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NEWS

Elon vs. Obama

Choose your fighter

BY JACOB SIEGEL

So it's war. Twitter, the social media platform that led the charge in censoring reporting on the Hunter Biden laptop, was reluctantly forced to approve Elon Musk's \$44 billion "leveraged buyout" Monday after running out of options to block the deal. With that move, the richest man in the world, with a day job running electric car manufacturer Tesla, instantly promoted himself to five-star general of a free speech army fighting to liberate the internet from top-down political control. "Free speech is the bedrock of a functioning democracy, and Twitter is the digital town square where matters vital to the future of humanity are debated," Musk tweeted in his first statement announcing the deal, where he also pledged to make the platform's algorithms open source "to increase trust," defeat the site's spam bots, and authenticate its human users. "The Berlin Wall of censorship fell yesterday," internet entrepreneur David Sacks tweeted on Tuesday.

If Sacks had wanted to use a different metaphor, he might have said that Musk had captured a key foothold—a defensible initial position from which to build up forces in an effort to gradually expand the territories in which it's possible to dissent from the party line on issues like COVID-19 or U.S. policy in

Ukraine where discourse has been most tightly regulated. Because, with this latest move, Musk and a merry band of fellow billionaires that includes Sacks and the venture capitalist Marc Andreessen seem to be coalescing into an American counterelite committed to breaking the monopoly on public discourse held by our current ruling class.

On the other side of the skirmish line we have the forces of the bipartisan political establishment under the command of General Barack Obama. The members of this faction are easy to identify because they have been engaged in an unhinged freakout for weeks. Ever since news first broke indicating that Musk was trying to acquire a controlling share of Twitter, his critics have been apoplectic about the dangers to democracy that will be unleashed by allowing users to more freely share and view information. Former Clinton administration Labor Secretary Robert Reich captured the shrill zeitgeist of apocalyptic liberal technocrats everywhere when he warned that Musk's "libertarian vision of an 'uncontrolled' internet [is] also the dream of every dictator, strongman, and demagogue." Uh, sure, "what linked Idi Amin, Suharto, and Adolf Hitler," James Kirchick recently noted in *The Scroll*, "was their belief in unfettered freedom of speech." But the official, buttoned-up version of the freakout was articulated by Obama himself. Less than a week ago

in a speech at Stanford University, the former president warned that it's necessary to impose *more* regulations on the internet, in order to prevent toxic disinformation from destroying American democracy by eroding citizens' trust. "Once they lose trust in their leaders, in mainstream media, in political institutions, in each other, in the possibility of truth, the game's won," Obama told the audience at the Silicon Valley hub. "As Putin discovered leading up to the 2016 election," Obama said, "our own social media platforms are well designed to support such a mission."

The Stanford speech was a nearly perfect encapsulation of what is so corrupt about the disinformation discourse—which is, at this moment, frantically being redirected against Musk to force him into playing ball or being painted as a Russian stooge. In the same speech where he made the case for more censorship, even while hollowly proclaiming his commitment to free speech, Obama could not stop himself from echoing the single most destructive piece of disinformation of the modern political era—the establishment's "big lie" that Russia swung the 2016 election for Donald Trump, a claim that has repeatedly been proved false but is kept alive because it makes such an effective political weapon.

Obama has to uphold the Russian collusion narrative, even if it means spreading disinformation himself, because that extraordinary claim established the basis for the joint government-tech company control over the information environment, which was expanded under COVID and he now wants to fortify. In the current system, which Musk is vowing to change, social media platforms take orders on censorship protocols from government officials and partisan functionaries with titles like "fact-checker" who work inside the complex of NGOs funded by the Democratic Party. If Obama, or President Biden for that matter, was serious about curtailing the power of the tech oligarchs, they would put aside the culture war rhetoric and act in the national interest by using antitrust laws to break up tech monopolies. That might actually restore political agency to American

citizens and political sovereignty to the government. So why hasn't that happened, and indeed won't ever happen? Because the Democratic Party relies on the tech companies to fund its political campaigns and regulate what kind of information reaches voters. The populist movements of 2016 were an attempt on both the left and right to wrest power back from technocratic elites. Those movements relied on figureheads—Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump—because average voters, even when they were tens of thousands strong, were too cut off from the levers of power located inside institutional centers to pose any long-term challenge to the American ruling class. Even Trump, at the time supposedly the most powerful man in the world, couldn't quash the false Russia collusion narrative or keep himself from getting booted off of Twitter, and was forced to mope off pathetically like he was just another anonymous troll account. Musk and other billionaires who are now coalescing into the counterelite are testing out what happens when they simply buy back the central institutions of public discourse and—exercising a degree of independence that only truly "fuck you money" can buy—remake the rules in a way that empowers average users but directly threatens the interests of the establishment elite. It is, let us say, hardly ideal in a democracy to depend on the whims of a billionaire who seems to get off on winding people up to secure the basic constitutional protections of free speech. Let's not forget that Twitter's founder and former CEO Jack Dorsey—who has been embarrassingly woo-woo in his praise of Musk—was until very recently more than happy to go along with the Hunter Biden charade and the government's other censorship demands. But given Twitter's current ownership structure, in which the majority of its shares are owned by BlackRock and Vanguard, and the fact that the company serves an alliance of global financial capital, the Democratic Party, and progressive activists, I'll take my chances on the counterelite. ■

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Album of the Week

Jack White, *Fear of the Dawn*

There's a feeling of constant surprise on White's latest solo album, the first of two releases planned in 2022. Looking at a record like this, it's clear to see what elevated The Stripes was the push-and-pull between minimalism and maximalism. White is all maximalism. This doesn't always work, but it does on *Fear of the Dawn*.

The album starts off with the mammoth "Taking Me Back," sounding a little like "White Orchid" from *Get Behind*, with riffs building tension and exploding. White's vocals create a background chorus, a role that would have once been filled by Meg. It's possible that this could feel soulless, but White's abilities still produce a thrill. The shredding is loud, massive, and catchy.

Fear of the Dawn compels one to listen on in sheer curiosity over what sound is going to come out of the headphones next. A little like a one-man TikTok, White is a magician endlessly pulling scarves out of his jacket pocket.

White's affect is annoying to some, which is fair enough. He was the epitome of cool in his early days, and today he is not. His albums became defined by his changing looks, some of them bizarre. It's still worth checking in on what Old Man White is up to these days.

—David Meir Grossman

Why America Only Pretends to Compete With China

Ukraine shows that the 'return of great power rivalry' isn't happening under the Biden administration

BY JEREMY STERN

When it comes to Ukraine, Washington seems to be running two parallel but incompatible policy simulations. As the war drags on, and the minds of most Americans wander elsewhere, it's getting harder to figure out which simulation we're actually living in.

In the first, Washington is engaged in a hard-nosed traditional "great power competition" with Moscow and Beijing. Facing Chinese-backed Russian expansion on NATO's eastern frontier, the United States has responded with enlightened but tough-minded realism by freezing Russia's central bank assets, providing Ukraine with weapons, and labeling Vladimir Putin a war criminal, even as it continues to blacklist Chinese companies, sanction Chinese officials, ban imports from Xinjiang, and build and strengthen alliances—NATO, AUKUS, the Quad, Five Eyes.

In the second simulation, by contrast, Washington doesn't appear to be engaged in much strategic rivalry at all. The United States is still importing petroleum products from Russia, exempting Russian banks from sanctions, withholding certain heavy offensive weapons from Ukraine, pleading with Beijing for help with Moscow, overlooking reports of Chinese cyberattacks on Ukrainian military facilities,

and insisting, against all evidence, that Xi Jinping doesn't support Putin's war.

The fact that both simulations seem to be playing out simultaneously within the White House does not by itself suggest differing policy approaches or levels of conflict-avoidance among administration officials. Nor does it necessarily imply a concerted effort at deception. From one perspective, at least, it simply emphasizes the tendency of national press coverage to toe official lines without much equivalent attention to real-world outcomes. Far more media attention has been devoted to the idea that the West is united behind an "unprecedented" anti-Russia sanctions regime, for example, than the fact that the sanctions quite obviously aren't working (and that sanctions against Serbia and Iraq were in many ways more severe). Europe is still sending Putin 800 million euros a day in energy payments, and since the war started, prices for Russia's main exports—oil, gas, coal, copper, fertilizers, precious metals, wheat—have skyrocketed, producing windfall gains for Moscow's war machine. President Joe Biden's open speculation about regime change, trying Putin for war crimes, and seizing his minions' yachts has served little purpose other than to obscure the strength of the ruble, the ongoing flow of hard Western currency revenues to the Kremlin, and the ugly truth that the war is going badly for Ukraine.

The gap between perception and

reality is even wider when it comes to China. A U.S. sanctions regime that now includes not only Huawei and forced labor but semiconductors and cross-border data and capital flows has given the impression of a united Washington girded for decades of bipartisan competition with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). But it's hard to square talk about Cold War 2.0 with the reality that U.S. firms have in fact been increasing investment in Chinese semiconductor companies and accelerating gas and coal exports to China. While the U.S. Navy continues to serve as the security detail for Chinese oil imports from the Persian Gulf, U.S. elites advocate for a transition to renewable energy technologies dominated by Chinese supply chains and commodity inputs. When the American hedge fund BlackRock, the world's largest asset manager, told investors last fall to triple their exposure to China, it was an expression of confidence that Washington has no intention of making good on threats to seriously restrict outbound investment into China. And BlackRock would know.

