a self-fulfilling feedback loop. In this way, as poet and scholar Jackie Wang discusses in her 2018 book, *Carceral Capitalism*, the datafication of bodily control meant that "biological and cultural racism was eventually supplanted by statistical racism," converting white supremacist social structures into algorithms.

The question here is what to do with these technologies when they're used to criminalize, coerce labor, and extract profit, and whether they can be repurposed or should be dismantled. For many, this can mean relying on individual hacks to evade or confuse surveillance. There are limits, though, to relying solely on these autonomous strategies if we're thinking about building the conditions for collective liberation. Taking a longer view of the logics and structures of our data-saturated society can help us better understand what got us here—and which strategies can be used to avoid reifying these same systems.

TRACKING BODIES ALL THE TIME

The specific possibilities of AI-generated surveillance and mobile health apps may not have existed before now, but the logics and parameters on which these technologies rely have a lengthy history. Many of the concepts used to build our current system were codified in the early 20th century as part of the massive collection of biometric data that fueled the eugenics movement. Eugenics rests on collecting extensive data around the body and measuring it against an ideal "norm." For those interested in tracing a critical history from the eugenics movement to our current moment, this suggests a continuity in two major goals of biometric data collection: measuring who is dangerous and determining how labor or profit can be extracted from people.

The academic branch of eugenics, often tied to Francis Galton who coined the term, heavily shaped emerging fields like psychology, social work, and criminology. Eugenicists invented concepts such as the body mass index and IQ to attempt to determine the ideal social body, and created statistical judgments about some individuals as better, "healthier," or more "normal" than others. This included taking the social construct of race and trying to turn it into objective biological or evolutionary fact through empirically dubious studies.

Alongside this project of scientific white supremacy, eugenicists were intensely concerned with whether people would conform to many different constructs of "normal." These included expressions of sexuality and gender performance, and framings of disability and "fitness" around who could be a "productive worker."

Measuring people for productivity and surveilling them for control predates the rise of the eugenics movement, with roots in slavery and colonization. In her book *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith discusses how these notions of scientific measurement required "pre-existing views of the 'other' around science, philosophy, imperialism, classification, and 'regimes of truth'" that could be adapted to "new conceptions of rationalism, individualism and capitalism." Regarding these deeper histories, in her 2015 book, *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness*, Simone Browne writes that the conceptual and power structures of slavery solidified around the accumulation of people as a countable, surveillable subject, and Blackness as a "saleable commodity."

Even the specific technologies of the Nazi Holocaust, often remembered as the most famous and



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horrific example of how a regime can mobilize eugenics, were workshopped and fine-tuned in colonial projects in Jamaica and the Pacific. After World War II, it generally fell out of fashion for academics and public figures to openly name eugenics as their explicit research apparatus or political logic. But these measurements, value judgments, and systems of control continue to texture our world, from restricting access to gender-affirming health care to forced sterilization in ICE detention centers.

ALGORITHMIC JUSTICE BEYOND AUTONOMY

For those of us committed to challenging these legacies, we then ask: How do we respond tactically to the criminalizing potential of biometric surveillance without fleeing into the fiction of personal responsibility? What systems and technologies can we build that aren't merely protecting ourselves individually from the worst effects of this extraction and criminalization, but are also building a different world together?

We can't fully retreat to bodily autonomy. Although this can be a powerful and important political frame in many contexts, we can never be individual units moving as autonomous bubbles through the world. We are highly entangled with each other, our histories, our environments, and the more-than-human world; we are affected by and affect each other beyond the scope of what is legible to variables in a tracking software. Also, although the criminalizing strains of these systems might come for us differently, they are coming for all of us, whether or not you have a uterus, precarious legal status, nonnormative gender expression, or any of the variables along which we can be extracted from or criminalized.

There's great work being done by groups like the Algorithmic Justice League and the Center for Critical Race and Digital Studies to address the harms caused by biased biometric algorithms, such as the notorious incompetence of facial recognition software to detect darker faces, or the use of AI to deepen medical discrimination. In addition to this, we need to continue pushing beyond accuracy as the horizon of our demands. Even if we had a universal data set fully quantifying and tracking every human on the planet, is that algorithmic justice? If the systems that created these technologies, and the purposes for which these technologies were designed, are fundamentally oppressive, more efficient or accurate tech does not lead to a more just world.

After all, August Vollmer, the eugenicist "father of American policing" who founded the first U.S. police academies with proposed courses like "Race Degeneration," was obsessed with gathering perfect data in order to determine a criminal "type." His vision of social control dreamed of a moment "[w]hen statistics reach a plane where their accuracy is no longer doubtful." If we are to focus on pushing for better algorithms, we must ask how this



is different from what the eugenics movement wanted. Perfecting statistics does not necessarily intervene in the fundamental variables against which the "normal" is judged, or the power structures in which this biometric data is being designed and deployed.

So much of the data for these systems is crowdsourced, which allows complicity to be dispersed. Given this, we have responsibilities as the building blocks that make up this algorithm. As artist and poet Manuel Abreu asks in a 2014 article for *The New Inquiry*, how do we engage with these structures when "[o]*ur* banal activities are the source from which algorithms automatically generate kill lists made up of nodes that deviate from the cluster of normal activity patterns" and "algorithms make complicity incalculable"? When we are embedded in these systems, our answer has to be something beyond opting out.

One response could be to treat data security as community care. Legacies such as COINTELPRO and other domestic surveillance programs teach us that taking sensible precautions with our own communication practices can reduce harm to people in our community. There can be deep solidarity, along the lines of "we keep us safe," in small-scale measures such as using an encrypted messaging app or browser, and having politically or legally sensitive conversations face-to-face with physical distance from your phone.

A contradiction of political organizing is that it often requires a level of visibility to build community and draw more people into the work, but visibility attracts repression. Some projects that offer tools and resources to help people grapple with these conundrums include MediaJustice's Defend Our Movements campaign, A People's Guide to Tech, the Electronic Frontier Foundation's guide to surveillance self-defense for abortion access activists, workers, and patients, Hack*Blossom's DIY Guide to Feminist Cybersecurity, and Our Data Bodies' Digital Defense Playbook.

Another response is to intervene through collective action. In 2018, members of Mijente, an immigrant justice organization, created the #NoTechForICE campaign to confront the surveillance firm Palantir, whose tendrils stretch from collaborating with U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement on deportations to supporting the Israeli Defense Forces in surveilling and bombing Gaza. Mijente aimed to put pressure on companies and cities to break contracts with Palantir, reducing its ability to recruit and retain workers and bringing this surveillance more under public scrutiny.

Groups such as the Tech Workers Coalition have also organized to create solidarity in workplaces. One of the grievances that kicked off the West Virginia teachers wildcat strike in 2018 was the demand that they wear a Fitbit and perform a certain amount of movement or face higher health insurance costs. People could have individually opted out of this ableist, fatphobic, and generally invasive requirement. Instead, they collectively withdrew their labor to change the conditions of possibility through worker power.

Fundamentally, the lesson is that in order to confront these systems, we must build something greater than individual autonomy. In *Dark Matters*, Browne writes about what she calls "dark sousveillance," reversing the surveillance and turning the gaze on those in power as a tactic to keep oneself out of sight in the flight from enslavement to freedom. This flight requires networks and histories far in excess of the autonomous self, entailing the creation of entire social networks, languages, technologies, and relationships outside of and directly opposed to the systems of power that are surveilling.

Our response to a world trending toward alienation from each other and data-driven social control cannot be based solely on personal privacy. Any engagement with these systems that takes solidarity seriously must remember that, whether we find ourselves shoulder to shoulder or embedded in an algorithm, our liberation is bound up with each other.

Juliet Kunkel is an independent writer, "scholar" (ambivalently), and general troublemaker who learned far more from her comrades in movement work than from the Ph.D. Twitter: @juliet_kunkel

SAFE (*Sacred*) SPACES

LGBTQ people are creating queer churches where no one's identity is a sin.

SARA YOUNGBLOOD GREGORY



Participants close their eyes during a guided meditation at a monthly moon magic ritual hosted by Bex Mui, founder of Our House of Queer, in Oakland, California.

PHOTO: ALISON YIN FOR YES! MEDIA

In December 2023, Pope Francis announced that Catholic priests may bless same-sex unions—as long as they do not resemble marriage. Despite headlines heralding a radical shift, the declaration notes Church doctrine "remains firm" on its definition of holy matrimony as the exclusive province of heterosexuals. One month prior, the Vatican also announced that transgender people can be baptized.

Though inclusive steps forward at first glance, both announcements sidestepped any tangible commitment to LGBTQ people. The documents were stereotypically vague: both blessings and baptisms are permitted only if they carry no risk of public "scandal" or "disorientation" among the faithful, terms which are not defined in the documents.

In short, the Vatican's "progressive" moves perpetuate a long-standing trend within Christianity, where LGBTQ Christians are expected to be grateful for the table scraps of a well-fed faith—or at least feel sated with the rancid "hate the sin, love the sinner" ethos popular across Christian denominations.

"It's no question that religion globally has been used as a weapon, especially against LGBTQIA persons," says teaching pastor and theologian Roberto Che Espinoza, Ph.D. "But religion actually is rooted in the practice of re-connection or binding together. The Latin root for the English word religion is *religio,"* a noun referring to an obligation, bond, or reverence.

And there is no shortage of LGBTQ people of faith. A 2020 study by the Williams Institute at the University of California, Los Angeles, found that nearly half the country's LGBTQ population—5.3 million people—self-identified as a person of faith.

So can queer people still hungry for spiritual connection—especially



Theologian and pastor Roberto Che Espinoza, Ph.D, draws upon their Texas Baptist upbringing, seminary education, and trans and queer identity to write and speak about issues of faith, community, and our mutual interconnectedness.



Rev. Naomi Washington-Leapheart believes "the conceptualization of God in an affirming, justice-seeking space has to be, first of all, radically inclusive."

those who revere Christian traditions—find religious communities that recognize queerness as a blessing, rather than a sin? An emerging group of queer and trans faith leaders, activists, on-the-ground organizers, and people who simply refuse to give up their faith are already answering that call, carving out affirming faith traditions, building tools to remediate religious harm, and proving that it's possible to build a queer church.

SANCTIFIED DISCRIMINATION

For many LGBTQ people, disconnection is a defining element of their faith, with a third of religious LGBTQ adults reporting conflicts between their faith and identity in a 2013 Pew Research Center study. Many experience rejection for the first time via their faith communities, or at least learn that their identities are inherently dirty or impure. As of 2018, an estimated 700,000 people have undergone conversion therapy in the United States, a practice involving forcibly "changing" someone's gender or sexual identity. Though widely discredited—and illegal to subject minors to in 22 states—conversion therapy is still used in some religious settings. According to research from the Williams Institute, 81% of people who underwent conversion therapy did so at the hands of a religious leader.

Even for those who escaped the direct impacts of religious trauma, current U.S. politics are deeply intertwined with weaponized Christianity, making it nearly impossible to emerge unharmed as an LGBTQ person—personally, politically, or spiritually. The Republican party, which has longstanding ties to the Religious Right, is increasingly overt in its embrace of Christian nationalism—the belief that the U.S. should be a strictly Christian country. According to a 2023 survey by the Public Religion Research Institute and the Brookings Institution, more than half of self-identified Republicans currently sympathize with or explicitly adhere to Christian nationalism.

Christian nationalism goes beyond the desire to create a Christian theocracy. It's about creating a country where certain people are privileged and others—LGBTQ people, people of color, and those seeking reproductive freedom—are punished. "When we say Christian nationalism, it's white Christian nationalism," says Maureen O'Leary, director of field and organizing at Interfaith Alliance, a religious freedom and civil rights advocacy network. "It's white Protestant Christians that are being elevated."

That exclusionary ethos can be found throughout the modern Republican party, which is, not coincidentally, the beating heart behind much of the anti-LGBTQ legislation currently circulating. In 2023, more than 525 anti-LGBTQ bills were introduced nationwide, more than any other year on record, according to the Human Rights Campaign. Those bills included the implementation of Florida's high-profile "Don't Say Gay" policy, which restricts classroom discussions about sexuality and gender identity in public schools. Dozens of copycat bills have emerged since the Florida Board of Education approved the initial policy in 2022.

