Postcolonial Style, Economic Hauntology and the Rise of Dark Academia

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Dark academia takes many illicit routes as both an aesthetic and a subculture that is primarily focused on the glorification and romanticisation of white upper-class British society and liberal universalism. Scenes of cloistered education taking place within neoclassical Greek and Gothic architectures become the setting for a particular type of amnesia regarding the Early Modern period, when Britain, alongside France and the Netherlands, joined the commercial venture of trafficking enslaved Africans. In the British context, institutions of higher learning such as Oxford and Cambridge, as well as Harvard and Yale, became spaces for elites to receive education in service to that trade's administration, thus consolidating, firstly, their ecclesiastical and later scientific, social, and economic supremacy. These hierarchical institutions focused on a classical curriculum of Latin, Greek and philosophy, serving as instruments of the church and state in this endeavour. These universities relied upon donations from wealthy planters and merchants whose fortunes directly derived from enslavement, which in turn funded the education of the sons of colonial elites. Eventually, it penetrated into the very fabric of those inhabiting these frameworks.

Kai Toussaint Marcel gives the example of madras, as an object of material culture that takes on this valance in the United States. In 1718, a donation of five bolts of fabric was made to the Collegiate School of New Haven, Connecticut. 'The donor, whose name the school now bears, pledged a very large amount of money and goods to the then-desperate institution, in addition to the valuable fabric' (2022). This was not the beginning of Elihu Yale's bequest to the College; in '1713 he sent hundreds of books on theology, literature, medicine, history and architecture, a portrait of King George I, fine textiles and other valuable gifts.' (Pandey 2024) At the time, 'Yale served as the all-powerful governor-president of the British East India Company in Madras in southern India (present-day Chennai) in the 17th Century and it was a gift of about £1,162 ($1,486) that earned him the honour of having the university named after him.' (Pandey 2024). What makes this story remarkable isn't how relatively little he paid for this honour, but rather Yale's notorious involvement in enslavement. "Known even in his own time as corrupt and cruel, Yale was famous for his greed, which amounted to perpetrating financial scams, and with his common practice of illegally abducting and enslaving local children, even flouting the legal limits of the British slave trade so heinously that he had to be sanctioned by the British Government." (Marcel 2022). It is ironic then that madras would eventually become a staple of "Ivy League" style centuries later. (Marcel 2022).

Some 260 years later, shorn of its illicit connotation, madras literally becomes the framing device for *The Official Preppy Handbook*, which implores its readers not only of its significance but also of its delicacy. Its author, Lisa Birnbach (1980), tells us as early as page 16 that "shopping for madras" is a rite associated with "the Prep child's indoctrination," and forms an element of their proper schooling as well as ancestral allegiance. In a section entirely devoted to the care of the fabric, Birnbach asserts that "there is one fabric that is quintessentially Preppy, it is madras. True madras, of course. The real thing is one of the oldest fabrics in the cotton trade, a fine, hand-loomed cotton that is

imported from Madras, India. What sets true madras apart from imitations is that it 'bleeds'; the murky colors — navy blue, maroon, mustard yellow— of its distinctive plaids are imparted by vegetable dyes that are guaranteed to run." (1980, 120). The hand of the fabric's maker remains invisible within this account, but the presumption is that it, too, in some way authentically 'bleeds' and is prone to both obscuration and the fleeing of its course.

Birnbach continues, "since the colors are so unstable, madras has to be treated very carefully. Shirts, shorts, and items that are not going to be dry-cleaned must be soaked in cold salt water for at least twenty-four hours before they are washed the first time. This sets the dyes. Then they really should be washed separately for months thereafter, because the colors will still run. Old madras takes on a lovely soft look and feel with many washings (the crux of the fabric's appeal to Preps), though jackets, which are dry-cleaned, of course, maintain that sharp plaid." (1980, 120). Madras is unstable and must be disciplined to maintain that sharp plaid. All the ingredients are there for us to believe that the fundamentals of fashion require conservatism, neatness, and attention to detail, implying that all of this long-wearing is a studious, disciplinary business. Birnbach's eleven references to madras that appear throughout the book "are layered in a turducken-like configuration of cultural appropriations and hegemony" (Marcel 2022).

Marcel's remark provides an ideal starting point for analysing patterns of wealthy white elites and tracing back in time to find other mementoes from the colonial era in what we now typically call the long eighteenth century. These elements have come to haunt discussions of whiteness from the late twentieth century onwards, when preppy madras was linked to a break in the pattern of wealth favouring white transatlantic coastal elites that began to falter significantly with late 1970s postcolonial trends towards globalisation. In tandem with that, the dark origins of ancestral fortunes built from slavery, linked to the cotton trade involving Indian, African, British, and American colonies, were obscured by the rise of a neoliberal transatlantic, transactional culture.

