

**SPRING 2015**

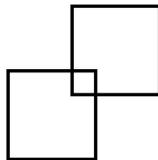
The image features two crumpled aluminum foil cylinders against a solid pink background. One cylinder is positioned vertically on the left side, and the other is positioned vertically on the right side. Both cylinders are heavily crumpled, showing a complex, textured surface with many folds and creases. The lighting is even, highlighting the metallic sheen of the foil.

**COLUMBIA  
JOURNAL OF  
LITERARY  
CRITICISM**

***COLUMBIA JOURNAL  
OF LITERARY CRITICISM***

**VOLUME XIII**

**TASTE**



# LETTER FROM THE EDITORS

What do we mean when we say someone has good taste? Relative to what? To whom? How is taste constructed, how does it circulate, and how does it change? How does taste—in connection with material cultures and economies—regulate and promote certain modes of cultural expression? We had these questions in mind when deciding on ‘Taste’ as the theme for this volume.

To start, we enlisted the work of Pierre Bourdieu, whose landmark book *Distinction* (1979) provided generations of commentators with the means to interrogate questions of class and culture. Bourdieu demonstrated how elites identified themselves by specific tastes in music, art, food, literature—the list goes on. Yet as we discovered in our interview with Shamus Khan, Bourdieu’s word is by no means final; in fact, it might be dated. High and low culture are not so easily distinguishable. New elites, according to Khan, are no longer snobs: they are omnivores, who consume across a cultural landscape in an effort to assert their individuality and obscure the role of their class background in their success.

As Khan suggests, the regimentation of our tastes is far from a thing of the past: today they are more individual, more monitored, and more political than they have ever been. If class informs our tastes more than we might presume, technology compounds this effect. We think our Netflix “taste profile” reflects our inner aesthetic sensibilities. And yet, didn’t we make half of those choices based on Netflix’s helpful suggestions? Aided and abetted by Facebook’s secret formulae, we surround ourselves with people who think the same way, read the same leftist periodicals, and share it all for us to share right back. When someone’s subjectivity can be mapped on a graph, one has to ask—are we no more than the sum of our metadata?

In this vein, Joe Bucciero’s look at the response to Jaden and Willow Smith shows us how the media we consume informs our tastes in advance, even in the “ostensibly anything-goes, democratized world of internet publishing.” Still, what’s at stake in this compartmentalization? Rosa Inocencio Smith takes a look at the advertising strategies of Seamless and Foursquare, who sell a vision where you will never again have to eat food not to your individual taste (or interact with other humans while doing so).

The many options we are offered today—be they in TV, food,

or media—may be personalized, but they aren’t personal. When everything is under surveillance, somewhere lies an ominous digital record even of what we try to keep Incognito: our illegal streaming of *The Bachelor*, our WholeFoods online shopping cart, how far we got through *Capital in the 21st Century* on Kindle—it’s all there. And what’s more, this information is available for a price.

In an age of hypervisibility, where everything is on display, we are simultaneously individuated by our tastes, and indexed into social and political categories. With metadata, who needs a census? Your #JeSuisCharlie tweet may be an individual expression of your convictions, but it is counted, verified and mobilized by larger forces. Today, every choice we make is political. What we wear, what we eat, and what we listen to are all an assortment of totems that prime us for inclusion in some communities as well as exclusion in others.

Our conversation with Partha Chatterjee reveals how these totems are used to marginalize minority communities in India, a nominally secular state. Meanwhile, our interview with Andreas Huyssen examines how museums can serve to valorize certain narratives of identity over others. Elsewhere, Dur e Aziz Amna analyzes the implications of the tastes of two postcolonial protagonists. And Megan Stater looks at how a contemporary taste for “female containment” is linked to violence.

Turning to the literal sense of taste, an interview with a professional sommelier casts some light on how “taste” can be learned. Michael Beam’s analysis of ancient Rome’s most renowned wine demonstrates that taste has always served to distinguish a ruling class; similarly our interview with Kyla Wazana Tompkins focuses on how taste perpetuates class and race divisions in the US. Conversely, Niklas Platzer argues that eating well need not be at the expense of revolutionary activism.

As always, thanks are due to Nicholas Dames, our faculty advisor, and Rosa Inocencio Smith, whom we couldn’t do without. We hope you find the issue to your taste.

Ian Trueger and Hallie Nell Swanson  
Editors-in-Chief

# **CJLC**

**XIII**

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# ADVERTISING LONELINESS: Seamless, Foursquare, and New Appeal of Urban Isolation

By Rosa Inocencio Smith



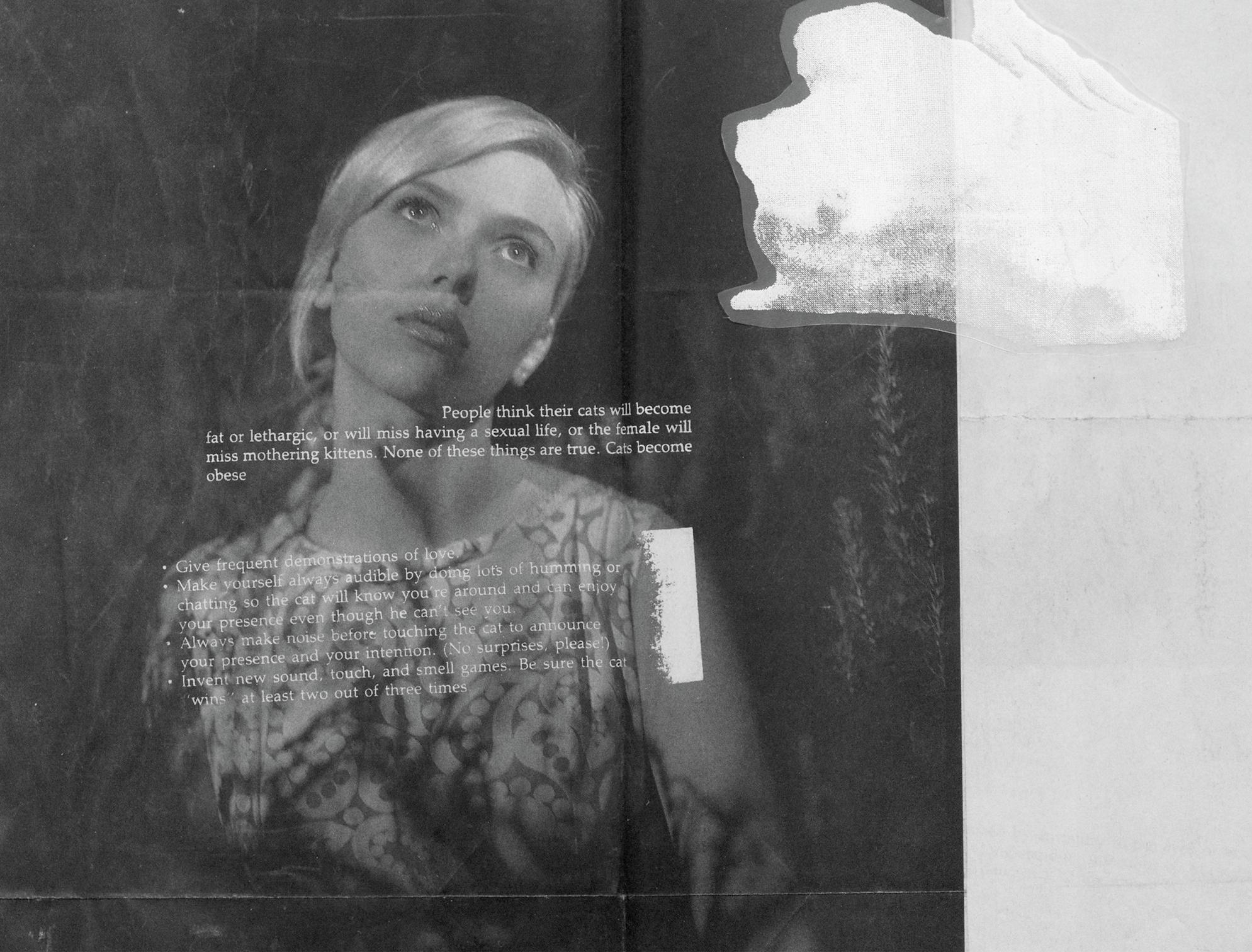
Zipcar wants, with original emphasis, to be “the official vehicle of ‘get your stuff OUT OF MY APARTMENT.’” What a strange aspiration for one’s product: to be the emblem and vector of loss. You too, the car-sharing company promises, may need us one day—may be like this sad, greasy-haired and clean-shirted young man, in an armchair forlorn on the pavement. You too may find your electric guitar sailing out of the window, flung by your girlfriend, your shirts on the railing, your shoes on the sidewalk, your TV smashed and your lampshade upended—and this, when it happens, will be one of those times when “you just need a car.” To this, Zipcar says: We embrace you. We will be waiting when everything falls. In the ad where the man sits, his head in his hand, in an old chair in front of a storage unit, the back of a Zipvan looms white from the side of the frame, half in and half out of the picture. It’s pointed to drive away. And it dwarfs the man and his boxes. His place at the center of the image only spotlights his insignificance. You don’t want to be him. And yet you really want to drive that car.

Among the “six important types of brand-building feelings” that Kevin Lane Keller lists in the SAGE Handbook of Advertising—warmth, fun, excitement, security, social approval, and self-respect<sup>1</sup>—a sense of lonely, guilty humiliation is nowhere implied. This man on the curb, whose relationship is over (he’s getting kicked out; it was probably his fault) is a version of ourselves we’d prefer to forget. Yet Zipcar not only reminds us of our loneliness, but latches on to that feeling, converting it into something to feel good about: a selling point, a joke. This cheerful pessimism (not to call it callousness) about human relationships is in line with contemporary video ads streaming online and on air for brands like T-Mobile and Kotex, which compare viewers’ use of a product—a phone, a data service, a tampon—to a romantic relationship, and encourage them to “break up.” In one of these, following the release of the iPhone 6, the voice of a man’s iPhone 5 pleaded with him not to leave her all the way to the Verizon store.

But there’s something special about the subway ad, aimed at a squashed,

trapped, exhausted audience in New York, where roughly a million people live alone.<sup>2</sup> Zipcar, Seamless, and the personal search engine app Foursquare are part of a recent spate of tech companies promoting themselves with what AdWeek calls “old-school” out-of-home ads<sup>3</sup>—and using the unlikely feeling of loneliness to do it. The campaigns play on the urban commuter’s experience of isolation within a crowd, propelling their messages by force of the viewers’ own frustration. Traditional emotion-based advertising, researchers write, works by offering viewers transcendence, seeking to “propel the features of the product into an inspired madness,” or “transport the recipient into a world of imagination.”<sup>4</sup> These new ads, in contrast, ground themselves in recognizable reality—even a reality that isn’t wholly appealing. “The real world is not perfect,” photographer Ty Milford, who shot Zipcar’s 2013 campaign, told the Photo District News. Explaining his “spontaneous,” Instagram-inspired aesthetic, he added, “I want to see some flaws that just help the viewer, even subconsciously, feel like the imagery is real.”<sup>5</sup>

It’s in this vein that Seamless, the food delivery service, presents you with the following: You are single and childless, and live alone with an oven that you use mainly for storage in a seventh-floor walkup that makes even the thought of leaving the apartment to buy food exhausting. Most of your interactions take place over technology: friends are those people you delete “after their 529th invite to Candy Crush,” or who gave “your post about ordering at 4 a.m. . . . more likes than your relationship status change.” You often desire, when “your friend calls and you know they’re gonna be dramatic for hours,” to get food delivered, so you’ll have something to do while pretending to listen. Indeed, your “favorite part of having a smartphone is never having to talk to anyone.” Sex is more about outcome than intimacy, and you have no steady partner, but at least, thanks to Seamless, “you’ve perfected the art of getting to third base faster: Food Delivery Date Night.” Food is what’s real in your life, what is sensual, the only physical constant. You are lonely, longing, hungry. It is time to order takeout.



People think their cats will become fat or lethargic, or will miss having a sexual life, or the female will miss mothering kittens. None of these things are true. Cats become obese

- Give frequent demonstrations of love.
- Make yourself always audible by doing lots of humming or chatting so the cat will know you're around and can enjoy your presence even though he can't see you.
- Always make noise before touching the cat to announce your presence and your intention. (No surprises, please!)
- Invent new sound, touch, and smell games. Be sure the cat "wins" at least two out of three times

**KT LEE**

## NOBODY SEES ME

Often the protagonists of Zipcar ads are faceless. The "Sometimes you just need a car" campaign features people obscured by their objects: a woman at a bus shelter whose torso and head are a pile of gift boxes, two men with their heads stuck inside a canoe, a woman whose face is half covered by the twelve-pack of toilet paper Zipcar enables her to carry. Then there's the picture captioned "No booty call shall go unanswered": A couple embraces in the front seat of a car, his hand passionately clutching her headrest. The glare of the sun on the windshield obscures their faces, making their twined bodies shadowy and vague. You could call this romance. It could almost use some cozy, corny caption: "Every kiss begins with Kay."

But Zipcar opts instead for the jaded and unsentimental. These are booty calls, not lovers; anonymous bodies, not faces. And as they rise from the walls of subway cars and float over the heads of commuters, as you stand packed between bodies of strangers and stare at them to avoid human eyes, they make perfect sense. Zipcar's faceless ambassadors play on the discomforts of public spaces, striking a chord between the desire to be less anonymous and the desire to be more invisible. Imagine taking the train home with your excess of toilet paper, or the morning after your booty call—all eyes on your bed hair and purpling hickeys, dropping personal hygiene products on people's feet. It won't do. The car enables you to be both faceless and comfortable, safely contained in a metal shell with the things you do not want others to see.

Seamless takes a slightly different

tack, presuming a degree of isolation to start with. It's what's inside your shell that these ads expose, in a series of half-proud, half-self-deprecating descriptions of social isolation. "Your friends in the Midwest share photos of their kids. You share photos of dinner," boasts one banner, a pulled pork sandwich and a tray of macaroni sliding haphazardly out of the frame as if caught in a candid snapshot. "You know the food delivery guy's name, but can't name one neighbor," announces another, presenting a salad. Seamless ads never show photos of people; it would be, perhaps, too embarrassing to attach a face to these feelings and a witness to their acknowledgement. Instead, they pair solid backgrounds with apparently random shots of food, a no-frills aesthetic that manages, in its blunt anonymity, to enact a private confrontation. Do you see yourself in this white lettering, this blue industrial-carpet background? In the pad thai and the pot stickers, have you found what you're looking for?

When you can't name one of your neighbors, this recognition is important. It's a sign that someone (imagine the face yourself) understands you, knows who you are. And Seamless is highly successful in positioning itself and its products as a kind of surrogate for the affection consumers can't get from anyone real. Consider the delivery guy, a recurring figure in Seamless ads: he seems to be the only person to whom the Seamlesser feels any connection. You know his name, after all, when you don't know any of your neighbors'; in one ad, you even share a secret handshake. A rare first-person headline says it all: "I'm sorry I can't be your Valentine, I'm in a healthy relationship with my de-

livery guy." While the jokes hinge, rather troublingly, on the presumed absurdity of attaching a full human identity to a person who shows up to serve you, the surrogacy works: the delivery guy becomes the faceless face of the products providing you comfort. The jokes also present the Seamless life and the social life as binary opposites, which, in the Valentine ad, works out surprisingly in loneliness' favor—the day-in, day-out routine of solitary dinners is actually better than love.

### NOBODY LIKES ME

In their 2008 book *Loneliness: Human Nature and the Need for Social Connection*, John T. Cacioppo and William Patrick argue that loneliness—social pain, in other words—is an evolutionary alarm system, designed to protect human well-being just like hunger or thirst or the pain of a burn.<sup>6</sup> Cacioppo's past research, with Richard E. Petty, focused on persuasion, and his Elaboration Likelihood Model of changing attitudes has been highly influential in advertising since the mid-1980s.<sup>7</sup> His more recent work finds that loneliness is often self-perpetuating: "when we are lonely, the social expectations and snap judgments we create are generally pessimistic ... Once this negative feedback loop starts rumbling through our lives, others may start to view us less favorably because of our self-protective, sometimes distant, sometimes caustic behavior."<sup>8</sup> The more you need to be around other people, the more irritating you find them—and vice versa.

Thus it is that Seamless has progressed over its past few subway ad campaigns from deadpan, aw-shucksy

self-deprecation to a brazen fuck-the-haters attitude that's only half ironic. "You avoid eye contact with strangers, but you'll read your credit card to one?" challenges one bright red poster, while another states, "You never call restaurants because the only person you ever wanna talk to is Siri." From the same campaign comes "Skip the hold times and reserve your frustration for manspreading," addressing strangers' obnoxious use of both personal time and public space. That humble Midwesterner with the highly procreative friends back in his hometown has grown up a little, slimmed down his lettering, lost his cutesy NY♥. He now approaches calling restaurants the way he approaches tourists, which is by marching behind them, presumably gnashing his teeth, and chanting, "Serenity now!" The lonely are very easily irritated. Studies show that they're also less logical<sup>9</sup>—which means that if you strike their pessimistic moods just right, they're easier to persuade. No, they can't handle ten more minutes in public; they need dinner delivered immediately. They will any minute be kicked out by their girlfriends, and when it happens, they'll

just need a car.

"This is the Age of Loneliness," writes critic George Monbiot in *The Guardian*. "Structural changes have been accompanied by a life-denying ideology, which enforces and celebrates our social isolation. The war of man against every man—competition and individualism, in other words—is the religion of our time, justified by a mythology of loner rangers, sole traders, self-starters, self-made men and women, going it alone."<sup>10</sup> Indeed, there's a touch of callousness in Seamless' rejection of human contact; at times the ads read like an antisocial manifesto. But the ideal Seamlesser is less guilty of denying life than of giving up on it. Communication is hopeless in the world of these ads: the assumption that underlies every slogan, from "Serenity now!" to "If you wanted to repeat yourself, you'd have called your mom," is that the simplest of utterances, a food order, can never be communicated without misunderstandings. You will never be heard from the midst of the crowd, from the end of the phone line: better stop talking. A more controlled, complete isolation will be much more convenient.

Kobe steaks ✓

Art museums ✓

Duck a l'orange ✓

Kale shakes ✓

Art house films ✓

Orange bitters ✓



The new Foursquare learns what you like and leads you to places you'll love.

**FOURSQUARE**

FIND YOUR PLACE



### NOBODY UNDERSTANDS ME

Foursquare, for its part, is more ambivalent about hopes for social connection. The company, which began as a way of checking in with friends at restaurants and other locations, recently relegated this job to an app called Swarm and isolated its personalized search function, reinventing itself as the service that “learns what you like and leads you to places you’ll love.”<sup>11</sup> This app’s first advertising campaign hit subways in October 2014<sup>12</sup> with photographs of pairs of people in public spaces, personal checklists of their tastes floating in pink bubbles over their heads. In one of these, two men sit side by side at a shoeshine stand, engaged in conversation. Though their clothes and ages mark them as strangers—how often does a young hipster go out with an elderly aesthete?—their postures mirror each other; leaning forward with knees spread and shoes planted firmly, they seem to be trying to find common ground. Their two pairs of shoes even match. They are close to making some kind of connection. Yet their hands, raised in nearly identical gestures, are pointing in different directions, and as the search terms above them show, they don’t have that much to talk about. It’s kale shakes versus kobe steaks, art house films versus art museums, orange bitters versus duck a l’orange. The means of communication they hold—a smartphone and a newspaper—belong to two different eras; they might as well be speaking two different languages. Neither can know what the other is looking for.

That’s the only image of the campaign’s four that shows an attempt at connection. The others merely show

strangers: two women (toffee versus tofu) with their backs turned to one another, each one engaged in her own thoughts as they pass in a park without looking. Two transit passengers (chili cheese fries versus Chilean sea bass) face forward, blank-faced and uncomfortably close; his football face paint matches the colors of her makeup, though neither of them can see it. Even the two women, apparently identical twin sisters, sharing a taxi have nothing in common: as one of them giggles at something outside the frame (expect this of a girl who likes jukeboxes), the other (she likes DJs) gives a slight roll of her eyes, smiling tolerantly. “Everyone’s tastes are different,” reads Foursquare’s website. “So why should we get the same search results?” You say martinis, I say margaritas. Let’s call the whole thing off.

Cacioppo and Patrick write in *Loneliness* that “the role of subjective meaning in our sense of social connection is not all that different from the role of individualized, personal meaning in other aspects of our lives.”<sup>13</sup> Surrounding yourself with people who don’t quite understand you, they explain, is like filling your bedroom with fake trophies: it doesn’t make you feel any better, even though it looks like it should. Whether it’s food, or friends, or bedroom décor, “if there is no deep, emotional resonance—specifically for you—then none of these relationships will satisfy the hunger for connection or ease the pain of feeling isolated.”<sup>14</sup> You need a space to be made in the world especially for you, and when someone fails to understand you—when the name on your coffee cup is spelled wrong, when

everything on the menu has gluten, when you ask to hold the onions and the onions come piled on anyway—you feel each small instance of indifference as a stinging denial of the self. This isn't just frustrated desire; it's the absence of your choice among apparently infinite choices, the sudden understanding that although this restaurant, this city, has options for everyone, it cannot accommodate you. This is what motivates Foursquare's personalized search, what drives Seamless' obsessive vigilance against misheard food orders. They are there for you, serving you, claiming your right to exist with all your desires.

Yet the terror of individual taste also works in the other direction. The more specialized, the more personalized your identity becomes, the more impossible it seems to connect that identity with anyone else's—to reconcile a particular hunger for pickles and toffee and frozen yogurt with a hunger for companionship. That's the point, after all—that not even the landscape looks the same to Foursquare users—that the same space is mapped out differently for different people. No one else, you begin to realize, will ever value just what you value. And this, too, is painfully isolating—for as loneliness documents, the need to know that others recognize you as an individual is complemented by the need to see yourself as a member of a group. Seamless ads play on this: they create, or imply, a community of the antisocial, activating a sense of isolation at the same time as they normalize it. Perhaps it's worth noting here that Cacioppo and Patrick cite a study, led by psychologist Roy Baumeister, that supports a connection between eating and loneliness: Participants told they must work alone

because no one else wanted to work with them ate twice as many cookies as those told they must work alone because they were just too popular.<sup>15</sup> And then subway commuters, reminded that they had takeout where their peers had children, were presented with a picture of a pulled pork sandwich. We understand: you're impossible, states Seamless. Have some food, and feel better.

\*\*\*

Why can't isolation be freedom? We can survive without others' agreement. We can self-suffice with our personal search engines; we can subsist without needing to speak. Intimate friends and lovers burden us with their tacky restaurants and strange pizza toppings, their bad music, their expensive insistence on splitting a cab when we're pretty sure we can walk. Their problems and their politics, their pain-in-the-ass TV shows, their eventual rejection when they find we aren't enough. You don't need this obstruction, this compromise, these confining limitations. You will find more adventures—adventures more to your taste—by striking out on your own.

