

Surviving San Francisco: Race, Money, and the Neoliberal Tech-Bro

GIDEON LEWIS-KRAUS TALKS TO TONY TULATHIMUTTE ABOUT HIS DEBUT NOVEL

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Tony Tulathimutte's debut novel, *Private Citizens*, made me deeply uncomfortable. It was a pleasurable sort of discomfort: the book is also smart and dense and, often, hilarious. But over the few days it took me to read it I felt as though I was starring in my own private version of *Peep Show* or *Veep* or some other brutally unsparing social comedy. The novel's milieu was immediately recognizable to me: Tony graduated from Stanford a few years after I did, and both of us spent our formative writer-years as ambivalent, outmoded, and often self-hating humanists living in the San Francisco of the future.



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Private Citizens tells the intertwined stories of four recent Stanford grads in a San Francisco that has just really begun to recover from the 2000 dot-com bust, and is on the verge of the bigger collapse of 2008. The novel announces itself as panoramic in ambition; it's clear from the beginning that it plans to cover nothing less than the relationship between politics, relationships, mental illness, sex, drugs, literary criticism, race, and technology—the latter in the various forms of tech utopianism, Internet performativity, startup culture, and so on. It's about the tension between, as they call it out there, "engineering" and "editorial." There's no attempt to hide the fact that Tulathimutte, no stranger to engineering, has thrown in his lot with editorial: this is a hyperliterary novel; the sentences are dizzy, and play flirtatious games with discipline and control.

Both of us left San Francisco some time ago.

Gideon Lewis-Kraus: This book, it's not exactly a kind novel.

Tony Tulathimutte: No, it sure isn't. But it's not straight satire either, in the sense that satire's purpose is to condemn by ridicule and caricature; I mean, can a book be satirical when it so obviously implicates its author? It was a conscious choice to align my characters' biographies with mine in such glaring ways (occupations, hometowns, birthdates, and yes, race) that any barb would have to cut both ways. I snuck that Susan Sontag epigraph in there—the one about how people who participate in a given sensibility can't analyze it, only exhibit it—to imply that I wasn't trying to lay judgment from a terrible height.

Here we have four characters with yachtloads of privilege, at odds with certain rarefied disprivileges; it didn't seem appropriate to write about them with the kind of earnest tenderness or reverence that they'd never apply to themselves, or rarely even to one another, what Proust called "those individuals who are better at analyzing than at valuing themselves." And the last people who should be earnest or self-righteous are the ones who've benefitted most, or at the very least haven't been held back all that much, by the systems that enable privilege. I can see how having a very close POV on characters filled with ironic self-loathing can be readily mistaken for satire, though. So I guess the techniques of satire (exaggeration, humor) are mobilized toward different ends. Satire written from the inside, like what Edith Wharton does in *Age of Innocence*, usually gets labeled as comedy of manners, which I guess is more fitting here.

GLK: Oh, I didn't mean to suggest that it was straight satire, and, yes, the character that you're hardest on–by a serious margin–is the more obvious authorial stand-in. But it seemed to me that even in that critique you're playing games, no? To what extent did you identify with that person? That character is not, after all, a writer.

TT: I identify a lot, though no more or less than with the other protagonists. The difference with Will is that I didn't try to demurely abstract the character Will from myself, but to deliberately bait comparisons with him. Of course, no matter the degree of similarity, all such comparisons are technically invalid, at best mildly interesting; to write a true authorial surrogate would entail a degree of knowledge and perspective on oneself that I don't think anybody has.

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So what I did was a form of malicious compliance, undermining a system by strictly obeying its rules, the system in this case being racism. Since I knew I'd be identified with my Asian character anyway, I rigged it so that doing so would force critics to make blatantly racist surmises, to expose what we're dealing with. That is, if they're going to try to essentialize my character's Asianness, they'll have to go through me. This sort of accelerationist approach could backfire big time but it seemed better than doing some tedious fictional jig to distract readers from the Asian man behind the curtain.

GLK: Wait, I didn't totally catch that. Tell me a little more about Will, and your authorial relationship to him. What does it mean that for a reader to identify you two, he or she would have to make blatantly racist surmises? I want you to pursue this accelerationist idea a little further. It seems to me to get to the heart of the book.