Birnbach's book suggests that the preppies' merit is demonstrated through adhering to specific behaviours, such as knowing the proper etiquette or having appropriate manners, but also hints that preppies will have to be more overtly ambitious than their ancestors and merit-focused to keep up with a new class of wealth. The effortlessly insouciant preppy she offers up finds itself dwelling alongside a new class of wealth that is entering their midst, one that appears to openly celebrate effort. A system that rewards privilege while pretending to value hard work, however, will only allow the broader cultural shifts toward market-oriented individualism to go so far, and the idea of privilege as something one has acquired, a characteristic of the neoliberal era that followed, as the exclusionary nature of "Prep" culture will nonetheless persist.

At a time when the British were forcing their way into India and goods out of it, the Americans had another Asian nation in their sights for commercial exploitation. One might say that its first brush with "Preps" took place with Commodore Matthew Perry's arrival and the subsequent forced opening of Japan's commercial sector in the 1850s. Perry, a direct descendant of Mayflower passengers, staged repeated military incursions into Japan between 1852 and 1854 to topple the Tokugawa military government. At the time, it was one of the world's wealthiest and most powerful governments, alongside the Mughals in India, the Savafids in Persia, and the equally anti-foreign Qing in China, and had successfully enforced a sakoku, or "closed country" policy, to isolate Japan's culture and economy from the rest of the world for the previous two and a half centuries. Following its downfall, the country was plunged into years of chaos and social upheaval until 1868, when reform-minded samurai took control of the government under the leadership of Emperor Meiji and sought to adopt Western technologies and lifestyles as a means of staving off further attempts at colonisation by America and Europe. This led to the so-called Meiji Restoration, a period whose effects reverberated well into the twentieth century, as the same ethos of preserving national stability through Westernisation prevailed.

Japan entered World War I on the side of the Allied Powers due to its existing alliance with the United Kingdom. It saw its entry as an opportunity to expand its imperial reach and assert dominance in East Asia and the Pacific. The victorious, economically prosperous postwar period of the 1920s ushered in the concepts "mobo" and "moga" (modern boys and modern girls), with all aspects of the Anglo-American "Prep" aesthetic being fully embraced. "The boys wore their hair slicked back and donned wide-leg 'trumpet pants', while the girls adopted silky, boyish skirts - much like the flappers across the Pacific" (Muzquiz 2019).

The American occupation of Japan after the Second World War, a period from 1945 to 1952, ushered in a second wave of cultural imperialism as American-style aesthetics once again began to proliferate in Japan. Those who came of age in the austere years immediately following Japan's defeat in World War II wanted their now affluent offspring to play a pivotal role in Japan's newly emerging consumer society. They looked to America for inspiration on how these youth could gain such an advantage. On 28 April 1964, a new magazine called *Heibon Punch* appeared on Japanese newsstands. The cover illustration depicted four boys dressed in the style of American Ivy League students, wearing blazers, short cotton trousers, loafers, and sharply parted Kennedy haircuts, as they chatted with another boy in a red sports car. *Punch*'s pages instructed teenagers on how to dress in this so-called 'Ivy' style (Marx). Once again, Madras fabric appeared on the scene, becoming a defining staple within the wardrobes of aspirational young men, who paired their blazers with cotton button-down shirts and chino pants, and completed the look with 'penny' loafers. There was something distinctly anthropological about the way this look was approached from the offing, as the press dubbed these teenagers "the Miyuki Tribe (miyuki-zoku)" (Marx). This was based on the fact that those dressed in these clothes started "to park themselves on Miyuki Street and stay all day, to see and be seen" (Marx) The term zoku means

"tribe" in Japanese, but the postwar usage connoted a delinquent subculture. (Marx).

W. David Marx observes that what distinguished the Miyuki Tribe was that "it learned to dress directly from the mass media - a youth brigade drafted straight from the models in *Heibon Punch*." The ranks of teens who were attracted to the phenomenon threw off the term 'Miyuki Tribe' and redefined themselves as 'Ivy'. In doing so, they emulated the sartorial values of their urbane ancestors who, in the 1870s, cut their hair short to imitate the style of their Emperor, or who wore British-style suits to work from the 1890s onwards. They were not rebels nor barbarians, but rather part of a long lineage of Japan's middle classes, who eagerly joined the elites by adopting Western customs in dress and taking style leadership from the upper classes. Kensuke Ishizu, the progenitor of the Ivy League look in Japan, was from the former, pretending to be the latter - meaning he was a classic "Prep".

