

Incinerate All Other Magazines

CURRENT AFFAIRS

\$10.95

VOL. 2, ISSUE 4

JULY/AUG. 2017

CULTURAL APPROPRIATION

A MEANINGFUL CONCEPT?
YES, KIND OF, POSSIBLY.

EMPATHY

COULD IT BE WORTHWHILE?

HOW TO GET INTO STANFORD

USING ONLY A HASHTAG

MAKING PROPAGANDA

WHY REPUBLICANS
ARE GOOD AT IT



*May you forever inhabit a small
New Orleans of the mind...*



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“Bringing Families Together” (p. 20) — Tyler Rubenfeld

“Greetings From New Jersey” (p. 21) — Tyler Rubenfeld

“Pin the Finger” (p. 28) — Pranas Naujokaitis

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“Mail-Order Democrat” (p. 63) — Nick Sirotich

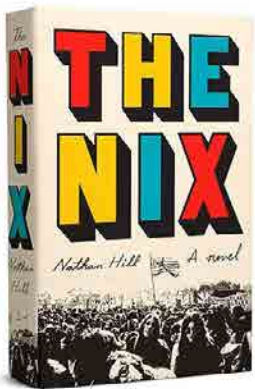
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*The Selfridges Building in Birmingham, England
Like everything else built in
the last 50 years, it is ugly.*



LETTERS FROM THE PEDANTIC & QUARRELSOME

Hi, I've been waiting so long for my latest *Current Affairs* magazine, is it still coming? Is it arriving by horseback? by turtle? by snail? Am I being punished?
Best,
K. Spicer (no relation)
Island Pond, VT

Mr. Spicer, Regrettably, the magazine has been dispatched on the back of an unusually slow-moving postal tortoise. Since it is a Louisiana tortoise, it has a tendency to make somewhat frequent daiquiri stops, which cloud its judgment and further reduce its forward momentum, as well as leading it to further stray from its course. Worse, the tortoise is elderly (350+ years), and suffers from an advanced case of reptilian dementia. This causes it to become confused, and hinders its sense of geographical awareness. As of the latest GPS readout, the tortoise had stumbled off route and was located in the vicinity of Southern Virginia. (See below map showing the tortoise's progress toward your home.) A *Current Affairs* Tortoise Rerouting Agent has been dispatched to collect the tortoise and place it back upon its rightful trajectory. Regrettably, the Rerouting Agent, too, is from Louisiana, and is therefore not immune to distractions of the intoxicating variety. Rest assured that both the tortoise and the agent will be physically disciplined upon their return to New Orleans.

Mr. Spicer, we are doing everything within our limited power to ensure that your magazine arrives swiftly at your home. We would like to apologize sincerely for this inexcusable delay, which we can assure you is not intended as a form of punishment. We believe you will find it a far greater punishment to have to read the magazine than to be deprived of it.
Yours always,
Current Affairs

CURRENT
AFFAIRS
POSTAL
TORTOISE
PROGRESS MAP



Dear Editors:
I recently very much enjoyed Ms. Rennix's "The Regrettable Decline of Space Utopias" but feel compelled to note an error. She therein states that, aside from "a few itinerant JAGs," the world of *Star Trek* is bereft of lawyers. This, however, is false: in "Court Martial" (TOS S1E20), Capt. Kirk employs the services of trial lawyer and Luddite Samuel T. Cogley in an ultimately successful, albeit rather contrived, effort to clear his name of a charge of criminal negligence resulting in the (supposed) death of a crew member. As the son of a civil rights and employment law attorney, it warmed my heart to think trial lawyers still might have a place in humanity's domain even after the establishment of global peace and the development of warp drive technology.
Leo Carton Mollica
Dept. of Philosophy, Univ. of Pittsburgh

Mr. Mollica: Thank you for bringing this matter to our attention. When confronted about this flagrant discrepancy, Ms. Rennix at first made a number of incomprehensible excuses, suggesting that the presence of a lawyer in the episode in question was "clearly one of those *Star Trek* universe anomalies, like how the Klingons used to just be humans with weird eyebrows" and that it was "non-canonical, like that one episode of *TNG* where a Trill symbiont joins with a human host without any apparent physiological complications." What Ms. Rennix meant by any of this, we cannot begin to imagine. Upon further interrogation, Ms. Rennix broke down and admitted she had only ever seen "I don't know, five complete episodes of *The Original Series*." We are gravely alarmed by this lapse. We issue a retraction of the piece in full, and a solemn apology to our readership. Ms. Rennix will be obligated to watch the entirety of *The Original Series* and submit 500-word theme essays on each episode before she references *Star Trek* in this publication again.



INSUFFERABLE PERSON OF THE MONTH

"At Goldman Sachs, He's David Solomon. At the Club, He's D.J. D-Sol."
— The New York Times, July 13, 2017

IF CURRENT
AFFAIRS IS
EVER LOCKED
INSIDE AN
ATM, YOU
HAD BETTER
RELEASE US



"A worker arrived on Wednesday to repair the 'locking mechanism' of the room... The door shut behind the worker, and somehow, she said, the man locked himself in. The worker, whom the police did not identify, had left his phone inside a vehicle. But once he realized that people were using the A.T.M., the man began slipping notes out the receipt slot... Unfortunately for the man, several A.T.M. users who got a note thought they were being pranked and apparently did nothing." — "Man Trapped Inside Texas A.T.M. for 3 Hours Is Rescued by Police," *The New York Times*, July 13, 2017

Ours is a species that can only make its way through life through mutual aid and compassion. The universe into which we have been born is filled with obstacles and pitfalls, from the mildly inconvenient to the downright deadly. Each of us must, at various points, walk across frayed and precarious rope bridges, drive automobiles while blindfolded, hand-feed the gila monster a potato chip, clamber up teetering steeples, and overload an electric socket whilst taking an evening bath. All of this is dangerous. Would that we could render it unnecessary.

Surviving such a treacherous world depends on the altruism of our fellow creatures. We must all of us help each other out. When we fall from the seventh story of a carnival tent, we must hope that a firefighter awaits us below with a trampoline. When we accidentally erase an important equation from the professor's board after class, we must hope that the janitor is a mathematics prodigy who can both rewrite and improve the formula before the end of office hours. It is a truth that cannot be escaped: we all depend on one another.

It is therefore our solemn duty, when any of us receives a note through the slot of an automated teller machine in central Texas informing us that a human being is trapped within, to take the matter seriously. We cannot dismiss the thing as obvious jest, casually tossing the note into the grass with an impetuous giggle. Our first thought must be of the human, who is potentially running out of notepaper and newly deposited checks upon which to scrawl entreaties. Nobody should take an allegation of ATM imprisonment lightly: it has happened before, thus it must necessarily happen again.

Dear reader, we would like to express a hope. We hope that, should your friend *Current Affairs* find itself trapped in an ATM, Texan or otherwise, you would do the decent thing and release us. Should you open the receipt slot, only to find a torn page from *Current Affairs* with the word "HELP" written in unbleached paper, you must leap into action. You must free us using all available means, even comical ones. After all, it should go without saying that, so long as your subscription remains active, we would always do the same for you.

THE GENTLEST MAN

A reader writes to ask whether last issue's use of the term "Ladies and gentleman" was intentional or was a result of a mishap in the typesetting warehouse. It is, the reader helpfully informs us, more common to hear the plural "gentlemen" preceded by the word "ladies." To place a single gentleman with many ladies is either a typo or a scandal. But those who were troubled at seeing the phrase "ladies and gentleman" appear on our pages have forgotten the *Current Affairs* Rule Of Errors: If something in *Current Affairs* appears to be an error, it is almost certainly the reader who is making a mistake, a.k.a. "The Fault Is Not In *Current Affairs* But In Ourselves." We have never subscribed to the execrable mantra "the customer is always right," which may be a fine philosophy for the selling of Apple Mackintoshes or sex acts, but which is entirely inapplicable when it comes to the production of a serious journal of political thought. (Now, let us be clear: by "the customer" we do not refer to you, the fully-paid, auto-renewing print subscriber. We speak instead of that basest of creatures, the newsstand impulse buyer. This loathsome peruser is happy to purchase a *Current Affairs* in his hour of need, in advance of a ten-hour nonstop international flight without wi-fi. Yet he is a sunshine patriot: when *Current Affairs* needs him, suddenly he has scarpers off to the loo complaining of wicked indigestion. This "customer," who will claim in outraged letters-to-the-editor to be an "avid reader" of *Current Affairs*, thinking us incapable of perceiving the sly distinction between "reader" and "subscriber," is not only not always right, but is a traitorous leech, who would desert not only his country but his periodicals the moment the fascists came dangling a small bribe like a timeshare or a modestly-sized speedboat. Do we feel free to tinkle on such a customer's needs and desires? Indubitably.) As to the phrase "ladies and gentleman," the intention is clear: we believe the number of true gentlemen among the reading public is exactly one. (And he knows full well who he is, doesn't he?)

To pluralize would be to exaggerate, and if there is one thing *Current Affairs* is known for, it is its steadfast refusal to exaggerate for political reasons. No, dear reader, "gentlemen" would be a lie, and we cannot forget our vow: this publication will never, ever lie to you. You may long for a soft cushion of falsehoods upon which to sprawl. This may make your days easier, it may give comfort. But it is the job of the journalist to tell it like it is, even if it isn't very good. Know how seriously we take this duty. Thus: gentleman. Someday there may be more. But today there is only one.



WORDS THAT HAVE BEEN
OVERUSED BY CURRENT
AFFAIRS IN RECENT ISSUES
AND THAT WE ARE TRYING
NOT TO USE QUITE AS MUCH

HORROR
TERROR
NEVERTHELESS
LICENTIOUS
SQUALID

ODIOUS
OSTENSIBLE
SANCTIMONIOUS
APPALLED
VACUOUS

THE MAGAZINE FOR MOMS



A mistake has been made. It is commonly believed that Current Affairs is some sort of magazine directed at cynical left-wing millennial intellectual types. This is false. In fact, the target audience for Current Affairs is listed, in the American Directory of Magazines, as "the mothers of cynical left-wing millennial intellectual types." Disgraced former Vox editor Emmett Rensin said recently, with a note of slight disdain, that Current Affairs is a magazine with an "even your mom can understand it" philosophy. There is a reason for this; we are not pitched at the Emmett Rensins of this world, but at the Emmett Rensin's Mothers. Mr. Rensin is not wrong to observe that Current Affairs seems to believe that people's mothers should be able to understand things. If they could not understand our magazine, they might not read it. And we firmly believe that hope for the left rests not in the millennial intellectuals, but in the exasperated and decent-minded mothers of those intellectuals. After all, they are intelligent (they raised smart children!) but tend to remain relatively uncorrupted by fashionable academic theory and social media applications. They are more likely to use Facebook for its correct purpose of posting vacation photographs than for debating The Future of The Left. There is no hope for the left intellectuals, but their moms can still be saved. They need a magazine. This is that magazine.

THE MANDATORINESS OF MONOGRAMS

Nobody who has read more than a page of Current Affairs could mistake our position on monograms: we are for them. The invention of the monogrammed bath towel was the single most consequential moment in the history of human progress. We believe no serious person could dispute this. The wearing of monogrammed garments confers dignity, the absence of them implies a personality prone to slovenliness and vice. There is good reason why all members of the Current Affairs editorial staff are required by office policy to sport Current Affairs branded monogrammed cufflinks during work hours. Monograms made this company what it is today. You might expect, then, given our stated predilection, that we would also support the monogramming of public school children. And as a broad theoretical matter, we do. A recent case out of the New Orleans school system, however, puts the principle to the test. According to The New Orleans Lens, two homeless children enrolled at the Sophie B. Wright Charter School were prohibited from attending school for a month because they could not afford uniforms. Then, when the children did obtain uniforms, they "were told on at least one occasion by Wright staff that they could not attend school until the uniforms were monogrammed." One has to be an extremely inflexible devotee of calligraphed fabrics to support such a policy.



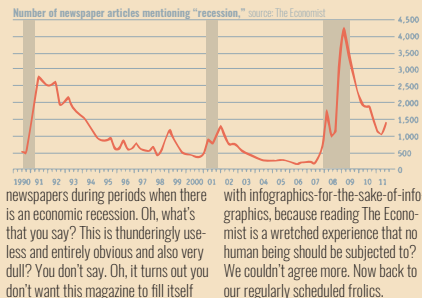
The main conclusion to draw here, obviously, is that turning a school system over to unaccountable charters will inevitably result in new kinds of absurd injustices being inflicted on poor kids. We have a sneaking sense that Sophie B. Wright's monogram policy has little to do with the administrators' principled belief in monograms and more to do with its commitment to finding new rigid bureaucratic mandates with which to terrorize vulnerable little children into becoming obedient.

Let us not mistake the villain here, then: it is private sector bureaucrats, not lovers of monograms. The left should not shy away from a political program that encourages monogramming, but it must be monograms for all, monograms as a voluntary and loving celebration of identity rather than as a means of branding children like cattle and extracting their family's precious little remaining wealth. To throw monograms out along with capitalism would be, in the words of a certain "philosopher," like throwing perfectly good bathwater out with a ghastly unwanted devil-baby. Always make sure to keep the bathwater when you get rid of the baby. Thus: monogram the world.

MORE CHARTS AND GRAPHS PLEASE

Besides our magazine's tone, design, and content, the #1 reader complaint about our work concerns charts. There are, we are told, not enough of them. The Economist has charts. Why does Current Affairs not have charts? Well, for one thing, as we have attempted to make clear on several occasions, Current Affairs is not the bloody Economist. Would you like a graph of sorghum exports from NATO countries over time? Go and pick up an Economist. Oh, you wouldn't like such a graph, because it sounds both deathly boring and of questionable utility? Come to Current

Affairs, mon cher, and let us ply you with fables and quizlets and unsettling pictures of nude horses. Won't that be better? Don't answer that—of course it will. Ah, but what about the reader who craves a tiny diagram or pie chart atop his suggestive equine lithographs? What is there in Current Affairs for such a person? Very well. If it is graphs you want, you shall have a graph. Behold. We lifted this one directly from The Economist. It tracks mentions of the word "recession" in newspapers over time, demonstrating that the word "recession" appears more often in



ON TARDINESS

There are few worse things than being tardy, it is said. Death, perhaps. But even then: to be late for a funeral is considered far more inexcusable than to die in the first place. People do not like the tardy. They are thought to lack gusto. Even the word tardy, derived as it is from the offensive term "retardation," is in its true sense a slur. Punctuality is next to virginity and patriotism in the hierarchy of American virtues. By this standard, then, Current Affairs is an ignoble publication indeed. It has been pointed out to us, by a series of irate subscribers, that what was ostensibly our "May-June" issue was in fact delivered at the tail end of the month of July, which is neither May nor June. At this rate, these subscribers observed, the final issue of the summer would in fact come out in the fall, the fall issues would come out in the winter, 2017 magazines would be released in 2018, and time would cease to have meaning.

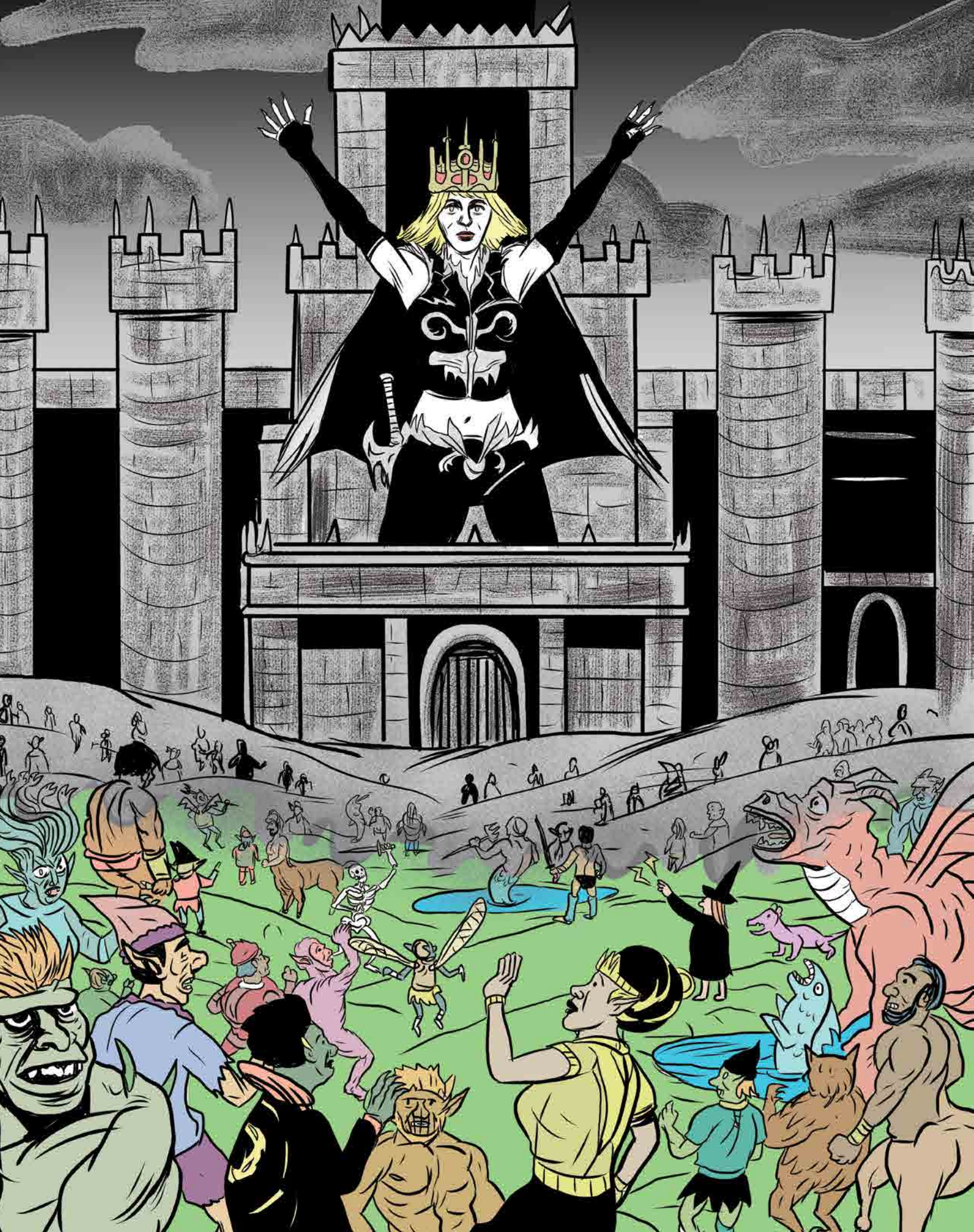


We would like, then, to reassure the reader: we believe that time should have meaning. While our official editorial stance continues to be in favor of the abolition of time, we recognize that people have places to be and that they damn well need their magazines when they get there. We fully appreciate the torment and despair that comes with awaiting the latest Current Affairs, and the abject heartache that comes when the magazine fails to arrive within the allocated window of dates. To feel that one's love for Current Affairs is unrequited is a cruel stab in the midriff. Now, dearest Current Affairs fanatic, we could use this opportunity to make excuses for ourselves. We could remind the reader that this publication is edited and produced in the state of Louisiana, where all affairs, even current ones, proceed at the molasses-pace of the mighty Mississippi. We could once again cast the blame upon drunken postmen, and at least for the portion of mailings done from our New Orleans headquarters, this would almost certainly contain an element of truth. Or we could remind the reader that the effects of absence and deprivation upon the heart render the final experience of receipt all the more transcendent, with the ecstasy of possessing a Current Affairs only heightened by the length of time spent without it.

But we have never been excuse-makers. We decline to satiate the reader with unconvincing demi-truths. The scaping of goats has always struck us as vulgar. Yes, the fault lies partially with society. Yes, the polybagging contraption at the print shop suffered a catastrophic mechanical failure, necessitating the ordering of an expensive replacement part from an obscure Dutch machine shop and the hand-bagging of every single copy of the last issue. Yes, this was undoubtedly an act of sabotage by The Economist. Yes, there were other, similar attempts to undermine us by that and other periodicals. Yes, the copy-editing budget was mistakenly blown on novelty straws for the break room and potted ferns for the office corridor, a corridor that turned out to be much longer than expected. Yes, time was spent antagonizing John Stoebr of the U.S. News & World Report that should have been spent on page layouts. And yes, a fair-minded observer would inevitably conclude that all of the aforementioned unfortunate mishaps are entirely the result of fate rather than human agency and exonerate us completely for the late appearance of our last issue.

But we shall not waste time in blaming the gods. Delaying Current Affairs is among the least consequential of their many divine blunders, intolerable as it may be. No, instead we shall be humble and magnanimous, as is our wont. We are sorry. We are sorry our magazine was late. We shall try to make sure it is not late again. We may fail. But know that even when Current Affairs has not showed up at your home, the staff of Current Affairs are still thinking of you day and night. We have not forgotten you. The levels of our tardiness are matched only by the levels of our gratitude to the Current Affairs readership.





sci-fi, fantasy, and the STATUS QUO

by Lyta Gold

LAST OCTOBER, AN INTELLIGENT AND good-hearted acquaintance of mine in the SFF (science fiction and fantasy) community told me, “I just want Hillary Clinton to be queen.” She would go on to repeat this line multiple times. It was a joke – but since the Clintons are a *de facto* aristocratic family, it wasn’t really a joke. Most people I know in the SFF community ardently supported Hillary in the 2016 election. Many still support the Clinton dynasty, rushing to defend Chelsea whenever a leftist objects to her real lack of qualifications. In general, they stayed silent over revelations of past wrongdoing by the Clintons in Haiti, Honduras, Arkansas, and elsewhere. And they posted and reposted loving images of their exiled queen emerging from the woods.

People are of course entitled to their politics, even half-ironic liberal-monarchist politics. I don’t expect—or want—everyone I know to agree with my opinions. When it comes to SFF fans and writers, I really just want to talk about books. But of course, the political is personal, and more than personal; the political is everywhere. The political is especially present in SFF literature, which explores and attacks reality through the lens of alternate universes. If you’re a leftist who hasn’t read

much contemporary SFF, you may be distressed to learn that in the last decade, much of the alternate world has been thoroughly and unpleasantly colonized by the most anemic and superficial elements of the Democratic Party.

As defined genres, science fiction and fantasy actually began as literatures of rebellion against bourgeois liberalism and capitalism. Re-told fairy tales, neo-medieval romances, ghost stories, gothic dramas, science fiction, surrealism, Romanticism in general: all these non-realistic modes were reactions to Enlightenment rationality and the stresses of industrialization. As the literary critic Rosemary Jackson writes in *Fantasy: the Literature of Subversion*: “The fantastic traces the unsaid and the unseen of culture: that which has been silenced, made invisible, covered over and made ‘absent’... From about 1800 onwards, those fantasies produced within a capitalist economy express some of the debilitating psychological effects of inhabiting a materialistic culture.” She continues: “... the fantastic introduces confusion and alternatives; in the nineteenth century this meant an opposition to bourgeois ideology upheld through the ‘realistic’ novel.”

Realist nineteenth-century novels were often critical of bourgeois life, of course, but they generally presented social

norms as hard facts which could only be rejected so far. Fantastic literature tried alternative routes. In novels like *Dracula*, *Frankenstein*, and *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, dark desires, irrational fears, and moral transgressions were physically manifested through supernatural characters and impossible events. Journeys to other worlds proliferated in the latter half of the nineteenth century, presenting thrilling scientific adventures and imaginary histories, which were lovelier—and sometimes crueler—than the slow, stiff march of liberal progress.

But Jackson cautions us against assuming that fantastic literature has been any kind of haven for left-wing radicalism. In fact, much of fantastic literature has been regressive and reactionary. Tolkien's invading hordes of dark and monstrous Orcs (plus swarthy, scimitar-wielding humans) are less ubiquitous than they once were, but the glorification of monarchy is still

a standard feature of SFF novels. Rightful kings and queens pop up in every wood, and they're constantly being restored to their thrones.



QUEENS ARE PARTICULARLY FASHIONABLE THESE days. Hillary Clinton has been frequently spliced into memes of the Khaleesi from *Game Of Thrones*, that very problematic white queen savior of brown slaves. There's a bitter irony there, of course, in that Clinton once relied on black slave labor when she lived in the Arkansas governor's mansion. In life as well as fiction, apparently, liberation—if it comes at all—will be imposed from above, and only when the white queen is ready. You'd think people would be less eager for political leaders who remind them of *Game of Thrones* characters, given



that the *Game of Thrones* universe is one of utter hopelessness, in which everything is shit and getting worse. (At the time of this writing the series hasn't ended, but it looks like the best that can be hoped for is the Khaleesi in some position of power, or living death for all as ice zombies. Talk about your lesser of two evils!)

But although most contemporary SFF is less cynical than *Game of Thrones*, even optimistic stories—and writers—put hard limits on political possibility and social progress, both within their fictional works and in their real-life political expression. Much of the anti-Trump #Resistance has found solace in the imagery of *Harry Potter*, referring to themselves as “The Order of the Phoenix” or “Dumbledore’s Army.” This too is a joke, until it isn’t a joke: a means of temporary escape from a painful reality can sometimes become reality itself. J.K. Rowling herself openly conflates the limited politics of *Harry Potter* with the real world, and makes ex-cathedra proclamations about how Harry (a fictional character) would or would not feel about real-life current events. According to her decrees, Jeremy Corbyn is *not* like Dumbledore; Corbyn, she assures us, is far too extreme. In June 2016, after Corbyn survived an attempted ouster by members of his own party and too many *Harry Potter* fans still had the temerity to compare him with Dumbledore, she sarcastically tweeted: “I forgot Dumbledore trashed Hogwarts, refused to resign and ran off to the forest to make speeches to angry trolls.”

BUT LET’S LOOK AT WHAT DUMBLEDORE *ACTUALLY* does—especially as relates to angry trolls—in the *Harry Potter* books. SFF has a long and ugly history of projecting race and class-based anxieties on inhuman Others, and *Harry Potter* is no exception. Rowling’s trolls are violent, illiterate morons, unfit for civilization. House-elves are stupid, adorable, natural-born servants. Goblins are hook-nosed, avaricious bankers. Centaurs and giants are noble savages, forced to wander the woods and mountains on the borders of civilization. All of the non-human species are forbidden to use wands – that is, they’re kept away from real power.

Dumbledore does express some liberal guilt for this arrangement. At the end of *The Order of the Phoenix*, having destroyed the fountain of Magical Brethren (“A group of golden statues, larger than life-size... Tallest of them all was a noble-looking wizard with his wand pointing straight up in the air. Grouped around him were a beautiful witch, a centaur, a goblin and a house-elf. The last three were all looking adoringly up at the witch and wizard...”) Dumbledore says, soberly: “... the fountain we destroyed tonight told a lie. We wizards have mistreated and abused our fellows for too long...”

But by the end of the *Harry Potter* series, precisely nothing about this apartheid-style arrangement has actually changed. Elves, goblins, centaurs, giants, and trolls are never permitted access to wands. Hermione, who was passionately devoted to “elf rights” for much of the series, settles down at the end in domestic bliss. Rowling has claimed that after the story ends, Hermione continues to fight for the rights of the downtrodden as an employee of the “Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures”. (Apparently she doesn’t fight very hard, or she would have done something about the department’s *name*.)

In general, it’s hard to take Rowling’s non-canonical pronouncements seriously: if she really wanted elves to be free (or Dumbledore to be gay, for that matter) she could easily have written that into the text. But instead she gave us house-elves who, with a few exceptions, are more than happy to serve their masters. Ron Weasley actually says: “they like being enslaved!” Ron comes around to the notion of elf sentience eventually; Hermione marries him and apparently adopts a pragmatic approach to civil rights. Equality is a fine thing to fight for when you’re a passionate teenager, but dreams fade into incremental bureaucratic reality when you grow up, get married, and get serious.

“Getting serious” means acknowledging that power struc-

“Dreams
of equality
fade into
incremental
bureaucratic
reality when
you grow up...”

tures, as they exist, can’t be overthrown. Inequality is just one of those “hard facts” of bourgeois life. Tolkien, for all his flaws, was at least working within a mythological framework in which the desire for domination could be externalized and destroyed. But in the less elaborately symbolic, more down-to-earth universe of *Harry Potter*, the characters fully acknowledge the terrible injustices of race and class, resolve to “do better” – and then throw up their hands. What can imagination do against capitalist realism? At least we have an infinite variety of Bertie Botts Every Flavor Beans!

In many contemporary SFF novels, the best that can be hoped for is that a viciously unequal status quo will be reset – gently – from above. Take *The Goblin Emperor* (2014), an award-winning and critically acclaimed steampunk novel by Katherine Addison. Pushing back against Tolkien’s paradigm of noble elves and wicked orcs/goblins, Addison posits a world in which elves and goblins are separated only by racism. The elves (who are snow-white) consider

The year is 2549. You live in some kind of society, but which one? Not sure? Take this handy quiz!

QUIZ

WHICH DYSTOPIA HAVE I FOUND MYSELF IN?

1. Commuting! We all do it, we all hate it. Choose the answer that most closely resembles the way you get to work.

A. Dawn. You creep cautiously up the stairs past your sleeping comrades. The Silicon Emperor's roving bands of death spiders didn't find you as you slept. That's good, but now it's time to hunt. The death spiders have been fed your gene signature and those of all the other Designated Nopes. You must find and kill the death spiders before they kill you. You open the cellar door, just a crack. You are immediately eaten by death spiders.

B. Up, up, up! If you don't snag a flying car now, you'll have to wait thirty seconds for the next, and that's a whole thirty seconds of debt you're accruing. Jumping in the car – oh no – a tooth fell out. The distraction costs you two seconds. You'll make up for it in the air. Zipping above the Devastation, you're mildly horrified by the crawling misery below. But you comfort yourself with the notion that civilization has finally finished sorting itself into the deserving and the un-. Still, you wonder. What if there are a few deserving mixed up in the undeserving hordes below? What if someday you, and not just a rotten tooth, fall into the abyss? You feel sick. It's not just the untreated infection in your mouth. Before your first gig you waste an entire minute buying a Calmer from the closest Anx-No-More.

