THE WALRUS

CANADA'S CONVERSATION

NOVEMBER 2024 • THEWALRUS.CA

IF HE WINS

How Poilievre will change Canada

Y WE TRAVEL

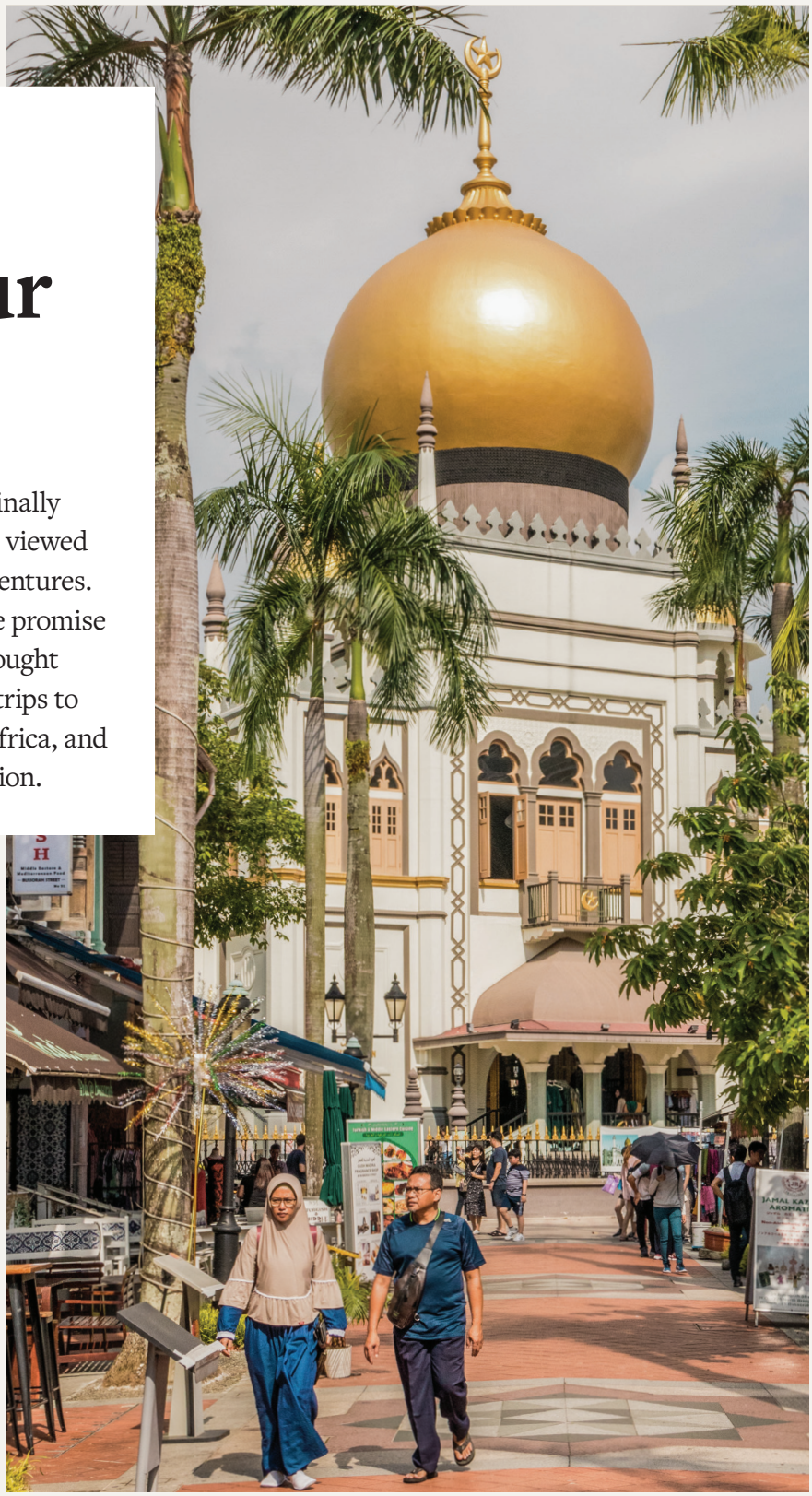
Why do we travel? For too long, we took this question for granted. Travel can make our large world small, and we forgot what a gift this is until it all got taken away from us not too long ago. Today, we're returning to the skies in record numbers, but with a more appreciative mindset. It's a perfect moment to take stock. The contributors to the "Y WE TRAVEL" series are accomplished writers from all walks of life. Over the length of this series, they will explore the diversity of purpose in our journeys—not just where or how, but why. On behalf of Toronto Pearson Airport and the Canadian Airports Council, please enjoy.

PART THREE

We travel to relive our past lives

By Kamal Al-Solaylee

In my thirties and forties, when I finally had the financial means to travel, I viewed every flight as a licence to new adventures. The thrill of the unfamiliar and the promise of discovery occupied my every thought and drained my last cent. My first trips to East Asia, South America, North Africa, and Australia followed in quick succession.



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My Canadian passport, obtained at thirty-six, replaced my Yemeni document—historically one of the least-welcome travel documents in the world and currently ranked 106th among global passports by Guide Passport Index. It turned crossing borders from an existential dilemma into a mere formality. It's a privilege and one of life's biggest lotteries to have a border agent stamp your passport nonchalantly.

As my fifties draw to an end, my relationship with travel is changing. I still love to travel, but my itineraries keep getting smaller and are now guided by a desire not to explore the new but to relive the old. Gone is the young man's curiosity, replaced by the hauntings of age. I travel to retrace my steps and to get as close as possible to the homelands I left behind nearly four decades ago—Yemen, Egypt—and the cities where I was swept off my feet romantically or came of age as a gay man—London, Hong Kong, Toronto. I travel to commune with the

past and its cast of characters, from siblings to lovers, who once dominated or altered the course of my life. Every plane is a flying time machine, dials firmly set to the past.

My desire to reverse course, to return to the point of departure, became more acute during and immediately after the Covid-19 pandemic. Like billions around the world, my physical space had shrunk. I ached to travel but was consumed by the notion of going home.

In the months leading up to the pandemic, I had been field reporting a nonfiction book called *Return*, and I spent the next two years of social distancing writing it. Every interview subject, regardless of age, had booked that one-way ticket to the homeland: as if they intended to write, produce, and star in what they assumed would be the final act of their lives on their own terms. Their journey home gave them the creative control denied by years of diasporic living.

But I also wanted something different from travel during the pandemic: a reassurance that the past would be waiting for me in the immediate future. I wished to preserve the certainties of the time before, complete with everything that made it mundane and predictable.

As the travel restrictions slowly lifted, the connection between my obsession with the past and my need to escape the present grew stronger, becoming almost uncontrollable. In 2021, I moved from Toronto, my home for twenty-five years, to Vancouver to take up a senior academic position at the University of British Columbia. I was barely a few weeks into my new life when I realized I wasn't ready for such a big change. This city, stunning as it can be, could never be my home. Everything felt new, alien, and isolating at a time when my soul sought comfort and healing. I had just lost two sisters to Covid-19 the summer before, and grief had become an unexpected life companion.

Travel saved my life. I returned to Toronto as often as I could, staying in the guest suite of my former apartment building to restore the ties I had cut. I revisited every street where I had lived or experienced something memorable: a lovers' quarrel or embrace, a friend's cruelty or generosity. Every return visit had a spiritual element akin to pilgrimage. I even retained the services of my eye doctor and dentist of more than two decades. Moving my medical files to Vancouver would have been a break from home and given me one less reason to travel. The Toronto I dedicated my first book to lives more in my nostalgia-soaked memories than in reality. But with every trip back, I unearth a piece of its glorious past. I travel to indulge my inner archeologist.

However, a travel destination need not have played a decisive chapter in my life for me to want to return. My last international trip before the pandemic was to a literary festival in Singapore. I was there for six days, five and a half of which were spent in the fog of severe jet lag. Yet I fell in love with the city-state. I promised myself I would return and spend more (waking) time there, but the pandemic disrupted those plans. When I was invited back to the same festival in 2022, I knew immediately that I had to go and relive that moment.

> "Every return visit had a spiritual element akin to pilgrimage."

Something about Singapore felt like a long-lost homeland. Yemenis from the province of Hadramut, my mother's birthplace, have been migrating to it for nearly two centuries. There are still traces of their history here and there: in the gentrified, Insta-ready Arab Street or Aljunied Road (and metro stop), named after a wealthy nineteenth-century merchant from Yemen. I have returned twice more since. The year-round tropical weather is the closest I'll come to experiencing, as the old jazz standard goes, "a summer with a thousand Julys": my idea of heaven, of home.

Singapore is the new familiar, the comfort zone that allows me to pursue a place with a feeling of safety and belonging I once knew. As the world becomes more unpredictable and geopolitical points of tension erupt everywhere, I'll keep travelling in time and through space, crossing continents and oceans, just to feel at home again. •

Kamal Al-Solaylee is the author of three nonfiction books: *Intolerable: A Memoir of Extremes* (2012), *Brown: What Being Brown in the World Today Means (to Everyone)* (2016), and *Return: Why We Go Back to Where We Come From* (2021). He holds a PhD in English and is the director of the School of Journalism, Writing, and Media at the University of British Columbia.

Where We Travel

In 2006, I arrived to work in Poland, a country that has had a profound impact on me both professionally and personally. As I left the airport, I remember feeling struck by how fortunate I was to be there. Poland had spent years in the Soviet bloc and had only recently become accessible since the end of the Cold War in the 1990s. My father, for example, would never have had such access to the country and its rich culture. But relations between countries change and new links are forged. That's the beauty of travel!

Today, my work takes me all over the world, from Geneva and London to Corsica and Phoenix. These trips, and my exchanges with colleagues in sustainable development, are opening up new horizons for me yet again. The innovative practices and knowledge they share have undoubtedly helped Montréal-Trudeau International Airport (YUL) and International Aerocity of Mirabel (YMX) airports become more sustainable as we implement Flight Plan 2028, a major infrastructure development program designed to accommodate our phenomenal growth in passenger traffic.

Martin Massé,
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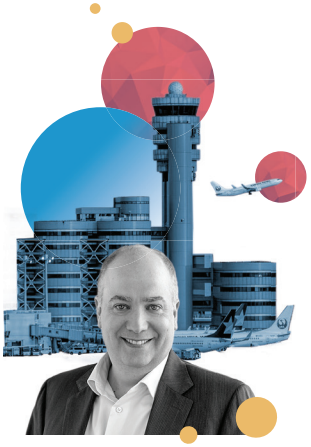

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ON THE COVER
Photo illustration by Brian Morgan

Brian Morgan is a designer-at-large at The Walrus. He is also the co-art director of *Maisonneuve* magazine.

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411 Richmond Street East, Suite B15,
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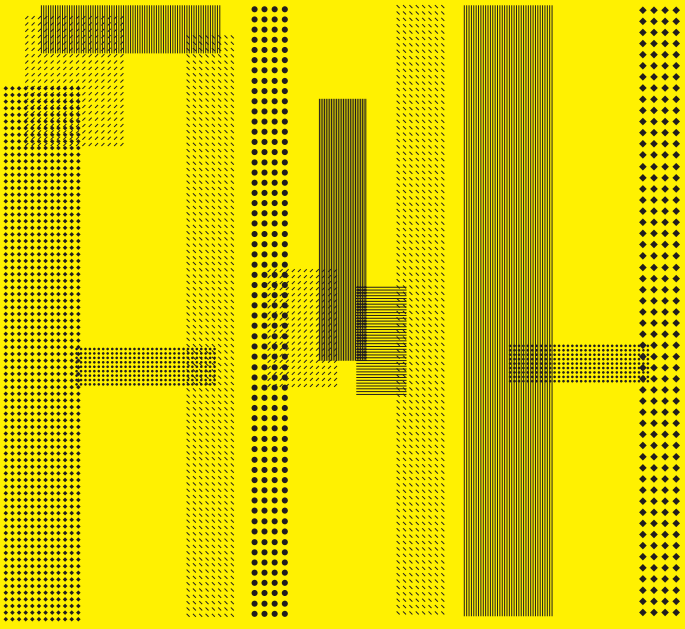

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THE WALRUS | CANADA'S CONVERSATION

Editor's Letter

CHATGPT LAUNCHED two years ago this month, becoming the fastest-growing app in history.

Right from the start, the chatbot's fluency when conversing with users was game changing. And one game it changed, maybe irreversibly, was the way we look for information online.

No surprise why. Underpinning ChatGPT is an AI system able to ingest billions of words about a topic from every precinct of the internet and spit out bite-sized summaries in straightforward English. Type "What are Pierre Poilievre's policies?" into a search engine, and you'll get pages and pages of links to sift through. Type the same question into ChatGPT, and you might get several paragraphs on how, if he becomes prime minister, he plans to tackle everything from the size of government to the cost of living. If you have a query, wouldn't you rather get a human-sounding reply instead of a bunch of websites?

ChatGPT is not technically a search engine—it doesn't cite any sources, for one. But the summarization tool it has popularized is already being incorporated into the search functions of companies like Meta, Microsoft, and, of course, Google (whose AI Overviews, which provides thumbnail reports at the top of search results, is being rolled out across the United States). Such tools will be a boon for people seeking quick answers but a bane for publishers. Disincentivizing curious users from clicking through to a news site for additional information—a trend called zero-click search—sends less traffic to media outlets that invest in the costly reporting that AI machines are scraping, strip-mining, and synthesizing. According to a recent study by Datos and SparkToro, more than half of all Google searches in the United States and the European Union are already zero click.

But AI-powered search won't simply steal journalism; as it gets better at generating convincing and comprehensive responses, it could also end up eroding the attention that readers need to properly consume the original work. More specifically, the convenience of powerful searchbots might discourage users from vetting sources themselves. Worse: it might make reading critically seem too tedious to justify doing at all.

This makes it urgent that organizations like The Walrus defend what they do. A search engine won't break a story about the years of horrific abuse students suffered at a military school, or spend months interviewing a visionary curator to learn about her controversial departure from a major Canadian art gallery, or pin down the harmful stereotypes that inform the cover designs of books by racialized authors. And it certainly won't ask twelve of Canada's savviest writers to examine various scenarios and implications of a possible Poilievre administration. (All of which we do in this issue.)

What a search engine *can* do, and increasingly will, is drain all colour from the prose driving the enterprise of those specific stories and excrete what remains in bullet points. The stagecraft of storytelling can't be replaced by reeled-off facts and stats. That's because the "return" on a stylish, reportorial, narrative-driven article is pleasure. Pleasure in a writer's skill at laying out a series of anecdotes, or translating complex research into an accessible vignette, or simply describing a room. Pleasure in a well-chosen verb, a deft turn of phrase, or the bravado of a sentence. Pleasure in voice.

My favourite definition of long-form journalism comes from the critic Kenneth Burke: to "use all there is to use." Using everything they know and everything they've learned, good magazine writers operate at a level of detail few other formats can afford them. For their art to survive, we have to resist the idea of a future in which we learn about one another through an AI curator that reduces and depletes language to fit the minimum requirements of a query. And that resistance starts with reading The Walrus.

—Carmine Starnino

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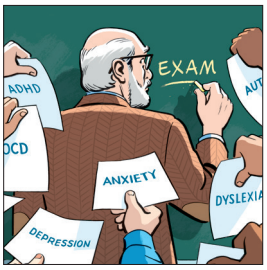
Letters



ONE SIZE FITS NONE

I was struck by Simon Lewsen's article "The Accommodation Problem" (September/October). Are universities enabling students to avoid the essential challenges of learning, or are universities finally adapting to inclusive learning? As a high school teacher, I see this struggle as being the result of students carrying high school accommodations into higher education. A number of high schools in Canada follow Universal Design for Learning principles. But since provinces—Ontario, most recently—started "de-streaming" courses, eliminating the distinction between applied and academic streams, there's a greater diversity of abilities and learning styles in our overstuffed classrooms. We don't always have the time, training, or resources to tailor individual accommodations to every single student on every single assessment, so we look for universal strategies, like removing deadlines altogether or creating rubrics that don't penalize spelling and grammar errors. Given this reality in high schools, it's no wonder students are arriving at universities expecting extensive accommodations.

Anonymous
Toronto, ON

I've been a post-secondary educator for eight years. As a result, I have some sympathy for heavily underpaid sessional instructors, even when their classroom policies present hardships for disabled or neurodivergent students—a situation Lewsen describes in his cover story on university accommodations. What I object to is not so much the article itself but its framing on the cover, which depicts students presenting their diagnoses to an overwhelmed professor. University is intense all around, but if we wanted to find the most "coddled" students, we'd look for those who've had a disproportionately easy time. That's not the disabled or neurodivergent students. There are currently too many reasons why disabled people feel they have no choice but to drop out. As usual, accusations of academic "coddling" help no one, solve no problems, and scorn the already marginalized.

Marisa Brook
Halifax, NS

IT'S JUST A PHAGE

As an undergraduate student at Queen's University with a particular research interest in antibiotic resistance, I found Monica Kidd's evaluation of antibiotic resistance and bacteriophage therapy in "The Resistance Is Coming" (May) to be insightful and well communicated. Given the presentation of bacteriophages as a potential solution to widespread antibiotic resistance, I am curious as to the author's thoughts on bacterial resistance to the phages themselves. I've read that bacteria can develop mutations that stop phages from entering their cells. If this happens in a bacterial population treated with phages, the bacteria could become resistant, similar to how they develop resistance to antibiotics. As promising as phage therapy seems to be for treating drug-resistant bacteria, I wonder if, like antibiotics, it is just a temporary fix.

Ronin Offman
Richmond Hill, ON

TUSK, TUSK

The article "Dream Machines" (July/August) referred to a walk-through of a Microsoft data centre. In fact, the walk-through was of the Redmond silicon lab. The Walrus regrets the error.

"The time has come," The Walrus said, "to talk of many things." Send us a letter, email (letters@thewalrus.ca), or tag us on social media. Comments may be published in any medium and edited for length, clarity, and accuracy.

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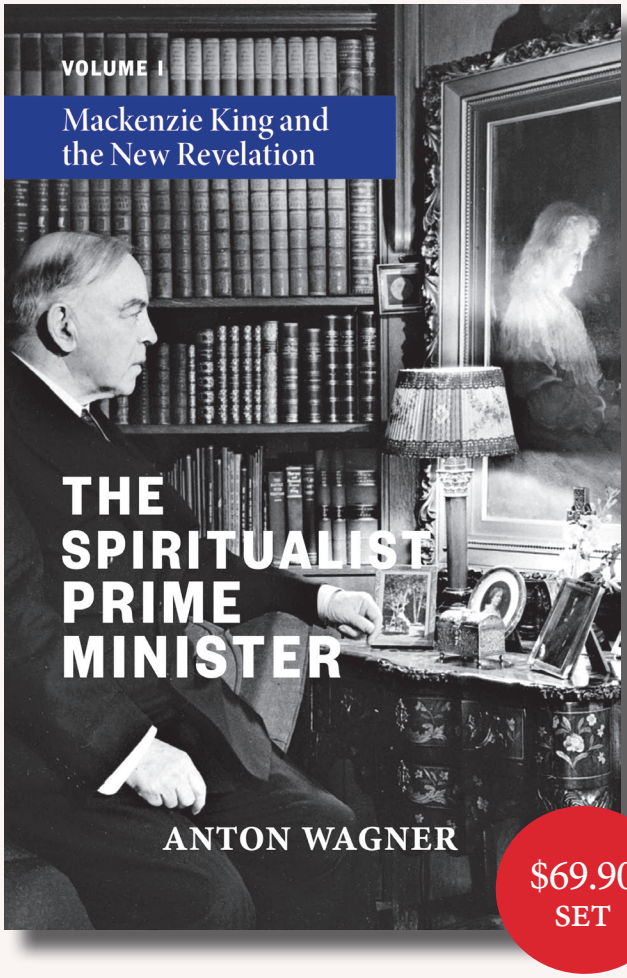

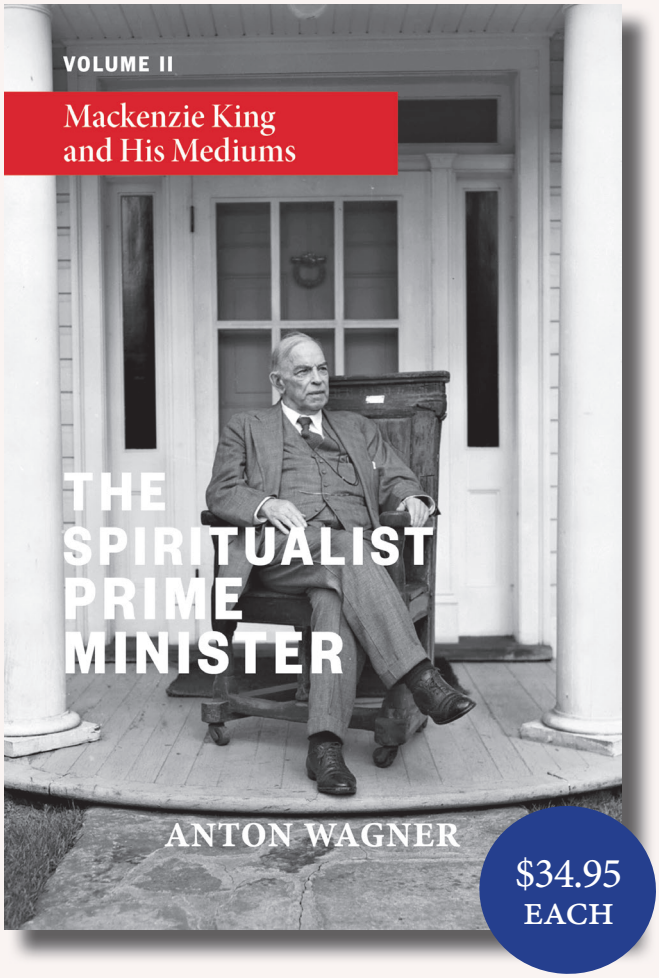

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TECHNOLOGY

Legal Fictions

Burnout and heavy workloads are driving lawyers to AI — and into trouble

BY JULIE SOBOWALE
PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY BRIAN MORGAN

On December 6, 2023, Chong Ke, a Vancouver lawyer at Westside Family Law, filed a notice of application in court for a client who was asking for more access to his kids. When lawyers representing the mother went through the application to put together a response, they noticed two of the cases being cited couldn't be found. That's because they didn't exist. Ke had used ChatGPT, the chatbot developed by OpenAI, to do legal research and didn't realize the cases it provided were entirely made up.

