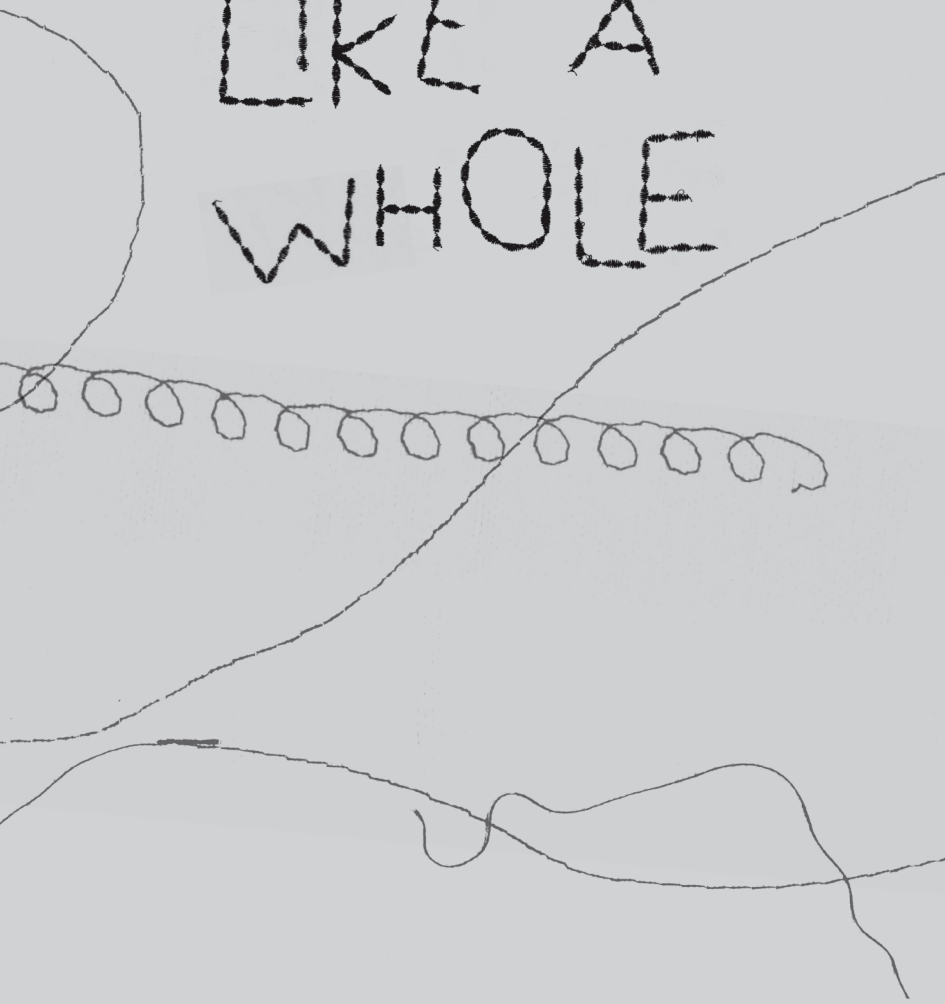


SWALLOWED  
LIKE A  
WHOLE



5

*Editor's Note*

Harriet Foyster, Rosie Haward,  
Clémence Lollia Hilaire

7

*Manual for General Housework*  
Saidiya Hartman

11

*Material Solidarity:  
Debility Across Time and Place*  
Iarlaith Ní Fheorais

23

*I Do Nothing*  
Rots Brouwer

39

*Male Sexuality and Genitality*  
Jamieson Webster

35

*Sea Foam*  
Cesare Pavese

43

*Leftovers*  
Brackish Collective

51

*Three Anatomies of a Fall*  
Rick Geene

63

*A Tutorial with Hegel*  
Katrina Palmer

67

*In the Liminal Space of Spirit-Being:  
on Spirit and Deity Possession in the  
Poems of Logan February*  
Pelumi Adejumo

75

*Parenthesis, Will, and Dissent*  
(some notes)  
Monique Todd

79

*Trompe-L'œil*  
Johanna Hedva

97

*Checking In...*  
Crip the Curriculum

107

*The Black Gaze Upon Nature*  
Musoke Nalwoga

115

*My Trans Body is an Empty House*  
Paul B. Preciado

119

*Inhabitant*  
Elena Braidà

123

*The Empty Erotics of the Ugly-Chic*  
Weronika Wojda

137

*Bad Sex*  
Tessel Veneboer

151

*Curtains*  
Katrina Palmer

157

*Opening*  
Alexis Pauline Gumbs

162

*Colophon*

Harriet Foyster, Rosie Haward,  
Clémence Lollia Hilaire

## *Editor's Note*

This book doesn't talk around the ideas it contains, but cuts to the centre of them: it's alive, vital, direct, and confrontational. Talking about something that hurts in a language exempt from pain is a distortion, so the language contained within necessarily disrupts, demands, and disorients. It asks its audience to witness and to feel what is at stake, both in the texts themselves and in the contexts they were written in. It grapples with the abstractions of language as much as it wrestles with material reality. Above all, it's an unwavering engagement with struggle and a persistent refusal of defeat.

*'Even dead things go on struggling.'*

Cesare Pavese

*'You are not done yet. You never will.'*

Alexis Pauline Gumbs

*'I don't want that; I choose something else.'*

Rots Brouwer

As they reckon with being in the world today, please be aware that several of the following contributions address – explicitly and implicitly – genocide, war, maiming, injury, suicide, murder, pregnancy loss, sexual violence, and rape, among many experiences.

Saidiya Hartman

## *Manual for General Housework*

Extract from:

Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women and Queer Radicals*, Serpent's Tail, 2019

Manual: of or pertaining to the hand or hands, done or performed with the hands. Now especially of (physical) labor, an occupation, etc., as opposed to mental, theoretical. Manual as distinguished from the mind and the intellectual. Manual: as of a weapon, tool, implement, etc.; that is used or worked with the hand or hands. Actually in one's hands, not merely prospective. (Manual: short for manual exercises, i.e., physical labor, and not the exercise of reason or imagination.) A tool or an object, within one's grasp, not speculative, not a proposal for black female genius. The use of the body as tool or instrument. Of occupation or possession. Able to have in one's own hands, as in possession is three-fifths of the law, as in possession makes you three-fifths of a human, as in property handled by another. Also to be possessed. To be handled as if owned, annexed, branded, invaded, ingested, not autonomous. Manual: to be wielded by another, to be wielded on a whim; to be wielded as an exercise of another's will, to be severed from one's own will or motives or desires. Manual: as opposed to mental, as in not an exercise of rational faculties. As opposed to the formation of critical reflections; as opposed to contemplation of the self or the world. A method of operating or working. A function. Short for manual exercise. Short for manual tool. Manual: as opposed to automatic, as opposed to starting or functioning by itself and for itself, as opposed to deliberation and judgment, as in the need for direction, as in the imposition of a mistress or master. Manual: As of pertaining to the hand or hands. The hands to be outmoded or made obsolete by the machine. Of or pertaining to the mule more than the machine. Worked with the hands, finished with the hands. No more than a pair of hands. Hands cracked and swollen from harsh soap and ammonia. Hands burnt taking the pies out of the oven. Hands stiff and disfigured from wringing cold sheets and towels

outside in the winter before hanging to dry on the line. Hands, no longer yours, contracted, owned, and directed by another, like a tool or object. The hands that handle you. The hands up the dress, the hands on your ass, the hands that pull down your undergarments, the hands that pin you to the floor. The hands that pay you two dollars for the day or thirteen dollars for the week. Manual: as of subject to use, made a tool, handled, grasped, palmed, slapped, fondled, hugged, harassed, caressed; as of pertaining to the hand. Manual: as opposed to contemplation, or theory. As opposed to the use of the intellect. As opposed to looking, viewing, contemplating. As opposed to thinking, reflecting, scheming, plotting, planning, weighing, brooding. The use of the hands as opposed to a conception or mental scheme or paradigm. Manual: the concrete, the physical, the embodied as opposed to abstract knowledge and the formulation of it. As opposed to reason. Manual: as pertaining to ignorance, obtuseness, stupidity, and as opposed to erudition.

As related to handle, as to be handled, as to be handled with no regard, as to be handled as a tool or instrument; as to be handled like a slave, like a wench, like a bitch, like a whore, like a nigger. Handled as pertaining to that part of the thing which is to be grasped by the hand in using it or moving it. To be grasped by the hand or sometimes by the neck, the ass, the throat. Colloquial: to fly off the handle; to go into a rage; to fuck shit up. Figurative: that by which something is or may be taken hold of; one of two or more ways in which a thing may be taken or apprehended. To manipulate, manage; to subject to the action of hands, to touch or feel with hands. As opposed to: Don't touch me. As pertaining to: Hands up, don't shoot. To manage, conduct, direct, control. To be handled by men, to be manhandled, to be seized by

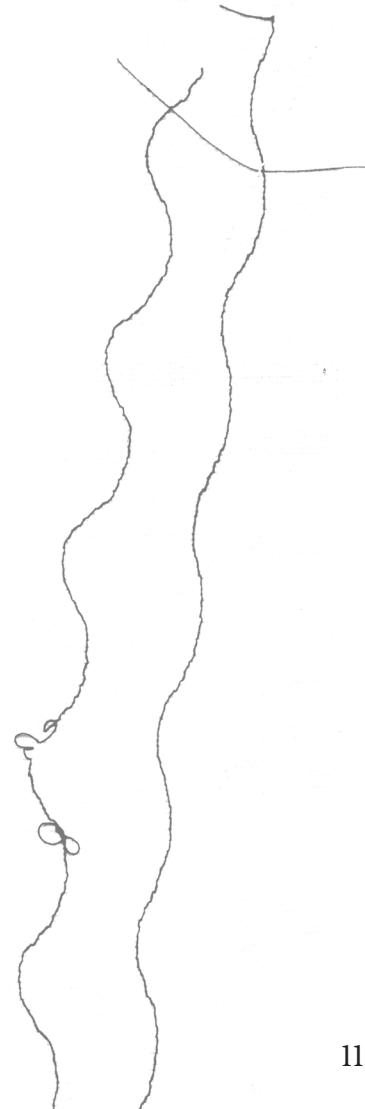
men, to be used by men, to be used up by men.  
Handled, as related to use of the thing, to do something with the tool, as opposed to directed by will and desire; as opposed to consent, as opposed to leave me the fuck alone. To deal with, to treat as you wish, to serve, to use, to accumulate, to expend, to deplete.  
Manual: as related to a book, etc.—of the nature of a manual intended to be kept at hand for reference.  
A concise treatise, an abridgment, a handbook.

> *Street Scenes, Seventh Avenue around 30th St., Colored District, 1903*, Byron Company, New York, NY (Museum of the City of New York, 93.1.1.15397).



Iarlaith Ní Fheorais

## *Material Solidarity: Debility Across Time and Place*



In *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity and Disability*, Jasbir K. Puar draws our attention to the role of the state and neoliberal capitalism in maintaining disability as a central vehicle in its biopolitical power apparatus. Crucially, she argues for the reframing of disability from a human-rights-based and pride-focused framework towards and in parallel with a model of debility that focuses on the debilitating violence of the state, which creates and maintains disability in certain populations. *The Right to Maim* was written against the backdrop of both the 2014 Israeli invasion of Gaza and the murder of Michael Brown by US police in Ferguson, MO. At the time, ‘Organisers protesting these seemingly disparate events began tracing connections, tracing the material relationships between the Israeli occupation of Palestine and the militarisation of police in Ferguson.’ (1)

Drawing connections between multitudinous points of state violence, Puar examines the Israeli military’s ‘tactical calculations of settler colonial rule – that of creating injury and maintaining Palestinian populations as perpetually debilitated, and yet alive, in order to control them’, in contrast to the US police’s right to kill. She goes on to state that:

The Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) have shown a demonstrable pattern over decades of sparing life, of shooting to maim rather than to kill. This is ostensibly a humanitarian practice, leaving many civilians ‘permanently disabled’ in an occupied territory of destroyed hospitals, rationed medical supplies, and scarce resources.

This framing of disablement moves disability from a ‘neutral’ position that calls for pride, inclusion, and

(1) Jasbir K. Puar, *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2017.

rights, into a matrix of state violence, neoliberal profit, and biopolitical control. Puar brings to question the very authority of Western white Euro-American disability studies as the legitimate voice for disabled people internationally, and asks it to ‘confront itself, as the production of most of the world’s disability happens through colonial violence, developmentalism, war, occupation, and the disparity of resources – indeed through US settler colonial and imperial occupation as a sign of the global reach of empire.’ (2)

Tracing material parallels between Palestine and Ireland, this essay will examine the occurrence of debility, as defined by Puar, and specifically the role the state plays in administering this debility among populations. Further, it seeks to ask how Puar’s reformulation of disability can help to build solidarity across diverse regions and across the diverse experiences of disability and debility that result from wide-ranging instances of state violence.

As *The Right to Maim* was written during the 2014 invasion of Gaza, I am writing this essay during the ongoing 2023– genocide of Gaza by Israel, with 34,494 killed and 75,668 injured thus far. (3) There are 48,360 disabled people living in Gaza (4) – many of whom sustained injuries from previous invasions – a number that is increasing daily in this current escalation of violence. Even before the 2023– offensive, life for disabled people in Gaza has been worsened by the:

(2) Puar, *The Right to Maim*.

(3) Latest figures taken from Al Jazeera on April 4, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/longform/2023/10/9/israel-hamas-war-in-maps-and-charts-live-tracker>.

(4) Linah Alsaafin and Ruwaida Amer, ‘People with disabilities not spared by Israel’s war machine on Gaza Strip’, *Al Jazeera*, 27 October, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/10/27/people-with-disabilities-not-spared-from-israels-war-machine-on-gaza-strip>.



17-year siege on the Gaza Strip by Israel and Egypt [that] has led to heavy restrictions on movement and has curbed access to assistive devices and healthcare for people with disabilities. Chronic power outages compromise the rights and freedoms of these vulnerable people of society, who rely heavily on electronic equipment to move around, such as elevators and mobility scooters, and light to use sign language with others. (5)

The incarceration of a whole population is debilitating in itself over the long-term, with Israel denying access to medicines, medical devices, food, and building materials through the border, creating an injurious environment. This is of course in addition to the psychological stress of incarceration, the denial of freedom of movement, and life under constant surveillance. Furthermore, disabled people are also more vulnerable to further injury and death from Israeli airstrikes, often unable to flee, transforming the IDF's apparent humanitarian warnings into horrific premonitions.

I will read the historical and current debility in Gaza alongside the history of mass incarceration in Ireland, notably executed through its extensive 20th-century system of psychiatric hospitals. Crucially, this essay will examine injury (debilitation) as the site of concern, seeking to understand how injury is used by states across time and place as a means of biopolitical control and profit generation.

In Galway in the west of Ireland, debility is *in* the lan-

(5) Alsaafin and Amer, 'People with disabilities not spared by Israel's war machine on Gaza Strip'.

scape. It is in the very language we use, it is ingrained in Galway's socialities and geographies. Debility makes up the musculature of the place; it forms the sinews of its maiming history, occupying the very names of towns. Until recently, 'To go to Ballinasloe' was a familiar turn of phrase used as shorthand to describe a wide range of psychological and social experiences, from having a mental health crisis to being committed to a psychiatric hospital. The town of Ballinasloe in County Galway is home to St. Brigid Hospital, established in 1833 as the Connacht District Lunatic Asylum. At one point, the town was almost solely associated with the hospital. Ireland had the highest rate of incarceration in the world by the mid 20th century, the largest population of which were living in psychiatric hospitals, with each region home to its own psychiatric institution representing the material and symbolic presence of St Brigid's. In the 1950s, St Brigid's had a population of 2,078 living onsite, in a town with a population of 5,596; the institution formed the basis of the town's economic and social identity, which was representative of the country overall. 'The population of Ireland almost halved between 1841 and 1911, decreasing from 8,175,124 to 4,390,319 ... This is the same period that saw institutional residency of the "insane" increase more than seven times, from 3,498 to 24,655.' (6)

Despite claims that the Irish were more susceptible to madness, there were a number of factors that contributed to this proclivity towards psychiatric incarceration. The state-run psychiatric hospitals were unlike other institutions in Ireland's 'carceral matrix', (7) which were run by the Catholic Church, such as Mag-

(6) Damien Brennan, *Irish Insanity: 1800-2000*, London and New York, Routledge, 2013.

(7) Liat Ben-Moshe, 'Disabling Incarceration: Connecting Disability to Divergent Confinements in the USA', *Critical Sociology*, vol. 39, no. 3, 2013.

dalene laundries, mother and baby homes, and industrial schools. The hospitals were run directly by the local government, and admissions were made through local doctors and magistrates, working alongside relatives. Many of those committed to psychiatric hospitals did not have mental health, intellectual, or developmental disabilities. Rather, people were committed for a wide range of social reasons, such as settling inheritance disputes, as a means of control, for respite, to relieve the pressures of poverty and emigration, and to disappear family members. These psychiatric hospitals ‘functioned as a vast, unwieldy social welfare system for patients and possibly some staff [so much so that] in 1907, 30% of admissions [for one Dublin asylum] came directly from workhouses ... which leads to the conclusion that the Irish asylum system was a social creation as much as it was a medical one’. (8)

Puar contends:

that the term ‘debilitation’ is distant from the term ‘disablement’ because it foregrounds the slow wearing down of populations instead of the event of becoming disabled. While the latter concept creates and hinges on a narrative of before and after for individuals who will eventually be identified as disabled, the former comprehends those bodies that are sustained in a perpetual state of debilitation precisely through foreclosing the social, cultural, and political translation to disability. (9)

Debility points to no singular point of transformation from able-bodied to disabled, it is rather a gradual

(8) Brendan Kelly, *Hearing Voices: The History of Psychiatry in Ireland*, Dublin, Irish Academic Press, 2016.

(9) Puar, *The Right to Maim*.

temporal process. This ‘slow death’ (10) is a more accurate description of the process of debilitation that took place in Ireland through the mass incarceration of the population in psychiatric hospitals. Though the conditions of these hospitals changed over time, and indeed due to widespread chronic poverty they were, in many ways, the community’s only form of welfare, offering respite care for families and convalescence for new mothers, they were also largely debilitating spaces. A large cohort of those being committed to these psychiatric hospitals – many for life – became disabled only after being committed: ‘The prison[-like] environment itself [was] disabling so that even if an individual enters prison without a disability or mental health diagnosis, she is likely to get one. (11)

Although the psychiatric hospitals in Ireland differed from prisons, they did share some commonalities that could and did result in debility, with many of the early asylums that later become psychiatric hospitals built in a similar fashion to prisons, and the ‘inspectors general of the prisons ... assum[ing] responsibility for the inspection of all institutions that accommodated the insane in 1787.’ (12) In tandem with the trauma of incarceration against one’s will for extended periods of time, ‘the physical and material violence against people with disabilities that are justified in the

(10) Lauren Berlant, ‘Slow Death (Sovereignty, Obesity, Lateral Agency)’, *On the Case*, edited by Lauren Berlant in: *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 33, no. 4, Summer 2007.

(11) Liat Ben-Mosh, *Decarcerating Disability: Deinstitutionalization and Prison Abolition*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2020.

(12) Catherine Cox, *Negotiating Insanity in the South-east of Ireland, 1820–1900*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2012.

(13) Sami Schalk, *Black Disability Politics*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2022.

(14) Eunjung Kim, *Curative Violence: Rehabilitating Disability, Gender, and Sexuality in Modern Korea*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2017.

name of cure,' <sup>(13)</sup> known as 'curative violence,' <sup>(14)</sup> would have been further debilitating. While today, curative violence might look like overtreatment or lack of treatment, between the 1920s and the 1950s, this meant brutal practices such as lobotomies, insulin treatment, and electroshock treatments. If the bloated system of psychiatric hospitals was not built and maintained due to real demand for services to support disabled people, and indeed on the contrary were sites of mass debilitation, then these sites were maintained for the purposes of questionable welfare solutions and for accumulating profit.

These hospitals were the economic heart of their communities, providing work for local people at a time of entrenched poverty and emigration. Many uneducated women worked as nurses in the hospitals, providing an income that many families relied on when work was scarce. The hospitals also served as consumers of local goods, and for many towns they were an economic lifeline when few other industries were operating in Ireland, much like prisons for many communities today. In addition, some patients worked on local farms and construction sites or repaired furniture, thus the hospitals as banks of labourers were providing a cheap workforce for local businesses and consumers. Some patients would be 'wintered' in the hospitals, which entailed being admitted during winter and temporarily discharged to work on farms during later summer and autumn. The evident economic motive of these institutions might explain their gross overpopulation at a time of mass emigration. At a time of economic stagnation, where unemployment was high and the state was unable to provide the most basic welfare, these sites offered a cheap alternative for those needing care, economic relief, or both. These institutions also supported families emigrating to the US to seek

economic opportunity; under American eugenics laws, whole families would risk immediate deportation if a member of the party was thought to be disabled, which resulted in many being committed for life in Ireland so their families could escape poverty and emigrate.

Ultimately, 'debility is profitable for capitalism,' <sup>(15)</sup> resulting in a demand for the creation of disability, which could be transformed into profit, or at the very least financial relief, through the ongoing slow death of incarceration. As stated earlier, these institutions functioned as respite services in an environment of chronic poverty; they held a vital role in the economy of the state, providing economic relief for the poor. In that sense, these mass sites of maiming were not peripheral to the operations of the state but, in coalition with other carceral institutions, they were central to its operation. One reason this regime was slowly dismantled through deinstitutionalisation was the economic transformation of Ireland beginning in the 1970s, which lessened the comparative economic possibility of these sites, rendering them no longer convenient to the state.

In a similar vein, the debilitation of the people of Gaza is actively profitable for Israel and its allies. During this current invasion, we've seen profits and stock prices for weapons manufacturers soar. With the destruction and subsequent rebuilding of Gaza after each invasion or escalation in violence, there are 'post-onslaught donor conferences rais[ing] billions of dollars for rebuilding infrastructure in Gaza – capitalist accumulation that ultimately feeds back into Israel's regime,' <sup>(16)</sup> After reaping destruction and widespread maiming, in 'this regard we can say that along with the right to maim,

<sup>(15)</sup> Puar, *The Right to Maim*.

<sup>(16)</sup> Puar, *The Right to Maim*.