Therefore Foursquare, with its premise and promise of a city mapped out as if made for you only. Therefore Seamless' banners, blank except for a secret thought and a promised meal. Therefore these ads: safe and selfish in the shell of your own loneliness, you are free to want and free to pursue without compromise or shame. In "Leaving the Movie Theater," Roland Barthes writes of the "darkness of the cinema (anonymous, populated, numerous)" and it sounds like the darkness of underground tunnels, crowded with isolated minds:

"It is in this urban dark that the body's freedom is generated; this invisible work of possible affects emerges from a veritable cinematographic cocoon; the movie spectator could easily appropriate the silkworm's motto: ... it is because I am enclosed that I work and glow with all my desire."<sup>16</sup>

Zipcar offers this: "Wheels when you want to get away from your roommate." Zipcar says: "Low commitment will get you everywhere." Zipcar promises, in a heart made of car silhouettes, "It's not your first and it won't be your last," and there is comfort in this statement of insignificance, in this promise of endings to come. You, enclosed in the car that you need only borrow (pay by the hour, as for certain hotel rooms) will move unscathed through worlds of importunate connection, unburdened by love or by loss. Your isolation will become an asset. Anonymity will be your trademark. And when you are most alone—don't you long to break all your connections?—is when you will be most powerful, most mobile, most self-contained.

And so we return to the man in the chair on the curb. He faces away from the camera. He is passive and powerless, sitting alone, but soon he may leap into action. Soon he may jump into the giant van and leave all his belongings behind. He will be safe, behind that opaque white, and none will see his loneliness; in a vehicle with room for all of his problems, he'll multiply in strength and size. Thus the power of the Zipcar ad turns on what cars and loneliness have in common. Both of them can envelop you, set you apart. But the car can take you away.

*Rosa Inocencio Smith is a senior at Columbia University. She is an English major and the 2015 winner of Columbia's Brownstein Prize for creative writing. After graduation, she will be working in New York City as a Social Media Fellow for TheAtlantic.com. She is the CJLC 2015 MVP.*

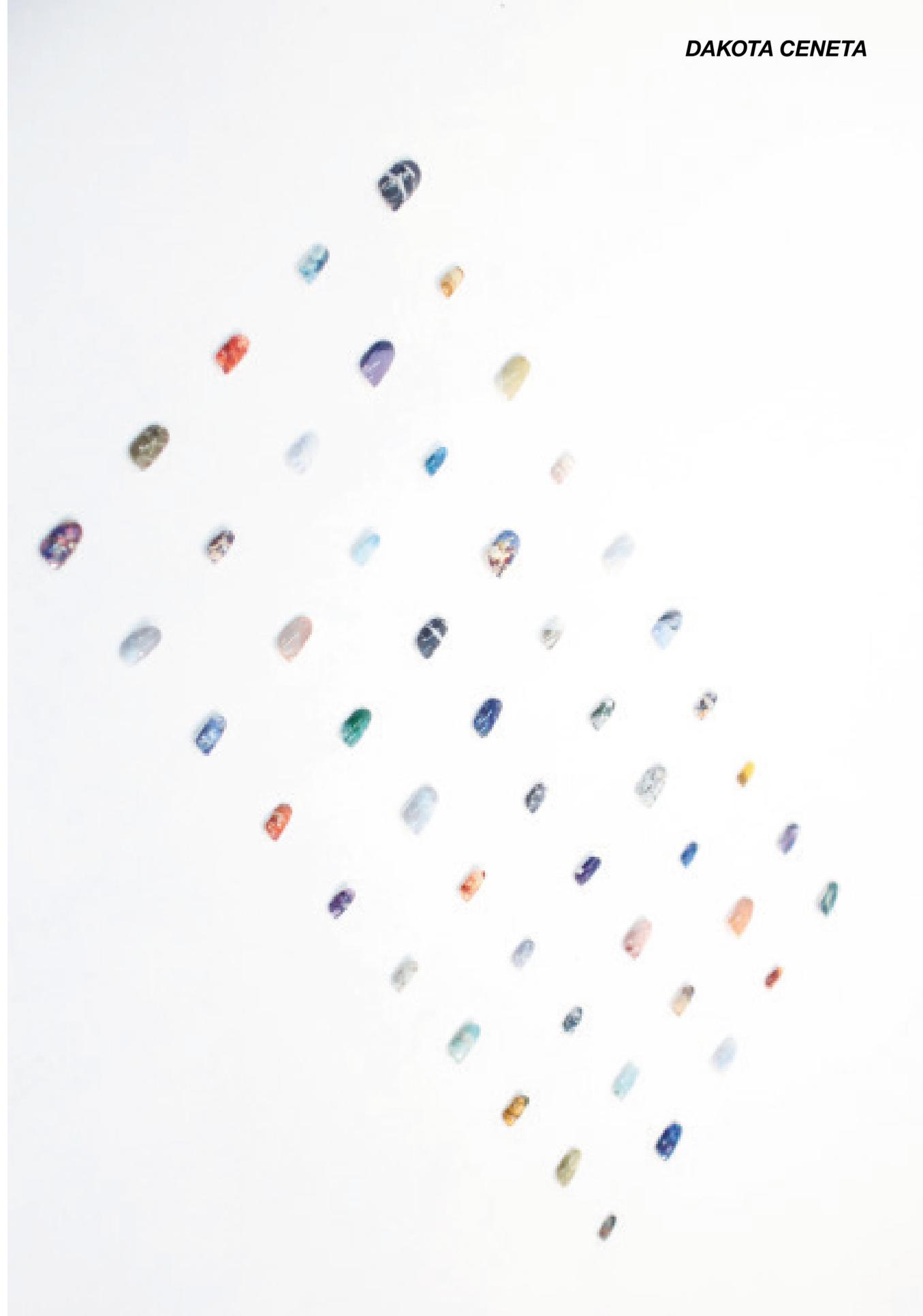
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Images:

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# OMNIVORES AND INEQUALITY: *An Interview with Shamus Khan*

By Ian Trueger

*Shamus Khan is an associate professor of sociology at Columbia University. His work focuses primarily on cultural sociology and stratification, with a particular focus on elites. Khan is an alumnus and former faculty member of the prestigious St. Paul's School in New Hampshire, which serves as the subject of his book *Privilege*. The *Columbia Journal of Literary Criticism* sat down with Khan to discuss his book, cultural omnivores and their tastes, as well as the concept of ethical capitalism.*

**CJLC** How do you conceive of privilege?

**SHAMUS KHAN** So in the book [*Privilege*], the idea of privilege is a little different from how it might be understood colloquially. For me, the idea of privilege is a shift in the logic of the elite: to think of oneself and one's advantages as a product of what you do, and not of the institutions that you belong to, your family connections, or the amount of money your family might have. So in this sense, I try to juxtapose a logic of entitlement, which I think of as an old elite logic tied to class position, with a logic of privilege, which is the idea that we are each the engines of our own achievement. And in many ways I think of this logic of privilege as a total fiction. The logic of entitlement is in some ways a little bit more honest as a logic of how it is that people acquire their positions.

# I think it's important to note that *meritocracy* is a form of *social engineering*.

**CJLC:** How did inequality become the focal point of your research?

**SK:** There are two things really at the core of this. Firstly, what we saw from, say, the 1970s to today was that the position of the middle class and the poor wasn't really changing much, but the position of the elite was changing a lot. As a person who was studying inequality, that made me really interested in the role of elites in the reproduction of inequality. And secondly, I thought that when we conceptualize inequality on a theoretical level, we are usually thinking about it relationally. But as much as we gave lip service to the idea of inequality as a relational concept, we actually didn't study one side of the relationship very systematically. That is, we didn't study elites.

**CJLC:** In your book, you talk about "the triumph of individual man and the death of collective politics", where we increasingly view one's economic position as determined by one's character, as opposed to one's class. To what extent can your work be seen as a sustained

critique of the language of liberalism?

**SK:** It is a kind of indictment of liberalism, or certain aspects of liberalism. While on the one hand it can be quite healthy to believe that what you do matters, on the other hand, this can often lead to blaming the attributes of people who are less advantaged than you, rather than explaining their position relative to the same sense of inheritances that you have, only inverted.

Not everyone at Columbia University is rich. About half of them are. Even if you think that the average financial aid package at Columbia is around 35,000 dollars a year, more than half the people who are on financial aid are able to pay 30,000 dollars a year. That's more than almost half of Americans' total post-tax income. Many people on financial aid are probably in the top ten percent of families. Maybe half or a quarter of the people at Columbia come from poorer families. I think one of the ways to think about this is that the amount of money that people have invested in them is actually staggering. The average kid from a wealthy family has probably had ten

# And we should recognize it and articulate it as such.

times more invested in them before they get to Columbia. And the curiosity is not how amazing they are. It's actually that they are not better.

**CJLC:** Your work is very much focused on the United States. Is this geographically confined at all when we're talking about inequality, insofar as productive capital - the source of a lot of this inequality - traverses national borders?

**SK:** The global circulation of capital is really important to this overall story, but I think it's massively overplayed as a way to suggest the inevitability of the process. It's not as if we didn't have huge flows of capital between empires throughout the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries. Who was New York's top trading partner in the 1790s? China. So to me, the argument about global capital is kind of a cop out. In many ways political choices are what's driving this process, and I think we need to be more honest about these choices. A little bit of the weakness of the thinking of the Left is the commitment to the Marxian ideal

that the economy is always the dominant, driving force and that everything else is epiphenomenal, when in many ways there is an enormous political machine that is behind the production of this inequality.

**CJLC:** You seem to suggest that the rhetoric of meritocracy is a part and parcel of this political machine. The Conservative government in the UK is particularly fond of the term meritocracy. Is there a productive comparison to be drawn between elites in both countries?

**SK:** The fascinating thing about the Cameron government and its use of meritocracy is to just ask how many people in the cabinet went to Eton. Almost to a man—and they're mostly men—everyone in the cabinet went there. The question would be: if the world were such a meritocracy, how likely would it be that the cabinet of Britain would be all from one school?

Meritocracy is not a terrible idea, but it's important to realize its origins. It

does not emerge out of a beautiful ideal, but instead from a British education Labor minister [Michael Young, 1915-2002] who coined the phrase meritocracy in a dystopian novel to suggest the collapse of a political society, not its triumph. I think it's important to note that meritocracy is a form of social engineering. And we should recognize it and articulate it as such. Think about the metrics of meritocracy today that we deploy here in the United States. When we evaluate the SAT, one of our great meritocratic tools, we find that it is actually a terrible indicator of performance in college. We need to be critical of these modes of engineering that we think are creating fairness, but instead create systems of organization in which only certain people can invest in advantaging themselves. If you ever took an SAT prep test, it should become immediately clear to you that it's not an aptitude test. If I can pay someone to help me improve my score, it's not aptitude; it's something else.

**CJLC:** You talk about a dearth of class rhetoric in the US. In the UK, public discourse is saturated in class rhetoric, although it's also strangely naturalized. As soon as you open your mouth, you are indexed along class lines...

**SK:** I make this argument about race in the US. As much as people pretend to be race blind, in the moment of an interaction, people are acutely aware of the race of the person they are interacting with. In Britain, I think class works in a similar way. As a total aside, my brother runs the largest race equality think tank in Britain, and for him, even having race be recognized as a thing in Britain is an enormous challenge, but by contrast class dynamics are incredibly transparent to people.

**CJLC:** You also express concern in your book that race might go the way of class, that it might continue to be an enduring source of inequality but cease to have any traction in political discourse...

**SK:** Before Ferguson, I think that was really a concern. The recent problems with policing have made race a more acute question. But the broader aspects of race and its relationship to class and inequality have not been as present in these conversations. Everybody cares about what is happening with these communities when it comes to policing. We don't have as much discussion about why the average black family makes about 75 percent less than the average white family.

**CJLC:** Bourdieu's work *Distinction* framed the basis of your inquiry. I am wondering where his framework proved insufficient, especially in regards to your examination of how elites mobilize cultural capital as 'cultural egalitarians.'

**SK:** There are two ways to read my relationship to Bourdieu. One is that Bourdieu is wrong. The other is Bourdieu is right, but things just work differently in the US than in France. The first person you meet in the book [*Privilege*] represents what Bourdieu thinks should happen. Chase Abbot is a wealthy guy whose family all went to St Paul's and elite private schools. Bourdieu's argument is that people who have the right lineage and legacy develop a set of habits and skills which match the expectations of the institution, and that allows them to have a pathway to success. Chase Abbot is the perfect representation of this. He is part of the fabric of elite America. I start with him because he's failing at St Paul's. And I use that to ask what's working and not working with Bourdieu's explanation of the social reproduction of elites. And a lot of what I point to is that there is a certain group of elites, an old school group, who thinks that their family inheritance really should matter. And

it's not that they're wrong. It's that they make that transparent.

**CJLC:** So it's how they negotiate it.

**SK:** It's how they negotiate it. They get rejected, suppressed for that kind of entitlement. Instead, what they are disciplined into doing is acting as if they earned it, as if their family didn't matter. So a lot of what's happening among the upper classes today is this extreme attempt to make their class background invisible. You see this this refrain about the Silicon Valley guys who wear jeans and black t-shirts all the time. This is a project of making it seem as if the investments that were made in you as a kid didn't matter. Even the way in which we talk about how, "Well, it doesn't matter if you go to college, it matters how hard you work, look at Bill Gates, look at Mark Zuckerberg." Well, where did Zuckerberg go to high school? Exeter—one of three major league boarding schools in the country. Bill Gates' father was a CEO of a major bank in Seattle. That these guys started from nothing, and actually acquired their position is utter fantasy. They are a representation of the ways in which advantage can and does reproduce advantage, and can do so on a monumental scale.

**Why does Columbia have a 50-50 gender ratio? Probably because huge numbers of men are given preferential treatment in terms of admissions over women. Women are actually more highly qualified as a pool. This creates a gendered dynamic, where men can be a little bit more ambivalent about their orientation to all kinds of things because they get rewarded for being less good.**



**ALEX PABARCIUS**

**CJLC:** In your discussion of inequality, there is a lot imagery associated with food. For instance, you use the term omnivores in your book. Where is food implicated in the kind of cultural egalitarianism you're talking about?

**SK:** The omnivore term isn't mine. I've adapted it from Richard Peterson, who looks at how it is that elites at one point were sort of snobs, that there were certain sets of things collected together that defined elite taste that were fairly small: classical music, opera, very particular kinds of plays—not musicals—Shakespeare, Ibsen, things like that. By contrast, omnivores select from a cultural buffet. They are using their own interests to select from a variety of cultural objects that they can then consume.

The omnivorousness argument is often taken as, "elites eat a wide variety of things." But as it turns out they don't. They may really like Chinese food, but not shitty Chinese delivery. We are talking about the explosion of Xian Famous foods, which just opened near us, which is seen as authentic—hand pulled noodles which have a kind of specialty character to it. And this is what we see when we look at the 'omnivore' - they're not listening to all country music, they're listening to Hank Williams, Patsy Cline, some Johnny Cash. Expanding beyond that into contemporary country, that's really pushing it. It's still actually highly defined in terms of what the acceptable form of that consumption is, but it appears as if elites are selecting within a flat world of availability.

**CJLC:** And do you think that is because they've been *given* the ability to cultivate these tastes—an interest in the noodles

they are eating, the Patsy Cline album they are listening to? What's the relationship between structure and agency here?

**SK:** Ability and desirability. One, you are given exposure to a lot of things. Two, you are given positive feedback for choosing in some ways versus others. People are making choices within a structure or patterned set of constraints. As soon as the constraint operation enters into the dimension of choice, the idea of choice doesn't actually operate on the level of an explanation in the way that you think it does. Because people aren't actually choosing from within everything, they are actually choosing from within something that is slightly predetermined. And that predetermination means that the model of action is neither pure structure nor pure agency. It's actually something in between; a kind of interplay. If you only chose to listen to one kind of music, you would be mocked for being a kind of one trick pony, close minded. This rhetorical framework helps to construct an idea that what people are doing is making a set of individual choices that are driving their position. It actually helps serve the function of privilege.

**CJLC:** In your book you talk about how privilege is manifested differently along lines of race and gender at St

Paul's. What does this mean in the real world?

**SK:** So you can look at this on a structural level, or the individual level. On the large structural level, how do we see gender operating? Why does Columbia have a 50-50 gender ratio? Probably because huge numbers of men are given preferential treatment in terms of admissions over women. Women are actually more highly qualified as a pool. This creates a gendered dynamic, where men can be a little bit more ambivalent about their orientation to all kinds of things because they get rewarded for being less good.

A big curiosity for all kinds of people who are interested in education is: how and why is it that women far outperform men in the aggregate at every level of an educational institution but don't make more money? In terms of my own argument, the basic idea is that minority students and women are constantly confronting these disconnects between the rhetoric about the way in which the world works—meritocracy, hard work, performance, etc.—, and the material consequences for themselves. And managing that set of contradictions on a psychic level is probably fairly interesting, but on an interactive level, it makes it harder to embody this kind of ambivalent ease that characterizes elites and

is the driving force of a lot of elite outcomes. It creates different capacities in men and women, whites and nonwhites, to most skillfully embody the characters of a really successful student.

**CJLC:** And this ambivalent ease looked different when you were at St. Paul's?

**SK:** It looked a little different. I begin by describing how when I was there, there was a minority student dorm at St Paul's. The first sentence of the book, "I'm surrounded by black and Latino boys," is meant to be very jarring because the reader is learning about elites. As a young student entering the school at the age of fourteen, it wasn't what I expected. But being placed into this dorm had a huge impact on my overall experience at the institution, and when I returned it didn't exist anymore. The kind of explicit racial dominance that was central to my experience at the school was no longer present, and that is an important transformation.

I think that we see that here at Columbia here too. The massive racial transformation at Columbia is not window dressing, it's a kind of intentional inauguration of diversity in the fabric of the institution. And that's actually really important, in terms of people's experiences. Now I'm not suggesting here that I would rather go back to the incredibly

racially homogenous Columbia of the 1960s, but I am saying that we need to confront the fact that this new diversity actually provides an experiential basis for the idea that we're part of a pure meritocracy and that everybody who got here earned it. It provides a false sense that you've entered into a place where, if you're just willing to compete along those dimensions, you'll find that it doesn't matter who you are, a wide variety of people who are the best rise to the top. The implication is that people who didn't get here must have been doing something wrong.

**CJLC:** Is ethical capitalism a contradiction in terms?

**SK:** It's very hard to answer that. Let me be clear as to why. There is no capitalism. There are capitalisms. Capitalism is an economic form that's actually quite multiple. In many ways, capitalism as an epoch is a useful way to describe something that is a little bit different than previous economic forms, but at the same time, subsumed under this very large category, are very different pathways. Here is where cross-national comparisons can be incredibly helpful. We could also look historically and say that American capitalism in the 1960s was a very different beast than it is today. That suggests that absolutely things could be

quite different. The Left suffer under a little bit of this Marxist haze, of the necessary and determined development of the form of capitalism against which there is nothing one can do. And I think that it's not determined. There are tremendous advantages to capitalism, that actually could be celebrated.

There are also tremendous harms inherent capitalism that should be addressed. The result could mean that you have a kind of gentler capitalism, or it could mean that—if we're more careful in our description—that what we are characterizing as capitalism is multiple different things and we should inhabit that multiplicity and think about which is the one that we think of as being the most desirable. It's not just an economic form, there are social and political dimensions of our present that are intimately tied to the economic and help produce it but aren't determined by it. Just operating on that one level of analysis—the economic—can also do an enormous amount of harm to our capacity to imagine alternative futures.

*Ian Trueger is a junior at Columbia University who is majoring in History and Middle Eastern and South Asian Studies, or some combination of the above, or neither. Give him the summer to think it over.*



“David, there’s nothing strange about the backyard.”



“Oh but honey, I don’t know where it came from.”



**DAKOTA CENETA & SAM WILLIGER**

## **FEMALE CONTAINMENT: Synthesizing Anicka Yi's 'You Can Call Me F'**

**By Megan Stater**

*“So every day, I exfoliate and shower with my Resurfacing Micro-brasion System—it’s a tiny granule, and I file it with a very rich hydronic serum that has pigment. It also has mulberry, bearberry, and chamomile. Your skin will actually look more soft and less pink afterward. Then I also wash my face with my Universal Anti-Aging Cleanser With Olive Oil—it takes off makeup, too. Never go to bed with makeup on. It could be 3am—even if it’s just three hours of sleep—I never go to bed with my makeup on. It’s got pollution and free radicals in it from the environment so you should be taking that off and using an antioxidant to combat those effects.*

*When I’m out of the shower, the first thing I put on my skin is Patricia Wexler Acnescription Overnight Acne Repair Lotion [ed note: currently unavailable]. I use a retinol three times a week—right now it’s the Natura Bissé Diamond Extreme. I think that it’s great, but you have to know how much your skin can tolerate. I have a lot of red in my face, so I’m careful. If you’re not so red, you can use it a little more, especially because a lot of the new formulas are non-irritating. I also love the Natura Bissé Diamond Ice-Lift. A day before a red carpet event, you put it all over your face, leave it on for 10 minutes to dry, and it peels off like cellophane. **It looks like you had a facelift.** I try to keep two jars around at all times. If you have puffy eyes or lip lines, **it’s like a miracle...***

*But at the same time, **I’m also very lazy.**” [emphasis added]  
— Dr. Patricia Wexler, Dermatologist, Into the Gloss*

As Oscar Wilde once quipped, America's "youth is now one of her oldest and most hallowed traditions." This is a truth hardly unacknowledged. Look at the headlines in the Huffington Post: "America's Perspective on Aging in a Youth-Obsessed Culture," "Here's Everything That's Wrong With Our 'Under 30' Obsession," "Millennials' Youth Obsession is Stressing Them Out!" It is taken for granted that we obsessively value the young. But what is it about youth that so captures our imaginations?

We want clean and smooth surfaces, unmarred by wrinkly ridges or hyperpigmentation. We want the endurance and the maximal oxygen uptake of a young adult. We clean, exfoliate, tone, dab serum, apply a mask, drink green juice. We embalm our youthful look in retinols and hyaluronic acid and preserve our features by plumping up with collagen. Maybe she was born with it. Maybe she #wokeuplikethat. Maybe, instead, she labors day in and day out, with the notion that if she works hard enough, some natural and essential womanly self will emerge: clean, tight, refreshed, and

pure. It will seem as if she is "lazy;" as if no work has been put in at all.

But this ideal woman is an illusion. She is a body without organs, a Form that masks female biology. What seems to be the preservation of a feminine essence is actually the containment of our female humanity. It is the opposition of the ideal to the actuality, the woman to the female. The irony of this aesthetic is that it doesn't want the natural. It restrains nature, even as we fetishize her: witness the Bobbi Brown (no-makeup makeup) look or the ubiquity of surf spray.