Ishizu was educated at Meiji University, trawling its corridors in "a three-piece suit of brown-green tweed - at the cost of half a professor's monthly salary- paired with white-and-brown saddle shoes"(Marx). Continuing along in his gilded path of life, in March 1932, "Ishizu was married in a high-collar morning coat and a custom-ordered ascot" (Marx). He continued his pattern of appropriation well into the 1930s, relocating to the Chinese port city of Tianjin to become sales director at a department store, and soon took over clothing manufacture and design. During this stint, "Ishizu frequented British tailors to learn trade secrets (naturally, he was fluent in English), heard war news at the local Jewish club, and bet on jai alai in the Italian concession" (Marx). Through these networks, when the Japanese postwar economy eventually rebounded in the late 1950s, Ishizu knew how to capitalise on the new Japan, where everyone aspired to emulate American lifestyles, because he had done so previously with the British within his own "Preppy" persona cultivated at the turn of the twentieth century. From the start, it was necessary to break Ivy down

into a set of dos and don'ts, with clothing playing a key role in shaping a distinct Japanese version of a "Preppy" identity. However, it was not until Ishizu green-lit an exorbitantly expensive trip to the East Coast in 1965, to get some research on the actual schools of the Ivy League, that the phenomenon that became *Take Ivy* was born.

When the eight-person team that Ishizu assembled for the task arrived in the US in 1965, they were stunned by the dissonance between real Ivy League style and the Japanese understanding of Ivy. The original Ivy style was by now long gone; American students in the mid-60s didn't carry attaché cases or wear saddle shoes. The resplendent sartorial formality of Japan's Ivy was nowhere to be seen. Initially, the crew was dismayed that no students wore the three-piece suits that were supposed to be the de facto Ivy League uniform. They had to revise their approach fundamentally. By recalling the first decade of the twentieth century, when "Japan's rulers attended bureaucratic meetings, banquets, and gala balls in three-piece suits and Napoleonic military uniforms", Ishizu and his team found their answer: to focus not on capturing the form, so much as the social practices that defined it (Marx). As a result, the finished product of Stay Ivy resembles less a fashion sales catalogue and more a sociological study. "The final portion of the book was entirely devoted to summarising those indelible elements of Ivy style and giving definitions for various must-have Ivy pieces. Other sections are devoted to explaining the differences between the major Ivy League universities and the rules and fanbases of the big campus sports. The book even goes on to explain the various neighborhoods worth knowing about, examples end up including Madison Avenue and the shops around Cambridge, Massachusetts" (Muzquiz 2019).

What *Take Ivy* achieves is the construction of a world where what is accurate or even relevant cedes ground to what is consciously desired in a way that, in many ways, anticipates the aesthetic environment of 1980s catalogue buying and 2020s social media marketing. To espouse and emulate what may never have existed: a culture and post-adolescent

white, affluent British manhood that remained wholly detached from its colonial entanglements, as though imperial Western fashion and customs had entered society through the male elite and trickled down to the white working classes, rather than flooded out to the would-be elites of the modern, colonised world.

Whilst the book's emergence coincided with a period of American dominance, importing and adopting this image to suit Japanese tastes created "a kind of 'sartorial kayfabe' - a performance of an 'authentic' style that was, in fact, a Japanese-manufactured reality" (Yow 2023). The irony is that it was this version of a white verisimilitude that was then re-internalised within the contours of American design, through figures like Ralph Lauren, who were subsequently influenced by the hyper-stylised, archived version of Ivy Style refined in Japan. Adding to this is Ralph Lauren (formerly Lifshitz)'s Jewish heritage as a first-generation American whose parents emigrated to New York from Belarus in 1939. The basis of his brand is reimagining identity and belonging in America from the perspective of an Eastern European subaltern who was excluded from that world as a youth. Lauren's brand embodies an aspirational vision of American style, similar to *Stay Ivy*. Its goal is not merely to capture and adopt the essence of the White Anglo-Saxon Protestant elite, but to enable others to leverage it socially for their own benefit by recognising it as a highly constructed concept identity.

In mid-century New York, "largely Jewish merchant tailors and retailers imported cloth, especially Scottish tweeds, or garments from Great Britain, organized cutting and sewing in a combination of factories and workshops, and used Jewish, Italian, and later Hispanic workers, before marketing to an initially largely white, Anglo-Protestant privileged clientele" (Nothmann 2023, 751). Like their Japanese counterparts, for Jews, 'sartorial affect in the form of Ivy style became a critical component in the Jewish occupation of space, the assertion of belonging, and the signification of status and identity' (Nothmann 2023, 751).

Ultimately, "the Jewish relationship with Ivy League culture remained fraught, colored by discrimination, anxiety, aspiration, and desire. The gray flannel sack suit, the herringbone tweed, the Weejun loafer, and the oxford button-down were markers of status, identification, and belonging, however fragile" (Nothmann 2023, 750). This fragility distorted timelines. During Japan's postwar economic recovery, which, for all practical purposes, remained under U.S. influence, it was crucial to persuade the Japanese public that Americans dressed in this manner.

