RHYTHMS

Counter Media

Fall 2025

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Edited by
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RHYTHMS chronicles a community of scholars—our vibrations arising through texts and conversations, in the flows of shared space and departure, making each other and ourselves to an uncommon beat.

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Samira Rajabi

On Sundays We Ride Bikes

It is Sunday, it is time for worship. Clad in purple, in a darkened room with purple up-lighting, adding to her mystique, is your latest charismatic leader. With sparkly eyeshadow and long pigtails adorning her toned, luminous physique, Ally Love gives her sermons from atop, you guessed it, a spin bike. The Peloton "Sundays With Love" series offers an intimate meeting with influencer Ally Love, in her role as fitness instructor turned preacher, through a weekly (on Sunday) workout centered around devotion and spirituality. Without explicitly naming any one religion, the symbolism and language of Christianity perpetuate throughout the class, where riders are invited to sweat while listening to Christian rock, gospel and inspirational messaging.

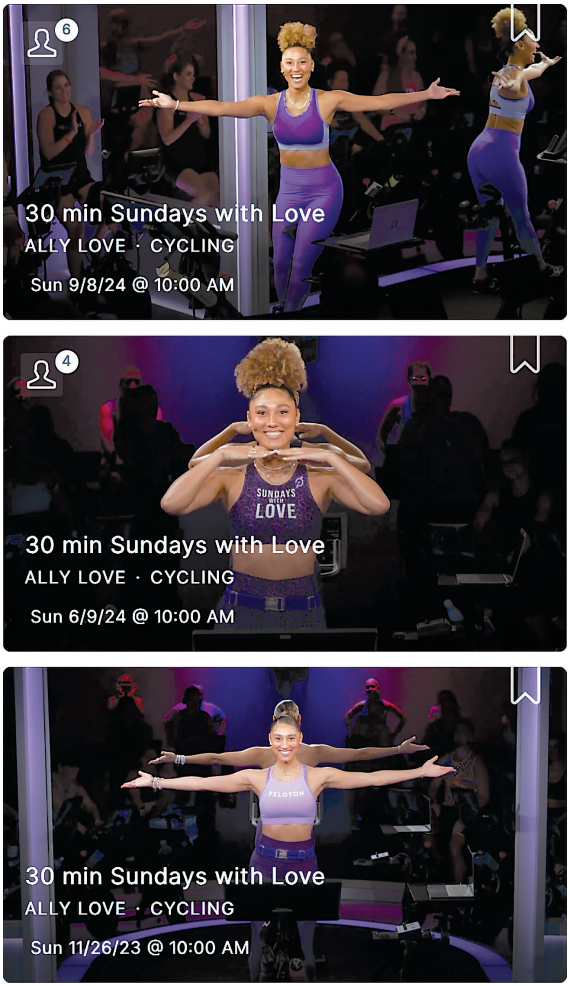
Sometimes I listen to that song by Hozier, "Take Me to Church," and when the angsty voice of the lead singer declares, "I'll worship in the bedroom," he probably doesn't mean: ride your Peloton bike in the bedroom on a Sunday morning, but because

of the sacred space I've witnessed researching Ally Love's Peloton series, that's where my mind goes. As Peloton founder John Foley is quoted saying,

The stuff that happened on Sunday morning at Church or synagogue is still important to human beings. It's still something humans want. But they're not getting as much of it from organized religion. People want fitness and they want something else — instructor-led, group fitness classes, replete with the candles on the altar and someone talking to you from a pulpit for 45 minutes — the parallels are uncanny. In the '70s or '80s, you'd have a cross or Star of David around your neck. Now you have a SoulCycle tank top. That's your identity, that's your community, that's your religion.

So, in creating Peloton, Foley created a religion without religion. Or something akin to it. And he needed a spiritual leader to lead his flock.

Ally Love, in her own words, is a "multifaceted woman, pioneering the slash generation as the CEO/Founder of Love Squad," her organization devoted to self-love and love in community centering around women's experiences. Notable, outside of her capacity as a fitness instructor with Peloton, are Love's devotion to certain identities — she is a boss, and as she notes in her Instagram post from March 2022, a Boss knows how to BOSS UP — or "acknowledge the hardest part of the process. Face that first, then continue on." Love went to college at Fordham where she studied dance but minored in theology. She credits this in part to a childhood accident in which she was hit by a car, something she describes on the *She Pivots* podcast as a major factor in orienting her to spirituality and trust



"Sundays with Love" episodes.
image credit: Peloton Studios

in God to help her heal and grow through her accident. In media interviews she often proclaims pride in the "spiritual part of me" and notes that it's a big part of her story, saying "Our differences make us unique, but our will to be better makes us stronger."

That *will* is what she brings to her Peloton rides. The "Sundays With Love" programming on Peloton, in addition to being a fully branded and merchandised experience on the popular exercise platform, focuses on a particular understanding of spirituality that centers on "showing up for each other" and in particular showing up for the specific subset of the "One Peloton" family that finds themselves reflected in this programming. In one ride, Love discusses belonging through strained breath as she herself rides the bike. She says, "Belonging only works when there is an offering, a commitment, a conversation, that makes a connection." The language of the rides echoes the language you hear in the music she plays, she calls on her followers to "serve fiercely" and to "let that light shine, that light needs a home" in such a way that even as a non-believer I find myself moved, often inspired. The combination of the music, the language of inspiration and religion and the embodied movement you take to be in these rides serving as a powerful conduit for spirituality.

Notably, these rides are sacred and perhaps even political to Love herself. In one social media post on her "love squad" account there is a clip of Love clapping along to Whitney Houston's "Higher love" while saying that this ride is "an opportunity for us to unite … to provide support and protection … we do it without harm … that's who we are." This is

paired online with a long video where she discusses temperance — and the notion of self-control and virtuousness.

I come to this examination of Love's rides to interrogate whether or how these rides form some kind of counter media for those looking to inhabit mainstream spaces with their devotion intact. Or perhaps, these spaces are counter media for those who do not have access to devotional space, so come to spirituality not from church or synagogue where this would then be an extension, rather they come here and find something they were looking for. And perhaps, sometimes folks going to these rides will find something they are explicitly *not* looking for, as one Reddit thread posted in r/pelotoncycle identifies, "note that 'Sundays with Love' Rides are heavy on Christianity," an observation that got this poster downvoted and caused them to double down on their frustration:

Now I have no problem with all people choosing to believe in whatever they want to believe, and appreciate that this ride gets some of the biggest live audiences. But I do have an issue when this sort of programming isn't flagged up in advance — I don't want my children listening to these sorts of messages. I also feel upset for all the Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus and Jedis that don't have Peloton programming options available to them — this community is all about bringing people of all sizes and types together, why are we dividing people by religion? Peloton should either be offering something to all major groups, or not bothering at all.

What a striking comment. As a digital fitness company that has over 3 million subscribers, Peloton's

slogan of "together we go far" does in fact argue that they are a space for everyone to come together. But as "Sundays With Love" demonstrates, there are, within this community, subcommunities that are both contested and specific to identity, ideology and belief.

Of course, there is a long history of devotional fitness that is both implicit and explicit. From the explicitly Christian Power Team who performed body building routines accompanied by Christian music, to the "Weigh Down Workshop" that came from the problematic charismatic figure Gwen Shamblin, who espoused religious dieting, to the more retro feeling "Christian Fitness."

In his work on religion and the media, Stewart Hoover argues that "what had once been secular worlds of entertainment, on the fringe of social life, marginal and infrequent, came more to the center." As religion collides with the secular demands of popular culture, Hoover argues that "individuals today are more active in the construction of their own religious meaning … seeker or quest culture in religion." And this quest is not uncomplicated, in one response to the Reddit post referred to earlier, one commenter said, "just read a review of one of these classes from someone who knew about the Christian themes and sought them out. Her opinion was that that class wasn't Christian enough.… A funny reminder of how wide the range of opinion is about any given class, instructor, or ride type." Indeed, with a plethora of options available to users on the Peloton platform, there is perhaps something for everyone, but these *somethings* are contested, complicated and nuanced by the forces that govern so much of

The Power Team.
image credit: reddit.com/r/GenX/comments/z135vm/hide_your_phone_books_the_power_team_is_here

culture, especially in spaces that seek to foster belonging, either through brand ideology or through deeply rooted identities that matter deeply to users.

Studies of other fitness programming such as CrossFit and SoulCycle have demonstrated that religion and fitness have long been intertwined, not

just through implicit messaging but Musselman notes, in their study of CrossFit, that the sport of fitness has long had a focus on preparedness, militarism, fitness through an explicit connection to Christianity and nationhood. Which leaves me to wonder, in her more tempered Christianity that purports to be inclusive but is not received as such but has social media adherents frequently posting about how much they enjoy the rides, does Love evoke an alternative vision of the nation? In one recent ride that seems to gesture to the politics of the moment, referenced earlier, Love says that her rides are about a higher love and that uniting is crucial—offering support and protection to "people we do not agree with always," which defies understandings of religion as only available to true believers. What is it that Love wants her worshippers to believe in? Is it God? Is it her God? Or is it something else? Something less tangible, less defined?

SoulCycle similarly uses charismatic instructors to lead its users to what Musselman calls "an indoor cycling experience that combines dancing on a stationary bike with spiritual and emotional 'breakthroughs,'" using charismatic authority and an affiliation with Christian megachurch Hillsong to achieve its goals. But a more diffuse devotion to me is perhaps more effective in creating the kind of counter media that I am interested in. Scholar Michael Warner tells us that "like all publics, a counter public comes into being through an address to indefinite strangers" and that "addresses are socially marked by their participation in this kind of discourse"—a particular, situated

discourse. And in this case, it is an embodied discourse.

Bodies always seem to complicate everything. Scholars Hargreaves and Vertinsky use the 1984 work of Pierre Bourdieu to investigate the way embodiment is a "bearer of symbolic value" that reflects the various identities we carry and the social and cultural divisions they accompany. It is no surprise then, that an embodied discourse such as "Sundays With Love" would center the body's relationship to the social world even as it decenters it with its religious and spiritual discourse that never mentions the explicit body. Instead, the body comes into being in this counter public through material movement that is a prerequisite to participation in this community. Hargreaves and Vertinsky go on to discuss that

The idea of bodies as objects of salvation is especially relevant to the bodies of [the] young women . . . . The equating of fitness with goodness, followed by success, is signaled as an imperative pathway for the young women who are targeted. But if the body was not an object of constant attention and interpretation it could not be effective in this way as a means both of self-identification and social communication.

And this social communication is incredibly powerful in what they call "naturalizing" the social body and all the politics that cohere around it.

So, on those bikes, the purple up light shimmering across sweaty faces, and sweat dripping from the legions of Peloton users tuning in from their bikes and apps at home, when Ally Love calls out to her followers to "show up for each other" and "do

everything with love," this message is a call in to this particular, embodied community. One that I negotiate as counter because of the way it is mediated, bound and produces new subjectivities around old discourses.

This essay is my way of exploring what the precise magic of Ally Love and "Sundays With Love" is. And in some ways, I cannot exactly pinpoint who is the counter and who is the mainstream anymore. In some ways, "Sundays With Love" represents a counter public of Christians (or SBNRs) who want a place for devotional practice without the confines of a traditional religious institution. And I think that based on the online comments and responses to Love's content, that's true for a lot of folks. But for others, like those in that Reddit thread, "Sundays With Love" represents how dominant Christian ideologies function semiologically in other space and how the slippage of what counts as ritual allows these spaces to become coopted by dominant, mainstream forms of Christianity. Warner reminds us in our work that "counter publics are 'counter' to the extent that they try to supply different ways of imagining stranger-sociability and its reflexivity," so we must also explore that reflexivity with attention to the complexity of embodiment, community and spirituality in one.

On September 9, 2024, a lucky Peloton user who was fortunate to join Ally Love in person at the New York Peloton studio posted a video of her experience. And with purple hearts as bullet points, she posted the following:

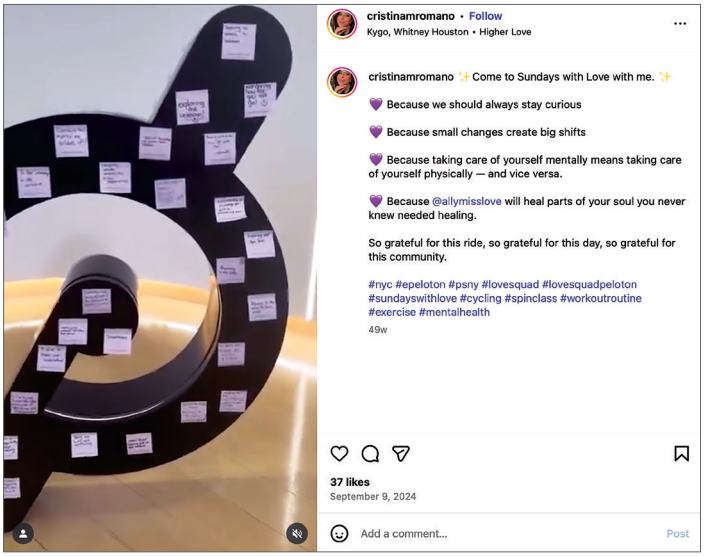


image credit: @cristinamromano, Instagram

Come to Sundays with Love with me
♥ *Because we should always stay curious*
♥ *Because small changes create big shifts*
♥ *Because taking care of yourself mentally means taking care of yourself physically — and vice versa.*
♥ *Because @allymisslove will heal parts of your soul you never knew needed healing.*
So grateful for this ride, so grateful for this day, so grateful for this community.

As I continue to study and learn about this community, I hope to uncover answers to the questions of how Love's body as an explicit, charismatic authority functions in this space. I want to know,

How is it racialized? How is it gendered? How does its physicality, its exposure, its ability and disability move through the larger questions of authority? Does being pregnant make her more of an authority or less? Does her display of her body shift the way her message is received? What does the embodiment of Love as the authority do? This exploration is all part of a much larger project that seeks to understand how the ritualization of Peloton affords this type of engagement as a "natural" extension of its programming. And for now, I have as many questions about Ally Love and "Sundays With Love" as I have answers, but what I have uncovered is that in donning her purple, in baring her soul, and in moving alongside those who receive her message, Love has created something worth looking at, something worth understanding and, for some, a counter media space worth spending their time in.

Júlia Martins Rodrigues

In Search of Economic Entanglement

Hace ciento treinta años, después de visitar el país de las maravillas Alicia se metió en un espejo para descubrir el mundo al revés. Si Alicia renaciera en nuestros días, no necesitaría atravesar ningún espejo: le bastaría con asomarse a la ventana.
— Eduardo Galeano

Through the hands of a beloved Chilean friend, Galeano found me — one of those things that happens through the good old *hermandad latino-americana*. I devoured the pages of *Patas Arriba: La Escuela Del Mundo Al Revés* beneath the bright-pink blossoms of a jambo tree at my family's little farm. What he describes as a "looking-glass world" is a reality that is fundamentally backwards from logic, justice, and human values. Since then, I could not help but see how upside down our world is, full of the bitter ironies, entrenched disparities, and carefully constructed lies that populate our cultural, political, and economic systems. Years later, however, it occurred to me that reality is not

exactly upside down. Forgive me, Eduardo — I no longer think the world is inverted or backwards, but rather tragically disentangled.

Here's the thing: An upside-down world implies the structure is intact but operating in reverse. A disentangled world means the very relationships between structures have been broken: economic logic divorced from ecological reality, social systems cut off from human needs, political power separated from collective wisdom. Dear Galeano, I wonder if the moral inversion you witnessed might actually be the inevitable result of systemic disconnection. An upside-down world needs to be flipped; a disentangled world needs to be rewoven.

