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CONSUMPTION

CJLC
2017

ISSUE XV

REFLECTIONS ON THE FERAL CHILD
NEGATIVE FOILS

THINKING BEYOND COMMODITIES

GHOSTS THAT OUGHT TO EXIST

COOKING WITH THE EROTIC

THE VIEW FROM VANTINE'S

INTELLIGENT APOCALYPSES

WHAT WE ARE AND WHAT WE WANT TO BE

ATTENTIONS TO THE BODY

CONS UMPT ION

The early use of the word, drawing from tuberculosis, positions consumption as “using up, wasting away” — an exhaustion of the limits of the body and nature, drawing towards death. Today, this conception of consumption as loss seems to have receded — instead, capitalism positions it as an accretive, accumulative force, through which all can be obtained or created. In our current moment of late capitalism, do works of art, literature, culture “perish when [they are] solidified into a cultural asset and handed out for consumption purposes,” as Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer suggest in *Dialectic of the Enlightenment*? This issue of CJLC pushes alongside and against this claim--attempting to attend to the violent circumscriptions of the market while investigating spaces of desire, consumption, and being in which other, stranger forces flow.

In Devika Kapadia and Melanie Shi’s interview with Branka Arsić, Arsić pushes against an understanding of things circumscribed by commodity fetishism, seeking instead to trace complex ontologies through which things can be read as alive and desired without necessitating their objectification. Through this lens, she investigates loss, selfhood, and collection. Hunter Koch’s essay, “Ghosts Which Ought To Exist” explores the specter of what once was alive but now has been destroyed within the archive of nitrate film.

Consumption is also revealed as both site and mode of violence. In “Negative Foils,” Egon Conway reads the consumption of racialized narratives of criminal labor as symbolically undergirding white hegemonic subjectivity. This labor conceals its coercive roots in the aftermath of slavery, veiling itself within a moralizing rhetoric of redemption through hard work. Anne-Laure White’s essay “Intelligent Apocalypses” also investigates fragile justifications for violence and their bloody inscriptions. White dissects the anxieties and justifications of the fictive apocalyptic frenzy that fuels US military research

into cybernetics, mapping this disembodied fiction against the very real cartographies of violence in contemporary drone warfare.

Are there sites of resistance or subversion through consumption? In an interview with Cheeyeon Park, video artist Ilana Harris-Babou discusses how her mock-up cooking show foregrounds consuming and being consumed as refracted through race and gender. Against this background, she explores what can or should be edible. In another examination of consumable goods, Melanie Shi teases out from the historical trajectory of marketing strategies the social and political underpinnings and complexities of anti-Asian xenophobia. Here, Shi shows how the alignment of political policy and the marketplace has served to fetishize, exclude, and marginalize non-Western influence in the service of an American exceptionalism that is entrenched in white supremacy.

Nihal Shetty examines another aspect of the violence propagated by histories of consumption — this time, through the figure of the feral child in history, fiction, and the stories that lie in the murky in-between. What happens after consumption, what remains unconsumed, discarded or invisible? He discusses the networks through which these stories are propagated and consumed, and their use to police and destabilize the boundaries between nation and wilderness, human and animal.

Finally, we would like to thank our faculty advisor, Nicholas Dames. We would also like to express deep gratitude to our editors and contributors for all of their labor and care.

Devika Kapadia and Rebecca Teich
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CJLC

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Reflections
On the
Feral
Child

**Nihal
Shetty**

Reflections on the Feral Child

Nihal Shetty

I. Child, Canine, Citizen

Oxana Malaya was found as an eight-year old, five years after her disappearance from the Ukrainian village of Novaya Blagoveschenka.¹ The year was 1991, Ukraine still under Soviet control, and a neighbor had noticed a child running around with a pack of wild dogs. At three years old Malaya had wandered away from alcoholic parents, and it seemed, had lived with the dogs since. Dubbed the “dog girl” (*devochka-sobaka*) by both the Russian media and the doctors who would periodically give their opinions on the matter, Malaya has been the subject of a Discovery Channel special, and a single Youtube clip of her has garnered over a million views—hardly a massive number by today’s standards of the viral, but for a human (animal?) interest story from over 25 years ago, remarkable. In the video, she yelps and barks, sounding indistinguishable from a wild animal, and she moves in an outdoor pen on her hands and knees with remarkable speed. Since her discovery, Malaya has been trying to grasp human speech to mixed success. At 23 tests revealed that she had the mental capacity of a six-year old. She cannot read or write, and still suffers from a severe intellectual disability that is common among feral children.

Since the mid-20th century, this disability has led psychologists to dismiss many claims of feral children as simply a severe infantile autism covered up with a fantastical story of animal foster parents.²

This explanation has persisted into the 21st century: French surgeon Serge Aroles argues in his 2007 book *L’Enigme des enfants-loup* that almost all of these cases are fabrications used to embellish what in reality is frequently autism or another form of related intellectual disability.³ Because feral children tend to be found near isolated villages, it can be difficult to verify which of these children are raised by animals and which are falsely attributed to such narratives. Though Aroles may disagree, the validity of some still seem to be corroborated by a number of sources. In 1998, seven years after Malaya’s discovery, the Moscow police were finally able to capture Ivan Mishukov, a six-year-old boy who had escaped his mother’s alcoholic boyfriend to become a pack leader of several dogs who depended on him to supply them with food. Mishukov, who had only left civilization for two years, was able to redevelop his speaking skills quickly, and has since made several appearances in the Russian media.⁴

Myth or not, it is unsurprising that these children ended up in the media’s gaze, at which point their bodies, mannerisms and psychologies were subjected to the assessment of a public that carefully marked the ways they deviated from the images of the ideal Soviet subject. We might consider that in the Soviet context, the feral child functioned as a sign of the eschatological: the early 20th century post-revolutionary spill of artists predicted and dreamed of a Soviet future that could only be defined as existing within a hygiene of lifestyle. Take the work of the filmmaker Aleksandr Medvedkin, who depicted a vision for a mapped city, open skies and a gleaming white infrastructure housing only the bodies of handsome men and women in his 1928 film *New Moscow* (*Novaya Moskva*). A profound irony that little over 50 years later, nearing the end of the Soviet project, Oxana Malaya emerged—some unknown wild, awkward, dirty far cry from the promises that the future once seemed to hold.

In *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (More to

1 Grice, Elizabeth. “Cry Of An Enfant Sauvage”. The Telegraph 2016. Web. 19 Sept. 2016.

2 Bettelheim, Bruno. “Feral Children and Autistic Children.” *American Journal of Sociology* 64.5 (1959): 455-67. Web.

3 Aroles, Serge. *L’Enigme Des Enfants-Loups*. Paris: Publibook, 2007. Print.

4 Newton, Michael. *Savage Girls And Wild Boys*. New York: Thomas Dunne Books/St. Martin’s Press, 2003. Print.

Follow), Jacques Derrida observes the unstable boundary between man and animal. Man is both defined as animal and as not animal, and without this latter definition we would be lost as to what man is in the first place.⁵ We might consider that all firm distinctions between man and animal will always be unsteady, even arbitrary. Derrida points to nakedness as such a distinction, a property solely of man. Since Genesis, man has been ashamed of his nakedness, while an animal, lacking shame, is never naked. He critiques the untenable, rather ludicrous distinctions that the Western philosophical tradition has drawn between “human” and the huge swath of beings that comprise “animal,” a project that sweeps many special humans out of the category of the “human” and into that of the “animal.”

It’s difficult to refrain from slipping into overstatement when talking about feral children. The feral child displaces and spoils established and idealized categorizations of humanness. These are properties which are both ontological (this is human, that is animal), as well as ideological (this is what a human ought to be). The ontological categorization of the human rapidly falls apart when confronted with the feral child, a body that is biologically declared as human, but with little attention to how. Few would likely argue that Malaya is not a human, but one struggles to find what divides human from animal and establishes Malaya firmly as the former, excluding her from the latter. Perhaps it is reason and language—or, per Derrida, shame—that elevate humans from being animal. Does Malaya possess any of these?

An attention to the ontological implications on human/animal identity is the curious centerpiece of Michael Newton’s 2000 book, *Savage Girls and Wild Boys*. Newton traces out several cases of feral children’s appearances throughout history. For Newton, the feral child contains the excitement of a personal, existential probing into human identity. Newton’s book consolidates a large number of previously disparate stories, analyses, and myths of feral children. Despite the many merits of his

work, Newton is less interested in what we might call the ideological and political dimensions of feral children, as opposed to their ontological properties. The public spectacle of Oxana Malaya’s story did not occur solely because she disrupted the human/animal divide ontologically, but also because she disrupted a Soviet ideology that dictated the ways that human bodies were supposed to look and act; the feral child is inherently political, playing with the designations not just of what humans are, but what humans are supposed to be. It is clear from Newton’s work that, more frequently than not, stories and myths of feral children are found in the context of empire—famously in Ancient Rome and most commonly in South Asia. Perhaps what the feral child exposes is a geographical anxiety at the root of empire: the inability of the imperialist to have full control over his land. It is no coincidence that just as Ukraine was slipping away, Malaya appeared from the woods. Whether or not the feral child exists within the context of empire and colonization, the number of stories—fiction or otherwise—which have emerged linking feral children to these sites of imperialism is worthy of further examination.

II. Wolves & Whores

This man, Taratius, carried them down to the bank of the river and laid them down there. Then, a she-wolf came to the infants and let them suck at her breast, and birds flew to them and brought small morsels of food, placing them in their mouths, until a swineherd, having caught sight of them and marvelled at such a sight, boldly went to the children and took them away.

—Plutarch, *Lives*, Book I⁶

The archetypal empire was founded by the feral child. A great deal of art has been devoted to Romulus and Remus, cherubic infants and the first of the Romans, suckling at their she-wolf surrogate. What Plutarch, writing in Greek, omits from his depiction of the events is what Livy, writing in Latin, does not avoid. After report-

5 Derrida, Jacques. “The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow).” *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 28, No. 2. (Winter, 2002), pp. 369-418.

6 All translations are my own, unless otherwise noted



ing the same course of events as Plutarch, Livy doubles back. It's a question of translation. Consider his shorter reflection on the same events: "There are those who believe that Larentia was called "lupa" among the shepherds because she was a common prostitute, and from here was the opening for this marvelous story." (Livy, *Ab Urbe Condita*, I.4)

Livy speaks about the double entendre in the Latin lupa, best translated as both she-wolf and whore. Prostitutes in ancient Rome could be divided into levels of hierarchy: a lupa is not the same as a meretrix, the prostitutes who held an officially recognized place in Roman society and even garnered some measure of respectability. In contrast to the meretrix, the lupa is lawless, loose in sexuality and morals.⁷ In contrast, wolves have strict sexual mores and regulations—the association between the animal and human counterpart may have more to do with a common, implicit threat of female sexual power and agency. The lupa, in both the human and animal meaning, is excluded from human-

ness, and serves as a reminder that humans other than feral children are robbed of their humanness, reduced to a bestiality. Moreover, A.W.J. Holleman suggests that the connection between lupa and lawless prostitute has much to do with the etymology of lupa from an Etruscan origin, and that the Etruscans, the Italian civilization which preceded the Romans, had long been associated in the Roman imagination with a kind of sexual depravity and rapacity.^{8 9}

8 Ibid.

9 The terms "whore" and "prostitute" as both offensive and antiquated. I use them to most accurately translate these texts with respect to the historical context, specifically that of Ancient Rome. In her book "Playing the Whore: The Work of Sex Work" Melissa Gira Grant discusses the complex histories of these terms entrance into the English language, saying: "The word [prostitute] is young, and at first it didn't confer identity. When prostitute entered into English in the sixteenth century it was as a verb—to prostitute, to set something up for sale...The word whore is older, old English or old German, possibly derived from a root that's no longer known, and dates back as early as the twelfth century BCE. There were countless people whose lives prior to the word's invention were later reduced by historians to the word whore, though their activities certainly varied." Like Melissa Gira Grant, I will use 'prostitute' "to refer to its historical use...in a period before the phrase 'sex work' was invented" (Grant). It was in 1978 that Carol Leigh wrote the work "Inventing Sex Work," which both crucially coined the term and class of labor called sex work, and provided a shift in the nomenclature.

7 Holleman, A.W.J. "Lupus, Lupercalia, Lupa". *Latomus* 44.3 (1985): 609-614. Print.

The provocative connections between this word and the axes of power and identity formation on which it relies furnish a number of conclusions. Lupa, and its ethnic, sexual, animal multiplicities, contains an instability of meaning that forms the root of an original anxiety at the foundation of the empire. This anxiety is deeply embedded in the feral child as an embodied lack—a lack of humanness, a lack of animalness, and most important here, a lack of confirmation. Confirmation refers to the project of trying to validate whether feral children are real or not, and thus, whether the stories we take as the foundations of our culture are true.

Mythohistory reflects the nation-building narrative that Livy purports to tell. It troubles the distinction between present, in the flesh feral children and imagined or constructed ones. The incongruity between these two kinds of feral children—the awkward, dirty Malaya and the heroic Romulus and Remus—makes it clear that stories of feral children do not necessarily reflect feral children in the flesh. But the tension between the glorious, clean myth of a she-wolf surrogate and the quotidian myth of the prostitute suggests that, even in its own time, the fantastic feral child story started to crumble under its own weighty miraculousness. Such instability is especially apparent in Livy, whose style constructs a history that relies on multiple disagreeing voices. Unlike some of his fellow ancient historians, Livy includes varying interpretations on the events in his mythohistory of Rome—he fuses fact, rumor, and speculation. Rooted in and acknowledging ambiguity, Livy's history points to an "opening" (*locus fibulae*) where meanings and histories are constructed.

Sigmund Freud's work on the "Wolf Man", the Russian aristocrat Sergei Pankejeff, likewise relies on the relationship between ambiguity and meaning.¹⁰ In Freud's story, Pankejeff, as a young boy, had dreamed of white wolves sitting in a walnut tree. After he approached Freud as an adult for a number of "nervous problems", Freud connected

these problems to Pankejeff's trauma to of having witnessed his father having sex with his mother from behind—an archetypal event he dubs the "primal scene". Or, Freud allows, Pankejeff may have witnessed two animals having sex, and subconsciously connected this occurrence to an imagined primal scene with his own parents. Regardless of what actually occurred, whether Pankejeff had seen his parents having sex or, more innocently, animals in the same act, the possibility of both implies that the primal scene is inescapable, as an imagined trauma has the same effect as a real one. To imagine the founders of Rome as the surrogate children of a lupa, a whore, implies the presence of such a primal scene in the imagination of the Roman people. For the Romans, who considered their national heritage intensely familial—the esteemed *patres* belonging to a direct lineage that connects each Roman to a shared kinship and past—the question of whether the Romans are the descendants of a wolf or a whore is connected to a deep-seated anxiety over the legitimacy of their history. R.J. Schork points out the connection between the Romulus and Remus story as Livy describes it and the Roman festival of Lupercalia, where naked young men, *Luperci*, after performing rites at the Lupercal cave where the she-wolf was said to have suckled the twins, proceeded to run around the city, whipping women with goat-skin thongs in order to promote fertility.¹¹ It's a festival centered upon both sex and wolves, not exclusively one or the other. The feral child exists, from its beginning, as a site of ambiguity.

In the festival of the Lupercalia both meanings of lupa are very much alive, but as Bakhtin observed about the carnival, some festivals are departures from established narratives of life, and are not the narratives themselves. This is the case here: Livy is the exception—the ambiguity has been crushed in the other ancient sources, and in subsequent depictions of the story. For the Romans, speaking casual Latin, the connection between wolf and prostitute was inescapable; once we leave Latin and the festival, that connection disappears. The recorders of history have selected to preserve one

10 Freud, Sigmund. "From the History of an Infantile Neurosis" (1918), reprinted in Peter Gay, *The Freud Reader* (London: Vintage, 1995).

11 Schork, R. J. "Moral Metamorphosis in Livy." *Latomus* 47.1 (1988): 98-104. Web.

story at the expense of another. We can take comfort in the “marvelous story”, the beautiful one with the children and the flying birds and the regal she-wolf, and ignore the ugly, human one: a prostitute and two babies, a scene like any other.

(cont. next page)

III. Mowgli's Body

*I think I could turn and live with animals, they
are so placid and self-contained
I stand and look at them long and long.
They do not sweat and whine about their
condition,
They do not lie awake in the dark and weep for
their sins,
They do not make me sick discussing their duty
to God,
Not one is dissatisfied, not one is demented with
the mania of owning things.*

-Walt Whitman¹²

If Romulus and Remus are some of the earliest stories of feral children, the most commercial is Rudyard Kipling's Mowgli. John Lockwood Kipling, perhaps best known as his father, uses the Whitman poem as the epigram to his own study *Beast and Man in India: A Popular Sketch of Indian Animals in Their Relations with the People*. Lockwood Kipling sets out to replace a myth of Oriental spiritual superiority with one of spiritual impoverishment¹³; the irony in the unrepentant British imperialist invoking an injunction against “the mania of owning things” is uncomfortably evident.

The Whitman poem brings to mind a fixation with the animal or primitive as exemplars of virtue. It is a poem fascinated with lack—animals are not good because of what they do but because of what they do not do. Though without the empha-

sis on virtue, such an interpretation of the wild as a lack of the human is the reason for the fascination with most real-life feral children. See how Oxana can't speak like us, see how she doesn't act like us, see how she has all her humanity stripped away from her. The lack of confirmation of a feral child's validity can be an intrinsic part of their importance in narratives of empire, but the Kiplings' depiction of the feral child is quite different. Here, a lack of humanness is not met by idle fascination—it is a gap that is filled.

What is striking about the world that Rudyard Kipling creates in his *Jungle Books* is how the wild is made so unwild. In his novels, he foregrounds laws and codes of honor, the “Law of the Jungle—as old and true as the sky.”¹⁴ It is as though the jungle contains more of the rituals and structures of civilization than civilization itself. Per Kipling's style, the animals speak in a formal register of British English. While their speech is not unusual for stories about anthropomorphized animals, it certainly circumvents the feral child's lack of formal language. We see that the jungle of Kipling's imagination reflects a replacement of wildness with civilization, that in the place of lack there is instead supplied the political and imagined visions of the colonizer. This implementation is not limited to the political and sociological institutions of the jungle. In the iconography surrounding the *Jungle Books*, Mowgli's body has likewise become the subject of the colonial imagination.

John Lockwood Kipling was the first illustrator of the *Jungle Books*. His illustrations of Mowgli and the animals of his world are beautifully detailed, and composed with an eye for the fantastic, parabolic qualities of the text. They are also clearly homoerotic. In one, Mowgli, as a young man, sleeps naked on a tree, his long hair feminine and body toned. In another picture, again naked, he carries the skin of the tiger Shere Khan and moves away from the other animals of the jungle in a starlit night scene, their eyes following his triumphant, somewhat tragic, walk. Lockwood Kipling's illustrations depict a body that is both vulnerable and

¹² Whitman's poem is from his “Song of Myself”

¹³ Kipling, John Lockwood. *Beast And Man In India*. London: Macmillan and Co., 1891. Print.

