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Recommended Citation
Chalermkraivuth, Chalay; Judt, Daniel; Nodarse, Alejandro; Grabar Sage, Margaret (Migs); Ajani, Ashia; Diagne, Dimitri; and Judt, Nicholas, "BRINK: A Review of Books, Issue 5" (2019). *Brink*. 5.
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BRINK
A REVIEW OF BOOKS

ISSUE NO. 05

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REVIEWED

ORNAMENTALISM

ANNE ANLIN CHENG

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
224 PAGES | $29.95

WHEN FLESH BECOMES ORNAMENT

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 "ASTONISHINGLY LITTE FEET."[1]

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"[2]); Orientalism, on the other ("the representation of Asia ... in a stereotyped way ... [that embodies] a colonialist attitude"[3]). 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 fetishized 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

Blackstone—conceived of: a personhood characterized by freedom, autonomy, agency, and natural internal coherence. She shares this anti-humanist critique with Marxist, feminist, and critical race theorists, who have been arguing since the 20th century that humans are much less free than powerful people—who have tended to be propertied white men—have claimed they are. Her innovation is that she does not seek redemption through a return to agency, bodies, or personhood. Instead she embraces surface, excess, and non-humanity, insisting, in fact, on their centrality, and enjoining her fellow feminist and race scholars to overcome nostalgia for the flesh.

Each of Cheng's chapters takes up a new cluster of case studies, and a new intersection of disciplines, in order to probe at the interface of personhood and objecthood. The book's first half is devoted to humans who are produced through style. The first chapter deconstructs legal personhood through the "Case of the Twenty-Two Lewd Chinese Women," in which twenty-two recently-arrived immigrants were conceptualized and judged through their clothing—or, more precisely, through white American men's prurient imaginings about their clothing. The second chapter takes up, somewhat more disjointedly, Anne May Wong's role in *Piccadilly* (1929) as Shosho, an objectified 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 who 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" (81). 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 in their intellectual ancestry as to be irreducible to their parts.

And it is important that Cheng's method is interdisciplinary, 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 much the same. *Ornamentalism*, like the people and objects that populate it, is a profoundly synthetic work that finds being through assemblage. It is an act of interdisciplinary daring that is often dazzling, bearing the occasional cost of being far-fetched. And it is a redemptive reading of raced and gendered objecthood, at the occasional risk of running counter to the political goal of censuring objectification. Cheng is keen to investigate moments of yellowface and appropriation, and her theorizing is so rich and achieved as to be worth the risks attendant to readings that are not specifically condemnatory. At the same time, the specter she wards off in such moments—the specter of politics—haunts the book. We therefore hear an almost anxious refrain, in which Cheng defends her choice of redemption over skepticism:

> "If we dismiss this association between Asiatic femininity and Chinese ceramic as yet another Orientalist cliché, we miss a much more intricate and intriguing proposition: the affinity between racialization, imagined personhood, and synthetic invention."

Perhaps there is no contradiction here. Perhaps delineating something that others would will away is complementary, not dialectical, to their efforts. After all, *Ornamentalism* offers itself as a solution to the political anemia of other schools of object-oriented ontology, known broadly and popularly as post-humanism. Post-humanism is a broad term indeed, encapsulating a range of critical impulses that are loosely united in their decentering of humanity. Sometimes these impulses are technological (the robots-are-coming-to-get-us school), sometimes environmental (the climate-change-is-coming-to-get-us school); either way, they frame post-humanism as a distinct moment in history when the human race's dominance is on the brink of expiration. Which is political enough, but this trendy new post-humanism—often practiced by white scholars—conveniently forgets the roots of post-humanism in feminist and critical race theory, which has long since worked to question liberal humanist ideology by bringing to light histories of dehumanization. *Ornamentalism* unites the turn towards non-human things with the older tradition of post-humanism by pointing to ways in which humans are constructed through things, and things comes to life—or don't—through "the conduit of racial meaning." It therefore historicizes future-oriented, ahistorical post-humanism, and reconciles it with its raced and gendered past.

But one problem with post-humanism's politics persists: its treatment of agency. A rejection of liberal humanism is a rejection, in part, of the traditional conception of agency. But to abandon traditional agency without offering an alternative is to abandon political action. Take Marxist anti-humanism, which, at its extreme, totally denied the existence of human agency, displacing the motion of history onto structural forces. The malaise of determinism makes political action look naïve.

Racial post-humanism suggests that agency is not desirable, because it occurs only in a world whose existence we do not want to prolong, a world that has worked to eliminate other worlds and subjugate the life found therein: native communities, raced populations, non-human species. It looks, instead, at life that has appeared non-agential—in the form of flesh, spirit, animal, plant, or cyborg—and suggests that we cultivate that life, care for it, permit its endurance, if not its flourishing. This is a beautiful thought, a world-loving thought. But what is the actual practice of post-humanism?

Cheng's image of ornamentalism as practice arrives in the monograph's epilogue, in which she discusses the character of Sethe in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. Sethe's lacerated back is on the one hand "dead," on the other a "chokecherry." In her, Cheng finds "an alternative form of ontology, one entwined with dirt, soil, and death." She ends on a singingly eloquent note of redemption as found through ornament:

> "The flesh that passes through objecthood needs 'ornament' as a way back to itself. Even Baby Suggs's much-quoted sermon, which so passionately urges a return to the flesh, understands that self-possession has to be courted ... This is why her song is also a blazon of body parts: 'backs that need support; shoulders that need arms ... love your neck; *put a hand on it, grace it, stroke it, and hold it up*" ... Here the instructions for loving the 'natural' body articulate this poignant and melancholic gesture of almost orthopedic reconstruction, of carefully tacking a scaffold of the body as a prop for one's psyche."

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 concretization 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 enfleshment to crave. Of course, her work has partly been to deconstruct the distinction between flesh and ornament, but the fluidity between the two seems to be one-way. Here Cheng's effervescent work registers the limitations of its own framework: the figure around whom ornamentalist ontology is built does not stand to recover through it. Furthermore, because the book is in no sense about 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, Shosho, is an exceedingly beautiful celebrity.

What may we who carry flesh do with this work? For us, "corporeal dematerialization" cannot be literal, so for what is it a metaphor? And: if Asiatic femininity is style, when do Asian women—and *which* Asian women—get to wear 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 shadowy, complex, uncomfortable figures, is complementary to activism, not activism itself.

But the theory of Asiatic femininity she has forwarded so boldly is incomplete without an audience that isn't just scholarly, without an address to a public community. Such is the flaw of post-humanism in practice: as crucial as it is and has been to trouble traditional notions of the human, post-humanist work can fail to make a distinction between "human" as academic byword for Lockeian-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 works point 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.

1 "FOR ONE WEEK ONLY, (Owing to other engagements.) Unprecedented Attraction...," 1842, *American Broadsides and Ephemera*, series 1, no. 6010. 10F45405EC316290.

2 "objectification, n.2". *OED Online*. March 2019. Oxford University Press. http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/129623?redirectedFrom=objectification#eid. Accessed Feb 18, 2019.

3 "orientalism, n.3". *OED Online*. March 2019. Oxford University Press. http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/132531?redirectedFrom=orientalism#eid. Accessed Feb 18, 2019.

REVIEWED

NATURE, ACTION, AND THE FUTURE: POLITICAL THOUGHT AND THE ENVIRONMENT

EDITED BY KATRINA FORESSTER AND SOPHIE SMITH

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
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IN SEARCH OF A POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT

IN SEARCH OF A POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT

DANIEL JUDT

I

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.)[1] 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.[2] 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 1.5C 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 emis-sions 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.[3]

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 movement has operated with an implicit assumption that if the science were unanimous, the technology available, and the economics sound – and if we could convince everyone of those evident truths – then good environmental politics would follow. This equation has now proven itself false many times over. Today, most Americans do believe that climate change is real: according to the Yale Climate Opinion Map for 2018, 70 percent of Americans believe global warming is happening, 77 percent support regulating carbon dioxide emissions, and 79 percent believe schools should teach about global warming. We have all the sufficient conditions, but the politics have not followed.[4]

So the question then becomes: why is it that the modern environmental political movement has been unable to generate political will? Three explanations are often proposed. Journalists, who tend to search for proximate causes, have shown how self-interested and often corrupt industries – energy producers, Big Agra, car manufacturers – have lobbied against environmental regulation with a success unrivalled in modern times (except, perhaps, by cigarette companies). Historians have focused on how the environmental movements have confronted those industries, and why those confrontations have failed. And political theorists, their philosophically-inclined *confrères*, have homed in on our ethical assumptions about what we, as carbon-producing citizens of developed nations, owe to our fellow humans.[5]

Although each of these explanations is true, the three books under review point to a deeper and perhaps more fundamental problem with environmental politics. Their methodological approach is to focus on the evolution of the words and concepts that have shaped our environmental concerns. Taken together, they offer an intellectual history – inevitably incomplete and sometimes scattershot, but nonetheless crucial and enlightening – of some five-hundred years of Western ideas of nature and their relationship to politics. To survey that history is to realize just how absent concerns about the natural world have been in our political traditions. And it is also to realize that when the environment *did* become political, it carried with it an intellectual genealogy that has hamstrung the modern environmental movement to this day.

