

# AMASS *Magazine*

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Crisis**

**Mass Shootings and  
Mental Illness**

**New Labor Activism**

**Poverty of Education**

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**ISSUE 89  
NUMBER 1  
VOLUME 28**



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"BORDER SHADOWS"

HELI SWENSSON

**"Border Shadows"**

Cover Design by Heli Swensson.

Since a gunman went on a rampage in Lewistown, Maine, killing 16 people, we've learned a few things about the shooter, Robert Card, who was found with a fatal self-inflicted gunshot wound after a two-day manhunt. A member of the Army Reserve, Card had recently been committed to a mental health facility after he reported hearing voices and threatened to shoot up the National Guard base in Saco, Maine.

Card's mental health history has been central to reporting that laid out the lead-up to the deadliest mass shooting in the US this year. Questions of how Card was able to have access to guns, given his psychiatric hospitalization and documented concerns of family and soldiers in his reserve unit, drove much of the coverage. Lax gun laws that allow people like Card to slip through the cracks warrant interrogation, but the reality is that most mass shooters don't have a mental health history like Card's, nor is a record of mental illness a good predictor of gun violence.

- Olivia Riggio

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# MASS SHOOTINGS AND MENTAL ILLNESS

O L I V I A R I G G I O

Since a gunman went on a rampage in Lewistown, Maine, killing 16 people, we've learned a few things about the shooter, Robert Card, who was found with a fatal self-inflicted gunshot wound after a two-day manhunt. A member of the Army Reserve, Card had recently been committed to a mental health facility after he reported hearing voices and threatened to shoot up the National Guard base in Saco, Maine.

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Card's ability to carry out this tragedy is a symptom of the gun violence crisis in the US, but the presence of his mental illness is not representative of the issue. In the vast majority of cases of mass violence, mental illness is not considered a primary factor. Attempting to rationalize the horrors of a mass shooting by emphasizing the perpetrator's mental state does very little to address the larger issue at best and leads to dangerous mental health stigma at worst.

## A Textbook Case?

The *New York Times* piece "The Signs Were All There. Why Did No One Stop the Maine Shooter?" (11/2/23) referred to Card having a "textbook set" of warning signs, including that he was "hearing voices."

"The Maine Gunman Was a 'Textbook Case' for a State Law Designed to Remove Firearms From People Like Him. Why Didn't It Work?" read a CNN headline

(11/5/23).

"Even to the most untrained eye, Card is the literal textbook example of a person who shouldn't be allowed to have access to firearms," a *New York Post* editorial (10/26/23) declared.

These pieces refer to Maine's "yellow-flag" laws, which gun control advocates consider watered-down versions of red-flag laws. Also known as extreme-risk laws, red-flag laws allow the loved ones of a person in crisis or law enforcement to petition a court for an order that temporarily prevents the person from accessing guns. Yellow-flag laws require several procedural steps, including a mental health evaluation, before a gun can be removed from someone's possession. Red-flag laws don't require mental health evaluations.

It needs to be made clear: While Card's mental illness might make him a "textbook example" of someone who should not have had access to a gun, it does not make him a "textbook example" of a shooter. A large majority of firearm deaths involving mental illness are suicides. These pieces did not make that distinction. (Gun suicides outnumber gun murders overall, but by a narrower margin.)

## A Tiny Minority

So while a critique of the weak gun laws that allowed Card access to firearms is warranted, harping on his mental illness doesn't add much context to the larger epidemic of mass shootings in the US. Mental illness exists all around the world, after all, but only one country accounted for 73% of the mass shootings that occurred in the developed world between 1998 and 2019. And removing guns from everyone who displayed similar symptoms to Card is not likely to decrease mass shootings by a significant amount.

An FBI study that monitored pre-attack behaviors

of mass shooters between 2000 and 2013 found that 25% of them had diagnosed mental illnesses (which includes non-psychotic conditions, such as depression and substance abuse). This is not far off from the 23% of US adults who experienced mental illness in 2021, according to the National Alliance on Mental Illness. Only 5% of the shooters in the FBI study had been diagnosed with a psychotic disorder.

And a diagnosis doesn't necessarily assert a causal relationship. In most cases, the relationship between the violent act and mental illness is incidental (Columbia Psychiatry, 7/6/22).

In a piece for the American Association of Medical Colleges (1/26/23), John Rozel and Jeffrey Swanson cited

**Suggesting  
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commitment can  
prevent mass violence  
without engaging  
in meaningful discussion  
about barriers to effective  
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can cause—is lazy.**

— Olivia Riggio



a 2018 study that found that less than 5% of mass shooters had any record of a gun-disqualifying mental health adjudication, like involuntary hospitalization: “Indeed, if serious mental illnesses suddenly disappeared, violence would decrease by only about 4%. More than 90% of violent incidents, including homicides, would still occur.”

They added, “The real story—and the real need—regarding mental illness and violence is suicide.”

### The Real Red Flag

Card’s family’s concern for his mental health was central to corporate media reporting, including a segment on MSNBC’s Chris Jansing Reports (10/26/23) and an NBC piece (10/26/23) that described Card’s family and colleagues recalling him hearing voices. A CBS News Boston piece (10/26/23) that outlined a number of facts authorities knew about Card when he was on the run headlined his mental illness: “What We Know About Lewiston, Maine, Shooting Suspect Robert Card and His Mental Health History.”

“Even as [Card] was confronted and hospitalized and had a sheriff’s deputy come knocking, nothing went far enough,” the *New York Times* article (11/2/23) read.

“Cops Were Warned About Maine Gunman’s Declining Mental Health in May,” reported the *Daily Beast* (10/30/23).

A *New York Post* report (10/31/23) was headlined “Maine Mass Shooter Robert Card Claimed Voices in His Head Were Calling Him a ‘Pedophile.’”

### Eclipsing the Why

The obsession with Card’s mental health eclipses why stronger risk-based gun restrictions—like red-flag laws—are so effective. In an opinion piece for the *Boston Globe* (10/30/23), Kris Brown, the president of gun violence prevention group Brady, points out: “Importantly, these laws were intentionally designed, in their initial recommendation by the Consortium for Risk Based Firearm Policy, to avoid reliance on mental health diagnoses, and instead to focus on the behaviors that best indicate potential future violence.”

As *NBC* (8/6/19) reported in 2019, mental illness is not a significant risk factor in mass shootings—but a record of violent and risky behavior is. Card’s spoken threats and access to guns were statistically much more indicative of the risk he posed to the public than the mental illness that dominated the headlines.

### Involuntary Commitment and Stigma

The stigma caused by this type of reporting is palpable. Following the massacre, GOP presidential candidate Vivek Ramaswamy took to *Twitter* (10/26/23), painting with dangerously broad and wantonly vague strokes: “We must remove these violent, psychiatrically deranged people from their communities and be willing to involuntarily commit them.”

The *New York Post* (10/26/23) defined the issue as “making sure the mentally ill or unstable can’t access guns.”



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Unsurprisingly, the *New York Post* editorial board (10/26/23) was also a fan of involuntary commitment, suggesting that Maine needs red-flag laws—and “better ways to commit the mentally ill.”

The *Post* editorial made the solution seem simple: “The state must intervene by making sure the sick person’s getting the treatment they need and keeping them totally isolated from any and all guns. Imagine if cops, prosecutors and mental health workers had acted swiftly to put Card back in a mental hospital and not let him leave.”

Advocating for more mental health hospitalization requires an understanding of what’s wrong with mental healthcare in the first place. What, exactly, is the “treatment they need”? Is it available? Are psychiatric hospitals adequately staffed and funded? Is the staff trained enough to manage patients’ conditions and keep everyone safe? Does the patient have insurance, or sufficient funds to pay for treatment? How does stigma from communities, politicians and media serve as a barrier to effective treatment?

The *New York Times* piece’s subheading (11/2/23) said, “Shortcomings in mental health treatment, weak laws and a reluctance to threaten personal liberties can derail even concerted attempts to thwart mass shootings.” But the text of the article hardly addressed the former. It stated: “The system to treat people who resist getting help on their own is geared toward acute, not long-term, problems. Involuntary stays require an imminent threat of harm and generally last from 72 hours to two weeks.”

Suggesting that involuntary commitment can prevent mass violence without engaging in meaningful discussion about barriers to effective mental health treatment—and the trauma inadequate mental health treatment can cause—is lazy.

In response to Ramaswamy’s ill-informed and stigmatizing tweet, journalist Ana Marie Cox (*MSNBC*, 10/26/23) highlighted another crucial point: 97% of mass shooters are men, and the majority of those men are white. Involuntary commitment *has already been* on the rise, but white men remain significantly underrepresented in involuntarily committed populations.

## That Unstable Neighbor

A *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* editorial (11/2/23) that advocated for tighter gun laws also used vague and stigmatizing language that villainized “unstable” people. While first discussing red-flag laws that should keep guns out of the hands of those who display signs of mental illness, the piece later sarcastically accused legislators who refuse to pass gun control measures of “mental instability”: “These are the same lawmakers who (talk about a clear sign of mental instability) defeated a measure this year that would merely have specified that children aren’t allowed to carry guns around in public. On firearms, these folks are immune to common sense and beyond convincing.”

The piece ended: “Fully 60% of Missourians favor the modest, rational step of keeping guns from the mentally ill, according to a St. Louis University/YouGov poll this year. Yet the only way they will ever achieve that


imperative is by sending a saner delegation to Jefferson City. Until then, you’ll just have to keep an eye out for that unstable neighbor.”

The righteous call for stricter gun laws is obscured by the facetious conflation of mental illness with violence, political corruption, and the need to be locked up. Statistically, the bigger reason to “keep an eye out for that unstable neighbor” with a gun is because of the risk of suicide—not mass violence.

Public stigma—including branding mentally ill people as dangerous—leads to worsening symptoms and reduced likelihood of receiving treatment. It can also lead to discrimination by employers, the healthcare system and the law (American Psychiatric Association, 8/20).

Locking people like Card in mental health facilities doesn’t automatically cure them. And considering mentally ill people are far more likely to be the victims than the perpetrators of violence, it certainly does not adequately address the mass shooting crisis in this country.

Olivia Riggio is a journalist who writes for *FAIR* and other publications.



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# SPY TOOLS FOR CUSTOMS AND BORDER PROTECTION

S A M B I D D L E

**T**he popular data broker LexisNexis began selling face recognition services and personal location data to U.S. Customs and Border Protection late last year, according to contract documents obtained through a Freedom of Information Act request.

According to the documents, obtained by the advocacy group Just Futures Law, LexisNexis Risk Solutions began selling surveillance tools to the border enforcement agency in December 2022. The \$15.9 million contract includes a broad menu of powerful tools for locating individuals throughout the United States using a vast array of personal data, much of it obtained and used without judicial oversight.

Through LexisNexis, CBP investigators gained a convenient place to centralize, analyze, and search various databases containing enormous volumes of intimate personal information, both public and proprietary.

“This contract is mass surveillance in hyperdrive,” says Julie Mao, an attorney and co-founder of Just Futures Law. “It’s frightening that a rogue agency such as CBP has access to so many powerful technologies at the click of the button. Unfortunately, this is what LexisNexis appears now to be selling to thousands of police forces across the country. It’s now become a one-stop shop for accessing a range of invasive surveillance tools.”

A variety of CBP offices would make use of the surveillance tools, according to the documents. Among them is the U.S. Border Patrol, which would use LexisNexis to “help examine individuals and entities to determine their admissibility to the US. and their proclivity to violate U.S. laws and regulations.”

Among other tools, the contract shows LexisNexis is providing CBP with social media surveillance, access

to jail booking data, face recognition and “geolocation analysis & geographic mapping” of cellphones. All this data can be queried in “large volume online batching,” allowing CBP investigators to target broad groups of people and discern “connections among individuals, incidents, activities, and locations,” handily visualized through Google Maps.

CBP declined to comment, and LexisNexis did not respond to an inquiry. Despite the explicit reference to providing “LexisNexis Facial Recognition” in the contract, a fact sheet published by the company online says, “LexisNexis Risk Solutions does not provide the Department of Homeland Security” — CBP’s parent agency — “or US Immigration and Customs Enforcement with license plate images or facial recognition capabilities.”