And science itself offers us a template for understanding this interconnectedness. For a long time, we approached our world mechanically, looking at different elements as separate things, each in its self-contained box of existence, captive to what our eyes could see. Then breakthroughs in quantum physics shifted everything we thought we knew with the notion that the tiniest bits of the universe share a secret connection no matter how far apart they may be, mutually shaping their behavior. In the quantum world all is tied by invisible rules, completely entangled. If entanglement governs the behavior of the universe's smallest particles, why should we expect human systems to operate any differently? We struggle to see these connections not because they don't exist, but because our institutions are structured to ignore them. Their invisibility isn't accidental — it's engineered. Our laws, markets, and social frameworks compartmentalize what should flow together,

severing the natural relationships that would otherwise guide our collective behavior.

Over a decade of legal training had taught me that our lives are shaped by two very distinct sets of laws: those of nature and those we've constructed for ourselves. From birth, we navigate within well-defined social codes, state laws, cultural norms, market forces, and countless conventions for interacting with the world around us. As we mature, we become imperceptibly conditioned to the infrastructure that contains us—an infrastructure that often creates friction, gradually alienating us from our most human essence, emotions, and longings. Through my years in legal practice, I observed how law and love, happiness and economics exist in separate universes, rarely converging as frameworks through which we approach our social existence.

But what if we designed it differently? What if we recognized that the artificial boundaries between human systems and natural systems are exactly that—artificial? The indissociable connection between humankind, human designs, and everything else isn't just a philosophical ideal; it's a blueprint for radically reimagining how we organize collective life.

In my ongoing journey exploring alternative institutional designs through research and public policy work, I started noticing something—economic thinkers around the world are grappling with the same fundamental question: how do we create an economy that serves all life?

Take Kate Raworth's "Doughnut Economics." She's mapped out this sweet spot where we stay within what the Earth can handle while still meet-

ing everyone's basic needs. Schumacher saw this coming decades ago with "Small is Beautiful," questioning our automatic assumption that bigger is always better. Likewise, Meadows' "Limits to Growth" confronted us with an uncomfortable truth: infinite growth is impossible on a finite planet. What if abundance came from our ability to give rather than accumulate? Sara Horowitz's work on mutualism shows how people can organize to support each other rather than compete. Marshall Sahlins' "Stone Age Economics" tells us that abundance and sharing (not scarcity and competition) were the original economic principles.

All of these ideas point toward something deeper about how we relate to each other economically. Along with many others, these voices represent a kind of counter-culture in economics — thinkers operating at the margins who recognize the economy as part of a living, interconnected system, while mainstream discourse continues down familiar paths of scale and competition.

As I explored these emerging frameworks, I found myself searching for older wisdom that might connect them — something that could help us understand the economy not as a machine, but as a living web of relationships. That search led me to the 18th-century Neapolitan School of Civil Economy, thinkers who grasped something we're now rediscovering: economy and society aren't separate spheres operating independently, but rather expressions of the same fundamental human desire to flourish together.

In the Kingdom of Naples, which included much of today's southern Italy, peasants lived in

deep poverty with little chance of social mobility, while nobles and the Church controlled most of the land. Farming methods were backward, with low productivity and frequent famines. The people weren't facing the disruption of generative AI or the cusp of climate change, yet they knew what it meant to live in an economy that worked for the few while failing the many. It was against this backdrop of systemic dysfunction that a local priest suggested a connection between economics and ethics. Antonio Genovesi, who had long sought to ground metaphysics in human experience rather than abstract theory, proposed that prosperity is both material and moral: an economy without justice, fairness, and solidarity leads to social collapse.

Genovesi was the founding father of what he called "Civil Economy," developing a series of lessons built on the premise that economics must nurture social solidarity, not just individual enrichment. For him, true wealth wasn't found in private accumulation but in the well-being of people, the spread of culture, and moral education. His approach wove together applied ethics with economic thinking, sustained by the pillars of trust, reciprocity, and public happiness. But this wasn't the shallow reciprocity of contracts and transactions. Genovesi envisioned genuine mutual aid that recognized our fundamental interconnectedness. He saw broad-based education and social welfare as the real drivers of development. At the heart of his thinking was the principle that everything is connected in the civil body: *tutto è connesso nel corpo civile.*

Over 200 years later, we find that happiness didn't need to be "added" to economics — it was there from the beginning, simply pushed to the margins. And that is where we should look for ways of rebuilding it: the power of the edges. Happiness, reciprocity, and mutualism may not find favor with predominant North Atlantic economic thought, but these principles have endured in many traditional and indigenous communities worldwide. That is why part of my search for economic entanglement brought me to explore and learn from a wider and more diverse repository of governance ecologies, in which lesser-known communities have sustained local economic systems rooted in collective well-being, ecological stewardship, and intergenerational responsibility — principles that echo what Genovesi understood centuries ago about the inseparable relationship between human prosperity and economic health.

In the Xingu region of the Amazon basin, for example, hundreds of indigenous people have built a networked economy rooted in ecological healing, where native seed collection and commercialization generate livelihoods while restoring degraded landscapes — all coordinated through collective democratic decision-making. In New Zealand, the Waikato-Tainui community upholds that "the river is us," engaging in hydrological restoration that prioritizes human–river relations through long-term stewardship for future generations. In Nepal's Himalayan region, community forestry has transformed millions of hectares of degraded land into productive forests, creating extensive employment while generating income

through sustainable forest products — all governed by local democratic institutions that balance community needs with global climate benefits. Likewise, in Tanzania's southeastern region, village communities have woven together forest stewardship and economic prosperity, where elected committees govern sustainable timber harvesting from miombo woodlands. Their activities generate substantial revenue while democratically investing half of all earnings in community development projects that strengthen the very social fabric supporting their forests. In each of these communities, economic activity becomes a practice of care: for the land, for each other, for future generations.

Entanglement isn't just a property of particles, but a fundamental principle of existence. These living examples show us what happens when we design our economic systems to honor rather than sever these connections. They show us that when systems are properly entangled — when economic logic reconnects with ecological reality, when individual prosperity links to collective wellbeing — the old trade-offs dissolve. We no longer have to choose between efficiency and equity, growth and sustainability, because entangled systems generate abundance through relationship rather than extraction.

Once again: Galeano's upside-down world doesn't need to be flipped; it needs to be rewoven. And in the patient work of these communities — tending forests, healing rivers, building democratic institutions — we glimpse the careful, daily practice of reweaving our world back together. Thread by thread, seed by seed, they are showing us the way

home to an economy that serves all life. In their hands, the civil economy isn't just an idea from the past — it's a blueprint for the future we so desperately need.

Art Bamford

Switched-On

Throughout the history of popular music, moments of innovation have often emerged not from commercial ambition, or a desire to chase novelty, but from a deeper need to navigate and express the complexities of artists' identities. These stories challenge us to reconsider how we engage with the affordances of new technologies as part of the creative process, and how we value creative work in an era increasingly dominated by artificial intelligence and algorithm-driven media production.

In 1968, an artist named Walter Carlos released an album titled *Switched-On Bach*. To most listeners it was a novelty record; Carlos employed an array of then-new electronic Moog synthesizers to reimagine familiar pieces by Johann Sebastian Bach. But to some discerning critics and fellow musicians, it was also a stroke of genius. Carlos had masterfully coaxed a symphony worth of timbres and textures from monophonic synths which, at the time, were seldom heard anywhere other than sci-fi sound-

tracks and avant-garde obscurities. The album eventually sold over a million copies, earned Carlos a handful of *Grammy* awards, and has since been recognized as an important step in the popularization of synthesizers and electronic music.

Switched-On Bach also marked a pivotal moment for its creator. Shortly prior to the album's creation Walter Carlos began a process of transition that ultimately resulted in their coming out publicly as Wendy Carlos in 1978. In hindsight, it is noteworthy that the top line of the original *Switched-On* album cover read "Trans-Electronic Music Productions, Inc. Presents …", since Wendy Carlos had begun an affirmative care path with Harry Benjamin, an author and endocrinologist who popularized the term *transexual* (which was widely used, popularly and clinically, for several decades prior to being eclipsed by the now-preferred term *transgender*) in the mid-1960s. Sadly, in the few public appearances Carlos made to promote the bestselling album, she wore fake sideburns, a masculine-styled wig, and drawn-on facial hair. However, after her 1978 announcement, subsequent versions of Carlos' work were reissued and credited to Wendy rather than Walter. In the years since, she has enjoyed continued success, primarily as a film score composer whose credits include *A Clockwork Orange* (1972), *The Shining* (1980), and *Tron* (1982).

Wendy Carlos' status as a pioneer with respect to both transgender visibility and electronic synthesizers is no coincidence. In interviews, she has often discussed how the newness of these instruments held special appeal to her because the tones produced were not culturally coded along gendered lines the way traditional instruments

(e.g., flutes, tubas, harps) often are. Synthesizers offered a fresh, more fluid musical vocabulary well-suited to Carlos' own personal evolution. Meanwhile, her choice to perform Bach's canonical compositions helped diminish attempts at labeling the music as "outsider" or "experimental," and instead introduced synthesizers to a much wider audience.

Wendy Carlos' creation of *Switched-On Bach* amidst her transition is one of many such stories found throughout the history of popular music in which artists used emerging technologies to engage with deeper aspects of their identity. Like Carlos, Stevie Wonder embraced synthesizers on his legendary run of early 1970s albums, as he evolved from a former child Motown star into a serious adult artist. In Wonder's case, synthesizer's seemingly endless range of unconventional tones allowed him to draw from a deeper interior place to express himself more authentically and connect more intimately with listeners, as reflected in album titles like 1972's *Music of My Mind* and *Talking Book,* and 1973's *Innervisions.*

Wonder's Motown colleague Marvin Gaye similarly stepped away from formulaic pop on his 1971 album *What's Going On?* where he unlocked the potential of multi-track tape recording to create an introspective socio-spiritual call-and-response between and within himself. Whereas the Beatles had famously demonstrated multi-track's ability to layer sounds more densely, Gaye's innovation was conceptual: what if, rather than enlisting a duet partner or back-up singers, he sang and overdubbed multiple parts himself to evoke a sense of interiority and fragmented identity?

Then there is Sly Stone, who responded to Gaye's titular question through his own 1971 opus, *There's a Riot Goin' On*. Stone's multi-gender and multi-racial band, the Family Stone, was intentionally cast to reflect a certain kind of mid-1960s optimism about America's progress towards a more inclusive multicultural future. But at the peak of the band's popularity near the turn of the decade, amidst cultural backlash and regressive backsliding, Stone was pressured to fire his white band members (especially drummer Greg Errico) and embrace his blackness more boldly. In response, Stone produced the first major album to use a drum machine throughout. Rather than choosing between a white or black drummer, Sly opted for "none of the above," and adorned the album's cover with a dark, distorted American flag.

We might also look at the cadre of Jamaican reggae producers (including King Tubby, Lee "Scratch" Perry, Scientist, and others) who, beginning in the 1960s, reimagined the studio recording process altogether as they reckoned with the complex traumas of colonialism in an emerging postcolonial reality. From this relatively small, unassuming island music scene, the world was gifted several innovations which have shaped modern music, including sampling and emceeing (core ingredients of hip hop), and remixing.

It is tempting to celebrate these stories as examples of the creative synergy that seems to occur when technological innovation intersects with artistic ingenuity at a distinct cultural moment. Instead, I want to suggest, the commercial success, critical acclaim, and subsequent influence of these albums and artists obscures a more timely

and important lesson. These were artists with nothing to prove, either because they had already achieved certain pinnacles of success or because of their relative obscurity. They did not seek out new and different ways of making music to satisfy the market's appetite for novelty, or to dazzle critics with their originality. In fact, as their biographies often reveal, they agonized over the riskiness or apparent absurdity of what they were attempting to do. Nevertheless, they committed to artistic processes that allowed them to grapple with their realities and negotiate core aspects of their identities — gender, race, sexuality, spirituality, nationality, physical abilities, economic class, and so on — in substantive ways. This is not to say artists like Wendy Carlos and Sly Stone were self-indulgent or indifferent to how audiences might respond but it was ultimately the creative process itself that mattered most and proved to be most meaningful. Their musical innovations were born naturally out of these processes, not any market aspirations.

A disheartening feature of today's discourse around digital technology, including AI, is our apparent inability to consider art in these terms. We have come to think of artistic endeavors primarily in terms of their viability as professional career paths, and of art itself as a category of consumable commercial products, valued according to certain sets of analytic data. This same mindset has contributed to an erosion of support for the arts and art education over the past few decades: young people are told they should only learn things that will directly result in a material or financial return later in life.

What has been lost is the simple notion that art provides ways for us to explore and express ineffable, otherwise incommunicable things. My hope is that one unintended consequence of our current moment of existential insecurity, technological disruption, and overwhelming polycrisis might be a long-overdue shift away from such mercenary, market-driven views of art and creativity. Perhaps someday soon, after AI has perfected the formulaic science of mass pandering once and for all, our desire to create for its own sake will be switched back on, and we will rediscover and reclaim the real value creative work has to offer.

Nandi Pointer

The Flipside

A Countermedia Representation of Family, Faith, and Music

I need a light. I need a hit.
I want the shit that I just can't quit.
— Malik Pointer, "Crack Hit"

Growing up with my grandmother in Novato, California, I knew two things about my older cousin Malik: he was an incredibly talented artist, and he was a drug addict.

His escapades — equal parts legend and cautionary tale — circulated through the family like folklore, shadowed by a constant, unspoken fear that Malik wouldn't live to see adulthood. To me, he was larger than life: the kind of person who lights up the room with his infectious charisma, warmth, and big smile. But he was also elusive, drifting in and out of my life. I carried the quiet dread that one day, he'd take the wrong hit — and be gone.

I could have never imagined that in 2011 I'd be onstage singing with his band MacDracula at The Hills' first annual Fourth of July barbecue, held at

a sober living facility in Beverly Hills. To commemorate his second sober birthday, Malik headlined the celebration and performed "Crack Hit" live. One of his longtime friends called that milestone a "miracle." I had always admired Malik from afar for his perseverance and resilience. That summer, I began to understand the depth of his commitment to family and people battling the disease of alcohol and drug addiction.

My brother and I created *The Flipside* — an independent reality series documenting our cousin Malik Pointer: the eldest son of Ruth Pointer of The Pointer Sisters. What started as a personal project became something larger: an attempt to create a space where a more complicated narrative of Black masculinity, addiction, faith, and family could emerge.

In this sense, *The Flipside* also became what Christina Sharpe (2016) might recognize as wake work: the labor of attending to Black life in its ongoing, everyday struggle, not just in its aftermath. Filming Malik was never just documentation. It was a form of care. His lyrics functioned as both prayer and lament, using religious language to articulate the uncertainty of recovery, the yearning for grace, and the absence of promised redemption. In archiving these moments, we were refusing erasure. As Sharpe writes, wake work is about holding space for Black life "in the wake of slavery, in the wake of ongoing Black death, in the wake of Black being" (Sharpe, 2016, p. 14). *The Flipside* was, for us, a practice of that holding.

