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BOOKS the ARTS



A Thing or Two About Life

The education of Michael Apted

BY SUSAN PEDERSEN

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MICHAEL APTED'S GREAT *UP* SERIES, ABOUT a cohort of English children, wasn't conceived as a series at all. In 1963, fresh out of Cambridge and as a trainee at Granada TV, Apted was asked to find a group of talkative 7-year-olds for a 40-minute special about the children who would be Britain's barristers and businessmen, factory workers and housewives, at the century's turn. Directed by Paul Almond and screened in 1964, *Seven Up!* was to have been a one-off. But when someone at Granada suggested revisiting the children at 14 and again at 21, Apted jumped at the offer to direct. Even after his career took off and he moved to Hollywood, he made time to make a new installment every seven years.

With the release of *63 Up* last year, the series spans nine films and six decades. It is Apted's most important work and one of the most revelatory documentaries about social change ever made. It has attracted imitations, scholarly articles and comment, and hordes of passionate fans—though perhaps this is the case as much in spite of as because of Apted's direction.

From the outset, he imagined the project as an indictment of class inequality. He wanted to make, as he put it, “a nasty piece of work about these kids who have it all, and these other kids who have nothing.” Drawn to children (mainly boys) at the sharp ends of the class divide, he recruited five of the 14 children from elite private schools and six from London's working-class primary schools and care homes but only two from a middle-class Liverpool suburb and one from rural Yorkshire. In their interviews in *Seven Up!* these 7-year-olds unselfconsciously performed the hierarchies of class—theater all the more devastating for its actors' innocence. Who can forget the now-canonical clip of Andrew Brackfield, Charles Furneaux, and John Brisby (the “three posh boys”) obligingly recounting their reading material (“I read the *Financial Times*”), their plans (“We think I'm going to Cambridge”), and their view that the public (that is, private) schools were a very good thing indeed, since otherwise, their schools would be “so nasty and crowded”?

Riveting cinema, yes, yet troubling, too, and not only for the attitudes it exposed. Watching, one can't help but wonder about the adults behind the camera, who, after all, orchestrated the performances and chose the scenes most likely to arouse our empathy, laughter, or even scorn. Not surprisingly, by the time of the first sequel, *7 Plus Seven*, some of the children had become twitchy and resentful, and by *21 Up*, they bristled at Apted's patronizing manner and leading questions. Sue Davis, Lynn Johnson, and Jackie Bassett (three of only four women subjects) were interviewed together, as if their shared working-class background outweighed any individuality they might have. He went on to ask: Were they angry about their straitened opportunities? Didn't they resent that they would go nowhere in life? It is unclear whether Apted could see that he was enacting the very class relations he deplored, but his subjects stoutly rejected his analysis. They had plenty of opportunities, they told him, more than enough. They intended to have the lives they wanted, thank you very much.

Is it possible to fall in love with a work of art but be appalled by the artist? In “What Do We Do With the Art of Monstrous Men?” the essayist Claire Dederer dissects her complex feelings about Woody Allen. She can't help loving his films, even while recoiling from their narcissism and sheer creepiness—the plotlines about men kill-

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ing off their troublesome mistresses, the glowing girls preposterously still tumbling into bed with an ever-wrinklier Allen. Apted, of course, is no Woody Allen, but there is a similar connection between his touchy character and his brilliant oeuvre. His initial propensity to treat his subjects as stereotypes, his urge to goad rather than sympathize with them, his eagerness to pounce on and probe their every weakness or failure drove even the mildest of them to speak up—and as they did so, to make the films their own.

28 Up (1984) was the tipping point. The first film of the series widely screened in the United States, it was the one Apted considered a breakthrough. Only then did he realize that he wasn't making “a political film about Britain's social classes,” but something much more unusual: an ongoing inquiry into how individuals from a wide range of backgrounds sought out meaning and happiness amid the rapid social change of postwar Britain and all the random incidents and accidents that life threw at them.

The films after that changed as a result. Apted still layered in clips from the earlier installments, but the subjects were now interviewed individually, in segments that explored their unfolding lives and personalities. The films still had much to say about social class, but they now attended to other transformations as well, not least how the quest to balance fami-

ly commitments and personal autonomy was spread across the social scale and revolutionized all of his subjects' lives (especially the women's). Apted wanted to raise awareness of the iniquities of class, but he provoked something else, too: a group campaign by his subjects to teach this emotionally tone-deaf man a thing or two about life.



he lesson began after *21 Up*, and it first took the form of abstention. In 1964 no one thought to seek the children's permission to ask intrusive questions, but by the early '80s some of the interviewees had wised up. Charles, one of the three posh boys, went to Durham rather than Oxford or Cambridge. At 21, his stringy hair, jeans, and green sweater signaled his dissent from the values of his clipped and suited peers. By 28, unwilling to serve as a poster boy for class privilege any longer, he pulled out of the series. Apted called him up to remonstrate, but the conversation went badly, particularly after Charles announced that he had decided to become a documentary filmmaker, too. By his own admission, Apted “went berserk,” poisoning the relationship to the extent that Charles never appeared in the series again and even tried to force Granada to remove all footage of him from the series. The defection still rankles: Apted told *The Hollywood Reporter* in 2018 that Charles had “a rather undistinguished career with the BBC.” Cross him who dares.

The defections continued. John, another of the posh boys, also refused to take part in *28 Up*, and three of the series' participants skipped *35 Up* (1991)—among them Peter Davies, a middle-class suburban Liverpool boy who had become a teacher and, after expressing sharply critical views of Thatcherite policies in *28 Up*, was pilloried by the right-wing press. Traumatized, he refused to take part in the next three films, but like other participants, he eventually discovered that he had leverage and could bargain. He returned for *56 Up* (2012) on the condition that he could promote his new band. John returned in *35 Up* to promote his charity, Friends of Bulgaria.

The concessions made to keep John in the films provide, in themselves, a lesson in the workings of social class. The most opinionated and seemingly snobbish of the posh boys, he insisted at 21 that well-paid autoworkers could easily send their children to university if

only they valued education more. But he clearly felt that he had been set up and in later films insistently revised the record. Though he was chosen to exemplify privilege, he said that when he was 9, his father died, leaving his mother hard up. She then worked to support the family, and he worked through his school vacations, spent a year in the army, and attended Cambridge on a scholarship. “I don’t regard myself as particularly typical of the type that I was no doubt selected to represent,” he said in *56 Up*—not least because “apart from anything else, I’m three-quarters foreign.” John, it turns out, is a great-great-grandson of Todor Burmov, the first prime minister of an independent Bulgaria, and with this revelation, his charity work and his marriage to Claire, the daughter of a former UK ambassador to Bulgaria, suddenly fall into place. John, of course, reaped the benefits of his elite education. He is a barrister and a queen’s counsel, the top rank of lawyers, and enjoys a very comfortable and culturally rich life. This gave him the training, status, and confidence to set his own terms. But his irritated objections to the series’ pieties have become one of its pleasures.

