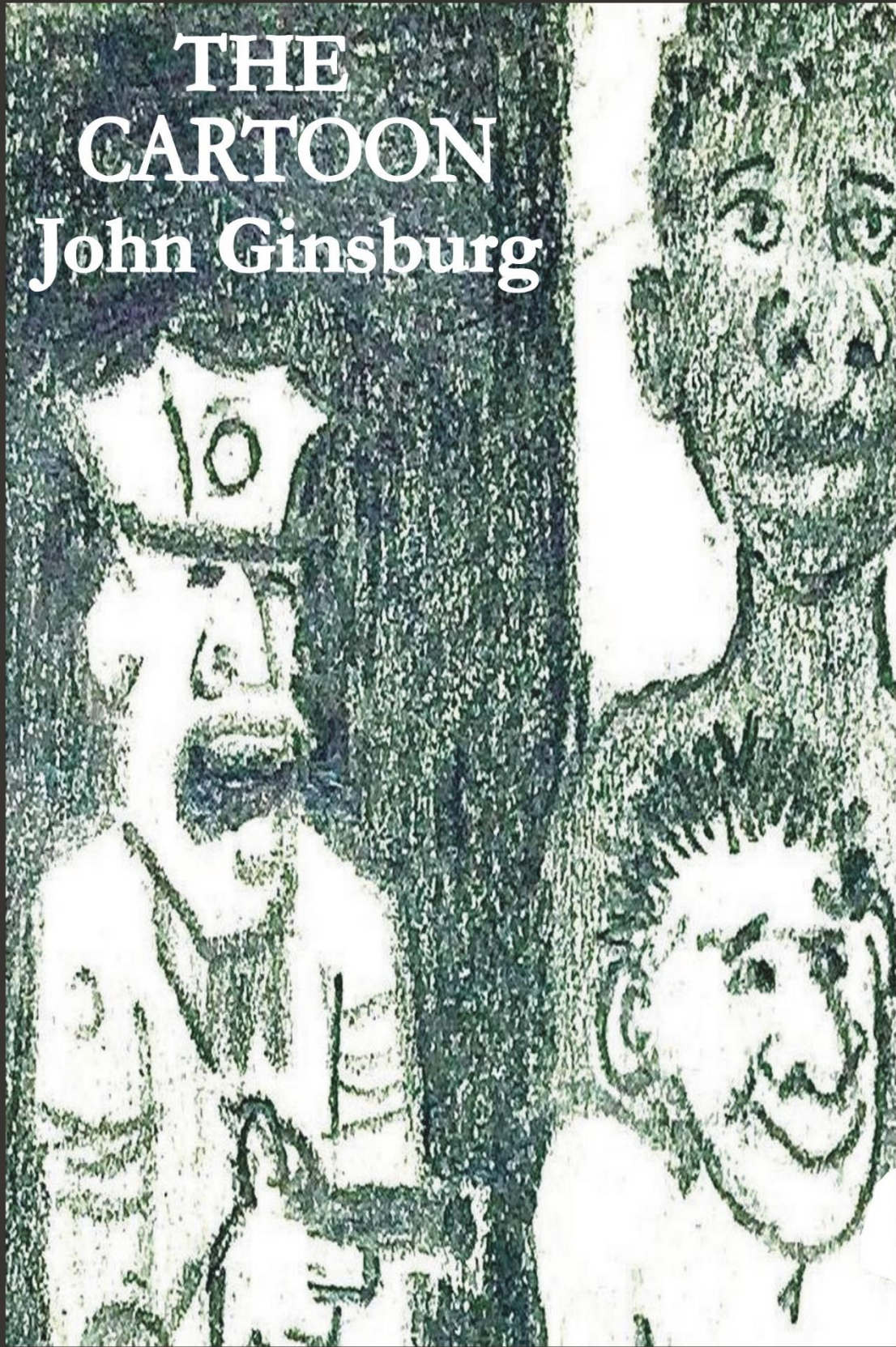


THE CARTOON John Ginsburg



It's March 2020 in Winnipeg. As the country topples headfirst into the coronavirus pandemic, a Media Studies course on political correctness and cancel culture enters its final weeks. A senior professor is the course instructor, a white male who finds himself in a world of trouble when one of his students files a complaint against him. The offending course topic is a cartoon, just published in a Seattle magazine. A parody of sexual preferences, racial issues and the pandemic, the controversial cartoon has gotten its creator, a Black male cartoonist, fired. It should have been perfect material for the course. The professor lives alone, but his life is entangled in a previous relationship. As he deals with the university fall-out, communicating with his two children takes on a new level of urgency, especially with his estranged daughter.

