25

GREAT THINKERS

Great Thinkers

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Push boundaries
Hold power accountable
Shift entrenched beliefs
Question accepted truths
Shape conversations

And ultimately, help us
understand ourselves.

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invests in great thinkers
who generate big, bold ideas
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Photograph by Laura Vignale.

Introduction

Anne-Marie Slaughter
CEO, New America

For 25 years, the Fellows of New America have defined what it means to be a powerful public thinker in our time.

They are writers and reporters, filmmakers and photographers, scholars and podcasters—storytellers who have given us new language to describe old problems and new frameworks for tackling urgent challenges. Together, they have produced groundbreaking work: best-selling books that rewrote our thinking on major issues, films that reached national audiences, podcasts that changed conversations, photography, and virtual reality that shifted perceptions of places and people. They keep us turning pages and watching images until we can no longer look away.

In a time when truth is contested, institutions are fragile, and technology is reshaping our lives faster than we can regulate or even understand, we need people who can hold power accountable while also inspiring hope. Our Fellows do just that. They reflect the complexity of America in all its plurality, and they show us the future we must build.

To mark this 25th anniversary, we showcase 25 new stories of impact—highlighting visionaries like Clint Smith, whose *How the Word Is Passed* became a #1 *New York Times* bestseller, and Jeff Goodell, whose *The Heat Will Kill You First* has reshaped how we think about the climate crisis. These books join a rich archive alongside the work of Fellows such as Nikole Hannah-Jones, Vann R. Newkirk III, Patrick Radden Keefe, Reihan Salam, Sheri Fink, and Eve L. Ewing—voices that continue to influence how America sees itself and the world.

As you read *25 Great Thinkers*, I hope you see not just the achievements of individual Fellows, but also the spirit of a program that has become central to New America's identity and impact. The next quarter-century will bring transformations as profound as the last—new technologies, new movements, new challenges to democracy and society. I believe our Fellows will continue to lead us through those transformations with creativity, conviction, and courage.

25 Great Thinkers



A first draft of Clint's forthcoming book, *Just Beneath the Soil*.

01 Clint Smith's favorite job? High school English teacher.

You began your career as a high school English teacher with Teach for America. In conversation with John Green, you said, "I don't think anything that exists in my life now would have happened or been possible had I not become a teacher." Can you expand on how teaching influenced your professional journey?

It was such a particularly transformative time in my life. In 2011, I became a teacher in Prince George's County, Maryland. I taught at a school that was largely low-income, Black, and Latino, and had a significant undocumented population. It was a place in which the failures of our social and political infrastructure were made so evident.

The 2010s were an era when the language that incentivized people to go into teaching was rooted in this notion that this is the civil rights movement of our time, and that nothing will transform a student's life the way that a teacher or a school can. It's not to say that I don't believe that a teacher or classroom can be transformative; I absolutely believe that. But I think the language and the discourse were operating in isolation. I felt like a part of the conversation was missing. We weren't talking about the landscape of social and historical inequality that animated the realities of our students' lives. It became clear that it was impossible for me to understand their lives without understanding mass incarceration, the history of immigration policy, food insecurity, housing policy, and the list goes on and on. It became clear that school was part of a larger archipelago of social forces and social institutions, and that we could think only about schools, without considering everything else that surrounds them.

I also spent a lot of time thinking about what it means for my students to understand that their lives are the result of decades—or centuries—of public policy decisions. Decisions that directly affect their lives every day and have created specific conditions in their communities. But this reality,

I wanted them to understand, is not static. It can be reconstructed and deconstructed and made into something new. And so I got started doing a lot of work with my students, trying to use literature as a prism through which to understand the social inequality that shaped much of their lives.

And I just loved teaching. Reading books with teenagers was just so fun and generative, and so fascinating. I thought I'd be a high school English teacher for the next 30 years, and I would have been happy doing so. But I also wanted to spend more time thinking about the political and social forces that I, and my students, are a part of. What would it look like, I wondered, to create the sort of books and resources that might move my students, and that might help them more clearly understand who they are in relation to the world?

You got your start in writing through performance poetry. Can you describe what that experience was like for you, and what did you love about it?

I discovered slam poetry in college at Davidson, where I originally enrolled as a Division I soccer player, still holding onto dreams of playing as a professional. But I soon was disabused of my soccer aspirations after my collegiate playing performance was not going as I had hoped. And yet I felt very lucky to be at a place—a small liberal arts college—that pushed me to figure out what I cared about and what moved me. So I joined the school paper. I did voter registration work. I volunteered with Big Brothers Big Sisters. I joined a historically Black fraternity. And then I started a poetry group. We were akin to the *Dead Poets Society*, gathering together every Sunday evening on the top floor of our main academic building to read and share our own poems with one another. That was a really special time that propelled me into poetry when I moved to Washington, DC, to teach.

The thing about subcultures is that when you're in one, you feel like it's the entire world! I was on the DC Poetry Slam Team from 2012 to 2014, which included the five poets who won the citywide poetry slam to represent DC in the nationwide poetry competition. You couldn't tell me that wasn't the Super Bowl. We practiced every day 'til like 3 am. The connection between all of us was so intense. It was some of the most fun I've ever had. It meant that my earliest experiences of being a writer were team-oriented. And coming from a team sport, that was a great bridge for me into the world of literature. It was where I learned to be a writer. There would be no *How The Word Is Passed* if it weren't for the world of poetry slam.

In what ways has New Orleans, where you were raised, influenced the lens through which you approach your work?

You don't realize until you leave that New Orleans is such a singular place. There is nowhere else like it in this country or in the world; it is such a blend of cultures and histories and especially of Black life. It is distinct and rich. I feel so lucky to have grown up there.

I'm going to speak in generalities here—I have found that if your parents have immigrated from another country, they often want you to have a relationship with their home country. I don't know if people from other U.S. cities feel this way, but I feel a version of that for New Orleans, as if it's a different country, and my children are like first-generation non–New Orleanians. I want them to understand where they're from, like it's a sort of "motherland." I want them to feel a connection to the city because it's a place that made me, the place that made them possible. And so I bring them back every summer, and they stay with their grandparents who always give them the full New Orleans experience. I try to make sure they see that this place is significant to me, and hopefully, it creates some sort of significance for them.

Since your time as a New America Fellow, you've gained significant recognition as an author and poet. How do you navigate your relationship with literary fame and public attention today?

I feel enormous gratitude. *How The Word Is Passed* changed my life. It catapulted me into a place that I'm still getting used to. I've seen my book alongside the books of people who are my literary and intellectual heroes. I'm asked to sit on panels that only a few years ago existed in another literary stratosphere. I feel so grateful that the book took on the life that it has.

It is interesting to get recognized at a restaurant or when I'm walking down the street. Almost everyone is incredibly kind, and that just means a lot. I'm 36 years old and I've already had a career that's more than I could have ever hoped for. I also know it's only been possible because of so many people who have poured time, love, and resources into me. I try my best to do right by it. I try my best to pay it forward.

When it comes to evaluating the quality of your work, whose perspective matters most to you?

I've thought about this a lot, and in a lot of ways, I think I'm always writing for a teenage version of myself.

I grew up being taught poetry in a way that made it feel distant and

rewarded complexity for complexity's sake. When I started writing poems, it was, in some way, done in opposition to that. I have no desire to write a poem that someone won't understand, which isn't to say that people can't have a different understanding of a poem, right? That's the beauty of art—that 1,000 people can read the same poem and have 1,000 different interpretations of it. But there's a difference between that and when someone is trying to purposefully obscure meaning for the reader. I also know that is my personal preference of poetics, and it's completely okay if others conceive of poetry in a different way. I can only speak for myself. But for me, I knew I wanted to write the sort of work that the high school version of myself would have read and understood. It's always coming back to what would 16-year-old Clint want to read or what would have spoken to him.

In the context of my historical work, it's somewhat similar. I'm writing to fill the gaps in my own understanding. I wrote *How The Word Is Passed* because in 2017 I watched these Confederate monuments come down in New Orleans, the city I grew up in that was the heart of the domestic slave trade. What's more, I am the descendant of enslaved people—my grandfather's grandfather was enslaved. And yet, watching those statues come down, I realized that I didn't understand the history of slavery in a way that was commensurate with the impact and legacy that it left on this country. I wanted to fill in those gaps. I wanted to understand more than I did. For me, the history books I write are largely an effort to teach myself about a history I wish I'd known more about.

Now I've spent the past few years writing a book about World War II. It's born out of a similar vein in that all I really knew about World War II was basically *Band of Brothers* and *Saving Private Ryan*, and the story is so much bigger than that, right? I've spent the past four years traveling to Japan, Korea, Argentina, France, England, Germany, New Mexico, California, and Mississippi to understand what this war and its related atrocities meant to people in these communities.

I think I am still the reader who I'm thinking of most. The historical nonfiction books I write are just excuses to teach myself history and take myself to places that help me understand that. And I hope that the book serves as an invitation to the reader to join me on this journey, and then as a catalyst for them to go on their own journey. It is born out of a deep belief in the power of putting your body in the place where history has happened.

In the five years since you became a New America Fellow, what role has your fellowship cohort played in your professional journey?

My particular cohort met and came together at such a unique time—literally two weeks before COVID shut everything down. We were, in many ways,

among the last people to spend time with one another before lockdown. And I think that experience created a particular sort of affinity or bond, even when, at the time, we didn't necessarily know all of what was coming.

I'm particularly close to several of the Fellows, and they have played a huge role in my life, some I work alongside, others I make a point of visiting when I'm in the same city as them. All of us text or call one another to share life updates and whatever's going on with work. But even if I'm not always in touch with each of the Fellows in my cohort, I follow everything that they do. Whenever a new book or article or piece of media that they created comes out, I find that we're all pretty good about texting or DMing one another with praise. It's a mutually supportive community.

What memories stand out from meeting other New America Fellows in person?

When we started the fellowship, I had produced a draft of the manuscript for *How The Word Is Passed*, and a few of the other Fellows wanted to share work in progress. It was the first time anyone other than my wife or editor had read the book, and it was an incredibly vulnerable moment. I was wondering, "Am I just cosplaying as a journalist and a historian?" Before writing this book, I was a poet, so I was nervous to share a work of narrative nonfiction. And yet, I'll always remember the care, the thoughtfulness, the generosity, and the affirmation that I got from that group of Fellows.

Talking with them about my work with such rigor and such thoughtfulness, it just buoyed—and propelled—me in those early days of COVID when I was editing my work at home, in isolation, with a one-year-old and a three-year-old. It gave me so much confidence moving forward. It made me think, "Maybe there is something here?" because these people create work that I so deeply respect, and they told me there's something to what I'm writing.



Clint Smith
Class of 2020

Clint Smith is the author of the narrative nonfiction book *How the Word Is Passed: A Reckoning with the History of Slavery Across America*, which was a #1 *New York Times* bestseller, winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award for Nonfiction, and selected by *The New York Times* as one of the 10 best books of 2021.



Katie at the office building of *The New York Times* after learning she had won the Feature Writing Pulitzer Prize for her article “The Mother Who Changed: A Story of Dementia.”

02 Katie Engelhart on what we get wrong about the right to die

Katie Engelhart didn't set out to become an expert on death and dying. "I'm still squeamish about it," she told New America. "But I feel like a lot of stories go untold because they're uncomfortable to tell and to read. So, I feel the mission to tell these stories very strongly."

A Pulitzer Prize-winning contributing writer to *The New York Times Magazine*, Katie has been reporting for nearly a decade on aging and the right to die movement, in which people have challenged the medical establishment to help them die to end their suffering. Several U.S. states allow assisted dying under strict parameters, and other countries have legalized that option or active euthanasia nationwide, with pushback. It's a fraught topic, often seen as pitting an individual's right to choose when and how they die against physicians' duty to sustain life.

Katie dove into this complex subject to produce *The Inevitable*. Written with support from her New America fellowship, the book tells the stories of people grappling with the decision to pursue assisted death, of physicians and activists determining how to address illness, and of the knotty ethics involved in facilitating death across different health and socioeconomic conditions.

Katie shares what it's like confronting mortality head-on, reporting sensitively on a high-stakes topic, and using her work to inform healthy debate.

You've closely observed people wrestling with the decision to end their own lives. How did witnessing their moments of uncertainty—or ambivalence—shape your understanding of that choice?

There's this phrase I think about a lot from a right to die advocate describing someone: "She doesn't want to die, she just doesn't want to live this way." And I think that describes a lot of people.

When I'm reporting, I assume people are undecided. I'm always very careful—my greatest fear is that somehow the process of speaking to me, being involved in a story, might lead them to some outcome they wouldn't otherwise choose. That someone who knows I'm writing about the right to die might feel pressure—even a little bit—to do the thing they told me they were going to do.

I always tell people that I'm interested in talking to patients who are considering assisted death, not necessarily people who are certain. And I always tell them: "You don't owe me anything. If, at any point, you don't want to keep talking to me, you can let me know. You can also stop answering my calls and texts, and I'll get the point."

You wanted to move into long-form journalism and now you've moved into being an expert on the right to die movement. What drew you in, and what kept you?

The book was five years in the making. My origin story for *The Inevitable* is not particularly poetic. I was assigned a story at my old job and I ended up running with it. And there weren't a lot of people reporting on assisted death outside of the legal and medical context. I did take a break from it, [though] not from dire subjects—I spent time reporting on dementia and psychiatry. But, I'd say I've been dragged back into it. There's still more to learn. Still, I'm hoping [my current project] will be my last on the right to die for a long time.

What corners of this world haven't been explored yet?

I think it's important to let the messiness and complexity of these decisions come through. I've read a lot of tidy, packaged stories about assisted death. To be fair, a lot of assisted dying is like that. The classic case is someone in their 80s who has terminal cancer, is educated, and has resources. But a lot of people have factors that weigh on—and complicate—their autonomy, like loneliness, mental illness, socioeconomic status, obligations to people in their lives, or inversely, the feeling of being a burden on people in their lives. Theoretically, choosing an assisted death is an autonomous choice, but there are a lot of things that weigh on that autonomy. So I'm interested in complicating the picture as much as I can.

The father of one of your subjects told you, "I don't want my daughter to die so your book has a good ending." How has that statement shaped your understanding of your role and the ethical boundaries of storytelling?

His daughter was young, around 40 years old, had multiple sclerosis, and was considering assisted death. I'd been talking to her for over a year and really wanted to speak to her father, but he had no interest. Finally, he agreed to a phone call. He very quickly aired his grievances. He worried his daughter would get swept up in the story I was telling and would feel she needed to give me her death as the ending of my book.

He was a retired journalist, and he was so thoughtful. I felt very comfortable telling him that I completely agreed, and that I hoped she wouldn't feel pressured. I explained the ways that I was trying to make her not feel pressured. [But] it is a risk. It wouldn't be fair for me to tell them there was no way that could happen. In fact, I think that was a really important chapter in the book because it ends with his daughter, still years later, uncertain—maybe she's going to die [this way], maybe she's not. I needed to show that perspective in the book.

When you look at U.S. states or countries that have right to die laws, there's a significant minority of people who get approved for assisted suicide who never go through with it. Some of them changed their minds or found some way to live comfortably.

Before you started reporting on the right to die movement, how did you relate to your own mortality? How has that since changed?

I have [thought about it] ever since I was a little kid. I have no idea [why]. My dad is a kind of capital-A atheist with Richard Dawkins books lined up on the shelf. I was told from a very early age that there was no afterlife, that there was no heaven. If my friends thought that there was, that's because their parents believed in fairy tales. I have very strong early memories of asking questions about the universe. So, I think I was drawn to these questions at an early age.

Your 2024 *New York Times Magazine* article "Should Patients Be Allowed to Die From Anorexia?" was an unsettling read. Naomi's life felt like an almost unrelenting battle. What was your personal takeaway from telling her story—and sitting with the complexity of her suffering?

I still can't believe that article was published, in some ways. I give credit to my editor for believing in this story because it's dark and complicated. I think readers want the subject to be likeable and legible to them, and Naomi has struggled with a lot. No amount of reporting would make me understand all of her actions. I wanted to bring the reader in on her decision-making. Palliative psychiatry is sort of a new idea in psychiatry and medicine,

and it is mostly theoretical, but there are a few people who are applying it, and most of them are doing so in the context of severe eating disorders.

It was a struggle to convey the extent of [Naomi's] suffering in specific ways, but also be kind of restrained. That's something I have to think about a lot—how to be detailed but respect the dignity of the person I'm writing about. And also not make my articles completely unreadable.

I don't know if I hold the Janet Malcolm view [that what I'm doing is "morally indefensible"], but to some extent I [do]. I have to make sure that the relationship [between me and my subject] is not crossing some grounds and also that I'm not inadvertently taking advantage of their loneliness.

Of all the pieces I have worked on, that might have been the most challenging, with respect to my relationship with my subject.

When you hit publish on a project, who or what do you look to for validation?

I think I'm lucky enough to get to do this work, and have this finished product be something that I'm proud of, that I don't particularly care if it's one of the most-read things. When I'm writing about these niche, uncomfortable subjects, I find that the people who need the article will find it, and it doesn't matter if it's not to everyone's taste or people don't feel like sitting with it. I get long emails from people who have connected in a really strong way with a piece. I care more about a small number of people getting a lot of meaning from something.

With the last few pieces I've done, I've really enjoyed seeing healthy debate in the comments sections on *The New York Times*. I know I'm successful when I see people reach different conclusions from my articles. For instance, there were people who definitely thought I was siding with Naomi's doctor, and others who definitely thought I was subtly critiquing her doctor's method all along. I consider myself successful, in that case, if the results are divided.



Katie Engelhart
Class of 2018

A Pulitzer Prize–winning contributing writer to *The New York Times Magazine*, Katie Engelhart has been reporting for nearly a decade on aging and the right to die movement, in which people have challenged the medical establishment to help them die to end their suffering. She is the author of *The Inevitable: Dispatches on the Right to Die*.

03 Emily Kassie on uncovering the truth about Indian residential schools

Your film, *Sugarcane*, tells the story of an investigation into abuse and missing children at an Indian residential school. How did you come to make this film?

In the spring of 2021, when news broke about the discovery of unmarked graves at a former Indian residential school, I had this gut [reaction]. I reached out to my old colleague Julian Brave NoiseCat right away. Julian is a tremendous writer, historian, and storyteller. We worked our first reporting jobs together and had been trying to find a project to collaborate on ever since.

Then, I went looking for a First Nation individual who had announced they were beginning their own search, and I found an article in *The Williams Lake Tribune* about Chief Willie Sellars. I reached out. He called me back that same day. "The Creator has always had good timing for me," he said. "Just yesterday our Council said we need someone to document our search." Two weeks later, when Julian called again, I told him I was planning on following the search at St. Joseph's Mission near Williams Lake. He paused. "That's the school where my family was sent and where my father was born..." Out of 139 schools, I chose the one where Julian's origin story began.

While you have covered stories across the globe, this project brings you back to your home country of Canada. How was your experience as a journalist and filmmaker different in a more familiar place?

Sugarcane marks the first time I've turned my lens on my own country, its original sin, and the horrors it perpetrated against First Peoples. I felt a more direct responsibility to help uncover the truth and ensure that Canadians understood this foundational atrocity on which the

country was built. The last residential school closed during my first year of kindergarten, and yet, I didn't know these schools existed until I became a journalist.

In a previous interview with New America, you described once seeing Canada as a gentler, kinder version of America. But in tracing the history and legacy of Indian residential schools, you've had to confront a much harsher truth. What has that journey taught you about questioning the histories we're taught—and how we come to accept them as final?

Most histories included in our grade school and high school curricula have glaring omissions. They tell a story from a perspective that we're meant to accept as absolute and as a final ruling on truth. Once you realize how many voices and experiences are missing from that narrative, the grounds and framework of your understanding of the world start to shake. Who gets to tell the story of what happened and what they might choose to highlight or ignore can tell us as much about the dynamics and power structures of the time as the history itself. I think documentary film and journalism at their best help us subvert the status quo and illuminate new ways of thinking and seeing.

***Sugarcane* uses a documentary style known as cinéma vérité, which emphasizes realism and close observation. Can you describe what that approach entails—and why it felt essential for telling this particular story?**

We felt that to tell this particular story, we had to live it, and bring the audience into the urgent and present consequences of the residential schools and all that they wrought. We also felt that the film needed to reject the historically colonial approaches to telling native stories from an anthropological and arms-length perspective. So we eschewed formal interviews and more standard conventions to get under the skin of what it was like to live this moment through the lives of our participants. That required building real trust over many years, participating and living in reciprocity with the community in *Sugarcane*.

We also shot the majority of the film on prime lenses, meaning that we couldn't zoom in. So in order to get close, which much of the film is, we had to really gain that intimacy, and you can feel it through the lens. We also believe this is an epic world worthy of epic cinema and storytelling, and vérité filmmaking can lend itself to feeling more like fiction, with real tension and scenes and story arcs.



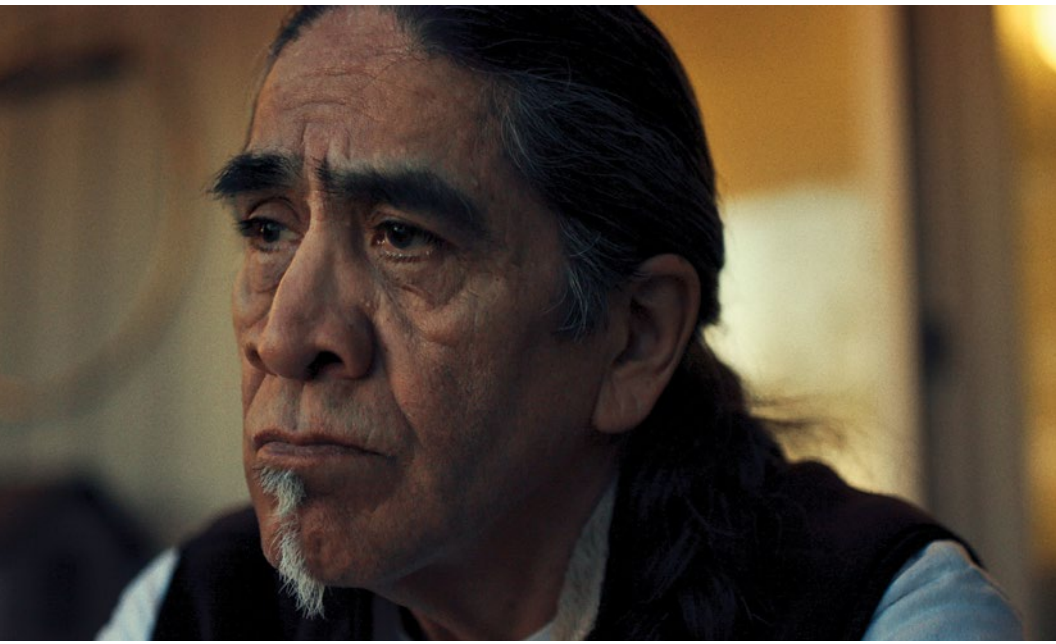


Stills from *Sugarcane* (2025).









