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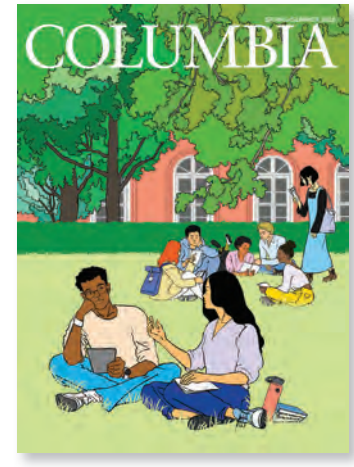
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COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY
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FEEDBACK



A FINE EDITION

I am writing to express my appreciation for the Spring/Summer 2026 issue of the magazine. The entire edition — from the Feedback section and College Walk to Paul Hond's fascinating article on A'Lelia Bundles — truly recaptured the sense of curiosity and academic vibrancy I felt as a student.

Debra (Epstein) Brooks '82SW
Portland, OR

GUNS AND SCHOOLS

The article "Schools Under Siege" (Spring/Summer 2026) is outstanding, the best thing I've read about our country's violent DNA. I can think of only two times in the past few months I have heard the words "gun control" mentioned on TV. Instead, the response is: Buy more guns.

Judy Krakauer '52SW
Los Altos Hills, CA

David Craig has provided an even-handed, thoughtful commentary on the intersection of research and policy on school violence. Like other alums, I am hopeful that this collaboration of the fields of public health, education, and psychiatry will create space in our polarized political landscape to explore solutions.

Expanding that collaboration to include the study of vulnerable populations through the School of Social Work could provide an even broader context to our perspective on school violence.

Nancy Brown Janus '98SW
Avon, CT

I was disgusted that David Craig ignored two present examples advocating for armed guards and teachers in our schools. The first is here in the US: Many African American church parishioners are now armed, committed to not permitting another Charleston massacre.

And we don't hear of school shootings or bus shootings anymore in Israel. There's a good reason for that. Why don't we learn from this example, and implement those security components that are consistent with our open society?

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The missing component for our path forward is to have armed teachers who volunteer for the role and receive extensive training in situation management and neutralization of active shooters.

Obviously, prevention, stricter gun laws, education, mental-health improvements, recognizing threats, and empowering local authorities to confiscate weapons from those who exhibit precursor behavior (indicating potential for future harm to others) are all issues that require renewed commitment and funding.

But citing Australian and Connecticut citizens' opinions — and ignoring the example of Israel — is poor research, and clearly and plainly biased.

Gary Lehman '76CC, '80BUS
Essex Junction, VT

LCB SPEAKS

Former Columbia president Lee Bollinger gave an interesting interview ("Defending the Fifth Branch," Spring/Summer 2026) with many good points. But his message ended on a pessimistic note that surprised me. He thinks the president can destroy our democracy if he really wants to. I strongly disagree.

President Trump does badly want to destroy our democracy. And his reasons are perfectly understandable: He has indictments and civil suits hanging over his head when he leaves office.

What can Mr. Trump do to prevent this Armageddon for himself? The answer is a lot but maybe not enough. He can get a pardon from his successor for the federal crimes. He can probably prevent a conviction in the Senate, if not an impeachment in the House. What he cannot do, in my opinion, is get all the states' attorneys to drop their civil and criminal cases against him.

Mr. Bollinger is a world-class lawyer. It surprises me that he has so little faith in the courts and in the many lawyers in Congress.

Robert Leslie Fisher '76GSAS
Voorheesville, NY

Lee Bollinger is right that American universities need a NATO-style charter. The harder question is how to build one that works. As a Columbia engineer who now runs capital projects at a peer research university, I read his proposal the way I read any plan: The diagnosis is correct; implementation of such a compact is where the proposal lives or dies.

The hardest part is defining the trigger. A workable charter would have to name the narrow class of government actions that count: conditioning grants based on viewpoints, retaliatory visa actions against named faculty, or accreditation pressure tied to curriculum.

The issue is not whether universities should be above criticism. They should not be. The issue is whether

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criticism becomes coercion, and whether each institution has to discover that distinction alone.

Jeremy Edmunds '09SEAS
New Haven, CT

VIVA ALSTON

Your piece about curator Denise Murrell of the Met ("The Art of Curation," Spring/Summer 2026) mentioned that she is instrumental in helping the museum acquire the art of African American painters. The article references Charles Alston as one of those artists but fails to mention that he was a Columbia alum himself: Columbia College 1929, Teachers College 1931.

Vivian Ducat '07GSAPP
New York, NY

A FINE EDITOR

By happenstance, the day I read the encomia about Jennifer Crewe ("The Editor Turns the Page," College Walk, Spring/Summer 2026), I received CUP's royalty statement for *Theory's Empire*, which Daphne Patai and I published in 2005. That our book is still in print highlights Jennifer's openness, patience, and sagacity in supporting an extensive volume on the excesses of literary theory at the turn of the century. The eighteen reviews, its being a Book of the Year for the *Times Literary Supplement* and the subject of articles and a collection of essays, and its continuing polemical presence owe much more to Jennifer than to us.

Will H. Corral '84GSAS
San Francisco, CA

SEEING RED

As a former Marxist (including during my time at Columbia), I was not surprised to see the university celebrate a talk called "Confronting McCarthyism" ("The New Red Scare," College Walk, Spring/Summer 2026). Columbia has been a hotbed of leftism since at least the 1930s. It would be too much to expect the magazine to concede that there really were Communists in the American government in the 1940s and 1950s, that Senator McCarthy's accusations were based on FBI investigations, and that Communist infiltration had genuine, negative effects on American foreign policy.

Brad Tupi '75CC, '78LAW
Pittsburgh, PA

Interesting that Michael Meeropol has finally accepted that his parents, Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, were Soviet spies.

Julius Rosenberg's code name in the spy network was LIBERAL, apparently a joking reference to his starry-eyed view of the Soviet Union, which he had of course never visited. But I wonder if his designation wasn't also a warning to his spymasters that if he and Ethel ever learned the truth about Stalin and the Soviet Union, they would likely defect to the West.

Sadly, the Rosenbergs' eyes were never opened. When the US government sentenced them to death, hoping to force them to reveal their spy network, they remained faithful Stalinists to the end, following instructions to assert their innocence and give the USSR a propaganda victory.

Taras Wolansky '74CC
Kerhonkson, NY

"The New Red Scare" evoked bitter memories. As a "red diaper baby," I paid a price. An American Legion medal that I earned on merit in 1951 was rescinded by an assistant principal who claimed that a son of radical parents did not deserve this award. Two years later, I joined a group of Camp Kinderland alums to protest the electrocution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg. In 1954 during my freshman year at Columbia College, my left-leaning classmates were afraid to sign petitions or engage in political activity, fearing that it might endanger their future. Now the Red Scare has resurfaced with Donald Trump and his legion of lackeys and admirers. This timely article is a painful reminder of what author Lillian Hellman correctly called "scoundrel time," coupled with a renewed need for collective action to counter this menace.

Joseph Dorinson '58CC
Floral Park, NY



Jennifer Crewe

RICHARD A. CHANCE

NAME CHANGE

I enjoyed reading Paul Hond's article on Robert Livingston ("His Signature Achievement," Backstory, Spring/Summer 2026). Mr. Hond mentions that Livingston Hall was renamed Wallach Hall in 1969. I attended Columbia from 1980 to 1984. The renovation of Livingston Hall was completed during fall semester 1981, at which time the University changed its name to Wallach Hall.

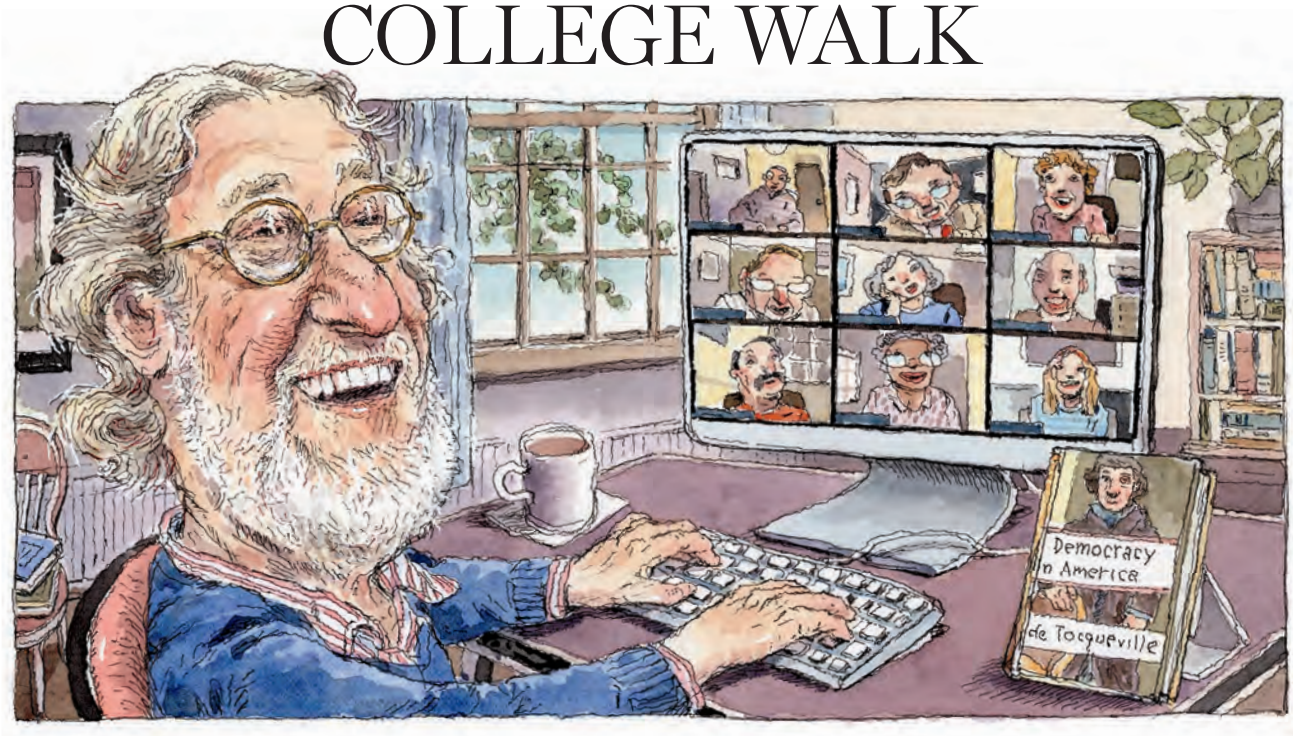
Leon Paley '84SEAS
East Brunswick, NJ

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COLLEGE WALK



JOHN CUNEO

Class Consciousness

How a college reunion led to a revived seminar

In 2021, at his fifty-fifth college reunion, held on Zoom due to the pandemic, Barry Coller '66CC wondered about Professor Kesselman.

Coller rarely thought of college without thinking of Mark Kesselman. He had taken Kesselman's seminar on local governance in his senior year and never forgotten it. Kesselman was twenty-seven then, a breath of fresh air on a faculty of older men who could remember having tea with Nicholas Murray Butler 1882CC, 1884GSAS. The Kesselman seminar was the opposite of stuffy. There was wine and cheese. Local politicians sat in. The class read Tocqueville, Robert Dahl's *Who Governs?*, and Kesselman's own studies of local French politics. Kesselman radiated a pure love of teaching, and Coller became a certified "Kesselmaniac."

Now, at the reunion, Coller asked around: Was Kesselman still alive?

Kesselman was indeed alive, according to Neal Hurwitz '66CC, who had been Kesselman's first teaching assistant. Retired in 2007 after teaching at Columbia for forty-two years, Kesselman had since been busy writing about politics and lecturing in the US and in France. He lived in Massachusetts, where his wife was a professor at Amherst College, and he had two grown sons.

Now Coller and Hurwitz got to thinking: What if they rustled up others from the old seminar to meet and reminisce with Professor Kesselman?

The group met, and they had such a great time catching up and kvetching about autocracy that the next idea arose: Since Kesselman was still active — and with the US political system reeling from the first Trump presidency and the events of January 6, 2021 — why not rekindle the classroom spirit and hear from the professor himself?

In February 2022, Hurwitz organized a Zoom meeting with members of the Class of 1966 — and their professor. "I was very nervous," Kesselman says. "I over-prepared, I'm sure. I wanted to do well." His topic was the Federalist Papers, and how the system of checks and balances that authors Alexander Hamilton 1788HON, John Jay 1764KC, and James Madison had devised was meant to prevent tyranny, yet failed to stop Donald Trump. The reason, Kesselman explained, was because the system also relied on what Tocqueville saw as the cultural norms of American political functioning.

Nervous as he was, Kesselman — white beard, wire-frame glasses on his nose, mirthful eyes — was the picture of composure. At eighty-four, he looked younger than some of his students, who kept calling him Professor. He had to urge them to call him Mark.

Everyone loved the atmosphere and the company, and now Hurwitz had another idea: What if they did a real, ongoing seminar, with other speakers and topics? They certainly had the firepower. Coller, for instance, had been

physician in chief at the Rockefeller University for twenty years. Kenneth Fox '66CC was a historian. Gerald Friedman '77CC was an economist. And they all knew people, particularly at Columbia, who could contribute.

Coller and Hurwitz took the lead as organizers, and in some sessions, as many as thirty people attended. Columbia political-science professor Ira Katznelson '66CC lectured on US security policy. Coller and Friedman debated health-care policy. Fox spoke on affirmative action in light of *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard*. Daniel Kurtzer '73SIPA, '76GSAS, former US ambassador to Egypt and Israel, discussed Hamas and Israel, ten months before October 7, 2023. And amid the crises and controversies that roiled the Columbia community after October 7, the seminar, heavily male and Jewish (a reflection of 1960s demographics), held together, despite occasionally bitter disagreements. "Overall, civility has been maintained," reports Fox.

To be sure, clashes of politics and personalities have made for raucous discussions. Many of the participants came of age socially and intellectually in a milieu of freewheeling, unedited exchanges, and it's safe to say that not every utterance in the seminar adheres to modern academic speech codes. More than once, gentle Kesselman has had to pound the gavel.

Born in 1938, Kesselman grew up in Peekskill, New York. One of his formative memories was the 1949 Peekskill Riots, when performer and labor- and civil-rights activist Paul Robeson 1923LAW was scheduled to sing at an outdoor concert. Before Robeson's arrival, white supremacists attacked concertgoers with stones and bats, injuring 150. Social and economic justice became central to Kesselman's worldview. At the University of Chicago he took a course on Marx with Leo Strauss, often called the father of neoconservatism. "Strauss is known as an ultraconservative, but he was his own person, and I thought he was brilliant," Kesselman says. At Columbia, Kesselman's signature course was The State in Advanced Capitalism. He also taught comparative politics and contemporary political theory.

Today, at eighty-eight, Kesselman is enjoying this unexpected ride. And he's grateful to the seminar organizers — Hurwitz, Coller, and physicist Mel Siegel — for doing the driving: finding the speakers and running the show. "I'm taking more of a back seat," Kesselman says. "I'm more of an informed commentator." Recent guests, such as Columbia law professor David Schizer, who gave a frank and nuanced talk about campus antisemitism, and Maya Kornberg '16SIPA, who discussed her book *Stuck: How Money, Media, and Violence Prevent Change in Congress*, attest to the seminar's continued high level of scholarship and discourse.

Kesselman may still be "Professor" to some, but the seminar allows him to be a student too. "It's been very stimulating," he says. "And I've learned a lot." — *Paul Hond*



DIANE BONDAREFF / COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

A NEW CHAPTER Columbia's twenty-first president, Jennifer L. Mnookin, a legal scholar and former chancellor of the University of Wisconsin, started her new job in July. "I arrive with deep respect for Columbia's history, with clear eyes about the challenges before us, and with great confidence in what our University can accomplish," she wrote in her first-day message to the Columbia community. "Great universities like ours must insist on intellectual seriousness while recognizing the varied ways serious inquiry proceeds. That means balancing rigor with open-mindedness and shared purpose with pluralism."



Clean Air Begins at Home

Lamont-Doherty Earth Observatory researchers take a closer look at fighting pollution

Columbia's Lamont-Doherty Earth Observatory (LDEO), located in Palisades, New York, sixteen miles from the Morningside campus, isn't easy for everyone to get to. But a virtual series called Earth Observations: Conversations with Lamont Scientists is bringing LDEO scientists to our screens to discuss their environmental research. In a recent installment, geochemist Benjamin Bostick and atmospheric chemist Róisín Commane talked about air pollution, especially the health threats that lurk right under our noses — and our roofs.

Air pollution kills an estimated seven to eight million people a year worldwide, which makes it the biggest risk factor for human death after high blood pressure. And although the phrase evokes industrial smokestacks and clogged freeways, Bostick and Commane brought us closer to home — into kitchens and basements — to examine the impacts of fossil-fuel-powered cooking and heating.

Take asthma, which is often associated with bad air quality. In New York City, where programs provide residents with portable air purifiers to trap particles generated by gas stoves, Bostick and his students — including Columbia undergrads and high schoolers who live in the areas being served — are trying to figure out how to optimize the filtration process. Working in households, the team placed the filter in different rooms. What they found surprised them: When the filter is in the kitchen, where most indoor pollution is generated, the toxic concentrations are actually *higher*. The filter worked much better when placed at the opposite end of the apartment. Bostick explained that when an air filter is placed near someone cooking, "the air doesn't leave the kitchen" — resulting in high concentrations of pollutants that weaken the filter. "It's a completely counterintuitive result," said Bostick, "and a great example of how there's no substitute for real data."

That goes, too, for another pollution enigma: the heavy presence in New York City of methane, the biggest climate-warming gas after carbon dioxide (CO_2). Potent and short-lived (it lasts ten years in the atmosphere), with eighty times the warming power of CO_2, methane is typically abundant around wetlands (through decaying organic matter), factory farms (through cattle emissions and waste pits), and oil and gas production sites (through leaks), as well as landfills and wastewater-treatment plants. Yet New York City, which has no feedlots or oil or gas production, is the largest urban source of atmospheric methane in the US. Why?

That's what Commane wants to know. In her studies of the air in Harlem, Commane and her students have looked at how much natural gas — which is composed of more than 90 percent methane — is delivered to the metro area. Then they determined how much of the methane in the air is from natural gas. Over several months in 2023 and 2024, they calculated a 1.7 percent loss rate — hundreds of millions of dollars' worth of methane that ended up in the atmosphere instead of being burned.

But where was it coming from? Along with the methane plumes over Harlem, Commane's team also saw high concentrations of carbon monoxide — a by-product of burning natural gas. "Somebody has tried to burn this natural gas and not done a very good job," said Commane.

To crack the riddle, the team started working with Brookhaven National Laboratory on Long Island, to do tests of natural-gas boilers. They found that when a boiler is operating properly — when it receives adequate airflow — only very small amounts of unburned methane escape. But when the researchers significantly reduced the airflow, to a point where the boiler barely worked, they started seeing what they saw on the Harlem rooftops. "This is not Con Ed's problem," said Commane. "This is the boilers, the appliances. This is *our* problem. And we need to do something about it."

For these scientists, there is no better way to clear the air than to study it.

"If we want to address air pollution," said Bostick, "we need to actually spend some time and research. We need to understand mechanistically what's going on, and we need to quantitatively evaluate solutions. Those are all things that are uniquely strong here at Columbia." — *Paul Hond*

RYAN DEBERARDINIS / SHUTTERSTOCK

Lab of Laughs

When improv comedy meets neuroscience

Rajyashree "Rai" Sen drags a chair to the middle of the stage at Magnet Theater on West 29th Street in Manhattan. Across from her sits Vikram Gadagkar, a fellow neuroscientist at Columbia's Zuckerman Institute and the special guest for this evening's improv comedy show.

Joining Sen and Gadagkar onstage are about a dozen people who make up the Lab, the improv comedy troupe that Sen started three years ago with a grant from the Zuckerman Institute. The crew — made up of Sen, the only scientist/comedian, and a group of people who daylight in other jobs and moonlight in comedy — work with a selected guest to put on a show each month, with the aim of communicating science to the public.