C. You've told the alarm-bird to fuck off twelve times, but it's noon and you really have to go to work. Ugh. The dresser suggests one of your sexier outfits, but you're not feeling sexy today. Why do you even have to put on clothes? The world is so fucking unfair. You throw on an ugly jumpsuit. The mirror tells you how good you look, and you tell it to go fuck itself. Then you have to convince the mirror you didn't mean it. It takes a while, but eventually, the mirror stops crying. You step through the silken glass and there you are, at work. Ugh. You are just not in the mood for interaction today.

D. You swing a thermometer inside a wet rat-skin, testing the air outside the bunker. 38°C. Shit. You'll have to hunt across the blasted hellscape for food tomorrow.

2. Well, you've made it to work. What do you do?

A. It's not all battling death spiders. Sometimes you fight Freedom Knights and Rage Nazis. And then you're eaten by death spiders.

B. Lease out your kidneys to wealthy duocentenarians. It's not really that bad. You just have to keep smiling. Show those remaining teeth. If a client thinks you've failed to appreciate the honor of physically processing their thin, dusty fluids, they might give you a bad rating, and then it's down to the Devastation for you!

C. There's a transport shortage on Tristus Prime, and its citizens have to wait up to an hour in line at the spaceports. Your committee meeting's deadlocked. Any one of the three proposed solutions will probably alleviate the crisis, but which is best? No one can agree. Everyone keeps sniping at each other, bringing up personal grudges and factional loyalties. The meeting lasts the whole workday – two hours! You leave irritated with your colleagues.

D. You follow the shadow of a vulture across the bleeding sand. In the distance the acid sea laps quietly against the shore.

3. You've got a hot date tonight. How does it go?

A. Under the rubble you've carved a cozy spot. A stolen Rage Nazi banner turned into a blanket, a rose you found in the weeds. You even repurposed a taserfly into a lantern. There's no food, but that's ok. You and your partner make desperate love in your little cave of light. Before you can finish, you're eaten by death spiders.

B. Your date is gorgeous, witty, and thoughtful, but the dinner's spoiled by your racing mind. As a vulpinate splice from a backwoods hypersphere, is it ok to be attracted to a squidress from Selfex Eight? Is it not ok to NOT be attracted to a squidress from Selfex Eight? What does your attraction or lack of attraction to squidresses say about you and vulpinate splices in general? Can you monetize this date by writing a piece about your anxieties? In the kitchen, the squidress chef is running a fever. She coughs all over your food.

C. In the public luxaflora garden, you get into an argument over Scora Moan. Yeah, okay, she's talented, but she doesn't write all her own songs. Your date calls you pedantic and judgmental. You storm away under the neon shadows of the floating miximba trees. Later, you realize you were, in fact, being pedantic and judgmental.

D. You spend a lovely evening with a skull. You talk to it for hours, admiring the descending curve of its spinal column. It really is the cleanest and most complete human spine you've ever seen.

4. What does your downtime look like?

A. Even in the midst of a running fight for your life, there are long stretches of quiet hours, sometimes even days. You and your comrades tell stories of the fallen, of all the tribes of Designated Nopes that have been taken from the universe. There was so much beauty, so many varieties of human experience, silly jokes, raunchy stories...all destroyed by the Silicon Emperor, who smashes what he doesn't understand. A flying death spider drops its payload. You drown in liquid flame.

B. What's downtime? Do you mean sleeping? You do sleep, sometimes. You've outsourced your dreams to Creatabix, and the raw stuff of your imagination is fed as a slurry into the minds of rich kids who want to be artists but lack the crucial ingredients of talent, awareness, and sensibility. When you wake up you feel drained, listless. Stop complaining. What keeps the air flowing to this closet you sleep in? It's dream-money, baby.

C. Since you only work two hours a day, most of your life is downtime. But if you ever get bored of art, literature, holosports, and getting drunk, you can always plug into LiveMind for a round of "Who Shat Themselves Today"? The game is to find the person who accidentally revealed the most embarrassing thought and ridicule them mercilessly. Of course, before you start playing, you search through your own LiveMind archive and delete any thought-pattern that might reveal too much genuine vulnerability.

D. At night, when you can't sleep for the itching of the dust ticks and the scourge gnats, you contemplate all the people who should have fucking done something while the earth slowly died beneath their feet.

5. You've decided to go to a museum. What's it like?

A. Tonight, the Silicon Emperor will be attending the Museum of the History of Dynamism. You and your comrades have reprogrammed a death spider to lock onto the Silicon Emperor's genome. All you have to do is get it through a window...there he is, the Silicon Emperor, consecrating a fresh monument to himself – now's your chance! Take the shot! Your death spider hits the wall and explodes. The Silicon Emperor no longer has a genome. He's replaced all his living parts with nanites embedded in a flexible carbon mesh. You are ripped apart by his personal death spiders.

B. You don't have museums, exactly, but you do have auction houses. Sometimes you score an invite as the personal footrest of an orcabro. It's funny – most orcabros have money, and most vulpinates and squidresses don't. Everyone says vulpinates and squidresses just need to work more and smile harder. As you slowly compress under the weight of the orcabro's dorsal legs, you square your shoulders and hustle up a grin. Your orcabro bids on a jade Olmee mask from the fifth century BCE. When he wins, he films himself smashing it on the floor. You put in a bid for one of the shards.

C. There are many museums, but your favorite is the Museum of Late Capitalism. Whenever a real rift has arisen in your friend group, you gather together at the feet of the memorials. By the end of the day, you've all had the same revelation: yes, the petty bullshit of your fellow citizens is excruciatingly annoying, even toxic – but it's the worst of your problems. You all have dinner together, humbly grateful to be alive in this moment.

D. Some of the items you find aren't useful for survival, but too beautiful to be thrown away. So you've created the Museum of the End of the World. Sometimes, when the wet bulb temperature is only 33°C, you take these rescued memories up to the surface. There, you arrange the Museum of the End of the World on blackened sand under the beating silence of the sky.

ANSWERS

Mostly As: Libertarian Paradise/Fascist Robot Death Hell

Margaret Atwood once said "every dystopia contains a little utopia," but did you think it would be a utopia for you? Did you really think you might be one of the chosen, the Designated Yeas, destined by your superior strength and brains and overall genetic excellence to sit at the right hand of the Silicon Emperor? If you did, you're an idiot. You were devoured by death spiders long ago.

Mostly Bs: Neoliberal Dreamland, sponsored by Creatabix®

Stop! You don't have time to read this! Every second you waste is a second you're not out there hustling! You've got dreams to sell and body parts to rent. If you pause to think, you might wake up to the realization that all this running and giggling and self-promoting is making you completely miserable. But it's ok. You can watch three entire holoshows starring vulpinate splices just like you!

Mostly Cs: Mostly Automated Luxury Socialism

Is it perfect? Nah. Is there lots of pointless infighting? So much. Are resources still distributed imperfectly? Yes, but it's getting better. Are you thoroughly sick of spending so much time working out problems with your obnoxious fellow citizens? YES, but you've got a nice solo vacation to Enceladus coming up. Is this political arrangement better than anything that's come before? You bet your socks.

Mostly Ds: Climate Change Deadzone

We really should have fucking done something.

themselves superior to the goblins (who are ink-black). The novel's protagonist—half elf, half goblin—is suddenly thrust onto the imperial throne of the Elflands, and has to negotiate with a white court which is fundamentally hostile to him. But he's more or less successful, and the novel ends with an expectant sense of coming racial concord. Reviewers were delighted by this progressive parable, with one person writing, "I wondered early on whether this wasn't an Obama novel—a new ruler who is black and inexperienced coming to the capital with a will to enact change amongst entrenched and hidden enemies." (Gee, I wonder).

I read *The Goblin Emperor* in January 2017, which was the exact wrong moment for its hopeful message. After all, if the best that can be imagined is getting racist aristocrats to like you, and work with you, then your imagination is insufficient—not to mention doomed to failure, as the real-life Obama presidency clearly demonstrated. But the real flaw in the novel isn't its naivety about the swiftness with which race relations can be mended—it's that the book's seemingly-optimistic vision is founded on some seriously disturbing class politics.

In the narrative, the goblin emperor comes to power after someone plants a bomb on his father's airship. This murdered emperor was a true nineteenth-century autocrat, indifferent to the suffering of the people laboring in dark satanic mills. And the terrorist bombers are true nineteenth-century political assassins—they're anarchists, and workers from those same dark satanic mills.

THEY'RE ALSO COMPLETELY INSANE.

Here's one of the anarchists, under arrest and being questioned by the emperor:

Min Narchanezhen had the full-blood elf's ferret face and wore her white hair in a worker's crop. [The emperor] could tell that she was determined not to be

impressed by him; he didn't care... "Did you know what [the bomb] would do?" It was the only question that seemed to matter.

"Yes, and I would do it again," she spat at him. "It is the only way to force you vile parasites to relinquish your power..." Corporal Ishilar cuffed her. "You speak to your emperor, Narchanezhen."

"My emperor?" She laughed, and it was a horrible noise... "This is no emperor of mine... He would never know my name if it were not for the glorious strike we made against the stagnant power he represents..." She shouted at [the emperor] as Ishilar and one of the officers from Amalo dragged her out, her voice rising and rising until it was a shriek as terrible as the wind.

Imagine a shrieking harriidan so mentally ill that she spits on the divine right of kings! Min Narchanezhen is crazy—she can only be crazy. Addison could have chosen to write Min and her fellow bombers as justifiably angry—if overzealous—revolutionaries, whose violent actions spring from the real misery and injustice of their forced subservience. But the logic of the narrative says that anyone who wants too much change, too fast, and isn't willing to wait for relief to be bestowed from on high must be diseased and hysterical. Such people are moving faster than Reason will allow. Their desire for meaningful justice can only manifest as unhinged extremism.

Novels like *The Goblin Emperor* are especially disappointing because they'll go out of their way to include genuinely progres-



sive elements—acknowledgement of inequality, protagonists of color, gay characters, heroines who persist—but consistently stop short of portraying anything resembling large-scale political or societal change. This failure of imagination is all the more distressing in a literary genre where imagination is *the whole point*. After all, politics may be the art of the possible, but fantasy is the art of the impossible. The visionary—and tragically neglected—science fiction writer Joanna Russ put it this way: "The actual world is constantly present in fantasy, by negation... fantasy is what *could not have happened*; i.e. what *cannot* happen, what *cannot* exist... the negative subjunctivity, the *cannot* or *could not*, constitutes in fact the chief pleasure of fantasy." So why not, when writing a fantasy version of an unequal nineteenth century society, fully explore what *did not happen* in our actual nineteenth century? Why steampunk airships and (possible, future) racial equality, but still hideous class inequality, workers ground to death in factories, and the veneration of a "reformist" emperor?

If there are no possibilities, then there's nothing to negate, and nothing to rebel against. A fantasy novel that simply replicates real-life political discontents—without bothering to envision how they might be solved—is a negative zero, an airless void, not an open playground in which to explore alternative modes of being. If, in both reality and fantasy, absolute monarchy is the best we can hope for against a howling darkness, then the two

universes collapse into each other. The fantasy universe simply flattens into our present Reality, a dull landscape within which there is no alternative.

IN GENERAL I DON'T SUBSCRIBE TO THE BINARY LOGIC of contemporary criticism, where a work of art is either genius or contemptible. Up until the point of narrative failure, *The Goblin Emperor* and *Harry Potter* are intelligent, creative, stylistically interesting novels. I also don't want to gloss over the terrific SFF novels of the last decade (N. K. Jemisin's *Broken Earth* series, Nnedi Okorafor's *Who Fears Death*, Naomi Novik's *Uprooted*, to name a few), but these works have tended to address the fallout of regressive policies and historical crimes rather than offer alternatives. In a piece for this magazine "The Regrettable Decline of Space Utopias," Brianna Rennix noted that dystopias have almost entirely replaced utopias in popular culture. If you want to read utopian or at least politically radical SFF, you have to go back in time. Lately, I've become obsessed with feminist novels from the 1970s. While arguably both dystopic and utopic, Joanna Russ's *The Female Man* and Suzy McKee Charnas' *The Holdfast Chronicles* at least imagine worlds in which crippling patriarchy can be defeated, or at least escaped. Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *The Dispossessed* calmly invert both gender and capitalism, showing that neither structure is inevitable or necessary.

Since the 2017 election, I've had a number of discussions with

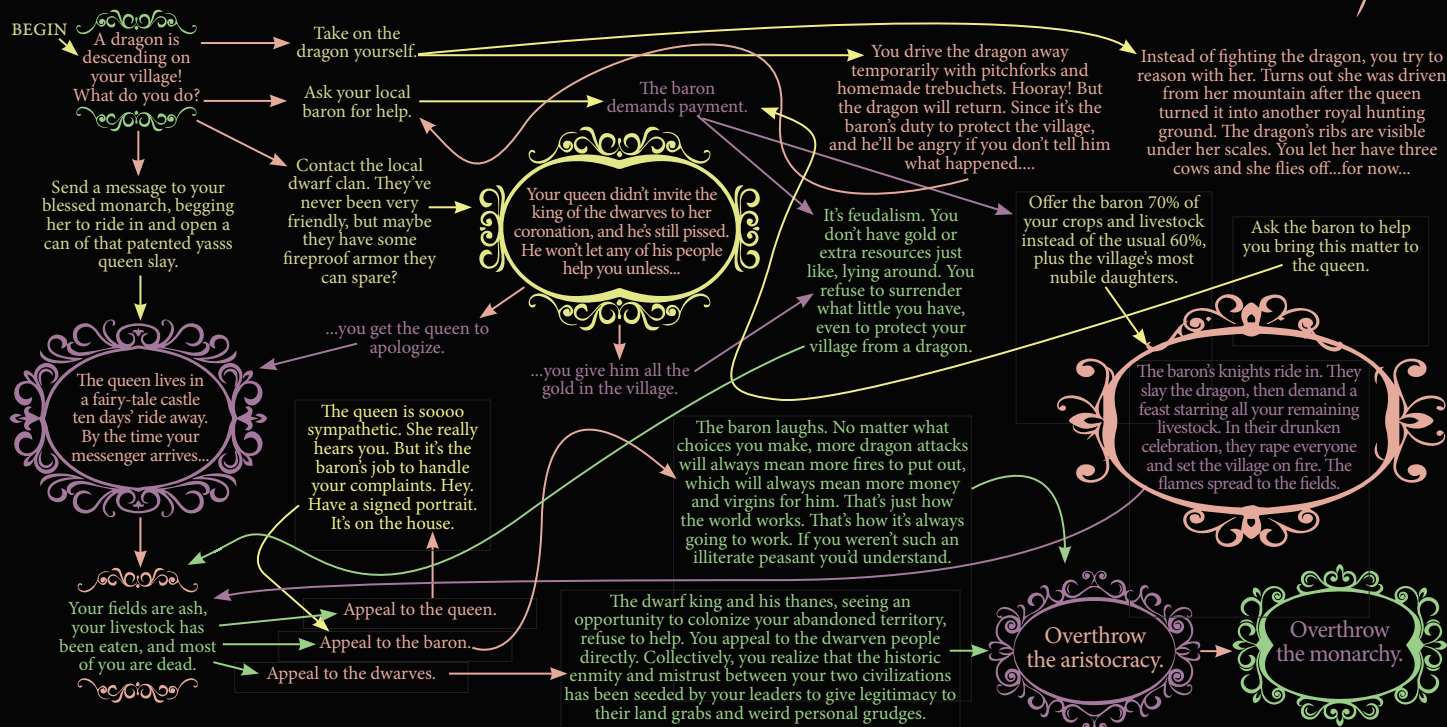
friends and acquaintances who are committed centrist Democrats. A few are secretly conservative and don't realize it, but most genuinely believe that weakly defending the Maginot Line of incremental progress is as good as politics can get. This is cynicism, but it's also despair. It comes from an inability to believe that our world can ever significantly change, at least not in a positive direction. So how do we help each other imagine a world that's capable of significantly changing for the better? One place to start is in our dreams: that is, inside the alternate universes of fantasy and science fiction.

Ursula K. Le Guin herself has called for a more imaginative SFF literature of the future, one that envisions new worlds and new modalities of life beyond capitalist realism. In 2014, upon receiving the National Book Award's Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters, she gave a fiery speech, mostly taking aim at greedy publishers and the writers who permit their work to be commodified and sold "like deodorant." But she also touched on the substance of SFF literature itself, and the imperative need—both politically and artistically—for real change. She said:

"Hard times are coming, when we'll be wanting the voices of writers who can see alternatives to how we live now, can see through our fear-stricken society and its obsessive technologies to other ways of being, and even imagine real grounds for hope. We'll need writers who can remember freedom—poets, visionaries—realists of a larger reality..."

...We live in capitalism, its power seems inescapable—but then, so did the divine right of kings." ❖

DRAGON ATTACK!



THE NOVEL

and why it has gotten bad

BY BRIANNA RENNIX

LAST SUMMER, THOUGH YOU MAY NOT HAVE KNOWN IT, THE literary world was raving about a novel called *The Nix*. One reviewer had only gotten ten pages into the book when he flipped to the dust jacket to see what author Nathan Hill's photo looked like. "I was thinking to myself, Jesus, this guy is gonna be famous," the reviewer gushed. "I wanna see what he looks like."

Critics from major publications were united in their praise. They agreed not merely that *The Nix* was good, but that it was *breathhtakingly* good. Said *The Independent*: "Reading *The Nix*—all 620 pages of it—is an experience of complete unadulterated pleasure." Said *The New York*

Times: "Hill has so much talent to burn that he can pull off just about any style, imagine himself into any person and convincingly portray any place or time... the author seems incapable of writing a pedestrian sentence or spinning a boring story." Said *The Guardian*: "Hill is an assiduous selector of words whose artistic concentration seldom lapses. He is also a very musical stylist—the book is full of long, beautifully counter-weighted sentences and subtle cadences that change from voice to voice as different characters take up the narrative." *Booklist* compared Nathan Hill to John Irving. John Irving, reportedly, compared Nathan Hill to Charles Dickens.

Literary critics, as we all know, are the Virgils sent to guide us through the gruesome hellscape of modern publishing. So with all this



lavish praise being bandied about, what could I do but read *The Nix* for myself? After all, I had been assured, I was going to laugh until I cried. Every chapter was going to be mesmerizing, every sentence musical. I would travel through time! I would inhabit the consciousnesses of a dizzying range of fully-realized characters! A world of *unadulterated pleasure* awaited me!

NOW, LET ME BEGIN BY SAYING, I DON'T LIKE TO knock other people's favorite novels. All right, fine, that's a lie. I *love* knocking other people's favorite novels. Sometimes, however, I feel bad about it afterwards. After all, life is short, and people ought to read whatever books bring them pleasure, whether or not they're "well-written" by some other person's standards. That said, the world of literary criticism about as low-stakes as it gets, enabling me to pronounce my cruel opinions with great confidence and little consequence to anybody. Reader, I read *The Nix*—all 620 pages of it.

In the interests of sparing you the trouble of reading the whole thing yourself, I'll summarize the plot briefly for you here. *The Nix* is the story of a sexually frustrated academic who despises his students. Most of the first part of the book is an extended flashback to the time in his childhood when his mother abandoned him. Cut to his mother. She has an extended flashback to the time in her college days when she was peripherally involved in some anti-Vietnam protesting. There is a longish interlude about a kinky affair between a police officer and the mother's college roommate, who enjoys being choked. The mom and the son have some cursory present-day interactions for the purposes of linking the two storylines together. There is a shocking twist at the end where you find out that one minor character is actually a different minor character. The end.

Oh, wait, there was also another plotline where the academic is in love with a violinist but her soldier brother sends the academic a deathbed letter from Iraq telling him not to have sex with his sister, so he doesn't. Also a malnourished recluse named Pwnage nearly dies of a blood clot after playing a video game for too long. This is described at considerable length and has more or less nothing to do with any other part of the plot. The end.

All told, *The Nix* is *not* the most extravagantly awful critically-acclaimed novel I've ever read—that would probably be one of Cormac McCarthy's or Don DeLillo's howlers. It's just not very good. The plot is a real mess, with contrived framing devices, jittery narrative focus, and little forward momentum. On a sentence level, Hill dutifully sprinkles unusual metaphors throughout his text in order to demonstrate that he is a serious literary stylist. A luxuriously wealthy home, for example, is described as having "Corinthian columns that were so intricately detailed at the top they looked like muskets that had backfired and been torn apart." (Intricately-carved scroll-and-leaf stonework that looks just like a piece of metal that's been randomly blown apart—yes, I can *definitely* picture those exotic Corinthian columns now, thank you.) The way a man feels when he's in love, meanwhile, is "like his chest and guts are held together by a single wooden clothespin that she could remove by simply not showing up." (Apparently she is going to summon the clothespin from afar, with one of those *Accio!* spells from *Harry Potter*.) All depicted sexual activity is either pornographically implausible or skin-crawlingly awkward. There are pointless experimental elements that do nothing to make the book more interesting: for example, there is a single sentence that is sixty-two pages long, though it feels much, much longer than that. Additionally, in homage to the main character's childhood love of Choose-Your-Own-Adventures, several chapters of the novel are formatted in the manner of a Choose-Your-Own-Adventure story, except that—get this—there end up being *no choices at the end*.

The Nix is, in addition, awfully self-satisfied about its own inaccessibility. At one point, the sexually frustrated academic's editor says scorn-

fully of the academic's planned novel, "So it's going to be like six hundred pages and ten people will read it? Congratulations." "That's not why I'm writing," the academic declares. The mercenary editor assures the brave academic that his disinterested artistic integrity is career suicide: "In today's market, most readers want books with accessible, linear narratives that rely on big concepts and easy life lessons."

The peculiar irony is that *The Nix's* narrative may not be linear, out of sheer laziness, but it offers up easy life lessons in spades. There's a hamfistedly moralizing tone to a lot of the writing, which, to me, was its only moderately endearing quality. Hill is not taking *any chances* that somebody might misunderstand the narrative themes he is trying to convey. Characters are always dramatically announcing things like "Every memory is really a scar" and "the things you love the most can hurt you the worst," and the narrator frequently butts in to double-check that you, the simple-minded reader, are fully appreciating the emotional arc of his characters: "What Faye won't understand and may never understand is that there is not one true self hidden by many false ones. Rather, there is one true self hidden by many other true ones." I do not mean to scorn simplicity—accurate truisms and sincere aphorisms have their place in life—but *The Nix's* desperation to be aloof and clever, and its equally clumsy attempts to be earnest, simply cancel each other out. Its tired conceit falls slowly (so, so slowly) between two stools.

SO WHY HAS THIS DREARY NOVEL RECEIVED SO much adulatory attention from the critical establishment? Well, aside from the possibility of a highly concerted behind-the-scenes wining-and-dining campaign by Nathan Hill's agent, my only explanation is that literary critics are trained to respond to certain cues that signal to the reader that a given book is A Serious Work Of Postmodern Literature. Over recent decades there has been a hiving-off of books into lowbrow "genre novels"—mysteries, thrillers, science fiction, romance, and the like—and "literary novels," which are all self-consciously vying for an immortal place in the Great Books canon.

But just as mystery novels have their locked rooms and romance novels their kilted Scotsmen, the literary novel is a genre like any other, with predictable tropes and a predetermined range of narrative possibilities. Postmodern writing has a very strong focus on literary *style*: it prioritizes conveying a mood rather than telling a story, and writing a "striking" descriptive sentence over presenting a fully-realized three-dimensional character. The art of the short story, being easier to read and grade, is more highly-prized by MFA instructors, and consequently the novels produced by MFA-trained writers have a cobbled-together feel of multiple short stories mashed into something of a novel-length. So-called experimental elements, such as unusual text formatting, have long since ceased to be experimental: they are now well-established formulas.

One thing I find truly irritating is that reviewers and other literary sophisticates are forever insisting that postmodern novels are *funny*. I can't tell you how many times a back-of-book blurb has assured me that some unlikely tome is, in reality, a comic masterpiece. Nathan Hill, for example, has been hailed a "major new comic novelist"; one reviewer promised me that *The Nix* was going to be "so intelligently funny," though it provided no textual examples to back this up. (For fellow *Arrested Development* fans—seasons 1-3—think "Footage Not Found"). Another reviewer declared that *The Nix* "swaps the masks of comedy and tragedy so deftly you can't always be sure which is which." I confess I was so bamboozled by the deftness of this tragicomic bait-and-switch routine that I failed to laugh even once. Perhaps the reviewers were referring to scintillatingly witty dialogue like this:

"*But here's the thing,*" Periwinkle continues, *his eyes all aglow, "even the things we do to break the routine become routine. Even the things we do*

to escape the sadness of our lives have themselves become sad. What this ad acknowledges is that you've been eating all these snacks and yet you are not happy, and you've been watching all these shows and yet you still feel lonely, and you've been seeing all this news and yet the world makes no sense, and you've been playing all these games and yet the melancholy sinks deeper and deeper into you. How do you escape?"

"You buy a new chip."

"You buy a misshapen chip! That's the answer. What this ad does is admit something you already deeply suspect and existentially fear: that consumerism is a failure and you will never find any meaning there no matter how much money you spend."

This sidesplitting exchange is an excellent example of what B.R. Meyers, in a famously crotchety (and mostly correct) 2001 essay entitled *A Reader's Manifesto*, described as the plague of "Consumerland" humorists: writers who believe that lists of winky brand-names and interminable musing on the emptiness of consumer culture are slyly entertaining, rather than trite and dull. There's nothing particularly wrong with a novel that doesn't have jokes in it: humor writing is hard, and the small number of people these days who could theoretically have written really good comic prose have probably just gone into TV instead. But I am not sure why literary reviewers persist in forcing themselves to laugh at things that simply are not funny. It cannot possibly be good for their health.

Perhaps I have systematically chosen exactly the wrong novels to try, but I'm hard-pressed to think of a critically-feted contemporary novel I've read in recent years that has made any distinct emotional impression on me. For example, I know I read Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom*, but I can't remember a damn thing that happened in it, except that a bunch of people cheated on their partners, and at one point someone was dissecting a freshly-laid turd in a frantic search for an accidentally-swallowed wedding ring. (I believe this was intended to be one of the



FREE

Funny Scenes that make for a Great Comic Novel.) David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* was a definitely finite jest: I think there might have been a good novel encased somewhere in all that dross of self-indulgence, like a Michaelangelo statue trapped in a slab of marble, but Wallace's editor evidently couldn't be bothered to chisel the thing out. Junot Diaz, of *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* fame, at least knows how to keep a plot moving, but his complete dehumanization of women—pardon, his *narrator's* complete dehumanization of women, let's make sure to be clear—makes for exhausting and depressing reading. None of these are books I could envision returning to, for comfort and guidance, in the way I usually return to books that move me.

I think there is a certain prevailing notion that everything has already been written, which—in a society that often places a premium on originality over quality—drives ambitious authors to write books with ironic footnotes and eccentric formatting, in the hopes of drawing some critic's

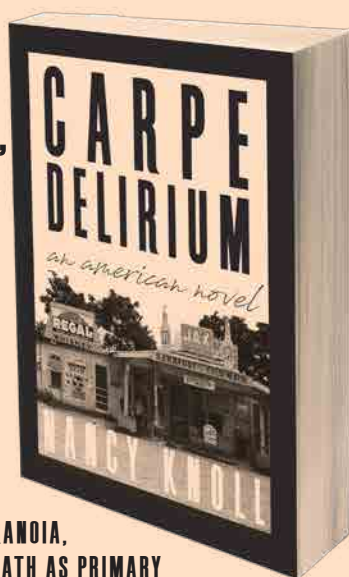
praise for nancy knoll's

CARPE DELIRIUM

**"THE GREAT
COMIC NOVEL
OF OUR TIME..."**

"HILARIOUS."

**"POWERFUL, UNSETTLING,
UNFORGETTABLE... THIS
STARKLY SURREALISTIC
PHANTASMAGORIA IS A
SEARING INDICTMENT OF
MODERN LIFE, EXPLORING PARANOIA,
ENTROPY AND THE LOVE OF DEATH AS PRIMARY
FORCES IN THE HISTORY OF OUR TIME... THE MASTERPIECE
AGAINST WHICH ALL THE WORKS OF THE TWENTY-FIRST
CENTURY WILL ONE DAY BE JUDGED."**



read an exclusive excerpt:

Professor Marlena Montageau-Morgenstern sits in her windowless dungeon office, illuminated only by piss-colored indoor light. Around her walls are shelves of books, smartly arrayed like lines of regimental soldiers, rubbing shoulder to shoulder in their stiff jackets, their bodies rigid with repressed words. Across the desk from her sits her student, Lars Allosaur. He is wearing a thin white wife-beater, flimsy and diaphanous as a tissue, and denim shorts of a remarkable tininess and tightness, constricting, surely, the circulation of his thigh-muscles. Marlena is conscious of her smell, of her menstrual stink, of her mintless morning breath, of the sweat of her unshowered flesh. Last night she was up late reading Sherlock fanfiction, her secret shame. She disgusts herself: she knows this sort of behavior is pathetic in a grown woman. The fine gold hairs on Lars's legs and arms glint like sunlit sporangia. She must disgust him too. He is spinning an excuse for the lateness of his paper, and his millennial speech is to her as uninterpretable as oracular ravings:

"And like so we were all turnt and and then I get this iEmote™ message that's all like hey your broseph Brad is vomiting in the ER and I'm like mmmmkay so I go to go see if he was okay and he was legit like messed up, like probs almost dead, and tbb I was v annoyed I was like brah what are you doing with your life but I didn't want to leave him there alone and I was going to write my paper, like for real honest to God, but I had to like stay and chill with Brad, because when he woke up he was like for real freaking out, and you know friends are friends, and all that Care Bears crap, so, you know, sorry not sorry."

