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WHEN FLESH BECOMES ORNAMENT

IN SEARCH OF A POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT

OBJECT STUDIES FOR A DEPOSITION

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LIBERATION BY SOIL

FINDING EUROPE

OUR COLLECTIVE RECORD
WHEN FLESH BECOMES ORNAMENT

CHALAY CHALERMKRAIVUTH

AFONG MOY, the first Chinese woman to “immigrate” to the United States, was imported for exhibition in 1834 by brothers Nathaniel and Frederick Carne. A poster dating from 1842 proclaims, in typography by turns gaudy and sensibly serif, “THE CHINESE LADY, AFONG MOY, Lately exhibited in Mobile, Providence, Boston, Salem, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Washington, Richmond, Norfolk, Charleston, New York and New Haven, will have the honor of appearing before the Company in a splendid CHINESE SALOON, fitted up with rich Canton Satin Damask Chinese Paintings, Lanterns and Curiosities.” An illustration depicts her smothered in an elaborate silken robe, and smothered once more in the dizzyingly intricate saloon. She appears to be one with the chinoiserie and the Canton Satin Damask Chinese Paintings behind her. Of her own flesh we see only her face, her hands, and her “ASTONISHINGL LITTLE FEET.”

The last of Moy’s traces dates from 1850; what happened to her afterwards, if anything, is unknown. But her life’s echo is heard in all the decorative Asian beauties, more ornament than person, who have been paraded about to the American public since. Denied humanity through aestheticization, the yellow woman is nevertheless no object of art—china is, after all, irremediably associated with kitsch. She lives, instead, as ornament.

There is a ready vocabulary to describe the forces at work here: objectification, on the one hand (the OED’s chipper, concise definition: “the action of degrading someone to the status of a mere object”); Orientalism, on the other (“the representation of Asia ... in a stereotyped way ... [that embodies] a colonialist attitude”). It is well-established in feminist thought that women have been considered less than human, well-established in black feminist thought that the manner of this dehumanization is splintered along racial lines (think, by comparison, of the Hottentot Venus and her fetished flesh).

But stating this truth does not tell us its meaning or its consequences. It is one thing to identify oppressive fictions, but quite another to understand, let alone explain, the hybrid, fantastical beings—Asiatic cyborgs, porcelain dolls, geisha girls—that emerge from these strange and violent conflations.

What Anne Cheng looks to offer in her new monograph Ornamentalism is a heretofore-missing theory of Asiatic femininity. She doesn’t look to critique the confluence of racism and sexism that produces the not-quite-human, not-quite-thing that is the “yellow woman” (a term she revives to grapple with its legacy) so much as to examine what kind of being gets produced.

Where black feminist thinkers like Hortense Spillers have focused on flesh as the site of the black woman’s denigration and racialization, Cheng’s theory of the yellow woman revolves around flesh’s opposite: artifice, ornament, style. “The yellow woman ... makes visible [an] unspeakable aspect of injury: its unnerving capacity to be seen as a quality of beauty and to incite appreciation. There are few figures who exemplify the beauty of abjectness more than the yellow woman,” she writes. Cheng argues that style has not been supplemental to the being of the yellow woman, but constitutive of it. And she suggests that this speaks to a broader truth: that style and artifice are always constitutive of being, and that in looking for a unified essence, an organic body, or a natural personhood, we look for the impossible.

Ornamentalism poses a challenge to the kind of personhood that canonical political philosophers—Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and William...
Blackstonian conceptions of a personhood characterized by femininity, and natural internal coherence. She shares this anti-humanist critique among feminist, anti-racist, and critical race theorists, who have been arguing since the 20th century that humans are much less free than powerful people—white men—have purported to be. She connects this history to the present by showing how the experiences and ideas of these artists and critics are much the same. For Cheng, the book’s first half is devoted to humans who are produced through style. The first chapter of her book, rendered through the title of the chapter, “of the Case of the Twenty-Two Lewd Chinese Women,” in which twenty-two recently-arrived immigrants were conveyed on board through their clothing—more precisely, through white American men’s prurient imaginations about their clothing. The second chapter takes up, somewhat more disjunctively, Anna May Wong’s role in Piccadilly (1929) as Shoshoo, an object woman who claims her own objecthood in order to achieve aesthetic centrality.

Ornamentalism’s second half shifts into more experimental territory, to thrilling results when Cheng is most successful, and puzzling tracts when she falls short. Where the first half investigates humans produced through style, the second concerns objects that straddle and cross the border between objects and humans by invoking racial otherness. The third chapter is a stunning study of Through the Looking Glass, the Met’s exhibit of “Eastern” aesthetics and Western appropriations. The fourth is a foray into food and the border between consumer and consumed; and the fifth, a rich consideration of blockbuster representations of white-coded, feminine robots that arrogate themselves to, and are haunted by, Asiatic femininity.

Cheng describes her own method best in her description of Anna May Wong’s performance: “she commands all things around her, centrifugally pulls objects, lights, and glances to her magnetic center” (83). At her critical disposal is an improbably vast array of disciplines: celebrity studies, aesthetic philosophy, critical legal theory, photography theory, science and technology studies—just to name a few, beyond the dominant frameworks of feminist and critical race theory. Her arguments are so wide-ranging and in their intellectual ancestry as to be irreducible to their parts.

