

APRIL 2019



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[psc-cuny.org/retirees](http://psc-cuny.org/retirees)

**MONDAY, APRIL 1.  
GREATER GOTHAM**

An event we have been waiting for. Not an April joke, but destined to include some good stories and humor.

**Speaker: Mike Wallace.** Professor Wallace is an American historian at the CUNY Graduate Center and John Jay College. He specializes in the history of New York City. In 1998 he coauthored *Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898*, which won the **Pulitzer Prize in History**. He authored a second volume in the Gotham series in 2017, *Greater Gotham: A History of New York City from 1898 to 1919*. Mike says that he will whisk us through the latter's thousand-plus pages in half an hour flat!

Discussion will follow. As usual, light refreshments provided. **PSC Union Hall, 61 Broadway, 16th Floor, 1-3 PM.** □

**TRANSITIONS.** Following the meeting, a new PSC Retirees group called **Transitions** will be meeting. If you are concerned about health care options or

alternatives for family members or friends, this group is intended to provide peer support and find ways to gather additional information. The first meeting will be **April 1 from 3-5 PM.** For more information, contact Connie Gemson, retiree from LaGuardia Community College, at [chgemson@gmail.com](mailto:chgemson@gmail.com). □



**MONDAY, MAY 6.  
GOOD AND WELFARE**

Since March didn't happen this year (or at least our Retirees Chapter Meeting was snowed out), we are bringing back the March program with predictably better weather.

The focus of speakers at the meeting is the Good and Welfare of our chapter members on issues ranging from health care to Welfare Fund benefits to community resources for retirees.

**Kathryn Haslanger**, chief executive officer of the Jewish Association Serving the Aging (JASA), is a prolific author on the subject of health care and aging. She will provide us a comprehensive overview of health care

choices, delivery and planning for seniors in NYC.

**Ron Bruno**, who for sixteen years has been executive director of Morningside Gardens NORC (a Naturally Occurring Retirement Community), will talk about the NORC movement, resources, activities and outreach.

**Donna Costa** (executive director) and **Sandra Zaconeta** (retirement benefits counselor) will update members on PSC/CUNY Welfare Fund benefits.

## **ANNUAL SPRING LUNCHEON, MONDAY, JUNE 10: THE GREEN NEW DEAL**



**Speaker: Michael Menser.** Prof. Menser has taught at Brooklyn College for almost a quarter century and has served on the college's Sustainability Council and the Provost's Task Force on City-Based Sustainability Education. He is a member of the doctoral faculty in Earth and Environmental Sciences and Environmental Psychology at the CUNY Graduate Center.

Recently he has become immersed in the Green New Deal, a blueprint of proposed economic stimulus that brings a new urgency and political activism to the impending climate crisis and economic

inequality. He'll discuss the Green New Deal, defining its broad national outlines and particular implications for New York.

More details will be posted by mid April at <https://psc-cuny.org/RetireeLuncheon061019>. The posting will include the luncheon menu and a link to a reservation form. At that time we will start taking luncheon reservations. **12:30 – 2:30 PM, CUNY Graduate Center/ Room 9204-7. Monday, June 10.**

## **UPCOMING OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES**

### **BROOKLYN HEIGHTS WALKING TOUR SUNDAY, MAY 5, 2019, AT 12 NOON**

Join another fabulous walking tour led by Steve Levine, who teaches urban history at City College's Center for Worker Education. **Meet in front of Brooklyn Borough Hall.** Subways: 2,3,4,5 to Borough Hall; A,C,F to Jay St./Metrotech Sta.; R to Court St.

We will walk through the historic neighborhood of Brooklyn Heights, which was designated as New York City's first historic district in 1965. Of the 1,100 buildings within the district, 600 were built before 1860. We will pass houses representing every urban architectural style of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Among the highlights of the tour are Packer Collegiate Institute, Riverside Apartments (model homes for working class tenants), Grace Church, the Heights Promenade and Plymouth Church of the Pilgrims. We will stop for lunch around 1 PM at Teresa's Restaurant on Montagu Street, notable for its Polish soups, pierogis and blintzes. The tour will conclude with an optional walk across the Brooklyn Bridge. To reserve a place, RSVP with your name and mobile phone number to [sleberstein@gmail.com](mailto:sleberstein@gmail.com).

