WHAT A DEBACLE

TOP NY DEMOCRATS ARE BLAMING EVERYONE BUT THEMSELVES AFTER THEIR MIDTERM BLUNDERS HANDED HALF OF CONGRESS BACK TO MAGA REPUBLICANS

BY JOHN TARLETON — P10
Nov/Dec

Opening Nov 18 • $14-$17
Film: Bad Aye
Asian American filmmaker David Siev returns to his hometown of Bad Aye, Michigan at the beginning of the pandemic to help keep his family’s restaurant afloat. When the George Floyd uprising begins, Siev’s family uses its collective voice to speak out in their conservative community. What unfolds is a real-time portrait of 2020 through the lens of one multi-cultural family. 102 min. Accessibility: Assistive Listening, T-Coil. Visit icfccenter.com or call 212-924-7771 for showtimes.

IFC CENTER
323 6th Ave., Manhattan

Nov 23 • $25 • 10PM-4AM
House Music from Detroit: Marcellus Pittman
As a child growing up in Detroit, Marcellus “Malik” Pittman was playing his radio at maximum volume, listening to the sounds of "the Wizard" and the "Electrifying Mojo," in addition to the jazz outputs of Rosetta Hines. He is a true master of the knobs. And you might be lucky enough to see him spin some vinyl. 100% worth going out on Thanksgiving’s eve (dancing is good for the soul, anyway). Get tickets ahead of time via eventbrite.ca/1601979.

Nowadays
56-06 Cooper Ave, Queens

Nov 25 • $20 Suggested • 8PM-9:30PM
Music: Shoko Nagai’s Tokala
Shoko Nagai’s Tokala explores the sound of the ancient connection between Far East Asia and the Middle East via the Silk Road where cultural exchange happened and left an imprint which became an integral part of Japanese culture. Shoko Nagai on accordion and piano with Suta Chay on violin and voice.

Barbes
376 9th St, Brooklyn

Dec 3 • 6:30PM • Free
Science Against Capitalism: Geochemistry and Solar Communism
As a part of Film Forum’s series Science Against Capitalism: The Role of Biophysical Sciences in Building A Sustainable Future for All, David Schwartzman, biogeochemist and professor emeritus, will give a talk on geochemistry, earth history and the building of solar communism. This event will take place in-person and will be live-streamed. More info via bit.ly/3hK8U3J

The People’s Forum
320 W 37th St, Manhattan

Dec 8 • $15/$7 Reduced Price • 7:30PM-9PM
Film: I Didn’t See You There
When a circus tent goes up outside of his apartment, a disabled filmmaker must confront the legacy of the Freak Show and whether his past autobiographical filmmaking has fit into its tradition. With the camera pointed away from himself, he captures the personal and poetic from his wheelchair. 75 min. This screening includes open captioning, as well as ASL interpretation during the talk-back discussion. There will be a post-screening Q&A with filmmaker Reid Davenport.

Mayday Space
343 Lenox Avenue/Malcolm X Boulevard, Manhattan

Dec 9 & Dec 10 • Free to Attend • Fri 7PM-9PM & Sat 11AM-7PM
Social Justice Holiday Market
Mayday Space’s annual Social Justice Holiday Market is back in its fifth year. A delightful indoor gathering of small vendors selling all things social justice-oriented! There’s nothing like going out on a winter’s night. Wollman Rink is a public ice rink in the southern part of Central Park. Remember beginners, don’t let your ankles cave in! Check wollmanrinkny.com to buy tickets ahead of time and to see holiday hours and pricing.

Dec 10 • $15/$7 Reduced Price • 8PM-10PM
Music: Marcellus Pittman
Marcellus Pittman: Master of the knobs. Straight from Motown.

Marcellus Pittman
214 Starr St, Brooklyn

Dec 15 • Free
Film: I Didn’t See You There
There will be a post-screening Q&A with Reid Davenport.

Marcellus Pittman
214 Starr St, Brooklyn

Dec 29 • Pay-What-You-Wish on Fridays, 7–10pm.
Art Exhibit: Edward Hopper’s New York
Edward Hopper was known for his human scale and largely unpopulated depictions of New York. This new exhibit takes a comprehensive look at Hopper’s life and work, from his early years as an illustrator, to his eventual triumph as a painter of the American scene in the 1920s and 1930s. The show and whether his past autobiographical filmmaking has fit into its tradition. With the camera pointed away from himself, he captures the personal and poetic from his wheelchair. 75 min. This screening includes open captioning, as well as ASL interpretation during the talk-back discussion. There will be a post-screening Q&A with filmmaker Reid Davenport.

The Morgan Library & Museum
225 Madison Avenue, Manhattan

Dec 30 • Pay-What-You-Wish
Film: I Didn’t See You There
There will be a post-screening Q&A with Reid Davenport.

The Morgan Library & Museum
225 Madison Avenue, Manhattan

Dec 31 • Pay-What-You-Wish
Film: I Didn’t See You There
There will be a post-screening Q&A with Reid Davenport.

The Morgan Library & Museum
225 Madison Avenue, Manhattan

Dec 31 • Pay-What-You-Wish
Film: I Didn’t See You There
There will be a post-screening Q&A with Reid Davenport.

The Morgan Library & Museum
225 Madison Avenue, Manhattan

Calamari • 5PM
Mayday Space community center.

KARAOKE AT STARR BAR
WEDNESDAYS • 6–9PM

ICE SKATE AT CENTRAL PARK
Mon & Tue 1pm-2:30pm; Wed, Thu & Sun 10am-9pm Fri & Sat 10am–10pm

ICE SKATING AT CENTRAL PARK is one of the most romantic activities to enjoy on a winter’s night. Wollman Rink is a public ice rink in the southern part of Central Park. Remember beginners, don’t let your ankles cave in! Check wollmanrinkny.com to buy tickets ahead of time and to see holiday hours and pricing.

MARCELLUS PITTMAN
214 Starr St, Brooklyn

MAYDAY SPACE
830 5th Ave, Manhattan

CENTRAL PARK
3rd Avenue and 68th Street

THE WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART
945 Madison Avenue, Manhattan

THE WITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART
945 Madison Avenue, Manhattan

THE MORGAN LIBRARY & MUSEUM
225 Madison Avenue, Manhattan

THE MORGAN LIBRARY & MUSEUM
225 Madison Avenue, Manhattan

Caleo • 5PM
Mayday Space community center.

KARAOKE AT STARR BAR
WEDNESDAYS • 6–9PM

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830 5th Ave, Manhattan

CENTRAL PARK
3rd Avenue and 68th Street

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Interview

AMBA GUERGUERIAN

to join indigenous activists occupying Bonafont warero, Mexico in 2014. In 2021, he traveled to Mexico from the Ayotzinapa Rural Teachers’ College in Guerrero. He joined the organization in 2019 and was radicalized by learning about the 43 disappeared students from the Ayotzinapa Rural Teachers’ College in Guerrero, Mexico in 2014. In 2021, he traveled to Mexico to join indigenous activists occupying Bonafoot waterfall.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

By Amba Guerguerian

n Sundays from May to October a corner of Sunset Park feels like a thriving Mexico City marketplace. It’s called Plaza Tonatiuh and is organized by Mexicanos Unidos. At this year’s final Plaza on October 30, the narrow pathways between rows of vendors in the park were crowded with attendees of all ages. Vendors sold Mexican and other Latin American food, household items, toys, clothes, jewelry and more. Live music and dancing in celebration of the Nov. 2 Day of the Dead lasted into the night.