And it is important that Cheng’s method is inter-disciplinary, because one of the book’s premises is that part of what it means to be a yellow woman is that one is an aesthetic artifact—which is to say that, for Cheng, the study of being and the study of aesthetics are more importantly intertwined, like the people and objects that populate it, is a profoundly synthetic work that finds being through assemblage. It is an act of inter-disciplinary daring that is often dazzling, bearing the occasional cost of being far-etched. It is a manual that teaches Asian and Asian American histories and aesthetics, a manual that teaches us, “Corporeal dematerialization” cannot be literal, for so what is it a metaphor? And: If Asiatic femininity is style, when do Asian women—and which Asian women—get to be it? It was not Cheng’s intent to address these questions: as she explicates in the preface, “This is not a manual that teaches Asian and Asian American women how to act. But by tracing the complex dynamics between subjecthood and objecthood, we might begin to shake loose some of our most fundamental assumptions about what kind of person, what kind of injury, or indeed, what kind of life can count.” Her work, which teaches us how to think about shaw- ows, complex, uncomfortable figures, is complementarily to activism, not activism itself.

But the theory of Asiatic femininity she has forward so boldly is incomplete without an audience that isn’t just scholarly, without an address to a public community. Such is the law of post-humanism in practice: as crucial as it is and has been to trouble traditional notions of the human, post-human work can fail to make a distinction between “human” and “animal” by academic byword for Lockean-liberal-humanism and “human” as a common word for real people. To call anti- or post-humanism literally anti-human is, in an important sense, to talk past its historical formation; it is, in another sense, to pinpoint a deadly flaw in its evolution, during which the original referent of “human” has been partially obscured in a scholarly haze. Post-humanist work points to the necessity of deep care for all forms of life, interconnected as they are, and for marginalized forms more than others. If they lose sight of the marginalized communities to which they are theoretically and ethically indebted, then the point is lost.

Cheng has historicized and politicized post-humanism, but to be practicable, post-humanism must make good on its promises to the humans in our midst.

Ornamentalism needs to ‘come back’ to the flesh, to be fleshed out as well as fleshed on. Cheng’s opening critique of feminist theory—that it occupies itself too much with the flesh—comes full circle here: flesh is ornament, and requires the ornamental practices of synthesis and assemblage in order to put itself back together again. To put this in more familiar terms: one returns to the body with self-care. At its best, Ornamentalism offers an alternative vision of agency as not resistance but resilience, of forms of living produced under impossible conditions—providing, too, a much-needed recontextualization of post-humanism’s rhetorical gestures.

But if flesh may find itself through ornamental practices, how might ornament find itself? Cheng dismisses, after all, nostalgia for the flesh, so there is nothing for the yellow woman to return to, no enshrinement to crave. Of course, her work has partly been deconstructed to the distinction between flesh and ornament, and the fluidity between the two seems to be one-way. Here Cheng’s effort to deconstruct to the limits of its own framework: the figure around whom ornamentalist ideology is built does not stand to recover through it. Furthermore, because the book is in no sense about actual real Asian women, it does not speak to our lives, spectral or otherwise, an effect exacerbated by the book’s near-exclusive concern with ravaged beauty and East Asian aesthetics—itself powerful and hegemonic in the age of East Asian economic and geopolitical dominance. It may be telling that the subject of the book’s most redemptive treatment of a yellow woman, Shoshoo, is an exceedingly beautiful celebrity.

What may we who carry flesh do with this work? For us, ‘corporeal dematerialization’ cannot be literal, for so what is it a metaphor? And: If Asiatic femininity is style, when do Asian women—and which Asian women—get to be it? It was not Cheng’s intent to address these questions: as she explicates in the preface, “This is not a manual that teaches Asian and Asian American women how to act. But by tracing the complex dynamics between subjecthood and objecthood, we might begin to shake loose some of our most fundamental assumptions about what kind of person, what kind of injury, or indeed, what kind of life can count.” Her work, which teaches us how to think about shaw- ows, complex, uncomfortable figures, is complementarily to activism, not activism itself.

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The 24th annual United Nations Climate Conference, or COP24, concluded on December 15th with a tepid agreement that will do little to address our global climate crisis – or perhaps nothing at all, if nations continue to ignore the emissions reductions pledges that they made three years ago in Paris. I attended the first week of the COP, which was held in Katowice, the polluted heart of Poland’s coal country. (There was much fighting over what the location symbolized.) What struck me was not that the conference ended with a middling accord desperately hashed out over a sleepless final weekend – we have come to expect little more from these international gatherings – but that all the delegates and diplomats in attendance seemed to know exactly what would stymie the negotiations before they even started. There was, they all insisted, one stubborn missing ingredient: “political will.”

Over the past few years, “political will” has become commonplace in environmental politics – a byword for some mysterious missing resource that would, were we to harness it, unleash a wave of global action to stop climate change.1 In Katowice, I heard “political will” invoked often enough to make for an excellent drinking game. The call came from the press: “Limiting warming to 1.5°C is possible – if there is political will,” ran a Guardian headline; “Countries struggle to muster political will to tackle climate crisis,” wrote the Climate Action Network. From activists and academics: “The main difference between possibility and impossibility is just political will,” pronounced Chris Weber of the World Wildlife Fund; “The final tick box is political will,” said Jim Skea, a prominent climate scientist. And from UN officials, most frequently UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, who raced from conference room to conference room extolling “leadership and ambition ... the political will to fight climate change ... a firm political will,” as if by repeating the words over and over he could somehow coax such a will into existence.