**MEET THE METS (again)  
THURSDAY JUNE 6 @ NOON**

PSC retirees will once again head to Citi Field in Queens to watch the Mets play the San Francisco Giants. (Remember the NY Giants, formerly the NY Gothams, and Bobbie Thomson’s home run or Willie Mays’ catch?) This time we hope for a change in weather and score for our visit.



Information about buying tickets will be in the next *Turning the Page*.

**UNFINISHED BUSINESS**

**TRS UPDATE.** On Monday, March 11, our chapter chair, Bill Friedheim, wrote Margret Egan, the acting vice chancellor for human affairs, that:

...the patience of affected retirees, to put it charitably, is wearing thin -- and justifiably so.

It's been more than three months since a number of retirees testified at a B.O.T. hearing and met with you.

She responded:

I totally understand the frustration and appreciate that patience is wearing thin. We believe the file that

we sent on February 19, 2019 is final. From our perspective it should be ready to load and the problem resolved.

We will wait a week or two to see if the February 19 data file resolves the issue. If it does, we'll then press TRS to quickly make whole (with back pay and interest) retirees who are waiting for their full pensions. If the February 19 data file does not resolve the issue, our chapter Executive Board has plans for more militant action targeting CUNY Payroll.

We'll keep you posted.

**ALBANY AND US**

**State Budget:** As we go to press this month we await a state budget that would take CUNY out of the dark ages of austerity, and provide funds for enhancement of salaries across the board and respect and much needed raises for adjuncts. Many of you have been up in Albany with the PSC lobbying for our contract, as well as meeting state representatives here in the city. Please keep emailing and calling your Assembly person and Senator to demand adequate funding for CUNY. They count phone calls and messages.

Stay up to date on CUNY and PSC issues, and find an e-letter you can send to your legislators: <https://psc-cuny.org/>

**AUSTERITY HITS CUNY LIBRARIES HARD**

--Bonnie Nelson, retiree, John Jay College

Even as CUNY suffers under the weight of continuing austerity, the CUNY libraries and library faculty have been hit disproportionately hard. The PSC Library Faculty Committee has done a preliminary

analysis of statistics from the Academic Library Survey (part of IPEDS) that shows that, while the overall CUNY budget rose modestly from 2014 to 2016, the amount of money spent on the libraries (both on staff and materials) actually decreased, so that the percentage of the CUNY budget devoted to libraries dipped from 1.93% in 2014 to 1.68% in 2016.

So many CUNY librarians in the Baby Boomer generation have retired in recent years that we have formed our own Retirees Roundtable in LACUNY (the CUNY Library Association). But CUNY colleges seem to have taken these retirements not as an opportunity to bring in new talent in what has become an increasingly exciting and vital field but, rather, as an opportunity to save money by not replacing us. John Jay College, from which I retired, has seen three library faculty members retire in the past three to four years, but not one of us has been replaced with a permanent full-time line. Hunter is losing 2-3 librarians to retirement, but the past 4-5 vacancies are still being filled by substitutes. York's two recent retirements have not been filled. For various reasons, Medgar Evers is down 5 faculty lines (with no acquisitions librarian); and Brooklyn, City Tech and BMCC each have 2 full-time vacancies.

And yet this is a period when the library faculty ranks should have grown! In the current contract the PSC negotiated two extra weeks of annual leave for library faculty to begin to move them to parity with the classroom faculty; these additional weeks were "paid for" as part of the financial agreement. But it does not appear that any of the money budgeted for that additional annual leave has gone to the libraries; as best as the Library Faculty Committee can tell, not one CUNY library has gained a position as a result of the contract agreement. The Committee

estimates that for every 12 library faculty positions, a library is short the equivalent of one full-time line.