The contract includes a variety of means for CBP to exploit the cellphones of those it targets. Accurint, a police and counterterror surveillance tool LexisNexis acquired

in 2004, allows the agency to do analysis of real-time phone call records and phone geolocation through its “TraX” software.

While it’s unclear how exactly TraX pinpoints its targets, LexisNexis marketing materials cite “cellular providers live pings for geolocation tracking.” These materials also note that TraX incorporates both “call detail records obtained through legal process (i.e. search warrant or court order) and third-party device geolocation information.” A 2023 LexisNexis promotional brochure says, “The LexisNexis Risk Solutions Geolocation Investigative Team offers geolocation analysis and investigative case assistance to law

enforcement and public safety customers.”

Any CBP use of geolocational data is controversial, given the agency’s recent history. Prior reporting found that, rather than request phone location data through a search warrant, CBP simply purchased such data from unregulated brokers — a practice that critics say allows the government to sidestep Fourth Amendment protections against police searches.

According to a September report by 404 Media, CBP recently told Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Ore., it “will not be utilizing Commercial Telemetry Data (CTD) after the conclusion of FY23 (September 30, 2023),” using a technical term for such commercially purchased location information.

The agency, however, also told Wyden that it

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— Sam Biddle





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## BORDER SURVEILLANCE

could renew its use of commercial location data if there were “a critical mission need” in the future. It’s unclear if this contract provided commercial location data to CBP, or if it was affected by the agency’s commitment to Wyden. (LexisNexis did not respond to a question about whether it provides or provided the type of phone location data that CBP had sworn off.)

The contract also shows how LexisNexis operates as a reseller for surveillance tools created by other vendors. Its social media surveillance is “powered by” Babel X, a controversial firm that CBP and the FBI have previously used.

According to a May 2023 report by Motherboard, Babel X allows users to input one piece of information about a surveillance target, like a Social Security number, and receive large amounts of collated information back. The returned data can include “social media posts, linked IP address, employment history, and unique advertising identifiers associated with their mobile phone. The monitoring can apply to U.S. persons, including citizens and permanent residents, as well as refugees and asylum seekers.”

While LexisNexis is known to provide similar data services to U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, another division of the Department of Homeland Security, details of its surveillance work with CBP were not previously known. Though both agencies enforce immigration law, CBP typically focuses on enforcement along the border, while ICE detains and deports migrants inland.

In recent years, CBP has drawn harsh criticism from civil libertarians and human rights advocates for its activities both at and far from the U.S.-Mexico border. In 2020, CBP was found to have flown a Predator surveillance drone over Minneapolis protests after the murder of George Floyd; two months later, CBP agents in unmarked vehicles seized racial justice protesters off the streets of Portland, Oregon — an act the American Civil

Liberties Union condemned as a “blatant demonstration of unconstitutional authoritarianism.”

Just Futures Law is currently suing LexisNexis over claims it illegally obtains and sells personal data. Sam Biddle writes for *The Intercept* and other publications.



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## Variation on Poem 9 by Ono No Komachi

—for Virginia J. Renner (1934-2022)

While counting days  
The blush of roses faded  
And their petals fell  
Like teardrops inside the rain

As I looked towards the sea

*S.A. Griffin is the author of Pandemic Soul Music.*





## ABOUT BEYOND BAROQUE

Beyond Baroque Literary Arts Center is one of the nation's most successful and influential grassroots incubators of literary art. Founded in 1968, and housed in the original Venice City Hall building in Venice, California, it is a nonprofit public space dedicated to cultivating new writing and expanding the public's knowledge of poetry, fiction, literature, and art through cultural events and community interaction. The Center offers a diverse variety of liter-ary and arts programming, including readings, workshops, art exhibits, and education. The Center also houses a bookstore with the largest collection of new poetry books on the west side of Los Angeles; the Mike Kelley Gallery, which specializes in text and language-focused visual art; and a 50,000 vol-ume archive of small press and limited-edition publications that chronicles the history of poetry movements in Los Angeles and beyond.

Few literary spaces have done more to cultivate innovative art from cultural outsiders, or to shape emerging artistic movements. Across five decades Be-yond Baroque has nurtured the Venice Beats, cradled the Los Angeles punk scene, and provided crucial support to a series of seminal experimental writ-ers and artists that include Dennis Cooper, Wanda Coleman, Mike Kelley, and Will Alexander.

It's legendary free workshops have profoundly shaped Los Angeles literature by helping to launch a number of influential careers, including those of Kate Braverman, Tom Waits, Leland Hickman, Bob Flanagan, Eloise Klein Healy, David Trinidad, Jim Krusoe, Exene Cervenkova, Amy Gerstler, Paul Vange-listi, Michael Ondaatje, Harry Northup, Brendan Constantine, Jenny Factor, and Sarah Maclay.

It's reading and performance series have exposed L.A. audiences to some of the world's most notable writers and artists, often at early stages in their ca-reers, including Allen Ginsberg, Amiri Baraka, Raymond Carver, X, Patti Smith, Viggo Mortensen, Paul Auster, Chris Kraus, Eileen Myles, Luis J. Ro-driguez, Dana Gioia, Hector Tobar, David St. John, Robin Coste Lewis, and Maggie Nelson.

Today the Center continues to provide a vital cultural forum through it's free workshops, reading series, youth programming, and artistic gatherings.

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Beyond Baroque's mission is to encourage the writing, reading, publication, dissemination, and preservation of contemporary literature through program-ming, education, archiving, and services in literature and the arts.

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# IATSE LAUNCHES REFORM CAUCUS

L I S A X U

**A**fter supporting screenwriters and actors through a months-long double strike, film and television crew workers are finally stepping into the spotlight themselves.

Dissatisfied with their union's leadership and direction, a group of members of the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE) is launching a reform caucus called CREW, or the Caucus of Rank-and-File Entertainment Workers.

Their first public event will be a webinar on preparing for the 2024 expiration of the main pattern-setting contracts they work under, the Hollywood Basic Agreement (HBA) and Area Standards Agreement (ASA).

IATSE has 170,000 members across the U.S. and Canada, well beyond Hollywood. They work behind the scenes in film, TV, theater, and live events, and in roles as diverse as lighting, sound, cinematography, animation, editing, costume, set design, and on-set education.

Hollywood is still rightfully known as a union town, but in the 1940s and 1950s, the film industry had close to 100 percent union density. By 1989 that rate had fallen to 40 percent, reflecting the prolonged assault against unions. As IATSE weakened, so did its contracts. Some of the worst conditions members face now were traded as concessions only in the last few decades.

These include long hours and inadequate pay. "We shouldn't have to work every day without a day off for months on end and no home life just to afford to live," said Maggie Goll, who works in special effects and is a member of IATSE Local 44 in Los Angeles.

Local 107 member Aaron Hall is a stagehand and audiovisual technician who works in theater and live events. About a third of IATSE members work in these industries, while the rest work in film and TV. He notes that stronger contracts in film and TV improve the negotiating position of all workers in the union.

"If we don't have a fighting, democratic union

in motion picture and television, it will be hard to have a fighting union in stagecraft," Hall said. Both parts of the union are also affected by common issues, such as dangerously long hours.

## Majority Vote Loses

To understand why IATSE members want to reform their union, we need to rewind to "Striketober" 2021, when 60,000 film and TV crew workers appeared poised to follow the walkouts at John Deere and Kellogg's. Members across 36 locals covered by the HBA and the ASA voted by 98 percent to authorize a strike, with a formidable 90 percent turnout.

Film crew members were literally sick and tired, having worked through the pandemic to meet the studios' hunger to profit from the rising demand for streaming services. The tragic on-set death of cinematographer and IATSE member Halyna Hutchins prompted further grief and outrage.

Two days before the October 18 strike deadline,

a tentative agreement was reached for the HBA, averting a strike. Many workers argued that the agreement fell short of their demands, such as raises that would address inflation, shorter hours and longer turnaround times (a popular demand was "12 hours on, 12 hours off"), and increases in employer contributions to pensions and health benefits, funded with residuals from streaming.

A slim majority of members voted against ratifying the HBA contract, 50.4 percent no to 49.6 percent yes. Members voted for the proposed ASA agreement by an unenthusiastic 52 percent to 48 percent.

However, because of IATSE's electoral college-style ratification procedure, it was ultimately delegates' votes that counted. The combined vote of the delegates on the HBA and the ASA was 349 yes to 282 no, with both agreements sailing through.

This failure of union democracy and the lackluster deal were a bitter disappointment for many IATSE members. Two years on, emboldened by the writers and actors strikes, they haven't forgotten.

## How Crew Came Together

IATSE will soon get another crack at bargaining the HBA, which expires on July 31, 2024, and covers 40,000 workers across 13 Hollywood locals. The ASA, which expires at the same time and is patterned off the HBA,

**"We shouldn't have to work every day without a day off for months on end and no home life just to afford to live," said Maggie Goll, who works in special effects and is a member of IATSE Local 44 in Los Angeles.**

— Lisa Xu



covers 20,000 more workers across the country. The HBA sets the pattern for many contracts throughout the film and TV industry and is therefore a focal point for many union members, including those in CREW.

Many of the founders of CREW met each other for the first time at the Labor Notes Conference in June 2022. They have spent the last year getting on the same page about their values and goals, slowly building up a core of members, and preparing for their public launch.

Goll was one of several workers who helped organize a special session for IATSE members at the conference. She was motivated to get involved by the disappointing 2021 contract negotiations. “The tentative agreement wasn’t what anyone was expecting,” she says.

During the ratification vote, she made it her mission to speak to co-workers on set as well as over social media—including on several IATSE Facebook groups—to explain why she was voting no. There wasn’t a coordinated “no” campaign, only the combined efforts of motivated members like Goll.

Other IATSE members who planned the Labor Notes Conference session initially met through the Democratic Socialists of America, whose National Labor Commission connects members within the same industries.

### Voice For Every Member

The CREW caucus platform emphasizes strong contracts, union democracy, education, and solidarity. One important demand related to union democracy, borrowed from reform caucuses in the Teamsters and the Auto Workers, is one member, one vote, or direct elections for top union leadership. “A lot of the problems that we have—the reasons why things change so slowly—is because the people in charge have been there too long,” said Goll.

“We may have ousted the people who enacted mob rule in the 1930s in IATSE, but we didn’t oust the institutions that put them there,” said Nora Meek, a member of the Animation Guild, IATSE Local 839, and a founding CREW member.

In the 1930s, mob-controlled officers instituted the union’s top-down structure and initiated an unbroken line of IATSE presidents who appointed their successors (to be rubber-stamped by delegates) down to the present day.

Meek, who lives in Los Angeles, was politicized on this issue when she attended the annual convention for her IATSE district. She discovered that international officers are elected indirectly through a delegate system. Resolutions

she supported were defeated by this conservative-leaning body, including one that had passed in her local about police union affiliation with the AFL-CIO, and another on changing the voting method at the convention.

She also learned that the contract for animation workers is patterned off the HBA, but members of the Animation Guild don’t have input into important aspects of their contract, such as health care and residual plans. She realized that “there was a lack of avenues to express my opinion as a worker,” Meek said. “I didn’t have a vote in a lot of what IATSE did.”

### 2024 Contract Fight

The past year has been trying for IATSE members. The Writers Guild and Screen Actors Guild strikes meant that IATSE film workers were out of work for months. This will make it economically challenging to go on strike in 2024.

“What’s unfortunate for IATSE is that, while we supported the WGA and SAG-AFTRA very willingly, we’re going into our own negotiations very economically depleted,” said David McMahon, a IATSE Local 52 member who works in set construction for film and TV. “It’s going to take a real effort to make sure everyone’s ready in our contract fight. But I think there’s enough frustration there.”

He is excited by Auto Workers President Shawn Fain’s challenge to the labor movement to align contract expiration dates for May 1, 2028. That’s when the recently negotiated Ford, Stellantis, and General Motors contracts are set to expire.

“One of our objectives is to have synchronized contracts [across the film industry], eventually,” McMahon said. “Hearing Shawn Fain state a deadline of May 1, 2028, is amazing.”

