THE PUBLICATION BEFORE YOU is unlike anything we at Williams Magazine have attempted before. It’s a special issue focused on two major forces shaping our campus and our world: a pandemic that has upended nearly every aspect of daily life, exacerbating systemic, structural inequalities; and the ongoing horrors of racism and brutality against Black Americans. 

This issue of the magazine also creates space for more contributors than ever. At a time when our community was reeling and raw, we asked Williams people to help make sense of where we are now. Their poems, essays, stories and interviews fill the pages of this magazine. We thank them for entrusting their words and ideas to our care.

Williams Magazine is the result of measured and thoughtful writing and thinking on topics that defy easy explanation. One aspect of that work is presenting “the first rough draft of history,” as journalism has been described by Washington Post Publisher Philip L. Graham and others.

The magazine also aspires to what Claudia Rankine ’86, whose poem “Weather” appears on the facing page, calls “unknowing.” As she defines it in an interview with LitHub.com, unknowing is “the will to keep questioning the things that work against the potential for a better life, a more equitable one, a more inclusive, justice-filled one.”

Both in print and online, Williams Magazine will continue to make space for complex conversations and the diversity of voices and experiences of our communities. There’s so much more to be written. We hope you’ll keep reading.

—AMY T. LOVETT, EDITOR IN CHIEF
Weather

By Claudia Rankine

On a scrap of paper in the archive is written
I have forgotten my umbrella. Turns out
in a pandemic everyone, not just the philosopher,
is without. We scramble in the drought of information
held back by inside traders. Drop by drop. Face
covering? No, yes. Social distancing? Six feet
under for underlying conditions. Black.
Just us and the blues kneeling on a neck
with the full weight of a man in blue.
Eight minutes and forty-six seconds.
In extremis, I can't breathe gives way
to asphyxiation, to giving up this world,
and then mama, called to, a call
to protest, fire, glass, say their names, say
their names, white silence equals violence,
the violence of again, a militarized police
force teargassing, bullets ricochet, and civil
unrest taking it, burning it down. Whatever
contracts keep us social compel us now
to disorder the disorder. Peace. We're out
to repair the future. There's an umbrella
by the door, not for yesterday but for the weather
that's here. I say weather but I mean
a form of governing that deals out death
and names it living. I say weather but I mean
a November that won't be held off. This time
nothing, no one forgotten. We are here for the storm
that's storming because what's taken matters.
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“I lied because I could not bear to tell her the truth, yet.”

“I worry that physical distancing in response to the pandemic could become a deeply ingrained habit long after this crisis is over.”

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“It’s important to recognize the magnitude of the losses brought by this pandemic and the fact that this is the backdrop against which the current mobilizations for racial justice are taking place.”

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“It is too early to tell what the future of memory may look like in Williamstown.”

“Imaginings of the apocalypse, like our lived experience today, share the feeling that the world no longer makes sense.”
Living, Learning

The world’s issues have always been Williams’ issues. Our campus may be tucked away in the northwestern corner of Massachusetts, but the college and our people are continually shaped by broad social crosscurrents. Through our educational work, and our moral and political agency, we can influence that larger world in turn.

In an academic year unlike any other, our campus, like our world, already looks much different than it did a year ago. Meals once eaten in the dining halls are now taken to go; sports teams and student groups are often meeting online; roughly 25% of our students are learning remotely or taking a gap year; and well over half of our faculty are teaching remotely. Tents, once set out primarily for graduations and reunions, now have been repurposed as Covid testing sites, outdoor classrooms and eating spaces.

But the changes at Williams are more than physical or pedagogical. In parallel with the pandemic, we’re in the midst of an ongoing project to redefine how we build community. Here, again, the college has been shaped by broad societal crosscurrents. We’re thinking about inclusive education and racial equity during a time when Black Lives Matter and other movements are raising such issues nationally and when Covid-19 has laid bare, with brutal clarity, the ways that injustice, inequity and political and economic instability operate in our world today, often determining who lives and who dies or suffers.

The work of recent decades to expand our admission and hiring has been a crucial step in broadening Williams’ impact. Now we are shifting—sometimes proactively, sometimes urged by advocacy—into a period of intensive work to ensure that our campus is fully inclusive.

Williams’ mission is to prepare students for the world into which they will graduate: a world in which, by virtue of their education and credentials, they will likely enjoy significant influence. It is imperative that we provide them with the tools they need to become problem solvers who can take on complex issues that we and those before us have not yet solved. In that way, we all become contributors to the essential task of creating just and equitable societies.

A Williams education takes many forms, and we are weaving such work throughout our curriculum and co-curriculum. The Office of Institutional Diversity, Equity and Inclusion welcomed Dialogue Facilitator Drea Finley. Drea, whose office is at the Davis Center, teaches restorative practices that help people peaceably resolve conflicts and reach mutual understanding. You’ll find Drea’s exceptional poem “I Can’t Breathe” on the last page of this issue.
We’ve also hired an outstanding staff at the Davis Center with strengths in student support and inclusive pedagogy, including Director Eden-Renée Hayes, Assistant Director for Intergroup Relations and Inclusive Programming Aseel Abulhab ’15 and Program Coordinator Natalie Montoya-Barnes. The center itself, a hub for this important work and for many student and academic activities, is also undergoing a physical renovation that was paused when the pandemic and financial crisis hit in the spring.

The vibrancy of today’s Davis Center honors the family whose name it bears—and it’s a testament to the struggles they and so many have endured at Williams. In “Struggle and Success” (p. 16), Gordon Davis ’63 relates how his father, W. Allison Davis ’24, severed his connection with Williams after he was turned down for a faculty position because he was Black. He went on to hold a professorship at the University of Chicago for nearly 40 years, and his foundational work on the role of class and race in a child’s education and acculturation continues to be cited today. He made his peace with Williams just a year before his death in 1983.

Students and alumni have also struggled to “make their peace” with Williams. Nicole Alvarez ’22 writes about her own experience in “A Williams Professor Once Told Me ‘Don’t Use Your Poetry as a Soapbox’” (p. 15). As activist Virginia Cumberbatch ’10 writes in the essay “Facing the Truth” (p. 21), breaking this cycle of harm and healing “will require us to get into what the late Congressman John Lewis called ‘good trouble’ … to sacrifice convenience, disrupt comfort and shake ourselves from complacency or complicity in our individual lives and collective commitment.”

We’re shaking ourselves out of one form of complicity by continuing this year with our examination of the college’s past, including our historical relationship to chattel slavery and to the Native American peoples displaced by settler-colonists in this region, among other issues. You can read about one aspect of that work in Christine DeLucia’s essay “Resurrecting Vanishing Narratives” (p. 22).

We’re also challenging ourselves to look ahead by thinking about more inclusive and supportive models for our residential life system: Can we intentionally guide students to engage with people different from themselves? And can we pair such efforts with other opportunities that let them more fully explore their own identities and interests?

This is the work of a great liberal arts school. There’s a particular ideal of living-learning at a place like Williams, where the lessons of the classroom are complemented—and sometimes complicated—by the experience of trying to put one’s ideas into practice. That education shapes people to be thoughtful, searching and effective. In this issue, and in the words, ideas, experiences and actions of our students, staff, faculty and alumni, Williams comes alive.
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Harm and Healing

Almost fifty years after a racist incident drove his father out of Williamstown, a son begins the work of helping him—and the Williams community—to heal.

By Bilal Ansari, as told to Julia Munemo
Bilal Ansari, vice president for campus engagement, felt it was his calling to work at Williams after learning of his father’s experience there with racism.
My great-grandfather was a World War II veteran, drafted into the U.S. Navy in 1939 and placed in an all-Black unit at the Naval Air Station Quonset Point in Rhode Island, where he worked as a machinist on warplanes. He and my great-grandmother had wanted to buy a house with a yard when their kids were young. Even though they had enough in savings for a down payment and good jobs at the college, they weren’t able to get a mortgage. And Colonial Village, where many new homes were available for sale, had a whites-only restrictive covenant.

Finally, in 1962, after my great-grandparents spent years applying and being rejected, two fraternity brothers stepped in and co-signed their loan for a house on Maple Street. The Logans were grandparents before they ever owned their own place.

That summer, my 14-year-old father and his siblings boarded a northbound bus in New York City to visit their grandparents in Williamstown for the first time. When they stepped off the bus and walked into the new house, the mood was jubilant. The grandchildren set down their bags and, reunited with their cousins, set off on a short walk to the store to buy milk to make ice cream.

They didn’t get far before they passed a group of white boys about their age who called over to Harry Jr., who’d grown up in Williamstown, and said, “Who are those niggers you got with you?”

To my father, those were fighting words, and he wasn’t scared of the challenge. The fight was quick—my father landed one punch, with the result of a bloody nose—and soon the cousins continued on their way. When they got home with the milk, there was a white mob waiting for them.

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At this time, the college was beginning the process of abolishing fraternities. But Chi Psi held the deed to my great-grandparents’ house and employed them both. They’d been told Agnes could find work in the newly established Dining Services, and Harry Sr. could work in Buildings and Grounds. Plans for their continued employment were being made, but nothing was set—and the mob was made up of Williams College administrators.

They demanded my father and his siblings get on the next bus out of town. If not, they said, the Logans would never work at Williams again. It broke my great-grandfather’s heart to send his grandchildren back to the bus station, but he didn’t have a choice. He went on to work in Buildings and Grounds, and she at Dining Services, until they retired in 1971. As a parting gift, and in their final formal act as a fraternity, the Chi Psi brothers paid off the Logan’s mortgage on the Maple Street house and inducted Harry Sr. into their brotherhood—the only Black member—in their last ceremony on Williams’ campus.