Apted’s less-privileged subjects started pushing back, too. Take the two boys he found in a children’s home in 1964, Paul Kligerman, who was there because of a custody battle (he was later taken with his father’s new family to Australia, where he still lives), and Symon Basterfield, the only Black child in the series. Both were anxious and diffident children, and both drifted into manual labor. In the

early films, Apted quizzed them about their seeming lack of ambition: Why didn’t Paul try for qualifications? Was driving a forklift really the best Symon could do? Very gently, both let Apted know that their priorities lay elsewhere. Both married young and put their energy into their families. By 28, Symon had five children, and those children, he told Apted, “have what I never had.” Which is what? Apted asked. Symon looked at him in disbelief. “A father, innit?” he replied.

Apted had centered his films on class, but another narrative was fast displacing it. Family, it seemed, was society’s bedrock and the individual’s haven. That focus on family suffused the later films, with subjects from modest backgrounds expressing great pride in their children’s accomplishments and bristling at any implication they might have fallen short. Lynn, for example, asked if she was disappointed that her daughters didn’t go to university, answered with a curt “no.” Working-class Tony Walker alluded to troubles that led him and his wife, Debbie, to raise their granddaughter but declined to elaborate. Andrew, one of the posh boys, and Bruce Balden, the son of a soldier stationed in what was then Southern Rhodesia, were sent to boarding schools while very young. (At 7, solemn Bruce said heartbreakingly, “My heart’s desire is to see my daddy, and he’s 6,000 miles away.”) As adults, both refused to send off their own children and married women who wouldn’t think of it anyway. Well-off Suzanne Lusk, whose disaffec-

tion at 14 and 21 had much to do with her parents’ acrimonious relationship and bitter divorce, made family and children the center of her life. Nick Hitchon, a farmer’s son from the Yorkshire dales who became a nuclear physicist and an academic in America, was open about the pain caused by the breakup of his first marriage, saying,

“It was like a death.”

We can understand then why Symon, who had recently lost his mother and went through a hard divorce, declined to participate in *35 Up*. When we are introduced to him again in *42 Up* (1998), he has remarried, and we are not surprised

to discover that he and Vienetta, his second wife, remain intensely family-oriented. Yet they have directed that empathy outward, too, working to reconcile with Symon’s first family and fostering more than 100 children over two decades. Claire Lewis, who joined the series as a researcher for *28 Up* and now serves as its producer, captured the family orientation but missed the social ethic that can undergird it when she concluded, “When it’s all said and done, all people really care about is their family.”



Of course people care about their families. But what happens when that “truth” becomes the narrative through line? The *Up* children were born in the year of the Suez crisis, attended school during Britain’s wars of decolonization, entered university and the labor market in a decade of cultural and industrial strife, and (especially if

they lived in London) watched society become—relatively quickly and with a sometimes violent white response—much more racially and ethnically diverse. As the series zeroed in on family life, not only class but much of this historical drama fell away. Today, when 13 percent of UK residents (and 40 percent of Londoners) are people of color, the disproportionate whiteness of the *Up* cohort feels jarring. True, the Black population in Britain of various ethnic origins was probably under a million when Apted went looking for his schoolchildren in 1963, but London, where he found 10 of them, was already a center for the country’s West Indian and South Asian communities and was changing fast. The films do provide occasional glimpses into this transformation (we watch Bruce’s East London math classes fill with the children of South Asian immigrants), but they don’t explore with any seriousness a postimperial reckoning that surely touched the life of every one of these subjects. When Apted let go of class, he lost sight of other social transformations as well.

The series is also oddly unreflective about the sexual ferment and experimentation that marked the 1970s and ’80s—or, at any rate, it keeps those issues off-screen. In the world of *Up*, people live in couples, and couples are heterosexual. Even though divorces are noted, there is no hint from Apted that the life course might take other forms. I can’t be the only viewer who squirmed when watching his graceless probing of reserved Bruce’s still-unmarried state in *28 Up* and *35 Up*. Could Apted really not imagine why people might wish to keep their sexual history or desires private? Bruce had an unconventional career path for a soldier’s son, teaching by choice in state schools in the East End and later traveling to Bangladesh, but he, too, eventually got with the program, marrying fellow schoolteacher Penny before *42 Up*—which was the film that captured this group’s moment of what we might call peak coupledness. Was the series, by this point, documenting its subjects’ search for happiness, or was it guiding them down a particular path?

Small wonder, then, that the series’ most unusual and compelling participant stands out sharply—not only for his social awareness but also for his anomalous unmarried and childless state. Middle-class Neil was wide-eyed and engaging at 7 but by 14 was already showing signs of anxiety. By 21, he had dropped out of Aberdeen

University and was living in a squat and working on a building site. When Lewis tracked him down for *28 Up* (a task that took her three months), she found him in a camper in North Wales; when filmed, he was tramping in the Scottish highlands and was in obvious psychological trouble. Articulate and philosophical but rocking slightly to and fro, Neil voiced open doubts about his sanity and almost laughed when Apted asked him, inevitably, about having a family. “Children inherit something from their parents,” Neil said. Even if the mother were high-spirited and normal, “the child would still stand a very fair chance of not being full of happiness because of what he or she inherited from me.” Viewers everywhere were relieved to find Neil alive at 35 and, remarkably, serving as a Liberal Democrat councilor in the London borough of Hackney at 42 and in rural Cumbria at 49. (He still does this work and is now a lay minister as well, something that he says “delights me inside.”) If we value social commitment, Neil’s is a commendable if painfully achieved life. But, the films hasten to remind us, he is still living alone.