¹⁴ Kipling, Rudyard. *The Jungle Books*. 1st ed. Penguin. Print.

beautiful—completely different from the awkward, feral body of Oxana Malaya. Her body is unable to match up to the imagined feral child; Mowgli's handsomeness reflects a fantasy that dominates his iconography.

From 1967 to 1971, the Soviet animation studio Soyuzmultfilm (Union Animation) released a highly popular series of cartoon shorts as an adaptation of the novels.¹⁵ Mowgli's depiction follows in John Lockwood Kipling's paradigm—he is tall, bronze-skinned, muscular, and speaks perfect Russian in a baritone. He wears a loincloth and has long dark hair. Bagheera, his originally male teacher and protector, is a purring woman in the Soviet adaptation. Consistently, Kipling's novels have produced a legacy of a sexualized iconography of the feral child. Even the most recent adaptation, 2016's Disney version, uses the voice of Scarlett Johansson for Kaa, the snake who seduces Mowgli into danger and an Edenic sexuality, making the already sexual subtext of the snake's earlier appearance in the 1967 Disney animation even more evident. Incongruously and frequently, Mowgli's body is made the object of sexual attention and desire.

If, as Whitman's poem points to, the wild is defined by lack, an absence of civilization, then any construction of the feral child's body as the target of sexual desire must contend with the fact that these qualities are ascribed to the feral child archetype, not inherently or objectively possessed by the feral child. Kipling answers the chaotic jungle and its lack of human civilization by placing on it laws, mores, and customs, all illuminating Kipling's own position and politics. In the same sense, the qualities that are inscribed onto the imagined body of Mowgli suggest the desires of his illustrators. The feral child does not exist as its own subject but instead as a canvas upon which the narratives and desires of the public are painted. Mowgli does not exist—as a character in a novel, he illustrates the archetype of the desired feral child, one to whom actual feral children, like Malaya, do not match up.

IV. Eating Children

Bhanu Kapil's cross-genre document, *Humanimal*, concerns the missionary Joseph Singh who, near Midnapure in 1921, claimed to have killed the wolves acting as the parents of "the Bengali Wolf girls," Amala and Kamala. Kapil blends her own experience traveling to Midnapure with Singh's journals, fusing fact and fiction, the past and the present. She reconstructs the moment human food is introduced to the girls:

*Both children, the wolf girls, were given a fine yellow powder to clean their kidneys but their bodies, having adapted to animal ways of excreting meat, could not cope with this technology. Red worms came out of their bodies and the younger girl died. Kamala mourned the death of her sister with what Joseph describes as "an affection".*¹⁶

The "technology" of turmeric separates the children from their humanity. Food here becomes the marker of the girls' difference, and the language Kapil uses to describe the encounter likewise is alien, defamiliarizing the experience of human food, illness and mourning. Is poetic, defamiliarized language used here as a matter of style, or to reflect the perspective of the characters who do not understand the world they encounter? Made vulnerable, the inability of the girls to consume human food and the resulting, avoidable death of Amala suggests a violence at the root of taking the feral child back into human civilization. Perhaps, Kapil wryly notes, Singh's fixation with the girls verges on the perverse, the dangerous.

Why does the feral child need to be saved at all? To ask this question brings up a larger issue of child welfare and safety. In humanist rights discourse, welfare connotes a moral responsibility to those deemed human, a label which feral children cannot separate themselves from even as they complicate it. Many of these stories, fictional and not,

15 Adventures Of Mowgli. Soviet Union: Roman Davydov, 1973. film.

16 Kapil, Bhanu. *Humanimal*. Berkeley, CA: Kelsey Street Press, 2009. Print.

arise from an originary case of childhood abandonment by their parents. But a difference exists between ensuring the safety of these children and forcibly reincorporating them into human society.

The need to restore civilization to the feral child is an extension of Kipling's literary project of imposing civilization onto an embodied wildness that eventually demands subjugation and custom. This logic is carried out in the narratives of these feral children stories: a shepherd saves Romulus and Remus, who then found the paradigmatic city; Mowgli, in the second *Jungle Book's* final story, "The Spring Runneth," reconciles with his "true" identity as a human by being taken in by his adopted mother and joining her village. Malaya, though by most accounts seems to be doing well, was also taken in and immediately subjected to a slew of tests and rehabilitations, put in front of cameras and introduced to a massive public in a forceful introduction to the world through violent taming.

In another scene, Kapil makes this violence clear: "Accused by an orphan of biting, Kamala is called into Joseph's study where he bites her back. Beats her with a bamboo wand, then pricks her in the palm with its tip."¹⁷ He bites Kamala "back", though, tellingly, Singh was not the orphan whom she had originally bitten. Singh acts as the retributive force for a larger human society against the feral child. Kapil points to Singh's rescue of the girls as ultimately sadistic. It is also crucial to consider Singh's role as a missionary in addition to the complex legacy that such a role implies in enacting power over colonized people. He means to discipline, to subdue the feral child, even at the cost of the child's own welfare.

V. Conclusion

Kapil never verifies Singh's claims and journal entries, and whether or not Singh's descriptions actually occurred remains a matter of debate. Serge

Aroles, the French surgeon, says Singh's widely disseminated journals are lies, that the missionary took advantage of a sensational chance for a story, and, instead, both girls had severe cases of autism. While perhaps overzealous, Aroles does point to the way in which stories of feral children are instrumentalized to cover up the unpalatable. For Aroles, this amounts to a dramatization of feral children as cover stories for mental disability. It's a conclusion we might find reductive, but there is a suspicious salaciousness at the heart of so many of these stories devoured by the public. From the whore/wolf opposition at the origins of Roman history to the sexualization of Mowgli, narratives of feral children cover up secret histories or express secret desires, turning them into majestic, marvelous stories for consumption.

The figure of the feral child unsettles the fantasy of stability and reveals the precarious instability around the category of the human. Widely disseminated and consumed depictions of feral children are used to both assert and muddle national boundaries, colonial narratives, and differences between these depictions' own myths and realities. A relationship with feral children that is centered around ourselves and our own humanity may inevitably lead to violence: Singh's carelessness, his violation of two children by dictating the way they ought to be human, ended in their deaths. Rather than exclusively viewing the deep-seated integration of these narratives into an organized social order as a taming or disciplining of feral children and their narratives, we may also view these stories and figures as rendering wild, perhaps more chaotic, than a social world that rests upon an artifice of order. The sensationalized treatment of the feral child mythologizes the banality of the news cycle, reawakening the folkloric underpinnings and unspeakable fantasies that lurk beneath everyday narratives.

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17 Ibid.



Negative Foil

**Egon
Conway**

Negative Foils

Symbolic Labor of the Incarcerated

Egon Conway

The value of blackness resided in its metaphorical aptitude, whether literally understood as the fungibility of the commodity or understood as the imaginative surface upon which the master and the nation came to understand themselves.

-Saidiya Hartman in *Scenes of Subjection*

In 1989, a store called Corrections Connection opened its doors on South Main Street in Pendleton, Oregon. While the brick-and-mortar store has since closed, its products remain available on the Corrections Connection website, allowing virtual access to “durable” goods that not only “[fill] the needs of hardworking individuals or the casual dresser” but also serve as a “conversation piece.” This “conversation,” conducted honestly, might begin in one of two places: federal money from drug seizures and a plan to defray incarceration costs, coming together to form the Prison Blues program. Taking over a defunct 47,000-square-foot garment factory, the company has worked with eighty incarcerated individuals to produce a line that they describe as “the original, authentic, prison-made clothing brand.” While most beneficiaries of prison labor attempt to hide that fact, Prison Blues is remarkably candid and even celebratory about the work program. The site proudly proclaims that incarcerated laborers keep about twenty percent of their earnings, about \$120 per month, while the rest of the profits go to reducing incarceration costs, touted as saving taxpayer dollars.

The garments, still produced and sold today, remain popular. A testimonial on the website’s homepage praises the “good work” of the “guys,” inviting the reader to rush to the production floor to give them “a pat on the back,” and admires the

jeans for being “American-made.” Even if these incarcerated laborers do not continue to “tailor upon their release,” the consumer can rest assured “that they will have an applicable job skill as well as a work ethic that may have been previously lacking.” Not only does the consumer of Prison Blues support ‘American business’ in his choice of Prison Blues, but also the rehabilitation of the (male) prisoners. To consume these goods is to be a good citizen, reducing the tax burden of incarceration while promoting the transformation of deviant, idle, anti-State prisoners into hard-working “guys.” Prison Blues’ consumers are constructed, through the website’s curation of reviews and general rhetoric, as always-already law-abiding and productive white male citizens, whose national belonging never comes into question.

Built on the expropriation of incarcerated labor, the theatrics of the prison become apparent in Prison Blues’ moralization of two positions: one a criminal indebted to the nation, and the other an honest, hard-working man performing the rehabilitative savior from the outside. Within the theatre of the prison, itself produced through histories of slavery, these two subject positions – the criminal and the law-abiding citizen – are racialized. This racialization is encoded both in the coerced labor that produces the clothes and through the significations of the clothes themselves by those who wear them. As a costume, Prison Blues’ denim jackets and work jeans move against the black-and-white stripes or khaki jumpsuit of the prisoner, serving to fashion a form of white, masculine subjectivity. These can both be considered uniforms, serving to mark a population en masse rather than an individual. Yet in the pared down, rugged, denim aesthetic, the white everyman can signal his detachment from excess or luxury, positing labor not as instrumental but as a good in itself. The market-determined system of choice through which he acquires these clothes allows him to perform a kind of choice, his clothing marking a moralized simplicity of lifestyle.

The “everyman” lifestyle advertised by Prison Blues, along with citizens’ praising the ‘hard work’

of incarcerated workers, aligns with a conception of “American” labor devoid of class, race and gender relations. The purity of “hard work,” and the “ordinary” consumer’s recognition of that work, becomes the narrative through which the consumption of the citizen and the salvation of the incarcerated worker become intertwined. As seen in the testimonials, the consumption of these clothes is not just a matter of the individual citizen crafting his own style. For it is precisely through this narrative of noble consumption -- that to consume the products of incarcerated workers is to encourage “hard work” and therefore to participate, as a proper citizen, in the prisoners’ salvation -- that the dynamics of property, contract, selfhood and race are sufficiently concealed as to allow the citizen to be at once an ‘everyman’ and savior. By praising the prisoner’s ‘hard work’ and wearing the clothes with pride, the citizen imagines that he is not simply giving the prisoner a compliment but acknowledging and affirming his own vitality as a citizen with moralized purchasing power and consigning the prisoner to a form of vitality that is legible only through his labor. This imagined vitality conceals the precarity of the prisoner’s livelihood and the coerced nature of his labor, as well as the history through which the modern prison, the unacknowledged site of the citizen’s fantasy, actually emerged.

Inextricably bound to notions of property, contract, selfhood and race, the modern prison constructs two subject positions, whiteness and blackness, which Nikhil Singh describes as arising out of a racialized history of policing. These two positions are constituted such that whiteness is a position of propertied vitality that arises from contract relations, while blackness is imagined to be a threat to property and contract and “imagined to harbor a potentially criminal disregard for propertied order” (Singh 1091). The prison and the police function as a theater in which a white, propertied order is reified through the imprisonment of deviant bodies, marked primarily by race. The prison enacts what Saidiya Hartman terms the “afterlives of slavery,” and Fanon’s insight that the colonized people might as well be dead if their material and symbolic labor were not so profitable.

In “Whiteness of Police,” Singh argues that police function as a racialized counter-insurgent force that protects and upholds a certain property order based in contracts. Singh writes that policing “emerges from the governance of property and its interests in relationship to those who have no property and thus no calculable interests, and who are therefore imagined to harbor a potentially criminal disregard for propertied order” (Singh 1091). Inextricably tied to racial formations in imperialism, colonialism and slavery, modern policing emerges out of the establishment of slave patrols. First direct counter-insurgent measures, slave patrols and other militias designed to protect the masters and the institution of slavery criminalized blackness as disorder. Enacting this criminalization, the Georgia General Assembly proclaimed patrols should be instituted for “preventing the many dangers and inconveniences that may arise from the disorderly and unlawful meetings of Negroes and other slaves” (qtd. in Singh 1091). In the very act of meeting as a collective with sovereign interests, enslaved people challenged the dominant order of slavery that established their bodies and minds as mere fungible commodity, without desires and rights. In an attempt to preserve white definitions of property (with black bodies commodified as such), the Georgia General Assembly criminalized black collective life as unlawful disorder. His accurate assertion that the prison and its systems (policing, and later parole, welfare) are a core of state power aimed at “managing dispossessed and dishonored populations” gestures towards the specific biopolitical character of the prison, which racially organizes and manages criminalized populations such that they remain bodies to be excavated, a situation beneficial to the growth of capitalism (Wacquant 80).

While slavery ensured a source of free labor and confined enslaved people, the antebellum period posed the problem of legally freed black people, resulting in new methods of managing criminalized bodies. The immense productive capacity of the southern plantation system drove the expansion of the United States and growth of capitalism across the nation, but came under threat after the Civil War. Against this threat

of disorder, abolitionists turned to the task of educating the freedmen and acclimating them to the hard-working American way. Hartman, in her study of early texts, educational manuals and other pamphlets aimed at freedmen, writes that these materials “strived to inculcate an acquisitive and self-interested ethic that would motivate the formerly enslaved to be dutiful and productive new laborers” (Hartman 3). This threat of the collapse of the southern economy, which would have likely led to the collapse of northern industry reliant on the export of cotton, drove reformers and other progressives to impress a pious work ethic by criminalizing and racializing vagrancy and idleness while cultivating consumer desire. Hartman argues that “the mobility of the freed, their refusal to enter contractual relations with former slaveholders, and their ability to subsist outside wage labor relations because of their limited wants” were criminalized to make the “formerly enslaved as rational individuals and dutiful subordinates” (4). Infamous vagrancy laws and the strict enforcement of exploitative tenant farming contracts criminalized a way of life outside of the propertied order defined by hard work (threatened by idleness) and property ownership (threatened by vagrancy and nomadism) as

metrics of success. Through this criminalization, vitality is forcibly circumscribed within the realm of labor.

Although the criminalization of idleness and vagrancy supported the growth of capitalism, these crimes are distinctly racialized as Black. Singh terms the practices of policing aiming to manage these criminal populations as the “whiteness of police,” a term suggesting the manner in which policing is designed to uphold a propertied order defined as white. Singh understands whiteness and blackness as subject positions and modes of perception that, while correlating to and being produced out of racial identities, correspond to certain defined positions within racial capitalism rather than being “strictly reducible to specific white people or black people” (Singh 1096). He writes that in opposition to whiteness, which is a status of holding “social, political and economic freedoms” (1091), blackness, the primary object of police, “was by this time an increasingly thick and naturalized but also fungible way to define a (state of) being whose relationship to contract was untrustworthy and unstable and at worst null and void, requiring permanent supervision and when necessary direct domination” (1095). Thus, the idleness and vagrancy of the freedman, which challenge labor and land contracts, are dually criminalized and racialized.

The racialized architectures of prison cordon off the dispossessed into an invisible realm of social death, in which the body is ‘alive’ insofar as it can work and be punished for deviating, but ‘dead’ with regard to rights. The prisoner’s wage labor is conflated with his vitality and freedom. With the specter of antebellum slavery surfacing in the contemporary, the carceral institution functions as a source of undead social reproduction that enforces a neoliberal, white, propertied order by employing incarcerated bodies as foils for the dominant



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subjectivity. As a result, lack of work ethic, excessive leisure and pleasure, and immodest displays of wealth mark the criminal body, and constitute a threat to the moral order. The criminal is imagined as too lazy or pleasure oriented to agree to the compact that we describe as work ethic. Thus, the Prison Blues program defines hard work and honesty as the remedies to pay back the debts incarcerated individuals owe to society. Such debts are accrued through nominal action against property and capital, though being racialized as Black is itself considered such action when national belonging is constituted through whiteness and property. The national imagination thus confers and recalls citizenship in accordance with dominant subjectivity.

The policing of blackness thus enables and reproduces white hegemony. By criminalizing vagrancy, idleness and restricting black people's rights through poll taxes and voter registration laws, the imprisonment of primarily black bodies reified contract relations, property and land ownership as proper. Linking colonial practices to the antebellum period, Lisa Guenther paraphrases Fanon to describe the colonial predicament: "The black man has no being in the colonial world beyond his opposition to the white man, who reduces him to a negative foil for his own identity while exploiting his labor and resources and disavowing their contributions to his own wealth" (Guenther 55). By demonstrating what and who the white order was not, the imprisonment of freedmen served to construct a white subjectivity aimed at preserving an order inextricable from the tenets of capitalism that demand a politically dispossessed class of unskilled laborers.

Although the policing of deviant bodies aimed and aims to assimilate them into a dominant, white order, a temporal separation emphasized in these freedmen pamphlets places the freedman in a positions of mimicry. Hartman points to the grammatical structure of these pamphlets



that narrated the freedman's desires in the future tense. The pamphlets often emphasized that the freedman "was eager to be..." suggesting a proper path towards assimilation, but placing the freedman always behind, as not quite realized (23). Although the logic of incarceration urges a path toward freedom through labor, the black body, even when attempting assimilation, can never fully become a part of the white order. The logics of assimilation and merit rely on the occlusion of structural anti-Blackness. Homi Bhabha crystallizes this asymptotic relation, suggesting that "mimicry is a production of the subject as same and other" (qtd in Hartman 23). For Hartman, anxieties surrounding the assimilation of freedmen into a white order also manifested themselves in minstrel theater. The popularity of black dandy character, who was found ridiculous by simply performing the typically white-coded role of dandy, in the minstrel show reinforces the category of blackness as laughably incompatible with the responsible ownership of private property and contract.

As a category for policing that requires surveillance and discipline (counter-insurgent measures to protect the white order), white (and broadly non-Black) subjectivity define themselves in opposition to Blackness. Riffing off of Orlando Patterson, Guenther proposes that blackness is a state of social death that finds historical roots in slavery, responsible for its errant action but not bequest to the benefits of whiteness as defined

as social, political and economic freedoms. For the deviant, punishment produced not a soul and mind in need of rehabilitation, but “a contained and controlled body, pinned to itself and the master’s will, immobilized just to the point of remaining available for exploitation” (45). This punishment ties the body, mind and soul of the enslaved to the will of the master, ripping it of rights, agency, and subjectivity, while reinforcing the body’s responsibility to work and culpability with regards to crime. In the contemporary moment the subjection of people extends beyond the enslaved, the deviant freedman, and the prisoner to the contemporary disinherited, including the poor, the disabled, formerly colonized populations, and the disposable remnants of global capitalism. Worked to death between three part-time jobs with no benefits, unable to get welfare and facing imprisonment because compounded fines have led to unpayable debt, the dispossessed, like the enslaved before them, face a social death that effectively hides structures of oppression under the notion that the dispossessed squander their resources or otherwise violate their contract. Captured by the prison system, these new “prisoners are saddled with the blame for their own disinheritance” (58).