The effect of so much divergence between spin and reality is to stir suspicion that U.S. public officials and policymakers might be less comfortable with the return of great power rivalry than they've been letting on. And indeed, it seems everywhere you look there are signs that the upper echelons of U.S. leadership are less committed to geopolitical competition than voters have been led to believe—a fact that a largely docile press, which understands itself as having certain responsibilities to the administration, has helped muddy. To the extent that analysis of the great power drama unfolding in Eurasia is obligated to have one eye on the president's sagging poll numbers, those interested in the actual direction of U.S. policy are advised to look elsewhere.

A watershed moment in America's new era of great power competition came a few days before the 2020 election, when Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Mark Milley called his Chinese counterpart to assure him that "[w]e are not going to attack or conduct any kinetic operations against you ... If we're

going to attack, I'm going to call you ahead of time." Milley later explained this to Congress as an attempt to "de-escalate the situation," a reference to then-President Donald Trump's aggressive rhetoric and military exercises in the South China Sea.

The specter of America's highest-ranking military officer attempting to take policy into his own hands over the head of the president elicited very little comment from those otherwise concerned, as a representative *Washington Post* essay put it, that "The United States is heading into its greatest political and constitutional crisis since the Civil War." Ivan Kanopathy, former China director on the National Security Council under both Trump and Biden, told Tablet that Milley's call "validated the CCP's core theory that the U.S. political system is failing, that democracy is failing. The message was taken as: 'If these politicians go too far, we [the military] got this.'"

Milley's decision to inform the People's Liberation Army to disregard the White House—which incurred no disciplinary action from the civilian officials who nominally control the armed forces—was peculiar enough. From a purely strategic point of view, it was even stranger that Milley was willing to break the chain of command for the sake of *eliminating* unpredictability from U.S. policy. "At the time Chinese forces were worried about an attack from us, and presumably on a defensive heightened alert posture," says Kanopathy. "That costs them money and readiness, it was a cost we were imposing on them, the way they've always imposed that fear of uncertainty on us. But the decision was made that that wasn't desirable."

Another revealing moment came the day before Russia's invasion of Ukraine, when U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman told CNN, "Foreign

"It's hard to say what Washington's China policy is, exactly. But it's important to appreciate what it isn't."

Minister Wang Yi of the People's Republic of China, the PRC, [said] that sovereignty and territorial integrity are critical principles, and that included Ukraine. ... I hope that President Putin listens hard to the PRC in this instance. They have it right."

Sherman's reference was to a banal statement Wang had made a few days earlier about "the sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity of all countries. ... And that applies equally to Ukraine." But Wang did not, in fact, declare either support for Ukraine or even neutrality, as the Biden administration knew well enough: In the same speech, Wang had also spoken of Russia's right to stop Ukraine from joining NATO, and his supposed support for Ukrainian independence went unreported in Chinese media (which was prohibited, as a Chinese outlet itself advertised, from publishing "content that is unfavorable to Russia or pro-Western").

In any case, Xi's degree of support for Putin was known in advance. Three weeks before the invasion began, the two leaders had met in Beijing to sign a joint memorandum stating "that the new inter-State relations between Russia and China are superior to political and military alliances of the Cold War era. Friendship between the two States has no limits, there are no 'forbidden'

areas of cooperation." Crucially, Xi agreed in the statement to "oppose color revolutions" and to "oppose further enlargement of NATO," both references to Putin's two main justifications for war. The proof that these were not just empty words was in the very real price Putin paid in return: a 25-year gas deal, with Gazprom increasing deliveries to China by 10 billion cubic meters per year at a steep discount.

Wang's reference to the sanctity of the U.N. Charter and its equal application to Ukraine was, in reality, a relatively transparent effort to deflect responsibility for Putin from China and cast Beijing as a "mediator" in the coming war—paving an onramp for the United States to cooperate with China rather than compete. The day after the invasion began, *The New York Times* reported that the Biden administration had regularly shared intelligence on Russian troop movements with China "in hopes that President Xi Jinping would step in."

The question of why the administration appeared to bite on what it likely knew was a mischaracterization of Chinese policy has come up more than once. On April 6, for example, Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen suggested to the House Financial Services Committee that if China invades Taiwan, the United States would deploy "the same" type of sanctions that it's imposed on Russia. As the official with the most knowledge and power over economic sanctions on Earth, Yellen must have at least wondered whether Beijing would interpret "the same" in this context to mean "pretty manageable," the way it clearly has been for the Kremlin. Xi—even more so than Putin—has already decided to sacrifice GDP growth for the sake of greater political control over the economy, which he has been pursuing for the last two years by controlling capital flows, weakening corporate control of private firms, forcibly deleveraging the property sector, and imposing the world's most severe COVID lockdowns. Combined with Milley's reassurance of military restraint and Sherman's expression of diplomatic solidarity over Ukraine, Yellen's tepid sanctions threat could be

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read as something like a yellow light with regard to Taiwan.

Yellen and other ostensibly sanctions-happy officials in Washington, including congresspeople from both parties, are also well aware that the deepening sanctions burden on America's strategic competitors might be hastening a decline in U.S. financial supremacy—an advantage that no convinced participant in “great power competition” would ever willingly sacrifice.

The more Washington multiplies financial sanctions, the more it undermines the dollar as an international reserve currency and drives the development of systems of exchange independent from the United States. Given the scale and penetration of the Russia sanctions—which include a previously unthinkable reserve freeze—it's no longer so difficult to imagine a world in which significant non-Western economies start accepting payments for international transactions in renminbi and invest them in Chinese government bonds to keep their wealth beyond the reach of Washington. At that point, it's not clear how long the U.S. dollar would endure as one of America's last real sources of hegemonic power.

At this point, it's hard to say what Washington's actual—as opposed to professed—China policy is, exactly. But it's important to appreciate what it isn't.

It isn't to reduce the dependence of U.S. firms like Apple, Goldman Sachs, and JPMorgan Chase on the Chinese market, or to stop feeding Chinese industry with American fossil fuel exports. It isn't to avoid U.S. dependence on China's renewable energy supply chains, or to reshore manufacturing or rebuild American supply chains. It isn't to exploit uncertainty about America's willingness to use force, or to take advantage of the onerous burden that Ukraine has placed on Xi's commitment to Putin. It isn't to reform the federal bureaucracies, like the Treasury and Commerce departments, still committed to “engagement” with China, or to exclude people who made money from China in the private sector from working on China policy in the government. It isn't to declare independence from the constellation of captured interests—Wall

Street, Silicon Valley, Hollywood, universities, corporate donors—that would like to prevent Washington from ever taking actions that might target their assets in China.

To insist on the competitive nature of its approach to China, the administration typically points to alliance policy—a new trilateral security pact with Australia and the United Kingdom, pushing for the extension of NATO's responsibilities to the Pacific, a possible new role for Japan in Five Eyes. But a serious effort to contain Chinese power would presumably require a big increase in consultation and support not just from Cold War allies and fellow democracies, but also from key regional powers like Vietnam, Myanmar, Thailand, and Singapore, regardless of their internal political systems. Yet one of the most ingrained habits of the current administration—going back to its campaign in 2020—has been an incessant attempt to frame U.S. foreign policy not as a struggle to preserve U.S. interests but as a global showdown between liberal democracy and autocracy. In turn, the “battle of values” approach requires Washington to act against its own strategic interests by shunning flawed allies that would strengthen America's position against China if only it wouldn't chase them away.

The administration therefore finds itself in the increasingly insane position of claiming to be in a new Cold War with China while simultaneously haranguing India for its human rights record, nationalist ruling party, and lack of sufficient hostility to Russia; it likewise remains committed to publicly insulting and icing out Saudi Arabia—the world's swing oil producer, a Eurasian great power, and the holder of hundreds of billions of dollars in U.S. currency reserves. Whatever moral or domestic political itches this kind of performative diplomacy might scratch, it doesn't say much for the sincerity of Washington's official China policy.

The big opportunity to clarify America's containment strategy and plans for building an anti-China coalition outside of Europe and the Anglosphere was the White House's “Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States,” released

two weeks before the invasion of Ukraine. The document favors “rivalry” over “engagement” and contains many perfectly sane items, such as, “Our objective is not to change the PRC but to shape the strategic environment in which it operates.” But the document is light on commitments, and heavy on promises like “harness[ing] rapid technological transformation, including in the digital economy” to “expand economic opportunities for middle-class families.” Far from a new NSC-68, the White House's seminal strategy paper for Asia reads like a quiet acknowledgment that successive administrations, Republican and Democratic, bungled the rise of China so badly and oversaw the destruction of so many American livelihoods in the process that voters no longer trust them to make foreign or trade policy.

