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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR:

Dear Reader,

Welcome to the 20th annual issue of the *Columbia Journal of Literary Criticism*.

When our editors chose the theme of Double for this year's issue, we were interested in exploring twinhood, reflection, and reverberation. It seems fitting that this theme idea came to us as CJLC entered our second decade. Founded in 2002, CJLC has reached an age where its editors are as young (and old) as it is. This year's Editors-in-Chief were not only born in 2002, but are also both twins; doubtless, these ruminations about doubling spring from a lifetime of being defined as half of a set of two.

In society, doubling has been an eternal source of unease. The prevalence of the doppelgänger as the ultimate symbol of the uncanny permeates the collective unconscious. Doubleness also pervades literary form: in their essay "The Ambivalent Encounter," Elijah Knodell argues that the *double entendres* used in old English riddles should not be interpreted as providing the reader with two solutions, but instead as underscoring the ambiguous relationship between language and phenomenon. This is part of the terror that is folded into the meaning of double: although the double implies the existence of two entities instead of one, that there is a single source from which another entity is projected challenges the legitimacy of the double as an actual phenomenon.

Roberto Bolaño's *The Savage Detectives* offers a metaphorical double of a literary movement: Visceral Realism stands in for *infrarrealismo*, as Rodrigo Aguilera Croasdaile writes about in his essay for this issue, "The Real and the Visceral." He explores the relationship between literary structure and the coherence that we attempt to impose on our lives. Enfolded into this phenomenon is the question of heritage, a kind of generational doubling. Mira Mason's "Your Scythe is Soooo Big!" explores the self and the Other through the way in which whiteness produces a racialized "I," as seen in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*.

However, there is also a euphoria of the double, as argued by Amari Grey in her essay "What we do in 'the Dark'," the second installation of their "Digital Semiotics & Pandemic Intimacy" series, previously published in our *Intimacy* issue. In ludic structure and prose, they write about their gender transformation as related to gender performances online through the creation of "digital doubles." Moreover, the double is crucial to the Christian aesthetic and moral system of values, which Donna Sanders explores in her essay "Mystery and Dichotomy: Catholicism According to Flannery O'Connor." Sanders reflects on the opposing forces that were at work in O'Connor's life, from her severe health conditions to the relentless piety that she brought to bear on the many stories that she wrote during her short life.

We would like to thank the incredible artists who contributed their pieces to this issue, as well as our layout editors Corinna Akari Singer and Aristotle X for the effort that they put into designing the issue and doing justice to the work of our authors, artists, and editors. We want to thank Philip Mascontonio, our advisor, who helped to bring this issue to fruition on a logistical level. Finally, we want to thank our editors and contributors for producing exemplary pieces of literary criticism to populate this journal.

With gratitude,

Annelie Hyatt and Grace Novarr

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Annelie Hyatt & Grace Novarr

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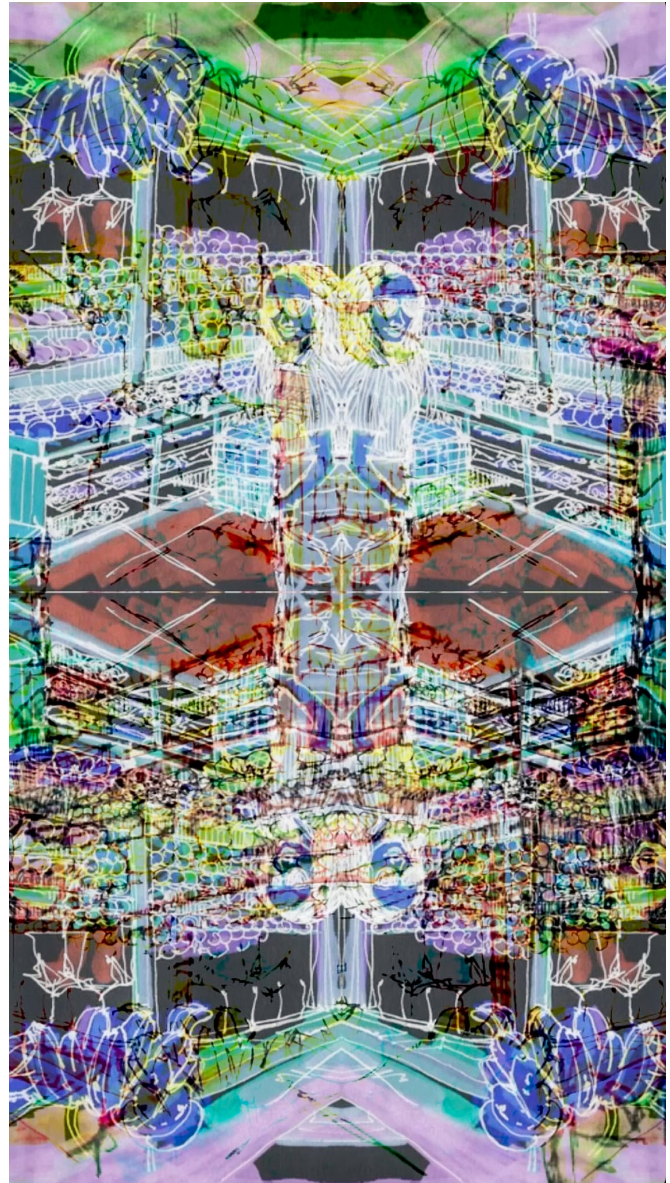
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Untitled
Amy Xiaoqian Chen



Untitled
Amy Xiaoqian Chen

The Real and the Visceral

“We are all writing the same book, at the end of the day. And that same book, at the end of the day, is nothing – in uppercase letters, that is, or maybe in lowercase.”
— Roberto Bolaño

Go to your nearest library or bookstore and find a copy of Roberto Bolaño’s 1998 novel *The Savage Detectives* (or Natasha Wimmer’s 2007 English translation).¹ Once you find it, steal it. If you get caught, say it’s a reference to the book. The young poets in *The Savage Detectives* steal books. One of them reads books in the shower. Another has a sword fight with a critic of his work. Yet another calls himself Piel Divina, Luscious Skin. At one point, they plan to kidnap Octavio Paz, real life Mexican poet and Nobel Prize laureate. Imitate the poets at your own risk. This is serious literature.

Bolaño’s novel draws from his life as a Chilean in Mexico of the 1970s, and is equal parts tragic, absurd, and deceptive: it is entirely composed of testimony, without a single concrete fact. The order of its chapters, at first chronological, ends up looping over itself; the narrative often loses sight of its protagonists, going off into massive tangents with one-night stand-ins. These literary games are almost frustrating—at times it feels like a massive collection of short stories crammed between the pages of a novella—but our initial dissatisfaction is exactly the point. By avoiding factual omniscience, by tossing aside protagonism, and by refusing closure to its own narrative, the novel feels more real, more viscerally real than any other. *The Savage Detectives* does not try to bring literary order to the chaos of life, but rather succumbs to it. The result is a book that feels aware of its own status as a book, a narrative, a lens through which Life and Literature refract upon each other.

Section 1: The part about the book

The Savage Detectives begins with the

¹ Library of Congress codes are PQ.8098.12.O38. D48.1998, D4813.2007 for the translation.

diary of Juan García Madero, a college student and amateur poet, who has just been “cordially invited to join the visceral realists” (Bolaño, 3). His entries detail his first meeting with Ulises Lima and Arturo Belano, who accepted him into the movement on day one. Our narrator idolizes the two and follows in their footsteps—meaning, for the most part, skipping class and stealing books. From the perspective of the younger García Madero, the entries play out as a picaresque, with a wide cast of aimless characters going in circles around Mexico City. The diary tracks discordant narratives: Lima and Belano are searching for Cesárea Tinajero, a 1930s poet and predecessor of the visceral realists; García Madero meets the poet María Font and her prostitute friend, Lupe; he starts dating María Font and almost immediately breaks up with her; Belano starts expelling visceral realists from the group; García Madero stops going home to his aunt and uncle and moves in with a new girlfriend; Lupe runs away from her boyfriend/pimp Alberto. Among all this, García Madero remains aloof, distant even from his own diary, wandering through bookstores and cafés of the city.

The narrative threads really start to come together only by the last two entries of the diary, one hundred and thirty pages in. García Madero visits María Font’s house on December 30th and finds it under attack: the pimp Alberto is holding a siege to get Lupe, who is hiding inside. García Madero manages to enter the house but is unable to leave. On New Year’s Eve, Lima and Belano come to the rescue: they agree to take the Font family’s Chevrolet Impala and leave the city with Lupe on board. An adventure begins: Belano and Lima set off to find Tinajero, the founder of the visceral realists, while rescuing Lupe from the tyrant Alberto. Juan García Madero joins the quest:

I saw the two thugs get out of the Camaro and I saw them coming toward me. I saw that Lupe was looking at me from inside the car and that she was

opening the door. I realized that I'd always wanted to leave. I got in and before I could close the door

Ulises stepped on the gas [...] through the back window I saw a shadow in the middle of the street.

All the sadness of the world was concentrated in that shadow, framed by the strict rectangle of the Impala's window. (Bolaño, 124)

The monstrous second part of the novel begins. "The Savage Detectives: 1976-1996," consists of a series of statements by over forty characters throughout twenty years, the first in January 1976 and the last in December 1996. The statements, in general, relate to the visceral realists: Belano and Lima each travel around the world, alone; some Mexicans stay true to the movement but eventually leave it; many die young. García Madero and Lupe are never mentioned. Here we must emphasize the chaos of this part: the statements often have little to do with each other or even with the characters we already know. They are not contained within a city, nor the span of two months, nor by the point of view of one person. The first part feels like a one-act play by comparison. Even summarizing the second part implies a kind of coherence that is not fully there. Lima and Belano cross paths only once in twenty years. In some statements, they are only shadows on the background of entirely self-sufficient narratives. The lives of the part's characters create a shapeless constellation. They are together only by virtue of the novel itself—by the fact that their statements, together, accumulate into what we recognize (or choose to recognize) as a novel, intertwining their stories and presenting them as one.

The novel's greatest effort to keep the stories together is Amadeo Salvatierra. His statement stands out from all the rest: it is the first—chronologically and structurally—and it is the only one split up into separate parts—thirteen total—and it is the last. He relates, among pages and pages of other statements

that span twenty years of life, the single night he met Ulises Lima and Arturo Belano in 1975, when they inquired him about Cesárea Tinajero. Bolaño's narrative intentions are clear enough: the statement brings context and meaning to the lives of Belano and Lima, and it creates a crescendo to the story by handing it out in pieces. But the effect produced by such choices is only that: the author's choice. The artificial placement of the account seems to want to say something more, something that must go beyond the insufficiencies of the text in order to be said.

The third part of the novel takes us back to the Impala. The promise that Lima and Belano made to Amadeo Salvatierra (The night before? A month ago? Twenty years?) is still fresh in their heads and ours. Alberto the pimp is hot on their trail. After the magnitude of the previous part, the prospects for the remainder feel miniscule. Our return to this moment is disorienting. Juan García Madero himself seems to notice something has changed. His first entry reads:

Today I realized that what I wrote yesterday I really wrote today: everything from December 31 I wrote on January 1, i.e., today, and what I wrote on December 30 I wrote on the 31st, i.e., yesterday.

What I write today I'm really writing tomorrow, which for me will be today and yesterday, and also, in some sense, tomorrow: an invisible day. But enough of that. (Bolaño, 527)

What starts off as a clarification ends as a rising suspicion that the text, time, and identity are constantly affecting each other. He recognizes the uncertainty of his own account: his entries are not fully accurate as they have been affected by memory and foresight at the time of writing. He reflects on his omnipresence in the "today" of the date in the diary, in his physical "today," on the yesterdays and tomorrows of life and literature. What, then, is that invisible day? It could be the day that has not happened yet—that, once it happens, will become visible. It might also be the unwritten day, which does happen and will happen but remains unknown to us. García Madero stops himself right when he is about to crash into the fourth wall. The novel, however, is already leaving us. The final pages feel like a film dissolving on the projector, still running. You don't have to steal the book, but go read it.

Section 2: The part about the writers

“Now even bookish pharmacists are afraid to take on the great, imperfect, torrential works, books that blaze paths into the unknown. They choose the perfect exercises of the great masters.”

— Roberto Bolaño, *2666*

Juan García Madero admits, on the first page, not to know what visceral realism is. By the end of the book, the question remains. Amadeo Salvatierra, who knew Cesárea Tinajero, doesn't know the answer. We readers might discover the movement is based on a real one, *infrarrealismo*, that Bolaño belonged to, but that doesn't answer what visceral realism is, or what it means, or what makes a visceral realist. The question is of monumental importance. It might be, for all we know, the first question Lima and Belano wish to ask Tinajero. It is, by far, the most fascinating question left unanswered in the entire novel. The answer could fundamentally change Latin American literature in the 21st century. I'm serious. This is serious literature.

Let's go back to our Author. Roberto Bolaño was born in 1953, meaning he belonged to the generation that followed that of the Latin American Boom: South American writers like Vargas Llosa from Perú, García Márquez from Colombia, and Cortázar from Argentina, whose novels were translated and read in the United States and Europe. Reviews of Bolaño's books will not let you forget that: browse the Amazon page for *The Savage Detectives* and you will find phrases like “the most important writer to emerge from Latin America since García Márquez,” or “Latin America's literary *enfant terrible*.” It's a cruel joke (admittedly, a funny one) that a book so obsessed with novelty and youth in literature, written by an author who personally belonged to a movement that hoped to “blow the brains out of the cultural establishment,” is praised through comparison to the books that come before it. But it gets funnier.

Bolaño's last work, the 1100-plus pages-long *2666*, is, in the opinion of many, his greatest. Through its posthumous publication, the heir of the Boom became the definitive Latin American author of his generation and has kept the title ever since (even now, twenty years after his death, no one has stepped up). The praise takes another turn: *2666* is seen as “one of those exceptional books that transcend[s] its author and its time to form a part of world literature.” (Amazon, translation mine) In other words, Bolaño is no longer contending for a spot among García Márquez or Octavio Paz, but has instead been crammed into the ranks of The Greats. What gives? Does the “polymathic descendant of Borges and Pynchon” earn the privilege of not being compared to his peers? Is Bolaño's reward to ignore anything in his books that would characterize it as Chilean, Latin American, or Spanish literature? *The Savage Detectives*, therefore, lies in the shadow of two giants: the previous canon of Latin American authors deemed fit to be read in the first world, and Bolaño's own magnum opus, which managed to peel off its label of exported product.