FOR MY FATHER, being run out of Williamstown by an angry white mob was just one of several traumatic racist experiences in his young life. But of the stories he shared with me growing up, the one I’ve laid out here was not among them. It came to me, through tears, almost 50 years after it happened, when I called to tell him I was applying for a job at a small liberal arts college in Massachusetts.

“Which one?” he asked.

I didn’t expect that he’d heard of Williams, because I never had.

I was living in New Haven, Conn., at the time, and my dad flew out from California to drive up to Williamstown with me for my interview for the position of Muslim chaplain. It was 2011. He cried most of the way, pointing out things he remembered seeing from the bus window as he digested the shame and regret on his way out of town all those years ago.

“If you work at Williams,” he said, “maybe it will finally be a restoration and allow my healing with this place.”

Discovering that my great-grandparents had lived here made this strange place suddenly feel familiar, and I felt deep in my soul that it was my calling to work at Williams. I wanted to build restorative practices and help create a community of hospitality and welcome, so that no visitor to town and campus would ever have to experience what my family endured.

Our first stop in town was the East Lawn Cemetery. We told the groundskeeper we were looking for Harold Logan’s grave, and he said, “Doc? I’ll take you there right now. He’s at the top of the hill in the military circle, and Agnes is down the hill.”

My great-grandfather is buried in a spot that overlooks Williams’ campus. His legend lives on today, but so does my father’s shame and anger at being run out of town.

My family story is painful, but it’s not all bad—and it’s crucial to do the work of revisiting our past to understand where we’re headed in the future. ☑
ON THE MORNING OF AUGUST 24, I turned on the news, opened up social media and was immediately overwhelmed by videos of Jacob Blake being shot seven times, in the back, by a police officer in Kenosha, Wis. As I lay in bed with my husband, tears streaming down my face, my 2½-year-old daughter came bounding into our bedroom. “Mama, why you crying?” she asked when she saw my face. “You have a boo-boo?”

While I don’t know Jacob Blake personally—nor did I know Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd, Sandra Bland or so many others whose lives have been ended or permanently altered by racialized violence—I do know them. I value their lives just as I value the lives of my brother, father, mother, daughter, friends of color and my unborn Black son, due to arrive in November. Racial trauma is real and—for Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC)—inescapable.

How is it possible that I have to explain racialized violence to my innocent 2½-year-old daughter? What could I possibly say? This time, I lied. “These are happy tears because mama loves you so much.”

I lied because I could not bear to tell her the truth, yet. The true answer to her question is “Yes.” BIPOC have physical and
psychological injuries from frequent and pervasive exposure to racism at cultural, systemic, institutional and individual levels. These injuries begin in childhood and continue throughout adulthood. As BIPOC, we are exposed to personal experiences of racism as well as to the racialized violence and trauma experienced by others across the country and seen on media and social media. We anticipate this exposure, and these experiences of racism can lead to deleterious mental health consequences, including stress, anxiety, trauma, sadness, hopelessness and anger.

Currently, BIPOC are contracting and dying from Covid-19 and associated complications at disproportionately higher rates than white Americans. The pandemic has exposed systemic oppression in the form of racial disparities in housing, education, food security, access to quality health care, availability of clean water and many more resources necessary for livelihood. As BIPOC, we understand, deeply, that these disparities are the source of the overwhelming casualties of Covid-19 in our communities. We also understand that we are fighting for our lives as we protest racial injustice and inequity.

While the current state of racial justice in our country is bleak, I’m heartened by the resurgence of commitment by people from all walks of life who are facing the reality of systemic oppression in our country and trying to do better. I’m heartened by the first responders, medical professionals, teachers and frontline workers making immense sacrifices to care for us and our loved ones. I’m hopeful because of these demonstrations of the great capacity for compassion and sacrifice that are central to being human.

So this is how I’ll introduce my daughter to our world. I’ll show her that people and communities of color are beautiful, resilient and empowered. I’ll teach her to value her identity as a multiracial and multietnic girl and woman. I’ll instill in her compassion and kindness. And, yes, someday soon, I’ll begin to teach her about racism and the ways it will negatively affect her life. I don’t have a choice.

Navigating Uncertainty

By Lynn Gerwig Lyons

AS A SPECIALIST IN ANXIOUS FAMILIES, the days of Covid-19 have been busy for me. People want to know how best to manage fear, loss and stress, how to parent to mitigate long-term damage and how to navigate ongoing uncertainty. Early in the pandemic, I realized that I’m saying now what I’ve been saying for years: Life is uncertain, and that fact can create anxiety. But the way we handle that during a pandemic does not require the development of unique emotional skills.

Let me be clear: This feels different. The content is new, and the urgency is higher, but the work of emotionally equipping our young people to move into an uncertain future is the same. It’s about learning how to step into—rather than away from—the emotional and circumstantial curves life throws us.

Anxiety seeks certainty and comfort. It wants to know everything and feel comfortable before moving forward. Anxious people imagine catastrophic outcomes and seek reassurance to try to forestall them. They avoid risks. But uncertainty is unavoidable, and so the most important skill I help my patients develop is the ability to tolerate it.

The first step involves managing emotions. Many of us try to tamp them down. But the key is to feel them and respond in healthy ways. I tell people all the time: You should feel anxious, sad and disappointed right now. The question is, can you articulate these emotions? Are you allowing space for others to tell you what they’re feeling? We learn how to manage our emotions when we’re given the opportunity to get through them. Instead of jumping in to try to solve, rationalize or minimize what others are feeling, we should use two words: “Of course.” Of course you feel worried. It would be weird if you didn’t.

Worry can lead to feelings of hopelessness, which is fed by the stance that nothing will change. But things are always in flux, even now. We don’t know exactly what will happen next, but we never do, really. The knowledge that emotions, circumstances and relationships are ever-changing is critical to healing and growth. So the question becomes: How will you adjust? Malleability and flexibility are the opposite of the “stuck” feeling of hopelessness that anxiety and depression depend upon.

In my darkest moments, I become overwhelmed by the machinations of a culture I see as being at odds with the well-being of our young people. I’m not sure how Covid-19 will affect that. But one little guy I treated recently saw me on the news talking about the need to navigate uncertainty, manage emotions and remain flexible. He turned to his mother and said, “We’ll be OK, Mom. We already learned all this stuff.” It’s doable, he reminds me, so I’ll keep at it.
Flattening the Loneliness Curve

By Eunice Lin Nichols

AS THE DAUGHTER OF CHINESE immigrants, I grew up surrounded by a sprawling collection of aunties, uncles, grandmas and grandpas. Some of them were related to me. Most of them weren’t. The richness of this multi-generational community anchored my childhood in an expansive view of home, sparking an obsession with connecting the generations that has followed me throughout my whole career.

That work has never felt more threatened. Long before the coronavirus, we were already spiraling into a loneliness epidemic with health implications as lethal as smoking 15 cigarettes a day. And while the assumption is that older people are the most socially isolated group in society, the generation reporting the greatest sense of isolation today is our youth.

I worry that physical distancing in response to the pandemic could become a deeply ingrained habit long after this crisis is over. I worry that as we engage in the critical, collective work required to flatten the Covid-19 curve, we will lose sight of the urgent need to simultaneously flatten the growing loneliness curve for young and old alike. I worry that so many more will die.

Every day, I counter that worry with wisdom gleaned from the elders who sustained me through an earlier crisis 20 years ago, when my world was rocked by 9/11. I was running a program that brought older adults into public schools to help kids read by third grade. My team of volunteers taught me (and countless children) that fear and hope, grief and joy, and brokenness and resilience exist side by side. The volunteers became extended family.

Today I see that extended family everywhere. I see it in organizations like The Cares Family, a community of 18,000 older and younger neighbors in the U.K., using telephone, mail and virtual visits to maintain connection between the generations. I see it in the city of San Francisco, as it partners with the intergenerational matching service Mon Ami to recruit 2,500 new volunteers to make grocery runs, offer tech support and even provide virtual concerts for isolated seniors.

I see it in the neighborhood groups springing up to check on those most vulnerable to the virus. In the music and dance choreographed by grandparents, parents and children over Zoom. In the many heroes, including retired doctors and nurses called back into service to care for those who are sick. Across geography and generations, this extended family reminds us how much we need each other.

An entire generation of young people will be shaped by Covid-19 and by who we become as a society when we emerge from this crisis. Did we see and call on the assets of both the old and the young? Did we express our humanity through daily acts of personal connection? Did we care for one another like extended family?

Every day, I’m filled with hope as I see older and younger generations banding together, many for the first time, to form a web of support around one another. These are the stories I will tell, the behaviors I will promote, the habits I plan to ingrain, so that they are the ones that will last long after this crisis is over.
Grieving the Loss of Employment

By Chris Rudnicki

As the world reels from the fallout of coronavirus, millions of individuals are silently experiencing the unique flavor of psychological suffering related to job loss and unemployment that my family knows too well.

My father was laid off during the Great Recession of 2007-2009. For the longest time, I thought his challenge was singular and better left unsaid. The emotional and psychological toll exacted on him was something to talk around, not through.

In the decade following that first layoff, my dad has wandered in and out of short-term contracting gigs, which are nearly always punctuated by several months of the seemingly Sisyphean task of job searching. It's in those long stretches of unanswered LinkedIn messages and dead-end phone calls with recruiters that he struggles the most. In his words, he feels “lost at sea.”

Over the years, he and I both came to realize a fundamental truth about losing work and precariously walking the edge of employment: The psychological burden associated with being untethered—devoid of professional purpose and exposed to the myriad stressors of unemployment—is devastating.

