

ABSTRACT

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This is an interdisciplinary dissertation--in construction and content. It is an exploration of in-betweenness in text and selfhood. Increasingly, as craft, pedagogy, and scholarship evolve and change, a wider space opens for the blurred areas between genres and categories. From “pure” history texts, to highly subjective examples of ‘life-writing,’ narratives cross borders, blurring lines (such as “true” and “false”) that once appeared stark and rigid.

Ethnography, life-writing, and fiction all concern themselves with creating meaningful representations of “self” and “other” through narrative. Language, structure, and voice--aspects of craft frequently corralled with creative writing--are in fact equally important to, and co-dependent on, the “objective” reasoning of “fact”-based writing and scholarship.

In its widest definition, this dissertation is a self-reflexive ethnography, inhabiting various genres, crossing borders both creative and scholarly, that consider

the author's own blurred identity, and the borders of culture negotiated as an individual and writer. At the core of this thesis is the assumption that personal experience is a form of valid research. The value of the "I" is an overarching, organizing principle of this text.

Each chapter addresses particular aspects of categorization: identity, genre, and their interrelations, while certain key themes and questions (gender, ethnicity, place, identity, the politics of words, language, craft, pedagogy, and aesthetics) resonate throughout.

WHAT FALLS BETWEEN

By

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Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the
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Preface

There is no pure dissertation

Humans categorize. Everything around us, everything we are and produce. Categorization is the methodology of our minds. We are incapable of doing otherwise. It is biological

We know the result of sulfur and carbon mixed in a test tube. We predict earthquakes. We locate a book at the library using Dewey's decimals. We belong to the American Studies Department at the University of Maryland, College Park in the United States of America in the Northern Hemisphere, latitude 38 ° 59' 12.77" N, longitude 76 ° 56' 31.05" W.

Categorization breeds meaning, community, knowledge, systemics. It is also hierarchical. It breeds power and despair.

One must believe and participate in a system in order for it to continue functioning.

To question systems is to question reality. To question systems is to revolt.

I am investigating this most human of things: categorization. The desire to impose order on the world, on language; to classify trees, rainclouds, butterflies, behavior, ourselves. I am exploring the longing, impulse, necessity for categorization in order to better understand my craft and pedagogy (Literature, Cultural Studies, Creative Writing) and my own identity.

Michel Foucault had a laughter that shattered. I picture him on an exercise

bike, reading Borges, in French. One slug of laugh, and the window behind him (framing the limb of an oak tree), breaks into sharp cantles of glass that sparkle and embed in a cropped, white carpet. Michel does not stop pedaling. He is used to such occurrences because he abhors the sheen of Plexiglas and laughs frequently.

In the preface to The Order of Things, he begins:

"This book first arose out of a passage in Borges, out of the laughter that shattered as I read the passage..."¹

What caused Michel to erupt--a fellow writer, Borges, describing, "a certain Chinese encyclopedia," in which:

"Animals are divided into: (a) belonging to the Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) suckling pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l) *et cetera*, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies."²

Words that shatter—this, the power of narrative.

What was shattered for Foucault?

Preconceived notions of order, meaning, language, and thought.

So, what does it mean to categorize a person?

Imagine if Borges had written; Human beings are divided into (a) age at which one's mother died, (b) over 10,000 dollars in bank account, (c) neat, (d) birthplace of great-grandfather on father's side, (e) month in which first tooth appeared, (f) favorite song, (g) love a woman, (h) skin the shade of a wild cherry tree, (i) once-a-month bleeders, (j) kneel when praying, (k) nail biters, (l) afraid of cats,

(m) vaccinated against polio, (n) having a bellybutton.

Categories are always imperfect, mutable (and slightly absurd). The walls of categories, seemingly solid, are as permeable as the membranes of cells. When writing, one flows through walls of genre. When writing, whether consciously or not, one enacts genre-osmosis. There is no “pure” ethnography, “pure” fiction, “pure” autobiography, “pure” history, “pure” science, “pure” dissertation. The values and methodologies of each genre mingle and mix, dodge and weave.

And so the notion of category is complicated and illusory. As Trinh Min-Ha writes: "Despite our desperate, eternal attempt to separate, contain and mend, categories always leak."³

Within all disciplines, scientific or otherwise, categorization exists. It is necessary and restrictive. Vital and reductive. The antithetical nature of categorization creates a flexibility and elusiveness which can be most accurately (comfortably?) described in the language of contradiction or the language of metaphor.

Wendell Berry has described genre as “both enablement and constraint”⁴

Madeline Kadar says:

“Like water, genres assume the shape of the vessel that contains them. Like water, genres tend to exhibit certain properties. But if you empty the containing vessels, the better to see what’s inside, you are bound to be tricked. Like water, the shape of genres does not really exist, and their essence can never really be captured.”⁵

This is an interdisciplinary dissertation--in construction and content. It is an examination of genre-blurring. It is a self-portrait. It seeks, as its thesis, to wander across borders of genre and personal identity. It is an exploration of in-betweenness in terms of text and selfhood.



I am half-South Asian (Sindhi, refugee), half-Irish American (County Kerry to Hell's Kitchen, third generation). I entered a PhD program in American Studies at the University of Maryland with an MFA in Creative Writing (fiction) from a nontraditional program: Vermont College's brief-residency MFA. After I had finished my coursework and comprehensive exams, my collection of short stories was published (Where the Long Grass Bends, Sarabande Books, 2004), and I began teaching at Spalding University's brief-residency MFA in Writing Program (fiction). So, during the course of my PhD in American Cultural Studies, I was writing fiction and thinking about how to teach it. These interwoven aspects of scholarship all came to bear on my dissertation.

Because of my bicultural, bilingual, bi'racial' identity, because I float between creative and academic realms, because I write in numerous genres, this dissertation, as a reflection of its author, is a creature in-between. In form and content, it straddles genre categories: ethnography, memoir, photography, poetry, fiction, essay, lecture, biography, literary criticism, and so on. The hybrid form of this dissertation mirrors

my own experience of moving in-between cultural categories as an individual. The hybrid form of this dissertation *is* the point.

Although each chapter is a stand-alone essay, certain themes and questions resonate throughout. For example, gender, ethnicity, place, and identity are taken up in the form of a “traditional ethnography” in Chapter I (“Six of One, Half Dozen of the Other,”) while they are approached through an imagined (part fictional) literary criticism in Chapter X (“What Hands Are These? (I)”). The politics of words, language, and aesthetics are taken up pedagogically in the form of a craft lecture (delivered to MFA in Writing students at Spalding University) in Chapter III (“Words, Words, Words”), and these concepts are revisited in Chapter IV (“Political Flappings”) in the form of a personal-research essay that includes mini-biographies, interviews, poetry, and photographs. Throughout the dissertation, ideas explored in one chapter (and one genre) are picked up and examined in a different chapter (in a different genre).

The form of this dissertation, I hope and intend, serves as both map and example of how aspects of our separate genre methodologies can intermingle, cross-pollinate, and lead us to a more inclusive version of narrative. Life-writing (autobiography, memoir), ethnography, and fiction are all concerned with constructing meaningful representations of “the self” and “other” in narrative form. This dissertation attempts to explore the possibilities of interconnection between these genres (and others), through a self-reflexive, creative, critical thinking “I.” I have attempted to lay the self upon the page, and to treat it as other.

Throughout the construction of the thesis I paid close attention to language,

structure, and voice, “experimenting” with all and treating them as equal to the content, ideas, and scholarship of the piece. This bears repeating, as it is both a central theme and motif of the work: language, structure, voice--aspects of craft frequently corralled with “art” and “creative writing”--are herein equal to and co-dependent on “fact” and “scholarship” (a note—I believe craft and art *to be* scholarship, and scholarship *to be* craft and art. I see no divide between them).

In thinking through the topic of categorization, I considered both how it is taught (to me, to children, to adults), and how to teach it—in its contradictory complexity. I considered categorization as a reader, writer, student, teacher, member of a given academic department (Cultural Studies, English, Anthropology, Creative Writing), and as an individual (through gender, class, race, sexuality, religion, and so on). I considered the pedagogy of categorization. Chapters Four (“Words, Words, Words”), Six (“Lassoing Time and Space”), Eight (“Magical Realism”), and Nine (“Stepping Into Character”) are transcribed lectures on craft and methodology, initially delivered at Spalding University for MFA in Writing students (cross-genre—fiction, poetry, and creative nonfiction). In my lectures, I enact a type of critical thinking, political approach (that I learned, and was first exposed to, in my American Studies courses at University of Maryland) to creative writing. Since I am investigating genre, craft, and methodology, I thought it vital to include a discussion of my main genre--fiction--and to consider its methods and how I, personally, teach them. All of these lectures also stem from the premise and belief that fiction has a methodology as rigorous and scholarly as any other academic pursuit—that fiction *is* a scholarly pursuit.

In some essays, I attempt to subvert traditional forms and genres, from the scientific report (see Chapter Seven, Section Two, “Report From the Live Butterfly Exhibit at the Louisville Zoo”) to ethnography (see Chapter Eleven “Prayatna (work)”). Throughout, I combine poetry, photography, fiction, creative nonfiction, ethnography, memoir, biography, literary criticism, the essay, and other sub-genres. In each piece, I try to write in the *ways* and methodologies of the genres I am examining. I enact and embody, through writing and style, a genre inquiry.

In its widest definition, this dissertation is my version of a self-reflexive ethnography--inhabiting various genres, crossing borders both creative and scholarly--as I consider my own blurred identity and the borders of culture I negotiate as a person and writer. Through the essays themselves and *how* they are written, I hope to show, to exhibit, my ideas about genre.

I consider this dissertation more of a circular reverie than a progression of linear thought. Through a method of space and silence (around my language and ideas), I try to tap into different modes of consciousness, verbal and nonverbal. Throughout the text, I supplement my ideas with images. Images, another way of seeing (with eye and “I”) are embedded within the text as alternate versions, alternate narratives. The dissertation also considers power in terms of genre and identity. Power and hierarchy are central themes of each essay.

Any narrative, anything *written* (be it considered “objective” or not), is constructed, imagined, and refracted through the prism of the terrible, glorious “I.” The text of blurred genre, the text that asks a reader to question genre assumptions, that asks to be read as belonging to two or more genres at once, throws the very

notion of boundaries and borders, of “truth” and “fiction” entirely into question. As Clifford Geertz writes:

"This genre blurring (of late, he says) is more than just a smatter of Harry Houdini or Richard Nixon turning up as characters in novels or of Midwestern murder sprees described as though a gothic romancer had imagined them. It is philosophical inquiries looking like lit crit (think of Stanley Cavell on Beckett or Thoreau, Sartre on Flaubert), scientific discussions looking like belle lettres morceaux (like Galileo's Daughter or Flatwoods which is written as a journal), baroque fantasies presented as deadpan empirical observations (Borges, Barthelme), histories that consist of equations and tables or law court testimony (Fogel and Engerman, Le Roi Laduire), documentaries that read like true confessions (Mailer), Parables posing as ethnographies (Castaneda), theoretical treatises set out as travelogues (Levi-Strauss), Ideological arguments cast as historiographical inquiries (Edward Said), epistemological studies constructed like political tracts (Paul Feyerabend), methodological polemics got up as personal memoirs (James Watson). Nabokov's Pale Fire, that impossible object made of poetry and fiction, footnotes and images from the clinic, seems very much of the time; one waits only for quantum theory in verse or biography in algebra...The present jumbling of varieties of discourse has grown to the point where it is becoming difficult either to label authors (what is Foucault--historian, philosopher, political theorist? Or to classify works (what is William Gass' On Being Blue--treatise, causerie, apologetic) And thus it is more than a matter of odd sports and occasional curiosities or of

the admitted fact that the innovative is, by definition, hard to categorize. It is a phenomenon general enough and distinctive enough to suggest that what we are seeing is not just another redrawing of the cultural map--the moving of a few disrupted borders...but an alteration of the principles of mapping.

Something is happening to the way we are thinking about the way we think....The properties connecting texts with one another...are coming to seem as important in characterizing them as those dividing them; and rather than face an array of natural kinds, fixed types divided by sharper qualitative differences, we more and more see ourselves surrounded by a vast, almost continuous field of variously intended and diversely constructed works we can order only partially, relationally, and as our purposes prompt us.”⁶

How we write--the specific forms through which we do our jobs, tell our tales--can be considered a political action. Informing, possibly changing people's minds, making them think about something for more than a media-minute, is both an act of scholarship and an act of creation. And in a time when having Hollywood stars attached to a “cause” generates more change and attention than the validity of the cause itself, it becomes even more important to investigate the modes we use to impart information. More and more, the beauty of the message carries as great a burden as the message itself--for better or worse. How we write affects the emotions of readers--and emotions make political, cultural, and academic endeavours more or less effective.

This is an emotional, aesthetically-driven dissertation. I insist that these

things (emotionalism, beauty) are important and powerful aspects of culture and human behavior, and therefore should not be overlooked as points of ethnographic (self-reflexive or otherwise) and scholarly examination. I insist that narratives (with all their flashy falsities, whether “objective” or not) are as legitimate an investigation of “truth” as any other.

The dissertation travels geographically from piece to piece and within each piece, across borders of both genre and place--the places where it was written, the places it explores. It also crosses geographies of the self—mind and body. I try to allow, through the reflexive “I,” a certain level of eroticism and attention to the functions of the body--things that have traditionally been considered suspect in the “I,” or not quite “appropriate” topics of ethnographic inquiry. The dissertation represents, among other things, a return to body (as has been called for in contemporary memoir and life-writing--a retreat from the traditional Cartesian mode where the self is represented by the mind and soul--but not the body).

At the core of this thesis is the assumption that the exploration of personal experience is a form of valid research, and that personal experience is a valid subject for research. I attempt to learn and investigate from experience, my own experience--what I know--as my starting point. My own identity, multi-“racial,” blurred, becomes representative of the multigenre text. I use the self as a site of excursion and knowledge. The value of the “I” is an overarching, organizing principle of this text. Through the first-person voice, I “experiment” with differing tones--didactic, classical, conversational, artistic--attempting to inhabit, through voice and participation, the very thing I am investigating. One form of research for this

dissertation was simple awareness and observation of my self and surroundings at all times. I made some purposeful excursions (such as to the Louisville Zoo and the Boston Museum of Science) and happened upon others. Regardless of what I was doing and experiencing, I paid attention, and took notes.

On the first day of class in American Studies 601, the introductory course for MA and PhD students at the University of Maryland, we were, collectively, as a class of new American Studies students, asked this question: “What is American Studies?” The question was the theme of the course. We returned to it throughout the semester.

And the answer to the question?

The question, asked again. Like a koan or Sufi riddle.

Question: “What is American Studies?”

Answer: “What is American Studies?”

American Studies, Cultural Studies, is a scholarly pursuit that asks questions, and considers questions a form of answer.

In this dissertation, I am concerned with the following questions:

What is categorization? Why and how is it important? How is it divisive and restrictive? In terms of literary genre? In terms of human identity and society? How is it necessary and unavoidable? What are the advantages and disadvantages of genre and categorization? What are the distinctions between art and politics, true and false, objective and subjective? Why is there a decisive split between the above binaries? Who controls genre—writers, readers, publishers, academics, critics? What is the importance of pedagogy for creative writers and academics? How are differing genres taught—and why? What can genres (and their practitioners) learn from each

other, and offer each other, methodologically speaking? What does it mean to be a public intellectual--as an artist? As a scholar? What does it mean to pay attention to language, to beauty and aesthetics? How does hybridity function in a text? In an individual? In a writer?

Initially, I intended to write a dissertation that was mostly creative (fiction)--an historical novel. The first section of the dissertation, which I envisioned to consist of a few chapters, was to be an academic, strictly “scholarly” inquiry of genre and genre-blurring works. I intended to explore themes of “true” and “false,” and various texts that fell somewhere between “fact” and “fiction.” This part of my dissertation was not “problematic;” in preparing my proposal, I simply wrote out my ideas. I did not have to explain why this mode of inquiry was valuable or important. This mode of inquiry was standard for the institution and degree. However, for the second part of the dissertation--the novel--I had to give reasons, “scholarly,” “academic” reasons *why*. I had to legitimize my desire to write fiction and legitimize fiction as a form of scholarship and inquiry. I had to supply reasons I could support and cite. The implication being that creative writing is not as substantive, not as worthwhile, not as effective or intellectual as academic writing. Not as defensible: a negative value judgment on the genre of fiction.

I understood the need for this (because of categorization and systemics) and found it fair.

So I set about dissertating (a new verb for me) and when it came time to write the novel, I found it problematic. I could not create a text while adhering to the academic standards of the genre “historical novel” (as I had laid it out in my own

proposal). I found it impossible to write the novel while consulting an outline. My imagination felt choked, started turning blue.

While conducting research for the “scholarly part” of the dissertation (as I had come to think of the chapters on genre), I kept my notes in a file on my computer labeled: “Diss.” While (simultaneously) conducting research for the “historical novel” part of the dissertation (as I had come to think of it), I stored my notes in a file on my computer labeled: “Novel.” I kept the two files separate. I categorized based on genre, based on values of “true” and “false.” It was not until I had officially decided to discard the novel as part of the dissertation that I began blurring genre.

Initially, I could not decide how to write the new, “fictionless” dissertation. I knew I wanted it to be a blurred-genre text, in and of itself, but I struggled with how to write the piece. In what way? What style? What voice? What structure? I did a great deal of research and reading on genre, and immersed myself in the world of the essay—personal, research, and everything in between. Eventually, I chose to write the chapters of the dissertation as a series of linked personal-research essays.

The word “essay” comes from the French verb *essayer*: to attempt, to try, to leap experimentally into the unknown. Montaigne, often deemed the father of the Western essay, understood that, in an essay, the play of a person's mind as it struggles to achieve some understanding of a problem *is* the plot.

A sampling of essayists speaking “on the essay,” brings the fluidity of the genre to light:

"Howells, for example, refers to the essay's "essential liberty" (802),

Chesterton to its "leisure and liberty" (2), Williams to its "Infinite fracture"

(323) Kazin to its "open form" (ix), Hoagland to its "extraordinary flexibility," (27) Lopate to its "wonderfully tolerant form" (1) Epstein to its "generous boundaries" (34), and Hardwick to its "open spaces" (xiv). By persistently invoking such expansive phrases...these essayists seem to be conceiving of the essay as a unique genre--a form of writing whose distinguishing characteristic is its freedom from any governing aspect of form. These essayists seem to be portraying the essay as an antigenre, a rogue form of writing in the universe of discourse. Or as Adorno puts it "the law of the innermost form of the essay is heresy" (171).⁷

"The essayist must be willing to contradict herself, to digress, even to risk ending up in a terrain very different from the one initially embarked upon."⁸ Rosellen Brown says the essay "presents itself, if not as precisely true, then as an emanation of an identifiable speaking voice making statements for which it takes responsibility. In such writing the reader encounters "a persona through whose unique vision experience or information will be filtered, perhaps distorted, perhaps questioned," the writer's voice creates an identity that "will cast a shadow as dense and ambiguous as that of an imaginary protagonist. The self is surely a created character."⁹ William Gass says "the essay is unhurried [sic]; it browses among books; it enjoys an idea like a fine wine; it thumbs through things. It turns round and round upon its topic, exposing this aspect and then that; proposing possibilities, reciting opinions, disposing of prejudice and even of the simple truth itself--as too undeveloped, not yet of an interesting age" (25).¹⁰

And so, in the essay, I found my form for the dissertation. I felt I knew how to approach my topic; stylistically, at least. I had my map. I had my genre.



In each chapter of the dissertation, I attempt to push at the boundaries of genre. Each piece is indeed an essay, but an essay that also inhabits the genres of fiction, ethnography, poetry, photography, and memoir.

The first essay I wrote for the dissertation was “Taxa.” Since categorization is such a wide and general topic, I wanted to start out by considering the topic through some specific themes--to make the ideas more manageable. I hit upon the butterfly, with its beauty and taxonomic classification. The essay poured out of me, onto the page, as a hybrid-text: part poem (constructed word by word, line-break by line-break), part personal essay, part research essay. Part self-reflexive ethnography, linguistics inquiry, mini-biography of three Nabokov’s--centering around their shared synesthesia, and scientific-aesthetic inquiry into the symbol and being of the butterfly. The structure of “Taxa” (titled sections) reflects the thematic content--classification, categorization. It is a structure that also repeats throughout the dissertation.

I joined the long line of thinkers viewers the butterfly, and the pinning of it, as a symbol. For me, the butterfly became a symbol of aesthetics and politics. Of art and science. Of language and texture. Of beauty and usefulness. The butterfly as symbol flits throughout the dissertation.

Chapter Two, “Six Of One, Half Dozen of the Other,” is a combined self-reflexive ethnography, ethnography, and a “version” of my mother. Part I of the essay is an ethnographic portrait of my friend Sonja, who, like me, is half-Indian, half-American. The work of this section is taken from a longer ethnography I conducted of Sonja and her husband, Satya, over a period of six months. Sonja and I worked together, through a back and forth dialogue, to consider our different relationships with our mothers, and to consider how these relationships have affected our sense of our identities, bodies, and appearances. Part II of the chapter is a personal essay I wrote in response to mine and Sonja’s discussions about our identities and mothers. Incidentally, Part II is the first essay I ever wrote—a final assignment for a personal essay workshop I took at University of Maryland because I was missing creative writing and the workshop environment. From the instructors, Susan Leonardi and Rebecca Pope, I learned how to politicize a creative writing workshop—through the choice of *which* pieces we studied. It was the first writing workshop I had ever taken where *what* was discussed in a piece, the ideas at play, the politics, were as important as *how* the piece was constructed. Part II of Chapter II, the essay, is fraught with the problematic issue of memory (what am I remembering of my mother and self in the essay—is it ‘true?’ Are the memories changed to suit the narrative, the themes?). In order to avoid fudging memory for the sake of “plot,”

I tried to keep the essay “formless” and non-linear. It is a series of vignettes, separated by small breaks. Still, thematically, episodically, the essay is a constructed narrative that molds my memories and changes them; and, it moves forward in a linear fashion. Chapter II is both autobiography and biography of self, friend (who is like a sister), and mother. It is a self-reflexive, co-dependent ethnography, as well as a “relational memoir,” wherein the self cannot be understood alone, but only in terms of others.

Chapter Three, “Categorically Speaking,” views categorization through museums and material culture—key aspects of collection and of American Studies. The essay begins with a section called “Teaching Children to Classify” wherein I look at categorization in terms of how it is taught to children. Through examining the “beginnings” of how we learn to classify, I hoped to start at the ‘basics’ of the topic. In addition, I was actively pursuing a form of participant observation. I experienced the museum exhibit, and participated in its interactive games, as a form of research. I then took my first-hand experience and molded it into a narrative. The essay goes on to examine language and its categories--naming, metaphor and simile—and the classification of sameness and difference. I address the intersection of the personal with the anthropological--how the self is categorized, culturally--and continue with the threads of Chapters One and Two as I delve my memories and the experiences of my family in an attempt to better understand the categorization of identity (in a Cultural Studies sense). The theme of museums and what they mean continues throughout the essay. Later, I examine the methodologies and criterion of categorization--color, shape, framing. There is a brief ethnography of books--of what

is found in their margins; the act of reading as dialogue between self and other.

Throughout this essay, I consider what it means to me to be American, and I use photographs to supplement and bolster the text. The chapter ends with a rewritten, re-imagined Hindu myth that connects the self and family with the idea of nation and the world.

Chapter Four: the lecture “Words, Words, Words,” is the first of my Spalding University lectures. It was aimed at an MFA in Writing audience (mixed-genre—fiction, poetry, creative nonfiction) and addresses the essential question: as a writer, how to keep words fresh? It discusses the themes of the dissertation: words as categories, the effort of beauty, of craft, and the importance of words as the building block of anything written, be it academic or artistic--or both. It also examines rhetoric, nouns, verbs, adjectives, meaning-making (asking students to take responsibility for their words and narratives, for the choices they make, as writers), and the inherently “mixed” history and culture of words. I ask that the writer be considered a political, pedagogical being. The lecture ends with a (transcribed) audio recording of Muriel Rukeyser’s poem, “The Ballad of Orange and Grape” (about meaning-making, categories, and words), and a visual presentation, a slide-show of protest posters from the march against the 2003 Republican National Convention in New York City.

Chapter Five: “Genre: What Falls Between the Cracks Besides Everything,” is a more traditional academic inquiry into literary genre and its categorization. It includes an interview I conducted with multi-genre author, Victoria Redel. This chapter examines the “I” and subjectivity and how it functions in different genres--

fiction, ethnography, life writing, and theatre. I examine the mixed-genre text, the blended text, the “experimental” text, and how books are categorized within particular genres--by writers, readers, critics, libraries, and the publishing industry. I consider genre from the perspective of creative writers and academics. Questions about what each genre can learn from the others (where we all overlap and differ) are raised—in terms of methodology and core values.

Chapter Six, the Spalding University lecture “Lassoing Time and Space,” discusses one of the main differences between fiction and other literary genres—an attention to craft, form, and a necessary focus on (and manipulation of) time and space. The chapter opens with a discussion of 16th Century Netherlandish paintings and how the use of space/time in the paintings reflects the creation of space/time in various short stories and novels. I try to teach, to lecture, in a cross-genre fashion—to illustrate my points through images as well as a careful textual examination. If my point is not made in one genre, I’ll try another.

Chapter Seven: “Political Flappings,” continues to track the thread of craft, of words, and attention to them, going a step further in considering craft and language as political. The essay acknowledges the constructed nature of texts, and that everything springs from the personal. I continue the ideas suggested in Chapters One (through Nabokov) and Two (through my mother) of biography as a form of life-writing (as relational as any memoir), by beginning the chapter with a mini-biography of the Irish rebel/martyr/hero Roger Casement. I chose to start with Casement because of the themes of language, power, sexuality, and hybridity that are central to the story of his life. I follow the image of the butterfly through the section on Casement, and move

from him into an experimental ‘scientific report’ based on my visit to a live butterfly exhibit at the Louisville Zoo. As earlier, I experience a place of collection (now a zoo instead of a museum) and follow the metaphor of the butterfly. I continue to track ideas about power through an imagined, invisible character at the zoo: Jelaila. The next section follows butterflies to an inquiry of the woman’s body and world population, of my self and my mother. A photograph of art critic Andre Breton and Leon Trotsky, with Frida Kahlo in the background holding a butterfly net, moves the chapter into a mini-biography of Frida Kahlo, an artist, a woman in-between, who wielded the personal as political. I examine her paintings (exhibiting some as photographs and describing others solely through words—again, playing with the construction of knowledge and interplay between words and images). From there, the essay enters into an inquiry of the role of beauty in scholarship and politics, via multi-genre authors Arundhati Roy, Jamaica Kincaid, and Silas House (with whom I conducted an interview). I consider whether or not some genres are more “useful” or inherently more ‘political’ than others. The remainder of the chapter examines the idea of the personal as political, the artist as public intellectual, the pedagogy of teaching art as politics to MFA in Writing students, and teaching craft as worthwhile scholarship to non-MFA in Writing students. I consider a more critical-thinking approach to teaching creative writing, and the differing uses (in terms of activism) of both fiction and nonfiction. I consider the role of the artist as public intellectual, and the responsibilities and capacities of the artist as scholar. Included in the chapter is a poem I wrote about my family, gender, and anti-exoticism. The chapter combines poetry, ethnography, biography, photography, pedagogy, and literary criticism. It is a

series of meditations, often inconclusive and open-ended.

Chapter Eight, the Spalding University lecture, “Magical Realism: The Politics of Structure and Reality, continues Chapter Seven’s discussion of pedagogy and the politics and aesthetics of craft in fiction. I focus on the politics of structure in magical realism, and its hybrid, politicized approach to Reality (in terms of the world) and Realism (in terms of Literature). Through ‘traditional’ literary criticism, I examine magical realism as a hybrid space, and magical realist texts as hybrid and blurred. I talk about how structure and form can be political choices--how form, in fiction, represents resistance. In this lecture, I look at the methodologies of fiction and literary structure from a Cultural Studies and Creative Writing standpoint, simultaneously.

Chapter Nine, the Spalding University lecture “Stepping into Character,” continues to draw upon Cultural Studies and Creative writing. In this chapter, I use “explanatory systems” of ethnography and methodologies of the theatre to describe the creation of character. As a cross-methodology lecture, it both serves to exhibit and facilitate movement between genres.

Chapter Ten springs from Chapter Nine’s exploration of character. “What Hands are These? (I)” follows Shakespeare’s character, Lavinia, from Titus Andronicus, through a somewhat traditional literary criticism into an imagined, exploratory fiction. Via Lavinia, I investigate the culture and symbolic humanity of the hand, gender, sexuality, rape, textuality, and how they all intersect. I explore a literary character and make her real, bring her to life in the present—the chapter blurs fact and fiction.

Chapter Eleven: “Prayatna (Work),” is a self-reflexive ethnography written in the form, voice, and style of fiction. When I first wrote the essay, it was much longer. But something was off about the pacing. It felt tedious, boring. I ended up using the license of creative nonfiction, and taking two different women and collapsing them into one “character,” one woman: Rudra. All of the events of the essay are “true,” and “actually occurred.” However, they occurred over a span of a few weeks; for the sake of the essay, for the sake of the *narrative*, I collapsed the events into one day. I did this also to create a sense of exhaustion in the reader, an overwhelming sense of work, to better represent and *evoke* a particular way of life. The essay is therefore part fiction, part anthropology, part memoir, and considers race, ethnicity, class, place (rural versus urban), gender, and sexuality.

Chapter Twelve: “What Hands Are These? (II)” is a continuation of Chapter Ten. This essay is a self-reflexive ethnography that combines and considers the author’s marriage (which occurred during the course of my dissertating), mehndhi art, gender, class, power, sexuality, and literary criticism. Some sections rely on fictional techniques of description and pacing. Others are more ethnographic. Still others, memoirish. At one point in the essay, the author (me) becomes a “she”—I move from the first person to third person in an examination of myself as bride and wife. It is a relational memoir/ethnography that considers the self in terms of family, culture, and society. There is an interplay between the pronouns “we” and “I,” and “she” and “I,” and a consideration of how each defines the other. Photographs are embedded in the text, and assist in telling the story of the body and self as a site of inquiry.



The deepest and most involved twists and turns of scholarship are but letters and phrases away from the myths that remind us we are human. The rigidity and binarisms of black and white, of primary colors, is giving way, tectonic, to a blurring and embracing, to translation. As we evolve beyond cubicles and segregations, our craft and scholarship and art evolves, too. We blur—selves, methodologies, genres, and disciplines. It is my hope that this dissertation, in some small way, serves these concepts and aims.

¹ Michel Foucault, The Order of Things (New York: Random House, 1970) xv.

² Foucault xv.

³ Marlene Kadar, Essays on Life Writing (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992) 222.

⁴ Gary William Raspberry, Writing Research/Researching Writing Through A Poet's I (New York: Peter Lang, 2001) 1.

⁵ Kadar 153.

⁶ Clifford Geertz, Local Knowledge (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1983) 1-2.

⁷ Carl H. Klaus, "Essayists on the Essay," Literary Nonfiction: Theory, Criticism, and Pedagogy, ed. Chris Anderson (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1989) 156-157.

⁸ Philip Lopate, "What Happened to the Personal Essay?," The Fourth Genre: Contemporary Writers of/on Creative Nonfiction, eds. Michael Steinberg and Robert Root, Jr. (New York: Longman 2001) 302.

⁹ Michael Steinberg and Robert Root, Jr., Introduction, The Fourth Genre: Contemporary Writers of/on Creative Nonfiction (New York: Longman 2001) xvi.

¹⁰ Klaus 162.

Dedication

For my parents, Holter, and Lugnut.

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Chapter I: Taxa

The Body, In Death

Let us begin with the black, downy thorax of a butterfly, the segment squeezed with thumb and forefinger when exterminating lepidoptera, the segment punctured with a pin when spreading a butterfly on cork after it has been relaxed in a humid jar of cheap gin. Two pair of wings, mahogany, flush with silver, blue, and white, and three pair of slim, jointed legs attach to the thorax. Dressmaker pins skewer the wings, and hold the clubbed antennae stiffly upright in the shape of a bobby pin pried open. The south end of the thorax connects to the abdomen that is lined with spiracles: lung-like, the size of punctuation. Inside the abdomen: the genitals of the butterfly and the long, flexible, tubular heart. At the north end of the thorax is the head where the proboscis coils. Flanking the head: two compound eyes of 6,000 faceted lenses. ^{11 12}

The wingspan of this butterfly is petite. 3/8 of an inch.

The violence that can be done to 3/8 of an inch.

The butterfly is muffled in a sheet of glassine paper. In twenty-four hours, the pins will be removed. The butterfly, mounted, in ventral profile. It will be tagged. Named.

Western pygmy blue

Brephidium exilis

captured by Anonymous

3 July, 2004

In a lemon grove. Orange County, California.¹³

Women and Butterflies

On the skin of a North American woman born after 1960, the butterfly is a standard tattoo, like a heart or rose. Permanently spread-eagled to the inner thigh, ankle, top vertebrae, haunch. The places on a woman it is best to lick.

3/8 of an Inch

[]

Adult Butterflies

They ingest only liquid. They taste with their feet. Their wings smell of yellow cupcakes and testicles.¹⁴

They are Dreaming Us

I tell you, Chuang Tzu: we are nightmares of nets and pins.

At Rest

E x p a n d e d is an unnatural pose for a butterfly. Yet, this is how we depict them. Pert-winged, sprawled on our limbs. In museums: martial linearity. Above the cribs of newborns: hung and twisting.

Reposing, a butterfly holds its wings vertically. In this posture, it is thinner than a credit card. In this posture, it is as safe as a butterfly can be. Quiet camouflage: revealed.¹⁵

What is essential to our fascination is what we maim.

The mutilation of *taxa*, or, categorization.

My Mother

In 1979, she wore a butterfly T-shirt. The black wings bridged her breasts. She studied Mandarin. She said the only things she had to do were pay taxes and die.

Mandarin for butterfly: *hu-dieh*.¹⁶

Strength

Float like one, a fighter with conscience. The muscular thorax propels the wings, fulcrumly, in a figure-eight pattern.

For the butterfly, I do not approve of the plushy, idle word: *flutter*. It is only used because of the false equation: small = delicate.

Those wings are throbbing.

Nabokov

Synesthesia. From the Greek. *syn*: together; *aisthesis*: to perceive.¹⁷ An overlapping of senses, such as, heard color: (magenta tire squeal); tasted shape (oval radish bite); visible sound: (Red burlap of C minor). Words with texture, temperature: the furred green edge of the letter *P*. The slow tinkle of orange. It smells of balloon.

To me, the name *Vivekananda* is a pool of sulphurous yellow. The repeated *v* cool, high, on the palate: a cucumber, re Fridgerated.

Nabokov found Vera, another synesthete. Their son, Dimitri, also synesthetic. Perception shared, passed on. I wonder if they agreed on the weave of *Dimitri*?¹⁸

Tight and bumpy like a good cornrow.

Nabokov, lepidopterist-literati. Wanderer. Whose father was murdered. Who was passionate for the butterfly. Who netted and pinned them with voluptuous, ochre pleasure. A serial killer in the name of the twins Art and Science. To a synesthete, the butterfly is a revelation. Jingling spectrums, flapping words. No wonder he chased!

The flash of a Morpho, steamed blue, wing underside, a slippery brown, grain of brick, like the word *quotient*. The etymology of butterflies; the entomology of words. How could he resist?

Imagine: a rabble of butterflies, a parish of phlox. To Nabokov, crapulous on color, this was divinity.

Out on a butterfly hunt with a friend, Nabokov ruefully called a common butterfly: "a winged cliché."¹⁹ In addition to hunting disappointment, I think he saw a

dingy phrase. Something like: *her bosom heaved*.

His greatest contributions to lepidoptery: his work with Blues, his use of genitalia for taxonomic purposes, scale-counting to classify. He was: "temperamentally a 'splitter,' a taxonomist who recognizes and elevates distinct differences between two types. Those who tend to blur such differences into more generalized types are called 'lumpers'." ²⁰

My veins are difficult to pierce. My father, a physician, draws my blood with a butterfly needle. My mother faints. My father and I are connected to the needle and no one is there to catch her.

"When Nabokov caught his first butterfly in 1906, at the age of seven, his mother showed him how to spread it." ²¹

Nabokov referred to butterflies as: *she*. ²²

If you hold my arms, I will attack you. It is involuntary.

Women know the violence that can be done to 3/8 of an inch.

I am pinning words and time.

Sight

Butterflies see in pixels like Seurat and television. They see ultraviolet wavelengths on flowers and the wings of other butterflies. They see polarized light and track in it the precise tilt of the sun. They see red and avoid green when feeding (it is not a liquid color) but hover to it when laying eggs. The eyes of some are bifocal, magnifying pollen.

As the butterfly beats its wings, the shingled feathers tip and reflect, the

scales, iridescent. To a creature who sees ultraviolet, the butterfly flickers, communicates, in flight.

We do not see ultraviolet. We are burned by it. To us, butterflies appear colorful. To Nabokov, verbose and tintured. To each other, they must be rapturous.

From the Cornell lectures, March 1951:

"You will ask--what is the feeling of hatching? Oh, no doubt, there is a rush of panic to the head, a thrill of breathless and strange sensations, but then the eyes see, in a flow of sunshine, the butterfly sees the world, the large and awful face of the gaping entomologist." ²³

Vultures, My Mother, and Butterflies

In the myths of butterflies, the sun is a burning compass.

We run calculators by the sun.

Vultures coast on thermal air.

A carcass is a carcass.

Nesher is a Hebrew word translated as *eagle* in the King James Bible. In contemporary Hebrew, *nesher* means *vulture*.²⁴ The current translation of *Exodus* 19:4:²⁵

And I bore you upon wings of vultures and brought you unto me.

The vulture, seraphic vehicle.

For a literature class in 1993, I was asked to consult a King James Bible. Knowing nothing of bibles, I asked my mother to buy one. She mailed me a Catholic Bible with a Francis of Assisi bookmark (beneath the lamination, birds perched on his

shoulders) and a note that read: *Your grandmother would not allow a King James Bible in the house.*

My Catholic Bible says *eagle*, too.

My father taught me that Garuda is half-vulture, half-man. Most call him half-eagle. In Kashi, a renowned wrestler and crematorium worker told me that Garuda--born into slavery, enemy of snakes, king of birds, mount of Vishnu--is half-vulture. Not eagle, he said.

I said: *haanji*. Definitive "yes."

In the myths of humans, eagle and vulture overlap, categorically.

Without vultures, rabies and anthrax.

My Aunt Sonja is 1/2 Parsi. Parsis leave their dead for vultures in stone towers (fire, water, earth are sacred and must not be defiled). Since 1993, vultures have declined by more than 95 percent in Pakistan, India, and Nepal. The vultures are being poisoned from eating carcasses of cattle treated with the veterinary drug *diclofenac* (made in the U.S.A.), an anti-inflammatory that alleviates pain in beasts of burden and arthritic humans.²⁶

There are not enough vultures to eat the Parsi dead. In Mumbai, the Parsi *panchayat* erected solar reflectors to hurry decomposition in the Towers of Silence. A U.S. educated Parsi engineer built "an ozone-generating machine to...combat the stench...from bodies left out."²⁷ In the northern mountains of Cambodia, where lychees and strawberries thrive and *diclofenac* is not available, vultures are flocking: the slender-billed vulture (*Gyps tenuirostris*), the white-rumped vulture (*Gyps bengalensis*). A winged, silent message. Vultures know the power of a crowd. They

know how to confirm an hypothesis.²⁸ Their heads are nude, efficient. Ideal for entrail dipping.

In the myths of vultures, we have grown elusive.

How right, how *vulturous*, they are. They are taxonomic lumpers, dunking their glabrous heads into carrion of any species. They are angels. Mourners. Janitors. It is ingratitude that labels the vulture marauder. It is fear of omens, symbols.

How kind, to feed the birds! I would be happy to be digested, to fuel the span of vulture wings. Happy, for the bits of my flesh to take flight in the ultraviolet sky, visible to the butterfly.

¹¹ "How To Mount A Butterfly," Newport Butterfly Farm and Zoo, May 2003 < <http://community-2.webtv.net/guestsbook/HOWTOMOUNTABUTTERFLY/> >

¹² "Anatomy of a butterfly," Alexanor.Urghorod.ua, ed. S.G. Popov, January 11, 2000
<<http://www.alexanor.uzhgorod.ua/anatom00.htm>>

¹³ L.J. Orsak, The Butterflies of Orange County, California, Center for Pathobiology Miscellaneous Publication #3 (New York: University of California Press, 1977) 349.

¹⁴ Some information obtained from a ranger at the "Live Butterfly Exhibit at the Louisville Zoo," May 2004.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ I called my mother, Sheila Vaswani, and asked her how to say "butterfly" in Mandarin.

¹⁷ Melissa Lee Lewis, "What is Synesthesia," Neuroscience for Kids 2006
<<http://faculty.washington.edu/chudler/syne.html>>

¹⁸ Stacy Schiff, Vera: Mrs. Vladimir Nabokov, (New York: Modern Library, 2000) 103.

¹⁹ Brian Boyd and Robert Michael Pyle, eds., Nabokov's Butterflies (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000) 537.

²⁰ Boyd 54.

²¹ Boyd 3.

²² Boyd 473.

²³ Body 473.

²⁴ J.J. Goldberg, "Where Linguistics Dare to Fly," The Forward 10.20.2000
<<http://www.forward.com/issues/2000/00.10.20/arts4.html>>

²⁵ Catholic Bible Press, The New American Bible, (Nashville: Catholic Bible Press, 1987) 171.

²⁶ John Roach, "Has Mysterious Killer of India's Vultures Been Found?," National Geographic News May 4, 2004 <http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2004/01/0128_040128_indiavultures.html>

²⁷ Sanjeev Srivastava, "Parsis Turn to Solar Power," BBC News July 18, 2004 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south_asia/1443789.stm>

²⁸ Alex Kirby, "Rare Vultures Flock to Cambodia," BBC News, June 10, 2004
<<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/3795645.stm>>

Chapter II: Six of One, Half Dozen of the Other

A year ago I wrote an ethnography of my friend Sonja²⁹ who, like myself, is Indian and American. While reworking the ethnography for this paper, I was also revising a personal essay, parts of which addressed memories of my mother. In re-listening to Sonja's interviews, I realized that after every question I asked, she answered, then asked me if I had a similar story. My personal essay was essentially based on my responses to Sonja's questions. I was also struck by the different ways Sonja and I connect our appearances and physicality to our mothers and how these ties and/or discrepancies affect how we navigate our identities--especially in the past. Our two narratives, one ethnographic, one essayistic, attempt to answer similar questions through the exploration of sites of memory associated with mothers, language, and appearance.

The paper is in two parts; the first section relies on Sonja's ethnography and transcribed bits of our taped interviews. The second section is a series of vignettes, in the form of a personal essay.

Part I

Sonja discusses her identity in terms of what she calls "my phases." She feels that in the past, she struggled with balancing her "cultural selves" and that she is currently reconciling her "two sides." She contends that in the future she will

continue to adapt and change how she navigates her identity and that the only thing "stable" about her identity is that it fluctuates depending on who she is with and how she is feeling.

Sonja's father is Indian, her mother American. Her parents married in 1972 and divorced in 1975. After the divorce, Sonja's father married a Punjabi woman with whom he had a son. For the next five years, Sonja and her half-brother, father, and step-mother, traveled back and forth between India and the States.

For Sonja, relations with her American birth mother were either prevented or associated with guilt; alienation from her mother began after her parents divorced and she moved to India for six months, at the age of four. Arriving back in the States, Sonja says the main thing separating her from her mother was language:

"I spoke only Hindi. Or Punjabi. My mom thinks it's Hindi. But I'm sure it was Punjabi. This is not something I remember. This was something I was told...my mom couldn't... communicate with me. She was upset about that, of course. My American accent is like my mom's [birth mother]. Just by default, I don't know why. We have the same voice, the same inflection, the same mannerisms when we speak...even though I was never around her. And I speak Punjabi like my step-mother."

For Sonja, language represents her two cultural selves: Indian and American. Linguistic distinctions infiltrate even her name--how she refers to herself and how she wishes to be addressed. She emphasizes the fact that her father, step-mother, brother, extended Indian family, and members of the Indian community all pronounce her name, *Sonja*, the Indian way. Her American mother, non-Indian friends, and

extended American family, pronounce her name, *Sonia*, the American way. When Sonja introduces herself to an American, she pronounces her name *Sonia*; when she introduces herself to an Indian, she pronounces her name *Sonja*.

During my first interview with Sonja, she told me about meeting a Punjabi-American girl who did not realize that Sonja was Indian despite the fact that Sonja introduced herself as Sonja. One day, Sonja asked the girl, in flawless Punjabi, how she was doing and if she had done the class reading. The girl demanded to know how she had learned the language--it still did not occur to her that Sonja *was* Punjabi.

While relating this story, Sonja exhibited a combination of glee and irritation. She subversively enjoyed playing with what she knew to be the girl's expectations about her "non-Indian" identity. She used Punjabi to break the girl's expectations and to "prove" her Indianness. Often, Sonja refers to her facility with Hindi and Punjabi as her "Indian credentials." However, the fact that the girl did not recognize her as Indian or Punjabi (because of her physical appearance) angered Sonja.

When Sonja talks about her appearance she is indignant because she feels that in the past her "looks" kept her an outsider in American and Indian communities:

"Growing up with my step-mom, she's...typical Indian, she's got big beautiful eyes and nice hair...she's voluptuous, and I was always like.. I'm not Indian, I'm not pretty enough, all this stuff, because I just didn't look like anything that I thought was pretty...I didn't abide by the typical American ideals of what's pretty and I didn't abide by the typical ideals of Indian-pretty either, so I was like, OK, I'm fucked. I think if I had grown up with my mom [birth mother], who I look like, it might have been different."

Since the mid-nineties, Sonja has felt that she fits the American beauty ideal. While she was in highschool, she felt that ideal was: Caucasian, blonde, blue-eyed, fair-skinned, and “healthy” body proportions. Now that Sonja fits the, as she says, “current magazine standard,” she has more confidence in her appearance and takes pride in the fact that: “Suddenly, girls want to look the way I do.” She has a fondness for Benetton and Gap models because she feels that these men and women are “not easily racially traced.”

Clothing is also important to Sonja's sense of identity. Her original career aspirations were geared toward fashion design and drawing. She describes her relationship to clothes as another aspect of her either “fitting-into” or being “misplaced” in the Indian and/or American community. As with language, the ability of clothing to empower or isolate fascinates Sonja and is something she frequently considers in terms of her past and identity.

Sonja states that she used to wear strictly Indian or strictly American clothes. In the following quote, she emphasizes the fact that she enjoyed wearing Indian clothes with American friends, and that she now mixes the two cultural styles comfortably. This mixing is symbolic to her and represents her movement from one “phase” to another, from being uncomfortable with her identity to embracing and enjoying it:

“I had really nice outfits that my step-mother made. A lot of the sharada and matching headbands, really nice stuff...I always got good feedback from my American friends when I was wearing Indian clothes, it was kind of like this special status that you had over them, and as I got older, clothes--it's definitely

an identity thing, you know? ... I didn't have that much of a connection to Indian clothes...it was always the western version in my head. Fashion wise. Indian clothes were what you wore to Indian parties...When I designed stuff I would design American stuff and I would always then design some Indian things but always sort of within the mentality that they're separate. I never did what a lot of people did then, I mean I do it now, I wear kurta with jeans. Now that I'm comfortable being both. But before, I never did that. I kept them separate.”

Note, at the end of the next passage, that Sonja states she often felt more comfortable in American clothes with South Asians:

“I always had a problem with feminine stuff, you know looking feminine, looking cute, I don't do that. Neither does my [birth] mother. She wears dark colored, mannish suits. What I do is wear stuff that makes me feel like I'm in control of the outfit...I always felt comfortable...in pants. In fact, because of my body type...my parents would just get fed up and my [step]mom would be like, 'Why don't you just wear American clothes,' and I would wear American clothes to an Indian party because I didn't feel good about the Indian outfit because I wasn't fitting it...the way the other girls [were].”

Clothing is one of the contexts where Sonja feels a direct connection with her step-mother and birth mother. Sonja associates her step-mother, Indian clothes, and sewing with her "Indian self," and her birth mother, American clothes, and shopping excursions with her "American self." She told me that she considers shopping with one's mother to be an American teenage rite, one of the few experiences that

connected her to other non-Indian-American girls:

“The sparse times that I would actually see [my mother] we would go clothes shopping. It was liberating. I always had a self-censorship going on because I was always around my parents and you know there's one person you are at school among your American friends and another at home with your parents...[My birth-mom and I would] go shopping and she'd say let's buy this skirt or something and I'd be like, 'Oh, it's kind of short, I won't wear it,' you know, things like that, and she'd say, 'Look, you have nice legs...now is the time to wear this skirt,' (*Sonja laughs*). But I had difficulty leaving the house in the morning...it was just like this innate thing-- I felt bad...my step-mother and father didn't approve of American outfits.”

Sonja is now at a point in her life where she wants to recover forgotten memories and fill-in the gaps of her past and thus get at a larger truth about herself and identity. She has mentioned many times that there are no photographs of her mother and father's wedding but two albums of her father and step-mother's wedding. Also, the fact that Sonja's step-mother and father married on the same day (different year) as her father and mother seems to Sonja to be an attempted "cover-up" of her parents' marriage and her own "true identity." She emphasizes that there are many pictures of her brother as a baby and very few of herself. In the following excerpt, Sonja's tells a story that she views as a symbolic "cover job" of her and her birth mother's identity. Also, it is important to Sonja that she shares her artistic ability with her mother. It is equally important to her that she and her step-mother are good seamstresses. The two activities are in balance *within* Sonja specifically because each

is associated with a different one of her mother's:

“...My step-mom and I sew...And my birth mom and I draw...And I swear...I had a Holly Hobby poster that my mother had drawn for me, and I keep looking at this one frame that's in ...my dad's house, and the border on it, is the border that I remember being around that Holly Hobby picture my mom drew. But nobody seems to...my step-mom's like, 'No, no, we bought that.' I have always thought that they took my mother's picture out and put something else in and just used the border and frame. But I can't get anyone to corroborate on that. But I recall my mom drawing that for me. It was Holly Hobby, I liked the patchwork on her skirt.”

During our final taped interview, Sonja related the following story. In it, she addresses the fact that she looks like her birth mother and that this "gave her away" in situations where her father and step-mother did not want it known that she was half Caucasian-American:

“...sometimes I feel like a spy because people don't know that I belong to this other group unless I choose to tell them...I want to tell you about the last time...my parents saw each other amicably...We were living back in the States. My dad had a big party, you know these Indian events where it's like my birthday but it's not really because of my birthday that we're having a party...My mom was invited. She drove down from Kentucky. All I remember is her.. sitting there, in one of those folding-chairs...and nobody would talk to her...And my parents felt as though they had done their part, they were like, oh well, we invited your mom, we did a good thing, but I felt, I

remember I felt a little bit guilty like spending time with her because there was ...always...the explanation...you had to give to people. Cause [my father and step-mother] never told people that I was half, they always just said, 'She's our daughter.'...And...My [birth] mom is totally white, dark brown hair, people always say we look alike. A lot. And everyone could see that, I'm sure. I felt weird about looking like her and feeling like no one knew who she was, and no one knew how we were related but maybe they did because we looked alike."

After this final statement of Sonja's, she asked me if I looked like my mother or father. The following personal essay is my answer to Sonja's question--this one, and those that preceded it.

Part II

Versions of My Mother; Versions of Myself

The day after she announced to the class that if she could exhume Keats, she would simultaneously commit adultery and polygamy by marrying his corpse, my Romantic poetry professor, who reminds me of my mother, who had recently met my

mother, whose children I babysat, whose children look like clones of the childhood photographs of their mother, said to me:

"It must be hard for your mother."

"Yes," I said automatically. Then, "What must be?"

"Having a child who looks nothing like her."

"Yes," I said automatically. One of my hands went to my jaw, the other to my neck.

When we are alone, together, my mother curses excessively. She is a woman who, as she says, "Rises to the occasion," and "Takes responsibility for her actions." With these phrases, she condemns and implicates anonymous (and familiar) people who do *not* rise to the occasion, who do *not* take responsibility for their actions. All of my mother's aphorisms must be inverted in order to be fully understood.

My mother is a teacher, an educator. She will not curse in front of *her* children; she will not be a bad example. But when she is alone, in front of her own child, her real child, her only child, her flesh and blood (as I jealously remind her), she curses with grit and proficiency. It makes me feel special, more myself. It makes her feel unfettered, more herself.

"Ma!" I say, scandalized, after she trills a particularly shocking set of epithets about the young boy (Little Ungrateful Prick) who promised to appear on Saturday and clean the gutters.

She spied him playing stickball in the street. She witnessed him shirking his

responsibilities, breaking a promise. He had given his word. On his mother's soul. My mother had asked this of him. To her, one's word, on one's mother's soul, is the most binding and solemn of contracts.

"What?" she snaps. She is thinking of the gutters, stuffed with leaves and sparrow nests. Quite literally, the gutters hang over her, an incomplete task, an imperfection. It does not matter that no one can see them. She knows they exist, unsightly and clogged. She knows that if they remain untended, one day, the roof will leak and there will appear a stain, a blight on her ceiling.

"Your language," I say, "He's just a kid." But I am delighted; I love her language--how mussed and coddled and scabby it is. I love that this boy, a stranger, is held to the same standards as myself. We are equal.

"I'm Irish," she says, as if that has anything to do with it, as if I wouldn't understand, as if I am not Irish, too, although a lesser percentage than her. It is like that for children. We are all a lesser percentage of our parents.

Her two favorites:

"Fuck a snake at midnight." Most effective when hurling a tissue box.

and

"Shit on a ten-foot rock." Most effective when slamming a door.

I love the specificity of both. I love ducking tissue boxes; I love picking locks.

If it were not for my mother, I would not be a burglar. That, inverted: Because of my mother, I am a burglar.

"Dr. Bunoup," she says. "Now there was a man with a mind." She refers to the curator at the Cairo Museum whom we met and befriended in 1982. When I was six, my mother brought me to see the mummies at the Metropolitan Museum in New York. She taught me to read hieroglyphics; she taught me that there is a beginning (and end) to everything; she taught me that death could be gold-leafed and opulent. We lapped-up books about Queen Hatshepsut, ruler of Egypt for 22 years--the length of my parents' marriage. A woman who wore a Pharaoh's beard (a beard with a granite tip indicates that the pharaoh lived while the statue was chiseled. I appreciate this distinction. It is important to know if creation occurred during a subject's life or death). We marveled at the Queen's decadence, her imagination--Hatshepsut, who purchased a forest from a watered East African coastal kingdom I can no longer recall the name of. On a school of ships, the trees were sailed to her, then planted around her palace; she hired armies of men to hydrate the trees: five, six, seven times a day. A woman who attached a king's beard to her chin; a woman who kept alive a forest in the middle of a desert. A female exemplar my mother can admire. Her prototype, my prototype.

She followed-up on our New York spelunking by taking me to the source. When I was eight, we went to Egypt. We saw more mummies. We saw more granite statues and learned that those in the frontal pose with clenched fists were men, and those with relaxed hands, female. We sailed in a falouka with a Canadian, paralyzed from a recent stroke everywhere but the mouth and tongue. He had always wanted to

sail the Nile in a falouka, he told us. He had promised himself, and he was doing what he said he would do. My mother approved. She told me: "Life is short; life is suffering (as the Buddha said), never put off tomorrow what you can do today (as my mother said)." She clenched her fists and we watched the sun set, talking of Akhenaton, the mad fanatic. We understood him.

At the Valley of the Kings, my mother and I bought alabaster organ jars. I promised her my heart. She promised me hers. She said she hoped she died first. I said I hoped she didn't. She said, "That's not natural. Mother's should always die first." I changed the topic.

She always cries when she thinks of her mother, who died before her.

"Why was Dr. Bunoup a man with a mind?" I ask. I have heard this story hundreds of times.

"When he first met us--you were too young to remember" (I remember him perfectly, his white hair, square glasses, black sandals, girlish voice, and deep brown feet--what more of a person need be remembered?), "He pointed to you and said to me, 'She has your facial bone structure--square jaw--and your long neck.' Now this is a man who knows faces, painted on sarcophagi or not; he knows bones dating from 2180 BC. This is a man who studies things like faces and bones. If he sees this in us, it must be true."

"It must be," I say.

I remember feeling embalmed, a specimen, when he indicated to his assistant what a mandible at a ninety-degree angle looked like. He used a thin, wooden

pointer. He touched it to my mother's jaw, and then, to my own.

I can tell that my mother is still thinking of the gutters. I plead: "Please don't try to do them yourself. It's too dangerous. After I take a shower, I'll go out and find the boy and bribe him with pizza." She presses her lips together. "I've lived a full life," she says, "I'm not afraid to die."

"Your father," she says and then says nothing more. We stand accused, my father and I. Her tone. Is a wrecking-ball. We are crushed.

"Your father was not in the room when you were born. He was off taking care of some diabetic lacking in self-control (like your grandfather) who had eaten too much cake. He always said medicine was his first love. I should've known. Get a good job. With benefits. Never rely on a man. The nurse took you away to be cleaned (he looked just like the man your cousin John dated before he met Jim), and while you were gone, in waltzes your father. He says, 'Hiya!' Just like that, 'Hiya!' I could have strangled the son of a bitch. Then the nurse comes back into the room with you, and he's already forgotten who your mother is. That's how baby swapping happens. I read an article in the Times about a woman who had raised the child of the woman who was in the hospital bed next to her. Didn't realize the mistake until twenty years later, after a paternity test. What's the difference? So stupid. Why bring up what's in the past? I could love any child. I wanted to adopt but your father wouldn't let me. The woman next to me in the hospital was sleeping. The nurse looked at her then looked away. He looked at me and looked away. He looked at

your father and then down at you (you weren't crying; you always behaved in front of *other* people) and then that excuse for a nurse hands you to your father. You were mine. I had carried you in my womb for nine months. It was my right to be handed you. I earned it. So what if you looked like your father?"

I shower quickly. As I'm dressing, I glance out the window and see my mother perched at the top of a ladder (even at the top, she is still two feet away from the gutters; my mother is very small), wearing blue gardening gloves, gripping a black trash bag. I stop myself from rapping on the window, from shouting at her to get down. If I rap on the window, if I shout, she might fall, so I throw on a robe and race outside and hold the base of the ladder steady, saying, "Careful, careful, please be careful."

When I turned seven, my mother had her tubes tied. "You're perfect," she said. "We don't need another one." Her saying I was perfect upset me. It was not in character--hers or mine. I did not believe her when she told me it was a simple operation because I could see that she did not believe it herself. "Do something constructive while I'm gone. Study your Hindi, *chowkri*."

She said it wrong. My father and I giggled. They drove away.

Looking for something to examine, I went to the bottom of the driveway with my mother's tweezers, my father's surgical gloves, and my grandfather's empty grape jelly jar. I found pieces of fur, brownish-blond fur, scattered around the mailbox. Small pieces. The hide was tough, at least a year dead. I put on the gloves, nabbed

the pieces with the tweezers, and put them in the jar.

When my mother came home, she looked the same as she when she had left. But I knew something had changed because she gave me a present from the hospital gift shop. A World Wildlife Patch. "Since you and your father don't eat animals, I thought you might like to be a member of an organization that saves endangered species."

I thought I understood. I, an endangered species.

If I did anything perilous, climbed a tree, crossed the street, turned on the stove, she would say: "Remember. You're an only child."

In Arizona, I saw my first mule. My mother explained: "It's a cross between a horse and a donkey. They're sterile." I was eleven.

Later that day, I overheard a ranger calling me a mulatto. I was standing between my parents.

Suddenly, I understood the root of the word. Suddenly, I loved mules.

It is not the horse or the donkey who takes Americans around the rim of the Grand Canyon. We mules are stubborn and sure-footed. We are originals, incapable of replicating.

The first time I went to a doctor for adults, my mother came with me. The doctor told her that I might have trouble getting pregnant (I was 17) because my hips were so narrow.

This made sense to me. After all, I was a mule. But my mother was livid.

She called the doctor a White Devil, an Ignoramus. I barely had time to dress before she pulled me from his office.

When we got home, she photocopied her Asian geography test map: all purple borders and amorphous shapes--no names. She wrote in: China, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Thailand, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Vietnam. She wrote the population for each country beneath its name. At the very top of the page she wrote "Narrow-Hipped People of the World" and mailed it, Express, to the doctor.

I heard her say to my father, "I want a fur. They always look at me like they think my husband doesn't love me because my coat is wool."

I could not hear what he said.

I went outside and swung in the hammock. I liked to be suspended. The leaves above me fluttered like kites. I took up a stick and pushed it against the ground. I swung myself higher and higher and then the stick was an oar and the hammock a boat, and I heard no one but myself and the trees and the wind. At the backs of my thighs, where the jute strings supported me, were red diamonds.

I saw my mother leaning out the back door, waving to me. I closed my eyes. She walked across the lawn to the hammock and stood there until I opened my eyes, stopped swinging, and threw my stick aside.

"Your father is going to buy me a fur." She said it triumphantly. The sentence seemed to dazzle her. I shifted uncomfortably in my synthetic windbreaker.

"Did you weed?" she asked.

"Not yet."

"Manana, manana, is good enough for me," she sang.

"Ma. I'll do it soon. Today."

"Tell the truth and shame the devil," she said. "You won't do it. Doctor's daughter," she sing-songed to me. "Oh, Daddy, Daddy." She batted her eyelashes. She flirted with me.

"Ma. You're a doctor's wife. And I don't sound like that."

"Of course you don't, my little revisionist. A doctor's wife is different from a doctor's daughter. I'm an immigrant's daughter. Poor Irish. Hell's Kitchen. What would you know about that?"

"I'm an immigrant's daughter, too."

"I'll do it myself. Weeds don't talk back." She stalked off.

I took up my oar and started rowing. It was not the same. I left the hammock, the leaves, and went to help my mother weed. When I knelt beside her, she got up and left. I did a very good job weeding. There was not a weed in sight when I was finished, nothing but orderly rows of Impatiens and black soil. But she would not speak to me.

That night, I wrote her the type of apology note she liked and slipped it under her locked door.

When my father came home, he knocked on their bedroom door, but not very hard: "Open the door, open the door, for God's sake, woman, this is ridiculous." He stopped knocking and put his hands at his sides.

"She's upset," I said, as I picked the lock for him.

In the summer, we brought the coat to a fur vault. The place smelled like a cemetery.

When activists began throwing paint on fur coats, my mother called them Barbarians. She kept the coat in her closet, afraid for it. Once, I opened her closet and stood next to the fur with a bottle of red nail polish. I just stood next to it. I was a barbarian, too.

Why do people think I don't look like my mother? If you listen to me, I look like her. If you tell us a joke, we will laugh at the same line. If you look at me quickly, in left profile, you will see her in my face.

My mother brought me over to the children, dragging me along while I tried to eat an apricot with one hand. The children shrank from her white skin, white like the Ravanna effigy they built. They stared at me, uncomprehending.

The children used gathered sticks and scraps of wire to build Ravanna's skeleton. A girl with an orange ribbon at the end of her braid handed me a fizzling pataka. She looked like me, with darker hair. I lifted the pataka above my head, a Statue of Liberty, and spun in a circle.

We took pieces of white cloth and paper and soaked them in a flour-water mixture, pasty and adhesive. We covered Ravanna's frame with the sticky strips, bestowed him with a triangular nose, bulging eyes, ten arms and nine small heads radiating out in a straight line from his principle head, all with the same expression and features. The children, they let me do the second to last Ravanna head on the left

by myself.