At the same time, CUNY librarians in recent years have been asked to add to their workload by supporting a (very successful) institutional repository—CUNY Academic Works—and, more recently the CUNY move into Open Educational Resources (OER). Both of these have been worthy initiatives that benefit CUNY faculty, CUNY students, and CUNY as a whole. But only the OER project has been supported by the state with modest funds for adjunct hours.



And the cuts are not just in professional (faculty and HEO) lines. College assistant hours have been cut as their minimum wage has increased with no additional budgeted funds. Money to purchase books, journal collections and other online resources has also been reduced. College administrations find it easy to cut library budgets—there are no required courses that must be taught; no class section limits that can't be breached.

The results, alas, are predictable: shortened library hours, fewer hours of help at the reference desk, fewer library instruction classes offered to students, less support for classroom faculty to integrate information skills into their courses, reduced

chat services, less availability of one-on-one research help and more frustrated and burned-out librarians.

Not all of the vacancies in CUNY libraries are from retirements; sadly, just as in other departments, some of the best and brightest of the library faculty are finding that the pay and working conditions are better elsewhere and are choosing to leave.

□

**Editor's Note:** If you would like to write about what is happening to the job title you once held, please write to [retirees@pscmail.org](mailto:retirees@pscmail.org) with "newsletter" in the subject line.

## AND IN OTHER NEWS



-Santiago Villafane, retiree  
Bronx Educational Opportunity Center

People, politics, money and nature have combined to bring Puerto Rico to a crossroads in history. The paradise formerly known as *Isla del Encanto* (Island of Enchantment) is today *La Isla de El Engano* (Island Deceived). While the island is a place of enchantment for tourists and the wealthy, it is the opposite experience for the majority of its native inhabitants.

The forces of nature, hurricanes Irma and Maria, are the catalysts that set in motion a series of events which point to an ominous future. Like the drop in barometric pressure and increasing surface winds that emerge

from a black horizon before a hurricane makes landfall, a recession that began in 2005 and continues today, is a harbinger of desperate circumstances. The events of 2018 have transformed *La Isla del Encanto* to *La Isla del Engano*, a deception that destroyed houses, roads, bridges and human expectations. The following offers a context of the circumstances of the island's reckoning. The perspective is that of a Puerto Rican born and raised in New York City, whose parents left the island in the mid-1920s to escape similar desperate conditions.

Puerto Rico's humanitarian, political, economic and infrastructure problems are the result of misjudgments, decision-making with unintended consequences, short-term solutions to produce revenues for running a government, and its political status as a U.S. territory. The island was ceded by Spain to the U.S. after the Spanish American War in 1898. The Foraker Act of 1900 instituted a civil government under which an American governor administered the territory as Washington desired. The lost autonomy that Puerto Rico experienced under Spanish rule raised anger and resentment among the Island's people against the U.S.A.

The Jones-Shafroth Act of 1917 passed by Congress made Puerto Ricans U.S. citizens, and eligible for military service, in which many served in WWI, WWII and subsequent wars. Puerto Ricans who live on the island, are citizens, but cannot vote in presidential elections. However, those residing on the mainland, as my parents did, are able to participate in national elections. This contradiction still remains in effect and fuels the debate regarding the status of Puerto Rico over statehood, commonwealth, or independence. The Jones Act also authorized tax-free government bonds issued by Puerto Rico to investors eager for profitable investments.

In 1948 Puerto Ricans were able to elect their own governor, and the island officially became a U.S. commonwealth, creating its own constitution with limited powers of self-government. Soon after, the U.S. and Puerto Rico began Operation Bootstrap, which attracted American companies to the Island with financial benefits for these companies that brought manufacturing, tourism and jobs. When the tax abatements were ending, the companies looked to other fertile territories for investment, and thousands of Puerto Ricans found themselves jobless. Due to the lack of jobs, many Puerto Ricans were forced to emigrate to U.S. cities such as New York to seek employment.

