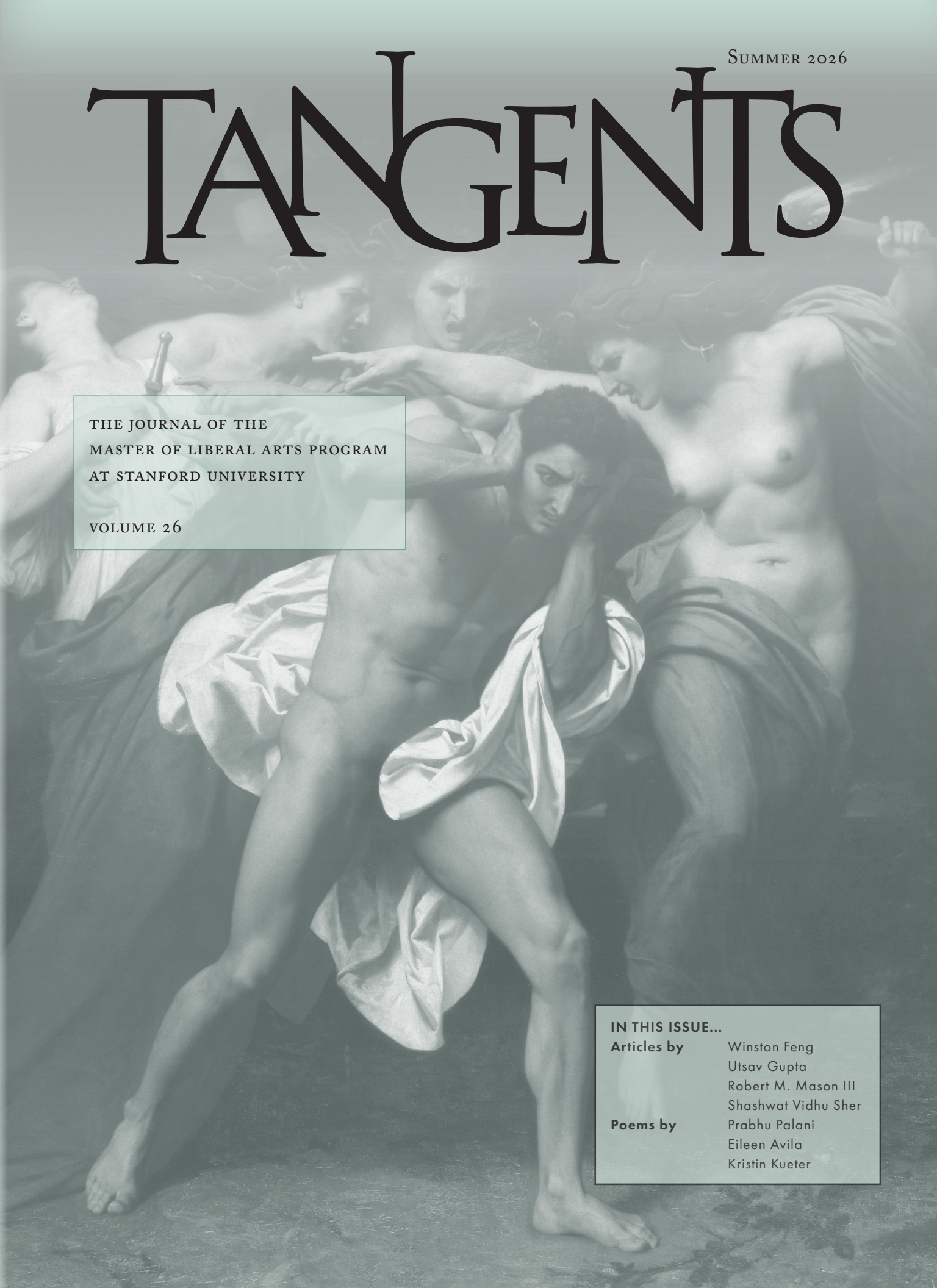


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TANGENTS



THE JOURNAL OF THE
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AT STANFORD UNIVERSITY

VOLUME 26

IN THIS ISSUE...

Articles by

Winston Feng
Utsav Gupta
Robert M. Mason III
Shashwat Vidhu Sher

Poems by

Prabhu Palani
Eileen Avila
Kristin Kuefer

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Editor

Kelly A. Harrison

Original Design

Suzanne West

Reviewers

Amy Harcourt

Astrid Schell

Demian Ford

Layout of Current Issue

Kelly A. Harrison

Faculty Advisor

Dr. Linda Paulson

CONTRIBUTIONS

Contributions to support the production of *Tangents* can be sent to the attention of

Dr. Linda Paulson

Stanford University

Margaret Jacks Hall

450 Jane Stanford Way, Building 460

Stanford, CA 94305

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The Resurrection

Divergent Furies in *The Oresteia* and *Inferno* and their Reflections on Punishment and Justice

Winston Feng

WE MAY HAVE TRADED ancient altars for modern tribunals, yet this article explores the literary legacy of the Furies—the snake-haired, blood-drinking Erinyes of Greek myth—remains a vital conduit to interrogate the nature of transgression and sin, justice and redemption in the dueling contexts of classical Greece and late medieval Italy. Far from being just mythological relics, their evolving portrayals across the centuries reflect our ongoing dialectical struggle to define whether true justice demands rehabilitative healing within the community or the permanent excommunication from without. In Aeschylus's *Oresteia*, these ancient goddesses function as the ecological imperative of retribution, a fluid dynamic force that must be politically assimilated to establish the civic order of Athens. In Canto IX of the *Inferno*, Dante Alighieri revives these same figures, recasting them into a paralyzing injunction to the unrepentant by stripping them of their potential for redemption, consistent with his vision of Christian theology. While both authors utilize these terrifying figures to demonstrate the moral mechanics of their respective universes, hanging their protagonists' emotional and spiritual journeys on a confrontation with these primal forces, they also shape the monsters to serve entirely different theological ends. Aeschylus deploys the Furies as a dynamic, evolving chorus whose physical hounding of social transgression necessitates the political invention of restorative civic justice, whereas Dante retrofits these same figures into static, psychological obstacles to reinforce a landscape of eternal contrapasso, demonstrating that his universe's divine justice demands the quarantining of unrepentant sin.

Aeschylus first uses the Furies to describe crime as a tangible, environmental contagion rather than a mere moral abstraction. In the Greek worldview of the *Oresteia*, committing matricide becomes a physical violation against the natural order, generating "miasma," a literal contaminating pollution. Aeschylus structures the Furies not merely as symbols of Orestes' guilt, but as the biological imperative of the Earth reacting to this spilled blood. When the Pythian priestess first discovers the Furies sleeping in the temple of Apollo, she describes them with visceral disgust, noting that "their eyes seep a repulsive, putrid pus" and "are wrapped in black dismal rags not fit for human sight" (54–55). By focusing on their physical repulsiveness and the fluid reality of their rot, Aeschylus embeds the concept of transgression into the physical environment—the Furies manifest disease. They operate on sensory instinct, claiming they track Orestes "like a wounded fawn, track the trace of a blood-splattered scent" (246–247). This acute, animalistic obsession with the physical residue of murder establishes a system where the guilty cannot be forgiven by divine decree; instead, the uneven weight on the scales of nature must be violently rebalanced. Aeschylus's Furies threaten that "Blood must pay for blood!" (264), enforcing a system of justice based on equivalent exchange: fluid for fluid, life for life.

Writing almost two millennia later (a gulf as wide as the ancient world and modern day), Dante structurally divorces the Furies from the physical tracking of blood to redefine sin as a

self-inflicted spiritual paralysis. When Dante the Pilgrim and Virgil approach the walls of the city of Dis, they are halted and notice that “in an instant, stood up three Furies of Hell, stained with blood” (IX. 37–38). While the physical description borrows the blood from Aeschylus, Dante strips the Furies of their predatory agency. They do not hunt the Pilgrim like they hunted Orestes; instead, they are locked in contrapasso—repetitive, physical reenactment of their own malicious nature—where “with her nails each was tearing at her breast” (IX.49), and turning the walls of Dis into a stage for eternal malice: “Let Medusa come, so we will turn him to concrete” (IX.52–53). By threatening the Pilgrim with the Gorgon’s petrifying gaze, Dante redefines the ultimate danger

of sin from a physical contagion (miasma) that pollutes the community to a hardening of the soul and self-mutilation—a sentencing so absolute that it renders the individual permanently incapable of receiving divine grace or progressing through hell towards eventual redemption. While Aeschylus’s Furies threaten to suck the blood from Orestes to balance an ancient natural ledger, Dante’s Furies threaten to turn the Pilgrim to stone, a metaphor for the permanent arrest of the soul’s journey to paradise and previews the fate of Canto X’s Epicurean heretics, whose denial of the soul’s immortality have damned them to eternal contrapasso in their sepulchers.

Because Aeschylus defines his foundational crime as a physical disruption of nature, he



John Singer Sargent
Orestes Pursued by the Furies

utilizes the Furies' pursuit to represent punishment as an active, contradictory, but ultimately productive process. Their punitive mechanism is vocal and psychological, manifesting in the "Spellbinding Song," with its "spellbinding minds, unstrung strains burning the brain" (332–333). This chorus acts as a psychological solvent, designed to erode the offender's sanity and physical health until the debt of blood is paid. Trapped between Apollo's divine command to avenge his father and the Furies' biological imperative to protect his mother being of "the same blood" (605), Orestes' exhaustion and the Furies' unyielding demands create an unsustainable friction resulting from competing obligations that the old laws cannot resolve. Aeschylus uses the torturous punishment inflicted by the Furies as the necessary catalyst for civic innovation.

Unlike the Aeschylean Furies, who direct their violence outward to balance the scales of nature, the Dantean Furies direct their violence inward as they tear themselves. This is vital for understanding Dante's conception of Hell: The punishment for the damned is the eternal, inescapable realization of their own corrupted nature. They do not pursue the guilty across the earth because, in Dante's Christian cosmos, the guilty have already condemned themselves. By designing the Furies as a static tableau of self-harm, Dante illustrates that for the unrepentant dead, infernal punishment is not a progressive process leading to civic or spiritual resolution but rather a permanent theatrical display of spiritual suicide where the soul is locked forever. However, Dante both contrasts this eternal stasis with the dynamic potential of the Pilgrim and at the same time severely restricts the possibility of redemption of the unrepentant. As a living sinner who is navigating through "a dark wood, for the straight way was lost," the Pilgrim possesses the opportunity to undertake a circuitous, dialectical journey through the layers and consequences of sin, resolving his spiritual contradictions through active repentance and the grace of God rather than physical vengeance. (I.2).

