GALLATIN TODAY

EQUALITY AND JUSTICE

Inside

Essays by Gianpaolo Baiocchi, Kim DaCosta, Vasuki Nesiah, Jenzia Burgos, Michael Frazier, Furqan Sayeed, and Kari Sonde

ALUMNA FEATURE: KELI GOFF / ALUMNI NOTES
This moment in history provides opportunities for introspection, action, and change. Gallatin Today asked faculty, including Gianpaolo Baiocchi, Kim DaCosta, and Vasuki Nesiah, as well as alumni, including Jenzia Burgos, Michael Frazier, Furqan Sayeed, and Kari Sonde, to share their thoughts on the times we are living through as shaped by the themes of equality and justice.

As the world faces the demands of responding to a deadly virus for which there is no treatment and no vaccine, there is also a global reckoning with systemic racism and social and economic pressures from radically divergent perspectives on how we should move forward. We’re also seeing the effects of climate change with recent fires ravaging the West Coast. Throughout the globe, countries are struggling with the ongoing pandemic and its human, social, and economic costs. So much is at stake for us as individuals, for the country as a whole, and for the planet.

Taken together, the following essays consider how we arrived where we are today as well as the kind of futures we can and must imagine together.

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**Essays by**
Gianpaolo Baiocchi, Kim DaCosta,
Vasuki Nesiah, Jenzia Burgos, Michael Frazier,
Furqan Sayeed, and Kari Sonde
Who Gets to Say Goodbye to All That?

BY JENZIA BURGOS

A small peninsula hangs into the East River in the South Bronx, once the poorest limb in all the country. This is the neighborhood of Hunts Point—an enclave of auto shops and expressways roping around a wholesale market, the largest food distribution center, again, in all the country. But national inscriptions aside, this district, which is also my home, is largely forgotten. Back downtown, Michelin-rated restaurants spin pricey meals out of fine meats, their cuts processed here at a co-op flanked by housing projects. That detail never seems to make the menu.

When the pandemic first etched its way into New York City—before the state’s jobless count reached the millions and our death toll surpassed 30,000—passersby in the Village lamented the closing of their favorite eateries like those Michelin spots. It was nothing more than a hassle for some, especially for those still operating under the impression that a two-week shutdown could actually stave off epidemiologists’ predictions. They’d land themselves back at Sunday brunch in no time—or that was the idea, at least.

For others, the last of their packed subway rides were stuffed with worry instead. Worry over those falling ill, worry for parents or grandparents, worry over involuntary time off and lost wages. I fell into this latter category, worrying my way uptown on the green line—back to my corner of the city, where the Village’s passersby rarely step foot save for overwrought graffiti tours.

There is a band of New Yorkers for whom this kind of worry is persistent. At times it grows especially cataclysmic, like following an economic crash or this year’s pandemic, but mostly, it sticks around in hushed tones of poverty and marginalization. Our headaches over illness, ailing elders, hourly gigs with no health care, and this summer’s later confrontations with racism and police brutality—these were not new. Pre-COVID, my smokestack section of the Bronx understood these troubles intimately: everyone here knows someone with asthma, for example, thanks to dusty old buildings or exhaust from the 15,000 trucks that pass through the market daily. Everyone here knows someone, or has been someone, stopped and frisked for walking by the 41st Precinct. This escape—if you can call it that—would be fine only if it meant those fleeing the city didn’t risk spreading a virus to other local communities. It would also help to acknowledge that, upon one’s exit, those left behind in the forgotten corners of this city are still here. No proclamations of “New York is dead” have taken hold. In my building, workers from the market continue to rise each day, don their uniforms, and go off to package the ingredients that have sustained this city’s doctors, nurses, and grandmothers from the market daily. Everyone here knows someone, or has been someone, stopped and frisked for walking by the 41st Precinct.

By the time this year became an “unprecedented” one, bearing witness to so much hardship felt familiar, if heightened, for all but those who rarely confronted such troubles before. My state’s own governor seemed to be one of them, taking to his daily coronavirus briefing one morning in April to wonder, “Why are more African Americans and Latinos affected?” He rhetorized about us, the “poorest people” who always seem to “pay the highest price,” and landed on an empty promise: “Let’s figure it out,” he said, as if the answer to his question wasn’t already tucked into his damming state budget passed days earlier—one that manages to benefit the rich, gut health care, and sneak in a rollback to last year’s criminal justice bail reform. Meanwhile, social media exploded with adoration for his paternal reassurances and on-air repartee with his brother, Chris Cuomo.

Nobody living in Hunts Point needed to ask the governor’s question for themselves. Our reasons for worrying were already made clear, and “let’s figure it out” had long been part of our daily lexicon. This looked like the church on the corner organizing food drives in lieu of Mass, or Black and brown neighbors dropping groceries off at the senior housing center across the street—all during “normal” times, when normal had always meant vulnerable people were slipping through the cracks anyway. And mere weeks into this year’s latest malady, entire networks of medicine drop-offs, childcare pods, and running fridges filled with food on sidewalks erupted from the kindling of our worry. There was no leaving for the suburbs to reap the comforts of the Cuomo brothers’ mundane banter. There was no exodus to family homes upstate or out west, to private backyards or lawns.