Why this fixation on political will? In part because all of the other necessary conditions for climate action are, at this point, present and accounted for. Gina McCarthy, the former head of the now-gutted Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), recently remarked, “We have the scientific knowledge, we have the financial capacity, and we have the technical capacity to be able to address this. What we’re essentially lacking is political will.” McCarthy is right. Scientific knowledge: COP24 came on the heels of the latest (and grimmest) report from the IPCC, the international authority on climate science, which documented the catastrophic effects of even 1.5 degrees Celsius of warming above pre-industrial levels and concluded that, to avoid those effects, we would need to halve our global emissions in the next twelve years. Financial capacity: a rapid transition to a zero-emissions world would be financially difficult but by no means impossible, and it would certainly save jobs and money compared to the alternative. (According to a recent U.S. government report that the Trump Administration tried to bury by releasing it on Black Friday, a business-as-usual approach to climate policy would slice 10% off America’s GDP by 2100.)

Technical capacity: renewable energy is readily available and easily scalable – it has been for quite some time. Environmental science, environmental economics, and environmental technology are soldiers ready for deployment, waiting for an order from their commander-in-chief: politics.2

And yet the desperate search for political will, even when all these other elements stand at the ready, indicates that somewhere along the line a grave misstep has occurred. For decades, the modern
environmental history has operated with an implicit assumption that if the science were unani-
mous, the technology available, and the economics sound, the consensus—evidence of these
truly evident truths—then good environmental politics would follow. This equation has now proven itself
false. For example, most Americans do believe that climate change is real: according to the Yale Climate
Opinion Map for 2018, 70 percent of Americans believe that climate change is happening, 77 percent support
regulating carbon dioxide emissions, and 79 percent believe schools should teach about climate
change. But, as Brett notes, the evolution of the words and concepts that have
shaped our environmental concerns. Taken together, they
offer an intellectual history—inevitably incom-
plete and argumentative and inevitably non-
linear—of how people and ideas have interacted and
informed our relationship to nature. To survey that
timeline is to realize just how absent concerns about the natural world have been in our politics. And it is also
to realize that when the environment did become political, it carried with it an intellectual gene-
alogy that links the modern environmental movement to this day.

We might begin with the unfortunate truth that for
much of Western history the natural world was not
just outside the political realm; “nature” and
“politics” were antithetical to one another. That is
Western political thought—who are not experts on
environmental history, and have asked them to con-
sider how the thinkers they studied conceived of the
relationship between the natural and the natural world.

In response to that prompt, many of the essays in
this book simply and convincingly deny the premise:
there is no way to understand environmental ideas in a political context, because for most

The historical essays in Nature, Action and the Future trace this development across multiple
European countries. In Germany, resource man-
gegment of forest policy offered a welcome
access to address environmental politics. (Quentin Skinner, the
godfather of the Cambridge school of intellectual
history, has contributed to the importance of always
locating ideas in their precise historical moments, contributes an afterword to the collection.) In order
to “play,” the contributors included in the
European intellectuals defined politics as “centrally
concerned with relations between human beings, not
between human beings and things. In this way, a
natural world could have “natural rights,” but never political ones.

As Paul de Warde, Libby Robin, and Sverker Sorlin set out to document how that trans-
formation occurred. The politics that take place inside our global
environment are not just a means for government expansion.
Future environmental economists, offers this telling
remark: “the environment that key political quality – agency –
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environmental institutions remain “strangely local.”7 The conclusion is that Environmental politics have been, in large part, a history of trying to build political movements that would match the scope and ambition of the concept.

What we have, then, is a history in which our idea of nature has remained out of sync with our idea of the political, the one forever circling the other as though its very distinctness reflects a new way to think about the relationship between the two.8 Unlike those thinkers who wrote during moments of acute political crisis where an old order seemed to be fading and new one had yet to come into view, though this self-conscious emulation feels overblown (this is not to say Mann and Wainwright don’t have such trouble aligning “the environment” with the political – not because our idea of the natural world has been undermined by global capitalism is not simply a case of “bad timing,”)

Mann and Wainwright’s valuable focus on economist thinkers who wrote during moments of acute political crisis where an old order seemed to be fading and new one had yet to come into view. Though this self-conscious emulation feels overblown (this is not to say Mann and Wainwright don’t have such trouble aligning “the environment” with the political – not because our idea of the natural world has been undermined by global capitalism is not simply a case of “bad timing,”)

The idea that the modern environmental movement has been undermined by our conception of the new. Naomi Klein, a journalist and academic whose 2014 bestseller This Changes Everything has been named as one of the “uncanny overlap between the crises and the continued struggle to catch up to the requirements of liberal capitalism” of “the environment” did make its way toward the natural world across some five-hundred years of Western history. The Ground speaks of environmental activism as a forlorn hope that can no longer be built on the political – not because of a failure to understand, but because it is implicated in, and economic globalization took off. This confluence of political and economic processes driving these physical processes, make it impossible to think about anything other than climate change. When delegates and diplomats paced the halls of the UN Climate Conference in Katowice this past December (and contributing to a lack of “political will,” perhaps they were getting at a more profound – and, we might fear, a more intractable – historical problem)

And yet Skinner’s pessimism undermines his own earlier argument about what the history of ideas can do for us in the present. Good intellectual history helps to reveal the contours of current predicaments. A certain amount of fatalism is to be expected – the ideas that got us into this mess are unlikely to get us out. But the point of Skinner’s 1969 essay was to suggest that we could look to history, and especially the history of political thought, to find different ideas, long lost and discarded, that could offer us a new way of thinking about a dilemma in the present.

