Politics in the post-Trump era

Students and alumni fight for climate justice

A semester unlike any other
The Power of Narrative

“This is nowhere near the whole story.”

I was reminded of that fact in late March, during a virtual conference hosted by Boston University, where historian and writer Jelani Cobb was discussing what he called the “particular power” of narrative.

“We make sense of the world through narrative,” Cobb said. “We create a beginning, middle and end of a set of events and, through that beginning, middle and end, [we] convey values, ideas, perspectives about the world we’re inhabiting.”

At the time, we were deep in the process of developing this issue of Williams Magazine. Building on the success of the fall magazine, we cast a wide net to students, faculty, staff and alumni—never expecting that, once again, so many would graciously answer our call to share their scholarship and their ideas, their struggles and their experiences, to help us make sense of the times.

As we did in the fall, we offered writers the emotional and intellectual space to share what was in their hearts and minds. And yet the magazine you now hold in your hands is nowhere near the whole story. Nor is it an unvarnished story. From our selection of writers to their choice of topic and words, from the order in which stories appear to how illustrators and photographers bring them to life, narrative storytelling involves decisions that manifest the conscious and unconscious biases of all the people involved at every step of the process.

In his address, Cobb spoke of another complication of narrative storytelling: “Even in our best strivings, there are questions we don’t ask, and it’s in the unasked questions that we wind up creating a perspective by omission, even if we don’t want to create one by commission.”

While we can never eliminate any of these imperfections, acknowledging them helps blunt their power to exclude. So, too, does expanding the kinds of stories we tell and who tells them. As we embrace the diversity of thought and experience of Williams’ many communities, let us always strive to ask as many questions as we can—and appreciate the answers we receive.

Amy T. Lovett, Editor-in-Chief
On the surface, Williams looks different in 2021 from the way it did in 1921 or 1821. But something essential has been retained from one era to the next. A flame was kept, a torch passed, and we’re its latest keepers.

Our job is to carry the light forward through new and sometimes challenging times so that we can pass it on, in full flame, to our successors.

What is that light? It’s the college’s mission to support the intellectual and personal development of our students and thereby nurture the entire Williams community. Every aspect of that work—our courses, co-curricular opportunities, residence life programs, even alumni programming—should contribute to a learning environment in which ideas are explored, scholarship developed and character and friendships forged.

How we do this work evolves over time and with intention, as it always has. One example of this principle is the curriculum. For almost the first half of Williams’ existence, disciplines such as economics and political science were unknown. Today, these fields and even “newer” ones like computer science and bioinformatics are staples of the curriculum. As educational torchbearers, it is incumbent upon us to ask: What areas of knowledge emerging today are likely to become core subjects for the next generation of students?

Residence life is another example of planned evolution. Williams’ very first students lived in local boarding houses, not on campus. Over the course of more than two centuries, we’ve constructed buildings and programs to support co-education, focus on first-year life and even create quiet spaces (a lesser-known innovation). Today, where and how students live is just as important to their development, and just as worthy of our attention, as their curricular life. As we look to the future, we must ask: How do we ensure that an ever-evolving student body thrives in a world whose contours are not yet known?

Such changes are essential—but they must be evolutions, not revolutions. And they must be planned in ways that stay true to our mission and values.

This work is never over, nor should it be. As you know, we’ve undertaken a strategic planning process that asks, in part, what a great residential liberal arts education should look like for the decades to come, so that we can sustain the spark that makes Williams Williams.

A number of ideas about how we might do this are outlined in Williams’ draft strategic plan, which we circulated for community comment earlier in the spring. These ideas include thinking about new areas of the curriculum and existing strengths; a coordinated approach to co-curricular and residential life; and ways to elevate our commitments to access, sustainability and inclusion. The plan also signals the importance of attention to crucial facilities like the Davis Center, the college museum and art department, and the field house, and it highlights our ongoing need to support the very best faculty and staff anywhere.

All the various tasks we perform as an institution are in service of one job: to give each student the very best education we can imagine. If we do that job well, our graduates will leave here intellectually bold and personally compassionate. Ethically courageous and culturally aware. At ease with themselves and welcoming to all. They will take that light with them out into the world, even as Williams nurtures the flame for generations to come.

Maud S. Mandel, President
Inside the Issue

2 The Power of Narrative
Answering unasked questions.
Letter from Editor-in-Chief Amy T. Lovett

3 Planned Evolution
Remaining true to our values.
Letter from President Maud S. Mandel

ON CAMPUS

8 News
Williams’ fall 2021 opening, new science facilities and more.

14 Together at Williams
Highlights from a year unlike any other.

22 Mapping Ballet’s “Dark Stars”
Students recover the stories of Black artists, schools and influences.
Story by Kate Abbott ’00

24 More than Medicine
How future physicians benefit from liberal arts learning.
Story by Julia Munemo

25 Critical Partnerships
An internship with the Stockbridge-Munsee Band of Mohicans.
Story by Meadbh Ginnane ’21

OUR ENVIRONMENT

26 From Activism to Action
The new generation of environmental justice warriors.
Story by Vicki Glembocki

“‘I’m trying to come up with a food system to heal the soil. That’s what I think my life will be.’”
Chander Payne ’24

33 Research, Untethered
Gender dynamics on Juneau’s Icefield.
Essay by Bertie Miller ’18

34 An Undaunted Spirit
Essay by John Hubbell ’71

35 A Matrix of Catastrophe
Publishing a fictional account of a pandemic during a real one.
Essay by Jim Shepard

HISTORIES IN THE MAKING

36 Breaking the Code
Alumnae surface the little-known stories of female codebreakers in World War II.
Conversation led by Soledad Fox Maura

42 Strength and Resilience
The pandemic clarifies a pediatrician’s place among the Navajo.
Essay by Jessie Kerr ’06

44 The Myth of the Model Minority
Situating anti-Asian racism within larger histories.
Essay by Danny Jin ’20

45 An American Tragedy
The double bind of being an Asian woman.
Essay by Jiayang Fan ’06

RESTORATION AND JUSTICE

46 Claiming Williams: In Conversation
Michelle Alexander discusses community, fierce love and the messy path to justice.
Interview by Kelsey M. Jones ’08

Cover illustration by Nicolás Ortega
“Maybe we just have to clash with history as it’s been taught.”

Soledad Fox Maura

“The future of American politics is ... likely to be the politics of racial fear. And yet perhaps this is not inevitable.”

Matt Tokeshi
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The Outlook for Fall

“
A residential learning experience is the very heart of what makes Williams special."

Maud S. Mandel

Provided the health outlook continues to improve, the college has announced tentative plans to open in the fall for a fully in-person semester.

Strict health and safety protocols, including wearing masks, social distancing and routine testing, kept Covid-19 rates low this past spring, when more than 1,600 students returned to campus for in-person and online classes. The number of vaccinated adults continues to rise, and the state is easing restrictions on indoor dining and recreation.

As part of planning for a full opening in the fall, the college is monitoring Covid-19 rates and considering factors such as whether local K-12 schools reopen. A final decision is expected to be made by July 1, with the campus Operations Group working through the summer on detailed health and safety guidelines.

“A residential learning experience is the very heart of what makes Williams special,” President Maud S. Mandel wrote in a March 19 letter to campus about the plans. “I’m buoyed by the possibility that we’ll be able to return in earnest next fall and that I’ll be able to welcome you all back home.”
Reimagining New England Histories

Williams is part of a new partnership studying historical injustices through the lens of maritime history—a project funded by a $4.9 million Just Futures Initiative grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

The effort, led by Brown University’s Center for the Study of Slavery and Justice and involving Connecticut’s Mystic Seaport Museum, seeks to generate new insights into the relationship between European colonization in North America, the dispossession of Native American land and racial slavery in New England.

Williams and Brown are working together to create research clusters of faculty, staff and students and will each hire a visiting faculty fellow to be in residence during the three-year grant period. The project will also generate a Mystic Seaport Museum exhibition on race, subjugation and power, an online “decolonial archive” spotlighting stories from several New England communities, and expanded courses on historical injustice in early America for students at Williams, Williams-Mystic and Brown.

In a letter announcing the grant, Interim Vice President for Institutional Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Ngonidzashe Munemo wrote, “Building upon generations of scholarship and community-led work, the project employs the sea as one lens to grapple with intertwined histories of Indigenous and African American experiences in the Northeast and the closely related impacts of colonization and enslavement that have so deeply affected multiple communities.”

Added Munemo, a professor of political science and co-principal investigator for the grant, “Equally important, the project foregrounds the continuous work Black communities and sovereign Native nations have undertaken to maintain freedom, self-determination and cultural thriving in this region.”

Living in Community

In an effort to provide students with greater support and improve housing options, Williams is introducing new elements to its residential life program starting in the fall: TAPSI housing and area coordinators (ACs).

TAPSI, which stands for Theme, Affinity, Program, Special Interests, provides sophomores, juniors and seniors with the opportunity to create living-learning environments based on shared academic, co-curricular and identity-based interests. Students are currently developing proposals for TAPSI housing, which must have a leadership board and faculty and staff sponsors. A selection committee will review the proposals, with three such houses expected to launch in the fall.

The college is also hiring four ACs, professional residential life staff members who will work closely with junior advisors and other student residential leaders on matters like dialogue facilitation, conflict resolution and crisis management. ACs will also help develop programming that supports holistic wellness, personal development and community building.

The new elements are the result of extensive research by the Learning Beyond the Classroom strategic planning working group, whose outreach included a campus-wide survey, campus meetings and town halls, and conversations with consultants from peer institutions.

Dean of the College Marlene Sandstrom says TAPSI housing, in particular, expands student’s options, which include first-year housing, quiet housing, co-ops and traditional residence halls.

“Not only will these spaces provide direct benefits to the students who live in them,” Sandstrom says, “but we also expect them to become hubs of activity that will add excitement and energy to the campus as a whole.”
The Wachenheim Science Center opened its doors at the start of the spring semester, marking the completion of a $200 million expansion that also included construction of the Hopper Science Center and several updates to Thompson Biology Labs. 

The 113,000-square-foot Wachenheim houses the geosciences, math and statistics, and psychology departments. Among the highlights, a spacious outdoor garden provides a teaching space where geosciences students can study boulder specimens. And a 40-foot-long dinosaur trackway composed of fossil footprints greets visitors outside the 212-person auditorium.

The Hopper, which opened in the spring of 2018, includes 30 flexible research and teaching laboratories, a microscopy suite and faculty offices for the biology, chemistry and physics departments. The 78,000-square-foot building also features a machine shop to build and design new equipment for research and teaching.

Both buildings were constructed with locally sourced materials and are expected to receive LEED Gold certification from the U.S. Green Building Council. They use roughly one-sixth the energy of the original, 1960s-era Bronfman Science Center.

The new facilities reflect Williams’ “substantial resources and commitment to undergraduate science,” says Protik Majumder, Science Center director and Barclay Jermain Professor of Natural Philosophy. That commitment, he adds, is reflected in the many members of the community who supported the buildings’ development, including Andreas Halvorsen ’86, Diane Koenitzer Halvorsen ’84, and Sue and Ed Wachenheim ’59.

“Creative thinking, interdisciplinary learning and solving complex, open-ended problems are at the core of Williams’ educational aspirations,” Majumder says. “Our new science buildings will enhance all our work to prepare students to solve the most urgent, challenging problems that the world has to offer.”

Photograph by Bradley Wakoff
The Show Goes On

“For most students, music is a source of escape from the stress of pandemic life on campus.”

So says Ed Gollin, chair and professor of music, whose department, like many in the performing and visual arts, found creative ways to connect students with audiences at a time when venues were closed to the public.

Their solutions almost always involved technology, giving students’ work wider reach. Music recitals and concerts such as the I/O New Music 2021 Virtual Music Festival were livestreamed using high-quality microphones and archived on the college’s YouTube channel (see bit.ly/WilliamsRecitals). Concert Choir members recorded individual voice parts, editing them together to create ensemble performances (see bit.ly/ConcertChoir_RoadHome). Hundreds of people have viewed the recital and concert videos.

The dance program took to the streets last summer with “Finding Ground,” a 12-minute video of student, faculty and staff performances in locations around Williamstown (see bit.ly/FindingGround). The CoDa contemporary dance ensemble performed Anna Sokolow’s Rooms, an exploration of isolation that combined in-person and remote dance.

Many studio art classes moved outdoors for on-campus students, while remote students received supply kits to make pieces at home. Their works were collected in a Virtual Big Art Show (see bit.ly/BigArtShow) in the fall, with plans for a limited, in-person exhibition of seniors’ work at the college museum before graduation. Students frequently showcased their work in and around the W.L.S. Spencer Studio Art Building and filled Instagram with their creations (see instagram.com/williamsartdept).

Videoconferencing gave students and the broader Williams community access to special guests and industry professionals—such as when Alex Szrol ’21 met costume designer Sharen Davis during the theater department’s virtual Green Room series.

“I never imagined I would get to meet the person behind the wardrobe of Watchmen,” says Szrol of taking part in the weekly series, organized by theater chair Omar Sangare (see theatre.williams.edu/the-green-room/).