Who Gets to Say Goodbye to All That?

“By the time this year became an ‘unprecedented’ one, bearing witness to so much hardship felt familiar, if heightened, for all but those who rarely confronted such troubles before.”

Jenzia Burgos (BA ’19) is a writer and critic from New York’s South Bronx. Her words on music, entertainment, and popular culture have appeared in Pitchfork, TIDAL, Remezcla, Paste, and more. Burgos is the curator of the Black Music History Library, a digital archive of materials about the Black origins of traditional and popular music, available at blackmusiclibrary.com. Follow @jenziaburgos and read more at jenzia.com.
The (still-moving) trajectory of events is, of course, well-known: a virus from elsewhere arrived and very quickly exposed the fault lines of race and class that structure life in this city. An anticipatory wave of exodus by those with access to second homes in presumably safer elsewhere quickly followed, even before the official quarantine began. Those who could not flee braced.

By the time the official period of quarantine began in the city, there were already signs of an economic slowdown, but it was around April 1 that the proverbial penny dropped: the economic bottom had fallen out. Businesses shed employees, gig work ground to a halt, and it turned out that life had been so expensive before that just about no one had savings to protect them. As a result, many thousands of New Yorkers were unable to pay rent on that day. Just as the city and state governments were belatedly settling on a message to “stay home,” home—always a difficult proposition in this city—was now more precarious than ever.

It became obvious that death and disease were concentrating among those who could not shutter or who shuttered in crowded conditions. Mutual aid flourished, less out of ideological commitment than survival. Amid the pandemic, the movement of a lifetime around the right to housing surged around the banner of #cancelrent. Organizations like Housing Justice for All were suddenly flooded with requests on how to fund that? Will taxes need to be raised, and if so, on whom? Does it mean that mortgages, debts, or utilities need to be canceled, too? Similarly, if police are defunded, where would those funds be spent? What are the police’s essential functions, if any? Do we want the state involved in punishment and surveillance at all? What other institutions of racial subjugation need to be abolished? What reparations can there be for past harms inflicted by the racist state? What are alternative ways to deal with the harms that people cause one another? How would public safety be organized without police?

It is worth thinking about these emergent demands as a kind of policy, and asking what future possibilities they animate. On the face of it, #cancelrent and #defundthepolice are brilliant demands in that they are specific, actionable, and entirely unreasonable. That is, they are not premised, as public policy usually is, on starting with what seems possible and then engaging in an exercise of choosing which possible reforms are more desirable, efficient, and so on. They do not start with reasonable propositions.

They instead begin with end goals—housing justice, in one case, and prison abolition on the other. Then they ask the first question. What is the institutional demand that will take us in that direction?

To evoke Paulo Freire’s radical pedagogy of questioning, you know you have a good question when the answer implies more questions rather than an end to the discussion (Freire and Faundez, 2002). If rent is canceled, who will pay landlords, and should they be paid at all? If so, which ones? Who would fund that? Will taxes need to be raised, and if so, on whom? Does it mean that mortgages, debts, or utilities need to be canceled, too? Similarly, if police are defunded, where would those funds be spent? What are the police’s essential functions, if any? Do we want the state involved in punishment and surveillance at all? What other institutions of racial subjugation need to be abolished? What reparations can there be for past harms inflicted by the racist state? What are alternative ways to deal with the harms that people cause one another? How would public safety be organized without police?

From the Pandemic to Radical Demands

Excerpted from “The Utopian Counterfactual” for thesis eleven

BY GIANPAOLO BAIIOCCHI

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Housing justice and abolitionist thinkers and activists articulate these demands as part of larger transformative processes whose outcomes are yet to be fully determined but will be created by activated communities in charge of their own destinies.

Sociologist and ethnographer Gianpaolo Baiocchi is the director of the Urban Democracy Lab, which promotes critical, creative, just, and sustainable forms of urbanism. His most recent book is We, The Sovereigns (Polity Press, 2018).
My Mother Says, “Don’t Come Back to America, ’Cause You’re Safer in Japan”

BY MICHAEL FRAZIER

You’d miss me too much if I stayed here, I say. Who said I was going to stay in America? she laughs. I’m saving up for my ticket now. I’m choosing Grandma’s nursing home. I’m shipping your brother all his junk. And we both laugh.

Earthquakes, tsunamis, volcanic eruptions, typhoons, torrential rain inducing mudslides, roof-caving snowfall, murder hornets: my fears are different here. Even if nature does kill me, I’m collateral damage, not the pinpoint of its ire.

Here, I will never be called out by name, because the language is not built for that type of violence. Only the moon or mosquitoes follow me at night, and even if I’m stopped by the police, they don’t have the means to gun me into a headline. I can walk in and out of a convenience store with a hood on, with my hands in my pockets, and still be thanked for coming.

I feel guilty, I tell my mother. What am I doing for the black community? How am I helping? You alive, ain’t you? she asks. You got them poems, students, and your church, right? Black people been dying in this country since before you were born; whether you here or not that won’t change.

