WEEKEND *SATIRE & PERSONAL ESSAY*

SATIRE

A field guide to the Yale liberal

// BY EMA BEKIC

The following content is entirely satirical and does not reflect the author's personal views.

The Yale liberal is a fascinating creature. Found primarily in any graduate school library, in Commons — only eating the salmon poke bowl from Nori, of course — or performatively debating on Cross Campus, the Yale liberal is distinguished by a strong commitment to social justice and an extremely complicated relationship with any institution, with the sole exception of any that they are affiliated with.

The Yale liberal isn't hard to identify: they're well-read, often found with a book like "The Stranger" or the "Manifesto of the Communist Party" visibly peeking out from their tote bag. They're extremely suspicious of wealth yet disregard the $4.50 delivery fee for their weekly DoorDash order. Most recently, the species has been found replacing their standard order of coffee with chai lattes, matcha and myriad other forms of tea. The following guide is intended to help observers identify the Yale liberal in their natural habitat.

Identifying the specimen

The Yale liberal is most easily identified by their vocabulary, with common expressions such as "I agree, but," after which they explain exactly why they don't agree, as well as "yes, and," which can be commonly attributed to their background in improv theatre.

The Yale liberal is also known to describe themselves as "anti-capitalist" and "radical"; they may spend several hours explaining how "socialism is the only way to fix this country," which, to be fair, is backed by their copy of Marx's manifesto — but please don't ask them about their applications to Yale Undergraduate Consulting Group and Yale Student Investment Group.

If you'd like to learn more about the specimen without engaging in a conversation that's secretly a "who's smarter" competition, feel free to check out their LinkedIn, updated daily.

Consumption

The specimen is particularly fond of discussing the morality of consumption; they can explain why fast fashion is exploitative, why global supply chains are unsustainable and more. However, if a closer look is taken at their own attire, the tag is likely to be cut off and, when asked, they're quick to respond that the garment was "thrifted." A word of advice: it's better to believe them than to mention the fact that you saw those same jeans in Urban Outfitters just two days ago.



ILLUSTRATION BY MAIA WILSON

They are more than open to discussing consumption with you, too. Feel free to meet them in any local coffee shop, where the minimum price for their drink will be a crisp $9.

Habitat

The Yale liberal resides within a university with a difficult past and contentious present-day politics. The Yale liberal is well aware of this. Because of their deep opposition to wealth inequality and colonial influence, they have made sure to live off-campus to protest the history of the dorms. However, it should be noted that the sophomore species still pays for room and board, since they technically "aren't allowed to move out yet." Their apartment is usually located in one of the new luxury condo buildings that replaced a mom-and-pop shop, but, hey, at least it has air conditioning.

The future of the species

Researchers have proposed several theories as to the future of the Yale liberal. Some suggest they will eventually abandon the institution; others believe they will attempt to reform it from within. Those who are more pessimistic tend to believe that the Yale liberal will spend four years protesting, graduate, then take a job at Goldman Sachs. But in the meantime, the species remains at Yale, drinking chai lattes, staying "niche" and reposting political TikToks.

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PERSONAL ESSAY

The writing is on the wall: An anthropology of the Yale student

// BY ERIN MUSE

I went to the stacks to study for my midterms. Instead, I found myself studying the walls.

There is something vaguely subterranean about the stacks of Sterling Memorial Library. Removed from the grandeur of the library's more public spaces, they offer a less romantic vision of intellectual life: narrow aisles, imposing shelves, dim lighting and the occasional solitary student hunched over a desk. The atmosphere is conducive to two things: academic productivity and existential despair. I was making little progress with the former.

It was in this state that I began noticing the writing.

Scattered across the desks and walls were fragments of poetry, obscure literary references, philosophical declarations, academic grievances and occasional words of encouragement. One inscription quoted Isaac Newton's reflection that, despite his discoveries, he remained like a child collecting pebbles on the shore while "the great ocean of truth lay all undiscovered before me." Elsewhere, the defiant verses of William Ernest Henley's "Invictus" offered a different philosophy of intellectual survival. Together, they suggested a population simultaneously enamored with the pursuit of knowledge and exhausted by its demands. Even Yale's vandalism, apparently, has a reading list.