As part of their coursework, theater students performed plays as radio dramas, and senior honors and independent study students staged digital performances. Professor Shanti Pillai connected her Global Digital Performance students with those at Shiv Nadar University in India to create short videos and written responses.

“The show must go on!”

“Adapting our program to fit the constraints of pandemic life was our only real option,” says Sangare, echoing the words of many faculty and staff in the arts. “The show must go on!”

L-R: Photographs by Megan Mazza, Bradley Wakoff
Covid-19 sidelined athletic competition during the winter and fall seasons and necessitated a shortened schedule in the spring. But Williams’ programs adjusted, creating enhanced opportunities for team building, mind and body fitness, and personal growth.

Coaches extended outdoor practice hours to accommodate smaller groups of students and expanded physical education classes to provide all students with the chance for organized activity. Varsity athletes used the time normally spent traveling to games to take part in weekly readings and Zoom conversations about social justice and diversity, equity and inclusion in their chosen sports. Meanwhile, the college constructed a massive outdoor tent alongside Farley-Lamb Field so that all students could continue weight training while wearing masks and remaining socially distanced.

Early in 2021, the presidents of NESCAC colleges announced that limited regional competition would take place between mid-April and mid-May, an abbreviated schedule. Thanks to robust health and safety protocols, the baseball, golf, lacrosse, rowing, softball, tennis, and outdoor track and field teams were able to participate.

As Athletics Director Lisa Melendy wrote in an email to students in April, “We are all determined to remember and protect the heart of Williams athletics as we go forward, and that is our dedicated coaches and athletes, our connection to each other, our love of sport, our love of representing Williams in the competitive arena—and, of course, beating Amherst.”

*Below: Women’s softball, which hosted the NESCAC Championship at home in May.*
Together at Williams

Highlights from a year unlike any other.

Photographs by Bradley Wakoff
For an event at The Clark Art Institute in October, students taking the two courses Sound and Sculpture exhibit safe-distancing apparatuses and sound works that depict walking in nature during a pandemic.

This spread, clockwise from left:
- A Covid-19 testing site for students.
- Grace Kim ’23 of Cello Shots performs in front of the Paresky Center on Mountain Day in October.
- Fall Move-in Days.
Clockwise from top left:
Dining Services prepares meals for students living on campus during winter break.

A November shoot for a cosmic horror short film directed by John Murphy ’21 for his honors theater degree.

A student helps boil 155 gallons of sap from Hopkins Forest maple trees down to about four gallons of syrup in March.

Chess games outside the Paresky Center in March.

A popular fall hangout on the steps of Chapin Hall.
Students conduct lab work for Biology 101: The Cell in the fall. (Photo provided by instructor Janis Bravo.)

The Free University Winter Study Program, organized by students, includes Intro to Ukulele. (Photo provided by instructor Marika Massey-Bierman ’23.)

A new weight-training tent next to Farley-Lamb Field is open to the campus community.
Mapping Ballet’s “Dark Stars”

By
Kate Abbott ’00

The orbit of Doris Jones (at right), founder of the Jones-Haywood School of Ballet, intersected with those of her former student Chita Rivera (bottom left), who went on to become a noted dancer, actor and singer, and Arthur Mitchell (top left), founder of the Dance Theatre of Harlem.

Photographs (clockwise from top left) courtesy of Dance Theatre of Harlem; mobballet.org; Ted Streshinsky/Corbis via Getty Images
A student project helps recover the stories of Black artists, schools and influences in ballet.

In a 1948 photograph, Doris W. Jones stands en pointe with the light on her shoulders. Already an exceptional dancer, choreographer and teacher, she would go on to have wide influence with leaders in the ballet world, including George Balanchine and the New York City Ballet, Arthur Mitchell and the Dance Theatre of Harlem, and Alvin Ailey. Yet, growing up north of Boston, Jones was unable to find formal training; no school would take her because she was Black.

Her story, and those of other Black artists in the ballet world, are now part of a new archive, The Constellation Project, developed with the help of five Williams students in the fall as part of the course Re-Reading/Righting Ballet’s History.

Artist in Residence in Dance Janine Parker has created and taught several “hybrid” courses at Williams, combining studio practice with classroom discussion. This time, her focus was on artists of color and the obstacles they have faced—and still face. She invited Theresa Ruth Howard, choreographer, journalist and founder of the digital research project Memoirs of Blacks in Ballet, to co-teach the course.

Howard, in turn, introduced the five students to a cosmos of Black ballet artists, many of whom, amidst their own struggles for the chance to perform, supported one another and influenced their art form. Their stories have only been recorded in fragments—in an old dance program or a student’s memory. Journalists and scholars have rarely written about them.

“[The knowledge] is not there, or it’s segregated, as people’s lives were,” Howard says. “It should infuriate you. … Why is it so difficult to have evidence and artifacts that these lives happened?”

The Constellation Project begins to piece together these fragments and turns them into visual galaxies connecting the artists. In conducting their research, the students also redefined their own understanding of dance.

April Owens ’24 studied Jones and Claire Haywood, learning that Jones taught herself ballet from books and found jobs teaching dance at summer camps in Massachusetts. Jones was also invited to tour with noted African American tap dancer Bill “Bojangles” Robinson. (Her parents didn’t let her go.)

Jones taught tap in exchange for ballet lessons in a school that had previously rejected her; she also taught out of her parents’ home. One of her students, Haywood, convinced her to move to Washington, D.C., in 1940, and the two founded the Jones-Haywood School of Ballet, where internationally renowned dancers such as Chita Rivera and Sandra Fortune-Greene learned their craft and accomplished artists came to teach.

Owens says it was powerful as a Black dancer to learn about Jones’ and Haywood’s passion, determination and skill. She says she also began to recognize biases in her earlier dance education.

“In this class, I learned that ballet is a cultural dance,” Owens says. “I had never thought of it that way. I had thought of ballet as the foundation of dance, the default, and it’s an unhelpful way of thinking.”

Keshini Cardozo ’24 says the course showed her how deep the history of dancers of color runs in the U.S. and how little she had seen of it before.

“It’s not as in-depth as the history I have learned around white dancers,” she says. “There’s such a white demographic. It’s hard to see yourself in that field.”

As they explored what they love about classical ballet—the discipline and beauty of it—the class also took the time and space to think and talk honestly about racist, misogynistic and classist stereotypes. Though the work was difficult, it was also rewarding.

Parker hopes to continue teaching the course and thus bring more students into the research work with Howard, adding, “We want to think more broadly and contribute to the change of how we explore history going forward.”

See the students’ work at mobballet.org/TheConstellationProject.

“There’s such a white demographic. It’s hard to see yourself in that field.”

Keshini Cardozo ’24
New courses and a debut speaker series connect pre-med study to the liberal arts.

The daughter of two physicians and the sister of a medical resident, Laura Wang ’21 wasn’t planning to follow her family’s career path. She came to Williams for the liberal arts. In her freshman year, she took chemistry and math classes as well as introductory economics and psychology. She decided to major in economics, but medicine tugged at her. As she found her way to the pre-med track, she was determined to incorporate the ideas she was engaging with in her other courses into that field of study.

“I had thought the pre-med track would exclude other disciplines,” Wang says. “That’s in part because I knew there was an idea in the medical community that politics should be kept separate from medicine.”

Then she took a course last fall that shattered her assumption: Epidemic! A Critical History of Medicine, Science and Power, taught by Richmond Visiting Professor Ahmed Ragab. The course “investigated the place of epidemics in medical and scientific thought, how they relate to race, gender, sexuality and colonialism, and how they change the world we live in,” says Ragab, who received a medical degree from Cairo University and a Ph.D. in the history of science from the École Pratique des Hautes Études in Paris.

Of the 13 students who took Epidemic!, most were juniors and seniors, and roughly half were on the pre-med track, even though the course wasn’t required. Ragab says he was delighted to see so many pre-med students in the course: “I found they were starved for content that will prepare them for health care careers in a way that is embedded within the humanities.”

Medical humanities is an expanding field that focuses on how medicine and public health intersects with topics such as history, literature and religion. During the spring semester, Ragab taught two more courses in the field, the introductory Science, Technology and Colonialism, and the advanced Race, Gender and Science. He’ll continue as a visiting professor in 2021-2022.

Ragab also leads a lecture series at Williams’ Oakley Center for the Humanities and Social Sciences about the Covid-19 pandemic. Some events bring outside scholars into conversation with faculty; others are discussion-based and open to the entire community. “This becomes a space to talk about how Williams is dealing with and working through the pandemic,” says Ragab, who has previously taught at the Harvard Divinity School and is director of the Center for Black, Brown and Queer Studies. The independent center aims to address inequities in academia by “raising historical and cultural awareness around issues of race, gender, sexuality, socioeconomic status, citizenship status and colonialism,” according to its website.

Ragab, who also advises a pre-med student group and leads a reading group for students, says the series, “along with the courses I teach, helps bring medical humanities into the larger conversation we’re having at Williams. It’s key to sustaining the liberal arts mission.”

Wang says she is grateful Ragab came to Williams before she graduated. In the spring she took Race, Gender and Science and worked as Ragab’s research assistant.

“The courses I’ve taken with Professor Ragab will influence how I practice medicine,” she says. “I will question things more, like who the health care system benefits and who it leaves out, and how different people interact with it.”
Deep in the Williams College Museum of Art’s storage, a slim box sits in an unobtrusive cabinet—the odd eternal resting place of a human hand. Originally from Egypt, the hand is almost 2,000 years old, cracked and brown with age, bearing the remains of once-clean linen bandages and, curiously, missing a thumb. I became acquainted with the hand in a sophomore seminar in which our class discussed the difficult dynamics of consent and respect that museums blur when it comes to the preservation and study of human remains and religious objects. What is the role of museums in preserving pieces like this, especially if they are from Native American or global Indigenous communities whose members are hoping to finally return ceremonial objects and ancestors to their rightful places?

As of 2013, the remains of roughly 120,000 Native American and Hawaiian individuals were held within museum collections across the U.S. These remains are accompanied by hundreds of thousands of funerary objects as well as religiously and culturally significant pieces, often collected illegitimately or alienated under duress. This is not to say that the circumstances surrounding all Native American objects in museums are suspect, but the problem is endemic.

To take steps toward combating the issue, the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) was passed in 1990. It was praised as a historic piece of human rights legislation that would create a straightforward path through which Native American and Hawaiian communities could reclaim their cultural heritage and ancestors. It is not, however, always that simple.

Successful restitution ultimately hinges on the ability of tribes to label remains and objects as “culturally identifiable,” with the final approval of this label often resting with the museums themselves. In many cases, museums and curators enthusiastically work with tribes, respecting the right of Native communities to preserve and interpret their own heritage. In other cases, however, the process can be frustratingly opaque, with the burden of proof resting solely on petitioners with limited resources and time.

In January, I began an internship with the Stockbridge-Munsee Band of Mohicans, whose historic preservation office is now located on Spring Street in Williamstown. For the past few months, I’ve worked with Historic Preservation Manager Bonney Hartley to research objects that may be eligible for repatriation under NAGPRA from museums including the Mission House in Stockbridge, Mass., and the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian. I’ve been widening my focus to include research into possible repatriations of the remains of Stockbridge-Munsee ancestors who were disinterred and are now held within an unsettling number of Northeastern museums.

As Williams College (and the U.S. as a whole) continues to grapple with the legacy of its early interactions with Native American communities, it is critical that partnerships such as those between Williams and the Stockbridge-Munsee Historic Preservation Office continue. Such partnerships represent a significant advance, but much work remains to be done in order to raise awareness and ensure allocation of resources toward the preservation and repatriation of Native American cultural heritage.
Meet the new generation of Williams leaders fighting for environmental justice.

By Vicki Glembocki

Mohammed Memfis ’21 was working with the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) in Georgia when he arrived in rural Randolph County to fight voter suppression. A Williams freshman at the time, he quickly learned that the residents he was assisting, most of whom were poor and African American, were facing another major threat—construction of a natural gas pipeline that could contaminate their drinking water. Memfis, who from an early age knew he wanted to be a civil rights lawyer, returned to Williams that fall eager to study how environmental issues disproportionately affect disadvantaged communities—and determined to do something about it.

Memfis is one of many Williams students and young alumni actively engaged in the issue of climate justice. Their work often “doesn’t look like environmental activism in the traditional sense of conservation or sustainability,” says Nicolas Howe, director of Williams’ Center for Environmental Studies (CES). It involves things like developing equitable climate adaptation policies in California, building regenerative farms serving Washington, D.C.-area food pantries, conducting path-breaking research into how the state of Florida failed a community whose groundwater was poisoned, or unpacking what role Atlanta’s highways may play in higher Covid-19 death rates among Black residents.
“Our students and recent grads know you can’t deal with climate justice without dealing with all kinds of injustice,” Howe says. “They’re taking their knowledge and liberal arts education and doing something with them.”

**The Political is Personal**

Memfis was getting ready to leave for a voter rights meeting in southeast Georgia when his mother asked him, “Where are you going again?”

“Randolph County,” Memfis replied. An election board was planning to close seven of the county’s nine polling places. Memphis had been home in Atlanta all summer, pursuing his childhood dream of becoming a civil rights lawyer by interning with the American Civil Liberties Union.