Law can be a slog, so it's no surprise lawyers are eager to leverage AI's ability to sift through databases of legal texts, case laws, statutes, and regulations. A tool able to summarize findings and highlight relevant precedents can save significant time and effort. But ChatGPT isn't a search engine; it's a large language model. It trains on data and generates human-like responses based on what it learns. That creative streak gives the chatbot a dark side: a tendency to serve up data that's false or inaccurate, a phenomenon called hallucination.

Ke's was the first reported example of a Canadian lawyer submitting false information as a result of generative AI. Incidents have also emerged in Massachusetts and Colorado. Last year, according to legal documents, New York lawyers Steven A. Schwartz and Peter LoDuca were prepping for a personal injury case against an airline. When Schwartz couldn't find the court cases he needed using Fastcase, a well-known US legal database, he turned to ChatGPT instead. His brief contained six fabricated citations including cases with wrong dates or names. LoDuca, who was supposed to be supervising Schwartz's work, said it "never crossed my mind" he couldn't trust the technology.

"As soon as ChatGPT was making headlines, we started seeing these stories about fake cases cited in court," says Amy Salyzyn, an associate professor at the University of Ottawa law school who specializes in legal ethics and technology. "These stories are like car crashes. You can't look away."

As more and more lawyers integrate AI chatbots into their practice, Salyzyn worries about contracts and wills being created that may not get a second look. "It seems inevitable that one day we're going to have an error sneak into a legal decision," says Salyzyn.

If generative AI is prone to making mistakes, why would lawyers still use it? Blame long work hours and heavy caseloads. A 2022 national study from the Federation of Law Societies of Canada about the mental health of lawyers revealed more than half of all lawyers experience burnout and nearly 60 percent of legal professionals are under psychological distress. "It's tempting to push the easy button when you're facing a deadline," says Salyzyn.

AI doesn't change the reality that lawyers are still responsible for, well, being lawyers. Lawyers who use AI should "comply with the standards of conduct expected of a competent lawyer," says Christine Tam, director of communications and engagement at the Law Society of British Columbia. That means checking that everything filed in court is accurate. Professional embarrassment

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might be the motivation some lawyers need to get their act together. Ke is currently under investigation by the Law Society of British Columbia for her conduct. Schwartz and LoDuca were sanctioned and fined $5,000 (US). Colorado lawyer Zachariah Crabill received a ninety-day suspension after he used ChatGPT to do legal research.

Lawyers are already required to take professional development courses about new technology. But AI is so transformative that using it responsibly requires hands-on experience. Law schools are beginning to develop courses to give students exposure to chatbots like ChatGPT, and AI legal clinics are popping up at Queen's University and the University of New Brunswick.

Law societies are taking this seriously too. In Ontario, British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba, they have set out specific guidelines. Most of the guidelines focus, unsurprisingly, on harms like hallucinations. But they also require lawyers to ask clients for consent when employing the technology. The Law Society of Ontario has a checklist on how to choose an AI provider and how to audit your AI practices on an annual basis. Alberta takes a different approach, focusing on the positives, such as how to use AI to draft letters to clients or creating questions to ask a witness at trial.

Len Polsky, author of the AI playbook for the Law Society of Alberta, is bullish on the technology. He argues generative AI can excel at tasks beyond legal research, such as creating outlines for documents, coming up with trial questions, and proofreading legal briefs. "Generative AI can help lawyers provide better legal services to the public as long as they use it in a safe, reliable way," he says. "We're not saying don't use AI. We want people [to] use it and be smart."

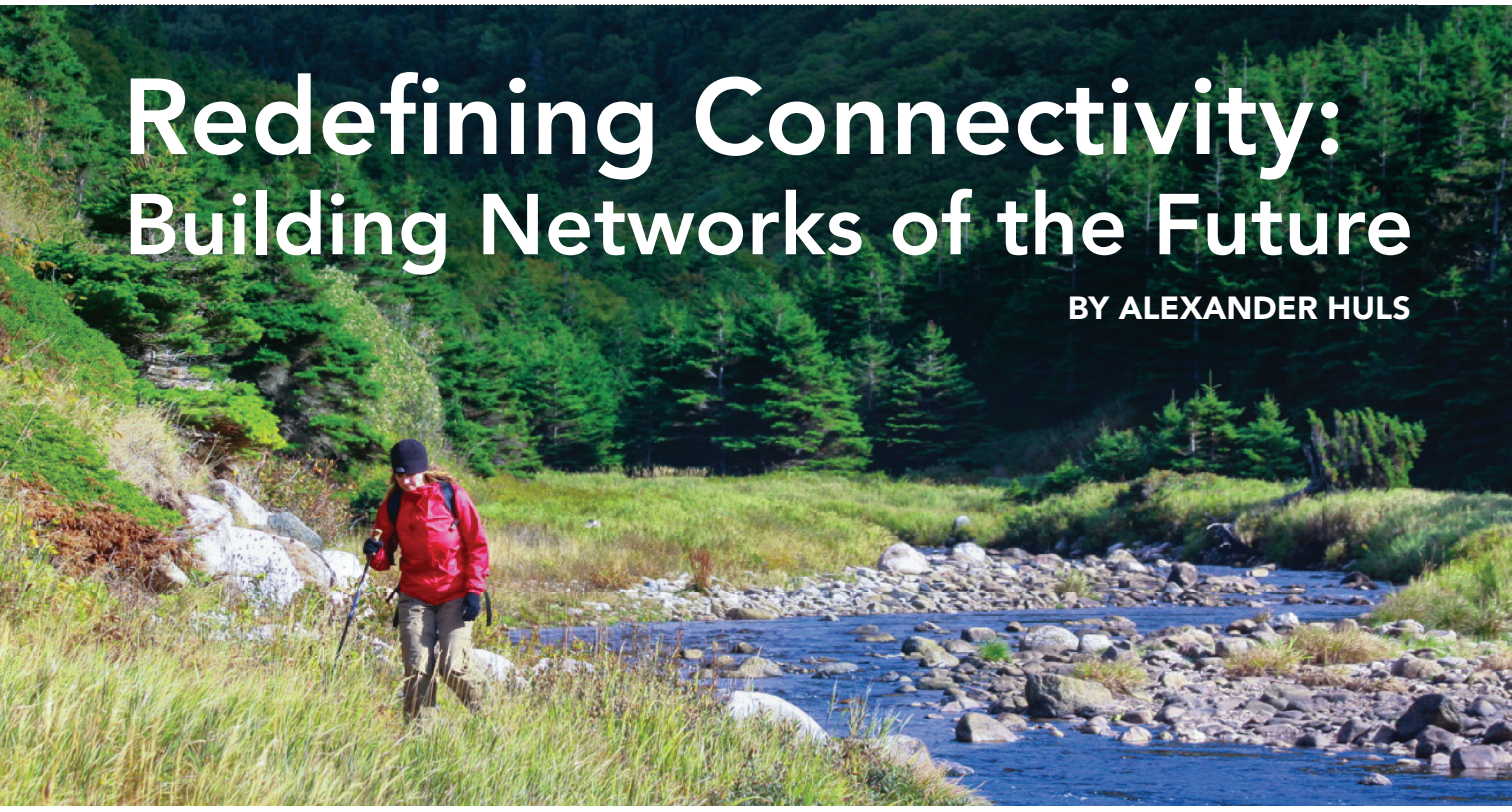
Lawyers aren't alone in struggling with the technology. Generative AI is an attractive option for people who need legal help but can't afford attorneys. The problem, again, is there's no guarantee users are getting accurate information. This can be a danger for people who opt to represent themselves. In the UK, Felicity Harber used nine ChatGPT-fabricated citations in her appeal against paying property taxes. When Jonathan Karlen appealed a decision that he pay damages against a former employee, the Eastern District Court of Appeals in Missouri found he had invented the citations he relied on in his defence. Only two of the twenty-four cases he used were real. Karlen explained he had hired an online consultant and didn't know the consultant would use "artificial intelligence hallucinations" in creating the brief.

Canlii, a popular free legal research website in Canada, has seen the trend toward the public using AI and started rolling out its own generative tool last year. The company is looking to get funding from provincial and territorial law foundations to create summaries of case law and legislation for each location, and so far, they have been able to get data for Saskatchewan, Alberta, Manitoba, Prince Edward Island, and the Yukon.

The software—developed by Lexum, a subsidiary of Canlii—isn't perfect. Users have caught errors, such as incorrect labelling or summaries missing the correct legal analysis. Pierre-Paul Lemyre, vice president of business development at Lexum, says the tool has a 5 percent failure rate because some cases are too long or complex to summarize. But he expects the software to improve and wants his team to hear about the errors in order to fine-tune the product. "We're doing this work because we want people to be able to understand the law better," he says. "People need access to legal information that's convenient and fast."

For the moment, the convenience and speed have to be matched by careful implementation and oversight. We need collective action from the courts, government, and regulators on educating lawyers and the public on how to use AI and deciding how AI can be used to serve people and protect them. Otherwise, expect to see another headline of lawyers behaving badly.

JULIE SOBOWALE is a freelance journalist and lawyer writing about legal affairs.



Redefining Connectivity: Building Networks of the Future

BY ALEXANDER HULS

In today's digital world, networks are about more than just connections between devices. They connect people with their communities, businesses with their customers, and first responders with those needing help.

When Sara Spangelo was growing up in Manitoba, she remembers power outages, especially during the winter months, and spring floods. Workers would drive across vast stretches of the province to get to the root of the problem, often with limited network service along the way. Today, in her capacity—working in partnership with Rogers Communications—as a senior director of satellite engineering at SpaceX, she imagines how utilities and personnel can use direct-to-cell internet-of-things (IoT), messaging, and future voice technologies to better monitor and respond to such emergencies.

Rogers is partnering with SpaceX and Lynk Global to bring satellite-to-mobile connectivity to Canada. The company's national wireless network reaches nearly all Canadians with coverage, but because of the country's size, its network covers 12 percent of Canada's landmass. That's a lot of territory to cover, and the company's investment in satellite-to-mobile technology will ensure Canadians stay connected in areas beyond the limits of traditional wireless networks.

Satellite-to-mobile operates similarly to cellphone towers by allowing standard mobile phones to maintain a connection to wireless networks through satellites in low orbit around Earth. What that means is anyone with a smartphone can call, text, or access data no matter their location.

Spangelo also stresses the technology's impact on us as a community.

"It's about peace of mind," she says. "Whether you are in the middle of a Great Lake, hiking on a mountain, or just in a super remote place between the cities, you'll be able to connect."

For Tony Staffieri, president and CEO of Rogers, bringing satellite-to-mobile connectivity to the most remote parts of Canada is part of how Rogers is shaping the future.

"Innovation has always been a part of our DNA," says Staffieri. "We are always thinking about 'what's next, what is it that the customer is likely looking for, and how do we bring the best technology and innovation to Canada and to Canadians?"

Spangelo recalls a time from her childhood when she'd take long drives to her cottage, or visit her grandmother in the small town of Morden with limited connectivity. Her experiences aren't unique. Canada is home to some of the most remote places in the world, with towns that are often hundreds of kilometres away from anywhere else.

Despite the presence of cellphone towers in areas of large population density near cities and towns, it can be a challenge to reach all rural and Indigenous communities, natural resource

operations, and first responders coordinating to control wildfires or other remote emergencies.

That's why the primary benefit of satellite-to-mobile technology is significant. Through this expanded service, everyday Canadians on road trips or outdoor adventures will be able to remain a text or call away from loved ones, and enterprises will be able to monitor the conditions of faraway equipment with IoT sensors.

"Our vision is that we will have 100 percent coverage below and above ground, as well as cover all parts of Canada, including its remote corners," says Staffieri.

The investments Rogers is making in satellite-to-mobile technology also has an application for first responders in ensuring public safety.

When cell towers burn down, or affected communities are in remote areas where there's limited cellular service, it can be difficult for first responders to contact each other, find people who need help, or send out messages that a situation is developing or getting worse.

Until now, satellite phones have helped as an emergency line of communication, but they are often expensive to use. What's more, they are at most a tool used by select first responders, not one readily available to everyday people who may need to, for example, make an emergency evacuation call.

"This new satellite technology will be phenomenal for search and rescue, we'll be able to do more rescuing and less searching," says Mabel Tilly, provincial training coordinator for the Newfoundland and Labrador Search and Rescue Association, who participated in Rogers' historic satellite-to-mobile test call with Andrew Furey, premier of Newfoundland and Labrador, in December 2023, with Lynk Global.

"Having the ability to pinpoint someone by GPS signal from the cellphone in their pocket, speak to them, and find out exactly why they are in distress will drastically improve our response time and ability to get people out alive. Along with being able to find people easier and bring them back quicker, we'll also be able to bring in the proper equipment to help them right away, like first aid or appropriate means of transportation," added Tilly.

First responders don't just need to be connected during wildfire emergencies, but also need to have preventive systems in place. To tackle this, Rogers is also partnering with SenseNet, a global leader in early wildfire detection technology, to bring the Vancouver-based company's AI technology to communities across the country.

Rogers is also partnering with the University of British Columbia and BC Wildfire Service to test wildfire indicators using 5G sensors. They've also deployed 5G-powered Pano AI cameras on wireless towers in Kelowna and Prince George that can detect smoke up to a twenty-kilometre range.

For Rogers, these investments are part of an overall mission to create a reliable, seamless experience, going from wireless to wireline and soon satellite, no matter where you are or what you need it for.

"What consumers and businesses really want is reliability. That's been our focus and where we've been putting a lot of emphasis," says Staffieri. The intended outcome, he says, for customers is straightforward: "You don't care which network you're on, all you know is that you're always on."

This means even smarter, more sophisticated networks.

Network slicing is one way. It's essentially a 5G network technology that adjusts how networks operate by moving from one single "lane" to multiple lanes for wireless traffic, depending on needs. "Today, all wireless traffic just happens," says Staffieri. "Network slicing is a technology for the wireless part of our business that allows us to create dedicated lanes."

Those lanes can be customized for different attributes, such as low latency, high-precision location, or higher speed demands. One notable case Staffieri points to is first responders. "For them, it's important that they're always on and that they don't run into network congestion, particularly in the case of a natural disaster when everyone is trying to connect either to seek assistance or to contact family or friends. We need to make sure first responders have priority access with a dedicated lane for them," says Staffieri.

Similarly, a low-latency lane could be provided to hospitals and clinics performing robotic surgery, or at a concert—the venue could be given one low-latency network lane to live stream the show and a separate high-capacity lane for fans to share their experiences on social media.

Collectively, these efforts are in pursuit of a singular goal. "Our vision is that in ten years every corner of our country is connected," says Staffieri. "It doesn't matter where it is, doesn't matter how far north it is, doesn't matter if it's underground, above ground. It's all connected."

POLITICS

IF HE WINS

Pierre Poilievre has promised to shake up Canadian politics if he and the Conservative Party win the next election. We asked twelve political observers how this might look in practice

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JAMIE BENNETT

For over a year, Pierre Poilievre and his team have been putting out a remarkably disciplined message: we are not the Liberals. Campaigns are about contrast, and in its dark appraisal of the country's current state, the Conservative Party has honed a rhetoric that offers frustrated Canadians an alternative. Judging by Poilievre's current double-digit lead in the polls, the line of attack is working. But, too often, it seems exactly that—a line. Exaggerated talk. Combative but vacant. Called a "masterful rage farmer," Poilievre speaks in punchy slogans ("Axe the tax," "Spike the hike") designed to channel the frustrations of a working class struggling to get through the day. The fact that the Conservative leader isn't in a hurry to offer solutions to the resentments he's stoking isn't a sign of inattention or carelessness. It's the whole strategy: tap into the collective desire of an unhappy electorate desperate to turn the page on Justin Trudeau. Poilievre is generating high hopes with pledges deliberately light on substance, and he has found his stride by not worrying about it. Win over voters first, figure out the details later. At The Walrus, we wanted to start figuring it out now. There are plenty of hints as to what a potential Poilievre administration would do—or, in some cases, not do—on a variety of files. The essays in this special series attempt to parse those signals.

— Carmine Starnino

Immigration

KAMAL AL-SOLAYLEE

Of the many high-wire acts that Conservative leader Pierre Poilievre needs to perform between now and the next federal election, the immigration file provides the clearest evidence of his potential statesmanship but also, more immediately, his showmanship. He needs to adhere to one of his party's founding principles—Canada as a "welcoming land of refuge for the world's persecuted and afflicted"—while conjuring an image of a leader with tight control of our borders. He must maintain the Conservatives' inroads with various immigrant communities in the same breath that he cautions against admitting more of them into the country.

Luckily for Poilievre, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's Liberals have handed him the gift of well-meaning but badly timed policies that are currently allowing him the rhetorical edge in the immigration debate and, based on polling figures, the lead in federal voting intentions across all age groups. In November 2023, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada released its Immigration Levels Plan for 2024–26, which would admit 1.5 million (or more) new permanent residents. This follows from 437,180 newcomers in 2022 and 471,771 in 2023. The increase in immigration levels coincided with a pandemic-induced cost-of-living crisis and put a strain on our already-challenged health services. It also exposed a housing shortage that has contributed to making homeownership more elusive while driving rents into unaffordable levels.

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY BRIAN MORGAN. PHOTOS BY CHRISTINNE MUSCHI / THE CANADIAN PRESS, UNSPLASH

Poilievre's response has been restrained and tactically brilliant and may be summed up as "It's the numbers, stupid." While most right-wing politicians in the West—from Rishi Sunak in Britain and Marine Le Pen in France to Donald Trump in the United States—have focused on the cultural and economic impacts of immigrants on native populations, Poilievre has, to date, avoided stoking emotional and usually racialized anxieties that accompany this conversation. Instead, he has set his sights on the temporary foreign worker programs and the influx of international students to Canadian post-secondary institutions—two groups with no voter rights or electoral prospects.

Poilievre has couched his objections to the Liberals' targets in terms of concern for underhoused, exploited, or struggling immigrants in Canada. He even reframed the study permit debate as one about predatory colleges and universities inviting then abandoning students. In some nationalist, far-right circles, which he has also courted—remember his support for the trucker convoy in Ottawa or how he wriggled his way out of condemning white nationalists in the House of Commons by calling Trudeau a wacko?—this approach doesn't go far enough. Poilievre may take issue with the high levels but is yet to make public his own proposed immigration targets. How many is too many?

All of this seems to be in line with Poilievre's "blame Trudeau for everything that is 'broken' in Canada without offering clear solutions for how exactly to fix it" strategy. When it comes to immigration, I believe the existential stakes for Canada are higher than, say, discussions of the capital gains tax or law and order. The coming election is likely to take place against a backdrop of changing attitudes among Canadians to immigration, aligning them closer to views south of the border and in western Europe. History has shown that tolerance for immigrants and refugees dips at moments of economic scarcity or competition for resources. We are at or are fast approaching this historical juncture in Canada.

A 2023 poll from Abacus Data suggests that over two-thirds of Canadians favour a reduction in newcomer targets, breaking what has traditionally been seen as a "consensus" on the economic advantages of immigration. Recent research suggests that economic concerns are the tip of the iceberg and that, beneath the surface, "Canadians' opinions on immigration are deeply influenced by aspects like religion, ethnicity, personal and familial immigration history, and political leanings." So it's not just how many are coming in but where they're coming from, what skin shades they have, and what gods they worship—basically, how "different" they seem.

We last saw this scenario play out in the Conservative Party's 2015 federal election campaign, which opened the door for the divisive politics of "old stock" Canadians and the "barbaric cultural practices" hotline. Poilievre was a member of the Stephen Harper government that proposed what was essentially an anti-Muslim snitch line. As prime minister in waiting, he has chosen to steer clear of similar political landmines.

It's possible that any reduction in immigration levels under Poilievre's leadership will be small and symbolic. Like many politicians, he understands that Canada's economy is powered by the labour—cheap labour, I would argue—of largely racialized immigrants from the Global South. According to a 2022 report from the think tank Cardus, immigrants make up a sizable contingent of Canada's 6.5 million working class. Definitions of that group are shifting from male and white to female and racialized, and from industry-focused to service and sales-based occupations.

From time to time, Poilievre may feel the need to score emotional engagement from his base and shore up support from more traditional religious communities by focusing on other cultural issues—trans rights or parental control of children's education, for example. His chances of winning the next election will depend on stirring just enough immigration anxieties without turning them into anti-immigrant sentiments.

KAMAL AL-SOLAYLEE is the director of the School of Journalism, Writing, and Media at the University of British Columbia, in Vancouver, and the author of three nonfiction books.

Conspiracy Theories

TIMOTHY CAULFIELD

This past April, far-right radio host and supplement salesman Alex Jones endorsed Pierre Poilievre, noting that he is the "real deal" and "is saying the same things as me." And by "the same things," he mostly means the legitimization of conspiracy theories about "globalist elites" and the World Economic Forum.

When Jones sounds off about something—be it Hillary Clinton's demonic sex trafficking ring, how the chemicals the US government is adding to water are turning frogs gay, or how the Sandy Hook shooting was staged—it is safe to assume he's *spectacularly wrong*. That's the default. But this time, Jones is on to something. A merging of the Jones and Poilievre world views.

Look, I'm no fan of the WEF. It is hard to cheer for a gathering of private-jet-owning

0.01 percent-ers in expensive casual wear pontificating about world issues. But let's be honest: when Poilievre complains about "globalist Davos elites," he isn't upset about the crassness (or the carbon footprints) of the uber rich hanging in a Swiss ski resort. He is very obviously playing to a base that has embraced the paranoid belief about a secret plot to control the world and take away our basic rights. And he wants their votes.

