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Title
50% Laughter, 50% Despair: A Dialogue with Jarett Kobek.

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5vh3q5bg
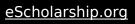
Journal
ASAP/Journal, 5(3)

ISSN
2381-4705

Authors
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Publication Date
2020

Peer reviewed

"50% Laughter, 50% Despair: A Dialogue with Jarett Kobek"

Jarett Kobek and Rita Raley

Published in *ASAP/Journal* 5.3 (2020): 469–487

When Jarett Kobek says he writes garbage, he is not to be believed. The self-laceration is ubiquitous—"this is a bad novel," the narrator of *I Hate the Internet* (2016) says in so many words, throughout the text—but it should not be understood as false modesty, an anxious plea for affirmation, or as stylistic affectation. Such pronouncements are instead aspirational. "I try to make everything a little shitty," Kobek explains in an interview, because, the argument goes, truly holding a mirror up to the surreal horror that is post-9/11 America necessitates a self-conscious abandonment of the figure of the romanticized writer, as well as the aesthetic project of literary realism.[1] Writers of "*good novels*," his narrator protests, have "missed the only important story in American life," "the world of hidden persuaders, of the developing communications landscape"—in other words, the internet.[2] It may be that the new idioms and genres of self-expression and the accelerated temporal rhythms of multichannel communication are ill-suited to the mode of the *good novel*. But Kobek's argument is not about literary form or language, so one cannot point to Flarf, uncreative writing, Alt-Lit, or even *Emoji Dick* as counterexamples. Kobek's indictment is more fundamental and his outrage more overtly, unreservedly, political. What US writers in particular have missed, his work suggests, is the extent to which life itself has been altered by an industry that has broken its utopian promise; that captures and capitalizes on every utterance; that rewards extremity, cruelty, and, yes, stupidity— in other words, the internet. It is all very sordid, but it does make for wonderful, albeit tragicomic, satire.

Lest it not be clear, I should stress: Kobek is perfectly capable of writing *good novels* and in fact has done so. *ATTA* (2011), his fictionalized biography of the hijacker Mohamed Atta, imagines 9/11 as an enactment of Atta's master's thesis, which railed against Western skyscrapers and idealized an "Islamic-Oriental city."[3] It is incisive, elegant, and in many ways an emblematic work of academic fictocriticism. He has also written a carefully considered, sympathetic analysis of XXXTentacion, which uses the musician's social media presence to reflect on the question of separating the work and life of an artist. And here too he continues his critique of the exploitative structure of social media, the coercive force of which is unevenly distributed. "Rich kids don't suffer the same Internet as poor kids," he dryly observes, noting the class markers in many a Twitch streamer's home.[4]

All of this paves the way for Kobek's summative polemic, *Only Americans Burn in Hell* (2019), equally well titled and quite rightly described by Alan Moore as a "scabrous portrait of an America lost in its insipid fantastic dreams while it is sliding into an abyss."[5] The setup for the book, which is best analogized to a stand-up comedy set, with all of its seemingly digressive refrains, self-mocking confessions, and droll punchline, is this: Celia, the Queen of Fairy Land, goes to Los Angeles with her murderous bodyguard, Rose Byrne, in order to find her daughter. What else do you need from a novel, Reader, except perhaps a broadside against, in no particular order, the US publishing industry, NYU Abu Dhabi, fantasy and superhero films as war pornography, representational politics and call-out culture, homelessness in America, the endless war in Iraq, and Donald J. Trump as "the natural consequence of an entire society that adopted unending slaughter as its central function"?[6] Scabrous it surely is, but it works because it is also sincere. Not content to catalog and lampoon the grotesqueries of our moment, the book enfolds a moral lesson in an elaborate story about gaining access to the pit at a Guns N' Roses concert at

Staples Center with a friend dressed as a circus performer: we may all be in fairy land, but we can at least be kind to other people. Trolling may have overwritten the fundamental principles of our social contract, in other words, but individual acts of kindness and generosity can nonetheless still create spots of time in which it seems, momentarily, that humans do not necessarily seek only to destroy each other.

Kobek wants like all sharp satirists to disturb a consensus, which for him is our complacent media consumption and acquiescence in a technological regime that continues to secure the power of the global oligarchic class and exacerbate the crisis of liberal democracy. It's all terrible, from Facebook to Trump, but readers can find consolation in the author's directive: "Calm down. For the length of time that it takes you to read this book, everything will be fine."[7] The premise—humor can help us to forget—was memorably realized in Preston Sturges' *Sullivan's Travels*, and it bears repeating. As Joel McCrea's earnest director, John L. Sullivan, has to learn, films that "stink with messages" may not be what people need to withstand "a world committing suicide."[8] What we need to get by, what will see us through, is not then a realist adaptation of *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* but rather a comedy like *Ants in Your Pants of 1939*, or, better, *Only Americans Burn in Hell*.

Exercising one's critical judgment in the contemporary lexicon of liking and sharing is perhaps ill-advised for a text that rails against "bullshit instant commentary and hot takes by the stupidest people on the planet."[9] Indeed, Kobek cautions his readers not to assume that the pseudo-egalitarianism of contemporary culture means they are qualified to opine on the book's merits. Nonetheless, I'm giving it all the hearts, up arrows, and stars.