The hydrangeas are green and not yet a spectacle. I trace the Japanese characters 作 (make) and 家 (home), the characters for author. I read aloud Afaa Michael Weaver’s “Theme for Intermediate Chinese.” In my kitchen, I cut the watermelon flesh into neat small squares, and squint at the sun as it’s lowered into the ground.

None of the other American expats feel the way I do. Everyone says the same thing: We’re so lucky to be here instead of there. My mother calls thirteen hours into her future to ask me what’s going on in Rochester. She stopped keeping up with the news somewhere between Breonna Taylor spread onto a billboard and Daniel Prude snuffed out around the corner from her hairdresser. I tell her what they’re saying about the mayor. Where the protests are being held. What neighborhoods to avoid.

Before entering the classroom, I spray each of my students’ palms with a hand sanitizer spray bottle, the type you’d use to clean windows. I point the nozzle at two boys and they stop, raise their hands and say, Don’t shoot! I forget to laugh. Later my principal asks, With everything going on in America, how are you doing? And I say, I’m here.

The day after George Floyd’s funeral, the rainy season began. The air was humid, the sky clotted with clouds. We waited all day for the rain, and when it came, a dirge that lasted for an hour, then the sun, as if to say something.

NEGRO AUTHOR ASKED TO LEAVE JAPAN BY POLICE. I’m reading Hughes’ autobiography along the Asano River. I’m underlining the sentence, I, a colored man, had lately been all around the world, but only in Japan, a colored country, had I been subjected to police interrogation and told to go home and not return again.

We agree that she shouldn’t have called the police when she returned home and saw the door ajar. But what else was I supposed to do? my mother asked. I’m a woman. Everyone knows I live alone. Who was I supposed to turn to? Both of us aware of what could happen if an officer confused her for what he was looking for.

No, I don’t have any weapons, I tell the police officers in Japanese. Yes, I live here. Yes, I have a job. No, I don’t have any drugs. Here is my citizen card. As I bite my tongue, I think, Would you like my blood?

They just want to touch your hair. They just want to rub your skin. It’s just blackface at the staff Christmas party. It’s just blackface on national television. Nissin only whitened Naomi Osaka’s skin to sell more ramen. You only know one person who’s been told to go back to their country. They mean you’re scary in a cool way.

Mom, what is safety? Is it a country? Does it live inside four walls? Is it a feeling? Is it a song I can fall asleep to? Is it in my body? Can it be taken without my permission?

“None of the other American expats feel the way I do. Everyone says the same thing: We’re so lucky to be here instead of there.”

Michael Frazier (BA ’17) is a poet and educator. He graduated from NYU Gallatin, where he was the Gallatin 2017 Commencement speaker and a co-champion of CUPSI. He has performed at Nuyorican Poets Café, Lincoln Center, and Gallatin Arts Festival, among other venues. He is a staff reader for The Adroit Journal, curator for Button Poetry, and a 2020 Seventh Wave Editorial Resident. He lives in central Japan, where he’s working on a poetry collection about his mother. He can talk for days about anime, poetry, and how Christ has changed his life. Follow @fraziermichael.
Convocation is a key event to welcome new students to the Gallatin community. Built around the discussion of shared texts, Convocation is a moment for all first-year and transfer students to come together with faculty to explore interdisciplinary approaches to issues that will be at the forefront of their studies until graduation. In 2020, all incoming students to NYU read the same required text, Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption, by NYU Law professor Bryan Stevenson. Just Mercy is a memoir on compassion, race, and the systemic defects of the US criminal justice system. At the 2020 Convocation, Gallatin faculty member Kim DaCosta spoke about Stevenson's text and the other assigned texts: Loï Wacquant's “Class, race & hyperincarceration in revanchist America”, Rachel Kushner's “Is Prison Necessary?”, and works of creative writing by students from NYU’s Prison Education Program.

Convening as we are in the wake of yet more police killings of unarmed Black people and a global pandemic, these three readings could not be more timely. Racially skewed coronavirus death rates and incidents of police brutality reflect the deep racial and class fissures in our collective life, the harshest impacts of which—like incarceration—devastate the most marginalized in our society.

Taken together, our readings tell a very grim tale about our carceral system. The US has the highest incarceration rate in the world, confining 2.3 million people with six million more on probation or parole. It is exceptionally harsh, imposing life sentences for nonviolent offenses and locking up children in adult prisons, and the state, in the name of its citizens, kills people for killing people. It has largely given up on the principle of rehabilitation, instead extending confinement and punishment outside the walls of the prison and far beyond the length of formal sentence through probation and parole—systems practically designed to keep people under state supervision, as infractions as minor as being late for curfew can and do result in reincarceration. And, as Bryan Stevenson’s work shows so wrenchingly, it is a system riddled by error in which too many are profiled, arrested, and even killed for crimes they did not commit.

It is not, however, a system of “mass incarceration” (as it has come to be known), for that would suggest its effects are broadly distributed across the population and that we all share a similar risk of being locked up. But of course, we do not. Black and brown people are far more likely than others to be incarcerated, but the greatest risk factor of all is being poor. A long and complex relationship between racial exclusion, a deindustrialized and globalized economy, and a shrinking social state have resulted in what Loï Wacquant dubs hyperincarceration: a system “triply selective,” first by class, second by race, and third by place, that principally ensnares poor, Black men from urban ghettos.

