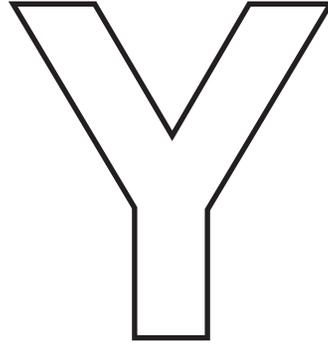


Candusen.net is a website full of games, playthings, secrets, and other fun.
All shapes were generated from candusen.net/ellsworth.

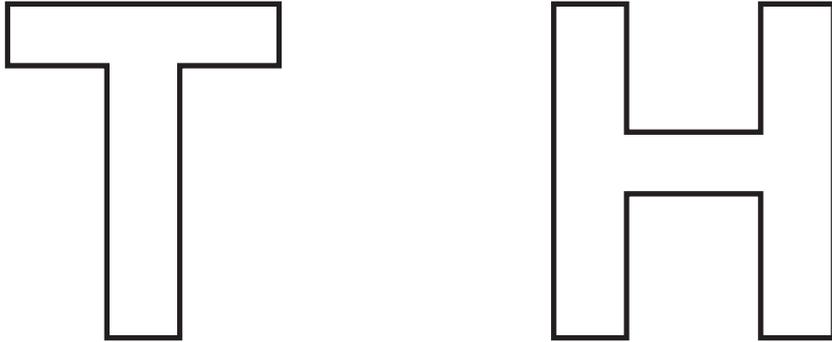




In this volume of CJLC, we turn to the pressing issue of how myth figures in contemporary politics. The term may invite images of antiquity, of fabled truths that have departed the realm of the factual, and wound up in an altogether different place. Yet as Joo Kyung Lee shows us with her analysis of Artemis in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (page 88), even a discussion of ancient myth invites contemporary questions. In this vein, our interviews with Ayesha Siddiqi (page 98) and Mark Lilla (page 58) turn to the mythologies latent in American culture and politics.

In Roland Barthes’ seminal work *Mythologies*, the semiologist outlines a theory of myth that revolves around language. In his account, myth is a mode of speech that distorts and reconfigures the relationship between signifier and signified. Appealing to our conceptions of nature, myths validate certain worldviews while suppressing others. In other words, myths distort. With this in mind, Kate Irwin’s article on the commodification of “edible minorities” shows us myths as they are inscribed on supermarket packaging. Devika Kapadia’s piece (page 42) examines how modern Hindutva mythology governs interpretations of sacred mythical texts. This phenomenon is also central to our interview with Sheldon Pollock (page 32), whose Sanskrit scholarship came under fire after he signed petitions in support of Indian students’ freedom of speech.

As our discussion with Clémence Boulouque demonstrates (page 80), today’s ostensibly novel myths have older genealogies and corollaries than we might assume: see Mariam’s discussion of nineteenth century discourse



on Arab female sexuality as it plays out in Saudi Arabia’s digital counter-culture (page 12). Meanwhile, Adil Habib’s review on page 20 draws connections between the East India Company’s painting business and today’s international art market. On page 68, Ian Trueger shows what hate crimes in today’s Europe have in common with Inquisition Spain (hint: sausages). And our interview with Reinhold Martin (page 118) brings to light the origins of the contemporary neoliberal university in eighteenth century corporate law.

This volume is not about mythbusting so much as charting the journeys of myths in all their ruptures and continuities. We hope to play with the distortions that they offer us.

As always, thanks are due to our faculty advisor Nicholas Dames. For most of the editors, this is our last issue of CJLC. We will miss it dearly, but are excited to see what it becomes in the able hands of Devika and Becca next year.

Enjoy!

Hallie Nell Swanson & Ian Trueger
Editors-in-Chief

CJLC XIV

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Milk, 16 Inkjet Prints
by William Jess Laird

Milk documents the illicit distribution and sale of raw dairy products within New York State. The substance shown here is kefir, a thick drink made through a process of fermenting milk with live bacteria cultures. Each strained glass of kefir in Milk is made from a different batch of raw milk illegally purchased at one of the sites shown. At the moment of sale these previously random locations become defined as crime scenes under State and Federal laws mandated by The Food and Drug Administration. Widely considered one of the greatest public health revolutions of the 20th century, pasteurization is the process of heating milk in order to kill harmful bacteria. This project finds itself at a peculiar moment in this history. The proliferation of such networks meant to provide access to unpasteurized, "natural" products marks a critical skepticism in the government's interest in health and well-being. The paranoia that pasteurization has become a mechanism of political repression suggests an insecurity over sources of power and control in the post 9/11 American psyche.



PARTY IN
THE KSA:
TINDER IN
SAUDI ARABIA

by Mariam

In the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, just like in Manhattan, swiping right means “DTF”, 420 means let’s get stoned, and the beers emoji means you’re interested in going out for pints. In the Western English-speaking world, we’ve developed these shorthand signifiers over time; just as spoken vernacular is constantly evolving, so too is textual vernacular. These signifiers are products of the last ten years, smartphones and virtual social networking, and cultural icons like Bob Marley and Kim Kardashian. But in Saudi Arabia, an isolated Wahhabist paradise – and the largest and wealthiest country in the Middle East – these abbreviative signs are handy rhetorical devices for tapping into an unrestrained subculture while under the seemingly inescapable gaze of government censors.

Dating in Saudi Arabia, aside from being logistically impossible (public spaces are divided into bachelors and family-only zones), is illegal. But then again, most products of modern life, particularly American culture, are. This does not mean that Saudi Arabians do not drink, do drugs, watch porn, and have sex. In the modern nation-state – be it liberal or Wahhabist – law-making is myth-making, and legal jargon, enforced by lashes and the death penalty, is fodder for the Saudi government, whose interests lie in maintaining the integrity and validity of the national imaginary. The instantiation of a national legal code supposedly creates and conscripts a legally sanctioned citizen, one that fits nicely within the Wahhabist doctrine of the Kingdom.

The legally sanctioned subject in the Wahhabi case is entirely mythical; the Saudi individual does not exist outside of the bounds of the law. After all, there is no greater myth created by the law than the fact that it is completely constitutive of culture, that it sets the parameters within which culture exists. It should be no surprise that there's a vibrant, thriving subculture in Saudi Arabia, where individuals express themselves extralegally. Though it may be more invisible and covert than other subcultures in the modern world, it's just as sexually charged, illicit, and unfiltered.

Having access to this subculture is like being allowed into a VIP club that feels like a marriage between Soho House and Burning Man. Bacchanalian events feature Saudi princes wielding Kalashnikovs at men who eye their women, cheetahs on top of Lamborghinis, and falcons perched on the shoulders of scantily-clad Eastern European women. The scene is populated by characters like Elisa from Brazil, who moved to Jeddah to teach Salsa dancing, and Sam, an actor who moved from France to learn Arabic so he could play a part of a kid in the banlieues and make some extra cash. This sybaritism is not entirely expat-produced; though expats do play a large role in the formation of the Saudi subculture, there are also many Saudi nationals in the scene. Usually the locals hail exclusively from the upper echelons of society. They're either royalty or pseudo-royalty, coming from the ten or so wealthiest families in the nation. If your name bears the mark of one of them, you are likely hosting the craziest parties in the Kingdom.

The representative image of the traditionally clad, hidden, and subdued Saudi individual is deceptive, and, over the past five years, works like the novel *Girls of Riyadh* and social bloggers – most of whose blogs get removed instantly, or live outside the Kingdom – have exposed this deception. The fact that Wahhabist laws in Saudi Arabia mandate a particular mode of existence does not mean that the individuals that live within it are producing the same culture that existed at the time of the Prophet. Saudi Arabian subculture is just as cosmopolitan

as it is in New York, London, Berlin, and Hong Kong. That is to say that it is modular, exportable, unoriginal, and very American.

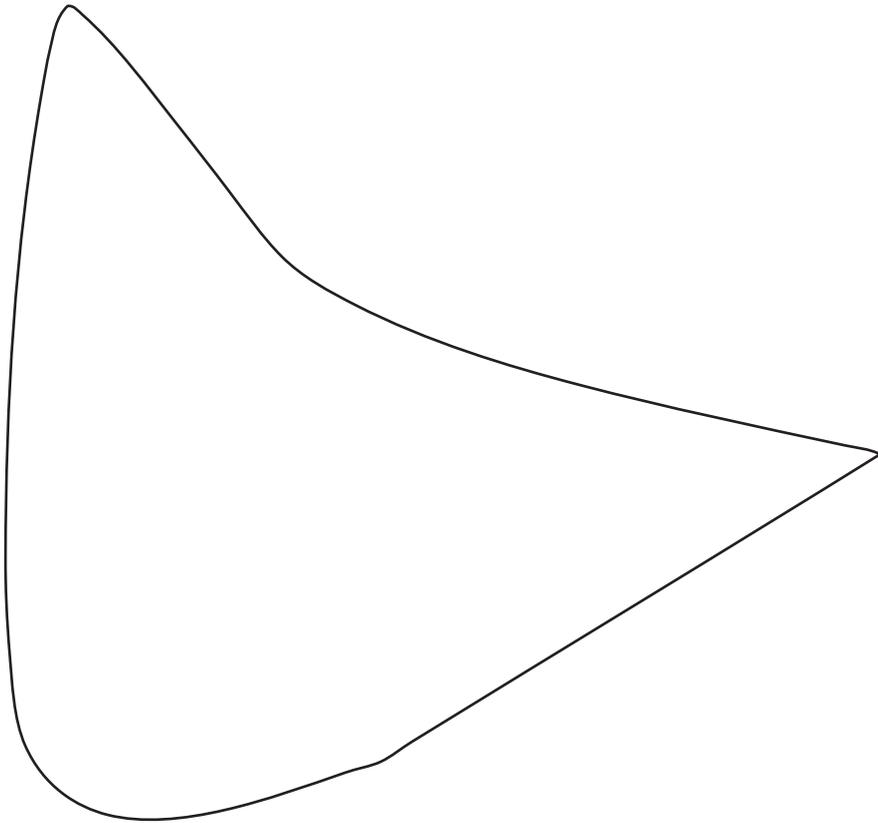
Because the simulacrum of Saudi Arabia created by Wahhabi legal doctrine is ostensibly devoid of culture, this debaucherous “sub-culture” becomes the only manifest form of “culture” in the Kingdom. If, per Raymond Williams, we take culture as a record of reactions to the changes in social, economic, and political life that come with the advent of modernity, we can see that this “sub-culture” – entirely a reaction to the creation of a legally inscribed Saudi Arabian nation-state – is just simply culture.

*

A MYTH OF SEXUAL REPRESSION

Sex has always been an important feature of the Orientalist fantasy. The deviant sexual activities of women in the harem – a lascivious gaze behind the veil, a bare ankle jingling with bangles at every step – are a fixation of nineteenth-century Orientalist literature about the Middle East. In *Desiring Arabs*, Joseph Massad argues that over the course of the colonial encounter and the Middle East's “entrance” into modernity, Victorian notions of appropriate and shameful sexual behavior created a sexually repressed Arabic-Islamic colonial subject. Sexual behaviors that had been known, but tactfully unnamed, became codified as “taboo” through colonial juridical interventions. In Western discourse, the veiled woman – eroticized and fetishized as a mystical sexual object in nineteenth century colonial writings – became a decidedly sexually repressed being, represented by images that promulgate her supposed piety and subdued domesticity.

This image of the sexually repressed Muslim woman continues to structure representations of Middle Eastern individuals today, and is most salient in the Saudi Arabian case. Saudi Arabian women and men alike are represented by those within and outside the Middle East as sexually repressed, constrained, and deprived. Saudi Arabia legally mandates the veil, a paramount



material signifier of sexual repression in the Western imaginary, and forbids women from driving cars or leaving the house alone. It is inconclusive to deduce from these legal measures that the material reality of a Saudi Arabian woman is a legally repressed one, and it is important to read nuance into her condition. For instance, most Saudi women I have spoken to conceive of driving as beneath them, too banal a task for a woman to undertake. And while women float down the sidewalk in their self-effacing black flowing garb – sometimes in the hellish 120 degree fog that fills cities like Jeddah in the summer months – they relish in the opportunity to host all-female gatherings where they can show off their Givenchy and Prada threads to other women. These women show no interest in allowing other men access to this spectacle; the aphorism that women dress for women holds true in the Wahhabi desert.

While these examples push back against the image of total female repression, the digital interactions and shorthand signifiers produced by an uninhibited virtual reality debunk this myth entirely. The medium through which women are interacting with

the masculinized public sphere resembles the veil – they are able to selectively emit content virtually from their position behind the screen of the computer, iPhone, iPad, or iPod, all common household gadgets in the Kingdom. The screen, like the veil, protects these women, their honor, their piety, while simultaneously allowing them to participate in a set of social mores that, while legally taboo, produce a culture in the nation they inhabit. This dual function, a dyadic existence of upholding legally inscribed Wahhabist values while being an unrestrained cultural subject, is only made possible by the veil, or by the screen. In many ways the emergence of online communities that perpetuate illicit activities are merely a modern technological extension of a structural social and cultural formation that has been in place since the creation of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

*

SWIPING RIGHT IN SAUDI

Tinder in Saudi Arabia is as sexually charged, illicit, and unfiltered as it is in New

York.

While in Saudi Arabia, I went on Tinder out of both curiosity and boredom, to see if the swipe fever had made it across the Arabian desert. I also tried downloading Grindr, to see if it, too, had been overlooked by the Saudi authorities, who successfully block most sites and applications that provide avenues for illicit behavior or communication. After all, this is the country that blurs women's revealed shoulders in the 1940s Egyptian films that rerun on national television. Grindr was definitely blocked. But Tinder, surprisingly, was not – and provided me an unexpected entry into a vibrant online community. The Saudi government's selective allowance of Tinder over Grindr (though Tinder is more mainstream, it also has options for queer matching) makes it seem like the Saudi Arabian government is sanctioning one type of illicit online activity while banning another. With the rise of surveillance practice and state intervention, it is clear that the Saudi government

is aware of the illicit subcultures - including both homosexual and heterosexual activity - that exist within its borders. But there are degrees of illicitness, and they are completely mediated by the Saudi government either through juridical measures like adultery laws or overt state intervention like disabling apps and shutting down blogs. In this way, it becomes evident that the online medium is only an extension of an existing structure of social mores that allow for "culture" to exist.

As I reside on a compound an hour outside of Jeddah (known as being the most "liberal" city in Saudi Arabia), I adjusted my settings to include the neighboring cities and small villages. I tried a host of settings, but settled largely on men age 23-33. The results were overwhelming. It seemed as if "swiping left" was not really an option that was utilized, and that these men were only swiping right, trying their luck to see what they could get. Each swipe is a gamble: is the other person going to be conservative

or liberal? How far will they take the interaction? Are they privy to the lexicon of this subculture? With this gamble, the stakes are higher: in an extreme case, the person on the other side could be affiliated with a particularly powerful family, political party, or they could even be the mutaween – the moral police. These risks up the ante: the potential of disrepute, scandal, or arrest at each swipe results in the encryption of the game. This is where signifiers like DTF, 4/20, and emojis come into play. They weave the web of symbols and representations that allow entry into this virtual game.

On principle, I swiped right at every single profile I came across. After an hour of swiping, I became sensitized to the exaggerated sexual expression of each profile, whether it was through images or through text. Locals and expats alike both used English on their profiles to present themselves, although the former a bit more haphazardly than the latter. Some conversations I engaged with were intriguing: expats who came to work from Germany and Pakistan discussing the transition into Saudi life; a Saudi man who intended to move abroad to study public policy; a Lebanese man who moved to Saudi to work in oil. These individuals were all privy to the mechanisms of cultural production in Tinderland, and most of them – especially the expats – came with seemingly global sexual mores.

Nobody in Saudi is going on Tinder to find a girlfriend. While somewhere like Manhattan, there's a wide range of attitudes towards finding a female partner on Tinder – anywhere between "lets hook up" to "I'm looking for a serious partner" – in Saudi, match-making happens in carefully coded, reserved forms. Tinder is thus reserved for hook-ups and quick sex. There's no grey area. As a result, a nuanced reading of Tinder profiles in Saudi proves that the sexual activities that occur in the virtual space are more exaggerated and expressive than those that transpire in the limited schema of Western sexual standards. The images presented were possibly the most revealing elements of the profiles. The most common thread in the profiles were the over-the-top representations of masculinity: men with

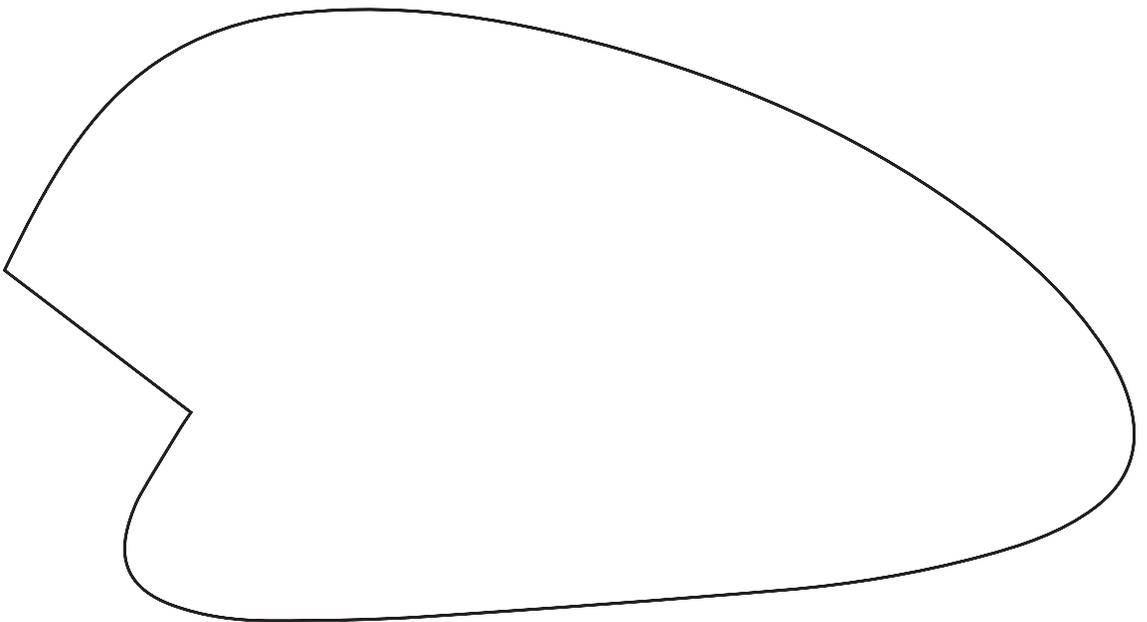
cheetahs, falcons, lions, and cars. One man was straddling an upright cheetah on its hind legs in an undeniably phallic image. Another had his hand down his pants with a caption that read: "I'll tell your mom we met at the library." Changing the settings to "females only" yielded similarly exaggerated results; some women posted selfies that emphasized cleavage, while others postured with more masculinized portraits, wearing khakis and showing off short haircuts. Unfortunately, I did not initiate any conversations with women for fear of getting caught, and quickly switched back to heterosexual settings, which posed less of a risk. Ultimately, it was clear that everyone on Tinder was there to foray into a world of unleashed sexual activity, liberated from the constraints of public society.

Tinder in Saudi Arabia does not necessarily reproduce the same set of dating norms and modes of sexuality that are prevalent in Western uses of the application. If Tinder in Saudi Arabia is an opportunity to release individuals within Saudi from imposed notions of sexual repression, then the hypersexualized community that emerges from it is more unrestrained than anything that happens on Tinder in New York today. Tinder does more than fuel a market for American-imported dating apps; it is not merely an example of disruptive innovation in the global free market. Importing the medium of Tinder does not necessarily mean importing all of Western sexual norms. Rather, Tinder provides space for uninhibited forms of sexual expression that react to legally codified repressive norms of sexuality in the Kingdom.

Can I say that the average Saudi Arabian individual on Tinder is outwardly "sexually liberated" or "sexually expressive"? Perhaps. But it's certain that Tinder in Saudi Arabia is not an exceptional instance of liberalism in an archaic desert land. The particularities of Saudi Tinder indicate that the individuals engaging in the illicit sexual activities within the parameters of virtual reality are navigating and manipulating the medium of Tinder to create and preserve a dynamic counterculture. Tinder provides a space to both resist Wahhabist legal constraints and complicate Western liberal

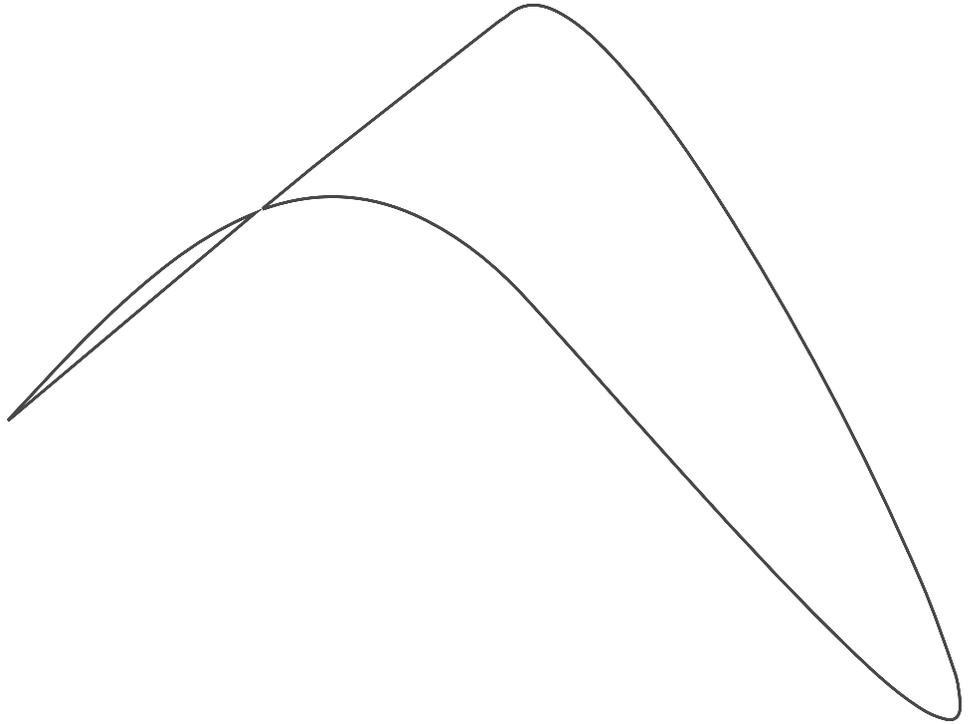
cultural sexual standards. Don't get me wrong: the Saudi subject on Tinder is not a revolutionary, but they are certainly a sexual being in a way that is not legally permissible in the Saudi Arabian public sphere. In this sense, Tinder is, at best, a creative site of individual sexual expression within the borders of the Wahhabist Kingdom. Tinder is not necessarily changing the culture of sex in Saudi Arabia: there was always a Saudi counterculture. Only now, you can download it in an app.

You can find Mariam within 100 kilometers of Jeddah if you search for girls aged 18-25.



IT'S A
SMALL (ART)
WORLD AF-
TER ALL: A
Review of Oliv-
ia Fraser's "The
Sacred Garden"

by Adil Habib



In the assemblage of Chelsea’s marketable ‘hipness’—converted factory buildings, reformed garages, carefully lit coffee shops and brick-and-glass caverns—lies Sundaram Tagore gallery, a space committed to “examining the exchange of ideas between Western and non-Western cultures.” Its latest show is Olivia Fraser’s *The Sacred Garden*. The title of the show recalls Frances Hodgson Burnett’s 1911 novel *The Secret Garden*, about a young girl born in colonial India who is relocated to her uncle’s Yorkshire manor after her parents and their servants are killed by a cholera epidemic. Burnett’s garden is a source of rejuvenation, and perhaps Fraser’s garden—filled with mandalas, lotus flowers and yogic motifs—marks a similar interest in meditative regeneration. Fraser moved to India in 1989 after completing her studies at Wimbledon Art College and Oxford. In Delhi’s National Museum she stumbled upon Indo-Persian miniature paintings, and it was there that she found inspiration for her own works.¹

The Indo-Persian miniature—traditionally found in manuscripts and painted on Wasli paper—is characterized not just by its size but also indiscernible brushwork, stacked perspective, and finely wrought illustrations of court life, royal hunts, and nature. The style emerged from the convergence of Indian styles of manuscript painting with

Persian schools of painting. While claims to any authentic style of miniature painting are specious, it was at the intersection of these various strands that the Mughal miniature form was created—the style most commonly referenced by contemporary South Asian artists in their miniature work. Fraser herself has been clear to point out the influence that Rajput and 19th Century Jodphuri miniatures have had on her own work.

Fraser is not the first of her family to voyage to the subcontinent. William and James Baille Fraser came to India in the heyday of the British Raj, rendering the colonial landscape in watercolor and patronizing what would come to be known as the “Company style” of pseudo-miniature painting. It was the company style—where British company patrons would commission South Asian artisans to produce miniatures in line with European tastes for a European market—that supplanted the Mughal atelier as the site of cultural production. The British applied the Western distinction between “fine art” and “craftwork” to the subcontinent, subsuming the Indo-Persian miniature under the latter. The company style thus became the ideal exportation of indigenous authenticity for a foreign market.

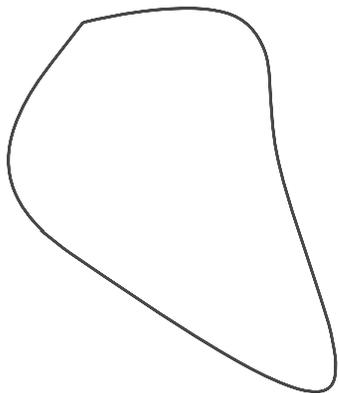
Over a hundred years later, Fraser is engaged in a similar project, mirroring her

ancestor’s fixation with Indian landscape, architecture, and people in her own work. In *The Sacred Garden*, the landscapes, the architecture and the people that occupy William and James Fraser’s imagined India are gone, but techniques of miniature painting remain, fused with a new-age fixation on mandalas, Bhakti and Buddhist imagery, yogic philosophy and modernist minimalism. What we find in *The Sacred Garden* is a peculiar melding of South Asian iconography; the figure of the mandala, the thousand-petal *sahasrara* lotus, eyes and hands, reflected across perfectly square, perfectly color-blocked pages. Fraser’s subject matter is “about a search for inner peace,”² and the imagery in her work and her process of painting reflect that project. Her painted surfaces are smooth, burnished in jewel tones and marked by symmetrical compositions. They represent hours of work put into hiding the artist’s hand. Despite this labour, Fraser presents us with what appears to be a reproducible object; this invariability seems to be the point. Her repetition of lotus flowers and mandala-hands could adorn any wall without raising an eyebrow. On their own, they’re perfectly pretty; together, they echo Warholian prints. Their connection with miniature painting seems tenuous, but is enough to give them a veneer of Indianness. Can you smell the jasmine yet?

*

ART AS NATIONALIST PRAXIS

While standing in a Chelsea gallery, it’s easy to forget that miniature painting in South Asia has a complex and contested history; one that began long before Sundaram Tagore brought Fraser’s work to New York. National art is an often overlooked component in the consolidation of the nation. But it’s under the rubric of national art that the miniature painting has come to embody a cultural touchstone in Pakistan. The National College of Arts in Lahore offers a Bachelor’s degree in Miniature Painting, enshrining the genre in the nation’s cultural canon. Central to this canonization is the lineage it draws to Mughal court painters.



Continuities with the Mughal-era—articulated as the foundation of South Asian Muslim identity—is a cornerstone in Pakistani myth-making. The story that the emperor Humayun brought Persian court painters to his newly-minted Mughal ateliers solidifies the art form’s Islamic identity. In the divvying up of culture in Partition’s aftermath, Pakistan laid claim to the sufis, Ghalib, Qawalli and the Persian miniature—anything that smacked of the Islamic. India could keep their pantheon of Gods, their classical dance, yogic traditions and the mandala. Syncretism in the Partition and post-Partition eras was a dirty word. It complicated the two-nation theory Pakistan was predicated on, and denied the religious purity Hindu nationalists held so closely. The miniature thus became a hallmark of Pakistani artisanship and craftwork, where “culture” and “tradition” were read as synonymous and firmly rooted in the past.

The construction of the miniature as part of proto-Pakistani tradition was paramount in the post-partition era, evinced by the reception of mid-century painter Haji Muhammad Sharif. Sharif came from a line of Punjabi court painters and was patronized by the Maharaja of Patiala before Partition. It was with a nationalist impulse that poet and secretary of Pakistan’s Arts Council Faiz Ahmed Faiz pushed for Sharif’s first solo exhibition of Mughal miniatures in 1962, an event inaugurated by no other than President Ayub Khan. As a painter able to (re)produce with mastery the style and tenor of Mughal-era miniatures, Sharif and his work were perceived as *authentic*; a perfect reproduction providing what the nation needed to point to an unbroken tradition. This perceived authenticity was also the reason for his greatest criticisms. As Omar Tarar has argued in *Third Text*, Sharif was “An artisan among artists and artist among artisans... his hereditary art practice was caught up in the conflicting demands of modern art and a nationalistic state.”³ While his role as an artisan needed him to continue tradition, this precluded the kind of genius a contemporary artist was called upon to have. The miniature was too traditional and too artisanal to be considered art.

If Sharif’s reception epitomized the artisan/artist paradox, what the NCA miniature art

program did was move the miniature from the realm of craft to the contemporary, from the artisan to the artist, paving the way for the reinscription of the genre by contemporary artists and NCA alums like Shahzia Sikander, Imran Qureshi, Faiza Butt and Saira Wasim. It’s no coincidence that all four passed through NCA’s halls before taking to the international stage. Sikander was at the forefront of this movement, enrolling in the NCA miniature program during Zia ul-Haq’s military regime in the 1980s, and studying under miniature master Bashir Ahmed. As Sikander recently said at ArtBasel in Hong Kong, miniature art at the time of her enrollment “was seen as fundamentally derivative and clichéd, incapable of intellectual rigor... miniature painting was anomaly amid the highly Westernized teaching methods in mid-late 80s Lahore.”

Her thesis project, *The Scroll* (1989-1991), burst the craft-status of the miniature from the inside. Depicting the artist in an autobiographical tableau, moving through a family home and its angular walls, with the classic miniature frame-within-a-frame composition, *The Scroll* drew on the miniature tradition precisely in order to break it. While the technical and stylistic strategies might be similar to the Mughal miniature, *The Scroll* spans five-feet, transforming the miniatures single-scene composition into a melded series of scenes. A sequence of mini-Shahzias populate the painting, moving through moments of quotidienne life: eating with family, reading a book, sitting with friends, while servants sweep the floor, carry tea, roam the kitchen. Under Sikander’s squirrel-hair brush, the venue for royal life became a site for representing the contemporary everyday. It may be consciously bourgeois, but it doesn’t harken back to any kind of golden age. In the final iteration, Sikander is seen painting herself. The miniature is shown as a self-reflexive act labour.⁴

In many ways Sikander has come to represent the international face of the contemporary Pakistani miniature movement. Her work at NCA caused a stir in the miniature art department, and gave a new generation of artists a forum for exploration. Yet Sikander’s explosive success on the international

art scene in the 1990s coincided with an increasing silence in Pakistan's domestic art world. As Raza Rumi put it in Pakistan's *Friday Times*, Sikander "slowly disappeared from the local art scene and the narratives within her country of birth, [and was] almost rendered invisible, like the mythical characters one reads in the folklore."⁵ It's this neglect that Faisal Devji takes up in his recent piece in *Newsweek*, "Little Dictators." For Devji, Sikander's erasure comes at the hands of a coterie of Pakistani art critics for whom Sikander's work does not fit within their definition of contemporary Pakistani art.

Devji's "Little Dictators" are perfectly happy with painters who drawn on a traditional style with a clear genealogy and then riff on that tradition. What seems so unsettling about Sikander's work is that it calls these very genealogies into question. As Sikander told me over email, "I'm driven to speak and open the discourse around the problematic notion of 'authenticity.'" Sikander's insistence on using figures from Hindu mythology in her artwork is just as much a strategy of subversion as her experimentation with form and scale. While the latter two challenge the miniature as stagnant craftwork, the former undermines the miniature's status as essential national tradition.

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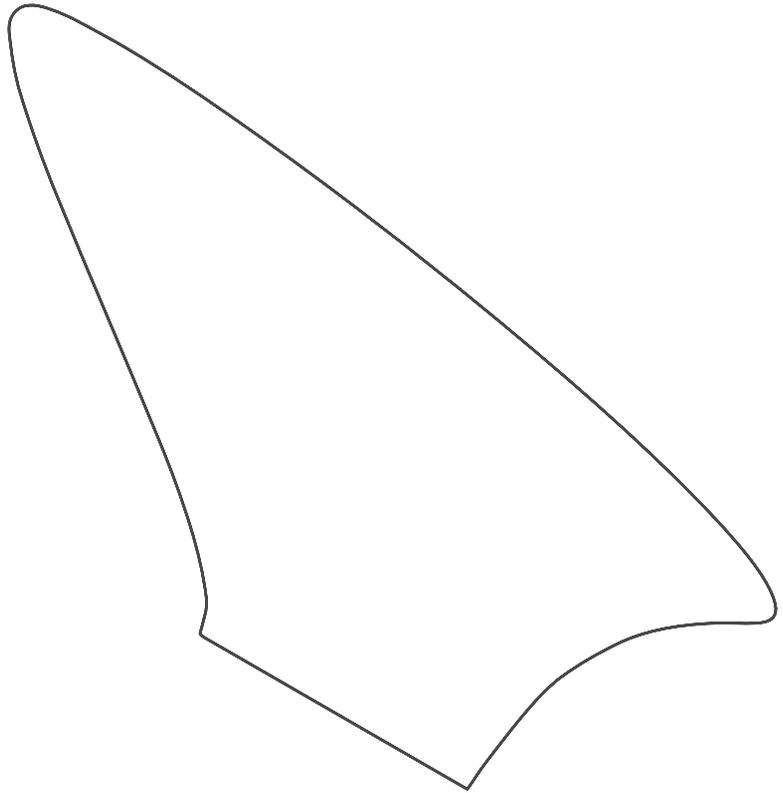
NATIONAL ART ON THE GLOBALIZED STAGE

Imran Qureshi may be one of the most famous products Sikander's legacy. He, like Sikander, studied under Bashir Ahmed at NCA in the early 90s, and his miniature works bear a striking resemblance to the style and composition of the Mughal miniature, down to the fine brushwork, the intricate rendering of leaves, faces, and the profiles of faces and clothes. Yet Qureshi's work is marked by a darkness; nimble trees become uprooted, and twirling flowers turn into spatters of blood on doorways and floors. These same blood spatters later found their way out of the frame-within-the frame of Qureshi's miniature and onto the

rooftop of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2013; a site-specific work that would be beautiful in its detail if it didn't also look like the scene of violent suffering.

