The Epoch Journal

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Write for The Epoch.

The Epoch Journal is St. John College's current-affairs magazine. It publishes researched articles and long reviews of global events and culture—all written and edited by members of the polity.

We need writers, reviewers, copy-editors, designers, researchers, photographers, and artists in order to produce a professional magazine.

We meet on Sundays at 7 PM in the *Gadfly* office, located in the lower level of the Barr-Buchanan Center, inside of Woodward Hall.

If you can't make it, email Erin Shadowens (at erin.shadowens@sjca.edu) to discuss working on the next issue. Article submissions for the next issue are due on January 15th, 2012.

Letter from the Editor

NOVEMBER 2011

I began writing for *The Epoch* during my freshman year at St. John's; over the past three years, I have actively participated in every issue, writing eleven articles and acting in an editorial position for ten. Throughout that time, I have seen the publication evolve aesthetically, from loud and colorful maps to a more minimalist and understated palate. The look of the publication reflects the thinking and taste of the editors, but it would be wrong to conflate the aesthetics with the quality and substance of the articles. While the look of *The Epoch* has changed, the mission has not: to provide quality, in-depth articles that bring the greater world to the St. John's College community.

In this issue, we have articles on terrorist bombings in India, media and democracy in Ecuador, and Hispanic immigrant culture on the Texas border. Each of these articles attempts to distill an ongoing issue for our readers while maintaining a focus on the human beings involved. I hope that readers will not simply see these articles as examinations of different countries, but rather as looks into ongoing, international conversations. Ecuador's debate about democracy is yet another voice in a 2,500 year dialogue, and Mumbai's response to terrorism is eerily comparable to New York City's.

I am excited to begin this new year with such a fantastic issue. In the last year, I have been impressed by the growth of student-produced work, from *The Gadfly* to the Community Exhibition, to *Energeia*. I hope that *The Epoch* will continue to bring a distinct tenor to the rich array of voices in our polity.

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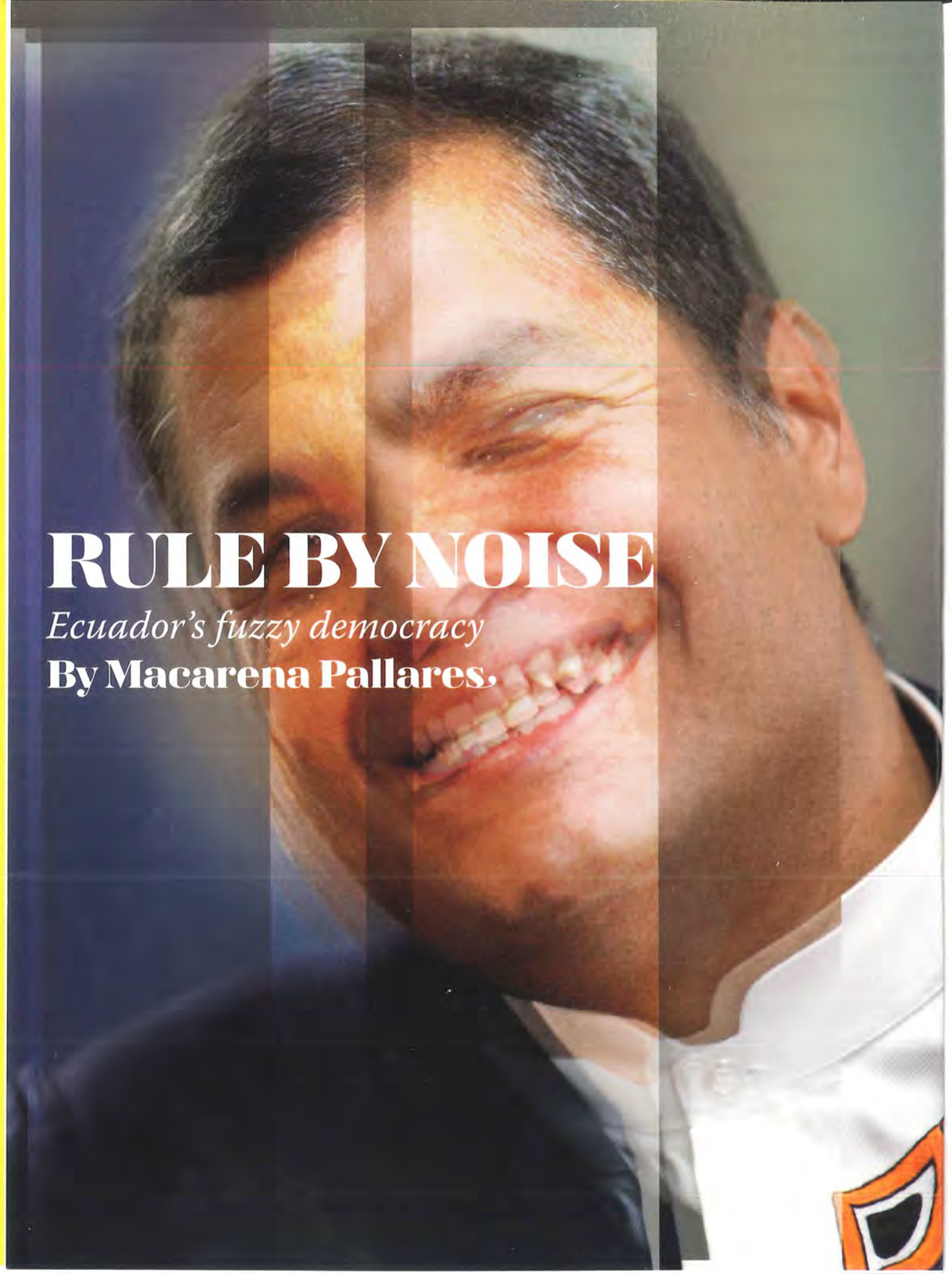


RULE BY NOISE

Ecuador's fuzzy democracy

By Macarena Pallares,

Rafael Correa was elected President of the Republic of Ecuador in 2007, when he ran with the Alianza PAIS political movement. Alianza PAIS endorsed a political alliance with the Ecuadorian Socialist Party and the Communist Party of Ecuador, and is usually denominated as the Revolución Ciudadana ("The People's Revolution"). The movement seeks to steer the Ecuadorian government toward "socialism of the 21st century"—a concept which acquired global currency when it was adopted, in 2005, by the Venezuelan leader, Hugo Chávez.

In the past four years, Correa's administration has dismantled Ecuador's Congress and re-written the country's constitution, among other radical changes to the government's structure. But what has undergone the most profound and long-lasting transformation is the Ecuadorian media. Shortly after his ascension to the presidency, President Correa verbally opened fire against various media organization, labeling them as "savage beasts," "informative mafias," and "charlatans," thereby declaring a fiery war against the press.

In 2008, government officials, citing technical irregularities with the station's license, shut down Radio Sucre, a frequent critic of Correa's administration. The list of media stations expropriated by the government since then has only increased: *El Telegrafo* (a newspaper), Cable Noticias, Cable Deportes, La Otra Group (a magazine publisher), Radio Universal, GamaTV, and TC Televisión. (The last two stations together account for about forty percent of the country's nightly news audience.) Around the same time of Radio Sucre's dismantling, officials of Correa's announced that the expropriated stations and the assets seized from them would be sold. (As of 2011, this promise remains unfulfilled.) Meanwhile, Correa's government created several new media organizations like EcuadorTV, Radio Pública, *El Ciudadano*, and Agencia Ecuatoriana de Noticias ANDES.

Three years later, in August of this year, Correa won a $40 million libel lawsuit he had filed against journalist Emilio Palacios, and STOP, the directors of *El Universo*, which is one of the largest newspapers in Ecuador. The lawsuit cited an article published in *El Universo* in which Palacios, the article's author, remarked that President Correa could be prosecuted by a future administration for allegedly ordering Ecuador's military to open fire on police officers during a police rebellion on September 30th of last year.

This past summer, I interned with TeleAmazonas, which is one of two major television stations that remain unaffiliated with the government. During my time working at the station, which Correa's government has repeatedly sanctioned and at one point illegally forced off the air for three days, working journalists employed the term "self-censorship" to describe their worry of falling prey to the fear aroused in them by the current regime, which targets individual journalists and media outlets by imposing harsh monetary penalties. Thus, in the service of reporting the truth, Ecuadorian journalists make something of a brave statement—about their country, to be sure, but also themselves.