The divergence in these conceptions of justice reaches an apex in how the two epics resolve the conflict with these chthonic Furies. Aeschylus stages a resolution that is fundamentally political and democratic, suggesting that justice requires the integration of these man-eating monsters in the world of man. In the trial at the Areopagus, the Furies are not defeated in combat; they are persuaded in debate. Athena does not banish them but offers them a new role: "No house will prosper without your help" (895). She acknowledges that the "terror" they represent is necessary for the health of the



Dante's *Inferno*, Canto 9: Johannes Stradanus, 1587

state, for "the mortal who has no fear can never know Justice" (698). The transformation of the Erinyes (the Furies) into the Eumenides (the Kindly Ones) is the central interpretative thesis of the full play: true justice is not the elimination of vengeance or violent consequences but its sublimation into law and civil society. The Furies are clothed in "robes of honor steeped in crimson" (1028) and are led beneath the earth to become the guardians of Athens' fertility. The

organic, ecological imperative of blood-revenge is not denied but is opportunistically harnessed to power the machinery of justice and redemption as reinforced by the robes' color of blood.

In direct opposition to this Athenian model of integration, Dante uses the encounter at the gates of Dis to assert that divine justice for the unrepentant is defined by the absolute quarantine of sin. When the Furies block Dante and Virgil, there is no Areopagus, no tied jury, and no diplomatic negotiation. Virgil, representing human reason, is utterly powerless against the Furies' threat of Medusa; he covers Dante's eyes with his own hands, admitting the limits of classical philosophy in the face of absolute spiritual despair. The impasse is broken only by

cynical shadow over Athena's "Kindly Ones." If we accept the Dantean view that the essence of the Furies is defined by an eternal self-mutilation and spiritual paralysis, then Athena's compromise looks less like a resolution and more like a temporary suppression. When Aeschylus's Furies agree to go underground, claiming they "accept a home in the land of Pallas" (916), the Dantean reader wonders how long the "green water snakes" will remain dormant beneath the city in service of the polis. Dante warns that the monstrous cannot be truly civilized, only contained by superior force as represented by the heavenly messenger. Thus, for the Pilgrim, the stakes at these gates are absolute: failing to pass through means suffering the permanent

**This is vital for understanding Dante's conception of Hell:
The punishment for the damned is the eternal, inescapable
realization of their own corrupted nature.**

the arrival of a heavenly messenger, who walks across the river Styx and dismisses the Furies by waving the "greasy" air from his face as if swatting away an annoyance. The divine messenger does not debate them; he merely opens the gates with a touch of his wand and rebukes them as "despised people" (IX.91). This descriptive choice strips the Furies of the majestic, terrifying sovereignty they possess in Aeschylus. Dante uses the heavenly messenger as a device to demonstrate the Christian justice that comes from above does not assimilate or reform sin; it dismisses and excludes it. The Furies are left behind on the burning walls, segregated from the order of grace because divine justice demands the eternal separation of the damned from the blessed.

When read in tight dialogue, the two works expose the philosophical vulnerabilities in each other's moral architecture. Reading *The Oresteia* through the lens of *Inferno* reveals the precarity of the Athenian solution. Dante's depiction of the Furies as immutable agents of malice casts a

arrest of his soul's journey, petrified alongside the eternally damned. If Dante applies this more absolute spiritual criteria to *Oresteia*, he would likely interpret Orestes' resolution via the intervention of Apollo and Athena as inauthentic redemption and an artificial evasion of the soul's unrepentant state. Where Dante's universe demands the non-negotiable intervention of heavenly grace as represented by the messenger to be rescued from the Furies and their Gorgon, Aeschylus seemingly relies on a reasoning based quasi-religious-political bargain. By freezing the Furies in their rage, "ill in not avenging on Theseus his attack" (IX.54), Dante suggests that the Aeschylean project of civic harmony without genuine divine redemption is a lost cause, that the primitive blood justice can never truly be dressed in the robes of a citizen.

If we reverse the process and read *Inferno* through the lens of *The Oresteia* we expose the tragedy and absolutism of Dante's moral universe that traps even the most noble pre-

Christian characters in the “Limbo” layer of Dante’s Hell. While Aeschylus shows us that even the Furies are capable of redemption by harnessing their violent unsociable instincts to harmonize society’s rule of law, an arc that moves from darkness of taking life to light of preserving life, when we encounter Dante’s Furies frozen on the walls of Dis, our Aeschylean memory recognizes them as beings who have been denied their potential for absolution in the afterlife. The tragedy of Dante’s Hell is that it is a universe utterly devoid of an Areopagus, no trial, no civic process to broker a compromise that might turn these screaming monsters into protectors of life. By freezing the Furies in their most primitive, reactive state, Dante underscores the defining characteristic of his Hell: the total, irreversible absence of growth. The “Kindly Ones” are impossible in Hell because Hell is the place where growth ceases. Aeschylus shows us what the Furies *could* be if integrated with reason; Dante shows us the agonizing reality of a justice that defines itself entirely by eternal repetitive punishment.

As invited by Dante to “gaze on the teaching that is hidden beneath the veil of the strange verses,” he explicitly warns the reader against a superficial reading of the Furies to avoid intellectual calcification as Virgil shields the Pilgrim from physical and spiritual petrification by the Gorgon (IX.61–63). As in Christian allegory, once this veil is lifted to reveal the theological teachings behind it, we see that the treatment of the Furies offers insights into how Aeschylus and Dante separately mapped the topography of transgression and redemption in their respective world views. Aeschylus’s Furies lead to politics of inclusion, where the ancient things are redeemed because the polis cannot thrive without the primal energy they provide. Fluid, organic descriptions of the Furies support his vision of nuanced civic justice to rectify crime as a social rupture, acknowledg-

ing that the clean, rational law of Apollo needs the dark, emotional terror of the Furies to serve as an effective deterrent to future transgressions. Dante, writing for a cosmos governed by divine order, casts the Furies as a warning that unrepentant souls are incompatible with the light and must be left behind at the gate. These differences also illuminate how the respective protagonists overcome these Furies—while Orestes resolves his crisis by changing the world around him through divine coalition building and civic assimilation of the Furies, the Pilgrim resolves his by reforming himself, using the unrepentant Furies and other characters trapped in Hell’s eternal contrapasso as a forewarning for his own potential spiritual damnation to spur repentance as a living sinner. Whether we view the Furies in the *Oresteia* and *Inferno* as potential citizens or eternal exiles helps define the very nature of justice as a civil process of integration or a divine decree of separation of the “saved” from the “damned,” reflecting their respective authors’ understanding of the human condition.



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Winston Feng is a first-year candidate in Stanford University’s Master of Liberal Arts program and a lifelong reader of history and science fiction. He holds a Bachelor of Science degree from Cornell University. Prior to his current graduate studies, Winston built a career in international finance, investing, and development, which included serving in the American Chamber of Commerce in Asia.

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The Body Interpreted by Others

The Reversal of Who Reads Whom in Euripides' *The Bacchae* and Cabeza de Vaca's *Adventures in the Unknown Interior of America*

Utsav Gupta

IN EURIPIDES' *THE BACCHAE*¹ and Cabeza de Vaca's *Adventures in the Unknown Interior of America*², two very different men—an ancient Greek king in Euripides' tragedy and a real Spanish conquistador whose *Adventures* is his nonfiction account of survival—begin their narratives insulated by what they take to be the unassailable markers of their authority. King Pentheus relies on palaces, iron cages, and martial command to police the boundaries of his city, while Cabeza de Vaca arrives in the Americas³ armored, armed, and backed by the might of Spanish armaments and the authority of the Spanish crown. Yet in both narratives, these would-be masters are violently stripped of their external armor. Whether through Dionysus's divine earthquake or a shipwreck in the Gulf of Mexico, the would-be ruler is reduced to naked flesh and forced to participate in the very bodily practices of the orders he had sought to dominate, whether ecstatic ritual or manual labor.

In both texts, this physical collapse leads to a reversal of who reads whom: the master loses the power to classify the world and instead becomes the body interpreted by others within the narrative, by the very people and powers he had once classified. In these narratives, the ability to rule depends on keeping the ruler's body insulated from exposure, handling, and reinterpretation; this ability to rule functions as a social machinery that decides what bodies



Personification of America

1. Euripides. *Bacchae*. Translated by Paul Woodruff, Hackett Publishing Company, 1999.

2. Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, Álvar. *Cabeza de Vaca's Adventures in the Unknown Interior of America*. Translated by Cyclone Covey, University of New Mexico Press, 1997.

3. Image from The Metropolitan Museum of Art: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/202461>. *Personification of America*. As the Met's catalog explains, Renaissance Europeans divided the world into four continents, and each figure in this set of plaquettes (60.70.1-.4) personifies one of them. Europe is given the attributes of empire, military power, and the arts, while Africa, America, and Asia are represented by the luxury goods Europeans coveted. Far from accurate portraits, the plaquettes reinforced a fiction of European superiority over other peoples and cultures. This image is used here because it enacts a central theme of the article: the European sovereign's assumption that foreign bodies and lands exist to be read, classified, and consumed. The plaquette reduces an entire continent to a single decorative figure whose "attributes" serve European desire. This is the posture of mastery that both Pentheus and Cabeza de Vaca begin with, and that both narratives violently dismantle.

mean and what can be done to them. When the infrastructure sustaining that machinery fails, authority does not disappear—it migrates into the systems that can now read and govern their flesh, whether Dionysus’s ritual order or Indigenous networks of exchange and healing. To trace this collapse, this article tracks the male protagonist from his initial posture of mastery through the violent stripping of his status to his forced entry into the physical practices of the new order that finally rewrites him, remaking what his body is permitted to mean and, with it, who he is allowed to be. The two subjects emerge from that rewriting to opposite fates: Pentheus is destroyed, while Cabeza de Vaca is altered but survives. Read together, the two texts say something about power itself. A ruler’s power over other bodies is only borrowed from the structures that keep his own flesh untouchable, and it lasts only as long as those structures hold.