Israel is also exercising a sovereign “right to repair,” one that reaps profit through a speculative withholding and destruction of rehabilitation.’ (17) Therefore the repeated destruction of Gaza and the debilitation and disablement of its people are strategically beneficial, as both a means of exacting biopolitical and colonial control and of profit making. As with the closing of the institutions in Ireland, it is urgently necessary for the economic profitability of war and occupation to be destroyed. In addition to the illegal settlements in the West Bank, and given the ‘economic profitability of the occupation ... it becomes even more urgent that resistant strategies such as BDS focus on disrupting the circuits of capitalist accumulation.’ (18)

The afterlife of mass psychiatric incarceration in Ireland lives on, leaving a mark on the psyche of the state that has been present since the 1950s, when the Irish dramatist Sean O’Casey described the Grangegorman psychiatric hospital in Dublin as ‘a house of strident shadows’. In *The Celestial Realm: A Memoir of Madness and Material Lineage*, Molly Henningan describes the after effects of such debilitation:

It lurks. Cold, towering buildings sleeping over towns and villages where we do driving tests and get X-rays and collect children from school and donate to Dogs Trusts. These institutions blend into the skyline of Ireland, and have withstood every National catastrophe we have faced.

Meanwhile, in Gaza, debility and disablement are being inflicted at full speed. ‘Israel and its wars greatly oppress people with disabilities and create more dis-

(17) Puar, *The Right to Maim*.

(18) Puar, *The Right to Maim*.

abled people – those who have lost their limbs to the bombardment.’ (19) If a permanent ceasefire is ever reached – and it cannot come too soon – the afterlife of this mass maiming will live on for generations. While calls for a ceasefire and an end to occupation are the urgent priorities of the moment, it is a given that after the war there will be many, many more disabled Gazans and it is important that we remember how they were disabled; who was responsible for this maiming. Just like war, disability is not a neutral space. It is not a ‘fixed state or attribute but exists in relation to assemblages of capacity and debility, modulated across historical time, geopolitical space, institutional mandates, and discursive regimes’. Therefore it is imperative to resist the ‘globalisation of disability as an identity through human-rights discourses [which] contributes to a standardisation of bodily usefulness and uselessness that discounts not only the specificity of location but also the ways bodies exceed or defy identities and subjects.’ (20)

Though Ireland and Palestine have a long shared history – from British colonial rule to the violent regime of the Black and Tans, to a longstanding mutual solidarity – this analysis is not about bolstering this history of solidarity. It does not draw these connections between disability in Ireland and Palestine to create false equivalences; these parallels could have been drawn between many different geotemporal points. Instead, the essay seeks to examine the conditions through which disability and debility are created in two different spaces and times through similar mechanisms of state-mandated violence, and to recognise

(19) Alsaafin and Amer, ‘People with disabilities not spared by Israel’s war machine on Gaza Strip’.

(20) Puar, *The Right to Maim*.

that disparate struggles are often shared. Joint analysis opens up the possibility of solidarity. Puar's framework of debility and maiming accounts for the specificity of these acts and their conditions, while illustrating that those affected are in solidarity with others injured and debilitated by colonialism, war, (under)development, sanctions, and blockades, outside of Western capitalist conceptions of disability. Under a human-rights model of disability, we may understand the state as bearing responsibility for care, prevention, and protection, but using a debility-based framework we see the state's disabling actions clearly. Applying Puar's debility framework makes it possible to move past liberal regimes of disability that obfuscate the path to disabled liberation, and instead facilitates a liberatory position for disabled people against the debilitating violence of the state. In crafting a Crip epistemology that is rigorous and attentive to the conditions of disability under neoliberal capitalism, we must be conscious of, and resistant to, the ways in which the capitalist state creates, maintains, and profits from disability in the places we find ourselves, and understand how that binds us to other disabled and debilitated peoples across the world. Vitaly, as Puar reiterates, it asks us to do everything in our power to end this war and the occupation, striving constantly and unflinchingly towards a Free Palestine.

Rots Brouwer

*I Do Nothing*

'I do nothing.

Because when I have an idea, my idea is not acknowledged as my idea, but secretly taken over, and then I have to listen to how you develop my idea further. We cannot think together because you are always right, the dominant factor. I argue with anyone who is not kind or willing to understand me. Why should I execute things that are so foolish when I say I want to sew something? My innovation is also innovation, and you only want to explain things to me, and we never have a constructive conversation where I can participate.

When I tell my mother about this, she says it's because of my father. What good does that do me? I am so sad, and I feel very unheard. I can't pay my rent, but I won't tell you that. I love my father so much, and he loves me, but the way we treat each other is toxic. I don't want people to treat me like this, but I'm so used to it from him.

I always have to be kind, or else everyone feels offended. I'm no longer interested in that. People don't have to be nice, but I do.

During my graduation, no one in my family helped me with anything. My parents were only interested in the ceremony, and I couldn't stand it. As if the content of the things I create or think doesn't matter. As if you can't help me because you don't understand what it's about. You want to talk to me, but you change the subject. You don't want to understand what it's about: as I wrote earlier, Shakespeare's parents and children were allegedly illiterate. Now, I'm not Shakespeare, but my parents also understand very little. My mother pretends she understands; she goes to various lectures and other intellectual events, but my father doesn't even pretend anymore. He thinks *Gladiator* is the most beautiful artwork on earth – strength and honour – his greatest values.

Maybe about me – if I were to be he/him? He is sad because when it's about them, it immediately has to be about gender, even though he wants to avoid that by not adopting one. He has been living for others for a while, and suicide is a big taboo here. He doesn't want to be here at all, but somewhere else is also difficult. When he's not around, something dies in the world. Now, his grandmother has been waiting in a refrigerator for more than five days to be cremated. He can never remember people's correct death dates.

Maybe I am the conflict-avoidant person in this case. Because I walk away and don't want to cry when men are around. How can you have such ideas when you have had sisters? How can you have more respect for your father's wartime experience than your mother's? Your father had more opportunities to be a hero, but your mother was one as well. My grandmother collected food from farmers during the war and distributed it in the Netherlands. That's different from working on the Burma Railway and helping people in the camp, but sexism is just as deadly as Nazism.

Women die from it, and people don't understand that. This means that, on average, more than five women or girls are killed every hour by someone in their own family. Yes, that is copied and pasted. My friend Miss Universe died, officially from an 'accidental' ketamine overdose, but she was on the front lines of the fight against patriarchy. She was raped at a young age, and now, even when I saw how my male friends treated her, it's different than how they treat(ed) their male friends, or even me, who doesn't approach my male friends in that way.

She did sex work, and some thought she was a bit crazy anyway, the way she acted, undressing completely in the middle of winter by the riverbanks when my friend Maze came to visit her and took a walk with her. Maze didn't understand that. I may not understand

Miss Universe either, but I understand that behaviour. If people always appreciate you in that way, for your body, then you will also show your body in that way. She did it with Ben, with Chad, and probably with my ex, Kees, too. I'm so glad I didn't have that kind of relationship with her.

When she was still alive, we used to talk for hours on my couch. The same pink couch on which she read, and cried about, *King Kong Theory*, that she finished in one day, without taking breaks. We would discuss Irigaray or other feminists. We would switch to French with some words, 'cause English and French were the languages we spoke. Her Dutch was also pretty good but it's my first language, and I don't speak Turkish – it's always better to meet in the middle.

We didn't know each other so well, but we knew each other, so we started organising these language events in the evening at the academy. In total we organised three sessions. She wanted to leave the organising to me, as she said that she wasn't good at it. I just thought that she was evading responsibilities if I'm honest. That she just wanted to do the nice stuff. These would be very nice language jams. She was a really good poet.

I organise or do things while nobody asks me to and then reproach people for not helping.

I always felt Miss Universe had strong autonomy over her decisions, also if that decision was to get on a FlixBus to Brussels to see me there, in high heels, with just a bottle of wine she drank with another Miss Universe she met and a book that she didn't have time to read yet, and that she forgets at the party, so you spend all your time – a whole day – in Brussels getting this important book back, she borrowed it from her friend Tarek, so she really needs it back.

I respected her in her totality and that also meant that I left her to be perceived how she wanted to be perceived. When she passed away, I felt the way our male friends endured her loss and the way they had treated her when she was alive were very different, and they didn't seem to know her that well at all, they just talked about these very scattered moments with her. And this distance is something I don't feel they want to speak about, now. As if it is their personal space, their personal distance to somebody they objectified, and that I'm now breaching their personal space by addressing their lack of knowing Miss Universe in any other way than physical.

I'm confused about her date of death; it must have been in the first days of March, and it was definitely not a leap year that year. My father says that my friends and I are too straightforward in how we deal with injustice.

My younger brother asks if he can do something for me because I'm crying while writing this, but I always cry when I write. My father does the dishes and remains silent out of great incapacity. He never cries, or yes, at his mother's funeral and maybe once when my parents separated. He has been through terrible things, experienced a genocide, and went to therapy when he separated from my mother, 20 years ago. In the meantime, he couldn't talk about what he had experienced and was completely isolated in his pain. I don't want that; I choose something else. I choose to talk and write about my pain, and I really think that's a better solution. Sometimes you shouldn't have a value judgement about how people deal with things, but I think it's better to start talking earlier than waiting for 19 years and then starting with great difficulty. My grandfather always kept dreaming about the war.

Reality is no picnic, but I'm right in the middle of it. I quit smoking and drinking, and I now occasionally smoke a cigarette, but that doesn't ease the pain; it actually makes it worse. Miss Universe smoked more than a pack a day, and when we mentioned it, she said her father smoked even more than she did. Her father came to visit her in the clinic where she was involuntarily admitted, and on the way back to Istanbul, he had a heart attack. He survived, and I spoke to him and Miss Universe's stepmother via video call after her death.

Ben hasn't mentioned Miss Universe since he returned from his South-American travels. I find it strange that you have sex with someone and then don't feel the bond I felt with her.

My father is probably angry, but I can't know because he is not open about his feelings. I make strong statements like earlier in this text about how deadly sexism is because I understand the intensity of such a comparison, and I know you're not supposed to say it. Miss Universe was admitted involuntarily to what she called the loony bin, and when I talked to her on the phone about it, she said it was because she posted too-sexual things on Instagram. They hurt her a lot, and her mother refused to visit her because she wouldn't promise not to do sex work anymore."

Jamieson Webster

## Male Sexuality and Genitality

Extract from:

Jamieson Webster, *Disorganisation & Sex*,  
Divided Publishing, 2022



I remember a male psychoanalyst explaining how terrifying and strange erections are for young boys, a fact almost completely repressed, especially how traumatic their first ejaculatory orgasm is, the sight of this strange substance that is emitted from the penis. The feeling on the one hand is something so outside of one's control, not only desire, but also its physical manifestation, to the strange partial control that one can exert over the organ through masturbation, an act that leads to the literal disappearance of the thing – beating it, exhausting it, removing its presence, killing it metaphorically.

One of the strangest psychoanalysts, and one of my favourites, is Sándor Ferenczi, who wrote the now out-of-print book *Thalassa: A Theory of Genitality* (1933). The origins of human sexuality for the Hungarian analyst Ferenczi should be sought in the sea where we were, if not transsexual, at the very least, wholly bisexual. The goal of sea sexuality isn't penetration and reproduction within the interior of a body, it's all external, liquid, permeable, auto-sensual, and the division between the sexes in their roles in reproduction is at best murky.

Human sexuality, according to Ferenczi, is the result of geological crises throughout evolution: for example, when sea creatures were forced to live on land and breathe air, their embryos, which required a liquid environment, were more and more in jeopardy, like tadpoles clustered in a quickly evaporating puddle. Evolution, Ferenczi says, devises the strange solution of a penis that would bore into a female who would act like a host to a parasite. The sea is now inside. This is also the origin of rape, sexed reproduction requiring the domination of one half of the species. (1)

(1) Sándor Ferenczi, *Thalassa: A Theory of Genitality*, trans. Henry Alden Bunker, London, Karnac, 1989, 56.

Freud also speculated on the great geological crises, saying that the first response would be, obviously, anxiety and panic, which were untenable in any prolonged fashion. The second response then would be hysteria in so far as humans would refuse all forms of sexuality and reproduction when child-rearing didn't seem optimal, making the libido a threat and causing the first psychoneurotic symptoms. The upshot, which we still see today, is that hysteria represses anxiety. The third response would be obsessional neurosis and tyranny, an act of turning away from the dangers of those suffering to the estimation of the powers of one's own thought, understanding the world not for what it is and all its attendant dangers, but according to one's ego. (2)

In a sense, Freud and Ferenczi's ideas are close: catastrophe and genitality go hand in hand, and bodily panic, or simply anxiety, is at the root of forms of domination, power, subjugation and tyranny which involve a narcissistic swerve or turning away from the world and from reality. Sexuality is either dark (thrown into suspension, repressed) or dire (the attempt to master a catastrophe in catastrophic form), or both, which is the bizarre proclamation of psychoanalytic speculation. One could appreciate the fragile lineage that brings us to today's renewed battle of the sexes in the human-dominated epoch of the Anthropocene.

Male sexuality, in so far as it has openly accommodated the avenue of tyranny most readily, is under immense scrutiny and criticism. But it isn't male sexuality as psychoanalysis thinks of it that one must address, but rather the defences to it that society – or power – harnesses towards its own unjust ends. I'm not a great believer in toxic masculinity, but rather toxic

(2) See Sigmund Freud, *A Phylogenetic Fantasy: Overview of the Transference Neurosis*, ed. Ilse Grubrich-Simitis and trans. Axel Hoffer and Peter T. Hoffer, Cambridge, MA and London, Belknap Press, 1987.

institutions, governments, systems, discourses that leach onto our libidos. The idea of toxic masculinity is the same mistake that the early, often male, psychoanalysts made when they desired a perfect powerful prohibiting father. Theory, like sexuality, is permeable to childhood fantasies of the proper protection of parents, especially in times as volatile as these. Male sexuality is, at its best, tragi-comically traumatic, a strange and alien creature that a body must host and accommodate. What a man can do with his body, what he can make of the inklings of a gratuitous pleasure only barely linked to procreation, needs to be given form – close to ritual passage, constraint and release, maximal play.

Let's turn to *Thalassa* by Ferenczi and the question of genitality. It seems the book is built on a ruse, the ruse of the temptation or desire to return to the womb, to water, as a principle of the death drive. It depicts the drive to return to inorganic origins, to death or Nirvana, as integral to the theory of genital sexuality. *Regressionszug* evokes in English the trait, pull, rift, and drift of regression. In this one seemingly simple term, an abyssal, contradictory and aporetic logic is at work, and all the terms involved in it are slippery like a fish. The logic of equivalences is confusing; as confusing as the logic in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) where Freud must finally admit that the idea of a foundational division between life and death drives is simply a rhetorical trope, a false distinction: there is not pure Eros or Thanatos; rather they slip, like the death drive itself. Why would a return to sea, or even to the womb, to the confines of the mother, promise Nirvana?

This slippage – both 'on the surface' and 'in depth' – is emblematic for Ferenczi of the attempt to return to a state of bliss that becomes death manifest as 'catastrophe'. It doesn't take Ferenczi very long to land

us on the shores, impose a forced evolution, a reproductive struggle, an ice age and a scorched earth: 'The possession of an organ of copulation, the development within the maternal womb, and the circumvention of the great danger of desiccation – these three terms thus form an indestructible biological unity which must constitute the ultimate basis of a symbolic identity of the womb with the sea and the earth on the one hand, and of the male member with the child and the fish on the other.' (3)

No psychoanalyst who has read this text can forget the analogy of the introjection of the sea inside as amniotic fluid and the semen/baby like a fish attempting to return home. For Ferenczi this condenses a whole history of phylogenetic catastrophes: the history of the earth in crisis that is present not only in every attempt at regression, but in every attempt at coitus, which he makes the hallmark of the progressive unification of the drives in genitality, though it is less a bliss than an act of anxiety-ridden violence – another hole, or forced water-pit marking an ever-increasing force of separation.

Forget breathing. Forget the inflow of air, the end of bisexuality in sexed reproduction. Forget that the origin of coitus is rape. Forget the creation of limbs in order to pin down the body of the other.

Let's go home to the sea where we are men and women both, where we simply release our bodily products into the fluid around us, wrap ourselves in ourselves and in an environment that is nourishing, wet, one. Let's forget that this oneness is only circumscribed in the act of fertilisation that essentially happens without us ever being there; neither parent is there, nor is the child.

(3) Ferenczi, *Thalassa*, 50.

Cesare Pavese

*Sea Foam*



Extract from:

Cesare Pavese, *Dialogues with Leucò*,  
Marsilio Editori, 1947

*Britomart, the Cretan and Minoan nymph, is mentioned in Callimachus. That Sappho was a Lesbian from Lesbos is regrettable, but far sadder is the dissatisfaction which made her throw herself into the Aegean sea. This sea is full of islands and it was on the most easterly of them, Cyprus, that Aphrodite the wave-born came to land. It was a sea that knew many tragic stories. Ariadne, Phaedra, Andromache, Helle, Scylla, Io, Cassandra, Medea—who does not remember their names? They all passed that way and some of them stayed there. Those waters, one might say, were drenched in sperm and tears.*

*Sappho, Britomart*

*Sappho:* It's boring here, Britomart, the sea is boring. You've been here for ages, aren't you sick of it?

*Britomart:* You liked being alive better, I know. To become a curl of frothing wave isn't enough for you mortals. And yet men seek death, this death. Why did you drown yourself, Sappho?

*Sappho:* I didn't know it was like this. I thought everything ended with that final jump. I thought the longing and the restlessness and the tumult would all be done with. The sea swallows, the sea annuls, I thought.

*Britomart:* Everything dies in the sea, and comes to life again. You know now.

*Sappho:* But you, Britomart, you were one of the nymphs. What did you want from the sea?

*Britomart:* From the sea? Nothing. I lived on the mountains. A man pursued me and I ran away. You don't know our woods, Sappho, how tall they are. The mountain falls away sheer, and the sea way below ... I jumped, to save myself.

*Sappho:* To save yourself? But why?

*Britomart:* To get away from the man who was pursuing me. To be myself. I had to, Sappho.

*Sappho:* Had to? Was he so horrid?

*Britomart:* I don't know, I didn't see him. All I knew was that I had to get away.

*Sappho:* But why? I mean, to leave your daily life, the hills and the fields? To leave the earth and become sea foam—all this because you *had to*. Had to *what*? Surely all this meant something to you, weren't these things part of you too?

*Britomart:* But Sappho dear, it was desire and longing that made you what you are now. And yet you blame me for running away.

*Sappho*: You weren't mortal, you knew that there is no escaping.

*Britomart*: But I didn't try to escape from desire, Sappho. I have what I desire. I was a nymph of the rocks, now I am a sea nymph. This is how we're made. Our life is leaf and trunk, spring water, sea foam. We play with the surface of things, we don't run away from them. We change. This is our desire, this is our destiny. Our one terror is that a man should possess us, catch us. That would be the end of everything. You know Calypso?

*Sappho*: I've heard of her.

*Britomart*: Calypso let herself get caught by a man. And nothing could help her any more. For years she never left her cave. They all came, Leucotea, Callianeira, Cymodoce, Oreithyia, Amphitrite ... They spoke to her, they carried her off and saved her. But it took years; and first the man had to go.

*Sappho*: I can understand Calypso. But I don't understand why she listened to you. If she'd really been in love, how could she have given way?

*Britomart*: Oh Sappho, mortal wave, will you never learn what it is to smile?

*Sappho*: I knew when I was alive. And I went in search of death.

*Britomart*: But that's not smiling, Sappho. Smiling means living like a wave, like a leaf, accepting your fate. It means dying in one form and being reborn in another. It means accepting—accepting oneself, accepting fate.

*Sappho*: And did you accept, Britomart?

*Britomart*: I ran away, Sappho. It's easier for the nymphs ...

*Sappho*: I knew how to run away too, when I was alive. My way was to look into things, into the tumult,

and turn it into speech, into song. But fate is something quite different.

*Britomart*: Why, Sappho? Fate is joy, and when you sang your song you were happy.

*Sappho*: I was never happy, Britomart. Desire is not song. It destroys, and burns, like a snake, like the wind.

*Britomart*: But have you ever known mortal women who lived peacefully in desire and tumult?

*Sappho*: None. Wait, yes, perhaps ... But not mortal women like Sappho. You were still a mountain nymph, I wasn't yet born, when a woman crossed this sea, a mortal woman, who lived always in storm and strife. Perhaps she was in peace. She killed, destroyed, blinded. She was like a goddess—always herself, unchanging. Perhaps she didn't even have to smile. She was lovely, no fool, and around her there *was* nothing but fighting and death. Men fought and died for her, Britomart, asking only for her name to be joined to theirs for a moment, for her name to be given to their living and dying. And they smiled for her. You know her—Helen, the daughter of Leda.

*Britomart*: And she, was she happy?

*Sappho*: At least she didn't run away, that much is certain. She was sufficient unto herself. She didn't ask what her fate was. Whoever had the will—and the strength—carried her off. For ten years she followed a hero; they took her away from him and married her to another man. He too lost her, countless men fought for her across the seas. Then the second man took her back and she lived with him, at peace. She was buried, and in Hades she knew still more men. She lied to no one, she smiled at no one. Perhaps she was happy.

*Britomart*: And you envy this woman?

*Sappho*: I envy no one. I wanted to die. It's not enough for me to be someone else, and if I can't be Sappho, I would sooner be nothing.

*Britomart*: Then you accept your fate?

*Sappho*: I don't accept it. I *am* my fate. Nobody accepts his fate.

*Britomart*: Nobody except us. We who know how to smile.

*Sappho*: What's so hard about that? It's part of your fate. But what does it mean?

*Britomart*: It means accepting, and accepting oneself.

*Sappho*: Yes, but what does it *mean*? How can you accept a force that seizes you and turns you into desire, into shuddering desire that struggles over a body, a man's or a girl's, like the foam between the rocks? And this body rejects you and crushes you, and you fall and long to embrace the rock, to accept it. Sometimes you are the rock yourself, and the foam and the tumult are twisting and turning at your feet. No one is ever at peace. How can one accept all this?

*Britomart*: You have to accept it. You tried to run away, Sappho, and what are you now? A bit of frothing wave.

*Sappho*: But don't you feel it, Britomart, this languor, this deep tidal unrest? Everything here is torn and tormented endlessly. Even dead things go on struggling.