Before them sits a small audience of about twenty-five people, some clutching drinks, eager for some science and maybe even some laughs.

"Could you tell us how you got into science?" Sen asks Gadagkar. She has handpicked him for this exercise not only because of his impressive work as a neuroscientist, but also because she can see some of herself in him. They are both Indian immigrants, and they have both shown remarkable adaptability in their careers, pivoting to neuroscience from other fields: Sen from epigenetics, Gadagkar from physics.



Gadagkar's face brightens like the spotlights trained on him as he talks through a broad smile, punctuating his words with sweeping hand gestures. "When I was in sixth grade in India," he answers Sen, "I fell in love with bird-watching."

The improv comics then take turns in the interviewer chair, asking Gadagkar more questions about his childhood (his dad was an evolutionary biologist studying wasps), as well as his current research into birdsong.

Gadagkar explains how dopamine, the reward and motivation chemical in the brain, aids young male birds in learning the best courting songs from their fathers. He measured the dopamine levels in zebra finches and tricked them into thinking they'd made a mistake in their song. He determined that a drop in dopamine levels acts as an error signal during practice to help the birds make corrections. The birds' goal is to perfect their song to attract a mate.

"It's kind of like what you're doing here," Gadagkar says, gesturing to the stage. "It's a performance. By singing this beautiful song, they're communicating their fitness."

Gadagkar then leaves the stage, and Sen and the other improvisers go about performing a few skits based on the contents of the interview: a creepy man in a van tries to lure kids with the promise of a Nobel Prize; a middle-school boy asks his dad for help flirting; three women act as the judges for *Birdsong Idol*, promptly rejecting the first male's singing performance.

Sen hopes that these skits — silly, playful, witty, and surprising — help people find science more approachable. Her own interest in improv goes back to her young adulthood in her home of Kolkata, India. She started out in community theater, then a friend invited her to an improv group. She was hooked, and her improv and her science grew up together.

Sen sees the improv work as integral to her pursuits as a scientist. "I'm interested in social behaviors," she says. "How we understand social status and rank, how we recognize others, how we categorize others into groups, how we switch between social hierarchies." And it was with an improv-inspired openness to surprise that, as a Columbia postdoc, she "bumped into" a discovery: a region of the mouse frontal cortex not traditionally associated with spatial representation, but which seems to help mice navigate unfamiliar environments.

Despite her years of experience in comedy, Sen always feels stage fright before a performance. And sometimes her jokes do bomb, she says. But the performances with the Lab train her to follow her instincts, something that is essential to making progress in neuroscience. As she knows from her work in the actual lab, scientific discoveries often come about by accident, products of curiosity, flexibility, and creativity.

"The best scientists use whimsy and play," Sen says. "You might find something unexpected."

— Bridget Balch '26JRN

Teaching the Chatbots

How do you incorporate AI into the classroom without compromising academic rigor? Columbia faculty are leading the way.

By David J. Craig

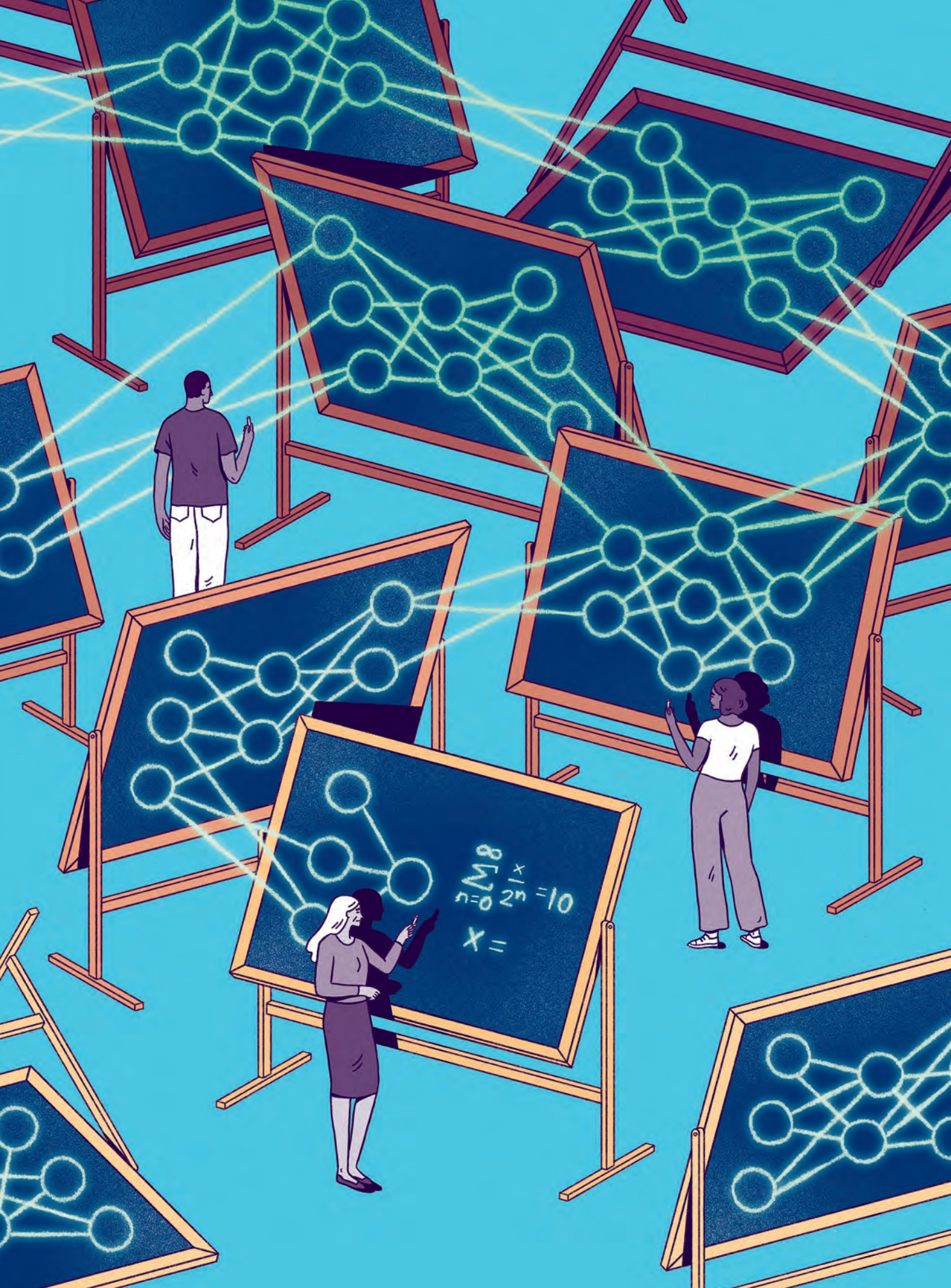
Last fall, Columbia students in an experimental new writing course fed short pieces of prose they had written into AI chatbots like ChatGPT, Claude, and Gemini and asked them to analyze and describe their own literary style. They then uploaded an excerpt of a stodgy academic tome — one that George Orwell had lampooned in his 1946 essay "Politics and the English Language" — and coaxed the system into altering the passage's style and tone to resemble their own. They discovered that it often took dozens of carefully worded prompts to achieve just the right combination of, say, neo-noir and modern lyricism they were going for.

"The goal was to show that chatbots can be used to enhance writing, but that it's not easy," says Dennis Yi Tenen, a professor of English who co-taught the course, Writing AI, with senior lecturer Nicole B. Wallack. The course explores the possibilities and challenges of using chatbots to augment different types of writing. "You need to have strong fundamentals and a sense of your own voice, and then use the tools surgically."

Other students in a history seminar last year were tasked with using chatbots to analyze thousands of government documents, in search of hidden connections between US political figures and historical events. Their professor, Matthew Connelly '90CC, a pioneer of digital humanities who uses generative-AI tools in his own research, offered lessons along the way. "I tell students that I'm amazed both by what AI can do and by the outrageous errors it makes," he says. "It can lead to discoveries, but also to bad scholarship, if you're not careful."

Computer-science students, meanwhile, were learning to use chatbots at nearly every stage of their design process, from writing and debugging code to stress-testing the software they've developed for all manner of industrial, biomedical, and cybersecurity applications. Along the way, they were graded on how well they used AI to improve upon their own manually produced code, as well as their ability to spot and correct mistakes in the AI-generated lines.

JOSIE NORTON

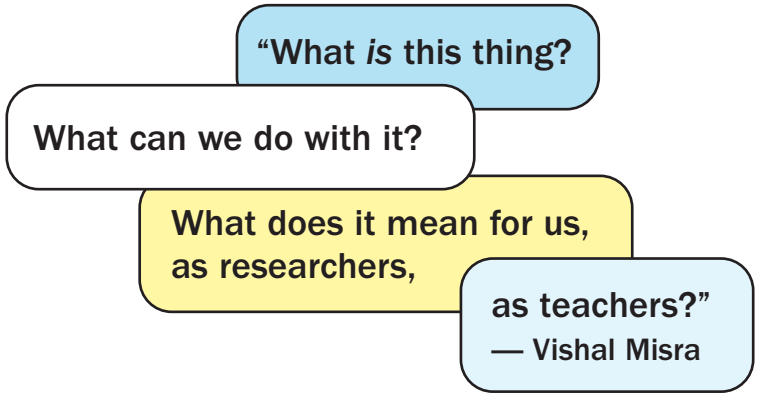

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"Today, training students to be software engineers is like training symphony conductors, because on the job they're going to be evaluating and coordinating lots of AI code," says Vishal Misra, a professor of computer science and vice dean of computing and AI at the engineering school. "We used to be training the violinists, the cellists. Now, they're all conductors."

Only recently have academics begun to talk so openly, even enthusiastically, about generative AI's role in the classroom. Four years ago, when chatbots were still new and waves of US college students began turning in oddly competent yet soulless term papers and nearly flawless take-home exams, instructors at most universities (Columbia included) did everything in their power to stamp out the technology. They spent late nights uploading students' papers into AI-detection programs and dreaming up other ways to spot abuse, such as planting nonsense terms in essay assignments and waiting to see if chatbots would faithfully regurgitate them in submitted works. Few professors even discussed chatbots in class, except to announce that anyone caught using one would be treated as a cheat.

Over time, though, the limitations of enforcement have become clear. As AI agents grew increasingly powerful, and as students became craftier at using them, professors struggled to detect who was relying on them and how. They found themselves spending inordinate amounts of time searching for traces of AI in student work and feeling less confident in their conclusions. They worried about falsely accusing students of cheating and about creating an adversarial atmosphere in class, tarnishing everyone's experience. "No one gets into teaching to be a cop," says one English instructor who prefers to remain anonymous. "And if you focus too much on policing, it builds animosity and mistrust, which is counterproductive to everything else you're trying to achieve."

At the same time, business and industry leaders began to predict that workers in nearly all sectors, from finance and marketing to nursing and drug discovery, would in the coming years need to be highly adept at using generative AI. That's because the same large language models (LLMs) that power AI chatbots can, with skillful prompting, be made to perform a dizzying array of tasks, such as coordinating inventory audits and customer-service emails or predicting market swings and the disease-fighting potential of new molecules. "You're not going to lose your job to AI, but you're going to lose your job to someone who uses AI," Nvidia CEO and cofounder Jensen Huang quipped at a conference in Beverly Hills last year. Meanwhile, scholars were beginning to employ chatbots in their own studies, even in fields that haven't traditionally been data driven, such as architecture, linguistics, and social work. To many students, it suddenly seemed apparent that knowing how to deploy AI in sophisticated ways was an essential career skill, whether they hoped to work in industry or in academia. Not surprisingly, many began to clamor for guidance in how to use the technology.



But if a central purpose of a college education is to teach students core knowledge and critical thinking, how could professors bring into the classroom a technology that might do that intellectual work for them? This is a question that academic administrators throughout higher education are now grappling with, and one that has no easy answers. Columbia's response has been to issue broad institutional guardrails around AI — the use of generative chatbots in classwork is acceptable only when explicitly allowed, for example — while encouraging professors to experiment. Faculty members say that the University, while strongly backing the use of generative AI in academic research, has given professors the latitude to establish their own AI course policies and test out new pedagogical strategies. Across the University, these experiments are now taking many forms — some aimed at limiting students' dependence on AI, and others at teaching them to use it more intelligently.

"We're going through a period of remarkable change, and at times like this it's important to keep an open mind about which strategies are going to work best," says Angela Olinto, the University's provost. "We want to have lots of flowers blooming. One of our community's greatest strengths is our adaptability and willingness to try new ways of teaching, learning, and conducting research."

Before they could prepare students for success in the age of AI, most college professors had to get up to speed on the technology themselves, in what amounted to one of the most dramatic and rapid pivots in their own careers. Even at Columbia's engineering school, where computer scientists like John R. Kender, Kathleen McKeown, and Salvatore Stolfo laid the intellectual foundations for modern AI, and where the University's influential Data Science

Institute was established in 2012, many faculty members were shocked by ChatGPT when it arrived in late 2022. "I'd been working on LLMs for years and knew how powerful they'd become, and even I was taken aback by how easy ChatGPT was to use, and by the social implications," says Misra. In the months following the tool's launch, he took a lead role in educating Columbia's senior leadership and faculty on its capabilities. "People who weren't working in AI reacted pretty much the same way," he says. "Everyone was like, 'Whoa, what *is* this thing? What can we do with it? What does it mean for us, as researchers, as teachers?'"

Amanda Irvin, executive director of the Columbia Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL), which provides training and support services to faculty, says that the collective mood she witnessed among instructors in the months following ChatGPT's release was one of surprise and uncertainty. "People in academia had the same questions that everyone had," she says. "Many wondered, What exactly is the value of human intelligence now? And what does AI mean for my own role, and for the role of a university?" Her staff began hosting large, town hall–style meetings where data scientists like McKeown and tech-savvy humanists like Wallack gave faculty tutorials on AI tools and how students might use them. "I think that everyone came out of those conversations feeling that higher education was actually more important now than ever, but that we had to be open to rethinking some aspects of how we teach."

Even as many educators viewed AI chatbots primarily as a threat to academic integrity, some faculty at Columbia immediately saw potential to harness the tools for their teaching. Foreign-language instructors like Zhongqi Shi '18TC, who teaches Chinese, were among the early adopters, recognizing that chatbots could be employed as virtual tutors, conversing with students and providing them detailed feedback on their grammar and pronunciation. Shi worked with technologists at CTL to design a chatbot specifically to help students prepare for job interviews with companies in China; it critiques their speech, and even evaluates their stabs at small talk for cultural appropriateness. Students "get a lot more feedback than I could ever provide," he says. Similarly, chemical engineer Chris Chen '22BUS created a chatbot assistant that intentionally makes mistakes. In using it, his students learn to sniff out bad engineering assessments, "like they might need to do working alongside a distracted colleague," he says.

Some faculty went further in their early AI experiments, designing lessons that aimed to mirror how students might one day use the tools in their careers. Gregory Wawro, a professor of political science, began teaching his students to use chatbots to write computer code capable of analyzing the vast quantities of demographic and public-opinion data now available to scholars. Kamel Jedidi, a professor of global business, encouraged his MBA students to use chatbots to improve the market analyses they conducted for real companies. And public-health expert Gabriele Windgasse '93PH trained students to use generative AI to quickly turn scientific reports about emerging health threats into accessible fact sheets. Along the way, these professors encouraged students to use AI judiciously, in ways that wouldn't interfere with their learning, and to be mindful of the long-term cognitive risks of delegating too much of their thinking to chatbots.

Many of these pedagogical experiments doubled as research projects, with faculty documenting how students responded to the new approaches. Education specialists at CTL helped the professors collect and crunch their data and then ran workshops promoting their efforts to colleagues across campus. In packed weekly sessions, CTL staff gave instructors ideas for how to reduce temptations for cheating (assigning fewer take-home tests; requiring multiple drafts on writing assignments) and tips for staying abreast of rapidly evolving AI tools: Students themselves are often privy to the latest products and have good ideas about incorporating them into lessons. And they worked on how to communicate AI course policies effectively to students, stating very clearly how and when chatbots could be used, if at all, and explaining the reasons.

Irvin says she expects that some of these endeavors will have an impact beyond Columbia. "Being at a major research institution, we're well positioned to find scalable solutions to how and when to integrate AI into teaching, while keeping human intelligence and judgment at the center of everything we do."

To date, faculty in data-driven disciplines such as medicine, engineering, finance, and environmental science have been the most receptive to students using generative AI in their coursework, because expectations of AI competency are highest in these fields. And graduate-level courses, with their emphasis on professional readiness, tend to place greater emphasis on AI skill development than undergraduate programs do. This fall, in fact, Columbia is launching a master's of science degree in artificial intelligence (MSAI) to train people to design and implement AI systems in half a dozen fields, including the arts and architecture. The program, run jointly by Columbia Engineering and five other schools at the University, combines courses in data science with training in how to apply artificial intelligence in a domain of a student's choosing — such as medical diagnostics, policy analysis, or the design of sustainable infrastructure.

"We're trying to fill a gap in the workforce right now," says Misra, explaining that there's a shortage of people "who know how to build and adapt AI systems for specific industries in which they're needed."

So far, every opportunity that Columbia has created for students to learn about AI has been wildly popular. In 2024, a small group of faculty led by computer scientist Adam Cannon

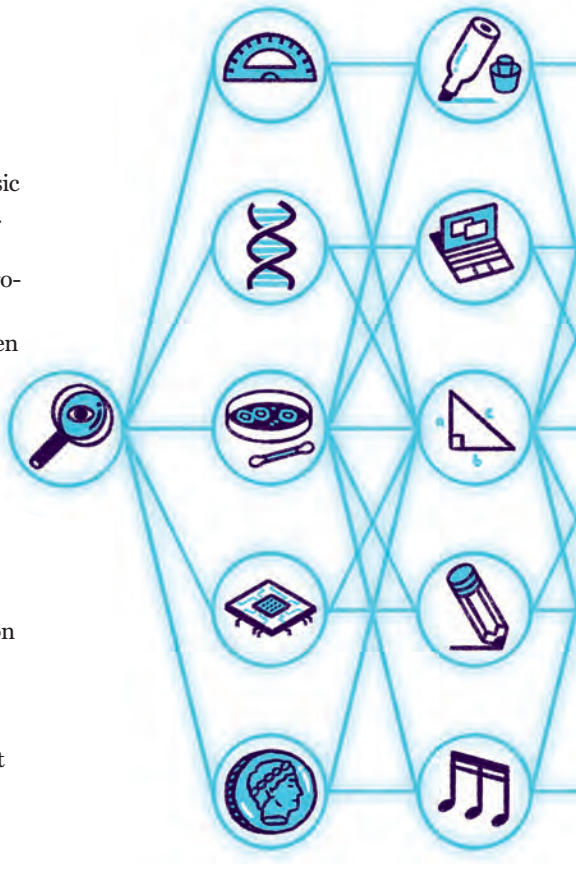
launched AI in Context, an interdisciplinary course designed to give undergrads the kind of AI literacy that is increasingly seen as essential for nonspecialists. Rather than teaching students how to build AI systems, the course explores how people are using the technology and being affected by it. Students trace the field's history from its origins in the 1950s to the recent emergence of LLMs and explore some of AI's most pressing questions: why chatbots hallucinate and give biased results; whether AI companies should be forced to reimburse the writers, artists, and scholars whose content they trained on; and how AI may already be harming the environment and jobs. The success of the class, which fills immediately each semester, inspired the engineering school to launch an AI minor last year. "The new program, like the course, has a strong ethics component, which will help Columbia graduates make responsible decisions related to AI, no matter what field they go into," says Cannon.