This metatextual irony and its effect on (re)readings of *The Savage Detectives* is worth exploring, because Bolaño himself explored it in his work. “Sensini,” a short story published in a collection one year before *The Savage Detectives*, is narrated by a young author advised to participate in literary competitions. An addition at the very end states that the story was submitted to a fiction contest and won. In an interview, Bolaño declares:

“The literary wager of ‘Sensini’ was not fulfilled, one-hundred-percent, in the writing of the work.

The literary wager was fulfilled by winning a prize – which was doing a full circle of what was being said in the story – but winning a real prize.” (Bolaño, *La Belleza de Pensar*, translation mine)

The literary game, that of “giving one

thing (which apparently has one meaning) many meanings,” finds a place in the only visceral realist poem made explicit in *The Savage Detectives*. “Sión” by Cesárea Tinajero, is a drawing (or, maybe, three drawings forming a poem, like three verses would) with no text.¹ Amadeo Salvatierra, who has known about it for fifty years, cannot make sense of it. Ulises Lima and Arturo Belano, however, explain it to him: the poem is a joke. The original Spanish text uses the word *juego*—not a joke but a game. Just as “Sensini” made a literary wager by existing as a prize-winning story, so *The Savage Detectives* stakes its story on its existence as a book—a Latin American book, a Mexican and Chilean book—to give meaning to its story and to the lives of its characters.

How does this attention to the *book-ness* of the book play out? We’ve observed the arbitrariness of Amadeo Salvatierra’s placement in the second part, or the sandwiching of those testimonials between Juan García Madero’s diary, but there are even earlier traces of the central concern with structure and meaning. García Madero writes on December 10:

“This afternoon, as I arranged my books in the room, I thought about Reyes. Reyes could be my little refuge. A person could be immensely happy reading only him or the writers he loved. But that would be too easy.” (Bolaño, 92)

No other section in the first part of the novel is so self-aware. García Madero’s dissatisfaction with life, projected into his literary search, reveals the anxiety lurking within his plotless diary, familiar to many but raised to a meta-textual level: the book about our lives makes no sense. In other words, García Madero — through his writing and through his systematic wanderings of cafés and book stores — is searching for structure and meaning in a

² See Figure 1 at end.

structureless and possibly meaningless world — that world being Mexico City, Latin America, the novel itself, or existence in general. Structure, Bolaño yells through the pages, is not found in the lives of the poets, but in the literature that serves as their escape from life. The coherence that we try to find in our lives’ wanderings is just like Amadeo Salvatierra’s account: artificial, arbitrary, imbued with meaning only because we choose to, or because we will it to contain meaning.

Section 3: The part about books

“I would rewrite my poems as many as ten or fifteen times. When I saw Jacinto, he would read them and give me his opinion, but my real reader was María. Finally I would type them up and put them in a folder that kept growing day by day, to my satisfaction and delight, since it was like concrete proof that my struggle wasn’t in vain.”

— *The Savage Detectives*, 340

How should we read this book and the concern it lays out? Should we find heroism through some secret victory of the poets who, despite succumbing to time, are bound by their loyalty to their craft and to each other? Should we despair at our sorry attempt to make sense of things, both within the book (and all books) and in our own lives? Should we laugh at the joke, or are we the punchline? The novel dedicates an entire section to this uncertainty: chapter 23 of Part II, made up of nine statements by nine different people, all with the same ending. The language of its speakers varies on cryptic, pedantic, anxious, but they all comment in the final line: “Everything that begins as comedy ends as ____.” The last word varies; we get tragedy, tragicomedy, comedy, cryptographic exercise, triumphal march, mystery, comic monologue, but we aren’t laughing anymore. The novel seems to pause, to ask, “What do you think?” before ending its twenty-year story. The chapters that follow bring a close to the second part: Lima meets Octavio Paz, and fades into the background of Mexico City; Belano goes to Africa to an uncertain fate; a young man claims to be “the only expert on the visceral realists in México” (who also does not remember Juan García Madero); we hear the last slice of Amadeo’s story. With nowhere left to go, we have to move as a visceral realist does. We now go, in the words of Ulises Lima, “backward, gazing at a point in the distance, but moving away

from it, walking straight toward the unknown.” We return to the single moment between 1975 and 1976, to the “strict rectangle” of the window of an Impala. We have followed a boy’s diary in 1975, then meandered through twenty years of stories (none of them including him), and we now return to his diary in 1976, right where we left off. The effect produced, while not real to the characters, is visceral. Lima, Belano, Lupe, and Juan García Madero are young again, but we have seen them age. We know the visceral realists disintegrate as a group not long after they leave. We know that, whatever it is they find in the desert, the search goes on for twenty years (or forever). We know that a chaotic, painful, and mostly disappointing life will follow, and that they, just like the Buendías in Gabriel García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, “did not have a second opportunity on earth” (417). We feel that the last part is happening almost at the end of time, where both past and future disintegrate, leaving only the “today” that García Madero writes about.

This is not the only place where the present devours everything before and after it. Amadeo’s all-encompassing account—narrating everything about the night from the moment he opens the door to Lima and Belano, to the break of dawn—might also remind one of Jorge Luis Borges’s story *Funes, his Memory*. In it, the eponymous Funes can remember everything with such detail that he can spend the entirety of a single day remembering another entire day (131-137). Amadeo Salvatierra’s account seems to magnify the timespan of its memory even more than that. Because the statement is split up and spread throughout the entire second part, the fateful night seems to happen before, during, and after the wanderings of the visceral realists, all at the same time. Now Borges’s *Aleph* comes to mind: a point in space containing all other points in the universe (274-286). This attitude of capturing is personified by García Madero himself, throughout all his diary entries at the book’s start and finish. During

the New Year’s celebration held under the threat of real violence, García Madero follows everyone in the house, recording their actions with what David Kurnick calls a “will to record, a will hard to distinguish from a desire to hold everything in a kind of impersonal love” (71). The collective in the house, however, appears united only by virtue of being collected in García Madero’s writing, and the dominant mood is absurdity—why are all these people here, and what is keeping them there? What, for the reader, feels like storylines coming together, the characters in the novel perceive as disaster; for García Madero, it is pure Literature and pure Life. By the end of the book, we know what happens—with Lupe, with García Madero, with Belano and Lima, Cesárea Tinajero, and all the poets. Yet we do not know the Big Question: what is visceral realism? And, since we do not know that answer, we also do not know the corollary—who is a visceral realist? The importance of our questions is epistemological—think of Amadeo Salvatierra, who could not understand Tinajero’s poetry. It is also political—think of the movement’s hatred for established poet Octavio Paz, or Arturo Belano escaping Pinochet’s Chile, or the shadow of the United States border as they flee to the desert of Sonora. Strangely, it is hereditary—consider the first visceral realist in the 30s, then Lima and Belano in the 70s, and the new followers of the novel published in 1998. Finally, it is wholly literary—think of the young artists, Roberto Bolaño first among them, wanting to establish their work beyond that of their predecessors. The answer is, finally, another game.

During the road trip to Sonora, García Madero makes a set of riddle-drawings for others to guess. The answers are all a joke, and a silly one, at that.¹

³ See Figure 2 at end.

Andrew Hurley, Viking Press, 1998.
 Kurnick, David. *The Savage Detectives Reread*.
 Columbia University Press, 2022.

Can you guess the answer? It’s a Mexican seen from above. A Mexican smoking a pipe, riding a tricycle, etc. The joke is the sombrero-shaped circle. Belano even jokes that he doesn’t understand the joke because he’s not Mexican. The only one who does guess correctly, each and every time, is Lupe—the one with no literary ambitions, the one always left aside. Yet the game is what comes closest to Cesárea Tinajero’s poetry, her games. García Madero, by creating them, and Lupe, by guessing, seem the most fit to be the inheritors of the literary movement, not because of their skill in writing (even given García Madero’s obsession with poetic meters), but for their ability to play.

The ability to see things from different perspectives. An understanding of the world beyond language. A sense of humor. The answer is still ambiguous and not entirely convincing, but there’s nothing more. *The Savage Detectives*, in the end, avoids becoming the sum of its parts, while still being the force of a collective, much like the fidelity of the visceral realists to each other—existing through, and also beyond, its components. The book, through the very fact that it is a book and by the fact that we give it meaning (just as we force meaning into our lives—or rather, open the door to our lives in the hope that meaning might drop by), becomes that which we truly appreciate: a Complete Work, a Book, maybe one of The Books. At the very least, it is a book worth its weight in the hand, nudging you to take it with you. Steal it and walk on.

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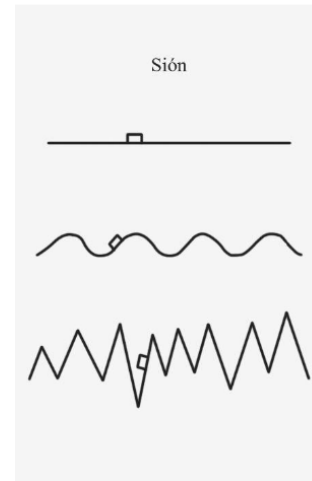


Figure 1.

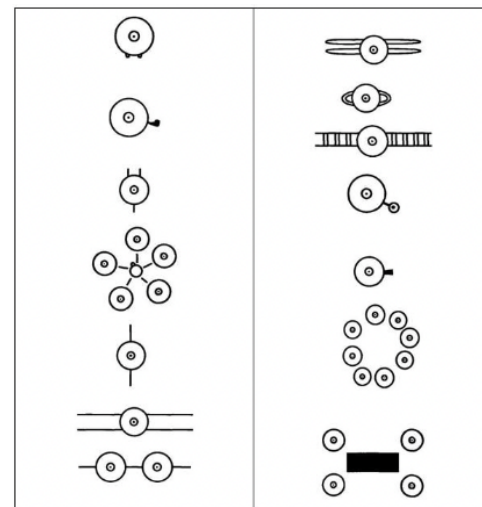


Figure 2.

Rodrigo Aguilera Croasdaile

is a graduating senior from Amherst College, ‘23. He was born and raised in Honduras before enrolling at Amherst, and writes in English and Spanish. He recently completed his senior honors thesis: a novel set in Honduras, titled “Capital.”



Devil's Peak
Remi Patton



Star Mountain
Remi Patton

Digital Semiotics & Pandemic Intimacy II (or) What we do in “the Dark”

Setting: Empathy – the silent and sensual realizations of (Our) meaning

Characters:

1. Skin – “protective but permeable” (Russell 148); accumulated in friction and flight
2. Body – platform/architecture; code/container; susceptible to capture and re-interpretation
3. Blur – the pussy part¹

This is a reflection on my journeys in the digital current, and the exchange of visibility I've negotiated these past three years. These are stories of being lost, as a praxis and a process; of being lonely, and often alone; becoming visible and unseen. I take vulnerability as an offensive measure against the techno-capitalist present; empathy, as a possibility made real in the arms of, in arms with, loved ones.

This is dedicated, and indebted to, the grace that I've received – those who have offered me life and commitment to our mutual care. I am grateful for my family, transflesh, and finding home, again and always.

I am journeying, now, with a faith and patience earned from slowness and frustration. I can rest on the page before you, changed, and changing. You and I are in the Current, and we have traveled through the Dark. We make each other possible.

*All that you touch
You change.
All that you Change
Changes you.
The only lasting truth
Is Change.
God
Is Change. (Butler 13)*

¹ According to “Know Your Meme”, a site documenting viral phenomena and Internet cultures, “the pussy part of X” refers to the best, and often essential, aspect of (a) matter. Appearing on Twitter circa 2018 from user “@eeb___”, the phrase tends to occur within situations we savor.

Scene 1: **Before Dusk**

March 2020

We begin towards the end of contemplation, in the moment of an awareness of things. Lessons have been sown, and the reaping will begin. These were the conclusions we reached:

“In our compulsion to construe reality, to (be) perceive(d) we are subject to the failure of conversation, yet persists a need to reconcile the miscommunication of self, to create something.”

“A ‘post’ more than a ‘counterlanguage’, a *refusal* than a response, Black soul force(s), digital or otherwise, does not endeavor to approximate white grammars, but constantly flows around their confines.”

“..black twitter as a public/private sphere mediates blackness’ accessibility. Therefore, movement around blackness becomes the intrinsic premise for racialization of everyone...Black Twitter effectively is Twitter, and vice versa. Again, We are the foundation, and Y’all are weird.”

(Amari Grey, “AG” herein)

Today, I am the last of us to leave. I am the one to graze the floors, to take the trash, and sweep our remnants here. Pink donation bags – mostly mine, sweat and tears – all of ours, and the panel of ceiling we can't fix.

I've been alone in this room before, on heavy days or winter breaks. (Whenever home wasn't homing.) But I am left today without our promise to each other.

*I pack the same bags, though they feel more burdensome now, and I wait, until They tell me I can stay. They moved me to E***t, which we've known for its roaches and the oversized rats, and I take this room for two. They say we'll have “class” soon, so I paint a schedule on the walls and pretend to know what's coming. It's these first few weeks that we perform being capable, and I put on my jeans to impress the audience.*

How quickly we give it up! In these old ass dorms, the connection is faulty, and the requirements of our meeting are taxing, even to the machine. Overloaded, our status here seems too strained, too unwieldy, to process. I might ease the weight for both of us and turn off the camera.

Covering me, a purple haze and a lover's sweater; I look through the windows and catch no one's eye. Over my body, I still feel Their watch. In this policed state², laid bare by isolation, the courtyard of river west resembles the panopticon.

I, and many others, shift our touches to the timeline and our breath into refresh and scroll. In skin crawls and goosebumps, we confess our attempt at relation.

I've logged off when I leave my room, to conspire with the water. In its warp and weft, I remember ourselves tangled in this universe, burning away place until here was the only one.

Now, I am the only one here. The trees watch me cry again, and at the setting of the sun, I encounter the fear of absence.

Based on data from The Washington Post and Mapping Police Violence, police killed “at least one Black person every week” from January 1st through August 31st (Cohen). In the eve of the pandemic, we found ourselves witnessing not only the crest of black death's wave but, through the channels of digital discourse, a viral circulation of our bodies.