I painted his lips red and attached his hair, gathered from their mother's, sister's, and their own combs, and stuffed into a sack. I wanted my Ravanna head to have mine and my mother's hair, reddish-brown and thin. I took the pit of my apricot from my pocket and poked it through a small hole in my Ravanna's skull, a brain, so he would not be hollow like the other heads, so he would be different. Looking over at my mother, I saw her standing apart from the shining group of sari'd mothers, her white arms crossed over her stomach, her shameless legs bare in shorts. I smiled at her and she waggled her fingers at me.

We piled the remaining pieces of wood, wire, paper, and cloth in a circle around Ravanna. It felt good to be a We. The girl with the orange ribbon gave me a stick wrapped in a green cloth that reeked of gasoline. Her mother came to us, took matches from a fold in her sari, and told us to stand in a circle around the villain Ravanna and be careful with our fire-sticks. She lit her daughter's stick; the girl touched her stick to mine, I touched mine to the child's next to me, and so on, till the circle of us held blazing torches. We held our fires to the heap of tinder around Ravanna and the fires merged into one fire, slowing as it reached Ravanna's feet and crept up his body, crackling hot on his main head before sliding across the nine others. When all his heads and arms blazed bright, we stepped back towards the mothers and watched him burn. We saw smoke from other children's fires; boys cheered at the shriek and crash of bottle-rockets. The girl who looked like me pushed me and yanked on my hair. I whimpered and ran to my mother.

She said: "What kind of a Sullivan are you? You should have pushed her

back. Your great-grandmother's rolling in her green, Kerry grave, right now, as we speak"

I pictured my great-grandmother turning and turning under my feet in an austere black dress with a lace collar. It was an odd image to conjure up in the Rajasthani desert, on Dussera, but it made sense to me.

"Shit on ten foot rock," I say, and fling a tissue box.

"Tell the truth and shame the devil," I scold, and inspire guilt in all the nurses.

I know they think I am adopted. They have not met my father.

My mother is in the hospital to have her ovaries removed. She has endometriosis. I change her enema pan. She is uncomfortable and will not speak to me. "You changed my diapers, you carried me in your womb for nine months. Sharper than a serpent's tooth--a thankless child." I repeat her words back to her. She smiles.

When I shower her, she cries and tells me that she was too embarrassed to help her dying mother take a bath. "I didn't want to see her naked," she whispers.

"You were young," I say. "A child. You're not dying, anyway."

"We're all dying."

"Ma. Don't be morbid."

That night, she dreamed I was a child. I came to the door of her room and asked to sleep next to her. I was scared, I told her. I climbed up on her bed and crawled under the sheet and she curled around me. She told me not to be afraid. "You looked just like how you used to look," she says and falls asleep again.

When she wakes, still groggy from the anesthesia, she asks: "What was your childhood like?"

I am terrified. My mother never asks questions like this. What's past is past. My mother hardly asks questions at all. She is a woman of statements, of certainties. I cannot answer her. I am too afraid.

Her eyes close, open, close, open. She struggles to stay awake. She looks around the room, at the woman in the bed next to her, at me. A nurse enters cradling a fresh saline bag in her arms. I step out of the way so she can attach it. My mother glares at her until she leaves.

Her eyes close again: "I am your mother," she says firmly. "Don't you forget it."

²⁹ All names have been changed. The material in this essay was excerpted from a longer ethnography/self-ethnography that I conducted of my friends Sonja, her husband, and myself over a period of six months. The effects of memory and versions of truth must be taken into account when reading this essay.

Chapter III: Categorically Speaking

Teaching Children to Classify

Down a backless set of stairs to the basement of the Boston Museum of Science.³⁰

Here: a permanent exhibit. *Natural Mysteries*. An exhibit designed to teach children about order through a series of interactive questions and games.

For the next two hours, I will be a child.

Carved into a tri-sided wooden post (I bend to read it):

What is classification?

One side of the post reads: *Grouping*.

By color:

A herd of red marbles separated from a herd of blue marbles. Glued onto the post.

By material:

A wood marble and metal marble, side by side. Different.

The second side of the post reads: *Comparing*.

By Size:

A line of marbles arranged from big to small, decreasing left to right.

The third side of the post reads: *Grouping by Multiple Characteristics*.

Marbles: Blue and big; wood and blue, metal and small.

To the right of the post, a sign:

The natural world is full of mysteries. How we make sense of it depends on the kinds of order we create--or reveal.

This statement confuses me and I am not a child. Its implications:

-The only way to make sense of the mysterious is to order it.

-What is natural is mysterious.

-Humans are not part of the natural world.

-Humans are not mysterious.

-Every mystery has an essential core, fixed and stable, that humans are capable of interpreting.

-Order is imposed by us; or, in looking at something order is revealed.

Through glass doors, I enter the main exhibit.

The first two examples of categorization: 1) a diorama dedicated to traditional Chinese herbalists who combine plant, animal and mineral materials into natural remedies. The point of this section--to teach that one must first identify, then separate, plant, animal, mineral before usefully combining them. 2) Apache tracking, an ancient classification system. Scouts examine tracks, reading as many as 4,000 pressure releases that individuate the gait of person or animal. I read how this has been incorporated into contemporary detective methodology--plaster casts of footprints to identify suspects. To determine the type of shoe. The weight of person.

I play the Mammal Skull Game.

Pick up a skull and answer these questions: *does your skull have canine teeth? Is the eye socket shaped like a nearly completed circle?*

Through a process of elimination and comparison (holding the skull against

pictures on a computer screen), I separate rabbit from cat. Herbivore from carnivore.
I know whose skull is whose.

In this game, the word *generally*. *Canines are generally found in carnivores.*

The word *generally* allows for variety, anomaly, for the speaker to not be
labeled wrong.

The implication: something, sometimes, will not fit.

I come to a second tri-sided wooden post: *Why classify?*

I lift up wooden flaps to find answers.

Why Classify?

To Identify:

What kind of marble is it?

To Communicate:

How would you order this marble over the phone?

To Organize:

Where does it go?

To Reveal Underlying Meaning:

How do the metal marbles feel different from the wood or glass ones?

Answer: Metal marbles usually feel colder or warmer than wood or glass.

Metal marbles have conductivity.

Revealing underlying meaning assumes there is an underlying meaning to be
found. Assumes that everything has meaning. At least, to humans.

The final tri-sided wooden post: *Who classifies?*

Who classified these? (A line of butterflies.)

Answer: scientists

Who classified these? (Pull an iron, leaf-shaped handle and a drawer opens; inside, a silverware divider, as in a kitchen drawer, and a spoon, knife, fork.)

Answer: families.

Who classified these? (Wrenches in decreasing size.)

Answer: mechanics.

Who classified these? (Beads with country names above them: Peru, Japan, Czech Republic, Ghana, India, Nepal, China, U.S.)

Answer: artisans.

I am sad for the scientists who cannot string beads. For the artisans who cannot use wrenches. For the mechanics who cannot be lepidopterists. For the families (like mine) who eat with their hands. If there is no silverware, is there no family?

Lesson: in every categorization, there is exclusion.

Lesson: categories are stable with rigid walls.

Lesson: to teach children, keep things uncomplicated and make generalizations.

The next game: *Tree in a row*. I am to match actual leaves to pictures of leaves labeled, elm, oak, maple. This is difficult. To me, it seems as though none of the leaves match the pictures. I am forced to ignore individual differences. I am forced to accept imperfect fits and consider them “matched.” I am taught to un-see specificity and nuance in favor of the composite and collective. This is human. Part

of our mythology. Our religions. Our heroines and heroes. The success of our species. To sacrifice the self for the group. For the greater good.

I am learning what is lost in grouping.

The next game: *Make your own Museum.*

A plaque: "Museums cannot display everything they own. Museum staff select objects from collections that will most clearly tell the story of the exhibit. As you explore the *Natural Mysteries* look at other exhibit cases. Why are objects in those cases displayed together?"

Lesson learned: meaning is made, stories constructed. One selects, chooses, connects, patterns. The person creating the exhibit is *part* of the exhibit.

At my feet, a wild jumble of materials, stored in a wooden box. Eight mini chalkboards nailed to the wall. In front of each chalkboard, a small plastic, transparent box. In each little box, the materials of the children's exhibits, displayed.

The instructions. "Organize any way you choose. Put your exhibit in the box. Write the name of your exhibit on the chalkboard above the box."

What the children arrayed and how they named it:

(Four pieces of obsidian.) "Museum of shiny dark rocks"

(Gold coins, plastic pink pompoms, jacks.) "Birthday Girl"

(Plastic seals, plastic whale, and a pink cloth rose.) "I Like Sea Creatures"

The rose seems to me to represent "Like" in the title.

(Multicolored rings and a plastic heart.) "Multicolored Rings"

The heart omitted from the title. A choice that turns a heart into a multicolored ring.

(Dice, rings, wooden rectangles, a button, green felt triangles.) "Shape Museum"

(A pile of plastic black rhinos with red lips.) "Jack"

One exhibit is titled with a quote. On display, a pink plastic fork. Written on the blackboard: "Worrying is like a rocking chair. It gives you something to do but it doesn't get you anywhere." (signed VW)

(Walnut, shell, rock, eraser.) "Museum of Orange Things"

To me they all look brown.

(A small wooden bowling pin.) Title: "I (heart) Mike Vogel. Tori was here."

I see this as an exhibit of hope. On Friday night, Mike will see Tori at the bowling alley. The black balls will thunder down the glossy wood lanes. He will be stunned by her straight, shining hair.

From this section of the exhibit, I learn that children understand the wide range of choice, randomness, flexibility, in classification. They understand categorization as a balance between order and chaos. They know to impose a set of

qualifications. They know to make choices that include and omit, that are imperfect. They know how a collection is named affects how it is received, its meaning.

In the next game, I pick up a group of varied shells. Touch them, feel them. As I do so, a voice from a speaker in the wall asks that I read about each shell and where it was found. At the end of my reading and touching, the voice tells me the person who donated this collection of shells has been blind since the age of four.

Suddenly, the fact that I touched the shells to know them takes on new meaning.

At the center of the exhibit, a set of glass doors. I walk through them, into a room filled with dead, stuffed creatures. The walls are lined with drawers. Inside the drawers: butterflies and moths, pinned. Skulls, shells, eggs in nests, empty turtle shells (there is nothing sadder than an empty turtle shell). I open the drawers and peruse fossils, nuts, coral, beaded necklaces. Mollusks. I wonder if there are differences between mollusks that only mollusks can recognize. I read that the items in this room were donated by a 19th-century woman's daughter. Yes, I think. This room has a Victorian sense of artifact and order. Orientalized fetishism. I decide what these artifacts have in common is the mind and temperament and era of their owner. I can see no other connection between them.

I leave the room and read about the Seri Indians, skilled fishermen who have dwelled in the state of Sonora, on the Northwestern coast of Mexico for 2000 years. A mainstay of Seri diets: green sea turtles. Scientific name: *Chelonia mydas*. The Seri's classify turtles with ten different names. "Moonsi" turtles, are larger, meatier, than "quiqui" fatty turtles. "Cooyam" is the migratory phase of young turtles who

travel up coast in schools. Hunters know to watch for them in spring. And so on. A classification system based on need, on what the Seri must know in order to eat. Their system is compared to the scientific classification of turtles created by biologists. Two groups of people with different systemic categories for the same creature.

Lesson: we classify based on need. On a visit to a museum it may be helpful to know the difference between a green sea turtle and a leatherback turtle, but if dinner depends on turtles it is important to know the differences between a moonsi and quiquii.

This final display acknowledges that classification is subjective and value driven. It reminds us not to judge different meaning systems comparatively, but to look at each system for what specific meaning it offers and why. This example acknowledges subjectivity, the "I."

I stand still, at the exit, thinking, in front of a set of glass doors.

Suddenly, the exhibit is overtaken by a large group of school children streaming away from their chaperones. Screaming eeewwww and Disgusting and Gross. I had forgotten. I was walking through *Natural Mysteries* trying to experience it as a child without having childlike reactions. I had forgotten to be grossed out. A young boy, six or seven, distraught, leads his mother by the hand from the room of butterflies, moths, empty turtle shells. As they pass me, the boy says to his mother: "If you don't want to look at any more dead stuff, follow me," and tugs her towards the exit. I look at his mother. We smile in the way adults do when a child says something wise, and I realize what everything in the 19th-century glassed room has in

common, what the whole exhibit has in common, its overarching principle of categorization: Everything in the exhibit is dead. The boy knows it, but I did not.

Once something is dead, stuffed, etherized, it stops changing. It is taken out of time. In this way, it is falsified. In this way, it is no longer itself. A white fox and a white rabbit have more in common, lifeless, immobile. But something is lost. Lost.

How to classify the living? How to classify people?

Humans are not so predictable (or so easily controlled).

We are erratic. Inconsistent.

We classify each other with every glance and thought. By color, shape, size, texture. Our language, how we communicate, is categorical.

And the only thing we have to talk about language with?

Is language.

How human. How absurd.

X

A letter of duality. Of secrets. Erotic and utilitarian. Mysterious and blunt. The only symbol in the Latin alphabet with two consonants following its vowel. A mating of S and K. A complexity of sound.³¹

ks, in Ancient Greece, written as Chi, 'X,' in Western Greek and Etruscan.³²

X, a letter that starts with breath, in the chest, *eh*, then catches, pops, at the back of throat, *k*, and slithers to the tip of the tongue, *s*. X. *ehksss*. The end of x--a release of tunneled air, just past the lips. A letter of movement. In four parts. From inside to outside. The mouth.

X the actor. With "e" in front of it, *ex*, the sound of the past, termination, deletion: ex-wife, excommunicated, extant, executed, extinct, extinguish, exterminate, expunge. Or, the sound of lavishness, pronouncement: expressive, exuberance, expound, expletive, extol, extroverted, extravagance, exultant.

At the beginning of a word, followed by a vowel, X has the sound of *zee*. As a child, we learn x as z. Its carnality, masked. X is for xylophone. Later, xenophobe.

Standing alone, or followed by a dash, its true sound. X-rated, X-ray.

X. No curves. Pure linearity. Bony. X, illicit, unforgiving. Four legs splayed open. Crashing, tilted, angled, sliced. Two lines supported, made whole, by connection, by impact. x as child and X as adult--same trajectory. Mere elongation. A continuation of self. (like c, C, o, O, s, S, v, V, w, W, z, Z; compare this to m, M, the hills drawn up into sharp peaks, or g, G, changed utterly.)

X. Two wild diagonals. Smashing together. A moment of chance, of encounter.

A letter of confrontation, its heart, a fixed, unrepentant point of union.

X. The moment of arousal.

At Ellis Island, Six-Second Doctors, speed diagnosers, drew an X, in chalk, on the jackets of those deemed mentally impaired. The mentally impaired were then sent home, over the heaving ocean, wretched, in boats.³³

Perhaps some were happy to go home.

If a doctor did not speak Armenian, Italian, French, Irish, Chinese, Portuguese, Turkish, was a patient deemed mentally impaired?

Jackets can be removed. Chalk rubbed off. That is what I would have done.

X is not a tease. At its middle, the place of brazen fusion. The letter C is more provocative. Makes a reader salivate. The tantalizing hang of space, the curve--a bust, profiled. Anne Carson writes: "a space must be maintained or desire ends." She calls this "the erotic dilemma." The implication: contact reduces desire.³⁴ X defies this. One point of contact, one touch, increases desire. C is a line, humped. A space between one end of itself and another. C is narcissistic. Masturbatory.

X is two lines that touch. Each other.

Four deltas of space. Alluvial fans. Four traversing directions.

What is created of the collision of X could be discord, love, dialogue, death, sex, pain, war. X is instantaneous. It does not speak of what comes next, or what came before. It speaks of a moment captured. It stands for that which is irreversible.

X, nameless quantity. The unknown, vivid in its mark upon the page. Fulgid. Two X chromosomes, XX, creates a female. X is a coordinate. X marks the spot. X is St. Andrew's cross. X, the name lost, excised, in slavery. X is hypothetical. X is alcoholic proof. Pornographic levels. Triple. XXX. Resplendent in raunch. X is Christ, kiss, crossing, a drug that makes you dance and stroke. X is variable. In Canada, X is Nunavut and the Northwest Territories.

X blew the whistle on Watergate.³⁵

Lingual Categories: The Anger of Thomas and the Anger of James

Jeffrey, built like a linebacker. Sturdy little shoulders. He climbs me like a tree and speaks in lingual binaries. My friend Allyson's 2-yr old son. Everything is

either bad or good; dirty or clean. He has trouble with pronouns (I, you, he, she) and instead uses proper nouns or titles: Mommy, Daddy, Jeffy, Nee-ah. Watching him acquire a new word (eat it, digest it), the basic function of language becomes evident--*to name*. Jeffrey points at something, I tell him the name of the thing, he repeats it at least five times, I encourage him that he has it correct, and he has learned another word: cloud, fish, desk, pepper.

To speak overly essentially, nouns name things (bird, desk, car), verbs name action (run, breathe, slide), pronouns name subjects (you, we, her).

An essential feature of words--grouping and generalization. The basis of language.

This linguistic concept is discussed in John Kouwenhoven's article, "American Studies: Words or Things?" Kouwenhoven's article is based on thinking that was laid out, simply and elegantly, 134 years ago by a banker in Utica, NY: Alexander Bryan Johnson. Kouwenhoven describes how Johnson made the study of linguistics his hobby. In 1828, Johnson published a small volume entitled: The Philosophy of Human Knowledge, or a Treatise on Language, made up of lectures he had delivered at the local Lyceum. Eight years later he published an expanded version, A Treatise on Language: or The Relation Which Words Bear To Things, and eighteen years later, in 1854, a third and more fully developed version.³⁶

Stupidly, because Johnson had no "university connections" his books were not read by "learned circles at the time...he was unknown to the intelligentsia of Boston, NY, or Philadelphia."³⁷ This banker from Utica sent copies to eminent men, such as Professor Benjamin Silliman at Yale, and August Comte in Paris. In a curt letter of

acknowledgement, Comte wrote: "Although the question which you have broached may be one of the most fundamental which we can agitate, I cannot promise to read such an essay. For my part, I read nothing except the great poets ancient and modern...in order to maintain the originality of my peculiar meditations."³⁸

The snobbishness of academics. A closed category. Knowenhoven writes "Not until 1947--more than a century later--was the book rediscovered and republished by Professor David Rynin of the University of California. Since its rediscovery, Johnson's book has come to be acknowledged as a pioneering study in semantics and one of the most original philosophical works ever written by an American." ³⁹

I am taken with Johnson and his ideas, not only because they are astounding but because he was a scholar outside of academia--a man with a passion who thought carefully and deeply about what interested him.

According to Johnson, the radical limitation of words, their defect, is that they are general *terms or names* referring to things that are individual and particular. ⁴⁰ For example, although no two blades of grass are alike, the word *grass* suggests a common identity. This suggestion of common identity, which is inherent in language, encourages us to disregard differences--different looks, feels, tastes, and smells of individual blades of grass. Words are categories that lump entities together under the rubric of "Sameness." As Johnson wrote:

"Nine hundred and ninety-seven millions of being exist, to whom we apply the word man. Amid the varieties of their complexion, stature, hair, features, age, sex, structure, habits, and knowledge, enough similarities are

discoverable to make the word man appropriate to all. No two are, perhaps identical in their general appearance, nor in the appearance of any particular part...The word man, therefore, refers to a mass of dissimilar individuals...Nature is a congregation of individual existences, and language a collection of general terms.”⁴¹

One result of the generalizing of language is that two people can be in verbal agreement without meaning the same thing.

"The anger of Thomas and the anger of James which are verbally identical are identical in only the conception of the intellect. Even the anger of Thomas today, and his anger yesterday, are only verbally identical, while unverbally they may differ from each other. The love also, which I feel for my dog, my children, property, country, etc. are verbal identities. They possess a sufficient analogy to each other to induce the intellect to deem them identities under the common name love." ⁴²

This generalizing characteristic of language is, of course, also its great value. It is what makes human communication possible. A language of particulars for each person (which they would have to make up themselves) would be incomprehensible to everyone else. A language of particulars, specific to every person and thing, would be a virtual Babel. We need to speak in categories in order to understand each other. In order to communicate.

And there is beauty in language and categorization--it shows our unity. That one word, "sad" can describe a general emotion common to all of us seems incredible. Miraculous. Despite all our differences, every culture has a word for the human

feeling "sad."

A turn of phrase: Categorically, yes. Categorically, no. A complete yes and no. Across the categories. Spanning them.

But here is the danger of categories. When I give something a name, say, for example, a bird, am I seeing the bird for who it is? Am I seeing the grass as individual blades? Am I seeing in categories? There are categories within categories. There is amphibian, fish, trout, fresh-water trout, river trout. The words bring us no closer to the individualism of each fish.

What are my categories, the categories of any human? I am a person, a woman, I am Indian, Irish, American, my hair is brown, my eyes are brown, my skin is brown. To get any closer to describing myself, I need more words--my hair is blackish-red but appears brown, etc.

Humans say what separates us from the animals (as if we, too, are not animals) is language. It isn't that animals don't have language. They do. It's not language that separates humans from other animals. It is words. Words are our unique creation.

The cat has language. It thinks in categories. It sees a sparrow, a finch, a mockingbird, a crow, and knows that they are all birds. They are all creatures it, the cat, would like to kill and eat. The cat knows it eats from this category of bird but not from the category of horse or pig. All birds have wings and beaks. The cat knows this.

When my dog Lugnut chases squirrels he looks up into trees; when he chases rabbits, he hunts among bushes. He ignores geese because he knows he can't fly. He

looks among garbage bags (only on 16th and 8th Ave, near Rebar) for rats. He knows when I carry the laundry bag where we are headed. He knows when I take out a suitcase that I am leaving. He knows when I change from my flip-flops to my sneakers that I am going outdoors. He looks at my shoes, then up at me and he knows. He knows which deli has cats and which has biscuits behind the counter and he knows that most cats do not like him but that in Montana, there is a cat named Blazer who is patient and war-scarred and will let him lick the earwax from its ears. He can categorize. All animals can.

We make general categories, therefore we communicate. To change our ways of thinking about categorization we would have to fundamentally change language and how it functions. We would have to change our brains. I do not even know if the human brain is capable of functioning without categories. When I try to think of a way around categories, the only thing that comes to mind is a blur of screaming.

What is to be done? Perhaps to understand that this is how we function, how language functions, how the human mind works? To know this is to be aware of the dangers of categorization and what it can breed (poverty, war, genocide, racism, crusades, sexism, homophobia, to name a few of the worst).

As Yvor Winters, author of *Forms of Discovery*, says:

"Unless we understand the history which produced us, we are determined by that history; we may be determined in any event, but the understanding gives us a chance."

What's In A Name

We learn as children: "Sticks and stones may break my bones but names will never hurt me." This seems wholly untrue. There is ultimate power in a name. The power of essence and definition. The power of walls and closure. These are dangerous weapons.

My own name shows who I am and where I am from. My last name indicates the place in Sindh my family is from, our "caste." My first name has meaning in Gaelic and Hindi (my parents chose it because of that). Based on my Indian horoscope, as a girl, on the day and time I was born, it was luckiest for me to be named beginning with a "nuh" sound. My middle name, as per Sindhi custom, is my father's first name. Any Sindhi who meets me knows who my father is, and which family I belong to.

A woman changes her name when married. Sometimes. I still look for my friend Sabrina under "S" for Shakley in my phone book. Even though now, married, she is under "B" for Brooks. I remember her as Shakley. She will always be Shakley to me.

To have a name is to have an identity. To be nameless is almost to not exist:

"One might say that it is the Name that organizes all Classical discourse; to speak or to write is not to say things or to express oneself, it is not a matter of playing with language, it is to make one's way towards the sovereign act of nomination, to move, through language, towards the place where things and words are conjoined in their common essence, and which makes it possible to give them a name. But once that name has been spoken, all the language that

has led up to it, or that has been crossed in order to reach it, is reabsorbed into it and disappears.”⁴³

Missing Persons

On September 12, 2001, I volunteered at Chelsea Piers (which FEMA had set-up as a temporary morgue) at the Missing Persons desk--a picnic table. I took the names of the missing, their identifying marks.

Nearby, hanging huge above the empty, closed, military-monitored West Side Highway, was a billboard for the Hallmark Channel. The words in the form of a skyscraper:

STORY

UPON

STORY

UPON

STORY

UPON

STORY

UPON

STORY

At Chelsea Piers, I filled out forms: Name, Hair Color, Eye Color, Age, Identifying Marks, Last Seen Wearing.

Everyone who spoke to me was missing someone.

Every detail given to me by a mother, lover, brother, friend, sister, grandmother, uncle, father, wife, was given in the form of a story. Every story was delivered in present tense. And I responded, always, in present tense. I had always thought of future tense as the tense of hope. On that day, I came to believe in the hope of present tense: “She's a redhead like my father; He has bullet holes here, here, and here, he was shot three times in Vietnam; She was born in Kerala, and has a small pox vaccination scar on her upper right arm; When he was twenty, last year, he had all his wisdom teeth out at once--drank milkshakes for weeks. Vanilla. He doesn't like chocolate, only vanilla; She broke her arm and had her appendix out when she was nine, she is wearing a black dress, a gold barette in her hair, and a gold Timex on her left wrist; He has his mother's eyes. Brown. Bits of gold at the center.”

One woman brought a comb wound with strands of her daughter's hair. “For DNA,” she said. Her hands trembling as she spoke in present tense.

I thought of bodies in pieces. I looked at the people standing in front of me. I thought of how to identify them if they went missing.

I thought about what it means to be lost, to become a name and characteristics on a piece of paper.

That night, after I'd taken more than 500 names, I lay in bed next to my partner, Holter.

I cannot speak of this in past tense.

While he sleeps, I memorize the geography of his scars--one above his left eyebrow that cuts, permanently, into the black hair from when his brother pushed him off the swing (that was before his brother died). A gash along his left calf from the

kickstand of a bike. Three small slices in his shoulder--self-inflicted razoring for an avant-garde midnight theatre piece. A nick beneath his nose from the second time he shaved with his father (that was before his father died). Crescent at the corner of his mouth (right side, close to the top lip) from a boy with a mohawk who drew blood to show he was better with a knife. Two tattoos, one on his back, a family crest (Scottish, his father's and brother's names and the dates of their births and deaths), one around his ankle, barbed wire (the caging of one's own leg, representing the fencing of his uncle's cattle ranch in Montana, and the miles he has worked). Slight stigmatism in the right eye. Mole on left temple. Royal toe, both feet. Scar from hernia surgery as a boy. Broken arm from falling out of tree on a camping trip. All toes and fingers broken at least once from football at a Quaker school. Thirteen cavities (too much soda). X-shaped scar on both knees from a firecracker incident.

There are invisible scars on my lover's body. When he was a year and half, a babysitter and her boyfriend put thirty-six cigarette butts out on his arms and legs.

The scars healed, his new skin, elastic, indestructible. He has no memory of the burns. He has no memory of the healing.

I pull my limbs from under the sheets, and, in the dark, examine myself. Most of the scars on my body are mysterious to me. I do not remember where they came from, how or when they appeared. It is strange to think something that gouged me deep enough to remain visible years later--that I cannot remember such things occurring.

We do forget pain. Sometimes. We are covered in scars that one else can see. Little wounds that shape us.

Metaphor and Simile

To name something is to own it. To name something is to pin it, summarize it, keep it still and static as a stuffed white fox. But nothing is static. Everything changes.

And so language and taxonomy have loopholes. Places of flexibility, places of transgression.

How do we achieve specificity? How do we escape the limiting generalizations of language? How do we acknowledge and pay homage to the individuality of each blade of grass?

The basic tenet of categorization is based on principles of Sameness and Difference. Foucault says:

"Up to the end of the 16th century, resemblance played a constructive role in the knowledge of Western culture. It was resemblance that largely guided exegesis and the interpretation of texts; it was resemblance that organized the play of symbols, made possible knowledge of things visible and invisible, and controlled the art of representing them."⁴⁴

Metaphor and simile. Resemblance. In the quest for specificity, we turn to resemblance (which by its nature assumes difference).

Metaphor combines two different entities and allows one to represent the other. Metaphor is "the other" inhabited. You in me and me in you. There is exchange, a swapping of being. Like love. Transference. Across categories. At its core, metaphor functions from the verb "to be." An implied existence. You are the

sun. Metaphor changes being, collapses one thing into another. It allows no barrier. This is that.

Simile is a more basic form of comparison. Similes are reflections, two entities close together in a mirror. Similitude is not as much of a *swallowing* as metaphor. The mere use of the words, "like," or "as," act as division, barrier, distance. Two things are similar yet retain their individuality. Similes, also known as "open comparisons." In holding two things together, the meaning of both is expanded.

Both metaphor and simile exhibit adjacencies, bonds, joints, connections. They are humane literary tropes. A reaching out, opening up, of possibility. Of kinship (an anthropological term). Both metaphor and simile cross categories. Literary devices that enrich meaning, that bring together two unlike entities and make them family.

We can never fully know each other. We can only try to understand, to make connections.

Today, I am in Kentucky. It has been raining. I stand, smoking, on a fire escape. Everything is deep green with wetness. The feathers of birds, bedraggled. I am looking at a wild black cherry tree. It is inhabited by tent worms. The tents of the worms, soggy. Sheer. Bulging black lumps at their centers. Inside, grown caterpillars, writhe. I fear all the leaves will be eaten from the tree. The worms are efficient. They eat branch by branch, systematically. I grieve for the tree. But it seems wrong, somehow, to interfere with this cycle of life. To burn the tent worms. To kill them. I cannot bear the thought. I watch one of the worms lying motionless

on the iron banister of the fire escape. When the tent worms were younger, they had looked like commas. This one, full-grown, looks like a sentence. With a strong beginning (black round head) and punctuated end (black round bottom). A statement. The yellow line up its back, linear, like a direct movement of thought. The hairs springing like tufted adjectives, prepositions, suitable decorations. And then the worm moves, wrinkles, up and down, and I shiver from the beauty of it, how unlike me as an organism it is, its life, its movements, its way of being. Yet so much like me, too.

I think about how a cigarette is also like a sentence. Take a last drag. Grind it out. Period.

There is nothing as inexact as a soggy, weak simile. Or an incomplete metaphor. Precisely because these two devices transcend the ordinary boundaries of words. To misuse them is to fail linguistically, to fail in meaning, to fail to cross categories. To conform. To be stingy of heart.

What does it mean to say a woman is like a tree, a man's hands move like birds, a child is the ocean?

Perhaps it is through metaphor that we humans come to see how we are like that which surrounds us. In our arrogance, we need to be *like* something in order to respect it. We need to see the other as self. Dirt, air, dogs, reptiles, insects, plants. If we can see how we are like them, of them, perhaps we will treat them better. With dignity. Perhaps we will protect them as we protect ourselves.

This is the power of metaphor and simile. They are pro-active literary devices. Weapons against destruction, reduction. Progressive, open-minded, radical.

Metaphor derives from the Greek. It means to bear across, to transport, to

migrate. In Athens, the public transportation system is named, the Mathophor.⁴⁵

To write a good metaphor, one must transgress. Break rules, smash patterns.
Seek gaps. Violations.

Fiction, poetry, creative nonfiction--genres that rely upon metaphor, simile.
Genres that use language as paint. Genres that allow a level of deep truth by dwelling
in blurry spaces. In the space of metaphor and simile. In between.

The biracial individual, the mythology of this person, is traditionally portrayed
as a person in mental tension, a state of war. Caught between sameness and
difference. Neither this, nor that, yet both. Less than the sum of her parts. The
biracial person in literature, in history, in the mythology of human culture, is a person
who embodies transgression and in-betweenness.

My identity is a metaphor for the text I write.

One reason “race” is so easily exploited, so explosive, is because it is a myth,
a social construction, based on surface qualities and form. Based on the most trivial
and meaningless of similarities. Color, shape. Again, there is the arrogant human
division between us and animals. We do not consider the German Shepherd, the
Labrador Retriever, French Poodle, Greyhound, and Dalmatian as belonging to
different “races.” We do not lump dogs together based on color of fur. But we do
group them based on their bloodlines, their genetics, their “purity.”

The Victorians began the aesthetic breeding of dogs. Canine eugenics. Hip
displaysia, bad tempers, truncated lives. Border collies are bred for sheep herding;
And a Border collie with no sheep, no work, is as neurotic as a writer not writing.
My friend Sonja, half Panjabi, half German is married to my friend Satya, half Uttar

Pradeshi, half Irish. Inside Sonja, baby Karan, half Indian, half European, the same ratio as his parents. She sat, pregnant, with their dog Kippu on her lap. Kippu barked and slipped. Hit his Pomeranian pure-bred skull on Sonja's mother's kitchen floor. Kippu's skull, the bones slightly open at the crown, a side-effect of overbreeding. His brain, unprotected. A gap borne of racism. He died, there on the floor, and her with the baby inside her. Poor Kippu. Dead from the myth of purity. Kippu, toted in a bag Sonja sewed from an empty sack of Panjabi wheat. Kippu as loved and well-cared for as a child. Kippu who would only eat bits of human food Sonja rolled between her fingers. He liked cheese. Kippu, bathed in the bathroom sink. Kippu wearing a tiny, hand-knit sweater. Kippu who could not see the world for the locks of styled hair in his eyes. Kippu, short for Kipling, a Victorian colonist.

Sameness and difference. The continuation of creature depends upon difference-- the wider the gene pool, the stronger the spawn. With too similar gene pools, there is less chance for difference, innovation, combination. Hybrid vigor, my uncle-in-law calls it, a cattle rancher in Montana. He keeps the sperm of his bulls in the fridge, next to the Ranch dressing. I have seen him eat a hamburger and speak of it like family before his first bite: "This is old forty-five. She was a good mother and had a nose for finding water. A natural leader." There is a genuine honor in knowing what you eat. In having cared for it, loved it. As I, a vegetarian, would a tomato. When I ask my husband if he knows what they do to chickens, he says, "Yes, and I can hear the broccoli screaming." He is right. If I listen, I can hear it too.

All cultures have the taboo of mating outside your category. "Race," class, religion. But in terms of gender, it is a sin to mate *within* your category.

A commercial. One White woman, One Latina, One Black. Hanging out in a bar, "being girls" (the message: gender overcomes all, as a category). Three men walk to their table, one White, one Latino, one Black. The White man stands across from the White woman, the Latino man stands across from the Latina woman, the Black man stands across from the Black woman. There is no confusion. This is not miscegenation. The "races" can hang out with each other but they should not mate. Miscegenation is rare in commercials. Although, on television, certain pairings are more acceptable than others. I have seen commercials showing White families with Asian babies or a Latina woman with a Black man. Once, an Asian woman and a Black man. Twice, an Asian woman and a White man. I have seen these commercials only in New York City, and even then, rarely. Where is the white woman with the black man? The black man with the white woman? Clearly, too loaded?

I taught a workshop at Harvard Extension in 2004, and after reading my story "Twang (Release)," in which a character of ambiguous "race" lives ambiguously in the woods with her mother of ambiguous sexuality, a woman, a student in the class demanded to know what "race" my character was. She could not talk about craft, about language, about narrative line or dialogue until I had told her what "race" my character was. I said, "I don't know. She's mixed. Maybe Irish-Chinese-Native-Spanish-Brazilian?"

The woman was deeply disturbed.

Anti-miscegenation, homophobia. The two big, remaining taboos. And poverty. Bigger than both.



This photograph was taken on 18th Street and 8th Avenue in 2005. The heart of Chelsea. A gay man put up the flier. By marriage he meant his marriage to another man.

There is the myth of consequences when sexually leaving your “racial” category. One of the myths or “legacies” of the biracial/bicultural child is that it will always be rejected by both of its sides. It is the sin of extinction. That stigma associated with homosexuality, with impure breeding, with interracial procreation.

What does all this mean, metaphorically speaking, for the multi-genre, hybrid text?

Those Monsters Outside

Trinh Minh Ha says "Despite our desperate, eternal attempt to separate, contain and mend, categories always leak."⁴⁶

Always, something does not fit. There is a value judgment on the thing that does not fit, that is unprotected, outside the safety and benefit of community.

Foucault writes of the monster (in relation to the fossil):

"On the basis of the order of the continuum held by nature, the monster ensures the emergence of difference. This difference is still without law and without any well-defined structure... The fossil is what permits resemblances to subsist throughout all the deviations traversed by nature; it functions as a distinct and approximative form of identity....Thus...the monster provides an account, as though in caricature, of the genesis of difference, and the fossil recalls, in the uncertainty of its resemblances, the first buddings of identity."

⁴⁷

My writing is often classified as "experimental." I do not like this word because it smacks of something deformed, unformed, incomplete. Indefinable. Unnamed. It brings to mind, the monstrous. That which cannot be categorized.

The value, the judgment, associated with the word "experiment" is something illegitimate.

The monster is an identity based on how something *doesn't fit*. An identity formed by existence outside of category. Therefore, I am a monster writing a monster. A monster creating in my own image. A person of blurred identity writing a blurry, meandering, genre-crossing text.

For humans, it is no longer about survival of the fittest. We pick up each

other's slack. We have so many systems to rely upon. It is those outside of the systems who suffer. Those who do not know the dominant system, have not been schooled in it, cannot afford it, do not want it, do not fit into it. Those left behind. Those monsters outside. In America and other wealthy nations and areas, survival has become less about surviving, and more about knowing systems. Survival of the fittest no longer means you're best equipped to kill, run, eat, protect, but best equipped to move within The System. To get ahead, you must know systems and understand categories and how to move within them. You must know how to belong and navigate once inside.

Anne Carson writes of the "negative" in her book, Economy of the Unlost. Much like metaphor, she describes "the negative" as an act of words coupled with an act of imagination:

"A negative is a verbal event. There are, philosophers assure us, no negatives in nature, where every situation is positively what it is...Negation depends upon an act of the imagining mind. In order to say 'the smoke of Tegea burning did not rise up into the clear air,' I bring together in my mind two pieces of data, one of which is present and actual (Tegea before me), the other of which is absent and fictitious (Tegea as it would be if it were burning). I put these two data together and say 'This is not that.'⁴⁸

This is not that. That is how to define oneself as a monster. This monster is not of that category.

The Shock of It

Mrs. Towne began with Pakistani, pronouncing Pak like “pack” and stan like “Stan.” Aliyah Hameed and I raised our hands. Mrs. Towne moved on to German (I raised my hand), French (I raised my hand), Irish (I raised my hand), American Indian--no specific tribe; this was 1984--(I raised my hand).

She quit naming and glared at me and barked: "Indian. From India." I raised my hand.

Perhaps she thought my mutiny had ended as I did not raise my hand for English or Chinese or Portuguese. But then she said Spanish (up went my hand), then African--no specific country (my hand went up), then Middle Eastern--no specific country (up went my hand), then Greek.

Mrs. Towne strode to my desk and pushed down my arm, aloft for Greek. "Stop raising your hand," she said. "You're making a mockery of the American Diversity lesson."

She said she would call my mother.

I had raised my hand for the members of my family. For my mother, my father. My ancestors. The immense displeasure of Mrs. Towne was disorienting.

She went through religions next. I focused on the world map unrolled behind her, on the tangerine hip of Brazil, the fuscina volcanoes of Japan. I was not accustomed to being upbraided in school so I did not raise my hand for any religion, but under my desk, I tapped my fingers together for Hindu, Muslim, Catholic (Mrs. Towne listed Catholic as different from Christian), Sikh, Jewish, Buddhist. There were others I would have tapped for but Mrs. Towne did not name them.

That day, I left school shuffling under the tight nervousness of false accusation. I was not American, if, to be so, there was a limit to the number of identities one could raise the hand for. It seemed the only explanation.

In me, the sum of my parents' parts became admonished. Absurd. Extravagant.

That night I studied my parents carefully. For signs of madness. Although they considered themselves American, maybe no one else did. It seemed a dangerous position. For them and for me.

The Truth Of It

In my family, English is a dirty word. The Brits who hired the starving Scottish (Black and Tans) to burn my great-grandmother Sullivan's shanty in County Kerry, Ireland, her with only a rotten potato and fourteen mouths to feed. They beat her for speaking Gaelic. They spit on her for being Catholic.

I stared at the map of South Asia hanging in my father's office, at the British-made line of demarcation between India and Pakistan. I recognized the complexity of my father saying, "Bloody British," with venom, as we read Enid Blyton and sipped cups of tea with milk and sugar from porcelain cups.

Because my mother identified as Irish (everyone on her mother's side and most on her father's--my grandfather, whose father had worked for Tammany Hall, said we used to be O'Kents but the "O" got lost at Ellis Island), I did, too. I knew of the French Huguenot, the Pennsylvania Dutch, the Cherokee. Lone genes in the Kent pool. But I said I was Indian-Irish, dropping the rest--the Iranian, the Greek, the Spanish, too. Indian-Irish was difficult enough for most people to understand. I took

pity on them. On myself. We learn to omit.

When I was eighteen, my mother took me into the garden and stood me near the Sweet William. She grabbed my shoulders and said in a rush: "You're old enough now that I can tell you the truth. We're English. Just a little bit."

To learn you are what you've been taught to despise, in a garden, is strange. I remember looking at the geraniums and wondering if they were geraniums. My mother told me about my great-grandmother, the rogue Englishwoman, her father's mother, a DAR from Brooklyn who joined the Klu Klux Klan when they marched through Hicksville, New York. My Irish-Catholic grandmother, my mother's mother, newly moved from Hell's Kitchen to Long Island suburbia, sucked on cigarettes and cursed the white sheets from behind her locked door. Through a crack in the curtains, she saw her mother-in-law marching with a sign: NO CATHOLICS.

For a while I would only admit to being a little bit English if drunk, and then, in a whisper. I crossed myself after saying it. I saw my little bit of English, hunkered down, scared, near my scoliosised hip. Hiding from the others who jeered at it. There was a war in my body.

When I went to Scotland with my Norwegian-Scotch-Irish-Blackfoot-Ukrainian-Jewish-by-step-family husband, we spent four hours in the Museum of Edinburgh. I read the history of the British, their bloodline: Gaul, French, Celt, Viking, Irish, Scottish, Pict. Mixed, like me.

And in England, in Piccadilly Circus, I stood amongst a throng of people. Every fourth Englishman was a woman of South Asian descent.

British--as my grandmothers, mother, and father had known it--had changed.

Still, I whisper it.

The Grief of It

After they had taken a train, empty-handed, from Pakistan to India in 1947, my family, old fashioned Sindhis (Hindu, Sufi, Sikh, gypsies all), lived in a refugee camp outside of Bombay. On Thursdays, my aunt, father, and grandmother walked to the Dargah. On Saturdays, they took the bus from Kalyan Camp, and trudged up the hill to Maji Malang to visit the Sufi shrine in a cave.

My uncle said of my aunt, father, and grandmother, "They are the Muslims in the family. We could have left them in Pakistan."

Now he says it of me as I cover my head and walk to the Dargah near Howrah Station.

When my father and I hiked up Runyon Canyon in Los Angeles, he sang out, with satisfaction: "This is just like Maji Malang."

A haze of pollution over the Hollywood Hills. Hot, dry. Homey.

I wept, a terrible, certain, immobile weeping, after we saw, in Izmir, the Mevlevi Dervishes whirl for God, making shapes, round and joyous, with their bodies. I was nine. I wept because I had discovered what I wanted to be, what I wanted to do. I approached the leader of the group, and standing between my parents who were proud of the passion of my response, I asked him, if, Respected Sir (I had read too many British novels), when I was older, if he would be so kind as to have me as a Mevlevi Dervish.

He said no. Girls could not be dervishes. I had not noticed, or it had not

seemed relevant, that all of the dervishes were men. He looked at my father grimly. As if he should have known better than to let me even ask.

For two days, in Turkey, a Eurasian country, a place in between, I stayed in bed and wept the inconsolable, rigid grief of classification. I was a girl. I was a girl and in the world outside my family, that was something to cry about.

It has always been story that heals me. Not plot, but narrative. My father told me the story of Nasruddin, my favorite Sufi, and how he tried to get a calf into a pen, but the calf refused to budge. Nasruddin walked across the village and went to the calf's mother and reproached her, shrill and angry. "Why are you shouting at that cow?" someone asked. "It is all her fault," said Nasruddin, "for she should have taught her son better."

Sufis believe one learns while laughing.

My mother told me the story of her brother and chess. He taught her to play, one summer in the 50's. They drank iced tea. She remembers the ice cubes clinking as she stirred in the sugar. After three games, she beat him. Enraged, he swept the rooks, kings, queens, pawns, knights, from the table. He pulled her hair until she cleaned his mess off the floor. He never played chess with her again.

In the Box

What does it mean to put a person in a box?

This is Olivia. In a box. She is Appalachian. Southern. Cherokee-Scotch-Irish-English-Melungeon (check the ridge behind her top row of teeth). Female.

Seven. Pentecostal. Red-headed. Lover of frogs. Painter. Pianist. Poet. Dancer.

Etc. Olivia is holding her stuffed animal, Woody the Weiner Dog (a pure bred), in a box.



This is the author in a box.



This is Olivia seeing if the author can be shut into the box.



It wouldn't close. I didn't fit.

Museums

Museums house both the monster and the fossil. Scientific museums, art museums.

My mother has a passion for museums. She fans herself provocatively over Picasso exhibits and lectures on Chinese Jade. She swoons for Yoruban masks. I was six when she first took me to the Museum of Natural History. We went to hear Richard Leakey speak. My mother loves evolution with the subversive delight of a Catholic schoolgirl. She read to me from The Sex Contract. We studied Jane Goodall's face.

What I gleaned from the lecture: We are all African. We are all related, with a common ancestor. We are family.

I also decided Richard Leakey was mistaken. If Richard Leakey were me, he

would not look for The Missing Link. *Australopithecus* mated with *A. Afarensis*; *Neanderthal* with *Homo Sapiens*. We are their spawn. In the ground, there is no explanatory skeleton that will form a neat line of progression. What came between hominids: sperm and egg. What came between them was you and me. The mixed being.

I do not believe in missing links. I believe in sex. The bee coated in pollen, seeds in a gale, a log floating a lizard across a river, a human reclined in coach-class.

I believe in portability.

My mother and I: filled with the knowledge of sloped skulls, brow-ridges, flanged pelvises, time. The fruits of mating.

I put a picture of Richard Leakey up on my wall even though I did not fully agree with him.

The first sentence of the fifth chapter of James A. Boon's book: Verging on Extra-vagance: Anthropology, History, Religion, Literature, Arts...Showbiz: "Any museum, any museum at all, makes me sad" ⁴⁹

It is the men in my life who dislike museums. And aquariums. My husband cried in the Monterey Aquarium as he watched the jelly fish glow, mushroom, bloom, traipse their ethereal tentacles behind glass, in water. He cried because he could feel their discomfort, could feel them struggling against the unnatural current pumped into their tanks.

My father has always been disturbed by museums. Especially exhibits on India. I think they make him feel glassed. I know they make me feel glassed. The non-Indians walking through the museum seem of flesh and blood. Seem exempt,

somehow.

Glass reflects, distorts.

In art museums, there is less glass. There are invisible alarm sensors, uniformed guards. In art museums, the paintings are framed, unglassed.

It is in museums of "natural science and history" that items are glassed. Glassed and, therefore, made into artifacts.

Museums make me more angry than sad. They trick. They say, like "objective" narration, This is the truth, I am the expert, This is Reality. And if you do not fit properly in that reality, you are defiant, an outsider, a monster. Even when it is your own culture on display.

The power of collection is frightening. It is like the power of politicians. It is the power of ownership. Of meaning-making.

My husband wants to rescue art from museums. He says the paintings look dead, hanging in rows. He wants to unhook them from the walls and run outside, spread them on the grass of Central Park to be rained on, lived with. My friend Way is a potter. She loves when her pottery (works of art, each plate, each bowl) breaks from washing, from a hard-stabbed fork. "Well," she says, "It's meant to be used." Fragile wonders of heated, glazed clay--she celebrates their destruction.

Once a month, the duration of my childhood, my parents and I went to the Museum of Natural History. I would say to my parents, "I am going home," and stand in front the glass exhibit marked Sindh in the Hall of the Asian Peoples. We could not go to Sindh. We could not go home. It had been absorbed into Pakistan. They did not let our kind of Sindhis back. It made my father sad. We stood there

together and looked at the red tassels of jutas. My mother wandered away to look at the Chinese bride.

Then, the tassels of the juta, bright red. Now, faded. Even away from sunlight, behind glass, color fades.

It is strange to see yourself behind glass. We were proud, though. We huddled there as if finding something forgotten. Once, I stood away from Sindh, near the painted mural of the Kaba and watched to see how many people visited Sindh. Most people came to see the Chinese and Indian brides. One woman walked by Sindh and glanced quickly. That was all.

The first place I traveled by subway, September 14, 2001, was to the Museum of Natural History. The Middle Eastern wing was quiet, empty. The muezzins sang from the speakers. No one was in my room. I stood in front of Sindh and looked at my shoes. Saw myself reflected in the glass. Felt safe for the first time in days.

As a child, seeing that small, glassed exhibit of Sindh was the first time I felt myself categorized by the wider world. Categorized by someone other than myself and my family. That diorama made me understand Sindh differently. It made me understand Sindh as something lost, never to be regained. It made me understand that Sindh was a place of the past for me and my family. That it was our fossil. Our origins.

Glass is the medium of categorization. It keeps things safe but viewable. Untouchable. There is isolation behind the thick transparency of glass. As Kiowa-American writer (poet, essayist, novelist, visual artist) writes:

"The clearest glass of a showcase will distort a truth on the other side" ⁵⁰

The mannequin in Sindh is faceless. Her chunni and clothing hang on a wire frame. She is mere structure.

Often, when I see an exhibit on India, I want to call my aunt. I want to take a pen and correct the neat, tidy statements hanging next to the artifacts. I want to cross it all out and write the names of my family. Write the places we live, scattered, across the planet.

What has been preserved for me, of Sindh, is what my father knows. What my aunts and uncle know. What has been told to me in stories.

In the 80's, My mother wore a t-shirt to teach her classes: VIOLENCE IS NOT THE ANSWER on the front. On the back: MAHATMA GANDHI.

When I was young, I associated my mother with Indira Gandhi. Even though my mother is as Irish as Paddy's Pig. "Gandhi, Gandhi," my father grumbled. "He tore us apart." He never said this in front of any other Americans. Besides himself, my mother, and me. Americans would not understand an Indian griping about Gandhi. Americans have taken Gandhi and made him over in their own image, for their own purposes (like yoga, mehndhi, bindis). Such good Gandhi has done here (and there). For Civil Rights. For the South. For the North. For everyone. And still, there is subjectivity. There is complication.

Outside of the Muslim World room, at the Museum of Natural History, is the diorama that helped make me a writer. A re-creation of a healing ceremony performed by an Eastern Siberian Yakut shaman.

It is a narrative. It has lighting and mood. It is a narrative, stopped in time, a moment from the middle of a story. It is theatre. It is dark, with a red glow from a

coal fire. Conflict, a woman sick, sweating, her face stretched with pain. Eyes closed. A person healing, a Shaman, in a wolf pelt.

As a child, I would stand in front of the glass window and feel the glass fall away. I would sink into the story, the scene. Sometimes I was the shaman, sometimes the sick woman, sometimes the wolf skin, sometimes the glowing coals. I heard them sizzling, smelled the sweat and smoke, the hanging herbs. Even though it was glassed, it was alive. It is the best diorama I have ever seen in a museum. It never fails to transport me. It is a diorama to dissolve self and other. In the dark light of the fire, the faces of the mannequins do not seem waxy. They are real. The metal chain of the kneeling shaman, his hand raised over the woman's head. The wooden beams of the ceiling, the close, tight, space. The quiet of sickness. The smell of fear and faith.

"Since the turn of the century objects collected from nonwestern sources have been classified in two major categories: as (scientific) cultural artifacts or as (aesthetic) works." ⁵¹

This nonwestern categorization of either "scientific" or "aesthetic" seems to me to be a metaphor for South Asians in America. The path of our immigration and "Americanization." At first, because of immigration law, we were mostly doctors and engineers. Now we are doctors and engineers but we are also recognizable to the general American public as writers (but only if we write about India or "Indianness" or immigrantiness in a particular way are we considered "South Asian writers"). Only if we write towards the market, write towards an imagined, American audience. Write to please, and glass ourselves in.

We must take hold of our own meanings.

I remember my cousins in India making fun of how I pronounced "karma," "atman," "Ravi Shankar." Words I had not heard pronounced at home but had heard mispronounced in larger America.

We must take hold of our own stereotypes. The mythologies that others make up about us. It is about taking hold of those stereotypes, owning them, remaking them in our own varied images. It is about removing the glass. No one else will do it. People like things to be glassed, still, static. With the illusion of neatness and understandability. So they can see the hierarchy.

When marketing my book, my publisher wrote my jacket copy, and the first word was a sentence unto itself: *Exotic*. I made them change it. Exotic is not a good word. In the mouth of the other, it is as dehumanizing and history-bearing as the word nigger.

Words change meaning, change impact, depending upon who speaks them and who they are spoken to.

At the second SALTAF conference at the Smithsonian in Washington, D.C. I was a panelist for "Migration and Cities." I stood with the other presenters, four other South Asian writers. I said, suddenly, "Oh no, I can't find my nametag." Vijay Lakshami, author of Pomegranate Dreams, responded, solemnly, "I have also lost my identity." We all looked at each other and then laughed, together. Knowing the beauty, aptness of Vijay's sentence for all of us. "I have also lost my identity." My friend Satish Menon, a filmmaker, said how he disliked the word desi because desi is Hindi/Urdu and therefore excludes Malayalam, Tamil, Telegu. Anita Rau Badami

talked about how Algonquin Books wanted to rename her novel (Tamarind Mem) to Sweet and Sour Woman, to make it Asian (Chinese!) in a way "Americans could understand." She said in Canada her books were shelved as literature. Here, they dwell on the "ethnic literature" shelf. Bharati Mukherjee said, "When I first started writing in the 1970's my publisher wanted me to change my name to Betty Markham."

What does it mean to put a text in a box?

I took this picture at the Barnes and Noble on 6th Avenue and 21st Street, in New York City, on March 19, 2006. A display of "African-American Fiction" ghettoized away from "Fiction and Literature:"



Next to this display, another strange categorizing principle. "Captivating Fiction" ghettoized away from "Fiction and Literature":



Is this type of categorization speaking towards marketability? Or does it imply something larger about the control of texts and identity?

In Vermont, in the 70's my father was the first Indian ever hired (in the entire state) as a permanent staff member at the hospital. He was the first non-white person in the state of Vermont to receive the Doctor of The Year award. They called him Frank because they could not pronounce his name.

Who, I wonder, received the award? Was it Frank? Was it my father?

My father's first Thanksgiving in America, in 1969, he dressed up as a pilgrim. Donned a long-haired blonde wig and carried a fake, plastic rifle. Wore a big buckle belt and tights over a tunic (a kurta, incidentally). My mother said that, all night, he wandered away from the turkey (which he dutifully ate bits of even though he was vegetarian) to look at himself in the mirror and laugh.

Is knowledge ownership? Is it power? Yes, and that is why museums make me angry. Shallow or skewed knowledge is dangerous. Americans have a strange sense of propriety over things Indian. Why does this enrage me? Perhaps because my own "claims" of "being Indian" have often been questioned, called suspect? I

whip out language, family, history, like an officially stamped passport. What my friend Sonja, half-Punjabi, half European, calls “our credentials.”

The question I was most frequently asked by audiences members while on tour with my book: “What’s it like being Indian?”

India is a place whose sense of identity is strongly informed by what other people think of it. It is a self-conscious post-colonial place, aware of its own complexities. A meta-country. America seems blind to me in comparison. When you have power, do you not question yourself? When we learn of our American, colonial past, the emphasis is on the romantic, mythic acts of defiance, the struggle, the defeat of the British. We have wiped from our collective memory our cringing and groveling. We remember only the tea floating in the Harbor. How would America change if we taught our colonialized past differently? If we thought of it differently?

It is only the South which retains a (false, and imposed) sense of inferiority, a loss of power, a sense of defeat, that is built into history books and culture.



Am I the exhibit? Or is the stuffed, smiling bear the exhibit? Who is Ursus Arctos Horribilis? Who is looking at whom? Which of us is glassed?

Color

The stage hand wears black and moves across the set, a ripple in the dark. Perhaps a bang, a scuffle, if she walks into a table the actors have shifted accidentally during a fight scene. The color of the stage hand's clothes, camouflage her with the darkness that falls between the acts. Her clothes signal: I am here but not here. I am invisible. We may hear and even see her, moving across the set. But we sit politely, quietly, participating in the illusion, waiting for the set to be transformed. Waiting for her to retreat to the wings, for the lights to come up. Then, the shock of change. The pleasure of it. We reorient. Now, the table is gone, the backdrop of snow rolled up. In its place, green, leafy trees. It is summer. We are outside. There is a croquet ball and wickets. A picnic spread on a gingham blanket.

In theatre, blackness is the space of change. The color of obscurity. And she, the stage hand, in black, is their vehicle.

The black of an orchestra: a uniform. A symbol of solidarity. The black of crows, perched and singing. It allows the mind to relax, to see the wood of the instruments, the blonde hair of the violinist, the dreadlocks of the clarinetist. Faces, hands, in acres of blackness. It allows the ear to listen.

Death black. A crepe dress sliding around the hips of a young widow. Stretched taught over the hips of an old widow. The color of mourning. Of silence. Of withdrawal. A statement of arrested grief. All is changed. I do not see color. I

do not see life.

In India, the widow wears white. The corpse is wrapped in white before set aflame. Orange eats white, the white cloth and bones. White in India is the color of death. The color of purity. White in America is the color of brides.

We assign meaning to color. We treat colors symbolically. Red, stop. Green, go. White, widow. Black, widow. White bride. Red bride.

What does it mean to say we are white and black and brown? We are colors. Colored.

I walked in the woods behind Faulkner's house, in Oxford, Mississippi, and saw through the branches of sycamores, the sky. White. Clouded. From the east flew a cardinal. A fast airborne streak of red: blood, lipstick, Marlboros. From the west, few a jay, a blue bird. A flash of ocean, Norwegian eyes. The red bird, the blue bird, streaking by each other against the white sky. This red, white, and blue, this meeting in the air, was more America than anything else I have ever seen.

I walked the woods thinking of Faulkner's character, Joe Christmas, the tragic mulatto. From Old Miss, a cheer from sixty thousand throats. A touchdown at the stadium. The noise would have driven Faulkner crazy. He would have moved.

Color is untrustworthy. Color is in the eye of the beholder. To categorize a human by color: Brown, black, white, yellow, red. It is all an illusion. Yet one we believe in. One dangerous to deny.

I remember in American Studies 603, a day when we argued. Some students said they saw no difference in people. They did not see "race." They felt "race" was irrelevant in this day and age. It was a beautiful sentiment. One that came from a

good place. But it seemed dangerous to me. It seemed dangerous to deny categorization and how it functions systemically. Even if you don't see a difference in people, The System does, and always has.

In 1666, Newton first used the word "spectrum" to name colors produced by a glass prism. Colors of white light bent, refracted, by differing amounts. There is no colored light, just a range of energies, proportional frequencies and inverse wavelengths.⁵²

There are three sources of color: light, our eyes (how we detect the light) and the object (that is colored). The color of the object can have three different origins: absorption (green of grass), emission (lightening) and scattering (color of sky). Made light, lost light, moved light.⁵³

I remember wearing navy to go to court for a speeding ticket. Navy is dependable. Staid. Nothing unexpected.

Picasso said, "Colors are only symbols. Reality is to be found in luminance alone...When I run out of blue, I use red."⁵⁴

Scientists and artists, the two categories of people who know color best. Those who study the eye, light, refraction, physics. And those who paint. One with a noetic, emotional, instinctual knowledge and sensitivity; and one with mechanical, biological knowledge. And combinations of both.

I would ask my father, a scientist, when I was a child, to *not* explain to me how the dishwasher worked, why the sun rose and set. I did not want to know. I wanted the mystery.

Josef Albers, teacher and painter known for his innovative approach to color

theory, writes:

"If one says "Red" (the name of a color) and there are 50 people listening, it can be expected that there be 50 reds in their minds. And one can be sure that all these reds will be very different. Even when a certain color is specified which all listeners have seen innumerable times--such as the red of the Coca-Cola signs which is the same red all over the country--they will still think of many different reds. Even if all the listeners have hundreds of reds in front of them from which to choose the Coca-Cola red, they will again select quite different colors...When we consider further the associations and reactions which are experienced in connection with the color and the name, probably everyone will diverge again in many different directions. What does this show? First, it is hard, if not impossible, to remember distinct colours. This underscores the very important fact that the visual memory is very poor in comparison with our auditory memory...Second the nomenclature of color is most inadequate. Though there are innumerable choices--shades and tone--in daily vocabulary, there are only about 30 color names." ⁵⁵

Color is a main principle of categorization. Color is subjective.

Order

What is the shape of order? In a museum? In Scotland? In Mexico? In Kenya?

Often, order is linear. It is imbued with a sense of status and value.

First, second, third. _____

The preferred placement is first.

Top to bottom.

What is on top is higher, better. I suppose there *is* less terror in the phrase:

"Off with her feet." On the human body, there exists a linear hierarchy, from top to bottom. It is possible to lose from the bottom up and live, but not from the top down.

What is lined up is controllable, understandable.

Linearity is the shape of order, reason, control.

My mother, the history teacher. She never liked teaching American History; she preferred global. One thing she liked about American History: the orderly lines of British soldiers that were easily picked off by colonists during the American Revolution. The colonists had learned a new formation of fighting--nonlinear, blending into the scenery, the art of surprise from behind a tree--from the Natives who they later turned their well-trained guns upon.

The shape of meaning in a sentence. Linear. In Pakistan, sentences are read from right to left. In India, from left to right. Vertical rows for Mandarin. Verb in middle of sentence in English. At the end, in Hindi. My name is Neela. My name Neela is.

Hindi, Urdu, nearly the same language. The same grammar. The same words. Written differently, with a different alphabet. Same meanings, sounds.

Written from different directions on the page.

Page the on directions different from written.

Pakistan, Urdu. India, Hindi.

.idniH, aidnI. udrU, natsikaP

There is the idea that in the womb, bones form first, flesh second. That bones are a skeleton upon which all else is hung. In reality, in the womb, bone and flesh develop together. Simultaneously. There is no order, or hierarchy of one above the other.



Rows are the shape of western death. Graveyards. Rows are the shape of Christian faith. Pews. They are the shape of entertainment. Risers. At my wedding in India, I walked a circle.





Differences in our senses of universe, order, world view, based on shape.

My Sindhi aunt says, "My mother is rolling on the floor."