One might have expected more chafing against this sometimes cloying familialism, but perhaps because Apted chose so few girls, no middle-class girls, and none who would go on to university (and, frankly, because he had so much trouble listening to the ones he selected), the films slide through the ’70s without really marking the transformations inaugurated by feminism. By the ’80s, however, critics and audiences alike found the skewed gender ratio shocking, and while the filmmakers passed it off as just a reflection of earlier social attitudes (although the last time I looked, boys didn’t outnumber girls 10 to four in the 1960s), Apted and Lewis scrambled to respond. Their solution—to bring the male subjects’ wives more fully into the story—helped. Andrew’s wife, Jane, who described herself in *28 Up* as “a good Yorkshire lass”; Paul’s Australian wife, Sue, who was often more perceptive about her shy husband than he was; and Debbie, the wife of East End lad turned London cabbie and bit-part actor Tony, have for decades brought much-needed ballast to the series. Their presence, though, is a distinctly wifely one: They explain, encourage, and occasionally correct or chide their husbands. Debbie especially, who had to put up with Tony’s on-camera confession of

extramarital “regretful behavior” in *42 Up*, has a look of mixed indulgence and exasperation that I wish I could patent. Tellingly, the wives who are what used to be called career women (Bruce’s wife, Penny, a busy head schoolteacher, and Nick’s second wife, Cryss, an academic) don’t play this mediating role, and Nick’s first wife, Jackie, the one woman who strongly defended an ideal of egalitarian and dual-career marriage, felt so bruised by the reception of *28 Up* that she refused to appear in the films again.

And yet feminism came for Apted whether invited or not, from a direction he clearly never expected. Lynn, Sue, and Jackie, his three working-class girls, in some ways conformed to the series’ norm of family-centered life. All three married by 25, and while Sue and Jackie divorced quite young, all were attentive and caring parents to children raised with long-term partners, although Sue, interestingly, has not remarried and described her now two-decades-long relationship with Glenn as “the longest engagement known to man.” And yet she and Lynn also voiced the series’ strongest defense of the value of work, both for their own happiness and for its social purpose. Lynn worked for years in East London as a children’s librarian. “Teaching children the beauty of books and watching their faces as books unfold to them, it’s just fantastic,” she said in *28 Up*. She spent decades battling to maintain children’s services in the face of the country’s austerity measures (by *56 Up*, her job had been cut) and insisted, in film after film, that the work was profoundly worthwhile. Sue did various office jobs while raising her children—“I worked all my life, I can’t imagine not working”—and then took an administrative job at Queen Mary University of London. There, clearly talented, she flourished. By *49 Up* (2005), though having never gone to university, she had become the principal administrator for the school’s postgraduate courses. Did she like the responsibility? Apted asked. Sue laughed and said, “I was born for the responsibility.”

Jackie, too, helped drag the series toward a more serious engagement with women’s aspirations and rights. On the face of it, perhaps next to Neil, she had the hardest life. Married at 19 and divorced soon after, she later had a “short, very sweet relationship” and a son, Charlie. Not wanting him to be “an only,” she then had two boys with Ian, with whom she amicably coparented even after their cohabitation ended. But Ian, tragically, was killed in a traffic accident, and Jackie, diagnosed with

rheumatoid arthritis and unable to work, was forced to rely on (and be subject to the terrible indignities of) the benefit system. Yet it was Jackie who, in *63 Up*, called Apted out for his decades of unthinking sexism. “When we were younger,” she told him, “I kept asking myself, ‘Why’s he asking me questions about marriage and men? Why’s he not asking me questions about how the country is?’ I felt you treated us, as women, totally different, and I didn’t like it.” His questions in *21 Up*, she

remembered, were especially obtuse and enraging. True, “when we started at 7... there weren’t many career women. But when we hit 21, I really thought you’d have had a better idea of how the world works, shall I say. But you still asked us the most mundane, domestic questions.” Jackie had had enough; in *21 Up* she got so angry with Apted that he had to turn the cameras off—an intensely revelatory moment of the subject striking back, and one that Apted, to his credit, let Jackie revisit and explain much later, with the cameras rolling.

So is the message of this remarkable series really that social class matters less and personality, family, character, and accident matter more? Not entirely. Yes, some of the working-class children (Tony, Sue) did better than expected, but none became rich or famous, whereas all of the upper-class children (John, Andrew, Charles, Suzy) enjoyed very

Despite the limits of Apted’s focus, class and social change do form the films’ important backdrop.



Before All of This

And as usual, early summer seems already to hold, inside it,
the split fruit of late fall, those afternoons we'll
soon enough lie down in, their diminished colors, the part no one
comes for. I'm a man, now; I've seen
plenty of summers, I shouldn't be
surprised—why am I?

As if everything hadn't all along been designed—I include myself—
to disappear eventually.

Meanwhile, how the wind sometimes makes
the slenderest trees, still young, bend over

makes me think of knowledge conquering
superstition, I can almost
believe in that—until the trees, like

fear, spring back. Then a sad
sort of quiet, just after, as between two people who have finally realized
they've stopped regretting the same things. It's like they've never
known each other. Yet even now, waking, they insist they've woken
from a dream they share, forgetting all over again
that every dream
is private...

Whatever the reasons are for the dead
under-branches of the trees that flourish here, that the dead persist
is enough; for me, it's enough.

The air stirs like history

Like the future

Like history

CARL PHILLIPS

comfortable private (and in the case of the boys, professional) lives. What is striking instead is that the subjects resisted the simple social determinism that the series tried to foist on them at first, insisting that they were, in spite of it all, the authors of their lives.

As a result, the films do tell us much about the nature of class and social change in Britain across the

past half century. Film reviewers treat the *Up* series as an entirely original endeavor, a unique attempt to document the relationship between individual aspiration and social change across a lifetime. But in fact, sociologists and ethnographers have been tilling this furrow for decades. The most creative such project is, perhaps, Mass Observation, which since 1937 has episodically enlisted ordinary Britons in constructing

an ethnography of everyday life, including by writing diaries. Social scientists took up the challenge also through cohort studies that tracked the health, educational, and career outcomes of children born in 1945, 1958, and 1970 and through studies that interrogated thousands of subjects about community life at midcentury, the move from slums to new towns in the '50s, the rise of commercial culture and affluence in the '60s, and the impact in later decades of deindustrialization, political polarization, and new social movements.

In the last few years, historians have returned to those records, trying to free them from the conclusions that the interviewers (much like Apted) drew before the subjects could even open their mouths. In *Me, Me, Me? The Search for Community in Post-War England*, Jon Lawrence goes back to the interview notes from 10 postwar community studies to see whether people really had abandoned solidarity for individualism. Unsurprisingly, the truth is more subtle. People often supported what we might call social democratic values—the belief, for example, that the state should ensure that prosperity lifts all boats—while embracing aspiration (especially for their children) and the post-'60s view that they ought to be able to think and live as they please. Economic crisis and, still more, neoliberal policies hit that consensus hard: Cuts and privatization created winners and losers, even as social safety nets were shredded. And yet the cultural changes wrought by the '70s were deep enough and profound enough that no one quite wanted to see the clock turned back. Women in particular did not mourn a past in which their horizons were sharply constrained.

As Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite argued in *Class, Politics, and the Decline of Defiance in England, 1968–2000*, although class continued to matter—even as inequality worsened—people resisted labeling themselves by class; the very word seemed snobbish or blinkered. Most preferred to say they were ordinary, and yet they were still able to define complex identities for themselves. In a recent article, Sutcliffe-Braithwaite and three other historians (Emily Robinson, Camilla Schofield, and Natalie Thomlinson) trace how the social movements of the '70s underwrote that shift in identification. Race and gender, they argue, had become as generative of social identities and social politics as class. The divergent trajectories but shared optimism of Sue, Lynn, and Jackie make sense in this framework. Much

as they deplored the harshness of austerity Britain, all three felt that their lives were fuller, happier, more varied, and more interesting than they could have predicted. The world, though much more precarious, had split open and let them in.

The *Up* series has now been with us for a lifetime. Countless viewers have identified with its subjects' trials and triumphs—especially, judging from the letters that pour in to the newspapers after each episode, if they are of the same generation. I am close in age to Apted's subjects, which made watching *63 Up* a rather melancholy affair. Having raised children and (often) buried parents, this cohort has become sharply aware of its own mortality. John's law practice seems to be winding down, and Andrew, who had a demanding career at a major international firm, has retired early. He regrets not spending more time with his family, and he and Jane want to have some good years together while they still have their health. Bruce has cut back his teaching, happy to let Penny's career take precedence. He worries about his weight and dreads not old age but the "disabling, degenerating conditions linked with [it]." So, with reason, does Neil, who has lived most of his life in the rural areas where he feels more comfortable and who has, as he says, "relied upon my body very much." Over the decades, we've watched wiry Neil tramp through Scotland or Cumbria. Now he bicycles to the nearest village from the cottage he acquired, with a small inheritance after his mother's death, in rural France.

There is sadder news, too. Nick, still teaching at the University of Wisconsin, has developed throat cancer. He isn't frightened for himself, he tells Apted, but he dreads the effect on those close to him. And Lynn, who had what she thought was just a minor accident—a bump from a swing when taking her grandson to the park—went to a hospital and suddenly and incomprehensibly died. With her rock-solid marriage and close family, she had always been a bit irritated by Apted's endless questions. "I'm happy with the way my life has gone," she told him shortly in *56 Up*. Five years after her death, her daughters dissolve into tears when speaking of her. Lynn is remembered for her dedication to the East End's children. St. Saviour's primary school, where she was a governor

for over 25 years, named its refurbished library after her. "I don't think I quite realized just how much she was adored by the wider community," one of her daughters confesses.

Other participants are thinking about their lives and legacies, too. Revealingly, both of the middle-class boys are now doing what the aspirant and educated do when they want to leave a mark: writing. (Neil has an unpublished autobiography and Peter an unpublished novel.) But the difference between the world they faced as young adults in the late '70s and the one facing their children and grandchildren has driven a few to an understanding—which the previously mentioned historians could not better—of how the collectivist entitlements and values of the '70s cushioned their early difficulties and underwrote their later successes. Sue's divorce didn't derail her, she tells us, because she had "wonderful support from the council." It helped her get and then later buy her flat, a bit of good luck that changed her life. With council housing now scarce and the National Health Service underfunded, she worries that the young face a much more precarious future than she did.

Peter, who so offended Thatcherites in 1984, agrees. Stuck in low-paying jobs in hospitality or call centers and with no hope of acquiring property, those in the next generation, he says, might be the first to have things worse than their parents. Even self-made Tony, who dreamed of owning a sports bar in Spain, has felt neoliberalism's hard edge, with Uber and other ride-share apps cutting his and Debbie's cabbie earnings by a third. A Leave voter during the Brexit campaign, he says he will never vote Tory again.

This reflectiveness is surely a byproduct of the project itself: One can't be turned into a historical subject without it having some effect. Apted's "children" have been forced to live examined lives, and this changed them in profound ways. Understandably, some have regretted ever getting caught in the net. In *35 Up*, John memorably called the series "a little pill of poison" inserted into his life every seven years, and in *42 Up*, Suzy said the films stir up "lots of baggage." (She opted out of this last installment.) But

most remain loyal to the project, to one another, and thereby, in a strange sense, to the social whole they are collectively meant to represent. Sue, for example, is happy to take part precisely because she thinks of herself as quite ordinary and hence useful. "The things we're going through, everyone's going through," she says. And a few seem to love it. One is the ebullient Tony, who was once driving the astronaut Buzz Aldrin in his taxi when someone stopped them to ask for an autograph—Tony's, he was shocked to discover. Another, more surprisingly, is Jackie. Asked how she could enjoy appearing in the series so much, given her often acrimonious relationship with Apted, she replies, "I told him off. I didn't kill him!" Indeed, she, like several of the other "children," has grown protective of Apted, who, however old they may be now, is older still. (He turns 80 next year.)

An unspoken question thus hangs over *63 Up*: Will there be another installment?

I am not sure that matters. Apted's series is already a masterpiece and one that will last. Despite all the backtalk his subjects gave him and the way the series adjusted to credit their views, the project has much to say about the power of social class,

even if people now insist on their right to contest its strictures and to define its meaning for themselves.

"For me, it's still them and us," Tony says. Asked how she sees herself, Sue replies, "Oh, working class, always working class"—a moving acknowledgment that while now-vanished social entitlements (and not just her drive) enabled her to prosper economically, it has not eroded her core identity and loyalties. And even though Jackie insists that despite everything (Ian's death, her disability), she's been "lucky," she now concedes, more than 40 years after she blew up at Apted for implying that she had no opportunities, that she should have stayed in school. She's proud of her three sons (one in the army, another working in a warehouse, and the third "cheffing"), but she is determined that her granddaughter will have more chances. "You're going to uni," she recalls telling the little girl. "What's uni?" the child asked. "University," said Jackie. "You're going."

An unspoken question hangs over *63 Up*: Will there be another installment in the series?



Have You Been Online Lately?