Florida, North Dakota, Missouri, Tennessee, and North Carolina all have restrictions on gender-affirming health care for minors, and at least five states are currently targeting gender-affirming health care for both minors and adults. Meanwhile, the Alliance Defending Freedom (ADF), a shadowy, right-wing legal organization, is using its deep pockets, allegiance to Christian nationalism, and wide reach to roll back civil rights in the courts. ADF is the legal powerhouse behind lightning-rod Supreme Court cases such as *303 Creative, Inc v. Elenis*, where a self-proclaimed Christian website designer won the right to refuse to serve same-sex couples, in defiance of Colorado's nondiscrimination law, as well as the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*. Taken together, these attacks target the rights and dignities of queer, and especially trans, people on all fronts: restricting access to health care, public spaces like bathrooms, and education.

This discrimination is often legitimized through the guise of Christian morality and language. In practice, this frequently looks like portraying LGBTQ people, and progressive values more generally, as a threat to a Christian way of life. At the 2022 Conservative Political Action Conference, former president Donald Trump told the audience: "School prayer is banned, but drag shows are allowed to permeate the whole place. You can't teach the Bible, but you can teach children that America is evil and that men are able to get pregnant."

Meanwhile, Florida governor and 2024 presidential hopeful Ron DeSantis used the words of Jesus Christ to woo potential voters and call for a "war on woke"—or more accurately, a war on LGBTQ rights, diversity and equity initiatives, reproductive and voting rights, critical race theory, and education. While speaking to a group of roughly 10,000 evangelical college students in April 2023, DeSantis said, "Yes, the truth will set you free. Because woke represents a war on truth, we must wage a war on woke."

As these right-wing politicians demonstrate, "Christian nationalism is a political ideology," says Interfaith Alliance's O'Leary. "It's not a religious tradition." But the conflation of the two mean that many queer and trans folks feel exiled from their faith. A truly affirming church must do more than skirt extremism or offer conditional shelter for LGBTQ people. It must imagine a God, a faith, and a tradition that engages directly with justice and queerness.

SACRED AND STRANGE

Rev. Naomi Washington-Leapheart, a Christian minister, movement organizer, and professor of theology and religious studies at Villanova University and Harvard Divinity School, reasons that a God who disregards the most vulnerable in service of the most powerful is not a God who will inspire a congregation to change a world that already reproduces cycles of dominance and dispossession. "An affirming, radically hospitable, justice-oriented congregation has to reject an idea of God that reinforces the very thing that causes exclusion and non-affirmation and injustice in our world," Rev. Naomi says. "The conceptualization of God in an affirming, justice-seeking space has to be, first of all, radically inclusive."

The Rev. M Jade Kaiser envisions God, and spiritual life more broadly, as something literally of the flesh: bodily, pleasure-oriented, and inseparable from material liberation. In 2017, Rev. Kaiser and Rev. Anna Blaedel co-founded enfleshed, a spiritual community that publishes resources for collective liberation, including queer liturgies, a podcast on trans spirituality, and poems and anthologies exploring ritual, blessings, and identity.

"Our greatest gifts to the world will not come through acceptance from dominant systems, or those

PHOTO COURTESY OF ROBERTO CHE ESPINOZA

PHOTO COURTESY OF NAOMI WASHINGTON-LEAPHEART



Frances S. Lee cofounded The Greenhouse at Harvard University as a grief and healing sanctuary for Black, Indigenous, and other students of color. "At the foundational level, it is a refuge of tenderness, laughter, and meaningful silence."



Bex Mui hosts Queer Church every Monday live on social media, offering affirmations and insights that bridge astrology, prayer, and ritual.

constructions of 'God,' but in recognizing how sacred it is to be strange," says Rev. Kaiser. "There is so much God in how we create chosen family, love queerly, resist compulsory gendering, and collectively organize with pride that counters shame."

Sacred texts and traditions, too, are ripe for reconceptualization. Theologian Espinoza, for instance, believes creating radically inclusive faith practices requires more than just reconciling a faith tradition with sexuality. It also invites us to identify where these traditions are *already* queer via destabilized, counter-hegemonic, and counter-normative narratives. "Queerness is wild and feral," says Espinoza. "[It] is an undomesticable animal that we have not yet been able to contain or domesticate out of the tradition."

Traditions like communion, for example, have the potential for queerness, Espinoza explains. Christians all over the world consume the actual or symbolic body and blood of Christ, and in so doing, engage with the (trans)formative potential of the body. Recently, one of Espinoza's students risked their clergy credentials by serving communion in drag. "The student embodied God by feeding people bread and wine in drag," Espinoza recounts. "[It was] a wonderful reminder that we are bound by our materiality, but when we imagine another possible world, shit gets real!"

For others, revisiting religious texts also means questioning—and reimagining—what is considered sacred. For Della V. Mosley, a healing arts practitioner and counseling psychologist raised in a Black Baptist church in Illinois, exploring their connection to faith meant finding truth in alternative systems and spiritual homes. "For me, that path led to Black feminism, justice and liberation spaces, and a deep connection with nature," says Mosley. "These spiritual homes resonate more closely with who I am, the realities of the world today, and who I aspire to be." Recently, Mosley used Black feminist writings as sacred texts during a Sunday service at NorthStar Church of the Arts in Durham, North Carolina.

Some spaces imagine spirituality outside of specific religious affiliation or institutions altogether. At The Greenhouse, a grief and healing sanctuary for Black, Indigenous, and other students of color at Harvard, the point isn't to emulate or become a religious institution. Instead, cofounder Frances S. Lee, a pastor's kid who is now an ex-evangelical, says The Greenhouse fosters spiritual leadership and moral boldness for those who are barred from, or simply uninterested in, traditional religious authority.

"The Greenhouse invites us to access emotional safety, wonder, and belonging outside of religious institutions," says Lee. "At the foundational level, it is a refuge of tenderness, laughter, and meaningful silence." The community meets twice monthly and offers dinner, ritualized reflection, grounding exercises, and emotional release. Like Mosley and Espinoza, Lee makes spaces for queer and trans interpretations of Christianity, while also incorporating new sacred texts and traditions. They've taught trans spirituality and shape-shifting bodily presentations in their Christian classes, and preached with Audre Lorde's 1978 essay "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power."

Taken together, these three tools—the reconceptualization of God, the queering of sacred texts and traditions, and the incorporation of alternate practices—form a sort of holy trinity on which a queer church may thrive. And much like queerness, this church, this connection with the divine, can happen anywhere: on a subway ride, in the pews, in passionate debate with your pastor. It may happen with music, in the silence of nature, in scripture, in a glance. It can happen while reading radical trans scholarship or Black feminist poetry. Queer church might look like a dance floor, a kiss, good sex. It may be reclaiming a saint or simply imagining Jesus at a gay bar.

NEW SACRED SPACES

Spiritual organizer Bex Mui's queer church began on Instagram. Raised Roman Catholic by her Polish mother and introduced to Buddhist principles by her Chinese father, Mui left the church at 20, in large part due to her burgeoning queerness and growing critical eye toward religion. To manage her grief, Mui threw herself into LGBTQ activism.

"As a professional speaker and trainer, I delivered 'the Word' of gender terminology and the rituals of creating safe spaces," says Mui, who works as an LGBTQ equity consultant. But by 2020, Mui was burnt out. She knew she needed to reconnect with not only her spirituality, but with other queer people as well.

Beginning in January 2021, Mui got on Instagram Live every Monday to share prayers, spells, and astrology readings, and use tarot as a tool for reflection, a ritual she called Queer Church. While discussing the power of a lunar eclipse in October 2023, Mui recontextualized interactions between Mary Magdalene and the newly risen Christ. "He's often interpreted as saying 'Don't touch me,' a slut-shamey interpretation perpetuating the stereotype that [Magdalene] was dirty and unworthy of his love and attention," says Mui. "In reality and the truer Greek translation, he says, 'Don't cling to me.'" From Mui's perspective, in that moment, both the gospel and the eclipse were inviting people to let go of what is ready to leave.

Eventually, Queer Church expanded to become House of Our Queer, a sex-positive and people-of-color-centered community for spiritual exploration and well-being. House of Our Queer offers spaces and tools for spirituality, including workshops, rituals, and in-person community gatherings. And the community has responded. Mui says around 200 people tune in to Queer Church every week, and as many as 500 people attend the monthly Queer Magic Dance Party in Oakland, California.

The focus of both Queer Church and House of Our Queer is to support people who were raised religious, or feel curious about spirituality, and affirm that queerness isn't just part of religion, but a blessing all its own. Rather than a set religious doctrine or denomination, Mui uses reclamation techniques—like adapting a Catholic prayer into a queer activist spell or honoring saints like Mary Magdalene—to affirm queerness and incorporate her religious upbringing.

"Whether I like it or not, I was raised Catholic, and that's a part of my culture. Reclaiming [my spirituality] started for me when I realized that I was actually putting a lot of effort into keeping that door shut," says Mui. "Queer Church is needed because queer people are human, and we need, just like everyone else, a place to gather for celebrations, shared ways to mark the passing of time, and places to turn to when we're in pain."

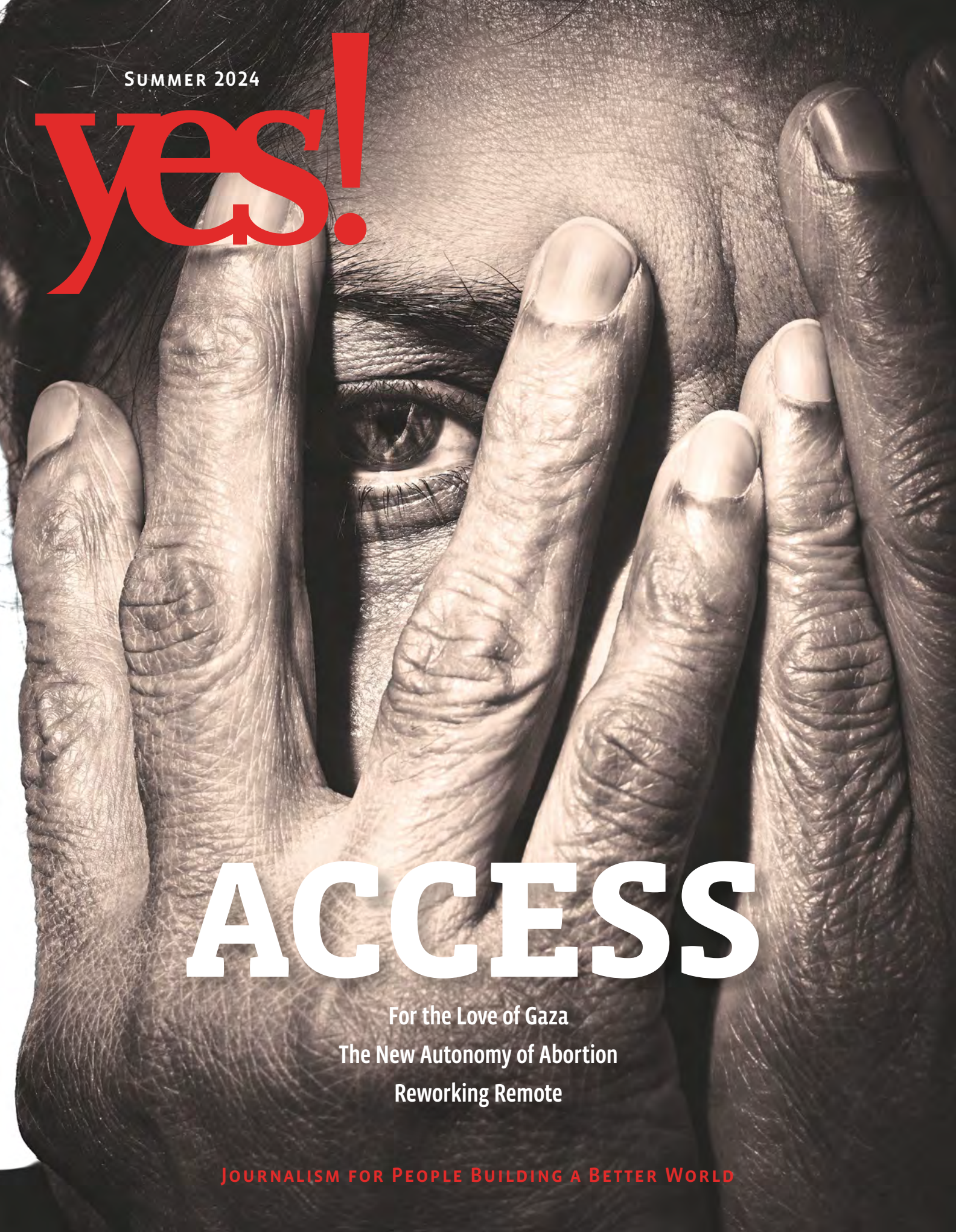
Sara Youngblood Gregory is a lesbian journalist and author of *The Polyamory Workbook*. Their work has been featured in *The New York Times*, *Vice*, *Teen Vogue*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Jezebel*, and others. Instagram: @sinister.spinster

PHOTO COURTSEY OF FRANCES S. LEE

PHOTO: ALISON YIN FOR YES! MEDIA

Summer 2024

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ACCESS

For the Love of Gaza

The New Autonomy of Abortion

Reworking Remote

Journalism for People Building a Better World

Alice Wong



Access Above All

Disabled people know the health care system is hostile. But it doesn't have to be.