When it comes to using AI chatbots in coursework, things get thornier. That's true especially at the undergraduate level, where students are still learning the domain knowledge and analytic skills they need to evaluate a system's output. The ability of chatbots to quickly generate answers to questions on almost any subject, whether ancient Greek philosophy or human anatomy, poses a constant temptation to students facing late-night deadlines or struggling through required courses. For this reason, professors still ban the use of generative AI on the majority of graded assignments. However, to help students become savvy users of AI, many faculty members have carved out portions of assignments where the use of chatbots is permitted — such as for brainstorming or research — or have designed stand-alone lessons that treat AI itself as an object of study. It's now common for professors in many fields to bring up a chatbot window on their lecture screen, type in a few prompts, and ask students to critique its mistakes or biases.

Efforts to keep students from overrelying on generative AI look different from discipline to discipline. In many science and math courses, where grades are based largely on in-class exams, professors are simply putting less weight on homework assignments, which students might use chatbots to complete. At the other extreme is computer science, where, in order to prepare students for coding jobs that already require intensive use of chatbots, Columbia faculty have increasingly integrated AI into their curriculum. And in the humanities, where writing has long been the heart of assessment, some instructors are redesigning their assignments so they're harder to automate, while talking with students about the intrinsic rewards of doing the work themselves. For guidance, many are turning to Columbia's Undergraduate Writing Program (UWP), whose affiliated faculty teach University Writing, a course taken by all first-year students.

"We provide professional development in what's known as writing-based teaching, which holds that writing isn't just a mode of assessment but one of the main ways we learn to think," says Wallack, director of the UWP. "In writing, students learn to tolerate the sensation of being uncertain, of trying hard to finish something but not being done yet, of being skeptical of themselves. If they stick with it, they learn to trust themselves as thinkers and discover their own style. There's no substitute for it."

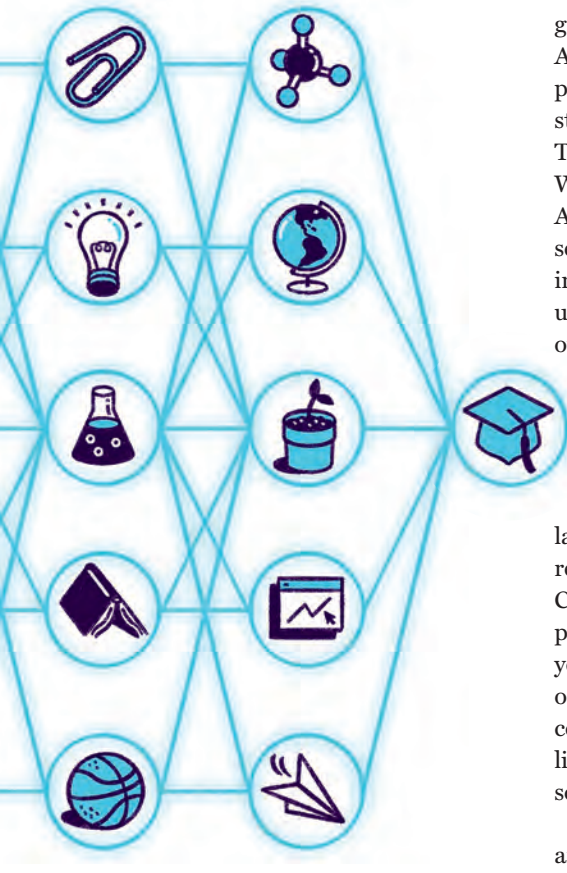
Wallack and her colleagues are doing everything they can to make sure students don't squander the chance. For years, they've been honing a set of research-backed teaching methods that reduce rates of plagiarism and enhance learning overall. These methods include encouraging students to develop arguments in their writing that have personal resonance; discussing their ideas with them one-on-one; and guiding them through multiple drafts and revisions. Now the UWP team is going further, finding innovative ways to demonstrate to students how the use of chatbots for writing assistance, even for seemingly small tasks like brainstorming or editing, can limit their creativity and cognitive growth. Some of the UWP's newest strategies are based on research done in the program. For example, writing instructors Kirkwood Adams '11SOA and Maria G. Baker have conducted studies on the rhetorical and stylistic limitations of chatbots.



JOSIE NORTON

"What our findings show, and what we try to communicate to students in compelling ways, is that chatbots are essentially 'status quo' machines — they reduce any idea or piece of writing down to its most generic, statistically average form," says Adams, who in 2025 coauthored a paper with Baker that offers one of the most detailed analyses of how chatbots write and respond to text. And while polished, anodyne prose may be perfectly suitable for corporate reports or emails, Adams says,

it's anathema in the Core Curriculum, and especially in University Writing, a course that treats essay writing as a vehicle for developing the communication skills befitting scholars and thought leaders. "In this course, we're welcoming students into the academic community and preparing them to participate in it, to be fully conscientious and engaged, and to begin to contribute to the creation of new knowledge," he says, "not to regurgitate homogenized data."



To drive the point home to students, Adams and Baker have designed a series of classroom activities that dramatize how a chatbot's editorial influence can drain the life out of language. In one exercise, students are told to choose any subject they know intimately — the TV show *Stranger Things*, say, or the music of Taylor Swift — and to jot down a list of the most interesting, meaningful things they know about it. They then ask a chatbot to generate its own list on the topic. And they ask it to repeat the task, ten times at least, starting a fresh conversation before each prompt. In aggregate, the bot's responses are obviously generic and predictable, Adams says, and students feel a rush of appreciation for their own, more distinct insights. "They see that, if they ask a bot to write or edit something for them, they're allowing something special and valuable about themselves to be erased," he says.

So how are most Columbia undergraduates actually using AI these days? And how are they responding to their professors' efforts to adjust? Several studies are underway to find out. The most ambitious, led by Connelly, Wallack, and CTL education specialist Adam Brown, has for the past several semesters been anonymously surveying first-year students about how they use AI in writing assignments. As part of the project, the team is also conducting a randomized controlled trial to see if any of several new Columbia-developed teaching methods are reducing students' reliance on chatbots. The study is the largest of its kind in the country. The researchers, who have also surveyed Columbia faculty members about their perceptions of students' AI use, haven't yet released any findings, as the trial is ongoing. But they expect to do so in the coming months, and they say their preliminary data has already challenged some of their own assumptions.

"Our findings indicate that students are using chatbots in more varied ways than many of their professors realize," says Connelly, a history professor and the vice dean for AI in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences. "Very few students will use AI to generate a whole essay and just submit it. That's almost never the case." More commonly, he says, a student will recruit a chatbot to help generate ideas, locate sources to cite, or copyedit. Or in a pinch, they may use AI to summarize a book they haven't read, write an outline, or draft the conclusion to a paper. That's hardly ideal, Connelly acknowledges, but it paints a more complicated picture than many faculty have imagined.

Connelly says that students are also deeply conflicted about their own use of generative AI. "They recognize that it's a tool of great efficiency, and that they might need to learn it for work, but they're also concerned about how it could be affecting their learning," he says. "Many of them are actually choosing to use it less in their schoolwork, over time."

In other forums, Columbia students have said they wish they had more opportunities to speak candidly with faculty about the difficult choices they face, without fear of being suspected of wrongdoing. At a daylong symposium that Columbia organized earlier this year, called Reimagining Teaching and Learning in the Age of AI, student participants described some of the questions they and their classmates confront: If chatbots are banned in a course, does that really mean they can't use them at all, under any circumstance? What if they were to use them in sophisticated ways that enhance their learning, such as summarizing large numbers of articles before deciding which ones to read? Or engaging in a Socratic dialogue about the strengths and weaknesses of their work before submitting it? And what if their classmates are doing all these things and more, but they refrain — won't their own grades suffer in comparison?

Connelly says that whenever he has incorporated AI into classroom exercises, he's been struck by students' thoughtfulness in wrestling with the technology, as well as their pent-up eagerness to discuss a topic that, in some corners of academia, still carries a stigma. "Ever since ChatGPT was released, I've found that students are filled with legitimate questions about it," he says. "They're not all looking to take shortcuts. Many of them are just trying to make sense of the technology — to know when it's useful, when it isn't, and why. And they're looking to us, their professors, for guidance."

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Hacking the System

WITH THE FINAL SEASON OF HER HIT HBO MAX COMEDY NOMINATED FOR A RECORD TWENTY-FOUR EMMY AWARDS, EXECUTIVE PRODUCER, WRITER, AND DIRECTOR LUCIA ANIELLO '04CC SHARES HER UNUSUAL PATH TO THE TOP BY STACEY WILSON HUNT '01JRN

It's late May 2026, and Lucia Aniello '04CC is sitting onstage alongside the cast and co-creators of *Hacks,* the series finale of which just screened in front of a raucous Los Angeles crowd of 725 Emmy voters, crewmembers, and obsessed fans.

Aniello directed and co-wrote the last chapter of the Emmy-winning comedy centering on the unlikely bond between Deborah Vance (Jean Smart), a salty seventy-year-old Las Vegas comedian, and Ava Daniels (Hannah Einbinder), a cynical Gen Z comedy writer.

Seeing the episode on the big screen has been an emotional gut punch for its cast. Smart and Einbinder are each doing their best to hold back tears after the closing scene: a hopeful shot of Deborah and Ava walking arm in arm along the Vegas Strip, as Barbra Streisand and Judy Garland's buoyant 1963 rendition of "Happy Days Are Here Again" plays over the final frame.

"I was so excited because it was a … *duet*," Smart says to the audience about the poignant song choice, while lovingly brushing Einbinder's arm. And with that, her costar is sobbing.

Sensing that the conversation is veering a little too maudlin, Aniello jumps in. "It's a comedy!" she declares, and the crowd erupts in laughter.

Aniello is doing what she's done best for the past twenty-plus years: seamlessly bringing funny back into the frame.

For five seasons, *Hacks* reflected and sometimes even predicted some of Hollywood's most pressing realities: ageism, misogyny, the wrath of cancel culture, the threat of AI, and, in an especially prescient and painful storyline, corporate meddling in late-night TV. But it never forgot to make us laugh.

Hacks also won over the industry it so often pointedly skewered: At press time it had amassed eighty-nine Emmy nominations and twelve wins, including Aniello's 2021 trophy for comedy-series directing and a surprise Outstanding Comedy Series victory in 2024, when the show unseated the incumbent, FX's *The Bear*.

"Please support comedy — it speaks truth to power!" Aniello implored viewers in her Emmy acceptance speech as she celebrated alongside fellow creators Jen Statsky and *Hacks* actor Paul W. Downs ("Jimmy"), who also happens to be Aniello's husband.

"You can see the literal shock on our faces," says Aniello, now in the living room of her and Downs's Hollywood Hills home. She's pointing to a framed black-and-white photo on a side table that shows the *Hacks* creators gleefully and incredulously exiting the Emmy stage in 2024, golden statuettes in hand.

It's five days after the tearful *Hacks* finale event, and Aniello is curling up on a beige couch accented by squishy green pillows. She has traded her

KENNY LAUBBACHER / HBO MAX

Aniello dressed in costume for her season 5 guest-star role in *Hacks* as a flirty Las Vegas real-estate agent.

strappy tangerine-colored dress from earlier in the week for a comfy all-black ensemble and Ugg slippers; her brown hair is tossed into a loose ponytail. Downs is in the kitchen nursing a cup of coffee as their four-year-old son giggles in the background.

"He actually had two jokes in *Hacks* this season," she says proudly of their son. "When [the TV executive to whom Ava pitches a show] says, 'I didn't like it … *I loved* it!' — he says that all the time. And when Deborah tells Ava in Paris, 'You shouldn't talk with your mouth full,' that's something he says too."



Aniello, Jean Smart, Paul W. Downs, and Hannah Einbinder on the set of the final season of *Hacks*.

Aniello and Downs seem to be acing what many married collaborators find to be a precarious intersection of work and family in Hollywood, or in any business, really. For this, Aniello credits some powerful role models: her own parents.

Aniello was raised in Hadley, Massachusetts. Her Italian American mom and Italian dad (he immigrated at seventeen) had met in Boston and vacationed in Italy after getting married. Aniello was actually born in the town of Anzio, just outside Rome, because her mom and dad had extended their honeymoon. "They won a lot of money gambling in Italy, so they stayed longer," Aniello says with a laugh.

The couple ran restaurants together in Amherst, which offered Aniello and her two siblings front-row seats to the art of stress management. "I watched them figure out how to be business partners. I also learned how to be a boss," she says, noting that restaurant work and running TV shows require similarly rigorous multitasking.

When she wasn't helping in the restaurants, Aniello was likely playing tennis, an activity she started before she was three years old. Though her parents had never played, they saw tennis as a ticket to greater opportunities. The sport became so central in Aniello's life that the self-described "pretty good but not straight-A" student dropped out of high school after tenth grade and earned her GED so that she could play tennis full-time. And after feeling "disillusioned" by high school counselors who assumed she'd stay local for college, Aniello also wanted more time to consider her future.

"I loved UMass, but I didn't connect with the idea that 'this is the kind of student you are, so this is the kind of school you're going to go to,'" she says. "I didn't feel understood at that time by the world around me." Aniello spent two years at Holyoke Community College nearby while also committing to tennis "in a more serious way." She dreamed of going to school in New York City, and soon, Columbia emerged as her top choice.

Aniello arrived at 116th Street and Broadway in September 2001 as a transfer student and lived in Wien Hall alongside other transplants. Her days were packed with trips uptown for tennis practice (she became the team's co-captain her senior year) and coursework for her film-studies major. The latter connected her with her most meaningful academic mentor, the iconic film critic and historian Andrew Sarris '51CC, '98GSAS. She recalls an early bonding experience on the harrowing morning of September 11, 2001, as a crowd of students gathered fearfully around a TV in Sarris's office. "I really loved him," she says wistfully of her professor, who passed away in 2012.

While Aniello had a passion for pop culture, she didn't yet have a clear vision for her future. "Film studies was adjacent to what I thought I wanted to do, which was maybe be a curator, critic, or documentarian," she says, recalling a stint working on interstitial music videos for a student-run Columbia TV station. She chose to write her senior thesis about her favorite movie, *Back to the Future*, and how time-travel movies often transcend their genre because they address a deeply human desire to heal familial or romantic love.

It did *not* go over well with her thesis adviser, Annette Insdorf. The experience would serve as preparation for future Hollywood pitch meetings: Sometimes people in power simply don't connect with a writer's vision.

"As brilliant as she is, I don't think she really took to me," says Aniello. "She made it clear that there were students she felt were filmmakers of the future, and I was not one of them. And that's fine!"

Does she think Insdorf's mind has since changed, considering her success?

"Honestly? I doubt it. She'd probably say, 'I don't remember who that is,'" Aniello says, laughing.

That minor angst aside, Columbia offered Aniello a sense of belonging that had previously eluded her. "It was perfect because I could be artsy with my film friends, fratty with my sorority, and sporty with my tennis team," she says. "And I could party a lot!"

Regarding the last item, Aniello has particularly fond memories of a

KENNY LAUBACHER / HBO MAX

summer spent living in the Sigma Tau Delta house, on 114th Street between Broadway and Amsterdam. "Every day I'd get a Nussbaum and Wu chopped salad and a Diet Coke, smoke weed, and watch *Sex and the City* with my friends," she recalls with a laugh.

After graduating in 2004, a feat she accomplished in just three years, Aniello coached tennis at Hamilton and Colgate colleges in upstate New York. She also worked part-time at a video store, where she consumed movies nonstop. It was during this time that she took her first earnest stabs at writing scripts. By January 2005, she'd moved back to New York City because she wanted to write, perform, and make comedy like her idol, Amy Poehler.

"I was that person waiting in line overnight outside 30 Rock for *Saturday Night Live* tickets," says Aniello of her "obsession" with the comedy star, which led her to join Upright Citizens Brigade (UCB), the venerable improv troupe cofounded by Poehler. Aniello says she was drawn to improv because of its focus on collaboration. "I learned how to make comedy with other people," she says. "If you want to be a showrunner or an actor, take improv. It's very humbling."

Aniello's UCB tenure yielded some life-defining relationships: There she met writer-performers Abbi Jacobson and Ilana Glazer, with whom she'd later collaborate on Comedy Central's *Broad City*. She also met Downs at UCB. By 2007, the two were dating.

By this time, Aniello had a day job at Lifebooker, a Groupon-like company, which helped fund her and Downs's burgeoning slate of digital-comedy videos. Armed with borrowed cameras, self-taught editing skills, and a coterie of original characters, the duo created an impressive digital footprint on YouTube and other platforms under the moniker Paulilu.

When Glazer and Jacobson were ready to staff their New York stoner-buddy comedy *Broad City* (which by then had landed none other than Poehler as its executive producer), they told the network they wouldn't make the show without Aniello.

Though still untested in TV, Aniello proved her mettle as a director, writer, and executive producer. Also featuring Downs as a writer, producer, and actor ("Trey" the trainer), the series ran for five seasons and created a blueprint of sorts for the couple's organically inclusive worldview. "For us it's never 'We should have more Black or queer people in our shows.' Rather, 'This is how we see the world: filled with beautiful oddballs and weirdos,'" says Aniello.

> "THE RESULT OF HAVING A SUCCESSFUL SHOW IS THE ABILITY TO FOSTER A COMMUNITY OF FILMMAKERS WHO GET TO TELL THEIR STORIES THE WAY THEY WANT TO TELL THEM."

In 2017, during *Broad*'s run, Aniello logged another milestone: She became the first woman in twenty years to direct an R-rated comedy, Sony's *Rough Night*. The bachelorette-party-gone-awry romp, which Aniello co-wrote with Downs, starred Scarlett Johansson. It earned mixed reviews and just under $50 million at the box office.

"After it became a 'Scarlett Johansson movie,' it wasn't the little indie we'd hoped to make," says Downs, chiming in on his way upstairs. "The marketing also didn't suggest it was as dark as it was," he says, referencing the film's grisly (but still funny) murder subplot.

"I also think I'd become used to spending more time with characters, in our web videos and *Broad City*," Aniello says. And, she admits, "when the reception for *Rough Night* didn't meet my expectations, it really shook my confidence."

But it wouldn't be long before critics changed their tune about Aniello: She, Downs, and fellow *Broad City* writer Jen Statsky conceived of *Hacks* in 2015, and six years later it premiered on HBO's newly minted streaming service, Max, to gangbusters reviews. Critics universally hailed the show for the fresh and relatable Zoomer-versus-boomer rapport between Deborah and Ava, which evolved into a rousing love letter to artistic soulmates.

