Anamesa
an interdisciplinary journal

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Anamesa is a conversation. From its inception in 2003, the journal has sought to provide an occasion for graduate students in disparate fields to converge upon and debate issues emblematic of the human condition. In doing so, Anamesa provokes scholarly, literary, and artistic innovation through interdisciplinary dialogue, serving New York University's John W. Draper Program and the graduate community at large.

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an-a-me-sa: Greek. adv. between, among, within
# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>vi</td>
<td>Contributors</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ix</td>
<td>Editor’s Note</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>POETRY</td>
<td>Night Music</td>
<td>Tim Craven</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>NONFICTION</td>
<td>From Dionysian Light to Dionysian Rite</td>
<td>David Bardeen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>FICTION</td>
<td>A Cabin in the Woods</td>
<td>Ty Cronkhite</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>POETRY</td>
<td>Mondrian Tissue Box</td>
<td>Jessica Scicchitano</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>NONFICTION</td>
<td>Another Storm Heard From Reflecting on the Natural Metaphors Assigned to the Arab Revolts</td>
<td>Anna Reumert</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35</td>
<td>POETRY</td>
<td>Decoded Trance</td>
<td>Elizabeth Bidwell Goetz</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37</td>
<td>ART</td>
<td>New American Pioneers</td>
<td>Erika Raberg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38</td>
<td>ART</td>
<td>Sun #5</td>
<td>Nicole White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39</td>
<td>ART</td>
<td>Pulls at Your Heart Strings</td>
<td>Eve Kalugin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40</td>
<td>ART</td>
<td>Prepare for a Harsh Critique</td>
<td>Eve Kalugin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41</td>
<td>ART</td>
<td>Caution</td>
<td>Ayten Tartici</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42</td>
<td>ART</td>
<td>Folds in Nature</td>
<td>Eleanor Neal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43</td>
<td>POETRY</td>
<td>Dinosaur Skin</td>
<td>Nicholas Goodly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>44</td>
<td>FICTION</td>
<td>Lake Water</td>
<td>J.E. Nissley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50</td>
<td>NONFICTION</td>
<td>Blowing Up Narnia</td>
<td>Marquis Bey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>64</td>
<td>POETRY</td>
<td>Bleed Soaked</td>
<td>Oakley Merideth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65</td>
<td>FICTION</td>
<td>Chupacabra</td>
<td>Christian Aguiar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70</td>
<td>CREATIVE NONFICTION</td>
<td>Emerging</td>
<td>Catherine Young</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>75</td>
<td>POETRY</td>
<td>Numbers of Streets that Will Never Exist</td>
<td>Nicholas Goodly</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Cover Images**

- The Daily Races
  - Whitney Oldenburg
- I Thought I Knew
  - Whitney Oldenburg
Contributors

Christian Aguiar has called Worcester, Pawtucket, East Providence, Providence and Inje home, in that order. He currently lives in Washington, DC, where he is a graduate student in English at Georgetown and teaches literature and composition.

David Bardeen is pursuing a Master’s Degree in Art History and Archaeology at the Institute of Fine Arts at New York University, where his current interests include Greco-Roman art and architecture and Medieval and Renaissance painting, as well as the influence of these artistic traditions on the work of modern and contemporary artists.

Marquis Bey graduated summa cum laude from Lebanon Valley College in 2014 and is now a PhD student at Cornell University’s English program studying African American Literature/Studies as well as Gender and Sexuality studies. He will soon have a book chapter published in Ambassadors of Giftedness: Insightful Narratives of Culturally Different Gifted Adults and another forthcoming book chapter in George Yancy's edited collection Black and Male: Critical Voices from Behind the Racial Veil. His research interests include philosophy of race; the co-constitutivity of race, gender, and sexuality; 20th century African American literature; and Black Feminist Thought.

Tim Craven is originally from Stoke-on-Trent, England. He was a neuroscientist living in London until he began his poetry MFA at Syracuse University. In 2014, his poems will feature in Rattle, The Lascaux Review, New Delta Review, Fjords Review, Sonora Review, CURA, Eleven Eleven, New Madrid, Natural Bridge, and others. He sometimes tweets @CravenTim.