Several Puerto Rican administrations, lacking the income generating sources of the departing firms, began to use investment income to pay for day-to-day operating government expenses, while borrowing large amounts of money to pay bond investors for the shortfall in revenue. In 2015 the governor of Puerto Rico announced the commonwealth could not meet its debt obligations, and subsequently declared, with Congress's approval, bankruptcy stating a government debt of over 70 billion dollars. In September 2017 Hurricane Maria, a category 4 storm, devastated the Island.

Puerto Rico found itself in a humanitarian crisis with limited support from the U.S. government, but assistance from private donors and organizations who provided food, water, fuel, and assistance with its obstructed roads, ruined homes, and downed power lines. Although Puerto Rico is very slowly recovering, it is at a crossroads of a journey towards an uncertain and possibly ominous future. However, the future also holds possibilities for a people with high literacy rates, education, bi-lingual fluency and

demonstrated resilience in the face of formidable odds. □

**LIFE DURING WARTIME.** *Josh Brown, the retired Director of the American Social History Project at the Graduate Center, produced a series of weekly political illustrations, beginning in 2003 with the war in Iraq, called **Life During Wartime**. The entire collection, 2003-2019, is available at <http://www.joshbrownnyc.com/lw.htm>.*

*Below is the latest in the series, a caricature of the President, who hugged the American flag before he gave a recent speech to CPAC.*



### **COMMUNITY LAND TRUSTS: Alternative to Private Property?**

-Tom Angotti, retiree  
Hunter College and the Graduate Center

*[Back in February, Tom Angotti, professor emeritus of urban policy and planning, spoke at the chapter meeting about the multiple ways that New York is sold off to the wealthy. Some of the questions members posed addressed how housing could indeed be made more affordable. This article talks about non-profit community-based organization as a way to do just that.]*

Housing prices are soaring in major cities throughout the United States and world. Renters and homeowners alike are being displaced as the competition for urban land looks more like high-stakes casino gambling. In this game, low-income communities of color have been historically the most vulnerable.



The good news is that communities continue to organize to protect themselves, improve regulations and increase investments by government to stabilize the runaway competition for urban land. In this context, community organizers everywhere are hearing about an approach to housing that has been largely absent from public debates on housing policy – the Community Land Trust (CLT).

A CLT is a non-profit community-based organization that owns land; the title requires that the land be leased for low-cost housing and that it remain affordable under a renewable 99-year lease. There are some 250 CLTs in the U.S. and similar efforts in

other countries. After the 2008 collapse of the housing bubble, the CLT was widely proposed as an antidote to foreclosures, predatory lending, and the growing proportion of households paying more than 30% of their incomes for housing. Housing activists have also proposed that vacant land and buildings be placed in land trusts instead of being put back in the speculative land market.

In New York City, the Cooper Square CLT in Manhattan's Lower East Side has its roots in the 50-year-long struggle to stop an official urban renewal plan that would have displaced thousands of people. The community came together, prepared an alternative plan, fought to stay in housing that had come under City ownership, and after intense organizing got title for numerous buildings transferred to the CLT, which leases the land under a 99-year renewable lease to the Cooper Square Mutual Housing Association (MHA). The lease and a regulatory agreement with the City require that the housing meet affordability guidelines. The housing continues to be affordable to mostly low-income residents because it is protected from speculative resale on the private market, benefits from previous capital grants for major repairs, and is exempt from local real estate taxes. Nevertheless, it is a constant challenge to sustain this community project. As the neighborhood experiences gentrification, affordable retail gives way to upscale restaurants and bars, and speculators search for every opportunity to grab land for investment. This I know because I have been a member of the CLT board for many years.

Efforts are now underway to establish new land trusts throughout the city. A grant from the Enterprise Foundation recently distributed seed money to several organizations promoting new CLTs. These include, for example, new CLTs in East Harlem, the South Bronx and Brooklyn.