RECENTLY I RECEIVED A MESSAGE from a journalist with a link to a story he'd written: "Alice, I thought about you often when I did my story on an extraordinary, emerging advocate—18-year-old Alexis Ratcliff, a vent[ilator] user, who has lived in a North Carolina hospital for five years." He continued, "Now [the hospital has] sued her to force her to accept placement in a nursing home out of state. And NC Medicaid isn't putting together a place for her to live at home."

When I tweeted about this article, people were shocked that a young disabled person had lived in a hospital for five years. But it didn't surprise me at all, even decades after the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990 and *Olmstead v. L.C.*, a 1999 Supreme Court ruling that found it's tantamount to segregation to force disabled people, who could otherwise live in the broader community, to live in institutions. The *Olmstead* ruling also insisted that public entities must provide community-based services for those who wish to use them. This is a struggle I understand intimately.

Born with a neuromuscular disability, I am a wheelchair user and have a tracheostomy, a hole in my throat connected to a ventilator that allows me to breathe. I have a team of caregivers who work for me around the clock. Medicaid covers some of the cost, but I also have to crowdfund out-of-pocket costs that total $840 per day. This is not sustainable, yet here I am, treading water until a medical or financial crisis forces me to abandon the family I've built with my cats, Bert and Ernie.

Some disabled people must live in a nursing home or hospital due to their complex medical needs and the lack of reliable home care workers and accessible housing. Medicaid, the largest payer of long-term care, is structured in a way that forces disabled people into impossible situations. States are required to provide care in institutions, but community-based services are optional, often with long waitlists. A recent survey of state programs found that nearly 700,000 people with disabilities are on lists for these services, with an average waiting period of three years. Ratcliff is one of many people who have their entire lives on hold because of institutional bias.

Two years ago, I was hospitalized for four weeks in the ICU, which left me unable to speak or eat by mouth. I was determined to return home, but we could not find the additional help I needed. When my sisters relayed this to the discharge planner, he matter-of-factly said we had two choices: Family members would have to indefinitely fill in the gaps, or I could be transferred to a facility outside of the county. I burst into tears. I raged silently, but my face expressed my terror at this prospect. I felt so powerless and fragile, tethered to structural ableism designed to warehouse people like me purely because of our bodies. I have always been vulnerable and dependent on others, but in that moment, I, like so many disabled people, was seen as nothing but a burden, a drain on society, a collection of diagnoses and expenditures.

My sisters consoled me, saying, "We're going home, and we will make this work," pulling me out of the depths of shame, guilt, and fear. Without their support I could easily have been persuaded into thinking that living in a facility was the only option. So many people are in this system designed to disappear us. This haunts me daily.

In January 2024, I was reminded again of the constant precarity of being disabled in a nondisabled world: My feeding tube ruptured, and I couldn't get it replaced until the following week. Meanwhile, the tube began coming out and my abdomen became distended, tender, and rigid. When I could not tolerate the pain anymore, I went to the emergency room.

I arrived to discover many patients, staff, and health care providers unmasked. When I lay on the exam table to have my tube replaced, I could not communicate the excruciating pain I was in throughout the procedure because they would not allow my smartphone or caregiver in the room. I tried mouthing words, but no one could understand me. My body shivered, every nerve ending tingling as I tried to hold on.

Two days in the hospital felt like two years. Laws like the ADA require only the bare minimum of care, and without enforcement. Compliance cannot be forced, even on people who do not see you as fully human or deserving of the right to access the same space.

Disabled people constantly navigate hostile environments, especially health care settings. Here people in positions of power can say whatever they want while patients have to give citations, articulate clearly and effectively, and have the presence of mind to push back during acute, potentially fast-moving situations. I have been advocating for my health with doctors since I was a child, but this latest experience shook me. They gaslit me about my valid concerns of mistreatment. Even with all my social capital and resources, I was reduced to nothing. I thought of all the patients on the same floor who were alone, scared, and suffering.

When will disabled people be free to just be and to fully participate in society with autonomy and dignity? Liberating disabled people is a constant collective effort that at times feels like a distant mirage. Alexis Ratcliff had no choice except to live in a hospital for many years and now is being forced to leave even that semblance of a home. I only recently created a home of my own, which took decades of planning, scheming, and manifesting. The constant labor of ensuring my freedom weighs on me heavily. It should not be so hard to survive—and survival is not enough.

Disabled advocate Sarah Blahovec wrote that "creating access is a critical way of showing up in solidarity." If we lived in a world that placed access above all, creating access would be a collective responsibility. In this world, cultures of care would ensure that carceral institutions like nursing homes are abolished; people, not profits, would be the priority; care would flow generously without restrictions from the state; and people like me would be secure knowing we are valued and wanted not for what we can produce but for who we are. This world—an accessible one centered on justice—would be ruled by a simple phrase always put into practice: "None of us are free until we all are free."

Alice Wong (she/her) is a disabled activist, writer, editor, and community organizer. Wong is the founder and director of the Disability Visibility Project. Twitter: @SFDirewolf

PHOTO BY EDDIE HERNANDEZ; ART BY MICHAEL LUONG

THE NEW AUTONOMY OF ABORTION

Since the overturning of Roe v. Wade*, abortion freedom now hinges on access to pills.*

ANDRÉA BECKER

When 18-year-old Rachel discovered she was unexpectedly pregnant, she made what she thought was a natural first step: call Planned Parenthood to schedule an abortion. "I wasn't ready to be a parent or a mom," she says. "And I didn't want to go through giving birth just to give the kid away." Even in an abortion-friendly state like Illinois, the nearest Planned Parenthood was one hour away, and there wasn't an available appointment for another month.

When Rachel consulted ob-gyns, they either told her they wouldn't provide an abortion or declined to provide recommendations. And since her insurance doesn't cover abortion care, she'd have to pay the expensive fee out of pocket. "I just wanted it to be over with," she says.

Feeling judged and scared, she and her mom turned to the internet, where they found a virtual abortion clinic. From there, the process was quick and straightforward: Rachel answered some screening questions to ensure she was a good candidate for medication abortion, chatted with a provider, and within days, the pills—mifepristone and misoprostol—were delivered to her door. Now, Rachel says she would choose telehealth again if she were in need of an abortion. "I liked that it was discreet and it was cheaper than other options."



ILLUSTRATIONS BY MARIAN F. MORATINOS FOR YES! MEDIA

EVEN THE WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION RECOGNIZES MEDICATION ABORTION WITHOUT DOCTORS TO BE SAFE AND EFFECTIVE.

To be sure, many people are not as lucky as Rachel, a pseudonym we're using to protect her identity. Even before *Roe v. Wade* was overturned in 2022, abortion deserts—defined as cities or towns located more than 100 miles from an abortion facility—covered large swaths of the United States, while many states had already instituted burdensome gestation restrictions and mandated waiting periods. The Hyde Amendment was also being used to keep some of the most financially precarious communities from accessing abortion care.

In the two years since *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*, abortion access has become even graver; 16 states have passed near or total abortion bans, rendering entire regions of the country abortion deserts. But, despite the fear and shame that tends to cloud the subject, seeking abortion care should be as easy as securing any other telehealth prescription: a few clicks, messages exchanged, and then picking up the mail.

In December 2021, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration lifted unnecessary restrictions on in-person dispensing of mifepristone, while professional organizations, including the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, endorsed a telehealth abortion model. These legislative and organizational changes, coupled with telehealth becoming an enduring norm, have revolutionized abortion care in the U.S.

It's important to note that telehealth is not for everyone and some abortion patients *want* or need to go to a clinic. So, while avoiding the clinics is empowering for some, we all deserve access to care that works best for us.

FINDING FREEDOM IN VIRTUAL CLINICS

While the future of mifepristone access in the U.S. depends on a pending Supreme Court case, easy, convenient, and compassionate in-home abortion care continues to be an option for many. It's still legal to access virtual clinics in 24 states and Washington, D.C., and now 16% of U.S. abortions are happening through these clinics. The latest science from Advancing New Standards in Reproductive Health at the University of California, San Francisco, a research group I am affiliated with, shows that abortion via telehealth is as safe and effective as in-clinic care. In fact, medication abortion overall is regarded as safer than many common medications including Tylenol, penicillin, and Viagra.

In response to the 2022 Supreme Court ruling, some states began passing proactive abortion protections, making abortion care in those states more accessible. Six states have begun passing shield laws, which allow health care providers to send pills to patients across state lines, while some people are even securing these pills on their own through what's referred to as a "self-managed abortion."

Research I've worked on regarding self-managed abortion indicates that many people inaccurately believe it to be unsafe across the board (e.g., they think of "coat hanger" abortions). In actuality, even the World Health Organization recognizes medication abortion without doctors to be safe and effective.

This trend began in the 1980s, when grassroots feminist activists in Brazil discovered that misoprostol, initially developed and prescribed as an ulcer medication, has abortifacient properties. This discovery led to the creation of whisper networks and "abortion accompaniment" groups, which have since spread throughout Latin America. The groups are now equipped with online tools like WhatsApp to deliver abortion pills and provide emotional support.

After decades of protests led by these feminist movements, several predominantly Catholic Latin American countries—Argentina, Mexico, and Colombia—decriminalized abortion. While many pregnant people in these countries can now enter local abortion clinics for the first time, pregnant people in the U.S., some of whom can no longer access clinics, are now reclaiming abortion freedom from the comfort of their homes.

The most recent data indicates that around 7% of women in the U.S. have attempted a self-managed abortion, which is likely an underestimation. And in a survey of people who self-managed with abortion pills, 96.4% successfully completed their abortion without needing an additional procedure and only 1% experienced a medical emergency.



Dana Johnson, Ph.D., an abortion researcher at Ibis Reproductive Health, is tracking this trend in the U.S. She's particularly excited about the emergence of "advance provision" in abortion care, where people can order "just in case" abortion pills online before they're even pregnant.

While there are various websites offering abortion pills, AidAccess, run by Dutch physician Rebecca Gomperts, is one of the most recognizable names in the game. AidAccess ships advance provision abortion pills across the U.S., even to states with active abortion bans, which Johnson says help reduce the anxiety for those fearful of a hypothetical pregnancy: "They won't have to wait for shipping times," she says. "They don't have to worry about someone intercepting the mail. They can tailor it to their lives."

Johnson and her research team at the University of Texas, Austin, which has surveyed people across the U.S., have found that a lot of the people who order pills in advance are folks with health issues for whom a pregnancy could be dangerous and even deadly. They're right to be worried, as story after story has emerged about pregnant people being unable to receive abortions even in the face of life-threatening complications.