A few years ago, I received a Manila envelope in the mail. Inside was a typed letter from my grandfather and a tattered copy of the April 5, 1982, issue of U.S. News & World Report magazine. My grandfather’s letter explained that he, like my dad, had suffered from the social and emotional challenges brought on by his job loss. In the aftermath of that suffering, he chronicled his struggles in an article for U.S. News. “You’re Fired! Memories of a Dark Day” appears in that 1982 edition of the magazine, and in the introduction the editor points out, quite rightly, that “few are willing to discuss openly this harrowing experience.”

For many that have been laid off or furloughed as a result of Covid-19, a new job will come soon enough. But for some significant portion of today’s unemployed ranks, the journey back to work won’t be as easy. Unfortunately, the guidance and support available to help them navigate that journey—whether it be public or private, nonprofit or for-profit—is woefully insufficient for the task at hand.

Being clear-eyed, calm and confident on the way back to work means tending to the psychological challenges brought on by unemployment, not neglecting them. So instead of helping the unemployed optimize résumés and covers letters, it’s time we help them grieve what they’ve lost and, only then, begin to piece their identities back together. It’s time we find purpose again.

I hope more of us can consider my grandfather’s example in these uncertain times. Now, more than ever, we need to talk through—and not around—the psychological toll of unemployment.
A Williams professor once told me,
“Don’t use your poetry as a soapbox”

But I look at my old work
And revolt like it’s garbage
Ironic that I was obsessed with
Dolls and polish
That spills over the cuticles of my meaning
Unable to ever really cover the dirt underneath my breathing
Unable to satiate the constant fiending
For the disruption of Black healing
Feeling that every part of academia I
Peel apart and partake in
Has me looking over the
Soapbox, leaning
But the fact of the matter is that
The only poetry I’ve ever really loved
Has killed me and revived me time and
Time again
With the truth
You know they called Langston Hughes backwards too, right?

By Nicole Alvarez
Struggle and Success

How two generations of the Davis family helped pave the way for Williams’ ongoing work on equity, inclusion, social justice and community building.

By Kate Stone Lombardi

THE FIRST TIME GORDON J. DAVIS saw Williams College was in 1957. His father, the renowned social anthropologist and psychologist W. Allison Davis, was driving the family home to Chicago after conducting research on I.Q. testing in Cambridge, Mass. Williamstown was already in the rearview mirror when Allison remarked, off-handedly, “Oh, that’s where I went to college.”

It was hardly a ringing endorsement. And when Gordon began his own college search, his father—one of three Black students in the Class of 1924—told him, “Anyplace but Williams.”

“Being rebellious, I immediately applied,” says Gordon, who graduated in 1963 and, like his father, was one of three Black students in his class.

Gordon related the anecdote and many others to me during an interview for the Society of Alumni Bicentennial celebration, which begins in January 2021. As part of the planning group, I had volunteered to collect stories about fellow alumni. I knew the Davis family had a long, complicated history with Williams, and I was eager for Gordon to share it with me. (Throughout this article, I use first names for clarity. No disrespect is intended.)
As a Williams student, Gordon J. Davis '63 became a civil rights activist during a time of great change for the campus and the country.
Speaking via videoconference from his apartment in Manhattan, Gordon talked about his family’s relationship with the college. Pieces of that history have been shared over the years as they relate to the Multicultural Center, founded in 1989 and renamed the Davis Center in 2012 to honor Gordon’s father and his uncle, John Davis ’33.

Today, the center helps lead campus conversations about diversity and equity, supporting students from historically underrepresented groups. Its name represents both the struggles and successes of the Davis family at Williams.

Allison arrived on campus in the fall of 1920, having graduated from Dunbar High School in Washington, D.C. One of a few public schools dedicated to serving Black youth, Dunbar sent a handful of students each year to Williams or Amherst on a full scholarship. Allison was under no illusions about the discrimination he’d face at the predominantly white college, Gordon says.

In a 2015 New York Times Op-Ed, Gordon wrote about how his father and uncle John witnessed the financial and emotional destruction of their father, John Abraham Davis, by the racist segregation policies of President Woodrow Wilson’s administration. Born in 1862, John Sr. was at the top of his high school class and ambitious. Jim Crow laws were entrenched, but the Civil Service was integrated and offered opportunity. John took a job with the Government Printing Office and rose from laborer to mid-level management, supervising an office with white employees, Gordon wrote. But Wilson began segregating the service shortly after his election in 1913. John was demoted to increasingly menial jobs, his salary slashed in half, forcing him to auction the family farm. Gordon described his grandfather as “a broken man.” Allison and, later, John Jr. carried this experience with them to Williams.

“He and the others who went there from Dunbar High School knew what they were getting into,” Gordon says today. “They knew it wasn’t a socially integrated place or some bastion of liberal outlook on African Americans.”

Barred from fraternities, Allison and his two Black classmates visited North Adams, a railroad hub at the time. They found companionship and parties where they were welcome with the Pullman Porters, the exclusively Black group of men who worked on the sleeper cars.

Allison graduated from Williams summa cum laude, with highest honors in English. He was class valedictorian and a member of Phi Beta Kappa. He completed a master’s degree in English from Harvard University and, soon after, applied for a faculty position in Williams’ English department. The college turned him down. Seeking guidance, he wrote to Williams President Harry Garfield, Class of 1885. Their correspondence is preserved in Williams’ Archives and Special Collections.

Garfield responded: “It is, I suppose, true that you will hardly be considered for appointment in Northern high schools or colleges, and yet the qualifying word is there. The difficulty, so far as our colleges are concerned, is rather obvious; We all have Southern students.”

Garfield advised Allison to apply instead for a teaching job at the Hampton Institute (now Hampton University), an all-Black college in Virginia, and wrote a letter of recommendation. The letter described a meeting of The Pipe and Quill, a student literary society comprised of “a select company of young men.” The event was held at the Sigma Phi fraternity house, where Allison worked as head waiter. After serving dinner to his classmates that night, he presented his own paper to the society.

As Garfield wrote in his recommendation letter, “Those who were present told me of the occasion, both because of the excellent paper he presented and because of the way he bore himself as waiter at the fraternity house. He served on that occasion as on others, taking his place naturally and apparently without embarrassment as a member of The Pipe and Quill when his duties as waiter were discharged. He dignified the work of his hands and the quality of his intellectual performance.”

Today Gordon says he considers that last phrase the most appalling moment in the correspondence.

Allison took the job at Hampton, but “that’s when his anger ignited” toward Williams, Gordon says. “He was a person who obviously didn’t accept barriers. There were no African American teachers in any white school in the United States, even in high schools. But he didn’t see that as a barrier to why Williams wouldn’t hire him after he’d been a superstar there.”

Gordon notes that his father remained connected with several alumni, including the acclaimed poet Sterling Brown, Class of 1922. In their correspondence, also in the college archives, Allison addressed Brown as “Dutch, Old Scout” and signed his letters as “Flap.” Allison also encouraged his friend’s writing career, offering to introduce him to publishers; “I want like hell to see your work in print,” he wrote on Oct. 18, 1925.

After completing a second master’s degree, in anthropology, and then a Ph.D., Allison held a professorship at the University of Chicago for almost 40 years. President Lyndon Johnson appointed him to the Civil Rights Commission. Known for his groundbreaking research into the role of class and race in a child’s education and acculturation, Allison and his wife, Elizabeth, embedded themselves in rural Mississippi at huge personal risk to scrutinize life under Jim Crow laws. The product of that scholarship, the 1941 book Deep South: A Social Anthropological Study of Caste and Class, remains relevant today. Pulitzer Prize winner Isabel Wilkerson devoted an entire chapter of her 2020 book Caste to Allison’s work, saying in her acknowledgments that she considers him to be “a spiritual father.”

Allison’s younger brother, John, also graduated from Williams summa cum laude and a member of Phi Beta
Kappa. Gordon says John's experience was more positive than his father's. Yet when John wrote a letter in 1935 asking Williams to consider a "Negro youth who lives in Springfield" for admission, President Tyler Dennett, Class of 1904, responded, "I should not recommend a Negro to enroll at Williams College at the present time for several reasons." Among them: Black students were now barred from working at fraternity houses, and there were very few social opportunities for them on campus.

In the letter, which is also in the college archives, Dennett stated there was no policy excluding Black students from Williams per se, noting that the college was "a pioneer in Negro education." But, he added, "The educational problem as it concerns the Negro is two-sided, since it involves also an educational problem for the whites." After Williams "went in for Negro education," Dennett wrote, the college hadn't been able to draw students from below the Mason-Dixon Line, something he regretted.

John went on to receive a Ph.D. in political science from Columbia University and pursued a career as a writer, educator and activist who, in the 1930s, organized one of the earliest civil rights protests in Washington and helped establish the legality of economic boycotts to fight employment discrimination. He was the lead historical researcher in Brown vs. Topeka Board of Education, the 1954 Supreme Court decision ending the separate-but-equal doctrine for public schools. He taught at Ohio State University, Lincoln University and the City College of New York and, from 1943 to 1946, was one of four directors of President Franklin Roosevelt's Committee on Fair Employment Practices. Despite his own frustrations, John didn't share his brother's bitterness toward Williams and eventually served as a trustee.

Gordon had his own experiences of racism at Williams. He recalls how, in the fall of 1959, while searching for a pencil in a desk drawer, he found a letter from the college to his freshman-year roommate, asking if he minded "rooming with a Negro."

"I went over to see the dean to express my outrage," Gordon says. "He gave me a lecture and told me I was speaking out of turn."

Gordon didn't tell his father about the incident. Instead, he became an activist. He recalls how two seniors came to the freshman dining hall that spring to organize students from Williams, Amherst, Trinity and Wesleyan. The plan was to picket the White House on Good Friday in support of the sit-ins in the South. Gordon says most of his white classmates, including someone at his table, booed the speaker.