With these three books, historians of political thought have offered us a glimpse at why our inherited traditions in the West have left us ill-prepared to face climate change – and why we have largely excluded the environment from our politics altogether. The task for those historians now is to shrug off late-Skinner’s pessimism and follow early-Skinner’s method. We must search for those past traditions which, precisely because they have not shaped our impermanent idea of politics in the present, might offer us some hope for the future.
These drawings and this poem (overleaf) were part of a January show at the Ezra Stiles College gallery called (De)positions: An Homage to Pontormo, conceived by Alejandro Nodarse.
Not around but under, through,
between the bones or whatever holds
you up. There will be no
touching you now. Just burrowing
burrowing through to the bottom of you
however bright or brined in death, however sorry
I’ll be to sink my flighty fingers in
where your splinters split so thin they flow.

The place is sterile, coldest bath
of sunlight save on me, in aging flesh
with toes already pointing off of cliffs
I’ve never seen. The bodies here are strung
like rubber bands from peg to peg.

The bodies here are clothed in water
like the rain-clouds, like I hope
they would have wanted. I am bound
by nothing solid save the rinds,
the crusts and pits and peels that lie
in waves along the sand when all has dried
and I have gone to tide me over.

Note: This poem imagines the inner life of Jacopo Pontormo as he painted his dazzling Deposition on the Cross. It was written as part of a multidisciplinary exhibit centered on reinterpreting the painting as well as the painter himself. This poem is a sort of ekphrasis on the painting, but it also draws on Pontormo’s diaries, in which he recorded what foods he ate nearly every day, along with other details of consumption—quotidian worries over waste and the passage of time. A typical entry goes like this: “Saturday, fasted. Sunday evening, which was the evening of Palm Sunday, I ate a little boiled mutton and salad, and had to eat three quadrini of bread.” Sometimes the painter records how his body feels, and often he sketches in the margins of the journal. On June 9th, 1554, all he writes in this: “Marco Moro began to prepare the walls and fill in the cracks in San Lorenzo.” Such lines are a reminder of everything these “diaries,” an obsessive and idiosyncratic set of records, lack. But there is also something marvelous in these unrehearsed observations, a poetry if you will, that makes me think I’m getting just a little closer to the painter himself.
LIBERATION BY SOIL
ASHIA AJANI

ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE RECOGNIZES THAT ENVIRONMENTAL BURDENS, such as industrial factory placement and lack of access to healthy food, are also matters of race, gender and socioeconomic status. The concept arguably hails back to the Civil Rights Movement and has evolved so that its work no longer only involves combating the unequal distribution of environmental burdens. It is also a rallying cry to return to sustainable, communal roots. Alongside proponents of liberation work—the effort to redefine our relationship to the current state, to take institutional power and return that power to people who have been historically marginalized—proponents of environmental justice are committed to creating alternatives to extractivist farming techniques, which cause soil erosion, water pollution and rely heavily on pesticides and other chemicals. By growing our own food, creating our own markets, and rebuilding our own communities—thus asserting our autonomy on the land—we subvert the notion that we are reliant on current, oppressive systems for survival.

On Soul Fire Farm, a seventy-two acre farm in upstate New York that is on the original territory of the Mohawk and Munsee people, Leah Penniman and her team live out the principles of environmental justice and liberation work. There they grow healthy, organic produce that is rooted in the cultural histories of Black and Brown people. Okra, cassava, leafy greens and herbs fill the wide expanse of hills. Children ages five through eighteen weed, sow and cook produce. Sometimes they go on scavenger hunts in the surrounding forest. They speak to the trees; the trees communicate back to them by sharing water and anaerobic resources. On the land of Soul Fire Farm, everything seems a practice of symbiosis.

In Farming While Black: Soul Fire Farm’s Practical Guide to Liberation on the Land (2018), Penniman, the farm’s founder, uses her own experience on this farm, historical analysis and reference, spiritual practice, liberation politics, technical information, and ecological science to create a holistic guide to tending the land, written specifically for people of color interested in the sustainable food movement. Farming While Black reads like a basic instruction manual for how to acquire land and establish your farm business. Yet Penniman has greater ambitions. This book shows how deep the roots of removal, oppression, and cultural innovation run in farming and food practices. It is a testament to the ancestors who paved the way, and a call to return to our ancestral ways of life through their farming practices, communal economics, and spiritual work.

