

C L U C

COLUMBIA
JOURNAL
OF LITERARY
CRITICISM



ORGANS

HOLD YOUR BREATH
"YOU CAN'T EAT STRAIGHT SPICE!"
HER STOMACH IS SOCIETY
BLACK RADICALISM AND THE POLITICS OF WRITING
IMPERIAL INTIMACIES
PNEUMATOLIBERALISM
TRANSLATION AESTHETICS

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XVI

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Lee, Russell, photographer. *An organ deposited by the flood on a farm near Mount Vernon, Indiana*. Feb. Photograph. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, www.loc.gov/item/2017763646/.

ORGANS

ed to reproduction, the skin as the casing that is often overlooked as an organ yet has become a site of cosmetic fixation. Becca Teich, Devika Kapadia, and Claire Zuo interview Andrea Long Chu on bodies at whose threshold(s) desires variously arrive. What do we make of our aspirations to make our desirous organs comply with our politics?

And in what ways can organs themselves be made anew, or always have been made anew, perpetually reinscribed and redistributed in signification and use? What happens to those terms when applied, symbolically, to the social, the political, the environmental? Organs as particulars are revealed as openings into forms of organization, politics, kinships, structured sensation. Amber Officer-Narváez's essay "Hold Your Breath: Blackness, Worldmaking and the Radical Ontology of Lungs" hones in on the particular organ of lungs, their respiration and obstruction. Anti-Blackness obstructs and distorts Black breath, yet lungs exceed the body—Black breath meets Black Being, where Black breath and Black being meet Black life as Officer-Narváez's prose offers a "deep breath," a "quiet inhale," and "collective exhalation." In Aaron Su and Benjamin Biese's interview with Professor María José de Abreu, de Abreu thinks about reconstituting our encounters with air as medium through which we move untouched, and to move instead towards a conception of inhalation and exhalation instead as a site at which the body is made and unmade, at which the social is circulated—in the context of neoliberalism and urban religious activities in Brazil.

"Organ" comes from the Greek organon, meaning tool or instrument. They are variously instrumental: they are imagined, built, and stolen; they are given away, they outlast and undo bodies. These movements are intimate and gruesome, occurring across frames of global colonial exploitation and interpersonal altruism. Bailey Miller reckons with these entangled intimacies in her essay "Imperial Intimacies: Commodity Fetishism and the Global Organ Trade," opening out the haunting traces of sold organs circulating through new bodies while old hosts grow debilitated, while Josué Chavez examines these networks of transformation and global traversal at the level of language, sites of transnational interaction toward political futures motivated by and through practices of non-national translation in his essay titled "Translation Aesthetics: Making Legible the Home-eyer-to-come as an Instance of the Event Before the Multiplication of Labor." Bodies, in their wholes and parts, emissions and transmissions, are used, put to use, for other bodies in ways that live at the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, class, and ability that both shape and defy the signification of that body across time and space.

The word organ's definition is rooted in instrumentalization, but what happens when that use phases out, shifts, transforms? The useless appendix ruptures, one previously excessive kidney is gifted to another, debates over the productive function of pleasure of various organs both related and unrelated

Organs are both embodied and exceed the body, are emotive and overflowing. Lizzy Hardings' essay "Her Stomach is Society: Digestive Trouble and "Real Muscularity"" explores the flows within Leonora Carrington's writing as, within the body of work, food flows in and out of bodies in simultaneous surrealist delight and grotesquerie. She helps us stomach that grotesque, strengthen the muscles of our own surrealist reading. In these fleshy works, what comes of these digestive troubles and consumptive excesses? Organs map onto and contain affective movements, finding ways to slip outside the physical, exceed definitional constraints. Sam Lin-Kimberg and Sebastian Mazzat talk to Brent Edwards in various veins adjacent to organs: on archival accumulation and structuring; the entanglement within the archive of empirics and the fictive. And, about music—of course, organs not only can be instrumentalized but are themselves a musical instrument, calling to both medieval theological polyphony and contemporary sonic experimentation. Organs proliferate, sound out to us in familiar and unfamiliar ways. We hope for this issue of CJLC to sound back.

We would like to extend thanks to our advisor Nicholas Damas. We would also like to thank our financial advisor, Philip MacCannell, and representative to the activities board, Thomas Li. We would also like to express gratitude for the editors and staff of CJLC for their care, work, and collectively thinking with and through ORGANS over the course of the year. While we will so greatly miss CJLC in our post-undergraduate ventures, we are related for what's to comes of the journal in the hands of our thoughtful and committed underclassmen, guided by the sensitivities and brilliances of editor-in-chiefs to be, Safwan Khatib and Claire Zuo.

Devika Kapadia & Rebecca Teich
Editors-in-Chief
2018

BREATH
YOUR
HOME

Hold Your Breath: Blackness, Worldmaking and the Racial Ontology of Lungs

Amber Officer-Narvosa

and mouth. If there is too much carbon dioxide in your body—if the process of exhalation is not enough to make up for the gases inhaled from, say, malfunctioning scuba diving gear or breathing into a paper bag—you could experience a host of consequences that range from vomiting to muscle spasms to death. If you don't breathe out, your body will eventually stop functioning. Scientists say that adults take up to 30,000 breaths per day. Through constant movement, our lungs save us again and again from the edge of death.

That is a good story, and some of it is true. But Whitney was a Black woman trying to love in this world, and so she knew, as she told us, that breathing is never as easy as it sounds.

It is a good story, and some of it is true. But the guidelines for how to stay alive are very clear, and that's where it starts to seem like fiction. In the movie *Waiting to Exhale* (1995) Robin says to Gloria, "I hope you find true love and get you some that's so electric, you ain't going to need no blow dryer." In this movie, exhalation is about love, or all the things that get in its way. Filling the lungs with a home to wake up in on clear mornings, tender words in the back of Gloria's salon, an electric love. A love that sets the air alive. Sometimes you spend a whole movie waiting, and it still isn't clear what your lungs should be doing. Sometimes you burn your man's car in your front yard and set the air alive yourself. Sometimes he leaves you for a white woman. Sometimes you spend a whole life asking your breath, am I safe here? It is a good story, and some of it is true.

"Racial or ethnic differences in lung function exist. Specific reference equations...that have been developed from studies of certain populations are preferable when available. When such reference equations are not available, however, the use of correction factors is an appropriate interim solution. As an example, a correction factor of 0.88 may be applied to white subject reference values for FEV1...Assigning specific correction factors for racial/ethnic groups will become even more complicated in the future as racial/ethnic diversity increases." — *Official American Thoracic Society Technical Standards: Spirometry in the Occupational Setting* (2014)

The babies in Beaumont, Texas know how hard it is to breathe. Or I am told they do. I am told they breathe in the rotten-egg smell of the sour crude that Exxon pumps onto their porches some nights, and I am told some of them grow up Black and alive. You can go online and hear this too, about Black people in Beaumont, Texas and Diamond, Louisiana and Oakland and the South Bronx and Bahia and Penuela. They will

breath out

During exhalation, the diaphragm relaxes from its previously expanded form, reducing the space in the chest cavity.¹ As the diaphragm pushes against the lungs, carbon dioxide is forced upwards and out, exiting the body through the nose

show you pictures of tired-looking Black rural folks and you will look into their eyes, the white reporters will show you washed out streets and back alleys, elders posed in the middle of the frame in broken chairs.

They will talk about how hard it is to breathe. They will talk about how hard the breathing is. They will talk about the time they couldn't breathe.

If they did not exist in their broken chairs to breathe in the carcinogens and wear house-dresses in the New York Times, would lungs really exist. Black folks invented breathing I think. It makes sense. What I am trying to say is that we cannot breathe. What I am trying to say is that Black peoples' lungs are never just lungs. What I'm trying to say is that our lungs are burdened with the weight of the world. We're carrying you. Can you feel it?

If you think lungs are an organ, born in every human body, then you haven't heard what I heard. I heard lungs were made in the middle of a plantation where Black South Africans breathed in the dust that eventually coated their entire insides more than the air itself.

I heard lungs were birthed from a white man's medical notes

I heard they never wanted us to breathe, and so they made lungs, and learned how to measure how much we couldn't breathe

I heard we may have breathed anyway, and so they were scared and created lungs

I heard lungs were born on the floor of the sea, when the sounds of Africans carried through the water² and menaced the slaveship sailors in their dreams

I heard lungs aren't real, not really
Have you heard this too?

In *Notes on the State of Virginia*, written in 1784, Thomas Jefferson described a number of physical features which he believed belonged to African slaves. It was these features, he argued, that made the Black slave suited to a life of bondage. Among the features he listed were a greater

tolerance of extreme heat, less need for sleep than whites, and "perhaps too a difference of structure in the pulmonary apparatus."³ Jefferson went on to write that "A black, after hard labour through the day, will be induced by the slightest amusements to sit up till midnight, or later, though knowing he must be out with the first dawn of the morning."⁴



John Hutchinson was a British doctor who invented the spirometer—a machine to measure exhalation—in the 1840s, after realizing that the amount of air that could exit the lungs of a patient seemed to predict things like life expectancy. He wrote articles in which he advocated for the spirometer as a way of ensuring that policemen and soldiers were physically fit, ready to defend the nation or go searching for missing property without the hindrance of weak lungs.⁵ One must take in air in order to wear a uniform, it seemed, and the more air exhaled, the better. Hutchinson was also interested in using the spirometer as a tool to stop the spread of tuberculosis throughout the urban centers of the metropole. The spirometer could strengthen the police force, quarantine the poor, and prepare the army. It seemed uniquely suited for the challenges and terrors of nineteenth-century European life.

Simone Browne reminds us that Black people were the first looked-at. Or that the hold of the ship, the boundaries of the plantation, the mid-

dle of the Atlantic, were the places where state surveillance and modes of measuring were born.⁶

On his plantation in Virginia in 1851, Samuel Cartwright conducted experiments on his slaves to measure what he believed to be inherent differences in lung capacity between Blacks and whites. Drawing upon both Jefferson's and Hutchinson's writings, Cartwright claimed to have found that "the deficiency in the negro was 20 per cent."⁷ Like the countless scientists who followed and adapted his theories for their own uses, Cartwright did not adjust for differences in environment or living conditions. For Cartwright, the equation was simple: Black people's lungs could expand to a lesser volume, and this physical pathology showed that the presence of the slavemaster and overseer was a necessary one. The deficiency in the negro was 20 percent. It could be measured in the lungs.

I heard they never wanted us to breathe, and so they made lungs, and learned how to measure how much we couldn't breathe. I heard we may have breathed anyway, and so they were scared and created lungs

Take, for instance, the government's letter closing a case filed by the Black community of Ashurst Bar/Smith, Alabama, about the contaminated water, "respiratory problems," and other harm caused by a state landfill.

"With respect to this issue, as investigated, the ECRCC finds that the record does not establish a prima facie case of discrimination... ECRCC finds insufficient evidence to conclude that ADEM violated Title VI and EPA's nondiscrimination regulation... EPA File No. 06R-03-R4 is closed as of the date of this letter."⁸

"insufficient evidence"

at what point does the work of gathering evidence cease to have meaning?
you need more, they say, and then we'll let you live

it is not enough

ous to the eye or mind"
whose eye or mind? yours or mine or the slaveholder's?

somewhere in "obvious," somewhere within the necessities of seeing or thinking evidence is the human (eye and mind) human organs that can lead to reasoned decisions, and maybe that is where the trouble begins

In their suit, the residents listed a number of health and quality of life complaints stemming from the presence of the landfill in their community. These included

"impact from proximity to natural gas line;" "increase in disease vectors;" "drinking water well contamination concerns;"

In responding to this list and the allegation that the landfill company "intentionally discriminated against the African American residents of Ashurst Bar/Smith community during the public involvement process...," the EPA does not deny that these adverse effects were there. They simply deny that they intentionally discriminated against the residents of the suit. They deny that they were required by law to inform residents of things like landfill overflow. How does one prove intention when the evidence is never enough?

How does one breathe when no one is required to notify residents that the air is polluted with methane gas? It must be a mistake that every landfill in Alabama is sited in Black and poor communities,⁹ because the tools for measuring white peoples' intention haven't been created yet.

I heard they never wanted us to breathe, and so they made lungs, and learned how to measure how much we couldn't breathe

I heard we may have breathed anyway, and so they were scared and created lungs

hold breath

Interviewer's Comment

He has trouble talking. One lung is affected. He is blind. He said he was wounded caused his lung trouble. Seems to me old age. He isn't very feeble in the house. Their house was clean and he and his wife, also born in slavery, looked clean.

breathe in

The difference was in the lungs. A holding breath, a withholding breath. In Thomas Jefferson's words we can read the fear of a white man who couldn't control his slaves. They would work all day and stay up into the night for themselves. They took the night for themselves, inhaled its cool air, made plans for rebellion or maybe just for tomorrow. A withholding breath. A breath held back close to the chest, a difference in the pulmonary function. A breath held with and among a breath only for those you love, a breath held back so that those you love may live, a broken sob, a breathing with.

Every time [REDACTED], remembering again how to breathe in smaller space, how to withhold, how to take in air while something else grasps at the ribcage like a smothering or a hug. [REDACTED] I can only hope that in this, my act of subterfuge, is some breathing left for me and you and us. There are different shapes for the air, some of them are smooth and snug. Less air is what you get sometimes when you change the shape of things, and that's okay.

-

When Whitney Houston sang *Waiting to Exhale* in 1995, she had already grown up attending church and singing in a gospel choir, and I cannot ask her but perhaps she was already acquainted with the divine possibilities of what Black folks do with the lungs we were given. The quiet inhale of a prayer. The held breath of fear, the collective exhalation at the end of a service. Did you know we have always prayed in the outdoors. In the outer limits, in the woods, beyond. Did you know it is there that we have done our deepest breathing?

In *Blackpentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility*, Ashton Crawley writes that, "To breathe within this western theological-philosophical epistemology, from within the zone of blackness, from within the zone of Blackpentecostalism, is to offer a critical performative intervention into the western juridical apparatus of violent control, repression, and yes, premature death. Thus, attending to the ways air, breath, and breathing are aestheticized are intentionally elaborating for one that would notice." Crawley writes that the

suppression of Black breath (Black life) (Black being.) (Black lungs!) has been a foundational part of the moral-political project that enshrined private property and practices of land holding within the rule of law. To be birthed within this project and to turn our attention, then, to Black people's lungs in the service of prayer, praise, remembrance...

For Black feminist thinker, writer, and educator Alexis Pauline Gumbs, breathing is one way that we might fill ourselves with the living teachings of the ancestors. Gumbs's Black Feminist Breathing Chorus website has guided audio meditations on affirmations based on quotes from Octavia Butler, Essex Hemphill, Anna Julia Cooper, Harriet Tubman, Audre Lorde, Lucille Clifton, Claudia Jones, June Jordan, Zora Neale Hurston, and others. Today, in a loud and cold place with my back against a window, I listened to Meditation #12, "I Have Hopes for Myself" (Gwendolyn Brooks). Gumbs's voice led me through Brooks's vision for cross-generational wondering, through what Gumbs called an "accessible affirmation," an homage to potential, i have hopes for myself, i have HOPEs for myself, I Have Hopes For Myself, I Have Hopes I Have Hopes for Myself, "and I have hopes for you." In 2014, Gumbs led the Black Feminist Breathing Retreat, for "black-identified people who breathe or who want to breathe and who would cherish a space to breathe in the queer affirming, gender transforming, loving and abundant context of black feminist legacy and practice!"¹⁰ Scrolling through the Black Feminist Breathing Chorus website, my eyes lingered on the ornate collages of ancestors, their hair drawn out into paintstrokes and curlicues, held close with glitter and fabric prints and flowers. I stared into Essex Hemphill's eyes, noting the brightness of the sunflower next to his smile. The air in my lungs began to sound like memory.

Thinking with Crawley and Gumbs about Black performances with breath and air as intervention and aesthetic, as ritual and quotidian practice, I also want to keep asking about the moments when breath was not given. Within the violence

of all that keeps Black people's lungs constricted, burdened with carcinogens and toxic waste, measured and harangued, instruments of a genocide continually in the making, to not only look for the breathing as answer, but for the breath saved for dreaming, the breath out of reach, the breath not breathed that speaks of impossible interiors, the never-possible things we have done with this thing called lungs, the ways we have hidden that could not have occurred, I will keep asking about the moments when breath was withheld. I will ask in the mornings and I will not write of it here, maybe you can ask in the mornings too.

remembering also, with Gumbs, that meditation is not only about breathing, but also about the chants that may give the breathing shape, also about its slowness, also perhaps, about its sometimes absence, we might remember that to breathe, maybe, is to remake the world.

To find the beauty in what Black people do with air to say Wait, in the relentless and ongoing cycling-through of our deaths, To breathe, therefore, is to remember the world, to reach back across yesterday and the days before, to offer praise and your forehead to the ancestors,

The hidden breaths that end the world, To breathe, then, and to hold a small piece of that breathing for ourselves, to not breathe, to keep some air where they will never find it, is a difference in the lungs, it is a deficiency in the air we breathe, to remember the sounds held in the water,

to breathe, to exhale and to make lungs for the world to have measured, to have cancer, have organs, to have the cold metal and the doctor's notes that say a deficiency in the lungs and to breathe, then, to breathe, then, is to—

Amber Officer-Narvusa is a Sagittarius.

