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Racial Prejudice and the Southern Context

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MANAGING EDITOR

It is all too easy to propagate a one-dimensional view of the South, a mistake made by *New York Times* contributing opinion writer Wajahat Ali in his recent piece “This Ramadan, I’ll Try Praying For Enemies, Friends, Frenemies, and Kanye West.”

Ali recounts a trip that he took to Williamsburg, Virginia to give a speech at William & Mary. On the way to campus, Ali’s car breaks down and he struggles to flag

a passing motorist for assistance. Eventually, a doctoral student at William &

Mary stops to help, saying, “I saw a fellow person of color and around here, well, we all got to help each other.” When the man operating the tow truck, “a tough-looking white dude,” arrives, Ali seems shocked that a white man would extend the basic kindness of recommending a place to eat in town.

Ali goes on to conclude that this chance encounter embodies the spirit of Ramadan. He seems astounded, however, that the formation of “a tiny, temporary multicultural community” could happen in “places like this.” Had Ali done even the most basic research, he would have found Williamsburg, and the surrounding area, to be significantly more racially diverse than many places in the country.

James City County, the polity surrounding Williamsburg, has a population that is 74.6 percent white. Newport News, a city just south of Williamsburg, is one of only 78 “majority-minority” local jurisdictions in the country. Six of these localities are in Virginia. Compared with my hometown in suburban Massachusetts, with a population that is 92.5 percent white, or Franklin County, Massachusetts, where my mother grew up, which is 94.2 percent white,

Williamsburg and its surroundings qualify as racially diverse. Why, then, does Ali find it so unlikely that three members of different races would come together in a friendly way in that area?

Ali paints a rather grim image of race relations in Virginia. Traveling in a Southern state, he assumes that no one stops to help him because he is a person of color. Considered for just a moment, the implication of his

column becomes clear. Ali subtly suggests that only another person of color would come to his rescue in such a prejudiced Southern state, which is why the white man’s hospitality surprises him.

Racial prejudice is not a Southern problem—it is an American problem. To focus the national dialogue about race relations on the South is intellectually dishonest and ignores the rest of the country. I do not mean to apologize for the South or its highly racialized history. I would suggest, however, that as long as American popular culture and its formative institutions, like the *New York Times*, depict racial prejudice only in its Southern context, Americans will remain blinded to injustice throughout the country.

Identity politics further obfuscates racism in America. By inserting race into what should have been a discussion of a culture of kindness in the South, Ali cries wolf upon an empty field. Had the white man pulled up in a truck bearing the Confederate flag, his surprise at the man’s friendliness might very well have been warranted. Given, though, that the tow truck driver was only a white Southern man, Ali showed himself to be the prejudiced party. Continued cries like this will deafen our ears to shouts of genuine racial discrimination.

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Henry Ossawa Tanner and Gateway, Tangier

CLAIRE ANASTASIA KITZ
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

As the age-old adage goes, “Every painter paints himself.” Countless artists including Michelangelo, Raphael, Artemisia Gentileschi, Rembrandt, Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, Vincent van Gogh, Marc Chagall, Frida Kahlo, Jackson Pollock, Georgia O’Keeffe, Andy Warhol, and even Lucien Freud have revealed as much. If painters paint themselves, then paintings say something of real consequence about their biographies.

The Italian Renaissance artist Leonardo da Vinci also acknowledged that every work of art is an inevitable act of autobiography. People from antiquity on have regarded the artist’s identity as one of the most important facets of a piece of artwork. Beginning in Greco-Roman culture, the names of great artists have superseded the lives of their works — stories about the artists remained, even if the original works did not. This assumed an essential connection between an artist and her creation, founded on the belief that the life and character of the person were of utmost significance to the work.

The emphasis on biography in understanding art suggests that it is more than the physical work. It proposes that the creator can be found in her creation — that a work reveals something particular about the artist’s interior life.

The Western tradition imbues the artist with qualities of heroism. For centuries, little mattered more than society’s perception of the artist’s role and the essential romantic ideal of the creative self. The artist became a channel between the material and the immaterial, an avenue of divine inspiration. Historically, the artist’s life was just as lauded and cherished as her work. The intermingling of art and biography was an interweaving and mirroring of man and image — the act of creation

continued on back

being just as important as the art itself.

Accordingly, the biographical analysis went beyond visual and stylistic interpretations. Biography emphasized the artist's life as an essential piece that provided further illumination of her body of work. It included anyone and anything that influenced an artwork—cultural and political background, religious upbringing, family life, training and education, stylistic and technical development—as well as the artist's artistic philosophy, intent, and motivation for creating the work.

For an example of biography's influence, one can look at the renowned African-American artist Henry Ossawa Tanner (1859-1937). His canvases testify to his talent and remarkable development as a painter despite the social and political obstacles he faced. Originally from Philadelphia, Tanner studied art under the American Realist painter Thomas Eakins at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, then moved to Paris in 1891 to

pursue his artistic career, believing he would be away from American society's racial prejudice. Painting in Paris liberated him. While there, Tanner often traveled to the western coast of North Africa. Tangier, Morocco served as an inspiration and a beacon. It stirred him to paint people in distinct costume and to portray unique architecture, much like the French artists Henri Matisse and Eugène Delacroix. He found that it was the perfect location in which to experience the "rare influence of the sun, which gives penetrating light to all things."