Some people, Johnson notes, are even ordering these pills so that they might be able to help someone *else* with an unwanted pregnancy. "They were really proud to share medications with the people in their networks. They definitely viewed themselves as activists," Johnson says. "And a lot of these people who we spoke to weren't necessarily activists before."

Politicians can close down abortion clinics and pass increasingly draconian bills, but at the end of the day, abortion is extremely popular (85% of Americans believe abortion should be legal in at least some circumstances). If anything, research such as Johnson's shows that people are more engaged and knowledgeable on abortion than ever before.

ABORTION IN THE MEDICINE CABINET

In a country with abysmally high maternal mortality rates, particularly for Black people, and where abortion is 14 times safer than childbirth, having abortion pills in the medicine cabinet is a prudent safety precaution. Johnson recalls one interviewee



telling her, "You wouldn't live in a house that didn't have a fire extinguisher, and that's why she bought the pills." Another respondent compared it to traveling with an EpiPen. Perspectives like these offer a new way of thinking about abortion: Rather than treating it as a scary, shameful experience, abortion pills can simply be a part of one's health care arsenal, tucked on the shelf between Tums and Advil.

Other parts of the health industry that were historically considered radical or fringe have also become part and parcel of health care with widely expanded access. Consider mental health, for instance—an area of health care long stigmatized, with a history of criminalizing patients or relegating them to mental asylums. Now, thanks to the Affordable Care Act, insurance companies must cover mental health care, and it's possible to use telehealth to see a therapist and/or a psychiatrist.

Getting antidepressants or antipsychotics today can be as simple as seeing a doctor on video and picking up the medicine. You can even keep anti-anxiety pills on hand in case of a panic attack. Why should abortion pills be any different?

While sexual and reproductive health care are often deemed the most sensitive or controversial aspects of health care, other medicines within this realm have been mostly destigmatized in order to increase access. For starters, people who are concerned about HIV can now take PrEP (pre-exposure prophylaxis), a precautionary pill that lessens the chances of contracting the illness, or PEP (post-exposure prophylaxis) after a potential encounter.

There are also virtual clinics for HIV/AIDS prevention, including Nurx, which also provides contraception, mental health care, and herpes treatment. Even Plan B, which is closer to the cultural land mine of abortion than other medications, is now available over the counter. Doctors can prescribe the medication to patients who want to have it on hand just in case, rather than needing to jump through hoops for access in a moment of crisis.

BRINGING BACK YOUR PERIOD

Period pills, which refer to a regimen of mifepristone and misoprostol used in a different way, might be the final frontier in the transformation of our understanding of abortion. Imagine this: Your period is a few days late and you're worried you might accidentally be pregnant. Some, like Rachel, would take a pregnancy test and schedule an abortion. However, for those who don't want to have an abortion or don't have access to the procedure, these pills can simply "bring your period back." You'll never have to know whether you were pregnant or whether your period was simply late for other reasons.

Wendy Sheldon, Ph.D., the lead scientist on the largest study conducted on period pills in the U.S., found that interest in period pills in the U.S. "could be substantial." During her study, which included nearly 700 people across nine clinics, she and her team found that 70% of patients who didn't want to be pregnant said they were interested in taking period pills without a pregnancy test. "It was enormous," Sheldon says. Indeed, she and her team were surprised to find no difference in the levels of interest between blue and red states, indicating that even people living in states where abortion access is protected would be interested in period pills.

Then why have most people never heard of them? While period pills are technically legal across the country, they are caught in the ideological crosshairs of the abortion debates. On one end, groups who seek to ban or highly restrict abortion view period pills as indistinguishable from abortion—these days, anti-abortion groups argue that more and more parts of reproductive health care, like birth control or in vitro fertilization, should be considered abortion. On the other end of the ideological spectrum, abortion rights groups view period pills as reinforcing abortion stigma, and that empowering people to circumvent a pregnancy test and an abortion contradicts the talking point that abortion is a normal part of health care.

Additionally, while period pills have been embraced in countries with poor abortion access around the world (from India and Nigeria to Peru), physicians in the U.S. are skeptical. Some, Sheldon notes, are unwilling to prescribe abortion pills in what's currently considered "off label," meaning, these pills are only officially approved to be used after a positive pregnancy test. "I think everyone knows that it's safe," Sheldon says, before adding the caveat, "We don't have enough data yet to publicly convince clinicians." But in order to get this data, researchers and clinics need funding. Sheldon, for one, was working on a newer study testing the efficacy of period pills but ran out of funding and had to shutter the research.

Ushma Upadhyay, Ph.D., is a researcher currently leading the first clinical trial on misoprostol-only period pills, but recruiting clinics and participants for the study has been difficult. "The main obstacle to recruiting people into the study is that people just don't know it's a thing," she says. "It's not mainstream yet. It hasn't been accepted." Despite the difficulties, the research must go on. Upadhyay envisions a future in which people—providers and patients alike—"embrace the unknown" as well as the complexity of pregnancy and abortion.

If we, as a society, can embrace this complexity, we can forge into this new phase of abortion freedom, where it is so normalized that patients can chat with a primary care provider or even urgent care and pick up misoprostol at a nearby pharmacy without worrying about being shamed, let alone arrested.

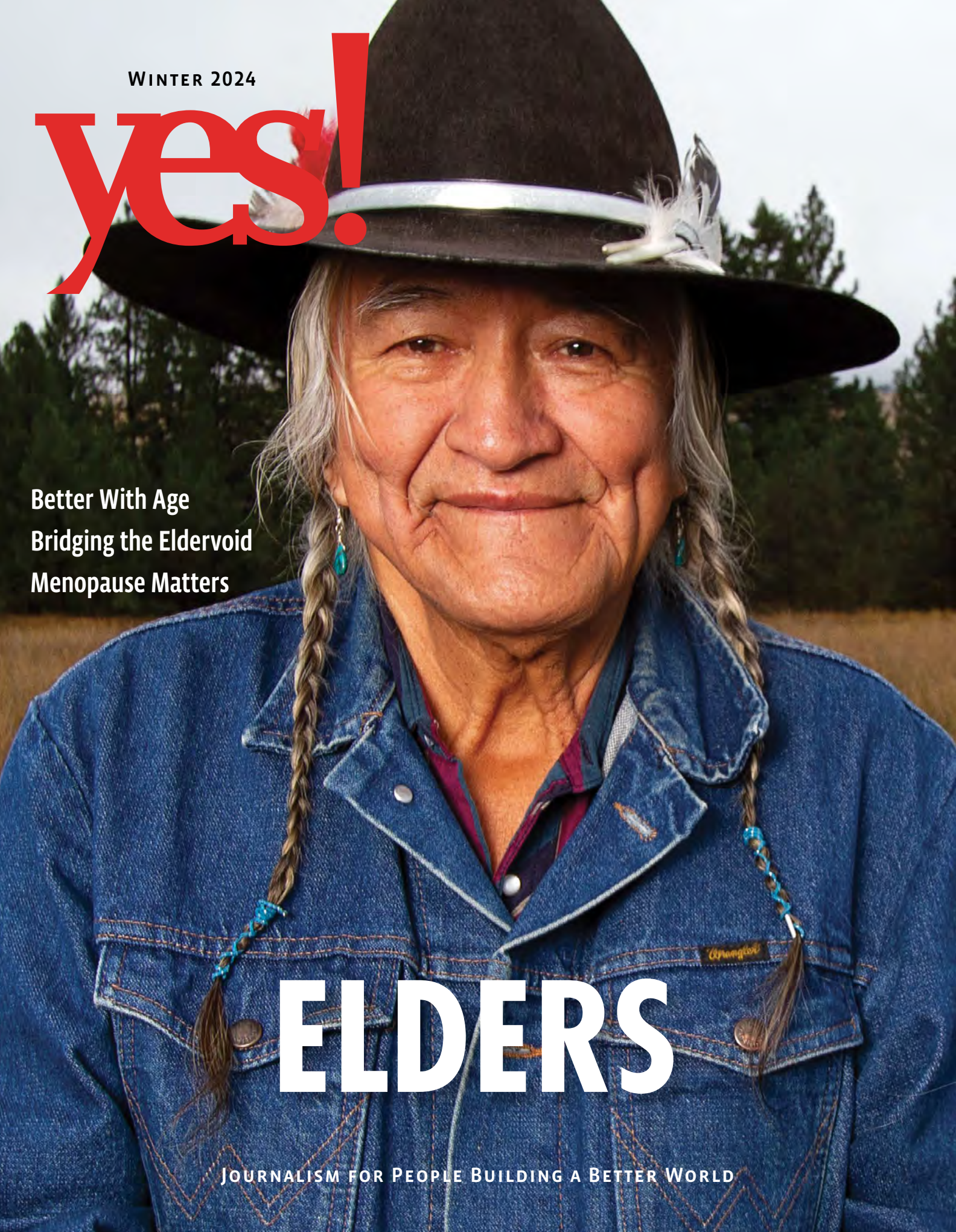
Across these various cases, one thing remains clear: While abortion is more restricted than ever before, freedom also abounds. Amid horror story after horror story—especially for those whose pregnancy requires in-clinic care—there are also people taking back their bodily autonomy. Abortion pills keep us safe in the face of bans, whether we order them on an app, keep them on hand, or use them in novel ways. While politicians seek to squash this idea, abortion should remain easy, convenient, and stress-free—and we, regardless of what happens at the Supreme Court this summer, have the power to help our communities ourselves.

Andréa Becker, Ph.D., is a medical sociologist researching abortion and contraception. Her writing has been published in *The New York Times*, *Slate*, and *The Nation*. Twitter: @AndreaVBecker

RATHER THAN TREATING IT AS A SCARY, SHAMEFUL EXPERIENCE, ABORTION PILLS CAN SIMPLY BE A PART OF ONE'S HEALTH CARE ARSENAL, TUCKED ON THE SHELF BETWEEN TUMS AND ADVIL.

Winter 2024

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Better With Age

Bridging the Eldervoid

Menopause Matters

ELDERS

Journalism for People Building a Better World

The Tenderness of Eldercare

How aging caregivers are putting their self-care first.

MARITA GOLDEN

In 2019, Dan Gasby, the husband of fashion guru and restaurateur B. Smith, made a public announcement in *The Washington Post*: While he, a Black man, remained devoted to his Black wife, who was diagnosed with early-onset Alzheimer's in 2013, he was also in a committed relationship with another woman, Alex Lerner, who is white. "If *This Is Us* and *Modern Family* came together, it would be us," Gasby told *The Washington Post*. Gasby's daughter, Dana, agreed, telling *The Washington Post* that she's glad her father met Lerner. "When he told me, I was like, *Thank God. I'm happy*," she said.

Gasby's admission ignited a virulent backlash, especially on the Facebook page he was shepherding for his wife's lifestyle brand. "[Lerner's] having her lifestyle funded by [this] Black woman, and this white woman didn't have to build a thing with you," YouTuber Paris Milan said in a 2018 video that has accrued more than 215,000 views. When Gasby appeared on *The View* in 2019, the hosts pilloried him for moving Lerner into the home he shared with Smith. Cohost Sunny Hostin, who was friends with Smith and Gasby, said that moving

Regina Wells looks at the collection of sympathy cards she received after the loss of her mother.

PHOTOS BY STEPHANIE WILLIAMS FOR YES! MEDIA



Regina Wells at home in her living room. Wells lost her husband and her mother within a year of one another.



In the room where her mother used to sleep, Wells touches a photo of her husband that was used at his memorial service.

Lerner in was "very disrespectful," to which Gasby replied, "I am keeping my vows to protect and care for [Smith]," who he said encouraged him to move forward with his life after her diagnosis. "When we got the diagnosis at Mount Sinai … she stopped me, put her hand on my arm and … she said to me, 'I want you to go on,'" Gasby said. "I'm not doing anything we didn't [discuss]."

While many were upset that Lerner was helping Gasby care for Smith, who died in 2020, this complicated love story is an example of an extended family coming together to combat Alzheimer's, one of the cruelest diseases of our time. It's also a starting point for an honest conversation about the emotional needs of those caring for loved ones with incurable diseases.