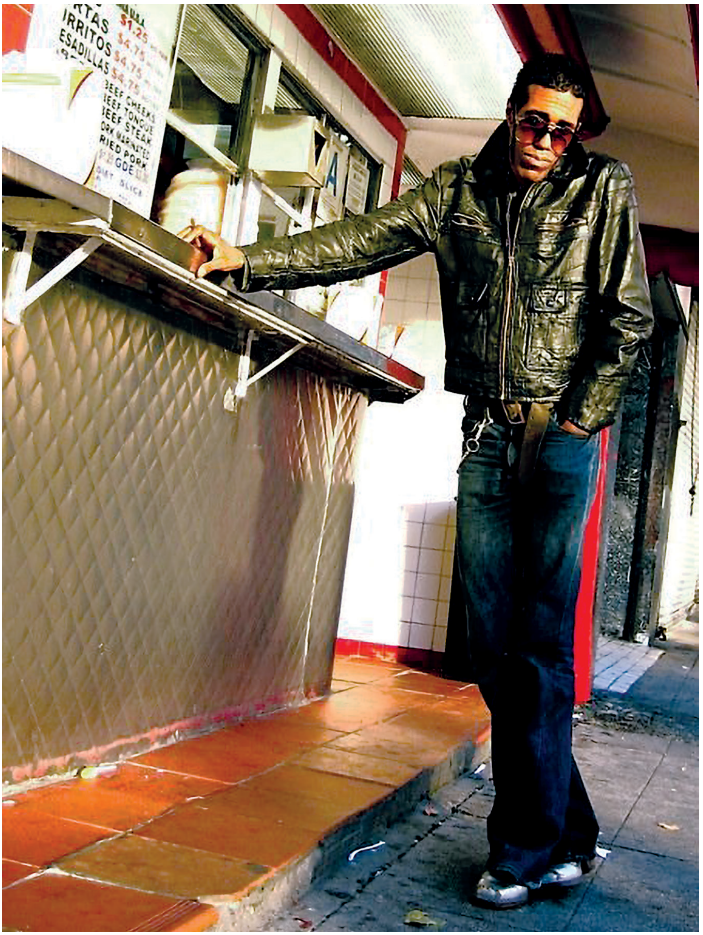
At its center was Malik himself, who embodied what bell hooks (2004) in *We Real Cool* describes as the erased figure of the "alternative black man

Singing with Malik Pointer's band, MacDracula.

seeking freedom for self and loved ones, a rebel black man eager to create and make his own destiny" (p. 14). Malik's masculinity didn't conform to popular scripts. He was expressive, vulnerable, and tender: qualities often denied to Black men in dominant media narratives. His swagger and flamboyant presence, often read as queer-coded by those around him, challenged rigid binaries of Black masculinity. As one comment on a YouTube post of Malik performing at The Roxy in 2011 stated, "Malik is talented, but I think he got a little sugar in that tank." Malik didn't perform identity for others' comfort. His life and performances offered what hooks might call a rebel masculinity: "a different image of black masculinity: one that is about being, not performing" (hooks, 2004, p. 104).

Music became Malik's primary mode of testimony. Raised by his grandmother, a Christian minister, his lyrics reflected both religious tradition and personal struggle. In "Only in Heaven," he sang: "Only in Heaven do they know where you are." His tribute to our late Aunt June opened with the poignant, "Good morning, it's June. I don't know where you are. Say you're coming home soon but so very far away from me." Perhaps most haunting was "Man Down," a song about addiction as spiritual breakdown: "Man down, man down, a man is down, I think it's going around. Man down, won't you help me up. I was hoping maybe that Jesus could save me." Malik's music resisted neat genre classification. His songs were part gospel lament, part secular confession — offering what Fraser might term an "oppositional interpretation" of Black male identity and spirituality (Fraser, 1990, p. 67).

As we filmed, I began to understand *The Flipside* not as content creation, but as the formation of what Michael Warner (2002) calls a counterpublic: a space of circulation structured in conscious relation to a dominant public from which it is excluded. Warner explains that a counterpublic "maintains, at some level, an awareness of its subordinate status" (p. 86), and that its narratives circulate precisely because they cannot circulate elsewhere. Our modest Facebook following — just over 500 people — was not evidence of failure, but a reflection of the small-scale, intimate publics Warner describes. We weren't seeking mass visibility; we were creating what Warner calls "a public of the intimate" (p. 89): a space where Malik's



Malik Pointer.

story could circulate without being reshaped for industry consumption.

Malik also orchestrated a rare moment of family reunion: he coordinated the three living Pointer Sisters coming together to sing at Canter's Deli, a historic, harmonic gathering that hadn't happened since Bonnie left the group in 1977. Two of my aunts have since passed away, rendering that moment even more poignant. At the time, I didn't fully grasp the significance of what we were capturing. My focus was on crafting an alternative media product, yet what we were truly building was a family archive. Each recording, each performance, each candid conversation became part of a living, breathing family history I had not set out to preserve but now treasure.

Looking back, I now see that *The Flipside* functioned as what Nancy Fraser (1990) theorizes as a subaltern counterpublic: a "parallel discursive arena where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs" (p. 67). Malik's story and the artists and addicts he surrounded himself with lived outside the boundaries and narratives of commercial U.S. media. He was heterosexual but liked to wear make-up, deeply spiritual yet battling addiction, and tasked with navigating a lived experience few, if any, Black men growing up in the U.S. could relate to.

Ultimately, *The Flipside* wasn't a product designed for network executives. It was a countermedia archive built on the belief that stories like Malik's — stories that don't resolve neatly, that blend faith with failure, that document Black masculinity in

its fragility — deserve to circulate. As Fraser (1990), Warner (2002), and hooks (2004) each remind us, counterpublics are necessary precisely because dominant publics refuse to hold these stories.

In following Malik's journey, we didn't promise resolution. We offered recognition. We built a small, intimate counterpublic — a family archive, a digital testimony, a form of countermedia where Malik's voice, in all its broken beauty, could finally be heard.

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Nabil Echchaibi

Where Are You Taking Me, Brother?

On Counter Archives and Epistemic Freedom

We have our own heroes.
—Dionne Brand

Back in the 1970s, Moroccan playwright and writer Tayeb Siddiqi said something profound about Moroccan and Arab culture: "We must defolklorize cultural heritage." Siddiqi, a prominent thinker and founder of the People's Theater, led a life-long struggle to amplify oral culture and defend it against its depoliticizing colonial roots. The colonizer, he said, deliberately relegated the local cultures of the colonized to the status of a savage folklore and an impoverished and rudimentary form of cultural expression. By remixing the sounds and stories of deep Morocco, Siddiqi reintroduced old epistemic and aesthetic forms of cultural participation and socio-political contestation and adapted them to theater and musical performance. He creatively integrated *l'aïta,* a form of musical scream from the villages nestled in the High Atlas Mountains, and halqa, a popular form

of cheeky public performance, into his theatrical adaptations and original plays.

Siddiqi was referred to in the French press as The Brecht or Molière of Morocco, just like the legendary band Nass el Ghiwane he helped popularize through his theatrical performances were dubbed the "Rolling Stones of North Africa." I never liked these analogies because they reduce the complexity of the world to a mere cultural approximation. The analogy was never meant to work for us.

When I found out, rather late, about the significance of Siddiqi's cultural struggle, I asked myself an agonizing question: why did we not hear about this giant of Moroccan/Arab theater during our schooling? Why were his questions not our questions? Even more infuriating was the fact that Siddiqi was a friend of my father's and as child, I remember him coming to our house for dinner and bringing his entire theater troupe when my father was only expecting a party of one. Why did we not know?

At the university in Morocco, we were assigned Raymond Williams' "Culture is Ordinary" and Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* and obsessed for years over their theoretical disruptions and cultural resonance. I'm glad we read these important texts, but their contexts were deemed universal and timeless. Siddiqi and many other Arab and African writers and thinkers were saying as much or doing as much, yet their contributions remain crude expressions of a specific geography.

I use this story not to engage in a kind of intellectual retreat or nativism. I do it to reclaim a right to our own memory, a right to restore our epistemic sovereignty. As the Canadian-Caribbean poet

Dionne Brand said, "We have our own heroes," and I would add we have our own archives, our own questions, our own categories, our own histories, and our own concepts. In the novel *The Blue Clerk* (2018), Brand writes about the things that have been withheld and left out from the official archives. Not only must these archival erasures be restored, they must also be salvaged as vigorous counter-narratives against all forms of epistemic resolution. As a series of essay poems, *The Blue Clerk* stages this archival tension between what is present and absent by opposing what is written on the verso and recto side of the page. The reader is yanked between two clashing narratives of an author who writes and an archival clerk who keeps reams of unarticulated memory. The book was printed with a number of blank spaces as a piercing commentary on blankness and omission.

The point of my essay is not to dwell on archival ruination and the inherent process of absenting that is the essence of a Western archiving practice. This is not Leopold Sedar Senghor's demonstration of What the Black Man contributes, nor is it about the fearful white child who haunts Fanon. This is no longer even about Edward Said's admonition of Western thought when it asks: "Show me the Zulu Tolstoy. What about the Bantu Proust? Was there ever a Haitian or Jamaican Mozart?"

Instead, I focus on the act of counter-archiving and what it reveals for those of us who have been unrecorded by history. In doing so, I do not seek recognition or relevance, or even redress. We don't write in an endless scheme of intellectual recognition or a craving for epistemic permission, nor do we wish to live forever in the dreams of others,

as the Gabonese scholar Joseph Tonda would say. Our task must not be weighed down by the burden of visibility. We do not write for you to finally see us.

As scholars of the Global South, we are made to feel we come from places of epistemic emptiness, ontological nothingness, and perennial chaos and suffering. Our writing and theorizing are met either with the dismissive discovery of an interesting case study or with the annoying surprise of theoretical erudition. Our words wrongly land as supplications of intellectual validation or affirmations of conciliatory pacification.

As Brand says about the necessity to set the archival record straight, "I don't think it's a question of visibility; I think it's a question of viability, by which I mean livability. Black people living on the page" (2020). My aim here is not to merely induct another author into the celestial pantheon of art or critical theory, nor is it to convince the reader to acknowledge that Moroccan art is worthy of a place in the universal canon. The livability of these voices on and off the page and the echoing resonance of their work for the people addressed by that work is what animates this writing. I am much more interested in rescuing authors and ideas condemned to epistemic oblivion or archival incarceration. This is why I start with Tayeb Siddiqi and his project to defolklorize Moroccan culture.

Maybe the Egyptian Nobel Prize winner Naguib Mahfouz popularized the European novel genre for Arabs, but Siddiqi reminds us that we didn't have to wait for Europeans to discover storytelling or learn fiction. Siddiqi operated within a long and deeply ingrained tradition of Arab hakawati

(storytellers), Amazigh poetry, Gnawa soul and Sufi music, Halqa (story circle), griots (West African storytellers), among others. His performances were an eloquent display of a counterculture that captured a vibrant cultural politics and a dissenting poetics in Morocco. Siddiqi applied lyrical pressure to both cultural and political expression by mobilizing and re-verbalizing an underground oral heritage long condemned to an ossified folklorization.

An important illustration of Siddiqi's de-folklorization was the integration of music and song in his theatrical performances through the budding work then of Nass el Ghiwane, a folk soul band of four working-class youth from Casablanca who revolutionized the soundscape of Moroccan music and poetry. Formed in 1970 in a tense climate of political repression, Nass el Ghiwane (name translates as *disciples of a chanted philosophy*) made their debut in political folk theater with Siddiqi's Theater of the People group, a dramatist movement known for its innovative performance style of *Lbssat,* a mix of humor, satire, poetry, music, and audience engagement. The band became instantly famous with their singing in colloquial Moroccan Arabic and their creative blend of modern and traditional musical instruments and rhythms. In their long hair, afros, and stylish vests and blue jeans, the band broke with the official sounds of Arab music and Moroccan classical musical genres. Their style, which combined Sufi poetry, ancestral chants from the remote villages of the Atlas Mountains, and the trance rituals of Gnawa music, resonated with an alienated youth caught in an oppressive political environment and a rich and

complex cultural scene of Arab, Amazigh, African, and European influences. Their songs were popular anthems against unemployment, corruption, socio-economic hardship in urban centers, and cultural marginalization. Nass el Ghiwane made Moroccan traditional music cool and relevant both aesthetically and politically. They inspired a remarkable surge of similar folk bands that transformed Moroccan oral heritage and recast it for a disaffected urban youth.

One of their iconic songs, *Fin Ghadi Biya Khouya?* (Where are you taking me, brother?), is a telling example of their artistic erudition and political savviness. Written in 1973 by the poet of the group Larbi Batma, the song is considered by many Moroccans a masterpiece of aesthetic vigor and veiled political critique. It begins, like most of their songs, with an entrancing poetic lament by Batma inspired by the iconic folk singing genre of *l'aïta,* a lyrical cry known to rural Morocco that combines local poetry and vernacular musical sounds. The lyrics are part of an intricate and deliberate play on words to avoid persecution and censorship despite the song's blistering message against abuse of power, social injustice, and massive economic migration.

To each falcon in a cage
To each rooster showing off up on the bridge
To each mule feeling the dig of spurs
To each wolf howling far off in pain
I have never seen a palm tree bear dates
Never seen a gazelle shod in iron
Nor knights turned into shepherds.
(Schaefer, 2012)

It's hard to know for sure who the falcon is or whether the mule is a reference to the working class, but that was the point. The song probably addressed the king, the authorities, and the cultural elite through a thin-veiled rebuke ingeniously implanted in poetic verse and in the song's persistent question in the chorus (Where are you taking me, brother?). That question alone, repeated dozens of times, is a haunting commentary on a rudderless regime and a disoriented youth hungry for economic opportunity and a strong cultural anchor.

Decades later, the song is still strongly resonant in Morocco and beyond. In 2003, It was adapted by the well-known Moroccan fusion band Hoba Hoba Spirit, who added new lyrics in French, Arabic, and English to express a similar sense of confusion and anxiety in a new environment of political and social turmoil.

We lost all our benchmarks
And nothing is still very clear
We're cyber berbers lost on Earth
We probably should slow down to rectify the shot
Slow down to stop this madness
You should tell me, if you know
Where are you taking me, brother?

And in 2011, the song became the protest song of the Arab Uprisings in Morocco. Today, *Fin Ghadi Biya Khouya* continues to inspire several remixes and covers. Nass el Ghiwane started a counter-cultural artistic movement in 1970s and 1980s which still reverberates in Morocco and across the Arab

world, thanks primarily to their effusive cultural authenticity and their aesthetic innovation.

Invoking the theater of Tayeb Siddiqi and the music of Nass el Ghiwane is not meant to romanticize Moroccan oral and popular culture or make it the object of uncritical celebration. My purpose here is to challenge the universality of the hegemonic canon and salvage the right to everyone's historical memory. Brand's important statement: *"We have our own heroes"* is an invitation to disrupt these imperial forms of epistemic abrogation which deny others a future to their own epistemic emancipation. It is learning how to find the exit in a world authored by others and a call to "look again." Brand writes, "To look again is to reassess the act of living through a process of critical understanding and transformation — in other words, to upend and affect certain ways of thinking, certain ways of knowing and certain ways of being in the world; it is to negate certain scripts" (2024).

Countering the dominant scripts is not only about negation, but it is equally about building new archives out of the possibilities muted by the imperial record. It is not a naive act of epistemic nostalgia, replacing one way of thinking and seeing the world with another. Countering is about liberating what has been violently suppressed in the past to retrieve its rightful place in a potential future. Our archives are open, living inventories and our task is to keep narrating them for everyone to recover a life unknown to the register. Anything else is beating a familiar archive to a predictable death.

The scholar of counter archives, Ann Stoler, writes that "In culling and curating 'another'

archive, we begin to question the politics of naming and authorizing which constitute the principles of what goes into the archive." Such a vital gesture, she says, allows us to see that the avant-garde does not always come from Paris or Berlin, New York, or London. The intellectual and creative avant-garde lives also in the streets, universities, bookshops, libraries, sounds, and smells of Casablanca, Tunis, Dakar, Khartoum, Lagos, Johannesburg, Beirut, Cairo, and Algiers. Reconnecting with this other archive liberates me and locates doors I never thought could be opened.