“Randolph County,” his mother repeated. “That’s where our family was enslaved.”

Until that moment, Memfis hadn’t known his ancestors had been enslaved, let alone enslaved in the place he was now headed.

On the ride there, he recalls staring out the window and asking himself, “Does everyone randomly get this clarifying purpose in their life?”

He now understood the voting issue through a much more personal lens. Had his ancestors not made it out of Randolph County, the people he would be assisting could very well have been his family members, working multiple jobs to make ends meet, fighting for the right to vote without traveling 30 miles to a polling place.

Then he learned that the residents were facing another threat: construction of the Sabal Trail Pipeline, which would transport 1 billion cubic feet of natural gas across 517 miles daily from Alabama to Florida—cutting right through Randolph County and its water supply.
“I said to myself, ‘Yep, I’m going to do something about that,’” Memfis recalls. He returned to Williams and signed up for the course Intro to Environmental Studies. Then he took Environmental Law. And then Environmental Justice with Laura Martin, who inspired him to dig into Kentucky’s plan to employ former coal miners by building federal prisons near coal dump sites, causing prisoners to become sick. Beyond environmental negligence, the plan was dangerous and underhanded, Memfis says.

“I know incarceration well,” he says. “I have friends and family incarcerated in state and federal prisons.” Memfis wrote a report opposing the plan and sent it to the U.S. Senate.

A Class of 1960 Scholar in environmental studies, he says he became “compulsive” about learning anything and everything he could about environmental policy and climate justice. Studying at the Williams-Exeter Programme at Oxford, he brainstormed with climate leaders from all over the world. Interning at the Natural Resources Defense Council in San Francisco, Calif., he brought business leaders to elected officials to advocate for clean energy. He joined the Brookings Institution as an American government research intern and then joined Ceres, a sustainability nonprofit, as a federal policy intern. In May 2020, he received a prestigious scholarship from the Udall Foundation for his commitment to a career in environmental justice.

Memfis says he strives to find the personal in every cause he takes up. His senior thesis explores how Atlanta’s highways, built decades ago, have made Black and low-income people more vulnerable to Covid-19. Some of his family members have died from the virus.

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“Thank you,” he says. “I know incarceration well, “ he says. “I said to myself, ‘Yep, I’m going to do something about that,’” Memfis recalls. He returned to Williams and signed up for the course Intro to Environmental Studies. Then he took Environmental Law. And then Environmental Justice with Laura Martin, who inspired him to dig into Kentucky’s plan to employ former coal miners by building federal prisons near coal dump sites, causing prisoners to become sick. Beyond environmental negligence, the plan was dangerous and underhanded, Memfis says.

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“So, when tasked as part of her fellowship with helping Alameda County update its 2010 Climate Action Plan (CAP) for government service and operations, she felt particularly drawn to community resilience, green economy and recovery.

There are two paths to climate resilience, both of which involve preparing effectively for the impacts of climate change. The most obvious is mitigation—reducing future impacts by convincing everyone from individuals to corporations to reduce greenhouse gases or transition to renewable energy. The second path is adaptation—helping communities cope with the effects they’re experiencing right now, like wildfire smoke.

Barandiaran, who will begin a master’s degree in urban planning at Rutgers University in the fall, spends her days researching climate policies that might work in Alameda. She often digs through California’s Adaptation Clearinghouse, a centralized hub of all the resources a community would need—research, tools, projection models, assessments and other CAPs, which Gov. Gavin Newsom encourages every community to have.

Unknown to Barandiaran, another Eph just 80 miles north in Sacramento has been managing that very clearinghouse. Nikki Caravelli ’16 joined the governor’s Climate Team in April 2020 as an assistant planner, helping communities do the very project Barandiaran was working on—integrating adaptation into local planning.

Caravelli graduated from Williams with an anthropology major, a concentration in environmental studies and a goal—to quit reading theory and start taking action. She landed back home in Lake Tahoe to work as a climate fellow with the Sierra Business Council, helping the region’s communities manage climate change.

“I could see the effects of climate change right there, where I grew up,” she says. “I could see it—the declining snowpack, the 100 million trees dying from drought.”

In 2018, a year after the business council hired her as a project manager for the Sierra Climate Adaptation and Mitigation Partnership (CAMP), the governor released a new report with the latest statistics and research to help regional decision makers “build resilience to climate impacts,” the report states. Caravelli and the CAMP team knew that if business council leaders weren’t plugged in to the findings and funding, nothing would progress. So, they reached out across the region’s daunting
geographic, political and economic divides to invite leaders to Tahoe for a workshop. And they came—forest managers, water utility managers, tribal leaders—more stakeholders than the group had ever gathered before.

“To have everyone in the same room, crossing boundaries and asking questions and coordinating—that’s what we need,” Caravelli says. “Adaptation only works if we have buy-in and action at the granular, community level.”

That also meant including the people who disproportionately face the worst impacts of climate change but, historically, weren’t invited to the table—low-income residents, people of color and immigrants.

“Equity is baked into everything we do,” Caravelli says.

That commitment followed her to the governor’s office, where, earlier in the spring, she convened virtual workshops to guide community leaders statewide, step by step, to develop their own adaptation plans. In her first workshop in January 2021, more than 300 people logged on statewide. Even more stakeholders attended the second workshop, in February.

Says Caravelli: “Convening people—it’s the only way to get things done.”

Healing Soil and Soul

The cafeteria line at Bethesda-Chevy Chase High School in Maryland sparked the idea that set Chander Payne ’24 on his life’s path.

The 10th grader usually brought in food from home or ate off campus. But one day, he forgot his lunch. As he waited in line, he noticed two things: Many of the students seemed to be receiving free and reduced-price meals; and the only fruits and vegetables available were applesauce cups, canned peaches and french fries.

Photographs by Marissa Leshnov
mission is to “connect people and the planet, for the healing of both” by building regenerative farms at schools to provide fresh produce to food pantries.

As a child, Payne often spent summers with his grandmother in Memphis, Tenn., helping to tend her backyard garden, which thrived with bees, birds and butterflies. When “Nama,” as he calls her, emigrated from a farming village in southern India, she brought the holistic, sustainable techniques she’d learned as a child. Over time, Payne came to learn that all over the world, toxic farming practices have made soil less fertile, threatening its ability to grow food.

“She showed me how to be gentle with the soil,” Payne says. “Being in the garden helps me when times are stressful. It’s meditation. Soil connects everything.”

He brought these practices to Urban Beet. By the summer of 2020, his school garden had grown to 200 square feet, sparked participation from a diverse group of students and regularly supplied the school’s food bank with produce. The group built farms at four more high schools and partnered with nonprofits like the Homeless Children Playtime Project, passing on gardening techniques and their meditative benefits to youngsters. When the pandemic hit, Urban Beet switched gears, making 200 windowsill planters called “Free Little Farms” for food-insecure families and personally delivering them to shelters in Washington, D.C.

Then Payne came to Williams, and Urban Beet came with him. With a team of Williams students and $20,000 in donations, including from the National Geographic Foundation, he refocused the nonprofit to build and maintain regenerative farms at homeless shelters in D.C., with plans to expand all over the country.

For now, though, Payne, who plans to major in economics and environmental science, is taking it one farm at a time. During winter break, Urban Beet built farms—fruit trees, berry bushes and even a grape trellis inspired by the one at Williams’ Class of 1966 Environmental Center—at three shelters in D.C., where the homeless rate is 95 times the national average. Five more farms are in the works, all being planned and organized from Massachusetts.

Payne’s organization to date has provided 3,400 pounds of fresh produce to underserved families and homeless youth. It’s also an environmental win. Washington, D.C., is an urban heat island, with much higher temperatures than surrounding areas because of car exhaust, concrete and asphalt. Urban Beet’s farms help turn the temperature down through transpiration—water evaporating from plants.

“Four years ago, I had no idea these issues even existed,” Payne says. “Now I’m trying to come up with a food system to heal the soil. That’s what I think my life will be.”

Seeking Truth

Ruby Bagwyn ’23 was working as a Williams research fellow in the summer of 2020, poring over documents in an effort to understand what had gone wrong in tiny Tallevast, Fla.

In 1996, Lockheed Martin purchased a defunct plant there that, throughout the Cold War, used beryllium to produce weapons-grade military parts. Toxic beryllium dust seeped into the lungs of workers, particularly custodial staff, some of whom were from Tallevast. And, as an environmental assessment commissioned in 2000 by Lockheed found, beryllium dust also poisoned the groundwater of the predominantly Black community of 80-odd homes spread over two square miles.

But the results of the assessment were never shared with residents. And as Bagwyn was slogging through more than 1,800 records in Florida’s public environmental database, she was finding...
mounting evidence of negligence at every level.

That’s when she came across an interoffice email from a specialist with Florida’s Department of Environmental Protection who visited Tallevast in 2002 to determine whether private wells were contaminated. The specialist wrote that she had seen some evidence but couldn’t say exactly how many wells were affected; she never left her car, because she found Tallevast “very unkempt (to put it mildly),” she wrote in the email message.

Says Bagwyn: “Her disdain for the community was clear. Having those words in front of me confirmed what we thought was happening behind the scenes.”

The “we” includes geosciences professor José Constantine and Africana studies professor James Manigault-Bryant. Bagwyn encountered their work on Tallevast her first year at Williams, while she was a research assistant in the college’s Environmental Analysis Lab. She was inspired by the way Constantine wove environmental racism and injustice into his research on how rivers reshape the landscape as well as by Manigault-Bryant’s personal connection to Tallevast. His father’s family had lived there, and Manigault-Bryant grew up just a few miles north. Though Manigault-Bryant’s family didn’t get sick, many residents showed high rates of miscarriage, sterility and neurological issues. A 2010 health investigation found 78 cases of cancer in current and former residents—85% higher than the cancer rate in Florida’s Black population.

This past December, Bagwyn, Constantine and Manigault-Bryant published their findings in a 19-page article in the Boston Review. Writing how Tallevast once “possessed a vitality of southern Blackness,” the authors dove deeply into a story of environmental racism that’s all too common, especially in the U.S. South. “Owning land was meant to lead community members inexorably toward future prosperity,” they concluded. “Now most of the land—poisoned by hostile forces that the founding families could not have imagined a century ago—remains in the hands of their descendants, who must determine what is to come.”

A Houston native, Bagwyn says she’s always been interested in environmental justice. She even spent a semester in high school at the sustainability focused Island School in the Bahamas. But until Williams, she hadn’t found an opportunity to take action.

“If we didn’t get this story out to the public, we didn’t know if anyone else would,” says Bagwyn, who intends to major in environmental studies and economics. “This project really brought environmental justice more into my sights. I realized that, even at 19 or 20, you can help to make a real impact.”

Ruby Bagwyn ’23

Photographs by Bradley Wakoff
Many of my queer friends have their own versions of the same story: minding your business—usually in a restroom—only to be yanked into a matrix of power and exposure by a stranger who wants to know, delicately or aggressively, “What are you?” Sometimes this sounds like: “This is the women’s room”; sometimes it is much more invasive. Common to these moments is the assumption that gender is something anyone should be able to read off your body like a tag. It is expected that our bodies serve as modes of mass communication.

The summer after I graduated from Williams, I went to Alaska as a student researcher at the Juneau Icefield Research Program (JIRP). As I prepared for two months of remote fieldwork, I anticipated the chance to rappel down a crevasse, collect data on ice structures and understand the movement of glaciers. But I also worried that I’d be regulated by demanded legibility—forced to answer “What are you?”—from my peers on the ice. Historically, glaciology has styled itself as the hyper-masculine arena of bearded, frostbitten insouciance proper to intrepid extremophiles. Glaciologists work and live in some of the most remote, extreme and isolated conditions on the planet. At JIRP, full days would be spent skiing across the icefield from one camp to the next. We were to live “off the grid” without internet, cell service or running water.

Beyond the athletic feats and moderate austerity involved, I was well aware of the potential perils of such environments from a gender-equity perspective. According to a study published in 2014, among 600 field scientists surveyed, 71% of female respondents and 41% of male respondents reported having been sexually harassed (see bit.ly/fieldharassment). Perpetrators have found opportunity and impunity in the field camp’s combination of geographic isolation and close quarters that muddle the boundary between private and professional space.

I worried I’d be forced to answer “What are you?” by my peers on the ice. More broadly, I worried that the empty expanse of the icefield might provide the space for the worst social and institutional injustices to run amok, without infrastructure for prevention or accountability.

JIRP quickly appeased my fears. I signed up with gusto for the gender-neutral housing offered, and the people I met were welcoming and wonderful. More than this, I found that the potentially hyper-masculine environment, which might have intensified or exaggerated my feeling of isolation, was largely neutralized. After all, what could be more gender neutral than a “restroom” made by digging a snow trough and privacy snow-wall for everyone to use—no urinals, stalls or door signs in sight? In crevasse rescue procedures, the physics of our Z-pulley systems ensure that a 115-pound person can haul a 275-pound person out of a deadly situation with skill and certainty. The rope systems required for safe glacier traverse render each person dependent on and connected to the next. As we glided across and wound around the vast ice, I felt my own sense of isolation morph into something else.