McMahon also takes inspiration from how the caucuses Unite All Workers for Democracy (in auto) and Teamsters for a Democratic Union helped to lay the groundwork for contract campaigns well in advance of potential strikes.

“If we’re able to get that clearly telegraphed in IATSE, get members behind that, we have a real chance of getting what we want,” he said. Given the WGA and SAG-AFTRA strikes this year, “the AMPTP [Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers] will not be spoiling for a fight... That’s why we want to have these conversations.”

Lisa Xu is an organizer for *Labor Notes*.

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EVERYTHING ELSE IS PUBLIC RELATIONS.”

– George Orwell

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Six Stories by John O'Kane

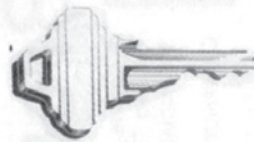


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# CHANGING CONSUMER TASTES

TODD G. BUCHHOLZ

**T**om Cruise's sports-agent character in the 1996 film *Jerry Maguire* spoke one of Hollywood's great catchphrases: "Show me the money." But the smarter lines come from the wife of Maguire's sole client, Rod Tidwell. When the best Maguire can offer Tidwell is a gig endorsing waterbeds, the savvy spouse exclaims, "He deserves the big four: shoe, car, clothing line, soft drink. The four jewels of the celebrity endorsement dollar." Today, two of those four jewels are cracking, and the fissures will remake the American economy.

Ask a European to describe Americans, and you'll likely hear two things: big people and big cars. Sure, it's a stereotype, but on average Americans do weigh 20% more than their transatlantic neighbors and drive 32% bigger cars. This is not just a matter of pounds and inches. Food (including soft drinks) and cars are key drivers of the US economy, employing 16 million and 4.4 million people, respectively. But these two sectors may soon begin to shrink, upending a 70-year trend that began after World War II and literally shaped American life. Why, after so many generations raised on Twinkies and V8 engines, are American consumers' tastes changing?

Blame kids and chemists. Kids these days don't care much about cars. In the 1980s, 80% of US high schoolers earned their drivers' license; that figure has since dropped by 40%. Like audiences for symphony orchestras, the average age of an American driver has climbed, so that a 70-year-old is now more likely to drive than a 20-year-old. What a change since the 1960s, when the Beach Boys sang about a girl who "makes the Indy 500 look like a Roman chariot race" and will have "fun, fun, fun 'til her daddy takes her T-Bird away." Back then, cars were more stylish, with jet-age fins and two-tone paint jobs. Carmakers used to hide their new designs from car-magazine paparazzi, who would chase prototypes through Detroit's back streets. CEOs would host televised unveilings of new models.

Today, Bill Ford doesn't hear oohs and aahs; Tim Cook from Apple does. And why not? Uber, Lyft, and Zipcar rides are just a few touchscreen swipes away. The downward shift in Americans' interest in cars seems to be on autopilot – a fitting state of affairs, since self-driving cars are just around the corner (mostly figuratively, but if you live in Austin, also literally). Headlines blare whenever a self-driving car bends a fender or slams into a pedestrian, but these cars are getting smarter. Before long, auto-insurance companies may begin to retreat from covering human drivers. And then there are electric vehicles (EVs), which contain 90% fewer parts and require 30% fewer workers to build than gasoline-powered cars do.

Squeezed by all these pressures, it's hard to see how autos will dominate future economic headlines, unless someday robots go on strike. Tellingly, NBC recently canceled *American Auto*, its sitcom series about a struggling car company.

The second jewel of the *Jerry Maguire* quartet, soft drinks, is vulnerable not because of the changing

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– Todd G. Buchholz

tastes of kids, but because of the changing tastes of overweight people. Today, half of American adults – over 135 million people – are either diabetic or pre-diabetic. But in the past six months, share prices of snack companies like Hershey and Mondelez have fallen about 30%. Investors and food executives worry about the increasing use of appetite-suppressing drugs like Ozempic and Wegovy. A 2021 study shows that people who take such medicines for a year cut their calorie intake and lose about 15% of their body weight. Morgan Stanley reports that 65% of obesity-drug patients drank fewer sugary carbonated drinks,

and Walmart's CEO says that the grocery basket has already shrunk, with "less units, less calories." America's food bill could dip by several percentage points. Of course, these new drugs do face obstacles. Long-term use may reveal risky side effects or evidence that their appetite-suppressing effect wears off. It's also possible that users become depressed when they lose their lust for Krispy Kreme donuts and 32-ounce Big Gulps of Mountain Dew.

Meanwhile, insurance companies struggle to decide which medications they should cover and for whom. The drugs are pricey, but if customers lose weight, they are less likely to suffer heart attacks, require expensive knee-replacement surgery, or depend on electric scooters to get around in shopping malls. If Americans spend less on cars and consume less food, where will that money go?

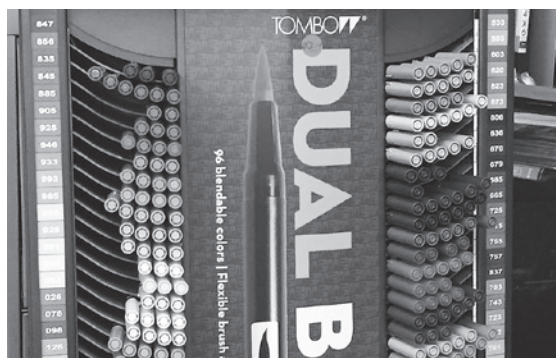


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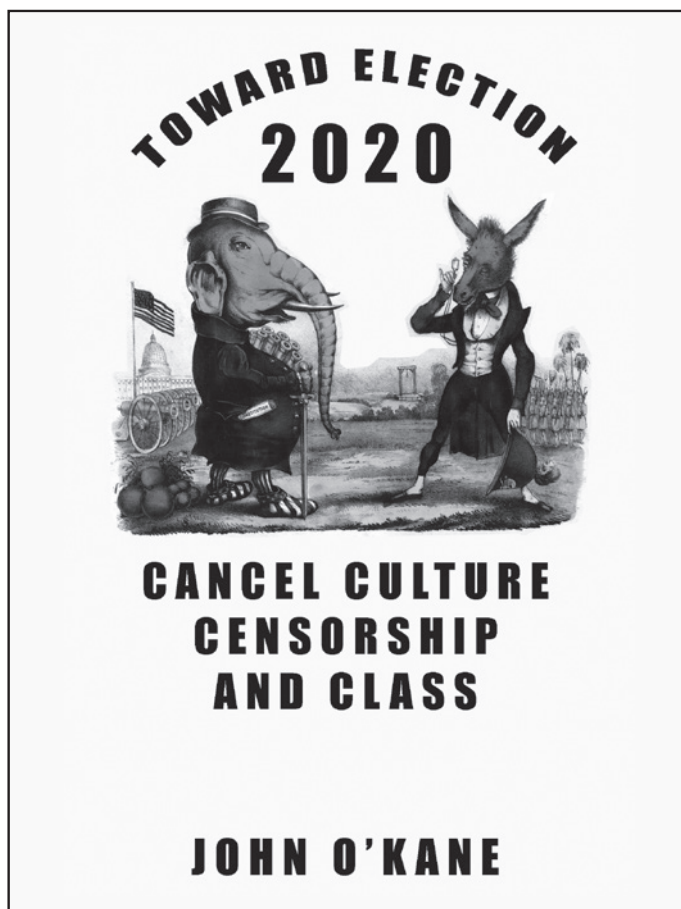


## CONSUMER TASTES

These trends should free up more dollars for entertainment experiences, whether streaming subscriptions, concert tours, video games, or family vacations. Disney might find that more fans show up at its theme parks but spend less at Minnie's Bake Shop. Mark Zuckerberg's Metaverse or Google's Starline could start to seem more affordable to potential users. Taylor Swift might be able to raise her concert prices even higher or create doppelgänger avatars to perform her songs simultaneously in stadiums around the world. Cruise lines could earn higher profits by not piling food so high at on-board buffets. When *Jerry Maguire* premiered, we had no iPhones, no streaming platforms, and no EVs. The term 5G sounded like a spot in a parking garage, and "the cloud" was only in the sky. Cars and sugary drinks seemed like permanent fixtures of American life. But soon we may see them in the rearview mirror.



A graphic design advertisement featuring a collage of text and geometric shapes. The word "DESIGN" is prominently displayed in a large, bold, sans-serif font. To its left, the word "GRAPHIC" is written vertically. Below "DESIGN", the word "HELISWENSON" is visible. To the right of "DESIGN", the word "create" is written in a smaller, lowercase font. A phone number "310.308.2288" is listed on the right side. At the bottom, an email address "heliswenson@gmail.com" is provided. The background includes various typographic elements, including a large plus sign, a series of vertical lines, and a small circular logo.



A book cover for "Toward Election 2020: Cancel Culture Censorship and Class" by John O'Kane. The title "TOWARD ELECTION 2020" is at the top in a large, bold, sans-serif font. Below it is a black and white illustration of an elephant and a donkey, both dressed in formal attire, standing in a field. The elephant is on the left, and the donkey is on the right. The subtitle "CANCEL CULTURE CENSORSHIP AND CLASS" is in a bold, sans-serif font. At the bottom, the author's name "JOHN O'KANE" is displayed in a bold, sans-serif font.



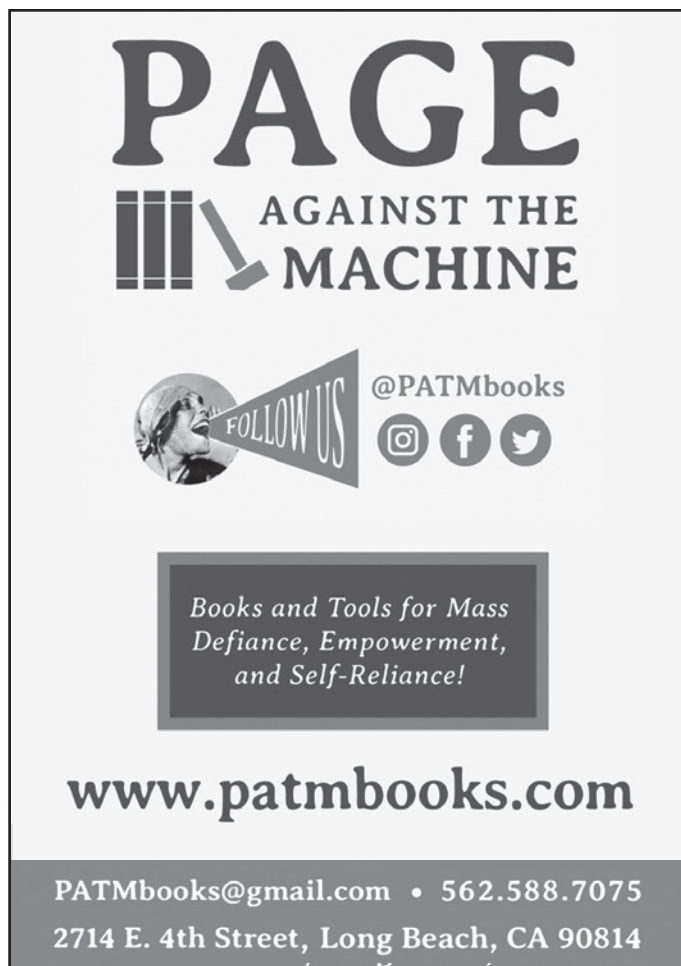
An advertisement for Chelsy Watson, a stylist at Pacific Coast Style The Salon. The text is in a serif font and includes the following information:

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A black and white portrait of Chelsy Watson, a woman with glasses and a headband, smiling.