As miniature art shifted from an artisanal relic to a site for contemporary experimentation, its status as national symbol underwent a particular transformation. To move from a National Museum to the Whitney and the Metropolitan Museum of Art is not a break from nationalist culture, but a shift to a different kind of nationalism: one which wants to see individual artistic talent on a global stage alongside Jeff Koons and Alex Katz. If constructing a national cultural tradition was crucial in legitimizing the nation, producing contemporary artists for the international art scene was needed to prove that this nation—with its rich history—was also the home of a thriving cultural life. The patrons of these arts aren't national Museums or local government institutions. They're global corporate foundations like the MacArthur Foundation and the Abraaj Group, or the US State Department. It's this kind of nationalism that marks as a source of pride Sikander winning a MacArthur Genius Grant or being awarded a US Department of State Medal of Arts—what Hillary Clinton calls "the diplomacy of art."⁶ The work that Sikander puts out and what the US State Department makes of it are two different things, and while the actions of the latter may not delegitimize the political valence of the former, those actions still serve as a statement about the role of art in a global economy. In this novel state of affairs, art carries a distinct currency. It allows governments and institutions to turn attention away from the wars they are funding, or the labour they are exploiting. As a commodity, it's a great investment; as a political tool, it's an excellent one.

Dubai may be the best example of what this global economy looks like. The United Arab Emirates is at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, and over the past three decades it's become a home for global capital and its cultural aftershocks. The Guggenheim's latest outpost in Abu Dhabi is slated for completion sometime in 2017, where it will later be joined by a franchise of the



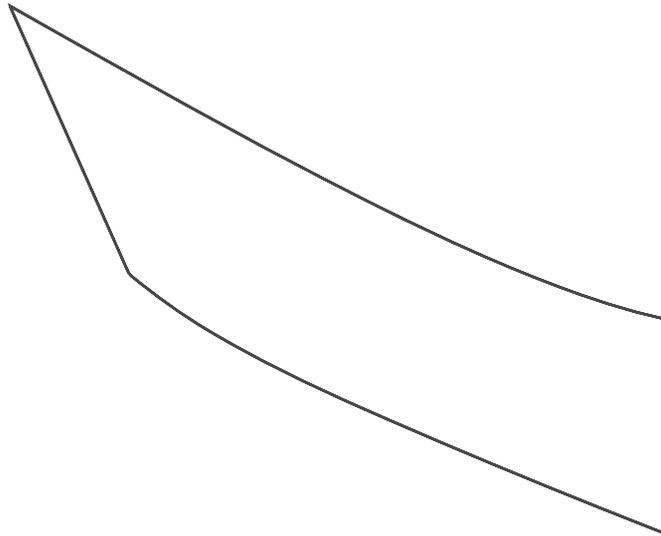
Louvre. Meanwhile, the Sharjah Biennial has been an art-world destination since 1993. The home of Dubai's burgeoning art scene is the Dubai International Financial Center; a cluster of glass towers, grassy squares and shining promenades. Galleries are interspersed between sleek international restaurants, making them the perfect eye-candy for window-shopping Credit Suisse execs on the way to their next business lunch. It's no coincidence that the city's financial district houses its cultural core, but the irony of it is perhaps lost on the gallerists, art dealers and socialites who flock to its grey marbled avenues.

Within the international art industry, museums, curators, collectors, gallerists, art foundations, institutes, diplomats, bureaucrats, are all involved in an arena that often has very little to do with artist themselves. This detachment is disillusioning. Outrage at the commodification of art is a banal stance to take when the likes of Wordsworth and Coleridge have been complaining about it since the 18th century. What's interesting is to see the kind of artistic work being done to pick apart the assumptions this global industry is built on. In some ways this is

asking a lot, especially when safe art—work that's good to look at, but isn't good for much else—is the most economically viable, at least in the short run.

These contradictions aren't lost on some artists. When Sikander was asked to show at the Sharjah Biennial in 2013, she presented *Parallax*, a fifteen-minute immersive animation combining paintings, text, and music and sound by composer Du Yun. Drawing on her trips to the Straits of Hormuz, which separates the Gulf of Oman and the Persian Gulf, Sikander fills her animation with images of oil rigs ("Christmas Trees") pumping fuel, floating dismembered arms, drawing connections between the strait's place in the British East India Company's route to South Asia, and the migrant labourers imported from the subcontinent to erect the UAE's cityscapes today. As Sikander told Bilal Qureshi at *Newsweek* last month, "Parallax addresses the Strait of Hormuz, particularly the fraught history of imperial control. It explores the colonial legacy of trade and corporate enterprise."

Sikander's *The Last Post* (2010) is an animation of a different kind. It uses a series of intricate paintings and puts them

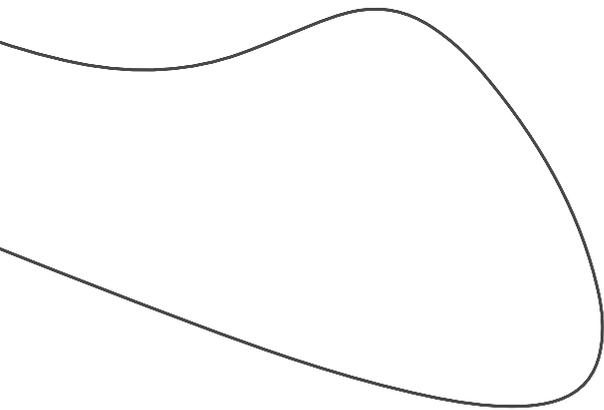


in motion, following the figure of the “East India Company Man” as he moves through Mughal courts and into the opium trade in China. In a way, it depicts everything that the Mughal miniature had left out of frame, and places their production in a network of trade and exploitation. Qureshi’s work is similarly imbued with the political. His *Moderates Enlightened* series of paintings riff on Pervez Musharraf’s doctrine of “Enlightened Moderation,” adopted after 9/11 under his military rule as a means of combatting Islamic extremism in Pakistan. The series depicts religious-seeming men—wearing long beards, white skullcaps and traditional *shalwar kurta*—lounging under trees, exercising, reading books and blowing bubbles. Some are sporting camouflage socks or bags, another a Nike satchel. The images force the viewer to confront their own preconceived notions of extremism. But the camouflage motifs are a gentle nod to the complicities between Pakistan’s military establishment, the CIA, and their history of supporting “Jihadism” at Pakistan’s frontiers.

It’s a manifestation of cosmopolitan internationalism that Qureshi was commissioned to create work for the Met. In his piece for the Met Rooftop Garden, *And How Many Rains Must Fall Before the Stains are*

Washed Clean?, Qureshi takes the miniaturist’s propensity for intricate foliage and paints it with a bloody brush. While the designs are compositionally beautiful, their likeness to bloodstains streaked across the floor makes for a piece difficult for the viewer to confront. While, come April, the Met’s rooftop garden becomes the perfect place for park-view summer cocktails, sipping drinks while standing on bloodstains seems comically grotesque. Perhaps this is why visitors to the piece found themselves skirting around its borders. The placement of Qureshi’s piece on the roof floor invokes an aerial spectator, challenging them with a series of questions: What does carnage look like from a drone’s-eye perspective? What does it mean to have a scene of slaughter on the top of a monument to Western Civilization? The circulation of global capital and Western patronage may have brought Qureshi to the top of the Met, but his work refuses to be grateful.

In a certain way, this shift toward an internationalism is predicated precisely on the production of a nationalist artisan culture. We can’t celebrate a work of contemporary art as transgressive or innovative if it has nothing to transgress. One of the reasons neo-miniature techniques are so lauded—



blowing up the miniature on a massive scale, bringing the everyday subject into a medium reserved for royalty, taking a static image and animating it through multimedia—is because their radicality rests on an established sense of what the miniature *is*, as well as the understanding that Sikander, Qureshi and their peers have already mastered the form. Quite simply, we respect their breaking of the rules, because they have taken the time to learn them.

★

Qureshi's blood-flower medallions make their way onto Fraser's canvas in the form of serene mandalas, but not before the gore is wiped off, and the image is made easy to look at. This might just be the logical conclusion to a global art market trying to sell culture as a commodity. On the level of Museum shows and art-fund commissions, Qureshi and Sikander are making work that gives the Mughal miniature a certain cultural caché. But site-specific installations, animated colonial officers and Nike-clad fundamentalists are a hard sell. For a gallery circuit to cash in on multicultural art, it needs to be rid of its political and historical

baggage. Fraser's blossoming lotus flowers and meditative eyes and hands evoke a fascination with Buddhist and Hindu mysticism, but they hardly question what the commodification of that practice looks like. Their modernist sensibility is predicated on an understanding of yogic thought as unchanging and eternal; a cosmology that just needs to be tapped into. Staring into a pair of eyes with golden lotuses for irises, the viewer finds themselves confronted by perfectly smooth surfaces of color and meticulous, indiscernible brushwork, that coalesce into an impenetrable screen.

If Sundaram Tagore gallery is invested in examining "the exchange of ideas between Western and non-Western cultures," then Fraser leaves her viewer guessing about what exactly is being exchanged. Perhaps it's a painting technique stripped of a sense of its history. For artists like Sikander and Qureshi, exchange is a much messier picture. It involves histories of exploitation, political maneuvering and bloodshed, which the national art establishment and its transnational corollaries are loath to admit. It raises questions of representation, commodification and globalization, which make for uncomfortable viewing at sites like the Met or the Sharjah Biennial. Sikander

and Qureshi are not exempt from the sticky web of the global art market; between art-as-nationalism, art-as-commodity and art-as-diplomacy, it's hard for any artist to be. Rhetorics of exchange hide the historical and political contingencies that enable cross-fertilized artistic production, masking them behind a veneer of cultural diversity. Under closer inspection, these myths become less palatable. The devil is in the details.

Adil Habib is graduating senior in Columbia College majoring in English and Middle Eastern, South Asian and African Studies.

NOTES

1. "The Miniaturist: Olivia Fraser," Platform Magazine http://www.platform-mag.com/art/the-miniaturist-olivia-fraser.html?para=1#article_title
2. "Sacred Spaces," Jai-Pur, Issue 2. http://www.jai-pur.com/journal_entry/when-east-marries-west-in-conversation-with-sitarist-shubhendra-rao/
3. Omar Tarar, "Framing of a National Tradition," Third Text 25.5, (Routledge, September 2011), 585.
4. Artist Salman Toor explains in detail the influence of *The Scroll* on miniature art: "[it did] two radical things to this historical craft: contemporary genre scenes were made worthy of it, the picture was liberated from a precious scale, and a static, decorative tradition began to hint at animation, movement, as seen in a double exposure in a photograph." Salman Toor, "The Unfurling Panorama," *The Friday Times*, 8 April 2016. <http://www.thefridaytimes.com/tft/the-unfurling-panorama/#sthash.fyBcMqzX.dpuf>
5. Raza Rumi, "Through the Looking Glass," *The Friday Times*, February 20th, 2015, <http://www.thefridaytimes.com/tft/through-the-looking-glass/>
6. Hillary Clinton, "The Diplomacy of Art," *Vanity Fair*, February 2013.





CRISIS IN
THE CLAS-
SICAL LI-
BRARY: An
Interview with
Sheldon Pollock
by Gayathri Raj

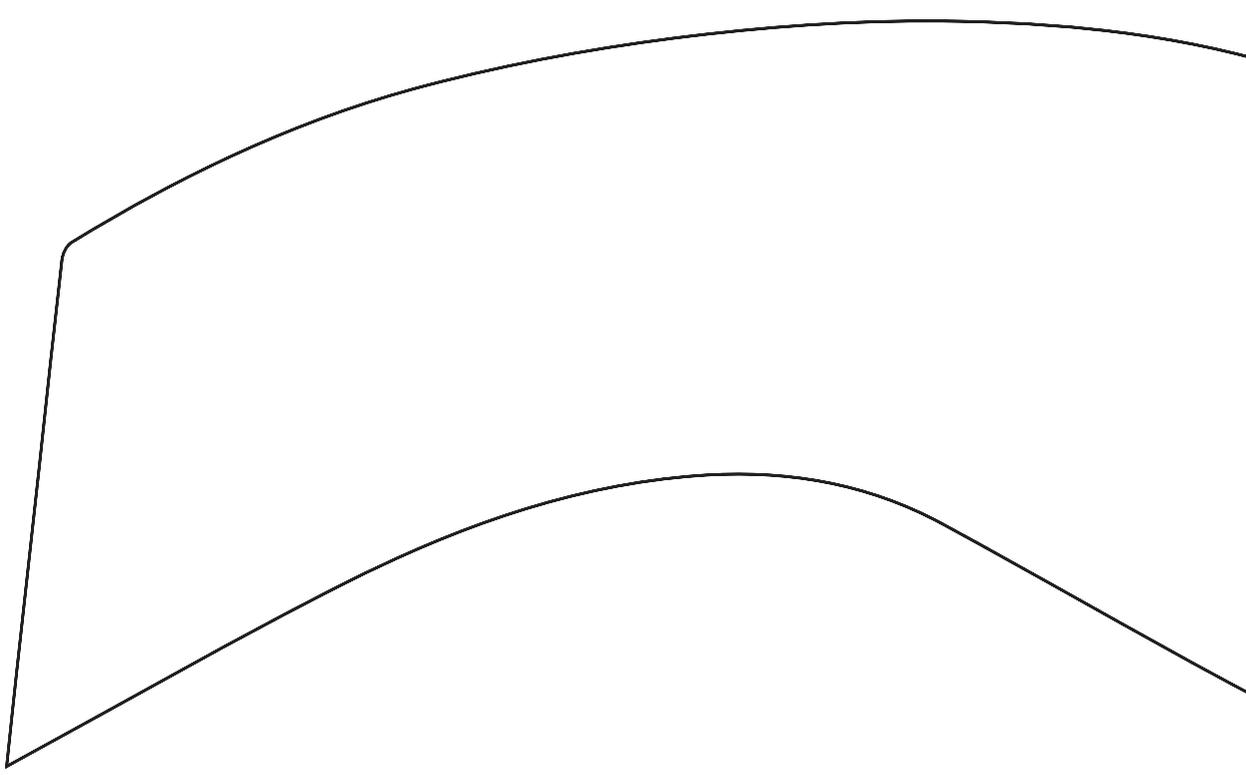
Sheldon Pollock is the Arvind Raghunathan Professor of South Asian Studies at the Department of Middle Eastern, South Asian, and African Studies at Columbia University. He was the general editor of the Clay Sanskrit Library and is the founding editor of the Murty Classical Library of India. A famed Indologist, his scholarship focuses on the hermeneutics of Sanskrit texts. He was awarded the Padma Shri, one of the highest civilian honors bestowed by the Republic of India, in 2010. His involvement with the Murty Classical Library has spawned a petition demanding he be removed from his post as editor-in-chief.

GAYATHRI RAJ: This issue is on myth, all kinds of myth, so I wanted to talk about national myths, given current events. I'll start with the first question: the big pink elephant in the room, the petition that has been written on change.org demanding to remove you from Murty Classical Library...

SHELDON POLLOCK: I was very tempted to sign that petition myself.

GR: [laughs] Why is that?

SP: My first reaction was, "Thank god, finally a way to get out from under all the crushing work of this project! [laughter] Then my second reaction was, are these people deranged? The suggestion that an obscure professor of Sanskrit off in the middle of nowhere could be a threat to the integrity of the great nation of India, simply because I signed a letter in support of students who have been arrested for nothing more than demonstrating their freedom of expression—I thought that was utterly delusional. The third reaction has come slowly, and it's more serious. It's a little more nuanced and complicated. What is it in contemporary India that could produce such an ignorant, hostile



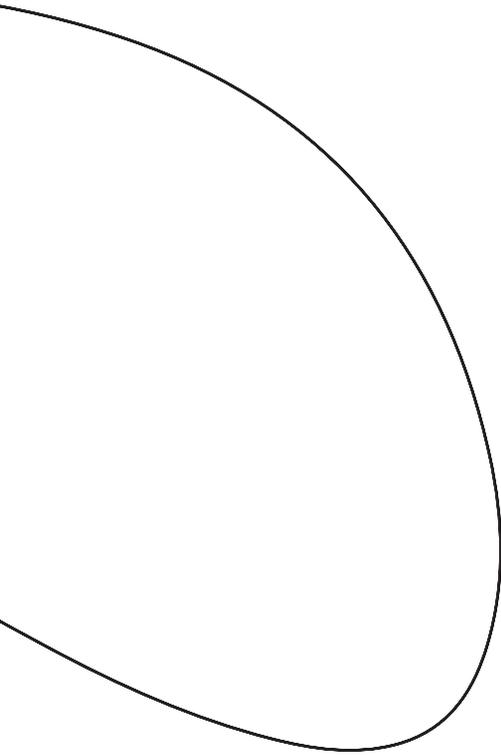
document?

I'm very concerned about the sources of this hostility and ignorance and how to address it in a manner that is progressive and salutary, that produces not more conflict but cooperation. So I'm not angry. I'm intrigued and worried about the cultural and psychological sources of the anger and shame that are evident in that document. When I refer to shame, I mean shame among people about the loss of their own cultural knowledge. Shame that it is virtually impossible to produce in India. a series of the quality of the Murty Classical Library. That fact is the result of a deep historical...I don't want to say robbery, but loss. There is the shame of, "Oh, here's this guy talking about power, domination, inequality, and hierarchy, and we don't want to talk about that, we want to just talk about flying saucers in the Vedas and ancient plastic surgery, but here comes along this mean Orientalist." But my sense is that the true shame that is motivating and empowering the document is the ignorance of things that people's grandfathers and grandmothers knew which they no longer know. They've lost it, and how can

they possibly get it back? I may be wrong: maybe too much psychology. But that is my sense of things.

GR: You say you're worried about what kinds of ignorance are driving this kind of document. I was reading the petition and going through the signatories, and a lot of them are associated with IIT [Indian Institute of Technology] and IIM [Indian Institute of Management], which I find interesting, almost obvious—but it brings me back to something that George Packer wrote about in the *New Yorker* about Tunisia and the Arab world in general, that "The most likely radicals are people in technical or scientific fields who lack the kind of humanities educations that fosters critical thought." This is something you bring up in *Crisis in the Classics*, where you note that the number of humanities PhDs being produced in India are nowhere close to what Western universities aspire to.

SP: I think that's absolutely true. A footnote to the Packer quote: I think it's interesting—and this gets back to my shame comment—



that India leads the world in forms of computational thinking because young people in India are the heirs of centuries-long traditions of high literacy fostered by the cultivation of the Sanskrit and other great forms of learning. I think the other, more telling point is that the nature of humanities education in India today is disastrously mediocre. And that is a bizarre development for a culture which for centuries led the world in humanistic production. Literature, philosophy, critical thinking, civil debate, interactions across community lines—that all that has dissolved today is a result, not a direct result of the collapse of humanistic education, but that has contributed to it. And this is not the case only in India, it's the case in Pakistan, it's the case in much of the Arab world, the case in much of Africa, the only exception may be China. But China is peculiar insofar as the state has appropriated the project of the humanities. I'm not so sure that's a very good solution, frankly.

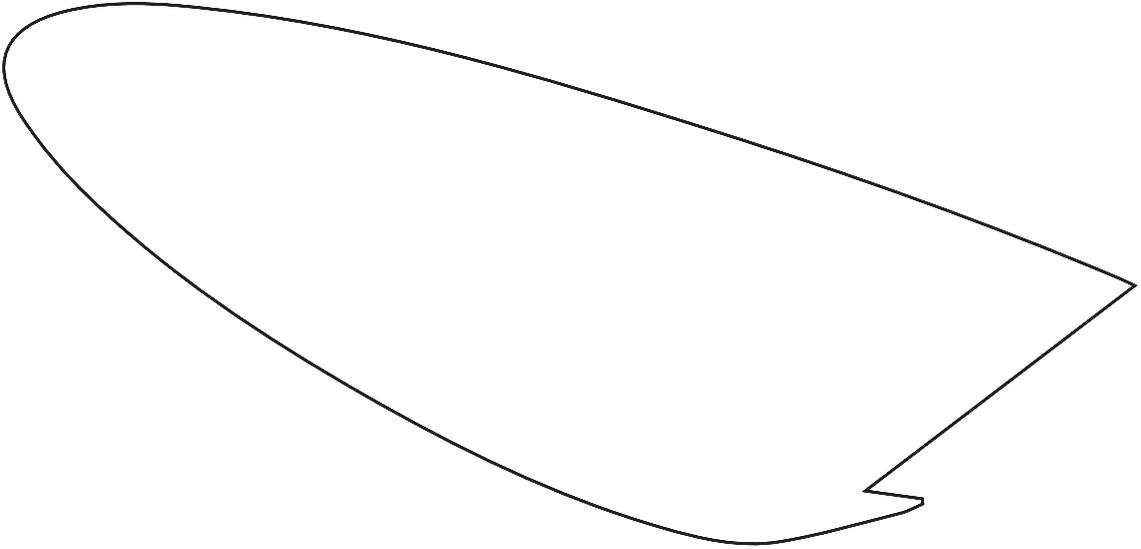
GR: So where do you see humanities education going in India or, what can be done to redress and reform it?

SP: A lot of people I think very highly of, including Rohan Murthy, the donor of MCLI [Murty Classical Library of India], and Pratap Bhanu Mehta in Delhi, who's a good friend, are thinking long and hard about the reforming of Indian education. I have always thought about India and Sanskrit culture as part of the real world, part of the world of women and men and their interactions with other women and men in domains of power in which they are enmeshed. But I think the events at JNU, Central University of Hyderabad, the Film School in Pune, Jadavpur...across the board there have been the beginnings of a powerful student movement. And I think if it's not crushed, and if it is sustained, there's a potential here for something very innovative. I am not just talking about student politics or reservations, or alliances between dalit/bahujans and Marxists, or any of that, I am thinking about a transformation in the structures of knowledge, where students will begin to demand educational structures that will empower them with the instruments of critical thought that are now being denied them. The short answer to the hard question is that first, there are a lot of good people thinking about these questions, and second, the students themselves seem to be taking matters into their own hands in a way that I find deeply inspiring. I hope the agitations and slogans are sustained until the universities are seriously reformed so that critical thinking becomes a central part of education. And that would mean bringing back things like the humanities in general, and what I call "critical classicism" in particular.

GR: What do you have to say about the textbook controversy, where Twitter had a trending hashtag called #removemughals-frombooks which was an attempt to rewrite history textbooks at the middle school and high school level?

SP: I'm a lowtech guy in a hightech world. Where did this hashtag originate? In California or in India?

GR: This was in India.



SP: I see, because a big textbook controversy has been happening in California, and to some rather extent I was involved with that. I think in general there have been excesses on both sides, to be quite frank. But I think the greatest excess has been in the state of California itself, which insanely opened up the textbook review process for public approval. I think they should now consider opening up brain surgery practices for public approval. They should allow everybody in every community to offer an opinion on how neurosurgeons open up the cranium—you know I really think that's the next step.

GR: What people would like to be a solution to that is to remove Mughals from the history textbook and to present India as a Hindu state that has existed since time immemorial.

SP: Another delusional step, and completely self-negating. This history cannot be sanitized. History cannot be stopped. I mean these people can produce their own textbooks for a year or two or five or 10, but they will be ultimately overthrown. The Indian textbook controversy has been going on for 30 years if not longer, since the revisions in the textbooks in the '80s. The

process of historical contestation is unending, and that's the way it should be.

What I myself would like to see is the problem of truth multiplied. I want to start talking about multiple truths and discuss collectively the controversies, teach the controversies. It's an old idea that I learned from a colleague at the U. of Chicago—teaching the controversies does not skirt the problem, but puts the problem—here, of truth and historical veracity—right in the center of the conversation.

I would like to see a history book that teaches the struggles over history, one that might begin the section on Mughal history with a statement from the RSS [Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, National Volunteer Organization] demanding that 300 years of Indian history be erased from the textbook and give their reasons for doing so. Teach that controversy. That's where I would like to see scholarship go. I don't want to see monological scholarship. Let's let 100 schools of thought contend. I know that that sounds slightly bizarre, but history is an ongoing struggle and it's very important that people understand that history is always written from the interests of the present moment and all of us are going to do so from a very interested and partial perspective. Teaching the controversies is one way to show people the fragility of historical truth. That may not be the answer you want to hear. The answer people want to hear is, "These people are insane and we should just kick them to the curb."

But you know, India is now a state run by the RSS. How do you deal with that? It's a very worrisome situation. The kind of expressions of rage and delusion that one finds almost every day in India is a result of the space that's been opened up by the RSS coup. It allows people to say things that they never would have said 20 years ago. It's sort of like the Trumpian revolution. Hundreds of thousands of members of the Sangh are drilling every day with khaki shorts and saffron flags. This is no joke. The textbooks are just a front in the culture wars that are taking place.

GR: In your "Future Philology?" essay you criticise Edward Said for saying that he understood studying literature as separate from his political commitments. The petition criticises you for signing petitions [in support of the students at JNU] which it says are purely political in nature and have no academic merit. So with the movements at JNU or Hyderabad happening the question becomes, what is the role of the confluence of the academic and the political, and why is it that the two of them have been so separated in contemporary india?

SP: First the Said question. What bothered me with his statement (this is not a direct quote): "My politics is one thing but scholarship is separate, please don't be angry with me" was I thought that was totally disingenuous. Now signing petitions in solidarity with students who are arrested for exercising their freedom of speech has nothing to do with my scholarly work whatsoever. The challenge that a person cannot be political while having another profession, like dentistry...I mean how dare a dentist sign a petition, how can he actually care for teeth if he signs a petition? Any suggestion that one can be debarred from political action by reason of affiliation to any given profession is utterly absurd and not worth talking about.

But then there is the deeper question of the relationship between one's political view of the world and one's sense of power in life and in culture throughout history, on the one hand, and the products of culture which one deals with as a scholar, on the other. There's a serious question in there of theory and method among other things, and you know the famous line of Benjamin's "On the Concept of History," that "every document of civilization is at the same time a document of barbarism." The beautiful things that we study in Greek poetry or Italian renaissance painting or Chinese philosophy, all of these beautiful parts of culture emerge out of a matrix of inequality and domination. And the question to what degree is the exploration of that matrix necessary to understand the

product is a theoretical one. In some cases, the degree is very small, and in some cases it's front and center. I mean, we could talk about the origins of *nyaya* in Sanskrit and the study of the *vidyasthanas* [disciplines of knowledge] without reverting to issues of inequality. They're not really pertinent to that set of issues.

Issues of gender, exclusion, and silencing—every culture evinces those, but sometimes they have to be brought into the analytical mix. One more thing: even were that barbarism to become an object of one's scholarly analysis, it does not require that one give up objectivity. Objectivity remains a non-negotiable value in scholarship, but objectivity does not entail neutrality, as Thomas Haskell said 20 years ago. We want to produce scholarship that is honest, and is as fair to the evidence as it can possibly be. You can't make up evidence, you can't cherry-pick evidence, you can't suppress evidence, you can't willfully mistranslate, you can't lie. You must be as objective as possible, but that does not mean that you have to celebrate structures of domination. You can critique it, you can take sides. Neutrality is not a requirement, nor is advocacy not a legitimate and important academic value.

When I write about forms of exclusion and silencing in Sanskrit tradition, I feel that I can state clearly and plainly that those forms of domination have had very deleterious effects in the long history of Indian culture. I feel that the evidence and the data permit me to make that sort of argument. It is part of one's obligation, as a global citizen to participate in an oppositional way when one sees oppression. In scholarship one may or may not feel a similar reaction to historical structures of oppression and domination, but the key thing is that if you deal with such materials you must adhere as closely as possible to the highest standards of scholarship. That doesn't mean that you have to remain neutral in analyzing the construction of inequality.

GR: How does this speak to your earlier quip about the construction of multiple truths? If we're all objective and objectivity

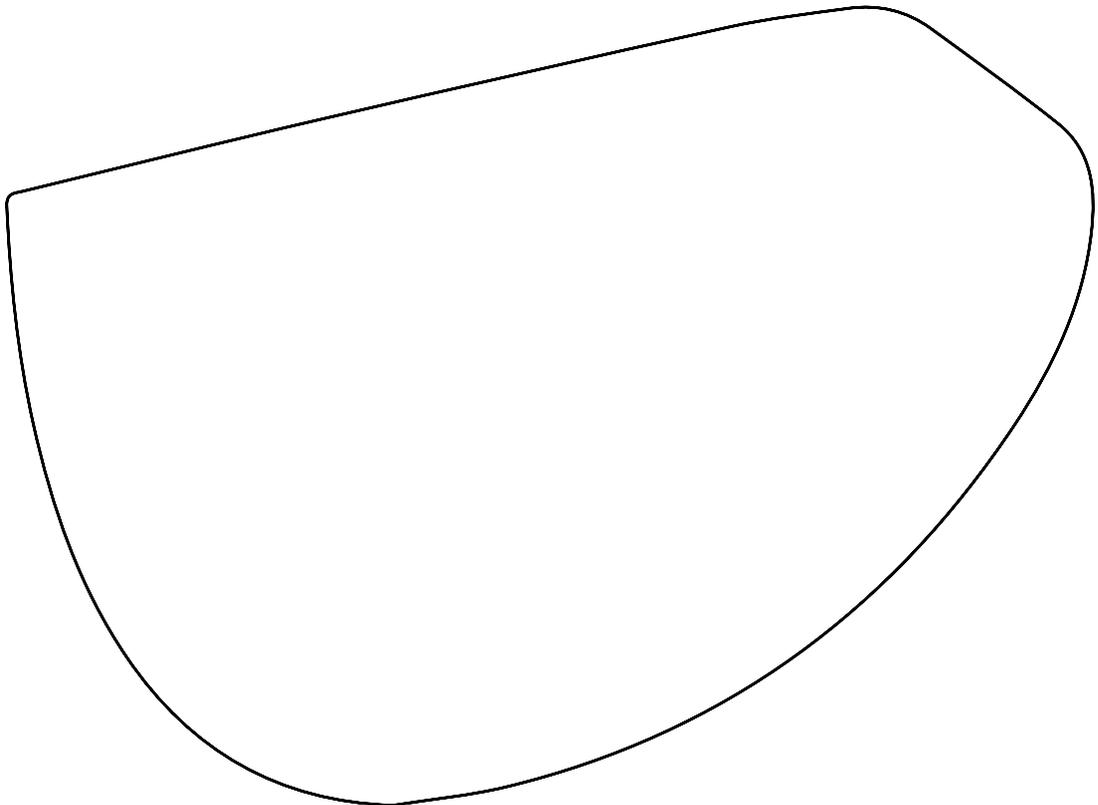
means that we cannot cherry pick evidences and also means you have to adhere to your critical thinking processes, how do we then arrive at multiple truths?

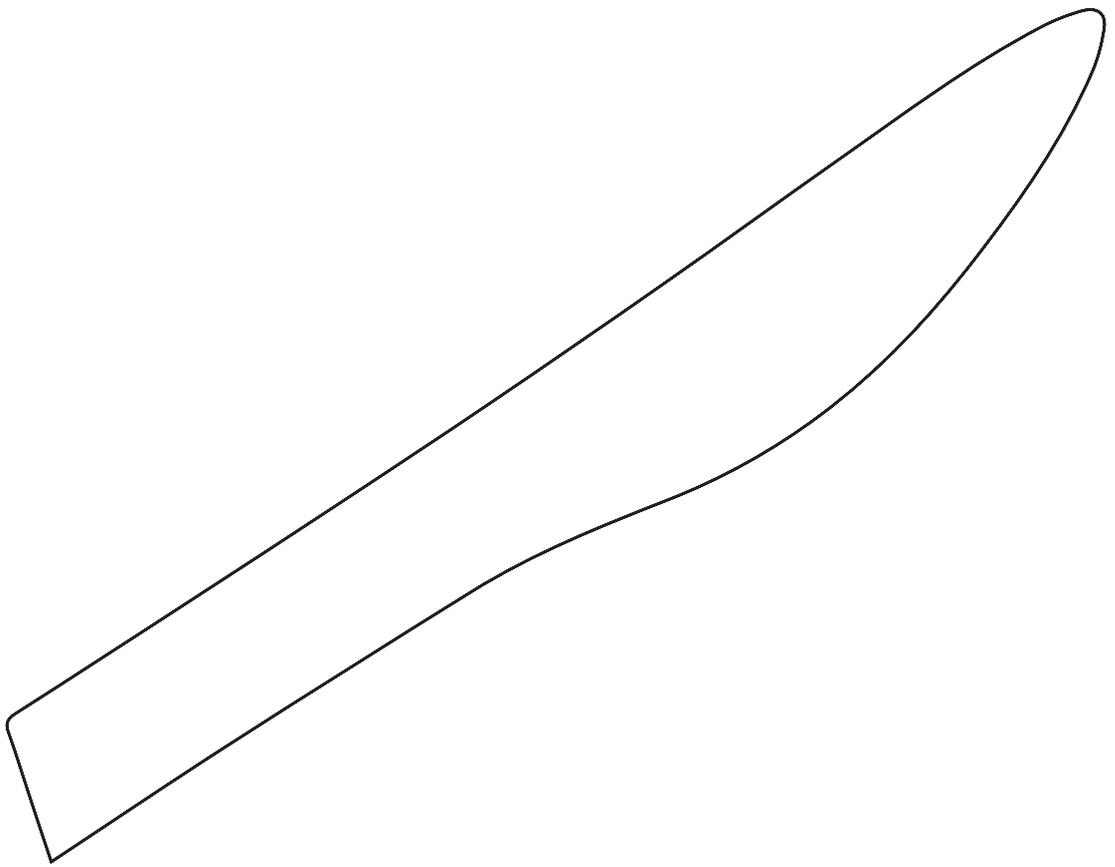
SP: So we read the Valmiki Ramayana—we are very objective and honest. We look as carefully as we can at the text, and we look at the context, and we wonder “what is going on in this work?” We look at the inscriptional data, we look at the history of writing in India, and since the epic's history is partially oral, we look at the nature of its earliest transcriptions, which we have before us in the various versions of the work that have been printed in the critical edition. We then come to the conclusion, at least it is my conclusion, that given the political ideology and theology of the work the Ramayana must have been composed in the era after the reign of King Ashoka (c. 250 BCE). That at least is my objective truth about the work, based on all the evidence I could possibly gather.