TT: The conventional realist approach, I mean Cheever-Updike realism, is all about restraint and subtlety. My deal with this book was to go the other way and overindulge as much as possible, and part of that was to not pussyfoot around race. The way people usually try to ameliorate racism in mainstream narrative is to take a stereotype and just flip it around—so Harold and Kumar are stoners who get with hot women, Glenn is a brave and virtuous fighter who gets with a hot woman. *Fresh Off the Boat* is basically an Asian-American *Leave it to Beaver*. There's a Mary Sue-ism to this approach that strikes me as both dishonest and equally beholden to cliché, whatever social benefit it may accomplish.

My attempt here is to inflate the stereotypes to their absolute limit, and yet still subvert them by making them intelligible in a social and psychological context, showing that whatever stereotypes exist are largely a matter of perception and are dwarfed by the complexities of individual character. It's a big risk, because uncareful readers will just see the stereotypical qualities and immediately freak out. Philip Roth does it in *Portnoy's Complaint*, Mary Gaitskill in *Bad Behavior*, Junot Diaz in his Yunior stories. All of them have been criticized for promoting stereotypes, when to me they're doing the very opposite, on a higher level: they're blowing apart the reductiveness of stereotype itself. I think what really pisses people off is that they also seem to be having fun doing it.

Will is a short, angry, repressed, chronically rejected techie with awesome grades and strict parents. He also biographically resembles me a lot, and that's the bait. It is a breach of critical professionalism to assume a fictional character's thoughts or circumstances reflect the author's, no matter how close the superficial characteristics line up, and race is the most superficial of all. And to reflexively assume that one Asian character's wholesale experience is a comment on Asianness, well, that's just racism. When I said earlier that I deliberately made my characters' biographies line up with mine, I meant it was a method I used to guide my treatment of them; a critic has no business drawing those connections, either to me or to Asian people in general. Yet I'm waiting for one to say that Will "captures *the* Asian-American experience," or to single him out as "deeply

(https://bookmarks.reviews)



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"Astonishing em Luna Phoenix Queen em brilliantly emphasizes the agony of isolation in its various…"

personal" in a way that the other characters aren't. I want the subtext of these criticisms—that they secretly believe Asians really are chinks, and here's an Asian author who agrees with us—to be made explicit.

If this means there's going to be some kind of chinkquisition where I'm accused of making Asians look bad, well, it wouldn't be the first time that's happened in literary history. It'd be terribly ironic, since nobody's angrier about the way Asians are represented than me. There's not much I can do about racist readers who're going to interchange Will with other Asians, simply because that's the nature of stereotype, especially regarding Asians. (It's no accident, either, that Will's own greatest anxiety is of looking bad because he's Asian.)

When I say "chink," by the way, I'm using the word to evoke the racism against Asians that a stunningly large number of people would like to minimize or pretend doesn't exist. People see us as chinks. I don't know a more straightforward way of saying that.

GLK: He is lampooned here for his digital habits—he's addicted to porn, he's obsessed with his own engineering and computational skills. He's the character that, to my mind, stands in for young-tech San Francisco.

TT: If any character does, I'd say it's his girlfriend Vanya. The main difference between them is that Vanya wants to be seen, and she derives validation from her online audience. She embodies the "social" part of social media, one that valorizes sharing, transparency, publicity, positivity, branding, and sincerely believes in technology as *the* key to liberation and empowerment. She's managed to monetize her identity as a paraplegic woman.

Will is the opposite. He's introverted, resentful; the only validation he cares about is Vanya's, and he uses technology instead to hide and surveil, orders all his groceries and booze online, has forgotten how to mail a letter, etc. But his digital gluttony and techno-utopianism are less exaggerated than it might seem to anyone who's hasn't lived there. It's pretty satire-resistant—if I write a novel with characters wearing T-shirts that say "DESIGN WILL SAVE THE WORLD" or wondering aloud (http://valleywag.gawker.com/douchebags-like-you-are-ruining-san-francisco-512645164) why elderly people would take public transportation instead of Uber, or have tech billionaires comparing themselves (http://articles.latimes.com/2014/jan/25/business/la-fi-mh-onepercenter-20140125) to Jews in Nazi Germany, it would seem heavy-handed. Yet it's true.