You've said one of your hopes for *Sugarcane* is that it becomes part of school curricula in Canada. What kind of impact do you think it could have on future generations—especially those who would be learning truths you never encountered in school?

We have been working to get *Sugarcane* into schools and universities across Canada and are working with *Canadian Geographic* to build specific curricula around it. I hope that the inclusion of the film helps generate dialogue and pushes students to question the structures of power and narrative that they are handed, and more specifically, how to think critically about the way Indigenous communities are struggling and rebuilding in the wake of historical wrongs. Fundamentally, I hope and believe the film has shifted the understanding of what these schools really were and how they brutalized communities. We've been so thrilled to see the Canadian government embrace the film—they've been showing it to Parliament, policymakers, government workers, and across embassies worldwide, so the narrative shift is happening at every level.



Emily Kassie
Class of 2023

Emily Kassie is an Oscar-nominated filmmaker and investigative journalist. Her feature documentary *Sugarcane*, directed alongside Julian Brave NoiseCat, follows an investigation into abuses at a former Indian residential school.

Sugarcane is available to stream on Disney+.

Patrick Radden Keefe
Class of 2017

"People want to be told stories;
that's not going anywhere.
But we shouldn't be too wed
to any one way of telling them."

04 Eve L. Ewing on the purpose of school

You started your career as a public school teacher. How did that experience shape you, as a person and eventually, as a writer?

Teaching public school gave me three gifts that I use a lot:

The first is time management. I think a lot of people who want to write spend a lot of time hemming and hawing about what's the right setup to make writing doable. As a public middle school teacher, there were a lot of things that had to get done and no one was coming to do them for me. So you have to figure out time management.

The second gift teaching has given me is a direct sense of urgency—a lot of the things I write about are big and abstract, but those things play out in our lived experiences. Teachers deal with everything at the end of the line of social issues, from mental-health care crises to food insecurity. These are things that can feel huge and impossible, but these problems manifest themselves in the life of a child standing right in front of you who needs your time and care. It's urgent.

A third gift teaching has given me is a premium on clarity. Middle schoolers are emotionally honest and direct. They can come up to you at any time and ask a question you can't opt out of answering. I think it's helped me be able to handle difficult, complex questions off the cuff.

What role did your upbringing play in how you view education?

I was raised by a single mom who worked really hard. She was amazing, determined, and brilliant. Having never attended college herself, she couldn't lean on institutional support or a credential to get ahead in life, so she relied on relationships. I remember seeing Yo-Yo Ma play the cello on PBS. I told my mom that I wanted to play cello and she, somehow, got me lessons. She just always made it work.

My mom was very committed to making sure we had emotional safety and security, and joy, even when things were precarious. I value the simple stuff that she was super intentional about, like always feeding me breakfast at home at the kitchen table. It might have been a frozen waffle but it was that time together that mattered, because in the afternoon I came home from school to an empty apartment while she was still at work.

You've said that when you teach classes on education policy, you always start with the question, "What is the purpose of school?" The answers you've heard vary. What is yours?

There's a difference between schooling, the institutionalized process, and education, the broader, transformative process.

In the United States, the purpose of school is to serve a political and ideological agenda. *Whose* agenda, ideology, and politics can be up for grabs. But the process of saying, as we do in America, that we're going to have a compulsory educational system and designate state employees whose job it is to determine what knowledge is and is not important...that is inherently a political project.

So school is a political enterprise under the guise of "wanting what's best for all kids." But who decides? At some points and in some places that has meant, for example, hitting children if they spoke their native language in class, because somebody decided that only speaking English is what's "best" for them. So "what is best" for kids should be the launchpad for a conversation.

Your latest book, *Original Sins*, has been described by writer Michelle Alexander as a book that will "change the way people understand the place we send our children for eight hours a day." What themes have resonated most strongly with your readers?

I thought people would drill down on the tough historical details and want to talk about those things, but instead, people want to share their story with me, and the audience in the room, hear some insight, and ask, "What do I do?" People are seeking encouragement from me and from one another.

I couldn't have anticipated the political moment when this book would be released. It's a terrible moment for many educators. And yet, at my book events, more than half of the audience is often made up of teachers, and I see that they're so committed to their students, and filled with courage and tenacity. I see that even in places that have been under very serious attack for a long time. The tone of the conversations has been about resolving towards collective action more than despair. That has been really moving for me.

The first chapter of *Original Sins* opens with W.E.B. Du Bois' haunting question, "How does it feel to be a problem?" How has this question shaped you?

Du Bois is a really important ancestor to me. People fight over defining his disciplinary affiliation—a poet, a fiction writer, an artist, a sociologist. He was all of those things! And that gives me permission, as someone who works across disciplines, to do the same. I believe the most important thing is to pursue doggedly whatever question you have in front of you.

In your conversation with writer Fred Moten in *New Suns*, you spoke about embracing mistakes in music, language learning, and cooking—noting how important it is to continue on rather than stop progress when a mistake is made. How has this philosophy of learning through imperfection influenced your role as a writer?

This book took me five years to work on and it involved me integrating a lot of histories I knew really well, but in many cases learning along the way. One of the issues with social media is that it has created an environment where you want to express the one right thing in the one right way. It's this idea that "being wrong" could be a career-ending moment in your life.

While I understand that fear, it stifles the opportunity to learn. So many of the best lessons in my life were in being in a reciprocal community with people who helped me learn from my mistakes. Transactional relationships can't help you evolve. But trusted friends, colleagues, and mentors can hold you accountable and show you the way.

Let's talk about power, specifically the power of narrative. You have described storytelling as having the power "to shift the conversation around something," which you try to do in all of your work. How do you know when you have succeeded in that mission?

That's a decades-long project and it's done collectively. Everything that I write in a book is itself a representation of what people have poured into me. But I will say that books are very slow. It's funny, in a sense, to commit to writing a book in a world where there are faster ways of communicating ideas, like through a podcast. But on this book tour, so many people have shared with me the impact of my last book, *Ghosts in the Schoolyard*, which was published in 2018. That book wrestled with the question about what is a good school and a good community, and who gets to decide what is "good." So many people told me the book helped them understand their own role in history and how they fit in their community.

I did an event in the fall with Ta-Nehisi Coates and he said, "My books are brawlers out there in the streets," and I know what he means—that books have a life of their own. I feel very proud that I've poured time into them and that they help give meaning to people's lives—and sometimes I'll know that impact and other times I never will. I found as a teacher that so often the student who says you were their favorite teacher is not always the person you would expect.



Eve L. Ewing
Class of 2021

Eve L. Ewing is a sociologist of education and a writer from Chicago. She is the author most recently of *Original Sins: The (Mis)education of Black and Native Children and the Construction of American Racism* and of three award-winning books: the poetry collections *1919* and *Electric Arches*, and the nonfiction work *Ghosts in the Schoolyard: Racism and School Closings on Chicago's South Side*.

05 Vann R. Newkirk II on finding the beauty in grief

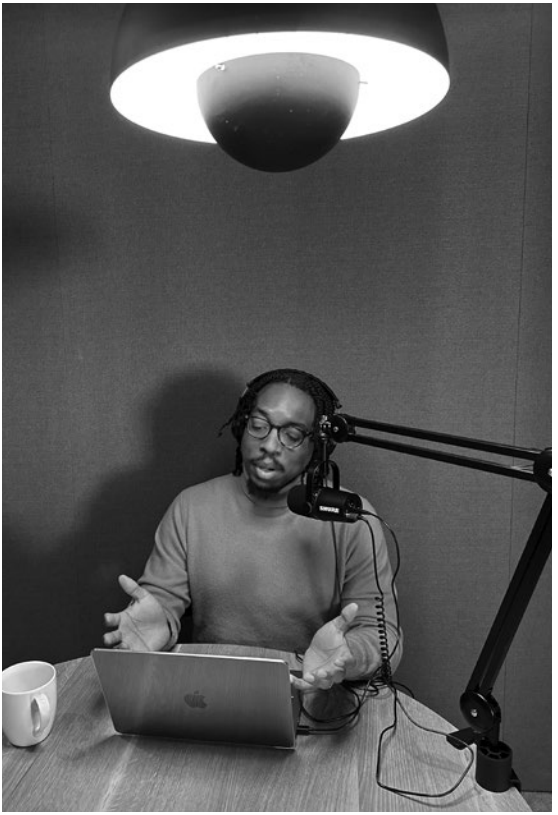
Vann R. Newkirk II wakes before dawn in a small apartment overlooking the Alabama River. Outside his window looms the dark outline of the Edmund Pettus Bridge, where in 1965 officers beat and tear gassed hundreds of civil rights marchers. In Selma, Alabama, history has a way of engulfing you.

Vann is on a self-imposed two-week writing retreat, seeking silence and solitude to focus on a new project. In this quiet town, where only the song of cicadas can be heard over the rush of the river, Vann works in near-total isolation. There are no distractions—no television, nightlife, family, or friends, not even a movie theater within 30 miles—just the steady rhythm of his work, carrying him from dawn until nightfall.

At a makeshift desk in his rental apartment, Vann is immersed in the past to write his forthcoming book, *Children of the Flood*, which chronicles the histories of three of America's earliest free Black towns: Princeville, North Carolina; St. Helena Island, South Carolina; and Ironton, Louisiana. These communities, established by formerly enslaved people in the aftermath of the Civil War, were shaped by Black resilience even as they weathered a century of white supremacist policies. Now they face new perils as climate change brings rising waters and flooding.

Much of the historical record in those towns has been washed away—by floodwaters or by neglect—but piece by piece, Vann is determined to tell their stories and offer a bridge between the past and the future. In Selma, he stitches together a patchwork history from the fragments that remain: century-old newspapers, photos, and town documents.

Vann shares his journey of writing Children of the Flood, *the challenge of capturing lost histories, and the hope he finds in honoring his ancestors' legacy.*



Vann during the recording of the podcast *Holy Week*.

I'm a big proponent of finding beauty in grief. The more intense the grief, the more intense the beauty.

That idea shaped *Children of the Flood* from the start. One of the first people I met for the book was Calvin Adkins, the town historian of Princeville, North Carolina. He believed Princeville's history as the oldest town in America incorporated by Black people could literally help save it. In his estimation, if Americans understood its significance, maybe it could be protected, maybe it could be preserved. That belief felt especially urgent given that Princeville had already been devastated once before—by Hurricane Floyd in 1999. At the time I met Calvin, the community had spent nearly two decades rebuilding, buoyed by the hope that its story could be its shield. But six weeks after he and I met, Hurricane Matthew struck. The floodwaters came again, destroying homes, archives, and dreams. It was heartbreaking. At that juncture, I had met so many wonderful people who were rooting for Princeville's future, and I knew this would feel like a death knell.

But the flip side is that people started reaching out. "We need the book out," they said. "You've got to do this. It's important to us." That's ecstasy. That's why I keep going.

I've been reporting and writing this story since 2016, and honestly, it feels like everything I've done has led me to it. I didn't set out to write about environmental disaster or climate change. What I wanted to write about was survival—and memory. How do communities make impossible choices between staying on the land their ancestors built, or leaving to survive?

That's what these communities—Princeville, St. Helena Island, and Ironton—are grappling with. These are places built on the ashes of slavery and also, floodplains. This is land that no one else wanted. Now, when the waters rise, outsiders wonder, "Why do people stay?" When they should be wondering about the long history of redlining, disinvestment, and white supremacy. To me, that's the center of the story.

A lot of what I call creativity is really just making connections between things. I think that's partly my dyslexia—it's made me see and organize the world differently. My brain is like the kitchen drawer where everything goes. There's a kind of logic in there, even if it's messy. I dip into that drawer constantly when I write.

My mom was the one who taught me to write. Having dyslexia meant becoming a journalist wasn't the obvious path, but she never told me it wasn't possible. She just said, "If this is something you want to do, then do it." I've had great editors and mentors, but really, the only validation I ever cared about was hers.

Now I think about my work as a way of being a good ancestor. There's this book by Olúfémi Táíwò, *Reconsidering Reparations*, where he talks

about living intentionally as if you will one day be someone's ancestor. That idea—that writing is a gift to people who will live after you—has shaped everything I do, especially this book. These towns have lost so much. And if I can help restore some of it, then it's worth pursuing.

I was born and raised in the South, and I think the South is where America is most honest about itself. There's a quote from Faulkner that I come back to: "To understand America, you must first understand a place like Mississippi." I really believe that. If you understand Mississippi, you understand everything else—our politics, our contradictions. When people express disdain for the South, I often think they're expressing their discomfort with America.

But the South also holds the most aspirational parts of this country. These Black towns I'm writing about, and their citizens, are examples of that. Princeville was founded in 1865. The original name was Freedom Hill. It was literally built on the site where Union soldiers told Black folks they were free. A week earlier, those same people could have been flogged for trying to read. And yet, they built a town. If that doesn't make you believe in human endeavor, I don't know what will.



Vann R. Newkirk II
Class of 2019

Vann R. Newkirk II is a senior editor at *The Atlantic*, and the host and co-creator of narrative podcasts *Floodlines* and *Holy Week*. *Floodlines* was awarded the Peabody in 2020.

06 Anand Gopal on getting out of the "war business"

You were living just blocks from the World Trade Center on 9/11. At the time, you were studying physics, but the attacks "impinged on [your] consciousness," and you began obsessively reading about foreign policy, Afghanistan, and the Taliban. That curiosity led you to teach English in Kabul in 2008. But when you arrived, you discovered the program was a scam—the building was boarded up, no job waiting. You faced a choice: Go home or stay and make something of your time in a place that had long fascinated you. What guided your decision to stay—and how has that choice shaped your life?

The immediate reason I chose to stay is because I couldn't afford to go back—I'd spent my meager savings on the ticket! But I certainly had a deeper motivation, which was to try to better understand my country's role in the world.

I'd arrived in Afghanistan without much insight into the American war or Afghan society, and as I traveled the country, I found many of my assumptions challenged. I also discovered that the world resolves into neat ideological categories from afar, but when you zoom in to study the teeming microsystem that is real life, those categories almost always break down. From afar, it seems as if the U.S. war against the Taliban was one of ideologies—liberal internationalism against religious fundamentalism. In part, the war was about that, but in part it's much more complex. At the village level, people joined the Taliban for a variety of reasons that often have to do with imminently local and material concerns. Some flocked to the Taliban due to the predation of U.S.-backed forces. Some former Taliban members tried to join the U.S.-backed government, but were spurned and then rejoined the Taliban. Some rural elites turned against the United States because they were squeezed out of lucrative contracts.

Over the years, I've noticed that ideological categories break down in this way in almost every context I've reported from—and it's certainly true in our country too. For example, in deep-red Idaho, people voted for Medicaid expansion when on the referendum—even as they vote against politicians who claim to support Medicaid expansion. So in a sense, the perspective that Afghanistan gave me helped me better understand my own country. When one spends time in these communities, such responses often reveal themselves to be reasonable and understandable.

While reporting for your book *No Good Men Among the Living*, you embedded with the Taliban for weeks at a time. How did you go about gaining access to a group of people who had little to no reason to trust an American journalist?

I was frustrated early on because so little was known about the insurgency, even though so much ink was spilled on it. Of course, part of the reason was that the Taliban had the unfortunate tendency of kidnapping journalists. I found a workaround by first meeting them in prison. Over the course of many months, I got to know several Taliban leaders and won their trust—that is, I was able to convince them that I was indeed a journalist and not a spy. These imprisoned leaders then connected me to their comrades in the field. So much of rural Afghanistan depends on networks of trust, so showing up with the imprimatur of an insurgent leader helped protect me while I was in the field.

In your Pulitzer-nominated *New Yorker* article "The Open Air Prison for ISIS Supporters—and Victims," you wrote a haunting reflection on how long-standing injustices in the Middle East are often ignored until they erupt into violence—and only then enter Western consciousness. If more policymakers truly understood that reality, how different do you think global decisions around the war on terror might look?

When I wrote those lines, I was thinking in particular of Palestine. The horrors in Gaza are on so many people's minds now, but it can be easy to forget the deeper history behind the current war—the 70 years of displacement and dispossession of Palestinians. By consistently treating Palestinians as less than human, Israel has not been able to achieve the peace and security its citizens deserve. If more policymakers truly understood the reality of this injustice—and put a commitment to ending this injustice ahead of their self-interested concerns—the path to peace in the region would look very different.



Anand with clowns, who drew a crowd of children as they arrived at the al-Wafideen Camp outside of Manbij, Syria.

Photograph by Victor J. Blue.

In 2017, you co-founded the Zomia Center to conduct research—and provide humanitarian relief for—communities existing outside of governed states. One of the center's focus areas is called the Legacy of War, and it examines the consequences of U.S. military operations across the Middle East and South Asia. In your view, what part of this work has felt most impactful so far—in shaping policy conversations, elevating the human stories that are so often overlooked, or other outcomes?

I'm fortunate to be able to work with talented colleagues who have been able to support communities and organizations in some of the world's most difficult operating environments. The Legacy of War program helps advocate for civilians who have been harmed by U.S. military actions. The program has helped bring redress for several families and has helped inform efforts to improve accountability measures. I'm also very interested in health care, and through our humanitarian program, we've been able to support the delivery of health aid across enemy lines.

Your writing has been described as "haunting," "breathtaking," and "compelling." Was there a particular moment—or period of time—when you began to feel like you'd truly found your voice as a writer? What did that process look like for you?

Writing is a craft, requiring diligence and a willingness to learn from one's mistakes—of which I've certainly made my share. Early in my career, words were something that seemed to misbehave when I put them on the page. It took me years to learn to get them to do what I wanted. There was no particular moment when this happened—and sometimes, such control still eludes me—but it took at least 10 years of focused effort for me to develop confidence in my voice. One key to that development was that I was fortunate to be surrounded by friends and loved ones who were much better writers than me, and from whom I could learn. Their honest, and sometimes brutal, feedback was essential to my education. The other key to my development was that I spent years reading—studying, really—the writers I admire, from the worlds of nonfiction and fiction. To develop as a writer, there's really no substitute for reading widely and persistently.

In a lecture at the University of Washington in 2024, you quoted Leon Trotsky—"You may not be interested in war, but war is interested in you"—to describe your effort to "get out of the war business." I can imagine why you'd want to move on, but in your own

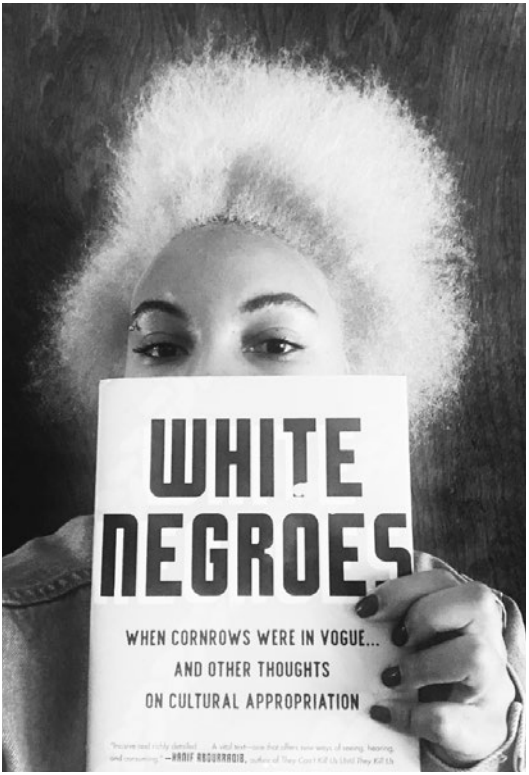
words, what's driving that shift? And what kinds of stories are you most interested in telling now?

I'm interested in telling the types of stories that are not easily captured through journalism, which is why I've found myself increasingly drifting toward fiction. In narrative nonfiction, you are greatly constrained by the nature of your material—by the availability of sources, the feasibility of fact-checking, and so on. With fiction, you are released from such constraints, which can sometimes allow you to explore aspects of the human condition in fresh and exciting ways. I'm drawn to stories that explore the hard facts of our brief lives, especially those related to love and death. I don't need to travel halfway around the world to find such stories—they are right here, under our noses.



Anand Gopal
Class of 2014

Anand Gopal is an award-winning journalist and assistant research professor with the Center for the Study of Religion and Conflict and the Future Security Initiative at Arizona State University. Anand's book, *No Good Men Among the Living: America, the Taliban, and the War Through Afghan Eyes*, was a finalist for the 2015 Pulitzer Prize.



Lauren holds a copy of her book *White Negroes*, which was short-listed for the 2020 Museum of African American History Stone Book Award.

07 Lauren Michele Jackson on why the internet broke her brain

Begin with curiosity

Before I started on my book *White Negroes*, the word appropriation was already somewhat codified in the national media as this fraught and punitive term. If you were a publicist, say, you would never want to see it associated with your artist in a headline. I'm always interested in the way that the terms we use are often taken for granted in their meaning—we say "appropriation" and we sort of pat ourselves on the back for knowing that it's wrong and pointing it out when people are doing it. And yet we have innumerable instances, even in a recent history of mass culture, of what could otherwise be called appropriation that isn't made conspicuous; meanwhile, more conspicuous occasions of appropriation, upon a longer look, take on a more convoluted appearance than a word like "theft" would connote.