Marlena remembers her eagerness when she first became a professor to inculcate young minds with an appreciation for the intricacies of literary symbolism, but it turns out that they are all simpletons like Lars, with their telephone apps and their twatter accounts and their fidget spinners. If only Marlena had finished writing that groundbreaking novel she had begun as a precocious twelve-year-old, and if only her one true love, Bertram, hadn't abandoned her to become an acrobat in a one-man Las Vegas dinner gymnastics show, stage name "berTrampolinist." She lets loose a soundless fart, scenting the unsuspecting air silent and deadly as the black rupture of an underground oil rig in pristine deepwater.

"Professor? You okay?" says Lars. He reaches out, suddenly touches her clammy hand skin.

Then the door bursts open, and the shooting begins.

AVAILABLE NOW

attention. But these postmodern gimmicks are not at all innovative, really: one has only to read *Don Quixote* (1605) or *Tristram Shandy* (1759) to see that self-referential surrealism and experimental plot-framing structures—albeit with much better jokes—have been around since the dawn of what we call the novel. In reality, the postmodern novel, with all its elaborate metafictional conceits, is simply doing consciously what epistolary and comic novelists of earlier times did unpretentiously as a matter of course. Postmodernism is nothing new, except in its prickly joylessness.

THE REALLY INNOVATIVE MOMENT IN THE history of literature, in fact, was not modernism, or postmodernism: it was the nineteenth-century novel, what we often call the "classic" novel. The word "classic" makes the nineteenth-century novel sound timeless, and thus does a disservice to what was truly a peculiar and unprecedented moment in the history of human language. The nineteenth century saw a lot of ghastly things in the way of colonialism, warfare, and exploitation, but it also saw the novel evolve into a literary form that delved intensely into individual psychologies, and examined webs of relationships between interconnected groups of people, and situated the small-scale experiences of characters in relation to larger historical trends and deep existential questions. All this while actually bothering to have a coherent central plot! And what's more, the nineteenth-century novel was not a type of "high" art only intended to be intelligible to a cabal of elites: it was a popular form that was serialized in magazines and newspapers. There had never been anything quite like it in the history of human art.

The greatest nineteenth-century novels are remarkable for their combination of depth and accessibility. Of course, there were plenty of bad novels written in the nineteenth century too, and certainly I don't mean to say that a book *must* be written along expansive, morally serious lines in order to be worth reading. Nevertheless, when I am going about my ordinary life, trying to figure out how to do the right thing, or how to better understand other people, the sort of novels that naturally spring into my head are George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, or Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, or Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. The central characters of these novels are people who want to be good, and learn that the world is much darker and harder place than they had imagined, and who still nevertheless want to be good. These books are realistic about human ugliness, in all its horrible grotesquerie, in all its pitiable banality, but they were not *cynical*. They have a powerful redemptive undercurrent, in the best possible sense. George Eliot, probably the greatest English-language novelist of the nineteenth century, writes about the inner lives of sociopaths, hypocrites, and charlatans with as much uncompromising honesty as any disaffected modern author. But her narrative universe refuses to be absorbed by them; she does not dwell on them with morbid fascination (as does the contemporary cult of the antihero), but nonetheless inhabits their thoughts with great subtlety and sympathy. Authors of this sort were brave: they did not throw up their hands in the face of the complexity of life, but endeavored to make works of art that were sufficiently intricate and robust that the problems of real human existence could be slightly better-understood through them. Compare, for example, *The Nix*'s banal narratorial pronouncements and tedious pseudo-comedic patter about the absurdities of consumerism, to this brief bit from *Middlemarch*:

"That element of tragedy which lies in the very fact of frequency, has not yet wrought itself into the coarse emotion of mankind; and perhaps our frames could hardly bear much of it. If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence. As it is, the quickest of us walk about well wadded with stupidity."

This passage kicks me in the gut every time I read it. It's a deceptively simple, deeply troubling sentiment, expressed in clear and beautiful

language. The great routine of human suffering makes us less able to empathize with the unremitting sorrows of thousands upon thousands of others: perhaps we should be grateful, in a curious way, to have been spared such an intensity of empathy in a world of pain, but we must also be humble, because no matter how clever and perceptive we are, we all fail to care for each other constantly. This is the kind of lesson that, if we remembered it more often, would undoubtedly make the world a kinder place.

And in that sense, I think books like *Middlemarch* took seriously the idea that novels had the power to transform human life, not merely—as seems to be the goal of a lot of postmodern novels—to riff off its foibles for the purpose of making the author look clever. The novels of Charles Dickens are credited with helping galvanize labor and judicial reform movements, because he succeeded in awakening public empathy through narrative, showing that literature has the power to affect change on a societal scale when you have a sufficiently large and engaged readership. In most other contexts, it might simply be that a line, or a scene, or a character pops into your head at a felicitous moment during your day—when you're about to speak harshly to somebody, maybe—and makes you think twice about what you're doing.

I think there's a real need to try to create books of comparable depth in the twenty-first century idiom, because the nineteenth-century novel is now increasingly less accessible to ordinary people, due to our distance from the context and language of the period. Our era urgently needs books of a similar generosity and subtlety, all the more so because nineteenth-century literature had massive blind spots adjacent to issues of race, class, culture, and gender: our collective consciousness now encompasses more things and more people, and if the better world we hope for is ever to come to pass, we must do the hard work of learning how to love every part of it. We need writers who are not so obsessed with being thought intelligent, and terrified of being thought sentimental, writers who believe the central purpose of their writing is to help readers become gentler and wiser. A return to the bread-and-butter task of telling good stories is clearly warranted. Contemporary writers have tried their damndest to convince the world that writing a book with an easily-intelligible plot is *easy*, and that “breaking” the rules of plotting is actually innovative and edgy. This is all a lie. Plot is harder than anything else in writing. Serialization may have been part of the reason why the nineteenth-century novel was, on average, so much better at plotting: writing (or at least revising and publishing) in installments, which the reading public will read and react to, makes the process of creating a novel more communal and feedback-oriented, rather than a prolonged labor of total solitude. This is closer to the original nature of human storytelling, and something we probably ought to return to.

OFF THE TOP OF MY HEAD, I CAN THINK OF AT least one contemporary author who probably has the skill and imagination to write a great novel on the ambitious scale that I, a random reader, am imperiously demanding. The most enjoyable novel I have read recently is George Saunders's *Lincoln in the Bardo*, which is an odd historical ghost-story about Willie Lincoln, son of Abraham, and his attempts to escape purgatory after his untimely death. Saunders's writing is beautifully irradiated by affection for human beings: unlike a lot of contemporary writers, he is not terrified of being laughed off as a sap, and as a result, he has, over a lengthy short-story career, honed his ability to write with great emotional force. I find that he always knows how to prick my heart in a tender place. Saunders's greatest short story, *Tenth of December*, is a tightly-constructed and profoundly moving tale of an encounter between a small boy and a cancer patient contemplating suicide; Saunders brings a similar sensi-

bility to *Lincoln in the Bardo*, his first-ever novel, which focuses largely on grief, longing, and the powerful but terrifyingly ephemeral nature of human connection. As the fictional Abraham Lincoln muses:

“One feels such love for the little ones, such anticipation that all that is lovely in life will be known by them, such fondness for that set of attributes manifested uniquely in each: mannerisms of bravado, of vulnerability, habits of speech and mispronouncement and so forth; the smell of the hair and head, the feel of the tiny hand in yours—and then the little one is gone! Taken! One is thunderstruck that such a brutal violation has occurred in what had previously seemed a benevolent world. From nothingness, there arose great love; now, its source nullified, that love, searching and sick, converts to the most abysmal suffering imaginable.”

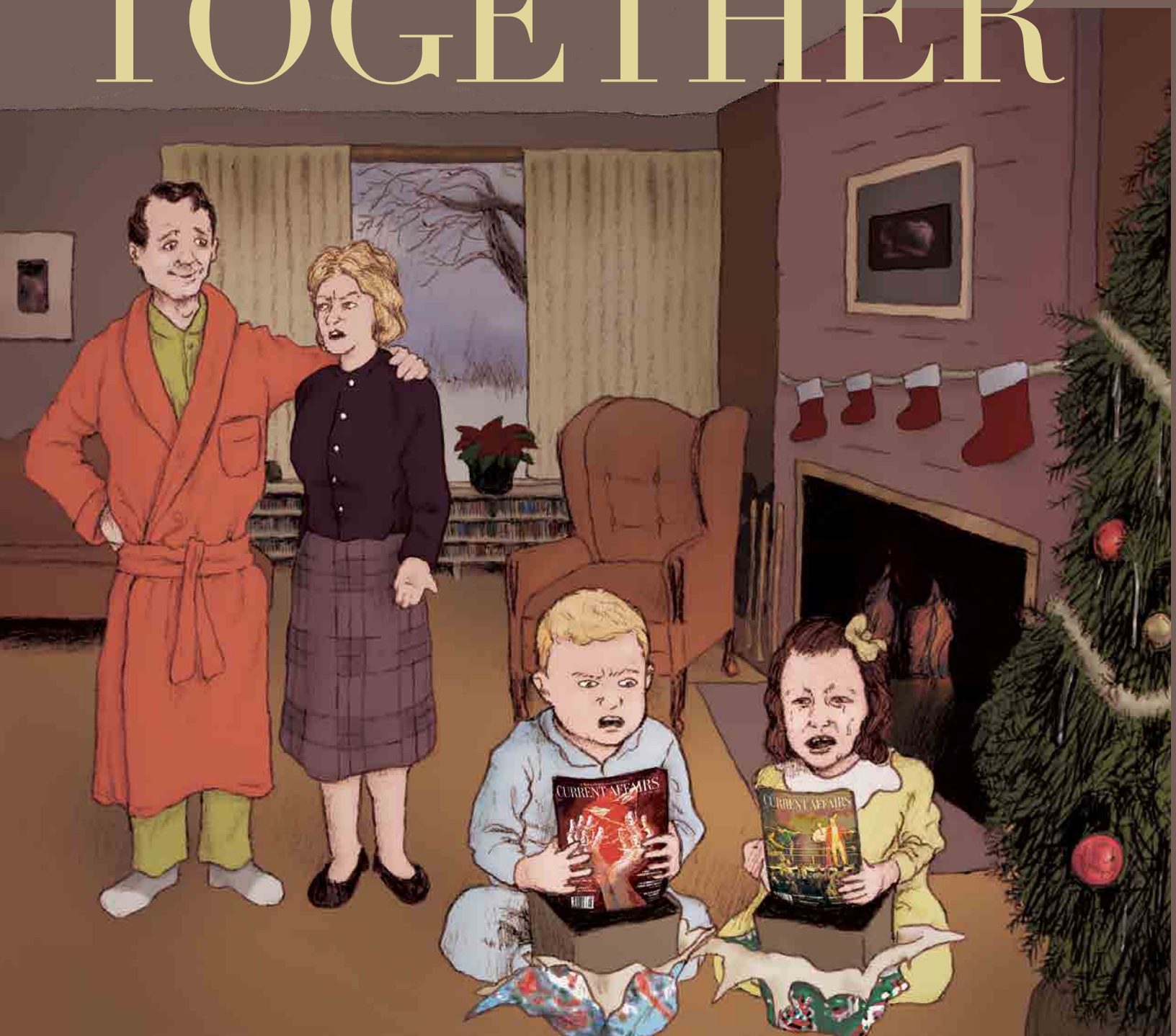
Saunders's writing is so good that I suspect I am petty to be dissatisfied with his novel. But nevertheless I am dissatisfied, or not-quite-satisfied. I feel like Saunders has the talent to write a twenty-first novel on the level of a *Middlemarch*. But instead he's writing the kind of self-consciously experimental, vaguely difficult-to-read novel that is the one of a slate of very limited options available to MFA types. *Lincoln in the Bardo*'s disorienting opening chapters, its arcane central conceit drawn from non-mainstream Buddhist theology, and its frequent, unexplained incorporation of textual snippets from Civil War scholarship means that this book will likely be read and enjoyed by only a small number of readers. In this respect, Saunders is, to me, like the chef who makes little artistic tastes when you want a full, rib-sticking plate of savory food. (If George Saunders has any interest in rebutting this criticism by serializing a groundbreaking, world-healing work of fiction in *Current Affairs*, we will be willing to receive his pitch in our inbox.)

All in all, there is room on earth for every sort of book: my own list of favorite novels includes everything from P.G. Wodehouse's *Leave It To Psmith* (which is not at all serious) to James Joyce's *Ulysses* (which is not exactly accessible) to J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* (which—well, see the preceding article in this issue for why this is Not Entirely A Good Thing). There may even exist people outside the literary critical establishment who are genuinely moved and edified by godawful garbage like *Blood Meridian*, or *White Noise*, or *The Nix*. Humans are peculiar creatures, after all. My only plea is that authors should think carefully about *why* they are writing the books they are writing, and take seriously their responsibility to promote the universal brotherhood of man, in ways great and small. Literature is not only a delightful form of entertainment: it is also perhaps the most significant means of inculcating empathy that our species has ever developed. Sometimes it is harder to write a simple thing than a complicated one; sometimes it is harder to portray goodness than selfishness; sometimes it is harder to nourish readers spiritually than to simply impress them with clever tricks. I wish that more authors would try to do the things that are hard. But until they get it all sorted out, I will probably go back to rereading books by dead people. ♦

ANSWERS TO “PUZZLES FOR LIBERTARIANS” FROM P. 42

1. Yes, because libertarian principles are psychotic, every other aspect of this is permissible under a libertarian framework.
2. No, of course there isn't, and it is mystifying that libertarians refuse to recognize the totalitarian nature of the corporate structure.
3. No, you can't.
4. No, it hasn't. And of course he should, but he can't be under a libertarian framework, because, again, libertarianism is psychotic.

BRINGING FAMILIES TOGETHER



Greetings
from

New Jersey

Don't bother coming!



EMPATHY IS PROBABLY GOOD

Paul Bloom, *Against Empathy*, HarperCollins, 304pp, \$26.99

THE DIFFICULTY WITH PUBLISHING A NONFICTION book is that you need a novel angle. It would be tough to get a contract to write something that simply expresses some basic and obvious truth, like *Hooray for Love* or *Democracy: Isn't It Nifty?* Instead, you need the “counterintuitive” perspective, the contrarian #SlatePitch that demonstrates why that thing you thought was good was actually bad, or vice versa. Thus we get books like *Against Democracy*, *Against Love*, and even *Against Everything*. The market pressure for constant novelty, which operates similarly in academia and in publishing, creates a dangerous incentive toward trying to say things that are eye-catching rather than things that are true.

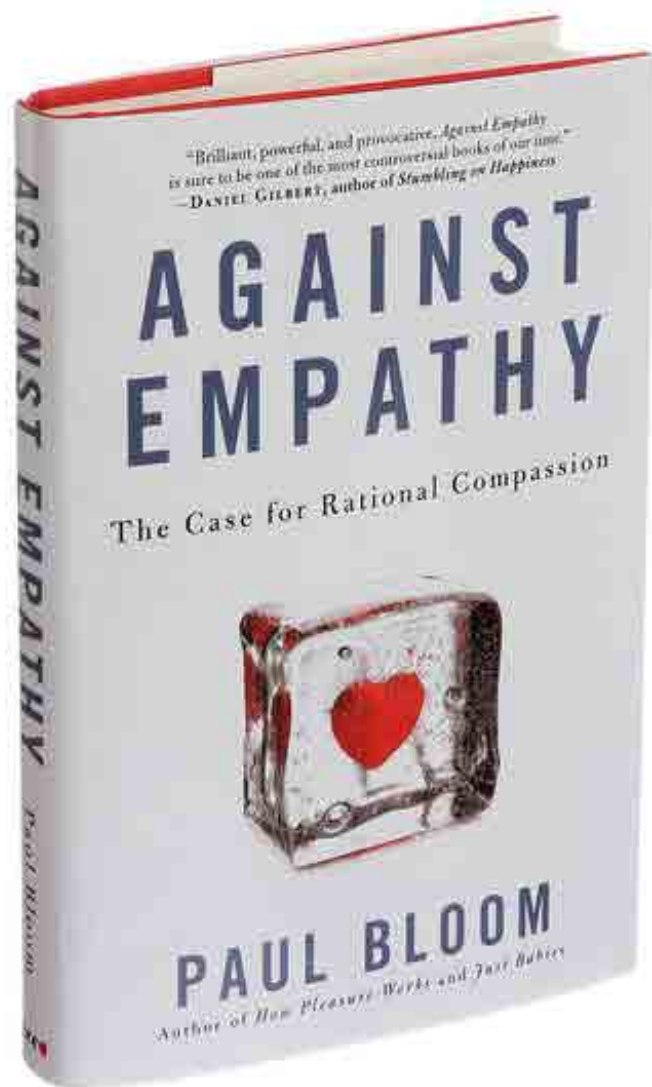
Paul Bloom isn't, despite what the title of *Against Empathy* might imply, against empathy. In fact, towards the end of the book, he even says that he “worr[ies] that I have given the impression that I'm against empathy.” The title is meant more for the purpose of making people angry and selling books than for clearly communicating the book's central point. Instead, *Against Empathy* is simply a book about why moral decisions should be based on reason rather than emotion. This is a far less controversial position than “empathy is bad,” but “we should try to be reasonable” is not a thesis that will land you on the bestsellers list, so *Against Empathy* it is. (Plus, as Bloom recounts, this allowed him to have tremendous fun by being a dick at parties, telling people he was working on a book about empathy, and then following up with “I'm against it” and watching them gasp.)

Bloom has said he is “not against empathy in general, just empathy as a moral guide.” This is not, of course, the same as being against empathy. But even here, Bloom is misleading: the thing he calls “empathy” throughout the book has little to do with our ordinary use of the term. Bloom says “empathy” is not the same thing as “compassion,” even though many people understand the word that way. In fact, Bloom’s definition of empathy is downright peculiar: he makes clear that what he is condemning is “emotional empathy,” by which he means “feeling what other people are feeling.” He distinguishes this from “cognitive empathy,” which he defines as trying to understand other people’s perspectives.

To those of us, like myself, who argue that people should generally have “more empathy” for one another, Bloom’s version of “empathy” is unrecognizable. I have always understood empathy to mean “trying to imagine what it is like to be other people” so that we can compassionately understand where they are coming from. But Bloom defines it as *literally* feeling other people’s emotions, suffering when they suffer, being distressed when they are distressed, etc. It’s possible to frame these two definitions so that they seem similar: both can be described using the expression “put yourself in another person’s shoes.” But the version in which we literally feel as if we *are* other people takes us far afield from the term’s everyday usage.

BECAUSE BLOOM DEFINES EMPATHY AS “EXPERIENCING what other people experience” rather than “imagining other people’s experiences for the purposes of better understanding and caring about them,” he is able to offer absurd caricatures of the pro-empathy position. He suggests that an “empathetic doctor” would be a bad doctor, because an empathetic doctor would be in pain while their patients were in pain, and this would inhibit their ability to offer good treatment. But does anyone who advocates having empathetic doctors believe they should literally feel as if they have whatever ailment the patient has? The point is not that you should literally experience what another person does (partly because, in the absence of swapping bodies, it’s not actually possible to experience someone else’s experiences), but that you may be better at caring for someone if you have gone through the exercise of imagining what it might be like to be them. Similarly, Bloom points out that we can “be concerned about starving people without having a vicarious experience of starving,” and that if we comfort a child who is afraid of a thunderstorm or a barking dog, we don’t literally need to be afraid of thunderstorms and barking dogs. For Bloom, the fact that we are not experiencing starvation or fear when we think about people who are hungry or afraid means that “there’s no empathy there.” That’s only true, though, if we adopt his bizarre definition of empathy. Of course, it’s true that if I comfort my child during a thunderstorm, I don’t need to be afraid of thunderstorms myself, and if I worry about starvation, I don’t need to feel hungry. But in order to understand *why* I should care about fear and hunger, it might help if I thought about what it feels like for a person who *is* experiencing those things. Pro-empathy people like myself do not advocate actually trying to become afraid of thunderstorms in order to understand how small children feel about them, but rather spending time remembering what it is like to be a small, scared child, in order to appreciate *why* thunderstorms might frighten them.

The distinction can be illustrated by thinking about how literature works. When people say that reading novels allows us to *empathize* with different perspectives, they do not mean empathy in Bloom’s



sense of actually feeling the person’s feelings. When I am reading about the protagonists in *The Stranger* or *Crime and Punishment*, I do not literally feel as if I have murdered someone. But I do get a better understanding of what it *might feel like* to be someone like Raskolnikov or Mersault. Empathy, in the sense in which people advocate it, is not a plea for people to weep when they see others weeping, but to better appreciate what it is like to weep. It is not, as Bloom says, that when somebody else’s child is killed I literally feel as if my own child has been killed. It is that I do my best to *imagine* what the experience is like for the person experiencing it, so that I am able to deal sensitively and humanely with the person who is going through it.

Even though I think “empathy as an exercise in imagining other people’s perspectives” is both a workable and natural definition of the term, Bloom firmly rejects it. He sticks to his belief that an empathetic psychotherapist would be a psychotherapist who actually *has* depression, rather than a psychotherapist who *has previously had* depression or who seems to appreciate what it is like to be depressed. The latter, he says, has “nothing to do with” empathy, even though it’s the only version of the idea of the “empathetic psychotherapist” that even makes any sense. Bloom says that when we talk about empathy as simply “understanding other minds,” we are talking about something called “cognitive empathy,” which is different from the “emotional empathy” he is against. “Cognitive” empathy, he says, is morally neutral: it’s what psychopaths, con men, and seducers do, since they

“understand” the workings of other people’s minds very well indeed. But since people who advocate that kind of empathy *also* advocate being a compassionate person, it’s hard to see how this matters.

Frankly, I think that because Paul Bloom defines empathy in such an idiosyncratic way, *Against Empathy* is the classic case of arguing against a “straw man” position that few people actually hold, and avoiding the much stronger case that people actually *do* make. Bloom says he “hates” terminological disputes, and that we should examine the concept being described rather than the word used to describe it, but this is like writing a book called *Against Science* and then revealing in the introduction that you are actually only against giving scientists dictatorial powers to run all human affairs, a position held by very few people. It is very easy to make a persuasive argument that doctors shouldn’t be crying all the time, but the only way such an argument would be useful is if anyone actually believed doctors should be crying all the time. Furthermore, since I think that the whole reason Bloom has to adopt a useless definition of empathy is because it’s the only way the *Against Empathy* framing can even work, this book is an intellectually dishonest exercise from the start, born from a desire to provoke rather than to reach clarity.

punitive criminal justice policies that have deleterious social consequences. Or when we see a starving child on a charity’s leaflet, we may rush to donate, even if this particular charity isn’t the most effective at helping children. The more we know about someone who is suffering, the more we are likely to want them to receive special treatment, even at the expense of those who are more deserving but whose names we do not know. Empathy, Bloom says, is selective: it causes us to sympathize with particular victims and make rash choices on the basis of our feelings about those victims, rather than stepping back and making a cool-headed decision as to what the most moral course of action actually is. Bloom says that a concern with the well-being of our fellow humans is best acted on through dispassionate cost-benefit analysis. All of this is essentially just a restatement of classic utilitarian ethics, and indeed, Bloom closes by praising Peter Singer and the Effective Altruism movement.

Bloom makes plenty of accurate points here, though again, they are a critique of “allowing your gut feelings to determine your morals” rather than “empathy.” It’s absolutely true, as Bloom points out, that people can be whipped up into a warlike frenzy by tales about individual victims, and that compelling narratives about one or two people can blind us to larger, less tangible harms. Bloom gives the example of climate change, saying that because its harms are diffuse, “empathy favors doing nothing.” But that’s false. Actually, if we truly appreciated what life will be like for the inhabitants of a boiling planet, if the power of empathy could finally let us see them as people just like ourselves rather than a mere abstract potential, we might finally appreciate just why the issue is so urgent.

In fact, Bloom’s advocacy of rationality over empathy misses something crucial: empathy offers data to aid rational decision-making. When I am trying to understand how other people feel, either just by using my imagination or literally trying to feel that thing, I am learning something about the world. If you want to make “cost-benefit”

BUT FOR A MOMENT, LET’S SET ASIDE THE FACT THAT the entire premise of the book is both sneaky and useless, and examine the substance of Bloom’s anti-“empathy” argument. It runs roughly as follows: “empathy,” defined as feeling other people’s emotions, is neither useful or necessary in grounding human morality. It’s not necessary, because plenty of people do good things without ever feeling the pain of the people they are helping. And it’s not useful, because it creates dangerous biases that can result in worse moral decisions. When we hear about the victim of a crime, and we empathize with their suffering, we may rush to support

AN EXERCISE IN EMPATHY

Can you empathize with these strangers?

This woman has just seen her daughter win a county-wide spelling bee, trouncing the other children in the final round with the word “anagnorisis.”



This firefighter saw unspeakable horrors when the orphanage burned down. He doesn’t know whether he can ever believe in anything again.



This woman was born in 1933. Wow! What must that have been like? Lately she has been reflecting on the nature of mortality and the trajectory of historical progress.



This man is secretly terrified that people will think he is pathetic. Imagine what it’s like to spend every day desperate to impress!



calculus about the lives of other people, it helps to understand what their pains and pleasures are actually like. Sam Harris, in supporting Bloom's argument, suggested that if we considered the pain of mothers who lose their children when we set laws designed to prevent traffic accidents, we would make everyone drive 15 miles an hour, because the pain is so great that any inconvenience would be justified in preventing it. But what Harris is advocating is *excluding* a certain kind of data (the feeling of a mother's pain) from our cost-benefit calculus, because we don't like the effects it has on the calculus. But that's not rational; if understanding a mother's pain made us feel that we needed to take greater precautions against allowing people's sons to die, that would be because we had a better understanding of the world having more fully appreciated people's subjective experiences. Bloom is right that emotion shouldn't be a trump card that overrides rational thinking, and "a mother's pain" is just one consideration to enter a cost-benefit calculus. But, fundamentally, empathy produces data on what it is like to be other people, and without it we will make *worse* decisions that simply impose our *own* conception of a person's good upon them rather than understanding their good from their perspective.

PEOPLE LIKE BLOOM AND HARRIS ARE OFTEN oblivious to the pitfalls of cost-benefit analyses, which can give them the dangerous belief that their subjective ideas of the social good are somehow objective and mathematically correct. Bloom praises economists for their cool-headed refusal to put emotion above facts, and their willingness to support policies like free trade, even though these policies hurt some people, because they serve the greater social good. Bloom's praise of economists is telling: it's precisely the problem with economists that because they see things in the statistical aggregate, they fail to appreciate what the actual individual experiences of economic policies can be. They think it is "irrational" not to support free trade,

without appreciating what it is actually *like* to live in a town that whose industry been hollowed out by globalization and technological change. Their inability to empathize prevents them from realizing why many individuals have perfectly rational reasons for despising economists.

Pure cost-benefit analyses, untempered by empathy, can be just as dangerous as emotion-based policymaking. The classic example is the dropping of the atom bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. From a cost-benefit perspective, the bombings were "rational"; they ended the war. But from a humane perspective, they were madness, an unspeakable form of cruelty. Now, it's often argued that this shows precisely why you need to use "rational" rather than "emotional" decision-making: the rational person doesn't allow feelings to keep them from making the tough but correct choice. But it's also true that when one gets rid of feelings, one fails to appreciate just how horrific the ultimate consequences of the decision are. A person who sees the atom bomb in purely statistical terms doesn't actually understand what it means for the people on whom it is being dropped. As a result, such a person won't have the necessary moral horror needed to make them urgently want to ensure that sure no such bomb is ever dropped again. Empathy helps us understand what *matters*, even if our decisions should ultimately be grounded in reason. We can see in Bloom's book what happens when one wilfully abandons this: in one chapter, Bloom rejects the idea that "violence is wrong," saying that violence will always be with us and is "right" in some circumstances. But those who truly understand the reality of violence will have a hard time ever saying that violence is "right." It may be "necessary," but it is always a necessary *evil*, and empathy helps us appreciate why violence is inherently evil even when it is morally compelled. The pure embrace of cost-benefit analysis creates moral blind spots. (We can also see this in Bloom's praise of Peter Singer. Singer is a classic example of someone whose commitment to "rational" morality over empathy has actually made him a morally oblivious person;

Empathy, no matter what Paul Bloom says, is about imagining what it's like to be other people, so that we can better understand and relate to them. It helps us figure out what the world looks like from perspectives other than our own, which is useful for learning how to live with and care about other human beings. With each of these photographs, try to imagine what it feels like to inhabit the person's consciousness. Think about what kinds of joys, sufferings, frustrations, and aspirations they might have. Learn to love and understand all of humankind. It's not so hard!

This woman has recently been struggling to reconcile her feminist principles with her devout religious beliefs.



This man gave up a promising career as a professional boxer after a debilitating injury. Now he is a prosecutor, but has mixed feelings about it.



This woman has just found out that her boss has died.



This man makes a living posing for stock photographs. Now that must be a pretty interesting line of work, don't you think?



even though he strongly advocates helping alleviate suffering, he constantly makes appalling and insensitive remarks about disabled people, then wonders why they are upset, something that would cease to be mysterious to him if he learned to exercise a modicum of empathy.)

Examining moral matters carefully and rationally, and treating human beings equally rather than singling out particular emotionally touching cases, is manifestly a good thing. But nobody needs to be against empathy in order to be in favor of that. Paul Bloom could have written a very good book on why we needed to empathize fairly with all human beings, and examine our biases. It could have been a beautiful manifesto for loving and understanding each other. But instead, he simply concluded that it's "impossible" to empathize with more than a few people (unless I am failing to empathize correctly, I have never found this to be the case), so we shouldn't try to do it. And instead of exhorting us to understand other minds, he wrote a book that will help people justify telling others what's good for them without having to actually listen to them.