However, it remains to be seen whether the City will shift its housing policies in any major way towards the long-term protection of land and low-income housing through Community Land Trusts. □



## **GO, WENT, GONE, A NOVEL BY JENNY ERPENBECK**

-review by Cecelia McCall, retiree  
Baruch College

[*The Retiree Chapter has two book groups, one of which recently read Go, Went, Gone.*]

Whenever I have a conversation with someone who tells me that they are contemplating retirement, I usually respond by saying that they may not be ready to retire unless they have a plan to deal with what was for me “the unbearable lightness of being” that accompanies freedom from the obligation to earn a living. No longer tied to a fixed routine and schedule that revolves around a job, there are countless hours to fill. Time offers an opportunity to do all that has been postponed, to fulfill suspended wishes and pursue delayed dreams. But it’s good to have a plan.

Richard, the protagonist in Jenny Erpenbeck’s novel, *Go, Went, Gone*, is essentially a man without a plan. A childless widower who lives alone, he has recently retired from Humboldt University where he was a professor in the

Department of Classical Philology. He idles away the days and weeks shopping for groceries, preparing meals and performing house and garden chores. Weather permitting, he swims in a nearby lake; however, at the outset of the story, he and his neighbors have been avoiding the lake because the body of a drowned man has sunk to the bottom and remains submerged. Self aware, he reflects upon his condition, saying, “He’ll have to be careful not to lose his marbles now that he’s going to spend entire days alone without anyone to talk to.”

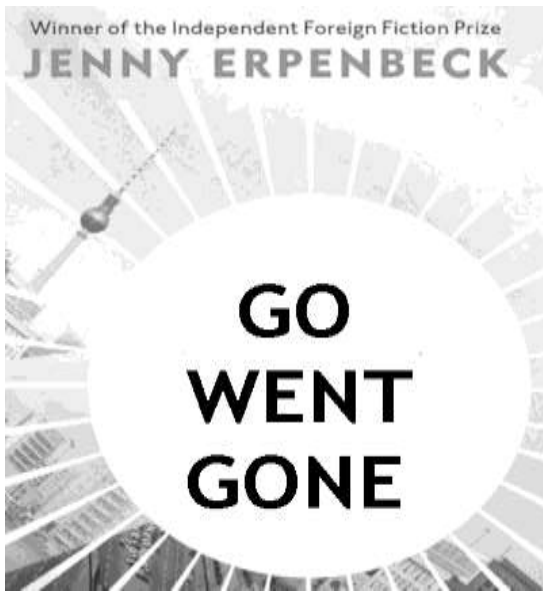
Though raised and living in what was the German Democratic Republic and having witnessed the fall of The Wall and subsequent reunification of the country, he is neither a political nor social activist. At the invitation of a colleague, he visits an archeological site at Alexanderplatz in Berlin, all but ignoring a nearby hunger strike of several African refugees, who are protesting for the right to permanent asylum and the right to work in Germany. Even though they carry a sign that says “*We become Visible*,” he and other Germans choose not to see the refugees. (The marginalized of France are wearing yellow vests to manifest their grievances and to make themselves visible.)

When the authorities locate some of the refugees in a facility near his town, Richard’s curiosity is whetted and he approaches their plight as if it were a research project, studying maps of Africa, reading accounts of various countries and formulating a set of objective questions to interrogate them. Once he talks to individual men from Ghana, Libya and Niger and hears their heartbreaking stories of loss and longing, they are no longer subjects of an academic’s curiosity but human beings for whom he develops great empathy and eventually close ties. They become his friends; they exchange meals;



he invites them to his home and even joins them in a demonstration.

Richard understands, however, that the black men are entangled in German bureaucratic red tape and that endemic racism will prevent the Africans from ever gaining permanent asylum in his country. The submerged body mentioned in paragraph two is a metaphor for the deeply rooted racism that has not been eradicated from German society. It lies beneath, is a part of the collective psyche and reemerges in spite of decades of education to eliminate it. Richard reflects, “. . . only if they [Africans] survived Germany now would Hitler truly have lost the war.”