And much like Nass el Ghiwane and as a student of the silenced archive, I feel compelled to ask my own version of their emblematic question, "where have you been taking me, brother?"

Somi Soroush

Please, Please, Don't Tell Me They're Not the Same

If someone asked me what my favorite painting is — in winter, summer, spring, or fall — my answers would be different. In summer, a certain series of paintings comes to my mind — oil paintings of blue water coolers around courtyards and rooftops of houses, or tucked in the corners of Tehran's streets and buildings — painted by students at the Tehran University of Art. (These "coolers" are the kind of air conditioner commonly used in Iran — specifically the water-based ones, not the electric air conditioners more familiar in other parts of the world.)

The "cooler" is a blue, metal box with a fairly large motor inside it. They are also called swamp coolers, desert coolers, or evaporative air coolers, and they work by cooling the air through water evaporation. Iranians call it "cooler," and that's exactly how the word is pronounced in Farsi. We don't have another name for it, and I don't think anyone even thinks about what the word means — it's like it has always been a Farsi word.

During my second or third year of undergrad at the Tehran university of Art, some of the painting students started painting these coolers for a class they had. One of the painting professors started it. He was showing the students how you could use simple, everyday things as painting subjects; how you could even take an object that's always in some out-of-reach spot (in this case, the rooftop) and think of it as an interesting painting subject — and draw it in different settings. I never asked those students what the story behind those paintings was, but that blue color of the coolers was always the sign of summer in my mind.

I never thought of those coolers as something particularly useful — let alone as a subject worth painting. These coolers weren't very reliable — they often burned out or broke down. They ran on water — and honestly, as water is scarce in Iran, they weren't that useful. The air they produced wasn't always cool, and a lot of the time, you'd be sweating, even while sitting directly under the breeze they were wheezing out.

In my city (Ilam), there were some summer nights when the water would get cut off, and because of that, the cooler couldn't produce cool air. And if you were asleep, you'd wake up in the middle of the night to stifling hot air and your body soaked with sweat. Imagine this: you're in a deep sleep and it's early in the morning and you know you have nothing to do tomorrow because it's summer, and you want to rest. But right then, the water gets cut off, and the cooler can only keep going for about half an hour or so with whatever water is left in its tank. After that, it starts blowing hot air, like a car fan. And after half an hour of

A lonely cooler on top of a house in Ilam, Iran.

sleeping in that hot air, you wake up from the heat, your clothes stuck to your body with sweat.

In that situation, the only thing you could do was to mentally hurl every curse and bad word you knew at the cooler. But even that didn't help — because in the middle of that 100-degree heat in mid-July, you had just woken up in the worst possible condition, and it felt like your whole day was ruined. Like you'd already lost a bright, happy summer day.

But there were some amazing moments in that situation too and everything could suddenly shift.

Dad — who always woke up much earlier than everyone else — had already gone out to buy some

fresh bread so he and Mom could enjoy their summer breakfast together: her homemade jam, local cheese and butter, and hot brewed tea with the smell of cardamom. He notices the hot air coming from the cooler, and like a hero, he goes up to the rooftop and tries to pour some water — saved by Mom the day before — into the cooler tank. Just to cool down the air a little so the kids could sleep in bed under the cooler's breeze for one more hour, and their day wouldn't be ruined.

These days, not many people have those blue coolers in their homes anymore — partly because of the water shortage and partly because the world has gotten hotter, and those coolers can't handle the heat anymore. But that moment — when the cool breeze blew — was one of the best feelings of life in my parents' house. And those blue coolers will always remind me of that moment, one I can't easily forget.

Those coolers, with their squeaky, creaky noise (that, after a while, you couldn't even fall asleep without), are woven together with the memories of cool moments in the middle of hot summer days. Along with a glass of Mom's homemade orange juice filled with crushed ice and the discovery of Lana Del Rey's *Summertime Sadness* on TV. Back then, I didn't understand many of the lyrics — I just enjoyed the music.

Those memories feel so distant, so cool, and so hot.

Those coolers are still on rooftops — of course, no one uses them anymore, but their shells are left behind, slowly rotting on the roofs of some houses. Some people have covered them with plastic, trying to protect them from the rain and the heat so

they don't get damaged even more. But I don't think most people remember them. No one checks on them. No one even thinks of putting them out of their misery, out of that sad kind of existence. Maybe their motors are broken, but I know that if someone wanted to, they could bring them back to life with a bit of oiling and a few repairs.

But why would anyone want to put in that much effort and time and energy to fix something that's not even very reliable? Is there a specific time when we're supposed to let things go? Does letting go mean forgetting — or can we carry their memories with us? Is it a personal decision, or should all the people who shared memories with that thing decide together to let it go? I don't know — but I think it's not that easy.

I always ask my mom about those coolers, and she's always surprised — wondering why it matters to me what happened to those old machines. She says, now every room has an electric air conditioner, and you can't live with water coolers anymore. She tells me you have to move with the times, that they're useless now. But I can't tell her that it's the memories of those coolers that sometimes give me hope. That helps me remember I haven't forgotten what home — my home — looked like. Those memories still make me believe I belong to that home. And I can't explain to her what it feels like — this slow forgetting of who you were, how you used to live, and how not having shared memories with your mother can sometimes make the days feel heavy. I can't tell her that even the smell of summer has changed for me. That I don't even remember what summer at home used to feel like.

I've tried many times to recreate those feelings in this new world — with an electric air conditioner, a glass of iced orange juice, and the song *Summertime Sadness* — to relive that experience. But deep down, in the back of my mind, I know that this breeze isn't coming from a water cooler. I can feel it. And that this orange juice is not the same — I bought it from Safeway. And the water never gets cut off in this country (As far as I know). And I don't even like Lana Del Rey as much anymore.

I'm chasing the memory of a past I ran away from. I flew thousands of miles to get away from it — but more often than not, I find myself talking about that past, writing about it, creating from it, judging it, and getting angry about it.

It's always like that, isn't it? When we have something, we don't recognize its worth. We don't fully understand its value. And isn't it true that the things we create — our artworks — are so often about the past? Don't we write about what we've lost or what we never had the chance to hold? Maybe not for everyone, but for me, it's always been that way. And that blue cooler has come to stand for all the things I desperately want to hold onto in my mind — and never let go of.

From the day I arrived in the U.S., there's been one thought on my mind: who I was in Iran, what I wanted to do, and who I wanted to become. The first years passed with sadness and the pain of being far from home. But I always reminded myself of the things I had wanted but didn't have — and how life had been hard for me. I was angry and all I remembered back then was pain from home. I was glad that I had managed to find another place, in some other corner of the world, to make my own.

top: Tehran, Iran.
bottom: Boulder, Colorado.

But now, in my fourth summer here, I find myself searching for things that remind me of home.

Yesterday, I took a photo of the building across from my apartment, with the moon hanging in the sky above it. It's not a particularly special photo — but it looked a lot like a photo I took years ago in Iran, of the building across from my apartment. Maybe nobody else can see it, but to me, the two seem very similar. I know the photo from home is black and white — they are not much to look at. But somehow, I've forgotten what colors in Iran looked like (except for the blue cooler) — and this picture captures what's in my mind. A small fraction of different memories that I find beautiful.

I'm searching for things I used to love in Iran. Things I found precious. I want to find them here too. Maybe this is my way of staying connected to my country. A way not to forget that we shared tender moments too. Maybe I want to better understand the person I used to be in Iran — how she dealt with problems — so that I can still talk to my family, listen to their struggles, try to understand, and maybe help.

For me, the past and the future move forward together. Sometimes, separating them feels impossible, so maybe finding good memories makes things easier despite everything I hear in the news about a place I loved once.

I've become obsessed with finding traces of Iran in everything around me — just to feel at home. I'm trying to make the life I have here feel like the life I used to have.

Now, all I remember are the beautiful and comforting memories of home.

So again, I'm going to try — with a glass of orange juice in hand — while listening to Lana Del Rey and trying to enjoy her song once more, to search for the creaking sound of that old water cooler and stare at the view of the mountains outside the kitchen window of my apartment in Boulder. I'll pretend it's the same window, looking out on the same view, as the one in my room back home.

Please, please, don't tell me they're not the same.

top: Ilam, Iran.
bottom: Boulder, Colorado.

بالا: ایلام، ایران
پایین: بولدر، کلرادو

کولر های غمگین آبیه آبی

اگر کسی از من بپرسد نقاشی مورد علا قه ات چیست در زمستان و تابستان و بهار و پاییز جواب های من متفاوت خواهد بود. در تابستان یک سری نقاشی که توسط دانشجویان دانشگاه هنر کشیده شده بود به ذهن من می آید نقاشی های رنگ روغن از کولر های آبی در اطراف حیاط و پشت بام خانه یا گوشه و کنار خیابان ها و ساختمان های تهران . وقتی میگویم کولر منظورم یک جعبه آهنی بزرگ آبی رنگ است که یک موتور تقریبا بزرگ در داخل آن است. آنها کولر باتلاقی، کولر صحرایی یا کولر هوای مرطوب نام دارند و با خنک کردن هوا از طریق تبخیر آب کار می‌کردند. ایرانی ها به آن کولر میگویند و این کلمه دقیقا همینجور در زبان فارسی تلفظ میشود. ما یک اسم فارسی برای آن نداریم و فکر نمیکنم کسی حتی به معنی این کلمه فکر کند و مثل این است که همیشه این اسم فارسی بوده است.

تعدادی از بچه های رشته نقاشی در اون سال فکر میکنم (سال دوم یا سوم لیسانس دانشگاه هنر تهران بودم) شروع به کشیدن این کولر ها کردند البته فکر میکنم این قضیه را یکی از استاد های گروه نقاشی شروع کرد. فکر میکنم او به بچه ها نشان میداد چطور میتوان از موضوعات ساده و پیش پا افتاده به عنوان موضوع نقاشی استفاده کرد . چطور می توان حتی به یک شی که همیشه در جاهایی دور از دسترس است (در این مورد روی پشت بام) به عنوان یک موضوع جذاب نقاشی فکر کرد و آن را در موقعیت های مختلف کشید. من از آن دانشجویان نپرسیدم که داستان پشت آن نقاشی ها چه بود اما رنگ آبی آن کولرها همیشه در ذهن من نشان تابستان بود. من هیچوقت به آن کولرها به عنوان یک وسیله خیلی بدردبخور فکر نمیکردم چه برسد به عنوان یک موضوع نقاشی. این

کولر تنهایی بالای خانه ای در ایلام، ایران

کولرها خیلی وقت ها می سوختند و خراب میشدند. با آب کار میکردند و صادقانه بگویم در کشوری که آب کم است این کولر ها خیلی قابل اعتماد نبودند.هوایی که این کولر ها درست میکردند همیشه خنک نبود و خیلی وقت ها آدم در حال عر ق کردن بود حتی زمانی که زیر باد مستقیمی که این کولر ها تولید میکردند نشسته بودی

در شهر من ایلام شب هایی در تابستان ها وجود داشت که آب قطع میشد و به خاطر بی آبی کولر نمیتوانست باد خنک تولید کند و اگر خواب بودی با باد گرم و عرق زیاد بر بدن بیدار میشدی. بگذارید که توضیح بدهم : می خواهم تصور کنی که تو در خواب عمیق هستی و ساعت حدود ۵ صبح است و تو میدانی فردا کاری نداری چون تابستان است و می خواهی استراحت کنی اما در همان لحظه آب قطع میشود و کولر فقط می تواند برای حدود نیم ساعت یا بیشتر با آبی که در مخزن دارد ادامه بدهد اما بعد از آن

کولر شروع به تولید باد داغ مثل فن ماشین میکند و تو بعد از نیم ساعت در باد داغ خوابیدن از گرما بیدار میشوی در حالی که لباس هایت از عرق زیاد به تنت چسبیده است. در آن شرایط تنها کاری که می توانستی بکنی این بود که هر چه فحش و حرف نا مناسب در ذهن داشتی به طرف این کولرها هدایت میکردی اما حتی آن هم کمکی نمیکرد چون وسط گرمای ۱۰۰ درجه اواخر تیر صبح زود به بدترین شرایط از خواب بیدار شده ای و فکر میکنی روزت خراب شده است و یک روز شاد تابستان را از دست داده ای. اما این شرایط هر لحظه میتوانست تغییر کند. پدر که همیشه خیلی زودتر از همه بیدار شده و رفته که تعدادی نان تازه بخرد که با مادر صبحانه تابستانی خود را که مربای خانگی مادر و پنیر و کره محلی همرا با چای داغ دم کشیده با بوی هل است را دو نفره میل کنند متوجه باد گرم کولر می شود و مثل یک قهرمان به پشت بام میرود و سعی میکند که مقداری آب که مادر از روز قبل ذخیره کرده است را در مخزن کولر بریزد و هوا را کمی خنک کند که بچه هایش برای یک ساعت بیشتر بتوانند در هوای خنک کولر در تخت بخوابند و روزشان خراب نشود. الان کمتر کسی در خانه اش از آن کولر های ابی دارد هم به خاطر کمبود آب و هم به خاطر گرمتر شدن دنیا که آن کولر های آبی دیگر جوابگوی این گرما نیستند. اما آن لحظه که باد خنک دوباره شروع به وزیدن میکند یکی از بهترین لحظات زندگی در خانه پدری بود و آن کولر های آبی همیشه یاداور آن لحظه است که من نمیتوانم به این راحتی فراموش کنم.

آن کولر ها با صدای قیژ قیژ که درست میکردند (که بعد از مدتی دیگر نمی توانستی بدون آن صدا به خواب بروی) تنیده شده با لحظه ها و خاطرات خنکی در وسط روز های داغ تابستان همراه با یک لیوان آب پرتقال با تکه های یخ ریز شده در لیوان که مادر برایت درست کرده و کشف ترانه سامرتایم سدنس توسط لانا دل ری در تلویزیون .در آن زمان من خیلی از کلمات این ترانه را نمیفهمیدم و فقط از موسیقی لذت میبردم. خیلی دور و خنک و داغ هستند ان خاطرات.

آن کولرها هنوز روی پشت بام ها هستند البته کسی از آنها استفاده نمیکند اما لاشه آنها روی پشت بام بعضی از خانه ها در حال پوسیده شدن است.بعضی از مردم با نایلون آنها را پوشانده اند که در باران و گرما خراب نشوند. اما فکر نمیکنم افراد زیادی آنها را

بالا: تهران، ایران
پایین: بولدر، کلرادو

به خاطر داشته باشد. کسی به انها سر نمیزند و حتی کسی به فکر اینکه انها را از این زندگی غمگین راحت کند نیست.

ممکن است موتور آنها خراب شده باشد اما می دانم اگر کسی بخواهد می تواند با کمی روغن کاری و کمی تعمیرات دوباره آنها را زنده کند و آنها هم شروع به کار کردن میکنند. اما چرا یک نفر بخواهد این همه زحمت و انرژی و وقت هدر بدهد برای درست کردن یک وسیله که خیلی قابل اعتماد نیست. ایا یک زمان مشخص برای رها کردن یک چیزهایی وجود دارد؟ ایا رها کردن به معنی فراموش کردن است یا ما می توانیم خاطرات آنها را با خود به دوش بکشیم؟ ایا این یک تصمیم یک نفره است یا تمام افرادی که با آن چیز خاطره داشته اند باید با هم تصمیم به رها کردن آن بکنند؟ من نمیدانم اما فراموش نمیکنم.