One benefit of devoting so much PR to U.S. financial warfare against Russia—despite its apparent lack of impact on the prospects for Ukrainian national survival—is that it focuses attention on a country where U.S. elites have very little financial investment, rather than the one in which they've invested everything. And the advantage of couching U.S. China policy in terms of a “new Cold War” is that it evokes the moral clarity of the old one, in which two self-enclosed blocs really did compete with each other for political, economic, and military power. Which is an appealing and effective stratagem—insofar as it helps relieve the uncomfortable impression that the U.S. leadership class often gives of amassing fortunes by selling off their own country while plunging ordinary citizens into economic hardship. ■

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Magnetic North

Jewish communities in northern New England's small towns find ways to attract more participants from diverse backgrounds

BY PAULA JACOBS

Community members from across the state of Maine dance after Havdalah at the Center for Small Town Jewish Life's 2019 Fall Shabbaton at Colby College Benjamin Wheeler Stowe, Vermont, overlooks Mount Mansfield, a popular ski and hiking destination in northern Vermont. This town of 201 residents—where antisemitism was once rampant and hotels barred Jewish guests—is now home to a growing and thriving Jewish community. Some have moved here to connect to nature or participate in mountain sports, while others have come for the slower pace of life or left crowded cities during the pandemic. Since the late 1980s, when a small group gathered for holiday meals, the Jewish Community of Greater Stowe has become a vibrant center of Jewish life: Today a multigenerational community of approximately 200 membership units—including local farmers, urban transplants, and interfaith families—hails from 15 towns as far north as 50 miles away on the Canadian border. What began as a one-room religious school now offers a variety of programs for 71 children, including 11 b'nai mitzvah scheduled over the next few months. “What is exciting about it is that people don't usually move up to Vermont to be Jewish,” said Rabbi David Fainsilber, who became JCOGS' first full-time spiritual leader in 2014. He has since forged meaningful connections with a Jewish community with diverse backgrounds and political beliefs; he has also reached out to the wider interfaith community, engaging his congregants in volunteer work such as at the local homeless shelter. “We have

found a good balance between caring for our Jewish community and the outside community in terms of programs and services.” “Rabbi David has made it a very inclusive community. He leads from a platform of positivity and possibility. I love his music and the sense of joy he infuses into the services,” said Marcie Scudder, who relocated here in 2015 from a large Jewish community outside of Boston. Her late mother, Roselle Abramowitz, helped found the Stowe community after retiring from Montreal in the 1980s. There's vibrant Jewish life across northern New England today, in small communities across Vermont, New Hampshire, and Maine. “Our communities are alive and thriving even though they look very different from Jewish communities in suburban and urban areas,” said Rabbi Rachel Isaacs, executive director of the Center for Small Town Jewish Life at Colby and spiritual leader of Beth Israel Congregation, a Conservative synagogue in Waterville, Maine, with a large proportion of interfaith families (more than 80%) as well as Jews by choice (20%). “We try to bring the full diversity of Jewish life here. If you don't try to create a home for the diversity of Jewish belief and diversity, then you are narrowing your reach.” But the community in northern New England also faces many challenges: a diverse and geographically spread-out population, few Jewish professionals, limited financial resources, and the lack of institutions such as JCCs, federations, and day schools. “In Maine, it gets dark early in the winter and it's difficult for people to get here,” explained Rabbi Erica Asch, spiritual leader of Temple Beth El in Augusta, Maine—the only

Reform synagogue in central Maine—which serves 100 households across a 50-plus-mile radius. “Like many other small communities, there are a limited number of people to keep things running.” In these small communities, as the only Jewish institution for miles around, the synagogue must accommodate people from different backgrounds. “In a small community in Vermont, you need to be broad-minded about who gets to participate,” said Andy Robinson, president of Beth Jacob Synagogue, a Montpelier-based, lay-led, 110-family-unit egalitarian synagogue that serves Washington County in central Vermont. “We have a very inclusive take on how to be Jewish and how to identify as Jewish.” Beth Jacob has long welcomed same-sex couples and interfaith families, including b'nai mitzvah of patrilineal Jewish descent. Depending on who leads services, worship ranges from Reform to modern Orthodox, with prayer books from different denominations. “We pride ourselves on being eclectic and leader-led,” explained Michele Clark, a native New Yorker and active congregant for more than 30 years. Elsewhere, individuals have organized Shabbat and holiday gatherings. The Mad River Valley Jewish Community—an informal association in central Vermont's Mad River Valley—connects 120 households via an email list coordinated by volunteer Susan Bauchner, a retired Jewish communal professional turned ski instructor who moved here from Philadelphia 19 years ago.

Jewish education is a major challenge, says Matt Boxer, a Brandeis University sociologist who has researched Jewish identity in small-town America, where approximately 1 million Jews reside. “There aren't a lot of Jewish educators



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in small communities. They make do with whoever is the most knowledgeable Jew in the community; they may run the Hebrew school but not know pedagogy.” Synagogues in college towns, such as the Upper Valley Jewish Community in Hanover, New Hampshire, and Beth Israel in Waterville, Maine, can tap into the expertise of students and staff. The Center for Jewish Life at Colby has created several educational leadership programs: Student Jewish Leadership Fellows teach Hebrew school and tutor b’nai mitzvah in Waterville and Augusta; Rabbinical Student Fellows teach children and adults in Bath, Augusta, and Waterville five times a year; and an informal education program—the Maine Jewish Youth Connection—brings together Maine Jewish teens for learning and socializing five weekends a year (plus an end-of-year trip). Often though, teachers are volunteer congregants with a rudimentary religious school education. In one instance, a Catholic mother learned about Judaism in order to teach at her child’s Hebrew school. Marilyn Weinberg recalls the weekly hourlong trek driving her son from Bath, Maine, to Auburn more than 30 years ago; the following year, she helped establish a Hebrew school at the Beth Israel Congregation in Bath where she still volunteers. Today 21 Hebrew school students from Bath, Brunswick, Freeport, and Yarmouth meet weekly with volunteer teachers. “There isn’t a large presence of Jewish kids in the public schools, so the Hebrew school is where they meet other Jewish kids,” said Rabbi Lisa Vinakoor, the part-time spiritual leader.

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“Small Jewish communities are innovative because they have to be.”

Congregation Beth El in St. Johnsbury—where the late Julius Lester was lay spiritual leader—is located 48 miles south of the Canadian border and is the only synagogue in the Northeast Kingdom of Vermont. This small congregation (approximately 30-membership units) has addressed Jewish education creatively: Its two current religious school children (each in different grades) study via Zoom with Rabbi Donna Kirshbaum, spiritual leader of the Bethlehem Hebrew Congregation in the New Hampshire White Mountains. Board member Jill Minkoff—who holds an M.A. in Jewish studies—is also a volunteer b’nai mitzvah tutor. “Those of us who are involved do everything. We need to make Jewish happen,” said Minkoff, who relocated here six years ago from New York City to live near her daughter’s family. One post-bar mitzvah student has participated in the Teen Interview Project, where Jewish teens interview Vermont peers on Zoom before their in-person Shavuot retreat. The goal is to connect geographically distanced teenagers so they don’t feel isolated, said its creator, Melanie Grubman, vice president and director of programming at the Living Tree Alliance—a kibbutz-inspired co-housing community in Moretown, Vermont, that hosts vacation camps, farm retreats, and nature programs for Jewish youth and families.

Since 2014, Jewish Vermonters have connected through the Jewish Communities of Vermont, which promotes a vision of “One Jewish Vermont.” Three

statewide summits—Sunday gatherings on mountaintops in Killington and Stowe—have offered educational and cultural programs for all ages. During the pandemic, 300 people attended a virtual summit featuring Nefesh Mountain, a band that combines bluegrass and Jewish musical styles. In January, the Covenant Foundation—a nonprofit organization that funds Jewish educational innovation—awarded JCVT a \$41,000 grant for Shmita Statewide, a statewide initiative to unite the Jewish community through collaborative Jewish education programs. “JCVT’s vision is that with this grant, more Jews will get involved in Jewish life, and connect with one another and with the wider Jewish community in Vermont through programs that speak to them, whether it be music, art, regional gatherings, Shabbat Across Vermont, and more,” said executive director Rabbi Tobie Weisman. The Center for Small Town Jewish Life at Colby has promoted statewide collaboration and resource sharing since its founding in 2015. It will hold its eighth annual Maine Conference on Jewish Life on June 17-19, 2022, where Jewish Mainers can exchange ideas and learn with Jewish scholars. Its newest initiative is the Makom Fellowship Program. Under a \$150,000 Signature Grant from the Covenant Foundation, it will train, support, and mentor emerging Jewish professionals in small Jewish communities nationwide—recognizing that each place (*makom* in Hebrew) is unique. The first cohort will serve five small Jewish communities across America, with details forthcoming at the June conference. “The goal of the Makom Fellowship community is to help attract the right professionals and empower the leadership and their lay counterparts to do transformative leadership in those communities,” said Rabbi David Freidenreich, associate center director and Colby Jewish studies professor. “Small Jewish communities are innovative because they have to be,” explained Boxer, the Brandeis sociologist. “We could benefit if we paid more attention.” ■

This article was originally published on April 28, 2022.

THE REST

→ The ruble is rising. **Russia's currency hit a more than two-year high** in trading against the euro on Wednesday, after Moscow backed Europe down by halting supplies of natural gas to Bulgaria and Poland because they initially refused to pay for their energy purchases in rubles. If you're wondering how Russia's currency could be doing so well in spite of what are supposed to be crushing sanctions, most of the answer is due to a **global dependency on Russian energy exports** that even the United States has been more than willing to continue buying while accusing Russia of genocide. The rest of the answer for the surprising resilience of the Russian economy is Moscow's economic partnerships with China and India, which have partially offset the costs of becoming a pariah with the West.