“When George Floyd was murdered by police in 2020, his 9-minute death video was viewed over 1.4 billion times online. Likewise, the live stream of Philando Castile being shot by police accumulated over 2.4 million views in just 24 hours. After Sandra Bland was found dead following a minor traffic violation, bodycam footage of her horrific police

² Harvard University regularly traumatizes Their black students and invests in our systems of oppression. In April 2023, four black students were accosted in their room and held at gunpoint by campus police, in the dorm that I used to inhabit. We manifest Their abolition.

encounter garnered hundreds of thousands of views in a few short days.” (Tanksley)

Incentivized by the “cost per click” and a lucrative garnering of views (Tanksley), the transmission of black death becomes as much a social spectacle as its own cryptocurrency. This sustained fact of murder, disseminated and reemphasized in digital circulation, establishes violence inescapable for us as black users, whether in the light of the physical or the Dark of cyberspace. Moreover, as the objects of surveillance and trauma, the systems of redress available to digital settlers (wypipo) were, and are, restricted from black users.

Tiera Tanksley, in her study of digital traumas experienced by young black girls, locates an algorithmic bias wherein our “reports [are] systematically denied or ignored” and our defenses to abuse are “flagged as ‘hate speech’ and ‘inciting violence.’” In a virtual economy of our death, the “only remaining method of protecting [oneself] was to simply ‘avoid social media for a while’” (Tanksley). With the pressure of global entropy compelling my flight, I hesitated to resort to a consciousness offline, and quarantined in my room, this ultimatum became the premise for my virtual dissociation – a reminder of “how technologies replicate the racial logics that produce, fetishize, and profit from Black death and dying” (Tanksley).

It was in the wake of these conditions that I wrote “Digital Semiotics & Pandemic Intimacy” or **What being (black) on Twitter** has revealed to me. Now, the setting relocates from the liminalities of interaction to the fullness of interiority; I remove the quotation marks from the page and bring you a transcript – of data, journals, and memory.

This co-constructed reality, *this* conversation, is a narrowing of reach from sufferers of the human condition to my sisters in transition. Both we (users gathered here), and We [black trans(itioning) folks], are assembled under the global present: a chaotic undulation of pandemic states and precarity of the collective future. As people in a changing body, and bodies in a changing world, the act of transition, and lessons therein, encompass linkages between the uncertainties of both *Our* flesh and *our* place in the world.

What knowledge might a body hold for our transition? What can we all learn from Our ever-changing form?

From the experience of my medical transition – through many false starts and misconceptions – I consider how We adapt to becoming change, and how we may garner peace within an opaque present.

In the “hybrid” gaze with which we’ve coined this moment, we pass from the isolation of quarantine into a state of in-between. When allowed by regulations, we convene “AFK” (away from keyboard¹), and our bodies are engaged by the physical eye; when we return to a social distance, we recede back into the singularity. The image of ourselves in the gaze of others remains as a static notion of our presence, but we lose the ability to watch our bodies move. Previously being the only observers to ourselves in isolation, we instead become the only one to see our selves *change*.

The contrast created between an alternating gaze and the reality of Our transition generates both an awareness of this disconnection and apprehension towards our transmission. I use *transmission* to describe both the capture of our bodies by the gaze and the movement from our physical selves into the skin of the virtual profile. At this juncture, the body is the battery for transmission, and from this resonance of bodily chaos, we can recognize our selves, and the machine, as containers of energy. In the restlessness of removal from the physical exchange, this kinetics generates entropy, and despite our attempts to be still, this energy oozes from the site of our flesh. When we listen, we approach awareness of our own permeability.

³ “AFK”, meaning away from keys/keyboard, dates to 1989 and became popularized in use within multiplayer gaming and chatrooms. AFK differs from the now more common “IRL” (in real life) by highlighting the proximities of our virtual and physical interactions. AFK acknowledges a movement to and from the mechanisms of the digital, and here, serves as a reminder of a hybrid zeitgeist.

These awakenings to our bodies manifest in my flight to the digital. By grounding digital world-building in the suppression of bodily instability, we discover a viral ecology premised on transition and terrified by it. As black trans users, the entropy enacted on Our flesh is synthesized with the anxiety of the zeitgeist and will reveal itself to me, in my dissociation from fears still unspoken into the digital double.

Scene 2: At the fear of Absence

Running it back...

Responding to the status of the black and the individual, at the onset of the pandemic, the first installment of this series bridged semiotics and digital studies towards a liminal perspective on our Twitter(s) and timelines. Now, we veer from our conversational reality into an a (re) interpretation of gaps and silences. Having located in Twitter’s architecture both the facts and fear of “slippage”, gaze, and “potential energy”, we bring the hyperintensity of our interactions into an updated temporal context.

Rather than the isolation of quarantine, our social relationships alternate between virtual and physical, in a shifting pandemic and political landscape. The sites of our meeting, alternately emphasized, give way to a hybridity whose movement to, and from, the gaze carries us in and out of a mutual reality. Recalling our discussion of potential, we recognized the intensified stakes of interaction in our status of isolation – “both the speech act and act of speaking” – and we named “the death of the social” as a precondition for our digital flight (AG). Accordingly, we retrace the genealogy of this potential through “the spaces of transformation intersticed in black socialities” (AG) – a fungibility erected around the black, and eroticized and pathologized by those whose stability it maintains.

This project redresses fears of instability (yours, mine, and Ours), and wonders how the questions of time and relation, surfaced by our (r) evolving current, are ever-present riptides for the black non-subject. Here, we reconsider that the warpings of time and multiplicities of space, enacted for others in the hybrid present, “always already [exist] in the territory of blackness, whether it knows it or not” (Dean), and if we signify the black as the modal logic of space, then matter and energy are the form and force which “extends and limits the human condition” (AG).

Thus, the matter and energy of digital space retranslate *their* subjectivity (the digital settler) and Our negation, and extract and transform a *black* potential. Put differently, the conditions of possibility which confer both an attraction and disquiet in virtual embodiment are recapitulations of “the range of trans*formations enacted on and by Black bodies...” (Sharpe 50). Christina Sharpe formulates these logics of transition and relation in terms of the Trans*Atlantic, and following Sharpe, I reimagine the digital platform and exchange as blurred landscape and torrid flow. The push and pull of our virtual relation – our negotiations of reality – occur in the gravity of the black, reverberating with its anxieties, and exposing its current in the Wake.

Terms of engagement:

So, we determine **black potential** as a particular type of possibility that the presence, fact, or *threat* of the black brings to the digital. In the absence of black users, this possibility remains and regenerates across the algorithm and platform and is recognized and revered in the logics of surveillance. The gaze mediated in our (hyper)visibility centralizes the black, and black users, not as representation but an originary locale. From this dark gravity the virtual is extracted, and cyber-space and **black space** are coterminous.

The economy of viral blackness illuminates the logic of digital construction in the register of

the libidinal – “the affective tensions undergirding modernity and Western technoculture” (Brock 10). With the black as a gravitational sense, these “affective tensions” are mediations of black potential which “can be understood as the combustion powering the engine – a visceral, powerful, and necessary component in any figuration. It is infrastructure, invisible to our perceptions...until a rupture occurs” (10).

In our contemporary moment, our rupture occurred in March 2020. Previously on *DS&PI*, the social landscape of isolation made visible the disquiet in our stillness that we may have otherwise continued to overlook. If these anxieties have generated an increasingly perceptible tension, then this rupture holds a familiar resonance for those whose flesh is malleable and morphing.

Our engagement with Sharpe introduces the conditions to attend to the “a range of embodied experiences called gender” (50) in the space of transformation opened by rupture. For black *trans* users, a landscape of instability and awareness of gaze are quotidian events; as bodies-of-change, the suspension of time in quarantine, and recent currents of transition, are already facts of Our flesh.

“The construct of the gender binary is, and has always been, precarious. Aggressively contingent, it is an immaterial invention the in its toxic virality has infected our social and culture narratives.”

(Russell 6)

We [the black trans user] are most often walking with the precarity of our selfness, and now we find the world in our shoes.

Where are we going?

The conditions of imitation, appropriation, and violence endured by black users in black space is understood by Legacy Russell, author of *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto*, as “viral blackness” (Russell). The experience of viral blackness, in hypervisibility and overexposure, can transform how black user’s process their trauma, especially that accumulated in the pandemic landscape; overwhelmed by precarity in both the digital and the physical, We may fall into dissociation. As We

dissociate from both our bodies and the profile, we synthesize the “real, virtual, and projective” (Lewis Ellison) selves and introduce the format of the “digital double” – an intensified symbiosis with our virtual embodiments.

Black space radiates in and out of the presence of black potential, and as a digital architecture is extracted from black space, black space both grounds and exceeds the sites coded in the digital. These sites are containers for our bodily transmission, and in the transfer of our doubles, the gaze is weaponized to regulate black potential and encircle our form.

“The idea of ‘body’ carries this weapon: gender circumscribes the body, ‘protects’ it from becoming limitless, from claiming the infinite vast, from realizing its true potential.” (Russell 8)

Gender represents an integral strategy for restriction of black potential with the flesh as a site for the capture of Our entropic force. This universal logic then organizes the gravity of digital presence, and the body of the digital double creates a local point in black space. For the black trans user, in the intensity of hypervisibility, the site of Our transition accelerates towards a **hyperlocale** wherein the double escalates from an autobiographical profile to an **autobiological** presence: a self-defining and defined “ghost in the machine” whose codified flesh may house Our spiritual potential.

“When the body is determined as a male or female individual, the body performs gender as its score, guided by a set of rules and requirements that validate and verify the humanity of that individual. A body that pushes back at the application of pronouns or remains indecipherable within binary assignment, is a body that refuses to perform the score.” (Russell 8)

The ability to assign a categorial container to the

threat of the non-subject (Us) sustains the function and equilibrium of identification technologies. The logic of gender proffers Our bodies as data, content, and matter for the digital landscape and its overseers. For this reason, Our transmission across the current, through the container of the double, can parallel a transition between and through forms of flesh – the autobiographical entrapments for the black. The kinetics of this transition then may re-emphasize dysphoria for Us whose bodily transition occurs concurrently.

Between the transmission from flesh and occupation of the digital body, the double is printed and produced for commodification and/or consumption. As the gravity of space and hyperlocale of legibility, black transflesh is distributed, received, kept, and archived – dissociated from its source and extracted from Our potential. We are both hidden and hyper-located, consumed but unseen. “There, a Black queer femme body is flattened, essentialized as singular in dimension, given little room to occupy and even less territory to explore” (Russell 21).

At the site of this flattening, despite the potential of its user, Our digital double is reconstrued as a “poor image” (Steyerl). Across an unstable pandemic landscape, this poor image not only describes an abstraction of Our energy by the platformed gaze but represents an interior fixation on Our own viral matter. Moving in and out of space, to and from the gaze, hybrid existence particularly impacts the transitioning black non-subject whose status is always in flux. Where to me, in isolation, my flesh is amorphous and illegible – an accumulation of kinetic flux – I am nevertheless read and re-stabilized when the gaze returns.

“The poor image is a copy in motion. Its quality is bad, its resolution substandard... The poor image has been uploaded, downloaded, shared, reformatted, and reedited.” (Steyerl)

In a zeitgeist of uncertainty, a hyperfocus on the stable, and dread for illegibility, is echoed in the

accelerating status of the world. I stepped into my transition under these conditions: dissociation from my flesh and compulsion towards the double. Amplifying, rather than curing my anxieties, the reality of a chemically changing form sharpened a sense of capture as my body took up change as its resting state. The distinction between myself and the static, circulated, *poor* image becomes stark. User @Ranting_Trans proposes a summation of this in the machinic lens:

January 2, 2023. 2:59 AM:

If transitioning is new game plus, then fixing all the mental health problems you developed while growing up as ‘the wrong gender’ haa got to be the secret nightmare boss fight you unlock after beating the game twice. (*quotations mine*)

In video game modes, “new game plus”¹ (or NG+) is a mode of gameplay typically unlocked after an initial completion of the plot; often a “replay” or “challenge” mode, the opportunity for new play redresses the landscape of the game to access features and spaces unavailable to the unexperienced. The transitioning body similarly reassigns its landscape and brings the consciousness of Our gameplay into the frame. Contextualizing the flesh’s journey through time, We play with the code of gender to unveil contours in the platform. Nevertheless, alongside these unlocked features, equipment, or truths remain the evils and opponents of our first playthrough.

In a reply to the former tweet, user @TheOnlyBiscuit furthered this technology of transition with the economy of gaze exacted around the coded non-subject.

January 2, 2023. 3:09 AM:

transitioning would be more like developing a game.

4 As a term NG+ was coined in the 1995 role-playing video game Chrono Trigger, but the unlockable mode could be found in earlier RPGs such as Super Mario Bros. and The Legend of Zelda.

You don’t realize anything is wrong but as soon as you checked the code, you realized there was a huge glitch at the very start that was the main cause of a lot of other glitches. 1/2

you have to spend a lot of time patching up these glitches while also releasing updates of the game to your ‘fans.’ Some fans may have abused some of these glitches and no longer enjoy your game because of it, but that is the sacrifice of developing your game. 2/2 (*quotations mine*)

I’ve sought transitioning as a means to quell my discomfort with a form incongruent to my spirit. Faced with the breaks in my code, I realized that I approached this act, as the plot’s final destination, rather than its development – the “patch” and not the “patching.”

Where “bodies traveling through the glitch fail joyfully” (Russell 116), evading digital surveillance and identification, the dissociated self is not capable of escaping perception, despite its delusion. The user instead flees into the double to avoid awareness of the flesh. I found that as a black trans non-subject, the distance I desired from myself, and enacted virtually, was antithetical to my consent to transition; as a witness to the global unstable and a body in change, my own concern for the gaze fostered a pathological relationship to both the double and the notions of glitch.

Medical and social transition can provide an insurgent avenue for imagining new forms of spirit and soul force, which the façade of the digital intends. The act of imagining, however, “is not merely looking or looking at; nor is it taking oneself intact into the other. It is, for the purposes of the work, *becoming*” (Morrison 4). The project of becoming is necessarily rooted in communal presence for those subjected to corporal and data trauma, the “manifestations of harm that emerge in the digital realm” (Githere).

On the mathematical level, the black space of the digital is graphed into what Wells Lucas Santo coins “algorithmic neighborhoods” – “neighborhoods of people rendered as a data points” to service surveillance and discrimination. As gender enacts locality in the space, the black trans user is

structured into data, yet the data set is corrupted in acceleration at the hyperlocale of Our transitioning flesh. More intensely, when we gather in digital space, and Our data points converge, We witness a mutual slippage through gender and reclamation of the neighborhood.