The aesthetic is defined by containment. It is about scraping away our rough, pore-ridden exterior to reveal fresh, baby-soft skin, while lathering ourselves with creams and pitera essences to protect us. From what? From the sun, from the air, from the cold, from the heat, from air-conditioned dehydration and tropical humidity, from time.

In Truman Capote's words, "real beauty... [is] the scrupulous method of plain good taste and scientific grooming"<sup>1</sup> Capote's "real beauty" contains,

and thus erases, the female through a violent regimentation of the body. It's an asceticism disguised by the language of indulgence. It doesn't feel austere to rip the hair out of your skin; it costs \$75 and your spa's candles smell like roses.

This aesthetic is ingrained in our collective consciousness. Not only is it a social fact, but both men and women happily participate in reproducing these values. It is not imposed top-down; there is a circular process to it. Our collective consciousness sees waxing as indulgence, rather than austerity, and in so doing manufactures a desire for it. Within the discourse of female containment, violences on the body are reinterpreted as necessary, and even pleasurable, demands. Violence proliferates around the womanly body in today's pornography. This violence parallels the self-violence necessitated by female containment. In fact, woman—the regimented and scrutinized female—finds the closest realization of her ideal in pornography.



Anicka Yi, 'You Can Call Me F' Photos courtesy The Kitchen

This spring, artist Anicka Yi's exhibition at The Kitchen, *You Can Call Me F*, capitalized on the tension between the female and her containment, embracing those elements of the female erased, masked, and contained by our contemporary aesthetic. The show's two major themes, growth and scent, grapple with the erasure of the female in the collective consciousness.

Far from the typical white cube, Yi's exhibition is dark and stuffy, an incubator for bacteria, mold and smell. The entrance contains a glass vitrine holding a slab of agar, over which the work's title is written in a spotty red smear. It resembles menstrual blood, but is in fact a kind of paint made from the distillation of bacteria collected from the cheek and vaginal swabs of 100 female artists. It spells out "You Can Call Me F." The vitrine contains and encloses "F," this female collective. During production, the artist could not prevent unwanted molds from the surrounding air from settling on the agar and beginning to grow. Without the vitrine, the surrounding environment advances inexorably, swallowing up the "F." The vitrine both preserves and contains "F."

Past the entrance, five dimly lit quarantine tents stand in the space. Each contains an artificial ecology—simultaneously an object of separation, observation, and protection. Standing inside the dark, high-ceilinged gallery, the viewer is confronted with a slightly rotten, damp smell. A diffuser inside one of the quarantine tents releases a thin fog with a scent derived from the female collective bacteria used in the vitrine.

Scent is difficult to contain. It unremittingly advances and seeps into every available space. A second diffuser in the

gallery releases a seemingly scentless mist. This, Yi claims, is what the Gagosian Gallery—a "patriarchal space"—smells like. Just as The Kitchen's dark, womb-like space contrasts with the over-exposed sterility of the Gagosian, the "natural" female odor in one part of Yi's exhibition opposes the synthetic, sterile, "patriarchal" scent of the Gagosian. The female fermenting smell repulses, while the "male" Gagosian scent remains imperceptible. Synthetic, sterile, male scents, like Yi's Gagosian diffuser, claim to neutralize these odors, while only masking them.

As recently as the 1980s, perfumeries profited off of "big" scents—YSL's Opium or Dior's Poison left visible trails of jasmine and incense or coriander and tuberose. In 2003, however, a brand named CLEAN was introduced, "as the antithesis to over-complicated, overpowering designer scents flooding the market." Their line includes several fragrances: Air, Skin, Rain, Fresh Laundry, and Shower Fresh. From Ralph Lauren's 'Cool Water' (2004) to the entire line of CB I Hate Perfume (founded in 2004), these minimalist perfumes conceal the natural scents of the female body even as they claim to be replicating them—CLEAN Perfumes' 'Skin' replaces bodily odor with an idealized, synthetic representation of how a body "should" smell.

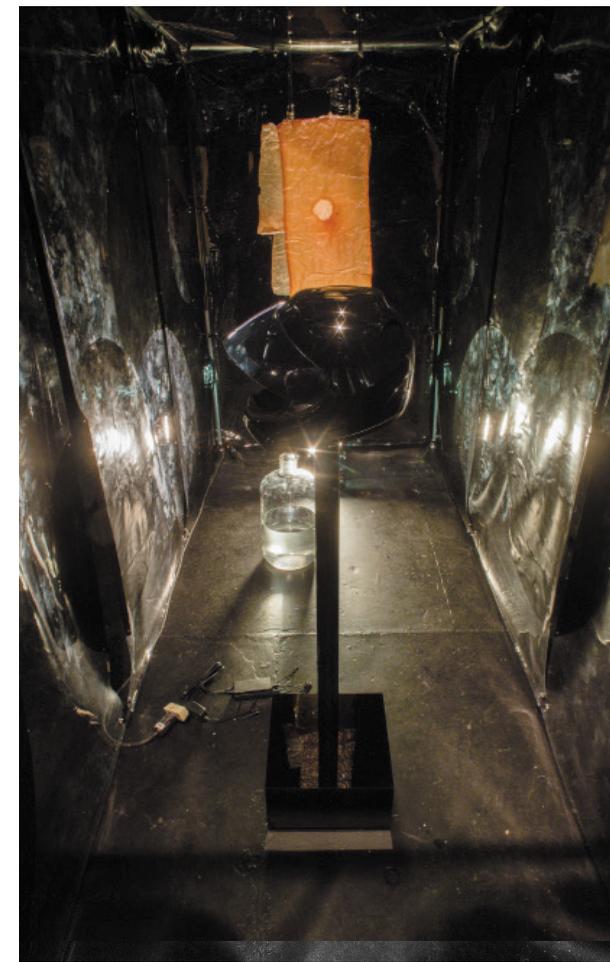
One of Yi's "ecologies" features long, rolled-out pieces of a SCOBY (Symbiotic Colony Of Bacteria and Yeast) used to produce kombucha, the trendy health drink. When a SCOBY is placed in black or green tea, it both ferments the tea (creating kombucha) and reproduces itself. For this reason, kombucha producers refer to their SCOBYs as "Mothers." The "Mothers" that Yi uses

echo the reproduction of “female” bacteria within the vitrine of the exhibition’s entrance. Unlike the live bacteria in the agar, however, the SCOBYs within the quarantine tent are desiccated. The confines of the quarantine tent remove the reproductive potential of the SCOBYs and leave them hung out to dry.

Another tent in Yi’s exhibition holds a bucket filled with synthetic beads. They are hard and small but, when exposed to moisture (Yi occasionally comes into the gallery to water them), become full and soft. Designed to hold perfumes and slowly diffuse them as air fresheners, these beads become smoother and rounder as they expand, growing like a pregnant belly but remaining constrained by their synthetic membrane. These distended spheres will never burst open or give birth because of the sterile strength of their material. Like the SCOBYs, the reproductive potential of the beads is inhibited by their synthetic (male) confines. The outline of a woman’s body, so long as it conforms to our smooth expectations, is beautiful. We can trace it in our mind: her rounded breasts and hips, the dip of a waist, the valley of her spine against her back. This outline constrains the female body just as the synthetic casing of the beads contains their reproductive capacity. We don’t mind if the bead expands; we only care if it bursts open, revealing the fleshy confusion beneath.

A woman is a circumscribed figure, like a marble statue. Her flesh is there, but she is utterly smooth and flawless, without an interior. She is a non-productive, non-reproductive, body without organs. This body without organs cannot possibly be *female*. We want the mons pubis without the hair and the breasts without the nipple. Everything has to be tight and clean, contained within their proper circumscription.

Yi’s quarantine tents delineate spaces of female containment. In their capacity as containment vessels of the female, Yi genders the synthetic tents as male. Yet their bounds are transparent. The viewer is encouraged to examine the contents. The circumscribed woman is confined, but it is the constant monitoring of her form, both by herself and others, that reproduces her limits. She shies away from producing or releasing anything from her body; she polices her own boundaries. She conceals her periods with deodorized tampons and even stops menstruation by never taking a week off from birth control. She gets anx-



Anicka Yi, ‘You Can Call Me F?’ Photos courtesy The Kitchen

ious about defecating in bathroom stalls. Childbirth’s outpouring of blood, the vaginal tearing, and the afterbirth of the placenta and fetal membrane transgress the boundaries between body and body, person and person. We find it disgusting. For this reason, it only acceptably occurs in the sterilized hospital room, under observation.

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If we have this squeamishness towards the female, how does one make sense of the abundance of graphic images of the female body? In a society where porn abounds, female genitalia hardly causes one to bat an eye. But are those vulvas—symmetrical, hyper-hygienic, and

hairless—really female?

Over the course of the twentieth century, armpit hair, and later leg hair, gradually became unacceptable, reflecting the increasing cultural imperative of female containment.<sup>2</sup> Whereas the porn of the 1970s included female bodies, full bush and all, the mid-’90s saw the gradual elimination of pubic hair. The Internet exposed porn to the sanitizing light of mass culture and, in the newly open marketplace, it adapted itself to the demands of the consumer. The American eye molded porn, populating its imagery with the waxed, clean, tight *woman*. Suddenly available for mass consumption, the pornographic body was forced to contain and remove any traces of the female.<sup>3</sup> Although full pubic hair

was the norm earlier in *Playboy's* history, "by the 1990s, more than a third of the models appeared to have removed some of their pubic hair. In the new millennium, less than 10 percent of nude models now sport the full pubic bush, while a third remove their hair partially and one-quarter remove it completely." In Kim Kardashian's words, women "shouldn't have hair anywhere but their heads."<sup>4</sup>

This produced a circular effect. As the aesthetic of porn changed to adapt to consumer tastes, those same consumers of porn (male and female) became more aware of this last bodily frontier, the vulva. This awareness opens the female body to new possibilities and demands. Waxing, vajacials, and labioplasty are increasingly available and increasingly normalized.

As Slavoj Žižek writes in *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously*, today "the bad is what threatens our health and well-being," not morality.<sup>5</sup> These radically unhealthy practices disguise themselves under a rhetoric of health and well-being. Rather than an ethic of health through moderation, it demands excess. Sleeping for only three hours is not a matter of concern, but taking off your makeup beforehand is. Foundation has free radicals in it, after all.

The effacement of the female, which aspires towards the pornographic

womanly ideal, necessitates violence. To shift and compartmentalize the disorder inherent to our physical life requires a dehumanization of the self. This dehumanization does not only exist in the realm of ideals, but requires a physical process of destruction. Juicing, detoxing, extracting, and waxing are all ascetic violences against the self. Beyond those "benign" regimes of beauty exist darker levels of the aesthetic's demands: starving oneself, forcing oneself to vomit, injecting synthetic materials into one's face, cutting away the fat around one's muscles. The more violence inflicted on the female body to conform to the womanly aesthetic, the less female and the less human she becomes.

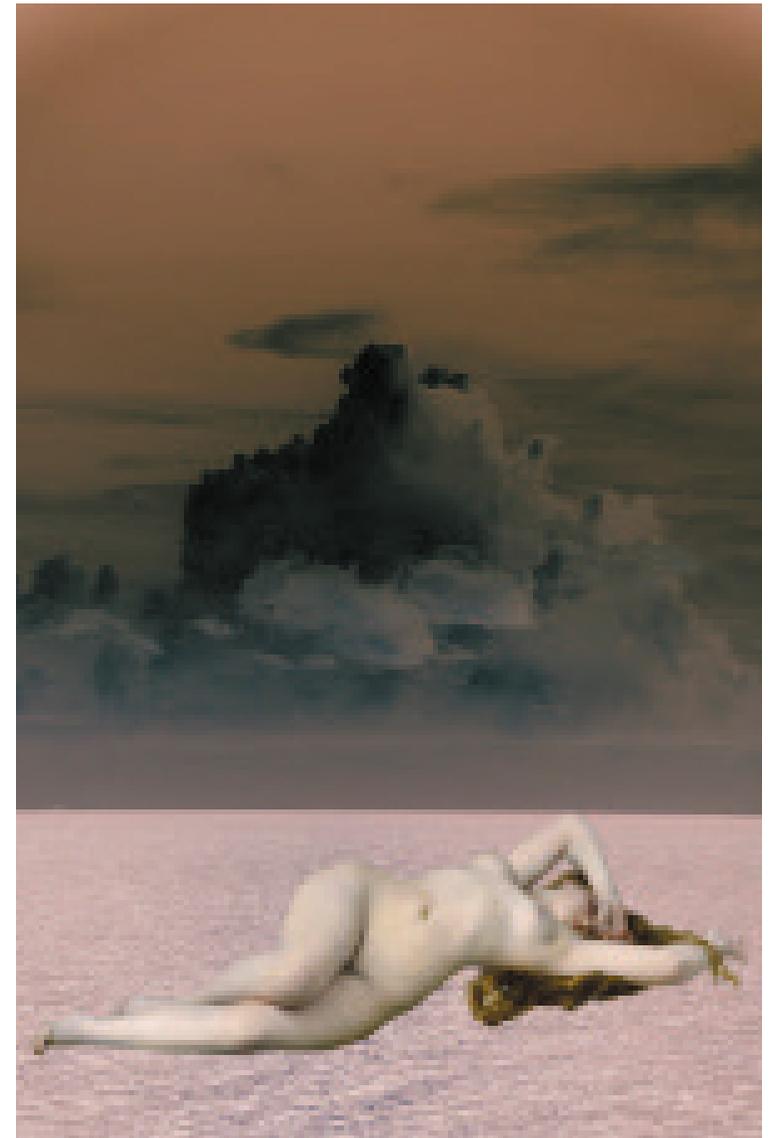
The pornographic body was always intended to satisfy a wide range of desires. Mankind has always included those who desired violent sex, anal sex, kink. But as the "ordinary" womanly body increasingly resembles the sanitized pornographic body, her dehumanization opens the body up to that same range of sexual acts. Once porn is consumed *en masse*, it introduces its wide range of fetishes to the public. Anything from (consensual) heterosexual anal sex to choking becomes normalized. Like a plastic doll, a woman's body can now be used for any sex act. These newly acceptable and desired acts may serve the ostensibly "healthy" end of discharging

repression, but on their face, these acts pose potential risks that are unhealthy for the body.

As the pornographic body—and the womanly body in general—has become "cleaned up," violence in sexual acts has proliferated. Aesthetics are not only part of a superstructure divorced from the materiality of experience. Through the sanitization of the body, her humanity has been effaced and she has become an object. The circumscribed woman just needs to smile, to consent enthusiastically, to keep herself tight and clean and fresh. She is happy to say "YES," to acquiesce, to put herself in ever more degrading positions—because if she's not female, she's not even human.

*Megan Stater is a junior at Columbia University, double majoring in Religion and Philosophy. Her interests include choral singing, endurance running, beauty blogs, and not postmodernism.*

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**JESY ARRIAGA**



## ***FOOD AND CITIZENSHIP: An interview with Kyla Wazana Tompkins***

**By Katherine Snell**

**CJLC** Can you begin by talking about how you became interested in food?

**KYLA WAZANA TOMPKINS** There's a joke that research is me-search, and I think that's probably true. All research is this strange assemblage of your history, your disposition, the historical moment, and the tools and resources available to you at the moment. A lot of it is happenstance. I come from an immigrant family. Food is important to immigrant families because it is the most transportable thing you have. It's part of your habitus. It's part of your way of moving, of your sort of gestural and embodied way of being in the world. So it became the thing that we held onto as a family and talked about a lot. I actually also come from a long line of bakers and wine merchants as well.

We emigrated from North Africa. My family grew up under French colonialism and then through the post-colonial moment. I was born just after my mother came to Canada. And when I was a child and teenager in the 70s and 80s there was a resurgence of French cuisine. So our existing familiarity with French-ness became kind of cultural capital that we made use of as immigrants. The discovery of French food in the U.S. was something already familiar. We didn't have money but we had taste. Right? That was the cultural capital that I traded on to become a

food writer and a journalist. I had a lot of familiarity with cuisine already. I was given the restaurant critic job at the newspaper that I was writing for. And that started to multiply. Because throughout this explosion of foodie-ness in the 80s and early 90s, I always knew that I was a writer.

This explosion of foodie lifestyle journalism, in particular Martha Stewart Living, happened at the same time as my exposure to post-structuralist theory. So while supporting myself as a food writer in undergrad I was doing work in theory for the first time, and I was also doing street-level and anti-racist work. There was a lot of police violence in Toronto. We had echo riots following the Rodney King riots that I was right in the middle of. A black woman and a black man were shot by the police around the time of Rodney King.

For me there were what felt like polarities: my family history, my sense of aesthetics, the historical explosion in theory and then in hyper commodity consumption culture, the political and antiracist work I was doing. I happened to be a graduate student at Stanford in a moment when there were a lot of people doing 19th century studies and it began to boom in ways that were very exciting to me, so that became the field in which I most wanted to roam. I was seeking to resolve these things. And that produced the work that I did around food.

**CJLC:** We've talked about food in the capacity of community building before: about your family, convivium, the way that food can offer us nourishment on a variety of levels. But it strikes me that while Racial Indigestion is interested in community building, it's also concerned with the power relations that emerge from food and from eating. I don't think that these capacities are necessarily contradictory, but I'm hoping you could speak to that ambivalence.

**KWT:** I began my book with the observation that the life of food is always bloodier and more abject than anyone wants to admit. Especially before the rise of the science

of hygiene, there's no dirtier room in the house than the kitchen, in which you gut, and peel, and char, and sear, and burn, and cut. I was trying to make an intervention, in the book.

There are a couple of key articles around Uncle Tom's Cabin about the 19th century kitchen. They were part of the conversation about the distinction between public and private that feminist criticism has been stuck in for a long time. Private sphere, public sphere: are they separate, do they even exist, where do they meet? Early feminist writers were working that out, and the kitchen was hyper-charged as this space where market and domestic economies meet. But I was actually much more interested in the kind of semiotic economy of food labor within the home itself. So public, private—whatever, right? Once we've resolved that these are mythologies, I don't know why we need to keep talking about them! [Laughs].

The kitchen itself has a literary life of its own. Food has a literary history of its own. It reaches back to Plato's Symposium, it moves through Rabelais' Gargantua and Pantagruel and the birth of the vernacular. The first vernacular books are cookbooks, because they're about what's local and regional. Language is local, cuisine is local. And both of these emerge into literary culture at the same time. Classical literary tropes of Early Modern vernacular are often related to the kind of vampy, lower body humor of food and the appetites. That's why there's all this sex and eating in Rabelais. That's why these Italian poets called the Macaronic poets restaged the Symposium and all of their symposia in food fights. Because it's about developing the vernacular language and the life of the lower body, of the common people, particularly organized around the language of food.

I started to notice that this history of the lower body in relation to food haunts the literary life of the kitchen in the 19th century; it resonates with early American literature and pantomime plays, but also with the architecture of the home. The history of American social life is very much organized around the kitchen fire because sometimes it's the

# The broader the society of control, the more developed the culture of the hyper-individual. Every time I step up to the counter at Starbucks and give my precious order I experience a sense of my freedom in the moment. My specialness.

only light in the house, it's often the only warm place in the house. Food labor, food spaces, lighting technology, sociality: all of these fold together in kind of unhygienic ways—the place where you gutted that fish is the place where you read to your family.

I wanted to tease out that lower body life in American literature. And of course, because it's American literature, the life of the lower body is inextricably linked to class and to race. The idea of puritanism and the American life of letters rests on the absenting of the lower body, which is projected onto people of color and working-class people, who then, of course, as the American middle class emerges, become the people doing food labor. So *comunitas* and the failure of *comunitas*, is I guess what I want to explore in food..

I don't have a nostalgic relationship to food. Honestly, I don't really like food anymore. [Laughs]. I'm a little tired of it. I think that our pleasures rest on such deep inequities that I never want to give in too easily to them, because I'm simply aware of their bloody underbelly. And

yet, I can't stop looking at this thing and hoping it would get better.

**CJLC:** The bloody underbelly of the food industry, our contemporary food landscape?

**KWT:** Yes. Who has enough to eat and who doesn't. What it costs to bring our pleasures to us. Who's working and who isn't. Who's got time to sit down. And extreme climate change, our deep immersion in the Anthropocene. I really believe that the foodie explosion of the 80s and 90s and our present time is a proleptic mourning of the planet. The aesthetics of food journalism, localism, the deep romance of the ingredient, the 40 adjectives for every commodity on every menu: this is a moment of deep unconscious mourning for the end of all that, for the reality that we're soon going to be working with scarcities that we can't even imagine and have no control over.

**CJLC:** We might be eating bugs before we die! Maybe?

**KWT:** Right. Jelly made of bugs, like in *Snowpiercer*.

**CJLC:** So to compensate for that future we obsess over choice. We expand the range of greens or grains that we eat, plucking them from wherever in the world. We get to choose the things that taste good to us and in doing so exercise our cultural tastes. Despite disparities in access to food, we're offered the experience of choice, which can mask the danger of our situation, diminishing resources, mass produced meals. Consuming is a way of asserting our identities: 'I'm a latte drinker.' Or, 'I'm decidedly

not a latte drinker.'

**KWT:** 'I'm basic' or 'I'm not basic.' Yeah. Foucault said the broader the society of control, the more developed the culture of the hyper-individual would be. Every time I step up to the counter at Starbucks and give my precious order I experience a sense of my freedom in the moment. My specialness. The detailed-ness of my specialness. I experience that exactly at the moment I swipe my card and enter my data.

In reality coffee is an industrial food. It's a mass produced food. Coffee is energy producing. This is its history. The moment of multitasking, of neoliberal overdrive, has everything to do with why coffee is specialized in ways that it is. We're all tired. We're so tired. Everybody I know is exhausted.

It all goes hand in hand. Taste rests on what Bourdieu called distinction, it rests on differentiation. It always already rests on vertical relations.

This is where the mythology of choice and individuation and liberal selfhood is really concretized. I like starting my classes with people talking about foods they like and don't like. Because I like thinking about disgust, I like knowing what disgusts people. And I want people to think about moments when what feels individuated is actually deeply social. I want to mess with ideas of individuality and interiority and choice and taste and class performance. Biological predetermination and racism are always haunting our ideas of individuation. "In my family we eat this and therefore. . ." "Which is, you know, both true and less than true.

**CJLC:** Do you think food can offer the possibility of better horizontal relations,

contrary to Bourdieu's vertical differentiation?

**KWT:** There's been a lot of work in food studies about group identity and the performance and constitution of group identity around foodways. That works. That's all true. In fact, that's where I started, with a sort of cultural continuity through foodways. But I'm interested in the different senses that are implicated in foodways. And I guess I'm personally repelled, not wanting to buy into mythologies of individuation and performances of individuation surrounding food.