Penniman founded Soul Fire Farm in 2011 with the mission to “reclaim our inherent right to belong to the earth and have agency in the food system as Black and Brown people.” She describes herself as a “multiracial, light-skinned, raised-rural, northeastern, college-educated, cisgendered, able-bodied, Jewish-Vodun practicing biological mother who grew up working class.” Growing up as a brown child in a predominantly white community lead her to seek empowerment and security in natural spaces. She writes that the land will tell you when you belong to it. When she visited plot of earth that would become Soul Fire Farm, it told her to wait. She returned with offerings, and the land welcomed her and her kin.

Part of Penniman’s mission is helping farmers of color claim ownership of the land, which is particularly powerful given the lack of resources available to Black farmers and non-Black farmers of color in a world that largely depends on their labor and innovation. Due to the history of slavery, oppression, and marginalization, Black and Native peoples are frequently left out of larger discussions about farming practices, or find it difficult to acquire loans for land purchases. Penniman asserts that land is the basis of liberation: how can people of color...
become liberated if they do not have access to land resources? For her, redefining relationships to the land is an important step toward land stewardship, and an important step toward healing. Once we stop seeing land as the thing that oppresses us, and instead view it as the thing that has always protected us, the healing can begin.

The book also serves as a call for white people to reevaluate their relationship to the land. In a section entitled “White People Uprooting Racism,” Penniman discusses how the concept of whiteness removes culture and ancestry from white identified people by replacing European roots with a false origin. Whiteness has no origin rooted in place. It is an ideology used to oppress other groups of people. Penniman later provides discussion questions about cultural appropriation, what it means to be anti-racist versus non-racist, and how white people can be better advocates for marginalized people. How do these skills relate to land stewardship and agriculture? White people own upwards of ninety-eight percent of the rural land in the United States, whereas Black people own about one percent, and most ancestral indigenous land is held in “trusts” by the United States federal government. Penniman calls for white advocates to redistribute their unearned wealth, have tough conversations about race and inequality with other white people, and invest their time and money in historically marginalized communities.

For someone unfamiliar with the agricultural industry, *Farming While Black* may seem overwhelming and complicated. Penniman has gathered a lot of material, ranging from the practice of squatting and how it can be a form of temporary land tenure to agroforestry for soil restoration. It is a thick, difficult read. But as we come upon an era of both self-reflection and environmental (social) crisis, it is a necessary tool in the fight against injustice and climate change. It not only provides history, but it treats the knowledge and application of that history as a solution to many problems, whether they be racial, socioeconomic or environmental. What would the world look like if farms followed the model of sustainable, culturally-significant agriculture that is embodied by Soul Fire Farm? What if students had a place where they could learn not only about agriculture, but about the legacies of innovation and resistance to historical models of agriculture? What if we all remembered that we came from somewhere, and that while intergenerationally we have experienced pain and removal, there are productive steps we can take and a community to remind us that we have purpose and worth?

One has to question the applicability of farming techniques in upstate New York to farms in places like Phoenix, Arizona or Seattle, Washington, where the weather and the growability of various crops differ greatly. But Penniman does not set out to create a blanket solution to global or even national agricultural problems. What she does is provide the reader with options and perspectives—even readers who are not looking to get involved with agricultural systems directly. Penniman emphasizes movement building and the ways consumers can combat exploitative agriculture practices through boycotts, economic and emotional support, and by teaching children about sustainable, intersectional agriculture.

More than anything, *Farming While Black* asks us to recognize that food is not just something we eat. It is not just a commodity or something with which we nourish our bodies. It has significant cultural and ecological roots that we cannot ignore. When someone knows where their food comes from, when they have meaningful involvement in the cultivation and protection of the land that births their food, they are much more willing to protect Mother Earth, to see other human beings as their siblings in the reverence of earth systems.
In Budapest, in the square outside St. István Basilica, there is a Christmas market. I worried about a truck attack for a split second, I entered. They were selling Christmas market things—mulled wine, hot chocolate, fried dough, fruit brandy, smiling snowmen, plastic reindeer, Santa figurines of varying quality. It was overcast and drizzling. I pictured Christ in the simple, turning over merchant’s stands, long hair disheveled and plastered to his face, sweeping his arms across counters full of pastries, the flesh of citrus and fohn, metal boxes of foineits, euros, and dollars, ripping down strands of LED lights. Maybe next year a conceptual artist will dress in linen robes and take up this task. Maybe the members of the parliament will host the main Christmas market, are packed with suburban alt-looking crowd; the bookstore-café owned by the book-owning café owner named Viktor Orbán, Hungary’s authoritarian Prime Minister and President of the far-right Fidesz Party, donated twenty-five kilometers of a new antemaze, in the form of barbed wire, to Montenegro this past summer. I first heard about this gift through that same Montenegro acquaintance, who droll and half-jokingly hypothesized that Montenegro might achieve long-awaited EU accession by becoming part of a growing right-wing-coalition. This informal group, spearheaded by Hungary’s Orbán, and including the leadership of Austria, Italy, Poland, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia, along with sizable minority parties in France and Germany, is committed to drawing a particular kind of boundary for Europe. Montenegro could decide to use Orbán’s gift and join in this mission. The Hungarian Prime Minister almost certainly intends the barbed wire to run along Montenegro’s southern border with either of two majority-Muslim countries—Albania and Kosovo. In an age of globalization, it would help affirm an image of Europe as a bastion of Christendom, a sharply delineated West.