What was not foreseen at the time was how profound an influence this would have on Lisa Birnbach's later work. Birnbach, like Lauren, was a first-generation Jewish American whose German father had immigrated to Mandatory Palestine before World War II and later to the United States. Birnbach attended the Birch Wathen Lenox School from 1962 to 1971 and the Riverdale Country School (class of 1974). She went on to study at Barnard College of Columbia University for her first year, before transferring to Brown University, where she graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree with Honours in Semiotics in 1978. Her book aimed to demonstrate to a popular readership in the 1980s, not only that some Americans continued to dress in this manner, but that those who worried about Japan as a rising economic rival should be assured that they could not only maintain, but also gain cultural superiority by emulating the long-standing white cultural mores she herself had long been taught. In the way Take Ivy pursued a vision of America that did not exist for a Japanese audience, Birnbach, at least as it was perceived, created a phenomenon where *The Preppy Handbook* became a style prototype for those aspiring to upward mobility. After the success of her publication, Birnbach worked as a technical consultant on the movie *Dead Poets Society* (1989), an American coming-of-age drama set in 1959, at Welton Academy, a fictional Episcopalian all-male preparatory boarding school in Vermont, that became a hallmark of dark academia. Their admired teacher, a Welton alumnus who studied English Literature at Cambridge, John Keating,

encourages his students to "seize the day", referencing the Latin expression carpe diem. In the context of the 1980s audiences, it could just as easily be read as a neoliberal marketing slogan.

Just as *Take Ivy* institutionalised a particular vision of reality at a time of radical economic transition, so too did the rise of brands such as J. Crew, Ralph Lauren, Tommy Hilfiger, and L.L.Bean institutionalise what would become known as neoliberalism. Collectively, the marketing mystique of all of them is owed to styling and art direction first established by Take Ivy. Birnbach equally credits *Take Ivy* as the inspiration for her satirical work, which in short order became institutionalised as a sartorial benchmark. As Matt Yow observes,

> if you thought culture could not be manufactured, this book corrects that presumption. Culture is not an ethereal and chaotic idea-entity with no apparent driver at the wheel. This is intentional staged culture export. The scaffolding of our current fashion sensibilities are someone else's proposition of an unreality turned reality - a kayfabe of fashion. Fashion is always a costume but in this case - Kenzuke Ishizu's *Take Ivy* -it has turned the idea of style into cultural cosplay (2023).

In this scene, as Birnbach observed, "the British have a lot to answer for - Shetland sweaters, Harris tweeds, Burberrys, tartan, regimental ties … primary colours and brilliant pastels are worn by men and women alike, in preposterous combinations. In some subcultures, hot pink might be considered a little peculiar; preppies take it for granted" (1980, 122). Daniel R. Smith explains that this, "colour has a particular mythological history in the British gentry enclave of the public school" and more generally, colour as indicative of national-racial, indeed colonial, "crossover" that allows for the emergence of a particular "palette" to emerge that "delves into a shared colonial history in elite colours which are vibrant and conspicuous" (Smith

2014, n.p.). If "the shared colour schemes of colonialists and colonialized allows gentry to be reformed in a manner which preserves British gentry's precedential position yet retains an aesthetic appealing to the wider cultural landscape of contemporary globalisation", it could also be said that dark academia roots itself in the obscuration of those encounters with classes and races that so contrast with themselves as to become the stuff of myth over which capital must easily triumph (Smith 2014, n.p.).

If old money must cede its rights to the multinational corporation, it is no less fearsome for that imposition. The joy of dark academia comes from any understanding that you are excluded from its premises. Through it, one is re-realising that what has 'come before' and is present in the 'new' in academia is its 'implicit claims to power, authority and stature' that remain as ever, 'entrenched in our understanding of the white-British (upper)middle class male' as what remains desirable about Western civilisation, 'even if their days of precedential position have 'faded' into myth' (Smith 2014, n.p.). Perhaps it is no coincidence, then, that Dark Academia emerged as a genre of speculative fiction in 1992 with Donna Tartt's novel *The Secret History*, which explored white American themes and addressed issues specific to the white American experience during the late twentieth century. The story begins in 1983, when the narrator, Richard Papen, leaves his home in California to attend the fictional Hampden College in Vermont. The novel's setting reflects Tartt's own experiences in the 1980s at Bennington College, which served as inspiration for Hampden; thus, we are again in the pseudo-spatial-temporal territory of *Stay Ivy* as a stylistic confection reflective of the cultural conservatism and countercultural movements of the decade, with students seeking to reject mainstream values even as an academic environment occupies them, focuses their attention on an Anglophilic curriculum of 'Classics' such the metanarrative itself shows off its own American white late capitalist imperially inspired-cred by plagiarising Euripides.