HAVE DWELLED TOO LONG ON THIS TERRIBLE PIECE OF work. Bloom is not an intellectually serious person; if he was, he would have dealt with the strong pro-empathy case (the one that says it's a useful exercise to compassionately imagine other lives) rather than the ludicrous one (the one that says every time a child dies in the world I should burst into tears). But it's worth pointing out just where Bloom goes wrong, because the book's reception has been positive (Jesse Singal of *New York* magazine said Bloom's "great" case is "tough to crack" and "absolutely succeeds") and he is a tenured professor at Yale, an institution whose affiliates are granted a level of public credibility completely out of proportion to the actual social worth of their ideas.

Against Empathy does, however, offer a useful opportunity to reaffirm what empathy is and why it matters. Empathy is probably best thought of as something you do regularly, rather than all the time. It means making sure that you frequently think about the lives of those who are different from yourself, especially those who are *very* different. It's an exercise to help connect you with your fellow human beings. Our imaginations are poor things with limited capacities, but listening to strangers and reading memoirs and stories can assist us. The aim is to get a real sense of the diversity of human perspectives, and to remind ourselves that other people experience consciousness just like we do. Empathy isn't a moral philosophy in and of itself, it's a technique for acquiring a better sense of the world as it really is.

The reason why empathy is so important is that it's so easy to lapse into solipsism, to forget just how human our fellow humans are. (And, by the way, how human *other animals* are. One reason I think people are unmoved by the industrial killing of animals, even though we all know in the abstract that causes extraordinary amounts of harm to conscious creatures, is that we have failed to sufficiently empathize with cows and pigs. The moment we understand what it is like to *be* them, it becomes far harder to turn away from their pain.) It's so easy to see others as statistics, or not even to see them at all. But the more I realize that others truly are just slightly different versions of myself, that they have dreams, itches, and fears just like I do, that they have eyeballs, teeth, and an anus just like I do, that they must fumble their way the bewildering process called life just as I must, the more I begin to feel a powerful and moving sense of community, one that I believe is essential for creating a peaceful and mutually

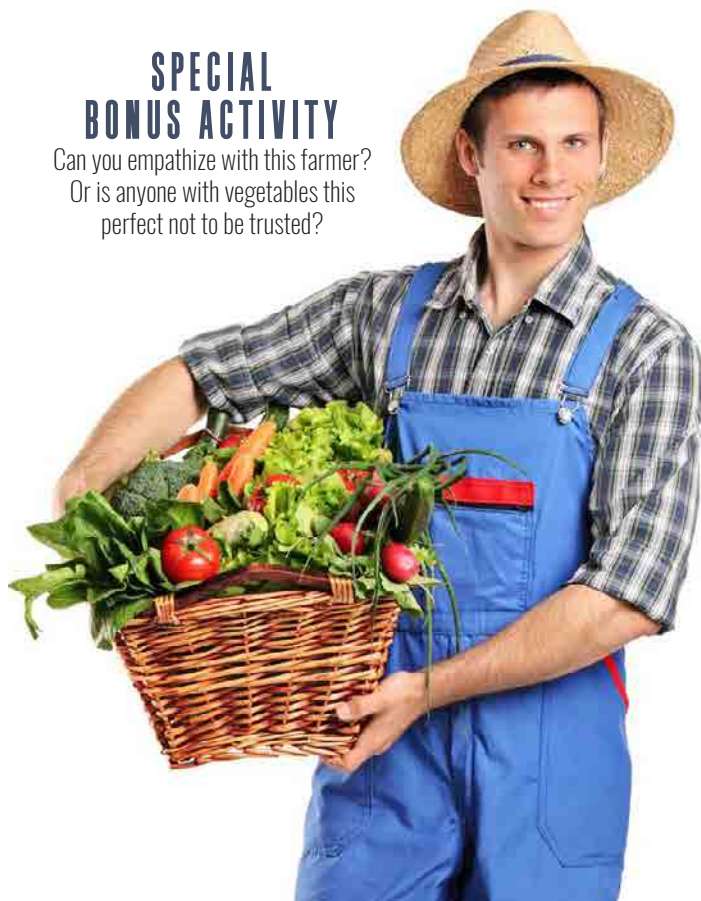
supportive world. Bloom quotes George Orwell, who found himself unable to shoot a fascist during the Spanish Civil War because the man was trying to hold his trousers up, and "a man who is holding up his trousers isn't a 'Fascist', he is visibly a fellow-creature, similar to yourself, and you don't feel like shooting at him." For the cost-benefit analyst, that only demonstrates the case *against* empathy: a soldier who empathizes with the enemy won't be able to shoot, and lives will be lost. And that may be right. But if we're ever to actually eliminate war, to create a world based on mutual understanding, it's vital for everyone to realize that the planet is filled with nothing *but* fellow creatures, that we're *all* just holding our trousers up. Not only is empathy a "good thing," but until we learn to empathize, we will never truly know who we are.

Books like *Against Empathy* make me viscerally angry. First, there's the contrarianism; I believe that bad things should be criticized, but Bloom is just trying to wind people up, and a true intellectual would frame their argument in the most *helpful* manner rather than the most attention-getting manner. Second, though, this just seems to me like the last thing we need right now. In a time where nobody understands each other, where there is so much isolation, when there are so few attempts to break down communications barriers and genuinely connect with other people, do we really need someone to come along and encourage us to feel other people's feelings *less*? Surely Bloom can't really believe what he's saying, that humankind suffers from a surfeit of empathy. It's already so difficult to make oneself understood, so difficult to get people to appreciate that those different from themselves are real and conscious, that I can't imagine anyone choosing to write *this* book of all the possible ones they could write. And I can't help but feel a seething hatred for Paul Bloom, more concerned with trolling people at parties than with seriously helping humankind.

But then again, I can empathize with him. After all, it can be tough to sell a book these days. ♦

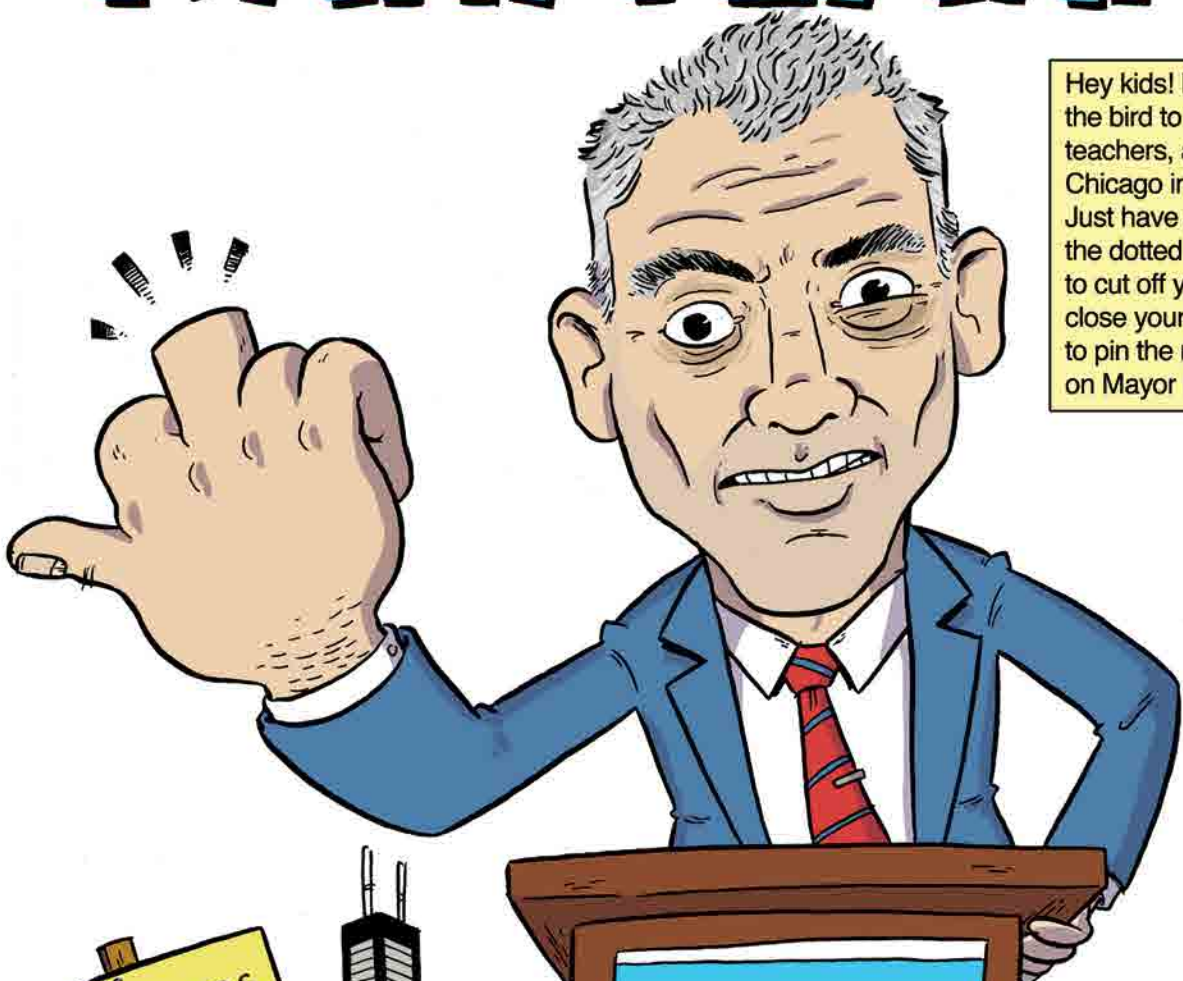
SPECIAL BONUS ACTIVITY

Can you empathize with this farmer?
Or is anyone with vegetables this
perfect not to be trusted?

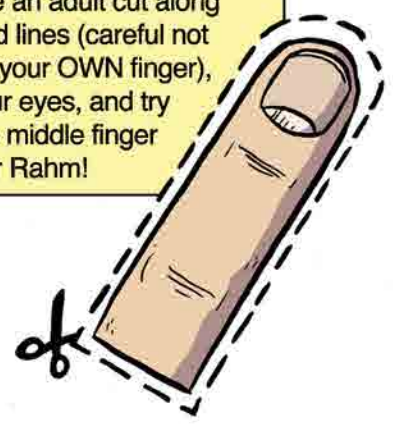


PIN THE MIDDLE FINGER ON
★MAYOR★

RAHM EMANUEL



Hey kids! Do YOU want to flip the bird to the labor movement, teachers, and the whole city of Chicago in general? Sure ya do! Just have an adult cut along the dotted lines (careful not to cut off your OWN finger), close your eyes, and try to pin the middle finger on Mayor Rahm!



A dense collage of various political campaign posters and signs for Jon Ossoff and Karen Handel. The posters feature slogans such as "Voting is Open Now!", "Early Voting Has Started!", "We're better than this. Let's stand up for what we believe in.", and "TUESDAY, MAY 30". The posters include photos of the candidates and various campaign messages. Some posters also include financial data, such as a table showing campaign spending: \$299.7 BILLION, \$124.7 BILLION, \$12.2 BILLION, and \$225.5 BILLION, totaling \$931.1 BILLION. Other posters mention "KAREN HANDEL FOR CONGRESS" and "JON OSSOFF FOR CONGRESS". The collage is a mix of colors and fonts, creating a busy and informative visual.

anatomy of a **PROPAGANDA CAMPAIGN**

BY NATHAN J. ROBINSON

I HAVE IN FRONT OF ME AN ENORMOUS STACK of political propaganda. Specifically, I have a copy of every campaign mailer, from both the Democratic and Republican parties, sent to a single household in Georgia's Sixth District during the run-up to the special congressional election held there in June. It is quite an archive. This one home received over 70 different leaflets over the course of a few months, as Democrat Jon Ossoff and Republican Karen Handel waged an incredibly expensive advertising war for a seat in the House of Representatives.

Actually, the campaign was not just incredibly expensive; it was *the* most expensive house race in the history of the United States of America, which already has one of the most money-soaked electoral systems in the world, so there's a reasonably good chance that this was the most money ever spent on a legislative election in the entire history of human civilization. Between the two of them, they spent over \$56 million, enough

to have prevented 17,000 children from dying of malaria. (Sorry, children!)

Looking through the mailers, it's easy to see where the money went. I am still amazed, whenever I spread them out on my desk, that I am looking at the material received by just one family. If you collected all the Handel and Ossoff flyers from the entire race from the entire district, they'd probably stretch to the moon. (Actually, probably not quite that far. If there are 700,000 people in a congressional district, and 2.5 people in the average household, then if every household got 72 mailers the sum total is only 3,000 miles worth, i.e. more than the entire distance across the United States from coast to coast. Still, uh, quite a lot of paper.) They're all glossy, all professionally printed and designed, and all, of course, rank propaganda.

Leafing through a stack of Ossoff/Handel flyers is a good way to examine the nature of contemporary political messaging. Both parties must have thought assailing people with these things would be effective, or else they wouldn't have done it. Whether

They make too much money.

(That's what Karen Handel thinks, at least.)



they *were* effective is another matter, but we can get a good sense of what the parties are *trying* to do. How do they pitch themselves to voters? What do they think people want from them? Do they treat people like children to be manipulated, or like rational citizens enacting the noble task of democratic participation?

LIKE CHILDREN, OBVIOUSLY. THE OSSOFF/HANDEL FLYERS seem to assume a voter whose every thought is either a grunt of approval or a grunt of disdain. And their theory of persuasion seems to be that voters vote for the candidate who sends them the largest mountain of mailers, regardless of what those mailers actually say. The ads are not just *simple*, they are for the most part empty of political content. The Handel message was, almost in its entirety: Jon Ossoff is a carpetbagging liberal funded by Nancy Pelosi. The Ossoff message was a little more diffuse. The central themes were: (1) Donald Trump is bad, and Jon Ossoff is not Donald Trump; (2) Planned Parenthood is good, and Karen Handel does not like Planned Parenthood; (3) guns are bad, and Karen Handel wants them to be in your schools; (4) government waste is bad, and Jon Ossoff *hates* government waste.

But that formulation actually overstates the coherence of Jon Ossoff's campaign mailers. One of the most notable things about them is just how surreally *vague* many of them are. The messages on some are not just ineffective, they are inscrutable. One mailer features photographs of young children arranged inside the silhouette of a soldier, with the caption "SOLDIERS IN TRUMP'S WARS." It's mystifying; presumably the flyer is saying that the children are going to be drafted into a war waged by Trump. But won't Trump's term of office long since have expired by the time they reach the age of enlistment? What war is being referred to, exactly? The flyer is mysterious; on the back, Ossoff simply says that Trump is dangerous and warlike.

Another mailer depicts a diverse set of people culled from stock photographs. It is unclear who they are or what they do, though some look like blue-collar workers and some look like professionals. "THEY GET PAID TOO MUCH," says the flyer, before informing us in smaller text: "(that's what Karen Handel thinks, at least)." But who are these people? How do we *know* whether they get paid too much? Is Karen Handel right? On the back of the flyer, we finally find out what is going on: in a debate, Handel said that she "did not support a livable wage." But instead of leading with that incredibly damning quote, the front of the flyer simply hints at it obliquely, by showing us a series of people and suggesting they get paid too much, then telling us that this is Handel's, rather than Ossoff's position. It's hard to think how the Ossoff campaign could have made such a confusing mess out of a quotation as straightforward as "I do not support a livable wage."

Worse, this is the *only* flyer using the "livable wage" quote against Handel, even though this was probably the single strongest piece of evidence that the Ossoff campaign had against her. After all, what kind of monster openly admits that they don't want workers to be paid enough to *survive*? If your opponent says this, you should talk about it constantly. You certainly shouldn't bury it on the back of a single flyer and introduce it using a strange form of counterintuitive rhetoric in which you announce that people get paid too much and then reveal that they actually don't.

THIS IS NOT, HOWEVER, THE MOST UNFATHOMABLE OSSOFF FOR CONGRESS mailer. That honor has to go to the one with the caption "See something wrong with this picture? Karen Handel doesn't..." The viewer is presented with a photograph showing some people in an odd position. It is not immediately clear what is going on. First, we notice a beer keg. Then, we realize that the man suspended above the keg is doing a "keg stand." Finally, we notice that a man standing next to the keg

“Their theory of persuasion seems to be that voters vote for the candidate who sends them the largest mountain of mailers...”



has a pistol tucked into his jeans. The back of the flyer informs us that Karen Handel believes guns should be allowed on college campuses, and suggests we vote for Jon Ossoff.

It's a spectacularly ineffective advertisement, because the entire point of the thing (that something is obviously wrong with the picture, something Karen Handel doesn't see) is undercut by the fact that at first, it's not actually obvious what's wrong with the picture. The viewer has to look twice, and may begin mentally answering the "See something wrong?" question with "I'm not sure..." (and possibly wondering whether Karen Handel is right), before understanding what they are supposed to be looking at. In our confusion, we unconsciously begin to side with Handel, then are told we are meant to be siding with Ossoff. At best, the viewer comes away thinking "Oh, okay, I guess that's what's wrong" rather than having the intended reaction of "How outrageous and foolish that Karen Handel could think this was fine!"

This "reversal" technique is also deployed on Ossoff's single worst flyer. This one features a photograph of an open laptop sitting atop a pile of money. The laptop displays a YouTube video with Osama bin Laden's face, along with the phrase "MOUTHPIECE FOR TERRORISTS." A caption informs us that "special interest Super PACs are spending millions on a desperate smear campaign against Jon Ossoff that INSULTS OUR INTELLIGENCE." On the back, we are told that "Comparing Jon Ossoff's investigative film work to terrorism is just absurd." Once again, the main feeling we are left with is one of confusion: why is Osama bin Laden on this flyer? What is the allegation about Ossoff and bin Laden? Apparently, Handel's negative advertisements had been highlighting documentary film work that Ossoff once did for Al Jazeera, implying it creates some kind of shady Ossoff-bin Laden nexus. The flyer is supposed to counter this smear, informing us that the allegation is *ridiculous*.

BUT HERE'S A LESSON IN POLITICAL strategy 101: if the first reaction that a voter has to seeing a flyer for Candidate X is to immediately want to Google "Candidate X and Osama bin Laden," you have produced a bad flyer. The Ossoff flyer actually *repeats* the ludicrous smear to those who haven't heard it, before going on to explain why it's ludicrous. The structure of the ad is: "JON OSSOFF IS A MOUTHPIECE FOR TERRORISTS... is what the Republicans want you to think. But you're smarter than that!" Like saying "These people are paid too much... is what my opponent thinks" and "Do you think this picture is fine? ... No, it isn't fine at all!", it takes a circuitous route to its essential point, with most voters probably having thrown the flyer away before completing the process of figuring out what it is trying to say (or having rushed to their laptops to look up why Osama bin Laden posthumously endorsed Jon Ossoff).

The "inscrutables" are only one category of Ossoff mailers, though. Many of the rest are focused on encouraging people who hate Donald Trump to vote for Jon Ossoff. One depicts a post-apocalyptic, environmentally devastated landscape covered in gilded Trump properties, asking whether this is the sort of world we wish to bequeath to our children. Others simply show Trump's face in a contorted or unflattering position (with captions like "Enough."), as if the mere sight of the president's flesh will sufficiently motivate voters to head for the polls. The Ossoff campaign's heavy emphasis on the irresponsibility and repulsiveness of Trump was a somewhat odd strategy, considering that Georgia's Sixth District had actually voted *for* Trump, albeit by a small margin. The Democratic Party was relying on Trump-hating voters to be more motivated to defeat Karen Handel (who is not Donald Trump) than they had been to defeat Trump himself.



The mailers that actually present a *positive* case for Jon Ossoff (as opposed to the the Trump ones, the baffling ones, and the ones depicting a pleased-looking Karen Handel sitting atop a golden throne as she squanders government dollars on over-priced office supplies) are cautious in the extreme. Many do not actually advocate anything, but simply consist of platitudes, such as “We are courageous, we are humble, and we know how to fight” (“humble” being a curious word to deploy when this phrase arrives printed on a 24-inch glossy fold-out poster). One consists of little more than a picture of Barack Obama, whose vocal inflections Ossoff mimicked in his speeches. Ossoff’s “policy” flyers stick to two basic points: support for women’s health and a seething hatred of government waste. Ossoff presents statistics for the various ways that the government is squandering your money, and promises to implement various GAO recommendations for reducing duplication and overlap in the functioning of federal agencies.

The “anti-waste” platform is a strange one in a time of incredible political turmoil around healthcare, the climate, foreign policy, and the economy. But the strategy deployed by Ossoff and the Democratic Party, which comes across strongly in the flyers, was to carefully avoid touching any seriously controversial issues. The theory was that Georgia’s Sixth District was naturally conservative, so Ossoff should stick to opposing Trump and presenting himself as the moderate voice of good government and sensible spending habits. As a result, a disproportionate amount of Ossoff’s paid advertising was devoted to presenting his plans for “consolidating federal data centers” and “eliminating mobile device contracts.” These arcane and

comparatively inconsequential policies were hardly likely to get many voters jazzed to go to the polls, but the assumptions underlying the campaign (that presenting Ossoff as inoffensive and blandly handsome was the way to win) meant that it was structurally committed to high levels of vacuity.

KAREN HANDEL’S CAMPAIGN MAILERS ARE AN altogether different species of document. They are relentlessly vicious, and they focus on one thing above all: Ossoff’s ties to Nancy Pelosi. The Republican party evidently concluded that the number one thing voters in Georgia hate is San Francisco liberalism, and that since Nancy Pelosi is its corporeal embodiment, the word “Pelosi” should appear in large letters at least once on every pro-Handel flyer. So we see Nancy Pelosi as a mad Geppetto pulling the strings of an Ossoff marionette. We see a cackling Pelosi using a wooden Ossoff as a pawn on her political chessboard. The most disturbing mailer features Jon Ossoff literally peeling off his face to reveal that he is, in fact, Nancy Pelosi under his skin. My personal favorite graphic is a recreation of an old-time postcard, featuring a sepia-toned Ossoff standing next to Pelosi by the Golden Gate Bridge, with “Greetings from SAN FRANCISCO in large letters.” (The photoshopping on the Republican flyers is consistently impressive, however deranged the themes.)

One might think that incessantly hammering the Pelosi point would seem tedious and desperate. But it’s actually somewhat effective, because it’s presented as part of a clear and unified message, captured in the Handel slogan: “Jon Ossoff Knows Nancy Pelosi... Karen Handel Knows Us.” The

While both parties spent an ungodly amount of resources on these leaflets and posters, Handel and the Republicans

Of course, it could be that both parties were just wasting their money on this barrage of moronic propaganda. I am not sure how many voters actually modify their choices on the basis of these things, and I'm certainly dubious that sending 40 flyers has a more productive effect than sending 30 or 20. There could, however, be a kind of "Prisoner's Dilemma" or "arms race" in operation here, where if neither party sent any

Karen Handel Knows Us.



For more than 20 years Karen Handel has been working for us. She's volunteered to raise money for cancer research, women's health and people in need. Karen Handel will represent us in Congress because she's one of us.

Recognition:

- Atlanta Business Chronicle
Most Influential Atlantaans
- James Maguire
Top 100 Influential Leaders
- Georgia Trend, 100 Most Influential
- #28 Magazine Award

Karen's volunteer record of service to us includes:

- › **Komen Race for the Cure** – Atlanta
- › **United Way North Fulton Campaign Committee** –
- › **United Way Corporate Campaign Chairman** (at CIBA Vision)
- › **United Way Corporate Campaign Lead** (at KPMG)
- › **Member, CEO Helpline** (mentoring organization)
- › **Panelist** – Infectious Point (corporate leadership mentoring program)
- › **Executive Committee / Vice Chairman Program**, North Fulton Republican Women
- › **Executive Committee, National Association of Secretaries of State**
- › **Executive Committee, Atlanta Regional Commission**
- › **Executive Committee, Regional Business Coalition**
- › **Board Member, Metropolitan North Georgia Water Planning District**
- › **Board Member, Metro Atlanta Transit Authority**
- › **Board member, North Fulton Chamber of Commerce**
- › **Executive Committee, Association of County Commissioners of GA**



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THE OSSOFF/HANDEL PROPAGANDA CONTEST reaffirms that Democrats continue to fumble in their quest for an actual message, and for a reason why voters should support their party. Republicans have a very good story, one that has both a positive and negative side: you are hurting, we will fix it, the Democrats caused this, they will hurt you further.

One should be cautious about taking lessons from this, because the causal links are so difficult to draw. But it is simultaneously true that (1) Jon Ossoff lost by 4 points and (2) Jon Ossoff's sales pitch was, for the most part, godawful. Could he have improved on that if he hadn't sent mailers with Osama bin Laden's face on one side and Ossoff's face on the other? I cannot rightfully say. But, at the very least, no harm should come from following the principle that your campaign messages ought to say something. Possibly even something substantive and inspiring. It's just an idea. ♦



DEFINING VIOLENCE

by Oren Nimni

I AM NO LONGER SURE WHAT VIOLENCE IS. THAT'S A problem, because I'm pretty sure violence is a bad thing and needs to be stopped. It would therefore probably be good for me to know what it is.

The first bad sign for my understanding of violence came from Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek, who once concluded that "Gandhi was more violent than Hitler." Žižek explained that what he meant by this appalling statement was that while Hitler simply reinforced the capitalist order and took it to its extreme, Gandhi "effectively endeavored to interrupt the basic functioning of the British colonial state." For Žižek, the word "violence" meant something like "disruption," thus whether people were "violent" or not depended on whether they changed the world, and not at all on whether they happened to massacre six million or so of their fellow human beings.

But Žižek is somewhat infamous for having entirely ludicrous opinions. Perhaps his use of "violence" to mean "structural change" was aberrational. I have always understood violence to mean bodily harm intentionally committed on conscious beings (i.e. humans and other animals) by other conscious beings. And I assumed that, despite a few debates here and there about what acts belong in the category, this definition was fairly commonly accepted.

Soon, though, I encountered other uses of the term "violence" that further shook my confidence in my comprehension. References to "violent" protesters and "violent" riots in the streets became commonplace. But frequently, many of the acts these "violent" protesters were accused of committing were against property rather than persons. They would have smashed windows or set garbage cans on fire. Frequently, in fact, when the headline "protests turn violent" appears, the only act of "violence" in the bodily harm sense comes when the police swoop in with batons and gas. There is a pronounced tendency on the right to blur the distinction between "property destruction" and "violence." This flows logically from

certain strands of libertarian philosophy, which view a person's property as an extension of the self, and therefore see acts of aggression against property as being indistinguishable from acts of aggression against persons. (This also conveniently justifies using physical force to defend one's property, rather than just defending one's body.)

But the tendency to expand the meaning of violence comes from both political camps. On the left, many things other than direct bodily harm are often labeled a form of violence. In fact, it can be hard to know what *isn't* violence. Gentrification is violence. Cultural appropriation is violence. Even charter schools have been labeled a form of violence. Various kinds of speech have also been considered, in and of themselves, violence. "Non-Violent Action Has Always Been Violent," says a writer for *Everyday Feminism*. An article about British youth soccer clubs in the *Sociology of Sport Journal* cites the coaches' profane hectoring of players (e.g. "if you want to fuck about, get into the car park, I couldn't give a shit"), and says that "it could be argued that the violence apparent in the coaches' discourse here was as much real as symbolic (in a verbal sense)." Slavoj Žižek may have expanded the term into the realm of offensive sophistry, but he's joined by many other parts of the left in giving broad meaning to the term. I don't think I'm uniquely dim-witted, then, to have lost track of exactly what violence is.

IT CAN BE NEARLY IMPOSSIBLE TO IDENTIFY A TRULY FIXED and stable definition for certain words. Usages vary across time and place, and there will always be fuzzy cases at the margins, things we're not sure should fit the definition. Furthermore, terminological disputes about what labels should apply to what concepts or things are often annoying, as they can be tedious distractions from more pressing underlying issues. What matters is not the word, but the thing, and changes in language do not change reality (though many social theorists wish this were the case). If we all decided tomorrow to start calling a grapefruit a

“greatfruit” instead (which it is), it would not cease to be what it is, insofar as it would still be a delicious subtropical citrus that goes well with a cup of coffee and a hardboiled egg.

BUT WHILE MEANINGS ARE CONSTANTLY IN FLUX AND words are human-made labels rather than God-given absolutes, when a word ceases to have a clear definition, it loses much of its power to communicate. If meanings multiply to the point where a person using a word could mean any one of a number of things, we swiftly cease to actually know what we are talking about. And in the case of a word like “violence,” where so many violent acts are so truly horrifying, and we want a word with the full power to convey that horror, the potential for the word to lose meaning and impact may be dangerous indeed.

There is, then, some practical value in adopting and maintaining a narrow conception of violence, one that refers to direct harms that destroy the body, rather than more indirect and abstract harms such as the changing economics of neighborhoods and the privatization of schools. The more capacious the term becomes, the less it is able to precisely aid us in understanding the world, and the less it will be identified with the original sets of acts the term was meant to describe.

But let’s consider the case for “expansive” uses of the term violence. If it’s useful and informative to employ the word to describe many more things than are commonly seen as violence, then nothing should stop us from changing the definition. Since the meanings of words are not some inherent fixed part of the universe, they can be adapted as necessary.

The right-wing idea of “property destruction as violence” is not worth considering in much depth. First, in order to believe it, you have to think that destroying inanimate objects causes a similar type of harm to the destruction of human beings. Unless we buy the quasi-religious fiction of property as part of a person’s self, these two kinds of destruction are different in an obvious and significant way. Harm inflicted on the bodies of conscious beings, who can feel pain and suffering, does not have the same effects as harm inflicted on a pane of glass or fire hydrant. Calling acts of looting “violence” equates objects and people. Setting fire to a police car may be shocking, but so long as the car is the only one harmed, we have chaos but not violence. And the use of “violence” in this way is often merely just rhetoric deployed to paint “rioters” as morally bankrupt.