The work that I'm doing now is thinking not about taste, not distinction, but rather about flavor. Traditional aesthetic ideals, Kantian taste, very much rests on distance -- from nature, our objects of observation, and again, from the lower body desires and senses. The performance of taste is the performance of difference from others. I'm interested in the alternatives that something like "flava" might offer us here.

**CJLC:** One thing that disgusts people is fat, which I know you're interested in. This mythology of "choice" even permeates the obesity epidemic: "it's not even cheaper to eat fast food or prepared food, people are just making poor choices!"

**KWT:** This question of blame and poverty that rests on exactly that failure to exert will, the failure to exert choice. The logic of failure of will that is deployed at poor people helps construct foodie-ism and upper middle class consumption patterns, it helps imbue those choices with virtue. They become markers of

good citizenship.

**CJLC:** There have to be bad choices in order to be good choices.

**KWT:** That's right. And food is a drug! This is something that we knew up until the turn of the 20th century when food and drug as categories became juridically separate from one another. Food is bioengineered to seduce and to secure addiction.

**CJLC:** This really is the control society.

**KWT:** It really is. We have to find a way to talk about pleasures in such a manner—I'm referencing Lauren Berlant—such that we're not shitting on people's dreams. We're not shitting on pleasures. We don't want fewer pleasures. We want more pleasures that are more world-making. My interest in parsing disgust is about parsing the deep pleasures in disgust. These pleasures that might actually be world-making possibilities that we've not fully explored.

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## **FOOD AS CONTESTATION, OR WHY LENIN WAS NO FOODIE: *In Defense of a Culinary Left***

**By Niklas Plaetzer**

When did the left lose its senses? Ever since the Jacobins saw an act of treason in the sharing of food, the main ingredient of activism has remained a fateful kind of soberness. According to Mikhail Bakunin, a true revolutionary “has no interests of his own, no affairs, no feelings, no attachments, no belongings, not even a name. Everything in him is absorbed by a single exclusive interest, a single thought, a single passion – the revolution.”<sup>1</sup> Similarly, in Lenin’s favorite novel, Nikolai Chernyshevsky’s *What Is to Be Done?* (1863), the protagonist Lopukhov is presented as a revolutionary hero for giving up sensual pleasure in the name of The Cause. All too often, any allegedly excessive enjoyment of art, music, sex or food has been measured against a standard of pure revolutionary dedication, an austere form of activism that condemns the world of the senses as a ‘bourgeois decadence.’ But the Archive of Leftism still contains traces of its erased desires. A look at the banquets of the French Revolution, the Socialist soup kitchens of the 19th century, and today’s social movements will show us that sharing a meal is wholly compatible with the revolution.

For many socialists, communists, and even anarchists, a dividing line is still drawn at pleasure, which operates as a symbol of bourgeois life and is by definition only open to the privileged. Sensory deprivation distinguishes the serious activist from the lifestyle leftist; the dedicated socialist from just another hipster. Our taste, it would seem, must somehow run against what we stand for: *pleasure as problem*. Yet contrary to what orthodox Marxists keep repeating, revolution is far from a fully rational endeavor. Instead, we can conceive of revolution it as a nodal point of desire – a solidarity with the desires of *all* that almost takes up a bodily quality. But how do we tell desire from decadence, pleasure from privilege? Some demonstrations have been critically compared to music festivals, and you can hear complaints that people in campus during Occupy Wall Street Occupy camps had too much fun. Some, like the Lacanian psychoanalyst and communist thinker Slavoj Žižek, would probably argue that much activism is just another decadent hobby, for people who are ‘struggling’ for a ‘decaffeinated’ type of revolution but really are just having a fun time with friends. “The problem for us is not are our desires satisfied or not. The problem is how do we know what we desire,”<sup>2</sup> Žižek explains, and leans back in his armchair. Actually, those people are no rebels but obedient to their superego’s command to enjoy, thereby keeping the logic of capitalism fully intact.

There is no point in denying that taste has indeed been a marker of class-distinction and a disciplinary power that is always at work, from breakfast to dinner. Such a view does not recognize the multiple ways in which sensual pleasure can itself be transformed: pleasure as contestation. According to a famous anecdote, Emma Goldman, a Russian-born American anarchist of the late 19th century, was approached by a comrade while dancing wildly at an anarchist party. When he asked her to stop, Goldman responded, “if I can’t dance to it, it’s not my revolution.”<sup>3</sup> If it was not for the unleashing of such desires and their possibility in everybody, she argued, what was the revolution supposed to be good for? Liberation can hardly take its starting point in repression.

There are options beyond the futile-but-fun hippie-activism so easily co-opted by economic interests and the relentlessly anti-fun sobriety of socialist ideologues. There can be an effective Left that also knows how to listen, dance, desire and eat. The question is not only *what* we eat but *how* we eat it and *with whom*. Is our food a commodity or a communal experience? Under what conditions was it produced, and how exclusive is its enjoyment? If freedom, in the words of Rosa Luxemburg, is always the freedom of those who think differently, it must also be the freedom of those who desire differently, feel differently, taste differently.



EMILY XIAO

#### A SHORT HISTORY OF A CULINARY LEFT

The debate about the place of sensual pleasure, between an idealized communal transcendence on one side and a rejection of conspicuous privilege on the other, is as old as the political Left itself. Even in the French Revolution, the enjoyment of good food was a hotly contested issue. A report from the Jacobin Society of Paris from 1793 celebrated shared food in the most lofty terms: “The great family was united and we saw the whole of her share the greatest delicacies of the civic banquet. How beautiful it was to observe this meal where the intermingled citizens were nothing else than a society of true brothers! Everything was enjoyment (*jouissance*) for the sensual observer!”<sup>4</sup> But by July 1794, when the Jacobin Terror had reached its climax, shar-

ing good food was no longer considered a legitimate activity for revolutionaries. A newspaper announced a ban on civic dinners in Marseille, as they supposedly served the “aristocrats” to “seduce the friends of liberty.” “The meals thus become signs of a perfidious reconciliation, the precursors of counter-revolution,” for which reason the Committee of Public Safety would have to adopt “rigorous repressive measures” against them.<sup>5</sup>

A few decades later—and certainly inspired by the civic banquets of the revolutionary days—the socialist thinker Charles Fourier developed a whole theory of “gastrosophy.”<sup>6</sup> In the utopian community of Harmony which he envisioned, cooking was to be recognized as “the most revered” of all the arts. Even the poorest of Harmony’s citizens would have “twelve types of soup, twelve varieties of bread and wine, and twelve dressings for meat and vegetables.”<sup>6</sup> Shared food would always go together with good company and thus serve as the “elementary form of Harmonian sociability.” The breakfast was to be replaced with what Fourier called the “gastronomic antenna,” “a very delightful imbroglio” to settle conflicts, introduce visitors and organize civic affairs.<sup>7</sup> In the eyes of the philosopher, the enjoyment of food represented “the first and last pleasure of man, the one that delights him from birth right up until his last hour:” a pleasure that already connects the young and the old, the rich and the poor, in one passionate union.<sup>8</sup> The sharing of food, however, would have nothing to do with charity: inequalities would be structurally overcome and food would be rescued from its debased status as a mere commodity. Ultimately,

Fourier’s sense of justice has a lot to do with a passionate recognition of everybody’s right to a good meal. In the union of the shared meal, we might also—like the residents of Fourier’s utopia—live our desires and share transformative moments across subjects.

It should be no surprise, then, that many activists throughout the centuries have already felt a glimpse of utopian gastrosophical pleasures in the here and now. In her work *On Revolution*, Hannah Arendt notes that “in every genuine revolution throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries,” “councils, Soviets and Rät/e” sprang up as the “spontaneous organs of the people.”<sup>9</sup> Our imagination would have to be rather poor to not see these revolutionaries united over dinner. For Arendt, there is a vital experience of political liberty, of direct face-to-face participation in the public realm that is particularly alive in those moments of revolutionary spontaneity – an experience which she refers to as “public happiness.”<sup>10</sup> If we look at the practices of revolutionary multitudes and social movements in the last two centuries and their ways of sharing food, we might get a more vivid taste of what she meant. Let’s not forget: The 1848 revolution was triggered by (admittedly bourgeois) people sharing meals – in the so-called French banquet campaign.<sup>11</sup> Many socialist movements of the 19th century then made their own soup kitchens a central rallying point for activists, far from engaging in conservative charity.<sup>12</sup>

This tradition survives today in many different political arenas. If you go to a French mass demonstration, say a CGT union strike, you are likely to encounter a *soupe populaire*: a shared meal—cheap

but delicious—that is provided for free, keeps everybody warm in the street, and easily serves as an ice-breaker between the assembled activists. In Istanbul in 2013, Muslim activists blocked the redevelopment of Gezi Park by breaking their Ramadan fast with civic dinners in the street, fiercely demonstrating the possibility of food as a means of contestation.<sup>13</sup> The transnational squatters movement has even produced its own cooking books<sup>14</sup> and German activists have contributed the term *Volxküche* (short *VoKü*, “people’s kitchen,” a joyful play on the otherwise problematic word *Volk*) for the squatter cuisine.<sup>15</sup>

#### WE ARE WHAT WE EAT: IMAGINING A MICROPOLITICS OF SHARED FOOD

At a time in which we are indeed conditioned to enjoy but simultaneously limited to live our desires within the framework of consumer capitalism, the question of pleasure must be regarded as far more than a marginal topic for today’s social movements. It is without a doubt that the central task of a ‘culinary’ Left remains the struggle for the eradication of hunger in a world of 805 million people without sufficient access to nutrition.<sup>16</sup> Important questions on vegetarianism and ecology, or the fair conditions of production for food, have by now entered mainstream political discourse and keep on growing in resonance. Nevertheless, our attention to food should also go beyond solidarity with those who suffer hunger and performing immensely important structural analyses.

The history of social and political struggles is also a story of communal meals, of micro-politics that transform our desires in a new encounter: from French revolutionaries’ civic banquets to soup kitchens in the squats of New York, Berlin or Athens. Such encounters, of activists who cook together, eat together and get to know each other as people beyond their mere functions in a socio-economic machinery, can represent considerable acts of contestation in and of themselves. The repression that civic banquets have undergone in the past is one illustration of this capacity. Encounters with strangers around a bowl of soup in the street can serve to interrupt the logic of rule that otherwise structures our lives. In that sense, 19th century American anarchist Stephen Pearl Andrews spoke of the dinner party as the model for a new

society in the shell of the old, while Hakim Bey regards “banquets” and “old-time libertarian picnics” as “already ‘liberated zones’ of a sort.”<sup>17</sup> Anyone who flatly ridicules communal meals as the self-important activity of privileged foodies does injustice to the specific ways in which the enjoyment of food—and any bodily pleasure more generally—can be transformed and politicized.

Such a micropolitics of food is of course always at danger of falling back into the decadence of the private circle, the commodification of human relations, and the exclusivity of privileged access to goods (including the privilege of buying biologically produced, fair-trade food at a higher price). A call for a culinary micropolitics that actually takes up a contestational quality must therefore always remain a risky and self-reflective undertaking.

At the very end of their illuminating book *Empire*, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri speak about the Multitude that poses “against the misery of power the joy of being.” For Hardt and Negri, “this is the irrepressible lightness and joy of being communist.”<sup>18</sup> It is time to get rid of our guilty conscience every time we enjoy good food. Through carefully maneuvering the space between the extreme points of exclusive privilege and collective asceticism, a whole world of *shared* pleasure in between emerges. An unapologetic affirmation of pleasure does not have to come at the cost of system-reproducing indulgence or ineffectiveness, as the old guardians of pure revolution try to make us believe. Instead, it can provide a taste of what a multitude can do together: creating contestational forms of sociability, and experiencing a shared type of liberty that approaches “public happiness.”

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# ***PALATE CONDITIONING: An Interview with Master Sommelier Evan Goldstein***

**By Megan Stater**

*At the age of 26, Evan Goldstein became the eighth American, and youngest ever at the time, to pass the infamously difficult exam to join the ranks of Master Sommelier, of which there are only 211 in the world. Based in San Francisco, he co-owns and runs his company, Full Circle Wine Solutions, a wine and spirits education firm. With over thirty years' experience teaching professionals and consumers about wine, Goldstein has written several books on wine. His first book, *Perfect Pairings: A Master Sommelier's Practical Advice for Partnering Wine* (UC Press), with tens of thousands sold, is being translated into simple Mandarin this fall for release in China.*

**CJLC** What does it mean to be a sommelier and how does taste play into your job?

**EVAN GOLDSTEIN** 'Sommelier' is a French term that was coined a long time ago. It essentially refers to the person who works in a restaurant, or a dining room situation, who is responsible for your beverage service. In the United States, it's evolved from being less of a "job" to an all-encompassing term. What we call sommeliers are often people who are wine directors or people who actually have a lot of say in selecting wines as well as serving them, whereas in France, historically, you may be the sommelier but you may not be the person selecting the wines to go on the list. So in this country it's a little bit different. But at the end of the day, this is a person who is responsible for that interaction, that back and forth and increasingly, you have the final say in picking the wines and beverages that go onto the list. In this country they can be accredited.

How does that pertain to taste? There are a couple of things. One of these things is creating a comprehensive wine program. Your goal is to provide a diverse array within the confines of the food that is being offered, the budget you are given, and the constraints of the place in

# When you walk up and they ask, “*What’s the difference between this Chardonnay and that Chardonnay,*” your answer should not be four dollars

which you have to store the wine. Great wine programs can be tiny, great wine programs can be gargantuan, and every space in between. You want to have a balance between reds and whites and between bubbly and sweets; you obviously want to factor in geography, you want to paint as complete a picture as possible. Obviously different wines and different grapes and different geographies all manifest themselves differently in the bottle to different types of tastes. Your ability to distinguish quality and taste, to transmit that information into an accurate choice selection, and then figure out what will please the consumer is very important. How you describe what a wine tastes like is very important not only to convey the information that you’re trying to share, about how Pinot Noir tastes versus a Chardonnay versus a Cabernet, for example, but to navigate the particulars of specific producers and specific bottles.

**CJLC:** But these wines from all over the world, whether Merlots or Malbecs, are so different and have such varying mark-

ers. How objective a process can this be, when you’re trying to distinguish quality?

**EG:** I think there are a couple of elements to that. Firstly, all wines ultimately have markers, a trait you just pointed out. The marker is the specific identification point that you can use. This can be by grape type—Chardonnays and Sauvignon Blancs have specific markers and Merlots, to your point, have very different markers from Malbecs. Layer over the geography: the way a Chardonnay tastes around, not only the world—the difference between France and Chile, California and Spain—but also within a geography. A Chardonnay from Sonoma County and Russian River specifically tastes differently from a Chardonnay of the Santa Rita Hills down in the Central Coast.

Each level of specificity that you hit gives you an understanding of the markers that have been identified and validated over time and history through years of tasting prior to you picking up that bottle and tasting it. Your ability to discern is two-fold. How opulently does

a particular wine grasp at that array of markers? Your palate is not going to be the same as mine, and mine is not going to be the same as the sommelier’s down the street. We all have our different interpretations of markers: the wine may suggest “peach” to me, but what you’re tasting tastes more like apricots or nectarines. It’s essentially the same thing, but the choice of descriptor might be a little different. As a rule, there’s a bucket, if you will, of accurate tasting terminology that you may associate with a particular wine. So the first factor is, does this particular wine meet the markers typically associated with this particular grape type from this particular area? The second aspect is, knowing that, is that wine a really good example of what it is? The first part, the markers, are a little bit more fact-based, more objective, if you will, whereas the question of whether a wine is a “good” example of what it is can be a very personal thing. What I might think is a really great example and what you might think is a really great example in terms of the actual, absolute quality might differ. We can both like Picasso, and I can like the Blue Period, and you can like the Cubist Period, but Picasso’s recognized as a great artist. There’s some subjectivity there, but there’s also an objective basis and melding the two of those things together at the highest level is probably what ascertains the quality of a sommelier.

**CJLC:** Maybe this is a little glib, but I’m wondering, then, what do you do with something like Franzia, or Two Buck Chuck? They don’t have any specificity, from what I know of their making,

**EG:** There’s a question people in the wine industry roll their eyes at, and it’s, “What’s your favorite wine?” I always tell people in the end that I’m an equal opportunity wine drinker and that I basically gravitate towards quality. There are three measurements of that for me. First of all, the wine has to have ten fingers and ten toes. What do I mean by that? I mean to say that the basic architectural elements of the wine—its alcohol, its acidity, its sugar, its tannins, and its oak—when in play, are in relative balance. Wine can’t be so acidic and that’s all you can taste. Or so much sugar, and not enough acid, that it comes off as clunky. Or so oaky, and all you can taste is the wood in which the wine was actually made. It has to have balance, that’s number one.

Number two is that it has to have truth in advertising. That is to say, wine should taste like the grape or grapes from which it is made. Pinot Noir that tastes like Syrah or Sauvignon Blanc that tastes like Chardonnay doesn’t do it for me, and I think that would take away from what the public is looking for when they order a particular bottle. And then the third thing I ask for is, truth in product. If a wine says that it’s made from California, which could be anywhere in the state, that’s one thing. The level of expectation on the specificity of that wine would be different than something that says it comes from Evan’s Vineyard at Southern Carneros in Sonoma County. The level of specificity there is very finite. The greater the level of specificity put forward on the label, the higher the expectation you have on a much more focused and defined wine. To get to your question, when you’re dealing with a wine that is \$150-\$200 a

# Nobody is born with a great palate. In the end, discernment in wine is a marked skill.

bottle, you're very clear and very specific about what that wine is all about. Your expectation level and your demands on that wine are going to be far higher than for a Two-Buck Chuck or a basic wine, which are much more generic by definition, by nature. If a wine says that it's a Chardonnay from California somewhere, your level of expectation should be: I hope it tastes like Chardonnay and it's reasonably good. Above and beyond that, my expectation is going to be lower, but then, at the same time, the price point asked of the person purchasing it is going to be lower. So in the end, the wine delivers on what it is. Your job as a sommelier is to match the right wine to the right people, and not everybody is a wine enthusiast. Your average person goes to the store and buys a bottle of wine somewhere between \$5 and \$10, and wants pleasure. That's a very different animal than the person who comes in and knows the score of every wine in *Wine Spectator* and is looking for a particular delivery on a set of 2012 vintage versus the 2011 that we're talking to them about.

**CJLC:** You say that you want to match the wine to the people—how do you

read people to match them to the wine?

**EG:** Any sommelier worth their stock in wine bottles will tell you that's your first job when you're approaching a table or first speaking to someone. When you walk up and they ask, "What's the difference between this Chardonnay and that Chardonnay," your answer should not be four dollars. It should be something of substance. I train people to do a little bit of prodding, a little bit of analysis, so you can help people make their own selection. Asking questions from a straightforward, do you have specific likes or dislikes by grape, by country, is important to know. To provide a reference point, do you have a particular bottle that you've enjoyed in the past? You should do some basic recon, in terms of their level of sophistication, what food they're ordering, where they're sitting in the dining room or the restaurant. Your goal is to do a little bit of back-and-forth and help them help you make a good choice for them.

**CJLC:** Who exactly do you work with on a regular basis?

**EG:** I've had a long career, but at this point in my life, I own my own com-

pany. We work about 97% with "the trade." "The trade" is the middlemen, or middlewomen, between your average Joe in Middle America buying wine and the people who are importing it, selecting it, and/or selling it to those people. We deal with the restaurants, with the hotels, with the retail stores, with the people who ultimately sell the wine to the public. We work with them to train and educate them on behalf of our clients, who represent countries and geographies around the world and we ensure to understand what is important to them. We can curate wines to the point that we give you a very vivid idea of what the difference of a Sauvignon Blanc coming from Casablanca or Chile is, versus one coming from Marlborough in New Zealand.

**CJLC:** I know on your website you have courses listed as "Wine Palate Conditioning." Is this what you're referring to, when you refer to these sorts of courses? What do you mean by "conditioning"?

**EG:** Nobody is born with a great palate. In the end, discernment in wine is a marked skill. Alcohol is something that one is not supposed to touch in this

country until you're 21 years of age. Needless to say, people are taking jobs as sommeliers at young ages of 22, 25, 26, without a tremendous amount of history, so they need to ramp up relatively quickly. As somebody who was the eighth American and the youngest American to pass the Master Sommelier examination, one of my responsibilities, moving forward thirty years, is teaching and educating up-and-coming sommeliers who are wanting to learn and wanting to grow. You want to teach them about service and what is expected mechanically on the floor and recommend the books with the theoretical information that they need to know.

But you also need to teach them about taste. Taste in this case not only encompasses how to taste, but what wines look like, what wines taste like, what wines smell like, how you describe them, and what physical characteristics manifest themselves in the wine. But then you want to layer over these basic tasting skills with the major differences we talked about before: by geography, by varietal, by blend, so you're matching the theoretical knowledge to actual wines that you can taste. You do this collectively, with an intense amount of rigor, and on a regular basis. That is

how people become more discerning. It gives them a greater array of experience to draw from and qualitatively judge by moving forward. When I say, we teach classes, my classes generally tend to be available to people who are in the business already, like the Morton's Restaurant group, or BR Guest in New York or Legal Seafoods in the Northeast—they could work with us, my company, to train their people.

**CJLC:** You stole away my last question by saying that you don't like to say what your favorite wine is, so instead I'll ask: What wine has been to your taste recently?

**EG:** Wines are a lot like anything of taste. What I might be into right now,

what I might be into in a week, is a little bit different. A dear friend of mine, a wine writer in the UK, said to me that all wines are enigmatic until you've had them. I tend to believe that. What wine floats your boat today may not be the wine that floats your boat tomorrow. I go in phases of what I'm drinking a lot of. I happen to be getting ready to host a big wine conference in New York next month. Its focus will be on South American wines, so South American wines are at the top of my mind right now, from the classic Malbec or Malbec Blend of Argentina, that you alluded to earlier, to the Tannats coming out of Uruguay, to the wonderful cold-climate Syrah and Chardonnay bottlings coming out of Chile. But I stand by my comment of being an equal opportunity drinker.