On the ice and off the grid, we were unencumbered by the typical necessity of our bodies to serve as a mode of mass communication. We found a rapport in sharing space outside the dynamics of legibility. Our fluidly shifting roles and reliance on one another fostered an intimacy that actually estranged, suspended and untouched us from some of the societal structures of meaning that implicitly or explicitly ask, “What are you?”

This is not to say that field camp is some utopian model of just inclusivity. The geosciences remain one of the whitest, most male and least accessible—financially and otherwise—of the scientific disciplines. Yet as a current member of JIRP’s Justice, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion steering committee, I know there are people and movements dedicated to the work of reimagining and remaking our field and our world.

My hope for geosciences is that we might replace a model of freedom as the domain of self-reliant individuals in an empty, rugged landscape with one that liberates us precisely insofar as we are tethered to one another. I urge my fellow scientists to understand the transformative potential in actively creating spaces of togetherness in regions far-flung from structural injustice and institutional hierarchy and their accompanying modes of mass communication.
I am living with death.

A week and a half ago, prior to beginning a new clinical trial, my oncologist said to me, “I am very worried. Plan for the worst, and hope for the best.”

While this may seem harsh, he spoke in the most gentle and caring manner. He was touching my knee and looking directly at me. Because of Covid-19, I was alone with him, as Kathleen, my wife, is not allowed to come in for appointments.

I was diagnosed with cancer a year ago, totally out of the blue. Diffuse, large B-cell lymphoma is highly treatable and has a good prognosis. Over the last 11 months, I have received three different types of chemotherapy and one round of CAR T-cell immunotherapy, and now I am participating in a brand-new clinical trial combining two cancer drugs that have never been used together. I am the first patient in the clinical trial. While the various treatments have initially been promising, they have all “petered out,” so that the cancer continues to grow in my body.

I am not ready to go. I was going to live into my 90s, as both my mother and father did. I was planning to attend my 50th Williams reunion, just as I attended my 25th, with no big expectations but some small wonderings and curiosity. Since the diagnosis, I have given much thought to the 50 years since graduation, who I was at Williams and who I am now.

Living with death is an unusual and unexpected place to be. There is a kind of exhilaration focused on taking in whatever is happening in the moment. I have come to love sitting in bed in the morning with a cup of hot tea as Kathleen and I discuss... whatever. I never used to sit in bed; I had to get up and get going. I had projects to do.

Living with death is terrifying. It’s full of sadness at the prospect of not seeing my children and grandchildren grow into who they are becoming. It’s frustrating, as I can barely do physically what I used to do. When flushing the toilet is painful, I wonder what will happen next.

Yet I am also grateful, because I am in this state and am able to think, feel and talk about it. I am still able to connect with people.

I don’t know if I will make it to the reunion. If I do, I look forward to the connections that can happen. If I don’t, you who are there will know that I am there in spirit.

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John Hubbell ’71 died on Jan. 17, 2021. This piece is adapted from his 50th reunion book essay, which you can read—along with his 25th reunion essay—at alumni.williams.edu/200/john-hubbell/
A Matrix of Catastrophe

By Jim Shepard

Here’s how preoccupied with catastrophe I’ve been: One of my earliest reading memories was a book called All About Volcanoes, and by the time I hit first grade I was one of the fierce early proponents of the asteroid theory when it came to the dinosaurs’ extinction (a theory that, I’d like to note, was vindicated 20 years later).

Fiction writing has allowed me to thrash around in that obsession for my entire adult life, and I’ve ended up researching and writing about everything from the destruction of the Hindenburg to the Chernobyl disaster to the tsunami following the Santorini eruption that wiped out the Minoan civilization to the cataclysm yet to come involving America’s crude oil trains.

Ten years ago, Vice magazine asked me to guest edit an entire issue devoted to catastrophe: I could recruit an all-star lineup of contributors, come at the subject 17 ways from Sunday and put together exactly the assemblage I myself would most want to read. The result, interleaved with snowboard and vodka ads, included a Q&A with a woman who survived when all 92 passengers, among them her entire family, were killed when their plane disintegrated in a thunderstorm high above the Peruvian rainforest; a photo essay on a nightmarish juvenile detention center in Uganda; and a series of doomsday scenarios considered in interviews with some of the preeminent scientists in each subject: gamma ray bursts, solar flares, near-Earth objects and the Yellowstone caldera.

And still, in 2016, I was startled by a story out of northwestern Siberia of a 12-year-old boy killed by anthrax, with 20 others infected. The Russians were panicked—anthrax hadn’t been seen there for more than 75 years—and investigators were stunned to discover that long-dormant spores of the bacteria frozen in a reindeer carcass had rejuvenated themselves to infect the boy as the carcass thawed.

The permafrost bordering the Arctic Ocean had for 35,000 years been stable, but with the Arctic warming three times faster than the rest of the globe, all of that biological material full of pathogens was re-emerging. And both Russia and Greenland had announced extensive plans to mine all across their northern extremities, meaning millions of tons of earth excavated and mountains of pathogens thawing alongside new mining communities. This seemed to me, in terms of disaster, a matter of when and not if, and I got an advance and headed to Greenland.

The research took three years. I delivered the novel to my publisher in March 2020. Flummoxed at first as to when to release a novel about a fictional pandemic during the onset of a real-life pandemic, the publisher decided to wait, so Phase Six came out last month.

As you might expect, the experience of watching a matrix of catastrophe unfold right after you’ve worked as comprehensively as possible to imagine that very thing has a surreal edge to it. It’s like an echo of déjà vu leavened with the superstitious sense on the one hand that maybe your imagination should have left well enough alone, and a chastened sense on the other that Cassandras are a dime a dozen—and are, by definition, ignored.

But the entire project of literature may be about trying to prevent ourselves from repeating our mistakes. If growing older involves the understanding that loss is the seminar in which we’re all going to be enrolled, this new century has seemed determined to instruct us in all the ways in which catastrophe may become our ongoing quotidian reality—and that, unless we learn from our mistakes, we have a lot of Covid-19s, and worse, ahead of us.

Illustration by Carmen Segovia
Breaking the Code

Two movies and a forthcoming book—the work of Sarah Megan Thomas ’01, Hilary Klotz Steinman ’90 and Amy Butler Greenfield ’91, respectively—reveal the untold stories of female spies and codebreakers during World War II. This past winter, the alumnae sat down together over Zoom for a conversation with Williams Spanish and comparative literature professor Soledad Fox Maura to discuss the pioneering women’s complicated stories and how, as spies and as women, their professional accomplishments were enveloped in a “vast dome of silence.”

Interview by Soledad Fox Maura
Soledad Fox Maura: Could you each tell us about your work and discuss your recent projects, perhaps when you first thought about them and what they mean to you?

Amy Butler Greenfield ’91: I’m a historian and a novelist, and I’m writing a biography of the codebreaker Elizebeth Smith Friedman, who I first learned about when I was 10 years old. We moved into an old house with a ton of stuff in the attic, including magazines from the 1930s and 1940s. I was the kind of kid who read everything I could get my hands on, and I read about this key woman of the T-Men in a Reader’s Digest article from 1937, and I thought she was amazing. She stayed with me. Then, about five or six years ago, my daughter became very interested in codebreaking. We took her to Bletchley Park in Buckinghamshire, Britain’s main decryption establishment during World War II, not far from where we live in Oxfordshire. We later took her to see an exhibit about Jewish codebreakers. She looked up at me and said, “Mommy, were there any girl codebreakers?” And I thought, “Yes, there were.” In fact, a huge amount of the codebreaking in World War II was done by women. That isn’t well known, and it should be.

Hilary Klotz Steinman ’90: I’m a documentary filmmaker, and I recently produced a film about Friedman for PBS’s American Experience series called The Codebreaker, in which Amy gives an extended interview. Friedman was the mother of modern cryptology in America, and her story—as Amy just said—was largely buried and forgotten. But her codebreaking skills helped fight organized crime in the U.S. during the 1920s and 1930s and defeat Nazi spy rings in South America during World War II.

Sarah Megan Thomas ’01: I’m a filmmaker for feature films—a writer, producer and actress working to tell stories about women in the workplace. I first learned about Winston Churchill’s secret army—and female spies—in a Winter Study class at Williams about World War II. When I began working on my film A Call to Spy,
I started doing archival research and came across 39 women spies. I chose to tell the stories of three pioneers: Virginia Hall, who was the first female field agent; Noor Inayat Khan, who was the first female wireless operator; and Vera Atkins, the first and only female spy recruiter. I put them together in time and space in a movie to allow for a global conversation about how women from different religions and nationalities can and did unite to resist evil.

**Fox Maura:** Why is it important to tell these women's stories today?

**Steinman:** Amy's story of her daughter is heartbreaking. How many other little girls around the world don’t see themselves reflected in the roles people have in public life today or in our history? Friedman was phenomenally influential in two world wars and in fighting organized crime during Prohibition. Her contributions to codebreaking and strategic intelligence are substantial. And she was written out of the history books because of sexism and secrecy. Her story reminds people that women are capable of anything; just because they’ve been left out of the history books doesn’t mean they weren't there all along. Women weren’t supposed to do intelligence. They weren’t supposed to be in law enforcement. And there Elizebeth was, leading the pack. She was also a risk-taker. At every step, someone told her no. At every turn, she said, “I have something to contribute. I’m not going to be deterred.”

**Thomas:** Virginia Hall, who I play in the film, was also a risk-taker who was told no countless times. She wanted to be a diplomat and was overqualified for the job—she knew several languages, she had traveled the world—but she was a woman, and she was disabled. She shot her leg off in a hunting accident at age 27, almost lost her life and had a wooden leg. Prostheses were made for men in the 1930s and 1940s, so hers didn’t fit. She lived in constant pain, but she didn’t let her disability define her. The Nazis dubbed her the most dangerous spy of all, period. Not male, not female: the most dangerous of all Allied spies. She was an incredibly powerful woman.

**Fox Maura:** When you watch A Call to Spy or The Codebreaker, these little-known histories of women in World War II feel like a revelation, and at the same time it feels like it’s long overdue. There’s a common theme of secrecy. Virginia Hall ends up coming back from France and working for the CIA after the war, which means she can’t be open about her life. Friedman is forced to keep her career secret after the war. Their lives are automatically covered up by the nature of their profession, which makes uncovering them now all the more exciting. How does secrecy relate to these women’s lives and to your role in telling their stories?

**Thomas:** Virginia Hall never gave any interviews. In fact, she was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross, and she said she didn’t want President Harry S. Truman to give her the award because it would blow her cover. So she had a private ceremony with only her mother in attendance. Hall didn’t want to be known. She wanted to do the work and make a difference. When she did get back, she was again rejected from being a diplomat. She was the most dangerous spy, and she changed the course of World War II, yet the U.S. Department of State said they couldn’t bring her on as a diplomat. But in terms of portraying her, the secrecy was the big challenge. I had letters she’d written, but how do you know the soul of the human being you’re playing when they don’t give interviews, when you don’t have their voice to listen to? I interviewed her living relatives and learned details, like how she wore a snake bracelet to school, or she was the pirate chief in the school play, or she was always in pain because of her leg. Those details gave me a sense of her determination and grit, like: “I have a mission and I’m going to do it.”

**Greenfield:** Afterward, the people in charge of those secret histories, who are going to be running international agencies, are not women. Women are allowed in during the war, but after that, they’re supposed to get off the stage. It’s this double bind, and women’s records get lost. Even Elizebeth’s family knew very little. I was talking with one of her grandnephews, and he said she would always say she was a secretary in the Navy during the war. Not unusual. That was, in fact, what many female codebreakers were told to say: “I’m a secretary in the Navy.” “I do clerical work for the Navy.” And everyone would believe it, because that’s what women were supposed to do. Initially Elizebeth and her husband worked closely together on codebreaking, but later she was not allowed to know about his work because she was lower ranking. He knew something about her work, however, because he was so high up as a codebreaker. This secrecy between them was one of the terrible prices they paid. Elizebeth and her husband lived with it all their lives.

**Steinman:** At the end of World War II, Elizebeth is laid off and told to go about her business. She doesn’t get a full pension. She goes off into obscurity. And who takes credit for all of her work? J. Edgar Hoover. The FBI did not have codebreaking capability during World War II. That all came from Elizebeth’s unit. They took every single secret message that Elizebeth’s team decrypted and put an FBI label on it, so it went into the archives as FBI work. They physically obscured her history, and when she was asked later about her life after World War II, one of the most poignant things she’s quoted as saying is: “I entered a vast dome of silence.” If she had been a man, she would have been getting medals and promotions, she would have been pulled up like all those other World War II heroes who rose through the ranks and catapulted to the upper echelons of government agencies and business because of their World War II accomplishments. She was shown the door. That’s how people are brought along in society. That combination of sexism and secrecy never ceases to appall me.
Greenfield: We tell these stories to demonstrate that there are so many women we have not heard about and to illuminate a history of bias. We have to understand how that system of bias works and how it has worked in the past. To get anywhere now, we have to understand both that women are capable and that there are a great many systemic obstacles to getting the kind of equal treatment that we would like to see.