Hari Kunzru's fatalist comedy of errors

BY KEVIN LOZANO

HARI KUNZRU'S *RED PILL* HAS THE TRAPPINGS OF A THRILLER you might buy at an airport. It involves a chase of sorts, one that starts in the suburbs of Berlin, moves back in time to Stasi-controlled East Germany, and then trapezes around from Paris to the highlands outside Glasgow and, finally, to Brooklyn. There are spies, intrigue, Peeping Toms, conspiracy, and violence haunting the many corners of his novel, and yet the sensibility of the book is much more digressive, cerebral, and torturously self-conscious. That's because at its core, *Red Pill* is a novel of ideas, probing seemingly disparate poles of thought: the conception of the self, the creation of whiteness in European Romanticism, and the threat of the Internet—the way it has destroyed our sense of privacy, circulated fringe ideas, and popularized the alt-right.

Much of *Red Pill's* action hap-

pens in the head of a stock character familiar to anyone who has read contemporary fiction. The narrator is a guilt-ridden, neurotic, middle-aged writer who lives in Brooklyn and spends more time doom-scrolling than writing. Like Kunzru, he is a South Asian British expat, but unlike his creator, he's not a fiction writer but a cultural essayist—the kind you might recognize in the liminal space between the academy and the general interest magazine. He is also in the throes

of a midlife crisis, but one of a more philosophical nature.

Kunzru's protagonist has just been awarded a prestigious fellowship at a Berlin arts foundation called the Deuter Center, an haute and vaguely libertarian residency based on ideas of collaboration. Yet on the eve of his departure for Europe, he admits the only thing on his mind is the dire state of world affairs—the upcoming 2016 presidential election, the global refugee crisis, and the images of war and death that litter his computer screen. No amount of distance and time spent writing will resolve any of the feral dread his news feed produces. Instead our hero spends the sleepless nights before his trip in tears and in the company of his glowing laptop. He's crying not out of empathy but out of fear, mostly directed toward his own soft, doughy uselessness: "If the world changed,

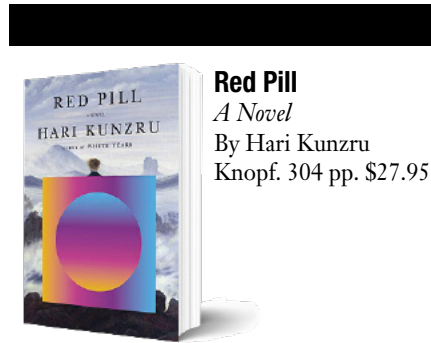
would I be able to protect my family? Could I scale the fence with my little girl on my shoulders? Would I be able to keep hold of my wife's hand as the rubber boat overturned? Our life together was fragile. One day something would break."

These primal impulses toward preserving the family unit and, by extension, the status quo are constantly on his mind, and his worry begins to fester into obsession once he is in Berlin. For our narrator, the first sign that things will not go well is the prospect of working in an open office at the center. His discomfort with the arrangements—an invasion of privacy, in his opinion—eventually grows into paranoia as he begins to believe the staff is keeping an eye on his comings and goings. Passing his time eating Chinese takeout, walking around the lakeside near the center, reading Heinrich von Kleist, and binge-watching a violent and baroque police procedural called *Blue Lives*, he does everything but complete the project he went to Berlin for.

Here we can sympathize with him. I don't think many would want to finish his book, a broad and, by his own admission, pedantic study of the history and "construction of the self in lyric poetry" (i.e., a book about how poets through the ages have used the word "I"). It is precisely the pointlessness of this work, smashed up against his sense of dispossession, that propels him to find new purpose, one he stumbles upon in a chance encounter at a gala and a kebab shop, where he meets an avatar for everything wrong with the Western world—white supremacy, the Internet, and bad television. From here, the chase begins as our narrator sets off on a mock-tragic quest to root out the wicked forces he thinks are hurtling us toward a hellish future.

On its face, this premise and the style in which it is packaged are transparently ridiculous. But ridiculousness is also the motor for much of our world, especially the banter among self-serious people like our narrator. If there is a lasting value to *Red Pill*, it is in its clever and thoughtful critique of the urge of many creative and purportedly progressive people to make themselves heroes—or at the very least historical subjects—at a moment in which they clearly have so little agency or role to play. To Kunzru's credit, he recognizes how far this kind of fatalist comedy can take us and makes the most of it. *Red Pill*, after all, is a bleak novel about how writers aren't going to save anyone—including themselves.

Born in London in 1969, Kunzru began his career as a novelist tackling topics befitting a Gen Xer: identity, globalization, and the end of history. His first book, *The Impressionist*, was a magical-realist-inflected historical novel about British colonialism, and his second, *Transmission*, was a comedy of errors about tech and immigration. In his 2008 *My Revolutions*, he began to move toward the recurring themes of his more recent work. A brainy romp about the fail-



Red Pill

A Novel

By Hari Kunzru

Knopf. 304 pp. \$27.95

ures of the British New Left, it marked the beginning of the form his novels now take: frenetic and cinematic high/low hybrids that chart a path through a wide-ranging ideological debate and historical inquiry.

Since the release of *My Revolutions*, Kunzru has lived in the United States, and his novels have become even more antic, roving, and ambitious. *Gods Without Men* (2011) was a systems novel set in the dusty locales of the American West that explored many of the taboos and canards in American culture: UFO cultists, meth lab tweekers, sensationalist TV news networks, the mysticism of the stock market, and helicopter parenting. Through his exploration of these realms, Kunzru showed the interconnected yet contradictory nature of belief—secular, extraterrestrial, and spiritual—that sharpened the paranoid style of 2010s America, where anti-vaxxers and free market evangelists existed in the same body politic as progressive liberals.

In his 2017 follow-up, *White Tears*, Kunzru continued to mine these paradoxes, telling the story of a young white audiophile haunted by a blues song as old as recorded music who ends up on a journey to the South to absolve himself of the sins committed by previous generations of culture vultures. Like *Gods Without Men*, the book looks at the invidiousness of obsession and spins a sprawling yarn that in

this case examines cultural appropriation, the prison-industrial complex, and the racism of the American music industry.

The project of Kunzru's American novels was to animate and satirize the highly interconnected alienation of life in the United States. In following the foibles of people who strain to find meaning or make positive changes to their lives and families, he illustrated the way many of his new neighbors find themselves at the mercy of forces that individual actors can't fix. Be it a devilish trading algorithm or a cursed vinyl record, a child lost in the desert or a patrician family that builds prisons, he created networks—through narratives as well as characters—to make a point about the social and economic conditions that crush his narrators' abortive attempts at more meaningful lives. We are, indeed, all connected, but not necessarily in ways that we like.