من همیشه از مادر راجع به کولر ها میپرسم و او همیشه متعجب می شود که چرا برای من مهم است که چه بر سر آن وسیله ها آمده است. او میگوید الان هر کدام از اتاق ها کولر برقی دارن و با کولر آبی دیگر نمی شود زندگی کرد و به من می گوید باید با زمانه به جلو رفت و آنها بدرد نمی خورن. من نمیتوانم به او بگویم که این خاطرات آن کولر ها است که گاهی اوقات به من امید می دهد که هنوز فراموش نکرده ام که حس و حال خانه چطور بوده است. این خاطرات من را هنوز جزیی از خانه به حساب می آورد. من به مادر نمیگویم چون این باعث می شود که او ناراحت بشود و برای دور بودن من غصه بخورد و به این فکر کند که من زندگی سختی در این جا دارم. من نمیتوانم برای او توضیح بدهم که چه حسی است که کم کم فراموش کنی که چه بوده ای و چه طور زندگی میکرده ای و چطور نداشتن خاطرات مشترک با مادرت گاهی اوقات روزها را سخت میکند. من نمی توانم به او بگویم که حتی بوی تابستان هم برای من عوض شده است و دیگر به یاد ندارم چه حسی داشته تابستان های خانه.

من سعی کردم بارها آن حس ها را بازسازی کنم و در این دنیای نو با کولر برقی و یک لیوان آب پرتقال و ترانه سامر سد نس آن تجربه را تکرار کنم. اما در پستوی ذهنم می دانم که این باد که میوزد از یک کولر آبی نیست و این آب پرتقال را از سیف وی خریدم بدون هیچ زحمتی و آب هم قطع نمیشود در این کشور و لانا دل ری را هم دیگر انقدر که باید دوس ندارم. من به دنبال یاداوری گذشته ای هستم که از آن فرار کردم و مایل ها پرواز کردم که

از آنها دور بشوم اما بیشتر اوقات خودم را در حالی پیدا میکنم که در مورد آن گذشته حرف میزنم و مینویسم و خلق میکنم و از او عصبانی می شوم.

همیشه همینطور بوده که وقتی که ما یک چیزی را در دسترس داریم قدر آن را نمیدانیم و ارزش آن را درک نمیکنیم. اما آیا همیشه کارهای هنری که ما میکنیم در مورد گذشته نیست؟ در مورد چیزهایی نمینویسیم که از دست داده ایم یا به آنها نرسیده ایم؟ نمیدانم اما انگار برای من همیشه اینطور بوده است و آن کولر آبی نشان چیزهایی بوده که من به شدت می خواهم در ذهنم نگه دارم و فراموش نکنم.

من الان چهار سال است که به امریکا امده ام و از روزی که به این سرزمین رسیده ام به یک چیز فکر میکنم و آن این است که در ایران چه کسی بودم و چه کارهایی می خواستم بکنم و چه کسی می خواستم باشم. سال های اول با ناراحتی و غم غربت گذشت اما همیشه به خودم یاداوری میکردم چیزهایی که می خواستم و نداشتم و اینکه ایران زندگی را برای من سخت کرده بود و خوشحال بودم که توانسته بودم جایی دیگر در گوشه ای دیگر از دنیا برای خودم پیدا کنم. اما الان در تابستان چهارم به دنبال پیدا کردن چیزهایی هستم که شبیه به خانه است.

دیروز یک عکس از ساختمان روبروی آپارتمانم در حالی که ماه در آسمان است گرفتم. خیلی عکس خاصی نیست اما به نظرم خیلی شبیه به عکسی بودکه سال ها قبل در ایران از ساختمان روبروی خانه گرفته بودم. به نظرم این دو خیلی شبیه به هم هستند. میدانم ساختمان ها در عکس ایران خیلی کهنه و قدیمی هستند و می دانم سیاه سفید است اما به طور عجیبی من رنگ ها در ایران را فراموش کرده ام و این عکس یک مثال درست برای نشان دادن چیزی است که در ذهن دارم.

من به دنبال پیدا کردن چیزهایی هستم که به نظرم زیبا بوده اند و در ایران دوس میداشتم و می خواهم که آنها را در اینجا هم پیدا کنم. شاید با اینکار می خواهم ارتباطم را با کشورم حفظ کنم و فراموش نکنم که لحظات زیبایی هم ما در کنار هم داشته ایم شاید می خواهم آن فردی که قبلا در ایران بوده را درک کنم و ببینم چطور با مشکلات روبرو میشده و به این ترتیب بتوانم هنوز با خانواده ام صحبت کنم و به مشکلاتشان گوش کنم و بتوانم درک کنم و کمک کنم.

گذشته همزمان با آینده برای من به جلو میرود و جدا کردن آنها از هم در لحظه هایی غیر ممکن به نظر میرسد. من وسواسانه به دنبال پیدا کردن چیزهایی در مورد ایران هستم تا بتوانم احساس کنم در خانه هستم. من به دنبال شبیه کردن این زندگی که در اینجا دارم به زندگی که قبلا داشته ام هستم. من الان فقط خاطرات زیبایی و دلپذیری از خانه به یاد دارم.

الان هم دوباره می خواهم سعی کنم با یک لیوان آب پرتقال در حالی که سعی میکنم دوباره از ترانه لانا دل ری لذت ببرم به دنبال صدای قیژ قیژ کولر آبی قدیمی خانه بگردم و به منظره کوه که از پنجره آشپزخانه آپارتمانم در بولدر قابل دیدن است خیره شوم و وانمود کنم که شبیه به منظره پنجره اتاقم در خانه است و خواهش میکنم لطفا به من نگویید که آنها شبیه به هم نیستند.

Colleen Ahern

Fragments for Reflection

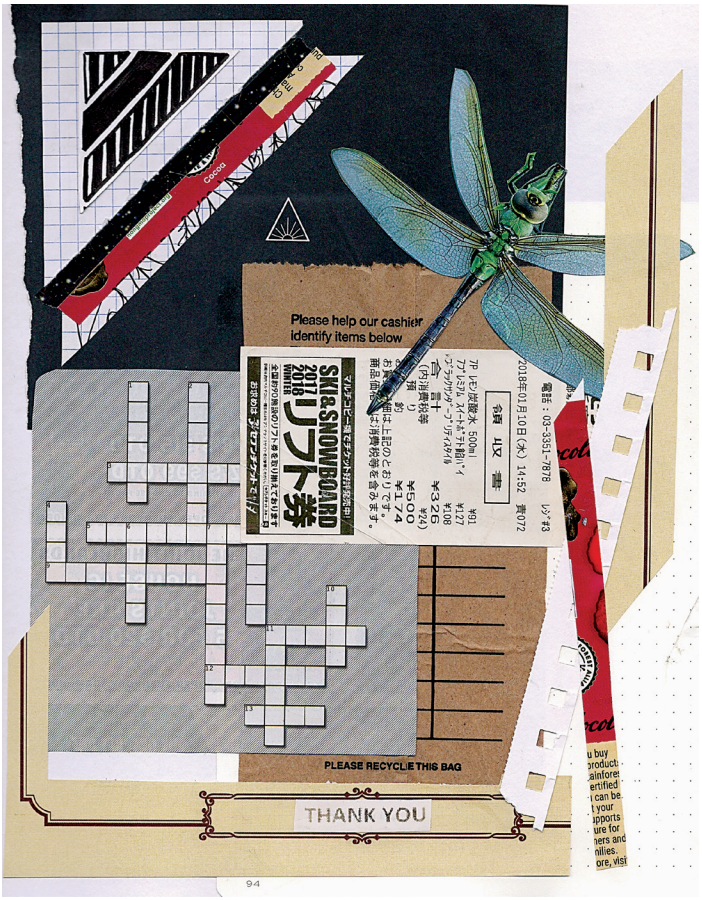
I created the following collages from 2024 to 2025 using a variety of found objects. I used the slow process of cutting, sorting, tearing, arranging, and glueing to meditate on symbols of power, technology, consciousness, surveillance, and nature.

I hope that the accompanying questions prove useful to anyone looking to spark curiosity and to reflect more deeply on their relationship with media.

Who gets to be comfortable? Where do your beliefs about wealth and wellbeing come from?

Ace of Pentacles (2024).

Who gets to decide what media is disposable and what is preserved? Where do you have an opportunity to express gratitude toward overlooked people, places or things?

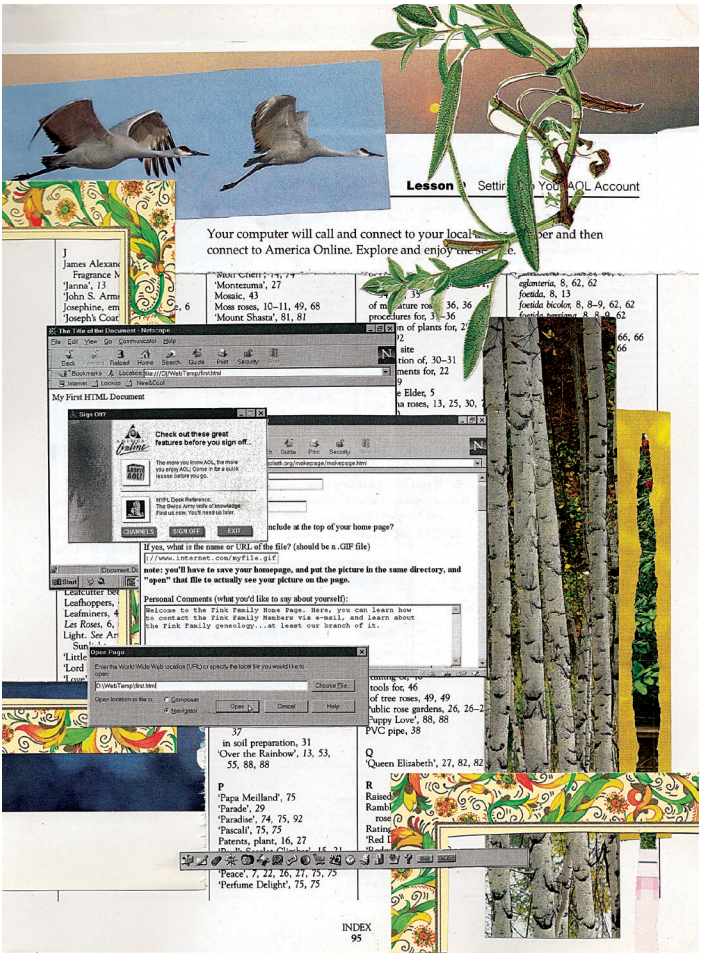


Thank You (2025).

How does your understanding of sacredness, playfulness and mystery influence your relationships? How can you cultivate love that transcends spaces and time?

Two of Cups (2025).

When was the last time technology felt magical to you? If someone peered into your mind, what would be framed as sacred?



A Window into Your World (2025).

Where do you have power right now? What element, process or technology can bring you agency at this moment?

The Magician (2025).

What aesthetics communicate sacredness and authority to you? How does the mode of communication change the meaning of your message?

A Message from Above (2025).

Giulia Evolvi

Can Catholic Women Be Priests?

"Women don't count anything in the Catholic Church. They have zero power, and it will always be like this."

This was a comment I received from a sociologist of religion some months ago, at a workshop where I was presenting my work on Catholic feminists. I interviewed 25 women in North America and Europe who campaigned for gender equality within the Vatican and for women's ordination. Women can't, indeed, become priests in the Catholic Church, something that many perceive as unfair. It is not only a doctrinal issue, but also a matter of how women are perceived within Catholicism and, one might argue, it reflects their role in society and culture. Hence, in 2002, seven women decided to disregard the Vatican and get ordained as priests. They were on a boat situated between Austria and Germany, in international waters, to make sure that no diocese could claim the power to shut down the event. As they were ordained by three male Bishops, one of whom remains anonymous

to avoid issues with the Vatican, the ordination is technically valid. Nowadays, there are hundreds of women ordained deacons, priests, and bishops, many happily leading communities where they foster inclusive practices with black, indigenous, and LGBTQ+ people, despite being formally excommunicated by the Vatican. Some of my interviewees are ordained, and some are activists for women's ordination, but they all tend to agree on one thing:

"Women are the backbone of the Church. Without women, the church will crumble."

The sociologist of religion in question, however, criticized my presentation by asserting that my idea that women could gain more power in the Catholic Church was a mere illusion. However unpleasant, this remark contains some truth: while many theologians assert that women can be priests and, in the past, there have been women deacon, the current dominant idea is that Catholic power is held by men. Therefore, women have been campaigning for ordinations since 1975 when they had the first Women's Ordination Conference in Detroit and then founded a campaign movement with the same name. At the time, living in a historical time of rising feminism and social justice demonstrations, and just after the reforms of the Second Vatican Council, these women expected that Catholic women's ordination would come at any moment. It didn't happen. Even Pope Francis, celebrated for his progressive stances and for putting women in positions of power, was reticent to discuss gender equality, and not many have hopes that Pope Leo XIV will make any

radical changes. But women haven't stopped campaigning. The organization Women's Ordination Conference, under the guidance of Executive Director Kate McElwee and Program Director Katie Lacz, launched online and offline actions through the "Ministry of Irritation," their activist branch. For instance, they shared pictures of empty shoes outside of churches to symbolize the unfulfilled vocations of women. They also protested several times in Rome, and they put pictures of their creative actions on social media. Demonstrations and actions occurred especially during the Synods, a gathering of Bishops and other delegate to discuss the Church, where the Vatican seemed to greatly overlook the question of women. Once, seven women holding red parasols with slogans for the ordination of women outside of St. Peter's Square got arrested by the Italian police. One of them complained that she hadn't had coffee that morning, so the policemen offered one to them in a nearby café before bringing them in for questioning. Hence, they weren't exactly seen as a threat, but they were annoying enough to be arrested. Another time, they waited for the bishops entering the Vatican for the Synod and chanted to them:

"Knock knock, who's there? Half of the Catholic Church."

I had discussed all this in my presentation, but the sociologist didn't seem to be convinced. I realized that the women I work with also are told a lot that they will never succeed, which reminds them of their invisibility within the Catholic Church. So, I decided to reply with a different example to the sociologist. I started talking about Iceland, which

seems very disconnected from the issue of Catholic women's ordination, but I reassured everyone that there was a strong connection. In 1975, Icelandic women decided to strike. The strike wasn't only about refusing to go to work, even if this was a big part of it, but also refraining from doing all kinds of domestic work, from cooking to childcare. Men found themselves in a very difficult situation. Nobody was there to bring their children to school, and anyway, most of the teachers were striking. Long lines formed outside of the rare restaurants and kiosks with male owners and staff, as men had no women-operated workplace cafeteria or female assistants to fetch them sandwiches. They say news anchors resorted to bringing their little ones on air with them as no babysitter was available. From that moment, everyone in Iceland recognized that women are fundamental to society, and today it is the country in the world with the highest gender equality. What does this have to do with Catholic women's ordination? I explained:

"This Lent, Catholic women also decided to strike."

Across the world, and inspired by the Icelandic strike, women in different dioceses stopped going to church for the duration of Lent. Not only that, but they also withdrew their financial support for the Church and refrained from doing any volunteer service within their parishes. The movement was coordinated through social media, and they launched campaigns online and offline. While the response was good, the movement will have to work harder to trigger a significant response from the Catholic Church at the global level. Knowing

how much work women usually do for their local Catholic communities, I cannot help but think that their strikes can make a huge impact. Without women, who would prepare and serve food for community events? Who would coordinate children's Sunday schools and teach them about the Bible? Who would clean the church? Who would bring kids to mass? Who would populate the pews that are emptier and emptier every year? Through strikes, online campaigns, or protests outside churches and the Vatican, women can make it very clear that the Catholic Church needs them if it wants to survive. They might be considered a fringe movement, a dissident group, but their social and digital activism has a lot of potential. With Pope Francis' passing and the election of Leo XIV, many people watched the movie *Conclave*. There is a quote from the last scene that summarizes well what many Catholic women are trying to convey:

"And perhaps it is my difference that will make me more useful."