The anxiety of practicing journalists and private media has only worsened since May 7th of this year, when a national referendum—a plebiscite, or ballot—proposed by President Correa passed by a hair's breadth. The referendum in question asked voters whether, in an effort "to avoid the excesses of media," there should be established a "Regulatory Council that may regulate the broadcast content." Having won the referendum, Correa's government has legitimized government censorship and control over the information and opinions that can reach the public, thus defusing the country's few weapons against government corruption.

Alfonso Perez, the director of one of the most influential Ecuadorian online newspapers, *Ecuador en Vivo*, told me that the state-owned media outlets have never reported on cases of corruption in Correa's government. According to Perez, "All allegations of corruption that have occurred in this government come only from the private media." And Correa has not lacked an expensive taste for corruption: a recent scandal involved illegal contracts, valued at 300 million dollars, between the government and the President's brother, Fabricio Correa.

"President Correa needs to discredit the press; he needs to take away its credibility," Perez told me, "because the press is the only way for citizens to have free and independent information that is not originated from the government."

Though Correa has never shown the press much respect, he did give much credit to WikiLeaks, the document-leaking website, to the point of expelling Ecuador's U.S. Ambassador, in April 2011, after WikiLeaks released a series of confidential diplomatic cables of the U.S. State Department, which reevealed that the U.S. Ambassador at the time, Heather M. Hodges, did not endorse Correa's decision to retain a former police commander, Jaime Aquilino Hurtado. (In one of the cables, Hodges had speculated that Correa knew Hurtado was corrupt but kept him around as commander of the national police to ensure he remained "easily manipulated".)

When it comes to Correa, Ecuadorians are split in half. As Perez put it, "Correa has unleashed a vicious intestinal ruction in Ecuador, one man against the other." If you walk around the streets of Quito, the capital of Ecuador, you can witness, on every corner, of every neighborhood, the fading remains of graffiti promoting Vota SI or Vota NO—the residue of last May's national referendum.

At the heart of this national disunity lies a deep disagree-

ment on what democracy means for Ecuador. President Correa's ideology has extended so far as to say that even Cuba is a kind of democracy—although Cuba has just one political party, just one candidate for the Presidency, and has been ruled by just one man, Castro, since 1959. "Cuba is not a western liberal democracy, but it is a democracy," President Correa told Mexican journalist Jorge Ramos. "To have a democracy doesn't mean that you have to hold elections every four years, but it is a kind of government of the people for the people."

In a different interview, Correa asserted that he, as the President of the Republic, functions as the Chief of the entire Ecuadorian State: "Listen to me well—the President of the Republic is not only Chief of the Executive Power. He is the Chief of the whole Ecuadorian State; and the Ecuadorian State is the Executive Power, the Legislative Power, the Judicial Power, the Electoral Power, the Power of Transparency and Social Control, the Superintendence, Attorney, Comptroller; all of that is the Ecuadorian State." Correa is arguing in the tradition of Louis XIV, implying that he is the state; he assumes a kind of Hobbesian understanding of representative government. But Correa claims to support a democratic state, too; he won the presidency on a pro-democratic and anti-corruption platform. One can sense, in this paradox, either an evolution of Ecuador's democracy or its total collapse.

"The dictatorial democracy," Cuban journalist Carlos Alberto Montaner has written, "as described and defended by the Dominican Juan Bosch in a 1969 essay titled 'Dictatorship With Popular Support,' and revived by Venezuela's Hugo Chávez in the so-called 21st Century Socialism, is in turn rooted in the enlightened despotism of the 17th and 18th centuries. It's a type of government in which the authority—exercised by an exceptional caudillo legitimized in the polls by a majority of voters who renounce their rights and their control over their lives - is imposed upon the masses allegedly for their own glory and benefit."

One half of the country—those who voted NO on that national referendum—support the "western liberal democracy" that President Correa excused Cuba from having. A liberal democracy is one in which people allow themselves to be governed as long as their individual rights are protected by a constitution that emphasizes separation of powers and a system of checks and balances between the branches of government.

This system of accountability is quickly vanishing in Ecuador. The fate of Ecuador's Congress, which balances the Executive Power, remains the most vivid example. Near the beginning of Correa's presidency, Congress approved his plan to hold a referendum for the purpose of setting up a Constituent Assembly to rewrite the Ecuadorian Constitution. The referendum took place on April 15, 2007. But after the date was decided, Correa revised the referendum to grant more powers to the Constituent Assembly. One of these powers was the authority to dismiss Congress—an authority which Congress itself never approved. As a result, 57 members of Congress, which was controlled by Correa's opposition, reacted by trying to impeach the President of the Electoral Tribunal. Still, Correa, explaining that their decision was constitutional, defended the Electoral Tribunal's expulsion of those members.

Alfonso Perez told me that the Legislative Power, which is now called "National Assembly" instead of "Congress," is unlikely to do its job: "The moderator of the executive branch, which is the National Assembly, is no moderator" he says, "Correa has them handled like puppets".

A few months ago, my brother wrote and published an article criticizing the national referendum. Among relatives and friends of my hometown, nobody discussed the quality of his article, the strength of his arguments, or his style of prose. Nobody agreed, or disagreed. "How brave of your brother to publish that!" or "Finally someone has the nerve to speak up!" were the kind of sentiments expressed. As president, Correa has transformed free speech into an act of bravery, and Ecuador itself into a country where voicing disagreement with public figures isn't a civic right or public duty, but an act of valor.

The only thing that Ecuadorians who support a liberal democracy have left is their right to raise their voices and speak their minds. Even if Correa and his supporters think otherwise, a great number of Ecuadorians believe that it is the media's duty to monitor the government, not the other way around. Left unchecked, Ecuador's government—any government—may as well possess, and act with, unlimited power. "Correa doesn't understand that the owner of the power is not the state, but the citizen!" Perez said fervently. "Therefore the citizen has to be accordingly informed, and in a plural manner—not only with the exclusive and alienating information of a government as dogmatic as the one we have." ■

WHY MUMBAI?

The limits of logic in urban terrorism

By Shikshya Adhikari,

"People were scared, shocked and mostly angry," explains Neha Bansod, an Indian citizen. The city of Mumbai was bombed thrice on July 13, 2011. The bombings occurred on Wednesday evening at 6:54 pm, 6:55 pm, and 7:05 pm, killing more than 20 people and leaving 141 injured. A *Times of India* article ["Three blasts rock Mumbai; 21 dead, 141 injured," July 14, 2011] quotes the home minister of India, Palaniappan Chindambaram—"we infer that this was a co-ordinated attack by the terrorist," the reason being the close timing of the consecutive explosions. Mumbai has had three major terrorist attacks in the last decade and the city seems to have been on edge since then.

"The year 2006 was bad", says Sidarth Shah, a resident of Mumbai and a freshmen at St. John's College. "The local trains were badly hit in rush hour."

On July 11, 2006 Mumbai witnessed a series of seven bombings within a period of 11 minutes. This attack was quite severe as more than 200 people lost their lives and over 700 were injured. Mumbai was again attacked in 2008. "Coordinated terrorist attacks struck the heart of Mumbai, India's commercial capital, on Wednesday night, killing dozens in machine-gun and grenade assaults on at least two five-star hotels, the city's largest train station, a Jewish center, a movie theater and a hospital" [*The New York Times*, Somini Sengupta, November 26, 2008]. The attacks had lasted for three days, from November 26 to 29, again leaving hundreds of people dead or injured. "The effects of this attack definitely stayed for a while," says Shah.

Shah also adds, "The recent bombings [of July 13] were much smaller comparatively. Some shops were hit. However, the Dadar train station was not bombed. One of the places that was bombed was about fifty kilometers away from the very populated station." Hit were the Opera House, Zaveri Bazar and Dadar west localities. So, how then did the people of Mumbai respond to the recent bombings?

Jyotsna Mehta, a Mumbai city resident, responds somewhat differently. She says, "People were sad and supportive towards the victim. But, most importantly, they were disappointed." Shah, who lives quite close to one of the bombed sites, Dadar, was on the bus back to Mumbai from Pune and the bus station is in Dadar. He says, "I got scared. Nobody wants to run into that. I got the news that bombings were still taking place and was advised by my family to stay on the bus."