I wanted to sit with both the conspicuous and inconspicuous and think about what is happening in a way that removes us from the easy narrative of here to there—as though every pop artist of the aughts woke up and thought, "How can I steal from a Black person today?" Culture has never developed like that and especially not in the age of the internet, where we are exposed to media that has been utterly detached from its environment. I like to begin with curiosity, because even if it leads us to some pretty dastardly places, as I think my book occasionally does, it still leaves us with a better assessment of the situation than the pointed finger.

In the classroom

Writers seldom get to observe the impact of how they see the world on others in a direct way—unless they are famous and/or especially didactic, or they teach. Teaching literature is quite direct and quite literal in its

aims, making students read important (that is, relevant) works, and imparting methods that will help them in encounters with media beyond the purview of the syllabus. Sometimes I feel like my courses, if nothing else, give students permission to sit with a work of art and think—the sort of activity that makes life worth living and what the technologies governing their lives would rather they not. As a gift to them, I made an enthusiastic return to blue books a couple of years ago.

Who I write for

I always laugh when authors say that they're not writing for a specific audience. I know what they mean—that they don't sit down necessarily and stare at the computer thinking, this is for you Bobby from Springfield, Illinois, or whatever. Whereas, in truth, audiences are manufactured by the context out of which the work emerged. (I write for publications that fashion themselves for certain demographics that are not at all obscured but rather thought about by people above my pay grade.) And so, even as I would like to believe that my writing is available to anyone who happens upon it—and I do, often, choose to believe that—when I was writing *White Negroes*, I did imagine or maybe hope that I would tap into an audience of people who were caught by and even skeptical of this big fuss about the A-word.

I am feeling more comfortable in feeling less responsible for the audience, however minor, created by my writing, if only because getting misread often enough will disabuse you of the notion that you can ever control how people receive your work.

Kim Kardashian

In my essay "How Kim Kardashian West Came to Represent America," I'm trying to think about Kim Kardashian as something of a cypher, whose presentation and reception says more about how race (and gender) is assigned and interpreted in the U.S. than it could ever say about her as a person, her individual subjectivity.

All celebrities are surfaces, and I admit I find her surface interesting. It's very canny to the workings of race in America, and I think we know that, even as we resent her for it. The Kardashians slim down and lighten up, and the public reads this as auguring the return to aping a certain WASPish whiteness; maybe the video vixen, the WAG, is over. They function as a sort of racial bellwether. How can it be an accident that Kim is playing around with Tesla robots in a time of flagrant techno-fascism?

Being a professional critic

Preconceptions make you sloppy. They make you overlook things that shouldn't be overlooked. I don't even necessarily mean that in a "don't judge by the cover" way—usually people say this as encouragement to be open to the idea of liking something. Whereas, I might have a sense that I'm probably not going to like something and will be correct that I don't like it, but nonetheless need to be able to perceive how the thing is putting itself together so that I can describe what isn't good or working. And that's easier said than done.

Surviving in media

I don't enjoy giving blanket advice, but what tends to apply is that the best shot in this [writing business] is to get really, really, really good. That does not mean that everyone who has a job—in academia, media, or otherwise—is good at it, and that does not mean that everybody who is good at it will get a job, far from it. But the faith that cannot sustain is that going through the motions will yield something solid. The people who can sustain that sort of faith have been earmarked since, like, birth, and know who they are. For everyone else—a shot in hell is going to take so much work. So much writing and writing when you're not being required to write, writing whenever and wherever you can, and reading and reading, so so much reading—reading the people alongside whom you want to be published, reading trade books and academic books, reading weird little books, reading people who are way smarter than you, who are way better writers than you are, reading people who are unpopular but brilliant.

But really, there is absolutely no shame in getting an "email job" that is going to give you health insurance so that you can survive long enough to write the things that you want to write. Just don't work for a weapons manufacturer.

The internet broke my brain

There's a tweet that used to haunt me, it went something like: You can tell when a writer is very online because their writing is always guarding against strange counterarguments that normally nobody would ever bring up. It's the curse of the person who says you hate pancakes because you said you like waffles, and also the curse of "Galaxy Brain," the grammar of social media—in which the thing that everyone says is bad is actually good, or is still bad, but is bad because it's good in this way that nobody's talking about. And on and on.

It's hell for writing. My worst pieces suffer from this sort of thinking. And on one hand, it seems like less of a concern as social media platforms become less usable as a means of reading anybody's pulse on any given subject. Yet with the increased usage of LLMs [large language models] and mass influx of slop online, people seem to be growing even less concerned with sourcing the media that is shaping how they express themselves. [The pursuit of] engagement and attention, such as they incentivize shedding attribution for ease of circulation, has a bad effect on the work. Everything has to be direct and to the point, and made for easy reading [to be shared on social media]. And the writing is worse for it.



Lauren Michele Jackson
Class of 2022

Lauren Michele Jackson is an assistant professor of English and African American Studies at Northwestern University and a contributing writer at *The New Yorker*. She is the author of *White Negroes: When Cornrows Were in Vogue...and Other Thoughts on Cultural Appropriation*, which was short-listed for the 2020 Museum of African American History Stone Book Award.

08 CJ Hunt is still trying to make eighth-graders laugh

In an interview with New America Fellow Clint Smith about your documentary *The Neutral Ground*, you said, "I view racists like a kid views fireflies, like, 'Oh my god! They are out in this number?! It's so bright I have to find something to catch this!'" Can you talk more about what you meant by that—and how that perspective shaped the way you approached the film?

When we started making this film, Obama was still president. It was the winter of 2015, and I still believed that racism was a fringe element in America, something destined to die out with an older generation. This documentary was fueled by the genuine surprise I felt watching some of the nation's oldest racial myths roar back to life. In Charleston, nine Black churchgoers were massacred by a white man who hoped to start a race war. Soon after, in New Orleans, the city council's decision to remove four Confederate monuments was obstructed by people arguing that "the Civil War wasn't about slavery" and "slavery wasn't that bad." As I started interviewing the people who flocked to town to "protect" inanimate statues from being *moved*, I began to wonder why so many of them recited the same stories, often in the same order. If an interviewee began telling me "the Civil War wasn't about slavery," it was only a matter of time before he leaned in close to educate me on how kindly most masters treated their slaves, and how those loyal slaves fought alongside their masters to defend the southern way of life.

As I researched, it felt less like an exposé on racism and more like tumbling down a rabbit hole searching for the source of that urban myth about alligators in the sewer, or trying to uncover how every millennial came to know that milk "does the body good." It was important to me to let all interviews with monument defenders unfold as generously as possible, free of any edits that might be accused of taking their words out of context.



CJ is working on a new project about education.

Once we discovered that the stories about states' rights, kind masters, and loyal slaves all come from deliberate changes [that] the widows and children of defeated confederates made to American textbooks, I started viewing these interviews as a way to frame racism less as an issue of hate in our hearts, and more as a question about the power of the stories we repeat. Those stories about our past shape our present. Nowhere was this clearer than in Charlottesville, Virginia, as I watched violent torch-wielding white boys rallying to protect a Confederate monument while chanting, "Jews will not replace us."

You've spoken about your early years in comedy as a time when you were imitating your comedic heroes. When did you start to feel like you were finding your own voice—and what helped you get there?

I love the way comedians give each other license. While making this documentary, I often felt like I was trying to imitate an interview style I had learned on my day job, directing for Comedy Central's *The Daily Show*. But whenever I stepped in front of the camera, the style never quite felt like me.

One day, I was watching the HBO show *Problem Areas*, and I was struck by Wyatt Cenac's unhurried style. He seemed as if he wasn't trying to make jokes at all, rather just listening intently and being charming and playful when the moment called for it. It made me feel like I had permission to discard my lists of pre-written jokes and just lean into my own curiosity. I took that energy into my next few interviews—one with organizer Malcolm Suber and another with historian Christy Coleman. The result was a sort of intimacy and playfulness that has become a North Star for me.

My other secret weapon was the film's co-writer, James Hamilton. An Emmy-winning television writer, James is also one of my best friends and oldest comedy partners. He coached me to discover a level of ease and silliness in my narration that finally felt like me. I'm proudest of a joke we wrote about the dry lips of Confederate Vice President Alexander Stephens. It wasn't universally loved in the edit, but in screenings, the line is still the film's biggest laugh and the one joke students most want to discuss. It's wild how much it took to remind me to just be myself and trust that my instincts are right and my curiosity is enough.

What is it about comedy that allows it to cut through the complexity of an issue like race in ways other forms of dialogue often can't?

I've been reading a lot of Frederick Douglass lately, and I'm shocked by how funny he was. We think of his stern gaze, and we forget Douglass

was one of the nation's greatest satirists.

During his 1852 speech "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July," he speaks to the necessity of satire as a weapon: "O! Had I the ability, and could reach the nation's ear, I would, to-day, pour out a fiery stream of biting ridicule, blasting reproach, withering sarcasm, and stern rebuke. For it is not light that is needed, but fire; it's not a gentle shower, but thunder."

To me, it's humbling to see one of America's greatest orators realizing the limits of logical argument. When it comes to race, comedy can move us into a space that no longer feels like an argument.

In your film, your father says, "I had to shock you into seeing that you were Black." It's a moment that's both hilarious and deeply poignant. Was there a specific moment when that truth really clicked for you?

I'll forever be grateful to the Third World Transition Program (TWTP), Brown University's freshman orientation program for students of color. At first jarring to us incoming students, the name "Third World" is a reference to Frantz Fanon's notion of solidarity among decolonizing nations.

Growing up, my understanding of Blackness was chiefly rooted in the history books my father left outside my bedroom in our white suburb. But TWTP was a moment of really understanding Blackness as a community. It was a space that fostered joy and connection among us as Black students and as a coalition of non-white students who, for once, didn't have to defend our worthiness or our right to gather with each other. TWTP instilled in me a message that I hope resonates in my own work: Even if this place was not built for you, you still belong here.

You've said that you measure the film's impact by the number of student screenings you've done. As of now, how many have there been—and of all those events, is there one that really stuck with you—something a student said or a moment that stayed with you?

Since the release of *The Neutral Ground* in 2021, we've had over 66 screenings in classrooms ranging from elementary school to law school. We've seen teachers do incredible things with our film: Georgia students designed new monuments and invited city council members to their presentation, California students created commercials and PSAs about racialized myths, and at schools across the country, high schoolers hosted screenings and moderated the Q&A for their classmates and families.

I'll never forget an Ohio school visit where I asked a group of high school students to review four primary source documents, largely comments from

Confederate leaders, and decide which of these historical receipts the students would use if they were filmmakers editing a scene addressing the claim "the Civil War wasn't about slavery." The joy in the classroom was so high. Each student group brought such personality and power to their presentation. As they finished, they were met with raucous applause and feedback. The speech-and-debate nerd in me swooned. One student pulled me aside to tell me he was half-Black and half-Filipino—just like me. He then proceeded to give an impassioned and hilarious presentation roasting Alexander Stephen's irrefutably racist "Cornerstone Speech."

As I watched, I felt time warping around us. On one hand, here was a Black and Filipino public school student reaching across time to roast a dusty Confederate who sought to build a nation based on the enslavement of his people. On the other hand, I was getting a glimpse of the teacher I always dreamed of becoming—the teacher I might still be had I not left the profession.

Earlier in your career, you worked in a public defender's office while doing stand-up and improv on the side. How much did that day job shape your comedy at the time? And now that comedy is your full-time focus, do you ever miss having a career that was completely outside that world?

I was an assistant at the Orleans Public Defenders office for three years. The work consisted of answering phones, scheduling meetings, and discovering the exciting world of data entry. However, assisting those badass attorneys fighting for justice in the incarceration capital of the world made me feel like a waterboy for the 1996 Chicago Bulls. The work didn't exactly change the content of my comedy. Instead, it gave me my first day job where I had the time and mental space to perform comedy at night.

These days, I'm working on projects that all seem to be deeply fascinated with the law, and it sometimes feels like I am glimpsing some alternate timeline version of me who lives in New Orleans doing public interest law.

You've said that teaching can have a more tangible impact on racial injustice than performing comedy. You've also talked about someday founding a school or becoming a district superintendent. Do you still see yourself returning to the education world in the future?

After graduating from college, I made a big deal about choosing teaching over a life in the entertainment industry. That didn't last long. I've spent the last nine years writing and directing comedy and film.

However, it feels as if my current work is helping me dust off the 22-year-old version of myself who was so convinced he would spend his life as a public school teacher. I'm working on a new project about education. It's still early, but I'm trying to unwind the heated debate around history curricula in public schools. It's about the anxieties parents feel, the tensions that have always existed in teaching history, and what new visions of school will emerge from the campaign to remove indoctrination from the classroom. I feel as if I'm returning to the set of questions and passions that brought me into the classroom so many years ago: What is school for? Why do we have so much trouble "fixing" it?

When it comes to evaluating the quality of your comedy work today, whose perspective matters most to you?

I've recently discovered that my target audience is eighth graders. I want to make the type of insightful, entertaining, playful documentary that would have had eighth-grade CJ Hunt riveted and falling out of his chair with laughter. In my last documentary, my target audience was broad: organizers, educators, Black families, young white southerners who grew up questioning the Lost Cause. On this new project, I'm telling myself, "If I can make a film that a diverse class of 8th-grade social studies students goes crazy for, then I've done my job."

Eighth-graders aren't easily impressed. They'll tell you when you're not funny. They're young enough to still possess a sense of wonder, yet old enough to be skeptical about the stories adults tell them. I want to make a film that helps them realize that serious academic work can also be funny, joyful, and surprising enough to make the audience say, "You've gotta be kidding me."



CJ Hunt
Class of 2020

CJ Hunt is a comedy writer and a field producer for *The Daily Show with Trevor Noah*. CJ has also been a staff writer for A&E's *Black and White*, a cast member in MTV2's *Vidiots*, and a field producer for BET's *The Rundown with Robin Thede*.

09 Victor J. Blue on how good photography can get to "the marrow of life"

How did you become a photojournalist?

It was a pretty circuitous path. I started out as an art major in college, then switched to history. After college I got a manual 35mm camera and started taking black and white pictures of my friends and our adventures. I did this for years, until I kind of stumbled over photojournalism. I didn't have any clue how to become a photographer, and I didn't know anything about the news business. I thought you just started a project and went from there. So I headed down to Guatemala, where I had traveled to study Spanish, and I lived in a small community for three months taking pictures and trying to figure it out. The next year I went back down and tried to cover a presidential election. At that point I was lucky enough to meet and work alongside an amazing contingent of Guatemalan and Latin American photographers who took me under their wings and showed me the ropes.

After a time, I returned to the U.S. and tried to start carving out a living as a freelance photographer. I wasn't learning fast enough and knew I needed the rigor of a staff job. After a few years I was hired by a mid-size paper, *The Record*, in Stockton, California, and I really loved working there. Every major issue facing our society was playing out in Stockton, and having a daily, visual conversation with the thousands of readers of the paper helped me to realize the great responsibility I had to them and to accurately reflect our community. I did that for three years until I realized I needed a new challenge to push my work further, and I went to graduate school at Ohio University to get a master's in Visual Communication. The cohort my colleagues and I formed there was very close and supportive, and we maintain it still.

After two years I didn't know what to do next. A couple of editors told me I should come to New York, and I did. I've lived and worked here ever since. I've always had a pretty mixed practice—covering news, doing enterprise

stories of my own, working on long-term projects locally, nationally, and internationally. I always think of myself as a community journalist no matter which context I'm working in. And I'm stubborn, so I've kept at it. An old friend of mine wrote to me recently pondering the question of how I came to this work. He wondered, "Was it the craft you have chosen...or maybe the craft chose you?" I had to kind of think about that one.

You once said of your love of journalism, "You could cut me and I would bleed ink." What is it about your profession that continues to draw you to this field?

I really appreciate the positionality. I'm comfortable in the role I play as a witness and interlocutor, trying to work independently from commercial or ideological considerations. I know it's a term that has largely fallen out of favor because I think it's misunderstood, but I strive for objectivity in my work. My journalism is not an expression of my personal politics, it's an expression of my values. I am not interested in telling people what to think; I just want them *to think*. Their conclusions are up to them. My job is not to "create change," it's to provide people the information they need to understand their world, and make decisions about how to live their lives, who to vote for, and what kind of community they want to live in. I believe that is a far more valuable use of my time than direct advocacy.

And despite all their failings and shortcomings and pecados over the decades, I still feel like newspapers, magazines, and books are the best places to do that. I just get so psyched to make pictures about the world and publish them. The forms of communication that have sprung up to replace editorial publications, or destroy them, don't operate that way. They aren't designed to deliver facts. They are organized around other priorities, and I usually find those priorities at cross purposes to my own.

I've had people ask if I feel constrained by the journalistic ethics I work with—I always think that's such a weird question. It's the opposite. I find the ethical dimension of this work liberating. Photographs mark time in our human story, and we need pictures we can believe in. Working in this way endows the pictures with a veracity that is key to their meaning, and their value for viewers in a way that art cannot. For photojournalism, integrity is not an ancillary concern—it is the defining aspect of the work. It determines if it succeeds or fails.



Elena Brito Ramirez cooks at home in the village of Cocop, Quiche. On April 16, 1981, Guatemalan soldiers massacred 79 people in the village and burned the houses.

All photographs by Victor J. Blue.



A quiet moment of contemplation for families about to leave everything behind as they flee the chaos of the fall of Afghanistan.





In Afghanistan, Noorzia Amarkhel is lifted into her wheelchair by her father Rahmatullah.

With your work, what are you trying to convey to ordinary Americans about the war in Afghanistan?

I want people to understand that the war was misguided from the beginning. I was driven to create a visual record of the expression of the ideas and doctrines that they heard their political and military leaders claim would bring victory and align with their country's interests. The falsity of their proposition was staggering, and I think that when Americans see these ideas in action, it makes it easier to understand them. My hope is that people realize what a waste all of it was, and think twice when the next official tries to convince them to grant them their support for the application of violence.

I am in the business of providing intellectual armor—facts—for everyday folks that they can use to defend against the false promises of their leaders and instill a bit of skepticism and reflection. But specifically, I want them to see the people caught up in circumstances beyond their control, and to engage their moral imagination to ask, "Wow, these folks aren't so different from me. Why did my country fight there for so long? What was the reason? Was it worth the damage, and the lives it cost?"

The renowned World War II war correspondent Ernie Pyle observed, "War makes strange giant creatures out of us little routine men who inhabit the Earth." How have your experiences in conflict zones transformed you?

It's hard to explain. Any way I answer this is going to sound weird. I read Pyle's *Brave Men*, and it had a big impact on me. He has another passage I love, about the eve of the invasion of Sicily: "Even the dizziest of us knew that before long many of us stood an excellent chance of being in this world no more. I don't believe one of us was afraid of the physical part of dying. That isn't the way it is. The emotion is rather one of almost desperate reluctance to give up the future."

That's the most accurate description I've ever read of the anticipation of violence. That reluctance, it's given me insight and perspective about life and what it means to live it and lose it that seems uncommon. I really, really value that. On the one hand I wish I could have come by it by some other means, but then I feel strongly that the work of accompanying people through the worst this world has to offer is an act of solidarity, and I am proud to do that. When you serve as a witness and document those experiences with people, you understand loss and get some idea what's at stake. So yeah. It's provided me a depth of understanding that I wouldn't have otherwise had and I'm grateful for that.

When faced with your extensive visual documentation of the war in Afghanistan, how did you determine which images would tell the story most effectively?

As I'm working, I am trying to put myself in interesting situations to make visually compelling images. It's pretty rare that in the moment, with a camera in my hand, I make a frame and think, "Oh yeah, that really gets at the heart of what this war is all about." The meaning comes in the editing process. First, I sit down and go through the thousands of images I've shot and find the strongest photos. From that selection I choose the ones that also convey something powerful—that go beyond just what they portray—and realize the things I was keying off of.

Every successful photograph balances two things: form and content. The photo itself has to depict an event or theme that has meaning, and also have enough visual power to deliver that meaning. Conversely, a really beautiful image that doesn't say something is just decoration. So it's a process of weighing both of those considerations with each picture. In the end the pictures aspire to a kind of metaphoric resonance—something bigger than what's depicted in the frame. It's this balance between the lyrical and the factual that makes photography so compelling, and that motivates me to keep going out and trying to make pictures. It's really hard. But when it works, I believe still photography is our strongest tool for making meaning in the world.

Editing for the book is another matter altogether. I returned to my archive and reviewed every image I made in Afghanistan from 2009 to 2023—10 trips total. From there I made a new working edit, around a thousand images. Then, with the help of some great editors and photographers, we winnowed that down and made a kind of narrative scaffold of the book. The book communicates so differently from [a magazine]—the pictures are doing a different job. They aren't communicating the urgency of now, they are talking to the ages.

Is there a photograph in your forthcoming book that maintains a special significance to you?

One that comes to mind is an image of a young girl named Noorzia being lifted into her wheelchair by her father Rahmatullah. She was just 12 years old, and had lost both of her legs to a mine planted by ISIS in Eastern Afghanistan. I took this photo in 2017, at a moment when the war had largely fallen from the headlines. I was there to produce a story about the rising numbers of civilian casualties as the U.S. pulled out and as the conflict increasingly took on the role of a civil war.

I remember how delicate and fragile and afraid she was, and how that was such a perfect encapsulation of what the war was doing to Afghans. It's one of those pictures that gets closer to the marrow of life, of what is at stake that gets lost in the policy debates and hearings in Washington. Rahmatullah was intent on fighting for a better future for his daughter, and I feel like that comes through in the picture.

In an interview with *PhotoWings*, you said, "I don't think that people owe us their attention to the photographs we produce." Could you unpack that perspective and how it shapes your work?