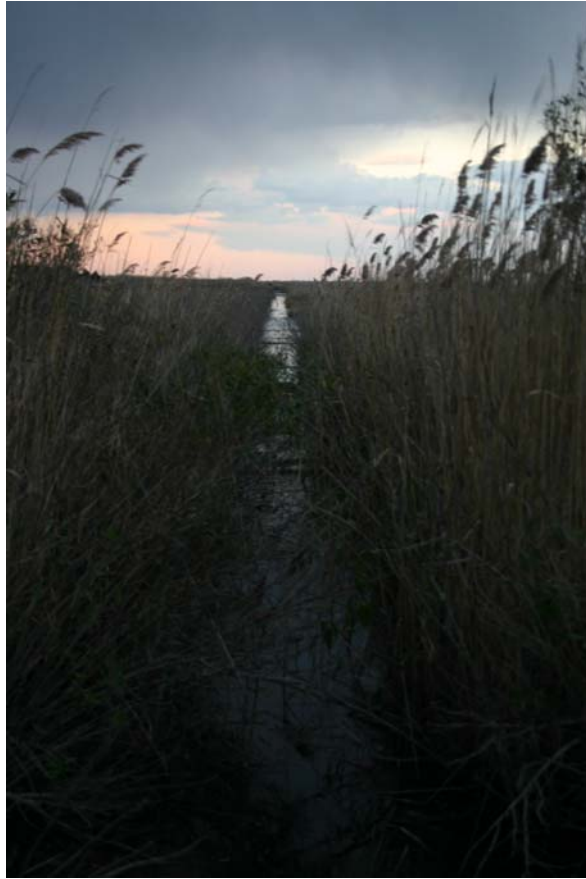
We don't have graves. We burn our dead.

What does it mean to cut down trees in a forest, trees that grow where they will, unlinear, unplanned? What does it mean to destroy such things? Such wild, disordered growth?

What does it mean to categorize a human by shape: fat, skinny, tall, short?

In shape, in lines, there are hierarchies. In theory, a line is infinite with no top or bottom, beginning or end. But, for practicality's sake, the line has been falsified and truncated. Dismembered to fit on a page. To be written. From this mutilation comes hierarchies. Bad is left, Good is right. Heaven is up, Hell is down. Top is good bottom is bad. Beginning is better than end.









Steeple can be seen from far away. They reach towards heaven. They hold bells that ring and toll, welcome and warn. Both steeple and skyscraper rely on the hierarchy of the vertical line.

The world over, cities, nations, compete to see who has the highest skyscraper. Currently, it is Taipei 101 in Taiwan.

In Dubai, a skyscraper shaped like the sail of a boat.

Windows

The mannequins are gloved and so it is December. In New York, I chart seasons by window displays. A brunette mannequin in a cabled sweater means Winter. I find spring (purple heads of croci) in terra cotta planters. I fall to my knees before them. I stand on my tiptoes to peer into window boxes, searching for the green

spears of jonquils.

The blooms of flowered dresses.

Windows are a border. Windows designate an inside and out.

Windows in New York: mirrors. See yourself walking, passing. A man stops in the rain, in front of a window, and combs his hair slowly. A cat sits on the inside sill of a window, flicking its tail. In the next window, someone has taped a sign, facing out to the street: Hello. Have a Good Day.

The city is made of windows. Windows into homes, stores, restaurants, offices. The city is reflective, voyeuristic. It is looked at, looked in. Windows of taxis, cars, buses, driving by. Windows that show mostly a blur of darkness on moving subways.

Only the bike messengers, unwindowed and free.

Windows frame. They focus our sight.

Theory is a frame. Structuralist, post-modern, post-colonial, Derrida, etc. Place a frame of thought, a way of seeing, around a text, individual, idea. Frame it. Theory is windowed. Screened. Smoked. Stained glass. Locked. Opaque. Insulated. Cracked. Open.

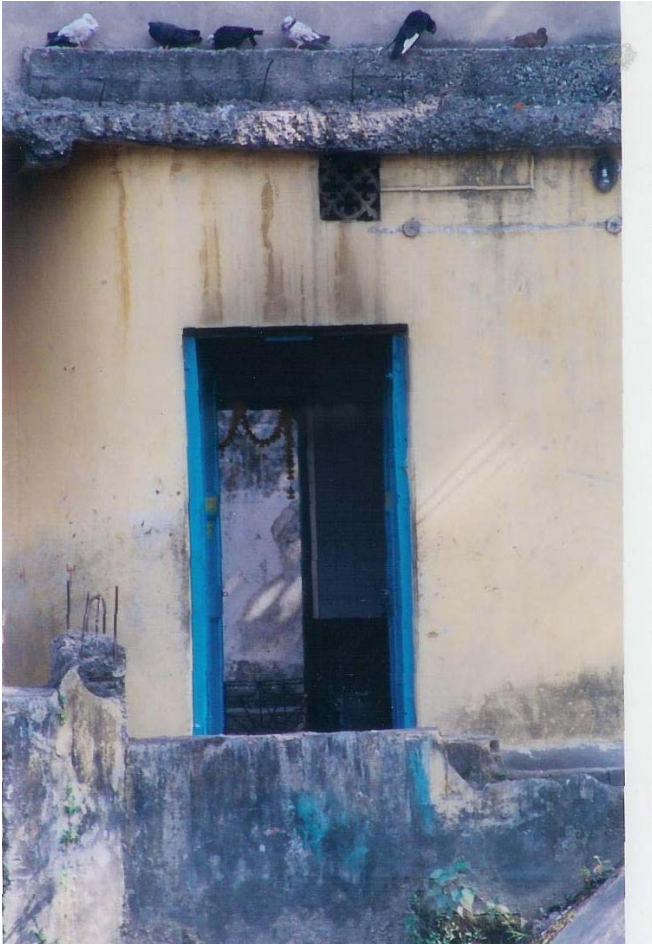
Irvin Peckham, in his essay, "The Yin and Yang of Genre," writes:

"I remember walking when I was young in the hills behind our Wisconsin farm and coming across the old deserted Snyder house in some forgotten valley. I was surprised to find the large living room window still intact. I did what any young boy is supposed to do. I found a rock and threw it through the window. The sound of the breaking glass, although frightening, brought

pleasure. So it is with genres."

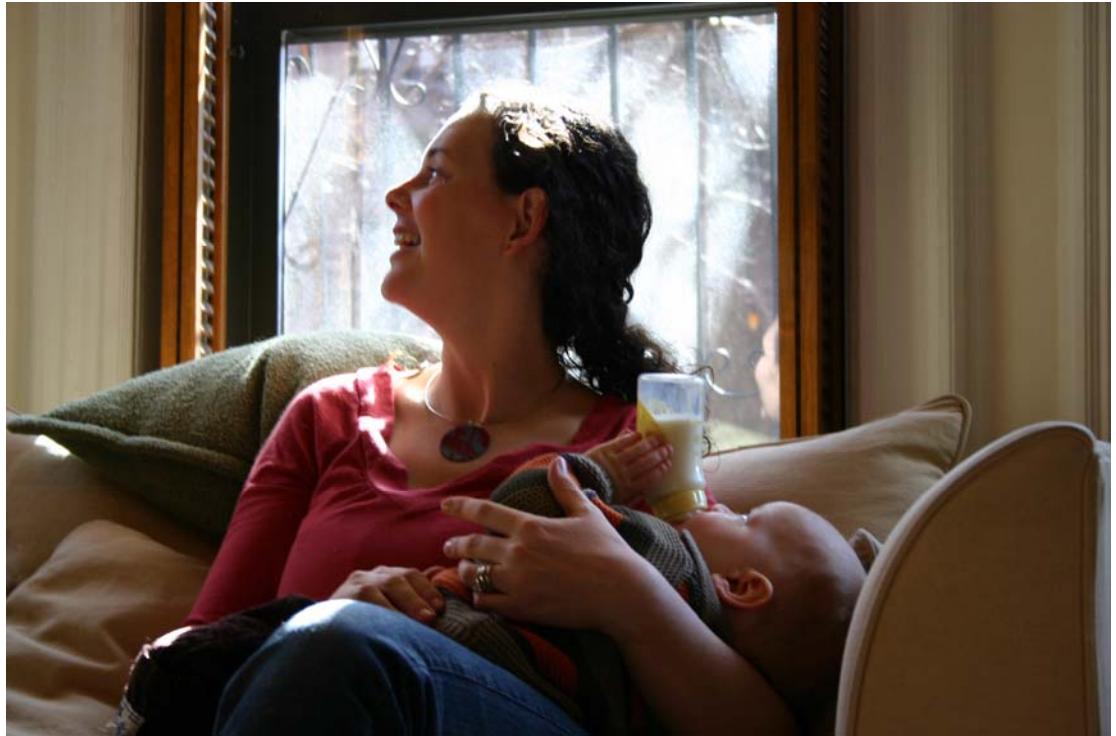






Windows inform.

Light passes through windows. Falls across us.



Our eyes are at the fronts of our heads. Not the sides, like fish. Or far from our snouts, like dogs. Windows are constructed to suit our eyes and how we see. How we think. In categories. Through my window, in Kentucky, I see the corner of a white wooden barn. A section of red tiled roof. The limbs of a wild black cherry tree. White flowers on some of its branches. Every now and then, from the top of the window to the bottom, I see a squirrel running headfirst down the tree. When he passes out of the frame of my window, I can no longer see him. I see birds, as they fly by, startling, dynamic. They make stage entrances from the edges of my window. They swoop. From left to right across the frame of my vision. And then they are gone.

My dog, Lugnut is sensitive to borders. He attacks menus slipped under the door of our apartment in New York. The menus have crossed a border into his world.

They are his enemy. He tears them to shreds. Barks, enraged, at the delivery person who dared such a trespass.

Books have borders. Edges. Margins.

What happens in the margins of books? What borders are crossed there?

The Edges of Books

"Nothing human is supposed to escape the anthropologist's attention. Yet reading, an activity on which many humans spend more time than on eating, having sex, or participating in rituals, has not been among the rubrics of standard ethnographic research and writing."⁵⁶

While reading *The Fourth Genre*, a collection of essays that resist genre and discuss the essay as a form in between poetry and prose, I had an internal dialogue with the book's previous readers.⁵⁷

I had bought the book used. In fairly good condition. The front and back covers, the pages, curling.

Throughout the book, one of the previous owners had written in big, teenaged writing. Rounded letters. Clearly, the reader had been a student. She was reading the text as a student, underlining topic sentences, responding to what she read as though speaking to the authors of the essays. Many smiley faces next to paragraphs that were particularly pleasing to her. I feel certain the reader was female. Strange to be able to pick out gender from handwriting, from comments. A paragraph in Mary Clewman Blew's essay "The Unwanted Child":

"All adult ranch women were fat. I remember hardly a woman out of her

teens in those years who was not fat. The few exceptions were the women who had, virtually, become a third sex, by taking on men's work in the fields and corrals; they might stay as skinny and tough in their Levis as hired hands."

The reader had underlined become a third sex and written next to it in the margin: *interesting how they make that distinction*. Later in the essay, next to a paragraph about how the author's mother felt less loved than her siblings, how she felt she was average, the reader wrote: *must have been very degrading*. Later: *kill deer for food? times got really bad*. And at the end of the essay, which concludes with the image of a mother wondering if she lied when she said "I want it." ("It" referring to a baby.) The reader had written: *how could you mistake whether or not you want your own flesh and blood?!?!?!?! A statement of youth and surety; she had never questioned her existence, the fact that her parents loved her, wanted her, planned her.*

I felt (I made assumptions; I categorized a fellow human being) after reading her comments and underlines, that the reader was a youngest child, that she had one older brother. That she had never been pregnant, never had an abortion. Had always eaten food from the supermarket; was from the suburbs. That she was someone who thought about gender. In a later essay by Judith Ortiz Cofer, one that starts out, "We lived in Puerto Rico until my brother was born in 1954." The reader wrote: *so much of this*. I immediately assumed the reader was white.

When I got to Patricia Hampl's essay "Parish Streets," I discovered a second reader dwelling in the margins. Someone who used a different pen, had different handwriting, and thought more critically than the first reader.

This comment in the margin of "Parish Streets": *the simplified version of the truth*. Next to Hampl's line: "reality refused to be real enough," the second reader had written: *great line*. Next to a section where Hampl writes about how her family dismissed all non-Catholics, the reader had written: *seems really ignorant to put yourself above other people*.

I very carefully examined the handwriting between the comments in the first few essays and in the Hampl essay. I wondered if it could be the same person, the same reader? Maybe she had learned, grown, expanded? Then I examined the two ampersands in both samples. One written like a half a sailboat, and one written as: &. That settled it for me. There were two readers. I could not tell if the second reader was Catholic or not but later in the Hampl essay, she had underlined this sentence: "meatballs are OK." I felt certain she liked meatballs. I could not quite determine the gender of the second reader although I thought she was female.

She was learning how to live, how to think about herself and other people. She was not thinking about genre or structure or how to write a personal essay. Her dialogue with the book was intensely personal. It was the content of the pieces she spoke to.

In the essay "My Father Always Said," the second, genderless reader had written in big bold letters, so deep that when I ran my fingers across the writing, I felt ridges and grooves: *important to remember where you come from, but don't let it rule your life*. At the end of that same essay, this: *not everything that happens is happy and good*. The second reader was more hardened, cynical, than the first reader. I thought I would like him/her better than the first reader.

I met a third reader during Toth's essay "Going to the movies." This female (definitely female) wrote in big, teenaged, loopy letters. Always in pencil. She was a good student. Dutiful. She read the essay to have something to say in class the next day (or in a few days; I felt she did her homework ahead of time). At the end of Toth's essay, she wrote: *Each man got more adventurous*. In the same essay, I tried to figure out the age of Toth at the time he was writing--based on his date of birth (which was mentioned in the beginning of the essay) and the current year. I turned back to the first page of the essay, and there, above the title, was the same math I was about to do. A previous reader (I could not tell which one) had done the work for me. I quickly checked the math and then read on.

My favorite reader, the second reader, the genderless one, wrote in Bartkevicius's essay: *Every time you look back on something, it's a little different than before*. Later, in that same essay: *With every new perspective comes a new truth*. I would kiss this reader if I could, I decide.

In Dillard's essay "To Fashion a Text," this sentence of Dillard's: "You have to take pains in a memoir not to hang on the reader's arm, like a drunk, and say, "And then I did this and it was so interesting." Above the word drunk, the first reader had written: *haha*.

Past page 250, all the readers were quiet. I made my own notes on clean, white margins. The third reader, the pencil-writing reader, came back on page 340. Next to a line in Schwartz's essay: "How it felt to me!" which is all about memory and truth and if something is remembered then it is true, the reader wrote: *softball alone on the bench*. I felt it was a sliver of her past, of her pain. She wrote it very

small.

Throughout my reading, I found myself sometimes skipping the first and third readers' notes. Sometimes I read them with a voyeuristic glee. I looked forward to the neat, even writing of the second reader. I wanted to know what he/she thought.

I had a few more encounters with my favorite reader, the second reader. Next to a section of the Poirir-Bures essay in which the author wonders if she will be sold as a white slave, my favorite reader had written: *paranoid?* And at the end of this essay, he/she had written, in the sweep of white space between the final paragraph and the bottom of the page: *I like how she related the sea to her own experiences.* And this, diagonal in the same space: *Do you write the person or the persona.*

Now he/she was thinking like a writer.

She had underlined one sentence in the essay: "Where is your education going to get you."

When I finished the book, I flipped back through it, and got a paper cut on page 284. A page, a book, is a strange, unexpected place to be wounded. So thin, harmless, but if you catch it just so. My finger throbbed from the cut. It can hurt to read. I wondered if any of the other readers had ever shed their blood upon these same pages.

I have always been a secretive person. When I take notes in a book, I take them in pencil. Often I will type my notes out into a computer program and then go through the book and erase all I've written. I will not lend out a book I have written in. I am protecting myself, how my mind works. This seems a very private thing to me. How I read, what I respond to, where I get my ideas--all of this seems deeply

personal. On the page, next to the paragraph where I get an idea, I write a note. So that I can go back and reread what inspired the idea in the first place and reexperience it in the context in which I originally had the thought. I write “ss” next to the note if it is for a short story. Or “nov” if it is for a novel. Or “ess” if it is for an essay. If it is for a poem, I write out a draft of the poem, immediately, quickly, with sloppy line breaks, right there on the page, letting my penciled words traipse into the black printed, published words.

I want to speak to my books, to authors. I want to interact with them. I was anemic as a child and had pica; I ripped corners from my books (on my favorite pages) and chewed and ate them. To be closer to the words. And the way they made me feel.

In the next book I read, Memory and Narrative,⁵⁸ I grew to trust the former, note-taking reader so much that I was able to skim through the book, only reading what paragraphs he had highlighted in bright yellow. We were reading the book for the same reasons, looking for the same information. I realized this halfway through, and I let him do the work for me. I trusted him.

One of the readers of this book had underlined passages in black pen. And gone back afterwards (or perhaps it was a later reader; a highly neurotic one) and white-outed all of the underlines with fine, thin strokes. The white-out over the underlines in the text looked like twenty-two minutes of accumulated snow on a straight, paved road.

In my childhood room, there were scuffs on the walls. Red, black, green, brown, navy blue. From various rejections, all very personal, of hardback books.

Paperbacks don't leave marks. One from Rudyard Kipling (a red leather-bound Victorian-looking book with gold pages--GUNGA DIN; it left a mark like blood from a very large fly). One from a man whose politics I hated. One because it was so poorly written that I felt the author had no respect for language or readers. And so on. I believe in the importance of sometimes throwing a book across the room. I take them and hurl them the way I want to hurl the person who has written something that is offensive to me. That is the thing with books. If you are offended, you can close them. You can turn the page. You can put it down and never again pick it up. Or, if they are virulently offensive, you can throw them. It makes a lovely, satisfying hard edged thwack.

Reading involves stillness. (Except for my husband who has trained himself to read while walking the New York City streets.) Reading involves only the movement of the eyes, hands. It is mostly the work of the brain. Mostly slow movement, graceful leaps. Reading is an art that just barely comes through the body. It is quiet. Rustle of page. Shush of hands shifting against cover. But how far away from home one can be while reading. On a mountaintop, in a subway, a meadow, a restaurant, in bed. How much we change from the first time we read a book to the second. For me, Milan Kundera will always be New Delhi. Each time I read The Unbearable Lightness of Being, I am transported back to New Delhi, in the train station, on my way to Mumbai to see my cousin. The motion of the book is the motion of that train. Time, space, place, nation, all borders are crossed as I read. Not just the borders of the place in the book. But where I was when I first read it and where I am now as I read it again. And who I was then. And who I am now. Each

time we pick up a book, it is an act of movement, of change, of time passing. Of border crossing.

Borders, Flags, and Nations

The Marshallese conduct a fishing competition every fourth of July. After the U.S. took over the island, the Marshallese took the day off because the Americans did. But the Marshallese did not celebrate the 4th as Independence Day; they made the day into a fishing holiday. And the Americans all celebrated (still do) the 4th of July on the 5th of July because the 5th of July in the Marshall Islands is actually the 4th of July in the States (because of time difference). So, in the Marshall Islands, the 4th is a fishing holiday and the 5th is United States independence from the British.

Albert Einstein: founder of string theory, and unified universe theory. A mind that thought in a wide, netted way about space had this to say about nationalism: "I am by heritage a Jew, by citizenship a Swiss, and by makeup a human being, and only a human being without any special attachment to any state of national entity whatsoever." ⁵⁹

I have never much liked the American flag. It makes me uncomfortable. It seems to imply a great unity, an oversimplification. It seems to be symbolizing something that excludes me, my family, my friends. I was once reprimanded, as a child, by a teacher, for rooting for Chinese Olympic gymnasts. I could not understand why I couldn't root for the gymnasts whose performances and styles I enjoyed the most. Nation seemed irrelevant to me. I believed in individuals--an American trait, I thought.

This photograph was taken on Blackfoot Reservation land, Montana, U.S.A. :



At the entrance to the Blackfoot Nation, Blackfoot-made sculptures, of scrap metal. And four flags. From left to right: United States, Blackfoot Nation, Montana, Canada:



In New York, in the summer of 2005, I saw two young girls walking in the East Village, wearing the latest fashion--gold, Moroccan-style sandals and Mesopotamian-style yellow-gold earrings and necklaces. Strange that the "Middle Eastern look" was the height of fashion in a year that saw _____ Iraqis killed in an American war.

Iraqi jewelry, Muslim shoes, on American girls, blonde, in skin-tight black dresses. A strange sight. What is the message? Wear the culture of the country your country is bombing. Wear that culture on your feet and in your ears and around your neck. Let it dangle into your cleavage.

My husband has a huge American flag hanging above his desk in the living room. Over it, over the blue square and 50 white stars, he has hung a cow skull that he collected at a slaughter pit on his uncle's ranch in Montana. To get a cow to the slaughter pit is no easy task. We hauled one, once, he and I, three miles. Tied her poor stiff legs with chains, attached the chains to the four-wheeler and dragged her, all 800 rigor-mortised pounds, to the pit.

Holter's uncle tells a story about when Holter went to Montana as a child. He went to Montana--his mother's place of birth and raising--from Baltimore. He was four. They were driving down a dirt road, cows, mountains, grass, on either side. They saw an American flag waving above a fencepost. Holter said to his uncle, with surprise and indignation, "Hey, that's *our* flag."

Baltimore and Montana had seemed like two different countries.

Holter's uncle told me this story as we were walking out of a bar in north central Montana. I still had a beer in my hand; before reaching the door, I set it down

on a table. Holter's uncle said, "You don't have to do that. You can bring it outside and drink it in the car. It's not really America," he said, and smiled.

I laughed: "That's what we say about New York."





So where, in God's name, is America?





My husband says I should claim the flag as my own. Claim the word American. I am beginning to think he is right. Claim who I am, my way of being and living, my family, my history, my cultures and languages, and say: This is American, too.

After 9/11, I put American flags up in the windows of my father's car. In his office. In the windows of his house. At this time, to be Muslim, South Asian (or to look as such—like, the South American man who was killed by police thinking him “a terrorist;” he was wearing a heavy coat on the London tube during a “warm” day (warm being subjective; “He was always cold in that country,” his brother told reporters and was... *suspected*).

The American flag, post-9/11, and for approximately two years afterwards, became a protection for those who could be perceived as “terrorists.” I remember the fear. The fear I had for my family, friends, self. The hushed conversations with cab drivers. Deli owners. We were nervous.

Claim words, like flags, and make them your own. The words American, family, love, marriage, anthropologist.

Define the word American rather than let it define you.

Until I was twenty-three, I sang the "Star Spangled Banner" this way: *and the rockets red glare; the mums bursting in air*. Mums. As a child, I knew that mums and marigolds grew in the fall and were of the same family. My mother raised both in the backyard of every house we lived in. She planted them for my father, for his homesickness. Marigolds, the flower of India that rains down in grief, celebration, honor. And so I sang *mums*. I thought mums were an American take on marigolds.

Mums made sense to me in a nationalistic song. I envisioned mums bursting in air, along with banging, happy patakas. I loved singing that line, loved the pictures it gave me, raining mums, raining marigolds. I never paid attention to the meaning of the other lines in the song. I sang them just to be singing along. But I felt close to both India and America when I sang: *and the rockets red glare, the mums bursting in air.*

It was a moment of shock, understanding, fear, when I was twenty-three years old standing with my husband (who was my boyfriend at the time) in Baltimore's Camden Yards at an Oriole's game, and heard, for the first time, the true words to the song. I was not singing. I was standing silent when I heard the words correctly. *The bombs bursting in air.* Ten thousand voices singing it at once. An entire stadium with their hands on their hearts singing about bombs. I stood thinking about how strange and protective my mind was. I had converted bombs to mums; I had created a meaning specifically for myself. I had misheard for twenty-three years.

That is a long time to mishear.

Later, the whole stadium shouted out “O,” as in *O, say does that star-spangled banner yet wave*, but they claimed the “O” in a forceful, celebratory shout, all together. O for Orioles. They had taken the song and made it into something of their own, too.

I have always misheard and misread things. As a child, driving in Michigan's U.P., Upper Peninsula, I thought it was Michigan's Uttra Pradesh, U.P. I pronounced Ramada Inn in Rama-da, thinking it was a chain owned by a Hindu man. I would look at street signs in Boston and think, initially, they were written in Hindi. These

errors, these misreadings and mishearings and misunderstandings reflected my reality.

Once my father told me a story of a Korean restaurant in Mumbai that no Sindhis would ever go to. It was called Hun ge ma. Which in Sindhi translates to: I have to crap.

And what of the word freedom? Does it mean the same thing to everyone?

The most wide-ranging and inclusive definition of freedom I have ever heard is allegorical. "The young man who asked Sartre whether he should join the Resistance or stay with his mother, [was] told "You are free, therefore choose; that is to say, invent." ⁶⁰

Invention. The art of the fiction writer.

For too many human beings, choice is not possible.

But invention is always possible.

What does freedom mean for a text? When is a text free? When it floats between the borders of genres? When it leaves the hands of the author(s) and is read and imagined anew by readers? When? Is it ever free?

My father is outside the history of this country. And I always felt I was, too, until my mid-twenties. My parents kept greater America from me. I was not allowed to watch television or go to the movies. My mother says it was my husband who made me into an American, that I wasn't a "real American," until the age of 21.

And my husband says he was "Raised by the television."

Is one American if one does not watch television?



When I was a child, I saw my father as being "free" of America's guilt. No slavery, no Vietnam, no Watergate, no Japanese Internment Camps, no bombing of coal workers in Matewan. He was free of the history of the place he left (because he was not there) and free of the history of the place he'd come to (because he was new to it). The immigrant exists in-between histories. There is an element of freedom and freshness in that. The freedom from responsibility and grievous wrongs.

My mother always said, "The Irish are the Blacks of Europe. We didn't get here until the 1890's, our family. And we stayed poor and stinking in Hell's Kitchen. There's no blood on our hands." This cannot possibly be true (with family working for Tammany Hall) but the mythology is interesting--the ways we all absolve ourselves. A coal miner dies in West Virginia. And in New York, I flicks on my lights, run my dishwasher, play my stereo. We take no responsibility for energy, for

where it comes from, for who digs it out of the mountain, the desert, the sea. We take no responsibility for the mountain, the desert, the sea.

When I lived in Belgium, in 1991, the Belgians would insist I was not American: "You're not blonde, or blue-eyed. You don't look American." When we went to Greece, Turkey, Thailand, India, Egypt, Israel, Spain, Mexico, people spoke to my father and me in the local language. Why is it that the rest of the world lacks a sense of hyphenated Americans? Of America as a place of immigrants, many from their own countries? Because the faces of power and money in this country, the public faces, the media, the television shows and movies, present a homogenous view? Or is it because America herself does not believe in it fully yet?

Adam Hochschild talks about the implied and complicated "lack" of hierarchy in American English:

"It [has] a marked indifference to rank and heirarchy. If the American language had a second person familiar form, we'd use it with everybody, just the way Americans assume the right to call strangers by their first names. Paradoxically, this American informality coexists with a far more unequal distribution of wealth than one finds in Europe and in many other countries. We may not be economically equal, but we assume a kind of social equality with others." ⁶¹

Yesterday, walking down 17th Street in New York City, I passed a U.S. Mailbox. In white spray paint, on government property, I saw graffiti : I LOVE VERU. I have no idea if it was written by a desi person or maybe just written to a desi person. It seemed, to me, an important milestone. It was the first time I had ever

seen a South Asian name spray painted (in this country). We are now as mundane, as American, as graffiti on government property. We, too, are loved, our names spraypainted and shouted across bridges and sidewalks and subways and mailboxes.



There is a United States flag on the moon. Outside of gravity. I asked my father once, “When they landed on the moon, where were you?” “India,” he said. “Where did you watch it?” I asked. (My mother and Irish grandfather always told stories of where they were when man landed on the moon). My father got snippy,

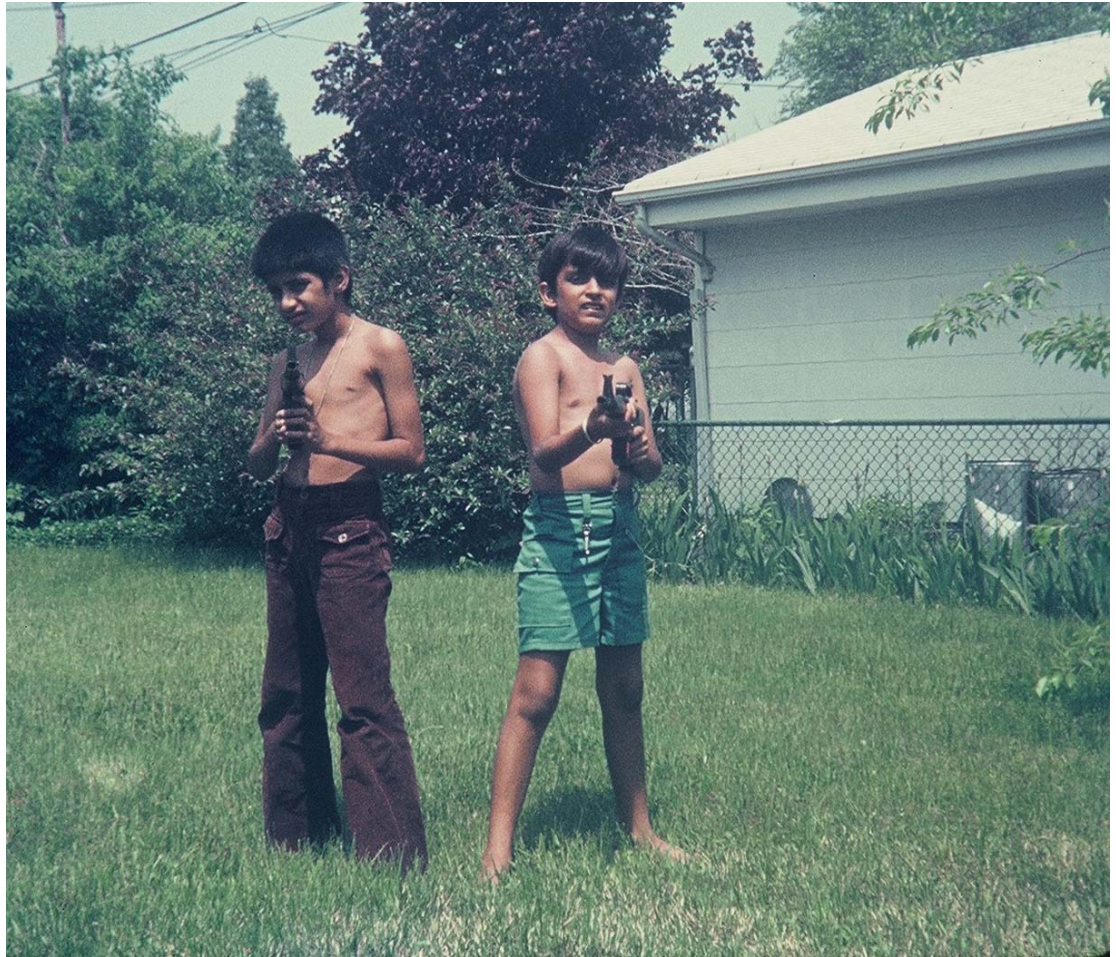
short-tempered. "There was no such things as televisions." "Oh," I said, and realized he meant in India or maybe in our family then. "Did you listen to it on the radio?" "Yes," he said. But I could tell he could not remember. It must not have seemed important to him, a man landing on the moon. And America then, to my father, was as unknown as the moon. Now, when he talks of an old India, an India he cannot return to, an India lost to time, it is as if India is the moon.

When my father talks of the moon, he talks of its beauty or of gravity curving the human spine and how, if his osteoporosis patients went to the moon, they would have less pain and their spines would straighten. I ask him what would happen if we were all born and raised on the moon and he says, "We would all be jinnas. We would be feet taller."



I do not like nationalism. Or nations. Although I believe in potato salad and the sudden beauty of fireworks. That expectant lag between sound and color. I love the ones that sputter and fail. When my husband barbeques on the 4th of July, he reads old newspapers (the headlines about Iraq, Afghanistan, Wall Street, Global Warming) before he wads them up and feeds them to the coals.

This is America.

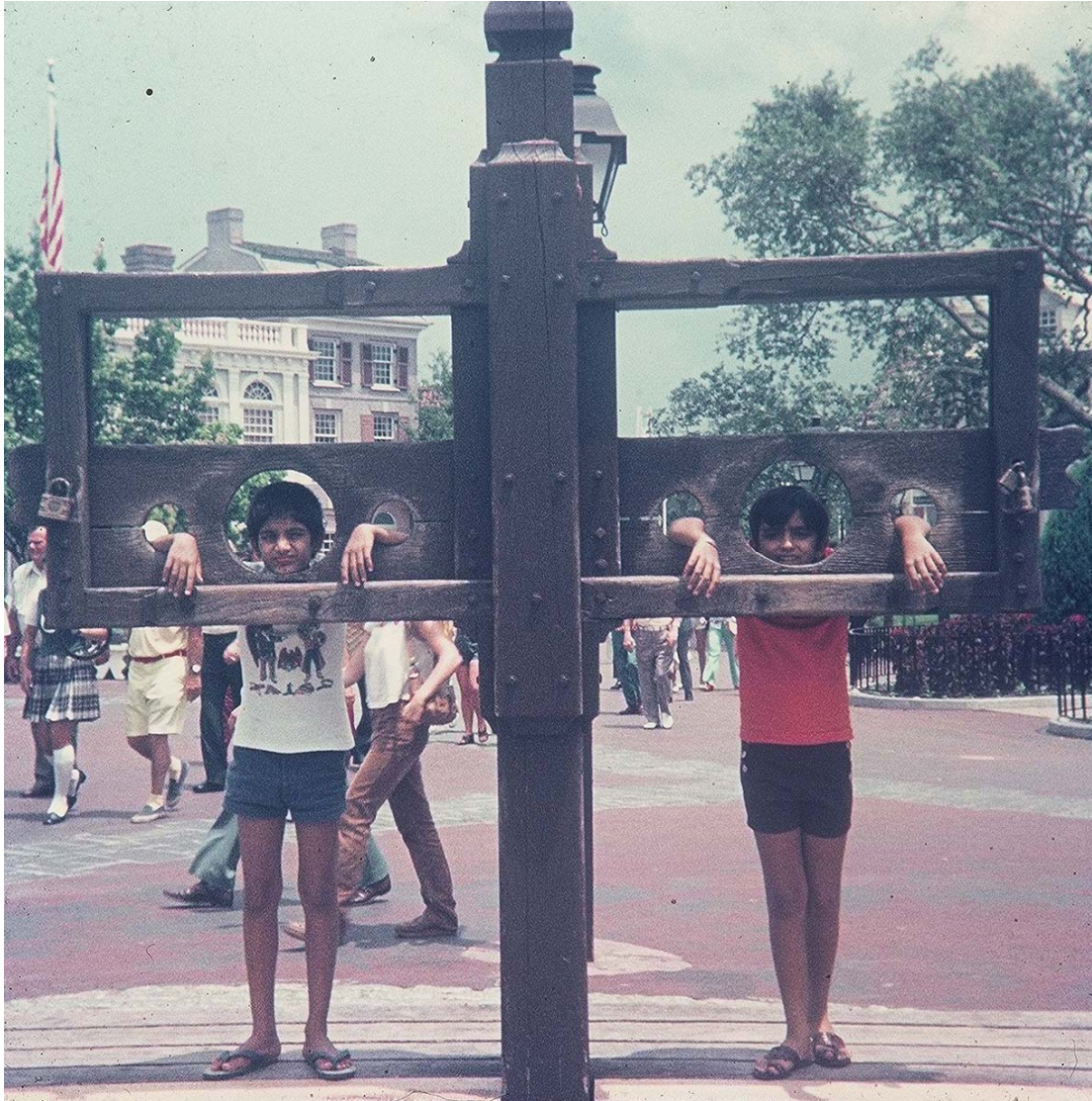


My cousins Naresh and Rajan. Who came from Calcutta to live with my parents, Irish grandfather, and me in 1977. The picture was taken in the backyard of the house my mother grew up in, in Hicksville, Long Island, on July 4th.

What do you see? Two Americans? Two terrorists?

I see my cousins with water guns. I see my cousins playing American gangster. They are mimicking what they have seen in the American movies that came to Calcutta.

On July 5th, we went to Williamsburg. My father made my cousins stand in the stockades so he could take their picture.



What do you see? Two terrorists? Caught? Apprehended? In Colonial Williamsburg?

These are my aunts. In Times Square. Visiting from Kolkata. 2005.



This is my father and my uncle in 1967.



Today, I write from Kentucky. I am alone.

I have bought a plant so I will have something to care for. A Guzmania. It

cost six dollars. Maroon, spiky bloom. Waxy petals. The bloom is hunkered down in the center of leaves that arc and droop over the sides of the terra cotta pot. On the plastic card (stuck into the soil) it says Guzmania must have water between its leaves at all times. It pools there, the water, between the leaves. Like the webbing between fingers. I move it back and forth from the windowsill to the table. I chase bands of sunlight.

Yesterday, I bought the makings for pickled beets and onions. Something I do in the spring and summer with my father--pickle vegetables. The Mason Jars look scientific, mouth-watering, on top of the fridge. It will be hard to wait three days for the beets to fully pickle. I am craving salt and vinegar. The crunch of blanched vegetables.

I pickle two jars of beets and onions. The way my aunts and grandmother and father pickle. I always feel emotional when pickling. For the first jar, I am full of joy, thinking of my family. For the second one, I grieve. For my family.

I spoon in the salt, peppercorns, thinly sliced raw onion. I mark the two jars: Grief and Joy.

Once I can eat the beets, I will see if they taste different or the same.

My fingers are stained with the blood of beets. I see that I have not yet typed a “q” or “x.”

Now I have. Now all the keys on my keyboard are violet.

I set the jars of pickled beets on the windowsill in the kitchen. Next to Guzmania. The light falls across them. The maroon bloom, the same color as the jarred beets. The white paint of the windowframe and sill. The pale, afternoon light.

The sunny cold of early Spring, blowing across the jars.

Red Meets Purple

When in pain
my mother
pushes her hands
into dirt.

I will trim these beets
into bloody stumps
boil them alive
slice
neatly
with an unserrated knife.

Under cold
running water,
I will prod skin from beet
and preserve
in vinegar and peppercorn,
in dill,
the hope of future tense.

In the hot smooth curve of a boiled beet

red meets purple.

Beets are hard. They take 55 minutes to cook. Once pickled, they last 28 days.

One must nurse a jar of pickled beets. Upend it in the sun. Watch the slosh of violet.

A slow mulling.

This is a contemplative desire.

I pickle beets

as my father taught me

taking time

to tip them

and think.

How wanton the blood of a beet.

The countertop is royal murder.





I am vegetarian. The bells from St. Francis church on Bardstown Road toll the noon hour and I think of my mother. Feel the backs of my half Irish-Catholic knees against a wood pew. I have boiled the beets. Babied them in my one small pot. Submersed them and moved them around with a wooden spoon. Once boiled, I sliced them. The rings of a sliced beet--like small trees. I held one, uncut, in each hand. Like young violet breasts. They are ready when they slide off the knife. I have saved the juice, from the pot, smelling of steel and dirt, for vegetable stock. I have saved the greens to sauté with butter and salt. The blood of the sliced beets, all over my hands. I am Lady MacBeth. The beet has an indomitable identity. An identity of color. It stays with you. Even if you eat only two or three slices of beet, you will see its blood in your stool. It is the most resilient of vegetables. Through

stomach acid and bile, feces, and blood, it retains itself. I always think, "This is it, I am done for, I am bleeding to death from the inside," when I look into the watery depths of the toilet.

But it is just the beet stating itself.

My father is in Kolkata now, in my aunt and uncle's apartment. My cousin Avi is getting married today. And yesterday was Priti's (his fiancée's) mehndhi and sangeet. My uncle sent me an e-mail that said: "Daddy is here safe and eating a lot."

That is what my father does in Kolkata. He eats. He eats his past. Relives it, bite by bite. My Aunt Renu's gajar ka pani (which she makes specially for him); he will spoon into his mouth. Crunch down on a papad. And say, Perfect. My Aunt Uma's and Aunt Dolly's stuffed parathas (which they make specially for him), my Aunt Chitra's tea and Sindhi kadi and fried potatoes, my Aunt Gagi's loli which her friend Lily makes, now, just the way Gagi did. And so on. An endless stream of women bearing food. The tastes of my father's past. His Sindhi will return, prodigal, to his tongue. It will be sweet, mellifluous. Lily will cover her head when the muezzin cries.

It is strange that, here, in Kentucky, I am homesick for India instead of New York. My homesickness always wanders. My homesickness is immigrant.

Through the window, I see the mother and child who live next door. They are barbequing. It smells like new flowers and charred meat.

This is true: the grieving beets tasted saltier than the joyful ones.

I am alone. My country hangs, framed, above the gas stove. A photograph of my parents. I look at it through the glasses my father wears in the photograph. I look

at it, feeling the white hairs on my head, increasing every day, like the white streak in my mother's dark hair, in the photograph.

The World

Dusk, Parvati says to Siva. Today, you are the color of dusk. Above his cheeks, his eyes rise, orange, two flaming, identical moons.

Here is Narada, as always, his bun crooked atop his head. I bring the perfect mango, he calls, and leans on his staff, waiting for the sons of Shiva and Parvati to come to him.

Ganesh, eating a laddoo, and Skanda, buffing his golden arrows, run to the sage. He holds the fruit just above the brothers' heads, and swats Ganesh's trunk out the way as it curls up, stealthily. Nah, Narada says, and tilts his head, wags his finger. You must work for this. Whomever is first to circle the world--thrice--shall win the right to eat this mango.

Skanda races to his peacock who is sleeping in the shade of a peepul tree, her head tucked under a wing. The base of her neck, blue-gold. When Skanda climbs onto her back, she screams and tries to shake him off. He kicks her sides and she runs, her talons scratching three-pronged, trident shapes into the rock. As she soars off the edge of Mt. Kailasa, she folds her legs neatly beneath her. Her wings beat up, and the hollow sound makes Skanda think of time; her wings swoop down, and he thinks of death. The eyes on her feathers wink and shimmer. Opening her black beak, she spits.

As they wheel west, Skanda looks back and sees Ganesh sitting cross-legged, still eating laddoos and rubbing his distended stomach. In farewell, he lifts the tip of

his trunk; Skanda raises his arms so his bracelets flash a greeting. Under the peepul tree, in the peacock's spot, Narada lounges on his back.

I will win, Skanda thinks, and spurs the bird on with his heels. She turns and nips at him but her beak bounces off his anklet. Ganesh is too lazy to go on foot and Nandi has been lame for weeks, Skanda says to her, rubs her thin neck. She shakes her head, dives down suddenly, trying to unseat the boy. He can almost taste the prize mango, sweet and chalky in his mouth. Be nice, he says to his bird and laughs when she turns and hisses. A flock of swallows fly in front of them and the peacock divides them. She arches her neck prettily. Time and death, time and death, her wings beat, and already they have passed over two continents and one ocean: twice.

At the end of the third lap, in sight of Mt. Kailasa, Skanda points the peacock's black beak towards Sage Narada. He waves wildly to his parents, who sit side by side on one of Shiva's old leopard skins.

Slowly, slowly, the boy says to the peacock. She cups her wings, extends her legs.

Skanda looks to Ganesh. He wants to see defeat on his brother's face. He watches as Ganesh licks clean the tips of his fingers, pushes aside his plate of ladoos. He watches as Ganesh stands and, in front of his trunk, places his palms together, then walks in a small circle, thrice, around his seated parents.

Such a clever boy, Parvati thinks, he has always been my favorite.

The peacock touches down on the ground and Skanda vaults from her back, runs to Narada. "Give me the mango!" he shouts.

Nah, Narada says and tosses the fruit to Ganesh. Your brother circled the

world, his world, thrice before you even landed. He has won.

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- ³⁰ In November 2004, I went to the Boston Museum of Science, in Boston, Massachusetts, with Robin Lippincott. This essay is based on my observations and thoughts that stemmed from my time spent in the permanent exhibit: "Natural Mysteries." Each plaque is directly quoted from the exhibit.
- ³¹ "Encyclopedia/X," NationMaster 2005 <<http://www.nationmaster.com/encyclopedia/X>>
- ³² Ibid.
- ³³ This fact taken from a plaque in the permanent exhibit at Ellis Island, New York. I went there January 2005 with Silas House and Paul Hiers.
- ³⁴ Anne Carson, Eros: The Bittersweet (Princeton: Dalkey Press, 1998) 26.
- ³⁵ "Encyclopedia/X," NationMaster 2005 <<http://www.nationmaster.com/encyclopedia/X>>
- ³⁶ John Kouwenhoven, "American Studies: Words or Things?," American Studies in Transition, ed. Marshall W. Fishwick (Boston, 1964) 18.
- ³⁷ Kouwenhoven 17.
- ³⁸ Kouwenhoven 17.
- ³⁹ Kouwenhoven 18-19.
- ⁴⁰ Kouwenhoven 19.
- ⁴¹ Alexander Bryan Johnson, The Meaning of Words, Analysed into Words and Unverbal Things, and Unverbal Things Classified Into Intellections, Sensations, And Emotions With A New Introduction by Stillman Drake (New York: Greenwood Press, 1969) 37.
- ⁴² Johnson 37-38.
- ⁴³ Foucault 117.
- ⁴⁴ Foucault 17.
- ⁴⁵ Rebecca Solnit, A Book of Migrations (London: Verso, 1997) 25.
- ⁴⁶ Kadar 222.
- ⁴⁷ Foucault 156-157.
- ⁴⁸ Anne Carson, Economy of the Unlost (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999) 102.
- ⁴⁹ James A Boon, Verging on Extra-vagance: Anthropology, History, Religion, Literature, Arts....Showbiz (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999) 125.
- ⁵⁰ N. Scott Momaday, The Man Made of Words (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997) 146.
- ⁵¹ James Clifford, The Predicament of Culture (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1988) 222.
- ⁵² "Early Studies of Color," Causes of Color, ed. Michael Douma, March 2003 <<http://webexhibits.org/causesofcolor/1B.html>>
- ⁵³ Ibid.
- ⁵⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵⁵ Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Colors: The Story of Dyes and Pigments (New York: Gallimard, 1999) 151.
- ⁵⁶ Johannes Fabian, Anthropology With An Attitude (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2001) 53.
- ⁵⁷ Steinberg, Michael and Root, Robert, Jr., The Fourth Genre: Contemporary Writers of/on Creative Nonfiction (New York: Longman 2001).
- ⁵⁸ James Olney, Memory and Narrative: The Weave of Life-Writing (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1998).
- ⁵⁹ From the exhibit "Albert Einstein," at the Boston Museum of Science, November 2004.
- ⁶⁰ Frank Kermode, The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction (London: Oxford University Press, 1968) 141.
- ⁶¹ Adam Hochschild, "Over There," Granta 84. (Winter 2003): 36.

Chapter IV: Words, Words, Words⁶²

Act II, scene 2 of Shakespeare's Hamlet. The prince enters stage left reading a book. Polonius asks of him, "What do you read, my lord?" and Hamlet replies: "Words, words, words."⁶³ I came to the idea for this lecture at a time when I was sick of words. I could not make them do a thing I wanted. I wished to be a painter or musician. I wished for a wordless medium. In the writer's art, words are our paint, our clay, our chords. But when we are *not* practicing the art of writing, we are still using words--to scream at each other, to promise, lie, compliment; words come at us from the t.v., from menus, billboards, tax returns, Spalding lectures; they are present in the most unique literary achievement and the most mundane transfer of information. So: as a writer, *how to keep words fresh?* A good place to start, I think, is to consider their origins. In this lecture, we'll wander around the topic of words, beginning with their histories. We'll look at nouns, verbs, adjectives, pronouns, rhetoric, and will end with two presentations, one aural, one visual.

Let's first break down words into their component parts: letters. The written letter is *sound translated into graphic symbol*. A (say) is A (draw). Letters and the learning of them are *especially* important to writers. In her autobiography, Eudora Welty wrote, and this is number 1 on your handout: "My love for the alphabet, which endures, grew out of reciting it but, before that, out of seeing the letters on the page. In my own story books, before I could read them for myself, I fell in love with various winding, enchanted-looking initials drawn...at the heads of fairy tales."⁶⁴ Poet Anne Carson says, #2 on handout, "Think how much energy, time and emotion goes into [the] effort of learning [to write]: it absorbs years of your life and dominates

your self-esteem; it informs much of your subsequent endeavor to grasp and communicate with the world. Think of the beauty of letters, and of how it feels to come to know them."⁶⁵ Learning a language is a transformative experience; it changes you deeply, like fear or being in love. In her book, Eros, the Bittersweet, Anne Carson explains how, in the early 8th century, the Greeks modified the Phoenician sign-system, introduced vowels, and thus invented the Greek alphabet, which is the root of the modern English alphabet. Imagine the 8th century Greeks and their *new* alphabet, the powerful change wrought by the act of an entire culture--adults, children, all at once--learning the alphabet for the first time. There are several scenes from ancient Greek tragedy where letters and the act of learning them are dramatized. Here's a section of Euripede's play Theseus in which an illiterate man looks out to sea and spies a ship with writing on it. He "reads": 3 on handout

"I'm not skilled at letters but I will explain the shapes and clear symbols to you. There is a circle marked out as it were with a compass and it has a clear sign in the middle. The second one is first of all two strokes and then another one keeping them apart in the middle. The Third is curly like a lock of hair and the fourth is one line going straight up and three crosswise ones attached to it. The fifth is not easy to describe: there are two strikes which run together from separate points to one support. And the last one is like the third." The man spells out, or rather describes, the six Greek letters of the name THESEUS. It must have been a scene that proved dramatically effective; other Greek tragedians imitated it very closely. Sophokles is said to have staged a satyr-play in which an actor *danced* the letters of the alphabet, and the Athenian playwright Kallias produced a play known as "The Alphabetic

Revue" in which the 24 members of the chorus performed in pairs of vowel with consonant.⁶⁶

So this is the runic power of the written word. But it is not all pleasure. One can be cut on the edge of a word. As the Kiowa -American writer, N. Scott Momaday says: "Make no mistake, we are at risk in the presence of words."⁶⁷ The risk he speaks of is the risk of squandering words, of forgetting their holiness. He approaches this idea by way of the oral tradition, the *unwritten* word, the word, *spoken*. 4 on handout. "One who has...an oral tradition thinks of language in this way: my words exist at the level of my voice. If I do not speak with care, my words are wasted. If I do not listen with care, words are lost. If I do not remember carefully, the very purpose of words is frustrated...The storyteller, the man who takes it upon himself to speak, assumes the responsibility of speaking well, of making his words count." ⁶⁸

In addition to holiness, there is an aspect of *randomness* to words. The alphabet has been defined as "meaningless shapes arbitrarily linked to meaningless sounds."⁶⁹ I remember my first experience realizing the *weirdness* of words; I was playing a game with my cousin where we said the word, frog, over and over again until the word became meaningless, just a grouping of sound. I remember, too, when I discovered how flat words on a page can be as I *read*, for the first time, the words to a song I liked. In liner notes, written, the words were cliché, heartless. But sung with music, they had tone and nuance; they became powerful. Words on a *page* are lonely soldiers who must do all the work themselves. No backup singers, no inflection, no horns or violins.

But words *do* have essences. *Grim* calls up a sense of hardship, bleakness. *Jubilant* calls up feelings of celebration, joy. Words indicate emotion, tone, mood; they create *images* in the mind, and bear culture and history. Philosopher Michel Foucault says, 5 on your handout: "The language of a people gives us its vocabulary, and its vocabulary is a sufficiently faithful and authoritative record of all the knowledge of that people; simply by comparing the different states of a nation's vocabulary at different times, one could form an idea of its progress."⁷⁰ Words are not static; they are always changing. Look at a dictionary or encyclopedia from just *ten* years ago; the language *feels* antiquated. If you said "burn a CD" to someone *five* years ago, she might make a bonfire. There are languages within languages: American English is different from British English which is different from Jamaican English which is different from Louisville English which is different from Brooklyn English. English mates with Hindi to become Hinglish or Spanish to become Spanglish. No language is homogenous or *separate* from any other. To illustrate this, let's look at a sentence of *American* English and break it down *historically*, word by word, 6 on your handout:

I spilled chocolate gunk on my scarlet pajamas but it's okay.

i. Dated 1137. From Old English. Around 1250, *I* came to be written with a capital letter to avoid misreading handwritten manuscripts.

spilled - Old English, via Proto-Germanic. Before 1200, *spillen* meant "to waste;" before 1325, "to shed blood;" it was first recorded as pertaining to the spilling of *non-blood* liquid in 1848.

chocolate - Entered English via Spanish *mispronunciation* in 1604. Originally a

Nahualt, Aztec word: *xocolatl*, literally, bitter water.

gunk - 1949. American English. Alluding to *Gunk*, a trademark for a thick, sticky liquid soap patented in 1932.

on - Old English. From *an* which functioned like the present-day word *in*.

my - from *mi*. 1200. Old English.

scarlet - Entered English in 1250 via a French *mispronunciation*. Originally Farsi (language of Persia/Iran) *saqirlat*, a rich, red cloth.

pajamas - 1800. Entered English from the Hindi word *pajama* which is from the Farsi, *pae* (leg) *jamah* (clothing).

but - Old English. From *butun* which means unless, without. First recorded as an adverb and preposition in Beowulf circa 725.

it's - (it is) From Old Saxon. Of Dutch and Gothic origins before 725. ⁷¹

O.K./okay - Perhaps the most commonly used African word in the English language (and probably the word used in more countries than any other). Clues to its African roots are found in the 19th-century black-spoken English of Jamaica and Surinam, as well as the Gullah speech of South Carolina. *o ke*, "that's it" or "all right" in Mande language, and *waw kay*, which means "all correct," in Wolof culture. The use of the expression "O.K." is first recorded in the speech of black Americans around 1776, but it was probably used much earlier in the 1700s. It became widely popular in the U.S. in the 1830's. ⁷²

I spilled chocolate gunk on my scarlet pajamas but it's o.k. There are effects of time and history at work in every word and sentence we write. All language evolves "in accordance with the effects of migrations, victories and defeats, fashions

and commerce."⁷³ Words are like people. They bear pasts that shape and form them.

Now let's talk a bit about the basics of words, and how they function. We'll touch briefly on nouns, adjectives, verbs, and pronouns.

There's nothing like watching a human being *acquire* language to bring back the basics of words. My friend Allyson's 2-yr old son Jeffrey currently speaks in lingual binaries: everything is either bad or good; dirty or clean. He has trouble with pronouns and instead uses proper nouns: Mommy, Daddy, Jeffy and he's terrible with tenses. Everything to him is in the present tense, the tense of need. Recently, I was babysitting Jeffrey. He took a nap and woke up crying. I asked him if he had had a nightmare and he nodded. He pointed outside the window and said "bird talk." I asked were the birds talking and he said yes. He said there were also cows outside his window talking "cow talk." What did they say, I asked. Cows say moo, birds say tweet, he said. He said Jeffy no talk bird cow talk. He was *very* upset by his inability to speak bird cow talk; he also seemed troubled by the idea of languages outside of the one *he* was just coming to know. He said: Bird talk hurt Jeffy. Later in the day, I overheard him whispering to Charley, his rocking horse: "Cows say moo," as if trying to warn the horse so it would not have linguistic nightmares. Jeffrey saying *cow* is an improvement as he used to call *all* four-legged creatures "*dog*" recognizing what dogs and cows and horses have in common (four legs) and *grouping* them together.

And now we come to an essential feature of words. This is number 7 on your handout. *Grouping* and generalization. According to the 19th century linguist Alexander Johnson, the radical limitation of words, their *defect*, is that they are *general terms* or names referring to things that are *individual* and particular. For

example, although no two blades of grass are alike, the word *grass* suggests an identity. The suggestion of identity, which is inherent in language, encourages us to *disregard* the different looks, feels, tastes, and smells of individual blades of grass. Language *encourages* generalization. One result of this is that two people can be in verbal agreement without *meaning* the same thing. As Johnson wrote: "The anger of Thomas and the anger of James are only identical in word." Of course, the generalizing characteristic of language is also its greatest *value*. It is what makes communication possible. A language of particulars, specific to every person and thing, would be incomprehensible, a virtual Babel. We need generalities to understand each other. *But*, as a writer, we want to do our best to rise *above* the generality of words. We want to make our words specific, to mark them as our own.

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Description is one way writers achieve particularity in language. For example, to give grass individuality, one could describe it with adjectives: thick, dry, green, short grass. Or: spiky, wet, long, brown grass. But there is a risk with adjectives, of piling on too many, of getting cluttered. And so there is another route to individuality in language, one that relies on reader autonomy. Consider this minimal sentence of Raymond Carver's, number 8 on handout: "He saw a young woman with her hair pinned up, wearing a sweater and standing with her bicycle as she watched the cars whip past."⁷⁵ Nothing is actually described in detail; we are offered a silhouette and can fill it in according to our imagination. When I read this sentence, I picture a dark-skinned girl in a red sweater with her hair in a bun standing next to a yellow ten-speed bike. Carver's sentence is filled with space and quiet, offering no explicit color or detail. An interesting insight into the process of

minimalism is Hemingway's theory of omission, 9 on your handout, which he likened to there being 7/8's of [an iceberg] under water for every part that shows.

Hemingway said "you could omit anything if you *knew* what you omitted and the omitted part would strengthen the story and make people feel something more than they understood."⁷⁶ In developing his spare style, Hemingway got rid of authorial "direction" by excising certain words such as modifiers and adjectives that instruct a reader how to feel, phrases like "never-ending," pejorative adjectives like "ghastly" and "horrible," and adjectival sequences like "exhausted, staggering; ripe, brown." Sometimes *removing* words is as important as including them.⁷⁷

Verbs. Like people, verbs are affected by time, marked with it. I ran, I run, I'm running. The verb is necessary, it is about survival: duck, hide, sleep, eat. Perhaps the most useful thing for a *writer* to remember about verbs is that they connote mood and emotion. I remember learning this lesson in highschool. My teacher started with a basic sentence, number 10 on yr handout: *Layla walked to the store*. We went around the class and each student offered a word in place of walked. We had Layla striding, skipping, dragging, clomping, meandering, sprinting, sashaying to the store. In addition to changing Layla's *action* with each new verb, we also changed her *mood and emotion*. There's a big difference, emotionally, between skipped and dragged. At their core, verbs have emotion and tone; they indicate so much more than action. An interesting aside, not all languages use nouns and verbs in the same way. For example, gender agreement in verbs is necessary in Hindi. And in Hupa (a native Oregon language), *active or passive verb forms in the third person* are used as *nouns*: nanya "it comes down" is the word for "rain". Nillin "it flows"

designates "creek."⁷⁸

Pronouns: The linguist Benevise says, number 11 on handout, "language is possible only b/c each speaker sets himself up as a subject by referring to himself as *I*...[which is] a...mobile sign...[and] can be assumed by any[one]. Anyone at all can slip under the cloak of *I* which, as a shifter, must take up with everyone who takes up with it." This shifting is the case with *all* pronouns.⁷⁹ As Beckett wrote in "The Unnamable," "Bah, any old pronoun will do provided one sees through it."⁸⁰ Thank goodness for the transparent aptitude of pronouns. It allows the fiction writer to don the mask of any "I," "you," "she," or "he." We fiction writers learn to use all pronouns as *filters*; a basic part of *fiction* is the act of speaking as someone other than yourself, of slipping convincingly into a pronoun. As a writer, I think it's important to fully *appreciate* the *transparency* of pronouns, to challenge yourself by trying to slip into as many as possible.

So let's talk about putting nouns, pronouns, verbs, and adjectives *together* in a sentence. This is number 12 on handout. What makes a grouping of words have meaning? Syntax, the ordering of words, rules of grammar, punctuation, subject-verb agreement, verb tenses and so on--all of which fall under the umbrella of "language standards." These language standards are as powerful and order-keeping as "red means stop, green means go." As Nietzsche said "I fear indeed that we shall never rid ourselves of God, since we still believe in grammar."⁸¹ To some, language standards are keepers of the gate against anarchy and unintelligibility. To others, language standards are a senseless formula contrived by members of the upper class to oppress members of the lower classes.⁸² We're trained to "speak properly" (whatever that

means) or we won't get the job, won't be considered educated or intelligent. Of course some language standards (like subject-verb) agreement are necessary for *comprehension*. But adhering over-strenuously to language standards, particularly as a *creative* writer, can sometimes constrict individual freedom, as in the case of squashing a home dialect and all it stands for. If Lee Smith had not allowed her character Ivy Rowe of the novel Fair and Tender Ladies to speak in her home dialect, the language of her Appalachian region, it would be a very different, *lesser* book and Ivy would be a much less powerful and individual presence. And how much lesser a book Ulysses would be w/out its transgressions of syntax, without its Dublinese; how barren the poems of e. e. cummings would be if *punctuated* and capitalized "properly." Writers, don't forget your artistic license. This is not to say you should quarrel with your mentors over grammatical errors. But if you have a reason for messing with language standards, if that reason furthers your story and the language of your character, *maybe* try breaking some rules. Part of being a writer, I think, is finding your own *individual* and *specific language*. I've always thought that "finding your voice" is actually about "finding your *language*." And in finding your language, look first towards what is natural to you. Don't rob yourself of your natural rhythms and quirks. As Ray Gwyn Smith says, 13 on handout: "Who is to say that robbing a people of its language is less violent than war?" Everyone has a language of their own, everyone sitting here *right now* speaks their own particular version of English.

So, what exactly happens to language when it is stripped of the subjective, when it does not come from a *specific* voice? To show the difference between language that comes from an "I," and language that is stripped of subjectivity, let's

look at two passages selected by the poet N. Scott Momaday, number 14 a and b on handout:

“By virtue of the authority vested in me by section 465 of the Revised Statutes (25 U.S.C. #9 [section 9 of this title]) and as President of the United States, the Secretary of Interior is hereby designated and empowered to exercise, without the approval, ratification, or other action of the President or of any other officer of the United States, any and all authority conferred upon the United States by section 403 (a) of the Act of April 11, 1968, 82 Stat. 79 (25 U.S.C. #1323 (a) [subsec. (a) of this section]): provided, That acceptance of retrocession of all of any measure of civil of criminal jurisdiction, of both, by the Secretary hereunder shall be effected by publication in the *Federal Register* of a notice which shall specify the jurisdiction retroceded and effective date of the retrocession: Provided further, That acceptance of such retrocession of criminal jurisdiction shall be effected only after consultation by the Secretary with the Attorney General. Executive Order No. 11435. (blah blah blah, it's one sentence)

I have heard that you intend to settle us on a reservation near the mountains. I don't want to settle. I love to roam over the prairies. There I feel free and happy, but when we settle down we grow pale and die. I have laid aside my lance, bow, and shield, and yet I feel safe in your presence. I have told the truth. I have no little lies hid about me, but I don't know how it is with the commissioners. Are they are clear as I am?

Satanta, Kiowa chief.⁸³

Satanta's example derives *its* power from direct, unadorned language; it comes from a

human subject of flesh and blood, from an "I." The *Executive Order* is couched in legal diction, a particular set of language standards one must be schooled in to speak and decipher. Its meaning is obscure; the power of the words comes from the *lack* of subjectivity, the *lack* of an "I." It's a whole office, a government, speaking. Not an individual. In some forms of writing, subjectivity is considered invalidating, like in science and academic and legal writing (just think of your critical thesis--you're warned off the "I" and subjectivity b/c it's traditionally considered to be *non-academic*. The subjective *supposedly* clouds reason, fact, "truth"--I personally do *not* believe this, but that's just me.) So with objectivity being, *supposedly*, on the side of reason, fact, and truth, any technique that uses a *lack* of emotion, a *lack* of an "I" *potentially* has persuasive power. We can see this at work in many different places. This is a sentence that was spoken, on T.V., by the police commissioner of NYC, 15 on handout: "the victim had buttressed the doors and access to all entryways was barred. " Now think of the language of a doctor: "the appendages of the patient exhibit edema." To give either the appearance of control as is the case in the police commissioner's language, or to give the appearance of clinical detachment as is the case in the language of physicians--each of these examples is divorced from an "I," from a "he" or "she." The words are masked, performing a function *other* than conveying meaning.