Endnotes

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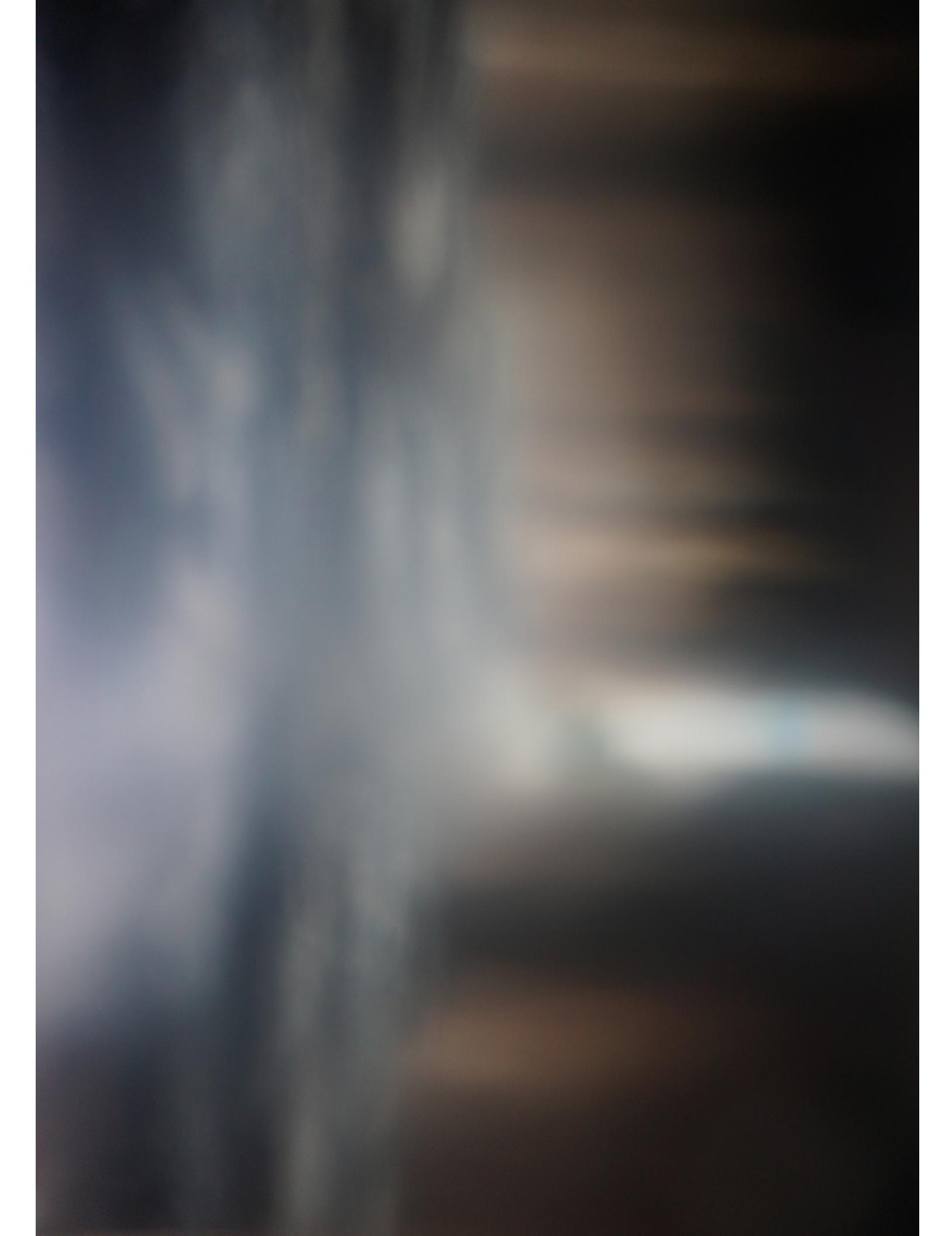
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Image Information
Image in "Hold Breath" from Federal Workers Project, *Arkansas Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States*. Native American Book Publishers, 1 Jan 1938.







"You Can't Eat Straight Spice!" : Good Lies, Bad Concepts, and Desire

An Interview with Andrea Long Chu

*Andrea Long Chu is a writer, critic, and doctoral candidate in comparative literature at New York University, where she is currently completing a doctoral dissertation titled "Bad Politics." Her areas of research include affect theory, transfeminist queer theory, cultural studies, phenomenology, and aesthetics. Her writing has appeared in *n+1*, *Arforum*, *Women & Performance*, and *TSQ*, with work forthcoming in *Bookforum*, *differences*, and the *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*. She sits on the editorial collective of *Women & Performance*.*

This interview was conducted by Rebecca Teich, Devika Kapadia, and Claire Zuo, editors of CJLC.

CJLC: While we were reading your essays, we were thinking about how desire relates to genre: how desire as you characterize it is slippery and resistant to forms of moral and other orderings, while genre suggests some kind of stickiness, or congealment within writing, reading or living practices. Could you map out how you think about that as a starting point?

ANDREA LONG CHU: I think of desire as something that's always happening to you. There's no authentic place from which what I want is welling up spontaneously, so it doesn't make sense to distinguish between desires that belong to me and that are imposed. A social pressure is usually a desire that you didn't desire. There's not just pressure from the outside, but it

feels like you want something but that you might not want to want it. I tend to think of desire as what's keeping people hooked into the world, or into worlds.

Genre is my way to talk about form. I desire a theory of form without a Theory of Forms, like Plato. Take gender: we've had *Gender Trouble*, gender performativity, social construction, we all have internalized that, to a certain extent, within the academy, popular culture, certain parts of the internet. But none of us stopped believing in the existence of women. None of us stopped believing in the existence of gender, either, at least in terms of lived reality—you walk down the street and you know (with some margin of error but not a very high one): That's a woman, or that's a man. Those things come to you as if spontaneously. Which is why I say everyone is a gender essentialist whether they like it or not.

Genre can be a productive way to think about not just but especially gender, as a set of aesthetic conventions geared toward producing a certain result, which are not criteria exactly. Part of how a genre works is that you know it when you see it and you can't actually enumerate criteria for it. A genre always involves both knowledge and non-knowledge--a kind of knowledge that to work, has to hide itself. What makes you ask about the relationship between those things?

CJLC: I was trying to digest this idea of desires being heteronormous—you describe it as something that comes to you, arrives to you spontaneously from the outside. And so I was attempting to imagine where it might originate or why it originates in the specific ways that it does?

AJC: One of the questions running through my work is this question of the political reeducation of desire—a kind of optimism that has circulated for a long time in feminism and more recently in queer theory and other disciplines. The question I get all the time is about “no fats, no femmes, no Asians,” as it circulates on Grindr—a case where there’s clear marks of racism, misogyny and imperialism on the way that desire has been

formed. On the one hand we can run a political analysis of a formation of desire. The problem is that that analysis doesn't seem to speak to that experience of that desire because you don't experience that desire as formed, you experience it directly, most of the time.

But having that analysis usually doesn't make you stop wanting what you want. An example of this is self-loathing. Say you are a woman, a feminist woman: you look in the mirror and say, “I don't like my nose, I can see a double chin coming in, I don't like my gut.” You can run all your feminist analyses of patriarchy, beauty standards, the cosmetics industry, the fashion industry, Hollywood, Instagram, all of these forces. You can be a very good Foucauldian about the whole thing—but still you don't feel better. Not only do you not feel better, you probably feel worse because now what little agential leeway that you've pried open through critical analysis is now being spent on still hating yourself. So feminism didn't actually make you feel better; it just proved that you're politically retrograde. So now you're ugly and stupid.

I'm sympathetic to that first half, where it really seems that there are some desires that shouldn't exist. It seems like there has to be a way to get rid of desires that involve racial exclusion or desires that actually involve sexual violence or hating women. But then when we turn to ourselves its not clear we've found a set of techniques that reliably produce change in our own desires. This is a site of great denial and disavowal. The political cultures that have grown on the internet in the feminist blogosphere and trans Tumblr world are very much about: How can we change the way that we have sex, change the way that we desire, to make the world a better place so as to, say, fight colonialism? So you can go on EverydayFeminism.com and find moral lists that are a contemporary catechism for “9 Ways You Can Have More Body-Positive Sex With Your Non-Binary Partner” or something like that. As if you could transfigure what you did in bed with your partner into some political act that was going to be resisting something. And as if that's something that we should require of people

and what they do in bed.

CJLC: Maybe we could return to the question of genre and desire from there—how desire might slip over onto the genre side of things, where you recognize desires and you don't know quite why they exist but there is nevertheless a connecting or congealing or stickiness in their patterns of emergence?

AJC: I see genre as the set of conventions for showing you how you might feel about something. Those don't have legislative power. Tragedy can be said to be sad, whether or not it makes one sad. You can recognize the formal elements of being sad or trying to make you sad whether or not you're personally choked up at it. Nonetheless, aesthetic conventions show you how to feel or show you how to feel about how you feel. I certainly think we want genres. We are often pursuing aesthetic forms that will help mediate our experience of our own feelings. They are just as often politically embarrassing as they are anything else.

Take, for instance, autogynephilia, which is part of this much maligned sexological theory starting in the 1980s by sexologist Ray Blanchard. He said he wanted to schematize transsexual women, who he imagined to be men. The idea was that there were two types of transsexual women. First you have homosexual transsexuals, by which he means straight trans women, that is, people who were gay men and then transitioned because they wanted to have sex with straight men. The other category is autogynephilic transsexuals. He invents this word autogynephilia to refer to a transsexual who is in love with the idea of herself as a woman, who is sexually aroused by the idea of being a woman. Both of these categories were supposed to sort of reject outright, as being transphobic and pathologizing, and all of the other reasons that we, as people who have read Foucault, are supposed to be skeptical of the medical establishment.

But if you go on Reddit or Tumblr, you'll find people using this term to describe what they feel. Sometimes in jest—but there are also folks

using it the way that we use other terms that come from medical vocabulary like transsexual, dysphoria. (And remember, there are people who oppose the word dysphoria, too, on the grounds that this is pathologizing, demeaning, dehumanizing.) What that criticism misses is that there are real women in the world who have feelings that do feel descriptively matched by that. There absolutely are trans women who are aroused by the image of themselves as women. That's a totally well-recognized phenomenon. What I mean is, autogynephilia, as a word, is not actually a discursive mechanism for disciplining subjects—or maybe it is—but it's also an aesthetic form that producing an armature on which you can then hang your feelings. It can be a relief to find out, there's a word for this way I feel; it helps me develop some structure of expectation around my own feelings, which by themselves originate outside of me even as I am experiencing them.

once not a rule but just a means for conjuring belonging becomes rules, prohibitions, the listicle. What's going on with sort of online internet trans politics is what happens when a fandom sees a rapid influx of members and doesn't necessarily change to fit that.

CJLC: These really resonate, about these kind of subcultures that are themselves world-building, creative rather than wholly contingent in some sort of historical facticity, like the question of the reality is not the question. Gesturing towards your essay "On Liking Women" and the article on sissy porn where desire is both partially generated and mediated through technology and texts, how may that relate to other perhaps outlaw demonstration of desire and sexuality? There seems that at times specific technologies of sex travel, at least in part, through text-fisting and Michel Foucault, muffing and Mira Bellwether, sissification and Tumblr; the list goes on. How do you see this mediation or production of desire as relational beyond human relation? What politics are, if at all, happening at these sites?

ALC: It's important, theoretically, to take sex as something ordinary, which is different than to say to normalize. By making it ordinary I mean that it's subject to the same set of affective preoccupations as standing in line at the grocery store or sitting on the subway have. It's often about desire, it's not often about sexual desire. The famous Oscar Wilde quote is "everything in the world is about sex except sex; sex is about power," which is half right. Everything in the world is about sex; sex is usually about everything else. You often have sex for the reason that you watch TV, which is really not quite much of a reason but because it's there and you're trying to either reproduce some sort of sameness. If you're in a relationship with the same partner there is a desire to just establish continuity over time and sex is just one of the things you do. Or you have sex because you're trying to feel a particular way about your body or because you're trying to get in touch with capital T' Politics.

You absolutely can have sex for political reasons.

Solidarity can be arousing, as can the idea that you're actually producing some sort of political change in the world. But I would say it's not political in so far as it doesn't have the kind of efficaciousness and maximal intentionality that is supposed to be behind political acts. It's much more like watching TV than it is like protesting in the streets. Protesting in the streets can also be like watching TV, which is why the question of how do we refine sex into something that isn't going to be infected by the patriarchy anymore, from the 1970s, ultimately never panned out. Enjoyment proved not very vulnerable to critique and the stakes could always get higher—down to very minute gestural things, like who's supposed to be on top, who's supposed to be using what part of their body, how they're using it—everything can fall under that rubric of is it doing politics enough. The impossible dream of lesbian sex during the 1970s was that you would just fall over on your side, and stare respectfully into your partner's vagina without topping, without any butch-femme, without any whips and chains, and it didn't work.

CJLC: I'm interested in your thoughts about other technologies that are often either viewed as political but form other kinds of relation instead of or in addition—bridging the gap between particular encounters that have media-attachments and, sissy porn as highly mediated or like porn in general as facilitating niche communities and what kind of relation lies therein.

ALC: One of the interesting things about porn period, which sissy Porn is only a sort of underscoring in large pink gel pen, is that it's totally possible to have sex with things that are not human. There's a real sense in which you're having sex with your screen when you watch porn. That's not a figure of speech, it's actually happening.

CJLC: Something that came up when you were talking about sex as a political act or not a political act right now, thinking about how when sex is a productive force in that it's like sex work and the realm of sex variously; how does that



change the ordinariness of sex? And this is sort of related but not completely. I was thinking about what you said about fandoms and desire and a lot of that being expressed as sexual desire even if it's not necessarily. I was just thinking about stan twitter and people saying "I'm just a hole", thinking about that way of organizing desire.

I was also looking at "On Liking Women" specifically—the sentence where you talk about how "transition expresses not the truth of an identity but the force of a desire" in relation to fandom. It presents itself as a certain identity but a lot of it is the force of desire to be in kinship with others.

ALC: I don't know that sex work actually changes the ordinariness of it. The feminist anti-sex work line is that it's like ripping sex out of the everyday and placing it in the chains of commodification, as if people had sex outside of that. Someone like Kathleen Barry, who was a second wave anti-porn, anti-sex feminist of the 1980s, would say that the scene of sex work becomes the scene of all heterosexual sex, but these anti-sex work and anti-porn feminists still held out for a concept of good sex in which there won't be any power and everything will be totally consensual in a real sense and not in the sense of capitalist patriarchal consent. None of that is true.

On this question of fandom and desire: First, there's shipping, which I'd imagine would have to do with some identificatory force that says "I want to be this person" and "This person should have sex with that person." But then there are other kinds, where if you're talking about fanfiction, or other forms of fandom on Twitter or Tumblr, or stanning, that are immediately sexual—in some sense, the relation to the fan object, whether it's a real thing or not, is always more than "I wanna fuck that thing." It probably is a bottoming relation—like all the tweets about people who would let Jeff Goldblum sit on their face or whatever. There's something to be said about wanting sex to make you into something—something that you want of sex which constantly is presented as a possibility and

constantly withheld.

Sissy porn is, for instance, porn about a desire for sex to make something happen. You want to become a woman by being fucked. That could be thought of as a subset of a larger question: It's not that we are certain things, therefore

want to have sex, it's that we want to have sex in certain ways so as to produce a kind of identity that because it's not there, will never quite necessarily feel real, which is why you have to go have sex again. Sissy porn is about being for an anonymous someone else, articulating a form of gender that is relational. We're supposed to say as trans people, "I transitioned for myself, I wouldn't transition for other people." Of course you transition for other people. If it was just me sitting in a room in a universe in which I was the only person it would make no sense. The point is that you want other people to behave in specific ways, vis-a-vis you.