Thomas: Which is relevant right now, in the pandemic. I have a newborn baby and a first grader who’s homeschooling. I work. My husband works. And while I have an amazing, supportive husband who more than contributes his 50%, in general women are being required in the pandemic landscape to step back because our children are home, and who’s going to monitor them on a computer all day long? Look how far we’ve come, but still we’re being asked to take over the childcare responsibilities when we’re also working full-time.

Greenfield: That was one of the questions I had: How did Elizabeth do it? What exactly were her arrangements? Because it’s not magic. It’s not, “Wow, watch her triumph, and here she goes.” I want to know how she pulls it off, because I’m busy trying to pull off my own act. There are times when she has housekeeping help, childcare. There are sections of her life where she doesn’t, and she’s saying, “I can barely cope. I’m sorry, I won’t be able to take that project on.” There’s one point when, because both she and her husband are working very long hours during the war, she arranges for a local restaurant to deliver meals to her son because she can’t get any housekeeping help. That part of the story needs to be told so that when women run into these roadblocks, they understand they’re not the first ones to face this. Many very capable women have also thrown up their hands and said, “What do I do now?” It’s not your fault that you are finding this hard. I think if a story can help you to understand that, then it’s doing some good work in this world.

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ABOVE, L–R: Virginia Hall, an American who worked with the U.K.’s clandestine Special Operations Executive (SOE) and the U.S. Office of Strategic Services, received the Distinguished Service Cross in 1945.

Noor Inayat Khan of the Women’s Auxiliary Air Force, before she was recruited in 1942 to join the SOE as a radio operator.

Vera May Atkins, a British intelligence officer who worked in the French Section of the SOE from 1940 to 1945.

Elizabeth Smith Friedman, cryptanalyst and pioneer in U.S. cryptology, in the 1940s.

Photographs L–R: GL Archive/Alamy Stock Photo; © Imperial War Museums; GL Archive/Alamy Stock Photo; Alpha Historica/Alamy Stock Photo

Histories in the Making
Fox Maura: Writing in the stories of women means rewriting male history as well. How can we think about these things in a new way that avoids that clash? Or maybe we just have to clash with history as it’s been taught.

Thomas: Another character in A Call to Spy is Noor Inayat Khan, a Muslim pacifist and a princess who volunteers and is trained as the first female wireless operator. When she was in training, her male supervisors wrote reports saying things like, “If this girl’s a spy, I’m Winston Churchill.” But she goes on to serve in the most dangerous job in Paris and is eventually captured and tortured. And she never gives up any information. So one of my jobs in writing the screenplay was to dig deeper than the male-written archival record. It was the same with Virginia, who knew she was putting her life on the line. They told her, “You have a 50/50 chance of survival,” and she said, “When can I go?”

Steinman: In the early founding days of the OSS (Office of Strategic Services), which is the precursor to the CIA, Elizabeth is asked to provide the OSS with encryption capabilities. She creates their first set of codes that enable them to send messages among each other and gives them the capability to decrypt their first messages as well. It’s fair to say that the OSS wouldn’t have gotten off to the start it got off to without Elizabeth’s team. This intersects with Virginia’s life and makes me wonder, wouldn’t Virginia have liked to have known Elizabeth? Wouldn’t they have liked to have mentor-y lunches, bringing each other through the ranks? In a different universe, they could have been colleagues and a support system for each other.

Greenfield: High-ranking women often didn’t even know that the others existed, and that is another reason these stories disappeared. It’s hard enough to tell the stories of women whose lives were not hidden. By their very nature, women’s lives tend not to be archived, and when the official role they’re given doesn’t reflect what they’re actually doing, their stories are even further obscured.

Greenfield: I hope the world is starting to understand that women really do hold up half the sky, that half our stories are with women and that we have to dig for them. I think of my work as being like that of a codebreaker. I take fragmentary messages and try to piece them together. Often, they’re written to deliberately obscure the truth, and I have to find ways of penetrating them. I do that because women have not gotten all the attention they deserve from historians. And we are so lucky that Elizabeth left an archive, but it’s not the archive of somebody who wants a hagiography. She left records of her doubts and disappointments and challenges and failures. She wanted us to write complicated stories about her. We are in an age where we can really tell complicated stories about women’s lives, stories that echo our own complicated lives. And we can learn from those, we can be inspired by them, and we can use them to create new stories for ourselves.

This interview has been edited for clarity and space.
My husband and I moved to the Navajo Reservation nearly six years ago to become “rez docs.” I’m a pediatrician; he’s an internist. We completed two monthlong rotations in Shiprock, N.M., during our training, and friends and family offered constant praise for our decision to work with a marginalized population in the middle of what they perceived as a barren desert.

At first, I accepted this praise, feeling that my work here was righteous. But this pandemic has put into clearer focus the complexity of my place here. It has made me a better doctor, broken my heart and left me in awe of the strength and resilience of the Diné (Navajo people).

Our presence here—the doctors swooping in from elsewhere, the outside support, especially during the pandemic—hasn’t absolved white people of the structural racism and trauma inflicted on the Diné. It certainly didn’t protect this community from Covid-19. The helicopter transports to bigger hospitals off the reservation three, four and five times a day over the past year all carried Navajo patients.

We “outsiders” may share a zip code with our patients, but our lives and opportunities are entirely different. If you drew a color map depicting Covid-19 cases per capita, the government housing neighborhood where many non-native doctors and nurses live would be an island of light yellow—indicating negligible numbers—amid a Covid-saturated sea of eggplant.
This disparity has nothing to do with doctors’ stellar public health adherence. It’s about our privilege and power. Early in the pandemic, my husband felt ill at work. He had access to immediate testing and then walked to an on-call apartment, where he quarantined while awaiting his result. When it came back negative three days later, he returned home. Soon after, when our nanny was exposed, my husband and I traded childcare duties for two weeks, taking advantage of our paid sick leave.

Among the Navajo, there is no denial of Covid-19, and everyone wears masks. But there are overcrowded homes full of multi-generational families, grandparents watching grandchildren while parents go to “essential” jobs with limited worker protections. There are underlying health conditions, like obesity and diabetes brought on by a lack of food sovereignty. There are limited places for the sick to isolate.

The stark reality of our patients’ lives crystallized for me at the height of the pandemic. Because children were largely spared the disease, and in-person visits ceased for a time, I was tasked with making phone calls to check on my colleagues’ patients who required home oxygen after being discharged from the hospital. The calls often felt jarringly intimate. On the other end of the line, patients were in bed or out feeding their animals or sitting by their televisions. I imagined their frail figures, a cannula line in their nostrils, struggling to breathe. “Ya’at’eeyah,” I would greet them in Navajo. “How are you feeling? Do you have that pulse oximeter to put on your finger? Can you read me the numbers? Can I have you walk for a couple minutes so I can make sure your oxygen saturation is OK?”

The voices on the other end of the phone were tired, afraid, frustrated, grieving. But they were also funny, strong, kind, resilient and grateful. I made notes about who had recently lost someone or whose spouse or child or mother was hospitalized. I realized my role—perhaps more important than getting their oxygen levels—was to help them carry their fear and grief.

These days, I’m again able to see children and families in-clinic, which has brought for me new priorities. I’ve realized how little can be conveyed in a 15-minute visit if core concerns are left heavy in the air, and so now I take the time to ask every family how they’re doing, who they lost and what is hard. I try to leave space for difficult answers. How can I expect a mother who has just lost her mother to want to discuss infant sleep routines? What adolescent wants to hear about reducing sugar-sweetened beverages when he is coaching three siblings through their remote learning and trying to do his own?

As I write this, I worry about focusing on the hard before mentioning the strong, a mistake I often observe among family, friends and the media when discussing under-resourced populations. There is historical trauma here, but there is also a long history of rising up and overcoming. The Diné have a deep commitment to protecting each other and their culture. They have endured through the forced removal and attempted genocide of the Long Walk of 1864, the boarding school era and the ongoing structural and abject racism of today to preserve their language, stories, land and traditions.

Many lives on the Navajo Nation have been lost in the pandemic, but many were saved because people protected their elders, stayed home when they could and weren’t selfish. Vaccination rates and vaccine acceptance are better here than almost anywhere in the country, an effort led by Navajo people.

When I reflect on what I will carry with me from this time, I realize it’s the thing my white privilege caused me to miss when I first got here. Despite this tragic year and the ongoing disparities and oppression the Diné face, their strength and resilience remain. That’s the most important story.
The Myth of the Model Minority

By Danny Jin ’20

Soon Chung Park, 74; Hyun Jung Grant, 51; Suncha Kim, 69; Yong Ae Yue, 63; Delaina Ashley Yaun, 33; Paul Andre Michels, 54; Xiaojie Tan, 49; Daoyou Feng, 44. In the days after these eight people—six of whom identified as Asian women—were shot and killed at Atlanta-area spas, it was astounding how little we learned about them. Major U.S. publications focused on the shooter, parroting narratives from law enforcement: that the shooter said he was not motivated by racism; that he’d had a “bad day”; that he had a “sexual addiction.” They left out details reported by local Korean-language newspapers, including that a witness heard the shooter say he would “kill all Asians.” These gaps indicate more than just a language barrier; they show the broader invisibility of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPIs) and the struggles they face.

While some media accounts linked former President Donald J. Trump’s anti-Asian rhetoric to recent violence, immigration laws reflected and reinforced ideas about “yellow peril” well before Trump. The first restrictive federal immigration law, the Page Act of 1875, was passed out of fear that Chinese women, whose bodies have long been exoticized and fetishized by white men, would threaten the institution of marriage. Immigration enforcement identified almost all Chinese women as sex workers and, under this law, prevented their entry.

U.S. military engagements also furthered perceptions of Asian women as sexual objects available to white men and perceptions of Asian nations as threats to the white world. U.S. military bases started popping up in Asia near the time of the 1898 colonization of the Philippines. Near those bases, soldiers engaged with economically disadvantaged sex workers and brought ideas about Asian women’s bodies back home. Indeed, the Atlanta-area shooter viewed his victims as a “temptation” he wanted to “eliminate.”

When U.S. society assimilated people of Asian descent, it refused to see them as anything more than submissive, robotic workers. Often, Asian immigrants were excluded from unions that won gains for white workers. Today the “model minority” stereotype posits that AAPIs climbed the social ladder by putting their heads down and working hard rather than complaining about racism or working conditions. It relies on a related myth that all AAPIs are wealthy, obscuring past and present economic exploitation: Asians and their descendants have the highest rate of income inequality in the U.S. as well as the highest poverty rate in New York City. The “model minority” narrative pins responsibility for hardships on individuals, shifting blame away from an economy that runs on undercompensated work performed disproportionately by people racialized as “other” and pits AAPIs against an implied “unmodel” minority.

Our inability to situate anti-Asian racism within larger histories might not come as a surprise, given how little attention we pay to AAPIs. Look no further than Williams, where Asian American studies often gets confused with Asian studies and where AAPI students and faculty have long felt their voices go unrecognized. In a scarcely discussed bit of college history, a fraternity rejected a Korean student in 1961 over some members’ concerns that they “could not live with him.” Despite three decades of student activism, an Asian American studies program didn’t become a reality during my time as a student. Affirming these lives as worthwhile to study is the least the college could do.

Editor’s Note: In the spring of 2019, Williams’ Curricular Planning Committee committed to establishing an Asian American studies program. The first steps in that process have begun.

Image courtesy of washingtonhistory.org, Edward N. Fuller Ephemera Collection
On Tuesday, March 16, while eating out with a friend, I received a text: “Just holding you close in my heart tonight.” It was from a Taiwanese American friend and New York State Assembly member, Yuh-Line Niou. I thought she was referring to an alarming uptick in anti-Asian crimes in recent days, and I wanted to tell her how strange I’d felt, hours earlier, when I’d requested that my friend drive from the southern tip of Manhattan, where he lived, all the way up to Harlem to meet me for dinner. I’d texted him apologetically, explaining that I no longer felt safe traveling alone after dark. “The anti-Asian hate is real,” I wrote. My friend was gracious and accommodating, but in texting those words I’d felt anxious: Was I surrendering to an ill-founded paranoia? I knew Yuh-Line would understand how I was feeling. What I would not know for hours was that her loving text was a response to the deadliest crime against Asians in the U.S. in recent memory: a killing spree in Atlanta, carried out by 21-year-old gunman Robert Aaron Long, that took the lives of eight people, six of whom were women of Asian descent.

Anti-Asian hate incidents have historically been underreported, but they appear to be on the rise in the U.S. Since last March, Stop AAPI Hate, a nonprofit that tracks discrimination against Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, has received nearly 3,800 reports of incidents ranging from verbal harassment to physical assault. In a survey of several police departments, the Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism, at California State University, San Bernardino, tallied 122 anti-Asian hate crimes across 16 American cities in 2020, up from 49 in 2019. To live through this period as an Asian American is to feel defenseless against a virus as well as a virulent strain of scapegoating. It is to feel trapped in an American tragedy while being denied the legitimacy of being an American.