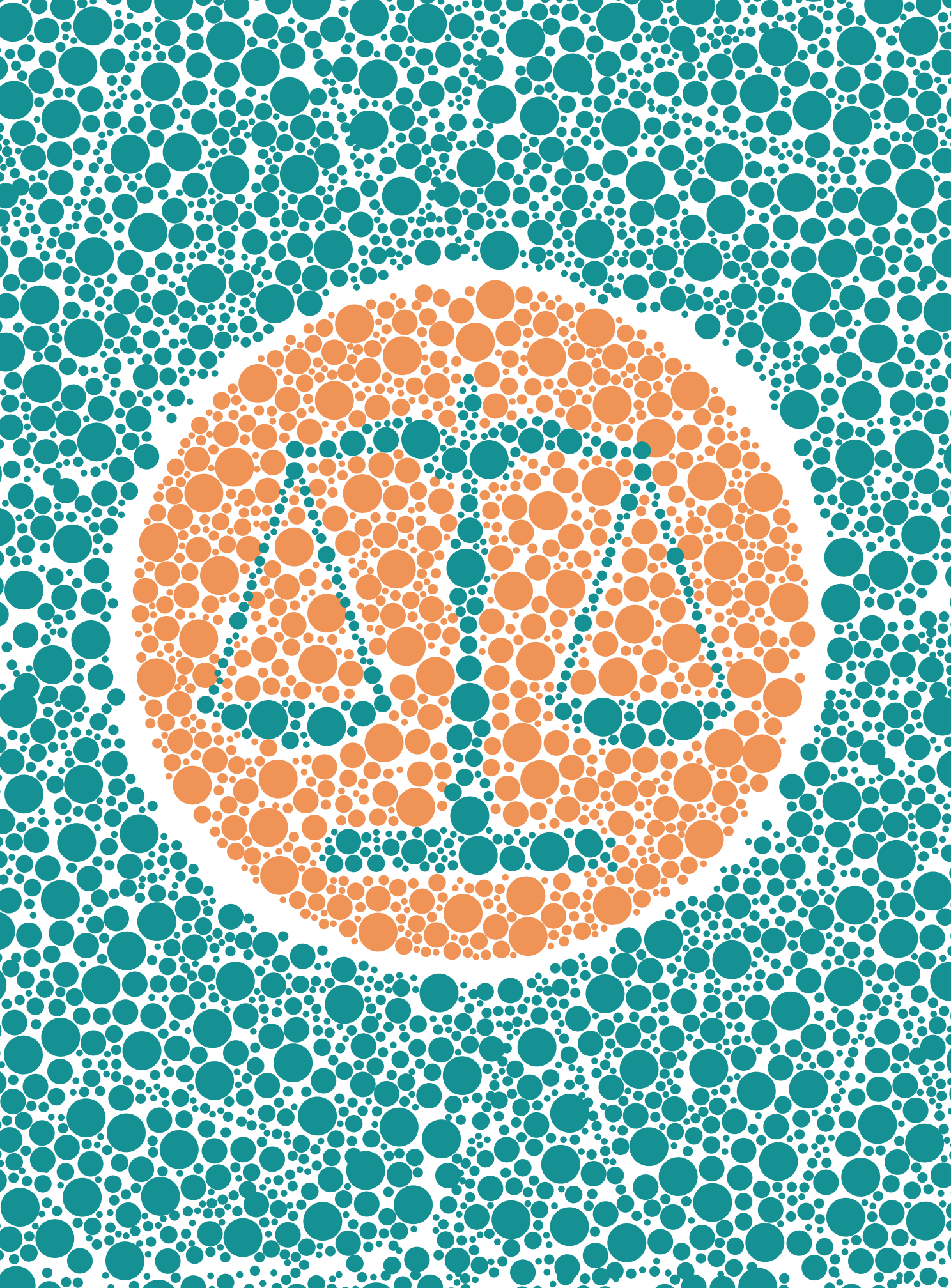
Despite the show's immense critical success (in addition to the Emmys, Golden Globe and Peabody award statues adorn the shelves of Aniello's living-room cabinet), she doesn't spare herself a dose of self-criticism. "There are episodes I see now and think, 'I should have blocked that scene differently,'" she says. "To be honest, I find directing painful because I care so much about the product and the story. Because of that, I put a lot of pressure on myself."

As she mulls what comes next (she, Downs, and Statsky have numerous projects in the works), Aniello reflects on the twenty-fifth anniversary of starting her artistic journey and how she has — and hasn't — changed since she first arrived on campus.

"I loved Columbia, and I think I'm a more evolved version of who I was then," Aniello says. "I used to talk a lot about wanting power — so much that my friends would make fun of me! But what I'd wanted was to work without anything stopping me. And the result of having a successful show is the ability to foster a community of filmmakers who get to tell their stories the way they want to tell them. That's what power means to me now."

There is an added layer of meaning in *Hacks* and its legacy that fills Aniello with immense pride. It's the same truth she experienced working in her parents' restaurants, playing tennis at Columbia, debating film theory with Sarris, and braving the boards at UCB.

"Making *Hacks* cemented for me that the best work comes from collaborating," she says. "And that's what the show was literally about: Collaborating makes you a better artist and a better person."



Is Justice Colorblind?

Recent Supreme Court rulings have hollowed out the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which sought to prevent racial discrimination in voting. Columbia experts weigh in on a massive legal shift.

By Paul Hond

When the Supreme Court agreed in June 2025 to hear arguments later that year in the voting-rights case *Louisiana v. Callais*, constitutional scholars had a good idea of what was coming. For years the court under Chief Justice John Roberts had been chipping away at the Voting Rights Act of 1965 (VRA), which Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg '59LAW, '94HON called "one of the most consequential, efficacious, and amply justified exercises of federal legislative power in our Nation's history." Now, with *Callais*, the court had a further chance to shape the fate of the sixty-year-old law.

Kerrel Murray felt a need to respond. A Columbia law professor and election-law expert, Murray saw the case as a legal reckoning — not only over the VRA but also over the balance of powers among the branches of government.

Murray had been following *Callais* closely: A group of voters in Louisiana who described themselves in court filings as "non-African American" alleged that a majority-Black congressional district, which the state had drawn to remedy a VRA violation, itself violated two constitutional amendments: the Fourteenth, which guarantees "equal protection of the laws," and the Fifteenth, which provides that voting rights "shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude." The case made its way to the Supreme Court, whose conservative majority has embraced the legal doctrine known as "constitutional colorblindness" — a favorable sign for the plaintiffs. "Colorblind theory says that it is presumptively improper for the government to take account of race when it acts in a way that benefits or burdens some persons," Murray explains. "But to say something is presumptively improper is to say that there are also circumstances when it could be justified."

For *Callais*, Murray decided to submit an amicus brief, a legal document filed by nonlitigants who can offer specialized arguments about a case. "I thought, 'This is my chance to say something,'" says Murray, who clerked for Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson during the 2022–23 Supreme Court term. Murray would base his legal analysis on decades of VRA jurisprudence.

Congress enacted the VRA under its authority to enforce the Fifteenth Amendment, which was ratified in 1870. Despite the amendment, Black voters, especially in the South, continued to face widespread disenfranchisement: States carved up their congressional districts to dilute Black voting power and enacted poll taxes and literacy tests, while the electoral violence of the Ku Klux Klan went unchecked. By the 1960s, tensions had reached a breaking point. On March 7, 1965, state troopers in Selma, Alabama, attacked civil-rights marchers on the Edmund Pettus Bridge. The incident galvanized public opinion, and eight days later, President Lyndon Johnson addressed a joint session of Congress, urging the swift passage of voting-rights legislation.

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The resulting bill contained two key enforcement provisions: Section 5, which required states with a history of voter suppression to get federal approval, or "preclearance," for changes to their election laws and procedures; and Section 2, which was meant to prohibit a variety of methods that could deny or abridge the right to vote "on account of race or color." On August 6, 1965, before a bipartisan gathering that included Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks, and the Brooklyn lawmaker who steered the bill through the House of Representatives — Emanuel Celler 1910CC, 1912LAW — President Johnson signed the VRA, saying, "This act flows from a clear and simple wrong. Its only purpose is to right that wrong."

Over the following decades, Congress reauthorized and amended the VRA five times. But the Roberts court issued a series of decisions — starting with *Shelby County v. Holder* (2013), which effectively rendered the Section 5 preclearance requirement inoperable — that significantly narrowed the scope of the VRA, while also limiting Congress's enforcement authority.



Kerrel Murray

That pattern promised to continue in *Callais*, a case that centered on Louisiana's Congressional district map. These maps are often drawn for partisan or demographic advantage — a practice known as gerrymandering — and for generations states have used gerrymandering to dilute the voting power of Black Americans. A Louisiana map drawn in 2022 appeared to be an example: For a state that was about one-third Black, the Republican legislature redrew the state's six congressional districts so that five were majority white. Civil-rights groups sued, claiming that the map was drawn in a way that prevented Black voters from having an equal chance to combine their votes with others to elect their preferred candidates — a violation of Section 2 of the VRA.

A lower-court judge agreed. To comply, Louisiana in 2024 drew a new map. This one created a second majority-Black district — a roughly 250-mile-long strip linking parts of several cities with large Black populations. That's when a group of white plaintiffs led by Phillip Callais, whose district was affected by the plan, challenged the new map as unconstitutional. This created a conflict between the Equal Protection Clause and Congress's authority under the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments to enforce voting-rights protections through legislation.

Murray knew what he was up against. He had already been working on a scholarly article called "False Conflict: Colorblindness and Section 2 of the Voting Rights Act," and he drew his argument from that paper. "I felt I had a different angle on why the VRA should not pose a problem to the court's colorblindness approach," he says.

His amicus brief, filed September 3, 2025, was for the court, of course, but it was also for future justices and scholars — and for history.

In Murray's view, the colorblind theory, as advanced by the Roberts court, still permits race to be used remedially, to address race-based harms. The theory "has not rejected the idea that if somebody imposes a harm because of race, that you might have to take account of race to fix that," Murray says. This idea is called the "remedial rationale," and, Murray contends, it harmonizes perfectly with Section 2.

Murray's thesis is rooted in VRA legal history. In 1980, the Supreme Court ruled in *City of Mobile v. Bolden* that the Alabama city's at-large election system (rather than district-based elections) — which favored the white majority — did not, on its face, discriminate against Black voters, and therefore did not violate Section 2. That meant that plaintiffs in Section 2 cases would now have to prove that the state acted with racially discriminatory intent — an exceedingly difficult bar to clear.

The decision drew fierce backlash, and in 1982, Congress, with bipartisan support in both houses, moved to amend the VRA to restore plaintiffs' ability to challenge voting laws on the basis of their effects. The new doctrine held that even a seemingly racially neutral law might violate Section 2 if it resulted in a minority group's members having less opportunity than other members of the electorate to participate in the electoral process.

Not everyone was pleased. Some senators, fearing that any racially imbalanced electoral outcome could trigger a Section 2 claim, insisted on adding language stating that no group has a right to proportional representation. Both Democrats and Republicans agreed, and President Ronald Reagan signed the legislation, saying that "the right to vote is the crown jewel of American liberties, and we will not see its luster diminished."

But how was a court to determine whether a particular districting map violated Section 2? That question demanded clarification, and in *Thornburg v. Gingles* (1986) the court, under Chief Justice Warren E. Burger, created the three-part framework at the core of Murray's argument. Under *Gingles*, plaintiffs with a Section 2

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complaint had to prove that (1) the diluted minority population was large and compact enough to comprise a majority in a single, reasonably drawn district; (2) the group was politically cohesive; and (3) white voting blocs consistently defeated the group's preferred candidates. If these terms were satisfied, plaintiffs then had to meet a "totality of circumstances" test that weighed the role of past discrimination in present-day conditions.

In his brief, Murray quoted the Burger court's recognition of Section 2 as a means to "eradicate inequalities in political opportunities that exist due to the vestigial effects of past purposeful discrimination." For Murray, this is the heart of the matter. "The *Gingles* framework identifies those circumstances where race is *already operating* to prevent certain groups of voters from having an equal shot at participating," he says. "That means that Section 2 is remedial — it isn't forcing the state to inject race into circumstances where it wasn't previously present."

Murray also cited *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard* (2023), or *SFFA*, in which the Roberts court ruled that the admissions programs at Harvard and the University of North Carolina violated the Fourteenth Amendment's guarantee of equal protection — a decision that severely limited affirmative action in college admissions. Murray anticipated that the court would evaluate Section 2 through the same colorblind lens it had applied in *SFFA*. And so his brief laid out the court's own criteria for constitutional colorblindness: that "race may never be used as a 'negative'" — meaning that it can't negate the opportunity of others — "and … may not operate as a stereotype"; there must be "time limits on race-based state action"; and race-based state action can be justified only by a "compelling interest," and only in "the most extraordinary case." Then Murray showed, through legal precedent and logic, why Section 2 does *not* violate these tenets.

On the last point — whether a "compelling interest" exists to warrant race-based state action — Murray again used the court's own words in *SFFA*, which said that "remediating specific, identified instances of past discrimination that violated the Constitution or a statute" constitutes a "compelling interest" that "permit[s] resort to race-based state government action."

So there it was: the remedial rationale, as articulated by the advocates of constitutional colorblindness. Section 2, wrote Murray, "fits comfortably within one of the enduring justifications embraced by this court for governmental consideration of race … The bottom line is that, at its core, Section 2 is concerned with remediating past (or present) intentional discrimination," and "thus presents no conflict."

On April 29, 2026, the Supreme Court, in a 6–3 ruling, found in favor of Phillip Callais and the other plaintiffs in Louisiana. The majority opinion, authored by Justice Samuel Alito, declared that "no compelling interest justified the State's use of race" in creating the second majority-Black district. Louisiana's remedial map, the one that linked Black areas of three cities, was "an unconstitutional racial gerrymander."

As Alito wrote, the state's Section 2 claim "triggered strict scrutiny because the State's underlying goal was racial," and Louisiana's "intentional compliance" with the lower-court order to remedy the districting imbalance was evidence of an "express acknowledgment that race played a role in the drawing of district lines."

The court also substantially altered the *Gingles* framework to reflect its view that the country has made "great strides in ending entrenched racial discrimination." Plaintiffs bringing a Section 2 complaint would now have to "disentangle race from politics" and prove that legislators drew their disputed maps out of racial bias rather than for partisan advantage — regardless of the effects.

As for the "totality of circumstances" question, Alito placed the focus on "present-day intentional racial discrimination regarding voting," and asserted that "discrimination that occurred some time ago and present-day disparities characterized as ongoing 'effects of societal discrimination' are entitled to much less weight."

"I felt I had a different angle on why the VRA should not pose a problem to the court's colorblindness approach."
— Kerrel Murray

Voting-rights activists condemned the decision. Eric Holder '73CC, '76LAW, former US attorney general and chair of the National Democratic Redistricting Committee, denounced "this out-of-control, deeply ideological Court," whose ruling "ensures that it will be remembered as one of the most destructive and deeply irresponsible Courts in the history of our nation." Michael Waldman '82CC, president and CEO of the Brennan Center for Justice at NYU School of Law, called the decision a "profoundly unjust historical setback" that "demolished" the VRA.

One of the most incisive analyses of the Roberts court's voting-rights record comes from Khiara Bridges '02LAW, '08GSAS, a law professor at UC Berkeley. Bridges identifies "an anachronistic notion of racism" in the court's voting-rights decisions, which, she says, "allows the Court to ignore the modern-day techniques that work to achieve the same racial hierarchies."

Bridges identified this dynamic in 2022, in a *Harvard Law Review* article titled "Race in the Roberts Court." Her premise was that the court "invites observers to believe that it is just using simple common sense when it identifies, or refuses to identify, something as racism," she wrote. "The crux of the Roberts Court's apparent racial common sense is that racism against people of color is what racism looked like during the pre–Civil Rights Era — in the bad old days." In a voting-rights context, that means things like poll taxes and literacy tests.

Bridges pointed out that immediately after the Roberts court in 2013 gutted the Section 5 preclearance requirement (its *Shelby County* decision cited decades of increased minority voter turnout and an outdated congressional formula to determine which jurisdictions needed federal oversight), states began implementing facially race-neutral measures such as voter-ID laws and voter-roll purges. To many, wrote Bridges, these practices looked an awful lot like modern iterations of literacy tests and poll taxes. Justice Ginsburg, in her *Shelby County* dissent, famously stated that "throwing out preclearance when it has worked and is continuing to work to stop discriminatory changes is like throwing away your umbrella in a rainstorm because you are not getting wet."

For Bridges, the Roberts court's notion that modern voter suppression must resemble poll taxes and George Wallace with a bullhorn "allows the Court to implicitly declare that racism against people of color is a thing of the past; it permits the Court to deny the existence and persistence of structural racism."

Noting what she calls the court's pattern of "solicitousness toward white grievance," Bridges wrote that the conservative majority's jurisprudence "makes it extremely likely" that nonwhite plaintiffs claiming racial discrimination will lose, and "more likely" that white plaintiffs claiming the same will win. To Bridges, "politics and the desire for an outcome that aligns with the Republican Party platform appear to overdetermine the inquiry."

> **"The court is turning a blind eye to the techniques of racial disenfranchisement, and I'm comfortable saying that this is intentional."**
> **— Khiara Bridges**

The *Callais* decision did nothing to make Bridges question her 2022 assessment. "The court said essentially that Section 2 cannot prevent states from gerrymandering Black voters out of existence," she says. "The court is turning a blind eye to the techniques of racial disenfranchisement, and I'm comfortable saying that this is intentional: The court knows precisely what it is doing."

Following its ruling on *Callais*, the court promptly applied it, vacating an injunction that had required Alabama to use a remedial map that cured a previously adjudicated violation of Section 2. Other states, mainly in the South, moved to eliminate majority-minority districts. "The *Callais* decision is a major, major blow to the representation of Black voters throughout the country, and it also fares dangerously for Latino representation," says Juan Cartagena, '81LAW, former president and general counsel of the LatinoJustice Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Education Fund and a lecturer in law at Columbia.

As an attorney, Cartagena litigated multiple Section 5 cases in New York, starting in the 1980s when certain counties in the state had fallen under Section 5 coverage due to ongoing discrimination against Black and Latino voters. Cartagena believes that the solution to voting rights must come from Congress.

"Congress has the authority to exercise its legislative powers as an equal branch of government and go beyond what the Fourteenth Amendment would otherwise require," Cartagena says. "The VRA was passed by Congress, and it is Congress's right to state what it thinks is a proper balance between the competing interests of intentional discrimination and effects discrimination. These are complex issues, but it's up to Congress to decide — except that we have a Supreme Court majority that believes Congress, the most democratic of all three of our branches, doesn't have the authority to interpret the US Constitution."

So where does that leave us?

Kerrel Murray points to the Constitution and to state legislatures. He was, he says, "disappointed" by the *Callais* decision, and he doesn't deny that it leaves the VRA a shadow of its former self. But in his view, *Callais* is not the end of the story.

"Obviously, the court's decision is going to limit what Congress can do under current law," he says. "But this decision only deals with Congress's power to enforce the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments."

Beyond those amendments, Murray notes, Congress has power to regulate the "manner" of federal congressional elections (as stipulated in Article 1, Section 4, Clause 1 of the Constitution), which can include regulating districting. And at the state level, legislatures "have a general authority to regulate the electoral process," he says. That includes passing laws to protect the voting rights of their citizens, as New York and other states have done.

"There are still plenty of things," Murray says, "that can be pushed for."

The Lion of the VRA

ON MARCH 15, 1965, eight days after the Bloody Sunday attacks on civil-rights marchers in Selma, President Lyndon B. Johnson addressed the Senate and the House of Representatives: "Wednesday I will send to Congress a law designed to eliminate illegal barriers to the right to vote."

The point person in the House was Emanuel Celler 1910CC, 1912LAW, a Democrat from Brooklyn's Tenth District and chair of the House Judiciary Committee. "LBJ sent his voting-rights proposal to Celler, and it was Celler's job to get that bill through the Congress," says Wayne Dawkins '80JRN, author of *Emanuel Celler: Immigration and Civil Rights Champion* (2020). "That meant getting it through a solid wall of Southern Democrat segregationists."

Then seventy-six years old, Celler had already been the driving force behind a host of landmark legislative achievements: the Civil Rights Acts of 1957 and 1960, for which he was principal House author; the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which he helped strengthen and guide through Congress; the Hart-Celler Immigration Act of 1965, which he sponsored in the House and which ended the national-origins quota system that had favored immigrants from northern and western Europe; and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, for which he was the main legislative sponsor and floor manager in the House.



Emanuel Celler

"I can say full-throatedly that Celler is the godfather of civil-rights legislation," says Dawkins, who has taught at Morgan State University and Hampton University. "He started with the 1957 Civil Rights Act, which the NAACP and others thought was toothless. But it was not, because now, for the first time, our government was documenting what was going on in the South — the abuses, the terrorism, everything."

The son of a door-to-door wine merchant, Celler was born in 1888 and grew up in Williamsburg. He went to Boys High School and later commuted to Columbia. His parents died when he was in college, and a wealthy uncle, Sam Grabfelder, a Kentucky liquor wholesaler, stepped in to pay his tuition. "Grabfelder told Celler, 'You have to promise me that you will use your degrees to work on behalf of others — not just to make money and get rich,'" Dawkins says.

Celler got into Columbia Law School, where his favorite professor was Harlan Fiske Stone 1898LAW, who went on to become Chief Justice of the US Supreme Court. After graduating, Celler opened a law practice focused on helping immigrants, and in 1922 he ran for Congress. He won and would be reelected twenty-five times.

"Celler was a straight shooter, and he wasn't for everybody, because he was going to go into details," says Dawkins. "There's a saying that congresspeople are divided into two types: 'show horses' and 'workhorses.' Celler was a workhorse."