II

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 the main theme of *Nature, Action and the Future*, a collection of essays assembled by Katrina Forrester and Sophie Smith. Though both Forrester and Smith now teach political theory (at Harvard and Oxford, respectively), both studied history at Cambridge, and *Nature, Action and the Future* is a welcome attempt to bridge those two disciplines by "showing how the history of political thought can be used to address environmental problems." (Quentin Skinner, the godfather of the Cambridge school of intellectual history, which emphasizes the importance of always locating ideas in their precise historical moments, contributes an afterword to the collection.) In order to "place environmental ideas into a wider political, economic, and philosophical context," Forrester and Smith have assembled a group of historians of Western political thought—who are not experts on environmental history—and have asked them to consider how the thinkers they study conceived of the relationship between politics 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 much of Western history, the natural world was defined as that which was outside the political. Annabel Brett's essay, which is the first in the collection and focuses on early modern Europe, argues that this distinction between "nature" and "the political" lies at the core of the modern Western political tradition. With few exceptions, sixteenth- and seventeenth-century European intellectuals defined politics as "centrally concerned with relations between human beings, not between human beings and anything else." Animals could have "natural rights," but never political ones; the same went for land. This was because admission into the political realm required agency – the ability to articulate and to act on decisions. These "strong conditions on agency," Brett concludes, "mean that conceptions of the land as an agent or partner in [political] community...are very hard to find."

The only way that nature could take on a political meaning was through the idea of a homeland, or *patria*. Brett cites Henning Arnisaeus and Alberico Gentili, two seventeenth-century political scientists who argued that one's "native soil" played an important role in determining one's political community. Arnisaeus used this idea of *patria* to argue against dual-citizenship. Gentili, writing of the Roman destruction of Carthage, proposed that our native land, "the region to which our eyes have become accustomed," not only gave us a distinct nationality but also shaped the way we see the world – and so one's political affinities become tethered to one's location. But, as Brett acknowledges, the kind of politics that *patria* provides – narrowly local and often nationalistic – is not a desirable tradition for the modern environmental movement to take up. And it remains an exception to the rule: for early modern Europeans, the natural world had no place in politics.

This anti-political idea of nature remains baked into the more recent concept of "the environment." As Paul de Warde, Libby Robin, and Sverker Sorlin (all environmental historians) demonstrate in *The Environment: A History of the Idea*, the term only entered the English lexicon in the mid-1820s. In 1827, British reactionary Thomas Carlyle borrowed the word from the French environs – "surroundings" – and used it to describe the circumstances that shaped great men. This definition of "environment" as "those extrinsic conditions that shape the real object of the study or story" remained dominant in Europe for most of the nineteenth century. The environment changed us, affected the way we act – but it was never a protagonist, and thus always peripheral to the (human) world of politics. When sociologists such as Herbert Spencer and early ecologists began to narrow the term to mean *natural* surroundings, this anti-political sense continued to hold. The environment could influence political actors, but it was itself a stable, agentless force. The idea of "environmental politics" in Carlyle's time would be an oxymoron. Slowly, in fits and starts over the course of the nineteenth and early twenty centuries, "environmental politics" began to make sense – not because our idea of "the environment" moved closer to the political realm, but because politicizing the natural world became a useful tool for the state.

The historical essays in *Nature, Action and the Future* trace this development across multiple European countries. In Germany, resource management – especially of wood and forested land – offered a welcome avenue for the state to extend its control into local politics (as local as a single farm) that were previously beyond its boundaries. Thus one finds nineteenth-century German politicians calling for a coordinated effort to regulate the timber industry and forest management, an effort that, in the words of one German forester, "only the state can manage." Likewise in England, where prominent naturalists like James Hutton argued that the safeguarding of woodlands and prudent husbandry of soils required "the wisdom

of the legislature" to guard against self-interested landowners who might exhaust the nation's resources. The environment had become political, but only as a means for government expansion. It was not (yet) an end unto itself.

Resource management meant extending politics into nature. But it also had the effect of granting the environment that key political quality – agency – that it formerly lacked. Malcolm Bull, in his fascinating essay on the idea of idleness in mid-20th century environmental economics, offers this telling quotation from a 1926 speech by Gifford Pinchot, head of the US Forest Service and later the Governor of Pennsylvania:

> We have vast stretches of idle forest land. It brings no good to anyone. It pays little or no taxes, keeps willing hands out of work, builds no roads, supports no industries, kills railroads, depopulates towns, creates a migratory population, all of which work against a good and stable citizenship. Idle forest serves no one well. It is a menace to our normal national life.

Pinchot personifies the land, but not in a traditional (or biblical) Mother-Nature way. Here the idle forest is the idle citizen, a deadbeat who forfeits her obligations – her political duties – to her community. In other words, it had become possible to speak of nature as a truly political entity, an agent in a symbiotic relationship with human beings. This language stuck: in 1961 another head of the Forest Service, Edward Cliff, another head of the Forest Service, echoed Pinchot when he declared that "nonproductive, misused and idle woodlands will add nothing to the economic and cultural foundation upon which our future as a nation and a civilization depend." As Bull notes, the idea of having "full employment" of natural resources – and the notion that the natural world could, by remaining idle, shirk its civic duties – meant that there was no meaningful distinction between the idleness of men and the idleness of nature. Both were political concerns. (The idea that the state should correct for economic idleness in its citizens is a development in political economy that we ought to scrutinize outside of its environmental implications – though that is perhaps beyond the scope of these books, and certainly beyond the scope of this review.)

This remarkable conceptual shift marks the beginning of the modern history of "the environment." It is also where *Nature, Action and the Future* hands off its historical account to *The Environment*. Though Warde, Robin and Sorlin begin their history of the environment in the mid-1800s with Carlyle, they date the modern environmental era to 1948, a year in which two bestselling polemics that warned of a coming environmental apocalypse – William Vogt's *Road to Survival* and Fairfield Osborn's *Our Plundered Planet* – signaled the inauguration of a new way of thinking about our relationship to nature. The modern concept of "environment" was shaped, the authors argue, by four political fixations of the postwar era: an urge to make predictions (often apocalyptic ones) about the future of our planet; a deference to scientific expertise to judge those predictions; a faith in the numbers and models that constituted that expertise; and a tendency to expand the scope of those models to a global level, and so transform "the environment" from a term about local circumstances to a "truly global issue, which could be scaled to any nation and locality, and [which] no nation could treat ... in isolation." Warde, Robin and Sorlin set out to document how that transformation occurred.

To do this, they make an explicit shift away from the tendency in intellectual history to trace the development of an idea by scrutinizing the scribblings of a lineage (often quite an arbitrary one) of famous political thinkers. "Ideas are not just shaped by lone people," they write, "but just as much in conference halls and laboratories." Our modern concept of the environment, in particular, "became the aggregate of techniques and institutions that shaped the idea more than individuals." That, incidentally, is a criticism that we might direct at Smith and Forrester's collection, whose essays tend to focus on precisely the elite theory and lone scribblers that *The Environment* wants to eschew.

This shift in focus from the individual to the institutional is one of the great strengths of *The Environment*. But if Smith and Forrester perhaps lean too heavily on a small group of writers who come to represent all of political thought, Warde, Robin and Sorlin suffer from the opposite problem. Their approach invites a frustrating, vague passivity: while it may be true that "the environment was nobody's intention," readers do need a story to hold onto, and Warde, Robin and Sorlin refuse to settle for a clear cast of historical actors.

