



My first day working at the bookshop was the day after the election. I ducked away from “Make America Great Again” chants, and smiled at “Pussy Grabs Back” signs as I walked into work. I could feel the emotions roiling through the air, but here, I had to hold my tongue.

“As an employee at Albertine Book Store, you will be mediating many events and discussions,” my boss explained to me. “We always choose hot topics, but because Albertine is a child of the French Embassy, you cannot voice any political opinions.”

“How do I mediate a discussion if it gets heated?” I asked.

“Like the philosopher Michel Foucault, you will be providing structure and reason to sites of discourse.”

My first day was fairly quiet. Students from the Lycée Français picking up Francophone textbooks, French tourists browsing through old manuscripts, and the occasional New York hipster looking for a cute tote.

When the light outside had faded, I looked up at the ceiling: a vast inky sea of constellations that glowed in spite of the darkness outside. I looked around at the shop, at all of the famous names inscribed on books spines, and I thought about all of the contrasting ideas that must all be held together in the same room by Albertine. The books almost seemed to come alive.

GOLDEN AGE VS. RENAISSANCE THINKING

IN OUR CURRENT POLITICAL
CONTEXT

Public discussion at Albertine

**A project of the Cultural Services
of the French Embassy**

7pm November 25th, 2017

**972 Fifth Avenue,
NY, NY 10075**

Suddenly a man materialized right in front of me. It was Michel Foucault, the philosopher my boss had mentioned.

“Trump took my Golden Age Thinking and twisted it,” he said, his lips curled. “I strongly disagree with him. But I still stand by my argument that many things were better in the past. What what do you all think? I now open it up to the floor.”

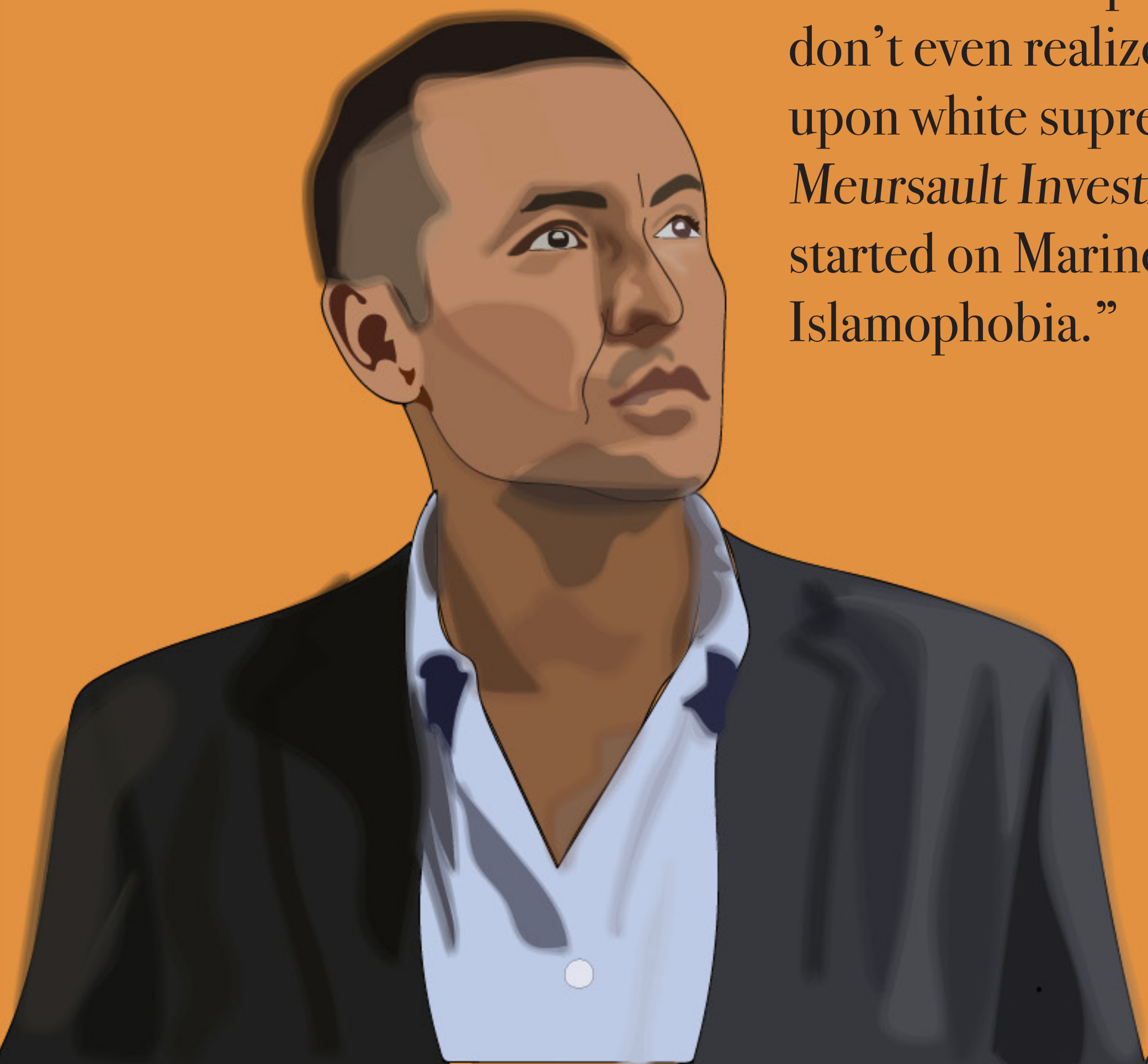
Other people began to materialize too, and books began opening on their own. I could hardly believe the famous faces before my eyes.