He could also be charming and playful, Dawkins says. "He would write verse, little sketches, about the folks in the Congress. He loved opera. He played violin as a child, but he preferred the piano, and his suite at the Mayflower Hotel in Washington had a grand piano, which he played. One journalist called him the last Victorian on Capitol Hill."

Celler's language reflects this sensibility. "Clear as a pikestaff" was how he described the wording of the Twenty-fourth Amendment, which prohibited poll taxes in federal elections, and which Celler pushed through Congress in 1962. And he once referred to Herbert Hoover — the second of the nine presidents, from Harding to Nixon, with whom he served — as "a bit Pecksniffian," referring to the sanctimonious hypocrite Pecksniff in Dickens's *Martin Chuzzlewit*. In 1969, Celler explained the decade's flurry of civil-rights legislation this way: "I think it was Victor Hugo who once said, 'When the time for an idea has come, nothing can stop it.'"

The voting-rights bill was a case in point: It passed the House 328–74. "There was an attempt to attach fourteen amendments to the bill, which would have weakened it substantially," says Dawkins. "It was tough, but Celler got the bill through with only three changes."

By 1972, Celler, then the dean of the House, was eighty-four years old. That year, he lost reelection to thirty-year-old Elizabeth Holtzman, a Harvard-educated lawyer whom *Time* magazine dubbed "the Lion Killer." After fifty years of public service, Celler left Washington and returned to New York, where he resumed his law practice and advocated for immigration reform.

Celler died on January 15, 1981, at age ninety-two. It was also Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday. That same day, in Washington, thousands of people, led by musician Stevie Wonder, marched from the Capitol to the National Mall in support of a federal holiday for King, who had been the public face and moral voice of the civil-rights bills that Celler, the workhorse, had shepherded through Congress to the president's desk.

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THE MEMORY COLLECTOR

Twenty-five years after 9/11, Clifford Chanin ’77JRN, ’80SIPA keeps the events of that day in the public consciousness By Julia Joy



Clifford Chanin ’77JRN, ’80SIPA can tell you exactly what he was doing on the morning of September 11, 2001: He knows that when the first plane struck the World Trade Center, hitting the North Tower at 8:46 a.m., he was listening to the radio while getting ready to leave the house, and that when the second plane struck the South Tower at 9:03 a.m., he was in his car trying to get onto the Brooklyn Bridge. He remembers the police cars and the screams and the smoke across the East River, and he remembers going to meet his three kids after they were released early from school. “The dust was blowing to Brooklyn,” he recalls. “It was foggy and hazy, and all of a sudden, I saw my kids emerge more clearly, and I thought, ‘This is what it’s like to be at war.’”

Chanin is the executive vice president and museum director of the 9/11 Memorial & Museum, an institution that takes the slogan “never forget” very much to heart. Chanin’s job is to keep the events of 9/11 in public memory and to tell the story of what exactly happened on the day a coordinated terrorist attack killed nearly three thousand people, transformed a vibrant patch of Lower Manhattan into a heap of rubble, and thrust the United States into a decades-long “war on terror” that still reverberates today.

The day’s violence was unusual, Chanin notes from a conference room in the museum’s basement, before leading a walk through the exhibit highlights, because people watched it play out in real time, on television, for 102 minutes. “There had never been an event like this, one that was transmitted around the world to people who understood that history was changing in front of their eyes.”

Twenty-five years later, the bustling plaza in the shadow of One World Trade Center bears no trace of carnage and ruin. But the 9/11 Memorial — two square sunken waterfalls built into the original foundations of the Twin Towers, with the names of the victims engraved along the perimeters — offers a sobering reminder of what happened there. Inside the mostly underground museum, a 110,000-square-foot cavern that once housed part of a commercial complex containing a shopping mall and parking garage, Chanin points out the raw bedrock and steel structures that supported the World Trade Center’s seven-building complex. “The architecture frames the visit and has a lot to do with the success of the experience,” says Chanin.

The artifacts on display include a fragment of the North Tower’s antenna found in the wreckage and part of a staircase that helped survivors flee the World Trade Center’s elevated plaza. “This is what we call impact steel, where the plane entered the building,” says Chanin, pointing to a large, mangled cluster of three rusted beams mounted to a wall like an abstract sculpture. “This was located on the north face of the North Tower, between the ninety-sixth and ninety-ninth floors. It’s 8:46 a.m. frozen in time.” Along with a photo

FRANKIE ALDUINO



of nearly every person killed in the attack, these elements of the main exhibit are intended to bring visitors back to that fateful day.

Decades before 9/11 changed New York, Chanin grew up in Kensington and Canarsie in Brooklyn and attended Samuel J. Tilden High School, where he edited the school newspaper. After majoring in government at Wesleyan University, Chanin received a Thomas J. Watson Fellowship to conduct a one-year independent study abroad. His chosen project was an oral history of Holocaust survivors who had gone back to Europe instead of settling in places such as the United States or Israel.

After his return, Chanin enrolled in Columbia's Graduate School of Journalism. "The journalism degree was an opportunity to really learn how to talk to people, ask them questions, and listen to their answers," he recalls. "Professors would send us out into the city to do our assignments while we figured out: How do you identify the details that convey the story? What are you listening for, and how do you frame it?"

To complement his journalism studies with a more traditional academic program, Chanin pursued a second master's degree, at the School of International and Public Affairs, with a concentration in Soviet studies. "The folks who were teaching those classes spoke from such an incredible well of knowledge and experience," says Chanin. "Both Columbia programs showed me the possibilities of what I could do, seeing how faculty and other experts had made the most of their specialties. I think that aspect impressed me even more than the immediate subjects."

Chanin did end up pursuing a career in journalism, covering politics and other topics, then spending two and a half years as an assistant press secretary under mayors Ed Koch and David Dinkins. But in 1990, he pivoted back to international affairs by joining the Rockefeller Foundation, the humanitarian and cultural nonprofit founded in 1913 by philanthropist John D. Rockefeller Sr.

As a program officer with Rockefeller, Chanin traveled the globe to examine what at the time was a looming but underestimated issue: a surge in religious fundamentalism coupled with economic disadvantage in the Muslim world. "I helped start a program on the emergence of different voices across Muslim societies, and the challenges of what we might call the 'identity politics' of the Islamic revival," says Chanin, who spent time in the Middle East, Asia, and Africa, absorbing a wide range of perspectives. "One of the things we did was try to create a network of institutions across regions that had different languages, histories, and concerns but were all wrestling with similar situations."

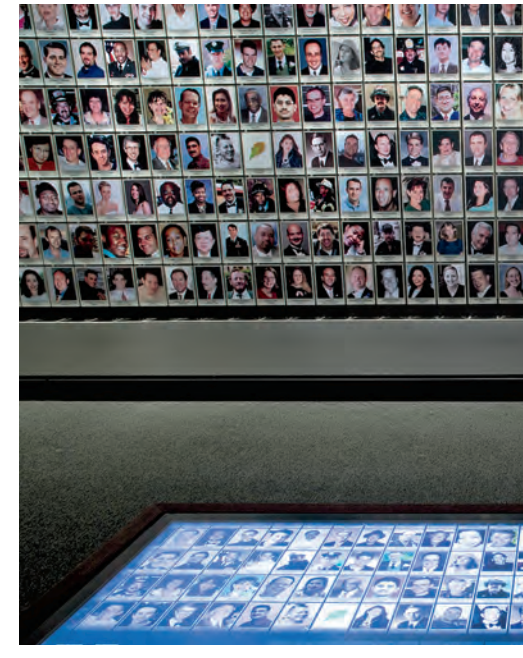
During his travels, Chanin noticed a common thread across regions and cultures. "In many of the Muslim countries, there was this focus on history and traumas of the past," he says. "I became very interested in looking at how societies in general remember mass violence, whether through public debate, creative works, or monuments and other constructions." That curiosity took Chanin to sites such as Holocaust memorials in Europe, Cambodia's Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, and Gorée Island, in Senegal, a former hub of the Atlantic slave trade and now a UNESCO World Heritage Site. In every country, he saw a similar dynamic: Creative people had embarked on projects that helped process these mass tragedies. "The responses took different forms and different media," he says, "but this seemed to be a universal phenomenon."

Chanin left Rockefeller as an employee in 2000, but he received a grant from the nonprofit to start an initiative called the Legacy Project, a nonprofit that documented how societies around the world deal with collective memory of conflict and mass violence. Less than two years later, al-Qaeda jihadis attacked the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, and suddenly, all the geographic and subject expertise that Chanin had honed at Rockefeller was converging on his doorstep.

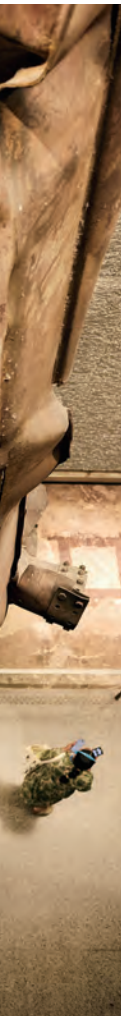
"Within days of the attack, people started talking about a memorial and what it would be, and I was drawn to try to contribute something," he says. Chanin signed on to the memorial and museum development project in 2005 as a consultant during the planning phase, and he eventually joined full-time, overseeing programming. Literally built on ruins, the 9/11 Memorial opened in 2011, followed by the museum in 2014. "The project itself is an artifact of the community response to the event, a demonstration of the resilience," says Chanin, who stepped into the role of museum director in 2022.

"Cliff has been my go-to person for anything concerning the overall operation," says Jeh Johnson '82LAW, a member of the 9/11 Memorial & Museum's board of directors who is also a co-chair of Columbia's Board of Trustees. "He has dedicated his career to the memory of 9/11, and the organization is better-off as a result."





TOP: FRANKIE ALDUINO; BOTTOM: JIN LEE



"TODAY, A THIRD OF THE POPULATION OF THIS COUNTRY WAS BORN AFTER 9/11 OR DOESN'T HAVE A MEMORY OF IT."

A piece of "impact steel" from where the North Tower was struck (left); a gallery displaying photos of thousands of 9/11 victims (below).



Johnson, too, was shaped by the day the towers were hit. An attorney who had served as general counsel for the Department of the Air Force under President Bill Clinton, he was working in a Midtown Manhattan law office on September 11, which happens to be his birthday. "After that, I rededicated myself to returning to national security," he says. In 2009, Johnson was appointed general counsel for the Department of Defense by President Barack Obama '83CC, and from 2013 to 2017, he held the cabinet position of United States secretary of homeland security. "It's important for not just Americans but the international community to remember how tragic and transformational 9/11 was," says Johnson. "I joined the board of the memorial and museum to help ensure that we never forget."

For Chanin, memorializing a catastrophe such as 9/11 means making it relatable to the general public. "Today, a third of the population of this country was born after 9/11 or doesn't have a memory of it," he says, while walking through an exhibition of phone recordings and flight maps from the morning of the attacks. Chanin invites visitors of all ages to imagine: "On a normal day, you are put in a situation suddenly — literally out of the blue, in this case — where the stakes of life and death are all that's in front of you, and the only questions are whether or not you can get out, whether or not you can help others."

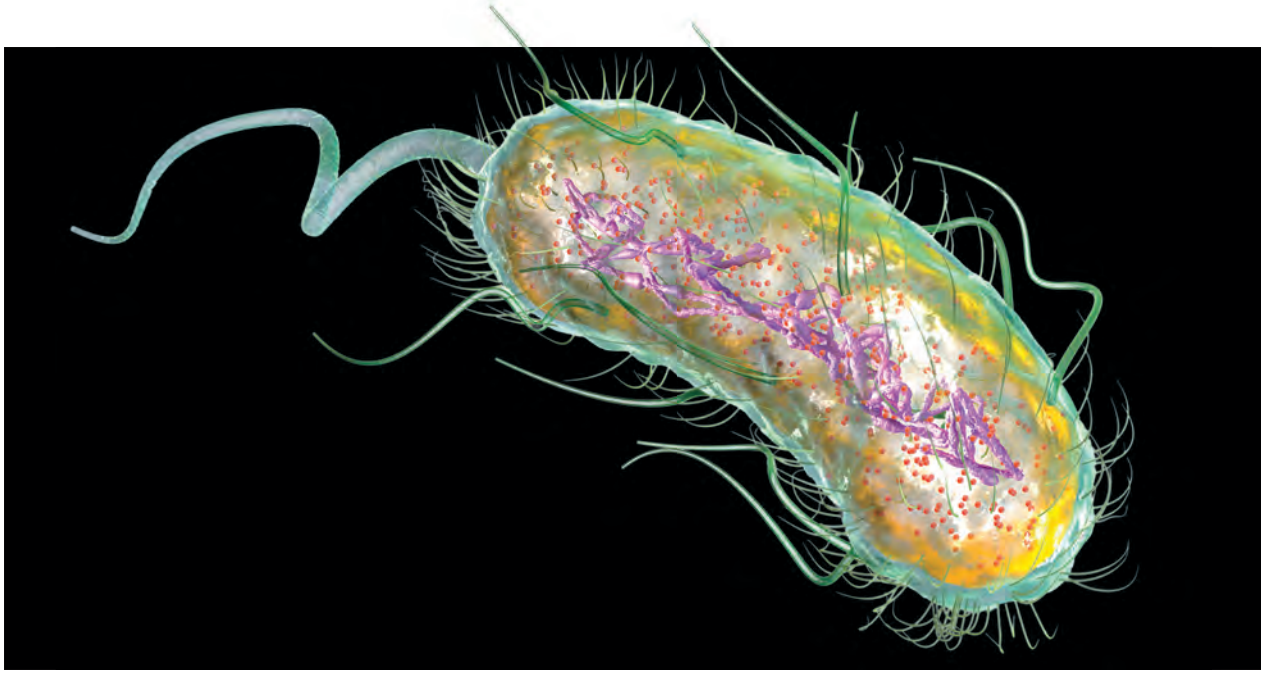
Since opening more than a decade ago, the museum has expanded its vision from the day itself to cover some of 9/11's long-term impacts. Exhibits now include, for instance, the scale model of Osama bin Laden's compound that the Pentagon used to plan its 2011 assassination raid, as well as a display on the toxic dust that continues to plague first responders with health problems (around 1.8 million tons of debris were removed over nine months, creating an "environmental catastrophe" for the neighborhood, Chanin notes).

The site has also emerged as an important pilgrimage spot for emergency workers and civil servants. As part of their training programs, the FDNY, NYPD, FBI, and Port Authority Police Department periodically bring in new recruits for ceremonies on the memorial plaza and tours of the museum. "We never imagined that we would be given the responsibility and privilege to tell this story to future firefighters and other rescue workers who are stepping into the shoes of those who responded on that day," says Chanin.

This fall, to commemorate twenty-five years after the attacks, the museum is presenting several new exhibitions: one on individuals who were inspired by 9/11 to pursue acts of service, and another on comic books and graphic novels tied to the tragedy. As in past years, the organization will be holding a ceremony in which the names of the day's victims (2,977 total) are read aloud, and two massive light beams will be projected into the sky as ghostly reminders of the towers that once stood. The museum will be releasing a new half-hour film of first-person accounts of 9/11, including recollections from people who lost a parent in the attacks, and a virtual chat session will invite kids across the country to submit questions about the film (last year's event saw around a million participants, Chanin says).

Unlike the many New Yorkers who avoid revisiting that September day (a large percentage of museum attendees are from out of town), Chanin isn't weighed down by the gravity of the event that is central to his job. "Some days it strikes me differently than others, but what we do here is such a profound and moving experience for visitors that I find it enriching in ways that I never would have imagined," he says after passing through a gallery where short videos remembering individual victims are projected onto a wall. "Being part of this story is to experience all aspects of humanity. There aren't a lot of places where you go to work and that happens."

EXPLORATIONS



An illustration of *E. coli*.

AXEL_KOCK / SHUTTERSTOCK

Could life be made simpler?

For all of life's glorious diversity, its basic building blocks are stubbornly consistent from one organism to the next. Every living thing on Earth today — from fungi and fruit flies to oak trees and humans — is composed of the same twenty chemical compounds, called amino acids, which can be strung together to form hundreds of millions of distinct proteins. (A few organisms contain more than twenty amino acids, but none have less.) Many scientists believe that this biochemical architecture is essential for life, and that if any of those twenty amino acids didn't exist, neither would we nor any of the plants or animals around us.

But now a team of scientists led by Columbia systems biologist Harris H. Wang has provided some of the first experimental evidence to suggest that life as we know it could operate with a simpler tool kit, and that if only circumstances had unfolded differently, evolution might have settled on a sleeker design. In a paper in the journal *Science*, the researchers describe having created a bacterium that thrives despite having only nineteen amino acids in some of its most critical components. Specifically, the scientists used AI models to genetically reengineer a harmless form of *E. coli* so that it lacks the amino acid isoleucine in its ribosomes, the free-floating mini-factories that produce all other cellular parts. The stripped-down ribosomes still churn out proteins that contain all twenty amino acids, so the rest of the bacterium operates with a full set, but the ribosomes' ability to do the job shorthanded has been heralded as a promising first step on the path to creating an entire organism with a leaner biochemical makeup.

"The paper is a tour de force of synthetic biology," Tom Ellis, a British genomic engineer who wasn't involved in the study, told *Scientific American*. He praised the work for addressing "a really interesting question that's fundamental to the origin of life on Earth."

Wang and his colleagues first set out more than a decade ago to pare the chemical code of life down to nineteen amino acids. The Columbia scientists specialize in genetically engineering microbes for novel biomedical applications, such as monitoring the health of the gut microbiome and delivering cancer drugs straight into tumors, and they thought that a bacterium trimmed of one or more amino acids would make for an ideal vehicle. That's because the specific DNA sequences that would ordinarily encode for an amino acid could be reassigned to carry instructions for new, synthetic compounds designed to function as living drugs or sensors.

"We knew that removing an amino acid would be extremely difficult," says Wang, likening it to "writing a book without using the whole alphabet."

The scientists zeroed in on isoleucine as a candidate for removal after observing in *E. coli* that nature occassionally swaps out the compound in favor of similarly shaped amino acids, valine and leucine, without causing much harm. Wang and his team then began the painstaking work of genetically removing isoleucine from dozens of *E. coli* ribosome proteins where it typically appears, and subsequently making lots of compensatory genetic tweaks that turned out to be necessary to ensure that those proteins continued to function smoothly. Their strategy showed promise — after a couple of years, the team had successfully reprogrammed a handful of the relevant proteins — but the work was so difficult and expensive that they eventually shelved it.

The Columbia scientists picked up the project again in 2021, though, when AI systems became capable of predicting which genetic changes were most likely to preserve the function of affected *E. coli* proteins. "Some of the solutions that the AI models came up with were surprising, things that we'd have never thought of," says Wang. He notes, for example, that the algorithms sometimes proposed altering multiple DNA sequences in different parts of a protein in order to compensate for isoleucine's removal.

Currently, Wang and his colleagues are working on plans to create a new version of *E. coli* that is entirely devoid of isoleucine. If successful, they say, the effort could have profound implications for biomedical science, opening up new avenues for targeted drug delivery and real-time health monitoring.

Evolutionary biologists are sure to be watching the Columbia team's progress too. Until now, scientists could only speculate whether life with fewer than twenty amino acids is possible, and what the advantages and disadvantages of a simpler design might be. That's because all living things on Earth today, and all species in the fossil record, appear to have descended from a bacteria-like organism that lived some four billion years ago and bequeathed to us its biochemical code. "But now, by reducing the number of amino acids in an organism, we can start to investigate the boundaries of cellular life in an experimental setting for the first time, rather than just theorizing about it," Wang says.

He says that his team's AI-driven approach to synthesizing cells promises a windfall of discoveries about human biology as well. "Part of what's exciting about this research is that the AI models are starting to recommend to us genetic sequences and amino acid combinations that we can see clearly function, even though we don't always know *why* they function," he says. "That means the AI has the potential to reveal to us new things about how our bodies work, and how we could make them work better."