"I said, 'What are you booing about? Don't you believe Negroes are equal to whites?"' Gordon recalls. "'You're sitting at a table with me and my cousin and Bill Boyd—what the hell is the matter with you?'"

Bill Boyd '63 and John Davis '63, Gordon's cousin, were the only other Black students in the freshman class. Gordon says his cousin had to physically restrain him from "ejecting" the white student at their table.

Gordon and about 20 Williams students ended up taking part in the Good Friday protest on a sweltering, 90-degree day in the spring of 1960. Some students were concerned that Williams might expel them for picketing. Gordon's friend Geoff Howard '63 was worried that his parents would pull him out of school. Gordon remembers reassuring Geoff, "There's no way they'll ever know."

The next day, however, The New York Times published a cover photo of Gordon and Geoff picketing in their
Allison Davis ’24.

When Gordon J. Davis ’63 received an honorary degree from Williams in 1982, it was a powerful moment for his father, W. Allison Davis ’24. Gordon’s father was the first Black partner in a major corporate law firm. Far from being angry, Geoff’s parents bought multiple copies, Gordon recalls with a chuckle.

During their sophomore year, Gordon and Roger Warren ’63 cofounded the Williams Civil Rights Committee. Connecting with other students at a civil rights conference at Sarah Lawrence College, the two returned to Williams to raise money for the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee and other activist organizations. They fundraised at each of the 15 fraternity houses, talking to students one on one.

“The real purpose of the fundraising was to confront each individual with the issue of race in America,” Gordon says.

That year, the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. visited Williams. After preaching in the chapel, he gave a standing-room-only presentation on civil rights in Jesup Hall. Two years later, Gordon’s senior year, a busload of Williams students headed to Birmingham, Ala. Gordon didn’t go—his parents had warned him to stay out of the South. But he recalls John Kifner ’63 returning with a “Whites Only” sign he’d stolen from a bathroom.

“The campus was in complete agitation and excitement about civil rights,” Gordon says. “It took Williams many, many years, but that was the beginning of change.”

His father visited him at Williams only once—to attend Gordon’s graduation.

Gordon went on to Harvard Law School and served as one of the first Black partners in a major corporate law firm. He also was commissioner of parks and recreation for New York City Mayor Ed Koch, and his sweeping changes to the urban landscape included installing benches throughout the park system and restoring beaches and landmarks such as Brooklyn’s Prospect Park Arch and Sheep’s Meadow in Central Park. He is a founding chairman of Jazz at Lincoln Center, a life trustee of the New York Public Library and a trustee of the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, appointed by President Barack Obama. On Oct. 29, Gordon is to be honored by the New York Landmarks Conservancy as a 2020 Living Landmark.

All three Davises received honorary degrees from Williams. Allison received his in 1974, and Gordon recalls that his father was “not happy the whole weekend. His basic attitude was, ‘What took you so long?’”

When Gordon received his degree in 1982, seven years before John, his father returned to Williamstown. At a dinner before the ceremony, Allison was surrounded by admiring faculty members. Williams finally seemed to recognize the importance of his father’s work, Gordon says.

The next day, father and son stood on the steps of the President’s House, watching the graduation procession. A young Black woman marched by, and Allison asked who she was. When Gordon explained that she was the class marshal, his father responded, “Hmm. This place really has changed. Not as much as it should—but it’s changed.”

Sixty years of anger finally began to thaw. That evening, at a family dinner at the 1896 House, Allison stunned the table by announcing, “This has been one of the happiest weekends of my life.”

Gordon says he still thinks about his father’s words that night. “He knew, and I knew, that Williams had a long way to go,” he says. “Maybe it was the combination of my being honored, being there with my mother and the warmth of the greetings he received. It was a powerful moment for him and provided an opportunity to let anger and resentment fall away. The most important point is that a year before he died, my father was mostly reconciled with Williams.”

Following Allison’s death in 1983, Williams led the successful effort to have a commemorative postage stamp issued in his honor. The Davis Center, Davis Lecture series, Allison Davis Research Fellowship and other awards and workshops bear the family’s name, highlighting equity, inclusion, social justice education and community building. The academic focus of the tributes, Gordon says, would have been the most meaningful to his scholarly father. The Davis legacy at Williams continued when Allison’s granddaughter Jordan joined the Class of 2017.

As a journalist and Bicentennial committee volunteer, I take to heart two guiding principles: to “tell our story as a community” and to “acknowledge shortcomings in the history of the college and the Society of Alumni.” It’s impossible to excuse the college for its treatment of the Davises and so many others. Nevertheless, these alumni persisted and prevailed. I’m grateful to Gordon Davis for entrusting me with his family story.

And I’m haunted by the image of Allison Davis at Sigma Phi, clearing the last dinner plate, slipping off his white waiter’s jacket and presenting his paper to The Pipe and Quill. The topic of that paper is lost to history, but an essay he published after graduation, “On Misgivings,” may provide insight. He wrote, “The man who has accepted life at its face value has surrendered, and is lost.”
Facing the Truth

By Virginia Cumberbatch

THE GOAL SET FORTH in the Williams mission statement is, in part, “elevating the sights and standards of every member of the community, encouraging them to keep faith with the challenge inscribed on the college’s gates: ‘climb high, climb far.’”

Today, as we witness the continued brutalization and oppression of Black and Brown bodies and the denial of rights and humanity, we must decide if that call is one of reconciliation and reckoning—a reframing of our obligations as students and alumni. Perhaps it is a call to move beyond aspirations of racial diversity to truly dismantle oppressive systems, inequitable spaces and the whitewashed stories we’ve nurtured. As public academic Rachel Cargle writes, “Unless racism is addressed and eradicated in the places you are seeking to make ‘diverse,’ you are simply bringing people of color into violent and unsafe spaces.” What spaces within our beloved Williams community, within our hometowns, within our American context, need to be interrogated, disrupted and rebuilt to offer equity and justice?

I often meditate on Martin Luther King Jr.’s words: “An individual has not started living fully until they can rise above the narrow confines of individualistic concerns to the broader concerns of humanity. Every person must decide at some point, whether they will walk in the light of creative altruism or in the darkness of destructive selfishness. This is the judgment: Life’s most persistent and urgent question is, ‘What are you doing for others?’”

I cannot confirm the emotional state of social reverberations after Martin Luther King Jr. spoke those words, but I can deduce—given the similarities of our social context and political climate—that this was not a pep talk but an admonishment. A warning that the journey to equity, the road to justice, would require much more than good intentions, liberal idealism, woke tweets, fancy titles at elite colleges and universities or performative days and dialogues (slight shade to “Claiming Williams”).

King’s words were a critique of America and, by extension, of the Williams community—a revered, elite liberal arts college in America, a self-proclaimed bastion of liberalism in the Northeast. Reverend King was speaking to all of us grappling with the curious yet inevitable state of our country. The pursuit and promise of racial justice, equity and access for all requires much more than desire and tepid social media support. It requires deliberate, selfless investment to loudly agitate our institutional practices and challenge the problematic policies that drive them. And, for some, it will require us to check our own personal paradigms, assumptions and motivations.

To shift our problematic policies, to examine our political practices, warrants more than platitudes or statements birthed out of fear of public shaming, student critique or loss of alumni donations. It requires intentional, radical cогitation and disruption. It mandates facing the truth of our distorted historical, collective memory of how we have arrived at this point as an institution and as a country. The unchecked attitudes, assumptions and authority of whiteness have long positioned themselves as the status quo at Williams, leading to the informal and life-costing politicking, policing and too-often pain of Black and Brown bodies. How many of us have equipped ourselves with the stories of Williams’ first students of color, of the history of Black and Brown bodies navigating the Berkshires? How have we acknowledged and contended that the Black Lives Matter movement isn’t just warranted but that our identities as Ephs are tied to this pursuit of justice and freedom for Black, Brown and Indigenous communities?

Our longing to see justice and equity transpire at Williams, in our individual communities and in America will require us to get into what the late Congressman John Lewis called “good trouble.” This means we must be ready to sacrifice convenience, disrupt comfort and shake ourselves from complacency or complicity in our individual lives and collective commitment. Lewis said, “Ours is not the struggle of one day, one week or one year. Ours is not the struggle of one judicial appointment or presidential term. Ours is the struggle of a lifetime, or maybe even many lifetimes, and each one of us in every generation must do our part. Get in good trouble, necessary trouble, and help redeem the soul of America.”

Even in the midst of a pandemic, the cry for racial justice is loud. For those of you who have just arrived to the conversation and are exploring your personal and collective responses, it can feel overwhelming. But that does not mean you can or should opt out. Instead, you must ask yourself how to find your role as a “co-agitator,” a term that centers action and challenges comfort, complicity and convenience to demand ongoing disruption in the spaces you are called to.

As the nation continues to grapple with fractured understandings of community, I’d ask what values you plan to champion. Will you leverage your privilege to empower and affirm others? Or will you allow privilege, such as the privilege of being a purple cow, accolades and status, financial prosperity and family heritage, or a political party, to shield you from pain, suffering and injustice? The responsibility to reconcile injustice rests in the hands of community leaders, politicians, police officers and advocates, for sure. But it also rests in the hands of all of us who consider ourselves a part of the beloved Williams community.

Let’s ask ourselves how we will allow our history to shape our future. How will our present disrupt the stains of injustice written in our own history as Ephs? The call to be brokers of peace, disrupters of injustice and ambassadors of good trouble is not a moral plea—it is a declaration of necessity that was extended to us all when we accepted the challenge to “climb high, climb far.”
SHORTLY BEFORE THE PANDEMIC caused Williams to move to remote learning, I brought my American Material Culture seminar on a historical walking tour of the campus and local surroundings. We began at the Civil War soldiers’ monument in front of Griffin Hall, then progressed west down Route 2, winding up at the 1753 House, which sits in Field Park, inside the traffic circle in front of the old Williams Inn site. The park was quiet as we walked around this replica structure, installed during Williamstown’s bicentennial in 1953.