So, here is another risk of words--*rhetoric*. This is number 16 on handout. The risk of being misunderstood, of not stating what you mean *clearly*. Words are slippery little buggers that can mean almost anything depending upon who is reading and writing them. Everything you write and say has a particular *rhetoric* and makes

use of *rhetorical* devices whether you realize it or not. Rhetoric can be defined in many ways--as the words *under* words, as the art of persuasion, as the interdependence of language and meaning. There are thousands of rhetorical, literary devices such as: aphorisms, characterization, satire, metaphor; we writers employ a rhetorical device with *every* sentence we write. To better understand what is meant by this, let's look briefly at an author who carefully and overtly builds his rhetoric: Charles Dickens. This is 17 on handout. Dickens creates pathos in the reader through rhetoric manipulation. In his novel, The Old Curiosity Shop, he refers to his character, Nell, not with her name, but as "the child" which serves to remind the reader of her weak and innocent state. For every one mention of Nell as "Nell" there are four mentions of her as "the child." Throughout the novel, the adjectives "little" "poor," and "weary" are used more than 500 times in relation to Nell. These are adjectives Dickens liberally employs, along with the phrase "the child," to *work* on the reader, causing us to have a tender, emotional reaction to Nell. The words *under* the words are: pity this child; loathe the society that puts her in a powerless position. That is Dickens's *rhetoric* in The Old Curiosity Shop and so many of his other works. He gets this rhetoric across by carefully *choosing* his words, by *knowing what effect they will have*.

Okay we 've come to the strictly aural part of this lecture. Writer Grace Paley says we've forgotten how to listen and I think that's true, so I did not include a written version of the poem we're about to listen to; I thought we'd exercise our hearing and just follow the words with our ears. We'll hear the poem," The Ballad of Orange and Grape," being read by its author, Muriel Rukeyser. The poem is about words and

their meanings *not* matching up, it's about binaries, rhetoric, and how it works on us.

Transcribed from tape:

“The Ballad of Orange and Grape”

After you finish your word

after you do your day

after you've read your reading

after you've written your say—

you go down the street to the hot dog stand,

one block down and across the way.

On a blistering afternoon in East Harlem in the twentieth century.

Most of the windows are boarded up,

the rats run out of a sack—

sticking out of the crummy garage

one shiny long Cadillac;

at the glass door of the drug-addiction center,

a man who'd like to break your back.

But here's a brown woman with a little girl dressed in rose and pink, too.

Frankfurters frankfurters sizzle on the steel

where the hot-dog man leans—

nothing else on the counter,

but the usual two machines,

the grape one, empty, and the orange one empty,

I face him in between.

A black boy comes along, looks at the hot dogs, goes on walking.

I watch the man as he stands and pours

in the familiar shape

bright purple in the one marked ORANGE

orange in the one marked GRAPE,

the grape drink in the machine marked ORANGE

and orange drink in the GRAPE.

Just the one word large and clear, unmistakable, on each machine.

I ask him: How can we go on reading

and make sense out of what we read?—

How can they write and believe whwat they're writing,

the young ones across the street,

while you go on pouring grape into ORANGE

and orange into the one marked GRAPE--?

(How are we going to believe what we read and we write and we hear and we say and we do?)

He looks at the two machines and he smiles

And he shrugs and smiles and pours again.

It could be violence and nonviolence

It could be white and black woman and men
It could be war and peace or any
Binary system, love and hate, enemy, friend.
Yes and no, be and not-be, what we do and what we don't do.

On a corner in East Harlem
garbage, reading, a deep smile, rape,
forgetfulness, a hot street of murder,
misery, withered hope,
a man keeps pouring grape into ORANGE
and orange into the one marked GRAPE,
pouring orange into GRAPE and grape into ORANGE forever.⁸⁴

Onto the visual part of the lecture. On August 31st, I marched along with 250,000 others in a protest against the Republican National Convention being held in NYC. I took a bunch of digital photos of the event which I'll run for you momentarily--it's a four minute slide show. The photos are predominantly of *words*--the words on protestors signs. I was thinking about my lecture at the time of the march and so I was struck by the fact that the written word was the most forceful and part of the protest. People carrying homemade signs, people with words on their t-shirts, words written on their bald heads, on their underwear, on buildings. Words of protest or statement--all of them using different *rhetorical* devices: some ironic, lewd, punning, profane, statistical, some in the genre of report cards, some in the genre of

gravestones, some in Chinese, Spanish, Arabic. It was striking to me how *silent* the protest was. The *written* word was doing *most* of the speaking. And in order to get the message, you had to read. It was the act of reading made political. In the photographs I'm about to show you, notice how many mouths are closed. And in terms of rhetoric, look at the people bearing the written words. There's a sign that says: "In my 84 years I have never seen a worse president than G.W. Bush." The sign would have a lot *less* rhetorical meaning if it was held by an 18-yr-old. There's also a photograph of a young man holding a sign that reads LESS IS MORE; STAY PURE STAY POOR a statement that I find grotesque and the statement is rendered hypocritical since the young man has about 3,000 dollars worth of tattoo art on his arms. My point is that it matters *who* is doing the writing, *who* is bearing the words. *The writer* is an important part of context and meaning-making. Remember that depending upon who you are, your words take on different meaning. You are part of the context of your words. And I'm not talking about being p.c.; I'm talking about taking responsibility for words, what they mean, what *you* mean by them, and *how* they will be understood by others. So let's take a look at these photographs of words and the people bearing them. The pictures will no doubt have a different effect on each person sitting here. I think my political affiliation is clear because I was marching in this protest but I don't *necessarily* agree or disagree with all the opinions expressed. So, here goes:





















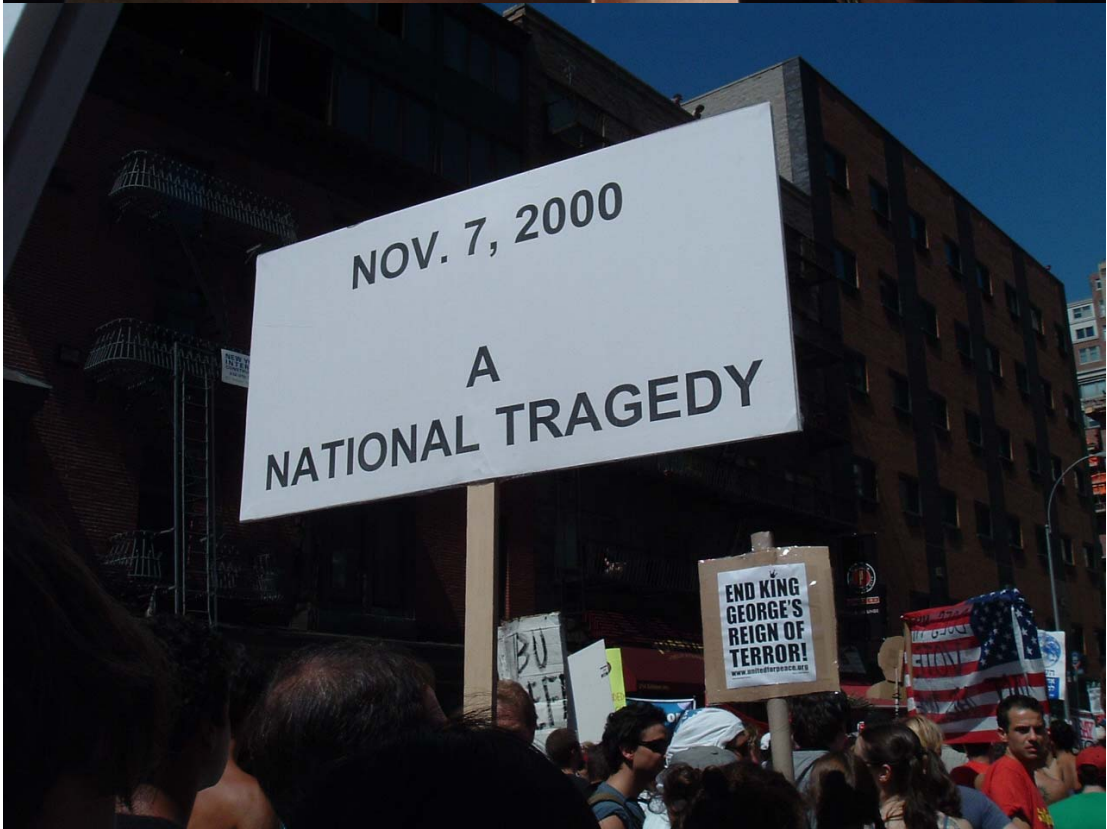












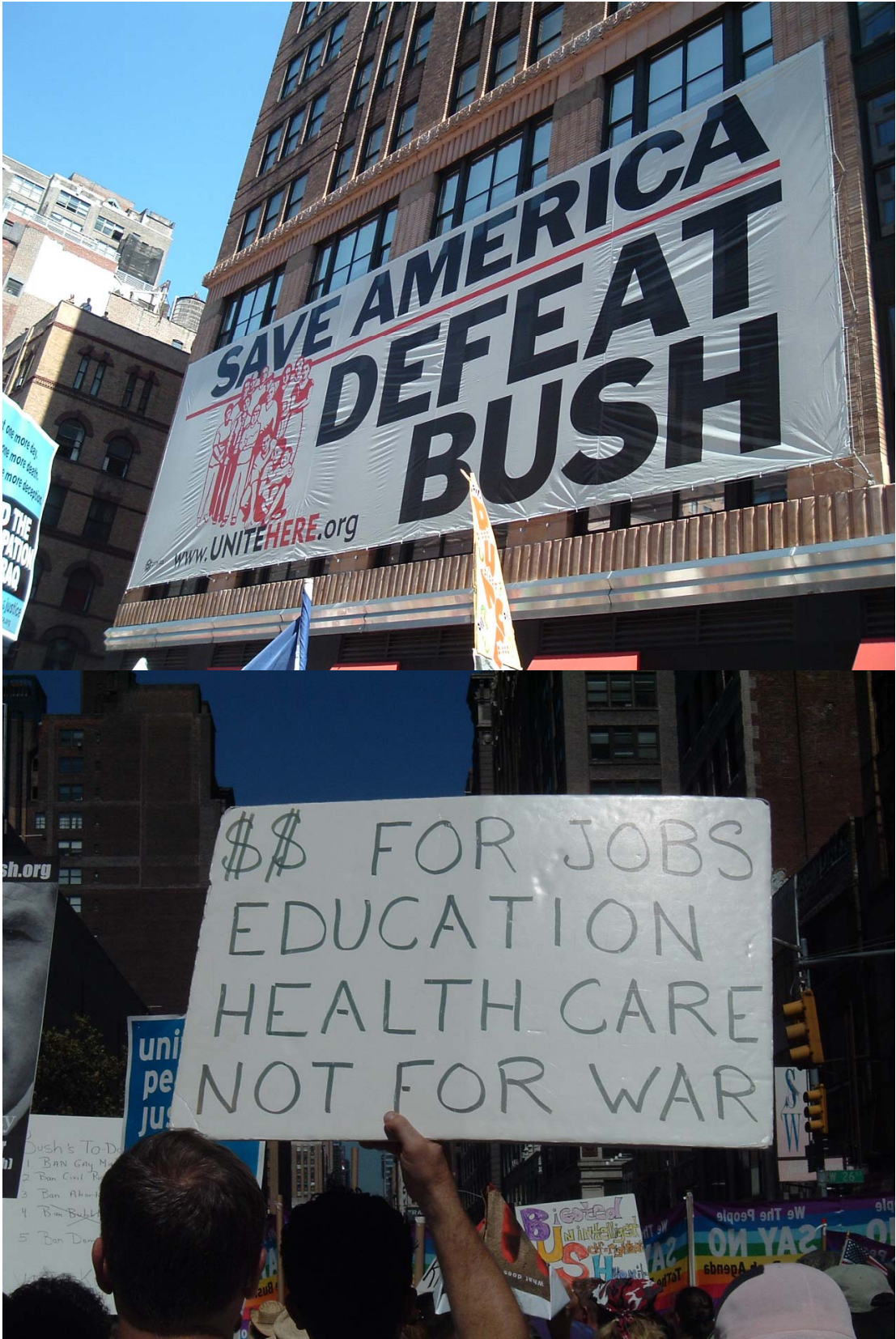




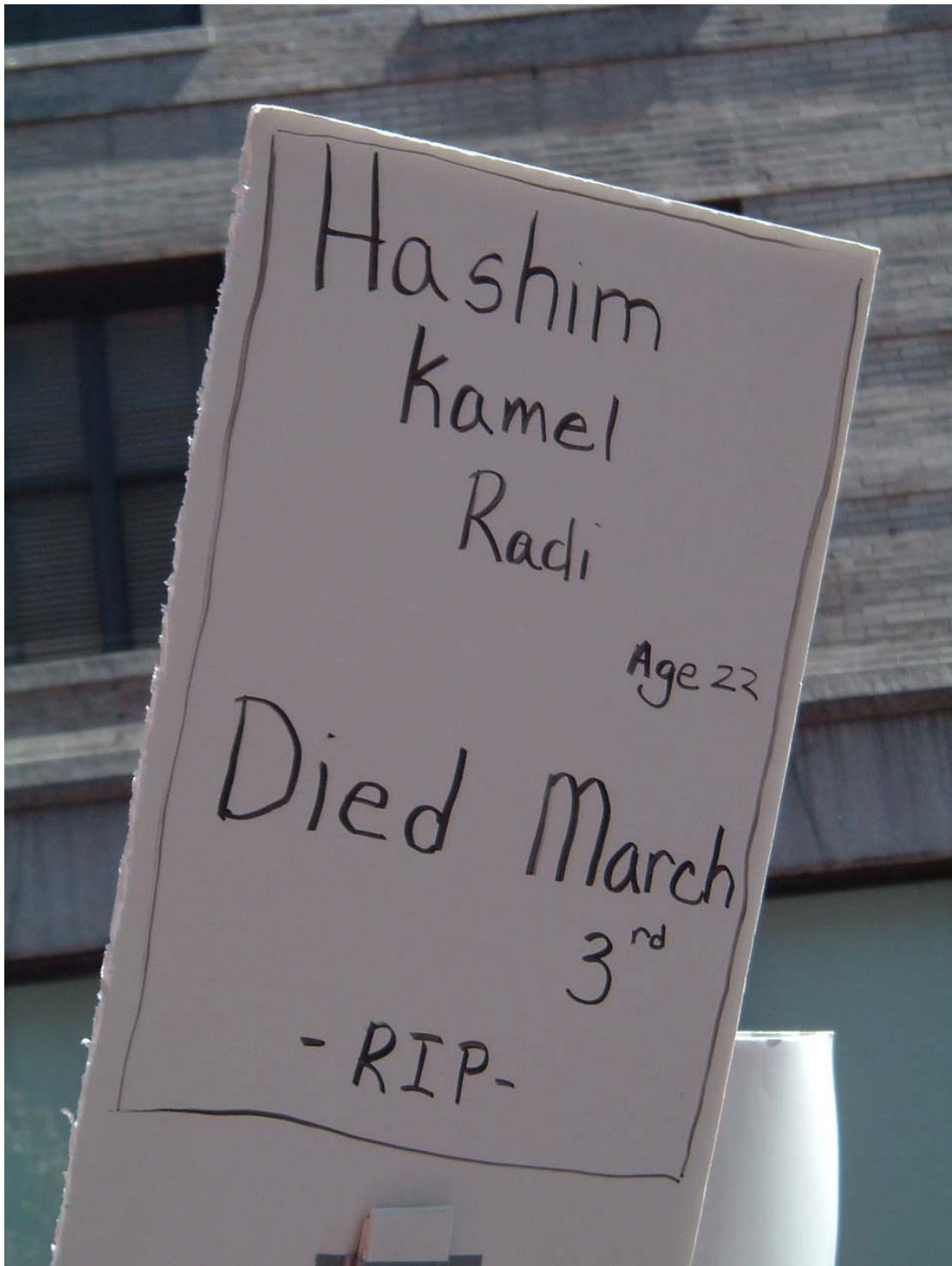




















































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- ⁶² A lecture first delivered at Spalding University, Louisville, Kentucky: November 5, 2004.
- ⁶³ William Shakespeare, "Hamlet," The Riverside Shakespeare, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1974) 1154-1155.
- ⁶⁴ Eudora Welty, One Writer's Beginnings (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1984) 9.
- ⁶⁵ Carson Eros 55.
- ⁶⁶ Caron Eros 57-58.
- ⁶⁷ Momaday Words 169.
- ⁶⁸ Momaday Words 15.
- ⁶⁹ S. Bett, "Alphabet Origins," Fortune City August 2004
<<http://victorian.fortunecity.com/vangogh/555/Spell/alfabet2.html>>
- ⁷⁰ Foucault 87.
- ⁷¹ All definitions from the following: Robert K Barnhart, Dictionary of Etymology (New York: Harper Collins) 1995.
- ⁷² Wikipedia Foundation Inc, "Okay" August 2004 <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Okay>>
- ⁷³ Foucault 90.
- ⁷⁴ Kouwenhoven 18.
- ⁷⁵ Raymond Carver, Cathedral (New York: Random House, 1989) 50.
- ⁷⁶ Phyllis Frus, The Politics and Poetics of Journalistic Narrative (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) 74.
- ⁷⁷ Frus 60.
- ⁷⁸ Emil Beneviste, Problems in General Linguistics (Coral Gables: University of Miami Press, 1971) 132.
- ⁷⁹ Beneviste 220.
- ⁸⁰ Olney 249.
- ⁸¹ Foucault 298.
- ⁸² Amy Devitt, "Genre as Language Standard," Genre and Writing: Issues, Argument, Alternatives, eds., Wendy Bishop and Hans Ostrom (Portsmouth, New Hampshire: Boynton/Cook Publishers, 1997) 49.
- ⁸³ Momaday 55-56.
- ⁸⁴ Muriel Rukeyser, "Ballad of Orange and Grape," The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry, eds., Richard Ellman and Robert O'Clair Robert, 2nd ed (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1988) 884-885.

Chapter V: Genre: What Falls Between the Cracks Besides Everything.

1.

It is the human condition to seek understanding. We do not exist comfortably in a world without definitions. We seek to own things, to know their names. We believe arranged shelves will make it easier to learn from our books.

When it comes to our writing, our critical thinking, our storytelling, and the pages where they interconnect, we push a grid of Genre on top of our work.

By its nature, genre is human, flawed, political, and motivated as much by power as by the simple desire (and necessity) to define. Genre is, in essence, oxymoronic: a silky-eared, sturdy, big-hearted mutt, yet in ideology, in rhetoric, it insists on the illusion of yapping, neurotic “purity.”

“While it is in the nature of genres to be mixed, to contain and be contained by other genres...it is the ideology of genre to deny such mixture or contamination.”⁸⁵

Genres are open to question. They are permeable, flexible. However, despite current scholarship and theory (such as New Criticism which fundamentally rejects, “any overly strong systemization and classification of literary works”)⁸⁶, institutionalized norms weigh heavily upon genre and keep its core ideology normative and prescriptive.

What genre is and what it appears to be is contentious.

The ideology of genre “purity” is historical--a past of decree and ordinance, a history of dogma, regulated more by critics than by writers themselves (I use the word “writer” here to mean creative writer of fiction, poetry, nonfiction; although critics and academics are also writers they do not generally identify as such singularly). Take for example, the traditional notion of poetry as detailed by Joseph P. Strelka in his book *Theories of Literary Genre*:

“[it can be] reduced to several rigorous principles and codes broadly mapped out by the rhetoricists and the grammarians of the Alexandrine epoch, reaching full maturity in the Renaissance and strictly delimited by the whole of Neo-Classical Europe. The great admiration for Classical works and principles turns into norms and constraints, the view that poets “have to” observe and cultivate the following principles, logically derived from one another: 1. Each genre has its own laws, ideals, beauty (Boilau, *L'Art Poétique*, II, v. 139), and mixing must be prohibited. (Horace, *Ars Poetica*, v. 89-92). 2. The rigorous separation of the genres obliges each poet to keep within the strict limits of the genre adopted. 3. Thus each genre maintains its unadulterated “purity” its “unity” of tone. The genres are *Bien Tranches* or they do not exist at all. 4. Conformity with the internal and formal norms of each genre leads to the achievement of the work. The fact is not possible without compliance with the precepts of criticism. 5. There is a hierarchy of genres (including higher and lower genres, “great” and “petty”) essential for the scale of values in literature.”⁸⁷

These principles no longer remain “true” (if, in fact they were ever “true” in the practice of writers). In actuality, there are no pure genres (since the notion of “purity” itself is a problematic myth). There are, instead, intermingled forms, conjugal categories. Rene Welleck says:

"In the practice of almost all writers of our time genre distinctions matter little: boundaries are being constantly transgressed, genres combined or fused, old genres discarded or transformed, new genres created, to such an extent that the very concept has been called in doubt."⁸⁸

Genres are born of other genres. A new genre is merely the transformation of an earlier one. A work relates to its genre(s) either through negotiation, resistance, violation, or conformity. The process of a work “fitting into” a genre (or, more accurately, genres) is dynamic, not static or singular. It is impossible to map the borders of genres--to know where one ends and another begins. The edges overlap.

Yet, the very language used to describe genre is geopolitical. “Turf,” boundaries,” “territory,” “borders.” Places that are policed, monitored, controlled. One requires citizenship, permission, to cross from one territory into another. One is questioned before crossing a border, and if not of the country being entered, one is alien.⁸⁹

It seems that genre, because of its antithetical nature, is most accurately described in the language of contradiction, or the language of metaphor. Wendell Berry has described genres as “both enablement and constraint”⁹⁰

Kadar says:

“Like water, genres assume the shape of the vessel that contains them. Like

water, genres tend to exhibit certain properties. But if you empty the containing vessels, the better to see what's inside, you are bound to be tricked. Like water, the shape of genres does not really exist, and their essence can never really be captured.”⁹¹

The word “genre” comes from the Greek, “genus,” meaning “kind” or “sort.”⁹² When a text is categorized, it is included in a grouping of other texts. The nature of categorization is a yearning towards the illusory singular. Towards inclusion within one category. The identity of a text is defined as much by what categories a text *does not* belong to as by the categories it does belong to. Inclusion creates exclusion. Traditionally speaking, to be a novel is to *not* be an ethnography, *not* a poem, *not* an essay. A text cannot be truly understood unless it is held up against something different from itself. Compared, contrasted. To know that a short story is a short story and an ethnography an ethnography is to hold the two against each other. Only then can their individual properties be comprehended. And within the borders of any genre, there is wide variation. The Sun Also Rises (a linear, Realistic “traditional” novel) and An Autobiography of Red (a nonlinear, fantastic, novel in verse) are both *novels*.

There is a purpose to genre. “Normalization” and unification create order, identity, meaning. It is when these identities and meanings become rigidly fixed that genre becomes dictatorial, stifling. But to banish genre altogether would create chaos for writers, readers, academics, critics, and the publishing industry, alike.

So where, then, is the happy medium, the common ground, which supports genre categorization while allowing for a natural blurring of boundaries? Does such a

place exist?

2.

The good health of a genre relies upon a dance between conformity and innovation. There is the text that typifies its genre, and the text that is an exception to its genre. Both are necessary. Blanchot says:

"If it is true that Joyce shatters the novelistic form by making it aberrant, he also hints that that form perhaps lives only through its alterations...It is thus as if, in novelistic literature, and perhaps in all literature, we could never recognize the rule except by the exception that abolishes the rule." ⁹³

Genre acts as a map, a structural guide and architectural plan for both writer and reader. Yet, in order for a genre to thrive, it must deviate, it must mutate and transgress its own boundaries. This transmogrification is actually what keeps a genre immortal--not maintaining its "purity." The "aberrant" text therefore infuses life and identity into the very genre it "deviates" from.

Despite the seeming symbiosis between the "pure" and the "aberrant," the "experimental" text still bears a whiff of illegitimacy, regardless of which genres the "experimental" text straddles (be they considered (or marketed as) largely ethnography, fiction, memoir, autobiography, history). Just the word "experimental" implies something unfinished, aborted, smoking in a test tube held by a wild-eyed (white?) man with straight-standing white hair. The value of the blurred genre work (such as Amitava Kumar's book of literary criticism Bombay London New York, which combines personal essay, memoir, literary criticism, poetry, translation,

cultural studies theory, and photography; Maxine Hong Kingston's The Fifth Book of Peace which combines memoir, fiction (an unfinished novel), ethnography, and a pedagogical writing workshop; Michael Ondaatje's Coming Through Slaughter which combines biography, history, jazz, photographs, fiction, and poetry (in an interview at Spalding University, Ondaatje called Slaughter his "most autobiographical book--including my book of poetry and my memoir; and yet it is marketed as a novel"); Anne Carson's Glass, Irony, and God which combines poetry, Greek translation, literary criticism, Women's Studies theory, personal essay, and research essay) lies in the *existence* of such texts and their successful blurring. They enact, embody, and inhabit the mixed nature of genre by employing varying methodologies and embodying different forms--simultaneously. They move fluidly across genre in the space of one text, one chapter, one section, one paragraph. They break the rules of genre and create new forms of recombination and collage. None of these books is widely sold, read, or appreciated in terms of a mass audience. Perhaps it is a question of changing how these texts are named? Perhaps the word "experimental" should be expunged from descriptions of literature? The value of such works is unquestionable; however, they are relegated to the margins to such an extent so as to be ignored or read mostly by specialists.

3.

Why is the experimental text regarded with suspicion? Debra Journet suggests one reason (in terms of academia):

“The established academic genres carry with them a set of conventions that are frequently perceived as being *inherently* more "objective" "impartial" or "accurate" and these perceptions can be difficult to resist. It is therefore not uncommon for innovative rhetorics to be characterized as less than "rigorous"... Finally, critiquing genre traditions is, as Berkenkotter (1993) has recently argued, a politically difficult business, at least for those who are not influential senior scholars.”⁹⁴

Categorization is an emotional topic. Always political, it carries with it implications of power, hierarchy, and privilege. And so, by its categorical nature, genre is influenced by implications of power, hierarchy, and privilege in the worlds of academia, critics, publishers, readers, writers. Genre is affected by the power of a group (or mob), the power of the established, the inherent strength or capacity or benefit or cruelty or homogeneity of a conglomerate.

Who controls genre and its institutionalization? Academics? Publishers? Writers? What are the risks of rocking the genre boat? To be “experimental,” to create a work of blurred genre, is to take a risk. The risk of difference, aloneness--unprotected, strange, and “othered.” The taboo of breaking genre is strong:

“The...nature of genres...constrains the writer...That constraint is powerful, more powerful perhaps than the trivialized notion of etiquette can capture. Depending on the society, the need to belong to a group--or the power of membering in a particular group--may be so strong that individuals choose to violate such etiquette only at great risk to their well-being.”⁹⁵

4.

However, it would be foolish to suggest that *all* texts need to be cross-genre, or that genre itself is something to be abolished. Genres are good for academia. They allow groups of scholars with common interests and goals to speak to each other, to work towards new epistemology. There is a shared vocabulary that goes along with each genre, shared methodologies, theories, assumptions, concerns, and histories. I believe all this to be necessary and good. But, we must also take care to acknowledge the “normalizing” or “...universalizing tendency of genres.”⁹⁶

The weight of time, the power of the established, of habit, and the inherent resistance to change that power and control create in those in power--this is what the multi-genre text resists:

“Those who go on to graduate school have been shaped by the genres that essentially reproduce the kinds of academic professionals, and the kinds of academic communities, that have existed for the last thirty or forty years... The problem is that having African-Americanist academics producing the same kinds of papers and articles does not alter our academic or professional communities in any fundamental way. In fact, it constitutes a failure of the academic community to acknowledge that new fields of knowledge require new forms of representation, thus new genres. Without a revision of the genres that allow us to give a meaning and context to the material we study, we risk denying the differences in the experiences articulated by new material. What we get instead is a normalization of experience and leveling of differences that preserves the identity of the academic or professional

community...”⁹⁷

5.

The work of blurred genre slashes at what has been normalized. It questions through its very structure. Academically speaking, perhaps the most destabilizing effect of blurred genre has come from the mixing of the “subjective” and “objective.” The introduction of the “I,” creates a text that is both autobiography and research, and thus changes notions of what is “true,” and “false,” what is considered “literary,” and what is considered “scholarship.” Many educators encourage students to write in the more subjective genres such as journals, personal essays, response papers. Still, there remains the question of academic rigor and legitimacy, of meeting and upholding institutionalized standards.

With the introduction of subjectivity, the more “stable” (or traditionally considered “stable”) genres such as history, ethnography, sociology, and so on, become less stable in the way of novels: “Bakhtin describes the novel...as volatile by definition. Obituaries, by contrast are exceedingly stable.”⁹⁸ The “I” makes everything more complex and volatile. An obituary that let in the “I” would indeed be a volatile text. Imagine: “I never liked the bastard.” Or: “I can’t live without him.” The “I” becomes particularly complicated when it inhabits mixed-genre works of fiction and autobiography. As in the case of W.G. Sebald’s work, Jamaica Kincaid, Dorothy Allison, Margaret Atwood, Umberto Eco, and so on.

“What reason do we have to identify autobiographical elements as distinguished from fictional ones? I think we suspect that autobiography reads differently from fiction. Before we open the cover, for example, we find

ourselves wanting to know whether a book is fiction or nonfiction. To be sure, when we say that a work is autobiographical we suggest that it has a claim to truth. That is why, as Alice Munro attests, those who classify a work as autobiographical go on to comment on its validity and its author's 'good faith' or 'honesty'.⁹⁹

6.

In spite of ourselves, then, we readers check to see where a book is shelved; we read the dust jacket; we watch for markers within the text.

In the case of Margaret Atwood and her autobiography-fictional novel, Cat's Eye:

"Doug Glover writes in his review...Atwood is playing 'hide and seek at the place where autobiography and fiction meet, always ensuring there is a back door open for quick escapes" (11). More important than our trying to define Cat's Eye in relation to these two terms fiction and autobiography is our exploring the implications of Atwood's challenging us to try...Atwood has always forced us to explore our assumptions as reader.¹⁰⁰

Atwood asks the reader to read with a kind of double vision. Her underlying message to readers--this text should be read as *both* autobiography *and* fiction, simultaneously.

The text of blurred genre, the text that asks a reader to question genre assumptions, that asks to be read as belonging to two or more genres at once, throws

the very notion of boundaries and borders, of “truth” and “fiction” entirely into question.

"This genre blurring (of late, he says) is more than just a smatter of Harry Houdini or Richard Nixon turning up as characters in novels or of Midwestern murder sprees described as though a gothic romancer had imagined them. It is philosophical inquiries looking like lit crit (think of Stanley Cavell on Beckett or Thoreau, Sartre on Flaubert), scientific discussions looking like belle lettres morceaux (like Galileo's Daughter or Flatwoods which is written as a journal), baroque fantasies presented as deadpan empirical observations (Borges, Barthelme), histories that consist of equations and tables or law court testimony (Fogel and Engerman, Le Roi Laduire), documentaries that read like true confessions (Mailer), Parables posing as ethnographies (Castaneda), theoretical treatises set out as travelogues (Levi-Strauss), Ideological arguments cast as historiographical inquiries (Edward Said), epistemological studies constructed like political tracts (Paul Feyerabend), methodological polemics got up as personal memoirs (James Watson). Nabokov's Pale Fire, that impossible object made of poetry and fiction, footnotes and images from the clinic, seems very much of the time; one waits only for quantum theory in verse or biography in algebra...The present jumbling of varieties of discourse has grown to the point where it is becoming difficult either to label authors (what is Foucault--historian, philosopher, political theorist? or to classify works (what is William Gass' on being blue--treatise, causerie, apologetic) And thus it is more than a matter of odd sports and occasional curiosities or of

the admitted fact that the innovative is, by definition, hard to categorize. It is a phenomenon general enough and distinctive enough to suggest that what we are seeing is not just another redrawing of the cultural map--the moving of a few disrupted borders...but an alteration of the principles of mapping. Something is happening to the way we are thinking about the way we think....The properties connecting texts with one another...are coming to seem as important in characterizing them as those dividing them; and rather than face an array of natural kinds, fixed types divided by sharper qualitative differences, we more and more see ourselves surrounded by a vast, almost continuous field of variously intended and diversely constructed works we can order only partially, relationally, and as our purposes prompt us.”¹⁰¹

7.

On November 5, 2001, At the 92nd Street Y in New York City, author Amos Oz told the audience that he: "can't bear the English word *fiction*." In Hebrew, he said, the translated equivalent of fiction is *narrative prose*, a phrase that avoids implications of truth or falseness. Oz also spoke of how he resents the critics' "postmodern" stamp on his book, The Same Sea, which he considers to be: "pre-archaic in the way of the troubadour--some song, some history, some dance, some memoir, some poetry, some narrative." Because of the novel's resistance to categorization (in form and content), Oz was approached by a librarian who wanted to know how to shelve the book; she suggested, as options, the areas of poetry, fiction, autobiography, family, travel, and the Middle-East. Oz offered her this alternative:

“Why don’t you just let it have a good time? Put it on a different shelf every night.”

It’s not a solution, of course, but it speaks to the difficulty of genre. From the writer, reader, publisher, bookstore, and librarian perspectives.

Where are genres located--in the writer’s perspective, the reader’s perspective, the critic’s perspective? In the assumptions and interpretations of each writer and reader of a work? How much does the publishing industry affect genre--how a book is categorized, named (blurbs and covers and jacket copy), reviewed, sold, shelved? Are genres “ the enemy of the reader...a too rigorous constraint on the interpretive act?”¹⁰² Are genres the enemy of the writer?

8.

Frequently cross-genre writers use the same material, the same content, in more than one text. For example, Jamaica Kincaid uses daffodils and the learning of Wordsworth’s poem “Daffodils“ in her novel Lucy and in her essay “On Seeing England for the First Time.” In her short story, "The Boyish Lover," Laurie Colwin fictionalizes an event that reappears later in a nonfiction book. In the short story, the non-domesticated Cordy tells girlfriend Jane how he makes eggs:

"Well, I get up in the morning, put some corn oil in a pan, turn the light on under it, and then I shower, shave, and dress. When I get back to the kitchen, the pan is about the temperature of a Bessemer converter. I beat the eggs and put some spice in...some stuff I found in the apartment when I moved it. Then I throw the eggs in, and they immediately turn into an asbestos mat.." ¹⁰³

In Home Cooking, a collection of essays and recipes, Colwin “re-tells” the same story as nonfiction:

"I was once romantically aligned with a young man"...who..."claimed his scrambled eggs resembled one of those asbestos mats. I heat up a little vegetable oil in a pan and go take a shower. When I come back, I put in the eggs and then I go and shave. By the time I'm finished shaving, they're done."

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Depending upon the genre, the way the material is written about changes. The structure differs, the tone, the language, and yet *what* is being discussed is the same across texts.

9.

The publishing world affects genre assumption. Physical indicators on a book affect how a book will be received and interpreted. If a text is labeled “memoir,” “novel,” “ethnography,” “autobiography,” the reader will bring to the text a set of assumptions. Even author blurbs affect the reception of a book. (Interestingly, many multi-genre and genre-blurring writers blurb each other. John Berger, Maxine Hong Kingston, Susan Sontag, Joan Didion, Anne Carson, and Michael Ondaatje are often found blurbed on the backs of each other’s books.) There is the identification the writer makes for a particular work as well. Although Anne Caron’s book Glass, Irony, and God contains poems and lit-crit-personal-essays in the form of poems, the

book is labeled simply “essays.” Leslie Marmon Silko’s book Storyteller which combines autobiography, memoir, ethnography, fiction, and photography is largely considered an “autobiography,” but Silko has never made any such distinction herself. There is nothing on the book’s jacket copy or cover to indicate such a categorization. Yet, it is shelved as nonfiction/autobiography.

There is a chain of command in the reception of a book. The author takes part in naming the category of a work. Then control falls to the publisher, the bookstore/library (where it is shelved), the reader, the critics. All of these factors affect how a work is categorized by genre.

The publisher’s control of genre and how it is read is potentially dangerous because publishing controls what’s available to be read by readers, writers, scholars.

10.

“In literary communication, genres are functional: they actively form the experience of each work of literature. If we see *The Jew of Malta* as a savage farce, our response will not be the same as if we saw it as tragedy.”¹⁰⁵

When we try to decide the genres of a work, then, our aim is to discover its meaning. For the reader, knowing how an author has categorized a work is vital. The controversy that ensued around Casteneda’s book, Journey to Ixtlan came about because he labeled the work an ethnography; however, not all of the book was “true”-some of it was imagined. Once the book was (re)labeled fiction, it was accepted

(lauded, even). It is, in actuality, a book of blurred genre: ethnography, memoir, and fiction.

If an institutionalized genre existed, called “blurred genre,” perhaps no controversy would have occurred?

A recent controversy springing from the question of genre and the implied contract with the reader (nonfiction is true, fiction is false) is the highly publicized controversy over James Frey and his book, A Million Little Pieces, marketed as a memoir by author, agent, publisher, and Oprah.

On “the Smoking Gun,” the website that first exposed Frey’s nonfiction as fiction, the following was stated:

"I know that, like many of us who have read this book, I kept turning to the back of the book to remind myself, 'He's alive. He's okay,' Winfrey said. In essence, that is part of the book's narrative power and a primary marketing tool. All this terrible stuff actually happened to a guy named James Frey, a former degenerate who survived drug and alcohol addiction, escaped his criminal past, and somehow avoided a relapse in the decade-plus since leaving Hazelden. When Doubleday sent the book's galleys out to reviewers, editor Sean McDonald wrote a letter touting Frey's "fearless candor," while a publicity manager hailed his "unprecedented honesty." Of course, if "A Million Little Pieces" was fictional, just some overheated stories of woe, heartache, and debauchery cooked up by a wannabe author, it probably would not get published. As it was, Frey's original manuscript was rejected by 17

publishers before being accepted by industry titan Nan Talese, who runs a respected boutique imprint at Doubleday (Talese reportedly paid Frey a \$50,000 advance). According to a February 2003 *New York Observer* story by Joe Hagan, Frey originally tried to sell the book as a fictional work, but the Talese imprint "declined to publish it as such." A retooled manuscript, presumably with all the fake stuff excised, was published in April 2003 amid a major publicity campaign."¹⁰⁶

A writer, desperately trying to sell his book, fails in one genre, and so bills it as another. This succeeds (initially), until the "fact" that prose billed memoir is supposed to be "true" trips him up. The book is currently being referred to as "A Million Little Lies".

The difference between the genres of nonfiction and fiction, reader expectations and market success has to do, in this case, with a great deal of money and the shattered credibility of not only the author, but everyone (including the readers) who believed Fry's fictions to be fact, who felt emotionally swayed by his writing. It is not just that the facts were twisted; it is the emotional betrayal the readers felt upon realizing what they had read and *how* they had empathized with the author was "false."

The implication: the empathy created in a reader towards a "real person," (especially when the "real person is the "actual author"), and the empathy created in a reader towards a character, an "unreal person," is different.

Currently, in the market and publishing world, memoir is thriving.

"Although it is unclear whether the market has led or followed, market demand currently encourages marketing practices such as subtitled an author's first book "a memoir" when in previous years it might have been classified as fiction or selecting for publication a memoir by someone whose story would not have previously been expected to appeal to a so called general audience. The extent to which the current expansion is driven more by marketing and publishing choices ("memoir sell! let's have more memoir!") than by writing practices is not clear. Thus political and social movements, the forces of popular culture, developments in academe, and the market all contribute to and are shaped by the current hothouse of ideas about telling the story of the self." ¹⁰⁷

11.

Frey is a perfect example of the dangers of the market to writers, and the dangers of crossing genre borders when issues of "fact" and "fiction" are involved.

To strip genre to its core is to see that it is always a matter of dialogue between writer and reader, an act of interpretation. It is a dialogue between the writer and the history of genre—and every text that came before the text being written and created. It is a dialogue between the reader and the text being read--and every previous text the reader has read. It is a matter of the past and present, of memory and active participation. And all of this butts up against the institutionalized, powerful trajectory of genre as the classification of literature. As Wellek and Warren

phrased it:

"Men's pleasure in a literary work is compounded of the sense of novelty and the sense of recognition...in the murder mystery, there is the gradual closing in or tightening of plot--the gradual convergence...of the lines of evidence. The totally familiar and repetitive pattern is boring; the totally novel form will be unintelligible--is indeed unthinkable. The genre represents, so to speak, a sum of aesthetic devices at hand, available to the writer and already intelligible to the reader. The good writer partly conforms to the genre as it exists, and partly stretches it." ¹⁰⁸

For the writer, the selection of genre is one of the most determining choices in creating a text. It is a question of appropriateness. What genre(s), what tone(s), structure(s), voice(s), format(s) are most suitable to the material?

As multi-genre writer Samuel Beckett says of genre: "We must find a form to *accommodate* the mess." ¹⁰⁹

In selecting a genre to write in, the task of the writer is made simpler. The material, the content, is given structure, order, and meaning:

"...Genre has quite a different relation to creativity from the one usually supposed, whereby it is little more than a restraint upon spontaneous expression. Rightly understood, it is so far from being a mere curb on expression that it makes the expressiveness of literary works possible." ¹¹⁰

Through genre (or a combination of genres), a writer finds a form, a voice, a

language. In selecting a genre(s), a writer can also attempt to ensure that her work is received by readers in the manner she wants it to be received and understood.

12.

In an interview with Lisa Appignanesi, author John Berger (poet, short storyist, novelist, art historian, art critic, essayist) suggests that genre is something learned and institutionalized.

Lisa: Why it is that in an epoch when most writers hesitate to stray across forms, to transgress boundaries, you felt free to defy these boundaries of category and genre?

John: Um. I don't know. Really. Perhaps it has something to do with my education. Because I ran away from school when I was sixteen and after that I didn't have any formal education and I was a sort of an autodidact. I had lots of teachers, lots of men and women who taught me most of what I know, but always in a completely informal situation and never in an educational institution. Perhaps it has something to do with that. Because it seems to me that one of the things that formal education does, or formal higher education does, is to construct those very tight walls around categories, and once you've passed through that educational machine, maybe you are rather inhibited about moving from room to room through these walls. Maybe you can't even find the door. Whereas if you haven't been through that, well. You are

always more or less in this strange situation (in which we all are in all the time) [where] there is me and the world all around and everything that is happening in it and you find yourself in it and your whole life is a story with trying to come to terms with that, trying to come to terms that you are in it and that it exists. And given the enormous difficulty of that, perhaps any means [any form or genre] is useful. And then if I answer that question more subjectively, I think that when I am writing a story, fiction, or when I am writing so called reportage, or when I'm trying to write something closer to a biography or even when I'm pursuing an idea in a theoretical essay, I don't actually *feel* any very different activity taking place somewhere in my body or in my head. There is always the same kind of struggle, that is to say, that somewhere I think that I have not even understood, but that I have *felt* or *perceived* something and I don't know what it is, I can recognize it if I see it, but it certainly doesn't exist in words maybe it exists a tiny bit like a musical motif or like a visual hieroglyph and then there is that endless or seemingly endless struggle to find words which don't betray and which come closer and closer towards it. Anyway, that is how I see my own activity of writing and that process which I just described is not very different whether I'm writing a story or whether I'm trying to explain why Constable didn't paint portraits.”¹¹¹

And so, from the writer's perspective, genre is not a universal but a choice, a process, a way to accommodate specific material. It is a set of tools rather than a set of commandments.

13.

Genre is taught as something with closed walls. There is a purpose and usefulness to this. There is a necessary order when teaching genre, when learning to write in any genre. We must learn the rules and methodologies of each genre before we can begin to see how the boundaries are illusions and falsifications. We must learn genre before we can transgress it. Virginia Woolf's first novel was the most "traditional" in terms of Realism, structure, and language. Picasso spent years painting traditionally before he developed his individual, unconventional style.

The first undergraduate poetry workshop I took eased me into genre, into form and content. The professor assigned very structured forms--villanelle, sonnet, an ode, a poem about death. We learned the traditional forms. This was necessary, at least for me. It allowed me to learn and develop. We read and studied various forms, then mimicked them. The last assignment was blank verse. The last assignment was "free." I was ready for it after weeks of structure and learning. In my second poetry workshop, we had no structural assignments. We were just told to hand in a poem a week. I tended to write narrative poems, poems with speakers and a sense of story so when the course ended, my professor suggested that I try writing some fiction. I did. I felt more comfortable in fiction. It was a progression from genre to genre, as it is for most writers.

The problem arises when one is not taught to question the walls of any and all genre (and categorization, in general). For writers, genre seems to be considered more of a process and methodology than a set of historical structures. Writers are practitioners of genre. Makers of genre. And we of different genres should speak to

each other more often, learn differing methodologies from each other.

Very little of what's out there on genre and genre theory and categorization takes the writer into account. One can find bits and pieces (in interviews and articles, mostly) of writers discussing genre--but nothing long or in depth. Perhaps this is because writers know better than most how fluid genre is, and that to reduce a piece of writing, whether creating it or reading it, to the boundaries of the genre in which it seems to fall, is problematic and untenable?

14.

In November 2005, I asked Silas House, to talk about his experience writing across genre(s). He is the author of four novels, a weekly columnist for various newspapers, a contributing feature-writer for No Depression magazine (on music and musicians), a poet, playwright, and screenwriter. He said:

"I identify as a novelist, mostly because I'm most comfortable in that form. But lately I've been doing more writing outside of fiction, so I'm starting to feel as if I can call myself a "writer" instead of a "novelist." To me, even the act of writing a short story is a different thing than writing a novel. I find short stories much more akin to poetry because of the attention to economy, the compression involved. I guess I think the farthest thing from writing novels is my work in nonfiction, especially when I am doing feature work. I often write long features (usually cover stories) on musicians and singer/songwriters. Those are very different because you're much more in control with a nonfiction piece (like that) than you are with fiction. In

fiction, I feel as if I should hand the reins over to the characters and let them do their own thing. But with feature-writing, I have to shape the piece--choose a slant, run with that slant, make everything come full circle back to that slant. I've also recently finished a play and that is very different, structure-wise, from novel-writing, mostly because everything has to be contained within the dialogue and you lose the freedom of narrative.

Having said all that, I think that writing across genres is not very different at all. Because really what we're doing in all forms of writing is trying to find the emotional center, the beating heart, of the piece of writing at hand. Whether it be a feature story on a real person, a play, an essay, a short story, a poem, or a novel, what we are trying to do is arrive at some kind of emotional truth that resonates with people. The most important thing about all forms of writing is that it do two things: 1. tell a story and 2. use language to its fullest. As writers, we have to apply those rules to whichever genre we're writing in, so--in the end--all writing is just that, the act of telling a story and using carefully chosen (but organic) language to do so.

I think that writing in different genres really feeds your entire writing process. For example, I am certain that my writing of dialogue in novels is much better since I wrote the play and began to understand the importance of making every line of dialogue full of tension. Also, doing features on real people--often famous people--makes me aware of how complex and surprising people can be, and that feeds my novel-writing as well. Human beings are incredibly complex and if you don't completely capture that in a novel, then you don't have anything with your characters. More importantly, it taught me how to present people who are

contradictory while still making them believable. And writing poetry helps me to be aware of economy and the importance of the perfect word, and the rhythm that should exist in all forms of writing. I think many novelists forget that rhythm must be present in novels, in every single line. So all forms of writing feed each other, strengthen each other.”

15.

In an interview (December 2005), I asked writer Victoria Redel about her experiences with genre. She is the author of four books, two of poetry, one short story collection, one novel, and a screenplay that was produced in 2004.

Neela: How does writing a story or poem feel different to you? Are you actively aware of the genre you’re writing in, as you write?

Victoria: When I wrote Where the Road Bottoms Out [her collection of short stories], I was just trying to understand the plasticity of a sentence. At that point I was trying to write prose fiction. The sentences in Road are much more densely musical than the first book of poems I wrote, Already the World. I was learning something about myself as a writer. Learning that none of it matters in terms of form--just in attending to language. I do believe in a connection between form and content. A poem is not a story. The form of it is different. I think to myself let me just express myself--will it be a story or poem? I’m writing a fiction or I’m writing a poem. On the other hand I’ve

taken up some of the same material in both forms.

Neela: Can you talk about your relationship to the “I” when writing poetry or fiction?

Victoria: My relationship to the “I” is different in each one. In the poem, the “I” is closer to an autobiographical self. When writing Loverboy [her novel], the woman, while I would say there is plenty of self inside of that book, and my relationship to my sons, I never felt like *she* was *me*. And somewhere in the middle of writing that novel, I drafted the poems in Swoon which are very much about my self, my two sons. The project of the poems was to just let exactly what’s in a day be in the poem.

Those poems came about during a period of time that I was teaching so much that I wasn’t able to write. I wrote in the middle of the night. I had no time to write. I thought for a long time that I had to write them separately--the poems and the novel. I felt like I couldn’t write poems--they felt like chopped up stupid prose. I mostly couldn’t stand poetry at that time--it felt really self-referential and whiny and broke a lot of what I thought were important rules of fiction—you know, in fiction, no “me me me me me” and “my feelings are so important.” I’m nothing, that person is everything, in fiction. It seemed the opposite for poetry, to me, at the time.

The thing about a poem is you can knock it out much faster. You may revise and revise, chop it up, but at the end of the morning, have a draft of a poem.

Neela: What about the “I” in your personal essay, “The Body Metallic?”

Victoria: Essay, the “I.” Well, I’ve only written one essay. I have to say I loved writing that essay. I have to say I thought it was really easy to do. I thought it was the easiest kind of writing I’d ever done. The self felt very close to me. I allowed myself more room to ruminate than I would in fiction or a poem. To think about what the experience meant, to connect it, to frame experience in some way that I hadn’t before. When I wrote Loverboy I tried to be more straightforward and flat-footed in my sentences. I find in certain ways, third person easier to do, to write. In the novel, in first person, you’re bound all the time to character, every sentence you’re pushing character more than the self of the book. More than what’s going to happen, the character’s voice controls what the sentences feel like and look like. I don’t think you could sustain a novel in the lyrical dreamy voice of most people’s poems. A poem tends to reflect back on itself. I think that would be hard to do in a first-person voice in a novel.

In the essay, I felt like I could just talk a little more. I paid less attention to language. I was still making every sentence, but it was easier. Because I felt I had more room to move back and forth. Have a thought, advance my thought,

question it, pull back. Maybe I do that more in a poem, than in a piece of fiction? I don't know. I do know that it was more about voice with the essay. Less about language.

That's sort of the thing about genre...do a survey of a 100 short story writers--there's such a spectrum of sound. Ben Marcus, Lydia Davis, are their stories anything like an Alice Munro story? Are they closer to a poem, yeah, maybe, but those authors *absolutely* feel that they are fiction writers.

Neela: Do you ever wrestle with what genre to place your own work in? When submitting it, for example?

Victoria: Is that a short story, is that a poem? I don't know. Last section of Swoon is made up short prose pieces. With them, I had a devilish desire that I was going to publish them in a book of poems *and* publish them in a book of short stories. Both. I don't feel I know enough about a prose poem to know if it *is* a prose poem. What the fuck's the difference between a short short and a prose poem? I don't know. When I would send the pieces off to a magazine, I would write "Enclosed please find four new *pieces* of my work," because I didn't know what to call them. They were all uniformly published as fiction in journals but I put them all in Swoon, a book of poetry. It was always interesting to me--where are they going to get placed, how are they going to get seen? "Four fictions by Victoria Redel"--that's the titles they first came

out under. And now they live in a book of poetry.

When I got off the phone with Victoria, I thought about how, as writers, we make something. We fashion something. Of sentences and lines and words. Something constructed and created. This is an approach to writing, to the creation of a text, that can be taken up by any writer of any genre. It is an attention to aesthetics. To language. To craft. To structure and the play of time on the page. It seems an attitude towards writing that is most often found in creative writers. But perhaps this attention to craft is something that can be shared across genres as a way of considering written work, a means rather than an end.

16.

“I.” A voice in the darkness. The beauty of the monologue, the solo, the one voice speaking, shouting, whispering, witnessing. “I”--in English, a single letter, a Doric column. A whole being, memories, potentials, held in its straight, sturdy trunk. A past, present, and future. The shape of “I”--a line, infinite, but capped. A shaft with base and capital, as if the “I” has beginning and end. As if it is not infinite, complex, contradictory.

The linguist, Beneviste, says the “I” is a “mobile sign”

“...The “I” in its accommodating nature is complicated precisely because it *is* accommodating...Anyone at all can slip in under the cloak of this I which as a

shifter must take up with everyone who takes up with it.¹¹²

All pronouns are transparent. They are masks.

Considering the “I” is a necessary endeavor. All languages possess pronouns; the question of the self, of “I” and “you,” is a human one:

“ Language is marked so deeply by the expression of subjectivity that one might ask if it could still function and be called language if it were constructed otherwise. The very terms we are using here, I and you, are not to be taken as figures but as linguistic forms indicating "persons." It is a remarkable fact--but who would notice it, since it is so familiar?--that the "personal pronouns" are never missing from among the signs of a language, no matter what its type, epoch, or region may be.”¹¹³

And yet it is possible to have a language without a subject. The language of computers, for example, and the language of Samuel Delaney’s fictional novel Babel 17--these are languages without pronouns, without subjects (science fiction is a space and genre often used to explore such ideas--to approach the unthinkable).

What does it mean for the “I” that so much of modern existence is run by a language of programming, of computers--a language without an “I,” without a subject, whose object is a series of inorganic parts?

“I” implies individuality. This is the root of human conceit. We refer to trees, mountains, rivers, flowers, as “it,” “they.” It is built into our language, it is reflective of our way of thinking. If we do not consider trees, mountains, rivers, flowers to be individuals, it is logical that we can, and will, abuse them.

Though the “I” appears to stand alone, it is, in fact, surrounded.

The “I” is always speaking to a “you:“

“... Consciousness of self is only possible if it is experienced by contrast. I use "I" only when I am speaking to someone who will be a "you" in my address. It is this condition of dialogue that is constitutive of *person*, for it implies that reciprocally *I* becomes *you* ...neither of the terms can be conceived of without the other; they are complementary...and so the old antimonies of "I" and "the other" of the individual and society, fall. It is a duality which it is illegitimate and erroneous “¹¹⁴

“I” and “you.” The two need each other. Each is necessary to the other’s identity, formation, existence, and the very possibility of discourse. In a text, when the first person is used, “I” becomes the author (or the author’s persona, or, if fiction, the author’s created character). “I” is the narrator speaking to an implied, invisible, and ever shifting “you.” And that “you” is the reader--any reader, every reader.

17.

Depending upon the genre, the “I” functions differently. It shape-shifts, accommodates the material diversely through tone, distance, voice. The writer uses the “I” differently, and the reader comes to the “I” with a different set of expectations depending upon the genre of the work one is reading/writing.

For example:

“Readers come to creative nonfiction with different expectations from those they bring to other genres. At the core of those expectations may be, in a sense, the hope of becoming engaged in a conversation. Much fiction, drama,

poetry and film is presented as performance, as entertainment essentially enclosed within itself--we are usually expected to appreciate or admire its creators' artistry whether we are encouraged to acknowledge their intensity or insight. Much nonliterary nonfiction (like some forms of journalism and academic writing for example) is presented as a transaction delivering information, sometimes objective, sometimes argumentative--we are usually expected to receive or accept their creators' knowledge or data the way we would a lecture or a newsbroadcast.”¹¹⁵

18.

Let us take a moment to consider the “I” at work in various genres. Below, I will not state which selection belongs to which genre, and I have removed all obvious indications of genre. There is only the “I,” the first person, in common for each selection. Is it obvious in each quote which genre it has been written in? Is it obvious from how the “I” functions, from the voice of the narrator, if what is being stated is true or false? If it is fiction or nonfiction? If it is research or imagined or some combination of the two?

1. Now that he has gone down, I can hear his voice in the silence. It carries from one side of the valley to the other. He produces it effortlessly, and, like a yodel, it travels like a lasso. It turns to come back after it has attached the hearer to the shouter. It places the shouter at the centre. His cows respond to it as well as his dog. One evening two cows were missing after we had chained them all in the stable. He went and called. The second time he called

the two cows answered from deep in the forest, and a few minutes later they were at the stable door, just as night fell.

2. I read the poem, a third of it anyway, standing stunned in a bookshop in the Village. I remember the afternoon, cloudy and quiet, and I remember, too, almost leaving myself, the person I was, the ordinary way I felt about things, my perception of--there's no other word for it--the depth of life, and above all the thrill of successive lines. The poem was an aria, jagged and unending. Its tone was what set it apart--written as if from the shades. *There lay the delta, there the burning arms...* was the way it began, and immediately I felt it was not about rivers uncoiling but about desire. It revealed itself only slowly, like some kind of dream, *the light fluttering on the fronds*, with names and nouns, Naples, worn beaches, Luxor and the kings, Salonika, small waves falling on the stone. There was repetition, even refrain. Lines that seemed unconnected gradually became part of a confession that had at its center rooms in the burning heat of August where something has taken place, clearly sexual, but it is also the vacant streets of rural Texas, roads, forgotten friends, the slap of hands on rifle slings and forked pennants limp at parades. There are condoms, sun-faded cars, soiled menus with misspellings, a kind of pyre on which he had laid his life. That was why he seemed so pure--he had given all. Everyone lies about their lives, but he had not lied about his. He had made of it a noble lament, through it always running this thing you have had, that you

will have, but can never have. *There stood Erechtheus, polished limbs and greaves...come to me, Hellas, I long for your touch.*

3. All night the boy is hungry, looking up crumb-faced saying, I need food. And the mother? She follows through the house with fruit and Jello-O, toasted rolls, plates of sliced leftovers, saying, Do I look like a restaurant? She's pouring milk and pouring juice, and after a last plate of crackers by his bed, he wanders to the kitchen saying, I'm too hungry to sleep. You're full, the mother says, too full for sleep. So the boy comes in close, rubbing against the mother by the sink saying, Please? Can't you seem I'm growing? Of course she sees it. How can she avoid it? The way day-to-day pants scooch higher up his legs or how he's taken to walking starting down as if own too big feet will trip him, which they do, all shuffle and underfoot, everything a knock, a shatter in her house, dishes he drops and the mother finds him half asleep licking a spoon.

4. I arrived in a plane but love the harbour. Dusk. And the turning on of electricity in ships, portholes of moon, the blue glide of a tug, the harbour road and its ship channels, soap makers, ice on bicycles, the hidden anonymous barber shops behind the pink dirt walls of Reclamation Street. One frail memory dragged up out of the past--going to the harbors to say goodbye to a sister or mother, dusk. For years I loved the song, "Harbour

lights,” and later in my teens danced disgracefully with girls, humming “Sea of Heartbreak.” There is nothing wise about a harbour, but it is real life. It is as sincere as a Singapore cassette. Infinite waters cohabit with flotsam on this side of the breakwater and the luxury liners and Maldives fishing vessels steam out to erase calm sea. Who was I saying goodbye to? Automatically as I travel on the tug with my brother-in-law, a pilot in the harbors, I sing “the lights on the harbour don’t shine for me...” but I love it here, skimming out into the night anonymous among the lazy commerce, my nieces dancing on the breakwater as they wait, the lovely swallowing of thick night air as it carves around my brain, blunt, cleansing itself with nothing but this anonymity, with the magic words. *Harbour. Lost ship. Chandler. Estuary.*

5. When we walked back inside the apartment, I could tell in an instant that there had been a sea change. By some unaccountable feat of sorcery--I was never able to figure out exactly how it had happened--the bathos had been exorcised from Apartment A. Everyone could feel the difference. The Lee children, who talked and giggled as they walked from the parking lot, fell silent as soon as they crossed the threshold. The television was off. The candle on the latern had been lit. A joss stick was burning, filling the apartment with smoke trails that would guide the familiar spirits. The *txiv neeb* had put on a black silk jacket with indigo cuffs and red sash. His feet were bare. He had shrugged all the American incongruities off his outer aspect and his inner aspect--the quality that had singled him out for spiritual

election--now shone through, bright and hard. I saw that I had underestimated him.

1. John Berger. "The Storyteller." Essay. Nonfiction.
2. James Salter. "Give." Short story. Fiction.
3. Victoria Redel. "Boy Food Man." Poem.
4. Michael Ondaatje. Running In the Family. Memoir. Nonfiction.
5. Anne Fadiman. The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down. Ethnography. Nonfiction.

19.

The first thing most people learn when writing fiction is "write what you know." This is a problematic and oversimplified statement in itself, but it is interesting that, in fiction, it is assumed that one is always writing *some* version of personal truth. At public readings, I am frequently asked if what I read was "true or not." I respond to this question by saying that it's all "true" because it's coming from my imagination, which is fed by my experience, by everything I've read and known and seen and smelled and felt. But that it's all "untrue" because of the manner in which these things combine to suit the plot, the characters, the story, and because of how "truth" combines with what is wholly imagined. But, all that said, I am an individual who puts fiction on the side of truth. This is a baffling response, but one that feels honest and inclusive to me.

Even after I make such a statement, people will often say things like "In the

story, you...” as if I am all of my fictional characters. And perhaps I am. And perhaps I am not. It is odd to note the gender distinction that most people carry. Most people do not assume that a male character is based on me. Rather, they assume that all my male characters are based on my father or husband.

The “I” in fiction allows the narrator to speak in a voice other than that of the author. I am accustomed to reading fiction at public readings. It was when I first read nonfiction, a personal essay, where the “I” was assumed to be myself speaking, that I understood one of the inherent differences in genre. I am always nervous when reading publicly, but the experience of reading nonfiction was tortuous. As I stood up there, saying “I” (I read the first five pages of “Prayatna (work),” Chapter 11), I realized that “I” was “me,” and that everyone in the audience (about 150 people) heard it as such. I felt completely exposed, threatened, sick, vulnerable, in a way I do not feel generally when reading fiction aloud written in the first-person.

There is something protective about the fictional “I”. Even when writing purely autobiographical fiction, the fictional “I” protects. The blurred line between a reader not knowing what part of the work is “true” and what part is “false” lends to the author a certain freedom, anonymity, security. It is the character speaking, thinking, feeling. Not the author. The “I” in fiction provides a divide between author and character; a safety net, a one-way mirror.

20.

Reading past the “I,” is an act of suspension of disbelief on the part of the reader. Much like the suspension of disbelief that is asked of audiences in theatre.

To believe that Meryl Streep is Arkadina in Chekhov's "The Seagull," even though we see that it is Meryl Streep's face and body on the stage, walking around, speaking—that is the "I" transparent, seen through as if it does not exist.

I, Effaced. I, subsumed. Slip inside a character: the self made invisible. Meryl Streep is a shape shifter, but her presence and face are always recognizable. The body, with acting, must also be changed, inhabited. Gain a limp, lose a twitch. The "I" becomes a filter. And the self is never abandoned. Actor, Gene Hackman says, "When I'm working on a character, I never get to the point where I don't believe it's still me. I think there's everything in me. I think it's possible that I could be anybody. When you think that way, all things are possible for you."¹¹⁶

The performance of the writer occurs in the imagination and on the page; it is a disembodied transformation. It is made of words and images. For the performer, the transformation into character is spiritual, emotional, mental, physical. At the physical level is where the journey into character most differs for actors and writers.

21.

A few decades ago, musician Alice Cooper choreographed a section of his on-stage performance in which a dummy of himself was placed in a guillotine and its head chopped off. The dummy was extremely realistic and Cooper was afraid it would upset his young daughter to see "him" getting decapitated. So he showed her how the guillotine worked; he let her in on the deception. He explained to her that the dummy on stage was Alice, not Daddy.