In chapters on the study of population growth, ecology and climate change, *The Environment* builds toward its central claim: that the modern history of "the environment" is that of an ever-ballooning concept under which local concerns swelled into "global objects." In the 1960s, a group of neo-Malthusian population theorists – led by Paul Ehrlich and his bestselling work *The Population Bomb* – popularized a view of the world which "saw resources as a finite part of a global system." The idea of a resource-limited, interconnected Earth also seeped into ecology, a field once concerned with localized studies of conservation techniques that rapidly turned its attention in the 1970s to models of a global ecosystem in which even the smallest of local shifts could have planet-wide effects. And with the widespread recognition of climate change that began in the 1980s, "the environment" came to represent not only a global natural world, but also a global civilization. If the environment "encompassed the whole planet," and if our (local) actions were shaping its character, then we needed a global forum to figure out how to act. By the late 1980s, "the environment" had become "an expertise that created a new global politics."

Which brings us to what we have today: a global politics of the environment that places a premium on predictions, models, expertise, and a sense of interconnectedness. Every year we receive the latest round of climate forecasts from the IPCC, a body that commands respect in international climate politics precisely because it is apolitical: an international group of scientists who evaluate thousands of papers and models and condense them into one set of objective forecasts for policymakers. Those policymakers then attend a series of UN-hosted conferences – like COP24 this past December – at which the IPCC scientists present their report and try to convince all the world's nations to turn their science into politics. More often than not, those attempts fail. But what we do get are more reports – more models, predictions, and deference to experts – from a host of acronymed international bodies like UNEP, UNFCCC and IEA. And so this cycle, which produces what Warde, Robin and Sorlin call "an internationally active and restlessly conferencing alliance of scientists" but fails to translate that international science into international politics, continues.

Warde, Robin and Sorlin argue that this history underscores the main problem with our current state of affairs: our idea of "the environment" is now global, but our politics are not. We have proven ourselves capable of conceiving of nature as a single interconnected ecosystem – that is the intellectual journey traced in *The Environment*. But we cannot yet do the same for politics. ("The Earth Is One but the World Is Not," they title one of their chapters.) The politics that take place inside our global

environmental institutions remain "stubbornly local." They conclude that "Environmental politics has been, in large part, a history of trying to build political institutions that could 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 in gimbal lock. Where once "the environment" was a concept trying to catch up to the requirements of politics, now our understanding of "the political" is struggling to catch up to the requirements of "the environment." That is the history – and the present dilemma – that these two books offer us.

III

When we do reach a coherent form of environmental politics – when the scope of the political aligns with the scope of "the environment" – what will that look like? That is the opening question in Geoff Mann and Joel Wainwright's *Climate Leviathan: A Political Theory of our Planetary Future*. Like many of the contributors to *Nature, Action and the Future*, Mann and Wainwright are not specialists in environmental politics, and their primary academic interests – in political economy and critiques of liberal capitalism – guide their foray into climate change. Unlike those contributors, though, Mann and Wainwright don't want to plumb the genealogies of our current environmental concepts. Theirs is a "speculative mode" styled after Hobbes (whence the title) and Marx, two thinkers who wrote during moments of acute political crisis where an old order seemed to be fading and a new one had yet to come into view. Though this self-conscious emulation feels overblown (this book is no *Communist Manifesto*), it does allow Mann and Wainwright to adopt a more biting polemical tone. *Climate Leviathan* is a helpful reminder that political theorists should offer something more ambitious than the dry thought experiments – what Clifford Geertz called "the little stories Oxford philosophers like to make up for themselves" – that have overrun the field.

Climate Leviathan takes as its premise the conclusion to which *Nature, Action and the Future* and *The Environment* have led us. "Our technical understanding of the physical processes driving climate change has run far ahead of our explanations of the social and political processes driving these physical processes," write Mann and Wainwright. They want to know what will happen when our conception of political processes catches up to our idea of environmental ones. They assume that our modern idea of the environment and our idea of politics are, by virtue of climate change, bound to collide within the next few decades. One will change to accommodate the other.

According to Mann and Wainwright, that alignment could play out in four "formations" that fall along two different axes: capitalist or non-capitalist, and "planetary sovereignty" or "anti-planetary sovereignty." A capitalist and planetary regime – which they believe to be the most likely response to climate change – they call "Climate Leviathan." (Think the UN, but with more power.) A capitalist and anti-planetary order leaves us with "Climate Behemoth," where each nation regulates its own environment and the idea of a global system is scuttled— something like Trumpism. "Climate Mao" would mean a non-capitalist but planetary system: authoritarian, but appealing because it might yield quick action against carbon emitters. And a non-capitalist, anti-planetary sovereignty system – which would require a political economy that is neither communist nor capitalist, national nor global – they label "Climate X."

Although Climate X is what Mann and Wainwright want us to move toward, they fail to provide any meaningful description of what an anti-capitalist, anti-planetary politics would look like. To "glimpse" Climate X, they urge us to "bundle together the most radical strategies of the climate justice movement – mass boycott, divestment, strike, blockade, reciprocity." But it is difficult to imagine that bundle as anything more than a jumble of angry voices, and *Climate Leviathan*'s appeal to "Climate X" never manages to transcend the understandable but unhelpful stage of protest that cries "down with the system!" over and over again.

Mann and Wainwright's valuable focus on economics and their discussion of Climate Leviathan make their book far more interesting than the other two under review here. "Any substantial attempt to come to grips with climate change *must* contend with capitalism," they write. And their contention is that capitalism, with its insatiable drive for growth and progress and its proclivity to encourage vast inequality, has stymied and will continue to stymie humane environmental politics at every turn. The "liberal, capitalist order" is what makes our idea of politics incompatible with care for the environment. "Capitalism may not be the *only* problem" facing the environmental movement, they concede. "But it is surely one of the big ones."

The idea that the modern environmental movement has been undermined by global capitalism is not new. Naomi Klein, a journalist and academic whose 2014 bestseller *This Changes Everything* made her the darling of environmental activists the world over, has argued that environmental politics began in earnest at the precise moment (1988, she says) that liberal capitalism triumphed over communism and economic globalization took off. This confluence was, Klein suggests, the ultimate roadblock to climate action. She memorably termed it a case of "epic bad timing."

But the history of our idea of the environment sketched by these three books suggests that the simultaneous rise of the modern idea of "the environment" and the kind of liberal, capitalist, global economy that *Climate Leviathan* condemns is not simply a case of "bad timing." Rather, our conception of a global capitalist economy and our conception of "the environment" share several striking similarities. The four dimensions that shaped the modern idea of "the environment" – predictive; scientific; modellable; and almost infinitely scalable – could just as well apply to a globalized capitalist economy.

Though Mann and Wainwright never make this connection explicit, reading *Climate Leviathan* with these two other histories in the background makes it difficult to ignore. Perhaps this is part of why we have such trouble aligning "the environment" with the political – not because our idea of the natural world lies beyond the bounds of what counts in politics, but because our contemporary idea of the environment relies on the same conceptual tools as does our current political economy. If this is indeed true, it would force environmentalists to confront an uncomfortable paradox. Our modern idea of "the environment," which we so often invoke to summon our fellow citizens to climate action, is part of the same intellectual history – the same family tree – as the global capitalist politics that, if we buy Mann and Wainwright's argument, is antithetical to climate action.

IV

In his infamous 1969 essay, "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas," Quentin Skinner ruthlessly scolded historians and political theorists for deriving "dateless wisdom" and "universal ideas" from historical texts. This search for "perennial questions" was, he asserted, poor scholarship. And it was also a very narrow-minded way of learning from the past. Historians of political thought ought not to rummage through history in search of old answers to our current political questions. Rather, Skinner argued, the point of documenting how ideas change over time is to discover questions and concepts that are not familiar to us today. We can use the past as a way to imagine a different future – to realize that "we may be freer than we sometimes suppose." Annabel Brett, who studied under Skinner, puts his mantra well in a more recent essay: "In trying to unravel the mental worlds of the past, we give ourselves the opportunity to re-weave our own."[6]

Can these histories of our idea of "the environment" and its intersection (or lack thereof) with political thought give us the tools to re-weave our contemporary idea of environmental politics? In his afterword to *Nature Action and the Future*, Skinner backs away from his normally-hopeful stance that intellectual history can free us in the present. He strikes a much more despondent tone. "We are ill-equipped by our inherited traditions of thinking about the natural world to deal adequately with our current predicament," he writes. "The more one contemplates the disjunction between what is scientifically necessary and what is politically possible, the more it seems hard to end on anything but a deeply pessimistic note."