Momentary panic, anger, resignation or indifference — which of these reactions resounded after the initial alarm, dread, and confusion? It seems that as time passed, so did panic, anger and sad resignation.

Shah says, "Things got back to normal some hours later and people were completely free to move around. Nobody I know was hurt. As a matter of fact, there have been so many bombings that people have become indifferent."

Mehta adds, "People had 'I am used to this' kind of attitude. Yes, people got normal the next day. Mumbai was running at its normal pace once again."

What is normal for Mumbai? What is Mumbai's normal city pace? Mumbai is one of the most populous cities in India, with a huge metropolitan population of approximately twenty million. The city hosts a great number of industrie—including the huge film manufacture—and is home to many renowned and respected people. It is the capital city of Maharashtra, the Indian State. Mumbai is said to have the highest GDP (about 200 billion) and it ranks among the world's top ten trade cities. Mumbai also contributes seventy percent of the capital commerce to India's economy. Along with big numbers, big businesses and big people, the great city of Mumbai also consists of the everyday hustle and bustle of normal people. Mumbai represents a great mass of crowd with their daily business. With crowded buses, trains, streets, shops, stations,

Mumbai's populous is unstoppable. Is it this populace that is being targeted constantly?

When asked why Mumbai has constantly been the victim of many terror attacks, Shah says, "Mumbai is a popular city. It is one of main attractions in India. And, I think it is the masses that are triggered all the time."

Mehta says, "Mumbai has well-developed local trains, a huge population and stock market. If Mumbai shuts down for some reason, everything drops and consequently, its trade is badly affected." It is the masses that seem to be targeted the most. Delhi, the capital city, with all the government buildings and offices, has not been hit as badly and frequently as Mumbai.

"With the masses and the area that contains the masses being targeted, there is so much you can avoid. Personally, I felt pretty safe to continue using the train. Some of my friends' families got paranoid and they suggested using taxis instead of local train. But, that can also go on for a certain period of time. There are small shops in those places. People have to pass through them to get anywhere. How much can the police block and for how long?" questions Shah.

It seems reasonable for the city to resume its normal life again. Investigations were made concerning the attacks, articles were published, certain groups were suspected and, condolences offered by the leaders of the nation and of other nations. The general sentiment was that the incident was yet another terrorist attack --the status quo.

Bansod says, "Nowadays, terrorists only choose places that are internationally known and where they will be able to garner maximum publicity. Terrorism is sustained on publicity these days." Even though a 'terrorist attack' was what the investigations pointed to, the official reports are yet to come. Mumbai police detained several men for questioning and among them was Faiz Usmani, the brother of one of the accused members of the 2008 Ahmedabad bombings case. Reports say that the first finger was pointed at the Indian Mujahideen (IM) and Student Islamic Movement of India (SIMI). Aljezeera reported [The (in) visible in Indian terrorism, Irfan Ahmed], "Shortly after the attack, the police said that IM and SIMI were behind the blasts", pointing to the fact that Muslims are generally the first ones to be accused of any terror attacks. The article also expresses that the Muslim population were generally harassed by the officials after every one of these incidences.

"It is difficult to claim anything," says Shah. "One of the bombed sites, Zaveri Bazar, is predominantly a Muslim area."

In the past, Hindu activists have also been responsible for the bombings in some religious Muslim sites. In 1993, India witnessed a terrible Hindu-Muslim riot where both parties were equally responsible and victimized. Mumbai, along with other big cities, have designated Hindu and Muslim areas, generally popular among the less wealthy people. Bansod says, "The people of Mumbai have a fairly liberal attitude. There are misguided youths in all countries and India is not devoid of its fair share. India is very proud of its secular credentials."

Mehta adds, "People are treated equally in middle or upper middle class families. However, I cannot speak for certain on behalf of the people belonging to lower classes. It might also be a way for politicians to avoid giving answers and get into deep investigations. So, they usually blame religion."

Next, Pakistan's role in the bombings became a question. Reports indicate a connection between the accused groups and Pakistan; however, the statements are once again not official. The 2008 attacks by the Lakhshar-e-Taiba militant groups almost put India and Pakistan into a state of war. Pakistan has been under severe international pressure to recognize the members of these groups since 2008. However, these groups still seem to be operating. Considering the Indo-Pak history, one can see how India blaming Pakistan is the most likely outcome even though Pakistan offered condolences on the blasts. Shah says, "Condolences are offered all the time. There is nothing new in that. Pakistan offered condolences, so did America and Europe."

Mehta says, "These statements are made by officials and I do not think they are true. I believe people in Pakistan want peace as well. If brains are washed and people manipulated, there is nothing that can be done."

It is difficult to calculate Mumbai's response to these terrorist attacks. The question arises: is Mumbai safe for all?

Mehta says, "Mumbai will never be safe; but, people are and will be more aware. This time people were not interested in candle-lit protests or other such activities; but, they really wanted the government to take some serious actions."

"There is always a shock that follows," says Shah. "It would be inhuman if there wasn't any. But, shocks last less each time. [...] The security is pretty good for what is possible with the number of people entering and exiting Mumbai per day. I feel safe." ■

THE SOUTHERN STAR

The fragile future of South Texas's immigrant families

By Ian Tuttle,

"They call them *sanchas*," says Peggy, a former manager for Sam Kane Beef Processors, Inc., a pillar of south Texas' agricultural economy located on the industrial outskirts of Corpus Christi, Texas, a Gulf Coast city of 300,000 a couple hours north of the border. Peggy is referring to the line workers at the plant; there are about a thousand of them, mostly Hispanic, almost exclusively male. "I would say nine out of ten have someone on the side," she says—those are *sanchas*, "other women." "It's a very odd culture."

Precisely what culture Peggy describes is unclear. A chaotic amalgamation of social forces—some arriving from Latin American sending countries, the rest culled from an increasingly heterogeneous America—is creating a new culture among American Hispanics, a fusion of old and new world customs that is driving the devastating phenomenon sweeping Hispanic America: the collapse of the Hispanic family. Whether the "*sancha* subculture" is behind that trend is unknown; regardless, it is indicative of the pervasive and problematic breakdown of traditional sexual and familial standards that threatens the social stability of a prominent ethnic group and their adopted nation.

South Texas, a region of twenty-eight counties comprising much of the territory south of San Antonio stretching to the Mexican border, is seventy-two percent Hispanic. Texas, by comparison, is only thirty-eight percent. The region includes four growing metropolitan areas whose population growth outpaced that of Texas as a whole from 2002 to 2007, and McAllen, one of those metropolitan areas, boasted one of the country's fastest growing real estate markets in 2008. In age, south Texas is young. Persons under the age of twenty-five account for nearly half of the population, and the median age along the border is twenty-nine. And the region is a natural entry point for immigrants (legal and illegal) because it has maintained much of the cultural identity of Mexico, which still exercises a significant cultural influence over much of Texas south of San Antonio.

It is in this region—and in similar pockets nationwide—that the collapse of the Hispanic family is playing out most prominently—not only at Sam Kane Beef, but within companies, hospitals, government offices, public school systems, and churches across the region. However, what is occurring in south Texas may be indicative of the future of the country. The Census Bureau predicts that Hispanics will be the country's largest minority by 2050, tripling in size to become almost a full third of the American population by mid-century. So it is likely that the collapse of the Hispanic family, which is already exacting a heavy toll on Texas and California, will soon become a national issue.

The behavior Peggy describes is difficult to classify: it is neither outright polygamy (the man is married to only one woman, whom he considers his primary companion) nor simple adultery (many Hispanic women appear to have accepted that their partners may be involved with other women). And for the men it is fully justified. "The man feels that he deserves to have his needs met," says Peggy, "and each woman fulfills a different need. He has the 'main' mother of his children, then a woman he can visit on the way home from work, then a woman who will go hunting with him." And while he only considers one woman his wife, he usually has a child (or children) with each. "We would have a worker request time off because his wife had had a child, then come back three months later and ask for time off—because his wife had had a child. One man had four children in a single year." For some workers, almost their entire paycheck goes to child support fees—and child support checks are addressed to several different locations.

What is most shocking to Peggy, though, is the wholesale acceptance of this behavior among many Hispanics. "There is no stigma behind it whatsoever," she says. She recounts speaking to one of the plant's cafeteria workers whose daughter gave birth at 13; she bore two more children before she turned eighteen. "The parents loved it, encouraged it—they wanted more children in the family."