The house is a visible symbol of colonial beginnings and a memorial touchstone for heroic Anglo-American heritage narratives. It is a potent expression of what Jean O’Brien, a historian and citizen of the White Earth Ojibwe Nation, has described as a “vanishing” narrative. New England colonial mythologies have asserted that colonization unfolded in a largely uncontested manner across a lightly peopled or vacant wilderness, and that Native Americans eventually disappeared, being replaced permanently by Euro-colonial inhabitants.

Over the summer, Field Park was the staging ground for a recurring Black Lives Matter vigil. Some participants asked what the public markers there signify and value—and simultaneously erase and devalue—and began conversations about recognizing local Indigenous and Black histories. The dialogues unfolded amid a wave of national and global reckonings with monuments, in which activists have painted over memorials to the Confederacy, toppled statues valorizing Columbus, pulled down bronze likenesses of slave traders and called for fuller, more accurate accountings of the past.

Resurrecting Vanishing Narratives

By Christine DeLucia
What kind of monumental future might the 1753 House site have? What would it mean to make visible and honor multiple communities’ long-standing ties with this place? Following a series of formal and informal discussions, town residents have corresponded with the Stockbridge-Munsee Community Band of Mohican Indians, a federally recognized Tribal Nation that maintains deep connections to and caretaking for these ancestral homelands. Plans are underway to add Indigenous-language signage at Field Park that will mark it as MohHeConNuck, a historic and ongoing Native place. (Other relationships are also developing between the Tribal Nation and Williams, creating opportunities to meaningfully support Mohican heritage and historical interpretation initiatives.) All of these proposals are still in their early days. Yet what originated as a relatively small question about a sign has opened the door to much bigger possibilities.

For example, how might communities transform the memorials directly in front of the old Williams Inn site? A boulder with a plaque memorializes 18th-century English “homesteaders,” characterized as the “original settlers of West Hoosac,” and a “massacre” perpetrated by the “enemy in ambush”—the “allied foes” of “French and Indians.” Kappa Alpha fraternity members installed the memorial in 1916 as they sought, in the midst of World War I, to commemorate a more distant conflict. Nearby stands a worn metal sign erected by the Williamstown Historical Commission that recalls the “scalping of three soldiers” in 1756. These signs cast Native people as a monolithic, implacable foe and obstacle to colonization. They convey little about Indigenous coalitions’ efforts to exercise power and sovereignty across traditional homelands and to form strategic alliances amid the enormous upheavals and dispossession of colonialism. But these markers could—and arguably should—take on very different forms in the 21st century.

Nearby stands a worn metal sign erected by the Williamstown Historical Commission that recalls the “scalping of three soldiers” in 1756. These signs cast Native people as a monolithic, implacable foe and obstacle to colonization. They convey little about Indigenous coalitions’ efforts to exercise power and sovereignty across traditional homelands and to form strategic alliances amid the enormous upheavals and dispossession of colonialism. But these markers could—and arguably should—take on very different forms in the 21st century.

It is too early to tell what the future of memory may look like in Williamstown. I hope that any transformations that occur are not merely symbolic or cosmetic but instead are more fundamentally significant for how those who live here interact with complex pasts and their legacies.

Toward a More Perfect Williams

By Laura Moberg Lavoie and Aroop Mukharji

IN 2021, THE WILLIAMS SOCIETY OF ALUMNI (SoA)—the world’s oldest alumni association—celebrates its 200th birthday.

We are humbled and honored to lead more than 100 alumni volunteers and Williams staff in organizing a yearlong commemoration of this milestone in our shared history as Ephs. We stand at the crossroads between the SoA’s storied past and its unfurling future.

The bicentennial is an opportunity to celebrate our colorful history and to honor the bonds that unite Williams alumni with one another, transcending geography and generations. It has long been envisioned as an inclusive enterprise to highlight the power of our Eph family and our ages-old tradition of supporting one another. But now, as 2020 comes to a close with all of our lives upended, this work takes on sharper focus. Our bicentennial year will arrive in the context of a pandemic and a charged, vital national conversation about race, racism and anti-racism. The conversation is complex. Each of our lived experiences is uniquely our own but also part of the greater story of what Williams, and thereby the SoA, has been—and what they will become.

In this light, we share parts of our own stories.

I, Aroop, had a lovely and supportive childhood in Kansas City. I witnessed and experienced a few racist incidents (“At least I am the right color,” “You cannot sit with us”), but I never thought much of them at the time. The stereotyping of Indian-Americans and Indian culture (“Your house smells weird,” “Your food looks like vomit”) also felt innocuous. I think of those experiences now in a different light. Subconsciously, and deepened by pop culture, they engendered a feeling of flaw.

Williams was the first place I fully began to take pride in my identity—as an Indian-American, as a child of immigrants, as a Kansas. Pride in the darkness of my skin. That was largely because of the loving and accepting community at the college, which reinforced my family and friends. But that process was also
complicated and uneven. Even at Williams, there were shortcomings: religious and racial epithets scrawled on dorm dry-erase boards; a Facebook group started by students called “Finish your drink, there are sober kids in India;” and so on. Poignant reminders that despite how far we’ve come, we still have a ways to go.

For me, Laura, 2020 stirs in me forces that have quietly shaped my entire life. I am a half-Japanese woman. The most common question I’ve been asked throughout my life is, “What are you?” as people try to decipher my heritage. One of my earliest childhood memories is bewilderment at hearing older boys scream, “Chinese a@$#$#@$” and belatedly realizing they were referring to me. My Williams application essay was about being labeled “the white girl on the bus”—as a member of one of the country’s oldest voluntary desegregation programs, I commuted from my middle-class, inner-city neighborhood in Rochester, N.Y., to my almost-all-white suburban high school.

My identity has always been a complicated experience of feeling and being “other” while being granted access to in-group spaces where I don’t always feel I belong. During my freshman year at Williams, I had a friend demand to know why I had not “told him” I was Asian; senior year, I was one of two non-Black singers in the Williams Gospel Choir and got invited to parties at Rice House—a majority-minority space that white students rarely, if ever, entered. At Williams, I struggled to find where I fit, but eventually I came to see my label of “other” as a gift in my ongoing quest for belonging.

These are snippets of our stories—two among a multitude that we hope Ephs from all walks of life will bring to light during the Society of Alumni bicentennial, which begins in January. Our goal is to honor what is honorable in our history—and there is much. Our aim is to shed light on areas where progress must be made—and there are many. Our hope is to help create an alumni community we all can call home.

By sharing our individual experiences and by channeling our collective effort for good, the Society of Alumni can continue striving together toward a more perfect Williams.

You can share your story and learn more about the bicentennial at alumni.williams.edu/200.

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Protecting the Food Insecure

By Marion Min-Barron

IN MY WILLIAMS CLASS INTERNATIONAL NUTRITION, I show my students a photograph of about a dozen Rohingya refugee children standing in line waiting for food. The image was taken in Cox’s Bazar, Bangladesh, several years ago, and what’s chilling about the image in today’s context is not necessarily the slight child frames but rather how close they all are to one another. The possibilities of social distancing or self-quarantining in population-dense refugee camps are slim, and they bring to light the myriad challenges Covid-19 presents to the food insecure.

This pandemic has heightened questions of food insecurity across the globe, but in resource-limited settings—particularly those in civil war or conflict, where malnutrition rates were already unacceptably high—the potential effects are magnified. Actors at all levels, from national health ministries to community health workers, are being forced to decide between Covid-19 containment measures and food-access programs. Even before the pandemic began, 2020 was estimated to usher in one of the worst food crises in years. Now, food systems are severely disrupted as many countries enter economic recessions and labor markets suffer from movement restrictions. Some experts predict that if no policy changes are made, there will be multiple famines in coming years.

For now, some countries have worked to keep global food and agricultural pathways open. The goal is to avoid the mistakes that triggered the 2008 Food Price Crisis, when increasing oil prices and demand for biofuel led to trade shocks and the near doubling of wheat and rice prices around the world. That, in turn, helped trigger skyrocketing malnutrition rates among already vulnerable populations. Yet despite efforts to keep food prices more stable, blanket public health restrictions, such as lockdowns, restaurant closings and curfews, have led to labor shortages and disruptions in both food supply and demand chains. Nutrient-dense foods, such as fruits and vegetables, have become not only scarce but also out of reach for those families most in need.

As Covid-19 continues to degenerate economies, humanitarian agencies are pivoting away from emergency disease containment and toward more sustainable, livelihood-based approaches to elevating food security, such as cash transfers. This is when organizations like the World Food Programme provide vulnerable populations with money to meet their basic needs. Cash transfers are logistically easier to deliver than food, can empower people to make choices and give a needed boost to local economies, leading experts to see them as one of the most promising ways to end food insecurity. Accurate and effective targeting of these approaches, however, rests on access to reliable income-tracking programs to know who is most in need.

In the time of Covid-19, both governmental and non-governmental agencies are finding new ways to access this necessary data, such as making income estimates from telephone and mobile-usage surveys.

The amount of innovation and technology that has emerged from this pandemic has provided insights into how to create a more resilient food system, giving us hope that, though the challenges we’re facing are large and, in some ways, new, they are not necessarily impossible to overcome.
Leaving the World Behind

By Christopher Nugent

THE MEDIEVAL CHINESE POET Tao Yuanming was a minor clerk during the Eastern Jin dynasty. Good enough work if you could get it, but Tao had the nagging feeling this was not who he was meant to be. In his poem “Returning to Dwell in Gardens and Fields,” he writes:

My youth felt no comfort in common things,
by my nature I clung to mountains and hills.
I erred and fell in the snares of dust
and was away thirteen years in all.
The caged bird yearns for its former woods,
fish in a pool yearns for long-ago deeps.
Clearing scrub at the edge of the southern moors,
I stay plain by returning to gardens and fields.