Perhaps women never had power in the Catholic Church, but maybe their differences might be what makes them gain power. Despite what sociologists of religion say.

Stewart Hoover

Religious Media as Counter Media

I have been thinking about—and then studying—the mediation of religion for most of my career. I first began to notice religion media during college, working as a disc jockey at a commercial radio station in the middle of Kansas. At the lowest rung there I spent Sunday mornings running syndicated religion. I became interested in—and later fascinated by—the cultural seams or boundaries represented by those "radio ministries." They had already moved beyond the stereotype of bible belt radio and the "radio preacher" of the era of the Scopes trial. They had begun to use more modern production twists intended to work more seamlessly into the format expectations of commercial markets.

They did represent a religious "counter-media" of their time. Their ostensible purpose was protestant gospel work: saving souls. Protestant ideas about the seductions of "the culture" and the protection of abstemious, upright, moral life were both implicitly and explicitly present. And yet, this

"counter" narrative had to fit the constraints of the secular context of our small radio station where the rest of the programming schedule was filled with popular programs that often challenged those values.

In my studies of religion and media I've seen the boundaries and counter-forms of religion media grow in importance. As I began to look at things more carefully, I learned that it is not just about faith, but about secular culture. I first realized this doing my dissertation on televangelism. When these programs first emerged, the questions were all about how they might affect conventional religion and conventional churches. While looking into that, I discovered something more profound. A number of the viewers I interviewed started talking about how these television preachers represented something far larger for them.

Instead of talking about their preaching, they talked about how these men (and most were men) were important symbols of how their world and worldview could have a place in public, mainstream culture. They saw the presence of these ministries in the context of (what they saw to be) mainstream media to be an important marker of the emergence or resurgence of conservative religion. They were all acutely aware of how the Scopes trial had led to their kind of religion being repudiated and pushed to the margins. The sophistication of television ministries symbolized for them that they could once again have a place back at the center of things.

At the same time, that larger context retained its dangers and portents. That seam or boundary between "their" culture and the "mainstream"

culture held powerful meaning. Jimmy Swaggart, who fell in disgrace decades ago, was particularly adept at framing this. His program was structured as a telecast of a large live revival, complete with very good R&B gospel music (he was, after all, Jerry Lee Lewis's cousin and they performed together as boys). At a certain point, he would turn to the camera, seemingly breaking the "fourth wall" and performatively address the audience beyond. "You out there … mister wealthy lawyer or banker sitting in your pentouse … you are not so high and mighty. You are actually a poor smelly creature dwelling in SIN!" Of course it carried the fire and brimstone of the southern preacher, but at the same time it inscribed significant cultural and class boundaries. It also said to its viewers that the television medium could both differentiate them from the sinful wider world but also be a vector into that world on behalf of their culture.

The question of how or whether religion could actually "cross over" into the mainstream, and what it would do once it gets there, continues to be a challenge and a problem. Religiously-based media, both legacy and online, have become increasingly sophisticated. But does that mean the boundaries have disappeared, that they are no longer "counter" but in the mainstream? And, importantly, given what I've just said, would they want to become part of the mainstream or is it vital that they remain counter-media? That question — and its basic contradictions — continue to roil as religion has become ever more important in cultural politics.

This can be seen even in the world of Christian influencers. Chip and Joanna Gaines, based in

Texas, recently encountered blow-back on their reality show, "Back to the Frontier." Their show, which articulates with the Christian home-maker and "trad-wife" discourses made the mistake of including a gay couple in one of their series. This put them in the middle of the conundrum of where the boundaries are and what is or is not "counter" and to what. As is obvious in this example, the religion of the margin here — the counter-narrative pushed by those criticizing the Gaines's — is in fact a narrative of domination, not marginalization, in contemporary social relations.

Religions of all kinds face the challenge of conforming or resisting public culture. They can no longer be totally separate from it (see, for example, the experience of the Amish who — while ostensibly living outside the media mainstream are nonetheless lured into it). Major figures in the transformation of religion (both within the U.S. and abroad) have all walked along that boundary. The televangelists and even the epoch-defining Billy Graham had to confront the marketplace logics of media which structure the extents and limits of possibility.

However, the contradiction that conservative religion continues to seek ascendancy and at the same time desire distinction, persists. The fundamental issue seems to be whether or how a hermetic and authentic (Biblical, Talmudic, or Koranic) world is even possible anymore when so much of social life is media life. Producers of most religious counter-narratives operate as though it was and is.

By my observations, things are further complicated by the question of whether the object of

religious media is faith or society. So much of it seems to be much more about society than about saving souls. In the U.S. much of this has been aligned with projects of memory, grievance, and nostalgia for a lost, halcyon social past devoted to sobriety, "virtue" (as the religious right defines it) and traditionalist domestic values.

We are seeing more and more examples of counter-media that are focused on religious institutions and religious authority. There has been a lot of work done on the impact of digital circulations on the Mormon church, for example. All of this confronts the reality that the boundaries that define what might be "counter-" are — as I have said — complex and even contradictory. There are two kinds of complexity. First the object "religion" is itself intermingled with its mediations, and second, these counter-media are focused both on faith and on cultural politics.

The entanglements of religion have roots in (particularly American) protestant culture. We can then see how religion media today cannot disentangle a pure or hermetic form of "religion" from the cultural fleshpots of the media. This is a centuries-long condition. And, as protestantism in the American context came to be the generic form of bourgeois social life, it also became complicit in a variety of social moralisms. These are constraints that anything that wishes to call itself authentic or reformist "religion" in contemporary life must recognize and account for.

Resistive, reformist and reactionary forms of religious counter-media operate on a geography that is far from level and balanced. It is not just about identifying, or nuancing, or re-making a pure form

of faith, it is also about doing so in a context where both the reform and the object of reform operate within defined media-religion logics. And these are logics that have their own deep histories of interconnection.

What is needed then? Those who make religion counter-media must operate with both reflexivity and with a historiographic consciousness. In order to have any hope of actually being "counter," they must do so self-consciously and with a clear understanding of "how we got here." The terrain has not been made not by God, but by a political economy.

Religion counter-media seeking reform is necessary, even vital. It is in fact reassuring to see how many such efforts there are, and how many of them seem to have a rich understanding of the conditions within which they must operate, and a reflexive understanding of how we got to where we are.

Oisín Sheerin

Sharing Access

Let's begin at the end.

I feel myself in debt for the experiences that the documentarian Jordan Lord has given me access to. Their acts of sharing that have expanded my conception of representation, liability, and relation; for showing me to move with what I cannot know but feel nonetheless; to question the relational ethics of the onlooker and the entangled praxis of who directs the gaze; to hold all parties accountable, within and beyond the screen's frame. I am writing in an attempt to repay such debts. Yet, some debts can never truly be repaid. As collateral, I want to share something with you — how Jordan Lord's documentaries have moved me, and of how I move with them.

When I watch something that truly affects me, I am taken outside of myself. I feel an errantry move through me. Fundamentally, the ways in which I relate — to self, other, world — undergoes (ex)change. I do not position myself alongside the text, but through it.

Beginnings and endings become much the same as we move with them, when we accept — if not, *embrace* — their lack of totalizing explanation. They both relay, relate, try to tie things together. Such knotted articulations are not fast, the cuts are never clean, but are often deep.

During my MA, I took an ethnography class with the ambition of doing an auto-ethnographic study of my home. Having left to study abroad when I was still a teenager, I had become interested in the material traces of my presence that I had left behind. I wondered whether I could (re)trace the ephemera of my queer becoming in the Irish countryside. Way back when, this had felt like a place I had a to run from. *Growing pains.* I later found myself in this state of return, a feeling of in-betweenness, an implied accountability for those I love yet chose to leave.

Wanting to start at the beginning, or at least some approximation of it, I sought to orient myself through an archaeological excavation of this (once) familiar environment — *the past is a foreign country.* I dug up photo albums, scrapbooks, textbooks, report cards and toys. I followed the scratches, rings, and depressions I left etched in furniture. I observed how routines had changed during my six-year absence. I felt like the prodigal son, one who did not expect the fatted calf to be slain, but to find answers in the traces of a quotidian (inter)-personal history. Mapping feeling through objects and the rhythms — or the lack thereof — which gave them meaning; I wanted to write about my presence amidst such material and affective absences; to understand how I got where I was, and where I was going. I desired access to such

"The table is assembled around the support it gives."
— Sarah Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*

memories to flesh out their affect in relation to their materiality. I wanted to learn from their experience, to allow the past its dwelling and to heal through its negotiation. I wanted the reader to move with me through this process; past, present and future.

After reading a piece of my writing, my professor, Laliv Melamed, recommended I watch Jordan Lord's documentaries. She told me that they were a filmmaker deeply invested in the traces, affects and relational attachments of familial memory. She lent me a hard drive with Lord's *Shared Resources* (2021) on it; I carried it home like a piece of gold. Transferring the film to my laptop was the first of many interpersonal — albeit parasocial — mediated exchanges.

Shared Resources is Lord's first feature-length documentary film. As a culmination of their MFA, Lord's 2021 film further explores themes of (in)-accessibility, participatory reflexivity, and indebtment that can be seen in their previous short films — *I Can Hear My Mother's Voice* (2018) and *After… After… (Access)* (2018). Lord recurrently asks, shows, and tells what it means to share access to the self within and against institutional, technical and experiential constraints of documentarian representation.

In *Shared Resources* (2021), Lord articulates debt — material and affective — as a relational entanglement between the documentarian, participants and audiences. Filming over the course of four years, Lord explores their family's experiences of debt as a shared resource; Lord's ex-debt collector father (Albert) suffers visual and physical debilities resulting from exposure to Agent Orange in the

Shared Resources, 8:54 (screen still).

Vietnam War; the family had to file Chapter 13 bankruptcy after losing their home in Hurricane Katrina, causing Albert to further lose his VA benefits; Albert had to liquidate his pension to support Lord through their Ivy League education, leading to their mother (Deborah) telling Lord they "owe" it to them to be successful. For Lord, this is a debt that can never be repaid in full.

In the beginning, the end, and throughout the film, scenes filled with a reddish-pink light pulsate through the screen. Lord tells us of how their finger covers the lens, thus concealing what lies beyond whilst providing us access to their body's own interiority. In telling us that "some things are too close to be shown," the opacity of Lord's blood recurrently performs as both a blockade and conduit

for representing the affective intimacies of familial experience.

For the postcolonial philosopher Édouard Glissant, transparency is a colonial logic in which the other must be known in totality—this is achieved through the (meta)physical violences of subjugation (*Poetics of Relation*). Under coloniality, the subject's transparent legibility is conflated with a normative humanity. In such a mode of relation, to understand the other (*comprendre*) is to grasp them (*-prendre*), and thus reductively fix their being in stasis. Rather, Glissant proposes a relational poetics of opacity; these are articulations that position intersubjective illegibility as a human right that must be strived for by all, for all. Instead of seeking understanding of the other, through opacity we must learn to give-on-and-with (*donner-avec*) the other's innumerable differences that cannot be framed, let alone fully understood. This is a moral generosity that opens the self up to the possibilities of encounter and the (ex)changes this may enact in us. Moving with one another, we make relationality anew.

Like Lord, I cannot help but feel the debts I have to have to my family; the red I have put them in, the absence I left them; the guilt of both.

Experiences are what we share. They move between us. They may be mutual, or not; access to them may be granted, or denied. One might find themselves desiring to share access to their experience but end up falling short.

I can never relay my experience to you, or my parents, in full.

This is not for a lack of trying.

Sometimes words are not enough or hurt too much.

Sometimes things cannot be shown or evade capture.

We must move with the opacities of such experiential inaccessibilities if we are ever to relate to one another, let alone to oneself (in whatever iteration this self comes to find itself). Three things in life are certain: death, taxes and (inter)subjective uncertainty. As Glissant asks of us, one must "[plunge] into the opacities of the world to which [one] has access."

If to capture is to enclose, to grasp the other through a closure that is not of their own making, then perhaps it is in the lacunae of the incommunicable that new relationalities open up to the world. Perhaps, it is through such Glissantian poetic opacities — articulations of the *right* to subjective illegibility, the desire for alternative modes of relation beyond subjugation — that we may discover the openness of encounters with difference, and take joy in the experience of intersubjective (ex)change. To paraphrase Glissant, we can only grasp at threads as we trace the textures and relational entanglements of experience's weave.

Such opaque poetics may take form through experimentation, through the countering of formal convention. For example, in documentary film opaque poetics may arise as tactical ambiguities, visual effacements, aural elisions, descriptive failures of the unspoken and the unspeakable. Lord

uses these poetic modalities to explore their (in)-tangible debts to their family and the liabilities of being in entangled relation.

The philosophy of countering is central to Lord's documentarian praxis. Reflexively, they repeatedly ask how they can hold themselves accountable for their representation of others, and of how the audience is ethically implicated in their looking and listening. Perception of the other is a relational endeavour — where there is relationality, there is the ethics of the encounter and of intersubjective (ex)change. Through this lens, documentary becomes a mode of transfer; participants' knowledge of self runs the risk of being extracted and abstracted for the consumption of audiences unknown to them. In speaking of their family's debts, Lord asks the audience, "who is this information for? … How does a life become information?" Like their ex-debt collector father, Albert, Lord also views the role of the documentarian as being a "risk manager." In debt collection, the creditor conventionally offloads all risks onto the borrower. The same holds true for traditional documentary filmmaking; through asking participants to sign a documentary "release agreement," the documentarian is waived from any representational liabilities and potential negative repercussions on the participants' behalf. In other words, through release agreements, documentary participants are denied self-representational autonomy — their appearance, voice, experience and knowledge are no longer their own. For Lord, participation is a labor that affectively "sticks with" the represented, long after the camera stops rolling.

Shared Resources, 1:07:19 (screen still).

To remedy the problematics of representational extractivism and reduction, Lord offers a counter-proposal in the form of a documentary "catch agreement." Poetically, Lord inverts all terms and conditions of the conventional release agreement in order to hold themselves ultimately accountable for their representation of others. Central to their catch agreement is the claim that participants have the right to revisit, revise, or contest their representation at any point in the (post)production process. Lord facilitates such participatory reflection through the provision of access features (audio description and closed captioning) in which participants are asked to review footage and comment on their representation in three registers: "how they reacted to seeing it, how they would

describe it to someone who could not see, and what was left out of the frame but important to know" (*Contractual Obligations*). Albert's contestation of scenes that portrayed him as "weak" due to representing his physical debilities thus necessitated Lord's fingered opacifications.

In this way, Lord's attempt at documentary access — the permission to film another in a given space and time — is positioned within and beyond the film's diegetic frame. Spatiality and temporality are collapsed to position the identities and experiences of the documentary participants as fluid, open to revision, and unknowable in totality. Participants speak of an audience that is not-yet-there, but is actively perceiving. This is an exercise in the temporality self/other-perception. The audience must thus learn to move, to give-on-and-with, such generative uncertainties of eclipsed visuals and non-diegetic description of what they are not seeing.

In the final scene of *Shared Resources,* we return to another blood-opacified screen. Beyond the pulsating frame, Lord reflects on the unpayable debts that they have to their family and of how love is what one truly only owes the other:

This circuit between "I and you" can't be closed because "I and you" are never and can't stay the same. This difference can't be framed. It can only be missed. In missing it, it can only be felt. A feeling that can't be denied. Through each other.

Like debt, experience is something that bonds multiple parties together. I owe Lord for sharing with me access to their family's experiences in all

their opacities. I am not the same; I feel the (ex)changes that have occurred within me. I wish I could tell you, show you, the difference that I feel. I can't deny it. Some things are too close to be shown, or told. Others are too close to not be felt.