Fast forward to year 1400. You go down south [of India]. You go to Tamil country. You find people reading the Ramayana, and what is their understanding of the Ramayana? Their understanding is that it is a text that was created in the *Dwaparayuga* that tells the story of God's presence on earth, and is really an allegory about the soul's progression by way of a teacher to self surrender to God. That's what that work is really about. What do we say to those Vaishnava people [who think this]? People from Ashoka's time would think, these guys are morons, and don't know anything about the Ramayana; nineteenth-century orientalist said the same thing. I say that these people have a truth about the Ramayana—I want to understand their understanding.

So now we have two truths—or, if not truths, then readings, understandings, ways of making sense of the text, of using the text. We don't have to use the honorific “true.” Fast forward 1990, when Advani is making his Rathayatra, and to 1992, with the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya is destroyed. Mr. L K Advani sees the Ramayana as a living work, providing a political blueprint, for a Hindu Rashtra, a Ramrajya. It is an under-

standing. You can call it specious, duplicitous, anti-Muslim, opportunist—but he is using and thinking through and understanding the Ramayana in a particular way, just as the Shree Vaishnavas were, just as I was, in my post Ashokan way. I want to look at this multiplicity as ways people have come to understand this work and make use of it. You might want to rank these interpretations and say Advani is wrong, people got killed [as a result of his ideas], let's kick them to the curb, the Shree Vaishnavas were theologians and possibly making it all up, kick them to the curb as well, and this leaves me, the real historian who has really cracked the code to the Ramayana. The view that I am the only one who fully understands the Ramayana is not going to get you anywhere. I want to take all three levels of textual usages very seriously and find a way to think about all of them together. I feel the same way about the RSS. So I don't think a pragmatic account of the shifting meanings of culture stands in any fundamental contradiction with my presence as a scholar on one hand, and on the other hand





as a citizen who wants to think about global culture and address inequality at the same time.

GR: As someone who fancies themselves as a person who studies Indian civilization, a question that I always struggle with is that of, and I borrow here from the text of the petition, instilling this “sense of respect and empathy for the greatness of Indian civilization”. Are pride and respect for cultural tradition, for historical texts, necessary for scholarly work? How is pride and respect for a certain thing implicated in the type of scholarship you produce, or is it at all?

SP: I think the way knowledge about places like India gets organized at Western universities, which is largely based on the area-based approach to knowledge (at least when it comes to literature and thought), which is generally the area organization of knowledge, does have the tendency to segregate or to silo traditions like Indian Studies or Chinese Studies. This segregation does tend to stimulate a sense of proprietary control over tradition, and to

some degree pride in tradition, and that can be a good thing. You can’t very well spend 45 years of your life reading stuff you think is worthless. In fact, that’s very difficult. I wrote a big piece about Nazi scholarship once, and I had to read a lot of Nazi material, and it’s very difficult to read stuff if you think it is worthless. So I think my work—I don’t know what these people have read about it, or know about it—adequately evinces my respect and pride in dealing with Indian studies.

But there’s another way of organizing knowledge that’s more disciplinary, and that’s what we’re missing today. That disciplinary organization of knowledge would insulate us far more from feelings of pride or pity or piety around these traditions, and that’s an essential component. I don’t want anyone to tell me that I have to produce scholarship that will celebrate India or ensure the endurance of the Indian nation. Of course, nobody goes into Indian studies, if there is such a thing, without having this national pride. But part of the problem in India is that traditional studies have now been captured by the RSS. The people

who trained me, the true scholar practitioners, are all gone, and what's left are these ideologues and opportunists who know little about the past, who can barely read this stuff, and if they read it, they have nothing interesting to say about it. The excess of pride in India, the demand that everyone show pride, is astonishing. In the Western academy, pride is important but needs to be balanced by science. I have no problem using the word science in the humanities. I want to be able to study this material as an object of scientific study.

GR: One more prophetic question. To give some context - Smriti Irani, celebrated HRD [Human Resource Development] minister of India, recently said that Sanskrit should be taught at IITs. Given this appropriation of Sanskrit by the BJP [Bharatiya Janata Party, Indian People's Party], RSS, etc., and the tension between studying Sanskrit at Western universities versus studying Sanskrit at Indian universities under pundits, where it's been couched in the Brahminical traditions of thought and political power, where do you see the future of Sanskrit as a language that is taught and learnt lying ahead?

SP: That's an interesting problem with India, and where India goes from this point on: for several thousand years, there was a great tradition of indigenous learning organized around gurukuls and family structures and all sorts of small-scale institutions. Sanskrit knowledge was very effectively transmitted over several thousand years through this educational structure. In 1857, with the founding of the three new universities - Bombay, Madras and Calcutta - Sanskrit traditional learning was basically left out in the cold. You couldn't have pandits teaching at those universities [at the time]. This is a deep question for historians of education—I think it was some part of the long, slow descent towards our present predicament.

I think the Rashtriya Sanskrit Sansthan [National Council of Sanskrit] needs to be radically overhauled to help transform higher education in Sanskrit studies. From what I can see, the Sansthan is a failure.

To my knowledge, they have not produced one single Sanskrit project in 20 years, or trained very many scholars who have edited difficult texts or published serious books. What have they done? Into this mess along comes the minister of human resource development, who has very little familiarity with university culture, who is going to dictate the future of Sanskrit studies by attaching them to institutes of technology. You have the money and you're going to throw it away? Throw it away. It's quixotic and silly. I think the whole IIT thing is pure grandstanding. If people in India were serious about teaching young children classical languages in such a way that they could produce citizens who were in power to read the texts of their past, they would do it. I would love to cooperate on finding a way. I often suggest to colleagues in India that there should be an institute or set of institutes dedicated to the cultivation of classical knowledge with the same kind of funding and seriousness of purpose as the IIMs and IITs—an Indian Institute of Classical Studies. I'm worried that with an RSS government such an institution would be immediately polluted with ideologues and people who do not possess the requisite scholarly values. Since 1925, from the founding of the RSS till now, they have been attempting to capture Sanskrit tradition as its possession, and it is slowly achieving that. What does this great nation-state do with its classical heritage? How does it effectively create scholars who embody the kinds of values we talked about earlier—respect for evidence and for argument, objectivity, historical sensitivity, theoretical depth, sincerity, thoughtfulness, civility? It's a very tough but very pressing question.

Gayathri Raj is a senior at Columbia. She does not want you to know what her major is, but sometimes she reads Sanskrit. She enjoys enjoys listening to M S Subbulakshmi and Oum Kalthoum.

THE POLITICS
OF COUNTER-
MYTHOLO-
GY: Reading
Many Versions of
Mahiṣasura

by Devika Kapadia

“In the ecology of narratives, recycling is a very old process. Each telling of a myth draws upon these rags and bones, and each piece has its own previous life-history that it brings into the story.”

*—Wendy Doniger, Introduction to Myth and Meaning
by Claude Levi-Strauss*

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On Blasphemy, Book Banning, and Buffalo-Demons

If the Hindu textual tradition is an amorphous, contradictory and unwieldy thing, nobody told its gatekeepers. The self-appointed fundamentalist “Hindutva” movement jealously guards and often demarcates the boundaries of Hindu text, maintaining its hermeneutic hegemony by violently suppressing suggestions of interpretive difference. The Hindutva movement is largely spearheaded by an alliance of organizations known as the Sangh Parivar, organized around the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). Their anxious assertion and defense of a dominant form of knowledge takes many forms—attempts to rewrite textbooks, a demand for the teaching of Sanskrit at engineering schools so they can work on Vedic science, the banning of books, and harassment of authors when they do not align with prescribed Brahmanical and often Vedantic narratives. In this context, secular academic attempts to engage with the science or history of the tradition are not simply considered dissent, or even wrong—they are blasphemous.

Before this year, perhaps the most visible sign of the interpretive intolerance of this movement was when the Sangh Parivar labelled a book by Sanskritist Wendy Doniger as blasphemous and offensive to religious sentiments. Her publisher, Penguin, halted the sale of Doniger's book, which engaged with retellings of Hindu history from the margins of Hindu society.

The role of Indian law within this argument is ambiguous. If an idea (as book, speech, movie etc.) is merely "expected to injure religious sentiments,"¹ it may be subject to censorship. This underscores the idea that there is no defined answer to the question of what blasphemy is, shifting the question to when it arises--when it can be used to characterize a certain kind of speech, to act on it. This reveals an understanding of blasphemy as a discursive function that serves to limit--to close off through the implication of inherent and absolute unholiness.

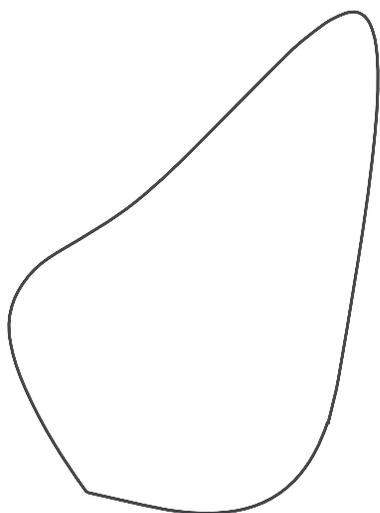
The accusation of blasphemy has a certain weight—it lifts a discourse beyond the realm of rational disagreement. And the power to determine the boundaries of blasphemy has recently been centralized in an unsettling way with the election of the

Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), a party that began as the RSS's political wing and is still heavily influenced by its parent organization. When Hindutva enters government, the associations between these two organizations carry the accusation of blasphemy a step further: dissent is not simply viewed as anti Hindu, but anti-national.

"Anti-national" became a buzzword this year as the government cracked down on protests at universities. These flared up on campuses across India following the suicide of Dalit scholar Rohith Vemula at Hyderabad Central University, who hanged himself with the blue banner of the Ambedkar Students Association on 17th January, 2016. Vemula came under extreme pressure from the University of Hyderabad for his political organizing for marginalized communities, including his own. In his suicide note, he wrote "my birth is my fatal accident."² This catalyzed outrage on campuses across India over the treatment of students from Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Other Backward Castes (classifications used by the government) as well as other groups facing discrimination.

On February 9, 2016 at Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) in Delhi—which has always been politically active—an event was held in memory of Afzal Guru, a Kashmiri Muslim, who was hanged in 2013 for his involvement in an attack on Parliament. A week later, three students (including the Student Union President, Kanhaiya Kumar) were arrested on charges of sedition for making "anti-national" statements at the event.

In response to the arrest of the students, Smriti Irani, the Human Resources and Development Minister and a BJP member, made a half-hour speech in Parliament to claim that JNU students were, in some way, anti-national. "The nation will not tolerate an insult to Mother India,"³ she said of their actions. As one of her arguments, she weaponized a poster allegedly announcing another event at JNU, Mahishasur Martyrdom Day. In this way, the furor over anti-national sentiment turned, unexpectedly, to issues of myth and blasphemy, as Irani brought the question of religious interpretation into a political debate.



Mahishasur Martyrdom Day, held at JNU since 2012, is an attempt to recognize alternative histories through the reformulation of a well known Hindu myth about the victory of the goddess Durgā over Mahiṣa, a demon who is half man and half buffalo. It is held around the time of Durgā Puja, a ritual around the mythology of Durgā, including the Mahiṣa myth (Mahiṣa is often iconographically pictured around or under Durgā)⁴, and widely celebrated in Bengal. In the alternative version, activists try to accommodate the historical possibility that Mahiṣa is the ancestor of disenfranchised group who was killed by Aryan invaders, his murder forming a pattern of violence and control that continued through the caste system. This reinterpretation was, expectedly, not well received by representatives of the Hindu nationalist central government.

Irani's statement denouncing Mahishasur Martyrdom Day can be understood as a reflection of a logic whereby Irani fuses dominant narratives of Hinduism, the political views of her own party, and the nation itself into one. This terrain of associations reveals a construction of Brahmanical Hindu statehood, through the state-making project of a helpless "Mother" India, who, like Durgā, must be protected from slander. Everything that opposes this construction is "depraved," blasphemous, and, by extension, anti-national. Here is an excerpt from her speech, including dramatic flourishes (a legacy, perhaps, of her past as a soap star):

"A statement by the SC [Scheduled Caste], ST [Scheduled Tribe] and minority students of JNU. [she is reading from a poster, allegedly distributed by a JNU student group] And what do they condemn? May my God forgive me for reading this. "Durgā Puja is the most controversial racial festival, where a fair-skinned beautiful goddess Durgā is depicted brutally killing a dark-skinned native called Mahishasur. Mahishasur, a brave self-respecting leader, [was] tricked into marriage by Aryans. They hired a sex worker called Durgā, who enticed Mahishasur into marriage and killed him after nine nights of honeymooning during sleep."

Freedom of speech, ladies and gentlemen. Who wants to have this discussion on the streets of Kolkata? I want to know...For these are the students! What is this depraved mentality? I have no answers for it." [Irani throws away the pamphlet]

Irani doesn't articulate the source of her distress—whether it is the characterization of Durgā as a sex-worker, or Mahiṣa, an asura or demon, as a brave, self-respecting leader, or the deceit implied in his murder, or the caste implications of the Aryan invasion theory referenced that upper caste Hindus might not be comfortable with. Whatever it is, Irani is clear on one thing—this myth is not up for debate. This is depravity, blasphemy, even sedition. She doesn't need to tell her audience what is offensive: she implies the outrage is natural, unquestionable.

JNU activists have claimed that the poster she read from was a deliberate misrepresentation of their event. Mahiṣasura Martyrdom Day at JNU, they claim, is held to honor a historical figure traditionally respected and mourned by castes and tribes who believe themselves to be descended from him, rather than to defame Durgā or even engage with the theological groundings of the myth. The perspective is a historical and genealogical celebration, not a religious one. "The aim was not to have some sort of new prayer meeting," said a JNU activist. "It was to try and understand contemporary society and why it is a certain way. It was looking at literature and history, and the transfer of societal values. We are not saying that nobody should worship Durgā, it is the people's right [to worship as they like]. But at the same time, why must you show Mahiṣasura dying?"⁵

This framing of Mahiṣasura Martyrdom Day as a secular attempt to reclaim an alternative history, however, is undermined by evidence of very real religious praxis outside JNU's intellectual context, and the very nature of mythology as existing between fiction and symbolic reality. Behind Irani's disavowal lies a genuine question—by what authority, and to what end, are myths adapted? And, though she would never ask,

what frames of history, of action and reaction, regulate the retelling of Mahiṣa-myths? What are the politics of their creation?

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MYTH AS MURDER

A myth is not a story but a corpus—a series of connected but distorted characters and events. In his essay on the multiplicity of the Ramayana tradition, A.K. Ramanujan describes “the cultural area in which the Ramayana is endemic” as having “a pool of signifiers (like a gene pool), that include plots, characters, names, geography, incidents and relationships...These various texts not only relate to prior texts directly, to borrow or refute, but they relate to each other through a common code or common pool.”⁶

If the idea of a corpus emphasizes the idea of common parts, the question of the origin of difference still remains. In his theories of myth, anthropologist Claude Levi Strauss argues:

“all mythology is dialectic in its attempt to make cognitive sense out of the chaotic data provided by nature...each dualism produces a mediating term which is then found to be one-half of a new dualism...Myth is a form of language, and language itself predisposes us to attempt to understand ourselves and our world by superimposing dialectics, dichotomies, or dualistic grids upon data that may in fact be entirely integrated. And underneath language lies the binary nature of the brain itself. Right and left, good and evil, life and death—these are inevitable dichotomies.”⁷

Here, myths are a series of binary formations, each revision mediates between a previous set of binaries. These binaries, as Levi-Strauss points out, allow for clear distinctions between such things as good and evil. This makes mythology particularly fertile ground for polarized politics, in which the subject of ‘evil’ is constructed, like in mythology, as perfectly opposed to ‘good’—demonized, unnatural, alien to the order of the world. Revisions rework these neat binaries, complicating the notion of

evil.

Myth-tellings are constructed to meet the political needs of their listeners, to fit their needs for certain classifications, and to deliver the anxiety that their beliefs might be false. They murder, in their structure, the possibility of oppositional myths. And yet, seen as a corpus, each revision marks a fault-line in a polar and changing discourse. The changing characterization of the various central figures and the causal relations that link their actions produce a distillation of attitudes towards caste, gender, sex, nationhood and power. The Mahiṣa myth itself doesn’t fold neatly into the binary of myth and counter-myth, much as the discourse around JNU seems to suggest. Each retelling contains certain revisions, excisions and additions. By examining what changes in various retellings—which binaries of good and evil are mediated which new ones constructed—I will try to understand the politics of this change, and how it relates to the construction of evil in political discourse.

The first known written Mahiṣa-story in an episode in the Devi Mahatmya, from the 6th century Markandeya Purana. The Devi Mahatmya is a mythic articulation of the nature power bound up in the Devi, or Goddess. Though the Devi Mahatmya⁸ is not necessarily an urtext, it is the first known, written version of the myth in which Durgā and Mahiṣa are both present.

It should be noted that I do not begin with this Puranic version of the Mahiṣa myth to validate a claim to a discursive centre desperately fighting off attacks from the political left. I present, rather, a version among versions, a turning toward or away, placed in a field in which each turn has historical and political implications.

This is not, of course, how the myth sees itself—it positions itself as authoritative, the ‘true’ version, through its use of Sanskrit. Coburn explains the significance of the Sanskritization of the Devi Mahatmya in terms of Indian epistemology—knowledge is not to be “discovered” as is sometimes the founding epistemological assumption in “the West,” but “recovered.” In the process of recovery, several “lifelines” exist that connect back to the “original revelation,” and

Sanskrit is one of them. Sanskrit, he claims, is one of the “prime methods of restating a tradition in relation to its sacral past.”⁸ This Sanskritizing tradition, as Coburn notes, allows forms of knowledge to establish distance from “the uncouth profaneness of non-Aryan hoi- polloi.”⁸ This version, then, in its content and its very language, presents an understanding of power, and a claim to power, that is deeply political.

The myth-version from the Devi Mahatmya forms an implicit logic of female divinity and the right to rule through several devices. The goddess emerges to fight the Asuras in a time of crisis for the gods at the hands of Mahiṣasura:

“In days of yore there was a battle between the gods and Asuras that lasted a full hundred years,
When Mahiṣa was chief of the Asuras and Indra (chief) of the gods.
Then the army of the gods was conquered by the valorous Asuras,
And having conquered all the gods, Mahiṣa became Indra (“the chief”).

In the Devi Mahatmya, Mahiṣa is more a symbol than a man. He is barely characterized—he has no story of his own, genealogy, or anything beyond his placeholder as chief of the Asuras. In his defeat of the gods, he is not evil, a coward, or individu-

ally unworthy. He represents an unqualified transgression; he embodies a rule broken. While he rules in heaven, and the gods walk the earth as “mere mortals,”⁹ he is the agent of an acceptable social reversal. The holy trinity’s rage is not a reaction to radical evil but to his transgressive agency:

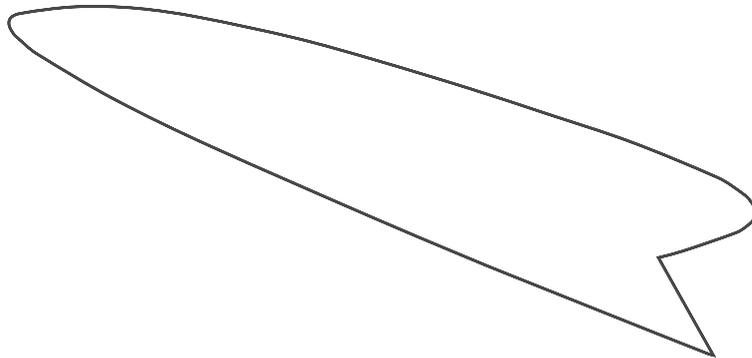
Then the conquered gods, having put the lotus-born Prajapati in front,
Went to the place where Śiva and Visnu were. [4]

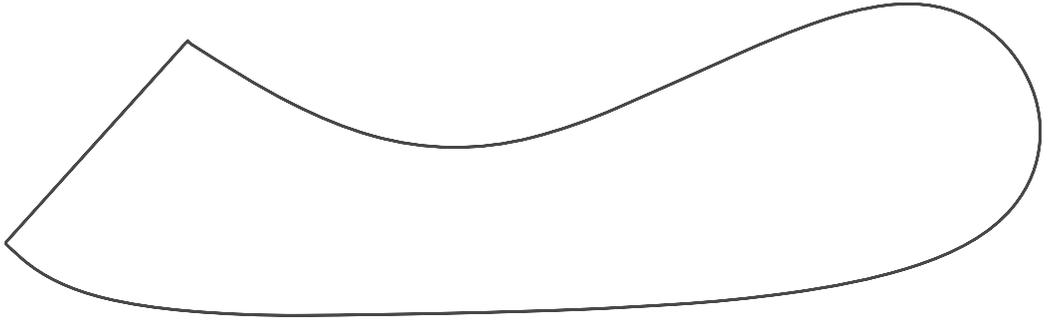
The thirty (gods) told them of the extent of the gods’ defeat,
How it all happened, and likewise the conduct of Mahiṣasura...

We have told you what the enemy of the gods has done,
And we have taken refuge (in you). Please put your mind on doing away with him!

The plight of the gods, who “wander on earth like mortals,” having been established, and intervention having been called for, the “bodies of the other gods” become “unified” to produce the Goddess:

That peerless splendor, born from the bodies of all the gods,
Unified and pervading the triple world with its lustre, became a woman.
From Śiva’s splendor her mouth was produced,





Her tresses from that of Yama, her arms from the splendor of Visnu. From that of Soma, the moon, came her two breasts, from that of Indra her waist. From that of Varuna her legs and thighs, from that of the earth her hips.... And whatever was born from the splendor of the other gods, that, too, was the auspicious (Goddess).

This is followed by an account of the several weapons the Goddess was gifted—including a trident drawn from Śiva’s own trident, and a discus drawn from Krishna’s own discuss. Then,

“Honored by the gods with ornaments and weapons,
She bellowed aloud with laughter again and again.
The Entire atmosphere was filled with her terrible noise.
And with that measureless, overwhelming noise, a great echo arose.
All the worlds quaked, and the oceans shook.
The earth trembled, and the mountains tottered”
...

“Mahiṣasura, having fumed in anger “Ah, what is this?!”
Rushed toward the sound, surrounded by all the Asuras.
Then he saw the Goddess, filling the triple world with her radiance.

An extensive and gruesome account of the Goddess in battle follows, with her dragging Asuras on the ground with her noose, smiting them with her mace until they vomit blood, cutting off heads and arms and even slicing them down the middle, so they are left with “a single arm, eye and leg.” She kills several generals in the Asura army before reaching Mahiṣasura, whose own valor in battle is also described.

“When his own army was thus being destroyed, Mahiṣasura
In his own buffalo form caused the (Goddess’s) troops to tremble.
Some he slew with the blow of his snout, others with the stamping of his hooves; Others were lashed with his tail, still others torn by his horns.
Others by his sheer speed, his bellow, his wheeling about,
Still others by the wind of his breaths did he knock to the surface of the earth.
Having cast down the hosts of Prathamathas, the Asura
Ran forward to slay the great Goddess’ lion....
Having seen the great onrushing Asura, inflated with anger,
Caṇḍika got angry in order to slay him. Hurling a snare at him, she bound the great Asura.
Thus bound in the great battle, he abandoned his buffalo form.
Immediately thereupon he became a lion. As soon as Ambika cut off his head, He appears a man, sword in hand.

Her violence is not justice. It is obliteration and warning. He becomes a lion; she slays the lion. He becomes a man; she slays the man. He becomes an elephant; she slays the elephant. Mahiṣa's morphing body is destroyed in each of its forms—no matter what he is, he cannot get away. No matter how fluid, he can't get past the border.

Thus, he caused the three worlds, along with what does and does not move, to tremble.

Then the angry Caṇḍika, mother of the world, quaffed a superior beverage (wine),
And again and again she laughed with reddened eyes.

...

With passion in her face that was flushed with intoxication, she uttered fevered words.

The Goddess said

“Roar, roar for a minute, O fool, while I drink this nectar!

When you are slain here by me, it is the gods who will soon roar!

...

Having spoken this and springing up, she mounted the great Asura.

Having struck him with her foot, she beat him with her spear.

Then he, struck with her foot, came forth out of his own mouth.

Completely hemmed in by the valor of the Goddess.

That the great Asura, who had come forth halfway fighting, was felled by the Goddess,

Who had cut off his head with a great sword.”¹⁰

Durgā's victory over Mahiṣa is sometimes understood as a “victory over ego”—punishment for his presumption in ruling. It is from this disciplining, reinstating anger that Durgā is born, and it is this divine social order she upholds through his murder.

At the meeting points of all the myth's constituent parts—the rage of the Gods at the victory of Mahiṣa, the (bodily) construction of the Goddess, her embodied fury,

Mahiṣa's fluid physicality, his death at the Goddesses feet, the use of Sanskrit—is formed an implicit logic of female divinity and the right to rule. How these parts relate to each other within this version of the myth, and how they are shuffled and revised in other version or re-tellings, suggests the broader dynamics of negotiating power, theology, and projects of state-building that govern revision. Each of these parts represent a fault-line in the political field of revision, and I will attempt to map them as they change in subsequent versions. As Mahiṣa, Durgā and the social order into which they fit morph in other versions, precise points of political anxiety emerge.

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MANY MAHIṢAS

Mahiṣa's identity beyond Durgā has existed in text and in worship—but at times outside of the Sanskrit tradition, outside the Brahmanical textual space in which he, as a demon, is natural transgressor. Though the historical textual tradition has long been controlled by the literate priest class, various oral traditions have circulated through generations and now make themselves known. These traditions are often rooted in traditionally voiceless communities—including the Dalitbahujans, a dispersed group of people considered untouchable in the Hindu varna (caste) system.

In Dalitbahujan written mythology, a contemporary attempt by Dalit intellectuals like Kancha Ilaiah to reinscribe and validate orally transferred myths, Mahiṣa is not merely a symbolic rule-breaker or a mythic anti-hero, but a historical ancestor of variously categorized groups that are marginalized, oppressed and erased from the predominant historical narratives and archive. This version of Mahiṣa comes not from the story of the birth of a goddess, but from the story of the death of a people. Kancha Ilaiah, in his polemic against Brahmanical textual supremacy entitled “Why I am Not a Hindu,”¹¹ connects Indra, the Brahmanical chief of the gods, with the Aryans who some believe invaded India, displacing if

not brutally murdering the “Adi-Dravidians,” who the Dalitbahujans consider their ancestors. The very source of Indra’s glory is his ability to inscribe his claim on the land through the spilling of Adi-Dravidian blood. Illaiah’s argument places caste-hatred at the very root of Hindu mythological structure as well as within this myth in particular, which, while imaginary, constitutes a set of very real epistemic violences against India’s marginalized communities. In the tradition that continued from Illaiah’s historical reconstruction, the war between the Devás and Asuras described in the Devi Mahatmya is specifically located in the discourse of Aryan colonization. Mahiṣa is the indigenous king, Adi-Dravidian (a group Illaiah calls Adi-dalitbahujan as a way of demonstrating ancestry), who was killed as part of a program of racialized genocide.

Several ancestral lineages and associations claim Mahiṣa’s patrimony— the Santhals, the Asurs, a tribe of iron-smelters in Jharkhand, even the city of Mysore, the name of which is etymologically linked to Mahiṣa. While the exact history is uncertain and contested, it is the imagination of an alternative history, an alternative understanding of the natural heir to land that is so crucial to Mahiṣasur Martyrdom Day as a political project. This version, is represented in an account published on Dalit-activist magazine *Countercurrents* in 2014, in which the encounter between Durgā and Mahiṣa takes very different form from the Devi Mahatmya:

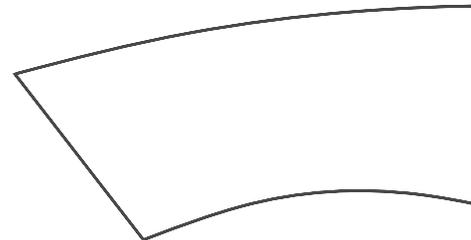
“tribals did not pick up weapons against women, children, aged and the weak, [and so] the Aryans sent a woman to lure [Mahiṣa].... The Aryans came with a proposal of marriage, but they used treachery and a woman called Durgā killed him.”¹²

In this version, Mahiṣa is not the usurper but the inhabitant, not the monster but the upholder of civilized rules. He is the righteous victim; his enemies are the amorphous, invasive “they.” It is the remembering of this version that forms the bedrock of Mahiṣasur Martyrdom Day at JNU.

Yet this political field is not simply populated by two versions in direct opposition, with the Puranas presenting one story and the Dalitbahujan tradition another. The *Kālika Purana*, written in the 10th century, about four hundred years after the Devi Mahatmya, 13 also revises Mahiṣa’s characterization—and both validates and domesticates him. It asks the question of why Mahiṣa is so central to Durgā’s worship, when he was among many demons she killed, and answers by providing two versions of the story, both in a single chapter, one following the other. In the first version:

Mahiṣa has a dream that a terrible Goddess brutally murders him—cuts his head off, and drinks his blood. Knowing that this is his fate, and terrified, he begins to pray to the Goddess. Bhadrakālī comes before him. He asks: I know it is my fate to be killed at your hands, but may I ask a favor of you? He explains that he has been blessed and cursed—he was allowed to reign for several years over the three Manus, but also, because he once distracted a meditating man by coming before him as a woman, he was condemned to die at the hands of a woman.

At this moment before his death, he says all three worlds have satisfied him equally—he has no regrets and no desires. He asks, as one final blessing in death, to be worshipped in any sacrifice to the Goddess,



and not have to leave her feet as long as the sun shines.

She grants him these wishes, and then, turning into her Durgā form, steps on him and spears him to death. She then changes into the form of UgraCaṇḍa. Bhadrakālī with two more arms, holding a club with her right hand below and a drinking cup filled with intoxicating liquor in her left hand, wore a garland of human heads and a snake on her neck, with red eyes and a huge body, atop a lion. She is terrifying.

Then, the second; this version builds, adding layers of context and relation to the first. This version, told achronologically right after the original story, tells us that Mahiṣa is an incarnation of Shiva, and that Shiva asks Durgā for his own bodily death (as Mahiṣa)—

An asura named Rambha prayed for years to the great God Śiva, who was touched, and offered him a blessing.

Rambha asked Śiva for a son. He said “Lord, I have no son. Bless me with a child who will be famous and fortunate, victorious over the gods, and who no man can kill.”

Śiva replied ‘I will be your son,’ and when Rambha had sex with a she-buffalo, Mahiṣa was born.

When the guru cursed Mahiṣa—‘you will

be killed by a woman’—Śiva approached Caṇḍika and asked her to kill his ‘buffalo body.’

He had been born as Rambha’s son for three births before the guru cursed him. He asks Durgā to hold his body under her feet, so he is never born into the world again until the world’s destruction.¹³

These versions of the Mahiṣa myth godwash him—he is “rescued” from his demonhood, placed under and within the Brahmanical tradition. He becomes Śiva’s subordinate. In this, Mahiṣa joins several local goddesses—attached to the more centralized tradition through a marriage to the Brahmanical god, Śiva. Yet Mahiṣa is not married to Śiva—he is Śiva. The dynamics of power here are quite different than the *Devi Mahatmya*—Mahiṣa is no longer the uncontrolled demon, threatening the hierarchy with his presumption. In the *Kālīka Purana*, he is complicit in his own subjection. His murder is an act of convenience, wrapping things up, not punishment for transgression but an easy death as reward for submission to and recognition of the power of the Gods. This is a strange form of a typically colonial logic—it was for your own good. Yet this version has no easy categorizations. Durgā is terrifying; Mahiṣa is tame. The shift in his characterization reveals a domestication of the threat he presented in the previous version. The evil that Mahiṣa mythically embodied is no longer radical evil—he is reduced to a divine inconvenience.

The ambivalence within this characterization of evil doesn’t carry over into this version’s other major question—of sacrifice, or worship, and of who is remembered. Mahiṣa’s prayer—let me stay forever at your feet—was certainly answered, and yet he is not granted the worship he asks for in the myth in contemporary Durgā Puja. In her *Revelry and Rivalry*, Rachel McDermott traces the use of political and cultural symbolism in the making of worship spaces in Bengal in the 80s.¹⁴ In this iconographical compound of myth and modernity, Mahiṣa is everywhere and everyone—both slightly

farical in the extent of his transferability and uncomplicatedly malevolent in his openness to symbolic exchange with any representation of evil, whether it aligned with his mythic representation or not. The ambivalence of the Kālika Purana is not preserved but parodied in modern worship:

“Mahiṣa is sculpted in the likeness of Zinedine Zidane, the French soccer star, head-butting the lion...a spacey-looking Durgā arriving into a spaceship pandal and blessing the illiterate asura with the light of knowledge; an Egyptian theme, with Durgā in the form of Isis, Mahiṣa as the god of death”¹⁴

Yet the pandal next to the slightly ludicrous football player is the far more insidious political enemy: “Demons of recent years have been Nawaz Sharif, the LTTE chief Veerappan, Bill Clinton and Tony Blair.”

Mahiṣa as a representative of different forms of evil forms precisely the mythic tradition Mahiṣasur Martyrdom Day attempts to oppose. Yet the politics of this attempt at counter mythology is incomplete without an understanding of Durgā, and the relationship, the finely wrought balance between Mahiṣa and Durgā that each version of the myth attempts to strike.