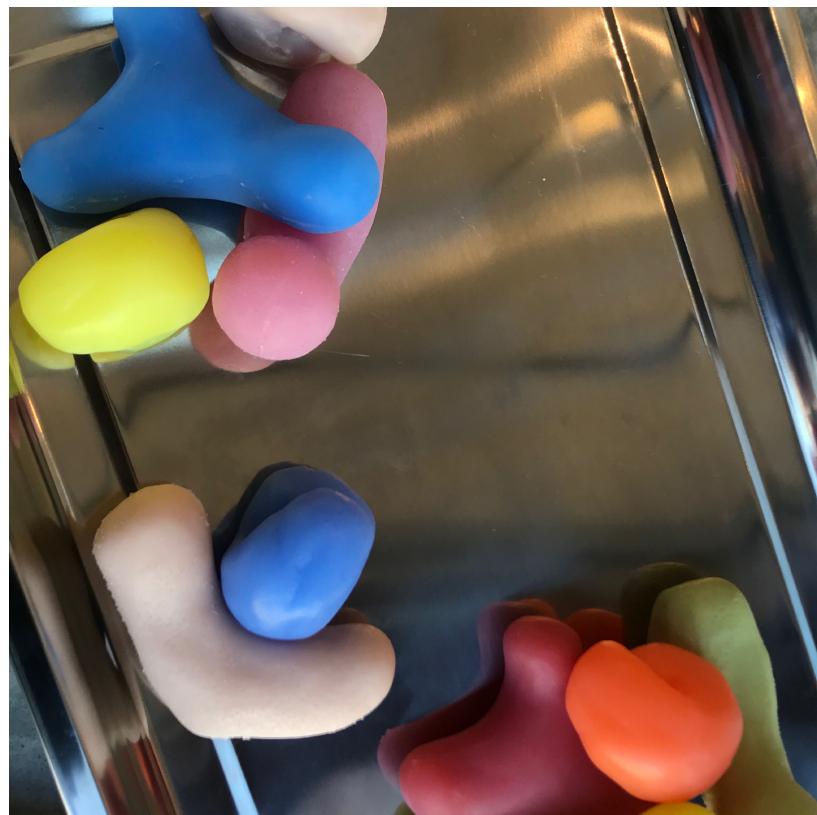
There's an optimism that because sex involves, as it were, setting up a computer program and then running a set of relations. There's a chance for experimentation in sex. I don't mean that in the "kissing a girl in college" experimentation, though that falls under this, I mean actually getting to try on different kinds of relationality in a way that you don't usually get to. Which doesn't just mean different sexual positions, it also means getting to attend to the specific shape of your desire. "I want you to do this thing to me and then for me to be a little scared but also kind of annoyed at you." There can be room in sex for this—even in the straightest, most vanilla sex, which in its first iterations is often bad not necessarily because there isn't pleasure happening in both people but because so few forms of relationality are being worked with. It's impossible to have heterosexual sex—to actually mimic it in exactly the way it's supposed to happen, you have a better chance shooting proton torpedoes into the Death Star. There's a very very small window of opportunity where straight sex happens the way that it should.

Sex is maybe one of the rarer opportunities to explicitly think about and adjust relationality.

Not in big ways. Even people who are into kink are bound by habits and scripts. No one is constantly spicing it up. You can't eat straight spicel. But it can be a space for trying out different ways of relating that you might then be able to carry over into other aspects of your life. It's not about identity, it's about getting to be for someone else. There's messiness where you're figuring out how to relate.

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TROUBLE

DIGESTIVE



Her Stomach is Society: Digestive Trouble and the Problem of "Real Muscularity" in Leonora Carrington's Short Fiction

the lines of such descriptions of boxes of tea, cat food, oils and medications strewn about among imperfect crockery, decorative postcards and clippings of the English royal family. (Conley 1) a yearning for some real-life origin of Carrington's artistic obsessions comes to the fore.

The general connection between food and Carrington's artistic practice has been well articulated; some critics go so far as to claim that, "For Carrington, everything begins in the kitchen" (Chénieux-Gendron 85). Others emphasize the experimental mode of her interest in cooking: "Together, [Remedios Varo and Carrington] began to experiment with cooking and, with a penchant for experiment and a taste for the ludicrous, they conducted pseudoscientific investigations using the kitchen as their laboratory," noting that she was particularly interested in food rituals and emphasizing the "correspondence between food preparation, magic and painting" (Aberth 60, 2). Carrington apparently saw cooking almost as an artistic practice: "The transit of food from

Hans-Ulrich Obrist indulged this very impulse in an interview with Carrington upon asking about the recurrence of equine imagery in her paintings, trying to “locate a subjective origin” (Eburne 1) of the motif. Carrington made the pithy reply: “I used to ride a lot. My mother was Irish and it is well known that the Irish have a tradition with horses. This is a logical reply and I don’t think it’s really true. I don’t think it is that simple, but I don’t really know” (Eburne 1). Obrist’s question implies an expectation that Carrington ought to be held accountable for the themes of her work and answer to their symbolic functions, hopefully aided by a biographical referent. In Jonathan P. Eburne’s words, Obrist “arrives at a dead end”; Carrington effectively “flouting the terms of the interview” with her final words on the subject—but I don’t really know. The artist revels in the realm of uncertainty, not rejecting the line of Obrist’s questioning entirely, but holding it in suspense.

Food, in many stories, does not do its "job"—that is, provide sustenance and perhaps familiar comforts to the eater, and by extension, to the reader. Turning to White Rabbits, we see how Carrington conflates rotting meat with the undead and d ring, with leprosy. The narrator of this story (who lives on Pest Street) takes it upon herself to buy a piece of meat and wait for it to decompose before bringing it to Ethel, her neighbor across the way. At the story's outset, Ethel calls over, "Do you happen to have any bad meat over there that you don't need?" The narrator cannot believe her ears, and Ethel repeats, "Any stinking meat? Decomposed flesh meat?" (109). The narrator pays Ethel and her husband, Lazarus, a visit to deliver her aged victuals, and soon discovers that the bad meat is for their beloved though carnivorous white rabbits. Plus the animal-lovers are stricken with leprosy; all but undead zombies at this point. Carrington's tone, as usual, is decidedly matter-of-fact, as though the narrator and her readers should have seen this deathly revelation coming. As readers, we feel slightly chided—after all, the meat was intended to go bad from the beginning, but what was it meant to signify?

This tendency toward logic that devolves into uncertainty is paradigmatic of the way Carrington's work functions through a sort of willful non-knowledge—a quality found especially in her written work. Carrington is not one to shy from uncertainty, multiplicity or hybridity; she has a penchant for animating inanimate objects and making humans fall in love with animals who dress in fancy clothes. Her fictive spaces are populated by hybrid creatures, transformations spiraling toward both life and death, and countless edible and inedible objects that are earnestly thought-inappropriately wielded.

the kitchen to the table to consumption was, in particular, likened to alchemical processes of distillation and transformation, which in turn led to associations involving art production." (Aberth 64-5). Her understanding of food is tied up with fixations on transformation, a generative force rather than something merely consumed.

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In this spirit of suspended certainty and an attempt to temper the impulse to constantly over-determine the significance of the artist's biography, it seems only appropriate to consider Carrington's food imagery as it asserts itself along the terms of each story. Sweeping analytical attempts to decode her associative, obsessive oeuvre, to locate either origin or superstructure, tend to flatten the work. That said, Carrington's writing can roughly (if at all) be characterized by a tendency to linger in liminality. In hungrier words, her stories assert

The flesh meat the narrator buys expressly in order to let spoil is far from the only site of decay in this story. Ethel and Lazarus and even their house on Pest Street break down just the same, devolving past conventions and utility. At the close of the story, poor Ethel's fingers fall off, akin to how her doorbell breaks off when the narrator pulls it earlier in the story, before watching the door itself "[cave] inwards, admitting a ghastly smell of putrid meat" (110). By suspending conventional ideas of how doors, rabbits, and neighbors can and cannot transform, Carrington gestures in this story to a sort of progress that sets itself up against utility—the food is not good to eat, the people are more dead than alive, and the story's ends corresponds exactly with the narrator extricating herself from the festering house. As such, we are not asked to meditate on the meaning of the events in the story; it all quite literally falls to pieces just as they converge.

Is there a moral to be had here? Maybe: Don't Talk to Neighbors, or, Never Trust a White Rabbit, or, Refrigeration is Key. We can eke just about anything we want out of the story, but Carrington takes no definite stance. Accordingly, the demands on her readers are simultaneously low and high: while we are not expected to fully understand the workings of this world, to piece together some semblance of reason, we must stick with the story through this unfamiliar fictive space. To get through the story, we must suspend our expectations and check linear logic at the door.

For some, this is a tall order. Critic and poet Sue Hubbard posits that these fictive spaces are microcosmic. She complains that "Carrington's whimsical dreamworld[s]" are too self-involved, and that "the imagery is often simply inaccessible or boring... Carrington's microcosm, full of furry beasts and grey ghostsies, is rather like entering Tolkien's work of asexual woolly-footed Hobbits. You long for something a little less rapid, some real muscularity, some real sex" (33). Hubbard wants Carrington's fiction to engage more with the world outside of her own head, as "the problem is that they are not very interesting to others" (33). Carrington's fiction, it seems, is just too plain fictive!

Granted, a degree of frustration is understandable. Carrington's stories are perhaps an acquired taste. I take Hubbard's point: there are no easy assumptions to be made regarding the logic of Carrington's constructed worlds, which seems to differ from story to story, and any rules of such fictive spaces enact themselves only positively, known only by what is given the reader. In only a handful of stories, people readily converse and copulate with animals, food is lavishly prepared and rendered inedible, the idea of eating a gentleman's mustaches is within the realm of possibility but dismissed as uncouth for reasons unrelated to plausibility; vegetables are whipped by fine ladies, brawling cabbages reduce their opponents to slaw, and three brothers who live alone in the woods are indefinitely dismayed because all their hunting trophies are cursed to transform into sausages. But

if not all this, what exactly does Hubbard expect in terms of "some real muscularity?" It would be more direct perhaps to ask for "some real biography"—this seems to be what Hubbard is missing. In Carrington's interview with Obrist, she reveals a wariness of the need to trace fiction back to its "roots" in the real world, but Hubbard goes so far as to explicitly conclude that Carrington's life is "more interesting" (33) than her art.

But what does the distinction between art and life have to do with Carrington's treatment of food? For one, Carrington handles food elaborately and experimentally in her fictive spaces as in her own life—food serves as a common denominator, an obsession of her artistic and everyday practice. For example, Carrington abstained from food during Max Ernst's interment during WWII and took up vomiting as a symbolic practice, claiming that the effects symbolized Max himself, "whom I had to eliminate if I wanted to live" (Walsh). Perhaps this tidbit possesses some of the muscularity Hubbard is after. Second, Carrington's wavering treatment of food in her stories suggests that the very impulse to know is a masculinist fiction in itself, and can be interrogated as an extension of the problem of fiction versus biography or "readiness" in her work and life.

"It is to our advantage to believe that we know," Carrington once said. "But it is obvious that absolute truths like the ones that were accepted in the times of Newton and Euclid do not exist" (Cherem 27). Notions of certainty, origins and absolute truth are restrictive and wholly beside the point. The point, rather, seems to involve movement, generativity, the pursuit of indeterminate meaning. Carrington's stories impart the condition of lingering in-between, leaving readers with a perpetual stomach ache, cannot be conveyed in plain language or without a vast body of work. Whether or not Carrington's microcosms are accessible to Hubbard or anyone else, the real trouble here lies in the interpretation of fiction. Conventionally, the "job" of fiction is to subtly but surely unveil some deeper truth that cannot be conveyed in plain language or without a story. This interpretive mode demands that fiction produces truth. In interpreting this productive fiction, we consume the truth. Carrington's stories, however, are difficult to swallow.

Insofar as Carrington's collected stories lack a coherent stance on the way her imagery operates, they are "simply inaccessible," possibly boring, and difficult to interpret from the outside. Hubbard's complaint of the work's vapidly is a plea not only for some real-world referents, but for an assertive, muscular logic to organize Carrington's microcosm for the purpose of translating it for readers, some consistency never delivered. Logical inconsistencies and the suspension of organized meaning come up continually in A Neutral Man, for example. A "high ecclesiastical dignitary" takes a pork chop out of his "crimson cummerbund" and bestows it upon our narrator, whose face is painted green. The dignitary presses

Joanna Moorhead, her cousin and biographer, that she had never written a story that she did not consider autobiographical (Moorhead). Given the otherworldly quality of her writing, this is telling. Carrington does not much care to separate her life from her work, but ascribing the dreamy quality of her work wholly to her unconscious is apparently inaccurate. Perhaps this speaks to Hubbard's point—the muscularity of Carrington's writing may be found in its circumstance as embodied surrealism embedded, bafflingly, in real-life; or perhaps this just makes Hubbard's problems with the writing all the more "real."

This is not to condemn Hubbard for privileging Carrington's life over her artworks, but rather to suggest that it could be an oversimplification at the outset to assert stark divisions between her everyday interests and her artwork. While Carrington's artistic and everyday obsessions inform each other, the idea that we can only truly know the work through her biography and handed-down anecdotes does a disservice to her vast body of work. Whether or not Carrington's

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To accept raw pork chops spirited from cummerbunds as tokens of charity but still get flustered over the "faux pas" (134) of confusing a moustache as an after-dinner-snack is to emphatically disavow any semblance of consistency that might lend itself to the interpretive project of decoding MacFrollick's indignant assertion that his moustache is indeed inedible and, for that matter, not magical in the slightest but for its remarkable size, actually affirms the possibility that there are moustaches of more considerable magical

property than his, though perhaps they are not in circulation on this occasion. At other points in the story, however, Carrington's symbolism is so comically overt as to mock the search for meaning in literary imagery and naming. For instance, the narrator's green face is almost too much at home with the story's atmosphere of squeamishness; and she notes a smelly shrub while walking at night that the locals apparently call "it smells at night" (133). In keeping the laws of this fictive space open with respect to symbolism and social codes, Carrington holds definite meaning in suspense.

Further, Carrington refuses to end the story,

flouting her own terms by declaring, “There is no proper ending to this story, which I recount here as an ordinary summer incident. There’s no ending because the episode is true, because all the people are still alive, and everyone is following his destiny” (136). This story lacks “real muscularity” in the sense that it repels symbolic interpretation and as an “ordinary summer incident” mocks the relationship between truth and fiction.

This speculative work about Carrington’s suspensive mode has affinities with Susan Suleiman’s discussion of indeterminacy and mimicry. Writing on Carrington’s position as a black-humorist and woman surrealist, Suleiman muses: “Assimilation [to characteristically masculine surrealist black humor] on the one hand, hostile parody on the other: is there an intermediate position between these two extremes? I think mimicry occupies that place...” (8). Just as non-knowledge and the blurring of “real muscularity” or “real biography” work to undo the problem of interpretation, mimicry in Carrington’s work operates in the sweet spot just between assimilation and total rejection.

In a story called *The Three Hunters*, a character named McBologan offers to show our narrator some of his hunting trophies, which are forever cursed to transform into sausages as soon as they are preserved. Carrington writes:

Walking through the long gallery, we arrived in a room well lit by some lamps. There was nothing but sausages. Sausages in aquariums, sausages in cages, sausages hanging on the walls, sausages in sumptuous glass boxes. Nothing but sausages. I may have shown a certain surprise. McBologan looked at his sausages. “That,” he said to me, ‘is the hand of destiny.’ I stood beside him in deep thought. ‘One’s got to realize that nothing is eternal, that nothing’ — he contemplated a landscape of sausages—‘nothing is finally stronger than goodness’ (75).

The tropes of this tragicomedy can be read as an obtuse critique of phallocentrism in representation and of the impulse to preserve trophies as symbolic

proxies of masculine prowess, but the grander comedy comes with McBologan’s invocations of what he seems to understand as profound universal truths. (Indeed, “interpretation waives.”) Carrington highlights and parodies the practice of interpretation: her narrator stands deep in thought, but the activity is distant, primarily identified with configurations of bodies in space, while McBologan contemplates the “landscape of sausages” and finds himself making only the largest possible statements about eternity and morality. The subject of derision here is the idea that poor misguided McBologan can derive from his impotent trophies the most grandiose and absolute truths of life, destiny, morality. Trophies are placeholders, proxies of meaning, and are supposed to function as tangible signifiers of something dominated—this is not the case here.

In mimicking McBologan and his sausages, Carrington plays in the field between rejecting and affirming the workings of symbolism and artistic interpretation. In doing so with food—a hall full of sausages—she further confounds the codes of her own fictive realm. Not only does food transform in Carrington’s stories and work beyond its conventional means, the internal interpretations of what food can signify transforms from story to story. So broadly, we understand that Carrington is toying with what food can and cannot be in her stories, but we are not privy to how these complications may or may not set up tenuous rules of Carrington’s fictive space writ large. Even her characters seem to be in disagreement as to whose mustaches can be eaten and how to tell whether they possess magical properties.

Carrington’s aesthetics veige toward non-knowledge through this confusion. Indeed, Carrington’s signature suspension of certainty operates not unlike that which Derrida identifies as the deconstructionist reading of a text. The deconstructionist reading, in Derrida’s formulation, “would mean respect for that which cannot be eaten—respect for that in a text which cannot be assimilated.”

In speculating “the relationship between understanding and eating,” Derrida considers

“the very notion of comprehension as a kind of incorporation.” While Carrington’s work might just as soon be described as the churnings of a proverbial cauldron as pastiche, it is perhaps more entrenched in amalgamation than assimilation. In Derrida’s formulation, Carrington’s undertaking of hybridity and transformation would constitutes a sort of symbolic digestion, but stop just short of total assimilation. But if there is a relationship between understanding and eating in Carrington’s writing, it is not as clear-cut as Derrida might have it; for Carrington, consumption does not directly connote understanding.

It seems fitting then, that hardly any food in Carrington’s short stories is, at first blush, edible. If it is, it is also often highly aestheticized as a ritual object of preparation for a banquet or feast. He value of food in Carrington’s written work seems gestural, stylistic or a function of shock, not unlike the heady literalism of *hail-omelettes* and mustardy feet. Still, Carrington seems to pose real questions about meaning and certainty: What happens when food is not doing its proper job? How do we assign meaning to symbols that oscillate between functionality and aestheticism? Is eating a form of comprehension? Is digestion or indigestion a better one?