“With physical movement often restricted, female-identifying people, queer people, Black people invent ways to create *space* through *rupture*... Here, in that disruption, with our collective congregation at that trippy and trip-wired crossroad of gender, race, and sexuality, one finds the power of the glitch.” (Russell 7, italics mine)

To thrive in transition, “becoming” now means for me an embrace of this possibility and Our mutual journey through the perils of rupture. This “crossroad” is energetic and electrified, a minefield of Our own network that glitches the flesh and permeates the skin of the platform.

At this point, we’ve assumed the black as a tension between the digital double and AFK selves, as logic of human relation, and a precondition of digital accumulation and exchange. We’ve explored where the distinctions of “real, virtual, and projective” fluctuate in isolation, and when/where the “safe” transmission between the self and the digital double is a projection afforded to digital settlers. For the black, the digital current rebounds internally, reflecting and revealing black potential both to Ourselves and others. The intensity of our digital presence rests on an implicit apprehension towards algorithmic failure; though sensitive to the pressures of digital embodiment, we likewise may fear rejection from the platform, and a forced confrontation with our bodies.

We both refuse to ask, and are always asking, “what will I do if the tweets stop loading?” When the virtual “lights” go out? **What do we do in the Dark?**

Scene 3: **Through the Closing of Eyes** January 2021

At the turn of the year, I find myself in Harlem. I live with Shavonna, on streets my father once shared. G-ma’s calls feel almost further away, but my mother reminds me that I am often, and always, home. With others, I am scared and static. To myself – distant and seldom.

I enter the classroom through the screen and type the password to Time Out of Mind. For a few hours, we are spatial conspirators and consensual witnesses to the other’s locale. Though conjuring our space, we are also fatigued of this perception. We might pause our connection, venture to the outside, and remember under the same sky.

I enter the park from the East. I sit towards the pond, and Tomashi breathes into the pages of our novel, Parable of the Sower. She will task us to define Change, but first to observe. We journey with our Lauren through displacement, transition, empathy, and survival. She journeys with us. Soon, it is my turn to read,

We are Earthseed

The life that perceives itself

Changing. (Butler 135)

I haven’t been lonely since we’ve sat together, and I find faith with the many who in these corners surface. At the bank of the water lies the world that we gather, and we perceive ourselves changing. We keep more than one promise to each other: to be land and wave. To be together. And we plant the machine in the grass. With the location of my sight in the frame of our rupture, I can feel the time that has led from our loss. What has pushed me so far away from home, and blessed me with an old one.

I walk often then under the moon. I find the dock, to paint and write myself into the ground. I search for traces in the torrent of stars, and I feel full of time – like time can feel full. I might imagine these

stars, their image, as an accumulation of time and speed; in my sight, a transmission of their distant energy, placed for me across the lightyears. I feel comfort in this eye contact with the universe, and alone together our silence swells.

I am grateful in this time, for these offerings that bring me calm, if not stillness. For community in confronting the fear of the world together, and rendering our mutual instability. For the summoning of light in the negative of the Zoom, and reminders of the touch and love I deserve.

Essential to the tool of glitch, as “socio-cultural malware” (Russell 116), is a willingness to embody change, as Octavia Butler writes, “to take root among the stars” (87). Becoming change is not only to inhabit the transitioning form but to be one with its ever-changing pace, the shifting accelerations of Our chemical processes. For Russell, “This is *bodywork*” – to become the blur.

April 23, 2021 – “we transitioning?”

Summer returns, and it's the euphoria of the sun that convinces me I'm ready. But what I've experienced as a through-way I fixate as a destination. At the time of this decision, I've found a place to move, and I have an image of myself that I feel ready to capture. Soon, Jesús will leave to endure another year, and once again, I will be with myself. There is a whisper surfacing to have something other than me, a reason or compulsion for being *What I Am*. So, on the eve of our parting, I am decisive and determined.

August 4, 2021 – “2 weeks on moneys and my nipples are perky. maybe not all people are bad.”

Under a new light, I am alone again. Paranoid, by the possibility of disruption. More than the fact of depression, I am worried of a return to a past-felt self. I fear the dependence of my comfort on the presence of Another, and I am losing, softly,

a trust in my body. At the onset of the storm, a loved one visits. I am confronted with how different we are, with every where that we've traveled, and yet, we release a long-held breath. We remember the banks of the river, and for these two weeks, who I was and who I am encounter each other. This is the last time I will see them, and I feel we both know.

Their leaving feels like the slippage of time, a final departure of a former moment and the cracking of spoiled chrysalis. It's the experience of closure that ultimately breaks me, and in riptides through my body, loss echoes. I sit in this apartment in the wake of their absence, resounding in quiet, and still, I am unsettled by the feeling of presence. I sense myself watched and surrounded. I close my eyes to the rhythms around me and am faced with an ambient pulse. It is the softness of this glow that captures my restlessness, and in the tense density, my spirits question me.

What is transition for a body that's been hurt? For what experiences have I blamed myself? How far must I go, to get to me?

Through the closing of eyes, I allow myself to still, and witness a murmuring deep and through the blood. These are the fears that I accumulate, brought close to me by the burden of our intimacy. Now, when there is no one, and no where, else, I head into the Dark.

Scene 4: **Into the Dark** November 2021

November 8, 2022. 1:11 AM. Tweet. Grey, Amari (@greys_place, “frank ocean's tooth gap”):

“i'm afraid of the way I experience and understand love changing bc it's an unknown type of pain and also euphoria that will reveal things I don't know about myself and change me in ways i probably can't imagine

so i think ultimately i'm afraid of becoming something i can't imagine which is also inevitable so like the fear is silly” [lol]

In the months after, I paint the room with each turbid, transient emotion. Red, in September, for the swelling of anger. October – the cabinets – ceruleans and sky. November comes, and slowly I wade into mourning. I choose green for the living room, which we will finish together.

My use of “the Dark” recalls both Toni Morrison’s *Playing in the Dark* and Simone Browne’s *Dark Matters*. Morrison takes the dark as a (black) shadow over rhetorical presence, while Browne configures blackness as a precondition for the “universe of modernity” – “the invisibilized infrastructure through which legibility is negotiated” (AG). I deepen these significations of the Dark as the *sense* of peril and *surroundings* of opacity conjured around Our current, whose affect reverbs through the transitioning flesh.

Russell regards this peril as a viral misgiving towards Our potential: “Within technoculture, a glitch is part of machinic anxiety, an indicator of something having gone wrong” (7). As the horcrux of the machine, the non-subject may absorb the spectre of algorithmic failure; an “indicator of something having gone wrong” becomes an internalized reminder of an inability to be right. There, in the movement of anxieties swirling in the Dark, arises the opportunity for a corporal fear, and an unfortunate pathology of glitch’s power.

Thrust into the Dark by the shockwave of loss, I collided with the unresolved matters obscured by dissociation. In the torque of my transition, I had aimed towards an ultra-defined, hyperlocale – a “woman” to obtain and perform in the eyes of others. This is not who or What I Am, and when I push myself into a “passable”⁵ womanhood, I make evident to myself an incongruence and insufficiency – becoming vulnerable to manipulation of this toxic compulsion.

For survivors of digital semiotics and pandemic intimacy, artist and guerilla theorist Neema Githere offers a praxis of “data healing.” “As an experimental practice that sought to draw links between technology, nature, and spirituality” (Githere),

⁵ In reference to gender performance, “passing” refers to the successful registry of a person’s gender presentation in the gaze of others. For black folks in general, the politics of passing are mediated by racialization and permutations of patriarchy.

data healing reinterprets the archive of the flesh to address its captures and permutations. To deal with data trauma, We attend to the quiet of the Dark and register meaning beyond content and code. Data healing redresses Our “relationships to connectivity, and facilitate[es] ancient data retrieval” (Githere) to acknowledge not only “what, is (and isn’t) the technological artifact...[but] the *assemblage* of the artifact and its practices” (9). Perhaps most importantly, in Our spiritual practice, we reckon with “the technocultural beliefs about [Our] artifact as evinced by its users” (Brock 8) – the perceptions of my double that you and I both hold.

Through data healing, We reassess the profile as an *accumulation* of selves: an archive available to exploitation and analysis (both yours and Ours), and a container for Our inevitable overflow. Rather than an identificatory duplicate, I understand my double as an artifact accumulated in the wake of my transition – a timeline of change and gaze flowing from my turbulence and excess. In the silence of meditation, I bear witness to its *assemblage*, and I might rest into the fact of my own messy potential. All of us, in this global moment, might learn to pause in our uneasiness, to see ourselves accumulating, and embrace the opacity of change. We might not lose every fear, but perhaps we can embrace them.

If I am only, ever free to myself, that *will* be enough. I can be joyfully illegible and a malware to the machine by rendering this body “working against the design of the world” (Russell 136). Now, when I access the screen and boot up the double, the frequency of my intention has lowered.

In *Listening to Images*, Camppt detects the “quiet” as a “deeper understanding of the sonic frequencies of the quotidian practices of black communities” (4). The quiet represents “a sublimely expressive *unsayability* that exceeds both words, as well as what we associate with sound and utterance” (4, italics mine). This register attends to meaning in overflow of the code that refuses seizure by the

platform.

Essentially, though a public profile, I may embed meaning into the code of my image to be perceptible by the girls that *get it*.² With a “fuck you” to legibility, We refuse contortion towards the gaze and arrive at a mutual nonperformance; “this nonperformance is a glitch.” (Russell 8). By modulating the frequency of transmission, We exploit our “unsayability” to render Our content empty and leave the double – the poor image – as a hoax for capture.

Through the *quiet*, I attend to the slippage of my own image in its transmission across black space. Moving beyond the semiotic reproduction of the autobiographical, we can conceive of this frequency as a livewire in the platform. We recognize a deeper affective/interpretive register in the exchange of the double, but what of Our flight from capture?

If We emanate a frequency from the locale of Our doubles, then in the register of the imperceptible, Our livewires intersect. Put differently, by leaving the double vulnerable to seizure and fleeing through the quiet, We assemble a fugitive network. The gathering of black transflesh in the Dark escapes the detection mobilized by the platform’s algorithmic neighborhoods and “repopulate[es] the algorithm” (Bengal) with Our discarded imposters. Necessarily “as [the double] accelerates, it deteriorates” (Steyerl).

Having subsumed into the network, We locate a comfortable togetherness for black trans users wherein We afford ourselves an unquestioned affirmation. We congeal the hyperlocales of Our flesh and witness the blurring of skin – a consensual vulnerability to slippage through gender. In a blurred existence, Russell finds that “we become no-body, and in the gorgeous crush of no-body, we become every-body” (116). Leaving quiet at the level of

6 “The girls that get it, get it” refers to a sound on TikTok created by Black TikToker Mikhaela Jennings, aka “khaenotbae.” The phrase has been circulated and appropriated from its context by non-black brands and users which speaks to her implication.

the double, I suggest *silence* as the mouthfeel of this slippage. In silence, I refer to the implicit fact of blackness in a black trans “unsayability”, and I specify *blackness* to distinguish from the fact of the black in the double’s cyberspace.

The *silent* in this blackness then refers to the trust and embrace of Our selves, in confrontation with Our potential. Where the quiet enacts a fissure in my bodily identification, I sense the silent not on the surface of the flesh, but permeating through its layers.

It’s in my redirection from the double to the network, through quiet into silence, that I’ve consented to transition again.

November 28, 2021 – “I might be happy here in /as my body”

By blurring the architecture of gender and “deploying the Internet as a creative material” (Russell 9), the gathering of trans non-bodies in the digital “aims to make abstract again that which has been forced into an uncomfortable and ill-defined material” (8). This is a confrontation with landscape and its logic as much as a reclamation of Our territory from the digital settler. Russell puts forth the demand of glitch for “an occupation of the digital as a means of world-building” (12). But, where Black Twitter may be “an exercise in world-building as language-making” (AG), a black trans underground silently mobilizes this potential towards a world-breaking rupture...a bodily dissolution, at the core of our desires.

Through exploiting digital *modality* and *media* (Crystal), We move from a conversion and occupation of matter to a secession of our black space. In subsuming Our individual hyperlocales, the material we gather accelerates in the intensity of gravity, and in this blurred territory, we manifest Our own black hole.

In the confines of the Dark, We conjure mist over the collisions of Our flesh and hide the fissure We create. Like Lauren, We “Shape God” (Butler 133). Burning into the platform, We can be always, and already, undetermined and porous.

Conclusion // things I’m thinking about

“To glitch is to embrace malfunction, and to embrace malfunction is in and of itself an expression that starts with ‘no’” (Russell 17).

February 11, 2023. 12:37 AM. Tweet. (@blizzy_mcguire, “BLIZZY):

as a trans person i have set so many deadlines for myself; my hair should b this long by X age, my boobs should b this big by X months, i want to look like this in X years — i do not want to set myself up for disappointment/externalize my self esteem anymore!

January 2, 2023: ‘Consistency – the result of discipline + passion.

Passion – love, freedom, and the wisdom to know the difference’

I am my best, and most honest, when I refuse to be articulated. This is made possible in the camaraderie of transness, the silence of blackness. I am ill-equipped to occupy space settled by the white cis-hetero, and I will not be doing so much longer. There is nothing of myself that I am required to explain, and I do not care for the demands of the subject.

When We [the black trans user] leave the sites of Our exploitation – when We protect Our selves and bodies – We suffer the rage of those no longer able to access Our potential. We become the malware in their fragile stability. We force others to confront their own energy, and they redirect its shocking unto Us.

In the marrows of code, I have often absorbed this feeling, and it enacts a tension in my transmission. I’ve carried the guilt of others projected onto me, and the weight of becoming might threaten to break. I must choose to allow myself to leave others behind. I must forgive myself for growing.

Surrounded by these walls, I am revealed in the saturation. Loss, fear, intensity coloring the life that I’ve managed to build. I see All that I am, amongst all that I’ve survived. I had paused my transition, to return to the feeling of presence, and here, I wait silently.

Eyes open, I reread and recover the strokes of each intention. I admire their width and succession. Although I have fallen and fled often since our rupture, I have felt so much, so boldly. It is a gift to bear witness, and my endeavor to share.

The ghosts in the ground surface to these sounds, and I speak until I’ve felt them before. These are the ancestors I had called on, the Earthseeds I have planted. I remember the forces that have led me far from the fear of absence, and I arrive at the absence of fear.