In a 2010 report, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) revealed that, in 2007 (the latest year for which data is available), a little over half of Hispanic children were born to unmarried mothers. While this is noticeably behind the illegitimacy rate of black women (seventy-one percent), it is much more worrisome with the Hispanic population expected to triple over the coming decades. And the unmarried birthrate for Hispanics is staggering: Every 1,000 unmarried women bore 108 children, up from 100 at the beginning of the decade and 90 per 1,000 in 1990. The numbers reveal that unmarried Hispanics are having twice as many children as unmarried whites and one-and-a-half times as many as unmarried blacks. And the trend shows no signs of slowing.

Heather MacDonald, a scholar at the Manhattan Institute, has led the effort to study the change occurring within Hispanic America, and she admits that determining the causes of Hispanic family breakdown is difficult. Several forces appear to be working simultaneously.

First is immigration, which has forced a clash of customs. It is well-documented that Hispanics have significantly higher birthrates than white Americans, which has fueled steady population growth throughout Latin America and is driving the Hispanic population boom in the United States, but it is unclear from what this inclination stems: perhaps from the need of those in farm-based economies to have many children, perhaps because of higher infant mortality rates in Latin America, perhaps from a deeper concern for the perpetuation of bloodlines than is seen in the United States, perhaps from some combination of these motives or others. However, with migration to America, that custom has confronted progressive American culture. The CDC report shows a threefold increase in the percentage of children born to unmarried women among white Americans since 1980 (the first year of available data for all races), a phenomenon, at least in part, of decreasingly stringent sexual mores. Hispanic immigrants, who are inclined to raise large families, have had to confront America's increasingly tolerant sexual culture, and they seem to have embraced a sort of synthesis: large "families" without the traditional family structure. Though this cultural collision may bear partial responsibilty, it cannot be the sole cause. As Mac Donald has observed, the illegitimacy rate in Latin America is also very high. Can this be chalked up to globalization? That seems unlikely. But immigration is undoubtedly playing a role in the collapse of the Hispanic family; it is the extent of that role which remains unclear.

Second is a lack of focus among Hispanics on education. The contrast here, notes Mac Donald, is with Asian immigrants who, on average, demand significant academic effort on the part of their children. That same demand and effort are missing in Hispanic families. And perhaps because of a lack of focus on the classroom, Hispanics are more likely to end up in poverty, to be unemployed, and to end up in prison than are Asian Americans, who are disproportionately represented at elite universities, are the highest earning ethnic group, and, according to a study published in 2010 in the *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs*, are at the lowest risk of any type of youth substance abuse, from cigarettes and alcohol to marijuana and harder drugs. Moreover, Asian Americans have the lowest illegitimacy: just seventeen percent.

Third is an attitude that has been uniquely demonstrated in Hispanic culture: machismo, a desire among many Hispanic males to demonstrate masculinity. The overwhelming majority of the men at Sam Kane Beef, notes Peggy, have facial hair, and she suggests that the number of women a man can claim acts as a sort of "machismo signifier," a type of status symbol. (She describes it as "collecting" women.) And neither the attitude nor the behavior is restricted to low socioeconomic classes; both are present among wealthier Hispanics, she says, just more discreetly practiced.

What in the breakdown of the Hispanic family distinguishes it from the collapse of the black family, chronicled meticulously since Daniel Patrick Moynihan's groundbreaking 1965 study, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*? Mac Donald, in a 2006 *City Journal* article, identifies a key difference: "many of the mothers and absent fathers work, even despite growing welfare use." Peggy affirms this: "Labor at the plant is enormously difficult, and the workers are incredibly diligent, incredibly hard-working." And this poses a striking contrast to the sense of entitlement Peggy observes in the men. Whether these conflicting strains will persist remains to be seen. Peggy notes that younger generations of Hispanics are not demonstrating the same work ethic as their elders. "They are unable to cope with the strain of the work at the plant," she says. "Our turnover rate peaked at sixty percent at one point—three out of five hires leaving within months."

The decline of that work ethic—and the perpetuation of the decline of the Hispanic family—may hinge, at least in part, on a related trend Mac Donald observes: growing welfare use. That federal and state welfare systems provide financial support for children born into poverty may not act as an impetus to out-of-wedlock births, but it certainly is no deterrent. Peggy says that the multigenerational Hispanic family structure can better utilize the monies offered by welfare programs: "The daughters give birth, and the mothers and grandmothers take care of the babies using welfare money." However, an official from Texas's Department of State Health Services (DSHS), speaking on condition of anonymity, argues that, where drugs are involved, the system does, in fact, act as an impetus. Using state welfare money, she says, women can purchase large quantities of meat and trade it for drugs; by bearing more children they increase their welfare subsidy and feed their (or their partner's) drug habit. These instances are the exception, rather than the rule, but they reveal the inherent difficulty of constructing and maintaining a fair and sustainable welfare system.

And illegitimacy takes a devastating toll on the economy. Sam Kane Beef originally provided insurance for both employees and their families, but a million-dollar bill for the simultaneous Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU) treatment of one employee's two out-of-wedlock children—each born to a different mother—forced the company to restrict insurance coverage to employees alone. And the financial burden that the company was forced to offload fell onto the shoulders of Medicaid and other government programs. Moreover, the detrimental effects of single-motherhood are well-documented: children raised by single mothers are more likely to grow up uneducated, impoverished, and imprisoned—an enormous burden on America's public schools, courts, and prisons. Illegitimacy is proving a massive drain on both private and public coffers.

Are there solutions to this trend? The matter goes much deeper than public policy, though significant reforms could contribute to the trend's reversal—or at least its slowing. Some have asserted that the Catholic Church, focused for so long on internal struggles, neglected its responsibility to act as a moral force for Hispanics, and Peggy observes that the men and families in question demonstrate little spiritual activity. "They might believe

in God," she says, "but they are not involved in churches or any other activities we might consider spiritually enriching, and they certainly don't talk in spiritual or religious terms." But she wonders whether the reemergence of the Catholic Church would make much difference: "If the Catholic Church became a socially engaging force again, would it even help? The families are the ones encouraging this behavior." Any process of transformation, then, is forbiddingly complex. Effective change will require significant policy reform in multiple arenas, as well as a moral renewal within both the larger American and Latin American cultures. The initial problem, amid such overwhelming difficulty, may be determining where to start.

However, this is not to say that the Hispanic family is in imminent, unavoidable doom. Hispanics have not suffered the same ghettoization as blacks—though inklings of that can be seen in heavily Hispanic states along the southern border. The Catholic Church remains a potentially positive force, particularly when its moral values receive backing in the home. Latin America is home to half of the world's Catholics, but in recent years Catholics have been leaving the church in droves amid infighting between conservatives and progressives. Yet, despite the loss, many Latin American immigrants maintain at least a vestigial Catholicism, and new efforts in Latin America to reach out to those who have left the Catholic Church may prove effective among American Hispanics, as well. Moreover, the attenuation of the Catholic Church has not entailed a widespread rejection of Christianity. Pentecostal Protestantism has seen dramatic growth throughout Latin America, and a variety of denominations hope to fill the spiritual void. There is ample opportunity for spiritual renewal—if these institutions will accept the challenge to assert a revitalized public morality.

And any resurgent public morality must be accompanied by thoughtful public policy reforms. A study published in 2007 in the *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs* found that Hispanic immigrants to the U.S. are more likely to engage in illegal drug use and alcohol abuse—and that likelihood increases as they become acculturated. Considering that many of these immigrants are coming from quasi-narco-states like Mexico, this tendency is particularly disturbing. The DSHS official argues such drug use has much to do with familial collapse. Severe, mandatory sentences punishing drug use lock Hispanic men into the prison system without providing opportunities for rehabilitation; even after their release, a criminal record diminishes their chances of employment and financial security. Her theory suggests several crucial reforms: an immigration policy that would strengthen America's borders and reinforce ideals of citizenship; drug policy reform that would effectively target minorities and the poor, who are disproportionately more likely to become substance abusers; welfare reform that would prevent systemic exploitation; and prison and sentencing reform that would facilitate treatment and rehabilitation. Those changes are not enough, she says, but they will be a start.