Tao left his post and became a farmer: a return to his true self. His poems planning it, carrying it out and facing its sometimes dire consequences—continue to be read today by those who dream of leaving everything behind for a simpler life. Over the centuries Tao became one of China’s most celebrated poets, but he was first famous for being a recluse. In traditional China, a recluse need not be alone. Tao wrote of the people in his village with whom he passed the time, often while sharing some ale. He was rejecting not society itself but a particular role in it that he did not want to play.

In contrast, for the early Christian ascetic St. Antony, solitude was crucial. He sealed himself in a cave for 20 years to do battle with the demons that tormented him and tempted him to abandon his faith. Clad in a hair shirt, rarely eating and never bathing, he chose a mode of reclusion utterly different from Tao’s and surely less fun. But God was watching and rewarded Antony’s perseverance, promising, “I will be your helper forever, and I will make you famous everywhere.”

My students study these contrasting attitudes in my tutorial, Leaving the World Behind: The Literature of Hermits and Recluses, which I taught for the second time this past spring. I want to show students that there are alternatives to today’s near-constant connectivity, that for thousands of years people have sought to escape or at least hide from society, if only for short periods, to better understand themselves and their place in the world. I want them to see how reclusion can be revelatory.

Yet in all of the cases we study, reclusion was a choice. When we learned in March the whole college would experience reclusion, and not by choice, one of the students jokingly offered an action movie cliché: “This is what we’ve been training for!” The texts we had been reading did indeed provide models for dealing with what was to come; they could help us think about these experiences with a deeper sense of historical understanding. But my students’ own experiences of isolation, anxiety and, sometimes, profound loss were unique. Maybe they had been training for this, but it was not at all what they had signed up for.

I hope that one day soon we will again see solitude as something we seek out when we feel its pull, rather than something we find forced upon us.

burn

By Bret Hairston

for the Black princess
caught in ivory
towers for the Black
pauper girl selling
small tender matches
for the Black baby
girl born anew
there's no prince

no one arrives on
horseback prepared for
protection and care
to climb their hair so
long so short so
kinky so loose so
good for climbing the
lone tower that brings
solitude

no one comes for Black
rapunzel even though
her hair is better
for scaling great heights
because to be Black
is no fucking
fairy tale

but for the Black girl
hiding away in
solitude from the
world from the hungry
hands from greedy eyes
from consuming mouths
ready to eat
them alive

for the Black girls
i am too late to
save

know that i will burn
kingdoms and cities
ivory and stone
fast food joints and stores
down to the ground

i will burn it all
to the ground
in your name.
WHERE ARE WE NOW? That question was the starting point for a Williams Magazine interview that Neil Roberts, chair and professor of Africana studies at Williams, conducted in August with Juliet Hooker ’94, professor of political science at Brown University. Hooker, originally from the Caribbean coast of Nicaragua, first came to the U.S. to attend Williams. Roberts has family roots on the Caribbean island of Jamaica. Both are political theorists who had to blaze their own paths in the study of Latin American and Caribbean political thought during and after graduate school, where the focus was primarily on Western thinkers. And both are now distinguished scholars in their field, having helped to bring a hemispheric perspective to the study of political theory. They met via videoconference to discuss how their work impacts and is impacted by a country and world now rocked by a pandemic and—as ever—divided by racial inequity and injustice.

NEIL ROBERTS: I’d like to try to make sense of the current mass uprisings against racial injustice in the U.S., and to discuss the catalyst effect they have had across the country and across the world, which has put the Movement for Black Lives front and center. What do you believe is the significance of the movement, particularly now?

JULIET HOOKER: It’s important to recognize the magnitude of the losses brought by this pandemic and the fact that this is the backdrop against which the current mobilizations for racial justice are taking place. The rhythms of people’s lives have been disrupted, and the pandemic has exposed systemic, structural inequalities in all aspects of American life. Add to this the fact that the pandemic has not impacted all racial and socioeconomic groups the same—Black, Latinx and Native American folks have been disproportionately affected. This loss was ongoing before the mobilizations over the killings of Breonna Taylor, George Floyd and many others. Yet the Movement for Black Lives predates these most recent protests. It comes on the scene with the Ferguson protests after the death of Michael Brown [in 2014]. They changed the way people think about policing, and that didn’t happen overnight. It didn’t happen because of the Floyd protests. The Floyd
Brown University
Political Science
Professor Juliet Hooker ’94 blazed a path in American and Caribbean political thought during graduate school and in her career.
protests happened because of this ongoing organizing work, just as police killings have been ongoing. Attention is now shining on the problem of police violence as state violence and on how it connects to other forms of racial injustice. Addressing police violence doesn’t simply mean reforming the police but really trying to grapple systematically with racial injustice. For me, the significance of the Movement for Black Lives is our ability to reframe the conversation to a broader one about what racial justice entails. What would it mean to invest in Black communities, in Black lives, as opposed to simply investing in policing? We’re reckoning with the fact that we live in a society still deeply riven by racism and that it’s not a superficial, self-contained problem that we can address by reforming one institution.

NR: How can we make sense of this reckoning when trying to figure out not only issues of Black life but also Black death? There’s a belief that the United States was founded on anti-Black racism, and if that is historically the case, then the question becomes, can we ever get out of that racist system? There is a pessimism about it being possible to systematically unsettle and restructure polities founded as *Herrenvolk* racial states. [Ed. note: *The German term, meaning “master race,” pertains to forms of rule based on racial hierarchy.*] While I believe it is possible, there is evidence that leads to Afro-pessimism. I think there are lessons, both wonderful and challenging, [coming from] outside the U.S., that might have ramifications for what’s going on here now. How does your scholarship help us to stretch our imaginations?

JH: Since the era of enslavement, of independence, there have been organized Black and Indigenous movements in Latin America against racism, struggling for racial justice, even if they weren’t always visible or acknowledged by national elites. We have to avoid the temptation of thinking that there is a manual for how to overcome racism in, say, three simple steps—as though if we read a certain book, we’re all going to know how to become anti-racists. Angela Davis said that we’re working for a goal we may not achieve in our lifetimes. Yet you have to work for it. We’re not going to dismantle a system overnight, especially one that was centuries in the making. But we have to keep doing that work.

NR: Your important research speaks to the need to think about race and racism hemispherically. Figures such as Frederick Douglass, often framed as the quintessential American thinker, never saw himself only in U.S. national terms. Where can we look for models of what to do and not do in struggles for racial justice, equality and freedom?

JH: Our resources include the folks who came before us who have been doing that work, some in conditions that seem even more discouraging than ours. I take inspiration from the archive of Black activists and thinkers and intellectuals who have been trying to dismantle white supremacy for generations. You mention Frederick Douglass, who was born a slave and who helped bring about abolition and emancipation in the United States, even if that didn’t end up leading to full freedom. In Latin America, meanwhile, the mythology is that there’s no racism. Because there is a history of racial mixture, people take that to mean that we don’t see skin color. But nothing could be further from the case. Latin American societies are pigmentocracies. That is, the closer you are to whiteness, the more advantaged you are, and the farther away you are from it, the more you tend to be at the bottom of the social, political and economic order. In Latin America, societies deny racism and argue that taking race into account is itself racism. That’s why grappling with Latin American examples is so instructive for this moment in the U.S. It points to the idea that simply trying to be post-racial is not going to solve the problems of white supremacy and racial inequality. The question becomes, how do you tackle historic and ongoing racial injustice when a large percentage of the population is invested in thinking that racism is no longer a problem?

NR: Your remarks lead to me to reflect on your book *Race and the Politics of Solidarity*. Could you discuss that work and its arguably ongoing significance?

JH: My first book was published in January 2009, right after Barack Obama was inaugurated as president. In it I argue that we tend to believe in political solidarity—this idea that we have care and concern for other citizens, which is how we make decisions in common for the good of all. But in fact race has shaped and distorted political solidarity, so instead we have what I call racialized solidarity. Race impedes us from seeing people who are racial others as equal citizens who deserve the same level of care and concern. For instance, I saw a poll in late August that said that something like 60 percent of Republicans thought that upwards of 170,000 deaths from coronavirus is an acceptable level of loss. My question is, would that be acceptable if those losses were mostly white Americans from red states? Or is it acceptable because they’re seen as racial others, folks that we don’t see, know or have close ties with? A central problem for democratic politics is this question of how we come to see people we think of as “different” as deserving the same amount of care and concern that we reserve for those we see as “like us.” But when the book appeared, we had just elected the first Black president, and the reaction was, “Hmm, are you sure about that? Haven’t we moved past race?” It’s hard to remember now, but in 2008, 2009, there was this sense that the U.S. had solved racism. We had elected a nonwhite person. Of course, Obama’s election was followed by this enormous
Today people are literally putting their lives on the line by protesting in the middle of the pandemic.
Promises Broken

By Joy James

THE PUBLIC’S GROWING AWARENESS following U.S. police killings of unarmed Black Americans—among them George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery and Breonna Taylor—have brought greater attention to abolitionism, a centuries-old movement in opposition to the exploitation and captivity of African and African-diasporic people. It comes as no surprise that the concept of prison and police abolition has again gained traction, yet we would be wise to remember that with every wave of mutating racist oppression since the end of slavery, American politicians have made—and broken—abolitionist promises. Perhaps it would help today’s movement to understand abolition’s long history.