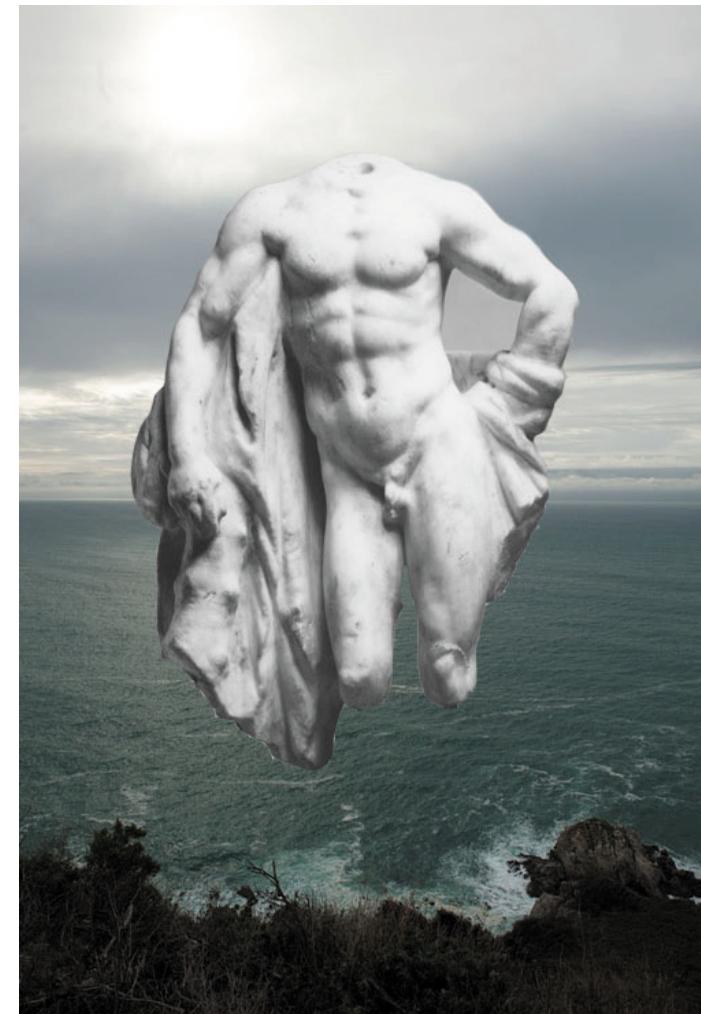
*Megan Stater is a junior at Columbia University, double majoring in Religion and Philosophy. Her interests include choral singing, endurance running, beauty blogs, and not postmodernism.*

# **DE GUSTIBUS: A Study of Rome's Greatest Wine**

**By Michael Beam**

*In 60 BC, Julius Caesar presented a national treasure to his guests at a banquet in honor of his conquests in Spain: an amphora of Falernian wine, the greatest wine the Roman world had ever known. It hailed from the legendary “Opimian vintage” of 121 BC, named after one of the acting consuls for the year, Opimius. Most of the vintage had been consumed in the intervening 61 years, and what remained was likely more akin to fruity vinegar than to wine. The clay amphora, containing 26 liters—the equivalent of nearly 35 modern bottles—must have suffered from severe aging, and the red lettering ‘FAL’ (for Falernian) on the cap would have faded considerably. Perhaps, as the pitch-sealed cap was removed, the amphora issued a deep groan as new air rushed to mix with the aged contents. If the contents truly hailed from the Opimian vintage, the resulting aromas of old wine—wilted flowers, overripe berries, a deathly sick-sweet—would have permeated the room within minutes. As Caesar sipped the Falernian, perhaps he reflected on the history it had witnessed: born the same year Gaius Gracchus was murdered, it had survived the Sullan reforms and the Catilinarian conspiracy, outliving many potential customers who were put to death. It was 20 years Caesar’s senior. And now, at its end, the Roman world’s greatest wine was being consumed by one of its most powerful men.*

*“For one as you can drink wine, for two you can drink the best, for four you can drink Falernian.” – advertisement outside the Bar of Hedone, Pompeii (CIL IV.1679)*



**JESY ARRIAGA**

Beginning with the rise of Roman fine wines in the 2<sup>nd</sup> c. BC, Falernian captivated the palates and minds of the Roman elite, who commemorated the wine in farming manuals, poetry, satires, letters, and philosophical treatises. Preeminent figures of the Republic and Empire—Cato, Cicero, Ovid, Martial, Pliny, Petronius, Catullus, and Horace—mention Falernian in their works, and likely enjoyed a good deal of the wine in their leisure time. “No other wine has a higher rank at the present day,” wrote Pliny the Elder in his section of *Natural History* devoted to wine. Any competitor, wagers Virgil in his *Georgics*, could “cope not with Falernian cellars.”

Silius Italicus, who attributed the wine’s quality to divine favor, felt that even the best Greek wines (conventionally held to be the finest in the Mediterranean) “all yielded precedence to the vats of Falernus.” As Italy came to dominate the wine trade in the late Republic, Falernian represented the acme of skilled viticulture, enjoying a reputation of unparalleled excellence that may have outlasted its actual quality.

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Reasons for Falernian’s outstanding quality ranged from the viticultural to the mythical. One account of Falernian’s origins claims attests to a divine pedigree. Silius Italicus, writing in the 1<sup>st</sup> c. AD, sited Monte Massico as the mythological origin of winemaking. Breaking off from his narrative of Hannibal’s destructive march through Campania (during which he burned the ager Falernus), Italicus tells of Bacchus’ visit to Falernus, an ancient proprietor of the fields upon Monte Massico before vines grew there. Falernus, unaware of his guest’s divine origins, receives Bacchus into his humble home, and serves him an ordinary meal. The god’s response, however, is extraordinary:

“Touched by the old man’s generosity, Bacchus determined that there should be wine. Suddenly, miraculously, the beechen cups foamed with wine, recompense for the poor man’s hospitality. Wine filled the milk pail and the wooden bowl was awash with the fragrant juice. ‘Here, take some!’ said Bacchus, ‘It is unfamiliar now, but one day it will make famous the name of Falernus the vintner.’”

Falernus proceeded to (liberally) enjoy the new drink until falling asleep. Rising from his drunken slumber the

next day, he discovered “all Mount Massicus was green with vine-bearing fields... The mountain’s fame swept through the land and from that day Falernian wine surpassed the vintages of Lydia, Chios, and Lesbos.” Thus Silius attributes Falernian’s excellence to its divine origins. It is not simply a man-made product, but a blessing of the god of wine himself. Moreover, by placing wine’s origin in the ager Falernus, Italicus not only highlights Falernian as the paramount expression of fine wine, but also portrays Italy as the divinely appointed cradle of the wine world. Falernian paired well with Roman hegemony, exhibiting its power to create a product superior to any other: better wine, better armies, and a better society.

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Such lavish praise begs the question: how did Falernian taste? While amphorae of Falernian have been salvaged from wrecks in the Adriatic, none still contain the wine itself; the sea has had two thousand years to wear away at the clay containers, and the contents have leaked out. Even if an excavation serendipitously yielded the legendary drink, it would be nearly impossible to reverse-engineer Falernian from the long-spoiled contents within. Therefore the answer to the most tantalizing question regarding the wine lies not at the bottom of the sea, but somewhere else.

Taste is a subjective sense and inconsistent across palates. Personal and cultural preference doubtless cloud the ‘tasting notes’ of ancient writers, and extracting a coherent flavor profile from a handful of sources may leave us only with a Frankenwine, a motley hodgepodge of sensations awkwardly sewn together.

In his *Odes*, Horace describes Falernian as strong (*forte*), weighty (*severum*), and later burning (*ardens*). Other writers confirm the strength and heat of Falernian, a result of its high alcohol level. Martial too found it *ardens*, and to Galen it was warm (*θερμός*). Pliny goes so far as to claim “it is the only wine that takes light when a flame is applied to it,” although in a time when distilled spirits were unknown, this is highly unlikely. Galen, who had the privilege of tasting through the imperial cellars, confirms two of Pliny’s three styles: one sweet (*γλυκύς*), one rougher (*αύστηρός*) and astringent (*ὑποστύφον*) by comparison. He does not mention Pliny’s third, the tenue Falernian. We

can only guess as to why this is so: perhaps in the period between Pliny and Galen's writing, Falernian producers narrowed their production to a single style; perhaps Pliny perceived a distinctive third style that others did not; perhaps Galen simply did not do his research. Dionysius of Halicarnassus is even more sparing, mentioning only one style—the sweet—in his *Roman Antiquities*. Thus while the number of Falernian styles varies across authors, certain characteristics—its power, heat, and sweetness—emerge as a constant throughout.

Other styles of Falernian certainly were produced, but the sweet, aged wine emerges from classical sources as the preeminent style of antiquity. The Opimian vintage, that coveted harvest which ushered Falernian into the pantheon of fine wines, was sweet. No wonder, argues wine writer Hugh Johnson, that sweet Falernian was the choicest drink; the Augustan era was the heyday of robust flavors. “Powerfully savoury tastes, fermented fish sauce, garlic, and most of all asafoetida—a strange onion-smelling root that to some modern sensibilities is a byword for nausea—were combined with every sort of sweetening from raisins to honey, including a drench of the sweetest wine.” Pliny's *Natural History* is littered with recipes for wine cocktails with all sorts of additives: honey, seawater, snow, pitch, and myrrh. It was not until the 2nd c. AD, when Galen lived, that “Roman taste [shifted] away from the thick, sweet wines that had made Campania the most prestigious region” in favor of lighter and drier styles.

While it certainly appealed to the palate of the Roman elite (as evidenced by the wine's prevalence in both the archaeological and literary record), Falernian also bore rich symbolic value which conveyed the superior ‘taste’ (i.e. sensibility, discrimination, aesthetic judgment) of the Romans who consumed it.

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The reasons behind the Roman obsession with Falernian, however, are not limited to its physical sensation. Falernian's fame can in part be understood through Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital: “the esoteric knowledge required to collect, blend, and ‘properly’ consume” objects both material and immaterial. This is a strictly class-bound form of capital. Bourdieu further divides cultural capital

into the embodied, the institutionalized, and the objectified state, the latter of which encompasses “pictures, books, instruments, dictionaries, machines, etc.”—and wine. Fine wine, and Falernian most of all, perfectly encapsulates objectified cultural capital, for it was in the collection, consumption and appreciation of wine that a Roman could accrue and maintain his social standing. Moreover, the symbiotic relationship between economic and cultural capital—namely, that an increase in one form guaranteed an increase in the other—ensured that Falernian was a ‘liquid asset’ in two ways. First, the purchase of Falernian communicated the economic capital of a Roman aristocrat. Second, the consumption and appreciation of Falernian had its own immaterial value: it bespoke an esoteric knowledge that distinguished him from his contemporaries. Thus, while Romans may have balked at the 1200 sesterces price tag, they still participated in the purchase and consumption of Falernian, tacitly acknowledging its cultural capital in addition to its economic value.

That fine wine is a luxury item is no surprise: unpredictable growing season weather, labor-intensive harvest, and costly production tools make for an expensive and often scarcely available product. Moreover, it produces a pleasant effect upon the mind and body when consumed in measured quantity. As such, fine wine became a mode of conspicuous consumption for the Roman elite, the only clientele who could afford to enjoy it. Conspicuous consumption, a phrase first coined by Thorstein Veblen at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, arises from the leisure class' need to consume non-essential goods in order to demonstrate their superiority within their class. “The ceremonial differentiation of the dietary is best seen in the use of intoxicating beverages,” writes Veblen. “If these articles of consumption are costly, they are felt to be noble and honorific.”

The ‘noble’ and ‘honorific’ are locked in a tautological exchange with the leisure class, where drinking fine wines is noble because the leisure class does it, and the leisure class does it because it is noble. As a result, for the wealthy Roman male “it becomes incumbent on him to discriminate some nicety between the noble and the ignoble in consumable goods. He becomes a connoisseur... in manly beverages.” This explains the rankings of fine wines by Pliny and Martial, the preferences for specific regions

expressed by Cicero, Caesar, Augustus, Horace, and a host of Roman elites. A man of nobility had to have a discriminating palate, and such a quality was part and parcel of conspicuous consumption of luxury goods.

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Falernian was used to police the boundaries of the elite: in that sense, it was as much a measure of taste as it was a marker of it. Let us return to the testimony of those Roman writers lucky enough to have tasted the wine. The Roman authors included Falernian in satires and social critiques of the corrupting power of wealth and the vulgar overindulgence of the aristocracy. Diodorus Siculus, writing at the end of the Republic, bewails the “pernicious tendencies” of modern Romans:

“Young men turned to a soft and undisciplined manner of life, and their wealth served as purveyor to their desires. Throughout the city lavishness was preferred to frugality... Elaborate and costly dinner parties came into fashion...Of wines, any that gave but moderate pleasure to the palate were rejected, while Falernian, Chian, and all that rival these in flavor were consumed without stint.”

For Diodorus, as well as for many of his contemporaries, the manner of consumption—conspicuous and hedonistic—was symptomatic of the greater moral decay of Rome.

Horace, too, mentions Falernian as a primary tool in the abuse of luxury. His Odes III, in which Falernian appears alongside symbols of luxury such as Phrygian marble and purple-dyed garments, is written in praise of simplicity in contrast to aristocratic ostentation. “Since, then, distress is not relieved” by the accumulation of such luxuries, Horace reasons, “why should I struggle to build a towering hall in the modern style with a doorway that arouses envy? Why should I change my Sabine valley for riches that will bring an increase only of trouble?” It is not, however, total abstention from luxury that Horace promotes; instead it is the balance of the luxurious with the rustic that distinguishes the truly elite from the parvenu. The uninitiated

misunderstands luxury as the be-all, end-all of elite life; the more luxury one acquires, the more elite one becomes. Yet, as commentators Nisbet and Rudd note, “[a]ristocratic ostentation led to disharmony...Horace rejects luxury because it does not lead to happiness, not because it is socially and politically unacceptable.” One ought not eschew luxury entirely, nor embrace it wholeheartedly. To Horace, it is by tempering luxury with moderation and simplicity that one truly achieves elite status.

The same goes for Trimalchio, the comically wealthy freedman from Petronius’ *Satyricon*. During an evening of outrageous overindulgence, his guests are shocked to discover that the slave masseurs are sipping Falernian—and spilling it, no less. A household in which even slaves can casually enjoy such a luxury would be absurd to the Roman reader; such a fine wine was wasted on an unappreciative palate. Later on, “some glass jars carefully fastened with gypsum were brought on, with labels tied to their necks, inscribed, ‘Falernian of Opimius’ vintage. 100 years in bottle.” This would tickle the Roman wine enthusiast: Falernian was never bottled in glass jars, nor was the vintage indicated like so, nor would it be 100 years old — it would be closer to 180! The deliberate inaccuracies illustrate, and mirror, Trimalchio’s status as an impostor.

Trimalchio’s conspicuous consumption here, which suggests that similar if less absurd displays took place, represents his attempt to “do as the Romans do.” Even to the boorish Trimalchio, it was clear that Falernian was a component of *Romanitas* (Roman-ness) — in fact, one of the easier components to acquire. Unlike *dignitas*, or a gift for oratory, or military distinction, Falernian was a commodified element of *Romanitas* that was available for a price. There is a double irony in Trimalchio’s ostentation: mimicking the practices of the Roman elite, his lavish banquet both fails and succeeds to convey his *Romanitas*.

Throughout Petronius’ account, however, Falernian is not on trial; it is the unwitting victim of Trimalchio’s excess. The presence of Falernian is not outrageous, but its casual treatment by slaves and clear counterfeiting is. It is not Trimalchio’s possession of Falernian, but his abuse upon acquiring it, that reveals him to be a poseur unfit for the ‘true’ Roman elite.

The irony of Trimalchio’s lifestyle lies in the fact that, while he is mocked for crudely aping the Roman elite, he

may actually be the most Roman of all. If the production of Romanitas includes lavish banquets, careless expenditure, and the conspicuous consumption of Falernian, Trimalchio is in good company with the most eminent Romans, including Maecenas, Pliny, Martial, and Petronius.

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Falernian's fame endured for at least five hundred years after its heyday in the 2nd century AD, longer than any other wine in history. But how long the wine itself actually endured is the subject of some debate. There is no certain evidence that the wine was being exported in the fifth and sixth century, though it was received literary attention. According to classicist Paul Arthur, "late references to Falernian wine may have been no more than examples of literary glossing, the wine's rarity or non-availability rendering it a token sign of luxury." Half a millennium after Falernian's rise to fame, it still bore symbolic connotations of luxury to the (post-)Roman world.

The strength of its symbolism was what allowed Falernian to endure for so long, bolstering and preserving the fame the wine initially achieved by virtue of unparalleled quality. Connotations of Roman hegemony, Romanitas, and luxury (in both its distinguished and notorious forms), all of which were central features of the Roman elite, adopted and preserved Falernian in Roman culture. Falernian was a component of the lifestyle of the Roman elite, and as such would always have a clientele as long as the Roman elite existed.

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1. Pliny, NH XIV.xvii.97
2. Sealey (1984), 251
3. Pliny, NH. XIV.62
4. Virg. Georg. II.96
5. Sil. Ital. Punica VII.210-211
6. Sil. Ital. Pun. VII 186-191
7. Ibid. 207
8. Parker (1992), Tchernia (1986)
9. Horace, Odes I.27, II.11
10. Martial, Epigrams 9.73.5; 14.113.1
11. Galen, Method of Medicine XVII.vi.334; 803; x.831; 835-6
12. Pliny, NH XIV.viii.62-3
13. Galen, Method of Medicine XVII.iv.832; xi.87
14. Dio. Hal. Roman Antiquities XIV.8
15. Johnson (2004), 39-40
16. Pliny NH XIV.xix, xxiv-xxv. c.f. Cato RR CV, CXII-CXV, CXXII-CXXIII, CXXV for similar concoctions.
17. Johnson (2004), 40
18. Tuten (2004), 175
19. Bourdieu (2011), 82
20. Pliny, NH XIV.vi.56. To orient such a price, consider that a Roman legionary eared only 900 sesterces annually.
21. Veblen (1934), 70
22. Ibid., 74
23. Diod. Sic. Bib. Hist. XXXVII.3
24. Hor. Odes III.41-8
25. Nisbet and Rudd (2004), 4-5
26. Petr. Sat. 34
27. Arthur (1982), 33

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# **SECULARISM IN INDIA: An Interview with Partha Chatterjee**

**By Ian Trueger  
and Hallie Nell Swanson**

*Partha Chatterjee is a preeminent political theorist, anthropologist and historian, and one of the founding members of the Subaltern Studies collective. He is currently a Professor of Anthropology and Middle Eastern, South Asian and African Studies at Columbia University as well as an honorary professor of political science at the Center for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta. His writings include influential works such as *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World* and *The Nation and its Fragments*. The Columbia Journal of Literary Criticism sat down with Chatterjee to discuss the BJP beef ban in India, the politics of dress, and the emergence of secularism and modernity.*

**CJLC** What's your take on the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) recent beef ban in Maharashtra?

**PARTHA CHATTERJEE** I don't know if you have been following it, but this matter has been taken to court in Bombay. The background is this: slaughter of cows has been banned in many states of North India for quite a while, mostly since the 1960s. What was allowed was the import of beef from other states or from abroad. So effectively beef was sold. It was available in certain restaurants, and it was obviously consumed by some people. Now, the latest that's happened is that the government of Maharashtra has made it illegal to possess or sell or consume beef.

What's been alleged by whoever went to court is that this has been an infringement on individual freedom, that it's a violation of a fundamental right. So the government of Maharashtra, has been arguing that this ban has nothing to do with religion because then there would immediately be a question of discrimination, where one religion, or the sensibilities of one religion, was being given priority over those of others. It was likely that this particular law would be declared unconstitutional by the courts. So what the government of Maharashtra has had to do is to say that, "it's got nothing to do with religion, this is a matter of animal rights." And there is an overwhelming sentiment in the country that cattle and cows in particular are regarded as particularly valuable because of their use in agriculture, which is why the cow is venerated in a certain sense. So it's got nothing to do with religion as such, but the protection of a particularly valuable species of animal.

**CJLC:** That's what they're saying.

**PC:** The real problem in the rural Indian economy is perhaps the surplus of cattle who have no use. So it's a strange logic. Essentially, the argument is connected to an assertion made by this particular set of political organizations of a religious identity in a political sense, where the real target is Muslims, and increasingly now Christians too.

**CJLC:** So the BJP's case is in fact waged along communitarian lines?

**PC:** The argument they would make in the more straightforward political campaigns would be: "Muslims get away with asserting a whole range of completely religious communitarian demands, many of which are utterly irrational, but nobody wants to say anything because they are considered a minority, and therefore you have to respect their sensibilities. But what about the majority community?" That's the kind of argument that they keep making. But the interesting thing is, of course, who are the consumers of beef in India? All over North India, the only consumers of beef would be essentially the poorer sections of Muslims. But in the South of the country, it is eaten by lower caste Hindus very widely. In certain coastal areas, certainly Goa and Kerala, beef is eaten quite widely by all communities. Christians, even Hindus—upper caste Hindus, too—would often eat beef in Kerala.

**CJLC:** Is the disparity between beef consumption across different demographics and regions taken into account by the BJP?

**PC:** No. If you point that out, they will say that it's a local aberration.

**CJLC:** It is very interesting that they try to deploy that rhetoric. Sudipita Kaviraj observed that when these sorts of controversies emerge, the Congress party's impulse is to localize it, and the BJP's impulse is to nationalize it. Do you think that the rhetoric of secularism plays into this in a positive or a malignant way?

**PC:** Secularism can be defined in all sorts of ways. For instance, you have the variety of secularism in a country like Turkey, which was associated with a whole Kemalist westernization of society, so secularization effectively meant clamping down on Islam itself. In India you've never had that kind of strong secularism. This attempt to actually use the powers of the state to keep religion out of the public domain has never been practiced in India. The concern has been much more, "How do you handle the claims of different religions at the same time? How does the state manage to do this?" I think the principal concern of secularism is for the state to demonstrate that it is not being partial to any particular religion. Here, the question would simply be this: "What would be considered partial?"

**CJLC:** In the 1980s, the BJP accused the Congress party of a policy of "pseudo-secularism." Providing for all religions was seen as actually not secular, because the state is not impartial in the sense of being removed from all things religious. Do you see a change in the BJP's line nowadays, when it comes to questions of dictating dress or meat consumption?

**PC:** You see it's an interesting move that some sections of the BJP seem to make because the early argument of pseudo-secularism was that there should be equality in the application of the law. The secularist argument was made demanding a uniform set of laws instead of a separate code of personal laws (such as marriage, inheritance). Congress rejected this proposition, advocating for special laws for minorities. And that was what was called pseudo-secularism. The twist today is that the debate seems to have died down. We don't hear the BJP demanding the abrogation of Muslims or Christians anymore. The interesting thing about the beef argument is that it's almost a kind of new majoritarianism. It posits the question: why shouldn't the views of the largest section of the electorate be given priority?

**CJLC:** Within the wider discourse surrounding secularism, India seems to be almost fetishized; it's seen as the case study. I'm wondering whether you think this is correct? If so, can we talk about French *laïcité* and Hindutva politics in the same sentence?

**PC:** France has a long history in which *laïcité* is historically situated. When *laïcité* became accepted, who were the other religious minorities that were affected in France? It was basically an agreement between Catholics and Protestants to say, "Let's forget our religious differences—as far as the public life of the state is concerned, religion does not exist." This is hard *laïcité*. Even if you think of it in the period of the early Republic, this comes out in something like the Dreyfus Affair. What's the place of the Jew here? It needed to be nego-

tiated all over again. Do the Jews have a place in this? "If we are free to pursue our religion in private, can we have synagogues?" In France even today a Jew cannot walk into a university wearing a skullcap. It's not allowed. Then of course what happens after World War II is the new waves of largely Muslim immigration from the Maghreb. These people were never part of the original agreement on which *laïcité* was founded. So this is a completely new set of negotiations which are now going on. What does "religion in the private" actually mean?