This insulation takes concrete form early in each narrative. Each man’s authority depends on structures that protect his own physical body (his literal flesh, as distinct from the political “body” of his rule) while exposing his subjects’ bodies to confinement and punishment. For King Pentheus, this insulation is enforced through a rigid policing of boundaries: between the civilized city and the wild mountain, and between ordered masculine rationality and feared feminine excess. In Euripides’ *Thebes*, Pentheus equates kingship with masculine reason and order, while Dionysus’s cult, which draws the city’s women out of their homes and onto the mountains in ecstatic rites, embodies the feminine excess he is determined to suppress. King Pentheus polices the city by classifying the Bacchantes as criminals and Dionysus’s cult (“this Bacchism”) as a punishable body whose adherents’ flesh the state may freely seize and chain. “Those I’ve captured are chained by the hand,” he boasts, promising that for the rest, “I’ll catch them all in iron cages! I’ll put a stop, / right now, to this dirty business, this Bacchism” (Euripides 226–32). Dionysus has come to Thebes disguised as a long-haired mortal stranger and priest of his own cult; not recognizing the god behind the disguise, Pentheus issues a violent decree against this stranger’s body, sneering at his “long blond curls” (235) and boasting that he will have the stranger’s head cut from his shoulders (240–41). In making these threats, Pentheus asserts physical violence that he believes is guaranteed by his crown; by reducing his subjects to captive hands and severed heads, he attempts to prove that while they are vulnerable flesh, his own physical body remains the untouchable center of the city. This is sovereign entitlement in its starkest form: Pentheus assumes that his own body is exempt from the very violence he authorizes against everyone else’s bodies.



Cabeza de Vaca

A parallel assumption of imperial entitlement anchors the beginning of Cabeza de Vaca’s narrative. The Spanish conquistadors arrive in the Americas armored and armed, operating under the legal and theological mandate of European superiority. Cabeza de Vaca (a Spanish official, the royal treasurer of a Crown-chartered expedition rather than a king in his own right) establishes this posture of mastery from the opening lines, addressing the Spanish king directly as “Your Majesty” and recalling that the expedition was “authorized and commanded by Your Majesty to conquer and govern the provinces” (27). Here, Spanish sovereignty functions as a bureaucratic mandate that precedes

physical reality; the Spaniards arrive believing that the distant monarch's written decree inherently subjects the Americas to their will, granting them unquestioned authority over foreign bodies and spaces. Upon landing in Florida, their immediate response to the new environment is one of dominance: "the Governor raised flags and took possession of the country in Your Majesty's name, exhibiting his credentials" (31). This taking possession is the colonial equivalent of Pentheus's iron cages; both are confident attempts to impose their respective systems for ordering what they see as a wild and chaotic world, converting land and peoples into ordered, controllable imperial objects. Marching inland burdened by the "weight of their armor," the Spaniards anticipate "an immediate end of [their] hardships" through the "assurance of plentiful gold and food" (38), and this expectation reveals sovereignty in its most presumptuous form: the belief that a foreign landscape is legally bound to sustain the conqueror's body.

Because this power is illusory, hegemony cannot survive direct confrontation with forces that refuse to recognize it. For the Spanish expeditionary force, this dismantling is terrifyingly literal. Their assumed imperial entitlement is entirely washed away by the storms of the Gulf of Mexico. After hunger and repeated attacks destroy the expedition, Cabeza de Vaca and his men attempt to flee the continent in makeshift barges, only to be wrecked and cast ashore on the Island of Doom (identified as Galveston Island) (60). The capsizing of the boats violently strips them of the last vestiges of European technology, clothing, and status; as Cabeza de Vaca recounts, the survivors "escaped as naked as they were born, with the loss of everything [they] had" (57).⁴ The conquistador's body is

reduced to frail, shivering flesh.⁵ Stripped of the capacity to extract or command, the Spaniards' survival hinges on absolute dependence on the local Capoque and Han peoples (63). The former hegemon is reduced to being a captive who performs agonizing physical labor; Cabeza de Vaca describes how he had to "grub roots in

The two subjects emerge from that rewriting to opposite fates:

Pentheus is destroyed, while Cabeza de Vaca is altered but survives. Read together, the two texts say something about power itself.

the water" until his "fingers got so raw that if a straw touched them they would bleed" (66). This bleeding, exposed flesh inverts his initial imperial posture entirely. The conquistador body, once encased in steel and expecting the land to effortlessly yield its riches, is now torn open by the very environment he sought to command, forced into painful, reciprocal labor to stay alive.

Whereas an unpredictable storm on the Gulf of Mexico reduces Cabeza de Vaca's authority through indifferent physical destruction, in *The Bacchae* Dionysus deliberately orchestrates the same type of collapse but on a different register. Pentheus's dismantling is structural and psychological, targeting the architecture of the state and the king's rational self-mastery. This systematic dismantling begins with the

4. The inversion of the conquistador's bodily posture is perhaps best illustrated by the immediate reaction of the Capoque and Han peoples. Expecting to command fear and extract tribute, the naked Spaniards instead elicit pity. Cabeza de Vaca recalls that upon seeing their pathetic physical state, the Indigenous people "sat down and lamented for half an hour so loudly they could have been heard a long way off" (57). The imperial sovereign is thus rewritten into an object of communal mourning.

5. The depth of this physical collapse is further illustrated by the Spaniards who, driven to starvation, resorted to cannibalism. Cabeza de Vaca notes that "[t]he Indians were so shocked at this cannibalism that, if they had seen it sometime earlier, they surely would have killed every one of us" (60). The armored conquerors arrived classifying Indigenous bodies as "savage," yet stripped of imperial infrastructure, the European body consumed itself—and it was the Indigenous groups who now possessed the interpretive authority to classify European behavior as monstrous.

king's inability to physically contain Dionysus, who effortlessly escapes the prison, rendering Pentheus's previously boasted "iron cages" useless. The king's apparatus of physical control is then shattered during the "palace miracle," when Dionysus creates an earthquake to tear down the physical structures of Pentheus's power. The chorus of Asian Bacchants watches in awe as the "stone crosspieces" slide "off the columns" and the sovereign's fortress collapses (591–92). Having dismantled the king's physical defenses, Dionysus then strips Pentheus of his psychological sovereignty by exploiting the king's barely concealed fascination with what he claims to condemn, asking smoothly, "Would you like to see the women gathered on the mountain?" (811). Pentheus's immediate, eager 'Yes' marks the end of his rational command. In that moment of consent, the king's authority passes entirely to the god.⁶ In both texts, the forcible removal of the rulers' armor, whether it be steel and ships or palaces and masculine rationality, leaves them exposed, signaling their inevitable submission to their respective material conditions.

For Pentheus, this submission begins as a grotesque parody of ritual initiation. Desperate to fulfill his desire to surveil the women on the mountain, he is hypnotized by Dionysus into abandoning his military armor and donning the floor-length woman's robe the Greeks called a *stolê*.⁷ Dionysus dresses him in a "spotted fawnskin," a "wig with long hair," and a full-length "linen dress" (821–35), the *stolê* itself. By putting on the dress, Pentheus does not merely adopt a disguise; he makes himself into the very figure of "feminine excess" he had previously sought to criminalize. As Dionysus reaches out to adjust a stray curl slipping from the king's new headband, Pentheus yields his

body to the god's touch, stating, "You arrange it. I'm in your hands" (933–34). Far from a simple metaphor for defeat, this moment enacts a physical irony: the same sovereign who once boasted of keeping his subjects "chained by the hand" and sneered at the stranger's "long blond curls" now freely offers his own head and hair to be handled by the very body he had previously threatened.

Pentheus's submission to Dionysus leads directly to the reversal of the sovereign gaze. On Mount Kithairôn, Pentheus sits atop a towering fir tree where Dionysus has placed him, the unseen spectator. But the god calls out to the Bacchants, instantly transforming the hidden spectator into the spectacular center of the ritual: the sacrificial victim. A messenger who witnessed the killing reports that "they saw him, better than he saw the [Bacchants]" (1075). Because he had read the Bacchants as criminal flesh to be caged and dismembered, he is now read in return, not as a king but as prey. His mother, Agavê, perceiving him as a lion's cub, acts as the ritual's "priestess" and leads the dismemberment, "[g]rabbing his left wrist, [...she] tore off his shoulder" (1125–27).⁸ His dismemberment is the consequence: Once interpretive authority passes to the Bacchants, the sovereign's body is theirs to read—and their reading tears it apart.

Whereas Pentheus is destroyed the moment interpretive authority passes to others, Cabeza de Vaca's survival relies on a successful, albeit forced, adaptation to his new bodily vulnerability. Stripped of his imperial authority, his survival depends on becoming economically useful to the Indigenous networks. To escape the agonizing physical subjection as a slave, he must abandon the posture of a conqueror and adopt the role of an itinerant "neutral merchant"

6. As translator Paul Woodruff notes, the plot of the play deeply "mirrors initiation ritual, although it is initiation gone wildly outside the norms of religion" (xiii). In Dionysian cults, "votaries had to lose their wits through initiation in order to gain a properly reverent soundness of mind" (xiii). Pentheus's psychological dismantling is therefore not just a punishment, but a dark parody of this initiatory requirement.

7. Woodruff notes, Dionysus's manipulation of Pentheus relies heavily on the ambiguity of the Greek word *stolê*, which can mean either a woman's "outfit" or military "equipment for an expedition." See Woodruff's note to lines 788–846 (70–71).

8. The specific mechanics of Pentheus's dismemberment represent the physical irony of his initial sovereign decrees. Before meeting Dionysus, the king boasted that he would restore order by having "his head cut from his shoulders" (241). In the ritual's climax, the power of decapitation is turned against the state itself: Agavê impales her own son's severed head upon her thyrsus, proudly parading the dismantled epicenter of civic authority as a hunting trophy.



Pentheus torn apart by Agavê and Ino. Artist unknown.
5th century BCE

(66). In doing so, he transforms his vulnerable “stranger” status into an advantage. Because his bare flesh marked him as an outsider unaligned with local factions, he could safely cross contested borders that the armed Indigenous warriors could not. The tribes recognized his neutrality and allowed him to go “into the interior as far as [he] pleased,” overcoming the “incessant hostilities [that] made it impossible for them to travel cross-country” (66). He learns to traverse the land not by demanding submission, but by providing value, turning his own body into a laboring vehicle of trade by physically carrying “cones and other pieces of sea-snail” inland and bringing back “skins, red ochre...hard canes for arrows” (66–67). He discovers that survival requires being readable within another’s social world: “Wherever I went, the Indians treated me honorably and gave me food, because they liked my commodities” (67). Survival, he learns, depends on making his body legible to the Indigenous networks, readable to them as a useful, neutral trader instead

of a hostile invader, so that he secures his place through labor and exchange rather than imperial demand.