It is true that after reading these three books that document the way we have thought about the natural world across some five-hundred years of Western history, one might come away thinking that we are trapped. The way we think about nature is strongly rooted in a kind of anti-politics. And when our idea of "the environment" did make its way toward the political realm, it ended up overshooting the political entirely and gave us an environmental politics that is too global, too technical, and perhaps too reliant on the same intellectual structures that sustain the kind of political economy that seems only to exacerbate climate change. When delegates and diplomats paced the halls of the UN Climate Conference in Katowice this past month bemoaning (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 origins of our current predicaments. A certain amount of fatalism is to be expected – the ideas that got us into this mess are unlikely to be the ones that will 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-forgotten 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 done an excellent job of showing 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 impotent idea of environmental politics in the present, might offer us some hope for the future.

1 Shannon Osaka, "This Year's UN Climate Talks – Brought to You by Coal?" *Grist* (4 December 2018): https://grist.org/article/this-years-u-n-climate-talks-brought-to-you-by-coal/.

2 I draw on Bill McKibben's language from a 2014 article in the *New York Review of Books*, in which he concluded that "the resource [that we need is] ... political will, which is infinitely renewable. If we can get it going" (Bill McKibben, "Climate: Will We Lose the Endgame?" *New York Review of Books* [10 July 2014]: https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2014/07/10/climate-will-we-lose-endgame/).

3 *IPCC*, "SR 1.5: Global Warming of 1.5 oC" (2018): https://www.ipcc.ch/sr15/; USGCRP, "Fourth National Climate Assessment" (2018): https://nca2018.globalchange.gov.

4 See http://climatecommunication.yale.edu/visualizations-data/ycom-us-2018/?est=worried&type=value&geo=county.

5 There are of course far too many good texts of environmental journalism, history, and political theory to cite here. But I will offer a representative (and recent) example from each field. For journalism, see Hiroko Tabuchi, "The Oil Industry's Covert Campaign to Rewrite American Car Emissions Rules," *New York Times* (13 December 2018): https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/13/climate/cafe-emissions-rollback-oil-industry.html; for history, see Andreas Malm, *Fossil Capital: The Rise of Steam Power and the Roots of Global Warming* (New York: Verso, 2016) and Thomas G. Andrews, *Killing for Coal: America's Deadliest Labor War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010); for political theory, see Simon Caney's numerous articles about climate justice: https://simoncaney.weebly.com/climate-justice.html. A notable exception to my (very rough) generalizations about how these three fields have approached environmental politics is the work of Jedediah Purdy, who has attempted the kind of intellectual history of the environment that is similar to that of the works discussed in this essay. See Jedediah Purdy, *After Nature: A Politics for the Anthropocene* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).

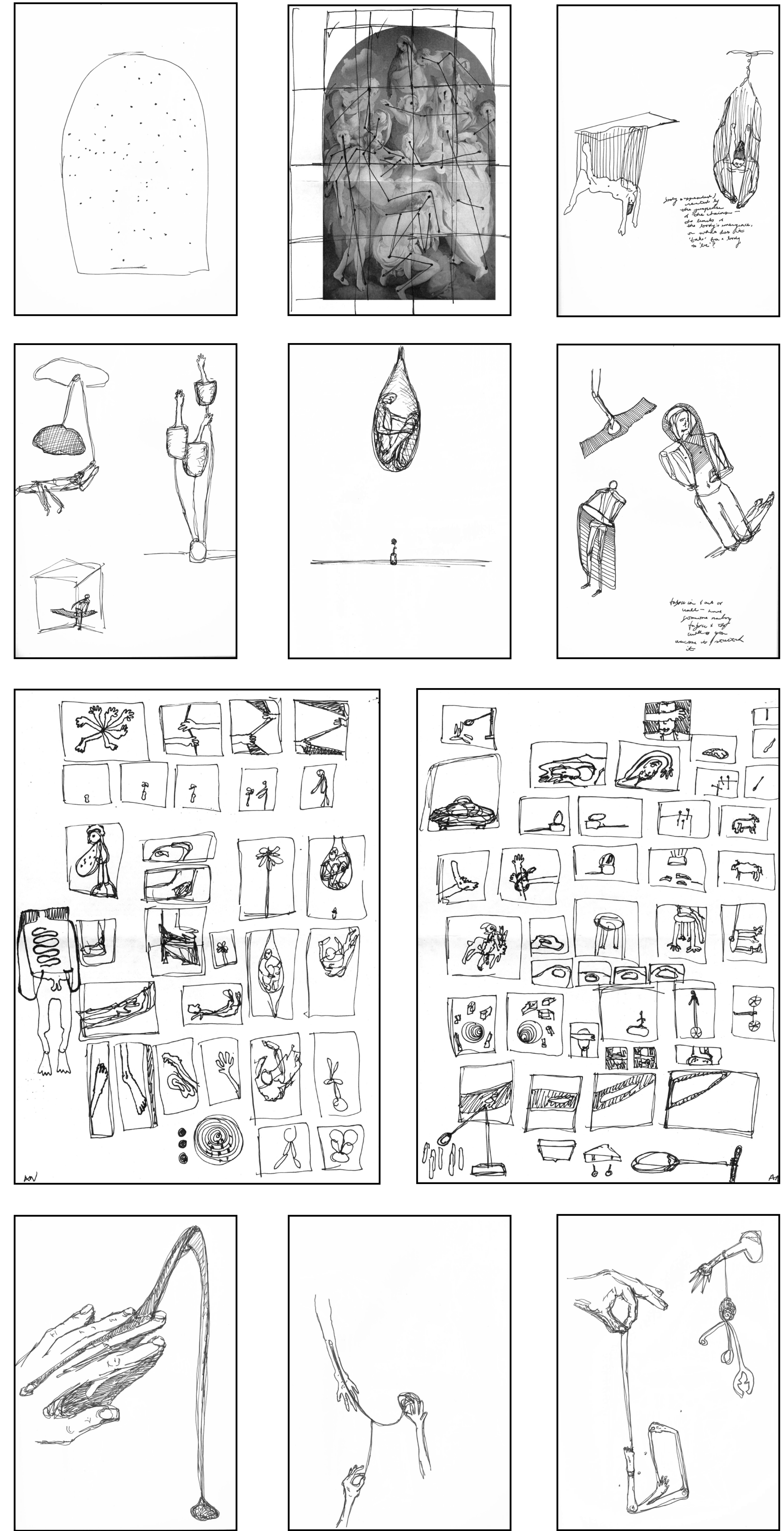
6 Quentin Skinner, "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas" in *Visions of Politics, Volume I: Regarding Method* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 57-89; Annabel Brett, "What is intellectual history now?" in D. Cannadine ed., *What is history now?* (London: Palgrave Press, 2002), 128.

DRAWINGS

ALEJANDRO NODARSE

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.

OBJECT STUDIES FOR A DEPOSITION



MARGARET (MIGS) GRABAR SAGE

FROM PONTORMO

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 quattrini 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 is 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.

REVIEWED

FARMING WHILE BLACK: SOUL FIRE FARM'S PRACTICAL GUIDE TO LIBERATION ON THE LAND

LEAH PENNIMAN

CHELSEA GREEN PUBLISHING
368 PAGES I $22.72

LIBERATION BY SOIL

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 combatting 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.

ESSAY

DIMITRI DIAGNE

FINDING EUROPE

FINDING EUROPE

DIMITRI DIAGNE

IN BUDAPEST, IN THE SQUARE OUTSIDE ST. ISTVÁN BASILICA, there is a Christmas market. After worrying 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 temple, turning over merchant's stands, long hair disheveled and plastered to his face, sweeping his arms across counters full of pastries, the flesh of salmon and fowl, metal boxes of forints, 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 an artist collective will go to all the Christmas markets of Europe and do it at the same time, some dressed in linen robes, some dressed as Charlie Brown.

For all their cheap commercialism, Christmas markets bring joy to many. The posh and artfully-lit promenades of Central Budapest, which host the main Christmas market, are packed with people marching in tight formation from Lacoste to Intimissimi Italian lingerie to Zara Home, each storefront dripping with icicle lights, an enormous glowing tree guiding the way. Stepping into a side street feels like stepping out of a slow but powerful river full of eddies that disorient and terrify. I prefer the slightly quieter, stranger quarters. The Ottoman bathhouse where, for about twenty dollars, you can sit in a 500-year-old stone tub with old Hungarian men in linen loincloths for unlimited time; the tiny bar operated semi-legally by an English immigrant of Afro-Caribbean origin and frequented by an alt-looking crowd; the bookstore-café owned by the publisher of László Krasznahorkai's mind-bending novels. I even prefer St. István in the rain.