In the face of immigration from majority-Muslim countries, this ancient and strange mission of waging war on the cultural spaces that, like continents, aren’t inherently political, geography is a politically involved practice. Because continents are not made of tectonic plates, these political and physical reality, they may offer the most stable and inviolate cultural markers. Historical hypotheses about this functional and symbolic identity can be held up to defend the idea, easily exploited by conservative politicians and other xenophobes, that a culturally coherent Europe coincides with a politically integral Europe. The latter gives the former the legitimacy of material existence.

A physical definition turns Europe from a shakily defined cultural construct to something literally set in stone. But the lack of a clear geographical boundary leaves a physical definition dependent on cultural and political debate. The most successful strategy in this debate has continually proven to be the identification of a cultural Other, a group whose demographics with Europe’s. Everything about the Other is defined by the way in which one wants to define “Europe” exceed the border. If I were to choose the lesser of two evils, the border that has been Islam, by the Ottomans. The Other now takes the form of insidiously diffuse Middle Eastern and North African migrants whose stereotypes are set in the minds of many white Europeans, both Christian and non-Christian. This contemporary stereotype of the Other is closely linked to the perception of the dark continent. Each trait is enough to imply the others, and each is enough to prompt a boundary of Europe. Each represents something that those who attempt to draw the boundaries of Europe see their continent not to be, something they want to prevent
their continent from becoming. This otherness appears more legitimate, more fundamental, when it is tied to something seemingly objective physical barrier— the Central Asian nomads beyond the Ural River, the Moors across the Strait of Gibraltar, or the Turks and Levantines past the Bosporus. When the Muslim Other is confined beyond the physical frontiers of some contiguous area, Europe is no longer the subjective and viscous concept of Christendom or, even more vaguely, Western Civilization, but a concrete, stable, unchanging cultural and physical entity.

Of course, this immutable unity is largely a myth. One reason is that groups characterized as Other live within areas within any physical definition of Europe. Along the eastern coast of the Adriatic Sea, completely surrounded by the majority Christian countries of Serbia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Croatia and Greece, lie Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and Albania—three majority-Muslim countries. Most members of their religious majorities trace the origin of their faith to the Ottoman conquest. The existence of these three countries is evidence enough that no Christian definition of Europe can rely on the physicality of the continent. The most it can do is attempt to maintain literal fences and equally real legal barriers between itself and its foil. This seems to be the European Union’s working plan. A map of the Schengen Area reveals a large hole, occupied by the three majority-Muslim countries and three of their four Christian neighbors. Croatia, the exception, appears with Romania and Bulgaria as part of a buffer zone of European Union members that are not part of the Schengen Area. The EU has made it clear that Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, and Kosovo, along with Serbia and Montenegro—which both have significant Muslim minorities—are not part of Europe.

As I was writing this piece, an article by the Bosniak writer Riada Ašimović Akyol appeared in the Atlantic. She argues that the nation of Bosnia and Herzegovina is living proof that Islam can exist in Europe, and has indeed existed there for hundreds of years. The standout sentence is the claim that “Bosnian Muslims, Albanian, Turks, and others see themselves as fully Muslim and fully European.” Akyol suggests that if those who define their continent against Islam would get hip to the fact that entire communities of Muslims are both indigenous to geographical Europe and proudly embrace European identity, they could stop worrying so much about whether recent Muslim arrivals can integrate into European society. But this hopeful conclusion relies on a premise too general to describe the process of identity formation in at least some parts of the Western Balkans. Hundreds of years of discourse and conflict, combined with the EU’s current politics of exclusion, have produced a more complicated situation than the one Akyol describes. Most people I’ve talked to in Kosovo, Albanians and Serbs alike, do not consider themselves European.

Two minutes by foot from the new central mosque, a gift from Turkey, the hottest bar in Mitrovica occupies an old Ottoman bathhouse. On the weekends, they’re known to turn people away on the basis of their outfits. Behind the counter is a display of around thirty bottles of Cîroc vodka. At this bar, a couple of months ago, I made a sarcastic comment about “you Europeans.” One of my friends chuckled. “You think we’re European?” another asked, feigning flattery. I thought of geography in terms of many in Kosovo and in the region, factions in several former Yugoslav countries believe that by becoming European, they’ll get access to some of that money and possibility of Montenegro allying with Orbán’s right wing EU front, to prove that they belong on the European side of the antemuralis. This is a long-standing trend. In Race and the Yugoslav Region, Baker relates how in the 1990s, members of Slovenia’s nascent independence movement asserted their “Europeanness” to contrast themselves with the “Balkanization” of their neighboring Republics to the South and East. Likewise with Croatian nationalists, who could emphasize their Catholicism and relatively pale skin. Slovenia and Croatia are both members of the European Union. Kosovo is still waiting for its citizens to be deemed worthy of traveling there. As Jeton Zulfaj recently observed in Kosovo 2.0, a Kosovo online investigative journalism publication, the European Union’s refusal to grant Kosovo visa liberalization is likely at least partially due to xenophobia. Unlike some nearby countries, Kosovo can’t claim to participate in what EU members identify as cultural Europeanness. Most Kosovars I’ve met aren’t interested in becoming fully culturally European—if doing so requires assimilating completely into a Western way of life that many reasonably see as alienating, cold, and lonely. It seems that Kosovo must instead focus on abandoning the practice of basing political, social, and economic inclusion on some notion of European cultural uniformity.