**CJLC:** Even the conceptual categories of the public and the private spheres are historically contingent, as is the secularism that arises from them. How does this play out when you transplant these concepts to India?

## If you think of the French *laïcité*'s as the only proper secularism then yes, of course it's dead.

**PC:** This has been negotiated very differently. In the Indian case for instance, if you were to wear a hijab, fine. If you want to do it you do it. There is a whole history of clothes, headgear, etc, which is associated with particular sectarian, religious, all kinds of associations. And people were free to display these to the extent that they wanted to, although much of this has changed over time: if you look at any pictures even from the early 20th century you'd find men on the street wearing all kinds of headgear. Each headgear represents a particular type—it could be a caste, a particular area, a religious denomination, all kinds of things. Now all that's gone, no one wears headgear anymore in India. But this question of to what extent you display your private identity in a public space, this is a matter that's been historically negotiated over time. The kind of situations that you get in France for instance, about women wearing headscarves, would never happen in the Indian

# The kind of situations about women wearing headscarves would never happen in India. I would say France could learn something from the Indian model of secularism.

case simply because it's been accepted that it's still considered private what you wear. It's fine to carry one's private identity into a public place.

**CJLC:** Do you think France could learn something from the Indian model of secularism?

**PC:** I would say so! But the history of what became a secular identity in France was established against a whole tradition of the church and so on and so forth. There was a serious fight there which was won in a particular way. I can understand people who think that it's a victory they can't let go of.

**CJLC:** But the times have moved on...

**PC:** Yes, of course. There are completely different kinds



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of people, who don't even understand the fight of church versus republic, who don't understand its significance. Most of these new people who are entering Europe have no sense of what that meant. And why should they?

**CJLC:** There is the argument that secularism in the West is essentially just Christianity. The Hindu Code Bill assumes an Indian Citizen is Hindu until they can prove otherwise. Can you draw an analogous argument in India, that 'secular' registers as Hindu?

**PC:** There's an interesting problem there. The Hindu Code Bill had to be fought for because a great deal of variations within what was supposedly Hindu society were completely erased and a single legal framework for all Hindus was sought to be imposed. It seemed to be a step toward something like a uniform civil code for everybody. The reason why it was restricted only to Hindus was precise-

# Modernity didn't just drop from the sky ready-made.

ly because this question of Muslim identity was seen to be too sensitive. It is possible that had Partition not been such a terrible event, the move toward a uniform civil code would have been at that moment far stronger. It's still there in the constitution as one of those pious wishes. So in a sense, the French kind of idea was accepted as the desirable end for a proper republic to have—that all the laws should apply to all citizens.

**CJLC:** But it was unfeasible.

**PC:** It was not feasible, and it was seen to be an exceptional situation. Or a temporary situation: “we’ll get there ultimately, but right at this moment, it would be unwise to try and push it.” Today of course even the BJP doesn’t seem particularly keen to push this agenda at all. There is the additional question of whether the Hindu Code Bill is necessarily the right model for a uniform civil code which applies to everybody—why should that be? One could always argue that a uniform civil code should not necessarily just be based on what’s uniform for the Hindus. As always, it’s a matter that needs to be negotiated between all the parties that are concerned and that negotiation hasn’t happened. And one more thing, when one says “secularism in the West,” one has to realize that there are all kinds of variations. Secularism in the US is different from

secularism in Britain or in Scandinavia for instance. In many of those places you actually have an established Church. They don’t think that stands in the way of secularism.

**CJLC:** Do you think that’s a possible critique of Talal Asad’s account of secularism, that he conceives of Christianity as too monolithic, failing to take into account how the secular compact was negotiated differently in different countries?

**PC:** That’s correct, but Talal Asad wouldn’t deny the fact. Talal Asad’s main point is to say that in fact when secularism is created, religion is created at the same time. There is no such thing as religion prior to secularism. So when religion is defined in a way which says, “it’s a matter of private belief and private practice,” then what you have is a crucial problem in many of the Protestant countries of Europe, where you actually have an established national church so the state is identifying with one particular religion, even though you could say that in actual practice the state doesn’t discriminate against other religions. But it is a fact.

**CJLC:** Ashis Nandy thinks secularism is dead. What is your diagnosis?

**PC:** I don’t think it’s dead. Again, you

see it depends on what you think secularism is. If you think of the French *laïcité*’s as the only proper secularism then yes, of course it’s dead. That kind of hard secularism is probably impractical and unfeasible in most places, including Turkey now. On the other hand this question of putting a certain distance between the state and the various religious communities is a problem which simply can’t be avoided in any large country with a heterogeneous population. Whenever there is a perception that the state is favoring a particular religious community at the expense of others, you’re going to get a set of conflicts emerging which will be defined along lines of religious difference and the state will be forced to into one of two positions: it can either explicitly claim it is in favor of a particular community, and the other communities could just as well disappear or be second class citizens; or else, the state has to demonstrate that it’s not actually being partial to one particular community. The problem of secularism is not going to go away. It’s a problem that’s here to stay.

**CJLC:** Can you envision a kind of self-government scenario in which particular communities argue among themselves and then present their rulings to the state? So the state ceases to be an arbitrator?

**PC:** One of the things that Ashis always argued was that whenever there was some sort of religious conflict, without outsiders—these larger forces—the local community left to itself would find ways of resolving the problem. Which may well be correct, but how can you avoid these larger forces from coming in. You can’t have self-governing towns or villages anymore. So there will be larger forces, there will be larger political parties, there will be larger political movements. They will have their effects on local politics, yes. You can’t avoid this.

**CJLC:** One of Nandy’s arguments is that “a natural tol-

erance tinged with faith” was a principal component of India’s indigenous religions before modernity. This is part and parcel of an anti-modernist stance that rejects secularism as an ideological imposition.

**PC:** The problem with that is even if you were to identify modernity as the source of the problem—and accept that—how does one manage to get rid of all the modern institutions? How do you say that we’re going to return to some kind of pre-modern ethos of respecting each other’s differences and still somehow manage to live together? The reality is we have a state where you have votes, you have population groups, and these numbers make a difference. Majority religious communities and minority religious communities are all defined in terms of numbers. You can’t get away from the fact that under modern conditions of citizenship, those who have greater numbers will always have this tendency to impose their views onto others. There must be ways within the framework of the state itself to protect those who are small in number, the minorities. I don’t see any way of getting away from this.

**CJLC:** So these disavowals of modernity are fanciful?

**PC:** I would say this: in terms of trying to gain a better sense of the origins and limits of modernity, these are important analytical observations. You become aware that modernity didn’t just drop from the sky ready-made. That certain things were lost because modernity had to come in, but that does not mean that the things that were lost can simply be recovered and brought back—they wouldn’t work anymore. We don’t have the conditions or the means to make them work anymore.

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**SARIEL FRIEDMAN**

# **POSTCOLONIAL LONDON: Migration and Metaphor in Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* and Zia Haider Rahman's *In the Light of What We Know***

**By Dur e Aziz Amna**

*The following is a series of excerpts from a senior thesis. For a longer version of the essay, please visit [www.columbiajournalofliterarycriticism.com](http://www.columbiajournalofliterarycriticism.com).*

“Wide-armed, hospitable, disputatious, worldly, cerebral,” James Wood declared of Zia Haider Rahman’s debut novel, *In the Light of What We Know*.<sup>1</sup> In lauding the novel, Wood is hardly alone: countless reviews and interviews have taken on the task of grappling with the book’s labyrinthine, 500-page aria.<sup>2</sup> The novel is at once an acutely personal tale of Zafar, a brilliant man haunted by family tragedy and a calamitous love affair, and a commentary on the dilemma of a globalized world that wishes to disregard—even as it falls victim to—the age-old prejudices of class and race. Indeed, Zia’s words are intensely conscious of our age, turning a critical eye towards a world still recovering from 9/11 and the 2008 Financial Crisis.

In all the conversation that the book has generated, however, there remains a gaping absence: the novel’s engagement with *Seasons of Migration to the North*, Tayeb Salih’s postcolonial classic. Readers of the novel will find no dearth of epigraphs: every chapter begins with an invocation of two or more literary classics, references to

writers as diverse as James Baldwin, Edward Said, and Umberto Eco. And yet, Zia’s invocation of Salih in chapter two is particularly salient. Despite a gap of almost half a century between their two novels, Salih and Zia have similar biographies: both were born in countries that were part of the British Empire—Salih was Sudanese while Zia is of Bangladeshi origin. Both authors migrated to England, attended university there, and settled in London, but had careers that took them across the world, with Salih working for the BBC in Paris and Qatar, while Rahman having lived in Dhaka, Munich, and New York, where he worked in investment banking.

The two novels reflect these biographical similarities. For anyone who has also read *Season*, Zia’s novel is an exercise in déjà vu. Modeled after the novelists themselves, the two novel’s protagonists, Mustafa Saeed and Zafar, are men of color whose experiences of living in London form a large part of the stories that they tell. Both have ties to countries that the novelists themselves grew up in—Saeed grew up in Khartoum while Zafar’s parents are from rural Bangladesh. Both characters form part of a lengthy procession of lonely men in modern literature, joining the ranks of Roquentin, Dedalus, and Meursault, among others.

The storylines of both novels are also strikingly similar. Both protagonists, represented as brilliant outsiders, tell the narrator their stories of heightening estrangement with the world around them. Most astonishingly, both end with a chilling confession of rape, the symbolism of which is charged with issues of race and power—both men rape white English women who have provoked their pride and undermined their self-conception through cold, haughty indifference.

Why are there such striking similarities in both the narrative structures of the two novels and in the lives of their protagonists? While the epigraph alludes to the former novel’s influence upon the latter, I argue that the commonalities arise out of the shared lived experiences of the two protagonists and the choices that arise from of them.

In my attempt to answer these questions, I have chosen an approach that stays true to the spirit of the novels, especially Zia’s. My project takes the form of an imaginary dialogue between the two authors in which they discuss the novels, each writer asking the other questions that reflect not only his curiosities about the other book, but also his anxieties regarding his own novel.

Salih: Where did the idea for the novel come from?<sup>3</sup>

Zia: It came from an image that is described in the first line—an image of a man showing up at a friend’s doorsteps, weary but full of stories.<sup>4</sup> The whole novel grew out of this scene, of two friends reuniting after a long time, narration—and the ways in which it changes the story being told—lies at the heart of the novel. To have stories to tell, there needs to have been an absence, and then a reunion.

As I went along, the stories that Zafar was telling began to center on questions and conflicts that have occupied me for a long time. There was a constant tug of war on the page; on the one hand, I wanted my characters to explore these concerns, but on the other, there needed to be a plot as well, so that the reader could leave feeling that they had not only heard a conversation, but also read a story. I have attempted to achieve both aims by allowing the discussions between the two friends to bring forth two major revelations: first, the narrator’s betrayal of Zafar, and second, Zafar’s rape of Emily.

Salih: The two events are closely tied to each other, as is their treatment in the novel. It is only when the reader finds out about the rape that they understand why Zafar appears at the narrator’s doorsteps. Zafar need to share the unbearable burden of the rape with another person. But these are the larger pillars that hold up the story. What many of your readers have found even more fascinating about the novel is the detail—the discussions of class, race, and politics, all carried out in relation to the stories that Zafar tells. Interestingly, a lot of these stories are of times that he and the narrator spent together. They are shared recollections, and yet often the narrator either doesn’t remember the events at all or remembers them in a very different light.

We also see the gaping holes in the narrator’s understanding of his own life. At one point, he fondly reminisces about Sergey, a Russian graduate student at Princeton who would frequent his family’s home when the narrator was a child, living in the US with his parents. I wonder how many readers realize that the narrator’s mother had an affair with Sergey. The narrator himself either still does not recognize the hints even as he tells the story years later,

or never confronts the truth alongside the reader. In either case, the novel tries to impress upon the reader the need to reconsider our own lives and to wonder whether the narratives we build around them are accurate or not.

Zia: In this sense, your novel differs from mine. Mustafa Saeed tells the story of his life, and particularly of his activities in London, to a narrator whom he has met for the first time just weeks ago. The narrator’s involvement with the story begins after he has heard of Saeed’s exploits of English women, and particularly, of his rape of Jean Morris. The novel is more interested in the effects of these tales on the narrator and the rest of the village, than in the process through which the reader gets to know about them.

But to go back to how the novels begin—yours starts off with the narrator describing his return from London and his comfortable and strangely uneventful resettlement back home. How deeply is this storyline influenced by your own relationship with the Sudan, a place that you stopped visiting a very long time ago?

Salih: The ease with which the narrator adapts to life back home, and I can see you think it is unnatural, is indicative on two fronts. Partly, it is sentimentality, maybe even whim—estranged from Sudan as I am now, I fantasize about going back to my village and not finding myself out of touch, of being able to recognize the value of the simple, untainted life there. That village is the only place where I have felt as truly one with my surroundings, where I have seen an unadulterated connection between

people and the natural world around them.<sup>5</sup> At one point, the narrator says, “I used to treasure within me the image of this little village.” And perhaps that’s reflective of my own secret hopes, that going back to that place will fill up a vacancy inside of me. On the other hand, the story of the return is also pertinent given the time period. The novel is set in a newly independent Sudan, at a time when the British had recently moved out and gone back home. I wanted to tell a story that mirrored this grand imperial exodus.

I think you have a much less optimistic view on the matter. The first epigraph in your novel is an excerpt from Edward Said’s “Reflections on Exile”, in which he calls exile “the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place.”<sup>6</sup> I believe that, for Said, the nature of this rift implies that going back home is not simply arduous, but also temporally impossible. The home that the exile knows of has vanished.

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Salih: [...] I find Zafar’s obsession with class problematic on two fronts. First of all, in creating a fine distinction between himself and those that he encounters within the stony courtyards of Oxford or on Wall Street, Zafar is denying how similar he is to them. He has had the same education, he is working in similar fields, and most significantly, his mode of thinking, if not the content of his thoughts, is the same as theirs. Your novel, as a whole, is unapologetically elitist. It is fully accessible only to a privileged few, and perhaps most relevant to those who have had access to same kind of economic mobility and intellectual

growth that Zafar has enjoyed. His capacity for intensive reflection, digressive conversation, and rumination on class and politics—these are not things that many people are capable of. Zafar is an undeniable part of London’s intellectual elite, even if he doesn’t form a part of its social elite.

Zia: There is a significant caveat in Zafar’s pronouncements on free will that we might be in the danger of ignoring. He doesn’t quite deny the presence of choice in our lives, because in the same passage, he says that choice “lies in wait in the crevices of time, to surprise us when we seem to have the least room to maneuver.” This is an ambiguous statement. It doesn’t deny the possibility of free will, the way the other line does, but expresses frustration at the skewed offerings of choice that we get in life, choice that presents itself only in the hardest of times.

Salih: And in retrospect, this is part of Zafar’s justification for his act of rape, the third and final horror that the novel contains.

Zia: If you remember, Zafar invokes the concept of free will again at that moment. “If it is true that our will is free, how is it that we do things we regret?” He mentions to the narrator that he felt exhilarated by his act, but there is nothing in his words to support that. There is no sense of victory that accompanies his act, despite the symbolic implications of what he has overpowered and subdued: Emily and the hated Englishness that she represents. Zafar’s act is my final verdict on the depravity of our times and on the depths of darkness that we

all contain within ourselves. It is not the act of a warrior, the way Saeed’s is.

Salih: There is a perverse celebration on Saeed’s part: he revels in his rape of Jean Morris and the racial implications of his act. He thinks of himself as the Oriental warrior who has come to set the score right. He tells the judges at his trial, “I came as an invader into your very homes: a drop of poison which you have injected into the veins of history.” For him, the act is an empowering one, through which he breaks away the shackles that he imagines Empire to have wrung around his feet.

Zia: The tragedy inherent in this distorted metaphor of reverse colonization is that in both Saeed’s and Zafar’s cases, the final battlefield remains the female body. Yet, this feminization strengthens the metaphor. If Sudan was the emasculated land ravished and destroyed by the colonizer, Saeed’s revenge is meant to mirror colonial atrocities by targeting London’s own daughters, including Jean Morris.

Yet, despite everything, Saeed gives into the same Orientalist tropes that he rebels against.<sup>7</sup> He entertains Western stereotypes by identifying himself as the Arab warrior, “warring with bow and sword and spear and arrows.” While reading, I wondered if he was using these tropes mockingly, or if he earnestly envisioned himself as a legendary Arab warrior, governing much of the world, as the Muslims had in the heydays of the Ottoman Empire. The reader remains conflicted between thinking of Saeed as a rebel against Empire, trying to avenge the wrongs done to his people, or as simply a ruthless narcissist.

Salih: [In one of] your interviews, [...] you mentioned the essential circularity of time, about how every age considers itself to be positioned at a pivotal time in history, even though, like Saeed, we are simply repeating the horrors people committed 20, or 200, or 2000 years ago.<sup>8</sup>

Yet, I think you give too little credit to this age. There’s a wonderful verse that Agha Shahid Ali wrote, in a poem dedicated to Edward Said.<sup>9</sup> “By the Hudson lies Kashmir, brought from Palestine.” On one hand, Shahid is mourning the inevitable loss of separation: his separation from his beloved Kashmir, Said’s exile from Palestine. But he’s also acknowledging how the two places, through the two men, have been brought together in a quiet corner by the Hudson, in a completely different part of the world. That’s the beauty of this age—how freely it allows people and ideas to disregard the constraints of geography and find each other in the most unexpected of places. That world that we live in today doesn’t allow for the Occident-Orient polarity that we see in my novel. There has been too much movement of people and ideas to allow for neat and discrete categorizations of East and West.

Zia: I think this had started happening even at the time that you wrote *Season*. You mentioned the homeward movement of the British after the collapse of Empire, but they carried back with them the echoes of all the places that they had seen. England, and in particular London, would never be the same again. The movement of people from all over former colonies and the rapidly thickening diaspora in London would change the nature of the city forever. Perhaps the most crucial struggle that your narrator goes through is his return to a Sudan that he imagines to be thoroughly cleansed of British influence. The country is now independent, and he hopes for a neat partition, a return to a time before the British came. At one point he says, “The fact that they came to our land, I know not why, does that



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mean that we should poison our present and our future? Sooner or later they will leave.” He’s abrupt, even nonchalant, in his attitude towards British presence in Sudan, as if it were a short-lived, misplaced adventure that is thankfully ending. Perhaps this is why he respects his grandfather so much, because he sees in him a representation of the uncorrupted, pre-Western Sudan. He imagines the Arab-African roots of his village to be immutable and staunch in the face of any invasion.

Salih: One of the most unfortunate consequences of the postcolonial dialogue, of our attempts to right the wrongs of Empire and dissect its every effect,

has been our inattention towards the thousands of years of history that preceded British presence in these places. Despite the fact that the Second British Empire was much later in history than the discovery of America, it still inflicted upon us an amnesia regarding all things that had preceded it. Precolonial history is now a fable, the stuff of romantic folklore. In our history books and in our conversations, tangible history seems to begin at the start of Empire, as if the victor not only wrote history, but created it.

Zia: I am thinking back to Said’s notion of the unhealable rift. Sympathetic as I am to your narrator’s desire to imagine

Sudan in all its precolonial purity, there’s the undeniable fact that Empire changed the essence of the country, of all the places that it controlled.

Salih: Where do we turn to for help in imagining a precolonial landscape? The inevitable result is misrepresentation. Without the power to imagine reality, we cannot help but distort it. My narrator tried to brush this matter off by claiming that it is not only possible, but natural, to imagine and regain the precolonial past. And yet, soon the village of Wad Hamid is shaken to its core by Saeed, the postcolonial warrior, who changes the village from a place of untainted peace to one of tragedy and scandal. The postcolonial takes over, despite the narrator’s best efforts to shrug it off, leaving no place for the past.

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Zia: You say that Saeed is a symbol for the postcolonial, but what explains the extravagance of his character? The hyperbole that goes into presenting him is astounding. He’s an American Psycho-esque character parading through London, annihilating one Orientalist soul after another. The descriptions of his bedroom, which he likens to a harem, portray an exaggerated persona of him: he describes it as “heavy with the smell of burning sandalwood and incense, the bathroom..pungent [with] Eastern perfumes, lotions, unguents, powders, and pills.” The details of his interactions with English women and their conversations are filled with romanticized tropes that highlight the Occident-Orient polarity. This is not the “sly civility” of the colonial subject that Homi Bhabha speaks of: it’s a much

more extravagant and caricatured hyper-reality.<sup>10</sup> At one point, he describes a time when he won over a girl by playing along with her heavily distorted conception of him as the beautiful, brooding Arab. He proclaims, “Lies are turned into truths, history becomes a pimp, and the jester is turned into a sultan.” Saeed recognizes the inevitability of distortion that you mentioned, but he seems willing to let it happen, as long as he can use it to his own advantage.

Salih: Do you know of William Hodges?<sup>11</sup> He was one of the first British artists to document India during the time of the East India Company.<sup>12</sup> If you look closely at his drawings of Indian landscapes, you’ll see that they’re often speckled with a specific representation of the “Indian type”: an indolent, lazy man sitting quietly in one neat corner of the scene, sometimes by the riverside, sometimes on the steps of a monument.<sup>13</sup> He is the epitome of passiveness and a thorough lack of agency. Many of his drawings are quite rudimentary, sketched on the spot and finished later. He would often add the figures to the image afterwards, not based on observation but simply to lend some human content to the drawings—a crouched man here, a turbaned beggar there. The Oriental became a pawn, to be placed and removed at will.

This is the kind of distortion that postcolonial literature aims to rectify. Imperial history has wrought much abuse on the world. Perhaps unfortunately, postcolonial literature carries a chip on its shoulder regarding its duty to reverse these wrongs. Saeed’s character is a result of this awareness, and the stubborn, pointed response that stems

from it. He simultaneously plays along with Orientalist stereotypes when it suits him, like when they help him charm English women, while at times engaging in active, engaged rebellion, unlike the slouched, passive brown figures of the Western artist's imagination.

Zia: Saeed and your narrator look back at and romanticize a world that simply does not exist anymore. The precolonial world does not exist as a geographical entity anywhere in the world. We have moved beyond it not only temporally and geographically, but also imaginatively. Whether we are in London or in Wad Hamid, in Dhaka or in Islamabad, we are part of the postcolonial, which is not just an intellectual construct but also a set of physical coordinates that encompasses all regions that fell under the crown.

Salih: Earlier, we talked about how both Saeed and Zafar are eternal outsiders in the worlds that they inhabit, particularly in London. The most important metaphor in the novels is London: a symbol of the alienation that both the protagonists feel.