*Britomart*: You should know the sea, Sappho. You came from an island.

*Sappho*: Oh Britomart, even when I was a child it frightened me. That ceaseless life is monotonous, sad ... There are no words for the weariness of it.

*Britomart*: Once on my island I saw people coming and going. There were women like you, Sappho, women who lived for love. They never looked sad or tired to me.

*Sappho*: I know, Britomart, I know. But did you follow them on their journeys? There was one woman who hanged herself from her own roof beam in a foreign land. And one who woke up one morning on a rock, abandoned. And the others, so many others, from all the islands and all the lands who went down to the sea. Some were enslaved, some were tortured, some killed their own children. There were some who toiled night and day, and some who never touched solid land again and became things, creatures of the sea.

*Britomart*: But Helen—she came out unscathed, you said?

*Sappho*: Sowing fire and slaughter. She smiled at no one, she lied to no one. She was a woman worthy of the sea. But Britomart, do you remember who was born over there?

*Britomart*: Who do you mean?

*Sappho*: There is one island you've never seen. Every morning when the sun rises, it touches this island first.

*Britomart*: Oh Sappho.

*Sappho*: It was there she sprang from the sea, the goddess who has no name, the tormented, restless one who smiles to herself.

*Britomart*: But she doesn't suffer. She is a great goddess.

*Sappho*: And everything that is torn and tortured in the sea is her substance and her breath. Have you seen her, Britomart?

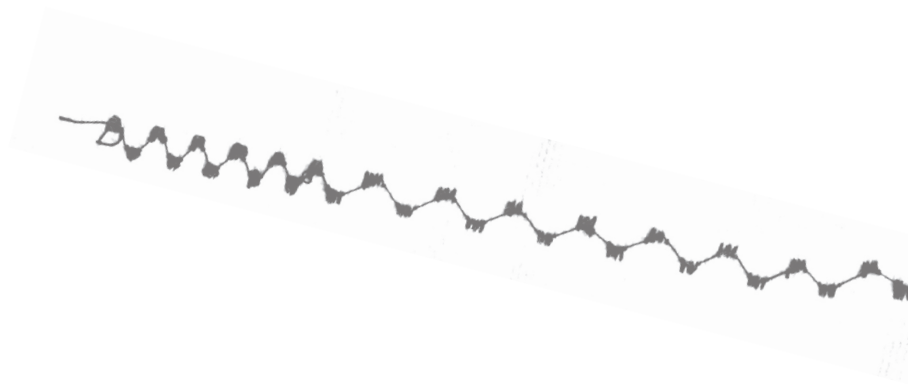
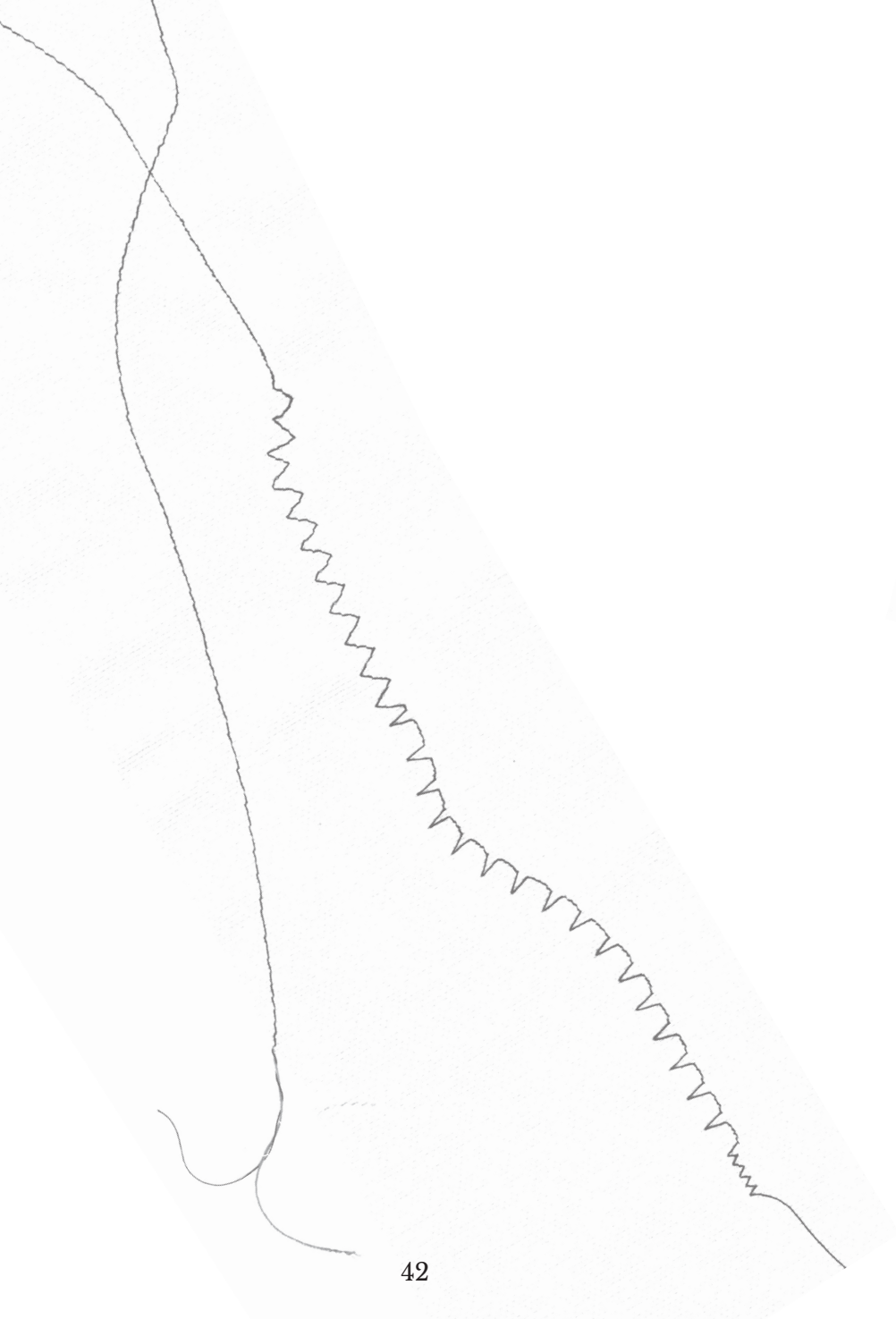
*Britomart*: Oh Sappho, don't ask me. I'm only one of the little nymphs.

*Sappho*: You must have seen her, then?

*Britomart*: In her presence we all run away. Don't speak of her, child.

Brackish Collective

*Leftovers*

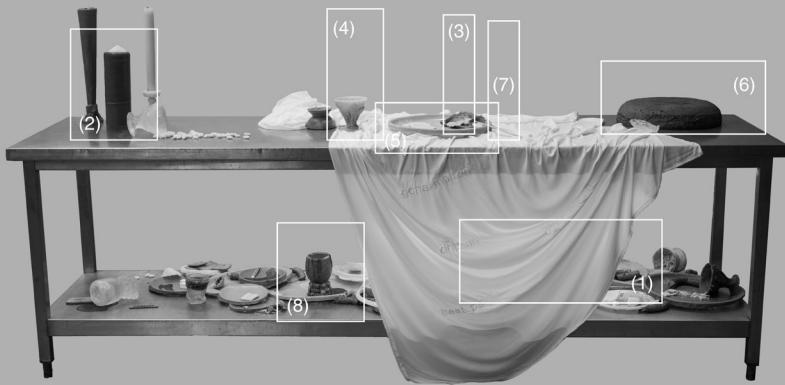


For the smooth operation of a global food corporation, a flavourist is essential. As the perfumer concocts a smell, so the flavorist mimics, modifies, and translates chemical compounds into easily distributed tastes. For the discerning management team of the aforementioned global food corporation, it would be wise to keep the flavourists on side. They should be given flexible working hours, a proper benefits package, and ample provision in the yearly budget. Failure to meet such conditions might affect commercial success. The company may formulate any number of marketable mouthfeels, filler ingredients, and texturisers, yet it is the flavourist who presides over taste, over the palatable.

For the culinary philosopher Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, the pleasures of the table would manifest in two main stages. The first, a silent affair, involves the satisfaction of hunger, the business of eating without really paying attention to anyone around you. The second occurs at the moment when fullness sets in, a fullness that sedates the body and intoxicates the mind. It is with this ethos that the flavourists approach their latest brief. Calls from above dictate that a new banquet of delectable flavours should be developed, surprising yet familiar in taste.

Unfortunately, as the flavourists embark on this proposal, caps on holiday requests appear and discussions around pay increase dissolve. If these provisos had been met, if the flavourists had not been so frazzled, overworked, privy to unachievable targets, the following flavour profile may have differed. Consequently, these flavour profiles become imbued with the stench of corporate workplace dynamics.

Silence and intoxication replace communal digestion



> Photograph by Joeri Bosma.



as these flavour profiles are savoured by management. New tastes, honed from synthetic fabrics, saline towers, and waxy rind, decorate the corporation's dinner table. These advanced flavours, gleaned from the waste sentences of the companies' circular ethos, spoil into an edible amorphous mulch.

Flavours synthesised for the occasion of the Annual Board Meeting

- 1 Embroidered tablecloth, 3 x 1.5 metres, viscose.  
The tablecloth is lifted hurriedly by the intern from a pile of dirty laundry abandoned after a staff party. Nestled in its folds are an excess of poised utensils, neat piles of lecithin, and an emulsifier which seeps into the wove. A backdrop to accumulation, the folds are emphasised in Dutch still life painting to bring order to this chaos of turned about vessels. Tablecloths are rumoured to have functioned as a visual device for the national treasury to balance the books. Therefore the faint taste of coinage – metallic dysgeusia – accompanies the viscose and chemical texturiser, like the inside of an over-bitten cheek.
- 2 Cast replica salt cellar, 5 x 30cm, casting wax.  
A stranger to the contemporary table, this salt-cellar towers above the surrounding implements. The shareholders milling around the table are attracted to a carefully balanced pile of citrus fibre, which replaces the salt. With many benefits this soluble ingredient is adept at increasing any nutritional score. Impressed, a single shareholder licks their outstretched finger and dips it

into the fluoro dust. A sugary powder clings to their top lip as they resume a studied dialogue with a lingering colleague. Along the coastline sea-soaked turf was dug and the saltbearing earth was burned to ash. The flakes of smouldering earth were isolated and lengthened, then mixed with the shareholders' shame and craving, to replicate a perfect balance of salty and sweet.

- 3 Three half oyster shells, 5 x 8cm, resin.  
Tossed about the dishes, facing upwards, the slimed contents slowly congeal. The shareholders discuss the finer points of the directors' opening speech. Long and arduous, it nevertheless affects the lower rungs of the company employees. Falling about themselves they consider the bounteous table with glee, each one picturing their chosen food, salivating at the thought of new and delectable marketing strategies. The flavourists turn the pages of M.F.K. Fisher's *Consider the Oyster*, gingerly looking for clues in their turn from dry land to a spoiled catch. Upon dubious advice from his peers, Fisher's character traverses the city's oyster bars, indulging his desire to impress a new date. Spilling the contents of his stomach, the flavourists concoct a sample. This dream stew, 'stubbornly sensuous', dwells on a platter before the director.
- 4 Carved chalice, 15 x 20cm, casting wax.  
A vital part of the sensory process, the company is told that the laid banquet will remain for the foreseeable, all planned functions to be rescheduled. There is a growing unrest in the company, the offices of middle management back into the room. Last time a banquet had been left to mould the smell of rotting chemicals had clung

to their clothes for days. For this complex taste the flavourists wait for their specimens to spore. This is the first occasion rotted aromas are shared and consumed.

- 5 'More Overflow', dish with engraved text, 15 x 35cm, stainless steel.  
Light scratches to the surface of the culinary steel indicate its heavy use in a small catering business. Working in the cold, the dishwasher, with reduced feeling in her fingers, had knocked the platter against the sink with more regularity than usual. The fragmented sheen softened the long tubular formations of starches and derivatives. The flavourists have developed an aesthetic interpretation of the incident. Soapy citrus fibre nestles between their teeth, dispensing hints of bicarbonate throughout the dinner.
- 6 Truckle of rind, 40 x 40cm, wax.  
The team exchange smug glances between each other and receive a knowing nod from the director. Useful in dairy products, confectionery, meats, and beverages, the ingredients boast a myriad customer-friendly labels and could preserve for years if stored correctly. Shaped like a cheese wheel, the dried glucose syrup and maltodextrin dominate the composition. Requiring a decisive chewing action, the truckle of rind silences the corporation for the remainder of the tasting.
- 7 Butter knife, 3 x 15cm, silver.  
Jutting over the front edge of the table, the knife casts long shadows upon the descending face of the tablecloth. The company title can be read clearly engraved into the handle. The intern,

who had worked on the arrangement themselves, edges closer to the table. Deep in conversation, the rest of the party fails to notice the intern's use of the implement to mix together mounds of pectin. This action forms the basis of the flavourists' umami notes. A cool silver tang contrasts with this gritty sour to mark the end of the meeting.

- 8 Ornate rummer, 10 x 15cm, blown glass.  
Studded with prunts for maintaining a steady grip, the vessel of choice for merrier members of staff. While the minor chemical reaction spreads to both ends of the table, the rummer is the only implement that remains in their clutches. For this reason, many replicas are produced, the intern's portrait printed on the side, and the objects distributed amongst senior members during retirement parties. For their final taste, the flavourists infuse alcohol with a reduced arrogant chatter. The intoxicated company forgets the complexities of the flavour profile and proposes generous redundancy packages for each team member.

References:

- Roland Barthes, 'Ornamental Cookery', in *Mythologies*, London, Vintage Publishing, 1973, 85.
- John Berger, 'The Eaters and the Eaten', in *Selected Essays of John Berger*, London, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014.
- M. F. K. Fisher, 'Consider The Oyster', in *The Art of Eating: 50th Anniversary Edition*, Oregon, Harvest Publications, 2004.
- Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You', in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, North Carolina, Duke University Press, 2003.
- Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, *The Pleasures of the Table*, translated by Anne Drayton, London, Penguin Books, 2011.
- Ruth Alexander and Beatrice Pickup, *The Food Chain*, episode 'The Flavourists', podcast.

Rick Geene

## Three Anatomies of a Fall

The whodunnit that's not really about who done it has become a genre itself, which in turn has taught people how to read the trick. 'It's not the point to find out who's done it or what really happened': a conversation killer that posits its structural knowledge safely from the outside, that claims to understand how our desire for the missing answer is driving the narrative, to then refuse the sociality this missing answer could create – the product of bad education.

In the case of *Anatomy of a Fall*, the 2023 courtroom drama directed by Justine Triet, it's also the wrong answer. Daniel, an unusually sharp and perceptive 11-year-old, finds himself facing a contradiction, forced to make an impossible choice, precisely about whodunnit. His mother, Sandra (played by Sandra Hüller), has to defend herself against the accusation of murdering his father, Samuel. Their life is pried apart as the world is watching.

Sandra and Samuel are writers of fiction and, as it turns out, this isn't so different a job from those of the prosecutor and the defence lawyer. As both sides spin their narratives, it becomes compelling to believe that fiction is all there is. It's so hard to know what to believe! If everything is fiction, maybe every narrative is plausible, is valid, and this is really what the film is trying to say. To each their own truth (or rather, opinion). But though this perspective believes itself to keep things open, I would argue that it rather gives false closure, by imposing some idea of multiplicity which itself becomes the answer that closes the gap. Through this answer sociality is refused too, because this belief in multiplicity forecloses the possibility of agreeing with one another – on what happened, a reality out there, perhaps even something about truth? Even worse, it's an answer that accommodates a blindness to

the fact that there is an unexplained corpse and a child who has to deal with it.

A dead body found by Daniel, in the snow underneath the chalet. Four blood spatters on the wall, a puddle of blood. No murder weapon present. Both prosecution and defence bring their own anatomical reports in front of the jury, around which they speculate narratives that can explain these cold hard facts. It is through narrative that these materials become part of a network of signification; there can be different theories as to how they ended up there. The body and blood spatters themselves are incapable of providing the truth, but their existence is not a matter of narrative, and their materiality functions as a limit on the speculations produced in court – not anything is possible.

The prosecutor's case is grotesquely misogynistic, almost unbelievably so. She's a successful writer of fiction, her fame – so the prosecutor claims – achieved through selfishness, a selfishness that is usually associated with male artists, but one that Samuel – also a writer, without success – did not seem to have access to. Through his psychoanalyst in the witness stand, dead Samuel accuses Sandra of castrating him while his apparent selflessness is presented as a virtue that Sandra lacks. Bad mother.

The prosecutor's anatomical report speculates a murder in cold blood. First, a blow to the head with a heavy, blunt object (never found) as Samuel hangs backwards over the edge of the second-floor balcony (a position necessary to explain the blood spatters on the side of the shed); next, a deliberate push. The scenario plays out in Daniel's head, he doesn't believe it. But is the defence's plea of suicide more convincing? After the defence lawyer paints a caricature of a sad,

broken man, a loser who must've seen suicide as the only way out of his pathetic life, Sandra whispers to her lawyer: 'That wasn't Samuel.'

The fictions meant to seduce the jury do not leave us unaffected, and what about the fiction that is meant to seduce *us*? In an interview, Hüller reveals that the film was edited to be as ambiguous as possible. It was tested on multiple audiences, and moments where the audience 'lost' Sandra (because she was having too much fun, for example) were cut. (1) But where is it that we're being swayed? Consciously, we think we are weighing up the options, one against the other, this against that, but what about our unconscious investments? How can we know we're not getting lost ourselves, in this maze of affect, fiction, and identification?

In the very last scene, when Sandra lies down and Daniel's dog Snoop takes his place next to her, we seem to get what we were made to want; closure, through empty symbolism and the completion of an affective arch that the film has made us invest in for most of its 2,5-hour running time. After all, in the first 2 hours there is really only Sandra to identify with: the prosecutor is classically unlikeable; we empathise with son Daniel but only because he's a child and we feel he should be protected from what is said in court; and Samuel is dead. (2) And we might think we want to know the answer, but do we really even want to imagine the impending tragedy if she goes to

(1) Talk: Sandra Hüller | IFFR 2024', International Film Festival Rotterdam, YouTube, 26 February, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mc7i-euhTQc>

(2) That Samuel is dead of course doesn't mean we can't identify with him; who hasn't felt like a Samuel, endlessly procrastinating, not finishing projects, blaming circumstances. But now he is dead, and it's Sandra (and Daniel) we're following in court.

prison, leaving Daniel all alone? And if she doesn't go to prison, do we really want to imagine what it would mean for Daniel if she's guilty?

Now she's free, the dog lies down next to her; that must symbolise her innocence, right? *Right?* When a compelling fantasy of whole(some)ness threatens to lull us to sleep, only anxiety can cut us awake. What preceded the aforementioned scene could leave the viewer disturbed and uncertain, could have them leave the cinema questioning everything and – this is imperative – force them to engage in discourse, to get their hands dirty, to reveal where they are invested, to work through the material. How else to resist the lulling affective fiction of closure? How else to stay with the anxiety, with what it has to show?

The sequence: after being acquitted, Sandra comes home late, having stalled going home to her son – *Why?* She finds him asleep, the court-appointed caretaker watching over him. The caretaker wants to leave, Sandra asks her to stay another night – *What? Why?!* Sandra carries her son upstairs, a tender scene, until an uncomfortable thought imposes itself: Daniel is almost as tall as his mother, who carries him with such ease – *What else are those surprisingly strong arms capable of?* Upstairs, with the caretaker gone, it turns out Daniel was awake the whole time. We find out right away why he pretended to be asleep until after the caretaker had left. 'I was afraid of you coming home.' 'Me too, I was afraid to come home.'

*Why?*

The only reading I'm left with is an anxious one. The un-anxious reading, that takes the film as-is, is led by the unconscious investment of the viewer and their

fixed beliefs. By not questioning them, it takes them as true. To read anxiously is to puncture the fictions of affect and identification, to question all feelings except anxiety, which is a question in itself. An opening. Its uncertainty could lead us, though it's a means, not an end. Rather than imposing (for example, the idea of a lacking truth, or a happy multiplicity of coexisting opinions), it listens for the logic of the film itself.

Let me make my case.

Daniel says he always leaves when his parents are fighting. He wants to know nothing about it. The tragedy in question unfolds while Daniel is walking the dog, his parents alone in their isolated chalet. He finds his dead father on his return. In his testimony he claims he left because of the loud music his dad was playing. When the police interrogator points out an inconsistency regarding the volume of his parents' voices and that of the music, he gets confused, changes his story. Afterwards, Sandra tells him that it's okay to be confused, that he didn't lie, that he doesn't have to change his memories for anyone. But he's already altered one memory to hide the truth, and he will be forced to see that, within the fiction of the court, the currency of his memories is worth too much to hold on to the illusion of his unspoiled innocence.

Through Daniel we see both falls – murder on the second-floor balcony and suicide from the third-floor attic window – imagined, as they become memories forced upon him by the speculations of the court. A third, repressed option also exists. We see it first through Sandra's eyes, as she's returning from a walk with Daniel, who, because of his visual impairment, doesn't see it: A dummy falls from the third-floor attic window, its head bounces on the metal edge of the

shed (necessary to explain the blood spatters) before it hits the ground. The second time we see it is on video in court, where the spectators are told it tests the fall of a suicidal man jumping. What we see is a puppet being pushed.

Everyone has been shown what happened before Daniel can see it. In an early scene Sandra freezes, her expression filled with agony, as she stares at her lawyer walking over to inspect the attic window that he will later speculate a suicidal jump from. The stare feels like it lasts an eternity; she only snaps out of it when he addresses her again. We see it, we see the lawyer see it, but he does not respond, as though there is nothing to see. Without his authorisation, we feel we can't be sure. Later he tells her he doesn't care about the truth – if he saw anything, he doesn't want to know about it. But by then our reading of Sandra's stare has already been mediated by his lack of response.

Daniel can no longer avoid coming to terms with the nature of his parents' fighting when an audio recording is played in court in which the couple fights, first in a civil tone before screams become thuds and bangs – implying violence, though we're told by the defence they are photo frames thrown at the wall. He now hears what he couldn't see before.