Ty Cronkhite lives with his imaginary dog on any friendly couch he can find in Albuquerque while he pursues a PhD in English Literature and teaches English Composition at the University of New Mexico. His poems and short stories have been or are about to be published in spaces like the Xavier Review, Idiom 23, The Stray Branch, miller’s pond poetry review, and Four Ties Literary Review.

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Eve Kalugin is an interdisciplinary artist exploring the intersection between reality and fiction, chance and intentionality. Blending photography, video, text, and sound, her work challenges the viewer’s conception of communication, narrative, and language. Strongly influenced by early 20th century Russian literature and Latin American magical realism, her work ruminates on the complexities, ambiguities, and surrealism of the mundane. Eve received her BA in Comparative Literature from Bard College and is now pursuing her MFA in Photography at The School of The Art Institute of Chicago.

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Contributors

Whitney Oldenburg was born on February 28, 1987 in Jacksonville, FL as the youngest of five children. She graduated from Cornell University with a BFA, concentrating in both painting and sculpture, and received a Certificate in African Studies for her coursework in the fields of African culture and politics. Whitney is currently in her second year of graduate school at RISD and expects to receive her MFA in Painting this upcoming spring. She was most currently awarded the Maharam Steam Fellowship and a RISD Graduate Studies Grant to carry out a research project at the Mayo Clinic.

Erika Raberg is an artist and writer currently pursuing a dual degree MFA in Photography and MA in Visual and Critical Studies at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago. She enjoys an artistic practice that thinks of the entire world as a research laboratory, and believes that the best visual art remains close friends with other disciplines. Current projects include identical twin boxers fighting each other, surrogacy as explored through photography, and Yelp reviews as modern day art criticism. Erika speaks Swedish, Japanese, and Spanish.

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Jessica Scicchitano was born, raised, and now raises herself in Syracuse, New York. Lore suggests she’s the soul of the city. A recent graduate of the Creative Writing MFA Program at Syracuse University, Jessica was the former Nonfiction Editor at Salt Hill Journal. Some of her other poems can be found in Night Block, Birdfeast, and Tirage Monthly, but her Tumblr handles prove a dedication to sad, thought-provoking screenshots and cows.

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Nicole White is a photographer, curator, historian, and writer. She holds a BFA from Massachusetts College of Art (2002), an MA in Art History from the University of Connecticut (2010), and an MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (2012). Recent selected exhibitions include: Mutual Ruins, Heaven Gallery, Chicago, IL (2014) High Tide, Dossier Outpost, New York, NY (2014), and XOXO, Gallery 19, Chicago, IL (2014). Currently, White is full-time photography faculty in the School of Art & Visual Studies at the University of Kentucky. More of her work can be seen at: www.nicolewhite.net

Catherine Young lives, farms, and writes in Wisconsin. She is completing her MFA in creative writing at the University of British Columbia Vancouver and serves on the editorial board of PRISM International. Catherine’s poetry has appeared in Fermentation Fest Farm Art Dtour. Her essays have been published in the anthology Imagination & Place: Cartography and in About Place Journal.

Editor’s Note

Imposing order on unruly reality—that’s the game, here. We strive at all times to understand more about our world; to fit the happenings we encounter into sensible narratives. Tipping points alert us to the major and minor relationships that lead events to unfurl as they do. In these pages we look to past experience to pinpoint the inception of an artist’s signature style, compare the factors that erupt in revolution with the language used to describe them, and confront the particular mix of memories and emotions that may cause us to turn away from our friends and our past in favor of new, uncertain directions. We pay attention to the phenomena on the surface but seek also to describe the brooding forces gathered below.

In this issue we celebrate the ability to tell the story and the elegance of the language we use to tell it. It is our aim at Anamesa to blur boundaries and re-imagine links, and I hope the writing and art contained here provoke a similar questioning of the critical mass of each moment. We hope you enjoy what you find and will join us in reckoning with the tipping points and other tools we use to make sense of the awesome complexity of experience.

—Jason Didier
Night Music

Tim Craven

The night has gone electric: windmilled power chords of scolded dog, cracked-up fuzzbox of gust-scattered leaves, wah-wah pedal wind that threatens to rip the roof off.