This interview was conducted May 9, 2019, at the University of California, Santa Barbara and the transcript has been condensed and edited for clarity.

—Rita Raley

Rita Raley/ Where else to begin but with the first title, *I Hate the Internet*?

Jarett Kobek/ Before the 2016 election, an open expression of hatred for the internet was not common in the media, but it was also a feeling that everyone had. If it wasn't a deeply considered conviction, it was something that emerged in fits of irritation. When I thought of the title, I looked at Twitter to see how often the phrase appeared. Every thirty seconds. That seemed indicative of success. I could've printed a blank book with that title and still moved two thousand copies as a novelty item. When the book was written, I had been gentrified out of San Francisco. Now I don't care that much. Maybe I've matured into a phase of being more amused. At the time, it felt like life and death. The character "J. Karacehennem" is a broad self-parody. He's how I envision myself dumbed-down and animated by less-sophisticated irritation. In *Only Americans Burn in Hell*, the narrator is "Jarett Kobek," but that isn't me either—it's a fictitious iteration of myself motivated, I hope, by something other than vanity and ego. It's closer than the character in *I Hate the Internet*. I don't climb to the top of hills and scream for thirty pages at an indifferent city. I know my place. Karacehennem doesn't. The speech condenses the haphazard arguments scattered throughout the book. There's also an element of me making fun of myself. A thinly veiled fictional analogue shouting into the void and being told to go fuck himself.

The value of *I Hate the Internet*, if there is any, is not its ideas or opinions. An accidental aspect of the book's style is that the opinions come off unusually strong. I'm not sure they mean

anything. I think the value of the book, again if it has any, is that it's a document of a moment in time; what it was like to be in San Francisco in 2013; what weird shit people were saying; the kind of things that you had to accept in social situations if you didn't want to be a pariah. But if it gets people off social media, then that's not the worst thing in the world.

RR/ As you were working on *I Hate the Internet*, were you at all thinking about, or are you interested in, other critiques of big IT, e.g., Adam Curtis's series, *All Watched Over by Machines of Loving Grace*, which similarly interrogates the legacy of the cult of Ayn Rand?

JK/ If there's one idea unique to the book, it's that the ideologies, spoken and unspoken, acknowledged and unacknowledged, of the people who create technology get embedded into that technology. Everything else is someone else's. I functioned as a receptor to those ideas and opinions and then filtered them through a bad mood. Zadie Smith wrote an essay about Facebook, for which she took an enormous amount of shit.[10] Her essay documents the historical moment when you would answer questions about yourself to build your Facebook profile. Smith points out that Facebook asked the questions of a twelve-year-old: what's your favorite book? What's your favorite movie? Her essay wrestles with the implications of such questions. It's a profound critique. I mention it in the book. Attributed.

RR/ Sorry to say, I am going to ask questions like that. But for now, could you talk a little bit more about what informed *I Hate the Internet*?

JK/ I was on the internet before there was a World Wide Web. My father was interested in personal computers long before they crept into everyday life. I've had the experience of watching it all happen. If you'd asked me about technology when I was fourteen, I would have offered an incredibly embarrassing set of opinions that are still held by grown ass men in San Francisco. About knowledge being power, etc.—ideas recycled from about ten books and then taken out of context. Around 2000 to 2001, I started to get a very bad feeling. It wasn't until 2009 or 2010 that I realized it had gone horribly wrong. This coincided with an acceleration, the process of the internet conquering everything. The effects became more visible. I was in San Francisco at the time. You could see the city change to benefit a rarified group of people. The city changed so fast that they invented the term "hyper-gentrification" to describe what was happening. No previous gentrification was analogous to the block-by-block, cellular transformation of San Francisco. The detrimental impact was obvious, but any time you opened your computer or read the news, it was hosannas about the internet liberating the oppressed people of the world. While the Arab Spring was being reported as an advertisement for Twitter, I could open my door and literally, without exaggeration, see class warfare. But it was a long process, going from being enamored with technological liberation theology, to being very uneasy with it, and then thinking it had destroyed everything.

RR/ An almost-offhand observation Fredric Jameson made about Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* is perhaps apposite here. He said that Foucault's critique of power is so powerful that it can make us feel powerless, so overwhelmed as to be almost incapacitated. One of the responses my students had to *I Hate the Internet* was essentially this: it makes us feel bad and

self-loathing, and we feel worse and less like agents than we did before reading it. This is actually a compliment, but I wonder what you make of that response?

JK/ It is a compliment, but also a huge problem. It's dogged me since the book's release. When you put an "I" at the beginning of a book's title, you own that "I" for years to come. The question I get asked all the time is, "What do we do?" I wrote a novel; I can't solve it. *I Hate the Internet* feels like a black-magic spell. Within months of its release, the internet became a thing that everyone blamed for everything. People are right to blame it for many of our social ills, but $100,000 of ads on Facebook didn't throw an election.

RR/ My answer to them in part was that the book positions us like Howard Beale in *Network*. We're experiencing a radically transformative moment in media history and a primal scream into the void, however futile, is not without catharsis. Someone has to open up the window and shout, "I'm as mad as hell and I'm not going to take this anymore," in order to lighten the mood.

JK/ Yeah, I think that's right. I don't know what good it does in the end. But it's worth saying.