He has blown similar misinformation dog whistles for the anti-vaccine, climate-change-denial, and anti-trans crowds. (Okay, that's often the same crowd.) He wants their votes too.

Obviously, in-group flag waving has a long tradition in politics. (Indeed, a penchant for virtue signalling is a common criticism levelled against Justin Trudeau.) Still, it is monstrously depressing that we live in an era where politicians can so easily leverage absurd conspiracy theories for political gain. If Canada gets a Poilievre government, will the country get more of this BS?

I recognize this sounds like a partisan rant about conservative politics. In fact, I fully concede that the embrace of harmful misinformation happens across the ideological spectrum — such as the (mostly) left-leaning fear mongering about nuclear energy and GMOs. In the 1960s and '70s, it was the left that was more distrustful of science and public institutions. And, most recently, we saw politically motivated speculations about the Trump assassination attempt. So context, topic, and history matter. But in *this* cultural moment, adopting shadowy narratives has become a staple of right-wing politicking. Poilievre, alas, seems to fit this pattern.

And research suggests those who identify as conservative are more prone to believe conspiracy theories. As noted in a 2020 study from Cambridge University, "conservatives in the United States were not only more likely than liberals to endorse specific conspiracy theories, but they were also more likely to espouse conspiratorial worldviews in general." Other studies come to similar conclusions. A 2021 study from Indiana University explored the impact of social media echo chambers and partisanship on vulnerability to misinformation. The researchers concluded that, while the association is present across the ideological spectrum, it is stronger among conservative social media users. An Ohio State University study, also from 2021, found that conservatives perform "worse at distinguishing truth from falsehoods," likely due, at least in part, to the fact that "falsehoods tend to promote conservative positions." Indeed, for some topics, conspiracy theories — such as those surrounding vaccines — seem to be driven largely by ideological affiliation.

There are complex, interrelated variables that may explain these trends among conservative voters. They include socio-economics (e.g., less education), psychological tendencies (e.g., more likely to think intuitively), consumption of right-wing media (e.g., when repeated enough, tall tales start to feel true), and reacting negatively to scientific facts (e.g., vaccines work, climate change is happening, etc.) that run counter to a politically informed position — something that, according to a recent study, both conservatives and liberals do.

But much of it relates to identity. Politicians endorse conspiracy theories to secure votes, transforming these theories into ideological markers for their political base. This, in turn, amplifies the value of spreading such fabricated stories.

Thus, an ever-accelerating conspiracy theory vortex is created. Once someone believes one such theory, it becomes easier to believe others. It fuels polarization and diverts attention away from more important (and *real*) social issues toward bogus concerns, as evidenced by recent laws and policy recommendations designed to respond to chemtrails (Tennessee now bans them), fifteen-minute cities (Edmonton will not allow *Hunger Games*-ish districts, phew), and mRNA vaccines.

Poilievre can't control who endorses him. But the fact that one of the world's most notorious liars says he's on Team Poilievre should give us all pause.

The spread of conspiracy theories has been recognized as one of the greatest threats facing our world. Indeed, a recent survey by UNESCO, involving respondents from sixteen countries, found that 87 percent believe misinformation "has already had a major impact on the political life in their country."

Now, more than ever, we need political leaders who are willing to champion the truth. Is Poilievre that leader?

TIMOTHY CAULFIELD is a professor at the University of Alberta and author of *Relax: A Guide to Everyday Health Decisions with More Facts and Less Worry*.

Reconciliation

MICHELLE CYCA

On July 11, as Pierre Poilievre began his first in-person address to the Assembly of First Nations, a number of Indigenous delegates and veterans rose from their chairs and turned their backs to the leader of the Conservative Party of Canada. Their silent protest symbolizes the challenge Poilievre faces in trying to win over Indigenous communities, many of whom are concerned about what his leadership will mean for their nations.

With each change in federal leadership, the new government commits to resolving its fraught relationship with Indigenous people; for the past three decades or so, this process has largely been described as reconciliation. Justin Trudeau's campaign for prime minister and almost ten years in office have been marked by unprecedented commitment to this process, in words if not always in action. Since his election in 2015, the gap between what Trudeau has pledged to do and what his government has accomplished has widened, to the frustration of Indigenous leaders and to the delight of his detractors. The majority of the ninety-four calls to action from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission have not been fully met, dozens of communities remain under long-term boil-water advisories, and the crisis of violence against Indigenous women and girls persists.

Poilievre remains dogged by a comment he made in 2008, when he suggested that compensation to residential school survivors was a waste.

This past spring, the office of the auditor general reported that the dire housing conditions in First Nations communities had not meaningfully improved since 2015. Meanwhile, health inequities exacerbated by the toxic drug crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic have led to a decline in life expectancy; in BC and Alberta, the lifespan of First Nations people dropped by a staggering seven years between 2015 and 2021. (Poilievre has been a virulent critic of safe supply and promised to end some supervised consumption sites, which advocates say will lead to more deaths.)

Poilievre has seized on the mounting frustration with Trudeau's unfulfilled ambitions to articulate the broad strokes of his own vision for reconciliation—one that echoes many of the same long-held positions of his opponent: Poilievre has promised to end water advisories on reserves, to fund searches for human remains at former residential school sites, and to abolish the Indian Act, which he has called a "racist, colonial hangover." The Indian Act is universally considered a deeply flawed piece of legislation, but many Indigenous experts worry that a replacement would be worse and effectively extinguish Indigenous title and self-determination. "The political effect will be to convert these bands into a kind of ethnic Indigenous municipality rather than self-determining nations," writes Mohawk policy analyst Russ Diabo.

Poilievre is ascendant at a moment when federal promises to respect Indigenous sovereignty and engage in "nation-to-nation" relationships have been drowned out by a full-throated endorsement of "economic reconciliation" by parties across the political spectrum. Poilievre has championed oil and gas projects: "Remove the gatekeepers in Ottawa so First Nations can unlock more opportunity and paycheques for their people," he posted on social media. Economic sustainability is crucial for Indigenous nations, but economic reconciliation is focused on marshalling Indigenous participation and support for extractive resource projects such as pipelines, which many Indigenous nations continue to oppose. The singular focus on economic reconciliation suggests that Poilievre's government will selectively uphold the interests of cooperative Indigenous groups while dismissing the objections of others—not unlike what his predecessor has done.

But Poilievre remains dogged by a comment he made in 2008, when he suggested that compensation to residential school survivors was a waste. The comment, which was followed by a swift apology, can be read as a blunt summary

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY BRIAN MORGAN. PHOTOS BY JEFF MCINTOSH / THE CANADIAN PRESS, UNSPLASH

of the logic underpinning economic reconciliation. "My view is that we need to engender the values of hard work and independence and self-reliance. That's the solution in the long run—more money will not solve it," Poilievre said in a radio interview shortly before then prime minister Stephen Harper issued a national public apology to survivors. Since then, in particular after he became party leader, Poilievre has developed a diplomatic approach, wearing an orange shirt and paying his respects on the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation. Many Indigenous leaders remain wary of both his intentions and his execution.

As Poilievre attempts to sell Indigenous people a vision of prosperity driven by resource industry partnerships, many are pointing to his poor record and critical statements on other issues of particular significance to Indigenous communities. After his speech to the Assembly of First Nations, he was rebuked by Kukpi7 Judy Wilson, former chief of Neskonlith Indian Band, for failing to acknowledge residential school survivors, missing and murdered Indigenous women, the climate crisis, or the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples—Poilievre voted against legislation supporting the declaration in 2021. Duane Gastant' Aucoin, one of the delegates who turned his back to Poilievre, said the Conservative leader's statements on transgender rights constitute an attack on two-spirit people. And Poilievre's well-established opposition to environmental protections and regulations will be felt by the Indigenous communities already grappling with disproportionate impacts from climate change, wildfires, and industrial contamination.

"We don't want the legacies of successive governments to make outrageous promises that then aren't kept," Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami president Natan Obed told the *Toronto Star* in June. "I think that is the direct threat that reconciliation faces." Under Poilievre, the greater threat could be promises kept.

MICHELLE CYCA is a contributing writer for The Walrus.

Health Care

CHRISTINA FRANGOU

Pierre Poilievre never seems to talk about one of the biggest changes underway in Canadian health care: the growing private market.

When asked by The Walrus about his plans vis-à-vis private health care, his team provided a statement that ignored the questions. It mentioned Trudeau and wait times and the difficulties for foreign-trained nurses and doctors in having their credentials recognized. The statement vowed to maintain the 2023 deal on health transfers to provinces and territories, in which the federal government committed to investing $198.6 billion in health care over the next decade.

But on private care, nada.

All the evidence suggests that, under a Poilievre government, the private health care market—which, according to some estimates, accounted for about 29 percent of all health dollars spent in this country in 2023—will flourish, at least by Canadian standards. More people will find themselves paying out of pocket for access to medical services like diagnostic imaging, orthopedic surgery, primary care, and virtual care.

People often ask: *Isn't private health care illegal here?* It's not. For the most part, provinces and territories decide what their health systems look like. The feds provide funding to provinces and territories in the form of Canada health transfers. In order to receive the full allotment of funds without incurring any deductions, provinces and territories have to meet five principles set out in the Canada Health Act. They must provide medically necessary care that is publicly administered, comprehensive, universal to all residents, portable to other jurisdictions in Canada when residents are travelling, and reasonably accessible.

That leaves a lot of room for interpretation. Who gets to decide what is medically necessary? The New Brunswick government, for one, controversially decided to stop funding surgical abortions performed outside of hospitals. How do we define "reasonably accessible"? Is a five-month wait to see an orthopedic surgeon in Ontario reasonably accessible? How about over fifteen hours in an emergency department in Quebec? Right now, the answer to both of these—somehow—seems to be yes.

The federal government can levy deductions on provinces and territories when they run afoul of the Canada Health Act. But it doesn't always do that.

Federal funds, as a percentage of overall health funding in Canada, have declined over decades, watering down the federal government's authority over health care. Provinces are looking elsewhere for help. Entrepreneurs are finding innovative ways to offer private care that skirts the edges of the Canada Health Act—doing things like selling orthopedic surgery procedures to out-of-province residents who pay privately because they're tired of waiting in pain at home. And many Canadians who've become frustrated with the public system are more willing than ever to pay.

The end result: private care is on the rise steadily across Canada, even in terms of medically necessary care. In 2021, Canadians spent $1,168.20 per capita on health care—a 9 percent increase from the year before, according to the Canadian Institute for Health Information.

The Jean Chrétien government allowed the first private diagnostic imaging clinics to flourish in the early 1990s. It later tried to rein in privately paid care by using a carrot — more money to the provinces — but the horse was out of the barn.

The Stephen Harper government — in which Poilievre was a cabinet minister — looked away as private care picked up between 2006 and 2015. It did not levy fines on provinces and territories where residents paid out of pocket for care.

The Trudeau government tried a combination of sticks and carrots. In March 2023, his government levied health transfer deductions worth $82.5 million on provinces that allowed patients to be charged for medically necessary services — representing the first ever penalties given because patients paid for medical imaging like MRIs. In the same month, it also offered a carrot: a new health care deal worth nearly $200 billion, including $46.2 billion in new funding, over ten years.

What will Poilievre do? For now, it seems he won't say. His team ignored my question about withholding funds for provinces and territories that run afoul of the Canada Health Act. They also did not respond to a question about whether he plans to update the act to allow Canadians to pay privately for medically necessary care.

Whatever happens with private care will not come as a campaign promise. But it's not hard to predict. If elected in the near future, Poilievre will walk into the PMO at a time when conservative premiers hold the balance of seats at first ministers' conferences. They've long demanded that Ottawa give money for health care and back out of decision making. From the opposition benches, Poilievre seems to be far less willing than Trudeau to go head to head with this group.

I believe he'll continue providing health funding to the provinces, yes, but he is unlikely to levy deductions when Canadians pay privately for care.

I'm not here to argue whether private care is good or bad; I'm pointing out that these changes will likely happen by stealth, without a candid discussion about how the private health care sector could and should work in Canada. Instead of an organized system that blends private and public medicine, I can easily imagine Canada's private health care system will grow without planning, publicity, or proper integration with our public health systems. This is the worst possible option.

CHRISTINA FRANGOU is a Calgary-based journalist who has been writing about health care for more than two decades.

Polarization

JEN GERSON

I must admit that when this fine magazine asked me to write a column examining a Pierre Poilievre victory and its impact on national polarization, my eyes did roll three degrees to the side. My concerns with such an outcome aside — I'll get to those presently — who do we imagine is the leading driver of polarization *right now*?

By any credible objective metric, the most profound source of national enmity is the current prime minister, Justin Trudeau. He and his party have consistently been behind in the polls by astonishing margins for more than a year. One recent poll suggests that as many as 68 percent of Canadians want the man gone. As I sit to write, my feed is pinged by news that the mere mention of Trudeau's name by Mick Jagger prompted boos at a concert by the Rolling Stones — in Vancouver. I recently stayed at a lovely Airbnb that was amply supplied with Trudeau toilet paper placed unobtrusively next to the toilet.

Polarization? Poilievre?

By the mere virtue of being a breathing alternative to Trudeau, Poilievre is practically a unity candidate at this point.

My concern with Poilievre isn't that he's polarizing but, rather, like Trudeau before him, that he's unserious. That Poilievre is Trudeau's Conservative foil, the inevitable living consequence of Trudeau's own history of divisive politics gussied up by a dead language of correct values espoused but not upheld. What I fear from a Conservative leader is not some radical change but, rather, more of the same: wedge politics and symbolic gestures, a vacuous ship's captain heading into deeper ocean currents, ignoring signs of rot in the hull and a long overdue spell in dry dock.

This country is facing significant challenges: allegations of foreign interference, stalling productivity, collapsing health care, immigration, housing, an opioid epidemic, an increase in the cost of living, crumbling military, and general institutional decline. Canadians can no longer luxuriate in petty political bun fights and social programming like "national pharmacare" that covers only two kinds of drugs. The world is getting meaner and harder. We're going to have to set real priorities and be willing to make hard choices. It means we're going to have to figure out who our allies are, decide how and where to spend limited resources, and be willing to say no when our ambitions exceed our reach. In short, we're going to need leaders who are serious people.

Prompted by fears surrounding the rise of Donald Trump in the US, Canadian pundits and political scientists have spent

much time fixating on the rise of populism at home. Some of this concern is grounded and reasonable and correctly identifies problems with decline in social cohesion and institutional trust. Some of it is hysterical and too often forgets that populism isn't a new feature of Canadian politics. Everything from the rise of the Reform Party to the creation of the NDP was the result of the inevitable populism that is born from geographic and economic alienation. Regardless, my take is that Poilievre is more of an opportunist than a true populist. He does not shy away from exploiting disgust with governing elites—as he did when he peddled anti–World Economic Forum conspiracy theories during the Conservative leadership race in 2022.

In reality, however, Poilievre was elected to Parliament at the age of twenty-five and has spent his entire career representing an Ottawa constituency. He's neither authoritarian nor credibly anti-institutional. His political instincts lean toward libertarianism (which champions absolute personal freedom and minimal government) rather than the centralization of power. And while it may be fair to characterize Poilievre as a reformer of institutions, I don't see any evidence of a man hell-bent on destroying Parliament or the courts or democracy itself. Rather, I suspect any changes he does make while in power will be seen by him to be a restoration of institutions to more historically grounded functions within Confederation. The CBC notwithstanding.

And while I do think he deserves credit for his intelligence and political savvy, my concern is that what we're going to get with a Prime Minister Poilievre is a sharper version of Trudeau, merely tuned to the opposite frequency. I think he's someone who will make offerings of shallow words and empty gestures to a base of people who will delight in taking revenge for the past nine years of ineffectual government. Memes all the way down.

I see a man who enjoys annoying his ideological enemies, who revels in a sparring match and gets off on scoring the good quip during question period in the House of Commons.

In and of itself, this personality trait is fine. No prime minister has an obligation to be nice or make everybody feel good. In fact, this country could probably use a little less pointless feels and a little more straight talk and scrappy nature. But that can't be all that he has to offer. Actually leading a country must mean identifying real problems, enacting meaningful reforms, and setting realistic priorities. Priorities that will mean saying yes to ideological opponents and no to politically aligned friends. Can Poilievre do this?

Poilievre acts as if he understands. In March, in an address to the Greater Vancouver Board of Trade, he castigated the Ottawa lobbying class as "utterly useless," warning them that a Conservative government will pry itself from its parasitic hold. I will believe he is actually serious when he takes that threat to its logical conclusion and, for example, pulls the plug on Canada's vestigial supply management system, which maintains an artificially high price for dairy and chicken products.

In April of this year, polling firm Ipsos compiled research into the state of Canadians. In it, they found a startling shift in post-pandemic attitudes, marked by a decline in optimism. This is a country that is coming to terms with the fact that very bad things can happen—one that is losing faith in its institutions' abilities to solve big problems or to react to future catastrophes. Consequently, the Ipsos polling found that a focus on the collective good is evolving into something else—a greater desire for individualism, autonomy, and self-control. Likewise, these attitudinal shifts are increasingly being reflected in declines in behaviours like volunteering or donating to charity.

These attitudes and behaviours are also, in part, the result of growing economic insecurity. If people need to work harder to get by, it stands to reason that they will have less time to volunteer and less disposable income to donate to charity. Regardless, this attitudinal shift favours a more conservative party—a party more ideologically aligned to individualism, for example. This will be even truer if that party is fixated on Maslow's hierarchy of needs: i.e., food, housing, and basic safety and security.

Canada will not retain its long-term prosperity and security if we stay complacent. The country cannot afford another decade of petty, self-involved leadership, regardless of which party unfurls the banners at the top. The Liberals cannot fix this. That's clear.

The problem is that I don't know that the Conservatives can either.

JEN GERSON is co-founder of *The Line*, a Canadian commentary website on Substack.

Housing

LAUREN HEUSER

In late 2023, Pierre Poilievre released a widely circulated mini documentary, titled *Housing Hell: How We Got Here and How We Get Out*, that highlighted the extent to which home and rental prices had increased in the years since Justin Trudeau came to power.

His criticisms are not without foundation. Housing affordability has deteriorated sharply between 2015, when the Trudeau Liberals were first elected, and today. In October 2015, the average home price in Canada was $453,000; in June 2024, it was $697,000. Average rents

also climbed steadily from 2015 to 2020 and then sharply both during and after the pandemic.

Poilievre's criticisms also seem to be landing on a receptive audience. In a June 2024 poll, 47 percent of respondents identified housing affordability as a key concern, second only to the almost indistinguishable issue of a rising cost of living.

But the question is: What would a Poilievre government do about it? Broadly speaking, there are two levers his government — any government — can pull: supply-side levers and demand-side ones.

Many experts agree that, in Canada and other Western economies, supply-side barriers such as municipal zoning laws are at the heart of the problem. They also credit Poilievre with drawing attention to these barriers.

"I think Poilievre is recognized internationally, at least in the Commonwealth countries, for speaking about and identifying the supply-side constraints," says Chris Spoke, a housing advocate and partner at the Toronto real estate development firm Toronto Standard.

The Conservatives have "been absolutely right in specifying the extent to which many municipal governments act as gatekeepers," agrees Benjamin Dachis, an economist who has written extensively on housing policy.

Dachis points to development charges and land-use restrictions that inhibit vertical or horizontal growth as key ways municipalities discourage new builds. Some of these restrictions were originally well intentioned, aiming to keep "noxious factories" separate from residences, Spoke says. But these rules now primarily serve the interests of residents who "want to keep their areas looking a certain way," he says. In a word, NIMBYism.

Today, the Liberals and Conservatives might agree on the need to address these supply-side barriers. Where they differ is in their approach.

"It's a carrot-versus-stick thing," says Spoke. The Liberals have introduced a "big carrot" with their Housing Accelerator Fund, he says. This $4 billion fund supports municipalities that grow housing supply faster than their historical average, increase densification, speed up approval times, tackle NIMBYism, and more.

The Conservatives, by contrast, have proposed more of a "stick approach," Spoke says. The party's housing bill, which was defeated in a parliamentary vote in May this year, offers some clues as to the likely shape of this approach. The bill would have withheld federal infrastructure funding from "high-cost cities" that failed to meet housing targets, and it would have rewarded, with bonuses, cities that exceeded targets.

Dachis says the Conservatives' "focus on outcomes and paying for performance is exactly right." Since local governments and provinces are responsible for limiting supply, any federal response needs to be focused on getting them to change their ways.

The other — more controversial — lever the Conservatives could pull would be to reduce demand for housing by reducing immigration, which has soared under the Trudeau government. In 2023, Canada's population grew by 3.2 percent, the highest annual population growth rate since 1957. According to Statistics Canada, more than 470,000 permanent immigrants and nearly 800,000 non-permanent immigrants came to Canada in that year.

While the Liberals have conceded that high immigration contributes to housing unaffordability, they have been slow to act on their pledge to scale back the number of immigrants they admit. It remains to be seen whether the Conservatives would take a materially different approach.

Poilievre said at a news conference in January that he would ensure alignment between how many immigrants Canada admits and how many homes it builds. If he is serious about this assertion, it would suggest a Conservative government would be prepared to reduce immigration if cities were not meeting housing creation goals. And, unfortunately, the likelihood of cities not meeting their current housing targets is high.

"We're not seeing anywhere near the level of action needed to reverse the trend," says Spoke.

The notion advanced by political parties "that we can build our way out of the housing crisis" is not realistic, says Sasha Tsenkova, a professor of planning at the University of Calgary. Canada is estimated to need an additional 3.5 million homes by 2030 to restore affordability. Even if we double levels of production, we won't get there, Tsenkova says. "It's mission impossible."

The implications are twofold. One is that a Poilievre government may then decide it does need to curtail immigration — at least more than the Liberals have done. Another is that most Canadians should not expect rents or home prices to drop significantly anytime soon.