True violence is such a deeply terrible human experience. It leaves people with brain damage, nightmares, disability, and trauma. The destruction of human bodies is a moral horror that simply should not exist in the same category as the breaking of light fixtures, and applying “violence” to property destruction diminishes the term’s power. (It also immediately creates all kinds of contradictions that make it unworkable. What kind of harm to an object comprises violence? Is it a violent act to recreationally shoot a bottle with a BB gun? To take apart an air conditioner? If I eat your nachos while you are not looking, have I done violence to them?)

THE LEFT-WING EXPANSION OF “VIOLENCE” follows a far more persuasive chain of reasoning. Generally it runs roughly as follows: certain social harms not traditionally labeled violence operate in the same way as violence. You can traumatize a person just as much with verbal abuse as by hitting them, and things like gentrification, privatization, neoliberalism, appropriation, etc. have effects that are just as harmful as physical violence. Gentrification, for example, according to Daniel Older in *Salon* is “a systemic, intentional process of uprooting communities,” and the “central act of violence is erasure.” Older means that destroying a neighborhood

by sending all of its residents elsewhere and ignoring their preferences and treating them as if they don’t exist should be conceived of as violence.

Much of the left rhetoric on non-bodily violence is derived from the concept of “symbolic violence” formulated by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu in the late 1970s. “Symbolic” was conceived of as a kind of ideological equivalent to physical violence, whereby people were kept in subordinate positions through “soft power.” The police might beat you until you submit, whereas the schools will teach you until you submit, but the effect is the same. The European Institute for Gender Equality defines “symbolic violence” as:

“...the kind of gentle, invisible, pervasive violence that is exercised through cognition and misrecognition, knowledge and sentiment, often with the unwitting consent or complicity of the dominated. It is embedded in the very modes of action and structures of cognition of individuals, and imposes the spectre of legitimacy of the social order characterised by masculine domination. Manifestations of symbolic violence give recognition to structural and direct violence.”

Variations on this conception of violence have had a lasting impact in the academy and among some activists, to the point where an editorial in the University of California’s newspaper concluded that “asking people to maintain peaceful dialogue with those who legitimately do not think their lives matter is a violent act.” The conception that speech is not just capable of inducing violence, but actually *is* violence, has helped to justify efforts to disrupt or cancel campus events by right-wing speakers, on the grounds that bigoted speech operates as a form of violence and bigoted violence does not qualify as a form of legitimate speech. In the *New York Times*, psychology professor Lisa Feldman Barrett even suggested that neuroscience justifies classifying certain kinds of speech as violence:

“If words can cause stress, and if prolonged stress can cause physical harm, then it seems that speech—at least certain types of speech—can be a form of violence. But which types?... We must [halt] speech that bullies and torments. From the perspective of our brain cells, [it] is literally a form of violence.... Words can have a powerful effect on your nervous system. Certain types of adversity, even those involving no physical contact, can make you sick, alter your brain—even kill neurons—and shorten your life.”

IT’S EASY TO SEE WHY THESE IDEAS ABOUT VIOLENCE persuade people. After all, if Barrett is right on the evidence, how is speech *not* violence? If hitting me causes physical debilitation, but certain verbal assaults can cause similar kinds of physical debilitation, the two acts would seem to fall clearly into the same category. There’s a very strange kind of logic to Barrett’s argument, though. Note how the reasoning goes: if words cause stress, and violence causes stress, then speech is violence. This depends on us believing that if thing A and thing B both have consequence C, thing A and thing B are indistinguishable. And that seems... wrong. Consider a parallel syllogism:

1. Being in the rain gets you wet.
2. Being in the sea gets you wet.
3. The rain is the sea.

Or, slightly more absurdly:

1. Spiders can cause fear.
2. Bosses can cause fear.
3. My boss is a spider.

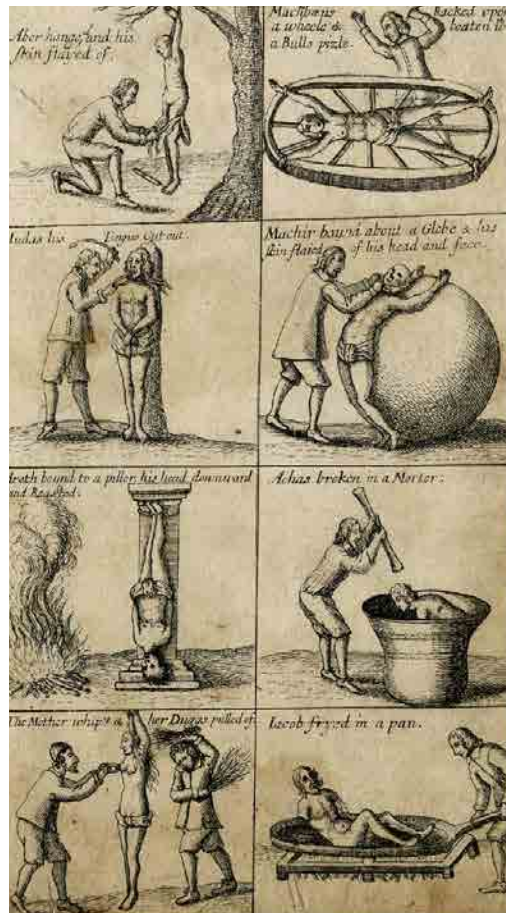
Speech might cause an effect that violence causes, but that means that speech shares a quality with violence, not that it thereby becomes violence. Things can share qualities while being incredibly qualitatively different. (As a lawyer, I share a quality with Alan Dershowitz, but I am not—thank



God—Alan Dershowitz.) And if we accept this pattern of inference as legitimate, anything can become anything. Exams cause stress, bullying causes stress, therefore exams are form of bullying. (Though in honesty they kind of are.) On the left, there is a tendency to let concepts bleed into each other, especially when concepts are given abstract and imprecise definitions (such as the Gender Equality Institute’s incomprehensible definition of “structural violence” above). Eventually, every bad thing is every other bad thing. Neoliberalism is white supremacism is erasure is gentrification.

Two things can be different, however, while still both being bad. It’s not necessary to prove that cruel words are *violence* in order to prove that cruel words are harmful and that nobody should be subjected to them. Having differing categories of harms does not necessarily trivialize the seriousness of either of those harms, it just tries to capture their qualitative differences. We can oppose school privatization and child murder without believing that school privatization is child murder, and without minimizing the particular ways in which both harm kids.

But those who wish to expand the use of the word violence actually have a good point here. The reason why they want to call non-physical harms “violence” is that they believe we do not sufficiently appreciate how much they hurt people, and that by using the v-word we can powerfully show certain parallels between the more visceral harms that we do pay attention to and the more subtle harms that we do not. They want to keep us from “fixating on” and “fetishizing” the use of physical force as being the only way that people can be harmed. Otherwise, it can seem as if, so long as you’re not hitting someone, you’re not hurting them. That’s the libertarian theory, which sees economic and social coercion as nonexistent, and it’s wrong.



Some things that are violence

whether they help advance us toward that goal. Calling a lot of things that people inherently *don’t* recoil at “violence” might make it difficult to convey the urgency of eliminating violence.

Once everything becomes violence, it’s hard to get violence taken seriously. People won’t understand what you’re talking about, because the thing you’re referring to isn’t violent in the way they understand the word. But it also prevents us from accurately describing the dangers of *non-violent* harms in ways that people will appreciate. Gentrification

has many negative consequences, and if you describe those consequences well, you can make a persuasive case against it. People who have lived in neighborhoods for decades, neighborhoods that have a strong character and identity, find they can no longer afford their rent and that places they knew and loved have either shut down or changed completely. And because U.S. gentrification has a strong racial component, historic black neighborhoods are often irrevocably altered without any actual democratic input from ordinary residents (gentrification is a result of free market decision-making, meaning that those who have money and own property determine whether it occurs). This is a serious racial injustice. But it’s not violent in itself. And recognizing what is and isn’t violent is important in determining the political approaches we will take toward solving a problem. If everything is violence, if war and speech and economics are all the same, violent struggle will always seem like an appropriate solution. But different problems require differing solutions. Conceiving of everything as violence will lead us to ill fitting responses, like solving the problem of my house being too cold by burning down the building rather than just putting on a sweater. The more

everything descends into a swirling torrent of

violence, the less effort we put into determining effective remedies and the more people will be hurt.

THIS IS A REASONABLE JUSTIFICATION. BUT IT DOESN’T take into account the inherent tradeoff: because people are not going to be able to instantly shed their uniquely adverse reaction to physical forms of harm, expanding the term might function less to get them to appreciate other harms in the same way as they do physical ones, and more to simply sap meaning from the term violence altogether. Calling it violence hasn’t made it easier to convince people that gentrification should be stopped—and that’s the goal, isn’t it? Furthermore, there is an independent value in maintaining bodily harm as a distinct category deserving of its own recognition. Certainly, things that wound people psychologically can be devastating. But victims of bombings, torture, rape, shootings, and physical abuse are affected in a qualitatively different way; things that attack and tear apart the body create particular forms of trauma. It’s not that they’re always *worse*, but that they’re different enough to justify keeping in a separate category. And because violence *is* bad, and needs to be eliminated from the earth, we need to make our terminological decisions pragmatically on the basis of

WORDS CHANGE, AND IT’S FINE THAT THEY CHANGE. We need them to serve functions, and if applying old terms to new concepts will help us understand the world better, let’s do it. But words also need to mean things, and to be able to communicate forcefully. Violence should be a term with power, because people need to appreciate the urgency of getting rid of it. Those on the right will minimize the gravity of harm to human beings if they insist violence can be perpetrated on objects. Those on the left risk making the word meaningless even as they attempt to convey the enormity of the world’s various wrongs and injuries. This does a disservice to accurately describing the devastation of both violent and other harmful acts. If we want to change the world, we ought to know what we’re actually dealing with. And if we’re not careful, we may end up in a kind of Žižekian madness, concluding that everything is everything and Mahatma Gandhi was more violent than Adolf Hitler. ♦



the meaning of

TOLERANCE

“SO MUCH FOR THE tolerant left!” This retort, in all its various permutations, has become the right’s go-to response to the suggestion that bigoted, harmful views should be met with anything less than unanimous praise. It often shows up in response to organized boycotts, Twitter blockings or Facebook image removal policies, all things far beyond the reach of the First Amendment. Supposedly, the left must remain committed to a doctrine of pure non-judgment. In this worldview, tolerance is what leftists and liberals prize above all else. Marx wrote *The Tolerance Manifesto*, Eugene Debs was jailed for loving civil discourse too much, and Bernie Sanders is always shouting about how billionaires are hoarding all the tolerance. But nobody *should* embrace a pure form of tolerance. For one thing, it’s impossible. And for another, it’s intolerant.

by Alex Nichols

Any remotely functional notion of tolerance must include certain caveats by design. Herbert Marcuse's 1965 essay "Repressive Tolerance" argued that the liberal values of tolerance and free expression had, paradoxically, become a method by which the ruling class maintained its dominance. This was because the prevailing idea of tolerance included the toleration of ideas and policies that were brutal and repressive. Marcuse pointed out the impossibility of tolerating, for example, both the Ku Klux Klan and the civil rights movement, because tolerating the one means permitting the repression of the other. In his view, an attitude of pure tolerance naturally favors the continuation of the status quo by way of repressing dissent.

Marcuse was astute in diagnosing how the media reinforced particular dominant opinions in the name of tolerating ideological differences. In a passage that has aged impressively well, he said that "in endlessly dragging debates over the media, the stupid opinion is treated with the same respect as the intelligent one, the misinformed may talk as long as the informed, and propaganda rides along with education, truth with falsehood." The election of Donald Trump confirmed Marcuse's thesis: the media tolerated Trump's brazen lies and gave him endless airtime and coverage, supposedly to rebut him or accuse him of indecency, but the rebuttals didn't stick. The "marketplace of ideas" would sort it out, they said. It didn't.

before we kill the wolverine we should hear what it has to say and be fair to its point of view." (Although in fact, to be fair to the wolverine's point of view, devouring Michael Kinsley would be a service to both human- and animal-kind.)

Trump deports families. Do people not understand this? Consider the words of a disillusioned ICE agent interviewed by *The New Yorker*, on the changes Trump has brought to the agencies:

"I don't know that there's that appreciation of the entire realm of what we're doing. It's not just the person we're removing. It's their entire family... I've never seen [such] rampant [contempt] towards the aliens... The whole idea is targeting kids... [If you look] at the people in custody, it's people who've been here for years. They're supposed to be in high school... We seem to be targeting the most vulnerable people, not the worst... There's just this school of thought that, well, we can do what we want."

This means the ruining of lives. It means people being torn from their homes and sent to countries they have no connection with. It means mothers being taken from their kids, grandparents disappearing into vans. It means sending women who have fled physical abuse back to face their abusers. It means that children who have been sent to the United States so they may escape gang violence will be sent back to be shot to

“ 11 out of 12 regular op-ed columnists are white, in a majority non-white city, something that the columnists themselves would find scandalous if they actually took any of their stated values seriously. ”

THE LIBERAL IDEA OF TOLERANCE IS WHAT INSPIRES THE modern media's idea of objectivity: every perspective equal, no judgments made. But both are mythical, for the same reason: everything we do takes a side somehow. Every media organization, "Fair and Balanced" tagline or not, is always deciding which perspectives to present and deciding how much weight to give them.

After Trump's victory, instead of confronting the biases inherent in any idea of objectivity, the media went in the opposite direction. *The New York Times* began actively searching for pro-Trump intellectuals to publish (unsurprisingly, no members of this oxymoronic group were ever found). Instead, in May, the paper began running a nauseating column called "Say Something Nice About Donald Trump," in which the president would be praised semi-weekly by career pundit Michael Kinsley. Kinsley, whose prior résumé spans the worst entities in political media (*Slate*, *The New Republic*, and CNN's *Crossfire*) began his first column with a plea to be nicer to Trump:

"[D]oes he deserve all of [the criticism]? Does he never do anything right? Say anything wise? Are all his schemes to reform this agency and abolish that regulation utterly misguided? ... The venom, the obsession, the knife-twisting are hard to understand... Even a stopped clock is right twice a day, though, and even Donald Trump can't be wrong all the time... we're looking for a few positive words about the president, and we're asking for your help. This is not about Trump the family man. It's not another forum for debating the issues. It is a place to point out positive things Mr. Trump has said or done from the viewpoint of The New York Times and its readers."

This deeply misguided call for niceness shows well how "tolerance" and "fairness" can become neither tolerant nor fair. The answer to Kinsley's questions, of course, are "yes," "no," and "absolutely not," respectively. The reason is simple: Donald Trump is a corporeal aggregation of all of humankind's cruelest, dumbest, and most selfish qualities. Suggesting we appreciate the "positive things" he does is like suggesting we appreciate the positives of gonorrhea or infanticide. If Kinsley was about to be devoured by a ravenous wolverine, his last words would be "Well, I think

pieces. Decent people's lives are destroyed by Trump's actions.

Donald Trump is a demented bigot who admitted on tape to sexually assaulting women. To ask us to "say something nice" about him is not being "fair" or "even-handed," because it's actually minimizing the seriousness of the harm. It's taking the attention off the people who Trump's policies hurt; it's precisely the kind of "tolerance of repression" that Marcuse warned was embedded in liberalism. You can say "Well, even a murderer does things other than murder people," and that's technically true, but it's probably the murders that should consume our attention. This is the same reason why it's not "fair-minded" when Ellen DeGeneres pals around with George W. Bush on television, or Michelle Obama gives him a hug. To tolerate Bush is to tolerate and minimize the deaths of 500,000 Iraqis. By treating war criminals the same way you treat everyone else, you tolerate war crimes.

THE KINSLEY COLUMN DID NOT MARK THE END OF THE *New York Times*' efforts to elevate the right. In April, the paper poached columnist Bret Stephens from *The Wall Street Journal*.

Stephens is a conservative of the "respectable" NeverTrump sort, and *Times* opinion editor James Bennet said he was "thrilled" to have Stephens as part of a "collegial debate among brave, honest journalists with very different points of view." In response to outcry over Stephens, Bennet said that "all of our columnists and all of our contributors and all of our editorials agreed all of the time, we wouldn't be promoting the free exchange of ideas, and we wouldn't be serving our readers very well." (Given that their columnists do, in fact, agree nearly all the time, and that they neither promote the free exchange of ideas nor serve their readers very well, Bennet's statement was truer than he realized.)

In the case of Stephens, the "point of view" that the *Times* was "thrilled" to have paid for included opining that anti-Semitism was a "disease of the Arab mind," denying climate change, fretting about "thuggish elements" in Black Lives Matter, and claiming that "what Trump, Erdogan, and Black Lives Matter have in common" is "a fake victimization narrative." Sure enough, immediately upon joining the *Times*, Stephens used his

allotted space for, among other things, a call to overthrow the North Korean government and a tongue-in-cheek column called “Only Mass Deportation Can Save America” (the joke being that it should really be native-born Americans who see their loved ones thrown into cages, because the native-born are actually less efficient servants of capitalism. Hah!)

Stephens’ infamous debut column was titled “Climate of Complete Certainty” and followed the “just asking questions” model of reinforcing public doubt about climate change. Stephens asked why, after the liberal press turned out to be so wrong about Hillary Clinton’s sure path to victory, we should put our trust in the overwhelming scientific consensus on climate change. (The answer to which is “for about a dozen reasons,” including the fact that the science is based on decades of hard data rather than a few months of landline polls; that climate change is not just a future prediction, but a phenomenon readily observable in the uptick of natural disasters and back-to-back hottest years on record; and, most importantly, no one in the field of environmental science is as disastrously stupid as Clinton campaign manager Robby Mook or the members of America’s prophesying punditocracy).

It was unclear what Stephens was ever supposed to add to the *New York Times* op-ed page; his particular niche is already well-filled by David Brooks

scientists to be accused of “intolerance.” “Really didn’t expect otherwise smart climate advocates to go the way of Berkeley protesters on the NYT,” CNN’s Dylan Byers tweeted. *Times* editor Jonathan Weisman scolded liberals for unsubscribing, calling it a “liberal embarrassment.” Mark Hemingway of the neoconservative *Weekly Standard* compared cancelling a *Times* subscription to the Cold War practice of blacklisting (though it was somewhat puzzling to see a neoconservative suggesting blacklisting was a bad thing). One commentator said the objections “reflect[ed] a growing narrow-mindedness and illiberalism on the Left” while another said that it showed a “growing rigidity of thought among American liberals.” Stephens himself responded to criticism by positioning himself as a victim of vicious online harassment by the closed-minded left, his prime example being a tweet by user “CrochetJanet” that asked “When is the *Times* going to get rid of you?” (Answer: alas, probably never.)

These commentators suggested that unsubscribing from the *New York Times* in response to their hiring decisions was “illiberal,” out of keeping with classical liberal value of open-mindedness. On that view, even refusing to hand money to one’s ideological enemies violates the principles of the Enlightenment. Somehow, the demands of “liberalism” mean that it’s necessary to pay for whatever the tastemakers at elite publications foist



} a representative selection from the varied spectrum of human opinion

and Ross Douthat. But the *Times* has taken seriously the conservative charge that there is not enough diversity in liberal institutions. That’s not “diversity” in the traditional, not-being-overwhelmingly-white sense. 11 out of 12 regular op-ed columnists are white, in a majority non-white city, something that the columnists themselves would find scandalous if they actually took any of their stated values seriously. Rather, what’s sought is “ideological diversity,” which means the breadth of the *Times* opinion page expanding a few millimeters to the right.

Again, we can see just how the concepts of “tolerance” and “fairness” mark a distinct lack of both. Expanding the spectrum of opinion means adding a climate change denier. It does not mean adding, say, a Hispanic person. It *certainly* does not mean adding a leftist. Paul Krugman is as radical as the *Times*’ progressivism gets, and he spent good chunks of 2016 screeching about BernieBros and Vladimir Putin. “Ideological diversity” stretches all the way from the mid-center to the far-right. Over 12 million people voted for Bernie Sanders in the Democratic primary, only a few million less than voted for Clinton. Yet there was hardly a word of support for Sanders among the *Times* op-ed columnists.

Times opinion page editor James Bennet, in hiring Bret Stephens, admitted that the perspectives allowed in the paper operate within certain boundaries. Taking the goal of diversity seriously, he said, “doesn’t mean letting any opinion into the discussion.” After all, there’s “no place for bigotry or dishonesty in intelligent discussion.” In defending Stephens after the climate change column appeared, Bennet said that the column didn’t fall “outside the bounds of reasonable discussion.” In doing so, Bennet affirmed that speaking about “diseases of the Arab mind” doesn’t constitute “bigotry,” and trying to mislead the public about the scientific certainty of climate change doesn’t constitute “dishonesty.” Bennet’s defense did helpfully illustrate that even the disciples of “ideological diversity” acknowledge that there must be limits to the discourse.

Soon after Stephens’ hire, climate change activists and scientists began lambasting the *Times* for including him in the “reasonable discussion,” with many threatening to cancel their subscriptions. It didn’t take long for the

upon the public. Once the boundaries of “reasoned discussion” have been declared, one is obliged to subscribe to them.

These notions of liberalism and tolerance, then, are both offensive and illogical. They’re offensive because they deem it illegitimate to hold a different notion of what constitutes “reasonable discourse” (i.e. one that excludes climate change denial and anti-Arab racism). And they’re illogical because they have no clear definition of what the boundaries of debate should be. It’s not a violation of tolerance for a paper to exclude leftists and brown people from the ranks of its columnists, but it *is* a violation of tolerance if a layman refuses to fork over money for their racist hackwork.

THIS HYPOCRISY CONSISTENTLY PERVADES “FREE SPEECH” and “open debate” advocacy from both conservatives and liberals. “Blacklisting” is an illiberal horror if newspaper readers stop subscribing when the paper becomes full of unscientific bunk, but when it’s used to keep pro-Palestinian professors like Steven Salaita or Norman Finkelstein from getting academic jobs, it becomes unobjectionable. When a racist pseudoscientist like Charles Murray is kept from speaking on campus, it means the left is “intolerant,” but when Princeton professor Keeanga-Yamahatta Taylor is forced to cancel her Black Lives Matter talks after receiving dozens of death threats from Fox News viewers, the “hear all sides” types fall strangely silent.

This misuse of “free speech” rhetoric by right-wing commentators is precisely what Marcuse warned of: “*When tolerance mainly serves the protection and preservation of a repressive society, when it serves to neutralize opposition and to render men immune against other and better forms of life, then tolerance has been perverted.*” If an “open forum” is confined to a certain set of ideas acceptable to political and economic elites, its vision of tolerance is a repressive lie. If the *Times* truly did believe in a “diversity of ideas,” the ranks of their columnists would look very different; they would certainly have to hire a socialist, and yes, maybe even a Trump supporter. Anything else, after all, would be illiberal. ♦

SOME PUZZLES FOR LIBERTARIANS

CANNIBALS, COERCION, AND THE INFINITELY WEALTHY MAN. ANSWERS ON P. 19

1

Deep in the forest, thousands of miles from civilization, there is an isolated village. It has not seen contact with any other humans for a long time. It is, however, a pleasant and flourishing community, which strongly values freedom and entrepreneurship. There is, however, one tiny quirk. In this village, there is a ritual. Every year, a boy who reaches 18 is cannibalized. It brings the rains, or something. But despite its taste for cannibalism, this village wishes to live in accordance with libertarian principles. Thus, they will only cannibalize the boy if he consents. In order to encourage this to happen, they will put tremendous social pressure on the boy. All through his youth, they will tell him they believe the future of the village depends on his consenting. His parents tell him that he would bring great shame on the household if he refused, which is true. The choice nevertheless rests with the boy, and whatever he chooses will be respected. The parents and villagers attempt to persuade him, but never lie to him, and make clear that they would never force his choice. However: if the boy refuses to be cannibalized, the village has a backup plan. The boy will be blacklisted. No shopkeeper will sell him food, no hotel will give him a room, no hospital will treat him, no employer will hire him. After all, under libertarian principles, nobody can be told how to use their property. The boy's parents, ashamed of him, will turn him out of the house with no money. He may leave the village, but it is certain death, for thousands of miles of desolate wolf-infested wilderness stand between him and other humans and he has no food. (The wilderness is also privately-owned, and he cannot pay the admission fee.) He is shunned and despised, left to wander the streets in a futile search for shelter and sustenance. However, no force is exercised against him. He is never touched or arrested. He is treated as nonexistent, as the villagers await his demise. So the boy starves to death. The villagers then cannibalize his emaciated corpse, reasoning that they cannot be compelled to give him a dignified burial (plus he died on private property, collapsing in a flowerbed).



QUESTION: IS EATING THE BOY'S CORPSE AFTER HE DIES THE ONLY POTENTIAL VIOLATION OF LIBERTARIAN PRINCIPLES IN THE VILLAGE? IS EVERY SINGLE OTHER ASPECT OF THIS COMPLETELY PERMISSIBLE?

2



IS THERE A DIFFERENCE BETWEEN
STATE
AND
PRIVATE
COERCION?

3

CAN YOU CONSTRUCT A
THEORY OF PROPERTY RIGHTS
THAT DOES NOT SUFFER FROM
INTERNAL INCOHERENCE
OR DEPEND ON SPECIOUS
NATURAL LAW ASSUMPTIONS?

4

The Infinitely Rich Man is not infinitely rich. He is just very, very rich. Nobody knows quite how rich. One day, you happened to meet the Infinitely Rich Man in a bar. At first he was friendly, but soon you found yourselves in an argument about horses. You were for them, and he was against them. Or perhaps you were against them, and he was for them. You don't actually remember how it went. As you parted ways, you expected never to see the Infinitely Rich Man again. Little do you know: the Infinitely Rich Man now despises you. His sole desire on earth is to see you unhappy. This should hardly trouble you, though. After all, you have a good job at a castanet factory. You own your own home, which has a picturesque lake view. You have a wife, whom you love and who loves you. You also have a prized possession, your 1972 Pontiac Lemans. You don't have much spare cash, but this never bothers you because of your stable job. The Infinitely Rich Man is also a strict Libertarian. He believes it is illegitimate for anyone to initiate force against another. And because you are fortunate enough to live in a Libertarian world, you are free to enjoy those things you treasure most in the world without being bothered by the state or the Infinitely Rich Man. The Infinitely Rich Man is not discouraged, however. He still believes he can ruin you. He will be a Count of Monte Cristo, but an extremely law-abiding one. The first thing the Infinitely Rich Man does is buy the castanet factory where you work. He immediately fires you. He also makes sure that if any other employers inquire about you, the castanet factory will refuse to serve as a reference. Not that this matters, for he intends to bribe any other castanet company who hires you into firing you. (There are four castanet companies.) You therefore find yourself unemployed. Fortunately, you have a skill. You know how to make castanets! (Castanets are very popular.) So you scrape together what money you have, and you open a little drive-thru castanet stand out on Route 9. But the Infinitely Rich Man has a plan. He opens a stand next to yours. At his stand, castanets are free. He gives them away by the truckload. He sets the whole world clacking. You cannot compete. You are ruined. At least you still have your wife, your friends, your lakeview home, your 1972 Pontiac Lemans. But the Infinitely Rich Man has a plan. First, he buys the lake. He fills it with concrete. No more lake view, and your property value diminishes by \$100,000. Then, he buys every house around yours, flattens it, and turns it into a landfill. The smell doesn't reach your home, but it turns the neighborhood unsightly and desolate. Your house becomes worthless. The Infinitely Rich Man buys the heating company and refuses to provide gas to your home at any price. (You try to talk other gas companies into competing, but they refuse: laying a new main for a single home would be absurd, they say.) But you have a wife! And friends! And you get to drive a 1972 Pontiac Lemans! The Infinitely Rich Man offers a bribe. Any of your friends who refuse to speak with you ever again will receive a salary of one million dollars per year. At first, many decline to take the bribe. But sooner or later, most of them have one or another sticky financial situation, and they give in. Goodbye, vast majority of your friends! At least your wife loves you. But one day, she becomes ill. She finds out that she will die, unless she goes on a treatment regimen for the rest of her life. The regimen costs \$100,000 a month. The Infinitely Rich man pops up, and offers to pay. The one condition is that she divorce you, cut contact, and never speak with you again. As soon as she breaks the agreement, he will cease to pay for the treatment. You love your wife, but you do not want her to die. You both agree that it is better that she should accept. At least you can drive your 1972 Pontiac Lemans. Oh, but wait. The Infinitely Rich Man invests heavily in electric energy. Slowly, he makes gasoline-powered transit obsolete. He buys the oil companies, burns the gasoline, and converts every gas pump to a charging station. You can only drive your Lemans short distances, using some of the last gallons of available petrol, which you ordered from the internet. (That is, if the Infinitely Rich Man didn't outbid you!) They don't make the Pontiac Lemans anymore. Parts therefore exist only in small quantities. The Infinitely Rich Man buys up all existing Lemans parts. The moment it breaks, you are out of luck. As you sit alone, broke, and starving in the garage of your unheated home, caressing your disabled Lemans, thinking about your long-gone wife, your lake view, and your job, you are thankful that you live in a world of freedom, where nobody can encroach upon the liberty of another.

QUESTIONS FOR LIBERTARIANS: HAS THE NON-AGGRESSION PRINCIPLE BEEN VIOLATED? SHOULD THE INFINITELY RICH MAN SUFFER ANY CIVIL OR CRIMINAL PENALTIES FOR HIS ACTIONS?

QUICK FIXES FOR VEXING SOCIAL PROBLEMS

Current Affairs has been mercilessly chastised by the deacons of American Punditry for the speed with which our magazine condemns things. We see this as no vice: when things must be condemned, surely it is better to condemn them speedily than sluggishly. But amidst this staggering heap of unfair accusations, there remains a miniature nugget of a truth-like substance. It's true that occasionally our criticism is not what is called "constructive." On this page, then, we dedicate ourselves to proposing actual implementable solutions to the crises that all humankind.