One day last July, when I was walking home from the grocery store, a man accosted me. I couldn’t hear him—I had headphones on—but his voice grew louder until I was forced to turn in his direction. For a second, I thought he was flagging me down to ask for directions. Then he made a gesture with his hands in front of his chest and grinned, licking his lips. The only thing I heard him say—he raised his voice, to make sure I heard—was “chin chong kung flu!” At this, I raised my phone to take a photo of the man, and he posed for it, the self-satisfied grin never leaving his face.

I initially thought I’d snapped the picture to document the harassment as something real. Now I can’t help but think that I was also determined to capture the split second in which sexual interest transmutes into racist scorn. Misogyny and racism have never lived neatly in their separate categories, and the bodies of Asian women have long been objectified and abhorred, fetishized and exoticized. Asian women have been hypersexualized and then demonized for their projected hypersexuality.

A former roommate of the Atlanta shooter, Tyler Bayless, has described Long’s deep religious faith as well as his inability to control his sexual desires. “I’ll never forget him looking at me and saying, ‘I’m falling out of God’s grace,’” Bayless told The New York Times, adding that guilt and shame seemed to consume his roommate.

It is an unbearable irony how acquainted I am with the feeling of shame. Every time I am called a “chink” or hear a part of my body appraised by a stranger, I feel a familiar heat rising within me. The women Long killed may have been familiar with shame, too. One of his victims, Hyun Jung Grant, was a single parent who for years told her son that she worked at a “makeup parlor.” Grant might even have sympathized with Long, who is two years younger than her son. What’s shameful is that Long could not bring himself to show any sympathy for her.

In a virtual campus event that drew hundreds of attendees, Distinguished Visiting Professor of Education Kelsey M. Jones ’08 and noted legal scholar, advocate and author Michelle Alexander discussed community building, fierce love and the messy, courageous path to justice.
Kelsey M. Jones ’08: We have folks in the audience who are just starting to carve out their paths and making choices about who they want to be in the fight for racial justice. Can you share some of the experiences that led to the choices you made in becoming a civil rights lawyer, leader, author and educator?

Michelle Alexander: Our family did not have a lot of money, but they did everything they could to shelter me from the racial realities of the world. I went to Vanderbilt in Nashville, Tenn. I came from the West Coast, from a very protected environment, and I was not ready. The racial pain and trauma I suffered, as well as a painful awareness of my own ignorance, propelled me. I wanted to do what I could as a civil rights lawyer to fight for justice and for a world in which we all could belong. When I think about young folks starting out, I would say: “Do what brings you joy.” And I’d ask: “What are your natural gifts and talents?” But also: “Where does it hurt? What don’t you understand?” I would have never written *The New Jim Crow* if it hadn’t been for a terrible mistake.

I was working as a civil rights lawyer at the ACLU, directing the Racial Justice Project, representing victims of racial profiling and police violence. I didn’t believe a young Black man when he told me a story about being framed by the police. I was searching for the perfect plaintiff and unwilling to represent someone who had a felony record. He tried to tell me: “No, look, I was framed.” He asked, “What’s to become of me? I can’t get a job anywhere because of my felony record. I have to live in my grandma’s basement. I can’t even get food stamps.” He said, “Good luck finding one young Black man in my neighborhood they haven’t gotten to yet.” And with that, he grabbed his notes and papers and started ripping them up, throwing them in the air, and walked out, saying, “You’re no better than the police. I can’t believe I trusted you.” Several months after that, the Oakland Riders police scandal was broken. A gang of officers, otherwise known as a drug task force, had been rounding up, stopping, frisking, searching and planting drugs on folks, beating them up. One of the main officers charged was the officer the young man identified to me. I realized, he’s right—I am no better than the police. The minute he told me he was a felon, I stopped listening. Even civil rights lawyers, people devoting their lives and their careers to fighting the good fight, were on the wrong side of justice. I wasn’t just wrong for not representing an innocent guy. I was wrong because I thought there was some path to racial and social justice that did not include him.

Jones: Even the perfect case doesn’t matter. That’s not how justice works.

Alexander: We shouldn’t have to prove our worthiness. There’s a long history of civil rights lawyers searching for the innocent one, the person who defies the prevailing racial stereotypes and proves to white people that we are deserving of respect, dignity and inclusion. That’s a failed strategy. It will never end mass incarceration, mass criminalization and mass deportation. It denies the reality that we are all flawed, and we all make mistakes. This idea that the criminals are them—the others—is a lie. It’s important for those of us who do not have felony records hanging around our necks and have been able to get college degrees or graduate degrees to remind folks that it’s not because we’ve done right. It’s because we haven’t been caught. We haven’t been punished relentlessly for the mistakes we’ve made. It’s not because we’re better. It’s because we’ve been afforded more grace.

Jones: In an interview a few years ago, you talked about the common error of imagining progress as linear. For folks who feel that sense of urgency, who want to change the institution, how would you encourage them to embrace progress as nonlinear, specifically when we think about missteps and mistakes we’re going to make?
"We all find ourselves at those crossroads moments where we're wondering, ‘Can I be true to myself? What will it cost me? And is it really worth it?’"

Michelle Alexander

we’re going to bring George Floyd back. There’s no amount of money that could be paid by the U.S. government to repair the harm of slavery. We have to be more imaginative, creative and courageous as we think about what it takes to try to repair, to the extent that we can, harm that has been done—recognizing that so much of it is irreparable—while we commit ourselves completely to the radical change necessary to ensure those harms never occur again. What is so promising about many of the movements that have been born is that they are forward-looking, asking, “What does it take to reimagine justice? What would a world look like without police and prisons? What do we need to invest in instead of the punitive apparatus we have today in order to ensure thriving, healthy, safe communities in which it is utterly unnecessary and unthinkable to have the level of police, patrolling and militarism we see in our communities?” We’re recognizing both the messiness of it and the necessity of abandoning this pretense that we can tinker with this machine and somehow fix it. We have to think much bigger and bolder.

Alexander: I heard an interview with poet Nikki Giovanni a while back where she said, “There’s no such thing as justice after the fact.” Once the harm has been done, the idea that there’s some way to balance the scales and make things right is mythology. There is no repairing the harm of slavery. There is no repairing for the family of George Floyd. The idea that we can do justice by simply arresting those cops and locking them up and then justice has been done—no. Justice is being in right relationship with one another so that no one ever has a knee on their neck for more than eight minutes while they’re calling out to their dead mother. It’s organizing our relationships with one another and our society and government in a way that minimizes the potential for trauma, harm or injustice. A lot of times, we look for what’s going to make it right. We seek a punitive form of justice, the eye for an eye, or we imagine there are some elaborate machinations we can go through that will somehow clean the slate, and then we’ll be able to start over. It’s much messier than that. There is no way

Jones: Many of these ways of repair—this is how you make it right, an apology and “X” thing—we learn when we’re young. It takes a lot of creativity to think about something different.

Alexander: Yes. It’s exciting, hard and painful, beautiful and terrible. One of the historians and activists I admire most, Vincent Harding, would ask: “Is America possible?” His point was that nothing like this has ever been done before—this attempt to create a multiracial, multiethnic, multigender, multifaith, egalitarian democracy out of the ashes of slavery and genocide. The fact that it’s hard, and sometimes feels impossible, shouldn’t surprise us. It’s going to take an enormous amount of creativity, courageousness, experimentation, failing and messing up and trying again as we fumble our way as heroically as we can. I hope we’ll extend a lot more grace to one another in this process. We don’t have to beat each other. There’s enough of that being done to us.

Jones: There are folks who are having a hard time loving themselves, and folks who feel, “You’re asking me to show love and compassion to a group of people or to a person who is actively dehumanizing me with their words and their behaviors.” How do we root ourselves in grace when we have these challenges to love in our work for justice?
Alexander: We think of love as niceness, in this Hallmark way. The word has lost meaning. What you just said about loving ourselves is key. When I was working as a civil rights lawyer, and we were waging lobbying and media campaigns, we would often imagine that what we needed to do was figure out how to persuade the so-called middle, mainstream, white swing voter. If we could only persuade a certain percentage of them and tip them into our column, then we could win whatever legislation we were trying to pass. At some point, it became clear to me that chasing after the white swing voter was not the path to liberation for our people and that we had to ask ourselves, “What would it look like for us to really show love for ourselves and one another?” Rather than asking white people to stop doing this to us, what would it look like for us to show up for one another in a real way, to fight for one another, to speak up and speak out for one another, to organize in support of one another, to be active in solidarity with people in our community and beyond who are fighting similar fights in deep solidarity, rooted in love? I just saw the new Fred Hampton film (Judas and the Black Messiah), which shows the Black Panthers were motivated by love for their communities and for the young people, wanting to feed them and care for them and protect and defend. That’s a form of revolutionary love. It’s not about necessarily hating the others. That can be a fierce love. It can be a tender love. I’m grateful that we see so many people determined to do long-term organizing work in our communities. I credit organizers since Ferguson. People kept working, kept organizing, kept building—even when the cameras went away. That work to keep going when the money starts to run out, when the cameras go away, when it begins to seem hopeless again, when the videos and the police killings keep circulating, to keep going, that’s got to be coming from a place of love.

Jones: The theme of this year’s Claiming Williams Day is “From Racial Justice to Restoration.” It’s very much rooted in grassroots organizing. The day originally came out of the activism of a group called Stand With Us that I was a part of as a senior here. It was incredibly transformational. I learned a lot about loving myself alongside folks who were part of that movement. In the 2007-2008 school year, there were many racist, sexist and homophobic moments thatharmed the well-being and safety of students, faculty and staff. I remember feeling so energized and inspired to act—and also devastated because it was the first time that some of the people who’d known me for years realized I was a Black woman with a Black woman’s perspective and needed to be seen, valued and loved. In that moment, we were not welcomed with open arms by the college, broadly. We were called hypersensitive. We were told by peers and by faculty that we should find more palatable language in response to unpalatable injustices. They could not understand what it was like to feel that pain in your bones. Like the young man you described earlier who, at a certain point of frustration—like, all you can do is rip up the paper and say, “I’m on my own.” It’s painful for folks to accept what you’re saying when you’re saying it about the place they love, a place that’s been very good to them. So we had all this connectedness in the community, but also loneliness trying to speak with people who were skeptical and defensive.

Alexander: Learning to be true to yourself is one of the most important skills. When I was on the faculty at Stanford Law School, I was hired as an associate professor to direct the civil rights clinics, and I was thinking about transferring to the tenure track. There had never been a Black female tenured faculty member before. A lot of people were saying, “You need to be the one.” I told folks I wanted to write this book, The New Jim Crow. And they were like, “What? You want to write a book arguing that our criminal justice system functions more like a racial caste system than a system of crime prevention and control? Have you lost your mind?” It was long before Trayvon Martin, long before Ferguson, at a time when people were still calling Black men superpredators. People didn’t believe in what I was trying to do. One of my closest mentors said, “Wait till you get tenure, and then you can write whatever kind of crazy stuff you want to say. But you can’t say that. You will ruin your career. You want people to take you seriously. You’ve gotten your education. Don’t throw it away.” I remember having this feeling of utter aloneness. We all find ourselves at those crossroads moments where we're wondering, “Can I be true to myself? What will it cost me? And is it really worth it?” I ended up deciding to leave Stanford Law School and go to Ohio State. John Powell was there, leading the Kirwan Institute [for the Study of Race and Ethnicity], and he said, “You come here and you write whatever you want to write. We’ll support you.” I was able to connect with people willing to support my vision. I’ve heard [activist] Mariame Kaba talk about the importance of joining a group. Even if it’s a matter of grabbing a handful of people around you or figuring out how to connect to a friend, form a group that can sustain and support you. None of us is meant to fight this alone. I’ve formed women of color writing circles. I’ve joined activist circles. It’s essential for our organizing. It’s essential for our activism. But it’s also essential for our mental, emotional and spiritual health.

This interview has been edited for clarity and space.
We are currently witnessing the death throes of white supremacy in our country. And it is not a pretty sight.

As someone who has spent the major part of my adult life trying to understand the history of the American South, it has been, in the immortal words of Yogi Berra, “déjà vu all over again.” I had the strong feeling as I watched the Trump years unfold that I was seeing something I never thought would happen again on a national scale: the elevation of a racist demagogue to the White House.

Racist demagogues were my stock in trade as I spent years teaching courses on both the Old and the New South.

In the antebellum period, it was Alexander H. Stephens of Georgia, the vice president of the Confederacy, who bragged in 1861 that the South had turned a vital corner in seceding from the Union. Thomas Jefferson and other founders were clearly in error when they argued “that the enslavement of the African was in violation to the laws of nature.” Nothing could be further from the truth, Stephens insisted: “Our new Government is founded upon exactly the opposite idea; its foundations are laid, its cornerstone rests, upon the great truth that the negro is not equal to the white man.”

This theme was carried forward into the New South years with nauseating frequency.

In his inaugural address as governor of Alabama in 1963, George Wallace insisted that white Southerners were being subjected by liberal Northerners to the “false doctrine of communistic amalgamation,” an outrage that would lead to a “mongrel unit of one” in the South “under a single all-powerful government.”