What I tried to address instead is the broader and more timeless phenomena of money and privilege, and how they callus you and foster arrogance by insulating you from ever hearing the word "no" and depriving you of any sense of proportion. If someone throws a million VC dollars at you, your ego is going to do some pretty wild pirouettes to convince you that you deserve it.

What's worse is that these attitudes get hailed as forward-thinking rational humanism, when it's just neo-neoliberalism. Back in 2008, Steve Jobs, who delivered the commencement speech at my graduation, was sneering at the idea of e-readers because people don't read anymore

(http://bits.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/01/15/the-passion-of-steve-jobs/?_r=0). That more people might be encouraged to read if books were accessible on his devices never seems to have occurred to him; what mattered was that he thought it wouldn't sell. The part where Vanya says that books are paywalls—that wasn't made up. I remember the CEO of 37Signals wrote (http://www.inc.com/magazine/20091101/the-way-i-work-jason-fried-of-37signals.html), "I don't read fiction. I find it a waste of time. There are so many amazing things that are real; I don't need to spend any time on a made-up story," before going on to say that he loves *Curb Your Enthusiasm* and *House M.D.* Silicon Valley *loves* talks. It thinks books, as a content distribution platform, are boringly impervious to disruption.

I'm not going to be the one to yodel about how everyone in tech is a head-in-ass libertarian tech-bro philistine, though those do exist. I know plenty of good, thoughtful people in tech who support the humanities with their time and money, socially skew progressive, and some are more or less radical. The question is who's exerting the most influence on culture, and I think that's been answered.

GLK: Take me back to your own youth in San Francisco c. 2007-ish. Where are the beginnings of this novel? As a young writer in that very engineering-heavy milieu, what's the stirring there?

TT: Like my characters, I was two years out of college, dissatisfied, resentful, well-off, and completely blocked. I harbored vague writing ambitions but a definite sense that they wouldn't be realized as long as I was working. My job title was User Experience Researcher, and my job was mainly to intercept visitors to our clients' websites via pop-up form, have them launch screensharing browser plugins in exchange for a $75 Amazon gift card, and watch them use the website while talking to us over the phone. Sometimes the users would be in Singapore or Hong Kong or India and we'd have to come into work at midnight. We'd observe and record common mistakes and complaints, design feasible recommendations based on user-centered design heuristics (and other stuff we made up to fit our idea of what good design was, which we called "expert analysis"), and report them to our clients. I also co-wrote a methodology book with a preface written by the guy who coined the word *blog*.

When I wasn't working, I was either reading books or going to bars and parties and trying to get people to like me. Whenever people asked what I did, especially in Silicon Valley, I never said I was a writer, was instead careful to reply, "I've published some stories" or "I'm into fiction writing," and then finally, "I work in tech. UX. You?" I still knew I wanted to write, but the stirring, if you can call it that, was just a crude, formless angst over not having accomplished anything I was particularly proud of, nothing that I thought represented me in any way. The book came out of me only after prolonged, painful yanking.

GLK: Right, and that's something I can absolutely identify with, as someone who went through the same process in the same place just a few years before you did. But when I lived in San Francisco, it had regained some of its shabby appeal, and as a young, annoying, self-absorbed

writer in that city, at least I never felt confronted with staggering wealth and accomplishment everywhere.

TT: Yeah, it was a really accommodating place to be a self-absorbed writer. There was no publishing dogfight to get caught up in.

GLK: But I left in 2007, when *Private Citizens* takes place, and I know that was right around the time that it got increasingly difficult to do anything there that wasn't immediately instrumental and profitable. You must've been watching your peers become very rich, no? All of this stuff is most pointed in the depiction of the book's political activist, who has to deal with commercial pressures that threaten to undermine her campaign. What was it like to be a writer in a sea of rich, young, entitled, energetically pragmatic engineers?