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Destabilizing Durgā

In the Dalitbahujan version of the myth, Durgā is the antagonist--and she is weakened, diminished in her wild, disciplining anger from the Devi Mahatmya. In the Hindutva version, she is unquestioned force, tied to ideas of ideal femininity and

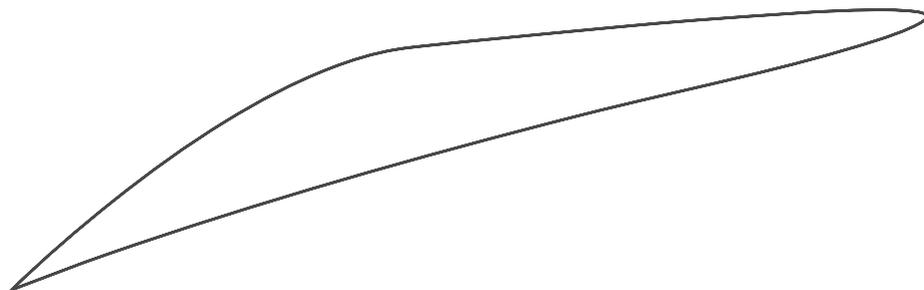
political sovereignty. Both extremes ignore the subtleties of her mythic characterization. Mahiṣa’s construction as evil cannot be understood without being defined against Durgā, and in her character as much as his the opposition of good and evil is inscribed. Examining Durgā is crucial to understanding the project of political mythology on either side of the political spectrum.

Durgā changes as much as Mahiṣa does—in various versions, she is continuously the site of construction and control, even as she embodies an unstoppable and universal form of Sakti or energy. From the Devi Mahatmya—

“By you everything is supported, by you the world is created; by you it is protected and you always consume it at the end of time. You are the great knowledge, the great illusion, the great insight, the great memory, and the great delusion.”

And then, from this radical dissolution into absolute unity comes a difficult paradox: “you are the great goddess (mahadevi) and the great demoness (mahasuri).” In the Devi Mahatmya itself, Durgā is both goddess and demon, both transgressor and enforcer.¹⁵

The conception of Durgā in the Devi Mahatmya as a source of primordial energy that holds the world together while pushing it towards entropy or unity makes her characterization in the Mahiṣa myth as discipliner--as enforcing social hierarchies and divisions—difficult to reconcile. By what logic is Durgā both an agent of entropy and the anxious, disciplining rage with which she marks—on Mahiṣa’s body—the social difference that makes his rule of the gods unbearable?



It is in this relationship between goddess and demon, in Durgā's presence or her absence, her subservience or her explosive power, her shame or her audacity, within which each myth's conception of evil (or the question of what is to be policed) is encoded. In the *Devi Mahatmya*, she is a universal Sakti, indefinable in her pervasiveness. In the Dalitbahujan version she is faceless, a foreign woman, marked simply by her instrumentality in a murder orchestrated by men. Her radical, terrifying agency is stripped from her. In the *Kālīka Purana*, her agency stays, but her anger is muted—she is no longer both goddess and demon, but a benevolent mother-murderer to Mahiṣa. Yet, in all three myth-versions, a precise and oppositional binary of power exists.

A final Puranic version allows us further insight into the nature of Durgā's agency. The fifteenth century *Caṇḍi Purana* reveals Durgā as not simply force but forced upon—not just an instrument of power, but as instrumentalized. In this version, the distance between her and Mahiṣa is smallest. She is wild and fierce, the mahasuri (great demoness), but also controlled, oppressed, the victim of a controlling and masculine superstructure that simply weaponizes and sexualizes her female body to seduce and destroy Mahiṣa's half-bestial one. In the *Caṇḍi Purana* version, there are no certainties about right and wrong, and no constancy of power. Kālī is controlled as much as she challenges, Mahiṣa is killed as much as he evades.

From Usha Memon's account of the *Caṇḍi Purana*:

Mahiṣasura became so powerful that he tortured everyone on earth and heaven. He had obtained a boon from the gods according to which no male could kill him. All the gods pondered on ways to destroy Mahiṣasura. Each contributed the strength and energy of his consciousness—his bindu—and from that Durgā was created...Durgā ... fought bravely, but she found it impossible to kill the demon. The gods had forgotten to tell her that Mahisa could only die at the hands

of a naked female. Durgā finally became desperate. She stripped, on seeing her, Mahiṣasura's strength waned, and he died under her sword.

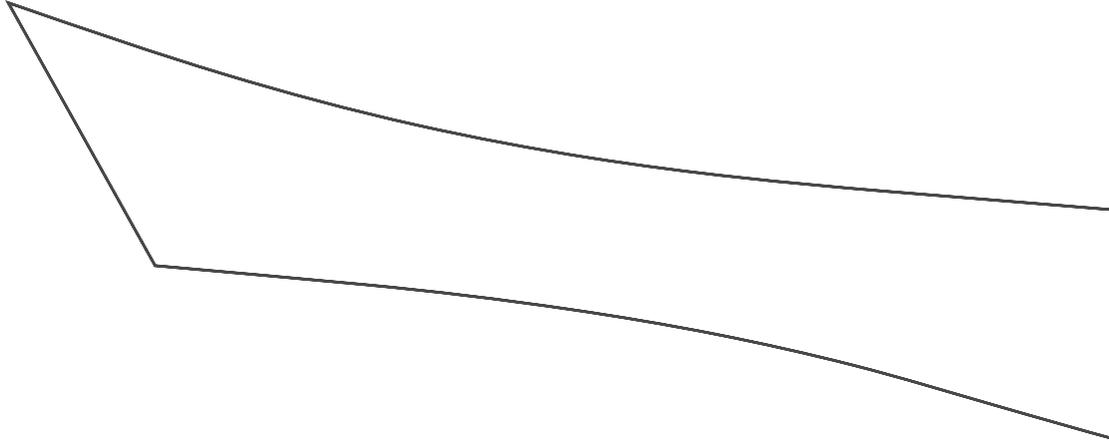
Here, it is Durga's femaleness, not her capacity as a warrior, that is weaponized. Her power lies beyond her—in the male desire for her body, in his weakness rather than her strength. She reasserts herself through her rage—

After killing him, a terrible rage entered Durgā's mind, and she asked herself, "What kind of gods are these that they do not have the honesty to tell me the truth before sending me into battle?" She took on the form of Kālī and went on a mad rampage, devouring every living creature that came in her way. Now, the gods were in a terrible quandary— who would check Kali in her mad dance of destruction?

She reclaims her uninhibited power briefly, but is folded back into the controlling social order, the realm of 'reason,' through a reminder of her place—

The gods decided that only Śiva could check Kālī...he went and lay in her path. Kālī was absorbed in her dance of destruction, and stepped on him all unknowing. When she put her foot on Śiva's chest, she said "Oh! my husband!". She had been so angry that she had gone beyond reason, but once she recognized him, she became still and calm.¹⁶

Here, the Goddess is both Mahasuri (in her mad dance of destruction) and Mahadevi, channeling and respecting divine logic in the form of her husband, at her feet, (in much the way Mahiṣa is at his death). She moves from vulnerable to all powerful and back again. All the identities in this version bleed into each other without presenting, like in, a distinct hierarchy despite the merging forms, like in the *Kālīka Purana*. The Goddess is shameless and shameful, constructed and betrayed by and betraying the divine logic that created her and in



a sense, not unlike Mahiṣa. Like him, she threatens the divine order, and she is disciplined—not through death as a man would be, but through a marriage that chains her “madness” to a disciplining reason.

When Durgā kills Mahiṣa it is a form of suicide, it is a ritual enactment of the same power that is then enacted on her. This version of the myth, then, has less to do with the production of identities of good and evil and far more to do with a critique of how power functions in the world. Here, we see a bodiless power that is invested in not the victory of one side but in the punishment of anyone who shifts, moves, destabilizes. Both bodies are rebellious, transgressive; both bodies are tamed.

*

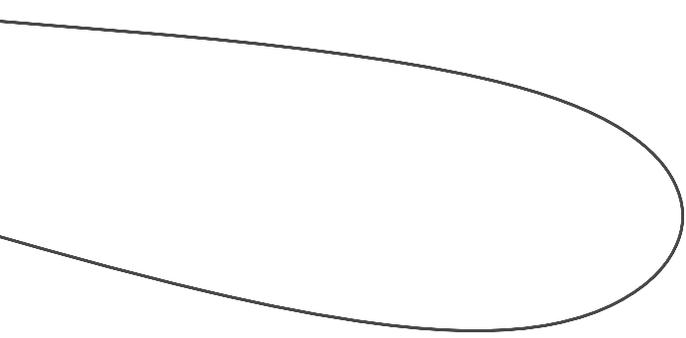
PROGRESSING FROM POWER

The question, after all those versions and revisions, remains—what political responsibility remains to counter a dangerous narrative of evil? In what ways can those who wish to desacralize, to blaspheme, to subvert the Brahmanical nationalist claims of transcendent truth use these myths in the construction of a politic?

In an environment in which, in worship, Durgā is deified (and purified, wiped clean of her dangerous associations, her slippage into demon-hood) and Mahiṣa is blank,

faceless evil, to turn the myth exactly on its head is a deeply understandable political maneuver. And yet it is this very clear binary structure, this failure to recognize the nature of power as paradoxical and constraining—or rather, the desire to interpret power as morally valid, and undoubtedly binary—is the root of the hegemonic (political) mythology that Irani and her comrades-in-harm perpetuate.

When alternative histories are celebrated, especially at an academic institute like JNU, alternative mythologies should be constructed as well—not just alternative in who they cast as the hero and the villain, but alternative in their willingness to embrace different epistemological (and so, mythological) structures of good and evil, and power at all—to embrace a narrative that is active in its rejection of easy conceptions of agency and victimhood, a mythological discourse that retains the ability to question and recognize power (in its various disciplining forms) while reveling in the power to reconstruct identity.



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CONSERVA-
TISM AND
POLITICAL
THEOLOGY:
An Interview
with Mark Lilla

by Adil Habib and
and Megan Stater

CJLC met up with Professor Mark Lilla at Cafe Dada in Park Slope, Brooklyn, for a conversation about American politics and political theology.

ADIL HABIB: You teach a series of seminars on the history of the self. Montaigne, Pascal and, this semester, Rousseau. Could speak to what interests you about these specific thinkers, what connections or lineages you're drawing between them and what kind of breaks we see from premodern or early modern thinkers?

MARK LILLA: I've been writing a book for a number of years called *Ignorance and Bliss*. It's on the idea that the less you know, the happier you are. It's essentially a book about the goodness of knowledge. (Not about the possibility of knowledge; I'm not interested in epistemology.) I'm preoccupied with the age-old question that maybe there are things worth not knowing. And the related idea that something in us resists discomfited knowledge. I'm trying to bring these two questions together. It is all very complicated and has led me to think a lot about our attitudes towards innocence and curiosity, and our most basic assumptions about human psychology. So I began teaching Montaigne a few years ago to study his attitudes on

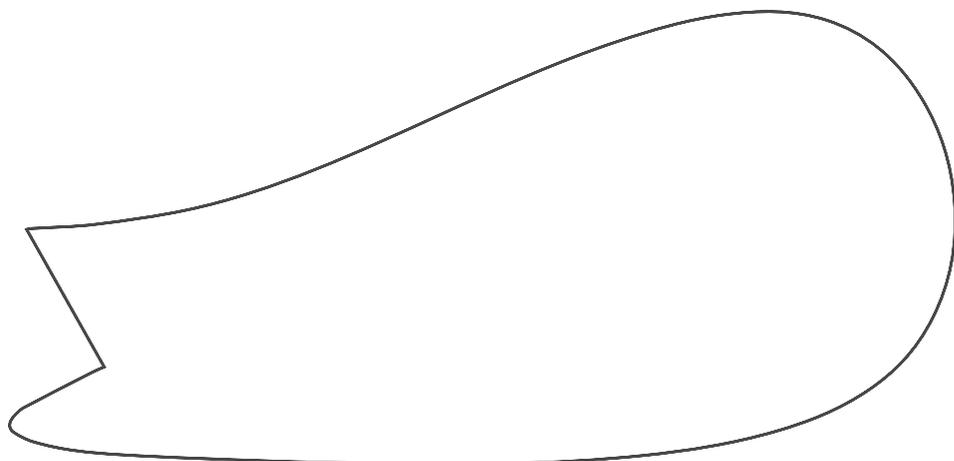
ignorance and knowledge and decided to pursue the inquiry with later thinkers who reacted to him.

AH: Some people draw a connection between the language in which people couch student activism and certain academic disciplines, many of which draw from French structuralism and poststructuralism. Is there a connection between academic work that you see in departments like Comp Lit or MESAAS or CSER, and the kind of activism we see on campus?

ML: I don't know anything about these departments. But it's obvious that people with a certain political bent are drawn to reading these sorts of books and bringing certain sets of concerns to them. There's a lot of projection that goes on. Structuralism and poststructuralism, for example, became wildly popular cargo cults in the U.S., beginning in the Eighties. When I was living in France at the end of the Eighties I discovered that many of the master thinkers in these movements didn't matter anymore in France, or they mattered in ways very different from the way they matter here in the US. Foucault, for example, had already moved way beyond his early work. He had been writing about sexuality and the Self, and

his earlier writings about the prison and madness, not to mention his support of the Iranian revolution, seemed in retrospect to be a phase that had to do with the dynamics of French political life. To see his early works or those of Derrida sacralized offers a fascinating little window into postwar American intellectual life.

As for the connection with campus politics, I keep my distance from those sorts of things because I remember a time when politics was genuinely serious. I remember the Vietnam War, the end of the Civil Rights era, cities burning, and in comparison the politics on our campuses today seem so lame. Perhaps that's because I have absolutely no interest in identity politics. I'm not interested in your identity, and I don't think you should be interested in your identity. It's a big world out there; politics begins when you walk outside the gate at College Walk and get into the subway and plunge into the swirl of life. There's a kind of laziness and even conservatism to a campus politics where you're not willing to give up your summer or your year off to become engaged in party or movement politics because you might miss your internship or get off your career track. So this artificial outrage about renaming buildings, as if that's going to change the condi-



tion of anyone suffering in this country, strikes me as laughable. It's because I take real politics so seriously that I don't give these things a moment of thought.

MEGAN STATER: But when you walk outside of the gates, there is the easy example of Donald Trump. There's a certain lack of seriousness to Trump's candidacy. But the issues he's bringing are very serious. He's a figure who's been around for a long time, but people very purposefully do not—or at least, did not—take him seriously. In your NYRB essay on Republicans in 2012 [“Republicans for Revolution,” *New York Review of Books*, Jan. 12, 2012], you wrote that “the real news on the American right is the mainstreaming of political apocalypticism.” You discuss Glenn Beck, and the Tea Party, and that 2012 context. I think there's a sense in which Trump is riding on the wave of this desire to burn everything down. Is Trump in some way heir to this political apocalypticism?

ML: Well, not just Trump. I think Bernie Sanders is to some small degree. They are speaking to the same areas of the country, where despair seems high. If you look at a map of areas which went for Bernie, and areas which went for Trump, there's a lot of overlap.

MS: It's no accident that they are both over 60% of the electorate.

ML: Right. It would seem to me that if you're really interested in American politics right now you want to understand this phenomenon. There's a lot of talk of “privilege” in the university, and checking people's privilege. But how much effort has their been on campus to really understand what Trump's voters are about? I want to ask you, how many people south of Mason-Dixon line have you met as students at Columbia? Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana? How many Baptists

have you met? How many born-again Christians have you met that aren't Asian?

You can easily change the color of the faces of the people in the university without changing the fact that they're all essentially from the same class, the same parts of the country. What would it mean to go out and encounter the country right now? It would mean taking the year off, living somewhere with lousy internet service, getting involved in politics, trying to understand what's happening. It's clear that something deep is going on. In all post-industrial societies right now the bridge from the working class to the middle class is breaking, and it has to do not only with changes in the economy, like globalization. It has equally to do with the need for a certain level of education and culture in order to even be part of the economy. By education, I don't just mean book-learning. It also requires parents who themselves are part of the educated workforce, who read to you and talk to you about politics and the like. And who also inculcate the kind of behavior and social skills that allow you to swim in the world. That's breaking down.

MS: Did you read that essay in the *National Review* a few months ago? [“The father-Fuhrer: chaos in the family, chaos in the state,” Kevin Williamson, *National Review*, 28 Mar. 2016] The essay was trying to point out that, for instance, Sanders' emphasis on structural issues or structural economic problems is often missing the point, which is that the problem is often moral education. The fact is that many small-town communities lack a moral center. It was generally derided as a very condescending article, which, coming from a small town in Oregon, I don't disagree with.

ML: Oh right, I know the article. The

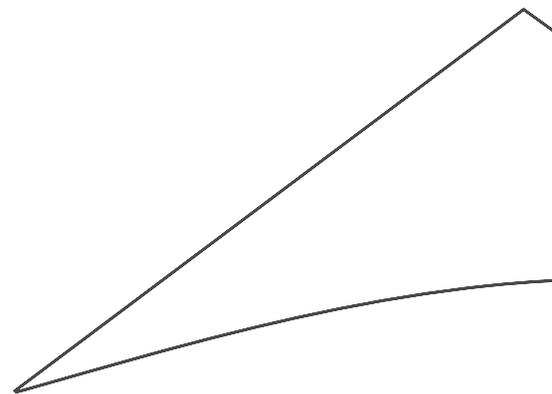
article where he said, essentially, that these places deserve to die.

MS: There's a level of condescension there, which is not necessarily the right way to talk about this issue. I think you're right in diagnosing that there's something going wrong—it's not just that people are poor and they don't feel like there are opportunities, but there's actually something going wrong on a cultural level, maybe...Do you think that he was identifying it correctly?

ML: I don't know, I don't have the article in front of me. But a book that really made an impression on me was by the conservative writer Charles Murray, called *Coming Apart*. Murray had written some things about race in the past that had gotten him into trouble, and he wanted to talk about this moral breakdown without getting involved in that issue again. And so he decided to focus on moral life—to use moral in the large sense of customs and habits and so on—in White America. He looks at how the lives of people who have not finished high school, only finished high school, or have only started a year of college, are radically different from the lives of those who get a two-year degree, four-year degree, and so on: they going to church less often, many never getting married, more children never have a second parent in the home, expectations for men have changed. Some women have resigned themselves to living in a world in which they must fend for themselves. A woman in these marginalized areas comes to assume that she's never going to settle down permanently with a father, so she'll have to have two jobs and deal with the kids herself. There's a kind of atomization that Murray describes that widens the divide between classes. I see the same thing in France, and in Britain.

AH: Is there a connection then between what we're seeing here, that popularity of Trump and Sanders, this atomization you're describing, and the way in which Western neoliberal policy functions?

ML: Let's call the dogma of our time libertarian, because it has an economic, political, and cultural dimensions to it. The most useful way to distinguish people politically today is to see in which areas they're libertarian, and in which ways they're not. So, those on the Right want to be economically libertarian, but culturally less so. On the Left it's the reverse. They want cultural libertarianism, so individuals can conduct their private lives the way they want to, but they don't want more economic liberty, they want more regulation and controls. This libertarianism across the spectrum has filled the vacuum that was left by the grand ideologies that ruled from 1789 to 1989. The last American ideology that focused political attention was Reaganism, which followed on the ideology behind the Great Society. The Reagan agenda is now exhausted because they got what they wanted. Now we're living in the consequences. Libertarian-



ism is at the heart of what both Bernie Sanders and Ted Cruz are complaining about. We do not have a way to parse these things out in an intellectually coherent and politically compelling way. There's an arbitrariness, a one-sidedness to our commitments to liberty and our concerns that it has gone too far. There's an inability to look at this libertarian dogma in the face.

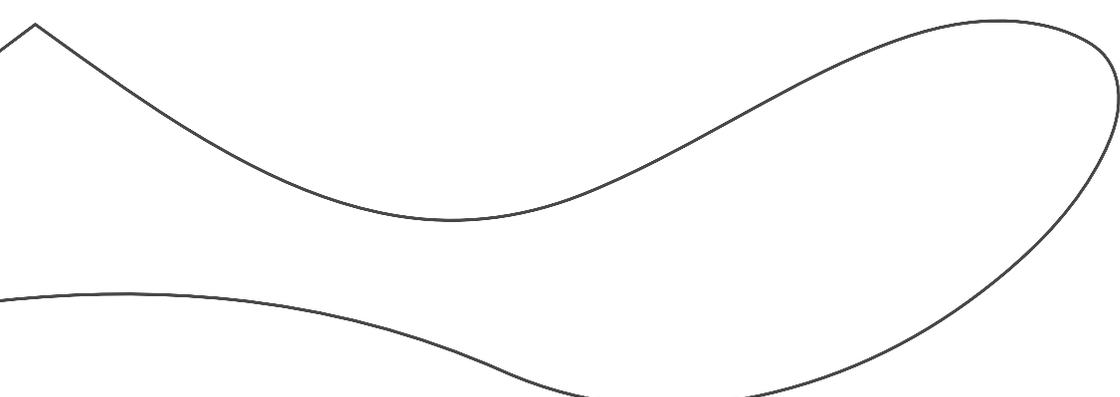
MS: You've written about trying to parse out the different kinds of people you see on the Right, and this is true on the Left as well, that this is a heterogeneous bunch of people who somehow find one another. Do you think some way to re-categorize what we're talking about is possible, so that their affinities make more sense?

ML: That has to shake out historically. I've thought more about how to distinguish different elements on the right, and define what it is to be conservative or reactionary. You can make the argument that Louis Hartz made years ago: we never had a real conservatism in this country. We're just different species of liberals. I'm interested in how on the

Right, for example, there's a reactionary element that is really responding to an apocalyptic view of history, people who believe we have to either go back in order to revive something from the past. Whereas conservatism, classically considered, is really based on assumptions about human nature and psychology, how institutions operate, how societies slowly change over time – not about returning to an idealized past. The reactionary Right after the French Revolution, was obsessed about restoring the monarchy. Conservatism sees that change is inevitable.

On the Left, things are more complicated. There is such a single-minded focus on rights that you have no language for talking about duty. Take an example, FDR's famous Four Freedoms speech in 1941, just after the Depression and as the nation was going to war. He defined four kinds of freedom that we have to defend.– freedom of speech and worship, but also freedom from fear, from want. It was a call to political commitment and sacrifice by all Americans for the good of the whole.

Since the Seventies, however, it's been harder to develop a language on



the Left for thinking about what you owe to others or to your country, because people have grown accustomed to demanding their rights without considering the corresponding duties. So, the question on the Left is, how do you begin to talk about those things? And do you actually think people have duties?

MS: You've also written about political theology. Can you define what you're talking about when you say political theology? I'm interested in the question of whether you think it's possible in the United States to have a political theology. Is there a kind of political theology on the Right?

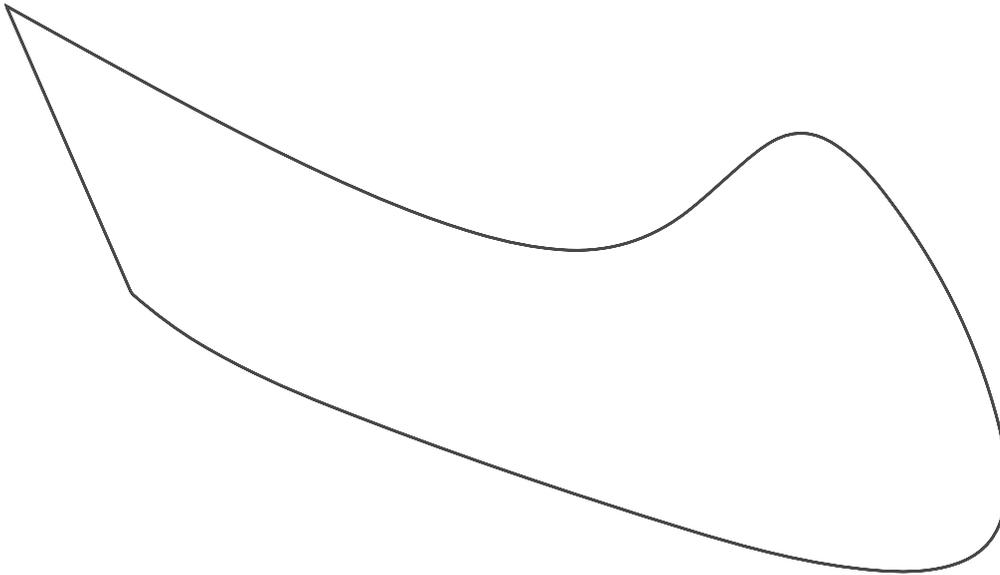
ML: Well, a lot of people now are using the term rather loosely, so it's important to be precise, as I tried to be in my book *The Stillborn God*. I wanted to make a distinction between a way of thinking about politics that begins with the fact of revelation and deduces from what one needs to do in politics, and a political humanism that begins with an anthropological understanding of what a healthy political and social life is like and inductively develops institutions that support that sort of life. Hobbes did the most important thing any important thinker can do: he changed the subject of our political thinking. Before Hobbes, the question is, what does God want from us? After Hobbes, the question became why do human beings ask what God wants from us? By developing a religious psychology, or anthropology in the larger sense, Hobbes developed a theory of politics that would protect individuals and the state from the dangerous things people will do inspired by the idea of a divine command.

In that sense, there is no political theology in the United States. That is, it was founded and remains a country where even though people can make

theological arguments in public, and say that the Bible demands that we do x or y, there is an understanding that the legitimacy of the institutions does not depend on those theological assumptions. We don't have a radical movement that rejects the legitimacy of the United States on theological grounds. So, the arguments about religion in the United States tend, I think in a healthy manner, to be instead about the consequences of supporting religious belief and institutions for the good of the public. We don't really have an experience with living political theology in this country. We don't have experience with it elsewhere in the world. It's one reason why—strangely, since this is such a religious country—we are not really equipped for understanding what the political-theological mindset is, its psychology, its passions, its fears, its aims. A very different mental and political universe is created if you begin with the assumption that there's a revelation that's true and everything must be deduced from it.

MS: Damon Linker wrote a response essay to you in which he said, no, we do have a political theology in this country, because the motivations that drive people's understandings of the free market, for example, as something that should be endorsed no matter what, or gay marriage as something that is important and should not be passed, are fundamentally theological.

ML: I disagree. You can make theologically-based arguments within a liberal democratic regime without making the legitimacy of the regime itself depend on that. And Americans have learned the trick of doing that. It may just be that that's the fluke of our history. The people who founded this country—and I don't just mean the Founding Fathers, but I mean those who were fleeing reli-



gious persecution—were simultaneously motivated by theological truths they took to be self-evident and the realization that, to protect themselves, they needed a kind of humanist understanding of what happens in politics, in order to create a system in which other sects wouldn't turn on them, or the government. And that had to do with the fact that they were Protestants and largely sectarians. If you look at papal bulls up until Vatican II, which I've been doing recently, they're a mixed lot depending on which pope was writing, but essentially they reject the legitimacy of humanist liberal democracy. It's even harder [to accept] in Islam. Europeans' experience with the Catholic Church makes it hard for them to think that you could have a system in which you could make theological arguments regarding policy, while the regime was legitimized on other grounds,. And now it's facing an Islam that is theologically unprepared for making that distinction as well. And so, Europeans today are divided between those who think that, well, if

the United States can have a regime where religious people can be active in politics, we can too; and those who say, one can never do it, and the United States somehow is not really doing it.

MS: Would you say then that the theoconservative claims made in this country are nonetheless made within the domain of liberalism? They're not necessarily holding liberal and illiberal assumptions simultaneously or in contradiction, but actually are within the liberal? For instance that famous issue of the theoconservative journal entitled "The End of Democracy? The Judicial Usurpation of Politics," devoted to what the editors diagnosed as the end of democratic self-governance with the ascendance of judicial activism in matters like abortion, homosexuality, and the like. Their question was: is the regime still legitimate?

ML: Yeah, that was something. But generally they're content to make essentially sociological arguments about

the benefits of religion. The country would be healthier, we would be healthier, if people were more religious, and so we encourage religious practice.

MS: I do think that there is this strain, especially in conservative Catholic social thought, which questions the legitimacy of democratic means of consensus. Especially after the Supreme Court decision [*Obergefell v. Hodges*] last June, there was certainly a lot of questioning of its legitimacy, which is an illiberal claim.

ML: That may have something to do with the disappearance of a certain kind of religious intellectual in this country. There was this tradition running up until the Sixties of serious Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish thinkers who were part of the public conversation. You had Jacques Maritain, Reinhold Niebuhr, Abraham Heschel, and people like them whom secular intellectuals read and engaged with. But we can't will that world back into being. I don't know if you've read the book by Mark Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*? It's a lament about the withering of intellectual culture among evangelicals. He comes from the older evangelical churches, and sees what has happened. In Catholic and Jewish institutions you can still find public intellectuals. Among Protestants, not so much.

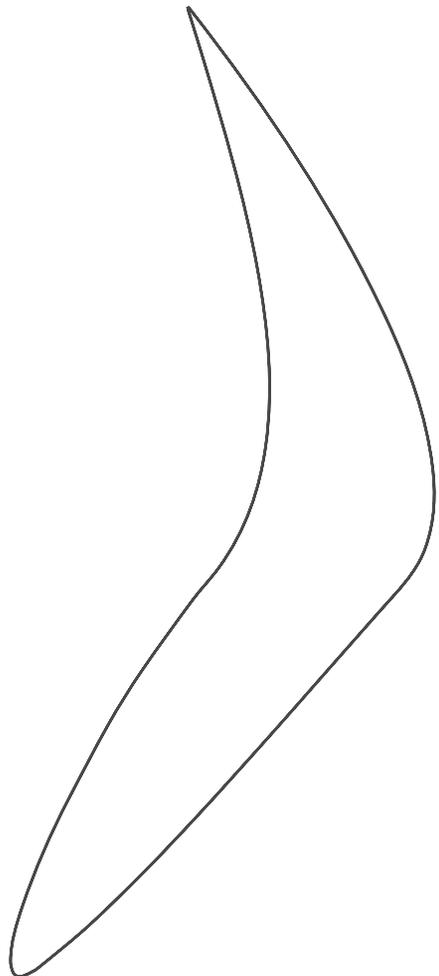
AH: In your discussion of the Great Separation [of Church and State] that you see in Europe, Hobbes' intervention and the way in which that's translated into the kind of tolerance that's a cornerstone of the American mindset...A lot of Trump support comes from anti-Muslim sentiment. Within this discourse of toleration, where do we place the kind of xenophobia that is at work in the contemporary political conversation?

ML: Well, when it comes to xenophobia and toleration, it's always important to ask, compared to what? That is, compared to other periods in American history, or compared to attitudes in other countries? In all those regards, when it comes to toleration, Americans score extremely high and certainly in terms of their history, score high now. The case of Muslims is different because Americans haven't had enough experience with them. The "Muslim" is now a totally cathected symbol because of 9/11, and only because of 9/11. Xenophobia in Europe is being provoked by a day-to-day experience with Islam that is leading to a complicated reaction; some of it is very reminiscent of the past, and some of it isn't.

I don't think we're basically a xenophobic country. Instead, we do shift from over-sentimentalizing the Other, to then, when there is a crisis, thinking quite brutally about him. It's hard for us to come up with a way of calmly thinking about the challenge that is posed by Latin American immigration, for example, in particular of areas of this country where there has been a flooding of the labor market, and the schools are affected. You have a hysterical-sentimental reaction, where some deny there is a problem and saying so is racist. Then there are the real xenophobes who want to build a wall and guard the border themselves with their guns like toy soldiers.

Adil Habib is graduating senior in Columbia College majoring in English and Middle Eastern, South Asian and African Studies.

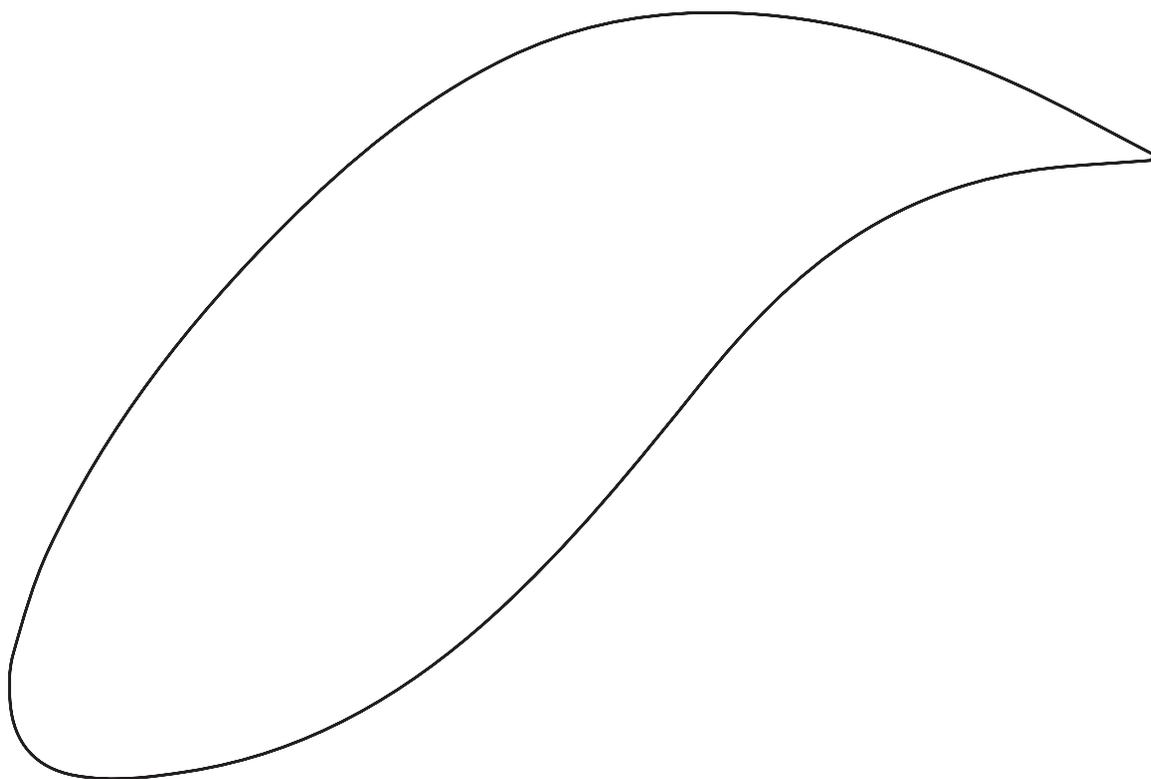
Megan Stater is a graduating senior in Philosophy and Religion; anchorite enthusiast.