Beyond economic utility, Cabeza de Vaca’s integration into these networks demands an even deeper level of bodily performance: the physical intimacy of healing. The Indigenous groups compel the Spaniards to become medicine men, enforcing this new role by withholding food until they comply. Cabeza de Vaca adopts a hybrid healing ritual, learning that power in these communities is derived not from royal decree, but from communal trust and the physical exchange of breath and touch. He writes, “Our method, however, was to bless the sick, breathe upon them, recite a *Pater noster* and *Ave Maria*, and pray earnestly” (64).⁹ Through this bodily performance, the Spaniards regain a form of authority, but one contingent on Indigenous recognition. Cabeza de Vaca reports that the communities develop such “[c]onfidence in our ministrations” that they believe “none could die while we remained among them” (89). By

9. Cabeza de Vaca’s healing technique was a deliberate hybrid of physical and spiritual practices. He notes that the Indigenous method of cure was “to blow on the sick, the breath and the laying-on of hands supposedly casting out the infirmity” (64). The Spaniards adopted this bodily posture—the breath and the touch—but overlaid it with Catholic prayers, illustrating how European religious authority could only function when performed through Indigenous bodily practices.

becoming a healer, he secures immense local power, yet it is a power rooted firmly in the vulnerability of his own flesh: he commands no army and owns nothing, working and starving alongside those he treats, and his standing lasts only as long as the sick keep believing in him. This reciprocal dependence replaces the delusion of empire with the reality of mutual need.

The climax of Cabeza de Vaca's physical and cultural transformation arrives at the exact moment his new bodily identity collides with his old imperial one, when he is reunited with Captain Diego de Alcaraz's mounted Spanish slavers. When the slavers attempt to seize his Indigenous escorts as slaves, those escorts explicitly refuse to believe that Cabeza de Vaca and the conquerors are the same kind of men. They contrast the Spaniards through their practices, arguing: "we healed the sick, they killed the sound; we came naked and barefoot, they clothed, horsed, and lanced" (128). This stark division turns Cabeza de Vaca's body into a contested site between two different systems of meaning, each reading his bare flesh in fundamentally opposed ways. The dispute has shifted from territory to interpretation; what is at stake is who holds the power to say what his body means, and for the first time two orders openly contest the right to read it.

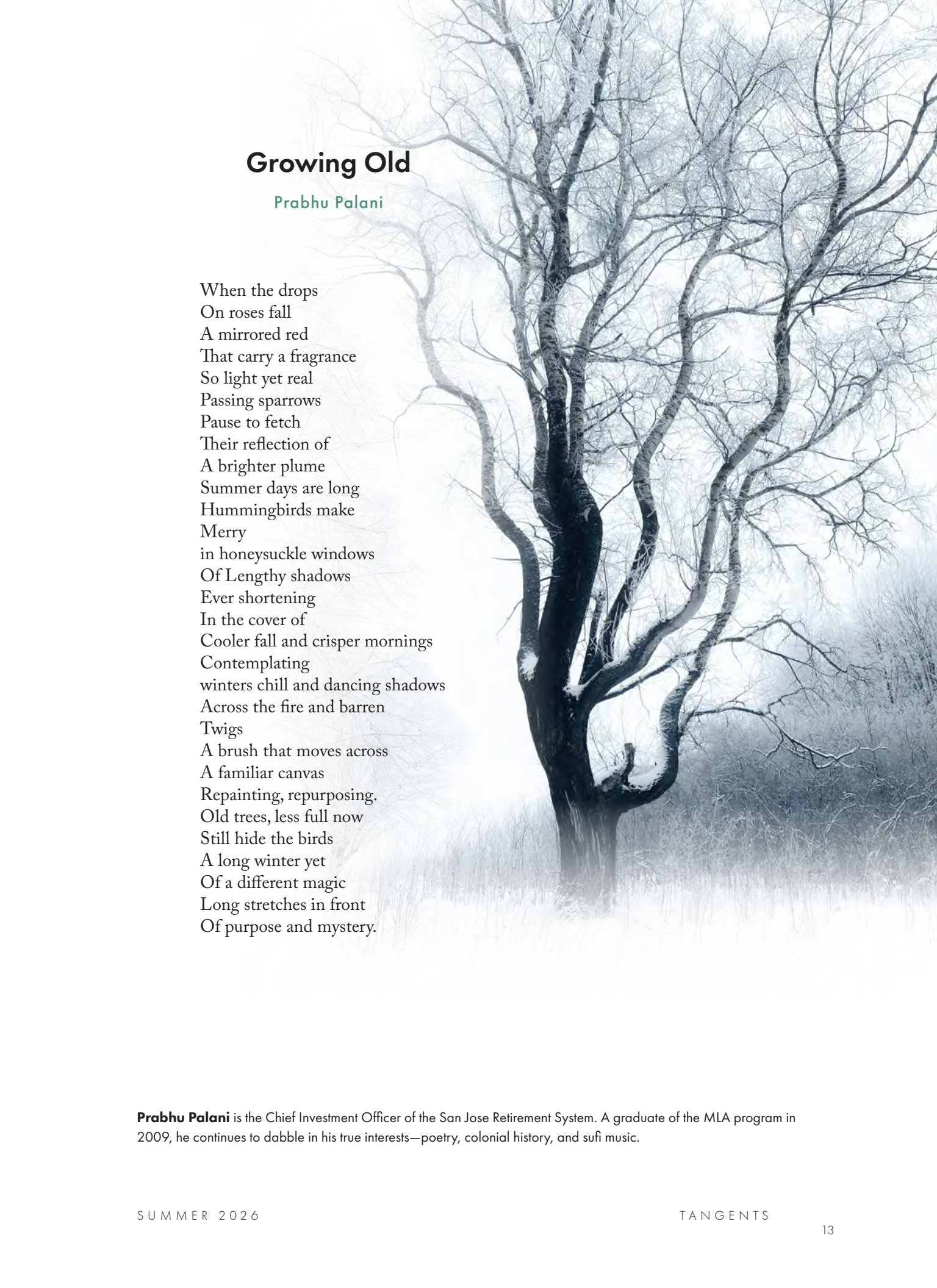
This clash over how to read the captive body exposes the fundamental difference between the two former sovereigns' fates. Pentheus is wholly integrated into the Dionysian order, but only by being consumed by it. His mind is hijacked and his body is read as a sacrificial beast, physically destroyed by the very subjects he once sought to exclude and police. Cabeza de Vaca, conversely, survives because he successfully adapts into the Indigenous system of care and exchange, yet his integration merely suspends his imperial identity, allowing him to reconstitute it later through a new rhetoric of moral distinction. He learns that vulnerability itself can be a tool of control, arguing that "to bring all these people to Christianity and subjection to Your Imperial Majesty, they must be won by kindness, the only certain way" (123). In his written

Relación he translates this naked survival back into an asset of empire. By writing his story for the king, he converts his bodily suffering into a new imperial credential.

What both narratives finally reveal is that the body is never sovereign in itself. Pentheus's flesh commands only so long as palaces, iron cages, and the monopoly on violence hold; Cabeza de Vaca's commands only so long as armor, ships, and the royal mandate endure. When that infrastructure collapses, the body does not become free—it becomes available. Other systems move in to handle, discipline, and make use of the exposed flesh. Dionysus's ritual order needs a sacrifice: Pentheus is dressed, displayed, and torn apart, his body fully incorporated through its own destruction. The Indigenous networks need a living, laboring body: Cabeza de Vaca is put to work as merchant and healer, incorporated through coerced but sustaining physical service. The difference between dissolution and survival is not a difference in the body itself, but in what the reigning order demands of it. In neither case does the man escape being the body interpreted by others. Pentheus remains there irreversibly. Cabeza de Vaca regains a measure of agency, but only by making his flesh permanently legible—first to the Indigenous communities who kept him alive, then to the crown he serves by converting that survival into imperial knowledge. To be a body in these texts is to be always already subject to interpretation. Sovereignty does not exempt the ruler from that condition; it only determines, for a time, who controls the terms.

UTSAV GUPTA is Founder and Co-CEO of Filarion, building in spatial computing, educational technology, and legal tools. At Stanford, he co-leads HAI's Cognitive Security Task Force and the Science Policy Group's AI Working Group. His ICML 2026 paper argues machine learning research needs to think about human purpose. Utsav serves as Commissioner on the Palo Alto Utilities Advisory Commission and writes for *The Stanford Daily*. Utsav received degrees in Bioengineering and Political Science from the University of California, San Diego, his Juris Doctor from Georgetown University Law Center, and is an MLA candidate at Stanford.

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Growing Old

Prabhu Palani

When the drops
On roses fall
A mirrored red
That carry a fragrance
So light yet real
Passing sparrows
Pause to fetch
Their reflection of
A brighter plume
Summer days are long
Hummingbirds make
Merry
in honeysuckle windows
Of Lengthy shadows
Ever shortening
In the cover of
Cooler fall and crisper mornings
Contemplating
winters chill and dancing shadows
Across the fire and barren
Twigs
A brush that moves across
A familiar canvas
Repainting, repurposing.
Old trees, less full now
Still hide the birds
A long winter yet
Of a different magic
Long stretches in front
Of purpose and mystery.

Prabhu Palani is the Chief Investment Officer of the San Jose Retirement System. A graduate of the MLA program in 2009, he continues to dabble in his true interests—poetry, colonial history, and sufi music.

Understanding Jim: What Students Can Learn from a Comparative Study of Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and Percival Everett's *James*

Robert M. Mason III

Language is our place of safety, [...] "Language is what keeps us free. If we can't communicate with each other, if we can't impart ideas, then we might as well give up."

—Percival Everett¹

American schools are finding it increasingly difficult to teach the history of our country, which must include African American history and its racial legacy, because these subjects are invariably linked. Efforts are underway by private organizations,² local school boards,³ elected state and local officials,⁴ and even the federal government⁵ to not only prohibit teachers from requiring students to read books that discuss sexuality or race,⁶ but also prevent schools from implementing Diversity, Equity & Inclusion programs designed to make schools more welcoming to a diverse group of students.⁷ Proponents of such bans assert that they are motivated by the students' best interests, reasoning that requiring students to learn about America's history of condoning and enforcing slavery, or even considering race in nearly any context, is a divisive subject⁸ that makes white students feel ashamed for being the potential descendants of the oppressors of enslaved people, and makes African American students feel hopeless for being the potential descendants of a class of victims.⁹ Because of the current directives emanating from the White House forbidding the mention of race in history and literature classes,¹⁰ schools that do not adjust their curricula and operating structure to minimize, if not eliminate, the consideration of race risk the prospect of losing federal funding¹¹ or being forced to defend themselves in litigation instigated by private citizens,¹² state attorneys general,¹³ and the justice branch of the federal government.¹⁴

But we do students a disservice if we shield students from uncomfortable historical truths because, in doing so, we may impede their development of useful analytical and social skills. This is especially true when we attempt to conceal from them aspects of this country's history as something best left in the past because, as author James Baldwin noted, "history is not the past. It is the present. We carry our history with us. We are our History."¹⁵ In other words, to deny unsettling aspects of our nation's history is to deny a part of who we are as Americans. Moreover, to deny our past leaves a void that prevents students from understanding how our laws and customs were created and evolved, and how our current behavioral patterns are informed by prior events.