→ On Monday, several prominent former defense and intelligence officials published an open letter seeking to kneecap pending legislation aimed at curbing Big Tech. Citing Russian misinformation and cybersecurity risks, the former officials, including James Clapper, who served as President Obama's director of national intelligence, and Leon Panetta, Obama's CIA director and secretary of defense, argued that to fight Russia's efforts, **Big Tech should maintain its ability to collect the personal data of U.S. citizens**, and that social media companies must be able to mitigate the power of misinformation campaigns on their platforms. Nevermind that Clapper and Panetta themselves were practitioners of the same statecraft they accuse the Russians of perpetrating. Recall that Clapper oversaw (and lied to Congress about) the National Security Agency's massive operation to sweep up the metadata of hundreds of millions of Americans. And in the lead-up to the 2020 election, Clapper and Panetta were signatories on a letter that argued without evidence that Hunter Biden's laptop full of emails related to his Burisma bribes "ha[d] all the classic earmarks of a Russian information operation."

→ The **Department of Homeland Security is "standing up a new Disinformation Governance Board to coordinate countering misinformation** related to homeland security, focused specifically on irregular migration and Russia." The government's latest office of truth and narrative regulation will be headed by Nina Jankowicz, a "disinformation expert" who previously helped run interference in the great "Hunter Biden laptop" episode. Jankowicz helped to spread the false claim that reporting based on the laptop was "Russian disinformation," which was used to justify censoring it in the media and online but has been conclusively disproved, most recently by The New York Times and The Washington Post, which both quietly admitted in recent weeks that information taken from the Biden laptops is authentic.

→ There were **2,700 antisemitic incidents in the United States last year**, according to data from the Anti-Defamation League—the highest level on record since the organization began collecting statistics in 1979. Past ADL reporting on antisemitism in the United States has sometimes included dubious incidents that inflated the levels reported to the public, but in this case the organization's numbers reflected trends that have also been reported by other organizations, like the New York Police Department, which noted that **antisemitic hate crimes were up by nearly 50% in 2021 compared to 2020**. The trend has gotten even worse this year in New York, with antisemitic hate crimes up 92% in the city in March 2022 compared to the same month the previous year.

FROM THE BACK PAGES

Last year, when I wrote this piece arguing that all of the United States' core institutions are irreparably broken, most readers seemed to agree—with one major caveat: "Fine," many begrudgingly admitted, "we get that our healthcare system is messed up; journalism seems beyond saving; we're ready to give up on decayed cultural and communal spaces. But we have kids. We can't just go ahead and build all new schools, right?"

Wrong.

Synthesis, now a company, started as a class at Ad Astra, the lab school that Joshua Dahn built with Elon Musk on the campus of SpaceX, in Los Angeles. It gave kids the chance to learn concepts and skills by tackling lifelike problems. The thinking tools we learn in school, Musk has noted, make little sense when kids never get the chance to use them. So, Musk hired Dahn to create problem-focused educational experiences.

At first, classes were limited to the Musk children and the kids of SpaceX engineers, but in the fall of 2020, Dahn partnered with Chrisman Frank, the founding engineer at ed-tech giant ClassDojo. The two of them decided to turn their program into its own company, arguing that you didn't have to be the son or daughter of the world's richest person to have access to stellar education.

—Alana Newhouse

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Richard Howard's Politics of Togetherness

The poet, who died last month, understood that American tradition is broken—but knew it was possible to begin again

BY BLAKE SMITH

Tradition is dead. The values, symbols and forms by which our ancestors organized their common life, lie broken, irreparable.

No one can now hope to see fulfilled the ambitions of the self-declared “moderns,” who in the first generations of the previous century aspired toward a new culture adequate to the upheavals of history. We can see ourselves in good faith neither as the heirs of a tradition perpetuating itself through our inheritance of it, nor as the bearers of a modern mission to remake the world. We are alone.

This was how Richard Howard, poet, translator, and critic, saw our situation at the end of the 1960s. His monumental survey of postwar American poetry, *Alone with America* (1969), analyzed the work of 41 poets, who, diverse in style, tone, and subject (ranging from John Ashbery to Allen Ginsberg, Denise Levertov to Sylvia Plath) were united by one problem: Americans’ estrangement from tradition and self-confident modernity alike. In his essays on these poets, Howard, while attending in a spirit of generous engagement to the specificities and temperaments of each, found them working toward a shared—and insufficient—set of answers. Most abandoned verse and meter; despite the attempts by modernist masters of the previous generation, like Ezra Pound and W.H. Auden (*Alone with America’s* dedicatees), to renovate them through a learned reappropriation of the whole range of occidental aesthetics from troubadour love songs to opera, these

forms seemed not only obsolete after the bracing experiments of free verse and fragmentation, but also the ornaments of a vanished order, annihilated by the world wars and civilizational suicide of Europe.

Howard, who died on March 31 of this year, was one of post-traditional, postmodern America’s most sensitive and intelligent observers. Born in 1929, Howard, like the poets he profiled in *Alone with America*, came to adulthood in an America of unprecedented wealth and power, amid the apparent collapse of the ethical, intellectual, and literary traditions by which Americans might have sought to understand what this wealth and power were for. We are, in one sense, far from that postwar era. As we begin the second generation of the 21st century, America’s prosperity and security are increasingly uncertain and imperiled. The unraveling of American hegemony, indeed of American society, however, only makes our cultural disorientation a more crucial matter of thought and feeling, which we must be able to experience as the crisis that it is, rather than the benumbing, irresistible, or even unnoticed (because ubiquitous) malaise as which we often have lived it.

Howard’s criticism is urbane, filled with pretentious puns in multiple languages, and sentences of such length and side-winding digressiveness that to read them aloud staggers the breath and astounds the ear. His translations are elegant—and voluminous, numbering over 100, spanning the range of modern French letters from Baudelaire to Barthes to *The Little Prince*. His poetry

is gossipy (recounting his literary run-ins, rivalries, and respects), or theatrical (staging encounters between literary figures of the past) often in an aureate, erudite prolixity that seems designed to dazzle the reader out of remembering the author was born in Cleveland (“the suburbs of his heart,” he called provincial Ohio in an early poem). None of these aspects of his work, however, which readers may take or leave as a lively mind’s delightful play or as pretentious, Frenchified self-satisfaction, should distract—although they have distracted—from the seriousness of its demand—the call that unifies Howard’s vast contributions to diverse domains of literature—to confront the twin loss of tradition and of high modernity, and, from their double ruin, to begin again.

Alone in America is a witness to a civilizational disaster and a celebration of those born under it. Howard heralded—but with crucial reservations—the poets whom he saw discovering new possibilities for literature. Howard praised Levertov, for example, as “an autochthonous maker,” whose American English, though carrying memories of the Old World, was confirmed in its “identity and autonomy” by a poet who was “not merely an agent but an origin of that language.” But Howard also saw the enormous risks of a poetics, without meter, rhyme, or reference to a thousand years of English forms, disappearing into prose.

This was not, he warned, merely a loss of certain techniques that distinguished the highly patterned writing of poetry from prose’s more expansive and meandering expressions. It was the collapse of the structures by which writers had pursued what Howard understood as poetry’s specific purpose. A poem, Howard argued, is a way of expressing, in the rhythms of language, “something happening in your life ... your life when it seems to you to welter in a particular exemplary status.” Without concern for these rhythms, and for the experience they shape for the reader, American poets were losing the ability to understand the intensities of private experience as manifestations of our

common—historical, national, human—life. As poetry became indistinguishable from prose, the private could no longer speak to the public.

The poet is, or ought to be, Howard wrote, “that emblematic man, who ... must stand, in particulars, for the generality.” The task of poetry is to discover in what seems like the originalities of peculiar selves the hidden originals of human nature, to ask of what seems to befall us, singly and exclusively, of our apparently incommunicable idiosyncrasies, “what does it mean—for humanity—that this can happen in a human life?” The decline of traditional poetic forms therefore poses a danger to the identity of the poet. Without a repertoire of flexible but familiar rhythms of language through which to communicate experiences to the reader, the “emblematic” status of the writer’s personal experiences became problematic, something either asserted, willfully and hysterically or ironically and chattily, but not demonstrated in the writing—not produced in the consciousness of the reader.

Some became poets of the contingent and personal. Frank O’Hara, Howard chided, descended over the course of his career as a writer into the mere display of personality, “a fidelity to the worst in himself,” coupled with a “growing scorn of any artifice.” Insistent autobiographical chatter, devoid of “the kind of tension that makes for a unity,” fills the page the way splotches fill a Pollock painting. Or in a still more unflattering comparison, O’Hara’s poetics was a “cult of personality” akin to that of Stalin. Howard had similar criticism for the apparently quite different Anne Sexton, whose tone—dark and violent—was at antipodes to O’Hara’s indulgent enjoyment of popular culture, modern art, and bodily pleasures. But Sexton shared with O’Hara, Howard argued,

an abandonment of poetry’s rhythms, of the poet’s age-old ambition to make the reader feel, through the recursions and surprises of sound, something like the personal experiences blazoned by the poems’ speakers.