An advertisement for "PAGE AGAINST THE MACHINE". The title "PAGE" is in a large, bold, sans-serif font. Below it, "AGAINST THE MACHINE" is in a smaller, bold, sans-serif font. To the left of the title is a graphic of a book with a pencil. Below the title is a graphic of a megaphone with the text "FOLLOW US" inside it. To the right of the megaphone are social media icons for Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter, with the handle "@PATMbooks" above them. Below this is a box containing the text:

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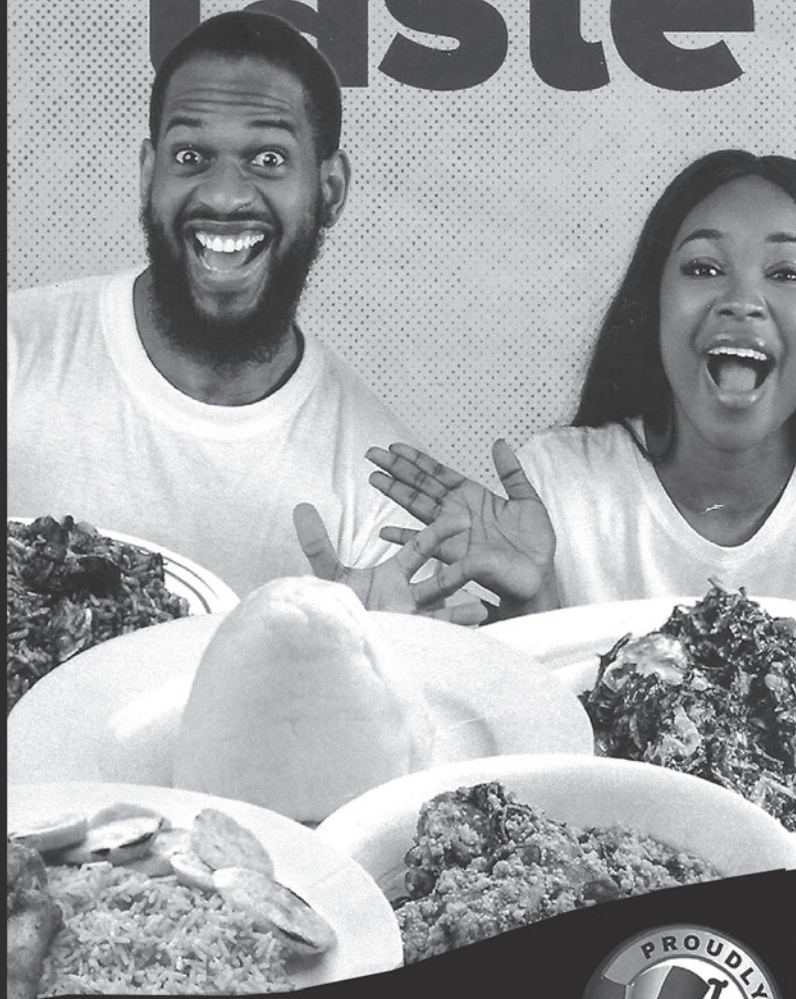
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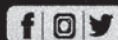
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# FERTILIZING THE WASTELAND: A RETROACTIVE CONVERSATION WITH PHILOMENE LONG

JOHN O'KANE

**A**s time passes, we need to start preserving the memories of the Venice Beat writers, and above all identify the spaces where they flourished before they are bulldozed into oblivion. Finding these locations might become quite difficult, however, since many of them moved around a lot, and the clues are becoming ever fainter. We could perhaps benefit from a high-tech boost, an upgrade of those 3D glasses from the 1950s that sought to expose the hidden schemata of everyday life. With a little luck, we might even begin to see the spiritual emanations that matter...

A few steps southeast from the back of the Cadillac Hotel, just across Speedway, are some not very conspicuous clues. At first they seem like little more than splats of gray paint a careless handyman let drip when making some improvements to the building, the Ellison. They're concentrated on the narrow cement strip that runs along the building and separates it from Speedway, but they also spill onto this alley. And they're directly below one of Philomene Long's closets that nurture more skeletal traces per square inch than any other Beat enclave in the city. These splats are clues for grasping the meaning of more haunted space. But this gets ahead of the story.

## The Mad Woman of Paloma

Philomene is the most famous resident survivor of Venice West. It's fitting she lives a short block from one of its key sites, the Dudley corridor. She's lived in this sector since arriving in 1963, and even over on Park for a

while near Larry Lipton's house. So it's no surprise she's passionately devoted to the history that breathes through it. We often ramble into the wee hours about whether it will survive the haunted folks and spaces. She's hopeful.

"Venice has been a special place ever since Abbot Kinney created it from the swamp," she says. "The inspiration's out there...all we need to do is let it happen!"

"But what if the time comes when no one knows what's happening?" I ask.

"There will still be hotspots that flare through the ignorance...it's in the air and land."

We owe much of what remains of Venice West to Philomene's discoveries and continued creativity. She was named Venice's Poet Laureate by Councilman Bill Rosendahl during the city's 2005 Centennial. Her acceptance was a manifesto for poetry as a power to see better and live committed to what really matters, but especially as *the* power for keeping a healthy slant on Venice's past and present.

I'm walking to her place along Speedway, eager to launch into the weekend with stimulating conversation. My notes are in order, and I'm prepared for all contingencies. I've even swung by Henry's Market for Shyla's veggie burger special for ballast in case the language gets liquefied. I approach the final steps below her window, carefully arc my way around the gray splats while paying close attention to traffic on the right.

When I turn left at Paloma there's a line working the intercom so I follow the crowd into the Ellison. Surprising Philomene has advantages. Sometimes I even lie in wait across from the entrance to hitch a code-free pass up the stairs. Dropping in on neighbors is a valuable custom that distinguishes the small-town element of this community. Though

Philomene relishes this spontaneous quality, she prefers advance notice since it gives her time to close the closets and straighten things up. She's always apologizing for her messy place.

She surely doesn't need to, but I sense she's feeling the pressure to clean up her act. In fact her son chipped in recently during a stay. Perhaps overcompensating for the fallout from their blissfully-beaten, anti-nuclear family experiment, he repaid the favor by finding a slot for every-

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thing, leaving her with a waste-free folder-rich upgrade that appears to have set her writing schedule back several weeks. Perhaps she's learned that too much method can be maddening.

I walk softly to the stairs. I never take the elevator when I'm in the surprise mode. The sound might tip her off. Plus a detour up the stairs offers another angle on this architectural wonder, one of the city's first structures. I've learned that keeping the spirit of early Venice close helps access Philomene's frame of mind and prepare to grasp her free associations. I knock on the door, visualizing her panic from having to do many things at once. I hear rushing footsteps and a sonorous, "Who is it?"

"Guess who!"

She opens the door, looking like she hasn't a clue, and I glimpse her state in the brief moment before her memory returns. She seems preoccupied. Philomene thrives on good conversation but relishes her solitude. She's become quite adept these days at shifting in and out of moods.

Her look changes slightly like she's about ready to snap out of it. But she's angled in the door frame like it could go either way, perhaps needing an extra push from someone. Her hair prophesies the dilemma. Like an unkempt eucalyptus on Rose Ave ready for the gentrifying shears, her locks are multitasking.

### Beatress Beattitude

"Are you ready for some..."

"...thought you were coming after you ran...got this deadline, some literary mag in Spain wants me to go on and on about sex and orgies here in the 1960s. I'm so tired of seeing my aunt lying in that bed. I didn't have a chance to get any more wine...Illuminate's at it again!"

"I brought what you left at my place...want me to come back later?"

Her gestures pull me across the threshold into the light streaming through the beach-facing windows. It disorients me. But as I angle inside it paints the mounds of memorabilia in clear relief.

"This place is transformative...can't imagine you ever leaving."

"The muse is here! Many very creative people in Venice's history have spent time here."

"It reminds me of the Sailhouse Lofts over on Main and Marine...those balconies facing inward to the courtyard. *Some* are keeping the look of early Venice alive."

"The look maybe, but creativity needs sacrifice and struggle."

"The muse can't be accommodated in million-dollar closets?"

"No...the rich are welcome in Venice too, it's just that to create you must be in touch with the spirit and...what's really meaningful gets deadened by the material possessions and lifestyles you have to maintain to keep them."

"Isn't that an outmoded idea? Don't you also get deadened by not having enough, from always having to do

survival things to stay even with the game?"

"Yes...it's one of the tragedies of what's happened here...but being slaves to material objects makes us more insensitive to the things and people that matter. We can't have a quality life without freeing ourselves from them. It's not about choosing to be deprived, just living more selectively. 'Blessed are the poor and meek for they shall inherit the earth', one of my favorite beatitudes."

The final syllable leaves her wide-eyed and glowing with satisfaction, like she's solved a perplexing mystery. How apt in this shrine for the preservation of the past, renewal space for many who've never stopped believing beat. Sappho's words on the near wall: "The sounds of mourning do not suit a house that serves the muse; they are not wanted here."

"If you get your head straight about what really matters in the everyday scheme, learn how to stay away from material objects and pleasures, you're home free and richer in spirit than the rich? A lack of worldly things gives you more privileges spiritually?"

"It's dedicated poverty."

"Will the victims of poverty, the good people who wanna get out of it, have a clue about what all of this means?"

"Well...Christianity, with its power and wealth, keeps many poor people in its clutches, encourages them to accept their deprived states and love their masters. But the truth is out there!"

"Where? How do they find it?"

"Well, every once in a while there's a breakaway, some want to bring things back down to earth and practice those great ideas in the gospels, turn their attention to this life but not deny the other one either. It's Liberation Theology, the rage around the time when I went into the convent in 1958, revived through the inspiration of Pope John 23rd."

"It's interesting that he died in 1963, the same year as JFK, a Catholic president who was telling youth to help others and serve their country, and also the year you dropped out of the convent? Those must've been fertile times for dedicated poverty."

"I think there was so much going on then that escaped our ability to grasp it."

"It was then when altruism seemed to be the natural gospel, not greed and me-firstism. Community and sharing and spiritual betterment seemed right."

"Yes! Looking back, it's hard to imagine how that happened. Compared to now it's like...well this seems like another planet."

"The world of the poor and deprived seemed to inspire many then. I think of Kerouac's fascination with hobos and 'negroes'...but wasn't this 'slumming' sort of like tourism? It seems they barely broke bread with them before finding the freeway."

"It was right, maybe not pure, but people were trying to bridge worlds."

"It's interesting that dedicated poverty was happening in good economic times and when consumerism was becoming the national religion."

"That's what they saw through, what motivated them...but the media confused the messages. There was a core that refused the hype and did its best to ignore the false signs and...that's where Zen came in. Get your own house in order, don't force anything that..."

"Didn't this get trendy too, a way to drop out and turn away from..."

"Yes, but the energy created from the practice of living directly and genuinely in the moment produces a smile of understanding, a sudden intuition, a wordless transmission that reveals both the problem and the solution."

I imagine this power and see another quote on the wall. It's over by the calligraphy made by Zen master Maezumi Roshi for her marriage to John Thomas. From Tan Taigi: "Many mosquitoes bloated with blood during Zen meditation." I picture waves of energy radiating from a squinting monk that spread out everywhere and empower all subjects eager to strive for some purity of resolution.

"That's a tall order! But doesn't the world stay as screwed up as ever...the caring mind just getting a reprieve from the whole mess that society..."

"If you care it shows and your attitude will urge others to follow. The right course comes from just accepting. You'll possess the truth and...it can't be violated."

You do feel possessed when you enter this space. It's like entering church in a sense, with the large wooden cross, and nuns everywhere. The liturgies are thought waves created from the intense desire to communicate that saturate the many journals and binders of poems, papers nesting with flyers and yellowed newspaper clips, the surplus of books yet to find their resting place. They can

incense you at random with a eucharistic power to make meaningful patterns.

Many who've crossed this threshold speak of succumbing to conversational rapture where new words and phrases pulse them through the night. There have been some epic rap sessions. Like those between Philomene and John Thomas who died in 2002, a philosopher-poet who arrived here in the heyday of Venice West and could never leave. His ghostly voice remained on the message tape for years after. Fielding calls from the tribe of visionaries who refuse to pass? Perhaps those random traces of dusty sea breezes on the wall over the bed are really stains of his thoughts and feelings.

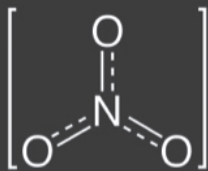
When possessed by this space you do feel it's bigger, like the late night polemics and yearnings have stretched it out, played with your perceptions, jujitsued the actual cubic volume into a cathedral.

"Would you say your philosophy is a mix of Zen and Catholicism, similar to Kerouac's?"