Carrington’s stories broaden what it means to consume. In so thoroughly divorcing food from the realm of fuel-to-energy conversion—eat to live—Carrington invites her readers not necessarily to live or read to eat, but rather to linger on the very materiality of the sticky pork chop clinging to the hairs of the questionably edible moustache and to smell the festering flesh meat on Pest Street. Carrington lavishes attention on her descriptions of food regardless of whether it is edible. In *The Sisters*, she describes:

Meat, wine, cakes, all half eaten, were heaped around them in extravagant abundance. Huge pots of jam spilled on the floor and made a sticky lake around their feet. The carcass of a peacock decorated Junart’s head. His beard was full of sausages, fish heads, crushed fruit. His gown was torn and stained with all sorts of food (98)

These are the last lines of a story that follows Engadine, a maid, and Drusille and her sister, Juniper, who has to be locked away because she is slowly turning into a bird-woman, as preparations are made for a meal greeting Junart, a bankrupt king and Drusille’s lover. At the end of the story, Juniper frees herself and attacks and sucks the lifeblood of Engadine, possibly because Drusille refused to bring her any red wine. The closing tableau is a mess of food and bodies, characterized by its halfway state. Something of the hybridity of the scene is apocalyptic: food is mingled with animals and people, people are turning into animals, a bird-woman makes a meal of a maid. There are no rules to this consumption, only that consumption is taking place on many levels. At one point in the story, Junart tells Drusille to kiss him so that he might eat her migraine away (94). To say the least, this final table-scape is not calculated to pique one’s appetite, at least not for jam or cakes; whoever wanted to find a beard-hair among their fish heads? Consumption here works almost as a set of aimless flows. It is relational rather than utilitarian, a means perhaps without an end; indigestible, or perpetually digesting.

Carrington once said, “My stomach is society” (Walsh), directly connecting her personal consumption to the happenings of society at large, to all the inhabitants of Earth, obviating a symbolic hypersensitivity that entrenches eating or the abstention from eating in the way she relates to the world and understands her place within it. Derrida’s idea of assimilation, however, strains to align eating with homogeneity, whereas Carrington’s work privileges indigestion as the generative layover between total comprehension and utter rejection, between “subjective origins” and “grey ghosties.”

Still, the idea of keeping truth at a distance is tied to the idea that we must look carefully to the assumptions and systems that inform our understanding of the world and consider their falsity before attempting to posit anything new. This is a postmodern, anti-authoritarian and anti-masculinist idea—that false truth cannot be replaced with a “new” or better truth, but that truth and assimilative forms of knowledge are

dismissed as both repressive and reductive.

neither needs to be eaten to become so.

In this spirit, Carrington's writing is perhaps best taken with a side of ontological indigestion than swallowed whole. But then how can we approach comprehending Carrington's seemingly moral-free, extra-logical parables? Is the suspense of assimilation, of comprehension admirable, or should we stand with Hubbard in demanding that Carrington just swallow her food already? Is there a difference, ultimately, in trying to collapse Carrington's legendary food pranks and her fictional food imagery onto each other and urging ourselves to take Carrington completely at her word, trying to swallow the whole as an autobiographical-artistic arc?

Earlier, I glossed this gravitation in Carrington's work toward non-knowledge as "paradigmatic." Carrington, however, has dismissed the very notion of paradigms as "a transitory convention for man" (Chetem 27). Where does this leave us? What lies beyond the realm of paradigms?

Her short stories offer readers to go about reading in a new way nor primarily concerned with whether we can consume and assimilate her work—to fully comprehend it—but in posing something more generative, to be had through the digestive confusion of art, truth and fiction. The artist once wrote that "It is quite possible that there are not answers which are profound and comprehensive at the same time" (Hubbard 33). If anything, her stories are profound and comprehensive introductions to her own sort of hybrid writing—by turns literal and allusive, at all times apparently autobiographical and unconcerned with straight realism or objective truths. Ultimately, Carrington's stories are a window on her way of thinking, artifacts of artistic realism; rather than coming fully into being when read, or consumed, Carrington's work is so fully fleshed-out, so fully in conversation with its own devices, that we are subjects of the work and not harbingers of interpretation. Like her hair-omelettes and pork chops and moustaches presented on fine china, Carrington's stories are perhaps less for dinner-party guests or readers than for her own practice. Part and parcel of her artwork and her life's work,

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Black Radicalism and the Politics of Writing: Lessons from the Archive

An Interview with Brent Hayes Edwards

Brent Hayes Edwards is a Professor in the Department of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University, where he is also affiliated with the Center for Jazz Studies and the Institute for Comparative Literature and Society. His publications include the books *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (2003) and, most recently, *Epistrophies: Jazz and the Literary Imagination* (2017) and the translation of Michel Leiris's *Phantom Africa* (2017). His current book projects include a history of the "loft jazz" scene in downtown Manhattan in the 1970s and "Black Radicalism and the Archive," based on the Du Bois Lectures that Edwards presented at Harvard in 2015.

This interview was conducted by Sam Lim-Kimberg and Sebastian Mazza, editors of *CJLC*.

Sebastian Mazza: We thought we'd begin by asking you about the classes you've been teaching over the past decade or so about issues related to archives, including the seminars "Black Radicalism and the Archive" and "The Archival Imagination." We're hoping this might be a way to open up a more general conversation about the black radical historiography and the politics of the archive. Can you tell us about the genesis of this part of your teaching?

Brent Hayes Edwards: A good deal of my

teaching and scholarship touches on issues related to archival research in one way or another. Those two classes are graduate seminars. They're different in orientation. "The Archival Imagination" is a class about the relations

between the practice of fiction and historical archives. The title is meant to suggest the ways that some historical fiction takes something like an archival approach to the past — that is, imagines the novel itself as functioning as a sort of assemblage or compendium of historical evidence. Sometimes it's about the archive as a setting, with characters doing historical or forensic research, think of Bayat's *Possession* or Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*. But it's also that the archive comes to serve as a formal model. That is, books like Sebald's *The Emigrants* or David Bradley's *The Charnwood Incident* or Hemingway's *The Lazarus Project* seem to be structured "like" archives, as collections of fragments and traces, even to the point of including photographs, maps, and diagrams.

This isn't a new thing, of course. You could even argue that this is one of the fundamental issues in the novel, something you can find pretty much everywhere, from Cervantes's *Don Quixote* to Potocki's *Manuscrit trouvé à Sargassos* or Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year*, all the way up to, say, Marlon James's *A Brief History of Seven Killings*. But you can make the case that the stakes are different in the modern era when, as Foucault teaches us, the archive serves such a crucial role in the mechanisms of social power, from the legal system to the slave trade to colonial administration. In that context, to imagine a novel as a kind of archive can be a way to imagine an alternative to the monopolization of the historical record — an "outside" to the state, an "otherwise" to empire.

"Black Radicalism and the Archive" is more of a hands-on seminar about archival practice: the technical aspects of collecting, classifying, and preserving. It's not meant to be a training class, but we do talk a lot about what processing archivists actually do: how they organize materials into a "collection" in the first place; how they compose a finding aid. When

researchers work in libraries and archives, we often take finding aids for granted — it's just a tool; it's the listing that tells you where to find materials stored in a given collection — but a finding aid is a textual subgenre in its own right, with its own protocols, even its own poetics.

The first time I taught the class was 2009, and since then I've offered it every other year. About a decade ago, Michael Ryan, the former director of the Rare Book and Manuscript Library on the 6th Floor of Butler, was instrumental in bringing a number of collections related to black intellectual and political history to Columbia, and that commitment has continued and expanded under the current director, Sean Quimby, and his staff of curators. I came to Columbia in 2007, and not long after that I heard that the librarians were in negotiation to acquire two major collections: the papers of the poet and activist Amiri Baraka and of the Trinidadian intellectual C. L. R. James. I realized that RBML had a critical mass of collections connected to the black radical tradition: not only James and Baraka, but also the Caribbean socialist and black nationalist Hubert Harrison, and the queer scrapbook-maker and Harlem Renaissance salon host Alexander Gumbey, among others. Despite the differences among these figures, it's a rather glaringly male group; but in the end that seemed like it could be interesting to think about masculinity and archival practice, especially when there were other collections at Columbia, like the papers of Hettie Jones and Constance Webb, that could provide a sort of counterweight in considering the lives of some of these men. I asked if I could put together a class in RBML that would give students a chance to dig into the collections themselves — to get their hands dirty, as it were.

The basic premise of the class is simple. We do read classic works by these intellectuals — James's *Beyond a Boundary*, Baraka's *The Dead Lecturer* — and sometimes we use the collections the way literary scholars and intellectual historians normally do: we look at a first draft of a poem to get a sense of Baraka's revision process, or we look at James's letters or Harrison's diary to

contextualize some part of their careers. But I try to get the students to think about it from another perspective: to consider Harrison, Gumbey, James, and Baraka as themselves deeply involved in archiving. All these intellectuals collected materials that were related not only to their own writing, but also to the institutions, publications, and events they were involved in. To put it simply, the question is: what would it mean to consider the impulse to preserve a documentary trace of the past as itself political, to consider archival practice not as passive accumulation — much less antiquarianism, a fetishistic investment in the past — but instead as a practice integral to black radicalism?

SM: So it's about learning to see a person's collecting practice as political?

BHE: Yes, in part. But it ends up being more complicated than that sounds. Hubert Harrison, for example, was a labor organizer in the 1910s and 1920s. He was one of the most famous street speakers in New York in that era: a soapbox orator who attracted huge crowds in Union Square and on 125th Street in Harlem. In other words, very much what we'd now call a "public intellectual". But looking at his papers in RBML, you see that at the same time he was keeping these meticulous scrapbooks on all sorts of topics, with quirky titles — "The Color Line"; "Weltpolitik"; "The White Man at Home: Moral and Political"; "Mea Historica"; "Eminent Men and Remarkable Deeds" — spending hours alone at home cutting and pasting and annotating articles from all kinds of periodicals.

But it's not quite right to say that the street speaking was his "public" side, and the scrapbooking some sort of "private" practice. In his diary, he sometimes notes that he borrowed a scrapbook from a friend or colleague, or that he went to New Jersey to look at someone's scrapbook on a given subject. In other words, in that era, scrapbooks weren't necessarily personal documents or family heirlooms. They were shared: they were also public, just on a different level. The Alexander Gumbey collection in RBML includes more than 160 scrapbooks he

made about various topics in African diasporic history. When he had his salon on Fifth Avenue and 130th Street in the 1920s, they were on display, and you could go there and peruse his collection. Scrapbooks were an alternate mode of circulation to the newspaper or the library; even as scrapbooks also served as ways to filter and reorganize other sorts of print, like a cut-out article or illustration.

SM: You mentioned that you've taught multiple iterations of the "Black Radicalism" seminar over the years. How has it changed over time? How has your thinking and practice evolved?

BHE: The first time I taught it was just after the Baraka and James collections had arrived, which meant that they hadn't been processed. The materials were still mostly in the boxes they had arrived in. Normally libraries don't let you look at collections at that stage. But the RBML staff graciously allowed us to consult some of the materials. I realized that it although it was a challenge in some ways — stuff was all mixed together, it was hard to know where to start — it was also illuminating, because it gave us "direct access," as it were, to Baraka's own way of collecting. Why did he decide to keep 24 copies of that particular photo of Maya Angelou? Why was that Malcolm X research material on top of the letters from Nina Simone? We were able to ask these sorts of questions, which are exactly the facets of the collection that disappear from view once the processing archivist organizes it according to logical categories like date, genre, and subject matter. I had each student choose a box out of the nearly 300 boxes in the collection and create a preliminary inventory of whatever they found. Baraka had hired assistants over the years who had helped him keep listings of the contents, but they didn't always match what was actually in the boxes.

For that first version of the class in 2009, we were also fortunate to have visitors come to the class: Robert A. Hill, the executor of the James estate; Jeff Perry, the Harrison biographer; and Amiri Baraka himself. The day with Baraka was eye-opening: he made it clear just how conscious

he was of the need to document black political history — how aware he was that collecting was itself a radical act.

Teaching the class on multiple occasions, I've found that there are ways to build on previous versions. Sometimes we look at an inventory prepared by students from a prior year. A couple of students have even come back to visit a later version of the seminar. In fact, one student from the 2009 class was selected for the RBML internship program where they train graduate students in archival processing — and he ended up being the person who processed the Baraka papers!

Because it was so interesting to look at Baraka and James right when they arrived, I've also tried to find other collections that are "minimally processed," as librarians put it. So I've changed the syllabus and added some other things, most recently with the papers of the dancer Arthur Mitchell.

Sam Lim-Kimberg: We were looking at your essay, "Taste of the Archive" [Calaloo 35.4 (Fall 2012): 944-972], and noticing that in the way you introduce Claude McKay's archive in that essay, it seems that part of the excitement stems from the relationship between McKay's "transitory and impermanent life," or his life as a self-described "vagabond poet," on the one hand, and his practice of collecting, on the other. And we couldn't help thinking about that issue in McKay's life in dialogue with a line in David Scott's essay, "On The Archaeologies of Black Memory" [Small Axe 26 (June 2008): v-xvii], where he frames the significance of the Marcus Garvey archives in terms of what he calls "an activity of thinking and imagination that opened out vast possibilities not just of memory but of counter-memory: the moral idiom and semiotic

registers of remembering against the grain of the history of New World black deracination, subjection, and exclusion." In both, though in markedly different ways, there seems to be a way in which one must think about the archive as produced or preserved under conditions hostile to what one might conventionally think of as the

stability, constancy, or lastingness of the historical record. And so we were wondering how this changes the way one thinks about the archive, reads the archive, etc.

BHE: From one perspective, "The Taste of the Archive" is all about the relationship between personal archives, individual collecting practices — in the way I was just talking about with Harrison and Baraka — and what we so often assume "the archive" to be: a product of a central authority, whether the state or a church or a corporation, where the ongoing processes of administration produce a layering of historical "records" that consolidate that authority.

Part of what David is writing about in that article is that when you think of archival practice in this expanded sense, including things that happen outside of the purview of the state, it becomes apparent that you're dealing with something that can only be called counter-archival. Archival work is political because there's never just one archive. And as the historian of photography Shawn Michelle Smith has put it, archives "contest" each other. So Hubert Harrison, in his scrapbooks, isn't just clipping newspaper articles haphazardly. He juxtaposes things from very different places — a piece from the New York Times next to an editorial from Marcus Garvey's *Negro World* — and reorganizes them under new headings, like "The White Man at Home" or "Oddities and Freaks." The Times would never run a recurring feature called "The White Man at Home," but Harrison's scrapbook makes us "see" that category as implicit in the paper's coverage. So his scrapbooks are a kind of counter-archival practice: they run against the grain of a mainstream newspaper like the Times, showing us what it takes for granted and what it leaves out. There's a critical sensibility embedded in his scrapbooks, in other words, that allows for a different "moral idiom," as David says — a different way of remembering.

With McKay, it's a little more straightforward. Given how uprooted he was in the 1920s and early 1930s, his "vagabond" years, when he lived not only in Harlem but also in London,

Moscow, Berlin, Paris, Marseille, Barcelona, and Tangier, it's just remarkable to me how much stuff he did manage to keep. It's nowhere near as oppositional as what's going on with Harrison. But I am trying to say that in the things he did keep, even something as seemingly minor as the single photograph I'm focusing on, there is a way to read for that counter-archival charge.

SM: Since we've already brought Scott and Smith into the conversation, how do you consider your own work on archives in relation to broader developments in the fields of literary studies, black radical history, or African diasporic studies?

BHE: That focus on the counter-archive has emerged in scholarship across a few different fields over the past few decades. It's there in Subaltern Studies when Ranajit Guha says that you can use the colonial records of counter-insurgency — in other words, the empire putting out fires, trying to crush rebellions among the "natives" — to gain a sense of insurgent or subaltern consciousness. You read those colonial records against the grain. It becomes a major issue in colonial historiography in general in the work of scholars like Antoinette Burton, Thomas Richards, Nicholas Dricks, and Ann Laura Stoler, just to name a few. And it's taken up in a slightly different register in African diasporic studies, especially in the historiography of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and of black radicalism: Cedric Robinson, Michel-Rolph Trouillot, Stephanie Smallwood, Marisa Fuentes, Simon Gikandi, David Kazanjian. So I'd say that what I've been doing is very much in dialogue with these larger trends.

I lifted the title of my essay on McKay, "The Taste of the Archive," from a book by Arlette Farge, an eighteenth-century French historian who collaborated with Foucault. Her little book *Le Goût de l'archive* — which has since come out in English translation under the title *The Allure of the Archives* — is an attempt to write about the affective experience of doing research. It's about what it feels like to be in an archive — to be drawn to, to be under the allure of, that illusion of proximity to the past. You open a

scrapbook that Alexander Gumbey glued together in the 1930s, or you unfold C. L. R. James's taped-together, handwritten manuscript of *Notes on Dialectic*, and you feel that somehow you're right there with them. I'm writing about the "taste" of McKay's archive now, to me: what it feels like to wade through the stuff he saved. But I'm also trying to think about what it meant for him. One of the photos I write about has visible punctuation marks, probably from being tacked to a wall. I'm trying to think about what it meant to him to hold on to these things — the reasons they became things he needed to live with, to look at.

SM: To talk about the individual versus the community or group might fall prey to a sort of public-private binary, but it's striking how much these stories have to do with the idiosyncrasies of particular people: McKay, Harrison, Gumbey. Does it make sense to think about the archiving practices of a given individual as a counterpoint to an institutional sort of thinking?

