Naming Value

Issue No. 1

My best piece of writing (and thinking) to date is an essay on how chores connect us [0]. Writing that piece helped me clarify how I think about "progress" by naming the intangible values that modernity displaces. The world is getting better, so long as you narrow your definition to averages of what is possible, and measurable, technologically and for consumers. But this good for consumers has universalizing progress has costs; the past has virtues we are losing or have lost.

This newsletter is my attempt to think and talk about this with the people I care about.

McMansion Hell and Fans

For over a decade, the blog McMansion Hell has educated and entertained me [10]. It's an infrequent publication that revels in careless and labels the absurd designs of suburban architecture. But while it's always a laugh, McMH also educates its readers - giving you the language to describe why something looks wrong, and an appreciation for form and function well married (for which conspicuous luxury [10]. In an age of mass-produced McMansions serve as temples), the blog is a reminder that taste and aesthetics are a project we all can participate in and enjoy. Their recent post on the revolutions in the world of ceiling fans is worth a read (and a laugh) - a great reminder that as our capability to manufacture anything increases, discernment has never been more important. [11]

Gerontocracy-mandering

The best solutions to corruption are 'automatic': they leave no room for discretion, and in doing so weed out the possibility of malign action. One such solution to the corruption of gerrymandering is 'age-based-districting', where someone's age, rather than their geography, determines the district that they vote in. If used in Colorado for our eight representatives to the House, the districts would be ages 18-25, 26-31, 31-37, 38-44, 45-52, 53-60, 61-69, and 70-and-over. This system would achieve generational diversity (and continuity) in governance, and rebalance political power away from the wealthiest and best connected, who are often the elders of every geographic district. Additionally, in today's fast-moving world, we often have more in common (politically and economically) with people of our generation than our geography. Congress does not work because most congressional districts are not competitive, and efforts to make them so tend to get viewed through short-term impact on political power. We need a comprehensive and partisan neutral reform. [9]

Media on my mind

Book - Cat's Cradle by Kurt Vonnegut is a delightful page turner and essential wisdom for times of technical revolution. Equal parts mystery, character study, and pacifist manifesto, it follows a fictional journalist obsessed with the bombing of Hiroshima, who quickly finds himself embroiled in adventure and calamity. Fictive religious writing woven through the story gives contemplative respites through the rising suspense and action.

Musical (on Streaming) - On a recent flight, a production of "Hadestown" brought me to tears in Seat 35B. I had (incorrectly) thought "oh just another retelling of Orpheus and Euridice" - and figured my familiarity with its many retellings (including two favorites: Arcade Fire's Reflektor, Black Orpheus) would diminish it. It did not. Some stories are worth returning to time and time again. [12]

Article - Quotidian changes to flight patterns could reduce warming from contrails by a few percentage points of all human caused Global Warming, with a real world experiment playing out over the Atlantic this winter. I found it an exciting reminder that we can always use the understanding of our world to chip away at problems that appear insurmountable. [13]

Gridification

Popular music today is quantifiably more on-beat and tonally precise than the billboard charts of previous eras, a trend termed "Griddification". One obvious driver of this trend is technology - auto-tune makes snapping spurious or early tones to the pitch and the beat, and computers don't have human imperfections. A more subtle driver is the increasing level of professional training and rigor among the most successful musicians - singers will take the best take of dozens, and professional training emphasizes consistency. Another driver: music is rarely recorded in live sessions - most pieces of music are complex layerings of intricately stacked digital recordings, mixed and tuned and perfected by producers. Playing live with others introduces subtle changes in rhythm, conversation between performers, small inconsistencies in timing and pitch that give the whole a sense of coherence that more tightly knit produced counterparts can lack. Like any good neologism, Griddification quickly went from something I read about once in a good blog [8] to lodging in my mind as a shorthand for how precision and measurement distorts our sense of quality.

That was Naming Value Issue #1! **Footnotes are at grady.dev/nv/1**, where you can find links to sources to learn more, unsubscribe from NV, or sign-up a friend. Comments are always welcome, as are suggestions for future editions. Thanks for reading, writing, and thinking!

Thanks to JLC and ZBW for editing.

Grady

In each (~quarterly) issue I will curate morsels of ideas that are helping me see and label the tension between totalizing progress and less legible values. My hope is that Naming Value - both the activity and the newsletter - helps me think about this with more coherence and depth. I'm limiting it to a one-page origami fold-out as an intentional constraint. I hope you peruse it, seek out something that piqued your interest, and join me in conversation.

Are kids learning with AI?

A recent study from China strongly suggests "no". Students who use AI spend much less time on homework and receive higher grades on that coursework. But when they take exams (without AI), scores plummet. Typically, homework scores and exam scores tightly correlate, but this correlation inverts for students who use AI on assignments - the better they do on homework, the worse they do on exams [4]. The hope: these findings should encourage us to take a second look at Paul Lockhart's pleas from the 2000s to reform math curricula in the face of changing technology [5]. For the AI age, some teachers are collecting chat transcripts along with assignments [6], others are having students navigate unbounded environments through LARPing papal conclaves [7]. In the Cambrian explosion that is underway, we'll need to pay attention to what actually builds within students the virtues, capacity, and self-direction that an education needs to form in any time, not just what is fun, easier, or faster.

Papua New Guinea

In 1930 (the same year hundreds of thousands of Indians participated in the Salt March, and astronomers discovered Pluto), a terrestrial "discovery" was made. The highlands of Papua New Guinea had long been assumed uninhabited, but in 1930, air travel allowed passage over the physical barriers of inhospitable mountains and impassable jungles, and for the first time connected the people of the highlands (distant relatives of Aboriginal peoples of Oceania) with the broader world. The mutual exposure of cultures was documented extensively via photography and early video, recording in incredible fidelity how →

the indigenous populations lived, what they valued, and how their cultures and power structures had evolved under the isolation and constraint of the highlands. This history shows how culture evolves as a reaction to limitations - and has me thinking about how our society (so focused on consumer values) seems to see constraint as something to be liberated from. I highly recommend this brief blog post [2] and, if it piques your interest like it did mine, a trilogy of award-winning documentaries [3].

On Newsletters

In the postbellum United States, a staggering number of people regularly published newspapers. War necessitated innovation in portable printing that spilled into consumer use. Tens of thousands of Americans edited and set type for themselves - assembling anecdotes from their communities, clippings from other papers, and evergreen advice and poetry when the news was thin. While most papers were flashes in the pan, some became staples: a 12-year-old started and ran a weekly "Little Nellie's Little Paper" that circulated to thousands until she married. Amateur editors (collecting and curating) were rarely financially motivated; instead, it was a hobby, a community service, and a means of thinking, through voracious reading and careful writing. These facts and others about the history of the American newspaper industry (including the use of Mummy linen in newspaper printing) can be found in "Empire of Ink" [1], the book that inspired the newsletter you're currently holding.

Dear Reader
Want this in your mailbox?
Sign up at grady.dev/nv