Wrong. As soon as Donald J. Trump rode down that escalator in Trump Tower and announced his candidacy, I had a terrible feeling the country was heading for deep and, to me, familiar trouble.

Unfortunately, we were.

Starting with his initial attack on Mexican immigrants, characterizing them as murderers and rapists, continuing on through his Muslim travel ban, his “very fine people, on both sides” comment following the 2017 neo-Nazi rally in Charlottesville, Va., to his final attacks on minority voters in cities like Atlanta, Philadelphia, Detroit and Milwaukee, Trump played the race card over and over again. It was the centerpiece of his “Stop the Steal” campaign: Black and brown voters had stripped the vast majority of his voters—white voters—not only of their president but also, as they saw it, of their God-given birthright: the right to rule.

The result was totally predictable—a lynch mob.

The Trump presidency culminated in the vicious attack on the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021. The attackers even erected a noose and scaffold on the Capitol grounds in case anyone might be confused about their intent. Their cry of “Hang Mike Pence!” ringing through the halls of the Capitol seemed almost like an afterthought. Anyone who has studied lynching in this country had seen it all before.

By mid-century, white people will be in a minority in the U.S. Demography may not be destiny, but it is one hell of a barometer. And you do not have to be a weatherman to see which way the wind is blowing. White nationalists certainly do and have become more frantic and violent in their response to these inexorable changes, as the events of Jan. 6 so clearly indicate. But as a historian of the South, I think we can take hope: Time, much less the arc of justice, is not on their side.
What Will Liberate Us

By DJ Polite '13

Some public figures have declared the conviction of former police officer Derek Chauvin as “justice served.” George Floyd is dead. Justice does not occur if harm to communities or holes in families are neither repaired nor restored.

How can we possibly achieve justice when those who share George Floyd’s racial identity face persistent systemic oppression? Broader than the killing of another unarmed Black man, the events of 2020 clearly demonstrated a systematic onslaught against the African American community. We bore the brunt of the Covid-19 pandemic. We disproportionately lost jobs in the economic fallout. Food became even more scarce as food deserts spread overnight. Given the reliance on employer-based health insurance, we lost access to medical care along with our jobs. We were blocked from small-business loan programs, and, as a result, more than a third of African American businesses are now on the verge of collapse. Then came an election where the votes of Black communities were attacked, and states looked to further restrict voting rights so that such a record turnout never occurs again.

Justice and freedom from this form of oppression will not come through singular or even widespread acts of momentary heroism. Putting a more compassionate face on grave inhumanity is not justice—and it will not liberate us. Liberation will only come when systems are replaced. This is harder than individuals promising to “do better.” It demands more precision than the vague goal to “end racism.” These are aspirations and mantras, not plans, and a goal without a plan is just a wish.

Racist oppression is a system that relies on a series of policies, norms and institutions. And so I would argue that there is only one suitable way to achieve some semblance of justice, one that goes beyond merely convicting Chauvin: removing the source of the Black community’s anger, anxiety and fear by abolishing the police. That system is at the heart of the injustice in this country, and systems cannot be reformed and then be expected to act differently from their original design. Abolition asks us to imagine not a world without public safety but one with a creative mandate to build new structures that perform the tasks of policing efficiently, effectively, humanely and equitably.

When officers can no longer intimidate, abuse or terrorize, the promise “to protect and to serve” can be fulfilled. Abolition will not solve the health or economic calamity befalling many in the African American community. It will not reverse decades of inequity. The dismantling of the predatory police state will not equal liberation, just as the abolition of slavery did not fully liberate freedpeople. But modern policing is broken, and its weight is unduly felt in minority communities. Justice will only be achieved when Black people are liberated from the numerous systems that serve to inhibit their individual and collective potential. The modern police state must be the first chain unshackled.
Economists today interpret low wages as low skills and use the word “unskilled” as an epithet to describe the low-wage workforce: unskilled workers “deserve” low wages; they have no distinguishable skills and are therefore interchangeable. If they suffer unemployment, it can be ignored as the “natural rate” of unemployment, which cannot be lowered without accelerating inflation. Unemployment becomes an incentive for low-wage workers to get trained and join the high-wage workforce.

Economists choose not to interpret the fact that when Covid-19 struck, the temporary loss of millions of private-sector service worker jobs was in fact a trade-off to benefit society by reducing the spread of the disease—and therefore worthy of compensation for lost income. This is because, historically in the U.S., service workers have been slaves or recent immigrants and mostly women. They cook, serve food, clean, groom people, make beds, take care of children and older adults—in short, “they” serve “us.” Modern economics was founded in the late 19th and early 20th centuries by people who believed in eugenics and viewed the races of service workers as inferior. These foundational beliefs still infect the discipline.

Perhaps this helps to explain why, despite recent research showing that raising the minimum wage would be good, so many economists insist that it would be counterproductive. Economists equate value with money: Cheap things have little value and thus cannot be essential.

Despite the pandemic forcing many people to appreciate the skill with which their favorite restaurant meals were prepared or their children tended, economists continue to wave off that workforce as unskilled. Paying “low skill” workers more would only encourage people to be lazy about acquiring skills; so, economists cannot admit into their theories or models the centrality of these workers’ jobs or industries.

Furthermore, while we have all seen the high level of U.S. inequality laid bare, we need to focus on how and why we accepted the depth of this inequality in the first place. For market signals to work in economics, the relative prices of things matter. The market will still function if the lowest-wage worker makes a decent living, as long as the highest-paid worker still earns thousands of times more, a price signal that makes people want to acquire more rewarded skills.

We have moved from a sick moral judgment about “deserving poor” to one of “deserving workers.” This judgment once held that people who were not working didn’t deserve society’s help. Now it holds that some are no longer deserving of society’s help because they are not skilled. In contrast, consider that when Wall Street tied itself in knots during the Great Recession of 2008, the nation instantly dumped billions of dollars on a tiny share of American workers to preserve their “vital” industry. The efficient flow of money is vital to an economy much as the heart’s movement of blood is vital to the body. But the stomach, kidneys and intestines are equally vital organs, and their failure will also kill you.

When it started to be evident that the pandemic and its economic fallout had huge, racially disparate effects, the discussion seemed to shift from being about why such a large share of Covid-19 cases were Black to how Black workers had higher comorbidities. Lost from view were the data clearly pointing to Black workers being in more dangerous positions for catching the virus, whether working in Amazon warehouses, hospitals or meatpacking plants.

Economists have been silent as the nation let market forces concentrate its health care delivery system. We’ve allowed our medical system to increasingly organize around economic efficiency and our labor markets to substitute efficiency for human dignity. We see the consequences in the radically uneven distribution of the human tragedies of Covid-19.

Let us hope the time will come when we truly understand how much we got wrong. Hopefully, it will bring introspection on deeper issues about our assumptions and why we hold them.
During the Civil War, the physical suffering of African Americans as slaves, refugees, military laborers and enlisted soldiers was laid bare to the public. African Americans, fleeing plantations where they had been enslaved, appeared at Union army camps, often in need of medical treatment but also ready to labor, looking for protection and some measure of freedom. As observers and participants recounted the physical conditions of African Americans in the midst of this war, white medical staff and African American soldiers found that the hospital setting provided a unique place for reflections about freedom. African American soldiers, as they lay wounded or ill in Army hospitals, dictated eloquent appeals to President Abraham Lincoln in which they demanded medical care for themselves and their families as part of their due as soldiers and soon-to-be citizens.

After emancipation, medical care continued to appear in discussions of labor and politics. Black people continued to resist any system that denied them autonomy in accessing medical treatment. African American patients and practitioners found themselves in a new medical landscape—one newly shaped both by scientific discovery and by a government that was in the process of recognizing and defining their citizenship. During this time, African American medical culture developed in a variety of significant ways. Understandably, many freedpeople developed conflicting attitudes toward health and healing. While some continued to rely on the folk medicine that had served as an effective survival mechanism during slavery, a few aspired to become practitioners of modern medicine. The latter hoped to move toward a medical culture where African Americans could attend quality medical schools and practice medicine in hospitals and dispensaries. African Americans also desired modern scientific care for themselves and their families and found imaginative ways to raise collectively the funds to establish medical and nursing schools as well as hospitals. Black doctors began to publish research and findings in Black medical journals.

These Black medical schools and journals have a specific historical significance beyond their pathbreaking existence and the opportunities they provided to aspiring Black doctors. They serve as proof of a shift in African Americans’ sense of themselves within professional medical culture and modern science. In the first generation after freedom, African Americans tried to move away both from the folk traditions of slavery and from dependence on white largess. This shift, however, would necessitate a new trust in science and medical authority.

In African American communities, the progression toward citizenship and the transition to modern medicine were beset with obstacles both ideological and logistic. Life expectancy for African Americans lagged well behind that of white Southerners, as the former fell victim to diseases and to the effects of poor sanitation and nutrition. Many lacked cash to pay for medicines, doctors or hospital fees, yet they needed bones set, wounds cleaned and cared for, infections cured and pain relieved. For free African Americans, throwing themselves on the mercy of their employer, municipal government or nation-state often meant accepting labels of dependency and degeneracy. However, even without cash funds or relationships with white masters to call upon, African American individuals and communities mobilized the resources that freedom had bestowed to procure medical care. Organizing themselves into brotherhoods and associations, they found ways to provide their members funds for medical expenses. In their election of officers, public parades and pooling of resources to provide medical care for themselves and indigent African Americans, members of these societies took active roles in philanthropy, self-reliance and citizenship. In the first generation after freedom, African Americans both enslaved and free, deployed the same skills they used in more traditionally political forums—balancing self-interest with the longer-term interest of their community, deciding who belonged to their community and who did not, and negotiating with different actors for funds, treatment and recognition from the U.S. government.

Indeed, the clinic, the hospital and the dispensary were important arenas of African Americans’ post-emancipation political action. The routines of a modern hospital, lack of adequate care in a Union
army camp or an employer’s intolerance of absence from work could be reminders of conditions under slavery or of white supremacy more broadly. Black people creatively asserted themselves as independent, discerning and deserving patients under all of these conditions.

These were political acts. In articulating their medical needs, organizing their finances and demanding quality medical care, African Americans attempted to carve out a tolerable place for themselves in American culture—a culture that had for decades been instrumental in denying them rights and personhood.

Text is excerpted from Gretchen Long’s book *Doctoring Freedom: The Politics of African American Medical Care in Slavery and Emancipation.*
In the early morning hours of April 27, 1913, Newt Lee, a Black night watchman, discovered 13-year-old Mary Phagan’s battered and sawdust-covered body next to the incinerator in the basement of the National Pencil Co. Phagan had gone to the factory the previous day to claim her final pay after she was laid off five days earlier. She never returned home.

The autopsy on the young white girl revealed death by strangulation. While rape was never confirmed, there was evidence of extreme genital violence that explained the condition of her blood-soaked underwear. The rest of Phagan’s body was equally bloodied and bruised. A blood-spattered strip torn from the petticoat of her dress was wrapped around her neck, where a seven-foot cord tied into a slipknot also remained cinched. The entire front of her body was caked with dirt and covered in scratches, giving the appearance that she had been dragged by the ankles face down. Her arms were crossed reverently over her chest, giving detectives the impression that whoever had dumped her body felt at least some sympathy for her.

No compassion was shown toward Leo Frank, the Jewish factory manager who was charged with Phagan’s murder. Frank, who had just completed a term as president of the Atlanta Chapter of B’nai B’rith, was alleged to have been the last
person to see Phagan alive. Police also believed that Frank behaved suspiciously and attempted to implicate Lee, the night watchman, in the grisly murder. To use law enforcement rhetoric, Frank exhibited “guilty behavior.”

Presuming Frank to be the culprit, Georgia Solicitor General Hugh Dorsey pursued a speedy court case against him that pivoted around circumstantial evidence. The state relied heavily on the wildly inconsistent testimony of Jim Conley, a Black janitor at the factory who at one point claimed that Frank enlisted him as an accessory after the fact to help move Phagan’s body to the basement, where it was destined for the incinerator. Conley, who changed his story several times, also alleged that Frank promised him $200 to cremate the body but withheld the money when Conley refused.

Yet Dorsey, in a paradoxical twist of racial fate, eagerly accepted the janitor’s accusation that Frank murdered the teenage girl. (Other observers felt strongly that the custodian had acted alone in committing the crime.) To Dorsey, Frank was more than a murderer.

Dorsey painted a picture of the factory superintendent as a homosexual and sexual pervert who preyed on young girls. Factory employees offered false testimony that Frank had made sexual advances toward them. Dorsey also presented the evidence of a madam at a nearby sex house who alleged that Frank had phoned her several times, seeking a room for himself and a young girl. In an era where it was a “hanging crime” for Black men to have any sexual contact with white women, this racial dictat was swiftly applied to Frank, a Jew. On Aug. 25, 1913, he was found guilty of murdering Phagan. It had taken the jury less than four hours to reach a verdict. Frank was sentenced to death by hanging—certainly satisfying to the crowd that had gathered outside the courthouse each day, shouting, “Hang the Jew:”

For nearly two years, Frank exhausted every legal possibility in an attempt to overturn his conviction. In spite of the many breaches of due process, Georgia’s higher courts rejected his appeals, and the U.S. Supreme Court voted 7-2 against reopening the case. However, on June 21, 1915, Gov. John Slaton commuted Frank’s sentence from capital punishment to life imprisonment, an act that prompted Tom Watson, a Democratic populist who penned several anti-Semitic essays scrutinizing the case in The Jeffersonian and Watson’s Magazine, to advocate for Frank to be lynched. Years later, the historian C. Vann Woodward explained that the influential Watson, through his writings, had “pulled all the stops: Southern chivalry, sectional animus, rape prejudice, class consciousness, agrarian resentment, state pride.” Watson’s work had been enough to cause wary Jewish families to flee Atlanta.