A poet instead might seek to empty the self out entirely, as Mark Strand seemed to do. Strand, himself a provincial (born in Prince Edward Island) Jewish poet, struck Howard as registering in his early work (*Sleeping with One Eye Open*, 1964) “a collapse, a defeat, a disintegration” of identity. The speaker of the poems became merely a “dummy” through which an impersonal language ventriloquized itself. By 1968, in his second book, *Reasons for Moving*, Strand had found a spare diction to match this ascetics of self-emptying, with lines made up of “the simplest declarative sentences” in which the poet, recording everyday experiences, steps as it were out of the life where they occur. Rather than bringing, as Sexton and O’Hara sought to do, his personality into focus as both the site of the experiences his poems attempt to communicate and as the force which is communicating (or at least, communicating *about*) them to the reader, Strand tries to dislocate the two, to wake from the “narcissist’s wet dream” by making his poems about the disjuncture between the self of experience and the self of writing. Howard drew attention to Strand’s “boasts”:

*In a field
I am the absence
of field.
This is always the case.
Wherever I am
I am what is missing ...*

Such a “poetry of erasure” is only superficially different from the more straightforward egoism of O’Hara and Sexton. Instead of replicating something like the poet’s experience in the reader through the play of familiar (and unexpected variations on) forms, connecting the intimate, otherwise inaccessible incidents they described to others by creating new incidents on the page, and thus allowing the poet to stand as a particularly lucid discloser of the extraordinariness of ordinary life, these

poems singularized the poet, whose task was now to confess his uniqueness—or to suspend his subjectivity in an ecstasy of witnessing. But without formalism, the pursuit of truth, whether conceived as an autobiographical tell-all or objective testimony, is impossible for poetry or any art, which succeed, if ever, through the “lies” of artifice—not by showing us things outside ourselves, but by making the semblances of those things take place within us.

Six months after the publication of *Alone with America*, Howard wrote in the first issue of the journal *Prose* a reappraisal of what his accomplishment disclosed about our culture. He observed that nearly half of the poets he had selected were Jewish. He did not say, Jewish like himself—nor did he reckon how many, although it was surely also rather a disproportionate percentage, were, also like himself, gay men. He mused that perhaps Jews were such excellent and representative American poets (it went without saying that Howard could not have selected poets who merely appealed to him, who were not in fact paragons!) because they could feel, in an especially intense way, the uprootedness of American postmodernity. Coming from annihilated elsewhere to a culture cut off from its own pasts, Jews were alone in America’s loneliness.

Howard’s poetry, however, was already wiser than the self-stereotyping (and self-concealing) of this essay. If the situation of postmodern poetics tempts some poets to shrilly or sardonically insist on their individual selves, and others, ostensibly, to extinguish the self through (self-asserting) feats of literary asceticism, it poses the same dilemma for the problem of the poet’s membership in groups larger than the self and smaller than humanity. To say, in a paraphrase of Strand, that one’s identity as a Jew (or gay man, or American, etc.) is an emphatic absence of identity, a field of absence, hardly resolves the issue. Our “identities” conceived either as what makes us individual, or as what makes us categorizable in “identity” groups, afford us no solution to the bewilderments of an era that can neither inherit

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the certainties of tradition nor continue the venture of modernism.

Howard's poetry, however, models a way to elude the characteristic failures of the postwar poets of aloneness, thinking through identities not directly as "one's own," but taking them up as masks. In his 1969 volume *Untitled Subjects*—published the same year as *Alone with America*—Howard offered readers a series of dramatic monologues, each by a 19th-century figure (most real, some imagined). Bringing new life into the unfashionable and apparently utterly uncontemporary Victorians, Howard used them to think about his, and our, own problems. Rather than try, as Strand seemed, to become the ventriloquist's "dummy" of a world outside the self (a project that, however, convincingly executed, could only ever fail; there is no one who can speak through us but ourselves), Howard would make these historical and pseudohistorical personages and situations his own "dummies," and find, in speaking through them, that they often could tell him more than he knew.

Untitled Subjects, for example, features an imagined letter to Moses Montefiore, a Jewish financier and leading British Zionist of the late 19th century, from Hermann Levi, who conducted the opera *Parsifal* for the notoriously antisemitic composer Richard Wagner. Against Montefiore's "kind misgivings" to Levi's collaboration with Wagner, the conductor advances several arguments. Wagner's apparently sweeping antisemitism is in fact motivated specifically by his rivalry with the Jewish composer Giacomo Meyerbeer (at the time one of the most famous in Europe). It is Wagner's wife, Cosima, who is the real hater of Jews; her husband is noble and sensitive. Finally, these biographical details are of little importance compared to the great work—not that Wagner is making, with the help of a Jewish collaborator—but that is being wrung out of him, "sponge ... squeezed by God." The beautiful music of the opera, not the magnanimity or petty prejudice of the vessel by which it enters the world, is what matters—and all that will be remembered. In half a century, Levi writes (this is 1882),

"what will it signify / to our children, in Germany where mine / are born, and in that new Zion where you have bred / the hope of yours," whether Wagner was an antisemite?

Of course, in 50 years—that is, in 1932, one year before Hitler took power—all this would matter a great deal, and the very idea of art for the sake of art, ignoring racial and political hatreds, would be attacked by Wagner's totalitarian admirers as a bit of Jewish degeneracy. More cogently than a direct statement could, the poem makes us participate in its speaker's longing to escape considerations of "identity"—ethnoreligious attachments and personality alike—into a conception of art as an aperture through which impersonal beauty flows—and, knowing what the speaker of the poem does not know, the terrible conclusion of the half-century ahead, feel how awfully that longing will be answered. From *Untitled Subjects* on, Howard wrote poetry chiefly through such characters, or, with greater frequency after the '80s, through first-person reminiscences that retained a semifictional form. Both in structure and in content, the latter pointed to possibilities beyond the confessions and erasures Howard had criticized in *Alone with America*.

Howard learned in his poems what it might mean to be *together* rather than *alone*. If it is now impossible to be traditional, in the sense of taking up a set of techniques, subjects, and models generally recognized as canonical (and equally impossible to see oneself as part of a modernist avant-garde working together to overthrow tradition and replace it with some new canon), it is still possible, and imperative, to write ourselves into the past. Both in form (experimenting with quantitative verse and shapes of stanzas to organize his monologues, dialogues, and epistolary poems) and in content (speaking through characters drawn from the era before the tradition's end), Howard showed what it would be like to have a poetics of playing well with others.

These others—the great poets he echoed, the figures through whom he ventriloquized (they were often the same)—became Howard's necessary

substitute for a tradition. They replaced, insofar as it was possible, the repertoire of received forms by which poets had mediated between their interior intimacies and the public. They gave the poet not only a set of others to and with whom to speak, but a means of accessing the otherness within himself, and within each of us. Howard's poems tell us that we find this otherness—our own difference from our "identity" and "identities"—not through our brave self-declarations or bravura self-annihilations, but through our generous interest in the people of the past.

Thirty-five years after *Alone with America*, Howard returned to Strand's boast, "I am the absence of field," in his own poem, "Writing Off." Strand, he argued, stood for a poetics—an ethics—of "forsaking ... withdrawing himself from the scene." This was, Howard countered, just another means by which a poet "scores identity," showily presenting his purported absence. Howard put forward a "converse claim," a different vision of poetry. He brought forward a series of images—Arabic calligraphy, the cave paintings of Lascaux, and a wall "covered, cancelled, *encrusted*" with graffiti—declaring that they were "the field from which Mark Strand / proclaims himself absent," our insurmountable desire to inscribe ourselves in the world and "sigh / with authorial satisfaction."

Critics and translators—those who receive and transmit, pitch and catch culture—are perhaps particularly thick in the impasto of art, their writing only a hidden layer, providing a surface on or through which what they prize can become visible. But poets too, and all "original" writers, are losing ourselves in the palimpsest. The impossibility of immortality, of persevering in being at least as a name—or of preserving ourselves from our compulsion to devote ourselves to the memory of others—is not for Howard the tragedy of art. Art is rather the condition of making something together that, bearing us along unseen, transcends everything, after tradition and modernity are gone. ■

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Doja Cat, the Shitposting, Cow-twerking Queen of the Internet

How the rapper of mixed Zulu and Jewish origins embodies all that is real in the uncanny valley of online culture

BY ANI WILCENSKI

Three weeks ago, Doja Cat, the Grammy-winning-rapper-slash-internet-darling who boasts 22 million TikTok followers, 10 Grammy nominations, and Spotify's title of most popular rapper (which she recently nabbed from her fellow Jewish rapper Drake), burst onto Twitter to announce that music is dead. To be precise, she tweeted, "i fuckin quit i can't wait to fucking disappear and i don't need you to believe in me anymore. Everything is dead to me, music is dead, and i'm a fucking fool for ever thinking i was made for this this is a fucking nightmare unfollow me."

The proclamation came after a fracas in Paraguay, where the rapper's appearance at a music festival was canceled due to heavy storms. When upset fans complained on Twitter that Doja seemed insufficiently disappointed by the cancellation, the habitually high millenarian post-millennial replied to one stung tweeter with "I'm sorry," prompting another fan to post a photo of Doja's face emblazoned with "PUBLIC ENEMY #1" with the caption "it's too late to apologize"... leading Doja to respond "I'm not sorry." Cue the Twitter rant about everything being dead, and Doja's subsequent Twitter name change to "I quit," followed by Doja saying she'll no longer take photos with fans, topped off with "This shit ain't for me so I'm out. Y'all take care."