The screen goes black.

I can see myself.

Not a reflection, but an implication.

I thank them for sharing.

Jieyu Liu

Locating Chinese Media in Its Globalization Process

The global presence of Chinese media has grown to a scale that must be recognized and confronted by academia. In December 2024, *Black Myth: Wukong,* a video game designed by a Chinese independent game development company called Game Science, became the first Chinese video game to receive a trophy on stage at the industry's most prestigious awarding platform, The Game Awards. In February 2025, a Chinese animation film named *Ne Zha 2* was introduced in the theatres outside of mainland China and soon became the all-time best-selling animation at the box office. Both media pieces are considered new *guochao* (国潮) products, defined as cultural products that rewrite Chinese traditions and history, under the current *guochao* wave in China (*Black Myth: Wukong* was based on the 16th-century fiction *Journey to the West,* and *Ne Zha 2* was based on the Chinese myth *Creation of the Gods*). As many Chinese scholars demonstrate, this new *guochao* wave is global, since it produces not only the Chinese narrative but also Chinese soft power

in the world. With these cultural products' economic success and global recognition, Chinese media today should raise awareness for scholars to examine their significance and future potential.

The presence of Chinese media examples globally calls media studies scholars to put them through the lens of theories or develop new concepts to understand them. Current global media studies theories fail to offer a comprehensive understanding of the political atmosphere and cultural production in China. Shown in specific scholarship studying global cultural powers, scholars from different parts of the world view media in these global powers with different standpoints, thus resulting in conflictual narratives about the formation of the global media and cultures. Therefore, this paper proposes that media studies scholars must recognize that the rise of the Chinese cultural industry globally is a complicated process that involves not only the meaning of China becoming a global cultural power to the West, but also how and why China becomes a global cultural power from a Chinese perspective. I argue that to study the globalization of the Chinese cultural industry, we must develop new theories and thought processes to examine different examples, phenomena, and social movements.

These Chinese media examples, collectively consisting of the *guochao* wave, on the other hand, are individual creations with unique meanings. This means that, besides a perspective studying how these media products represent Chinese narrative and soft power globally, there is another perspective studying how these media products

represent the everyday life of individual content creators and the audience in China. In other words, Chinese media examples are not just a manifestation of State power but also the ordinary life of the people. This is the popular culture, according to scholars such as Raymond Williams and Henry Jenkins, and it is significant to speak about the identity of the average Chinese people and serve as a popular discourse resisting against the State and even Western discourses. The second part of the paper briefly discusses the *guochao* as a case study and proposes its conflictual nature of being both the manifestation of State power and, at the same time, a popular discourse.

Diving into the global media scholarship, scholars from the West or a decolonial standpoint propose completely different arguments about the globalization of Chinese media from those of East Asian media scholars. Nick Couldry and Ulises Mejias, coming from a decolonial theory foundation, in their work about data colonialism, protpose a new kind of colonial power based on the exploitation of everyday life into quantifiable data. They challenge the setup of the binary of the East vs. West or the North vs. South by recentering the tech centers with the political power behind them, instead of the geopolitical center of the world alone. With its rise in technology and economy, China thus becomes a colonial power according to Couldry and Mejias. Other decolonial scholars, such as Last Moyo, set up a North vs. South binary, replacing the East vs. West. They focus on the southern part of the world in opposition to the colonial power of Euro-America, often ignoring China as a

global force today, or categorizing China as part of the global North.

It seems reasonable to set up China along with the recently risen East Asian global powers, such as Japan and South Korea, since they all express some kind of economic boost and benefit from the globalization of their cultural industry—Japanese video games in the '80s, K-pop in the last decade, and now the Chinese game and animation industry. However, we cannot overlook the crucial difference between how East Asian global powers and Western powers have risen, especially in their cultural contexts. Dal Yong Jin, an East Asian media studies scholar, in his work about the globalization of East Asian media culture, put Brazil, South Korea, and China in the category of Global South instead of Global North, differing from Couldry and Mejias. In his words, globalization of media culture is not simply about the discussion of coloniality. It is also technological and infrastructural. From this perspective, scholars can trace back to cultural imperialism and then to cultural proximity. Today's boost of East Asian media culture globally is the result of East Asia benefiting from Western technologies and discourses, reconstructing them, and disseminating them to the world in a unique East Asian manner.

Even putting China under a colonial standpoint when discussing its globalization of media culture, it is not as simple as China has become a colonizer in recent history. When scholars discuss colonialism and its impact on the colonized, they usually mean settler colonization from imperial forces on others' lands, along with ideological control over others' cultures. Using this logic, China

as a colonial power today, as indicated in the North vs. South binary, does not make sense. Sunny Han Han, in his piece about pop-nationalism in China today, describes an aversion at both the State and popular levels against Western discourse that has existed for hundreds of years. After the Opium Wars, the Qing Dynasty, at the time, against the Western imperial forces, gave up parts of its lands forcibly. After the Boxer Uprising around 1900, the State and the Chinese people solidified the West as the enemy and proposed to use the power of the West to compete with the West inside China. Wendy Su, in her piece about Japanese popular culture in the PRC, mentioned how Japanese imperial power during WWII imagined a pan-Asian identity and ideology against the West, where parts of China were conquered to support the plan. In both cases, China should be considered as the colonized instead of the colonizer. From a settler colonization perspective, thus, it does not make sense to say China has become a colonizer. Rather, as argued by Jin, its uprising, like South Korea and Japan, is much more cultural, technological, and infrastructural.

Here, combining the perspectives above, it shows that the rise of the Chinese cultural industry globally today has its unique trajectory. It is not simply the rise of another empire joining the Western imperial forces, nor is it similar to the rise of the South Korean and Japanese cultural industries. As argued by various Chinese scholars, the success of the Chinese cultural industry globally today is accomplished by the blossoming of individual creators' works supported by State-oriented discourses along with recent Chinese history.

Therefore, scholars have to look deeper into Chinese history and Chinese scholars' voices to picture a comprehensive image of today's China under its globalization process. This also means to connect past theories or create new theories to describe this globalization process. I propose that scholars should look back at the East vs. West binary, but not in a manner of setting up a hierarchy between the Western and Eastern cultures, as Edward Said and Stuart Hall have critiqued orientalism. Instead, building on this hierarchical ideology demonstrated by Said and Hall, we need to examine how Chinese and other East Asian cultural products, using this binary, set up their uniqueness and popularize themselves around the world.

Black Myth: Wukong and *Ne Zha 2* (the second episode of the *Ne Zha* trilogy) are two Chinese cultural products that are perfectly fit to examine the uniqueness of the globalization of the Chinese cultural industry. Earlier, I described how these two products are categorized under the *guochao* wave, currently happening in China today. In fact, the *guochao* wave consists of two phases. The first one, represented by the *guochao* products, refers to the physical consumable products aesthetically linked with Chinese traditions and history. The second phase, represented by the new *guochao* products, is cultural products with discourses of Chinese traditions and history. Clearly, *Black Myth: Wukong* and *Ne Zha 2* are media examples of the latter phase. *Guochao* does not have a unified definition among Chinese scholars. Generally speaking, *guochao* is defined as the national chic, with a conflicted nature of being both State-oriented and also initiated from the popular culture.

Chinese scholars who study guochao often mention *Black Myth: Wukong* before it was published, and *Ne Zha 1* (the first episode of the *Ne Zha* trilogy) in the past. Degang Kong imagined *Black Myth: Wukong* as a Chinese game that could perfectly incorporate Western technologies with traditional Chinese narrative, thus speaking a Chinese voice and identity to the world. Haiyan Xing demonstrated that *Ne Zha 1* inspired young individual film creators and nurtured a stage for the blossoming of works around Chinese traditions, which offered a firm base to the economic success of *Ne Zha 2* globally. Kong and Xing essentially add to Jin's idea, arguing that the globalization process of the Chinese cultural industry neither replicates nor resists Western cultural imperialism. The Chinese cultural industry walks a unique path by holding firm to the discourses, the narrative in those products, within the hands of Chinese people and the State, while adopting Western technology and infrastructures to channel and disseminate the products globally, so that the Western audience is familiar with these products. It is a unique Chinese soft power influencing the world by portraying a Chinese voice to them instead of shaping the world by providing values and tools, as discussed by Michael Keane and Huan Wu.

Besides *guochao*'s demonstration of cultural power in the globalization process, its definition also draws attention to the domestic sphere with respect to two groups of people, the State and the individual creators. Since the *guochao* wave is essentially represented by a collage of collective individual cultural works, could all the individual

creations still serve their unique purpose and send messages to society after they are all merged into the *guochao* wave? How does the conflict between individual works and the State discourse play out domestically under the *guochao* wave? Unfortunately, I am not able to find scholarship that directly addresses the domestic conflicts inside China during its globalization process. It is important to study the individual cultural works, for they represent the everyday life of Chinese people under the *guochao* wave. To really understand the popular culture of *guochao,* individual works must still serve meanings outside of the State discourse to the world. The individual cultural works' purpose and the *guocaho* wave's purpose together shape the globalization of Chinese media and cultural industry today.

This paper provides a conflicting theoretical foundation along with a case study to rethink the globalization process of Chinese media culture. It does not seem that the decolonial scholars and the East Asian cultural and media studies scholars are going to reconcile with their theories in the short term. At the same time, I am still working on how I might argue the questions of *guochao* since it is an ongoing wave that is still heavily impacting the cultural industry and State discourse today in China. However, one thing is certain: the Chinese cultural industry will push forward even more and impact the global economy and different nations' policies even more. We, as media scholars, must confront this phenomenon and recognize and criticize the globalization of the Chinese cultural industry today.

Antoinette Kendrick

Voices We Can't Hear

People don't usually think of apps as moral choices. We think of them as tools, effectively devoid of human error, utilitarian and technical; credible, informative, and ultimately, as *things* that assist. "Invest in tools that will serve you," a more seasoned grad student urged during my doctoral program orientation, and I took that suggestion seriously. The next day, I invested in the tool I thought I'd need most of all: a tool to help me read. I spent $125 on Speechify (text-to-Speech technology) on a tight budget, and it seemed to fulfill its purpose, as published. I was enthusiastic, and even evangelical, about the app during my first semester, publicly rejoicing and encouraging my peers to invest in a subscription, and really, in *themselves* and their pursuit of academic knowledge.

I started poking around the Speechify app in the fall of 2023, and its potential felt nothing short of revolutionary; representing a true alternative to conventional modes of learning, I'd drilled it into my routine. At the outset of my doctoral studies,

overwhelmed by the sheer volume and density of assigned readings, I held fast to the belief that the right tool could render scholarship more manageable for me, particularly as someone trained as a social work student and practitioner—a discipline where practical/contextual skill development was stressed above deep reading and sustained research skills. A Ph.D. felt like a tall order that I wasn't sure I'd be able to fill.

In that spirit, I felt indebted to Speechify… at least at first.

Reaping the benefits of my Speechify subscription, I was able to get through my assigned readings by simply uploading any article or document, choosing a voice narrator out of the provided list of U.S. English voice narrators, and my pre-selected, "human-like" voice would pop up, ready to linguistically steer me through the day's information overload. Voilà! A godsend, right?

As I continued implementing the app into my study routine, prompting it to read aloud more critical and culturally targeted texts, something was immediately lost in translation.

Selecting from the usual lineup of standard, white-coded voices—"Jamie," "Ethan," "Shawn," "Phillip"—I prompted the app with an excerpt from W.E.B. Du Bois' seminal contribution to Black intellectual life, *The Souls of Black Folk,* and that's when I heard it.

The narrator's polished, placeless, "United States" English glazed over every utterance, accent, and inflection; the meaning of the text (and subsequently, the meaning of the writer) was sonically distorted. Instead of carrying the weight of Du Bois's words, the voice sheared it away, stripping it

of its historical relevance, regional specificity, and situated consciousness. Reading Du Bois's work on paper felt undeniable, but when articulated through white-coded AI voice-generated technology, the original indictment and intention felt misinterpreted. Abstracted. Undone?

I then tried to run a decolonial French-Martinique writer, Frantz Fanon's chapter from *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), into the Speechify app, and that's when I heard it again. In the first line from the chapter titled "The Fact of Blackness," Fanon writes:

*"DIRTY N*****!" Or simply, "Look, a Negro!"*

I came into the world imbued with the will to find a meaning in things, my spirit filled with the desire to attain to the source of the world, and then I found that I was an object in the midst of other objects.

Having Frantz Fanon's words read aloud to me from a white narrator's voice is sonic violence, period. Attempting to run this excerpt through ANY of the AI-generated listing of voice actors in the U.S. catalog could constitute an act of sonic erasure. And coming to this realization, all I remember feeling was — bewitched, beguiled, *bitter.*

This reflection revisits that moment (and the moments since) as I've tried to understand what it means for a tool to "fulfill its function" or "serve users' needs," especially when the very infrastructure and design protocols embedded within the technology secretly define whose/how voices get coded. This app seems to serve users seeking alternative models while simultaneously acting as a *disservice* to other users' learning process. What

does it mean to subscribe to your own epistemic (sonic) prison?

Out of more than thirty premium voices offered in the U.S. English catalog, as late as the spring of 2023, only two voice narrator options appeared to be recognizably Black.

1. The first is **Snoop Dogg.** His sonic register carries an instantly familiar drawl and lax demeanor, and for his visual icon, he is depicted in a bucket hat, patterned casual outfit, gold chain, and laid-back pose, embodying a relaxed, streetwear-inspired aesthetic. This stands in stark contrast to the traditional professional attire (e.g., suits, ties, understated jewelry) worn by the majority of default (white) voice narrators represented in the U.S. English catalog (see figure 1). While the oversized chain is culturally significant within hip-hop as a marker of success and authenticity, in many academic or workplace environments, it is read as flashy, informal, or even delinquent, clashing with dominant expectations of docility and uniformity in professional dress codes. Combined with his playful demeanor and expressive hand gestures, this look projects fantasy and individuality rather than authority or applicability, qualities often expected of those deemed "neutral" arbiters of information.

2. The second option is **"Mr. President,"** a narrator suggested to be modeled on Barack Obama. Unlike other voices, this one is not tied to a real person's photo but is visually represented by a cartoonish Black figure in a suit (see figure 1),

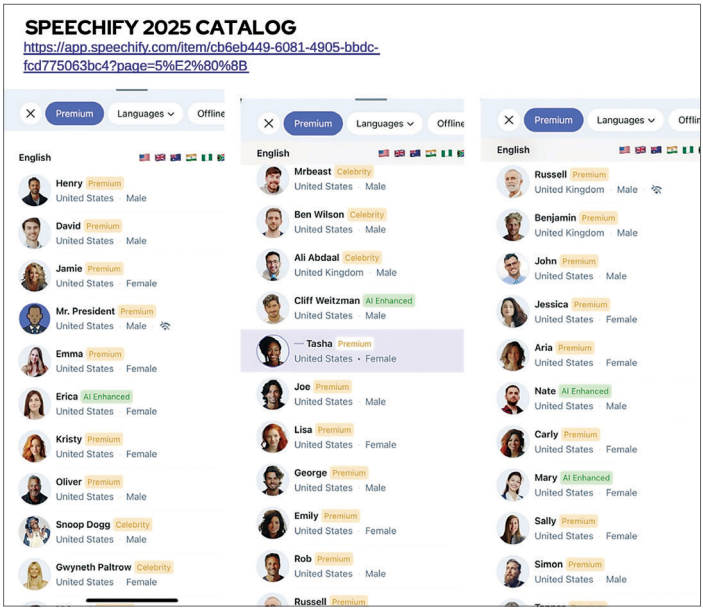


figure 1
Speechify 2025 voice catalog (U.S. English Premium voices) featuring "Snoop Dog," "Mr. President," and "Tasha." Screenshots captured from Speechify app (accessed May 2024).

meant to replicate (and arguably appropriate) Obama's measured cadence.