We are told from the start that Richard, the only white working-class student featured among the book's main characters, came to Hampden

simply because it looked great in the brochure pictures. He ended up studying Classics because the students were just so attractive, wealthy, and intelligent, alluring. Richard himself is cast as a Greek mythology nerd with the basic media literacy necessary to become an admirer of the most important figures within a broader academic atmosphere, which precisely surrounds him, fulfilling those same fantasies of both exclusion and transgression into an elite to which they do not and cannot belong. The violence, the incest, the substance abuse, and the disregard for human life that takes place there serve a perceived secret history for which participant observer fans are meant to be temporarily drawn. The time, once again, is out of joint. Influencers claim the novel for their "dark academia" aesthetic, basing outfits on the different characters and wistfully fantasising about attending the fictional Hampden College, a place where, in the first line, the scene of a true crime is revealed. The coincidence of those narratives is consequential because *The Secret History*, very much like its cultural predecessor *The Preppy Handbook*, is conceived as a satire of elitism, of the self-conscious banalities of evil that rich white kids get away with because of their privilege, only for it to be quickly hailed as 'a modern Bible' for that very same demographic.

Within this same cultural matrix, the fictive figure of "Ramzellee" emerges in New York. His scholarship in English, history, and Classical studies aligns with those interested in dark academia, as he, according to Greg Tate, in this same essay, recognises through his autodidacticism that "the Romans stole the alphabet system from the Greeks through war," and that "then in medieval times, monks ornamented letters to hide their meaning from others. Now the letter is armour from further manipulation" (Tate 2021). That the author, Skip Gates, is brought in here to agree that "learning to decipher codes is just about the blackest aspect of the black tradition" indeed speaks volumes compared with the 500 pages of Tartt's dark academic manifesto (Dery 1994, 183).

"Rammellzee" (his birth name, naturally, a closely guarded secret) was born on December 15, 1960, in Far Rockaway, Queens, to an African-

American mother and an Italian father who worked as a transit detective. This original story aligns with *The Secret History*, an inverted detective story narrated by Richard Papen, one of the six students, who reflects years later on the situation that led to the murder of their friend Edmund "Bunny" Corcoran. The events leading up to the murder are revealed sequentially. Rammellzee was famously depicted by another cultural critic, Francesca Alinovi, in 1983, as a young Black man 'who never went to school' but rather obtained his sophisticated knowledge of 'Western civilisation' through reading 'dictionary etymologies' and going to 'libraries to look at Gothic manuscripts' (1983).

Greg Tate would later assert, "as Ramm's thinking makes clear, he viewed subway art and hip-hop as a total movement representing a multidisciplinary and racialised and working-class military campaign against capitalism, Western Civ 101, and white supremacy" (2021). If Ramm "saw wildstyle train writing as reclaiming, through extreme abstraction, the integrity of the alphabet - mathematical symbols related to architecture and not literary tools - from the 'biologically diseased culture and language manipulation' of Western civilization" than it is possible for Gothic Futurism itself to as a conduit for 'the work done by b-boys and b-girls in the darkness of the train yards to the calligraphy of the 14th-century monks who wrote illuminated manuscripts for the Catholic Church' to connect through space-time to his generation of Gothic Futurists who weaponized the trains by grafting their paintings onto them' (Tate 2021). Ramm "believed the monks' knowledge had been fast forwarded [through] calligraphy that distorted the alphabet to the point of indecipherability" (Tate 2021).

As such, Tate came to believe that Rammellzee was not a name to be discovered, but an equation to be cracked. Similarly, in this version, 'their letters had become so ornate that the Pope and his bishops could no longer read them'; thus, for a time, the monks had prevailed against the Catholic Church, which had been engaged in a literal war of words against the forces of authority and capital with them throughout the

fourteenth and fifteenth centuries (Tate 2004). Whilst Rammellzee most frequently referenced the medieval monks' relationship to the alphabet, he was also examining the broader history of the Western alphabet and its involvement in colonisation, standardisation, and hierarchy. Access to the alphabet through appreciation of the potential power each letter held, for Rammellzee, was a gateway to the whole universe. As the ancient Greek alphabet began to inspire other empires and cultures' own alphabetical systems, it became clear that, in the eyes of its possessors, to have a system of written language was an indicator of civilisation. With the invention of the Gutenberg printing press, the world witnessed a standardisation of language, thereby facilitating the exponential growth of the alphabet's civilising dimension (De Looze 2016, 24).