Our authors reveal the US carceral system to be an unjust, unequal, inhumane, and immoral system, made all the more so because it is ineffective. It neither deters crime nor ensures public safety (its purported reason for being). Rather, it produces harm, not only to those it locks up, but also to the families and communities from which they come, and to our society as a whole (not least because of the massive resources it siphons from other pressing needs).

If Stevenson essentially asks us to wrestle with the morality of the death penalty, Ruth Wilson Gilmore wants us to question why we are locking people up at all. For this scholar and activist, “solutions” to the harm caused by the prison system lie not in its “reform” but in its abolition. Prison abolition may sound radical and utopian, but only because we have so normalized the idea of putting people in cages that it is literally hard to imagine a world otherwise. It may sound foolhardy and dangerous, but only if we think of it in terms of absence. Prison abolition is not just about an absence (no prisons) but a presence “of all things necessary for a violence-free life.” Gilmore stresses that we need to look at the conditions that produce violence and ask ourselves why violence comes to be seen as a solution to problems. It is not so everywhere. It need not be so here. To borrow Gilmore’s evocative phrase, “Where life is precious, life is precious.” It means organizing ourselves and our institutions to make it possible for people to thrive—to feed and be fed, to care and be cared for. It requires, at a minimum, adequate housing, quality education, health care, environmental justice, and a livable planet for all. We will not—indeed, we cannot—have justice without these things. “The opposite of poverty is not wealth,” Stevenson reminds us. “The opposite of poverty is justice.”

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In the days following the Black Lives Matter protests that took place in the aftermath of the police shooting of Jacob Blake in Kenosha, Wisconsin, a group armed with paint buckets and the crusading zeal of “All Lives Matter” went around the city covering up Black Lives Matter murals and slogans with words like “love” and “unity.” The words “equality” and “justice,” the theme of the current issue of *Gallatin Today*, have sometimes performed a parallel function within legal terrains by functioning as feel-good veils covering up and glossing over calls for accountability that point to law’s injustices and inequalities. In legitimizing the impunity, they serve to legitimate the injustice. In erasing the history of racialized violence that has rendered Black lives vulnerable, they have contributed to the violence. One way in which this has been done in and through law is by treating biased standards as if they were neutral reference points defining equality and justice. Among the most notorious examples in US law is the 19th-century case *Plessy v. Ferguson*, which legitimized apartheid under the rationale of “separate but equal.” As with the term “equality” in that case, and as with the terms “love,” “unity,” and “all lives matter” in the Kenosha incident, the abstraction works to shift our energies from addressing the very real histories of white supremacist violence and injustice that have been internal to the criminal justice system and to the functioning of legal institutions.

Arguably, “equality” and “justice” have had their most noteworthy lives in dissent. Writing this on the weekend of Ruth Bader Ginsburg’s passing, I am reminded of her dissent in *Shelby County v. Holder*, where she said, “Hubris was a fit word” in describing the majority opinion’s evisceration of federal oversight of voting rights (partly in the name of the sovereign equality of states) and thereby an attack on voting rights itself. Ginsburg’s dissent channeled Thurgood Marshall in arguing instead for the federal government to take robust action to fight the states’ institutionalization of inequality in exercising citizenship. The terms “equality” and “justice” may be hubristic camouflage of privilege when invoked in defense of the status quo, but they may be more compelling when channeled into paths dissenting against inequality and injustice.

One of the most striking aspects of Ginsburg’s dissents was that she often took the unusual step of reading out her dissent in court so that she was in dialogue with a public that went beyond the parties to the case and the limited academic and professional readership of the written brief. She was aware that the walls of the courtroom (real and metaphorical) cramped the paths for dissenting against inequality and injustice within the confining limits of the law. Indeed, in the words of John Lewis, another giant who passed in this season of loss, those paths may more often than not require “good trouble” that subverts how legal institutions have defined “equality” and “justice,” and even the terms through which they have imagined the paths to fight inequality and injustice. Critical race theory scholar Mari Matsuda captures the double consciousness of critical approaches to law and legal institutions in describing Angela Davis’ legal battles from her days with the Black Panthers. “There are times to stand outside the courtroom door and say, ‘This procedure is a farce, the legal system is corrupt, justice will never prevail in this land as long as privilege rules in the courtroom.’ There are times to stand in the courtroom and say, ‘This is a nation of laws, laws recognizing fundamental values of rights, equality, and personhood.’” Sometimes, as Angela Davis did, there is a need to make both speeches in one day.