People are busy. They come home from long hours at tough jobs, put dinner on the table, care for aging parents, and get their kids to school. Just because I did a story about a human rights abuse or a violent confrontation doesn't mean they are automatically obligated to drop what they are doing and read it. I am trying to make pictures so compelling, so full of information and insight, and so emotionally moving, that they are worth giving up a few minutes to look at, and in that process help others understand people very different from themselves a little better. And through that process people also learn a little about themselves.

Like it or not, we live in an attention economy, and my stories don't compete with other news outlets—I am competing with Netflix. I have to make stories good enough that it's worth it to miss a few minutes of today's hit show. They have to be better than a few minutes of scrolling TikTok.

You've said that you once heard someone say, "Photograph a riot like a wedding and photograph a wedding like a riot," and that you try to take the same approach. What does this methodology reveal that a more conventional approach might miss?

Yeah, I figured out that's a William Klein quote via Kim Komenich, the great San Francisco Chronicle photographer. I've always taken it to mean that it's important to photograph with flexibility and insight, to try and step outside the confines of expected perspective and look at what you cover with new eyes. Both events, at (usually) opposite ends of the human experience, carry assumptions. Strong photography is ready to subvert those expectations and to reveal new layers of meaning.

If I only make the picture that you expect at a wedding, I am reinforcing the romanticized view we are familiar with. It's the same thing at a riot. If I only run after images of violence or conflict and don't look for moments of reflection or revelation, I am reinforcing the conventional perspective of the "news event." By rejecting the assumptions inherent

in both, I open up the possibility of transcending those assumptions to say something new and nuanced, something that challenges the reader and, hopefully, resonates deeper with them.



Victor J. Blue
Class of 2024

A photojournalist and writer, Victor J. Blue focuses on the legacy of armed conflict, and unequal outcomes driven by policy and politics. His documentary photo projects cover the conflict in Afghanistan and post-conflict Guatemala, and his photographs appear regularly in *The New York Times*, as well as *The New Yorker*, *Harper's Magazine*, *The New York Times Magazine*, *Bloomberg News*, and *The Wall Street Journal*.

10 Rachel Aviv never thought she'd be a journalist

You started your writing career at *The Village Voice* in the early 2000s. You wrote about seemingly everything—music, art, food, equality, neighborhoods, and books—to name just a few of your subjects. What did you learn most about writing as a craft from your time at the paper?

So much of what I wrote at that time was approximately 300 words. I remember thinking back then that that was the perfect form. Because it was so constricted, I felt like I should try to be funny in my writing at all times. It's strange to think about that, because I don't think people consider me a funny writer; I guess I've chosen the wrong topics for that.

In hindsight, it's slightly terrifying that the paper allowed me to review books, given how little I knew about the world—I was in my early 20s—and how unaware I was of how meaningful a book review could be for an author.

I had an amazing mentor there named Ed Park, and without him I'm not sure I would have felt confident enough to keep going as a writer. After editing one of my first articles, I'll never forget that he described my writing as "lively." Until then, I didn't even know that "lively writing" was something that I should strive for.

Your piece for *The New Yorker* investigating Alice Munro's family secrets rocked the literary world. What about Munro's story intrigued you the most?

The morning that Andrea Skinner wrote her essay, a close friend, who grew up in Toronto, texted me the essay and told me I should write about Munro. I was struck by the way Andrea articulated her experience. She had such a complex mind and that's something I'm always drawn to.

For example, years ago, I read *The Center Cannot Hold* by Elyn Saks,



A photo of Rachel circa 2005 near the office of *The Village Voice*.

a memoir about her experience living with schizophrenia, and she was an early example for me of someone who had this ability to describe an aspect of the human experience that I didn't know existed, and describe it with such granular detail that I felt like I was learning about a new category of experience.

So, with Andrea Skinner, that's what I mean when I say I'm drawn to someone who has a complex, flexible way of making sense of what they're going through. When it comes to child sexual abuse, there are ways of talking about these things that are curiosity-diminishing because it can be easy to let platitudes and stereotypes and binaries stand in for the experience. I could tell Andrea had worked out her own schema and language for making meaning from what she'd been through and that the words she used felt new—like they would lead readers to a new place.

You've said that part of what drew you to psychiatry is that it's still a relatively young field. After researching and writing extensively about its history, you've reflected that recovery often has less to do with medication and more to do with people "finding someone to talk to who made them feel like they just weren't alone." How do you think psychiatrists—and perhaps the broader mental health field—should factor loneliness into their work?

I thought about this a lot when I was working on *Strangers to Ourselves*, which tells the stories of six different people with mental illness, and some of them recovered and some didn't. I wondered, "What were the key moments when they took a step toward stability?" The turns in their illness had so much to do with a sense of isolation and alienation versus a sense of kinship and community.

Can you describe what you were like as a child? Were you always drawn to questions and led by your innate curiosity?

I definitely didn't think I would be a journalist because I was so shy as a kid—asking strangers questions didn't feel like an available option to me. But there is something I love about the social clarity of a one-on-one journalistic encounter, the sense that it is a space where a certain kind of probing question is sanctioned and expected, the rules are, more or less, clear.

I do have a sense of continuity in terms of my curiosities. I was exposed early on to psychological thinking because I was forced to see a therapist three times each week from the time I was in first grade through fifth grade. It was so much and I felt totally oppressed. I didn't like the feeling that there was this adult who had access to parts of my

mind that I wasn't willing to give her.

But all of that therapy at a young age did teach me a new way of thinking about other minds—there was this sense of possibility that there were more layers than I had realized. It also made me aware of how provisional so much of psychiatric treatment is, the fact that it takes years or decades to really assess what it was really doing for you.

Ezra Klein told you that many of the "best journalists I know say you're their favorite journalist because of how good you are at finding and telling stories." So, because we're all so curious about what's on your mind, can you share any core questions, issues, or stories you are mulling over right now for pieces, even if they're not yet in the works?

Wow, I never realized he said I was good at "finding stories." That's funny, because while the "telling" feels like something that comes naturally, the "finding" feels excruciating, half-hazard, and unsustainable! Each time I finish a story, I have this sinking feeling of: "Oh no, not again." And then the Googling begins. Maybe my problem is that there is too much Googling as opposed to other methods.

As for core issues: On a more general level, I have been thinking a lot about what constitutes a story in this particular era, how to write about injustices without it feeling like this has become some sort of niche concern when so much corruption is now blatant. Many of the things that we as journalists might have thought to "uncover" are not even being hidden anymore.



Rachel Aviv
Class of 2019

Rachel Aviv joined *The New Yorker* as a staff writer in 2013, covering mental health, ethics, and criminal justice. She is the author of *Strangers to Ourselves: Unsettled Minds and the Stories That Make Us*, which became a *New York Times* bestseller and a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award.

11 Tim Wu on the only way to stop checking your phone

More than a decade ago, you wrote, "Today's machines don't just allow distraction; they promote it. The web calls us constantly, like a carnival barker, and the machines, instead of keeping us on task, make it easy to get drawn in." What essential human experiences do you believe we're losing out on at the altar of constant connectivity?

What we're losing, above all, is the ability to inhabit a single moment without the low-grade hum of outside solicitation. Solitude, boredom, and sustained conversation—conditions that once seeded creativity and intimacy—become rare when every pause triggers that reflex to check. The cost isn't merely a distraction; it is the gradual erosion of our inner narrative, and at worst, an unraveling of who we are. In short, the capacity to be yourself is the long-term casualty of uninterrupted connection.

In your 2017 book, *The Attention Merchants*, you explored our struggle against digital distraction. Since then, how has your personal relationship with focus evolved? Which attention management practices have you tried, dropped, or come to rely on?

Writing *The Attention Merchants* forced me to audit my own habits. I tried living out in the desert for a short while, alone. I kept a diary of how I spent all the hours in the week (discovery: I actually do spend more time sleeping than doing dumb errands). But what has stuck for me most of all is just a very ancient lesson. You have to tie yourself to the mast; you cannot trust your willpower in the moment. And you have to zone your life—keep devices completely out of certain spaces

In your 2014 essay "The Problem With Easy Technology" for *The New Yorker*, you observed, "We may evolve into creatures that can do more but find that what we do has somehow been robbed of the satisfaction we hoped it might contain." A decade later, as AI dominates our technological landscape, your insight feels prophetic. Is it possible to harness AI's productivity potential without sacrificing the human satisfaction that comes from meaningful work?

I think so. There has always been an important distinction between technologies that replace human autonomy and those that augment it. Our most wonderful tools augment us, projecting our will, instead of doing things for us. AI can be either, but we have to keep it in its lane—delegating drudgery while insisting on human judgment for the conceptual and ethical choices. There is some hope that AI can broaden rather than flatten the scope of satisfying work.

Peter Thiel famously asserted that "competition is for losers," advocating instead for monopolistic advantage. To what extent has this philosophy permeated Silicon Valley's entrepreneurial ethos? And where do you see the unintended consequences in this winner-takes-all mindset?

If Silicon Valley were a sports league, we'd have a generation of players whose aspiration is to find a way to fix the games so you never lose. Venture capital has been chasing "category kings," encouraging entrepreneurs to secure choke points rather than build better products. It makes founders rich, but the unintended consequences are visible: thinner markets for labor, stagnant wages in tech hubs, and an innovation tempo that slows once dominance is achieved. The risk is a Silicon Valley that becomes a museum of entrenched gatekeepers.

Your tenure in the federal government gave you an insider's perspective on regulatory systems. How did that experience transform your thinking about the practical constraints, and untapped possibilities, in modern antitrust enforcement?

In the White House I came to see antitrust enforcement as a part of national economic policy, much like industrial policy or the setting of interest rates. The administration should think of itself as turning a knob: choosing between a more decentralized or centralized economy, more competition or more monopoly.

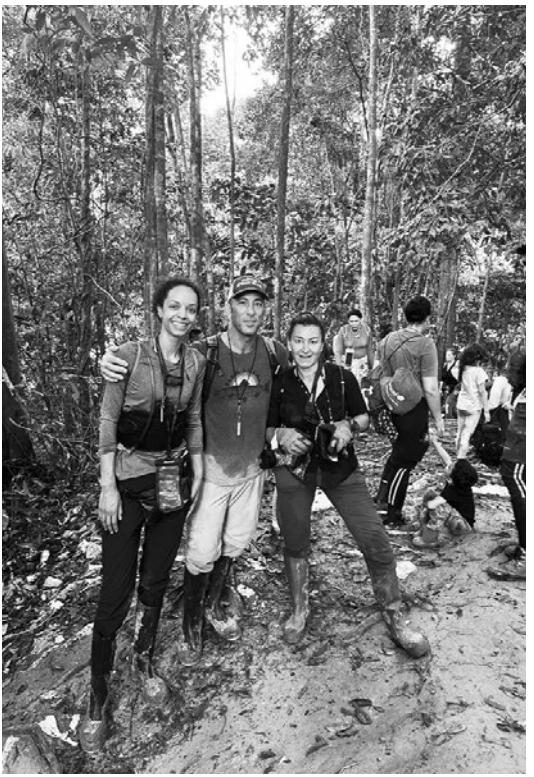
In your forthcoming book, *The Age of Extraction*, you describe how digital platforms threaten to "foster a two-class nation"—a premise that suggests a rather sobering analysis. Yet your publisher promises readers something "concise and helpful." Is there a path forward you've discovered through your research that genuinely warrants optimism?

The book argues that today's digital platforms excel at value extraction rather than value creation, risking a bifurcated society. Still, I do see grounds for optimism. First, public awareness of extraction is soaring; citizens now grasp that "free" often means "you're the product." Second, at some level, the digital platform itself retains the potential—the dream of the 90s—for an extraordinary shared prosperity. We need to learn how to make platforms into catalysts that support the economic activity of others, as opposed to taking too much for themselves. The road is narrow and requires political will, but it is hardly nonexistent.



Tim Wu
Class of 2010

Tim Wu is a professor at Columbia Law School and a contributing opinion writer for *The New York Times*. He is best known for his work on net neutrality theory.



Caitlin with photographer Lynsey Addario and their fixer, Joe, traveling through the Darién Gap.

12 Caitlin Dickerson's relentless pursuit of the truth

"I don't report stories because I want to," Caitlin Dickerson says. "I cover them because I feel like I *have* to." That sense of duty—paired with relentless thoroughness and emotional clarity—has made her one of the most respected immigration reporters working today. A Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and staff writer at *The Atlantic*, Caitlin is known for telling some of the most complex and consequential stories of our time.

In 2023, she risked her life to report from the Darién Gap, a treacherous jungle passage between Colombia and Panama. "There's no way to do it without risking your life," she says plainly. She had watched the number of crossings through the region steadily increase, tracking the trend over time while traveling around the United States, Mexico, and Central America to interview migrants. But eventually, the story demanded more. "It brought together so many themes I'd covered, all in one place—failed policy efforts to curb migration, trafficking, cartel violence, climate change, the role of technology and social media, and the human toll of forced displacement."

She didn't take the decision to go lightly. "The list of people I would have been willing to go with to the Darién Gap was very, very short," she says. When photojournalist Lynsey Addario texted her out of the blue, gauging her interest in a reporting trip to the area, Caitlin's reaction was abrupt and resolute. She turned to her husband and said, "Shit, I'm going to the Darién Gap." Lynsey and Caitlin had previously worked together in dangerous regions of northern Mexico. "Lynsey has a lot of experience in dangerous reporting environments. We've sat together and talked through what we do if we get kidnapped. I knew that I was going to feel as comfortable as one can in that environment going with her."

But the story required more than courage. It demanded collaboration: with photographers, fellow reporters, fixers, and *The Atlantic*'s security team. "There's this perception that journalism is a solo sport," Caitlin

says. "But that's never been my experience. When Lynsey and I decided to go to the Darién Gap, the first people we called were other journalists who had experience on the ground there, and they were so generous with their advice."

Caitlin's devotion to journalism and storytelling was shaped by her childhood in Merced, an agricultural community in California's Central Valley. "It looks more like Idaho than California," she says, describing open fields, almond orchards, and dairy farms. The area was home to first-, second-, and third-generation immigrants, and everyone had to coexist. "I grew up with friends who were truly from all over the world," she explains. Because the town was relatively small, it was impossible to exist in a bubble—she had no choice but to engage with a complex mix of cultural and political views, many of them unexpected. "Growing up in an area that was so diverse really drove me to seek out nuance in every story that I work on."

That nuance became her trademark as a reporter. After an early, successful career at NPR, she joined *The New York Times* in 2016 and suggested immigration as a beat—not because she intended to specialize in it, but because she'd been drawn to it since studying under a historian of immigration at California State University Long Beach, which led her to become a voracious student of the subject. With that background of knowledge, she knew she could make an impact. "I had no long-term plan," she admits. But when Trump won the presidency, immigration moved to the center of American political life. "For the next four years, my colleagues and I were all treading water, working seven days a week. I became nonexistent to friends and family."

Over time, Caitlin developed greater fluency in the subject's legal, historical, and humanitarian dimensions. "I reached a point where it would feel like a shame to move on to cover a different issue," she says. "Immigration is one of those subjects that many reporters find really daunting. When you've invested years in learning the system, like I have, walking away from it feels crazy. It's my job to stick with it."

Her work isn't without cost. Returning from difficult assignments often requires her to retreat socially, to recharge. "There are days where it feels like all I do is interview people about some of the worst experiences that a human being can have, like war, sexual assault and other forms of violence, exploitation that can result from living on the margins of society." She leans on a close circle of friends and family who understand her rhythms. "I'm grateful that they are always willing to help me decompress if I need to talk about a story, but they don't press for details unless I offer them because they sense how challenging the work is. Sometimes, I just

want to eat a good meal and watch *The White Lotus* or something else that doesn't require anything of me."

Despite her growing list of accolades—the Murrow Award, a Peabody, a Pulitzer—Caitlin says she no longer seeks validation in trophies. "Honestly, at the beginning of my career, I think I *did* need that sense of validation because I was unsure of myself," she explains. "I was surrounded by people from Ivy League schools, with family in the industry. I didn't have that. Winning those early awards gave me a baseline feeling that I belonged." Now, her satisfaction comes from the stories themselves: how deeply she can go, how much they move the reader.

One of her heroes is Robert Caro, who once inscribed her copy of *The Power Broker* with the words: "For Caitlin—A fellow member of the craft." It was a benediction. "He showed me what you can do if you take your time and turn every page," she says.

That's exactly what Caitlin Dickerson intends to keep doing.



Caitlin Dickerson
Class of 2024

A Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and staff writer at *The Atlantic*, Caitlin Dickerson has extensively covered American immigration policy and its human impacts. Her work often explores the subject's intersection with politics, history, and race.



Marcia being interviewed at New America by Millennial Fellows
Christian Hosam and Myacah Sampson.

13 Marcia Chatelain on what good teaching feels like

You have said of teaching, "We are all teaching in fascinating times, and it's a privilege to do so!" Now that you're decades into your career in the classroom, what does good teaching feel like to you?

I've always characterized teaching as two people sitting at a table. The professor brings their intellectual commitment to the table—their subject matter expertise and the backstory of how they came to their interests. And the student brings their curiosity; it can be about the class topic or their desire to learn broadly. It's exciting to share the things that are important to me with a class, but it's only meaningful and fulfilling if I can learn about what is important to my students. I always spend time getting to know what my students are committed to and how that fuels their curiosity. Good teaching feels like good learning to me.

Throughout your career as both a historian and educator, how has your understanding of education's purpose evolved?

I think as our political climate has become more challenging and scholars have to fight to stand up for the truth, I've become more convinced that education is not about the edification of the individual, but all learning is done in the interest of the common good. Making up your own facts and misinterpreting data only serves the purpose of making a person feel powerful, in the absence of care or curiosity. When you learn within a framework dedicated to truth and honesty, you become better for the world around you.

During the pandemic, like many educators, you were teaching classes remotely. What did those contrasting experiences reveal to you about the significance of sharing physical space with students?

Were there any unexpected insights about teaching and learning that emerged from this transition?

The Zoom times were hard, but they were also illuminating about the challenges of focus in the age of endless access to technology. The problem with Zoom isn't that students can check out more effectively because we aren't all there together. The problem is that boredom is now met with some kind of stimuli that attends to it, rather than the imagination. I am afraid that daydreaming, doodling, or just falling asleep is a lost art! Imagine that! I think that the Zoom experience of turning off cameras, exiting rooms, or just opening other websites during class didn't help students sharpen their ability to hang in there. In person, if there is something difficult or challenging or boring, you still have an opportunity to plug back into the content. Online, that is hard to do.

I [did] like Zoom teaching because the chat allowed for a second learning space that could be fun or insightful. For students who struggled to talk in class, having another way of contributing was good for them. I think that I've learned post-COVID how to segment my classes and lectures in a way that allows me to get through a lot of material but to organize it in a way to help with students whose attention spans struggle.

In your writing, you've noted: "Teachers are used to being the guiding force, but in all matters of inclusion, it's helpful to recognize that sometimes students can lead." Could you share examples of how you've created space for student leadership in your own classroom?

It's really important to me that everyone in my class feels confident and like a contributor, outside of their mastery of the content or the grade they will receive. I like to have class days where students are responsible for teaching everyone one thing. I ask students to write me notes or to suggest TV shows they like or accounts they follow online so I can get a window into their likes and interests. I allow students to tell me what they find interesting about current events or campus issues before I start my lectures, in order to allow my students to have a voice in the classroom outside of assignments and course topics.

You and your husband took the step of living on campus as faculty-in-residence at Georgetown. What insights did you gain from sharing this residential community with your students?

I loved living on campus. It was so fun, and I enjoyed getting to know

students in a non-classroom context. I met so many wonderful students that I never had the opportunity to teach, and we were able to provide a non-parent, non-authoritative presence for them. They were so kind and respectful, and I think they appreciated that they didn't have to impress us for a grade or a job reference, they could just be themselves and ask us for advice.

You've mentioned that in your consulting work with schools, you frequently encounter "teachers who felt moved by a particular moment"—such as the 2016 election or the Parkland shooting—and consequently "wanted to radically upend their teaching." Has there been a similar watershed moment in your own career that fundamentally transformed your approach to teaching?

Some days I feel like I live on a different planet from the years I was actively working with educators. The types of projects and initiatives that started in 2014 when I did #FergusonSyllabus and other curricular campaigns until 2022, when the commitments of the George Floyd summer started to wane, were so inspiring. Teachers wanted to help their students navigate the ways that education can make us better, more compassionate and justice-seeking people. It was truly beautiful. But once the right-wing assault on academic freedom took off with their witch hunts, book bans, and repression, all of the courage and care evaporated. It makes me so sad.

As a historian and educator, what do you think teachers should prioritize during this period of change and upheaval? Are there aspects of this political moment that feel familiar to you—echoes of the past that resonate particularly strongly?

I think that teachers need to emphasize that history isn't linear; there are moments of progress and backlash. We are in the deep backlash phase right now. Also, teachers help students understand politics not by telling them what to think, but by sharpening their ability to understand origin stories, discern fact from fiction, and recognize the various viewpoints and frames that inform how people understand the past and present. We are living through a moment that feels like the end of Reconstruction, the height of the anti-Vietnam War era, and the early twentieth century's commitment to race science and unregulated medicine. It's bleak.

Over the years, you've experimented with diverse teaching formats and methods, saying that your intention is to "distribute history as widely as possible." Could you elaborate on what this mission means to you in practice?

I like to take my research and bring it on podcasts, work with museums and cultural institutions, and then find ways to write op-eds about it, and I always welcome invitations from documentarians to provide "talking head" commentary. When I think of my research this way, I'm making a case for public-facing scholarship, and I get to maximize my work's impact and audience.

Georgetown and the University of Pennsylvania, where you've taught, are increasingly expensive to attend. You've observed: "I think of [our students] as anxious investors…they're not sure what the outcomes of this are supposed to be." How does this reality affect your approach to teaching and mentoring students who may feel immense pressure to justify their educational investment?

I think students, parents, and communities hear a lot of buzz about higher education, but they don't know a lot of details. It's easy to say this will make you money and this won't. A more thoughtful approach is, how much money do you need or do you want? What kind of life do you want to lead? How much do you think that costs? I am known to take out a blank sheet of paper and write numbers down with students so they have a sense, in a concrete way, of what is viable and what is not. I am a history professor; I know how to live on a budget and how to balance my material needs with my intellectual passions. I had to do that in order to live the life I wanted.