BHE: Well, it goes without saying that in institutional archives, individuals are there too. We just don't always think about it that way. Ann Laura Stoler has a book called *Along the Archival Grain* about the Dutch East Indies in the nineteenth century. It's called *Along the Archival Grain* because she tries to read for what she calls the "common sense" of colonialism, not against the grain but with it: the way the empire saw the world. She uses a phrase from Foucault: any archive has a "grid of intelligibility" built into it, a set of assumptions about what matters and what doesn't. But it's also a book all about individual colonial administrators and clerks making individual decisions about what to record and how to record it. So "common sense" isn't fixed and set, she says. It's made through the accumulation of individual decisions about what counts, and the sometimes awkward dialogue among individual actors. And those decisions and dialogues are racked with what she calls "epistemic anxieties": tensions, uncertainties, missed signals. The other insight here is that just as archives are always incomplete — structured by their silences, what they leave out, as much

as by what they save — archives are also always heterogeneous, internally divided. There are counter-forces inside any given archive, too.

This isn't just about the imperial state. It's there in McKay's archive, too, the ways that part of what you're seeing there is him "collecting" his relationships with some of the people around him. But if you look at the journals and correspondence of some of the people he crossed paths with in Morocco (Charles Henri Ford, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Anita Reynolds, Paul Bowles), you realize that they all had not just different perspectives on their interactions but also a different "common sense" about what was worth documenting. There's a book called *Special Delivery* that collects C. L. R. James's letters in the 1940s to his wife Constance Webb. They're amazing: insightful and politically engaged and passionate. But it's a one-way collection because, while she carefully kept all the letters he sent her, James didn't keep her letters to him. That idea of a "grid of intelligibility" sounds dry, but there's all kinds of human messiness up in there: anxiety, desire, confusion, misunderstanding, projection, and — not least — ego.

SLK: In some of your work, there's a sort of speculative aspect to writing about the archive, which seems to be linked with the counter-archival impulses you've been talking about. Some of the recent writing about archives calls for a practice of what's been called "critical fabulation," which is sometimes framed as a redressive practice. As a writer, how do you think of the archive not only as historical deposit, but also as a sort of impetus for literary innovation?

BHE: I've written a number of things now, like the McKay piece, in an experimental form that I call "orchestrated fragments." It involves a serial assemblage of short prose sections, each no longer than a few paragraphs. There's no narrative through-line — and there are sometimes abrupt shifts in focus or style from one section to another — but, hopefully, as you go through it you notice things that recur, a loose pattern or harmonic structure that develops. It helps me to think of it as "orchestrated" because

as by what they save — archives are also always heterogenous, internally divided. There are counter-forces inside any given archive, too.

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The essay you're alluding to is my colleague Saidiya Hartman's "Venus in Two Acts," which is framed as a sort of follow-up or postscript to her book *Lose Your Mother* ["Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* 26 (2008): 1-14]. She revisits one of the chapters of her book that recounts a terrifying episode, the violation and murder of two girls on a slave ship, because in confronting the thinness of the archive — the incident is only mentioned glancingly in one legal transcript — she found herself unable to go beyond a certain point, unable to let speculation or imagination fill in the gaps of the historical record. It comes to emblematic the whole ethical problem of dealing with the archive of the Middle Passage: how do you keep from simply repeating the annihilation of these individual lives in retelling these stories? Can you do it in a way that doesn't just rehearse the "common sense" of the slave trade, in which girls like these were assumed to be disposable? The problem is, if you go too far, if you imagine too much, you risk romanticizing their lives, which only seems to underline the fact that they can't be recovered or redeemed. So she ends up calling for a strategy of "critical fabulation," which means a way of writing that would both tell an "impossible story" and, she says, in the process "amplify the impossibility of its telling."

In "The Taste of the Archive" and in my other pieces in this form, like my essay about the brief collaboration between the jazz trumpeter Lester Bowie and the Afrobeat legend Fela Kuti [*Crossroads Republic*], *Transition* 97 (2007): 94-118], some of the fragments are fiction. It's meant as a provocation. It's meant to make the reader ask what is the role of speculation in this work that is also obviously deeply invested in historical research. Because at the same time, I'm clearly making claims about something historical, something that really happened — something that's empirically verifiable.

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It's a mistake, though, to think it's a matter of empirical documentation on one side and "imagination" on the other. Right from the start of the essay, she points out that the archive is already a realm of imagination. "Venus" isn't the girl's real name: the only name we have for her is the slave ship captain's euphemism, which already projects her into the realm of sexual fantasy and viability. So in writing with the archive, you're already dealing with fabulation — a mixture of "fact" and "fancy," as W. E. B. Du Bois puts it in his novel *Dark Princess*. The ethical issue is how you do so. Critical fabulation means writing against the grain of the archive by shifting the relationship between fact and fancy: you emphasize the gaps, the silences, the "un-tellability" of the story, even as you tell it. There's a lot more to say about this, and there's a long tradition of black literature that you could argue operates at this interface: not just Du Bois, but also McKay, Ousmane Sembène, Toni Morrison, Gayl Jones, Ishmael Reed, Marlon James. Of course, the slaves aren't always the same. Saidiya extrapolating from an extreme case, the archive of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, and it seems to me that the ethical issues there shouldn't be taken as paradigmatic for writing about archives in general. But there are ethical stakes even in taking up critical fabulation with McKay. The question isn't where I do make recourse to fiction, but where I don't. If you think about it, you'll notice that there are things I could have speculated about — first of all, how McKay got the photo in the first place — but decline to. When there's fiction in "The Taste of the Archive," it arises as speculation about specific events given in the historical archive (something McKay mentions in his autobiography or Ford records in his diary). The places where I write fiction are the places where there's a kind of archival anchor, like the pitons a mountain climber drives into the rock face to secure the rope. It's already there, a spike left in the rock, and I use it to intuit a different angle for the same ascent.

SM: Speaking of archival material as something like pitons — material around which speculation

can happen — we were interested in asking you about the way your sentences often stand in relationship to quotations, summarizing or rehearsing quotations but also standing among them, like elements of a collage to some degree.

There also seems to be a way in which the collage or collage-like proximity extends to the level of the relationship between paragraphs and essay sections nested inside each other or next to each other, somehow metonymically linked. It feels like here a quotation doesn't only provide evidence but also gives a "feeling" of things, not unlike what you said earlier about the illusion you get in the archive, seeing the handwriting on a historical document. Sometimes the way you use quotations seems designed to enact something that the filmmaker Arthur Jafa has called "affective proximity" in relation to his own work, resulting from the impulse to put things together, to put things next to each other and let them speak to each other. Do you feel like you're trying to create this sort of effect with the way you handle quotations in your writing?

BHE: That's hard to talk about without getting even more into the details of particular essays. But in general, yes, sometimes a quotation or an allusion serves less to provide evidence than to set a mood.

It's not quite the same as what I was saying about the "taste" of doing research in the archive, though. There, handling an artifact like scrapbook can give you a feeling that you're in contact with the past. When Arthur Jafa talks about "affective proximity," he means proximity among the things juxtaposed in the work itself: the disparate stuff brought together in a particular film, or in a particular essay-in-fragments, in my case. I think of it more in terms of musical composition, as I was saying, as a sort of contrapuntal approach to form. But yes, whether you call it polyphony or collage or — to adopt a term from Walter Benjamin — a kind of "constellation," the point is that it results in something where the connections between things aren't spelled out. It isn't a logical sequence or a single narrative thread. The effect is harder to describe: it's something "felt," maybe more a

matter of resonance — to stick with my musical metaphor — than direct linkage.

Samuel Delany, in his great book *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue*, talks about the tradition in ancient Mediterranean seafaring of navigating by periplum, which is a compendium of detailed descriptions of the coastline. If a ship was thrown off course by a storm, the crew could figure out where they were when land came into view by comparing what they saw with the descriptions in the periplum. As a resource, it's not really scientific. It's not a mariner's astrolabe; it doesn't give you longitude and latitude. But it does give you a way to orient yourself. Some of the things I include — like the short fragment in "The Taste of the Archive" about the photo Duke Ellington kept of his close collaborator Billy Strayhorn — are meant to function like that. It has nothing to do with McKay or Morocco, but it does hopefully resonate with some of what's going on in the other sections. It works at a distance, like a small but striking feature of the coastline, but in a way that's meant to help the reader navigate by feel among the fragments.

SLK: I can't help noticing that you tend to talk about these types of things through their marked trans-media aspect — as a relationship between writing and music, for instance. How did you come to think about it that way?

BHE: I'm not particularly interested in trying to sum up the various parts of my work with a master trope or some sort of overarching conceptual focus. I do different kinds of things and that's OK — it doesn't all have to go together. But one of the animating concerns I've noticed both in my work on black radical historiography and archival practice and in my work on music and literature is an interest in the ways that artists and intellectuals "think across media." Why did Jackson Pollock like to paint while listening to bebop? Why was Cecil Taylor so fascinated with Santiago Calatrava's bridges and with Carmen Amaya's dancing?

In posing these sorts of questions, I'd say I'm working very much in the wake of thinkers like

the poet and critic Nathaniel Mackey. For him, it's a matter of innovation: artists push against the limitations of their medium by looking to and extrapolating from the formal properties in other media. They strive to make the saxophone

"speak," or to give choreography the "solidity" of architecture, or to make a poem "dance" on the page. In the preface to their anthology *Moment's Notice*, Mackey and Art Lange quote from liner notes in which Mack Thomas writes about the reed player Eric Dolphy confronting "the barrier that begins with what the horn will not do."

The book about the interpretations between jazz and literature I published last year, *Epistrophies* — which emerged in no small part out of another class I've been teaching for years at Columbia, my lecture course "Jazz and the Literary Imagination" — is an attempt to make the case that this kind of thinking across media has been crucial in the development of black art in the twentieth century. In both directions, with poets from Langston Hughes finding models for literary form in music, and with musicians from Louis Armstrong to Sun Ra and Cecil Taylor equally drawn to literature.

But this also shows up in my work on the history of black radicalism. When the Senegalese Marxist labor organizer Lamine Senghor writes an allegorical short novel critiquing French colonialism, why does he decide to include illustrations? When we look at Hubert Harrison's scrapbooks, one of the things my students always comment on is their visual aesthetic. You see right away that he's not just collecting clippings, but cutting and pasting them in a way that's as much about visual juxtaposition and arrangement as their content. It leaps out at you: he needs to think about politics through visual art. Laying things out, moving them around, underlining them, allows him to see things, to make connections, in a way that might not be possible if it were "just" a matter of data and ideology.

It's almost like the scrapbook is a training ground for Harrison. You can see him teaching himself to think critically through the labor of

clipping. Of course, cutting and pasting to make a scrapbook is nothing if not a sort of collage-work. So he dips into another medium, making these intensely visual compositions, as though its

a way to teach himself to sense connections and arguments that wouldn't be apparent otherwise. And then he goes out and gives a fiery soapbox speech on 125th Street — which, of course, is nothing if not a sort of dance. So he's constantly moving, that necessary shifting of gears, that continual shifting of domains, has everything to do with the brilliance of the political critique that emerges — or in other words, with the form and impact of black radicalism as an intervention.

right in the number spot.

WBC 7.1
IU/L
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33/dL
33/dL
33/00

NEUT 7.
xEq/L
xEq/L
33/dL
33/dL
33/dL
Ratio 0.8

WBC 7.1

in the number spot.
some right now
same spot.

size 12a.1

GFR: mL/min/1.73 m²

This is African-American male, only reported result by lab. Estimated GFR value: 60 mL/min/1.73 m². Social



Imperial Intimacies: Commodity Fetishism and the Global Organ Trade

Bailey Miller

"On the day of the operation, I felt like a *Kumbhini goru*, a sacrificial cow purchased for slaughtering on the day of Eid the biggest celebration in the Islamic world."

-Dildar, a 32-year old Bangladeshi rickshaw puller who sold one of his kidneys¹

"Because you are poor, you will be gutted like an animal!"²

-Okwe, in *Dirty Pretty Thing*²

The scars left by organ transplant surgery never occur alone. Transplantation necessitates partnerships, openings and incorporations, intimacies. In Tsunami Nagar, a resettlement

camp in India for refugees displaced by the 2004 disaster, nearly every adult woman has a foot-long scar. These traces of kidney removal operations (nephrectomies) proliferated in the aftermath of the tsunami, when "a few entrepreneurial hospitals and organ brokers saw the tragedy as an opportunity to make a fortune peddling the kidneys of refugees."³ Journalist Scott Carney writes that "over the years so many people had sold their kidneys in Tsunami Nagar that wry locals began calling the camp 'Kidneyvakkam' or 'Kidneyville'.⁴

These nephrectomy scars have counterparts in thousands of other bodies located in wealthy communities all over the world. For

anthropologists Jean and John Comaroff, the global organ trade is "a metonymic feature of the everyday and occult economies of 'millennial capitalism,'" where new appetites and desires are cultivated by shifts in technology and production.⁵ Carney observes that "...our appetite for human flesh is higher now than at any other time in history."⁶

Like the connections between the scars of wealthy organ consumers and poor organ providers, a vast network of intimacies enables the functioning of the global organ trade.

Though these intimacies are (re)produced by enduring legacies of colonial violence and new capital formations, some are highlighted while others are disavowed. For example, the successful operation of an organ transplant between an ailing wealthy man from London and a poor woman from Sri Lanka functions on his perceived lack of intimacy with this woman. His decision to seek out the literal (and highly intimate) incorporation of her body into his own is often animated by the moral claims he feels toward his family and friends, by his refusal to ask for the "sacrifice" of an organ exchange from one of his intimate loved ones.

It is the privileging of some intimacies over others that pushes him to seek a kidney from a desperate organ provider. Ironically, it is this unacknowledged intimacy, not the intimacy he recognizes with his loved ones, that keeps his heart beating.

With anxieties about the debt of life itself threatening to destabilize bonds among family and friends, the logics of the market seem to penetrate all realms of intimate life. However, gross financial equality facilitates the acquisition of organs from the desperately poor, enabling organ recipients to live without having to encounter the sacrifice of the organ provider on an immediate level. Despite the highly intimate connection between both members of an organ transplantation, the sacrifice of the poor person's body and the new intimacies created by the intermingling of bodies are disavowed, obfuscated.

When entire villages exist of women with single kidneys, and flows of wealthy men from all over the world return home kept alive by the functioning organ of a poor person, questions about the ethics of "living together" in today's world become inescapable. What does living together today mean when transnational exchanges intimately connect people through blood flows and heartbeats? What makes it possible for a wealthy patient to consider his relationships to his relatives "too intimate" to ask for an organ donation? What processes enable him to purchase a kidney from a "distant" poor Sri Lankan woman, and ultimately be kept alive by the intimacy that he must also disavow?

There are a variety of reasons why privileged consumers display unease, even moral indignation, at the thought of making such a claim on a family member or friend. This may partly be because of the seismic shifts that can occur in relationships when such a sacrifice is performed. In research for their book about organ transplantation, Renée Fox and Judith Swazey found there were numerous reasons patients didn't want to ask loved ones for an organ, such as "the recipient may feel that because the relations between them are already tangled or strained receiving an organ from this individual would make the situation even more emotionally complicated and difficult," or "the recipient may be heavily burdened by the realization that it is such an extraordinary gift that he or she will never be able to repay it."⁷ They noted that one woman "did not want her father to give her a kidney. She could *not bear to be indebted* to him for such a gift."⁸ Another patient, after receiving her brother's organ, "refused to speak to her brother. She found that she resented that he had given her one of his kidneys, had tremendous guilt..."⁹

With anxieties about the debt of life itself threatening to destabilize bonds among family and friends, the logics of the market seem to penetrate all realms of intimate life. However, gross financial equality facilitates the acquisition of organs from the desperately poor, enabling organ recipients to live without having to encounter the sacrifice of the organ provider on an immediate level. Despite the highly intimate connection between both members of an organ transplantation, the sacrifice of the poor person's body and the new intimacies created by the intermingling of bodies are disavowed, obfuscated.

When "medical mythology promises the unprecedented possibility of extending life indefinitely with the organs of others," a hierarchization of different bodies values some lives over others.¹⁰ The global flow of body parts demonstrates the inequitable value and protection of life across differences in race, class, and gender. While organ transplantation has been framed as an "immortal promise" for wealthy people with access to medical services, for poor organ providers, it is often a detrimental process of bodily fragmentation that can leave them closer to death. The decision to avoid asking for a sacrifice from a loved one ultimately comes at the expense of receiving this sacrifice from another; a decision that is often defended through the unbreakable intimacy of the family.

Ultimately, the recognition of intimacy is the primary justification for why wealthy transplant patients can't bear to ask a family member or close friend for an organ donation. Anxieties about bonds of emotional debt among loved ones, coupled with the conditions of global inequality that can produce both the wealth of patients and the desperation of poor organ providers, ironically push people to seek out intimacies with other bodies over the intimacy of the family.

This multidimensional calculus between intimacies is what theorist Lisa Lowe calls the "political economy of intimacies," a concept that highlights how historic and contemporary processes of empire coalesce to produce "a constellation of asymmetrical and unevenly legible 'intimacies'.¹¹ This "unsettles the meaning of intimacy as the privileged sign of liberal intimacy or domesticity, by situating this more familiar meaning in relation to...the occluded 'intimacies' of slavery, colonialism, and imperial trade."¹² In other words, colonialism, mass migrations, and the global routes of capital produce a myriad of intimacies that are alternately underscored and obfuscated to produce the notions of affiliation and connection that undergird liberalism's modern subjectivities. The intimacy of the family is privileged over the intimacy created by gendered, racial capitalism between the organ consumer and the organ provider.