Today Angela Davis, with many of the BLM protesters in Kenosha and elsewhere, stand for abolition—the term that captures our current moment’s path for dissenting against inequality and injustice through initiatives (such as defunding the police) building toward what Andre Gorz described as “non-reformist reform”—reform that “is conceived, not in terms of what is possible within the framework of a given system and administration, but in view of what should be made possible in terms of human needs and demands.” It is a path that seeks to develop tangible strategies to challenge the formidable forces of racial capitalism, and the local and global institutions, discourses and imaginaries that reproduce, legitimize, and expand its compass. Protesting the atrocities associated with the current system of mass incarceration (from the shooting of Jacob Blake to the handcuffing of Blake to his hospital bed) and calls for revisiting budgets for policing (“defund the police”) can be the entry point for an abolitionist politics. The path being laid by abolition takes its signposts from an analysis of the underlying conditions that produce and sustain those atrocities. For instance, as Ruth Wilson Gilmore explains, privatization within the prison system is not the only target of radical abolition, but privatization is symptomatic of the system that engendered carceral geographies as a response to a range of intersecting and interwoven crises shaped by the political economy of austerity policies, a history of racist governance technologies, the spread effects of ecological devastation, the militarization of the police, imperial wars abroad, the state’s response to internationalist solidarities among dissenting and subaltern populations and more. Abolition in this view is not focused narrowly on “equality” and “justice” as envisioned by reformist approaches to the existing prison industrial complex. Better regulation to address the atrocities of private prisons, prison labor, prosecution of the “innocent,” the jailing of nonviolent offenders, racist bias in policing, etc., will not bring “love” and “unity” in Kenosha or elsewhere. In contrast, abolition seeks a path to changing the conditions that made prisons a part of the solution that was advanced in relation to almost every problem, from public education to sexual violence. Another way of saying this is that abolition seeks a path that challenges carceral geographies as the terrain for “equality” and “justice.”
GWB’s War

BY FURQAN SAYEED

When the pandemic began, I was reading *Frankenstein in Baghdad*. A gruesome tale of a monster—stitched together from the corpses of the Iraqi War—wreaking havoc on those who had wronged each of its parts, the book sees chaos and violence as intrinsic to post-invasion Iraq, its point of origin no longer a concern to the author, Ahmed Saadawi, nor to the global liberal elite who showered the book with praise and accolades.

I was reading this book as part of an independent study I was pursuing with Gallatin professor Sinan Antoon, an Iraqi national whose fiction explores the material devastation of war. Professor Antoon’s most famous book, *The Corpse Washer*, is also a graphic exploration of the destruction of war, but it keenly attributes blame to key actors: the despot Saddam Hussein; the corrupt and ineffective Iraqi government; the illegal war declared by American president George W. Bush.

It’s important not to see Iraq as a perpetual battleground. Though conflict is endemic to history itself, this birthplace of civilization has historically been and continues to be home to multitudes of diverse and proud people, brought together by geography and a common identity. These were the victims of Saddam’s ill-conceived war with Iran and Kuwait, the UN sanctions that left one million children starved, and the pictures of George W. Bush and Michelle Obama embracing in DC as a testament to their “enduring friendship,” or the articles dotting on the former president for painting loving portraits of immigrants (and leaving out the part where he founded the immigration agency that was just revealed to be sterilizing detained migrant women). To many “Never Trump” Americans, Bush represents the conservative willing to reach across the aisle, ready to push aside politics and have a beer with the boys.

But how can we push aside politics—as rancid and partisan as politics has become—when the only things that both Democrats and Republicans can agree on is raising the defense budget, again and again, to astronomical levels never before seen? When America’s foremost contribution to the Global South is raw destruction perpetrated by our bloated military?

When the Krugman story broke, I phoned Professor Antoon to hear his thoughts. We chatted aimlessly for a while about Zoom classes and postgrad life before embarking on the subject of revisionist history: “There is something in the American psyche, even amongst the liberals . . . this notion of American exceptionalism—the unimaginable goodness of America. Somehow [they] think that there’s always some kind of goodness which is essentially there,” he remarked, before adding, “Where were all of these [good] people in the last six months?”

White liberals like Krugman “cannot look beyond their own privilege, class, and background” to see that America is conceptualized entirely differently by those who suffer its wrath, Professor Antoon went on to say. A lifelong fan of Langston Hughes, Antoon directed me to Hughes’ 1938 poem “Let America Be America Again:”

> Let America be America again. Let it be the dream it used to be. Let it be the pioneer on the plain Seeking a home where he himself is free. (America was never America to me.)

Our criminal ex-president’s actions on that day, and entirely erasing the reactionary violence perpetrated by white Americans against anyone who remotely fit the stereotypical depiction of Arabs or Muslims.

Krugman isn’t the first, or last, to do so. Since the ascendency of an uncouth TV personality to the highest office of state, liberal media has been fascinated with rehabilitating the image of the conservatives of yesteryear; “respectable” figures like John McCain, who so eloquently stated, “I hate the gooks,” and the clown president George W. Bush, who is, at best, still a bumbling buffoon chasing his father’s legacy. The issue, Professor Antoon says, is that “problematic figures [are] taken from the past and shuttled into some kind of future, sheltered from the . . . material consequences of what they did.” That much is evident from the pictures of George W. Bush and Michelle Obama embracing in DC as a testament to their “enduring friendship,” or the articles dotting on the former president for painting loving portraits of immigrants (and leaving out the part where he founded the immigration agency that was just revealed to be sterilizing detained migrant women). To many “Never Trump” Americans, Bush represents the conservative willing to reach across the aisle, ready to push aside politics and have a beer with the boys.