In the recording, Samuel addresses a perceived inequality in caregiving tasks and the resulting lack of writing time he experiences. Sandra refuses Samuel's terms. She's not particularly sensitive in receiving his complaints – something the prosecutor greedily exploits. But Sandra is not wrong: many reasons he brings up as obstacles to his writing are of his own making. The chalet that needs a lot of work before it can become the B&B he dreams of, his choice to

homeschool their son, even – as Sandra points out – the very argument they are having now. He could be using the time to write instead. Sandra tells him there are many with writing careers who manage to work between caregiving tasks – she means many women. As she keeps raising during the trial, she herself has no trouble taking time to write. She can write when she’s drunk, she can write while an instrumental version of 50 Cent’s ‘P.I.M.P.’ blasts on repeat so loud that it’s impossible to have a normal conversation. Both of those things could be happening at the same time, and still she can write.

The fight keeps circling back to Daniel, and the accident that made him lose his sight. Samuel feels guilt about it, a guilt that is, not insignificantly, also the cause for his inability to fuck. The accident happened after Samuel was late picking up Daniel from school – late because Samuel selfishly *took the time to write*. His inability to take time to write is displaced onto everything; house, wife, son, analyst, medication, but it’s really his own. ‘Your generosity conceals something dirtier and meaner’, we hear Sandra tell Samuel before their fight turns violent. Selflessness obscuring his inability to be selfish. Generous, like a well-trained dog.

Of course, the content of the recording doesn’t really matter. Samuel had been secretly recording conversations in the house for a writing project. The fact that it exists at all, that Samuel started the recording before it turned into a fight, implies that he knew the conversation would turn *interesting*. It implies that he engineered the situation. After his second witness statement, Daniel states that if the trial cannot find out what exactly happened, they have to ask why it happened. Why did both fights, the second of which led to his father’s death, happen? Because Samuel instigated

them, the first day to record the fight for a writing project and on the fatal day by spitefully playing music so loud that an interview with Sandra had to be cut short. The prosecutor is right when he calls the fight from the recording a dress rehearsal for the fatal fight; they started the same way, Samuel pushing Sandra until she loses control, and they end the same way too – Sandra pushes back.

Daniel is forced to see that he isn’t just interpreting the case from the sidelines. He has stakes and he has power. In the weekend before the last court day, extended by his own request (to everyone’s surprise) in order to deliver a new witness statement, he tells his mother to leave the house so that he can make up his mind. In a strange sequence, he performatively poisons his dog Snoop. He claims it’s to convince himself of something related to his dad’s suicide, but at this point Daniel has seen enough of the case to understand it’s just as important that the scene is seen by his court-appointed caretaker and, by proxy, also the court. The dog’s vomit containing aspirin pills seems to retroactively make material a story about a prior suicide attempt of Samuel’s, a materiality the court needs with its obsession over blood spatters. This materiality is different though, in that its referent (the earlier attempt) remains purely discursive.

Still he isn’t sure. He demands from his caretaker she tell him what to do, that she give him the certainty he doesn’t have, that she resolve his anxiety. The order of the sequence is strange, because he has already poisoned his dog, and if that made him see the truth, why does he still need her advice? The question that plagues him is not about who did it, rather it’s a moral one. She tells Daniel she is not allowed to help him like that, and instead tells him that, sometimes, when we are not

sure, we just have to make a decision. Daniel has to stay with his anxiety without a promise of closure.

In *What IS Sex?*, Alenka Zupančič writes that, when encountering a contradiction, the desired outcome is not about making said contradiction disappear, or to simply look at it and say, ‘such a beautiful contradiction, I guess we’ll never know the answer’. Daniel can’t afford himself this kind of liberal chin stroking. Truth is about positionality, Zupančič writes, and *the position of truth* is about taking one’s place in the contradiction; it’s about a discursive intervention that shifts the position, that changes the very *form*. (3)

Hearing the recording of your parents’ fight made you see something that you had always managed to successfully, unconsciously, and passively repress: your parents are *both* not innocent. And, through witnessing the case, you lost your innocence too; a shift in position that requires you to lose your innocence again, consciously this time. Now *you* have to be the judge in their quarrel.

What do you do when the two options given to you are both not *it*? When the truth is a third, but it’s not an option? Taking up the position that is yours within the situation, you recognise the choice is not between the two scenarios in court: mother a winning girl boss or a murderous bitch, father a suicidal failure or a duped victim. Rather, it’s between the fictions of law and the truth of the family. This is a truth that certainly exists; your problem is that it cannot be *represented* – a contradiction inherent to the court of law itself. Forced to see that you still have to choose but neither of the two

(3) Alenka Zupančič, *What IS Sex?*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 2017, 71–72.

narratives in court do justice to the truth – that one of the two also takes away the family you still have, that that same option also blames everything on mother the way father blamed everything on mother – you choose family.

As someone on television quotes your mother from an interview – ‘Fiction can cover the tracks so that it can destroy reality’ – you re-member (as in, put together) the right memories, fabricating a fiction that closes the gaps, bringing the narrative to a satisfying completion. Through the story you tell – in which your dad talks about himself as if he is your service dog, selfless and servile – you communicate to the court that you’ve come to terms with his suicide. (4) The court is convinced.

You help your mother get away with murder. (5)

(4) ‘He’s a super dog, an outstanding dog. He spends his life imagining your needs. Maybe he’s tired, caring for others.’

(5) But can Daniel at least try to believe his father really killed himself? Can he regain his innocence through repression? That seems very unlikely. In fact, it’s very unlikely that *anyone* would believe it was suicide. Samuel’s whole life revolved around the guilt he felt towards his son; he would’ve never jumped where Daniel would find him. Nevertheless, Daniel and his mother will have to make this reality work out.



Katrina Palmer

*A Tutorial With Hegel*

Extract from:  
Katrina Palmer, *The Dark Object*,  
Bookworks, 2010

Addison Cole stands next to a low comfortable chair that can be opened-out and used to sleep on; it's a chair-bed, with a pile of folded bedding on its seat. A couple of blankets and a sheet form the neatly stratified oblong stack on top of a pillow. The pillow-case is printed with a blue and yellow floral pattern, which is faded.

Writing the Žižek stories, the episode with the Absalon book, its accompanying attempt to produce an essay and a distinct reduction of supplies in recent food parcels has left Addison feeling hungry and resentful and has been a huge distraction from the objective, which is of course, as Addison recalls, to make material work and not to let The School of Sculpture Without Objects succeed in suppressing creative activity. The visceral physical body has to be brought into the sterile cell, an object needs to be made that will counter the terrible thinness of Addison's experience and completely undermine the School's virtual existence. The means of producing this thing must be carefully considered. Addison walks over to the desk, perches on the edge of the plastic chair, picks up a pen, surreptitiously writes three words about creative practice and then stealthily conceals them within the lines of a half-written story: assemble; appropriate; fabricate.

'The School will never guess I have an object in mind', Addison whispers, and this suggestion sets off a muddy stream of speculation: If the object could simply be the objective of touching another person and whether it would be enough to have this or any objective in mind without ever having to actually create it as a physical reality, and if ideas *are* things but ones that have only the slightest material presence or none at all, or else are actually so dense that they are like dark matter or a completely different kind of entity, and if there is

nothing outside of materiality then the objective is not enough because it is nothing, and if the object is nothing more than a fantasy how would that relate to presence when a fantasy could, in fact, be a very carnal and not an intellectual thing, and yet some of the most intense sensual, even sexual experiences can actually take place, not physically, but in the arena of the mind. Thoughts coalesce and Addison imagines a theoretical-co-erotic essay, bursting with explicit imagery spawned from the excitement of ideas. The momentum of these musings slows to a stop. The deliberations are not actually progressing, instead they're moving back towards themselves in a jumble of inconsistent semi-lucid thought paths. To move forward, something needs to change, someone else's ideas must intervene. A little deference to the pedagogic order might be required. Addison suddenly knows what has to happen, jumps up with a start, and slams a hand on the table to give the revelation emphasis, 'I must demand a tutorial!'

Addison walks to the chair-bed, moves the stack of bedding from its seat and sits down to think silently before rushing to the desk and opening the lap-top. The production of an object would have to be put to one side, if only temporarily, because a tutorial has to be orchestrated. It will take considerable dexterity to fabricate the events and conditions necessary to achieve this objective. Addison, who generally pays very little attention to the unremarkable notice board on the School intranet start-up page, is now looking at it intently. There is the timetable, and next to it is the Internal Memorandum (which the student has never bothered to read) and just below is another notice. Have there always been three notices? Addison is so accustomed to the notice board's insignificance that the need not to look at it at all has made any looking at it seem forced. But now, something has caught the

corner of Addison's eye and, frustratingly, whatever the thing that has changed is, it seems to be merging in with everything that is the same. Addison is systematically scanning the screen from left to right, up and down, but the notice will not un-conceal itself. About to give up, Addison starts to turn away from the computer then quickly turns back and yes, there it is, a new one, just below the other two: A visit and tutorials by G.W.F. Hegel scheduled for 'today'.

Eager for critical feedback and not put off by the fact that there is no available time slot, Addison sends the notice to print, picks up a pen, scribbles, 'Please fit me in if possible' across the bottom of the page and tosses the desperate request into the rubbish bin.

Pelumi Adejumo

*In the Liminal Space  
of Spirit-Being:  
On Spirit and Deity  
Possession in the Poems  
of Logan February*

Poetry translation by Pelumi Adejumo in  
collaboration with Flora Valeska Woudstra

*Abíkú be deathless, or death itself.  
A knife to the throat be nothing but prayer.  
Abíkú got teeth made from bullets—  
he be tearing white flesh from beneath.  
Abíkú got many names  
begging him to stay.*

*He know he not supposed to, he know  
his time been long swallowed like a whole  
damned fist. His frigid fate, also a fist,  
curled up and tossed in the breeze.*

*You should be gone by now—most die  
before they turn three—how did you  
even make it to eighteen.*

*Every lip rubbed raw from praying  
that the child don't fold into hissself.*

*Abíkú be origami venerating itself.  
A firm tomato dripping sweet, red juice*

*without being sliced. & yes he do fear  
the knife, but only when it be in his hands.*

*Abíkú ben zonder dood, of de dood zelf.  
Een mes tegen de keel, ben enkel een gebed.  
Abíkú met kogels als tanden—  
verslindt wit vlees van binnenuit.  
Abíkú draagt vele namen  
die hem smeken: blijf.*

*Hij weet—hij behoort niet, hij weet  
zijn tijd is al lang opgeslokt als 'n volle  
verdomde vuist. Zijn kille lot, ook een vuist,  
gekruld en in de wind gegooit.*

*Je had al heen moeten zijn—de meesten sterven  
nog voor hun derde—hoe heb je  
het gered tot achttien.*

*Elke lip gebarsten van het bidden  
opdat het kind niet in zichzelf vouwt.*

*Abíkú ben origami, zelf vererend.  
Een stevige tomaat die druïpt van zoet rood sap*

*zonder gesneden te worden. & ja hij kent angst  
voor het mes, maar alleen als het in zijn handen is.*

The above poem is by Logan February, a non-binary Nigerian poet and songwriter. Their research interests include comparative literature, psychoanalysis, mysticism, verse narrative/epic poetry, and West African history and theatre. They write about love, loss, and mental vulnerability.

In the poem 'Dúrójayé', we are dealing with an entity surpassing horizontal time. Dúrójayé means 'the one who waits for the joy of life'. Àbikú is an entity that enters the world together with a newborn, but before the newborn has a chance to grow, Àbikú takes it to the other side again. This keeps happening repeatedly to the bearer. Àbikú means 'spirit child' and can be translated to 'stillborn' or 'births the dead'. 'The word is describing both the lost child and the entity. This dichotomy, the play between spirit-being and human being, can be seen in the poems by February. In the poem 'Dúrójayé' the entity speaks of itself in third person. With Àbikú, the Yorùbá culture gives an interpretation to the cruel experience of miscarriage or the loss of a child. When the pregnant one has had multiple miscarriages, a scar is left on the skin of the child in prayer before it's placed back into the earth. This way, when a new child is born, they can check whether it's born with this same spirit.

Àbikú is a phenomenon that knows many shapes within the poetry tradition of the Yorùbá. Two famous 'Àbikú's were written by Wole Soyinka and John Pepper Clark. Living, breathing children are taught about the spirit as well; they are told the entity can take on the shape of trees and animals. When at night you think you hear a baby cry near an old tree, a portal to the spiritual world, stay away. Like the baobab in the poem by Pepper Clark. The question arises why and how these myths came into existence. According to some,

it started around a period of time where child mortality rates were very high, and where the medical understanding fell short in offering explanations. It is in these gaps that storytelling has an important function within society. Not to explain, but to soothe.

In the version of 'Àbikú' by February, it's not a child haunted by this spirit but a young adult on the edge of a precipice. The spirit takes over the thoughts and actions of this person. This interpretation of psychological distress as spirits and entities taking over, instead of a condition in one's brain, is one peculiarity of Yorùbá culture. A mythologising, perhaps a distraction from the social conditions of what torments an unwell person, but not conditioning it to the person's own behaviour or faults. The line 'that the child don't fold into hisself' suggests a secret that the child might be born with, carrying with it, and hides away. This theme of hiding and covering is a recurrent one in the poems by February. A rattling closet door, the self-buried, the returning image of origami; its meaning is left to the reader to unfold. To the queer ones, fugitive or in hostile environments, it might be far too recognisable.

Within the spirituality of the Yorùbá, spirits, deities, and beings live together with us humans, and they have an active role in this world. The infamous òrisha Òshun is one of them: daughter of Yemoja, goddess over the rivers, womb of the sea, and bearer of fertility. February ends their collection of poetry *In the Nude* with a poem titled 'Òshun', where the 'I' becomes the goddess herself, and pain caused by grief is overflowing, and washed away.

*If I were an òrìshà,  
 I would have gone mad with grief.  
 My white dress would turn yellow  
 This time tomorrow, if I cried hard enough.  
 I can cry hard enough.  
 I have cried hard enough.  
 I know this always happens.  
 This is what's supposed to happen:  
 you turn into water,  
 you become a river.  
 It is not magic—  
 death has a part in everything.  
 If I were an òrìshà,  
 no one would go mad with grief.  
 This time tomorrow,  
 grief will not be  
 a part of everything.*

*Als ik een òrìshà was  
 zou rouw me de gekte in drijven.  
 Mijn witte jurk zou geel kleuren  
 morgen op dit uur, als ik hard genoeg huilde.  
 Ik kan hard genoeg huilen.  
 Ik heb hard genoeg gehuild.  
 Ik weet het, dit gebeurt altijd.  
 Zo hoort het te gebeuren:  
 je vormt om tot water  
 je wordt een rivier.  
 Het is geen magie—  
 de dood neemt deel aan alles.  
 Als ik een òrìshà was  
 zou rouw niemand de gekte in drijven.  
 Morgen op dit uur  
 zal rouw niet  
 overal deel van zijn.*

Monique Todd

*Parenthesis, Will,  
and Dissent (some notes)*

Parenthesis cuts up but does not condense, its signature marks – dashes, brackets, and commas – represent needless appendages and cautious style, according to Theodor Adorno, by intervening graphically on flow. Its sonic prompt is particularly ambiguous, or ambivalent, towards the managerial imperatives on pitch, volume, and breath cued by other grammatical modes. Even so, the voice responds to the marks. To signal text appearing in brackets for instance, the voice quietens and depresses, as if retracting to the back or to the side – both volume and volumetric vectors are adjusted to mark its difference from ‘uncluttered’ lines. Words might acquire speed and lightness, momentarily frazzling the atmosphere of reading, puncturing the solidity of constatives (or, exposing existing holes), cramping whatever figure is being drawn.

A man mugging me—therefore inverted, not just in relation to maturity—seeing I’m frightened is almost considerate by not hitting me when I struggle with him, though finally giving him the purse.

As such, sounding parenthesis involves spatially, temporally, and rhythmically adjusting a line’s flow and its sense-making drive whilst also preserving the sonic terms that ratifies the voice’s ‘centre point’ or ‘equilibrium’ – to which aesthetic notions of intactness, originality, authenticity, rootedness, fluency, and neutrality often apply. The category of the citizen is administered in part by this criteria, and fluxes according to cultural and socio-political-economic contexts, but no less works to optimise the speaking subject as an efficient vehicle for (singular) speech. The speaker must be, and is assumed to be, passively transparent to themselves and others – is this what hearing is ... the perception of transparency? Might it be possible that dysfluency –

the disruption and interruption of the forward flow of speech – is passivity’s antagonist? How does parenthesis relate to the metabolics of authority, vitality, validity, truth, accountability, exchange, value, and the sedimentation of concision? Where do we want to land?

The naivete—on my part—he’s depressed.

—————

He’s depressed—by mugging me—corresponds to me having a job.

In *The Politics of Delivery (Against Poet Voice)*, Holly Pester reflects on the descending tonality that indicates an impending closure and announces finality – ‘gravity’s pull.’ But she makes a specific point about ‘a will to descend’, a second force that brings upon an end, to highlight how the descent and its directive should not be taken as a completely natural arc to speech and writing. This ‘will’ is orientated towards the solace (and pleasures) of conclusivity, which ‘gravity’s pull’ can’t alone achieve. Pester briefly sketches a political map for this orientation by recalling a moment of catachresis: ‘I recently made a typo in a text message about attending a demo, writing “descent” instead of “dissent.”’ The melodics of micro-conclusion fabricate ‘knowingness’ against the dissenting material of our lives. But the ‘will to descend’ is also a desire for pleasure beyond and through the melancholy inherent in articulation – its ongoing contention with an unknown loss. What are the cadences and grammatical turns that speak to the possibilities of ‘dissent’ in ‘descent’?

In *On Palinode*, Lisa Robinson theorises on the qualities of the ode or song that retracts or recants what the poet wrote in a previous poem. In the retractive move, the



writer doesn't fully subtract what was initially written but adds and annotates, exposing its unfinishedness by unsealing faults and missteps. The palinode is a temporal intervention on 'presence', the previous poem no longer continues to be what it was. Suspending what it addresses, the palinode snatches the gravitational pull of the authority initially assumed. That is, the descent registered in the previous text is dissented with and takes dissent up as a form. Robinson writes: 'because palinode is relational or prepositional, like emotion, it has to do with change, but not with the propulsive will'. Comparatively, how does parenthesis contend with will? Does it challenge the propulsion at the level of a sentence's inner architecture, prompting a turn back, a readdress, which inevitably results in a deceleration? Does it make the descent social and crowded, thus stagnating its route? Is parenthesis a critique on production (as it produces)? Is parenthesis the sound of a citizen hesitant (but still compelled) to will?

Having an employer, I'd made jokes seen by him to be inappropriate, had offended him— I make jokes because it's in the past (is therefore sentient—I'm fairly immature in age and my offending him is un-intentional).

References:

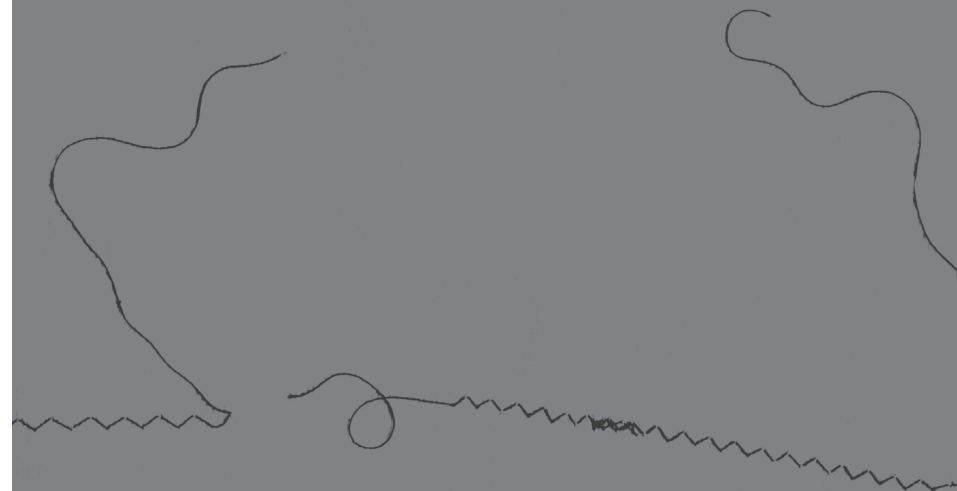
- Leslie Scalapino, *That They Were At The Beach*, New York: Litmus Press, 1995. (All the indented quotes are from this text.)
- Holly Pester, *The Politics of Delivery (Against Poet Voice)*, Amsterdam: The Last Books, 2020.
- Palinode, *Glossary Terms*, The Poetry Foundation, accessed January 27, 2024, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/learn/glossary-terms/palinode>.
- Lisa Robertson, *On Palinode*, Chicago: Chicago Review (Vol. 51, Issue 4), 2005.

Johanna Hedva

*Trompe-L'œil*

Extract from:

Johanna Hedva, *Your Love is Not Good, And Other Stories*, 2023



## Trompe-l'oeil

*literally “deceives the eye,” appearance of reality achieved by use of minute, often-trivial details or other effects in painting; a visual illusion used to trick the eye into perceiving a painted detail as a three-dimensional object.*

With Zinat, I remember everything, and I remember everything about our time together because, though it was my first experience of love, after, of course, my mother, it wasn't actually love. It was something more like a comminution, a defining disintegration, it produced a truth, fundamental to survival, the fact of how easily and reliably the body, or any small thing inflicted by the aim of another thing, can be ground down to nothing. This is love, and this is not love.

Her name was Zinat Fatemah Asgari.

Zinat A was what she called herself. First day of class, professor stumbling over her name, she interrupted, “Call me Zinat A.” *Zee-knot Ah*. The professor chuckled, “Well, okay then,” and he called her *Zee-gnat Ey*.

When he got to my name, he also mangled me, the Eastern European first name from my mother's mother and my Korean father's last name, neither of which he even tried to get right.

I had just begun my second year of art school. Zinat was in the sculpture class we were required to take as sophomores. The professor who taught it had done so for a hundred years. His name was something sturdy and manly and easy to say, like Jack Potts or Joe Dodge or Bob Mudd. He was tall and Superman-shaped, with a gray bun and beard, in his sixties, and he only ever wore a white T-shirt tucked into jeans and a belt the same color as his tan work boots. He said things like, “It's art if it tells the truth,” and, “Duchamp

was more of a genius than Picasso.” He'd hold up thick fingers to count off the great artists of the twentieth century: Pollock, de Kooning, Warhol, Johns, Serra, man, man, man. He'd been an art star in the 1980s, solo shows at the Whitney, whatever. He'd tell the class, unendingly, “New York—New York or Florence—*that's* where you gotta go if you wanna be a real artist.” This was in the twenty-first century in Los Angeles.