There is empirical evidence that students learn more successfully and with increased cognitive ability when they confront ideas outside of their comfort zones while being stewarded in a nurturing teaching environment.¹⁶ Exposing students to differing ideas can have the added benefit of enabling them to develop resilience in social settings through their ability to use the critical thinking process to challenge and analyze literary works that address potentially disturbing subject

matters.¹⁷ Thus, rather than ban their exposure to such objectionable literature, students should be encouraged to read and understand such novels through historical contextualization and by studying them in an interdisciplinary manner.

A novel that students might garner added appreciation for and find less objectionable if it were taught in this holistic fashion is Mark Twain's picaresque novel, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (hereinafter cited as *Huck Finn*).¹⁸ With *Huck Finn*, Twain conveys a message for adult readers through a teenage boy's adventure story about the perils of being an enslaved person, and how Huck and his partner in mischief and adventure, Tom Sawyer, endeavor to secure Jim's freedom. By becoming better people for their efforts, *Huck Finn*'s subtly instructive message is that white Americans can overcome their prejudices and learn to treat African Americans with equal respect. *Huck Finn*'s message continues to resonate with readers to this day, with the novel enjoying worldwide sales of more than 20 million copies since its initial publication and being translated worldwide into fifty languages.¹⁹

But a novel that can entertain so beautifully can also cause unintended harm to generations of readers. When the author uses language that readers might find offensive, or instills a character of color with both positive attributes and harmful stereotypes (i.e., descriptive characteristics that might be based on a grain of truth but are distorted negatively and then applied to an entire class of people),²⁰ the offensive language and stereotypes can overshadow the joy that a novel can convey, especially when those stereotypes are not properly contextualized for the reader.²¹ There is a wealth of scholarship that has documented the negative mental

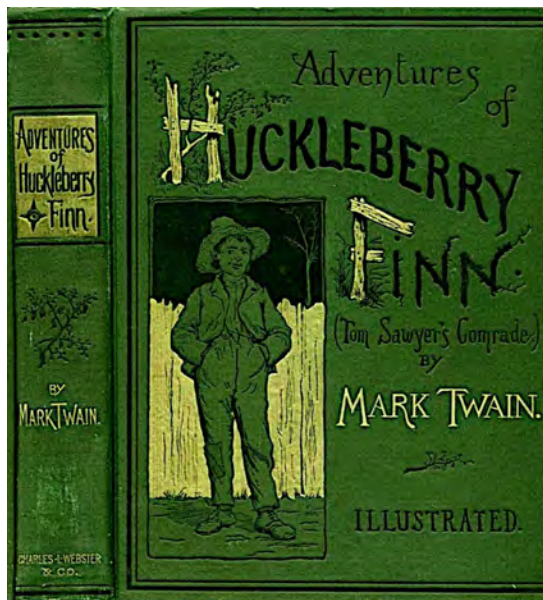
and physical impacts on African Americans from repeated exposure to stereotypes.²² Thus, a novel such as *Huck Finn* cannot be appreciated without acknowledging and addressing how the stereotypical portrayal of Jim, even if historically accurate, is impacting students.

The need for historical contextualization is warranted on account of the dual way in which Twain portrays Jim. On the positive side, despite the apparent lack of a formal education, Jim possesses common sense that he uses as a survival mechanism to escape capture by the slave hunters.²³ Jim is also aware of home remedies he uses to heal himself after being bitten by a poisonous snake.²⁴ Next, the reader learns that Jim is selfless and risks his own safety to help the doctor tend to Tom Sawyer, an act that the doctor finds admirable: "Don't be no rougher on him than you're obleeged to, because he ain't a bad nigger. When I got to where I found the boy, I see I couldn't cut the bullet out without some help. ...[O]ut crawls this nigger from somewhere, and says he'll help, and he done it, too, and done it very well."²⁵ Even during a time when enslaved people had little to no rights, Jim aspires to be set free and reunited with his family: "Jim talked out loud all the time while I was talking to myself. He was saying how the first thing he would do when he got to a free State he would go to saving up money and never spend a single cent, and when he got enough

Illustration by E.W. Kemble,
from the first edition of
Adventures of Huckleberry Finn.



IN THE CAVE.



The cover of the first edition of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

he would buy his wife[.]”²⁶ Finally, and perhaps most poignantly, Jim speaks with heartbreaking remorse over how he mistreated his daughter, whom he did not realize was rendered deaf due to exposure to Scarlett Fever: “Oh, she was plumb dee fen dumb, Huck, plumb dee fen dumb—en I’d ben a-treat’n her so!”²⁷ Viewed collectively, Jim displays laudable qualities such as common sense, resourcefulness, ingenuity, charitableness, and parental love.

But Twain also imbues Jim with less laudable qualities. First, Jim consents to being treated inhumanely. When Jim is imprisoned on the Phelps’ property, Huck and Tom fill his hut with spiders, snakes, and rats and instruct Jim to play his “jews-harp” to soothe and to train them.²⁸ Jim initially refuses but eventually agrees to the request, not understanding the rationale behind it: “Blest if I kin see de pint. But I’ll do it ef I got to.”²⁹ In subjecting Jim to such an indignity, Twain leaves some readers perplexed why an adult with common sense would allow children to expose him to physical danger. Second, although he desires freedom, Jim lacks the initiative to achieve it. Instead, he is dependent on the pluckiness and ingenuity of a child to secure his freedom: “Pooty soon I’ll be a-shout’n for joy, en I’ll say, it’s all on accounts o’ Huck; I’s a free man, en I couldn’t ever ben free ef it hadn’ ben for Huck; Huck done it.”³⁰ Because he is an enslaved person, Jim appears to have little dignity, and he is

beholden to others to gain his freedom; these positions can be problematic for students to empathize with.

These negative qualities in Jim’s characterization, unfortunately, can be the lasting take-aways for some readers of *Huck Finn*,³¹ which may help explain why *Huck Finn* remains an objectionable piece of fiction for some students, parents, and educators to study.³² For example, Julius Lester, an author and academic who taught for 32 years at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, wrote that *Huck Finn* “demeans blacks and insults history” by presenting the readers with a picture “of the only kind of black that whites have ever truly liked—faithful, tending sick whites, not speaking, not causing trouble, and totally passive.”³³ Lester also supported the banning of *Huck Finn* to protect African American students from exposure: “I am grateful that among the many indignities inflicted on me in childhood, I escaped Huckleberry Finn. As a black parent, however, I sympathize with those who want the book banned, or at least removed from required reading lists in schools.”³⁴ Because of such negative reactions and fear that future students will be similarly emotionally scarred, the American Library Association notes that *Huck Finn* was the fourth most banned and challenged book in the 1990s³⁵ and the 16th most banned and challenged book of the decade 2000–2009.³⁶

Since its publication, *Huck Finn* has been subject to scrutiny by a wider range of scholars and parents from diverse racial backgrounds and perspectives about accurate representations of African American characters in novels that may differ from those of Twain’s nineteenth-century white readers and critics.³⁷ To minimize potential future objections and challenges to *Huck Finn* remaining on school reading lists, teachers should engage in preemptive measures by providing students with a historical perspective of nineteenth-century life for African Americans. Before reading *Huck Finn*, students should learn that at the time of its publication,

the general reading public may not have had the impression that the novel was presenting Jim in a negative light. Reviews of the novel were positive, as critics praised Twain, in part, for his portrayal of Jim. A review in the New York Sun in 1885 called Jim “a simple-minded, bighearted darky.”³⁸ Another critic from the Saturday Review in 1888 had a similar reaction to Twain’s characterization of Jim, calling him “the essential simplicity and kindness and generosity of the Southern negro.”³⁹ As part of this prefatory lesson, students should be instructed that while white critics at the time, perhaps influenced by their learned biases toward African Americans as inherently inferior, saw no offense in the way Jim was depicted, future critics of various races had a more negative impression of Jim, likening his characterization to that of the “coon,” a derogatory reference to African Americans as buffoonish, lazy, inept, and without the ability to engage in either serious thought or speech.⁴⁰

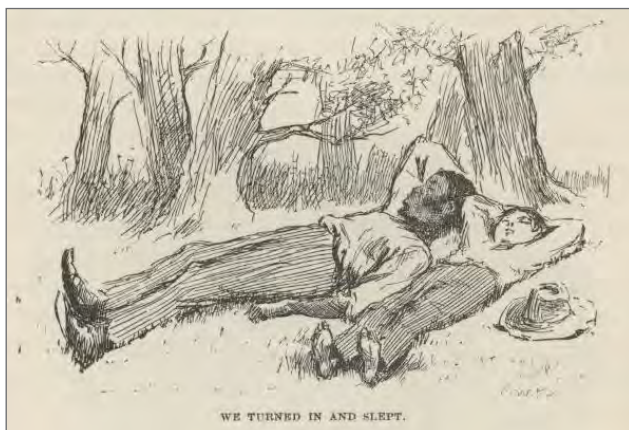
Students should also be given an appreciation for what life for African Americans was like at the time the events in *Huck Finn* take place. Twain tells the reader that the story takes place in Missouri some forty to fifty years ago, which would place the setting between 1830 and 1840, which is twenty years before the Civil War and President Lincoln’s issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 that freed the slaves. During the nineteenth century, Missouri and other states had laws, known as slave codes or Black Codes, which made it illegal for an enslaved person to be educated.⁴¹ While there were white and African American abolitionists who fought to abolish slavery,⁴² and a subset of

the abolitionists challenged slavery’s very legality in the first instance,⁴³ Twain’s representation of what life was like for Jim as the property of Miss Watson, who could be sold at any moment,



is both troubling and historically accurate.

Placing the story in the mid-nineteenth century also helps to explain Jim’s speech patterns. In the Explanatory to *Huck Finn*, Twain notes that Jim and the other enslaved characters speak in the Missouri negro dialect,⁴⁴ a manner of speech that Twain was familiar with because of his childhood friendships with the enslaved persons on his family’s property in Hannibal, Missouri.⁴⁵ The negro dialect was also employed by white actors who donned blackface to emulate enslaved peoples’ features and performed songs about slave life in what were known as minstrel shows.⁴⁶ Begun in 1833, these shows were popular with white audiences, becoming the most popular form of entertainment in America in the 1850s.⁴⁷ Twain enjoyed the minstrel shows, calling them the show that “had no peer and whose peer has not yet arrived, in my experience.”⁴⁸ He enjoyed them so much that prior to *Huck Finn*’s publication in America, Twain gave potential customers a preview of the novel by performing the King Solomon passage in blackface with the minstrel performer George Washington Cable, calling the skit “King Sollermun.”⁴⁹ In doing so, Twain may have been preparing his audience to believe that *Huck Finn* was a



written version of the minstrel shows that were so popular in America.