"Yes, well...like many Catholics, Kerouac was driven beyond the simple and ordinary, inspired to do extraordinary things, but would retreat into himself and return to Lowell and his mother. Maybe transcendence gets confused in a philosophy that's been made over into something quite ordinary, and after a while you need to get a better perspective so you embrace the East, leaving as much of your baggage behind as..."

"Which is what you've done?"

"Yes...but I have less baggage because I was in the convent and worked through and out of Catholicism. I left in 1963 because I couldn't take the brainwash that there's only one way to be saved and all that. But I've carried many positives with me and I'd like to believe I've



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married East and West successfully, though I'm definitely more Zen."

"More than the Beats as a group, or Kerouac?"

"He was a special case."

"Do you see yourself as a member of the Beat family, or do you have serious issues with it?"

"As far as the values and philosophy, yes, for the most part. I write about many of the same things, but they were a womanizing boys club, and especially the Venice clan. Bob Alexander, the high priest at the Temple of Man over on Cabrillo during the 1970s, was the worst... the scene was full of men taking advantage of women, treating them like property, and not many could get up the confidence to resist..."

She suddenly looks exhausted. The energy of the space seems to evaporate with her final syllable.

Philomene's poems are passionate testimonials like those of her male mentors, especially Ginsberg whom she knew well and used to drop in here. Her love affair with Emily Dickinson is a plus. Not exactly a Beat but a fine muse for Beatresses everywhere when it comes to dodging literary rules in a flip-off of male privilege. It's poetic justice that she's the only resident survivor of Venice West. The last word from a woman who can enlighten us about this special past. I'm trying to think of a question that might restore her energy when I hear a tap, tap, tap on the window facing Speedway. Philomene turns around to welcome a surprise visitor.

"It's Illuminate!"

## Beaten Birds

It turns out those gray splats below her window are not smatterings of paint after all but weathered dollops of pigeon doo-doo. On any given Sunday these birds flock to her second-story ledge, finding ample nutrients to get them through the day. They're always up there but on Sunday they converge on Philomene's space like strafed fighter pilots who've spotted the carrier. This is when tourists are thick as thieves and the fuming SUVs carrying them are particularly foul. They disperse more freely during the week, returning to the ledge only after their radar encounters a few aggressive hotspots left from the weekend.

This is good and bad news for us residents. With most getting their fill at Philomene's for Sunday dinner, there's less of a chance to be splat on our strolls to the beach. But avoid the Ellison since they might be vengeful from having their space violated. The gray matter seems to drop faster than the force of gravity, dunging all targets at random.

Over the years she's given pigeons sanctuary in a climate that's becoming increasingly hostile to feces-specific species whose very existence irks the clean-up committees. They've flourished alongside the seagulls and other fairer fowl that are making the grade better these days. Though no wimpy wasters themselves, seagulls are more photogenic and get more respect. Their size and mannerisms dwarf their droppings and even create the impression they're on a higher link in the chain of being.

"But how can you be so excited about these birds!? Does anyone really care that..."

"They have authority...were some of Venice's first residents. Abbot brought many from Italy and set them free along the shores and they homed in on this street, Paloma."

Philomene knows her bird types. She's been strain-spotting since 1963 when she shed her convent habit to find Venice, which fortunately led to her salvation through words in the family of disaffiliated writers rooted here. And one of the benefits from her mastery of words is the uncanny ability to see what many don't through the cracks and crannies in our everyday worlds. She has a special gift for picturing species as they evolve. She's convinced there is such a bird as the Paloma Ave pigeon. For as long as she can remember this special breed has appeared on her ledge pecking away with the desire to communicate.

"What's so special about that type of bird?"

"It's different than the rest. It pecks away with personality and hangs around longer, even plays house and does the family thing for a while. Ma and Pa Paloma, as I call them, have been here for a long time, bringing their share of marvels into the world. Many sit and stare for hours like they're ready for anything to keep the flow going. They have a dove-like innocence about them... pigeons are really low-brow doves! So I read them poems...they love Poe and Dickinson and...it's amazing how they take to words. One I call the poetess really gets into it, like she understands the meanings."

"How could you tell?"

"It was her pecks, blinks, and nods and a glint in her eyes like a child has when it begins mumbling. It made sense, like maybe she found language...perhaps pidgin English!...but then she began to get these twittering cheeps from the rest and started to withdraw, avoiding eye contact. After a while the other birds pecked away at her until she flew away."

"So is this the fate of sensitives who try to survive these days in a flock of hostile forces?"

"For the ones who stay around and seem to want something special, and perhaps have a little passion for... humanity!...they have trouble."

"Have Ma and Pa Paloma ever popped a pure dropout?"

"After the poetess left they persevered for several hours on a dark and cold and rainy day on the ledge and delivered a creature that seemed to be at such odds with the surrounding gloom that I named her Illuminate, a truly beatified bird."

"Perhaps she was nervous about what awaited her beyond the cracked shell so she took her sweet time to make a break?"

"She refuses to peck...her head's just not into what the hustling herd takes seriously, I guess...or maybe she's autistic."

"Or maybe she's just getting her act together and could care less about what sort of birdseed there might be on those bigger art-condo ledges over on Main."

"She certainly doesn't seem competitive."

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"It seems you and her have a bond...she obviously won't bite the hand that feeds her, but you must see something we don't."

"Most here could care less about much that matters, and so it keeps me hopeful to find humanity in places they ignore. It says we're immune from nothingness if beings from the lower depths--I guess it's really the higher and flightier echelons--can also refuse to fit. Illuminate captures something of what I feel the alternative spirit was all about before Venice became a circus."

Many dismiss this pigeon play with predictable putdowns: she's starved for companionship in a poetry-shrinking community and must consort with wild life; this is what happens to those who pursue the purity of the word in a world muddled with figures and graphs; the Beats, what do you expect from those who view the 9-5 drill as the curse of death.

But these naysayers have a stake in Venice's gentrification and measure progress differently. If they had their way they would likely refigure the breeding balance at the expense of pigeons. So they're not apt to be reliable observers of Philomene's behavior even if able to make sense of it. The widening gyrations in lifestyle are an unfortunate sign of our times. The center, a middle ground where folks all over the spectrum can hash out their differences, doesn't appear to be holding. This is all the more reason to appreciate what Philomene means to this community. Her ability to spot the right signs is one that many of us need in these moments when alternative life forms are fading and messages are getting confused.

### Fertileeyes

What she sees around her and how she puts it in perspective is what matters. It figures that she's attracted to animal life. Many poets and artists have played with the spectrum of life forms to comment on the state of civilization. If society's looking pretty dreary why not turn back the evolutionary clock and seed suspicions about linear progress?

For Philomene, whose mind is flush with words and the means to overlap and separate their meanings, it makes sense that diverse beings should share the same space. She's primed to welcome them. Birds of course are plentiful along the ocean, and you can see her most any twilight hour happily hugging the edge of civilization, zoned into the natural cocktail, the roaring immensity and celestial light show. This sensual bath bumps her visionary prowess to discover the correspondences that most of us miss.

"Illuminate seems like a perfect pupil for you. With lots of time on her hands she must have that make-do-on-my-own-terms mentality found among all serious dropouts."

"She's receptive, a blank slate, though scratched up with some genetic surprises!"

"She must be a natural for the hunt and peck method...not exactly the hip-techno way to get noticed these days, but..."

"Well, if the medium's still the message."

"She could get one of those manual typewriters like Stu gets once in a while at Marina Appliance on Lincoln. Don't you have one over there in the corner?"

"Yes, I love thinking with that machine. Strange, it makes me more creative. I often feel like a robot with my computer. It's always going down and...actually, I love to handwrite things when I can."

"If we use the old machines regularly maybe we can imagine the worlds of their users. There's actually an upright on the back cover of Lipton's book."

Illuminate's head-bobbing away on the ledge, stretching and jerking what could be a chain of pipsqueaks, alliterations and nonsense rhymes, apparently hunting for something. Replaying the hunt for the right letters and words might be exactly what humans need who want to express the fleeting and unknown. In a land laid waste by keyboarded haste, playing with a different medium might free up new messages. She might be a perfect role model if we're tempted to jump back into the rat race. Hopefully she'll remain here and keep breeding.

"Can sensitives like Illuminate survive long against these pressures, and especially with Venice's changing winds that seem to be licensing the animal instincts?"

"They fly away eventually, off somewhere...never see them again. But there's always more. The other day I looked out on the ledge and noticed Illuminate was gone, then another strange one appeared who had that starved look and familiar mannerisms, so I started reading poems and it really got into it. Pa Paloma arrived, followed by a few hopefuls, and I just kept reading and reading. Afterwards they chirped nonstop for several minutes."

"Do you think Illuminate will come back?"

"She always has."

Inspired beings yearn to test alien skies. Hopefully she'll return to Philomene's encampment. This would be a good omen. If a bird can survive such adverse conditions and keep pecking along, there's hope for all beaten beings trying to make it in the new Venice order.

### Fecal Force Field

Philomene loves these pigeons as if they were her children. But she's also concerned with what they mean to those whose mentalities are blocking quality renewal, especially gentrifiers on their clean-up missions. And since she doesn't hold out much hope for politicians to renew the city, she's become a believer in the power of symbols to shape an awareness of what the stakes are.

It's no secret that the sanitizers detest these wasters. But they tend to feel the same way toward most beaten beings and underbirds: those who have untended plants, refuse to get designer haircuts--or any other kind--at the salons on Kinney Blvd, let weeds overtake grass in their yards, neglect to bathe daily, let the dust bunnies flutter and consume their pads, commit unforgivable sartorial sins, beach-gaze at mid-day when the ticker-tape is still moving.

What can be done in the face of such prejudice? If the gentrifiers, like the best televangelist rappers money



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can buy, want to force all wasters to be free and see the light, suppress the evidence of their existence, then how do these birds express themselves?

For Philomene this is about controlling the rap on waste. Many are convinced our fair city has become a wasteland, but there's no consensus about what it means. It's hard to imagine her and others who believe passionately in Venice's quality renewal having a good sit-down with the players who view waste as mostly a matter of appearances and refuse to change what matters. The battle lines have been drawn.

The gentrifiers do their thing, rarely mince their words and use their power and resources to remake Venice into a squeaky-clean beach resort. They won't rest until all those who can't freely pay their way are gone. Those armed with words and images mostly lack the political savvy to envision an alternative plan, or the power to implement one. They see the obsession with clean-up as the problem since the gentry's removal strategies are really people-displacers. Dehumanizing policies are actually behind the streaming lines of architectural standardization and polished surfaces.

No one wants garbage-strewn streets. And you'll not find many ecstatic about bird-family droppings, especially from pigeons. Though not all residoo is treated equally. Deposits from canine companions the size of baby stud horses (laws of property beckon body guards) are on the rise among up and comers to our shores. Yet these droppings, and despite their greater visibility, are not noticed. It's like they're a natural part of the landscape. This hypocrisy complicates the fight and gives sanitizers an unfair boost.

They get one too from the examples of "successful" improvement in areas around Venice, especially that of Santa Monica. Our northern neighbor provides the model for material progress that improving communities feel pressured to embrace. And this city does indeed offer many amenities. But when a hot place like Santa Monica out succeeds others around it there's bound to be unintended consequences, and this has certainly proven true for Venice.

As Santa Monica sends more and more of its unmentionables across the Navy Street border, for example, we've had to spend more time devising ways to pass them on to Mar Vista! Our waste piles are a boon for the brown-bobbing shadows that dutifully spear and swab while their masters are at the ticker-tape parade. They can even consort with their nanny natives. They're also a godsend for the homeless. Our nooks and alleyways are still a gourmet smorgasbord compared to Santa Monica's.

By the way, you can always tell when a hood is on the up-and-up, turning that proverbial corner on the waste problem. The receptacles become aesthetically pleasing, even get padlocks to make sure only members use them. Planners know the truly wasted deposit suspicious packages. And owners of the newer condo complexes, no weepy wonks when it comes to stratification theory, pitch in with monitors and roving security squads.

A big barrier to quality renewal is the sanitizers'

obsession with wasted surfaces. The right façade is everything. Visionary homeowners spare no cost to erect better looking fences and maintain them, getting the best substances for whitewashing graffiti-waste away. Our taggers are no substance abusers though, usually finding a way to waste these efforts. Some get stroked by the muse and make their angry etches into meaningful messages, even murals.