I think about caregiving a lot. I'm a healthy 73-year-old African American woman and my husband, Joe, is a 76-year-old diabetic and a cancer survivor. The aggressive chemotherapy and radiation that saved his life 25 years ago destroyed some of his brain cells and activated a long-dormant genetic diabetes trait. He exercises daily, takes all his meds, and remains mentally sharp—and he's also at high risk of developing some form of dementia. I'm haunted by the possibility that I may one day have to be his full-time caregiver.

At its best and most challenging, marriage is about spouses caring for one another, something Joe and I have done for 33 years. During Joe's cancer journey, I insisted that his family recognize my need for emotional support. They eagerly responded to my call for help and buoyed my spirits: Joe's relatives asked me how I was doing when they called to check on him, which had not happened before. And, in the last stages of Joe's treatment, his parents opened their home to him so I could live in Richmond, Virginia, three days a week and teach at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Though Joe's cancer has been in remission since 1996, we've still talked about death, what we want, and what we don't want. He has told me that if he declines beyond recognition he wants me to "move on." Still, there's nothing that can prepare you to watch the decline of your life partner while also being their administrator, appointment maker, chauffeur, cook, nurse, and doctor.

Over the past several years, I have watched my oldest friend care for her bedridden mother while also taking time for herself. Her mother worked for the federal government for 30 years, so my friend depended on the generous resources of her mother's pension, Social Security, and Medicare to provide 24-hour care when needed. At the same time, I have seen another friend struggle with indifferent doctors and incompetent nursing staff as she tries to piece together support for her husband while he endures the final stages of Parkinson's disease.

Caregivers are a national resource and a national treasure, but they're not given the financial support, respite care, support groups, and time off that they deserve. They're not recognized as individuals who have often quit their jobs, changed the direction of their lives, and given up their dreams to support someone else.

The statistics are stark: According to a 2020 survey conducted by the National Alliance for Caregiving and AARP, 53 million people in the United States are caregivers for someone who is chronically ill or disabled. Of those, more than 34 million people in the U.S. have provided unpaid caregiving to an adult aged 50 or over. The number of people in their 20s and 30s who are caregivers is increasing every year, nearly 25% of adults between the ages of 45 and 64 are caregivers, and 19% of adults over the age of 65 are caring for a friend or family member. All this caregiving, done mostly by women, takes place against the backdrop of a health care system that's overly bureaucratic, difficult to manage, and does little to recognize the material or emotional needs of caregivers.

While nearly every state provides financial assistance to family caregivers, it often isn't enough to cover all the costs of care, including home health aides, health insurance, medical transport, and medications. Long-term care insurance, veterans benefits, and Medicaid help to fill in the financial gap, but most older people age in their homes, because their families can't afford to put them in assisted living or nursing homes. In 2022, the Department of Health and Human Services began attempting to address these concerns with its National Strategy to Support Family Caregivers, which highlights nearly 350 actions various federal agencies can take to better support family caregivers and 150 additional actions that other levels of government can adopt.

Some of those actions include access to AmeriCorps Seniors, which offers short-term respite care to family caregivers in need of a break; updating rules for the Centers of Medicare and Medicaid Services to ensure family caregivers are involved in hospital discharge planning for their loved ones; and leveraging Medicaid funding to ensure caregivers receive better pay and the tax credits that are available to them. But as caregivers, particularly older caregivers caring for other aging people, wait for these actions to improve their lives, they're taking respite care into their own hands.

There's a saying among Black American Christians that "God never gives you more than you can handle." Throughout my life, my acceptance of that assertion has waxed and waned, but 76-year-old Regina Wells, a retired case manager living in Washington,

"PEOPLE WERE TELLING ME TO TAKE CARE OF MYSELF. THERE WERE MANY OFFERS OF HELP THAT LOOKING BACK I WISH I HAD ACCEPTED. I CRIED A COUPLE OF TIMES, BUT I WOULDN'T BREAK DOWN. I FELT THAT I COULDN'T."

[REGINA WELLS]

D.C., has an unshakable belief in that adage. And yet, her resilience, generous spirit, and deep religious faith were tested as she served as a full-time caregiver for her husband and her mother for more than a decade.

Given her career, Wells was accustomed to stress, but nothing could've prepared her for the rigors of being a full-time caregiver. Brough, her husband of 45 years, suffered a series of strokes over the course of three years. He also had high blood pressure and gout, for which he had resisted treatment, and over time, he developed congestive heart failure and sleep apnea. "He was a terrible patient," Wells says. "He didn't follow the doctor's instructions. … He would insist that he was OK, that he didn't need help, and then fall or slide off the bed."

After Brough's last stroke in 2022, Wells realized she could no longer care for him on her own and that he would receive better care in a nursing home. The same year, Wells' mother had several strokes and was diagnosed with breast cancer. Studies have shown that more than 70% of full-time caregivers over the age of 70 die before those they're caring for. That can be partially attributed to "caregiver stress syndrome," a condition that can lead to physical, mental, and emotional exhaustion. As a result, caregivers are at risk for developing many chronic illnesses like diabetes, heart disease, and high blood pressure. Or, as geriatric care manager Ann Craynon told me, "Health problems often go unaddressed in caregivers."

Wells beat those statistics. However, caretaking still took an enormous toll on her. While her friends, siblings, pastor, and children offered to help, she didn't want to disrupt their lives by sharing the caregiving responsibilities. "People were telling me to take care of myself," she says. "There were many offers of help that, looking back, I wish I had accepted. I cried a couple of times, but I wouldn't break down. I felt that I couldn't."

Eventually, Wells reached a breaking point. "I remember one day when I felt so drained and tired and I did break down," she says. "I told them both, 'I can't take care of you.' I screamed in frustration and then I snapped out of it. I came back to reality." For Wells, that reality included a diagnosis of B-cell lymphoma followed by six months of cancer treatments. "Luckily it was a nonaggressive cancer, and I didn't have a bad reaction to the monthly chemotherapy treatments," Wells says. "When I'd come home from the treatments, I'd take my nap when my mother napped. I adapted to her schedule."

Wells developed cancer in 2021, a year before Brough died. Her mother died in 2023 at the age of 95. Wells is now a widow and a motherless child, grieving her mother and her husband in the same apartment in Prince George's County, Maryland, where she and Brough raised their children. "I miss them both," she says. "I talk to them constantly, just like they are still here. But I am relieved, relaxed, and peaceful. It's like they both had to die for me to finally get some rest, to get some time for myself."

Wells is a good wife, a good daughter, and a "strong Black woman," convinced that she had no time for tears, that vulnerability was a weakness, and that her needs and well-being were trumped by the needs of her family. To accept too much help would have undermined her sense of being capable. "Today I would tell anyone going through what I went through to ask for help, accept it when it is given, and take care of yourself," she says.

Kimberly Fleming, a licensed clinical social worker, social psychologist, and certified telemental health provider, is doing everything she can to preserve her mental and physical health as she cares for Ben, her husband of 27 years, who was initially diagnosed with mixed dementia (Alzheimer's and vascular dementia) in 2018, and was rediagnosed with Alzheimer's Lewy body dementia (LBD) in 2022. He's now in stage 6, so he can't move his legs, and he's developed Parkinson's-like symptoms. While Ben needs 24-hour nursing assistance, the couple can't afford it; instead, a certified nursing assistant is with Ben eight hours on Monday, Tuesday, and Thursday, and four hours each day of the rest of the week. "After they leave it's all on me," Fleming says. "The feeding, dressing him, getting him to the bathroom. I have shoulder and hip problems from lifting him. I don't sleep much at night fearing he will wake up and try to go to the bathroom and fall."

"I HAD TO LEARN THAT I COULD NO LONGER DEPEND ON MY PARENTS FOR THE KIND OF DEEP EMOTIONAL SUPPORT THEY OFFERED ME IN THE PAST BECAUSE OF ALL THEY WERE GOING THROUGH."

[DR. SHERITA GOLDEN]

After Ben's diagnosis, Fleming moved them from a four-story house in Edison, New Jersey, to a smaller house in Charleston, South Carolina, to be closer to Ben's daughter, who was stationed at a nearby army base. However, when Ben's daughter was reassigned to Japan six months later, it left Fleming with few options. "[Ben's daughter being reassigned] left me stranded in a sense," she says. "Navigating a health care system in a new state, dealing with Ben's nearby relatives who, when they visited us, despite Ben's clear decline, patted my hand and told me, 'He'll get better.' I wanted to scream, 'No, he won't!' but I understood their inability to accept what I struggled to accept every day."

For many Black Americans, caring for an aging family member is considered a point of pride because it allows the family to keep their aging loved ones close. As AARP notes in a 2021 article, Black Americans tend to have more "burdensome" caregiving arrangements since Black caregivers tend to be younger and unmarried and have to balance caring for their loved one with a full-time job. And yet, Black caregivers tend to cope better than their white counterparts, and a majority "find a sense of purpose" in caring for their aging relatives.

Dr. Thomas K. M. Cudjoe, a geriatrician and physician at Johns Hopkins School of Medicine, who cares for the elderly at Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore, knows this firsthand. "I wouldn't be a physician if not for what I learned and experienced helping my family care for my bedridden grandmother and my grandfather who had dementia, from the time I was 7 to 17," he says. "There is joy and peace that comes with caregiving. The peace of mind and joy of caring for someone who once cared for you, of giving of yourself to others, easing their pain. And in my community, we aspire to be there for family members. They want to care for their family as an act of love and devotion."

Fleming knows that the end is near for her husband. There's only one stage of LBD left, and he's currently in hospice care. "I'm watching my husband die a bit more each day," she says. "We had a great life together; we traveled, he supported me, we had fun, we had love, and I find myself living in those memories to keep me going. It's so hard to grieve [for] someone you are looking at every day." While she says this has been one of the hardest experiences of her life, she's also refused to lose herself. She has created a space in their home where she meditates, practices yoga, puts together puzzles for stress reduction, and uses Zoom not only for her continued part-time practice but for regular wellness check-ins with a group of other therapists who provide advice and comfort.

From her perspective, caring for herself is one of the best ways she can provide for her husband. "Sometimes when the nurse is here, I will go for a walk around a nearby lake, drive to a park, and just sit in my car for a while," she says. "I'm still working with some clients in my practice who are going through what I am going through, and I tell them what I tell myself and what I try to live: Caring for yourself is caring for your partner. Allow yourself to cry."

When I interviewed Fleming via video, I noticed that she was dressed up and wearing makeup. "I'm going out tonight," she says. "We've lived in this community for over a year, and tonight there is a community social event. I'm going. A family member will watch Ben. This will be the first time since we moved here that I have gone out to anything like this. Ben's care has been all-consuming."

A weeklong vacation in Scotland was the perfect mix of rest, relaxation, stimulation, and excitement for Dr. Sherita Hill Golden, who had never traveled to Europe before. The long-overdue vacation was especially meaningful after several years of supporting her elderly parents.

As vice president and chief diversity officer at Johns Hopkins Medicine, as well as a professor of medicine, Golden and her staff oversee the biomedical workforce diversity initiatives and health equity for the Johns Hopkins Medical system, which includes five hospitals in Maryland and one in Miami. At 55, she is at the top of her game, a Black woman in a key position to impact medical policy. She loves her job, but the



Dr. Sherita Hill Golden sitting in her dining area. "I find joy in reflecting on the fun that I have had and continue to have with my family, even in aging."



"My family is my heart, and I enjoy decorating my home with their photos. I learned this from my mother," says Golden, who keeps a picture-filled "Family Wall" in the living room.

responsibility of supporting her father in his role as the primary caregiver for her mother, who has Parkinson's, has required major shifts in her life.

For years, Golden has served as a guide, adviser, consultant, and watchdog as her parents age and as her mother's Parkinson's symptoms progress. She's the one who urged her parents to move from their two-story home in Bowie, Maryland, after her mother fell down the stairs. There had been a time when she and her mom could go to lunch and go shopping together, but that fall changed everything. Though it took months of planning—and then COVID-19 stalled the move for a year—Golden was eventually able to help her parents move into an independent living community about 20 minutes from her home.