Part of how these structures of oppression are occluded is the manner in which, as Hartman asserts, freedom and vitality are aligned with labor. In the postbellum period, frequent references to the blood spilled during the civil war and the loss of white lives implied that the freedman owed a debt to the nation, which was to be repaid in labor with uncertain returns. Reminiscent of Corrections Connection’s description of the Prison Blues program, the pamphlets directed towards educating the freedmen framed an image of a joyfully bent back as prerequisite to freedom. Hartman writes, “[t]he back bent joyfully to the burdens foisted upon it transformed the burdened individuality and encumbrances of freedom into an auspicious exercise of free will and self-making. This unsettling description



divulges servility and submission as prerequisites to enjoying the privileges of freedom” (Hartman 8). As submission to harsh labor becomes the key to freedom, structural oppression hides under the meritocratic notion that hard work pays off. Moralistic, neoliberal discourse suggests that individuals or family units unable to make ends meet are responsible for conditions that clearly arise from structural oppression. Acclimation to such conditions further entrenches the atomized character of society while those under such precarious conditions absorb and espouse principles of individual responsibility and self-maximization.

Loïc Wacquant, writing from a sociological perspective, suggests that prisons assist in sustaining insecure labor conditions, such that these exploitative contracts are accepted as a rational compromise or even as a welcome gift. As well as directly stripping families and individuals of wealth by seizing property, prisons and police departments mark prisoners through systems of parole and record such that gaining employment becomes difficult. Combined with the disruption of family support networks by capturing people that would otherwise provide income, the prison serves, Wacquant writes, as “a disciplinary instrument unfurled to foster the neoliberal revolution by helping to impose insecure labor as the normal horizon of work for the unskilled

fractions of the post industrial laboring class” (Wacquant 74). Disguising structural oppression, prisoner rehabilitation programs train prisoners for return to civil society in which their livelihood remains precarious.

The transition from coerced labor toward a precarious life in civil society recalls images of postbellum America. Dennis Childs discusses a postbellum photograph of a fugitive neoslave ‘treeing’ from the Louisiana State Prison Plantation, in which a convict, distinguished by prison stripes, clammers up a tree while a white prison guard, dressed in a bowler and a suit, sics a pack of dogs on the slave. Childs highlights the staged quality of the image, writing that the image casts itself “as an action shot of a prison plantation official fulfilling the heroic duty of apprehending a black fugitive neoslave” (Childs 17). Like the white ‘hero’ who captures the escaped fugitive, the police are held up as national heroes who are protecting communities from dangerous criminals. The quintessential image of the police

officer running down a fugitive, a robber or a dope dealer functions as a means of “solidifying the dominative and free status of whiteness, through the visual reproduction of black enslavement, corporeal rupture and dehumanization” (18). A moment of racial self-realization, the image Childs describes materializes in the visual and written discourses of the prison, which define a free, white identity and relegates the defined other as mere bodies to be exploited for labor.

The same honest masculinity alluded to in Correction Connection’s description of the Prison Blues program is found in the posture taken up by the prison guard in Louisiana State Prison Plantation’s image. A clearly staged image, the white prison guard presents an air of calculated action, with his body restrained and his horse standing grazing in the background. Completing his job, the prison guard serves to incarnate this white male subject in the form imagined by the propertied, white, neoliberal order. Set against the figure of the fugitive, the



man's dress in particular suggests a moralized presentation of the honest man. Wearing a suit and tie unsuitable to the physical character of his work, the prison guard seems transplanted from a family photograph where he would stand as the patriarch, owning property, negotiating inheritance and securing an income. Prison Blues establishes a parallel relationship, employing the image of the incarcerated individual as lacking work ethic as a foil to bolster the white working-class, masculine identity. While the photograph of the prison guard celebrates what aligns with an upper or middle-class image of masculinity, the rugged clothing offered by Prison Blues celebrates a working-class man whose honesty derives from upholding the contract of waged labor, who has a certain loathing of leisure and excess consumption. Tied up in this loathing is the rhetoric mobilized against feminized subjects and Black people around consuming "luxury" products and in excess.

Encoded in images of white heroes and fallen black bodies is an assertion of white right to life. The prison's biopolitical governance permits only the established white, propertied order,

while demanding the suppression of those bodies that attempt to function outside of it. Only by disappearing, subjecting and criminalizing bodies defined along Singh's notion of blackness could the white identity support its own actions and posit its superiority. Singh succinctly writes that "criminalization became indispensable to liberal governors, who worried from the very earliest development of US nationhood that the condemnation of blackness or redness alone was insufficient to justify the myriad wrongs committed by settlers, slave owners, and traders" (Singh 1093). Slavery, and the penal system function as institutions that consecrate the hegemonic identity. As the undead spectres of slavery and attendant anti-Blackness surface again in the prison system, the prison's function becomes clear. The penal institution, incorporating systems of labor exploitation and anti-Black oppression, uses bodies as negative foils to define a hegemonic subjectivity always in crisis.

Egon Conway is a senior at Columbia College. He will pursue writing as he continues his life in New York.

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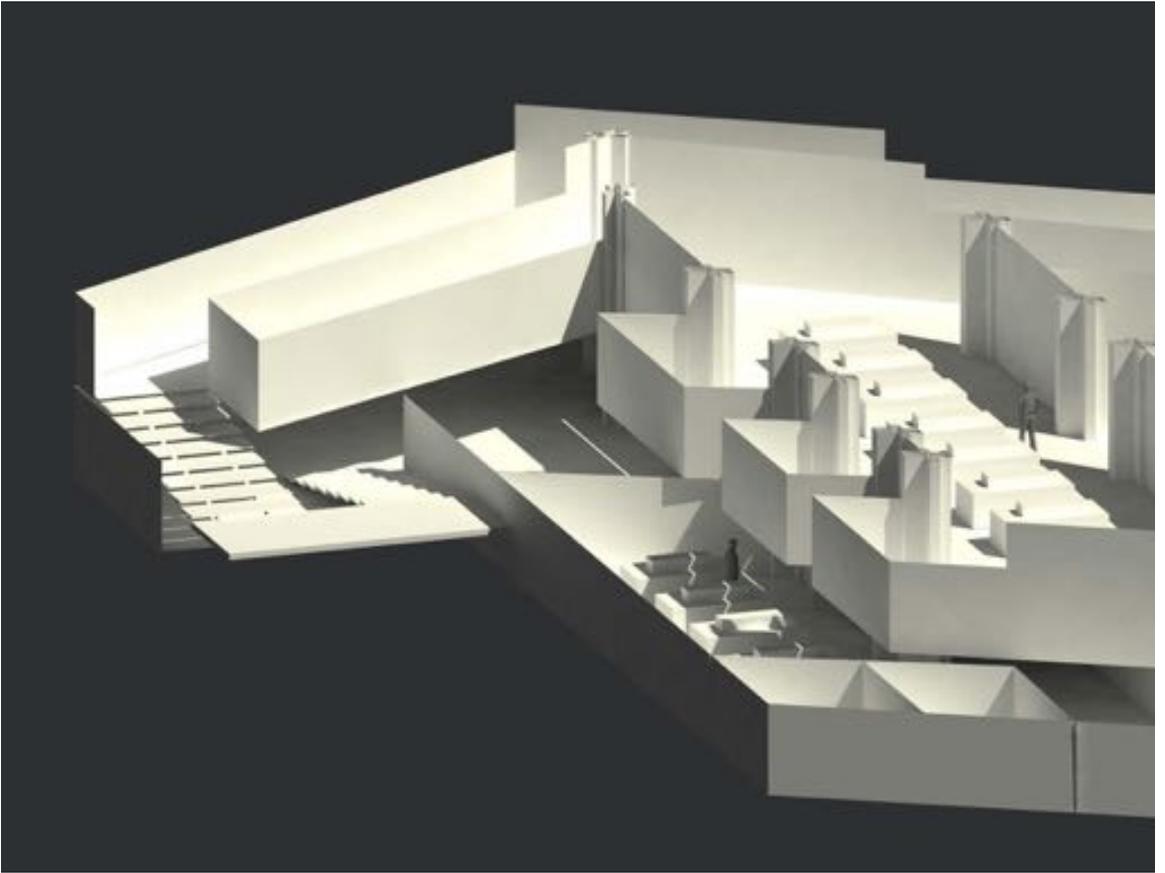
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Thinking Beyond Commodities

an interview with
Branka Arsić
by Devika Kapadia
and Melanie Shi

Thinking Beyond Commodities

An Interview with Branka Arsić

Devika Kapadia and Melanie Shi

Branka Arsić (BA) studies 19th century American literature (especially Emerson, Thoreau, Dickinson, and Melville) and the history of American life sciences. Her new book discusses Thoreau's morning practices in relation to biological life and pathology.

Devika Kapadia (DK) is a junior at Columbia University majoring in Philosophy.

Melanie Shi (MS) is a sophomore at Columbia University majoring in English.

DEVIKA: In your essay “Our Things”, you discuss the modes in which material culture is accessed and how Thoreau’s material ontologies set him apart from our capitalist way of thinking about material culture. To begin, can you give us an understanding of what you think an ontology of things or objects is within this framework, in which accessing, buying, owning are able to give meanings to things in a certain way?

BRANKA: That’s a very big topic these days -- “thing theory.” Beyond the traditional understanding of Marx’s critique of reification, I find interesting more recent thinking that builds on 17th and 18th century theories of things. For instance, in the works of authors like Thoreau, Melville or some Romantic poets, it’s possible to differentiate between what philosophy at that point called an “object” and what some theorists today call a “thing.” According to the distinction I have in mind, an object is something that always exists in relation to the subject, and is available for appropriation, whereas a “thing” would be something

that resists translation or appropriation; it would be a phenomenon with no market trade value or even aesthetic value, persevering in its own idiosyncratic way, not referencing anything outside of itself (here I have in mind the thing theory formulated by Johnathan Lamb, for instance). It is difficult to conceptually relate its possibility since there are actually not a lot of verbs in our language that can articulate the difference between a thing and an object. But, in any case, Lamb wrote a really interesting book called *The Things Things Say* about the variety of ways in which 18th and 19th century authors in England thought about things, differentiating them from objects. On Lamb’s account objects would be entities dependent on human recognition and appropriation, enabling reification, and they would be opposed to things, which could exist with or without humans, in utterly un-anthropomorphic landscapes.

However, when I think about the idiosyncrasies of thinghood I think less about the English than about Americans. I think about Thoreau, for instance. He visits estate sales and tries to salvage certain things from the property of people he never met, never knew anything about. The meaning of the things those people owned is unavailable to him. To him they have absolutely no value (they are very ordinary, bereft of market, aesthetic or sentimental investment) yet, he wants to incorporate them in the circulation of his own life and thinking. They don’t speak to him in the manner in which Benjamin says commodities speak to their future owners – begging them to buy them because they are outstanding – but in a manner that addresses the idiosyncrasy of his own thoughts. They are strange beings talking to particularity of his own mind. A happy encounter.

DK: As you were talking about the subject-object relation, you seem to suggest that the process through which things become objects is through language grafting that meaning onto them. I was wondering what ways of knowing things, through and in language, we can have that don’t have that violence outside of renaming them.

BA: I think there are many ways of knowing things that actually do not... but, hold on, are we

talking about things or objects here?

MELANIE: Perhaps things becoming objects.

BA: To clarify, according to the fragile and problematic distinction I am observing here, objects are things involved in a circulation of trade, exchange or phantasy. For that reason, they cannot but exist in relation to a subject or an owner. Objects are known through their market value or exchange value, which makes them so many little Marxist fetishes. A thing, on the other hand can or would be known in ways that are not necessarily economic or linguistic; one could know a thing impersonally, as an affect passing through one's body.

Different ontologies propose different ideas of things, of course. This semester I am teaching a class on *Moby-Dick* and because of it, because of Queequeg, I'm very much preoccupied by the cosmologies of South Pacific peoples. They found a really amazing way of integrating the non-human and inhuman, thing-like, forms of being. For instance, for them, a canoe is a transformation of a tree that hosts a living forest god within a thing; and that thing then becomes an archive of both ancestral and current life; something intimate and vital, irreplaceable, non exchangeable. And that has nothing to do with what the Western mind would vulgarly identify as animism; instead, it's an integrated way of understanding life, where the living matter out of which a thing is made continues to live in the thing and then affords the thing its irreplaceable, special status. There's a certain kind of respect operating there that resists reification since the thing is here the embodiment of the living memory of what has been. The tree sacrificed for a canoe is just one of many examples I encountered in South Pacific ontologies; but all of them can teach us a lot about how things might exist without succumbing to the fate of becoming capitalist objects.

To get back to Thoreau; he is so intense in his critique of people who spend their whole lives working to pay off houses they bought in neighborhoods they didn't even like, not because he

was claiming that people don't need houses but because those houses are valued according to their market value, a capitalist topography of the precious. Instead of developing a relation to one's own space, Thoreau says, people relate to their houses as objects of exchange and profit potential. These days, people will say "my apartment or my house appreciated so much," as though this suffices to make themselves better -- this is the object of his critique. He believes that those who thrive on the market value of their real estate live the life of "quiet desperation."

MS: That brings to mind the contemporary art market, in which people collect art objects to store wealth and accrue value. Even a creative production can be commodified and made into an object. What is the opposite of commodifying art? Your example of the canoe, an extension of a tree, is imbued with meaning from natural life. But could a thing contain human to human relations that are non-economic?

BA: There is a way of relating to things from the point of view of a collector, in Benjamin's sense of the word -- there are collectors who collect with the idea of reselling, like what you said in terms of contemporary art. On the other hand, there are people who collect, like I do my books, with absolutely no idea of exchanging. Such collecting is fueled by an intense obsession with not just the world of things but with what that collection would contribute to the world of the collector. Of course, there is an easy way to go about this and cleverly dismiss it; for one can easily say that you are fooled, that you never gather a world but always objects, that as long as you collect, you're storing values and exhibiting a capitalist drive to have more, a decadent desire to possess more (there is always a nostalgic little aristocrat in you!). Isn't that too straightforward? To me, when it comes to things, there is, naïve as that might sound, still a deeper way of encountering them; I believe there is a way in which a thing enters the somatic or emotional or intellectual space of your existence without turning you into a weirdo. For instance, I am a collector of Japanese stationery, but not because I think I can sell it, exchange it (I would never do anything like that) or because I

think I am finally in the possession of something precious; but because it does something to my writing. I have a tactile relationship to the surface of the paper, I have this little ritual of choosing which paper is right for which topic or chapter – it breathes good energy into my thinking, and I write better; it is all about having a good encounter between human and nonhuman, that is what I am after. I'm sure a lot of people would be successful in tracing my attitude to the logic of capitalism – the thinghood got into your psyche, they would say, you are objectivized, decadently aestheticized, etc. – but smart as it is I still find that critique reductive (can't it hold for all our desires?). There's so much more to our way of relating to the embodied world than the economic value it receives within the logic of the circulation of the capital.

MS: That answers to a lot of concerns I have about the way I relate to objects and sort of store myself in objects in my room. I don't have any intention to exchange those objects, but they quickly accumulate as I curate more things into my life.

I am also thinking about how it's impossible not to always be consuming. We eat first thing in the morning, which is a kind of consumptive act. From food to clothing, almost all the things we bring into our lives are bought or acquired in some kind of way, especially in this city. In the context of perpetual consumption, does the thing-object distinction present us with a more ethical way to relate to the things we consume?

BA: It's important to note that what we consume is not necessarily always things, and that leads us into a slightly different zone; because we consume all kinds of phenomena, from living beings to very sophisticated artifacts, meat to theater. So when we start talking about consuming, we are talking about a realm that is more heterogeneous than the realm of things.

To begin with, most obviously, when it comes to the question of consumption we encounter foremost a set of questions that is absolutely related to capitalism: how do we consume energy, constant-

ly enacting geological transformation and climate change that injures the Earth in so many ways. But while some aspects of unleashed consumption escalated with capitalism and its technological power and global spread, many of its ethical aspects were with us before capitalism (why are we then not better prepared to answer them now?). For instance, the question of the consumption of life did not necessarily appear with capitalism. It has been with us since the Vedas. True, we have to eat -- that's kind of obvious, because if we don't we put in jeopardy our own life and that is unethical. But having said that, the question of how and what we eat remains. Today this question is very intricate; we have to think about fair trade, health issues (organic food), responsible growing. But then, there's also this question of what kind of food, ontologically speaking, people should eat. Should we eat animals? That's not a question invented by capitalism; it goes way back, fused with the question of how we treat life and other living beings; it has a very long tradition, from the Vedas and the Upanishads through Greek philosophy, it survives in many ways throughout the medieval ages and we encounter it again, in a very powerful way in the 19th century, with vegetarian movements, across the globe, really, in India, in the United States, in England. It is in Thoreau's Higher Laws, it is in Gandhi's "home-rule," the question of vegetarianism traverses epochs, cultures and religions. If we move the question of consuming in this direction, which I think we should, then it becomes far more complicated; it reveals itself not as something that's new, but rather, as an old and persevering ethical obsession asking us to attend to ethical behavior toward other life forms, to do whatever we possibly can to decrease the suffering of other living beings.

So, to summarize, I would say that the ethics and politics of consumption demands responsibility toward resources, towards our environment, fair trade and labor. But I also want to think that when people think about consuming they think about the lives of beings other than humans, and do their best to respect them, trying their best not to consume them. So, yes, I am proposing vegetarianism, guilty of that charge; but please don't take me wrong; I really do not want to sound

moral or preachy here. Obviously, people eat meat, probably always will; my modest proposal here is the plea that if they like to do that they could try to invent more or less responsible ways of eating meat (I know, I am formulating a terrible ethical impasse here, I don't have space to articulate it now).

DK: I wonder if this distinction between morals and ethics, especially with relation to consumption, comes back to what Melanie said about storing herself in objects. Sometimes, ethical acts can

sive exteriority comes and which it has to process, do its best to keep it under control. Rather, self is something that's always in the process of becoming thanks to its contingent interactions with whatever it is not.

I will give you an example of what I have in mind, that comes from Emerson. He says that our life is such that we always find ourselves in a certain mood. You should register here all the complexity of this statement. We don't make ourselves, are not in charge of it; we simply find ourselves, pick



be ways to mark yourself or to be in a certain way, in a more concrete and unified way. But I know you think a lot about moving away from the self or reducing its boundaries.

BA: I think about self as something that's very porous, and in that sense ecological. Self is not something that's in a strict opposition to the external world, whatever that world is at the moment, whether it appears as a hard material thing or an emotional human being or a piece of clothing, or artwork. Self is not something that exists in some kind of stable interiority into which this aggres-

ourselves up in what? In a mood. But what is a mood? Well, a mood is not something we generate (so no intentional agency involved in it at all); rather it is a force that situates us on a certain spot of the affective map. We wake up quite fine, but then get a bit gloomier, look around ourselves, asking ourselves, "why am I feeling like this today, why am I a little bit low now when the morning started so fine, just fine? Is it the rainy day?" And often when the idea of rain and fog comes to mind our bad mood is dispersed, the mood evaporates. Doesn't that tell you that our moods have us rather than the opposite. Our psyches are objects



of our moods. This is not to say that we do not have a self, it really isn't either/or. It's not a clear division between what I am and what I am not but rather a dynamic, chronic negotiation. What self is is ceaselessly re-negotiated and not really through the force of some unconscious interiority that according to psychoanalysis presses on me, wanting to get out, bidding me speak my "true" self to the world; rather, closer to how William James imagined it, what the self is is ceaselessly negotiated through encounters with the external world. Thus, when I fall for an object or a work of art, it's about relation, not about my unconscious desires; some of them act on who I am and remake me. I guess, what I'm saying is that because they can remake me, even "objects" are a part of my self; not because I appropriate them, but because they act on me; they do.