On the first day of Jack Potts's class, I stared at Zinat the entire time. She seemed older than everyone else, and she smelled intoxicating, I would later learn it was a musk perfume. Her body was long, rail-thin, and boyish, no curves of any kind, as though someone had drawn two parallel lines to silhouette her shape, and when she moved, she sort of floated and flopped, half ballerina, half newborn horse. I had never seen someone wear a face like hers, the expression a mask of boredom and intelligence. Her eyes were large and black, edged with thick lines that swept off the sides and lowered into sharpened points near her nose. Her hair was so black and shiny it resembled wet tar, and looked just as heavy. As I looked at her clothes, each day a new dress, which I studied every time I saw her, I began to understand that they were all hand-made, not badly fitted the way my mother's had been but custom-tailored for her, elegant, simple dresses of plain but fine cotton, silk, or voile that looked like expensive nightgowns, with a line of stitches down each side and long sleeves. They stopped above her ankles, enough fabric to swirl around her when she walked but narrow through the torso and waist. Each dress was hand-painted in fuchsia, saffron, acid-yellow, cerulean, absinthe green, talon-like flowers, large eyes furred with eyelashes, scraggly looking suns grouped like barnacles, long forked tongues the color of a red stoplight, though some dresses were only patterns, wobbly polka dots and irregular stripes, and others

were spans of tableaux with bent nude figures, sleeping, praying, fucking. Some had writing on them, strokes of Farsi that I couldn't understand, the curves and dots exquisite in broad, black paint. Her shoes were also homemade, chunks of heavy canvas sewn together and wrapped in strips of grosgrain ribbon that trailed behind her in many colors. A maypole. She never wore a bra, and her small, triangular breasts were, to my eyes, relentlessly perfect. A single, opaque orb the color of milk and the size of a marble hung from an invisible fishing line around her neck. It rested in the hollow there, like a growth of bone poking through the skin. Later, when I saw her naked, it was still there. I never saw her without it, her own moon.

Within weeks of the new semester, she started hanging out with the group of cool boys. There were about four or five of them, one mixed-race, the rest white, all of them with tattoos of barcodes or words in all-capital letters, paint-spattered jeans, T-shirts of naked pinup girls, logos from the 1990s, money to buy drugs on a regular basis, shitty cars with good stereos. I've heard that some of them have had bits of careers since then, but mostly they've disappeared into graphic design jobs, branding, posting pictures of themselves with their more successful friends. They made large, arrogant sculptures out of expensive materials that had to be manhandled, metal, neon, so much plexiglass. Against the rules, they installed their work in the hallways, blocked the doors to the building, wrapped campus trees in Saran wrap and duct tape, and when they received a notice from the school of a fine and disciplinary action, they posted this next to the work as its title.

They were Jack Potts's boys. He gave them good grades, even though they never went to class, and he made them tutors to the sculpture studio, giving them keys for all-hours access. Zinat soon became one of

them and, by extension, a Potts boy. He allowed her to work in the studio instead of going to class, making her own work rather than the assignments. She'd appear in class only for her own critiques, to present mystifying objects that looked like the stuff decorating her dresses but in loopy, shiny 3D, tubes and masses and coils made of stainless steels and resins, rare materials bent to her use.

She had a massive black dog that never left her side. Without a leash or collar, he walked beside her in the hallways and rested at her feet while she worked. He was sleek and graceful and immense, lion-sized with a proud, knowing face, the kind of dog you imagine will save you from a house fire. He reminded me of Nyx before she was crippled. If someone came near Zinat, he raised his head and fixed his eyes in defensive alarm. Once I was working in the studio on an assignment where we had to make a sphere out of cardboard, and I listened to her conversation with some of the boys. She had a deep voice, like a man's. "Yesterday I came into my room and there was blood everywhere—everywhere! 'Gohar Taj!' I shouted, but I knew he was hiding under the bed. There he was, one of my bloody pads in his mouth, blood all over his face, and he was *chewing* and *licking* and just like"—she wagged her tongue, drooling—"loving it. *Loving. It.*"

The boys made sounds of disgust.

"No, no," she said. "Haven't you ever had coq au vin?"

Thinking of using Zinat as a model prickled my scalp, that someone looking at my paintings of her would see my bald desire, a record of my sucking inspiration out of her body. This was my first taste of such a thing, and the prickly heat pushed around my ears and behind my eyes and went into my stomach enough that I finally did it.

I found Zinat's email on the list of sculpture tutors in Potts's office. I wrote something timid and overly sweet, the way I used to write to my muses then—*If you don't want to or are busy I totally understand no matter what thanks anyway.* Now I write with a vagueness that protects me, at least on the surface. I know how to wrap up my words indeterminately so they have a sheen of importance and mystery, that my work is so very important and this invitation for them to participate in it is an extension of my graciousness, but beneath it all, I'm still petitioning, so familiar it feels genetically coded, my mother tongue.

She responded in lowercase, no punctuation, not even words:

funfun / have  
u n i  
coooo  
kiss  
z

Zinat and I were never in a relationship the way relationships tend to be defined. We were not a couple, not girlfriends—at least, Zinat would have never said we were. We were, though, together: naked in each other's rooms as we got dressed for parties, openings, school, drunk and high, tired and hungry, we slept in each other's beds after we'd talked until very late and fell asleep like children at slumber parties, we left notes, bits of twigs, pieces of cloth under the windshield wipers of each other's cars, we brought each other gifts of flowers, books, pages of articles, shells, we knew each other's dreams because we told them to each other, and we shared with each other the secret opinions that made us bitches, the wickedness we felt for "them," the other women in our program who we felt made women artists look bad, the girls who painted sad-eyed self-por-

traits of their skinny bodies with sharp elbows and knock-knees and called themselves the muses of Egon Schiele, whose eyes frightened and mouths closed when Zinat or I talked during critique about feminism and political lesbianism and how the clitoris has twice as many nerve endings than the penis.

And we especially hated those art boys who Zinat regarded as her foolish servants, who stank of their plexiglass and hangovers, who spoke the loudest and the longest in critiques, proud of their complicated and unintelligible sentences with references to Deleuze or Badiou or whoever, who all said we made "angry" art, art that was "too insular" and therefore "pretentious," or "too bodily" and therefore "emotional," or "too emotional" and therefore "just therapy." They accused us of being lesbians but framed their accusations as a rhetorical question, "Well, aren't you?" as if it were a polite gesture on their part, to reveal to us our error in judgment, so we'd sloppily grope each other's breasts in response and feel pleased with ourselves for our performance of transgression.

How cliché of me, I know. It's perhaps the most universal story for a queer girl to fall into the hole of a straight girl and not be able to get out.

We'd meet in dark, quiet bars that had candles on the tables and languish in gossip and insults. Zinat drank sangria, I Baileys with one ice cube, this was our earliest ritual, indulging our eccentricity. The first time we met was for a drink, to talk about her modeling for me, so I could explain her purpose to my work, which was what she called it, "I want to know my purpose to your work," and I was born into something when she said that. She chose the bar, which had no name or sign, just an address and a closed door. She arrived in a long beige trench coat that hugged her lithe waist, and it was the first time I'd seen a sophisticated, womanly garment being worn by someone my age. We were

all scraping by on student loans and here was Zinat, wearing something that must have cost more than rent. In that instant, I noticed my obliviousness to my own body, to the fact that I'd always slouched, kept my hair flat, long, and plain, like my white mother's thin mane, wearing thrift-store dresses two or three sizes too large for me, the silhouette another thing I'd inherited from my mother. At the sight of Zinat in her fine coat, and, when she took off the coat, her smart tits unembarrassed through the thin fabric of her dress, the dark circles of her nipples showing through, and the sight of her ordering her drink, barely looking at the waiter while I gave him my politest regard, and his eyes fastened on to her and not me, I saw the power of the artist for the first time. It was a power different than my mother's—who, yes, was a painter, like me. But my mother was monstrous. Her power seized attention with its tumult, the hysterical woman artist channeling some supernatural vision, a pretty banal archetype. But Zinat's power was magnetic. It put something together instead of blasting it apart. It was a performance she was in control of, it wasn't a mask she wore but rather a kind of glamorous mask she slipped over the face of whoever was watching her. It gave her dominion over what *she* saw. She could transform what she was looking at into what she wanted to see.

Of course, this power came from money. Zinat had it, had always had it, and I didn't. Even though Zinat was Iranian and did not remotely pass as white, she acted like a white girl, not just unaware of race, class, and how she was read or not read but bountiful and extravagant with all the freedom afforded to her, with how the entire world belonged to her. If a stranger stared at her on the street, it must only be because she was mesmerizing, not because she was a brown woman dressed in bizarre clothes. If people desired her, she simply accepted it as the natural order, of course you

desire me, of course you can't stop looking. Without hesitation, she conflated this with her art, of course you can't stop looking at it, of course you want it, and this conflation didn't bother her because her art and her self *were* the same thing.

Now, twelve, thirteen?, years later, I know I've learned to practice a version of such confident ownership, although mine is a performance I worked on by watching Zinat use hers. At first, I felt jealous that Zinat's uniqueness seemed to come from her like a kind of ubiquity, as if the well of her was more beatified than mine by birthright, and I hunched over at the fact that I'd had to work so hard to cultivate mine over the years, but now I see that for artists, it doesn't matter how your self comes to be constructed, nor out of what materials, because the distinction between authenticity and performance is meaningless. All that matters is if it accomplishes what it needs to, what you want it to, that it looks good, that it feels right, and this conclusion itself becomes part of your authority to demonstrate that you are unbothered by questions of provenance, by something as false as veracity. It's a trick of perspective, of depth. Like a painting—a two-dimensional surface that, when looked at, becomes three-dimensional, a whole world with its own laws of physics, and you feel as though you could reach into it and walk around in its rooms.

The house of the important independent curator was in Los Feliz. His living room, where the show was installed, was as large as a gymnasium with ceilings nearly twenty feet up, the walls so immense and white that they seemed like panels of light. I'd never seen so many people at an opening before, the crowd was thick and I couldn't see whatever was hanging on the walls, but I started to feel glittery with anticipation of what Zinat might have made about me, of me.

She came through the crowd like Moses.

I watched how she looked at everything, her eyes frolicking at herself, though her face was still set in its marmoreal mask. She was wearing an electric-pink coat with voluminous shoulders, though I saw the hem of one of her regular dresses peeking out by her feet. I thought of all her proclamations of fame and success, her determination that was also casual, of course I'll be famous, but also, I want it so bad. I tried to congratulate her, I think I said, "It's starting, Zee, you're on your way!"

But she turned to me, her eyes serious. "Please do me a favor." She gripped my shoulder. "Watch Taj tonight. He will be nervous if he can't see me, but if he is with you, he will be calm. He knows you. Please keep him close."

"Okay," I said, and then she was gone, swallowed back into her evening. The crowd closed around me, I couldn't find Taj, how was I supposed to watch him in this place? He didn't have a leash, he was the size of a man. We'd have to sit outside, I decided, we'd smoke alone, wait for her, keep a vigil. But I wanted to see the art first, I wanted to see me.

When I got close enough, I saw that the pieces on the walls were composed of cut paper and photographs collaged into circular shapes of bright primary colors. They were distinctly Zinat, they looked like her sculptures and dresses, but, I saw then, it was easy, they

were not very good. They looked naïve, whimsical, too symmetrical. It is difficult to say where the boundary to kitsch is, but Zinat had passed through. The bluntness of it sat on my chest, an ugly little creature squatting on my sternum. I felt embarrassed for Zinat. But also for me.

I watched the crowd, did they know the show was about me? I came to one that formed a face or a shape that inferred a face. There was nothing between me and the work, I was a narrow dirt path beneath her beautiful shoes, but it was not me. It was of Zinat, a self-portrait made of cut-up photographs. I stared at its pieces. I could make out a familiar texture, an uneven, earthy surface I'd seen before.

It was from one of my paintings. It was a photograph of one of my paintings.

Were they all made from my paintings? The label next to it gave its title—my name, then a colon, then *The Lovers*.

A lie.

Why did she think she was great? I tasted something gross. I went around the room again, looking, all of them made from my work, looking again, but they didn't look like my paintings cut to pieces, they were just photos of dirt. It gives you everything else, but does wealth also allow you the freedom to make bad art?

I lurched out of the room and found myself in a less crowded hallway, scraps of conversation snapping in my ears, "feminist," "heavy-handed," "visceral." More than once, "visceral," which was the art world's way of saying it was made by someone who is not a white man. I remember distinctly hearing a guy say, "Zee-gnat Ey, the new self-appointed guru." I found the bar and drained a plastic cup of sugary wine, then another. I looked around, I touched my hair, I breathed with comfort that it was still there.

I noticed that no one was looking at me, no one was looking at me, no one. I thought of my mother, her dark house, her aloneness, the paintings she'd labored over, how she made so much that was never seen by anyone, except herself and me. We were seen, we saw. What is an artist. It was her world, then mine, willed into existence through the sheer force of her aim. What she wanted became what I wanted.

That's how it works: what is yours first belonged to someone else.

I hid in the bathroom, splashed water on my face, went upstairs. I found a dim room, a relief after those huge panels of light. I slipped through clusters of people, but I closed my ears to what they were saying. My head was underwater. Did I let this happen? Was it my fault? I was trying to get to something to lean on, then I heard a voice, Zinat's voice, coming from the room next door. It was raised, sharp, a chant of spitting sounds and flashes of yelling. The room was like this one, murky people and sunken furniture, I wished I could find one of its walls, but they were far away. I moved toward her, the voice, and found her spread on a sofa. There were two or three men around her, crowded like onlookers to a crash. When I got close enough, I heard her saying names of women, St. Catherine of Siena, Simone Weil, Karen Carpenter, and then her own name, "Zinat Fatemah Asgari!" which she yelled much louder than the rest, and I assumed she was delivering another one of her lectures on overlooked women and how we would one day be famous. Then I saw light come from her face. It undid all my certainties about her. I pushed the men away and knelt. She wasn't looking at any of us and her face was still the smooth stone, but there was water pouring down it, "Then they took me to the hospital *again*, the fourth time! I was so sick of it by then, I was in a trance, I somnambu... somnambu... oh, what is the *word*,

I was in a trance! But at last I dove into my body with *extraordinary* accuracy, you see, and I lived—*lived*—so sweet it was to *be* like that, in silence, the silence *erupted* from *within* me, I created it, me, from nothing! Listen, listen now,” she reached out to grab someone, my hand darted up and caught her arm at the same time that the men leaned backward, like they were too close to a fire that had started to take. A wave of nervous chuckling passed through them. “Whoa, now,” one of them said. Then Zinat hissed, “*Listen,*” and tugged my arm and pulled me into her lap, “I was surrounded by *light.*” Her eyes were starry, with the look that drunk people get where they look confused and angry about being confused. One of the men gave a snide laugh and said, “Fuck, this chick is *fucked,*” and the rest of them laughed, loose and loud, relieved to have an explanation. For at least an hour I stayed with her, clenching her arm as it waved around, all my weight on her lap, keeping her prone on the sofa, while beneath us the city had gathered to look at her bad work that wanted so earnestly to be great. I noticed that her shoes had fallen off and her big pink coat was gone and there was a wine stain on the front of her dress, huge and brown. It was immeasurably sad to see, one of those beautiful hand-painted dresses ruined, her feet bare without their maypole ribbons, oh, where was Taj? She kept speaking in the same monotonous, hissing chant, it floated in and out of my ears, I didn’t know what she was talking about. She talked about her body “quaking,” she talked about “the protest of appetite,” I flattened my hand on her chest and felt the thudding of her blood. In between words, she made gurgling noises of suffering. Finally, she leaned over, pushing me out of the way, and vomited a flood of red onto the floor. The wine stench hit as she grabbed at my face and said, “I didn’t eat today, not one thing, it’s coming back, the silence! The light!” And I finally understood, I under-

stood, and then she shrank right there, she became a girl wilted into her illness, as my mother, too, had withered, bent beneath the icy-black ghost that sat in her brain and sang to her, just to her, the hymn of how she is not who she wants to be.

At some point, she stopped making noise and seemed to fall asleep. By then, the room was empty, except for the two of us. I peeled myself off her and went to wash my hands. They were flecked with vomit and wet with her sweat, then I saw there was a brown stain on my own blouse. I felt exhausted at this, crushed. I went downstairs. The crowd down there had thinned but not by as much as I wished.

I looked at the work Zinat had made, the vanity and pride of it, and I thought of her pushing her manicured fingers down her throat.

Zinat—whose name is no longer Zinat Fatemah Asgari but Zoe Benedict.

I’ve seen her picture on the social media pages of fashion magazines, at an opening, at a benefit in the Hamptons. Her hand-painted dresses have been replaced by designer gowns.

She holds her young blond children in her arms, holds the hand of her white British husband, an art collector and philanthropist whose name is everywhere, they have a foundation together. In the captions, she is listed as his wife, never an artist on her own, and she grins, something I never saw her do in the years I knew her. Her smile is happy, safely happy, still sure of its value.

I tilted away from the wall and started to walk through the crowd, looking for her dog. The house was huge. Taj was nowhere. There was another room next to the room with her work. It was somehow as large as the gallery room, and I was lost. The walls of this room were bare, but it had dozens of people in it, where had



they all come from? I leaned against a wall that had materialized, mercifully, and rested my head against it and felt empty. The faces of the crowd were smudges of gray, brown, dirty white. Where was Taj?

Then I heard a scream, a full-throated woman's scream, like in a horror movie. It came from outside. It made everything become a movie. We didn't want that so late into the evening, we all turned lazily. When the scream repeated itself, we had to allow the room's composure to cave in. We listed toward the front door, dribbled onto the lawn. Even more like a movie, the screams came one after the other now. "Jesus, *what?*" a woman said. Someone stumbled drunkenly at a ninety-degree angle to a flutter of chortling. The drunk person laughed the loudest.

And then it was Zinat, kneeling in the driveway in a halo from a car's headlights at her back. How did she get down here? She was viciously awake, her eyes wild with fury. A man was leaning over her, the bottom half of her was black. She was howling, the climax of the movie, but wrong, it was wrong, too shredded, someone laughed at it. She bent over the black in her lap, wrapped her arms around it, pulled it toward her. It was her crown jewel lying still, sprawled in the road. He was too heavy for her to lift, but she still tugged at him. A voice behind me calmly said, "Is that her dog or something?" and there were murmurs in the crowd. I saw the man leaning over her, frantic. "It just jumped in front of the car! I couldn't see it! It's night! No one would've seen this thing!"

Zinat kept making her dirty, violent noises, rocking the big dark body back and forth. I pushed through the crowd, called her name. She jerked her head up, and the serpent let its tail fall from its mouth. The end. Her eyes landed on me, and she lifted her arm and quaked a finger. Her hand was shining with blood. I tried to speak, to apologize, but I only felt a fast, slimy

rush of humiliation spread across my face. She said one word next, it sounded like an egg getting cracked, I didn't know what to do but to turn around and go away from it, her serrated voice shooting it like an arrow, I felt it land in my back, the last word she ever said to me: "You—"

*Checking In...* (1)

(1) The title of this text refers to the subject of the email thread that this essay derives from. 'Checking in' is a common expression of curiosity regarding a person's wellbeing.

As of 4th April, 2024, an estimated 34,494 Palestinians have been killed, and an estimated 75,668 Palestinians have been injured, (2) by Israeli airstrikes and attacks on Gaza. Israel's historical occupation of Palestine has become a focal point of disability justice worldwide, emblematic of the disabling nature of apartheid. 'The IOF's operations on Gaza permanently renders it as a facility for debilitation,' an evocative speech by a speaker resounded at the International Court of Justice Hearings on 12th January, 2024, referencing how Palestinians are being disabled everyday.

The complicity of many cultural and academic institutions in the ongoing violence reveals itself in their silence, and their preference for 'neutrality'. The double standards of these organisations rings loud and clear in their propensity to publicly celebrate work that foregrounds subjects of justice, access, and inclusion – such as intersectionality or disability justice – while being totally unwilling to engage, either globally or locally, with the material reality of these notions. Too often, disability is elevated as a subject of artistic interest within institutions that continue to reinforce ableist exclusion.

The following anecdote reflects on two and a half years of institutional exclusion and harassment, seeking to fossilise through writing the callous failure of the academy – both the specific academy in question, and the academy as representative of many art academies across Europe – in its duty of care and support. This period also reflects what Crip the Curriculum (3) was premised on. At the centre of the account sits the life-cycle of a meek wheelchair, purchased on behalf of a

(2) Latest figures taken from Al Jazeera on April 4, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/longform/2023/10/9/israel-hamas-war-in-maps-and-charts-live-tracker>.

student – for the purposes of this text, Student X. The saga of the wheelchair is emblematic of institutional violence and ignorance both on the whole – no doubt applicable to many – and as experienced explicitly by the student in question. The account is a sigh among many sighs, serving as a breakdown of the surreal nature of institutional harassment, and is a metaphorical middle finger to the institution.

'The first disabled student at the Rietveld and Sandberg' (4) – a statement that has been repeated into oblivion throughout the duration of study, and the title bestowed upon Student X by the institution. It was not only entirely false as a statement, but more importantly was engineered as an excuse, a way to evade responsibility for the lack of accessibility protocols at the institute. If they had never encountered this problem before, why should they have accessibility measures in place? This is, of course, never considered in the reverse – instead of counting who is missing, an exercise in counting the ghosts of exclusion, would it not be better to ask who would be here if the institution was built differently?

(3) Crip the Curriculum is an educational platform at the Gerrit Rietveld Academie & Sandberg Instituut dedicated to dismantling ableist structures. 'For a common future that is just, accessible, and joyfully liveable, the deeply embedded ableism in society must be challenged. In approaching this shared future, artists and designers carry both responsibility and opportunity to re-think methods of creating, communicating, and caring. Crip the Curriculum encourages locating, questioning, unlearning, and dismantling of ableist patterns and biases within ourselves, our school, and ultimately our society. It strives for collective learning and community-building.' <https://extraintra.nl/initiatives/crip-the-curriculum/> Amongst many things, CtC was conceived as a platform for curating, gathering, and for transformative activism.