Mexicanos Unidos formed in the initial weeks of the George Floyd uprising that roiled New York City three summers ago. In July 2020, the organization held protests around the killing of Vanessa Guillen, a 20-year-old U.S. soldier who was bludgeoned to death by another soldier, Aaron David Robinson.

Later that month, they distributed a flyer: “United Mexicans of America Lost invites a un foro para discutir nuestros proyectos comunitarios/Invites you to a forum to discuss our future community projects.”

By early 2021, MxU was protesting less often and had begun to shift its energy toward community engagement. In May 2021, galvanizing frustration around gentrification and crackdowns on street vendors, they launched Plaza Tonatiuh, their central organizing project.

At the last Plaza of 2021, there were 20 vendors. This year ended with 88 and more looking to join.

During every Plaza, MxU holds a vendor assembly to discuss operations. On Nov. 7, a week after the last Plaza of the season, the organization invited vendors back to Sunset Park to participate in a debrief. Around 60 people showed up. Childcare and coffee were provided.

Vendors and MxU members formed two conversation circles in which one by one, each participant shared critique of themselves and the Plaza as a whole. They discussed at length how to secure access to bathrooms when the Parks Department closes them hours before the Plaza ends and other logistical issues.

Now in the off season, MxU will be synthesizing vendors’ feedback and needs and traveling to vendors’ homes to continue political education. The organization, with around 50 members representing all boroughs, hopes to soon procure a community space in Sunset Park.

Leo, 26, is the chair. He grew up in Sunset Park with his mother and four siblings but has since been priced out and now lives in Bensonhurst. Leo was radicalized by learning about the 43 disappeared students from the Ayotzinapa Rural Teachers’ College in Guerrero. He joined the organization in 2019 and was radicalized by learning about the 43 disappeared students from the Ayotzinapa Rural Teachers’ College in Guerrero. In 2021, he traveled to Mexico to join indigenous activists occupying Bonafont waterfall.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

How was Mexicanos Unidos formed?

It was formed during the George Floyd uprising and had a lot to do with what happened around that time with Vanessa Guillen and the consciousness that grew out of that. We wanted to direct those mainly nationalistic tendencies toward something more revolutionary, more organized for the collective — also understanding that in New York City it’s not just the Mexican diaspora. So we have a large Caribbean, Asian, Central American and South American diaspora. We wanted to make folks understand that our liberation is tied to the liberation of others.

Tell us a little bit about the political education you have coming up and why it’s important.

Right now, we’re gearing up to start doing more political education classes. We see these as a necessity. We’re doing that with the plaza participants first. It is a way for us to also get unity in thought, because we already have unity in action. It’s also something that we’ve also been doing internally with incoming members.

Our basic course consists of the Five Golden Rays by Maxo, The State and Revolution by Lenin, The Pedagogy of the Oppressed by Paulo Friere, Wretched of the Earth by Franz Fanon and we also include excerpts from Open Veins of Latin America by Eduardo Galeano. We have advanced courses too that consist of readings on George Jackson, and more by the Black Panthers.

What was your experience with how people received what you were sharing?

We use Paolo Friere and popular education because we strive for people to understand that we’re not teachers — we’re also learning with you. After going through the study, we see a change of mentality and commitment, but some folks retain it a lot faster than others. It’s hard to ask folks to study it on their own time, while they’re also working-class people. Not everybody has time to read. And not everybody can read. So we’ve shifted a lot of our learning to be done mainly through discussions.

We met at the end of 2021 during protests outside of Bergen County Jail in North Jersey. The cops were beating up ralliers for supporting hunger-striking ICE detainees on the inside. That was brutal.

We realized how unsustainable that was and how burned-out was so prevalent, especially around organizers. I remember watching a video of Kwame Ture where he mentioned the difference between mobilizations and organization. In 2020 and in parts of 2021, we were still just heavy on the mobilizing. Nobody ever pulled out a clipboard while we were marching to ask people what they can contribute or ask people where they’re at, or how can we organize to defeat this monster that has his body all across North America.

So we took a moment to sit back and start to base build in Sunset Park and do the Plaza, to stay somewhere consistently. And just build here, honestly.
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Don’t Turn the Page on School Libraries

Students still want all the magic you can find in a library, yet 60% of NYC schools don’t have one that’s functioning

By Ben Mankoff

My mom won’t take me to the public library,” said a high-school sophomore in Brooklyn upon learning that her school library didn’t have the novel she’d been mandated to read. When she was offered an e-book version, her nose crinkled. She preferred to wait until she could get the paper book at school, even though it might take months to arrive.

This student needed her school library. It was barely up to the task. Dust lay thick on the shelves, new books hadn’t been ordered in years, and instead of a certified school librarian, the person running the place was a newly minted substitute teacher with a master’s degree in who-the-hell-cares-me.

The condition of the library — most books a decade past relevance, cataloging software I couldn’t use, broken furniture and computers shoved away in a corner — should not have been surprising. New York City’s public-school libraries were in crisis long before the pandemic endangered enrollment and budgets, and before the recent national moral panic around gender and race prompted waves of censorship. State regulations require most city public secondary schools to employ a certified school library media specialist, but between 2005 and 2014, the number of librarians in the city program, the now national Leadership Academy, whose mandate is unfunded and therefore unenforced.

One principal, a former librarian, told me that her campus had no librarian because she and the two other principals don’t hire a new one. Their philosophy was that competition breeds innovation, that empowered principals would innovate in response to the needs of their communities. That school-district-as-market philosophy often resulted in educators within a school campus jockeying for the limited space available. That left libraries especially vulnerable to neglect, because their mandate is unfunded and therefore unenforced.

A CHANGE IN MANAGEMENT

In the early 2000s, Mayor Michael Bloomberg and his education chancellor, Joel Klein, set out to change the way the city educates children. Their program involved breaking up large schools, making space for more charter schools, training principals in business management and replacing superintendent oversight with private-sector contracts paid out of school budgets.

“Klein set out to do something any other schools chief would consider insane: Disrupt his own schools with builtin competitors,” Richard Whitmire wrote admiringly in a book about the era. Klein and Bloomberg, with money from Bill Gates and others, pushed the progressive-sounding Small Schools of Choice initiative, which broke large “failing” schools into smaller student bodies sharing a single campus. Klein also brought in former General Electric CEO Jack Welch, nicknamed “Neutron Jack” for his love of neutron-bomb mass layoffs, to head the board of a then-new city program, the now national Leadership Academy, whose goal remains training new principals in the art of “disrupting inequities.”

Their philosophy was that competition breeds innovation, that empowered principals would innovate in response to the needs of their communities. That school-district-as-market philosophy often resulted in educators within a school campus jockeying for the limited space available. That left libraries especially vulnerable to neglect, because their mandate is unfunded and therefore unenforced.