Zia: In both the novels London is a city that the protagonists try to own, and there is great poetry to this, given the connotations that the city has. Saeed's London is the imperial capital of the post-War era, albeit one that will soon see its dominions rise up against it. The first non-cooperation movement has begun in India at this point and things will soon begin crumbling elsewhere as well. All said and done, though, it is still the imperial capital, a place that holds

symbolic power over Saeed. Joan Didion has said, perhaps a little optimistically, "A place belongs forever to whoever claims it hardest, remembers it most obsessively, [and] renders it...in his own image."<sup>14</sup> And perhaps, in his twisted way, Saeed tries to do exactly that. There are two means through which he tries to own the city. The first matter—his exploits in London, and how, by bringing his English lovers and their families to their knees, he tries to make London servile to him. The other process is that of recollection; telling his story to the narrator is another way of claiming the city, as it allows him not simply to relive his exploits, but to amplify them, to describe them with powerful words laden with allegory.

Zia: I am a bit wary of this thesis, that the Empire is now writing back, and through words is reclaiming some of the autonomy, authority, and price that it had lost. I believe that this idea has become too monolithic to describe our world today. Certainly, London is home to more colonial immigrants today than ever before—immigrants who are doing astoundingly well, like Zafar, like the narrator and his parents. Claiming the city for oneself does not seem as arduous a task as it was in Saeed's time. Yet, to me, the rise of an elite within minorities in London does not appear to be a case of reverse colonization, but instead evidence of the inevitability of oppression. At one point in *Season*, the narrator expresses his disdain for the new extravagant and corrupt African rulers that have replaced the British. Speaking of Saeed, he says, "Had he returned in the natural way of things he would have

joined up with this pack of wolves. They all resemble him: handsome faces and faces made so by comfortable living." My novel touches upon a newer breed of such irresponsible leaders: those in the world of finance, whose behavior brought the whole world to its feet in 2008.<sup>15</sup> My narrator, who is forced to claim responsibility for his own and others' wrongdoing, is part of the London elite, and so is Zafar, despite the latter's constant critique of the city's rigid classism. In my mind, this implicates them in certain systems of oppression. I don't see them as colonial subjects attempting to right the wrongs of Empire. They are themselves the enablers of a newer, vaster, more global empire.

Salih: So what would you say the meaning of London is, in your novel? What does the city stand for?

Zia: I think of London as the emotional and intellectual epicenter of Zafar's life. But as I have said already, it is a place that leaves him very uneasy. There is a verse from a poem by the Urdu poet, Ghalib: "I saw the desolation of wilderness, and was somehow reminded of home."<sup>16</sup> Ultimately, London is the closest that Zafar has come to home.

Salih: It is a place that he cannot escape from. We have seen that the luxury of escape is an elusive one, both for Zafar and for the narrator in my novel, who cannot retreat back to the precolonial past that he cherishes so much. The concluding lines of your own novel, in which the narrator says that "the only mission available to us...is to let unfold the questions, to take to the river know-

ing not if it runs to the sea, and accept our place as servants of life.”

Zia: Our desire to go back in time, to return to purity, is itself a result of our modern fantasy. Your narrator’s yearning for the precolonial is a result of his postcolonial imagination. Not only can he not return to the precolonial, he can also not escape the postcolonial.

Salih: The other pertinent question is: why would we want to return? If we are inevitably modern, inevitably postcolonial, what harm is there in that? The current of time has moved us in that direction and we stuck in the temporal reality of our lives. Fighting against this can lead only to the kind of destruction that we see erupt in Wad Hamid.

Our true responsibility, as ending lines of your novel insist, is to move forward within time, to anticipate the future, not only our own but of those who will follow us, while remaining witness to the horrors of time. Godel told us that there are many things that we will never know. Of the little that we do know, we must hold on to it even as we move forward. We must never, ever forget.

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1. Zia Haider Rahman, *In the Light of What We Know*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014. All subsequent references will be to this edition.
2. Particularly noteworthy, along with Wood’s review, are Amitava Kumar’s review in the *New York Times* (Amitava Kumar, “The Banker, the Visitor, His Wife and Her Lover,” *The New York Times* 11 Apr. 2014) and interview of the author by his editor Eric Chinski, (“Zia Haider Rahman & Eric Chinski: Authors & Editors in Conversation,” available on the publisher’s website)
3. A compromise between literary analysis and creative writing, the dialogue will shift from one topic to another as it moves towards the main argument—often digressive and perhaps more informal than an argumentative paper. Every aspect discussed is essential to the claims stated in the introduction, although the reader might realize this only retrospectively. Given that the novels’ similar narrative structure was one of the first elements that made me consider this project, the conversation begins by examining the role of narration in Zia’s book.
4. This conversation is almost entirely imaginary; all the questions are my own, and the answers mostly mine as well. However, I have relied on a few recorded interviews with the both the authors, to give me authentic insight regarding the novelists’ own concerns about their works. A borrowed thought will always be footnoted. Here, Zia’s description of how the novel was born is taken from an interview with *Guernica* magazine (“How Do You Know?,” conducted by Jonathan Lee.)
5. Salih expressed these sentiments regarding his village in Sudan, which is a model for the fictional village of Wad Ahmed, in an interview with *Writers and Company* in 2002 (“Remembering writer Tayeb Salih,” conducted by Eleanor Wachtel)
6. Edward W. Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 2000.
7. My views on Orientalism, its characteristics and manifestations, are heavily informed by Edward Said (*Edward W. Said, Orientalism*, New York: Vintage, 1979)
8. Zia’s views on the “hubris in regarding ours as a pivotal moment in history” are taken from an interview with *The Hindu*

- Literary Review (“Interview with Zia Haider Rahman”, conducted by Jaya Battacharji Rose)
9. The quote from Shahid’s wonderful ghazal, “By Exiles”, is taken from Adel Iskander and Hakem Rustom’s book on Said. (Adel Iskander and Hakem Rustom, *Edward Said a Legacy of Emancipation and Representation*. Berkeley: U of California, 2010)
  10. My views on colonialism and Empire have been shaped by many sources, of which Bhabha remains an important one. (Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London: Routledge, 1994) Other influences include David Armitage (*The Ideological Origins of the British Empire*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000)
  11. William Hodges (1744-1797) was an English artist who worked in India for four years, producing numerous drawings, of which ninety belong to the Yale Center for British Art. More information on his life and work is available in his own travel account ((William Hodges, *Travels in India*, London, 1994) and Isabel Stuebe’s important dissertation on the artist (Isabel Stuebe, *The Life and Works of William Hodges*, Garland Publishing: Princeton, 1979)
  12. See W. J. T. Mitchell’s views on landscape as an instrument for imperial power and control. (W. J. T. Mitchell, ed. *Landscape and Power*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002) See also G. H. R. Tillotson’s views on Hodges’ role as an enabler of Empire (G.H. R. Tillotson, *The Artificial Empire: The Indian Landscapes of William Hodges*, Routledge: London, 2012)
  13. This characterization of the “lazy, indolent type” comes from Anna Maria Jerichau-Baumann, quoted in Elisabeth Oxfeldt’s *Journey from Scandinavia: Travelogues of Africa, Asia, and South America, 1840-2000*
  14. Joan Didion, *The White Album*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009
  15. Zia’s novel contains a detailed explanation of the 2008 Financial Crisis, pertinent given that both main characters have had experience of working in high finance, as has the novelist himself.
  16. Mirza Asadullah Khan Ghalib, *Ghazals of Ghalib; Versions from the Urdu*, New York: Columbia UP, 1971.

# ***CITIES, CULTURE, AND THE POLITICS OF REMEMBERING: An Interview with Andreas Huyssen***

**EMILY XIAO**

**By Jack Gross**



*Andreas Huyssen is the Villard Professor of German and Comparative Literature at Columbia University. He is one of the founding editors of *New German Critique*, and serves on the editorial boards of numerous other journals. His research and teaching is focused on 18th-20th century German literature and culture, international modernism, Frankfurt School critical theory, cultural memory in transnational perspective, urban culture and globalization. His books include *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (1986) *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (1995), *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (2003) and, *Miniature Metropolis: Literature in an Age of Photography and Film* (2015).*

**CJLC** Your work started to focus on memory in the early 90s—

**ANDREAS HUYSEN** No, even earlier, even in the 70s. There's some articles on memory and temporality already in my book *After the Great Divide*. It wasn't central because that book was about postmodernism and of course the claim that was—famously articulated by Fredric Jameson, that modernism was about temporality, about time; and postmodernism was about space. I never believed that, because I don't think you can separate the categories. He doesn't believe that himself, anyway. So, I had already in that book a first piece about the Holocaust TV series that came out in the late 70s and its reception in Germany in the context of other work, particularly in the theater that had been done on the Holocaust, on the Third Reich, and German literature from the 1940s through the 1970s. So, you know, that was already there. Being a German of that post-war generation—although I was born in the war—this was a key topic for me since the 1960s, since my graduate student days.

**CJLC:** And so that interest was about literary methods of dealing with cultural memory.

**AH:** Yeah—exactly. And then with my next book *Twilight Memories*, I took up the whole issue of memory politics in the context of 1989 and the fall of the Berlin Wall. One could see in Berlin how spaces were opening up that were drenched in history, whereas before everything was in the freezer of the cold war. That was fascinating to me. Then my interest in memory moved from literature—from plays, television, film, etc.—over into urban space and into architecture.

**CJLC:** In the 90s, the debates about cultural memory practices in Germany after reunification coincided with all of these large architectural projects as well.

**AH:** Exactly. I mean, Postdamer Platz—the whole reconstruction of Berlin became a key kind of thing. The disappearance of the wall, I mean building of architecture always comes together with disappearance of architecture. It's

like memory and forgetting. So that was fascinating and I had a sabbatical in Berlin at the time, right after the fall of the wall, 1991. I dealt with these issues of German unification, both politically and culturally, in *Twilight Memories*.

**CJLC:** In the 1990s, both memory and trauma were becoming prominent threads in academic discourse. I was wondering if today the question of memory politics still has the same purchase or urgency in popular discourse?

**AH:** I would say in German, jein: yes and no. In the early 2000s I already asked myself, how long can this memory wave last? Because the university is part of the culture industry—at its elevated level or whatever you want to call it—and there are certain trends that go up and then they go down. But there's still massive amounts of memory work happening today. What's interesting to me, is it's no longer bound to the nation-states, to national geographies, which it largely still was in the 1990s. For me, it was always the Holocaust that started it all, but in the 90s you had the apartheid regime in South Africa, the Latin American dictatorships, and their trauma discussions, you began to have discussions in India about Partition, later on the comfort

women, Cambodia, Rwanda, the falling apart of Yugoslavia, etcetera. So the 90s were politically a time when memory, both good memory and bad memory—you know the Yugoslavian war started because Milosovic mobilized memories in favor of the war; Hitler had mobilized memories of World War One and the defeat at Versailles in order to start the new war. But I think a major difference now is that the trauma discourse is over with. I mean, we still talk about trauma, trauma exists, no question. But it's no longer the master signifier for memory, and one can ask historically why it was so dominant in the 1990s. Everybody would have different explanations for that, but I think it had to do with the issue of representation. There was a famous book edited by Saul Friedlander which was called *The Limits of Representation* which had to do with the concept of unrepresentability. A key definition of trauma is that when you experience trauma you can't represent it. There was a debate in the 90s about Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*, which was about the representation of the Holocaust. Lanzmann said you cannot represent the Holocaust. And then with Spielberg's—

**CJLC:** *Schindler's List*

**AH:** *Schindler's List*. Spielberg gave the counterexample. And these movies are of course very different. One should not denigrate one just in favour of the other. Because the idea that the Holocaust cannot be represented, I mean tell that to the victims of the Holocaust, first of all. The question is not whether it can be represented; the question is how it gets represented. And Lanzmann, for me, too, gave an incredibly strong and powerful example of that. But for another type of audience, *Schindler's List* was certainly a valid way of inscribing Holocaust memory into a broader public discourse. I mean ask today how many people have seen *Schindler's List*, and how many people have seen Lanzmann. Lanzmann is largely forgotten, except in academic circles. So the trauma discussion was, I think, tied to the aesthetic idea of the impossibility of representation, which is no longer a widely accepted idea today.

**CJLC:** This Lanzmann vs. Spielberg debate made me think of the Expressionism debate between Bloch and Lukács in the late 30s—the stakes in that aesthetic debate were extraordinarily high, politically speaking. It seems clear that these kinds of debates aren't happening anymore, that their potential to have any effect seems really minimal.

**AH:** I basically agree. "Aesthetics and Politics" was written in all capitals in the interwar period. And some of it has to do with the fact that it was the age of avant-gardism. It was the age of the new: the new in politics and the new in art. Where is the new in politics right now? There may be lots of new in the arts now, but this linkage of an aesthet-

ic avant-garde with the notion of the Leninist vanguard in politics, or with a political notion of the vanguard on the radical left and the radical right was of course dominant at the time. It made for a situation in which any artwork would have to face political questions. Today, those stakes are clearly not as high, just as the stakes of avant-gardism aren't. I wouldn't use the term avant-garde anymore today. I mean there's new in art today, but I think the political purchase of art in our society—early 21st century consumer society—is very weak. Of course artists do work on political issues—gender, climate, financial issues, you name it. So artists will take up political issues, but they will never have a hope that their work will create political change.

**CJLC:** Or even be relevant for political actors.

**AH:** Well, in geographic areas beyond the northern transatlantic, I think there is still a stronger political purchase in artistic practices. I've done work on some artists in Latin America, South Africa, and in India, and I got into these artists because these they happened to be working with memory politics. William Kentridge who works on apartheid and post-apartheid race relations. Nalini Malani in India works on the Partition in the late 40s and the after-effects of the Muslim-Hindu divide in India today, because there were these pogroms, right in 2000, 2002, in the 90s at one point. In those countries, memory politics still does have a function, especially when it's tied to trials—think of the trials in Argentina for instance. So it's no coincidence in a way, that politics—not only

memory politics—are more strongly inscribed in artworks in those areas. Do they have more of an effect? I'm not the one to make that claim.

**CJLC:** It seems like memory politics never really had direct purchase in that way in American public discourse, at least not in the same way that it did Germany. Is that because of a lesser urgency in the political issues of memory? It seems like, when it comes to academic discussions, much of the memory moment was maybe also more concerned with marking the end of a century which was defined in a lot of ways by large-scale state violence related to these future-oriented political-ideological regimes...

**AH:** The end of the utopias of the twentieth century, yes. But at the same time the topic of memory has become huge in the U.S. as well.

**CJLC:** Through these proxies.

**AH:** I mean if you remember the debate about the creation of the Holocaust museum in Washington in the Mall, the result was people asking "Why was there no museum to slavery?" Which, you know, many African Americans maybe don't want to see. I mean, Israelis did not want to be reminded of the Holocaust throughout the 50s, and much of the 60s. Or: "Why is there no memorial to the genocide of Native Americans?" So these questions did come up and were largely then subsumed under the celebration of the Greatest Generation in the 90s. But then came 2001, and a series of completely misguided American wars. What has been new in the last

ten years is that the tropes of memory politics—genocide, state massacres, state terror, catastrophe—have wandered into contexts that were originally not connected with the Holocaust.

**CJLC:** In *Present Pasts* you have this formulation where you call the Holocaust a cipher for the 20th century. And this extends to human rights discourses at large, especially considering that a lot of these practices in terms of museum building and monuments find their paradigmatic cases in the German context.

**AH:** But that's where you have to follow that: I mean what is being exported? It is not the Holocaust as a whole, but certain topoi: certain phrases, certain kinds of images that get transported elsewhere. And the difference is, get forgotten.

What became interesting to me then was the way that, for instance, the Holocaust discourse played out in Argentina. The first national commissions report was called *Nunca Mas*—never again—which was a trope clearly tied to the Holocaust. So what happens when the Holocaust discourse as a major model of genocide wanders into other situations? Argentina did not witness a genocide, you know. I had these debates with some Jewish friends in Argentina and they were saying "It was like the Holocaust" and I was saying "It was not like the Holocaust!" People were not being persecuted because they belonged to one specific kind of group. Of course there were a lot of Jewish kids that were being killed but Buenos Aires has a large Jewish population and very frequently young Jewish people were being drawn to the Left in that country at that time.

But it was not, for heaven's sake, it was not a genocide as the Holocaust was. So it's interesting, what happens when these kinds of tropes, in this case genocide, wander into other fields. There are reasons the memory topic hasn't been entirely exhausted. The question is to ask: what is new in it? What is an exciting cognitive gain we can still get out of the topic?

**CJLC:** In regards to the continuing presence of these memory tropes I was wondering about the opening of the 9/11 Museum.

**AH:** Now that's a museum about forgetting.

**CJLC:** Right, exactly.

**AH:** That's a disaster.

**CJLC:** Yeah! An utter disaster.

**AH:** I still want to write about it. I think it's an abysmal disaster as a museum, although I like the monument—the reflecting pools I think are very successful.

**CJLC:** The really questionable and highly ahistorical nature of the 9/11 museum seems to strike a discordant tone with popular discourse in some ways. Is that because of the 'forgetting', the erasure?

**AH:** Well I think that even failed projects have the power of raising public consciousness about the past. There have been a bunch of discussions about the museum and the other buildings that were planned and why those ones did not get built. I think these discussions

have been part of the public discourse about memory after 2001. I think many people will go into this museum with great skepticism, because of everything that it leaves out.

At the Museum of Memory and Human Rights in Santiago, Chile, too, issues of memory and forgetting were very tricky. And that also begins on an eleventh of September, when Allende was toppled. It was the same date. But 9/11 means something very different in Chile than it does everywhere else. When I asked Chilean friends, well, "Why is there nothing about what led up to the toppling of Allende? The political constellation, the lingering Cold War situation, his relationship with Cuba, economic policies etcetera." They would say: "Oh we can't touch that because, you know, the right wing will immediately appropriate that topic and say, 'You see, it was Allende's fault that he was toppled.'" And I think this is nonsense. There should be a full historical account without trying to evade something simply because it might feed into the right wing discourse. Look, I'm not Chilean, I can't judge it, these are people who argue with great conviction that the museum is great and that it could not deal with the pre-9/11 period in Chile. But I would hope that the earlier period could be supplemented, just as the museum here needs supplementation.

The other thing which we didn't talk about which was also of course important in the 1990s was the rise of witnessing culture. Not just trauma but witnessing, with the Fortunoff Archives at Yale, primarily. And then one began to think back, well, when did this witnessing actually begin? And I think cultural historians nowadays would say,



the first time that witnesses appeared in a juridical context, was the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem and the Auschwitz Trial in Germany in the 1960s already. And of course Marianne Hirsch has done wonderful work in this whole area of witnessing and memory and post-memory.

**CJLC:** Maybe going back to the 9/11 Museum and the also recently opened Canadian Museum for Human Rights, which also had some controversy around its opening, and is dedicated to this universalized concept. I was wondering what you think about the temporal situation of situating issues that are very much alive within the context of a museum building.

**AH:** There's the old argument that the word 'museum' is very closely linked to the word 'mausoleum.' In other words, that's the danger, there's always the risk that the Museum for Human Rights becomes a sort of cemetery of human rights.

I think that something interesting has happened because the museum and memory discourse was something that primarily happened in the humanities—cultural historians, literary types, art historians, philosophers to some extent. The human rights discourse, apart from a few people working in political theory, happened primarily on the legal side. In practice, however, the two things are always interlinked. Any court needs witnesses. The rights issue in Argentina, in Chile, in South Africa was always writ large over the memory discussion. My thought at one point was, what if we tried to bring the human rights issue closer to the memory politics issue?

Memory politics always has a very strong local dimension; it's grounded in very specific experiences of a specific place in a specific time while human rights as a category is always in danger of falling into abstractions. And of course the human rights movement has been criticized for being eurocentric, westernized, and being plopped into certain situations in Africa, in Asia, where there are other traditions of thinking about these things. So if one could bring a local aspect with the universalizing aspect of human rights together in interesting ways, that might give impetus to the whole debate. I think there are some signs of that happening recently.

Then what happens to it in the museum, well, how do you make memory concrete? It is bizarre: how do you exhibit human rights?

**CJLC:** Maybe to totally shift gears... About your new book: I wonder if to start you could talk about any continuity between this new book on modernist miniatures and your work on memory--

**AH:** This book came out of a desire to leave memory studies! My attempt which has not been successful. [Laughs]

**CJLC:** You're bored with it?

**AH:** No. With some aspects of it, yes. But I have also continued. There are some articles I've written about the memory and human rights piece but they will never become a book because I don't know enough about law. At my age I don't want to start studying law. That would be absurd.

This book was an attempt to do something different, but it is connected

to my earlier work, particularly *Twilight Memories* and *Present Pasts* which deal with urban spaces. The city as a phenomenon has occupied me for quite some time.

The book begins in the 19th century, and goes into the interwar period. It is fundamentally concerned with urban imaginaries and the way people experienced the rise of the European metropolis at a time when the metropolis was still an island of modernization in a largely provincial and agricultural environment. And that is the period from mid-19th century to mid-20th century, because after world war two, the city as island no longer existed. You had the suburbs, the exurbs, you have urban culture arriving in rural areas because of television, radio, etcetera.

So the body of short prose texts—they were all known, but their connection through metropolitan experience and through their relation to film and photography had never been discussed. And that's what's really new I think, in this book.

**CJLC:** There's a relation between the texts in their mode of publication, too. Feuilleton pieces...

**AH:** Feuilleton and magazine texts—not entirely all of them, but most of them.

**CJLC:** And that's also significant for this moment, historically.

**AH:** Yeah. It was a move out of elite culture into mass distribution. Although when they were published in the magazines they were not very successful. And we know them as books now. They were published in different kinds of sequenc-

es, in different combinations, and we have the retrospective advantage of seeing these texts as complete books. But they are ambitious texts, and they were sitting in the feuilleton as foreign bodies. What was the feuilleton there for? To entertain people, to amuse people. You know, fast consumption. These texts don't allow fast consumption. They're really sabotaging the feuilleton.

Although, I do have to say, that the earlier feuilleton of, you know, the *Neue Presse* in Vienna or the *Frankfurter Zeitung* in Germany, and equivalents in France. Many of these feuilletons were much more ambitious than the *New York Times Arts* pages are today. There was incredible stuff published in these feuilletons. You can't imagine any of that in the *New York Times* today.