At home, when Cooper's daughter happened to see him on television, she would say, "Look Daddy! There's Alice!" As if she made some distinction between her father and her father's performative self. As if they were two distinct beings.

At the root of this is the issue of the "I." Who is the "I?"

It is both performer and performance.¹¹⁷

A similar story: Charlie Chaplin would often watch his films with his children. They remember him saying, as he watched the screen, "Oh yes, he's very good, he's very very good; oh yes, that is funny, he is very very funny." Chaplin's children thought it strange that Chaplin referred to the tramp as "he." He seemed to consider the character of "the tramp" as somehow separate from himself.¹¹⁸

22.

In fiction, the writer takes on a role or multiple roles. The writer performs on the page. To imagine is to dissolve the self. A dissolving "I." To imagine is to empathize, to acknowledge a level of fluidity and permeability, between self and other. People often ask both actors and writers, "How were you able to create a child when you are an adult?" Or, "How could you write as a woman when you are a man?" The writer and actor must necessarily believe in the commonality of human experience, in humanity, in order to successfully become anyone, and represent any experience--to cross cultural boundaries of "race," age, class, gender, sexuality, religion, and so on. And what is mostly required to do this, is not just imagination, but empathy, and an emotional openness.

The empathetic "I."

Fiction writers will often say they are channeling a character, acting as a medium for a voice and consciousness other than their own. Acting as a scribe for another being. A type of possession. Obsession. This is felt when writing in any point of view, but especially a close third person or first person. The writer is taken over by the voice, language, patterns of thought, body movements of the character. The writer's "I" is subsumed, effaced, by the character's "I." And the character becomes the author as much as the author becomes the character. As Staislavsky puts it, in terms of Method Acting:

"You can understand a part, sympathize with the person portrayed, and put yourself in his place, so that you will act as he would. That will arouse feelings in the actor that are analogous to those required for the part. But those feelings will belong, not to the person created by the author of the play, but to the actor himself."¹¹⁹

From writer Silas House's lecture, SURRENDER, delivered at Spalding University, October 2005.

"I'll be talking about the act of method-writing. We've all heard about method acting. Robert DeNiro gained weight for Raging Bull. Joaquin Phoenix never stopped talking like Johnny Cash—even when the cameras weren't rolling—for "Walk The Line." Jane Fonda lived with Dolly Parton for months preparing for a role in which she needed to talk like an Appalachian. The thing I realized early on in my writing is that writers have to go the extra mile

this way, too.

“We all know how important research is. We scour books for details on the Bubonic Plague, spend hours studying up on how cars of the early 1900s operated, own copies of Sears catalogs from the 60s so we’ll really get the fashions right. I want to explore what I call “Spiritual research.” A corny title, maybe, but a perfect one, too. Because to really get into the souls of our characters, to really reveal the depths of our characters, and thus our story, to our readers, we need to know about the ways of our characters’ spirits. Spiritual research is when you live within the world of your novel, when you do the things the characters are doing to make sure you accurately portray that action, when you search yourself to find how you agree or disagree with your characters and find the peace in that.”

23.

“I have to sit down and really work at it, concoct something that feels forced and artificial at the start. But then it all comes to life as the characters take over.” —Anne Tyler on her writing process

“Often, when I was working on *Fair and Tender Ladies*, I would completely forget myself. I became the main character, Ivy Rowe. I wrote like her, I thought like her, I lived like her. I could have never written that book if I hadn’t surrendered to her, if I hadn’t put myself out of the equation and welcomed her to come on in and take up residence. Sometimes it felt like

being possessed. But it was all a good feeling, a good thing. Not just in the actual product of the book, but in the experience itself. It was complete catharsis.” —Lee Smith, on writing, *Fair and Tender Ladies*

“I felt that I knew this character John Ames, and I was so mystified by him...Suddenly here he was, telling me what he was telling me. I’ve never in my life, my odd life, had a stronger feeling of the actual presence of the character—like a self-induced delusion, you know, who knows all about *baseball*, what a surprise.” —Marilynne Robinson, on writing *Gilead*, winner of the 2005 Pulitzer Prize

“When I’m writing from Ellen Foster’s POV, I find myself more direct in my daily/real life encounters with others and less willing to cope with tedium, more honest in my reactions, less willing to shape what I’m saying for others’ approval, much the way she is...so being in her voice so often has been helpful and extremely instructive. People who think writing is more or less escapism are in for a terrible surprise, because writing worth anything is a route inward to the deepest reality, and though it isn’t very pretty much of the time, there’s still nothing like creating an alternate reality and being able to live inside for the duration of a novel.” —Kaye Gibbons, on writing the new sequel to *Ellen Foster*

“Writers should only work with two things: a plot and characters. In the

beginning, both are loose, but as the plot progresses, the characters naturally have to follow along. Characters are like people, the longer you know them, the better you know them, so after a while, you might come to a point where you are asking the characters to do something for your plot that the character would not do. You are not being honest with yourself or your material if you don't stop and pay attention. Generally it means you have to change to plot. (Characters should never be in service to a plot.) This is one area in which writers say their characters "take over." It works organically, too. Putting the characters into the action of a plot helps you know them better, so you know where to go with the plot, which helps you go deeper into your character, and on and on. Often, I'll get 50 pages or so into a novel and realize that the character I started out with has changed -- I know her so much better and, rather than go on, I start over with the new information. "Follow your characters" is a good motto." —Catherine Landis, award-winning author of *Harvest*

"I thought that I would write a novel about what it was like to be a Cherokee woman married to a white man in the early 1900s and I figured the book would mostly center around racism, the act of being a Cherokee. But once I got about twenty pages into the novel, the main character, whom I called Vine, completely took over. But I knew that the only real way to write a good novel was to surrender to the character, to open myself up to the experience and see where it would take me. So I fully embraced what I felt was a sort of

supernatural whisper in my ear. So I got rid of any kind of outdoor light and would venture out into the woods at one in the morning, experiencing darkness the way she might have. I went out at noon and picked blackberries. Every time there was a scene of Vine seeking wisdom among the leaves, I was out in the woods doing the same. My neighbors all think I'm crazy because I spent so much time stroking leaves and feeling the trunks of trees, but I didn't care. I loved my character more than my neighbors, so I did it for her." --Silas House on writing *A Parchment of Leaves*

24.

A teacher will often tell a creative writing student who is writing in the third person and struggling with a character (with developing that character realistically), to try writing about that same character in the first person. The writing done in the first person may or may not be the final product. It could just be an exercise for the writer to fully enter and inhabit the character, to speak in that character's voice, to get to know the character better, and then to use that knowledge to write the character, later, in third person.

The close third person in fiction is similar to first person (writing from within a character's perspective), yet often third person offers more fluidity and opportunity for the writer than first person.

Like any tense or person, first person, in fiction, has advantages and disadvantages. In first person, there is the closeness an author can have to a

character, the use of their specific language, dialogue, and voice as a way to enrich the presentation of that character. But there are also limitations. First person is not as flexible as third person. The writer is restricted to one consciousness. It is difficult in first person to make the narrative float above and away from the narrating character. It is more difficult to dip into the minds of other characters, to move around a scene with freedom. The story and plot-line are tied to one consciousness—as is the language. In addition, when writing in the first person, there is the issue of time and place. A first person past tense narrator raises questions of “where is the speaker speaking from? Where and when is the narrator telling this story and why?” Dickens solves this problem in David Copperfield by creating a narrator who is a writer. By the end of the book, the first-person-past-tense is justified because the narrator tells the reader that he is writing his life, he is telling this story, now, because he is a writer, looking back. This is a common solution to writing in first-person-past-tense.

First-person-present-tense also carries benefits and limitations. The benefit of first-person-present-tense in fiction is immediacy. The reader is directly *with* the character/narrator and can experience things along with them. There is a heightened sense of emotion. But, there is also the awkwardness of narrating a story and plot in a blow-by-blow, minute-by-minute fashion. There is also the difficulty of “endings” with first-person-present-tense. It is a tense-person combination that can potentially trap a writer into petering out a plot, or creating a falsely dramatic, “ending” (one that may not actually suit the story), something to “shut down” or “stop” the narrator’s present tense, real time narration—something like death or a coma. A sort of soap opera exit.

25.

In most nonfiction (ethnography, memoir, autobiography, life writing, creative nonfiction, essays) the first person is most commonly tied to past tense. These genres either rely on research experience (for example ethnography, in which case the experience has been processed and transcribed and supported by secondary sources and so the “I” must necessarily speak in the past tense in order to faithfully record events) or they are genres of retrospection, that look back on an event, that consider an idea, a life.

Fiction is not just a place for questioning the value of “true” versus “false.” It is a rich literary space where a writer can explore craft and the parameters and complications of wielding various persons. One of the most determining and important choices a fiction writer makes is what person to write in (first, second, or third) and what tense (past, present, continuous past, and so on). In most nonfiction genres, these decisions are less determining, and the consideration of such options less prevalent or important.

There is no prescribed introduction, body, or conclusion in a work of fiction. There is only what makes sense to the reader--what is understandable, the logical (or, unlogical) movements of a character and story. The structure of a piece of fiction is part of its art, part of what holds it together, part of what fiction offers to the reader--creative shape, one that organically, aesthetically, or performatively enhances the content.

This is something other genres could learn from fiction. An attention to form

and structure, voice, person, tense, a respect for playing and experimenting with such structures. And a careful attention to language. Avoid the cliché, know that part of a story, any story, is the language in which it is told.

26.

The ethnographic method of participant observation also requires empathy and getting to know an individual--their language, religion, body-image, walk, laugh, dreams, fears, eating habits. The ethnographer, indeed, often takes more active part in their “character’s” lives—generally spending more time with “informants,” and living like “informants,” than an actor or writer would.

The Dewalts, in their book Participant Observation: A Guide for Fieldworkers say the following:

“...key elements of the method of participant observation as used by anthropologists usually involve the following: living in the context for an extended period of time; learning and using local language and dialect; actively participating in a wide range of daily, routine, and extraordinary activities with people who are full participants in that context; using everyday conversation as an interview technique; informally observing during leisure activities (hanging out); recording observations in field notes (usually organized chronologically); using both tacit and explicit information in analysis and writing.”¹²⁰

Whether creating a fictional character, playing the role of a character on

stage, or trying to capture an informant on the page, empathy is required. And across the genres, empathy and emotional openness are not necessarily considered important aspects of methodology. They are too frequently overlooked. Included in the methodology of empathy, is a sort of erasure of self. An act not of intellect or emotion, but of noetic sensation, of unconscious activity. In the words of the 17th century poet, Basho (his advice to art students): "Feel like the pine when you look at the pine, like the bamboo when you look at the bamboo."

As Ernst explains, "Truthful artistic expression can arise only with the complete surrender of the artist to the nature of the object before him, a surrender uninhibited by the artist's intellect or emotions."¹²¹

Genre is a literary strategy. As stated by David James Duncan, genres are varying methodologies to arrive at the same place:

"Admirers of nailed-down definitions and tidy categories may not like to hear it, but all writers and readers are full-time imaginers, all prose is imaginative, and fiction and nonfiction are just two anarchic shades of ink swirling around the same mysterious well. Those of us who would tell a story can only dip in our pens. We can never claim full certainty as to which shade of ink we're using" ¹²²

All writers--ethnographers, historians, novelists, poets, essayists, memoirists--write to figure something out, to learn something about an experience, about the self. All writing is a process of discovery for the author, regardless of the genre. One writes, always, to figure something out.

Life writing--ethnography, memoir, personal essay, etc.-- the shape-shifting of personal memory, the subjectivity of culture and upbringing, and the selective nature of first-person history all bend the edges of genre in order to maintain a sense of personal "truth."

Considering autobiography, Paul John Eakins says:

"When we settle down into the theater of autobiography, what we are ready to believe--and what most autobiographers encourage us to expect--is that the play we witness is a historical one, a largely faithful and unmediated reconstruction of events that took place long ago, whereas in reality the play is that of the autobiographical act itself, in which the materials of the past are shaped by memory and imagination to *serve the needs of the present*."¹²³

The "I" is as complex as any individual. It must express this complexity of "truth" and memory, no matter the genre. All memoirists and autobiographers wrestle with the "I, Not I" issue.

"Identity and memory are and have always been principal concerns of the life writer and it is mainly worry about them that has determined the skittishness of the mid 20th c writers about the use of I."¹²⁴

27.

The memoir, according to Nancie Atwell:

"...is not autobiography, not a diary or chronicle of one's days; it is an art.

Like fiction, it's fashioned deliberately. However, the memoir, although neither an autobiography nor a work of fiction, maintains elements of both.

Like autobiography, the memoir focuses on the past experiences of an author, yet there is a theme connecting the memories; such a connecting theme, which ultimately reveals the truth of the experiences as critically considered by the memoirist, is absent in the autobiography. In On Writing Well, Zinsser furthers the distinction between autobiography and memoir when he states, “Unlike autobiography, which spans an entire life, memoir assumes the life and ignores most of it...Memoir isn’t the summary of a life; it’s the window into a life, very much like a photograph in its selective construction” ¹²⁵

Some of my favorite memoirs are “relational memoirs,” memoirs that speak as a “we,” as in Sheila Ortiz Taylor’s memoir Imaginary Parents which she collaborated on with her sister (a visual artist). Memoir need not be a work of the pronoun, “I;” it can also be a “We” text.

My father, an Indian immigrant, speaks in the “we” (to me and to family in India). “We had a good day.” “We’re going to Patel Brothers to get some chiki.” “We made money in the stock market.” “We saw forty patients today.” He is often telling a story that involves only himself, or things that he alone has accomplished, but still, he refers to himself in the “we” (not royally, but culturally). His “we” includes me, my mother, my husband, my father’s brother, sister, nephews. A friend of mine, who is Appalachian also speaks in the “we,” (when home, speaking his own language to his own people). He’ll be standing alone, talking to someone else and, in parting, he’ll say: “We’ll see youns.” As if he is standing with a fleet of people behind him (which he is, at all times, from his perspective and in the reality of his culture). Many cultures have a relational sense of self. The mainstream

American/Western focus on the individual and “I” is being questioned and changed—by the margins. This “we” perspective is affecting the genre and style of life writing. The “I” itself, memoir itself, is being changed because of *who* is writing and reading it:

"My own instinct is to approach autobiography in the spirit of a cultural anthropologist, asking what such texts can teach us about the ways in which individuals in a particular culture experience their sense of being 'I' - and in some instructive cases that prove the rule, their sense of not being an 'I'"¹²⁶

28.

An example of a cultural sense of “I” can be found In Maxine Hong Kingston’s memoir, Woman Warrior:

"When I went to kindergarten and had to speak English for the first time, I became silent. " and few pages later "It was when I found out I had to talk that school became a misery. Reading out loud was easier than speaking because we did not have to make up what to say, but I stopped often, and the teacher would think I'd gone quiet again. I could not understand “I”. The Chinese I has seven strokes, intricacies. How could the American I assuredly wearing a hat like the Chinese, have only three strokes, the middle so straight? Was it out of politeness that this writer left off strokes the way a Chinese has to write her own name small and crooked? No it was not politeness. "I" is a capital and "you" a lower-case. "¹²⁷

It seems to me that the more memory and the “I” are questioned as part of a life-writing text and as part of a life-writer's process of writing about themselves, the more “literary” the text is--the more it evades confession and becomes about language. For example in Christa Wolf's, A Model Childhood. Or Michael Ondaatje's, Running In the Family.

It is perhaps interesting to note the infrequency with which the “we” is used as a person and point of view in fiction. And when it is used, it is used to exhibit community, whether it be family, as in Maura Stanton's short story “The Country I come From,” and Victoria Redel's short story, “My Little Pledge of Us,” or Susan Sontag's story, “The Way We Are Now”—a piece with twenty-six narrators (an implied, unstated “we,” a “we” joined by AIDS), each narrator's name beginning with a different letter of the alphabet.

29.

Ethnography straddles genre in a more complicated way than other forms of life-writing (such as memoir or personal essay). As the “ography” at the end of a word implies in Western academe, ethnography lays claim to being a “science” or a “study.” In trying to most closely marry the (supposed) objectivity of scientific methodology with the personal influences and opinions of participant observation, and the inherent constructed nature of all narratives, ethnography has to be careful about where it blurs or strays from current accepted norms. It is both science and art and has the added burden (and benefit) of having to meet the standards of both:

“Ethnography produces a style of 19th century natural history writing and has

the appearance of being factual, authoritative, and "objective." However, when we remember the subject matter--people's lives--the effect [of "objective" writing] upon the reader is alienating, and the reader questions the validity of the description. As Spencer has said, "Ethnographic naturalism, while working with ostensibly unproblematic literary devices, in fact constructs a kind of object--a world robbed of its idiosyncrasies and foibles--which is foreign to the experience of its readers"¹²⁸

And what of the "I?" What of the strong authorial, narratorial voice in ethnography?

"The question of signature, the establishment of an authorial presence within a text, has haunted ethnography from very early on, though for the most part it has done so in a disguised form. Disguised, because it has been generally cast not a narratological issue, a matter of how best to get an honest history honestly told, but as an epistemological one, a matter of how to prevent subjective views from coloring objective facts. "¹²⁹

So, allowing the "I" in, allowing the "I" to speak, to be ungagged, unbound—this changes the core of ethnography—most of all in terms of how it is *written*. This, coupled with the changing face of ethnographers, some of whom speak from a "we," is having an effect:

"...An increasing number of anthropologists who are working at home in their own societies will be critical [as in, instrumental] to this new ethnography.

When the "other" is not exotic but is oneself, ethnography, anthropological

life writing, can only be both reflexive and political and the question "whose life is it anyway" will be answered."¹³⁰

"I" and "you" become less separate, and are brought closer together. "I" and "you" becomes "we."

In ethnography, the "I," traditionally surfaced in diaries and letters and the prefaces to books, but was not written into ethnographies. This, too, is changing. Ethnography has always been wary of the "I," of too much navel-gazing, of being considered nonscientific, narcissistic, self-consumed (something writers of other genres could learn from—a healthy self-criticism, self-monitoring, and self-awareness).

Recent "experimental" ethnographies draw from life-writing and a reflexive "I":

"Rather than the dispassionate scientist, reporting from behind the scenes with an all-knowing, third-person voice, we have instead the heroic, socially engaged author and passionate critic of the status quo, or even just a frustrated artist seeking to dispense aesthetic experiences about exotic locales" ¹³¹

(I find it jarring that Behar uses the word "exotic" here—at least, without quotes.)

The first person, the "I," in ethnography, allows for "better science"--by showing exactly where the researcher is coming from, and therefore, avoiding any false "objectivity." Using the "I" also involves ethnographers acknowledging the inherent persona constructed out of every written voice. There, now, is the aspect of "voice" and "persona" to tackle (and wield) in ethnographic writing.

"The work of Clifford Geertz, for instance, is read widely because we enjoy reading Geertz, the author, as much as we enjoy reading his study results.

And Geertz is well aware of his rhetorical powers; "I've always argued that in part I'm represented in my texts by my style, that at least people won't think my books were written by anybody else, that there's a kind of signature in them." ¹³²

Often, in nonfiction(such as memoir and personal essays), a reader reads a piece because they enjoy the speaker's voice, style, and persona. And so, with the entrance of a strong, vocal, ever-present "I" in ethnography comes the necessity for a closer attention to craft. A recognition that: "Ethnography is a genre played with words, and we know that written reality is a second-order reality that reshapes the events it depicts."¹³³

Ethnography is confessing to a first-person eye and "I," becoming a meta-form, discussing its own flaws and subjectivities as a way to more clearly define itself and its subject. This seems to me, personally, good (better) for ethnography and its final aims of "truth"--of getting insider perspectives while taking into account how all experience is filtered through an "I."

As Auger says of ethnographer, Ruth Behar:

"Behar in effect advocates that ethnography become autobiography; she is trying to find out what makes herself tick by exploring her emotional reactions to everyday experiences, by trying on new identities. ...The only way to be honest, for readers to appreciate where you are coming from, is to own up to your biases as explicitly as possible by becoming aware of them yourself, and

writing them down”¹³⁴

30.

What does ethnography have to offer other genres--besides its belief in empathy, its careful research, the questions of culture and society it considers, its sense of responsibility?

Ethics. As stated earlier, ethnography may feel the pressures of genre and blurred borders more than most forms. Successful ‘New Ethnography’, if such a name can be used, can therefore offer its sense of ethics to the rest of academe. A new ethnography includes a vigilant sense of personal ethics; a desire to do no harm, to illuminate without damage.

All autobiography involves others. The following set of questions can be applied to any written genre that involves a self and other:

"Where does the right to express and represent oneself begin to infringe on another's right to privacy? How shall the desires of the self be weighted against the demands of the other, concern for aesthetics with concerns for ethics? Is it necessary, or at least desirable, to obtain consent of permission from those to be represented? When consent cannot be obtained, what constraints, if any, should apply to intimate life writing? Are auto/biographers obliged to "do good"--or at least to do not harm--to those they represent? Can harm to minor characters in one's autobiography be dismissed as unavoidable and trivial? If life writing necessarily involves violating the privacy of others and possibly harming them, what values might offset such ethical liabilities? What constitutes appropriation or even expropriation of someone else's story?

"you can't betray someone you barely know" (a journalistic attitude.

Journalists and biographers are not indebted--and thus are not obliged to be loyal to--non-consenting subjects. But consensual relationships involving trusting cooperation have unique potential for treachery. What ethical rules or principles, if any, should pertain to life writing beyond legal constraint? Should such principles differ from genre to genre?"¹³⁵

Creative writer, Patricia Hampl, offers an example. The first poem in her first published book referred to her relationship with her mother and a grand mal seizure. Her mother said "You have no right," but Hampl questioned the premise underlying her mother's objection—her mother's right to privacy--by suggesting that epilepsy was nothing to be ashamed of and thus not a matter requiring privacy. When her mother could not be convinced, Hampl offered to cut the poem, even as she proclaimed it the best in the volume, playing on her mother's desire to see her succeed. Later, Hampl felt that she had violated her mother's privacy *and* exploited her pride in a talented daughter. This shows how even poetry, with its license, can endanger and damage the fragile private relationships that nurture and encourage it.

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Every life-writer must become, to a certain degree, a "we," as an author (without, perhaps, expressing oneself overtly in the first-person-plural). Every life-writing author must at least consider the "we," acknowledge the "we" not just in the gathering of information, but in writing and publication, as well:

"Rather than claiming "ethnographic authority" exclusively for themselves, then, many contemporary ethnographers are now willing to share it,

incorporating narratives by their "subjects;" giving them a voice as well. That is to say, they are acknowledging, granting, and even fostering the autonomy of their subjects.”¹³⁷

31.

David Wright grappled with a new quagmire of ethics when he wrote a creative nonfiction piece that was accepted by “The Kenyon Review” as an “article.” He was brought before IRB for “bad research practices” and “unethical behavior.” The problem was that, “What the IRB had called an article...was in fact a personal essay: creative nonfiction (CNF).” Wright said, “It was not clear in my case, what constituted “research” or what defined the “human-subjects” against whom I had behave unethically. The IRB, I quickly learned, had the authority to do what it threatened.”¹³⁸

Created fifty years ago, IRB's came about to protect human subjects who volunteered to take part in biomedical research—and so there is a built-in “victim/defendant” paradigm at the heart of the IRB. The definition of CNF, as a genre, as a name, renders it inapplicable to an IRB. As Wright states:

“Therein lay the real threat of our IRB: with no tradition of IRB oversight of the humanities and not a single humanist on the board, much less someone with experience in CNF, there was no safeguard to assure that charges leveled against me were justifiable and not merely motivated by malicious intentions....I was being charged, on one hand, with “bad research practices”

for writing about a student without having attained his prior written consent--a requirement of the biomedical model of IRB oversight--and on the other, with "unethical behavior" for failing to report that student for the crime that he had alleged to have committed. How, precisely, I practiced bad research is beyond me as I had not, in fact, conducted "research" at all. I wrote a personal essay--a piece of CNF narrative about a complex of societal and personal observations dealing with race, class, and pedagogy. In the essay, the experience with the student prompts the reflection that drives the narrative...I did not seek out the student's prior written consent...I had in fact gone to great lengths to protect him and his identity--which is the motive for requiring consent...[The essay] was CNF--all true but informed by omission as much as inclusion and shaped for dramatic purposes, not scholarly exegesis. The notion of 'inventing the truth' had been a central theme of interrogation of my class; what my student had described in his essay may have been true or not--I didn't know then and do not still...I am a writing teacher, not a police officer...beyond my personal malaise and our campus wide loss, my case brings to light larger questions about the hazards of IRBs. IRBs have fired a shot across our bow, alerting the humanities to beware...can the same model of oversight as is used for research in the biomedical sphere be applied to what I do? Where the hard sciences concern themselves with the practical applications of black and white, CNF, by its very definition exists in the blurry spaces in between."¹³⁹

This seems to be a potential danger of the blurring the genres--the

ethics of one genre suddenly restricting another. In this situation, genre, the walls of genre, and *naming*, becomes vitally important. If a piece is considered by its author to be creative nonfiction, if that piece has been written with the methodologies and ethics of creative nonfiction in mind, then, should it be held to IRB standards? If an ethnography has been written as a combination creativenonfiction/ethnography/fiction, should it adhere to IRB standards? These questions will no doubt become increasingly important and irritating as genres continue to blur--and blurring itself becomes institutionalized. Perhaps the naming of genre, and the parameters of each genre, will become even more important in determining ethics and institutionalized standards. To deny creative nonfiction the freedom it allows itself, that its practitioners allow themselves (built into the word “creative”), would be criminal. But to not consider these sorts of ethical-subject questions—is equally problematic.

32.

MFA students rarely write critical papers or study theory. And PhD and MA students in English, Cultural Studies, and Anthropology rarely take Creative Writing workshops. This is as powerful and sad an example of genre rigidity as I can imagine; an example of how a blurring of the genres would serve to aid practitioners on both sides of the current, unfortunate, still-existing divide. I believe there needs to be more of a feeding and exchange between the academic and creative aspects of not only the English department (between Literature and Creative Writing), but all departments. Ethnographers should take creative writing workshops. Creative writers should take Cultural Studies courses (ethnography, material culture, gender studies). We all need to push ourselves to learn other ways of writing, to better

understand the genre that we predominantly or most comfortably write from within, and to better learn how to innovate and enrich our material--by having other weapons of form and style and content in our arsenals. Think of Stephen Hawking's clear and elegant prose opening the cosmos and quantum theory to millions of people—untrained scientists; or, Garcia Lorca's poetry seething more than a political tract; of the earth-shattering simplicity of a one-page paper by Watson and Crick et al that literally twisted our world around a spiraling new form. Think of Rachel Carson's creative-scientific prose driving home the message of environmentalism; of Anne Carson's brilliance with words sneaking us through four or five styles of writing and thought without us noticing, or minding. When different genres acknowledge, share with, and respect one another, the only result can be an overall growth of thought and how it is disseminated to people, the world over, from the ivory towers to the magazine stands, and everywhere in between. There is that of every genre in every artist, every scientist, every person. Therefore this most important of all: to thine own self *and* other selves, be true.

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Chapter VI: Lassoing Time and Space¹⁴⁰

In this lecture, we're going to graze like cows, nipping through some general concepts of time and space. The point of all this is simply to remind ourselves that time and space are constructs that writers can manipulate in their work. We'll start by looking at some paintings, all early Netherlandish from the 15th and 16th centuries. I'll be interjecting with some quotes--some fiction to painting parallels. Then, we'll focus solely on time and space in literature, and we'll end with a brief exercise.

Most narrative paintings play with space and distance (in terms of a fore, middle, and background) but they keep time *unilateral*, meaning they depict only one instant, one moment, time is captured and framed--as in a photograph. There are of course exceptions to this rule--one being Salvador Dali (think of his signature melting clocks--an overt rendering of malleable time). Another exception: early Netherlandish paintings in which *multiple* times and spaces are depicted within *one* frame. These paintings traverse a simultaneous past, present, and future.

All of the paintings we'll be looking at are rendered in what's considered "miniature style." All are oil on wood. On your handout, you'll see the title and size of the work, and the artist's name. We'll start with 2 works that exhibit a fairly conventional organization of space: "The Crucifixion" and "The Last Judgment."



Despite their restricted space both panels are crammed with detail. Space is arranged vertically in both. In “The Crucifixion,” the background is crosses against a vista of city, landscape, and sky. In the foreground, is the mourning Virgin Mary in blue. Middle ground begins with a bare spot of earth, one of the *few* places in the painting *not* filled-in with detail, besides the sky. This cleared space, is more profound and effective *because* of the surrounding clutter. The space adds depth. This same effect is created in fiction via a short, perfunctory sentence in a paragraph of long, intricate sentences. The short sentence feels powerful--because of its rhythmic difference. This is number one on your handout: From Virginia Woolf’s novel To the

Lighthouse:

“Such were the extremes of emotion that Mr. Ramsay excited in his children’s breasts by his mere presence; standing, as now, lean as a knife, narrow as the blade of one, grinning sarcastically, not only with the pleasure of disillusioning his son and casting ridicule upon his wife, who was ten thousand times better in every way than he was (James thought), but also with some secret conceit at his own accuracy of the judgment. What he said was true. It was always true. He was incapable of untruth; never tampered with a fact; never altered a disagreeable word to suit the pleasure or convenience of any mortal being, lest of all of his own children, who, sprung from his loins, should be aware from childhood that life is difficult; facts uncompromising; and the passage to that fable land where our brightest hopes are extinguished...”(and the sentence goes on for a lot longer but we’ll stop here).¹⁴¹

You see the power of the two short sentences in the middle of the paragraph: “What he said was true. It was always true.” They change the palate, like the clear space in “The Crucifixion.”

In the second panel, “The Last Judgment,” fore, middle, and background are flattened to represent space in three, vertical tiers. Heaven on top, earth in the middle (spilt in half to show land and sea--the angel marking the border between), the bottom is hell. Note how the wings of the angel delineate the region between heaven and earth, just as the skeleton’s skull and arms mark the border between hell and earth. Space is tamed and sectoried. A fiction parallel--the use of subheadings or white

space or chapters to delineate borders.



"The Rest

on the Flight into Egypt." Taking up most of the frame, the Virgin Mary nurses the Christ Child. Now look into the background, into the trees.



There is the holy family shown at an earlier time maybe minutes, maybe hours before the *moment* of nursing. Repetition of the blue of Mary's cloak and the configuration of Mary seated with Christ on her lap shows that the characters are the same in both scenes. The family's future destination, Egypt, (although it looks nothing like Egypt, more like Brussels) is shown at the other side of the painting. We have a past, present, and future in one frame. This is the genius of early Netherlandish paintings. Three different times are depicted at once, through a careful ordering of space.



"The Annunciation Triptych." This painting shows only *one* time but many spaces. We see in the middle Mary, the Angel Gabriel, and the *tiny* Christ child descending on rays of light. Notice the detail that specifies *the time* of the painting--Christ's entrance has *just* snuffed out the candle on the table--see the smoke--and this settles the exact time, the moment, of the painting. Joseph occupies a wing of his own, plying his carpentry trade--he is next door in the same house. The male donor to the church, who most likely paid for the painting is on the left wing and observes the annunciation through an open door. Note that each background has an opening through which we can see a space even *further back*, a sort of back background. City square visible through Joseph's window--the snowflakes, white, against the tiny figures--alludes to winter, the season of Christ's birth. Again the city, through the donor's door, and through the Virgin's window, just the heavens.



"Adoration of the Magi." In this narrative painting, we have a right to left movement of time. The background landscape is continuous--here is the house and fence, the fence continues, the mountain continues, we see a bit of the Abbey then, the rest of the Abbey, and in this part of the sky, birds. Space is stationary in the painting; but *time* is not. The different times are linked *from one panel to the next* by the presence of the donkey, bricks, pillars, and characters. Here is the Holy Family approaching the manger. In the next frame, we see the same donkey and same people, but in different positions--it's a different time. In the next frame, the scene is linked by the loose bricks, the pillars, but now Joseph is crowded out by the Magi. This linking of different situations and times through repeated objects (like the donkey, the bricks) is quite common in literature. An example, number two on your handout, is from John Berger's novel To the Wedding:

"On a corner where the No. 11 stops, the woman driver of the first tram of the

day smiles at the smell of newly baked bread which she breathes in because she has jammed the tram windscreen open with one of her shoes. Five floors up, Zdena smells the same bread. The window of *her* room is open. Long and narrow, so narrow that a single bed arranged lengthwise barely leaves enough space to walk between the bed and wall, the room is like a long corridor leading to the window which gives on to an acacia tree and looks down on the tramlines.”¹⁴²

We move from one woman on a street, in a tram, to another woman in a fifth floor apartment *via the smell of bread* which both women smell *because* both women have a window open. Berger moves us through two different and unrelated spaces and characters via the bread and windows, just as the bricks, donkey, and pillars move the observer smoothly through time in “The Adoration of the Magi.”



The

“Penitence of St. Jerome” is another continuous panoramic landscape. The center

panel shows St. Jerome, kneeling on a ledge in the desert.



The

monastery that Jerome founded is perched on a high plateau in the middle ground. To his right, an illustration of the legend of Jerome's lion. All of these scenes are from disparate *times* in Jerome's life--*here* they're all in one frame. The left wing, features the Baptism of Christ by St. John, and in the middle distance, St. John preaches in the

wilderness. The right wing shows Saint Anthony the hermit. So it's the same landscape continuing throughout but each panel tells multiple stories of different men. This type of organization parallels short story collections like Sherwood Anderson's Winesburg, Ohio, and our own Crystal Wilkinson's Water Street, in which a number of stories take place in the same town, same general setting, but from story to story, different characters move in and out of the landscape.



And in our last painting, “The Fifteen Mysteries of the Virgin of the Rosary” we have *multiscenes*--all events from the life of Mary and Jesus. This time, *the locations and times change* and it is the *characters* who remain constant. Center of the scene, Mary is crowned queen of heaven. Above this, the painting is divided into three registers: the five

joyful mysteries, the five sorrowful mysteries, the five glorious mysteries--like a book in three parts, five chapters per part, and a main character or characters in every scene. It's the formation of most novels and short stories in which *one* character is the main focus--think of a book like Updike's Rabbit Run, which, for the most part, sticks with Rabbit although there is a section from Janis's perspective, just as we have in this painting, a register dedicated to Jesus.

Okay. We're done with the paintings (Pause). Last month, my five year old cousin showed me a pair of white tights and told me they were ballet tights, and I said I didn't know you took ballet and she said, quote "I used to dance but that was a long time ago." I was struck by the fact that this child whose life consists of only five years, has a strong sense of a past that *belongs* to her. Later, I asked her mother about the dance lessons and she said my cousin had taken a one day ballet class *a week ago* which was, to the child, a long time ago. My point in telling you this is that we all have a sense of a past, present, and future, *and* we all have very different *overall* senses of time. Time is subjective. Time is a concept we humans shape and construct to suit our purposes. As a species, we're obsessed with time. We're always trying to beat the clock, rest and stop time, rush and save time, grow up faster, stay younger, everything we do bears a sense of the average human lifespan, a sense of time. St. Augustine said it best: "Thou human soul...to thee is it given to see and to measure lengths of time." We remember the past, we project into the future, we exist in the now. Our language and grammatical structures are organized around a sense of time. I am. I will be. I was. I will go. I went. I would have gone. And just as we humans travel in time, so too does the art we create. All fiction adheres to a framework of

minutes and hours and seconds.

In the 3rd millennium BC, inhabitants of Sumer and Egypt developed writing and a counting system based on the number 60. Via Greece, the system was transmitted to the European Medieval world where the hour was divided into 60 minutes, the minute into 60 seconds, and the circle into 360 degrees. As with all standards of time the only rule was to have a set scale--an equation, a ratio...something like: One dog year equals seven human years. Time is malleable. We have Daylight Savings Time, in this country, because of the oil crisis of the 1970's, we have eastern standard time, mountain, central, and Pacific time. Chinese New Year falls on a different day than Times Square New Year, etc.. It is important for a writer to consider time a construct because in our stories, we mold time. On the page, an author can manipulate time down to the last millisecond. You make up the rules, just be sure to abide by whatever rules you come up with.

There are many different aspects of time in literature. I'm going to enumerate a few --some pretty obvious, some a bit more creative. Number 3 on your handout: There is the sense of time a character has--is she a woman more grounded in the past than the present? Someone who is *always* remembering, never acting? Or is she always moving forward, *never* remembering--is her past something she wishes to avoid?

Number 4 on the handout: The time in which a story takes place--is it 1964, 1714, 1210 BC, 2008, etc.

5) The tense of a story. We all know the dangers and pitfalls of wandering between a past, present, or future tense. Connected to tense is the motion of stories

through time: is your story chronological, non-chronological, cyclical. Are there flashbacks, flashforwards?

6) The time *span* of a piece, the *parameters*--where does a story start and end?

Consider Virginia Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway a novel-length work that spans, in fiction time, one day. Compare this to Woolf's novel Orlando that spans, in fiction time, four centuries.

7) The *timing* of a story, as in the pacing, rhythm, speed. Think of this in terms of music. A tick of a metronome keeping time to a beat that is dictated by the writer. All writers, like musicians, have an inner sense of tempo (which usually changes from piece to piece *or* changes a many times *within* a piece). For example, in Maxine Hong Kingston's latest book, The Fifth Book of Peace, the pace of the writing moves like a speeding car as the character Ah Sing drives around Ha'waii, but the writing *slows* and moves like a man swimming, when Ah Sing parks the car and goes scuba diving. Many writers have *signature* rhythms that creep into their work. The playwright, Harold Pinter was interviewed late in his career and asked why his sentences and rhythms were no longer clipped-- why had he changed the timing and pacing of his prose? Pinter answered with one sentence: "I stopped riding the bus." He went on to explain how at the beginning of his playwriting career, he rode the bus for a few hours everyday to get to and from work. On the bus, he listened to blips of conversation. And this timing, this clipped rhythm entered his writing.

There's a story about Hemmingway that is supported by a scholar whose name I can't remember (he wrote a book on the topic). Supposedly, Hemmingway began as a writer of lavish, adorned prose. His sudden shift to spare and declarative

sentences appeared after his heart was broken by a lover. His inner rhythms changed and so did his written.

8) Time as it is affected by space, and vice versa. Time and space *are* inseparable. The Japanese character “ma” roughly means “time space” or “pause” and combines spatial and temporal notions into a single ideogram. Time and space in terms of physics are considered to *co-inhabit* the fourth dimension.

Connecting time and space is vital for a writer. As the poet Noel Arnaud said: “I am the space where I am.” I once read a friend’s short story which was set in NYC. It was a very good story, beautifully written but something was wrong, something didn’t feel right about it. I finally realized what it was: none of the characters had a *NY* sense of time *or* space. People walked leisurely and seemed to have huge apartments, the traffic lights seemed very long, there was hardly any noise. It was my only criticism of the story but it *affected the entire thing*. My friend confessed that the story had originally been set in Kansas City; she changed the city name, but nothing else.

9) Specific and general time. Here’s an example of specific time from *The English Patient*:

“*Every four days* she washes his black body, beginning at the destroyed feet.”¹⁴³

Every four days. Specific time.

Now here’s a sentence, from Flaubert’s novel Madame Bovary, that exists in a more general time. This particular sentence, the second one I’ll read, was a favorite of Flannery O’Connor’s:

"She struck the notes with aplomb and ran from top to bottom of the keyboard

without a break. [Here's the sentence] Thus shaken up, the old instrument whose strings buzzed, could be heard at the other end of the village when the window was open, and often the bailiff's clerk, passing along the highroad, bareheaded and in his list slippers, stopped to listen, his sheet of paper in his hand."¹⁴⁴

Note the space or distance the sentence spans--from inside a house to the other end of a village sound carries through an open window. The time is general: "often the bailiff's clerk"-- "often" is a general time, *but still* there are *some* parameters; "often" can only occur anytime that the "the window is open," Emma is playing the piano, and the bailiff is walking on the highroad.

10) Time as a theme and setting. Let's look at a section from Robin Lippincott's novel Mr. Dalloway. Note, at the beginning of the excerpt the tense of the dialogue is *present* tense, even though the rest of the scene is in *past* tense. *Dialogue almost always slides fluidly between tenses, usually existing mostly in present tense, even if the story is written in past tense.* Most writers do this instinctually, without being aware of the shift. Just an interesting aside. In the following excerpt, a crowd of people await a solar eclipse which will occur only once in the lifetime of every member of the group. The "once in a lifetime" aspect of the experience is what makes the event so special and *time-defined--it makes time the setting of the scene*. To punctuate the many different aspects of time in the scene, I've added some italics and comments:

"He *briefly* looked down at the ground and then returned his gaze to his wife.

"It served to remind me that we haven't much walked in London together for

years.”

“No, we haven’t,” she agreed. “I daresay it’s been at least *fifteen or twenty years.*”

“But now that I have *time* again, we must.” He squeezed her hand “Just as we *used to.*”

“6:20!” (*specific time*) a wizened old woman called out through her megaphone. Silence *immediately* fell over the crowd as--en masse--they now stared up at the sky.

The clouds were sweeping, moving along at a great pace; then sailing fast across the sun; then red streamers appeared; now a golden haze. (*time passing rapidly; note how the words “then” and “now” push time along*)

Someone in the crowd announced that after this it would be over until 1999 (and Richard Dalloway thought to himself that 1999 was a year so far away, so remote-seeming, that he couldn’t even imagine it).”¹⁴⁵

So that’s another way to wield time in fiction--time as a theme and setting.

OK. Let’s move on to space, which, like time, is something we can manipulate on the page. Consider an architectural design where one inch equals four *actual* feet. Or a map, where the *same* inch represents the distance between Louisville and Baltimore. Borders between nations and neighborhoods are constructs--there is no actual line, no demarcation, between India and Pakistan or Florida and Georgia. We create these lines and borders and live by them.

Like real people, *characters* inhabit a space, they move *through* space.

Douglas Bauer writes, this is number 11 on the handout:

“Maybe 70% of writing fiction is getting someone from one side of the room to the other....Virginia Woolf said something similar when she complained in a letter that the hardest thing for her was getting her character through the door. In other words, for all those moments of "intense emotion" and "keen perception" as O'Connor identifies them...the great majority of narrative, the greatest number of sentences in a piece of fiction, have to do with getting your people through the door and across the room, in and out of the car, standing them up, sitting them down, having them wave to their neighbor..."¹⁴⁶

Thus, we must move our characters *convincingly* through time and space. Our stories *hinge* on this very simple and *mechanical* organization. Choreographer Lucinda Child's calls dancers "Space eaters," those who cover distances, who gobble space as they move through it. We writers have to be space eaters too. The dancer who most certainly has aching joints and bad knees but appears to fly effortlessly must be our model. We must move characters through space with the illusion of fluidity and ease.

Here's an example of a character moving through space from Raymond Carver's short story "A Small Good Thing." Number 12 on the handout.

"She ran water, undressed, and got into the tub. She washed and dried quickly, not taking the time to wash her hair. She put on clean underwear, wool slacks, and a sweater. She went into the living room, where the dog

looked up at her and let its tail thump once against the floor. It was just starting to get light outside when she went out to the car.

She drove into the parking lot of the hospital and found a space close to the front door. She felt she was in some obscure way responsible for what had happened to the child... "147

On the page, *space informs time*. White space indicates a *gap* in time, it is a *code* for the reader. If, after white space, time jumps seventy years and moves 4500 miles, the reader will not be shocked or confused. The white space is easily interpreted--incidentally, the same sort of break is also indicated by a new chapter, or by a new paragraph or new sentence. White space can also be used for a very small jump in time, as in the Carver example we just looked at where we see a woman getting into her car, and after the white space, making turn into a parking lot-- we merely skip driving time. Notice how in the first paragraph, Carver quickly summarizes the character's actions. We do not see her washing every finger; we do not see her opening her car door. We see just enough to assume that her fingers are clean, and that she is moving forward, from the bathroom, to the car to the hospital.

In Lydia Davis's short short, "Oral History (With Hiccups)" space represents a rhythmic pause (as punctuation often does). The story is only two pages long--a good length because clever as the technique is, if it went on for any longer it would probably get tiresome). Just read this one quickly to yourselves, number 13 on the handout--it's less effective when read aloud:

“My sister died last year leaving two daughters. My husband and I have decided to adopt the girl. The older one is thirty-three and a buyer for a department store, and the younger one, who just turned thirty works in the state budget office. We have one child still living at home, and house is big, so it will be a tight fit, but we are willing to do this for their sake.” (and so on).¹⁴⁸

Space in literature also pertains to the length of a piece, how much *actual* space the story takes up. We have 800 page novels, short stories of 9 pages or 24 pages, or, a short short, of two pages like the Lydia Davis example.

Space is a where and time is a when. Where and when we choose to begin a story affects everything. An early story I wrote was 55 pages long, 55 *terrible* pages in which I tried to tell everything about my main character’s life, from her birth to age 78, in twelve different locations. I had a “writing revelation” when I decided to pick a scene from the *middle* of my 55 page story and *rewrite* the story starting there-- *there* being with the character at age 14. In the new version of the story, I stayed with the character for only one week in only two locations and wrote a 12 page story which contained all of the important themes and ideas of my original, miserable 55 page story. Compressing time, limiting space allowed me to find the story I *actually* was trying to tell.

How you describe space affects your material. A book like, A Journey Around My Room written in 1794, when the author, Xavier de Maistre, was in prison, describes “diagonal and zigzag visits to such diverting sites as the armchair, the desk,

and the bed.” The author’s confinement is viscerally experienced by the reader because the story never strays from the cramped jail space. A very different sense of space can be found in Italo Calvino’s book Invisible Cities which roams to over 35 cities in 165 pages. Thousands of miles are covered in the short book; each city is summed up in chapters ranging from only one to two pages in length.

Like painters, writers frame space (the page as canvas). Let’s look at two final examples of written, framed space. Space is compressed and zoomed in on through a telescope in Yukio Mishima’s novel The Sound of Waves. Two young people, a boy and a girl, are at a lighthouse, looking at the sea. What they see is carefully described. Then, the girl leans down and looks at the *same* vista but now through a telescope. Number 14 on the handout:

“Hatsue gave a second cry of admiration. A large ocean-liner had just come into the field of the telescope. It was scarcely visible to the naked eye, but as the ship made its stately way across the telescope’s field of view, its delicate reflection was so splendid and clear that the boy and girl...[took turns looking through] the telescope.

It seemed to be a combined cargo and passenger ship...In a room off the promenade deck they could plainly see several tables spread with white cloths, and a number of chairs. Not a single person was visible. The room was apparently the dining salon, and as they were examining its walls of white asphalt-tile, suddenly a white-uniformed steward entered from the right and passed in front of the window...

Presently the vessel, carrying green lights at bow and sterns, passed out of the

telescope's range and sailed away through the Irako Channel, bound for the Pacific.”¹⁴⁹

Lots of interesting things happening here. We *cross* space via a telescope, and magnify something previously invisible. What is described is only *what can be seen in the frame* of the telescope. We are also seeing through a “We,” which we know are two alternating sets of eyes--the boy and girl taking turns at the telescope. We have a time jump indicated by an ellipses after the word “window,” and a new paragraph beginning with the word “Presently” (which like “Later” or “then” or “now” or “next” moves a reader through time). Next, we go beyond the reach of the telescope, through the Irako Channel and then project to the ship’s future destination, the Pacific. *Many* different types of spatial movement in just one page.

And our last example, number 15. Steven Milhauser’s compartmentalized story “Little Kingdoms” is a miniature. The story is organized by headers that detail some small aspect of a particular kingdom, such as a section titled: Clouds, that describes only the clouds of the kingdom; or dragons, which describes only the dragons, and so on. I’ll read from the section entitled, Eyelids, a sort of meta-miniature, a miniature commenting on the miniature:

“The art of illuminating the eyelid is old and honorable, and no Court lady is without her miniaturist. These delicate and precise paintings, in black, white, red, green, and blue ink, are highly prized by our courtiers, and especially by lovers, who read in them profound and ambiguous messages....These paintings are never the same, and indeed are different for each eyelid, and one cannot

know, gazing across the room at a beautiful lady..whether her lowered eyelids will reveal a tall willow with dripping branches; an arched bridge in snow, a pear blossom and hummingbird...rice leaves bending in the wind; a wall with open gate, through which can be seen a distant village on a hillside.”

Note how Milhauser describes his eyelid paintings *as* paintings, each is framed, a moment in time, a sliver of space. The last example, “an open gate through which can be seen a distant village on a hillside” has a fore, middle, and background, just like a painting.

Well, as we all know, time flies, especially residency time, and the hour of the exercise is upon us. Remember: it’s your fiction, it’s your world, you define the time and space.

Time	Space
1 hour	bathroom
1 day	closet
1 week	roof of house
1 year	hospital bed
10 years	empty field
50 years	submarine
a century	underground parking lot

Pick a “time” from the time column; pick a “space” from the space column. Write

about a character in your selected time and space. Do not let the character physically leave the space you choose. Write a paragraph or two or whatever you have time for. For example: write a paragraph about a woman in a closet for a week. Or a dog in a submarine for an hour. Or a skeleton in an empty field for a century. **Okay? Five minutes.**

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- ¹⁴⁰ A lecture first delivered at Spalding University, Louisville, Kentucky: October 15, 2003.
- ¹⁴¹ Virginia Woolf, To the Lighthouse (San Deigo: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1927) 4.
- ¹⁴² John Berger, To the Wedding (New York: Vintage Books, 1996) 32.
- ¹⁴³ Michael Ondaatje, The English Patient (New York: Vintage Books, 1992) 3.
- ¹⁴⁴ Douglas Bauer, "The Pack Mule of Prose: Thoughts on the Sentence," AWP Chronicle Sepetember (2003).
- ¹⁴⁵ Robin Lippincott, Mr. Dalloway (Louisville: Sarabande Books, 1999) 212.
- ¹⁴⁶ Bauer
- ¹⁴⁷ Carver 77.
- ¹⁴⁸ Lydia Davis, Samuel Johnson Is Indignant (New York: Picador, 1976) 125.
- ¹⁴⁹ Yukio Mishima, The Sound of Waves (Berkeley, California: Berkeley Publishing Corporation, 1956) 139.

*Chapter VII: Political Flappings*¹⁵⁰

Roger Casement

Born 1 September 1864, Sandycove, County Dublin, to a Catholic mother and Ulster Protestant father.

Roger Casement. Hanged for treason. 3 August 1916. Pentonville Prison, London.¹⁵¹

In a museum, in Dublin, a butterfly. Orange wings, rimmed in black. White circles at wingtips.¹⁵²

Tagged: *A South American butterfly collected for the Natural History Museum by Sir Roger Casement circa 1911.*¹⁵³

1911. One year before Irish Home Rule was introduced into the British Parliament for the third time since 1800. Nay'ed, again. Five years before Casement was hung. His corpse, the broken neck, chucked in quicklime.¹⁵⁴

Roger Casement. A British consul in Portuguese East Africa (Mozambique; 1895-98), Angola (1898-1900), Congo Free State (1901-04), and Brazil (1906-11). He exposed atrocities against native labor by white traders in imperial employment in the Congo and the Putumayo River region, Peru. His Congo report (published 1904) led to a reorganisation of Belgian rule under King Leopold (1908). Casement's Putumayo report (1912) earned him knighthood.

His crime: at the beginning of World War I, seeking German assistance to cease British rule in Ireland. 1914, he traveled to America, sought immigrant Irish money for guns. Then to Berlin: the German government, reluctant to risk an

expedition; Irish prisoners of war, unrecrutable. The one shipment of weapons he acquired sank off the coast of Ireland. The Germans loaned no army officers to lead the Irish rising planned for Easter 1916. ¹⁵⁵

My mother always says: "The Irish never ask for what isn't offered."

Casement returned to Ireland on Good Friday, 1916, in a German submarine (the slow rise, water cascading in an oval), and was put ashore near Tralee, County Kerry. Of that moment, he wrote:

"When I landed in Ireland that morning...swamped and swimming ashore on an unknown strand I was happy for the first time for over a year. Although I knew that this fate waited on me...I cannot tell you what I felt. The sandhills were full of skylarks, rising in the dawn, the first I had heard in years--the first sound I heard through the surf was their song as I waded in through the breakers...and all around were primroses and wild violets...and I was back in Ireland again." ¹⁵⁶

Wet, he was arrested and hauled to the Tower of London. On 29 June 1916, he was sentenced to death.

His knighthood, which he earned for human rights, he "regarded dubiously"

¹⁵⁷

His sense of humor: defiant. A vigorous participant in the Gaelic Revival, he championed Irish language, culture. Both squashed under British rule. Among his papers: "an acerbic note from his bank asking him to please not correspond in Irish."

¹⁵⁸

He who owns the bank, speaks English. This remains true.

A person with a defiant sense of humor often returns, in death, as a ghost.

Roger Casement. Betrayed (twice) by that which served him best: language.

The first betrayal:

"The law by which he was tried [for treason] dated back to 1351 and was written in archaic French. Much of the deliberation about whether or not he had committed treason depended on whether the text implied a comma and how a word should be translated; some of the local witnesses to his arrival in Kerry [via submarine] spoke in a brogue the English court could hardly understand." ¹⁵⁹

George Bernard Shaw felt Casement's defense should be that he was not English and therefore could not be tried for treason against England. It was a matter of words. ¹⁶⁰

The day of his sentencing, Casement joked he would return as a ghost wearing the armor of a knight of 1351, the year of the law by which he was convicted. ¹⁶¹

Language, his weapon. His report on the Congo, published as a Blue Book--an official government document--detailed daily life in the work camps of the Congo--roughly 900,00 square miles. Camps where natives were starved, flayed, raped, maimed, worked to death. Murdered. He exposed the system installed by King Leopold's officials which permitted a tax levied on natives, mostly on India-rubber. ¹⁶²

Casement's writing: ethnography, transcribed dialogue; the stories of the suffering in their own voices. Memoir, journaling. Fiction's sense of narrative, description, setting. A tone (by Victorian standards), flat, brutal in its factuality. But not without drama. For he described bodies. Bodies in pain: ripped, undressed, raw.

And so he undid "the legitimacy of the authority of imperialism...by making the private and individual and local pain of...bodies, a public, political issue, thousands of miles away in Europe and America" ¹⁶³

In his Congo report, he wrote:

"At other villages which I visited, I found the tax to consist of baskets, which the inhabitants had to make and deliver weekly as well as, always, a certain amount of foodstuffs. [The natives] were frequently flogged for delay or inability to complete the tally of these baskets, or the weekly supply of food. Several men, including a Chief of one town, showed broad weals across their buttocks, which were evidently recent. One, a lad of 15 or so, removing his cloth, showed several scars across his thighs, which he and others around him said had formed part of a weekly payment for a recent shortage in their supply of food.

. . . Two cases [of mutilation] came to my...notice while I was in the lake district. One, a young man, both of whose hands had been beaten off with the butt ends of rifles against a tree; the other a young lad of 11 or 12 years of age, whose right hand was cut off at the wrist. . . . Of six natives (one a girl, three little boys, one youth, and one old woman) who had been mutilated in this way during the rubber regime, all except one were dead at the date of my visit.

[A sentry in the employ of one of the concessionary private companies] said he had caught and was detaining as prisoners [eleven women] to compel their husbands to bring in the right amount of rubber required of them on the next

market day. . . . When I asked what would become of these women if their husbands failed to bring in the right quantity of rubber . . . , he said at once that then they would be kept there until their husbands had redeemed them.

.....

(Signed) R. Casement¹⁶⁴

He did not describe the act of looking. He described what he saw. People, in pain. The "lad's" scars across "his thighs." Not legs. The humanization that comes with specificity. The moment preceding the revelation of wound: "he removed his cloth." The pulling down of garment; the lacerated flesh. Descriptions, wide-angled, choreographed. Horror speaking for itself in unadorned language. An aesthetic, a style, that disassembled empires.

A touch of the erotic keeps a reader reading.

Thighs. Not legs.

Roger Casement. His body, snapped, by the British government.

The needs of his body: natural, pure.

He died a Catholic, having converted, in his bed in the Tower of London. He went to his death, he said, with "the body of his God" as his final meal.¹⁶⁵

In the 1970's it was reported that Casement's ghost made frequent appearances in Calabar, Nigeria, where he had been a consul at the beginning of his involvement with British imperialism.

A line from the Nigerian report: "The apparition was always said to be of a kindly nature"¹⁶⁶

The second betrayal of language--post-mortem. His own words (probably).

His personal journals known as "the Black Diaries," published, by the British government, after his death. An attempt to slander an Irish hero. In Casement's diaries: "erotic encounters are reduced to a few descriptive phrases of beautiful eyes, large cocks, and sexual acts." He included penis measurements in sexual shorthand.¹⁶⁷

An Irish martyr, stained by sexuality. Abhorred for his aesthetics. Abhorred for how he loved what he found beautiful.

The Irish reacted to Casement just as the English wanted them to.

In 2002, the "Black Diaries" were examined (controversy surrounds the findings). The handwriting pronounced: Roger Casement's. It seems to me the main controversy stems from those who will not accept his homosexuality. This, from Ireland, a Christian country; Christianity, its hero, human.

Consider this:

"The following [is a] sample pair of 1910 entries, from the White and Black Diaries respectively:

"Sunday 4th December. Out for a walk to the military firing ground with Ignacio Torres as my guide. Took several photos of the ground and trees and a stream beyond. Back at 11 - in great heat - and wrote a little in the afternoon altho' it was stifling. In the evening the Cazes' had a bridge party after dinner which lasted till midnight - and the heat lasted all night. It was really atrocious - not a breath of air and I lay for hours trying to sleep - and then got up and wrote, but the mosquitoes stop that game.

“Sunday. 4th DEC. Very hot morning. Looking out window saw Ignacio waiting. Joy. Off with him to Tirotero and Camera. Bathed & photo'd & talked & back at 11. Gave 4/-. At 5.30 Cajamarca policeman till 7 at Bella Vista & again at 10.30 passeando & at 8 long talk. Shook hands and offered. Tall, Inca type & brown. Cards & Bridge & stupid party till near midnight. Saw Cajamarca several times from window.”¹⁶⁸

This is the commentary made by a scholar named Murphy on these diary entries. My comments on Murphy's comments are embedded, within brackets.

"The first entry describes a day commencing with a combined walk and tour of inspection and concluding with an evening of socialising at a bridge party. [*Murphy implies this is "normal," commendable behavior.*] The second entry portrays a round of sexual frolics with not one but apparently two males, concluding with a bridge party which seems 'stupid' in contrast. [*Murphy clearly has a penchant for bridge. And what is wrong with having two men in one day? He offered, after all, and in addition, they had a long talk.*] If the second diary entry is genuine, Casement possessed superhuman energy and a Jekyll and Hyde personality, combining official investigative work and reporting with voracious cruising day and night, and all the while finding time to write up two diaries... [*Is it inconceivable that one man lived two lives? When one of his lives was reviled by society? Is it strange that one man had energy enough to roust imperialism and bed multiply?*] A reasonable case can therefore be made for the Black Diaries

being written by someone other than Casement, using real people and events from the White Diaries or other genuine documents as the inspiration for the forgery.”¹⁶⁹

Perhaps, naked, Casement heard more truth than as a uniformed official of imperialism. He stripped: artifice, power.

It does not surprise me that he could not sleep. Or, that, amidst atrocity, he sought pleasure. Gave and received it. It does not surprise me that he had two diaries. One public, one personal. (I think of Malinowski.)

Anyway, truth is elusive.

It is hard
to believe you
sometimes
since you lie as easily as a hungry cat
since you love like an open green bottle
You
who would admit
that truth
moves too fast
to be named

Roger Casement. We are left with his words, official and private. We are left with the effects of those words: progressive, controversial. We are left with the

butterfly.

Of Putumayo, he wrote:

"I said to [a] man that under the...regime I feared the entire Indian population would be gone in ten years and he answered, "I give it six." ¹⁷⁰

It was within this environment of genocide and rainforest that Casement caught the butterfly, now flattened in the Natural History Museum, Dublin.

It was as he sloshed, knowingly, from the German submarine towards death, that the beauty of skylarks and wild violets touched him.

Does this say something about Roger Casement, specifically? Or does it speak to the nature of beauty and atrocity? Aesthetics and politics?

Yes, beauty is subjective. But universally painful, I think. It comes from pain; it causes pain. The beauty of a butterfly, alive, dead: painful.

Beauty comes from juxtaposition.



If the goiter were not there, would the woman be as beautiful? A goiter of that size is felt, experienced. We live out the realities of our bodies. My father, an endocrinologist who treats goiters, took this picture in Nepal. In the mountains, due to a lack of salt, one can become iodine deficient, and goiters grown. My father took this picture because the woman was next to the fruit, because the size and shape of the fruit showed the size of the goiter, comparatively. I did not know any of this when I first saw the picture. My father was silent when he handed it to me. I looked at the photograph. I saw the woman more beautiful because of the goiter. The neat comb-

tracks in her hair. I saw the way she lives with her pain. I saw the goiter and fruit
each more shapely because of the other.

Yehuda Amichai wrote:

Sometimes pus

Sometimes a poem.

Something always bursts out.

And always pain.¹⁷¹

The word butterfly, in Spanish, *mariposa* is a Latin American term for fag or
fairy.¹⁷²

Roger Casement. Cupping the orange wings. Crooning, tenderly: *mariposa*.

*Report from the Live Butterfly Exhibit at the Louisville Zoo*¹⁷³

Exhibit is both a noun (a collection of things displayed) and a verb (to show,
to display, to want to be seen).

At the Louisville Zoo, live butterflies vibrate against the ceiling. Their wings:

Squalid yellow hemmed in cherry. Green of a renegade marriage.

Beneath the butterflies, on the dirt floor, turtles chew lettuce in groups of
three. They huddle near a pool of water with human-sized steps leading from the edge
to the dark bottom. I imagine a woman in a brown, janitorial uniform and thigh-high
rubber gaiters, easing down the chiseled steps. Carp swishing at her hips. The

butterflies, hovering. She scrapes algae from the rocks with a curved metal pick.

I look past the pond and watch butterflies at a feeding station--sliced oranges on cafeteria trays. I am still. From the beauty of the fruit. The white rinds. The butterflies perch on the fruit and sip pure juice, foot-first. The butterflies, like slips of origami.

Long tubes of lettuce stalks lie on the ground. The turtles do not eat the stalks. I wonder if they would eat them in the wild, or if the regular feedings at the zoo have made them fussy, gourmet.

Bach's cello Suite No. 2 pipes from speakers as if overheard from an open window. The courage of D minor grips the muggy environment.

A zoo ranger approaches me, a woman in a pine green uniform and peaked pine hat. Her hair, the auburn of quelled passion. She directs me to a large chart depicting the different butterflies flying overhead, their dorsal and ventral markings, their names. I crane my neck, looking up. I watch a butterfly--wooly, citrus. I watch another--churchy, stained-glass. I watch Blue Flashes and Blue Morphos. There is Sapho, with the white and brown blotches of a pinto pony. Owl, wings like one upper quadrant of owl face, one baleful owl eye. There is Mosaic. The Small Postman. And Little Grey Hairstreak. I wait for them. Just one glimpse will do.

The turtles gather around the glistening, wet lettuce. An iguana, green, like a lime on fire, straddles a log in the pool of water, a foot, one of four, flexed. A Morpho alights on my shoulder, points its antennae at the silver bell hanging from my earlobe. I try to blow it off. It grips and shudders as though my breath is wind and my shoulder, a flower. The ranger shoos the Morpho with her hand. I could have done the

same but there are signs: DO NOT TOUCH THE BUTTERFLIES. I look up and watch them, winging by. "It's stifling," pronounces a man with a baby on his hip. He sweats in the controlled 80 degrees. A good climate for the tropical-bodied, for the butterflies and me.