One principal, a former librarian, told me that her campus had no librarian because she and the two other principals who share the space could not agree on its use. “My kids wanted to do a mural in there,” she said, but the other principals objected. “It was this competitive thing, again, a campus. No real shared vision.” When the last librarian left for another school, hiring a new one had fallen to the bottom of the priority list, leaving the 500-odd students on this campus without one.

The DOE has shifted to this franchise model, where each school is kind of like its own serfdom,” Bronx librarian and union leader Christina Gavin said.

Many principals are unaware of both the state mandates for libraries and librarians, and of the ways in which a library can benefit their students. In New York City, whether a student receives those benefits comes down to the decisions of individual principals.

“Instead of having standardized operations being pushed out to all the schools, it’s inconsistent across the city,” said Gavin. She and other advocates, with help from the DOE’s Office of Library Services (OLS), have worked to educate principals about the benefits of school libraries, even creating tools to make it much easier for them to search for and hire new librarians. As laudable as these efforts are, passionate librarians like Gavin spend too much of their time advocating for libraries instead of running them.

With enough staff, maybe advocacy wouldn’t be such a burden. In an effort to address the shortage of librarians, says OLS director Melissa Jacobs, the office turned to New Visions, the same private organization that received the bulk of Gates’ funding to create small schools. Together they created a program called TeacherLibrarian, which subsidizes certified teachers studying for Master of Library and Information Science (MLIS) degrees, in exchange for three years of service in a public-school library. But this program is not designed to fully close the gap between state mandates and reality.

One place TeacherLibrarian has been successful, says Russell West, a New Visions coordinator of the program, was at the Julia Richman Education Complex on the Upper East Side, once cited in the New York Times as “the country’s premier example of a large, failing urban high school turned into a peaceful campus of successful small schools.” But according to West, the campus had a library that wasn’t working. A teacher there took it upon herself to improve the situation and eventually joined New Visions’ first cohort in the TeacherLibrarian program.

That success, however, relied on a principal willing and able to support that work. “There’s a certain aspect of the principalship that is served by independence,” West put it. But that flexibility is also a central flaw in the city’s ap—
toward education: It relies on the interests and values of individual principals over structural support.

And what about the simple fact that principals who do want to hire a certified librarian can’t seem to find candidates for the job? Last spring, Melissa Jacobs was imploring librarians daily to send her their resumes, saying she was getting requests from principals who couldn’t find certified librarians to hire. Although the number of MLIS degrees being granted in the New York area continues to rise, there aren’t enough graduates who want to get the extra certification that would enable them to work in public schools.

“Libraries should be able, willing, and provided the means with which to adapt to fit the needs of the communities they serve,” says Jesse Miglus, a public librarian who got her start in central New York State and now works in Colorado. In school libraries, she says, “sometimes the administration and school board have the librarian’s back, but not always.”

**DISCIPLINE THROUGH TECHNOLOGY**

The librarian, in transforming into the “library media specialist,” is becoming the midwife of bringing children into mass media. We imagine that media literacy education will produce cool, rational, Vulcanian information argumenta navi gating a “field of options,” in the words of anthropologist and philosopher Thomas de Zengotita, and parents and teachers are being told that this is somehow the same thing as literacy.

It is not. We know that digital technologies like smartphones are socially isolating, that time spent on them makes both children and adults less integrated with others.

“One thing I have noticed is that books, like experiences in life, make it into a person’s dream life, but the stuff on screens barely does,” says Jameison Webster, a psychoanalyst and author of a recent New York Times guest essay about the mental-health crisis among adolescents. “The time spent on the machine is not coming into sessions, it’s not coming into their unconscious life. And that means that a huge swath of experience is being deleted constantly.”

All this is discouraging for those of us still invested in the idea that widespread literacy is good for democracy. The students who come into the library where I work tell me, over and over, no matter what kind of reader they are, what kinds of stories they seek, that they prefer paper books to digital books.

But when I don’t have the book they want in the library, the solution the OLS offers is the Citywide Digital Library, via an app called Sora. Sora, made by a company called Overdrive that contracts with the DOE, makes it possible to read books on a Kindle device with an e-ink screen, which does a better job of replicating the experience of reading a physical book, as it is single-purpose and less straining to the eyes. But only some of the digital titles available are compatible with the Kindle, and the user has to go through multiple extra steps to get a book they’ve borrowed from Sora’s website onto a Kindle.

The Citywide Digital Library was touted as an achievement in access when it was introduced by the OLS during the pandemic, but the children most in need of access to books are the ones least likely to have multiple devices, which means they wind up reading on tablets and smartphones with normal screens. The proponents of digital books as a solution to the access problem miss this reality.

Their implicit argument is also not so different from those made by Netflix or Facebook: That with digital books we can — in theory, someday — feed a student the perfect book tailored to their individual reading level, interests and demographics. But not all students want that. The young Black woman standing in the library, in addition to outright rejecting digital books, tells me that she is tired of books that have the media, and the media have them. I want to suggest that librarians in particular, in the age of information overload, ought to promote an embodied kind of literacy. This doesn’t have to mean no longer showing students how to discern good online sources from bad, but it does mean questioning how far that can go in nurturing thoughtful, engaged citizens.

When I asked Jesse Miglus, the public librarian in Colorado, what she wants people to know about what libraries need most right now, she pointed to 1931, when “Library Hero” S. R. Ranganathan proposed his famous five laws of library science:

1. **Books are for use.**
2. **Every person his or her book.**
3. **Every book its reader.**
4. **Save the time of the reader.**
5. **A library is a growing organism.**

**WHAT IS TO BE DONE?**

The problems facing school libraries are not unknown to decision-makers in and around City Hall. The City Council is putting over $14.4 million toward infrastructure and supplies for school libraries in 2023, the most it has ever appropriated for school libraries, according to a Council spokesperson. But this money does nothing to address the staffing issue.

The DOE’s Panel for Education Policy, composed of a mix of mayoral appointees, borough president appointees and community members from each borough, is currently debating whether to include funding for librarians in the base rate that each school receives for its yearly budget. This change would add teeth to the state mandate for librarians in secondary schools, but it seems unlikely to happen: The PEP is going to have to choose between funding librarians or social workers in schools and, according to panel member Dr. Kaliris Salas-Ramirez, it’s likely going to choose social workers, given the COVID-19 pandemic’s assault on our collective mental health.

The answers to the problems with school may have to come from below, from librarians themselves. But the obsession with digital media is clouding our vision, obscuring what libraries can be for children. The digital-literacy tools given to librarians are 10 years behind in terms of capturing the current information ecosystem, and the rate of change in that ecosystem is only increasing.

I don’t mean to suggest that we bury our heads and ignore the march of mass media, or try to completely restructure education to fit some kind of pre-capitalist bucolic fantasy. That is impossible and probably undesirable. Children have the media, and the media have them. I want to suggest that librarians in particular, in the age of information overload, ought to promote an embodied kind of literacy. This doesn’t have to mean no longer showing students how to discern good online sources from bad, but it does mean questioning how far that can go in nurturing thoughtful, engaged citizens.