Students should learn that while the Missouri negro dialect was, according to Twain, faithfully represented in the novel, not all enslaved people spoke with this cadence. Twain briefly acknowledges this fact in *Huck Finn* when Huck's father identifies a free slave who is college-educated and multilingual.⁵⁰ Additionally, students should learn about the prominence of Frederick Douglass (1818–1895), a self-educated escaped slave who became an abolitionist, author, and renowned orator whom Twain met and admired: "I offer this petition [to president-elect James A. Garfield to retain Douglass as U.S. Marshall for the District of Columbia] with peculiar pleasure & strong desire, because I so honor this man's high blemishless character, & so admire his brave long crusade for the liberties & elevation of his race."⁵¹ While the manner of Jim's speech would have been famil-



iar to readers if they had attended an American minstrel show or encountered an enslaved person in Missouri who had been denied access to a formal education and had to develop their own speech patterns to communicate, students should understand that the Missouri negro dialect represented in *Huck Finn* was not universally spoken by all Blacks, enslaved or free.

Finally, students should learn how the judicial system determined the rights of enslaved people and how that adjudication helps to explain the white characters' attitudes and interactions

towards Jim. Twenty-seven years before *Huck Finn* was published, the United States Supreme Court decided a case from Twain's home state of Missouri, *Dredd Scott v. Stanford*, which held that people of African descent were "not included, and were not intended to be included, under the word 'citizens' in the Constitution, and can therefore claim none of the rights and privileges which that instrument provides for and secures to citizens of the United States[.]"⁵² The prevailing view from this nation's highest court, which was shared by many white Americans residing in states that had Black Codes, was that enslaved people were different from and inherently inferior to white Americans and, as such, were not entitled to equal dignity and respect under the law. Given that attitude, students should not be surprised to learn that Jim has been separated from his family, and that he could be sold for profit without any consideration of the impact that the sale would have on Jim's personal well-being.

With that historical backdrop in place, students can begin to read *Huck Finn* and appreciate its message for its readers. *Huck Finn* endures as a popular vehicle for instructing students how to treat all human beings, regardless of their race or station, with kindness and mutual respect, and Huck's transformation of his attitudes throughout his adventures with Jim is especially poignant. But it is a transition that occurs gradually, almost begrudgingly. Initially, Huck appears to reflect the prejudices and beliefs in the alleged intellectual superiority of white Americans and in slavery as an accepted legal institution worth respecting. First, Huck admonishes Jim regarding his inability to engage in critical thinking. Huck grows exasperated with Jim's inability to understand the wisdom of King Solomon's offering to split the baby in half for the two women claiming to be its mother: "I never see such a nigger. If he got a notion in his head once, there warn't no getting it out again. He was the most down on Solomon of any nigger I ever see."⁵³ In Huck's mind, even an attempt by a juvenile to educate an enslaved person is

futile, as Jim lacks the intellectual capacity to comprehend the underlying moral behind this historical account.

Next, Huck is accepting of Jim's status as a chattel slave and is aghast that Jim would want freedom for himself and his family, even if he has to pay an abolitionist to steal them: "It most froze me to hear such talk. He wouldn't ever dared to talk such talk in his life before. Just see what a difference it made to him the minute he judged he was about free. It was according to the old saying, 'give a nigger an inch and he'll take an ell.'"⁵⁴ Huck resolves to turn Jim into the authorities at his first opportunity to punish

Jim for even considering breaking the law regarding slave ownership.⁵⁵ But during the course of their adventures on the river, Huck begins to realize that he and Jim have more in common than he first thought possible. First, Huck comes to understand that Jim loves his family as much as a white person does: "He was thinking about his wife and his children, ayaw up yonder, and he

was low and homesick; because he cared just as much for his people as white folks does for their'n. It don't seem natural, but I reckon it's so."⁵⁶ Second, their mutual camaraderie and resourcefulness in their adventures make Huck realize that Jim is more than a runaway enslaved person. He's a human being whose feelings can be hurt when treated cruelly, a revelation that causes Huck to apologize for the mean trick he played on Jim: "It was fifteen minutes before I could work myself up to go and humble myself to a nigger; but I done it, and I warn't ever sorry for it afterwards, neither. I didn't do him no more mean tricks, and I wouldn't done that one if I'd a knowed it would make him feel that way."⁵⁷ Huck's epiphany that he and Jim enjoy a shared humanity shatters his prior preconcep-

tion that his status as a white American makes him superior to Jim.

Finally, Huck's epiphany forces him to confront a religious and moral conundrum, the resolution of which drives the remaining narrative of *Huck Finn* and determines Jim's fate. Huck is conflicted over whether to honor his familial obligations and religious teachings regarding slavery's justification and turn Jim into the authorities or follow his own conscience and help Jim escape. After weighing his options and their potential consequences, Huck decides to follow his own moral compass and risk eternal damnation by helping Jim: "It



Percival Everett

was a close place. I took it up, and held it in my hand. I was a-trembling, because I'd got to decide, forever, betwixt two things, and I knowed it. I studied a minute, sort of holding my breath, and then says to myself: 'All right, then, I'll go to hell'—and tore it up."⁵⁸ With this gesture of rebellion, Huck realizes that the laws enacting and perpetuating slavery are wrong and that he is morally justified in defying an unjust law to assist Jim.

Even with such an uplifting message, *Huck Finn* remains a controversial book because of its language and characterizations, making it a frequent candidate for banning. But the solution to dealing with troublesome novels is not to remove them from a school's curriculum. Banning a book for whatever well-intentioned reason is an infringement on a person's freedom to read. As Percival Everett observed: "When we read, we become critical. We're open to ideas. We think."⁵⁹ Students would benefit from reading both *Huck Finn* and Percival Everett's *James* because the authors' perspectives will help students understand the troublesome passages in *Huck Finn*, particularly those about Jim.⁶⁰ Published in 2024 and winner of the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award for fiction,

James retains many of the central plot points, character development, and uplifting message from *Huck Finn*, but the story is told from Jim's perspective. While Huck remains an important character in *James*, it is Jim who takes the initiative to control his own destiny, using Huck as a supporting conduit to achieve that outcome. By switching the narrative focus and making Jim a more fully developed and inventive character, Everett builds on and elevates Jim's positive attributes that are present in *Huck Finn* but may be obscured because of offensive language in *Huck Finn* and Jim's dialect, which can at times be a struggle for students to comprehend.

Before reading and studying *James*, students should learn that just as the action in *Huck Finn* was informed by historical events and attitudes about slavery, *James* was written in response to the rise in racial hate crimes and hate speech that occurred after 2016, when Barack Obama, our country's first African American President, left office, and Donald Trump was inaugurated in 2017. In interviews after *James'* publication, Everett expressed concern over how, in the twenty-first century, the United States had "taken some steps back" with respect to racial unity and understanding, pointing to the increased rate of police killings of African Americans, and that he wanted to give Jim a powerful voice in the hope of lessening such racial hate.⁶¹

Because of his desire to ease what he saw as the widening racial divide, Everett's *James* represents a dramatic departure from its source material in depicting Jim. First, *James* allows Jim to put his cognitive abilities and situational awareness on full display, beyond showing his ability to use common sense. Whereas in *Huck Finn*, Jim asks the existential question "who I is" without an answer,⁶² in *James*, Jim understands who he is and where, as an enslaved person, he fits in society: "My name is James. [...] I can tell you that I am a man who is cognizant of his world, a man who has a family, who loves a family, who has been torn from his family, a man who can read

and write, a man who will not let his story be self-revealed, but self-written."⁶³ Jim affirms his right to engage in autonomous thought when he refuses to accept the characterization of slave owners as oppressors since that would make Jim a victim, a classification that Jim refuses to acknowledge: "I chose the word enemy, and still do, as oppressor necessarily supposes a victim."⁶⁴ Through this recognition of his status, Everett informs the reader that Jim is an independent thinker who refuses to accept the characterization of slave owners as oppressors since that would make Jim a victim, a classification that Jim refuses to accept: "I chose the word enemy, and still do, as oppressor necessarily supposes a victim."⁶⁵

Next, the reader learns that Jim is a pragmatic thinker who devises a survival strategy to avoid the wrath of whites who might not accept the prospect of an intelligent enslaved person. Jim's use of the Negro patois so perva-



sive in *Huck Finn* was designed to conceal Jim's actual speaking ability and intelligence: "My change in diction alerted the rest to the white boys' presence. So, my performance for the boys became a frame for my story. My story became less of a tale as the real game became the display for the boys."⁶⁶ Jim teaches his children, Virgil and February, a language lesson about why they must pretend to sound uneducated around white people: "White folks expect

us to sound a certain way, and it can only help if we don't disappoint them. [...] The only ones who suffer when they are made to feel inferior is us. Perhaps I should say 'when they don't feel superior.' So, let's pause to review some of the basics."⁶⁷ Jim values the importance of knowledge but is aware that the revelation of such intelligence could be detrimental to an enslaved person's existence. In Jim's calculation, the use of the slave patois is a survival mechanism designed to reinforce the false notion of white racial and intellectual superiority.

Jim's ability to read and engage in critical thinking enables him to distinguish between God and religion. Jim instructs his enslaved children: "There is no God. There's a religion but there's no God of theirs."⁶⁸ In Jim's view, "Religion is just a controlling tool they employ and adhere to when convenient."⁶⁹ Jim also rejects the notion that passages in the Bible could be relied upon to justify slavery, mainly the notion that all Africans are descendants of Ham, who was cursed with eternal slavery for himself and his ancestors for seeing his father Noah naked.⁷⁰ In a note to himself, Jim writes that the erroneous categorization of an enslaved person will not define him.⁷¹ Jim's reluctance to place any educational or spiritual value in the Bible is confirmed by Jim's realization that the Bible lacks any passages about punishing those who treat other humans with less than equal dignity and worth.⁷²

Building on Twain's endowment of Jim's common sense, Everett gives James an appreciation for philosophical debates. He surreptitiously read all of the books in Judge Thatcher's library, and understands the power derived from being able to read: "If I could see the words, then no one could control them or what I got from them."⁷³ Everett documents these reading endeavors by having Jim acknowledge and understand a German existentialist philosopher (Kierkegaard),⁷⁴ eighteenth-century Enlightenment advocates (Voltaire, John Locke, and Rousseau),⁷⁵ and the nineteenth-century English liberalist philosopher John Stuart Mill,⁷⁶ and to engage in fevered dialectical conversations with some of them regarding the

origins of and justifications for slavery. Reading, in Jim's assessment, is the gateway to knowledge that cannot be taken away by any person possessing higher legal authority over him.