SNEHIT PHOTO / SHUTTERSTOCK

The AI boom's unpaid bill

It's easy to think of AI as a kind of software magic floating in the cloud. But behind every chatbot response sits a sprawling physical architecture — warehouses full of servers, giant cooling systems, substations, and transformers that can occupy hundreds of acres. In the US, there are currently more than five hundred "hyper-scale" data centers, with nearly as many now in the works.

According to a new paper by Stijn Van Nieuwerburgh, a professor of real estate at Columbia Business School, the scale of this build-out now rivals or exceeds the biggest infrastructure booms in American history, including the laying of the railroads and the creation of the interstate highway system. He estimates that investments in AI infrastructure will account for roughly 2.8 percent of GDP over the course of the expansion and that they're already driving nearly all economic growth in the country. "We'd basically be in a recession right now without data centers," Van Nieuwerburgh says. "That's how big AI is."



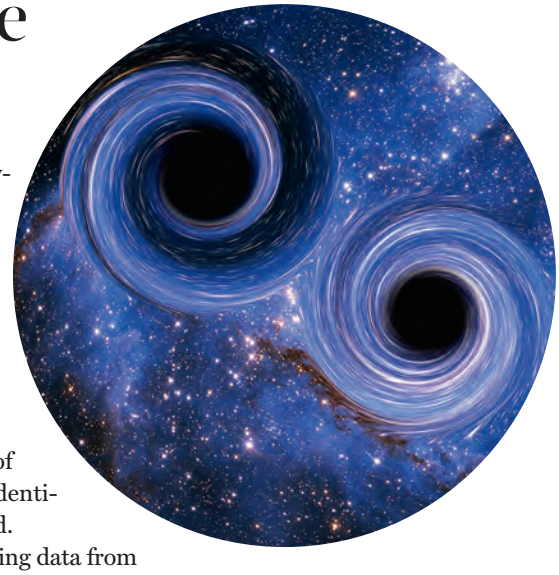
A new data center under construction in Columbus, Ohio.

This growth comes with hidden risks, Van Nieuwerburgh writes, because cloud giants like Amazon, Microsoft, and Google are increasingly relying on outside investors and complex financing structures to pay for their data centers. If enthusiasm for generative AI cools, he says, the effects could ripple outward through pension funds, real-estate investment trusts, and other lenders.

Van Nieuwerburgh says it's vital that policymakers and investors monitor how money is flowing through the system and watch out for signs of crisis. "It's very hard to get the timing right with these big build-outs, and often what ends up happening is we get overexcited and accrue too much debt," he says. "That doesn't mean these are not important, productive investments. What I'm arguing is that we need to be careful and think through the risks."

— Andrew Palmer

Black hole roll call



By listening to gravitational waves, or tiny ripples in the fabric of space-time, an international team of astronomers that includes Columbia professor Maximiliano Isi has roughly doubled the total number of black-hole collisions ever identified, to nearly four hundred.

The new observations, using data from detectors in the states of Washington and Louisiana, as well as in Italy and Japan, have enabled the researchers to refine measurements of the universe's expansion rate, discover two unique types of black holes, and determine multiple pathways by which black holes are created.

Isi contributed a key analysis showing that black holes are split into two distinct groups: a majority that spin very slowly, and a minority that spin extremely fast. That finding has far-reaching implications for our theories about where these black holes come from and how they are formed.

The question of whether massive black holes come directly from dying stars or are assembled step-by-step from the mergers of smaller black holes is still hotly debated. The diversity in spins identified by Isi suggests that both mechanisms may be at play.

"With this catalog, we now have enough data that we can start to tease apart the properties of these black holes and to figure out where they came from," says Isi. "We're also able to chart the expansion of the universe over its history, which is a super-important, unanswered question in cosmology."

Etna's surprise fuel



One of the world's most active volcanoes, Sicily's Mount Etna, is known as a gentle giant, with relatively mild eruptions every few years that do little to deter hikers and skiers. But scientists know that Etna erupted violently four thousand years ago, and again in 122 BC. Will they know when the next big one is coming? A new paper by Columbia geologist Terry Plank '93GSAS, Anna Barth '21GSAS, and several Cornell and University of Hawaii colleagues may help. The study reconstructs Etna's ancient eruptions in unprecedented detail and reveals that a buildup of carbon dioxide within its plumbing greatly intensified the 122 BC blast. That finding may surprise some volcanologists, who have traditionally discounted CO_2 as a major factor in eruptions.

Why are some bosses bullies?

If you've ever had a boss who ruled through threats and intimidation, you might have assumed they knew exactly what they were doing. But new research by Columbia Business School professor Daniel Ames and Dean Baltiansky '26BUS suggests that domineering leaders are often unaware of how they're affecting morale. In a series of laboratory studies, they found that people with a "dog-eat-dog" view of relationships tend to assume that their aggressiveness is seen as normal and harmless, while those with a more harmonious view of the world are better at anticipating the risks of pushing subordinates too hard. The takeaway for managers? "Give yourself an opportunity to test if your assumptions are correct," Ames says, by seeking feedback from colleagues who can reveal blind spots.

Alzheimer's may start with cellular waste

Columbia neurologists led by Kapil Ramachandran have found new clues about the beginnings of Alzheimer's disease, revealing how tau proteins become misfolded and begin forming the toxic tangles long linked to memory loss. In a study in mice, the scientists observed that when a cellular-waste-disposal system that Ramachandran discovered a few years ago breaks down, defective tau proteins escape destruction and start clumping together. The researchers also found evidence that the infamous APOE4 gene variation, which doubles a person's risk for Alzheimer's, works in part by damaging the waste-disposal system. They say their findings raise the prospect of developing Alzheimer's drugs that prevent the production of tau tangles at the source.

TOP: VICTOR DE SCHWANBERG / SCIENCE PHOTO LIBRARY; BOTTOM: SEAN PAVONE / SHUTTERSTOCK

Scientists reveal malaria's method of attack

Malaria deaths are surging in many parts of the world today, as the drugs used to fight the disease are losing their effectiveness. In sub-Saharan Africa, hundreds of thousands of children are dying of the mosquito-borne illness each year.

But a major new discovery by Columbia scientists is raising hopes that more-effective drugs could be developed. In a recent issue of the journal *Cell*, the scientists provide the first detailed description of how malaria parasites attach themselves to red blood cells, drive spiral-shaped proteins into the cells' outer membranes, and then rip open a hole and slip inside.

According to Chi-Min Ho, a microbiologist and immunologist who oversaw the team, scientists have known for decades that malaria parasites enter blood cells by hoisting themselves in through a distinctive hatch they carve into their membranes. (These attacks occur in synchronized waves as trillions of parasites spread throughout the body, causing severe fever every forty-eight hours or so.) But the invasion occurs so quickly that until now, no one had observed exactly how an individual parasite cuts open a blood cell. The Columbia team accomplished this by freezing parasites at the moment of assault and then using



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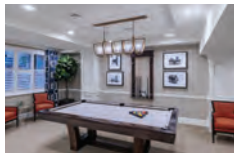
cryo-electron microscopy to produce high-resolution, three-dimensional images of the crime scene. This enabled the scientists to visualize the molecular mechanics of the strike in such detail that they were able to subsequently synthesize a protein that can break a parasite's grip on a blood cell and foil the raid.

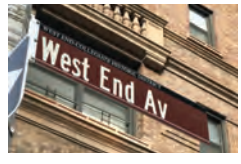
The Columbia researchers say the protective compound they've synthesized is not a drug candidate itself but that it could lead to the development of one. "That's the part we're most eager to build on," says Daphne Kaxiras, a medical student in Ho's lab who led the compound's development.

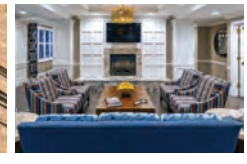
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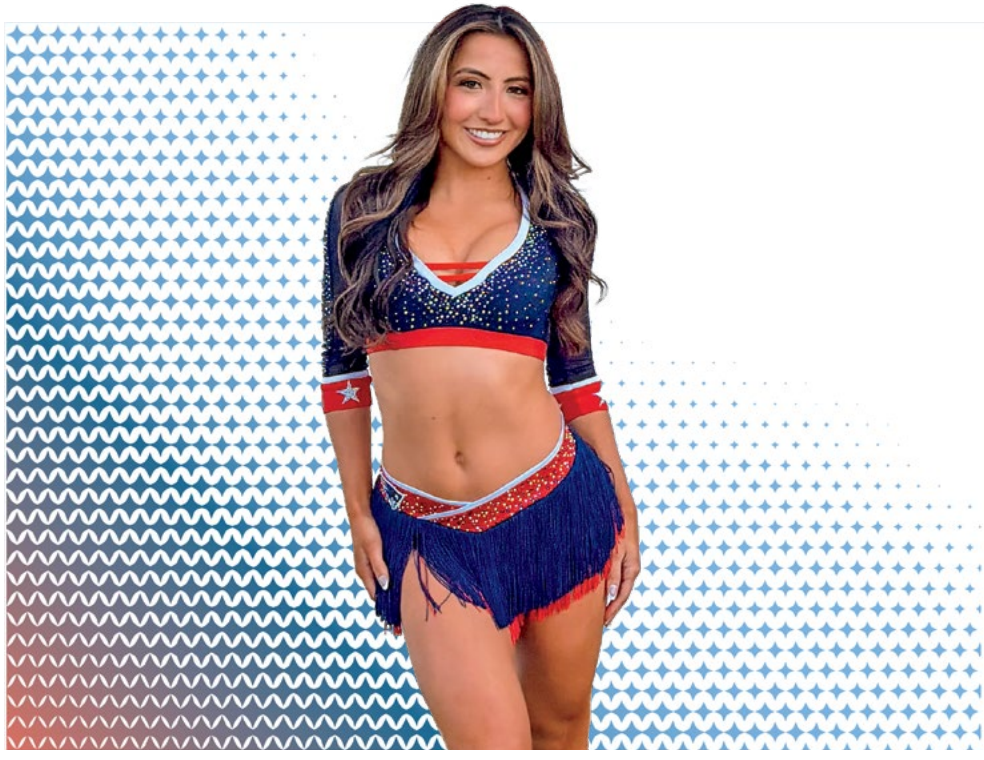
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NETWORK



Balancing Act

National Football League cheerleader Jade Bucci ’25CC leaps into her first season on the job

On a typical Monday evening, Jade Bucci ’25CC is clocking out of her day job in strategy and operations at a New York City tech start-up and catching the Amtrak for a four-hour ride to Boston. On Tuesdays, she works remotely from a friend’s house while reviewing choreography on her lunch break, and by around 6 p.m., she’s off to Gillette Stadium in Foxborough, Massachusetts, for practice. As a cheerleader for the New England Patriots, Bucci repeats a similar routine at least twice a week.

“I have a *Hannah Montana* life,” says Bucci, referring to the 2000s-era Disney Channel series in which Miley Cyrus plays a middle schooler who moonlights as a pop star. “I’m working one job during the majority of the day, and then when night comes around, I switch into my dance and cheer mode.”

Bucci joined the Patriots cheerleading squad in April, making the 2026–27 NFL season her first full term. As one of eight “rookies,” Bucci spent the past spring and summer training with the squad’s thirty other women and one man, learning dance routines and participating in promotional events. In June, Bucci broke in her pom-poms while performing at the FIFA World Cup games held at Gillette Stadium — “I never in a million years would have thought I would get to do that,” she says — and then traveled to Cancún, Mexico, for a photo shoot for the squad’s annual “Resort Cheer” calendar. In August, during the NFL preseason, she made her official game debut, and for the full season, September through January, Bucci will be performing at every home game (plus the Super Bowl, if the Patriots happen to advance).

In some ways, Bucci has prepared for this role for most of her life. Growing up in San Diego, she trained as a competitive dancer, studying contemporary dance, jazz, ballet, tap, hip-hop, and other styles. But she put that career on hold while at Columbia, where she majored in computer science and maintained a busy schedule of extracurricular activities, including serving as president of her sorority and participating in the Women’s Business Society. “I wanted to see what my life could look like without dance,” she says.

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY COLUMBIA MAGAZINE (JADE BUCCI)

After graduating in 2025, Bucci suddenly had more free time, and she started to dip her toes back into the dance world, casually dropping in at studios around the city. A dance teacher in New York recommended that she try out for the Patriots cheerleading squad in Boston, a city where Bucci has family and friends. She ended up taking prep classes and auditioning for the team. Bucci was particularly attracted to the flexibility of the job. "What's awesome about an NFL cheerleader role is that, while it's a part-time position, we do everything outside of traditional work hours," she says.

Unlike competitive cheerleading, which involves gravity-defying stunts (watch the 2000 film *Bring It On* or the Netflix documentary series *Cheer*, and you'll see high school and college troupes performing daredevil throws and acrobatic tumbling tricks), cheerleading for the NFL is an entertainment spectacle. "It's more like spirited dance," explains Bucci, whose various routines call for switches among blue, red, and white uniforms — Patriot colors. "Our style draws influences from jazz, hip-hop, and commercial dance, and it requires a lot of technique. We're doing pirouettes, we're doing leaps, and sometimes there are tumbling tricks if a dancer has that skill set."

When the cheerleaders aren't stomping, shimmying, and performing intricate steps on the field in perfect unison at home games, they act as community ambassadors for the Patriots franchise, which is owned by businessman and philanthropist Robert K. Kraft '63CC (Robert K. Kraft Field at Columbia's Baker Athletics Complex is named after him). "We do appearances at elementary schools, and we go to career fairs," says Bucci. Like her, many squad members lead busy lives outside of cheerleading — everything from corporate jobs to teaching careers. "We do so much more than meets the eye. There are people on the team who are pursuing postgraduate degrees or studying for the LSATs."

Patriots cheerleaders must reaudition every year, and they can stay on the squad for four years at most. When Bucci eventually hangs up her pom-poms, she plans to stay in the tech world and maybe go into project management. "I'm really fortunate that I can pursue that and pursue this — there isn't a lot of conflict with my time and energy," she says. "Whatever's meant to happen will happen, but I'm going to keep putting my best foot forward with cheer, and balance both paths as best I can."

— Julia Joy



SUSANNAH STEVENS OF LIFETIME LENS

Grace Pak decorates the America250 cake at the Library of Congress's James Madison Memorial Building. The cake was later displayed at the White House Visitor Center from July 7 to August 2.

Let Them Eat Cake

This past summer, when many Americans were winding down for a relaxing Fourth of July weekend, Grace Pak '16TC was adding the final touches to the official America250 birthday cake: an edible sculpture of national symbols — a sugar bald eagle and more — to be displayed in Washington, DC. Pak, who studied neuroscience at Columbia before founding cake-art studio Duchess of Cameron, is accustomed to building elaborate desserts for weddings and other events. But this was no ordinary assignment. Pak created the cake pro bono to honor the nation's anniversary in a bipartisan way — she recruited members of Congress from every US state and territory to help with the construction, and incorporated heritage ingredients such as whole-wheat flour from the gristmill at George Washington's Mount Vernon. "The politicians became instantly unguarded around the topic of cake," says Pak, who has appeared on the Food Network and the baking series *Is It Cake?* Pak's Instagram (@duchessofcameron) is full of photos of her whimsical creations, and you can also find her work — a confectionery Butler Library — on the cover of this issue.



ASK AN ALUM: HOW TO WATCH A MOVIE LIKE A CRITIC

Natalia Winkelman '15CC, a film critic and podcast writer and producer, pens several reviews per month for *The New York Times* and other outlets.

How did you become a film critic?
I was a film studies major as a Columbia undergrad. I knew that I didn't want to make movies, but I wanted to be involved in the industry in some capacity. During my senior year, I took an elective called Writing Film Criticism, with critic and adjunct professor Caryn James, and it dawned on me that this could be a real career path.

What goes into reviewing a film?
It depends on the movie — one day I'll be assigned a streaming documentary, another day an animated movie for kids. Typically a publicist will set up a press screening at a local theater for journalists, or sometimes even just for me. With some films, I'll go in blind, but other films call for having more context about a director and their filmography in advance. And if you're reviewing something like the latest *Wuthering Heights* adaptation, I think it's crucial to have an understanding of how that novel has been adapted in the past.

The golden rule of film criticism is that you have to evaluate a work on its own terms. You're not asking a Netflix rom-com to be *Casablanca*. You identify what the work is trying to achieve, and you evaluate how well it achieves that goal. Of course, critics break this rule all the time: If a work is clearly setting out to be, say, sexist or abrasive and it's successful at that, you don't have to give it a positive review.

A film review should ideally stand on its own as a work of writing — I enjoy reading reviews by my favorite critics even if I haven't seen the movie in question. Some people see criticism as a grumpy job occupied by people who sit around wagging their fingers and commenting on others' art without trying to make something themselves, but I prefer to think of criticism as an act of creation rather than reaction.

Is it harder to write a good review or a bad review?
If I feel strongly about a movie, whether in a positive way or in a negative way, it's easier to write about it. The hardest reviews to write are the middling ones, when I don't have a strong opinion one way or another.

Can you name any movies that you consider close to perfect?
For me, a "perfect" film feels exciting and fresh and will stand the test of time.



Blue Heron

One of my favorites of the year so far is Sophy Romvari's *Blue Heron*, a semi-autobiographical film that looks back on painful memories from the director's childhood. It's a smaller production and Romvari's first feature. There's also a German comedy from 2016 called *Toni Erdmann* that's one of my go-to favorites.

You're also a podcast writer. Tell us about that work.
I was a producer and writer for HBO's *The White Lotus* companion podcast for the show's third season, and more recently, I've been working with Turner Classic Movies as a writer on *The Plot Thickens*, hosted by Ben Mankiewicz '92JRN. My second season with that podcast focused on the making of the 1963 epic *Cleopatra*, which was directed by Ben's great-uncle Joseph Mankiewicz '28CC. There was a mountain of archival tapes and interviews that I had to sift through to find quotes and clips, but it was one of my favorite projects.

Many media outlets have cut back on arts criticism in recent years. Why is it important to keep this type of film coverage alive?
For one thing, there's utility in criticism — it helps audiences find the gems. In a world where we're inundated with streaming options, there's less and less curation. Analysis and criticism help us feel more informed and discerning, whether in art, culture, or politics. We're all smarter if we operate with a critical mindset.

There's the phrase "everybody's a critic," which I think is largely true and a good thing. The app Letterboxd lets you write your own reviews and share what you're watching. Its popularity shows that people have an appetite to be critics themselves, even informally. You can consume movies for entertainment or as a diversion from "real life," and that's fine, but it's exciting that so many people care deeply about film and want to discuss it in a critical way.

— *Julia Joy*

CENTER: JANUS FILMS

Spacesuits for Earthly Ills

Lawrence Kuznetz ’64SEAS, ’65SEAS wants to dress us for the next pandemic

You can’t miss the threads running through the story of spacesuit designer Lawrence Kuznetz ’64SEAS ’65SEAS. He was a boy on Long Island when he saw *War of the Worlds* (1953), in which Martian invaders, bent on colonizing Earth, wreak destruction on human civilization. “That movie scared the bejesus out of me,” Kuznetz says.

A few years later, when his father’s Garment District belt-and-button factory was threatened by the invasion of the beltless, buttonless chemise, Kuznetz’s mother opened a nursery school. A parent of one of the students was science-fiction writer and aviation whiz Martin Caidin, and the teenage Kuznetz, at his mother’s urging, visited Caidin, who was helping NASA promote the Project Mercury launches. In his office, Caidin had models of Russian launch vehicles, and he filled Kuznetz’s head with dreams of a space-based career.

“Between the movie and Caidin,” says Kuznetz, “the die was cast.”

In graduate school for bioengineering, Kuznetz was drawn to the challenges of making spacesuits, and in the lead-up to the Apollo 11 moon mission in July 1969, he joined NASA. On the big day, he was at a Mission Control console in Houston, monitoring the life-support systems in the astronauts’ spacesuits as they stepped from their module into the scant lunar atmosphere.