We have to give students guidance on making those calculations rather than telling them what is or isn't possible. I respect the fact that someone has made a huge financial, time, and emotional commitment in order to support my students in their education. What better way of honoring and valuing all these contributions than guiding students to a life that is fulfilling, ethical, creative, and substantive? The only way we get there is to engage deeply in the question of how to create a life, not just earn a paycheck or live out someone else's dream.



Marcia Chatelain
Class of 2017

Marcia Chatelain is the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *Franchise: The Golden Arches in Black America*. During her 12 years at Georgetown University, she won several awards for her teaching and university service.

14 Jeff Goodell on the invisible threats of heat

You've shared how an experience of near heat exhaustion in Phoenix—running 15 blocks in summer—became the catalyst for your book *The Heat Will Kill You First*. This led to your realization that we should view heat as "an active force." Why do you think so many of us don't truly understand the risks of extreme heat?

Because heat, unlike other forms of extreme weather, is invisible. Looking out the window in my office in Austin right now, I can't tell if it's 70 degrees outside or 120 degrees. If there is a hurricane, on the other hand, I know it: The wind howls, the trees shake. So, there are no visual cues for heat, nothing that imprints it in our imagination.

Also, the media is very bad at communicating about the risks of heat. When weathercasters talk about heat waves, they often accompany it with images of people at the beach or playing in sprinklers. There is very little attempt to talk about risks or dangers.

Finally, the simple fact is most people prefer warm days to cold days. We prefer flip-flops to snow boots. And so we have a very hard time understanding how quickly the comforts of warm weather can tip into the dangers of extreme heat.

In an interview with *The Story*, you explained that the problem with most climate writing is essentially one of intention. "Most people who write about climate don't think about it as a story," you said. "They think about it as information." Can you elaborate on how you turn facts into stories to draw in readers?

Well, I don't think what I do is actually turn facts into stories. I think I use facts to build the world that the stories I write exist in. To write about the dangers of extreme heat, for example, I read a lot of science papers that



One of Jeff's favorite snapshots of how Texans talk about the heat.

looked at the human body's tolerance for heat, and I learned as much as I could about the mechanism by which heat damages cellular structures, etc. The more I learned, the better I understood how it all worked. But to turn that into a chapter of a book—at least the kind of book I wanted to write—I had to find a narrative that would carry all that.

Around that time, I happened to read about a family that had gone out for a hike on a summer day in the Sierra Nevada foothills and didn't return home. When a search party went out to look for them the next day, they were found dead on the trail. It took more than a month for investigators to determine that the cause of death had been heat stroke. I decided to build the opening chapter of the book around that family's experience, which allowed me to build a narrative with some human drama, while at the same time sneaking in a lot of science about how heat impacts the human body. To me, the story is a vehicle for the science. But I try to keep that a secret from my readers.

When you know as much dire information about our warming climate as you do, and you've been reporting and telling stories for as long as you have, how do you continue to find optimism and hope?

There are lots of different ways to think about hope and optimism. There is cheap hope and hard-won hope. There is optimism that is rooted in ignorance of the scale of the challenges we face, and optimism that comes out of a deep trust in human ingenuity and imagination. Myself, I am just constantly inspired by the people I meet—scientists, activists, entrepreneurs, artists, community leaders—who are fighting hard to build a better world. That might sound corny, but it's true.

What do you think of the phrase "human resilience" when it comes to Americans living in some of the hottest places in the U.S.?

I don't know what the phrase "human resilience" means. Humans are obviously incredibly resilient creatures—as a species, we are like cockroaches, almost impossible to kill. What's fragile is our way of life and, in the long run, civilization itself.

Do you think certain places in America should be deemed "uninhabitable" because of warming temperatures?

Uninhabitable? No. With enough technology and supplies, humans can live on the moon. But why would you want to? The same is true with hot cities like Phoenix and Houston and Austin. As the heat rises, life will

change. Outdoor work will become impossible in the summer, as will outdoor concerts and sporting events (goodbye, summer high school football-training camps). Loss of air-conditioning during power failures will not just be an inconvenience but a potentially deadly event. Steel bridges will crack in the heat. More and more people will lead vampire lives—indoors during daylight, outdoors at night. Some people will decide to try to live with it. But a lot of others will flee to cooler, more hospitable climates. In that sense, climate-driven extreme heat poses a real threat to the economic and cultural vibrancy of hot cities like Austin and Phoenix and much of the southwest. And the hotter it gets, the bigger the impacts will become. To imagine that we are just going to air-condition our way out of this is profoundly naive.

You moved from upstate New York to Austin, Texas, and now live in a state that regularly experiences 100+ degree temperatures. How have you adapted to the heat?

I try to get out of Austin as much as I can during the summer. I go for walks and hikes early in the day. I have made peace with our air-conditioner (which is powered, I should add, by a heat pump, a terrific heating/cooling device that allowed us to get rid of our gas-fired AC unit).

I go for frequent swims at Barton Springs, Austin's wonderful spring-fed public swimming pool. I don't know how long I'll stay in Austin, but for now, my wife has a good job here and two of my kids live here and the tacos are great, so I'm going to stick around for a while. And for me, there is some virtue in living in the story you are writing about. Texas is the belly of the beast—besides heat, we have droughts, wildfires, sea level rise, hurricanes, invasive species, crop failures. It's a Disneyland of climate impacts.

You've said that the New America Fellows Program gave you the "intellectual camaraderie" you needed "to write the book I wanted to write." Could you elaborate on those relationships and their impact?

Writing a book—especially a nonfiction book tied to current events—is a solitary trip through the wilderness. As one writer I know put it, "There are no ways of doing it. There are only ways it's been done." At New America, I gained a lot by being in conversation with other writers and hearing how they had done it or were doing it.

During one meeting at New America, I remember talking to Chris Leonard about his book about the Koch empire and the difficulty of writing a book about people who don't want you to write it. And Peter Bergen,

about the challenges of covering the Iraq War. And Mattieu Aikins, who was just finishing up his book about Afghan migrants. And Lisa Hamilton, who was working on her book about an immigrant rice farmer in California's Central Valley. Being with other writers who are on the same journey—even if the landscape they are traveling through is very different—was tremendously inspiring.

None of the conversations we had were profound. They were more mechanical, about research tips and agent woes. And, of course, writerly whining and moaning: "You hate writing footnotes too! Your editor hated your first draft too! You are struggling to come up with a title too!" All in all, New America gave me the feeling that I was not in this alone, that the work I was doing was important, and that it could, if I did my job well, make a difference in the world.



Jeff Goodell
Class of 2016

Jeff Goodell's latest book is *The New York Times* bestseller *The Heat Will Kill You First: Life and Death on a Scorched Planet*. He is the author of six previous books, including *The Water Will Come: Rising Seas, Sinking Cities, and the Remaking of the Civilized World*, which was a *New York Times* Critics "Top Book" of 2017.

Victor J. Blue
Class of 2024

"I am not interested in telling
people what to think;
I just want them *to think*."



A self-portrait. Mona at work on her art.

15 Mona Chalabi on why humor is central to journalism

You created Sharia, the hijabi mom character in *#1 Happy Family USA*, the first time a main character in a U.S. animated series has been shown wearing a headscarf. You gave tremendous thought to how you could illustrate that "the hijab isn't just an outward expression of inner values. It's as practical and fashionable an item of clothing as any other." What reactions have you heard from audiences so far?

I feel so grateful because the reaction has been so positive. I literally haven't heard anything bad—and that's virtually unheard of!

From the get-go, I wondered if I was the right person to create Sharia because I'm not hijabi. And so, it was so nice that people who wore hijabs said that Sharia's depiction was good and that what I created meant a lot to them.

I approached this project with a lot of humility. I didn't say that *this* is the definitive depiction of a hijab. I wasn't talking about religious or scholarly interpretations of the hijab. The hijab means different things to different people, and actually, it can have this levity to it. It can be this thing that you want to accessorize and feel beautiful in, as well as this piece of clothing that has enormous significance to you, too.

Along the way, I showed the co-creators of the show, Ramy Youssef and Pam Brady, working illustrations. Pam is a former creative producer for *South Park*, so she has a wealth of experience in animation. She talked about the practicalities of the character. She explained that the character's head needs to be massive in proportion to the rest of their body because otherwise you don't see the expressions well on their faces, which I thought was really interesting and also hard because I wanted less cartoonish energy, and a big head and big eyes contribute to that look and feel. So, we went back and forth, and I saw exactly what she meant, and I think the characters are better for it.

The team that I worked with was vast—nearly 300 people—and one of the most incredible was Kendra Melton, who worked on character designs and what are called "character turns," which is how you show the character from all different angles. And also, having a very large team means there's a ton more negotiation, but it's so much less lonely than journalism, and the process is more collaborative. I could feel myself getting sharper just being around so many creative ideas.

Can you talk about the colors you chose for Sharia's character?

So often, the hijab is depicted as quite drab, as if women want to erase themselves. And that's not been the experience of my family at all, where many of the women wear hijabs. I just met my cousin in Los Angeles and she walked into the coffee shop wearing all leopard print and a straw hat on top of her hijab. I mean, after all, it's clothing, it's an expression of who we are. I chose pink and green for Sharia's character, in part, because I love that combination together. I also see Sharia as a militant feminist, so green is an allusion to that part of who she is.

In a review of *#1 Happy Family USA*, the writer Aymann Ismail describes watching the show as not just cathartic but necessary: "It reminds some viewers of a moment we never got to narrate and gives us the chance to enter it into the record. It doesn't ask Americans to see Muslims as more fully human. It asks Americans to sit with how ridiculous and dangerous their fear was, and still is." How does that resonate with you?

It's absolutely spot on.

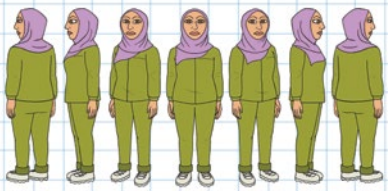
I did not think when I started working on the show that it would be as relevant as it is today. We got the green light in 2020, and it's finally been released in April 2025. The process took so long because that's the nature of animation. From the moment I was attached to the show to the time that we had the main cast of family members took 10 months. I felt like an incredible failure! But someone more experienced in animation said that it usually takes a year to 18 months just to finalize a cast of animated characters.



Feeling sluggish, Mona remarked on Instagram, “Mondays make me feel like I’m in a body that’s 20 years older than the one I have.”

All illustrations by Mona Chalabi.

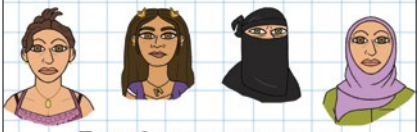
How To Draw A Not So Terrible Hijabi



If you've seen a hijab on a screen, it probably looked a bit like this - a little hair poking out of a shawl that can be quickly slipped off. And people really do wear the hijab that way.



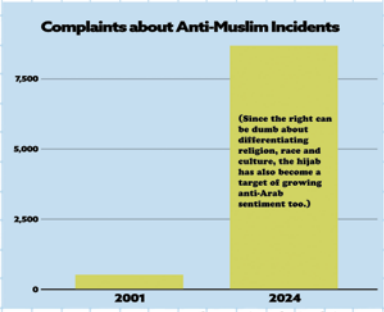
** Was Princess Jasmine a hijabi? IDK, not clear if she's even Muslim. She always put on a head covering when she left the palace. But it also looked like a blanket???*



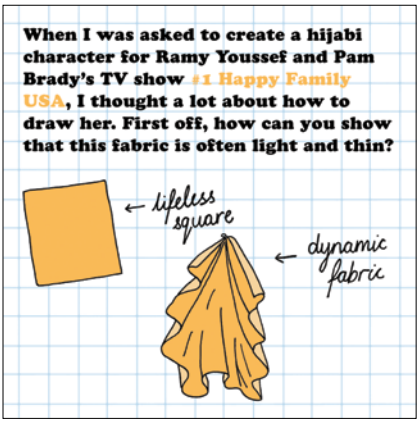
But there are so many choices between a niqab and nothing. And so much personal expression within each choice.

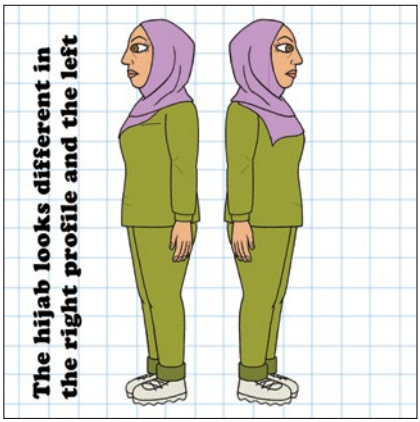


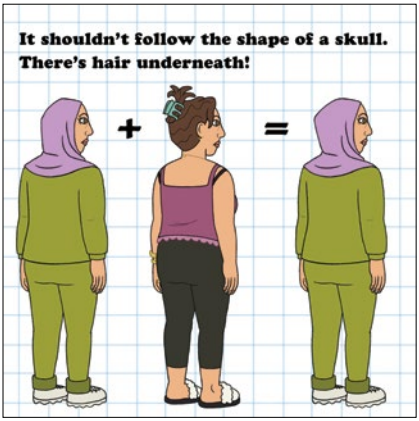
The way that the hijab is depicted matters. Not least because people who are visibly Muslim are the first to be targetted by Islamophobia.



Source: Council on American-Islamic Relations, 2025

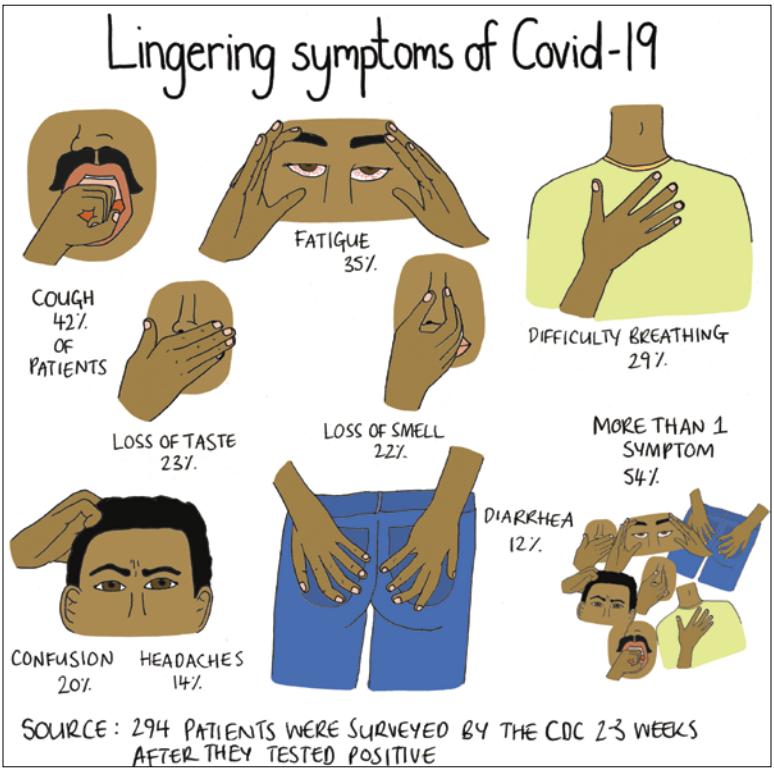








The illustration process for Sharia from *#1 Happy Family USA*.



A graphic depicting long-term symptoms of COVID-19.

You've said that your approach to using data in storytelling has evolved—especially in terms of pacing. In one interview, you reflected, "Five years ago, I was trying to do a piece in a few hours the day of, and now I'm just like, no, I'm going to take a few days and I'm still working the same number of hours each day. There's no change in the intensity, just a more cautious approach." How has that slower, more deliberate pace changed your creative process, and the work you produce?

Getting older is definitely a part of it. The point is not to be first; it's about getting it right. Even when I was young I felt that I had only so many years of this energy—and that was part of my desire to break my back at work, because I knew I had a limited time to do so, and that time has now ended for me. I'm not willing to sacrifice my physical health for the end product. I've just slowed down. And what's funny is, I realized that the many articles that I *don't* end up writing and the illustrations that I *don't* end up doing—it's fine. The ones that are really, really worth it are the ones that you cry over, the ones you put to one side and they just keep coming back up—whether it's at a dinner party conversation or they emerge just as you're about to go to sleep. Those are the ones really worth doing.

Your Pulitzer Prize-winning *New York Times Magazine* piece, "9 Ways to Imagine Jeff Bezos' Wealth," manages to surprise—and even, at times, delight—the reader. How do you strike a balance in tone? And what role does humor play in your work?

I think humor is a really, really important tool in a journalist's toolbox. Part of our role is to present information in a way that is, first and foremost, accurate, but we also need to offer it in a way that doesn't make people look away. When you're writing about very serious subjects, the question is: "How do you grab the reader's attention and inform them?" I recall working on an illustration about data released by the World Health Organization about the lingering symptoms of COVID. I wanted to educate people about the virus and also make sure that what they learn, they *remember*. So, how do I do that? It turns out that one of the lingering symptoms of the virus is diarrhea, so I drew a person clutching their butt. Now, that can look a bit silly, but so many people commented on that one visual! And look, it's really important information from a public health messaging perspective. It helped people recall one of the core symptoms of lingering COVID.

So much of journalism is informing people of things they don't know. In the case of Jeff Bezos' wealth, I started on that piece from the premise

that everyone knows he's very, very rich, and we've become desensitized to it. My role is to make his net worth surprising to you all over again. It's not the exact figures that matter; it's his vast fortune versus the income of the average American. This enormous wealth disparity results in political power and this new fascism in America.

I spend as much time working on the language of a piece like that as I do on the illustrations. I want to make the language accessible—so, I'm constantly asking myself, am I using the simplest and most accurate words to describe this problem?



Mona Chalabi
Class of 2023

Mona Chalabi is an award-winning writer and illustrator. Her work has earned her a Pulitzer Prize, a fellowship at the British Science Association, an Emmy nomination, and recognition from the Royal Statistical Society. In recent years, her art has been exhibited at the Tate, the Brooklyn Museum, the Design Museum, and the House of Illustration.

16 Patrick Radden Keefe on what extreme wealth does to people's judgment

Starring in a J. Crew ad

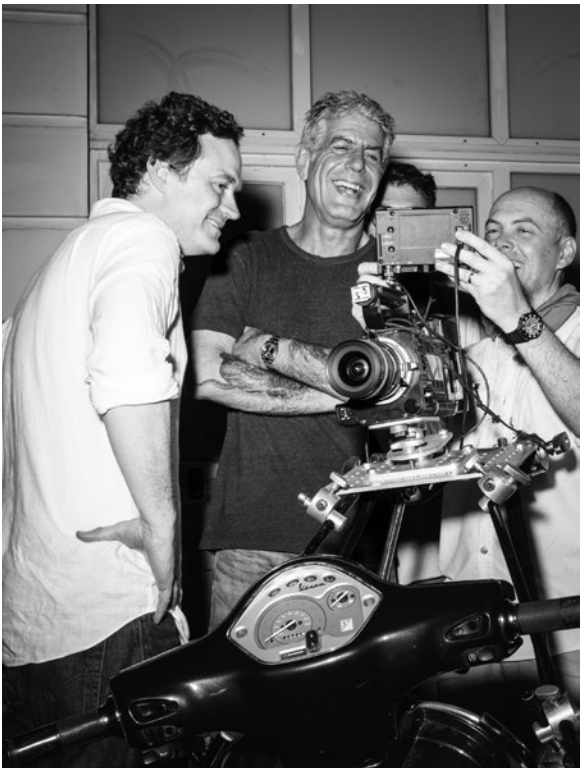
I didn't go into it with that conscious intent, it was just something that came up and seemed fun. But I do think that partnerships of various sorts are a good thing, and that it's not enough these days to do the work and hope that people find it on their own. I try not to be too precious. Sometimes you have to go out and bang the drum. As for staying grounded, it helps to have adolescent kids who think I'm a gigantic loser.

Making Obama's reading list (twice)

That was a nice surprise, not least because I think he has quite good taste; a lot of his other picks are books I love. There was definitely a bump in book sales, but what I'm really grateful for is the chance to find new readers through that sort of recommendation, people who might never have encountered my work. I'm always grateful for any affirmation by people who have read the books. It's certainly nice when it's someone with a huge platform or someone I particularly admire, but honestly, it means so much to me when I go out and meet ordinary readers who I've never heard of and will probably never see again but who have devoted many hours of their lives to read what I've written. That still feels like magic.

Sinbad the Sailor

As a kid, I had a print of Paul Klee's *Sinbad the Sailor* on my bedroom wall. It's an image of a guy in a little boat holding a spear and facing several big and hungry-looking sea monsters. There've definitely been times when I felt like I was facing down a much bigger, nastier, more formidable quarry.



Patrick spent considerable time with Anthony Bourdain while writing a *New Yorker* profile of the former chef. In the piece, Patrick wrote, "Anthropologists like to say that to observe a culture is usually, in some small way, to change it. A similar dictum holds true for Bourdain's show."

Photograph by William Mebane.

The ultra-wealthy

I think extreme wealth tends to pollute people's judgment, both their moral judgment and also the fidelity of their empirical understanding of the world around them. To be very wealthy almost inevitably means insulating yourself from the kind of touch points with ordinary people that inform the way most of us experience and understand the world. This tends not to be particularly conducive to compassion, or to the kind of self-critique that I think is essential if you're trying to live a reasonably ethical and responsible life. This may not be an ironclad rule of human behavior, but I think it's a prevailing tendency, one which the very wealthy tend to avoid only through a lot of conscious effort.

Denial

Self-delusion is a powerful drug! We're all capable of telling ourselves a story that justifies our own bad behavior, but I think in the case of the Sacklers we saw a particularly extreme version of it. If you're surrounded by sycophant courtiers who believe that the only way to keep their job is to reaffirm everything the boss says, at a certain point you are going to lose touch with reality. The tariff policy of Donald Trump is a more recent example of this phenomenon. I'm fascinated by the psychology of denial in general, but also the way in which the very powerful and the very wealthy, who you would think could avail themselves of the best advice, are actually much more susceptible to this form of cognitive drift.