In the endless debates over whether recent arrivals will be able to integrate into European culture and adopt European values, it is easy to forget the premise behind these concepts—the contrast between Europe and not-Europe. A fence cannot be built around Europe. A line from mountain range, to river, to sea, marks a barrier between European culture and the Other. Europe’s economic power, reinforced by a continual reduction of the bodies of Black and Brown and not-quite-white people into exploitable resources, makes it a resource to others. Ability to partake in that resource, and to eventually become material partners in it, rather than mal-treated generators of it, cannot be determined on the arbitrary basis of culture. As the world becomes more cosmopolitan, and the injustices of Western-dominated global capitalism come into sharper relief, it will only grow more difficult to use mythical geographies to support protectionism and exclusion on the feeble foundation of “cultural difference.” Only a regime of openness and equal community of mind and body, that more honest, just, and functional than the past.


REVIEWED

THE MUSIC OF KANYE WEST

OUR COLLECTIVE RECORD

NICHOLAS JUDT

THE CRISIS IS FAMILIAR: you love an artist, spend years of your life taking in his work and singing its praises, nourishing your soul on his art. Then, one day, you realize that he is not a good person—he did or said something immoral, revolting, inexcusable. The verdict is plastered in the headlines and smeared across the Internet, impossible to ignore: your favorite artist is a scumbag. So you have to figure out what to do. Can you keep listening to and admiring his work? Or must you instead do as the newspapers and the newsfeeds demand and abandon ship, shouting hurried disavowals of your past devotion before you hit the water?

Like many other people, I faced this crisis in 2018. It came via my devotion to the work of Kanye West. I discovered his music when I entered high school, and it blew my world open. I had never heard anything like it before: its propulsive energy, structural rigor, and intellectual range taught me what great music can be and how to listen to it. I would go through cycles where I listened to nothing but a single song, “Lost in the World” or “Blood on the Leaves” every morning on my way to school. There was something about West’s music that seemed undeniable to me, the progression from word to word and sound to sound inevitable in the way of all great poetry. As I walked down the street or stood in the subway listening, I felt the urge to thrust my headphones into the hands of a stranger: listen to this! You have no idea of the world I’m living in right now, the world this music has given me.

What makes West’s music this good? Perhaps the best example is “Blood on the Leaves,” a six-minute tour-de-force from his 2013 album Yeezus. The backbone of the song is a sample from Nina Simone’s version of “Strange Fruit,” a haunting song that describes the lynching of black Americans. “Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees,” Simone intones. “Blood on the leaves.” West begins the song with this sample, and then he splinters Simone’s words and scatters them throughout the track—the song’s first layer. Next he adds an entirely unexpected second layer: a series of verses describing a failing celebrity marriage, with particular attention lavished on drug use and the post-separation division of money. And as the song kicks into high gear, West introduces a third layer; an extraordinarily forceful and unsettling house-music beat, which thumps underneath most of the song.

The first time I heard “Blood on the Leaves,” I was bowled over by its raw power. But I was also perplexed: what was West’s intention? It seemed offensively mismatched to pair Simone’s evocation of lynching with lyrics about a millionaire’s marriage in crisis. But this, I came to realize, was precisely the point. “Blood on the Leaves” is about the degradation of American pop-culture, the ways in which its moral center has rotted. West does not want Simone’s sample and his verse to fit together—he wants them to clash, and for this contrast to upset us. How did America go from songs about lynching to songs about alimony? There is a conversation happening in the song: Simone tries to remind the speaker (heard in West’s verses) of the history he has forgotten, but he does not listen. He shouts her down, dominating the track. All the while, that bludgeoning house-beat keeps churning, crushing history under its wheel.

Importantly, West knows that he is part of the corruption and the forgetting, what with his wealth and his vanity. “Blood on the Leaves” is a blow directed against itself and its creator—which is why West casts his own voice in the role of the self-obsessed speaker who cannot seem to hear Simone’s cry from the past. The most pointed evidence of this self-awareness comes in the song’s climax: a heavily auto-tuned West implores himself to “breathe” and “live,” even as Simone’s aching description of “black bodies swinging in the summer breeze” continues in the background. Breathe and live—the two things...
West accomplishes all of this not through didactic views of the alt-right. I always knew that West was, to put it mildly, not very smart. But it never seemed consequential—that was perhaps I didn’t need to reckon with the fact that I was in the media attention, but they were hardly the only alarming statement he made. For instance, he also tweeted “I love the way Candace Owens thinks,” giving a thumbs-up to the Fox News commentator who claimed that black kids, “illegally” held by the police, are a “bunch of whiny toddlers, pretending to be oppressed for attention.”

West’s support for Trump was not an isolated media event: he had embraced and chosen to broadcast the views of the alt-right.