Finally, employers have the ability to effect behavioral change. Peggy notes that Sam Kane Beef has always been willing to hire individuals passed over or rejected, for whatever reason, by other employers; many of their employees, she says, are "those on the fringes." Reflecting on the company's hiring process, she affirms, "If you're willing to work hard, we're willing to consider you." And, she points out, Sam Kane Beef has created a healthy work environment that encourages employees not simply to work hard but also to fulfill familial and social responsibilities—from paying alimony on time to attending rehabilitation programs. Peggy says that local judges are aware of the unique atmosphere at Sam Kane Beef and that it factors into their consideration of employees' cases. Where the government incentivizes or perpetuates troublesome behaviors, individual employers have the opportunity to disincentivize by creating healthy, socially responsible work environments. Sam Kane Beef offers a strong, encouraging example for other employers.

But the burden of transformation remains, ultimately, in the power of America's Hispanic community. And that community is at a crossroads. If older generations—or, perhaps, the newest generation of parents—can shift the cultural paradigm, the Hispanic family may be rescued. But if they will not, Hispanic social stability faces a long slide into chaos, and, as Hispanics become a greater part of the national population, America will likely slide, too. ■

ESSAYS + REVIEWS

TRICKED

Obama as illusionist

By J. Keenan Trotter

Before I get into my review of Jason Mattera's book, *Obama Zombies* (THRESHOLD; $25), I want to suggest two changes to his work that should make his ideas clearer to readers. Wherever Mattera mentions the word "conservative" or something variant thereof, scratch it out with an ink pen and write "conservative policy". And where he writes "health care," again scratch it out and write "health insurance". His arguments, and his book, make much more sense after these edits are made.

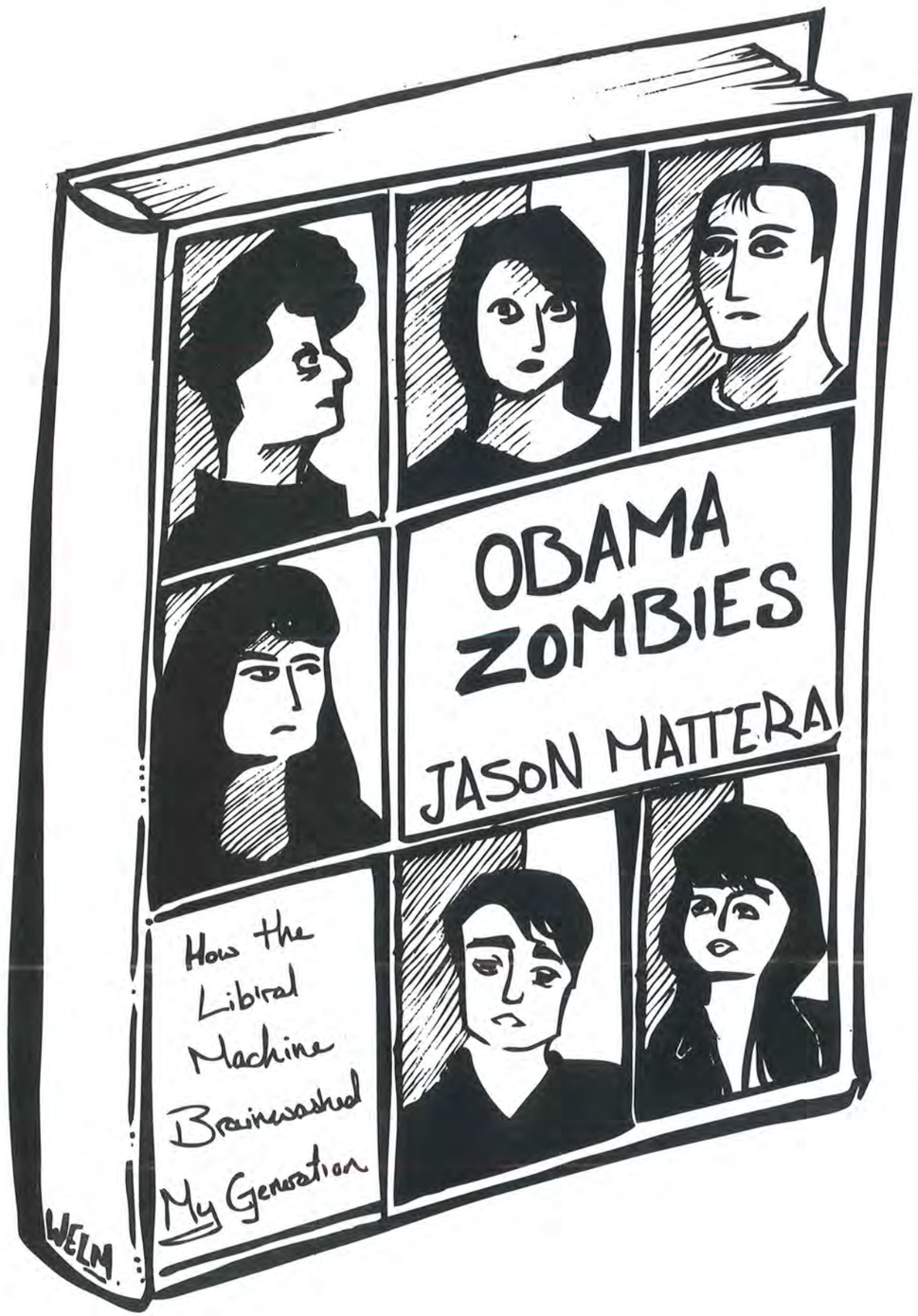
Now, on to the book, which was born out of the historic 2008 election of Barack Obama. This event both surprised and did not surprise this book's author, according to whom John McCain—Obama's primary opponent—"was an atrocious presidential candidate" who "looked like death." Mattera pumps much blood about McCain's military history, specifically his experience as prisoner of war in Vietnam, yet the narrative McCain's campaign built out of his heroism strikes Mattera as lukewarm and ineffectual. "McCain's message was about self-sacrifice," he writes, "which was, eh, okay." The glib tone pervades the work, which might be an inheritance of its very real and consequential subject matter: the easy transformation, in contemporary America life, of cultural rapport into political power.

To be clear, Mattera deems Obama's tenure an utter failure: "We've seen a president who distrusts his country, genuflects to dictators around the world, and takes massive dumps on the idea of American exceptionalism," he writes. Obama's various failings are not, as noted, the primary matter of *Obama Zombies*, as the book's title suggests; rather, it is the generation (in which Mattera counts himself) largely credited with the success of Obama's presidential campaign—namely, 18-29 year-olds, the demographic of which Mattera calls, yes, "Obama Zombies".

Mattera's first method of illustrating his thesis is plain, even shopworn: scouring televisual records of the 2008 Obama campaign and waiting for someone—usually a college student or celebrity—to say or do something ridiculous. For example: during election coverage arranged by MTV at a university in Florida, Sarah Phillips, a student, was recorded saying, upon witness of the night's Democratic victory, "It's probably the most excited I've ever been in my entire life. I seriously think I had an emotional seizure or something. My whole body siezed up. I couldn't breathe. It's like I really mattered . . . I picked the president! That was me! . . . I think I'm in love with America right now!" Such fervor, as anyone who was a conscious human being in 2008 will agree, was widespread.

All of this excitement baffles Mattera. Why are these young people so enamored by this unknown senator from Illinois? Because the Zombies were not drawn to him by default, i.e., by repulsion to another candidate. This is Mattera's theory, anyway, which if evaluated in light of some of his "takedowns" of figures such as Jon Stewart (who is "self-loathing", according to Mattera, presumably because he employs a stage name) and Stephen Colbert (who is merely "self-hating"), shall begin to draw concern.

Whom Mattera discusses in very little detail is George W. Bush, that president we had for eight years before Obama. The political moment of 2008 can be difficult to recall correctly because, while Obama was obviously incumbent to the presidency, he wasn't yet the actual commander-



in-chief. Bush was. And in the years leading up to that year's election no person took a stronger beating than him. The possibility missing from Mattera's book is that without Bush there would be no Obama, or, to be more specific, no particular fervor which swirled around him and anointed him with powers of foresight and wisdom. To many of the Americans quoted in Mattera's book, Obama seems not only inspiring or affirming but penitential, the public's reward for enduring eight long years of a very unpopular presidency.