As a student of this peculiar civilization, I felt compelled to investigate.

Anthropologists have long reconstructed societies through the artifacts they leave behind. Pottery fragments reveal patterns of trade; burial sites suggest religious beliefs and inscriptions offer glimpses into the preoccupations of the dead. The Yale student body, fortunately, has made the anthropologist's work considerably easier. Rather than burying its cultural artifacts, it has written them directly onto the furniture.

The inscriptions offer an unofficial taxonomy of undergraduate existence: the literary quotation, whose relevance to the author's circumstances remains a mystery; the philosophical pronouncement, composed with the apparent conviction that no one has previously contemplated mortality; the academic lament; and the anonymous encouragement, addressed to an unknown successor in suffering. There is something wonderfully absurd about encountering antiquated poetry in a place where students presumably go to finish reading it.

But more curious than the writing itself, perhaps, is where it appears.

The stacks are not a particularly sociable place. Students disappear into individual desks and narrow corridors, emerging occasionally to retrieve another book or surrender to the distractions of their phones. Silence hangs heavy between the shelves.

And yet, everywhere, there are traces of conversation.

A student sitting alone encounters the thoughts of someone who occupied the same desk before them. A complaint about academic exhaustion becomes a message of solidarity; a fragment of poetry offers a glimpse into a stranger's private preoccupations. The writers and readers may never meet. In the stacks, where students spend so much time alone together, the graffiti permits a peculiar form of companionship without requiring conversation or recognition.

Yale students are accustomed to expressing themselves before an audience. Their ideas are articulated in seminars, evaluated in essays and attached to names and reputations. But the anonymous inscriptions offer no comparable reward — no grade for a clever quotation, no recognition for an eloquent confession, no assurance that anyone will read the words at all.

A literary reference scratched onto a desk is therefore a curious thing. Perhaps the writer is not trying to demonstrate familiarity with literature so much as using it to articulate something that ordinary conversation cannot quite express. In the classroom, poetry is interpreted and analyzed. In the stacks, it is borrowed, repurposed and personal.

But the students who borrow from the literary record are also leaving something of their own behind.

The shelves preserve the accumulated work of generations of writers and scholars. Their books are organized, catalogued and attributed to identifiable authors. The surrounding graffiti constitutes a considerably less orderly archive. Its contributors remain unnamed, its contents unclassified and its survival dependent on the tolerance of future occupants and the University's cleaning staff.

Yet these two archives preserve different histories of intellectual life. The books record what people thought worth publishing. The graffiti records the considerably less distinguished business of being a student: boredom, anxiety, loneliness, fleeting inspiration and the desperate hope that the next exam will be survivable.

The undergraduate experience is brief, and the students who inhabit the stacks are constantly being replaced. Every year, another class arrives to occupy the same desks and develop its own complicated relationship with academic ambition. The building remains while its inhabitants pass through.

The graffiti allows generations of undergraduates to briefly coexist, their anxieties and aspirations separated by time but united by the surface on which they were written. There is something almost touching about this minor act of preservation. Yale students inhabit an institution that encourages them to imagine consequential futures and lasting achievements. Yet here, in the least glamorous corners of one of its grandest buildings, they leave behind evidence of much smaller ambitions: to be understood, to be remembered or simply to make it through another afternoon.

Of course, an anthropologist must be careful not to overinterpret the evidence. Not every literary quotation conceals an existential crisis. Some students, presumably, write on desks because they are bored and happen to possess pens.

I was hardly in a position to judge.

After all, I had arrived in the stacks with the perfectly ordinary intention of studying for my midterms and had somehow transformed the graffiti into an elaborate investigation of Yale's collective psyche. My predecessors had responded to academic exhaustion by writing on the furniture. I had responded by contemplating the anthropological significance of their writing. The distinction was perhaps less substantial than I wanted to believe.

Eventually, I returned to my actual coursework. I did not add anything to the walls.

But I did leave the stacks with the uncomfortable realization that my afternoon of amateur anthropology had produced an article instead of an adequate understanding of the material on my exam.

I suppose there are worse ways to fail a midterm.

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ILLUSTRATION BY SASHA CABRAL

WEEKEND RECOMMENDS:

A THRIFTED COAT