Days later, the astronauts returned to Earth in the command module, for which Kuznetz had designed the ventilation system’s filter to trap microbes. This was in accordance with Article IX of the 1967 UN Outer Space Treaty, which requires space-faring nations to take measures to prevent pathogens from leaving and entering Earth. But when the capsule splashed down in the Pacific, Navy SEALs opened the hatch, releasing astronauts Armstrong, Aldrin, and Collins, and whatever else might have been in there. The team wiped down the spacesuits — and tossed the rags into the ocean.



Kuznetz (left) and his mobile quarantine suit.

“NASA pooh-poohed the idea of pathogens on the moon,” Kuznetz says. “But we’d never been to the moon, never sampled anything. We had no idea what the hell was there.”

It’s true, Kuznetz says, that the six moon missions went where there was no ice, which could harbor pathogens, but NASA’s current Artemis program, which aims to establish a base on the moon, “will go to places in permanently shadowed craters, where there’s likely to be embedded ice that could have come from anywhere. It could be anything.”

After the Apollo program ended in 1972, Kuznetz went to work on the Space Shuttle program, and in 1981, the year NASA’s first reusable spacecraft, *Columbia*, lifted off, he went on *The Tonight Show* and coolly outfitted Johnny Carson in the latest protective space couture. He grieved, like everyone at NASA, after the *Challenger* disaster in 1986. And when, in 1989, President George H. W. Bush called for a human mission to Mars, Kuznetz’s mind took flight. “Mars is a different world,” he says. “There could be pathogens there. Chances are that life could have taken hold and that there are microbes beneath the surface.”

Energized, Kuznetz did a postdoc at NASA’s Ames Research Center, in the Bay Area, publishing a paper on Mars spacesuits, and in 2012 he began teaching at UC Berkeley, where his first class was called Spacesuits for Mars. “I’ve never been adept at getting grants or funding,” he says, “so all this was on paper. And that’s how it kept on going — until the pandemic.”

By then, Kuznetz was working with spacesuit builder Cameron Smith, a professor at Portland State University. The system Kuznetz and Smith had devised for Mars involved Super HEPA filters, which can stop particles as small as 0.1 micron (smaller than the influenza virus). As COVID-19 swept the world, killing millions, Kuznetz had a flash: A COVID particle was bigger than 0.1 micron, which meant that his filtration concept could be worked into PPE — personal protective equipment. He and Smith quickly made a prototype.

The garment, intended for the general public, is white and weighs less than a pound. It is reusable and steriliz-

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY COLUMBIA MAGAZINE (COURTESY OF LAWRENCE KUZNETZ)

able — and, in Kuznetz's vision, affordable, with a target price of $200. "I call it a 'mobile quarantine suit' because you can go anywhere with it." Kuznetz believes that the further we get from the pandemic, the more people forget how difficult the isolation was. If everyone had a suit on hand, he says, there would be no need, in an outbreak, for 2020-style mass confinement.

Now he hopes to attract investors to get the venture off the ground. That's the hardest part. He recalls working summers for his father as a teenager, pushing dress racks on Seventh Avenue, and his father telling him, "Whatever you do, don't ever get involved in the schmatte business." So much for that.

Yet it's the *War of the Worlds* (spoiler alert) that really sews things up. The main character is Clayton Forrester, a scientist at the fictional university Pacific Tech in Northern California, who leads the effort to understand Martian technology and biology. The merciless extraterrestrials prove impervious to human weapons, and young Kuznetz, popcorn in hand, was transported when the Martians were finally stopped — not by bombs, but by Earthly bacteria, for which they had no protection.

—Paul Hond

NEWSMAKERS

● Several alumni journalists received Pulitzer Prizes this year: Reuters reporter **Jeff Horwitz '14JRN** was awarded in the beat reporting category for exposing fraudulent advertising on Meta, and **Mike Spector '06JRN**, also of Reuters, won for national reporting for his team's coverage of the Trump administration's abuse of executive powers to prosecute enemies. Bloomberg investigative journalist **Natalie Obiko Pearson '09JRN** shared the award for illustrated reporting and commentary for a graphic-novel-style article on online scams in India.



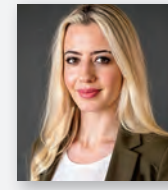
● Alumni theater professionals were involved in two of the most-awarded productions at this year's Tonys. *Schmigadoon!*, which featured **Megan O'Keefe '17BUS, '17LAW**, **David Manella '17LAW, '18SOA**, **Alex Donnelly '14CC**, and **Adam Miller '04SOA** on the producing team, won Best Musical. *Ragtime*, written by **Terrence McNally '60CC** and produced by **Lamar Richardson '15CC**, won for Best Revival of a Musical.

● **Lin King '22SOA** won the 2026 International Booker Prize for her English translation of *Taiwan Travelogue*, a 2020 novel by Yáng Shuang-zi originally published in Mandarin.

● *Trafficked with Mariana van Zeller*, a National Geographic series investigating criminal networks, hosted and executive produced by **Mariana van Zeller '02JRN**, won seven News and Documentary Emmy awards for its fifth season, which focuses on issues such as illegal street racing and the shark-fin black market.

● **Huma Nayab '25CC** received a $10,000 grant from Middlebury College's Projects for Peace to launch SwipeSafe, a virtual training and support network for women navigating online dating in Pakistan.

● Art historian **Connie Choi '19GSAS** was named chief curator and inaugural vice president for art and education at the Barnes Foundation, a Philadelphia museum home to approximately four thousand artworks and artifacts.



● **Sarah Asali '23PH**, a health-care administrator who oversees revenue-cycle management at Richmond University Medical Center, made the Arab America Foundation "30 Under 30" list for 2026.

● Five alumni received 2026 Guggenheim fellowships to pursue independent creative projects: visual artists **Allison Janae Hamilton '10GSAS, '17SOA**, **Michael Ross '81SOA**, and **Tenzin Phuntsog '06SOA**, and writers **James Marcus '84SOA** and **William Deresiewicz '85CC, '87JRN, '98GSAS**.

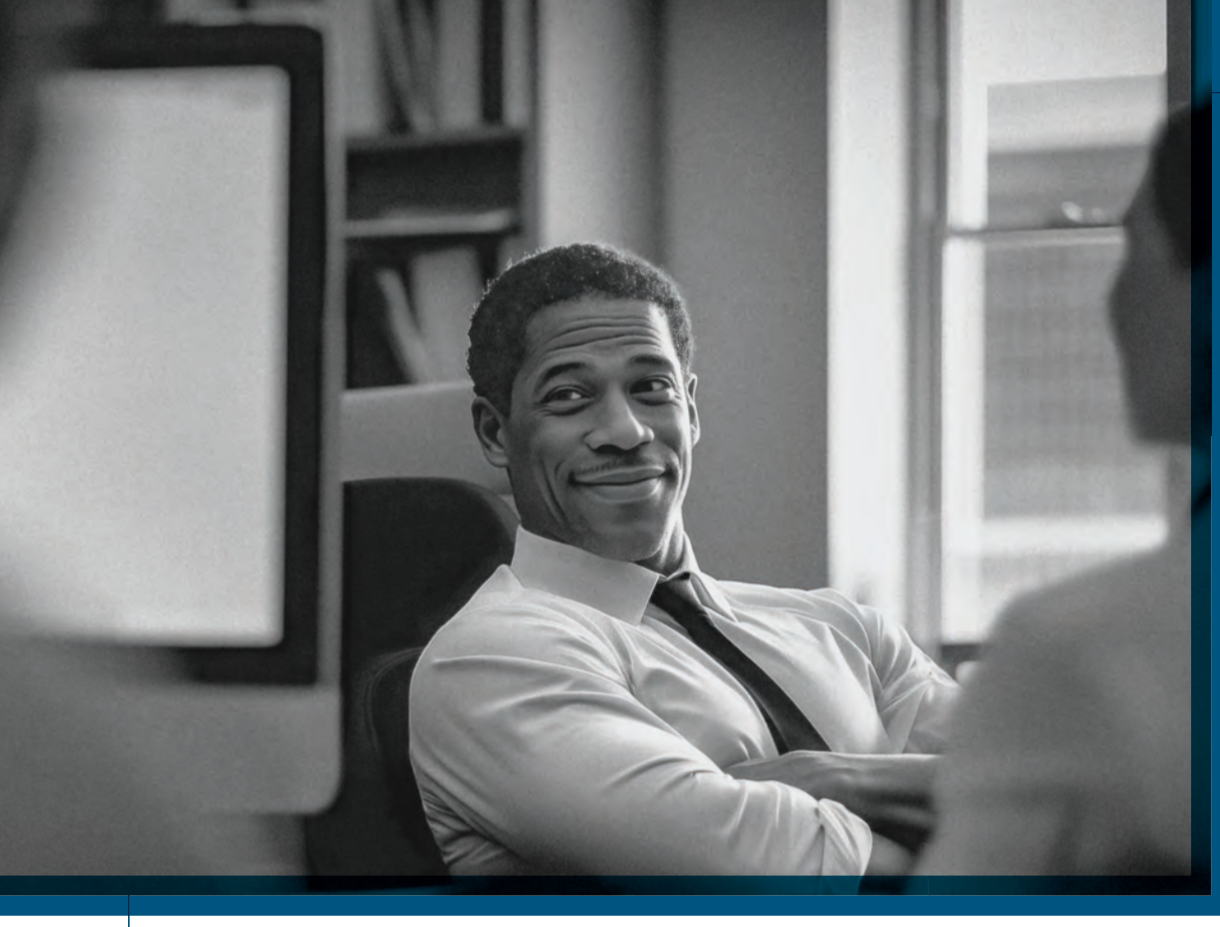
● **Lisa Kersavage '98GSAPP**, executive director of the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, was appointed chair of the agency by Mayor Zohran Mamdani in the spring.



● A permanent mural honoring suffragist **Mabel Ping-Hua Lee 1917BC, 1918TC, 1921GSAS** was unveiled in Washington, DC's Chinatown in July.

● Architects **Pavitra Nayak '24GSAPP**, **E. J. Shin '24GSAPP, '25SEAS**, and **Mikhail Kossir '25GSAPP**, recipients of Columbia's 2024 Percival and Naomi Goodman Fellowship for research in natural building materials, presented their resulting project, a pavilion made of rice-husk waste, at India's Sinhgad College of Architecture.

CENTER: MATTHEW MURPHY AND EVAN ZIMMERMAN; BOTTOM: BARNARD COLLEGE



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BULLETIN



SIPA Launches Undergraduate Major in Global Affairs and Public Policy

Columbia's School of International and Public Affairs (SIPA) recently announced the creation of an undergraduate major in global affairs and public policy, an interdisciplinary program that will be open to students starting in the 2026–27 academic year.

For eighty years, SIPA has trained diplomats, policymakers, and public servants at the graduate level, producing alumni who run foreign ministries, international institutions, and government agencies worldwide. This new major brings that tradition to undergraduate education at Columbia for the first time, offering a course of study taught by the same scholars and experienced practitioners who lead SIPA's graduate programs.

"Building on the breadth and depth of Columbia's Core Curriculum and excellence across the arts and sciences, the major provides Columbia College and Columbia General Studies students with the knowledge, analytical tools, and practical skills to enable them to address complex policy challenges at every level, from their own communities to the global stage," says SIPA dean Keren Yarhi-Milo '03GS.

The 32.5-credit major involves courses in political science, economics, history, ethics, data science, and regional studies. Students will learn how different political systems, economic frameworks, historical contexts, and leadership choices shape policymaking at the local, national, and international levels. A "policy practicum" will give students the opportunity to work directly with external clients, applying their classroom learning to real-world situations. After graduating, those interested in pursuing a master's degree in international affairs or public administration at Columbia will be able to do so in one year instead of the customary two.

The program launches at a moment when SIPA is investing significant resources in instructional capacity and research initiatives that tackle current foreign-policy concerns. In May, the school's Institute of Global Politics (IGP) announced a task force with Rice University focused on assessing the strategic rationale for providing US assistance overseas. "Recent events remind us that meeting international challenges requires using diplomacy and development alongside defense, and to do that means modernizing and strengthening all three," says Hillary Rodham Clinton '22HON, cofounder and chair of IGP's Faculty Advisory Board.

ABIGAIL BLACK ELBAUM NAMED CO-CHAIR OF TRUSTEES

Abigail Black Elbaum '92CC, '94BUS was recently elected co-chair of the Columbia University Board of Trustees.

Elbaum succeeds David Greenwald '83LAW, who is stepping down after three years of leading the board. Jeh Johnson '82LAW, who stepped in as co-chair in May 2025, will continue in the role through the end of 2026.

Elbaum is co-founder and principal of Ogden CAP Properties, a real-estate investment and development firm. She has been a trustee since 2016. She currently serves on the Executive, Trusteeship, and Health Sciences committees and is chair of the Physical Assets Committee. Throughout her tenure, she has



played a central role in the board's work across governance, strategic planning, and the medical center, including serving on the Audit and Academic Affairs committees.

Elbaum has also served in the Columbia College Alumni Association and on the College's Board of Visitors, and, in 2002, she received the Columbia College Young Alumni Achievement Award. Additionally, she is the former chair of the Alumni Trustee Nominating Committee, and, in 2015, received the John Jay Award at Columbia College for distinguished professional achievement.

RIGHT: SIRIN SAMMAN



MICHAEL ANDREASEN NAMED EVP FOR DEVELOPMENT AND ALUMNI RELATIONS

Michael Andreasen, an accomplished academic administrator with three decades of experience in university fundraising, has been appointed Columbia University's executive vice president for university development and alumni relations. In this role, he oversees a department that leads a wide range of activities aimed at engaging alumni in the life of the University and raising philanthropic support to advance Columbia's teaching, research, and service mission.

Andreasen comes to Columbia from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where he was the vice chancellor for development. In that position, he built a collaborative fundraising ecosystem that includes twenty-six independent fundraising units, seventeen associated fundraising foundations, and numerous advisory boards. He also guided the successful One Carolina fundraising effort, with donations totaling $606 million in the last fiscal year, the second-highest total in the university's history.

Prior to leading fundraising at UNC-Chapel Hill, Andreasen served as senior vice president for university advancement at the University of Oregon, where he oversaw the university offices dedicated to development; state, community, and federal affairs; advancement operations; stewardship; and public events and alumni relations. He also executed a $3 billion campaign and was instrumental in securing some of the largest donations ever to a public flagship university.

Before Oregon, Andreasen was in fundraising leadership roles at the University of Michigan; the University of California, Santa Barbara; and the American Film Institute. Andreasen began his career as director of the annual fund for the University of California, Irvine, where he also earned a bachelor of arts in political science.

Andreasen's appointment follows a nationwide search.

Said President Jennifer L. Mnookin in announcing his hire: "From the beginning Mike stood out for his deep understanding of large and complex institutions of higher education, his demonstrated ability to ensure the efficient and effective use of university resources to achieve institutional fundraising goals, his ability to think creatively about transformative philanthropic opportunities, his intellectual curiosity and commitment to excellence, and his excitement about the potential that lies in Columbia's next chapter."



LIONS WIN IVY LEAGUE GOLF CHAMPIONSHIP

This past spring, the Columbia women's golf team swung its way to victory as Ivy League champions for the first time since 2007.

Despite cold, rainy weather at the Baltusrol Golf Club in New Jersey, the Lions achieved a tournament score of thirty-six over par, beating Harvard with the overall fewest swings per hole. Sophomores Sarah Shao and Christine Chang carried the team to a seven-shot lead, with Shao earning an impressive three over in the final round. Chang, who has previously broken several Columbia records, hit five birdies to score three under — the best single round for any competitor at the 2026 championship.

GITA MANAKTALA TO LEAD CU PRESS



Gita Manaktala, the former head of MIT Press, has been named executive director of Columbia University Press.

Manaktala spent more than three decades at MIT Press, where she expanded its trade publishing program and pioneered innovative approaches to digital publishing and open access. Her hire follows a nationwide search led by Sarah Cole, dean of the School of the Arts, and Ann Thornton, vice provost and University librarian.

Founded in 1893, CU Press is one of the nation's oldest and most respected university presses. It publishes some 190 books annually and maintains a backlist of more than 5,500 active titles on a range of subjects, including climate science, critical theory, East Asian studies, film, history, politics, literature, sociology, social work, and business.



AVERY ACQUIRES ADDITIONAL CHIP LORD ARCHIVES

Columbia's Avery Architectural & Fine Arts Library recently acquired the personal papers of Chip Lord, an architect and multimedia artist best known for his work with the San Francisco avant-garde collective Ant Farm.

Founded in 1968 by Lord and Doug Michels, Ant Farm specialized in provocative installations and constructions inspired by mass media and consumer culture, including *Cadillac Ranch*, a row of half-buried cars outside Amarillo, Texas (pictured above), and *House of the Century*, a futuristic home south of Houston that resembles a spaceship. The duo disbanded in 1978 after a fire destroyed their studio, but Lord continued to work on a solo basis and eventually joined the faculty of University of California, Santa Cruz.

Columbia's new acquisition adds to the existing Lord archives at Avery Library, which deal specifically with the artist's Ant Farm oeuvre. Now visitors interested in Lord's work will have expanded access to his ideas and creative process.

TOP: COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY ATHLETICS / THE IVY LEAGUE; BOTTOM LEFT: GRETCHEN ERTL; BOTTOM RIGHT: WYATT MCSPADDEN

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—William "Travis" Brown '67CC
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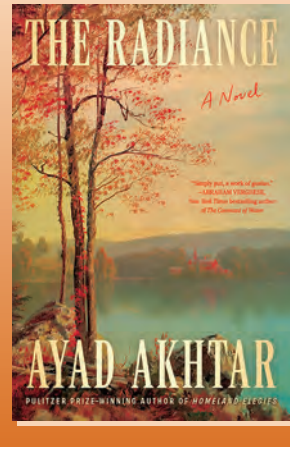
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BOOKS



The Radiance

By Ayad Akhtar '02SOA (Summit Books)

The narrator and protagonist of *The Radiance* is a man with a *lot* on his mind: science, psychology, sociology, philosophy Eastern and Western, culture high and low — not to mention the wackier-than-your-wildest-dreams state of modern-day academia. And that mind, in the aftermath of a devastating injury, is behaving erratically. This condition of "altered perception," which doctors cannot explain, permeates everything that happens in *The Radiance* and is a source of both alarm and a euphoric sense of wonder (hence the book's title). Characteristically, author Ayad Akhtar '02SOA probes these mysterious, even mystical, neurological effects — which, along with weird bouts of bodily dissociation, produce vividly prescient dreams and visions that, in the hands of a lesser writer, might come off as intolerably trippy or woo-woo — with a clear-eyed intellectual rigor and passion for learning that will be familiar to readers of his 2020 tour de force, *Homeland Elegies*.

And like that earlier novel, *The Radiance* revolves around narrator Ayad, a successful writer (a clear alter ego for Akhtar, a much-awarded playwright and novelist) who is a "non-Muslim Muslim-American who could not seem to escape the Islam that played no meaningful role in his life." Ayad has moved, early in the COVID-19 pandemic, from New York City to a deeply polarized, almost entirely white community in New York State's Hudson Valley. From his rental house on the edge of town, Ayad soon gets entwined in a plot woven from four separate, only mildly overlapping, threads: his work with a local police detective to track down the hit-and-run driver who left Ayad for dead on a deserted road; his cousin's revelation of shocking family secrets; his treatment by a brilliant psychiatrist to get to the bottom of his bizarre symptoms; and his involvement with a local literature professor, whose relationship with an unstable student precipitates a huge scandal.

Akhtar keeps all these balls in the air throughout the novel, but the heart of the story is Ayad's infatuation (rapturous but nonsexual, given the loss of libido that accompanies his injuries) with Lucie Neraponte, the aforementioned professor at the area's highly progressive liberal arts college. Lucie's chief claim to literary fame rests on a widely anthologized essay that details her passionate affair, back in 1990, when she was a junior at the University of Chicago, with her married fifty-two-year-old professor — a coupling that is anathema to the current college generation, which, as Lucie puts it, "flatten[s] the world into abusers and their victims." Ayad is fascinated by Lucie's backstory, and awed by her unorthodox intellect and fluency on topics as disparate as Tibetan monks and Dostoyevsky's descriptions in *The Idiot* of epilepsy (an ailment that Lucie believes offers a parallel to the neurological transformations Ayad is experiencing).