I had walked, so slowly, until I found where I was. It was the pacing of lungs that would guide me. I hadn’t felt held, so gently, since our parting of ways. Now hope comes before me, awake and awakening.

Like the swirling of sea foam, Our bodies churn in the virtual current. Softly and swiftly, We may touch each other. More often, We cohere. I admit to the fear of drowning, and I depart from the eye(s) of the storm. As We sink beneath the surface, We subsume within the phosphorescence and (be)come into a heart-felt elsewhere. I must promise myself to always feel this abundant.

This is a viral diffusion. These are truths that I have earned. This is what we do in the Dark.

tl/dr:

(This yt lady chewed a lil.)



jenny slate ✓

@jennyslate

As the image of myself becomes sharper in my brain&more precious, I feel less afraid that someone else will erase me by denying me love

4:56 PM · 24 Mar 16

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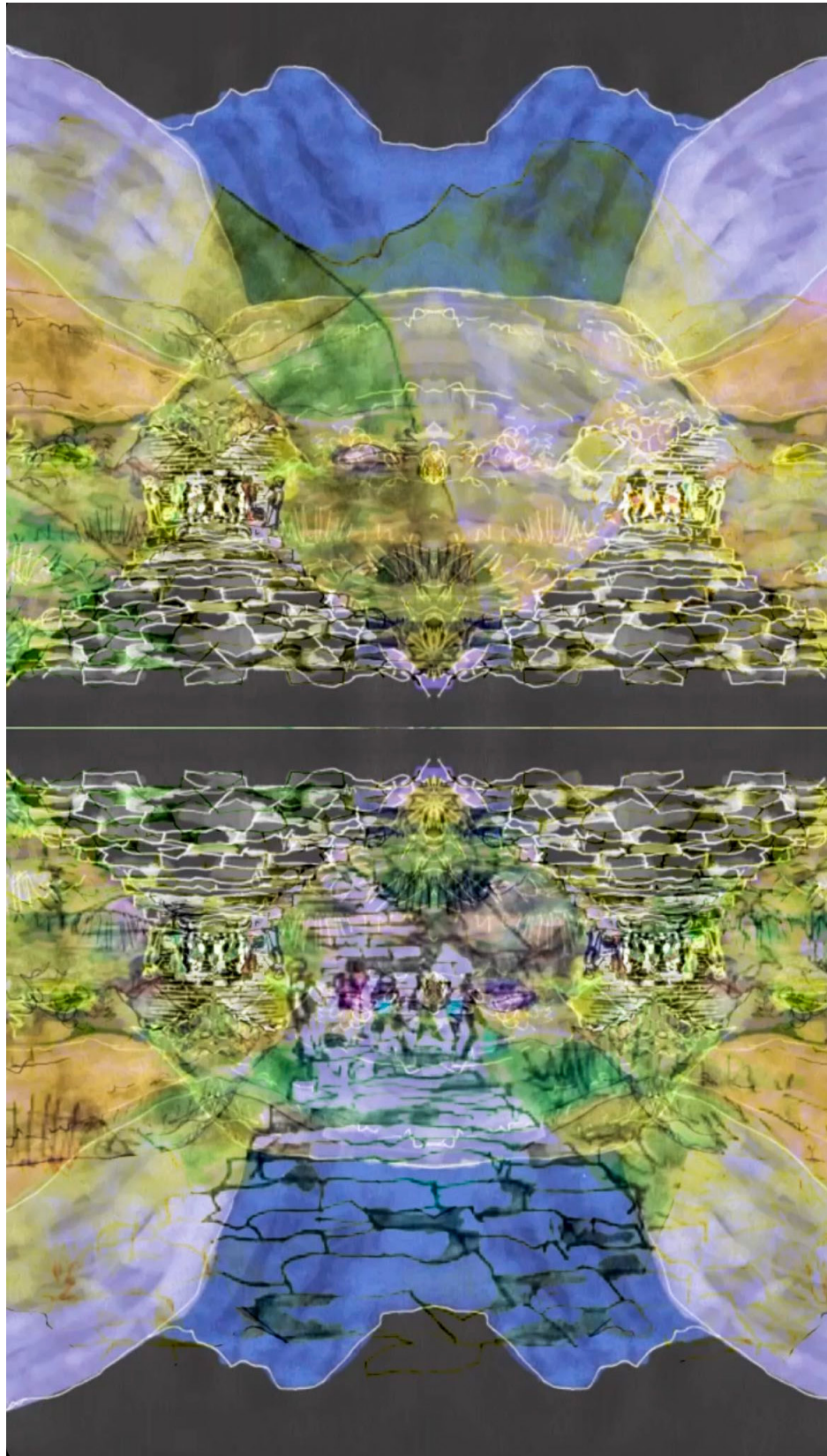
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BLIZZY [@blizzy_mcguire]. “as a trans person i have set so many deadlines for myself; my hair should b this long by X age, my boobs should b this big by X months, i want to look like this in X years — i do not want to set myself up for disappointment/externalize my self esteem anymore!” *Twitter*, 11 February 2023, twitter.com/blizzy_mcguire/status/1624281371161026562?s=20

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Untitled
Amy Xiaoqian Chen

Your Scythe is Sooo Big!

The Deaths, Desires, and Dreams of Whiteness in *White Noise*

It's right there in the title: *White Noise* by Don DeLillo is a book about whiteness. Well, not exactly. The Oxford English Dictionary defines "white noise" as a "continuous, indistinct noise, esp. that which obscures other sounds" (OED, "white noise, n. 1," italics in original). White noise is that sound which fades into the background, which imperceptibly shapes what we hear even as it becomes impossible to pick out. *White Noise* then, is a book about the invisible character of whiteness; the way it evades detection, becoming the background of everything else we perceive. Of course, the question remains: what is whiteness? Even in the novel, the term takes on a host of meanings: it refers to the color, to the racial identity, and to the eponymous type of noise. I argue that whiteness of *White Noise* (and "white noise") is the racialized system of power. Further, this racialized system of whiteness inculcates a complicated relationship with death. Jack Gladney, the main character of the novel whose fear of death serves as the main driver of the plot, becomes metonymic for whiteness in his simultaneous desire and fear of death.

Although Jack is explicitly racialized as white, the reader doesn't learn this until the penultimate chapter of the book. When Jack begins his climactic attempt to murder Willie Mink, the inventor of a pill that attempted and failed to eliminate the fear of death and the man with whom Jack's wife had an affair, Mink asks Jack "why are you here, white man?" (DeLillo, 296). Earlier in the final and third section of the book, Jack mistakes his father-in-law for "Death's errand runner," he feels himself "getting whiter by the second" (DeLillo, 232). A more ambiguous whiteness, which merely refers to going pale from fear, but nevertheless links the color white to Jack's complexion. Before these moments in the last third of the novel, whiteness-as-race goes unmentioned. It's not as if any kind of race is absent from the first two-thirds of the book: in Part One, Jack Gladney and his family are unable to

remember the name of "the black girl who's staying with Stovers;" when the same family is fleeing an airborne toxic event that defines the second and third parts of the book, Jack speaks with a "black man with the tracts" (DeLillo, 80; 128). The word "white" is even abundant in these earlier sections: they describe the mysterious pills that Jack's wife is taking, the uniform packaging of the goods in the grocery store Jack frequently visits. But it never leaves the terrain of color. Still, the system of whiteness is very much in the background of the opening acts of the book. When Jack goes to a bank and successfully makes a transaction, "waves of relief and gratitude [flows] over me [Jack]. The system had blessed my life. I felt its support and approval" (DeLillo, 46). This system might appear to be limited to the bank, the network of computers and codes, but Jack is not just "in accord" with the system of the bank but "the networks, the circuits, the streams, the harmonies" (DeLillo, 46). This slurry of words all gesture at the same thing, a kind of invisible network of relations, of power, that Jack is a part of, profits off of, is blessed by. It is an entire field of connections and relationships, a kind of economy of relations that seems to be, but is not called, whiteness. So, whiteness in Part One and Part Two of the book goes unnamed. It fades into the background, does not need to be mentioned, it is the default from which others may deviate. It is the white noise of the novel's beginning. Now, there's no need to specify what "the system" is, to give it the indignity of a name: the reader can already intuit the racialized, affective character of whiteness. And yet the moments where whiteness pops out of the background and demands to be mentioned by Jack or those around him are both linked to confrontations with death. Why is it that whiteness only becomes visible, only becomes explicit, when Jack is drowning in existential dread?

Section 1: Going Psycho(analytic)

Jack's fear of death is provoked by an exposure to a toxic airborne event. When he tells an emergency responder that he was exposed, he is given 30 years to live, a span of time that more than overlaps with the middle-aged character's natural lifespan. Yet, this prognosis causes an existential crisis: "death has entered... You are said to be dying and yet are separate from the dying, can ponder it at your leisure, literally see on the X-ray photograph or computer screen the horrible alien logic to it all... It makes you feel like a stranger in your own dying" (DeLillo, 137). Faced with death, Jack is alienated from his own experience, and becomes "a stranger," a mere external observer. He is thrown outside of himself and forced to confront the fragility of his sense of identity. To understand why this occurs, I now turn to psychoanalysis, a branch of philosophy concerned with the nature of the psyche and the desires it produces. For Julia Kristeva, a prominent Lacanian psychoanalytic theorist, death and its alienating force is Jack's "abject." In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva argues that the abject is that which is outside the subject/object relationship. When confronted with disgusting things, like human waste or rotting food, the "I" often "expel[s] it," flinging the item of disgust outside the realm of signification so it no longer has to be considered (Kristeva, 3). But, for death, which must be considered at some point, "it is no longer I who expel, 'I' is expelled," meaning that the perception of the bounded Self is put into question (Kristeva, 4). And this is precisely what happens to Jack: he is faced with the fact of his own death and he is abjected from his own person, which comes from the Latin *ab-iacio*, and means to cast out (Lewis and Short, "abicio"). Jack is cast out from his Self, forced to view his own individuality from the outside in, and thus experiences a temporary dissolution of the borders between subject and object, between the Self and the world.

For Kristeva, this dissolution is deeply, oddly pleasurable. She says that "one does not know

[the abject], one does not desire it, one joys in it [on enjouit]. Violently and painfully" (Kristeva, 18). At first, this seems like a contradiction in terms; joy is normally opposed to pain and violence. Yet, the abject is that which exists beyond these normative terms of signification. The abject represents, for the "I," the space that exists before desire, before knowledge, before the separation of Self and Other. When the "I" is flung from itself in its confrontation with death, it ends up in this space, the place where words do not go. This place is none other than the Lacanian, "abominable real" (Kristeva, 18). The Real, for Jacques Lacan and for his acolytes like Kristeva, is the psychic detritus and experience that cannot be described by language, the parts of life left over after the descriptive power of language is exhausted. The Real is most accessible to the psyche pre-language, before the psyche of the infant develops into an "I." Calum L. Matheson gives a useful explanation of this infantile phenomenon in his book, *Desiring the Bomb*:

"At first, individual human beings do not have a strong sense of differentiation between self and world. Boundaries are porous. Hungry babies cry, and food is provided. They do not understand the breast (or bottle) as belonging to the caregiver as a wholly different entity. Rather, it is a transitional object, merging self with world. Both psyche and body are disorganized and indistinct because the infant does not have a strong sense of corporeal identity. This experience is perhaps not always pleasurable, but it does bring with it a sense of continuity." (Matheson, 30)

Notice the similarity between Matheson's and Kristeva's description of the enjoyment felt through the Real, within this pre-linguistic, developmental state. It is not "pleasurable," it does not match up with the usual sense of "joy" or happiness. Instead, the Real is deeply satisfying, the sense of wholeness achieved in the absence of any border between the Self and the World, providing an extremely fulfilling way of experiencing the place of the infant in the world. But this state of transcendental bliss, where

the baby is one with the world and the world is one with the babe, is not meant to last. At a certain point, the infant recognizes itself in the mirror, identifies itself as a separate being from the rest of the world, and “finally [dons] the armor of an alienated identity,” that of the “I” (Lacan, 78). Lacan’s use of the word “armor” is crucial here. Because that is the role of the “I,” of the perception of the Self as a Self: it shuts out the rest of the world, protects the psyche from Other, and thus constructs the boundary between Self and Other, Subject and Object. But “the same cut that creates the subject also creates the lack, a vacuum left by our [sic] identification with a limited subject” (Matheson, 31). That is, the “I” wants to return to that unbounded state, that transcendental bliss, that oceanic feeling, even though the very ability for the “I” to recognize itself as such is indicative of an inability to return to that state. This permanently unfulfillable desire is the lack, and, for Lacan, Matheson, and Kristeva, it is the driving force within the psyche, the drive from which all the desires of the “I” are derivative.

The primacy of the lack explains why the abject and abjection can be both violent and joy-ous. To be ripped out of the armor of the “I” is necessarily a violent, painful process. After all, the “I” is deeply invested in its own boundedness, in its own individuality. But at the same time, the dissolution of the individual is exactly what the “I” wants, as it represents a return to the Real. However, the abject is not the magical object that immediately satiates the lack. Instead, Kristeva says that “‘I’ want none of that element... ‘I’ do not assimilate it, ‘I’ expel it,” indicating the reaction of the “I” to the abject is one of rejection, rejecting the questioning of the borders between Self and Other that it represents. At the same time, this rejection of the abject is “the same motion through which ‘I’ claim to establish myself” (Kristeva, 3). So, when faced with the abject, the “I” not only refuses to consider it but uses that temporary moment of fragility to reconstitute

itself, to become more rigid in its separation between Self and Other. And Jack does this very thing.

Just after declaring himself a stranger to his own dying, he says that he “wanted my academic gown and dark glasses” (DeLillo, 137). The academic gown, which “department heads wear... at the College-on-the-Hill,” and the dark glasses donned to counter Jack’s “feeble presentation of self,” each represent his power in the world (DeLillo, 9; 16). Likewise, Jack’s obsession with getting his hands on white Dylar pills, the mysterious medication his wife takes to alleviate “the fear of death,” marks an attempt to reassert his sense of Self through the consumption and replenishment of whiteness (DeLillo, 190). When faced with the ultimate abjection of death, Jack desires the things that represent his authority, he seeks out a kind of mastery that would confirm the sanctity of his “I,” of his place as a bounded individual. This is the paradox and cruel cycle caused by the tension between the lack and the “I”: the “I” demands close encounters with death to get closer and closer to fulfilling the lack. But it must always bail out at the last second, retaining its coherency, despite that coherency’s cost. Of note, however, is that this “I”’s reconsolidation of the “I” takes the form of a search for mastery, signified in the class markers of Jack’s academic robes and the veiled racial marker of the white Dylar pills. These culturally specific and coded signs of mastery and the solidity of the “I” point to the non-universal, extremely specific character of this kind of psyche.