With the onset of European expansion and colonisation into the Americas, Africa, and Asia, colonising forces established their own structure of the written language as the primary bearer of civilisation, enforcing linguistic imperialism upon the cultures they colonised and asserting their language structure as not only superior but unmatched (De Looze 2016, 81). Rammellzee believed that each person had it within them to not only understand his ideas surrounding the power of language, but also to use this knowledge to embark on a journey of creation and enlightenment that would free their own minds and language from those who had used language to subdue their power. When asked in an interview what the individual would achieve by successfully arming the alphabet, liberating it, and taking its power into their own hands, Rammellzee replied, "Well homeboy, you be god" (Tate 2004).

By 1994, just two years after the release of *The Secret History*, author and cultural critic Mark Dery coined the term 'Afrofuturism,' defining it as a genre of speculative fiction. His influential essay in the anthology *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture*, titled "Black to the Future," begins with two notable quotes: 'If all records told the same tale - then the lie

passed into history and became truth. "Who controls the past," ran the party slogan, "controls the future: who controls the present controls the past.'" - George Orwell, and 'There is nothing more galvanising than the sense of a cultural past' - Alain Locke (Dery 1994, 179). If as Dery suggests, African Americans are "the descendants of alien abductees" who "inhabit a sci-fi nightmare," consequently, it is worth questioning whether dark academia, with its self-reflective nostalgia, functions as the shadowy underside of Afrofuturism - unknowingly exposing the academy's history of violence against women and racism directed at people of colour through their very absence (Dery 1994, 180).

Perhaps also obscured from this narrative of history is Britain's participation in the construction of this sci-fi nightmare. In many ways, the first phase of dark academia, which emerged in the 1980s, was embodied in New York by the publication of *The Official Preppy Handbook*, with its counterpart, *The Official Sloane Rangers Handbook*, in London. In 1982, it was created by Ann Barr and Peter York, the features editor and a writer (respectively) for London's *Harper's & Queen* magazine, and became a chart-topping success almost immediately, classifying itself as a work of humorous social anthropology. For several years, they and their colleagues had been documenting a new breed of pseudo-aristocratic upper-middle-class Londoner they dubbed "the Sloane Ranger".

The most famous Sloane of all was Diana, Princess of Wales, who graced the book's front cover and was awarded the title of 'supersloane' in the book. By contrast, the most famous anti-Sloane was Margaret Thatcher, whose Big Bang of 1986 brought into London the sort of international wealth and bravado that Sloanedom could no longer compete with, and an ambitious new globalised rich soon infiltrated the Sloanes' old Chelsea/Kensington stomping grounds, which felt to many of these privileged whites like a colonial incursion (Bullmore 2022). Like any lauded British institution, "it was solidity and constancy that were so admired: the same schools, the same Oxford colleges, the same

regiments, the same jobs, the same tailors, the same holidays, the same wine, the same sexual positions, the same hospital wings, the same children, the same names… and so on until infinity, or at least until 1985-ish" (Bullmore 2022).

Sloanedom depended on a "wholly unspoken complex of myths, prejudices, values and assumptions through which they interpreted the meaning of the world to themselves" (Bullmore 2022). Inclusion was based "on knowing how to identify and dissect the archetypal codes and customs, the revealing turns of speech and manner, and the almost imperceptible nuances of lifestyle, by which the community defines itself in relation to its environment and its past" (Runciman 1983). The Viscount Runciman of Doxford, W.G. Runciman, himself both a Sociologist and businessman, in a mirthful piece of academic self-parody concerning Sloanes, concludes that that orientation has very much been lost, and "now adaptability is all, and camouflage is the best uniform" (1983). In privileged company, however, the favourite jokes remain as ever, well chosen: 'scene but not herd', 'in the days when England was a White's man's country', 'christened her Marigold and hoped she would' (Runciman 1983).' Finally, "above all, they deploy what the authors rightly acknowledge to be an 'extremely subtle and secret verbal culture' to keep safely at bay any threatened intrusion by trendies, tradesmen, swots, pooves, ponces, proles, peasants, Jews, media types, lefties, yobbos, jerks, Mayfair Mercenaries or International White Trash" (Runciman 1983). What makes this all work, at least for a time, is that Sloanes are considered "a living museum of old modes of behaviour" (Runciman 1983).