The Owl flies above, ventral side (black, blue, yellow), lyrically different from dorsal side of mottled stone. The colors blur. Mimicry, camouflage. Behaviors that evolve to avoid being eaten. There is always something unremembered, irretrievable, when moving from one identity to another. There is always something lost. And are these deceits, these conceits, merely for protection? Is there not the stench of extravagance? Butterflies that appear to be leaves are green, leaf-shaped. In addition, they bear markings on their wings that look like holes bored by leaf-eating grubs. Nabokov called this protective device a game of enchantment.¹⁷⁴ He believed it went beyond evolution and into the realm of whimsy.

I wander to a screened-in hutch, a good height for children. Kneeling, I press my face against the wire mesh. Rows of chrysalis hang from wooden dowels, butterflies developing inside each sac.

When the caterpillar enters the pupal stage, its skin splits; it does not move or feed. Larval tissues dissemble and reorganize. Same cells, same matter, different form. After 10-15 days, the chrysalis ruptures. An adult butterfly hauls forth. Transformation. Caterpillar into butterfly. So unlike each other, they require a different name. Do they long for the other name? The name that was lost? The scorched name of the beloved? Caterpillar into butterfly. From earth to air. And inside the pupae, a secret life. The secrets that change us when we know them. The

secrets that change us when we choose to keep them secret.

I sit down next to the screened wooden hutch, take out a pen and paper. A woman leans over, tries to read what I write. Her son stands next to her. We are eye to eye. He points inside the hutch.

"Are those butterflies dead?"

I glance at the rows of pupae. They have the structural look of Western Death. Lined up, spaced rows, like a graveyard. I say, "Ask the ranger, that woman over there."

He shouts, "Hey, Lady," and the ranger takes her hands from her pockets, strolls over.

"Those ones," he says, pointing to the pupae. "Are they dead?"

"No," the ranger says, crouching, "They're waiting to be born."

The boy's mother pats his head with her cabbage-white hand, "Isn't that wonderful," she says. "They're waiting to be butterflies."

Mother and son head toward the iguana, and the ranger and I regard the rows of chrysalis. From the top dowel, upsidedown, pupae reorganize in chili-green pouches. From the next row, sacks dangle like tiny dragons; the next, sea-horses; the last, oak leaves. At the base of the hutch--two butterflies, crumpled, twitching. Near them, another butterfly staggers.

I ask the ranger about the two bedraggled butterflies. She says, "When they first come out they're wet, their wings soft and wrinkled. You think they'll never be able to fly." Her breath smells of milk. She wags a finger at me, "But there's no time to waste when you only have two weeks to live. If you ever see them tail to tail,

they're mating."

"Oh?" I say.

"Yep," she says, "they can fly while mating."

She smirks, a woman with a dirty mind.

I point to the staggering butterfly. "When will that one fly?"

"Never," she says, "That one was born deformed."

I wish she had spoken to me with the same gentleness she used for the boy.

Even grown, we need gentleness. I cannot watch the staggering butterfly. I want to kill it. I want to be its natural predator. I close my notebook and walk to the exit.

I walk through the Reptile Hut, see the Palestine Viper, who dwells behind glass with cacti, sand, bullet casings, in a desert diorama. Hebrew, etched on the bullets.¹⁷⁵ Human politics imposed on a viper. I am fixated on the oval eyes of the snake. The crispness of its black scales. I feel what it is to be coiled, unblinking. I feel what it is to live in a small, glassed space. In this tropical little body, I am a woman.

I pass a Dumeril's Boa lounging on dried palms. A map of Madagascar, darkened, next to it. I pass a Sandkirtland's Water Snake and read it is native to Kentucky, threatened by destruction. Its habitat: marshy areas, meadows, creeks, ponds, residential suburbs, cemeteries, city parks. The Sandkirtland's diorama: rocks, sand, an orange taillight from a car.

In Kentucky, most butterflies live two weeks. Tropical ones live days or months. Migratory species up to ten months. The greatest threat to the world's butterflies: ongoing loss of suitable habitat due to logging, agriculture, urban expansion, industry, pollution.

It is said that overpopulation of humans is a statistical myth. That in Germany, Japan, Montana, humans dwindle. But these are statistics of wealthy nations and I think it is not the numerical population of humans that poses a danger to the earth. It is the way we behave, the way we are: consumptive, desirous, controlling. Therefore, the less of us, the better.

I walk through the aviary and stop to admire an emerald Macaw. A pack of unsupervised children burp hello at a crimson parrot rocking from grey foot to foot. I pass an ostrich. It looks uncontested. Sated. I lean on the ostrich's railing and eavesdrop. A ranger lectures a group of retirees on the benefits of animal confinement. He tells of the breeding of the American Buffalo in the Bronx Zoo. "From a population of twenty-five to full herds," he says. "That wouldn't be possible without zoos." He is practical. He values the merits of captivity. Of breeding. He tilts his head, and I look behind the glass of his spectacles to his green eyes.

I think of the pool of water in the butterfly exhibit. The human-sized steps leading to the dark bottom. I see, again, the woman in a brown janitorial uniform, scraping algae from the rocks. When she is not scraping, she sits, jiggles a foot, reads zoo brochures. She likes knowing that butterflies evolved in the Cretaceous Period, The Age of Flowering Plants. She finds the terse movement of their antennae, erotic. Aloud, to the sleeping turtles, she says: "They flew above the heads of dinosaurs." Her name is Jelaila. She was born in Trinidad. She works nights scrubbing ponds, toilets, floors. She is Hindu and sometimes prays to Jesus because he was a good man. She has two children. Girls. They fry eggs, barefoot, in pajamas, as their mother leaves the zoo and catches the bus home.

Butterflies and Population

There was a butterfly, the color of marmalade. The chunky gloss of jam. Tail to tail with a butterfly of rambunctious, glimmering yellow. As I watched them swelling their wings, I conjured my friend Eli. Pregnant in Berkeley. I pictured the beauty of the butterflies breaking her open, translating through her veins to the baby, who I was near through her stomach in its first three weeks of life when it had already grown its fingernails. I hesitate to say such a thing because I believe in a woman's right to choose. And somehow, to some, fingernails mean all choice is lost, fingernails that are cut and filed once outside the womb.

I do not know if I will ever bear a baby. I like the idea of unused organs. An unused womb. Unused ovaries. The defiance of this. Yes, I have it, yes it works. I will not use it. I do not have to. I do not want to.

If I think of a baby, I think of adoption. To look at someone and say: I choose you. Nothing to do with the haphazard mingling of sperm and egg. In its randomness, adoption is true choice. Freedom from your own genetics. From your body. From your past.

John Berger writes: "The sexual thrust to reproduce and to fill the future is a thrust against the current of time which is flowing ceaselessly toward the past." ¹⁷⁶

I do not want to fill time. I will take up someone else's thrust and call it my own.

Some people get angry about homosexuality. Is it because being gay, lesbian,

transgender, by their biological nature, does not admit procreation? We are beyond physical truths. We go against nature at every turn. Electricity, running water, atomic bombs, highways, strip mines. How is a woman loving a woman or a man loving a man against nature? It is not. It is natural. It is beautiful.

There are more than 1,000,000 named insect species (named, by humans) of the estimated 8,000,000 species of insects on earth. Among them, the butterfly. Compare that to 4,650 named of the 4,809 estimated mammal species. Or the 72,000 named of the 1,500,000 estimated fungi. Insects outpopulate every other taxonomic group. They do not use oil. Some, like the lightening bug, generate their own light.

After a meal of fireflies, the stomach of a frog will sometimes glow.¹⁷⁷

We are one species. On earth, more than 6 billion human beings.

Humans are uncomfortable with the idea of overpopulation. It is unseemly to wish for the culling of your own kind (though the main argument for hunting is the minimilization of herds). I think the discomfort stems from the overarching human arrogance, that we are better than animals. That we are not animals.

We are animals.

It was the UN conference in 1997 on sub-replacement fertility that generated the "underpopulation" uproar. What was glossed over: fertility in the modern world varies from region to region, nation to nation. (More than 90% of America's growth will be from immigration between now and 2050. This pleases me.) Another aspect of statistics--much, or even most of the reported low fertility may reflect women's decisions to delay childbearing rather than reflect women bearing less than two offspring.

To bear a child. Bear: a complicated word. I feel sorry for my mother.



I have been to villages where there is no running water, but an ultrasound. In the line of this logic, a terrifying equation: girls grow into women with the potential to reproduce. Of every woman can be born eleven, sixteen, nineteen human beings.

My mother told me, when I was a child: "Don't get pregnant. It will ruin your life."

I feel the possibility of my nonexistence.

Most of the world's future population growth is projected to occur in what are already the most distressed nations on the planet. Iraq, Lybia, Afghanistan, Sub-Saharan Africa, South and Central Asia. And with the population increase--more

human misery: undernutrition and malnutrition, unsafe water, inadequate or nonexistent waste disposal, widespread deprivation in basic health care, housing, and education.

And yet, there is life. There is beauty, even starving, sick, beaten, unhoused. And yet.

"Since 1995, a hostile Congress cut American international family planning aid by at least 30%. Even were there no population explosion, it should be a goal of all humankind that every couple, regardless of income, be allowed what most in the affluent West take for granted--effective and affordable access to the contraception of their choice, when and if they wish it. The range of choices should include modern means of natural family planning for persons opposed to artificial contraception. An adequate supply of family planning services would avert many millions of unintended pregnancies every year, thereby preventing millions of abortions as well. It would substantially decrease the number of women who are killed or injured from illnesses related to pregnancy, childbirth, and attempted abortion, estimated to take the lives of more than 500,000 in the developing world annually." ¹⁷⁸

My mother said, "You're perfect; who needs more?" I saw her twelve Irish Catholic uncles and aunts (two stillborn) marching across her face. When first told she was pregnant with me, the doctor had told my mother it was twins. I have always wondered about this. As a child, I asked my father. He said sometimes embryos can be "digested by the body." I thought I must have eaten my twin.

People ask, "Is it hard being an only child?" I say, "Of course not. And anyway, I don't know anything else."

To not exist is the same, I think, as not knowing anything else.

On every continent, except Antarctica, butterflies exist.

Humans visit Antarctica.

We are ominous visitors.

Live gently.

Bartcop Entertainment - Wednesday, 2 April, 2003

Surrealist Works to Be Sold

Andre Breton Collection

“Some 5,500 objects considered talismans of the French Surrealist movement from Breton to Magritte will go on sale in Paris this month despite an outcry from artists opposed to splitting up the works.

The entire contents of poet Andre Breton's 231-square-foot workshop, except for a wall of "primitive" art objects which has been donated to Paris's Pompidou Center, are going under the hammer because his descendants can no longer manage the legacy.

The sale at famed auction house Drouot is expected to fetch as much as \$33 million.

Breton's studio at 42 rue Fontaine, near the Paris district of Montmartre, was so small and so packed with objects that "there would have been room for about three people."

Critics deplore the lack of state aid to preserve so rich a collection -- on sale are works by Rene Magritte, Pablo Picasso, Joan Miro, Jean Arp, Francis Picabia and naif master Hector Hippolite.

It also includes photographs of Mexican artists Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera with Leon Trotsky, manuscripts of Breton's poems and letters, his collection of primitive sculptures and Mexican paintings, and quirky objects like 90 enormous waffle irons, a pack of tarot cards and a butterfly collection. ¹⁷⁹

This is a photograph of Trotsky and Andre Breton, on a picnic. In the background is Frida Kahlo. Holding a butterfly net.



Trotsky, with whom Frida Kahlo had an affair. He and his wife lived with Frida and Diego (after Diego took Frida's sister Cristina as his lover) in the Blue House. Later, Trotsky and his wife moved down the street. I have seen the bullet holes in the wall behind Trotsky's desk, the failed assassination (the second one, by knife, successful). I have seen his rabbit hutches. On the floor of a closet, I saw his wife's shoes. They were very small. I do not know her name.

Frida said of Andre Breton and the European surrealists:

"They are so damn 'intellectual' and rotten that I can't stand them anymore....I [would] rather sit on the floor in the market of Toluca and sell tortillas, than have anything to do with those 'artistic' bitches of Paris."

and

"I never knew I was a surrealist till Andre Breton came to Mexico and told me I was."

What Breton said of her art: "A ribbon around a bomb." ¹⁸⁰

Frida, Frida, Frida

How she desired. Color, lovers (male, female), Diego, mobility, God, a child.

1925, the bus accident that changed her body, her self. She wrote: "The arms of the seat went through me." Frida lay in the street as a crowd gathered. She had been impaled by an iron handrail. It had entered one side of her abdomen and pushed out the other. Inexplicably her clothes had been removed by the collision and a package of gold powder carried by a workman had been spilled across her bleeding

body. A man at the scene took hold of the rail and pulled it out.

Her spine and pelvis broken in three places. Right leg in eleven. Collarbone and three ribs broken. Her right foot dislocated and crushed.

"They had to put her back together in sections," said a friend, "as if they were making a photo montage."¹⁸¹

Instantaneous change. Violent. Sudden knowledge.

From her hospital bed, she penned an imaginary son conceived during the accident:

"Leonardo was born at the Red Cross in the year of our Lord 1925, in the month of September, and was baptized in the village of Coyoacan the following year. His mother was Frida Kahlo, his godparents Isabel Campos and Alejandro Gomez Arias."¹⁸²

A nonexistent child with a dead mother. No father.

1934, her second miscarriage and the toes on her right foot, removed. 1945, she donned an orthopedic shoe to compensate for the shortening of her hypertrophied right leg. 1953, after seven operations on her right foot, her leg, amputated below the knee. It was summer. In that year, she completed two paintings. Neither of herself. Both of fruit. "Fruit of Life" (squiggled with red lines, like blood) and "Still Life with Watermelons" (the watermelons, upsidedown, black-pitted hearts).

Fruit: legless, inert, alive.

Two legs for forty-six years. Nineteen years of one leg shrinking by the inch. Even before her accident, she knew pain and stillness. At age six, she contracted polio and stayed in bed for nine months. She was her father's favorite child.

Operations. In her spine, a piece of her pelvic bone. The self, rearranged.
Reconfigured.

The intimacy of her paintings, most of them no larger than one square foot.
She made a space that allowed for duality, binaries, to exist in accord.

Her last painting completed eight days before she died--a still life, the words,
“Vida la Vida” cut into a watermelon wedged like a grin in the central, foreground of
the painting.



Diego's last painting, three years after hers: also a watermelon still life. His,
on a green table, the color of uncut rind. His watermelons: long, circular, halved.
One wedge is chewed.



After I have lived six days alone (no sight of another human face, no sound of another human voice), I write about her.

Now we are panes of glass.

Kahlo's father, Wilhelm Kahlo, a Hungarian Jewish immigrant, a photographer, married Frida's mother, Matilde Calderón, a *mestiza*, a Mexican of mixed European and indigenous Indian ancestry.

Her mother. Her country. Her self. *Mestiza*.

1939: *The Two Fridas*.

The Frida on the left in a white, high-necked, European dress. Lace ripped away from her left breast. Firm, unnipped, slightly mashed by the heart on the outside of skin.

Frida on the right in traditional, local dress of Tehuana. Heart on the outside of shirt. Her legs spread, comfortable, suggestive, beneath an olive skirt.

The two Fridas hold hands. A gentle grasp. An imperfect fit. Fingers lopping. Wrist cradled. Beneath their hands, a diagonal slice in the rattan bench. The bench is bifurcated. Down the middle. The free hands of the two Fridas rest near their genitals. In her right hand, Tehuana Frida holds a picture of Rivera as a child. From the picture a vein curls to her vena cava and flows directly into white lace Frida's European heart. They have separate hearts. This is important. They share one vein. In her right hand, white lace Frida grasps (lightly) surgical pincers, typical of those used during cardiovascular hemodynamics, person to person

transfusion. Blood drips onto her white skirt, complementing the embroidered red flowers. The skirts of both Fridas: pleated at bottom (one closely shirred, one flat and wide). Both Fridas, the same hair. Behind them, the same sky. Beneath them, the same ground.

Tehuana Frida: darker-skinned, hirsute.

Diego Rivera said: "Through her paintings, she breaks all the taboos of the woman's body and of female sexuality."

Pain. In English, its homonym. Pane. See-through, a panel, a small sheet of glass. The shape of a *retalbo*. Pain as landscape: fissured earth, smooth, blue sky.

There is only the body, the self, in pain.

Homonym. Two words with the same pronunciation. Different spellings and meanings. The first secret of language.

The two Fridas. A similarity of sound. Pain. Pane.

Pain is transparent. After the accident, Frida said: "Now I live in a painful planet, transparent as ice. I became old in instants."

Of her body: miscarriages, Diego's infidelities. The pain of disguise (initially, she wore men's pants to cover her brace. She cut her hair to match her clothes. Later, she wore long skirts to cover her uneven legs, her corset, her cast. She grew and braided her hair). Disability. The grotesque. Wheelchair-bound. Bed-ridden.

She is always alone in her paintings. Sometimes she is thinking.

At the Blue House, I stared into the mirror above her bed. The mirror next to her bed. Next to her easel. A wheelchair in front of it.

If you paint pain, you control it. Shape it. Wheel it around the canvas.

Here is her personal reality:



Here is her art.

The self as subject. A life as art. The self, a life, marked with politics,

ideologies, systemics.

1944. *The Broken Column*.

She is virtually naked, loose hair slightly mussed. Skin pierced by nails, small trails of blood (or shadows of nails), cast upon her skin (or scratches in the skin where the nail first dragged, then imbedded). A broken Ionic column (Classical, glorified), ribbed and cracked inside her. Impossibly upright. Torso: spilt. Brokenness. A body betrayed. Halved. A white, leather, orthopedic corset (she wore it every day) binds the split torso. Corset: feminine; orthopedic: sick. Feminine and sick. Both. The beautiful, perfect breasts. The cloth swung around hips, like an Ingres model, or the Virgin Mary. The landscape, cracked. The perfection of skin, the perfection of shape: exterior beautiful, interior, decayed. The whites of her eyes. Tears passing from eye to cheek. They do not relieve. They just are.

Two years after completing this painting (1946), she wore an iron corset for eight months. Always, when she was not bedridden, she was physically active. She loved to dance and have sex standing up.

Are you a woman if you don't have a baby? Are you a woman if disabled?
Are you beautiful with a crooked, uneven body?

Her paintings are rebuttals. Yes, yes, yes.

1932. *Self-Portrait on the Border between Mexico and the United States*.

She stands in a pink dress, a color she rarely wore. Her hair coiffed, white lace gloves, coral necklace, pink shoes, rouge, lipstick. Her hair, parted down the middle. Like the painting. Parted down the middle. Like her self. Parted down the

middle. Her hands crossed, one holding a Mexican flag, a little more than half-pinked--feminized--by the pink tulle of her gown. In her other hand, a cigarette, glowing at the tip. Smokeless. The cigarette on the side of industry. She stands, on a pedestal, a monument, a woman memorialized: "Carmen Rivera painted her in 1932"--she is Carmen Rivera. A woman memorialized by a woman. By her self. Beneath her feet, the roots of plants, flowers, native to Mexico, extending, joining (two strands only) with wires of fans, light bulbs, blaring loudspeakers (the voice of the worker). Ford spelled on stacks spewing industrial gas over the American flag. Obscuring it. Detroit, the Henry Ford Hospital, the site of her first miscarriage where she spent eleven days in bed. Mute with grief. In Mexico, the stone ziggurat, past in present. Mayan deities (both female--breasts on the brown idol, slit between legs of the white). A skull rests on its cheekbone. The same sky. The same earth. Frida in the middle. A political landscape. The personal, the political. Dualities. Joined in the middle. Joined in her. Native and European, natural and manmade, Mexico and America. Woman as nation; woman as citizen. Woman as artist. Politics wrapped tight in aesthetics. Over Mexico, the sun bleeds from the mouth. There is no sun or moon in the sky above the United States. Just nationhood and smoke.

The Function of Beauty

John Berger writes, in his essay, "White Bird:

"...we live in a world of suffering in which evil is rampant, a world whose events do not confirm our Being, a world that has to be resisted. It is in this

situation that the aesthetic moment offers hope. That we find a...poppy beautiful means that we are less alone, that we are more deeply inserted into existence than the course of a single life would lead us to believe...All the languages of art have been developed as an attempt to transform the instantaneous into the permanent. Art supposes that beauty is not an exception--is not *in despite of*--but is the basis for an order”¹⁸³

The Order of Beauty. Beauty as a system. As a way of categorizing the world.

What is the function of beauty? Why is it that what is beautiful, literary, artistic, is often considered limp and wasteful? Ineffectual? How did beauty come to be considered puny? Is it not one of the most powerful, influential, inspirational aspects of human life and history?

What is the value of art?

"To say that a thing has value is to say that it is, or that we esteem it, good for some use. The value of things is thus founded on their utility, or what amounts to the same thing, on the use we can make of them”¹⁸⁴

What is the value of beauty?

“Somewhere in the 18th century, the fine arts are once again united but now in the name of the beautiful, understood as an achievement in itself...literature, then, comes under the banner of the beautiful: ...[and] "pleasing" wins out over "instructing." Having once been identified with the useful, the beautiful is now defined by its nonutilitarian nature.”¹⁸⁵

Is not beauty utilitarian?

In New York City, at Second Avenue and 11th Street is the Settlement School of Music. Outside, on the wall of the building, a mural, painted by students. The Twin Towers, yellow and tall. Beneath the Towers, these words, scrawled in a childish hand:

"This will be our response to violence: to make music more intensely. More beautifully. More devotedly than ever before." -Leonard Bernstein.

Beauty functions as defiance. As statement. As performance.

In writing, language, and a heightened attention to it, is an act of performance. As the actor wields her body, so does the writer wield language. Make the words perform. Make the words bend across the page, twist, respond to each other. All the page's a stage.

Beauty can be insistent. It can arrest the observer. Through the performance of beauty, a statement is made: Don't look away. See this. Appreciate. Remember. The human brain remembers beauty as strongly as it remembers ugliness.

Beauty *is* utilitarian. Beauty is Political.

Does beauty differ according to genre? If fiction is considered literature in part because of standards and values of beauty (this seems unfair to beautiful ethnographies, essays, literary criticisms of the world), what does that imply about genre? Are some genres (in general) more beauty-driven or more useful than others?

Is power related to specific genres?

In his essay, "The Yin and Yang of Genres," Irvin Peckham implies that the genres of nonfiction, the genres considered "less nurturing and soft" are the genres of power. He states that there are the genres of power, genres that "get things done" in the world.¹⁸⁶

Writer, Arundhati Roy, was first known for her novel, The God of Small Things. lyrically, lushly written--with great attention to language and beauty as well as politics. Roy has said in an interview:

"The writer is the midwife of understanding. It's very important for me to tell politics like a story, to make it real, to draw a link between a man with his child and what fruit he had in the village he lived in before he was kicked out, and how that relates to Mr. Wolfensohn at the World Bank."¹⁸⁷

Roy has not written a work of fiction since The God of Small Things. Instead, she has been writing nonfiction, books and essays and manifestos and articles. She is more controversial in her nonfiction than she was in her fiction.

What has been said about her switch from fiction to nonfiction (why this "switch" is seen as something permanent confuses me--it seems rigid to assume that because a writer writes in one genre, they will never write in another):

"She has nailed her colors to the mast. Arundhati Roy is that most unusual, and welcome, of animals: a writer who takes sides."¹⁸⁸

The following was said after Roy wrote a criticism of nuclear weapons in India. When she was praised by politicians, it was for her fiction. When she was savaged by politicians, it was for her nonfiction:

"In India, you don't write that sort of thing if you don't want to make powerful enemies. And Roy did. The same politicians who had praised her only months before now condemned her for betraying her motherland. In a fever of nationalistic pride, Roy was savaged for saying the wrong thing at the wrong time. As it turns out, she was only just warming up."¹⁸⁹

That cloak of fiction. The safety of the word, "fiction," and all it implies. This is not true. Or, This is only partly true. The value of "not true" or "made up" or "imagined" is what keeps fiction ambiguous, powerful, beautiful, dangerous. And what keeps it appearing "softer" or less "effective" than nonfiction.

When Roy switched genres, from fiction to nonfiction, she was viewed as more threatening. She was trafficking in facts. And this made her more dangerous, more political. Does this prove that genre matters? That some genres are more effective or powerful than others? Is Roy more "useful" and political when writing nonfiction rather than fiction?

Roy says this about how she sees the difference between nonfiction and fiction:

"Writers imagine that they cull stories from the world. I'm beginning to believe that vanity makes them think so. That it's actually the other way around. Stories cull writers from the world. Stories reveal themselves to us. The public narrative, the private narrative -- they colonize us. They commission us. They insist on being told. Fiction and non-fiction are only different techniques of story telling. For reasons I do not fully understand,

fiction dances out of me. Non-fiction is wrenched out by the aching, broken world I wake up to every morning. The theme of much of what I write, fiction as well as non-fiction, is the relationship between power and powerlessness and the endless, circular conflict they're engaged in. “¹⁹⁰

Roy began as an architect and is a writer concerned with shape and structure. When she moved from fiction to nonfiction, when she changed genres, she changed her agenda. This switch in agenda shows the different aims of genre, the different achievements. Roy was more widely read and beloved as a fiction writer. That is certain. Who is to say if she was more or less effective? She has said that she does not know if she will ever again write another novel because “the sadness” of writing the first is still with her. She does not directly, publicly equate the usefulness of nonfiction with her current desire to write it. Nor does she equate the “less usefulness” of fiction with her current desire to not write it.

Although when asked why she joined the movement against dams, Roy said of the Booker Prize and ensuing fame:

“I felt that each feeling and emotion described in my book was being turned into a silver coin and that one day I was going to be turned into a silver statue with a silver heart. I needed to go back to the world and give back to it.”¹⁹¹

Does this imply that nonfiction is a genre of the world?

Amitava Kumar states of above quote, “[there is the] undeniable fact that Roy has also changed powerfully under the force of social demands.” He goes on to say:

“Last year, Roy received recognition from two governments during the same

week: the Chevalier des Arts et des Lettres from the government of France and a “contempt of court” charge from the Supreme Court in Delhi over her antidam protests. Roy called this simultaneous recognition a “rare honor,” and added, “Both are an acknowledgement of me as a writer, and I am happy to accept both.” And yet Roy has been opposed to the label “writer-activist”--it reminds her “sofa-bed”--and there is a good reason why. There is a normative assumption about both art and writing, and about its distinction from politics and activism...”¹⁹²

Look at the difference between Roy’s language, her prose when writing fiction and nonfiction. This difference could also be explained by a changed self, changed style. Still, it warrants a brief examination.

This excerpt from the novel, The God of Small Things is rife with description, adjectives; the sentences accumulate and build upon each other. The writing is thick, colorful, with a slightly truncated rhythm. There is an attention to beauty, to the performance not just of language, but of beautiful language. It is an ornate performance:

“May in Ayemenem is a hot, brooding month. The days are long and humid. The river shrinks and black crows gorge on bright mangoes in still, dustgreen trees. Red bananas ripen. Jackfruits burst. Dissolute bluebottles hum vacuously in the fruity air. Then they stun themselves against clear windowpanes and die, fatly baffled in the sun.

“The nights are clear, but suffused with sloth and sullen expectation. But by

early June the southwest monsoon breaks and there are three months of wind and water with short spells of sharp, glittering sunshine that thrilled children snatch to play with. The countryside turns an immodest green. Boundaries blur as tapioca fences take root and bloom. Brick walls turn mossgreen. Pepper vines snake up electric poles. Wild creepers burst through laterite banks and spill across the flooded roads. Boats ply in the bazaars. And small fish appear in the puddles that fill the PWD potholes on the highways.

“It was raining when Rahel came back to Ayemenem. Slanting silver ropes slammed into loose earth, plowing it up like gunfire. The old house on the hill wore its steep, gabled roof pulled over its ears like a low hat. The walls, streaked with moss, had grown soft, and bulged a little with dampness that seeped up from the ground. The wild, overgrown garden was full of the whisper and scurry of small lives. In the undergrowth a rat snake rubbed itself against a glistening stone. Hopeful yellow bullfrogs cruised the scummy pond for mates. A drenched mongoose flashed across the leaf-strewn driveway.

“The house itself looked empty. The doors and windows were locked. The front verandah bare. Unfurnished. But the skyblue Plymouth with chrome tailfins was still parked outside, and inside, Baby Kochamma was still alive.”

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Compare this to an excerpt from Roy’s nonfiction book, The Cost of Living.

The tone is direct, straightforward, the language unadorned, bare and honest. Yet

there is similarity of rhythm and pacing to the sentences of her fiction. There is also the difference between a distanced third person point of view (in the novel) and an aggressive first person point of view (in the nonfiction). Look in particular at Roy's of description of land and the natural world in the second paragraph, how it differs from her description of the natural world in her fiction. The language is much "cleaner," and spare than that of the novel. More terrifying. It creates a completely different effect. One that does that cause dreamy transport in the reader (as the description of land in her fiction does). In nonfiction, the effect is that the reader gets scared, angry, sits bolt upright, and takes notice. In this excerpt of nonfiction, Roy's arguments and ideas accumulate along with her sentences.

"If only, if only, nuclear war was just another kind of war. If only it was about the usual things--nations and territories, gods and histories. If only those of us who dread it are just worthless moral cowards who are not prepared to die in defense of our beliefs. If only nuclear war was the kind of war in which countries battle countries and men battle men. But it isn't. If there is a nuclear war, our foes will not be China or America or even each other. Our foe will be the earth herself. The very elements--the sky, the air, the land, the wind and water -- will all turn against us. Their wrath will be terrible.

"Our cities and forests, our fields and villages will burn for days. Rivers will turn to poison. The air will become fire. The wind will spread the flames. When everything there is to burn has burned and the fires die, smoke will rise and shut out the sun. The earth will be enveloped in darkness. There will be

no day. Only interminable night. Temperatures will drop to far below freezing and nuclear winter will set in. Water will turn into toxic ice. Radioactive fallout will seep through the earth and contaminate groundwater. Most living things, animal and vegetable, fish and fowl, will die. Only rats and cockroaches will breed and multiply and compete with foraging, relict humans for what little food there is.

”What shall we do then, those of us who are still alive? Burned and blind and bald and ill, carrying the cancerous carcasses of our children in our arms, where shall we go? What shall we eat? What shall we drink? What shall we breathe?

”The head of the Health, Environment and Safety Group of the Bhabha Atomic Research Center in Bombay has a plan. He declared in an interview (The Pioneer, 24 April 1998) that India could survive nuclear war. His advice is that if there is a nuclear war, we take the same safety measures as the ones that scientists have recommended in the event of accidents at nuclear plants.

”Take iodine pills, he suggests. And other steps such as remaining indoors, consuming only stored water and food and avoiding milk. Infants should be given powdered milk. ”People in the danger zone should immediately go to the ground floor and if possible to the basement.”

”What do you do with these levels of lunacy? What do you do if you're trapped in an asylum and the doctors are all dangerously deranged?”¹⁹⁴

Whatever Roy’s reasons for moving to nonfiction and staying there (at least for now--she has been an architect, a screenwriter, a novelist, and a nonfictionist, so far), it does appear that Roy believes nonfiction is a genre that “gets things done in the world.” And it does appear that the effect of her nonfiction on her readers (be they individuals or governments), is somehow, more active and chips away more overtly at the powers that be.

Is this a writer-by-writer difference and not a question of genre?

Jamaica Kincaid, a writer in and of many genres, both fiction and nonfiction, experienced a similar situation. Her first book, At the Bottom of the River, was unconventional in structure and poetic in language. It was reviewed as having “strained the criterion of accessibility” (100). Her next novel, a coming of age “autobiographical fiction,” Annie John, was heartily approved by critics. The New York Times Book Review used as a jacket blurb stated: "Coming of age in Antigua--so touching and familiar...it could be happening to anyone of us, anywhere, any time, any place."

“Not too long after that endorsement, a long essay “A Small Place appeared.”

[It was] a polemic against the tourist's gaze and the practice of tourism as uninspected colonial privilege. It was declined for serialization in the New Yorker as "too angry" and reviewers castigated Kincaid for her unbecoming rage.”¹⁹⁵

A novel with an autobiographical feel is well received because it is still considered fiction and therefore safe? Because it deals with the story of a child? In “accessible” language? When Kincaid tackled adult issues in hard-hitting, critical, nonfiction prose, she was criticized and instantly politicized by reviewers.

I conducted an interview with author Silas House, the most well-known and beloved Appalachian author and most visible artistic face fighting mountaintop removal in Eastern Kentucky. He is a novelist, short storyist, poet, playwright, screenwriter, teacher, and weekly contributor to the Lexington Herald and the Courier Journal.

He told me:

“The land I was raised on was taken over by coal companies, and people have been fighting for landowner rights ever since. Even today, we're witnessing environmental devastation on a huge scale, and the government has joined forces with the coal companies to work against the people of my region. My whole life I have been judged by the way I talk, the kinds of food I eat, the kind of music that comes out of my region. Because of my ethnicity--a rural Appalachian of Cherokee-Irish-English descent, I have been judged as a racist, a homophobe, and a misogynist. I have been judged as ignorant and simplistic just because of my heritage. Besides that, because I was raised Pentecostal, everyone assumes I am a Fundamentalist in the worst definition of that word. These are all things that are not true and these judgments made by others are all political factors that have sculpted me--and my writing.”

A writer can make quiet political choices. For example, Silas makes the choice, in his novels and short stories, to have dark-skinned characters--often he does not comment on their ethnicity. By doing this he widens the view of Appalachia, changes it from a place that most people think of as being completely white into the more diverse culture it actually is. He widens the definition of Pentecostal by portraying hard drinking, dancing, good Pentecostals, alongside nondrinking, nondancing good Pentecostals. These are political choices. To insist that a particular character resists easy definition--this is transgressive, subversive. It is a small act but read many times over, it becomes larger. There is also a politics to language. As author Lee Smith said: "I kept my accent for a reason. It's a political decision." Silas's characters speak a local, regional English, not the English heard on television, not the English of Chicago or Louisville. By writing in his own language, Silas legitimizes another way of speaking, another form of grammar and vocabulary. He insists that it be heard and respected. He puts this language in the mouths of human, dignified, sympathetic characters.

I asked Silas: Do you think you're more "effective" or "influential" or "pro-active" as a writer of fiction or nonfiction? Meaning, do you think nonfiction is a more "useful" or "active" genre (than fiction)?

Silas: I believe that nonfiction is quicker to cause reaction. For example, nonfiction that I write is in editorials and in features for magazines, so it's read pretty much as soon as I write it and its effects are known right away. So, on the surface, it may seem that nonfiction is a more "useful" or "active" genre than fiction, but I don't agree. I think that fiction is actually much more

effective because the "lessons" taught in fiction tend to sink in for the long haul while nonfiction pieces such as editorials and journalistic features may not have effects that are as long-lasting but are more "of the moment." For example, I have written several editorials about the ill effects of mountaintop removal mining on the mountains of Eastern Kentucky and they have caused quite a bit of controversy and discussion within the state. However, the discussion comes and goes and I believe that my editorials will be quickly forgotten as soon as the next round of editorials by another writer comes along. But I have also included environmental issues in my novels and I am certain that these issues sink into a reader's mind more solidly because they're shrouded in fiction. My belief is that people learn more when they don't realize they're being taught. Therefore, it's much easier to "teach" someone something under the guise of fiction. A good example is that my first book came out five years ago. Its main character was a young coal miner. After the recent mining disaster at the Sago, WV mine where 12 miners died, I received more than a dozen sympathy cards from readers all over the country. One of them read as follows: "With the recent tragic news of the Sago disaster, my heart went out to the miners' families. But I also was reminded of your character, Clay, who first taught me that coal miners are real people, and not just faceless workers who go down into the mines to bring electricity back up for the masses. I know this may be strange, to send a sympathy card to you in the event of this horrible tragedy in WV, but I am sure that you are hurting because the way you loved mining people was so evident in your novel." It

seems to me that this reader--who was from Kansas--had been taught a lesson about the people of a particular workforce and region by reading my fiction whereas a nonfiction piece may not have had such a long-lasting effect.

(I take Silas' words and think about how the human brain remembers beauty. As it remembers grief and pain. Is a lesson delivered with beauty more memorable? More affecting?)

Neela: Do you think you were/are seen as more political, more dangerous (as a writer and person) once you started publishing nonfiction? If so, do you think that has anything to do with genre and how people see fiction versus nonfiction?

Silas: Definitely seen as more political and dangerous now, and yes, it's because of the nonfiction. The reason, I think, is because the nonfiction is supplied pretty much free to the public in the newspapers. They don't have to consciously go out and buy my book to find out what I believe; they just pick up the paper and there I am. In other words, they can ignore my novels by not buying them, but they can't ever be guaranteed I won't be awaiting them in the pages of the paper or a magazine. Also, I think you're seen as more dangerous when you write nonfiction because it's obvious that you've done your research, that you've checked out your sources. In nonfiction, you quote actual people and statistics. Readers assume that everything in fiction is pretty much

made-up, so it doesn't feel as dangerous to them, even when it is. Which goes along with my earlier point that fiction is more subtle, which to me, means therefore more effective.

As Ross Tolarcio says:

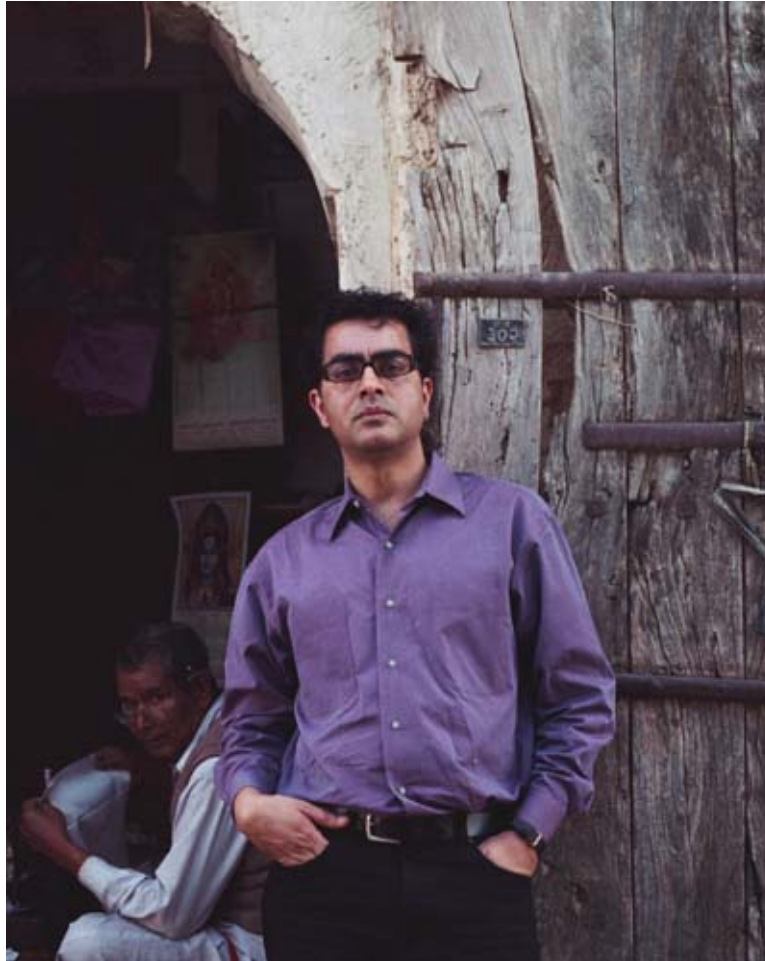
"Something simple happens when we read a legitimate piece of literature: we learn something. Sometimes it's a reiteration or a clarification of what we already know or have suspected but have not articulated in a meaningful way; sometimes the experience of the literature provides an insight, or another way of seeing or understanding; sometimes, in the works that strike us deeply, we experience the epiphany that marks unforgettable works." ¹⁹⁶

Aesthetics and Politics

2004 Election. On the night of the first debate, Laura Bush and Teresa Heines-Kerry both wore white suits. They discussed their suits when they first saw each other.



Amitava Kumar.



Cultural Studies public intellectual, pedagogue, essayist, poet. In his scholarship, he insists upon beauty. He insists upon poetry. His own, and others. Sprinkled throughout the text. He crosses genre categories--literary criticism, Cultural Studies, poetry, essay, self-reflexive ethnography. The following is part I of a five part poem, untitled, written by Kumar, and part of his book, Passport Photos. His personal and political are inseparable--in his being and his art.

I.

The cigarette smoke lingered

in the blue Minnesota chill
as my friend said, "I'd like to talk
to you of other things.
Not politics again but things like
whether you are lonely."

"What could be more political
than the fact that I'm lonely,
that I am so far away
from everything I've known?"

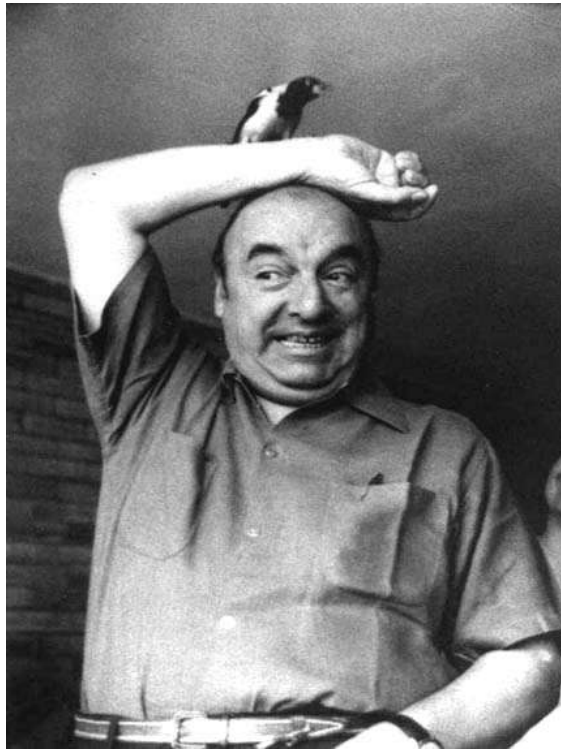
But, the consular here has other queries.
Do you have property in India?
Land? Relatives? Anything?

"Write down, officer:
The yellow of mustard blossoms
stretching to the blue horizon.
My grandmother's tears
when she asks me what good is your learning
when it steals you from my embrace.
In our old house, with its dampness,
the music of my sister's laughter.

Four friends who bring news
of a new canal that has been dug by the villagers.
The bend in the river
near the tall trees where the spirits
of my ancestors are consecrated.
Women's voices from across the waters
that I have been hearing since my childhood.
The smell of hot pepper being roasted over a naked fire."¹⁹⁷

Politicians and writers are not necessarily separate beasts.

Pablo Neruda. Chilean poet, diplomat, activist. A politician best known for his love poems.



When his politics failed, his poetry succeeded:

"One time in 1969, I saw Neruda campaigning in Chile. It was a very boring political speech, a very rainy day, and people were standing in the mud.

When Neruda wanted to leave, they began to shout "Poetry! Poetry! We want poetry!" and he asked "What poems would you like me to read?" from these people came unexpectedly ten or twelve titles of different poems, and as he began to read one of them there came a chorus. I don't think any of these people had been to school." ¹⁹⁸

Vaclav Havel. President of the Czech Republic. Before and after he served his terms, best known as a playwright and essayist:

....."Right after Vaclav Havel became president of Czechoslovakia, he traveled to Washington and gave an address before Congress. The address was riveting. There was a very positive bipartisan reaction. Some of the senators later said, "Why don't we ever have language like that? Why don't we ever hear political speeches like that? Why don't we have that quality of linguistic engagement in our political process? It occurred to several of us that it may be because Vaclav Havel wrote the speech himself and that what Americans were listening to for the first time in a long while was the sustained voice of a human being rather than a committee of speech writers, political analysts, and marketers cobbling together something that would please everyone and no one." ¹⁹⁹

Politician-playwright--category fluidity. The true self in politics. The mask

dropped. Language, beauty, taken up. To a more effective end.

In Cultural Studies, a Pop Culture Reader, I studied theory that denigrated literature as bourgeois, elitist. Unproductive. Apolitical. Theory that, while correct in fingering some fiction that does nothing more than uphold the status quo and dominant culture, is still, a theory appears to believe in an inherent difference between art and scholarship, the personal and the collective, aesthetics and politics.

Where does that leave John Berger? Because his prose is beautiful, it is not Marxist? Gramscian? In a scholarship (Cultural Studies) that lauds multiplicity, inclusion, is there only one way to be political? To be scholarly? To be constructive? To be beautiful? Where does this leave: Susan Sontag, D.H. Lawrence, Nina Simone, Oscar Wilde, Paul Robeson, Charlie Chaplin, Simone Weil, Grace Paley, Muriel Rukeyser, Hazel Dickens, Amitava Kumar, Arundhati Roy, and so on?

Where does that leave Alokdhana, a self-described poet of the peasantry? And his poetry? Because it is literature, is it, it he, therefore elitist?

ALOKDHANA, OPEN FIRE POSTER

This is the twentieth April of Nineteen Seventy-Four or
a professional assassin's right
hand or the leather glove
of a detective or a spot stuck on the binoculars
of an attacker?

Whatever it be--I cannot call it just another day!

Where I am writing--this is a very old place,
here even today more than words it is tobacco
that is used.

The sky here--is only as high as
a pig.

Here the tongue gets used
the least,
here the eye gets used
the least,
here the ear gets used
the least,
here the nose gets used
the least.

Here you have only teeth and the belly,
and hands buried in mud
there is no man
only a dark hollow
that keeps begging for grain--
from one day of downpours to another day of downpours.

This woman is my mother or
a five foot iron stick--
on which hang two pieces of dry bread--
like dead birds.

Now between my daughter and my strike
there is not even a hair-breadth's difference
when the constitution is on its own terms breaking
my strike and my daughter

After these sudden elections
should I stop thinking about gunpowder?

Can I after Nineteen Seventy-Four's twentieth April
live
like a father with my children?
Like an ink-pot filled with ink, like a ball,
can I with my children
be like a green, grassy field?

If those people ever grant me entry into their poems
it is only to blindfold me
and to use me
and then leave me outside the borders

they never let me
reach the capital.
I am grabbed
by the time I begin to reach the district towns.

It is not the government--it is this country's
cheapest cigarette that has kept me company.

Growing all around my sister's feet
like yellow plants
was my childhood--
that was eaten by the police *daroga's* water buffalo.

To keep a sense of humanity alive
if the *daroga* has a right to shoot
then why don't I
have the same right?

The earth on which I sit writing
the earth on which I walk,
the earth on which I plough,
the earth in which I sow seeds and
from which I gather grains and
load them in *godowns*--
for that earth do I have a right to shoot

or do those eunuch landlords--

who have turned this entire nation into a moneylender's dog?

This is not a poem

this is a call to open fire

that all those who use the pen

are getting from all those who work the plough.²⁰⁰

Is that a poem? Petition? Personal statement? Political act? Is it literature?

Is it elite?

Why is there a binarism, a schism, a split between "committed art" (meaning political) vs. "art for art's sake" (meaning beautiful). Why does it have to be one or the other?

To write is a verb. Writing is an act. Writing is activism.

Does the artist have a responsibility? To be political? What is the function of the writer in society? Does the writer have an obligation to say something, to speak for something?

In touting the political, I am not snubbing art for art's sake. I am not snubbing beauty, aesthetics, structure, language. To claim and hail what you find beautiful-- this is political. That is the politics of aesthetics.

The Political Ways of Beauty

In art, sometimes, beauty serves as politics' cloak. Directors (and writers)

from nations like Iran and China have to contend with negotiating film censors, government restrictions, bannings. The protest and defiance in Chinese and Iranian films is almost always veiled in heavy, overwhelming, unavoidable, beauty. Beauty of the most irresistible, undeniable levels. Chinese director Zhang Yimou's films ("Hero," "Not One Less," "Raise the Red Lantern," "Ju Dou," "To Live") are shown in China *and* they are subtly critical of the Chinese government. He has developed a method of flirting with flagrant criticism while catering to nationalistic pride and the preservation of China's great past. Through heightened color (it assails the eye, slow, gorgeous), camera angles so compositionally perfect that each frame appears as a painting, he makes art that is so beautiful one can't look away; it *must* be seen. He layers political, critical messages within this lush beauty--and the beauty serves as a decoy.

Beauty can also allow for real grief, horror, and pain to be borne. Beauty swaddles, distributes. As E.L. Doctorow said: "A writer should distribute the suffering so it can be borne." ²⁰¹

In Silas House's short story, "The Cool of the Day," a coal miner has these interior thoughts about his wife:

"...the beans lie clumped in a basket, crowded together like skinny, living things...She breaks them perfectly, each one snapping out four singular pops. When a bean is broken, she throws her hand into the air carelessly and the pieces fall into the bowl like green knuckles." ²⁰²

The editor of the journal the story was published in was reluctant to accept the story, writing this as explanation in the margins: "This is a working man, a coal

miner. Not a poet. Coal miner's don't think this way." Silas's coal miner is sensitive to the beauty of beans breaking. His wife's wet hair. The coming greens of spring. His story changes the notion of who is poetic, who speaks and thinks beautifully. It changes the notion of coal miner. He constructs a new mythology, and deconstructs stereotypes. These are conscious political choices. A miner who sees beauty, relishes it, appreciates it, in beautiful language, after a day of work in the dark. An idea, a people, widened, through aesthetics, through beauty. Writing against stereotype, however subtly, is political. Writing about people makes them visible and visibility is political.

As E.L Doctorow puts it:

"If we read a book and we learn about someone else's life and torment to the extent that the book is effective and good we'll be participating in that character's life and torment. When we close the book we have an enlarged understanding of people we wouldn't normally think of having to dinner. Fiction enlarges our humanity." ²⁰³

Author Larry Brown finds beauty in people who are not frequently considered beautiful. His characters are hard-talking, hard-living alcoholics, poverty-stricken, self-destructive women, and ex-cons who are reentering a world they don't completely understand or trust. In his short story, "Samaritans", from the collection Facing the Music, he writes about a woman who has come into a bar to beg for someone to buy her a beer. The narrator, a down-on-his-luck working man whose girlfriend has just left him, takes pity on her. Although the other people in the bar look at her as if she is trash, the narrator realizes the beauty of her as a human being.

Brown writes:

“Her eyes were all teary and bitter, drunk-looking already, and I knew that she had been stomped on all her life, and had probably been forced to do no telling what. And I just shook my head.”²⁰⁴

Later on, in a moment of overwhelming pride, the woman screams at the narrator:

“What do you care? All you goin to do is go right back in there and get drunk. You just like everybody else. You ain’t never had to go in a grocery store and buy stuff with food stamps and have everbody look at you. You ain’t never had to go hungry. Have you?”²⁰⁵

Brown lets his characters speak for themselves. He chooses to not pass judgment on them, allowing their own human beauty and dignity to shine through.

Is this stereotype?



Is this the reality?



On the other hand, there is the opposite political desire (with the same result).

To make what is considered beautiful, uglified. That is, to make something real.

Human. To take something imbued with a dehumanizing sense of beauty, mysticism, eroticism, exoticism, and to make it REAL. To counteract, unwind, smash the framed, glassed image.

The Sari

1.

My Aunt Gagi

taught me to wear a sari

to fold and tuck the pleats
to check the length of the petticoat
to hide the safety pin in the pallu
so no one would see it.

We ironed her saris
foot by foot, folding the hot
squares of fabric into a smooth pile.

My Aunt Gagi gave me the sari she wore
when she walked alone with my uncle
for the first time.

My love sari
she said.

It will bring you luck.

My aunt, my uncle
good pleats
arranged by their mothers.

While I was at college
my Irish mother
created Indian Feast Day
for her ninth grade students
at a New York Public Highschool.

(She likes her students
to don the clothing

of the country they study.

Walk a mile in a man's shoes
and you'll know how he feels,
she says.)

For Feast Day

they ate mutter paneer
cooked in the Home Ec room
the recipe flashing on a neon blue
computer screen above the rows of white wholesale stoves,
teflon pans, frozen peas in vacuum packed bags
the paneer donated
by the lone Pakistani girl (her mother purchased it at the Hicksville
Patel Brothers, and would not accept
reimbursement).

Wielding spatulas, the thin boys wore my father's kurtas
the big boys wore my uncle's kurtas
my cousins' lunghis.

My mother found my aunt's love sari
wrapped in a pillow case, embroidered with a green peacock, hidden under a pile of
books
in my closet.

She gave it to a girl
pale blonde, green-eyed.

who spilled milk on the *choli*.

“Mrs. Vaswani,”

The girl said,

“I’ve stained the costume.”

2.

My Aunt Maya

in a champagne sari

of gossamer silk

gold, embroidered

kinaree

(border)

24 karat

beaten

from raw gold nuggets

beaten

to thin threads

malleable

woven

(by men in cotton)

into the pallu

rippling
from her left shoulder.
My Aunt Maya
in this sari
shoves aside
the kitchen girl
in a salwar kameez
welted arms
from the stove
and the heavy hot
tava
that she lifts with both hands
bent knees
for leverage.
The kitchen girl
is nine.
Skinny.
Not because
she is too poor to eat
but because
she cooks
ten hours a day
and food bores her.

My Aunt Maya

drops

in front of the stove

in her

gossamer

gold

silk

sari.

She vomits

aloo, gobi, chawal, saag, roti, raita, achaar (nimbou).

(She does not eat meat

on Thursdays

for Shivji).

She is drunk

in Lagos.

A Sindhi

in Africa

entertaining businessmen

friends of

her husband, my uncle

whose businesses

fail.

Everyone he helps

succeeds

one man made so much money, he opened a supermarket

one man made so much money, he opened a bank.

My uncle succeeds in Africa

(Sierra Leone, Canary Islands)

every fourteen years

the length of

Rama's exile.

Then

he loses it

all at once

goes home:

India.

This knowledge

is in

my Aunt Maya's

whiskey glass

and the vomit

soaking the edge

of her gossamer sari.

She uses

the golden end

to wipe her mouth.

3.

Draupadi's sari

saved her

dignity

saved her

nakedness

as Duhsasana

claimed his fee

unraveling her

when Yudhishtira

lost her

his wife

(and the wife of his five brothers;

Arjuna won her, his arrow

piercing the eye of the fish; their mother

said they must share Draupadi, equally)

during a game of dice,

his weakness.

Duhsasana unwound

the sari

from her body

he was laughing

and she turned

her eyes
towards the ceiling
Oh, Krishna
she said
and he heard
(as he always hears)
and he made
her sari
endless.
My uncle believes
Krishna (that lech)
does not hear the voices of men
as clearly as he hears
the voices of women
so when he prays
to Krishna
my uncle speaks in a
high
falsetto.
It works, he says.
You must try it.
When he tells me this
I laugh

in a sari.

He has forgotten

I am a woman.

4.

My Aunt Nindatha

wears a sari

to work

as a receptionist

in a steel factory.

On the way to work

she passes fisherwomen

saris tucked

between their legs

like pants.

One woman has tied her pallu

into a sling.

In it

her baby sleeps.

At night, he cries

distressed

when he smells

her clean

foreign

skin

after she has washed

in the gutter.

Only when her wet stomach

reeks

with the guts of fish,

only then is he comforted.

My Aunt Nindatha

(who has her Master's in psychology)

lifts her hand to her pallu

shifts it

flat upon her shoulder.

She types 96 words a minute.

In English.

She answers the phone:

Hello, Birla Industries.

Apke naam kya hai?

5.

The sari
is not
exotic.
It is not
a costume.
It is clothing.
Like jeans. Like a t-shirt.
It is something you wear
catching fish with both hands
sleeping on the floor
jogging on a golf course
getting raped in a shower
puking vegetarian
carrying bricks on your head
pumping gas
orgasming in a jute bed
threshing wheat near Chandigarh
paying the water bill
teaching neurobiology
shitting in a hole
typing in English
punching an intruder
miscarrying

smoking hashish
laughing in Urdu
bicycling uphill
cooking spinach
crying hard
reading fast.

Writers make choices. Choices of form and style. Choices of content. It is not all airy muse. It is active choice. We participate in our art.

I put politics into the lives of my characters. Miscegenation, single mother, orphan. I actively write biracial characters who are not tragic, not confused, who successfully negotiate two worlds or more without being stomped by either. Confident, fluid individuals. Transgressors. I do this knowingly. I want to gut the literary "tragic mulatto." All my life people have asked me the annoying and stupid question: what are you? I write characters that would also be asked that question. I try to give them dignity and humanity.

To show how people live, who they are, is a political act. How people live is legislated--abortion, who can be married, age of drinking. Because of miscegenation laws, when my parents were married, their marriage was illegal. When I was born, my existence was illegal in nine states. My father would not have come to America if the government had not lifted its ban on South Asian immigrants in the late 1960's (a ban lifted only for doctors and engineers, not a true opening of doors for South Asians--only letting in educated, moneyed South Asians).

Can love be political or politicized? Yes, it can. I write here as proof of that.

To insist that a particular character exists, has feelings, resists easy definition--this is transgressive, subversive. It is a small act but read many times over, it becomes larger. It chips away.

Painters have paint, light, canvas, brushstrokes, images. Writers have language, form, the page.

I do not italicize all non-English words. I refused to include a glossary in my collection of stories. I spell gray, grey. Organise. Yoghurt. I made my editor furious with all my lingual inconsistencies. A character will mix Hindi/Sindhi/English in one sentence.

English. How many people the world over speak it or must learn it to make a better living, to get out of desperate situations--either in their own country, or abroad? English, the global language of commerce and power. My father was taught by Jesuits in a post-colonial nation. We did not have any American dictionaries in the house. We played Scrabble with an Oxford-English dictionary. When we dropped a glass, we said Bloody Hell. My father speaks nine languages. My grandfather spoke with a Brooklyn-Irish accent. He said ain't. Nothing in all the "wrong" places. My mother spoke in Irish aphorisms and fluent Mandarin. My grandmother spoke only Sindhi. We co-habitated, in various rotations, for eighteen years. In one house. This is normal. When I am with my family in India, displaced, uprooted, conversations drift between languages: Sindhi, Hindi, English, Bengali, Urdu, Pashtun, Pharsi, Marathi, Tamil. If you cannot keep up in one, someone will switch to another.

Maison. Ghar. Casa. *House*. What does italicizing a non-English word

mean? It sets it apart. It marks it other. Is it not as real a word? Is mariposa not as real a word as butterfly?

Language is flexible. Words have elastic edges. They can be pushed, prodded. Widened. Widen the meaning of a word. Redefine it. Family, American, Love, Normal. Writers push at words. We know they are stretchy.

Paying attention to language is political.

In my short story, "The Pelvis Series," I chose to make my character Eve, Black. But I did not want to ever refer to her race in the way that race is often referred to for African-American or South Asian American or any "dark" character-- through a description of skin color. Through some sort of adjective like "dark, coffee-colored," etc. I never used the word "black." I refused to define my character by her race. And I felt I was making a political statement with my omissions.

Sometimes, I do not write about being biracial, immigrant, Indian, first-generation American, brown, a woman, queer. Sometimes I write about straight European men who conduct orchestras. Why shouldn't I? Sometimes I refuse to write within the categories of my identity. Most times I blur, sometimes I stray completely. This is a political choice.

In a review, my own work was both appreciated and admonished for its attention to aesthetics and language and its veering away from only writing about the immigrant South Asian experience. This praise and criticism is confusing, conflicting, I think because the author of the review has an inherent belief in the binary opposition existing between that of the aesthetic and the political.

"Vaswani's work distinguishes itself from the mainstream trends in contemporary

South Asian American fiction. Whereas many of these South Asian American writers focus on such themes as culture clash, alienation in the new country, nostalgia for the old country, and critiques of nationalism and patriarchy, Vaswani's work emphasizes aesthetics. She is highly experimental and her stories have a mythic quality to them. The characters are odd, the plots are bizarre and they invite the reader to question his/her expectations of fictional forms, cultural issues, and the relationship between fiction and fantasy. Her writing is also very beautiful and each sentence has a distinct poetic sensibility. In "Twang (Release)" she writes:

Standing in the slanted rain and diagonal wind, she stared up at the sky. In the midst of all that power, she seemed a puff, a brief exhalation.
(p.50).

Her character, a daughter writing about the imminent loss of the mother to a storm, writes the preceding sentence which brings home the power of the storm and highlights a moment of beauty in an otherwise terrifying moment. It is in yoking such disparate elements together that Vaswani offers us a glimpse into a new direction for South Asian fiction in the US -- one that can explore topics other than culture clash and identity problems. (Although there is some extraordinary South Asian American writing emerging today, I can't help but rejoice at another thematic and aesthetic dimension to this emergent literature.)

Vaswani explores her own biracial heritage (Irish and Sindhi) in some of her

stories. Even when she treads on familiar ground for readers of South Asian American fiction, she brings in a new perspective. Her "Five Objects in Queens" is a story with the scope of a novel -- the lives of two sisters of Sindhi and Irish heritage. However, the story is constructed as five vignettes which powerfully examine identity, difference, love and loss with such brevity as to let the reader build the novel through her imagination. This story, one of my favorites in the collection, also has a wonderful cast of eccentric characters -- a reckless Sindhi grandmother who "surreptitiously chucked her insulin in the neighbor's trashcan and hunkered there to eat half a Ring Ding and Ayurvedic tablets" (125); two young girls, Priyanka and Rita, who begin as adventurous teenagers and continue in the story as individuals who deal with their mother's cancer, their sexuality, and questions of race; a garden loving, mother, who struggles with cancer and copes with a cross-cultural marriage; and a father who obsesses over a ceramic plate with a lotus painted on it. Another story about immigrants is "Sita and Mrs. Duber" in which Ms. Duber, a well-meaning teacher tries to understand her genius kindergarten student, Sita. Even as Mrs. Duber's perspective dominates the story, it is neatly undercut by Sita's artwork which often counters Mrs. Duber's view of the world.

Eccentric characters abound in Vaswani's stories. Perhaps, the most memorable is Bandar, the protagonist of a story called "Excrement". The character's obsession with cleanliness and bodily functions, his narcoleptic sister, his deaf lover named Mez , a cast of eunuchs to cater to his every need after he migrates to a Christian land all inhabit a fantastic universe that is comparable to

the work of Marquez, Allende, or Rushdie. However, unlike Marquez et al, Vaswani's work is less concerned with politics. This may well be one of the drawbacks of her work for some -- an excessive preoccupation with aesthetics, textuality, and narrative form at the expense of a sustained critique of material conditions of life. All in all, however, Vaswani brings a refreshing new voice and perspective to the burgeoning field of South Asian American writing."²⁰⁶

This is a good review. I am not unhappy with it. In fact, I am flattered and amazed by it. What confuses me is how, if I am inviting "the reader to question his/her expectations of fictional forms, cultural issues, and the relationship between fiction and fantasy," how, then, am I apolitical? If one writes about the material conditions of life, about human beings, but in "poetic language"--does language distract so easily? Does an attention to beauty neuter politics? Or is it a question of audience? Or language so performative that it alienates?

We are trained in MFA programs to not consider the audience when writing. To consider one's audience overly is to not be true to yourself, the work, the characters, the story. However, what if, to be more effective as a writer, to be more heard, your language must be less performative?