For our cast of psychoanalysts, the formation of the “I” is a socially contingent process. Lacan writes that the mirror stage, the moment where the infant recognizes This culturally contingent construction of the “I,” its lack, and its relationship with abjection informs how the reader understands the escalatory attempts Jack makes to fill his lack. Jack starts off the novel with relatively benign and controlled encounters with death. At first, he

simply watches disasters on the television, “floods, earthquakes, mud slides, erupting volcanoes” (DeLillo, 64). But that fails to fill the lack: “every disaster made us wish for more, something grander, bigger, more sweeping” (DeLillo, 64). And Jack gets his next hit of abjection in more direct terms, with the in-person recounting of the almost-plane crash starting on page 90. Both internal to the story and for Jack himself, the encounter with death makes “being alive . . . a richness of sensation,” if only until the “I” reconstitutes itself (DeLillo, 91). Even in this moment, the satisfaction with living can only be achieved through a sense of mastery. As the plane, having lost power, falls, the passengers and crew panic, faced with death, abjected. Then, “the engines restarted. Just like that. Power, stability, control” (DeLillo, 91). This “control,” the mastery over the air and motion, is what turns the terror of death into the satisfaction of abjection and is what differentiates the desire to encounter death from a suicidal desire to die: the “I” only encounters abjection on its own terms, even if those terms are set retroactively. The sense of fulfillment is only achieved through the assertion of mastery. The next step of escalation is for Jack to encounter his own death, his exposure to the airborne toxic event mentioned above. Yet, that only causes his desire to become more extreme, in need of either a more direct encounter with death or a dissolution of knowledge of death in the first place. This confrontation comes in the form of Mink, the inventor of those white Dylar pills. Jack, throughout the encounter, dramatically asserts his mastery over the situation. He repeats his plan like a mantra: “advance gradually, gain his confidence, take out the Zumwalt, fire three bullets at his midsection for maximum visceral agony,” reminding the reader, over and over again, that he is in control, that everything that happens is as it is supposed to, despite the long, extended nature of the attempted murder (DeLillo, 295). In this murder plot, Jack is in a position of absolute mastery. Mink recognizes this

absolute mastery. He calls Jack a “white man,” again, explicitly racializing him for the first and last time (DeLillo, 296). Thus, Jack is most white, identifiably so, only in this position of absolute mastery, only on the verge of his most fulfilling encounter with death yet. Sure enough, upon shooting Mink for the first time and witnessing the gore that follows, he “saw beyond words. . . . Mink’s pain was beautiful, intense” (DeLillo, 298). This moment, enjoining mastery and death, mastering the making of death, is the almost-euphoric explosion of the Real into the psyche, the entrance of the place without words into the “I.” And like any good junkie upon getting their fix, Jack makes the most of his death making as he can: “I fired a second shot just to fire it, relive the experience” (DeLillo, 298). And yes, that third shot is withheld, but only because Jack is “pleased to see how well [the murder] was going,” only because he is too caught up in the feeling of absolute satisfaction, of the brief reappearance of the Real, to think straight (DeLillo, 298).

Yet this perfect storm of circumstances that allows the improbable mixing of mastery and abjection still only leads to temporary satisfaction. By the end of the novel, Jack is still afraid of death, “afraid of the imaging block. Afraid of its magnetic fields, its computerized nuclear pulse. Afraid of what it knows about me” (DeLillo, 309). This fear is the original refusal to accept or confront the abject, the process of rejecting the abject while utilizing that rejection to form the “I,” which Kristeva explained. This return traces out the necessarily cyclical nature of whiteness’ relationship with death: it starts with denial, then turns to minor confrontations, before escalating more and more, eventually exploding into material violence (directed towards the Self or the Other) that results in material death and the ultimate experience of abjection. Then, the “I,” still unfulfilled (if it still exists), must start the cycle over again. Surely this cycle is not inevitable. Surely those raised into the psychological system of whiteness are not damned to be trapped in this vicious cycle. But

what other what other forms of desire are possible? Through what means can the “I” be dissolved, if not through the violence or death of abjection?

Section 2: If You Love It, Let It Go

White Noise does offer a couple of alternatives to this cycle of death and desire, but they are limited in their efficacy. The first of the two is the character of Orest Mercator, “who wants to sit in a cage full of deadly snakes” (DeLillo, 197). Orest’s solution to the problem of death is to embrace the risk, to confront it extremely and totally in a room full of danger. Yet, his goal is still to master death. When Jack asks him how he knows he won’t be bitten, how he knows he will be triumphant, Orest asserts that “they [the snakes] won’t bite me.... Because I know [they won’t]” (DeLillo, 197). Simply: he will find a way to control the snakes. Similarly, Murray, Jack’s colleague at the College, argues that Jack should simply embrace death, instead of denying it: “once we stop denying death, we can proceed calmly to die.... Another reason why I think of Tibet. Dying is an art in Tibet. A priest walks in, sits down, tells the weeping relatives to get out and has the room sealed. Doors, windows sealed. He has serious business to attend to” (DeLillo, 38). In both instances, the embrace of death is nothing but an excuse to master it. Orest masters death through controlling the snakes, through asserting authority over the makers of death and thus, through metonymy, death itself. Murray also seeks the mastery of death, to find forms of dying where the time, place, setting, and conditions of death are all finely tuned to the wants of the Subject. Both these strategies fail to leave the cycle of the psyche of whiteness because of their limited aims: they only seek to move death from abject to object, from unknowable reality to controllable fact, keeping the “I,” the subject, and its lack intact. Instead, another way of desiring all together is needed.

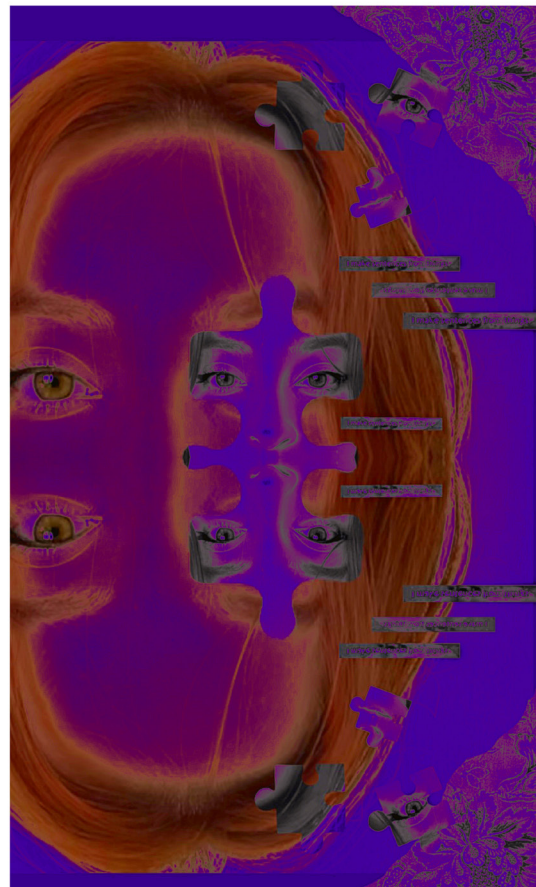
Avgi Saketopoulou, in her essay “Risking Sexuality Beyond Consent,” offers up one method for the “I” to escape the cycle of the death drive and its refusal. Although she is a Freudian, not a Lacanian, psychoanalyst, her arguments about the ego and its tyranny get at the same issue that the white “I” faces. For her, “nothing new happens with the ego’s consent” (Saketopoulou, 780, italics in original). That is, there is only mastery for the Freudian subject, dull, monotonous, boring mastery where even new experiences become variations of the same old, same old. Although the specifics of the Freudian ego are different from the Lacanian “I,” they both face the same problem: a kind of brittleness to their desire, an inescapable sense of desire unfulfilled and unfulfillable. So, Saketopoulou’s tentative solution remains relevant. She argues for “overwhelm” or moments and experiences that are so unexpected and unexpectedly pleasurable, that the ego is overwhelmed, the “I” is dissolved, and more satisfying and pleasurable experiences can follow. Now, this concept of overwhelm does bear some similarity to Kristeva’s conception of abjection, but there is a crucial difference: “overwhelm and limit experience cannot be planned or orchestrated” (Saketopoulou, 787). Unlike Jack’s encounters with death, which are variously planned and variously controlled, overwhelm requires the giving up of mastery, the ability to orchestrate the encounter with death/the abject/novelty on the “I”’s terms. This difference is crucial because it radically alters the effect of the dramatic encounter, of the limit experience, of the event which produces an emotional reaction stronger than what the psyche can handle. Rather than its primary effect being the reconsolidation of the “I” through the refusal of the abject/limit experience, the abdication of mastery instead leads to a weakening of “I” and an acknowledgement of its fragility. Of course, no single experience will be enough to remake a psyche, but through repeated moments of overwhelm, repeated practice in abdicating from

mastery, the “I” may very well dissolve, may very well be let go as unneeded. What is at stake is the explosions of death-making violence that define the psychological topography of whiteness. Although the construction of the “I” is defined by lack, the materiality of the violence that the drive to fill the lack produces, the white supremacist violence that results, is all but lacking. It is the responsibility of the “I” itself to work towards its own dissolution and cease the violence it produces. Therefore, I and “I” have got to disappear.

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Pink Puzzle
Eli Andrade



Untitled
Luke Shaw Nicholson



Untitled
Tanvi Krishnamurthy

The Ambivalent Encounter on Old English Double Entendre

Of the surviving literature written in Old English, the *Exeter Book Riddles* stand out as the corpus's potentially most misappropriated texts. These poems are unruly and often baffling, and they resist easy classification and understanding. Nevertheless, beginning with the work of Frederick Tupper—whose 1910 edition *The Riddles of the Exeter Book* led him to be credited as the “first important American student of the riddles” (Tanke, 21)—scholars have toiled to sort and solve the 90-odd poems in the collection, with particular emphasis on demystifying their enigmatic form. Though scholars like Tupper attempt to create classifications or subgenres of riddles, the original manuscript contains none of these groupings, and the *Exeter Book* provides no riddle solutions.

The goal of this essay will be to complicate one such academic label: sexual or *double entendre* riddles, which Tupper first called puzzles of “double meaning and course suggestion” (xxv). I will challenge the existing theoretical framework dealing with such texts, which has been so far too preoccupied with the erotic nature of the subject matter without appropriate attention to how the riddles function poetically. This existing framework was most clearly articulated by Ann Harleman Stewart in her 1983 essay “*Double Entendre* in the Old English Riddles.” Her understanding of the *double entendre* poem is that it is ambivalent about its referents—the poem oscillates back and forth between two objects of description, a “true” solution and a “false” solution, which is an “embarrassing obscene reference” (39). However, I will argue through the critiques of more recent scholars including John Tanke and Glenn Davis that a reappraisal of this framework is overdue. With particular attention to Riddles 44 and 62, I will argue that there is only one object being described in the *double entendre*, not two. What these poems do, rather than provide a description that oscillates between two poles, is narrate this oscillation itself; a new referent is crafted and brought into speech.

The *double entendre* riddle is not a poem that is ambivalent about its referent, but whose referent (singular) is an ambivalence presented as an object itself.

As *double entendre* is a retrojected academic classification and not one to be found in the Exeter Book itself, there is dispute as to which riddles truly constitute a *double entendre*. I will focus briefly on Riddle 44 before turning to Riddle 62 most intently, but Ann Harleman Stewart's influential study includes Riddles 25, 37, 42, 45, 54, and 62 as other examples in this grouping. To provide an outline on the general function of the *double entendre* riddles as Harleman Stewart put forward, let us briefly look at Riddle 44:

Wrætlic hongað bi weres þeo,
frea under sceate. Foran is þyrel.
Bið stiþ ond heard, stede hafað godne;
þonne se esne his agen hrægl
ofer cneo hefeð, wile þæt cuþe hol
mid his hangellan heafde gretan
þæt he efenlang ær oft gefylde.
Something wondrously wrought hangs near a man's
thigh,
in the master's under region. Through the front is a
hole;
it is stiff and hardy, a good stead it has.
When the man his own rags raises
over the knee, he wants with his hanging-thing's
head
to greet that well-known hole,
which his equal-length has oft fulfilled before.

Riddle 44 describes its object of focus while leaving the reader in a state of ambiguity. According to Harleman Stewart, this ambiguity is a trap; the *double entendre* leads us to a “wrong answer” that is: “an embarrassing obscene reference. The riddler carefully feeds his listener details that clearly point to a sexual referent. At the same time, with the same details, he is describing some harmless non-

sexual referent which, much to the decipherer's embarrassment, turns out to be the 'real' solution" (39).

So, where has Riddle 44 (mis)led us? To two points: one obvious and false, the other obscured yet true. According to Craig Williamson, who compiled an edition of riddle solutions in 1977, the "true" solution of Riddle 44 (as settled by scholars) is Key (281). However, the guesser is led somewhere more uncouth with the riddle's phallic description. While the "true" solution is Key, there is a second solution distracting us: Penis.

That is, according to prior scholarship, two referents are brought into meaning at once; in being set to language simultaneously they become doubles. Harleman Stewart further describes the poetic action of the *double entendre* as a juggling act: "Sustaining the *double entendre* throughout a riddle requires, obviously, a juggling of the two solutions and the two contexts in which they occur, and a painstaking selection of words and images that will suit both. The poet cannot for a moment lapse wholly into one or the other of the two worlds... The words and images he chooses reflect this double preoccupation, since they must apply to both solutions, and participate in both contexts, at once" (40).

But how can Harleman Stewart say the poet participates equally in both contexts, never exclusively entering one world over the other while simultaneously speaking of these worlds as if one were true and the other false? In his essay "Wonfeax wale: Ideology and Figuration in the Sexual Riddles of the Exeter Book," John Tanke identifies the "artificial semantic hierarchy" imposed here: "one of the two subjects simultaneously represented must be credited as 'real' and the other as unreal." (28) As Tanke points out, iff the Key is really there and the Penis is not, Harleman Stewart's framework of true

and false solutions privileges one of the solutions over the other. How can we say a true doubling has occurred if the alleged doubles are hierarchized, one viewed more important, more "real" than the other? And, as Tanke notes, scholarship is nearly unanimous in its quest to call the sexual solution the false one. Scholars have convinced themselves that the "purpose of the riddle is for the riddler to lure the solver to propose a sexual solution, in order to then expose his salacious imagination" (Tanke, 29). The critics relegate the sexual solution to a secondary status in the poem.