Print is not dead

I don't think print is dead, not yet anyway. I still read a bunch of magazines in hard copy, to say nothing of books. I love the tactile and aesthetic experience of reading print, and the way in which I am able to concentrate more deeply when I'm not distracted by a bunch of competing tabs. That said, it would be naive not to recognize that print is in serious decline. For writers, I think this means that if you want to make a career as a reporter you need to think creatively and across different media: Try different forms, make a podcast or a video story or a documentary, invent some new form altogether.

People want to be told stories, that's not going to go anywhere, but we shouldn't be too wed to any one way of telling them. For publishers who want to continue producing a print publication, I think that the beauty and distinctiveness of the object itself are important, more so than they have been in the past. A magazine, whether it's one of the big legacy glossies or

a little startup, needs to make a case for itself as a fetish object, something you want to pay for and display on your coffee table and hold in your hands.

Keeping secrets

I worked at the Pentagon for a year and held top-secret clearance. I was actually shocked by how little we knew about some things, and how much we knew about others. I was also astonished by how many people had security clearances, and by how much information was classified that didn't seem like it should be. Overall I came away with a pretty jaundiced view of our classification bureaucracy.

Anthony Bourdain

It's funny, I think about Bourdain all the time, and to return to the question you started with, things like saying yes to that J. Crew ad—saying yes to things in general—that's a tendency that I really learned from him. There are a bunch of other small ways in which having been lucky enough to know Tony for the short time that I did has influenced my life and work. But Tony had a darkness in him that I don't. There was a depressive tendency he had, and real demons of a sort that (at least for now, touch wood) I seem to lack. So I'm always chasing something, for sure, but most of the time it's just driven by my own interests, or a sense of injustice or indignation, or this thing I've always had where if you tell me there's a secret, I want to know what it is.



Patrick Radden Keefe
Class of 2017

Patrick Radden Keefe is an award-winning staff writer at *The New Yorker* magazine and author of *The New York Times* Bestsellers *Rogues: True Stories of Grifters, Killers, Rebels, and Crooks*, *Empire of Pain: The Secret History of the Sackler Dynasty*, and *Say Nothing: A True Story of Murder and Memory in Northern Ireland*, as well as two earlier nonfiction books. He is a member of the New America Board.

17 Sian-Pierre Regis on the unexpected gift of caregiving

Becoming a caregiver

When my mom, Rebecca Danigelis, was abruptly laid off with only $600 in her bank account, she was devastated. You could hear it in her voice. There's a voicemail of hers that I share in the film that's very matter-of-fact but there's also fear, anger, and uncertainty—so many emotions in there. In the days after her firing, it became clear to her that she had lost more than her job, she had lost just about everything—her value, her purpose, and her work family.

I am inherently an emotional person, but in a crisis I become practical. I knew that [with her] at 75 and suddenly jobless, and just $600 in her bank account, I needed to be my mom's rock. I needed to get everything in order—her legal documents and testimonials.

Money

While my mom does have a small Social Security check, it's not enough to fully support her, and so, it does weigh on me; I feel it. Every dollar I make, *I make*. It's a cobbling up of different streams of money to make all this work. But, I have no regrets. I know, for me, at this moment in my life, my job is to make sure that my mom, who is 84 years old, is safe and comfortable every day she is on Earth. If that means that I have to pay for her apartment—which I do—then I will; it serves my mission. That's how I think about it.

I can only control how I show up for my mom while she's here. I don't want to have any regrets in that sense. Caring for my mom is my legacy. That's what drives my decisions. I'm not pulled by wanting all of these other things. I've seen and felt the good that my feature documentary, *Duty Free*, has had on others—how it touches other people, and changes hearts and minds. I mean, what else is there? I just feel so present in the way that I live my life.



Sian-Pierre lived with his mother, Rebecca Danigelis, for three years before he and his partner, Sam Moll, moved out to their own place.

Photograph by Karsten Moran/*The New York Times*/Redux.

Professional validation

I think the process of making *Duty Free* actually diminished my need for validation. I was in my late 20s and early 30s throughout the making of the film, and prior to that, I had focused much of my career on TV journalism, climbing the ranks of cable news. In that world, you seek validation from TV ratings, from your peers, from the scoops you get. When my mom lost her job, I guess I realized what was really, really important to me, which was making sure the person who mattered most to me in this world felt safe. Everything else fell away.

Being a first-time documentary filmmaker, you get lots and lots of feedback, and at the start of the process, I held onto what stakeholders or gatekeepers thought about the film. Eventually, I realized that their feedback wasn't going to shape the film that I wanted to make. I realized only I knew the film I wanted to make because only I knew my mom. Over the five to six years it took to make the film, it was a test to not seek outside validation and remain really focused on what I was being called to make.

A higher purpose

One day I was sitting around wondering how I could cheer my mom up. I'd never seen her this low. Out of nowhere, I came up with this idea of taking my mom on a bucket list adventure, and filming our journey together. It felt like the idea was placed in my mind. I thought about what this experience could mean to her—and for us—so I decided to follow it.

There were so many times when I didn't want to pick up the camera. Sometimes she was so emotional and I just wanted to "be" with her instead of film our interactions. But I kept being called back to record her journey through this process. I'm so glad, too, because so many of the most important moments of the film are the ones that I captured when I was, unbeknownst to the viewer, dreading picking up my camera to film. Sitting next to my mom, I became a proxy for the struggle she was navigating.

For young folks who are hungry and driven, there are a lot of reasons to say, "not right now" to having your parent move in with you. But, you don't really understand the human experience of someone who is 75 years old—how much they may need a friend, and in my mom's case, how much help she needed applying to jobs or logging into LinkedIn for the first time. That made me wonder, "Who else is like my mom?" And that question started the reporting process for the film.

"To disagree well, you must first understand well."

My mom is British and British people generally don't talk about their feelings. That's how I was raised. We didn't communicate our frustrations. My mom's mantra is: "You fall down, you get up, and you keep going." In many ways, that's been really helpful in my own life. It is the reason for my resilience.

My partner, Sam, has taught us the importance of communication. He has no problem expressing exactly how he feels at the moment. He's confrontational in a non-scary way. My mom tended to retreat to her room and close the door if she was upset or didn't want to be bothered. Sam would be the one to check in about an issue and within 15 minutes, it was over and we could move on. I learned that the stories that we tell ourselves about what's going on are often so much more damaging than they actually are. So we got better at open lines of communication after three years of living together.

Multigenerational living was the biggest challenge for Sam because he was the man in the middle. Patience and nonjudgmental curiosity about the other person are the keys. My mom had 75 years of life that informed how she moved through the world. Sam was really interested in and able to learn about who Rebecca is.

As for the little things we each did that drove each other nuts, it varied. It drove Sam crazy that my mom didn't know how to load the dishwasher! The way she would put the dishes away never made any sense! But we'd never had a dishwasher growing up in our small New York City apartment so she wasn't familiar with it.

Alternatively, she would get so annoyed that I never made my bed, so she started making it. I mean, she was a hotel housekeeper so she knew how to make a bed really well—I wasn't going to stop her! We were running an Airbnb downstairs, and my mom started managing it, which was amazing—I mean this is what she did for her career. But then she started buying new toothbrushes, toothpaste, and Dove soap for every single guest, even when they come for just one night. It really started to add up. We're like, "Mom! This isn't the Ritz! We know you care about this stuff, but we can't afford to do this for everyone!"

A mother's cancer diagnosis

Finding out my mom has cancer was really emotional at the start. There is a lot of learning to do. My mom said it so well in one of her recent Instagram posts—cancer is the thing that people talk about in hushed tones, but you don't know what it's really like until you experience it. It was initially way too much for me to hold—a lot of tears and emotions. But I was on every

call and at every doctor's appointment, and I came prepared with 100 questions. I wanted to be as informed as possible. But then I would go home and break down to my partner, Sam. I told him, "Everything is moving so fast." It became very real to me that I only have so much time left with my mom.

My mom was initially very scared. She just didn't know *how* you live with cancer. What we learned is that you *can* live with this. Lots of people do. All you can do is what's in your control. We've just tried to spend our time together now being present with one another.

Simple joys

My mom is a bird when it comes to eating. She basically just eats granola and yogurt. And yet, my partner is a dietician and former farmer, so food is his love language. He would always encourage her to eat healthy. As a stepping stone from that, we would cook and eat dinner together at least once a week. We would play a game called "Highs and Lows" where you name two highs of your week and two lows of your week, and then share a personal challenge for the week ahead. And then we'd check in with each other—did you meet or defeat the challenge? It was such a wholesome, sweet thing that we did together. And we were really invested in each other's challenges. I look back on those conversations as so beautiful. Truly a family event with my atypical family!

My mom is, in general, such a crafty person, so she loved to decorate our apartment's terrace to celebrate a holiday. For Easter, she'd go to Michael's craft store to buy fake Easter eggs to hang. For Pride month, she'd purchase fabric to make handmade Pride flags, or for St Patrick's Day, she'd dress up as a leprechaun. In other words, she brought joy to our doorstep. Now that my partner, Sam, and I live separate from my mom, we don't take the time to create those same moments in our own home. So, we've lost some of the joy!

Solitude

My mom, partner, and I lived together for three years from 2020 to 2023. It's now been about 1.5 years since Sam and I moved into our own place, and I've had a chance to reflect on that journey together. It was the most beautiful three years of my life because I was surrounded by the two people who love me the most.

On the other hand, it was challenging because there was no alone time since we shared a small, New York City apartment. I mean, I could see my mom's bedroom from my own—there really was no space. There were times when that got in the way. But I'm lucky, because my mom is my best friend.

I have this incredible emotional empathy for her that felt like my heart was living outside of my chest. I was so focused on, "Is she OK? Is she happy?"

But there was also the dynamic of wanting solo time with my partner, Sam. As a growing adult, who needs my own separate experiences from my mom, it could be difficult to navigate. When I lived with my mom, I had to fit within the boundaries of this person she thought of me as. I don't think any of us want to divert from the person who our parents think we are. There was a level of who she thought I was versus who I really am. It's like I was 90 percent of myself when I was with her.

For my new project, a podcast called *Raising Adults*, I talk to people across the country who are living multi-generationally. I'm curious about a few central questions: How do you care for a house of adults while grappling to become one yourself? How can you become the person you were meant to become under the thumb of your parent?

I've found that some people have a very hard time negotiating the child they once were versus the adult they are now when they're living with their elderly parents. The adult child can feel trapped, especially if their new role is as a caregiver, but the interactions with their parents feel like déjà vu from when they were a little kid. Most of the people I talk to still wouldn't change their situation because of the time they're getting to spend with their parents. This is a part of the life cycle that Americans have been coaxed away from—the idea of the village, that we should be together when we're born and together when we die.



Sian-Pierre Regis
Class of 2024

Sian-Pierre Regis is a former journalist (CNN, MTV, HLN) turned documentary filmmaker whose debut feature, *Duty Free*, was a #1 *Apple News* story and distributed by Independent Lens on PBS. *Raising Adults* is his latest podcast project that will uplift stories of modern families who—by choice or circumstance—are living multi-generationally in America today.

18 Why Peter Bergen will never leave Washington, DC

Interviewing Osama bin Laden

I was dogged about following that story because of my long-held interest in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region.

I first went to Pakistan in 1983 as a university student with two friends to make a documentary about the Afghan refugees fleeing the Soviet invasion of their country. To be clear, we knew nothing about filmmaking, or much about these two places, but we were all aged 20, so we just went for it. And ultimately, the film, *Refugees of Faith,* was shown on Channel 4 on British TV. I didn't know it at the time, but that was the beginning of my career covering the region.

In the mid-1990s, I was working as a producer for CNN, and I asked my bosses if I could travel to Afghanistan and try to secure an interview with Osama bin Laden. To their credit—given the expense and danger of such a trip—they said yes. I owe a lot to them for giving me that green light. Bin Laden was, at the time, threatening to attack the United States, and I wondered how one could attack the most powerful nation on Earth from a mud hut in Afghanistan?

I was 34 years old when we interviewed bin Laden. The reason I was able to get that interview was that, by that point, I had developed something called patience, which wasn't something I had when I was younger. I spent weeks and weeks with people who were bin Laden's associates—these were mostly Syrian or Saudi dissidents. These guys were very paranoid and not used to dealing with the media. I spent much of my time trying to persuade these men that the interview we could conduct with bin Laden would be no different than an interview with anybody else.

Around that time, al-Qaeda had declared war on the U.S. in one of the few independent Arabic newspapers, and no one had really noticed. So, I think that bin Laden wanted to do an interview with a Western media outlet to de-

clare war because, in his particular brand of jihadism, he had a duty to warn. He wanted to lay a predicate that he'd warned America before an attack.

Interviewing bin Laden certainly sent me down a particular career path.

Osama bin Laden's compound

I was the first and only journalist granted permission to enter Osama bin Laden's compound in Abbottabad, where he was killed, and where he had lived the last few years of his life. I didn't know that two weeks later the Pakistani government would demolish the place so that it wouldn't become a shrine to bin Laden.

The whole place was completely undisturbed from the 2011 raid by the U.S. Navy SEALs. There were broken glass windows and blood splatter on the wall from bin Laden's killing. Cows were in the pasture, and crops were growing in the yard—ensuring that bin Laden and his family never had to leave the compound; they could be self-sustaining.

Some of what I found demonstrated bin Laden's vanity—a box of Just for Men hair dye, something he used in the final years of his life to dye his hair and beard jet black because they had otherwise gone white. I also noticed Avena syrup, a purportedly natural form of Viagra—bin Laden was against the use of pharmaceuticals. Although he seemed much older than he was at the time of death—54—he was only middle-aged. And he had four wives who ranged in age between their mid-20s to early 60s.

There was also a treasure trove of documents recovered by the SEALs. And I love documents because they largely don't lie. These materials have helped me understand his relationship with his wives and family. I found a very tender letter he wrote to his oldest wife, whom he hadn't seen in 10 years because she was exiled in Iran. She had a PhD and played an instrumental role in writing his speeches.

Because he was taking every precaution possible, bin Laden never thought he'd be found. As a result, the documents found at the Abbottabad compound represent his true views and what was on his mind at that time.

Humility

I was friends with the war photographer Tim Hetherington, who was killed more than 10 years ago by a rocket while covering the Libyan revolution. He was an amazing person. In fact, my wife and I named our son, Pierre Timothy Bergen, after him.

On the tenth anniversary of Tim's death, I wrote an op-ed continuing to marvel at his humility, saying "Tim lived and worked in the toughest environments in the world, from Liberia to Afghanistan, to Libya...but he



Peter produced the first televised interview with bin Laden in 1997 from a cave in Afghanistan. In conversation with CNN's Peter Arnett, bin Laden declared a jihad on the United States.

Peter during coverage for *Anderson Cooper 360* on location in Helmand, Afghanistan, in 2009. Photograph by Tim Hetherington for CNN.







The *Anderson Cooper 360* production team and host in Helmand.
Photograph by Tim Hetherington for CNN.

was never jaded by those experiences, nor was he a showboat about his many years on the front lines. He was a very gentle man. A gentleman."

Tim and I met on a CNN reporting trip to Afghanistan that I was producing with Anderson Cooper and Tim was taking still photography. We were embedded in a Marine base in Nawa, Helmand Province, the kind of place that had no water or electricity. And yet, Tim loved it, just like he loved Afghanistan. He was very low-ego and a real artist. His film, *Restrepo*, is one of the best war films ever made.

After that trip, we stayed in touch, and he would visit and stay at my home in Washington. Everyone who knew him loved him. He was such a thoughtful human being.

Becoming a podcaster

Starting the podcast *In the Room with Peter Bergen*, I didn't know what I didn't know. Look, anybody can create a podcast, but to produce one that people actually want to listen to, and one that has structure, narrative, and drama, well, that requires some skill. I was so fortunate to have as our executive producer Alison Craiglow, who formerly ran the *Freakonomics* podcast and public radio show. We also had a team of really good producers, assistant producers, and a sound designer. And we produced the entire show virtually because we were all spread out from Brooklyn to Washington, DC to Mexico City to California to Chicago.

I find that audio allows people to let their guard down in a way that they wouldn't if they're on camera. And the barriers to entry are much lower in terms of cost. I enjoyed it a great deal and I learned a lot about audio storytelling.

The "War on Terror" era

I'm writing a book about the history of the war on terror from September 11 to the withdrawal from Afghanistan. I told my friend Vali Nasr, a former senior advisor to Richard Holbrooke on Afghanistan and Pakistan, about the premise of this book, and he said that he thinks now is the right time to tell this story. That's because enough time has passed—we are far enough away from that era in history to take a look at it.

The global war on terror is as much an epoch as the Cold War was. It was a distinct era in American life. And there is now a treasure trove of material available to the public about that period. The Miller Center at the University of Virginia, for example, interviewed all of the principals from the Bush administration back in 2012 and publicly released the transcripts in 2019. Similarly, Southern Methodist University conducted interviews with all of

the people involved in the surge decision in Iraq, offering another informational gold mine. So it's exciting to explore these kinds of materials.

This is my eighth book, and there are a lot of traps a writer can easily fall into—and I've done them all by this point. I used to think that I had to know absolutely everything there was to know about a subject *before* writing anything. Well, that's just not possible. I also used to think that I had to put *everything* I learned into a book, but if I did that, it would be an encyclopedia! Now, I find that writing a book is as much about what you leave out as what you keep in. There has to be an understanding of narrative and a sense of where to begin and end the story.

How Washington, DC has changed

I moved from New York City to Washington, DC in the early 1990s when it was the most dangerous city in the United States. It has since become much safer and has gained roughly 200,000 more people. I've also watched another shift take place. People used to move to DC temporarily to work for an incoming administration and then return to wherever they came from once that term ended. Now people come here for those kinds of jobs, get married to someone who's like-minded, and stay put.

I continue to live here because I'm interested in history and national security, and this is where the sausage gets made. It's not being made in London, Paris, or any other American city; it's made here, and I think it's a really interesting place.

During this second Trump administration, several of our friends have lost their jobs or their professional sectors have been turned upside down. For that reason, it's a strange place to be right now; there's a great deal of uncertainty. But I think our political system will right itself quicker than people might think.



Peter Bergen
Class of 2002

Peter Bergen is a journalist, producer, vice president for global studies & fellows at New America, CNN national security analyst, professor of practice at Arizona State University, where he co-directs the Future Security Initiative, and the author or editor of 10 books, three of which were *New York Times* bestsellers. He hosts the Audible podcast *In the Room with Peter Bergen* and writes a column for CNN.com.

19 Francesca Mari explains why housing is so expensive

You've described yourself as being endlessly curious about how things work (or don't work). So much of your recent writing has been focused on the housing crisis. What about this topic is most interesting to explore?

Shelter is a basic human need, a need that's been addressed with endless ingenuity and art. So many fascinating factors are involved: design, materials, building code, land use policy, housing finance, law, and cultural ideas around what good living looks like. And yet we've allowed housing to become an investment vehicle and an increasingly speculative asset. I try to understand how that happened and why it doesn't need to be that way. Everyone deserves a safe, beautiful, affordable place to live.

You are a born and raised Californian, but you went away for college and didn't return until your 30s. You've said you were shocked by the inequality you discovered in the "new San Francisco." What were some of the things that you saw on your return that stuck out most to you?

Working families sleeping in their cars. Blocks-long homeless encampments. A needle jammed into the broken light fixture outside my apartment door. Within two months, my car was broken into three times, the windows smashed into tiny cubes of shatter-proof glass. In the first break-in I lost a backpack with notebooks of value only to myself. The next two times, I was wiser and there was nothing to steal. With the median housing cost over a million dollars, I imagined that the city had become one big rage room.

In the waiting room of the car window repair shop where I'd become a familiar face, I met a twenty-something who worked for Airbnb. He was also getting his window repaired. He invited me to dinner at the

company cafeteria—I counted something like 21 local brews on tap—where he evangelized about cryptocurrency. He invested all his savings in bitcoin, which was running at about five or six thousand per coin at the time. He's likely now a multimillionaire.

Money starts to seem senseless in the Bay Area, divorced from labor and actual productivity. How can a place ostensibly so committed to equality achieve so little of it? Nowhere is this more evident than in housing. In San Francisco, it costs $1 million to build a single unit of affordable housing. No one benefits from that, because it stokes inequality, and understandable rage.

In your article "How an American Dream of Housing Became a Reality in Sweden" in *The New York Times*, you explain that women make up less than 15 percent of U.S. construction workers. What would it mean for the industry if more women were involved in construction?

Any industry benefits from the labor and insight of a gender that makes up half the population. Lindbacks said it attracted a greater variety of workers, including women, because building in a factory environment means regular hours, a controlled environment, safe working conditions, and predictable outcomes and timelines. It makes sense that more women would be drawn to assembling a beautiful, pragmatic product.

You lived for several years in Austin, Texas, writing for *Texas Monthly*. What lessons did you draw from how Texas has approached housing, accessibility to land, and regulation?

According to a recent RAND study, it's more than twice as expensive to build multifamily housing in California than in Texas. Municipal impact and development fees average $29,000 per unit in California, compared to less than $1,000 per unit on average in Texas. Projects in California take an average of 22 months longer. There's no question that California's excessive regulation around building has backfired. Californians are now flooding Texas, attracted by the lower cost of living.

But while I think there's much to admire about having less restrictive building codes and fewer zoning restrictions, a fair amount of the building in Texas is sprawl. (And a city like Austin was the site of some of the highest property inflation during the pandemic.) I'm more inclined to look to social housing in a flourishing metropolis like Vienna, for solutions. Social housing is insulated from the market, either run by limited profit housing associations that charge "cost rent" (a particularly precise

Viennese term for rent priced according to the cost of operating the property including a modest profit capped between roughly 3 to 5 percent, rather than priced according to what the market will bear) or municipal authorities charging a fixed rent.