From there, I walked towards the parliament, through the kind of neighborhood that surrounds important government offices. The streets were clean and quiet, the buildings grand and featureless. Like many somewhat famous and extraordinarily photogenic buildings, especially those that imitate old styles, the Parliament's Gothic Revival structure was quite boring in person, a strained and self-conscious attempt at an anachronistic form of beauty. I left quickly. The sun began emerging from the clouds as I boarded a yellow tram. It took me along the Danube, on whose far bank Buda's monumental architecture lay bathed in golden evening light.

Budapest looks like a city someone would design in Forge of Empires or some other online strategy game. Looking across the river from Pest into Buda, one sees a Baroque palace in front of a Gothic church. Next to that a colossal statue of an angel hovers over a medieval citadel, behind a sprawling Beaux-Arts hotel-bathhouse. At first glance, there is very little to indicate that we are no longer in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The historical jumble of styles, expressed in their most grandiose forms, easily reads against the late-afternoon backdrop as a piece of propaganda artwork, a testament to what a particular element of Europe sees in a particular section of history. It is distinctly Western, distinctly opulent, distinctly built to project the grandness of what many would like to interpret as a distinctly grand European civilization.

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Several hundred miles to the south, in Montenegro, the distinction is less clear. The country prides itself on being the only part of the Balkans that remained at least partially autonomous throughout the entire Ottoman period. Popular history holds that the Empire's forces were no match for its rugged land and its rugged, warlike clans—one of which my maternal great-grandmother was a member. A Montenegrin acquaintance offered me a more skeptical revision of this story. He suggested that the jagged limestone plateaus covered with scrappy oak trees were not worth the effort to conquer, so it didn't take much to convince the Ottomans to stop trying. In any case, Montenegro held out for hundreds of years despite being completely surrounded by Ottoman territory. Meanwhile, on the Empire's far northern frontier, the Hungarians toiled on the ramparts of the *antemurale christianitatis*, the symbolic wall between Christian Europe and the Muslim East.

Perhaps it is out of a feeling of solidarity, then, that Viktor Orbán, Hungary's authoritarian Prime Minister and President of the far-right Fidesz Party, donated twenty-five kilometers of a new *antemurale*, in the form of barbed wire, to Montenegro this past summer. I first heard about this gift through that same Montenegrin acquaintance, who dryly 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 walling off a particular version of Europe is becoming increasingly fashionable and visible. It is also practically impossible—and morally unjustifiable. Europe cannot be constituted as a fixed and uniform cultural and geographical region, especially in a contemporary world drawn together and also ravaged by the inequities of global late capitalism. It is these inequities that at once make European countries desirable destinations and create people in need of destinations. Attempts to wall off Europe are a kind of trans-boundary ethnonationalism, which, like all instances of ethnonationalism, require a dishonest smoothing over of history. The idea of a white, Christian Europe that is fundamentally separate requires rejecting the great historical truth that such a Europe is not real. Not only in the sense that the creation of the Western European powers was only possible through exchange with African, Middle Eastern, South Asian, and East Asian societies, and later, through the exploits of colonialism. But in the sense that Europe, as a coherent cultural and physical territory, has never really existed.

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A National Geographic world map hangs in my childhood bedroom. Thanks to its decade-long presence, I can recite most national capitals. I can draw from memory a decent outline of the Mediterranean Sea. France is purplish-blue, Brazil is green, South Africa is yellow. Other countries are delineated by their own rings of color that fade to clean white as you move away from the borders, which appear as the crisp, sudden interfaces between two colors. Sometimes they are separated by the slender blue strand of a river. Some follow the jagged ridge of a mountain range (*Pyrenees* is written above the France–Spain border). Some seem to follow nothing in particular. These take the form of either straight lines (curved to account for the map's reduction of a spherical surface to a flat one) or convoluted meanders, like the vast squiggle between Kazakhstan and Russia that bifurcates into the vast squiggles distinguishing Mongolia from Russia and China.

Look at a satellite image of Central Asia and these boundaries seem absurd, as they ford rivers, wind through deserts, and cut across mountain ranges and language families. One could make the same observation of the US-Mexico border west of the Rio Grande, and of countless other fronteirs. The meaning of such a border is not geographic, linguistic, cultural, or ecological. Political boundaries denote the area over which the international community, or some powerful element of that community, has acknowledged the sovereign authority of a particular nation state. Of course this state sovereignty is amended, suspended, violated, and ignored so frequently that it rarely exists in its pure form, revealing just how contrived political borders are.

The borders of continents tend to be less arbitrary than those of countries. They are delineated less by compromises and treaties than by geology. Floating on the slurry of molten rock miles below Earth's surface, there is a North American Plate, a South American Plate, an African Plate, an Australian Plate, an Antarctic Plate, and a Eurasian Plate, into which the Arabian and Indian Plates are smashed. Cracks in the Earth's crust tend to manifest in geographical features on the surface. South America erupts suddenly the bottleneck of the Panamanian Isthmus. Australia and Antarctica are surrounded by ocean. The Mediterranean and the deep trench of the Red Sea separate Africa from Eurasia. But at what point on that great landmass does Europe begin?

A high school history teacher of mine described Europe as a fractal pattern of peninsulas sticking out from the northwest corner of Asia. For hundreds of years, powerful people who lived on this continental outgrowth have tried to define its eastern boundary. Even when it concerns spaces that, like continents, aren't inherently political, geography is a politically involved practice. Because continents are understood to be rooted in the most concrete physical reality, they may offer the most stable and irrefutable identity around which to organize politically. Continents are more than tectonic plates—they become cultural associations, parties of solidarity, which take on new political significance in the framework of transnational federations and organizations. NAFTA, the African Union, and the EU are all based on some notion of continental identity. As the EU expands, it becomes more and more geographically contiguous, constituting a territory of adjoining states whose membership in the Union can be held up to defend the idea, easily exploited by conservative politicians and other xenophobes, that a culturally coherent Europe coincides with a physically 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 geological 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 differences with every culture in whatever area someone wants to define as "Europe" exceed the differences between those cultures. Since the 8th century encounter between the Umayyad Caliphate and a Frankish Army led by Charles Martel, this other has been Islam, later to be represented by the Ottomans. The Other now takes the form of insidiously diffuse Middle Eastern and North African migrants whose stereotyped image stirs paranoia in the minds of many white Europeans, both Christian and non-Christian. This contemporary stereotype of the Other is not only Muslim, but also dark and poor. Each trait is enough to imply the others, and each is enough to prohibit inclusion within the ideal 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 some 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.

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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, Albanians, Turks, and others see themselves as fully Muslim and fully European."[1] 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 the map in my bedroom wall. The people I was with did not. On the other end of the local glamour spectrum are *çajtores*, small, sparse, unisex cafés where men gather to talk and gamble over tiny, hourglass-shaped cups of strong black tea that cost twenty cents each. "Some young people here can't even afford one of these," an acquaintance told me over a cup at the *çajtore* I frequent, whose name in Albanian translates to "at the hut" and whose design, with burlap wallpaper and bark-covered wood panels, tries to emulate one. "Things are very bad here. Lots of people leave for Europe."

Europe, then, is a place to which one travels from this country on the Balkan Peninsula. One goes there to find functioning train systems, the rule of law, and regulations that prevent power plants from pumping brown coal smoke into grey winter air. An abundance of jobs that don't require having a well-positioned relative, and the freedom to cross international borders in pursuit of those jobs, in search of education, to meet relatives, in a way that—by declaration of the EU—Kosovars cannot. Many people say that living here can feel like being "trapped."

A Kosovar Passport is one of the world's least powerful. Citizens can travel to 14 countries visa-free, and thirty-four with a visa on arrival. Not included in this number is the United States, the powerful ally that occupies a position of special reverence in the minds of many Kosovar Albanians. Neither are the countries of the European Union, whose flag adorns public buildings and infrastructure projects throughout the country. Getting a visa for Germany or Switzerland, two of the most common destinations for Kosovar immigrants, requires a long wait outside an embassy, a barrage of forms, a non-refundable fee of close to one hundred euros (no small change in a country where unemployment hovers around thirty percent and average monthly income at around four hundred euros), and an understanding that in the end, you're likely to be denied. It is a process that many describe as humiliating. Similarly humiliating might be boarding a plane at the Stuttgart airport, where the flight to Kosovo is sequestered in a small, old, far-flung terminal along with flights to Hurghada, Egypt and Izmir, Turkey. You have to pass through a special passport-check to enter the gate area. The terminal serves as quarantine for less wealthy, darker-skinned, not-quite Europeans. It contains a single food stand that sells four-euro coffee.