Spoke doesn't anticipate a return, in the near term, to the level of affordability we saw ten years ago — "or maybe ever."

LAUREN HEUSER is the founder, publisher, and editor of *Canadian Affairs*.

Environment

ARNO KOPECKY

For Canadians who appreciate the twin threats of climate change and collapsing ecosystems, few phrases may be more frightening than "Prime Minister Pierre Poilievre." Poilievre has promised to lay waste to Justin Trudeau's climate and energy policies. Canada will miss its Paris targets

and increase its dependence on oil and gas just as the global energy transition shifts into high gear.

That's not all. The carbon tax will go. The Oil Tanker Moratorium Act, which bans crude oil tankers from British Columbia's north coast, will go. The emissions cap on oil sands producers will go. The federal EV mandate banning gas-powered passenger vehicle sales after 2035 will likely go. The Canadian Sustainable Jobs Act, which commits government to helping oil and gas workers through the energy transition, will go.

These are a few of the doomed policies at the heart of Canada's 2030 Emissions Reduction Plan, Trudeau's federal blueprint for reducing emissions 40 percent below 2005 levels by 2030, as per the Paris Agreement. His Liberals are already slightly behind on their plan: Environment and Climate Change Canada projects a 36 percent reduction by 2030 under current policies. Any hope of meeting the Paris target depends on ramping up, not cutting, existing programs.

Instead, a Poilievre government will accelerate oil and gas production and likely eviscerate the Emissions Reduction Plan. But he hasn't said what he'd replace it with. Whenever he's asked what his climate policy would be, Poilievre vaguely promises to "speed up" clean energy production. "My approach [to lowering emissions] is to greenlight green projects," Poilievre said in April. "We need a massive abundance of clean, green emissions-free energy by giving fast permits, and responsible permits, for hydro dams, nuclear power, carbon capture and storage, offshore tidal wave power." But Poilievre's apparent embrace of renewable energy puts him on a revealing collision course with Alberta, whose conservative premier, Danielle Smith, has done everything she can to halt clean energy production. At a certain point, clean energy becomes a threat to fossil fuels. Renewable energy's share of Alberta's power production almost doubled between 2018 and 2022, from 10 to 17 percent, and is expected to rise to 30 percent by 2026. What will Poilievre do when confronted by similar math?

He may also not say much about specific environmental policies, but his parliamentary voting record speaks volumes. An investigation by *DeSmog* found that, as of May this year, Poilievre had voted against environmental protection 400 times, as opposed to only thirteen times in favour. He and his party view ecological protection as an assault on freedom and prosperity. Conservatives have cast Liberal efforts to reduce plastic pollution as "government controlling our lives"; they've lambasted the curtailment of logging to protect endangered caribou in Quebec as attacking the forest industry; and they've denounced measures to protect North Atlantic right whales as interfering with the "powerful paycheques" of the Atlantic lobster fishery. In British Columbia, where Poilievre has spent a lot of time campaigning, BC Conservative leader John Rustad now pledges to repeal the province's "30 by 30" commitment to protect 30 percent of lands and waters by 2030. Poilievre would likely kill the federal version of that target.

Poilievre's environmental policy, in all likelihood, will be a combination of lip service and denial. Consider his enthusiasm for carbon capture, which has yet to be proven at scale and is widely regarded by climate experts as a false promise aimed at justifying increased fossil fuel production (and, therefore, emissions). Perhaps the most poetic example of this is the massive carbon capture project proposed by the Pathways Alliance, a coalition of six companies that account for 95 percent of production in the oil sands. Pathways envisions a "carbon capture pipeline" that would collect the emissions of twenty oil sands facilities and store them underground. The price tag: a staggering $16.5 billion. A recent analysis by Deloitte concluded it would be cheaper for the companies to lower production. Instead, they've been aggressively lobbying the federal Liberals to increase the subsidies already on offer for carbon capture projects.

The Liberals have declined. But it's not hard to imagine a warmer response coming from a Conservative government. Poilievre might even buy the thing outright just to prove his green credentials and keep the oil sands humming. That would give Poilievre and Trudeau one overpriced pipeline apiece.

ARNO KOPECKY is a contributing writer for The Walrus.

US Relations

JUSTIN LING

"**Connect the dots,"** Christopher Rufo wrote. "Then attack, delegitimize, and discredit."

Rufo is one of the most effective political actors you've likely never heard of. He is not a high-power consultant or some campaign strategist but a filmmaker, a blogger, and a man who knows how to take down his political adversaries. His track record includes aiding in the ouster of then Harvard University president Claudine Gay, inspiring Florida's anti-LGBTQ+ laws, and spurring more than seventeen US states to ban critical race theory, the academic discipline that explores systemic racism and its effects on society. Rufo has been derided as a "carnival barker," and his campaign has been characterized as "alarming and deceptive," underpinned by "dramatic, dodgy reporting."

In August, the Canada Strong and Free Network — successor to what was once the Manning Centre for Building Democracy — announced that Rufo would deliver a keynote address at their conference of right-wing thinkers, in Red Deer, Alberta, on "fighting the left and wokeism." While Rufo is a complete unknown to the average person, he has achieved rock-star status amongst the reactionary right because of his ability to bring the culture war to the doorsteps of the establishment.

These traits are in high demand amongst Conservatives these days. Jamil Jivani, ex-president of the CSFN and current Conservative MP, made his bones in the movement with such declarations as "Critical race theory is a real problem in Canada." An unrepentant culture warrior, Jivani has had a rise in politics which has closely mirrored that of his old friend and Republican vice presidential nominee, J. D. Vance.

Over the past century, conservative movements in the US and Canada have rarely flowed in parallel. Their aspirations and grievances seldom sounded similar, nor did they share ideological North Stars. Perhaps the only obvious exception was the deregulation craze that swept both Brian Mulroney and Ronald Reagan into office.

Poilievre has cribbed Trump's warnings of "globalists" and a "deep state," borrowed Republican attacks on transgender people, and taken to calling Trudeau and his father "Marxist."

But a variety of factors has pushed to one side the files that would normally define the US–Canada relationship. The North American Free Trade Agreement was renegotiated under the first Trump term; plans to modernize the North American Aerospace Defense Command are already in the works; and the huge influx of asylum seekers crossing the land border into Canada has largely been halted. Fractious domestic politics in America and international tumult mean that Democratic and Republican politicians think rarely, if ever, about us. Bottom line: a hypothetical Poilievre government doesn't have to think too hard about the things that may normally vex a Canadian prime minister about the relationship with our southern neighbour — regardless of who occupies the White House. Even on outstanding issues, like our anemic defence spending, Poilievre has managed to skate by on a few high-level slogans, without much consequence.

Poilievre's greatest challenge with the US, however, is far less a question of traditional statecraft than one of ideology. Figures like Rufo are now a massive pole for

Canadian conservative thought, and even Poilievre's MPs — like Jivani — are happy to feel the magnetic pull.

The MAGA movement has steadily radicalized itself since its inception, feeding on its leader's bombast and anti-establishment zeal. From its beginnings as a protectionist and nationalist movement to its hard-right turn on abortion and LGBTQ+ rights, and into the expansive conspiracism of election denialism and its chilling calls of "mass deportations now" — Trump and his political project have become a self-moving force, each acting on the other as they stray further into the political unknown.

Pierre Poilievre is not, despite the allegations of his critics, Donald Trump. But he is dancing many of the same steps, and his movement is increasingly tuned to the MAGA frequency. Poilievre has cribbed Trump's warnings of "globalists" and a "deep state" with his professed fears of the World Economic Forum. He has borrowed Republican attacks on transgender people and taken to calling Justin Trudeau and his father "Marxist." Poilievre has leaned into growing skepticism around immigration levels while adopting Trumpian tag lines to paint our urban centres as dangerous hellscapes.

The Conservatives see this as a delicate dance: an attempt by Poilievre to show that he knows how to play the hits popularized by Trump — anti-woke, anti-DEI, anti-WEF. But by being primarily responsive to what die-hard conservatives want, Poilievre puts himself at their mercy.

That's a dangerous game. It means that Poilievre is not the top banana in his own movement: Trump is. Others, like Rufo, hold as much sway with the priorities and paranoias of the movement as the Conservative leader does.

As I write this, we don't know who will occupy the White House for the next four years. But whether he wins, loses, or loses and insists he won, Trump and his MAGA movement will control much more of Poilievre's political destiny than the latter would care to admit.

JUSTIN LING is a contributing writer for The Walrus.

Media

ASMAA MALIK

Pierre Poilievre is no friend of Canadian journalism. The Conservative leader has become known for his antagonistic interactions with reporters from national news organizations. At his first press conference as a federal party leader, in 2022, Poilievre refused to let reporters ask questions and relented only after being loudly called out by Global News chief political correspondent David Akin. He has described the Canadian Press as a "tax-funded mouthpiece to the PMO." In an X post last October, he called out a CP story that falsely attributed certain remarks to him, leading to three corrections. (Never a banner moment for a news organization, but one might just see press accountability as a good thing.) "Remember that next time they attack me," he wrote.

If any of this sounds familiar, it's because we've seen it before.

If the Conservatives win the next election, CBC leaders are well aware they should brace themselves for a serious reckoning, once again. In a campaign ploy reminiscent of Stephen Harper's unfulfilled promise to defund the national broadcaster, Poilievre's vow to save "$1 billion" by axing funding for the CBC plays well with populist supporters who distrust mainstream media.

Further diminishing the CBC would have cascading effects on Canada's journalism-starved cities and rural communities, which have seen the closures of hundreds of news outlets in recent years. It would also end its Indigenous-focused news services, including programming in eight Indigenous languages. Poilievre has promised to spare Radio-Canada because of its support for "French-language minorities," who he says cannot get news and information from a competitive media market. The logic of the Radio-Canada exception is misleading, as there are still several French-language print, digital, and broadcast news options in Canada, although many are based in Quebec, including *La Presse*, *Le Devoir*, *Le Journal de Montréal*, TV5 Québec, and Groupe TVA.

Meanwhile, Poilievre dodges in-depth scrutiny by avoiding network current affairs shows and interviews, where he would likely be asked challenging questions, in favour of his own YouTube channel that features his House of Commons speeches and gives him free rein to expound on economic strategy and to bash the Trudeau government. Through short scripted videos on topics ranging from housing affordability to tax cuts, Poilievre sets the agenda for his media coverage. Outside his platforms, he receives favourable coverage on conservative-leaning sites like *The Hub*. (Ben Woodfinden, who writes for *The Hub*, is Poilievre's new director of communications.) Under a Poilievre administration, such outlets may wield a level of power much like the *National Post* did in Conservative Party circles during Harper's leadership.

The former prime minister was notorious for limiting press access to his cabinet members as well as for blocking reporters from covering the repatriation of Canadian soldiers from Afghanistan. In 2006, Harper announced a change to Parliamentary Press Gallery protocol, requiring reporters to sign up to ask

questions ahead of time. This led to a walkout of some two dozen journalists fed up with Harper's attempts to control the press. (Under Trudeau, the practice has been reversed.)

In a similar vein, taking pre-emptive action and collectively refusing to engage on Poilievre's terms would be the wisest course of action for the country's press corps. Beyond news conferences and scrums, there are more effective ways for journalists to cover the Conservative leader's campaign and policies, by strengthening their reporting practices to counter disinformation campaigns and social media noise.

To do that, news organizations need to up their game. The ongoing editorial layoffs at major media companies, including Global News and Bell Media, continue to impact the quality of news Canadians consume. And while the CBC is not, as Poilievre claims, the "propaganda arm" of the Trudeau government, it is in dire need of radical reform. The national broadcaster finds itself significantly under pressure from the economics of attention-fragmented audiences and limited commercialization options. CBC executives appear increasingly disconnected from the pressures their journalists on the ground are facing, especially those from historically mis- or underrepresented communities. It's crucial for the broadcaster to lean harder into its public service mission to prove its relevance and value.

There are promising signs elsewhere. In Ontario, news organizations such as *The Narwhal* and the *Toronto Star* have been holding Premier Doug Ford's feet to the fire, despite his similarly adversarial relationship with the press, with award-winning reporting on the Greenbelt scandal, which revealed misdeals in his plans to open up protected land for development. A recent *Narwhal* investigation found Poilievre has had frequent meetings with oil and gas lobbyists despite having called them "utterly useless."

Under a Poilievre government, news leaders shouldn't take the bait and allow social media gimmicks and belligerent sound bites to distract them from their work. Reporters will need to move beyond superficial coverage and horse-race headlines to delve deeper into Poilievre's actions and the impacts of his policies. And if that means walking away from the Conservative leader when he disrespects the value of journalists' work in our democracy, then so be it.

ASMAA MALIK is an associate professor of journalism at Toronto Metropolitan University.

Foreign Policy

JONATHAN MANTHORPE

The Conservative Party manifesto, published in September 2023, describes a broad approach to world affairs in its two pages and nine clauses on foreign policy. It is only on promised actions against Beijing that it offers an itemized agenda. It is a short and sharp to-do list. The Conservatives say they will end military co-operation with Beijing, stop Chinese participation in sensitive Canadian research facilities, ban companies linked to the Chinese Communist Party from owning Canadian companies or buying sensitive technology, and campaign for China to be removed from the World Trade Organization until it reforms its economy.

The Conservative Party's visceral distaste for the CCP regime in Beijing is logical. There was an intense chill in bilateral relations under the first government of the reformed Conservative Party led by Stephen Harper after it raised questions about China's human rights record in Xinjiang and Tibet in particular. Along with this inherited ideological mistrust of Beijing, Pierre Poilievre and his party have the immediate grievance that the CCP has tried to interfere in the Canadian election process with the aim of defeating Conservative candidates or influencing which candidates get selected by the parties' constituency associations.

The brief references to the Conservatives' foreign policy in the manifesto loom large because their vision of "Canada in the world" is otherwise hard to find in the party's public discourse. This has caused some head scratching and a frenetic hunt for clues among foreign diplomats in Ottawa — and speculation among Canadian commentators that perhaps Poilievre is so parochial a politician that he thinks little about the world beyond this country's borders.

More broadly, the manifesto and statements by Tory MPs envisage introducing a tight framework for foreign aid, both in deciding which countries get it and how it is managed. Poilievre said early this year he would cut "wasteful foreign aid" and end funding to "dictators, terrorists and multinational bureaucracies." The aim was to free up money to raise the proportion of gross domestic product spent on Canada's armed forces, from 1.37 percent now to at least 2 percent — the level all members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization are meant to spend. For many years, Canada has been near the bottom of the list of contributors among the thirty-two NATO members and has come under repeated criticism from fellow members for freeloading. Poilievre, however, subsequently backtracked. "I make promises that I can keep, and right now we are, our

country is, broke after nine years of Trudeau," he said at a press conference when asked about meeting the NATO target.

Much of the management of foreign affairs by governments tends to be geared toward how to respond to nasty surprises. In the world today, there is enough known nastiness in Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and Asia to keep a Poilievre government busy even before the added surprises that are inevitably in store.

In the Middle East, the Conservative Party has been a staunch supporter of Israel for a long time. Poilievre wants to strengthen that commitment. The party manifesto advocates the contentious act of moving the Canadian embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, which the Israeli government claims as its capital despite the city's division with Palestinians. In March, the entire Conservative caucus in Parliament voted against a non-binding New Democratic Party motion to formally recognize the state of Palestine. A few days later, Poilievre told an audience at a synagogue in Montreal that he regards the Jewish people as the only true indigenous people of the land occupied by Israel.

The Conservatives' foreign policy is hard to find in the party's public discourse. This has caused a frenetic hunt for clues among foreign diplomats in Ottawa.

The Conservative leader also intends to try to mend relations with the government of Narendra Modi in New Delhi and strengthen trade and diplomatic ties with India. There is one big fence to mend before this can be achieved, though, as ties between the two countries went into deep freeze after Justin Trudeau accused the Indian government of involvement in the killing of Sikh leader Hardeep Singh Nijjar in Surrey, BC, last year. Speaking to a media outlet last October, Poilievre said, "It's fine to have our disagreements and hold each other accountable, but we have to have a professional relationship, and that is what I will restore when I'm prime minister of this country."

Coming to Eastern Europe, the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the continuing war are of the most pressing concern for Canada. Russian leader Vladimir Putin has indicated that his aim is to restore the Russian empire. As several of the countries gathered up by the Soviet Union after World War II, and which were liberated when it collapsed in 1991, are now members of NATO, Putin's agenda presents an immediate risk to Canada. If NATO gets directly involved in a war with Russia, so will Canada under the alliance's all-for-one-and-one-for-all commitment.

Yet, as a campaigning opposition leader, Poilievre appeared to see the issue through the prism of domestic politics. When Russia renewed its invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 after its 2014 seizure of Crimea and some eastern Ukrainian provinces, Poilievre backed accepting Ukrainian refugees and giving the Kyiv government all material support possible. There are about 1.3 million Canadians of Ukrainian heritage, comprising about 3 percent of the population. Early this year, however, Poilievre was less firm in his backing; polls showed that of the people who thought Canada was offering "too much support" to Ukraine, close to half were Conservative Party voters.

Thus, all indications are that Poilievre's initial impulse in government would be to shape his foreign policy around the demands of his domestic audiences. But like many government leaders before him, he will find that events exert their own tyranny and demand a broader, national response.

JONATHAN MANTHORPE writes on international relations, politics, and history. Over his fifty-year career as a journalist, he has reported from Asia, Africa, and Europe.

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY BRIAN MORGAN. PHOTOS BY SEAN KILPATRICK / THE CANADIAN PRESS, UNSPLASH

Economy

RICARDO TRANJAN

With less than a year to go before the writ is expected to drop, Pierre Poilievre's economic proposals are vague and shallow—and appear likely to stay that way. Though populists from both sides of the aisle tend to galvanize support by arguing the economy isn't working for everyday people, the left tends to propose precise policy solutions. They promise, for instance, to tax the rich and invest in universal public services. They promise to regulate markets to stop profiteering in basic-need sectors such as nutrition, health care, and housing. They also promise to nationalize natural resources so everyone benefits from them. Say what you will of left-wing populists, but their intentions are clear.

Right-wing populists like Poilievre are less forthcoming.

While pledging a new day to people falling behind, their economic policies favour the wealthy, in keeping with the ruse of trickle-down economics. The argument is that governments should focus on growing the economic pie so everyone will one day get a larger piece. In the meantime, the rich will get an outsized slice of the existing pie—that's the part right-wing populists conceal.

Take, for example, Poilievre's tax proposals. "Axe the tax" is his most popular plank. He says ending the carbon tax, which raises the price of fossil fuels for consumers and sets standards for industry as an incentive to curb emissions, will put money back in people's pockets. But most households already receive more carbon tax rebates than they pay in carbon taxes: between $260 and $723 more annually, depending on the province. Axing this tax will benefit only those people who consume more energy than most and who therefore stand to lose more money to the tax than they receive in rebates. This would include people with large houses, heated swimming pools, and large cars.

The same is true of the increase in the capital gains inclusion rate, introduced in June, which Poilievre has vehemently opposed. Justin Trudeau has defended the hike, calling it "a fundamental choice around a fairer society." Prior to the increase, Canada collected taxes on 50 percent of capital gains (like selling properties and trading stocks). With the Trudeau government's recent change, companies and trusts are subject to taxes on two-thirds of capital gains. For individuals, the new inclusion rate applies only to the portion of capital gains that exceeds $250,000 within a year. According to this year's federal budget, only 0.13 percent of Canadians will pay more taxes as a result; their average income is $1.4 million a year. The other 99.87 percent benefit from the services the tax funds. Poilievre has said, if elected, he would form a "tax reform task force" of "entrepreneurs, inventors, farmers, and workers" that could help his government lower taxes. Details on the force remain slim.

Poilievre has also committed to creating a "bring it home tax cut" that will "bring home production and paycheques with lower taxes on work, hiring, and making stuff." What does that mean exactly, and will we know more before the election? The *Hill Times* asked his office those questions and was told simply that, if elected, Poilievre would "immediately" eliminate the carbon tax, without any further details on what his government's approach to tax policy might be.

The thing with tax reform is that if someone pays less, someone else must pay more; otherwise, services must be cut. We'll find out *who* will pay less, *who* will pay more, and *whose* services will be cut only if he wins the election. That's a big gamble.

Then there is "Justinflation."

Poilievre claims the federal government and the Bank of Canada are playing fast and loose with monetary policy, printing too much money and taking on too much debt, which is causing prices to go up. This simplistic explanation masks the real drivers of inflation: the supply-chain disruptions the COVID-19 pandemic created; Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which drove up energy costs; large grocers hiking up food prices; and, more recently, the impact of high interest rates on mortgage costs and rents.

The thing with tax reform is that if someone pays less, someone else must pay more.

Labour unions have criticized the Bank of Canada for single-mindedly pursuing inflation targets through interest rate hikes, which can lead to high unemployment. The Trudeau government could have pressured the bank to slow down rate hikes, balancing the need to tame inflation with the need to protect jobs. This approach would have also benefited mortgage holders and renters. Instead of siding with workers, echoing the clear analysis of unions, and supporting their concrete proposals, Poilievre incessantly repeated "Justinflation" and swore to increase oversight over the bank.

Nobody knows what that would mean in practice.

Right-wing populists don't win elections on the specifics. Evasiveness is a tactic, not a weakness. Donald Trump, Doug Ford, and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil all had nebulous economic platforms. They promised to govern for everyday people, but under their watch, the rich have grown richer and the poor have been left behind.

The antidote to this political strategy is a genuinely alternative and clearly articulated economic program, one that describes how the state can unapologetically intervene on behalf of working families. Such an alternative is currently not on offer in Canada.

Without clear and concrete alternatives, people falling behind will be tempted to vote for the candidate who echoes their concerns most loudly. And for many, that someone is Pierre Poilievre.

RICARDO TRANJAN is a political economist with the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives and author of *The Tenant Class*.