I think something similar about clothing, should I even say this? Well, clothes are not something that is severed from who I am, brutally imposed on me by the inhuman society we inhabit. Doubtless, one can say, we live in a capitalist society and there are only so many places where people can shop for clothes, despite all the terrible discrepancies in terms of their economic value and trade ven-

ues, all of it true. I don't want to quarrel with that reading at all, for it is just right. Totally correct. Except that, in defense of our fragile uniqueness I should like to add that despite all the standardization we nevertheless do not look the same. You go down the streets of Manhattan and you see people so differently dressed, different relations making them; what does that tell you? It tells you that despite the effort to standardize the specificity of our individuals we are heterogeneous, porous psyches. When I think about desire I always refer to Proust and Deleuze; they thought that our desires are not shaped by the secret drives of minds that find their truth in what is hidden and escapes us. They thought rather that desires comes to us from elsewhere, assemblages of ontologically diverse phenomena. Deleuze so convincingly argues that when, for instance, Proust sees Albertine on the beach, he sees her as the part of the beach and the sea and the atmosphere and light; and all of that, for him, is she. Proust's person is integrated in a landscape, dressed in a certain way enlightened by the Normandy light and -- all of that is the "person."

MS: If self is produced by collecting external bits of clothing, curating all that's supposedly exterior,

and becoming at each instant, I wonder if we have a baseline natural desire to possess or have things that come from outside of us, that we then assign the name of a capitalist urge to acquire things in the process of history.

BA: I don't think that one thing would exclude the other. What I am resisting is a reductionist approach that would interpret everything as the simple outcome of the circulation of capital. One really has to be a capitalist-pervert to think that capital is the only thing that circulates, that without the effective force of capital everything remains inert; as if capital were the spirit of all flesh and we dead without it. But that is bizarre, isn't it, some version of secularized Christianity? There are so many things that go around, happy to be outside of capitalist logic (that is what capitalism is afraid of, precisely, things it can't capitalize on). I don't deny it, the economic condition we inhabit affects us, but so do other phenomena, like the exposure to the view of the Pacific (that always remakes me. I'm a very different person where I'm close to the ocean. And much better.). Or looking at an Agnes Martin painting; or a New Mexican desert or, also the Kauri tree that hosts Maori ancestors. Despite the arrogance of Western metaphysics, ancestral religions realized something very wise, namely that we are made of so many other beings. The basic reasoning grounding these religions supposes that we are made of many psyches that already were, so that we are, in a sense, multiplicities. I think many people wisely realized a long time ago that we are many, made of memories not necessarily lived by us but instead entrusted to us, that gradually might become us; they wisely realized that there is a circulation of thoughts, attitudes and even gestures or words, or little looks or smiles that we exchange, that make us and remake us in a way that we can't control, so that we are, actually, made of relations.

DK: Is this to say we can't trace the precise source of our desires, or the precise ways in which things act on us? Is it simply a 'magical interaction' produced by this dense conglomeration of relations that you talk about?

BA: With this I go again in the direction of Emerson

and pragmatism. Emerson thought -- and following Emerson, Proust also used a similar phrase -- that there are 'involuntary perceptions' and memories, something registering in us, coming to stay with us as the outcome of contingent encounters, which all encounters are. When I talk about the porousness of the self, that's what I mean: the exposure to the event of encountering; the surprise. We perceive so many things without even knowing when and how and why, but here they are, working in us to reinvent us. These affects work and re-work us before we can even figure out the kinds of changes that they initiate in us.

I am not saying there is no way for us to react and contradict them. Rather, I am saying that things start happening to us well before we actually became aware of their occurrence; once we realize their presence we can then think about whether we want to act against them or endorse them. But whichever way we go, at the moment we start acting on them we are already touched by them. We are acting on what has acted on us. We are already changed, for our affects precede us. And that's what I mean when I say we are acted on or upon; nothing magical about it. It's the feeling you find in yourself, and the fact that it's there changes you, even if for no other reason than the amount of force that it will require for you to act back on it. And that interaction makes you different. And while I'm by no means suggesting that there is no thing we can call "rational agency," I am suggesting that rational agency is a very intricate and complicated thing made up of a lot of irrational things, affects, perceptions and involuntary orientations that we have to acknowledge as preceding our volition.

DK: The way in which we come to abstractions, especially in the context and the conditions of the university environment, neglects this system of irrationality or seeks to deny it. I was wondering what you thought about that and how you navigate your place here within the university and within the expectations of being in the English department?

BA: So for somebody who is so convinced that the self is porous it would be inconsistent, and really

inaccurate, to say that I find my little spot in our big English department by acting in some programmed, supernaturally organized way. It's not that, you know, I wake up and have a clear plan of my day hour to hour, as if this is what's going to happen whenever I meet some of my colleagues. But, research, what can be called a chronic thinking about what I am writing, it is going on for me 24/7. Sometimes, for instance, I can't fall asleep; I am awake in the middle of the night and then I start thinking about the chapter I am writing; sometimes, if I am lucky, I figure out a paragraph that I couldn't figure out that morning when I was working on it, and since I am awake I get up and I write it. Even now, talking to you, I'm thinking "Oh this thing I said about affect I should follow up on." In a sense, I always write.

About your question of the English department more concretely. The department has a pretty organized set of customs and expectations and behaviors regarding what a good citizen should be or do. And I want to be a good citizen in every realm of my life, not just in the department but in general. I am invested in its future, I try to contribute to its improvement.

MS: I am thinking about what your conception of rational agency means for us as students of literature -- if we define consumption more broadly like you were speaking of earlier, we consume ideas at school, consume what we read and consume in our dialogues with others so as to become, right now, as we learn. I struggle not to be the product of what I'm reading, and am wondering if that's a problem.

BA: I understand! But if your reading is good then you're going to go away from the text with something uniquely special, good, shareable but also yours.

MS: But where do we exercise control? When we choose what to read?

BA: See that's the thing! It is the thing I'm constantly working through with my graduate students who are in the position to write their own dissertation, which is expected to be a piece of

original research and thinking. I always advise them, as I do myself, that they should not be too original, but just a little bit original. A tiny bit novel, never eccentric but always interesting. I try to say to them that it's kind of all happening at the same time: reading, thinking, writing. It's kind of a "mesh" as it were, but that's how everything else is; life is like that, isn't it?

You never take everything from what you read, that's impossible and is not wise. I don't even think that religious people take absolutely everything from religious texts they believe in. I think there's always some way of filtering. Some things stay with you, whereas others you are kind of -- you must be -- a bit suspicious of, no? Other things you read through and they don't say much to you at the moment, but then, years later -- this happens to me very often -- they come to haunt you. You want to write something and the question comes back to you, something like "Oh, didn't Kant say that? Where did I read that?" It stays with you, you go back to it -- who knows how and why -- in different periods of your life and different phases of your thinking. And when you get back to it, well, you too are very different, you take very different things from the texts you used to know (that is why you should never sell or throw away your books, they are always changing and becoming!).

What does that mean, to find old and supposedly known texts (or people) unrecognizably novel? It means they haven't lost the capacity to take you out of what you already know. That's how thinking really works, by escorting you out of what you know. If you experience this wonderful moment of a thought taking you out of what you know to land you in a different place, making you learn new things, seeing things differently, well, then everything starts becoming very interesting.

I should also add that there's a whole aspect of the contemporary world -- this world of the web and digital reality where the question of programming what people are going to be and how they're going to feel is prevalent -- that I don't know much about. I have a sense that it's almost a new world; I know, it sounds uninformed, and it is exactly

what it sounds. I am really a very old fashioned person. I write my books in handwriting. I don't have Facebook. I should probably get digitalized, to get in tune with everybody else.

DK: Part of the contemporary situation is that the information we start taking in abstraction happens at a disembodied level and the more that happens the harder sometimes it is to interact with materials and allow them to work on you. I was wondering how we might think of more embodied forms of reading of taking in information?

BA: Well... reading is always embodied, traces us, configures our cerebral and affective cartographies. Walter Benjamin convincingly claimed that perception is reading; Emerson also convincingly claimed that involuntary perceptions inscribe in us messages that we read regardless of our intention. On the other hand, in our everyday political reality there are events with horrific consequences – ominous signs that threaten us – occurring right in front of our eyes, that we don't really read, not necessarily because for some psychic reason we would be in denial of their presence, but because, much like Melville's Captain Delano we don't know how to interpret what we see. We know the letters but we can't read. That is precisely why it is so urgent to teach people the skill of reading; it is terribly mistaken to think of reading as a skill mandated by literary texts only. Every encounter – from conversing with other people, trying to figure out what it is they are trying to tell me, to watching a movie, to, say, reading *The New York Times* - requires a very developed reading skill. Reading well is not something only students of English or philosophy should be skilled in. I think everybody should be educated in the art of slow reading because it's the most essential art of ordinary living. It is the art of paying attention, the craft of hearing and understanding.

Ghosts Which
Ought to
Exist

**Hunter
Koch**

Ghosts Which Ought To Exist

Decay in Nitrate Film

Hunter Koch

The motion picture archive is filled with ghosts. To go back, to return to an archive, or, better yet, to return to the past for the first time, is to encounter a spectral presence that permeates the material at which you look. The first use projected celluloid film occurred roughly 120 years ago, and to view these films now, especially on a film print, is haunting. To view a very early Lumière brothers film, for example, like 1895's *Repas de bébé*, is to gaze at a family whose members have long been dead. One witnesses the movements, the interactions between them—these actions which leave their mark nowhere else but on this strip of film. To watch is to feel these individuals, to feel that which is not quite a presence, though not an absence—a spectrality, of sorts.

More haunting is to know where the possibility of the spectre has slipped away, to know one may no longer see ghosts which ought to exist. To approach the beginning of the motion picture archive is to slowly see fewer and fewer films. These early films used a cellulose nitrate base for the film stock, a stock still widely in use until the 1950s, and one with an unfortunate propensity to spectacularly destroy itself. This strange material, a material with a death drive, removes itself in one of two ways: either it auto-ignites, highly flammable and containing oxygen in its chemical composition; or, it decays, producing wonderful patterns that render the film all but useless. Most films that are lost have disappeared in vault fires that consume hundreds of reels at a time (and lots of film has been forgotten, thrown away, or misplaced). When we see a decaying film, then, it becomes all

the more painful—this remnant of a lost corpus never to be reassembled, a fluke survival caught in its march toward becoming a heap of deformed, brittle plastic containing no real information aside from the marks of decay.

How do these ideas relate—ideas of remembrance through film and film's inevitable decay? I offer here a meditation on this question. I work with the idea of cinematic trace in order to ask about nitrate film's degradation and our response to it a century after the nitrate film was first produced. Put differently, this paper seeks to offer steps toward a cinematographic theory of decay.

* * *

Though he wrote sparingly on cinema, Jacques Derrida, in an interview with the French magazine *Cahiers du cinéma*, offered his comments on spectrality and trace with respect to film spectatorship; this rich paper serves as a useful framework with which to develop ideas of film decay. Derrida remarks, "The cinematic experience belongs thoroughly to spectrality, which I link . . . to the very nature of the trace" (26). The trace—is this an indexical trace? Perhaps, considering indexicality is a trace in the most material sense: light reflects off of the depicted subject, hits the film emulsion, and brings forth a chemical reaction that constitutes the indexical trace. An indexical trace would point to, or index, an object



in the context in which it occurs—e.g., a shoeprint in the mud indicates a shoe through the mark it makes in the mud, an index of the shoe made in the mud by the shoe's very interaction with it.

Footprints in the sand; thumbprints on a page; a cast shadow. These are indexical in a fairly strict sense. Mere indexicality, then, seems insufficient for a discussion of cinema's power over a spectator.

Therefore, let us return to the specter, the spectral dimension of "neither the living nor the dead, of neither hallucination nor perception," (27) the witnessing of the distant past made uncannily visible in a present setting. Derrida writes, "Cinema thus allows one to cultivate what could be called 'grafts' of spectrality; it inscribes traces of ghosts on a general framework, the projected film, which is itself a ghost" (27). We may see this at work in a historical film such as a western or a adventure film about the French revolution—in other words, any film about a time when cinema was non-existent. There then exists "the spectral memory of a time when there was as yet no cinema" (28). To be presented with a filmic representation of a past unable to actually have been recorded by a camera is to allow for the introduction of another kind of spectrality on an already spectral medium. Viewing a film is itself a phantasmagoric phenomenon: we see apparitions moving on the wall. We know that we see an image recorded in the past, but it is projected in the here-and-now. Imagined, spectral pasts are allowed to inhabit this space--pasts unable to have been truly recorded by a camera that regardless begin to graft themselves onto the film. In some way, seeing a historical film produces a feeling of perceiving pasts not actually contained in the image. It is not a re-presentation, but a presentation of a past, a new past, a spectral past; we are not seeing again, but experiencing some construction of the past for the first time.

And this holds true a fortiori for all films, not simply historical ones. All films are necessarily products of the past, as the camera records the moment at the very instant it slips by. What would it mean to perceive a past actually contained in a film? By virtue of their mediation, the images on screen cannot really be pasts in some objective sense. As Derrida writes, "An image, and what is more in a film, is always liable to interpretation: the specter is an enigma and the ghosts who parade past in the images are mysteries" (30). The enigmatic specter produces an enigmatic past,

a past not concretely tenable or interpretable, but nevertheless present in some sense. Recall the Lumière film mentioned at the beginning, *Repas de bébé*. Who are these people? Where are they? When are they? These images are not quite referents. Instead they oscillate in a space between representing some physical person and simply existing themselves, existing as an apparition in their own right. The people in the film are dead, but what we are seeing is not.

* * *

In the interview, Derrida puts forth his thoughts on Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*, a nearly ten-hour movie about the Holocaust comprised entirely interviews with witness and survivors. Derrida remarks:

Shoah is constantly seizing imprints, traces; the whole force of the film and its emotion depends on these ghostly traces without representation. The trace is the "that-took-place-there" of the film, what I call survivance. For all of these witnesses are survivors: they lived that and say so. Cinema is the absolute simulacrum of absolute survivance. It recounts to us what we cannot get over, it recounts death to us. By its own spectral miracle, it points out to us what ought not to leave any trace. It is thus doubly trace: trace of the testimony itself, trace of the forgetting, trace of absolute death, trace of the without-trace, trace of the extermination. It is the rescue, by the film, of what remains without salvation, salvation for the without-salvation, the experience of pure survivance that testifies. (31).

Derrida seems to point at something beyond a visible spectrality—cinema can elicit something beyond the visible, and it is here where we can think more explicitly about film decay and what it produces.

Earlier I characterized nitrate film as having a death drive—a misappropriation, perhaps, of that Freudian concept. But a purposeful misappropriation, for the idea may ring as in a material as in an individual. In *Archive Fever*, Derrida explores the death drive vis-à-vis the archive, and his remarks resonate well with the cited section above. He writes, "[The death drive]





works to destroy the archive: on the condition of effacing but also with a view to effacing its own ‘proper’ traces—which consequently cannot be properly called ‘proper’” (10). The drive the film has toward destruction is two-fold: yes, the information in the film is destroyed; we no longer have the image in a proper sense, and we see this. But the march toward destruction that nitrate has is less immediate with respect to history. The self-destruction of this material effaces any retention of certain history, of moments archived and categorized in a certain way—put differently, it resists a transmission of historical milieus, and resists historicization and interpretation, itself a type of archivization of moments. But we are catching this decay in the act. It has not finished effacing itself, but has incidentally produced a new type of trace, a different type of history—not quite an archive, since it does not represent some prior events, and it cannot even recall its earlier self. What then is produced?

The decay itself becomes a specter, a specter that haunts the film in a similar way to other images, but also points beyond. This decay is the trace of the without-trace, a trace of that which is no longer visible, no longer extant. Indeed, a simultaneous visibility and invisibility. Spectrality has gained a true corporeal source, or at least corporeal correlate—this trace jolts us out of phantasy, not presenting itself as moving apparition but a physical presence.

There is an interesting tension in Derrida’s words, at least when we think about decay: “It is the rescue, by the film, of what remains without salvation...the experience of pure survivance that testifies.” Decay is Derrida’s double trace, the trace of decay itself, the process, and the trace of a history rendered invisible, but a trace of history nonetheless. Yet this becomes cyclical: the trace attempts to rescue, while simultaneously making that rescue necessary. Thinking about this nitrate decay places us, paradoxically, back into the realm of material. We see that, ignoring projection and the phantasmatic elements that accompany it, nitrate stock has a spectrality embedded within.

Returning to the motion picture archive places us

face-to-face with death: not just images of those who have gone, but a physical manifestation of death or destruction actively working to erase itself. But it is a death that is active, a death that is, paradoxically, not dead. It signals to us a self-survival, a resistance to itself. More than anything, decay haunts because it lives not in an ether, but within the material—a rootedness to spectrality that is nearly always invisible until it becomes too late, until the decay destroys the information. What haunts, then, is potentiality and violent shake away from a notion of true preservation. André Bazin's influential idea of a mummy complex in art that peaks with film, a way of "providing a defense against the passage of time... to preserve [a subject] from a second spiritual death" (9-10), feels a deep tremor. This psychological idea, this certainty, begins to feel untrue. For we live in an age where we can supposedly record time and reproduce it infinitely—indeed, technological reproducibility. But continuing with Derrida's line of thought, neither film is not so easily categorizable as another medium, just another preservative conduit that achieved some type of perfection.

But what we do see is that film is not so easily thought of as a definite retention of memory or history. It is volatile and self-destructive. The trace of the decay points to that which normally leaves no trace, or that which never leaves a true trace; it points to the slipping-away of history, the loss of an incomprehensible amount of information; of affect, of memory, of whatever it is that might be captured in a somehow-rescued moment of time. The trace of the decay becomes such a haunting signifier for it signifies something that we never wanted to believe: that no true preservation through a physical medium is possible. A cinematographic theory of decay must look to the spectrality of film itself, the unique way in which it presents a past. It also must return to the material, to acknowledge the complications that arise when face-to-face with its destruction.

* * *

But it perhaps seems self-evident that there is no universal retention of memory, no system that can guarantee such a bold request. Regarding the

psychological, yes, decay reminds us of this. Yet a clear problematic arises: nitrate film is obsolete; we do not screen nitrate film, let alone decayed film, on a regular basis. Moreover, film generally is hardly shown. It is tempting to attempt to ignore theoretical considerations of film stock in a digital age, but it remains a sizable presence in the archive.

Hence my shift to a spectrality of the material places emphasis away from thinking of film in terms of spectatorship and toward a reconsideration of film as an archival and historical medium. I utilized Derrida's musing as a basis to think through the issues presented above, but this starting point is not meant to be a simple transposition of his ideas onto nitrate decay. In many ways, Derrida's ideas do not easily correspond to how we perceive film today, nor to how decay itself functions within our viewing or consumption of nitrate film stock. In this final section, then, I want to clarify this breach, pointing more sharply outward beyond Derrida, to pinpoint contextual limitations in his ideas and sketch more clearly a direction toward a theory of decay.