Red Pill picks up many of the themes of Kunzru's American novels. In it he scrutinizes the malignant influence of the Internet on solidarity, love, and care. Though its protagonist lives in America, the novel also represents something of a return to Kunzru's Europe. This is true in the book's setting as well as in its interest in finding the place where the freneticism of American digital culture and Old World European racism, nihilism, and apocalyptic thought meet.

Red Pill is perhaps Kunzru's most overtly political novel. It not only engages the world of electoral politics but also offers an unsparing study of the flaccid state of 21st century liberalism and the intellectuals and creative types who hold on to its false promise of order and reason. Kunzru's narrator disdains reactionaries, but like many good bourgeois writers, he also spurns what he sees as the coarseness of the politics that might be needed to challenge them. "The only political slogan that had ever really moved me," he tells us, "was *Ne travaillez jamais* and the attempt to live that out had run into the predictable obstacles." In conversations with his wife, Rei, he also shows how willing he is to escape into outworn historical analogies rather than confront the present. "Have you been online lately?" he asks her. "I think this is what Weimar Germany must have felt like." Then, predictably, he compares himself to Walter Benjamin.

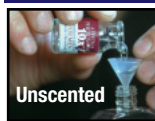
Like many in his milieu, our narrator sees the political and the intellectual as separate strands of

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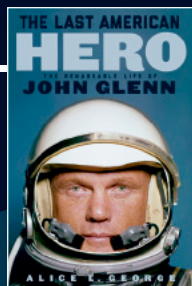
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"Today, it seems, we cherish our cinema superheroes, forgetting that people like John Glenn used to walk among us—and probably still do."

—Neil deGrasse Tyson,

Astrophysicist, American Museum of Natural History, author of *Space Chronicles: Facing the Ultimate Frontier*



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life, and given that the political creates so much anxiety for him, he's far more comfortable with the intellectual. Fluent in critical theory and pop culture, he sees his role as an interpreter, even if the critical work of interpretation is being made obsolete by a world that demands action. He recognizes this tension but is so wedded to a self-fulfilling fatalism that when called to defend his work by a fellow scholar at the center, he justifies his inability to do so as something outside his immediate control.

By focusing much of the book on the mental and moral contortions of those liberal but often apolitical writers who prefer to see themselves as above the risks and commitments of action, Kunzru offers us a cunning and damning portrait of many of his peers. But by throwing this character into a world of intrigue and political activity, he also shows the limited role these writers and intellectuals can play.

If Kunzru were simply to follow his unnamed narrator, the novel would likely crumble under the weight of the latter's dreary inactivity and proclivity for clichéd pronouncements. But Kunzru also uses the story as a vehicle to explore the world around his protagonist. Through him, we meet ex-Stasi spies, gun-toting porters, alt-right television show producers, and dumpster-diving migrants, and we are given a sharp and desolate picture of 21st century Berlin. Like many of its peer cities, it is a metropole consumed by the contradictions and violence of the powerful—a place where, throughout its history, power has been exerted by the state and where mass media has created a more atomized way of life.

Monika, a maid at the Deuter Center, helps bring this theme to the fore. She and the narrator first meet when she is cleaning his apartment and finds him passed out in the bathroom. He sees her as someone who might have the answers about the dark forces he senses within and outside the walls of the center. She sees him for what he is: an addled writer in the midst of a nervous breakdown. Yet she agrees to have dinner with him at the Chinese restaurant he frequents, where she tells him her life story.

Monika, it turns out, was once a punk drummer and denizen of East Berlin's bohemian set. In those years, she ran away from home and school and worked in a textile factory, but she soon found herself beset by boredom and anger. She refused to join Free German Youth or to acquiesce to the needs of the "piss schnapps" functionaries who paid for her manual labor. Then she fell in with the punks of Friedrichshain and began huffing paint thinner and moshing at secret shows. Eventually she joined a band led by two women she met and moved into their squat. Just as she

was settling into her new life, a Stasi agent tried to coerce her into keeping tabs on her friends. Monika refused, so the Stasi sowed seeds of doubt about her among her social set, planting items at her workplace

and in her apartment to make it appear she had become a snitch after all. Left with no other options after her friends turned on her, she became an informant, traveling around East Germany and snooping on punks and dissidents in other cities, until she was abandoned by the Stasi once her usefulness had run its course.

Our narrator sits in the restaurant and takes in the story with as much empathy as he can muster, trying to salvage from this bleakest of lives some kind of connection with his less-bleak but still sad-sack one. But even if he struggles to find the kinship he so desires, it's clear why we are hearing Monika's story. Through her, Kunzru offers an example of how power can be wielded—by the state or by one's peers—to destroy a person's sense of self and solidarity, which contrasts with the narrator's. ("You're soft and selfish," she tells him. "The world will chew you up and spit you out.") Here, Kunzru gives us a real historical subject, an ordinary person whose hardship comes from her attempt at creating community in the face of a state and culture hostile to it.

Agency, probably, is a myth for everyone, writer or regular citizen. But unlike our narrator, Monika long ago has come to terms with this. Meanwhile, the narrator tries to do everything he can to resist this realization. He sees evil everywhere—in television shows, in online forums, at the ballot box—and in the wake of her story, he struggles to overcome it. He's just as ensnared in a system that wants him to be

Kunzru offers us a cunning and damning portrait of many of his peers.

74,000 Acres of Forest Burning

The kids go out for coffee. They arrived at 3 AM and we only have decaf.

They've left chimneys in the rubble. Contorted washers and driers.

The blistered street sign. The flaming heart of the redwood.

Even here, the air hangs umber-colored, smoke-thickened.

Ash falls, flaking the bench, the path. It gathers in the veins of leaves, in the spiders' webs.

Sally carries photos and notebooks from the car and the lace wedding dress she still hasn't worn.

Max brings a big bowl of heirloom tomatoes and his knives.

Janet bakes an apple galette and cries.

Here we tunnel into the day. Here we shovel the hours.

I walk the neighborhood, crushing a thin crust.

A man sleeps in his car, seat tilted back.

A woman stands at the open door of her van. Inside chickens flutter in cages. She gives them water.

Back home, kibbles in the dog's bowl.

The sun is neon orange on our kitchen wall.

I pack a tinted photo of my mother, Janet's silver bracelets, the ceramics we schlepped the length of Italy.

Sally vacuums.

Now she thinks she feels the baby move.

We strain toward the next briefing. The fire's moving on the ridge. It's .8 miles from their house.