THE CAPITALISM PROBLEM

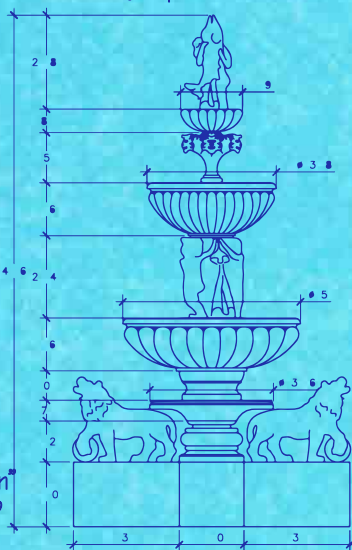
PROBLEM: Capitalism persists despite being widely loathed.

SOLUTION: A committee will be formed to develop a strategic plan for the rapid elimination of capitalism. The committee will be forbidden to squabble. The plan must be workable and must be produced within 18 months of the committee's formation. If the plan does not involve gulags and/or mass murder, it shall be immediately implemented.

THE FOUNTAINS PROBLEM

PROBLEM: As you walk through certain cities, you do not seem to see or hear many fountains, even though everyone likes fountains. They are visually appealing and their noise is relaxing.

SOLUTION: Each city shall adopt a mandatory "fountains per square kilometer" ordinance that specifies a designated minimum number of acceptable fountains. Every application for a building permit must be submitted along with a "fountain plan" indicating how the builder intends to include fountains in the building.



THE ALIENS PROBLEM

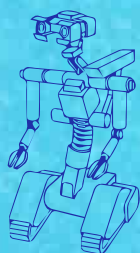
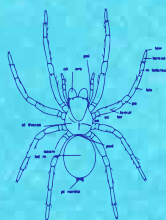
PROBLEM: There are aliens, but we haven't met them. Failure to meet and trade with aliens is economically inefficient due to the principle of comparative advantage.

SOLUTION: Once the diseases have been cured and poverty eliminated, the bulk of human endeavor shall be put towards venturing into space to meet the aliens. The abolition of militaries will provide ample funding.

THE SPIDERS

PROBLEM: Spiders.

SOLUTION: Spiders are a quandary. There are obviously too many of them, and yet they are evidently "useful" and every creature technically has a right to life no matter how creepy it may be. Thus, instead of exterminating the spiders, each spider will be required to wear an amusing little hat, in order to make it less visually frightening and to justify its continued presence on earth.



THE TECH PROBLEM

PROBLEM: Technology. If the internet doesn't stupefy us into numbness, the artificial intelligence will probably rampage sooner or later, dooming us all.

SOLUTION: "Innovation" will become a dirty word. Nobody will be praised for coming up with a new thing, unless that thing is actually something that makes life better rather than simply being something that people can be convinced to buy. Silicon Valley will be demolished and its denizens exiled.

THE MUFFINS PROBLEM

PROBLEM: The muffins problem is twofold.

First, there are people in the world who would like muffins but do not have muffins. Second, the muffin is a lie. It masquerades as a breakfast food, when we all know it is cake. And since eating cake for breakfast is seen as indulgent, all of us fear recognizing the truth about the muffin.



SOLUTION: To solve the problem of duplicity, the muffin will be rechristened a "breakfast cake." To solve the problem of insufficiency, all police officers will be required to bake muffins and hand them out to passersby. This will be considered an integral part of their social role.

THE TRUMP PROBLEM

PROBLEM: Donald Trump

SOLUTION: We shall all just agree to pretend he isn't there. This will have the benefit of (1) restoring our peace of mind and (2) irritating him by depriving him of what he craves most, the horrified attention of millions.

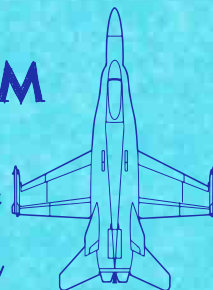
THE DISEASES PROBLEM

PROBLEM: Many people spend a lot of their time dying of diseases, even though they do not want to.

SOLUTION: A program will be set up to cure the diseases. Progress will be measured annually. The program will be funded by taking rich people's wealth away.

THE FIGHTER PLANES PROBLEM

PROBLEM: Thanks to some accidental outburst of madness, human beings have inexplicably developed a device called a "fighter jet." It is like other planes, except that instead of taking people places, its only function is to fight other planes. This is clearly a ludicrous technology. Also they cost something like a billion dollars each.



SOLUTION: It will be illegal to build these things. Money will instead be put toward building playgrounds the size of cities.

THE OLD PEOPLE PROBLEM

PROBLEM: Many old people are lonely.

SOLUTION: Each young person will be assigned an old person to keep company. In this way, the elderly will have new friends to play canasta with, and young people will have their hotheaded enthusiasms and ill-advised impulses tempered by the sage counsel of their aged companions. The elderly will become more alert and engaged with social life and it will no longer be necessary to keep them warehoused in "living facilities."





why you

HATE

contemporary architecture
(and if you don't, why you should)

by BRIANNA RENNIX and NATHAN J. ROBINSON

THE BRITISH AUTHOR DOUGLAS ADAMS HAD THIS to say about airports: “Airports are ugly. Some are very ugly. Some attain a degree of ugliness that can only be the result of special effort.” Sadly, this truth is not applicable merely to airports: it can also be said of most contemporary architecture. Take the Tour Montparnasse, a black, slickly glass-panelled skyscraper, looming over the beautiful Paris cityscape like a giant domino waiting to fall. Parisians hated it so much that the city was subsequently forced to enact an ordinance forbidding any further skyscrapers higher than 36 meters. Or take Boston’s City Hall Plaza. Downtown Boston is generally an attractive place, with old buildings and a waterfront and a beautiful public garden. But Boston’s City Hall is a hideous concrete edifice of mind-bogglingly inscrutable shape, like an ominous component found left over after you’ve painstakingly assembled a complicated household appliance. In the 1960s, before the first batch of concrete had even dried in the mold, people were already begging preemptively for the damn thing to be torn down. There’s a whole additional complex of equally unpleasant federal buildings attached to the

same plaza, designed by Walter Gropius, an architect whose chuckle-inducing surname belies the utter cheerlessness of his designs. Boston’s John F. Kennedy building, for example—featurelessly grim on the outside, infuriatingly unnavigable on the inside—is where, among other things, terrified immigrants attend their deportation hearings, and where traumatized veterans come to apply for benefits. Such an inhospitable building sends a very clear message, which is: the government wants its lowly supplicants to feel confused, alienated, and afraid.

The fact is, contemporary architecture gives most regular humans the heebie-jeebies. Try telling that to architects and their acolytes, though, and you’ll get an earful about why your feeling is *misguided*, the product of some embarrassing misconception about architectural principles. One defense, typically, is that these eyesores are, in reality, incredible feats of engineering. After all, “blobitecture”—which, we regret to say, is a real school of contemporary architecture—is created using complicated computer-driven algorithms! You may *think* the ensuing blob-structure looks like a tentacled turd, or a crumpled kleenex, but that’s because you don’t have an architect’s trained eye. Likewise, fans of Brutalism—the blocky-in-

dustrial-concrete school of architecture—are quick to emphasize that many of these buildings are *logistically complicated* to make, as if this somehow excused the fact that they look, at best, dreary, and, at worst, like the headquarters of some kind of post-apocalyptic totalitarian dictatorship.

Another thing you will often hear from design-school types is that contemporary architecture is *honest*. It doesn't rely on the forms and usages of the past, and it is not interested in *coddling you and your dumb feelings*. Wake up, sheeple! Your boss hates you, and your bloodsucking landlord too, and your government fully intends to grind you between its gears. That's the world we live in! Get used to it!

But let's be really honest with ourselves: a brief glance at any structure designed in the last 50 years should be enough to persuade anyone that something has gone deeply, terribly wrong with us. Some unseen person or force seems committed to replacing literally every attractive and appealing thing with an ugly and unpleasant thing. The architecture produced by contemporary global capitalism is possibly the most obvious visible

at, but to decline to make the world more beautiful when it's in your power to so, or to destroy some beautiful thing without need, is a grotesque perversion of the cooperative ideal. This is especially true when it comes to architecture. The environments we surround ourselves with have the power to shape our thoughts and emotions. People trampled in on all sides by ugliness are often unhappy without even knowing why. If you live in a place where you are cut off from light, and nature, and color, and regular communion with other humans, it is easy to become desperate, lonely, and depressed. The question is: how did contemporary architecture wind up like this? And how can it be fixed?

FOR ABOUT 2,000 YEARS, EVERYTHING HUMAN BEINGS BUILT WAS beautiful, or at least unobjectionable. The 20th century put a stop to this, evidenced by the fact that people often go out of their way to vacation in “historic” (read: beautiful) towns that contain as little postwar architecture as possible. But why? What actually changed? Why does there seem to be

Below, left: The Imperial Hotel Tokyo designed by Frank Lloyd Wright. Below, right: What they replaced the Imperial Hotel Tokyo with after knocking it down in the 60s. Well done, Japan. Right, above: The Cleveland Arcade. This is literally just a shopping plaza in Cleveland, which shows you how beautiful everyday things used to be. Right, below: The Prague Synagogue. Beauty standards cross cultures and religions.



evidence that it has some kind of perverse effect on the human soul. Of course, there is no accounting for taste, and there may be some among us who are naturally deeply disposed to appreciate blobs and blocks. But every public poll ever conducted suggests that devotees of contemporary architecture are overwhelmingly in the minority. And when it comes to architecture, as distinct from most other forms of art, it isn't enough to simply shrug and say that personal preferences differ: where public buildings are concerned, or public spaces which have an existing character and historic resonances for the people who live there, to impose an architect's eccentric will on the masses, and force them to spend their days in spaces they find ugly and unsettling, is actually oppressive and cruel.

THE POLITICS OF THIS ISSUE, MOREOVER, ARE ALL upside-down. For example, how do we explain why, in the aftermath of the Grenfell Tower tragedy in London, conservative commentators were calling for more comfortable and home-like public housing, while many left-wing writers staunchly defended the “populist” spirit of the high-rise apartment building, despite ample evidence that the vast majority of people would prefer not to be forced to live in such places? That the conservative commentators had ulterior motives is easy enough to prove, but why so many on the left are wedded to defending unpopular schools of architectural and urban design is less immediately obvious.

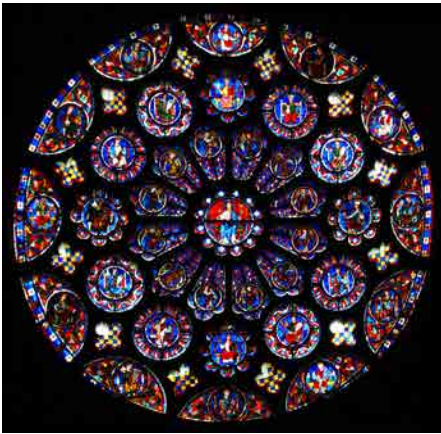
There have, after all, been moments in the history of socialism—like the Arts & Crafts movement in late 19th-century England—where the creation of beautiful things was seen as part and parcel of building a fairer, kinder world. A shared egalitarian social undertaking, ideally, ought to be one of joy as well as struggle: in these desperate times, there are certainly more overwhelming imperatives than making the world beautiful to look

such an obvious break between the thousands of years before World War II and the postwar period? And why does this seem to hold true everywhere?

A few obvious stylistic changes characterize postwar architecture. For one, what is (now somewhat derisively) called “ornament” disappeared. At the dawn of the 20th century, American architect Louis Sullivan proclaimed the famous maxim that “form follows function.” Even though Sullivan's own buildings were often highly ornate, adorned with elaborate Art Nouveau ironwork and Celtic-inspired masonry, “form follows function” was instantly misinterpreted as a call for stark utilitarian simplicity. A few years later, architect and theorist Adolph Loos, in a 1908 essay called “Ornament and Crime,” dramatically declared that a lack of ornamentation was a “sign of spiritual strength.” These two ideas quickly became dogmas of the architectural profession. A generation of architects with both socialistic and fascistic political leanings saw ornament as a sign of bourgeois decadence and cultural indulgence, and began discarding every design element that could be considered “mere decoration.”

A contempt for ornament imbued the imagination of those architects who saw themselves as dedicated to social engineering rather than the mere creation of beautiful trifles. This mindset is best exemplified by the French architect Le Corbusier, who famously characterized the house as a “machine for living.” Corbusier's ideas about planning and design were still taken seriously even when he proposed his “Plan Voisin” for Paris, which would have involved demolishing half of the city north of the Seine and replacing it with about a dozen enormous uniform skyscrapers. (Thankfully, nobody took him *quite* seriously enough to let him do it.) Corbusier may have done more than anyone to convince architects that they were no longer allowed to decorate their creations, issuing unquestionable pronouncements, like “the desire to decorate everything about one is a false spirit and an abominable small pervers-





Beauty crosses cultures, from Buddhist temples in India and China to cathedrals in Spain and France. People everywhere recognize the dazzling possibilities of multi-layered symmetries. Next spread: a sample of "blobitecture."

sion" and "the more a people are cultivated, the more decor disappears." He condemned "precious and useless objects that accumulated on the shelves," and decried the "rustling silks, the marbles which twist and turn, the vermilion whiplashes, the silver blades of Byzantium and the Orient... Let's be done with it!"

THIS PARANOID REVULSION AGAINST CLASSICAL aesthetics was not so much a school of thought as a command: from now on, the architect had to be concerned solely with the large-scale form of the structure, not with silly trivialities such as gargoyles and grillwork, no matter how much pleasure such things may have given viewers. It's somewhat stunning just how uniform the rejection of "ornament" became. Since the eclipse of Art Deco at the end of the 1930s, the intricate designs that characterized centuries of building, across civilizations, from India to Persia to the Mayans, have vanished from architecture. With only a few exceptions, such as New Classical architecture's mixed successes in reviving Greco-Roman forms, and Postmodern architecture's irritating attempts to parody them, no modern buildings include the kind of highly complex painting, woodwork, ironwork, and sculpture that characterized the most strikingly beautiful structures of prior eras.

The anti-decorative consensus also accorded with the artistic consensus about what kind of "spirit" 20th century architecture ought to express. The idea of transcendently "beautiful" architecture began to seem faintly ludicrous in a postwar world of chaos, conflict, and alienation. Life was violent, discordant, and uninterpretable. Art should not aspire to futile goals like transcendence, but should try to express the often ugly, brutal, and difficult facts of human beings' material existence. To call a building "ugly" was therefore no longer an insult: for one thing, the concept of ugliness had no meaning. But to the extent that it did, art could and

should be ugly, because life is ugly, and the highest duty of art is to be honest about who we are rather than deluding us with comforting fables.

This idea, that architecture should try to be "honest" rather than "beautiful," is well expressed in an infamously heated 1982 debate at the Harvard School of Design between two architects, Peter Eisenman and Christopher Alexander. Eisenman is a well-known "starchitect" whose projects are inspired by the deconstructive philosophy of Jacques Derrida, and whose forms are intentionally chaotic and grating. Eisenman took his duty to create "disharmony" seriously: one Eisenman-designed house so departed from the normal concept of a house that its owners actually wrote an entire book about the difficulties they experienced trying to live in it. For example, Eisenman split the master bedroom in two so the couple could not sleep together, installed a precarious staircase without a handrail, and initially refused to include bathrooms. In his violent opposition to the very idea that a real human being might actually attempt to live (and crap, and have sex) in one of his houses, Eisenman recalls the self-important German architect from Evelyn Waugh's novel *Decline and Fall*, who becomes exasperated the need to include a staircase between floors: "Why can't the creatures stay in one place? The problem of architecture is the problem of all art: the elimination of the human element from the consideration of form. The only perfect building must be the factory, because that is built to house machines, not men."

Alexander, by contrast, is one of the few major figures in architecture who believes that an objective standard of beauty is an important value for the profession; his buildings, which are often small-scale projects like gardens or schoolyards or homes, attempt to be warm and comfortable, and often employ traditional—what he calls "timeless"—design practices. In the debate, Alexander lambasted Eisenman for wanting buildings that are "prickly and strange," and defended a conception of architecture that prioritizes human feeling and emotion. Eisenman, evidently trying his damndest to behave like a cartoon parody of a pretentious artist, declared that he

found the Chartres cathedral too boring to visit even once: “in fact,” he stated, “I have gone to Chartres a number of times to eat in the restaurant across the street — had a 1934 red Mersault wine, which was exquisite — I never went into the cathedral. The cathedral was done *en passant*. Once you’ve seen one Gothic cathedral, you have seen them all.” Alexander replied: “I find that incomprehensible. I find it very irresponsible. I find it nutty. I feel sorry for the man. I also feel incredibly angry because he is fucking up the world.”

The 1982 debate is perhaps one of the most aggressive public exchanges in the history of design. It is also illuminating, both because of Eisenman’s honesty in defending buildings that make people unhappy and uncomfortable—“If we make people so comfortable in these nice little structures,” he declared, “we might lull them into thinking that everything’s all right, Jack, which it isn’t”—and because of Alexander’s wildly inaccurate prophecy that architects and the public would soon see through Eisenman’s deconstructionist mumbo-jumbo and return to a love of traditional forms and values. In fact, the opposite happened: Alexander sunk into relative obscurity, and Eisenman became yet more famous, winning the National Design Award and garnering prestigious commissions across the world.

But can these two schools of design, the comfortable and the unsettling, peacefully co-exist? After all, Eisenman insisted that the world had room for both his brand of monumental, discordant poststructuralist architecture and Alexander’s small-scale, hand-made traditional architecture. The extraordinary fact about architecture over the last century, however, is just how dominant certain tendencies have been. Aesthetic uniformity among architects is remarkably rigid. Contemporary architecture shuns the classical use of multiple symmetries, intentionally refusing to align windows or other design elements, and preferring unusual geometric forms to satisfying and orderly ones. It follows a number of strict taboos: classical domes and arches are forbidden. A column must never be fluted, symmetrical pitched roofs are an impossibility. Forget about cupolas, spires, cornices, arcades, or anything else that recalls pre-modern civilization. Nothing built today must be mistakable for anything built 100 or more years ago. The rupture between our era and those of the past is absolute, and this unbridgeable gap must be made visible and manifest through the things we build. And since things were lovely in the past, they must, of necessity, be ugly now.

FOR MANY SOCIALISTS IN THE 20TH CENTURY, THE abdication of decorative elements and traditional forms seemed to be a natural outgrowth of a revolutionary spirit of simplicity, solidarity, and sacrifice. But the joke was on the socialists, really, because as it turned out, this obsession with minimalism was also uniquely compatible with capitalism’s miserable cult of efficiency. After all, every dollar expended on fanciful balusters or stained glass rose windows needed to produce some sort of *return on investment*. And since such things can be guaranteed to produce almost no return on investment, they had to go. There was a good reason why, historically, religious architecture

has been the most concerned with beauty for beauty’s sake; the more time is spent elegantly decorating a cathedral, the more it serves its intended function of celebrating God’s glory, whereas the more time is spent decorating an office building, the less money will be left over for the developer.

But let’s leave aside God’s glory—what about ordinary human happiness? One of the most infuriating aspects of contemporary architecture is its willful disdain for democracy. When people are polled, they tend to prefer older buildings to postwar buildings; very few postwar buildings make it onto lists of most treasured places. Yet architects are reluctant to build in the styles that people find more beautiful. Why? Well, Peter Eisenman has spoken for a lot of architects in being generally dismissive of democracy, saying that the role of the architect is not to give people what they *want*, but what they *should* want if they were intelligent enough to have good taste. Eisenman says he prefers to work for right-wing clients,

because “liberal views have never built anything of value,” due to their incessant concern with public process and public needs. (On a side note, it’s no accident that Howard Roark, protagonist of Ayn Rand’s *The Fountainhead* and the arch-hero of the American conservative literary canon, is an architect who intentionally dynamites a public housing project because somebody had the gall to add balconies to his original design without his consent.) Eisenman suggests that if we deferred to public taste in music, we would all be listening to Mantovani rather than Beethoven, and uses this as evidence that architects should impose taste from above rather than deferring to democratic desires. Indeed, there is always a “Thomas Kinkade” problem in believing that art should be “democratic.” If you deferred to public taste as judged by sales volume, Kinkade would be the greatest artist in the world. Taylor Swift would be the best musician, and the *Transformers* series would be the best cinema. Of course, we *don’t* trust democratic judgment in matters of taste, because people often like things that are garbage.

But architecture is very different from other forms of art: people who hate Beethoven aren’t obligated to listen to it from 9-5 every weekday, and people who hate the *Transformers* series aren’t obligated to watch it every night before bed. The physical environment in which we live and work, however, is ubiquitous and inescapable; when it comes to architecture, it is nigh-impossible for people to simply avoid the things they hate and seek out the things they like. It’s also true that intellectuals are too quick to write off the public as stupid and unable to decide things for themselves. There are plenty of instances where, when something truly great comes along, the public is perfectly capable of recognizing it. Shakespeare’s plays, for instance, have consistently been incredibly popular, despite being complex and intellectual pieces of literature, because they work on multiple levels. They are accessible enough to be loved and appreciated widely, but deep enough to offer fodder for centuries of reflection and analysis. Likewise, the masses tend to like, for example, Gothic cathedrals and Persian mosques, which are breathtakingly intricate and complex works of art.

The left, in particular, should eagerly embrace a conception of architecture that is both democratic and sophisticated. Many of the worst parts of contemporary architecture have echoes of the “bad” parts of leftism:



The bad kind of traditionalism: McMansions and shopping plazas. Instead of trying to actually build a beautiful thing, they just try to faintly remind us of beautiful things.







the dreariness of the Soviet Union, the dehumanizing tendency to try to impose from above a grand conception of a new social order. They exemplify what James Scott calls “high modernism,” the twisted effort to “rationalize” human beings rather than accept them as they are and build places that suit them and that they like. The good kind of leftism, on the other hand, operates from the bottom up rather than the top down. It helps people create their own places, rather than creating monolithic structures into which they are placed for their own good. It looks far more like a village than a tower block, decentralized and with a strong connection between the makers of a place and the inhabitants of a place.

At the moment, the needs or wishes of the people who actually have to use buildings are rarely considered at *all*. Architecture schools do not actually teach students anything about *craft* or about emotion; most of the courses are highly mathematical, dedicated to engineering and theories of form rather than to understanding traditional modes of building or understanding what people want out of their buildings. Unless they are an uber-wealthy client, users of buildings rarely have much input into the design process. Students do not get to say what kind of school they would like, office workers do not get to say whether they would prefer to work in a glass tower or in a leafy complex of wifi-enabled wooden pagodas. Some of this may come from the design process itself. Unlike in the age of artisanship, there is today a strong separation between the process of designing and the process of making. Frank Gehry designs his work using CAD software, then someone else has to go out and actually build it. But that rupture means that architecture becomes something imposed upon people. It isn’t participatory, and it doesn’t adapt in response to their needs. It’s prefabricated, assembled beforehand off-site and then dumped on the unwitting populace. We are not meant to live in modern buildings; they are made for people who do not poop. Good architecture is made better by the life that people bring to it, but one gets the sense in a contemporary structure that one is befouling the place with one’s odors and filth.

In fact, everyday good architecture should not even be about the *building*, it should be about the people. If the building isn’t intended as some kind of public monument or centerpiece, it shouldn’t draw much attention to itself. Frank Gehry is a wanton violator of this rule: when he decided to design homes for the Lower Ninth Ward in post-Katrina New Orleans, he created a discordant batch of hyper-contemporary houses that “riffed” on the region’s traditional vernacular architecture. Rather than being concerned to give people comfortable houses that fit in with their surroundings and suited the preferences of the residents, Gehry designed houses that screamed for attention and were fundamentally *about themselves* rather than about the people of the city he ostensibly cared about. Good buildings recede seamlessly into their surroundings; Gehry’s blare like an industrial klaxon. Similarly, when a building like Peter Cook and Colin Fournier’s Kunsthau in Austria (see photo) is placed in the middle of an old village, the entire fabric of the village is disrupted. The Kunsthau (a representative example of “blobitecture”) cannot coexist peacefully with the things surrounding it, because it’s impossible to stop looking at it. Like the streaker at the football game, the building parades in front of us with such vulgar shamelessness that no amount of willpower can peel our eyes away.

Architecture’s abandonment of the principle of “aesthetic coherence” is creating serious damage to ancient cityscapes. The belief that “buildings should look like their times” rather than “buildings should look like the buildings in the place where they are being built” leads toward a hodge-podge, with all the benefits that come from a distinct and orderly local style being destroyed by a few buildings that undermine the coherence of the whole. This is partly a function of the free market approach to design and development, which sacrifices the possibility of *ever* again producing a place on the village or city level that has an impressive stylistic coherence. A revulsion (from both progressives and capitalist individualists alike) at the idea of “forced uniformity” leads to an abandonment of any

community aesthetic traditions, with every building fitting equally well in Panama City, Dubai, New York City, or Shanghai. Because decisions over what to build are left to the individual property owner, and rich people often have horrible taste and simply prefer things that are huge and imposing, all possibilities for creating another city with the distinctiveness of a Venice or Bruges are erased forever.

Once upon a time, socialists liked to make beautiful things; the works of William Morris, John Ruskin, and Oscar Wilde are filled with both celebrations of classical aesthetics and pleas to liberate human beings from the miseries of economic deprivation. The core idea of leftism is that people should be free to flourish, in both body and mind, and they should thus be able to do so materially, spiritually, intellectually, and artistically. Handcrafts and ornament are not bourgeois, they are democratic, in that a society of artisans is a society of people who are getting to maximize their creative capabilities, whereas a society of people in clean-swept Corbusier-style skyscrapers have been reduced to specks, robbed of their individuality, stripped of their ability to make the world their own.

How, then, do we fix architecture? What makes for a better-looking world? If everything is ugly, how do we fix it? Cutting through all of the colossally mistaken theoretical justifications for contemporary design is a major project. But a few principles may prove helpful.

OVERCOMING FEARS

Postwar architecture has been characterized by fear and taboo. Architects are terrified of producing so much as a fluted column, because they believe their peers will think they are stupid, nostalgic, and unsophisticated. As a result, they produce structures that are as inscrutable and irrational as possible, so that people will think they are clever. But they need not be afraid! Their architect friends might think they are stupid if they put in a decorative archway. But we won't.

1. THE FEAR OF BEAUTY - There is a misconception that if beauty is "subjective," it therefore doesn't exist or can't be discussed. This is wrong; the fact that people disagree on something doesn't mean it can't be discussed, just as the fact that there is no "objectively best film" doesn't prevent us from having discussions about which films are the best. Even if beauty *is* subjective, we can still have discussions about it, just as we can still debate morality even though people's values differ.

There is a widespread conception, reinforced by conservative classicists, that "beauty" is just a euphemism for European imperialist art. Leftist writer Sam Kriss, who has ludicrously and incorrectly argued that London's Brutalist Alexandra Road is more beautiful than St. Paul's Cathedral, writes that "sentimental traditionalists talk a lot about beauty, but if beauty means proportion, regularity and harmony then modernism does it very well. But, of course, that's not what they mean by beauty; they mean some ineffable organic connection to the life and striving of the nation." But beauty doesn't need to just mean "proportion" and it doesn't mean "the life and striving of the nation." It can't simply mean simplicity and proportion, for many things are simple and proportionate that are not beautiful. And it can't be nationalistic, because ancient mosques and temples are among the most beautiful of structures. When we talk about architectural beauty, we're talking about a quality held in common *across* civilizations, one that unifies Indians and Mayans and Spaniards.

People are actually *uncomfortable* with the idea of beauty because they think it's subjective. But we can't actually rid ourselves of it; there are places we find beautiful, and places we don't, and it's important to have the conversation if we are to keep ourselves from continuing to make places that we *don't* find beautiful. Without developing a language to talk about beauty, we will end up confusing the impressive with the attractive and creating spaces that are extraordinary from an engineering perspective and yet dead and discomforting.

2. THE FEAR OF ORNAMENT - Ornament is not an indulgence; it's an essential part of the practice of building. In fact, "ornament" really just means



LEFT: More of this, please; RIGHT: For the love of God, less of this.



The people of ancient India sure knew how to make attractive places. Why can't we just do this again? What is stopping us?

attention to the micro-level aesthetic experience. It's the small things, and small things matter. The idea of decoration as decadent is particularly ludicrous in the age of monumental design projects. How many more resources are wasted trying to make Frank Gehry's latest pretzel stay standing up than it would take to install some attractive stonework on a far simpler structure? When we sacrifice the possibility of decoration we forfeit a slew of extraordinary aesthetic tools and forgo the possibility of incredible visual experiences. An allergy to ornament sentences humanity to eternal tedium, with nothing interesting to look at, nothing that we will notice on a building the second time that we did not see the first time.

3. THE FEAR OF TRADITION — It was astonishingly hubristic and careless for architects to craft a theory that forbid the possibility of ever again using traditional styles. Tradition is important, and severing one's self from it is pointless and suicidal. We have inherited a palette of possibilities from the architectural practice of all prior cultures, and to squander it is both ungrateful and needless. Memory and continuity are not mere nostalgia. Of course, tradition has gotten a bad reputation, simply because most "neo-traditional" architecture *is* so bad and Disneylike. Recreations and pastiches are not the solution, and the mindless conservative love for everything Greek, Roman, and Victorian is a mistake. The point is not to just mindlessly love old things; that gets you McMansions. Rather, instead of recreating the exact *look* of traditional architecture, one should be trying to recreate the *feeling* that these old buildings give their viewers. Don't build a plastic version of Venice. Build a city with canals and footbridges and ornate pastel houses dangling above the water, and give that city its own special identity. McMansions are an attempt to superficially remind people of beautiful things rather than doing the real work it takes to make something beautiful. But tradition is crucial, old things were generally better things, and if we abandon them we doom ourselves to creating mindless new shape after mindless new shape.