The graffiti wall was the result of this simmering passion. A section of wasted material became the target of serial scratchers for several years, becoming pasted over and over with new messages. Unfortunately it was dozed some years ago as wasting gibberish. In the face of such odds, Philomene and others realize they need to get more inventive.

"What if," she said one night, "suddenly Paloma Ave pigeons were everywhere, breeding so often that no one could miss them. These masses of beaten birds perched throughout the town could become the masters."

Then it hit us like a lightning bolt. We could actively breed pigeons and place them all over town. Unlike Hitchcock's aggressors, these peckers would have good values and educate us in being more humane. We could mount a public relations effort to change their image as degenerate dung droppers into carriers of special insight about dropping out. Eventually many might come to reject the idea that a beaten-looking community is automatically wasted.

But Philomene knows better than anyone that what most would likely see in this breeding explosion is merely more feces and flies, and this will likely spur an increase in vigilantism to make them extinct. And since there's only so much she can do to protect her beloved beings, she's enraptured by their symbolic power. As we've seen, she holds out little hope for a serious renewal of Venice through absentee powers. She loves T. S. Eliot as a poet and thinker, but rejects his idea of the wasteland because it relied on an outside redeemer and is too pessimistic. It's a change in consciousness from the bottom up and within the community that propels her. She's an optimist who believes people can make things happen themselves.

Doo-doo is a powerful symbol for grasping how a wasting community can renew itself. It's a substance



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voided of life yet full of its potential; an end-product that can sprout new product from the dead ground. Fertilizer makes the world go round. You don't need to be from Iowa to know how those big round splats in the field--cowpies--can do the persistent bidding of good folks committed to rebirth and crop yields.

Visualize Illuminate and other pigeons piling up special power below Philomene's ledge. As the breeding process gets going it will increase and become a special sign with mind-changing potential, even foster creative acronyms. CRAAP, concerned residents against airport pollution, is already into the act.

Since those closer to the crap and privy to its material conditions, like pigeons, can more easily spread around its magic, consumerism may become an ally. With all the eateries these days upgrading menus for the trust-funders, there's been a bump in the quality of street droppings from our fowl friends. At Mao's Kitchen, where the cultural revolution is as faded a memory as their two-dollar commune pancakes, dumpster drippings--especially after peak dining hours--come with more protein and less cholesterol than the power breakfast at the Café 50s. This could lead to subversion from within.

But no matter how improved the waste or how much it accumulates, this noxious life-force has to circulate. Fertilization needs a vehicle. The compost below Philomene's window teems with possibilities, but it's merely manure until activated. Digestive tracks get it all going, but the tire tracks keep it going. So on Sunday, when the traffic is especially thick, there's the potential for pigeon power to get transported around town.

Unfortunately, these vehicles are mostly SUVs and land-roving domiciles, the choice of tourists or those taking advantage of a respite from the rat race to stalk property. This means the delivery paths will be limited. Once this crowd creeps along Speedway and gets its fill of the bazaar, they're off on the popular arteries. East on Rose to the 10 FWY and up to Brentwood; north on Main through Santa Monica; down toward Windward and beyond to Venice Blvd and the 405 FWY; or south on Pacific through Marina del Rey.

Ironically, while these fuel-inefficient vehicles pass this powerful substance on, too much of it will likely disperse outside Venice where it will get diluted. A few nodules might drop along these getaway paths but they likely won't juice the inspired locals who keep a low profile until the tourists have made it back to wherever.

So we owe a debt to those who've learned to kick the benzine habit and amble around on foot, as well as a critical mass of bicyclists. Many of them hang around Philomene's hub where the Venice West vibes remain strong. Whether fully aware or not, they're ready and able to sponge up the residoo and carry it throughout the field of barren and barely visible locales and walkways where the waning but unforgettable Venice alternative spirit hovers. Here many are ready to rediscover their own community.

### Power to the Pigeonry

Philomene feels the city's pigeon prejudice, and

knows how difficult it is to force changes in perception. She hardly expects to find anything remotely resembling pigeon-under-glass at Tony Bill's gastro-gourmet restaurant on Market. But then her culinary tastes are well below market anyway, so she'll likely only be surprised secondhand. If the truth be told, she is secretly hopeful Papa Joe will soon add a Paloma wrap to his menu at the South Beach!

But this prejudice is deeply rooted in our institutions. Preoccupied with words, Philomene's fond of referring to the official books, like the dictionary and thesaurus, where the learned find the handles to define what's important. Just consider the meanings associated with her beloved birds: stoolpigeon, pigeon-holed, pigeon-hearted, pigeon-toed, pigeon-post...a rash of frames that deny our fluttering friends the qualities necessary to be socialized. They're slow, clumsy, and can't even feel, or relate to others emotionally with the organ--the heart--that clearly separates the civilized from the barbaric. They're figures for stereotyping. If you're pigeon-holed you can't be authentically identified. And they're synonymous with dupes. Stoolpigeons, marvelous story plants to texture the dark and unpredictable crevices of street life for Hollywood in the 1940s and 1950s, can't be trusted. And their abbreviation is even worse: stoolies. That adage has never been truer: you are what you do. Pigeons are doo-doo, forever tethered to a stool.

These meanings seem clear. We want these creatures to stay put or be downwardly mobile; get away from us and find their hole in the wall, or ledge at the Ellison if they're fortunate. But just as doo-doo is not mere dead matter but power-packed potential for sprouting new life, these definitions are merely the beginning. They're the most common ones but not the final answer. As Philomene says, when you find a word in the good book it's defined by other words, which are defined by still more words. We follow this trail eager to pin down the meaning of the word we want to clarify, but eventually realize how far we've strayed. We may even end up in a meaning space that's nearly opposite the one that set our search in motion, one with less popular meanings.

So stoolpigeons, per the linguistic fates, share meaning with tricksters who can manipulate circumstances to their liking and play fast and loose with appearance and reality, qualities traditionally associated with magicians and creative artists.

And sophistry. This is not surprising since the Sophists were hair-splitting equivocators and poetic word wizards from just before Socrates, flighty characters who despised reason and arrogant logo-machos claiming to possess the absolute word. They were skeptics, moral relativists, postmodernists of their day, adjuncts to society who roamed around with soap boxes challenging the endowed chairs of authority soon to be occupied by Plato's fraternity.

Ironically one of its key spokesmen was a tricky-tongued character named Hippias. It was likely birds of this feather that Plato had in mind when he argued that poets should be mere functionaries that praise great leaders

and coddle the gods. Free and loose tongues can threaten the political state, and surely its real estate.

Just consider the definition of a pigeon's neck, not the most delectable or eye-catching bird part for most. It can be associated with diversity and difference in the good book. And it comes packaged in French for cultural reinforcement: *gorge-de-pigeon*. Illuminate's neck does seem especially long and flexible, capable of quick and varied contortions.

Even those despised stoolies can get associational relief. A stoolie can double as an informer doing work for the man and a freelance sleuth investigating the truth.

Much depends on what happens in practice, what word pairings and combos the wordsmith uses, and under what circumstances. He or she may have a coherent intent or be driven by impromptu urges. Unexpected meanings lie in the network of language that complicate or even challenge the user's intentions. This is really only language doing its work. Prejudices and official definitions can therefore lose their power and authority through slips of the tongue that erupt from the shock and awe of the warped society. And these slips might catch waves of meaning that flip into moments.

Perhaps underbirds can lift themselves up through the same system that denies them; their weak power can expand through a playful twisting of meanings that disarms their stronger masters. And if they're continually assaulted with slurs and insults, even degraded to the status of their lowly stools, there's bound to be a moment when they say they're simply not going to take it anymore. So if they're good patriots, have a heart, mind their own business without hurting anyone, and are far from witless, these assaults will likely only backfire.

A sort of piling-on principle, to crudely paraphrase that famous German philosopher who used his share of bird metaphors in quest of the gray truth, might come into play. This is where quantity can become a quality force. When too much of a bad thing accumulates, whether it's foul odor or vile insult, it can convert to its opposite. Excreta that piles up on the street, or in any other space, can become fluid spiritual excretations, passes of meaningfully-loquacious vapor that smell like roses, or even strongly suggest an entirely new attitude toward cleanliness. And it's certainly not too much of a

leap to say that a greater presence of pigeons and beatens just might begin to change mentalities on the street, even eventually undermine gentrification.

Think of the possibilities. Overdosing on circus and carnival might make you more than a devout debauchee. It could lead to a fixed boost in the hang-loose attitude that allows you to go at ordinary everyday activities more relaxed and perceptive. It might even put such a permanent smile on your face that it will infect everyone in your immediate circle, and each one of these charged-up agents might pyramid the spark to others.

Philomene's philosophy makes sense. We could do worse than look to the underbird world for salvation. This is where the energy lies that can topple top-down systems with barely a whimper. There's no need for outside help from evangelical redeemers or big bang politicians. Only indigenous visionaries like Philomene who can shepherd the flock toward a better consciousness from within.

This dropout ditty has been criticized by benevolent activists because it allows the powers that be to have their way with the flock. With so many drugged out on mind-games, so they say, business proceeds as usual.

But it seems that Philomene's philosophy models a solution to the wasteland. Her words are soluble, her rhyme schemes stretchable, and her politics playfully non-partisan. She's way beyond sectarian hair-splitting. Her openness is what immunizes her from a maddening take on her beloved city, and perhaps full-scale madness.

And if we could all monitor her brain waves and act them out, we'd likely be protected from having to live with democratic centralism, or the LA City Council's makeshift version of it. Once juiced-up we could get more active in community affairs, and possibly even return to the days when the alternative culture controlled Venice. Our special kind of anarchism might get revived with a face more human than ever. We might even become catalysts for bringing some variant of humane socialism in through the back alleys and swamp waters. But will enough juice get loose in time to reach the dwindling numbers?

Much depends on whether Illuminate's feces start to fertilize the fallow consciousness-fields so that the alternative community can be renewed from below.

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**M**arc Arnusch, a third-generation farmer, has spent his career raising sugar beets, onions, and barley grains in Colorado's Prospect Valley. Recently, when his seventy-year-old friend and neighbor reached out because he was considering exiting the farming business, Arnusch found himself consulting an unexpected ally for advice: ChatGPT.

Arnusch wanted to investigate every outcome before offering guidance on such a personal and life-altering decision. ChatGPT helped Arnusch lay out a strategy, with options for changing markets, leaving the industry completely, or selling the farm for a stake.

Eventually, his friend decided to rent his farm holdings to Arnusch's son and nephew — the fourth generation of Arnusch Farms. Now, the two farms are in business together. "I feel ChatGPT brought us to a point where we had a really good conversation and drove the principal pieces of that discussion," said Arnusch. "It's almost like a robotic business coach that I'm learning to confide in."

Arnusch is part of a small but growing number of farmers leveraging artificial intelligence (AI) and large language models (LLMs), like ChatGPT, to tackle daily tasks. He's used it for everything from drafting employee evaluation questions to researching Colorado's wolf recovery initiatives. "I've been blown away by the information it can kick out in a host of different areas," he said.

Still, Arnusch says he's wary of using the tool for questions related to his farming products. "When I ask it about animal agriculture, sustainability, or GMOs, it produces things I don't agree with as a farmer, or that are blatantly false," he said.

Earlier this year, Farmers Business Network (FBN), an ag-tech data research platform based out of San Carlos, California, released its own version of ChatGPT called Norm. Norm is built on OpenAI's GPT-3.5 model, and uses public data like weather reports, soil data, and product labels to answer ag-related questions. It also

taps into FBN's exclusive agronomic data and assets from the USDA's National Agriculture Statistic Service to avoid some of the common misinformation its predecessor has become known for. Referred to as hallucinations, instances of misinformation occur when a model generates incorrect information but presents it as fact. OpenAI, ChatGPT's creator, has already faced legal challenges due to these hallucinations.

Kit Barron, head of data science and analytics at FBN, said the company recognized the dangers of getting farming information wrong early on. "You do not want a chatbot hallucinating recommendations for highly regulated products that have a significant impact on the viability of your family farm," Barron said.