I cut parsley from the garden, wash off the greasy film.

Bees keep on nuzzling into the blossoms.

An ant carries a broken ant across the patio.

A fire truck. Four men in profile through the windows. They look straight ahead, jaws set.

The dahlias nod their big flame-heads in the breeze that's picking up.

Breeze is what we don't want. The maple leaves rustle.

ELLEN BASS

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alone and powerless, but he still holds on to a notion of defiant selfhood. For both the narrator and Monika, the institutions that should take care of people have not only failed but participate in perpetuating this lack of care. Our narrator is convinced he can change this.

Monika's story is one of the rare sections of *Red Pill* that is more or less earnest and humorless, a kind of step back before the book's gears of absurdity begin to grind again. When Monika exits from the novel, the narrative moves into overdrive, and the villain is revealed: Anton, the creator of the violent cop show that our narrator has become obsessed with during his time in Berlin. Like him, Anton is a stock character but in a different sense, a composite of the loudmouthed, reactionary cultural ideologues who are hawkish salesmen for new tech and fringe ideas—a kind of cross of Richard Spencer, Elon Musk, and Joe Rogan. Anton's television show, our narrator observes, is "very conventional, but something else was at work, a subtext smuggled into the familiar procedural narrative."

In a twist that strains credulity, that subtext is reactionary philosophy, ranging from the Counter-Enlightenment to nihilism. *Blue Lives'* characters quote passages from figures like the French monarchist and counterrevolutionary Joseph de Maistre and the Romanian philosopher of pessimism Emil Cioran, and the show's creator, we later discover, is an evangelist for a garbled mix of tech-bro accelerationism and old-fashioned race science. Before meeting Anton, the narrator sees *Blue Lives* as "just an elaborate illustration of some point of view of the writer, something to do with the world's hopelessness." After they meet, he sees a darker agenda. Anton could reach millions of people with his work, whereas the narrator could hope to influence only a cloistered few. And while the novel's title appears only once in the text, its meaning should be pretty obvious by now: The narrator worries that *Blue Lives* is a gateway drug for the alt-right.

The narrator's fateful meeting with Anton and the lopsided battle it spawns give shape to the rest of the book's action.

At a gala in a tony part of West Berlin, the narrator, still reeling from his encounter with Monika, is introduced to Anton, and after a clumsy conversation about *Blue Lives*, the two end up having dinner at a kebab restaurant, where Anton reveals what he really is: a high-powered troll, a conservative "chad" counterpart for our "lib" narrator.

For the rest of the novel, this reactionary doppelgänger haunts our protagonist. He "lives rent free," as Anton puts it, in the narrator's head; Anton torments him in real life, too, stopping by for a visit at the center, where he poses as an acquaintance obsessed with Nazi arcana, and later as a shadowy figure in a sprawling, QAnon-style conspiracy theory the narrator imagines taking place in online forums. While the narrator's life was obviously falling apart before he met Anton, this introduction to his nemesis tilts him toward madness. As someone tasked with interpreting culture, he becomes

"We must remember," the narrator reminds us, "that we do not exist alone."

fixed on the idea that Anton's show is a primary organ for the violent and callow conditions the narrator sees emerging around him. He is so disturbed by this realization that he abandons his writing and commits himself to combat with Anton and his ideas, following him first to Paris and then to a final showdown in the highlands of Scotland.

Things don't go well from the outset. In Paris the narrator attends a speech during which Anton presents his unvarnished vision of the automated future. This new world "belonged to those who could separate themselves out from the herd, intelligence-wise.... Everything important would be done by a small cognitive elite of humans and AIs, working together to self-optimize." Our now-unhinged narrator blurts out during the Q&A section, "Why are you promoting a future in which some people treat others like raw material? That's a disgusting vision." Anton, of course, just shrugs him off:

I'm sorry it gives you sad feels, but I think it's how it's going to be. Some people will have agency and others won't.... Despite your outraged tone, all you're doing is describing your own preference, which, when you think about it, is more or less

irrelevant when assessing the truth or falsity of a prediction.

As a character, Anton at times feels hollow, stitched together from the catchphrases that a hectoring online conservative might lob in a Twitter thread. He's a bit of an overdetermined symbol, a stand-in for how politics, the economy, and the dark corners of the Internet and entertainment are intertwined. But there is a deeper problem with Anton as a character: We learn very little about his world. While it is true that belief in conspiracy theories is a powerful part of everyday life (QAnon's growing influence on electoral politics should indicate that), the narrator's inability to respond effectively to Anton tells us only about the fecklessness of well-intentioned but often daft liberal intellectuals; it tells us very little about why people end up taking that red pill.

Behind each alt-right forum post is a person, but these people go entirely unexamined in Kunzru's novel. Its discussions of race also seem underdeveloped. Race exists as a theme and is central to Anton's bizarre articulations, but we learn very little about how the experience of race shapes the narrator's life. All we know is that Anton holds abhorrent views, that the narrator has mostly admirable liberal ones, and that Anton always wins.

Our narrator doesn't catch up with Anton in the end. The next time we see his nemesis is on a television screen, in a MAGA hat on election night, when the narrator is back home in Brooklyn. He's watching the returns with his wife and friends. They're there to celebrate Hillary Clinton's impending victory—until, obviously, the unthinkable happens. Here, too, Kunzru twists the knife. While Anton has ridden the right-wing wave to the doorstep of power, our narrator is even more anxious and useless than he was at the book's opening.

After their friends leave the party dejected, the narrator and his wife spend a sleepless night on their phones. Just as at the start of the novel, the narrator fixates on his family and the world that awaits them. He understands that coping with the present will entail learning something he didn't understand at the beginning: that agency cannot come through the self in its isolated state. "We must remember," he tells us, "that we do not exist alone." **N**



The Square Root of Sound

Jyoti's Mama, You Can Bet!

BY MARCUS J. MOORE

IN MID-JULY, DURING A 48-MINUTE INSTAGRAM LIVE interview with the Black culture and art website *Afro-punk*, Georgia Anne Muldrow explained the meaning behind *Mama, You Can Bet!*, her third album under the pseudonym Jyoti. As she put it, single mothers forgo their desires for the betterment of their children; the album was written to celebrate them. "I wanted to make a song for when a daughter sees their mother as a woman...for when the child respects a mother's right to have passionate love in her life," Muldrow said. "They say after a certain age, you're not beautiful.... They say that this woman... who's given her whole body [and] done the most holiest thing known to man, has now depreciated in value." On the title track, which opens the album, she speaks specifically to Black mothers. And with its distinctly West African sound—a woozy mix

of goblet drums, upright bass, and quiet piano chords, produced by Muldrow in her home studio—it's meant to empower a group of women who have been historically mistreated and disconnected from their ancestry. "There's many a man who'd love your hand / Mama, love is waiting for you," she sings.