The ethos of competition and the advance of digital technologies into education work together to undermine these principles. The former fosters neglect of the library’s physical space, while the latter is changing the definitions of “book” and “literacy.” The result is that we are losing sight of the purpose of a library: to be a physical space where members of a community can participate in a knowledge commons. The mandate for media literacy in schools and the pressing of school librarians into that work has drained the profession of its vital force. The creative work of librarians is being optimized out of existence in favor of frictionless delivery of content — eliminating the emotional and physical inefficiencies of a room full of books.
Seth Goldstein is fast-talking and full of information. He’s been a labor lawyer for more than 25 years, the last 16 at the Office and Professional Employees International Union (OPEIU), and looks the part: in his mid-fifties, a graying head of hair, and always wearing a suit, tie and loafers. He takes calls on-the-go, constantly driving around the Northeast to meet with workers and negotiate labor contracts.

Recently, he’s been volunteering for the Amazon Labor Union. The road to that began in late 2015, he recalls: “I was sitting at a cafe in the East Village reading The Progressive, and I saw that Menards had a policy in which they were going to cut managers’ pay by 60% if a facility unionized.” Goldstein knew this was illegal. He called the magazine’s editor and asked if anyone had brought a claim against the home-improvement chain store for that policy. No one had. He got to work, on his own time.

“I’d had enough. I was tired of the billionaires telling us what to do. John Menard is very rich,” Goldstein says.

After helping win gains for workers at Menards, Goldstein continued to volunteer legal support for workers organizing, at the tech companies Alorica and WeWork. In late 2018, he met with Kickstarter workers trying to organize, and in February 2020, they became the first white-collar tech-company workforce in the United States to unionize, when they voted to join OPEIU Local 153, Goldstein’s local.

Goldstein wondered about tackling Amazon, the nation’s second largest employer and fierce opponent of unions. He felt that “an intersectional, grassroots, worker-led campaign would work better than traditional labor organizing.”

One day in mod-April 2021, he was sitting on his couch after work surfing Twitter, when he saw a tweet from Christian Smalls, president of the newly formed Amazon Labor Union (ALU), requesting an attorney to assist him and other workers fighting to unionize an Amazon warehouse in Staten Island: “Any Union labor lawyers in NY that can assist @amazonlabor please contact me ASAP! We’re ready to go!”

Goldstein responded instantaneously. “It’s essential to bring together police brutality, Black civil rights, and the labor issue. I felt Chris embodied that,” he says. “I knew that an opportunity to be able to represent Amazon workers against Amazon would change labor law, and that’s what I wanted to do.”

Smalls called him about a week later, and Goldstein was soon spending 20 hours a week as a volunteer lawyer for the ALU, on top of putting in 60-hour weeks for the OPEIU — “working from my kitchen table, using my iPad.”

In April 2022, the ALU became the first union to represent Amazon workers in the United States, winning a union election at the JFK8 warehouse on Staten Island. But it has lost two elections since then, at the LDJ5 facility on Staten Island and at ALB1, near Albany, and is having little luck in forcing Amazon to negotiate a first contract.

Goldstein now has a small army of law-student volunteers assisting him in various legal efforts against Amazon.

A month after the JFK8 victory, he was asked to speak by the student-run Labor and Employment Action Project (LEAP) at Harvard Law School. Third-year law student Maxwell Ulin saw an opportunity and a need he and other students could help fill: The ALU’s success had inspired workers at other Amazon warehouses, which meant there was more legal demand than Goldstein could handle.

Other LEAP members and some of Ulin’s friends at Yale and New York University law schools were likewise eager to help, and soon they had around 20 students ready to work alongside Goldstein for the ALU.

“The ALU campaign has captured the imagination of labor
ALU’s Volunteer Legal Team, Spread over Four Time Zones, is Constantly Working.

The volunteer team meets weekly on Zoom. A rotating group of 15-20 students attends and picks up tasks.

“Seth is always so appreciative of the students,” says Ulin. “I don’t think I’ve ever had a conversation with him where he wasn’t like, ‘Thank you so much for the work you’re doing’ — even if it was a thirty-second call.”

“Defend Amazon Workers posted it on Twitter, ALB1 warehouse near Albany, NY, workers reported that they were fired for being on their cell phone after she used it to take photos of unsafely stacked boxes falling off shelves,” says Emma Barudi.

“Amazon was only required to file expenditures on captive audience meetings and not those on other union-avoidance activities. (It should also be noted that the 2021 filing does not account for expenses during the critical period of the JFK8 election or the LDJS and ALB1 elections.) It’s a complete cognitive dissonance, spending their money on lawyers to instead of spending their money on workers,” says Emma Barudi.

To avoid getting burnt out by their workload, the students and Goldstein turn to different strategies. Barudi has "a relatively long skin-care routine that I get made fun of by some of my friends, but by doing it every night, it calms me down and helps me focus on something really small.”

“Mr. Smalls is serving as a full-time lawyer in New York City,” he says. “They’re committed to social change.”
1. MICHAEL GIDNARIS

2. KATHY HOCHUL

3. JAY JACOBS

4. MADELINE SINGA

5. ANTONIO DELGADO

6. SEAN PATRICK MALONEY

7. ERIC ADAMS

THE NEW YORK TIMES
November 2022

NEW YORK POLITICS

THE INDYPENDENT
November 2022

A JOURNEY IN 11 STEPS TO THE REPUBLICANS. CAN THE STATE PARTY’S NY DEMOCRATS HANDED HALF OF CONGRESS A CASCADING SERIES OF BLUNDERS BY LEADING DEBACLE NEW YORK POLITICS and that of Democrats across the country. as tributaries forming a mighty stream of hubris, incompetence and possible during the second two years of the Biden administration. gridlock as opposed to continuing Democratic control of the White lose more than two seats in any other state. Meanwhile, as four congressional seats in an election in which their party didn’t congressional majority. 2020. Democrats control all of New York’s statewide offi  ces and that of Democrats across the country. President Joe Biden won the state by 23 points in this year’s midterm elections saw the much-anticipated President Joe Biden won the state by 23 points in while doing minimal in-person campaigning. Hochul also de- decided to keep Jay Jacobs, a longtime Cuomo ally, as the head of his year’s midterm elections saw the much-anticipated

2. KATHY HOCHUL TAKES COMMAND, SORT OF

After their stinging defeat in the legislature, the Republicans decided to go shopping. Judge shopping, that is. They found a sympathetic district judge in Steuben County, in New York’s rural Southern Tier, to block Singas’s confi rmation. But the fi x was in. Two weeks af- ter her nomination, the State Senate leadership brought Singas’s nomination to the floor. They took advantage of pandemics-era rules to rush her nomination through while several senators were outside the Senate chamber. Singas got her 14-year term on the high court. It wouldn’t take long for Gianaris and his Senate col- leagues to rise to the occasion and stop Singas from getting a hat."/>
favoring and then ran like she was in a witness protection program. There was little in the way of voter outreach. “No text, no phone calls, zero campaign volunteers in my neighborhood,” tweeted a concerned Democrat in Forest Hills, Queens. “No idea what the Hochul campaign is doing.” When it became clear that Hochul just might lose the race, the Working Families Party leapt into action in the final two weeks of the campaign and launched phone banks and door-to-door canvasses. Hochul would ultimately prevail by six points. She won New York by 17 points less than Biden did in 2020, the worst underperformance by any Democratic governor in 2022. While she survived, her weak showing at the top of the ticket took a toll on down-ballot candidates.