Things got worse a week later with West’s infamous visit to the headquarters of the celebrity gossip publication TMZ. Accompanied and supported by Owens, West was calling out, leaking statements, and justified them in the name of “free thought.” Once again, a singularly galling sound-bite sucked up the media coverage of West’s appearance: his claim that “slavery for 400 years…sounds like a choice.” But Kanye West is one of very few who has theunwrapable mystery, the skill to make music that is somehow both at odds with itself and entirely sure of its purpose.

As the gravity of West’s remarks sank in, I could have abandoned it all, wiped the slate clean and said what the music, the artist with the art. Listening to West’s words, I find myself constantly, sometimes even mid-song. In the case of West, there’s a lyrical quality that determines the quality of artistic work, like technical prowess or the deep, dangerous lyricism. This is understandable. For the vast majority of us, the problem with this is that it treats artists like politicians, viewing each as an inseparable entity deserving of respect. And yet I think that this is true about the line’s creation: “it’s funny because the song got a lot of traction, and half-made soundscapes onto the tracks. This is a different artistic mode than that of ‘Blood on the Leaves.’ West is not solely ordinary and his absence is both deep, but also dangerous.” He said that West had “ chosen collaboration.” He accused West of “lending himself to the project. This is West’s new project: he wants to strike by ambush, creating work before he even knows what he wants to say. It isn’t that West has abandoned it all, wiped the slate clean and said what the music, the artist with the art. Listening to West’s words, I find myself constantly, sometimes even mid-song. In the case of West, there’s a lyrical quality that determines the quality of artistic work, like technical prowess or the deep, dangerous lyricism. This is understandable. For the vast majority of us, the
album is the same as endorsing all aspects of the product, even if you’re not a fan. The logic behind why you’re the sort of person who would buy something that you don’t actually like is as follows: it’s not about the product; it’s about the purchase. The purchase is the act of choosing something, of engaging in the act of economic participation, and it’s the act of choosing something that you don’t actually like that makes the act of choosing something more valuable than just buying the product. The purchase is about the act of choosing something, of engaging in the act of economic participation, and it’s the act of choosing something that you don’t actually like that makes the act of choosing something more valuable than just buying the product.

When this argument is applied to strictly commercial products, it is logical and productive. Papa John’s and Pizza Hut both mass produce pizza, but only one has been caught making racist comments. If I were a regular customer of Papa John’s, it would make sense for me to trans- fer my patronage to Ed Sheeran. If I was just a substitute for someone else’s budget, I would be sated elsewhere. Admittedly, West’s album is the same as endorsing all aspects of the production for art is an embrace of capitalism in its crassest form—which is why it is disappointing to see so much of the left adopt this argument.

It is not entirely our fault: we have been raised on Marvel Studios and Taylor Swift, Far from the Madding Crowd and The Help, and so on. As Americans, I enjoy one of these products and don’t enjoy others. But they are all just that: products, like Papa John’s and Pizza Hut. Even some of your favorite historical and record companies, Americans have become accustomed to the idea that they can buy any other type of product that we buy at the mall. Browse well, then pick your favorite brand. But serious artists are not brands; they are works of art, and capitalism provides nothing to satisfy that need. West’s particular affinity for corporate branding makes my consumption of Jay-Z—or even to be more precise, of corporate branding—rather than its competition, we say yea to the former album is the same as endorsing all aspects of the production for art is an embrace of capitalism in its crassest form—which is why it is disappointing to see so much of the left adopt this argument.

West’s work is a risky and distinctive act of creative risk-taking. Encouraged by movie studios and record companies, just because two artists make work in the same way does not mean that talking to satisfy a craving that could never be sated elsewhere. Admittedly, West’s album is the same as endorsing all aspects of the production for art is an embrace of capitalism in its crassest form—which is why it is disappointing to see so much of the left adopt this argument.

The argument from hindsight is powerful because it rests on economic interpretation rather than economic justifications—it has no need of the pizza modicum. And yet even this argument from hindsight—this argument from economic dissent: that an artist’s work is one indivisible whole, and therefore can be judged only as a whole—is a legitimate act of artistic reinterpretation to now abandon West’s music, both past and present; why give our time to a project that was inexplicable to the right, to slavery-as-a-choice, to racism?

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to beeeee." Lil Yachty’s distinctive red braids bounce into the frame. The whole time, a stocky white man in a cowboy hat lurks in the background, not moving, flanked by an equally stationary dog. "I put my hand on a stove to see if I still bleeeeeed."

It is an astonishing scene: strange, hilarious, inspiring, disturbing, intensely moving. Every time I watch it, this little video embeds itself into my consciousness like a seed and then grows rapidly, pushing outward until it is no longer a part of me but I am a part of it, and then it keeps expanding until it is not something but everything, the whole of what I see, feel, and know. In one little minute, it captures the mystery and sorrow and joy and tumult of being alive. That is what art can give.

Kanye West may not be your artist of choice. You may feel none of what I feel when you listen to his music. But whichever artist shapes your world and returns it to you as a gift, dynamic in its imperfection—do not trade that person’s contribution for a little more dissent and a false assurance of purity. Art is not a product, nor a way to reaffirm the perfection of our morals. It is the record of our collective time here on earth. If we do not choose to value that, then we may one day turn around to see that we’re living in a society with no justification for art. Or, far more terrifyingly, we may not turn around at all.


2 Ibid.
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