Europe is where the money and the power are. This is a definitional statement, from the perspective 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 power. Hence the possibility of Montenegro allying with Orbán's right wing EU front, to prove that they belong on the European side of the *antemurale*. This is a long-standing trend. In *Race and the Yugoslav Region*, Catherine Baker relates how in the 1980s, members of Slovenia's nascent independence movement asserted their "Europeanness" to contrast themselves with the "Balkanness" of their neighboring Republics to the South and East.[2] 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 Kosovar online investigative journalism publication, the European Union's refusal to grant Kosovo visa liberalization is likely at least partially due to xenophobia.[3] 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 wait, then, for the European Union to abandon 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 cannot mark 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 maltreated 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 radical openness can create a future that is more honest, just, and functional than the past.

1 Akyol, Riada Asimovic. "Want to Cultivate a Liberal European Islam? Look to Bosnia." *The Atlantic*. January 13, 2019. https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2019/01/bosnia-offers-model-liberal-european-islam/579529/.

2 Baker, Catherine. *Race and the Yugoslav Region: Postsocialist, Post-conflict, Postcolonial?* Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018.

3 Zulfaj, Jeton."Will Kosovo Pass the Final Test?" *Kosovo 2.0*. September 11, 2018. https://kosovotwopointzero.com/en/will-kosovo-pass-the-final-test/.

OUR COLLECTIVE RECORD

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

that a lynched person cannot do. The speaker's lack of self-awareness is galling, but West's abundance of self-awareness makes the song extraordinary. As he put it years before on "All Falls Down," "we all self-conscious, I'm just the first to admit it."

West accomplishes all of this not through didactic explanation, but instead via the counterpoint of samples and words, borrowed sounds and fragmented melodies. This is the centerpiece of West's brilliance: his ability to play various facets of his music against each other, to create nuance and argument through musical tension. West's best songs are in conversation with themselves, as each facet of the music makes its case and their curator assembles them into a sonic whole. The participants that West draws into this conversation are astonishing in their variety, demonstrative of his encyclopedic command of music history—his samples range from 1960's Hungarian rock to contemporary hip-hop, touching on countless traditions in between. Many artists can write a great verse, and many can produce a great track; but Kanye West is one of very few who has the audacity, the knowledge, and the skill to make music that is somehow both at odds with itself and entirely sure of its purpose.

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I always knew that West was, to put it mildly, not very agreeable. His arrogance was the stuff of celebrity legend. But it never seemed consequential—that was gossip, and I was in it for the music. Then came 2018, and the situation changed. In April, West emerged from a long public absence with a flurry of tweets boasting of his support for President Trump. The photos of West sporting a "Make America Great Again" hat lapped up most of 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 Lives Matter protesters are "a bunch of whiny toddlers, pretending to be oppressed for attention." West's support for Trump was not an isolated media stunt: 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 rattled off a string of appalling 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 as with his Twitter rant, there were plenty of other claims that largely escaped the public's attention. He enthusiastically repeated Fox News' racist 'black-on-black crime' talking point. He lauded Trump for allowing business owners to bypass regulations and increase their profits. Perhaps most upsetting of all, he proudly embraced ignorance: "we can talk about history, but not too long." Like the speaker in "Blood on the Leaves," West bullishly shouted down the lessons of the past. It was a deplorable show of bad politics and bad morals.

West's garish behavior continued for months, culminating in a visit to the White House in October. Sitting across from Trump, West gave a ten-minute, seemingly unprepared speech. There were bits of real content sprinkled in—like West's insightful, if bizarrely expressed, take on the 13th Amendment—but they were drowned in a sea of spurious nonsense. The President looked thrilled. And then, at the end of October, it all seemed to stop. Following an apparently minor scuffle with his then-friend Owens (the two subsequently parted ways), West announced on Twitter: "my eyes are now wide open and now realize [sic] I've been used to spread messages I don't believe in. I am distancing myself from politics and completely focusing on being creative." But then, on the first day of 2019, West came circling back: "Trump all day," he tweeted. "Just so in 2019 you know where I stand." The Kanye show was back on the air.

When the headlines about West's comments at TMZ first flashed across my phone last spring, I reacted with bemusement rather than anger. What he had said was jaw-dropping, to be sure, but it seemed more like a particularly ugly sideshow than an event of real political importance. I rolled my eyes, watched a few highlights from the TMZ video, and went back to my day. I had been listening to some of my favorite West songs all week, and his new comments weren't about to stop me. The song I had on repeat that day was "Runaway." "You've been putting up with my shit just way too long," West rapped into my headphones. I smiled.

But as West continued to assert his views, I began to realize that his alt-right outburst merited an angrier response than I had given. I finally got around to watching the TMZ video in its entirety, and I was struck by the response of Van Lathan, the black TMZ employee who became momentarily famous for shouting back at West from across the office floor. Lathan told West that there would be "real-world, real-life consequence" for what he was saying, and accused him of ignoring how the President he was embracing was a threat to the lives of black Americans who don't live in West's celebrity bubble. What struck me was the intensity of Lathan's feeling. For Lathan, West was not merely another celebrity gone off the rails; he was a powerful man doing harm to the very community that had made him a star. Lathan, in his own words, was "unbelievably hurt."

The magnitude of West's betrayal fully hit me when I read Ta-Nehisi Coates' blistering essay "I'm Not Black, I'm Kanye" the following week. Coates' piece was not solely concerned with West—it was about the intersections of celebrity, race, and heritage. But what stayed with me was his searing condemnation of West's immorality: "West's ignorance is not merely deep, but also dangerous." He said that West had "chosen collaboration." He accused West of "lending his imprimatur, as well as his Twitter platform of some 28 million people [now more than 29], to the racist rhetoric of the conservative movement." He argued that West had become "a mouthpiece" for America's most horrific instincts.[1] He was right.

As the gravity of West's remarks sank in, I could have abandoned it all, wiped the slate clean and said what so many others were saying at that time: I'm done with Kanye West. Instead, I found myself going back to all of my old West favorites in order to explore my conflicted reaction to his public offenses. Would I still love his art as much as I had? Would I feel guilt or regret about that love? Would the image of West in his MAGA hat prompt me to reevaluate his past work? It did not; I loved his albums as much as I ever had. Still, the conflict between my admiration for West's music and my disdain for his recent remarks did not sit well with me. I began constructing a simple story, one designed as much to exculpate me, the listener, as to describe reality: Kanye West was a brilliant artist who could not handle fame, stumbled into the arms of an evil political movement, and lost his former genius. If this turned out to be the case—if West *had* been a great artist, but no longer was—then perhaps I didn't need to reckon with the fact that I delighted in the art of a Trump supporter.

Then a burst of new music arrived, fresh on the heels of all the controversy, and my simple story fell apart. I thought the new albums were terrific. West released five albums in May and June. Three of them were works he produced for other artists. The other two were a solo album entitled ye and a collaboration with Kid Cudi entitled *Kids See Ghosts*. Two of the three West-produced albums (Pusha T's *Daytona* and Teyana Taylor's *K.T.S.E*) were excellent: tightly constructed, brilliantly produced (West's hallmark), mischievously dirty, and a lot of fun. But the core of West's project lay in *ye* and *Kids See Ghosts*, and these were the albums to which I found myself returning over and over again in the subsequent months, drawn in by an orbit of unexpected potency.

ye and *Kids See Ghosts* are powerful because they spring from a spirit of reckless, instinctual, first-thought-best-thought creative force: "just say it out loud, just to see how it feels," as West says on the first track of *ye*. The result is that they shift form constantly, sometimes even mid-song. In the case of *ye*, this shape-shifting is evident from the first track, "I Thought About Killing You": it begins as a dark, meditative spoken-word monologue, only to transform midway through into a dance track with a powerful trap beat. The album is full of such jarring pivots—stylistically, structurally, and in content. "Yikes" and "All Mine" are energized chunks of braggadocio in which West boasts about his invincibility and sexual prowess; "Wouldn't Leave" and "Violent Crimes" are soulful, almost repentant songs in which West criticizes himself for his irresponsible behavior and his objectification of women, even as he sporadically continues to objectify them. The album does not bother to choose between its many seemingly contradictory identities—it swerves between them at breakneck speed, daring you to come along for the ride. *Kids See Ghosts* is equally impossible to pin down, oscillating between jittery, nerve-jangling energy and warm, contemplative self-reflection.