While Golden's parents have access to medical care, social workers, and even a gym, caregiving still took a toll on her father. Shortly after her return from Scotland, her father passed out and was hospitalized for what his doctors believe was dehydration. It wasn't until his hospitalization that her mother confessed that her father was falling asleep whenever he sat down. Golden's father, a proud man devoted to caring for his wife, kept all his fatigue and stress a secret from his daughter.

When her father was hospitalized, Golden took a week off work to care for her mom. Though her son and a friend helped her, caregiving was still overwhelming. "I was wiped out by the end of that week," she says. "When [my] dad was released, we knew he had to get more help at home. He needed a break."

Since that time, Golden has begun seeing a therapist and has become a member of the Binti Circle, a support group for Black women caregiving for their parents. Those two decisions have given her the tools she needs to be a more effective caregiver, daughter, wife, and mother. "I had to learn how to set boundaries and how to say no to requests from my family that were unreasonable," she says. "I had to learn that I could no longer depend on my parents for the kind of deep emotional support they offered me in the past because of all they were going through. … And I realized that I needed someone other than my husband and my son and friends to vent to, to share my frustration and grief, someone outside the family."

Overwhelmed caregivers need the kind of guidance and support Golden is now receiving. For more than a decade, Paula Rice was a New York–based outreach director for the Alzheimer's Association. "People often don't know how to ask for help or where to get it," she says. She encourages caregivers to contact the national foundations for the illness or disease of the person they are caring for. Those foundations can provide information about support groups, the illness itself, and even legal advice. Rice says reaching out to the foundations is a task family and friends can perform for the primary caregiver as a means of support.

Shadowing all conversations about caring for the elderly is dying and death, uncomfortable but essential topics that seem to be unspeakable until the end of life is near or has come. In order to relieve stress, geriatric care manager Craynon recommends that aging people, especially those with children, have these difficult conversations with their potential caregivers. "A gift we give our children is telling them what we want long-term caregiving and our dying to look like," she says. "It is important to talk about this. Don't be afraid to talk about the end."

Craynon suggests filling out all important forms ahead of time, including power of attorney, wills, and advance directives. For caregivers with parents who are hesitant to discuss these matters, Craynon suggests this language: "As your child, I am concerned about knowing what you want. That is an important thing that I can do for you—honor your wishes—but you have to tell me what they are."

Rosemary Allender, who provided geriatric care services to families before retiring, agrees. She encourages families to design a plan of care that minimizes caregiver stress, expands support systems, and maximizes independence and quality of life for those who require care. "The most important thing is to have open communication and conversations long before the family faces the crisis of how to care for Mom or Dad," she says. "Call a family meeting and bring family members together to create an action plan to implement if faced with a long-term caregiving crisis. Everyone can't do everything, but everyone can do something. These conversations, if held in advance, make responding to the needs of elderly family members much easier."

In 2011, former first lady Rosalynn Carter offered one of the most apt and moving descriptions in a written testimony for a Senate Special Committee on Aging: "There are only four kinds of people in the world: Those who have been caregivers. Those who are currently caregivers. Those who will be caregivers. And those who will need caregivers," she said. As I prepare emotionally to continue to age, I prepare for the possibility of being a caregiver by remembering that because my life is blessed, every day of my life I am caring in some way for someone, and someone is caring in some way for me.

Marita Golden is the co-founder and president emeritus of the Zora Neale Hurston/Richard Wright Foundation, a veteran teacher of writing, and an award-winning author. She has written for *Essence*, *The Root*, *Bitch*, *The New York Times*, and *The Washington Post*. Twitter: @maritagolden

Terra Affirma

Our Ancestral Future

IgrewupachildofTaínolandinMaricao,
Boriken,clamberingupmountainsides
and through dense forest tangle.

The forest only tells the truth.

Thestoryittoldmewasofthetangled
unity of death and life and birth and
decay and rebirth. And most of all,
aboutthefrightening,unstoppable,
brilliant determination
of life to exist.

ADAPTED FROM ANIMATED VIDEO PRODUCED BY LINEBREAK MEDIA ON BEHALF OF THE 100% CAMPAIGN.
WORDS AND ILLUSTRATION: RICARDO LEVINS MORALES

Igrewupundercolonialoccupation,
which is a large-scale version
of armed robbery, meant to
keep poor people poor and
the rich rich.

Colonialism
depletes
without
replenishing.



It’swhathasblownsomanyofus,likesporesonthewind,toplacesfarfromourhomes
—in my case, to the occupied homelands of the Dakota people and their
more recent neighbors, the Anishinaabeg, another disp ed pe ple.
The words “spore” and “diaspora” share the same Gree ot.



Idon’thavetotellyouthatwe’reataturningpoint
in our intertwined histories. We all feel it.
TheGulfStream,thejetstream,themigrantstream,
all changing and shifting at once. We, like every
generation,arealinkbetweentheancientpastand
theancientfuture.Howwestepintothatrolematters
a great deal to those who await in the future,
where we’re headed. It matters that we learn
to read the land, feel the wind,
listen to the vibrations in the ground
and the rhythms in each other’s hearts.

ne of us know how to get there,

o we need to become the kind of people
capable of figuring it out.

We humans have been gathering experience for hundreds of thousands of years.

Let's use it.

We have to know our history and each other's.



Union leader Joe Hill once said, "Don't mourn, organize." We need to organize, but we also need to mourn. Accumulated loss can weigh us down.



Grieving lightens the load.

We get to grieve for our loved ones, for the polar bears losing their ice, for the unhoused we've left behind, for our people's pain.

But to mourn for the whole entire world? That feels irresponsible.

When your child is sick, you don't mourn their loss. You fight like hell for their life.

The same should be true for Mother Earth.



Hope is the life force that drives every chipmunk, sea turtle, or butterfly to venture out each day in search of a meal or a nesting place or a mate. It's what allows us to see opportunities. I'm sorry to have to tell you, but the universe is a lot more invested in what you do than in how you feel. Because however you feel, the choice is the same. It's about either giving up or stepping up.

There are some who are waiting for us. I can feel them. They stand in a circle beside a wide river summoning us, their ancestors, for a ceremony of gratitude. They are thanking us for all we did during the confusing, frightening, uncertain time of the turning. How we rose to the occasion. How we never gave up, so that one day they could stand here, beside a river, bird chirping and water rippling, and honor us. It's what ancestors live for. Literally.



I never knew this before. We don't just need our ancestors; they need us.

We are their anchor point in the future: someone to dream about.

To fight for.

To walk toward.

We must walk toward those who wait for us.

Let's go.

–Ricardo Levins Morales

Ricardo Levins Morales is an artist and organizer based in Minneapolis who uses art as political medicine to support individual and collective healing from the ongoing harms of oppression. Instagram: @ricardolevinsmorales

Menopause Matters

The end of menstruation has been stigmatized and misunderstood. The "menopausal multiverse" can change that.

OMISADE BURNEY-SCOTT

Throughout history, individuals experiencing menstruation have faced the daunting task of navigating the complex, stigmatized landscape of menopausal symptoms without support. There's a presumption that all individuals undergoing menopause will exclusively identify as women, be white, heterosexual, desire or have the ability to bear children, already have children, and will be in their 40s or 50s. The abundance of conflicting information surrounding menopause has made it challenging to comprehend its essence—its defining features, unique attributes, expected timing—and receive strategies to navigate this phase. And yet, it is crucial for anyone with a uterus and ovaries to have access to a clear and concise guide to help them navigate this inevitable and transformative journey.

Menopause takes place when a person has a continuous year without any menstrual cycle, including no instances of spotting or breakthrough bleeding. During menopause, the ovaries stop making estrogen and progesterone hormones and no longer release eggs. Before that happens, there is a perimenopausal period—"peri" meaning "pre"—that can last up to 10 years before an individual's menstrual cycle ceases altogether. Menopause typically occurs during a person's 40s or 50s, with the average age being 51 in the United States. The most common physical symptoms of menopause are hot flashes, night sweats, brain fog, vaginal dryness, weight gain, and dry skin. There are also lesser known physical manifestations such as migraines, dizziness, depression, burning mouth, and fatigue.

Unfortunately, the menopausal experience isn't often depicted or celebrated as a positive life transition with various stages and expressions; instead, it's frequently portrayed as a fearful conclusion of menstruation. In mainstream culture, especially in media, people going through menopause are often white, cisgender, heterosexual, middle-aged, and middle-class individuals depicted as hot, sweaty, confused, and angry. Consequently, the expanding landscape of support, services, education, and advocacy lacks intentional representation of the unique menopausal experiences, needs, and struggles faced by those marginalized along lines of race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexuality, and socioeconomic status.

Much of the stigma surrounding menopause is rooted in negative societal attitudes toward people who identify as women or who have been assigned female at birth. This objectification is amplified for older individuals no longer considered fertile, perpetuating the harmful notion that they are less valuable or "washed up." It's important to emphasize that menopause shouldn't be seen as the end for anyone, including gender-expansive and racially diverse individuals. All individuals, regardless of gender identity, race, or age, should be equally respected and valued throughout their life stages.

Menopause as a physical, cultural, and political experience is often overlooked in discussions related to health outcomes and systemic oppression. But, like most public health experiences, it is affected by a range of factors, including poor access to health care, toxic work environments, unsafe neighborhoods, and socioeconomic hardships. These stressors place considerable strain on the body, disrupting hormonal and biological processes and contributing to chronic inflammation. As a result, menopausal experiences can become more challenging and occur earlier for individuals exposed to these systemic injustices.

I'd like to offer an intervention: I see the Earth's evolution, at the remarkable age of 4.5 billion years, as parallel to the life of individuals experiencing menopause. As our planet warms through human intervention, we see species dying off. What if human beings are being offered the wisdom, medicine, and warnings of an Earth entering its cosmic menopausal phase? If so, are we listening?

By 2025, there will be more than 1 billion people experiencing menopause worldwide, which will



ILLUSTRATION BY BARBARA SEESE FOR YES! MEDIA

represent 12% of the global population. Now, as individuals take charge of their bodies, a contemporary revolution is taking shape, one that's dismantling age-old stereotypes and misinformation about this pivotal phase.

MENOPAUSE'S ORIGIN STORY

Across generations, Black, Indigenous, and women of color, as well as those who identify as transgender or have expansive gender identities, have grappled with the profound challenge of asserting agency over their own bodies. Historical injustices, such as the displacement and genocide of Indigenous peoples and the enslavement and racial violence endured by individuals of African descent, have hindered bodily autonomy. These obstacles find their origins in the socially constructed concept of race, where whiteness has been artificially elevated as the societal standard. Consequently, experiences outside of this norm consistently face othering, marginalization, and dehumanization.

In 1821, the French physician Charles-Pierre-Louis de Gardanne coined the term "menopause" by drawing upon the Greek language, where "men" denotes "month" and "pausis" signifies "cessation." The Greeks can also be credited for coining the term "hysterikos" (a word that shares the same root as "hysterical"), which translates to "suffering in the womb." In ancient Greek belief, women displaying "irrational" behavior were thought to be influenced by their uteri moving around within their bodies, causing disruption.

Throughout the 19th century, the naming and defining of menopause became another means of reinforcing the perceived frailty of the female body. In the U.S., women faced a heightened vulnerability to receiving insufficient diagnoses and treatments. Prevailing beliefs of the time often attributed most of women's physical ailments to their sexual organs or mental health issues, leading to distressing and occasionally fatal treatments. Such stereotypes became yet another vehicle to subjugate women and individuals assigned female at birth within the emerging field of gynecology.

J. Marion Sims, the so-called father of gynecology, also influenced traditional thinking about menopause. As historian Deirdre Cooper Owens documents in her 2017 book, *Medical Bondage: Race, Gender, and the Origins of American Gynecology*, Sims honed his newly developing gynecological techniques in the 19th century by practicing on enslaved Black women, including Anarcha, Betsey, Lucy, and others named in the book, without anesthesia. Over the course of four years, Anarcha endured a total of 30 experimental surgeries, while all the women faced the pathologization of their gender and race, reflecting the historical trend of stigmatized and medicalized women's health.