4. THE FEAR OF SYMMETRY — The tendency toward discord has to end. Symmetry is nice. Multiple overlapping symmetries can be dazzling. A building doesn't need to be lopsided. You can line the windows up. It's okay. It will look better. Don't worry. We won't tell your professor.

5. THE FEAR OF LOOKING FOOLISH — The people who most loudly disdain traditional architecture are those most concerned to convince others of their own intellectual seriousness. Designing a comforting, pleasing, and, yes, nostalgic space is simply not smart enough. People are afraid to say that they don't "get" a building or find it ugly. It sounds childlike to say you wish it was a pastel color or you wish the two sides matched or you wish it didn't look like it hated you. But it should be okay to say those things. Buildings shouldn't hate you. They probably shouldn't be *weird-looking* and they shouldn't grate on the eyeballs. They should be comforting and attractive, because we have to live in them.

BOTH COMPLEXITY AND SIMPLICITY

One of the elements that makes a place truly beautiful is a careful balance of complexity and simplicity. Contemporary architecture frequently just goes for the simplicity and forgets the complexity, or it makes up for the simplicity of its appearance with complexity in the technical processes necessary to build it. But the old buildings that please us most are frequently simple at the larger level and complex at the micro-level. For example: the buildings in New Orleans' French Quarter are not actually elaborate. Most of them are simple, rectangular structures in a straight line along the street. But they are given pleasant colors, and adorned with colorful shutters and intricate iron galleries, and decorated with flowers and tropical plants. And it's those complex elements that give the place life. The harmonious balance of simplicity and complexity, the complexity of a floral arrangement combined with the simplicity of a plain building painted well, make a place a delight to stroll through.

INTEGRATING NATURE

Plant life is actually one of the most important elements of architecture. One of the most serious problems with postwar architecture is that so much of its entirety devoid of nature. It presents us with blank walls and wide-open spaces with nary a tree or shrub to be seen. Generally speaking, the more plant life is in a place, the more attractive it is, and the less nature there is, the uglier it is. This is because nature is much better at designing things than we are. In fact, even Brutalist structures almost look livable if you let plants grow all over them; they might even be downright attractive if you let the plants cover every last square inch of concrete. Every building should look like the Hanging Gardens of Babylon. We need plants and water to be happy. One of the reasons tower blocks are so insidious is that they deprive people of access to gardens. Gardens should be integrated seamlessly into everything; there is a reason being banished from a garden was the most terrible fate God could think to inflict on humankind.

FEELINGS OVER FORMS

There is, generally speaking, too great of a desire for architecture to convey ideas. Architects obsess over the ideas that they are embodying in their buildings. But most people who use a building don't understand whatever abstract theoretical notion the architect was trying to convey. Far more important than "ideas" are the feelings that a building generates, the experiences people will have in it, and these should be given priority.

Likewise, "form" is dwelled on excessively; architects care far more about the shape of the building than whether its inhabitants are comfortable. Hence "blobitecture": the architect precisely designs the exact perfect kind of blob, using elaborate digital design and engineering tools, without stopping to wonder whether people actually like blobs. The website of Zaha Hadid Architects brags that the buildings for a new project are "iconic in both their scale and ambition... creating a unique twisted, intertwined silhouette that punctures the skyline." But architects should not want to create things that are "iconic in scale" or to "puncture the skyline." This is precisely the wrong thing to care about; it suggests the architect simply craves attention rather than the creation of perfect beauty and comfort. You're not supposed to be puncturing! You're supposed to be adding another delicate and perfect note to the skyline's gorgeous symphony.

THE NEED FOR COHERENCE

Frank Lloyd Wright's Guggenheim Museum is an impressive building. Unfortunately, it doesn't bear any actual relationship to its surroundings; it could have been placed anywhere. Wright's Fallingwater house, on the other hand, was designed to cohere with its location. Aesthetic coherence is very important; a sense of place depends on every element in that place working together. The streets of the Beacon Hill neighborhood in Boston are beau-

tiful because there are many different elements, but they are all aesthetically unified. The Tour Montparnasse in Paris is horrifying, because it doesn't flow with the surrounding buildings and draws attention to itself. Capitalism eats culture, and it makes ugly places. Money has no taste.

DEMOCRATIC VALUES

We can see the fruits of Peter Eisenman's anti-democratic philosophy in the places he builds. A student at the Cooper Union, where Eisenman built a dormitory, reported that because Eisenman had built oddly-angled walls, placing furniture well was impossible, and because he had built the windows at floor level, one had to get on one's knees to see outside. The person who assumes they know what people ought to want generally doesn't actually know very much at all. Places should be liked, they should make people comfortable. Architects should find out which buildings people like best (hint: it's generally the older ones) and should try to make new buildings that give people those same feelings of pleasure. Brutalism is the opposite of democracy: it means imposing on people something they hate, all for the sake some narrow and arbitrary formalistic conceptual scheme. Deferring to popular taste doesn't have to mean Las Vegas; it can mean elaborate cathedrals and gardens with fountains.

THE ABOLITION OF THE SKYSCRAPER

It should be obvious to anyone that skyscrapers should be abolished. After all, they embody nearly every bad tendency in contemporary architecture: they are not part of nature, they are monolithic, they are boring, they have no intricacy, and they have no democracy. Besides, there is plenty of space left on earth to spread out horizontally; the only reasons to spread vertically are phallic and Freudian. Architect Leon Krier has suggested that while there should be no *height* limit on buildings, no building should ever be more than four stories (so, spires as tall as you like, and belfries). This seems a completely sensible idea.

But more than just abolishing skyscrapers, we must create a world of everyday wonder, a world in which every last thing is a beautiful thing. If this sounds impossible, it isn't; for thousands of years, nearly every buildings humans made was beautiful. It is simply a matter of recovering old habits. We should ask ourselves: why is it that we can't build another Prague or Florence? Why can't we build like the ancient mosques in Persia or the temples in India? Well, there's no reason why we can't. There's nothing stopping us except the prison of our ideas and our horrible economic system. We must break out of the prison and destroy the economic system.

There's an easy test for whether a building is beautiful or not. Ask yourself: if this building could speak, would it sound like the Rubaiyat or the works of Shakespeare, or would it make a noise like "Blorp"? For nearly 100 years, we have been stuck in the Age of Blorp. It is time to learn to speak again. ❖

OVERRATED BUILDINGS

(A VERY SERIOUS LIST)

We would scornfully drink a bottle 1934 red Mersault wine across the street from any one of these:

THE EIFFEL TOWER

When the Eiffel Tower was first proposed, a petition called "Artists Against the Eiffel Tower" objected in the following terms:

Imagine for a moment a giddy, ridiculous tower dominating Paris like a gigantic black smokestack, crushing under its barbaric bulk, Notre Dame, the Tour Saint-Jacques, the Louvre, the Dome of les Invalides, the Arc de Triomphe, all of our humiliated monuments will disappear in this ghastly dream. And for twenty years... we shall see stretching like a blot of ink the hateful shadow of the hateful column of bolted sheet metal.

They were not wrong. The only reason people like the Eiffel Tower is due to subliminal messaging: because it is printed on so many throw pillows, and appears in the background of so many movie scenes featuring people who are about to get laid. In reality, however, it looks like a gigantic creepy bacteriophage about to pop a squat on Paris. TEAR IT DOWN.

THE ENTIRETY OF MANHATTAN



This insane fad for terrifyingly tall buildings must cease. Walking through New York is like being trapped in a laboratory maze. To be human in New York is like being a rat. To be a rat in New York is like being a king, due to New York's abundance of rotting garbage. The laws of nature are out of alignment, and must be set right. TEAR IT DOWN.

THE SYDNEY OPERA HOUSE



It just looks like a collision of giant yachts. TEAR IT DOWN.

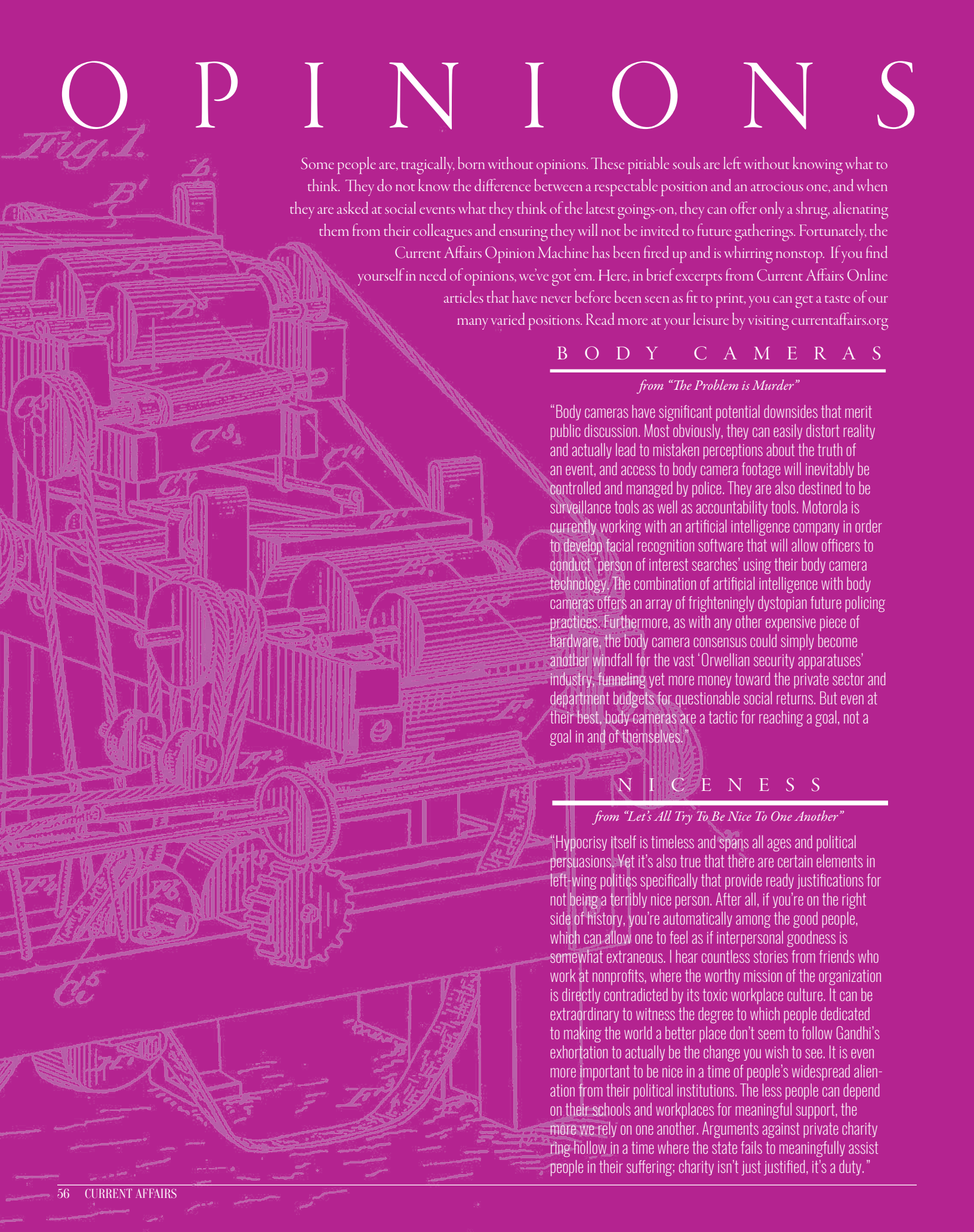
FALLINGWATER

Okay, Fallingwater is all right, but you know what's really great about Fallingwater? The fucking waterfall that was already there before the house was built.

Fallingwater is 10% "good architecture" and 90% "got a building permit on top of an idyllic goddamn waterfall." If you transported Fallingwater to an ordinary field, it would just be called That House In The Field No One Knows About. We won't make you tear it down, but MODERATE YOUR ENTHUSIASM, OKAY.



OPINIONS



Some people are, tragically, born without opinions. These pitiable souls are left without knowing what to think. They do not know the difference between a respectable position and an atrocious one, and when they are asked at social events what they think of the latest goings-on, they can offer only a shrug, alienating them from their colleagues and ensuring they will not be invited to future gatherings. Fortunately, the Current Affairs Opinion Machine has been fired up and is whirring nonstop. If you find yourself in need of opinions, we've got 'em. Here, in brief excerpts from Current Affairs Online articles that have never before been seen as fit to print, you can get a taste of our many varied positions. Read more at your leisure by visiting currentaffairs.org

BODY CAMERAS

from "The Problem is Murder"

"Body cameras have significant potential downsides that merit public discussion. Most obviously, they can easily distort reality and actually lead to mistaken perceptions about the truth of an event, and access to body camera footage will inevitably be controlled and managed by police. They are also destined to be surveillance tools as well as accountability tools. Motorola is currently working with an artificial intelligence company in order to develop facial recognition software that will allow officers to conduct 'person of interest searches' using their body camera technology. The combination of artificial intelligence with body cameras offers an array of frighteningly dystopian future policing practices. Furthermore, as with any other expensive piece of hardware, the body camera consensus could simply become another windfall for the vast 'Orwellian security apparatuses' industry, funneling yet more money toward the private sector and department budgets for questionable social returns. But even at their best, body cameras are a tactic for reaching a goal, not a goal in and of themselves."

NICENESS

from "Let's All Try To Be Nice To One Another"

"Hypocrisy itself is timeless and spans all ages and political persuasions. Yet it's also true that there are certain elements in left-wing politics specifically that provide ready justifications for not being a terribly nice person. After all, if you're on the right side of history, you're automatically among the good people, which can allow one to feel as if interpersonal goodness is somewhat extraneous. I hear countless stories from friends who work at nonprofits, where the worthy mission of the organization is directly contradicted by its toxic workplace culture. It can be extraordinary to witness the degree to which people dedicated to making the world a better place don't seem to follow Gandhi's exhortation to actually be the change you wish to see. It is even more important to be nice in a time of people's widespread alienation from their political institutions. The less people can depend on their schools and workplaces for meaningful support, the more we rely on one another. Arguments against private charity ring hollow in a time where the state fails to meaningfully assist people in their suffering; charity isn't just justified, it's a duty."

I N B R I E F

V A G U E N E S S

from "Academic Language"

"The use of words without fixed or clear meanings is a major part of what makes academic writing so terrible. People often complain that academic writing is "obscure" or overly convoluted and complex. But there's nothing inherently wrong with either complexity or obscurity in themselves: research papers in the sciences have to be complex and technical, and introducing people to obscure and unfamiliar words or concepts can be a key part of developing human knowledge. The problem largely comes when words are vague and unclear, admitting of many possible interpretations. Infamous academic terms like 'phenomenological,' 'intersubjectivity,' 'embeddedness,' 'hermeneutical,' and "discursive" are not bad because they describe complicated concepts, but because it's often not clear just what an author means by them. It's not that they're meaningless, necessarily, but that they could mean lots of things, and people don't seem to have a very precise shared idea of how to interpret them. Vagueness allows an escape from responsibility. I can never be "wrong" about anything, because I can always claim to have been misinterpreted. (This is how Slavoj Žižek always defends himself.) If you ask me my prediction for what will happen in 2018, and I say "the state of California will break off and fall into the ocean," it is fairly easy for my proposition to be either proven or disproven. But if I say "the people of California will develop a greater sense of their own intersubjectivity," almost nothing that happens can clearly disprove my assertion, because it could mean many things."

C H A R L E S
M U R R A Y

from "Why Is Charles Murray Odious?"

"I do not see, then, how if the word "racism" has any content, Charles Murray is anything other than a racist. He has argued: (1) that black people are dumber than white people, (2) that black culture is objectively less accomplished and worthwhile, and (3) that the Founding Fathers' conception of social equality, an inherently racist vision in its every aspect, is worth reviving. Of course, I do not know whether Charles Murray knows he is a racist, just as I do not know what was in his mind when he burned a cross on a hill. But, when we put aside all of the distortions and exaggerations about his work, and examine its text closely, I do not see how we can escape the conclusion that Charles Murray thinks black people are inferior to white people, and that having them in socially, economically, and politically subordinate positions is acceptable."

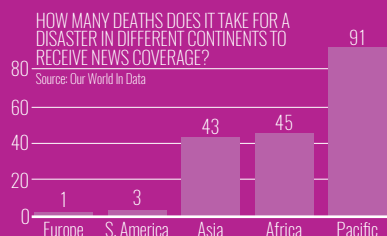
M A R K E T S

from "Anybody Who Says They Can't Pay \$15 an Hour Is A Lying Swine"

"What free market economists and minimum wage opponents rarely say out loud is that their models and predictions assume that capitalists and business owners are sociopathic: i.e., that they do not act in the interests of their workers' well-being, but that their workers' well-being is incidental and will be sacrificed as needed to ensure continued profitability. So if the minimum wage rises, a business owner will not compensate themselves less, but will try to find a way to cut back on labor costs elsewhere, say by requiring greater amounts of work over shorter periods of time. The whole reason that economists believe minimum wage raises hurt workers is that companies do not mind hurting their workers. Corporations are structured so as not to have moral obligations toward human beings, and so it would be unsurprising if they reacted to an effort to get them to behave more morally by behaving less morally."

M E D I A B I A S

from "There is No Justification For The Media's Hierarchy of Victims"



"One of the most easily provable forms of media bias, one that shouldn't really be up for serious debate, is its biased weighting of the importance of different people's lives. Throughout the mainstream media, people's suffering becomes news not on the basis of how bad it is, but on what the victim's demographic characteristics are. Some people's deaths are news, some people's aren't, and the question of who matters reflects nothing more than the purest kind of subconscious prejudice."

P R A G M A T I S M V . U T O P I A

from "Lessons From Chomsky"

"The problem with utopians is that they're not practical, and the problem with pragmatists is that they often lack vision. If you dream of elaborate perfect societies, but you don't remain anchored in real-world realities and have a sense of how to get things done, all of your dreams are useless and you may even end up destroying the progress you have already made for the sake of an ideal you'll never reach. But if you don't have a strong sense of what the ultimate long-term goal is, you're not going to know whether you're moving closer to it or not."

S O C I A L I S M

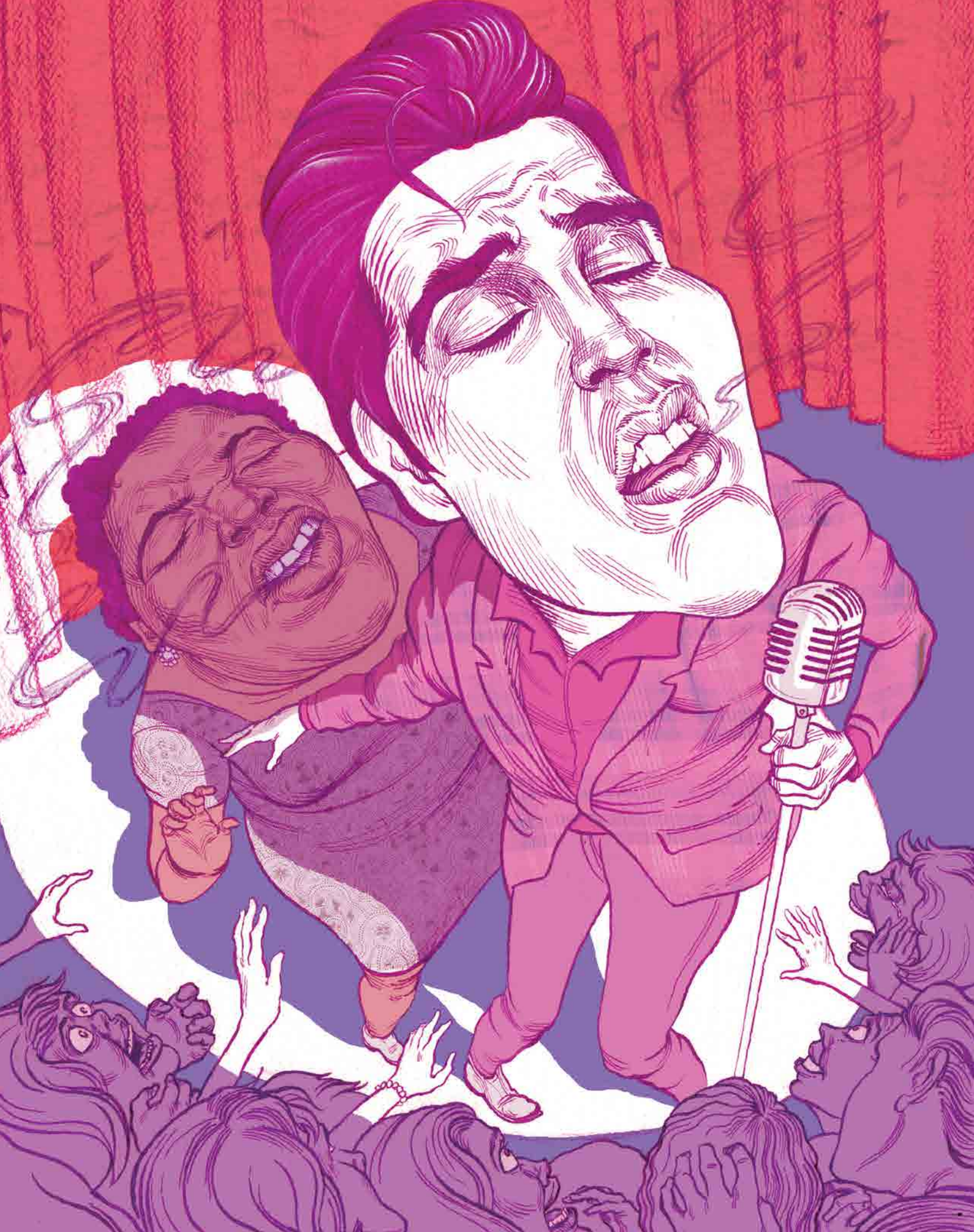
from "What Socialism Means"

"If socialism has now been rendered into a vague sense of 'leftier than the average Democrat,' then communism and Marxism have been reduced to empty iconography. The philosophical literature of Marxism is vast; indeed, arguably no political tendency has ever produced a denser body of philosophy. The essential elements of Marx's system are encapsulated in the Communist Manifesto: a revolutionary socialism that wins power through the struggle of the working class against the rentier class, which results in a post-capitalist, post-state society defined by mutual need and organized into decentralized democratic bodies that act according to the needs of the proletariat. The philosophy is materialist, atheist, anti-capitalist, and in fact anti-statist, though communism is often associated with a vast state apparatus, thanks to the shadow of the Soviet Union. But the word 'commune' appears in 'communism' for a reason, and it does not do leftists any favors to equate communism with the failed, false version that was advanced in the Soviet state. We should expect leftists to do a better job of representing the most influential school of left-wing politics of all."

W E A L T H

from "It's Basically Just Immoral To Be Rich"

"Even though there is a lot of public discussion about inequality, there seems to be far less talk about just how patently shameful it is to be rich. After all, there are plenty of people on this earth who die—or who watch their loved ones die—because they cannot afford to pay for medical care. There are elderly people who become homeless because they cannot afford rent. There are children living on streets and in cars, there are mothers who can't afford diapers for their babies. All of this is beyond dispute. And all of it could be ameliorated if people who had lots of money simply gave those other people their money. It's therefore deeply shameful to be rich. It's not a morally defensible thing to be."



THE APPROPRIATE QUESTION

by Briahna Joy Gray

THE TROUBLE WITH ELVIS'S VERSION OF "HOUND Dog" is not that it is bad. It's that it doesn't make any goddamn sense. Big Mama Thornton's original 1954 version of the song is sleazy and defiant. In a bluesy growl, she tells off the low-down guy who keeps "snooping round her door." It's a declaration of independence by a woman who is sick and tired of having a "hound dog" of a man take her for granted. The lyrics are full of dirty double-entendres: "You can wag your tail, but I ain't gonna feed you no more." In Elvis's version, sanitized for a pop audience, the line is changed to "You ain't never caught a rabbit, and you ain't no friend of mine." Drained of its original meaning, the song seemingly becomes about... an actual dog. Yet Elvis's version of "Hound Dog" sold 10 million copies and became his single best-selling song. It's ranked #19 on Rolling Stone's List of the 500 Greatest Songs of All Time.

The term "cultural appropriation," a pejorative used to criticize certain types of ostensibly illegitimate borrowing from other people's cultures, gets a lot of people into a lot of arguments. That's especially true now that it is used to describe an ever-widening set of acts. What constituted "cultural appropriation" might once have been relatively clear: if you wore a ceremonial Native American headdress without actually being a Native American performing a ceremony, you were disrespectfully appropriating a culture that was not your own. But nowadays, the notion can be far

more expansive in its scope. "Cultural appropriation" has been taken to mean that only blacks are entitled to create art about black historical figures: white artist Dana Schutz was boycotted and protested after displaying a painting of Emmett Till's body, on the theory that black suffering was not fit subject matter for nonblack painters. It's also infamously been invoked to suggest there's something wrong with people making foods from cultures other than their own.

If the definition of "appropriation" had stayed narrow, it would be easy enough to defend. It's obvious why it's insulting and upsetting for a white person to casually sport a feathered headdress: they are items of deep symbolic meaning to the people who originated them, bestowed in recognition of great achievements. Treating them like party hats cheapens and dishonors them, and slights those people who have the same feelings about their tribal regalia that military members have about the sanctity of medals and uniforms. If "don't culturally appropriate" just means "don't treat things that are sacred to other people with ignorance and mockery," critics of the concept could easily be dismissed. The demand to be permitted to appropriate would simply be the demand to be able to act like a jackass without social consequence, and if there is one thing jackasses inarguably deserve, it is social consequences.

But as the "appropriation" concept has been used to object to many formerly innocuous forms of cultural mixing, certain criticisms of the term become increasingly credible. The more things are stuffed under

the “cultural appropriation” tent, the more legitimate the concern that it may put limits on creativity, cultural exchange, and innovation. If taken to its logical extreme, critics of the concept delight in pointing out, the consequences would be outlandish: only Asians could use chopsticks and only Italians could play the violin. (And apparently, as one man deeply ignorant in the history of science urged on Twitter, only whites could use “technology.”)

It should be obvious that there is no such thing as a “pure” culture. Any “technology” the oblivious tweeter might have had in mind relies on a numerical system invented by Arabs. We wear textiles from central Asia; we eat “Italian” pasta brought to Europe from China in the 13th Century; and we developed our earliest legal framework from East Africans. (And that “Italian” violin is a Persian derivative). So many of humankind’s most exciting achievements result from centuries of cross-pollination, and if the term cultural appropriation is to have any meaning, it can’t simply function to condemn the very exchange of ideas on which all progress depends.

“Appropriation” also suffers from an inherent theoretical difficulty: it depends on having a clear notion of cultural “ownership.” The term tends to be defined as “the adoption or use of the elements of one culture by members of another culture” – often with the added proviso “without permission.”

But how can a cultural group can give “permission” to take or use a cultural product? It’s not as if each ethnic group has a council or bureaucratic agency that processes requests for cultural exchange like ASCAP licenses music. Anyone claiming to give “permission” is adopting authority they do not have; after all, what happens if other members of the culture disagree? Do we put it to a majority vote? Once we accept the core idea of “cultural appropriation,” that there is a coherent concept of cultural “ownership” that operates the way other forms of property rights do, all kinds of impossible questions are raised. These go beyond the usual “Can white men sing the blues?” (to which the answer remains, as always, “Yes, but usually not well.”) What do we do, for example, about New Orleans’ Mardi Gras Indians, who are black rather than Native American, but who wear elaborate feathered garb including—yes—headdresses and adopt tribal names? The Mardi Gras Indian tradition is meant to honor Native Americans, but it certainly never received “permission” from the U.S.’s indigenous population. If we accept the notions of ownership underlying “appropriation” analysis, we seem destined for either absurd logical extremes or arbitrary line-drawing.

AND YET: DISCARDING THE CONCEPT entirely also seems like a mistake. Certain patterns of cultural exchange *do* seem to entail a kind of “theft,” and in considering whether cultural appropriation is a helpful idea, we should be careful not to throw a useful analytical baby out with its muddy conceptual bathwater, so to speak. A “property rights” framework doesn’t actually fit culture very well. Its boundaries are too amorphous, its creation too much a collective enterprise, for us to be able to divide up rights of proprietorship like parcels of land. But if we abandon the “appropriation” idea altogether, it becomes hard to describe what feels wrong about the misuse of tribal artifacts or the commercialization of artistic works made by marginalized groups.

So I’d like to propose what I believe to be a better approach than “cultural appropriation” for understanding problems with using other people’s culture. I think when we talk about appropriation, we’re really talking about two separate issues: first, an issue of cultural exploitation, and second, an issue of cultural disrespect.

One core issue that the “appropriation” idea tries to get at is eco-

nom ic exploitation. In an economic landscape where some groups get rewarded disproportionately to others, the people who make the culture are often not the ones who see the rewards from it, i.e. the problem is not that white men play the blues, it’s that white men who have played the blues have gotten rich from it, while the black people who invented the blues stayed poor. (Led Zeppelin, for instance, notoriously didn’t even give credit to the Delta bluesmen who had written their songs, thereby depriving them of both royalties and public recognition.) Non-white cultural products have often been repackaged for white audiences, reaping tremendous profits, none of which accrue to those who actually originated the culture.

THAT BRINGS US BACK TO ELVIS, BIG MAMA Thornton, and “Hound Dog.” The issue there isn’t that Elvis *shouldn’t* sing “Hound Dog.” It’s that when Elvis sang Hound Dog, it made him rich and he became “The King,” while when Thornton sang what is—let’s be honest—an objectively better version of the song, she *didn’t* become a world-famous megastar. Elvis’s early records, the ones that made his name, are filled with covers of songs by black artists (“That’s All Right,” “Mystery Train,” “Milkcow Blues,” etc.), but the life stories of early 20th century black musicians are stories of poverty and exploitation by a predatory music industry that lifted their sounds and left them with nothing. The trouble isn’t that Elvis sang the songs but that he did so in a viciously racist economic landscape that didn’t reward black cultural innovation with black economic success. Using cultural “ownership” doesn’t help us here—after all, “Hound Dog” was written by white songwriters, albeit specifically for Thornton, who added her own improvisations. But it’s still obvious we’re dealing with a racially unequal music industry.