Though an expansive concept, I want to return to a foundational Derrida text on representation and suggest that thinking of traces of decay as correlative to Derrida's ideas of the "supplement" is somewhat tricky. In *Of Grammatology*, the section "...That Dangerous Supplement" begins to articulate supplement with the following: "I renounce my present life, my present and concrete existence in order to make myself known in the ideality of truth and value" (142). I point this out to indicate a centeredness on a supplement resulting from or directed toward a subject. Toward the end of the chapter, we read: "Thus Rousseau inscribes textuality in the text. But its operation is not simple. It tricks with a gesture of effacement..." (163). We recall a sense of a false duality between absence and presence in this effacement—an effacement that rests upon an act of writing, of inscribing. This is not to return to some notion of authorial intent (that Rousseau purposely does this inscribing, etc.), but merely to point out that Derrida's argument rests on a

language system that is reproduced through actors, through generative processes brought about by individuals.

Decay, on the other hand, is produced spontaneously. Moreover, we are not dealing with a series of significations. Decay does not signify so much as it signals, by which I mean it signals something being lost, something decaying. This does not render issues of spectrality moot; on the contrary, decay is as haunting as ever, and can indeed signal loss. But we must be aware that even if films are considered texts or a language (a notion that is not unanimously agreed upon), decay within it is not. We can still think about effacement and the duality between presence and absence, but not in the same schema as we do with language. Recall the suggestion of a death drive of the material, of a self-effacement, of a cyclical rescue/destruction. These are problematics that ought to be considered from a decentered position; that is, these are not issues of any subject but of a material. We must reconsider the implications of spectrality as it arises from a de-subjectified, non-linguistic space.

With respect to the archive, attempting to reconsider of the idea of supplement through a non-linguistic lens is a worthy project. That is, what does decay offer us in terms of self-narrativization, in terms of the need to archive history? Derrida writes: “[T]here is lack in Nature and that because of that very fact something is added to it” (149). One may suggest that we lack a proper way of archiving history, a proper Natural way. We need recourse to materials in order to create this, but in turn we create something unnatural, a system where a sign or image makes ‘the world move,’ where nature becomes supplement to the image (147). But perhaps decay questions this. Film stock, this lifeless material, has its own progression toward its destruction, a move away from information—nature has perhaps attempted a reversal of its supplementation to and of a sign.

What implications does this have on humanity’s self-temporalization, on its memory, on its conception of itself? In the end, I am pushing away from theories of spectatorship, away from a

paradigm of textuality or reading this decay as a text/language. Nitrate film has a strange archival position and cannot be read in the ways suggested by Derrida or previous film theorists, the way they interpret narrative films or the act of consuming movies. One must recognize that consumptive patterns and the historicization of our pasts are rooted in and structured by the material. In a broader sense, nitrate decay de-centers the subject, defamiliarizes them with their own practices, and pushes us to consider how every medium is embodied and how it influences our practices to a degree we may not always comprehend.

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Cooking With the Erotic

an interview with
Ilana Harris-Babou
by Cheeyeon Park

Cooking with the Erotic

An Interview with Ilana Harris-Babou

Cheeyeon Park

Ilana Harris-Babou (IHB) uses music videos, cooking shows, and home improvement television as material in an abject exploration of the American Dream. She works primarily in ceramic sculpture and video installation. She received an MFA in Visual Art from Columbia University in 2016, and a BA in Art from Yale University in 2013. She has shown her work throughout the US & Europe. Venues include the Jewish Museum & SculptureCenter in New York, and Le Doc in Paris, France. She was recently a Fountainhead Fellow in sculpture at Virginia Commonwealth University, and is currently a Visiting Assistant Professor of Art at Williams College. Her solo-exhibition One Bad Recipe will open this fall at the Museum of Arts & Design in New York City.

Cheeyeon Park (CP) is a junior at Columbia University, majoring in Visual Arts and Anthropology. She is bad at cooking, which led to this interview.

CP: The theme of our journal this year is on consumption, and I find various interpretations of consumption in your *Cooking with the Erotic*, a video of a mock-up cooking show featuring yourself and your mom, where you use real food, paint, and other nonedible materials. Could you tell us what inspired you to create this satiric cooking show?

IHB: I think about what it means to be consumed visually. As an artist, I am constantly making things for visual consumption. I started wondering why certain spaces for making were privileged over others; why some creative labor was revered, and some labor made mundane. What's the difference

between an artist's studio and a kitchen? That's how I began to use cooking shows as the template for my video work. They emphasize the process of making over the end result. I wanted to use the seductive light of the cooking show to interrogate what it really means to consume and to be consumed. I like the work of the art historian Krista Thompson. She talks about the way light is used in black vernacular culture. She posits that the moment of being seen generates its own value, independent of who, or what is being seen. The flash of the camera illuminates turds and piles of caviar with the same glamor.

CP: You not only teach how to make food using loud power tools, but also teach how to paint your nails hovering above a boiling pan of water and smoke tobacco in a pipe. What is the relationship between these activities? Perhaps they have to do with blurring the expectations of what feminine activities entail as seen in cooking shows typically run by a female hostess?

IHB: That's a part of it, but in a broader sense I am also interested in seeing what happens when we conflate different forms of making, and varied forms of labor. I'm interested in what role play can have in this context. The tool can be a tobacco pipe or spoon, because I say so. I can be a celebrity chef or a home improvement expert, because I say so. And yes-- as someone who identifies as a woman, a black woman, I dictate what activities I engage in.

I like disrupting the way commercial cooking shows often seek to build a cohesive world inhabited by the host; one of leisure, health, gluttony, etc. What happens when the chef becomes incoherent, and the inconsistencies of her identity are laid bare? My mom and I didn't simply leave room for error, but instead our "errors" became the paradigm around which the whole cooking show was formed. Each seeming "mistake" we made was repeated several times, finely tuned and described in detail to the camera.

CP: What is the role of your mother in *Cooking with the Erotic*?





IHB: I like working with my mom because she is me, and also not me. Or rather, I am simultaneously her and someone else. I think knowledge is embodied, and passed intergenerationally in ways we might not always expect. I also like to assert the idea that being playful is not only the domain of the young. My mom is in her 70s, yet she is someone who is always changing. She wears a different hairstyle and develops a different set of tastes from week to week.

The first scene I shot with with her was based on this passage from Lorde's speech:

During World War II, we bought sealed plastic packets of white, uncolored margarine, with a tiny, intense pellet of yellow coloring perched like a topaz just inside the clear skin of the bag. We would leave the margarine out for a while to soften, and then we would pinch the little pellet to break it inside the bag, releasing the rich yellowness into the soft pale mass of margarine. Then taking it carefully between our fingers, we would knead it gently back and forth, over and over, until the color had spread throughout the whole pound bag of margarine, thoroughly coloring it. I find the erotic such a kernel within myself. When

released from its intense and constrained pellet, it flows through and colors my life with a kind of energy that heightens and sensitizes and strengthens all my experience.

When my mom read the Lorde text she had a wealth of personal memories of kneading margarine when she was young, and of enjoying it. As a girl my mom lived in a mansion with my grandma, who worked there as a maid. Kneading margarine was my mom's daily chore. She loved it. For her, it was a chance to play-- to make a mess. I think of eroticism as play, and vice versa. To have to do housework in someone else's home could be seen solely as lack: the absence of free time or space to be a child. For my mom the act of kneading was about her own satisfaction. It was independent of what the people she worked for wanted from her.

These sorts of anecdotes would spring up often in response to the materials in my studio, or the recipes we were reading. We had improvisational conversations in front of the camera that we would then reenact again and again before the lens. We liked seeing how the directions we gave



off the cuff became simultaneously more familiar and more strained when repeated again and again.

CP: You begin *Cooking with the Erotic* together with your mother, by quoting Audre Lorde's *Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power*: "There are many kinds of power, used and unused, acknowledged and otherwise. The erotic is a resource that lies within each one of us. It comes from a very deep, female, and spiritual play, rooted in the power that comes from unexpressed and unrecognized feeling." Then you add a phrase that you could hear from a television cooking show, "We'll be building, we'll be cooking, and we'll be having a great time." How does this cooking show convey your idea of the erotic?

IHB: I was struck by the way Lorde identified the erotic as a way of seeing the world; a way of seizing ownership over quotidian or potentially oppressive tasks. I ended up taking Lorde's (erotic) way of looking as a point of departure for an imaginary cooking show. I wondered, how might a recipe be similar to, or different from, a performance score? I began looking for other sorts of texts that might become the basis for recipes. This process began

by attempting to reenact a scenarios found in texts like *The Futurist Cookbook* or *Vibration Cooking: Travel Notes of a Geechee Girl*. Every time I began shooting, however, my hands and words quickly veered away from the texts that had incited them. The limitations or sensuous surprises of the materials in my studio would take over, and each shot would become as much an exploration of color, form, decay, or play as it was a response to words.

CP: I realized that the messy, overflowing food and paint has a relationship to feminine liberation from certain constraints when you mention at the end of the video that you find the erotic in "the release from constrained packaging [of kernels that] flows through and colors my life, with a kind of energy that heightens and sensitizes and strengthens all my experience." What is the relationship between food and body as a proxy for your ideas of the erotic?

IHB: Lorde described how we might begin to engage with our own nourishment through eroticism. The erotic can exist apart from the pornographic; beyond pathologized set of

relations between individuals.

I have long been interested in the ways the objects we make become proxies for our bodies. In this instance, the bag of margarine becomes the self. When it is massaged and cultivated color and satisfaction are allowed to spread through every aspect of experience. It's interesting, though. In this image the margarine still retains its bag. It remains whole and retains its own boundaries. Yet it allows itself to be touched by the world, to remain supple.

CP: I noticed how your recent cooking show videos have traces back to your earlier videos, such as your music videos and your recordings of showing the process of playing with art materials. In *Some Music Videos*, you show alternative ways of presenting stereotypes of the erotic and beauty as seen in hip hop music videos by inserting yourself in those hip hop videos, juxtaposing yourself in pajamas or other shabbier clothing, covering yourself up with no flesh showing. And in *Studio Sounds*, where you show experiments in your studio playing with paint splashing and overflowing everywhere, I see how you slightly alter the purpose of paint as not a medium for making a painting but into a different symbol that stands on its own. Such as making paint appear as chocolate syrup. Or neon-colored fluids that can be seen as erotic. You have a knack for transforming the expected notions of things, into something unexpected, in a humorous way.

IHB: Thanks! *Studio Sounds* was my undergraduate thesis work in the painting department at Yale University. I began by thinking about how vivid language can transform materials in the context of hip-hop. I started hunting for painterly metaphors in rap lyrics. Some examples were "ice cream paint job," "lemonade," "everything is purple," and "all gold everything." I then proceeded to imagine each vignette as inhabiting the color-world proposed by the song I was appropriating. I imagined that I was a video vixen who decided to become an abstract expressionist painter and to paint the set based upon her own material desires.

CP: Could you tell us about your Instagram

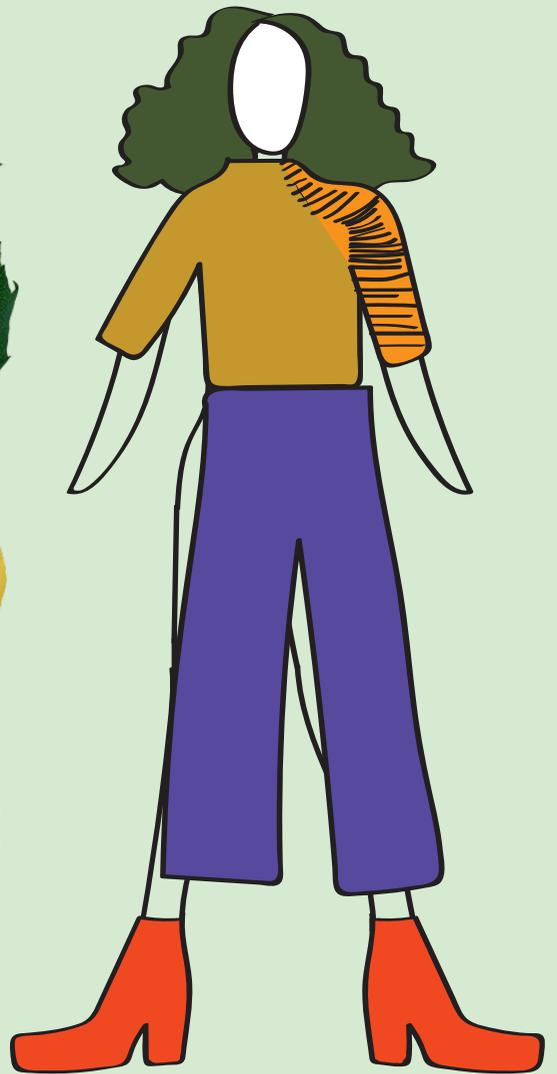
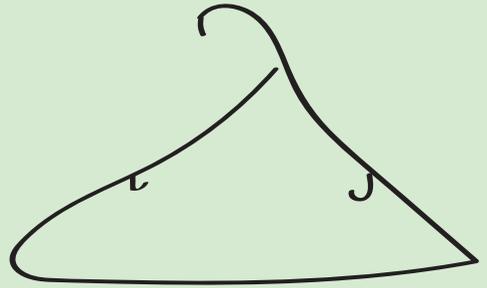
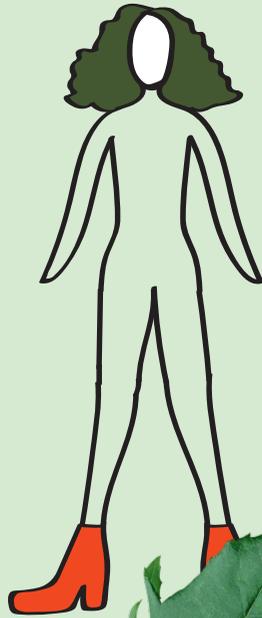
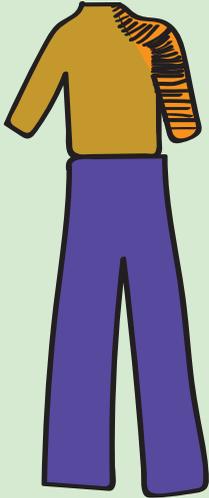
account of pictures of the "food" that you've cooked? I think about how I am fascinated when I watch videos from the Facebook page "Tasty," because I'm captivated by how quickly these ingredients come together to make this gorgeously presented food, but I think part of that fascination comes from knowing that I will never be able to make it on my own. I think about how the inability to consume what you see on social media is part of the attraction to these nicely presented foods.

IHB: I completely agree. What's appealing about those sorts of videos is that you don't have to worry about actually moving your eyes away from the screen or your body to the kitchen. Tasty videos have all the fun without any of the messiness. Without running out of the proper ingredients. Without having to go to the grocery store. You get to consume them visually and it's so neatly delicious. Way more chill than most of the other stuff on your newsfeed. A lot of those recipes don't make any sense at all. Once you finished all those stupid steps you wouldn't have any appetite for your Watermelon Mirror Glaze Cupcake.

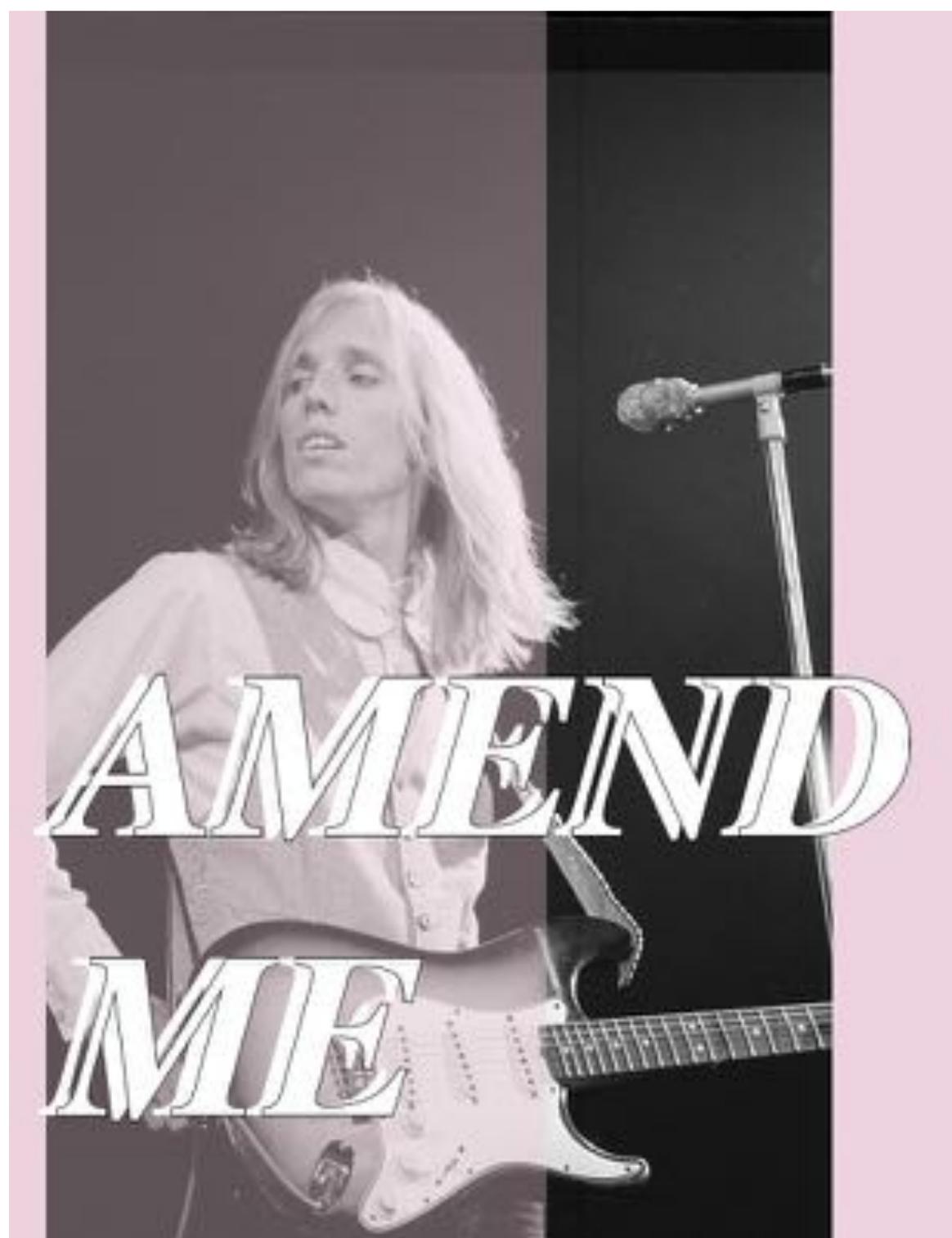
I adopt the names of famous cooking show hosts temporarily on Instagram and add "official" to the end. @Melissa_Clark_Official-- for example. People think I'm her and follow me because at first glance my pictures look legit. But they're a mixture of leftovers from stuff I ate that day, and studio materials I have no use for, all lit really well.

CP: Could you tell us how humor plays in your strategy of defying stereotypes? I also noticed in *Cooking with the Erotic* how clumsy all the activities were. The use of power tools used no accuracy, you say that you don't measure anything, you paint your nails beyond the nails and all over the hands, and everything is just dripping everywhere.