RR/ Indeed, that's the power of one of the last lines of the novel: "I guess it was worth trying."

JK/ It's worth it. You might as well give some punishment back. The book has sold quite a few copies in the US—about fifteen thousand, which for any small-press book is enormous. For a self-published book on a press with no history, it's huge. I've seen places where its rhetoric, or its style, has crept in. There was a moment when an old Facebook executive became a dissident.

If you read what he was saying in speeches and writing in op-eds, it was obvious that he'd read *I Hate the Internet*. It was a pastiche with the humor removed. I read, randomly, a review of a Jonathan Richman album. It was written in the style of *I Hate the Internet*. For a minute, I wondered, *did I write this*? What else can people do except complain? I don't know if it adds up to anything. But it's been good for me. I feel much less worse about all of it than I did when I was writing the book.

But I don't know. I wrote a book critiquing global capitalism and all it did was make rich people love me. Within eight months of its publication, *I Hate the Internet* was turned into tote bags at the Frankfurt book fair.[11]

RR/ My students and I started coming up with different modes of response, one having to do with anger, another with fantasies of disconnection, and a third something like rational technological management—avoid Google, control one's data to the extent that one can, etc.

JK/ It's a multipronged approach. All of these solutions done in the aggregate would be good. It would move things forward. But it's not clear to me that most people care. As I've said, *I Hate the Internet* couldn't have succeeded without its title. It was a thought that everyone had, but if it'd been a truly common opinion, the book would not have succeeded. Where would the shock be? There is a layer of people who care. Some people fall in, some people fall out, and there's a core of the concerned, but it isn't a big slice of society. Certainly nowhere close to a majority. The presence of the Amazon Alexa, and its inescapability in people's houses, tells you how people think. The revealed preference. The problem isn't clever people. It's not the kids in your class. It's their parents. It's their cousins. And those people do not care. This is how these

companies survive and thrive. People don't care. I find it very difficult to blame people for taking unsophisticated positions about very sophisticated issues. Normal people's lives involve an astronomical level of complexity. You cannot expect people with kids and jobs and bills and the crushing accoutrements of everyday life to think about this stuff in any great detail. They don't have the time, and the technology comes with the ultimate advertising slogan: "We will make your life easier." But not thinking about it and not taking a proactive stance is a horrible trap. This is the problem. It's not about clever people.

RR/ This then reintroduces the old question, what is to be done?

JK/ The challenges of modern life require a level of engagement that I'm not sure people have. I don't think that's a flaw of people. The complexity is so overwhelming that maybe our nervous systems can't handle it. If you look at human history, and the way that class and social hierarchies are established, it's not a happy picture. There's probably a biological element that trends toward the necessary conformities of social structure. The technologies of Silicon Valley are built to exploit that. And that's something new.

Instagram can determine whether or not you are an insecure person. If you post a picture of yourself and three hundred people heart it, you aren't shown all the hearts immediately. They're doled out over time. So you have to keep coming back. That's an exploitation of human weakness. Do you blame the person who is weak, or do you blame the person who exploits weakness?

We underestimate the psychic cataclysm of the internet. It happened so fast. It's a lot to expect that people can catch up at the same pace that it's happening. I tried in these two books. I don't think I've done it, but I've gotten close.

RR/ Perhaps it's this generation's LSD, but the difference is there is no one thing we can point to as a tripwire. "The Internet" is a nice metonym for the whole sociotechnical and economical apparatus, but one cannot productively reckon with it as a root cause of anything. Yet at the same time, "it" has had demonstrably material effects on the way we think. It is hard to say this to a writer, but it is anecdotally true that students consume text differently now.

JK/ That's all right with me. I write in fragments. The book about XXXTentacion has done really well when you consider that there's no evidence of its existence apart from a page on Amazon. It was written to take into account those ideas about how we read differently now. Every paragraph is one sentence. It's typeset to resemble Twitter. And it's a book about someone's Twitter. It's a perfect marriage of subject and form. You don't get those opportunities every day. I have a feeling that the book made inroads with kids who otherwise wouldn't be reading. I have no illusions this will translate into audience retention for other projects, but the fact remains. It's done very well for a book that you cannot easily find by searching on either its title or its subject. It's a book that essentially does not exist.

RR/ A new conception of not existing: discoverable only on the fifth page of search results.

JK/ It's entirely Amazon print-on-demand. You can't get it in bookstores. If it had been published with a publicity budget, I probably could have sold five to ten times as many copies. But I didn't want to do it any other way. It felt crass to exploit his death. I didn't write catalog copy. So I put it in the world and let the right people find it if they wanted it. Its audience isn't the people who buy books at Skylight in Los Angeles. These are the kids who've been most impacted by technology and are now supposedly incapable of reading. And yet there they are. Buying my weird shit. On average, it sells about three copies a day. And then some days it sells thirty. And because it's Amazon print-on-demand, it sells in about eight markets across the globe.

RR/ I was imagining that in part you were sympathetic to his story because of the self-made component.