Tangier had a positive and harmonious effect on his painting. There Tanner produced several small sketches, which he brought back to his Paris studio and translated into larger paintings on canvas. *Gateway, Tangier* (1912, now in the Saint Louis Museum) was but one example. In this painting, Tanner captured Morocco's exotic patina. The biographical influences of travel, place, and an experience of greater freedom produced a stronger emphasis on color and color

harmonies, with richly textured, luminous layers of paint. Tanner had found his voice.

The emphasis on biography in understanding art suggests that it is more than the physical work. It proposes that the creator can be found in her creation — that a work reveals something particular about the artist's interior life. Biographers can survey artists' lives as successions of beginnings and setbacks, actions and accomplishments, and reveal the flickers and hints of insight found in their drawings. An artist's works are influenced by deliberate choices made in response to external events and internal stirrings. *Gateway, Tangier* was and is an ethereal, expressive work evocative of a heroic artist who rose above discrimination and pain to posit the opposite, a different gate. Through this painting, Henry Ossawa Tanner gave the world something it may not have merited from him, an insight into his humanity, his inner freedom, and his solemnity, through a radiantly beautiful and serene canvas.

Nikita Khrushchev's Failed Corn Crusade: A Maize Love Affair

EDWARD SHVETS
STAFF WRITER

Nikita Khrushchev, the peasant-born Soviet leader who rose to succeed Stalin, is well known for instigating the Cuban Missile Crisis. People might not know, however, that he loved corn. His infatuation with corn forced the Soviet Union on an agricultural crusade that would disappoint him almost as much as the missile crisis humiliated him. Khrushchev, desperately needing to increase the Soviet food supply and facing competition with the United States, implemented reforms to elevate corn as the new crown jewel of the masses that would fulfill meat and dairy product demand. At the end of the day, his efforts showcased political ineptitude and shortsightedness more than they fostered progressive, beneficial change.

Agriculture and the food supply during Stalin's reign needed improvement, to say the least. The food shortages and starving citizens of that period demonstrated that the Soviet government cared more about constructing machinery than filling the growling stomachs of its people. Khrushchev acknowledged the predominance of manufacturing over food cultivation in Soviet policy and how industry was thus in a much better condition than agriculture. He took it upon himself to solve the

issue and called for a campaign to bolster food production. In his statement "On Measures for the Further Development of Soviet Agriculture" the Soviet leader detailed that "between 1940 and 1952, industrial production grew 2.3 times" but "the overall production of agriculture (in comparable prices) rose only by 10 per cent." He then proclaimed: "The most urgent tasks confront us in the sphere of livestock-farming, since the lag here is long drawn-out in character, and we will not be able to improve the position quickly without decisive measures."

With totalitarian providence, Khrushchev declared corn as the answer to the nation's sustenance problems and the vast sowing of the grain as the necessary decisive measure. Corn, under his reasoning, would provide the Soviet Union abundant fodder to increase meat and dairy production.

In addition to an arms race, the United States and the Soviet Union also engaged in a lesser-known "corn race." Khrushchev was an ardent communist and awaited the time his statement that "the Soviet Union would surpass everything in the United States," including corn production would come true. He prepared, labored, and fought for that "jovial day." However, history would never see

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that day. His efforts proved futile and the United States remained the superior agricultural power.

It would be inaccurate to claim that totalitarian impulse and communist vision were the only drivers of the Soviet leader's agricultural reforms. Khrushchev genuinely cared about, and was fascinated by, farming. During his visit to the United States, he made a special point to visit a farm in Iowa. Khrushchev ventured to Coon Rapids, Iowa to meet with farmer Roswell Garst. As the 1959 *Carroll Daily Times* newspaper article "Khrushchev in Corn Country" detailed, the Premier toured the farm, learned more about farming practices, and was "particularly impressed with Garst's mechanized system to feed cattle and his method of irrigating his fields through steel pipes and sprinklers—standard features on American farms, but not in the Soviet Union."

The initial success of Khrushchev's corn policies made the man briefly resemble the corn champion he wished to be. But their ultimate failure demolished any hopes that the Premier would go down in history as an adept and wise agricultural leader. According to the essay "Corn Campaign" by Professor James Von Geldern, Chair of Russian Studies at Macalester College, corn acreage increased from 4.3 million hectares in 1954 to 18 million just a year later. Corn grew in abundant supply on this newly developed farmland thanks to favorable hot weather during two successive years. Khrushchev misinterpreted a lucky shot as intelligent and sustainable policy. He continued to bullhead and get his way sowing more corn crops even when areas lacked the "appropriate climatic conditions and sufficient labor supplies." Soon, a cold and rainy season arrived, bringing retribution for Khrushchev's haste and lack of forethought. Seventy to 80 percent of the corn acreage was in ruins.

Nikita Khrushchev, Soviet leader, self-made man, the grand "Mr. Corn," dreamed of a corn-powered utopia, but in the end saw millions of barren acres and his eventual removal as leader of both Soviet agriculture and the Soviet Union.

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