Furthermore, attentiveness to the political economy of intimacies illuminates how conceptions of love and connection are implicated in the violence of the global economy. Elizabeth Povinelli asks, "How do we practice

our deep, thick everyday lives so that we continually perpetuate the way that liberalism governs difference, even when we seem to be doing nothing more than kissing our lover goodbye.”¹³ For Povinelli, “The intimate event is an anchor point because it seems... to be the densest, smallest knot.”¹⁴ How, then, can teasing out the knot of co-entangled and co-productive intimacies in the global organ trade shed light on “modern forms of dispossession, exploitation, and subjectivities haunt the intimate moments of repression, and their concrete impacts on the bodies produced by the liberal settler state? What can the organ trade tell us about the violence required to (re)produce these intimacies?”¹⁵

These “occluded intimacies” occur literally *in the flesh* in the global organ trade, in which, “The historical relationship of conquest, colonization, and extraction has shaped the transformation of actual...bodies into raw materials in their own right. The outcome is a serious form of exploitation...where impoverished populations become organ suppliers to prolong lives for the...few.”¹⁶ The flows of the organ trade span the entire globe, with commercial connections between Brazil and South Africa, Israel and Moldova, Germany and Turkey, China and the United States, and beyond; the circulation transgresses national and continental borders. Indeed, “Globalization has made the speed and complexity of these markets bewildering.”¹⁷ However, as Scott Carney notes, “The one rule with organ markets is that human tissue moves up-and never down—the social hierarchy.”¹⁸ Nancy Scheppe-Hughes, a medical anthropologist, echoes this sentiment, writing that “in general, the flow of organs follows the modern routes of capital: ... from poor to rich, from black and brown to white, and from female to male.”¹⁹ Amidst increasing global financial crises and expanding precarity, “poor people around the world often view their organs as a critical social safety net.”²⁰ As elaborated by researcher Lawrence Cohen, “It is not that every townspeople actually knows someone who

has been tempted to sell a vital part of the self but the idea of the ‘commodified’ kidney has permeated the social imaginary. ‘The kidney stands...as the marker of one’s economic horizon, one’s ultimate collateral.’²¹ In fact, many people that Cohen interviewed in India spoke “matter-of-factly about when it might be necessary to sell a ‘spare’ organ.”²² In her ethnographic work, Scheppe-Hughes discovered that many “women had sold a kidney to feed the family; the most common explanation given by kidney sellers world-wide.”²³ This is supported by an advertisement published in the Brazilian newspaper *Diário de Pernambuco*, which detailed: “I am willing to sell any organ of my body that is not vital to my survival and that could help save another person’s life in exchange for an amount of money that will allow me to feed my family.”²⁴

Even when many organ providers know they will not ultimately receive the full compensation promised by their brokers, desperation pushes many to decide to move forward with the extraction regardless. During his fieldwork, anthropologist Monir Moniruzzaman found that “most sellers (27 out of 33 sellers) do not receive the full amount of money they had been promised.”²⁵ Even when initial cash payouts are collected, the majority of people who sell organs quickly fall back into poverty. For Egyptian providers, 81% spent their cash payouts within 5 months, most of which went toward paying off financial debts.²⁶ Iranian providers experienced an income decline between 22% and 66%, while 65% of kidney providers noted an overall negative effect on their employment. In Moldova and the Philippines, organ providers experienced large degrees of unemployment after returning from their operations, partly because of physical debilitations.²⁷ In fact, the lack of medical care and susceptibility to other complications often means that the physical after-effects of organ transplant surgery are so detrimental that it affects people’s ability to return to work, demonstrating that the global organ trade is not only a question of lives, but a question of livelihoods. Scholar Gerard Boyce observes that, for most people, “The removal and

sale of a kidney is likely to reduce their primary productive asset—physical strength.”²⁸

This transnational network updates Marx’s visions of vampiric nineteenth century capitalism through a system of commodified life-extension that functions by “sapping the health and strength from ghettos of poor donors and funneling their parts to the wealthy.”²⁹

Contemporary capitalism not only produces reserve armies of laborers, but the macabre vision emerges of reserve armies of “spare parts.” This implicates the logic of capital in the very functioning of organ exchange, from the financial precarity that pushes people to sell their organs to the subsequent processes of commodification. Yet the market for organs is often framed as aberrational, even scandalous, among other normalized modes of production.

Scott Carney, for instance, continually highlights the exceptional nature of the organ trade, writing that “markets in flesh are different because their customers *owe their lives and family relationships to the supply chain.*”³⁰ For Carney, an organ, unlike “other capitalist commodities, which ideally retain no element of workers’ personal engagement when they go to market,” cannot fully efface its production process.³¹ In other words, the scars persist.

Carney’s unease is edifying, for it appears to be the explicitness of the intimacies that have him so disturbed. He writes, “When we buy a body part, we take on the liabilities for where it came from both ethically and in terms of the previous owner’s biological and genetic history. It’s a transaction that never really ends.”³² The physicality of the organ, its biomass, and the scars it leaves in its wake make it, in Carney’s words, an “uncomfortable” commodity.³³ These traces make an alienated organ more resistant to the processes of commodity fetishism that efface the violent production processes of other global commodities, such as clothing and coffee. And this is perhaps the true scandal of the global organ trade—it makes explicit the intimacies, the violences, and the connections that undergird all modern modes of production.

For anthropologist Anna Tsing, “aberrational” markets like the organ trade are important to explore because “their scandalous status allows us to see them; they do not collapse into the taken-for-granted status of capitalist discipline. This is a Conradian Heart of Darkness moment, where the horror of how capitalist commoditization works is laid bare.”³⁴ Ultimately, the global organ trade enables us to see a larger truth about contemporary capitalism—that beneath the commodity fetishisms and complex erasures are markets of inestimable horror.

Bangladesh, for example, doesn’t just produce organs for circulation in the global economy, but also clothing. While “organ classifieds reach millions of poor rickshaw pullers, day laborers, slum dwellers, and village farmers, some of whom eventually sell their body parts to get out of poverty,” many classifieds for jobs in the garment industry also reach these same “poor rickshaw pullers, day laborers, slum dwellers, and village farmers.”³⁵ On April 24, 2013, just outside of Dhaka, the Rana Plaza clothing factory collapsed, crushing 1,127 people to death.³⁶ To what extent were these people also pushed to desperately “sell their body parts to try to get out of poverty?” What connections exists between the villages of women with missing kidneys, and the villages of missing women, whose bodies were buried under a collapsed factory?

What makes the violence that underpins the mass production of commodities like clothing any less than the violence that enables the global organ trade? The “strange alchemy that happens when we decide that a human body part can be swapped on the open market” is the same alchemy that occurs when any produced object goes to market.³⁷ While Carney believes that the purchase of an organ is “a transaction that never really ends,” what if we looked at all exchanges, both ethically and in terms of intimacies with histories of production and circulation, as transactions that never really end?³⁸

The scars that accompany organ transplantation attest to a past violence and residual trauma,

of an absence that is also a presence. They haunt, thwarting attempts to efface the myriad intimacies that criss-cross our world by confounding assimilation into the amnesiac project of Western modernity. When, as artist Kader Attia says, “modernity is about making wounds disappear,” scars are the specters that haunt and interrupt these processes of effacement.³⁹

Whether they admit it or not, wealthy people all over the world are haunted by intimacies with refugee women and poor day laborers that flow through their veins, by the echo of a matching scar on a different body that is both impossibly far away and devastatingly intimate. The very conception of a “self” is unsettled by these connections because, as sociologist Avery Gordon writes, “Subjectivity is always and inevitably haunted by the social and most especially by those repressions, disappearances, absences, and losses enforced by the conditions of modern life.”⁴⁰ This requires liberalism’s privileged subjectivities, of the “family” of the “sovereign self,” to continually disavow infiltrated intimacies, to continually repress all traces of that which is “other.” However, these traces, perhaps in the form of scars, or in the handwritten notes of protest slipped by factory workers into the pockets of mass-produced clothing, are always already emerging to haunt modernity’s effacements.⁴¹ Indeed, Gordon writes that “haunting is one way in which abusive systems of power make themselves known and their impacts felt in everyday life, especially when they are supposedly over and done with (slavery, for instance) or when their oppressive nature is denied (as in free labor or national security).”

When the inconceivability of violent connections is the precondition for smooth consumption, what would it mean to account for all the intimacies that underpin the contemporary economy? Avery Gordon, speaking on Fredric Jameson, argues that it would be overwhelming. She writes that modern consumers are kept busy just surviving in the confusing supermarket of life, itself already having coded and decoded all exchanges, reification—the effacement of the

traces of production—appears, in this milieu, to be the welcome relief one hopes for. Jameson puts it well: ‘the point of having your own object world, and walls and muffled distance or relative silence all around you, is to forget about all those innumerable others for a while.’ To remember ‘would be like having voices inside your head.’ It would be like having voices inside your head because a postmodern social formation is still haunted by the symptomatic traces of its productions and exclusions.⁴²

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To be privy to all the intimacies that are the conditions of life, then, is not only overwhelming, it is terrifying. It is to apprehend the myriad bodies that intimately haunt every act of consumption. Haunting is disorienting and strange, it is hearing utterances and encountering figures that modern capitalism has attempted to render unsensible. Haunting entails an estrangement from the self, from the family, from the known, because the encounter of haunting is always an intimate encounter with the other.

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While the expropriation of organs from poor bodies into the socially privileged is a horrifying feature of the global economy, it is ultimately the spectacularization of violences that are indeed integral to contemporary modes of production. In the words of Jacques Derrida, “Is not the spectacle of this murder, which seems untenable in the dense and rhythmic briefness of its theatrical moment, at the same time the most common event in the world? Is it not inscribed in the structures of our existence to the extent of no longer even constituting an event?”⁴³ The “non-event” of the violence of the global economy is the routinization of a “sacrificial economy” where “incalculable sacrifice” lies behind the “smooth functioning” of society.⁴⁴ The horror of this mass death is effaced through the political economy of intimacies, which highlights some intimacies while disavowing others in order to continually reproduce divisions between self and other, between loved ones and expendables. This disavowal, “whose resources,” Derrida points out, “are inexhaustible,” means that privileged intimacies are always already haunted by the

sacrifice of the effaced “other.”⁴⁵ This is a human sacrifice that is, according to Derrida, inscribed into the foundations of contemporary society. He writes that “because of the structure of the laws of the market that society has instituted and controls, because of the mechanisms of external debt and other comparable inequities, that same ‘society’ puts to death or (but failing to help someone in distress accounts only for a minor difference) allows to die of hunger and disease tens of millions...Not only does such a society participate in this incalculable sacrifice, it actually organizes it. The smooth functioning of its economic, political, and legal order, the smooth functioning of its moral discourse and good conscience, presuppose the permanent operation of this sacrifice.”⁴⁶

The logics that enable a system’s “smooth functioning” and reproduction of a “permanent operation” are both evident in the global organ trade, in which the sacrifice of some bodies over others is justified through a hierarchization of intimacies. The privileged intimacies under this system, then, are always implicated in a kind of putting to death. Yet the traces of this violence reappear, ghost-like, in the scars that accompany organ transplantation. Tracing the political economy of intimacies in the organ trade shows how the disavowed intimacies of production processes constantly haunt global commodities. These material bearers of the hidden relationships and power dynamics that define the global economy mean that moments of consumption are constantly haunted by the occluded intimacies. Since it is almost impossible to avoid contact with commodities on a daily basis, we touch and are touched by the violence of capitalism even in our intimate moments, even when we are just sipping coffee, sending a text message to a friend, or pulling a shirt over our shoulders. These objects contain intimacies with the violent histories of colonialism, slave plantations, national revolutions, and omnipotent economic power.

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To feel these intimacies as “haunting” is to engage in a relationship with social violences that is not premised on modernity’s terms of

occlusion and disavowal. Like the scars that persist after organ transplantation, haunting speaks to the traces of violence that cannot be easily assimilated into modernity’s amnesiac machine. Haunting, as Avery Gordon writes, is an animated state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence is making itself known, sometimes very directly, sometimes more obliquely. I used the term haunting to describe those singular yet repetitive instances when home becomes unfamiliar, when your bearings on the world lose direction, when the over-and-done-spot comes into view.⁴⁷

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Scars are uncanny because they speak to the traumatic history of a body, and the scars of the global organ trade make explicit the violent connections that exist among different bodies in today’s world. Furthermore, tracing the political economy of intimacies within this network of bodies opens new possibilities for the apprehension of other violences in other processes of production. Though other commodities are not accompanied by the physical scars that organ exchange entails, haunting presents an alternative modality to apprehend the violent intimacies that are effaced by fetishism.

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Haunting as an engagement is inherently anti-epistemological (the effacements of the production process make it literally impossible to know the other through the commodity form) but rather emphasizes disorientation, loss, discomfort, and disturbances. An alternative modality of relation to global intimacies and one that isn’t premised on violent obfuscation, haunting interrupts the economy that undergirds the political economy of intimacies. This interruption is ultimately a loss of the system of values that push organ seekers to privilege their familial intimacy over the intimacy that they share with an organ provider. Of this loss, Derrida writes that “the sacrifice of economy...is indeed in this case the sacrifice of the oikonomia, namely of the law of the home

(*oikos*), of the hearth, of what is one's own or proper, of the private, of the love and affection of one's kin.”⁴⁸ Derrida is saying that to lose the economy of intimacies means to lose the privileging of intimacies that have been inscribed by contemporary and historical processes of domination. This loss is premised on a loss of the terms of engagement that define modern distributions of violence.

Haunting, by estranging the normal, by evoking violences that are supposedly hidden and buried, can engender this loss. To be haunted by global intimacies, then, is to lose oikonomia, to embrace those “repetitive instances when *home becomes unfamiliar*; when your *bearings on the world lose direction*. ”⁴⁹ Furthermore, haunting acts as a force of unrest that demands response, demands action. Expounding on the mobilizing power of haunting, Gordon writes:

Haunting is a frightening experience...But haunting...is distinctive for producing a something-to-be-done. Indeed, it seemed to me that haunting was precisely the domain of turmoil and trouble, that moment (of however long duration) when things are not in their assigned places, when the cracks and rigging are exposed, when the people who are meant to be invisible show up without any sign of leaving, when disturbed feelings cannot be put away, when something else, something different from before, seems like it must be done.⁵⁰

Ultimately, haunting presents alternative imaginaries for “living together” by interrupting the processes of commodity fetishism that are crucial to capitalist functioning. When the occluded intimacies of modernity emerge as visions of horror, when the familiar becomes strange and unrecognizable, it becomes impossible to live as one has before. Haunting is a demand, a demand for a world where scars and wounds can no longer be invisible.

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⁹ Fox, Renée C., and Judith P. Swazey. *Spare parts: organ replacement in American society*. Pp. 36

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²² Schepet-Hughes, Nancy. “The Global Traffic in Human Organs.” Pp. 194

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³⁴ Tsing, Anna. "Sorting out commodities." *HAC: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 3, no. 1 (2013): 21. Pp. 38

³⁵ Moniruzzaman, M. (2012), "Living Cadavers" in Bangladesh: Bioviolence in the Human Organ Bazaar. Pp. 70

³⁶ Yardley, Jim. "Report on Deadly Factory Collapse in Bangladesh Finds Widespread Blame." The New York Times. May 22, 2013. Accessed April 24, 2017. <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/23/world/asia/report-on-bangladesh-building-collapse-finds-widespread-blame.html>.

³⁷ Carney, Scott. *The Red Market: on the trail of the world's organ brokers, bone thieves, blood farmers, and child traffickers.* Pp. 3

³⁸ Carney, Scott. *The Red Market: on the trail of the world's organ brokers, bone thieves, blood farmers, and child traffickers.* Pp. 4
³⁹ Wall text from exhibition *L'Un et l'Autre* by Kadet Aria and Jean-Jacques Lefeb. 16 Feb.-13 May 2018. Palais de Tokyo. Paris.

⁴⁰ Gordon, Avery. *Ghostly matters: haunting and the sociological imagination.* Pp. XI

⁴¹ Young, Sarah. "Upaid labourers are 'slipping pleas for help into Zara clothes.'" *The Independent.*
⁴² Gordon, Avery. *Ghostly matters: haunting and the sociological imagination.* Pp. 17

⁴³ Derrida, Jacques. Translated by David Wills. *The Gift of Death and Literature in Secret.* Pp. 85

⁴⁴ Schepers-Hughes, Nancy, and Lawrence Cohen. *Commodifying Bodies.* Pp. 9

⁴⁵ Derrida, Jacques. Translated by David Wills. *The Gift of Death and Literature in Secret.* University of Chicago Press, 2008. Pp. 85

⁴⁶ Derrida, Jacques. Translated by David Wills. *The Gift of Death and Literature in Secret.* University of Chicago Press, 2008. Pp. 86

⁴⁷ Gordon, Avery. *Ghostly matters: haunting and the sociological imagination.* Pp. XVI
⁴⁸ Derrida, Jacques. Translated by David Wills. *The Gift of Death and Literature in Secret.* Pp. 95

⁴⁹ Gordon, Avery. *Ghostly matters: haunting and the sociological imagination.* Pp. XVI
⁵⁰ Gordon, Avery. *Ghostly matters: haunting and the sociological imagination.* Pp. XVI





Pneumatoliberalism

A Conversation with Maria José de Abreu

Maria José de Abreu is assistant professor of anthropology at Columbia University. Her work engages with a range of anthropological, philosophical and literary debates about temporality, personhood, the human senses, and their technological extensions in the Lusophone world. Her work takes inspiration from the work of Padre Marcelo Rossi, a Brazilian Catholic Priest and figurehead of the widely televised Charismatic movement, conjugating an interest in the aerobics of faith with new media infrastructures.