But no. Mattera's theory of Obama's success is this: the voting public was systemically fed misinformation about the fiscal and social policies with which Obama marketed himself, and also suffered from the most technologically-advanced presidential campaign in history. The Republican party—or, variously, "conservatives"—had no chance winning. Plus, "Gramps," Mattera repeats, speaking of McCain, "looked like death."

Mattera is correct to recognize the evolving, and growing, influence of media on the outcomes of electoral politics. He writes somewhat well about the game the news cycle makes of campaigning. This game, he suggests, rotates through trials of identity, race, religion, class, education, and so on. But instead of reporting on this game, the primary product of which is caricature and distortion, Mattera elects to play it himself. For example, Mattera quotes from an on-air transcript of a conversation between MSNBC News Live host Tamron Hall and *Chicago Tribune* reporter Jill Zuckman, who was reporting on a television advertisement touting McCain's military record. "Senator Obama's got a great success story, too," Zuckman says, "and it's just a different one and I think voters are equally impressed with what he's all about."

Mattera, verbatim: "Ah, yes, the story of a kid who was sired by Ph.D. parents, went to two Ivy League schools, and grossed millions in book deals is somehow comparable to the hellish brutality Senator McCain faced as a prisoner of war. Beam yourself back down to reality, Zuckman."

It's true that though Obama's father never finished his doctorate, his mother did, and it's also true that Obama graduated from Columbia and Harvard, at both of which he almost certainly benefited from affirmative action policies in place. He has written two best-selling memoirs. And yet—and this is perhaps to Mattera's credit—this remains a difficult position to argue from. It seems vulgar to discuss the extrapolitical life of John McCain, so I won't here, but that leaves Mattera's statement unanswered. Even so, do we really want to weigh the personal hardships of presidential candidates? Is that a productive discourse? After all, Mattera himself seems to resist any judgements not strictly based on policy.

The author persistently critiques Hollywood—and its central figure, the celebrity—because, as Mattera argues, its members gain the most from the free market yet consistently favor candidates who wish to regulate it. This dissonance has trickled down to mere consumers, especially Zombies, who vote against their own interests. This is Mattera's central thesis: that popular culture has made us unable to recognize what it best for us; that individuals like Sean Combs—the overfamous rapper and entertainment mogul—have replaced politicians as the monuments of public life.

Combs, apparently, is an exemplar of the free market because of his outsized success. Here is how Mattera sees it:

> As a boy, Combs was born in the public housing projects of Harlem, New York, and was only a child when his father was tragically murdered. He attended Howard University in Washington, D.C., while interning at Uptown Records in New York City. . . . Today, for better or worse (for worse) . . . Combs is a household name. . . . Diddy loved music, loved promotion, loved the spotlight, and worked his derrière off to achieve his dreams. Uncle Sam didn't orchestrate it. He did. Not Washington.

This paragraph is a rather large tactical error. Mattera wishes to see federal government—all government—end its involvement in the lives of private human beings. And yet he mentions that Combs was "born in the public housing projects of Harlem, New York." Who funds *public* housing? Combs, had he lacked proper housing (and, very likely, health care via Medicaid) may have had a very different life: the reason for which the social contract—funded by taxpayers, administered by government agencies—exists in the first place.

It's clear that Mattera has read his Ayn Rand. He salts his prose in a manner intended to convince the reader that he or she is essentially awesome and super-talented and hence should not be taxed. It's Rand's method, paraphrased and interspersed with one-liners, hey-ohs, jabs. For both clear policy and a humorous perspective on the political scene, *Obama Zombies* is strangled, almost numbingly incoherent. When he has something to say, he tends to get it completely wrong.

Yet however frivolously a author considers the task of honest thought, his critic ought to treat the objects of his output seriously—especially in politics.

One issue, for example, that Mattera handles with particular concern is health care. He introduces Gabriel Humphreys, whom MTV interviewed for a report called "The Young, Hot, and Uninsured." According to the report, Humphreys injured himself while snowboarding but delayed seeking medical treatment because he doesn't possess health insurance and would therefor have to pay for the treatment (surgéry) without subsidies.

Here is Mattera: "Hey, dude, if you don't have health care, and don't want to pay for it, then don't go snowboarding! If you still believe in personal responsibility, any personal responsibility, raise your hand. Why should you, I, or anyone have to fund this brother's [sic] snowboarding accident?" Two things. First: As mentioned before, Mattera shifts the discussion from health insurance to health care by equating the two terms. (This is an important and possibly conscious decision on Mattera's part: it is the necessary condition of advancing the argument that health care—all health care—ought to go the way of plastic surgery and LASIK, which is to say the way of the free market.) Second: the idea of "personal responsibility" is, in fact, admissible here. If Humphreys wasn't prepared to suffer injury, he should have avoided the possibility of injury. But what if, instead of tearing his rotator cuff, he was diagnosed with cancer? Is it within his *personal responsibility* to avoid cancer? Mattera's question—why I should help subsidize this man's health care with my tax dollars—is answered simply: because under that system he—everyone—would do the same for me.

A popular counterargument says that redistributive policies aren't inherently anti-capitalist but inevitably become so when made government policy. Under this argument, various charities, and churches in particular, ought to administer (or subsidize) health care to those who cannot afford it by themselves. In theory, there's nothing obviously wrong with this idea—it reflects the arrangement of early America—but tax dollars still go to those institutions in the first place, and those institutions would inevitably request more and more tax breaks and grants (given their responsibility to administer free health care) that eventually the arrangement would begin to resemble either the for-profit health care industry or the socialized systems of Western Europe. Since this experiment rests upon the certainty that tithing is preferable to taxing, that those who help others ought to do so out of their will rather than a forced contribution, then why would a more efficient means of ensuring affordable access to health care remain beyond the frame of a person's will? Wouldn't you want to guarantee, on a moral principle, that those less fortunate than yourself aren't financially ruined by one hospital visit?

It's not as if America doesn't have a *de facto* socialized health care system—it does. But it operates not out of one policy but in isolated services to certain populations: Medicare (seniors), Medicaid (the poor), CHIP (children), various state laws (Romneycare, most famously), the EMTALA legislation (for those who cannot afford the emergency room), TRICARE (servicemembers and veterans), and a collection of government policies, charities and religious organizations for every ailment imaginable. Is this patchwork array truly preferable to a more open and less confusing system? It's true that such a system has enabled much innovation in health care, from which we get the koan that America has the "best health care system in the world." But who could mistake our system, which actively conspires to deny people treatment—either as a function of the profit motive or actuarial science—for some kind of international example?* Who would confuse a Gu-

* The relevant journalism here is that of the *Los Angeles Times*, whose reporter Lisa Girion demonstrated, between 2006 and 2008, that a bunch of health insurance companies in California practiced startling amounts of "recission", a policy whereby the company's "customers" are investigated for fraudulent applications

Book Notes
Between Men

Written over nearly a decade Chad Harbach's *The Art of Fielding* celebrates the sweaty (and very mental) toil anyone great or even merely good at anything—baseball, scholarship, writing, love—confronts in daily life. Harbach's book features a South Dakotan dirtbomb-prodigy named Henry Skrimshander, whom Mike Schwartz, a Harpooner at Westish College (whose mascot takes from a singular visit to the college by Herman Melville, in 1880), discovers at a random Illinois baseball game. Skrim's performance, we learn, "was like taking a painting that had been shoved in a closet and hanging it in an ideal spot. You instantly forgot what

the room had looked like before."

That's a pretty good way to describe the experience of reading *The Art of Fielding*. Though wrought from rather fine depiction (a character's eyes are "a lovely, light-bearing color, like the lucid amber in which prehistoric insects were preserved"), *The Art of Fielding*'s real success rests upon Harbach's recognition of shortcoming of language as it pertains to the relationships ambition forges between men.

Thinketh Schwartz: "Maybe it wasn't even baseball he loved, but only this idea of perfection, a perfectly simple life in which every move had meaning, and baseball was just the medium through which he could make it happen."

cci store for a hospital?

Then Mattera attempts semantics. Is health care a "right" or a "commodity"? Mattera argues the latter by telling us—with complete seriousness—that "food is a much more basic necessity than health care, yet we do not have food-based insurance, or even food-based savings accounts." Actually, we do. It's called the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, also known as food stamps, into which every citizen pays.