The Politics of Creative Pedagogy

Bernard Crick, Scottish literary critic, writes:

"If one set a group of good students an essay with [the] title ["Literature and Politics"], one might anticipate any of all of these interpretations: 1) the

antipathy of the two concepts 2) their necessary interdependence 3) the duty of writers to commit themselves 4) the duty of writers not to commit themselves 5) the influence of politics on writers 6) the influence of writers on politics 7) the clash of censorship and free expression 8) the control and use of writers by the state in other countries than our own 9) examples of good and bad political writing 10) a case for the privatisation of public libraries 11) a demand for subsidies for unsuccessful writers 12) a demonstration (granted certain theoretical premises) that Literature is a bourgeois concept and that the novel has a special role in maintaining the class system. There could be other angles. There are more than seven types of ambiguity." ²⁰⁷

Graduate students of history are taught the place of history in academia, and in society. They are taught the importance of history. Science seems to require no explanation--everyone already knows it is important. And funded. In American Studies, we study the history of the discipline. We learn why and how it began, changed, is important. We learn about our place as a department in the university and within academia.

As a creative writing student, one is not taught much of anything about the importance of writing, the importance of the artist. This is not to say that most or many writers don't already have a natural sense of this. But it is not part of the creative writing institutional pedagogy. The responsibility of the writer, the role of the artist in society, does not receive syllabus attention in most MFA in Writing programs. Nor is the place of the writer in academia discussed. In MFA programs,

we talk about craft. Narrative line, pacing, the contract with the reader, dialogue, body language, plot, getting published, setting, atmosphere. MFA in Writing students don't have to take theory classes. The PhDs roll their eyes when there is a writer in their Victorian Lit class. "They always talk about *how* rather than *what*," one said to me. She did not know I was a writer; she assumed I wasn't, because I am in the American Studies Department.

Undergraduate Cultural Studies students are taught about power, politics, identity, the personal as political.

How is that writers do not study these things? We who write about all of it, too? We who must write convincing, human characters?

One of the first things you learn as a writer: Write what you know. One of the first things you teach as a writer: Write what you know. "Write what you know." How much more personal can you get? And therefore how much more political?

Carol Becker says:

"the best art goes so far into the personal that it broadens its own particularity and touches the world."²⁰⁸

What do you come to the page with?

"What we should use is what we have." Susan Sontag.



Does the artist have a responsibility to speak up? To be political?

As an American Studies student, I took a pedagogy workshop. The teacher as radical, the public intellectual. For my final syllabus, I designed a creative writing workshop that, in addition to focusing on craft, also attempted to teach creative writing students to be public intellectuals. The artist as public intellectual. The socially responsible artist. In life and art.

Writing students are not taught to think critically in the way a BA, MA, PhD student in American Studies is taught. But it is questioning that makes for the best books, I think; good art makes you think. To be able to impart this, a writer must know how to question and think critically.

Writers' political acts are sometimes lived. The consequence of this has often been censorship, alienation, ex-communication. Largely, though, writer's political acts appear on the page. For one person at a time to encounter, read, be transformed by. Reading is a solitary act, a private conversation. Unlike theatre, film, dance, painting, music, which are communal arts, reaching a large audience at once--a community experience. Reading is a one on one dialogue. Reading is a quiet act.

People often think politics and writing/art should have nothing to do with each other. That one reads, looks at art, to escape from life, to exist in a beautiful bubble. That art is a place to get away from the politics of life, that an artist's art will be dragged down if it is political. That all political art is propaganda. But there is more than one way to be political. Most art is full of life and therefore full of politics. It is impossible to read something and not see a writer's politics. Toni Morrison and slavery, history, power; Dickens and child labor. Woolf and women's rights. Berger and Marxist agrarianism.

At a global conference on art and politics, writer Nuruddin Farah said:

"I was thinking of the many purposes of art. One is to serve as a memorial. It makes me think of a photographer, I believe his name was Roman Vishniac, who went to Poland in the late 1930's before Hitler moved in. He smuggled in a camera and photographed people. the photographs became a memorial to these people--I believe the book is called The Vanished World. that is something that art, that writing can do" ²⁰⁹

Writers witness, record, make visible, construct, deconstruct, memorialize.

When teaching writing students to write, the first thing to remember is to remind them of their worth. Every student, including a student of art and craft, needs a sense of purpose.

At the same conference, poet Carolyn Forché told this story:

"When I was first invited to el Salvador, they wanted to have a North American poet learn as much as possible about the situation there before the war began, so that *when* the war began...this poet could come back to the US and speak to the American people about the reasons for it because the North Americans' opinions were going to be critical to the outcome. First I asked "Do you know how poets are viewed in the US?" they said, "No, how?" So I tried to explain our marginality. I said that we're a fringe element. We don't have a great deal of credibility. We are bohemians. We're mentally ill or we commit suicide or jump off bridges. Many North Americans cannot even name any poets. I said, "I don't think I am the proper messenger. Don't you want some sort of junior journalist, a young Barbara Walters, so that this

person will come back and be listened to?" They said, "No, we want a poet or writer someone who has a sensitivity and a critical distance, someone who can awaken language." and I was told by the Salvadorians, "If this is your situation as a writer in the US, then you must change this. Americans must not view writers in this way." ... When I came back to the United States, I thought, "Well the most important thing now will be to keep this distinction in mind, that poetry is deeply important but that I should never merge that with any sense of inflated self-importance of the poet." ²¹⁰

As a writer you get people to think by "fooling with" their assumptions and what they think are hard and fast truths. Anti-essentialist teaching through writing.

bell hooks said:

"People want to behave as if certain images don't mean anything.

Representations are consciously constructed. It's not pure imagination and creativity. There is manipulation involved." ²¹¹

It's something I don't think creative writers are educated in--a sense of responsibility, a sense of being a radical teacher, a public intellectual. I think this is a flaw in artistic education. Everything has meaning. Everything has context. How can artists make art without knowing this? Impossible. Writers are taught to control craft, language, structure, narrative. But they are not taught to control meaning. They are not taught the very simple fact that everything has meaning and that in making a narrative, they are making a thing of meaning and context. And to take responsibility for this.

For example, when we create a character, we create a full person, a full life. We have to treat our characters with respect. When we write a character, we have to take responsibility for the history behind them, the insidious stereotypes that must be written against in order to show a character's true, complex humanity. The lives of our characters are as politicized as our own. We must release them from their categorical boxes. We must show their human faces. Make every person understandable. To do not do so is to fail as a writer.

Carol Becker, public intellectual, dean of faculty at the School of the Arts Institute in Chicago says:

"We are trying to help students to imagine themselves as citizens within the world--not only the art world...in their role as spokespersons for multiple points of view and advocates for a critique of society, artist may well be understood as public intellectuals--those who believe in and take seriously the importance of the public sphere and who create, for an increasingly shrinking collective area able to house real debate, work they expect the world to respond to" ²¹²

Becker goes on to say:

"Theodor Adorno, Edward Said reminds us, always placed a great premium on "subjectivity," always mistrusting the "totally administered society." It is finally the refusal of the artists to fit in, to conform to this regimentation, that makes the image of the artist so powerful within the culture. The artist is the living negation of society...few artists themselves are able to articulate the range of possible roles they might play, and even fewer have been trained to

see their function as parallel to that of the intellectual--and yet it is and should be. Artists stand at the edge of society. Few ever dare to hope they might create an image or representation that actually affects or changes society. This is because the task of artists, which is to pull what is personal into the public sphere and to give shape to what is public as it occurs in the private sphere, is rarely valued. Few artists would describe themselves as attempting to enter political life through their work; however, Said quotes Genet as once saying, "The moment you publish essays in a society, you have entered political life; so if you want not to be political, do not write essays or speak out." ²¹³

Beauty and art are deeply subjective.

Subjectivity, the personal and political, critical thinking, questioning, standing on the fringe. Why is there any divide between the scholars and the artists? Why do we not see each other as similar beings working towards the same aims? Why do we not take the time to learn from each other, to cross each other's borders and genres? To acquire each other's methodologies?

Luisa Valenzuela at the global conference read from his piece called, "A Little Manifesto" :

"..Literature doesn't pretend to solve anything. it disturbs and stirs ideas, keeping them from becoming stale. but it is precisely at these crosswaters where it becomes necessary to have a lucid ideology as a base from which problems may be focused on, exploring new options .

...I don't believe writers are or should be judges; neither should we pretend to

be the blind, beautiful Justice. We are simply witnesses with our antennae alert, witnesses to our external and internal realities, intertwined as the ways are....writing is a constant game of questioning and it is a dangerous one, and not because we might be fighting against some kind of censorship but rather because we can never permit ourselves the comfortable solid ground of absolute certainty..." ²¹⁴

Why can't art be beautiful, entertaining, and political? Why can't art ask questions? Why is there a division between political art and "art for art's sake?" Why does it have to be one or other? A recent article in the Brown Daily quotes Rhode Island School of Design students who say they don't want to talk about politics in their art; they want to focus on craft. The article goes on to talk about usefulness, activeness in art as being inartistic, somehow. ²¹⁵

Even the choice of structure can be political. The Unbearable Lightness of Being, Milan Kundera's novel of love and politics in communist-run Czechoslovakia, is a combination of autobiography, history, romance, and philosophical inquiry. In an interview with Philip Roth, Kundera said of his personal past:

"If someone had told me as a boy: One day you will see your nation vanish from the world, I would have considered it nonsense, something I couldn't possibly imagine... But after the Russian invasion of 1968, every Czech was confronted with the thought that his nation could be quietly erased from Europe." ²¹⁶

Kundera's existence was deeply affected by Russian totalitarian leadership. By

combining autobiography and history (much of the history written as if in a textbook), Kundera subtly shows how the "I" is affected by history, how history is made up of individuals. Through his choice of mixed genre, he thereby takes history out of the hands of government and puts it in the hands of citizens. The novel is structured in small, short pieces like a collage; the same story is told over and over again from different perspectives, with each new perspective filling in different parts of the overall narrative. His choice to tell the story this way speaks out against the totalitarian idea of one truth. It insists that truth can only come from multiple points of view. The characters in the novel often disagree with each; they pose questions of each other, and in this way the reader is offered freedom and space to come to their own conclusions. Kundera has said:

"A novel does not assert anything; a novel searches and poses questions. I don't know whether my nation will perish and I don't know which of my characters is right. I invent stories, confront one with another, and by this means I ask questions...The novelist teaches the reader to comprehend the world as a question... The totalitarian world, whether founded on Marx, Islam or anything else, is a world of answers rather than questions." ²¹⁷

In short, Kundera injects his world view and way of thinking into the shape of his novel, in how he writes, not only what he writes. The very structure of The Unbearable Lightness of Being embodies Kundera's personal politics.

As M. Keith Booker writes:

"Even the most transgressive works of literature do not in general immediately send their readers into the streets carrying banners and shouting

slogans. Transgressive literature works more subtly, by chipping away at certain modes of thinking that contribute to the perpetuation of oppressive political structures”²¹⁸

Alice Walker is another author who asks questions, who speaks her personal politics in her art, and she does so predominantly through her characters and themes. Walker, the youngest of eight children was born to impoverished sharecroppers in a small rural town in Georgia. Both of her parents were storytellers, and Walker was especially influenced by her mother, whom she described in her essay, Our Mothers' Gardens, as "a walking history of our community." In that same essay, she says of writing from the personal, "We must fearlessly pull out of ourselves and look at and identify with our lives..."²¹⁹ Walker is known for unwavering honesty in evoking the forbidden, either in political stances or in love and sexuality. She is also known for creating characters who are complex, undiminished human beings. She does not shy away from unpleasant, hard truths, and believes in the politics of visibility. In an interview with Claudia Tate, Walker said of one of her characters: "I know many Brownfields, and it's a shame that I know so many. I will not ignore people like Brownfield. I want you to know I know they exist. I want to tell you about them, and there is no way you are going to avoid them."²²⁰ In The Color Purple, Walker's main character, Celie, is an uneducated, country black woman. Celie fights to survive throughout the story; she resists the oppressions, of race, class, gender, and sexuality, surrounding her. First she survives her rapist step-father, then her abusive husband, Mister, and finally, she survives her own past to become a fulfilled, independent woman. Walker supplies us with a woman that most people would never think of as a

poet, yet every word Celie speaks is full of keen insight and beauty. Walker's most subtle, powerful statement is to encourage the reader to look within, to overcome oppression, and to take control of their own lives in the way Celie does. This deeply personal, political novel has affected millions of lives. While Walker speaks of the experiences of black women, the messages of her books transcend. As Gloria Steinem said, "Alice Walker comes at universality through the path of an American black woman's experience.... She speaks the female experience more powerfully for being able to pursue it across boundaries of race, gender, and class."²²¹

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- ¹⁵⁰ Some information in this essay was taken from a lecture first delivered at Spalding University, Louisville, Kentucky, "This is not a poem/this is a call to open fire," co-written and delivered by me and Silas House: May 5, 2005.
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<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roger_Casement>
- ¹⁵² Solnit 29.
- ¹⁵³ Solnit 29.
- ¹⁵⁴ Solnit 43.
- ¹⁵⁵ Solnit 37-38.
- ¹⁵⁶ Solnit 39.
- ¹⁵⁷ Solnit 38.
- ¹⁵⁸ Solnit 36.
- ¹⁵⁹ Solnit 40.
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- ¹⁶⁴ Joseph O'Brien, "Report of the British Consul, Roger Casement, on the Administration of the Congo Free State," JJay.CUNY.edu April 2005
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- ¹⁶⁶ Solnit 43.
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- ¹⁷² Solnit 42.
- ¹⁷³ Based on a visit to the Louisville Zoo, May 2004.
- ¹⁷⁴ Boyd 124-125.
- ¹⁷⁵ A detail noticed by my friend, Andrew Beahrs, with whom I went to the exhibit.
- ¹⁷⁶ Berger, John, Selected Essays (New York: Vintage Books, 2001) 283.
- ¹⁷⁷ From a plaque at the Boston Museum of Science, November 2004.
- ¹⁷⁸ William Hollingsworth, "Population Explosion, Still Expanding," USA TODAY 1998
<<http://www.faculty.fairfield.edu/faculty/hodgson/Courses/so191/GlobalIssues/PopulationExplosion.html>>
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- ¹⁸⁴ Foucault 196.
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- ¹⁸⁶ Bishop and Olson 43.

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- ¹⁹² Kumar Bombay 54-55.
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- ²⁰⁴ Larry Brown, "Samaritans," Facing the Music (Chapel Hill, Algonquin, 1988) 37.
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*Chapter VIII: Magical Realism: The Politics of Structure and “Reality” in Fiction*²²²

Initially, I was inspired to write this lecture because of two statements that stuck in my craw. The first, #1 on your handout, quote: “Americans can’t write magical realism” was said by an intelligent and talented writer--none of you know her. The statement irritates me on a few levels--it seems to imply that there is only one kind of American, it seems to imply that American is a term that only applies to United States citizens as opposed to Canadians or Brazilians, and the *obvious* irritant--the implication that there are *no* Americans writing *good* magical realism.

Although magical realism is generally associated with writers such as Gabriel Garcia Marquez and other Latin American authors, it is actually an “international commodity” employed by writers from Africa, Europe, Asia, North America, etc. Magical realism is also generally thought to be a *modern* mode that “started” and flourished during the 1960's, but this assumption ignores the tradition of the *interweaving* of magic and real in works such as: the Decameron, The Thousand and One Nights, Don Quiote, as well as 20th century magical realist texts written *before* 1960.²²³ Take for example, Bernard Malamud’s short story, “Angel Levine,” written in 1955. The story enters a third space (meaning it doesn’t inhabit a solely magical or a solely real space, but a third space that incorporates both the magic *and* the real). In the story, Manishevitz, a Jewish, first-generation American tailor, prays to God for help for his dying wife. Angel Levine, an African-American-Jewish angel appears and recites the Hebrew blessing for bread. The tailor doubts Levine, wondering why

God would send him a black angel to which Levine replies: quote, “It was my turn to go next,” and then, offended by Manishevitz’s doubt, angel Levine disappears.²²⁴

While searching for the angel, Manishevitz looks inside a store he frequents and sees that it has magically transformed into a synagogue, this is #2 on your handout:

“In the rear [was] a long table on which lay the sacred scroll unrolled...Around the table...sat four Negroes wearing skullcaps...as they read the Holy Word, Manishevitz could, through the...window, hear the singsong chant of their voices...Their heads moved in rhythmic swaying. Touched by this sight from his childhood and youth, Manishevitz entered and stood silent in the rear.”²²⁵

This experience changes Manishevitz and when he finally discovers Angel Levine in a blues bar the tailor states his belief, quote: “You are Jewish. This I am sure of...I think you are an angel from God.” Once the tailor believes, his wife is cured and the angel flies away, quote, “...a dark figure borne aloft on a pair of magnificent black wings.”²²⁶

This story, which is realistic in many ways, enters a magic realm in part by taking flight (much like Garbriel Garcia Marquez’s short story “A Very Old Man With Enormous Wings” which was written in 1968-- thirteen years *after* “Angel Levine”). Malamud’s story relays that in America two worlds must be bridged; Manishevitz must learn to believe in a new world which *resembles* the old, *but* exists as something else entirely. To bridge these two worlds, the story straddles two modes--that of the magic and that of the real.

Steven Vincent Benet’s story, “O’Halloran’s Luck,”--written in 1938, 17

years *before* “Angel Levine” and 30 years *before* “A Very Old Man With Enormous Wings” --also combines the magic and real. Tim O’Halloran, a first-generation American, meets a leprechaun on America’s midwestern plains. The leprechaun *tells Tim* of a banshee living near Lake Superior who suffers because people no longer believe in her, this is #3 on your handout:

“...you could see [the banshee’d] come down in the world. For even the bits of children wouldn’t believe in her and when she let out a shriek, sure they thought it was a steamboat. I misdoubt she’s died since then--she was not in good health when I left her” ²²⁷

Tim believes in and takes care of the leprechaun. In return, the leprechaun uses magic to help Tim succeed and marry the woman he loves. Because Tim successfully inhabits both the old and new world, because he believes in the leprechaun and sustains the old Irish ways, he is rewarded. In terms of content and structure, the story inhabits a realistic world that is affected by and infused with magic. And all of this *in* the United States, *before* 1960.

And back to my irritation. The second statement that stuck in my craw was made by a professor with a PhD in English (you don’t know her either)--she said, and this is 4 on your handout: “Magical realism is frivolous because it is not based in reality--it’s all entertaining tricks with nothing important to say.” This ignorant statement made me realize how magical realism is often set-up in opposition to (and lesser than) literary Realism, which took a central position between 1860 and 1914--think of authors such as Henry James, Edith Wharton, Booker T. Washington.

Now, I did not write this lecture to say the opposite of these statements, that

is, to say that *all* North Americans *can* or *should* write magical realism, nor to say that magical realism is a *better* or superior mode to realism. But I do hope to show that magical realism is a mode that is successfully employed by many United States writers and that it is a mode with important, unfrivolous things to say.

In magical realism, the supernatural is not a simple or obvious matter but it is an *ordinary* matter, an everyday occurrence--admitted, accepted, and integrated into "real life." Some current scholars discuss the difference between realism and magical realism as stemming from "intentionality," meaning, realism intends its version of the world to be singular and universal whereas magical realism intends its version of the world to include a multitude of possibilities.

In an interview published in The Fragrance of Guava, Gabriel Garcia Marquez maintains that, and this is #5 on handout," realism (he cites some of his own realistic novels as examples) is a kind of *premeditated* literature that offers too static and *exclusive* a vision of reality. However good or bad they may be they are books that finish on the last page." A "realistic" text does not give an accurate presentation of reality itself, Marquez contends, because "disproportion is part of our reality too. Our reality is in itself all out of proportion." In other words, Marquez suggests that a *magic* text is paradoxically *more realistic* than a "realistic" text.²²⁸

Frequently, magical realism is lumped in with science fiction, surrealism, the fantastic, the gothic, but magical realism does *not* use dream motifs, and it does *not* distort reality or create imagined worlds--as fantastic lit and sci fi does, nor does it emphasize psychological analysis of characters as often occurs in the gothic. In fantastic lit, the supernatural *invades* a world ruled by reason. In magical realism,

"the mystery does not *descend* to the earth, but rather hides and palpitates behind it."

Magical realism is an *attitude* toward reality--writers confront reality and try to untangle it, to discover what is mysterious in life, in human acts.²²⁹

Frequently, magical realist texts are written in reaction to totalitarian regimes. Salman Rushdie wrote his novel Midnight's Children in reaction to Indira Gandhi's autocratic rule. Toni Morrison wrote the novel *Beloved* in direct response to the atrocities of slavery and its aftermath, Isabelle Allende wrote House of Spirits in part to critique the barbarity of Pinochet's Chilean regime. These texts, which are receptive to more than one point of view, to realistic and magical ways of seeing, respond to a desire for *freedom* from a uni-vocal stance. Many magical realist texts take a position that is antibureaucratic and use their magic against the established order--as a form of resistance. In Midnight's Children, Saleem's "Midnight Congress" is an alternative to the Congress Party which the narrator believes holds India in a deathgrip. In Milan Kundera's, The Book of Laughter and Forgetting, the magical levitation of political party members (as they dance in a ring) signals the danger of conformism, of rising on the unbearably light wings of homogenous doctrine.²³⁰

Frederic Jameson states that magical realist writing often stems from a place and time in which different cultures inhabit a single space--Jameson lists post-colonial nations, contemporary Eastern Europe, and the South of Faulkner. Others have observed that magical realism as a literary practice seems to be closely linked with a perception of "living on the margins" for authors not sharing in, or not writing from the perspective of, the privileged centers for reasons of race, class, language,

sexuality, or gender. It is a mode suited to exploring and transgressing boundaries, and often facilitates the coexistence of possible worlds, spaces, and systems that would be irreconcilable in other modes of fiction. Spirit and matter, real and imaginary, male and female, self and other are boundaries to be erased, brought together, or refashioned. This in-between all-at-onceness encourages resistance to monologic political and cultural structures *and* offers a way of access to the main body of “western” literature.²³¹ For example, Midnight’s Children both invokes and subverts the typically English tradition of the colonial novel as written by somebody like, Kipling. In this tradition, the English white, male view of the land and its inhabitants holds a central position. Thus the colonized Indians assume the role of the “other” the exotic, the strange. In Rushdie’s novel, the focus lies with the Indians themselves, with their views of *their* country and society. From this perspective, the exotic becomes something the West has projected *upon* India and it is the Westerner who becomes “other.” In Midnight’s Children, all the children born in India at the moment the country gained its independence from England, communicate with each other in a magic telepathy and literally give voice to an entire subcontinent--a proper voice this time, as the subjects of their own story and not as the objects of an English colonial novel.²³²

I want to tangent briefly and talk about Italian activist Antonio Gramsci’s idea of hegemony--what I’ll say is summarized in #6 on your handout. From 1929 to 1935, Gramsci wrote what have come to be known as the prison notebooks after being incarcerated by Mussolini’s fascist government. Gramsci’s main contribution to cultural studies and literary theory is his concept of hegemony--a process of

maintaining power and control, as in, for example, the case of British hegemony in the Caribbean. One of the ways in which the British attempted to secure control over the indigenous population and the African people who were transported there as slaves was by means of an imposition of British culture. Part of the process was to institute English as the official language. What emerged was a *transformed* English with new stresses and rhythms, with some words dropped and new African words introduced. The new language is the result of a “negotiation” between dominant and subordinate cultures; a language marked by both “resistance” and “incorporation.” Hegemony theory allows us to think of culture as an active, negotiated mix of intentions and counterintentions from above and below. There are of course limits to such negotiations. As Gramsci makes clear, the concessions can never be allowed to challenge the economic fundamentals of class power; in other words, the class on top economically will *not* relinquish its standing. In terms of literature, Gramsci saw hegemony at work in writers who in attempting to represent the “truth” of everyday life only reproduced their own quote “socioreligious and cultural prejudices”---which is to say, realities of the dominant economic culture. In short, he criticized literature that presented *one* version of Reality because of the inherent implications of power, control, and subordination over *any* other versions.²³³

Magical realism, as we’ve been discussing, is a literary mode that inverts power, that offers alternate and often conflicting versions of reality. It is also actively anti-hegemonic. For authors such as Isabelle Allende who wrote House of Spirits to “keep alive the memory” of her country Chile, and Toni Morrison who is explicitly concerned with the process of rememory in Song of Solomon, writing is grounded in

the recuperation of the historical, and the desire to preserve a past too often trivialized, built over or erased.²³⁴ These authors skirt the process of hegemony--as Morrison says of her own work, #7 on handout: "[There is] the acceptance of the supernatural and a profound rootedness in the real world *at the same time*, without one taking precedence over the other." There is in these author's works, the validity of multiple realities--of there *not being* one history on top, one way to live, one reality.²³⁵

So now that we have a background of the history, theory, and politics of magical realism, let's talk about primary characteristics--ways in which magical realist texts are frequently structured. These are summarized on the handout.

1) The magical realist text contains an "irreducible element" of magic, something we cannot explain according to the laws of the universe as we know them. Irreducible magic often means disruption of the ordinary logic of cause and effect. In terms of the text, magical things really do happen: Remedios the Beauty in One Hundred Years of Solitude really does ascend to heaven. Saleem of Midnight's Children causes historical events by singing a song or moving a pot on the dining room table.²³⁶ 2) Detailed descriptions--often vividly sensory--are common. The attention to *realistic description* creates a fictional world that resembles the one we live in. Realistic details signal that a story *is real*. On the *other* hand, the magical nature of many of these details (like Beloved's appearances, Saleem's transmitting brain) indicate a clear *departure* from realism. So magical details serve as markers that signal in the *opposite* direction--that this might all be imaginary.²³⁷ 3) Often in magical realist texts there are idiosyncratic re-creations of historical events--often

alternate versions of officially sanctioned accounts. Such as Marquez's rewriting the history of Latin America in that of Macondo and the opening of Kundera's The Book of Laughter and Forgetting which restores a man airbrushed out of history by party doctrine. History is the weight that tethers the magic balloon. Often there is "Felt history" in which a character experiences historical forces *bodily* as occurs with Saleem's birth which coincides with the birth of the independent nation of India (Saleem, like post-colonial India, is "genetically" half Indian, half English).²³⁸ 4) Metafictional tactics in which the texts comment on themselves as texts. (anyone here see the movie "Adaptation?"-- a metafictional movie- a movie about making a movie about the movie that's being made). In magical realist narratives, metafictional tactics usually involve a story inside a story or self-fulfilling stories such as Midnight's Children in which Saleem narrates the novel in first person and simultaneously writes the novel as part of the narrative--the reader "reads" both the oral and written tellings. In One Hundred Years of Solitude, Aureliano reads parchments in which he finds the story of his family documented one hundred years *before* any of them were born--this is #4a on your handout:

“Before reaching the final line, however... [Aureliano] had already understood that he would never leave that room, for it was foreseen that the city...would be wiped out by the wind and exiled from the memory of men at the precise moment when Aureliano...would finish deciphering the parchments...”²³⁹

For both post-colonial nations and many Americans, the past is another

country. As Salman Rushdie states in his essay “Imaginary Homelands,” 4B on your handout, “America, a nation of immigrants, has created great literature out of the phenomenon of cultural transplantation, out of examining the ways in which people cope with a new world.”²⁴⁰ For the first-generation American, the old world, the past, exists as story. Author Maxine Hong Kingston explains the phenomena this way, 4C on your handout “Those of us in the first American generations have had to figure out how the invisible world the immigrant built around our childhoods fits in solid America.” ²⁴¹

The following excerpts exhibit how story functions in American magical realist texts. We're at 4D on your handout:

From Maxine Hong Kingston's short story, “Shaman”:

“Not when we were afraid, but when we were wide awake and lucid, my mother funneled China into our ears: Kwantung Province, New Society Village, the river Kwoo, which runs past the village, ‘Go the way we came so that you will be able to find our house. Don’t forget. Just give your father’s name, and any villager can point out our house.’ I am to return to China where I have never been.”²⁴²

From Paul Slouka's short story, “Jumping Johnny”:

“I was accustomed to the ghosts that sent my mother to the bedroom, weeping, or my father out to the chopping block for an afternoon or more, and I knew enough to stay out of their way. In our home, the past was always

present, a landscape as familiar--more familiar, in some ways--than the one through which I ran and played.

“Born in New York, the immigrant’s son, I knew the low sky and the slate-red roofs of Brno and Prague long before I saw them, heard the silence of fields, cultivated since Rome, long before I stumbled in their furrows, smelled the smell of courtyards at dusk--the wet-sand smell of lumber and coal--long before I leaned out of actual windows, a foreigner smoking a cigarette, recalling a place I’d never seen.”²⁴³

From Victoria Redel’s short story, “My Little Pledge of Us” (1995):

“Natured, nurtured, everyone at this table has a fantastic, tortured story.

“How will it be told? With a needle and a spoon, it will be told. And it will be told, too, with a mother’s waltz and a father’s worry coin and with a treasure box where the youngest child has hidden buttons and feathers, the woolly scraps that help her to sleep, the soup spoon and bread crust she will need when the gypsies steal her and she must find her way back home. It will be told secretly, camouflaged, in a mended language made newly of the old, frayed words. It will be spoken in tarnished silver, in a beaten egg and a whisper, and in the shouting all-at-once voices of all relatives, each claiming the other is dreaming, has it wrong, and that his story, her story, this story is

the only story, the one to ward off disaster, the only one that is right.”²⁴⁴

In Toni Morrison’s novel Beloved, story acts in a similar way--to literally *feed* a “ghost,” and keep her alive with stories from the past:

"Tell me, said Beloved, smiling a wide happy smile. 'Tell me your diamonds.'

It became a way to *feed* her...Sethe learned the profound satisfaction Beloved got from storytelling..." ²⁴⁵

OK. Back to our larger list of characteristics. Number 5) The reader may hesitate b/w two contradictory understandings of events--and hence experience unsettling doubts. The reader's primary doubt in most cases is between understanding an event as a character's hallucination or as a miracle. In One Hundred Years of Solitude, Remedios the Beauty makes a miraculous ascension to heaven by way of a sheet that serves as a parachute to carry her up (against the laws of gravity and parachutes). Marquez uses the paragraph after Remedios’ disappearance to describe the townspeople’s *disbelief* in her ascension. He also describes Fernanda’s *belief*--she prays to God for the return of the sheet that carried Remedios to heaven. By commenting on the strangeness of the event--through the townspeople’s doubt--Marquez acknowledges the reader’s skepticism. He simultaneously *encourages* the reader to believe as Fernanda does.²⁴⁶ 6) The absurd coupled with the mundane is often given importance. The Annals of the Kabakoffs, a first-generation American novella, attributes a main character’s disappearance to the moment when he flatulated

at his daughter's wedding. And in One Hundred Years of Solitude the natural appearance of ice throws the town and characters into pandemonium. Remedios' ascension to heaven is eventually accepted, whereas ice is considered to be supernatural. 7) We experience the closeness or merging of two realms, two worlds. Often fluid boundaries exist between the living and the dead, the past and the present, history and fable, dream and reality. In Maxine Hong Kingston's story, "White Tigers" (from her boundary blurring text, Woman Warrior, that's part fiction, part memoir) she writes, this is 7a on your handout: "Night after night my mother would talk-story until we fell asleep. I couldn't tell where the stories left off and the dreams began." ²⁴⁷ The next twenty-four pages of the thirty-four page story launch into a magical realm where Kingston becomes the historical figure Fa Mu Lan (who has since entered America's imagination as a Disney character). She can fly, subsist on air, be recognized as both man and woman, tolerate excruciating doses of pain. In short, she is superhuman--a magical figure. Metamorphoses and transformations such as this Chinese-American girl *becoming* an historical figure are common in magical realist texts, as are an underlying base of ancient systems of belief and local lore. ²⁴⁸

8) The questioning of perceived ideas about time, space, and identity. In One Hundred Years of Solitude, this is 8a on your handout during "four years, eleven months, and two days of rain" an insomnia plague erases the past and the meaning of words (note the specificity in terms of numbers, *four* years, *eleven* months, *two* days, the concrete *combining* with a magical event to convince and add an aspect of familiarity); there is also a room in which it is "always March and always Monday." ²⁴⁹ Often, time is cyclical rather than linear and is associated with loss or

memory, as in Mark Slouka's story "The Shape of Water," in which the phrase "I remember" occurs at least three times on every page. In direct opposition to his saying "I remember," the narrator frequently states, quote: "All I know I heard from someone else."²⁵⁰ His memory and sense of time are *collective* and indistinguishable from the memories of his family and community.²⁵¹ 9) language is stretched and played with, metaphors are made real--as when blood is *literally* thicker than water in One Hundred Years of Solitude. Jose Arcadio Buendia shot himself, this is 9a on your handout and a trickle of his blood "came out under the door...went out into the street...went down steps and climbed over curbs...turned a corner to the right and another to the left." and once inside the Buendia home, hugged the walls "so as not to stain things" and came out on his mother Ursulas' kitchen floor. There is also in magical realism a sense of duality in language. Language in a post-colonial nation is full of *opposition* that has its roots in the process of either transporting a language to a new land or imposing a foreign language on an indigenous population.²⁵² For many first generation Americans, there is *also* a process of linguistic maneuvering. There is often *one* language spoken for the personal and private, for the home, and *one* for the public. 10) Wonders are recounted largely without comment, in a matter of fact way, accepted without undue questioning or reflection. Often descriptions of phenomena are explained for the *first time* so the reader *participates* in the fresh wonder of that experience such as when the Beundias discover ice or a magnifying glass or, 10a, on your handout, this description of a train as: "something frightful like a kitchen dragging a village behind it." The voice and tone of the magical realist narrator is also frequently matter-of-fact--and this aids in making magic *familiarized* for the

reader. Overlaying this matter of fact tone is a carnivalesque spirit in which, either on the level of plot or language or both, there is an upside-downing, a celebration of passionate excesses and extravagance²⁵³....And last but not least in our general list of magical realist characteristics, this is #11) Ghosts are often prevalent. In One Hundred Years of Solitude the ghost figure of Prudencio Aguilar is used to open the novel and eventually move the family and story-arc forward. And in Salman Rushdie's Midnight's Children the ghost Joseph D'Costa acts as the impetus for the unveiling of family secrets. Other magical realist novels that use spirits to similar effect are Peter Carey's Illywhacker, Toni Morrison's Beloved, and Brad Watson's The Heaven of Mercury.

In Maxine Hong Kingston's, Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts. Kingston and her family use *ghost* as an appellation for any non-Chinese person in America, 11a on your handout: "... America has been full of machines and ghosts--Taxi Ghosts, Bus Ghosts, Police Ghosts, Fire Ghosts, Meter Reader Ghosts..."²⁵⁴ This is a cultural toppling of the common immigrant experience of *being* a ghost in mainstream society--invisible, unreal, unseen.

So that's the end of our list.

As we've seen, magical realism comes from the notion of the ex-centric, in the sense of speaking from the margin, from a place other than the center; this is an essential feature of postmodernism as well. A current trend of thought pertaining to magical realism and its definition is its association with post-modernism. For a good example of a postmodern "text" think again of the film "Adaptation" or "Being John Malkovich." The following features are regarded as marks of post-modernism and

are listed on your handout: self-reflexiveness, metafiction, eclecticism, redundancy, multiplicity, discontinuity, intertextuality, parody, the dissolution of character and narrative, the erasure of boundaries, and the destabilization of the reader or viewer. Anyone minimally acquainted with Marquez, Cortazar, Fuentes would recognize their literary traits in this list of postmodern tendencies. Most commentators agree that the very term postmodernism originated in 1930's Latin America with the critic Federico de Onis and was reinvented or reused throughout the 40s and 50s in both Europe and the Americas. Most commentators would also agree that in its present meaning and with its present scope, the term, *postmodern* is used primarily with reference to US, prose fiction. In the essay "Postmodern Fiction in Canada" Lernout claims that "what is postmodern in the rest of the world used to be called magic realist in South America and still goes by that name in Canada."²⁵⁵

Since its inception, magical realism has never really had a singular definition. The term magical realism (itself a sort of oxymoron) was first coined in 1929 by Franz Roh, a German art critic. He referred to post-Expressionist painting as *Magischer Realismus* to explain what he saw as the movement *away from* Expressionism and its "suppression of the object" toward a hyper-realism. The term was *again* used, this time in a *literary* context, by Alejo Carpentier, in his 1949 essay, "lo Real maravilloso americano" in which he *distinguished* the magical real from surrealism and the fantastic. Since the 50's, numerous authors have been simultaneously categorized inside and outside the mode, and magical realism has been lumped *in with* as well as *rejected from* various literary traditions.²⁵⁶ In my opinion, all of this ambiguity makes sense, because magical realism is a form that purposefully avoids being boxed

in, and avoids the boxing-in of the author. And so magical realism, a mode used successfully by many United States writers, a mode with important things to say, remains in a hybrid, shared space--which is at it should be.

OK. Let's try a brief exercise. There's no pressure, we'll write imperfectly and quickly. The point of the exercise is simply to try to *expand* the limits of reality. On your handout is a left-hand column of "realistic" plots, and a right-hand column of "magical" occurrences. We're going to incorporate something from the "magical" column, into a brief paragraph about one of the realistic events. For example, you might choose to write a paragraph about a woman who is mowing her lawn and sees a bear flying by. Try to make your magical selection *affect* the realistic plot or character *and* keep in mind the usefulness of a matter of fact tone. I'll let you know when five minutes are up.

Real: *write a paragraph about*

Magic: *incorporate somewhere*

washing dishes

a stray cat who speaks French.

a nurse giving a shot to a child

a tree struck by lightning that
doesn't die

mowing the lawn

a glowing orb found in the cave
where the Dead Sea scrolls were
discovered

fishing

a pair of glasses that makes a

character see his/her past

walking the dog

a man who turns into a woman

on the third Monday in May

painting one's toenails

a person with the ability to move

small objects with their mind

a truckdriver taking a dinner break

a bear who escaped from the

circus by learning to fly

Time for one or two volunteers to read their paragraph aloud, and/or take questions.

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- ²²² A lecture first delivered at Spalding University, Louisville, Kentucky: May 15, 2003.
- ²²³ Wendy B. Faris and Lois Parkinson Zamora, eds., introduction, Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community (Durham: Duke University, 1995) 2.
- ²²⁴ Bernard Malamud, "Angel Levine," The Outnumbered, ed., Charlotte Brooks (New York, Dell Publishing, 1967) 62.
- ²²⁵ Malamud 66.
- ²²⁶ Malamud 69.
- ²²⁷ Malamud 32.
- ²²⁸ Scott Simpkins, "Sources of Magic Realism," Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community, eds, Wendy B. Faris and Lois Parkinson Zamora (Durham: Duke University, 1995) 148.
- ²²⁹ Franz Roh, "Magic Realism: Post-Expressionism," Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community, eds, Wendy B. Faris and Lois Parkinson Zamora (Durham: Duke University, 1995) 15.
- ²³⁰ Wendy Faris, "Scheherazade's Children," Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community, eds, Wendy B. Faris and Lois Parkinson Zamora (Durham: Duke University, 1995) 180.
- ²³¹ Faris and Zamora 6.
- ²³² Wendy Faris, "Scheherazade's Children," Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community, eds, Wendy B. Faris and Lois Parkinson Zamora (Durham: Duke University, 1995) 173.
- ²³³ John Storey, An Introduction to Cultural Theory and Popular Culture (Athens: University of Georgia, 1998) 124-130.
- ²³⁴ P. Gabrielle Foreman, "Past-On Stories: History and the Magically Real, Morrison and Allende On-Call," Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community, eds, Wendy B. Faris and Lois Parkinson Zamora (Durham: Duke University, 1995) 285.
- ²³⁵ Ibid.
- ²³⁶ Wendy Faris, "Scheherazade's Children," Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community, eds, Wendy B. Faris and Lois Parkinson Zamora (Durham: Duke University, 1995) 167.
- ²³⁷ Ibid.
- ²³⁸ Ibid.
- ²³⁹ Garbriel Garcia Marquez, One Hundred Years of Solitude (New York: Harper Perennial, 1967) 422.
- ²⁴⁰ Salman Rushdie, Imaginary Homelands (London: Granta Books 1991) 20.
- ²⁴¹ Kingston 5.
- ²⁴² Kingston 76.
- ²⁴³ Mark Slouka, Lost Lake (New York: Knopf, 1998) 92.
- ²⁴⁴ Victoria Redel, Where the Road Bottoms Out (New York: Knopf, 1995) 15.
- ²⁴⁵ Toni Morrison, Beloved (New York: Knopf, 1987) 63.
- ²⁴⁶ Wendy Faris, "Scheherazade's Children," Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community, eds, Wendy B. Faris and Lois Parkinson Zamora (Durham: Duke University, 1995) 171-172.
- ²⁴⁷ Kingston 19.
- ²⁴⁸ Wendy Faris, "Scheherazade's Children," Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community, eds, Wendy B. Faris and Lois Parkinson Zamora (Durham: Duke University, 1995) 178.
- ²⁴⁹ Wendy Faris, "Scheherazade's Children," Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community, eds, Wendy B. Faris and Lois Parkinson Zamora (Durham: Duke University, 1995) 173.
- ²⁵⁰ Slouka 35.
- ²⁵¹ Wendy Faris, "Scheherazade's Children," Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community, eds, Wendy B. Faris and Lois Parkinson Zamora (Durham: Duke University, 1995) 183-184.
- ²⁵² Wendy Faris, "Scheherazade's Children," Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community, eds, Wendy B. Faris and Lois Parkinson Zamora (Durham: Duke University, 1995) 176-177.
- ²⁵³ Wendy Faris, "Scheherazade's Children," Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community, eds, Wendy B. Faris and Lois Parkinson Zamora (Durham: Duke University, 1995) 177, 184.
- ²⁵⁴ Kingston 90-91.
- ²⁵⁵ Theo L. D'haen, "Magical Realism and Postmodernism," Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community, eds, Wendy B. Faris and Lois Parkinson Zamora (Durham: Duke University, 1995) 192-203.

²⁵⁶ Luis Leal, “Magical Realism in Spanish America,” Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community, eds, Wendy B. Faris and Lois Parkinson Zamora (Durham: Duke University, 1995) 120-121.

*Chapter IX: Stepping into Character*²⁵⁷

Most characters come from us organically, springing from the mind to the page, in a process that is difficult to describe or explain. But what about the times when a character isn't right or just won't appear? The methods we'll explore today can be useful to writers who are just beginning a character, *or* can be used to fix, deepen, adjust an already existing character that may be problematic. The basic premise we'll be working from is that actors and writers develop character in similar fashions. After discussing thespian and literary connections, we'll touch briefly on ethnographic methods that are applicable to the fiction (*and* creative nonfiction) process of forming a complex individual. Finally, we'll do some writing exercises and actualize the concepts we've talked about.

So, how can the techniques of an actor assist a writer when creating character?

I'm going to play a very short clip from an interview with actor Hume Cronyn, Jessica Tandy's husband. Before Hume comes on, their daughter talks about how infrequently her parents clashed at work despite the fact that they lived and acted together for more than 40 years. *Hume* talks about how they *did* differ--in their approaches to character--Tandy worked from the inside and Hume from the outside: (Play clip). There's another well-known example of this difference--Michael Caine and Lawrence Olivier on the set of the 1970's film, "Sleuth." As the story goes, on the first day of rehearsals, Caine and Olivier ran through their lines. And Caine, who had researched the culture of detectives and criminals, was giving a nuanced performance, but *Olivier* was clumsy, he seemed to have no sense of character and kept forgetting

his lines. The next day, Caine arrived at rehearsal and saw Olivier looking exactly as he had the day before except for a *little*, fake mustache under his nose. And once rehearsals began, Olivier was brilliant, he knew his character *and* his lines--all thanks to the mustache that allowed him to enter his part from the outside/in, whereas Caine had discovered his character's interiority first and *that* led him to embody the man.

In literature, one can also find characters who are created either from the outside or the inside. Generally, third person narratives are more conducive to outside beginnings for characters, and first person and close third person narratives lend themselves to inside beginnings, but both methods *can* be applied to any point of view. We'll start with an outside example, one from a first-person text, *David Copperfield*, by Charles Dickens, an unusual first-person narrative b/c it has the scope and perspective of third.

The first time we meet Mr. Micawber of *David Copperfield*, we get an exterior impression of him, based primarily on his appearance and secondarily upon how he delivers his dialogue. The following quote is #1 on your handout, and the speaker is David Copperfield:

"I went in, and found there a stoutish, middle-aged person, in a brown surtout and black tights and shoes, with no more hair upon his head (which was a large one, and very shining) than there is upon an egg, and with a very extensive face which he turned full upon me. His clothes were shabby, but he had an imposing shirt collar on. He carried a jaunty sort of stick with a large pair of rusty tassels to it; and a quizzing-glass hung outside his coat--for ornament, I afterwards found, as he very seldom looked through it, and

couldn't see anything when he did.”²⁵⁸

Critically examining this physical description of Micawber, one can infer that he is probably not well-off (this is a Victorian novel and his clothes are shabby) but either considers himself a gentleman or wants *to be considered* a gentleman, which is evident in his "imposing shirt collar." He's also frivolous, extravagant and believes in maintaining appearances--all of which are manifest in his jaunty stick with the useless tassels, and the ornamental eyeglass that actually *impairs* his vision.

In the next paragraph, we hear Micawber speak, and what we learn about him through his speech conforms to what we know about him based on his exterior. This is #2 on your handout:

“‘Under the impression,’ said Mr. Micawber, ‘that your peregrinations in this metropolis have not as yet been extensive, and that you might have some difficulty in penetrating the arcana of the Modern Babylon in the direction of the City Road--in short,’ said Mr. Micawber, in [a] burst of confidence, ‘that you might lose yourself--I shall be happy to call this evening and install you in the knowledge of the nearest way.’”²⁵⁹

As we have already ascertained, Micawber is fond of the superfluous, self-indulgent, and mindful of appearances; his spoken manner confirms these characteristics--he has used the most *flowery* and meandering way to say, “Since you're new to the city, I'll meet you and walk you home.” Throughout the novel, Dickens maintains Micawber's speaking patterns; the character begins every verbal interaction as a grandiose speech and towards the end says, “in short,” in a burst of

confidence.

Dickens is an author who almost always matches a character's physical description and speech pattern *to* their psychology--which is a simple and effective way to approach character and is also a common acting technique (Dickens loved the theatre *and* performers and sometimes developed his own characters based on *actors* he admired). Note what Dickens does with Betsy Trotwood, David's aunt. Here is a physical description of Trotwood, #3 on your handout:

“My aunt was a tall, hard-featured lady...There was an inflexibility in her face, in her voice, in her gait and carriage.. but her features were rather handsome than otherwise, though unbending and austere. I particularly noticed that she had a very quick, bright eye. Her hair, which was grey, was arranged in two plain divisions under...a mob-cap...with side-pieces fastening under the chin. Her dress was of a lavender colour, and perfectly neat; but scantily made, as if she desired to be as little encumbered as possible...She wore at her side a gentleman's gold watch...with an appropriate chain and seals; she had some linen at her throat not unlike a shirt-collar, and things at her wrists like little shirt waistbands.”²⁶⁰

Trotwood is one of Dickens' NON-stereotypical-Victorian female characters. The two plain divisions in her hair-part represent the two sides of her self--meaning she is hard, inflexible and austere, but also handsome, loving and kind. She is quick and bright like her eye, perfectly neat and appropriate like her dress. Her cap fastens under the chin since it's a cap that's meant to cover and stay on the head rather than be fashionable. (Note too that so far, Trotwood is the exact opposite of Micawber who

you'll remember was short, round, frivolous, and effusive while Trotwood is tall, thin, austere and blunt. This is something else Dickens often does--he creates pairs of antithetical characters who play off each other in the course of a novel). Trotwood is associated with masculinity b/c of her watch and linen and wristbands that looks like men's attire. So we know she is a "masculine" woman, she is two-sided, she is neat and efficient. All of these characteristics are mirrored in her speech patterns which are quick, effective, and mannish by Victorian standards. Here's a scene, # 4 on your handout:

"Miss Trotwood' rejoined Mr. Murdstone, shrugging his shoulders as he rose, 'if you were a gentleman--'

'Bah! Stuff and nonsense!' said my aunt. 'Don't talk to me!'... 'Do you think I don't know,' said my aunt, turning a deaf ear to the sister and continuing to address the brother...'Do you think I can't understand you as well as if I had seen you,' pursued my aunt, 'now that I do see and hear you--which, I tell you candidly, is anything but a pleasure to me? Oh yes, bless us! who so smooth and silky as Mr. Murdstone at first! The poor, benighted innocent had never seen such a man. He was made of sweetness. He worshipped her. He doted on her boy--tenderly doted on him! He was to be another father to him and they were all to live together in a garden of roses, weren't they? Ugh! Get along with you, do!' said my aunt."²⁶¹

Just as Micawber's way of speaking matched his dress and psychology so too does Betsy Trotwood's. (Something that can be learned from this is its inverse--to describe a character's exterior one way, but give them *unmatched* speech patterns and

a psychology that specifically does *not* coincide with either physicality or speech--in order to complicate a person and surprise the reader.) In the novel, *David Copperfield*, Trotwood consistently uses her two favorite expressions "Bah!" and "Stuff and nonsense." Dickens often writes massive casts of characters but it is virtually impossible to confuse them b/c each is distinct, with their own mannerisms, ways of speaking and dressing, so that every time they enter a scene they are instantly recognizable. This is definitely a tactic to bear in mind if you're wrestling with a vast, confusing batch of characters. The more distinct each one is, due to a set of *memorable* and *repeated* characteristics, the easier it will be for the reader to identify each person and keep them straight.

Stanislavsky, the method acting scholar, talks about repeated characteristics, or what he calls "the typical gesture," in his book *Building a Character*. The typical gesture, he says, "helps to bring the actor closer to the character he is portraying...these small adjustments and subtle movements...bring a performance to a higher level."²⁶² An example of this can be found in the movie "Lonesome Dove," where Robert Duvall strokes his mustache before attempting anything brave and daring. Stanislavsky also warns against *too* much repetition of a typical gesture as it will "lose...effect and become boring."²⁶³ (just think of any politician and the lack of effect in the overused emphasis/thumb motion). One way around the trap of redundancy is solved by Dickens through careful placement and off-setting. Betsy Trotwood, in addition to her signature phrases of "Bah" and "Stuff and Nonsense" uses many others that are *not* repeated. Also, she has a mannerism that appears *solely* in situations of duress. In the course of the novel, Trotwood experiences three

distressful events. During each occasion, when thinking hard on her problem, and *only* if seated, Trotwood rubs her nose vigorously.

An example of a characteristic being pushed (rather than repeated) can be found in the movie "Silkwood" where Meryl Streep smokes and curses throughout the film but as she gains responsibility in the labor union and awareness of how the workers are being maltreated, she very subtly increases the venom of her curses and the amount of cigarettes she smokes. It's a natural, seamless pushing of a characteristic since it is handled in slight increments and follows a logical behavioral curve. A literary example of a pushed characteristic is found in Toni Morisson's *Sula* who is introduced in the third person novel through an outside description--#5 on your handout:

"Sula was a heavy brown with large quiet eyes, one of which featured a birthmark that spread from the middle of the lid towards the eyebrow, shaped something like a stemmed rose. It gave her otherwise plain face a broken *excitement* and blue-blade *threat* like the keloid scar of the razored man who sometimes played chequers with her grandmother." ²⁶⁴

As the novel progresses and Sula lives up to the foreshadowing of this description (of being exciting and threatening), as her behavior gets increasingly "deviant," the birthmark becomes darker and darker. It is a slow and artful progression, a pushed characteristic that is carefully controlled by Morisson.

Let's go back, for a moment, to our original discussion of outside versus inside character development. Here's an example of a written inside/out character, Bertha, the narrator of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, a first person novel. We know the character from

what she thinks, and *how* she thinks, and it is not until the middle of the novel that we are given an exterior description of Bertha. It's a psychological rather than physical approach to character. #6 on your handout:

"I went to parts of Coulibri that I had not seen, where there was no *road*, no path, no track. And if the razor grass cut my legs and arms I would think 'It's better than people.' ...Black ants or red ones, tall nests swarming with white ants, rain that soaked me to the skin--once I saw a snake. All better than people...Watching the red and yellow flowers in the sun thinking of nothing, it was as if a door opened and I was somewhere else, something else. Not myself any longer. I knew the time of day when though it is hot and blue and there are no clouds, the sky can have a very black look." ²⁶⁵

Dickens writing this character might have dressed her unconventionally (she is not afraid to go new places, to explore pathless areas). He might have her speak in monosyllables, and write her body language as standoffish, avoiding contact with people. He might give her a brooding look (for even when it is a fair day, she sees black in the sky). But Jean Rhys approaches Bertha from the inside, and supplies us with the *same* information through an internal characterization. Also important to remember is that a balance of inside and outside methods make for the strongest of characters--and both techniques can be used for the *same* character or interchanged throughout a piece for different people.

Let's return to Sula to understand what actors call "action objectives." We'll look at a literary example first. # 5 on your handout, the physical description of Sula which is our first complete one in the novel, comes on page 53. We have some sense

of Sula based on this description. And on page 54, Morrison writes the first scene with Sula where we come to know her through her *actions*. The threat and excitement promised in the birthmark is reiterated in her behavior. This is #7 on your handout:

"Four white boys in their early teens...occasionally entertained themselves in the afternoon by harassing black schoolchildren...These particular boys caught Nell once, and pushed her from hand to hand until they grew tired of the frightened helpless face. Because of that incident, Nel's route home from school became elaborate. She, and then Sula, managed to duck them for weeks until a chilly day in November when Sula said, 'Let's us go on home the shortest way.'...They walked until they got to the bend of Carpenter's Road where the boys lounged on a disused wall. Spotting their prey, the boys sauntered forward...they stood like a gate blocking the path.

"When the girls were three feet in front of the boys, Sula reached into her coat pocket and pulled out Eva's paring knife...She squatted down in the dirt road and put everything down on the ground: her lunchpail, her reader, her mittens, her slate. Holding the knife in her right hand, she pulled the slate towards her and pressed her left forefinger down hard on its edge. Her aim was determined but inaccurate. She slashed off only the tip of her finger. The four boys stared open-mouthed at the wound and the scrap of flesh, like a button mushroom, curling in the..blood that ran in the corners of the slate.

"Sula raised her eyes to them. Her voice was quiet. 'If I can do that to myself, what you suppose I'll do to you?'"

In this scene, we get the crux of Sula--one page after officially meeting her. If an actor were to take the idea of action objective or "the super objective," meaning to sum up a character's motivation in one sentence, it would be for Sula: "I do not want anyone to think I am afraid or to dominate me, and I will do anything, even hurt myself, to achieve these aims." This "super objective" is what motivates the character Sula throughout the book. Every action, everything she says, is fueled by this unspoken statement, and is enacted in the first scene Morrison writes for her.

In Stanislavsky's book An Actor Prepares, an exercise dealing with objectives and character motivation is described. An acting-student goes *alone* to the stage and sits upon it for an uncomfortably long period of time. On stage, doing nothing, the actor looks uncomfortable, embarrassed, desperate, apologetic. He pulls at his clothing and shifts about. But when the *director* sits upon the stage, the following occurs. This quote is #8 on your handout:

"He neither did nor tried to do anything, yet his simple sitting posture was striking. We watched him and wanted to know what was going on inside of him. He smiled. So did we. He looked thoughtful, and we were eager to know what was passing through his mind....In ordinary life one would not be especially interested in his manner of taking a seat, or remaining in it. But for some reason, when he is on the stage, one watches him closely...The Director told us: 'Whatever happens on the stage must be for a *purpose*. Even keeping

your seat must be for a purpose, a specific purpose, not merely the general purpose of being in sight of the audience. One must *earn* one's right to be sitting there. And it is not easy.'" ²⁶⁶

A character sitting in a chair in a *book* must also have a purpose for sitting there and it is the author's job to *reveal* that purpose, to ensure that the actions of the character are *earned* and have an *objective* that is in keeping with the novel or short story. "For what reason is a character doing something?" is a useful question for an actor and writer to ask his/herself. Another method acting statement that can be helpful to writers is: "Every objective must carry in itself the germ of action." Morrison beautifully carries this out in *Sula*; it is Sula's objective that supports the majority of action in the novella and keeps the plot suspenseful.

Another lesson Stanislavsky's director discusses with students is: "all action in the theatre must have an inner justification, be logical, coherent and real." He proved this lesson by asking students to perform pretend tasks on stage, such as light a fire, close a door, move a piece of furniture. The students repeated these actions. They were mechanical and complained of being bored. After about ten minutes, the director stopped the students and said: "But suppose you are in *my* apartment and before I lived here, there used to live a man who became violently insane. They took him away to a psychopathic ward. If he escaped from there, and were behind that door, what would you do?" Everyone suddenly began screaming and running and slamming the pretend door and working together to move the pretend furniture in front of the door to keep the lunatic out. Once their actions had an objective, they

were logically executed and became engaging.

The director's second lesson in this exercise was: "*If* acts as a lever to lift us out of the world of actuality and into the realm of imagination." A writer can pose a series of "if-based" "super objective" questions to his/herself to imagine a character's motivation.²⁶⁷ An exercise taught to me by author Bret Lott is to ask about one's character (either before you have begun writing, or after)--and this is #9 on your handout: What does this person want? What doesn't this person want? What is this person afraid of? What do they admire? What makes them uncomfortable? How is this person brave? What does this person like/dislike? *Then*, tell yourself one story from this person's past. Tell yourself one hope this person has for their future. Another set of queries you can ask yourself when considering character stems from the premise that a person's behavior differs depending on the situation and who they are talking to. These questions are #10 on your handout: How does my character behave when alone? When at work? With parents? With a Partner/Spouse? Children? Siblings? A lover? A friend? A stranger? A person older than the character? Younger? A person weaker/stronger than the character?

If you sit down and try to answer these questions for your characters, you might discover a new dimension to the person, a new aspect of plot--perhaps you had not realized that your character has a rivalry with her sister? Perhaps you had not realized that your character is comfortable around children but not so around adults? What do these examples mean about your character's personality? How can these traits be manipulated to heighten plot?

A few weeks ago, I charted the character Rabbit, of John Updike's third-

person novel Rabbit, Run through the book's first 122 pages. I found that Updike forms Rabbit as a character almost solely by having him interact with many different people. Page 1-3 Rabbit plays basketball with teenage boys. 4-6 he is alone. 7-12, with his wife. 13-15, again alone, 16-18 he spies on his parents and son and remembers the past, 19 with his in-laws, 20-22, in his car alone, 23-24 talking to a male stranger, 25-34, alone, 35-38, with his mentor, an older man, his former basketball coach and protector, 39-88, with a lover, not his wife, and we see him in bed, 89-98, with a minister, 99-122, with strangers, a woman and child, and page 122, with an elderly woman, his boss. Since Updike takes the reader through so many different and consecutive interactions (and thus aspects of Rabbit), we have an extremely strong sense of character, of knowing Rabbit as a fully realized and complete individual.

Another set of questions I find particularly useful are--if the character is a man, how is he around other men and how is he around women? If the character is a woman, how is she around other women and around men? Gudrun from D.H. Lawrence's novel Women in Love is a character, like Rabbit, who exhibits strong changes in personality depending upon who she is with. She is extremely gender and class sensitive; her behavior and moods shift most drastically when she is talking to a man, especially a wealthy one (namely, Gerald). We don't have time to look at examples of this but if you read the novel, you'll be able to easily pick them out.

It is of course not necessary to put the answers to the questions from #s 9 and 10 of your handout directly into your text. The answers to the questions could be what actors call "subtext," just something that you, the author, knows for yourself and

can choose to either make overt or wield as a suggestion. In preparation for the play Brighton Beach, actress Elizabeth Franz wrote a 200 plus page novel about her character, Kate Jerome, in order to understand and *become* her better. The novel was *back-fill* that dealt with what happened to the character in the ten years leading *up to* the action of the play. Another example of subtexting shared by actors and writers can be seen in # 11 on your handout (Morning, Morning, Sleep Well? Yeah). These four lines are spoken by two different people, speaking two lines each. Imagine the various ways the lines could be spoken depending on the subtext, the back story. For actors it is tone, inflection, facial and body movements that supply and fill-in subtext. For writers, it is written descriptions of body/facial language, written inflection and tone in the words that come pre or post-dialogue. If these sentences were spoken by two people who had gotten drunk the night before and the first speaker said something that wounded the second but does not recall saying anything hurtful--how would the conversation sound?

Morning

Morning

Sleep well?

Yeah.

--

"Morning," Maria chirps. She ruffles Andre's hair on her way to the coffeepot.

"Morning," he responds and smoothes his hair.

"Sleep well?" When she takes a bite of his bagel, he slams his coffee cup on

the counter: "Yeah," he says, his voice thick with sarcasm as he stomps out of the kitchen.

--

An author wouldn't actually need to write the scene where Maria wounded Andre because the suggestion of something being wrong is written *into* the scene that surrounds the dialogue. Subtext can therefore be used to write rich mini-scenes, and to display character motivation succinctly--without pages and pages of explanation or narratorial summary.

OK. Before getting to the exercises, let's move from acting to ethnographic techniques. Ethnographic methods work very well for creative nonfiction *as well as* fiction. Essentially, ethnography is a description of a particular culture based on participant observation, interviews, and an understanding of an informant's language. The culture being described could be an individual, a neighborhood, a school, a family. It is most important in ethnography to attempt to understand the "other" from an *inside* perspective, in other words, as the "informant" understands his/*herself*. Once research is gathered, the ethnographer examines it for what are called *explanatory systems* which can be understood through the following questions: How does an individual make sense of his/*herself*? How does an individual make sense of the world and his/*her* place in it? What do the basic cultural categories such as gender, nationality/race/ethnicity, religion, age, class, and sexuality, mean to this individual and how are they influenced by these categories? More specific categories such as: place of residence, occupation, habits, hobbies, etc. can also be added to this list. Let's examine the explanatory systems for the character Sen from Kushwant

Singh's short story, "The Wog." This is #12 on your handout:

Gender: Male

Nationality/Race/Ethnicity: Indian/Bengali/Fair-skinned (relevant in Indian society and American for that matter)

Religion: Hindu/views himself as more pagan-Aryan than contemporary

Hindu

Age: 25

Class: upper class/kshatriya

Sexuality: heterosexual/married/finds British women and Indian women with what he calls an "east/west" mix most attractive.

Residence: Born in Calcutta, educated in Oxford and spent years in London, currently living in New Delhi

Occupation: Government/civil servant/high salary/managerial position

Era: post-colonial, post-independence (sometime between 1957-1971)

Hobbies/Interests: Enjoys scotch, pipe and Cuban cigars, going to the club with male friends, listening to music and the news.

Now these are just categories. What is more important, once you have these categories listed, is to understand *how* a person works *within* these categories. Do they resist, adhere to, contradict, conform to, or negotiate within these categories--and how? For example, Sen is Hindu. But he *negotiates* with his religion b/c, unlike an orthodox Hindu or even the majority of non-orthodox Hindus, he eats meat, smokes and drinks. Sen *conforms* to marriage norms by allowing his mother to arrange a

marriage for him but he *resists* marriage by never consummating with his wife, and interacting with her as little as possible. Sen is Indian, but was educated at Oxford and lived in England for many years; he feels more formed by his time in Europe than his time in South Asia. He is Indian but he speaks no Indian language, only English, and listens to European news despite the fact that he lives in Delhi. We could go on, but we'll stop here.

I think it's very important to remember that categories such as gender, sexuality, nationality, race, religion are usually *not* homogenous. Most people negotiate numerous aspects within one category. A person could be half African-American, half German-American, or Protestant but raised in a Jewish neighborhood, or Baptist and drawn to the principles of Buddhism, or female but never wear make-up or skirts. Most people are contradictory and surprising (thank goodness). Also, don't forget about the era in which you are writing and how that will change the culture and systems. If you are writing about feudal Japan or Harlem in the 1960's or a town in Oklahoma in 1987 take cultural and historical adjustments into account. I would recommend when working with explanatory systems to always be aware of the danger of stereotyping and really explore how your character relates *within* categories. Also, if your character is of a culture or existing in any cultural system that you are unfamiliar with, it's important to do research and make *certain* that you understand those systems and cultures as your character would.