A few days later, Doja Cat reemerged with a string of now-deleted tweets expressing gratitude for the opportunities her fans have given her, sparking speculation that she might not be serious about her withdrawal from music—which she quickly shut down by responding to one such article with a simple "yes the fuck i am."

Given that she's performing at Coachella and Lollapalooza, and also that she's going on tour in July alongside the Weeknd, it is conceivable that Doja Cat was simply acting out in the social media mirror and didn't mean to put anyone's bankroll at risk. Indeed, she says she will honor all of her obligations before stepping out of the spotlight. But to those who have followed her meteoric, chaotic, meme-fueled rise to fame, her frustration feels like the logical progression of a career spent chafing at, while coming to embody, a puritanical-yet-degraded age in which the internet giveth and the internet taketh away. For a night at least, Doja was simply getting some of her own back.

Amala Ratna Zandile Dlamini, otherwise known as Doja Cat, was born in Los Angeles to a Jewish mother and a South African father of Zulu descent. Her father, a performer best known for his role alongside Whoopi Goldberg in the 1992 musical *Sarafina!*, moved back to South Africa shortly before her birth, citing homesickness. He claims to maintain a healthy relationship with

his children; Doja maintains that she doesn't know him whatsoever, save for his regular appearances on her social media: "My dad's proud of me... He's all over my Instagram. But what's funny is I never met him. He's all in the comments like "My African Princess!" And I'm like, "Whaaat?!"

With her father out of the picture, Doja was sent to live with her Jewish maternal grandmother, an architect and painter, in Rye, New York. She lived there until she was 8, when she joined her mother and brother at Sai Anantam Ashram, a practicing commune in the Santa Monica Mountains founded by the late jazz musician Alice Coltrane, whose Sanskrit name is Turiyasangitananda. There, she took Indian classical dance lessons, wore headscarves, and participated in afternoon ecstatic-chanting services, where she learned she could rap.

A lifelong rebel, Doja found the ashram restraining, particularly as a self-described "hyper" kid. Yet the world outside the ashram's gardens could be even more challenging. When her family eventually moved to the upper-middle-class LA suburb of Oak Park, she and her brother were some of the very few mixed-race kids in the predominantly white and Jewish area. "People were very racist and rude and unhinged and weird," she told *Rolling Stone*.

Doja dropped out of high school at age 16, citing her struggle with ADHD. She describes her life during that period as "messy," holing up in her room, staying up all night, and sleeping on the floor. She spent most of her time on the internet, messing around in online chat rooms, scouring YouTube for beats and instrumentals, and uploading her songs to SoundCloud, all while smoking an ungodly amount of weed. (Her stage name Doja comes from her self-described "heavy addiction to weed culture.")

It was on SoundCloud where she got her first break, after her song "So High," a trippy electro-pop melody with lyrics that now make her cringe, caught the attention of her now-longtime producer Yeti Beats, who was captivated by the underwater uniqueness of her voice. In 2013, he signed Doja to the RCA imprint

Kemosabe Records, with which she released her debut album in early 2018, an album that failed to chart in any market and she now openly disdains. She says that the label “paid it almost no support” and that its quality was diminished by the fact that she was high during most of its recording.

Doja’s first breakthrough moment came in August of 2018, when she released “Mooo!,” a strangely catchy song with lyrics like “Bitch, I’m a cow” and “These heifers got nothing on me.” The song features an accompanying video in which she wears a cow costume, dances around her bedroom with french fries stuck up her nostrils, and sips on a milkshake in front of a glitchy homemade green screen with images of bouncing anime boobs. The video, which she says took 12 1/2 hours to make and was inspired by her Instagram live sessions with fans jokingly kicking around beats, went viral almost instantly, racking up over a million views within six days. This was the first peek into one of the truest sources of Doja Cat’s success—she’s spent a lot of time messing around on the internet. Accordingly, she’s well-versed in the mischief and transience of the digital age, and she’s equipped with the quick wit and the even quicker-on-the-uptake momentum to take advantage of its powers. Her second album, *Hot Pink*, came out in November of 2019 to largely favorable reviews and commercial success, peaking at No. 9 on the U.S. Billboard 200. But once again it was the viral appetite of the internet that took the project to another level: Her bubblegum pop meets ’70s funk single “Say So” blew up on TikTok after one girl’s dance routine set to it went viral, spawning thousands and thousands of recreations, including by Doja herself. The song became her first No. 1 hit, setting the tone for a subsequent trajectory in which nearly everything Doja touches turns into musical internet gold. Her third studio album, *Planet Her*—a June 2021 project inspired by Doja’s “space age” vision of a place where “all races of space exist and its where all species can kind of be in harmony”—features her experimenting with an expansive range of genres and lyrical themes. Her recording engineer, Rian Lewis, notes

“It’s nearly impossible to figure out what Doja Cat really thinks or feels (including about big Issues; she almost never speaks about politics).”

that all the harmonies, complex stacks, and background vocals in character voices were squarely Doja’s ideas. At last count, five tracks from the album (including one nonsingle, “Ain’t Shit,” which she premiered over Instagram livestream) have gone massively viral, propelled in no small part by more TikTok dance challenges.

It’s not just Doja’s music that gets so widely shared these days, it’s also her “content”: the TikToks making fun of cringey men offering harebrained dating advice; the tweets like “i love boobs so much fuck”; the Instagram posts with polished photos with captions like “if u got unfollowed it’s because I got a stick up my ass and all I wanna see right now is furniture.” Her online persona, tweeting PR-team-approved messages about global starvation one moment and “if ur reading this shut the fuck up” the next, is one part megastar and three parts experienced shit-poster, freewheeling and bold and constitutionally incapable of things we’ve come to expect of our major celebrities, like “earnestness” and “branding” and “staying on message.” It’s nearly impossible to figure out what she really thinks or feels (including about big Issues; she almost never speaks about politics) but her barrage of trippy pop and somewhat explicit rambblings, sincere or not, is vastly more interesting

than the canned politics of many of her better-groomed peers.

Of course, as anyone who has logged into a computer over the past five years could tell you, a proclivity for irreverent humor isn’t exactly a recipe for smooth sailing at the moment, even for social media natives. Doja has navigated more than her fair share of controversies, having issued a slew of public apologies—after searches of her Twitter history revealed that she’d once used an anti-gay slur, and after a March 2020 Instagram live culminated in her saying COVID was just a flu, and after a 2015 song called “Dindu Nuffin” (an alt-right term mocking Black victims of police brutality who maintain their innocence, which she said she tried to invert and reclaim in the song) resurfaced on the internet during the George Floyd protests. Though at the same time it also seems fair to say that any one of these controversies would have sunk a less authentic-seeming performer.

There is also the matter of her long-time producer. Doja’s label, Kemosabe Records, was formerly run by Dr. Luke, who around the same time he signed Doja started his now-notorious legal battle with the singer Ke\$ha, who claimed that he sexually and mentally abused her for years during their time working together. Amid the lawsuit, Dr. Luke withdrew from the music scene, stepping down from his role at Kemosabe and adopting a pseudonym for future work. The case against Dr. Luke was dismissed in 2016 on the grounds of insufficient evidence, but the stigma still stuck.

Shortly after being cleared in court, Dr. Luke began a full-throated comeback which is undeniably linked to Doja. He has five credits on *Hot Pink*, including on the massive hit “Say So,” and has been nominated for three Grammys for that album and *Planet Her*. Doja has rarely addressed her lengthy affiliation with the producer until she was asked by *Rolling Stone* last year whether she would follow fellow female rapper Saweetie in refusing to work with Dr. Luke again. She hedged a bit, telling the magazine she “didn’t think” they needed to collaborate anymore, then added with

a laugh that “it was definitely nice” of her to work with him.

This combination of edge-lord posting and her refusal to publicly disavow a famously skeezy producer has given rise to an inevitable discourse about whether Doja Cat is “uncancelable.” The answer, clearly, is yes—her fans recognize that most of her so-called scandals are silly, accept her apologies for the ones that aren’t, and appreciate her unfiltered zaniness much more than they would identify with a sleek PR powerhouse. If anything, the better question is how much more patience she has for the constant neck-breathing and tone-policing that comes with being a very online star.

Let’s hope that her patience doesn’t run out any time soon, because Doja represents everything that is fun and hilarious and exhilarating about the internet age. Despite every poorly executed or politically motivated attempt to regulate the online sphere, it’s still basically the Wild West, a lawless space where deranged memes and transgressive humor and utter wackos abound. This comes with obvious pitfalls—yet another Doja controversy went down in 2020, when old videos surfaced of the singer in a web chatroom occasionally frequented by alt-right trolls. Denying that she’d been personally involved in racist conversations, she hopped on Instagram Live to respond to the videos: “I learned that there are racist people who come in and out of the chat,” she said. “They’re there. They happen, and then they’re banned. The idea that this chatroom is a white supremacist chatroom is ... I don’t understand it in any way.”