Canadian Identity

PAUL WELLS

On his way to the Conservative leadership, Pierre Poilievre called Jean Charest a Liberal and Patrick Brown a liar. More recently, he's called opioid policy in British Columbia wacko and Montreal's mayor incompetent. He's expressed support for Freedom Convoy protesters and disdain for lobbyists. He wants to defund the CBC. Will he coarsen the national character?

If I'm being honest, I have to say I'm not particularly worried.

Let me tell you a story. In 2015, a producer called to ask whether I wanted to come on their Sunday-night TV news to predict the new Justin Trudeau government's effect on Canada's international reputation. At last, a government that believed in peacekeeping and fighting climate change! How would the world react?

I was always pleased for a call from the Sunday-night news, because in those days,

they would actually fly me in from Ottawa to join the panel, on set, in Toronto. But I am stuck with what I know. I said few people in the world are aware of who is governing Canada at any moment. And their opinions of Canada depend more on social interactions with Canadians than on news reports about its government. Finally, I said, the Trudeau government's actions on climate and peacekeeping would matter more than its promises.

The producer thanked me for my time. That Sunday, I watched from home while somebody else on the panel applauded the new era.

I dredge this memory up because I have been asked to anticipate Pierre Poilievre's effect on Canada's character if he wins the next election. Will there be a "Poilievre Effect" on the national discourse, the mood, the national soul itself? The question is worth asking. But I think it's important to begin by reminding ourselves that Canada's character, for better or worse, is not usually transformed by a simple change in government.

Some civics. Canada is a federation that reserves great responsibilities for its provincial governments and delegates considerable power to its cities. Parliament and the public service are terrible slogs for any government trying to get anything done. In Ottawa, we attach significance to whether a government holds a majority or a minority of the seats in the House of Commons. But this ignores the many limitations on even a majority government's manoeuvring room—the parliamentary rulebook gives the opposition lots of tools for bringing things to a grinding halt. In the twenty years since 2004, we've had majority governments for only eight: Stephen Harper's last government, formed in 2011, and Trudeau's first, in 2015. I think neither man would characterize those years of peak authority as a cakewalk.

Above all, if I may use an unpopular word, Canada is a *free* country, whose citizens are free, on most days, to ignore their governments. Most exercise this freedom with enthusiasm, to the vexation of their leaders.

Above all, if I may use an unpopular word, Canada is a *free* country, whose citizens are free, on most days, to ignore their governments. Most exercise this freedom with enthusiasm.

This is worth remembering, because new governments always say they'll change everything, and because their opponents always fear it's so. In 2003, as Canada prepared for Paul Martin to become prime minister, former New Brunswick premier Frank McKenna told the *Globe and Mail* that Atlantic Canada, in particular, would never be the same. "Paul's view is that if anything is to be done it has to be transformational. It can't be the old ways of doing things. It has to be a transformational investment that is virtually guaranteed to result in more equality between Atlantic Canada and the rest of Canada."

In hindsight, how would you say Paul Martin transformed Atlantic Canada? How about Stephen Harper? Or Justin Trudeau? This can be a hard country to turn.

In 2015, after nine years of Harper, Trudeau promised what he called "sunny ways." Nine years later, I would not say Canada's ways are particularly sunnier. To me, the country is more worried, less confident, and, according to research from the Centre for Media, Technology, and Democracy, measurably more confrontational in its politics. But it would flatter Trudeau unduly to blame him for the decline in social trust or to thank him for saving us from the worst. Any prime minister would have had to govern through COVID-19, Brexit, the Trump presidency, the rise of social media, and a more belligerent China. To a greater extent than he ever anticipated, I think he's had to be a spectator. It would be no different for Poilievre.

One more thing. I think people who are bewildered by Poilievre's sometimes harsh and cutting tone could stand to think harder about why he's that way. In June, during a campaign stop in Montreal, he gave a brief and surprisingly candid interview to a *Montreal Gazette* reporter, Aaron Derfel. It deserves more attention than it's received.

"I think that compassion is measured in results, not in words or gestures," Poilievre said. "So it's not about, you know, standing up, putting your hand on your heart and bursting into tears to plead with people, to make them believe that you care more than the other guy. It's about: what do you actually deliver?"

Derfel pushed a little harder. Why is Poilievre such a "glib put-down artist?"

"I think when politesse is in conflict with the truth, I choose the truth," he replied. "I think we've been too polite for too long with our political class."

I think there are a lot of people who agree with that. That Poilievre speaks to them is no guarantee he'll succeed in power, of course. That'll be a daily struggle, and there will be days when he will need allies he's glibly put down. But is he mad to talk the way he does? Does he represent a threat to some citadel of Canadian propriety that's beyond reproach or question? No and no. ⦸

PAUL WELLS is a Canadian journalist and pundit.

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JUSTICE

The Troubled School for Troubled Teens

Robert Land Academy promised to reform boys into "good citizens." Former students allege it subjected them to years of humiliation, degradation, and abuse

BY RACHEL BROWNE
ILLUSTRATIONS BY ANNISSA MALTHANER

ONE SATURDAY NIGHT in the winter of 1998, an engineer operating an eastbound freight train passing through Burlington, Ontario, spotted two teenage boys lying across the tracks. They were wearing what looked like school uniforms. It turned out they were seventeen-year-old Matt Toppi and sixteen-year-old Christopher Brown, who had run away from Robert Land Academy, a military-style all-boys boarding school near Niagara Falls, about fifty kilometres away. The engineer later told reporters that he saw one of them get up as the train neared. The boy tried pulling his friend off the track, but it was too late. They were killed instantly. Friends later said the two were fleeing for British Columbia—presumably as far from Robert Land Academy as possible.

Both Brown's and Toppi's funerals were marked by a guard of honour. At Brown's, nine cadets, wearing crimson tunics adorned with medals, followed the casket into a church. "Christopher did not have an easy life," said the reverend presiding over the funeral. Toppi's life was also tough; he had difficulty focusing in class and had run-ins with the law in his hometown. "He was definitely troubled," the vice principal of the public school Toppi had previously attended told the *Toronto Star* following the train incident. "That's one of the reasons he was at [RLA]."

RLA's intended goal was to turn young boys into strong leaders and citizens. But in the days following the two teenagers' deaths, former students started opening up to media about the academy. One described it as a "living nightmare," while another confessed to having been subjected to physical harassment in the form of punishments and initiation rites. Many were unable to cope with the school's gruelling regime that mimicked army training. "It made me worse," another student said.

Years later, Brown and Toppi's tragedy had mostly been forgotten by the public. But within RLA's walls, it was woven into the school's culture. Students theorized in hushed tones about what might or might not have happened in the lead-up to the boys' deaths. Staff allegedly used the story as a threat—if runaways were caught, they would be punished with hundreds of push-ups and laps or put on a "suicide watch" and made to sleep on the floor of a common room. "You were made to feel that [the boys who had run away] were cowards," one former head boy who attended the school in the mid 2000s told me under condition of anonymity. "If you try to run away and you're caught, you're getting three days of hard labour." Students could also lose access to calling or going home on their next leave or could receive physical punishment.

Over the past year, The Walrus has learned that nearly a dozen people—former students and a parent—have filed multi-million-dollar lawsuits against, or are planning to sue, RLA over a series of alleged abuses that former students experienced from the 1980s to the present. The allegations include physical and emotional violence by staff, racism, withholding of food, sleep deprivation, and sexual assault by fellow students that they say the school overlooked. The Walrus has obtained numerous statements of claim; the academy has not filed statements of defence.

Martin, who requested to go by only his first name, attended RLA starting in 2006, when he was twelve years old, after struggling in school; his parents believed a place with more structure would help. In his statement of claim, Martin states that, while at RLA, an older student who was tasked with overseeing him repeatedly abused him sexually, verbally, and physically. He is suing RLA for $5 million. The school administrators, Martin alleges, failed to document his abuser's offences, warn teachers and other students about his abuser, and put in place reporting mechanisms and counselling. "They didn't want me to talk to my parents about it," he told me. "I always knew I hated it [there], but I just thought I had to kind of eat shit on the whole matter for a long time."

Staff, he notes in his statement of claim, wilfully did not see the abuse and maintained what he calls "a system…designed to cover-up the existence of such behaviour." Several former students allege in statements of claim as well as in interviews that a culture of fear and abuse was enabled by the school's founder and former headmaster, Scott Bowman, and by other teachers and administrators. In a statement to The Walrus, Robert Land Academy noted, "The safety and well-being of our students is our top priority and these alleged incidents do not reflect the values of the school, past or present," and that the school "will not comment on the specific

allegations or individuals at this time." (I reached out to Bowman for comment via LinkedIn. He declined an interview request and told The Walrus to direct questions to RLA.)

The former students' stories, and their previously unreported lawsuits, echo growing concerns over North America's largely unregulated "troubled teen industry" as mental health and behavioural issues among young people are on the rise, leaving many parents and caregivers desperate for what they are sold as a lifeline to help improve the lives of their children.

Residential school programs for youth with behavioural issues go by many names, including therapeutic boarding schools or adolescent treatment centres. They typically claim to offer a mix of standard education, mental health or behavioural treatment, and wilderness or sports programs. Some youth are sent to these programs by parents or guardians seeking specialized attention for their children, or by child welfare or juvenile detention systems. In Canada and the US, these private institutions have become an industry worth, by some estimates, billions. Canadian caregivers often send their children to reform schools in the United States, where there's a much larger offering: *Huffington Post* reported in 2020 that around 28,000 children and teens in Ontario alone were awaiting admittance to American boarding programs; 200,000 children with "serious mental health issues" were reported to have no access at all to such services in Ontario. Unlike in the US, where private schools are regulated by states, in Canada, there's little to no government oversight of private schools, including those like RLA.

Some former students say RLA's strict military-style regime benefited them by providing them with structure. Others maintain that physical and psychological punishments should never be used against children and that they, in fact, prolong the very issues students were sent to RLA to address. As adults, many have post-traumatic stress disorder or anxiety, in some cases leading to homelessness and criminality. Matthew Lefave, the lawyer representing more than ten clients in separate lawsuits against RLA, says that the school tends to send kids "down a far worse path."

In 1978, twenty-seven-year-old G. Scott Bowman purchased a vacant, rundown barn on 168 acres of farmland in Wellandport on the Niagara Peninsula. After landscaping the grounds and erecting new buildings, he eventually opened Robert Land Academy. Bowman named the school after Captain Robert Land, an eighteenth-century United Empire Loyalist and spy for the British Army who was one of the first British settlers in Hamilton. Bowman, a sixth-generation descendant of Land, became headmaster and positioned the school as a place to turn young boys—those who struggled in public school, had learning disabilities, or had committed crimes—into productive citizens. A 1998 article in the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* describes it as a place for boys who weren't wanted anywhere else. "Where others see a problem, we see a leader," the school's promotional materials later stated. The school began with twenty-eight students, who in the early days called themselves the "Bowman Bunch," growing to around 125 today. Annual tuition (with scholarships available) costs at least $64,000.

RLA mirrors an actual military establishment, inside and out. Major Bowman—as he called himself—boasted a military pedigree that he used to promote the school as a place of order, rigour, and high standards. The campus is modelled after a nineteenth-century British fort, with a parade square in the centre, barracks where the students sleep, and a mess hall. Military-inspired ranks and titles are assigned to everyone at RLA, with "recruits" and "cadets" the lowest and "sergeant" and "warrant officer" the highest. Typically, upon arrival at RLA, students are made to replace their civilian clothing with red uniforms. The first month serves as an initiation period, during which, for some former attendees, some of the harshest forms of punishment and abuse, both by staff and other students, have taken place. One former student said he was hit with a walking stick and forced to have his pubic hair shaved as part of an initiation rite. Wake-up is at 6 a.m. sharp, sometimes earlier, after which students prepare for an inspection of their bed area by a sergeant-major. If the student fails the inspection, consequences could include the sergeant-major throwing their belongings on the floor and physically pushing them. "Some days you would get full-day punishments, including yard work around the school," recalls Anthony Duffney in an interview. He attended RLA from 2003 to 2005, from age thirteen to fifteen, after, he says, his parents became frustrated with his misbehaviour at home.

Martin says that, during his initiation period, he was forced to perform push-ups, and when he didn't do them correctly, a staff member lifted him up and slammed his body to the ground. Students must stand at attention and salute at the request of instructors, most of whom have never served in the military but go by titles such as lieutenant and captain. "We try to take the best from the military and leave the rest," Bowman told the *Toronto Star* in 1995. "We're not turning out soldiers. Our intent is to turn out good citizens."

While the school may not have been turning out soldiers, it also wasn't dealing with adults who could leave at any time. The school accepts students from grades five to twelve, from around eleven years old to around eighteen, and most are sent there by their parents. It's a fraught and formative time, during which traumas, even short-lived ones, can have consequences that linger long after students depart or graduate.

One former RLA student, who is now seventeen, alleged in documents filed at the Human Rights Tribunal of Ontario in 2021 that he experienced emotional and physical abuse as well as anti-Black racism when he attended the school in the fall of 2019. "Upon arrival to the school, I was subjected to cruel and unusual treatment," the boy, who must be kept anonymous because he's a minor, noted. He alleges he was harassed by staff, who would smack books out of his hands while he was reading and call him a "mama's boy";

once, a staff member pushed his knee into his back. "Over and over I was emotionally tortured. Making me feel like I was a prisoner," he continued in a tribunal document. "I was told I could not contact my Father, after asking many times. I was chastised many times and told I was worthless." The boy claimed he was forced to wear a "suit of shame" and he urinated himself while wearing it. "To this day, I still have urination issues." (The Human Rights Tribunal complaint was later abandoned; the former student is now a client of Lefave.)

A version of RLA's parent handbook from the 2019/20 school year includes a page devoted to "Discipline Expectations" that describes how "the purpose of progressive discipline is to change behaviour and to develop self-regulation." Consequences for "poor choices," the guide states, may come in the forms of "laps, physical exercise, loss of privileges, extra chores, suspension from regular duties, loss of leaves and stand downs, or dismissal." It does not mention students facing any type of corporal punishment.

According to a 2010 report by *The Canadian Historical Review*, corporal punishment against children and students was condoned well into the 1960s, a time when children were seen to be subordinate and in need of harsh correction by any authority figure, from parents to religious leaders to teachers. The strap, in particular, was used as a disciplinary weapon in schools across Canada. Reforms to the public school system took place around the 1960s, during a surge of elementary and secondary school enrolment in the postwar period. Teachers and administrators began embracing a more child-centric approach to pedagogy. Corporal punishment was one of the many aspects of the old system that came under intense scrutiny.

In 1968, a report by the Ontario government recommended ending corporal punishment in schools. By 1971, Toronto's board of education became the first in Ontario to prohibit the use of the strap. But physical discipline was not formally abolished from Canadian schools until 2004, when the Supreme Court narrowed down the law, ruling that parents and caregivers may use "corrective force (or physical punishment) that is minor or 'transitory and trifling' in nature" and that "teachers cannot use force for physical punishment under any circumstances." Teachers may be permitted to use "reasonable force," such as removing a child from the classroom, in specific instances.

Research has linked physical punishment against children with long-term negative impacts such as increased aggression, higher rates of anxiety and depression, challenges with emotional regulation, and changes to the brain's development similar to what is seen in those who experience sexual and other forms of severe abuse. Existing learning and behavioural issues can be exacerbated by physical punishment.

I spoke with ten former students, many of whom said that physical punishment by staff and violence among students were regular occurrences and were overlooked by staff. In particular, they spoke about the use of restraint manoeuvres, prohibited by Canadian law, as a disciplinary tactic. "There were always kids that were getting restrained on the ground by staff," says Leon Duperre, who attended RLA from 2009 to 2010, in an interview. Duffney claims he was put in excruciating positions multiple times a year and routinely saw other students endure them. He says staff would grab students' right or left arm and swing it up behind the back so it touched the shoulder blades. "And then they'd put their hand underneath your elbow and just lift until you'd go limp." RLA said in a statement to The Walrus that the school maintains "a clear and strict zero-tolerance policy regarding corporal punishment and the use of physical restraints" but did not comment about these specific allegations.

Evan Holmes attended RLA in his mid teens, from 1998 until 2000, and is suing

Rivers

BY RICARDO STERNBERG

Nuestras vidas son los rios
que van a dar en la mar,
que es el morir
—Jorge Manrique

My father had insisted
he did not want an American funeral,
by which he meant the cheerfulness
and the laughing at anecdotes
the living here tell about the dead.

No. He wanted throats constricted,
speech impeded, eyes rimmed red,
the room brimming with tears.
So I was unsure exactly
whose funeral I was attending,

but in the dream it fell to me
to place the LP of Piaf (or Brel?)
on a turntable beneath the bier
that held his plain pine coffin.
People milled about the church,

waiting for the service to begin.
Then David, a friend, himself dead,
had an urgent matter to discuss:
some properties he owned in Arizona
needed inspection and he wondered

would I be up for the ride west.
Whether this was the same current,
a tributary, or an entirely new dream
didn't matter, for it carried me
out of sleep. My father's funeral?

He was cremated. A mass held
at the Newman Center in Berkeley,
a reception at the Faculty Club.
A slide presentation brought him
from the time he was a baby,

helpless in his mother's arms,
to his last days: a geographer
who had lost his bearings.
Grief was held in check
but haunted my mother's eyes.

A month later, my brother and his wife
took the ashes to the Amazon,
poured them into a small clay pot
bought in the market at Manaus,
and went upriver to the Paraná,

near to where my father spent
a lifetime on research. Leo poured
the ashes into the river, sent us all
a note: *Husband, father, grandfather,*
great-grandfather no longer studies

the Amazon. He is the Amazon.
He told me that as the ashes
mixed slowly with the river,
a storm of bright, noisy perroquets
flew to a nearby branch.

I wasn't there but like to think
the bird racket rose as disobedience
and hope it followed my father
as he swirled all the way downriver
to the mouth of the Amazon

and into the ocean beyond.

From *One River: New and Selected Poems* (Véhicule Press, 2024)

the school. He says he has struggled with mental health issues and homelessness since graduating. He alleges in an interview that he was physically restrained by staff repeatedly—"twist you into a pretzel and hold you so that you can't move," he recalls—and was forced to spend time outside in the winter months as punishment for poor behaviour, something commonly reported by former students. "I left there not caring whether I lived or died," he says.

Former students claim they were not allowed to seal the letters they mailed home, and that phone calls were restricted. Some students suspect both were monitored. (RLA noted in a statement that "staff are not permitted to read students' emails or letters" and that the school "support[s] and encourage[s] regular communication between students and their parents or caregivers.") Isolation and an inability to report can create an environment where abuse can fester, says Sarah Golightley, a social work assistant professor at the University of Strathclyde in Glasgow who researches institutional child abuse in so-called therapeutic boarding schools. This is compounded by "betrayal trauma," through abuse by adults who are supposed to care for you as a child.

Golightley acknowledges that there are cases where a child would benefit from living and learning away from home, but this must be done in ways that are empowering, such as with the child's consent. "I do think there are situations where being outside of the family home in a caring environment is sometimes useful and necessary," says Golightley, herself a survivor of a therapeutic boarding school, "but these legacies of violence are so entrenched that I think it's beyond reform."

In the years leading up to the train tragedy, Bowman and the school were open about their disciplinary tactics and harsh treatment of students. An episode of the CBC's *The Fifth Estate* from 1981 shows young boys struggling to lift cement bricks and another boy running around a soccer field with a backpack weighing upward of thirty-five pounds. "When boys choose to challenge the

structure in a negative way, yes, very clearly the consequences are laid out before them," Bowman tells the host in a sit-down interview.

Nearly a decade later, in the early '90s, a segment of the news program *Canada Tonight* showed Bowman demonstrating how staff used physical restraints against students—years after the provincial report recommended against corporal punishment in schools. "A code of discipline some might regard as draconian," the host states. "You may choose to get into the push-up position under your own steam. Or you may choose not to do that," Bowman says to the interviewer. "If you choose not to do that by the time I count to three, I will put you in that push-up position." When the host asks Bowman how exactly he does that, Bowman smiles and says, "It's really quite simple." The host eggs him on: "Do it!" Bowman places the host's arm behind his back and forces him—albeit lightly for the demonstration—to the ground.

Bowman eventually came under personal scrutiny. According to a 1996 investigation by the *Hamilton Spectator*, Bowman professed links to the Canadian military and frequently pointed to his work as an intelligence officer for NATO and his national security work for "the Israelis" in Lebanon. He claimed that his body bore a bullet hole and 400 stitches as a result of combat. In an interview with the newspaper, a reporter quizzed Bowman about his history and requested a copy of his résumé, which apparently claimed that he had twenty years of service with NATO in Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and Europe. "Checks on the claims came up empty," the reporter concluded. But neither this revelation nor the train tragedy appeared to significantly damage the school's reputation.

But stories did emerge. Days after the train incident, a local doctor told the *Hamilton Spectator* that two students with bone fractures had been left unattended, including one boy who had run away twice before. One of those boys, the doctor said, was "supposed to be carrying around a bag of sand on his back and lying on the ground pulling weeds." Five years later, in 2003, parents of RLA students told the *National Post* their children had been put in isolation rooms for weeks at a time and made to endure group punishments, including forced marches with twenty-pound "lap jackets" at 4 a.m. "They say their children were called 'retards' and 'idiots,'" the article notes, "fed rations and made to spend hours digging ditches at the expense of their studies." Then, one Sunday evening in November 2010, the mother of eighteen-year-old RLA student Donald MacNeil was driving him from Halifax back to the school after a term break. According to CHCH-TV, he jumped out of the car and ran into traffic, where he was struck by an oncoming vehicle and died. (RLA did not comment on these allegations or this incident.)