Moments such as these deflate Mattera's book, and will anger the reader, especially one who reads authors like Mattera in order to rehearse and confirm their own political convictions. What's strange is that when Mattera confuses terms (namely, health insurance versus health care) it is often to his tactical disadvantage. It would be hard to argue that he believes himself when he insists that "personal responsibility" will solve the problem of how to provide health care to 300 million American citizens. I say this because I do not think Mattera understands what he is actually saying, particularly about health care.

For example: Why, he asks, not just exercise the free market? Why: because health care within a free market which is not profitable will not be administered. Mattera would be forced to admit this. It's the free market. Yet in health care we are not talking about cellular phones or shoes. We are talking about the welfare of human beings. The market works in a lot of contexts, but it probably will never work in the health care industry, or at least not directly. Mattera might read this last sentence and think, but what about all those "for-profit" health insurance companies? Again: health insurance is not health care. The point of health care reform was to ensure the former to guarantee the latter.* The underlying debate is whether we have a right to treatment. It's a very good question. The only piece of insight *Obama Zombies* adds, however, is that Mattera is unaware of food stamps.

Mattera's treatment of health care is intended to demonstrate the mortal sin of government: wealth redistribution. Mattera is slightly more skilled here than when he's talking about celebrities or health care. The anecdote he provides to illustrate his point is fairly well-known. In April of 2009, a young woman named Alyssa Cordova videotaped interviews with students at George Mason University. The conceit was this: the students were asked whether they would favor a "grade redistribution" program whereby students with certain grade point averages would relinquish their extra points to students who didn't earn enough good grades to graduate. This is, of course, a stupid idea, and the George Mason students said so. Then the students were asked if they supported raising tax rates on the upper echelon of taxpayers. The students were unanimous: they supported the tax hike, which is—yes—a method of wealth redistribution. Then Cordova asked what the difference was between redistributing grades and redistributing income. I won't quote the students' defenses, nor Mattera's heckling, because the former were probably edited down to inanity (it was, after all, for YouTube) and because the latter just laughs. So there is no difference!

There is a difference. Unlike grades, which are only earned—and that's to say nothing of the SAT tutors high school students either employ or (as college students) become—wealth comes to an individual from many sources. One of these is income. Another is inheritance. Wealth redistribution, as a model of social welfare, seeks to account for the fact that humans are born into wildly different circumstances; that the conditions, the household, the money in which a person is raised depend nothing on "individualism" or "working hard" or any language involving the straps of boots but pure, utter luck. It's true that some very successful people arise from not much of anything. But the imaginary figure whom Mattera often conjures—the go-getter who doesn't need and has never needed the government—is extinct. I will not bore you with the details of the government's silent, benevolent influence on your life, from the food you eat to the roads on which you bike or drive, to the water you drink, to the food stamps you might need if you lose your job, from beneficial (but yes, sometimes messy and inefficient) government agencies to—as Mattera would surely agree—the most powerful military force in the world. Every successful American benefits, in some way, from the government. That's bad news for someone who instinctively distrusts the government to do its job—to even exist.

Mattera devotes a delightful though often strange and misguided chapter to two important figures in entertainment: Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert. Mattera is correct to assert that, when considering the cultural forces involved in ensuring Obama's victory, these two men cannot be ignored. Stewart (and by extension, Colbert, who was eventually granted his own show) is known for his satirical news program, *The Daily Show*, which Comedy Central broadcasts. *The Daily Show* in its present form debuted in 1999, but it rose to prominence only with the second election of George W. Bush. Stewart's basic-cable status never limited his appeal. (His quips benefitted much from the nascent video-sharing website, YouTube.) And his influence is obvious: Stewart's haranguing of Bush-era policies, and the cast of politicians who enabled them, created a generation of young viewers distrustful of the ability of grown-up policymakers to say what they mean. And nearly all of them were capable of voting in November 2008. Did Stewart enable Obama's presidency more than we'd like to think a "fake-news" anchor could?

Mattera thinks so. But this is not, he argues, to Stewart (or Colbert's) credit. They merely indulge young people's desire for a good joke. "Replacing any type of traditional news source with acerbic comedians is crazy," he writes. "Young people would rather laugh than think, feel than analyze. Humor is a feeling, so it plays right into the left's best weapon: emotion." Mattera does not understand his own arguments here. Has he ever watched an episode of *The Daily Show*? If he'd chosen to sit down and watch, he might have recognized Stewart's method. In place of critiquing the emotings of excited college students at political rallies, Stewart walks his audience through the prevarication and silliness of American politics, a model of investigation which "traditional news sources" have chosen, out of either fear or money, to eschew.

Matter's indictment of comedy might be his biggest mistake. To Mattera, it's like a taste or a temperature: a physical sensation. Literally, a "feeling". This is terribly wrong. Comedy is a subset of thought, a powerful tool of recognition and resistance. Stewart and Colbert employed it foremost for entertainment. It required the accident of a terrible presidency for their words to sublime into political power.

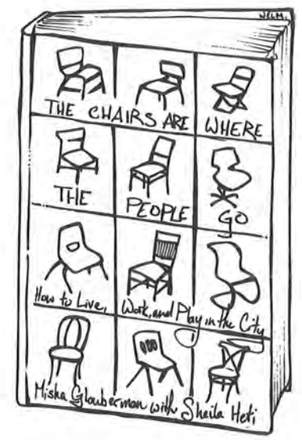
I think Mattera is trying to accomplish something similar with this book. The technique's all wrong, though. He ventures African American Vernacular English for zero reason except shock. He brands Gideon Yago, a former news correspondent for MTV, "effete," "the mother of all metrosexuals", "the uberwoman of all men," and "tight-pants Gideon". He deploys the exclamation point in the same manner a better author might use a question mark, or a period. The effect is disarray: judgement and accusation without reason or reflection, and throughout a mercurial containment of his own hatred. I wonder if this was intentional in some way. Obama Zombies might be a purely performative work intended to communicate Barack Obama's effect not on those who voted for him, but on Mattera himself. This is what you did to me, he's saying, even if he doesn't know it.

Obama Zombies is a book in search of blame. Whom to charge, though? Mattera seems unsure. Is it MTV, whose undue influence on the minds of young people manufactured Obama's victory? Is it academia, with

Book Notes
Improvement Art

The Chairs are Where the People Go is a collection of monologues by Misha Glouberman, a Canadian artist, who discusses, variously, gentrification, relationships, email spam, racial consciousness—nothing especially daring—but most importantly the philosophy of improvisational acting, which is obviously Glouberman's deepest concern but is also one of those things—among them organic food, parenting, environmentalism—which make for writing so boring that readerly fatigue often eclipses the potential for change the subject matter presents.

Locavorism, attachment theory, and androgenic climate change



are of significant meaning to our lives, and future lives—and this is what makes the book so frustrating. The contradictions posed by performance, group dynamics, emotional release—all of which improv reveals—even when treated with equal consideration, suffer Glouberman's unwaveringly positive attitude, which liquefies all matter into easily swallowable self-help gel capsules. And who wouldn't like that? For example: at a public-confessional event he organized for his college reunion, Glouberman notes that "there was this African American guy who described a kind of racism that had been invisible to all of us." Must earnest effort always suffer from itself?

after they receive a potentially expensive diagnosis. Under the auspice of honesty, these health insurance companies scrutinized the records their insurees submitted when buying their policy with the goal of finding the smallest of errors—a misspelling, for example, or a failure to report a small cough on two separate forms—and, in the many cases in which a company found an error, retroactively canceled policies. All of which of course demonstrated that health insurance companies profit not from administering health care, but from withholding it.

* The crucial example here is South CS-Carolina's Jerome Mitchell, who, as reported by Reuters last year, purchased private health insurance from Fortis (now known as Assurant) before leaving for college, in 2001. A year later, Mitchell was diagnosed with HIV, soon after which he learned that Fortis had rescinded his health insurance for what turned out to be an erroroneous note one of Mitchell's nurses—not Mitchell himself—had written during his diagnosis. Now, consider this for a moment. Did no one at Fortis think that denying Mitchell treatment for HIV would be a fairly big deal, especially since HIV is notoriously expensive to treat? Did no one there think that conspiring to deny an eighteen year-old HIV-positive man was clearly a moral harm, and also evil? The better question might be: did it surprise any person at Fortis/Assurant that the state of South Carolina would force the company to pay Jerome Mitchell ten million dollars, on top of reinstating his health insurance, for hedging their profits with his life?

its proliferation of books that aren't *The Federalist*? Is it Obama himself? Mattera does offer a clear explanation for the Republican defeat: John McCain. Here I'm inclined to agree with him. McCain's campaign, as Mattera notes, was painful to watch and must have been embarassing to support. (You need only one figure, Sarah Palin, to understand the cynicism and stupidity of McCain and his handlers.) This explanation would lend legitimacy to the idea that Obama is a bad President, at least according to the terms by which Mattera judges his leaders.