THE CARTOON

Nb

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nB

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a novel by
John Ginsburg

A sample from *The Cartoon*

From Chapter 1:

Winnipeg February 6, 2020

'Hello?'

'Hi, Rebecca. It's Dad.'

'Why are you calling? I asked you not to call.'

'I wanted to talk to you. I just-'

'I don't want to talk. I told you.'

'I know, I know. But it's been more than two months. It's not right. We should be -'

'I shouldn't have answered. I didn't even look at the number.'

'Can we just talk for a minute? Please?'

'Dad, I don't want to talk to you. Okay? I'm going to hang up.'

'Becky, please. Just give me a minute. Please? One minute. I'm your father. I care about you. I worry about you, and the baby. I want to be part of your life. I want to be part of my granddaughter's life.'

'You wrote off her dad like he was a piece of garbage.'

'I've thought about that, Becky. I'm sorry for the way I acted. I want to make things right between us. Can I at least help you with some money?'

'This is such bullshit. Say you're sorry, and then buy me off with a little cash? And then we're a nice happy family? Good-bye.'

Nathan grabbed his laptop and trudged up the stairs to his second-floor office. He had to find a way to talk to Rebecca; to get her to talk to him. It weighed on him. It was on his mind all the time. He was constantly worrying about her. Night after night, it kept him awake, composing conversations with her in his head, wondering what he could do. It just wasn't right.

He flipped open his laptop and began going through his email. Ignoring the new messages, he found the email he'd sent to Rebecca a month after the baby was born. She hadn't answered it. He re-read it for the hundredth time.

<< *November 20, 2019*

Rebecca: I heard the wonderful news from Saul that your baby arrived and that you have named her Suzie. A lovely tribute to your mom. Saul says you're both doing well, so that is fantastic. You and I have had some regrettable arguments in recent months, for which I accept responsibility. I want so much to make it right between us and to be part of your life. And especially, to see your little baby. Can we talk sometime soon?

Dad >>

Sad and disheartened, he closed the message. He didn't know what else to try. He'd already asked Saul to talk to her, but that hadn't worked. He couldn't just barge into her apartment building and knock on her door. Well, he *could*, but she'd probably just shut the door in his face, maybe even call the building caretaker.

A few lines below the email to Rebecca was the last message he'd sent to Annette Monford. He thought about it for a moment, tensed a bit, and then opened it.

<< November 17, 2019

Annette. We both promised not to do this, remember? We promised not to involve ourselves in each others' lives. In any way. We have to honour that promise and let that time together slip off into the past. They are great memories. I know you're a good-hearted and sensible person. Threatening to contact people at university or my daughter is just not fair. And it's not right. I hope you'll reconsider and let it go. >>

He opened the message from Annette that that email had responded to.

<< November 17, 2019

You think I'm a non-person? That I'm not still here? That you didn't affect me? Are you trying to pretend nothing ever happened? You think it doesn't matter? Everything is the same as ever in your happy little world? What would your university pals think if they knew what you were really like? Secretly meeting strangers for sex and then treating them like they don't exist. How would the nice professor look then? Or your daughter. What would she think? I know her email address, by the way, and all the people you work with. >>

Nathan stood up from his desk. He walked over to the window and looked vacantly out at the snow.

From Chapter 4:

Nathan opened the course folder on his laptop. There were two subfolders. The first contained the working material for the course: the course outline, the class list, his detailed notes for each lecture and suggested topics for term papers. The second folder contained audio recordings of the lectures, in mp3 format. If he was feeling particularly masochistic, he would listen to the audio recordings, wincing in pain as his words droned on, imagining how he could have done things differently. But he tried to avoid doing that too often.