IHB: My work is definitely slapstick. I think about the Three Stooges slipping on banana peels. Humor a great way to digest something painful. Having your subjectivity denied is definitely painful. If you can't laugh at this dissonance, what can you do?



“JESUS,
IS THAT
YOU?”



The View
From
Vantine's

**Melanie
Shi**

The View From Vantine's

The Oriental Goods Store and the Global Marketplace

Melanie Shi

On October 20, 1866, Japanese crafts and Oriental goods company A. A. Vantine & Co. entered the New York Times as the spectacular new supplier of “JAPANESE GOODS... the best assortment and a great variety, needful and ornamental, ever imported.”¹ By 1917, however, its newspaper ads no longer emphasized its Japanese connections, selling instead the “rosy dawns” and “brilliant sunlight” of the Orient.²

Between its founding in 1866 and its retail closing in 1921, Vantine's reacted to and reflected a rapidly changing political dynamic between US and Japan within its consumer appeal tactics. As Japan became a threat to US hegemony, Vantine's marketing expressed a growing fascination with a generalized Orient, and a growing distance from Japan. These changes culminated in the year 1917, when the US signed a treaty conceding privileges in China to Japan and Vantine's began to sell Americans an obviously obscured image of Japan. Vantine's representation of foreign goods bespeaks the shifting role of American consumerism during a breakdown in global order. As Americans shopped in a new global marketplace, their purchases cultivated a consumer identity that diffused intensifying political anxieties, using the consumption of foreign goods for a sense of

superiority to foreign others. Consumption of the Orient allowed consumers to preserve a sense of the nation as it had existed before the discovery of a global world.

Vantine's Japanese Goods, 1866-1894

On July 8, 1853, Commodore Matthew Perry sailing under the orders of US President Millard Fillmore docked at Edo Bay, breaking 220 years of peace and seclusion in Tokugawa Japan. In a letter addressed to the Emperor of Japan, Perry detailed the United States's desire to open up trade, and diplomatic relations to benefit both countries. “The United States are connected with no government in Europe,” Perry wrote to assure the Emperor of his nation's pure intentions. The US had been expanding its influence in Chinese treaty ports, but by no means was Perry's rude interruption to be read as aggression against Japan: indeed, “the United States and Japan are [were] becoming every day nearer and nearer to each other” .³

It would take many more years to reveal the full implications of Perry's phrasing, but his visit America's international intentions set off a series of changes in Japanese policy. Lacking the technological and economic strength to defy Perry's overtures, Japan acceded to demands for increased “intercourse” between the two nations. A year following Perry's visit, the US and Japan signed a treaty that wrested privileges from Japan as European nations had in China. These were followed by additional ‘unequal treaties’, which according to historian Sucheng Chan in his *Asian Americans: An Interpretive History*, reminded Japanese officials of the disaster that could befall them should they not comply with Western demands, generating anxiety about the safety of the islands.⁴

1 “Classified Ad 7 -- No Title,” New York Times, October 20, 1866.

2 “Display Ad 71 -- No Title,” St. Louis Post - Dispatch (1879-1922), May 6, 1917, 578095828, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: St. Louis Post-Dispatch.

3 Matthew Calbraith Perry, Narrative of the Expedition of an American Squadron to the China Seas and Japan: Performed in the Years 1852, 1853, and 1854, Under the Command of Commodore M. C. Perry, United States Navy, by Order of the Government of the United States (D. Appleton, 1857), 259.

4 Sucheng Chan, *Asian Americans : An Interpretive*

Political changes found an economic analog in *gaisho*, literally “foreign trading houses,” as new Western companies opened offices in ports designed to facilitate Japan’s overseas trade. One such house was A. A. Vantine & Co., founded by Ashley Abraham Vantine, and in its early stages, a key outpost for Japanese goods in the US. Vantine’s inaugurated its store opening as a purveyor of “JAPANESE GOODS: 50,000 BEAUTIFUL Wedding, Birthday and Holiday Presents, the best assortment and a great variety, needful and ornamental, ever imported.”⁵ The exotic outpost of Japan quickly attracted attention from reporters, who classified Vantine’s as a specialty Japanese store. In 1868, for example, *The Nation* marveled at the fact that “Vantine can sell two to three hundred thousand [Japanese] fans a year.”⁶ Vantine’s found an appetite for its Japanese offerings and prospered as a result. As art historian Yumiko Yamamori recounts, in 1871, Vantine’s began to import Chinese, Indian, and Turkish goods along with Japanese goods; in 1883, it relocated to a larger space along Broadway so as to contain more goods. In 1894, Vantine’s remodeled itself as a six-story emporium with distinct and elaborately decorated Turkish, Persian, Japanese, East Indian, Chinese, and Moorish display rooms.⁷

While the store’s overtures at growth might have shifted its focus away from Japan, Vantine’s stayed a Japanese specialist. Even following the advent of the emporium in 1894, *The New York Times* continued to refer to Vantine’s as “the Japanese store” when reporting on its promotions and logistical changes.⁸ In newspaper ads from this period, Vantine’s referred to itself as “A. A. Vantine & Co.: The Largest Japanese, Chinese, Turkish, Persia, Egypt, and India House in the World,” ordering national designations by priority.⁹ Even

when Vantine’s was known to sell Persian rugs and multicultural products its ad text routinely emphasized its Japanese offerings: one from *The New York Tribune* stresses “great reductions in Japanese folding screens--fourth floor” in large font and then meticulously lists the material, sizing, and prices of various Japanese screens.¹⁰ To readers of *The American Hebrew*, Vantine’s used the same ad layout to highlight its diverse offerings within the umbrella of specifically Japanese wares, from “blue and yellow kishiu ware--3 lights, handsome shapes” to “Tokanabi ware...dragon decoration,” to “Awaji ware...fancy patterns.”¹¹

Vantine’s popular reception among consumers underscored the fact that Americans were willing to use their newly acquired wealth to purchase objects that stood in for Japanese culture. They sought contact through consumption and expressed the desire to possess and collect

Vantine's: Orientalists & Jewelers ad in the New York Tribune, June 3, 1900

specifically Japanese products. At the least, they did not fear or resent Japan, which did not pose a political threat in its subservient position after Perry’s visit.

However, while consumers responded positively to Japan, the nation at large was embroiled in anti-Chinese racism. Violence against Chinese miners erupted in the early 1850s, when

History (Boston: Twayne, 1991), 9.

5 “Classified Ad 7 -- No Title.”

6 *The Nation* (Nation Company, 1868).

7 Yumiko Yamamori, “Japanese Arts in America, 1895-1920, and the A. A. Vantine and Yamanaka Companies,” *Studies in the Decorative Arts* 15, no. 2 (2008): 96–126, doi:10.1086/652831.

8 “INCA. MUMMIES CENTURIES OLD.: A Chief and His Wife Now on Exhibition at Vantine’s,” *New York Times*, February 4, 1894.

9 “Display Ad 18 -- No Title,” *New - York Tribune* (1866-1899), November 10, 1895.

10 “Display Ad 15 -- No Title,” *New - York Tribune* (1866-1899), November 4, 1894.

11 “Display Ad 11 -- No Title,” *The American Hebrew* (1879-1902), November 2, 1894.

Chinese immigrants dominated immigrant flows and challenged the domestic labor economy. Nativist rhetoric in political discourse targeted a racialized body of “yellow” people. These attitudes blossomed into the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, which limited Chinese immigration, but left the US’s gates open to an immigration wave from Japan facilitated by Japan’s campaign of Westernization.¹² From its station on Broadway, Vantine’s stood ready to absorb the change.

Garden Spot of the Orient, 1894-1916

When Perry’s visit in 1853 warned Japan of a Western imperial threat, Japanese officials moved to adopt a shockingly modern—and Western—direction. New leaders of the Meiji Restoration, who only nominally sought to restore the emperor, favored the ways of the West across all levels of life so as to cope with its might. New military initiatives were shaped by Fukuzawa Yukichi’s political tract *An Outline of a Theory of Civilization*, which literally urged Japan to emulate the West by colonizing parts of Asia.¹³ And colonize it did: in 1895, Japan defeated China in the First Sino-Japanese War, establishing itself as the geopolitical center of East Asia, then defeated Russia in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905. Yet the economic costs of this campaign of aggression fell disproportionately upon Southern Japanese rural residents, and spurred a massive migration toward the US.¹⁴ Perry’s declaration that the US and Japan grew “nearer” each day proved prescient: seafaring Japanese migrants literally reached the US, while Meiji Japanese society neared it in emulating Westernness.

Despite Perry’s prior optimism, America found that this nearness brought it a little too close for comfort: after Japan took Manchuria from Russia, Yellow Peril began to target Japanese immigrants.

Union clubs in San Francisco founded the Japanese and Korean Exclusion League, and the subsequent year, a group of nativist boys brutally stoned Japanese scientists inspecting the aftermath of an earthquake. According to Chan, these events marked the historical beginning of an ostensible anti-Japanese movement, rooted in the fear of an Eastern challenge to American hegemony.¹⁵

Further, antagonistic US-Japanese relations were codified in the law. Like Chinese immigration before, Japanese immigration was subjected to constraint as quickly as it had taken off. As historian Roger Daniels explains, however, policymakers on both sides of the Pacific took more nuanced measures to curb Japanese immigration. So as to avoid an overtly discriminatory policy, the Japanese government passed the Gentleman’s Agreement from within, denying laborers passports and overseas mobility. The US targeted Japanese immigrants already set up in California with the 1913 Alien Land Act, which prohibited “aliens ineligible for citizenship” from owning agricultural land or possessing long-term leases. The land policy disincentivized those accustomed to rural lifestyles from searching for home-making opportunities abroad.¹⁶

Sensing reactionism in US immigration policies, A. A. Vantine & Co. began to adjust its marketing strategy accordingly. In the period from 1894 to 1916, Vantine’s embarked on a gradual shift from Japanese goods store to popular “Oriental” store. Newspaper reporters immediately picked up on this change -- a reporter for *The Jewish Messenger*, for instance, wrote the following: “a garden spot of the Orient has been planted in the heart of the metropolis.”¹⁷ For a short period in 1904, Vantine’s gave itself the ambiguous appellation “The Unusual Store.”¹⁸ By 1913, *The New York Tribune* and other media outlets were referring to Vantine’s as “dealers in Oriental goods,” no

12 Chan, *Asian Americans*, 54.

13 Yukichi Fukuzawa, *Outline of a Theory of Civilization* (New York, NY, USA: Columbia University Press, 2009), <http://site.ebrary.com/lib/alltitles/docDetail.action?docID=10449832>.

14 Roger Daniels, *Asian America: Chinese and Japanese in the United States since 1850* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, c1988), 102.

15 Chan, *Asian Americans*, 51.

16 Daniels, *Asian America*, 139-143.

17 “A Visit to Vantine’s,” *The Jewish Messenger* (1857-1902), September 21, 1894.

18 “Display Ad 4 -- No Title,” *New York Times*, September 12, 1904; “Display Ad 14 -- No Title,” *New - York Tribune* (1900-1910), May 15, 1904.



A. A. Vantine & Co mail-order catalogue, 1914

longer specifying it as Japanese.¹⁹ Three years later, Japanese products dropped from 90% to a mere 65% of the company's overall sales.²⁰

Vantine's articulated its shifting, generalized direction typographically as well, adopting a new logo with its name engraved in what Japanese art historian Yumiko Yamamori deems "sinuous" and vague calligraphy that obscured the image of the store (Fig. 1).²¹ In New York Tribune ads between 1900 and 1901, this new logo was sandwiched between vertically running Japanese characters reading "支那" and "日本" (Fig. 2). While the righthand phrase, "日本," reads "Japan" in Japanese, the lefthand "支那" says "China" in Japanese.²² It took a bicultural turn, offering

"Japanese and Chinese Dress Silks" in perfect parallelism, the colors "white and black, black and white, navy and white."²³ So too did it advertise of "new Vantine importations of printed Chinese and Japanese Silks and Satins," all "controlled novelties" complete with "Oriental effects."²⁴ And for home decorators, it placed equal emphasis on Japanese jute rugs and traditional Persian ones handwoven from cotton and silk.²⁵

Just as its focus on Japanese goods had been in the period prior, Vantine's shift toward generally, not specially, Japanese goods and marketing after 1894 was met with enthusiastic consumer demand. Like any smart business, it properly gauged and capitalized on intensifying fears of Japan in the early 1900s. Via this change in strategy, moreover, Vantine's expanded its client base to middle class women and outer rural markets. Thus its geographically broader outlook tapped into the suburbanizing marketplace, and the standardizing consumer ethos of the time. As Ford's Model T enabled long-distance movement and homogenized housing developments made widely accessible a luxury suburban lifestyle, moneyed consumers left urban hubs for mass marketplaces, where they could find Vantine's geographically diverse products.

In 1914 the company appointed a new designer, J.F. O'Neil, to carry it into a lucrative mail-order catalogue business.²⁶ Vantine's catalogues still displayed Japanese images: the cover of the 1914 catalogue featured a docile Japanese woman dressed in a traditional kimono, passively sitting and arranging flowers bespeaking her "feminine" beauty (Fig. 3), while the 1916 catalogue displayed Japanese children gathered around a street vendor (Fig. 4). Yet these pictures hinted at a necessarily feminized and infantilized Japan. Here, Yamamori sees a dark twist in

19 "VANTINE'S TO GO UPTOWN: Oriental Goods Establishment Will Move to Fifth Avenue," New - York Tribune (1911-1922), May 30, 1913.

20 Yamamori, "Japanese Arts in America, 1895-1920, and the A. A. Vantine and Yamanaoka Companies."

21 Ibid.

22 "Display Ad 12 -- No Title," New - York Tribune (1900-1910), February 27, 1900; "Display Ad 15 -- No Title," New - York Tribune (1900-1910), January 30, 1900, sec. Only

Woman's Page; "Display Ad 18 -- No Title," New - York Tribune (1900-1910), April 12, 1900, sec. Only Woman's Page; "Display Ad 36 -- No Title," New - York Tribune (1900-1910), June 3, 1900, sec. Hearth and Boudoir; "Display Ad 38 -- No Title," New - York Tribune (1900-1910), January 6, 1901, sec. Hearth and Boudoir.

23 "Display Ad 36 -- No Title."

24 "Display Ad 38 -- No Title."

25 "Advertisement 3 -- No Title," *Outing*, an Illustrated Monthly Magazine of Recreation (1885-1906), March 1900.

26 Ibid.

representation. "By emphasizing a feminine and childlike vision of Japanese culture," she writes, "Vantine was...distorting reality...to sustain and enhance the stereotypical and commodified images."²⁷ Though the US could not exert control over Japan's political ascendancy, Vantine's could use its control of marketing representation to control the symbolic associations of its products.

As Japan rose as an imperial power, the United States saw it more as a potential adversary than another Asian investment opportunity. Alongside the threat of political equality, Vantine's placed Japan into a larger Oriental context. When Japan's legitimate threat to American interests became clear in US policies, the store consciously began to represent Japan as essentially feminine and childlike. When Americans could no longer retain a sense of dominance in the political sphere, they could turn to Vantine's global emporium to consume Orientalized images of Japan. As the US became politically decentered, Vantine's figured its marketing so that purchasing its products would allow Americans to maintain superiority and centrality as consumers.

Nonetheless, the onslaught of World War I began to pose more marketing challenges to the once-upon-a-time Japanese goods store. In 1914, Japan declared war on Germany; a year later, it sent China a list of demands that would extend its control of the Chinese economy. While the US and Japan found themselves on the Allied side, they fell out over failures in diplomacy and disagreements over the division of power in China. All the while, each experienced uncertainty about the changing international order. In fact, historian Noriko Kawamura sees the dichotomy between US President Woodrow Wilson's "idealistic internationalism" and Japan's "incipient particular regionalism and pluralism ... strong sense of nationalism and racial identity" as the greatest sower of world conflict in the Great War era.²⁸ Since they followed distinctively Eastern/regional and Western/international models of political

success, the two powers proved themselves incapable of existing "near" one another in a modern world.

Vantine's: The Oriental Store, 1917

The US and Japan finally came to a head in 1917. After the Bolshevik Revolution destabilized Eastern Europe, the Allied Triple Entente promised Japan German possessions in China at the close of the war. The US made another concession to Japan in the form of the Lansing-Ishii Agreement, in which both parties agreed to the Open Door policy but the US acknowledged Japan had "special interests" in China. This paved the way for Japanese naval expansion, of which negotiator Colonel Edward House wrote fearfully, "We cannot meet Japan in her desires as to land and immigration, and unless we make some concessions in regard to her sphere of influence in the East, trouble is sure, sooner or later to come." Earlier that spring, the US itself entered the armed conflict, Wilson declaring war against Germany.²⁹

As the US and Japan drew nearer on a global stage, on terms unfavorable to American hegemony, Vantine's took another marked step away from Japan and toward a generalized Orient, accelerating the shift that it had set out on in the period from 1894 to 1916. The Oriental Store, by then a generalist Oriental goods business, attempted to obscure Japan and render it an indistinct component of a mystified East. This strategy was manifest in two bodies of marketing material targeting two separate but related audiences.

In its mail-order catalogues, which circulated around rural and suburban America, Vantine's began to feature explicitly generalized Oriental imagery. A catalogue from 1917 depicts a female Western traveler surrounded by caricatures of exotic foreigners from the Middle East, China, Persia, and Japan, each offering her tokens that read as offerings from their respective cultures (Fig. 5). The Western female subject, at the center is surrounded by a series of Oriental signs, only one

27 Ibid.

28 Noriko Kawamura, *Turbulence in the Pacific: Japanese-U.S. Relations during World War I* (Westport, Conn: Praeger, 2000), 5.

29 Ibid.

of which is Japan, epitomized by a kimono-clad woman. The Western woman gives her attention to a hooded Persian woman in the illustration, while the diminutive Japanese woman gazes at her from the right side. This image contrasts sharply with the catalogue of 1914, in which a passive Japanese woman, while depicted as weak, is nonetheless the sole subject of the cover (Fig. 3). Explanatory text shepherds attention away from Japan, proposing that consumers “wander...in fancy, through the Orient--that land of sunshine and flowers, of quaint people and strange customs,” by thumbing through the book and purchasing Oriental products. The 1917 depiction sidelines Japan as a nondistinctive element of a distant Eastern construct, and then spectacularizes it as a sunshine mystery.