11. MALONEY CAUGHT BY SURPRISE

After Sean Patrick Maloney bulldozed his way into NY-17, he had a lot of new constituents to win over. A post-election report in Slate suggests he barely tried. When Maloney wasn’t antagonizing or ignoring local grassroots groups, he disappeared on an October junket to Europe. Late in his race, Maloney realized he was in danger of losing. The Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee he was in charge of shifted money from toss-up races on the West Coast to prop up Maloney. He lost anyway as did the candidates in O-6 and CA-27 who were defunded on his behalf. The Dems also worried about the Working Families Party taking on CA-5300 votes to become the first non-machine candidate from West Harlem’s Assembly District 70 to win a seat on the New York State Democratic Committee in decades.

Maria Ordoñez, 23, joined NYPAN in the wake of Sanders’ 2016 campaign and finished second in a crowded field when she ran for a city council seat in 2021. In June, she garnered more than 5,300 votes to become the first non-machine candidate from West Harlem’s Assembly District 70 to win a seat on the New York State Democratic Committee in decades.

Ordoñez signed the petition calling for Jacobs’ ouster and is hopeful Hochul will yield as more party officials voice their displeasure. She uses her position’s bully pulpit to advocate for issues such as affordable housing that are of concern to her community and helps constituents with accessing government services.

“It’s what you make of it,” Ordoñez said of her position. Being on the State Committee has allowed her to see the workings of the party up close. Progressives now make up 20% of the state committee, Ordoñez says. They are treated to emails from Jacobs boasting of his accomplishments. In September, the Committee re-elected Jacobs by voice vote lest dissidents have a chance to put their opposition on the record. Despite the hostility progressives face from the party establishment, Ordoñez vows not to walk away.

“I think that the way to create change is through going inside the party and getting people involved,” Ordoñez added. “To ignore the Democratic Party is like trying to cover the sun with one finger.”

In 2018, Julia Salazar became the first open socialist elected to the state legislature in almost a century and at 28 years old she became the youngest woman to ever serve in the New York State Senate. She has called for Jacobs’ resignation since last year. She also signed the petition calling for Jacobs’ ouster, but doubts it will have any effect. With Hochul safely re-elected and set to wield power for the next four years, most prominent New York Democrats are publicly avoiding the controversy.

“I think they have no motivation to lead in any meaningful way,” Salazar said of the party’s leaders. “Virtually all of them were born into the political class. And the status quo works for them, even when it’s not at all working for the vast majority of New Yorkers.”

While she’s “begrudgingly” a Democrat, Salazar says she prefers to focus on building her home organization, the New York City chapter of the Democratic Socialists of America. TheDSA is a member-led organization which in New York has knocked off a slew of entrenched incumbents in recent years and is active in the militant wing of the labor movement.

“It is strategic and practical for everyone left of center who has electoral politics as a part of our theory of change to continue to participate in Democratic Party politics,” Salazar said. “But we have to simultaneously be building something that is beyond capitalism and is resistant to it and actually represents the interests of working people. Otherwise we’re going to see the Democratic Party continue to reach the limit of being able to represent people’s interests, because its interests are always going to be split between capital and the wealthy versus the working class.”
HOUSING

By Steven Wishnia

EVER ROLLBACK

LANDLORDS OUTRAGED BY FIRST-KINGSTON RGB CUTS RENTS BY 15 PERCENT!

By Steven Wishnia

O

n Nov. 9, Kingston’s newly established Rent Guidelines Board did what New York City has never done in its more than 50 years of rent stabilization: It voted 6-3 to lower rents by 15% for tenants renewing their leases in the next year.

The Hudson River city of 24,000 enacted rent stabilization in July. The regulations cover 64 buildings with just over 1,300 apartments, about 22% of the city’s roughly 5,900 rental units, based on a vacancy study the city conducted in April and May. The rest are exempted by the state Emergency Tenant Protection Act (ETPA) because they are in buildings with less than six apartments or were built after the law was enacted in 1974.

After several hours of public hearings where person after person testified about having to spend 60% of their income on rent, “it became really clear that a reduction was the only reasonable choice,” says Carolina Soto, one of the two tenant representatives on the RGB.

The board also authorized tenants whose rents have risen by more than 15% since the beginning of 2019 to lower rents by 15% as well. Tenants must seek a 15% rollback for “amenities” — what tenants say is “a pool that isn’t open and a fitness center that is still under construction.” If renters have a cat or dog, that’s another $50 a month.

Rents at Stony Run start at $1,790 for a one-bedroom apartment. But that doesn’t include fees, says Soto: $25 a month for garbage collection; $25 for parking; water and sewage charges; and Aker wants to tack on $63 more for “amenities” — what tenants say is “a pool that isn’t open and a fitness center that is still under construction.” If renters have a cat or dog, that’s another $50 a month.

Meanwhile, tenants complain about sewage backing up into their bathtubs and black mold on their walls. Kingston tenants began organizing several years ago, but it intensified as the Common Council began considering rent control again this year. Soto, who lives there, calls “the blackmail letter” from the landlord: If they signed a new lease within two weeks of the end of October, their rent would go up by 18%. If they signed by the end of October, they’d get a 30% increase. If they hadn’t signed by then, their rent would go up to $2,200 a month.

Demanding those increases before the rent board voted was illegal, Soto says.

The Beacon-based real-estate investment firm Aker purchased Stony Run and three other properties from E&M Management for $81 million in January 2021. E&M had acquired the four between 2016 and 2019 for $55 million, according to The Real Deal trade journal. Aker says it focuses on deindustrialized small cities that “will be new culture and innovation hubs” where people work from home.

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”We knocked on doors in every ETPA-covered building,” says Vanderhaag. “The number-one thing we were hearing was that it was too little, too late. The rents were already too high.” One elderly woman said her rent was more than her income, says Aaron Narraph Fernando of For the Many.

They decided to seek a 30% rent rollback, and concentrated on turning out tenants for the RGB’s public hearings. At the first one, tenants and supporters testifying outnumbered landlords and property managers by three to one. At the second, more than 50 tenants and only two landlords spoke, says Narraph Fernando.

“They decided they couldn’t out-organize us,” he says. Instead, owners turned to the courts. In late October, the Hudson Valley Property Owners Association filed a lawsuit to block Kingston’s rent-stabilization law. The group, whose website declares “rent control is a cancer that kills cities,” argues that the city Office of Housing Initiatives survey that found the vacancy rate was below 5% — required to find a “housing emergency” under the ETPA — was invalid because it counted buildings where the landlord had not responded as having no vacancies, and illegal because the city Common Council hadn’t authorized it.

Kingston was the first city in upstate New York to enact rent stabilization after it was authorized by the Housing Stability and Tenant Protection Act of 2019. But its first attempt, in 2020, fell through when a survey found a 6.7% vacancy rate. “Landlords were warehousing apartments,” says Hirsch. This year’s survey found a vacancy rate of 1.6%. Even if all the 33 apartments where the owners or property managers did not respond were counted as vacant, it says, the rate would have been 4.2%.