But it also means that there is ample space in this freewheeling, weirdo-filled internet landscape for the sort of sharp, hilarious, out-of-the-box creation that is sorely missing from the humorless monolith of modern American culture. From Hollywood writers’ rooms to journalism to Oscar-winning movies, American media is as blandly one-note as it has ever been. So it’s no wonder that the Gen Zers in Doja’s fanbase would likely rather watch a 45-minute YouTube video of an influencer rambling to the camera while she drinks an iced coffee than the new inclusive version of *Sex and the City*. The

informality of the internet provides a space where people can be candid and unfiltered and genuinely authentic, which is what any young person hungers for, and is also the opposite of what American institutions are currently serving up. Young people don’t see themselves in, or aspire to be, the mega-woke teens in the latest reboot of *Saved by the Bell*—they’d much prefer the unapologetic messiness of the TikTok making fun of herself for crying over a man who didn’t even know what the word “mandatory” meant. In her unfiltered candor, that girl feels like an actual person, with the sort of anxieties and blunders and mundane problems that exist in the real lives of young people, who actually don’t spend their time leaning on lockers and conversing about privilege.

With her own unfiltered authenticity, Doja Cat is truly a star for her generation. She has her finger on the pulse of the same weird riffs and momentary internet fixations, and she is conversant in the cultural lexicon that actually animates and entertains her fans. And it’s not because some label executive is forcing her to be in the name of “expanding her reach”; it’s because at her core she’s a mildly horny internet lurker just like so many of us. (An excellent example: Last week, a TikTok was going around in which a girl sporting the smallest dress and the biggest boobs humanly imaginable did a dance with her friends, which was filmed sideways. The video, with almost 7 million likes now, was full of comments saying things like, “I’ve never turned my phone so fast smh.” Just yesterday, Doja posted her own TikTok ogling the video with her phone turned to the side.) The mildly horny internet spirit is a key part of her lyrics, too: “I heard from a friend of a friend that that dick was 10 out of 10”; “Met him on Tinder, he just swiped left on bitches”; “Ten-page text, shoulda wrote a book, coulda made a bag.” Doja is talking about sexuality in a vocabulary that is current; she’s steeped in the sort of cheeky, genuinely funny—not just shock-value explicit—self-deprecating but also self-aware (what woman hasn’t dashed off a lengthy text in a fit of rage

only to bemoan the moment of weakness to their friends later?) tone that characterizes the online conversation about sex and dating. As always, she’s in on the jokes—which are a lot more than just jokes anyway. Doja is arguably the only modern superstar who delights in being on the outside of the blob that is the American political-cultural complex. Her forays into edgy bits or Twitter transgression aren’t just snarky self-amusement; they’re an embrace of the aesthetics of outsiderism in a way we haven’t seen for years, and certainly not from our micro-managed, media-trained megastars. With the crystallization of our media into one corporate-backed, diversity-consulted, monotonous superstructure, there hasn’t been space for an American counter-culture to flourish in a long time. But Doja Cat, lurking in her chat rooms and twerking in her cow costume, might just be the closest thing to it we have seen.

Perhaps the most classically online thing about Doja is her pace. She moves at the breakneck speed that feeds the life cycle of the internet, from hopping in on the latest viral TikTok to retweeting 20 things about Taco Bell’s Mexican pizza. This is also true for the speed with which she (and her audience) moves past her sudden outbursts and incidents, blowing up for a few content-and-emotion-filled days before issuing the appropriate degree of apology and then moving onto the next thing without any of the now-requisite “taking time to reflect” or “stepping back to consider the harmful effects of my actions.” There’s a strange optimism to be found in the way she has been able to keep moving forward. Hearing major celebrities fall all over themselves to atone for their sins is tiresome and boring, and the last people who want that are fans of a woman whose rise to fame can be traced

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back to a viral video of her twerking in a cow costume.

Not surprisingly, even after Doja's dramatic announcement that music was dead and she was gone, she returned to her regularly scheduled programming almost immediately. She addressed her statement live on TikTok one night with the following: "English isn't my first language. Neither is any other language. I don't speak any language well. So I just mean that I'm gone, I quit. It doesn't mean that I quit, but I fuckin quit, I quit. You see what I'm saying?" She also sent out a few April Fools' tweets that

her account had been hacked by Nicolas Cage. In the comments, a couple people asked her not to quit, but mostly they just joined in on the jokes ("so this is what ur gonna do when ur retired," one comment read. "So what are your opinions on the Treaty of Versailles?" asked another.)

A week after the tweetstorm, she performed at the Grammys, where her single "Kiss Me More," featuring SZA, won the award for Best Pop Duo—though she was in the bathroom when the prize was announced and had to sprint onstage. As she accepted her award, blinking back

tears, she said, "I like to downplay shit, but this? This is a big deal."

If Doja Cat's shit-posting, meme-driven success within the ever-faster ecosystem of the internet offers any generational lessons, one might be that people respond to authentic style, even when it's somewhat deranged and incoherent. Another might be that culture wars can in fact come second to having fun and making cool new stuff, if that's what you actually care about doing. ■

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COMMUNITY

Volodymyr Zelensky and the World to Come

What an old rebbe's fable can teach us about the war in Ukraine

BY ALTER YISRAEL SHIMON FEUERMAN

When I was 6 years old, my grandfather, who was born in the town of Trisk near Chernobyl, told me a story about his great-grandfather, Reb Menachem Nochum Twersky. He was the Grand Rebbe of Chernobyl, known as the *Meor Einayim* (the light of the eyes), and a disciple of the Baal Shem Tov.

It was a classic Jewish folk tale replete with archetypes: the wonder-worker rabbi, the poor townspeople, a rich man, and the cold frozen Russo-Ukrainian landscape.

Though I have seen and heard the tale repeated in different forms and variations, it went something like this: The itinerant rebbe came upon a village somewhere in the Pripyat Marsh whose inhabitants were so poor they had no proper mikvah or bathhouse. In summer

they used the Pripyat to bathe and go to the mikvah. During the winter this was all but impossible. Those intrepid souls who did, risked death. Family life, which was dependent on the mikvah, could not continue.

The rebbe went downriver to Kyiv. (The Pripyat flows 80 miles or so south into the Dnieper, which divides Kyiv.) Kyiv was a substantial city even in the 18th century and there were rich folk there. The rebbe asked one such rich denizen of Kyiv to pay for a mikvah back in the village.

The conversation probably went something like this:

"May I ask you for 10 million rubles to pay for a mikvah in the village of Boiberik?"

"What? I should pay for a small town upriver in a place I never heard of?"

"That is what I am asking."

"Rabbi, I know you are a saintly man, but we are people of the earth. If I

fulfilled everyone's requests, I would be a poor man myself. Here, take this 10-ruble note and let's be done. You're doing the Lord's work, my good man and the Lord will have to provide. This is all I can do"

The rebbe prayed silently and used his head. "What if I told you that this was an investment that would bring you wealth? What if I told you that this would make you a richer man, a tycoon, in this world and the next?"

"I'm listening."

"I'm a poor man," said the rebbe. "I have nothing in the world, not even 2 kopecks. But I have wealth coming to me in the next world. What if I deeded over to you my share in the world to come? For 10 million rubles, you will be wealthy in this world *and* the next."

The rich man had never heard anything like this before. Was the rabbi mad? Who would give up their share in the world to come? Was there even a world to come? Who could be sure? And would the sale be valid? Is heavenly reward transferable? Does it work like a voucher?

"Indeed, it is transferable," the rebbe said. "I will write a contract, a deed for you right now. Call in witnesses to sign. I will do it right now, I say. Do we have a deal?"

"It is a risk, rabbi, a risk."

"We both have something at risk here," said the rebbe, "a world to lose and a world to gain."

"Tell me rabbi, why would you do

this, on behalf of some no-name village?" asked the rich man. "It's all that you have."

"Love God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your possessions," said the rebbe. "This is my chance to fulfill that commandment. I am a poor man. I have no possessions. This document represents all that I have. I give God my all, by giving it to you."

The rich man wept. "This may be utter foolishness, a foolish piety, but I am going to do it!" He called in witnesses and signed the document and handed him the money. "You are the luckier of the two of us, rabbi. How rich the reward in the next world must be for a man who gives his all."

When I heard this as a small child, my mother was 30, my father was 34, my grandfather was a robust 60. The world to come was as far from me as Timbuktu. Yet the story got into me somehow.

How many stories and ideas enter you as a child? Hundreds, maybe thousands. Many are repelled at the door, others enter you, stay for a time, only to be forgotten. Only a few remain, maybe to be mobilized much later when the shadows in life have already grown long.

In February, Putin sent his armies downriver through the 1,000-square-mile Chernobyl Exclusionary Zone—to conquer Kyiv. Volodymyr Zelensky's eloquent and brave response made me think of my grandfather's story.

In his address to the British House of Commons, Zelensky said, "To be or not to be? I can give you a definitive answer. It's definitely yes—to be." At another point when asked if he was afraid of dying, he said, "For my loved ones, yes. As for my life: I am the president of the country, and I simply do not have the right to it."

Zelensky and the rebbe were both trying to move the rich man. In the rebbe's case, it was the proverbial well-heeled urbanite in Kyiv. In Zelensky's, it was the metaphorical rich man: the collective, wealthy West.

To be sure, the rebbe was a pious, holy man; Zelensky makes no pretense to holiness. He is merely a courageous one. Yet in an ingeniousness born of desperation, both the rebbe and Zelensky successfully

The rebbe,
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and anti-money,
lived in a world
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generate capital.

fought the cynicism of the status quo: *What has this got to do with me?*

With a smidgen of slyness they each glamorized sacrifice and trounced the repugnant aspect of self-preservation. They each put an offer on the table. Zelensky's was this: If you love freedom from tyranny, then you are with me in a bond of everlasting self-respect for life. Give up self-preservation for righteousness, foresight, and courage.