By 2012, after more than a decade of stories, both public and whispered, negativity around RLA seemed to have been overshadowed by positive news coverage of how the academy had improved the lives of teens. The school seemed eager to focus on what they considered to be the pros of a military-style education, such as strict schedules and physical activity, rather than the hard labour and physical abuse. Bowman, for his part, seemed to no longer showcase the school's disciplinary code as he had in years past. "Tough love turns students around," reads the headline of one 2012 *Toronto Star* article, which noted that nearly 70 percent of RLA's students had been diagnosed with attention deficit disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, oppositional defiant disorder—ADD, ADHD, ODD—or learning disabilities. ("We welcome a diverse range of students," RLA noted in a statement to The Walrus, "representing various nationalities, and varying abilities. The proportion of students who have learning disabilities can vary by age.")

While the positive coverage continued, the school was able to build an esteemed board of governors and supporters, with Tim Hudak, former Ontario Progressive Conservative leader and current CEO of the Ontario Real Estate Association, currently serving as chair. Much of the rest of the board comprises current and former police officers. In 2023, former Ontario health minister and deputy premier Christine Elliott received an award from the school at its annual gala.

But as RLA's reputation continued on a positive trajectory, numerous people began posting on a Reddit thread called r/TroubledTeens, swapping stories of abuse or harm they allegedly experienced or witnessed at the school. "I saw countless restraints and maybe like one or two were justified, but usually they were for any kind of disobedience if the staff was in a bad enough mood," one user, seemingly a former student, wrote in 2023. "Sure I did well academically but holy hell, nothing like ODing after you graduate because all you want to do is die. Never ended up going to university that much is for sure," another person, who noted he attended the school from 2008 to 2011, posted. Others, however, spoke highly of the school. "The school helps a lot of kids become men and it isn't easy," wrote someone who says he attended from 2002 to 2004, "it pushes you to your breaking point and then some but builds on that to grow self esteem and mental health."

Last year, Martin found community in these forums, he says: he began commenting on Reddit and started groups on Facebook to connect with other former students and to put them in touch with his lawyer, Lefave. It could be years before the lawsuits come to a conclusion, whether by trial or settlement. Martin's mother is also suing the school, for $2 million in financial, mental, physical, psychological, and emotional damages, for allegedly failing in their duty toward her son, whom she sent to the school believing he was going to receive a high-quality education that would lead to success in life. She told me she blames the school's "depravity and brutality" for her son's ongoing trauma and inability to properly care for himself. Martin has struggled with substance use since his late teens and has been in and out of jail.

"A lot of the school staff refuse to acknowledge the truth about how bad [RLA] is," Martin, now twenty-nine, recently told me. "People lost their entire childhood there."

RACHEL BROWNE is a contributing writer for The Walrus.

SOCIETY

THE AGO VS. WANDA NANIBUSH

Why did Canada's top art museum push out a visionary curator?

BY JASON MCBRIDE
PHOTOGRAPHY BY ROBIN GARTNER

Last year, Wanda Nanibush, then the curator of Indigenous art for the Art Gallery of Ontario, was in New York City, serving on the jury for the Jane Lombard Prize for Art and Social Justice. She was doing events associated with the prize when, on October 7, Hamas-led militants breached the fence separating Gaza from Israel, some 1,200 Israelis were killed, and more than 200 were taken to Gaza as hostages.

Nanibush was stunned—and fearful. Long before she entered the art world, she was a political activist and, from her teenage years on, has been involved in the Palestinian struggle for self-determination and sovereignty. She's visited the West Bank dozens of times and has many close friends and colleagues in the region.

Nanibush stayed in New York a while longer and, in the wake of Israel's counter-attack, watched the protests that began there. In the days and weeks that followed, she posted about Gaza on her private Instagram account. One post mentioned the 1,000 children who had, by that point, been killed. (That number is now over 10,000, per latest reports.) Another defined settler colonialism—whereby colonizers displace and replace an indigenous population—and argued that "all violent resistance to settler colonialism is met with far worse and technologically destructive violence that is seen as justified as self-protection."

Then, in early November, Nanibush disappeared from public view. Her Instagram account went dark, and her name was scrubbed from the AGO's website. Shows that she had planned for months were cancelled. The AGO, which had formerly touted Nanibush's work during her seven years at the museum, issued no public statement.

The Shop Bell

BY MARY DALTON

A warm mellow tone—
lucky the cow that sported it,
ambling in meadows.

Over the door, dangling,
it announces an entry,
calls her from the kitchen.

A few minutes spent
chewing the fat:
the weather, new baby, or
a son home from Boston.
The rhubarb just coming.

Cheddar-hunk chopped
from the block, weighed,
encased in brown paper,
white string unspooled
from its cylinder—
a twist, a flick of the wrist,
string snapped, a flourish,
hand faster than eye—
a bow—
there you go!

A customer leaving,
the bell sounds out its goodbye,
in its own way a blessing—
the transaction marked kinder
than those signalled by
church bells or school bells.

Tucked in a drawer,
the bell's flared mouth now mute—
yet it
speaks volumes, resounds.

From *Interrobang* (Véhicule Press, 2024)

It soon emerged that Nanibush had abruptly, completely, left the AGO. In statements the museum and its director, Stephan Jost, would eventually release, her departure was described as a mutual decision. But in conversations with me, others would use stronger language—"squeezed out" or "obliged to leave." While the precise nature of what transpired between Nanibush and the AGO senior leadership remains hazy, a clarifying narrative soon took shape.

From the beginning of her tenure at the museum, Nanibush's public views on Palestinian justice, expressed on her social media and elsewhere, had irritated powerful members of the board of trustees. She'd been reprimanded before. Three years ago, the museum adopted a new social media policy that, while vague, effectively said anything staffers posted was an extension of the AGO. Nanibush felt the policy was directed expressly at her and was furious. No other staffers, she felt, were being policed as she was. But in the fractious, emotionally charged time after October 7, any advocacy for Palestine risked being interpreted as antisemitic. Those same influential trustees—just two or three out of a board of twenty-seven—could now use Nanibush's posts as an excuse to remove her from the museum.

A number of people I spoke to—past and current staffers, committee members, artists, and independent curators—insisted that the AGO's expansion was a major factor in the tide turning against Nanibush. In 2023, the AGO announced a $100 million, 40,000-square-foot, five-floor addition that was widely considered to be Jost's top priority. Canada Goose's Dani Reiss purchased naming rights to the expansion for $35 million, but Jost still needed to raise the balance of his budget. He couldn't afford to alienate any wealthy trustee, and many believed Nanibush's outspokenness did just that. "Wanda's speaking out threatened Stephan's ability to get the money for his building," one staffer told me. (Jost has denied this, saying he had already secured the majority of the funding.)

The details of the agreement Nanibush negotiated with the AGO remain confidential, including compensation terms and whether she is permitted to ever write or speak about the experience. (A gallery spokesperson would say only that any ideas Nanibush had in development at the time she left "were her own and that she may continue those projects elsewhere.") An open letter published by Jost on the AGO website on November 30 ostensibly addressed her exit, but in the vaguest of terms. It never mentioned Nanibush once.

For many—Indigenous communities, for sure, but also those in the more progressive precincts of the international art world and the majority of her colleagues at the museum—Nanibush's departure was a catastrophe. Prior to her arrival, the AGO, like many museums, tended to treat Indigenous culture as something ossified and static. Nanibush changed that completely. She gave centre stage to contemporary Indigenous artists, inviting performances, artwork, and ceremonies rarely seen in the AGO's galleries. From programming to catalogues, she insisted on the art's relevance, vitality, and urgency. Under her leadership, nearly one-third of the museum was dedicated

to Indigenous art, leading the *New York Times* to call her, in 2018, "one of the most powerful voices for Indigenous culture in the North American art world." But Nanibush became a champion for more than just Indigenous culture. She was a vector for anyone historically overlooked by the museum: Black artists, queer artists, non-canonical and marginal artists of every stripe.

To some, Nanibush's ouster represented significant failures: of reconciliation, of free speech protections, of the autonomy of our public cultural institutions. The AGO had, for years, seemed to be moving toward a different, more inclusive, and diverse model. Those efforts were now at risk of being seen as superficial and short-lived. "I have great respect for Wanda Nanibush," the artist Rebecca Belmore told me. "The AGO? None whatsoever. That's all gone."

Nanibush didn't lie low for long. By mid-November, she'd revived her Instagram account, and a couple months later, she was participating in public events like Gaza Lives, an afternoon of readings and music, which also included Sarah Polley. In April, I saw her at the Images Festival, where she was in conversation with her friend, Palestinian curator Nasrin Himada. A few weeks later, she agreed to speak with me, first on the phone and then in person, at a tiny Persian restaurant in Kensington Market. These conversations were the first she'd had with any journalist since her departure.

"Growing up a foster kid, a native kid, it's in your blood to see who's being hurt and try to understand and speak up for them."

At Images, Nanibush was feisty and wry. She wore a black dress, silver boots, and dangling watermelon earrings. She swore often and laughed even more. But when we met, she'd just returned from two weeks in Turkey, and jet lag had left her relatively subdued. The toll of the past few months was also evident. Just as the drama at the AGO was unfolding, two of her siblings passed away, a brother was diagnosed with cancer, and she herself underwent surgery and had to be hospitalized. When *Moving the Museum*, the book she co-authored with the AGO's curator of Canadian art, Georgiana Uhlyarik, won the 2023 Toronto Book Award, she wasn't well enough to attend the ceremony.

Nanibush still couldn't talk about the specific circumstances of her departure from the museum, but she was happy to discuss the unusual path she took to get there. Growing up, aside from Woodland-style painters like Norval Morrisseau, she had little experience of modern Indigenous art. But in 1992, when she was sixteen, she travelled alone, from Barrie, Ontario, to Ottawa, to see two art exhibitions that changed the course of her life. *Land, Spirit, Power*, at the National Gallery, with its paintings, mixed media installations, and collage, was one of the first major shows in Canada to present Indigenous art as contemporary rather than historical. *Indigena*, at the Canadian Museum of Civilization (now the Canadian Museum of History), was a more bluntly political survey. Taken together, the two shows represented for Nanibush a complete, powerful vision of Indigenous art, one that was resistant, resurgent, unpredictable, and pointing toward the future.

At *Indigena*, Nanibush was particularly moved by a complex, confrontational installation by Joane Cardinal-Schubert that addressed residential schools and the foster care system. At the time, the early '90s, these subjects were far from mainstream Canadian conversation. For Nanibush, they had violently and tragically warped her young life. Born on Beausoleil First Nation in Georgian Bay, Ontario, she was the youngest of eighteen children. Her mother, Caroline, had been sent to residential school, and when Nanibush was just five years old, she and two of her brothers, along with nieces and nephews—all the kids who were in the house that day—were forcibly removed and put into foster homes off reserve. "We were taken because we were poor," she said. Over the next decade, Nanibush would live with ten different families. "It was a brutal experience," she said.

Books and political activism provided some refuge. The Russians were an early love—Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky—as was *Our Lady of the Flowers*, Jean Genet's experimental autobiographical novel. She attended her first protest when she was fourteen, against the Gulf War. That same year, she visited a unity camp at Kanehsatà:ke and, on a school trip to Toronto, gave a talk about racism and education in front of 450 people at the Royal York Hotel. By her late teens, she'd read deeply about injustice around the world: in Iraq, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. "There are so many places in the world where we're doing shitty, shitty stuff," she said to me. "Growing up a foster kid, a native kid, it's kind of in your blood, of course, to see who's being hurt and try to understand and speak up for them." She dreamed of one day becoming a writer herself; by the time she was nineteen, she'd written three novels.

Over the next several years, Nanibush moved constantly—to Montreal, Peterborough, Ottawa, and Toronto—racking up degrees in philosophy, film, and visual studies. In Toronto, where she eventually settled, she picked up gigs at increasingly high-profile arts organizations, including the Ontario Arts Council and the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery at the University of Toronto. She shuttled easily between different artistic and political worlds, blurring the boundaries between creation, activism, and curation. She programmed films, made installations, was a prolific critic and essayist. For three years, she was an organizer and water carrier with Idle No More. She became known for her energy, creativity, and an uncommon forcefulness. "She really knocks your socks off," the artist Jamelie Hassan said.

By 2015, a couple of people at the AGO had reached out to Nanibush about working there. Her unusual résumé and broad

knowledge were appealing, but the museum also wanted her, Nanibush said, "to criticize what they were doing." That year, Canada was reimagining its relationship with its first peoples: Idle No More had gathered considerable momentum, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission had issued its calls to action, and Justin Trudeau was elected prime minister, pledging a more just and equitable partnership between First Nations and the federal government. Every cultural institution, including the AGO, was finally grappling with issues of diversity and inclusion.

Nanibush wasn't quite sure a museum was the place she wanted to be. She was busy and enjoyed her independence. But she also saw a considerable opportunity. Given shifting societal attitudes, and her own stubbornness, she believed she could dramatically reorient the AGO's relationship to Indigenous art: "I could see that there was so much space in there for change, and that our community needed it." That year, she took a contract position as a guest curator, and within three years, she was a permanent staffer.

Nanibush wasted no time bringing change. The first show she curated, *Toronto: Tributes + Tributaries, 1971–1989*, brought together scores of Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists and instantly signalled her radical ambition: among the first works visitors encountered was a photo by Haudenosaunee photographer Jeff Thomas and an audio recording by Black poet Lillian Allen. Then, in 2017, she and Uhlyarik were appointed co-curators of the newly formed Indigenous and Canadian art department. They adopted a governance model based on treaties between First Nations people and European settlers that were foundational to the creation of Canada. Those treaties, of course, were often broken, but Nanibush and Uhlyarik, as co-leads, worked as equals in a spirit of collaboration and non-interference.

Together, they redesigned the galleries thematically, eschewing the chronology that Nanibush felt privileged colonial art history. All wall texts were rendered in both English and Anishinaabemowin, Inuit work was in Inuktitut, and labels indicated if a work was created on unceded lands. There were other firsts: a seal feast, attended by thousands, was held in the middle of the museum. Belmore became the first Indigenous artist to receive a major show. In the fall of 2018, Nanibush organized the first *aabakwaad*, an annual gathering of Indigenous artists, curators, and writers from around the world that she would, a few years later, bring to the Venice Biennale. In 2022, while the rest of the museum coped with pandemic-related budget cuts, Uhlyarik and Nanibush's department expanded—Taqralik Partridge was named associate curator of Indigenous art, with a focus on Inuit art.

Michelle Jacques, currently the chief curator at Saskatoon's Remai Modern, began her career at the AGO. She remembered watching Nanibush with admiration. Jacques, who is Black, had tried for years to make the AGO less elitist—in her words, to engage "more diverse publics"—and been frustrated by the museum's glacial evolution. It's one of North America's largest art museums, with approximately 600 employees and 400 volunteers. It also has a sharply defined hierarchy, in which the senior executive and board, not curators, decide on policy, budgets, and programming. But Nanibush managed, in a very short time, to turn things upside down and inside out. "One of her colleagues described her as somebody who smashed through walls," Jacques said. "And then told everybody else to hurry up and come through."

Jost was appointed director in April 2016, right as Nanibush was hitting her stride. Over the next few years, she said, he would be a staunch champion of her work. On a stage at the Venice Biennale, he stood up and said, "With Wanda, all you need to do is say yes." It wasn't selfless, of course. At a time of growing racial reckoning, Nanibush was transforming the museum into a uniquely progressive institution. "I think he recognized that the AGO could be a leader by allowing Wanda to have authority and power to make change," Jacques said.

"A colleague described her as somebody who smashed through walls. And then told everybody else to hurry up and come through."

A number of people, however, didn't want the AGO to change. Or at least not in the ways Nanibush was pushing for. She didn't always stick to budgets and sometimes appeared to shrug off the practical considerations that went into mounting a show, exasperating an already overworked staff. Some of the gallery guides, who included women who'd been with the museum a long time and represented a portion of the donor base, bristled at her innovations, and they weren't afraid to let Jost know. When Nanibush and Uhlyarik decided to retitle the 1929 Emily Carr painting *Indian Church* as *Church in Yuquot Village*—the original title, they said, denigrated and discriminated—they were inundated with angry letters from the public. Even Robert Houle, a good friend of Nanibush's, and whose 2022 retrospective she curated, told the *New York Times* that the retitling was "political correctness."

For Nanibush, the fundamental issue was that her changes frightened some people both inside and outside the museum. "We were bringing in artists and art that they weren't used to," she said. "Having conversation around race and colonialism that they're not used to. I think all of that is scary because it challenges people's identity as Canadians."

Then there was Israel and Palestine. In May 2016, Nanibush travelled to the region for the first time, with Hassan, for a conference in Bethlehem called "Art and Resistance." Nanibush loved the place, its beauty and people, but she was also appalled by what she calls "the daily humiliations" of Palestinians. "Colonialism in Canada is still really strong," she told me, "but not so nakedly violent as it is there. It always makes

me think of our family members and what they went through when it was harsher."

A few months later, Nanibush wrote about the trip in *Canadian Art* magazine. She wrote admiringly about a couple of local artists, drew parallels between Indigenous and Palestinian experiences of occupation, and described the pomegranate and olive trees still surprisingly thriving in a confiscated Palestinian village as "sites of resistance." Soon after the essay was published, Jost called Nanibush into his office. In the meeting, according to Nanibush, Jost told her that the essay had upset some of the AGO's trustees, though he didn't say who. Nanibush told Jost that she hadn't written anything that wasn't true, that she wasn't going to apologize, and that she wasn't going to stop thinking and working in this way. When she asked if she was being terminated or censored, he said no. The meeting concluded with Jost requesting that, if Nanibush planned to publish anything similar, she give the gallery advance warning so they could prepare. (When asked about this meeting, Jost said, "The AGO does not comment on personnel matters.")

Nanibush left his office, still with her job and, generally speaking, with Jost's support for her curatorial work. But she also knew that this specific subject was going to come up again. Over time, she would connect certain dots; her particular criticism of Israel was being singled out, she felt, specifically because she was Indigenous. "I thought it was just a fear of what I was writing," she said, "but no, it's a fear of who I am."

ABOVE
Art Gallery of Ontario employees and OPSEU union members strike in March 2024.

IN THE WEEKS and months after Nanibush's departure, artists quit committees at the AGO and pulled out of programs and exhibitions; other cultural organizations dissolved partnerships with the museum; staffers—Partridge, most notably—left. Thousands of Indigenous, Canadian, and international artists, academics, and culture workers signed various open letters in support of Nanibush. The Indigenous Curatorial Collective, comprising eleven Indigenous artists and culture workers, sent Jost a letter titled "Let Wanda Speak," demanding that the AGO release her from the legal restrictions preventing her from discussing her ouster. The day after Nanibush left for good, Uhlyarik went into the museum and removed the long wall text that spelled out the nation-to-nation relationship they'd adopted. The treaty had been broken.

Much of this discussion around Nanibush and the AGO turned on conflicting questions of safety—the safety of those living in Israel and Gaza, of course, but, closer to home, the safety of those who chose to protest and those who felt threatened by that protest, the safety of an institution's staff versus the safety of the people in charge of that institution. There was no doubt who was more vulnerable in these relationships.

PHOTO BY COLE BURSTON / THE CANADIAN PRESS

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But that didn't lessen the ferocity with which each claim was fought.

Two moments in Nanibush's story illustrated the ways those claims collided. One of the projects she brought to the AGO was Indigenous Fashion Arts, a biennial festival scheduled to open in May 2024. With Nanibush gone, the IFA's executive and artistic director, Sage Paul, felt it impossible to proceed and told Jost she was pulling the event. Jost invited Paul to discuss the matter further. She went, along with Nanibush, the Indigenous Screen Office's Kerry Swanson, also the IFA's co-founder and strategic adviser, and Jason Ryle, the festival's board chair. The IFA team went into the meeting looking for two things: one, a precise explanation for why Nanibush was no longer with the museum, and, two, assurances that the hundred Indigenous artists they were bringing to the AGO, most of whom, the IFA felt, shared Nanibush's views on settler colonialism, would be safe from censorship or attack.

In the end, according to Paul, Jost could provide neither. Instead, he admitted that Nanibush had done nothing wrong and that her Instagram posts had not been tantamount to hate speech. AGO staff and board had experienced a "trauma response" to October 7, Paul recalled him saying—they were in an "attack mode," and that response "landed on Wanda." The AGO, he added, was "an unsafe place for her." Paul told Jost that Nanibush had been attacked because she was Indigenous, and asked him how other Indigenous artists could trust they'd be protected. How could they stay after someone they loved and trusted had been treated this way? "Because, honestly, if you don't, the AGO will be set back five years," Jost responded. Paul and her team were unmoved. They ultimately left, with the AGO providing undisclosed financial compensation, and relocated the festival to the Eaton Centre and Toronto Metropolitan University.

It's conceivable that the context for Nanibush's departure might not have become public were it not for a letter sent to Jost that leaked mid-November. Written by the directors of Israel Museums and Arts, Canada, it began, "We have been down this road before. As you likely heard, Wanda Nanibush has resumed posting inflammatory, inaccurate rants against Israel," and went on to dispute Nanibush's characterizations of the country as a colonizer and to question her bona fides as a curator.

The letter ended by asking the AGO to implement mandatory antisemitism training for staff and to adopt the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's definition of antisemitism, which argues that holding Israel to a standard not demanded of other democratic nations is antisemitic. The government of Canada as well as hundreds of other countries, cities, and universities have adopted this definition, but it's not without controversy: even the definition's creator, American lawyer and avowed Zionist Kenneth Stern, has repeatedly complained that it's too frequently deployed to suppress legitimate criticism of Israel.

The letter didn't explicitly ask for Nanibush to be removed. But its ire certainly rhymed with the displeasure of the trustees who wanted Nanibush out. And with the names of those trustees kept secret, IMAAC became, for supporters of Nanibush, the villain in the story—particularly Sara Angel, IMAAC's most high-profile director.