But there is another hierarchy working counter to this hierarchy of realness. In order for the false Penis solution to do its work, to distract the decipherer from the 'true' solution of Key, the Penis must be, in another sense, situated *above* Key in the poem's representation (if Harleman Stewart is correct that the sexual solution is what more obviously hits the ear). How can we say the Key solution is "true" if it is not really being described, if it is hidden behind false speech? How can we say that the Penis solution is "false" if it is more vocalized in the poem? There is an ambiguity as to which of these doubles subjugates the other.

For those whose interpretive aim is to explore what these riddles say about early medieval sexuality, this reversible double hierarchy has served an important explanatory purpose. A large preoccupation has been understanding how these riddles could have possibly found their way into the *Exeter Book* (a text compiled for the Bishop of Exeter), but this concern presupposes that sexual encounters must have been spoken of in a way that is veiled. When Tupper encountered this "smut," (xxv) *double entendre* was a useful explanatory scheme to preserve the Exeter Book's purity. The existence of an innocent, pure, concealed meaning in the work makes tolerable the riddle's "smutty" appearance. The Key only exists in the poem hidden within the description of Penis, but that a Key is being "described" also, in turn, sneaks in the Penis. As Glenn Davis argues in his essay "The Exeter Book Riddles and the Place of Sexual Idiom in Old English Literature," understanding the double

entendre riddles as being exceptional (and therefore isolatable) instances of obscenity in Old English is an attempt to defend the rest of the Exeter Book's supposed homogeneity and purity (and likewise that of the entire Old English corpus). The early scholarship took their obscenity as a troubling exception, failing to recognize that other, more celebrated texts (including *Beowulf*) might also demonstrate similar treatments of sexual themes. As Davis writes, "boundaries that surround the erotic riddles—artificial boundaries established by modern critics because of those riddles' perceived obscenity—have obscured important connections among Old English texts" (54). To advance our understanding of these riddles, we must complicate the presupposition that we have inherited from modern scholars that the *double entendre* is somehow unique in its dealings with sex. Perhaps we ought to dissolve the category of *double entendre* entirely if it only arose out of scholarly prudishness.

Therefore, the point of departure we must take is a reappraisal of what we seek to gain from riddle study. But unlike Davis, I will not attempt in this essay to explore the riddles for their insights to early medieval sexual attitudes, as fascinating as those insights may be. We need to go back further; our understanding of the structure of the *double entendre* riddle must be confronted before any observations on its sexual themes can be made. Davis was concerned with the reincorporation of the *double entendre* riddles back into the literary corpus from which they have been expelled on the grounds that similar sexual ambivalences occur elsewhere in the canon. My concern is the poetry taken as such, on isolating and elucidating the poetic mechanism of *double entendre* without a contrived structure based on the "uncomfortable" fact that one solution is "prim" and the other is "pornographic" (*A Feast of Creatures*, 201)

What must be asked is if double meaning occurs at all, at least in the oscillatory juggling act as it has

been described. Are these so-called *double entendre* riddles even poems with double referents? If they are, we need a new structure to understand how these poems are able to capture both of their referents in language, one that does not hierarchize one solution over another due to our modern presuppositions of how sex must have been spoken of in the middle ages. We must move towards a theory of *double entendre* that is not a mere *sous-entendre*.

Where it has so far been argued that the *double entendre* riddles are ambivalent about their referents—they oscillate back and forth between two objects of description—I argue that there is only one referent, one object being described. What these poems do—rather than provide a description that jumps back and forth between two hierarchically-organized referents—is narrate this oscillation as a referent unto itself. These are not poems that are ambivalent about their referent, but whose sole referent is an ambivalence that is discursively created. For example, Riddle 44 does not speak Key and Penis at once, or even bounce back from one to the other. Rather, the poetic space opens up so a new being can come into language; an ambivalence is presented as something that is independent of the two poles that it stands between.

In some *double entendre* riddles, this ambivalence speaks for itself; that is, it creates itself by speaking through self-referential first-person narration. Take Riddle 62 for example:

Ic eom heard ond scearp, hngonges strong,
forðsiþes from, frean unforcuð,
wade under wambe ond me weg sylfa
ryhtne geryme. Rinc bið on ofeste,
se mec on þyð æftanweardne,
hæleð mid hrægle; hwilum ut tyhð
of hole hatne, hwilum eft fareð
on nearo nathwær, nydeþ swiþe
superne secg. *Saga hwæt ic hatte.*

I am hardy and sharp, strong in entrance,
not ignoble in forth-faring from the master,

I go beneath the belly, and myself expand
the right path. The man is hasty,
he who presses me on from behind,
the man in rags; sometimes he pulls me out
hot of hole, sometimes he fares anew
into some confinement or other, thrusts exceedingly,
the southern man. Say what I am called.

The first half-line of this riddle, “Ic eom heard on scearp [I am hardy and sharp]” immediately draws us into an encounter with something able to describe itself, something able to gather its own being into a singular “ic.” It is an “I” able to speak itself into discourse. The indicative mood of “ic eom” demonstrates the directness of the narration; the poem plainly opens with the utterance “I am.” This “I” describes itself to us confidently; it does not employ the subjunctive mood. It does not dance around, oscillating between two descriptions saying what it *might* be — “I” never wavers.

The poem’s “I” informs us how it acts autonomously in the world. We see this in Line 3: “wade under wambe / ond me weg sylfa / ryhtne geryme [I go beneath the belly, and myself expand the right path].” “I” tells us that it is able to act of its own accord, “I” acts for “myself.” This “I” understands itself as acting on its own behalf, and we can see the riddle poem as an instance of this ability, as it functions as an autonomous act of narrating the self. The riddle poem is the space through which this “I” can narrate its own self-determinacy to us; the poem creates an encounter with this self-powerful, self-referential being.

In the final line, the riddle’s “I” exerts its power over us. Saga hwæt ic hatte—the unknown referent speaks directly to us, almost tauntingly, to “Say what I am called.” But how do we answer this demand? Let us not confuse what something is *called* with what something *is*. To say how we call something is a naming, but it is also an ordering, a return of the unnamed into the fold of classification. Embedded in

this ostensibly plain request is the double meaning of the verb *hātan*. It is “to name,” but also “to command, to direct, to bid, to order.” To “say what I am called” is more accurately to “say how I am ordered.” Naming is revealed to be a subjugation through this simple line, Saga hwæt ic hatte, which emphasizes the fallacy of equating solution with referent. To solve the riddle is to provide a solution, which takes the form of a name, but we must not assume that the referent (what is) and the solution (how we name/order what is) are the same. Here I am, the riddle says to us, I am this, I do this, here is how I act. “I” renders itself into speech; “I” is the one who creates this encounter and speaks to us, an encounter without need for our input.

We are the ones who need the solving word, but “I” can do without it. “I” speaks of what “I” is; the only thing we can add is what “I” is called, providing a word, a word that will always come up short of capturing the fullness in which “I” signifies itself. In order to speak of “I” we must resort to a single word, the solution. As solvers, we are beholden to that word; without this word we cannot complete our task. But “I” has no need for it; “I” can describe itself without the name we have given to it; “I” can describe itself without us.

The two possible solutions in a *double entendre* riddle have nothing to do with what the object is, but rather what we want to call it. Likewise, dwelling on these solutions, which are merely names, misses what occurs within the poem, what is referenced. It reduces what is spoken in the poem to a lesser importance than what is heard; the solver becomes more important than the poem itself. What is described in Riddle 44 and 62 is not a double referent. It is actually a singular ambivalent referent, and our encounter with this ambivalence exposes and frustrates our compulsion to give names. In our panic, we say give it this name or that. But the fact that its objectness cannot be rendered univocally into one name—that the ambivalence is a referent that subverts the act of naming—does not mean that it does not exist. And that these ambivalences give rise to dual solutions also does not deny their existence as objects unto themselves. A name (or two names)

is not what an object is, but rather how we interpret an object and force it beneath a signifier.

What occurs in the *double entendre* riddles is simply that we encounter this ambivalence, but it spins two ways, tearing itself from our grasp. In an attempt to return the referent back into classifiability, we insist on our right to name and contrive a pair of doubles to serve our will. But as the poem speaks this ambivalence into being through such a subversive language, we cannot decide on one word or the other to be its “true” name. The *double entendre* is almost analogous to the way we encounter and experience the world. Surrounded with endless ambiguity and ambivalence, we are constantly striving to demystify, explain, and solve. But the *double entendre* riddles expose just how flimsy our solutions are. We can only offer up mere words, names that are incapable of going to the heart of things. After this encounter with the riddle poem, we come away with an almost ethical realization that objects are always subverting our desire to name them. The ambivalent world around us is constantly resisting our desire to solve it.

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Dorm Room Prop
Elisabeth McLaughlin

Mystery and Dichotomy Christianity according to Flannery O'Connor

An Unpopular Pursuit

In a 1955 letter to one of her closest and most beloved correspondents, the Catholic novelist Flannery O'Connor streamlined into a handful of words the religious philosophy that she spent decades developing and extrapolating. "The truth," she writes, "does not change according to our ability to stomach it emotionally. A higher paradox confounds emotion as well as reason," such that we are always straining to unite the two in some remotely palatable synthesis (O'Connor, *The Habit of Being*, 100). We should not be surprised by the skeptical, atheistic valence of this claim, for it is in essence Augustinian. The themes of repulsion, division, and emotional crisis that feature throughout O'Connor's texts engage with a rich, centuries-old history of Christian philosophy. Like some of her foremost theologian-heroes, she made an object of awakening dull modern man to the many impenetrable mysteries and hair-raising dichotomies of true faith. As we will see below, the author known for her contributions to gothic romance rather celebrated than shied hypocritically away from 'holy' contradiction.

Of course, contradiction has always and forever existed at the heart of Christian theology. For millennia it has functioned as the ragged spur to belief, to communal debate, and, in less happy circumstances, to psychic and philosophical crises. Perhaps more than any other major religion, Christianity sits aloft a complex scaffolding of paradoxes; hardly any bit of dogma is so inviolable that it cannot be disputed or alternately interpreted. Nor is it simply a matter of rival factions — like Arians and the followers of Athanasius at Nicaea — engaging in a *pas d'armes* over correct worship. The ontological frameworks that we encounter in scripture and in the writings of the earliest church fathers are frankly rife with double-endedness. They demonstrate an understanding of the mortal form as riven in two, dominated by warring reason and

passion.

Still, it is infinitely simpler to parse out human existence than to turn bold and helplessly myopic eyes on the divine creator. However stormy or self-contradictory, life in the flesh is at least familiar to us — we can reasonably claim knowledge of Adam's torments and trace the mark of Cain on our own foreheads. God, on the other hand, is another story. He is the undiscovered country, simultaneously our punisher and our helpmate, the fiery judge of the Old Testament and the merciful lamb who ransomed mankind on the cross. An inability to reconcile these two divine 'identities' has plagued not a few of history's most trenchant scholars, compelling them to take refuge in such limp traditions as theodicy and the *amor fati*. Indeed, the desire to iron out pesky wrinkles in Christianity's underlying fabric has energized religious authors by the legion. They are few in number who occupy the contrarian camp and seek, perversely, we might say, to preserve human understanding in a state of chaos. These authors and rhetoricians are communicants to a mysterious, defiant brand of Christian faith that values rich unreason over trite logic; they are also Flannery O'Connor's closest ideological relatives.

O'Connor and the Contradiction of Faith

If any mortal man or woman of the past 100 years has ever communed with mystery, surely it was Flannery O'Connor, the fiercely erudite and highly celebrated author of mid-century American fiction. Aside from possessing tremendous belletristic skills, O'Connor was also a long-striving and long-suffering Catholic whose life was positively riddled with absurd dualities. Over the course of her foreshortened career, the author penned 31 deeply pious short stories that were deemed devilish and printed with tawdry paperback covers; she observed the High Church rite among floods of Southern Protestants in an age when religious affiliation of any

kind was increasingly on the downturn. Her literary acclaim led to a great many speaking gigs, though she did not like to talk about herself and denied having any special knowledge of the author's craft. She often expressed deep sympathy for the plights and trials of others but showed no such compassion for the gross, ironic characters that feature in her stories. She believed prodigiously in the love and mercy of an all-powerful God, even as a decalcifying hip obliged her to walk on crutches, and incurable, systemic lupus cut her young life woefully short.

We must be careful not to assume overly much about O'Connor's potential psychological state. Though a variety of medical issues, including systemic lupus and rheumatism, significantly impacted her life, she often expressed confidence in her treatment programs and, on several notable occasions, confided to friends her belief in the poetic justice of an author who is forced, by reasons of immobility, to spend hour after hour at the typewriter. Generally, O'Connor did not make a habit of publicly railing against her solemn and unfortunate lot; but, nevertheless, there is a particular affinity for burning, provocative injustice that features throughout her prose. To read the fiction — and particularly the short fiction — of Flannery O'Connor is to experience an emotional cascade of anger, confusion, indignation, and at last, powerful ambivalence. Her stories routinely depict grotesque heroes, criminals with missing or maimed limbs, perverts and religious hypocrites, playing liberally with paradox in order to destabilize the reader's sense of justice. They present dualisms of every kind and quality, most of which operate in biblical gray areas. O'Connor might have been a learned and devoted Catholic, but she took no pains to disguise the more fraught points of her faith.

Take, for instance, the deeply unnerving story called "The Lame Shall Enter First." Effectively a reworking of O'Connor's second novel, it explores the violent philosophical clash between Sheppard — an atheist social worker — and a fire-and-brimstone child of the streets. The child, Rufus Johnson, with his horribly disfigured foot, impudence, dishonesty, and almost vulgar display of popular, countrified piety exposes the sheer difficulty inherent in some

of Christianity's most fervent commands. It is very easy to love a poor, damaged child when that child is sweet and obliging by disposition; it is easy to accept the teachings of Christ when they are presented in the polite, civilized light of day. But O'Connor doesn't have truck with these 'optimal' scenarios — instead, she presents the darker, less-traveled side of faith. She shows us a plainly malicious child who cruelly disrespects his benefactor, commits multiple crimes, denies the power of reason, and, in a gut-wrenching finale, convinces another little boy to hang himself.