Tessellating the political economy of the digitized culture industry with the affective pathways it valorizes, de Abreu identifies the ancient Greek concept of the pneuma as an organizing organ of the contemporary. Articulated by the lungs and windpipes, the pneumatics of neoliberalism grounds the processes and practices of our long moment in the precarious temporality of the ongoing, in the renegotiations and propriections necessary to just catch our breath.

Editors Aaron Su and Ben Bresler sat down with her to discuss her methods and interests—truly a breath of fresh air in these noxious times.

crossings of materiality and neoliberalism have sharpened with my work in Brazil—on an urban religious movement in São Paulo, where you see a vested interest by this movement, which is a Catholic, evangelical, conservative movement [the Charismatics], moving toward the recuperation of Greek vocabularies and terminologies, with a strong emphasis on the notion of pneuma. Here, pneuma, which is the Greek term for “breath,” becomes a form of talking about spirit as both air and force. Therefore, to think about airspace in general will lead to the question of materiality. Contrary to the suggestions brought forward towards the latter part of the 19th century, which tried to conceive air as a dimension in which we exist, rather, pneuma thinks of air not as an empty vacuum in which humans exist, but as the substance in which we exist. So to attend to air’s material properties as such through Greek pneumatology—that which is motile, dynamic, and vital—you have this shift toward the material. And then there’s also the question opened up when this movement in São Paulo becomes very popular in the 90s, which is when Brazil is opening up to a neoliberal moment. Here ideas of flow also become important, and whereby materialities that were extant within a Catholic register such as ideas of images and statues, become too heavy with the kind of gravitas that seems to be incompatible with the jump into the neoliberal moment, where one would rather have an idea of the living body instead of those static images. It becomes urgent to interface with ideas of fluidity and flexibility, and other vocabularies that are central to neoliberalism. So what you see is this religious movement that goes back to Greek and Byzantine logics of pneumatology, in order to interface and enter the neoliberal moment through a very particular formation that is based on materiality—through the idea of the breathing body. [This shift] happens through the act of breathing, really, and the capacity of bodies to interconnect, through exchanges of atmospheres, centered on that idea of spirit and pneuma. In other words, what you have in the end is a spiritualized form of neoliberalism.

Once air is no longer perceived as dimension but as substance, what happens as well is a shift in the ways the substance of air and its circulations are followed, thereby transforming a whole set of considerations. That is to say, when you follow the circulations of air, you start to think of how the inside and the outside relate and constitute each other. You really follow the material circulations of breathing. And what does that do to an idea of the subject? This liberal subject that was once there and seen as a self-contained entity, is unsettled by this idea of circulation, by which subjects become more implicated into each other. Henceforth, you move from this idea of a public sphere in which people exist to a public atmosphere that is constitutive of the social. So you see a more material dimension, or reading, of public relations, based on this idea of atmosphere.

And through this logic of breathing and mutual implication in the collective, there are ways that space itself becomes implicated in the idea of the body. In the Charismatics’ practices of bodybuilding, a double standard emerges, wherein bodybuilding is also body un-building.

It’s important for Charismatics also to be in certain spaces that also create certain continuities with the inside, with lungs, so they often perform in tents or other porous structures where the inside and outside travel; there is a certain porosity that is valued in general. And so while they are in these ritual spaces doing bodybuilding, they are also doing body un-building—in that they are choosing certain special settings that forge relations between body and building on a continuum. The media is also an extension of that reciprocation between body and space, and body as space, as most of these shows are transmitted live elsewhere. So the airwaves extend this relation, so we have body-building media. And sometimes this extension moves to the Amazon rainforest, the ultimate lungs of the earth. So you have the lungs within; the body that becomes this membrane; and then space, tents, screens, which are other membranes; moving toward the spirit of the Amazon to find a vernacular form of talking about what is in fact global neoliberalism where the Amazon becomes

the lungs of the earth, so you see the local and global intersecting. What you have is this vast network where the minimal cells in the body are connecting through all these different stations: bodybuilding, media, forests, and back-- as this idea of circulating spirit, in a Christian idiom. Here, you feel the universalism of a Christian evangelical, highly conservative and very sophisticated operation.

CJLC: Which is to say that the technics of embodiment within this approach are quite vexed, because at once this engagement with air as substance heightens embodiment in a strange way—the way that the body is attuned to its porosity and flexibility—but at the same time it’s a dispersal and a disembodiment—it’s an extension of the body into different technological and natural scapes that configure the body in different ways. Do you understand this as a paradox of neoliberalism?

MD: Oh yes. Even breathing itself is paradoxical; it’s all about tension and release, employing grammar of neoliberalism, as in [writer Fernando Pessoa’s] “Anarchist Banker”—the paradox is no hindrance; it is precisely what keeps it going. And this is the essence of Catholic conservatism that Carl Schmitt talks about in his piece from 1923, “Catholicism and Political Form.” He describes Catholicism in terms—and these are his words—of his “outstanding elasticity.” And the concept he uses to explore this outstanding elasticity is a theological concept that goes under the name of the *complexio oppositorum* [coincidence of opposites], which is its capacity to speak to absolutely opposite audiences at the same time. That you will please Right and Left, the banker and the anarchist at the same time. And that this is a characteristic of conservative Catholicism. So there you see that paradox was a very familiar grammar to conservative Christianity, and it goes very well with neoliberalism as well, so no wonder we are seeing this moment: the spread, also here in the United States, of evangelical conservatism. And I think it’s going to get worse, stronger, more expressive.

CJLC: In terms of facing this futurity where it seems that the paradox will only exacerbate, how do you conceive of an optimism that doesn't approach the future in neoliberal terms? Where do you find this?

MD: I am so busy with this question myself. That is the problem of the paradox, and the logic of immunity that comes along with paradox: when you're able to incorporate the enemy within, the opposite within, the nonself within. If that which attacks you is precisely what makes you go, what constitutes you, what kind of resistance or immanent critique is possible? Is resistance being your friend, or going with you, or agreeing with you? What are the vocabularies that are going to be there to create a form of paradox? I do not know. I am myself wondering where to go with it, how to block this paradox, the vitality and the operational capacities of that paradox, how to interrupt it somehow. I can only tell you that I'm very busy with thinking about it.

CJLC: You say as you hold [Lauren Berlant's] *Cruelest Optimism*.

MD: I wanted something as a support, and look what I found.

CJLC: You just mentioned how there's a homology between this neoliberal moment and the one of Catholic conservatism that Schmitt is talking about. How do you think this relationship works? Is it that neoliberal practices and epistemological underpinnings are resuscitating it or bringing it back in some way? Why is Carl Schmitt's text now becoming an appropriate lens with which to apprehend the neoliberal moment?

MD: It's because of that grammar. In a way, your question responds to itself, because it seems that you were referring to that homology. I think that neoliberalism does thrive, or learn to thrive, on antagonism or contradiction. There's something about the challenging of certain logics of containment that were associated with the colonial moment, whereby we learn

to understand that everything that had to do with establishing borders and containment was negative, because we associate them with the incarcerations of colonialism, of forms of representation that delineate, demarcate, circumscribe, capture. And so many people have turned to people like Gilles Deleuze as a way of redeeming or liberating from those logics of containment. What people are not yet seeing is that conservative movements and neoliberalism alike use those very logics that seek to free us from these vocabularies of containment towards a strange form of capture that is all the stranger because you do not see the borders there. It becomes unbounded. If your neighbor puts a fence up for you, it's bad—but you know there's a fence there, and you can react to it. If there's no fence, it becomes very strange to localize power. It becomes a power that is everywhere by being nowhere in particular. Now, a thing that is everywhere by being nowhere in particular is paradox itself. So what's at stake here is how this infrastructure of paradox is operating in ways that allow power to disguise itself in terms that used to be considered very positive. Who talks about freedom these days? Is the Right. Of the logics of flow, of freedom. So there's something there that is oddly oppressive, precisely because you cannot grasp its contours because it has appropriated the structure of life itself, which happens through paradox. Because that's what breathing is—it's paradox. Paradox is so within, and so everywhere, and so promising; it marks the conditions of life itself. It is paradoxically both good and bad.

CJLC: You just mentioned how there's a homology between this neoliberal moment and the one of Catholic conservatism that Schmitt is talking about. How do you think this relationship works? Is it that neoliberal practices and epistemological underpinnings are resuscitating it or bringing it back in some way? Why is Carl Schmitt's text now becoming an appropriate lens with which to apprehend the neoliberal moment?

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brought on by vital materiality and engagements with new materialism that might more accurately articulate these dispersed vectors of agency, power, discipline. I'm wondering about any considerations you've had with that vein of thought, and any approaches you might've had that have been influenced by that.

MD: My big influence is—you're going to be surprised by this—Manel-José Mondain, on the iconoclastic controversy of the 8th and 9th century around Byzantine iconography. What is a Byzantine icon? This is a moment that can be compared with what's happening now. It was a moment when you had to think of icon, non-icon, this controversy over the icon, where the church had to find an icon that is not there. I'm very interested in the idea of the "I'm-not-there." The icon instantiates absence; it says, "I'm not here." This is the compromise that had to be found between the icon lovers and the icon destroyers, creating an icon that is kenotic—what in theology is kenosis, the ability to withdraw in the moment of appearance. Which is also what breathing is, this empty field, which brings this idea of motion, of dynamism.

She's not very well-known, but I think she's amazing. And so, you're probably surprised, you thought I would speak of Agamben, or Foucault, and they are important too. It's actually this very obscure woman, lesser-known woman. It's funny, she's called Marie-José too.

CJLC: Which brings me back to our earlier question, just because of the mention of the Byzantines, and this kind of uncanny repetition of the two Maria/Marie-Joses. So do we conceive of this rehashing of logics as some kind of linearity or convergence? We were touching on it earlier with the idea of colonial logics as a hinge, but how do we conceive of the trajectory, or form a historiography? How do we form a juncture between these much older styles of reasoning and then these ones we're encountering right now that resonate with each other despite the interregnum of an entire millennium in between?

MD: I think it relates again to the question of

the geopolitical and the logics of containment. Now, at least since the mandate of John Paul II, he really becomes the charismatic guy. And, just like with the Byzantine empire, it was a moment where the church feels that it needs to go to the gym. And work on its extensions. Because you have Peter, the Rock, and Paul, the tentmaker. And Paul is the Greek. He's the one who moves in space. He's the gymnasiarch in the primitive church in Greece. Nothing is really new under the sun. And this Byzantine moment was one of those moments when the Church had to go to the gym. It was a moment of universalism, of expanding. Of bringing this icon that is paradoxical—and in being paradoxical, it plays, again, with the idea that it's there and not there at the same time, so you cannot see where the borders are. In the nineties in Brazil, you also see this coming of electronic media that is going to replace the idea of the statue. Because the statue is positioned in time and place; there's a circumscription; there's an image; it's there. So my book begins precisely at this moment in Brazil in 1995—it's called *guerra santa*, the holy war. How did it happen, this holy war? It started with an evangelical pastor who comes

on television on the day that thousands of people across Brazil come to this sanctuary on pilgrimage to pay adoration to the Patron Saint of Brazil, named Our Lady of Aparecida. He goes on television and kicks the statue, kicks the image [of the patron saint]. It's a moment of blasphemy, and it was followed by weeks of protest and revolt and forms of retaliation by other TV channels because it becomes a war between Catholicism and Protestant Evangelicals, the people who owned that network. As you can see, it's a war between channels in the name of a religion. And this holy war goes on for weeks. What's very interesting is that, when I talk to people about this moment, everybody says that this pastor shattered the image in pieces. But that's not true. What happened—or my reading of it—is that the repetition of that moment on television—time and again—was such that people thought that the statue was broken. But it was just the iteration of the medium itself on the image, as if it shattered its own content. What happens here is that you see the particular

geopolitics of television that goes on and is infinite. The repetition of the image replaces the idea of the statue. People think it is broken, but it isn't—they have entered the register of electronic media at that moment—a kind of staccato of repetition, time-and-again. There's something about that moment that goes from something that is circumscribed in time and space into the electronic medium. I compare this with the Byzantine icon in the 8th and 9th centuries that is there and not there at the same time, and I relate the electronic image as a kind of serial iconoclasm, because it's one shot after another. The images are passing. One denies the one before.

And of course the logics of liveliness reappear here. Whereas in the Byzantine icon, that paradox that we were talking about is in a way what brings the icon to life, what makes it perform that kenotic becoming—like breathing itself. So the resonance is definitely there (according to my reading of this moment and the now). I describe it in terms of a change from what Mondzain calls from *pétigraphie* to *graphie*, from circumscriptio to inscription. The first means "border" and the other one "an absence of borders." I'm trying to speak of an image as a living image, whether it's a body or through the dynamics of television as such, which wants to keep the image alive. It moves—it's not a frozen statue. And through this form of iconography, you can find many problems with electronic media. Through this interfacing of being there and not there at once.

CJLC: Where do you locate this labor of detecting these resonances?

MD: When you see things through air, it's a completely different arrangement of your frame. It will bring in the ideas of resonance and parallels. To express the simultaneity of bodies, space, media, you can show the relational continuum that emerges between them. And at the same time, how are you going to be critical about that? How are you going to find the outside, which the subject seems to want to avoid precisely because that subject wants to be

everywhere? So, to eliminate a transcendental outside from where critique used to be articulated. Where am I going to find my niche of critique?

LOTOCGE11-Q1

January 13

⚠ EMERGENCY ALERTS

2m ago

Emergency Alert
BALLISTIC MISSILE THREAT
TO HAWAII. SEEK IMMEDIATE SHELTER.
THIS IS NOT A DRILL.



AESTHETICS

LAWSON



Translation Aesthetics

Josue Chavez

What follows are case studies put together to argue for a translation aesthetics that can be used to make legible the event before the multiplication of labor. This essay is an excerpt adapted from a larger online project, Translation Aesthetics: Making Legible the Home-yet-to-come as an Instance of the Event Before the Multiplication of Labor; which can be found at: <https://joschavez.github.io/>

Allow me to posit the idea of a translation aesthetics, which can be used to talk about ways in which semiotic objects use translation as their structure of possibility to bring about alternative political concerns for the sake of redefining matters of universal justice. Lydia Liu argues for an eventfulness to the act of translation that allows us to interpret the work of translation beyond the simplified understanding “community” to another. Translation can be seen as “a precarious wager that enables the discursive mobility of a text or a symbol, for better or for worse. The wager releases the multiplicity of the text and opens it up to an uncertain future, more often than not to an uncertain political future.” Translation allows the selected text to move in a different discursive realm, opening it up to uncertain political futures—uncertain because the translation does not guarantee changes in the material and social conditions. The home-yet-to-come, an event which I elaborate on in the longer version of this text, is thus a result of my precarious wager to translate 10 stories collected by artist Paul Ramirez Jonas. By translating them, I’m attempting to make “a preferential marking [that] holds the potential of turning a

symbol into an event, or an event into a symbol, back and forth.” Such marking turns the desires of the home-yet-to-come into “political evidence” that can be used to redefine claims for universal justice.

What are some other creative projects (apart from the one from which this essay is excerpted) that rely on translation to put forth political evidence from which alternative claims for justice can be imagined? One can start by looking at Elyla Sinvergizena and Guillermo Saenz’s project Cartas Mojadas / Wet Letters, where translation as structure of possibility for the art piece allows for a relationship across difference to be established. In 2016, the Nicaraguan duo collected letters from rural indigenous communities near Managua who were facing the threat of eviction from their lands with no due remuneration because the Ortega government signed a contract with infrastructure development firm HKND run by Beijing telecommunications billionaire Wang Jing, giving it a 50-year concession to build and operate an interoceanic canal, a Nicaraguan national aspiration since the 19th century. In the letters, people describe how police, military and Chinese businessmen engaged in various forms of intimidation in order to kick them out of their land. They also describe their willingness to die fighting for their land and their way of life. They use the letters to ask “Chinese people” for support. The artists translated the letters into Chinese, made them publicly available online and created an installation on an exhibition space in a hutong in Beijing, hand-delivering some of the letters to the hutong residents during the final performance. Hutong residents were chosen because they also face the threat of dispossession without remuneration due to Beijing’s beautification process, which seeks to get rid of “uncontrolled development and low-end entrepreneurship” to create a “city of the future.” Each letter had a QR code, which the hutong residents could scan through WeChat (ubiquitous social media app in China) in order to reply. Although the responses have not been translated yet (more funding is needed to continue the project), in the context of an

interview I conducted with Sinvergizena, she told me many of the hutong residents responded with accounts their own woes, asking not only where Nicaragua was but how can they help if they themselves are powerless. The goal is to translate the Chinese messages to Spanish as soon as possible and deliver them to the respective recipients in Nicaragua creating a pen-pal relationship.