Let’s begin with the Civil War, where some 200,000 Black Americans fought to ensure the North’s victory and to preserve the Union. On Jan. 16, 1865, Union Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman promised some freed families 40 acres and a mule. Yet Andrew Johnson, first as Abraham Lincoln’s vice president and later as the 17th American president, ensured that promissory note was abrogated. Instead, he courted Confederates and helped kill Black freedom by instituting a racial terror that became economically profitable to whites through lynching, convict prison leasing and sharecropping.

Almost 100 years later, activists engaged in what the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. called a “Second Reconstruction” and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) called a “Second Civil War.” The abolitionist goal was to end the terrors of Jim Crow segregation. Critical race theorist Derrick Bell argues that “interest convergence” determined civil rights gains. That is to say, the needs of the disenfranchised had to align with the needs of elites. The John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson administrations needed mass nonviolent protests to subside in order to stabilize their administrations, so they pushed for reforms, yes. Yet the Kennedy and Johnson administrations also controlled the agenda. At the historic August 1963 March on Washington, the Kennedy administration told SNCC leader John Lewis (who died this past July after serving three decades in Congress) to tone down his speech and other speakers not to demand full employment at living wages. They demanded that Black women not speak on stage. A month later, Klansmen planted a bomb in the women’s restroom at the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Ala., killing four Black girls.

When King found the courage to condemn predatory capitalism as an accelerant to dire poverty and the war in Vietnam as violent imperialism, promises of support from liberal foundations and funders, as well as from Black elites, dissipated. Uprisings followed King’s assassination, and, in the wake of abolitionist protests to stop the killing of Black Americans, law-and-order candidate Richard Nixon was elected to the U.S. presidency. His administration marketed the “war on drugs” to cover his anti-abolitionist campaigns against those protestors, and the war on drugs became a catalyst for the U.S. to lead the world in mass incarceration, as it does today.

As we see, no American president has enacted promissory notes to secure our rights to live in a nonracial democracy. Perhaps the best promissory note we could collect today would be for government not to ratchet violence and refuse to repurpose streets and prisons as display cases for authoritarian dominance. Abolitionism never promised a rose garden. Still, we could do with fewer bloody thorns as we seek to build a just society.
Learning from Reconstruction

By Robert D. Bland

In 1967, the historian Lerone Bennett Jr. wrote, “Reconstruction in all its various facets was a supreme lesson for America, the right reading of which might still mark a turning point in our history.” Bennett’s reflection on the Reconstruction era, the post-Civil War struggle to reshape the United States into a biracial democracy, had a special resonance in the midst of the Black Freedom Struggle of the 1960s. Like the 1860s, a grassroots movement called on the federal government to protect the basic rights of its citizens and prosecute domestic terrorists who enacted horrific violence in the name of white supremacy. In using his platform as an editor of Ebony magazine, Bennett was part of a cohort of historians and public scholars who popularized the idea that the civil rights movement constituted a “Second Reconstruction.”

As the nation now turns its attention toward the killing of unarmed Black citizens at the hands of law enforcement, a series of perspicuous attacks on democratic institutions and a growing white-identitarian movement, civil rights leaders, scholars and activists have once again turned to the road map of past reconstructions.

“Nothing less than a ‘Third Reconstruction’ holds the promise of healing our nation’s wounds and birthing a better future for all,” argues the Rev. William Barber II, leader of the Christian progressive movement Moral Mondays.

“Today, another Reconstruction is needed to avoid wasting the promise of its predecessors,” writes Brooklyn Law Professor Wilfred Codrington III.

Reflecting a soberly optimistic interpretation of the American past, the chorus of progressive voices seeking a usable past in the original Reconstruction era see the long arc of justice bending toward freedom—but only if ordinary citizens remain vigilant.

But the ongoing quest for another Reconstruction remains elusive. Seeing the dual promise of the state pursuing and protecting civil rights goals and biracial coalition organizing at the local level, proponents of the Third Reconstruction lose sight of how the first and second Reconstructions were both undone by violence, political infighting and federal neglect. Historian C. Vann Woodward, who first described the promise of the civil rights movement as a Second Reconstruction in 1955, expressed a deep pessimism about the movement a decade later. “Congress wiping its hands of the whole cause, LBJ backtracking, backlash lashing, Kluxers kluxing, G. Wallace booming,” Woodward remarked. “All the classic [1877] signals are up.” In 1972, Parren Mitchell, the first African American congressman elected in the state of Maryland, observed, “I think we are closer to the Reconstruction period more than ever now” after witnessing a decline in Black elected officials since the late 1960s.

More than focusing on the cloud over the silver lining, Woodward and Parren force us to observe the bitter lesson that accompanies the promise of the post-Civil War era. Change is possible, but the work of sustaining these movements for Black lives was incredibly difficult in the past and will remain a monumental task going forward. Once again, we find ourselves at a turning point in our history, and which way our society goes from here will be determined by what lessons we have learned from Reconstruction.
Unsafe at Home

By Owen Thompson

MUCH OF MY RESEARCH and teaching focuses on policies affecting high-poverty populations, especially children. To state the obvious, the problems encountered by low-income children and families due to the Covid-19 pandemic are especially acute. School closures in the spring increased low-income children’s exposure to often unstable home environments and reduced their access to basic nutrition, in addition to large academic losses, and these disruptions will extend into the fall for many children. Widespread employment reductions have pushed many lower-income families into food insecurity or homelessness. And data reveal that disadvantaged populations are more likely to contract or die from Covid-19 in addition to disproportionately suffering its economic consequences.

In thinking about U.S. social policy, I find it useful to distinguish between problems that arise from specific policy failures and problems that arise from poverty more generally. For example, our failure to build a sufficient amount of housing in places where people want to live may cause a teacher in San Francisco making $70,000 a year to be unable to afford an apartment. This is a failure of housing policy. Conversely, a family in Milwaukee making $15,000 a year may also find it difficult to afford housing, but the main issue is not as much a failure to build housing as it is poverty itself. Many families are simply too poor to afford basic quality housing, even when it is widely available and modestly priced.

Analogously, I classify many of the problems currently being encountered by lower-income populations not as pandemic problems that need to be addressed through public health interventions, although such interventions are clearly essential in general. Rather, they are poverty problems deriving from the fact that our social and political institutions have created a baseline scenario in which large numbers of children and families live on a knife’s edge of abject material deprivation.

The types of antipoverty and social safety net programs that I personally favor obviously do not provide immunity from viruses, and countries with robust social welfare policies like Sweden and Canada have not been spared from significant Covid-19 infections or mortality. In this sense, I may be interpreting the pandemic as confirmation that all of my tangentially related, pre-existing policy opinions were correct.

Yet I do think it is germane that other rich countries started this pandemic with far fewer poor people than the U.S. and had institutions that did not make access to health care, food or housing largely conditional on one’s ability to pay for them. These institutions cannot prevent pandemics, but they can surely mitigate the resulting human suffering, and I wish we had more of them right now.
Experience and Expectation

By Thomas Kohut

Many of us have been feeling unsettled in recent months. A framework that I use and that I teach my students to use to empathize with and understand people of the past might help us understand ourselves and our own state of bewilderment in the face of Covid-19.

Historian and philosopher Reinhart Koselleck developed two concepts applicable to historians’ use of empathy. In empathizing with past people, we seek to reconstruct what Koselleck called their “space of experience” and “horizon of expectation.” “Space of experience” characterizes the historical subjects’ past as it was alive in them. “Horizon of expectation” characterizes the historical subjects’ hopes, fears and sense of what will come in the future. Experience and expectation exist only in the moment and are constantly changing. Interplay between experience and expectation as they change over time produces change in history.

We can use space of experience and horizon of expectation to articulate and understand the pandemic’s traumatic impact on us. Given its unprecedented nature, we cannot integrate Covid-19 into our space of experience—nothing from our past has prepared us to understand this pandemic. Given our uncertainty about its future course, we also cannot integrate Covid-19 into our horizon of expectation. We may have hopes (for a vaccine) or fears (that lockdowns will never end), but we currently lack the ability to form realistic expectations about the future. That’s disquieting.

Koselleck would likely have understood why. He explained that the interplay between space of experience and horizon of expectation helps us make sense of the world and then, having made sense of it, to act in it. But in the time of Covid-19, we are cognitively and emotionally disoriented, unable to situate the virus in our sense of the past or the future. Unable to integrate Covid-19 into our experience or expectation, we are left feeling confused and adrift.

What’s more, this disorientation is not unique to us as individuals; it’s shared by the culture of which we are a part. Under normal circumstances, knowing that we are not alone alleviates our suffering. Here, however, the fact that everyone else is equally unable to integrate the virus into their experience or expectation actually increases our sense of personal disorientation.

With the passage of time, as the virus acquires a history and a trajectory for us, we may develop a space of experience and a horizon of expectation that includes Covid-19.

On the World’s End

By Jacqueline Hidalgo

This is not the apocalypse I was promised. I’ve spent years reading about persistent and diverse reappearances of apocalyptic imaginations, so I did not think any vision of the apocalypse would surprise me. Yet I’m still amused by some internet reflections circulating today that compare the apocalypses of our imaginations with lived experiences of 2020. One, for instance, describes how the expectation was fighting zombies, but instead we’re trapped at home with no toilet paper. This makes light of what has been a life-and-death struggle for so many, but I understand the appeal of using an apocalyptic frame for the strange times we’re living in.

The word “apocalypse” (Greek for “revelation” or “unveiling”) comes from the last book of the Christian biblical canon. The Book of Revelation contains complex visions of heaven, cosmic war, the end of the world and the dawn of a new era. Generally dating its composition to between 65 C.E. and 95 C.E., some scholars situate this text as a ritually performed product of Jewish communities in the eastern Mediterranean grappling with the social disruption after imperial Rome quashed
a Jewish revolt and destroyed the Jerusalem temple in 70 C.E. When crafting The Book of Revelation, they created a text that depicted the end of the world; it was meant to reveal truths that Roman domination had obscured.