The music is a mess, full of intellectual inconsistencies and unpolished lyrics. And it is precisely this disarray that is the source of its impact and profundity. West's work has always fused vast musical knowledge with sheer artistic instinct, and never before has he so fully allowed his impulses to take over, spilling his influences and contradictions and half-made soundscapes onto the tracks. This is a different artistic mode than that of "Blood on the Leaves." What distinguished that song was its thoughtfulness and intentionality. West had a plan, and he executed it. Not a lot on *ye* and *Kids See Ghosts* feels planned. This is West's new project: he wants to strike by ambush, creating work before he even knows what he wants to say. It's not that the music is vacuous, but rather that West has chosen a different route to reach his insights. He wants to stumble upon them, surprising himself as much as us, and he trusts that his instincts will lead him to something worthwhile.

In and of itself, instinctual randomness does not make for a great album—the work must still be more than the sum of its parts. Thrillingly, improbably, ye and *Kids See Ghosts* add up to something profound. West makes us feel the pit at the center of being human, the deep chasm where loss, sorrow, desperation, and the knowledge of mortality reside. He never directly references the pit, but instead evokes everything that surrounds it, all the bluster, numbness, and giddy energy that are on the periphery of that terrible center. West shows us the shadows, not the thing itself. He doesn't have to: we can feel how close it is. He is able to do this because he possesses the inexplicable instincts of a great poet, the ability to pluck the right phrase or sound as if from thin air. Take, for example, the most memorable line on *ye*, which is delivered by guest artist 070 Shake. Near the end of "Ghost Town," she howls: "I put my hand on a stove to see if I still bleed." In an interview upon the album's release, Shake told a revealing story about the line's creation: "it's funny because my actual lyric was, 'To see if I still feel.' And then Ye [West] was like, 'I want you to say bleed.'" West does not need to explain his revision—when you hear Shake deliver the line, the words are simply *right*.

Kanye West has placed those who admire his work in a confounding predicament. His public persona over the past six months has been immoral. The content of *ye* and *Kids See Ghosts*, while far more nuanced than West's public statements, is not unimpeachably ethical: both albums feature sexist lyrics as well as moments in which West defends or minimizes his recent behavior. And yet I think these albums are extraordinary. What happens now?

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The cleanest answer is obvious: boycott Kanye West. For some, the impulse to do so is rooted in a visceral reaction—the same hurt that Lathan described, mixed with sheer disgust. This is understandable. But others, either implicitly or explicitly, use logical arguments to justify a boycott. The most sophisticated of these rationalizations is what we could call the argument from economic dissent, and it takes the following form. It is a shame, the boycotter says, to abandon the music of Kanye West. But we cannot stand idly by as a powerful public figure advances ideas that sanction the oppression of our fellow citizens. We must make it known that these ideas are unacceptable. And for the vast majority of us, the only communication we have with West is through the music he sells. Unfortunate as it is, we must therefore show our disapproval by refusing to buy.

This is a powerful argument. It is true that the most efficacious way to voice displeasure with West is to stop buying and streaming his albums. The alternatives—an angry Facebook post, a sharply worded letter, a comment amongst friends—seem pathetically ineffectual. And we should certainly want to send a message to West that his support of racist rhetoric and policies is unacceptable. West's platform is huge: more than 29 million followers on Twitter alone. His actions, in combination with his power, demand pushback. And yet I think that this argument for a boycott should not be accepted, for it fails to recognize (or else gravely underestimates) the damaging precedent that a boycott would set.

To grasp this danger, we must understand the premises on which the argument from economic dissent rests. By arguing that we should abandon West's music to show dissent for his public statements, the boycotter fuses (however reluctantly) the man with the music, the artist with the art. Listening to West's music, per this logic, is an endorsement of his brand, and thereby of him in his entirety: music, public statements, private behavior, all of it. The problem with this is that it treats artists like politicians, viewing each as an inseparable entity deserving of either support or opposition. We hold—or at least *should* hold—our politicians to specific standards. They ought to check their facts, avoid contradicting themselves, and be wary of the repercussions of their public statements and actions. We look to them for moral public positions. If they do not meet these standards, they do not deserve our support. And because our option is binary (vote for or against), a politician who does not deserve our support necessarily deserves our opposition. But to approach artists in the same way is an error. If we treat artists like politicians, then we will come to believe that our perspective on them should hinge on their consistency and their morality, that we should give a thumbs up to the artist who voices good politics on a late-night talk show and a thumbs down to the artist who says something morally "problematic" (to use that vaguest and cheapest of contemporary critical terms). We will listen to the albums of the artist whom we endorse as a person and disregard the albums of the artist whom we condemn as a person. This will happen quite irrespective of other factors that determine the quality of artistic work, like technique, emotional impact, or insight.

Whence do we get the notion that listening to an

album is the same as endorsing all aspects of the artist, equivalent to voting for a candidate? The root of the idea is simple: in America, we vote with our wallets. When we choose to buy a certain product rather than its competition, we say yea to the former and nay to the latter. Then the companies making those products look at how much they sold and decide how they should change to get more purchases—more 'votes,' in other words. Buying music, the reasoning goes, is no different; when we listen to an album on Spotify, we tell the maker of the album that we support him, and that he should keep doing what he has been doing to earn our continued patronage. So listening to West's music does not merely convey curiosity about the work of an artist—it gives a vote to the man and all he says and does.

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 the former has an ex-CEO who was caught making racist comments. If I were a regular customer of Papa John's, it would make sense for me to transfer my business to Pizza Hut. It's just a substitution of one second-rate pizza for another; why not use my dollars to make a statement? But applying the argument to art is different. Unlike Papa John's pizza, whose sole purpose is to create a product that will attract buyers, art (when it is good) is made for reasons other than pulling in the maximum number of customers. To use the logic of commercial mass-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, *Fast and Furious* and Ed Sheeran. Like most Americans, I enjoy some of these products and don't enjoy others. But they are all just that: products, like Papa John's and Pizza Hut. Encouraged by movie studios and record companies, Americans have become accustomed to the idea that works of art are merely another type of product that we buy at the mall. Browse well, then pick your favorite brand. But serious artists are not brands. They do not offer us near-identical products at comparable costs. Each piece of art is a singularity: just because two artists make work in the same medium and genre, we cannot conclude that they are interchangeable, nor that we should vote for one at the expense of another.

To stop listening to West and compensate by doubling my consumption of Jay-Z—or even to be more proactive and transfer my listening-dollars to an up-and-coming rapper with admirable policies—is to follow the pizza model. It implicitly posits that the primary purpose of West's art was to fulfill a quota in my musical diet, to satisfy a craving that could just as well be sated elsewhere. Admittedly, West's particular affinity for corporate branding makes my defense of art as a non-commercial enterprise look a little silly. This is a man who has his own multi-million-dollar sneaker line and has mastered the game of promoting his persona as a brand; as Jay-Z might put it, West is not a businessman, he's a business, man. Is it not naïve to say that his output should be exempted from the capitalist game? Perhaps—but West's work is a risky and distinctive act of creative expression. For all the money and branding that surrounds it, the music is art. To say that such work is just another product would mean that talking seriously about art is utterly inane, like spending hours debating the merits of Papa John's pizza. This is the consequence of the argument from economic dissent: it establishes a model whereby art is just one more thing coming off the endless corporate assembly line.

We are thus caught between a rock and a hard place: either keep listening and lose an opportunity to meaningfully dissent, or boycott and lose the right to take art seriously. Neither option is ideal, and yet we must choose—there is no middle ground. It is not desirable to give Kanye West a free pass for what he has said; it is immoral. But setting a precedent that denies the value of art, that treats it as just another product, strips society of an indispensable source of value. To protect this core, we must be willing to become morally flawed. An imperfect solution is the best one I can find and the only one I can accept: uneasy but unwavering, I will continue to listen.