What is perhaps even more uncanny is that the social codes that Sloanes follow is based itself on a fundamental distortion of history, such that "the accoutrements and appurtenances of Sloane life unwittingly reveal is a 19th-century view of the 18th century, sustained and exemplified by token symbols of warrior/landowner gentrydom, which would be quite unrecognisable to a real Fielding squire"

(Runciman 1983). Their obsession with the ubiquitous Horse Motif, the quasi-military trophies and table-mats, the taste for archaic breakfast food, the staunch preference for Georgian wood and silver, the too-prominent placing of the dog-basket, the Fields and Horse and Hounds in the downstairs loo, Caroline's incurable addiction to Debrett, Henry's thin, gold, oval, engraved, not swivel-backed cufflinks, the nostalgic love of dhurries and Mogul hangings and Indian bedspreads (even if Grandfather wasn't in the Indian Army or ICS), the silk shirts "copied by Sam on a business trip to Hong Kong", demonstrate that this lifestyle is altogether little more than neocolonial cosplay (Runciman 1983). In conclusion, Runciman identifies Sloanes' 'keen as bloodhounds' sensitivity to the smells of boats, bonfires, leather and high-octane petrol (good) and aeroplanes, old vase-water, imitation leather and diesel oil (bad), are all symptoms of a half-conscious ideology whose deep structure is explicable only by reference to an unbreakable attachment to tradition: "Sloanes put tradition top because it keeps them top" - or near enough to it to keep them happy (1983).

It has been forty-odd years since the Sloane Ranger first appeared, yet the way it depicted life and society in Sloane Square now seems to have become a myth in itself. Whereas the Sloanes of the early 1980s belonged to a conservative and largely homogeneous social scene, united by traditional attitudes and institutions, the current breed have now refined their self-appreciation to include "an encyclopaedic knowledge of luxury brands, and their habitat has become a cornucopia of international design and boutique homegrown labels" (Haworth).

In his article, "Return of the Sloane Ranger", Peter Howarth makes note of the African American designer, Virgil Abloh's Italian luxury *Off-White* label as having its 'only store in the UK at 32 Sloane Street' (Howarth).

[This image is taken from the article, "Return of the Sloane Ranger", with no photographer credited.]

In the same breath, he gives honourable mention to Ralph Lauren, who 'has a new place too, at 32-33 Sloane Square' (Haworth). The standalone store opened in 2020. In a 2018 interview with *The Guardian* about his latest *Off-White* collection, Abloh paid homage to the supersloane herself, Princess Diana. Out of the 37 looks that walked, a majority of them could be traced back to specific outfits that Diana wore during her short 36-year life. 'The key inspiration was Princess Diana, pearls and all, with Naomi Campbell closing the show in £295 cycling shorts. "I was born in 1980, so I remember Princess Diana from my periphery," Abloh says' (Ferrier 2018). Before his interview with British fashion journalist Morwenna Ferrier, she was told that "Abloh would not talk about race or politics" (2018). At the time she remarked, that "given both inform his designs, his aesthetic and his entire process - and that, if the rumours are true, he is likely to become one of the most high-profile black designers in fashion history when he

inevitably gets a top gig - it seems an odd thing to censor" (2018). Even more strange, perhaps, when we consider that concerns about race and politics overshadowed Princess Diana's life as well as her death. Furthermore, labelling the collection about her as "Natural Woman" contrasts with what Abloh drew inspiration from, which was either paparazzi or publicity photos of her. This ambiguity was perhaps especially heightened because it was launched by a multidisciplinary designer who had then gained international recognition with his concept of "the grey area between black and white, as the colour Off-White", and Diana, who was essentially 'The People's Princess', a dazzlingly white global icon. Abloh stated that his other muse for this collection was Cinderella. The off-whiteness of the collection was evident in the subtle distortion of the princess myth of glamour and tiaras, as reflected in both the designs and their display on the bodies of Black models. Nonetheless, a superficial misreading of his admiration for whiteness became an issue for Abloh in a very different context when, the following year, he posted congratulatory images on Instagram of what appeared to be an all-white Milan-based design team celebrating Christmas together at his headquarters (Penrose 2019).

Within his designs, Abloh adhered to his 3 per cent philosophy, which involves transforming existing elements into something new by altering them by no more than 3 per cent. Throughout his career, Abloh faced ongoing criticism of his design approach, with many accusing him of appropriation and plagiarism of other creatives' work. Regarding higher education, Ferrier notes, "it was being mentored by the late, great Louise Wilson of Central Saint Martins" - who also taught McQueen -that sealed his move into fashion.' (Ferrier 2018). Abloh remarked in another interview on the precise nature of that relationship.

> There was a professor by the name of Louise Wilson, who was the head of the [master's program] at Central Saint Martins in London, and she was the teacher for some of the greatest designers of our time. Kanye and I sat with her, and

> we were like, "Hey, we want to learn the right way." And she basically said, "You guys are idiots. You know more than my students. Why on earth would you want to go to fashion school?" But that process is how we ultimately ended up interning at Fendi. And when we were there, we did all the meetings. We were off the radar in Rome, getting to work at 9 a.m. on a Monday. We did all the intern shit, and this was in the midst of *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy* (Bettridge 2019).