Albert Camus piped up: “Times were worse before. I’ve certainly been accused of racism, what with my blatant dehumanizing of North African people. Times were different then—everyone in France looked down on Arabs.”



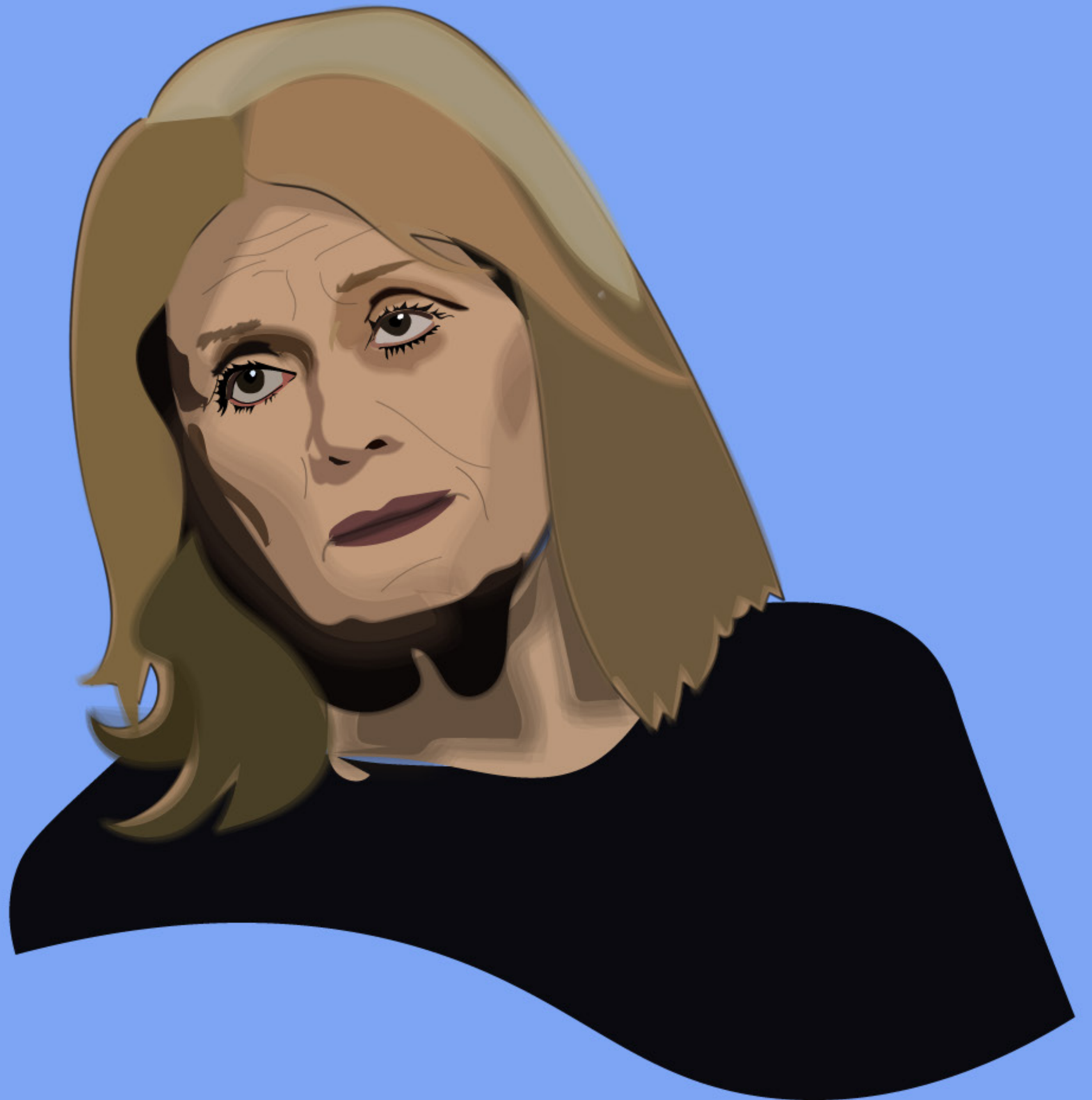
“France is still racist,” Kamel Daoud said. “Most people celebrate your book, *The Stranger*, as a brilliant exploration into existentialism, but don’t even realize that the entire book is based upon white supremacy. That’s why I wrote *The Meursault Investigation*. And don’t even get me started on Marine Le Pen, refugee rights, and Islamophobia.”



I turned to see Gloria Steinem.