While still in beta testing, Norm is trained to answer animal health, crop protection, and product usage questions for farmers across North America. Barron said the kinds of questions Norm receives range from mundane to serious. "[At first], there were a lot of novelty questions, probing, having fun with it," Barron recalled. "One farmer was even asking us to help him write his wedding vows."

"Over time it's become more of a useful tool, we're seeing a lot more seasonally relevant, directed questions. People are treating it as an ag advisor, or another trusted consultant on their farm. Now, they're asking about post-harvest [tactics], fertilizer regimes, or herbicide applications, and that's been really great to see."

Digital Green, a global development organization, created a similar tool, Farmer.CHAT, which is currently in use in India and Africa. This multilingual chatbot was also built on GPT-3.5. The app aims to close information gaps for rural farmers, who often lack

access to real-time agricultural information.

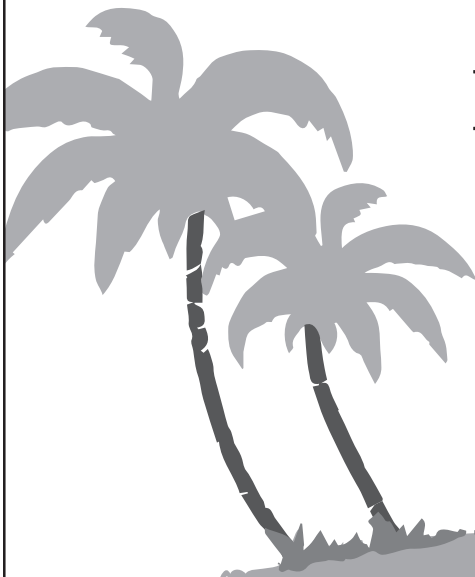
With a simple text or voice query on WhatsApp or Telegram, Farmer.CHAT answers questions such as, "What do I do if there are white flies on my chilies?" or, "How do I know when my onions are ready to harvest?" Its knowledge base is trained on proprietary Digital Green data, much like FBN's Norm, to ensure only the most accurate information is passed on. Digital Green stated that, to date, the app has reached 5.2 million farmers.

Jona Repishti, head of global gender programs at Digital Green, feels that bridging agricultural information gaps is one of the best applications of the GPT

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— Hannah Macready





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technology she's seen. She envisions a future where AI and LLMs could be used in predicting yield measurements, market timing, and pricing. "AI technology just has so much potential. It's so transformative," she said, "but one of the things that we see is that the landscape is lumpy, in terms of adoption, in terms of availability and equity of access to the latest technologies." She continued, "Some sectors are further ahead than others."

Repishti also emphasized that quick access to agricultural information is even more crucial in the face of climate change. Around the world, farmers face mounting climate threats, including wildfire, drought, and flood, as well as negative mental health effects from living in an increasingly unpredictable environment.

Joseph Walton, a research fellow in arts, climate, and technology at the Sussex Digital Humanities Lab, isn't convinced of generative AI's efficacy in the agricultural sphere just yet. Generative AI models have negative environmental impacts, which trickle down to agriculture, said Walton.

"While it can be tempting to think of AI as this ghostly, magical thing, it has a physical basis," said Walton. "It runs on servers built out of copper, steel, gold, silver, palladium, and cobalt. It took energy to extract those materials and twist and swirl them into servers."

He continued, "Training and deploying AI models is computationally intensive, and that has implications for embodied carbon in data center hardware, electricity usage, water for cooling, e-waste, and so on."

"Tech impacts climate and climate impacts agriculture," he said.

One study, conducted by researchers from AI firms like Hugging Face, aimed to quantify the carbon impact of a machine learning model called Bloom. The study found Bloom's training emitted enough carbon to power an average American home for 41 years. The same study reported that models of a similar parameter size, such as OpenAI's GPT-3 model, emitted nearly 20 times as much as Bloom.

Polina Levontin, an environmental policy researcher at Imperial College London, has a more optimistic perspective. She sees AI as a cost-effective way to offset agriculture's existing carbon footprint.

"There is enormous potential to use agriculture to regenerate soils, capture carbon, use less water and nitrogen, and only apply chemicals when really needed," she said. "AI will make all this much easier and cheaper ... and, combined with robotics, will limit exposure for farm workers from heat waves and [the like]."

Her concern lies with who will benefit from the adoption of these AI tools. "AI will benefit all farmers, small and large, but it is likely to benefit larger farmers a lot more, exaggerating existing inequalities," she said.

Still, farmers like Arnusch are already getting creative. He hopes AI can help take the guesswork out of decision-making and make it easier for smaller farms like his to run a profitable business. "I appreciate the value it has in understanding alternatives that maybe weren't as obvious to me as I would have thought," he said.

Walton notes that LLMs aren't the only AI tools being used in agriculture. Deep learning systems, which use large datasets to recognize patterns and make decisions, are also increasingly popular. These models can be used for crop disease detection, weed control, and yield prediction. Researchers have also found ways to use AI to assess animal emotions, a practice some think will have positive impacts on global animal welfare.

However, he warned against thinking of AI as a silver bullet solution. "We've really seen this gung-ho attitude this year ... where [suddenly] everyone is rushing to embed generative models in everything, without talking about what the long game is."

There are also still big gaps in tech companies' commitments to climate change and the energy-intensive worlds they are creating, said Walton. "Technology is going to be an important part of how we address climate change. Techno-solutionism is not."

Hannah Macready is a freelance writer focused on technology and innovation. Her work has appeared in *The Globe & Mail* and the *Financial Post*, among others.

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# NEOLIBERAL MINORITY RULE

JAMES LIVINGSTON

In recent years, readers of *The Economist* and other reputable publications encountered a multitude of articles lamenting, celebrating or coldly analyzing the downfall of neoliberalism. One might think that the tide has turned and that social democratic alternatives to the gospel of “free markets” have gained enough intellectual and legislative support to become conventional wisdom.

Of course, the left seems to be winning what the Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci called the “war of position” - changing the perception of the world through the language of “common sense” changes political reality (at least where political possibilities are determined by the rule of the majority and the consensus of the ruling). In the US, Occupy Wall Street, Black Lives Matter, #MeToo, Bernie Sanders, the “big resignation,” the rehabilitation of industrial policy and the new unions have really changed the perception of Americans about the role of the market.

Similarly, during the covid-19 pandemic, the issue of inequality was answered in the form of income redistribution, and new ideas about employment and education fundamentally changed the basic views on these problems. And in the previous decade, the collapse of the health care system and labor market meant that “Health Care for All” and massive government spending on infrastructure or the “Green New Deal” seemed like obvious solutions to the vast majority of Americans.

At the same time, the Supreme Court’s attacks on reproductive rights, the sphere of government regulation, and citizenship issues

provoked an ideological backlash that revived “progressivism” and saved the Democratic Party’s position at the state level. Meanwhile, a Pew Research poll confirmed that, contrary to popular belief, young voters are not moving to the right as they enter the workforce and try to make a living: Unions and socialism have never been more popular, even in the storied 1930s.

Taken together, these tendencies, at least in the form in which we can “measure” them - via polls and polls - explain both the

openly reactionary social movements, largely driven by a desire to reclaim patriarchy and aware that they were fighting a rear-guard battle, used their access to state power to manipulate public opinion.

The most striking, and not the only, example is the example of Florida, in which Governor Ron Desantis used the state legislature to launch a frontal attack on the private and public sectors of cultural industries - Disneyland and education. In other states, the redrawing of electoral districts to suit either party and the ruthless passage of laws that put “conservative” policies beyond the reach of majorities, court decisions, or executive vetoes have been enough to guarantee minority dominance.

This reality undermines the claim that the founders of neoliberalism, Friedrich von Hayek and Milton Friedman, have always insisted on, that free markets are not only compatible with democracy, but are a necessary condition for it. In the end, whatever the party of Donald Trump is promoting in our time, free enterprise always comes first. “Social outcasts,” billionaire cowboys, and Wall Streeters from the Clinton, Obama, and Biden administrations agree on this, no matter how “politically correct” they are. The idea of free markets is alive and well.

If democracy has never been a concern of neoliberals, then we should not expect that the turbulent offshoots of this religion are afraid or ashamed to rule in the name of the minority. The architects of the neoliberal edifice have always referred to a traditional commitment to freedom and equality as a contradiction in terms. For them, freedom is freedom of contract, which presupposes the existence of free markets. Therefore, any attempt to regulate the market in the name of equal opportunities is a threat to freedom of contract and should be rejected or prohibited.

The use of state power to

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hysterical rhetoric on the right about the apparent arrival of socialism in the United States and the sober thinking of the magazine. *The Economist*, about the impending collapse of free markets. It seems that we are indeed on the threshold of radical change. But if the left won the war of position, the “war of maneuver” - the struggle for control over the state apparatus, which, according to Gramsci, should have been *consequence* positional war - has not gone to the dustbin of history any more than the idea of free markets. Instead, conservative and

regulate the most private spheres - for example, control over a woman's body or dictate religious beliefs - is not evidence of the "hypocrisy" of right-wing legislators armed with neoliberal arguments. Neither are their persistent attempts to limit equal access to voting or discourage union organizing. Because if the means to achieve equality threaten freedom of contract, they should not be tolerated, even if equality contributes to the creation of a more democratic state.

Neoliberals know that markets have never been free and

that democracy has always been in the hands of those who created and strengthened and governed them by making the determination and protection of private property the highest priority of the law. In the United States, property rights have always taken precedence over individual rights, despite the founders' attempts to balance them in the creation of the republic over the centuries. This is precisely why a strike can be prohibited by filing an appeal to a judge, but capital flight cannot: if the former threatens the

value of property, as defined by law, the latter does not.

Positional and maneuvering wars have shown that the question is not how, but whether free markets can serve democracy. While the Democratic Party establishment, still enslaved to its own neoliberal narratives, is desperate to avoid the issue, Trump's Republican Party appears to care about neither. The others probably don't care.

James Livingston teaches history at Rutgers.

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# DID THE INTEREST RATE HIKE PAUSE HELP?

HAROLD ZIMMERMAN

**I**n a word, yes! Although the Treasury Department sets its yield rates at an amount INDEPENDENT of the interest rates set by the Fed, if the latter DID raise interest rates by what it was already considering—25 basis points (a 0.25 percent interest rate hike)—such a move, per expert opinion, would or eventually have an upward-trend-pressure effect upon what yields the Treasury would then have to OFFER and PAY on their bonds being auctioned...which would amount to billions more.

With Congress finally raising the debt ceiling last month, allowing the Treasury to pay its U.S. Government debts and obligations already due and those becoming due for the next two years (until January 2025), the Treasury will be auctioning a record one trillion dollars in Treasury notes, T-bills, bonds, and reverse repos.

If the Fed HAD RAISED interest rates even by the 0.25 percent it had been contemplating, experienced buyers would have immediately known that at some point, probably at the Treasury's next auction, the return yield on its bond issues would more than likely be 25 basis points higher and these buyers would have most certainly WAITED or bought Treasuries with very short duration, e.g., 4-week T-bills. That would mean for a trillion dollars in bonds being offered for sale, it would potentially, at 0.25 percent more in yield, equate to the Treasury having to pay out an extra \$2.5 billion per annum (assuming the full trillion in bonds was auctioned off). And a 0.25 percent increase over a 10-year period could amount to some \$25

billion dollars more in extra debt-servicing costs.

Surprisingly, the Fed had been totally silent about the details of this pending Treasury auction, with Fed chairman Powell only stating with regard to the decision to pause an interest rate hike that it would "skip" any hikes for the time being in consideration of recent data showing lower inflation and higher unemployment going from 3.4 percent last month to 3.7 percent (though there was an actual increase in hirings adding some new 339,000

**When you're talking about a 2, 3, or 5-year or even a 10-year business or consumer loan, 0.25 points can add up. But with a 30-year mortgage, that percentage of increase REALLY adds up!**

— Harold Zimmerman

jobs).

It seemed that the Fed did NOT raise interest rates ON PURPOSE specifically because of this up-and-coming Treasury bond auction (!) which would have been the smart thing to do because if it had raised interest rates, experienced bond purchasers (as mentioned) almost certainly would have waited or bought, say, 4-week T-bills—gambling that for the next auction, the Treasury would have to bump up its bond offerings by 0.25 percent as well. And if it didn't, what would these potential bond buyers lose?