In a series of perfume ads that same year Vantine's shifted to evocative descriptions whose textual nature gave rise to an especially Orientalizing imagination. It wrote in *The St. Louis Dispatch* that Vantine's Temple Incense “brings to mind the rosy dawns, the brilliant sunlight, the purple dusks of the Orient--the enchantment of strange Far Eastern countries” (Fig. 6).³⁰ By purchasing the incense, a consumer would be able to access a “dreamy,” “soothing” mental place. Vantine's recycled this same ad for more dreamy customers in a Christmas promotion in the *New York Tribune*.³¹ Meanwhile, it told patrons that read *The New York Times* that Vantine's Temple Incense had the effects of “inducing sleep.” On the one hand, this scent was a “refreshing fragrance,” but on the other, it had the power to lure inhalants into somnolence, the ultimate state of mystical tranquility.³²

That year, a similar ad for Sandalwood Toilet Water solicited customers thusly: “This fascinating odor, for centuries an Oriental favorite, as adapted

by us, brings you all the delights of an Eastern toilet.”³³ Here, the Eastern toilet is constructed as Other against the Western subject, then mythologized as “fascinating,” time-worn, and delightful. Ads that offered two-in-one purchases of Japanese lacquered cabinets filled with bottles of Vantine's perfumes told consumers that these scents were from “Wistaria and Flowery Kingdom,” imagining Eastern floral locations with no historical or geographical specificity.³⁴ Vantine's 1917 newspaper ads highlighted the transformative, transportive properties of their aromatic products, asking viewers to close their eyes, inhale, and imagine Japan away.

In comparison, other voices in contemporary culture expressed a direct fear of Japanese aggressors. In a book published that year, *Montaville Flowers* decried racial intermixture with Japanese immigrants as “radical” and “destroying,” coining the problematic of “the Japanese question.”³⁵ Similarly, Jesse Steiner published a pseudoscientific tract that argued that the Japanese could never assimilate into American society, emphasizing the danger they posed to white racial purity.³⁶ Business magnate William Randolph Hearst attempted to release a fearmongering film that depicted Japanese and Mexican people invading the US. Then-President Wilson had requested that Hearst revise this “sufficiently embarrassing” film, but even after Hearst's revision, “names of Japanese remain[ed] unchanged in the titles and the invading soldiers still could be mistaken for those of no other nation than Japan.”³⁷ Writers for several prominent

30 “Display Ad 71 -- No Title.”

31 “Display Ad 28 -- No Title,” *New - York Tribune* (1911-1922), December 2, 1917, 575795632, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: *New York Tribune*; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: *New York Tribune / Herald Tribune*.

32 “Display Ad 138 -- No Title,” *New York Times*, June 24, 1917, sec. Rotogravure Picture Section; “Display Ad 280 -- No Title,” *New York Times*, July 1, 1917, sec. Rotogravure Picture Section.

33 “Advertisement: Sandalwood Toilet Water,” 1917, <http://vantines.net/advertisements.html>.

34 “Display Ad 354 -- No Title,” *New York Times* (1857-1922), September 30, 1917, 98104571, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: *The New York Times with Index*; “Display Ad 4 -- No Title,” *New - York Tribune* (1911-1922), October 7, 1917, 575772440, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: *New York Tribune*; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: *New York Tribune / Herald Tribune*.

35 *Montaville Flowers, The Japanese Conquest of American Opinion* (New York: George H. Doran, c1917).

36 Jesse Frederick Steiner, *The Japanese Invasion; a Study in the Psychology of Interracial Contacts* (Chicago: A.C. McClurg, 1917).

37 “Hearst Film Still Warns Against Japan: ‘Revised’ by Wilson's Request, Continues to Picture ‘Yellow Peril’ Oriental Ally Is Shown as Foe An Invasion From Mexico Groundwork for Picturing ‘Atrocities,’” *New - York Tribune* (1911-1922), September

newspapers, including the Detroit Free Press, racialized this trade partner as they launched critiques of its supposed economic aggression: one made the heated declaration that “the Yellow Peril is real” and accused Japan of attempting to make America “revert from a manufacturing to an agricultural country.”³⁸

In mail-order catalogues and newspaper ads, A.A. Vantine & Co. reoriented its marketing strategy to avoid confronting the fear of contact with Japan in 1917, downplaying Japan in favor of fascination with an Oriental imaginary. Meanwhile, the real Japan loomed on the horizon, even dwelling within other domestic cultural productions as a threatening, non-Western, non-American imperial power. When it became clear that Americans could no longer control wartime politics, the global marketplace of the Oriental goods store offered them an opportunity to consume safe foreign goods.

A. A. Vantine & Co.’s retail business closed down in 1921, but following the success of its marketing campaign in 1917, it continued its perfume subsidiary into the 1940s. Around 1926, Vantine’s was purchased by notorious New York gambler Arnold Rothstein, who used the business for drug smuggling; Rothstein was later written into history as the model for F. Scott Fitzgerald’s Jay Gatsby, a tragic epitome and critique of the consumerist excesses of the 1920s.³⁹ Vantine’s last mail order catalogue dates to 1924--the cover features “Vantine’s” written in characteristic Chinese-restaurant Wanton font to a green and red backdrop of an Indian Buddha-like figure with slanted eyes and Persian jewelry (Fig. 7). In a disarray of cultural signifiers, the Orient is obfuscated to unrecognizability; there is no specific reference to Japan, and the slathering of references to Eastern countries creates an indecipherable myth. In its pointed confusion, this cover visualized the culmination of Vantine’s trend of generalization, a tactic it had initially

deployed as a response to a fear of an progressively more powerful Japan and then accelerated in 1917, when Japan loomed all too close to an American horizon.

Modern Alternatives

From 1866 to 1921, Vantine’s searched for the right image of Japan to sell to Americans who sought a comfortable identity within the modern “discovery of unfathomable multiplicity in the universe.”⁴⁰ At first, America’s encounter with international multiplicity generated consumer celebration -- the existence of foreign others also meant the existence of foreign goods, and the “first globalization boom” that coincided with the advent of modernity⁴¹ offered Americans the unprecedented opportunity to shop in a global emporium.

As the US lost its uncontested hold on the global order, the consumer realm then became a crucial counterpoint to America’s disintegrating political primacy. When Japan asserted its military power in campaigns against China and Russia, US policymakers passed laws against Japanese immigration, betraying overt fear of contact. Laborers and unionists accused the Japanese of

40 Robert W. Rydell, *All the World’s a Fair: Visions of Empire at the American International Expositions, 1876-1916* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 2–8. Rydell defines the period from 1876 to 1916 as one in which Americans were engaged in an anxious “search for order.” This periodization draws on Robert Wiebe’s *The Search for Order, 1877 to 1920*, which posited that developments in industrialization and urbanization at the end of the Civil War and Reconstruction violated Americans’ previously sufficient notions of a divinely ordained order and demanded new principles to explain modern experience. Rydell complicates Wiebe’s findings by “adding to the worries of the times...the discovery of unfathomable multiplicity in the universe.” While Wiebe ultimately argued that Progressive politics offered the social logic that Americans needed, Rydell presents World’s Fairs as multicultural solutions, offering fairgoers the necessary “interpretation of social and political reality” that would, by controlling the presentation of non-Western cultures and peoples, “reaffirm...white supremacy.” In this period, Vantine’s goods and the consumer culture at large operated similarly to the Fairs.

41 Eric Rauchway, *Blessed among Nations: How the World Made America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006), chap. Globalization and America. Rauchway, citing Kevin O’Rourke’s *Globalization and History*, takes the first era of globalization to span from the end of the Civil War to the end of World War I. His argument is that global labor and capital flows in this critical period shaped “Americanness,” the unique character of American government.

4, 1917.

38 “The Yellow Peril Is Real,” *Detroit Free Press* (1858-1922), February 25, 1917.

39 Yamamori, “Japanese Arts in America, 1895-1920, and the A. A. Vantine and Yamanaka Companies.”

taking their jobs and polluting white purity. By 1917, popular cultural productions reflected extreme anxiety over Japanese aggression. But Vantine's strategic marketing altered images of Japan so as to occlude the threat it might pose, policing representation of the foreign Other to preserve American centrality in the marketplace when it could not be found in elsewhere.

Consumption of foreign goods and popular myths offered Americans a way to avoid the anxiety of modern global encounters. Controlled, Orientalized representations like Vantine's advertising images mediated their experiences of otherness so as to uphold a myth of American hegemony. When modern politics could not be denied, consumers still held onto a vision of the world as it existed for the American shopper.

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Intelligent Apocalypses

**Anne-Laure
White**

Intelligent Apocalypses

Imagined and Embodied

Anne-Laure White

Bernard Wolfe wrote his novel *Limbo* in 1952, responding to the escalating conversation around mathematician Norbert Wiener's theory of cybernetics. Cybernetics is a theory proposing the use of computational feedback systems to enhance biological systems and their possibilities, and Wolfe describes the discourse around this theory as a schema of "badly posed questions" that misunderstand the realms of social life they attempt to regulate—thereby misapplying computational interventions. Once applied, Wiener's computational intelligence would develop through feedback systems, forming its own inscrutable and violent logic to which humans are subjected. Wolfe here envisions the "cybernetic-managerial revolution [...] carried to its logical end."

The misunderstandings and anxieties upon which the cybernetic revolution in *Limbo* is predicated draw from the geopolitical and corporeal anxieties of the age it claims to have transformed. The novel is set in a not-so-distant future after World War III, a catastrophe exploding into an incommensurable outbreak of violence between two cybernetic empires, Russia and the United States. The ensuing mass annihilation and cartographic restructuring are managed through computational systems while the humans within these systems are produced as servants. *Limbo's* societal

order emerges post-apocalypse, through a reactionary drive to generate a new, pacifist state through the reconfiguration of individual bodies. Out of the remains of the United States, a strip called "Inland" congeals as a zone where nearly everybody under the age of forty has been voluntarily immobilized through amputation.

Although some athletes use prosthetics, the status quo for most people (so-called Immobs) is limblessness, a physical category whose proponents argue will eradicate violence. The body here is construed as the instrument of apocalyptic violence. A new cybernetic order is established through an increased reliance not on human minds but on human bodies—on machines. In this society, a network of reductive computational and material calculations belie the abstract telos of pacifism in a process that serves only to produce fresh violence.

By envisioning this transforming society, Wolfe plays with narratives of apocalypse and frontier. The totalizing technological shifts that the novel envisions within cartography, biology, and the state, are, like the apocalypse itself, a recurring American literary trope. America's imaginary apocalypses operate alongside and intertwined with fantasies of new frontiers. *Limbo* reveals that the apocalypse stages a drama of nothingness. It is a climactic moment that paves the way for a tabula rasa of a new expansionism, a new start to the production of the same system. This totalizing destruction paves the way for new consumption. Featured prominently in this colonial fantasy are barren lands and a barren earth—daunting, but exhilarating. Daunting, but profitable. But Wolfe replicates the fantastical, expansionist apocalypse that seems to produce a blank slate only to recreate the technocratic, or cybernetic, world order that produced it. The apocalypse is not

the new start Wolfe proclaims if its seeds are dispersed among its ashes. This imagination, which Wolfe both participates in and critiques, intimately informs an enacted space of cybernetic violence—the United States military.

The United States military is a very real, managerial, self-perpetuating cybernetic system, invested in the production of technologies that aim to supplement and substitute embodied aggression. The dual fictions of apocalypse and frontier expansion undergird the self-understanding of the military's technology research wing, DARPA (Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency). DARPA states its purpose on its website as a "commitment by the United States that, from [the time of Sputnik] forward, it would be the initiator and not the victim of strategic technological surprises." United States aggression—explicitly referred to as "initiation" of "strategic technological surprises" and grounded in a system of research production and enactment that places it at the forefront of technological design—remains here couched in the language of defence and victimhood. But the source of the aggression that the military is protecting against is not tangible or clearly located. It is a hypothetical threat. "We will not," the military asserts, "be surprised." The threat that justifies DARPA's mission is fictive. It is unknown, intangible, a "surprise." This fictive quality expands the threat to the full realm of possibility—technically, it could be anything and from anywhere. Because of the intangibility of this threat, DARPA positions itself as an engine of constant invention with no explicit end-goal. The language of radical, totalizing change is omnipresent: DARPA's interventions are "break-through," "game-changing," "transformational." The statement also emphasizes a condensing of time—the "signature DARPA urgency to achieve

success in less time than might be considered necessary in a conventional setting." This is the language of emergency, even paranoia—DARPA imagines itself as detached from ordinary conventions, responding to an urgent, immediate threat.

This justification through urgency works to materialize a system strikingly similar to Wolfe's disastrous cybernetic world order in which surveillance and violence are practiced in increasingly disembodied ways. In fact, Thomas Armour, the director of DARPA's Genoa II program, describes humans as the weakest link in data collection and military defense in a world in which "however capable our cognitive apparatus is, it too often fails when challenged by tasks completely alien to its biological roots." Echoing Wolfe's pre-apocalyptic (pre-World War III), subservient humans, Armour instructs analysts for the Total Information Awareness program to "begin the trip to computers as servants, to partners, to mentors." The threat of "technological surprise" is digested by a slide into technological assimilation. His benevolently phrased progression "from servants, to partners, to mentors" elides the deep threat of a non-cooperative cybernetic system.

* * *

Despite this elision, the technocratic apocalypse of Wolfe's World War III is a genuine fear and fantasy of some of the most influential members of the United States scientific, military, and science fiction communities. When Michael Goldblatt, a transhumanist, biologist, and venture capitalist, began calling the Pentagon with his ideas for post-corporeal military technologies in the 1980s, he laughed off as outrageous. At the time of his calls, he was running the venture capital efforts at McDonald's and developing projects like self-sterilizing food

wrappers, products he aimed to sell to the military. Sharon Weinberger, a researcher on DARPA, contends that Goldblatt found inspiration in science fiction films like *Firefox*, a Clint Eastwood movie where humans could control weapons with their minds. Decades later, as the director of DARPA's Defense Sciences Office (DSO), Goldblatt would publish an office overview asking, "What if, instead of acting on thoughts, we had thoughts that could act? Imagine if soldiers could communicate by thought alone." This time, his question was directed to some of the country's highest paid researchers. "This is not science fiction, but science action," Goldblatt proudly writes. Formerly on the margins of the Pentagon, Goldblatt's ideas became mainstream within military circles even as his ideas abstracted from their context remained "science fiction" in the public eye. DARPA's inspiration from fiction and desire to materialize these imagined futures draw from an emphasis on possibility—the way DARPA structures its work as "transforming seeming impossibilities into practical capabilities." The threat of apocalypse as emerging from an undefined realm is what drives and justifies DARPA's very existence.

Contemporary investigations into this apocalyptic possibility are now situated beyond the literary. Goldblatt's rise in the Pentagon ranks coincided with new formulations of the body by American scientists and science fiction writers, perhaps best encapsulated by the emerging singularitarian movement. At NASA's 1993 symposium, "Vision 21: Interdisciplinary Science and Engineering in the Era of Cyberspace," science fiction writers and scientist Vernor Vinge introduced the term "singularity" to describe these new formulations. "Singularity" is a concept borrowed from physics. In its original context,

it refers to the dimensionless point at the center of a black hole where the laws of physics break down. Within the "event horizon" around the singularity, nothing, not even light, can escape. It is a point of no return. Drawing on this language, singularitarianism predicts that the profound intertwining of humans and technology will culminate in a "point-of-no-return" akin to a black hole, beyond which the power balance between humans and their technologies will be radically altered. Like Wolfe's *Immob* population, humans would depend on machines, either out of distrust or disdain for their bodily selves.

For Singularitarians, the black hole is a symbol of total submission and total consumption. The singularity imagines a universal humanity subsumed into technology, a universal human body bound into a digital space and unbound from its flesh and blood. Ray Kurzweil, an engineer and contemporary of Vinge's, has reconstrued the singularity as an explicitly disembodied moment. Kurzweil assumes an inevitable singularity in which the human body is rendered vulnerable and useless, and therefore promotes increased research and spending on machine learning and artificial intelligence through organizations like the Singularity Institute for Artificial Intelligence. In 2005, Kurzweil published *The Singularity is Near: When Humans Transcend Biology*, re-articulating singularitarianism according to biology and physics. Michael Beight and Steven Reddell, fans of his work, shared his book online, praising its recognition that this generation, both human and posthuman, stands "both before and after, balancing on the razor edge of the Event Horizon of the Singularity." That singularity, according to Kurzweil, will be spurred by artificial intelligence. The body has no place in this imagined future.

And yet, while the singularity is presented as

a universal event that will radically change the course of all humanity, it is in fact a very particular one. Despite the universalizing language of Vernor Vinge's "Coming Singularity," the singularity actually predicts a point-of-no-return in which the power balance between some humans and their technologies will be radically altered, and the control that some humans have continuously exercised over their technologies will be rearranged. The luxurious fantasies of a benign singularity are confined to a small class of people, given the massive inequalities of wealth, natural resources, and toxic exposure exacerbated by the unequal distribution of electronic waste and extraction today. Likewise, the power dynamics of domination and subordination that singularitarians fear so much are the lived reality of the majority of the planet, human and non-human. No major singularitarians have hinted at an awareness of the radically different relationships different people in different geographies, class positions, genders, and proximities to various kinds of governmental power have to technology. The post-body singularity is therefore a very particular kind of fictional American event.

Contesting singularitarianism's prediction of a future of disembodied unity is not mere speculation. The reality of radically differing relationships to technology is made evident by another version of the cyborg that is already tangibly coming into being. As early as DARPA's 1983 Smart Weapons program, where the first autonomous robots were designed, the new Pentagon motto was that "the battleground is no place for human beings." And yet, bodies are consumed on the battlefield. The disembodiment of the American military is a factory farm model of warfare. Machines will slaughter, the American corpus will consume.

The singularitarian fantasy is the Immo reality.

Humans, as the servants of technological masters, submit to a technocratic order that is supra-intelligent and relinquish their bodies along the way. Bodies, in the singularitarian imagination, are a historical artifact, what Thomas Armour called "the weakest link" in modern warfare. While the apocalypse was initially disastrous for the United States citizens of Wolfe's Limbo, the apocalypse that some singularitarians predict more closely reiterates Goldblatt's interpretation of the new military status quo, "not science fiction, but science action." Goldblatt's technocratic world order, like the singularitarian submission to technology, fetishizes technology and therefore experiences a future apocalypse in rapturous terms. It is a moment of total negation, stripping the world and setting it bare for a new cartographic manipulation. It is the frontier apocalypse.

Goldblatt and singularitarians do not only share a fetishistic relationship to technology, but also a similar logic of a future imperative. Apocalyptic fantasies, after all, only exist in psychology and literature. They are powerful for their imaginative potential, and all the more so when that imagination is embedded in one of the world's most wealthy and powerful military research agencies.

The international effect of a disembodied American future is already restructuring cartographies of violence in war. Goldblatt's logic works seamlessly with singularitarian logic in the context of the "War on Terror," which is predicated on the constant assumption of future violence and apocalypse. In the "War on Terror," the singularity is always near.

In contemporary United States military practices, AI and human intelligence-based machinery are staples of warfare. The "What

We Do” series of United States Air Force recruiting advertisements sensationalizes drones, planes, and computer simulations with a Goldblatt-esque caption, “It’s not science fiction. It’s what we do every day.” Indeed, since the CIA’s first targeted drone killing in Afghanistan in February 2002, drone warfare has become routine to military policy. President Bush conducted at least 45 drone strikes during his presidency. By 2012, Obama had already carried out 292.

Grégoire Chamayou’s *A Theory of the Drone* cites a 1964 essay by American engineer John W. Clark on human engagement in war via “remote control in hostile environments.” In these situations of remote control, writes Clark, “the machine may be thought of as an alter ego for the man who operates it.” Prosthetic weapons, like those of Wolfe’s *Limbo*, would create a symbiotic relationship between humans and their capacities for war: “his [the machine operator’s] consciousness is transferred to an invulnerable mechanical body with which he is able to manipulate tools or equipment almost as though he were holding them in his own hands.” Drones are one form of military prosthetics and they channel human minds into mechanical bodies.