The landlords’ claims “really don’t have any weight,” says Hirsch. The Common Council did not vote on the 2022 survey because “we did it in house, so we didn’t have to approve any payment.” “It’s really monumental,” Tierney says of the rent reduction. “I really hope it inspires some of the other cities and towns in the Hudson Valley.”
A CHARLES DICKENS CLASSIC RECAST IN 21ST CENTURY APPALACHIA

Demon Copperhead
BY BARBARA KINGSOVER
HARPER, OCTOBER 2012, 560 PAGES

By Jessica Max Stein

What if you rewrote the Charles Dickens classic David Copperfield, but set it in a contemporary Appalachia wracked by the opioid crisis, in order to make the point that the income inequality and human exploitation of the Victorian era are still with us? Sounds impossible, right? Yet this is exactly Barbara Kingsolver’s ambition in her ninth and latest novel, Demon Copperhead, and miraculously it works.

Why does it work? The engaging voice of the title character carries the book. Kingsolver has a special flair for first-person narration — her 1998 novel The Poisonwood Bible involved five different narrators, each instantly recognizable — and Demon Copperhead is one of her strongest narrators yet. His birth name is Damon Fields, but he soon acquires his nickname due to his rebellious attitude and bright red hair.

Damon’s short, declarative sentences paint his life with a wry sense of humor and an artist’s eye. A love interest has “grey manga eyes.” When Damon talks about finding opportunities to make out with girls in middle school, he says, “We were too young yet to do anything in cars like normal kids, but where there’s a will there’s a couch.” Kingsolver even manages to communicate to the reader things Damon doesn’t know. When he explains to a friend that he was born in the amniotic sac, she says, “You were born in the caul.”

“Yeah, that,” he replies, not understanding, “I had the call.”

Being born in the caul is just the beginning of Damon’s, well, Dickensian life. His father dies before he is born; his alcoholic, pill-addicted teen mother struggles to raise him; his stepfather abuses him; his mother ODs on his 11th birthday; he is shipped off to various horrifying foster care placements, where he’s neglected, underfed and exploited; by fifth grade, he’s working in a meth lab — and this is just the first third of the book.

This chockablock plot is slowed down by Damon being a relatively passive protagonist, unable or unwilling to direct his own fate. Yet this makes sense when you think about Kingsolver’s aims. This novel is no Hillbilly Elegy, the best-selling bootstrap Appalachia memoir. While Damon is exceptional in some ways (a tireless worker, a talented artist, socially adept, remarkably resilient), the point is not that he is exceptional but that he is typical. He is meant to be representative. He is not “the one that gets away”; he doesn’t even want to leave; when given the chance to live among a number of places (including some offering more opportunity) he chooses to stay in Lee County, Virginia.

His friends and community largely drive his decision to stay put. Kingsolver laudably rises to the challenge of modernizing David Copperfield’s two-dozen-plus characters. The characters are generally nuanced and vivid, most dealing with similar struggles of circumstance. Interestingly, Kingsolver makes Damon’s steadfast friend Matt “Maggot” Peggot a gay male, though this omission seems problematic.

Ultimately, like its 19th century predecessor, Demon Copperhead is a coming of age story, so its underlying question is the same as in the original: will our protagonist become the hero of his own life? Will he exercise agency, take action, take charge? Is it probably not a spoiler that the answer is yes.
RACE, CLASS & THE LIMITS OF FRIENDSHIP

Coras Kitchen
By Kimberly Garrett Brown
Inanna Press, September 2022, 280 pages

By Eleanor J. Bader

When Cora first met Earl, she was an aspiring novelist and he an aspiring musician. His dream was eventually fulfilled with a full-time gig playing bass in a Harlem club. Cora, however, faced a different reality. Children came quickly after the couple married, and while she had no choice but to work outside the home to make ends meet, there was little time for creative pursuits. Still, she held fast to her goal.

Cora’s Kitchen takes place in 1928 and offers readers a vivid description of her work as a New York City librarian. It was there, in the 135th Street branch, that she met Langston Hughes and other literary luminaries. Hughes, who was enrolled as an undergraduate at Lincoln University at the time, was already a published poet. Despite his youth, he became a catalyst, prodding Cora to read Walt Whitman, Dorothy West and Zora Neale Hurston. He further encouraged her to jot down ideas, impressions and phrases as they came to her.

Throughout, Brown maintains a light touch in presenting Cora’s concerns. Indeed, as Cora’s Kitchen interrogates the interplay of race and class in each woman’s life, the emotional toll of racism and classism are laid bare. It’s beautifully rendered.

As Cora explains, “Eleanor, I never thought a white woman and a black woman could have a real friendship. You have been one of the best friends I ever had. You understand me in ways no one ever has. But there is still a big difference between us. People see you and assume the best. They want to make the world right for you. They see me and they see the worst. They are all just waiting for confirmation of every negative thing they have ever thought of colored people. The proper language and appropriate dress is an act to them.”

Ninety-four years later, this assertion continues to be true, a horrifying reminder, should we need one, of how little has changed.

All told, Cora’s Kitchen is a masterful look at the many ways in which racism, classism and misogyny overlap and oppress. And while I found the denouement somewhat unsatisfying — simultaneously glib and overly open-ended — the novel nonetheless illustrates the possibilities of true solidarity and support, person to person, woman to woman, and writer to writer.

Wogran writes samples of her work, she offers a friendship — a progressive, if excessively rich, white feminist with a penchant for radical ideas — encourages this. And while I found the denouement somewhat unsatisfying — simultaneously glib and overly open-ended — the novel nonetheless illustrates the possibilities of true solidarity and support, person to person, woman to woman, and writer to writer.

Thank you. Yeah! Franz Fanon mentions why celebration is so important for the oppressed, because we get to shake all that oppression out of us. And we get to, like, not have to use horizontal violence onto each other in the streets. But now we can dance together and shake all these things out of our body.

What was the inspiration for the plaza?

One of the main ones was Chicano Park in San Diego and others out in Colorado. These cultural pillars that help with resistance movements. Another motivation was Industry City, a gentrifying entity coming into Sunset Park. Also the homicides and the robberies of street vendors, the dumping of their property by parks police. NYPD is ticketing ladies for selling mango on the street and in the subway.

I noticed a man wearing a Che Mario shirt at the Plaza debrief. How do you think being involved in the Plaza and practicing direct democracy is affecting people’s ideologies?

Well, you do have to remember that in general in Latin America, people are more radical. They have more leftist histories. But also I’ve definitely noticed that the plaza has created more of a collective awareness and combatted individualism.

So, what is the goal or vision of Mexicanos Unidos?

To help build a revolutionary socialist party, and to organize the lumpenproletariat (including but not limited to the unemployed, marginally employed, undocumented and welfare recipients), which are the most dispossessed and stand to gain the most from socialism.

Do the vendors know you’re a bunch of commies?

Yeah! We’re open with them about that. But we also try not to beat them over the head with it.