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tion Spain

by Ian Trueger

What is it with pork? With Europe's migrant crisis underway and increasing anxieties as to the state of multiculturalism in the metropolitan West, the pig has been vested with a peculiar symbolic heft by right wing populists and xenophobes alike. Take Sweden for instance: last year, activists sponsored the creation of a pig farm directly adjacent to a refugee asylum center.¹ In France, numerous municipal councils, under the auspices of 'laïcité', have subscribed to the 'Pork or Nothing' policy towards school meals, refusing to cater to the needs of minority students.² Meanwhile, in England, instances of bacon, sausages, and other pork products being thrown at mosques are becoming more and more commonplace. The United States appears to be no exception to this pattern: in January of this year, a man hacked open the door of a Florida mosque only to christen the threshold with slabs of uncooked bacon.³At the heart of all these episodes are deep-seated anxieties concerning the integrity of the nation-state, with its purportedly secular nature, its division between public and private spheres, and its relative ethnic and cultural homogeneity. As these anxieties increasingly give way to Islamophobic sentiment and a general climate of xenophobia, the pig emerges as an appropriate symbol for groups deemed alien by the European mainstream.



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The Muslim is identified by that from which he abstains, in a bid to frame his ways as irreconcilable with western norms. The language of pollution - appropriate given its dietary connotations - works in tandem with pork to describe Muslim populations within Europe; hotbeds of 'extremism' are thought to 'fester' with the inner city, posing a threat towards a sanitized, nominally secular, putatively Christian body politic. It is important to note, however, that this lexicon historically had a different subject: European Jewry. Whereas Islam was typically conceived in existential terms - a threat from without - it was Judaism which was conceptualized as a corruption from within. By tracing the peculiar evolution of this logic within the context of Inquisition Spain, we can gain some understanding as to how modes of discrimination that at first glance appear to be concerned with theology and reading easily segue to ones about culture and the body.

The prohibition of pork consumption in Judaism harkens back to the basic distinction between clean and unclean animals found in both Leviticus 11:3-7 and Deuteronomy 14:6-8.

The children of Israel are barred from consuming animals that have a cloven hoof but do not ruminate. This would not remain the case for Christians. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus asserts that it is "Not that which goeth into the mouth defileth a man; but that which cometh out of the mouth, this defileth a man" (Matthew 15:11). St. Paul's missionary work emphasized a disavowal of Jewish particularism in the name of a Christian universalism that rendered cultural difference immaterial. In Romans, he writes: "I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that no [food] is forbidden in itself...Everything is indeed pure." (14:14-15, 20).

Paul's thinking revolved around a pivotal binary of "flesh" and "spirit,"⁴ and had enormous implications for the status of Jewish

law. Indeed, he states quite clearly that the coming of Christ rendered Jewish law null and void by way of this analogy: “For when we were still in the flesh, our sinful passions, stirred up by the way, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death. But now we are fully freed from the law, dead to that in which we lay captive. We can thus serve in the new being of Spirit and not the old one of the letter.” (Romans 7.5-6) What Paul offers here is a commentary on Jewish exegesis: the Jewish People adhere to the letter of the law, but fail to grasp its inner meaning.⁵

This distinction between letter and metaphor, body and soul, Christianity and Judaism, became a trope throughout early Christian theological treatises. Augustine, abhorring Jewish literalism, explained in his treatise *De Doctrina Christiana*: “When that which is said figuratively is taken as though it were literal, it is understood carnally. Nothing can more appropriately be called the death of the soul than that condition in which the thing that distinguishes man from beasts, which is understood, is subjected to the flesh in pursuit of the soul.”⁶ With this in mind, Christians framed the Old Testament’s pork prohibition in allegorical terms. The popular explanation was that it was actually an injunction to refrain from pig-like behavior.⁷ The corollary of this was that Jewish abstention from pork was also framed allegorically: they abstained in a bid to inhibit their inherent lust and gluttony, or to put it more succinctly, their hoggishness.⁸ Clearly, the pig was of supreme theological importance to Christianity, insofar as it operated as a constant reminder of the Jew’s carnal nature, and his consequent inability to recognize Jesus Christ and the truth of Christian eschatology.

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These theological tenets were put to work in Medieval Spain, where religious and scripturally-based discriminations increasingly became laden with novel ideas concerning blood and inheritance. In the Christian

imagination, the Jew’s defective reading of religious scripture foregrounds his difference in physiognomy. Not only is the figure of the Jew portrayed as carnal, pig-like through an adherence to a literal reading of scripture, but through a more peculiar metamorphoses, the Jew actually became a pig.⁹ In fourteenth-century Spain and France, executed Jews were hung by their feet, in order to highlight their affinity with their supposed mother, the sow. Meanwhile, in Barcelona, a widespread folk tradition distinguished Jews on the basis of their high or low ears, a criteria usually used to determine the breed of a pig. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that in the Iberian context, the terms *Marrano*, presumed to mean pork, and *Chuerta*, literally meaning “fat of the pig,” were used to designate individuals of Jewish descent.

In the late 14th and early 15th century, the Iberian Peninsula was rocked by widespread programs of forced conversion. Within a number of decades, Europe’s largest Jewish population became, for the most part, nominally Catholic. This prompted what scholars have referred to as “a crisis of religious identification”, where the cultural and religious differences that had previously separated religious communities from one another became less clear. In a phrase, people could no longer tell who was who. Confronted by such a conundrum, Christians turned to lineage, blood, as a means of deciphering those who might judaize, and those who were “natural-born Christian.” In a society where purity of blood and honor became essentially synonymous, as Vincent de Costa Mattos put it, “a little Jewish blood is enough to destroy the whole world.”¹⁰

Reflecting these concerns, the language of genealogy and inheritance became more and more widespread in early 15th century Spanish literature. Things came to a head in 1449, where elites, frustrated by the rise of upwardly mobile converts, who were now unencumbered by anti Jewish legislation, rebelled against Juan II of Castile. During this short lived rebellion, they issued the Iberian Peninsula’s first *Limpieza de Sangre* (blood statute). These statutes barred *conversos*—people of Jewish or Moorish

descent—from attaining ecclesiastical and civic offices on the basis of their tainted blood. Under these laws, which spread throughout the Iberian Peninsula in the ensuing decades, discriminatory practices in the Iberian Peninsula increasingly took on a reproductive logic.¹⁰ For the first time, people read difference as a matter of biology, a mark handed down from generation to generation which baptismal waters could not remove. Religion was no longer a matter of choice; it was a matter of inheritance, transmitted through blood.

Within this discursive milieu, the term *raza*, meaning ‘race’, began to surface widely in the contemporaneous Spanish literature. Whereas in the decades preceding the 1430s, the term *raza* was typically applied towards issues of animal husbandry and taxonomy, by the 1440s – the era that spawned the logic of *Limpieza* – we increasingly see it applied towards humans, and, in particular, Jews.¹² Evidently, the Christian community had found a vocabulary with which to express its concerns about the contamination of its reproductive stock. Both the term *marrano* and *raza* operate in the same conceptual universe, one in which ideas about law, reading, and the body converge around the figure of the pig. Not only was the Jew identified with the meat that he deemed illicit, but it was this meat that disclosed his religious deviance. When tainted blood was equated with a proclivity for religious heresy, consuming or abstaining from pork in Inquisition Spain had real consequences: abstention could have one burned at the stake.¹³

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Late Medieval and Early Modern literature on the Iberian Peninsula is saturated in references to culinary imagery and the porcine. These references served as useful proxies with which to express anxieties about cultural and religious hybridity. Emerging in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries in the kingdom of Castile, the *Cancionero* genre of poetry contains interesting clues as to how anxieties were handled by first-

generation *conversos*, when genealogical conceptions of personhood were first emerging.

The genre featured poetic exchanges between different poets, some professional and under courtly patronage, others hailing from the administrative class, and still others, aristocrats looking to prove their worth. *Cancionero* poets were particularly fond of insulting one another. Among the various accusations of disorderly conduct which punctuated this genre of poetry – from shepherd sodomy to imbibing swine sputum – the most prominent appear to have been of the religious variety. These either took the form of directly alleging another’s *converso* status, or doing so through more allegorical means.

Interestingly, the majority of these *Cancionero* poets were in fact *conversos*: Juan Alfonso de Baena, one of Castile’s most prominent poets, converted as a child in 1391. With this in mind, it is important to stress that *converso* Judaism in Baena’s *Cancionera* – as well as the *Cancioneros* of his contemporaries’ – is a literary product. It points to the manner in which contemporary people thought of *converso* Judaism, and not necessarily the thing itself. In the context of these collections of poetry, Judaism was what David Nirenberg describes as “a governing insult that carried with it a host of theological, linguistic and physical implications.”¹⁴ This was important in a genre where provocation and invective were such important catalysts for creativity. As we shall see, pork was perhaps the foremost proxy with which to talk about Judaism and its corresponding vices.

In one of his more famous poems, the poet Anton de Montoro decries the impossibility of assimilation in a culture that asserts upon him an immutable identity. The poem itself is addressed to, of all people, Queen Isabel of Aragon:

O sad, bitter clothes-peddler / who does not feel your sorrow! / Here you are, seventy years of age, / and have always said [to the Virgin]: “you remained immaculate,” / and have never sworn [directly] by the Creator. / I recite the credo, I worship

/ pots full of greasy pork, / I eat bacon half-cooked, / listen to Mass, cross myself/ while touching holy waters - / and never could I kill these traces of the confeso.¹⁵

Unlike his Jewish brethren, Montoro (humorously) asserts the truth of the Immaculate Conception. He never takes the Lord's name in vain. And, pivotally, he boasts of consuming the meat that was seen to demarcate the boundary between Jew and Christian, the body and the spirit, going so far as to eat it rare in another infraction against Kosher dietary practice ("I eat bacon half-cooked").

Yet in spite of his efforts to overcome the embodied, corporeal signs of his heritage, Montoro cannot displace the inward, genealogical difference that the porcine implies, and so remains, by his very own self-conception "an old Jewish son of a whore."¹⁶ Of course, we know this not to be true: Montoro was the son of a goldsmith. Yet his reference to his mother as a whore illustrates an important equivalence in Spanish society at the time: to be born of a Jew effectively meant the same thing as to be born of a prostitute, with its connotations of sexual iniquity and stained lineage.¹⁷

Clearly, Montoro's efforts to corporeally embody Christianity were in vain. While the

latter poem was written towards the end of the poet's life, an earlier composition from the same collection frames his subsequent consumption of pork as a last ditch effort. Montoro pleads with one of his superiors about the legislation in the city of Cordoba, where the butchers were apparently ordered to only sell pork in a bid to weed out Judaizers:

To the Corregidor of Cordova Because the / Butcher Shop Has Nothing But Pork [sic]/ One of the true servants / of our mighty Lord the King, / has given the meat dealers / a reason to make me a perjurer. / Not finding, to my grief, / with what to kill my hunger, / they made me break the vow / I had made to my forefathers.¹⁸

At the time of writing, Montoro was a Christian, having converted long ago, but here he writes that before the *corregidor's* interventions, he did not eat pork. He cannot efface the traces of his former religion, the vow he made to his "forefathers"; his lineage asserts itself even if it renders him a "perjurer."

As Montoro's first poem hints, the conspicuous consumption of pork was fairly normalized in mid 15th century Spain. We see this in De Baena's poetry, where he

accuses one of his opponents, Juan Agraz, of living in such contradiction insofar as he “adores the old law” but also “gets busy with pork, the wretched man, in order to look like a Christian, putting his hand in his mouth...O what a *Marrano* he is.”¹⁹ This was quite the analogical slight; Agraz engages in the outward, fleshly semiotics of Christian belief, while also professing Christianity’s purported negation, Judaism. He may dissimulate, but this dissimulation is a matter of the flesh. He cannot help but embody his former religion, and with it, the porcine. Juan de Poeta, another *Cancionero* poet, attempts to assert his Christianity by going on a pig hunt, where he both wounds a sow and captures her piglets. Instead of proceeding to consume the meat, however, he hides it in a synagogue. In seeking to dissociate his personhood from his former self, Poeta desecrates the space of his forefathers in his performance of a sacrilegious spectacle.²⁰ His actions demonstrate the strange liminal space inhabited by many *conversos* of the time: alienated from their former religion, they remained unable to take on the trappings of their new one.

As we can see, an emerging “genealogical mentality” inhabits the pages of these *Cancionero* collections.²¹ Even Juan de Baena, who waxes and wanes in his acceptance of his Jewish heritage, takes offense when one of his adversaries sends him some pork. His response is framed in terms of inheritance when he responds “Don’t you know I received a certificate of purity.”²² This poetic language, inscribed as it was in genealogical terms, was inescapable. The poet Hernan de Castillo, responding to one of his adversaries, frames the *conversos* as resembling a different species: “for you are of one plumage, the Jew and you, *Marrano*; you will understand his language.”²³ In this case, the use of the language of taxonomy serves to frame Jewishness in terms of biology, as well as culture. When read as historical documents, these literary texts indicate the extent to which genealogy and nascent understandings of blood purity were, in their popular understanding and circulation, approaching a confluence where naturalized difference was met with institu-

tional violence.

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As the *Cancionero* genre of poetry would seem to indicate, much of Spanish society questioned the legitimacy of the *conversos*’ Catholic faith. Large sections of the Spanish clergy went so far as to advocate for the establishment of an Inquisition to deal with perceived problems of Judaizing and crypto-Judaism. Their wishes were granted with the foundation of the Spanish Inquisition in 1480, which operated seven tribunals throughout the Kingdom of Spain. News of the arrival of the Spanish Inquisition’s tribunals from city to city would often prompt widespread panic; in the 1480s and 1490s, thousands of *conversos* would flee to Portugal to escape its clutches. In the eyes of the Inquisition, as well as in crypto-Jewish communities themselves, feminine space, in particular the hearth, became the locus of religious heresy. Most Jewish families appeared to have had domestic help, many of whom worked in the kitchen. More often than not, it was this very domestic help that would testify against their employers.

Maintaining a kosher lifestyle was a conspicuous affair, as were the culinary rites attached to the Jewish calendar, particularly Passover. As such, foodways were often the most tangible means by which cultural difference, and thus heresy, was disclosed. Pamphlets were circulated which attempted to highlight the practices which were associated with Judaizing:

If you know or have heard of anyone who keeps the Sabbath according to the law of Moses...or if they have purified the meat they are to eat by bleeding it in water; or have cut the throats of cattle or of birds they are eating, uttering certain words and covering the blood with earth; or have eaten meat during Lent and on other days forbidden by the Holy Mother Church...

While Jewish institutional life was effectively destroyed as far as men were con-

cerned following the persecutions of 1492 (the expulsion of Iberian Jewry), for women, it remained relatively undisturbed.²⁴ Not surprisingly, then, the kitchen became the site at which tradition was transmitted. Inquisitors went as far as to observe how “the women were worse Catholics than the men; the latter refrained from eating pork, drinking wine, and doing other Christian acts because of “fear of their wives.²⁵ Renee Levine Melammed reports of an incident in Alcazar, La Mancha, where the sons and daughters of the Lopez family “singled out their mother Elvira as indoctrinating them without the knowledge of their father.”²⁶ Meanwhile, a certain Beatriz Alonso confessed how she instructed her daughters to observe “the law of Moses and that she had taught them since they were young girls who could comprehend; and when they were maidens and married women, they did the things that this confessant did.”²⁷

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To see how pork figured in a trial from beginning to end, we turn to the case study of Marina Gonzalez, who was tried by the Inquisition tribunal at Toledo in 1494. The chief prosecutor accused her of observing the Sabbath and Kashrut, adding “Likewise, she did not eat pork, nor any food from a pig, nor did she want to eat at a table when pork is placed there. When certain people ate pork, she did not want to drink out of the glass he had used, because he had eaten pork.”²⁸

When Marina Gonzalez’ defense began, her lawyer spent more time dealing with the accusation with regards to her pork avoidance than any other charge. In the trial, her pork consumption is a matter of contention thirteen times. Doubts are finally confirmed following the testimony of Pedro de Tevo, who was a friend of Marina’s husband:

Many times he ate with him in his house, consuming pork, strangled partridges, and other things, and Francisco’s wife, Marina did not eat any of it. One day, when he was eating a piece of wild pig with her husband, this witness said to

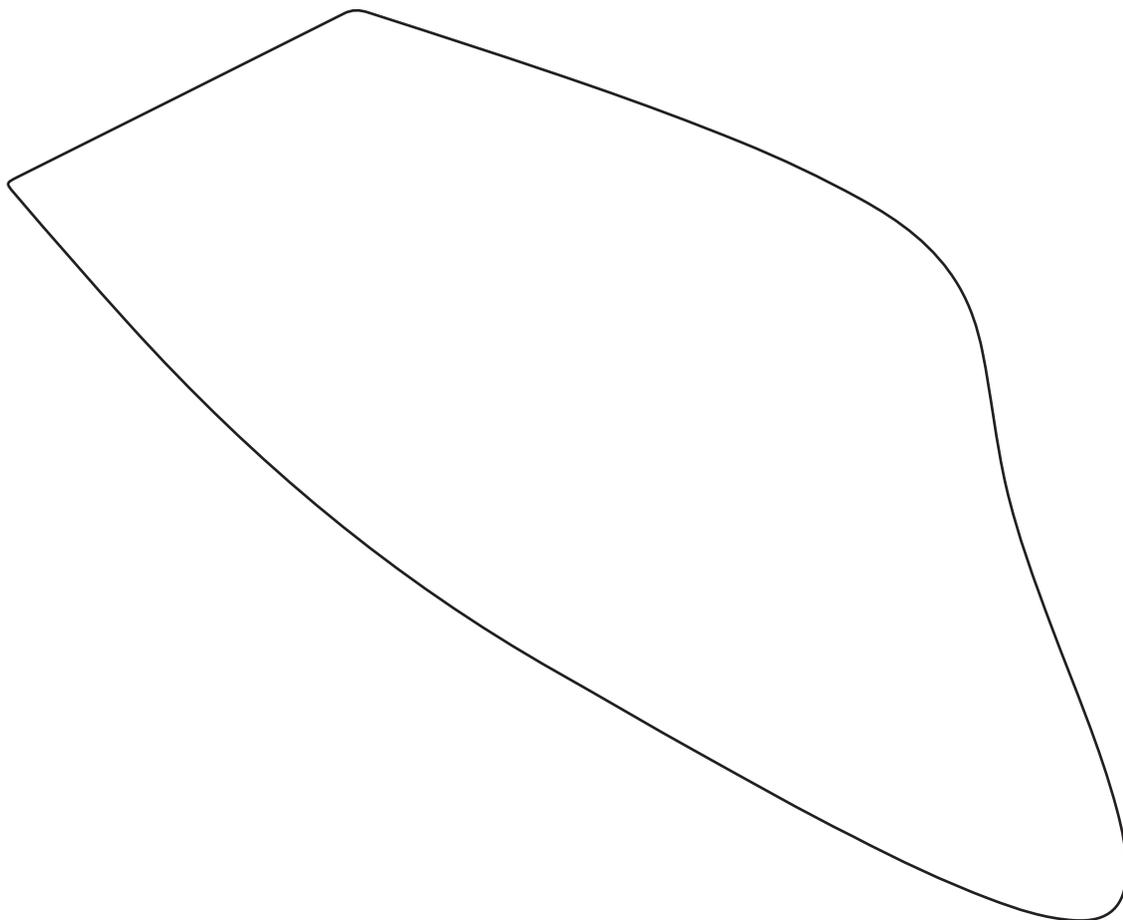
her, ‘Lady, aren’t you coming to eat?’ and she said, ‘I cannot eat now.’ Her husband said to her, ‘I swear to God, woman, you are tempting fate.’ And she said to him, ‘Leave it alone, afflictions may come.’ From this point on, this witness watched her carefully, and though he saw her many times, she never ate pork or strangled partridges. If they ate pork, she did not eat at the table, nor [when] they brought the pork would she eat anything that was cooked with it. If her husband ate pork, she did not want to drink out of the same glass he did.²⁹

All parties are fully aware of the symbolic dimension Marina’s abstention. More importantly, there is the recognition that it is this symbolic act, above all others, that has definitive consequences, to the extent that Marina’s husband publicly reprimands her. Marina’s defense deteriorated following de Tevo’s testimony, and she was subsequently sentenced to burn at the stake. Before this occurred, Marina starved herself to death.

As Marina’s case indicates, for *conversos*, pork’s very presence was cause for alarm. In numerous cases, women would destroy cutlery and dishes that had come into contact with pork. Indeed, within the household of Beatriz Gonzalez, Catalina Martinez, a neighbor, reports how after cleaning meat according to Kosher principles, the women of household made stew in an array of pots kept separate from the rest of kitchen utensils:

And in that different pot they never put bacon. And that the witness never saw bacon consumed in this household. And that they had pots, spoons, and other utensils set to the side, which nobody used except said ladies, and that if somebody drank from that jar, they made sure to have it cleaned, or destroyed.³⁰

Conversos showed great ingenuity in getting around this conundrum. Leonor Marti, a Majorcan woman, reported in the 1670s that her doctor advised her to abstain from pork “or any strong food.” Supposedly, servants were required to cook on her



roof because the smoke from pork bothered her.³¹ Mayor Melendez, tried in Guadalajara in 1520, was said to have fled the kitchen and “stopped up the holes in the door to escape the odor of cooking pork.”³² Fernand Alvarez, of Soria, testified how he always brought cooked eggs with him on long journeys, lest he should have to “share a grill with them [the old Christians].”³³ Of course, the inverse was also true. Many conspicuously consumed pork in order to ward off the suspicions of neighbors and Inquisitors alike. Inquisition officials themselves were said to have referred to pork as their “badge of honor,” consuming it every day in order to reaffirm their membership of a pure line.³⁴ Clearly, avoiding pork was extraordinarily difficult in this context. Public space and functions became inhospitable to *conversos* as pork and pig fat seeped into Spanish daily life. People destroyed their cutlery, scorched it with flames, feigned ill-

ness, and avoided festivals due to the early modern Spaniard’s propensity to cook with lard.

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This was not always the case. While pork was no doubt consumed in the years prior to the Spanish Inquisition, it simply was not as prominent in Spanish cooking before the fifteenth century. A look at the fourteenth century Catalan cookbook the *Libre de Sent Sovi* demonstrates this: it contains two dishes that directly use pork meat, and another four that use lard, out of a total of 156 recipes.³⁵ Fast forward to the 1520s, and a review of the Catalan cookbook the *Libre del Coch* shows some thirteen dishes directly concerned with pork, another forty using bacon, and another 32 utilizing lard for the purposes of baking pastry, cooking

vegetables, or meat.

This increase is striking, and perhaps accounts for Andres Bernaldez, a parish priest and famous chronicler from Los Palacios, detailing the infractions of *conversos* in the following way:

Thus they were gluttons and comrades, and they never stopped the Jewish customs of eating little dishes and stews cooked overnight with coals, little dishes of onions and garlic fried with oil, and meat cooked with oil, and they used that meat instead of pork and fat, in order to avoid the pork. The oil with the meat and the other things that they stewed smelled very bad on the breath, so their houses and doors smelled very bad from that food. Thus they themselves had the smell of the Jews, on account of the food they ate...They did not eat pork except by force. They secretly ate meat during Catholic feast days, vigils, and the four ember weeks.³⁶

Bernaldez continues for some time in this vein. His preoccupation with oil, and its resultant odors, is interesting, given that was generally the manner in which people cooked for the majority of the last eight centuries on the Iberian peninsula. By the 15th century, however, cooking with oil, as opposed to lard, marked one as Jewish, and as such, irrevocably other. Bernaldez account detailed the manner in which people envisioned this 'other', and in his slanderous depiction of *converso* life, it is the culinary sphere – foodways – which mark the Jews as a discrete population. In fact, food is the only criterion he gives for their identification: they are 'stinking' on account of this food. This newly racialized population represents a threat to the Christian body politic, given "their whole aim was to increase and multiply."³⁷

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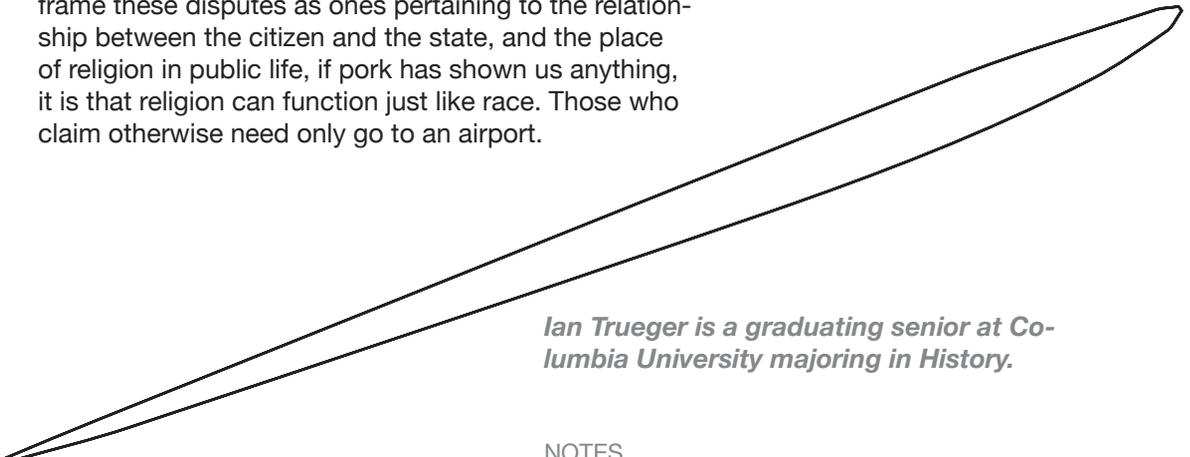
Some one hundred and thirty years after the Inquisition was founded, Miguel de Cervantes would release his first volume of *Don Quixote*. Numerous scholars presume the novel to be a lament for a lost world of cultural and religious pluralism, many going so far as to characterize the eponymous hero as himself a *converso*.³⁸ Throughout the novel, porcine imagery is used to allude to this point. Yet there is one episode above all others which seems to provide us with an oblique commentary on how Cervantes' himself conceptualized the persecutions of his day.

In a metatextual episode in chapter IX of Book I, the central storyline is interrupted by the narrator as he goes through the marketplace in Toledo to find the rest of the manuscript. When he stumbles across the text in Arabic, he asks a young Morisco to translate for him. Upon hearing the boy burst into laughter after having read an annotation, the narrator inquires as to the source of the humor. The boy replies, "As I have said, here in the margin is written: "This Dulcinea of Toboso, referred to so often in this history, they say had the best hand for salting pork of any woman in all of La Mancha."³⁹ The young Morisco laughs at Dulcinea's attempts at conspicuous consumption. As in de Baena's poetry in consuming enough pork, Dulcinea attempts to cast off doubts of her questionable heritage.

In this instance, Cervantes clearly and directly points to the upheavals over religious identity and blood purity that animated his age - he goes so far as to satirize them, to render them ridiculous, even after all the Inquisition had wrought by 1610. By moving from a fictional narrative into his historical moment, Cervantes not only points towards the absurdity of Dulcinea's symbolic gesture, but also to its radical contingency. It is the figure of the pig that has the capacity to save, or to damn Dulcinea, making her at turns an observant Catholic, or a heretical *converso*. While this may seem a matter of religion, this episode encompasses more than theology. It is concerned with opera-

tions on the body; in performing one—consuming pork—she holds at bay another—getting burnt at the stake. Religious identity, inscribed as it was in blood, is generative of a difference that exceeds theology, resembling modern concepts of “race.”

When we witness the events taking place in French schools today, we should be inclined to use the same vocabulary. In this context, pork is being used as a warped means of asserting the a-religious nature of French secularism. Ironically, all it appears to have done is reveal *laïcité* as contingent, Catholic, and somewhat absurd. While Liberal democrats would frame these disputes as ones pertaining to the relationship between the citizen and the state, and the place of religion in public life, if pork has shown us anything, it is that religion can function just like race. Those who claim otherwise need only go to an airport.



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NOTES

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 - 21.115 De Baena, no. 397
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KABBALAH
THEN AND
NOW: An In-
terview with
Clémence Bou-
louque

by Megan Stater

CJLC met up with Clémence Boulouque, Professor of Jewish and Israel Studies in the Religion Department at Columbia, in her office on 80 Claremont.

MEGAN STATER: I was wondering if you could say something about why you came to study Kabbalah. What was it about Kabbalah that grabbed you personally?

CLÉMENCE BOULOUQUE: My previous life in Paris was being a journalist, or book critic, rather. I was also very involved and interested in religious wars and I worked a lot on Israel and Palestine and the literature of the region. I would hear a lot of things said in the newsroom about how religions are really weapons of mass destruction, and I was interested in finding a counter-narrative, looking at people who use religion in a way to bridge gaps, to be intermediaries. Not to let religion be hijacked by those who have a violent agenda. I was a student at SIPA [School of International and Public Affairs] in 2001-2002. It felt like a scholarly environment was the right place to try to deconstruct those mythologies, in a way, of religion as violence. It's not a way of wishful thinking or blissful ignorance of what's in the text, but trying to see how, by contextualizing those texts, by trying to understand their layers, you could come up with another narrative, or at least understand where those narratives come from. It depends on whether you want to be in the ivory tower or not, but I also believe that there

is a sort of vacuum that shouldn't be filled by preachers of hatred. That was my initial motivation to pick up and leave France. And then I fell for this character, this rabbi, called Elia Benamozegh, who really checked all the boxes of a religious person who was trying to look at his tradition and interpret it in a different way, or shift the paradigm of what Kabbalah – because that's what we're talking about, this Jewish mystical tradition, to put it roughly – is about. He showed that from a very ethnocentric perspective you can make something more universal.

He was a polymath, already standing on the shoulders – which is one of the images used by the Kabbalists – of a wealth of Kabbalist thinkers. He was steeped in this tradition in its multiple facets. And that's how I started the journey, trying to wrestle with a tradition that might seem exclusive and understanding where it's coming from.

A friend of mine who's a Reform rabbi in France – she's very isolated – I say the female rabbi, because there are not that many, and certainly not that many women, I think there are only two of them. She keeps saying that if you are not violent towards a text or the Scriptures, the Scriptures can get violent towards you. So it's sort of like, pick your violence, or your exclusivism.

MS: Can you tell me more about the rabbi you said you fell for, so to speak?

CB: Rabbi Elia Benamozegh. He's a nineteenth-century rabbi who's responsible for rekindling interest in what's called the Noahide laws, which are the seven laws of Noah, and are in the rabbinic tradition, the way in which non-Jews have a share in the world to come. It would roughly be in essence natural laws. So obviously in the pre-Enlightenment period people seized them as a way to reconcile religion and reason. That has made a few comebacks since then as a hermeneutical, political device.

MS: Can you give me a sense of the historiography of Kabbalah?

CB: The founding father of Kabbalah studies would be Gershom Scholem, who was

born Gerhard Scholem, in Germany. He single-handedly created the field of Kabbalah studies. He was coming after a few generations of emancipated or post-Enlightenment scholars, who tried to predicate Judaism on its rationalism, Judaism as a religion of reason. As a result, Kabbalah was seen at best as a reservoir of myth, or as a backwards tradition that should be dispensed with. It was identified with Hasidism and the impoverished, impossible-to-assimilate hordes of Ostjudens, Jews from Eastern Europe. You find very strong language from German Jews against those people, because there was a mimetic rivalry and they would give anti-Semitic people a reason for their anti-Semitism, and there was no such thing as solidarity. What we see now as this romanticization of Jewish life in Eastern Europe really comes with Martin Buber at the turn of the century, with Kafka when he finds something that would be more authentic, that wouldn't strive for assimilation at all costs – but both of those come later. For a few generations, Kabbalah, Ostjuden, and Hasidism were lumped together and seen as giving Judaism a bad name.

Scholem looked at this and saw that there was something not unlike an alphabet, or an idiom, that had been lost. He has this phrase, of going through the mists of history in order to recapture that heritage. Otherwise, Judaism would have lost its compass. Scholem was absolutely fascinated by the antinomianism you find in Jewish heresy, like Sabbatai Zevi, the false messiah in the seventeenth century, and those that followed him, so he was looking at how the superstructure influenced the emergence of those antinomian figures said to originate in Kabbalah and thinking that there is something which is more inherent to myth-making.

MS: I'm curious about your interest in this interreligious dimension. When Kabbalah came into contact with Islam or Christianity in the medieval period, was there was a sense that this Jewish tradition was too particularist, and couldn't syncretically adopt anything, or whether, from a Jewish perspective, it was actually too universalist?

CB: Christian Kabbalah was one of the reasons that Kabbalah fell into disrepute among Jews because Christian Kabbalah had a certain agenda, meaning that all of the symbolism was used to show that it was a harbinger of the coming of Jesus. Judaism as a whole almost did away with Kabbalah because of this, because it was seen as a way through which Christians were trying to convert Jews. In a way, though, the fact that Kabbalah could lend itself to this kind of religious attraction shows that there is something universalist to it. If it had been completely remote or a completely different idiom, there couldn't have been any kind of dialogue between the two, Christianity and Kabbalah. In contrast, Abraham Maimonides, the son of the great philosopher Maimonides, was extremely interested in Sufism and finding dialogue with Sufism.