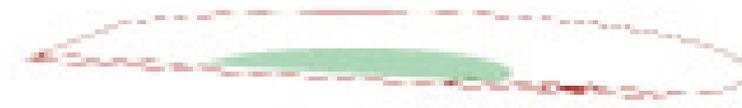
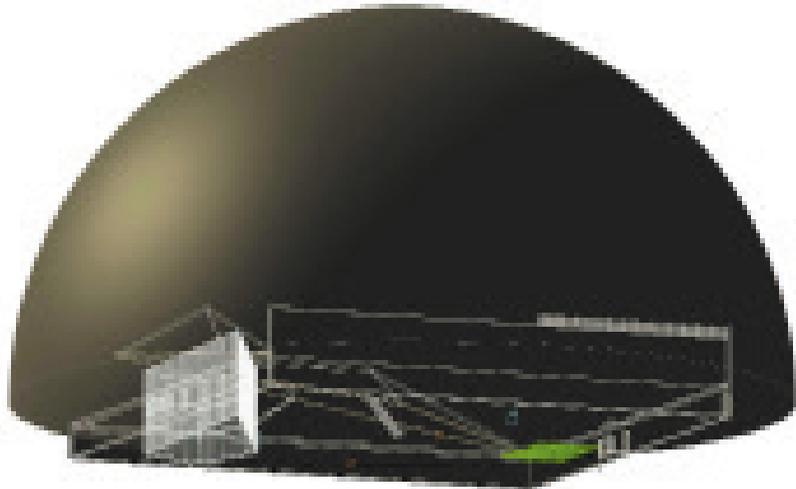
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## ***IN BETWEEN: Jaden and Willow Smith and the Dissolution of Taste Cultures***

**by Joe Bucciero**

“4 My 1,” the lead single off of Jaden Smith’s recent *This Is My Album*, is littered with Drake-isms. Over a vaguely cloudy, percussive beat, Smith splits time between crooning and rapping, his flow switching from quick, clipped blurts to a version of Drake’s signature melodic drawl. Smith’s music is undeniably mainstream, but retains a hint of weirdness, addressing a variety of themes both common and uncommon to pop and hip-hop. “I can’t feel you through them tight clothes,” he says, “but I can feel your love, it might grow.” Like Drake, Smith often expresses his ambivalence about sex and fame (both were child stars) with a mixture of lasciviousness and sensitivity. Unlike Drake, however, Smith also says some stuff about hieroglyphs and Osiris, the Egyptian god of the afterlife.



“4 My 1” isn’t the first instance of Smith addressing esoteric subject matter in his music; he frequently balances more predictable topics with ones found in the music of weirdo ‘90s alt-rap icons like Del Tha Funkee Homosapien or Kool Keith. In the coda of “Passionate V3,” another of Smith’s singles released in 2015, for instance, a pitched-down voice mentions an “interdimensional tesseract.” Earlier in that song, Smith addresses the dichotomous nature of his lyrical content: “I’m just trying to spit some lyrics that are more insightful,” he raps, “but you just call me bipo—yeah, that stands for bipolar.”

Judging by the reaction to the interview that he and his younger sister Willow did with *T Magazine* in November 2014, it’s easy enough to imagine someone calling Jaden “bipolar.” A

*Gawker* headline read, “Every Single Thing About This Jaden and Willow Smith Interview is Nuts.” Throughout the interview, Jaden and Willow play off one another, answering questions about how they view the world and how those views manifest themselves in the Smiths’ often overlapping bodies of work. When asked what they’d been reading, Willow answers abstrusely, “Quantum physics. Osho.” Jaden follows with “‘The Ancient Secret of the Flower of Life’ and ancient texts; things that can’t be pre-dated.” Later, they wax philosophic about the theoretical physicists living inside of us, the flexibility of time, holographic realities, baby’s soft spots, and how Willow’s been writing her own novels.

Coming from a fourteen- and a sixteen-year-old, sure, these are unusual things to be talking about. Are Jaden

and Willow really “nuts,” though? Why were people so quick to use that descriptor? *BuzzFeed* published a listicle called “The 18 Most WTF Jaden and Willow Smith Moments Of 2014,” wherein the author points out some of the siblings’ unconventional behavior (making crystals, shirtless photos, cryptic Tweets, etc.). There’s a palpable air of condescension when the BuzzFeed author addresses the *T Magazine* interview, pulling some of the Smiths’ quotes and asking us if we remember “When the siblings hit us with a slew of insane existential thoughts in their interview with *T Magazine*”, “Which included their two-cents on cognition of time...and, like, babies...And arguably nonsense.”

The sentiment displayed there wasn’t unique. In another recap titled “Say What? The Arcane Wisdom of Jaden and Willow Smith,” *The Guardian* called the interview “a journey though [sic] a dazzling palace of utter nonsense.” Some were more amused than dismissive—and some defended the Smiths, with variations of “they’re just kids,” or “they’re actually saying cool stuff.” *Ms. Magazine*’s Hope Wabuke wrote that the Smiths sounded “incredibly smart,” praising their creativity, desire to learn, and interest in social change. But the general media response tended towards the “WTF,” followed by a “these kids are nuts and/or idiots.” *BuzzFeed*, *Gawker*, and *The Guardian*—not to mention *VICE* and countless others—published such reactions, demonstrating the power of cultural consensus in the ostensibly anything-goes, democratized world of internet publishing.

What if Jaden and Willow Smith aren’t crazy, despite what most popular culture websites are saying? Might the siblings, budding pop stars and Hollywood actors (themselves the product of an entertainment dynasty), have subverted their given roles and decentered the cultural equilibrium? American popular media often seeks to classify mainstream culture, reducing their portrayals of celebrities to headlines and listicle captions. Perhaps that’s why the Smiths upset these outlets’ sensibilities—the Smiths evade description, while they prefer that artists—and, perhaps, people in general—stay within prescribed cultural boundaries.

Since the emergence of popular culture in the first half of the twentieth-century, people have written about the schism between popular and high culture. Is popular culture dangerous? Democratizing? “Avant-garde and kitsch should be separate,” says Clement Greenberg in the 1930s. “No, they shouldn’t,” says Susan Sontag in the ‘60s.<sup>1</sup> And so on and so forth.

In his 1974 study *Popular Culture and High Culture*, longtime Columbia University professor Herbert J. Gans tackles the issue from a sociological perspective. Gans states that high culture often sees popular culture as a threat: high culture’s proponents fear that popular culture will appropriate high culture, or that high culture will be forced to appropriate popular culture. Either way, the fear is the degradation of high culture.

Gans then defines what he calls “taste cultures” and “taste publics.” The former is described by groups of people with similar values and “aesthetic standards”; the latter, by groups that make “similar choices for similar reasons.” People of different taste cultures and publics receive art and popular culture differently: “The visual order of a de Kooning painting is interpreted as disorder by lower taste cultures,” explains Gans, “and the visual order of calendar art is not considered art by high culture.”<sup>2</sup>

In short, Jaden and Willow Smith—coming from Hollywood and making pop and hip-hop music infused with esoteric concepts—frustrate traditional

formulations of culture. “Vibrations,” from Willow’s 2015 EP *Interdimensional Tesseract* (a concept clearly of interest to both siblings), doesn’t work as a pop song, if only because it’s too short (ninety seconds) and lacks the requisite hooks and pop song structure. Its New Age-leaning lyrics that focus on the titular subject likewise separate the song from most radio pop and R&B music—but its production still situates it in the popular music idiom. It’s neither a de Kooning nor calendar art; instead, subversive yet “pop,” “Vibrations” is a bit of both.

Willow’s hybridization isn’t unprecedented in the popular music landscape—Erykah Badu and Janelle Monae offer similarly high-minded lyrics and non-pop musical forms. But because Willow’s media narrative centers around her being young and the child of celebrities, many are reluctant to recognize her experimentation as maverick, rather than spoiled and weird. In *Popular and High Culture*, Gans notes, “the prime effect of the media is to reinforce already existing behaviors and attitudes, rather than to create new ones.”<sup>3</sup> Those who consider the Smiths’ music strange and therefore bad are unlikely to reassess their opinions, seeing Jaden and Willow as the crazy, overindulged children of Will and Jada Pinkett Smith. These people, having read the *Guardian* and *Gawker* article after clicking a baited link on their algorithmically-customized Facebook timelines, use those sites’ opinions to bolster the ones they

already hold. They might then write some comments, like those on the YouTube entry for “4 My 1,”: “I just carn’t [sic] take [Jaden] seriously.” (It should be noted, though, that more and more outlets such as *COMPLEX* and *Vulture* have written positively about Jaden and Willow’s music in the last two months. *Vulture* had previously called the *T Magazine* interview “Zen gibberish.”)

The media’s capacity to reinforce existing opinions has only magnified since Gans’s writing. On the internet, we can read or watch or listen to whatever we want all the time, allowing us to limit our cultural boundaries as it allows us to expand them. While the utopian promise of the internet is to bridge cultural gaps, connecting us to other “taste cultures” and helping us engage with music and art made anytime and anywhere, it also works to reinforce cultural distinctions. Fifteen years ago you might’ve heard a new song on the radio without knowing who made it, giving you an opportunity to receive the song largely unmitigated by its cultural context. On YouTube, each song comes with copious information about the artist, as well as a stream of anonymous opinions from commenters. Nearly everyone watching and commenting, moreover, has chosen to be on that page (or, via suggested links, the page chose you), and comes to it with some sort of preconception. Internet culture consumers flock to their favorite websites to watch pre-judged videos or read predictable things. Jaden and Willow’s unpredictable interview forced us “to create new [behaviors and attitudes]” of cultural reception.

In the *T Magazine* interview, the interviewer asks, “So is the hardest education the unlearning of things?”

WILLOW: Yes, basically, but the crazy thing is it doesn’t have to be like that.

JADEN: Here’s the deal: School is not authentic because it ends. It’s not true, it’s not real. Our learning will never end. The school that we go to every single morning, we will continue to go to.

WILLOW: Forever, ‘til the day that we’re in our bed.

JADEN: Kids who go to normal school are so teen-agery, so angsty.

Here, Jaden and Willow separate themselves from other kids their age. While their distrust of school might be seen as arrogant or irresponsible, it actually situates them in a long line of misunderstood vanguard artists and autodidacts: punks, New Age artists, the beats to an extent. These artists’ combination of pop, esoteric, and renegade thought might one day earn them “high culture” praise, but only if they adapt to “high culture” standards (like, for instance, punk-turned-writer Richard Hell) or get discovered, and perhaps exploited, by “high culture” patrons (like New Age musician Laraaji, who respected musician Brian Eno found playing music in a park).

Like the punks and beats, too, a lot of what Jaden and Willow say in that interview sounds incoherent, like disjointed New Age blather. *VICE* asked an unnamed “philosophy professor” to “explain that Jaden and Willow Smith interview.” The professor, whose job title legitimizes him as a trusted intellectual, gives academic background and terminology to Jaden and Willow’s musings, showing that their ideas nearly all have specific academic precedents. When asked about the Smiths’ so-called “holographic reality,” the professor explains that the “hypothesis is just the Descartes dream scenario in new garb.” Jaden’s conception of time—“time moves for you wherever you are in the universe”—is explained, meanwhile, as a “consequence of relativity theory.”

Jaden and Willow are picking up on pretty heady ideas, even while operating outside the academy—outside high school, for that matter. They “sound like they’re

pretty well educated,” the professor concludes, “if a little New Age-y.” The professor’s qualification betrays the high-culture prejudice against high-minded-yet-non-academic New Age culture. Like many followers of New Age philosophies, Jaden and Willow are often unable to articulate their ideas in appropriately academic terms. They don’t speak of the “Descartes dream scenario” but of a “holographic reality,” which is something that sounds “crazy” to people on the internet, and not “high” enough to the academy.

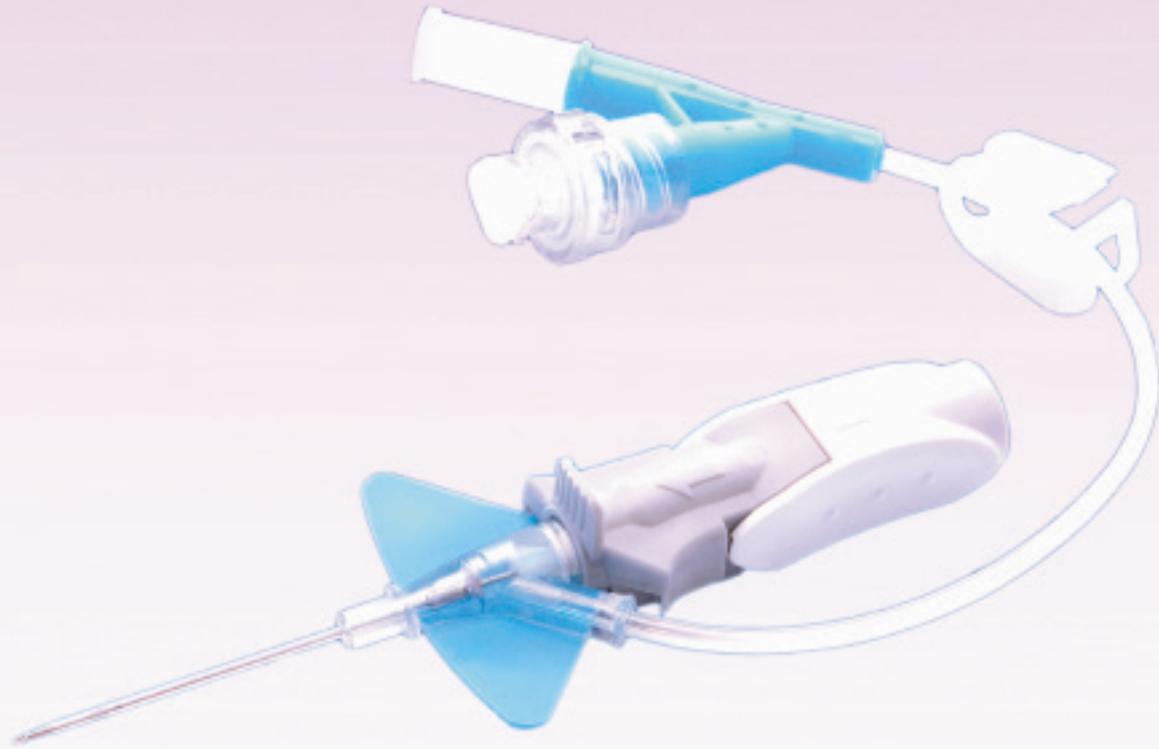
The professor’s general approval of the Smiths’ ideas suggests more than anything that those calling the Smiths “crazy” are doing so not because what the siblings say is gibberish, but because it violates their assumed cultural standing. Although what they say indicates that they’re “pretty well educated,” it’s dismissed because it’s uncharacteristic for a teenager, celebrity or pop musician to say.

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In his stories about the Glass family (published in the compilations *Nine Stories*, *Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters and Seymour: An Introduction* and *Franny and Zooey*), J.D. Salinger presents precedents for Jaden and Willow. Their desire for “unlearning” and their dissolution of the boundaries of high and popular culture offer themselves as parallels, as well as their precocity. Like the Glasses, the Smiths were born of two entertainers and, like the Glasses, are entertainers themselves

(the Glasses were on a radio program called “It’s a Wise Child”). Thanks predominantly to the influence of the eldest child Seymour, basically all the Glass children are unbelievably well-read in scores of different areas, notably—like Salinger himself—Eastern and Christian mystic writings. The Glass children also play off each other’s intellect in a way that’s as endearing as it is strange. And, like the Smiths in their *T Magazine* interview, the Glasses aren’t afraid to share their intellectual influences.

“‘Dracula’ now stood next to ‘Elementary Pali,’” writes the narrator and second-oldest Glass child Buddy Glass in Salinger’s *Zooey*, “‘The Boy Allies at the Somme’ stood next to ‘Bolts of Melody,’ ‘The Scarab Murder Case’ and ‘The Idiot’ were together, ‘Nancy Drew and the Hidden Staircase’ lay on top of ‘Fear and Trembling.’”<sup>4</sup> Knowingly, Buddy juxtaposes the popular, academic, and religious books that sit on the Glass family shelves. The Glass children, it’s assumed, have read both Bram Stoker’s horror classic *Dracula* as well as an introductory guide to learning Pali, the language in which several early Buddhist scriptures are written. The iconoclast Buddy seems proud of this selection of books; they point to the Glasses’ skepticism of the academy (*Nancy Drew* is as valuable as *Fear and Trembling*), as well as their interest in unlearning and detachment. While it’s unusual, of course, for children to read *Elementary Pali*, it’s discomfiting, according to the paradigm Herbert J. Gans lays out, for someone who reads *Elementary Pali* to be equal-



ly interested in *Dracula*. Jaden Smith also reads “ancient texts,” and as a result his musical aesthetic might be thought to not add up. “Ancient texts” and Drake’s *Nothing Was the Same* sit together on Jaden’s shelf, like *Dracula* and *Elementary Pali* do on the Glasses’, crossing the borders of Gans’s separated taste cultures.

The reading public of the 1960s was particularly mistrustful of Salinger’s Seymour. Arguably literature’s most precocious child, Seymour was reading what the Smiths are reading now, and so much more, by the time he was seven years old. In Salinger’s

story “Hapworth 16, 1924,” Buddy introduces a letter that Seymour sent home from camp when he was seven, wherein he asks his parents to send along a variety of books that he and Buddy can read while they rest in their cabin. The list comprises most of the story’s second half, and it’s full of texts—and commentaries thereon—that, yes, no ordinary seven-year-old would ever want or be able to read, from the *Raja-Yoga* to “the complete works, quite in full, of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.”<sup>5</sup>

The Seymour of “Hapworth” is an autodidact. He’s precocious, verbose,

and a little irritating. However, does he merit Michiko Kakutani’s characterization of him in a *New York Times* review of a new edition of the story? Kakutani writes, reasonably though with undue vitriol, that “for a child, Seymour makes requests for reading material that verge on the preposterous.” But this doesn’t make Seymour fascinating in Kakutani’s view, or an interesting case of popular (mainstream childrens’ books) fluidly mixing with high (adult, scholarly books). Rather, “It is something of a shock, then, to meet the Seymour presented in ‘Hapworth’: an obnoxious child given to angry outbursts.” Kakutani concludes that the Glass family is little more than “solipsistic.” In a review following the original publication of “Hapworth” in *The New Yorker*, noted critic Irving Howe takes a similar stance on the Glass family. “Under the infatuated guidance of Salinger,” Howe writes, the Glasses are “largely devoted to exercises in collective narcissism.” As well as the Glasses, Howe dismisses Salinger himself, whose esoteric interests and great popular success bothered “high culture” paragons like Howe.

Later in his review, Howe describes the Glasses in a way many describe the Smiths: they “have learned to talk, not yet to think.” In “Hapworth,” Seymour talks and talks, and he isn’t always coherent. Salinger knows that Seymour is young. The character may have read more than you or I ever will—but he’s nevertheless immature, prone to using “big” words as a crutch, or making naïvely lewd comments about a fellow camper’s mother in an attempt to sound “adult.” He has learned to talk and think, but he’s still finding his voice. The grown Seymour of Salinger’s earlier story “A Perfect Day for Bananafish,” was mysterious but more *complete*—an adult, and as such, didn’t merit derision from critics. The Seymour of “Hapworth” is young—he messes up here and there. Is he “obnoxious,” though? “Solipsistic”?

Like Seymour's in "Hapworth," the Smiths' thoughts and ideas in their *T Magazine* interview aren't totally formed and articulated. In both cases, the young intellectuals lack the necessary qualifications, in the view of their critics, to make their curiosity anything but "crazy" or "narcissistic." The *Gawker* recap prefaces one of the Smiths' quotes with, "Here are Willow and Jaden on babies (which they know nothing about because of how they're babies themselves!)." The writer disallows the Smiths even offering their opinion because their youth precludes the authority necessary to voice it. They lack the degrees, experience, and, perhaps most importantly, vocabularies (Seymour laments, "I am sick to death of the wide gap of embarrassing differences, among other things, between my writing and speaking voices!")<sup>6</sup> But the "arcane knowledge" of Seymour and the Smiths is exciting precisely because it's not yet written in stone, solidified with age and verified along familiar lines of high and low culture. It's not entirely pop, nor academic, nor New Age.

In his influential 1915 essay "Highbrow and Lowbrow," American critic Van Wyck Brooks outlines various traits of the highbrow and the lowbrow, focusing specifically on the categories' incompatibility in academic settings. Brooks separates, among other things, "academic pedantry and pavement slang," between which "there is no community, no genial middle ground."<sup>7</sup> Seymour, discussing

ancient literature *and* his friend's mother's bust in "Hapworth," and Jaden, discussing Osiris *and* a girl's tight clothes in "4 My 1," enter Brooks's impenetrable "middle ground." Jaden goes as far as making slang out of clinical vocabulary: "bipo." At the end of his essay, Brooks arrives at his fundamental issue with the distinctions between highbrow and lowbrow. "But where is all that is real, where is personality and all its works, if it is not essentially somewhere, somehow, in some not very vague way, between?" he asks.<sup>8</sup> Jaden and Willow Smith, and the Seymour of "Hapworth," are in between, in progress.

Even at a time when popular culture—hip-hop in particular—is amenable to more outre characters, the Smiths' brand of weirdness remains almost uniformly incomprehensible. Perhaps this is because the Smiths come from that homogenous mainstream culture, while prominent weirdo rappers like Young Thug, iLoveMakonnen, and Lil B the Based God rose from the underground, where weirdness is valorized. The Smiths' sincere attempt at disrupting mainstream culture's distinctions is therefore uniquely unsettling, especially when taken in concert with their youth. The public that ultimately consumes their content—a public largely interested in the mainstream, its media, and the commentary about it—rejects the Smiths' rejection.

Jaden and Willow Smith aren't "crazy"; they're "in between," as Brooks

indicates. They're opening up avenues by which Jaden wearing two different sneakers at a red carpet event can be read as not "crazy" or "teenager-y" but as evidence of him being a maverick-in-progress. Let's not write them off just yet. "Close on the heels of kindness," Seymour tells his parents in his letter, "originality is one of the most thrilling things in the world, also the most rare!"<sup>9</sup> It's hard to say exactly why, but the Smiths are originals—and like the Based God himself, they're undeniably #rare.

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1. See: Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," *Partisan Review* 6:5 (1939), 34-49, and Susan Sontag, "Notes on 'Camp,'" in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Picador, 2001), 259-274.
2. Herbert J. Gans, *Popular Culture and High Culture* (New York: BasicBooks, 1974), 68.
3. Gans, *Popular Culture and High Culture*, 32.
4. J.D. Salinger, *Franny and Zooey* (New York: Bantam Books, 1961), 120.
5. J.D. Salinger, "Hapworth 16, 1924," *The New Yorker*, June 19, 1965, 98.
6. Salinger, "Hapworth 16, 1924," 32.
7. Van Wyck Brooks, "'Highbrow' and 'Lowbrow,'" in *America's Coming-of-Age* (New York: Octagon Books, 1975), 7.
8. Brooks, "'Highbrow' and 'Lowbrow,'" 35.
9. Salinger, "Hapworth 16, 1924," 39.

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<http://graphics8.nytimes.com/images/2014/11/17/t-magazine/17smith-wu-2/17smith-wu-2-tmagArticle-v2.jpg>

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