(4) 'Rietveld: Information concerning studying with a limitation', Gmail email chain, 13 July, 2021.

By the end-term assessments at the end of the first year, over 60% of classes had been missed by Student X due to inaccessibility, and the impossibility of entering the main Rietveld building, containing both the canteen serving daily meals and the majority of the institute's workshops. The first year of studies involved navigating the woodshop (5) like a mouse in a maze, the path endlessly obstructed. Hopeless requests were kindly made time and again to people responsible for the space, often resulting in giving up in tears and deciding to turn around and try again tomorrow. At the end of the first year of study, a meeting was convened to discuss the institutional failures around accessibility and ableist violence experienced by Student X thus far.



A photograph of three blue and black trash bags occupying space in front of an elevator entrance. A text on the floor covered by the bags reads as 'nly for disabled p'.

(5) 'My colleagues have recently warned me the school is so full of material right now it is really inaccessible and will be difficult for me to come, so let's plan for online', Student X, 'Rietveld: Information concerning studying with a limitation', Gmail email chain, 13 July, 2021.

In this meeting were the main figureheads of the institution – the head of the institute at the time, the heads of facilities, the head of department, the student counsellor, the department coordinator, and two other employees. In this meeting, Student X presented a comprehensive proposal of their own making, forced to facilitate their own education after the institution's repeated failure to meet their obligation to do so. Student X was manipulated into representing themselves, a solitary individual amidst the steep power differentials in the room, without any mediating organisation, support from the student body, or even peers who might share elements of everyday reality in the classroom. Going into the meeting, it was clear that if the requests of Student X's proposal were not met, they would be forced to withdraw their enrollment and drop out of the masters programme. (6)

The focal point of this proposal (7) was the purchase of a Whill Model F, (8) a compact electric wheelchair requested for day-to-day use. This meeting itself was painful, one of seemingly hundreds of such meetings where the same traumatic incidents experienced that year were rehashed to a hostile panel that did not want to hear themselves or their institution critiqued. A debate over the architecture of the building ensued, where it was maintained that an award-winning design (9, 10) could possess no accessibility issues. (11) The millionth meeting concluded.

To Student X's surprise, a week later the institution relayed their decision to purchase the wheelchair on their behalf. The wheelchair's birth certificate was drawn up. This felt seismic, considering the ostensibly non-existent state of any accessibility measures (12) in

(6) Zoom Meeting Conversation, 4 July, 2022.

(7)

-‘The retailer explained that technically, the Whill is a personal mobility transporter, not a wheelchair, meaning it can be purchased independently and does not require a doctor’s referral.’

-‘The uniquely small dimensions and turning radius of this wheelchair will allow to navigate the narrow hallways in BC, enter the elevator to the basement of Rietveld, navigate within workshops (such as screen printing, CAD/CAM), and fit within the new access path to be placed in the ground floor of FedLev.’

-‘It is the most lightweight mobility wheelchair on the market at 58 kilos, making it transportable for others to help when things inevitably get stuck. There have been issues with the mobility scooter getting stuck at school, and in May in the BC building an accident occurred where the scooter was stuck in a narrow hallway and I had to manually back it out, thus accidentally running over and fracturing my foot.’

-‘It is extremely compact when folded, and fits inside of my small vehicle used to commute to and from school. This was tested when the retailer brought the wheelchair to my house for me to test.’

-‘One issue we ran into with purchasing the mobility scooter second hand, is there is no warranty protecting it and no one to contact for repairs. The Whill has a “smart” electronic system so problems are immediately relayed to the manufacturer and it has a 5 year warranty.’ All quotations taken from ‘Student X, Model Access Information for 2022\_2023 Proposal’, 8 July, 2022.

(8) The Whill Model F is a lightweight folding wheelchair allowing it to be easily transported and stored, <https://whill.inc/us/whill-model-f/>.

(9) ‘All buildings comply with all laws and regulations from the Building Decree (Bouwbesluit) on access for disabled people,’ <https://rietveldacademie.nl/en/page/18702/accessibility>.


(10) ‘Article 4.21 Guidance Article: The functional requirement that a building to be constructed shall have sufficiently reachable and accessible areas indicates that emphasis is no longer on wheelchair users. A building must have sufficiently reachable and accessible areas for all types of users, including wheelchair users,’ <https://technical-regulation-information-system.ec.europa.eu/en/notification/7312>, 105.

(11) Zoom Meeting Conversation, 4 July, 2022.

(12) ‘Wheelchairs and walkers: The Gerrit Rietveld Academie does not have wheelchairs and walkers available for rent,’ <https://rietveldacademie.nl/en/page/18702/accessibility>.

the institute’s history. To put it into perspective, this year (2024) marks the academy’s centenary, which has attracted very diverse students from all over the world.

The following autumn, the wheelchair was picked up for the first time, and the tone of the conversations with the institution dramatically shifted. Unbeknownst to Student X, the department of facilities had convened over the summer to create a new policy. This policy plagiarised Student X’s proposal for themselves (12) – in other words, the institution took an individual’s accessibility plan, made specifically to accommodate their own unique physical condition and needs, and applied this as the overarching accessibility protocol for the entire institution. This was both insulting and inappropriate, for a number of reasons. No two people experience the same embodied realities or identical health status, and therefore will never have the same exact needs. By being assigned the roles of ‘first’ and ‘only’ disabled student, Student X was positioned as an archetype, representative of all experiences of

disability and illness – much like how the  (wheelchair symbol) disability icon collapses all signs and signifiers into one seated stick figure. The wheelchair has come to serve as a symbol of both violence and care through the symbolic stand-in for the human body. The wheelchair icon in everyday life informs our fundamental ideas on (dis)ability and, societally, conjures separation and ableism, as the unofficial and reductive mascot encompassing all of disability.

The co-option of the proposal into official institutional policy was also a blatant act of exploitation of Student

(12) ‘New wheelchair’, Gmail email chain, 17 November, 2022.

X's unpaid labour and advocacy on behalf of themself. After having no choice but to spend over a year of working, without remuneration, to craft their personalised accessibility policy from scratch, this egregious institutional move was the salt in the wound; they had been tricked into spending their time and energy researching, pricing, and user-testing something that would eventually be purchased for the school. This duplicity shows how the expertise of marginalised students, faculties, and staff is only useful when it can be exploited by the institution at large, otherwise it will be ignored. Suddenly it was clear that the tool bought for necessary personal use had been allocated as a shared resource. Perhaps the most surreal revelation from this decision was how the institute expected the wheelchair to be shared by multiple users at once. (13) Did they expect a rather amusing stacking of disabled people? Many nesting dolls seated atop a single wheelchair? Or were students supposed to stay seated in line for their turn?

The institution deployed multiple methods of psychological coercion throughout the saga. These included the invention of fictitious 'other' students who also needed the wheelchair, so as to legitimise their claims that the device could not possibly be a resource for individual use; guilt-tripping Student X; and positioning them as a selfish ableist hoarding this mobility aid only for themselves. The institution also resorted to intimidation and harassment from personal phone numbers and at inappropriate times on weekends and evening hours, the most extreme of which was the threat of tampering with Student X's visa renewal

(13) *Agreement for use of wheelchair*, contract written by Facilities Department of Sandberg Instituut and Gerrit Rietveld Academie, 6 December, 2022.

procedures by threatening legal action if the wheelchair was not returned.

This kind of COINTELPRO on wheels is not unique to this story. It is a disturbingly common tactic deployed by institutions upon their most vulnerable members. Take the recent suicide of Dr. Antoinette Candia-Bailey, an American academic whose thesis dissertation studied the unique abuses Black women face in academia, quantifying the same harassment she faced at the University where she was employed that eventually led to her taking her own life.

Through this tale, the object of the wheelchair clearly became an obstacle to the 'rugged individualism' so prized by both Dutch culture and Western academic institutions the world over. This anecdote, seen through a different lens, is one of an institution treating a systematic problem as an individual failure, and utilising tactics of individualisation and isolation through private emails, meetings behind closed doors, and personal calls and text messages to come up with an 'individual solution' instead of widespread reform. This approach not only allows institutions to sweep things that threaten their equitable reputations under the rug, but problematises the 'individual' as high maintenance or demanding, to evade culpability on an institutional scale. Secrecy and isolation are how institutions are able to perpetuate and continue cycles of alienation and exclusion, be they be patterns of sexual harassment or physical inaccessibility.

Instead of dealing in historic 'firsts' 100 years into its reign as the country's preeminent art and design school, one must wonder what the outcome could have been if, instead of instrumentalising Student X for a collective policy after a year of petitioning, the

academy would have practised its due diligence, hired a professional consultant, or answered to decades of questioning as to why no disabled students could enrol before. The alarming absurdity of the events as they unfolded speaks more about the rigidity of institutional policy and the drudgery of bureaucratic processes that are designed to deflect criticism and forego principles of care. We imagine academic institutions to be malleable in a way that adapts to the needs of students, that listens to them more. In response to the recurring bullying and alienation that leaves disadvantaged individuals to fend for themselves, we need more collective and intertwined ideas of disability. This text finds a safe haven in the reader, both as a reminder of institutional failures and, simultaneously, an effort to inform them of the bare essential precedents and responsibilities of any institution towards its members. The nuances of care, community, and intimacy will always find a way to seep through the cracks of institutional formality.

The anecdote ends, and though we have let a lot out, a lot has been left out, too. The wheelchair was dutifully returned on 30th January, 2024.

- Musoke Nalwoga

## *The Black Gaze Upon Nature*

Motormond is a not-for-profit art space that is dedicated to circulating a critically grounded Pan Diasporic Culture. We are committed to staging, activating, and circulating culture that facilitates bonds of solidarity between all peoples in the diaspora.

#### The Black Gaze Upon Nature

A Black gaze rejects traditional understandings of spectatorship by refusing to allow its subject to be consumed by its viewers. A Black gaze transforms viewers into witnesses and demands a confrontation. (1)

Our 2025 and 2026 programming embraces and reflects our wish to critically and proactively engage with the imminent issue of climate change. Over the last three years, our main focus has been ideas of inclusion and diversity, so our efforts have been primarily directed at including BIPOC artists, circulating their art, and engaging their communities as our audiences for the programme and exhibitions we have made. This goal has been worth exploring: our efforts have been fruitful. In a 2020 interview with Yvette Mutumba, a curator, researcher, and editor of *Contemporary And*, she points out that it is important for BIPOC creatives to spread their wings beyond subjects of identity politics:

Focus on your work. Do what you want to create. If it is not about identity or colonialism, but robotics, then that is also fine. Do not let ‘diversity’, ‘decolonization’, or ‘global art’ programmes pressure you into thinking that the only chance

(1) Tina M. Campt, *A Black Gaze: Artists Changing How We See*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 2021.

to get in is if you tackle all the things that seemingly and by default make you an expert. (2)

Yvette is sharing a very interesting concept here. Within painting, photography, and performance, we have seen a lot of work concerned with BIPOC identity that seems to be told from a very expert perspective simply because the artists of the works are BIPOC. Our programme for 2025 and 2026 is requesting that BIPOC artists relent, and move from photographing, painting, and performing Black bodies in order to affirm their existence, to making work that *moves us* to action. We want BIPOC photographers, videographers, and performers to engage with the climate crisis *through* a Black gaze, and, through this active and demanding Black gaze, to make the climate crisis the very business of BIPOC communities. We want ‘... to shift the optics of *looking at* to a politics of looking with, through, and alongside another’. (3)

The beauty of making the Black gaze upon nature our focal point is the fact that it invites artists to experiment, to enter into a process of learning; they are not experts in this field, most of them have not worked on this before. Nor have we. Asking ‘So how do we do the work together?’ sets the tone for a real shared experimental approach to the coming year’s programming. In Renan Laru-an’s ‘Proposal for the Visions and Missions for Savvy Contemporary’, an art space in Berlin, he asks the questions that Motormond aspires to explore too:

How do we, as an institution, build infrastruc-

(2) Pablo Larios and Yvette Mutumba, ‘Yvette Mutumba on Why Decolonizing Institutions “Has to Hurt”’, *Frieze*, July 2020.

(3) Tina M. Campt, *A Black Gaze*.





> Photograph by Elzo Bonam, July 2023, opening of *Brave Beauties in Communion*.

tures that promise to embrace and ... lend radiance to the exhibitionary potential of compassionate care, where we work with and show artistic [development and] nourishment in their brilliance, poverty, and weakness? (4)

We are thinking about embracing artists as working progress: the artist not ahead of his time, commenting upon society in a backward looking manner, but rather the artist as immersed in and learning with society.

Modi Operandi

In 2025 and 2026, we will implement an important and experimental change to our institutional programming, by stretching a single exhibition over an entire year. We intend to move out of the three-month cycle that requires us to produce entirely new exhibitions and tell entirely new stories with different artists each time. Our one-year exhibition concept is one that moves our endeavors towards real, honest engagement with the climate crisis. The goal here is for our institution to perform the type of change that our exhibitions will stage. As we host and present various artists, we want to be porous, fluid, and accepting of the change that engaging certain practices will require of us.

Another important change coming to Motormond concerns our method of curation. Until now, the curatorial programme of Motormond has been a practice in auto-curation by our founding director Musoke Nalwoga. Going forward, four curators at large – two in 2025 and two in 2026 – will be invited to join Musoke in her endeavors. It is time to make Motormond truly

(4) Renan Laruan, 'A Proposal for the Visions and Missions for Savvy Contemporary', L00B-1, Savvy Contemporary, 2023.

public, by including independent voices that will expand upon Motormond's pluri-vocality, and by increasing the criticality of our engagement with artistic practices outside of the global north.

Two one-year-long exhibitions (2025 and 2026) These exhibitions will each form a year-long research into the relationship between BIPOC communities and nature. They will be invitations to engage.

Each exhibition will facilitate four moments of change, by way of introducing new works, removing works, and returning old works. What does it mean when an exhibition opening simply (re-)edits and re-conceptualises an old exhibition, one that you have already seen before? Does returning to a known place but with new feelings reveal an exhibition that is already warm? When was the last time an exhibition embraced us?

This year's programme is dedicated to hacking the way we understand exhibition making at large. We want to underline the importance of revisiting old things. We want to encourage the production drive to slow down. In this move to create room for transformative ecologies within Motormond, the year-long exhibition format is a way for Motormond to transform itself as well. We hope to concisely communicate that we need new ways of being, as much as new ways of seeing. We will not do this through direct communication – art must message in indirect ways; we have to see transformation through translation, in trans\*, in the space of emotions.

The most radical art is not protest art but art that takes us to another place, envisions a different way of seeing, perhaps a different way of feeling.

Robin D.G. Kelley, 2022

Besides bringing new voices to both our presentations and curation, we are also taking on new long-term collaborations with various institutions whose visions intersect with and strengthen our own. For our research and presentations in the fields of photography and moving image, we have sought collaborations with Shasha Movies, MUBI Netherlands, NOOR Images, Prince Claus Fund, FABA (For Africans By Africans), Unseen Amsterdam, and Paris Photo. In our performance arts work, we have sought collaborations with Queer is not a Manifesto, Queer Landing, Het Amsterdams Theaterhuis, and Moulin Rouge Amsterdam.

This broad range of collaborations will not only bring new ideas but will also enable us to stage takeovers, allowing other grassroots organisations to manifest within Motormond. We hope this fluidity and readiness to transform will reorient and reinforce our mission to center Black Queer voices. We realise that even within our 'niche' focus on Black queer audiences, there is inevitably a rich diversity of identities that cannot all be centered if Motormond's curatorial vision comes only from itself as a singular organisation. So as we grow, we invite radical forms of collaboration that de-centre our vision for Motormond to allow other wisely othered perspectives to deepen and critically ground our programming offerings in Amsterdam and beyond.

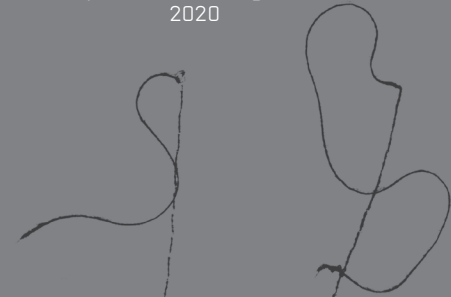
Our intention is to spend more time growing solutions than dismantling problems, while maintaining a generative critical lens. We will be working in radically site-specific, site-sensitive, site-suggestive, and site-significant ways. This means that our exhibitions will not be floating in the air, they will be rooted locally in Amsterdam West, they will be in conversation with the Netherlands, and they will contrast with the rest of the world.

Paul B. Preciado

## *My Trans Body is an Empty House*

Extract from:

Paul B. Preciado, *An Apartment on Uranus: Chronicles of the Crossing*, Semiotext(e), 2020



I live in Athens in a house that I can say is mine for the first time in over two years. I do not own it. That's not necessary. I simply have the use of it. I experience it. I celebrate it. After having passed through three houses in different streets and neighborhoods – Philopappos, Neapoli, Exárcheia – and through a dozen hotels – I especially remember birds singing in the morning on the Strefi Hill at the Orion Hotel – I finally decided, not without difficulty, to sign a rental contract.

For over a month, I lived in this empty house. Stripped of all furniture, a house is just a door, a roof and a floor. Because of the delay in delivering the bed (standard in Greece), for two weeks I was forced to sleep in a completely empty apartment. During the night, my hips would get crushed against the wooden slats and I would wake up all swollen. Without a doubt, the experience is inaugural and aesthetic: a body, a space. I would sometimes wake up at 3 a.m. and wonder, stretched out on the ground, if I was a human or an animal, in this century or another, if I truly existed or if I was just a fictional subject. The empty house is the worldly museum of the twenty-first century and my body – nameless, mutant and dispossessed – is the work on display.

In an empty house, the domestic space constitutes an exhibition scene in which subjectivity is displayed as the artwork. Paradoxically, every artwork is displayed within a private scene. "I hate the public," said the pianist Glenn Gould. In 1964, when he was 32, at the height of his career, he abandoned concert halls and withdrew forever into a recording studio to make music. An empty house is something like that: a studio where you can record your life. Except that our subjectivity is at the same time the music, the instrument and the recording technology. First, I thought that if the apartment stayed empty, that could be explained by a conjunction of various circumstances: too much work,

lack of time, absence of goods that could be accumulated in this space. I just have a few items of clothing (A.P.C. jeans, white and blue shirts, felt coat, black shoes), the indispensable suitcase, a few books and three dozen notebooks, which in themselves constitute an independent sculpture in the space, sign of a kind of cult, if not a pathology.

It took me some time to realize that it was not by chance I was keeping this space empty: I established a substantive relationship between my gender-transition process and my way of inhabiting space. Over the first year of transition, as the hormonal changes were sculpting my body like a microscopic chisel working from within, I could only live as a nomad. Crossing frontiers with a passport that barely represented me was a way of materializing the transit, making the shift visible. Today, for the first time, I can stop. Provided this house remains empty: suspend the techno-bourgeois conventions of table, sofa, bed, computer, chair. Body and space are confronted without mediation. In this way, face to face, they are no longer objects, but social relationships. My trans body is an empty house. I am taking advantage of the political potential of this analogy. My trans body is a rented apartment, a nameless space – I'm still waiting for the right to be named by the State, I wait and I fear the violence of being named. Living in a completely empty house gives each gesture its inaugural character, holds back the time of repetition, suspends the interrogation that challenges the norm. I see myself running through the house, or walking on tiptoe while eating; I see myself stretched out on the floor with my feet leaning against the wall to read, or leaning on the window ledge to write.

Freedom from habit extends to other bodies that penetrate this space: when she comes to see me, we can do almost nothing else except look at each other, remain standing while holding hands, lie down,

or make love. The beauty of this singular experience, which could be called “unfurnishing,” makes me wonder why we force ourselves to furnish houses, why it is necessary to know our gender, know what sex attracts us. Ikea is to the art of inhabiting what normative heterosexuality is to the desiring body. A table and a chair form a complementary couple that is not open to question. A wardrobe is a first certificate of private property. A bedside lamp is a marriage of convenience. A sofa facing the TV is a vaginal penetration. The curtain hanging from the window is the anti-pornographic censorship that looms when night falls. The other day, as we were making love in this empty house, she called me by my new name and said, “The problem is our mind. Our minds fight, but our souls and bodies are in perfect harmony.” A few minutes later, as my chest was opening up to breathe a few more atoms of oxygen and my cerebral cortex was taking on the consistency of cotton, I felt my body dissolving into the empty space and my mind, authoritarian and normative, almost dead, abdicating.

– Athens, 8 October 2016

Elena Braida

## *Inhabitant*



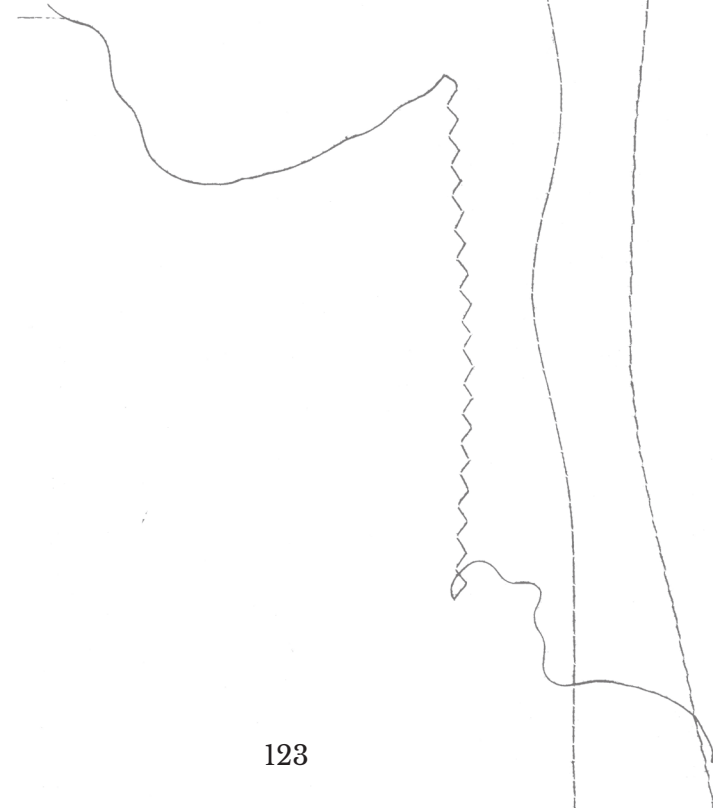


- > Elena Braida, *Inhabitant*, 2019, installation, felted wool coat, wood and metal chair.
- > *Golden Amulet of Women with Drinking Horn*, Stockholm, Sweden, Viking Age (Apron-Dress Quotations and Graphics, Caryl de Trecesson and Carol Hanson, 2002).