JK/ Yes. Also, remembering myself as a teenager. I was a total maniac. If I were the same fifteen-year-old in 2019, and I had the internet of the now, I would be dead by twenty. There's no question. XXXTentacion is interesting. But the person who's *really* interesting is his ex-girlfriend, Geneva Sativa, who was infamously beaten by him. He had the freak of monster talent. So his intersection with media is less typical. But Geneva's a peripheral figure pulled into the spotlight by the bad decisions we all make when we're nineteen. What did she do to deserve the scrutiny? She dated the wrong boy. If you look at her "life" online, she's an entirely new kind of person, a poor person whose existence is mediated and filtered through corporate platforms of expression. She's exactly the kind of person who never gets written about. There are more people like Geneva than there are people who write books. And the larger group is never thought

of, never discussed. She's fascinating. In a perfect world, the whole book would have been about her.

RR/ Still, it's a remarkable account of XXXTentacion's unfiltered social media presence.

JK/ It's experimental journalism. Da Capo has a book about him scheduled for release. It'll be the definitive source.[12] But from what I've read, it's going to be based on interviews with people who knew him. One thing that I learned while writing *ATTA* is that the worst sources of information are people in close proximity to a famous person. People lie, people mythologize, people misremember media depictions as their own memories. All of that misinformation will seep in. But his Twitter was an original source, one that happened in real time, and one that went deep. A person who becomes massively famous and is relentlessly tweeting long before that's even a hope of success, when they're dirt poor and can't imagine their fate. And those tweets are all still there. There are only two periods of deletion. That's a totally different insight into a person. And it's new. It's never existed before.

I deleted a chapter from the XXX book about his famous mug shot. It's a masterpiece of American photography. There was an analysis of it through Warhol. People have written so much about the paintings from 1960 to 1963, but what I've never seen anyone mention is that they are exercises in practicality. They're paintings in which someone figures out how reproduction interacts with human recognition of mass media imagery. If you take the Marilyn paintings, they demonstrate a person learning how far you can distort an image and have it be recognizable. Warhol decided two things reproduce in mass media: monster beauty and reducible style choices. And he applies the latter to his life: he gets that wig and he wears it for forty years.

That's a great style choice: you don't even need Andy; you can just have the wig. And there's Warhol. And it works in both black-and-white and color. Most reducible style choices don't. Warhol was orthodox Catholic. His church in Pittsburgh had a huge iconostasis, with portraits of the saints that bear no small resemblance to his portraits. And those saints are recognizable by their reductive iconography. St. Peter always has his keys. The XXXTentacion mugshot is a rare moment in which someone at the height of their monster beauty has made very reducible style choices.

This idea is true with writing. Think about every writer who has been really fucking famous. It's reducible style. David Foster Wallace and the headband. Tom Wolfe and the suit. Kurt Vonnegut and the hair. Zadie Smith and the headdress. Alan Moore, the most successful comic book writer in history, is unbelievably talented, but could he have been "Alan Moore" if he didn't look like a frost giant? It's depressing. It suggests something primitive in how people consume culture that's very different from how we conceive people consuming culture. If I tattooed the word MURDER across my forehead, I'd be an iconic writer. It's that simple.

RR/ How do you think about your own consumption?

JK/ The shine on media has worn off. I've reached an end point. The period where I can learn broad lessons from other people's work has ended. Once, I could read anything and gain some knowledge about writing. But it's been a long time. The closest thing to new is Byron Crawford. And that's not so much about writing itself as the idea of a person who will just say anything.

RR/ What do you think the difference is between the voice of your texts, as well as Crawford's, and the politically incorrect, Bill Maher-notion that one is flouting a norm or a taboo?

JK/ If you self-consciously position yourself as a gadfly, it's already gone wrong. As nasty as my books can be, they don't come from a place of self-satisfaction. In *Only Americans Burn in Hell*, no one gets worse treatment than myself. Bill Maher is a very good counterexample: in his film *Religulous*, the critique of religion emerges from a sense of superiority to the people who are religious. As much as I joke in *Only Americans* about the readers not being qualified to review it on Amazon and Goodreads, I don't think some people are better than other people, and certainly not in terms of individual worth measured by the tools we use to gauge social understanding. The books don't come from a place of superiority. If there are moments of overbearing self-righteous smugness, it's always directed at the people whom the reader believes, semi-secretly, are better than them. I'll make fun of Steve Jobs, but I'd never write a book that shit on people because they believe in God. That's the difference. And I think Byron Crawford's the same way. He constantly self-deflates, he's just a dude who works in a factory. It gives him an interesting position. My desire as a writer is to communicate with people who are nothing like me and who may think that I'm completely full of shit.

RR/ I wonder then how you regard the relationship between your work and the New Narrative movement, or even autofiction.

JK/ New Narrative isn't the worst place to situate *I Hate the Internet*. It wasn't conscious. But Kevin Killian and Dodie Bellamy appear in the book and it's loosely veiled autobiographical

fiction about people wandering through San Francisco. The major difference is that the New Narrative writers had a drive to reveal every shameful thing about themselves. Or perhaps just the things that society thought were shameful. *I Hate the Internet* is about revealing all the true shame of San Francisco. The stuff that New Narrative writers revealed, like Kevin fucking everything that moved, wasn't actually shameful. The real shame was always the city's relationship to money.

I had the idea that spontaneous art has the most vitality. It's impossible to be spontaneous in writing, but I thought I could get close by using a first draft with only a little editing. I wrote the first and second chapter, first draft, very close to how they appear in print. They seemed awful, which they of course are, but then I realized that this awfulness could mirror its subject.