By eliminating a destructible body as the source of antagonism, drones penetrate national boundaries, maintaining eyes, ears, and a disembodied muscle anywhere in the world. This post-body style of warfare gives United States intelligence and military unhindered access to the rest of the world. Drones reorganize geographies, Chamayou shows, by reconfiguring notions of “safe” and “hostile” war territories, expanding the zones of safety for the nations they represent, and producing zones of warfare in nearly all lived spaces for those that they attack. Human bodies and mind are, despite transhumanist attempts

to imagine a posthuman that would prove otherwise, completely intertwined. Removing a body from a war may remove accountability and direct physical harm, but it does not prevent the drone manipulator, the remote controller, from experiencing the physical and psychological repercussions of violence. Furthermore, the reduced accountability, of course, has dire consequences for the victims of strikes.

In November of 2016, Sonia Kennebeck released *National Bird*, a documentary following three whistleblowers who were formerly part of the U.S. drone program. Heather is a former imagery analyst struggling with post-traumatic stress disorder. She was thousands of miles from the strikes, but the psychological trauma and body dysphoria she experiences as a result of her work haunt her. Over the course of her time in the program, Heather saw many of her friends become psychologically unravelled. Her family fears that she might turn to alcohol or suicide. One moment in the documentary shows Heather reading a script of a drone strike, where the imagery analysts warn those controlling the drone that they see women and children in the shot. Eager for some action, the shooters dismiss her claims and go ahead anyways, killing several members of a family in a matter of moments. On the one hand, the spatial distance seems to produce a kind of ambivalence about shooting. On the other, the normalization of the violence is psychologically unbearable for the minds and eyes that operate the drone strikes, in this case, Heather.

The post-body’s most intense ramifications are on the people targeted by this “boundary-less” warfare. A former technical sergeant, Lisa, feels remorse for her involvement and travels to Afghanistan with a friend. Civilian deaths are incredibly common to drone warfare,

which is based on a strategy of “preventative war.” Chamayou summarizes this according to George Crawford’s idea of “manhunting as a foundation of US national strategies.” Suspects are often merely predicted suspects, as “militarized manhunting... is not so much a matter of responding to actual attacks but rather of preventing the development of emerging threats by the elimination of their potential agents.” Such preventative action subjects nearly anybody in a criminalized country to a drone strike, which can kill several people in a matter of moments. Here, the “possible” threat that DARPA defines itself against is materialized on random bodies.

According to the Bureau of Investigative Journalism in London, the 423 drone strikes in Pakistan since 2004 have killed anywhere from 2,497 to 3,999 people, 423 to 965 of which were civilians. When Lisa’s friend meets with the civilian survivors, they describe the pervasive presence of drones in their daily lives. One family member, a teenage boy, could not come because of intense post-traumatic stress. Due to the constant presence of surveillance drones, all outside space represented violence. The boy had hardly left his home since the strike killed his relatives. The drone is one of the military’s most visible forms of post-body warfare, but its repercussions reveal the ways in which some bodies are kept safe, while others are subjected to perpetual physical danger. In the case of National Bird, the American military body is kept safe as a legislative entity, as it protects American citizens from legible physical harm. Yet the employees of the drone program react in a process of hyper-embodiment, where their relationships with their bodies and actions become sensitized by attempts at disembodiment. And for the victims of drone warfare, bodies and minds are in a state of perpetual crisis.

The drone program’s intense ramifications

on people’s relationships with their bodies, like other forays into creating a productive post-body subject, reveal the difficulty of actually separating the laboring mind from the laboring body. Virtual reality, such as that experienced by drone operators, problematizes the notion of corporeal submission, in that it simultaneously produces a sensation of disembodiment, immersing you into a cyber reality in which you are bodiless, and produces this reactionary sort of hyper-embodiment. The latter is the physical reaction to entering cyberspace, to attempting to cognitively escape where you physically cannot, producing a heightened awareness of corporeality. Hyper-embodiment is the intensified awareness that you are feeling your body, which is in fact a product of destabilization. When your body is in a state of relative health, whatever that may look like for different individuals, your body is homeostatic and normalizes itself. When you are sick, you feel your body and develop a corporeal self-consciousness precisely because that homeostasis is no longer functioning. Virtual reality therefore makes you feel your body because it destabilizes it, creating a feedback loop that incorporates itself and your physicality unequally. This situation has been a significant barrier to the development of virtual reality projects like Facebook’s Oculus Rift, where programmers struggle to make a virtual reality that will not result in nausea or vomiting.

Artificial intelligence is the singularitarian alternative to drone warfare and a solution to problems of disembodiment. War prosthetics would not be corporeal so much as cognitive. If the Immo are analogous to drones, relinquishing their bodies but maintaining control of their minds, then *Limbo*’s contrasting characters, the indigenous Mandunji, are a vision of cognitive posthumanity. The problem of virtual reality nausea disappears, as controlling the mind

supersedes the control of the physical body because it polices corporeality. In Wolfe's post-World War III, indigenous Mandunji live on Tapioca Island, where a former American doctor named Martine has been living for years. The Mandunji practice lobotomy in order to reduce aggression and deviation from their community. Transgressive bodies are blamed on transgressive minds.

The post-body cyborg makes national frontiers irrelevant to the United States military, but so long as its icon is drone warfare, human minds risk resistance. Attempting to abstract and distance the body from humanity consistently produces hyper-embodiment. In the case of drone warfare, this risks pushing operators to the edge. On the scale of global violence, this has already produced an extensive cartography of hyper-embodiment, where people's bodies are perpetually vulnerable to the omnipresent eye of the drone.

Bernard Wolfe's *Limbo* was written in the aftermath of a period of mass-annihilation and mass hope. The atomic bomb was in the works. The apocalypse teetered on the horizon of people's minds, fabricating new relationships between people and their bodies, bodies and communities. In the face of apocalypse, the constantly looming singularity, the militaristic reconfiguration of bodies is today creating a new cartography of the world, consumed and created by United States cameras and screens.

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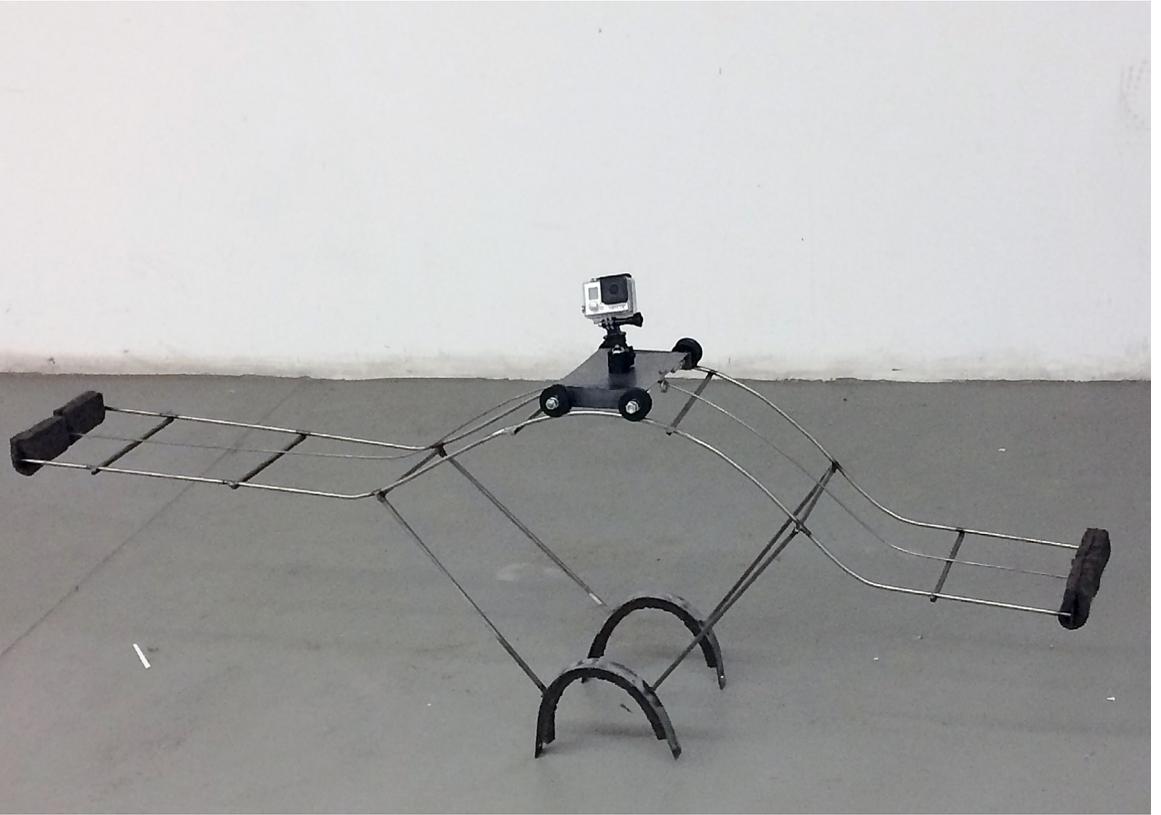




Wearable Camera Dolly, 2016

Emma Lesher-Liao

resting on the shoulders such that the track curves up over the wearer's head, camera (exchangeable) slides towards and over wearer's head through wearer's movements and tilted motions, with possible help from arms. test run documented at december 2016 prentis fashion show, special thanks to taylor for the gopro. second person's assistance probably needed to produce smoothest footage, project therefore open to future collaboration.



*Technologies
of
Dissent*

**Dennis
Tenen
with Gabriel
Strauss**

Technologies of Dissent

An Interview with Dennis Tenen

Gabriel Strauss

Dennis Tenen (DT) is Assistant Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University, where he is a Co-Founder of Columbia's Group for Experimental Research Methods in the Humanities.

Gabriel Strauss (GS) is a junior at Columbia University majoring in American Studies and concentrating in Computer Science.

Gabriel: In the interdisciplinary Computing in Context course that you teach with Professor Cannon, there's an emphasis not only on teaching skills that can be applied directly to research in the humanities, but also on getting students to unlearn the habits of mind that accept all kinds of computers as "black boxes" that we can use without understanding. Changing the way we think about the technology we use may change how we use it. But can it also change how the humanities thinks about the past? In other words, what can someone working in the humanities but outside a field like computational studies gain from technological literacy, other than a new toolset?

Dennis: In my research and teaching I approach computation both as a subject and a method of study. Part of what I want to accomplish is to encourage my students (and readers) to examine their engagement with technology critically. Computation also offers us new tools and capabilities to ask questions about literature and culture at scales of analysis not necessarily accessible to other modes of inquiry. Not everyone might be interested in learning how to code. However, our collective alienation from the material contexts of knowledge production--which are increasingly digital--has an impact not just on the humanities, but on human life in general.

Questions of censorship, surveillance, or democratic deliberation are inseparably entwined with the platforms that host such activities. Too often essentially political questions are couched in instrumental terms: bigger, faster, more connected, more secure. Technological literacy allows us to see through the ruse of instrumental reason and to connect our ideals with our everyday practice. For this reason, my courses often start with an exploration of those "black boxes" closest to hand and head.

GS: As a corollary, how can computer science programs benefit from exposing their students to an interdisciplinary perspective on the field? How would you describe the attitude towards interdisciplinary computational studies within the Columbia CS department, or within North American CS departments generally?

DT: Computer science is an incredibly welcoming discipline. Some of the best people in that field actively seek out collaborations, because computational methods attain their full meaning in a dialogue with domain expertise. I have learned a lot from working with researchers like Kathleen McKeown who directs the the Natural Language Processing Group here at Columbia, and with Dan Jurafsky who heads the NLP group at Stanford. We approach language and texts from different but mutually enlightening perspectives. Literary studies have a long history of deep thought about language, text, discourse, narrative, authorship, influence, style, and metaphor, among other concepts crucial for the development of both disciplines. For example, one cannot imagine a future of "machine intelligence" without understanding intelligence in its wider philosophical and historical contexts. Another example: In writing my first book on the poetics of computation (*Plain Text*, Stanford UP 2017), I was very much inspired by Brenda Laurel's work on computers as theater. She continues to be incredibly influential in the field of human--computer interaction. Her graduate training was in drama theory and criticism.

I wish more programmers and user interface designers were versed in contemporary literary

theory. Our interfaces with machines---the way we read, write, inhabit media, share photos or snippets of conversation---would be richer for it. I wrote my book in hopes of reaching literary scholars and software engineers alike.

GS: In your review of Bernard E. Harcourt's *Desire and Disobedience* for LARB, you describe the central role that our desire to watch others expose themselves plays in our assent to total surveillance. You liken the surveillance carried out by a range of government and corporate interests to a "pavilion of glass and mirrors." Our consumption of each others' digital doubles is driven by desire, but what about the unseen entities outside the pavilion, watching us all through the one-way glass? Is the desire that drives their continual requests for more data similar to our own? Are there parallels between their consumption of data and ours?

DT: The "pavilion of glass and mirrors" is a quote from Harcourt's work. The key point of my review and also of my review of *The Circle*, by David Eggers in Public Books is parity. A pact of mutual transparency between power structures and their subjects might be a bargain worth considering. However, there is an ever widening disparity between the transparency of the individual and that of the system. For example, the number of documents classified by the US government is growing almost exponentially with every year. At the same time, people think little of installing always-on microphones and cameras in the midst of their living rooms. The data flows one way, from the subject to the centers of power. This is precisely why humanists need to get involved in reversing the flows of information. We need more readers, more critics, more printmakers, more librarians, more archivists. Left to its own devices, the logic of technology will transform culture and politics unilaterally, in a way that can only exacerbate the existing inequities.

GS: You end the review of *Desire and Disobedience* by suggesting that the needed "collective response" to voluntary mass surveillance is not likely to happen while "being informed is still less fun than watching smart TV." Are we really

just waiting for some kind of catastrophic state of events to serve as a catalyst for a different public attitude towards surveillance, or are there any approaches to promoting widespread technological literacy and awareness that you are hopeful about? How can universities and other communities committed to sharing and building knowledge contribute to these efforts, and are there entrenched institutional attitudes that prevent them from doing so?

DT: You might also ask why most students do not pursue a career in social justice or universal healthcare. The university fulfills many functions: professional development, the advancement of specialized knowledge, social acculturation. A liberal arts education is dedicated to a life of questioning and reflection: of being a "thorn in the flesh," of being unsure, of knowing as well as unknowing, of asking why and how at inopportune and awkward moments. There's no money in it. It is not for everyone. I say this without a judgement: as an immigrant, I understand the need to improve one's situation. Capital will always favor development, however. There is no profit in selling fewer cameras, activating fewer microphones, or collecting less data. You caught me on one of my more pessimistic days. Few would admit to believing in the loss of privacy, in hunger, or in war, for that matter.

Yet our country spends insurmountably more money on drone warfare and surveillance than on feeding the hungry. To avoid crisis we must envision a social order in which cultural values align with political and technological commitments. This cannot happen if we are merely trying to make a living. In the short term, I try to cultivate a small community interested in code and poetry. In the long term, I would like to consider the possibility of radical thought in terms other than those offered by the dichotomy between capitalism and socialism.

GS: You're someone who thinks more rigorously than most about the questions involving how humans interact with and think about technology. Can you talk a little bit about when and why you first became interested in these kinds of

questions?

DT: A chef who uses a knife daily attains a measure of proficiency that elevates tool use into an art. Can the same thing be said about our daily use of mail clients or word processors? Before sitting down to read or write I like to tidy my desk. It bothered me greatly that I could not do the same with my electronic devices. The mechanics of inscription---document storage and organization---escaped me even as I started to write software professionally. Heidegger would say that a certain mode of tool use conceals. What does it conceal? The tool itself, the matter being transformed, and human nature itself. I was and continue to be influenced by Hannah Arendt in thinking about our engagement with technology, beyond the instrumental.

GS: In your recent post on your website you write about your involvement with online forums like Reddit's AskHistorians and Skeptics on StackExchange. You say that you view public writing as "an opportunity to use university resources on behalf of someone who does not have access, to correct the record, and to show, in some small way, the continual importance of the humanities." Could you elaborate on why it is important to correct the record? And furthermore, how might public access to sources of knowledge that are currently restricted affect the "importance of the humanities"? How might it affect record-building and record-correcting?

DT: I have a personal stake in making sure that an appropriate answer to "Did Nazis really use gas chambers in concentration camps" remains at the top of the search engine rankings. The library has long been the archive of record for such questions. Increasingly, public forums like Reddit and private concerns like Stack Exchange are beginning to fulfil that function. This is in part because our libraries are not terribly welcoming places. Whole communities are barred from entrance, real and virtual. New structures of knowledge formation offer an opportunity for a more egalitarian public sphere. They also invite targeted campaigns of misinformation. For example, Russian and Hindu nationalist groups will

regularly organize raids on Wikipedia, to edit articles on Kashmir or Crimea. The 2017 election has shown even more systematic and large scale attempts to influence the public record, involving state-sponsored intelligence agencies. The practice of public humanities is therefore becoming more necessary than ever. I am thinking of ways of incorporating such practices in my Technologies of Dissent class, offered in the fall of 2017.

GS: In that same post from your website, you describe an exchange with a reader who rejected a fact check that you posted because you were "using the 'current narrative,'"—in this instance sources like OED and the US Holocaust Memorial Museum—"to answer skepticism about the current narrative." This is not "healthy skepticism," you claim, but "conspiratorial thinking," unmoved by appeals to authority and expertise because it casts doubt on "knowledge making" as a whole. Do you see restrictions on public access to knowledge, and how these restrictions are justified as somehow feeding into "conspiratorial thinking"?

DT: Conspiratorial thought is an interesting phenomenon because it is a kind of a misapplication of critical reason. More public knowledge should theoretically lead to a more informed public. Many conspiracy theories dissipate with just a few minutes of research using widely available resources. The very insistence on "alternative facts" implies that the person will not be convinced by a preponderance of facts alone. Conspiratorial thinking belies a certain laziness of thought---hence "gaslighting." The conspiratorial thinker produces prodigious empty soot that obscures its topic. The strategy is to foul the whole conversation: to make it unpalatable and exhausting for others to continue. Conspiratorial innuendo thus masquerades as critical thinking. This problem is distinct from the problem of access to knowledge and its inequitable distribution I mentioned earlier.

GS: Vim or Emacs?

DT: In a former life I had time to play computer games. Vim helped redirect the tactile feeling of

“flow” at the keyboard into writing. For those who have not encountered it before, Vim is a free and open source text editor that understands text objects such as “word,” “sentence,” and “paragraph.” These allow for composable actions like “delete a word” or “move this sentence to the end of the paragraph.” It would not be an exaggeration to say that Vim has changed my relationship to the word. More importantly, editors like Vim and Emacs are extensible, allowing specialized communities like our own to tailor it to our own needs. I would love to see more plugins for literary analysis, editing, proofreading, and for long-form writing for example. You can find my configuration files (.vimrc) by searching for “denton vimrc” in any search engine. Are you interested in organizing a workshop? I’ll be happy to contribute.