For more, see @mexicanosunidos and @plazatonatiuh on Instagram or email mexicanosunidos@gmail.com.
Mike Davis's Forgotten First Book

Prisoners of the American Dream: Politics and Economy in the History of the U.S. Working Class
By Mike Davis
Verso, 1986, 320 pages

By Steven Sherman

Mike Davis, who died Oct. 25 at the age of 76, was a prolific author, a Marxist urban scholar and former truckdriver with a working-class perspective often rare in leftist academics of the last generation. His best-known book was City of Quartz, a dystopian analysis of how Los Angeles was transformed, but his works included the sort-of-followup Ecology of Fear; Planet of Slums; and histories of the car bomb, global pandemics, famines and imperialism in the late 19th century, and activism in L.A. in the 1960s.

Tributes to him have zeroed in on City of Quartz as his most important work. Largely ignored has been his first book, Prisoners of the American Dream: Politics and Economy in the History of the U.S. Working Class, from 1986. This is unfortunate, as it may be his richest work. Davis was unequivocally writing in the Marxist tradition, but his work breaks with the two more heralded Marxist texts of the period, Fredric Jameson’s Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism and David Harvey’s Condition of Postmodernity, which both debated postmodernism, something that seemed so urgent to many in the 1980s.

Davis went in a very different direction with a unique style, highlighting politics, labor and the economy — in remarkable, well-informed detail. Randomly selected pages brim with insights: “In the United States... The new middle class of professionals, salaried managers, and credentialed technicians comprised 23.8 per cent of the labor force in 1977 — a higher proportion than in any other OECD country except Sweden.” That sentence expresses one of the book’s major themes — that, along with the persistence of racism, the weight of the upper middle class, heavily entangled with the state, poses a major obstacle to a left advance. It’s a point that’s still relevant almost 40 years later, is still relevant, given the successful marginalization of Sanders by upper-middle-class centrists in the Democratic party establishment and their failure to stop two senators from blocking more ambitious programs.

Obituaries and remembrances have described Davis as an optimist, but there isn’t much evidence for that here. His depiction of what was then the recent past of the 1970s is particularly vivid: Racism resurgent, a destabilized and disorganized left, and capitalists facing new international competition and seeing an opportunity to break social contracts. He presented a grim future of an increasingly apartheid U.S., and it would be interesting to evaluate what has and has not come to pass.

If the U.S. left is to renew itself, he suggested, it will be closely aligned with the Latin American left, an outlook that seemed more palpable in the 1980s, when the movement in solidarity with leftists in Central America was thriving (Prisoners of the American Dream was dedicated to the rebels against El Salvador’s military dictatorship).

The book has quite a bit of history of the ups and downs of elections, campaigns and efforts to transform the Democratic Party, epitomized by the chapter title “The Barren Marriage of American Labor and the Democratic Party.” Although Davis came out of a Trotskyist tradition (he was associated with Solidarity, a Detroit-based organization descended from International Socialists), he was a nuanced observer of American politics. The book includes a forceful defense of Jesse Jackson’s 1984 campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination (just as in 2016, Davis enthusiastically embraced Bernie Sanders’ bid).

Davis explores all these topics — social history, economic transformations and electoral politics — in remarkable, well-informed detail. Randomly selected pages brim with insights: “In the United States... The new middle class of professionals, salaried managers, and credentialed technicians comprised 23.8 per cent of the labor force in 1977 — a higher proportion than in any other OECD country except Sweden.” That sentence expresses one of the book’s major themes — that, along with the persistence of racism, the weight of the upper middle class, heavily entangled with the state, poses a major obstacle to a left advance. It’s a point that’s still relevant almost 40 years later, is still relevant, given the successful marginalization of Sanders by upper-middle-class centrists in the Democratic party establishment and their failure to stop two senators from blocking more ambitious programs.
I know far less about the history of Italian fascism than I do about Nazism or Latin American military dictatorships. My knowledge is a jumble of the dates of 1922-1943; its “blackshirts” goon squads; their 1922 march on Rome to seize power; the Federico Fellini film where they forced castor oil down his fictional father’s throat and left him covered in bruises and diarrhea; and dictator Benito Mussolini’s ignominious end, his corpse hung from a meathook like a pig carcass.

British historian John Foot’s Blood and Power: The Rise and Fall of Italian Fascism is an antidote to that. It’s a highly readable, horrifying and extremely timely overview. Fascism has closer parallels with Donald Trump’s movement than Nazism does: Imagine if the January 2021 invaders of the Capitol had been efficiently organized on a national scale, with the tolerance or active support of the military and police.

In the early 1920s, the blackshirts — “squadristi” (squaddieri) in Italian — systematically wiped out the Italian left and Italian democracy. They ransacked and burned labor-union headquarters; kidnapped, tortured and murdered socialist leaders (yes, a favorite trick was forcing them to drink diarrhea-inducing quantities of castor oil and parading them through the streets); and invaded cities to depose leftist or antifascist local governments.

Italy had a strong, militant left in the “two red years” of 1919-20, with unions occupying factories and establishing workers’ cooperatives, and socialist governments in cities such as Milan, Bologna, Ravenna and Ancona. But when revolutionary socialist Ennio Gaudi was elected mayor of Bologna in November 1920, squadristi ousted him within an hour, storming the city hall and killing 10 people.

In June 1921, the first fascists elected to Parliament assassinated Communist deputy Francesco Missano and threw him out of the building. Socialist deputy Giuseppe Di Vagno, from the southern region of Puglia, was murdered that September. In July 1922, squadristi attacked Ravenna, burning a workers’ cooperative headquarters and killing at least nine people. “We need to terrify our adversaries,” leader Italo Balbo wrote.

That culminated in the October 1922 “March on Rome,” when thousands of fascists converged on the city, seizing power when King Victor Emmanuel III refused to approve the prime minister’s demand for martial law and replaced him with Mussolini.

“Fascism was built on a mound of dead bodies, cracked heads, traumatized victims of violence, burnt books, and smashed-up cooperatives and union headquarters,” Foot writes. “Fascist violence brought something fundamentally new to the political scene: a militia party, whose use of murder, beatings, intimidation, and destruction swept aside all opposition.”

For all its day-by-day detail about what happened, Blood and Power says little about why people behaved as they did. It’s an authoritarian, apocalyptic meldage of pure racism and nationalism and personality-cult worship that venerated violence and domination. By 1924, Italy’s parliamentary elections had been rigged by laws and violence. Socialist deputy Giacomo Matteotti was abducted and murdered after he gave a speech calling them illegitimate. The regime abolished elections in 1926.
The world is awash in grief. Covid, of course, climate change, nuclear threat, famine, what else... And perhaps the start of our collective sorrow is not the pandemic, but should be dated from September 11, 2001, the dawn of the 21st century. It is as if we’re no longer to “pray they hate us so much!” had been entirely different, there might have been a collective turning toward nonviolence, toward listening, the crucial nonviolent activity.

Taking the knee in crowds, outside in parks and malls, as we did for George Floyd, to mourn both his murder and our violent history, silent for almost nine minutes, is as close as we’ve come to collective mourning for those killed and for the thousands who died alone in hospitals, prisons, on the street, victims of a plague that forbad human touch.