3. Only recently, in January of 2024, was a lone Black female voice named **Tasha** added to the U.S. English voice catalog (see figure 1). Together, these limited offerings reveal how platform designers like Speechify's founder, Cliff Weizman (who includes a voice option of himself in

the catalog), tokenize Black voices rather than meaningfully representing their diversity.

The evidence was right there in Speechify's catalog.

I began to think about how these options weren't *really* options at all. They felt less like representations and more like neoliberal gestures, performances of inclusivity, or novelty acts even … (see figure 2).

These marketing images suggest a far greater degree of diversity than what *actually* exists in the app's U.S. English voice catalog. Beneath the polished marketing language and the promise of inclusive, accessible learning, something else started to surface: the recognition of a quiet, unsettling pattern that has persisted across time and space. A pattern that the father of critical race theory, Derrick Bell, captured through his theory of *Racial Realism* (1995), wherein he claims/names racism as *persistent, perpetual,* and *permanent,* evolving in its form, but stubborn in its function. This pattern isn't fresh hunny—it's by design. Packaged in the USA. Sustained, maintained, nourished, and propagated through empirical, empiricist means that reconfigure old hierarchies/logics in new technical disguises.

This wasn't a mere oversight in representation.

It's a manifestation of the very same rancid pattern that led to the canonization of select voices and the systemic bastardization of others. You know the one. It's the tired old regurgitated discourse that frames whiteness as the default register of reason, authority, and in the words of the late, great W.E.B. Du Bois, "whiteness is the ownership

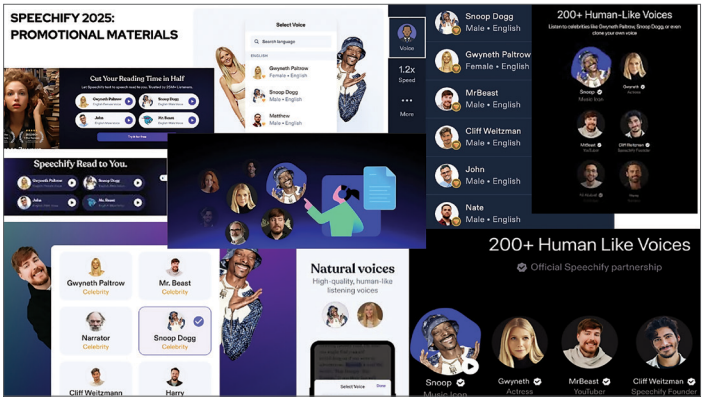


figure 2
Compilation of promotional materials for Speechify (sourced via Google Images), prominently featuring the Snoop Dogg and "Mr. President" narrators.

of the earth forever and ever, Amen!" (Du Bois, 1920, p. 29).

I repeat, this wasn't just a minor oversight in representation (for the homies in the back that may not have heard the message).

This project was never just about one app. It's about a larger phenomenon: How racism gets encoded into everyday technologies—*how AI-powered tools encode the hierarchies they claim to transcend.* I strive to further illuminate the ways in which automation abstracts, absolutely. Serving as yet another system designed through the "Western" coders' neglectful gaze and corrupt imaginary. Aren't we bored yet?

The human error embedded within the app goes beyond the scope of quantitative analysis, although three out of thirty is a striking statistic. The substance also lies in the subtler choices deployed by the app, from nomenclature and visual branding to vocal timbre and promotional narratives, the apps choices carry meaning. Names like "Matthew," "Salli," and "Guy" evoke a friendly corporate normalcy. Tasha is both a presence and an exception. Snoop and "Mr. President" are not everyday voices in the slightest; they are instantly recognizable, impossible to separate from their public personas and legacies. Speechify positions them as bonuses, as playful add-ons. But "playfulness," in this context, also represents containment and capture. These voices may challenge the norm or provide avenues for new meaning-making, but they also reinforce the making of Blackness into a consumable commodity (Browne, 2010). An auditory spectacle.

In my research, I drew on Critical Race Discourse Analysis, a framework that insists we look not just at overt numerical data but at the infrastructure of whiteness itself. This approach, championed by scholars like Daniel Hodge, pushes us to ask: who gets to be ordinary? Who gets to blend in, to sound "professional" enough to represent the default register against which everything else is measured?

When an app frames whiteness as clear, efficient, and trustworthy, it subtly trains users to associate Black voices with deviation or informality. This is how technological design becomes a racial project — how it teaches us, over and over, that whiteness is competence, and Blackness is either too much or not enough.

I felt wounded realizing that Blackness was being pushed to the digital margins. The concept of *epistemic violence* — the erasure or distortion of certain ways of knowing and being by dominant systems — echoed throughout this research. It sounds abstract until you experience it yourself, trying to find a voice that sounds like you or your family, and realizing you've been rendered an afterthought. . . . I felt the violence reverberating in my eardrums; each encounter with the app felt like a small rupture, a sonic injury I could no longer bear to self-inflict.

What began as an auto-ethnographic reflection soon expanded into a broader social reckoning. I started thinking about other users, Black and otherwise, whose identities and imaginations are diminished by these technologies, the possibilities for self-expression and critical thought, shrinking at the very moment when young learners are turning to AI-powered tools to ask questions, seek guidance, and teach them how to envision their futures.

In preparing to present this work for my first academic conference at the International Communication Association Conference (ICA75), I found myself returning to that gap between Speechify's glossy accessibility rhetoric and the *actual* experience of scrolling through voice listings. What do we absorb about race, authority, and belonging in these tiny moments — these micro-decisions hidden in our apps?

Maybe the goal isn't to build ever-expansive tools that promise to "serve all users" — a belief I once held (head nod to my grad advisor for nudging my imagination past that limit). Because the

reality, both offline and in Web 2.0 design, is that even "alternative" models often still draw from the same colonial springs, Enlightenment channels, and universalist currents that, by design, lead to the same sound.[1]

Scholars of color have long mapped the absences: whose voices are missing, whose messages are flattened and distorted, and who profits from those erasures (Noble, 2018; Ruha Benjamin, 2019; Brock, 2020; Buolamwini, 2021). As we think about "counter-media," I wonder if there's a way to reclaim something as mundane as a voice in an app. What would counter-voice technology even look like?

Perhaps the counter isn't *better universality.* Perhaps, it's a refusal of universal design altogether.

An Imagined Counter-Media Model:
Introducing **PolyVoiz** — a decentralized, community-anchored voice technology designed to resist the homogenizing impulses of mainstream media platforms and uplift community voices. **PolyVoiz** would not offer one catalog for all users. Instead, it would invite communities themselves — Black scholars, Indigenous storytellers, immigrant collectives, disabled voice actors, and others — to author, nominate, and govern their own voice narrators on a platform that directly funds its narrators through user subscription fees and crowd funding sources. Through this participatory model, representation

1 "Sound" is used here with layered meaning. In addition to denoting voice or auditory presence, it draws on Merriam-Webster's definition of *sound* (noun, sense 2): "a long broad inlet of the ocean generally parallel to the coast … [or] a long passage of water connecting two larger bodies."

is not a toggleable novelty or algorithmic afterthought but a process of self-determination and counter-investment, embedded in the platform's architecture. For example, users could nominate narrators who shape how they experience and interpret stories. I might nominate someone like Angela Davis, Ta-Nehisi Coates, Cornel West, or Denzel Washington to capture different sentiments and evoke *other* epistemologies. Importantly, **PolyVoiz** would also honor the everyday: an older brother whose melodic speech evokes memory and intimacy; a teacher, a friend, or a slam poet overheard in a café. Such nominations would allow communities to capture and circulate the mundane, quotidian, ordinariness of Blackness, or the localized cadences of diasporic experience, challenging the spectacle-driven logic of commercial media and endowing the message with a sincerity recognizable to the listeners. Unlike centralized catalogs of curated celebrity voices or tokenized gestures toward "inclusion," **PolyVoiz** centers situated, plural, community-defined narration as its central tenet and contribution to knowledge dissemination. Basically, FUBU for TTS technology.

In short: *Stop promising universality.*

Start designing for situated, plural, community-defined media — a counter-media intervention where sonic range and representational sovereignty are not add-ons, but foundational to the platform's design.

"If we're not at the table, we're on the menu."
— Sasha Costanza-Chock (2020)

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Nathan Schneider

Are Protocols Elite?

In a recent article that appeared in *The New Atlantis,* political scientist Jon Askonas identifies what has been "hollowing out" the Trumpish American heartland: the specter of protocols. Protocols, he argues, have been ascendant as a form of social organization through their centrality to the Internet and financial markets. But they manifest most viscerally for the heartland through "layers of bureaucratic decision-making and professional standards-setting"—along with, most perniciously, the "techniques" and "best practices" that constitute the cultural minefield known as "wokeness."

A result, according to Askonas, has been the collective hallucination of QAnon. Due to protocolized power, "those truly responsible for the hollowing out of America are completely obscure to their victims." In lieu of any more comprehensible explanation for stagnation and decline, some victims devoted themselves to a string of utterances, purporting to come from a renegade government official, on the notorious ∗*chan*

anonymous message boards. At least for a few years, climaxing in the riots of January 6, 2021, a new religious movement oozed from the dismay of regular folks living among the protocols of a distant elite. Askonas fabulates an image of the enemy:

A woke Millennial banker might return from a mid-afternoon self-care break or a privilege-decentering mindfulness exercise to prepare a PowerPoint on Dodd–Frank compliance obligations for financial risk management standardization.

The essay echoes, though it does not cite, the reigning treatise on the media theory of protocols: Alexander Galloway's 2004 book *Protocol: How Control Exists after Decentralization*. As Askonas does from the vantage of the political right, Galloway draws on left-coded Continental philosophy to understand protocols as a regime of control through apparently "voluntary regulation"—an illusion of agency when in fact we are trapped in the protocols' thrall. Both Askonas and Galloway recognize the digital age as a time of protocol ascendance, when specifications that go by such acronyms as HTTP and API have come to supplant the consent of the governed. Galloway chronicles the technocratic standardization processes that, like Askonas's "woke Millennial banker," invisibly impose themselves on our unsuspecting lives, especially online.

According to both accounts, protocols are essentially constructions of elites, who impose their power through mechanization. The challenge for everyone else is to find ways of bypassing, sub-

verting, hacking, and otherwise confounding the imposition of protocological governance. However, these theorists' position is increasingly being ignored among people who have found useful things to do and say with protocols.

Consider the testimony of two essay collections published this year. One is *As for Protocols,* the result of a series of events and exhibitions hosted at the New School's Vera List Center for Art and Politics. Many of the contributors are Indigenous artists and other artists of color. They turn to the term protocol because it has been a vessel for their ancestral lifeways and their creative practice. Yes, they talk about computers and AI, but they also talk about language and ritual and traditions that, as protocols, have survived centuries of colonization, enslavement, and forcible erasure.

The authors don't all love or like the word. Among them it bears serious ambivalence — as the book's introduction puts it, the essays regard protocols "both as insidious instruments of hegemony and as untapped opportunities for liberation." Many of these artists discern that protocol is a medium worth working with.

The second book comes from the standpoint of technologists and technology enthusiasts, particularly among those taken with the possibilities of blockchain protocols. For several years now, the Ethereum Foundation has supported a collective learning program called Summer of Protocols, and its initial findings appear in a self-published ebook, *The Protocol Reader.* Some of the essays involve blockchains per se. But there are also essays on death, time, memory, and dating. This book bears ambivalence about protocols, too — see the

essay on "Dangerous Protocols," which presents a Kafka Index of protocol dystopianism. But the overall gist is that protocols are a remarkable and inadequately appreciated way of doing things in the world, and they can be a technique for creative problem-solving.

In the engineer-speak of the program's founders, protocols "manage to catalyze good enough outcomes with respect to a variety of contending criteria, via surprisingly limited and compact interventions."

Media-adjacent social theory already knows this. Before Galloway, theorists had seen protocol-like practices as something other than a regime of elite domination.

Consider, for instance, the 1975 collection *Resistance through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain,* edited by Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson. In its sequence of ethnographic reports on rebellious young people, conducted by colleagues at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, we see how dress, music, and language serve as signifiers of cultural production that both challenge and replenish the dominant society. These are protocols, too. The subcultures make societies of their own through them:

The new meanings emerge because the "bits" which had been borrowed or revived were brought together into a new and distinctive stylistic ensemble: but also because the symbolic objects — dress, appearance, language, ritual occasions, styles of interaction, music — were made to form a unity with the group's relations, situation, experiences: the crystallisation in an expressive form, which then defines the group's public identity.

More recently, Michael Warner invoked protocol in his understanding of counterpublics, which "are structured by different dispositions or protocols from those that obtain elsewhere in the culture." I also think of AbdouMaliq Simone's explorations of "rhythms of endurance" and "ensemble work" in the districts of Global South megacities in his book *Improvised Lives*.

When you start looking, protocols are everywhere. To lay my favorite definition on the table, they are simply *patterns of interaction*. There are further distinctions among protocols worth noticing and naming. But first we should appreciate what Internet standards and ancestral rituals have in common.

Regarding the question of eliteness, I turn to the Catholic priest and theorist of technology Ivan Illich. A central concept for him was the "vernacular," which appeared in its modern sense through the making of its opposite: the national languages of colonizing powers. He traced the rise of national language in the early days of reconquered Spain, when Columbus was sailing the ocean blue and Queen Isabella approved the making of the first grammar book of Castillian Spanish at the behest of humanist scholar Elio Antonio de Nebrija. Before that, at least in Europe, language was a matter of local autonomy, something a head of state would not dare to standardize. But in the business of empire building, such hesitations had to be shed. The official grammar provided a standard that could then be imposed upon the various natives soon claimed to be subject to the crown.

Language is a kind of protocol, a pattern of interaction, to be sure. It can be a matter of national

imposition, or it can be a vernacular. Many kinds of protocols are vernacular—as Illich put it, "home-bred, homemade, derived from the commons, and that a person could protect and defend though he neither bought nor sold it on the market." As much as some protocols may be elite concoctions, whether from the Queen of Spain or the Internet Engineering Task Force, we can also attend to vernacular ones through our study. They are patterns that people make by doing, as a way through their most ordinary and extraordinary lives.

Technological protocols can be vernacular, too. From local traditions of weaving or building construction, people have created and used tools around community-scaled practices. "Everyone designs," Sasha Costanza-Chock writes in her book *Design Justice,* "but only certain kinds of design work are acknowledged, valorized, remunerated, and credited." Today, there are communities building open-source software and hardware to serve their needs, along with protocols to connect their creations. But what most of us experience in our digital lives, day to day, are the industrial-scale systems designed to be universal and one-size-fits-all for the sake of profit.

Religion is as much a site of vernacular protocols as anywhere. Religion scholars have come to recognize that, alongside the mighty official religions, there is also what they have variously defined as "popular religion," "lived religion," and, yes, "vernacular religion." These are the practices and commitments that official religions claim dominion over but can never fully control—the mountain faith healer defying the notions of the city priest, the indigenous trickster disguised

in devotions as a pearly-white saint, the God of Brigadier General Harriet Tubman, known as Moses to the people she led through the wilderness with songs and starlight.

Let us give ourselves permission, then, to see the medium of protocol as something more than an elite emanation, something that many of us and our ancestors have been skilled at doing all along—and something we can study, critique, and honor, whoever we are and wherever we look.