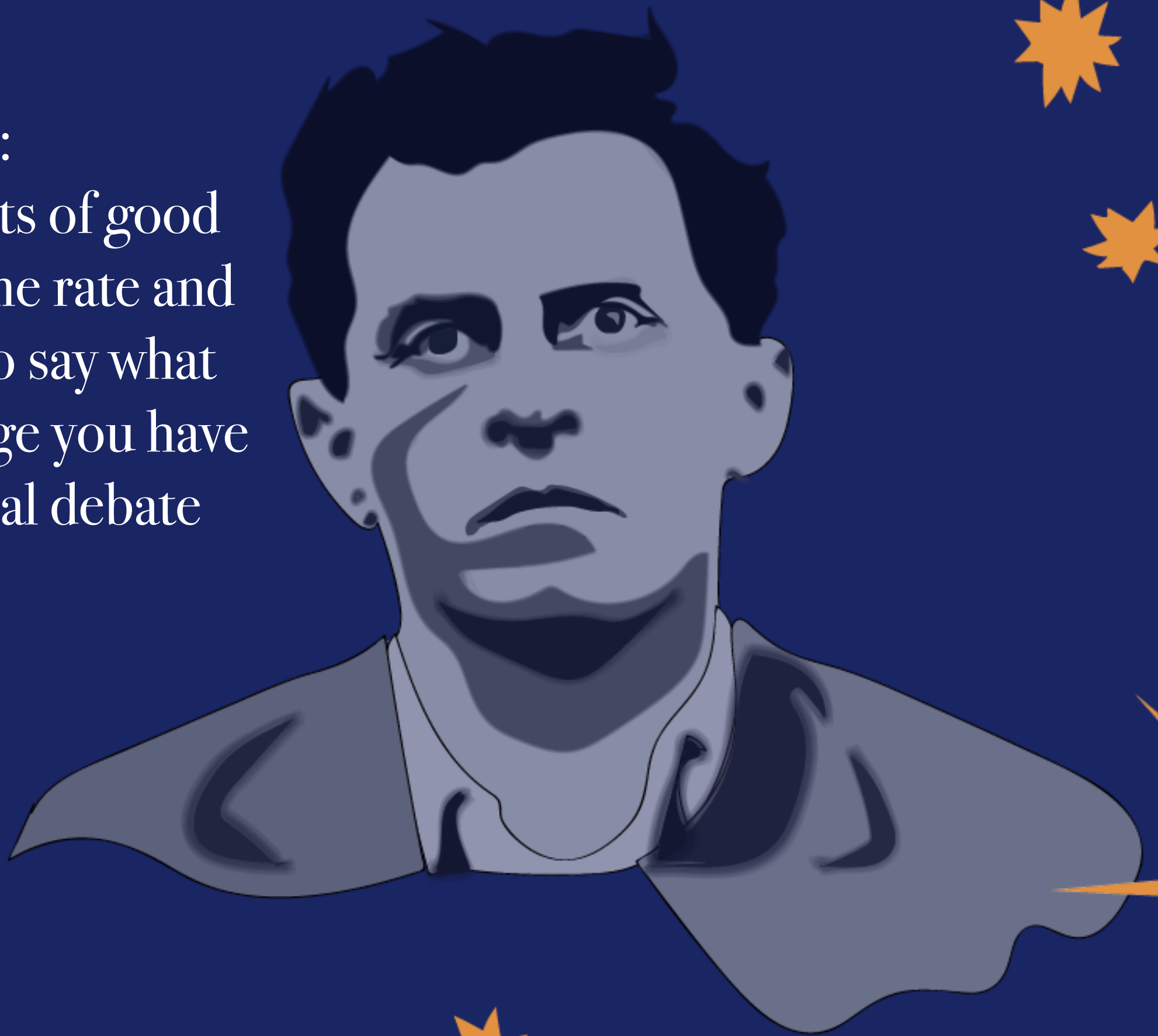
“We do have a long ways to go until we reach equality,” she said. “But with our new administration, fewer people will be deluded into thinking that we live in a post-racist, post-sexist world.”

Foucault ran his fingers over his bald scalp. “But look at how we treat the mentally ill! Look at our suppression of sexuality! Some things were better before.”



Ludwig Wittgenstein pitched in:

“We can’t pretend that all aspects of good and bad fluctuate equally at the same rate and in the same direction. And who’s to say what good and bad really are? In language you have to make assumptions, but in rational debate you must be skeptical...”



But skepticism undermines the very principal of language, and thus, rational debate, undoing the very concept of logic itself—”

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“What’s the point of discussing all of this without doing something about it?!” yelled Friedrich Nietzsche.

“I think we’ve gone off topic here,” I cut in. “The purpose of this discussion is to establish how things got to be how they are. Only then can we know how to solve the problems at hand.”

The philosophers began arguing uncontrollably. Voices swirled around the shop, and for a second I thought I saw the constellations on the ceiling fighting each other too.





My head was spinning. Would they ever reach an agreement about this? What was to become of the world?

Suddenly, the philosophers started to evanesce, and their books started shuffling back to their shelves. The debate was over for now.

Perhaps they would never reach a clean agreement, I thought as I locked up the shop. And perhaps both were right about some things. But if there was one thing everyone could agree on, it's that the world was constantly changing. And it was up to us to decide whether it would change for the better, or for the worse.