*Inhabitant* focuses primarily on the spaces that come about in between your skin, your body, and a garment. The coat is a two-dimensional crosscut, made from a rectangular piece of felted fabric. The crosscut makes the piece wearable and so: three-dimensional. The skin-like texture of the felted merino wool and its particular natural colour go back to my initial intention: to represent an architectural space defined by your skin. The cavities (the tunnels, openings, folds, etc.) seek to reflect not on a still body covered with a certain material, but rather upon the coat itself. The coat as something that moves like a mobile organism. The coat as an organism, moving and resting, nestling and crawling.

Weronika Wojda

## *The Empty Erotics of The Ugly-Chic*



In the A/W 1998 Prada campaign, one of the first iterations of the brand's 'ugly-chic' style, the model Angela Lindvall is sitting or laying on the ground in poses unusual for a presentation of high-fashion garments. She is surrounded by a synthetic, vast, and dark desert. She doesn't look into the camera in order to entice the viewer but rather seems preoccupied with her surroundings, or with herself. Often we don't even see her face. The clothes she is wearing are feminine and elegant but not provocative. Thinness, occasional openings, and cleanliness signal a different, perhaps muted erotic investment that diverges from the usual fashion editorial photography, where the *punctum* are particular female body parts presented in a seductive manner. Here, Lindvall's figure is folded awkwardly; all we get to see are her bare knees, back, hands, and neck. Her hair is noticeably frizzy, unlike the usual glossy mane or up-do of a fashion model. She wears a red tweed coat with a collar and slit seams; a black, silk, below-the-knee pleated dress with plastic elements; white briefs and a blouse; and a white sleeveless top and pant set. In one picture she scowls and pinches her eyelashes, in another she bows her head down and touches her open lips with her fingertips. In another we see her on the ground in a foetal position, curled around a white asymmetric bag.

Marie, the protagonist of Catherine Breillat's film *Romance* (1999) repeatedly finds herself on the ground in shots that could, if it weren't for the men present in them, warrant themselves a small, black, Prada logo placement. One of these instances is a sexual encounter with a stranger on a white and beige staircase outside of her apartment. Her dark hair is falling down her face and her chic white boat-neck dress is hitched above her legs as the anonymous man eats her out. The woman breathlessly narrates her own thoughts in a voice-over:

*That's my dream. To know that for some guy, I'm just a pussy he wants to stuff. No sentimental bullshit. Just raw desire. To be taken by a guy, anyone, a nobody, a bum. With whom you wallow for the joy of wallowing, for the dishonour, the shame. That's pleasure for a girl.*

The man flips her onto her stomach, calls her a 'bitch' and forcefully penetrates her. Although it's a scene of sexual violation, the main protagonist insists that she is not ashamed and that the various sexual experiences she undergoes are liberating.

The A/W 1998 Prada campaign could be only slightly referencing sexual or violent acts through their anticipation or aftermath visible in the body language of the model. The fashion in both the photographs and the film is minimalist and clean. It presents a particular brand of elegant but empty femininity, contrasted with frizzy hair, furrowed brows, and uncomfortable poses or Marie's self-imposed acts of pleasure and violence. The formally minimalist aesthetic of the clothes, imposing and rigorous in itself, references a specific attitude towards the female body and a performance of female beauty. If the feminine condition is to be literally and symbolically penetrated, the film and the campaign introduce an aspect of emptiness and hollowing out through the aesthetic form of minimalism. Could Lindvall's gestures and Marie's actions be read as ways of distorting or maybe upholding those connotations?

In the movie, we observe Marie's search for sexual fulfilment by means of BDSM or sex with strangers after her boyfriend, the male model Paul, refuses to sleep with her. Instead, he goes to eat sushi in a Japanese restaurant and reads Charles Bukowski alone. His frigidity transpires in their clinically stark and pristinely modern designer apartment, the spidery Alessi Juicy Salif citrus squeezer and the Luigi Massoni lamp included.



Attached to Paul is a certain emptiness: his clothes, furniture, and culinary choices portray a strict cleanliness, while their apartment, furnished with glass, chrome, and crisp white upholstery, fears a speck of dirt or the introduction of a gimmick. The space could be read as a symbol of a supervised order, conspicuous consumption, and curated procreation – Paul is able to sexually perform only once, when Marie suggests that they have a child. Marie also expresses a desire for emptiness throughout the film, but for her this emptiness constitutes female sexuality.

The transgressive nature of her acts points towards a desire for a renegotiation of the ways sex is done by and to women in heteronormative relationships. Marie seeks sex as neither a constructive force of love and intimacy, nor as a way of securing her place in society as a wife and mother. She is aware of and wants to experience the violent ways in which the female body is handled within the social order as well as examine the pleasure that comes with it. The symbolic layer, very present in *Romance*, accentuates this dual intention behind the protagonist's sexual excursions. What leads her is the desire, regardless of whether the outcome will be painful or pleasurable. The emptying Marie wishes to enact has a physical dimension of being sexually penetrated, examined, tied up, cared and provided for, pushed around, and eventually getting impregnated and giving birth.

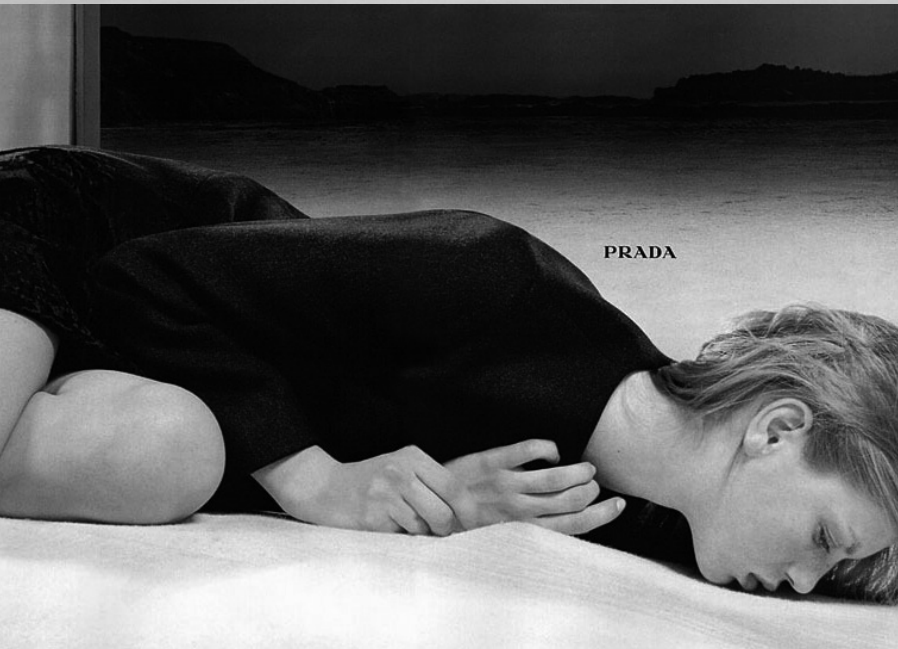
This leads Marie to first blend in with the white and clinical background, then let her hair down and wear a vivid red dress once she breaks out of her sexless *mise-en-scène* and finds sexual satisfaction in the arms of her boss, Robert. In contrast to Paul's sushi rendez-vous with Bukowski, Marie and her new lover laugh as they eat caviar and order rounds of vodka in ornate, crystal carafes.

Her erotic excursions, similarly to the Prada

model's gestures, are attempts at penetrating oneself and, perhaps, grasping that emptiness. In multiple photographs from the A/W 1998 campaign we can observe the woman as she sits with her back to the viewer and directs her gaze into the empty and vast landscape or examines her own body. Her fingers often probe at openings: pinching her eyes, penetrating her mouth, and pulling at the back of her top as if to take it off. There is an air of blankness waiting to be filled and the anticipation of something being gauged or thrown up. This effectively breaks with the expectation of a fashion commercial, with a seductive female inviting the viewer to consume and penetrate, if only with their eyes, her body and the garments. Here, the hollowing out and penetrating comes from within the photograph itself, as if the model was unaware she was being observed by the viewer.

Marie's self-imposed emptying is meant to subvert silence, cleanliness, and beauty as seen throughout her relationship with the almost-celibate Paul. In the Prada campaign, the body of the model, Lindvall, is presented in acts of discomfort rather than allure. Similarly to Breillat's protagonist, Lindvall is both beautifully elegant and explicitly uncomfortable in the stark vastness and her clothes. This could be seen as a strategy of emancipation: the garments and the model resist the kind of straightforward affirmation of sexualisation produced by the male gaze.

*I don't want to sleep with men. I want to be opened up all the way where you can see that the mystique is nothing but raw meat. The woman is dead,* says Marie, after a violent encounter in the staircase. The voice-over narrating her thoughts is a confession of her intentions to emancipate from being female, from having to sleep with men, yet this is exactly what she has to do. The paradox is also present in the foundational motivation behind







the ugly-chic style – Miuccia Prada claims that this type of fashion is a proposal of leftist feminist politics. (1) Incorporating forms that could be considered ugly was meant as a subversion of fashion's obsession with traditional beauty and femininity, which the designer saw as too conservative and oppressive. Simultaneously, the ugliness fascinated Prada because of the newness it brought, successfully implementing it into the constantly evolving capitalistic system of fashion trends. Therefore what is ugly changes constantly. In the case of the A/W 1998 campaign, the ugliness means minimalism, purity, and emptiness in place of decoration, vivid colour, and expression.

The expectation set by the stark aesthetic form is that Lindvall and Marie will become vacant objects rather than subjects. They themselves lean into these roles, producing a clash of possession and dispossession. Their bodies are already used respectively as a mannequin for clothes in a commercial and a rejected or coveted sexual object – a woman. The format of a fashion campaign puts the model's body to work, successively transforming it into a commodity ready for consumption in tandem with the garment she mannequins. Paradoxically, Lindvall's physical gestures signalling discomfort do not seem to fit with the fashion, giving away the split between what she is and what the sartorial *mise-en-scène* expects her to be. The emptiness present in both the clothes and scenography plagues her, and as a response, she puts her fingers into her mouth.

(1) Claire Duffin, 'Miuccia Prada, Head of Luxury Brand Label, Speaks of Fascination with "ugliness"', *The Telegraph*, August 25, 2013, accessed September 22, 2023, <http://fashion.telegraph.co.uk/news-features/TMG10264440/Miuccia-Prada-head-of-luxury-brand-label-speaks-of-fascination-with-ugliness.html>.

Prada's dedication to the minimalist form, and her statement about it being a political, pro-feminist stance, could be interpreted as an act of (perhaps muted) protest against bourgeois beauty ideals: the over-sexualisation of the female figure, its disengagement from labour, and its role as a demonstrative marker of masculine capital. The ugly-chic clothes are simpler than the ones worn by the founding protagonists of the Western fashion system: the 19th-century bourgeois wives whose main objective was to showcase their husbands' capital through their garments. The ugly-chic clothes are still impractical and not specifically masculine, as in the case of the feminine corporate staple: the 1980s power suit. In short, ugly-chic clothes do not endow women with even a symbolic phallus. Meekly buttoned up, with appropriate lengths and muted colours, the style risks no ornamental excess, indecency, or vulgarity. Instead it includes all the proper staples of a feminine wardrobe: skirts, dresses, hosiery, and subtle lingerie in a clean, high-quality, yet formally minimalist version of office wear.

Prada's so-called leftist-feminism bears traces of neoliberalism, as it devours and commodifies fashion's own anti-thesis: the ugly. Notably, it appears with its neutralising counterpart: the chic, as a necessary condition of its existence within the fashion sphere. The name as it is written: 'ugly-chic', reveals that the symbolic minimalism and purity exist as a product of the labour of beauty and desire. The model's expression in the campaign is a signal of a dissonance present in this style of clothing but also in fashion as a medium of self-expression employed by the capitalist economy. Beauty, purity of form, cleanliness, rationality, and minimalism are not structures that one can keep up without consequences. Where Breillat's protagonist's beauty is paired with Paul's ignorance, producing frus-

tration and anger, Lindvall's beauty is accompanied by a hollow discomfort, which the viewer wishes he could ignore.

Tessel Veneboer

*Bad Sex*

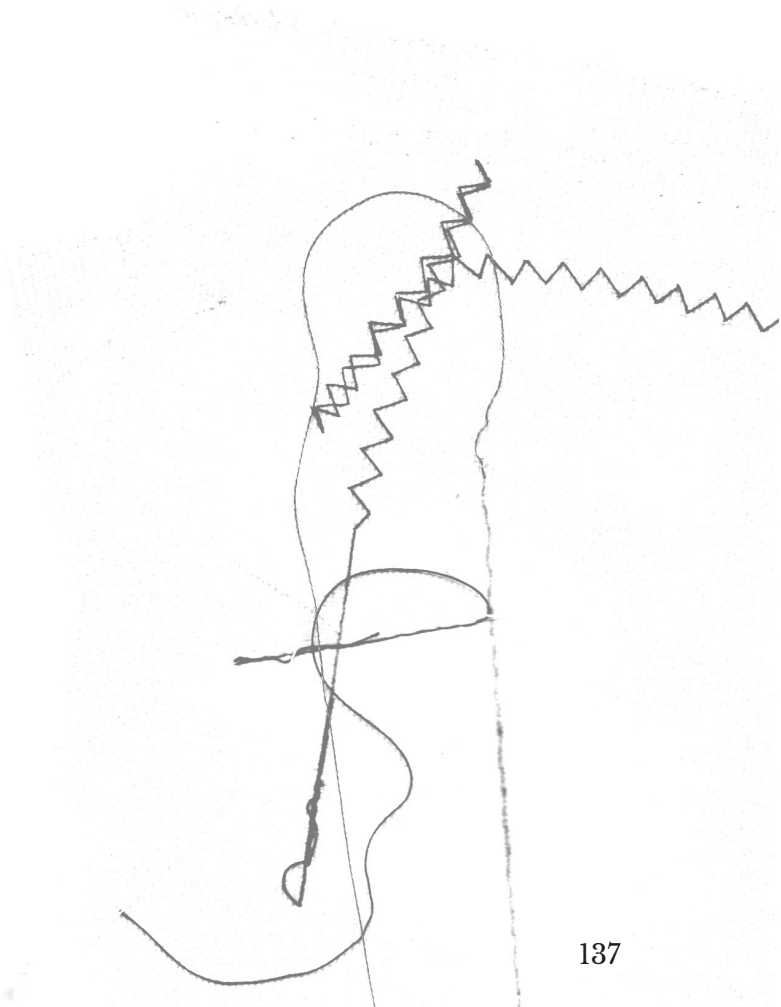


Image sources:

> Prada A/W Campaign 1998, modelled by Angela Lindvall, photographed by Norbert Schoerner, styled by Nancy Rhode.

> Stills from *Romance* (1999), directed by Catherine Breillat, courtesy of Impex Films.

We believe that any differences between pornography and experiential sex are accidental, and that sexuality itself is at the root cause of our oppression.

Southern Women's Writing Collective (Women Against Sex), 1987

In 'The Impossibility of Feminism', Andrea Long Chu points out an impasse in feminist sexual politics. She claims that around the 1970s, 'bad sex' became an allegory for women's oppression. The orgasm gap, monogamy, and lack of knowledge about women's health became central concerns among feminists.

Women's sexuality had been denied and women were starting to educate themselves about their bodies and sexual pleasure. But who or what was to blame for the bad sex women were having? Could women's emancipation be advanced by reclaiming sex, by learning how to do it 'their' way? Or should the feminist movement focus on sexual oppression as a structural problem, the system of heterosexuality itself, with marriage as its sedimentation in the domestic sphere? Or should sexuality not be feminism's main focus at all, as feminism aims precisely to emancipate woman from the limits and determinacy of her sexuated (1) position?

The legal scholar and feminist Catharine A. MacKinnon famously claimed that what labour is to Marxism, sexuality is to feminism, and thus the bedroom became a central site for feminist politics. But while pro-sex feminists emphasised the multiplicity of desire and sexual pleasures, the anti-pornography movement

(1) *Sexu * in French. The French philosopher Luce Irigaray uses this term to describe the psychological, relational, cultural, and bodily aspects of being a sexed subject without grounding sex in any one of these. See Luce Irigaray, *Conversations*, New York, Continuum, 2008.

vehemently opposed any sexualised representation of women. Their infamous slogan, 'Pornography is the theory; rape is the practice,' presents a direct causality between the depiction of violent sex and actual violence. Pro-sex feminists objected to this causality, claiming that anti-porn activists conflated reality and representation. Long Chu notes that the infamous Sex Wars that ensued were not particularly productive in advancing sexual politics materially: 'Paradoxically, the stronger feminist theories of sex became, the less effective they became.' (2) The impasse lies in this disagreement over the significance that feminism should assign to sexuality.

As part of my doctoral research, I get to spend four weeks at Duke University, North Carolina, to study the Kathy Acker papers at the Sallie Bingham Centre for Women's History & Culture. I work on the relation between sex and literary form, the optimism-pessimism split about the givenness of the patriarchal imagination of sex, and the mechanisms of sexual objectification and self-objectification. Sharing my interests with the archivist at the women's centre, she suggests I look at the archives of several anti-pornography activists. This diversion from the Acker papers goes on to consume much of my research time as I become more and more absorbed in the writings of the anti-pornography feminists. Flipping through newspaper clippings, personal correspondence, logistics for conferences and teach-ins, and drafts of lectures and manifestos, I begin to see that disagreements among feminists over the role of pornography, sexual violence, and censorship are not only about what femi-

(2) Andrea Long Chu, 'The Impossibility of Feminism', *differences; A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, 1 May, 2019, vol. 30, no. 1, 63-81.

nists want or should want from sex, but contain perhaps a more fundamental disagreement, namely, the definition of 'sex' itself. Is sexuality simply an activity, or should we analyse sex as part of human nature, that is: as subjectivity itself? And if the latter, can there be any authenticity of desire for women in a patriarchal society?

The prevalence of rape fantasies among women, both heterosexual and queer, is often defined as proof of the pornographic imagination. The question of women's erotica is first a question of the limits of language. What is the sexuality that can be articulated within the syntax and the given vocabulary of sex? Can we understand sexuality outside of the dominance-submission dynamic and sexual objectification? And in a literary text, is it possible for a woman to write herself out of her sexed position, to neutralise it, or must she always speak as a sexuated being? Anti-pornography and anti-sex feminisms are pessimistic about escaping these logics. They are suspicious of the assumption underlying pleasure politics that resolving the inequality around sexual satisfaction resolves the question of sexuality altogether. For the anti-sex feminists, the predicament of sexuality lies elsewhere, namely in what they see as its fundamentally violent nature.

Women feel the fuck—when it works, when it overwhelms—as possession; and feel possession as deeply erotic; and value annihilation of the self in sex as proof of the man's desire or love, its awesome intensity (...) sex itself is an experience of diminishing self-possession, an erosion of self.

Andrea Dworkin, *Intercourse* (1987)

Probably the most well-known figure among these debates is the 'all-sex-is-rape' feminist Andrea Dworkin,

kin, who was one of the founding members of the Women Against Pornography (WAP) movement. For Dworkin, the question of intercourse – penetrative sex – is the most important question for feminism because it reveals the structure of women's oppression and the ways in which it is internalised by individuals. For Dworkin, sex *is* subordination. And there is no power in reclaiming or redefining the submissive position of woman in the sexual imaginary. Any depiction of a woman's submissiveness is a violent act as it reinforces a metaphysics of sexual difference where woman is defined only in relation to man.

Pauline Réage's graphic sadomasochistic novel *Story of O* (1954), for example, 'claims to define epistemologically what a woman is, what she needs, her processes of thinking and feeling, her proper place', and formulates women's subordination and man's dominance 'as a cosmic principle which articulates, absolutely, the feminine'.<sup>(3)</sup> In Dworkin's analysis, women are taught to enjoy being dominated. She writes that:

... the political meaning of intercourse for women is the fundamental question of feminism and freedom: can an occupied people—physically occupied inside, internally invaded—be free; can those with a metaphysically compromised privacy have self-determination; can those without a biologically based physical integrity have self-respect?

Sexual oppression – 'the Great Unmoveable Sexual Structure' in Dworkin's terms – finds an expression

(3) Andrea Dworkin, 'Woman Hating: a Radical Look at Sexuality', in Johanna Fateman Johanna, Amy Scholder, eds., *Last Days at Hot Slit: the Radical Feminism of Andrea Dworkin*, Cambridge and London, semiotext(e), 2019, 61.



in writing conventions; 'The Immoveable Punctuation Typography Structure'. This overarching enforcing structure (for her: conventional language) 'aborts freedom, prohibits invention, and does us verifiable harm: [...] to survive, we must learn to lie'. (4) . Dworkin has her own theory of the avant-garde: being forced to use language conventions, as determined by man, woman is complicit with a lie. It is for this reason she originally wrote her books without punctuation, but her publishers refused to publish the texts as such. In short, the removal of writing conventions is a liberating act for Dworkin. Her position comes down to this: she has a sovereign subject in mind who can restore her 'metaphysically compromised privacy', for example by refusing to use certain conventions. But as long as we are working with man's definition of sex, sexual pleasure is 'categorically impossible' for women, according to Dworkin. This is where queer theory's negativity differs from Dworkin's: she believes in the sovereignty of the subject, which for queer theorist Leo Bersani and queer negativity thinkers is not possible. For them, the subject is always already split by the presence of the unconscious, an incompleteness, a gap in (self-)knowledge.

Among the anti-porn propaganda in the archive, I find an extensively annotated draft of a paper titled 'Sex Resistance in Heterosexual Arrangements'. A manifesto of sorts, the paper was authored by the radical Southern Women's Writing Collective, alternatively known as Women Against Sex (WAS). WAP met the WAS group at the Sexual Liberals and the Attack on Feminism conference at New York University in 1987. The advertising poster of the conference asks: 'Who are the sexual liberals? What are they doing to feminism? Why

(4) Dworkin, 'Woman Hating', 75.

do they defend pornography? And: what do they mean by "freedom"?' In the manifesto, the WAS members make a case against the reclaiming of female sexuality by emphasising the multiplicity of pleasures. To stage or represent the forms of sexuality that have been denied does not resolve the problem that sexuality itself presents to feminism. Instead, a feminist politics of pleasure follows the same logic that naturalises sexuality as an animalistic force. Women Against Sex asks: what if we resist compulsory sexuality?