Angel is the founder and executive director of the Art Canada Institute, an educational charity, and also a volunteer member of the AGO's Indigenous and Canadian Curatorial Committee. After the letter leaked, a number of artists and scholars immediately cut ties with the ACI. When the charity launched a new book in May, several protesters interrupted the proceedings. Angel did not respond to my specific questions about Nanibush or the ACI but told me in an email, "Regarding the IMAAC letter, I co-signed it as someone with a PhD on Nazi-era history. I teach university courses on how starting in 1933, speech throughout Europe that was harmful to Jews led to the death of 6 million in the Holocaust. In mid-October 2023, just days after the wake of the greatest massacre

of Jews since the Holocaust, IMAAC asked Stephan Jost to give AGO staff anti-semitism training."

But long before October 7, IMAAC had sought to police Israel's critics in the Toronto art world. In 2021, after more than 250 people were killed in Gaza during a battle between Hamas and Israel, over 1,000 Canadian artists joined a boycott of Toronto's Koffler Centre of the Arts, urging the art gallery to divest from the United Jewish Appeal Federation, a key supporter. IMAAC blacklisted artists and artist-run centres that supported the boycott, and it demanded that the Ontario Arts Council revoke funding to all organizations that had joined. In its 2022 newsletter, IMAAC tied the protest to the global boycott, divestment, and sanctions campaign against Israel and told supporters, "We believe there are effective ways to promote peace and coexistence between Jews and Palestinians. Unfortunately BDS wants Israel to disappear and anyone who is associated with Israel to be ostracized."

In late March, five months after Nanibush's departure, the AGO went on strike. The job action wasn't a direct response, but it made clear the larger discontent within the museum's walls. A long-time staffer told me they had never seen morale so low. "It's very bad," they said. The strike lasted a little over a month, and throughout, the union and staffers frequently pointed out the vast gulf between Jost's and his employees' salaries, while also drawing attention to the cost of the expansion—a sore point with employees who already felt overtaxed and underpaid.

At a town hall meeting, held right after the strike concluded, the first question from a staff member to Jost was this: "Mr. Director, when are you going to tender your resignation?" Jost didn't resign, but in late June, twelve staffers were quietly laid off, with Jost writing in an email that this was the result of "a restructuring that the AGO needed to do for financial and operational reasons."

This economic uncertainty underpins the Nanibush episode. The AGO, like so many beleaguered Canadian cultural organizations and institutions—from Hot Docs to Just for Laughs—is navigating shrinking audiences and diminished government support. And like those other organizations, it relies both on corporate sponsors and private donors whose values may not align with those of the artists they support and who are also able to wield undue influence. This funding crisis was brought into sharp relief after October 7, with many artists and activists pressuring Hot Docs, Contact Photography Festival, and the Giller Prize to cut ties with Scotiabank over its investment in Israel-based weapons manufacturer Elbit Systems.

A number of people told me that Jost had been between a rock and a hard place. Choosing to protect Nanibush meant possibly losing significant financial support. Choosing to side with the trustees meant sacrificing a well-known and valuable staffer, embarrassing the museum, and tacitly supporting Israel. It's difficult to know how much long-term damage Jost's choice has inflicted on the AGO. While some members of the public and the art community continue to boycott the

museum, most people have moved on. In May, Jacques, the Remai chief curator, attended a curatorial conference in San Francisco, where the majority of participants were American. The AGO's name, she said, kept coming up. Not because of Nanibush but because the museum remained an attractive venue. "In terms of their big-sibling organizations, the AGO is going to be able to find partners and collaborators, no problem," Jacques said.

For the local and global Indigenous communities, it's another story. It will likely be many years, and certainly a new director, before a major Indigenous curator agrees to work there again. When I asked Eli Hirtle, a filmmaker and spokesperson for the Indigenous Curatorial Collective, if the museum could repair its relationship with his community, he said not under the current leadership. "I don't think expending any more energy or resources towards the AGO is wise at this point," he said.

The AGO seems ready to move on too. Right around the time that Nanibush was leaving the AGO, the National Gallery of Canada appointed a new director and CEO, Jean-François Bélisle, who publicly questioned previous efforts at decolonization. "I'm interested in building something," he was quoted as saying in an article, "not de-building it." Jennifer Smith, director of the National Indigenous Media Arts Coalition, argued that thinking like this, and what happened with Nanibush, suggested that the Canadian art world had a limit to how far it would go. "Maybe there's a cap on the energy these institutions are willing to put into Indigenous art," she told me.

Nanibush's decolonization of the AGO, however, did exactly what Bélisle wants: it introduced new ways of seeing and thinking that the museum had previously been blind to. It took nothing away from what the AGO previously privileged—culture's not a zero-sum game—but rather fashioned the museum into a richer, more complex, more surprising place.

Now, Nanibush is taking her energy elsewhere. Once again, she's moving between places and mediums, with much of her new work happening far from the AGO—far, even, outside of Canada. She's put together another edition of *aabakwaad*, the international Indigenous art festival, that will take place this fall in Brisbane. In January, she'll be a visiting professor at the City University of New York. She is part of a team curating *Counterpublic*, the massive civic art exhibition that takes place in St. Louis every three years.

In between all this, there are documentary films, a book, new shows. Gaza is never far from her mind either—she has only become more vocal since leaving the museum, speaking out on Instagram, at conferences and festivals. "I still have lots going on," she told me. "I still have the life I always had. I think I always knew that if I have to quit or be fired for making a moral choice, I would. So I kept one foot out the door to protect myself and my decisions. Because if you are so dependent, you can't make an independent choice."

JASON MCBRIDE is a Toronto-based writer and editor. His first book, *Eat Your Mind: The Radical Life and Work of Kathy Acker*, was published in 2022.

FICTION

Extermination

BY SUE MURTAGH
ILLUSTRATION BY MATTHEW GAGNON

WITH THE KIDS AT basketball, it's an opportune time to fight about money, but neither of them has the energy or the will to continue. Instead, Richie drives to the gym, or so he claims, and Marina makes a batch of smoothies for later, dumping blueberries, yogurt, and whey powder into the blender without measuring. The smoothies began as a weekend treat—her idea, her fault—but have morphed into another daily chore that no one notices but everyone expects. Only the frozen fruit varies.

From the moment her eyes opened much too early, due to their inadequate blackout drapes, it was "internet bundle" this and "grocery budget" that coming out of her husband's mouth. Then he yammered about the price of the winter coat and boots she'd bought on sale.

"Family funds, major purchases," he'd complained, as if she didn't also have a paycheque electronically deposited into their joint account twice a month.

Saturday has barely begun, and she is already exhausted. *Crawl back into bed*, her body begs.

And then she discovers a mouse in her kitchen sink. She is about to rinse out the Vitamix pitcher and jumps back, startled, when she spies it. The thing skitters beneath her hands and circles the basin of the shiny sink as if it's an Indy racetrack. Marina doesn't think, just reacts. She grips the sixty-four-ounce glass pitcher in two hands, raises it above the sink, and brings it down hard and fast.

The creature disappears under the raised lip of the pitcher's base. A four-pointed blade inside the pitcher obscures her view, but Marina can see splayed, scrawny legs through the clear glass. She places the pitcher on the counter, reaches for her reading glasses on the windowsill, and examines the specimen in her kitchen sink. Her corrected vision brings the mouse into sharp focus. She has a clear view of its beady eyes. Open, staring.

One tiny, hairless foot wriggles.

No choice now, can't let the thing suffer. This time, she pauses, considers, adjusts the direction of attack, calculates where the bottom lip of the jug must land. Takes her time because this mouse isn't going anywhere.

Her aim is perfect. The bottom edge of the family-sized glass pitcher, it turns out, is an effective, bloodless guillotine. It breaks the neck without puncturing the skin. There's a dent in the mouse's torso from the impact of the opposite edge, and all foot movement has ceased.

She realizes that her blender manoeuvre must have worked like one of those old-school spring-loaded snappers.

"I'm the trap today, you little bastard," she says to the lifeless creature. "That's me."

She has always had a complicated relationship with mice.

MARINA AND IZZY were hungover when they toured the North End flat. The night before, they'd made the rounds on Argyle Street in downtown Halifax after Marina broke up with her boyfriend, Richie. Again.

"Hope the third time's a charm," Izzy had said, over egg rolls and chicken fried rice at two in the morning.

The apartment smelled like what it was—a dump where a trio of twenty-year-old males lived and a fourth crashed on the couch. The guys had moved out, but my goodness, what they left behind: old socks, random dirty cutlery, donair remnants, congealed Kraft Dinner on mismatched plates in one of the bedrooms.

The landlord opened all the windows before they arrived, but it didn't help. You can't disguise the smell of unwashed, worn again, and still unwashed T-shirts. Of rotting garbage hanging in a plastic bag on a kitchen doorknob. The aroma of nocturnal activities, solo and duo, hung in the air.

Joey, the landlord, was a cousin of a friend. The rent paid his mortgage. He wasn't much older than Marina and Izzy. It was the Labour Day weekend, and they needed an apartment before the fall term. Joey told them the flat was empty but not yet cleaned. If they wanted to see it before anyone else, this was the time.

"Great location, lots of potential," said Joey, wannabe real estate mogul. Izzy liked that the bedrooms were about equal size, so no disputes over who got what. Marina liked the natural light streaming into the living room, sun dappling the maple floor.

But Jesus, the stench. She thought she would puke.

"Smells like something died in here," she said.

Joey promised he'd scrub out the flat and they could move in next weekend.

"You better," said Izzy and suggested they go to a nearby tavern to sign the lease.

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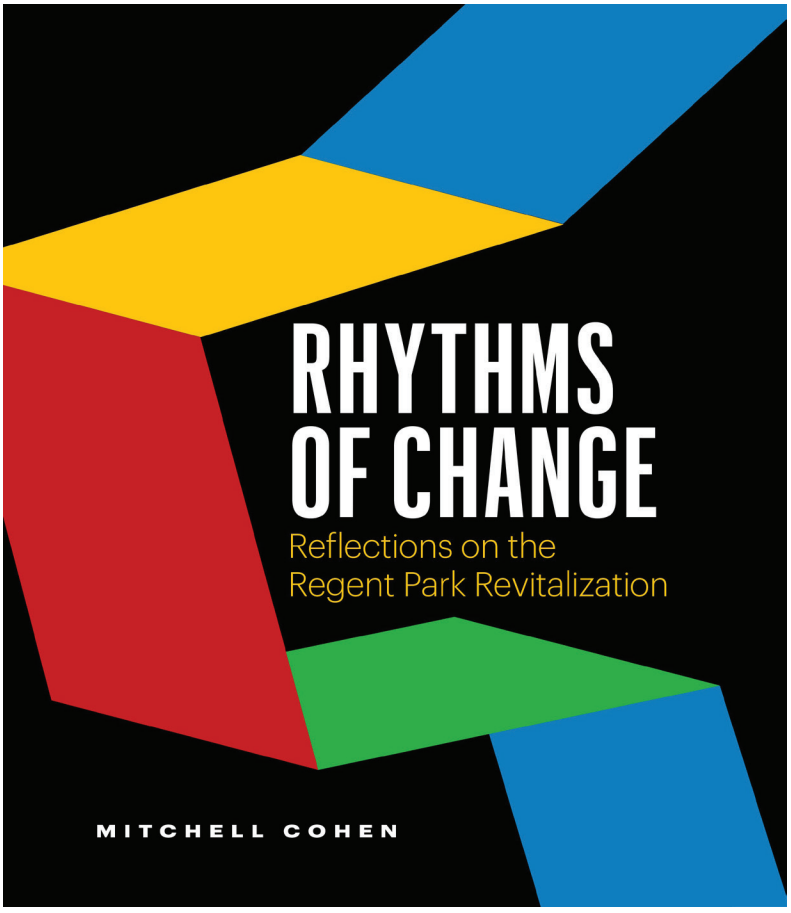

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On moving day, Marina carried a box of her mother's old pots and dishes into the kitchen. The stovetop was filthy. Joey or whatever cut-rate cleaner he hired had shoved tinfoil covers onto burners that were blackened with grease and baked-on food. She opened the oven door. Looked like chunks of charcoal. Had those guys dumped the remains of a hibachi? She poked the blackened bits and looked more closely. Charred fur. A tail. More fur, more tails. She slammed it shut. Tried to yell but it came out as a squeak.

"Izzy. Izzy. Izzy."

Marina found her in the driveway unloading a box of books and dragged her into the kitchen.

"What's the panic?"

Marina pointed to the stove. Her friend opened the oven door, peered into the darkness.

"Gross," said Izzy and shoved her head in to get a closer look. "Where's that box with my rubber gloves?"

"Do you not see what I see?" said Marina.

"Good idea. We should take a picture." Izzy was going into second-year law school. "We can get a rent cut from that asshole. Breach of contract."

"Screw this," said Marina. "I'm out."

"Don't be such a baby," said Izzy. "Where's my Polaroid?"

Marina slept in her old twin bed at her parents' place that night. She sat on her floral bedspread and read magazines, permitted her mother to serve her grilled cheese with tomato soup for supper. After her parents went to bed, Marina went to the corner store, where she bought a large bag of ripple chips, a jar of onion dip, a pint of chocolate ice cream, and a family-size bag of Skittles. When she got home, she changed into pyjamas and set herself up in the den. She rearranged the couch cushions to make a backrest and settled in to watch *The Tonight Show* and *Letterman*, working her way through the chips and candy, then the ice cream. Salty, sweet, crunchy, creamy. When she was done, she stuffed the empty packages into her knapsack and shoved it in her closet.

Izzy phoned a few days later with news. She'd crafted a letter to Joey that included the phrase "incinerated vermin." The letter helped her negotiate a rent cut of $120 a month, plus a visit from a pest control company.

"My advice? Just see this through. We'll have fun."

When he opened the door, she couldn't get the words out. Had to choose between speaking and breathing.

Marina could hear the living room TV blare downstairs as her parents watched the late news on the CBC. They were either going deaf or making themselves deaf.

"Remember, your name is on the lease, with mine," said Izzy. "It's a legally binding document."

MARINA STARTED TO BLEED in the predawn hours of day five of her honeymoon. The cramps woke her up with a pain that rumbled like distant thunder and then closed in at regular intervals. They were staying at a bed-and-breakfast in Lévis, taking a twelve-minute ferry ride across the St. Lawrence River to Quebec City every day to save on hotel costs. The breakfast of croissant and cappuccino that Marina had imagined turned out to be plastic-wrapped cheese slices on factory bread, with warmish coffee. She couldn't sort out if the problem was her unrealistic expectations or the breakfast itself. What should you expect for forty bucks a night?

The room was so tiny that their bed was pushed up against the wall. A scratched maple chest of drawers blocked the bottom of the bed, so she had to climb over her husband to get to the bathroom. Richie didn't wake up. He was a heavy sleeper.

The bathroom floor was covered in black and white octagonal tiles. Marina peeled off the red lace panties from her wedding shower and sat on the toilet. She leaned over, held herself in her arms, and studied the pattern of the floor.

This bathroom window must face east, thought Marina a few hours later, as she watched the sun rise. How long would it be before Richie woke and noticed she wasn't lying next to him?

The pain finally drove her into the bedroom. She turned on the harsh overhead light and nudged her new husband.

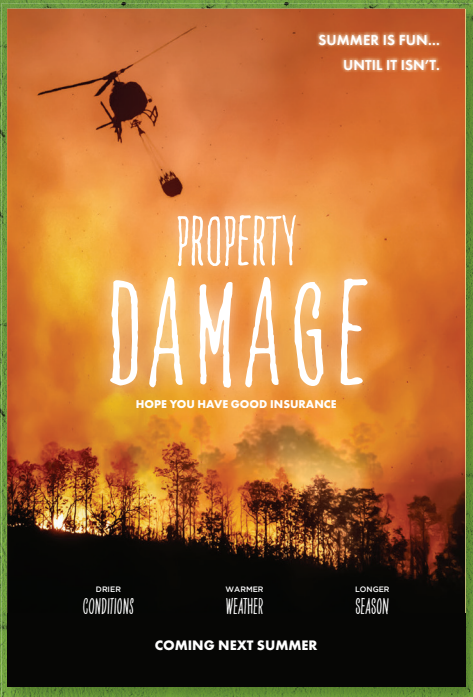
"We need to get to the hospital."

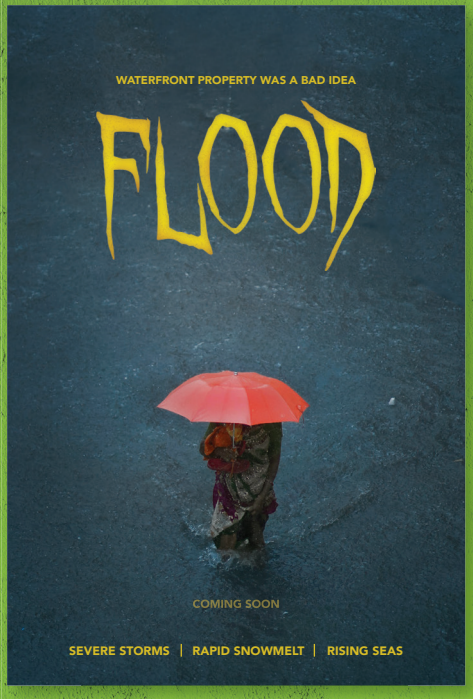
"THIS IS NATURE'S WAY," said the doctor with a kind, sad smile as the sun set that evening. His English was impeccable, and there was nothing to criticize about the treatment Marina got. She was numb from the waist down, drowsy with mild sedation. It was considered a minor procedure, so she was free to leave after a few hours in a recovery bed. They sent Richie and Marina on their way with a prescription for Tylenol with codeine. The doctor told them it was safe to travel but to take it easy and watch for signs of infection. Marina assumed they would drive straight home to Halifax. She wanted to sleep in her own bed. Richie assumed they would continue the road trip to see the Expos. The compromise was two nights at the Château Frontenac with room service before they started for Montreal.

"It'll cheer you up," he said. He held her hand on chemin Sainte-Foy as they left old Quebec, his palm rubbing against her wedding ring.

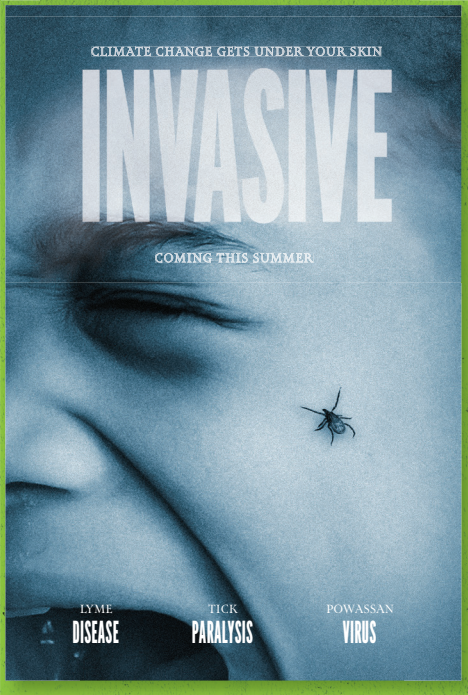
They decided not to phone their parents. They hadn't told anyone about the baby in the first place.

THEIR STUDIO APARTMENT—billed as a "junior one-bedroom"—seemed to be just as they had left it. It was on the second floor of a building in downtown Halifax. The sleeping area was on the left when you came in the front door;





Climate change is the real villain.



there was a kitchenette and bathroom to the right, and two steps down to a sunken living room. A picture window overlooked a green space across from the Public Gardens. There was a pancake restaurant on the main floor where senior citizens and red-eyed students congregated. Richie could walk to the engineering firm where he was interning, and Marina could walk to the newspaper. An apartment for adults, Marina told Izzy.

Richie started unpacking as soon as they got in the door. Marina found a beer in the fridge and put her bare feet up on the new leather couch. They'd picked it together, spending two Saturday afternoons at furniture stores. The couch and matching chair were a gift from Richie's parents when they'd skipped a big wedding and had a family-and-close-friends-only dinner in a private room at a steakhouse.

Out of the corner of her eye, Marina noticed a flash of movement across the living room carpet.

"Did you see that?"

"See what?"

"Nothing."

She went back to staring out the window. Richie was sorting their dirty clothes into laundry loads.

"Sit with me," she said a few minutes later. "Come on. It's not like we're putting it in tonight."

Richie said he was almost finished.

"This is called *helping*. You don't want to spend your last day of vacation washing clothes."

"I wasn't planning to. Am I supposed to?" she said, sitting up now. Feet on the floor.

She felt the slightest pressure on her ankle. Felt it, then saw it. A pink, two-inch alien with a tail. It raced across the floor and disappeared under an armchair. Another one ran through her legs and followed the first. Then a third materialized in front of her, moved across the floor, hit the wall, and raced along it. A fourth—or was it a fifth, or was it the first again—darted from under the chair and headed straight for her.

Hairless. Tiny. Everywhere. Marina climbed onto the sofa. Richie was separating cottons from knits when she screamed.

"What now?" he said.

She jumped off the couch and ran past him, hyperventilating down the hallway to Gary-the-super's apartment, and banged on his door. When he opened, she couldn't get the words out. Had to choose between speaking and breathing.

"Mice," she finally said.

They moved in with Marina's parents for a few weeks. She never entered their old apartment again. Refused to set foot in it even though Gary brought in an exterminator. The exterminator said the mother mouse likely came in under the apartment door. She used old newspapers to make a nest under the fridge, gave birth there.

"Bad timing," said the exterminator.

"We're clean people," said Richie.

"Nothing wrong with you," the exterminator said, as he was obliged to say to all infested clients. "Probably the pancake place downstairs. The apartment was empty and seemed safe to her is all."

Izzy offered to write a letter to the property manager to get them out of their lease, but that wasn't necessary. The building attracted young professionals who wanted to live downtown. The owners didn't want rodent stories to get around, for the mice to be exaggerated into rats, or for a single nest to be gossiped into an infestation. Besides, Gary liked Marina and Richie, especially Marina. He was a fixture at the front door every morning, having a smoke as she left for work, and stationed there again when she came home at the end of the day. Always wanting to chat, telling her he liked what she was wearing, asking her what they were up to for the weekend. Borderline icky, Marina told Richie, but Richie said to take it as a compliment. "He's like that with all the good-looking women in the building."