Muldrow has made a career

of such empowerment. Long before being woke was trendy, she and Erykah Badu coined the term in the song “Master Teacher,” from Badu’s 2008 album *New Amerykah Part One (4th World War)*, in which they sang about finding utopia (and themselves) in times of madness. In the early 2000s, as a student at the New School in Manhattan, Muldrow and her friend the saxophonist Lakecia Benjamin talked about wokeness as a way to understand how they could contextualize their music within the political battles of their everyday lives. “Most of the conversation in our friendship was about putting our struggles in our music because that was all we could do,” Muldrow told *Pitchfork* in 2018. “[We spoke about] trying to find points of power: in your soloing, in your composing. Most of our conversations were about things situated around African liberation all over the world.” To that end, Muldrow, who had been releasing rap and soul music under her own name, has long encouraged Black people to fully embrace their heritage and fight systemic oppression. “We play nice while they stackin’ up kills,” she proclaimed on “Blam,” from her Grammy-nominated 2018 album *Overload*. “How much we gotta grow before we can learn to defend ourselves?” On “187,” from 2019’s *Black Love & War*, a collaboration with the rapper Dudley Perkins, she declared, “Death to all oppressors.”

As Jyoti (“light” in Sanskrit), a name given to her by family friend Alice Coltrane, Muldrow creates a wistful mélange of spiritual jazz indebted to the work of the jazz greats. Through contemplative piano and organ solos, thick bass lines, and electronic drums, she crafts a sound equally informed by the past and the present, as if she’s trying to imagine how legends like Coltrane and Nina Simone would fit within the scope of modern-day jazz. Her music is also decidedly West Coast; listening to it, one hears the lush Afrocentric influences of Los Angeles stalwarts Horace Tapscott and Charles Mingus.

There’s a certain ease to Muldrow’s work as Jyoti; she borrows and riffs on the textures of Coltrane, Tapscott, and Mingus in her jazz-centered arrangements with panache. While she pays homage to her influences,

she doesn’t center them to the point of diminishing her own sound. Muldrow remixes two Mingus songs on *Mama, You Can Bet!* For “Bemoanable Lady Geemix,” she brightens his moody arrangement with big electronic drums and darting synths, turning the down-tempo original into a glossy hypnotic thump. On “Fabus Foo Geemix,” she quickens the original with an upbeat drum loop and electric bass, turning the old Mingus cut into a funk-infused breakbeat. Equally spacious, scenic, and forward-looking, Mingus and Muldrow use traditional jazz as the basis for something remarkably new and vibrant.

Muldrow was born in Los Angeles to an accomplished musical family, and her current creative direction is rooted in her biography. Her father, Ronald Muldrow, was an acclaimed funk and jazz guitarist known for his work with the saxophonist Eddie Harris. Her mother, Rickie Byars Beckwith, is an experimental vocalist who specializes in New Thought music and used to sing with the jazz musicians Pharoah Sanders and Roland Hanna. Muldrow started composing music at the age of 10. In 2006 the LA-based Stones Throw Records released her first full-length album, *Olesi: Fragments of an Earth*, a dense collage of hip-hop, Black liberation soul, and free jazz that foreshadowed her work as Jyoti.

Her first two Jyoti albums, the free-jazz-focused *Oco tea* and the more straight-ahead *Denderab*, were released in 2010 and 2013, respectively, before the jazz resurgence of recent years. In 2015, amid a nationwide reckoning over the police killings of Black people, the music of certain artists took on a darker, more political tone: Rappers like Kendrick Lamar and musical collaborators like the saxophonist Kamasi Washington responded to the moment with jazz-centered protest music that thrust the genre back into vogue. Muldrow predates Lamar and Washington, even though her Jyoti work was never appreciated to the same extent. “I don’t care how that shit happens. We need breakthroughs,” she once told me. “I’m very thankful that people are making jazz their own and making it live in a unique way for them.” Still, she should be

applauded for releasing such resonant jazz at a time when few were looking. Whether it’s bringing the term “woke” to public view or helping shape the current state of jazz, Muldrow’s work represents thinking ahead, waiting for people to catch up with her.

Mama, You Can Bet! is livelier than her previous Jyoti records, leapfrogging swing, ambient, and hip-hop through shorter instrumentals that don’t linger too long. Across the 15-song album, Muldrow doesn’t just nod to the past. On “Ancestral Duckets,” she summons her ancestors through meditative chants. On “This Walk,” in particular, she sounds weary yet resolute, lamenting state violence and how it takes a toll on mental health. Overall, *Mama* feels more like a beat tape resembling the instrumental projects she’s released under her own name. Whereas those albums display Muldrow’s love of electronic funk and West Coast hip-hop, her Jyoti work reaches back even further, to the late 1960s and early ’70s, when jazz musicians like Miles Davis and Herbie Hancock broadened their sound to include traces of funk and psych-rock. Jyoti celebrates the music of her youth while honoring the relatives and artists who have died. “Black improvised music is my foundation for life,” she told *Afropunk*’s Timmhotep Aku. “The Jyoti stuff is the root. It’s the square root of my sound.”

That explains “Ra’s Noise (Thukumbado),” a brassy cut featuring Benjamin, with its rhythmic scatting dedicated to the cosmic jazz pioneer Sun Ra. Its sauntering pace and vast arrangement are more restrained than Sun Ra’s sprawling compositions, but I can still hear parts of him in the track, from Benjamin’s shrill saxophone wails to Muldrow’s shouts of “Interplanetary!” in the background. Sun Ra believed that Black people would never find peace on this planet and should find refuge elsewhere in the universe. “Ra’s Noise,” in turn, seems to score a voyage to deep space. “Orgone” similarly finds Muldrow longing for another place, far from America’s systemic racism. “How I dream of living in Africa,” she sings over sparse piano chords. “I wanna go back, way back to the time when I was free.”

Of course, a declaration like this isn’t surprising from her: She’s long sought this kind of liberation for herself and her people. Now that social unrest and police brutality have reached a feverish clip, Muldrow’s calls for Black freedom ring louder than ever. **N**

Muldrow’s work represents thinking ahead, waiting for people to catch up with her.

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