As he'd done countless times since the beginning of the term, he clicked on the first folder and opened the course outline, which he'd distributed to students at their first lecture.

Media Studies 31.255 Political correctness and cancel culture in the media, the arts and educational institutions (2019-20 Winter, Wed 19:00 - 22:00, 105 Richardson Hall)

Overview Our intention in this course is to study how political correctness has affected the content produced by the media, the arts and public institutions, and the study and criticism of that content. Our focus is mainly on content related to racism, sexism and sexual orientation discrimination. We will be drawing on the general areas listed below for our discussions, including many of the specific examples indicated. These examples are in no way comprehensive; rather they are intended to direct and focus our discussion. Depending on circumstances and time constraints, other contemporary examples may be added to class discussions, while some of those listed below may not be covered.

Course Outline

- January 8, 15: popular music, comedy, live entertainment

John Lennon *Working Class Hero* 1970, *Woman is the N-word of the World* 1972; rap music Dr Dre, Kanye West, exclaim.ca/music report on rap analytics; comedians, obscenity/profanity, Lenny Bruce NYC trial 1964, Robin Williams, Chris Rock, Mike Ward's 2016 Quebec anti-human rights conviction, Judy Gold's book *Yes I Can Say That*; team names in sports, *KC Chiefs*, tomahawk chop, *SF Giants*

- January 22, 29: literature

Charles Dickens *Oliver Twist*, Joseph Conrad *Heart of Darkness*, *Fences* by August Wilson, school incident in Charlotte, N.C, *Winter Counts* by David Heska Wambly Weiden

- February 5, 12: art

Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ* and R. Mapplethorpe homo-erotic photographs removed from exhibit at Corcoran Gallery in 1987 in Washington, D.C; KKK images and the cancellation of the Philip Guston exhibition in the Tate Modern, London and the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C; Genghis Khan exhibit postponed at Chateau des ducs de Bretagne history museum in Nantes, France; Prado Museum in Madrid accused of reinforcing misogyny with *Uninvited Guests* exhibit; Amy Louise Wood 2019 paper in *European Journal of American Studies* on the Bootjack McDaniels photographs; special issue on spectacle and spectatorship in American culture

- February 26, March 4: sexual/ethnic/racial identifiers in journalism and the media, magazines, news sites, cartoons

cbc.ca on capitalizing B in Black; theguardian.com use of BAME and BPOC, identifying Kamala Harris; artist Cameron Lee's proposed use of nB; U Toronto prof Jordan Peterson's 2016 YouTube videos, using 'they' as a singular pronoun; Lindsay Shepherd, Wilfrid Laurier University academic freedom controversy 2017; Nick Bougas' *Happy Merchant* cartoon 2004; New York Post February 2009 cartoon of Connecticut chimp shooting; Serena Williams cartoon in 2018 by Mark Knight in the Herald-Sun; Southeast Missourian cartoon of Martin Luther King Jr; blasphemy, Danish cartoons in *Jyllands-Posten* 2005; Charlie Hebdo cartoons 2012

- March 11, March 18: film, video

racist stereotypes in film; *Gone With The Wind* 1939, *The King and I* 1956, *The Party* 1968, *Big Trouble in Little China* 1986, *Pulp Fiction* 1994, *The Wire* 2002, *The Devil Wears Prada* 2006; straight actors/gay roles, gay actors/straight roles; *The Imitation Game* 2014, *Rocketman* 2019, *Full Frontal* 2002, *The Anniversary Party* 2001; sexism; *Love Actually* 2003, Paris Hilton 2008 anti-John McCain pro Obama election ad video; Woody Allen NY Times articles, Amazon 2018 cancelling of movie contract in step with #MeToo, actors in *Rainy Day in New York* offer to donate salaries