Given all the people who disappeared in clouds of sludgy ash on 9/11, or in Iraq, or behind plastic curtains, tubes down their throats, I must be lucky. George Bartenieff, my partner of 35 years, in life and creative work, died in my arms in our bed at 2:08 am on July 30. I felt his last heartbeat. He is nevertheless gone and my grief is a vast unknown. I am lost in.

I had been reading him Romantic poetry much of that last night; his favorite poem of all time, “Ode to the West Wind.” The night before I had spoken with him, though he could no longer speak, most of the night through. We spoke of dying in this way: I repeated all the thoughts we had shared with each other as his illness worsened over several years. We both loved the natural world. “You will go back into life,” I said, using as many metaphors as I could. I quoted George Bernard Shaw, “Of life only there is no end.” In the early morning, he squeezed my hand, and managed to say, “that was good.” Did he mean this last talk, our whole time as partners on this earth, his entire life? All, perhaps.

One Saturday before, we made a trip by ambulance to the Brooklyn Hospital emergency room, where doctors rehydrated George, allowing him to live his last week. There, he said, “I feel I am losing language and sense.” I wept and wept in the frigid ER. Someone approached me from behind and put a heated sheet to his body and voice. He gave an enormous amount to the other actors on stage, by paying them deep attention, and the ensemble rose to embrace his uniquely holistic style.

We passed every pandemic evening reading from a great book. I read aloud as he could not see the words, but his listening was so acute we were able to discuss in detail passing stunnings phrases from Hardy, Camus, LeGuin, Baldwin, Gordimer, etc.

In his final stage and film performance with Kathleen Chalfant in Blue Valiant, he was Sam Brown, horse trader, a role completely alien but one whose cruxy insight he loved. Because I left him on stage the entire time, so he would not have to climb up and down, he also became a demi-god, overseeing with intense focus the wellbeing of each other character, including the immigrant child and the horse. In these final years, struggling with multiple myeloma and the effects of treatment, he became evermore free and mysterious, as if through his acting he touched the eternal. His transformation into an owl in Other Than We, literally winged without proper rehearsal, is unforgettable. No one guessed the extent of his disabilities, what they felt was the vibrant life force within, an electric zap to their hearts.

Though he and I never mentioned the word “funeral,” and hardly ever said the word “death,” when he died I knew he had to be memorialized, without dogma. In keeping with our secular Judaism, there was an immediate, intimate cremation ceremony held outside, under a huge beech tree in Greenwood Cemetery. Those few asked to speak also read poetry. I read for him his favorite speech as Uncle from Extreme Wheather. A month later, I traveled with friends to Vermont to the Bread and Puppet memorial grove where in an improvised ceremony, serenaded by their brass band, Peter Schumann, George’s oldest, on trumpet, I chanted his last to a tall pine tree, surrounded by flowers. We scattered his ashes and shared memories. I knew I had to be the first to reach into that box and feel for myself the grit of his bone mixed with ash, but I could never have done such a thing if not held in community. On Oct. 1, over two hundred people attended or streamed his public memorial at LaMama. I edited a selection from his diary about his early life as a hidden child that was read aloud, interviews about the Lower East Side scene were screened; in both he was disarmingly charming. He voted in selections from some of his best work we have managed to preserve on film. This memorial gave George back to me in health. He was never ill when he was making art.

What do I know of grief? Nothing but a depth of sorrow and an utter loneliness I never experienced with George. What do I know of loss? Only that I was one of the lucky ones in these years of mass death who was able to hold and comfort my love as he lost all. This was a promise and a privilege. We are lucky when we can accompany this far our beloved. The three memorials, too, though I never promised those, feel the fulfillment of a public need to remember him with and for the community of artists and visionaries he did so much to nurture and sustain.

Shakespeare. He made his Broadway debut at age 14. He studied from age 11 at Marsa and Irwin Piscator’s epic theater school. He learned dramatic ritual earlier, at an experimental school in Bavaria, as a six-year-old hidden child in Nazi Germany, sent by aunts in whose care he had been left, to get him away from a Nazi collaborator in the family. George fell in love with my play, Us, just as in 1963, he had fallen for a very different but equally extreme theatrical poem, The Brig, by Kenneth Brown, which Judith had also directed. We worked together for the next 35 years, creating, premieren and touring L2 new poetic plays on subjects from genetic engineering to the Holocaust, censorship of climate science, the war in Iraq, the U.S. torture program and post-apocalyptic ecofantasy. George had an unusually resonant voice and a malleable, shape-changing body. As we worked on my plays in which he had major parts written for him, he became more and more mesmerizing on stage. He disappeared inside his characters, fully animated by his transfor-
Dear Rev Billy,
I recently saw some early holiday-themed displays in a store. Ugh. Can’t stand all the commercialism around us. What can I do to not let it all get to me?

— SANDRA

Well Sandra. We reached 8 billion people on this Earth today, and if all of us were disgusted at once it wouldn’t matter. The sixth mass extinction is underway and accelerating.

There are variations on an old joke that people say off the cuff. “Shop till you drop.” “Shop yourself to death.” “He who dies with the most toys wins.” But the United States, birthplace of the consumerism that became the world’s raging infection, is now catching up to its own cliche. We have the choice to stop shopping and work with the Earth’s changes, or we can shop till we drop, or burn, or drown, or starve.

Strange how “shop to death” still sounds a lot like a joke, even after becoming the truth. When I started shouting it in Times Square 20 years ago it WAS a joke. A satirical televangelist with big hair with Mickey Mouse the antichrist. I knew that there was justice hidden in the joke, but with that justice part — I was less sure of myself.

I wasn’t defending the Earth in those early days, I was defending young women who worked in sweatshops in Mexico and Tanzania and the Philippines. I was more confident when Charley Kernighan and Barbara Briggs and the National Labor Committee folks walked up and put their card on my pulpit.

The Disney Store, which was at 42nd St. and Broadway back then, was 100% sweatshop products. Mickey Mouse was the great betrayer; he was (and is) the antichrist. And people began improvising songs on that sidewalk, songs about losing your eye-sight trying to see the needles, songs about company thugs kicking girls who fall asleep after 18 hours on the job...And the thing was, I knew that there was a sweatshop on the same block where I was preaching on 41st over there. Charley and Barbara would lead parades around the block and we would wave to the workers. Kids. really.

That’s what’s happening to us. We are joking about the bad weather and the storm is on the same street where we stand, where we stand with 8 billion people. Oh, amazing how we keep the 150 mph winds and the flooding seas at a safe distance. We have the disasters encased in our Santa, pixelated on screens...That two-mile wide tornado? We put a Coca Cola in the middle of the spinning green darkness and suddenly we’re pulling styrofoam out of packaging under the dying pine tree.

Sandra. You ask, “What can I do to not let it all get to me?” Let it get to you. Then use your disgust to escape. Maybe your disgust is your doorway out. Walk through it and get directions to the winter solstice. Make it personally crucial that you reach the Earth itself. Find the crisis.

Getting out of commercial Christmas leaves many of us lost — it’s the USA ritual. But however we return to the Earth, be patient because we haven’t done this in a while. Stick with it and work through it. Life is this year’s gift! Stop Shopping!

Earthalujah!

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