The latter part of The Book of Revelation tells of the violent destruction of Babylon, the empire that destroyed the first temple in Jerusalem in 587 B.C.E. Babylon’s gruesome ruination exposes the violence that Rome enacted to maintain its reign. Revelation lays bare experiences of social disarray even as imperial Rome asserted the era was one of order and peace.

The destruction of Babylon, a metaphor that so thinly disguised Rome that anyone reading or hearing this text in the first century would have recognized it, also promises an end to Roman rule. Where Rome claims to have divine sanction to rule the earth eternally, ancient Jewish readers of Revelation affirmed that such power only belonged to God. Thus, as Babylon was destroyed, so too would be Roman power—and a new Jerusalem would descend from heaven.

It can be easy to draw connections between this interpretation of Revelation and our own moment. The violence of anti-Black racism and the limits of U.S. power have been exposed this year in police assassinations of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Tony McDade and so many others; in police violence against protesters this past summer; and in the racially, ethnically and economically disproportionate death toll of Covid-19. The failings of our social order seem more apparent, and many people hope that some parts of this world will pass away while others cry for a new world to come.

Imaginings of the apocalypse, like our lived experience today, share the feeling that the world no longer makes sense. Dominant regimes don’t align with our realities, buried truths that minoritized populations have long known are finally surfacing, and we cannot escape the violence and unnecessary death structuring the daily life of so many. Apocalypse as a framework reflects our quest to make meaning, and it serves a yearning to assert a truth behind the veil once and for all.

This moment might not be the apocalypse I was promised, but—despite millennia of apocalyptic visions—I remember that the world hasn’t ended yet.

“THE WHOLE THING is implausible,” E.B. White wrote of New York City during the sweltering summer of 1948. “By rights New York should have destroyed itself long ago”—by fire, or the failure of a vital supply line or a plague carried in through the port. Yet the city survived, White wrote in his essay “Here is New York,” because it “makes up for its hazards and deficiencies by supplying its citizens with … the sense of belonging to something unique, cosmopolitan, mighty and unparalleled.”

White’s famous evocation captured the spirit of postwar New York: a city of remarkable self-confidence tinged with a measure of existential dread. The following decades put that confidence to the test. As residents and businesses spread into the suburbs and departed for the Sun Belt, New York City struggled with crime, crumbling services and the threat of financial insolvency. For the first time in its modern history, more people wanted to leave the city than move to it. By the late 1970s, New York seemed on the edge of collapse. “Here is New York” was out; Escape from New York was in.

Soon the production of knowledge, ideas and services supplanted the production of goods as the core economic function of major cities, and New York’s density became a tremendous asset. Wall Street, the creative economy and the tourism industry grew rapidly, providing the fiscal means for New York to restore its great democratic institutions, such as the subway and city parks. Immigrants from around the globe streamed in, revitalizing depopulated neighborhoods, providing the labor that drove economic revival and, sociologists believe, helping to bring down the crime rate.

But the fruits of New York’s recovery were distributed unequally. The city’s poverty rate is higher today than it was in the mid-1970s. New York’s schools are among the most segregated in the nation. And while affluent neighborhoods enjoy new public amenities like the High Line and Brooklyn Bridge Park, public housing has fallen into disrepair and hospitals continue to close.

The coronavirus crisis has pulled off New York’s mask. When federal, state and local leaders failed to respond to the pandemic quickly enough, the costs fell on impoverished and working-class Black and Latinx New Yorkers who were unable to leave the city or work remotely. These populations are, on account of the city’s long history of environmental racism, more likely to suffer comorbidities such as asthma and most vulnerable to cutbacks in public services. In Manhattan, where household incomes can drop from more than $130,000 to less than $17,000 in the course of a few subway stops, the case rate for white residents was about 64 per 10,000; among Black residents, it was 163 per 10,000.

Because it has struck at so many aspects of city life, this crisis poses as great a challenge to New York as any in its history. The years ahead will be difficult as political leaders seek to address the damage with diminished resources. New York will rebound, because what White wrote in the wake of another great crisis remains true: New York shouldn’t work, and yet somehow it does. The question now is whether this crisis will rekindle the city’s democratic aspirations or further entrench its deep inequalities.
During times of great morbidity, people fear what the new circumstances may forebode about the future, particularly when conflicts and disasters exacerbate social anxieties and are not met with a united effort. Confronted with a crisis we do not understand and cannot quickly control, we all too often resort to scapegoating vulnerable communities—ones that typically have long been persecuted—to explain our misfortune and alleviate our powerlessness.

Disease caused by pathogens invisible to the naked eye becomes an “invisible enemy” brought by “foreigners” from “dangerous” parts of the world. The 14th century Bubonic plague pandemic in Europe was blamed on the Jewish population. Irish immigrants fleeing the Great Hunger of the 1850s were blamed for the spread of typhoid in America. When cases of the plague were reported in San Francisco in 1900, Chinese immigrants were seen as the cause, consistent with the fears of the “Yellow Peril.” Humans often racialize and nationalize diseases, even though science eventually shows that race and national boundaries rarely have anything to do with the disease in question.

The 1918 influenza pandemic is the closest historical comparison we have to Covid-19. The first documented case appeared in Kansas before spreading to Europe with American soldiers in the closing period of WWI. It then returned to the U.S. with troops coming home. Mislabeled the “Spanish flu” simply because Spain was one of the first countries to confirm its existence, its perceived “foreign” origins added to the xenophobia in America that contributed to the rise of eugenics and the framing of the 1924 Immigration Act, which curtailed immigration from Eastern and Southern Europe and most of Asia.

Today it is believed that the novel coronavirus originated in China. In response, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo remarked, “China has a history of infecting the world” and insisted that the disease be called the “Wuhan
Responding to the Virus

By Lois Banta

IT SEEMS EVERYONE is asking how a tiny snippet of RNA can bring the world to its knees. From an infectious disease perspective, the real question is: How did we get through 102 years since the last outbreak of such global proportions? One answer, of course, is vaccines. A second is a half-century of public and private investment in basic research and epidemiological infrastructure.

When I teach about infectious disease and vaccination strategies, my students and I work through a seductively gamelike simulation of an intentional smallpox release in a medium-sized city. The data reveal a clear trade-off: either effective vaccination or “withdrawal to home” are the only winning strategies.

And so the race for a Covid-19 vaccine is on. Building on years of prior work, researchers went from viral genome sequence to injecting a candidate vaccine into a human volunteer in nine weeks rather than the typical nine-plus years. Multiple possible vaccines are now in clinical trials. But more potential trade-offs await us.

The costs of not getting this vaccine and its rollout right are staggering. Should we try to stack the odds in our favor by leapfrogging over normal testing protocols and challenge human volunteers with controlled exposure to the live virus after administering a candidate vaccine? Or should we follow more cautious, perhaps safer, paths, while prolonging the pain of shuttered economies and social upheaval?

Vaccine development is built on millions of hours of basic research—grad students and post-docs in labs around the globe, investigating phenomena whose significance may not be immediately obvious. They use genomic tools developed to help us understand evolutionary relationships among obscure critters or proteins to trace the global transmission and vulnerabilities of a virus with a universally recognizable name.

In the spring, international teams of researchers analyzed tens of thousands of sequences from each of thousands of individual nasal cavity and lung cells to figure out which specific cells have the appropriate constellation of receptors and accessory proteins to harbor a virus that has made a mockery of our best (and worst) laid plans.

The computational and biological technologies that enabled these analyses were only a twinkle in their developers’ eyes 30 years ago, when I was a Ph.D. student sequencing five short bits of yeast DNA at a time. But without a sustained commitment to basic as well as applied research over that time span, the current studies would have been inconceivable.

Researchers estimate that SARS-CoV-2 may have diverged from its closest known relative, found in a bat from Yunnan Province in China, 40 to 70 years ago. In the virus’s evolutionary journey, its ancestors appear to have made undetected pit stops in pangolins and probably people. As we deal with today’s crisis, we also need to lay the groundwork to respond to the virus of tomorrow, one that is evolving right now, perhaps through a critter.
“I Can’t Breathe”—
A Black National Anthem

By Drea Finley

"I can't breathe" is the national anthem of Black folks,
Oh say didn't you know?

With knees on our necks—George Floyd buried in the cement of our nation's platitudes where Derek Chauvin
bared the weight of his white cop soul—
duty to protect and serve
the land of the free
and home of the brave

"I can't breathe," is the national anthem of Black folks,
Oh say didn't you know?

Where forced entries into mistaken homes and hallways cost Breonna Taylor her Black woman soul.

"I can't breathe," is the national anthem of Black folks,
Oh say didn't you know?

Where Ahmaud Arbery, Eric Garner, Mike Brown, Trayvon Martin, Sandra Bland, Tamir Rice, Rayshard Brooks, Tony McDade, Elijah McClain
May we say their names and God rest their beautiful Black souls.

"I can't breathe," is the national anthem of Black folks,
Oh say didn't you know?

We witnessed a modern-day lynching as we watched the life leave the body of George Floyd's soul…

"I can't breathe," is the national anthem of Black folks,
Oh say didn't you know?

And yet from our Black bodies the greatest of creations were built,
this very land upon which you stand
came from an ancestral heritage that breeds white guilt.

With a history so rich,
There's no wonder as to why we are hunted

But the cry of our people is an ache that will bleed
For so long you weren't listening…

"I can't breathe,"
is the national anthem of Black folks,
Oh say, didn't you know?
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May we say their names and God rest their beautiful Black souls.
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