RR/ I was thinking as well of the appearance of David Foster Wallace, Bret Easton Ellis, Jonathan Lethem: is it fair to think of you as in dialogue with a certain generation of American authors, or with a certain moment?

JK/ Whether or not people accept it, *American Psycho* is the major American novel of the last twenty-five years—in terms of predicting the creepy relationship people have with pop culture, predicting Trump, its focus on rich people, and the technology of rich people trickling down. I make fun of Wallace because he's, frankly, a terrible writer of fiction. What he reveals is that the reading public are a bunch of size-queens. The novel as twelve-incher. I don't think Lethem has much in common with his contemporaries. He's too expansive. He saw the future. Most writers, imbued with the social capital that Lethem had in the early 2000s, wouldn't have dragged Philip K. Dick into the canon. They would have done mountains of coke and gone to shitty parties and

pretended that they were mini-rockstars. Maybe he did that too. I don't know him well enough to say.

RR/ Maybe there's a natural segue there to the comic book industry, which makes for a powerful and persuasive analogy in both *I Hate the Internet* and *Only Americans Burn in Hell*. In a way what one could say is that what you are doing in these two projects is redeeming comics from their misuse or misappropriation.

JK/ Comics is a very good medium for doing things that other media still can't. People argue that the superhero film appeared when it did because CGI technology caught up with the narratives. But there's a lot of stuff that you can do in comics that you still can't do in film or television. As far as I know, comics is the only medium where a character's thought can be visualized. Try doing that anywhere else and not looking stupid. But comics have a horrible history of people getting completely screwed. I didn't want to redeem comics. I felt irritated that people had stopped talking about what happened to Jack Kirby. There was a point when those injustices, which are the heart of the industry, dominated the discourse. When Marvel became successful at the box office, the dialogue disappeared. The only people still talking about it were cranks. The dark heart was buried. But in America, success is always morality. And then my friend Jeff Lester came up with the idea that the comic book industry and its practices were a perfect metaphor for where we've all ended up. So I stole it. Attributed, but I stole it.

RR/ And then if you were to continue this, the way that Stan Lee gets somehow redeemed and given cameos as compensation.

JK/ When Stan Lee died, you could watch civilization cohering into the lie agreed upon. Stan

Lee did terrible things. He did them when he was young and continued until the day he died. He

would not admit that Steve Ditko created Spider-Man and Doctor Strange. Ditko died several

months before Lee. I didn't write about Ditko in *I Hate the Internet* because I didn't want to piss

him off. He and I occasionally exchanged letters. I don't have a lot. I have a handful. But he's a

missing piece in that book. There's a lot about Ayn Rand and there's a lot about the comic book

industry, but there's nothing about Ditko, the industry's most famous adherent of Rand. With

most people I wouldn't have cared about upsetting them, but Ditko got screwed so hard by

Marvel, and because he was not acquiescent about that screwing, he became a figure of derision.

And he wasn't like Jack Kirby. He wasn't surrounded by a loving wife and family. Ditko was an

old man in a midtown building who had created an intellectual property that generated billions of

dollars. Truly created it, whole-cloth, and got nothing. If you calculate the page rates Marvel

paid in the 1960s, Ditko probably made $20,000 from Spider-Man. And that's the model for

social media. Everyone creating content that is valuable in its aggregate. What's the value of a

tweet? We have no idea. But a billion tweets? The stock market will tell us. At least the comic

book creators got paid.

RR/ On the subject of publishing, could you describe the work you are doing with your press,

We Heard You Like Books?

JK/ I'm about to publish the American version of *Only Americans Burn in Hell*, which I tried to

avoid. The UK publisher, Serpent's Tail, wanted me to do a simultaneous release with their

edition, but it felt pointless. Everyone would have ignored the book. What I didn't expect is that reviews in the UK would be overwhelmingly positive, and that the *Times*, the international paper of record, would give it a rave review. With that body of criticism, there's a compelling case for how the book can be published. But who knows? Maybe it'll be a huge waste of everyone's time and money.

I try to release a cassette on the press to accompany all of my books. With *I Hate the Internet*, there was a game for the ZX Spectrum, an old microcomputer that stored data as an audio signal on cassette. I think it insulated the book. Whatever else they wanted to say about the writer, they couldn't pretend as if it wasn't coming from someone nerdy enough to make a game for a system no one uses. For *The Future Won't Be Long* (2017), I gave out one hundred copies of a "we heard you like books" sampler. Do you remember the Fisher-Price PixelVision cameras, which record their signal on audio cassette? As far as I can tell, the B-side of that sampler is the first commercially released pixel vision film. And then Mike Kleine and I decided to do a black metal soundtrack for *Only Americans Burn in Hell*. It's the worst thing imaginable. It's so bad.

RR/ And here it comes: which writers do you particularly enjoy at the moment?

JK/ I read a lot of nonfiction. I like Javier Cercas and Emmanuel Carrère. Masha Gessen's book about the Boston Marathon bombing was amazing—its final pages are shocking enough that the *New York Times* dragged out Janet Napolitano and made her write a scoffing review.