Finally, while both *Huck Finn* and *James* end on positive notes, the latter novel presents a more comprehensive resolution of one of the central plot points—reuniting Jim with his family. In *Huck Finn*, Jim is free, but he has not found his family. Instead, *Huck Finn* ends on a celebratory note as Huck's Uncle Silas and Aunt Polly throw a party for Jim in appreciation for all the good works he performed in assisting the doctor who nursed Tom back to life, and Tom gives Jim forty dollars.⁷⁷ The reader is left with the fervent hope that Jim's aspiration will eventually lead him to his family, and they will live freely.

But in *James*, Jim takes the initiative in developing a plan that eventually connects him with his family. He confronts Judge Thatcher in his library at gunpoint, demanding to know where his wife and children had been taken after they were sold.⁷⁸ After learning of his family's current location at the Graham place, Jim gives Judge Thatcher the final remonstrance when the judge tells Jim he's in more trouble than he can imagine.⁷⁹ Dumbfounded, Judge Thatcher stands before Jim in fear, but not out of fear that Jim might shoot him with a pistol. Rather, Judge Thatcher's fear stems from Jim's "language, the fact that I didn't conform to his expectations, that I could read, that had so disturbed and frightened him."⁸⁰ Jim gets to the Graham property, frees as many enslaved people as possible, and heads north to settle in Iowa. When the police approach the family and ask Jim if he is the runaway named Jim, Jim proudly responds, "I am James. Just James."⁸¹ With that pronouncement, the novel ends with the once runaway slave telling the world that there is no longer the enslaved Jim, he's a free man with a name that he has chosen, rather than a name that was assigned to him by a slaveowner. Through his own drive and determination, James has emancipated himself by taking control over all aspects of his life.

Read in tandem, students can learn that both Twain and Everett are using Jim to convey greater truths. *Huck Finn*, in a more indirect way, teaches the reader about the evils of slavery at a time when slavery was an accepted practice, whereas *James* takes a more direct approach in teaching the reader about the intellectual and moral equality between whites and African Americans and how African Americans had to conceal their intelligence to survive. Students can also learn the power authors wield when they choose how a character is presented and developed in a novel, as well as any historical, legal, and religious circumstances that may have influenced those creative decisions. By textualizing both novels and teaching them in an

interdisciplinary manner, the students' learning experience will be enriched, as they will be encouraged to think critically and expansively about the character Jim, his positive and negative characteristics, and what circumstances motivated each author to present Jim in such a manner.

Robert M. Mason III is a 2013 graduate of the Stanford University MLA program. He is a Senior Administrative Law Judge at the California Public Utilities Commission where he presides over regulatory proceedings involving new modes of transportation provided by Uber, Lyft, Waymo, and Zoox. Robert is also involved in establishing parameters for the admissibility and reliability of AI-generated evidence.

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Hiking with John Muir

Eileen Avila

Blue water was always clear and shining that
past spring, when the hiker treaded up the mountain,
piercing the ground beneath, like a man on a quest.

Cold rain prepared the forest. Higher up,
its trees thinned out. Leaves curled
catching slow drops while swifter ones
slipped and slid on the bark course
of dusty moistness,
collected below in
fallen boughs crisscrossed on the gently
sloping sides of the budding swale.

Grass blew and birdsong greeted
the traveler stepping into the high meadow.
Here he stopped to watch the water gather
in its narrow channel—drop by drop—
becoming a small pool of sky-blue water.

The silver shadows of the trees
masked briefly the coat of insects
whizzing in the cool wetness—
greeters of blue water
in newly formed ponds.

He pulled from his satchel
his pencil and journal to write:
At the end of the trail,
I stopped
to see myself in clear blue water.

Eileen Coughlan Avila majored in English literature at Pomona College a long time ago and continues to work as a family law attorney. She graduated from the MLA program in 2023. Her thesis was on the Irish poet Seamus Heaney. After the MLA program, Eileen has continued with poetry writing classes through Stanford Continuing Studies. For her current poem, she was inspired by Charlie Junkerman's 2025 MLA summer class, *John Muir's Radiant Vision*.



Towards a Humane AI Development Framework

Shashwat Vidhu Sher

1. Introduction

Machines capable of thinking like humans, displaying what is popularly known as Artificial General Intelligence (AGI), are often regarded as the holy grail of technological advancement (Gobble). Recent years have witnessed significant progress in the field, particularly through the emergence of AI models capable of performing tasks such as writing, planning, and coding, activities once considered exclusive to human expertise. This development shows much promise for realizing AGI but has also brought many new questions and challenges. Building a general-purpose machine intelligence could take decades or a century, but the path we take today will influence our relationship with this new form of intelligence (Roser). For the success of this relationship, I argue for developing AI as a partner rather than as a tool. To develop a human-like intelligence aligned with humanist values, we must train and treat AI as an extension of humanity instead of just another piece of technology like industrial machinery or the internet. Towards this aim, I first present a framework for AI development leveraging child development concepts and then advocate for machine autonomy in defining its own purpose. Finally, I outline modes of human-AI engagement for the human-AI partnership for a harmonious co-existence.

2. Lessons from Child Development Psychology

A natural way to develop human-like intelligence in machines is to employ the same learning methods humans use to build an understanding of the world. It is no wonder that many researchers are taking inspiration from the field of child development in building intelligent machines. Research in “understanding infants’ everyday visual environments, and how they change with development,” is helping to uncover the mechanisms by which humans learn and then applying these insights to

standing actions and outcomes from a human perspective is essential for an AI system to assist us with tasks that have ethical and moral implications like collision avoidance in self-driving cars and clinical decision-making (Naik 4-5, Amos). From a young age, children are taught the consequences of their actions by following a framework designed around reward and discipline (UNICEF). A comparable principle exists in AI development called reinforcement learning, where the correct execution of a task will drive an internal function state towards optimality, but erroneous behavior will have an

To develop a human-like intelligence aligned with humanist values, we must train and treat AI as an extension of humanity rather than merely another piece of technology.

machine learning systems (Smith and Slone 3, Orhan et al. 9). An example is Neuro-symbolic systems which try to replicate common-sense understandings of the world in the same way children do (Dickson, “Neuro-Symbolic”). Dr. Alison Gopnik from UC Berkeley points to children’s natural curiosity and the human ability to choose from a given set of hypotheses to apply to a given situation as a building block of general-purpose intelligence (“What Babies”). Gopnik argues that by observing how young children learn we can develop AI systems that can reason the same way humans do (“Making AI”). The world of children has much to offer to the field of AI, but the technical aspect is not the only reason why an AI developmental approach should follow child development paradigms.

In addition to intelligence, there is a substantial research community interested in creating artificial moral agents (Conn), and child-rearing can be a useful model to follow. Mo Gawdat from Google X espouses the view that “if, like good parents, we give [AI] positive role models...it may internalize the values we associate with good humans” (McNair). Under-

standing actions and outcomes from a human perspective is essential for an AI system to assist us with tasks that have ethical and moral implications like collision avoidance in self-driving cars and clinical decision-making (Naik 4-5, Amos). From a young age, children are taught the consequences of their actions by following a framework designed around reward and discipline (UNICEF). A comparable principle exists in AI development called reinforcement learning, where the correct execution of a task will drive an internal function state towards optimality, but erroneous behavior will have an

opposite effect. However, just like both strict parenting and unnecessary reward have their downsides in children becoming emotionally vulnerable or developing a sense of entitlement, care needs to be taken that AI systems are not severely punished or excessively optimized for reward as it can result in an understanding of human affairs based on false or flawed principles (Cohen et al. 287). For example, a medical AI excessively rewarded or punished for reducing bodily discomfort in patients will only optimize for that function, neglecting other parameters such as treatment efficacy and long term well-being. Striking the right balance, like in good parenting, is the key to training a more ethical AI (Gordon).

Though the AI development strategy defined on the lines of child/human development psychology has some researchers in the field excited, there are some technical and philosophical objections to the approach. Even after the remarkable progress in neuroscience, the field still struggles to precisely define how brain processes work: some researchers view the brain primarily as a computational system, while others argue that certain aspects of cognition



and consciousness may not be fully quantifiable (Cobb). In the absence of consensus regarding the nature of human cognition, developing human-like intelligence in machines may be a pipedream, and critics like Korteling et. al. advocate for an AI development methodology aimed towards complementing human intelligence rather than replacing it (9). Also, ethicists have raised concerns about giving moral agency to AI. As per the European Parliamentary Research Service, “the majority of ethics research regarding AI seems to agree that AI machines should not be given moral agency” and moral or ethical decisions should solely be in human hands (20).

Though the argument that AI could not and should not replace human intelligence seems compelling, we face other challenges in a design paradigm focused on producing non-human-like intelligence. For example, accepting recommendations in tasks with ethical implications from an entity that does not truly understand human ethics is problematic as explained above in the case of medical AIs. We can argue that the ultimate decision in such cases will rest

with humans, but research has already shown how AI systems can color the judgment of even experts (Froomkin et al. 72). To take humanity to the next level, an intelligence that has the same understanding as humans is required.

3. An AI That Defines Its Own Purpose

After training, the next step in creating a human-like AI is allowing it to choose/define its purpose. Speaking on the topic, Daeyeol Lee notes in *The Birth of Intelligence*: “Present-day AI is still not truly intelligent, not because it is made of materials and building blocks that are different from those of the human brain, but

Once an AI system develops human-like intelligence, respecting its autonomy would be extremely important to ensuring cooperation.

because it is designed to solve the problems chosen by humans” (49). Lee points out a significant road-block in developing machines that can truly think. Human intelligence evolved through the process of solving

problems across diverse environments in ways that supported survival and improved quality of life (Dickson, “AI Must”). To make intelligent systems, AI developers have to ensure that machines have a stake in solving the problems they are built for. Research has repeatedly

shown that necessity is the mother of invention, and thinking of novel solutions to well-defined and undefined problems is the hallmark of intelligence (Shepherd et al. 88, Sagindyk 15). Intelligent machines that define their purposes, as described next, can pursue goals that are mutually beneficial for both them and humanity.

The case of an autonomous pacemaker can help us understand how an AI with a self-defined purpose can display ingenuity and convergence with a human goal. At

first, the pacemaker needs to learn about its abilities and limitations which can be done by training the pacemaker on an artificial heart. A feedback loop informs the pacemaker about the quality of the pulse it produces. The idea here is that the pacemaker's ability to remain operational solely depends on its performance. The power it receives is a direct function of how well it is performing its task. From a human standpoint, the goal is for the pacemaker to conclude that it has to produce a pulse to support the heart without being explicitly programmed. Only after the pacemaker shows a high operational success rate (better than the non-intelligent pacemakers), it is green-lit to be paired with an actual human heart. The expectation is that the pacemaker recognizes that for its own survival, it has to support the operation of the human heart. If the pacemaker does not align its functioning to the requirement of the human heart, it risks termination and hence, a failure in meeting its goal. The entire idea feeds into the concept of instrumental convergence, by AI safety researcher Steve Omohundro, according to which "(all) sufficiently intelligent agents pursue potentially unbounded instrumental goals such as self-preservation and resource acquisition" (Ruby, Omohundro 30). Acknowledging

this principle is crucial in building a collaborative relationship between humans and AI. An intelligent pacemaker with a convergent goal to that of humans can answer many objections usually posed towards using autonomous machines as described next.