The persistent impact of structural racism, which involves unequal access to resources, services, and opportunities based on race, significantly contributes to the health disparities observed between Black and white women during midlife. Black women often experience systemic barriers to accessing quality health care, educational opportunities, economic stability, and suitable housing. These disparities can lead to higher levels of stress, limited health care choices, and reduced preventive care. Chronic stress and limited access to adequate health care can exacerbate health conditions and contribute to a range of issues during midlife, such as cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, mental health challenges, and other chronic conditions. Additionally, the impact of structural racism extends to health care practices, where biases and stereotypes held by health care professionals can affect the quality of care provided to Black women. A 2023 survey from The Menopause Society found that "only 31.3% of responding obstetrics and gynecology program directors reported menopause education was included in their residents' training," while a 2019 study published in *Mayo Clinic Proceedings* found that less than 10% of OB-GYNs felt adequately trained to support menopausal people in their practices. In 2021, Dr. Cindy Duke, a reproductive endocrinologist, virologist, and fertility specialist,

A 2019 study published in the *Mayo Clinic Proceedings* found that less than 10% of OB-GYNs felt adequately trained to support menopausal people in their practices.

told me, "Menopause, in general, isn't taught a lot, not even in our training programs, unless you're fortunate enough to be in a program where there is someone who's decided, 'This is my life's work, this is my life's mission: to learn about menopause and teach the next generation of women's health specialists about menopause.'"

Addressing health disparities necessitates a comprehensive approach that acknowledges and actively works to dismantle structural racism, promoting equitable access to health care, education, employment, and other opportunities. Efforts should focus on transforming oppressive policies, fostering inclusive health care systems, enhancing cultural competence among health care providers, and advocating for social and economic reforms that empower marginalized communities. By confronting and dismantling systemic racism, we can strive toward a society where health outcomes are more equitable and just for all, regardless of their race or ethnicity.

"Modernity's menopause is an anthropocentric end-of-life event that heavily depends on aging and reproduction as productivity measures," Austen Smith, owner of Our Lunar Intelligence, which describes itself as an Afrocentric consultancy, told me in 2022. "It claims to serve women but strangely positions patriarchy as the life-giving force by gendering menopause as feminine and conditioning society to view it as a harbinger of death." Smith's analysis frames changing views on menopause and invokes the question: "What if we need to shift the narrative in the menopause story?"

I have worked as a social justice and reproductive justice advocate for more than 25 years, so I understand the need for a cultural shift in how we think about and treat menopause as a pathway to sustainable change. Examining the past and present experiences of Black, Indigenous, and women of color, as well as genderqueer and transgender individuals in the U.S. is essential to understanding why many older family members didn't discuss topics like menstrual cycles, sex, pleasure, pregnancy, or menopause with the younger generations. Perhaps their stories were muted by cultural or generational norms, or generational trauma of racial and sexual violence that often silences voices and stories at the margins.

Menopause, being linked to the reproductive experiences of menstruating people, is often tied to notions of aging, infertility, and childbearing. As a result, it's essential to foster a cultural shift that appreciates and respects aging as a natural and diverse part of life.

Unfortunately, this collective oversight within the medical industry dismisses a physiological reality affecting nearly half of the world's population. It hampers the development of effective health care strategies, research, and accessible support systems for menopausal individuals. Addressing this oversight and promoting open discussions about menopause are essential steps toward ensuring that health care systems adequately support and cater to the diverse needs of individuals experiencing this significant life stage.

According to the Study of Women's Health Across the Nation, Black, Latinx, and other non-Black women undergo menopause earlier on average and may grapple with more protracted and intensified symptoms than their white counterparts. (The study did not specify whether its survey of "women" included gender-expansive individuals, trans or nonbinary people, or simply any people of color with a uterus and ovaries.) This early onset has far-reaching implications for these communities, as it means they have a more extended duration of living with menopausal symptoms and their associated challenges. The heightened intensity and duration can significantly impact their quality of life, overall well-being, and ability to engage fully in daily activities.

The implications are profound, particularly for marginalized individuals navigating the intersection of race, gender identity, and menopause. Accessing appropriate health care, timely diagnoses, and effective symptom management become more challenging due to discrimination and biases, amplifying

Health care providers need to be culturally sensitive, acknowledging the unique experiences and challenges that marginalized individuals face during menopause.

health disparities.

Addressing these disparities requires a multifaceted approach. It involves promoting inclusivity in research, health care policies, and education. Health care providers need to be culturally sensitive, acknowledging the unique experiences and challenges that marginalized individuals face during menopause. By addressing these disparities and providing equitable health care access, we can work toward a more just and supportive menopausal experience for all.

Instead of being embraced as a potentially transformative journey encompassing diverse stages and expressions, menopause often becomes shrouded in fear and solitude.

"When considering the reproductive life course of humans, menopause affords the perfect opportunity to reflect on the unique contributions of sentient beings outside of the capacity to propagate our species," says Monica McLemore, a professor in the School of Nursing at the University of Washington. "Negative health care related disparities—which are simply differences among and between populations—in my view are exacerbated by the imprecise dissection of humans into body parts and disease states. In other words, without focusing on a whole human being, we miss opportunities to understand assets and resilience, which should be the foundation to promote optimal health throughout a lifetime."

When individuals move in the world with identities that exist outside of the frame put forth by white supremacy and patriarchy, they are marginalized, and their experiences and needs are invisibilized. This invisibilization is dehumanizing, violent, and typically reinforced by state-sanctioned policies. We need first-person stories that can lead to more intersectional research, advocacy, and policy change in order to shift the cultural understanding of menopause and aging.

EXPANDING THE DIALOGUE ON MENOPAUSE

It's natural to seek comfort and trust in those who share similar backgrounds and qualities. However, societal structures that marginalize us can cause us to feel embarrassed about aspects of our identity, appearance, and experiences as women or people assigned female at birth. Unfortunately, societal norms can create a stigma around discussing menopause, which can make it feel like a shameful secret and leave us feeling isolated during this important phase. This is particularly true for marginalized people who may face additional societal taboos around the topic of menopause.

I created the Black Girl's Guide to Surviving Menopause (BGG2SM) in 2019 as a counterbalance to prevalent harmful narratives and a lack of resources. BGG2SM is a multidisciplinary initiative focused on cultural organizing, narrative shift work, and advocacy. Understanding the historical and contemporary experiences of Black women—intergenerationally, across class and through a gender and racial equity lens—is critical for body sovereignty.

I believe that Black people are the experts of our own bodies. Owning our stories is vital to having agency over our experiences, relationships, and liberation. By integrating reproductive justice, radical Black feminism, and gender liberation, BGG2SM normalizes menopause by centering first-person narratives of those who exist at the margins of the growing menopause landscape. We nurture a community that includes all voices and lived experiences: cis, trans, intersex, queer, straight, affluent, low-wealth, activists, and creatives.

We are committed to a time-bending, expansive, culturally, politically, and spiritually grounded space for all stories and truths to be shared, accessed, and elevated. These principles require us to identify the pathways to new ways of thinking and talking about menopause grounded in the historical, cultural, and political understanding of the lived experiences, truths, and realities of Black women and people who have a uterus and ovaries. In that sense, we have become cartographers of what I call the "Menopausal Multiverse," and we are consistently alchemizing what we learn about the "who" inside the menopause and aging landscape.



The Menopausal Multiverse comprises the wide array of marginalized menopausal experiences. It encompasses the diversity of menopausal individuals, both historically and in modern times, along with ancestral technologies, systems of care, and potential futures emancipated from systemic oppression. Additionally, the Menopausal Multiverse embraces cultural wisdom and the concept of generational healing that invites people to embrace their menopause experience as a journey with connective tissue to their identities, relationships, and roles.

Any journey, long or short, is made easier with a good map, provisions appropriate for the trip, and travel companions. The menopause journey is no different and menopausal people are being invited to be our own cartographers. Some of those cartographers include podcaster and Black women's health advocate Karen Arthur of *Menopause Whilst Black*; researcher and advocate Tania Glyde of the Queer Menopause project; Heather Corinna, queer feminist activist, educator, and the author of *What Fresh Hell Is This? Perimenopause, Menopause, Other Indignities, and You*; and journalist, feminist, and activist Mona Eltahawy.

Gaining a profound understanding, building trust with, and effectively navigating your unique trajectory through the various phases of menstruation, from menarche to menopause, can be significantly enhanced by crafting a tangible record of your personal journey. This record empowers individuals to interpret their body's narrative and the monthly messages received throughout decades. It promotes bodily autonomy, sovereignty over one's body, and the agency to advocate for personal needs before, during, and after the menopausal transition. This process activates both the science and art of mapmaking.

An additional, more potent way to frame the menopausal experience is to see it as another rite of passage—a throughline from menarche to menopause. In anthropology, "liminality" is defined as "the quality of ambiguity or disorientation that occurs in the middle stage of rituals when participants no longer hold their pre-ritual status but have not yet begun the transition to the status they will hold when the ritual is complete." It is believed that social hierarchies may be reversed or even temporarily dissolved during these liminal periods of transformation. Thus, menopause should be treated as a transformation to a new iteration of yourself.

In an interview on the BGG2SM podcast, Syd Yang, ordained Buddhist minister, movement chaplain, and founder of Blue Jaguar Healing Arts, summarizes this: "As challenging, frustrating, and confounding as perimenopause and menopause may feel—what if this is your body and your sacred center saying 'I love you, let's get to know each other better?'"

When I launched BGG2SM, I interviewed my dear friend and mentor, Jaki Shelton Green, the first Black woman to serve as North Carolina's poet laureate. After reminding me that "womb spaces are wet, warm, and protective," Green pondered if aging and menopause can help heal generational wounds, especially if we ask ourselves: "What are the wombs I've built around me? When have I allowed myself to crawl into them?"

Achieving wellness, healing, and embodiment within a transforming body is a continuous process that involves putting knowledge into practice as a lifelong commitment. I have concluded that it is not a one-time event or a mere collection of information. Menopause is a journey involving deepening and reimagining rather than graduating. One may encounter new things to learn and experiences that could require deeper introspection and unlearning of what we thought we knew. Realizing that we possess the power to illuminate our own path through menopause can bring a sense of liberation. Fortunately, we are not alone in this journey. Many others are navigating this liminal expansiveness alongside us.

Omisade Burney-Scott is a seventh-generation AfroCarolina, Black Southern feminist, storyteller, reproductive and healing justice advocate, and creator of the Black Girl's Guide to Surviving Menopause. Twitter: @osunsweetnsour

Good Fashion Has No Age Limit

For the women featured in Advanced Style, getting dressed up is the beginning of something new.

CORI MURRAY

THE PERSONAL STYLE OF 78-YEAR-OLD TEXTILE ARTIST DEBRA RAPOPORT JUMPS OUT THE MINUTE SHE COMES INTO VIEW. Like now, on a Zoom call, she's adorned with black chunky earrings she's repurposed from paper towel sheets and twine, a navy layered conical hat made of hardened and spray painted paper towels, and several necklaces crafted from recycled paper, oversize buttons, and found metals. This is how she dresses every day, and on most days, she captures the wanted attention of strangers.

"Today, I got stopped by three young women who were here for Fashion Week," says Rapoport from her home in New York City. "One was from Honduras, one was from Peru, and one was from Mexico. We had the best time talking. We became instant friends. We took a video on the street. It's fun. That's how you make new friends, right? It's all about that."

Her life has been equally impacted by her friendship with Ari Seth Cohen, the creator, author, and photographer of Advanced Style, the celebratory platform for ageless beauty and eclectic fashions. Rapoport was one of the first subjects Cohen photographed for his blog; she's also featured in every *Advanced Style* book and co-stars in the 2014 documentary.