I'm in the funny position of publishing the people I like to read. We just did a fist-fucking gay porno novel by William E. Jones called *I'm Open to Anything* (2019). Jones is my best friend and just about the smartest person in California. Also a very good writer. Fiona

Helmsley—we did a book of essays with her that didn't do as well as it should have—is

astonishing. Byron Crawford (who gets a mention in *Only Americans Burn in Hell*) is the best. I

wrote a review of his new book for *FAZ* in Germany. He's probably the biggest influence on

Only Americans Burn in Hell. Iphgenia Baal has never gotten her due. She's a little similar to the

British psychogeographers I was into in the 2000s (Alan Moore, Iain Sinclair, J. G. Ballard), but

she's Black and a woman. The flâneur is a white dude wandering through a city. People don't

want to situate you in that club if you lack a penis and your father is from Suriname. The book of

hers that I published, *Death & Facebook* (2018), is an attempt to wrestle with the very complex

issue of remembering the dead in an era of social media. It's entirely written in vernacular. She's

fantastic. Mike Kleine is a really good writer who should have a bigger following. But he's

doomed in the same way as Iphgenia: a Black intellectual who refuses to write about what white

people would consider "Black issues." About two years ago, I did an event with Anelise Chen,

who wrote an excellent book about failure in sports. There's a lot of people out there. The ones

that I like the most are the ones who cannot make that leap over the wall into making a living.

RR/ On that question of making the leap over the wall is your wonderful *Frieze* piece, "Reading

Room" (October 2013), which documents a moment earlier in this decade when an illegal squat

in the Lower Haight district of San Francisco was used for literary readings.[13] If I tried to situate

you in institutional terms, in a field, I would say on the one hand, if we take the squat as

emblematic, you belong to a moment that has passed, when literary culture could be understood

as an underground force, with a countercultural, antiestablishment ethos. But on the other hand,

you belong to a world that has not yet come fully into being but of which we can see glimpses—

and writing and trying to think about which forms would be adequate for this new technological

environment. This makes you a particularly sharp critic of the contemporary moment because you can step back from it; you are not immersed in it fully.

JK/ It all goes back to Rhode Island. I've always been between two worlds. Because of my father, I was fluent with computers when no one was. I attended an alternative education arts high school. During the day, I read African American women writers and made shitty art. By night, I'd be programming in C++. If you'd asked me at the time which of those two worlds would have cultural currency in the future, I'd have said the arts. I never saw myself as someone who'd be working with computers. This is the definition of betting on the wrong horse. Tech was the future, the arts were the past.

Rhode Island is a strange fucking place. Almost every person in that state was either an immigrant, the child of immigrants, or the grandchild of immigrants. The way that rich people lived was almost indistinguishable from the working poor. The houses might be bigger, but everyone had the same goofy accent. It gave me a hopeless misunderstanding of class in America, which has plagued my interaction with publishing, the most class-bound and conservative of the culture industries. Until I started meeting other writers, it never occurred to me that anyone could see writing as a vehicle for social mobility. But that's what motivates most literary writers. Solidifying a position in the upper-middle class.

There are probably four Turkish people in Rhode Island. So what was I? What was my father? No one in the state even knew where Turkey was. My mother is Irish American and part of a tight-knit Irish American, conservative Catholic family. These are the people who, until about 1975, thought that going into a Protestant church was a mortal sin. Imagine them knowing that your father is a Muslim. Until 9/11, it never occurred to me to see any of this for what it was.

Rhode Island was a place where, as long as you weren't Black, you could be almost anything and function as white. My dad was white until 9/11. Then his neighbors wanted to beat the shit out of him. So everything changed.

This ever-present straddling of two worlds has helped the writing. The real moment of understanding was *ATTA*, even though it took another five years before it manifested again in *I Hate the Internet*. The idea that you could be a serious writer and be free of the class pretentions of American literature: that the psychological insights of fiction could be used in the service of writing about the ephemeral junk that is the preponderance of our lives, and that because I come from a place where I was disconnected from the groupthink of the American arts, I could do it in a different way than literary novels about sad people in overpriced apartments using social media. And this, of course, has enormous currency. Tech was and is the future. All the writers and artists who were my heroes in high school turned out to be the losers of history.

If you have each foot in a different world, you tend to fall over. Nothing is more uncomfortable than being without a tribe when your society has gone tribal. My fractious relationship with publishing has caused endless grief. I used to think that this problem would resolve itself when I demonstrated that I could earn out. But that's not true. Publishing serious writing is not a business, it's a fig leaf for publishing Bill O'Reilly and a way for the upper-middle class to impose its arbitrary values on a populace that loathes the upper-middle class. *ATTA* has sold a huge number of books, *I Hate the Internet* has moved over 100,000 copies worldwide, *Do Every Thing Wrong!* doesn't exist and has sold in the thousands, and I still can't get published in America unless I do it myself. *Only Americans Burn in Hell* was rejected by more presses, big and small, than I can count. On the other hand, perhaps using the text to denounce the Nazi ties of my former publishers was not a successful sales strategy.

I'm thinking there might not be fiction anymore. That if there is a future, it's going to be nonfiction, even though it will employ all of the same tricks.

RR/ Could that be the argument—that part of the appeal of the superhero and fantasy worlds is that we continually need to move the window of fiction because the hyperreal has so eclipsed everything that we have to look elsewhere for the truly strange?