TT: I didn't stand out much. For one thing, I was getting paid too, and since I had no illusions that I deserved it, it made me super guilty and anxious. Money flew out of my ass and went to carbon offsets and KQED and Amnesty International and random people's medical bills. Lord knows there's more than one artist manqué in the tech world, and most of the people I ended up making friends with were just trying to fund their art projects. As for everyone else, as much as I'd cringe when people bragged about being the Foursquare mayor of their favorite brunch spot, or audibly nutted when they got an RT from Robert Scoble, I always had to check my contempt because I knew I was not only participating but making bank off it. Again, all the stuff that reads as satire just drags me down along with it.

Which isn't to suggest I was an exemplary worker—I did lots of writing at my desk, though not much of it stuck. I hadn't found my way out of my undergrad mode.

GLK: I remember reading an award-winning story you wrote as an undergraduate, in what must've been like 2005. It was about a girl and her father in the woods of Alaska. How did you get from the woods to Dolores Park?

TT: That story was like the fourth one I'd ever written. I was under deadline for a fiction workshop, and stuck on the usual novice block of what to write about. My roommate was from rural Alaska, and the stories he told me about it—owning 14 cats and a deer, watching MTV by pedal-powered generator—seemed like obviously great material: an excitingly unusual setting, whose isolation unburdened me from addressing all that troublesome social context I was incapable of describing. Plus, what else would I write about?

All of my early stories are like that, because I operated under the assumption that really good fiction required writing about people and experiences as different from yours as possible. I was rewarded for it—as you mentioned, it won some awards. "Thinly veiled memoir" is a cudgel critics use to write off any blatantly autobiographical fiction; the presumption is that such writing was inherently underhanded, unimaginative, or navel-gazing. Sure, it can be, but then, like, Proust?

The irony is that my novel mines that exact uneventful Stanford period, and the dissipated years after, for most of its material. The artistry in a work of fiction is never contingent on its subject. Problems arise only when a single sensibility begins to dominate the field to the point that the "literariness" of other fiction is judged in relation to it. If I felt that books about twentysomethings living in cities were considered the model of exemplary literary writing, instead of self-indulgent bourgeois middlebrow fare, it'd be a lot less attractive. I'm at a point where I prefer writing about subjects that are considered unsexy and unseemly and minor, things that are supposed to be beneath the dignity of a writer.

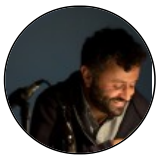
GLK: One of the things I most admired about the book was its ability to be crude and ugly. People have compared the prose to Amis, and I can see the grounds for the comparison. It seems to me that the book, at least in places, suggests that the kind of gentle literary lyricism you've described isn't the right tone for engaging properly with issues of race and class. Did you think that there's a connection there?

TT: Yeah, that's more or less it. Standards of etiquette, decorum, and taste are all bound up in authority and popularity, two things I really want to avoid catering to. Nothing gets praised more than writing by bourgeois writers for bourgeois audiences that's supremely anodyne, sentimental, or "lyrical," i.e. uses anaphora and metaphors. The kind that reinforces people's sense of their own virtue or discernment, or makes them feel like they're being informed. The moral behind these, and there's always a moral, is usually something like atrocities are bad and death is sad and love conquers all but sex is numero fuckin' uno. History repeats itself and foreign countries are way foreign, plus, oppression: can you believe it?

I say this, of course, as a former writer of exactly this kind of fiction, like the award-winning Alaska story. I like beautiful heartfelt writing, but there's way less of that than writing that cynically or naively dresses itself in styles we're meant to see as beautiful and heartfelt, and the same goes for serious or, in more limited ways, political writing. There's a Philip Roth line about this: "To write a serious book that doesn't signal its seriousness with the rhetorical cues or thematic gravity that's traditionally associated with seriousness is a worthy undertaking too." Comedy is usually the approach to this.

So certain kinds of controlled rudeness can be subversive. I'm not talking about *Family Guy* punching-down, or *South Park*-style know-it-all rants, or Chuck Palahniuk-style gross-out fare, which are all actually just negative forms of etiquette. I mean an approach to writing that gleefully shits on whatever literary pretenses are around, while providing its own satisfactions.

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