Interestingly, it was the story of Elvis Presley that writer Kenan Malik recently used in order to argue that cultural appropriation is a good and necessary thing. Malik acknowledges that Elvis’s success ended up overshadowing the contributions of black rock n’ roll innovator Chuck Berry: “*In the 1950s, white radio stations refused to play [Berry’s] songs, categorizing them as “race music.” Then came Elvis Presley. A white boy playing the same tunes was cool. Elvis was feted, Mr. Berry and other black pioneers largely ignored. Racism defined who became the cultural icon.*”

But, Malik says, “imagine that Elvis had been prevented from appropriating so-called black music. Would that have challenged racism, or eradicated Jim Crow laws? Clearly not. It took a social struggle — the civil rights movement — to bring about change.” Now, let’s for a moment set aside the irrelevant rhetorical question, which is oddly reminiscent of Hillary Clinton’s similarly disingenuous “If we broke up the big banks tomorrow, would that end racism?” (The answer to both is the same: no, but the fact that something doesn’t in and of itself “end racism” doesn’t mean it shouldn’t be done.) Malik believes that cultural appropriation is good because it gave us Elvis, even if that meant the eclipse of Chuck Berry, and even if that eclipse occurred for obviously racist reasons, i.e. because a white public wanted to have black songs performed by white artists.

Here we see why it’s more helpful to look at things in terms of economic exploitation rather than ownership: it takes the focus off whether Elvis was entitled to *sing*, and instead looks at why Elvis had the *economic* success he did. Malik is right that strict notions of cultural ownership would stifle innovation, but he doesn’t follow through the implications of the Presley/Berry problem: we’re talking about a system of cultural production in which people of color produce certain sounds, which are then taken and imitated for profit. In some cases, this was even more blatant: in the 50s, white pop singer Pat Boone was hired to produce wholesome, advertiser-friendly versions of black R&B songs like Little

Richard's "Tutti Frutti." As Richard said:

"They didn't want me to be in the white guys' way. ... I felt I was pushed into a rhythm and blues corner to keep out of rockers' way, because that's where the money is. When 'Tutti Frutti' came out. ... They needed a rock star to block me out of white homes because I was a hero to white kids. The white kids would have Pat Boone upon the dresser and me in the drawer 'cause they liked my version better, but the families didn't want me because of the image that I was projecting."

To frame the Elvis question as Malik does, then, is akin to asking "Well, shouldn't Pat Boone be *allowed* to cover Little Richard songs?" It misses the whole point: it's not that black songs should never be sung by white people, it is that there has been a long history of people pushing black creators to the margins while making millions of dollars off their work. If the music business hadn't been riddled with racism, and if the measure of financial success was "whether a person (of any race) had created something original and good" rather than "whether a white person could copy and repackage an unknown black song for a white audience more concerned with color than content," there would be no injustice. Music is inherently appropriative. It thrives on creative allusions, sampling, and embellishing the groundwork laid by earlier artists. I embrace that: after all, I'm a woman who grew up with—and still prefers—Aretha Franklin's version of Eleanor Rigby, and I didn't realize the song was a Beatles original until adulthood. However, "borrowing" becomes a problem when a piece of art is given preferential treatment *because of* pre-existing racial hierarchies of value – causing the work of people of color to be devalued, and artists to be undercompensated for their innovation.

The "exploitation" instead of "appropriation" perspective also helps clear up some of the issues surrounding food. When two white women shut down their Portland taco truck after being accused of culturally appropriating Mexican food, the incident

was used as an indictment of the absurdity of the appropriation concept. Once you have a racial test for whether someone can vend burritos, you might need to rethink your theory. Yet from an economic perspective, there is a problem with elite white yuppies opening an artisanal burrito truck: because there are massive racial wealth disparities in the United States, white people are disproportionately endowed with the capital that will allow them to open successful Mexican food restaurants; we can end up with a world full of Mexican restaurants where food is made by Mexican workers but the profits accrue to white owners. Just as with music, the problem is not that a TV chef like Rick Bayless makes Mexican food, it's that Rick Bayless makes *millions of dollars* making Mexican food while Mexican people bus tables in his restaurants. Public prejudice and an unequal economy make Bayless disproportionately *more able* to capitalize on Mexican cuisine than a working-class Mexican immigrant would be.

Across every cultural field, there are examples of white people receiving opportunities to benefit economically from a cultural product originating with people of color. Compare, for example, the fate of Kayla Newman, the young black woman who coined the term "on fleek," with Danielle Bregoli, the young white woman who famously used urban slang on the Dr. Phil show ("cash me outside howbow dah"). Bregoli now commands appearance fees of \$30,000 per event, while Newman is struggling to crowdfund a cosmetic line.

Not only is there a difference in remuneration, but non-white cultural products are often considered more valuable or esteemed when performed by whites. The "race records" made by black R&B musicians were considered "jungle music," while the white covers were innocuous "pop." We can even see it in hairstyles, too. Those associated with black Americans, like cornrows, are seen to reflect lower-class status, ugliness, and even criminality, until they are adopted by particularly celebrities like Kim Kardashian or Katy Perry, at which point they are rebranded



and called “new.” Contrast the *New York Post*’s breathless treatment of the “new” style they termed “Boxer Braids”—e.g. cornrows or French plaits—with *Fashion Police*’s Giuliana Rancic’s critique of young half-black actress Zendaya’s locs as “probably” smelling “like patchouli or weed.” That difference in perception can have real-world consequences: a black 12-year-old was recently threatened with expulsion for refusing to cut her natural afro-textured hair, and just this past May, two black students at a charter school in Malden, Massachusetts faced detention and suspension for wearing their hair in braids. And until 2014, locks, two-strand twists, and other natural (read black) hairstyles were prohibited by the military, essentially requiring that black women either shave our heads or chemically straighten our hair to serve our country. (It’s also easier to dehumanize people when their cultural contributions are erased. When a people is depicted as “savage,” their lives can be disregarded. When a conception of Arabs as tribal and backward—rather than as the inventors of mathematics and the violin—is internalized, it seems more natural to bomb their countries; Baghdad is simply a “war zone” where violent death is *normal* rather than a great centuries-old cultural center.)

EXPLOITATION ANALYSIS MAY BE MORE HELPFUL THAN appropriation in understanding why certain kinds of cultural lifting feel unjust. But it doesn’t get at the entirety of the issue: we still have cases in which nobody is necessarily *profiting*, but where it feels as if a particular culture is being misused, e.g. the headdress scenario. It may be best, then, to combine an objection to cultural exploitation with an objection to cultural *disrespect*, meaning acts which flatten or diminish the original meaning or value of the cultural product. If Native American objects hold particular spiritual and cultural meaning, using them purely for their aesthetic value implies a lack of interest in or empathy for the values of those who create the objects. That would apply equally well to those who intentionally used Christian religious objects without caring how Christians felt, but in the case of Native Americans, it is literally an insult added to an injury, given the country’s viciously genocidal history.

“Cultural disrespect” also helps us appreciate *good* kinds of borrowing. When a person truly tries to study and pay tribute to a different culture, their use of it becomes less objectionable. The most cringeworthy white blues is played by those who least understand it, but when people have truly immersed themselves in another culture and done their research, the results can be moving. So Mardi Gras Indians are fine: they are honoring a culture rather than simply cheaply replicating it. And Skip Bayless can have a *serious* cultural exploitation problem without necessarily having a cultural disrespect problem, if his *understanding* of Mexican cuisines is deep and genuine.

LIKE KENAN MALIK, I AM UNCOMFORTABLE with the possibility that a certain brand of cultural appropriation critique might inhibit artistic creativity. The idea that only black artists have the right to address Emmett Till’s murder through art seems wrong. The question should never be: “Who is *allowed* to express their feelings about the racially motivated murder of a child?” After all, when Till’s mother chose to keep his casket open to show his brutally beaten body to the press, she was doing so in order that white America could understand its own brutality. Blacks already knew what she was showing them, but she wanted to awaken whites’ humanity and provoke a white response. Critics of Dana Schutz’s Till painting said that “the subject matter is not Schutz’s,” but this seems wrong: the *subject* of Till’s death is important to humanity writ large, and it should move us *all* to the point where we express our feelings, whether through art

or otherwise. (There is, of course, a separate question about whether the work was in good taste or succeeded artistically.)

Yet there was another sense, the “exploitation” sense, in which the critics of Schutz have a point. Depicting Till is not a problem, but *using* Till to garner profit and acclaim would be. There are also serious questions about differing access to museum space and artistic recognition: it’s both fair and important to point out the ways in which certain people are given a platform to tell black stories while others aren’t.

It was this dimension that novelist Lionel Shriver missed in her infamous “sombbrero speech” at the Brisbane Writers Festival. Shriver, indignant at criticisms faced by white authors who write from the perspective of non-white characters, said that fiction was about “trying on other people’s hats” and writers should be allowed to depict lives different from their own. (She did not exactly help win over her critics by choosing to illustrate the point by wearing a colorful sombrero.) Shriver cited the example of Chris Cleave’s *Little Bee*, which is written from the perspective of a 14-year-old Nigerian girl even though Cleave himself is white, male, and British. Shriver suggested that the “hypersensitive” left was cramping the authorial imagination, by prohibiting writers from exploring the perspectives of many different kind of characters.

What Shriver ignored was the exploitation question. Chris Cleave, if his portrayal is rich and well-researched, may produce a novel that isn’t *disrespectful* toward Nigerians. Yet it’s still bizarre and unfair that the people who write bestselling books about the lives of Nigerian girls aren’t... Nigerian girls. An author is welcome to use whatever source material produces the best art. But when we talk about cultural exploitation we’re not just talking about “writing” as a pastime. We’re talking about the publishing industry, where people make *money* from writing, and in that context it’s fair to raise the question of whether packaging and selling the richness of African life, without Africa receiving any benefit, is exploitative. The goal is not to stop white people from writing about black lives, but to stop a racist economy from remunerating the white people who write about the lives rather than the black people who live them.

ONCE WE CLEARLY UNDERSTAND WHAT THE ACTUAL problems are, it’s easy to see how free cultural exchange can occur without creating injustice. The problems are largely those of economics and respect, and if we evaluate cultural borrowing by these measures, we can get rid of the racism without getting rid of the borrowing itself. A few simple questions can help us think about specific cases: (1) Is there a historic record of exploitation between the appropriator and the originating group? (2) Is the originating group and its culture being celebrated, appreciated, and respected, or are they being degraded, mocked and accessorized? (There’s a difference between Eminem’s genuine relationship to the environment of 8 Mile Road and his immersion in Detroit hip hop and, say, a person wearing a tacky, cruelly stereotypical, and cartoonish Mexican Halloween costume.) (3) Is the appropriator actually *claiming* to be the owner or innovator, or allowing the media to create a false origin narrative? (E.g. Elvis as the “King” or Miley Cyrus’s “invention” of twerking.) (4) Is differential economic enrichment occurring? Is the cultural product more valuable in the hands of the appropriator, and does that have wider financial or political consequences for certain groups?

Both the concept of cultural appropriation and the backlash to it are, to use a popular term, “problematic.” Rigid ideas of cultural ownership would lead us to absurdity, but profiteering and cultural disrespect are important to recognize. If we embrace a strict prohibition on borrowing, as Kenan Malik says, we wouldn’t get Elvis Presley. But if we don’t recognize how racial inequities structure the success of different cultural products, we might lapse into an even worse fate: listening to Elvis’s version of “Hound Dog” rather than Big Mama Thornton’s. ♦

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RIDING THE HASHTAG

ACTIVISM AND ELITE EDUCATION

by Yasmin Nair

THE MONTHS FROM December to April are, in many households with high-school-age teens, filled with degrees of fear ranging from palpable nervousness to sleeplessness to sheer sweat-inducing terror. Across the United States, young people who should be looking forward to life with excitement instead wait anxiously to hear about their college applications. This is a country that—unlike, say, Denmark—does not think that education should be free and equally available to all, so the stakes of what comes in the envelope are high. These young people's entire lives have been in preparation for this moment, in which they face either humiliation or elation when their preferred schools will inform them if, yes, the years of extra dance classes and soup kitchen duties were not for naught. For millions of teens, the onset of adulthood has been marked by a constant worship of

the Unseen Application Gods, an indoctrination process that happens to be an excellent way of easing a person into a lifelong habit of deference toward authority.

These days, as we know, it is not enough to merely be clever. It is not enough to have taken forty AP classes, or excelled on your standardized tests. You must have something extra, something special. Did you think Columbia was going to be impressed by your *grades*? You poor kid. The Ivies reject 9/10 of their applicants. They'll want to see something more than *that*. Oh, you're an intelligent and capable person who would do quite well there and is very nice? Join the queue. What is it they want? Good luck figuring it out.

Since his brief moment of Twitter Fame (a unit of time lasting about half the flap of a hummingbird's wings), Ziad Ahmed has drifted back into the internet ether. But Ahmed had figured out what they wanted. On April 1, the 18-year-old Princeton area native and Muslim-American activist tweeted out that he had been accepted into Stanford. He displayed a picture of the answer he had provided to one of the application questions: "What matters to you and why?" Instead of the more traditional use of "sentences" and "paragraphs," Ahmed had simply written the phrase "#Black Lives Matter" a hundred times. It was bold, it worked, and it got him on NBC News. The predictable reactions flowed from all quarters: Linda Sarsour, a nationally known Muslim American activist, tweeted her support, while on the right there was much grouching about the loss of standards and "identity politics" trumping quality.

GIVEN HIS YOUTH AND HIS ETHNICITY, THERE is no way to write about Ziad Ahmed without being criticized, censured, and called evil. The situation is a bit like defusing a bomb, as we see it in the movies. One crossed wire, the red one cut instead of the yellow, and we blow ourselves to bits. So, one treads carefully. After all Ahmed is eighteen, *eighteen* years old, a mere child, some might argue. And he seems so dreadfully earnest that it seems cruel to be critical of him. What's to hate about a young man who has been photographed holding a sign that lays out his politics that reads: "I stand against racism because it is my responsibility as a human to oppose oppression, dehumanization and systematic detrimental discrimination, which is unfair, moronic, and wrong." It is all of those things, and good for him for standing against them.

But Ahmed is no ordinary activist teen. The son of a hedge fund manager with his own firm, he attended the prestigious Princeton Day School. At the tender age of thirteen, he founded a nonprofit organization called "Redefy," "committed to defying stereotypes, redefining perspectives positively, embracing acceptance and tolerance..." Its exact work and accomplishments are somewhat unclear (it has something to do with hosting workshops about stereotypes), but Ahmed's commitment to redefining perspectives earned him profiles in major media publications

and an invitation to the White House, where Barack Obama praised his work. Ahmed didn't stop at Redefy: along with two other teenagers who shared his interest in "business, marketing, and philanthropy" (note which comes first and which comes third), he also created JÜV Consulting, a firm designed to help corporations understand "Generation Z." For \$1000 to \$5000 per client, JÜV will tell companies "how likely we are to like your brand, follow your social media accounts, or buy your products." Ahmed's consulting and nonprofit work has landed him on MTV's list of the "Top 9 Teens Changing the World" and *Business Insider's* "Top 15 Prodigies." And Stanford wasn't the only college impressed; according to his Twitter page (@ZiadTheActivist), the cover photo of which shows Ahmed performing—what else?—a TED talk. In the fall he'll be joining Yale's class of 2021.

THE TWITTER HANDLE SAYS IT ALL, REALLY. "ZIAD The Activist" is a brand, and a very successful one so far. Activist for what, exactly? For change, of course. The particular type of change can be tailored to suit the client's needs.

Ziad Ahmed can tell us something about both the contemporary elite university and the political worldview that both simultaneously creates it and emerges from it. First, Ahmed's story shows how the viciously competitive nature of the admissions process breeds ludicrous acts. When scholastic excellence isn't enough, the children of the wealthy found consulting firms and nonprofits and throw whatever else they possibly can at the Yale admissions committee. None of it actually does much of anything, and most of it will probably be abandoned soon after the start of freshman year, but the dance must be performed. After all, you may be competing against a student with *three* TED talks or *four* nonprofits, so you'd better at least have one of each.

This is perverse, of course: one's teenage years should be a time for simply getting to explore and understand the world. Generally, teenagers probably shouldn't be founding consulting firms, not just because *nobody* should found consulting firms, but because teenagers don't actually know anything yet. That's not a slight against them, any more than it is to point out that newborns don't have teeth or that kittens have trouble playing musical instruments. When you're a teenager, you're still working out your place in the world and how it functions (admittedly a lifetime endeavour for all of us, but the teen years are particularly fraught): it's just in your nature. Demanding that teenagers show world-changing brilliance is, except in the rarest of cases, demanding the impossible. This kind of pressure doesn't cause you to get a slew of applicants with unique moral goodness and historic accomplishment, it causes your existing applicants to puff themselves up as much as possible. In fact, there is a direct incentive *not* to actually try to do something worthwhile: the most successful candidates will be those with the most impressive-looking resumes, not those who have most improved the lives of their fellow human beings, so

the rational thing to do is to spend one's time doing nine impressive-sounding but superficial things rather than one less-impressive-sounding but socially helpful thing.

This vicious competitive marketplace now exists at every level of the university. For prospective undergrads, it is a *Hunger Games* scenario—show us how unique you are or you die—that compels kids like Ahmed to come up with ever-new tactics in order to impress. But even PhD-holding candidates looking for tenure-track positions face the dreaded “diversity statement,” which, while ostensibly intended to ensure equal opportunity, ends up as a high-pressure demand for applicants to prove that they are not only *good* for the position, but that they are *special* as well.

In a just world, of course, you could simply study and learn and that would be that. If you wanted to go to college, you would enroll in courses that interested you. To the extent that there was an “application” process, it would exist entirely to ensure that you had the basic capability necessary for participating in the program. Teenagers would be encouraged to spend their time both learning and serving the community, but one's life outcomes wouldn't be contingent on having to prove at the age of 17 that one had learned the *most of anyone* and served the community *more than anybody else*. People's performance would be measured against their individual goals and capacities rather than in some brutal death-match against their peers.

But as a college degree becomes more and more necessary for economic success, and the selective schools become ever more selective, that “just world” slips further and further away. We are approaching the point where it seems laughable and utopian to imagine a university as anything other than an anxiety factory, the function of which is to solely to train future workers for the even more anxiety-inducing competitive struggle they will soon face in the labor market.

LIAD AHMED CAN TELL US ABOUT MORE THAN JUST the nature of the university admissions process, however. He's also a parable about how activism itself has changed. Consider the hashtag application: #BlackLivesMatter, 100 times over. We know that words spoken over and over steadily lose their meanings. Here, #BlackLivesMatter is emptied of all substantive content. It no longer has anything to do with black lives. Instead it is simply a chant: “I am good. Admit me. I am good. Admit me.” #BlackLivesMatter does not mean that black lives matter, it means that I care about the right things and have allied myself with the correct cause. The phrase “virtue signaling” is often erroneously used by the right to trivialize and dismiss people with sincere and principled beliefs. But it's undoubtedly true that when politics is reduced to the display of a hashtag, when one can be an activist without performing any actual *activity*, slogans can become brands rather than demands.

Perhaps one should blame Barack Obama for this. Ahmed's political worldview seems to be part Obama, part Warren Buffett: vacuous civil rights rhetoric plus vacuous “progressive”

corporate rhetoric. Obama was the one who finally sapped the last substantive content from the words “hope” and “change,” and who used racial inclusion as a way of justifying the status quo. Obama was politics as image and iconography rather than power and policy, precisely the sensibility that Ahmed has inherited. Obama's realization was the same one that corporate America had about the counterculture: if you incorporated the *images* of radical politics, without any actual threat to the existing power structure, you could produce a version of progressive politics that Wall Street would love. You could feel like a good person and get rich at the same time.

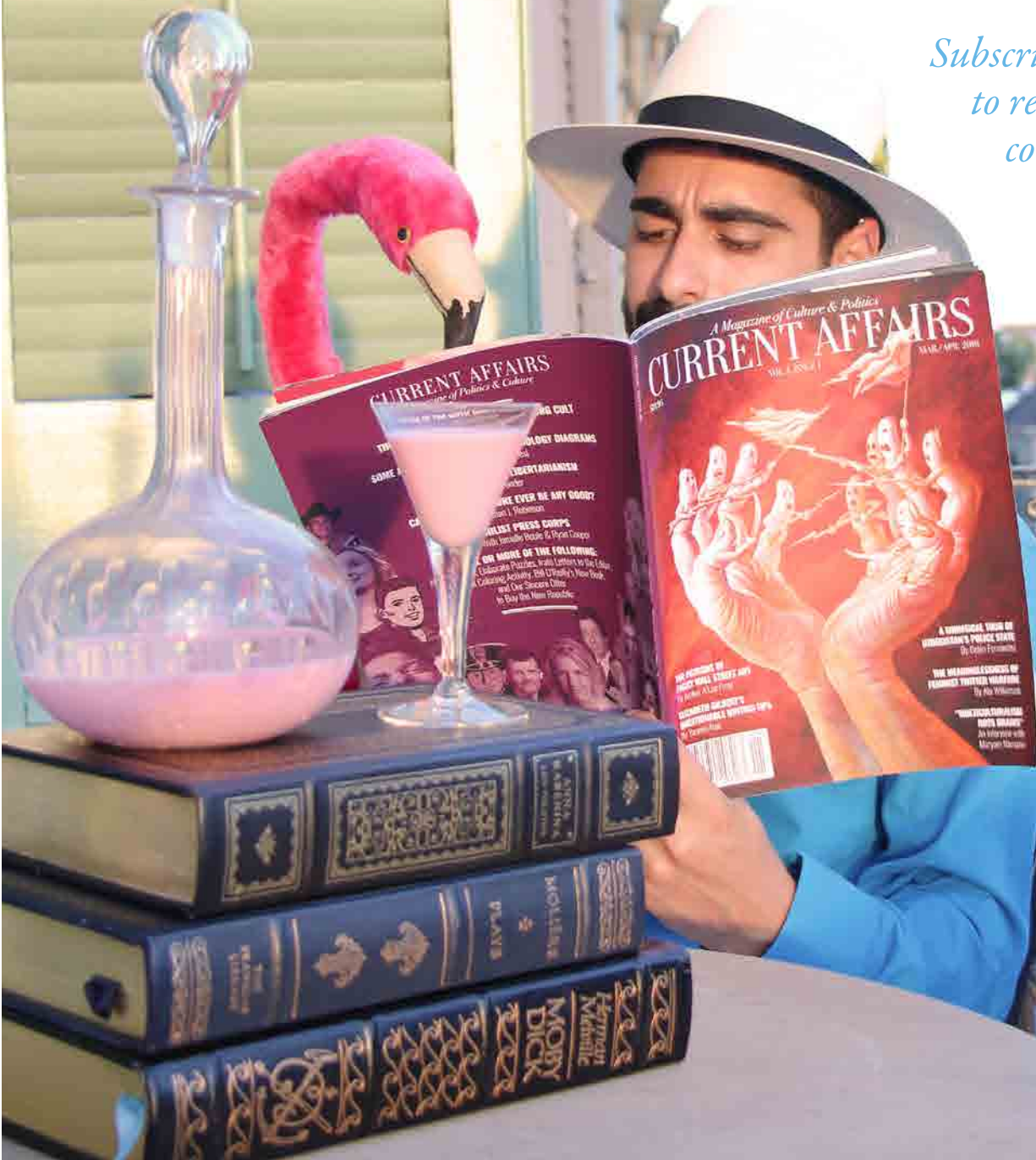
IT'S INTERESTING THAT AHMED FINALLY SETTLED on Yale, of all universities. After all, Yale is the epicenter of American inequality. Situated in high-poverty, mostly black New Haven, it is a gated fortress of the wealthy, funneling the children of the elite into cushy financial jobs. It's also the site of heavy labor conflict, with graduate students recently engaging in a hunger strike amidst a drive for unionization. And it's a place where the legacy of slavery hangs heavy. It took years for Yale to even acknowledge that naming one of its colleges, Calhoun, after an infamous defender of slavery was, in effect, defending his practices and politics (it has recently been renamed). And last year, black Yale janitor Corey Menafee was arrested after smashing a stained glass window depicting happy slaves picking cotton. (Menafee had been fed up with having to look at the window every day while sweeping the floors.)

We might wonder if Ahmed, having entered the belly of the beast, is likely to be radicalized by the sight of all these contradictions. Will he emerge from his four years fighting to bring down the very walls he and his parents spent so many years scaling? I will confess that I gaze upon him with one eyebrow slightly raised. I'm not encouraged by someone who had founded a consulting firm by the age of thirteen, even if the word “activist” is in his Twitter handle and even if MTV is convinced he will change the world. (I am betting the odds are >50% that he will end up working in finance.)

It's hard to blame Ahmed himself, though. He is simply the product of a political logic that has saturated the university. Yes, his use of the hashtag seems exploitative and self-serving. But it's also a product of a type of university that wants the simultaneous demonstration of fealty and individuality, and wants to appear progressive without incurring any possible risk to its existing structure. Yale wants activists, but preferably activists who go to the Aspen Ideas Conference to talk about why black lives matter, rather than activists who actually want to take Yale's money away or disrupt its jobs pipeline. Ahmed is perfect, then: consultant by day, activist by night, friend of Obama, and completely unthreatening. Nobody can accuse the university of backward racial politics: after all, they let in a student who wrote #BlackLivesMatter a hundred times! At the same time, New Haven will still be New Haven and Yale will still be Yale. You might ride the hashtag through the institution's gates, but the question is how to tear them down. ❖

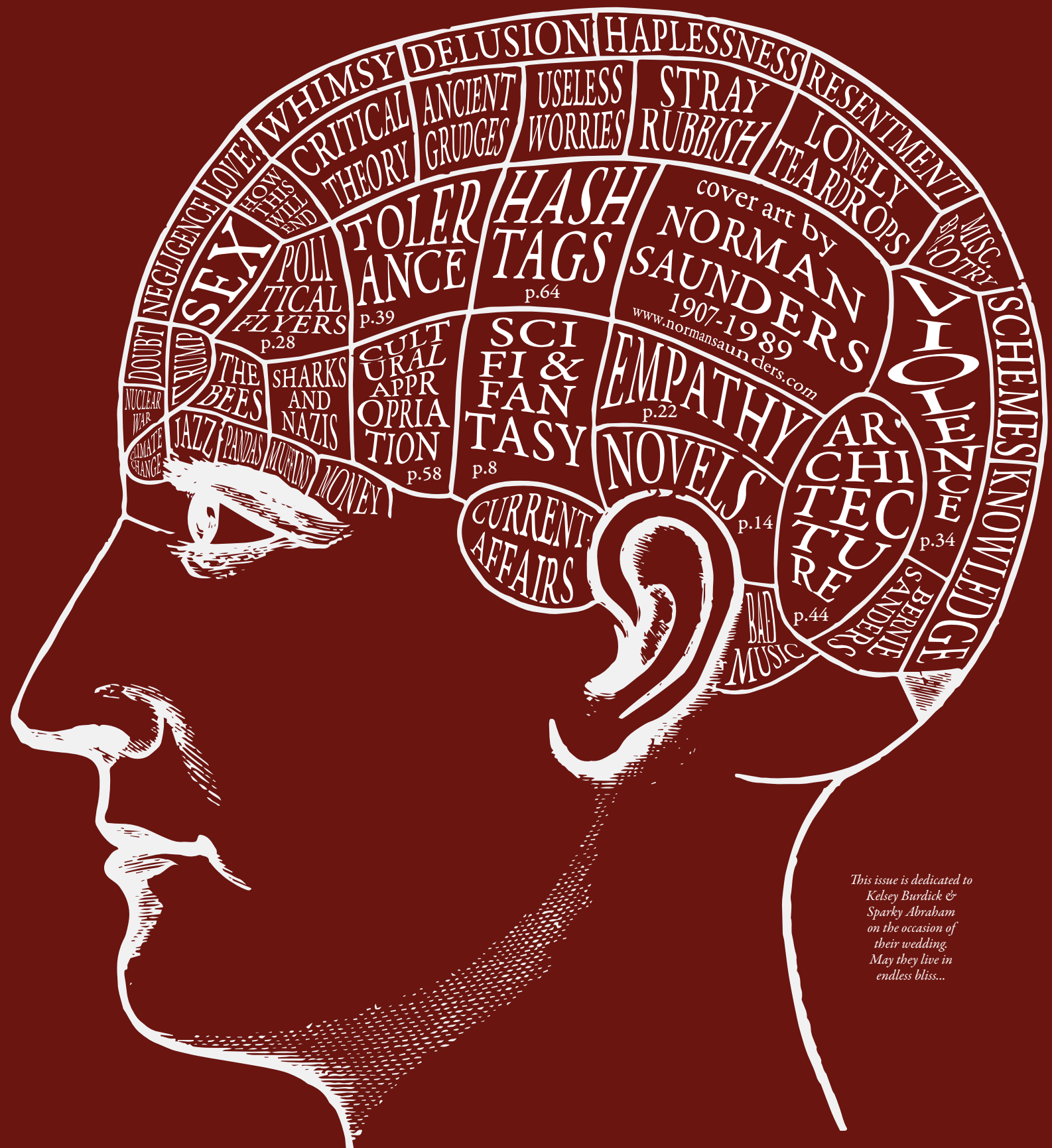
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THE HUMAN MIND

(approximate)



*This issue is dedicated to
Kelsey Burdick &
Sparky Abraham
on the occasion of
their wedding.
May they live in
endless bliss...*