In an interview with *The New York Review of Books*, you explained, "I'm always pre-reporting four or five stories at a time." How do you know when one of those stories is "the one" worth doubling down on and turning into a project?

Pre-reporting can be as simple as slipping a conversation with an acquaintance into a mental drawer for later consideration or it can be diving into documents and making dozens of phone calls. I generally come to stories in one of two ways: top down, in which I identify a theme I want to explore and then look for a narrative that will help me unpack the issues, or bottom up, in which I come across a compelling story that feels like it speaks to larger issues. As for when to go all in, I trust my gut… and it's right 75 percent of the time. But every year, I spend at least a couple months on something that doesn't pan out or that someone else nails before me. I think it's the unfortunate cost of doing original work.

How has being a freelance writer and an editor influenced how you teach narrative nonfiction to college students?

I teach the class I wish I had been able to take as an undergraduate. I don't much believe in writer's block; I believe in reporter's block. But reporting can be taught. Read, live, listen, observe: There are infinite ideas out there. I try to help my students recognize and catch them. We have weekly editorial meetings to discuss pitches and to figure out which are worth pursuing, how they might be strengthened, and the best way to execute them. Perhaps what I've learned as an editor and freelancer is when to hold on to an idea and when to let go. Not every idea is a good one.

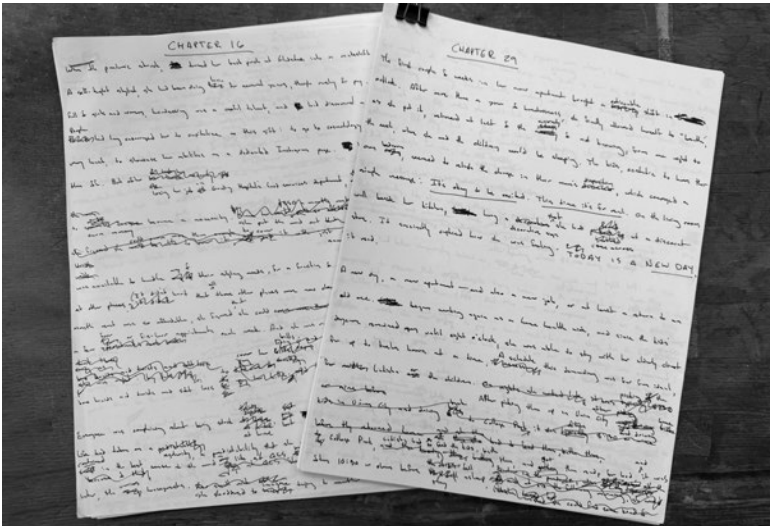


Francesca Mari
Class of 2022

Francesca Mari writes about housing, con men, and abuses of power. She is a contributing writer at *The New York Times Magazine* and an assistant professor of the practice at Brown University.

Mona Chalabi
Class of 2023

"The [stories] that are really, really worth it are the ones that you cry over, the ones you put to one side and they just keep coming back up—whether it's at a dinner party conversation or they emerge just as you're about to go to sleep."



Brian handwrote the entirety of *There Is No Place for Us*.

20 Brian Goldstone on what it means to work and still have nowhere to live

Perhaps one of the most neglected groups in America is the working homeless—people who hold down jobs yet remain unhoused, caught in the brutal gap between wages and rent. As a trained anthropologist turned journalist, Brian Goldstone has spent years documenting the lives of those enduring in the shadow lands of the U.S. economy. His debut book, *There Is No Place For Us*, developed during his New America fellowship, unflinchingly chronicles this crisis of contemporary American inequality.

Drawing on immersive fieldwork and narrative depth, Brian renders the stories of the working homeless not as abstract social commentary but as irreducible, deeply human portraits—refusing the familiar tropes of blame or redemption. In doing so, he challenges one of the most persistent myths in American life: that housing insecurity is a personal failure, rather than a policy choice. "When someone loses their home," he said, "it should be seen as a profound injustice—but it's not. It's made into a personal failure."

That impulse to question dominant narratives stems, in part, from a lifelong tendency to swim against the tide—whatever the setting. "I wouldn't trade my various crises of unbelonging for anything," Brian told me. "If nothing else, it gave me an inclination to explore not just people and places, but ideas that were outside of the norm. I embraced questioning the moral, social, and political status quo."

Brian shares his process of making the book, the uses of anthropology beyond the academy, and how never fully belonging has made him a better writer.

You've said you never felt like you fully belonged—to your faith, your school, even your discipline. How has that outsider status shaped the way you move through the world?

It's funny, but in hindsight, I've almost come to think of it as a kind of superpower. Growing up, I was always in this in-between space—ethnically Jewish, raised in a Pentecostal church; a punk-loving kid obsessed with poetry and literature at a conservative Christian school. I was always struggling to fit in, often isolated, partly because I never felt at ease within any given category or identity. It was painful at the time. But it planted the seed for how I understand the world. I'm interested in life at the margins, in difference, in what lies under the radar. And I gradually realized that not fitting in—socially, culturally, intellectually—allowed me to notice things that others might overlook.

How did that sensibility lead you to write about homelessness, especially in *There Is No Place for Us*?

It actually started in high school. I was a terrible student and got into a lot of trouble. After one of my many infractions, my parents made me volunteer at a homeless outreach center in Atlanta. That was my first real encounter with people who were unhoused—and their stories were so complex. They had aspirations, passions, flaws, and regrets. They weren't these caricatures that society tries to make them into. Over time, I kept returning to these questions: "Why is homelessness treated as inevitable in America? How has this become a normal feature of urban life in the richest country on Earth?"

Your book focuses on the working homeless—people with jobs who still can't afford a place to live. Why did you choose to center those stories?

Because their stories explode the myth that homelessness is about individual failure.

When my wife, who's a nurse practitioner, started telling me about patients who were employed but living in shelters, I was floored. These include daycare workers and home health aides. They were doing essential jobs—caring for our kids, our elders—and still couldn't afford rent. I typed "working homeless" into an academic database and found almost nothing. That silence told me something. These people's lives weren't being taken seriously, even in research.

You left academia to pursue longform journalism. Was that another act of unbelonging—or liberation?

Both. I had done the PhD, the postdoc, the whole academic track. But I felt like I was swimming against the tide of what an anthropologist was supposed to be. I wanted to experiment with form, to foreground storytelling, to move beyond the university. When *Harper's* accepted my first pitch, it was a turning point. I realized I could follow my curiosity wherever it led me—stories on opioids in Montana, or asylum seekers in Israel, or psychiatric healing in Ghana.

I'm still not sure what to call myself. Am I a writer? An anthropologist? I think I just follow what's urgent and try to make meaning of it.

You've described your own neighborhood in Atlanta as a progressive enclave, and yet you've witnessed opposition to low-cost housing out of a concern for "the character of the neighborhood" and possible damage to attractive tree canopies. What do you make of those conflicting stances?

What I've observed in my own neighborhood in Atlanta is representative of the housing debate going on in any other city across the country. There's a refusal in neighborhoods to allow those who are in most desperate need to live in their communities. When the subject of affordable housing comes up, well-meaning liberal homeowners will—for example—complain about things like the possibility of increased traffic, and that's really just a cover for their desire to keep property values as high as possible. It's fighting an uphill battle against people who wield a lot of power.

These are the dynamics and trends that I'm documenting in Atlanta, where what was once known as the "inner city" is now revitalized with luxury condos. The remaking of urban space is coming at the expense of the very people whose labor has made that growth possible. That's a perverse reality that's found across the country.

What gives you hope—especially in the face of a crisis as entrenched and overwhelming as housing insecurity?

The fact that there's a growing tenants' rights movement, even in the face of enormous odds. The public discourse around housing insecurity has tried to trap homelessness in a binary—either compassion or judgment—but what's been left out for too long is justice. The people I met while reporting this book—people living in cars, working multiple jobs, raising kids—have every reason to feel exhausted. And yet, some of them are still standing up and demanding change. That, to me, is inspiring.



Brian Goldstone
Class of 2021

Brian Goldstone is a journalist and author of *There Is No Place for Us: Working and Homeless in America*. Told through the lives of five families in Atlanta, the book traces the rise of America's "working homeless," exposing the forces—gentrification, racialized displacement, precarious low-wage labor—fueling a deepening crisis of housing insecurity.

21 Jason Fitzroy Jeffers unveils Barbados' hidden history

Your Fellows project will be a feature-length documentary film examining the legacy of Drax Hall, the oldest continuously owned and operated sugar plantation in the Americas. You grew up in Barbados, just 20 minutes from Drax Hall, driving by it regularly. And yet, you knew virtually nothing about its history until a few years ago when you came across an article in *The Guardian* about the wealthiest landowner in the House of Commons inheriting Drax Hall. Can you describe your reaction to the article?

For as much as I knew of the history of Barbados, reading Paul Lashmar and Jonathan Smith's article in *The Guardian* on Drax Hall floored me. I happened to be in Barbados at the time, and as soon as I finished reading it I closed my laptop, walked to the car, and drove straight to Drax Hall. I must have stood in that sugarcane field for nearly an hour, right until sunset, struggling and failing to fathom the history of the plantation and everything it's wrought. I'm still processing it all. In many ways, working on this film is my ongoing reaction to everything I learned that day and continue to discover.

What ultimately led you to decide to include yourself in the film?

Originally, I was nowhere to be seen on screen, but as I had more conversations about the film with my crew, fellow filmmakers, and various funders, I gleaned their interest in what I had to say. I realized that so many of my direct, personal reflections on growing up in Barbados were worth including in the project. As such, rather than only focusing on the history of Drax Hall, the film now uses it as a jumping off point for my own spiritual investigation into the significance of Barbados' history to both its citizens and the wider world, the relationship between chattel slavery and

modern capitalism, and what it means to decolonize oneself. Finding the balance between something intimate and personally driven on one hand and something too navel-gazey on the other has required a lot of work, but it's also been tremendously cathartic, allowing me to reach truths beyond what I initially thought possible for this project. The audience will be the ultimate judge of how well it works.

People might be surprised to hear that one of your biggest creative influences on the film has been *Twin Peaks*. Why is that?

I'm a massive *Twin Peaks* fan, but it didn't occur to me until pretty deep in production that I was churning through similar ideas and feelings that the show stirred in me. Chief among them was the cognitive dissonance that arose from reflecting on the idyllic nature of the island and the ghastly history it conceals. It's a dynamic that's present in *Twin Peaks*, in which demonic, otherworldly forces swirl underneath a quaint northwestern town. My film isn't nearly as bizarre as the show was at its best, but it's still influenced how I contrast the horrific, lingering legacy of Drax Hall and the plantation economy of the 1600s against the image of the island as it lives in tourism brochures and the global imagination worldwide.

This project points to what happens when we neglect to teach local history in schools. What impact do you hope the film will have on Barbados' school curriculum?

I have a deepening hope that this film encourages the Barbadian government to push forward on their stated plans to decolonize the island's education system, which, in everything from its content to testing, still bears the mark of once being Britain's favorite colony. There is so much that we were not taught about who we are growing up. We need to better understand our place in both history and the wider world.

What do you wish the public better understood about Barbados' historic push for reparations?

I have great admiration for the activists and civic leaders who are driving Barbados' push for reparations. Their campaign is quite thoughtful in how it addresses the island's challenges in public health, education, technology, and climate change, and in how to support these areas beyond a mere payout. In fact, those on the frontlines of this issue believe a strictly financial conversation to be an insult, as there's truly no sum that could repay the historic injustice that happened on our shores. Instead,



Jason in the field shooting his forthcoming film.
Photograph by Justin Jeffers.



Bathsheba beach, on the east coast of Barbados. Photograph by Melanie Grant.

they've constructed a reparative framework that will better help the island surmount the social, economic, and environmental challenges that lay ahead—challenges common to any developing, post-colonial nation with a fraught history that's not of its own making.

You started your career as a beat reporter in Miami, describing your time at *The SunPost* as "a boot camp" that trained you for "turning stories around quickly" and "[latching] onto what makes people's brains and minds and interests light up." How have those experiences influenced you as a filmmaker?

My experience as a journalist at the *The SunPost* and later at *The Miami Herald* has come in handy in my filmmaking career, but has also presented unexpected challenges. What's been difficult is defaulting on occasion to a hyper-literal mode, thinking of narrative in words and not primarily in image and sound. That said, leaning into that transition has also been the most exciting part of the creative process. On the flip side, my interviewing skills and research experience have really helped me dig into the most interesting and easily overlooked details of this story, and not a day goes by that I'm not grateful for my time in the newsrooms that shaped me.



Jason Fitzroy Jeffers
Class of 2025

Jason Fitzroy Jeffers is a filmmaker from Barbados whose work focuses on giving rooted and nuanced voice to the Caribbean, pockets of subtropical Black life across the American South, and other marginalized, equatorial, Afro-diasporic spaces. He has written and produced award-winning shorts such as *Papa Machete*.



Reo's project *Tested* was named "Best Podcast of 2024" by *Apple*, *Vulture*, and *The New York Times* and was nominated for a Peabody Award.

Photograph by Kayleigh Shaw.

22 Reo Eveleth is still asking questions

Reo Eveleth's projects are often sparked by a single question that they can't shake. "It starts with something I can't stop thinking about," they say. "If I haven't seen a satisfying answer—or if the question won't leave me alone—that's how I know it's something to explore."

That unrelenting curiosity has fueled a career across audio, journalism, and storytelling. Reo is perhaps best known for *Tested*, a Peabody-nominated podcast that investigates how sex testing in sports has shaped—and harmed—the lives of women athletes, especially those from the Global South.

The path to production was far from simple. "I pitched *Tested* 26 times before it was accepted the twenty-seventh time," they said. "That is a sort of deranged amount of pitching, and I'll never do that again. But I just couldn't stop." More than once, they were rejected for not being "famous enough to host it." Their response? "As a listener, I hate when you hear a show hosted by a celebrity who doesn't care about the topic. If the host doesn't care deeply about it, why would I spend six hours listening?"

To produce the series, Reo poured in their own time, energy, and savings. "I spent all of my savings to make *Tested*. I have no money left over. I can't do this again." While a fellowship from New America offered some funding and affirmation, the process exposed the challenges of sustaining deep investigative work in a creative economy that often demands speed, fame, or virality.

For Reo, the goal wasn't external acclaim. "I'm under no illusion that *Tested* is going to change the minds of people who are transphobic. But I want to talk to people who are genuinely confused. Often, these issues are made intentionally confusing. I want to create that experience of wondering, and then seeing the world in a new way that's complicated and interesting."

The response to the series surprised them. "I didn't get as much negative reaction as I thought I would. Mostly, I got people saying, 'I thought this

was simple and now I learned that it's not.' That was really great."

Curiosity is something Reo has nurtured since childhood. "I was very curious about how things work and why things are the way that they are," explains Reo. In fifth grade, their teacher banned them from asking more questions so the class could move on to other material. "I'm always interested in ways of learning new things," they explain. "When I was 12 years old, I got very interested in scuba diving and asked my dad to help me find a scuba certification course." Their dad found a course—it just wasn't designed for kids. "There I was, this tween, going through this adult certification, and of course, it was *really* hard!"

Today, Reo remains just as driven to ask, explore, and try new things. They recently became immersed in powerlifting—a hobby that began when they were "super depressed and needed a reason to leave the house." Their love for lifting is as practical as it is emotional. "It's my smooth brain time. It's simple: You pick up a weight and put it down. Also, it's really cool to be strong!"

Other creative outlets, like pottery, remain intentionally separate from professional life. "I never sell anything because I'm trying my best to resist turning a hobby into a hustle. If something doesn't work, I can throw it away. It just allows for more freedom to try things and have it not work. That's a relief."

In contrast, the world of journalism doesn't offer room for failure. "Failing in journalism is bad—it means you could've hurt a source or gotten something wrong. But in pottery? It's fine."

Even as their projects evolve, Reo's perspective on storytelling remains consistent. "I'm not the interesting part. I'm the camera pointing at things and saying, 'Look at this.' When the camera turns on me, I get very uncomfortable."

That discomfort extends to social media, where they reluctantly accept the performance required to succeed. "There are people who can write their books and don't have to [self-promote]. I'm not there yet. I sort of try to thread the needle."

But if Reo doesn't love the spotlight, they do love shining it—on questions that matter, and people too often ignored. At heart, they remain what they've always been: a seeker, drawn to complexity, and willing to follow curiosity wherever it leads.



Reo Eveleth
Class of 2022

Reo Eveleth is a writer and producer who explores how humans tangle with science and technology. They're the creator of the podcast network *Flash Forward Presents* and host of *Flash Forward* and *Advice For and From the Future*. As a Fellow, Reo developed *Tested*, an audio documentary series that explores the past, present, and future of sex testing in sports.



A detailed map shows what different languages are spoken in neighborhoods in Brooklyn in a map created by the Endangered Language Alliance.

Photograph by Anna Watts/*Documented*.

23 Ross Perlin says America is a fundamentally multilingual place

Your book *Language City* follows six New Yorkers all working to extend the lives of their languages. You are an accomplished linguist yourself, and yet, I think a lot of people would be surprised to learn that you were raised in a monolingual household. Can you talk about what drove your passion for learning and preserving languages?

That's right, I grew up only speaking English—the language that my once multilingual family moved towards. My great-grandparents were Eastern European, Jewish immigrants who generally spoke four to five languages. And yet, English was all we spoke in my household. But I was surrounded by all of these other languages in other ways growing up—in the building where I lived, the streets that I walked, and the neighborhood I was raised in. A fascination and a curiosity about languages took root in me early on.

You live in, as you describe it, "one of [Queens'] quieter corners—a nondescript neighborhood with an extraordinary soundtrack." What drew you there? And with your deep connection to language, can you imagine living anywhere else?

I do really love my neighborhood in Queens. It's both this very ordinary place and also an extraordinary one. There are certainly very practical things that have kept me here for a decade—it's still relatively inexpensive, it has public translation, it's safe and liveable, and it's actually positioned in the geographic center of New York, in terms of the five boroughs and the broader idea of the city. That means a lot to me, and is a big part of my work.

I go to all the boroughs and roam around the city widely, and it's at the same time a place of languages from all over the world. It's overwhelmingly immigrant, and that includes speakers of dozens of different languages,

from Latin America, Central and Eastern Europe, and different parts of Asia. So, what I love about it is its "ordinary extraordinariness." It's hard to imagine living anywhere else. But at the same time, nothing is perfect. Nothing lasts. I want to be part of the changes in the best possible way.

In *Language City*, you write that "the subway might not run throughout the world, but it can contain and display it, at all hours, for anyone who cares to see." What does riding the subway reveal to you about the richness of human life and language in New York City?

The subway is the great public space of New York City. It's a mobile one and an ever-changing one. It highlights the intensely practical, political, and daily nature of diverse life in urban spaces. The subway certainly has its problems, but it dwarfs all the other public transit systems throughout the United States by a huge margin. It is the lifeblood or the circulatory system of the city, and it is a deeply democratic space. It's the polar opposite of climbing into an Uber where you are paying a distant company that is trying to automate all labor out of existence. In riding the subway, for better or worse, you have to encounter other people; you have to encounter differences. You have to work it out.

I've seen the MTA [Metro Transit Authority] post notices in languages that are otherwise almost never seen publicly in the U.S., certainly not from government agencies. At the Elmhurst Avenue station in Queens, I spotted a '"change of service"' MTA notice posted in Burmese and Indonesian. That's extraordinary.

Do you find yourself overhearing a rarely spoken language and stopping to ask someone what it is they're speaking?

Sometimes I can't help myself. It is my lens on the city—to listen in on the languages. It is my way of living in the world. There's a lot of things one can notice without intruding on anyone's privacy.

I saw a car parked the other day with a vanity license plate that said: "SYLHETI." This is a language and an identity from Northern Bangladesh. There are a lot of Bangladeshi New Yorkers who speak Sylheti. Here was somebody proud [enough] to get the vanity license plate.

***Language City* includes a striking quote from Ludwig Wittgenstein: "The limits of my language mean the limits of my world." How do you interpret that idea in your work as a linguist?**

I think it points to a kind of fundamental humility that we all need to have.

There are 7,000+ languages in the world. We need to realize that the languages we grew up with and the ones we know best shape our way of seeing the world in very fundamental ways. We need to have a deep humility in the face of other languages.

The pandemic made clear that language access can be a matter of life and death. What did you witness while living in NYC at the height of COVID-19, especially around efforts to translate and disseminate health information?

When New York City became the epicenter of COVID in March 2020, the epicenter of the epicenter was in the middle of the most linguistically diverse neighborhoods in Queens. As a resident of the area, watching the crisis unfold in real time, I observed a number of factors at work. Multilingual immigrants were more likely to be essential workers, whether in hospitals or restaurants. One major issue was overcrowded housing. But also, information was not available in people's languages in a timely fashion, when a few days could make a major difference. The tragically higher incidences of COVID were substantiated by comparing our New York City language map with the case data from the NYC Department of Health.

There were lessons for preparedness for a linguistic emergency and having the language access measures and personnel in place to be able to respond.

On the positive side, it fell to communities and individuals to record PSAs and spread the word through WhatsApp, WeChat, and informal networks, to give people information on how to protect themselves. My organization, the Endangered Language Alliance, ran a series of events in more than a dozen different languages on the vaccine. These were languages that nobody was really spreading the word in.

It's not really clear to me whether lessons have been learned or if language access has improved in those places. The magnitude of the challenge and the lack of really any language policy apparatus are still glaring.

In a footnote in your book, you mention that the Jehovah's Witnesses website—available in over 1,000 languages—is the most multilingual website in the world. How did that come to be, and what do you think it reflects about the role of translation?

I am starting to work on a new project connecting language and religion and the fundamental role that Bible translation and evangelism have played in the documentation of languages, research on linguistic diversity, literacy, and publishing. The connection is particularly strong for vast evangelical movements.

The Jehovah's Witnesses' extraordinary website is a striking example of that and a testament to their seriousness, at least in putting out a welcome mat for many of the most marginalized people in the world who speak this huge range of Indigenous languages.