But Obama is, actually, a pretty decent president. He inherited a broken economy and has worked assidously to fix it. He passed health care reform, which, though imperfect, will protect citizens from documented abuses and excesses. Though he won't take credit for it—doing so would disadvantage his 2012 run—he is responsible for the maneuvering required to abolish "Don't Ask, Don't Tell". And he ended the murderous legacy of Osama bin Laden.

The reality of the Obama presidency makes Mattera's book an aesthetic exercise. It physically pains Mattera that Obama sits in the White House. It is not a huge discovery that a lot of people, on the other hand, really like Obama, especially the facts which his skin color and upbringing convey: that you can be an ethnic minority, that you grow up in a single-parent home, and still become the President of the United States. Mattera treats this sort of recognition—Obama/President as symbol, not policy-maker—as an error in human judgement. It's difficult to disagree with him here. You should vote in your interests, which is to say in terms of policy, not identity. But you're not going to convince Mattera that a single voter favored Obama because of his policies. Though you'll wonder which manner of voting, in terms of Obama, Mattera thinks is worse.

Mattera's "six-point battle plan", which concludes his book, is refreshing in its honesty. Bush was "reckless". Government "ruins lives". Reagan is "the greatest modern president". But yet again I don't think Mattera has walked himself through his own arguments. After and before which he encourages his readers to change the world they inhabit by embracing conservative policies, he informs us: "All the 'we can change the world' mumbo jumbo we hear on commencement day is utopian and immature. Truly. We've got to grow up." Can or cannot young people—can anyone—do much of anything about their station in life? Mattera can't quite decide.

The author could be discredited for his approach. He does, after all, argue that "Obama Zombies" would, with enough education, rescind their political convictions. This means that he thinks the Zombies are generally stupid, perhaps as a consequence of their youth or their generation's anomie. But they're not stupid, and Mattera knows this. The only level on which he can engage them is by calling them crazy, or brainless, or simply ridiculous. Which is, frankly, at least a little reassuring. Nobody ever gains much of anything with such little to say.

Yet it's a little heartbreaking, I want to add, that Mattera has chosen to call those whom he hates most—the supporters of President Obama—as something other than human. This kind of strategy befits his book, which gives its reader everything it promises—several conspiracy theories, the "unmasking" of liberal media, and the frequent hypocrisies of celebrities. (Al Gore's "Live Earth" concert series, and what it intended to accomplish, remains baffling.)

But such a method won't work in politics, the arena Mattera obviously hopes to enter. In that sphere of American life, fractured and ridiculous as it is, you are required to engage your adversaries as human beings. ■

Book Notes
Monography

"To start with, look at the all the books": This is how the third novel of Jeffrey Eugenides, *The Marriage Plot*, commences its long survey of college senior Madeleine Hanna, or at least the room in which she eventually awakens on the morning of her graduation from Brown University in 1982. Mention of just how wildly this begining differs from the nature of the author's first two novels (the choral grief of *The Virgin Suicides*, the melodic exuberance of *Middlesex*) may seem petty, but we soon learn it's not: this is a book about the travails of college students as they come to terms with the books,

and the ideas those books arouse, as they leave behind a leafy college quad. Eugenides is correct to recognize just how fresh and exciting it is to read "difficult books"—e.g., Derrida—a sensation only heightened by his novel's post-Vietnam setting, but it's a pretty weak foundation. Books alone, books only, are not enough.

We never find Hanna or her peers—Leonard Bankhead, a depressed philosopher-scientist of uncommon brilliance, or Mitchell Grammaticus, a wayfaring theologian cursed with religious ambivalence—actually *using* a book to make sense of their lives. Like Eugenides, these college graduates quote books like exquisite literary impresarios without digesting any their value. *The Marriage Plot* survives on Eugenides's emphasis that books can depict and inform and question human life but cannot replace it.

CONTRIBUTORS

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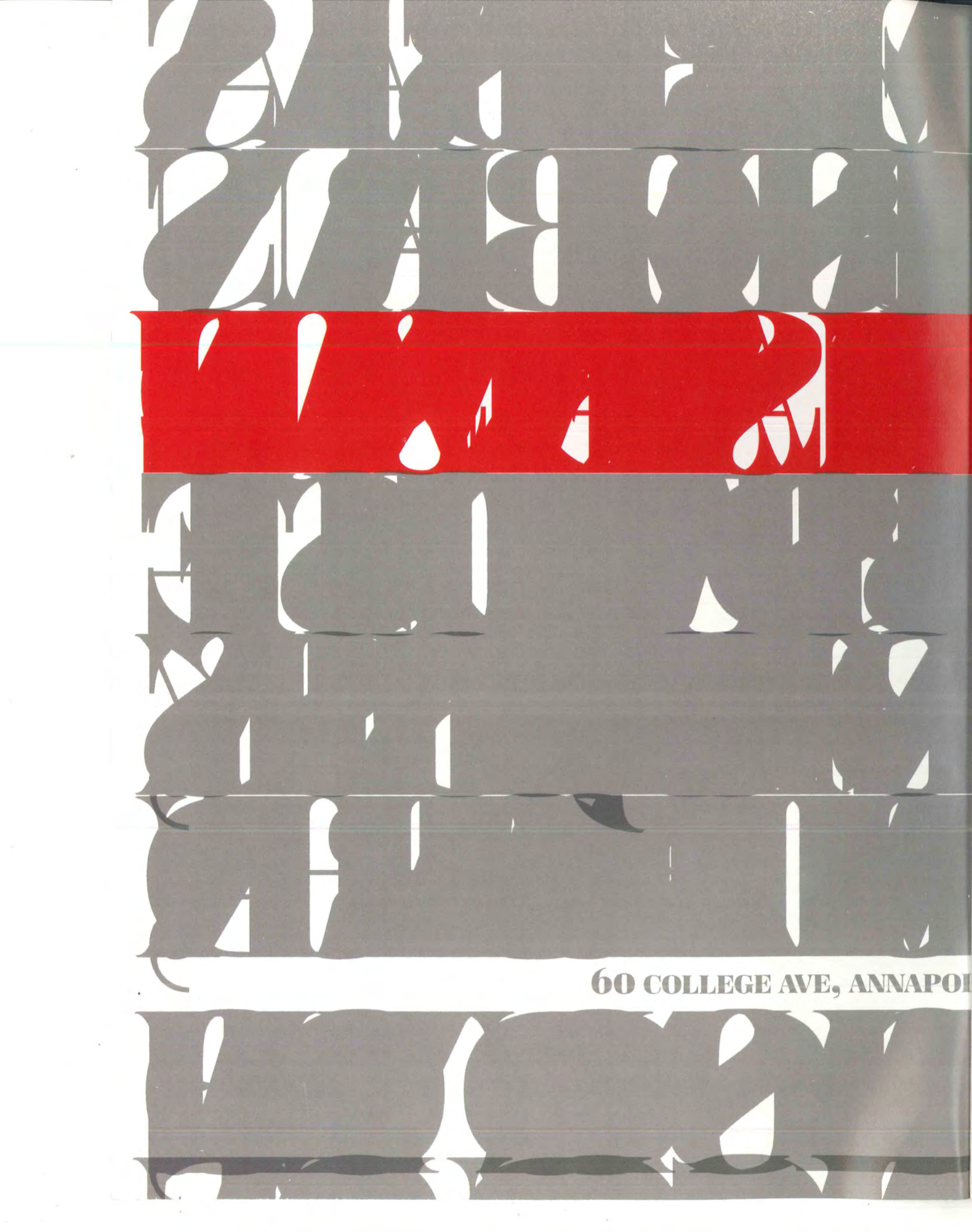
Special thanks to Noah Litvin.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