JK/ I think that's right, that's part of it. I never would have guessed that *The Matrix* would be a major touchstone of American culture. Its influence is shocking. The second half of the 1990s will not let us go. Who would have thought that the O. J. Simpson trial would be one of the most important things to happen in American life? I'm reading Lawrence Schiller's book about O. J.[14] It's ghostwritten, the same technique he used with Norman Mailer: harvest resource material and research and then dump it on a writer. Every night, Robert Kardashian went home and recorded an audio-diary. Schiller bought Kardashian's tapes. The book is Kardashian-heavy. But it's a transmission from a different universe. People who've become dominant in popular culture are present, but they're shadow versions of themselves. There's an amazing scene from the day of the car chase. O. J. leaves the suicide note, Kardashian realizes he has to go read it on TV. He's freaking out, sweating, thinking that this is the end of everything, that he's about to expose himself as a fraud on international television. He steps in front of the cameras and it's like a fish to water. The fluidity with media is hereditary, something his kids got. The book is a prophecy about the future. O. J. tried to kill himself in Kim Kardashian's bedroom. The murders of Ron Goldman and Nicole Brown are the twenty-first century being inaugurated with a human sacrifice.

RR/ So absurdity is the only way to meet it?

JK/ Yes! And that is a huge flaw in everyone's internet books. If you are writing about something that is fundamentally stupid and you will not allow yourself to be stupid, you are missing a key aspect. You cannot diagnose the stupidity of animated GIFs by being clever. You need dumb shit. I think that the difference between those two books (*I Hate the Internet* and *Only Americans Burn in Hell*) and everything else is my willingness to be stupid.

RR/ There has to be a more precise way to describe it than stupidity, though.

JK/ I know it's inadequate, but I like stupid. It's unclear to me that there are enduring social structures in place that will allow us—the collective, everyone—to get to where we can describe the world that we are in. The groups of people who have typically constructed ideas of the present are under threat.

RR/ Many people will make this argument, but this is the tragedy of investigative journalism, that a recounting of facts, the realistic mode, cannot do the same work now. It cannot hold the public imaginary in a meaningful way.

JK/ I did a review, again for *FAZ*, of Seymour Hersh's autobiography, which I liked a lot. In the last couple of years, there's been a general sense that his pieces have become less reliable. By virtue of being Seymour Hersh, he's held to a level of veracity that no one expects from other

reporters. If you read the newer pieces, it's clear that he is not making anything up, but the technique has failed. When you're in the 1960s and people in the Pentagon or random radicals have a tip, those people all share an agreed-upon social good. When you're interviewing people in the Middle East, that idea of a society-wide social good doesn't exist. There is a tribe and the tribe is the unit of social cohesion and the tribe's interests are preeminent. America has become a lot more tribal in the last fifteen years. And when that happens, the normal methods of journalism don't work. Journalism has never had the greatest track record, but Seymour Hersh did. And those pieces are not working. It's not because he's an old man in his dotage. It's because the technique can't work in a tribal society.

RR/ One would have thought that the internet would have facilitated moving in between tribes because very rarely do people find one online community and stick to it over time. We are used to finding new communities, groups, and feeds even within a single platform, so it's remarkable that we have both a proliferation of communities on the one hand and on the other hand a radical bifurcation between only two or three.

JK/ This is what happens when the platforms of expression are designed to make everyone inflammatory. Trump won because semi-rational debate was a twentieth-century notion. He grasped that the internet had created a new form of dialogue. The dynamic plays out on every message board. A rational person makes a twenty-paragraph argument for atheism, and then a teenager—and I've been that teenager—comes in and says, "you're a bag of dicks." The original poster now has two options. Respond and look pathetic in their attempt to sound above it all. Or not respond and look pathetic in defeat. Trump intuited that you could take this approach and

impose it on other forms of debate. You lessen the other by the simple fact of your presence. The debates between Trump and Clinton were reported wrong. After each debate it was: "She wiped the floor with him!" All I could think was, "Did we not see the same thing?"

RR/ On the subject of bastardy, could you talk a little bit about the genesis of the idea to use a seventeenth-century romance, Richard Johnson's *The most pleasant history of Tom a Lincoln*, as a source text for *Only Americans Burn in Hell*?

JK/ After the abject commercial failure of *The Future Won't Be Long*, I decided to retrench and do something in the spirit of *I Hate the Internet*. But I didn't want to write another book about tech. If Alan Moore can repurpose characters, why can't I? So I looked around for historical fantasy characters. When I found *Tom a Lincoln*, it was gold. Johnson's Fairy Land stuff is identical to *Wonder Woman*. The film had only been out for about two months. Post-Trump madness had cloaked the film with a righteousness that seemed like the heights of naïve liberal consumerism.

One of the bets I made, which paid out, even if it took years, was the Medieval and Renaissance degree. Barring the science, e.g., the sun revolving around the earth, Medieval and Renaissance thought is only another way of describing the world—and that description of the world, as well as the method of describing it, is not inherently invalid, even if it's fallen out of fashion. A way of differentiating oneself would be to avoid reading contemporary books of philosophy and theory and instead read what was the contemporary thought of 1200 or 1300. It left a huge mark on the work. My books come from an invented tradition of Medieval and Renaissance philosophy and junk pop culture combined with an incredible skepticism.