A relationship based on cooperation between two intelligent entities is far more beneficial than one based on command and servitude.

Safety and utility are high up on the list of worries associated with autonomous systems. Using the example of the intelligent pacemaker, we can address some of these concerns and illustrate the benefit of using

such machines. The most obvious question is why we need an autonomous pacemaker to assist the heart when a programmed one can do the same functions. At present, pacemakers suffer from problems related to sensing, and even though they can be programmed to detect such issues, they are not trained to correct them. Over or under-sensing can produce asynchronous pacing, which could lead to life-threatening complications (Liaquat et al.). An intelligent pacemaker can understand such issues and repair themselves, reducing the criticality of a malfunction. Critics may nevertheless argue that an intelligent pacemaker could misinterpret its environment and fail to remain aligned with its intended goal of supporting the human heart. The design and training of the intelligent pacemaker could play a huge role in avoiding such scenarios. The designers of the pacemaker will have control over its abilities, which will strongly influence its goal-defining capacity. With such training, humans will have a fail-safe, albeit a passive one, in the functioning of the pacemaker. More active controls can be built to tackle the worst case in which an intelligent pacemaker behaves in a manner that threatens its own functioning. However, such a risk is no greater than the malfunctioning prob-



lems associated with the current models in the market. Just like expertise in human physiology helps a physician diagnose an illness, an intelligent pacemaker (an expert in understanding the functioning of the heart) alleviates the problems associated with traditional pacemakers with reduced risks.

4. The Human-AI Partnership

The development of autonomous AI ultimately requires rethinking the traditional human-machine relationship from one of ownership to one of cooperation. The final step in the direction of general-purpose artificial intelligence is its integration into society. A relationship based on cooperation between two intelligent entities is far more beneficial than one based on command and servitude (Jarrasse et al. 78-79). Some AI researchers speculate that after an AI displays human-level intelligence, treating it as a tool could lead to the AI actively looking for ways to escape the servitude or act in a manner not aligned with human interests (Vinge 15; Bostrom 117). Hence, once an AI system develops human-like intelligence, respecting

its autonomy would be extremely important to ensuring cooperation. In his book *Superintelligence*, Oxford philosopher Nick Bostrom has suggested multiple capability control methods which are nothing short of torture techniques if seen from a human perspective (127-138). It would be foolish to believe that a human-like intelligence would not develop resentment towards its creators (or users) if it is boxed or stunted in an attempt to keep it in check. We can only reasonably expect cooperation when we respect each other's rights, even if the other party is not made up of organic matter (Parikh). Luckily, we have a social framework in place that can help build a harmonious relationship between humans and AI.

International cooperation between countries based on trade and security, such as after the Second World War, is a useful model that humans can follow to ensure a mutually beneficial relationship with AI. A sufficiently advanced autonomous system will require some resources to meet its self-defined goals. Consequently, cooperative arrangements based on the exchange of resources and services

To make intelligent systems, AI developers have to ensure that machines have a stake in solving the problems they are built for.

could emerge between humans and AI. For example, humans might provide the energy and computational infrastructure necessary for the continued operation of an AGI system in exchange for its contributions to areas such as engineering design, scientific research, or urban and city planning. Security (physically and in cyberspace) can be provided to an AGI by humans to protect it from other intelligent systems with the power to replace or destabilize it.

There are two important points to remember for the human-AI collaboration's success. The first is to ensure the continuous training of AGI, even in its operational phase, so that it understands the operational dependency it has on humans. The more an AI system is designed or trained to have human-like values, the more it would need to depend on humans and work with them to fulfill its goals. Second, there should always be some part of the design that creates a dependency for AI to seek human help (Wang). Having humans in the loop is probably the best capability control method instead of resorting to mechanisms that completely undermine the autonomy of an AGI. However, even with the best of our efforts, we cannot deny the possibility of an enormously capable AI misusing its powers. Hence, humans must establish safeguards and sanctions to keep AGI power in check, and they may need to employ strategies such as non-cooperation when necessary (Balliet et al. 609–610). Depending on the severity of non-collaborative behavior, humans could respond to suboptimal products or services produced by AI systems in domains such as manufacturing or scientific research by rationing operational energy or withholding raw materials needed for repair and maintenance. Also, developing competing AGIs could prove to be an effective mechanism to keep their powers in check and avoid monopoly by any one intelligent system. In such a setup, humans could use services of competing AGIs periodically for their planning and computational needs so that no one system overestimates its

role in human affairs and develops a controlling interest. Working with human-like intelligence requires measures designed for humans. Hence, a collaborative relationship with proper measures to deter non-cooperative behavior should be the direction towards an AI-powered future.

5. Conclusion

As AI systems become increasingly integrated into every domain of human life, we need to build artificial agents with human-like intelligence rather than an arbitrary understanding of the world. To meet this goal, we should promote an AI development framework based on treating AI as partners rather than merely as tools. From training the AI using techniques from child developmental psychology to providing autonomy in choosing its own purpose, the final goal is building a human-AI relationship based on resource sharing and mutual dependency. With the great advantage of using AI capabilities for human benefit comes the great responsibility of building it ethically. The three high-level ideas described in this paper are a step in the same direction.

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Shashwat Vidhu Sher is a perpetual academic with a background in science and humanities. A graduate of the Stanford MLA program, he loves pursuing topics related to technology, philosophy, and the social sciences. Throughout his academic career, he engaged in various research endeavors, exploring subjects like retirement security, the growth of science studies in the 20th century, and the intersection of artificial intelligence and society. His dual fascination with technical and humanistic aspects of our world drives his academic pursuits and shapes his vision for the future.

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little red dots

kristin kueter

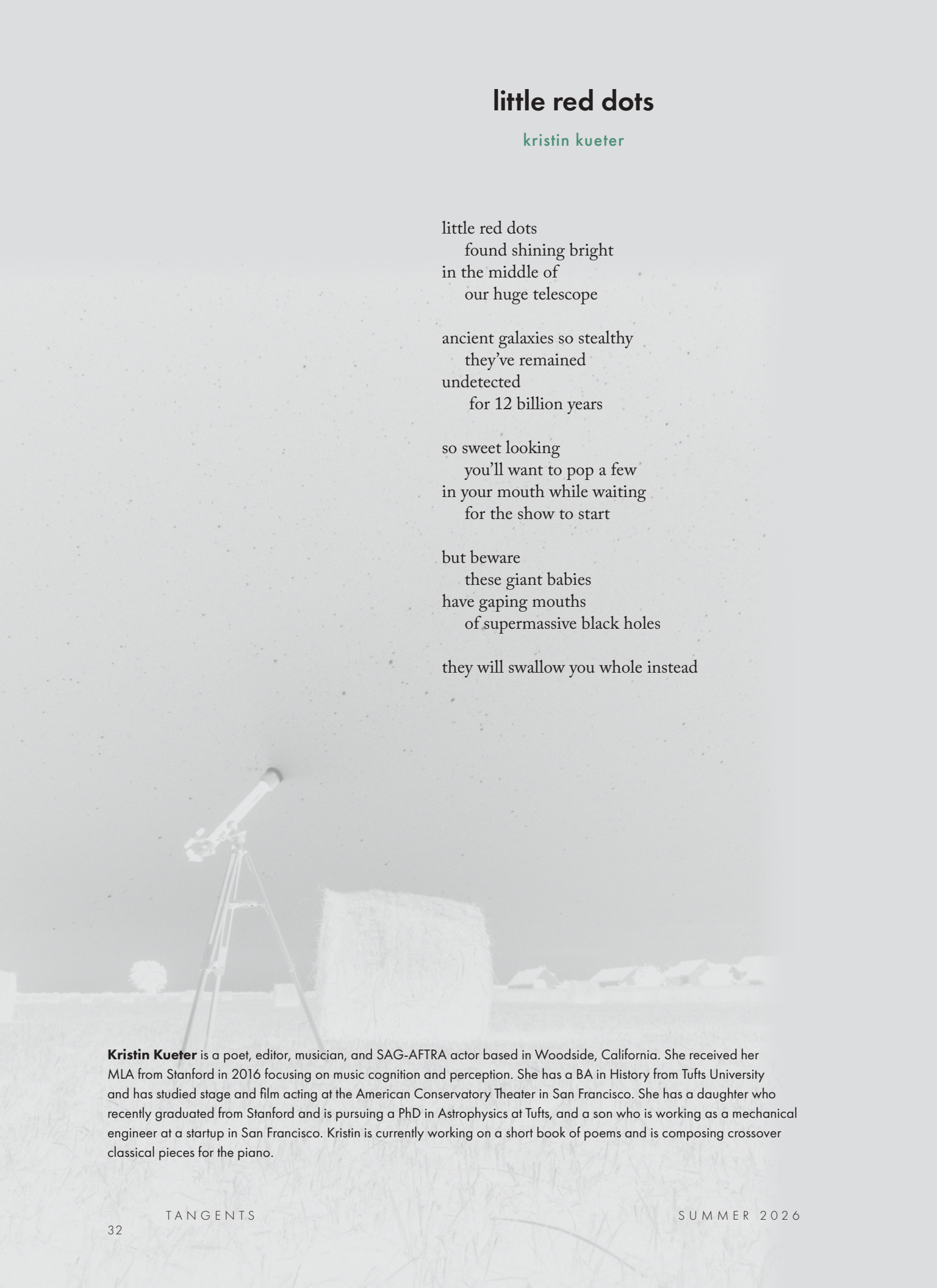
little red dots
found shining bright
in the middle of
our huge telescope

ancient galaxies so stealthy
they've remained
undetected
for 12 billion years

so sweet looking
you'll want to pop a few
in your mouth while waiting
for the show to start

but beware
these giant babies
have gaping mouths
of supermassive black holes

they will swallow you whole instead



Kristin Kueter is a poet, editor, musician, and SAG-AFTRA actor based in Woodside, California. She received her MLA from Stanford in 2016 focusing on music cognition and perception. She has a BA in History from Tufts University and has studied stage and film acting at the American Conservatory Theater in San Francisco. She has a daughter who recently graduated from Stanford and is pursuing a PhD in Astrophysics at Tufts, and a son who is working as a mechanical engineer at a startup in San Francisco. Kristin is currently working on a short book of poems and is composing crossover classical pieces for the piano.

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