When the Ukrainian Jewish comic-cum-president eloquently traded on transcendence, he helped me understand the *maggid* of Chernobyl. The rebbe said, "take Pascal's wager," exceed yourself, and you will be rich in this world and the next.

I confess that when I was younger, I cynically saw the holy man's gambit as a feint, a gimmick to receive an even bigger share in the world to come by selling his sainthood status in the here and now. Sure, why not double dip, to double your money, so to speak?

But when I heard Zelensky plead with us to give up immediate self-preservation for the pleasures of righteousness, foresight, and courage, I saw the tale of the Chernobyl *maggid* in a completely different light. He created a brilliant nexus between transactionalism and truth. The rich man trades in a world

of transaction, not transcendence. The rebbe, famously poor and anti-money, lived in a world of transcendent truth but no transactional truth—no way to generate capital. Was it a hustle? Yes, but a holy hustle.

Legend has it that he got the mikvah built in Boiberik, or some other such place like Voronkov or Yehupetz or Me-karv, the Ukrainian ghost towns of our impoverished yesteryear. Of course, millions have been slaughtered since then in those very places.

What then became of the rebbe with no share in the world to come? I asked my father this question 50 years ago when I first heard the story. Where is great-great-grandfather's place?

My father shrugged then gravely gestured toward the *seforim* shank, the bookcase with the Talmud and thousands of holy books—and the *sefer Meor Einayim*, the rebbe's Hasidic masterwork. "That's his world to come," he told me. "He's in there."

In my father's house we were "forbidden" to read the *Meor Einayim*. The concepts were kabbalistic in nature and my father felt that neither he nor the rest of the family could understand them. So the volume gathered dust.

Fifty years on, I "disobeyed" my father and opened the book. On the first page he quotes Genesis: In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was *tohu*, without form, and *bohu*, void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. *Tohu* and *bohu*, wonder and chaos. Playing on the word *bohu*, he writes *bo hu*—He is in it. God is in the wonder and the chaos. His spirit hovers over the waters of the world before and after creation.

I got a glimmer at that moment of the *Meor Eynayim*. There is a flow between worlds. For him the next world and this world were not completely separate units. They were like Jacob's ladder—the base on earth but the top in the heavens. Surely, a man whose head was already in the heavens can sell his share in the world to come and somehow still have a place. ■

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Cooking Under Pressure

How the Jews of Rome turned hardship and oppressive regulations into enduring culinary delights

BY BENEDETTA JASMINE GUETTA

A famous Jewish joke says that most of the events we commemorate on our holidays can be summarized in one simple sentence: “They tried to kill us, they failed, let’s eat.” This attitude has seen our ancestors through every form of oppression and persecution that the Jews have experienced across the centuries, all over the world. It doesn’t matter how much they try to harm us, we will make the most of our circumstances, however dire they may be—and we’ll end up with something delicious.

A prime example can be found in the history of Jewish Italian cuisine.

Jews arrived on the Italian peninsula back when it was united as the Roman Empire; during the Jewish-Roman wars, beginning in 66 BCE and spanning 70 years, thousands of Jews were taken back to Rome as slaves, an event depicted on the city’s Arch of Titus. Their numbers swelled to over 50,000 in the first century CE, when they occupied urban centers and port towns, often earning their freedom and becoming merchants. However, when the Emperor Constantine decriminalized Christianity in 313 CE and subsequently converted, he paved the way for central Italy to become what it is today: the seat of the papacy. The Roman Empire’s collapse created a number of separate states. Each state treated its Jewish citizens differently, but over time, a pattern emerged: that of ghettoization. Venice was the first city to restrict Jews to a ghetto in 1516, followed by Rome, where Jews were constrained to a ghetto in 1555 under a decree by Pope Paul IV. *Cum nimis absurdum* was a papal bull requiring Roman Jews to be segregated and to identify themselves with blue

items of clothing. It also restricted property rights and the learning of skilled trades, forcing Jews into unskilled jobs as pawnbrokers, moneylenders, second-hand dealers, and “rag men.”

The Roman ghetto was located in one of the most undesirable quarters of the city, subject to constant flooding from the Tiber river, near the old fish market. At this time there were about 2,000 Jews living in Rome and their living conditions in the ghetto were terrible, with many barely surviving in extreme poverty, due to the restrictions enforced on them. The hardship, however, did not discourage the Roman Jews. The women of the ghetto, demonstrating that necessity is truly the mother of invention, made the most out of their difficult situation. They went to the fish market after it closed, collected all the heads and tails and leftovers that the fishmongers had disposed of, and boiled them to make a soup. That is the humble origin of *zuppa di pesce* (fish soup), a dish that is now considered a local delicacy and a staple in the Jewish quarter in Rome, appreciated by locals and tourists alike.

In 1661, the local authorities, in the person of Domenico Zauli, bishop of Veroli and vicar general of the Diocese of Rome, had the rabbi and the administrators of the Jewish community of Rome set some strict sumptuary rules, or laws about luxury, to limit and restrict—supposedly on moral grounds—any extravagance in food and clothing within the community. These bizarre rules that the Catholic authorities wanted to enforce on the Jews had little to do with luxury and much to do with abuse—they really just seemed aimed at further limiting the freedom of the Jews.

Among the regulations contained in the sumptuary rules, many were about food. What could be served at a wedding

reception, which pastries could be gifted to a new mother, which specific type of cookie could be had at a brit milah ... the options were limited to almost nothing, so that the Jews would not take any pleasure or enjoyment, however small. Two strikingly odd rules applied to salads and fish: Jews could not eat “rich salads,” meaning leafy green dishes featuring other ingredients such as eggs or cheese. They could only have plain lettuce, endive, chard, and wild herbs. As for the fish, Jews were only allowed “anchovies and blue fish,” the latter being, in Italian, a category that includes small, lower quality, inexpensive varieties that are net-fished in large amounts such as sardines, mackerel, and herring. The Jews were not disheartened. They took some of the ingredients they were allowed to use—namely, curly endive and anchovies—layered them in a baking dish, topped them with good Italian olive oil, salt, and pepper, and made *aliciotti con l’indivia*, a delicious dish that is also served to this day in every restaurant in the ghetto.

But regulations continued to be placed on the Jews of Rome. In 1775, Pope Pius VI came up with another peculiar rule to complicate Jewish daily life. This time the object of the regulation was milk, which Jews could only buy for their own consumption in small quantities, but not sell to others, especially to Christians, in any form: cheeses, custards, baked goods, etc. That’s when Jews started to bake cheesecakes covered with a flat layer or a tight lattice of pastry dough, so that nobody could see that the filling under the pastry was indeed cheese.

These are just a few of the fascinating stories about Italian food that can be uncovered by looking in depth at the dusty recipe notebooks of Italian Jews. The stories behind these recipes show how, against all odds, even oppression and poverty can, over time, give rise to some extraordinarily delicious food, and prove how the Jews have never given up enjoying and celebrating the pleasure of life—such as good food—even when things were rough, making *limonata*, so to speak, out of every lemon that was thrown at them. ■

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Zuppa di Pesce

Roman Fish Soup

BY BENEDETTA JASMINE GUETTA

INGREDIENTS

- 6 ½ cups (1.5 L) water**
- 1 large yellow onion, quartered**
- 1 carrot, halved**
- 1 celery rib, halved**
- 4 ½ pounds (2 kg) assorted fish (red snapper, striped bass, cod, haddock, tuna, and/or fresh sardines), cleaned, scaled, skinned, and filleted if necessary, heads, tails, and bones reserved**
- 5 tablespoons (75 ml) olive oil**
- 2 garlic cloves, minced**
- 3 cups (675 g) tomato puree (passata)**
- Pinch crushed red pepper flakes**
- ¾ cup (180 ml) dry white wine**
- ¼ teaspoon kosher salt**
- Freshly ground black pepper**
- Crunchy bread for serving**

PREPARATION

Ask your fishmonger to fillet the fish for you, removing the skin as well, and to reserve the heads, tails, and bones for you, as you will need them to make the fish broth.

Step 1

In a stockpot or other large pot, bring the water to a rolling boil over medium-high heat. Add the onion, carrot, and celery, plus all the fish heads, tails, and bones you have, and bring to a simmer, then reduce the heat to low and simmer for a minimum of an hour, to make a flavorful, rich broth. Remove from the heat.

Step 2

Strain the broth through a fine-mesh sieve into a large saucepan; discard the solids. Set the broth aside.

Step 3

In a large saucepan, warm the olive oil over medium heat. Add the garlic and cook until golden, 2 to 3 minutes. Pour in the tomato puree, add the red pepper flakes, and bring to a simmer, then let simmer uncovered, stirring occasionally, for about 5 minutes.

Step 4

Add the fish fillets to the pan, raise the heat to high, and pour in the wine. Season with salt and pepper to taste and cook for a couple of minutes to evaporate the alcohol, then reduce the heat to medium-low.

Step 5

Cook until the tomato sauce has thickened, at least 15 minutes.

Step 6

Pour the fish broth over the fish in the tomato sauce and mix gently to blend well. Serve the soup hot, with a side of crunchy bread.

Step 7

The soup is best when just made, but leftovers can be stored in the refrigerator, in a bowl covered with plastic wrap or in an airtight container, for a day or two.

Yield: 6 servings