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Who Gets to Be Good?

BY KARI SONDE

Like others staying indoors, only venturing outside masked and distant, I fill the resultant silences with wanting. I want stuff, I want to meet friends, I want to go places and be surrounded by others. I am stopped, like others, by the knowledge that it’s not the right thing to do. To make unnecessary trips, to go around maskless, to eat at a restaurant—none of these are the right thing to do in a pandemic.

Instead, I run reels of kid memories over and over, a place to be when I can’t be anywhere. I fixate on all the rules, said and unsaid, of childhood: to not speak your opinions loudly (or at all), to complete all homework and tests with good grades attached, to not get in trouble. As a Good Kid, I was afforded luxuries others weren’t: teachers bumped my grades up because they knew I could do better, I was never suspected of cheating and was frequently allowed to read a book or do homework in class instead of paying attention. I wonder, which rules serve me now? I can’t think of one that does.

I was told that to be a good student, you study hard, keep quiet, ask smart questions, and stand up for others. But your standing is as fickle as the system itself, which I learned when I was punished by faculty for having a body despite not having a mouth, by a cruel math teacher when I couldn’t make sense of his teaching, and by a principal when I wrote an article about a racist school dance theme, which was cut and censored to praise the racist dance instead. None of the behaviors I was taught were “good” protected me from these things. I learned that what is taught as “goodness” could easily pass for compliance instead, a tool that offers protection but rarely delivers.

Compliance’s dirtiest side stops you from extending whatever protections you do have onto others through the fear of losing that implied, but not guaranteed, protection. It’s a fear easily taught but difficult to dismantle. Comfort is hard to let go of, fickle as it might be.

When the pandemic hit, it peeled away comforts—for those with just enough luxury, of class, wealth, racial or other privilege, not obscene excess but just enough, the falls came fast and hard, with shame attached. For some, the shame calcified into thick white cataracts, and for others it was vision cleared to see the damage of comfort; there is only so much that can comfort from such a virus, and for too many, that small amount is out of reach.

One of those things is a social contract, an agreement to do the right thing, to mask up, sanitize frequently, stay distant and mostly at home. It’s a stark contrast to the heroics of goodness we are so accustomed to seeing, and we see the results of that dissonance in videos of wronged “Karens” and militant violence against rightfully agitated protesters—but even those romanticizing, visualizing, capturing the benefits of stillness are reliant on the work of unseen others who have no other option financially than to put themselves and their communities at risk.

When I replay my childhood reels, I can visualize a thousand possible outcomes of noncompliance to the rules that did not serve my best interests. Some are good, like safety for more than just myself, and others are good but difficult. None are easy.

Staying home and masking up is not hard when you have a job that allows you to work from home, but for many this is out of reach. It’s not easy to do the right thing when the tools for doing so are out of reach. When we look at who can stay home, but won’t, it’s too easy to be bitter. When we look at who couldn’t stay home if they wanted to, it’s not enough to feel helpless, and counterproductive to be angry toward those who have no choice.

Implementing the safest course of action is, for too many, unavailable. Framing safety as individual instead of collective serves only the few who can benefit from that. When you have the smallest luxury of being able to stay home, it must be spread. Some give their money to mutual aid projects, others cook food for protesters to nourish themselves in their long walks, and tackle family shame head-on. There are more ways, some seen, some unseen, all worthy of doing. But all require stripping down the optics of “goodness” for more valuable meaning.

Kari Sonde (BA ’17) writes about food and culture. You can find her in The Washington Post, Mother Jones, Bitch Media and at karisonde.com or @kari_sonde on Twitter.
1970s
Gallatin honors alumna Eleanor Jacobs (BA ’79), who passed away at age 91 on August 25, 2020, at her home in Litchfield, Connecticut. Jacobs began a career as a commercial photographer and, during her time at Gallatin, co-founded with her husband, Raymond, the popular Earth Rugs. Jacobs is survived by her daughters, Susan and Laura, and two grandchildren.

1980s
Julius Galacsko (MA ’89) previewed online readings of his two plays A Wife in the Shadows and The Prince Flask.


Jay Goldberg (BA ’82) documented the nightly 7 p.m. gratitude for front-line workers during the early days of coronavirus pandemic, producing a five-minute video, Where the Buildings Cheered.

Todas Buamos A Set Reys (We Would All Be Kings), a feature documentary by Maria Malaret (BA ’82), premiered in movie theaters in Puerto Rico in February 2020 and was an official selection of the 2020 Philadelphia Latino Film Festival.

John Ridley (BA ’87) was quoted in the May 14, 2020, Los Angeles Times article “Some Creators of Color Fear Coronavirus Will Be a Major Setback in TV’s Diversity Push.”

Coronavirus Will Be a Major Setback in TV’s Diversity Push. “I hope that it will inspire more candid conversations about solutions and accountability that go beyond hashtags.”