The almost scholarly nature of their relationship, which ends after scandal erupts, reflects another characteristic of Akhtar's work, whether drama or prose: his propensity for taking on big, important, even third-rail topics. This is a writer in love with ideas (*not* polemics), and *The Radiance* is full to bursting with them. Another charming hallmark of Akhtar's digressive, overtly intellectual style is his fondness for half burying within a footnote a provocative concept the main text can't quite accommodate — for example, one character's almost offhand conflation of knowledge and sex as equal sources of pleasure.

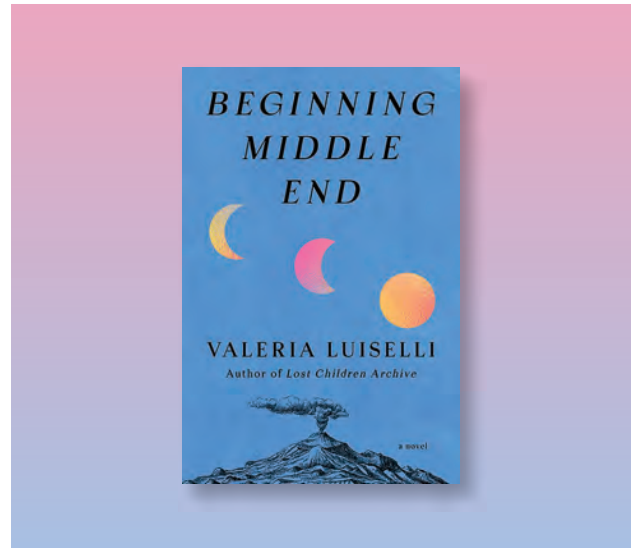
If all of the above makes *The Radiance* sound impossibly high-minded or even ponderous, do not fear. Yes, this book serves readers a dissertation's worth of food for thought, but ultimately its power derives from that seemingly tossed-off notion of knowledge as pleasure: Akhtar has written a stunning novel of ideas that is simultaneously a pure delight to read. — *Lorraine Glennon*

Beginning Middle End

By Valeria Luiselli '15GSAS (Alfred A. Knopf)

"All I had to do, or so I thought, was to answer a simple question: How do I reinvent it, the story, our lives?" Valeria Luiselli '15GSAS writes at the outset of her remarkable fourth novel, *Beginning Middle End*. But in life and in writing, beginning again is never simple, especially when one feels "on the edge of something ineffable."

The novel's unnamed narrator, an author who shares biographical details with Luiselli — both were born in Mexico, live in New York City, and write about the US–Mexico borderlands — has recently divorced the stepfather of her precocious twelve-year-old daughter, separating the only family unit the child has ever known. Her daughter, also unnamed, is beginning to keep secrets and plot her own path, complicating the narrator's search for a new start for them. Another preoccupation: The narrator's strident, independent mother appears to be developing dementia, circling an ending rather than a new beginning. "Mother on my shoulders, daughter by my side — how do I get us where we all need to be?" the narrator wonders.



Atop this poignant intergenerational challenge, Luiselli layers ancient and natural history that highlights the mutability of the world and the smallness of human life within it. At the outset of *Beginning Middle End*, the narrator and her daughter settle for the summer in Catania, Sicily, which seems an auspicious place to start over, not just for its mythological and philosophical significance but also for reasons of personal inheritance. The narrator's maternal grandmother was born in Philosophiana, a tiny town in the center of the island that once served as a way station for travelers between coasts. In Catania, mother and daughter scrutinize texts that will be all too familiar to alumni of the Core Curriculum, including *The Aeneid* and *The Odyssey*, finding symbolic resonance in references to Sicily and the nearby islands where the Greeks believed the god Aeolus housed all the world's winds. Indeed, Luiselli structures the novel's major sections around four of those winds: the Levante, the Ponente, the Scirocco, and the Mistral, which whip smoke and ash from wildfires and the exploding Mount Etna across the island, complicating the characters' summer plans.

What links all the layers — and ingeniously drives the plot of *Beginning Middle End* — is an object passed down through four generations of women in the narrator's family: an ancient Roman mosaic fragment depicting Proteus, the "elusive, ever-shifting" sea god who can see past, present, and future "in complete clarity" and whose name, Ovid writes in *Metamorphoses*, means "origin." The narrator's grandmother discovered the Proteus mosaic in the 1920s, when she was twenty-one, while laboring on an archaeological dig north of Philosophiana that uncovered the Villa Romana del Casale, a palace constructed in the fourth century AD. She took the mosaic with her when she boarded a ship in the port of Catania, in search of a route out of the poverty that defined her life. She settled in Mexico and never returned to the place of her birth, passing down the mosaic when she descended into dementia.

Now the narrator's mother, in a similar position, has passed the mosaic on. The daughter, though, becomes fixated on returning the Proteus to Villa Casale, a fantasy of restoration that she hopes will realign their family and that sets the pair on a road trip. Through the quest, Luiselli — a 2019 MacArthur "genius grant" winner, whose previous books *Lost Children Archive* and *Tell Me How It Ends* focused on migration and identity — takes opportunities to meditate on the difficult questions of ownership, provenance, and belonging in a world marked by plunder and perpetual displacement.

As the narrator struggles against these questions and the sense that "maybe all that there is, is the middle, bending, sinuous, constantly flowing back into itself," her daughter takes over, writing to her grandmother and imagining an ending to the story — which is also a beginning full of possibility for their family. It makes for a poetic exploration of mothers and daughters, one that is set against "the much greater epic of the natural world."

— Kristen Martin '16SOA

READING LIST

New and noteworthy releases

SWITZY

By Emma Cline '13SOA

This is the last trip of David Hastings's life — a goodbye tour of Europe by private plane that the retired executive's addled mind struggles to understand. His final stop, in more ways than one, is Zurich, where Hastings is scheduled to die by assisted suicide before he descends completely into dementia. Cline's third novel is a wild thematic departure from *The Girls* (her splashy debut about a Manson-style cult) and *The Guest* (about a grifter working her way through the Hamptons). But Cline treats this weighty topic with the same deftness, confidence, and even humor as her earlier works.

A WASHINGTON IRVING SKETCH BOOK

By Phillip Lopate '64CC

It's easy to equate Washington Irving with the Hudson Valley — it's there that his famed Headless Horseman roamed in "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" and there that the titular Rip Van Winkle took his very long nap. But, argues essayist, critic, and longtime Columbia writing professor Phillip Lopate, there's far more to Irving than his two most famous tales. In his latest book, Lopate makes an engaging case for a deep dive into Irving's surprisingly global oeuvre, works that were inspired by his seventeen years abroad, as well as travels across the then-nascent United States. Arguably America's first literary celebrity, Irving is worthy of a second look, especially with a guide as charming and knowledgeable as Lopate.

WE NEVER CALLED IT FRISCO

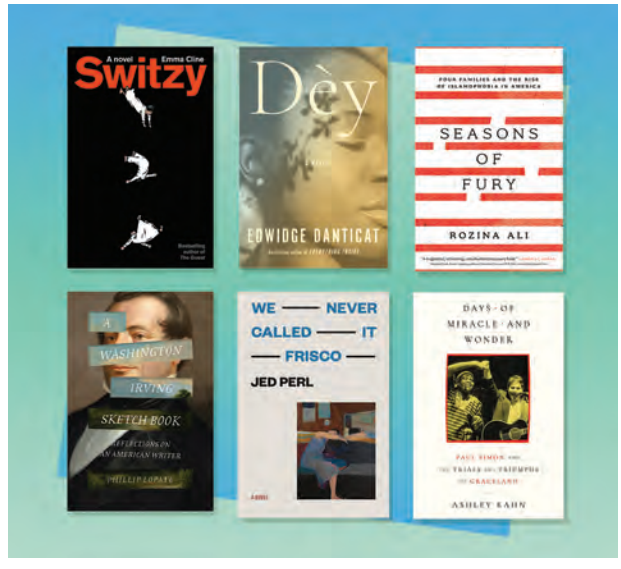
By Jed Perl '72CC

When the legendary San Francisco art critic Marcia Lang collapses and dies, she leaves behind the manuscript for an epic unfinished memoir, a "coffee-table book for intelligentsia." Her lover Burt, himself a poet and publisher, is tasked with completing the project, and their contrasting voices provide a vibrant portrait of the city's postwar bohemian scene. Perl has had a storied career in criticism (including a twenty-year stint as art critic of *The New Republic*), and this is his first novel — a fun, intellectually engaging pivot.

SEASONS OF FURY

By Rozina Ali '09SIPA

For many Muslim American families, the early aughts ushered in an unprecedented period of fear and anxiety, as post-9/11 Islamophobia gripped the nation. But, argues *New York Times* journalist Rozina Ali in her new book, anti-Islam sentiment began in this country long before 2001. In a true feat of reporting, Ali follows four multigenerational Muslim families, each with roots in this country that date back more than a century, and tracks the hardships and bigotry they have long faced as they pursued, like so many others, the American dream.



DAYS OF MIRACLE AND WONDER

By Ashley Kahn '83CC

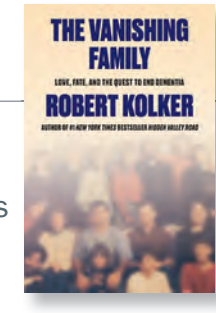
Few albums are as iconic as Paul Simon's *Graceland*, which sold sixteen million copies and ushered the new genre of "world music" into the spotlight in the 1980s. In his latest book, Grammy-winning music historian, journalist, and producer Ashley Kahn (who once DJed on Columbia's WKCR as the Cincinnati Kid) tells the incredible story of how the album came to fruition, from the moment a bootleg cassette of South African street music took hold of Simon to the win for Album of the Year at the 1986 Grammys.

DÈY

By Edwidge Danticat '90BC

It's an ordinary day in Miami, until suddenly it isn't. Magnolia, a real estate agent, decides to make an impromptu stop at a shopping mall to buy a birthday present for her daughter. She's there when shots ring out in the food court, killing three. Magnolia is safe, but after the incident, she unravels, silently obsessing about the victims while telling none of her loved ones that she had been there at all. Meanwhile, her parents arrive from Haiti, fleeing violence in their own community. But what refuge will they find in Miami, in America as a whole? In Haitian Creole, *dèy* is a word for mourning, and it's a fitting title for this powerful novel, the first in more than a decade from beloved author and Columbia professor Edwidge Danticat. But while the book is in many ways an exploration of grief, it also has tremendous warmth, and even hope.

Race for the Cure



In *The Vanishing Family*, journalist Robert Kolker '91CC follows three generations of a family plagued by frontotemporal dementia, or FTD, a rare disease that could give us insight into preventing and treating dementia as a whole.



JEFF ZORABEDIAN

Columbia Magazine: This book is in many ways a natural follow-up to your best-selling *Hidden Valley Road*, about a family of twelve siblings, half of whom develop schizophrenia. How did this new book come to be?
Robert Kolker: This family actually found me, and I was hesitant at first. I had spent several years learning about schizophrenia, whose genetic underpinnings are still largely unknown. But I learned that their variety of dementia, FTD, was caused by one particular genetic mutation. They knew what the mutation was and could actually look at it. That raised a number of questions that I was excited to explore, and made it a very different kind of book than *Hidden Valley Road*.

CM: Unlike Alzheimer's and other forms of dementia, FTD strikes during midlife and initially impacts self-regulation, impulse control, and social behavior rather than memory and cognition. Why is that important?
RK: Neuroscientists are fascinated by FTD for exactly this reason — it's where the study of the physical brain crosses over into fields like psychiatry. FTD is misdiagnosed all the time, often mistaken for things like depression and addiction; the personality changes are vivid. Being able to identify and study FTD patients has helped scientists establish links between what's going on in the brain and certain changes in human behavior — for example, the role that the frontal lobe plays in impulse and reward systems. And even as it looks very different from Alzheimer's and strikes much sooner, it actually might be a key to understanding Alzheimer's better.

CM: What is that key?
RK: When we look inside the brain of a deceased Alzheimer's patient, we see a lot of different things going on, and after a hundred years of study we're still not sure what's causing what and why. The two major proteins that seem to be a part of Alzheimer's are the beta amyloid and the tau. Many varieties of FTD, we now know, are caused by a tau mutation. When you look at this family's mutation under a microscope, it looks a lot like an Alzheimer's mutation. If scientists can come up with a successful treatment for this family, there's no reason that it couldn't be tested on people with Alzheimer's to see if it helps them as well. This is frequently the way that researchers treat complex diseases: One disease can be a sort of test kitchen for another.

CM: FTD is caused by an inherited genetic mutation. There is a test for it, and much of the book focuses on the heart-wrenching decisions that this family has to make around that test. After spending time with them, how did your feelings about this kind of genetic crystal ball change?
RK: I'm a reporter, so at first I thought that I would want all the information I could get. But walking a mile in their shoes, I could understand the complexities. Some of the latest generation is finding out in their twenties that their lives will change drastically. It impacts their ambition, their ability to dream about the future. People realize that their careers might be destroyed if this information comes out. And then there are people who have watched a parent go through it, and they want a moment's grace — a period of time when they can live their life, before they know what will happen to them. So actually there are a lot of reasons not to look into the crystal ball. More than the science, that's what's at the heart of the book — it's an emotional story of a family trying to understand and negotiate these changes among the people they love.

CM: It's devastating to read about a family that has been dealt such a difficult hand. How close are we to a cure?
RK: We're on the cusp of a genetic editing revolution, and the future looks promising in a lot of ways. But the cures themselves are proving more arduous than we imagined. It's not going to be just a quick injection and then watching the genes change. It's going to be a brutal period of experimentation, and will take a tremendous amount of money, before we come up with the right ways to do it. But I have a lot of hope. For this family, this disease is something that keeps happening generation to generation, and it has been repeatedly misdiagnosed and mistreated and misunderstood. Now we finally know what it is. And hopefully we won't lose another generation.

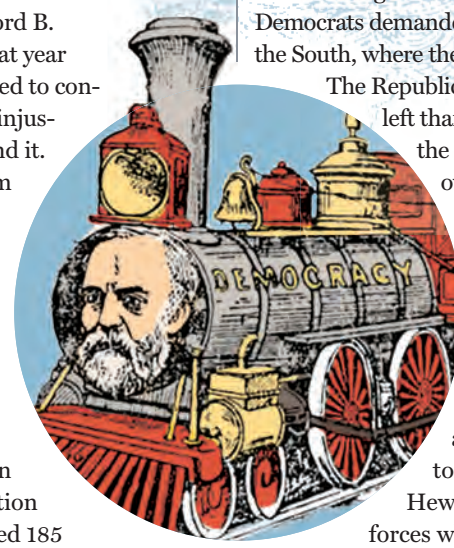
— Rebecca Shapiro

Electoral Dysfunction

Abram Hewitt and the contested election of 1876

He was an industrialist, a congressman, an anti-corruption crusader, the mayor of New York, a cofounder of the Cooper Union (named for his father-in-law, Peter Cooper), and a Columbia trustee. But for Abram Stevens Hewitt 1842CC, no role in public life was more pivotal than the one he played during the disputed presidential election held 150 years ago, a decade after the Civil War — a dispute so bitter that many people, including Hewitt, feared it would reignite the conflict.

Hewitt, who had made his name fighting the graft of New York Democratic machine boss William Tweed, was chairman of the Democratic National Committee and campaign manager for New York governor Samuel J. Tilden, the 1876 Democratic nominee for president. Tilden's opponent was the Republican Rutherford B. Hayes, governor of Ohio. A big issue that year was Reconstruction. Republicans wanted to continue this postwar effort to redress the injustices of slavery; Democrats sought to end it. Though Tilden ran chiefly on a platform of civil-service reform and lower taxes, Republicans charged that as president, he would empty the treasury to repay white property owners in the former Confederacy for their losses.



Days before the election, Hewitt told Tilden to issue a letter promising that, if elected, he would *not* pay dispossessed white Southerners. Tilden reluctantly yielded. By the end of Election Day, Tilden had won 184 of the required 185 electoral votes, to Hayes's 165.

But in Florida, Louisiana, and South Carolina — the only Southern states with Republican-led, pro-Reconstruction governments — as well as in Oregon, the electoral votes were in dispute. Twenty votes were at stake, and Hayes needed all of them. Both sides claimed fraud, and Republicans accused Democrats of suppressing the Black vote (gained with the Fifteenth Amendment in 1870) through intimidation.

To break the stalemate, Congress convened a bipartisan electoral commission in January 1877, consisting of five senators, five congressmen, and four Supreme Court justices, evenly divided between parties. A fifth justice was needed to avert a tie, and the four justices chose Joseph P. Bradley, a Republican known for his nonpartisanship. Hewitt accepted Bradley — a move that Tilden considered "surrender," leading him to accuse Hewitt, who had his own political ambitions, of trying to sink his candidacy. And just as Tilden had feared, the commission voted along party lines, 8–7, giving all twenty outstanding electoral votes to the Republican Hayes.

Democrats were outraged, and threatened to filibuster the electoral vote count. With partisans screaming for blood, the two parties met in February in Washington to cut a deal. As historian C. Vann Woodward 1932GSAS wrote in his 1951 book *Reunion and Reaction: The Compromise of 1877 and the End of Reconstruction*, "There was something else at stake, and it was probably of more consequence in the long run than any of the previous considerations. This was the question of whether the country could regain the ability to settle Presidential elections without the resort to force."

In exchange for their acceptance of a Hayes victory, the Democrats demanded the withdrawal of federal troops from the South, where they'd been stationed since the war's end. The Republicans assented. No sooner had the troops left than the three Republican governments in the South collapsed. Reconstruction was over, and Jim Crow began.

In his 1940 autobiography, Columbia president Nicholas Murray Butler recounted the 1876 campaign. Hewitt, he wrote, defended the electoral commission, and saw Tilden as dangerously power hungry: "Mr. Hewitt insisted that Mr. Tilden would, at that time, have gone to any lengths to obtain the Presidency and that he, Mr. Hewitt, was one of the powerful restraining forces which kept Mr. Tilden from precipitating a conflict and perhaps bringing on a new Civil War."

Hewitt became mayor of New York City in 1887, and his plans for rapid transit earned him the moniker the Father of the New York Subway. On May 2, 1896, he helped dedicate the new Columbia campus in Morningside Heights. His most famous speech came in 1883, when, as a congressman, he spoke at the opening of the Brooklyn Bridge. In his remarks, Hewitt exalted the bridge as a symbol of civic virtue over the corruption embodied by "Boss" Tweed.

"But what man is fit to hold office?" Hewitt said to the crowd of thousands, which included President Chester A. Arthur. "Only he who regards political office as a public trust, and not as a private perquisite to be used for the pecuniary advantage of himself or his family, or even his party. Is there intelligence enough in these cities, if thus organized within the parties, to produce the result which we desire?" — *Paul Hond*

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Across healthcare, AI, robotics, fintech, and neurotechnology, these founders are building category-defining companies reshaping how we live, work, and care for each other. Each reflects the innovation, ambition, and execution mindset that defines the 116 Street Ventures community.



BRAVE HEALTH

ANNA LINDOW

Founder & CEO, Brave Health
Industry: Digital Health / Behavioral Health



Clarium

STEVE LIOU

Founder & CEO, Clarium Health
Industry: Healthtech / AI / Clinical Operations



DYNA

LINDON GAO

Founder & CEO, Dyna Robotics
Industry: Robotics / AI / Automation



kapital

RENÉ SAUL

Founder & CEO, Kapital
Industry: Fintech / SME Finances



Precision

MICHAEL MAGER

Founder & CEO, Precision Neuroscience
Industry: Neurotech / MedTech



you.com

RICHARD SOCHER

Founder & CEO, You.com
Industry: AI / Search / Consumer Software

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COLUMBIA GIVING DAY
WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 28



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