It's also important not to project our categories. People were not necessarily interested in trying to create this universalism, but they were trying to crack the code of the Divine and get closer to God and a greater understanding of what the Divine might be. They felt there was a greater proximity between people in different traditions when they had acquired a certain degree of enlightenment than laypeople. At that level of enlightenment, there is a sense of unity. You see the tensions in all of these writ-

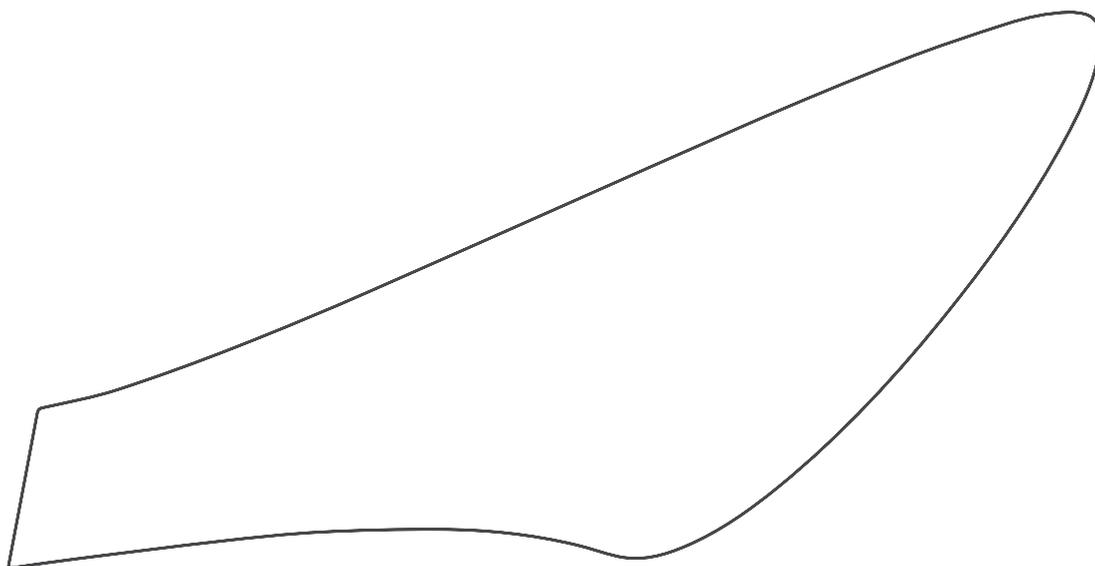
ers. You see something bound to a certain tradition, and you see that the tradition gives you access to the Divine which is all-encompassing and where differences are dissolved. But that's also the work of Eliot Wolfson, who says, yes, but what of Messianism? Is Messianism a place where all differences are erased? That's unclear, and according to certain traditions, and certain Jewish traditions, there is still this difference at the end of the day.

MS: At the end of days.

CB: [Laughs]. Looking at the Divine and the relation between man and the Divine is... we can hypothesize what the Divine or the Godhead might be, but you can certainly spot a few [anthropocentric, androcentric] patterns in those descriptions. This is Katz' article [Steven T. Katz, "Language, Epistemology and Mysticism"]: Is mysticism linked to language, or can it go beyond language, identities or traditions?

MS: This is Feuerbach's point in The Essence of Christianity, right, which is that your picture of God tells me more about you want to be, than who or what God is.

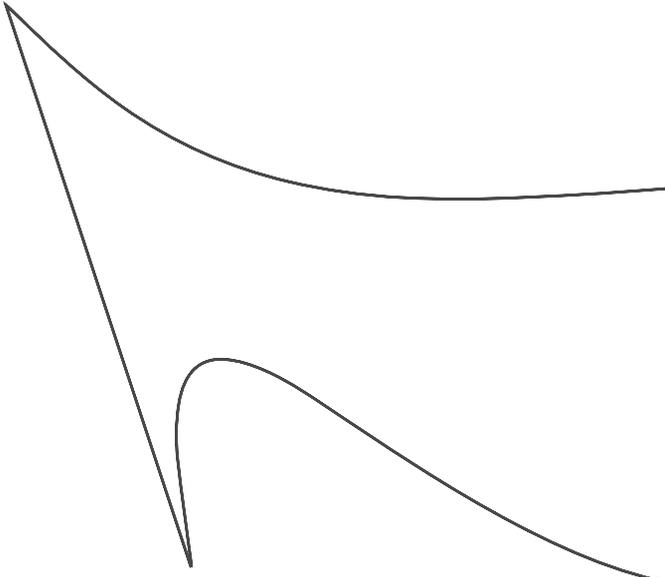
CB: He's talking about the nature of man in general. I'm looking at how certain tradi-



tions are reflexive, which is where things get interesting, the diversity of tradition that ask the same questions but provide different answers. Because basically the questions are the same, but the language in which they are couched are hugely different.

MS: Going back to the question of particularity and universality, you were mentioning that, in lending itself to incorporation by other traditions, Kabbalah, from a modern Jewish perspective, might be too universalistic? In that it effaces Jewish particularity?

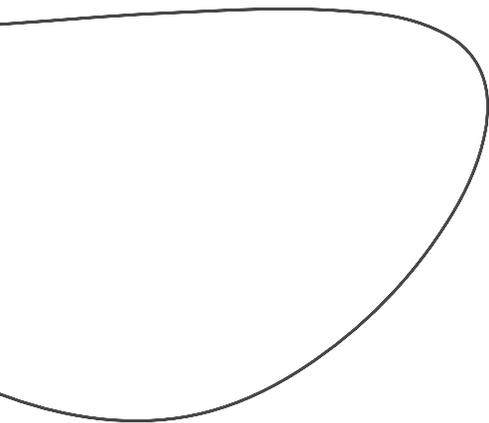
CB: Yes, it's difference-effacing. How can you efface differences while maintaining a sense of identity and specificity and not something that fades into mishmash white? In a way, it's not completely surprising that there is something that's difference-effacing, which is a result of this effort that was made by people like this man that I've worked on, Elia Benamozegh, when people were looking for a way to create this idiom that was myth- or concept-based and would create some legitimacy for religion to be relevant in the modern era. Because they saw that there was a danger, there was this showdown between religion and secularism. They wanted to show that religion captured something that is inherently human, human aspirations which are transcendental, which they saw mysticism as especially fit to capture. And then they showed that Kabbalah was heavily filled with myth or had this potential for myth-making or tapping into the unconscious of mankind. Kabbalah became for those people the unconscious of religious systems. In order to make those rituals relevant and not just remnants of artificial practices, to make them community-based after the rise of the individual, to legitimate religious practice in the modern era for the modern mind – what they wanted to show is that mysticism was best equipped, because it tapped into the self and something that's unconscious, irrational or pre-rational. They argued that that was the reason for which religion should not be discarded, because it had this potential to capture something, which then could become a new kind of universalism, not



reason-based but something beyond reason, which was something binding humankind on a deeper level than reason. Because reason obviously played a huge role in the twentieth century. Reason is not, actually, something that's universal. Rather, the birthplace of reason as the basis for religion was exactly where reason was assassinated. Or at least, came to nothing, annihilated. The nineteenth-century generation I'm talking about, and the postwar generation even more so, reacted against the rise of secular ideas, or scientific rationales for dismissing religion and saw that if the unconscious is suppressed – and Kabbalah or any kind of mysticism is the unconscious of a religion – then all kinds of evils will be unleashed.

MS: How do you think this nineteenth century recovery of an irrational self through Kabbalah is a projection onto the medieval texts or tradition of Kabbalah?

CB: One of Scholem's major claims is that mysticism was a reaction against the hyper-rationalism imported through philosophy that pervaded religion, like Maimonides. Mysticism was counter to the promotion of reason as a way of access to the Divine, which is Maimonides' elevator pitch, that



you can cleave with the Divine through the mind only so long as you perfect your intellect. There was no social element to this sort of desiccated religion. Scholem claimed that there was an elitist aspect to Kabbalah circles, but there was also this thirst of lay people for a different narrative, for something which makes space for the cosmos, something which makes space for interaction between the man and the Godhead. So Kabbalah was a reaction against rationalism.

Was there a switch of the pendulum again, and was the nineteenth century emphasis on reason followed by a twentieth century emphasis on irrationalism? I'm always loathe to draw such easy comparisons and symmetries. The nineteenth century was also a century of discoveries. The discovery of the mind's psychology creates a further need for religious self-justification. There is something that could resemble the unconscious, which was articulated by Jung as myth, or the collective unconscious. Obviously Jung and Judaism was a complicated proposition, but in general, the fact that he tapped into Kabbalah to shed light on how the collective unconscious works, this talk of images, the archetypes... you can pretty much argue that archetypes can

be found in Kabbalah, all this stock of images: the mother, et cetera.

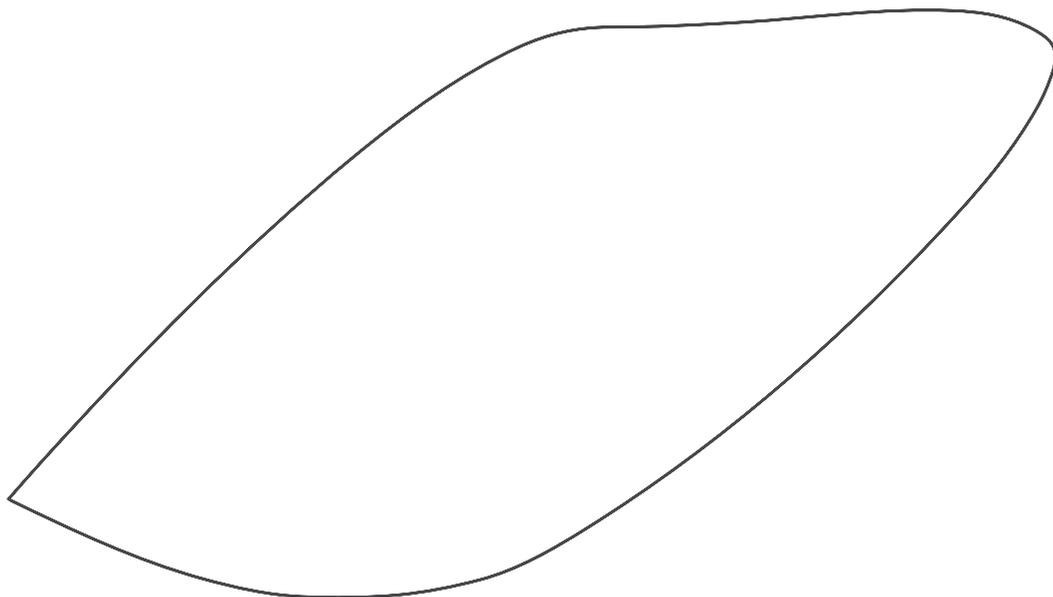
MS: What do you mean when you talk about Kabbalah being mythic or lending itself to thinking about the collective unconscious or archetypes? What categories of Kabbalah can be considered mythic?

CB: Let's take the Zohar, for instance. It was a forgery. It's claimed to date back to the second century, but it's actually a text from the Spanish Middle Ages. It's a commentary on the Pentateuch. In Judaism, you have the written tradition, the Pentateuch, the oral tradition, the Talmud, and for Kabbalists there is another tradition, revealed to Moses at Sinai that was kept, handpicked by a few chosen disciples. For Kabbalists, Kabbalah is the hidden tradition. This is a parallel oral tradition that explains the creation of the world and the secrets of the Divine. Based on this, the Zohar is a commentary on the five books of the Pentateuch. The Torah was considered to be the blueprint of the world. If you have this commentary on the Torah, the Pentateuch, you begin to see certain patterns that were used to write this world that we live in, the story that the Bible represents. Obviously the person who wrote the Zohar, or the people in Zoharic circles would not claim they were writing myth, they were writing the history of...

MS: What's most real.

CB: But at the same time, it's not mutually exclusive, because if myth is also those archetypes, those figures that are the blueprints of our conscience, then we see the role of everything: Eve as the mother, the father, the old sorcerer, the old witch, the old man – those are figures that run through the texts and can be elicited from the texts and that you encounter in other traditions.

MS: Not only is medieval, historical Kabbalah mythic, but also if you look at contemporary literary discussions of Kabbalah, in [Jorge Luis] Borges or [Umberto] Eco, for example, there's this almost mythologizing of Kabbalah. Is there some kind of nostalgia



around it?

CB: I think this is nostalgia, or romanticism, surrounding enlightened circles. Not of the Enlightenment, but circles of initiates, and places of secrecy, like alchemy – an esoteric tradition. I don't want to compare Eco to *The Da Vinci Code*, but certainly there is interest in initiation as with secret societies, which Eco described. There's also the role of language. If this world is created through language, which it is, according to the Zohar, then what is the role of fiction? What is our role in this fiction? How can we be self-created, self-reinvented? The role that the sheer fact of speaking or writing can have is something that really taps into our conscious or unconscious fantasies. It's only normal that writers like Borges or Eco would be so fascinated by Kabbalah, because basically it's a reflection or condensation of any writer's Demiurgic fantasy, that you're creating this world, this other world.

MS: In terms of contemporary "liftings," there is Madonna and this contemporary transformation of Kabbalah into something which is universal and "New Age." I don't even know what people mean when they

say New Age...

CB: It's about self-discovery, and finding a device for self-discovery.

MS: I was thinking about this before and to me it's always like the emptying of the word "religious" by replacing it with the word "spiritual."

CB: Right, "I'm not a religious person, I'm spiritual."

MS: And what does that mean?

CB: It means, instead of going to synagogue on Saturday, you stay in bed and go to a yoga class, or Sunday, you don't go to church and you go for a run. There is something less community-based –

MS: It's hyper-atomistic. It is about this psychology of the self, this borrowing from Buddhistic ways of thinking, this turning inwards.

CB: Yes, creating this mosaic: every tradition has a pebble and it makes a kaleidoscope through which you can see yourself.

MS: It's interesting. It's not only the replacement of the word "religious" with "spiritual," but an emptying – it does feel like it is a removal of practice.

CB: It's an aspiration towards something that is not completely materialistic, like there's some sort of transcendence that doesn't have to take the shape of a practice-based faith.

MS: What is being lost in New Age Kabbalah? Are they cherry-picking?

CB: They're not sourcing. This is how people, some rabbis – I'm not sure I like it so much – call it the difference between love and pornography. You take something, and take whatever pleasure that you can get from that practice, but you erase the source of the person it's coming from, the Otherness, or the tradition it's coming from. In a way, it's like intellectual genealogies: are you content with using something of which you ignore, or don't want to know, the provenance, the tradition, what it brings with it? When I like something or I find something interesting or arresting, I want to know why, where it's coming from. Spirituality comes in an age of extreme individualism. If it's only geared towards your own self-exploration, I think that also does not – it connects you on a superficial level to other practitioners, to perhaps this generation even, but it's like taking a yoga class. The history is lost. Yes, we have this thing that binds us together, but at the same time, collectivity is a product of various histories and stories. Spirituality is something that is fueled by, and lends itself to, amnesia, a sort of hyper-inhabiting the present, while thinking that the present is eternity. There is a sort of bizarre relation between a presentification of our religious experience and thinking of it as eternity. Spirituality is mystical practice emptied of its cultural context.

Is it just a product of mass consumption? I think it is a little disrespectful of the generation that preceded us to think that we're coming all equipped to create this universal bond between all mankind. Because again,

it's something that's a little navel-gazing and doesn't pay enough attention to the fact that we're the children of many generations. I was joking when I said it was like product-sourcing: you have to label things, otherwise you get GMOs. But there is a little bit of GMO in contemporary Kabbalah: it is a wonderful business model which has identified a number of spiritual needs of our times in our vacuum of materialism.

MS: How then can we reconcile particularity and universality, without erasing difference?

CB: The notion that universalism can be deeply steeped in particularism is something that Levinas dealt with. If you have archetypes, archetypes are also very context-based. That's exactly what makes them universal. In a way, it's To the Lighthouse. You know, when Mrs. Ramsey realizes around the dinner party that what makes her so anxious is her realization that nobody really likes one another, and that they all see things differently and then her realization, which is her epiphany, is that it is that difference which unites them. It's can't be oneness, some kind of "neither Jew nor Greek." It's really polyphony which makes sense of this unity. It sounds almost too catchy to be true, but unity through diversity. It's almost, not under one God, but it's under this understanding of multiple ways to access the Divine which creates real universalism. Otherwise there's something a little cosmetic, or totalitarian, and the effort that was made by thinkers like Levinas is really about coming to refine our understanding of how universalism can be understood in a way that is realistic. For instance, right now the French Republic is struggling with *laïcité*, how can you build society on difference-effacing concepts? The true way to true universalism is through true diversity. There's a sense, a constancy of purpose, something that unites you beyond what divides you.

Megan Stater is a graduating senior in Philosophy and Religion; anchorite enthusiast.

THE MYTH
OF THE
VIRGIN:
Violable and
Erotic

by Joo Kyung Lee

The ancient Greco-Roman divine order is rife with promiscuity, incest and sexual violence. From the establishment of primal authority in the Oedipal drama of Ouranos, Kronos, and Gaia, to Zeus's marriage to his sister Hera, to Hades' abduction of Persephone, the corpus of ancient myths is defined by a consistently violent sexuality. Rape is prevalent. While the word "rape" comes from the Latin *raptus*, usually referring to abduction, the current understanding of rape is largely traced to Roman legal term *stuprum*, which refers to illegal sexual intercourse with a woman. Both concepts were frequent in the Greco-Roman divine order, and the use of separate terminology may highlight the prevalence of such violence.

For the male figures of the pantheon, virility is equated with power – most clearly exemplified by Zeus, whose sexual power is inextricably linked to his role as Olympia's patriarch. This violence presents a consistent threat to the female figures that populate ancient myth—especially virgins. Yet according to the Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite, only three goddesses are identifiable as virgins: Artemis, Athena, and Hestia.

By virtue of its rarity, virginity holds a singular place within a divine order characterized by chaotic and violent sexuality. Amidst the three virginal goddesses, Artemis emerges as a character of particular interest. As goddess of the hunt, she resists promiscuity and abstains from all sexual activity; her role as hunter is enmeshed with the protection of her chastity. While Athena, the goddess of war and wisdom born from Zeus's head, is a decidedly non-carnal figure whose relationship to

violence and combat bears no mark of the sexual, female sexuality is crucial to Artemis's persona. Maintaining her own virginity is a way to protect female sexuality; her position as a huntress links chaste female sexuality and violence.

In Artemis, violence is positioned alongside virginity, not only as a by-product, but as integral to the maintenance of female purity. Ovid's depiction of Artemis in his *Metamorphoses* suggests that violence is inherent in the nature of virginity—both as it is committed on the virgin body, and in defense by the virginal figure. In particular, Artemis's use of violence can be read as performative, paralleling René Girard's theory of sacrificial ritual, in which sacrifice is understood as a mechanism for the momentary expurgation of violence from a community via the enactment of violence on the sacrificial object. In the twin aspects of virginity and violence embodied by the hunting goddess, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* situates Artemis in episodes that destabilize the myth of the virgin-to-be-defended.

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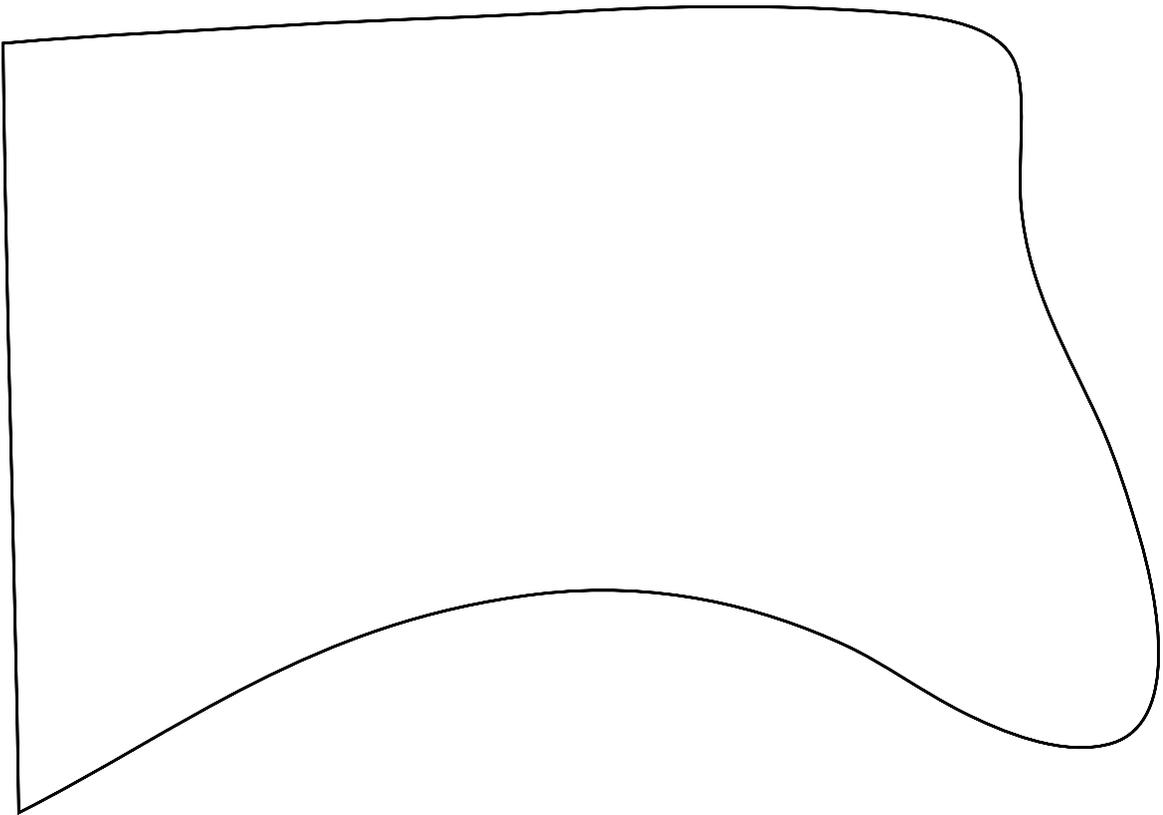
In Actaeon, Ovid describes the eponymous protagonist catching a glimpse of the naked Diana during her bath:

And while the virgin goddess was taking her bath in her usual pool, as fate would have it, Actaeon ... wandered into the glade. ... Imagine the scene as he entered: the grotto, the splashing fountains, the group of nymphs in the nude. ... They clustered around Diana to form a screen with their bodies, but sadly the goddess was taller; her neck and shoulders were visible over the heads of her maidens. (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*

3.173-182)

In this scene, Ovid seems to establish a relationship between Artemis's sexual vulnerability and her military vulnerability: "She wished that her arrows were ready to hand" (Ovid 3.188). The specter of her body being glanced upon by Acteon compels Artemis to wish for her arrows, she is vulnerable not only because she has been stripped of her weapons (3.165-167) but also because being nude places her in threat of sexual violation. It is in this passage that the text refers to Artemis specifically as the "virgin goddess", while a later passage (in which Actaeon is killed, a moment of violence), Ovid refers to her as the "goddess of hunting." Even as this scene's split of appellations disrupts the twin aspects of the figure of Artemis—the hunter and the virgin—it clearly highlights the simultaneity at work in the martial and virginal aspects of her character.

Even if she evades the threat of violation, nudity puts Artemis at risk of being sexualized. Yet her characterization does not represent an eroticized female sexuality. In her twin signification as virgin and huntress, Artemis is resistant to the myth of the erotic virgin—virgin as mystified sexuality, enticing purity. Accordingly, ancient artistic representations of the goddess most often represent her as clothed, while many male and female divine figures, Zeus and Aphrodite for instance, are represented as naked. Later artistic adaptations of the myth, however, present her as nude, thereby placing her at a realm of possible sexualization and eroticization, and loss of virginity. These representations focus more on the celebration of her sexuality, seeming to argue for a specifically female subjectivity that elides fertility as the only celebratory aspect



of female sexuality. This can be read as offering the figure of the young girl as a subjective human being, of which Artemis can be seen as exemplary.

This characterization of the virgin figure places her simultaneously in the crosshairs of eroticization and sexual violation. The distance, for instance, between an eroticized Artemis and an eroticized Aphrodite would seem to be the lack of sexual agency afforded to the virgin figure: her inexperience, her abstinence, marks her as lacking agentive power, unlike the highly sexualized Aphrodite.

As punishment for having witnessed her in the nude, Artemis turns Actaeon into a deer, leaving him to be chased by his own pack of hounds. They eventually tear him apart without his hunting companions realizing they were killing their own master (3.242-246). “Only after his life was destroyed in a welter

of wounds,” Ovid concludes, “is [Artemis], the goddess of hunting, said to have cooled her anger.” In his vivid description of Actaeon’s death, a scene suffused with violence, Ovid confirms Artemis’s essentially violent nature. Upon Actaeon’s death, Ovid calls Diana the “goddess of hunting,” alerting the audience to the flip side of the “virgin goddess.”

The death of Actaeon not only demonstrates the violent dimension to Artemis’s character, but also suggests a possible governing logic for that violence. Ovid calls her punishment of Actaeon a “vicious performance,” raising the possibility that the excessive violence Artemis enacts is not simply intended to punish him but also functions as a symbolic and ritualistic “performance” that protects virginity by expurgating the threat it faces. Following Girard, the ritual of sacrifice “purifies”

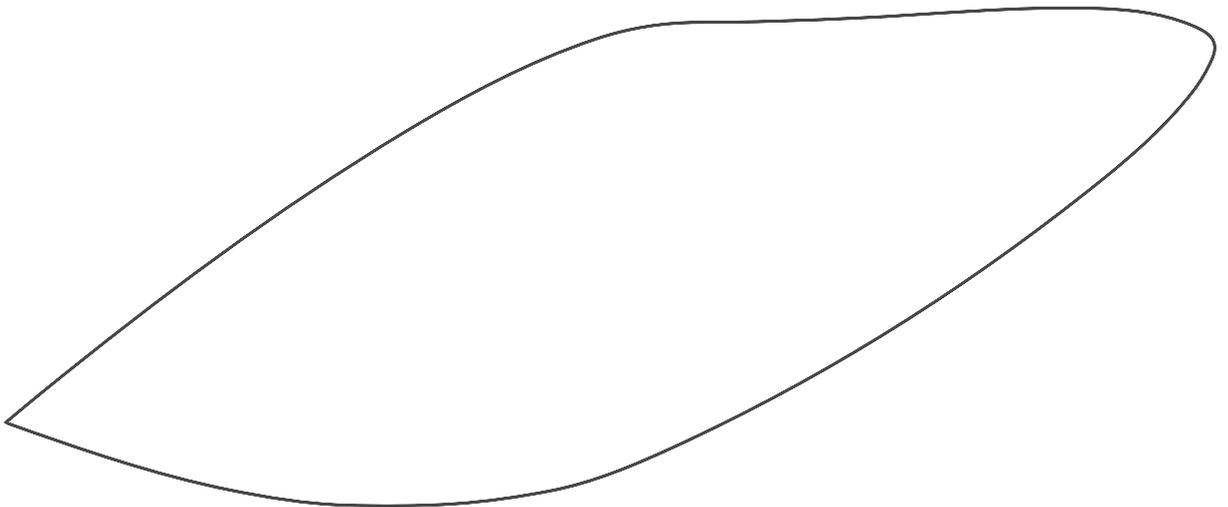
the community of violence. Actaeon, then, can be considered the sacrificial victim, or, in Girard's language, the "emissary victim," whose death will serve an expurgatory function, thus allowing Artemis to maintain both the purity of her own virginity and the purity of her community at large. Actaeon's death may also serve as an exemplary sacrifice to warn off other men, such as his hunting friends, who act as spectators to his death.

Moreover, the capacity to commit violence may be a necessary element for the virgin goddess who is forever under threat of losing her virginity. The difference between being a virgin and a non-virgin is a subtle one in the universe of *Metamorphoses*; even a single sexual experience means a figure can no longer be marked as chaste. Artemis treads the tenuous and anxious boundary between virginity and non-virginity, as her status as a virgin goddess is continually precarious: the threat is omnipresent. Therefore, to fight the threat of sexual violence and to protect her

female sexuality and virginity, Diana herself must employ violence. It is this dynamic that helps us understand her double position as both a huntress and virgin.

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The idea of protection recurs in the story of Callisto. Callisto – a favorite nymph of Artemis – is raped by Zeus, who had "assumed the features and dress of the goddess Diana" before addressing Callisto and sexually violating her (Ovid 2.425). Callisto responds, "Hail, goddess! I judge you greater than Jove, though he hear it himself," and to this, Zeus chuckles and starts kissing the nymph passionately (Ovid 2.428-9). Later, at a bath, when Diana notices Callisto's pregnant belly and realizes that Callisto is no longer a virgin, she banishes her from the group: "Be gone!" cried the goddess. "This sacred spring must not be polluted!" (2.464).



Why is the punishment inflicted on Callisto when the blame rests on Jove? Callisto has confirmed the fear of the “violable virgin,” realizing and embodying the threat that violation represents. That is, Callisto has demonstrated that the boundary of virginity is unstable, blurred, and that violence is an essential part of the transgression of that boundary. Rape, here, can also be understood as a desecration of Artemis’s virtue; Zeus’s actions, in his adoption of Artemis’s appearance, constitute a punishment of Artemis and the values she represents. The assumption of her appearance is a symbolic attack, implicating Artemis in the violent sexual activity which is antithetical to her constitution. Zeus’s rape of Callisto in Artemis’s form not only actualizes the threat of the violable virgin, but also dishonors the goddess profoundly, fueling her anger. That the rape is performed through a female body escalates the threat that the episode poses for Artemis’s relationship to virginity.

Artemis is not only motivated by self-protection but also the preservation of her community. Female solidarity, a kind of sisterhood, is at the center of Artemis’s world: in both the tales of Actaeon and Callisto, Artemis is positioned in the middle of her female followers. Sisterhood is an important means through which Artemis protects chastity—the groups of unmarried virgins who Ovid shows associating with Artemis allow the logic of Artemis’s self protection to be extended beyond her own status as a virgin and towards the very idea of chastity itself. This dynamic, moreover, contextualizes the significance of Zeus’s rape of Callisto as threat to Artemis: the fact that even a female figure may threaten female chastity suggests the weakening or dissolution

of female solidarity. It is this disruption of community that angers Artemis the most. This motivation intimately links Artemis’s violence to Girard’s explanation of performative ritual: the Girardian community that Artemis seeks to protect is the community of her similarly vulnerable sisters.

When Artemis banishes Callisto, she declares that the “sacred spring must not be polluted” (2.464), confirming the connection between Artemis’s purity and the notion of female solidarity. “Pollution,” here, can be interpreted in two ways: first, as a threat to female solidarity—that is, the presence of a polluting agent that disturbs the solidarity within the group; and, second, as a depurification associated with sexual activity in opposition to chastity. Artemis’s refusal to let Callisto enter the spring, or, symbolically, her group of followers, confirms both hypotheses. No longer part of a homogeneous group characterized by chastity, Callisto is at once a threat to female solidarity and a body physically “polluted” through sexual intercourse, regardless of whether she was willing to engage in it. The logic of virginal purity is extended from the single body to the collective identity of the group.

Here it is important to note that chastity is associated with purity, not explicit ethical judgments. In the history of Christianity, sexual activity was mapped onto all forms of ethical transgression, so lust became a signifier for all vice, just as chastity became a signifier for all virtue. However, Diana’s “purity” is by no means related to her ethical and moral values. She is one of the cruelest divine figures in the Greco-Roman order, as is evidenced in the stories of Actaeon and Callisto. In fact, she may willingly utilize “immoral” and

“unethical” violence as she wishes to keep herself and her group of followers “pure,” untouched by sexual activity and unexposed to any threat of rupture in female solidarity.

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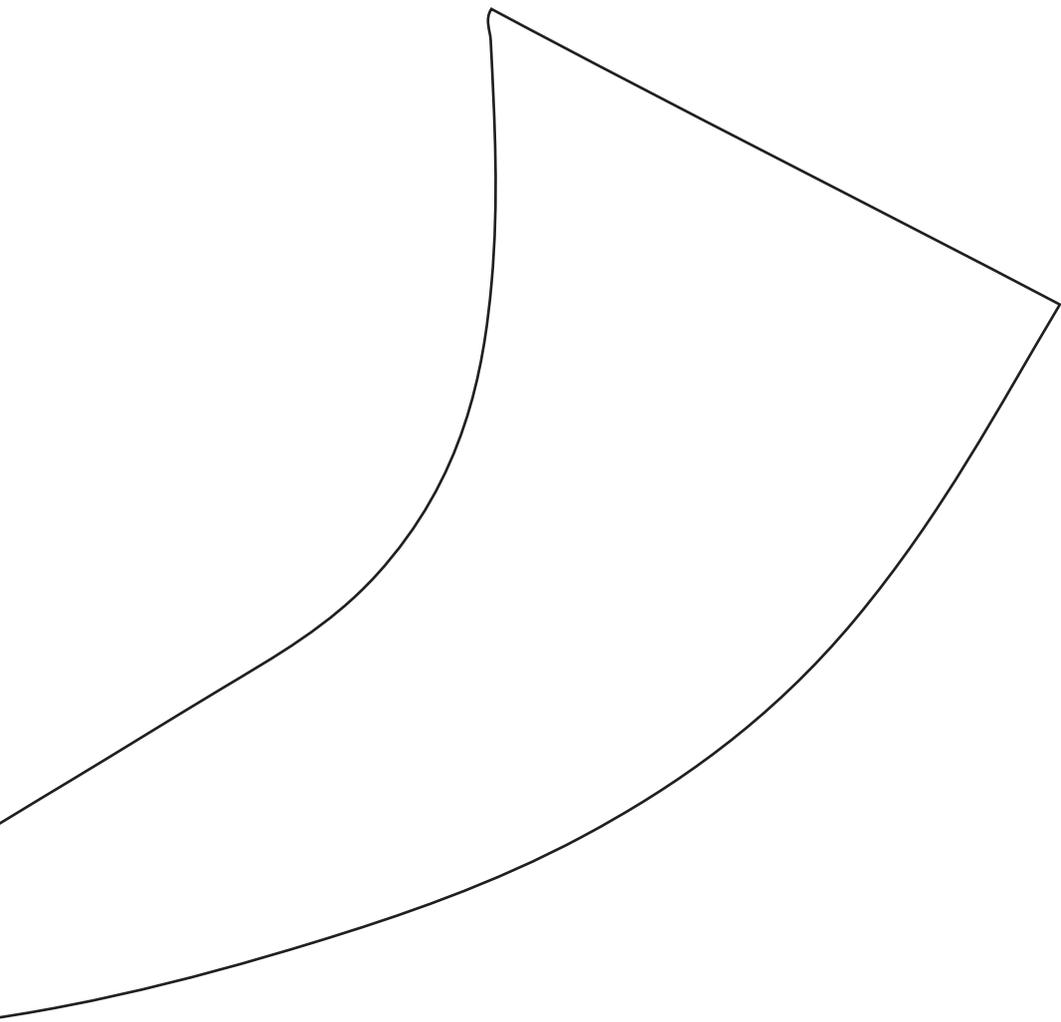
Without anachronistically judging these figures by modern standards, we may still interrogate the ethical implications of their deployments of violence through the frameworks that Girard’s theories provide. In the Girardian model of sacrifice, all the violence of an original sacrifice accumulates on the body of the emissary victim. Although violence builds up around one site, it does so in a non-reciprocal fashion, excluding the possibility of revenge.