Recently nominated for two Emmy Awards for her work on the Netflix documentary Reversing Roe, Keli Goff is a multiplatform storyteller best known for chronicling the intersections of race, politics, and gender in America. As a journalist, her work has appeared in the publications Time, Cosmopolitan, The Washington Post, New York magazine, and many others. She continues to serve as a contributor to The Daily Beast and various NPR affiliates but has also transitioned into crafting stories for film and television.

Keli Goff was awarded a 2016 NAACP Image Award for co-writing the Being Mary Jane episode “Spare,” which tackled sexual abuse and mental health stigma. The 2018 Netflix documentary Reversing Roe marked Goff’s debut as a film producer and was inspired by her work as a journalist covering America’s legal battles over abortion. A former playwriting fellow with The Public Theater, Goff was born and raised in Texas and now divides her time between New York and LA. Follow @keligoff and read more at keligoff.com.

2000s
Witter and activist Susan Angladla Bartley (BA ’00) wrote “Inflation in Portland’s Black Lives Matter Movement,” among other pieces for Medium.

Michael Bihovsky (BA ’09) wrote, directed, and performed a short parody about the COVID-19 quarantine experience based on “Master of the House” from Les Misérables.

Jessica Brier (BA ’05) earned her PhD in Art History, Race Studies, and Race Theory from the University of Southern California and is the Dnukel Curatorial Fellow in Photography at the Loeb Art Center of Vassar College.

Sona Charaipotra (MA ’06) earned a master of fine arts from The New School and is the cofounder of Cake Literary, a boutique book-packaging company, and is coauthor of the Tiny Pretty Things series, which will be released as an original drama series on Netflix in the fall of 2020. Charaipotra is also author of the forthcoming Rumor Game (Dunwilly, 2021); Symptoms of a Hero (Harpercollins, 2019), and the forthcoming How Mayu Got Fierce (Macmillan, 2021).

The work of photographer Jade Goskow (BA ’00) was featured in the August 14, 2020, New York Times article “Finding ‘Utopia’ in Apocalyptic Hudson River School Paintings.”

Goskow’s photographs were featured in the 2018 article “How the World’s Largest Garbage Dump Became a Green Oasis.”

Anna Drouzdowski (BA ’01) served as a panelist for Kresge Arts in Detroit, Michigan, which awarded performing arts fellowships to artists living in the city.

Heather Federman (BA ’09) wrote “With OJS’s Privacy Nutrition Label, Apple Upgrades Regulations” for Dark Reading.

Keli Goff (BA ’01) hosted a conversation on KCWJ’s “Left, Right & Center” about the movement for racial justice that emerged in the United States in the spring of 2020.

Marie Claire design director Wunmi Jiang (BA ’05) profiled Wuniward for the Wall Street Journal. “It Looks Easy.” In addition, Jiang began a Gerbings account to benefit the nonprofit NoKicks4Herneys, which ensures that children who depend on school meals stay fed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Whitney Kramer (BA ’09) earned her master’s degree in Library and Information Science from Queens College in 2014, and is an ILR research and data librarian at Cornell University.

Daniel Lee (BA ’00) was featured on the SKYTED podcast discussing his debut poetry collection, Anatomy of Want (Rebel Sartori Press, 2020).

Victor Maog (BA ’00) is a visiting professor of Theater and Performance Studies at Saint Mary’s College of California. Additionally, Maog served as creative director for “An Evening with Alan Menken,” a virtual fundraiser for the Walt Disney Family Museum, which aired in August 6 and featured Lin-Manuel Miranda.

Tyler Maulsby (BA ’08) was promoted to partner at Los Angeles– and New York–based law firm Frankfurt Kurnit.

The New Bushans, directed by Alyssa Nahmias (BA ’91), is an official selection of the 2020 Salem Film Fest. In July 2020, the Gene Siskel Film Center offered a series of screenings of the film, and on July 20, Nahmias spoke with the film’s executive producers Marquise Stillow and Moholn Expert Oliver Botas, and Art Institute of Chicago curator Matthew Witkovsky, in an online discussion moderated by Art Institute assistant curator Robyn Farrell.

Sarah Potempa (BA ’03), founder and creator of The Beachwaver, a patented dual-voltage rotating curling iron and line of styling products, was featured on the podcast Entrepreneurs in the episode “Leap and the Net Will Appear” as well as the podcast Fat Museum, “Get Your Squatch On with Sarah Potempa of Beachwaver.”

Alexandra St. Charles (BA ’08) is earning her MBA from the Tuck School of Business at Dartmouth College.


Krista Verrastro (BA ’03) was featured on the Creative Therapy Umbrella podcast in the episode “Drama, Introspection, and Community.”

1990s
Sherrin Bernstein (BA ’91), president of Touch Fitness Inc. in Miami Beach, Florida, has developed an all-natural products company called Atracto Essentials.

Leonard Jacobs (BA ’92) earned his master’s degree in Theatre from Hunter College and was appointed to the role of interim executive director at the Jamaican Center for Arts and Learning in June 2020. Previously, he served in the role of interim executive director from 2004 to 2009 while pursuing his master’s degree in Theater from Leonard Jacobs, the president of Touch Fitness Inc. in Europe through today, and their daughters, Susan and Laura, and two grandchildren.