We believe that homosexuality, pedophilia, lesbianism, bisexuality, transsexuality, transvestism, sadomasochism, nonfeminist celibacy, and autoeroticism have the same malevolent relationship to conceptual and empirical male force as does heterosexuality. These activities represent only variations on a heterosexual theme, not exceptions. There is no way out of the practice of sexuality except out. All these erotic choices are also a part of sexuality as constructed by male supremacy. We know of no exception to male supremacist sex. The function of this practice permits no true metamorphoses; all gender permutations remain superficial.

We therefore name intercourse, penetration, and all other sex acts as integral parts of the male gender construction which is sex; and we criticize them as oppressive to women. We name orgasm as the epistemological mark of the sexual, and we therefore criticize it too as oppressive to women. (5)

(5) Southern Women's Writing Collective (Women Against Sex), 'Sex Resistance in Heterosexual Arrangements', *Sexual Liberals and the Attack on Feminism*, New York & London, Teachers College Press, 1990.

The conference materials in the archive contain many drafts and internal disagreements over the WAS manifesto, but the rationale is clear: the only function of sex is the subordination of women, and therefore 'the practice of sexuality' must be resisted. The Sex Resistance Movement aligns itself with Valerie Solanas' proposal in the S.C.U.M. manifesto, to create an 'unwork force' of women who will take on jobs in order not to work at the job, work slowly, or to get fired. To engage in 'sex resistance' is to refuse the idea that woman is, before all else, a sexual being who must realise the potential to enjoy sex. Their proposal, then, is not what is up until now known as celibacy, as in religious contexts for example, but is a celibacy or resistance that must be transformed by a feminist radical consciousness:

She resists on three fronts: she resists all male-constructed sexual needs, she resists the misnaming of her act as prudery and she especially resists the patriarchy's attempt to make its work of subordinating women easier by consensually constructing her desire in its own oppressive image. (6)

WAS adds that, historically, women have long been practising deconstructive lesbianism and radical celibacy, for example, when a woman temporarily abstains from sex after sexual assault. The problem is that this abstinence has not been politicised as sabotage.

Political lesbianism provided one possible exit for feminists who wanted to escape sex as defined by man. Withdrawing from man's definition of sex, political

(6) Southern Women's Writing Collective), 'Sex Resistance in Heterosexual Arrangements'.

lesbians in some ways desexualised sex: the political lesbian doesn't necessarily need to sleep with women. The separatist movement defined the political lesbian as 'a woman-identified woman who does not fuck men', and encouraged that 'all feminists can and should be lesbians. It does not mean compulsory sexual activity with women.' (7) This desexualisation of sex is not possible for the more radical chapter of anti-sex feminists, because for them the problem is metaphysical. Sexual desire itself reproduces the male supremacist dynamic of dominance and submission. The WAS manifesto does not let lesbians off the hook: the fact that butch-femme relationships and lesbian sadomasochism exist proves to them that sex *is* a game of supremacy, invented by men. And so they propose to live relationships as 'deconstructive lesbianism'. If sex is woman's subordination, feminists should aspire to be in love without sexual desire, which would always objectify the other.

In a letter to WAP, one WAS member explains that the disturbing nature of sex – what they call woman's 'self-annihilation' as the social paradigm of our sexuality – is the *definition* of sex. From the WAP analysis of pornography, WAS extends the argument to sex itself: if it doesn't subordinate women, it's not sex. This claim is strangely close Bersani's proposal that sexual experiences can destabilise any coherent sense of self as the boundaries between self and other are disturbed. Anti-sex feminism, especially Dworkin's analysis of sex as a disturbing force, opened up sex as a problem for queer theorists like Bersani thanks to its refusal to romanticise sex; instead, the concept and definition of sex itself is denaturalised. The argument for radical

(7) Leeds Revolutionary Feminist Group, *Love your enemy? The debate between heterosexual feminism and political lesbianism*, London, Onlywomen Press, 1981.

celibacy in the paper 'Sex Resistance in Heterosexual Arrangements' was ambivalently received at the Sexual Liberals conference. WAP member Dorchen Leidholdt, for example, feared that it would undermine the credibility of the conference. But Dworkin was intrigued by the 'sex resisters' radical celibacy proposal. Only without sex would it be possible to restore, make whole again, what Dworkin calls the 'compromised meta-physical privacy' of woman.

The desire for a final objective analysis of sex resulted in the use of a quasi-scientific language, either in legal terms or the rationalistic logics of analytic philosophy. WAP produced elaborate diagrams to prove the causal relations between sexual violence and pornography. Analytic philosopher Melinda Vadas, one of the WAS members, used thought experiments to argue that sexuality's dynamic of dominance and subordination defines the essence of sex.

If pornography is sex, opposing pornography must mean opposing sex. Since there is no phenomenological difference between desires produced by exclusion or coercion and those not so produced, introspection is a poor guide to discovering the non-autonomous nature of unowned desires. Where Dworkin and MacKinnon frame their anti-sexual politics in legal terms, Vadas thinks about sex in terms of logical positivism: logical proof and analytic certainty. As she explains in one of the drafts of the 'Sex Resistance' manifesto, Vadas argues that:

Just as baseball is structured and identified by its win-lose dynamic, our practice of sexuality is structured and identified by its dynamic of dominance and subordination. A practice which lacked this dynamic of dominance and subordi-

nation would literally not be sex, just as a practice which lacked the win-lose dynamic could literally not be baseball. [...]

We cannot step outside of the practice of sexuality to 're-claim' or 're-name' the meaning of sexual acts since, outside the practice of sexuality, there literally are no sexual acts, just as outside the practice of baseball there is literally no such thing as a home run or as striking out.

How, then, can we know what the dynamic of a practice is, if the 'players' themselves might be ignorant of it? Well, like good scientists, we can test our theory about the nature of any dynamic by that theory's ability to predict and explain our observations. For example, the claim that the dynamic of dominance and subordination explains why rape – that is, sexual domination of another – is a concept which we can understand.

(B)

The desire for objectivity was occasionally troubled by lived experience. Phenomenological observations should not be trusted, for example. In one of the activity reports, a woman brings up that in discussing and analysing pornography together, even the most 'anti-woman material' aroused some of the women in the group. The critique of sex – and abstinence as resistance – can only be sustained if feminists accept that feelings cannot be trusted as 'the litmus test for the truth about sex'. As recent critiques of affirmative consent also suggest, the idea that women should sim-

(B) Melinda Vadas, as part of the Southern Women's Writing Collective, *Sexuality as Practice*, unpublished, 1987, in the Dorothy Teer Papers, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University, Durham.

ply learn to articulate their sexual desires falls short. We can't know what we want, and thus 'feelings' cannot be trusted or viewed as containing some sort of truth about desire itself. The anti-sexist feminists at the conference concluded that the fact that sexual violence turned them on actually supported their analysis of sex as the eroticisation of violence, a notion internalised by men and women alike.

If the allegory of 'bad sex' can be taken as the crux of the feminist struggle, the WAS group extends the problem from bad sex with men to bad sex as such. They ask: is it not suspicious that women have to 'learn' how to have sexual pleasure? Sex education and sex-positive self-help books are suspicious too: they have the same function as pornography, as a coercion of desire that makes the idea that we can have any desires of our own simply untrue. Clearly, the anti-porn and anti-sex feminisms that emerged in the 1970s are impossible positions in many ways. To deny and distrust feelings and fantasies is a severe demand and rather difficult to put into practice. Still, this particular moment in the history of feminist thought brought forth what I see as productive problems. The lesson of the 'Enlightened Wife' who has learned to please her man, and thus herself, only shows that finding pleasure in sex is first a coercion of desire itself. Though giving up sex might not be a particularly desirable political position, impossible in many ways, the WAS moment in feminist history does force us to consider the very foundations of what we think sexuality is. And as long as we are in denial of this conceptual problem, the 'impossibility of feminism' continues to haunt sexual politics.

Finally – I realize I have whizzed on and on here (I type about a hundred words a minute, but with a hundred errors) you say you don't know anyone who wants to give up sex forever, and so WAS calls for hypocrisy. Dorchen, I think you may have lived too long in NYC. If you want to meet women who are more than ready to give up sex forever, come talk to my neighbors. I do not think you understand their politics, and they do have a politics, though it is not recognized as such and they don't have the advantage of an education to put it into words. Their politics is simple but profound: They don't want to be fucked. Not today and not tomorrow and they didn't like it yesterday either. (9)

(9) Letter from Melinda Vadas to Dorchen Leidholdt, June 19, 1987, Dorothy Teer Papers, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University, Durham.

References:

- Dworkin, Andrea. *Intercourse*. Free Press, 1987.
- Fateman, Johanna and Scholder, Amy. *Last Days at Hot Slit: the Radical Feminism of Andrea Dworkin*. semiotext(e), 2019.
- MacKinnon, Catherine. *Towards a Feminist Theory of the State*. Harvard University Press, 1989.
- Southern Women's Writing Collective. 'Sex Resistance in Heterosexual Arrangements', published in *Sexual Liberals and the Attack on Feminism*. Teachers College Press, 1990.
- Dorothy Teer Papers, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina.



Katrina Palmer

## *Curtains*

Extract from:

Katrina Palmer, *The Dark Object*,  
Bookworks, 2010



Addison stands in the centre of the room clutching the bag-for-life. Having been confined and infantilised by student-hood for so long makes it impossible to imagine the space beyond its boundaries. At a pragmatic level, this means not being able to locate the door.

Addison attempts a systematic search, looks behind furniture, rolls up the rug. An eight-by-four sheet of board that looks capable of hiding a door: the student moves it, but there is nothing behind, it now leans against the bookcase that stands in front of the curtain. The tall locker won't budge, so the small locker is then pushed towards it and then thrust up against the bookcase too. The desk chair is placed on the table, and wedged against the lockers. Although it is heavy, Addison manages to lift the chair-bed in two awkward stages and put it upside-down on top of the whole configuration. There is still no sign of a door or any other way out and yet every item of furniture in the studio has now been moved so the entire pressure of the room is directed into the bookcase, that in turn leans backwards against the curtain and then into whatever it conceals. This screen has, until now, been mundanely unobtrusive in its presence. Addison realises, because of its inconspicuous character, the one place that hasn't been searched is behind this very curtain, and paradoxically, its unobtrusiveness has now become the focus of attention, precisely because it is almost completely obscured behind the wayward stack of furniture.

Addison paces anxiously around the studio, knowing that moving all the furniture again would be an arduous task, and there is no way it could be taken on, and that this is a really upsetting thought. The pacing doesn't help because this space which has been opened up has an air of expectance which is profoundly unset-

ting. The whole room has been disrupted and thrown off balance, re-orientated towards the curtain. Stopping and standing just to the one side of the furniture, Addison looks more carefully now and sees a cavity in the structure. Because the bookcase is leaning backwards, it has created a gap just large enough to allow access to the drapery. Without further thought Addison picks up the bag-for-life and squeezes inside.

The curtain stretches vertically from ceiling to floor and persistently turns back in on itself in deep regular pleats. Exploring the sensations with quick fingers delving into warm folds (its texture is like velvet but not quite so plush; velour perhaps) Addison discovers the point at which the fabric parts, puts a hand through that parting and finds a pane of cold wet glass and then realises there is a need to be less tentative and to push forward by plunging into the concealed cavity on the other side. Holding on to both a lungful of breath and the hope that this might really be the way out, the student squeezes in through the parting.

Standing between the fabric screen and the window: nothing is visible and no handle is evident, just a wide expanse of glass without edge, a deadening black mirror dripping with condensation. The curtain (which has swelled up and opened like a wave swallowing a weak swimmer) falls closed behind Addison who is enveloped inside, so swamped by damp shadows and dust, it's an effort to breathe.

On the threshold of the School, Addison attempts to turn. An elbow must have knocked the leg of a table or a chair because the entire stack of furniture shifts, further contracting the space. With some difficulty the student manages to turn around but can't find the opening that will allow access back into the studio,

so tries to push the curtain outwards, to get under it. No matter how much fabric is lifted there seems always to be more and a feeling of panic now surfaces. A stream of water all but flows down the window and on to Addison's body. The liquid doesn't equate with condensation, it is far in excess of that, it is more like rain. It might be sweat or tears.

Addison wonders if it is possible to drown in a velour curtain, decides it probably isn't, but even if it *is*, this would be a pathetic end. Trying to think in a less subjugated manner for a moment, Addison figures that at some point in the development of events a gross strategic error must have been made or at the very least an abuse of agency, because it was a mistake to have ended up here, trapped by the amassed contents of the room and for this peculiar confinement to be a self-generated space. The hollow centre of Addison's stomach turns at the thought that it is an experience that won't be documented for the School, yet without this place there's no one to write for.

Addison looks into the bag-for-life and can see the fruit, the glove, the packet of three condoms and the hammer, grabs the tool and has just enough space to swing it back and then thrust it into the glass. The window, the boundary, is so tough that the hammer bounces off the surface, striking Addison's head with its claw, causing an excruciating pain and an angry swelling. Instead of stopping there Addison slams the hammer against the window a second time. Again it bounces back to meet the same tender spot, this time breaking the skin in two places and drawing blood. Reeling and disorientated but galvanised by anger Addison's whole body twists into a final powerful blow. The impact of the hammer is viciously intense but the glass remains stubbornly intact, unlike the student's

forehead, which splits open and allows the hammer's claw to puncture epidermis, fracture bone and expose raw tissue. The heavy tool drags at weakened skin and tears a wider wound before it falls to the ground. Crying out and stumbling, caught inside the velour shroud, Addison crashes into the stack of furniture that collapses against the curtain and pulls it away from its fixtures so that it tumbles onto the heap. Addison slips to the ground with a catastrophic trauma to the head and a grotesquely bloodied face pressed into the impermeable window.

A.C

Alexis Pauline Gumbs

Extracted from *Opening*

Poem from:

Alexis Pauline Gumbs, *Dub: Finding Ceremony*,  
Duke University Press, 2020.



if you gathered them they would be everyone.

gather them.

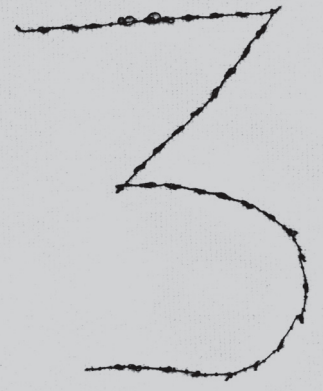
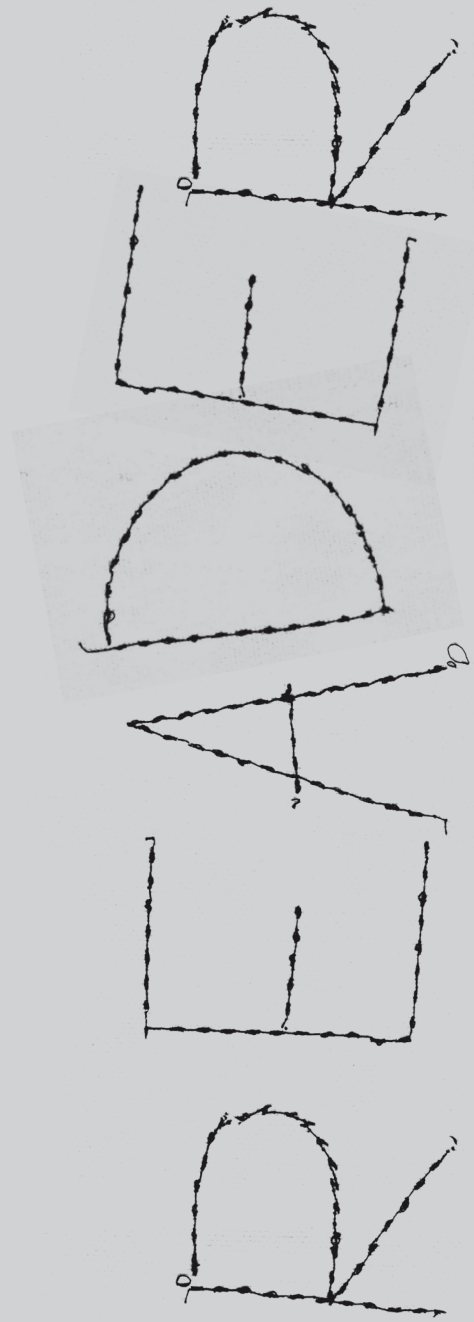
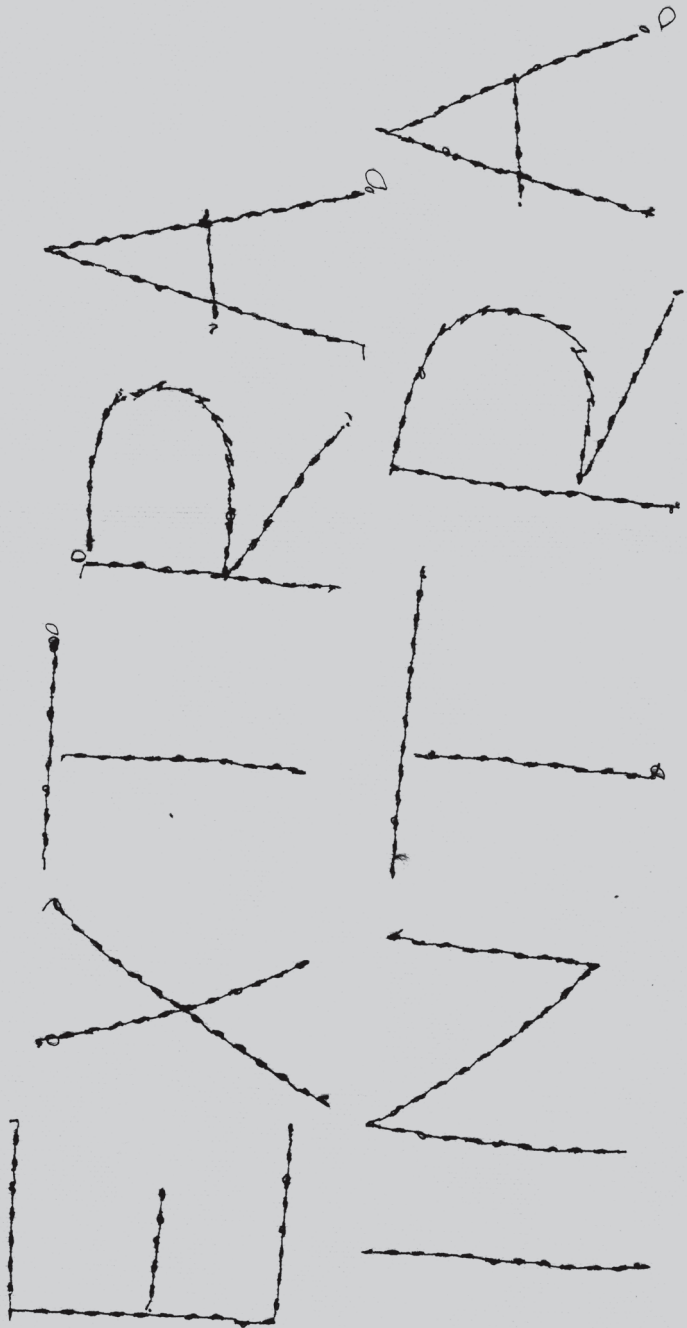
recognize in them your jawline, your wet eyes, your long-fingered hands, seeking what but this multitude. if you gathered them they would not fit on this island. they would spill back into the ocean whence they came. when you gather them they will have fins and claws and names you do not know.

gather them anyway.

some will look you in the eye, some are too microscopic to see. if you don't gather them all you will never be free. if you gathered them you could not hold them, scold them, demand back what you think is lost. gather them today or your soul is the cost. gather the ones who sold and who bought and who tossed overboard. gather the erstwhile children in the name of the lord. gather the unclaimed fathers, the ones with guns and with swords. gather them up. with your hands. with your relationship to land. with your chin set. you are not done yet. you never will.

gather them more. gather them still.

they will unfound you and surround you unfind you and unwind you travel to you unravel through your own needle. gather the thread. collect your dead.



Extra Intra Reader 3: *Swallowed Like a Whole*

The Editorial Board of Intercurricular Programmes  
Gerrit Rietveld Academie  
2024

Editors  
Harriet Foyster, Rosie Haward, Clémence Lollia Hilaire

Design  
Francesca Lucchitta

Index  
Harriet Foyster, Rosie Haward, Clémence Lollia Hilaire

Printing and Binding  
Tjobo Kho, No Kiss?

Thanks  
To all the students, tutors, and alumni who ran the  
intercurricular programmes from 2022–2023, and  
whose work this reader is inspired by: Alcide Breaux,  
Menko Dijksterhuis, Harriet Foyster, Rick Geene,  
Pernilla Manjula Philip, Musoke Nalwoga, Akash  
Sheshadri, Aida Ra Mana, Yasemin Sürek, Mara Yuki  
Thøgersen, Monique Todd, Elisabeth Verveken,  
Weronika Wojda, Finn Overdevest.

All texts in this reader were commissioned by  
the editors, other than the following:

Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments:  
Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome  
Women and Queer Radicals*, Serpent's Tail, 2019.  
Jamieson Webster, *Disorganisation & Sex*, Divided  
Publishing, 2022.  
Cesare Pavese, *Dialogues with Leucò*, Marsilio Editori,  
1947.  
Katrina Palmer, *The Dark Object*, Bookworks, 2010  
Johanna Hedva, *Your Love is Not Good, And Other  
Stories*, 2023.  
Paul B. Preciado, *An Apartment on Uranus: Chronicles of  
the Crossing*, Semiotext(e), 2020.  
Alexis Pauline Gumbs, *Dub: Finding Ceremony*, Duke  
University Press, 2020.



Contributors: Pelumi Adejumo, Brackish Collective,  
Elena Braidá, Rots Brouwer, Crip the Curriculum,  
Iarlaith Ní Fheorais, Rick Geene, Alexis Pauline  
Gumbs, Saidiya Hartman, Johanna Hedva,  
Musoke Nalwoga, Katrina Palmer, Cesare Pavese,  
Paul B. Preciado, Monique Todd, Tessel Veneboer,  
Jamieson Webster, Weronika Wojda