Translation, in the context of Cartas Mojadas/Wet Letters, is not only the structure that allows the art project to exist in the world as such but it is also what allows a relationship between non-aggregate communities, even when the relationship is not what the artists expected. The piece is an attempt to establish dialogue not in terms of national difference but in terms of the different mechanisms that are threatening their respective ways of being in the world. Translation as repetition (Sinvergizena wants to keep translating in order to deepen the dialogue beyond the hutong residents’ self-perception as being distant and powerless in relation to the people in Nicaragua) holds the possibility of reconstituting subjects nor as utterly different and distant from one another, but as interconnected by their vulnerability to dispossession. The reconstitution of the political becomes possible only after they recognize each other as interconnected precarious subjects.

Translation aesthetics refer to how translation becomes the space of possibility for a relationship between non-aggregate precarious bodies to be continuously worked on for the sake of actualizing their respective claims to continue to exist in space the way they want to, without having to sell their labor in the near future as domestic or transnational migrants.

The recognition of this interconnection as the necessary condition for the reconstitution of the political suggests that a relationship can only happen when subjects that can recognize it have been constituted. Thus, translation aesthetics is also about the way in which translation is a technology for the constitution of subjectivity, of “I.” Translation as a technology for the constitution of the self is at play in Amy Suo

Wu’s piece Thunderclap, which reappropriates fashion for the steganographic distribution of the writings of anarchist-feminist thinker He-Yin Zhen. Wu instrumentalized the popular Chinese fashion trend of having nonsensical English phrases printed in clothes to hide in plain sight translated quotes from Zhen’s writing, which Wu obtained after stumbling upon *The Birth of Chinese Feminism* while in residence in Beijing. For her final performance, she opened up her studio to anyone who wanted to customize their clothes with patches and ribbons she had created that not only display the radical thinker’s quotes but also hide a QR code. When someone scans it through WeChat, Zhen’s writings are automatically downloaded in Chinese and English.

The English translation facilitates the distribution of a text that has disappeared from the contemporary context. Thus, it becomes a wager that opens up to an uncertain future the desires and aspirations expressed in Zhen’s anti-capitalist, feminist work, which has the possibility of disrupting the here-now (beyond the already disruptive mobilization of it in an art performance piece). In circulating the translation through a steganographic practice that instrumentalizes fashion, Wu is also turning the translation into a medium for political self-fashioning. Wearing the ribbons and patches becomes an act of defiance to the state and solidarity across those who can read and relate to the text. It allows the wearers to construct themselves in relation to Zhen’s work, utilizing their bodies to not only spread censored texts but also to see themselves as agents of change in the world, a change that will allow one to live beyond the terms dictated by patriarchal global capitalism. In doing so, the translation aesthetics of Wu’s project constitute subjects that recognize global capitalism as the polymorphous threat to the body that needs to be addressed to achieve true freedom and equality.

Translation aesthetics allows us to perceive how translation, within the semiotic “objects” discussed, functions as a subject-making technology through which social relations are

negotiated. Translation as negotiation became clear to me when stumbling upon untranslatable phrases in the 10 stories I translated, out of 140 that were typed and digitized by California-based, Honduras-born artist Paul Ramirez

Jonas in the context of his 2010 performance installation piece, called Dictar Y Recordar, at La Mancha de Tomate, an independent art space in Tegucigalpa, Honduras. For the performance, Jonas invited anyone in Tegucigalpa to come to the art space and dictate memories of Honduras in an attempt to “do the impossible: write a complete history of Honduras,” in the span of 24 hours. While the event was open to the public, Jonas arranged transportation to the capital of indigenous and non-indigenous, female and male activists from all over the country’s rural areas. His interest in writing a complete history of Honduras is linked to the country’s political instability, “a country that has almost as many governments as years of independence.” This political instability is also fresh in the collective memory given that the piece takes place a year after the 2009 coup.

Imagine walking into a long and narrow room, stacks of papers held together and hanging against the wall thanks to clothespins and clotheslines, allowing you to peruse through the piles of memories. Desks run along the walls of the narrow room, each covered by dark purple or blue tablecloths with type-writers clinking away as volunteer typists listen to the recollections of participants, which are then added to the clothesline for viewers to explore.

In transcribing and exhibiting the memories, Jonas creates an immersive space where history is alive through the circulation and representation of memories as an interactive archive. However, by packaging and presenting the stories to an audience as a “history” of a self-evident and clearly differentiated space known as “Honduras,” Jonas’ performance installation obscures the fluid geographical and temporal dynamics expressed within the stories. This is where I can stage an intervention in his piece through a translation aesthetics. The act of translating ten of the 140 stories allows me to

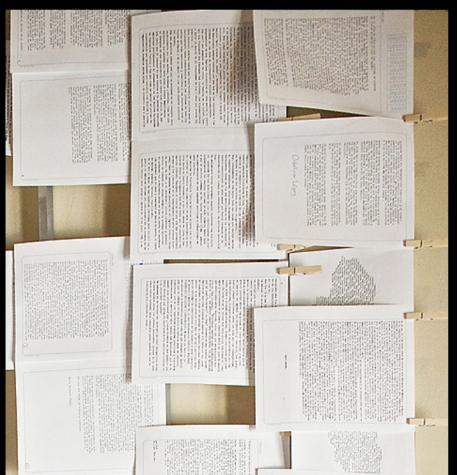
discern the subject-making aspect of translation, through the presence of “untranslatable phrases” like Fabrisio’s “aguastaras” and Mildred’s “de nanquius.”

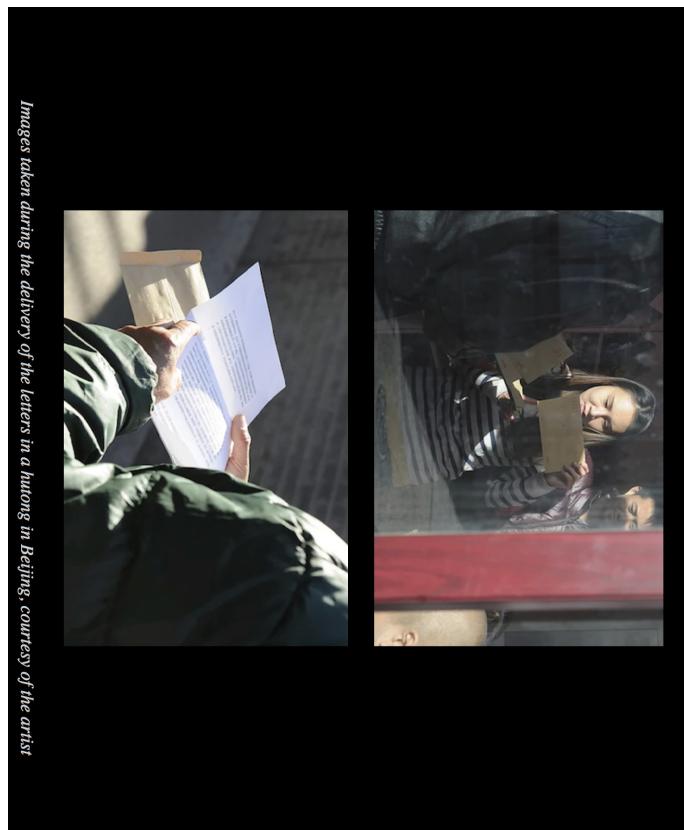
In both Fabrisio’s and Mildred’s stories, the untranslatable phrases are used to establish the speakers as subjects engaged in social relations where power is being negotiated. Fabrisio’s narrative tells the story of how the village of Sabanagrande became “modern” at the expense of the U.S. military, whose presence is an organizing force within the diegesis: “We used to go there to smoke our Pimates and to take advantage of its location to look out for the arrival of aguastaras. We knew that each time aguastaras convoys drove around, they’d bring with them chocolate and peanut butter. We also knew that they drove by at like 4, three hours after the gringo planes usually broke the sound barrier and made the world tremble.” U.S. presence permeates Fabrisio’s imagination; it becomes a referent for organizing time and behavior (the trembling that happens 4 hours before the arrival of military convoys is a sign to start climbing up the hill). But this presence is not one that renders the “we” of Fabrisio’s narrative helpless or submissive – their attitude toward U.S. military is of irreverent defiance, as seen by the neologism “aguastaras.” The phrase, like “gringo,” has a depreciatory tone and it was used during the 80s to refer to U.S. military in Honduras. The word itself comes from the name of the U.S. operation Ahua Taras II, which was a Miskito phrase meaning “Big Pine” borrowed by the army and then taken up and “bastardized” into Spanish by Fabrisio and others in order to insult them. Therefore, “aguastaras” points not only to U.S. military in Honduras but also to speakers who use the word to disdainfully refer to their presence.

Mildred’s account recounts the time when, as a little girl, she felt embarrassed for not being able to speak English when “working” (wageless) as a secretary for her father’s business transactions with Canadian clients. It takes place in 1977, when the military junta that had been in power stepped down. Mildred starts her narration as a child who experiences an embarrassing exchange



Scenes from the performance in 2010, documentation courtesy of artist





Images taken during the delivery of the letters in a hutong in Beijing, courtesy of the artist

that makes her aware of the need for a “change” to avoid feeling shame like that again. “One day, the phone rang and it was a Canadian man asking for my father who happened to not be at home. I asked him to leave a message with me, he dictated it and said ‘Thanks!’. I answered: ‘De nanquius.’ At that moment I realized that it was not pronounced like that and we both laughed before hanging up.” Because Mildred knew no English, this exchange must have taken place in Spanish with the client randomly switching to English at the end. This contingent action prompts the utterance “De nanquius,” her attempt to say “You’re welcome” and to maintain her competence (thus making her father proud). The phrase is a combination of the Spanish “De nada,” which means “you’re welcome,” and the perceived sound of English (“dú” = “You”). The phrase not only suggests Mildred’s desire to avoid the shame at not being able to communicate and uphold the image of professionalism that had earned her praise (“He was very proud of me when clients congratulated him on the way I expressed myself on the phone”), but it is also an attempt at self-fashioning. It is Mildred’s way to constitute herself as a bilingual, eloquent daughter-entrepreneur. “De nanquius” allows Mildred to constitute herself as someone who attempts to avoid the shame produced by not being able to speak English.

Instead of translating the words into something recognizable as an “English word,” leaving “aguastaras” and “de nanquius” as they were transcribed confronts the reader with translation as a subject-making technology. The phrases are translations in themselves that the speakers engaged in not to “deliver a message” but to establish their own subjectivity against an “other.” Their presence as hybrid also challenges assumptions that I’m translating from “Spanish” to “English” a text about “Honduras” to the “U.S.” The words are bastardized English or Spanish; they are instances of hybridity beyond one or even two languages in the case of the Miskito roots of “aguastaras.” The multiplicity of language and the arbitrariness of linking it to a nation (Honduras = Spanish, U.S. = English) becomes legible as a political

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If translation aesthetics can be a way to talk about the employment of translation as a structure of possibility for certain contemporary semiotic “objects” to reconstitute subjects and their social relationships in order to make claims for alternative visions of universal justice that attend to the threat of global capitalism, one “justice” that it produces is rendering legible the experience of being in transit, whose occlusion is the condition of possibility for the coherence of difference based on “nationality” or “language.” Naoki Sakai argues for the subject in transit when thinking what the subjectivity of the translator must be: one that is “internally split and multiple, and devoid of a stable positionality.” At best, she can be a subject in transit, first because the translator cannot be an individual in the sense of individuum in order to perform translation, and second because she is a singular that marks an elusive point of discontinuity in the social, whereas translation is the practice of creating continuity at that singular point of discontinuity.” Sakai points out how for translation to take place, the translator cannot be said to belong to one distinct “community” over “another”; she must be in between, or else how would she be translating in the first place?

At the same time, Sakai posits how the very corporeality of the translator marks them as a singular point of discontinuity while still

move that undergirds hegemonic relations. Its hybridity also suggest how Honduras might be better understood in this context not as referring to a sovereign nation but signifying the state practices that institutionalizing and materializing global capitalism. The linking of language to homogeneity (unity) allows for it to be associated with a national (and ethnic) being, from which politics and justice are envisioned. The untranslatable phrases challenge the assumption of a language’s unity and the understandings of politics and justice that derive from it. Translation aesthetics seek to renegotiate the political through the constitution of subjects working out difference in alternative ways that allow for a being in space to be imagined as a concern for universal justice.

existing within the social. This paradoxical condition suggests that translation must be a way to negotiate the difference imposed by corporeality, by being itself: "Through the labor of the translator, the incommensurability as difference that calls for the service of the translator in the first place is negotiated and worked on...the work of translation is a practice by which the initial discontinuity between the addresser and addressee," is corporeal existence itself; the fact that by being one is necessarily distant from others. The labor of translation allows for that distance to be breached through language, and it is only after such labor is undertaken that incommensurability can be represented as national unity and difference: "What makes it possible to represent the initial difference as an already determined difference between one language, unity and another is the work of translation itself. Only in the representation of translation can we construe the process of translation as a transfer of some message from this side to that side...[it] enables the representation of ethnic or national subjects, in spite of the presence of the translator who is always in between." The coherence of the nation and the national-linguistic subject is only possible through the labor of the subject in transit, who must be occluded for the "nation" and "language" to be cohesive to itself.

Translation aesthetics as discussed so far can be understood as demanding justice precisely by reframing the subject in transit. Being in transit becomes an "event" that is legible through the translation aesthetics employed by the pieces, where translation is the space of possibility for new events, new subjects and new relationships to take shape. Translation aesthetics revivify the reified social relationships that have come to be understood under ethno-national and linguistic terms in order to negotiate initial incommensurability between bodies differently, in order to combat the threat to being.

A universal condition that can be the basis for the actualization of alternative visions of justice,

put forth by the translation aesthetics of the pieces, is not the subject in transit but the subject who is negotiating the conditions that would force them to be in transit. Like the subject in labor whose work in the act of translation is foreclosed in order for translation to be able to represent itself as communication between two distinct unities, the migrant and the labor power they are forced to differentially sell are necessarily occluded for the cohesion not only of the nation, but also of global capitalism at this particular historical juncture. While none of the semiotic objects discussed so far work explicitly with the experience of migration, all of them are working with translations of texts concerned with the consequences of dispossession from one's land and one's ability to reproduce thereafter. They are all instances in which the source texts narrate contestations against material conditions that would lead subjects to migrate. This is clearly seen in Carras Mojadas, where letters are translated that deal with the threat of dispossession by the canal, a threat that will force people to leave their lands and to sell their labor in order to survive, turning them into migrants either at a domestic or transnational level. With my reading of the home-yet-to-come, this very threat to being that enhances the possibility of migration (both Jorge and Maira have already undertaken it) takes place through political instability, persecution and imposed disposability. He-Yin Zhen's writings are also concerned with threats to being that force a selling of one's labor across different regimes, a selling that undermines true freedom, "from the rule of (upper-class) men and from the rule of (upper class) women." The translated texts can be understood as contesting the material and social conditions that threaten the speaker's bodies. By remaining in place, the contested conditions will eventually force them to be in transit, to migrate, because they have been dispossessed from their ability to reproduce their own life.

The translations employed by the semiotic objects narrate moments before social and material conditions force subjects to be in multiple forms of transit, which is also the "event" before the multiplication of labor, the

condition of possibility for the bodies of the speakers to be translated into differentiated labor power not for oneself across different labor regimes. Although happening across different historical junctures, across disparate geographies and in ways that are local and particular, the translation aesthetics of the semiotic objects mark as an event the experience(s) before bodies are separated from their own lives and translated into (cheap) labor power. Sandro Mezzadra points out that capitalism today functions through "continuous multiplication of control devices that correspond to the multiplication of labor regimes and the subjectivities implied by them within each single space constructed as separate within models of the international division of labor." It is in these multiple labor regimes that the commodity of labor power is exchanged; but because labor power is inextricable from the body, the control devices must perform an act of translation. They must establish a "continuity at a site of discontinuity" which is the body as labor power that is no longer for itself but for the satisfaction of labor regimes where it finds itself inserted into. Once the subject is in the labor regime, the "continuity and stability of production and reproduction of labor power" can no longer be taken for granted. Translation aesthetics make the event before the multiplication of labor legible as a moment(s) when subjects contest the social and material conditions that will force their bodies into the commodity of labor power that supplies the demands of different labor regimes. Home-yet-to-come is thus one event, rendered legible through a translation aesthetics, that is an instance of the event before the multiplication of labor, the condition of possibility for bodies to be translated into labor power, for the migrant as a subject of labor to even be imagined.

This is a wager to make the event before the multiplication of labor legible as a political concern through a translation aesthetics in which semiotic objects employ translation as their structure not only to exist but also to reconstitute subjects that can engage in alternative social relations for the sake of a universal justice. At the same time, this project extends beyond the

scope of this essay. Whereas the specificities of this universal justice must wrestle with histories and particularities of specific locations in order to successfully address the threat to being (since capitalism updates itself to the particularities of space) there is a general direction this universal justice should aim for that exceeds the contemporary terms of political representation precisely because it is a justice concerned with the ability to exist in space. This universal justice that reconstitutes the political must seek to abolish the material and social conditions that make possible the violent multiplication of labor (a justice that disrupts the here-now), where living bodies are translated as organs for labor power meant to satisfy the demands of different labor regimes, and not of the living body itself.

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