My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy is a reference to Kanye West's fifth studio album, released in 2010. It was a product of West's retreat to a self-imposed exile in Hawaii after a period of controversy in 2009 following his interruption of Taylor Swift at the MTV Video Music Awards. It was reported that West spent approximately $3 million, funded by his record label *Def Jam*, to record the album, making it one of the most expensive albums ever produced. In the album, West places an introspective focus on fame, detailing the perks of power that he links to neoliberalism. Music critic Ann Powers observes that the songs on "Fantasy" operate on multiple levels - as pornographic boasts, romantic disaster stories, devil-haunted dark nights of the soul' (Powers 2010). She continues, 'The rootlessness West celebrates and despairs of on 'Fantasy' belongs to someone who feels unwelcome everywhere. This isn't just a personal problem. It's the curse of what the theorist Michael Eric Dyson has called "the exceptional black man," embraced for his talents but singled out for the color of his skin' (Powers 2010).

One would do well to remember that *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy* evolved from *Good Ass Job,* which Kanye West had planned as the conclusion of a college-themed tetralogy that began with *The College Dropout* (2004). He adhered to the plan with *Late Registration* (2005) and *Graduation* (2007). However, after his mother Donda West's death from coronary complications during liposuction and mammoplasty procedures, and a workaholic-fuelled breakup with his fashion designer

fiancée, Alexis Phifer, he abandoned *Good Ass Job* as the final chapter in his college-themed album series. As West explained to MTV News in October 2010, "I remember I just changed it because I didn't want to do the *Good Ass Job* thing and have to stick to the skits and everything that went with that," West told MTV News. "*My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy* and my album cover are just … those things are just awesome. It's really proper, decadent, soulful, lavishness, and it's exactly what I wanna say'" (Rodriguez 2010). "And I think that's why my creations are very luxury in a way," he continued. He concluded, "Because if you go into a luxury store, they have it presented exactly the way they want to present it to you. They don't adjust [to be] more commercial like a Wal-Mart, [or a] Kmart'" (Rodriguez 2010). The concept ultimately evolved into *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy*. In a twisted sort of way, Abloh and West's professor, Louise Wilson, was right; she had nothing to teach them about fashion that they didn't already know.

In 1976, when being interviewed about the rise of the Sloane Ranger, Peter York commented, "The flow of money in the 60's blurred all sort of class distinctions," and in light of that fact, "The Sloane Ranger represents an almost colonial type who no longer has an empire to go to. As a group they should be under threat from all sorts of changes, but they are cohesive, conformist, and almost interchangeable'" (Weinraub 1976). He continued, "A Sloane Ranger is not likely to have had a college education. That exposes you to mixing with people from different social backgrounds on a fairly equal basis," Mr. York explained. But most Sloanes agree that there are certain required skills' (Weinraub 1976).To that end, Sloane Rangers are also known for their adherence to traditional English values. "Basically, it's God, Queen and Country," explained Rosellen Bett, a researcher in the House of Commons. "They're in one's blood. You don't question them, but try to defend all three devoutly'" (Weinraub 1976). As proto-Brexiteers, arguably the genesis of the Sloane was not in Peter Jones but in the US' (Sims 2022). Josh Sims contends that if you "transpose Martha's Vineyard for the Cotswolds, or somewhere in Surrey, and the archetypal Sloane was very much a British incarnation of the prepster" (2022).

Much of its aesthetic inspiration derives from the past, drawing on conservative institutions, people, and places. Their unified, conformist, and interchangeable traits function as a defence mechanism against a world that no longer recognises their traditional British identity or romanticises British history whilst ignoring the darker sides of British imperialism.

As the conventional pillars of British power and aristocracy decline, the culture's emphasis on tradition and heritage in the way it markets lifestyles not only revives the Sloane archetype but also maintains a sense of national prestige based on its former imperial status. By idealising the past, particularly the eighteenth century, dark academia roots itself in a fantasy of idyllic Britain before industrialisation, and the influence of the nouveau riche twists its imperial imperatives from mercantilism to capitalism. Similarly, the Sloane Ranger archetype must once again rely on its old money and inherited status to cope with the emergence of 'aggressive' new wealth in London in the early twenty-first century. In this shifting social landscape, whiteness itself has lost some of its currency within a postcolonial context, where wealth is increasingly generated through personal achievement rather than inheritance, fuelling the emergence of new social classes that diverge from traditional class and racial distinctions. Dark academia, with its aristocratic nostalgia, arises in tandem with anxieties related to social class and exclusivity, racism, and the perceived loss of traditional values. For those facing the hardships of economic inequality and the diminishment of academic life under neoliberalism, as well as the anti-intellectual attack on the humanities, it can serve as a form of escapism, offering a highly aestheticised return to a more ordered past amidst economic turmoil and social unrest.

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