- March 25, April 1: academia, schools, public institutions

St. Michael School in Calgary, principal is recorded using the N-word in conversation with a group of high school students; University of Ottawa Professor V. Lieutenant-Duval suspended for use of N-word; closing off gay content for certain visiting school groups at Canadian Museum for Human Rights; Oxford Dictionary updates its definition of 'woman'; new trends in closing signatures in academic communications; controversy over the use of the term 'genocide' following 2019 report from MMIWG inquiry, Prime Minister's statement; state-sanctioned political correctness in religious discrimination, Bill 21 in Quebec 2019

He'd spent long hours reflecting on the topics he'd listed in the outline, especially the ones he'd already taken up in the first half of the term

The very first topic listed in the outline, the two John Lennon songs, had caused him considerable *tsuris*. They were from a totally different time and a totally different world. The second of the two had been published, distributed and promoted with the actual N-word in the title. But how should the title be displayed in the course outline? He had gone back and forth between N-word, N-----, N* and a few other text variations, changing his mind a number of times. The inclusion of rap music was intensely personal. Both Rebecca and Saul had driven him nuts with the stuff. For years, that was all they listened to. He would rail at them about the N-word and the profanity and the misogyny in the songs.

He had strong personal feelings about almost every one of the topics in the outline. The trick was to stand back and discuss them in a straightforward way, in meta terms, not getting dragged under by the content. How were those things presented in the media and why? How did other people and other media sources react to them? What social consequences did those reactions have?

Of all of the topics, Nathan had two clear favourites. One was on the docket for the next lecture, the so-called Cameron Lee designator. The other was Woody Allen, which was a month or so away.

Lee was a favourite of Nathan's in the arts world, a highly acclaimed Canadian visual artist. He was primarily a painter, in the Jackson Pollock tradition, flamboyant and controversial, with something interesting to say on almost every social issue. He had greatly enhanced his brand in the spring of 2019, when he was splashed all over the news sites for several days because of his *nB* label. He was a fourth-generation Canadian, with Chinese heritage extending back from his father's side. Both of his parents were scientists. In the media he was usually referred to as an Asian-Canadian artist, or as a Chinese-Canadian artist, sometimes as Japanese or Korean. He objected strongly to such designations. He had never been to Asia in his life. Even worse, he said, was to be referred to by another currently popular label, POC, person of colour. What colour was he, he'd asked rhetorically in a recent *Arts World* interview. Certainly not yellow. And *tawny* wouldn't be much better, he said. He certainly didn't consider himself as belonging to that dishonourable, catch-all category known as white, either. Or black. Since black and white were the most accepted and prominent descriptive North American categories, he felt he should describe himself in relation to those. He had chosen *not black*, to be rendered in text as nB. Above all, this choice reflected his support for Black rights and the Black Lives Matter movement. The capital B was in keeping with the current politically correct practice of capitalizing B in Black. Secondly, the designation also echoed the classical abbreviation *nb* for the Latin phrase *nota bene*, meaning 'note well'. This, Lee said, reflected the popularity and significance of his art. Interviewed at the Banff Visual Arts Festival, he was asked whether this infringed on the increasing use of NB to refer to non-binary individuals. It was a question he was well-prepared for. Labels depend entirely on their contexts, he answered. His was a racial/ethnic identifier, not a sexual identifier. He added that there were only a certain number of letters to go around. The letter L for example, meant inductance in Physics, and it stood for the constructible universe in Mathematics. Did that mean it shouldn't be used for 'lesbian'?

In discussing Lee, Nathan planned to ask the class two questions. Should people in the media, and elsewhere, feel compelled to refer to Lee by his chosen designation? Which individuals - how many individuals and of what stature - get to decide what is politically correct for the rest of society?

The segment on Woody Allen, who was one of Nathan's favourite directors, promised to be loud and memorable. Everyone would want to weigh in. He would begin by asking whether the most recent denouncements and actions against Woody were a coincidence. Were the cancelling of his films by Amazon and the flurry of negative news articles an easy conflation with the explosion of the #MeToo movement? And especially, with the heralding of *New Yorker* journalist Ronan Farrow as one of its great champions? Looking ahead, Nathan intended to end the March 18 lecture with the topic; otherwise it might easily take up the entire three hours.