Watson’s essays also incited a prominent group of armed vigilantes who had been outraged by Slaton’s commutation to carry out Frank’s extrajudicial killing. The group of nearly 30 men included Joseph Mackey Brown, the former governor of Georgia; Eugene Herbert Clay, the former mayor of Marietta and later president of the Georgia Senate; E.P. Dobbs, the then mayor of Marietta; and Moultrie McKinley Sessions, a banker and lawyer. Several current and former Cobb County sheriffs also participated. On the night of Aug. 16, 1913, the group, self-dubbed the “Knights of Mary Phagan,” abducted Frank from the prison in Milledgeville and drove him more than 100 miles to Marietta, Ga., where the slain girl had lived. Early the next morning, Frank was hanged with his body facing the direction of Phagan’s house. Frank became possibly the rarest fruit that an oak tree in Georgia had ever borne. He was one of just a few known persons of Jewish descent to be lynched in American history.*

A crowd of men, women and children witnessed the callous spectacle, and souvenir hunters cut away parts of Frank’s clothing. One onlooker, Robert Lee Howell, wanted to cut up pieces of Frank’s body and have them burned. But a local magistrate took a vote whereby those present agreed to have the body returned to Frank’s family intact. Howell, irate, stomped Frank’s chest and face after the body was cut down. Despite promises to punish those responsible, no person was ever charged, and the Atlanta Jewry has still not fully recovered from the trauma of the lynching of Leo Frank.

Instead, Frank’s lynching helped to revive the Ku Klux Klan, which in its second manifestation targeted Catholics, immigrants and Jews alongside African Americans. This cruel renaissance coincided with D.W. Griffith’s controversial silent film The Birth of a Nation, which premiered in 1915. Inspired by Thomas Dixon Jr.’s novel The Clansman, the film portrayed African Americans as sexually wanton and stupid, with Black men especially depicted as lustful toward white women. The film praised the Klan for rescuing white women from the savage and sex-crazed Black man, in the very same manner that the “Knights of Mary Phagan” had avenged her murder by Frank.

Both the book and the film represented the Ku Klux Klan as the South’s saviors after the Civil War. In so doing, they conjured up dreadful memories of the orgy of brutality and violence the Klan engaged in throughout the South to intimidate African Americans while stripping away the political rights Black people had gained in the wake of slavery’s demise. In Georgia alone, the Equal Justice Initiative has documented more than 300 murders and other attacks that were perpetrated during the Reconstruction era.

Whereas the Klan’s racist aggression did not lead to an overthrow of any government, its acts of barbarity, coupled with the compromises and ineffectuality of Republican leaders, led to African Americans being disenfranchised, just as their political aspirations were also curtailed. Outnumbered and outgunned, Black people in most areas did not retaliate against the Klan, and the old Southern, white supremacist order was eventually restored.
The political fallout was predictable. In the period of Reconstruction, 1,465 African Americans held office, including two Black U.S. senators, both from Mississippi—Hiram Revels and Blanche K. Bruce. After Bruce’s term ended in 1881, amid increasing disenfranchisement and racial segregation, it took 132 years for another Black senator, Tim Scott, to be elected to the U.S. Senate from the South. In the same time period, only two Jewish senators were elected from the South, although it is worth mentioning that Benjamin F. Jonas of Louisiana was already serving in office prior to the end of Bruce’s tenure. The second, Richard Stone of Florida, was elected 90 years later, in 1975. The same Klan violence that was inflicted on African Americans throughout the South, and that resulted in Frank’s lynching, ushered in an uninterrupted period of anti-Black and anti-Semitic Southern white intolerance that curtailed Black and Jewish political aspirations—especially the hopes of those seeking a seat in the U.S. Senate.

This prejudice has been notably acute in the state of Georgia. Neither an African American nor a Jewish senator had ever been elected to the Senate from the Peach State. *I found myself reflecting on this arc of history in the wake of the twin victories by Raphael Warnock and Jon Ossoff, who each won runoff elections in Georgia in January 2021, catapulting them to the U.S. Senate. The historic nature of their triumphs flatters more than our typical enthusiasm for notable firsts. Their successes evoked the history of Black activism and the enduring freedom struggle that African Americans have waged to challenge white supremacy. Warnock and Ossoff also overcame the long history of racial hierarchy, Southern resistance and voting suppression that have incapacitated the political interests of other Black and Jewish Georgians hoping to be elected to Congress.*

Warnock and Ossoff won just as the sitting president, Donald J. Trump, and others were vigorously engaged in attempts to overturn the results of the 2020 U.S. presidential election by delegitimizing the largely Black vote in the State of Georgia that propelled Joseph Biden and Kamala Harris (the first African American, South Asian American and female vice president) to a decisive electoral win. Ironically, those delegitimizing efforts culminated in a Klan-like, insurrectionist attack by a Confederate-flag carrying mob on the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021, the day that Congress gathered to formalize Biden’s and Harris’ victory—and only a day after the Georgia runoff elections were held.

Their victories were even more impressive if only because most political observers did not expect them, even after Biden and Harris carried the state in the presidential election. At best, the hopes were that one of the senatorial aspirants, amid the indefatigable work of former Georgia Rep. Stacey Abrams and her nonprofit, Fair Fight Action, to contest inequitable voting practices and to encourage voter turnout during an ongoing pandemic, might prevail, splitting Georgia’s two senate seats. Thus, the stunning sweep by Warnock and Ossoff reverberated politically. In the process, their electoral feats turned a blood-stained, red Georgia—where politics have been intertwined with the maltreatment of Black and Jewish people—blue.

This shocking outcome was captured by Saturday Night Live in an ironic and timely parody called “Blue Georgia” that nods to the anti-liberal politics that have permeated the state’s history since the time of Reconstruction. As restaurant patrons dine on gluten-free avocado toast, a character named Biscuit, played by cast member and Georgia native Kenan Thompson, reads Michelle Obama’s Becoming, or, as he refers to it, “the good book.” The most fitting line in the skit comes when one character, Lee, announces that he is Jewish, to which another character, Skeeter, hurriedly asks, “You know what we do to Jewish people down here? We elect them!”

Sure, in 2021. Demographic shifts have opened the door for such possibilities. But in 1915, a Jew could be lynched in Georgia, just as Leo Frank was—a grim fate even more customary in the lives of African Americans, from the end of the Civil War through the modern-day lynching of Ahmaud Arbery just 11 months before the unlikely election of Warnock and Ossoff. The two Georgians, who often campaigned together, are now Democratic allies in the U.S. Senate. But as the first Black man and first Jewish man to be elected to the U.S. Senate from the State of Georgia, the disenfranchisement, discrimination and deadly violence experienced by their forebears bind them to a more peculiar kinship.

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**Author’s Notes:**

*The historical record on Jewish lynchings remains incomplete. It is believed that a Jewish writer, Albert Bettelheim, was lynched in Georgia on Aug. 15, 1915, two days before Frank was hanged. Nearly 50 years later, Jewish civil rights workers Michael Schwerner and Andrew Goodman, along with James Chaney, an African American, were lynched by a murderous Klan squad that had beaten, burned and buried them in Neshoba County, Miss.*

*It is worth noting that after Jefferson Long served in the U.S. House from 1869 to 1871, 102 years passed before another Black representative was chosen from the state; in total, only 11 African Americans have shared the honor, with none ever serving in the House for more than one term. No Jewish politician has ever been elected to the U.S. House from Georgia.*
Some of my earliest political memories involve violence. My mother made me watch President John F. Kennedy’s funeral service on television, even though I was very young and did not understand its significance.

A few years later, the first known school shooting in Minnesota occurred in my hometown, at the high school my sisters attended. One sister remembers her math teacher trying to conduct class with blood on his shirt. My father, a surgeon, tried but failed to save the life of school administrator Forrest Willey, who was shot while trying to persuade the student gunman to stop.

Two years later, Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy were assassinated only months apart.

These memories came flooding back as I watched the Jan. 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol unfold in real time and, later, as I watched its recreation when the House managers presented their impeachment case to the Senate. I was pinned to my living room couch by the words, the actions, the hatred, the fear. Reflecting on my expectations for the day Congress would count the 2020 electoral votes, I realized I thought there might be protests or skirmishes with the police. But I did not expect people to storm the Capitol and roam its halls looking to kill the vice president and the speaker of the House.

The attack left me speechless. Later, I ran through the scholarship from my discipline, American politics, searching for research that would help me understand the day. We know that violence has often been used by state actors against its citizens—attacks on labor pushing for workers’ rights, on African Americans pressing for civil rights, on college students protesting the Vietnam War and on Black Americans demonstrating against police assault. Unlike the group that stormed the Capitol, however, the majority of political protests in this country have been peaceful. Organizers worry that violence will undermine their message and result in a loss of control over the debate.

Yet the people who attacked the Capitol were not concerned that their violent actions would reverberate against them. They called themselves patriots, not insurrectionists. They came with weapons. They used the material at hand as weapons. They erected a gallows on the lawn, bashed in windows and beat police officers. They claimed they were protecting the Constitution, but they were trying to subvert the election and the peaceful transfer of power.

I taught a class in the fall of 2020 about polarization in American politics, and I do not see a straight line from partisan polarization to this kind of violence. The differences between the political parties are bigger than they have been in the recent past. But the U.S. is not so polarized compared to the ideological differences in other nations. Given that, one would not expect a group to attempt to overthrow the national government.

The only way I can make sense of the attack is by considering the white nationalist movement behind it and its fear of losing the imagined country these insurrectionists thought they controlled. There is not a direct line between political polarization and violence, but there has long been one between racism and violence.
Racial Politics in the Post-Trump Era

By Matt Tokeshi

In my Racial Politics in America course, I show students some of the most famous political ads in American history.

There's the 1968 ad in which Richard Nixon declared that “the first civil right of every American” is to be protected against violent 1960s protesters.

There are George H.W. Bush’s 1988 ads attacking his Democratic rival’s opposition to the death penalty. The ads prominently feature the mug shot of Willie Horton, an African American man serving a life sentence for murder who assaulted a white couple while out on furlough.

There’s the 2006 ad directed at African American U.S. Senate candidate Harold Ford Jr., a Democrat, in which a blond woman says she met Ford at a Playboy party, adding with a wink, “Harold, call me.”

As these ads show, racially tinged attacks have long been a staple of American campaigns. But no modern president made them the centerpiece of his political brand quite like former President Donald J. Trump. His sympathetic statement regarding neo-Nazi protesters in Charlottesville, Va., his use of an unprintable epithet to describe Haiti and African countries and his vow to protect the “suburban housewife” from a desegregation program run by African American U.S. Sen. Cory Booker are in line with an insight Trump had back in 2011 when he launched his political career by questioning Barack Obama’s citizenship: that a full-throated politics of racial grievance is powerful enough to catapult a former reality TV performer to the presidency.

Though he is no longer in office, Trump’s style of racial provocation is likely to remain in vogue in the Republican Party for several reasons. First, the market for white identity politics is large. According to political scientist Ashley Jardina, 30% to 40% of white Americans score high on a scale of “white identity,” which measures the extent to which being white is a source of pride. Jardina also finds that there is less overlap than one might expect between whites who score high on the white identity scale and whites who score high on standard measures of racial prejudice, which suggests that a wide swath of white voters fall into one of the two groups. Since researchers show that both white identity and racial prejudice were strong predictors of support for Trump over his Republican primary opponents in 2016, we can expect future Republican presidential hopefuls to court these two constituencies.

Meanwhile, racial minorities are projected to surpass whites as a majority of the U.S. population by the 2040s. And as the elections of President Obama and Vice President Kamala Harris suggest, the makeup of America’s political leadership is likely to diversify. As a result, racial awareness among many whites is likely to endure. As demographic change ratchets up white anxiety, the Republican electorate will remain receptive to the politics of white cultural preservation.

Finally, the number of Trump-style politicians in the Republican Party is growing. More than 40% of Republicans in the House of Representatives at the beginning of the Trump presidency either retired or lost re-election and were replaced by his acolytes, according to a Politico.com article published before the 2020 election.

The future of American politics is therefore likely to be the politics of racial fear. And yet perhaps this is not inevitable. As recently as 2008, U.S. Sen. John McCain was reluctant to campaign on racial fear against Obama, believing that it was not only bad for the country but also carried the risk of political backlash. The lesson for my students—and why I show them those ads—is that political leadership matters. The fate of America’s experiment in multiracial democracy hinges on whether Americans choose leaders who believe that the politics of racial fear are best left alone.