The violence Artemis engages in mirrors Girardian sacrifice insofar as it is not simply concerned with revenge. She incorporates elements of ritualistic performance in a bid to rid her community—in this case, Artemis’s virgin sisters—of violence. In this way, the violence enacted by Artemis is qualitatively different from the sexual violence that she faces as a virgin. While male sexual violence serves to consolidate male power, female violence attempts to defend an ever-violable virginity. In his treatment of Artemis, Ovid sets up two counterposed forces of violence, allowing her use of protective and “performative” violence to emerge in opposition to the sexual violence of the male figures of the pantheon.

The stories of Actaeon and Callisto demonstrate that both the fear and threat of the violable, pollutable virgin can be located in the figure of Artemis. Her forceful protection of virginity reveals the risks and threats faced by a virgin, a figure treading on the often

vaguely defined boundary between virginity and sexual experience—a binary that suggests an element of violence inherent to that boundary itself. The transience of the virginal of a woman’s life adds to the instability of the virgin and non-virgin boundary. Artemis and her followers can be understood to symbolize a celebration of that soon-to-pass period of life in which one is a virgin, an independent sexual figure who protects one’s self by fighting off threats of premature violation. The ephemerality of virginity, and the very instability present in its definition, expose virginity itself as a kind of myth, belonging to an imaginary that perpetuates the objectification and mystification of women.

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SEB CHOE



WHOSE
AMERICAN
DREAM?:

An Interview
with Ayesha
Siddiqi

by Adil Habib

Ayesha Siddiqi is editor in chief of The New Inquiry. CJLC met her at Max Cafe to talk about myth making in American popular culture.

ADIL HABIB: I was reading your piece in *The New Inquiry* on Lana Del Rey, and how she consciously appropriates banal Americana iconography, so I wanted to talk about the myth of America. How is this myth constructed with discourses of the American dream, of meritocracy, of assimilation? What kind of violences are necessary for the construction of this myth? Are we seeing a skepticism toward or disenchantment with this myth?

AYESHA SIDDIQI: Myths are central to any empire – especially America, because America’s media and entertainment industries are so massive and the seat of much of the engagement with and production of those myths. The way that myth is maintained is by retaining a sense of being untouched by historical forces. That’s what I think a lot of pop culture, film, and music is about. They deal subtextually with notions of race and the frontier, but more so they act to reinscribe existing bodily relations – the way we’re meant to relate and not relate to each other.

So there are a few different forces: Racism is central to capitalism. Capitalism is designed to alienate us from one another. Add to that American individualism. At the same time that one is expected to experience America as an individual, you are also expected to situate yourself within the myth. It’s a lot. And obviously that myth is available to white men in a way that it’s not available to other demographics in this country.

What's interesting is how in we're observing that myth-formation in real time during all the media related to the War on Terror. The Western, for example, was crucial to understanding constructions of white domesticity, white femininity, white masculinity, and Christianity in the mid century. In current war films that take place in the "Middle East" you again see a normalization of violence inflicted against certain bodies and an effort to iterate "American" values, to distinguish American life, valued life. Before it was Native American bodies; now it's the normalization of Muslim death, with the attendant aesthetics of desert warfare. I think what's interesting is how less than 0.5% of the American population is in the Armed Forces. During world war II that was closer to 12%. I think that produces a very unique experience of war because, for the majority of Americans, war is a very abstract, far away concept. We weren't allowed to see any images of the returning coffins from war. The violence of our current wars is largely invisible to us; he deformities children in Fallujah are now born with because of what we did to that land. We're living in a time of protracted warfare while very few people have relationships with or knowledge of people in the armed forces, or the people they're being deployed against. Add to that the fact that these wars are fought increasingly in the abstract, with drones, with people sitting in trailers in Nevada, for whom the Muslims they're killing are just moving dots on a radar. The current Laura Poitras exhibit tried to illuminate that abstraction but it only centered our remove, and herself as a white American. Watching white Americans gawp at drone technology only further underscores how little we think of the people they're killing.

It seems that for all that's been written about myth-making in America, the best way to understand it would be to look at where alienation is maintained. Alienation between people's labor and what they would want to see as meaningful work. Alienation between war and the people funding that war. Alienation between different races. And I think right now I'm at the point where I have more questions

than answers. I'm looking at how bizarrely intense the ambient anxiety of this country is. Our appetites are shifting. Trying to look at where they're headed next has always been a fruitful way of understanding what's really going on in the undercurrents of the american imaginary and subconscious; all of these things that go unnamed but are in the atmosphere of life in this country.

AH: That kind of preempts a few of my questions. Is pop culture a kind of litmus test, a reflection of how people are thinking? Or is it more engaged in the production of imagination?

AS: I think it's both. It's certainly a litmus test for and snapshot of America's relation to race and gender, and reactions to pop culture are indicative of people's values and biases. As an immigrant, I learned about this country through pop culture. *What is this country about? What does it care about?* I approached it from an anthropological distance because it wasn't a culture that I saw myself in or one that belonged to me. That's no longer the case, I've become an American. I became one before I even became a citizen, which was very recently. But I'd recognized the ways in which growing up here had formed who I am today. At first I felt like an impartial observer of America, and looking at both its history and pop culture from that position, anti-Blackness stood out as a prominent foundational feature. But as I came to understand myself as an American citizen, too, I became another consumer through which anti-Blackness is and can be housed, as a South Asian. Anti-Blackness is not unique to America or American history, and actually as I learned more about it here as I began to understand the ways it exists in globally. Anti-Blackness wouldn't even be in our vocabulary if it weren't for the dialogue led by Black feminists online, which has brought this discourse further into the mainstream and made it more fully capable of describing the state of things.

AH: On that subject, I've been thinking about how the way in which we consume

hip-hop and rap, not just locally but also globally, and how this global audience perceives Black America.

AS: Because Black Americans have always been central to American cultural production, people outside the US consume an American culture in which Black Americans are highly visible, albeit in racist ways. There's an impulse to equate that visibility with power and security, which is obviously not the case. Simultaneously, the representation doesn't humanize Black people as equals, it exports an entitlement to their cultural output and labor in general. Black producers and Black consumers' experiences with the culture of production are erased, ignored, or relegated to the margins, especially in conversations that aim to analyze American culture. Anyone can take from rap what they need, and many often do. It's a genre that deals powerfully with struggle and outsider status and as well with joy and celebration, who wouldn't relate? But again that relationship, of just taking what you need without considering where it comes from and who it belongs to. It's a very colonial relationship. And it makes me question the way so much of reaction pic and meme culture relies on the circulation of black faces, famous or not, as vehicles for everyone else's emotions or punchlines. So it's interesting to see how nonblack people of color turn to rap as their way into American culture. You can see that in memoirs like *Fresh Off The Boat*. But rap is no longer the fringe genre, I think young immigrants and first gen kids, because of the internet, have a lot more resources and voices to help them navigate their experiences now.

Still, the co-option of black voices is an element of the American cultural experience, and it makes anti-Blackness a more precise term for discussing this form of racism—it highlights a phenomenon that people of color are just as complicit in. “People of color” has always been a very useful phrase in naming our shared position in solidarity against white supremacy, but we need to be very careful about the ways in which that condition is not shared homo-

generously. There are moments when “POC” is a useful phrase and moments when it is incredibly insufficient and erases textures of struggles that aren’t shared between the proverbial “us.” I’ve been called out on my usage of POC and I’ve definitely learned to be more thoughtful with it.

AH: That’s a big debate I was having with someone during the Mizzou protests, when there were a lot of people of color who made Facebook posts expressing solidarity with the protestors. The pushback asked why you had to identify as a person of color when it was a specifically Black struggle.

AS: Right, that impulse to relate occurs again even in attempts to demonstrate solidarity. The idea that there is a narrative that is available for you to not only consume and participate in but to center yourself in is ultimately incredibly disrespectful and comes at the cost representing the situation honestly. If you’re erasing Black voices to center yourself, even towards highlighting racism, how is that any different from historical oppression of the Black community?

AH: Absolutely. I am interested in the capitalist individualism that you see in musicians. I think it has a deep value because it articulates a humanity that has been denied for a long time. But what kind of “human” you are trying to be included into? Who is this subject? If an artist says, “I’m going to start from the bottom and climb to the top,” what structures of inequalities are being erased?

AS: I think you answered that question with a pretty accurate summation of what that process requires. It’s an invitation to participate in story of triumph against adversity that complements the American bootstraps ethic, the idea of “working your way up.” Of course, we often turn to music to soundtrack our personal experiences. What celebrities do and what their celebrity does for us is worth considering. These people become people’s avatars on personal levels. As much as our choices reveal about the status quo they can also be useful towards

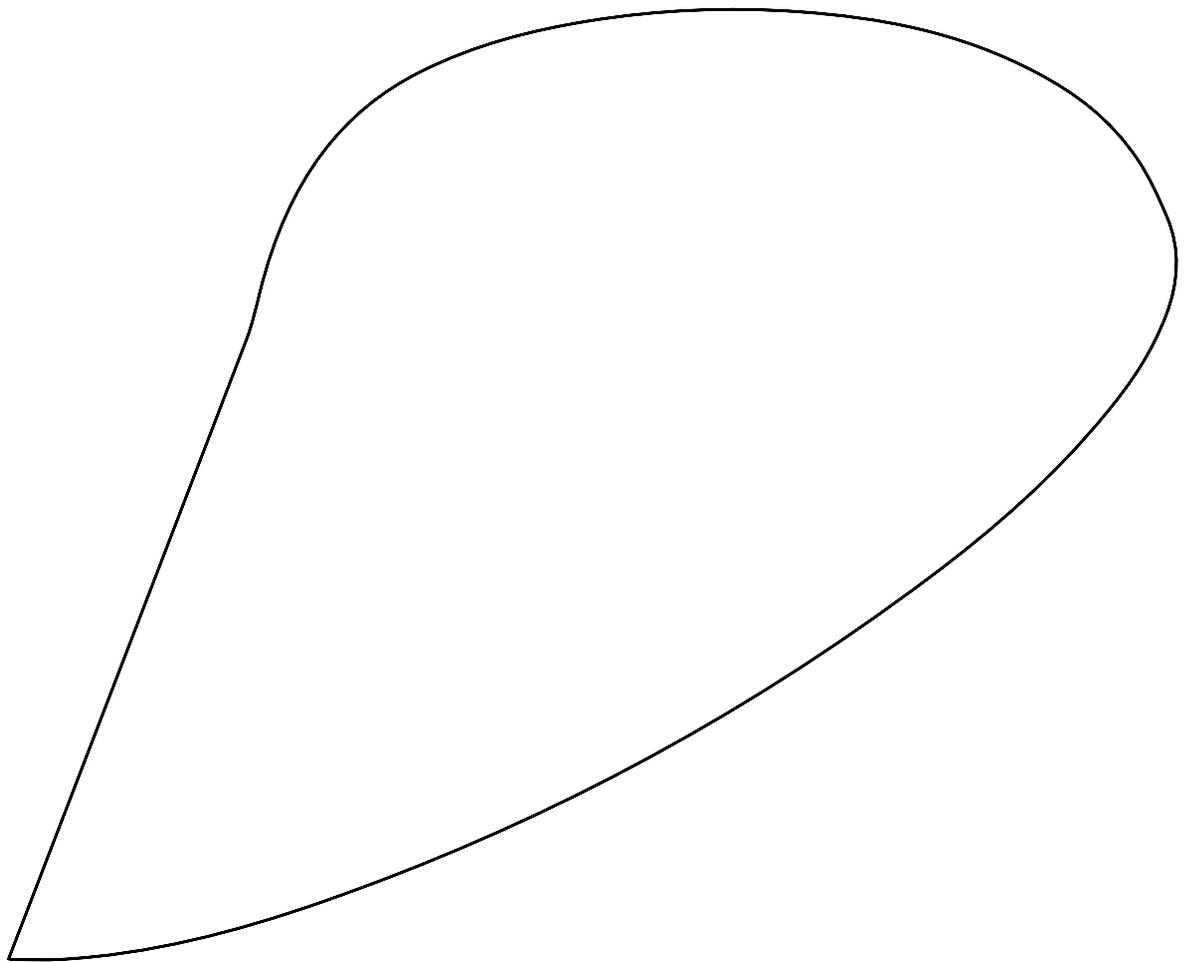
creating a new one. The consumption of pop culture isn’t always hyper-individualized. Stanning and fandom build bonds that, while seemingly superficial, resist alienation. What people feel within themselves and toward each other can be useful. Look at what Black women have written about what Beyoncé means to them.

Elements of pop culture can be experienced in ways that really free people to do the “real work.” If someone feels less depressed or anxious because of what Beyoncé creates, that is useful. We don’t want to say that these figures are necessarily liberatory. But people need what makes them feel good, what lets them live, that encourages them to do the work that needs to be done. So we don’t always have to pore over these celebrities’ personal lives or politics but we should look at the effect they have on the culture, that’s all we’re entitled to anyway, we don’t know them personally.

AH: How would you draw a connection between the construction of the American Dream myth and US-led drone strikes in northern Pakistan?

AS: Part of maintaining the sense of availability of a dream is also maintaining the sense that any threats against it are being eliminated, which explains why fear is such a central component of American myth-making. You don’t have to articulate the dream itself, just to gesture at its availability; the rest of rhetoric, political policy, and cultural production can fixate instead on the fears.

As long as the sense of legitimacy of the fear is maintained, there will be support for efforts presented as threat-elimination. This is ultimately the key of global economies. America’s number one manufactured good is weapons—we need to create a demand and market for their use because we have to move those weapons. The amount of money that cycles in trade depends on maintenance of conflict abroad. Yemenis are dying at the hands of made-in-the-USA weapons that we sell at record-breaking rates to Saudi Arabia. We have to use up all the guns we make—all the array of military



weaponry and of course maintain the relationship that many politicians in office have with corporations, lobbyists, and stakeholders. Consider Dick Cheney's economic assets and the fact that he was a chief architect of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars—it seems almost too obvious and too plain to be allowed to be true. You wish it were more complicated. But there it is--drones are a huge industry.

AH: I want to talk about Twitter. If we're talking about the myths of the country, we now see that people have outlets to vocalize their thoughts about this myth without going through the vetting processes in print media. Could you say a bit about the conversations enabled by places like Twitter, Facebook, even Tumblr, and any outlets that allow you to write and express your ideas, while addressing the backlash they enable?

AS: Over the past few years, digital media has broken down certain points of gate-

keeping. Because platforms like Facebook or Twitter have no precedents, the new media generation never feel as if these spaces weren't for them. So these platforms created a completely blank, open frontier for people to express themselves without inhibition. Writing and thinking publicly is very different from writing and thinking within academia or for an academic journal or a prestige media publication. For many marginalized people, there are spaces that you are socialized to not identify with or feel entitled to. That wasn't true for Twitter and Tumblr.

We are living in a rare moment that is often described as "outrage culture," which is a funny phrase to me because I think the outrage is overdue. The people who are newly offended are the people who were previously sheltered from the kind of feedback that is now reaching them. Many conversations only serve to indicate the position of the people having the conversation. Think of liberal pundits that are very suspi-

cious of Twitter and the masses because suddenly the status that their byline in a prestigious publication afforded them is no longer as relevant.

People want to talk about the culture of public shaming and how it could threaten someone's job if they say something bigoted online, but you know what also threatens people jobs? Racists. Many of the people able to be heard now, to evoke their membership in a crowd, are people who are and have been vulnerable to the whims of bigots. Their teacher, boss, etc. If shaming ultimately causes people to be more careful with their words, then good—we should be more careful; we should use the correct pronouns and perform these very simple and small acts that make a huge difference in other people's experience of the world. A lot of conversations about political correctness are about the dignity and courtesy towards people that were previously never considered, and I'm encouraged to live in a culture where that may be changing, where students do demand a recognition of history and experience. The ability to "call out" figures is a rare power for those who don't have many resources.

The other side is that, despite the innovative ways these platforms are being used by people of color, they are generating value that goes toward white capitalist institutions, corporate owned platforms.

AH: Twitter is the face for neoliberal economics, in a way.

AS: It wouldn't be half as relevant and interesting a space if not for black Twitter alone. The work of many different marginalized communities makes these spaces cool and fun, so they're supplying free labor to generate value for people who are *not them*, for corporations. Twitter can hand off your data to the government; Tumblr can delete your blog... you're at the whims of these corporations.

Another element is that just as many people are monitoring these communities. Activists continue to be monitored. It's a platform of visibility in a surveillance state—visibility is not power in a surveillance state.

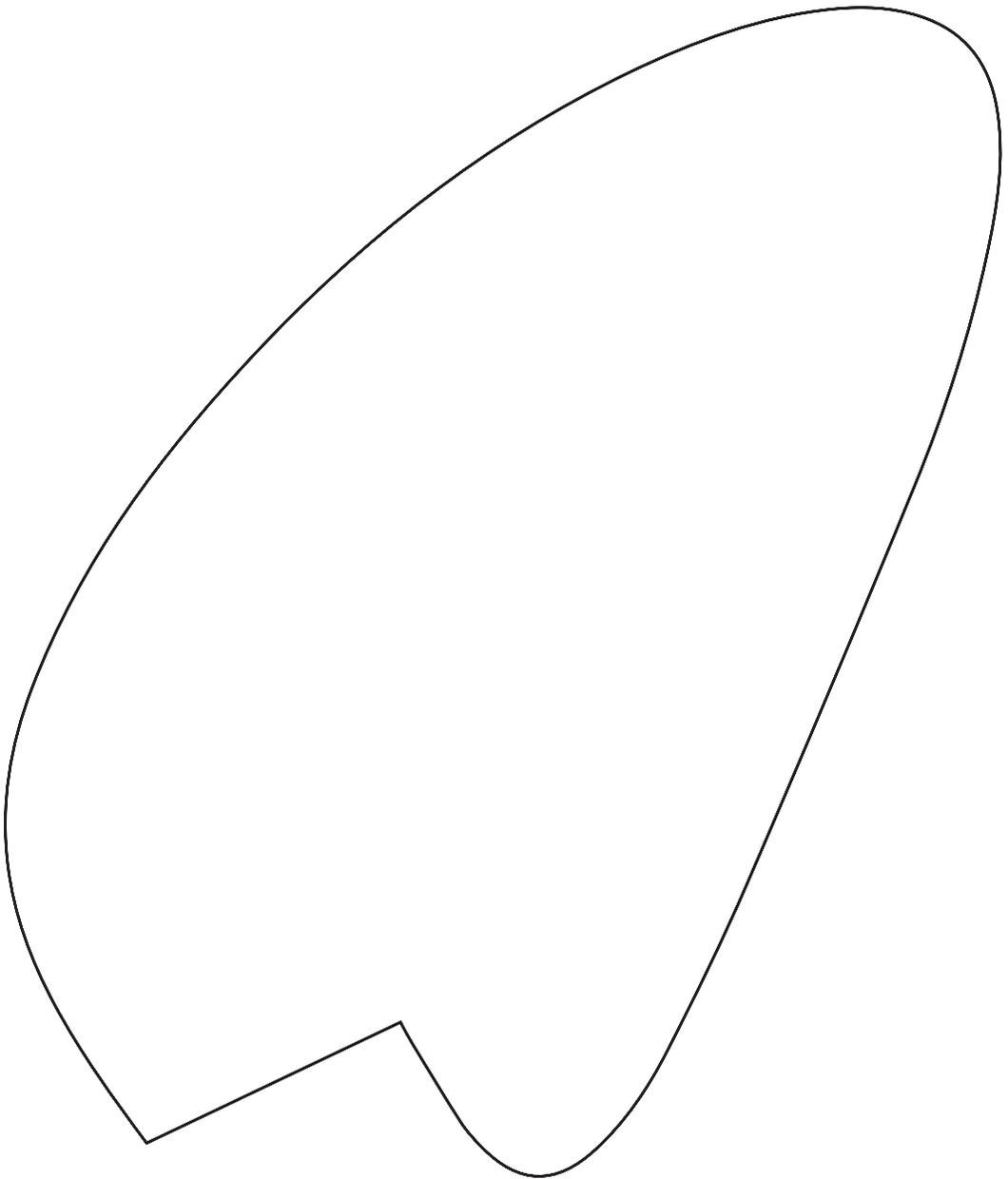
Media outlets constantly mine conversations among marginalized communities for content that they then use to generate income. They are monetizing the uncompensated labor of a lot of people, and it goes beyond rampant plagiarism. I've seen writers of color on Tumblr have work lifted and used without attribution in some of the most prominent publications today. What makes these spaces innovative is the people, not anything inherent to the platforms.

It's just as important, if not more, to look at the ways in which existing status quos remap onto digital spaces, and that social hierarchies are reinscribed onto these digital platforms. That is evident from the ways in which the most marginalized face the most abuse, to who gets ripped off of and who gets to see the profits their ideas. For every black teenager that's so good at Vine that they get hired to make compensated content, for every thinker whose blog has led to invitations to publish work elsewhere, there are plenty more people whose work goes uncompensated and exists only to feed into algorithms and trends trying to exploit them. That's a story of power and exploitation under capitalism.

We keep discussing black cultural production because it's such a major and obvious example of that. The girl who coined "fleek" saw none of the coins that a place like Denny's made when they used that phrase to sell pancakes.

The digital is hardly democratic. What's new doesn't dismantle what's old—it just shifts it. Monitoring the shifts is what reveals opportunities for intervention, which is what remains relevant as we continue to examine cultural production and consumption.

Adil Habib is a graduating senior majoring in Middle Eastern South Asian and African Studies.



EDIBLE
MINORI-
TY, EDIBLE
WOMAN:
Contemporary
American My-
thology

by Kate Irwin

Most think of myth as ancient Greek or as an etiological story fictional to those unfamiliar with its origins, but finding a myth today is no Herculean task. The term myth has a much wider breadth and depth of meaning. Charles Briggs explains that myth in anthropological terms does not necessarily mean “error” or “false conception” when considering how myth functions to convey meaning. Indeed, myth is far more complex than one side of a true-false binary. Myth manifests itself in human cultures and economic systems as language. “Myth” does not have to be a negative term – myth creation and performance is a kind of art form, traditionally orally disseminated, and now distributed in the corporate realm through graphic art, text, and radio jingles.

For many studying anthropology and folklore, myth is not something to be discredited. Instead, it carries semantic weight. It is a narrative, often set in a remote time. It is artistically rendered and complex. Because this myth, or narrative composed of language, is shared with others, every myth is “performed.” Traditionally, the creator of myths is acutely aware of his or her audience and performs the myth-narrative in a face-to-face setting. However, in the industrial age, myths are produced and disseminated with only the assumption of an audience. From this assumption, the audience is created only after the myth’s production.

To further deepen one’s understanding of myth as it functions in society today, one can look to semiologist Roland Barthes. In *Mythologies*, he writes that myth is a type of speech chosen by history. History, in

this context, refers to larger political power structures that employ myths to naturalize specific values, thus making subjective human constructions of power seem natural, normal, and benign.

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CORPORATE STORYTELLING

In America today, capitalism is the driving force that generates national myths. Corporate entities produce the vast majority of American myths, which are employed for marketing and corporate “storytelling.” The corporate myth is also a language, conveying information and meaning through its form—a form that is highly visual. Marketing and product design teams collaborate, creatively developing the product’s “story” and translating it thoughtfully into every aspect of the product’s release and presentation. Every aspect of a product on a grocery store shelf in America has gone through rigorous rounds of testing to ensure it performs, in the eyes of its respective corporation, the “right” kind of story, the right kind of myth-narrative about the product contained within. While companies do not refer to their marketing and product design teams as “myth-makers,” that is, in essence, what they are.

In the American grocery store, we are glutted with a genus of mythological graphic art. The product packaging art and its labels convey the myth of the product directly from the company’s myth-makers to the consumer. The label on a conventional container of butter or carton of eggs, for example, will often feature an illustrated idyllic farm scene with green grass and free-flying, happy-looking animals. However, these scenes do not depict reality – they promote a romanticized sense of “naturalness” that obscures the common practice for dairy and egg industry producers to confine animals to cramped, dark cages with little to no light – a far cry from the free-range cartoons on the box. It is also standard practice for egg-laying hens to loose their feathers due to stress and have beaks removed without anesthetic”, a picture far from the cartoon

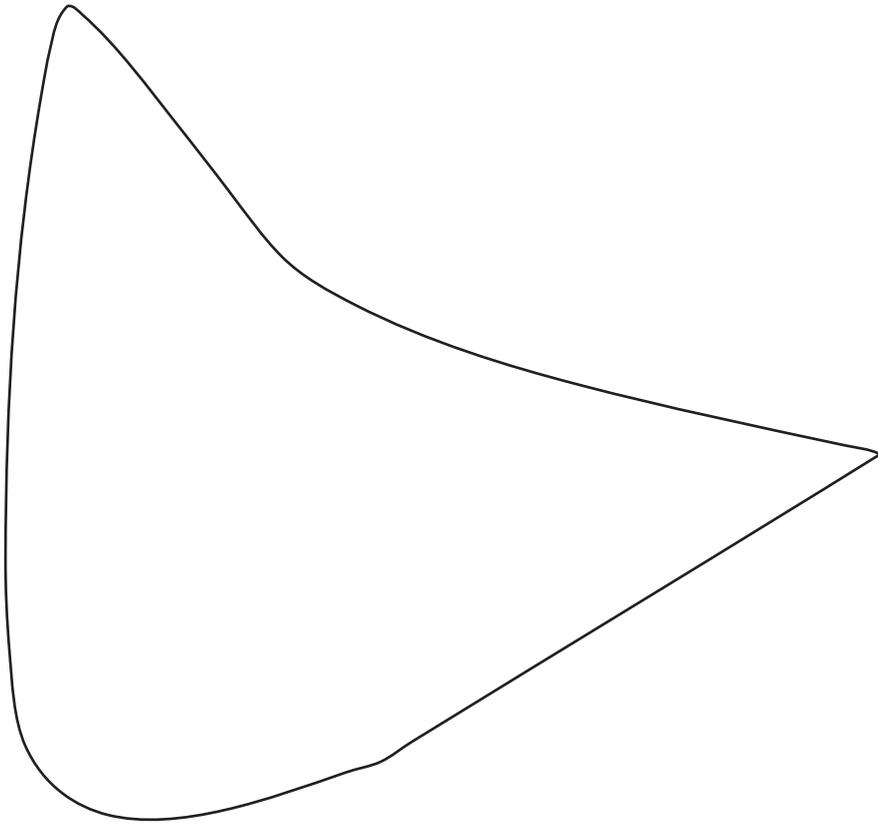
hens.¹

There is thus an evident discrepancy between reality and the narrative of corporate packaging. Through these illustrations, a myth-narrative is created, one that tells a story that may or may not have ever existed. There is nothing natural about conventional agriculture, yet to soothe and appease the palate of the average American, packaging neutralizes these disturbing processes by layering over them a constructed, mythical counter-narrative.

In recent years, some consumers have questioned corporate myths about conventional food and seek more “organic,” truly “all-natural” alternatives. Now, even large chain grocers such as Wal-Mart have caught on to the consumer demand for “honest” food. But in these “natural and organic” food aisles, brightly-colored packages containing ingredients grown hundreds or thousands of miles away from each other make claims about the “natural” soy-based inks that dye the casing of a box of “all-natural” chips that have been produced on a sterile conveyor belt. By claiming that the product itself is natural, normal, the packaging likewise claims that the fact that the food is packaged at all is also natural, normal. It draws us into the technological age, convinced of a new “normal” in which a product’s packaging is oft ignored and only processed at a subconscious level.

So how did we get to where we are today, where profit-driven conglomerates invent stories of how food was made and sell us these myths on a cardboard box? This history of consumer packaging began with the dawn of “self-serve” supermarkets, which allowed consumers to directly engage with the products on shelves. In this system, which was gaining traction by the 1940s and 1950s, consumers became able to engage with the product in a more direct, tactile and visual selection process than before.

With the onset of self-serve shopping came the production of packaging that produces myth or “tells a story,” directly engaging the consumer. A 1945 study by DuPont, prominent American Cellophane manufacturer, noted that “point of sale factors,



such as display and packaging become all-important to stimulate unplanned, impulse buying.”² Self-serve shopping renders effective packaging and myth production essential in order to maintain a profitable, recognizable brand.

The original Campbell’s soup can design, for example, produces the myth of Campbell’s soup as “homemade” through its cursive handwritten title, as though Joseph Campbell himself made and labeled each can. Campbell’s corporate archivist Jonathan Thorn said to the *New York Times* that the Campbell script “is very similar to Joseph Campbell’s own signature, which may have been used as a basis for the label script.” Thorn also notes that the cursive “was designed to appeal to the housewife” and “intended to look like the cursive handwriting of the day that one would find on handwritten recipes, equating to ‘Homemade.’”³

For nearly a hundred years, supermarkets have relied upon packaging to create myths about their products. From a marketing standpoint, package iconography depicts an appealing image about the company’s

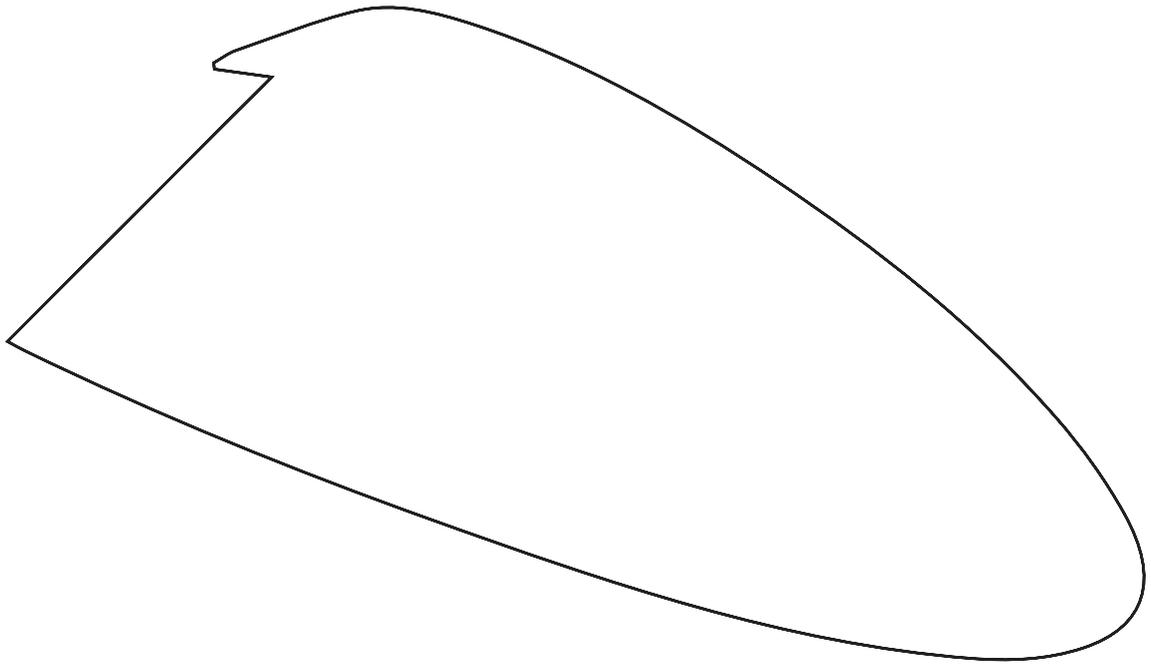
ethics and manufacturing processes. These stories are mythologized beyond reality, and are rarely true. Sometimes, these American myths carry insidious weight.

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AUNT JEMIMA: AMERICAN MYTH

In the United States, modern-day myths abound in various forms, posing as a perennial part of American culture when, in fact, such myths function as symbols that perpetuate false notions of the past and oppress those whom they fail, miserably, to fairly depict. Under this broad category of myth, the myth-narrative and myth-character emerge on American supermarket shelves. The corporate American-made myths of Aunt Jemima and Miss Chiquita are two of the most prominent examples of American myths—specifically, myth-characters with myth-narratives—rooted in racist historical tropes whose images number in the hundreds of thousands across American grocery stores today.

In 1889, two white men created Aunt



Jemima. Their names were Chris Rutt and Charles Underwood, businessmen who owned a milling company and developed the first ready pancake mix. By 1890, a spokeswoman, former slave Nancy Green, was hired to play the character of Aunt Jemima and sell the pancake mixes across America. By 1937, the Quaker Mills Company had bought Aunt Jemima and registered her image and name as an official trademark. A few decades later, a black woman was hired to play the character of Aunt Jemima at the new Aunt Jemima restaurant at Disneyland.⁴ Aunt Jemima the character spans virtually the entire pancake mix's history. As a result, her identity and image are deeply entrenched in American popular culture and are highly recognizable.

But Aunt Jemima is not a black woman—she is a mythological construction. During the early years of Aunt Jemima, she was portrayed by a number of real African-American actors, some of whom had recently been freed from slavery. And yet,

in the employment of the white creators of the Aunt Jemima myth, these female actors adorned the attire of slaves once again.

Early advertisements depicting Aunt Jemima explicitly invoked the black “Mammy” stereotype – that of the black female slave cook – to sell products. Early renditions and portrayals of Aunt Jemima showed her as a “large, gregarious woman,” a description consistent across Jemima’s early images⁴. In Jemima’s first iteration, Professor Diane Roberts argues that “Aunt’s Jemima’s enormous bosom signifies her maternal feeding function: she is a nurturing body.”⁵

The early Aunt Jemima was also clearly coded as “black” through her language. Supposedly comic advertisements from the 1940s have Jemima saying things like, “Um-m-m-m my secret Old-South recipe sho’ do happify yo’ appetite,” a phrase that renders her former status as a slave in the old South benign, even a desirable selling point. In another advertisement, she says

“Let ol’ Auntie sing a song in yo’ kitchen,” words which suggest again not only that Aunt Jemima lacks formal education but also that she is a complacent “happy servant” to the white family, who may no longer have an Aunt Jemima in the kitchen, but might still buy the pancake mix.