The answer is simple: absolutely nothing. Unless there's a specific reason for any buyers to purchase bonds immediately, they

wouldn't lose anything because the Treasury certainly wouldn't have lowered any bond yields (without a bump up of 0.25 percent by the Fed). Another thing to consider is real estate mortgages, both residential and commercial. Commentators and guests on Bloomberg, CNBC, and Fox Business News ALL say interest rates are already HIGH enough! This is another reason why the Fed may have paused on interest rate hikes. When you're talking about a 2, 3, or 5-year or even a 10-year business or consumer loan, 0.25 points can add up. But with a 30-year mortgage, that percentage of increase REALLY adds up!

Also, from a common-sense point of view, wouldn't it be better to wait to see how many Treasuries were sold and if more sales were needed before the Treasury considers increasing yield rates to make their bonds more attractive to purchase? Then the Fed could do an interest rate hike as well after the Treasury raised its yield rates! However, the current view is that money market funds will readily gobble-up these bonds with their present yield rates.

Something else to consider is that Treasury bond sales have the same effect as Quantitative Tightening—an action by the Fed that pulls money out of the business-consumer sector, thereby curbing the prime cause of inflation...“too many dollars chasing too few goods. In addition, the bank runs and failures that occurred last month have caused banks to adopt more conservative lending policies to maintain their cash reserves which have the same effect as the Fed's Quantitative Tightening by preventing the excessive entrance into the economy of too many dollars to chase those too few goods. As a result, both Treasury bond sales and the banks cutting back on lending DIMINSHES the need for the Fed to raise interest rates to curb inflation as both strategies mean LESS money in the business-consumer sector.



In closing, House Speaker Kevin McCarthy, under pressure from the (Trumpian) Freedom Caucus, reneged on the deal he made with Biden on June 3 to avert a government shutdown, but the matter was re-resolved within a week on Saturday, September 30 with a shutdown being successfully averted.


This was essentially a repeat

of the prior Debt Ceiling Crisis in May-June, which was resolved at the very last minute with the Fed pausing interest rates. In the present situation, experts again speculated that the Fed will do one more ¼ percent (25 basis point) rate increase at its next meeting in November.

And on the morning of Monday, October 2, two days after the most recent agreement was


achieved, the Treasury opened their 10-year bond with a 4.701 percent yield, the highest since 2007, only to be followed by an even higher yield the next day at 4.751 percent!

Harold Zimmerman is an attorney and former auto mechanic/repair shop owner. Currently, he devotes himself to writing about the U.S. economy and how it can best achieve "that perfect balance needed to provide maximum benefit to all."



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## TAX AVOIDANCE

SAM PIZZIGATI

Jeff Bezos is moving. The second-richest human being on the face of the Earth — with a net worth of some \$166 billion — has been calling the Pacific Northwest home for quite some time. But he's just announced on Instagram that he's decamping Seattle and making Florida his new home sweet home.

The move, says Bezos, will bring him closer to his parents who now live in Miami.

"My parents," adds the mega-billionaire, "have always been my biggest supporters."

But the move doesn't just bring Bezos closer to ma and pa. Bezos has had plenty of *financial* motivation to make the move — ever since Washington state started yanking out its low-tax welcome mat for the richest among us.

Those rich have flourished for years under a Washington state constitution that makes an income tax a no-no. Earlier this year, in March, that gravy train ended when the state's supreme court justices okayed an end-run around this no-no. They gave their blessing to a 7 percent "excise" tax on capital gains from the sale of stocks, bonds, and other assets "in excess of \$250,000 in a calendar year."

Lawmakers in Washington now stand poised to take an even stiffer step against grand fortune. They're contemplating a state wealth tax, a levy that would cost Bezos — if he chose to remain a Washington state resident — "about 45 percent of the more than \$3 billion a year" the new tax figures to raise, a Tax Foundation analyst estimates.

Florida, by contrast, has no levy on grand wealth in the works and nothing in any way close to a state income tax on the books. And Bezos already owns a place of his own in Florida, a mansion on an artificial Miami island widely known as the

"Billionaires Bunker." He spent \$68 million for that manse earlier this year and then, this past October, spent another \$79 million to pick up the place next-door.

Could life possibly get any sweeter for Jeff Bezos and his billions? Not likely. In fact, those billions are now facing their first significant squeeze.

A worldwide squeeze. Last month, lawmakers and activists from over 30 nations gathered together in the UK, at the Mechanics' Institute in Manchester, the historic birthplace of

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— Sam Pizzigati

the British national labor movement. This first-ever global "Summit to Make Amazon Pay" set about developing policy solutions — at the municipal, national, and international levels — for confronting Amazon's corporate abuses on everything from the environment and worker rights to tax justice.

That confrontation will intensify later this month. On November 24, the international retail industry's "Black Friday" super-sale day, activists worldwide will be staging strikes and protests demanding that Amazon start paying for the damage this corporate giant is doing to worker families, their communities, and our shared planet.

"No company" on that planet

today, U.S. senator Bernie Sanders told the Manchester summit, stands as "a better poster child" for "corporate greed and arrogance" than Amazon. Sanders made that observation about the same time Amazon was announcing that its quarterly profits had nearly tripled over the past year, a surge that just happened to come while Amazon was laying off some 27,000 workers.

The upcoming international November 24 Black Friday protests will be spotlighting everything from the glaring need for higher wages at Amazon warehouses to the environmental impact of Amazon's ubiquitous delivery trucks.

In Spain, the city of Barcelona earlier this year imposed a new annual tax on the glut of e-commerce delivery vans congesting local streets. In Paris, deputy mayor David Belliard has blasted Amazon for "for making billions by using public space." Proceeds from the new tax on e-commerce deliveries he's suggesting could fund significant improvements in the city's public transportation.

We all find ourselves today, Spain's minister of labor Yolanda Díaz noted in her keynote address to last month's landmark Summit to Make Amazon Pay, in "a conflict between profits and wages, a conflict over time and its free use, between the greed of a few and the possibility of a dignified life for the majority."

The issues these conflicts raise, Díaz added, extend "much further" than Amazon, a reality that demands we "explore new ways to fund an ecologically democratic and fair plan" for moving forward, a plan that has Amazon and other corporate giants contributing "genuinely" to the common good.

That plan could, for instance, include the global climate tax on the world's wealthiest the French economists Thomas Piketty and Lucas Chancel proposed earlier this year. Their World Inequality Lab proposal

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would levy a progressive tax of up to 3 percent a year on the world's richest 0.001 percent, those deep pockets with fortunes worth at least \$100 million.

To avoid a tax like that, Jeff Bezos would have to do more than move to Florida. He'd have to move to Mars.

Sam Pizzigati, an Institute for Policy Studies associate fellow, co-edits Inequality.org. His latest book is, *The Case for a Maximum Wage*.

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# Save Sacred Grounds



**Jacob Eisenberg** started this petition

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# THE POVERTY OF EDUCATION

JACOB GOODWIN

**T**eacher shortages have been reported in all fifty states, and 86 percent of public schools are hard pressed to fill vacant teaching positions. Low pay is often cited as a cause of the shortages. Let's put that in context.

On average, teacher pay in the United States is nearly 25 percent less than what other college graduates receive, according to a study by the Economic Policy Institute (EPI). If you are a teacher in New Hampshire, as I am, your paycheck is nearly 30 percent less than other college graduates. Let that sink in.

People who go into teaching are taking on the same level of debt as other college graduates (or more), yet they are receiving nowhere near the same financial benefits. The typical U.S. graduate with a four year degree walked away with their diploma and \$29,417 in debt in 2022. In my home state, the average debt for a bachelor's degree topped the nation at an astounding \$39,928.

Undoubtedly, this economic reality of the teaching profession is having an impact on teacher prep programs, which are seeing a drastic reduction in the number of enrollees. This in turn means fewer new teachers entering the profession. When the cost of a degree is paired with the "teacher pay penalty," to use EPI's terminology, the math is undeniable: politicians are shortchanging teachers.

Teachers are being paid roughly seventy cents on the dollar for their labor. If most other jobs had this kind of wage disparity during a labor shortage, employers would increase wages to attract qualified professionals into the field. Instead, what we're seeing are rightwing activists

using fear tactics, book bans targeting Black and LGBTQ+ histories, and direct threats to the livelihood of teachers in an attempt to erode confidence in public schools. These attacks have a high price: the financial future of educators.

In my more than a decade of working in public schools, I can attest to the fact that teachers are selfless. But we can only carry so much for so long. We're only human. It's time we exclaim with a collective and unified voice: Pay teachers more! Local, state, and federal governments must

more fair when it comes to educator pay. In 1996, the difference between teacher wages and other college grads was about \$300 per week. Today, that difference is over twice that and rising.

The shrinking purchasing power of educators coincides with classroom jobs being more difficult and demanding. Every educator strives to create classrooms of compassionate care, but the day to day experiences and the broader data show that we are facing a systemic crisis when it comes to the mental health of young people.

Widespread anxiety and hopelessness among students must be taken seriously and responded to with increased investment in public schools. We cannot continue to ask the schools that serve those that have the greatest needs to do so with minimal resources.

In the richest country in the world, we can do so much better. What will it take to reverse the trend?

We need our unions to be reinvigorated by the transformative energy and passion of classroom educators. From early educators who teach the ABCs to the high school teachers who teach calculus, we need everyone to pull together to defend our public schools, the pillar of our democratic way of life.

We must draw inspiration from our brothers and sisters across the country and find common cause with those battling inequity in other industries. We can see the gains that are rapidly being made by teachers in Los Angeles and by workers in other sectors, such as with the Writers Guild of America, the United Auto Workers, and the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, whose successful strikes resulted in significant pay increases and other concessions.

UAW President Shawn Fain and President Joe Biden agree that "record profits should mean record contracts." The present economic conditions favor workers more than any time in the past two decades. States with significant budget

**Every student  
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and every teacher  
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fair pay  
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dedication.**

— Jacob Goodwin

invest in public educators now. We cannot afford to balance society's books on the backs of teachers.

Fair pay and freedom to read might sound "far out" after a year that saw a record number of books banned and a record income gap between teachers and other professions.

The truth is every community in America needs to come together for our schools, our profession, and our communities now more than ever. Every student deserves a dedicated teacher, and every teacher deserves fair pay for their dedication.

Educators have long been asked to carry the burden of underfunding. But the data shows that in the not-so-distant past, things were a bit



surpluses must make significant investments in teachers and public schools. This includes states like Texas, where the \$32.7 billion surplus could be used to attract and retain professional educators, a step toward redressing chronically low pay.

Public support for labor continues to be at a generational high. Seventy-five percent of the public believes that teachers are underpaid. And a majority of the public hold a favorable view of their own local

educators. Now is our time. Let's reverse the trends of widening wealth gaps.

Economic justice for educators means providing financial support to the schools that serve *all* students. Raises for public school educators must reflect our professional status and our contributions to community life. Educators must earn wages that match those with similar educational backgrounds and experience in other fields.

This kind of investment is something that will take political will, and that must be cultivated in each community with the people who know those communities the best—educators, parents, and people who see how our way of life is intricately intertwined with quality public schools.

Jacob Goodwin is a sixth grade social studies teacher in New Hampshire.



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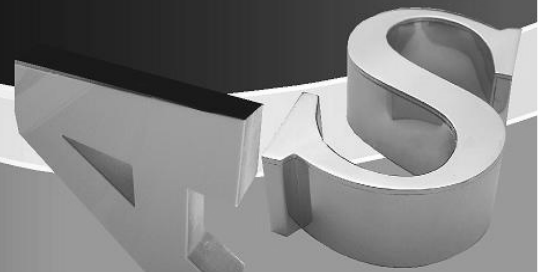


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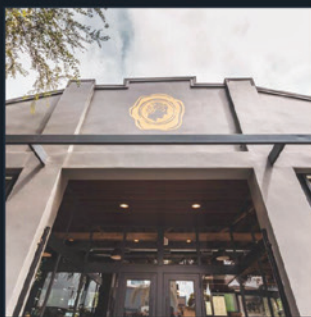
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