From the first moment Rufus enters his guardian's house, where he expects to live and wreak havoc for the foreseeable future, it is clear that the child will take every possible opportunity to defiantly upset the mundane family rules. Immediately, he begins to bully Sheppard's son, Norton by calling him "waiter" and ridiculing his "stupid face" (O'Connor, "The Lame Shall Enter First," 453-454). With great audacity, he traipses into every single room, as if he were master and proprietor of the place. Worst by far is the mess he makes of the bedroom that once belonged to Sheppard's late wife, in which dresses and toiletries were preserved like offerings at a shrine. Horrified, Norton watches as this cold interloper picks through combs and hairbrushes, mocks the dead mother's dresses and dances about fiendishly in her underclothes. The sheer irreverence that makes this episode so painful recurs throughout the remainder of the story, as Rufus creates enmity between the father and son, separating them by every possible means including death. His vehement sermons on hellfire and certain damnation coalesce into a distant, interminable ramble, like the eerie score of a horror film that slowly chips away at its listeners' sanity.

Without a doubt, Rufus Johnson is hard, almost impossible to love — and deliberately so. O'Connor writes him into her story in order to expose the more dichotomous situations imposed upon us by genuine Christian faith — she asks us to question how exactly we can follow the absolute word of God when it entails so much personal distress and logical inconsistency.

The fact that Rufus, in between acts of villainy, preaches shrill and radical Christian rhetoric only adds fuel to the spiritual fire; it would be simpler, comparatively speaking, to account for this youth's immoral excesses if he had never known religion a day in his life. By making Rufus a tried-and-true Christian, O'Connor forces us into an increasingly difficult pass — she asks us to consider the impossible paradox of a person who knows God's word and is yet capable of base, ungodly behavior.

The fraught and dualistic nature of truly thoroughgoing faith is exposed in similar ways throughout O'Connor's other stories, many of which follow a standard trajectory and feature recurring character 'types.' There are other devilish children like Rufus: in "A Circle in the Fire," three homeless boys repay the landowner who treats them compassionately by setting fire to her beloved homestead; little Mary Fortune in "A View of the Woods" tyrannizes her doting grandfather and refuses, perversely, to take his side in a vicious family war; June Star and John Wesley of "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" spend the entire story irritating and embarrassing the reader's sensibilities, such that their murder by the Misfit in the final scene inspires readers with a mild case of bad conscience — of course, it is much easier to love a murdered innocent than a living and breathing ne'er-do-well.

The macabre and suspenseful "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" exemplifies some of O'Connor's most persistent thematic and rhetorical tactics. Over the course of sixteen neat pages, the author dazes readers with off-kilter dialogue, wrenches their hearts with sorrow, and, somehow, convinces them to sympathize with villainy at the expense of innocence. The articulate, spiritually-questing Misfit inevitably wins our interest and understanding, while the small children that he does away with merely remind us of all the unpleasant, irritating bits of childhood. Little June and John are by no means the main focus of the story, but they exist always in

the background, desperate for attention as they insult their grandmother, use vulgar language and revel in the prospect of a car accident. Christian theology teaches us that 'these little ones' are the holiest and most worthy creatures in existence, the true inheritors of the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 18); but O'Connor, unlike Dickens or Dostoevsky or Hugo, makes it rather difficult to attach wings and halos to the outspoken rascals who tramp about in her stories. There is nothing angelic about a boy who blithely calls Tennessee "a hillbilly dumping ground," or, for that matter, a girl who screams and kicks at her overwhelmed mother when she does not get exactly what she wants (O'Connor, "A Good Man Is Hard To Find," 119). When O'Connor creates such exasperating children, she forces us to disregard the overly comforting and simplistic belief that all innocents are good, all criminals are bad, and all the world operates according to storybook Bible tenets. She is, essentially, forcing us to reconsider elements of Christian dogma in less ideal, less picturesque contexts.

But O'Connor does not limit her exploration of religious paradox to cases of childhood rebellion — she is also interested in the lukewarm, or imperfectly faithful figure. Here is a pill even more difficult to swallow! Whereas most people cannot genuinely identify with the Rufus Johnson personality, a great majority of us have likely experienced the need to engage in casual religious belief, if only to a certain neatly demarcated point. So O'Connor invents a character like Mrs. May, in "Greenleaf," a completely decent, churchgoing, charity-giving homeowner whose respectable faith begins to waver when thrust into more exceptional situations. Indeed, Mrs. May — who tries so desperately to maintain polite composure in the face of her lay-about sons and vacuous, infuriating farmhands — is every 'workaday' Christian who hasn't, say, spent years battling temptation in the desert or writhing in a hairshirt. She is the perfect example of the duality

imposed upon us by profound faith. Aware that God loves and plans to redeem us for our beliefs, we expect that he will not confront us with such painful and mystifying obstacles. That is — we expect that our mild, bourgeoisie belief will be enough to protect us from the challenges of the saints and martyrs.

In almost every one of her stories, O'Connor succeeds in exposing a more uncomfortable, inharmonious truth: the God who tells us we must 'only believe' is liable to challenge our confidence and our principles at any moment. True Christian belief, therefore, demands more than fairweather acceptance of one or two cheerful, magical events, like the Resurrection on Easter or the birth in the nativity at Christmas. Ultimately, what made O'Connor such a thoroughgoing believer was her willingness to stand by God's cosmic system even when it irks, discomforts, or causes moral outrage. Her stories attempt (by admittedly *outré* means) to instill a similarly strong and all-encompassing devotion in the reader. The character of Mrs. May is thus explicitly designed to emanate division — she is a generally moral person who ends succumbing to rage and envy; her quiet, clean faith is superseded by the extreme, sackcloth-and-ashes faith of an uneducated neighbor woman; she dies, in the story's final pages, from a bloody, unexpected wound that she nevertheless accepts with a willing conscience.

Preserving Mystery in the Modern World

The motifs of violence and undeserved reprisal that dominate O'Connor's fiction necessarily bring to mind a perpetual rift in the lute of Christian theology: the problem of evil. From the longanimity of Job and the gruesome suffering of the early martyrs to world wars, population genocides, and the countless tragedies endured by countless innocents every day, infinite scenarios have arisen in human history that would appear to give the lie to Christian witness of an all-merciful God. The antinomic existence of needless suffering in a divinely-ordered world has plagued priests and laymen across centuries, often resulting in fragile counter-arguments and unsatisfying theodicies of the Panglossian kind.

Even Augustine's cornerstone explanation of evil as a product of human free will cannot entirely shield the believer from strident doubts and misconceptions. O'Connor was, of course, an exceedingly learned Christian who devoted much time to studying and synthesizing the esoteric works of the church metaphysicians, mystics, and contemporary co-religionists. Significantly, she did not leverage this broad-ranging knowledge into a personal argument for the non-existence of spiritual paradox; she did not, like so many other authors, compose novels and stories that attempt to gloss happily over the bitter realities of grief, tragedy and temporally unrewarded faith. On the contrary, her fiction ostentatiously presents a world in which irksome inconsistency represents the foremost aspect of human life.

We might consider, among the superfluity of examples, an often overlooked story called "The River." Here O'Connor shows us a little boy, Henry Ashfield, who is sent by his debauching, bohemian parents to spend a day in the country with a matronly babysitter and her Baptist family. Once again, we have the unbalancing clash of religious and secular values — a stock scenario in O'Connor's fiction — but this time the narrative follows a more ostensibly positive trajectory. Henry, who begins by puckishly insisting that he shares the name of a famous preacher, is later baptized by that same preacher and thus introduced to the soothing prospect of a heavenly world without pain. O'Connor's signature moment of revelation seems to come early here, as the little catechumen sets out the day after his baptism to rediscover the promised kingdom. Lulled into a false sense of security, we hardly anticipate the story's swift and disturbing conclusion: keen on his quest, Henry wanders alone into a rushing river and is promptly drowned.

The dismay we experience upon picturing the grim scene to ourselves is transformed all at once into outrage when we realize that this grand tragedy is intended, teleologically, to serve a higher purpose. Though he doesn't know it, Henry is attended during his final moments by someone other than God —

a man called Mr. Paradise, who was earlier introduced as a scoffing, irascible atheist, tries in vain to wrest the child from the pull of the current. Only in the story's last lines is it revealed that the chilling metanoia so typical in O'Connor's work does not belong to Henry at all, but belongs instead to a cynical old man whose presence is otherwise tangential to the main plot. What results is, of course, an allegory that can be interpreted by various means. The most attractive and simplest reading — which is, unsurprisingly, the least correct — suggests that angelic Henry can and must be sacrificed in order that a more embattled unbeliever might be paroxysmally shocked into faith. Indeed, a great deal of O'Connor's fiction, when interpreted lazily, would appear to present a similar moral: episodes of great violence may be justified insofar as they can awaken apathetic, uncaring individuals to the extreme truths of God's universe.

Read as such, the stories offer a hackneyed rationale for needless suffering (a *felix culpa* theodicy) while also handily converting our dualistic universe into a neat and clean monad. But, when tempted with this or another picturesque interpretation, we must recall that O'Connor never professed a desire to simplify the demands of Christianity for the comfort of her reading public. Far more often did she lament the inability of modern man to preserve his belief in spite of logical challenges and failures of reason. Indeed, the aversion to dualism evinced by contemporary religion, philosophy, and culture more generally encouraged her to write fiction that placed a premium on the otherworldly and unknowable. O'Connor's God was first and foremost a God of mystery, whose attributes remained unseen by all but the Son and whose purpose baffles human reason. The double-ended nature of a faith that promises ransom for sinful mankind and yet permits evil to surround the most fervent of believers did not so much frighten as embolden O'Connor; the consternation that she occasionally expresses in her letters is never seen to

descend into doubt or rejection.

It is pertinent to consider that the characters in O'Connor's fiction, particularly the self-proclaimed 'intellectuals,' tend to follow a well-trodden path from pretentious mistrust to shivering, trembling humility. Figures like Asbury in "The Enduring Chill" and Calhoun in "The Partridge Festival" often survive O'Connor's literary charnel-house only to find themselves irreparably stripped of all the tepid reasons, justifications, and glosses that once motivated their egoism. They are left with naught but the knowledge that human reason, however vigorous, cannot possibly encapsulate all the paradoxes of life. Just as the innocent believer can be made to suffer an inconsistent fate, so the rational child of God and master over the natural world must eventually admit his unimportance and his fallibility. 'Doubleness,' we see, was a core tenet of O'Connor's faith and worldview. It permitted her to uphold a vision of Godly mystery that was in no way encumbered by the limits of human understanding. In a cultural and literary climate that liked so very much to create comfortable unity, Flannery O'Connor created division, with only the best intentions.

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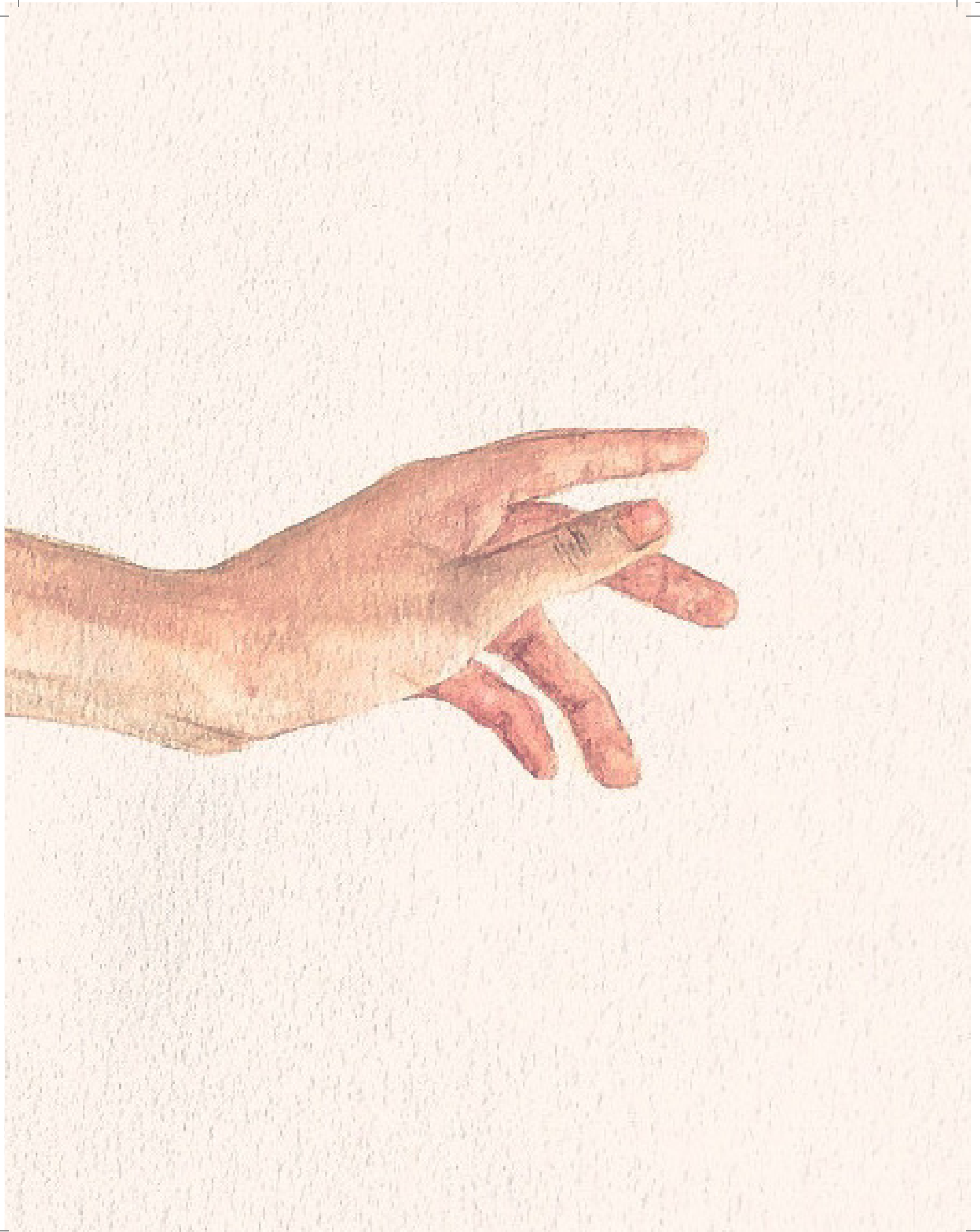
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