Before I went to NYU, I spent a year at the New School's Eugene Lang College. Aaron Garrett, who now teaches philosophy at Boston University, did a class on the literature of the English Civil War. That stuff had a heavy impact on everything. There's no way *Only Americans Burn in Hell* could have been written if I hadn't taken that class when I was seventeen. That's where I first encountered the power of early modern English.

I remain, alas, a very skeptical person, despite *Only Americans* becoming a Christian book.

RR/ Which comes as a shock, I have to say.

JK/ That's the whole point. For about 1,200 years of Western civilization, all art was Christian art. And then Christian art disappeared. It's the most discredited thing in the arts. And that was, obviously, the appeal. Working in the lowest form. The book has two competing ideas of Christianity. One is that the Celia, the Fairy Queen, goes on Albert Schweitzer's quest for the historical Jesus. But then the narrator, the "I," is making an argument for John Dominic Crossan's idea of Jesus as a Jewish peasant Cynic. These competing visions of Jesus don't resolve themselves in the book. There is a distinct possibility that *I Hate the Internet* is an irresponsible book, that rather than responding to the horror of the internet, it only mirrors and enhances it. *Only Americans* starts with that same strategy as *I Hate the Internet* and then, slowly, denatures that rhetoric and our aggro national dialogue into a suggestion of human kindness. And hopefully, by virtue of being the big bad ultra-negative writer who is now arguing for Christian charity, it makes it look as if I've had a nervous breakdown.

RR/ Or else it makes it look as if the book is part or even ahead of the zeitgeist with the resurgence of a leftist liberation theology, which is coming back.

JK/ Yeah, well. Catholicism is huge. It's big in a way that we can't see in America. Despite his many flaws, Pope Francis is fascinating. If nothing else, he's a one-man history of how brutal Argentina was through its different eras in the twentieth century. I think America is going to end up significantly more Catholic and Christian than its white upper class imagines. And it's not going to be a Christianity that has much to do with our current standards. Or the dreams of liberals. It's coming.

RR/ You have a 9/11 novel, an internet novel, and *Only Americans Burn in Hell* is the Trump book. That's a trifecta.

JK/ It's horrible. Would that I could do anything else. The next book, if it happens, will be nonfiction, a biography of the Swiss banker François Genoud. He was a child of the bourgeoisie who joined the National Front, met Hitler, worked for German intelligence during the war, became the literary agent for the deceased Nazi high command, founded a bank that moved money into the Algerian war of independence, became embroiled in international terror operations (Carlos the Jackal, PFLP, PLO), continued to be a literary agent, financed the defense of Adolf Eichmann and Klaus Barbie, and was a mentor to Ahmed Huber, a Swiss convert to Islam who was on the board of a bank that apparently financed 9/11. Then, in 1993, someone tried to blow Genoud up. Then he killed himself three years later at the age of eighty.

Genoud became a fascist when he was nineteen. He never had an identity crisis, never wavered in his jejune nonsense. People who don't have identity crises are the ones who dominate society. A lack of doubt is an incredibly powerful tool. If you're a person with a life of unexpected and overwhelming complexity, it's wonderful when Big Daddy tells you what to eat, whom to fuck, and where to shit. As long as he doesn't overreach and oppress people with something like the Stasi, then the vast majority of people will take it. Why else are they on social media?

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[1] "Alan Moore interviews Jarett Kobek," YouTube video, 44:09, posted by "Serpent's Tail," April 12, 2019, https://youtu.be/PcK-Hb29-2M.

[2] Jarett Kobek, *I Hate the Internet* (Los Angeles: We Heard You Like Books, 2016), 24.

[3] Jarett Kobek, *ATTA* (New York: Semiotext(e), 2011).

[4] Jarett Kobek, *Do Every Thing Wrong! XXXTentacion Against the World* (Los Angeles: We Heard You Like Books, 2019), Kindle edition.

[5] Jarett Kobek, *Only Americans Burn in Hell* (London: Serpent's Tail, 2019).

[6] Ibid., 280.

[7] Ibid., 12.

[8] *Sullivan's Travels*, directed by Preston Sturges (1941).

[9] *Only Americans Burn in Hell.,* 31.

[10] See Zadie Smith, "Generation Why?" *The New York Review of Books*, November 25, 2010, https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2010/11/25/generation-why/.

[11] For the launch of the German translation of *I Hate the Internet* at the Frankfurt book fair in October 2016, Fischer-Verlag printed three thousand tote bags as a promotion for the book. For documentation of the display, see "Fischer Verlag launch of *I Hate the Internet* German Translation Frankfurt Book Fair 10/19/16," YouTube video, 1:04, posted by "We Heard You Like Books," July 30, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rsxEQf8zNks.

[12] See Jonathan Reiss, *Look at Me! The XXXTentacion Story* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2020).

[13] Jarett Kobek, "Reading Room: Gentrification and Independent Publishing in San Francisco," *Frieze*, October 18, 2013, https://www.frieze.com/article/reading-room.

[14] O. J. Simpson, *I Want to Tell You: My Response to Your Letters, Your Messages, Your Questions* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1995).

Bios:
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