On March 1, President Trump signed an executive order making English the sole official language of the United States. In response, you and colleagues at the Endangered Language Alliance asked pointedly: "Despite the United States' rocky relationship with diversity, no administration felt obliged to impose an official language for 250 years. Why now?" What concerns you most about the broader implications of this order?

This is a major step backwards, in part because it repeals one of the very few pieces of language access legislation that existed at the federal level, which required federal agencies to make language access plans.

The executive order flies in the face of everything America has been culturally and linguistically for its entire history. There's a reason why there's never been an official government-mandated language imposed upon a fundamentally multilingual place, which is not only anchored in hundreds of Native American languages—many of which are fighting for their lives against incredible odds—but also a land of many hundreds of immigrant languages that are woven into the fabric of the country.



Ross Perlin
Class of 2023

Ross Perlin is a linguist, writer, and translator focused on exploring and supporting linguistic diversity. He is the author of *Language City: The Fight to Preserve Endangered Mother Tongues in New York*. He is the co-director of the Endangered Language Alliance, managing research projects on mapmaking, documentation, policy, and public programming for urban linguistic diversity.

24 Paige Bethmann on how running can heal generational trauma

What did you hope to reach—or reveal—with your film, *Remaining Native*?

The film places emphasis on healing, hope, and joy, showing one young person's journey towards a deeper understanding of self, community, and culture, learning to balance individual success without abandoning identity. I hope Ku's story is a reminder that we can run in parallel with our histories, simultaneously remembering our past while moving forward towards a future that doesn't have to be defined by trauma. I want audiences to feel empowered to look inward and interrogate their own relationships to land, culture, and history. For both Native and non-Native audiences, I hope they feel inspired and understand that healing is possible, while never linear. It can exist in spaces where we come together with openness, respect, and love.

What have you learned from Ku about empathy, compassion, and the work of reconciliation?

I think Ku carries himself and speaks from a place of compassion. His father, Delmar, would call that being a "dangerous Indian": Someone who is educated and generous, and can reach people to help bridge connections between us. Ku is an example of the future and often shares that what we do today will impact the next seven generations. I have often been frustrated in spaces where there is bigotry and ignorance, but Ku has taught me that there is power in speaking from the heart and sharing your story, and that even if someone can't understand, you've done your responsibility by carrying our ancestors' stories forward.

For the film's world premiere at SXSW, your team partnered with Nike Running to bring together Austin-based runners and Indigenous communities in celebration of the story. What has it meant—for you as an independent filmmaker and for the communities represented—for a global brand like Nike to help amplify this film and elevate its visibility on such a wide stage?

Nike has such a profound impact in the sports world, and now, with their N7 program, which focuses on uplifting Indigenous communities in athletics, it felt like an organic partnership. It's meant a lot to have the support and recognition from Nike to help elevate our work and bring more people together. Our goal is to foster a connection between community, land, and identity. To be able to move together and experience ancestral muscle memory in this way is awesome, and we look good in the Nike swag!

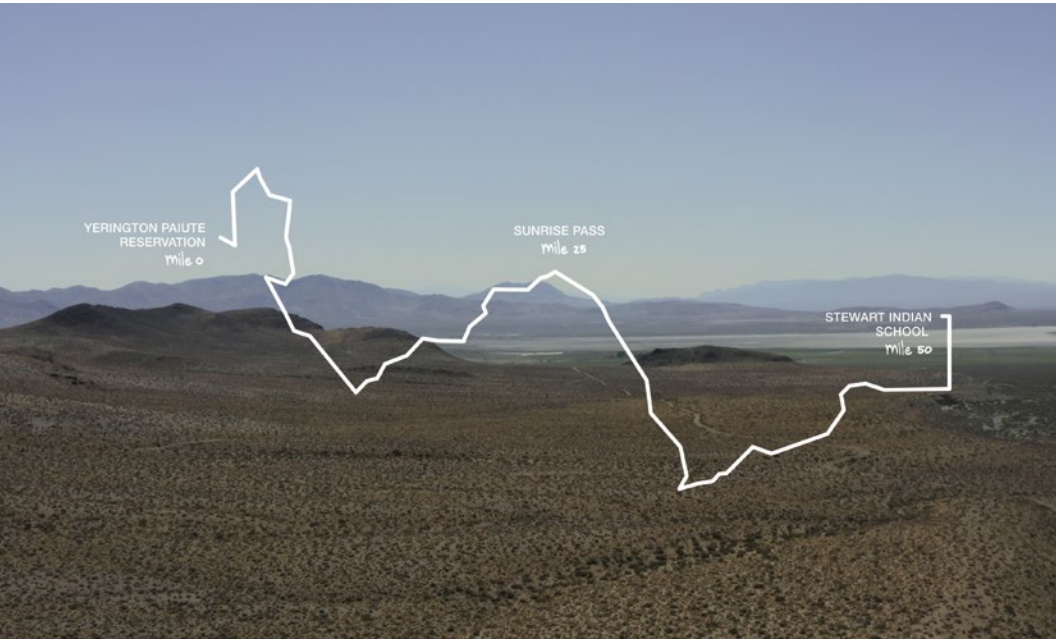
You've spoken about the deep significance of running in Native culture—and how, traditionally, runners held vital roles as messengers, covering hundreds of miles to connect communities. For those who might not be familiar, can you describe what it meant to be a "runner" in Native American communities, and what it means today, especially for Native runners reclaiming that role on ancestral land?

Running is medicine. It's a way to connect with our bodies, the land, and our memories. I can't speak for all Native American communities, but for Ku he has found a higher purpose with running. He sees the impact it's having, fostering conversation and getting people excited about forging their own relationship to land and ancestry. The land holds our stories, and through running, we can access those emotions and memories to better ourselves and think about our futures.

Your grandmother was a traditional Mohawk storyteller who believed stories should be passed down through generations through the spoken word. You've said, "I've always been a storyteller because of her." What made her storytelling so powerful—and how has that oral tradition shaped your own approach to storytelling, especially in the making of this film?

When I was a little girl, I used to sit at my grandmother's feet and listen to her tell stories about the Haudenosaunee. A traditional Mohawk storyteller, she explained to me how the birds got their songs, how maple syrup was made, and who Sky Woman was. Story after story, I was in awe of my grandmother and her ability to articulate every detail from memory.





Stills from *Remaining Native* (2025).







Behind the scenes of *Remaining Native*.

One day, I asked her how she could recall these stories without a book. She smiled and said, "When stories are passed down, they remain in the heart, not the head, and I always remember what's in my heart."

My work as a filmmaker has often been driven by stories that encourage introspection. I push myself behind the camera with the passion that my grandmother had for storytelling, taking time for every detail, whether or not it's deemed "important." While I think working in mainstream media and nonfiction television gave me a skill set and a platform to hone my production knowledge, I think my time creating *Remaining Native* is where I've started to find my voice, one that's speaking from the heart.



Paige Bethmann
Class of 2025

Paige Bethmann is a Haudenosaunee filmmaker who has worked in nonfiction television for various digital and broadcast networks such as ESPN, PBS, Vox Media, YouTube Originals, USA, and NBC.

25 Matthew Shaer on the future of podcasting

Location, location, location

Launching my magazine writing career in New York in my 20s allowed me to form friendships—with editors, writers, and mentors—that have been foundational to whatever success I've had. Since then, I've also lived in Durham; Washington, DC; Boston; and now Atlanta. But I often return to New York to see editor and writer buddies. I see those visits as just as necessary as any other kind of business travel, largely because magazine journalism is a relationship business, and you want to maintain the connections you've built (or just hang out and talk writing).

I often get asked if you need to live in New York to be a magazine writer. You don't, obviously—good journalists will break through eventually, no matter where they live. But it does give you a leg up to be able to grab a cup of coffee with someone you admire, or someone you hope to work with in the future.

Of course, spending zero time in New York has its benefits, too. Because so many publications are clustered in Manhattan, assigning editors can miss the sorts of local stories that can launch an aspiring writer's career—something you can own, without having to constantly peer over your shoulder for the competition.

A $19,000 tip

I wrote a story for *The New York Times Magazine* about the impact of lockdown and the pandemic on immigrant entrepreneurs in Atlanta. One of the entrepreneurs I focused on was named Sagar; he operated a restaurant called Monsoon Masala. He'd immigrated to the Atlanta area in the mid-1990s, and prior to COVID, his business had been doing really well. But once the pandemic hit, everything changed for him—I spoke to him

right at the moment where everything felt uncertain. Up in the air. I could see it in his face: He was scared. And I was scared for him.

After the story was published, I found out that a reader had called the restaurant, bought $100 worth of food, and tipped $19,000 on the order.

You never want to assume that something like that will happen as a result of a story you write, but when it does, it's wonderful.

Writing for *Cash Cab*

When you're writing for a game show like *Cash Cab*, you're giving the viewer a mini history lesson—you want them to learn something. You want to give them a cocktail party patter–type fact. It's an interesting test of concision. You have to learn how to get something across that is compelling, unusual, and that grips people. Every day, I would log into my computer and spend five to six hours developing a long list of questions because I had a quota that I had to meet. Ultimately, the questions had to be approved by an editor and pass fact-checking. Meanwhile, I got very fast on my feet: Working for the game show was really fun and required that I use a different kind of writing muscle.

The golden era of podcasting?

I started my podcasting company, Campside Media, five years ago. It was at the beginning of the commercialization of the podcasting space, which was moving from being the domain of public radio stations to the mainstream. Gimlet had sold to Spotify, Pineapple Street Media had sold to Entercom, and it felt like the sky was the limit.

Today, the situation is more complicated.

On the one hand, I firmly believe that audio journalism has not yet reached its potential in terms of storytelling possibilities. This is a really, really young medium, and I think the best is *probably* yet to come. The big reason I qualify that is that the business of audio journalism has not caught up with the demand for it. It's not being monetized in the way it should be. The ad sales model is broken. I think the discovery of new podcasts is broken. Which is a bummer, given just how many people listen (and will continue to listen) to great narrative nonfiction podcasts of all varieties.

I'll try to sum things up here: The artistic side of podcasting has unbelievable potential, whereas the business side...well, let's call it TBD.

Why we're so lonely

Reporting [on the loneliness epidemic] for *The New York Times* made

me understand the universal need for connection that's built into the human experience. There will always be a temptation toward electronic modes of communication, but I don't believe they'll ever eclipse the need for physical contact. I just don't think our longing for in-person connection ever really goes away.

I have a nine-year-old daughter who is just starting to understand and use the internet. (She will not get a phone until she's 35!) She can message me from her watch and she can email her friends from a school computer. She is a person who will be a part of the most digitally connected generation ever, as each future generation will be. But there's no part of her that doesn't want other people around.

And that's my counterintuitive takeaway from writing about loneliness: It's not as simple as saying, "Well, everyone's stuck on a device now, and they don't want to talk to people in real life." It is perfectly possible to embrace online modes of communication and also be a person in the world. Plenty of us do it. And we do it because in-person communication is literally evolutionarily ingrained in our very beings.

Also, I'd be remiss if I didn't point out that the internet, in of itself, is not all terrible, just as in-person communication isn't always perfect and uplifting. It's not as binary as that. Think (as I suggest in the piece) about a young trans kid in a conservative community in the Midwest. The ability to find community online is going to be incredibly important to that person. All to say that this stuff is very complicated!

Writing as a craft

I love John McPhee, who has, in recent years, written extensively about the craft of magazine journalism. One of my favorite passages involves his recollection of how many magazine writers started out as poets, or how many poets became screenwriters, or how many novelists became poets. Writing is like baseball. Some people are destined to be a shortstop and then there are people who can play all the positions. Most are shortstops, or third basemen, or catchers. You get the point: Most writers I know eventually learn where their skills truly lie.

A good interview

Ultimately, the best answers—and the most honesty—come from a place of trust.

Over the past few years, I've interviewed people from all ends of the political spectrum. The practice that I've adopted is not to argue with people about their politics during the interview. I try to find common ground

on everything else I can. That's how I get people to open up to me. You've got to try to see somebody as a human first, and to understand their motivations. In this highly partisan world we live in—I know this sounds like a Hallmark card, but I genuinely believe that the only way we're getting through this together is with empathy.



Matthew Shaer
Class of 2020

Matthew Shaer is a writer for *The New York Times Magazine* and a co-founder of the podcast studio Campside. In 2021, he hosted and co-created an audio documentary called *Suspect*, which was named one of the best podcasts of the year by *The New Yorker*, *New York*, and *The Boston Globe*, among other publications.

Eve L. Ewing
Class of 2021

"Books have a life of their own. I feel very proud that I've poured time into them and that they help give meaning to people's lives—and sometimes I'll know that impact and other times I never will."

The Enduring Need for Great Thinkers

Peter Bergen
Vice President for Global Studies
& Fellows, New America

Pursuing a big idea demands conviction—the belief that it matters, even when no one else can see it yet. You must be dogged in your pursuit, persistent, sometimes even single-minded. This is the common thread among great thinkers: persistence in asking hard questions and the imagination to see the world differently. That spirit is what defines a New America Fellow, and it is what has made them the beating heart of this institution for 25 years.

Before our Fellows became household names, this program nurtured their promise. Consider the record: They have gone on to win Pulitzers and Emmys, to shape government policy, and to produce books and films that reframe how we see the world. Taken together, they form a cornerstone of American public intellectual life.

Some of this I know from my own experience. I had been working at home alone for two years when I became a Fellow. I quickly became part of a community of like-minded people who were genuinely interested in ideas and how they shaped the world we live in.

Every era depends on its public intellectuals to make sense of the world; ours is no exception. As Ta-Nehisi Coates has written, they are the "sharpest interlocutors of this historic era," able to make sense of complexity and communicate it to a wider public in original ways. That is the work our Fellows take on. They hold power to account, expand our collective imagination, and bring urgent issues into focus.

I know this because I see it in each new class. Their work is not easy—it requires time, space, and community to flourish. That is what the Fellowship program provides, and why it must endure. If we want a future where ideas continue to shape public life, then we must continue to champion the thinkers who create them.

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25 years

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18 films

42 longform articles

2 podcasts

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16	NPR’s “Books We Love”
5	Barack Obama’s “Favorite Books”
5	MacArthur Fellowships
5	J. Anthony Lukas Book Prizes
4	Pulitzer Prize winners
4	Pulitzer Prize finalists
3	Emmy nominations
2	National Magazine Awards
1	Oscar nomination

Fellows Program Alumni

2026 Jake Bittle, Marcella Bombardieri, Mark Chiusano, Grace M. Cho, Anuj Chopra, Gabriella García-Pardo, Marielena Hincapié, Dan Xin Huang, Daniel Lombroso, Saket Soni **2025** Cecilia Ballí, Paige Bethmann, Keri Blakinger, Sam Butin, Matthew Campbell, Aimee Meredith Cox, Megan Garber, Seth Harp, Will Hunt, Jason Fitzroy Jeffers, Sheelah Kolhatkar, Molly O'Toole, Alex W. Palmer, Nadim Roberts, Mayukh Sen **2024** Atossa Araxia Abrahamian, Rozina Ali, Victor J. Blue, Kate Daloz, Caitlin Dickerson, Casey Gerald, Olivia Goldhill, Malaika Jabali, Sarah Esther Maslin, Ben Mauk, Laura Mauldin, JoeBill Muñoz, Sian-Pierre Regis, Jiayan "Jenny" Shi, Matthew Wolfe **2023** Philip Bennett, Eula Biss, Mona Chalabi, Zeke Faux, Tanisha C. Ford, Emily Kassie, Khameer Kidia, Jenny Medina, Ross Perlin, Jessica Pishko, Joe Posner, Albert Samaha, Rebecca L. Spang, Xinyan Yu, Jason Zengerle **2022** Azam Ahmed, Keisha N. Blain, Benoit Denizet-Lewis, Reo Eveleth, Mike Giglio, Lauren Michele Jackson, Myra Jones-Taylor, Sarah Kay, Abrahm Lustgarten, Francesca Mari, Julian Brave NoiseCat, Janet Reitman, Anna Louie Sussman, Justine van der Leun, Ellen D. Wu **2021** Cecilia Aldarondo, Daniel Bergner, Jonathan Blitzer, Jennifer Daskal, Eve L. Ewing, Caleb J. Gayle, Brian Goldstone, Adam Harris, Yi-Ling Liu, Shaun Ossei-Owusu **2020** Trevor Aaronson, Jessica Bruder, Josh Chin, Molly Crabapple, Josie Duffy Rice, Patricia Evangelista, Suzy Hansen, CJ Hunt, Daniela Lamas, Vann R. Newkirk II, Julia Ott, Raúl O. Paz Pastrana, David Rohde, Matthew Shaer, Clint Smith **2019** Rachel Aviv, Assia Boundaoui, Iona Craig, Jill N. Filipovic, Cara Fitzpatrick , Masha Gessen, Lisa M. Hamilton, Sarah J. Jackson, Jonathan M. Katz, Suki Kim, Karen Levy, Reuben Jonathan Miller, Chase Purdy, Kevin Sack, Melissa Segura, David Wallace-Wells, Thomas Chatterton Williams **2018** Greg Barker, Reginald Dwayne Betts, Nonny de la Peña, Katie Engelhart, Joshua Geltzer, Sara Hendren, Didi Kuo, Emma Findlen Leblanc, Taylor Lee Nagel, Larissa MacFarquhar, Azadeh Moaveni,

Mo Scarpelli, Mosi Secret **2017** Hassan Abbas, Matthieu Aikins, Marcia Chatelain, Matthew Davis, Bartow Elmore, Nikole Hannah-Jones, Emily Cole Hunt, Mara Hvistendahl, Jude Joffe-Block, Theodore R. Johnson, Patrick Radden Keefe, Azmat Khan, Gideon Lewis-Kraus, Souad Mekhennet, Nadia Oweidat, George Packer, Zia Haider Rahman, Lauren Redniss, Phil Sands, Lauren Henry Scholz, Timothy Shenk, Erin Snider, Paul Wood **2016** Rania Abouzeid, David Auerbach, Brian K. Barber, Andrew Bolden, Jason DeParle, Jesse Eisinger, Andrea Elliott, Virginia Eubanks, Frank Foer, Mei Fong, Jeff Goodell, Robin Harris, Zaha Hassan, Hua Hsu, Kevin Huffman, Greg Jacobs, Trymaine Lee, Yascha Mounk, Jay Newton-Small, Alexis Okeowo, Donna Patterson, Monica Potts, K. Sabeel Rahman, Janell Ross, Scott Silverstone, Levi Tillemann, Bina Venkataraman, Zheng Wang, Josephine Wolff, David Wood, Joshua Yaffa **2015** Perry Bacon, Jr., Kathryn Bowers, Shane Harris, Daniel Kurtz-Phelan, Douglas Ollivant, Ari Ratner, Daniel Rothenberg, J. Peter Scoblic, Meredith Wadman, Hao Wu, Julian E. Zelizer **2014** Marvin Ammori, Dana Goldstein, Anand Gopal, Anya Kamenetz, Christopher Leonard, Katherine Mangu-Ward, Wendy Paris, Emily Parker, Annie Murphy Paul, Matthew Pinsker, Christine Rosen, Nicholas Schmidle, Gabriel Sherman, Alexandra Starr, Louisa Thomas **2013** Reniqua Allen, Rosa Brooks, Sheri Fink, Mark Hertsgaard, Tamar Jacoby, Konstantin Kakaes, Steve LeVine, Liza Mundy, Louie Palu, Amanda Ripley, Brigid Schulte **2012** Fred Kaplan, Charles Kenny, Rebecca MacKinnon, Evgeny Morozov, Eyal Press, Romesh Ratnesar, Noam Scheiber, Katherine Zoepf **2011** Peter Beinart, Rebecca Hamilton, Christina Larson, Joe Mathews, Megan McArdle, Dayo Olopade, Thomas Palley, Benjamin Wallace-Wells **2010** Joel Garreau, Paul Glastris, Tim Golden, Eliza Griswold, Tomás R. Jiménez, Sean McFate, Reihan Salam, Steven Teles, Tim Wu **Earlier Years** Geneive Abdo, Marcellus Andrews, Robert Darryl Banks, Ricardo Bayon, Peter Bergen, Mary K. Bissell, Katherine Boo, Eleanor Brown, Shannon Brownlee, Jorge Castañeda, Jonathan Chait, Farai Chideya, Eric Cohen, Debra J. Dickerson, Camille Esch, W. Ralph Eubanks, Noah Feldman, James Forman, Jr., T.A. Frank, David Friedman, Peter Frumkin, Daniel Gross, Jacob S. Hacker, Christopher Hayes, Steven Hill, W. Lee Howell, Robert Kaplan, Kelleen Kaye, Parag Khanna, Brendan I. Koerner, Jonathan Koppell, Karen Kornbluh, Joel Kotkin, Anatol Lieven, Michael Lind, Eric Liu, Phillip Longman, Maya MacGuineas, Lisa Margonelli, Andrés Martinez, Rajan Menon, Afshin Molavi , Alicia Mundy, Annette Nellen, Erik Olbeter, Silvana Paternostro, Jim Pinkerton, Jedediah Purdy, Gregory Rodriguez, Nir Rosen, Douglas Rushkoff, John Ryan, Joshua Sharfstein, John Simons, J.P. Singh, James H. Snider, Bruce Stokes, Margaret Talbot, Nicholas Thompson, Rick Wartzman, Jennifer Washburn, Janine R. Wedel, Ted Widmer, Robert Wright

Clint Smith, Katie Engelhart, Emily Kassie,
Eve L. Ewing, Vann R. Newkirk II, Anand Gopal,
Lauren Michele Jackson, CJ Hunt, Victor J. Blue,
Rachel Aviv, Tim Wu, Caitlin Dickerson,
Marcia Chatelain, Jeff Goodell, Mona Chalabi,
Patrick Radden Keefe, Sian-Pierre Regis,
Peter Bergen, Francesca Mari, Brian Goldstone,
Jason Fitzroy Jeffers, Reo Eveleth, Ross Perlin,
Paige Bethmann, Matthew Shaer

25 YEARS OF NEW AMERICA