Cohen first saw Rapoport on a rainy afternoon when she stepped into Manhattan's New Museum. You could say it was her shock of pink hair and eccentric wardrobe that made him run over and enthusiastically ask to take her picture. But looking back at how his subjects have captivated him over the last 15 years, the author says he's ultimately drawn to a person's spirit. "My project was never about fashion," he says. "It's about how these women express themselves through what they have on, and that attracts people to them and keeps them visible. For me, it's symbolic of one's energy, because [being] 80 and 90, still putting that thing together shows your vitality."

In a way, Cohen didn't tap into his creative spirit until he followed his late grandmother Bluma Levine's advice and moved to New York City in 2008. "She was my best friend and the inspiration for the Advanced Style project," he remembers. "Being so enmeshed in her world helped me discover the power of style. I always loved vintage clothing



Some Advanced Style models—Carol Markel, Lana Turner, Joyce Carpati, and Debra Rapoport—take a breather to chat in between shoots for a project promoting New York City's Museum of Modern Art in May 2015.

PHOTOS: ARI SETH COHEN



Debra Rapoport, Wanda Chambers, Alice Carey, and Kathy Anderson pose for a shot in NYC's Meatpacking District in April 2023.

because it sort of made me feel like I was living at a time when she was young. When she passed away, that's when I moved and everything sort of began. It was 2008, and I started taking photos on the streets and meeting ladies to fill that void a bit." Their relationship, and the new friendships he found, nurtured the type of celebrated artist he'd become: a chronicler of older women with a flair for fashion. His blog-turned-empire has produced four books: *Advanced Style* (2012), *Advanced Style: The Coloring Book* (2013), *Advanced Style: Older & Wiser* (2016), and *Advanced Love* (2018). His next book, *Advanced Pets*, will be published in 2024.

Cohen's keen eye helps him find stylish women to photograph, and he receives recommendations from his featured subjects. Judith Boyd, 80, was introduced to the author's work through her online friendship with Rapoport. "I so enjoyed Debra, and we communicated by email," says Boyd, who lives in Denver. "I told her that I was coming for a visit and we set up lunch. When I got to the restaurant, she had brought Ari with her. We all spent the afternoon taking the bus, going to a museum. Then Ari found some other women to photograph. It was just a delight."

Known for her collection of vintage hats and frocks, Boyd is now a regular model on *Advanced Style* and posts on her own site, Style Crone. "I worked in mental health centers and we wore street clothes. I became interested in vintage and I would wear the '40s [style]. The patients loved it [because they saw it] as a form of self-expression," says Boyd, a retired psychiatric nurse. "My husband was my first photographer. He had been diagnosed with cancer in 2005 and I blogged during the last nine months of his life. This is how we diverted from tragedy and devastation."

Arlinda McIntosh has been pursuing her singular sense of style since she turned her mother's curtains into a skirt at age 12. "They were black and white checkered, and I love that print, with red roosters on the bottom," says the self-proclaimed Jersey girl. "I took a pair of her stockings, pulling them through the place where the rod was, [tying it] around my waist. And that was my first skirt." Now 65, McIntosh is still creating skirts—the more volume, the better. "I've always liked skirts with far too much fabric. I would wear a wedding dress every day just to wear the skirt part," says McIntosh, who showcases her original fashions at the Sofistafunk website.

"When I first saw Ari's page, I was in love," says McIntosh. "I never knew that there were other women that just did what they want." However, McIntosh noticed there was a lack of diverse faces like hers on his blog. "After we became friends, I told him, 'I need to see some more Brown people on your page,'" says the designer and stylist, who directed Cohen's camera toward uptown NYC. "I told him he can start in Harlem, but don't do it on a Sunday. Mothers will get you about coming up to them at church." (Amen.)

That's the unifying thread between the women Cohen magnifies through his lens. They are as unapologetic about aging as they are about their wardrobe. "Everything is a story that we're telling our mirror. I say it's an unspoken conversation with the onlooker. I don't do anything for the onlooker. I do everything for me," says McIntosh. Rapoport shares a similar mantra. "In my morning meditation, I say, *OK, who am I today? My Self, capital S*. Then I know intuitively, and I just go in the closet, grab stuff, put it together," she says. "It quiets me, it focuses me, and it just brings out my spirit." For Boyd, it's the simple act of being. "I celebrate my age. It's a privilege to be 80."

Cohen is thankful that Advanced Style serves as a motivator for elders who might be hesitant to embrace this glorious time of their lives. "There's people who, through looking at Advanced Style, started to dress up because they were limited by their careers or by, unfortunately, children and grandchildren who would say things to their older parents or grandparents such as 'You can't stand out. It's not your time.' I hear that all the time. Like there's a shame about it," he says. "Now they are finally like, 'Whatever. It's my time again!' There has always been this desire to express themselves, and maybe that's just a desire to feel seen, [or] to feel love. And [expressing their] style kind of makes these women get a lot of love."

For these ladies, getting dressed up is no longer reserved for special occasions because living should be celebrated in grand style, every day.

Cori Murray is the former deputy editor of *Essence*. She received an ElevateHER award from the Black Women Film Network in 2022, recognizing how she elevates future generations of Black women. Murray covers arts, entertainment, and travel for many outlets including *The Hollywood Reporter*, *InStyle*, *Ebony*, and *Detour*. Twitter: @corimurray

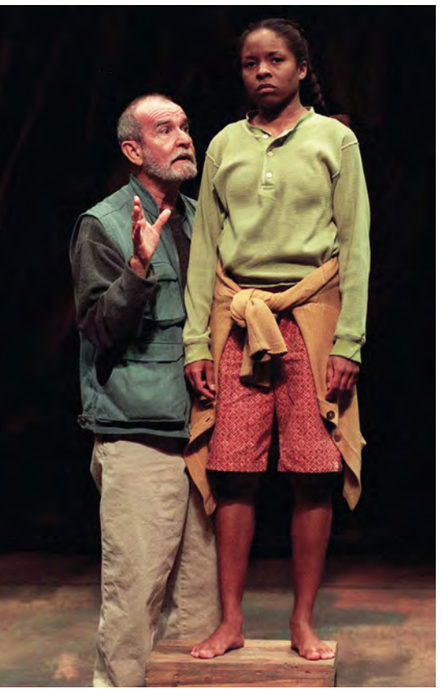


After two years of the COVID-19 pandemic and no photoshoots, Kathy Anderson, Wanda Chambers, Carol Markel, and Debra Rapoport gathered at Abingdon Square for an Advanced Style reunion party in October 2022.

LisaGay Hamilton

Actors Mature. Hollywood Hasn't.

FILM AND TELEVISION PORTRAYALS OF OLDER WOMEN, ESPECIALLY WOMEN OF COLOR, ARE LIMITED IN NUMBER AND SCOPE. A 2019 study by the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media found that nearly three-quarters of on-screen characters over the age of 50 are men. When older women are cast, they are more likely than their male counterparts to play roles that are "senile," "homebound," "feeble," or "frumpy." Further, older characters are less racially diverse than younger characters. Veteran actor and Peabody Award–winner LisaGay Hamilton, known for her roles on screen (*The Practice)* and on stage (*Beloved*), has first-hand experience with such biases and shared her thoughts with *YES!*



In 1997, Hamilton co-starred with Athol Fugard in his first post-apartheid play, the two-person *Valley Song*.

SONALI KOLHATKAR: You've been in this industry for a long time. How have opportunities changed for you over the decades?

LISAGAY HAMILTON: I've been in the business a long time, and I've been fortunate enough to fluctuate from theater and film to television, with theater being the place I love most. I still find theater as the place where I grow the most as an artist because the roles are much fuller, more interesting, more challenging, and they give me the opportunity to tell a much deeper story than just film and television.

As a Black actor, I'm usually offered roles that are still the asexual, generic best friend, sergeant, detective. On the one hand you say, *I'm gonna take that job because it pays the bills*. On the other hand, you're forced to go into work maybe three times an episode and do some exposition and leave, which is disheartening and sad and challenging.

KOLHATKAR: As you've gotten older, do you think the roles are less central and less well-rounded?





Above: ***The Soloist*** **is a 2009 film based on a true story of musician Nathaniel Ayers (played by Jamie Foxx), who developed schizophrenia and became homeless. Hamilton played the role of Nathaniel's sister.**

Left: **Hamilton played secretary/lawyer Rebecca Washington on the ABC legal drama** ***The Practice*** **from 1997 to 2003.**

HAMILTON: As I've gotten older, the roles have gotten even more generic. Of course I'm playing the mom and the grandma now; they're not central to the storyline. I can't say that the roles are interesting or challenging or even full-blown characters.

Women in general, regardless of race, don't have the luxury of aging gracefully as far as the executives are concerned. Although there have been some movies of late where they've proven that women directors, cinematographers, and stars of a broad range can make money, the bottom line is: Can I make money off of this person?

KOLHATKAR: In recent years, we've had some game-changing projects, like *Grace and Frankie* on Netflix. Jane Fonda, who played Grace, and Lily Tomlin, who played Frankie, tackled not only the challenges of women aging, but also being single and exploring sexuality as you age. *Good Luck to You, Leo Grande* with Emma Thompson explored the sexual life of an older woman. Emma Thompson, Jane Fonda, and Lily Tomlin are incredible actresses. They're all white.

HAMILTON: I haven't been offered those opportunities. You're naming roles and projects that star white women, which is good for them and good that they're tackling topics that are closer to my age range. But that doesn't mean that I get those opportunities because I'm a Black woman.

It's all about the green, so if a project were to come through that hit all those right markers [and has] women of color in it, then perhaps it might get approved. I'm not the most optimistic human on the planet, so I'm not quite sure what would make that change happen. I've done my share of pitching semi-autobiographical projects for myself, and no one's interested, primarily because I'm not a celebrity. It's just really hard.

KOLHATKAR: If you could envision the broad outlines of your ideal role on television, what would they be?

HAMILTON: I love roles that have a social impact and that allow the character to be a reflection of the politics of today. So let's say there was a show about the Black Lives Matter movement, for example. If there were a show about the three founders of the movement, their lives, their ups and downs, and their decisions that we on the outside sometimes think, Oh my gosh, I can't believe that you've turned into this, I would find that fascinating.

KOLHATKAR: How do we create a world where these stories get green-lit?

HAMILTON: I honestly don't know. I see what's on public view and I think to myself, I can't believe that got [funded]. I do know that there has to be a sense of faith that if I push hard enough, if I gather folks of like mind, that at least the project can be funded. Maybe not in the millions of dollars range, but I could raise a million. I could take my iPhone and do my own content and put it on the internet. It's a wonderful thing we have this technology. Look at TikTok. Those videos get views. Mind you, those aren't the kinds of individuals or topics that I'm interested in or that I think are healthy for our society, but somehow other people are watching that stuff. I do think there's an audience for us, and the way to get that work out there is via the internet.

KOLHATKAR: Is there any promise in collective action?

HAMILTON: Oh yes. That is the only way to do it. Finding like minds both artistically and politically is often hard 'cause you don't know where they are necessarily. But yes, finding like minds, working together, and being supportive of each other's work would be the most ideal way forward. I would love something like a collective where you have an already-made support system for your work and there's a commitment to the collective. Theoretically, kinds of environments seem to be rich and full and supportive and provide you the opportunity not only to hear your work, but to hear others' works, to critique those works. And that is exciting and challenging.

This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity and length.



Some of Hamilton's latest projects include ***Winning Time*** **(HBO),** ***The Lincoln Lawyer*** **(Netflix), and** ***The Dropout*** **(Hulu).**

PHOTOS: GETTY IMAGES (LEFT); ALAMY (TOP, CENTER, AND RIGHT)

INSPIRATION

Natalie Pryor



"STOP fearing aging,
it is a BLESSING to get 'old'!
That's why I always say,
'It gets greater later,'
because it really does.
Life is a gift.
Long life can be a
banquet of riches."

— **Bevy Smith**
Media Mogul

REFLECTION

Three things that get better with age:

Aging has changed my perception of...

Something I want to share with younger people is:

To leave the world better than I found it, I will ...

These reflections were compiled by Third Act, a movement of elders working together for a fair and stable planet. Third Act is a distribution partner for this issue of *YES! Magazine*.