There is a second rationale for boycotting West's music: the argument from hindsight. This argument posits that West's recent statements have tainted his past artistic output, or at least brought out its worst aspects. The components of West's music that were always present—the misogyny, bullish narcissism, and muddled racial politics—now no longer appear incidental. In light of his recent statements, they seem to be part of a consistent project running through West's oeuvre, a project which led to Trumpism. Coates alluded to this argument in his piece on West, claiming that "one is forced to conclude that an ethos of 'light-skinned girls and some Kelly Rowlands,' of 'mutts' and 'thirty white bitches,' deserved more scrutiny." Indeed, Coates wondered whether such elements of West's music were in fact "evidence of an emerging theme."[2] If they were, then perhaps it 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 inexorably bending to the right, to slavery-as-a-choice, to racism?

The argument from hindsight is powerful because it rests on musical interpretation rather than economic justifications—it has no need of the pizza model. And yet it shares a central premise with the argument from economic dissent: that an artist's work is one indivisible whole, and therefore can be treated as a coherent political project from beginning to end. This is a tempting approach, allowing one to cherry-pick those pieces of an artist's work that fall in line with his current statements. But it is simplistic: most worthwhile artists do not have a single argument running through their work. Instead, their oeuvres are rich with contradictions—and this is certainly the case with Kanye West.

For while it is easy to pluck morsels of Trumpism from his lyrics, it is equally easy to find ideas that contradict West's current statements. Take the lyric Coates referenced about "thirty white bitches." The full lyric (from his 2010 song "So Appalled") is "champagne wishes, thirty white bitches / I mean this shit is fucking ridiculous." Is this a crass glorification of excess, a self-lacerating critique of the speaker's crassness, or both? As is frequently the case in West's music, it is hard to tell. Contradictions and the tensions they yield are precisely what makes West's work remarkable; to gloss over them in search of a single political project would be a mistake. Nor is West unaware of his role as a curator of inconsistencies. One of the most memorable lines from *ye* comes during "Violent Crimes," when West interrupts his own monologue about the misogyny that his daughter might face from violent men to take an unforgiving look in the mirror: "how you the devil rebukin' the sin?"

There is something important at stake here: the question of who gets the final say in interpreting an artist's work. West's current statements do his music no favors. He is, intentionally or not, encouraging listeners to focus on the most immoral aspects of his art. But to follow his lead and thereby conclude that we were mistaken to hear anything other than racism, misogyny, and denial of history in his work necessarily posits that the artist is the best interpreter of his own work. This is not the case. It is perfectly possible for an artist to reach insights in his work that he did not intend, or else to retroactively

misinterpret his own creation. So when I hear West claim that "we can talk about history, but not too long," I see no need to revise my reading of "Blood on the Leaves" as a song that critiques historical forgetting. That interpretation did not rely on West's affirmation—it relied only on the music. Denying the artist interpretive authority affirms the mysterious potential of art: that it can say something even its maker does not know.

The twin notions that an artist's body of work is indivisible and that his interpretation is correct also produce a third justification for boycotting, one that is particularly pervasive and particularly flawed: the argument from purity. This argument posits that letting the words of Kanye West enter one's head makes the listener less moral. The unethical components of the music, in tandem with the recent statements of its maker, corrupt the listener's mind. This argument rests, like the argument from hindsight, on the notion that West's entire body of work has a single definition, one largely determined by his current statements. If we imbibe the music, we only internalize the bad bits. The argument from purity thus falls on the same flaw as the argument from hindsight.

But it takes a further logical misstep: if we choose *not* to imbibe the music of artists like Kanye West, it suggests, then perhaps we can avoid immorality. Perhaps we can be pure. While this desire is understandable, it is impossible: part of being human is having immoral thoughts and figuring out what to do with them. One cannot succeed in ridding oneself of such thoughts by refusing to take in morally-questionable art. We should want to be good people—but that means doing the hard work of grappling with immoral thoughts, not refusing to engage with them. To mute morally questionable content is thus more about *appearing* moral than actually being moral. If we make our minds into sacred cities, guarded at all times to ensure that nothing other than agreeable and morally sound ideas (or ideas stated by agreeable and morally scrupulous people) get in, we do so with little benefit and at great cost: we starve ourselves of ideas.

Suppose that we accept my arguments against boycotting West's music. Now we must pose a slightly different question: is it okay to *like* that music? Those who would answer in the negative assert that West's music has immoral components (even when considered separately from his public persona), so to like it is immoral. This fails to recognize that morality is not a binary, but a sliding scale. Some works of art (most of them boring) are scrupulous and pure in their morality. Some works are horrific and evil in their morality (or lack thereof). But the interesting work exists somewhere in the middle. So while it would indeed be immoral to feel fondness for *The Birth of a Nation or Triumph of the Will*, the morality of liking things that lie somewhere in the grey zone—that are immoral here and there, but not to their core—is far more complicated.

Our assessment of these works must therefore incorporate the *other* scales in play—those measuring technique, emotional impact, insight, and pleasure, to name a few. When a work ranks highly on all of these scales but has morally questionable moments, it is not wrong to like that work. Morality is one factor of many in the consideration of art. In the 1936 film *Swing Time*, for example, Fred Astaire performs a dance in blackface. The dance is not central to the plot, it is not a lengthy portion of the film—but it is there, and it is immoral. Does this mean that we must dislike the whole film, that we should not express fondness for any of its other aspects? Or what of The Beatles, who sang "I'd rather see you dead, little girl, than to be with another man"—is all of *Rubber Soul* now irredeemable? No: to introduce nuance into our reactions, to say that we admire a piece of art while recognizing its moments of failure, is an essential skill. It allows us to holistically appreciate works rather than being blinded by a single shortcoming. Kanye West's music stretching all the way back to *The College Dropout* is not perfectly moral. It has moments of shortcoming, some of them disturbing; these are worth discussing. But I still love the music, and I still will return to it, again and again.

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One question remains, the most important one of all: why is art worth it? It is easy to forget how to respond to this. Moment by moment, day by day, it seems like the world is falling apart. In comparison to such terrible threats, doesn't the venerated space in which artists experiment out loud look less important? No thinking person can avoid this creeping doubt, nor the thought that follows: maybe there's just no room in our world today for anything but politics, for the clean, sharp, stubborn lines of resistance. Why should we invest so much time and energy defending the reckless ambiguities of art? If there is a chance that listening to Kanye West makes one less moral, or makes the world less good, why is it worth the risk?

There is no one answer. Art gives us many things, and what it gives shifts depending on the needs of the society and the listener. Most obviously, it gives us insight: "Blood on the Leaves," for example, changed how I saw America. Equally evident is that art can offer pleasure, something that is often trivialized but is an essential part of a good life and a good society. As that most poetic of American socialist slogans asserts, we do not only need bread—we need roses too. Recently I found myself listening to West's song "Father Stretch My Hands, Pt. 1" in a nearly-deserted subway car while returning home late at night. When the beat dropped, it was so graceful, so decisive, so supple, that I let out a giddy laugh. I could not contain myself: the sheer pleasure that the music had brought me needed to be expressed. It was soul-enlivening.

And art also heals. Few would think of West's music as soothing, and yet a strain of gentle humanism runs through his entire body of work. From "Family Business" (2004) to "Ultralight Beam" (2016) to "Cudi Montage" (2018), West has made songs that are hymns to community, prayers for deliverance, benedictions for continued life. Like so much else in his music, the healing power of these songs stems from West's mastery of contrast—frequently such songs are situated on albums directly before or after harsh, feverishly energetic tracks. This positioning accentuates the music's healing power, making it feel necessary and earned. West's music offers not the cheap and short-lived salve of comfort, but the deep satisfaction of empathy. It does not solve our problems, but it reminds us that we are not alone, and that someday, somehow, salvation might be possible.

But art can also offer something else, something more mysterious. That mystery something is best defined by example. In June, someone published a short video on YouTube, an excerpt from the listening party that West held in Wyoming to release *ye*. The video, shakily filmed on a cell phone, drops the viewer in during "Ghost Town." On the outskirts of the party, 070 Shake is dancing to the booming sound of her own outro: "*and nothing hurts anymore, I feel kind of freeeeee.*" Shake is only 21 years old, and she still looks and carries herself like the kid from small-town New Jersey that she is. She is jubilant, and as the sound of the song rises she runs off into the wide-open Wyoming field behind her, carving out a wide arc, returning to the crowd's edge, then veering off again. As she runs, she extends her arms like a child imitating an airplane. A bright light throws her into sharp relief, illuminating a young artist's joy for all to see. "*We're still the kids we used*

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 stooooove 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.

1 Coates, Ta-Nehisi. "I'm Not Black, I'm Kanye." *The Atlantic*. May 7, 2018. https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2018/05/im-not-black-im-kanye/559763/.

2 Ibid.

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