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Stephanie von Behr (BA ’01) earned her master of fine arts from San Francisco Art Institute in 2010 and is head of brand communications at Silicon Alley, based in Berlin, Germany.

Jenessa Abrams (BA ’14) earned an MFA in Fiction Writing and Literary Translation and an MS in Narrative Medicine from Columbia University, where she now teaches. She is a Nadya Asimenoff Fellow at the MacDowell Colony and has attended residencies through the Ucross Foundation, the Norman Mader Center, and the Vermont Studio Center.

Jameson Fitzpatrick’s (BA ’12) debut poetry collection, Pricks at the Zipper, was released by Birds LLC in June 2020.

Director of IF/Then Shorts at Tribeca Film Institute Chloe Gbai (BA ’16) was awarded an Impact Partners Documentary producers fellowship and produced a conversation for Sound On from MTV News with “Kimberly Drew, Andy Laiwan & More on Allyship & the BIPOC Experience.”

Emma Goode (BA ’13) earned a master of architecture landscape degree from Harvard’s Graduate School of Design in 2017 and is assistant landscape architect at NYVS.

Denise Love Hewett (BA ’11), founder and CEO of Scripted, delivered “The Problem With Pattern Matching” at the 39th Conference and launched a new podcast, Do the Work, which features conversations with diverse entrepreneurs, creators, and innovators.

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Faith S. Heyliger (BA ’15) is publishing her first book, The Love, Letter, an epic visual poem illustrated by Lithuanian artist Rasa Vaišvilė and produced by fellow NYU alumnus Josh Raab (CAS ’11).

Kathryn Jones (BA ’16) is segment producer and multimedia contributor at The Knocknurth.

Carl Krakow (BA ’16) wrote about environmental racism and the COVID-19 pandemic for Jadakiah, the online magazine co-founded by Guggenheim professor Simon Anhoon. Mackenzie Leighton (BA ’17) released the single from her upcoming album, “On the Opposite Shore Will Be Free,” along with a music video.

Devery Lindo (MA ’14) stars in Spike Lee’s latest film, Da 5 Bloods, and was interviewed for the June 12, 2020, edition of the New York Times in “Devery Lindo on ‘Da 5 Bloods’ and Playing a Trump Supporter.”

Evan Lorberbaum (BA ’16) was profiled in the Examiner News in “Armonk Artist Donates to NWH Northern Westchester Hospital In Help Combat COVID-19.”

Christina Marini (BA ’18) authored and co-authored various scholarly articles, including “Tradition in the Kitchen: Oral Histories of Men and Women and Their Thoughts on Gender Roles,” “Detecting illicit opioid content on Twitter,” and “Exploring Researcher Perceptions of Current HIV Care and Impact of Health Interventions for HIV-Infected Individuals in New York City.”

Kat Harrison (BA ’10) wrote Surgery on Sunday (Warren Publishing 2020), a children’s book with illustrations by Shane Crampton.
Jocie Te Paske (BA ’11) is pursuing a master of divinity degree with an emphasis on digital culture, activism, meaning making, and spirituality at the Harvard Divinity School.

Link Tejewibuya (BA ’17) is pursuing a PhD in Neuroscience at Yale University and has been awarded a 2019-2021 Gruber Science Fellowship.

Allegra Venturi Forner (BA ’18) developed ARTIPS, an app designed to help the art and design communities receive feedback on their work.

2020s

Jahkilah Bradley (BA ’20) is research assistant at the Vera Institute of Justice working across four different centers policing, immigration and justice, sentencing and corrections, and youth justice.

Michael Brittenham (BA ’20) received a 2020 Green Grant from the NYU Office of Sustainability for his team’s project of building an urban farm and homeless resiliency center in an abandoned Brooklyn parking lot.

Morgan Clemens (BA ’20) was awarded an NYU Student-Athlete Award for women’s softball.

Giorgio DelGrosso (BA ’20) was awarded an NYU Student-Athlete Award for men’s swimming.

Sara Durvisac (DFUP ’20), a recent Doctoral Fellow in Urban Practice with the Urban Democracy League, was chosen as one of 22 ACJS Public Fellows for 2020, and was appointed as research and policy advisor for Oxfam America.

Brianna Elatove (BA ’20) wrote “After My Brother: Trying to Find the Language for the Loss of a Sibling” for The Yale Review.

Scott Fortier (BA ’20) is a banking/finance legal assistant with White & Case.

Comedian Matthew Friend (BA ’20) was featured as a guest on The Today Show for his celebrity impressions and viral TikTok videos.

Kate He (BA ’20) produced Firewexx, a short thriller about a Swedish immigrant with a pending green card.

Ilerti Jayesoba (BA ’20) was accepted into Harvard’s Graduate School of Education and is pursuing a master’s degree in the Specialized Studies Program, furthering her Gallatin research on embodying decoloniality.

Elias Keen (BA ’20) is heading up operations at Serving the People, a platform for creative inquiry and experimentation. In addition, Keen launched a BFA show with over 850 student submissions from more than 65 schools across 13 different countries.

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