Now let's do a few exercises and put into practice some of the things we've talked about. There's no need for perfection, we won't read any of this out-loud, and will write as quickly as possible b/c of time constraints. Everything we'll do during

these exercises can be continued later on, at your convenience. We'll take only three minutes for each exercise--maybe you'll get out one word or two sentences or ten.

Whatever you come up with, is right and good.

First, we'll work with character from the inside. Use either an already existing character of your own, or for creative nonfiction, use yourself or someone you know, and answer one or more of the questions listed under #9 on your handout. Try to work as the super objective does and boil down your answers to one to three sentences, to really encapsulate your character's motivation and inner aims. Maybe you'll spend the whole time answering one question, maybe you'll write a one word answer to each--just jump in and go. Three minutes. Now answer one or more questions from #10 on your handout for the same fictional or non-fictional person. Three minutes. The next exercise will have us working from the outside with a character. While teaching Russian Literature at Cornell, Nabokov frequently advised his students: "Caress the details, the divine details." For one final exam, his question was: "List the contents of Anna Karenina's little red purse." The purse is mentioned only a few times in the highly detailed 853 page novel--but the question was not an exercise in trivia since the contents of Anna's bag are crucial to an understanding of her mind. Nabokov would also ask students to envision the arrangement of rooms in the Samsa household (of Kafka's "The Metamorphosis") or to imagine the coiffure of Emma Bovary. For our *outside* exercise, take one of your characters and describe one or more of the following: clothing or hair, bedroom, bathroom, or kitchen, fill their purse, a suitcase, or a briefcase. Pick any one of these things to give an exterior description to--one that is geared towards revealing the interior. Again, an exterior

description of clothing or hair, bedroom, bathroom, or kitchen, or fill a purse, suitcase, or briefcase. Three minutes.

(if time, do this last one. If no time just say what it would be and go to questions). Now that we have all this information about our characters, let's use the chart from #12 on your handouts. Write out as many cultural categories for your character as you're able and quickly decide if he/she adheres to, resists, contradicts, conforms or negotiates within each and how (if you have time). Remember that there are probably *at least* two aspects of your character for *each* category.

contents of AK's little red purse: small cushion, paper knife, and an English novel.

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- ²⁵⁷ A lecture first delivered at Spalding University, Louisville, Kentucky: October 15, 2002.
- ²⁵⁸ Charles Dickens, David Copperfield (London: Penguin Classics, 1996) 152.
- ²⁵⁹ Dickens 153.
- ²⁶⁰ Dickens 186-187.
- ²⁶¹ Dickens 204.
- ²⁶² Constantin Stanislavsky, Building a Character (New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1949) 72.
- ²⁶³ Stanislavsky Character 73.
- ²⁶⁴ Toni Morrison, Sula (London: Triad Grafton Books, 1986) 53.
- ²⁶⁵ Jean Rhys, Wide Sargasso Sea (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1982) 28.
- ²⁶⁶ Stanislavsky Actor 138.
- ²⁶⁷ Stanislavsky Actor 278.

Chapter X: What Hands Are These? (I)

1.

The hand. Exploratory, intrepid organ. Reaching far from its trunk.

Instrument of the fifth sense: touch.

In South Asia, the upturned hand, palm flat, fingers splayed. A hand-stance that equals a question, a shrug, somewhere between yes and I don't know. The face can remain expressionless while the hand vocalizes.

In New York City, to give the finger is a symbol both forceful and recognizable. Often delivered with a bland visage and no words. The meaning is all in the digit.

To Shakespeare, the bloody hand, a symbol of guilt and the murderous act. Lady MacBeth addresses her hands, "Out, out damn spot," and, "What, will these hands ne'er be clean?"²⁶⁸ The hand as humanity--Shylock: "Hath not a Jew hands?"²⁶⁹ The hand as extension of self--Casca, "Speak hands for me!" as he stabs Caesar.²⁷⁰

The lopp'd, hewn, punning, raping, wandering, murdering, irreverent hands of *Titus Andronicus*.

2.

Lavinia enters *Titus Andronicus* with two hands, unmarried, and, perhaps, a virgin.

This is the shape of her life in the play:

Act I, Scene 1. She greets her father, Titus, the general, newly returned from war with the corpses of his sons, her brothers. Lavinia's first words, spoken in blessing: "In peace and honour, live Lord Titus long" (1.1.160). She kneels at her brothers' tomb and says to Titus: O bless me here with thy victorious hand,/Whose fortunes Rome's best citizens applaud (note--it takes two hands to applaud). 1.1.165-166. Titus blesses his daughter, "Lavinia, live, outlive thy father's days" (1.1.170) then orders the play's first hand lopping. He wants the limbs of Tamora's eldest son cut, and his entrails gouged from his bowels. Tamora, Queen of Goths, Titus's prisoner of war, appeals to him for mercy. Titus is unmoved. The next time we encounter Lavinia, she is mute as Emperor Saturninus claims her as his bride: "Lavinia will I make my empress," (1.1.243) and then asks her father if this pleases him. It is a political alliance; Lavinia is transaction. Saturninus tells Lavinia: "princely shall by thy usage in every way" (1.1.270). The Emperor, Saturninus, wants her; her father, Titus, gives her away. Next, Bassianus, to whom Lavinia had been formerly promised, "seizes her," saying "Lord Titus, by your leave, this maid is mine" (1.1.280). Two hundred lines later, Lavinia (1.1.403) is married to Bassianus (a wedding that occurs off-stage). She remains mute, a mere stage direction. She enters and exeunts without a syllable. The word *rape* is uttered for the first time-- Saturninus to Bassianus, referring to the seizing of Lavinia, "Traitor, if Rome have law or we have power, Thou and thy faction shall repent this rape" (1.1.408-409). Bassianus to Saturninus, "'Rape' call you it, my lord, to seize my own, My true betrothed love, and now my wife?" (1.1.410-412). The next time Lavinia is invoked,

she is not present. The sons of Tamora (whom Saturninus has chosen as Empress in lieu of Lavinia), Chiron and Demetrius, fight over Lavinia--which of them "loves" her more. Aaron, Tamora's lover and slave, convinces them to rape Lavinia, together, so they can both have her. One of the brothers, Demetrius, says of Lavinia: She is a woman, therefore may be woo'd, She is a woman, therefore may be won, She is Lavinia, therefore must be lov'd (1.1.583-585). (To me, these are the most frightening lines of the play.) When next we see Lavinia, she is in the forest with Bassianus; they catch Tamora and Aaron in a sexual act. Lavinia essentially calls Tamora a whore. Aaron leaves to scheme. Enter Chiron and Demetrius who kill Lavinia's husband, Bassianus, and throw his body in a pit. Tamora prepares to kill Lavinia but is stopped by her sons because they want to rape her. Lavinia speaks her most lines to Tamora, the only other woman in the play (besides the nurse who is murdered after a few lines in Act 4). Lavinia beseeches Tamora to kill her rather than let her be defiled. Tamora responds: So should I rob my sweet sons of their fee? No, let them satisfice their lust on thee. (2.2.178-179). Lavinia's last voiced words of the play condemn Tamora for not honoring their female bond: "No grace? No womanhood? Ah, beastly creature, The blot and enemy to our general name..." (2.2.182-184). The next time we see Lavinia, she has been raped, her hands cut off, her tongue cut out. She is taunted by her rapists and torturers, Chiron and Demetrius: "Go home, call for sweet water, wash thy hands; She hath no tongue to call, nor hands to wash..." The stage direction: *Lavinia runs away*. The next stage direction: *Lavinia turns* (2.3.12). She faces her uncle Marcus. He begins his famed, poetic speech, "Speak, gentle niece, what stern ungentle hands Hath lopped and hewed and made thy

body bare of her two branches...Why dost not speak to me?" (cite). Marcus brings Lavinia to Titus, and her brother, Lucius. Marcus refers to her in the past tense, as if she is dead: "This was thy daughter" (3.1.62). To which Titus responds in the present tense, "Why Marcus, so she is" (3.1.64). Lucius calls Lavinia "object": "Ay me, this object kills me," (3.1.65). He cannot look at her. But Titus, old soldier, accepts her as whole. From the moment of her mutilation, he seems to take his daughter as his own. Act 3, scene 1, Saturninus sends a message, through Aaron, that he requires a severed hand of Titus, Marcus, or Lucius, and that upon receiving said hand he will release Titus's sons and spare their lives. The three men fight over who will sacrifice a hand. Titus prevails. Aaron cuts off Titus's left hand to give to Saturninus. Handless Lavinia kneels with one-handed Titus. Later, Titus's cut hand is returned along with the heads of his murdered sons. They all exeunt, Marcus bearing one head, Titus bearing another, and Lavinia bearing, between her teeth, her father's hand: "And, Lavinia, thou shalt be employed: Bear thou my hand, sweet wench, between they teeth." Now, maimed, Lavinia is one of the boys. Act 3, scene 2, Titus, one-handed, feeds Lavinia. Act 4, Scene 1. Young Lucius runs onstage with books under his arms, Lavinia racing after him. The boy calls to Titus, "Help, grandsire, help! My aunt Lavinia follows me everywhere, I know not why." (4.1.1-2). Lavinia takes a book from Lucius--Ovid's *Metamorphosis*. She turns pages with her stumps, thudding them against the tale of Philomel and her rape in the woods. Her father, uncle, and nephew watch as takes her uncle's staff and writes. The stage direction: *She takes the staff in her mouth, and guides it with her stumps, and writes.* (Even Shakespeare's stage directions have innuendo.) She writes in the sand: Stuprum (rape

in Latin)---Chiron---Demetrius. We do not see Lavinia again for an entire act. She returns in Act 5, Scene 2, standing before her attackers, Chiron and Demetrius, a basin between her stumps to catch the blood that falls from their cut throats--cut by her father, Titus. Titus says to the brothers: "For worse than Philomel you used my daughter, And worse than Progne will I be revenged." (5.3.194-195). It is Titus's revenge, this act, not Lavinia's. Although Titus seems to feel them one and the same at this junctures in the play. Like Lear and Cordelia, the father represented by the wronged daughter; the fates of daughter and father intertwined. The next time we see Lavinia, Act 5, scene 3, she enters "with a veil over her face" (5.3.26). Her father has baked her rapists in a pie that their mother, Tamora, is unwittingly eating. Titus unveils Lavinia and once more leaves her fate to Saturninus. He asks the emperor "Was it well done of rash Virginius to slay his daughter with his own right hand Because she was thus enforced, stained, and deflowered? (5.3.35-37). Saturninus replies yes and when Titus demands a reason, Saturninus says: Because the girl should not survive her shame, And by her presence still renew his sorrows (5.3.40-41). Titus kills Lavinia with the same right hand he blessed her with in Act I. His final words to her, a command: "Die, Die, Lavinia, and thy shame with thee and with thy shame thy father's sorrows die" (5.3.35-36).²⁷¹

That is the end of Lavinia. A life dictated by men. A life, motherless, unprotected. A life *handed* from one man to another. A life mute, before and after her tongue was cut. I have read scholarship that compares the mutilated body of Lavinia to the mutilated body of Rome. To me, her mutilation embodies her gender. She was always handless, without actions of her own, without agency. She was

always mute. The maiming made her condition public, manifested. She is the woman in the play without a job (unlike the Nurse), the woman who is not a mother (unlike Tamora). Once Lavinia has been cut, men react to her suffering and pain. They do not want to see it. They want her pain to end so their pain, that comes from seeing her, will end.

3.

Rape begins with the hand.

Hands grab you. Take hold of your throat. Clamp your mouth. Tie your wrists above your head. Pry open your legs.

The horror of other people's hands.

The woods, a site of desire. For the newly married sex of Lavinia and Bassianus. For the adulterous, interracial love of Tamora and Aaron and the genesis of their half Goth, half Moor babe. I think of him as brother, the only one I have in all of Shakespeare for Othello and Desdemona never did conceive.

The woods, the site of Lavinia's rape. On her back, she looked up at the pine trees of Rome, their needled branches. Alive and chlorophyllic, bristling in the wind. She looked at the trees standing straight above the humped shoulders of the brothers.

When the brothers turned her over, she nestled in the dirt. It took the shape of her mangled form. It accepted her blood as if it was water.

Shakespeare had two daughters. His eldest, Susana, born six months after his marriage to her mother. In his will, he left the bulk of his estate to Susana. To his wife he left, "the second best bed." Something difficult to interpret. Something

possibly cruel.²⁷²

The only thing known about Shakespeare's daughters--the dates of their births, marriages, and deaths. And that neither could read or write.²⁷³

Lavinia was literate.

Writers revise their lives on the page.

January 1594: the first staged performance of *Titus Andronicus*.²⁷⁴ During Shakespeare's lifetime, it was the most popular of his plays. In 1597, a new English law was passed that redefined rape as a "crime against the person of the woman rather than against the property of her family."²⁷⁵

How many lawmakers' daughters, wives, sisters, mothers, lovers, sat in the seats of the Globe and wept for Lavinia?

Act 2, scene 4:

Enter...Lavinia her hands cut off, and her tongue cut out, and ravished.

Painful directions in perfect nanometer. The "and" does it. The commas. Wait for it. There is more. Her hands, her tongue. And ravished. Shakespeare grieves for his character as only a writer can--through punctuation and a groomed sentence.

The violence done to Lavinia's body is committed offstage. We see her post-mutilation. The audience is asked to bear witness to the true abomination of rape--the aftermath. The gruesomeness of the shocked, changed self. A self, remembering, remembering, the impotence of woman and the expiration of choice.

Lavinia is chopped, fashioned, into a fantasy. She cannot speak. She cannot scratch. She is two holes. A cunt. A mouth. But she still has teeth. They forgot to

knock those out.

She is silenced.

I feel this danger. In my bellybutton, that once connected me to my mother.

In my snatch, trim, hollow (Shakespeare's words, not mine). I feel it. Me, of 2005.

Me, woman, writer, of two hands and tongue.

How different are we, Lavinia?

4.

Human size: basic, consequential. Who is big. Who is small. These, the laws of force.

I want to learn Braille, to know letters by touch, to read by finger.

Writing issues from the hands. From self to fingers to keyboard to page.

A year ago, in Battery Park, the sky gaping two rectangular shapes, I sat on a bench of recycled material and looked over the railing at the Hudson flowing by. It was raining. Two chickadees alighted on the railing. One male, one female. The male flapped above the female and dug his claws into her brown feathers. He thrust and penetrated. I saw his red member. When it was over, she turned around and flew at him, pecked, then sailed upriver on wet wings.

I have a friend who could not orgasm until she was twenty-six. She started out slowly training her body, and for some reason, found the greatest success when rubbing against a corner of the T.V. remote. We lived together at the time with three other people, two women and a gay man. We all discussed our masturbation techniques and so knew the other life of our T.V. remote (there was only one in the

house). But nobody minded. We were close. Years later my friend mentioned masturbating and I asked, "Are you still using the remote control?" She said held up her right hand and said, "No, now I use my hand. It really gets the job done."

5.

Woman as tree. Her hands, branches.

When Marcus first sees mutilated Lavinia, he says: "Speak, gentle niece, what stern ungentle hands Hath lopped and hewed and made thy body bare of her two branches..." (2.3.16-18). The stage direction: *Lavinia opens her mouth*. Through Marcus's response, we know there is blood: "Alas, a crimson river of warm blood...doth rise and fall between thy rosed lips" (2.3.21).²⁷⁶

The staging of Lavinia's maimed entrance is the dramatic focus of *Titus Andronicus*. In 1951, Peter Brook opted for a highly stylized rendering. Lavinia, played by Vivian Leigh, had scarlet ribbons trailing from her wrists and mouth. She entered to "the slow plucking of harp-strings, like drops of blood falling from a pool."²⁷⁷

In Elizabethan times, Lavinia was played by a boy or man (a boy or a man can also be raped. Do not forget that). A fringe of dough was mixed with blood to give a severed look to Lavinia's stumps. The actor concealed a pig's bladder filled with pig's blood in his mouth.²⁷⁸ He bit down on cue. A 16th-century squib.

I wonder if, in playing the part of Lavinia, there is an element of relief. One has no hands for most of the play. Hands, the part of the body an actor most commonly struggles with. Flighty, awkward, when empty of prop. The last part of

the body to give itself over to a character.

I knew a director who, in rehearsal, tied the hands of an actress at her sides.

She fell into her character, suddenly, like something dropped. She began to act.

6.

The story, one sentence long, of the American slave, about to be sold away from her family, who cut off her hand and flung it in her master's face.²⁷⁹

The rubber forests of the Belgian Congo. 900,000 square-miles in which three million to six million people were murdered. Belgian soldiers walked the area, carrying baskets of hands. They said it was easier than lugging around an entire corpse to prove "death as punishment."²⁸⁰

Once, I played a game with a lover.

We were naked. It was afternoon. We lolled in a bed of green sheets.

I went first. He gave me body parts in pairs and I picked between them which to sever.

He said: Your arm or leg.

I said, Leg.

Eight fingers or one breast.

I said, Breast.

Your left hand or my penis.

I said, Your penis.

No fair, he said, You have two hands. Wouldn't you cut one off for the sake

of my member?

I said: No.

Sometimes I think of aliens descending from space millions of years from now. They will find our skeletons scattered in the desert where once was Hong Kong, in the rainforest rooted in Dubai's skyscrapers.

In New York, underwater, the well-fed skeletons will bear marks of violence.

The aliens will look at our hands and try to determine their function. I do not think they will be able to list all the capabilities of the human hand. You must know a human to know what we do with our hands.

Maybe the aliens will not be preoccupied with meaning like we humans are. Maybe they will have a use for the hand. They will turn our hands into hats, rattles, a fancy soup. And if they do not have heads or babies or enjoy soup, it could be that they will think the human hand disgusting, nothing more than a late stage in the process of oil.

And when they find the bones of dogs they will worship them.

We should consider these aliens when we so glibly label the function of the triceratops' horn; or when we find a spoon in a 13th-century garbage heap (humans always make garbage; *that* is an archaeological fact) and say definitively that it was used to stir. What if it was also a back-scratcher? A musical instrument? A killer of ants?

When I was eighteen, I had a piano teacher from Brazil. She played passages to show me how they should sound, and I cried from the beauty of it. One week, I went to my lesson slightly hungover and unprepared. I went expecting to be

reprimanded for my messy transitions and awkward fingerings. I sat down and played my assigned piece badly. "What is this," my teacher said, "What is this click click click, I do not see these sounds written here." She slapped at Mozart's *Fantasie in D minor*, resting in a sheaf on the piano bench. "If he did not write these sounds, I do not want to hear them. You have no right," she said, "No right. This is Mozart. You are a stupid girl." She went to her desk and took out a pair of nail clippers and set them down vertically on the middle C. The key depressed and sang out, once. I clipped my nails. The slivers fell into my lap.

I can stretch more than an octave from pinkie to thumb. I have my father's hands.

Like the nose of the dog, the hand of the human leads, investigates. We touch something to know it. We make contact. In the dark, the hand knows what the eyes cannot. The hand eases around corners. It reaches the top shelf. It sorts, arranges, classifies. It is a type of mobile brain.

For ten years, I smoked a pack of Marlboros a day. I did it for my hands. They like to be in motion; they like holding fire. When I quit, I took up knitting. My dog was suspicious. He considered knitting a type of wicked magic. The two metal sticks, ticking, the ball of yarn, shrinking, a scarf, appearing.

I had thought knitting would be a respite from writing. But, while making a scarf for my husband, I felt each stitch was a word, and the scarf, a long paragraph, of wool, of blue.

There is no escape.

7.

Lavinia is text. Her fate prewritten by Ovid's character Philomena. She is the words of her author, Shakespeare. She is made of language. And it was language that was taken from her.

No. Stop. Don't. Please.

Words of command, of action. Words that govern. Words that fly through the air like darts.

Throughout the play, the words that precede Lavinia's name are orders: Come, Speak, Kneel, Die.

In Louisiana and Texas, days before Hurricane Rita, people boarded up their windows and wrote messages on them. GO AWAY RITA. WE DON'T WANT YOU RITA. LEAVE US ALONE RITA.

How human a thing: to write a note to a hurricane.

No. Stop. Don't. Please.

Pleasure. That, too, taken from Lavinia.

What is love, sex, without hands and tongue? How to stroke, lick, quarrel, promise? Lavinia's mutilation represents a never-ending rape. Her truncated ability to give sexual pleasure as well as receive. The ruination of her sense of touch, of haptic curiosity.

Love is in the senses. It is not just the sight of the beloved, his smell, the timbre of his voice, his taste. It is touch, prehension. The cup, press, spread of your hands against his body. Lavinia can take her lover in her mouth. Arouse with her stumps. But she cannot memorize his face with her fingers. She cannot make a fist inside a boxing glove. She cannot slap a raw chapatti from palm to palm. She cannot

form calluses hoeing beans, ungloved, under a Lenten moon. She cannot lift a thumb, while scuba diving, to cause a rapid ascent. She cannot feel the green skin of a tree. She cannot lace herself, finger to finger, to a narrow-hipped man on a wooden dancefloor. She cannot ring the temple bell. She cannot braid the hair of a black-haired child. She cannot grope the dark, cold walls of a cave. She cannot scratch the head of a stray dog. She cannot pick a tomato, hanging in a dash of sunlight, and feel its juice, the burst of seed, against her tongue. That, the warm taste of lust.

There are hands you do not forget the touch of.

The last hands Lavinia felt on her body were not her own and were unkind.

Oh, Lavinia, take up arms.

Once cut, we never again see Lavinia's hands. They are lost in the woods. I think of them, separated and rotting amidst the pines. I think of Lavinia writing, her stumps moving quickly over a keyboard. She is screaming in all caps.

But this is a revision. After all, Lavinia is gone. She died on the page, in an inky grave of italics. *He kills her.*²⁸¹ That is all it took. Two pronouns of differing gender flanking a verb in present tense. And, a period.

I cannot revise her death. So it is written, so it is done. Still I search the text for a getaway. For an alternative.

There is always space, time, between the acts.

Lavinia, Lavinia, I have a plan.

At the end of Act IV, you must part the curtain, and run, Lavinia, from the theatre, before your father murders you in the next act.

A man, garbed in black, will cue a scraping wind. He will point a narrow

spotlight. For you are small, and need no wider beam.

I see you, a basket hanging from your left stump. Inside the basket are your hands. You want to do something beautiful for them. You walk, mutely, thirty blocks, from Broadway to Chelsea. You push my buzzer with the tip of your nose and climb three flights to my apartment. When I open the door, I recognize your dress, centuries out-of-fashion and ripped near the crotch. You sit on the edge of my sofa, and I offer you a glass of water. You grip it between your stumps. I take your hands from the basket, hold them in my lap. They are rigid, blue, and flecked with forest leaves. I flick away maggots and squeeze mehndhi from an icing-tube. I draw arrows, daggers on your fingers, and feathers on your thumbs. I draw hundreds of eyes to ward off the evil to which you are prone.

We sit for twelve silent hours. The mendhi hardens. I crumble the black shell. Your hands--covered once more in red. The head of a peacock, a swollen lotus, vines and eyes and arrows.

Tongueless, you smile.

I place a pen between your teeth, smooth a sheet of paper on the table. Write out again the names of those who have wronged you, Lavinia. I will hold your hands in my lap and when you spit the pen from your mouth, I will say the words aloud for you.

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- ²⁶⁸ Riverside Shakespeare, "Macbeth" 5.1.35.
- ²⁶⁹ Riverside Shakespeare, "The Merchant of Venice" 3.1.59.
- ²⁷⁰ Riverside Shakespeare, "Julius Ceasar" 3.1.76.
- ²⁷¹ William Shakespeare, "Titus Andronicus," The Arden Shakespeare, ed., Jonathan Bate (London: Thomson Learning, 2002) 266.
- ²⁷² "William Shakespeare's Biography," Absolute Shakespeare.com September 2005
<http://absoluteshakespeare.com/trivia/biography/shakespeare_biography.htm>
- ²⁷³ Linda Alchin, "William Shakespeare's Biography—His Children and Grandchildren," William Shakespeare.Info September 2005 <<http://www.william-shakespeare.info/william-shakespeare-children-and-grandchildren.htm>>
- ²⁷⁴ Bates 98.
- ²⁷⁵ Madalina Nicolaescu, "Lavinia's Mutilated Body," Universitatea din Bucuresti 2002
<<http://www.unibuc.ro/eBooks/filologie/meanings/8.htm>>
- ²⁷⁶ Bates 188.
- ²⁷⁷ Rebecca Brown, "Titus Andronicus in Performance," Shakespeare.org 2004 <
<http://www.shakespeare.org.uk/content/view/354/354/>>
- ²⁷⁸ "Shakespeare's Answers," TSL Education Limited, December 2000
<http://www.talkingto.co.uk/ttws/html/ttws_answ.asp?quesID=1014&CatID=381>
- ²⁷⁹ Michel Neill, Putting History to the Question, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000) 168.
- ²⁸⁰ Solnit 33.
- ²⁸¹ Bates 267.

Chapter XI: Prayatna (work)

We tucked the bottoms of our skirts in our waistbands and went barefoot into the peanut fields. Silver hoops, in our nostrils, tapped against our cheeks. A crack of yellow light split the grey land and sky.

Rudra showed me how to pinch the peanuts at their slender waists. She mimed a squat--thighs wide, knees flexed--and pushed the corners of my *dupatta* into my skirt so it shaded my face but did not tangle in my arms. My hair hung to my hip in a braid. I crouched, mimicking her. She shoved the braid into my *choli*. It itched down my back. Her hands ploughed like shovels through the dirt.

The sun rose hot, and she stood, barrel-chested, breasts flat behind the neat darts of her green *choli*. She squinted at me in the new, desert light. Her face, brutal. Cheeks of subsistence. No lies or pleasantries on her forehead. She stared at my relentless neck. I took my hands from the dirt.

Are you poor, she said. No, I said. Skinny, she said, using the colloquial Rajashtani, *tartia*, scrawny girl, a word I was familiar with. She grabbed my arm and held it against her own: lean. I said, *Amreeka mai*, In America, it is possible to be poor and fat, or rich and skinny. I did not say "the States." I used the mythic: America. I said, People often eat less in America to be skinny, to look skinny. Men and women both. She did not believe me. You are poor, she said.

My hands convinced her. She grabbed them and turned them over. She rubbed my palms. *Thum kaam nehin karthi ho?* You do no work? She shoved my hands back at me. I work, I said, I serve food at a restaurant. I rip tickets at a movie

theatre. I read and write. I think. I am a student. She clucked her tongue against the roof of her mouth, called to the women: See her baby-hands. They came across the field from all directions, silver doughnuts on their ankles, glinting. How old are you, Rudra asked. I said, *Unnees*, nineteen, and she pushed my dupatta off my head, grabbed my chin, tugged my eyelids, pulled my foot until I lifted it, an obedient horse. When she slapped my soft sole, I asked how old she was. She rose up, flicked her fingernails against my teeth. To me, she looked forty in the face. Sixty in the back, with an osteoporotic slouch. How old, I said again. She flashed a spread hand, four times. *Bis?* I asked. Twenty? and she wagged her head. She said, What work does your husband do? I said, I don't have a husband. Her laughter came: radical, complex. The women gathered close, razzing: There must be something wrong with this girl. Old Maid, she is an Old Maid. I work, I said again. It's just a different kind of work. Thinking is not work, Rudra said. Digging for peanuts is work. Fucking your husband is work. The women laughed. She pushed me. Let's see you work, she said, and pushed me, Work.

I turned my back on them and shoved my hands in the dirt. I dug and dug. I harvested. I do not remember being hot or thirsty. I remember the motion of my hands, the hatchet pain in my back, ossified knees, rigid bladder. I felt muscles I did not know I had. I pawed at the dirt. It smelled like a drawer of silverware, goat manure. I groped for peanuts, pulling them out of the ground, my Irish mother's favorite aphorism running through my head: *Idle hands are the Devil's work*. Rudra taunted me. Old Maid. Baby Hands. Baby Feet. She manipulated me around the field with her voice. I dug even when she rested.

Digging to my left was a pregnant woman named Nithiya who looked about forty-five. She was the most beautiful among us. Eighteen ,with three children. Straight, thick eyebrows. Tea-brown, reddish hair. Watchful lips. She was the one who took me to the edge of the field. I only knew the Sindhi word for piss and I did not know where to go to do it. Nithiya took me to a dip between the field and the dirt track. We squatted. She said I should work slower or the sun would make me stop. I said, No, I am fine. I asked her, How long, indicating her swollen stomach and she answered with a scale of time I did not understand. Finally, she pointed to the sky and knocked on the ground seven times which I took to mean seven months. I forgot the length of my braid. It hung between my legs and I pissed on the end of it. It dried instantly. The sky, hot blue.

In the fields, Rudra came to us. She said, Just four, tucked her thumb against her palm, her fingers pointing up. The women bent and took four peanuts from the ground. Crunched them slowly with their back teeth. Buried the shells. I copied them. When we were done, Rudra said, Have one more each, and it was a gift. This is money, Old Maid, she said, rattling the peanuts in her hand. Don't eat unless I say so. I nodded.

The sun blared directly overhead. This way, this way, the women said. We walked across the fields to a hut I had not noticed, tiny, of the same dirt as the surrounding desert. No demarcation between peanut field and desert. They seeped into each other. We went inside the hut and lowered our dupattas, shook the dust from our hair. The walls of the hut, lined with sacks: lentils, corn, peanuts. It was

dark, therefore cool. A rounded doorway, no door, no windows. Through the doorway, I saw the sky, like an upturned blue bowl, the brown fields spilled beneath it. Someone handed round two cold chapattis. We tore them into twelfths. Rudra pulled my glasses off my face and tried them on, kept a finger on the nosepiece. She removed them, handed them to Nithiya who gave them back to me, and combed her hair with her fingers. Where is your family, she asked. Calcutta, I said, simplifying matters. I picked up an empty tin pot and tried to balance it on my head. Rudra snatched it from me and balanced it on her own head. What do the women there do? Nithiya asked. I told her one of my aunts was a bookkeeper. Number-counter, I rephrased. My other aunt is a psychologist. I said the word in English then tried to explain. A mind doctor, I said, a doctor of thinking and feeling. She has soft hands? Rudra asked, and tossed the pot in the air. She caught it; it rang against her palms. Yes, I said, but nicer than mine. Painted nails. Gold rings. She removes the hair on her fingers. What does number auntie look like? she asked. Like me, lighter-skinned, I said. Prettier. Not skinny. Ah, rich, Nithiya said. She stood and stretched her back. Yes, I said. Rudra asked me something about American women I could not understand. She stood and rocked her hips, made motions with her hands that ended in a punching of her left fist into her right palm. Everyone was quiet, watching me. Yes, I said, American women fuck. Do American women fuck their husbands? Nithiya stood next to Rudra and looked down at me. Sometimes, I said. Sometimes just with someone they like. And not every woman has a husband. Our husbands are assholes, Rudra said. They don't do things. Like this, she said, and pulled her hands through Nithiya's hair, following the strands over breasts, ribs, belly. Leisurely, they

stood like lovers who had known each other as children. We all sat on the ground, eating morsels of cold chapatti. We watched them. Like that, Rudra said and looked at me. Do they do it like that in Amreeka? Yes, I said, Sometimes. She hung her arms around Nithiya's neck. It's her baby, Nithiya said, stroking her belly. We all laughed. Food is done, Rudra said. We had swallows of water from the tin pot.

We went outside, the air limpid and wavy with heat. More dirt, more peanuts, more white spears of sun. We kept our heads covered and down. The dirt warm, underfoot. I dug more peanuts than anyone else. I tracked my progress, compared it to Rudra's, kept up with her, surpassed her. I wanted to ease the workload. I did not want to be called lazy. I felt broken when still. Standing hurt more than bending, as though bending was what my body knew best how to do. When we took another break, we stayed in the fields, too tired to walk to the cool of the hut. Rudra said we could eat two more peanuts. I cradled mine. Pocked, tender food in my hand. We buried the shells, and the women surrounded me. They stroked my fingers and I stroked theirs. Our hands chapped, heavy with dirt. We held our palms together. They looked the same, felt different. My hands, dry, fingers cracked, black with embedded dirt. Still soft, soft, the women said. It takes a lifetime to make hands, Rudra said, and shook hers at me. We stood under the sharp sun with our skirts pulled up.

Rudra's hands were hard. Not scratchy. Firm with a polished armor: tortoise. On the inside of her forearm, running along her veins, a verse from the *Ramayana* tattooed in homemade blue ink. I looked at the forearms of the other women. Many of them had the same verse, in the same ink, in the same handwriting. The "huh,"

curled like a snail. The doctor, they said, He can write. He comes sometimes. They had memorized the verse and spoke it to me. I took Rudra's arm and read her tattoo, sounded out the individual letters: *Huh, aii. Ruh, aah, muh. Hai Ram.* I said, Together, the letters make a word. I drew Hindi in their hard hands and thought of Helen Keller. Language written on the body is language felt and remembered. I spelled into their palms. It was an entertaining trick. We were hungry.

When the sun looked to be at two o'clock, we finished the last field. We left the peanuts loose on the dirt, to dry. We would return at the end of the week to pick and sack them. We stepped into our plastic flip-flops and headed toward the dirt track.

On the walk back to the village, I took my cigarettes from under my bra strap. We smoked some of my *bidis*, soggy, salted with my sweat, and I distributed my precious pack of Marlboro Reds. I taught the women how to blow smoke rings, to say motherfucker in English. Rudra taught me to walk with the tin pot on my head. She said I would work in the pea fields next. She said they had other work to do and would leave me with the pea women. My back adjusted to uprightness and I kept the pot on my head for fifty steps. The women herded me at the center of the group. I looked at the flat, dark land. I looked at the sky. I looked at my feet. We heard a truck coming from a long way off. We covered our heads to keep out the dust. The truck bounced past us, then stopped. The driver stuck his head from the window, shouted, Get in. The women shouted, No room. He drove away, then stopped again and stuck his head out the window. Shouted, Plenty of it. We climbed into the back of the truck, crammed with white tanks of diesel. We slid into the small spaces

between the tanks. The bumps, dust, painful. We got knocked around and looked at each other and laughed. Rudra stood up and we held her legs, wrapped our hands around her calves. She lifted a few tanks, stacked them so they would not topple. After a while, the women banged on the sides of the truck. It slowed and we jumped out.

We passed through the village on the way to the pea fields. I saw the other American, female students. Some bathing children; sifting lentils. There were no males in sight under the age of ten. I was the only student assigned to outdoor labor. I preferred it that way. It seemed fair that because I looked like the village women, I should live like them too.

Rudra said to call me Old Maid so the pea women did. She told them to make sure the children *uskee Calcuttay kay hath milao* "meet her Calcutta hands." She equated my soft hands with Calcutta, not America.

During my first hour of planting peas, some men came from the village to watch. One of them hit me across the face with the back of his hand for planting the peas in too shallow a ditch. I felt four of his knuckles under my eye. I was so surprised I sat on the ground. He pulled up my pea plants. He did not damage them even though he ripped them from the dirt viciously. I kneeled on the ground and screamed. Pig, is this how you treat your mother, your sister? My voice, dry, cracked. He came at me with his fists. I covered my head with my arms. The sun hot on my spine. When he stopped beating me, I punched him in the knees. The other men came in a rush and dragged him away from me. The women stood in their furrows and watched. The men shouted. I stood and turned my back on them. I bent

and replanted one seedling. Someone grabbed me. Dragged me by my braid up the furrow, over the well-planted peas. My blood fast in my fingertips. I dug my heels in the dirt. He let go. I lay on the ground, then sat up, stared, my mouth hanging open. The men, flocked together. The pain in my back, from digging, more profound than the pain of a beating. I did not care about the men. I was hungry. I looked at the peas. I was ashamed of the ruined food. Five plants gone. Five plants crushed by my dragged body. I watched the woman next to me. I stood up, mimicked her planting, asked her to check my work. It's good, she said. A pair of hands with work to do, a pair of feet with a furrow to follow. My hands, the dirt, the drape of my dupatta, sun, peas, other women. The privacy of my furrow. I looked at my hands, pinching the slim green necks of plants.

When they tired of watching us work, the men wandered to their broken tractor and pushed it away. We waited until they were obscured by a hump of desert and then we stretched our arms behind our backs and tucked our skirts into our waistbands. This way, this way, the women said. As we walked, we slapped the dirt from our hands and knees. We smoked *bidis* behind a haystack. I showed the pea women my smoke rings. We punched our fists through them as they widened and hung above us in the air. After sharing a few cigarettes, we went back to our furrows. I thought about my 12th of chapatti and seven peanuts with pitted shells. The children came to the field. They lined up and I held out my hands. They stepped forward one by one and stroked my dirty, soft palms. Some of the children laughed. Some were confused. The sun was hard and bright and then it darkened and I looked up and saw a cloud of locusts moving across the sky. The women began singing to

the children. A song about a crow who stole the Queen's gold anklet. My arms and back were firm. There were rows of peas I had planted in sturdy lines behind me. I held one soft hand with the other.

At the end of the day, the peanut pickers came for me, traveling in a group with Rudra at the center. They looked over the pea-plants with approval and took me to the main courtyard of the village to pick lice from the schoolchildren's hair. The children who did not go to school had been deloused in the middle of the day when the sun was high. It is the schoolchildren who bring lice to the village, Rudra said. Eight of them. Two of them girls, sisters. These are the only schoolchildren, I asked? Rudra said, Yes, sometimes these children go to school.

Picking lice was light work. We made a circle. Between every child, a woman. We plucked the lice and nits. In the middle of our circle, a small, tin pail of grey, soapy water. There was one comb, green plastic, a man's comb, the tines straight and close together. We passed the comb around and scraped it through the water to keep it clean. In the children with black hair, it was easier to see the white eggs, glued poppy seeds. Children with reddish-brown hair, like mine and Nithiya's, were more difficult to delouse. Most of the lice at the back of the head, above and behind the ears. The women turned delousing into a lesson of numbers. Approximately twelve eggs per head. We counted out loud, all together, the children shouting: *Aik, do, theen, chaar...* With the help of the schoolchildren we added together the amount of lice in the heads of boys and the heads of girls. With the help of the schoolchildren, we reached one hundred and ten. I had never counted above fifty so I learned new numbers, too. One of the girls had adult lice. We parted her

hair and watched them, little beige grains, racing up and down her scalp. They were too fast to count so we made up a song. Run run run, run off Bhusa's head. The sun spread oval against the pea fields. We sang and counted to the beat of grooming. I liked the nimble motions it required of my hands. I asked Rudra if she would take me to see the school, seven kilometres away. She said, When the work is finished. I never saw the school. I kept a journal for the nine months I lived in India as a student. I wrote nothing for the three weeks I stayed in the village. There was too much work and I had forgotten a pen.

The sun went flat on the horizon. We sat in a row against the side of a mud hut, the walls so dry they thinned against our weight. Sand drizzled down our backs. We looked out at the brown fields and sewed sacks that we would later fill with peanuts. It was the only time my left-handedness became visible. I had not written anything more than a few Hindi letters in the women's palms. No one noticed I smoked with my left hand; it was the hand for dirty things, anyway. All other tasks were two-handed. I thought of the extravagance of one-handed tasks. Write, turn a page, hold a phone, click a mouse. At first, Rudra tried to make me sew with my right hand, thinking I was being my usual, stupid self. No, no, I told her, I'm left-handed, using the Sindhi word, the only one I knew, but she did not understand. I use this hand, I said, waving my left, The other one doesn't work for me. Someone said "mayur" and I looked up and saw a peacock streaking across the field, blue neck extended, feathers spread and shimmying with a glint like water. Male, Rudra said. They have good color. Then she said something I did not understand. Everyone laughed. She simplified her language for me. Same place, she said, and patted

Nithiya's belly. Girl, boy (she ticked the two words off her fingers), both come from the same place. Only different once they're outside the stomach. Someone said, Hey, Rudra, Even your husband came from there. Not him, she said. He came from rooster-shit. She looked over at me, checked my work. Stupid baby, she said. I fumbled with my sack. She snatched it from me and showed me how to stitch the seam closed in a straight, quick line.

We sat sewing for what seemed a long time. The light lingered. I developed a long thin blister on my left thumb and index finger. It was wondrous to sit. I looked up from my work, startled, when a man's voice said my name. It was Kapil. I told the women, This is my brother, and they teased him. He was wearing a jacket and tie; he had a walking stick. He smiled good-naturedly, looked at his watch, said we were late. For what, I asked. He said he had finagled me an invitation to the headman's house. The women tilted their heads at English. I told Rudra I wanted to go but I did not want to stop sewing. She asked me why I would want to go with the men. I said I wanted to know what they did, what it was like for them. They don't do anything, she said, and dismissed me with a shove. It was hard to stand up. My knees buckled. My back hunched. The women laughed.

Kapil walked fast as we traipsed along the terraced edge of the pea fields. I asked him what he had been doing all day. We spoke English. It felt like cheating. Or dreaming. He griped about carrying sacks of lentils and said the rest of the time, they had sat on the broken tractor and talked. Very interesting ideas, he said. The headman has excellent business sense. They'll do well for themselves in the new market. For how long, I asked, did you carry the bags of lentils. What does it matter,

he said, Don't you want to discuss the peanut market? No, I said. Tell me how long you carried the sacks. He said, The peanut is a drought resistant crop. No shit, I said. Tell me how long you carried the sacks. You're black as Kali, he said. How long, I said. About an hour, he shrugged. Did you eat anything? I asked. Some women came, he said. We had a nice meal of dal and rice and milk. I grabbed his hands. Soft. They looked white against mine. I displayed my palms: dry, blistered, blackened. I spread my fingers wide like the tail of a male peacock. Why don't you wash, Kapil said, We're going to dinner, and he swung his walking stick so it thwacked the tops of the pea plants. Don't fuck with the fucking peas, I said. That's the fucking food you ate. What's wrong with your voice? he said. I shoved him and he stumbled, caught himself with his walking stick. He was mad. I did not care. Why haven't you been working? I asked. The words croaked out. He wiped his jacket where my hands had been. He said, Why should I work when you will do it all? I walked away from him. Swung my arms and hips. I see you're still the same brute, he called out. Rough little village girl. If I had turned around I would have beaten him to death with his stick. He ran to catch up but I did not forgive him for being stupid and useless.

When we got to the headman's house, five men sat watching television and drinking whiskey. The headman had electricity because after dark he tapped into the line that powered the school. A dubbed re-run of "Falcon Crest" played on the small T.V. I had never seen "Falcon Crest." Black and white lines furrowed the screen. All the women looked purple and fuzzy, their pearls, green, hair, orange. I was shamed by the fullness of cleavage and thighs. Kapil said it was an episode from ten

years ago, he could tell by the actor's hairstyles. My stomach gnawed when I saw a commercial of a mother in a pink sari handing a glass of milk to her son. The second commercial was American, undubbed. I don't remember the product but I remember the words to the jingle: *Whatever you want, whenever you want it*. I stood at the back of the room, listening to the men talk about engines of Mercedes, the Chinese peanut market. They spoke a mix of Hindi and English. They asked Kapil about Hollywood, snow. The men, Kapil, seemed a different species. It was like spending time with hamsters. I fiddled with my hands. I thought about peas, tried to calculate how much I had planted. I took Kapil's whiskey and gulped all of it. The men stared at me. Kapil laughed. When "Falcon Crest" ended, I slipped out the door.

Rudra must have been watching for me. She saw me coming across the pea fields and walked to meet me. What were they doing she said? *Kuch nehin karthay hai*, I said. Nothing, and she grunted. When we got close to the cooking pit, I saw all the women and children, stacking dry cow-dung patties in front of the fire, slapping chapattis from palm to palm. Rudra steered me toward a vat of peanut oil used for cooking. The side of the vat, marked DEISEL in English from its former life. She skimmed her finger along the lip of it and rubbed a light coat of oil into her hands. She indicated for me to do the same. The oil soaked into my knuckles. Sookha, Dry, I said. You'll go back to thinking, she said. I covered my face with my hands. Food is ready, she said. I breathed into the privacy, the luxury of my hands.

We cooked and ate in the dark, outside, the wind shaping the fire into orange peaks. The children ran around counting. How many women, how many boys, how many nose rings, how many pink cholis, how many green, how many eyes and chins

and feet. We rolled out corn chapatti on a round rock. Ate it with dal. It was good because I was hungry and because I did not have to eat it for a lifetime.

Chapter XII: What Hands Are These? (II)

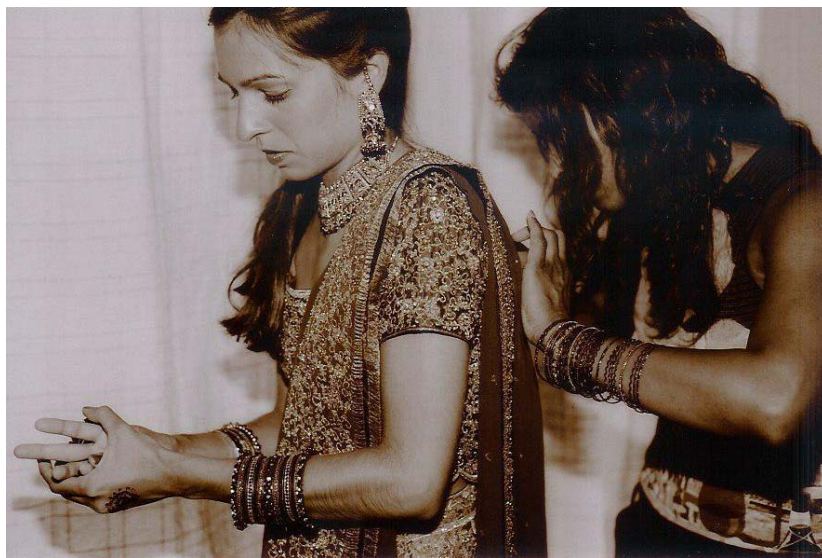
1.

The bride. *Ferrunghi*. Foreigner. To herself.

She is testimony, evidence. She is immigrant, between homes. She is beheld.

She is alone.

Katie Bradford, an hour before becoming Katie Bradford Dillehay.



Me: weighted

Necklace flared on collarbone. *Lengha* of cinnebar eddying waist to foot. Lips, scarlet. *Choli* stiff with gilded stitching. Earrings hung to shoulders. *Dupatta*, eclipsing bare stomach, layering breasts. Eyes bolded in black *kajil*. Arms slung with bangles, wrist to elbow. Ankles cuffed by jangling *payal*. Hair threaded through the cavities of 120 gold beads.

Later, at night, the beads rolled on the taut bed as he undid my hair saying the word: *patni*, wife.

As a bride in Kolkata, I bore, on my body, twenty-eight pounds of gold and silk. I walked slow, prudent. My embroidered hips, my heels (five inch), ticked.

Every prisoner wears a uniform. Every soldier. Every official.



In white, the widows laid their hands on me, tenderly, to bless.



2.

An Indonesian saying: "Art is thought expressed through the hands."

Mendhi: by the hands, for the hands. Cheap, impermanent beauty. It weighs nothing. In three weeks, it disappears from the flesh.



A poor bride, a rich bride, equally adorned.

When first applied, mehndhi is wet, thick as clay. Squeezed from a small plastic tube with a slit at the end of it. Cool, therapeutic, on the fingers and palm. The greenish-black of mortared plants.



It is best to sleep in mehndhi, to let it dry, harden, fourteen hours (fourteen, the number of exile, of years in a forest). Then, awaken and flake the crusted pattern.

A darshaan of the hands. A darshaan of the self. Beneath black, there is red.



Until her bridal mehndhi fades, a wife does no housework.

Woman, honor thy hands. Let them be idle, let them be tools of beauty, alone,

on at least this one day.

3.

Rukiya moved with the quickness of controlled irritation. Other people's hands meant work for her own. She whisked into the crowded lobby of my uncle's apartment building where I leaned against red pillows on the white-sheeted floor. She elbowed my aunts and cousins aside and dropped down, cross-legged, next to me. Her sari: the pink of wet azaleas, the green of tennis courts. She squeezed my wrists like unripe bananas.

Amisa, her daughter and assistant.



A wiry, efficient girl, thirteen years old. Ardent, lotus-shaped face and a long black braid like an arrow, pointing down, drawing the eye to the earth. Amisa sat between two silver bowls. One filled with lemon, sugar, cloves, oil; the other with ground henna, eucalyptus, and nilgiri tea stirred to a thick paste of mehndhi.

That night, my hands were the hub of Rukiya's attention. My body, her canvas. She created a geometry, and I kept my fingers spread so I would not smear her patterns. Between us, a quiet intimacy. She drew the mehndhi according to the shape of my hands, feet, shins, forearms. She drew fluid, spontaneous, her lips in a concentrated pleat.

On my left palm, a swirl grew into the neck of a peacock. A checkerboard on the saddle of my right palm. A gate of close, straight bars. Scales, fish-like above my knuckles. Lacy ferns on the pulp of my thumbs. A squat arrow on my pinkie, indicating a flower with a center of kibbled seeds. *Look here*, the arrow said. *Notice this*. The paisley horn of a rhinoceros on the arch of my right foot. On each toe, shafts of cilia. Above my ankles, vines, sprouting. Across my left wrist, a line demarcating frontier--end of Hand, beginning of Arm. Sideways, along my left index finger--arches, like holy entrances to mosques.



Anatomy understood. Each joint and border, feted.

Between the designs, spaces. The spaces were me--my flesh, the negative realm of Rukiya's pattern. Sometimes she filled an emptiness with a dot, as she did for the head of the peacock, to make an eye so it could see. She capped the tips of my fingers with solid gobs of mehndhi; I was suddenly aware of my fingerpads as one extremity of self, one place where I ended and everything around me began.



All over my left hand, she drew totemic eyes, watchful pupils, to protect against evil. The etymology of *left*, in English, is *sinister*. I am left-handed. Different. Deviant. In Kolkata, I eat with my right hand and say, "Excuse my left" when reaching for achaar. Dominant left hands run in my family-- Sindhi, Irish. In 1906, my grandfather Kent watched as a nun bashed a boy's head against a blackboard. He was beaten for writing with his left hand. He was beaten until he slumped to the floor, his hair white with chalk. The boy was never the same. And my grandfather's handwriting was always illegible. Not because he was left-handed

but because he wrote unnaturally with his right-hand.

The last thing Rukiya drew on my body, among the wreaths and swirls of my right palm, was the letter "H," the first initial of my husband-to-be. She copied the letter from a cocktail napkin where my Aunt Chitra had written it.

4.



When I was a child in Vermont, someone gave me a paint-by-number set. A pair of hands, praying. It said Jesus on the box--the hands painted beige, the background, blue. Palms together, fingers skyward, like steeples. To me, they looked like hands in namaste, in pranaam. I painted from the wrist up. I painted the hands blue, for Krishna. The nails I stained red. The background I sponged black with small arcs of green. When I showed my father, he laughed and said, "Chadi chowkri." Mad girl, in Sindhi.

Mehndhi requires patience. Three hours of work for Rukiya; three hours of stillness for me, followed by at least ten hours of restricted movement. An all

consuming distraction is a wise thing to impose upon a bride; it is difficult to think philosophically while something fragile and wet is applied to twenty percent of your body.

Mehndhi creates a pause, a forced calm.



I did not shift, walk, scratch, urinate. My aunt Chitra fed me, placing tikkians coated with chutney in my mouth. My cousins Archana and Bela took turns with a glass of water, holding the straw between my lips. A teenaged boy from the 14th floor with hair to his chin and bug-eyed sunglasses came downstairs to DJ. He played "Mundian To Bach Ke Rahi" twelve times in a row when he saw me singing along. I tried to tuck my hair behind an ear, and smeared a print on my left palm. I relapsed into vigilant stillness, watching my family sing and dance, the women fanning their own wet, mehndhied hands. People visited me in shifts.



We caught up on news. Who had given birth, who had moved from Dubai to Lagos, who had gotten a promotion in computers, who had died, who had returned as a ghost. My father and husband-to-be made dowry jokes. My uncle Chatru called me gudi, the word pronounced so sweetly, I cried and smeared my mascara. He said, "Eh, NiNi, don't you wish you had Durga's extra hands?" I laughed so hard I cried again. My cousins cleaned my face. I was an invalid to ritual.

I leaned against the red pillows and looked at the folds of my lehnga, felt the weight of kundun around my neck. I smelled the swags of marigolds hanging at the corners of the room. They had been strung by women bony with hunger. In the old days, itinerant Sindhis--traveling for trade or as bhagats--had worn their belongings. A woman donned all her skirts at once. All her jewelry. Conveyable property. I thought about status and economic success as proudly displayed on the bodies of women. I could not help but to calculate the disgrace of abundance, the abjectness of beauty.



The cost of what I wore could have powered thirty wells in Bengal.

I was an archetype for the sake of the photographs.



Somewhere in Kolkata, there is a child named Manku. She is always in her body. There is no other way. My wedding *lehnga* could have, should have, taught her to read. If she read what I am writing now, she would wonder how she got here.

She would wonder at the uselessness of could have, should have. She would wonder at the accident of birth.

In Bangkok, I once walked by a closed massage parlor. Through the window I saw a line of women, masseuses in white smocks, sitting in a line, massaging each other's backs. I wondered if Rukiya would paint her daughter's mehndhi when she married. Or, perhaps she would leave her hands defiantly bare to show that on this happy occasion, she had not labored.

At midnight, I extended my hands to my husband-to-be. He searched the mehndhi until he found his initial. "There it is," he said, gently, in English, and suspended his finger above the still-wet spot.

A roar of celebration from the throat of my family.

5.

It is said the darker the red of your mehndhi, the more your husband will love you.

Throughout the night, I doused my hands in lemon and oil, to set the mehndhi and enrich its color. We were staying at the Tollygunge Club, host of the first Pan-Asian Women's Golf Tournament, and former playground of British officers. In colonial days, the club was prohibited to Indians. Now, it is prohibited to certain Indians:



I had never slept in a hotel in Kolkata before; it felt strange to not be with family. I laid awake all night, flat on my back, elbows propped, mehndhied hands in air, mehndhied feet dangling off the bed. I thought about my mother as she had been when I was a child. She was home now, teaching, in New York.

How sensible the old ways are. Three weeks till mehndhi fades. Three weeks to transition from daughter to wife.

My mother's hands: white, lean, liver-spotted in the Irish way. She never wore a wedding ring because it aggravated her arthritis. Whenever someone asked, she said, "I don't need a bauble to remind me of love."



When I turned six, she enrolled me in French for First Graders and forbade me

from playing with the Turshmans who lived at the end of our street. She said, as explanation, "I worked hard to leave all that behind." And so, in my memory--secret walks with the Turshmans to watch tires burn, the flames, uncivilized, the smell, like truth; and, Madame Dupont, the jump of her white neck noosed with fake pearls as she trained me to articulate phlegm.

I enjoyed spitting, like my Uncle Chandru with paan. My mother forbade it, even in the backyard with the pits of cherries where I zigzagged, hacking covertly, hoping to sow a forest. My mother mouthed her cherry pits into cloth napkins. I watched her and thought of my grandmother Sullivan, the youngest of fourteen. She had worked as a domestic bleaching linen sixteen hours a day. Her favorite expression: "Heaven helps the working girl."

When I spat, in French, my mother heard advancement. She saw piles of white linen on fire.

In French, *etre* (to be), and *avoir*, (to have). Two plegmy, irregular verbs of great importance.

When I turned seven, my mother took a part-time job in real estate to pay for a Hindi tutor. She told my father: "You come home too late to teach her; she's got to learn or she won't know who she is."

They did not see me spying. I straddled the banister, a fast horse.

She hired an engineering student, a freshman, named Deepak. Gujarati, Jain. She did not boil potatoes or kill flies in his presence. My lessons lasted two hours. Afterwards, we ate lunch. My mother treated Deepak as if he, too, were her child. She gave us cheese and crackers and spoke in aphorisms: "Better to be dead than

powerless. And how do you get power?" (she'd pause for me to say the rest of the sentence, Deepak waiting expectantly).

I would sing it: "Get an education."



Sometimes she said, "Money is power," but that she pronounced with bitterness.

From Hindi to English, *to have* and *to be* translate into each other. In Hindi: *mujhe dhukh hai*. Literally (*I have sorrow*), translates in meaning to: *I am sad*. To

have, to be, interchangeable.

In English, *to have* is a verb of ownership, acquisition.

I do not like the words "my" and "wife, " or, "my" and "husband" next to each other in a sentence. There is something conditioned, something outside of love, between that adjective, those nouns. But language is unavoidable. A trap. And so, in the gurudwara, my hand and the hand of my husband were tied together with blessed thread.



Something in the hand is possessed. Finders, keepers. Hands take, hands acquire. By the same token, they give. In English, the word "hand" used interchangeably with "give." Hand it over. Hand it to me.

From the moment mehndhi is applied, it begins to disappear. That is part of its beauty. Its opposition to the illusion of constancy. It pays tribute, and then it is gone.



My mother did not wear an Indian bride's traditional red, nor did she wear a Western bride's traditional white. She married my father in a purple silk sari sent Air Mail from Kolkata. She peeled the postage from the package and added it to her childhood stamp collection. I have it now.

6.

I fell asleep, sometime in the early morning. I know it was after five because I heard the monkeys drop from the trees to the roof of the guest-house. I fell asleep and dreamed it was my wedding day. Each minute that passed, the mehndhi on my hands faded. As the day progressed, it disappeared completely. I hid my hands, behind my back, from my aunts and cousins.

When I woke at ten a.m., my mehndhi was dry, crumbling. I went outside and rubbed my hands together under the laundry spigot where the dhobis cleaned sheets. The black shell of mehndhi washed away. My hands, dark red. Symbolic. I read them like a book. I was a woman of glyphs. I was a bride. I looked up through wisps of smog and watched a kapasi, yellow-eyed, perched in a kunchundana tree. The seeds of the kunchundana have two uses--rosary beads, and unit weights for goldsmiths. Each kunchundana seed weighs four grams. Always. It is a certainty.

A sweeper-woman cleaned the path behind me. She swept my way and grinned at my hands and feet: "Aj, thumarhi shaadi hai?" Today is your wedding? I nodded. She clucked approvingly at the darkness of my mehndhi--"La, la, la, how he loves you." She had already seen my husband-to-be. He tipped large and everyone working at the club knew this. She held up one finger, "Tehro, aik minute," and disappeared into the trees. I kept watching the birds. Bulbul, shikra, kingfisher. The woman returned and tossed a thin garland of marigolds over my head. She called me *beti*, daughter. I thanked her and missed my mother. I watched her sweep, the yellow dirt sifting around her bare feet and the edge of her flaming blue sari. She moved away from me, up the path. I sat staring at my mehndied hands until I saw a snake, black, rippling over a rock with its whole body. We humans walk with such a small

part of ourselves touching the ground. Two little slabs. I looked down at my feet and sniffed my palms. They smelled like clay, like menstruation.

At the edge of the golf course, I saw a woman jogging in saffron-colored Nikes and a sari like mint ice cream.

Someone yelled, "Fore!" Someone yelled, "Deko!"

I went inside and woke my husband-to-be. He sat up and hunched over his knees. I laid my left mehndied hand against his back, adjacent to his tattoo, his Scottish family crest, and used one menhdied finger to take a picture.



I told him I would not wear a wedding ring. I would not cage a single finger.

He nodded and said, "That's a good sentence. You should use it somewhere."

8.

The wife. She. Not I. She.



That first day as a wife, she was frightened of her hands.

When she stepped from the bath, she saw herself in the mirror. Red hands and arms, shocking. Vermillion streak in scalp--the sign of a married woman. She was changed. It must be so. Her body, different. The state of bride, finished. And now, this category of wife.

It happened throughout the day. She made the bed, reached for a glass, opened a door, and saw her hands. She thought a stranger was near, or, she was bleeding. Then she remembered. The hands were her own. She was a wife. Under the mehndhi, her life line, scrawling down; her love line, fragmented; her head line,

bi-sected. She rubbed her dry hands with butter.

On the second day as a wife, her mehndhi was darker, deeper. She stood at the mirror and held her fingers against her naked stomach. She flapped them like the fins of a fish. How strange her hands looked holding a pen, ironing, opening the fridge. Mehndhied, her hands were rendered basic, their humanity, brazen. They looked best against the nude form, against grass, soil, cupping water.

On the third day, she took the subway to Kalighat to receive the goddess' blessings. The tips of her fingers like the goat blood in Kali's reparatory pit. The goat, male; the sacrificed male going to slaughter, the world over, for he cannot give milk or children.

It is said when Sati, Lord Shiva's wife, killed herself after her father insulted her husband, Shivji began his dance of destruction. Beneath a mauve sky, he walked the earth, grieving, carrying the corpse of his wife. Lord Vishnu sent his chakra to cut Sati's body to pieces. The bits of her fell in fifty-one spots throughout India. The dismembered body of a loved woman became sites of holiness. A finger of Sati fell on the land beneath the temple of Kalighat.

She thought of this as she stood before the doors of the goddess, waiting for a glimpse of the black cheeks, the burning eyes.

The doors flashed open. She looked into the face of the goddess.

She left the temple and crossed the river on a bridge of boats, upturned, held together by rusted chains. On the west side of the river, she lifted her camera and held it to her eye. Boys came and surrounded her, speaking Bengali. In their childish mouths the language was understandable. They wondered aloud where she was from,

and what was attached to her eye. One boy said she must be from Bombay, far across the country. All the children agreed. She was from Bombay. She said nothing to correct them. She said nothing for there was nothing to say. She was from Bombay. They had said so. She knelt and pressed a hand in the dirt. It left a hazy print. The children knelt and pressed their hands around hers. She thought of Grauman's Theatre, the handprints of movie stars embedded in cement. Famous hands walked on by anonymous feet.

The children played with rocks and a bottlecap. She looked through her camera at the temple across the river. She watched, through the eyepiece, as the morning goat was led to slaughter, his testicles tight and jiggling. She did not take a picture.

Epilogue

When I was researching PhD programs, I first looked at English departments. However, it was when I discovered the border-crossing, border-blurring nature of American Studies that I felt most at home. Here was a discipline that would allow me to follow my interests in Literature, Anthropology, Art History, Material Culture, and Cultural Studies issues of identity (race, class, gender, sexuality, and so on). American Studies seemed to be a space where I could bring more scholarship into my art, and art into my scholarship. Suddenly, a PhD in English seemed limiting to me. I applied to only American Studies programs.

American Studies drew me because it seemed to yearn for a borderless university, a world classroom where categories and genres were blurred by the necessity of inclusive research and scholarship. I hope that, in using a multidisciplinary, blurred form as both the point and process of this thesis, I have achieved American Studies' theoretical aim--where art informs academe, scholarship shapes art, thoughts float across borders, blast through classroom walls, and shuffle together library shelves in search of the best way to express and teach.

What I feel I have accomplished in this dissertation is an actuation of border crossing, in an American Studies sense. My methodology throughout was participant observation, self-reflexive ethnography, and a marrying of form and content; my aims were pedagogical, artistic, and scholarly. The thesis naturally grew along a multidisciplinary line, and the blurred nature of the final product is, I hope, an example of an American Studies mindset, and my methodology at work.

This dissertation puts into practice everything I believe and have learned thus far about the blurred space between art and scholarship, pedagogy and genre, identity and society. It is only the beginning; there is so much more to learn.

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