*Go, Went, Gone* is a skillfully crafted novel that interweaves not only themes of time and racism but also the meaning of family and borders. At the close of the novel, Richard is no longer alone. After expulsion from a residential facility (formerly a school) and pending removal from Berlin to remote regions when the Berlin Senate “. . . retroactively declared the agreement they made with the refugees invalid,” Richard shelters several in his home, breaking the boundaries between himself and them, thus reconstituting a family. At his behest, some

German friends have also taken Africans into their homes, not out of sentiment but because Richard has made the request. The artificial and invisible boundaries between this small group of Germans and the “other” has collapsed just as The Wall did. □

## **SEEING EMPYREAN IN *IF BEALE STREET COULD TALK***

-Review by Lisa Flanzraich, retiree  
Film Librarian, Queens College

[*Lisa Flanzraich has organized a series of retiree film meet-ups. See page 10 for information on the next film meet-up.*]

Director Barry Jenkins takes a daring leap of faith in his 2018 film, *If Beale Street Could Talk*. Based on the 1974 novel by James Baldwin, one of the most eloquent and revelatory writers of American literature and letters, it tells the story of Fonny and Tish, a young African-American couple on the brink of marriage and parenthood. Their plans for sharing a life together are ripped apart when Tish becomes pregnant and Fonny is falsely arrested and jailed for rape by a hateful, revengeful white policeman.

Jenkins has written a love letter to Jimmy, his muse and griot, informing him that his beloved children have claimed victory in overcoming the harsh, mean landscape of New York City at its nadir in the 1970s when social injustice and racial bigotry affected most aspects of the lives of people of color.

Baldwin’s novel is a religious text, infused with his lyrical passion and exhortation for the integrity and survival of the African-American family. He, as well as the director, stake out interior, sacred space to shield the couple from exterior, profane space, which degrades human beings and

robs them of their rights, dignity, and personhood.

Jenkins illuminates Baldwin's beatific vision through the iconography of light and color. Using a cinematographic palette of yellows, golds, reds, and blues, the filmmaker configures the couple into the metawindow of a stained glass cathedral where refracted light shines through them. Tish's family living room, the bokeh, dreamy lights of Greenwich Village, El Faro's restaurant—a Baldwin haunt—constitute the *mises en scene* of sanctuary, family togetherness, warmth, community, and caring.

In contrast, archival black and white photographs taken at night document the exterior zone of chaotic, urban geography where African-American men are handcuffed, bloodied, and shot routinely by white police.



Tish is the Black Madonna. Adorned in a raiment of buttery, sun-washed yellows, celestial blues, and leafy-greens, she glows in both natural and diffuse light. Her delicate, willowy features belie her iron-clad strength to transcend the hardship of Fonny's unjust incarceration.

Tish is also Beatrice from Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Like Dante and Beatrice, the lovers are childhood sweethearts. Tish is Fonny's beam out of purgatory to paradise. Like Dante, Fonny is a poet, a sculptor who carves the female form out of wood. He parallels Dante's journey—*Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita*—as the artist grappling with crisis and political unrest.

While Baldwin commands us to smell, hear, and see the Tombs, or The Inferno, where Fonny rots in solitary confinement, Jenkins chooses to radiate the prison visitor room with sunlight, thus freeing him from despair and hopelessness.

In the final scene, mother, father, and son join hands and say grace around a lunch table. Imagine if the saxophonist and composer John Coltrane were playing his moving hymnal, *A Love Supreme*. It reigns over *If Beale Street Could Talk*. Indeed, our Jimmy would be pleased. □



### Event Movie Meet Up Film Forum

Thursday, April 11, 2019

2 PM

Film: *Christ Stopped At Eboli!*

Contact Lisa Flanzraich,

[cinophile49@gmail.com](mailto:cinophile49@gmail.com) □