Gary put in a good word, and the company offered Marina and Richie a bigger apartment on the eighth floor at the same rent.

"Take the deal," Izzy advised, and they did.

The new apartment had a proper separate bedroom and a view of the Public Gardens. Richie was content, but the place was never the same for Marina. For him, the apartment was a step up. For her, the whole building was tainted. She was wary; there must be rodents here, maybe undetected, but somewhere.

What stands out for her from that time is the Dairy Queen that was across the street from their building. The summer they married, DQ came out with the Blizzard. Whenever Richie worked late, Marina crossed the green area in front of the apartment and tried out a new flavour combination. She liked to eat on a bench in the Public Gardens, tucked in next to the flower beds. Dipping the red plastic spoon slowly into melting ice cream until there was nothing left. There was always a garbage can to get rid of the empty cup, and a bathroom nearby to wash the sticky residue off her hands. She worked her way down the list: Strawberry Cheesecake, Oreo, Choco-Cherry Love.

Even if you don't see them or hear them, there are always others — somewhere in your home.

SHE LOOKS AT the carcass in her kitchen sink, worries the tail is suspiciously long. Richie and the boys aren't home yet, so Marina handles the rodent forensics. She remembers reading up on mice when she was younger, but maybe it's time for a refresher. She turns on the iPad, types in *mouse versus baby rat*. Pictures and charts pop up.

She roots around in the front closet to find the arts and crafts box from when the kids were little. Good—they still have fragments of Bristol board. She positions a piece of blue cardboard on the living

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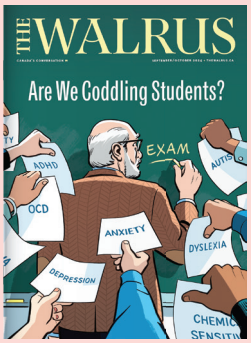

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room floor and searches the junk drawer in the kitchen for the barbecue tongs. She can't find the tongs, so makes do with two soup spoons, balancing the corpse between them and moving slowly so she doesn't drop it. She plunks the carcass on the cardboard, where the morning sun illuminates its brown and grey fur.

She'll need to measure the body and tail, she decides, and heads back to the arts and crafts box for a ruler. The wooden ruler has a sharp edge to make straight lines and a numbered edge for measuring. *Property of Jacob N.* is scrawled in red marker along the front.

Marina uses one of the spoons to nudge the body against the ruler. She pokes the tail to straighten it. It measures three inches, a vote for mouse.

Body length is four inches. A bit long for a mouse.

Furry tail, not bald and scaly. Mouse.

Ears, hard to tell given the creature's current condition. The chart tells her mice have bigger, floppy ears while rats have smaller ears and a bigger head. But this specimen has a broken neck and a crushed torso, so its proportions might be skewed.

Probably a mouse, not a baby rat. Probably. She can't be sure. She snaps a picture with her phone and texts it to Izzy.

"Looks suspicious," Izzy replies immediately.

Izzy is permanently suspicious, Marina thinks.

"Better check with an expert," her friend writes.

YOU KNOW WHAT THEY SAY about mice: there's never just one. Even if you don't see them or hear them, there are always others—somewhere in your home. They squeeze through tiny cracks and holes. They take advantage of weaknesses and flaws in your structure. That imperceptible opening where the electrical panel in your garage welcomes a thin wire into the wall of the main house, for instance. A rodent uses its sharp teeth to widen the space, and then it compresses and flattens its body thanks to a collapsible rib cage. If the mouse's head can push through, the rest will follow.

The mouse slides into your walls via the electrical panel, and then it runs that shiny copper wiring like the Yellow Brick Road through the walls until its rodent instincts lead it to the back of your built-in dishwasher, where a slight gap the lazy installers left behind is an open door.

Your kitchen. This is as good a place as any to nest. The first mouse shows the trail to others. They aren't too fussy about who they mate with, so when you take the kids skiing at Sugarloaf on March break, that's an opportunity to love the one they're with and expand their domain.

There is never just one mouse.

"I thought I heard something in the walls, but I ignored it," Marina tells the exterminator on a Monday morning two weeks later, the first appointment available in a busy mouse season.

"You didn't want to know," he answers. "People never want to know."

The exterminator is in his twenties, bald, and wears a navy cotton jumpsuit with *Cory* embroidered in cursive writing on a breast pocket. He balances a flashlight, phone, and clipboard.

The company's website had pictures of glowing young families standing in front of pristine homes. Cory explains that, for mice, they give a three-month guarantee. He can seal openings and cracks, lay down traps and poison today, and come back in a few days to check things out.

But rats are something else.

"For that, we'd need a plan," he says.

A mouse, mice, or even a colony of mice—this Marina can cope with. She's not afraid, but vigilance is required. And poison, as Cory said.

Poison, traps, vigilance.

But rats…

"Let's get started," the exterminator says. "Basement to attic."

"Can I show you something first?"

He shrugs.

The rodent carcass is in a freezer bag. Marina quarantined it in a corner of the chest freezer in the garage, after carefully reorganizing the Pizza Pockets, fries, plastic containers of homemade lasagna and chili, frozen fruit and vegetables, and the six chickens she'd bought on sale. She pulls on her blue rubber cleaning gloves and lifts the frozen hunk from the darkest corner of the freezer. She holds the bag flat across her palms and extends her arms to Cory.

"What do you think?"

He looks across at the frozen, dead rodent that his new client holds in her outstretched hands. He steps back for a second, then leans over.

"That's…you kept it?"

He waves off her offer to take the bag.

"You don't want to see it up close?"

Cory shakes his head, peering from two feet away at the ice crystals that cloud the plastic.

"Well," he says, "that is something."

An hour later, Marina and Cory drag the fridge into the middle of the kitchen. This is the final step in the house inspection. She can't remember the last time anyone looked under the fridge, let alone cleaned.

The floor is covered in debris. It looks like someone spilled a bag of loose tea or black rice. The droppings cover a forgotten photo that had strayed, unnoticed, under the fridge.

A photo of their boys as toddlers. It used to be on the fridge door, secured for years under a magnet from a plumbing company. It must have slipped off the stainless steel, mislaid and unobserved for who knows how long. Rodent excrement now speckles the faded candy canes and elves on the boys' Christmas pyjamas, obscures their tiny preschool faces. These children could be anyone's kids.

The exterminator reaches down, but Marina moves more quickly than the young man.

"I'll get that," she says. Still wearing her rubber gloves, she grabs the picture from the floor and stuffs it into the deep pocket of her grey cardigan.

Excerpted, with permission, from *We're Not Rich*, edited by Alexander MacLeod and published by Vagrant Press, an imprint of Nimbus Publishing, in October.

SUE MURTAGH's writing has appeared in *The Nashwaak Review*, *Grain*, *carte blanche*, *The Humber Literary Review*, and *The New Quarterly*. She lives in Halifax. *We're Not Rich* is her first book.

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BOOKS

Bad Impressions

The hidden racism of book cover design

BY TAJJA ISEN
PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY BRIAN MORGAN

When Lisa began brainstorming concepts for the cover of her forthcoming non-fiction book, she wanted to give the creative team a lot of space. The thoughts she sent her editor were mostly open ended—social media handles of artists she loved, examples of books where she liked the aesthetic, notes on mood and palette. As a debut author, she didn't want to overstep. But she also included a few more specific things: She wanted the art to be gender neutral—no pinks or purples. No images of Black people or linked hands, no variegated splotches suggestive of DEI or unity. She'd seen it done to too many other books by Black women—think *Maame* by Jessica George, or Brit Bennett's *The Vanishing Half*. By giving a clear sense of her limits, Lisa figured she'd avoid the problem. (Lisa is a pseudonym; her book is in production with a major press.)

Of the design options that later landed in Lisa's inbox, the majority were pink and purple. One had people holding hands. Another, a picture of a Black person. Even the paint splotches were there. All the signifiers she'd asked to avoid. By crudely foregrounding that the author was a Black woman, the design eclipsed all other aspects of the book—including the thing it was actually about. As if a clichéd depiction of the author's identity was the only reason a reader might want to pick it up and the only thing they would find inside.

Lisa began losing sleep. She doubted herself and her writing. "If you tell me that you read a sample of my work and this is the cover you created," Lisa says, "I'm having a crisis of *What did I write that*

IMAGES BY BRUCE MARTIN / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO / RICHARD HORVATH / UNSPLASH

would evoke this? What did I do wrong?" The situation was resolved, four rounds of revisions and one year later, when she was finally allowed to speak to the design team—access she had asked for, and was denied, when she first saw the cover options. But the process, and the exhausting self-advocacy it demanded, eroded some of her trust in her publisher and anything they said the book needed for it to be commercially successful.

Lisa's experience is not an outlier; it's broadly representative of how the cover process often goes. For author and designer not to be in direct contact is standard practice. The designer gets a brief that contains comparative titles—books of the same genre or similar subject—and notes about the publisher's and author's preferences. There's always an element of negotiation. And, most significantly, there persists in the industry the sticky question of how explicitly a writer's identity should be signalled on the cover—and the ensuing struggle, for many authors, of how hard to push back if and when things veer into stereotype.

It's become upsettingly commonplace to concede that publishing is inhospitable to minoritized writers. In a piece published in *The Atlantic* on Juneteenth of this year, academics Richard Jean So and Dan Sinykin elegize the sea change that almost was: the unprecedented demographic shift in the decreased proportion of fiction published by white authors versus the increase in books by racialized authors in the past five years. But, they note, we are now seeing a rollback of those historic gains, in high-profile firings of prominent editors of colour and disavowal of the "diverse" titles they championed. A commonly cited reason for this backlash is that the books didn't do as well as hoped. But, as So and Sinykin point out, the prophecy that "diversity doesn't sell" is self-fulfilling—across imprints, there was a failure to throw serious marketing, publicity, and sales resources behind such books despite their eager acquisition. These writers were set up to fail.

This climate creates a volatile set of conditions for cover design. A cover is likely a reader's front door to a book. The art needs to entice, convey the subject—books on nature will probably have an image from the natural world; a science fiction novel might depict the cosmos. Friction comes when that reach for recognizability gets tangled up in trying to represent minoritized identity. The problem of stereotypical covers may emerge, in part, from the idea of whom they are meant to be legible *to*. The industry, So and Sinykin attest, has a narrow concept of its target market. Most decisions cater largely to white women between the ages of thirty-five and sixty, with little effort made to develop readerships beyond that bracket. It follows that this group is also the imagined consumer whose putative tastes shape the product. "Cis white women between thirty-five and sixty" is also an accurate description of the majority of industry workers, including editors. If a book adorned by racially reductive imagery was gobbled up by the target audience in the past, publishers will be motivated to do it again. The goal is commercial viability: "By (quite literally) blurring a whole group of authors together with bright, often meaningless shapes," Miles Klee writes in the *Observer* of the "blobby book cover," "the major book publishers hope to maintain a financial consistency through an aesthetic one."

In this context, a writer may find themselves the lone dissenting voice. "The pressure to comply is enormous," another author says, especially for debut writers. For her first book, she had told her publisher she didn't want a cover that said—*by the way, this author is Asian*; she felt heard and respected and was happy with the outcome. But when the rights sold to a different company in another format, she was pressured to accept their redesign, which contained a stereotypical element. What made self-advocacy harder was the gulf she felt between her team's expertise and her inexperience at the time. "If they're telling me this should go forward—either because we're pressed for time or because it really will play well, or because this is just what readers are looking for—I didn't trust my own instincts as much as I have since learned to."

Cover design is a careful navigation between creativity and brute-force market logic. Often the writer doesn't even see the art, explains Brooklyn-based art director and book designer Tree Abraham, until it's been approved by many parties at the press. That step alone can take a lot of time. (It can also add subtle pressure if an offensive cover comes with a note saying, *Everybody loves it!*)

When starting a project, what Abraham gets in terms of a brief varies considerably. It's her job to walk the line between a manuscript's contents, the publisher's commercial hopes, and her creativity. She often feels like the designer has little agency in the process. She cites the racial reckoning of 2020 as a positive development in conversations about design, but when it comes to representing non-white cultures, she says, publishers have not fully moved past making that otherness a major part of the cover discussion—"some element signalling that this is in some way foreign."

To readers, these signals of foreignness can be conspicuous, even alienating. Michelle Cyca, a magazine editor and a contributing writer for The Walrus, has noticed the recurring use of Papyrus font in books about Indigenous life and history, like Dee Brown's *Folktales of the Native American* and *The Wisdom of the Native Americans*, both from the 1990s. (For a more recent example, see the Papyrus dupe used in the *Avatar* logo.) The lettering, Cyca says, has strong connotations—antiquated, unsophisticated, and conjuring a reductive image of Indigenous people. "It's a font that looks primitive," she says, "it looks unrefined." The visual language of design, Cyca observes, has a leeway that words do not. "It allows you to perpetuate ideas that are no longer really acceptable to articulate aloud, but you can usher them through in these unspoken ways."

In a 2008 piece from *Hyphen* magazine, Neela Banerjee expresses a related frustration. Sorting through a box of titles at the *Hyphen* office, she is confronted by "an array of stereotypical Asian images: lotus blossoms, flowing saris, flawless Asian faces." Her initial thought—that surely the commercial success of Asian

American writers should obviate the indignities of exoticized marketing—gives way to a more disturbing one: perhaps the trend of offensive covers is *related* to that success. Maybe books by minoritized writers do well only when they are marketed as "'authentic' cultural artifacts." The moment recalls a piece Abraham wrote for *Spine* magazine, in which she recounts designing a memoir by a Chinese American writer and is caught between "a brief that said NO ASIAN IMAGERY [and] a publisher that said 'maybe Asian imagery?'"

My first book is about exactly this problem: how well-meaning institutions advance reductive ideas of race by catering to the hunger of white audiences. It was acquired during the boom So and Sinykin describe, in which books by writers of colour were eagerly scooped up and then thrown into the marketplace. The cover brief I sent to my publishing team identified bodies and faces as "general zones of discomfort," a coolness that belied how terrifying it felt to assert myself. I wanted to avoid things like coy tableaux of inclusion or discrimination, or graphics of multi-shaded people cheerfully getting along. I knew how quickly a book that even touched on race could get me pigeonholed as someone who writes about race and nothing but. But the book is a researched critique of culture, not a guided tour of trauma. I didn't want the demeaning treatment of a so-called *diverse* author. I wanted to be treated like a smart white lady who was respected by her press. So I said, *no bodies*. And it worked. Like a fairy tale, I approved the first option they sent—the title, *Some of My Best Friends*, in a punchy serif font, with an enigmatic graphic of a leaf shaped like a mouth, a clever play on the *lip service* mentioned in the subtitle.

When it came time for the paperback reissue, it was suggested that the original cover had not been clear enough. (Clear to whom?) Lest I seem difficult, I made the same point I had two years prior, like it had just occurred to me: "In general, I'm uncomfortable with full faces or bodies on the cover." The email in response tolled like a knell. "I think the big question here," it asked, as if I had not spoken and did not exist, "is do we want a person on the cover?"

Of the design options that later landed in my inbox, most were pink and purple. One had a stock photo of a white girl throwing her arms around a Black girl. Another, a drawing of variously shaded Black and Brown people in a style reminiscent of Corporate Memphis, like a DEI graphic. Yet another had variously shaded black and brown *letters*, like *Chicka Chicka Boom Boom* had been updated for the BLM era. "A good cover tells a story," someone at the press said when I begged for a less literal treatment. What story, I wondered, was this: *People of colour exist? You have no voice here? It doesn't matter what you say or how elegantly or intelligently you say it—how we see you is and always will be the precise way you insist on not wanting to be seen?* I knew they only wanted the book to do well; so did I. But trying to explain why facile diversity gestures were wrong for a book critiquing facile diversity gestures made me feel crazy. Like Lisa, I lost sleep. I doubted myself and my work. If my book could be misread at such a scale, I wondered if writing in public was worth it at all.

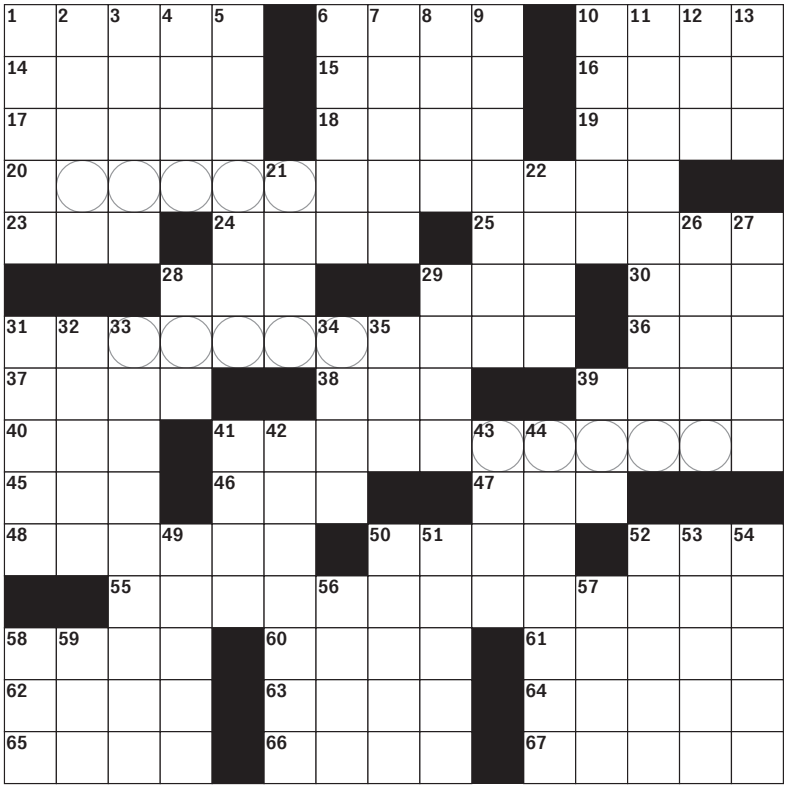
After much back-channelling, we got there eventually. But even in this industry, where the bare minimum of self-advocacy can feel like asking too much, it doesn't seem overly ambitious to want the process to be better. How it might be improved is something Abraham thinks about a lot. More detailed author questionnaires would help, she says—ones that go beyond the manuscript's contents to give a deeper sense of the writer's world view. It's a lofty goal in a field where the creativity of so many parties—writers, editors, designers—is hemmed in by the logic of risk aversion. While it may be true that what sold well once will do so again, that reasoning can collapse the difference between what makes money and what causes harm—a distinction, it's increasingly clear, publishing has not learned how to make. ■

TAJJA ISEN is a contributing writer for The Walrus.

GAMES

The Walrus Crossword

BY EMMA LAWSON



ACROSS

1 Tunisian currency
6 Gossip or plate
10 *The X-Files* vehicles
14 Photoshop company
15 Aware of
16 Home of Haleakalā National Park
17 Dashboard device
18 Feast with kalua pig
19 Like
20 "I almost forgot!"
23 Spicy
24 "Darn!"
25 Indeed
28 Oolong, e.g.
29 Genetic material
30 ___ Def
31 Settle a misunderstanding
36 *Barefoot Contessa* host Garten
37 The Cardiff Giant or Bigfoot, for example
38 Rowing need
39 Smelting by-product
40 Suffix for a gerund
41 "See ya"
45 Snake-like fish
46 *The Simpsons* neighbour
47 Before, poetically
48 Citrus soft drink
50 Broadcasting bands for 17A
52 Some docs
55 Reversal of opinion, or what's happening in the circled squares
58 "See ya"
60 ___ *the Explorer*
61 Skateboarding move
62 Peak
63 Nickname for Ireland
64 Andean animal
65 ___ *of the D'Urbervilles*
66 Some whiskeys
67 Place for a painting

DOWN

1 Vader or Sidious
2 State known for its potatoes
3 Acknowledge silently
4 Slightly
5 Organize differently
6 Food with a name from the Turkish word for "stuffed"
7 Indigenous people of the Arctic
8 Obsessive fan
9 Escape artist Harry
10 Fifth basic taste
11 Something you might wear to look nice?
12 French for "yes"
13 Transgression
21 The "E" in "QED"
22 Celebrity
26 Underwater detection tool
27 Indigenous nation in *Killers of the Flower Moon*
28 Payment to the Canada Revenue Agency
29 Bar game projectile
31 Most important
32 Solitary person
33 Modern bird watchers?
34 Head covering
35 ___ de toilette
39 "___ Bangs the Drums" (The Stone Roses song)
41 Civilization and empire which built Machu Picchu
42 Walk without direction
43 Grain used to make injera
44 Sleeve opening
49 Footwear
50 Where 33D might be placed
51 Pained sounds
52 Big bashes
53 Top quality
54 Take without permission
56 Like some horror movies
57 Jazz great Fitzgerald
58 Popular pet
59 Cubes in a cooler

SOLUTION TO LAST ISSUE'S PUZZLE:

H	T	T	P	■	E	D	A	M	■	I	N	K	E	D
A	U	R	A	■	R	I	C	A	■	M	A	N	G	A
U	N	I	V	E	R	S	A	L	D	E	S	I	G	N
N	E	V	E	R	■	T	I	A	R	A	■	T	S	K
T	R	I	■	I	P	A	■	W	I	N	G	■	■	■
■	■	A	C	C	E	S	S	I	B	I	L	I	T	Y
■	■	■	E	A	R	T	H	■	■	T	A	C	O	S
E	A	R	N	■	M	E	R	C	K	■	D	U	E	L
T	R	E	S	S	■	■	E	R	E	C	T	■	■	■
A	C	C	O	M	M	O	D	A	T	I	O	N	■	■
■	■	■	R	O	A	N	■	N	O	R	■	O	V	A
E	S	T	■	K	A	T	I	E	■	C	H	I	L	I
A	C	A	D	E	M	I	C	F	R	E	E	D	O	M
R	A	R	E	R	■	M	O	L	E	■	M	E	G	A
S	N	O	W	S	■	E	N	Y	A	■	P	A	S	T

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