Aunt Jemima is a product of post-Civil War slavery nostalgia. An early full-page advertisement for Aunt Jemima’s products features multiple columns of marketing prose, including the following extracted anecdote:

“A recipe that first won fame when good food meant even more than it does today—down South before the Civil War. A recipe that mammy cooks on many plantations tried in vain to equal. A recipe that has been used and liked by more women than any other in the history of food.

“While her master lived, so the story goes, Aunt Jemima refused to tell a soul the secret of that wonderful flavor in the tender pancakes she baked for him and his guests. It was only long after the war that she was finally persuaded to sell it to the representative of a now celebrated milling company.”

This myth, presented as truth through the vehicle of the advertisement to the American public, solidifies Jemima’s status as a former slave who invented the pancake mix while enslaved by her white, male master. It also suggests that Aunt Jemima herself was famous, a kind of legendary “Mammy” figure: the rhetoric that “mammy cooks on many plantations tried in vain to equal [her recipe]” endows Jemima, in contrast to other slaves, with a kind of “superior” status among them. This myth-narrative establishes not only Jemima as a myth, but also creates her mythical “master.” In early Aunt Jemima advertisements, Aunt Jemima is only depicted helping the white, bourgeois woman and serving white, nuclear families of middle and upper classes: a very different milieu to her mythical origins. However, the early image of the “large” Aunt Jemima in a headscarf appears in both reimagined slavery-era illustrations and twentieth-cen-

tury American household illustrations. She becomes, therefore, a mythical figure frozen in time. She is a woman from the nineteenth century transported to American households of the 1940s, 50s, and 60s.

★

REBRANDING AUNT JEMIMA

In 1989, Aunt Jemima’s image changed. Her slave’s headscarf was removed, she lost weight, lightened her skin and donned pearl earrings, a lace collar and red lipstick. The company described the rebrand as depicting not a slave but a modern “black working grandmother.”⁶ Critics have pointed out, however, that even after her “makeover,” the illustration and ongoing presence of Aunt Jemima’s face and name do nothing to erase her history. The Quaker Oats Company euphemizes her slave’s headscarf by calling it a “headband” they removed to give Aunt Jemima an “update.”⁶ Roberts argues that now Aunt Jemima “presides over the American breakfast, the head-rag gone, the face slimmer, the outfit changed to what a businesswoman might wear,” rendering Jemima “a Black Urban Professional, or Buppie, Jemima. But the name on the pancake-mix box is still “Aunt Jemima” – we are still haunted by titles of slavery and minstrelsy, even in our bright egalitarian supermarkets.”⁷ Though one racist caricature has been replaced with another, Aunt Jemima in all of her variants pervasively eternalizes the “Mammy” myth and contains coded messages about the role of African American women in historical and contemporary society, despite surface-level attempts to depoliticize her image.

For Quaker Oats, when faced with former racist marketing and iconography, the natural response is to whitewash its victim and efface the old records. Quaker Oats mythifies reality by stating, “Aunt Jemima products continue to stand for warmth, nourishment and trust – qualities you’ll find in loving moms from diverse backgrounds.” This language surrounding the Aunt Jemima myth “does not deny things . . . it purifies them, it makes them innocent, it gives them a natural and eternal justification.”⁸ Aunt

Jemima is dissociated from her true origins through abstraction. The Aunt Jemima myth “deprives the object of which it speaks of all History”⁹ because it behaves as though it is not affiliated with the history of slavery. Aunt Jemima as a myth manipulates History into appearing as Nature by obscuring history, depicting the African American woman as having existed with pearls since 1889, her presence on the box “a statement of fact.”¹⁰ Today, below Aunt Jemima’s “updated” face is the phrase “since 1889.” But we know this is a lie. Aunt Jemima has not appeared this way since 1889. Today’s Aunt Jemima has been whitewashed, transformed from the “Mammy” into someone new with lighter skin, western dress, and bourgeois pearls. Buppie Jemima is still a myth, a fictional construction of what a black woman is from a white perspective. It is hardly an “update” when Aunt Jemima continues to serve, as a mythic idea of a black woman, a predominantly white public. She has gone from white America’s “Mammy” to its “Mommy,” now officially called the latter by the Quaker Oats Company.¹¹

But her name and role remain cultural markers that falsely represent and limit black women. As Roberts explains, “The names white America has for black women are masks, aliases, constructions heavy with cultural baggage¹⁰.” Aunt Jemima’s manufactured identity is as whitewashed as her product. She remains enslaved to the white ideals of American patriarchal society.

Today’s Aunt Jemima is a modern myth because her figure functions as what Roland Barthes calls “depoliticized speech.” The racist myth of Aunt Jemima is depoliticized today through this removal of her original headscarf. The official Aunt Jemima website veils this historical change as something commonsensical or natural. However, this depoliticization of the figure of the black “Mammy,” “a black woman with responsibility for the care of white children” “esp. before the abolition of slavery,”¹² from her colonial context mythifies Aunt Jemima by removing the “contingent, historical, in one word, fabricated quality of colonialism.”¹³ Aunt Jemima is presented as “a natural image of this reality,” supported by the illusion that Aunt Jemima has always

been a capitalist selling products and was never a former slave or inspired by stereotypes surrounding slavery.

Furthermore, Aunt Jemima is coded as a capitalist and capitalist object: the “Other” whose livelihood originated in the kitchen. Aunt Jemima remains a myth, “a pure object [and] spectacle” of the “Other,” promoting “an erroneous conception of this history” through her rebranding as a modern American mom.¹⁴

Some argue that today, Jemima functions as “a label, not meaning anything other than to identify a particular brand, and kept because customers recognize the name and symbol⁷.” However, this statement oversimplifies Aunt Jemima’s historical ties to slavery, and the fact that obscures the fact that printed on a box and marketed to mass culture, she remains, as M.M. Manning writes, “a black woman bought and sold.”¹⁵

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CHIQUITA BANANA: PERSONAL COMMODITY

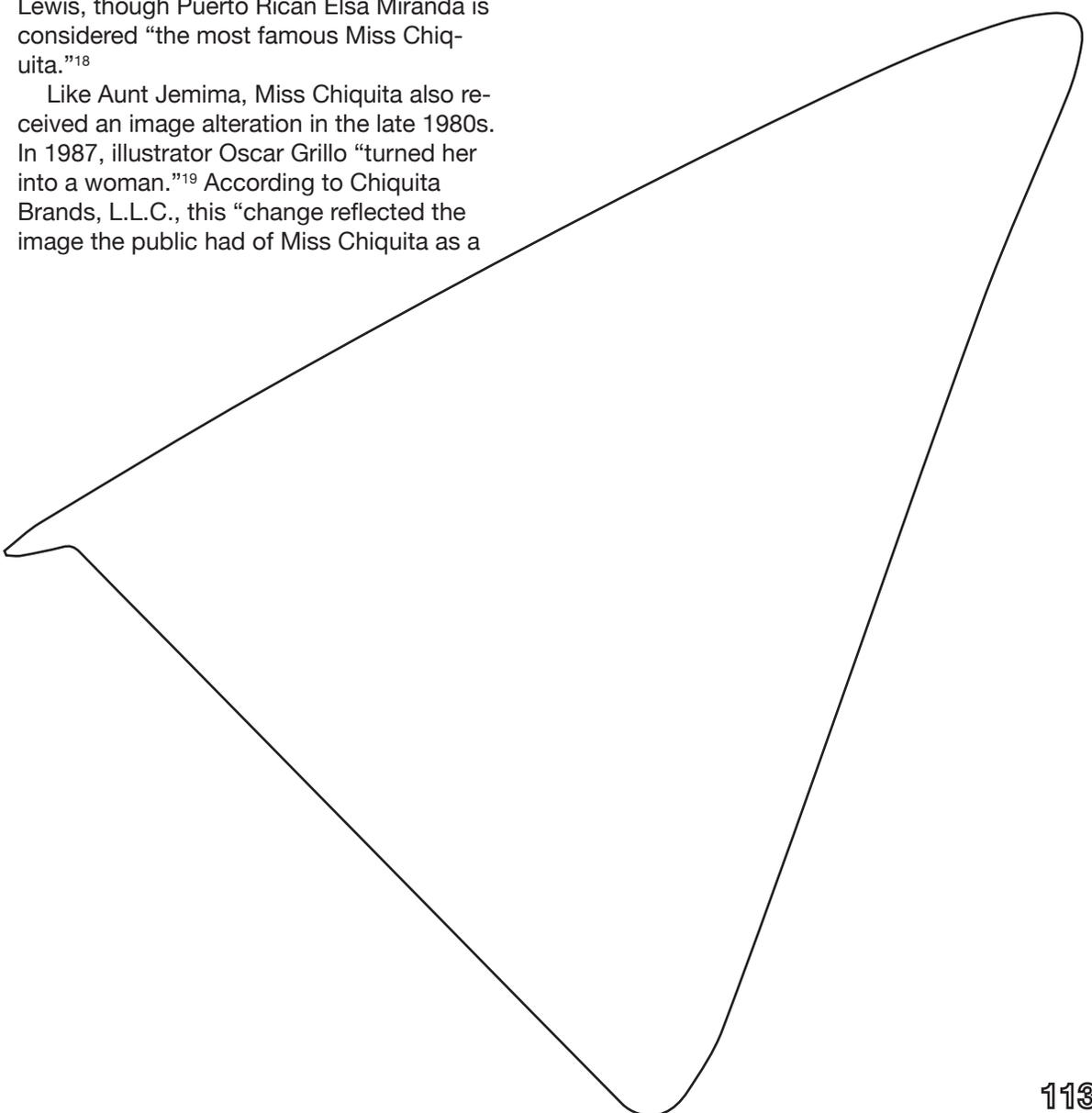
Aunt Jemima is not the only women of color conjured up by 1940s ad men to be bought and sold in the American supermarket. The figure of the Chiquita woman is another myth, perpetuating the idea of people of color as subservient, purchasable and consumable. In 1944, an illustrator named Dik Browne drew Miss Chiquita, a feminized banana with female legs. In Browne’s drawings, Miss Chiquita wears Latin-style dress, a basket of fruit on her head, and red lipstick. She is often shown winking or posing seductively, with a strange line above her dress that functions, in some renditions, as resembling cleavage. Drawing on racist stereotypes about Latina women, this symbol also dehumanizes women and deprives them of identity, as the edible woman is hypersexualized and made comically “exotic.”

Chiquita’s original jingle, imitating Latin American music, was created by a white man, Robert Foreman, at an ad agency in the United States. Another white male employee at the ad agency produced the jingle’s “Latin” music. The jingle became a pop culture phenomenon, played up to “376

times a day on radio stations across the United States. It was one of the most successful commercial jingles of all time.”¹⁶ In the song, Miss Chiquita begins by singing, “I’m Chiquita banana and I’ve come to say,” a phrase that establishes her, paradoxically, as both woman and edible fruit. She sings on, describing a number of various ways she can be eaten, served, and stored, underscoring her status as edible, feminine, and not entirely human.

Various “Miss Chiquitas” were, like the many “Aunt Jemimas,” hired as live actors at the inception of Miss Chiquita to embody her in real life. The first Miss Chiquita actor debuted in 1944.¹⁷ Many of the early Chiquita women were white, such as Monica Lewis, though Puerto Rican Elsa Miranda is considered “the most famous Miss Chiquita.”¹⁸

Like Aunt Jemima, Miss Chiquita also received an image alteration in the late 1980s. In 1987, illustrator Oscar Grillo “turned her into a woman.”¹⁹ According to Chiquita Brands, L.L.C., this “change reflected the image the public had of Miss Chiquita as a



real person,”¹⁹ though it may also have, like the contemporary Aunt Jemima rebrand, been motivated by allegations of racism. Either way, it apparently took over forty years for Chiquita Brands to recognize Miss Chiquita as a human being.

Both of these American myths, in effect, promote the image of the edible minority, transforming the woman of color into a resource to be consumed, a face on a packaging of food product. The edible minority is produced by transforming the spokesperson into the product, making the myth of the minority a consumed item along with the product itself. Aunt Jemima and Chiquita’s illustrated images on the products’ packaging, with the color scheme uniting the mythological personae and the product, render them equally consumable as they are disposable. This parallels how minorities are exploited in the capitalist system, as, like slaves and now underpaid illegal immigrant laborers of color, the Edible Minority is repackaged and sold to a white audience for the audience’s consumption of both the labor and goods produced. Like Quaker Oats, Chiquita Brands, L.L.C. euphemizes its dark history by referring to past labor rights abuses as “storied moments.”²⁰

The edible minority myth has been modified to appear benign, obscuring its roots in historical oppression, racism, and slavery. Today, Aunt Jemima and Chiquita still embody their respective histories rooted in institutionalized racism in the United States despite corporate attempts to normalize history. These myths remain insidious because they have been adapted in an attempt to partially efface their dark pasts. Continuing to use depoliticized myths, instead of acknowledge their histories, produces an effacement of our national reality.

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NOTES

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AMA TORRES





THE NEO-
LIBERAL
UNIVERSI-
TY: An inter-
view with Re-
inhold Martin

by Jack Gross

CJLC caught up with Reinhold Martin, Associate Professor at Columbia GSAPP and Directory of the Temple Hoyne Buell Center for the Study of American Architecture, to discuss the corporatization of the University.

JACK GROSS: Your recent essay in Grey Room, “His Master’s Voice: The Dialectics of the University”, begins with a quotation from Nietzsche, in which he describes the university as a kind of fragmented mechanical hydra: “One speaking mouth, with many ears, and half as many writing hands – there you have to all appearances, the external academic apparatus; the university education machine in action.” I thought this might be a good place to start – what work does this image do for thinking about the university?

REINHOLD MARTIN: This is a well known quote from Nietzsche, and what I like about it is that it’s not only the institution itself that’s represented as fragmented (into various departments and so forth) but it’s also the subjects within the institution that are fragmented: one speaking mouth and many pairs of ears, etc. It’s quite a literal description of the scene of teaching; most classically, the scene of the lecture. One thing that this very direct and literal way of understanding what actually happens in the classroom can do is complicate the idea that there is such a thing as “The University” as a unified body. At the same time, it helps us recognize that it’s precisely these kinds of fragmented processes that produce the phantasm of The University – the unified body of the institution.

So this article is about the interaction between lectures and seminars – the different media systems that enable them and the power systems that underpin them. One of the underlying paradoxes of the university as a unified institution is that it requires a certain kind of media-technical and bodily fragmentation to pro-

duce the very unity of the university – as an imaginary being, and as an institution that works in very real ways.

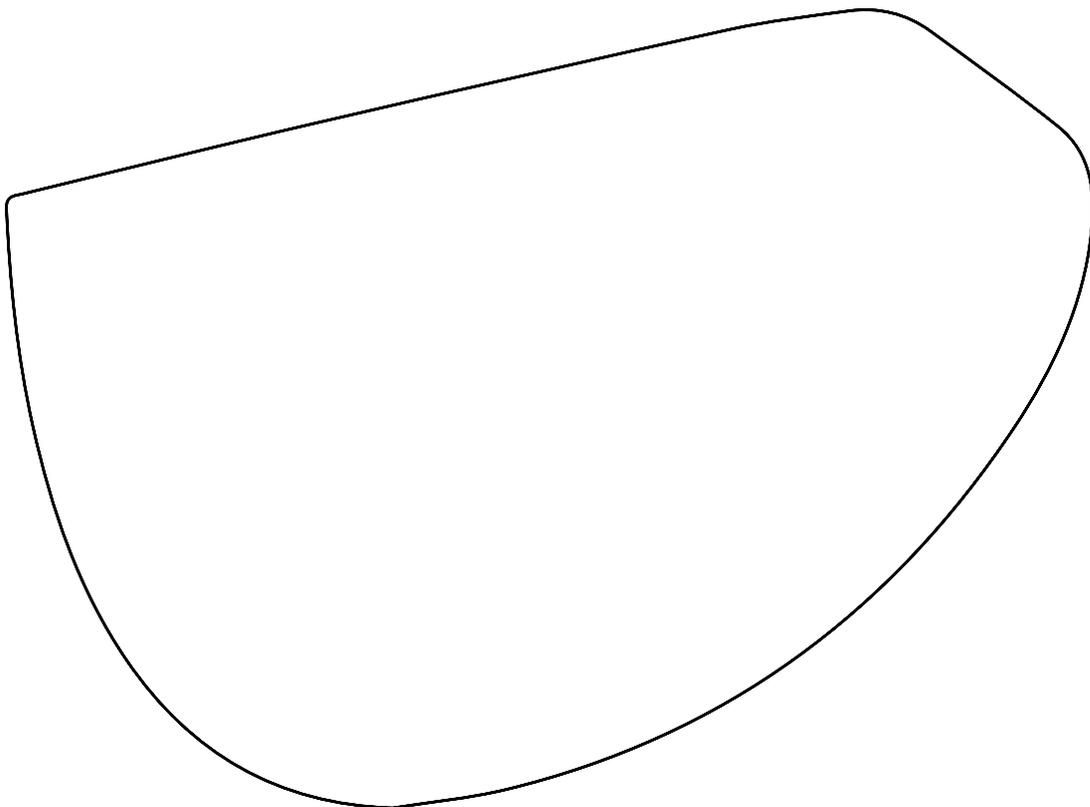
JG: One of the premises that you take up in your discussion of the University of Chicago is the specificity of the American university in comparison to the Prussian university of Nietzsche’s time. In Nietzsche’s model, the state looms behind the unity of the university apparatus, while in the American model there are theological foundations that contribute to or float above that unity.

RM: Well of course in the European universities the church was also there in very profound ways, but differently. Whether in Prussia or in the American case the typical way of figuring such modern institutions is to recognize them first as secular bodies and then recognize the denominational histories behind them. My project attempts to turn this around – it is in some sense an effort to make sense of the political theology of the university. In the example of the University of Chicago, specifically, but also elsewhere, religious doctrine and theology are figured in the chapels but are also displaced or translated through the various

protocols that structure the university itself.

JG: You examine the transposition of highly technical aspects of building and, in a sense, audio engineering, as evidence of a connection between the secular lecture hall and the religious pulpit.

RH: Right. In this case, with the chapel at the University of Chicago, there was a highly technical and precise effort made to construct a particular reverberation effect – to give the speaker an echo of themselves that wasn’t audible to the audience. And while few other lecture halls were designed and realized with that level of acoustical specificity, this set-up realizes what Foucault might call the dispositif of the lecture as one of auto-audition, hearing oneself speak, which is an uncanny experience that anyone who has ever given a lecture would recognize. In this sense the speaker, in hearing him- or herself speak, is inscribed into a theological circuit that then has genealogical ties to the chapel. I take this as an index of a larger apparatus, that we can understand in a manner similar to that in which Foucault took Bentham’s idealized panopticon as a diagram of a larger system



or regime. But I'm always interested also in the incompleteness that is inherent to these kinds of projects – that they always result in somewhat imperfect and incomplete systems – which is a variation that Foucault was maybe less attentive to. That's what media theory would call the noise in the channels.

JG: It's interesting that this technical specificity brings the aural into a central place in your study because it seems like intuitively the most crucial sense and media that one would talk about in relationship to the university and pedagogy would be sight, text. Could you talk more about the relationship between these two sense experiences? How do they relate to each other in what you call the dialectic of the university?

RM: The seminar begins with the written word – with the list. At Columbia, what eventually became Lit Hum was basically a reading list of what were later called the “Great Books” and now are called the Western Canon. There was first the texts themselves and then a related proliferation of documents and lists and bureaucratic procedures that went into the construction of these kinds of programs – the scripts for how to read a book, which is of course something that is still being disputed in literary studies. Some of these processes focused on the list became quite ridiculous: for example, there was a house in Chicago in which all these people compiling lists of the “Great Books” began identifying with the philosophers whose works they were indexing.

JG: Index house!

RM: Right. I see Index House as opening a window onto the proliferation of significations and references that are produced in relation to this attempt to make a list. Underneath this is a kind of scientism that wants to pin down those texts, but it ends up being kind of funny how it always overflows. So they have an index to an index, and it just keeps on going. Again, there are moments in which the ridiculousness of high pedagogy, its mixture of pretentiousness and seriousness, is important to take as deadly serious

on its own terms. What I'm trying to do, in this case, is to map out different pedagogical sites. Thinking of these institutions and programs as different sites allows me to think of, for example, the university as a boundary problem, which is a very big issue today for all kinds of debates about what these institutions are and could or should be, as for example, around the question of academic freedom. Speech that is permitted in the classroom may not be permitted in a boardroom, so discussing certain things here, uptown, that aren't discussable around similar tables in midtown becomes part of our function in this particular site. Now of course, those midtown office buildings are linked to this campus, via money, via alumni, but there's always a boundary, a gate, a threshold.

JG: The negotiations of those thresholds is of course also a central element of the history of the university, then.

RM: One of the key cases there is Berkeley – both because it was built on the imagined national frontier, but also because it's a state university. By the 1960s the network of institutions within the UC system was theorized as the “multiversity,” which was a kind of precursor to today's corporate university, except at the level of the state system. Within this multi-headed system there was again a division of intellectual labor, from the community colleges up to the big research institutes, with Berkeley as a sort of crown jewel. Within all of this there are boundaries, horizons. The one I am most focused on in this case is the threshold that marks out the laboratory as a frontier.

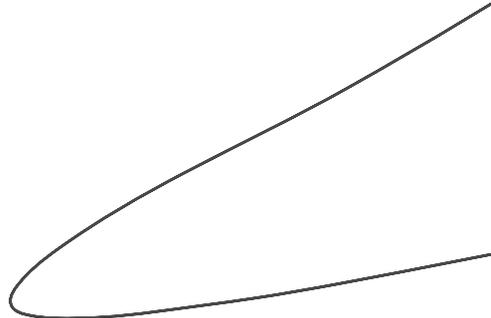
In 1893 at the Columbian World Exposition in Chicago, the historian Frederick Jackson Turner famously declared that the conquest of the national territory was complete and the American frontier was closed. This was the so-called Turner thesis. It was at this time that Berkeley had begun reinventing itself as a kind of capstone of Manifest Destiny. The connection between the campus and the frontier was materialized in kind of pivot point of the unrealized masterplan of the Berkeley campus: the

Hearst mining building, which was designed by John Galen Howard. And it was Hearst money – which founded the newspaper empire but began as mining money – that built what we can see as a memorial to the first wave of accumulation in the West, as mining was institutionalized as a science. There's a connection then, between the mapping of the territory, the colonization and displacement of the indigenous peoples, and the new necessity of converting raw materials drawn from the mines into objects of study. It was in this period that mining came to be seen as something that deserved an academic department. You know the architecture department here at Columbia, too, was originally housed in the School of Mines.

JG: So there's a relationship, then, between the establishment of Berkeley as you're describing it, its transition into a large research institute with big money and a mining department, and the transition in frontier ideology that Turner marked in that speech.

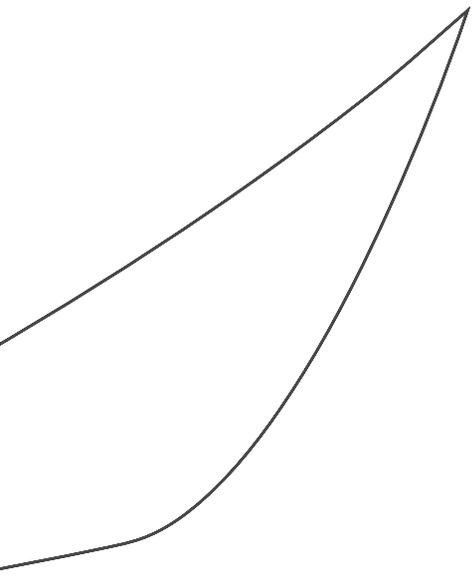
RM: The whole idea is – to modify what Turner said – a turn inward, toward the test tubes, toward the internal frontier of the laboratory. If we take, say, the title of a course like *Frontiers of Science*, we must understand this imaginary figure as a distant translation of the narrative of *Manifest Destiny*; I don't think it can be taken as an innocent metaphor, because it is exactly why big science is Big Science. An important milestone for this was the 1945 report "The Endless Frontier" issued by Vannevar Bush, who was a key figure during the Cold War and afterwards in the establishment of the National Science Foundation. Bush argued for increased government involvement in the funding and promotion of scientific research. In that sense, the laboratory, of course, has a political and economic history. When we think about the epistemology of the laboratory, we are in some sense also thinking about geopolitics.

JG: In conversations about the corporatization of the university, there seems to be a really tenacious presentism in the hand-



wringing about the effect that private power and money have on knowledge production. I've heard the joking counterpoint that draws a continuity between, say, Columbia undergrads going on to Wall Street in 2016 to pursue the limitless financial horizon and Oxford graduates going on to Colonial India in the 1800s. Is Wall Street the kind of logical end of the scientific frontier idea you're talking about? Where's the discontinuity with the past, if there is any?

RM: Sure, the financial and scientific frontier may go together. But of course, the thing is not to say, *vis-a-vis* the natural sciences, that all is ideology or power, but rather to thicken the situation and understand that there are different regimes of truth circulating through these sites. The lecture, again, instantiates a specific regime of truth, with a specific mixture of truth and power under specific circumstances. It's our problem to try and make sense of how those in turn instantiate a kind of complex of power-knowledge such that the corporate university comes into focus in a way that is more meaningful than slogans, which, while not wrong, in some sense flatten the system. That's especially true in the case of a state system like Berkeley – where you can't understand these terms as being exclusive to private universities. When you recognize that the universities and the colleges were amongst the nation's very first corporations, you also recognize that it doesn't work to



say “back in the good old days.”

JG: The foundational ruling in the Dartmouth College v. Woodward case of 1819 situates the university – or the college – at the source of corporate personhood cases. What does the intense intimacy between the university and the history of the corporation mean for current conversations about the corporatization of the university?

RM: These were religious denominational colleges that were set up, as many institutions were, as corporations – first as royal charters that were subsequently converted, if they were set up before independence, into corporate charters under the new system of governance. In this case the trustees are the shareholders, the representatives of the corporate body.

What’s important about the Dartmouth case is that it inaugurated a more or less century-long process by which the corporate person became a real thing. Today, when we speak about corporations claiming political rights, the right to express themselves with money most prominently, this is sometimes described as a legal fiction. I think here, a more acutely literary approach would hesitate at that designation. Rather than differentiating *de facto* between fiction and reality and saying, “Well we know after all that corporations aren’t people, because people are people” – we should take seriously the presumed fiction of the corpora-

tion. That means recognizing that in that moment, in that case, the Supreme Court first recognizes the corporate charter of the college as granting rights in the same way that individual humans have rights. And this recognition becomes performatively true – a kind of speech act.

The way the case was made by Dartmouth’s attorney Daniel Webster demonstrates how corporate personhood is performed, or enacted. In his comments to the Court Webster said, famously, that “This is a small college, and yet there are those who love it!” It is the declaration of love here that acts most strongly, most performatively. And this is something that every alumnus of a college in this country, but perhaps less so in other parts of the world, recognizes, when they are solicited for donations right from day one. In such solicitations, to an important extent, something like love or affect, some emotional relationship with the institution is being rehearsed. And this has to be repeated constantly, in all of the collegiate rituals, the alumni days, the ridiculous hats, and so on.

The production of norms – societal, sexual, pedagogical norms – that occurs within the context of the colleges also continuously rewrites the system, in a manner that isn’t necessarily reducible to the instrumentalities of an inexorable machine. The early residential college was at some level a being, a sentient being, performatively constructed as such; one did not say that one loved the President or the faculty, but rather the body of the institution itself.

JG: How does the connection between norms, loving, and corporate personhood contribute to subject formation within the American university? Is there a difference, for example, between the *Bildung*-oriented model of the German university and what we see today?

RM: Well, the human subject, fortunately, is not a monolith. A degree of disobedience is in some sense inherent to the structure of colleges – one that is basically about a form of obedience. I think it can be understood, partly because it produces this sort

of love-hate relationship, as something like an Oedipal relationship with the fictive body of the institution, gendered according to the heteronormative male, white social codes underpinning it. Now the kind of society that produces this highly normative subjectivity has certainly changed over the years, but a normalizing system is very much still at work, and even forms of dissent, what Foucault calls parrhesia, or truth-telling, are structurally necessary for these institutions to function as objects that still bear the traces of the contradictory thing that we still call enlightenment.

But on the side of neoliberal institutions, it's important to recognize that from the very beginning *Bildung* was about producing human capital. It wasn't named as such in those days, because the primary orientation was towards governance and the training of citizens, but there was always an interest in the production of technical knowledge that would then manage the resources of the nation. This kind of internally heterogeneous neoliberal subjectivity that we are talking about is an assemblage of abilities, what Foucault called an abilities-machine. It's a CV – another list.

JG: A list of abilities that also continues to determine who is inside or outside of the space of the university, the list contributes to the border question.

RM: The US has never had an aristocracy per se but family ties have always been crucial in the college and university system. Early on at UVA it was the southern gentry, in the north it was by and large the northern gentry that populated the denominational colleges, which were gradually democratized. To some extent, these levelling processes are also recalibrations of the CV-function. It is still broadly true that whatever is at the top of a CV – where you've been educated – is a clear class-marker. But there are all kinds of ways in which the CV inscribes the abilities-machine into the social and economic matrix.

JG: There's a pretty stark division in the ways in which people in the Humanities talk

about the dire straits of the university versus the way people in STEM disciplines do, although both are clearly affected by economic pressures and shifting administrative interests. I'm wondering how these two faces of the university relate to the production of the "abilities-machine"?

RM: An important thing to think about in regards to the ways in which universities are globalizing is that they are doing so according to this recognizable division of labor. With a place like Education City in Qatar, for example, it's the professional schools that are at the forefront for many of these elite American schools. You can ask: why is Northwestern opening an overseas branch of their journalism school in Doha? Because Al-Jazeera is there. A kind of professional class can be formed, another layer in the system of abilities. The neoliberal function is to capitalize on that, which is what the Qatari Royal family is doing – investing in the production of a population with a set of abilities that are fairly technical. To see the neoliberal university at work in its purest form, in fact, I would suggest looking at the professional schools rather than just the line to Wall Street.

Kant wrote about the conflict of the faculties – between what he refers to as the higher and lower faculties, which to some extent maps this division of labor. The higher faculties are the professional schools. In Kant's day it was the law school or the theology faculty that would be closest to power. Whereas the lower faculties were philosophy, the humanities, and natural sciences – anything that didn't produce instrumental knowledge. Kant is of course hinting that it's these lower faculties that need to be paid attention to – that this is where critique happens and so forth. The overall schema has changed, but it's still the case that there are portraits of Supreme Court Justices in the Law School, and that the Business School is going to be connected to the technical papers that underwrite the techniques of capital that lead to crisis.

The traditional way of understanding influence in higher education is through a system of patronage, of interested money

coming in – which is still important – but possibly more durable are the places where ideology is taught through technique. This is important not only because technical knowledge operationalizes certain kinds of ideology, but also because it de facto address the student in a kind of TED talk way, as someone who is going to adopt and deploy these abilities in the world as an abilities-machine. I think that’s where the floating signifier “neoliberal” is useful, because this is where neoliberal subjectivity is built. It’s built in a certain way, with certain forms of knowledge that are disarmingly self-evident.

JG: And highly exportable.

RM: Yes, exactly. They’re modular, they are translatable, they can be moved across campuses and taught as technical knowledge.

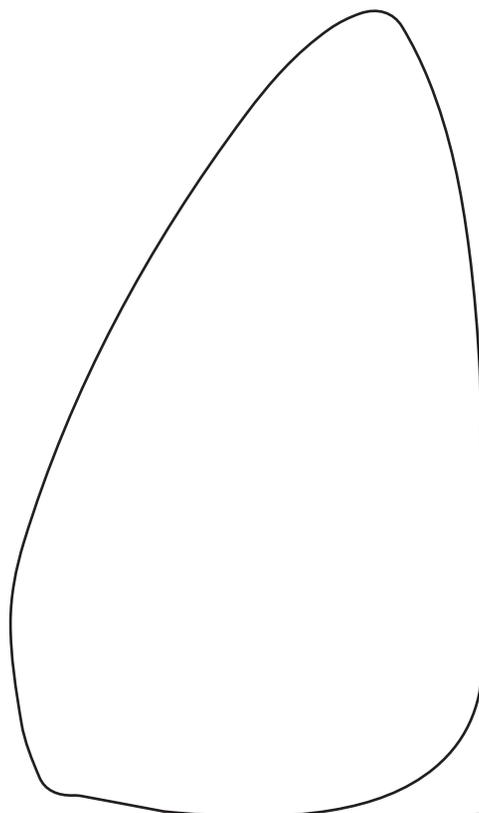
JG: And obviously, also centrally necessary to the reproduction of the institution itself. As you said, you can’t have a knowledge economy built on oil and gas without engineering. How does this way of looking at technical knowledge – of building, for example – relate to the work of architectural history?

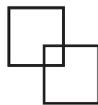
RM: I am also very interested in places like the University of Wisconsin and the University of Arizona, where certain kinds of technical knowledge were developed. One case that I’m looking at is the Tuskegee Institute, one of the historically black colleges. There, I’m paying most attention to the bricks. Tuskegee was set up by Booker T. Washington around a particular emphasis on self-empowerment through education. This was different than W.E.B. Du Bois’s own, somewhat ideological, idea of the talented tenth of elite education. The students at the institute built the place. They excavated the clay and had kilns, they made the bricks, and they designed and built some the early buildings on campus out of these bricks. The idea was to learn technical knowledge such that African Americans could run their own businesses, could do their own work, without having to depend on white patrons.

The idea was also to equip students with self-generated knowledge. This is another kind of inside-outside topological relation, traced by the brick in this case, that runs alongside a whole series of historical questions that have to do with the geography of race and the politics of knowledge in the south. The study is not, in that sense, an architectural history; it is a history that entails translating the methods of architectural history into different domains.

With these and other examples, the goal is to understand the university as a media system – to construe media themselves as productive of infrastructural relations rather than as standalone machines like a computer or a TV. Media organize, and those standalone machines are components of organized media systems, just like the lecture hall is. The lecture hall is a component, we could say, of the media system of the university.

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