I lie on crumpled sheets, draped in an unwelcome warmth. The cicadas ceaseless buzz is a well-worn vacuum tube amp. Sleepless fretting over the kick drum violence of the day feeding back, feeding back, feeding back.

The beat on an inter-city sleeper skirting the tracks—tribal beats embedded in the lizard brain, one thud following the next, following the next, affirming tomorrow’s dawn, beak-mouth song unspooling.
From Dionysian Rite to Dionysian Light

Rothko’s “Affinity” for the Villa of Mysteries and the Development of His Signature Style

David Bardeen

"Apollo may be the God of Sculpture. But in the extreme he is also the God of Light and in the burst of splendor not only is all illumined but as it gains in intensity all is also wiped out. That is the secret which I use to contain the Dionysian in a burst of light." —Mark Rothko

In June 1959, in a now-famous encounter, Mark Rothko, artist, approached John Fischer, publisher, in the tourist-class bar of the USS Independence en route from New York to Naples. “Rothko peered around the room through his thick-lensed glasses, then ambled over to my table with his characteristic elephantine gait,” Fischer later recalled. “He was sipping a Scotch and soda with obvious gusto; he had the round, beaming face and comfortably plump body of a man who enjoys his food; and his voice sounded almost cheerful.”

Rothko had every reason to seem pleased. His trip to Europe that spring coincided with the culmination of a decade of extraordinary strides in his career. In the late 1940s, Rothko had adopted what would become his signature style: large-scale oil paintings composed of detached, rectangular blocks of color that envelop the viewer in ethereal fields of light and dark. The approach had won him critical acclaim, the attention of collectors and curators, and a dramatic increase in the price of his canvases. In June 1958, Rothko had received his first in a series of sweeping commissions: the creation of a set of murals, five hundred to six hundred square feet in all, for the Four Seasons restaurant in the newly-constructed Seagram Building in Manhattan. But the trip to Europe also marked an inflection point. As his profile grew, Rothko became increasingly frustrated with how his work was characterized by critics. He took issue with those who described his canvases, with their warm and enveloping palettes, as decorative, or as primarily concerned with color and color relationships. In a lecture at the Pratt Institute in 1958, he sought to disassociate himself from the Abstract Expressionists, arguing that his art—and painting generally—was concerned with “a communication about the world,” not self-expression. And he had begun to experience some of the negative aspects of commercial success: the jealousy of colleagues and the fear that wealthy collectors coveting “a Rothko” might not properly appreciate his work. Perhaps reflecting a souring in his mood, or as an affront to critics, or both, the palette of Rothko’s most recent paintings had darkened considerably.

Fischer and Rothko befriended one another at the bar and decided to spend their first week in Europe together with their families. For Rothko, the summer was an opportunity to relax, but more importantly, to see art, to identify “ancestral connections” between European traditions and his own work.

The Italian leg of his journey would include visits to Rome, Venice, and Florence: to the Etruscan murals in Tarquinia, the Byzantine mosaics at the Cathedral of Santa Maria Asunta in Torcello, and Michelangelo’s Medici Library at the cloister of San Lorenzo in Florence. Rothko had visited the Medici Library on a trip to Florence a decade earlier, and he told Fischer on the crossing to Naples that he had been “influenced subconsciously” by the space. The Library’s staircase room, that “somber vault” of pilasters, columns, and blind windows, achieved “the kind of feeling” that Rothko sought to emulate in his painting ensembles.

Rothko’s trip began in the Bay of Naples, and it was there, by Fischer’s account, that Rothko identified some of the deepest connections to his own work. “After he had visited Pompeii,” Fischer reported, “he told me that he had felt a ‘deep affinity’ between his own work and the murals in the House of Mysteries—‘the same feeling, the same broad expanses of somber color.’” It is tempting to discount the importance of this reference, a single statement by the artist, relayed by Fischer, a third party, more than a decade later. But it deserves our attention. For most of the 1950s, Rothko remained largely silent about his work. When he did speak, at the Pratt Institute for example, his explanatory statements were cryptic at best. Rothko’s “affinity” for the Villa of Mysteries illustrates what he may have been trying to accomplish as an artist at a pivotal point in his career.

To appreciate the effect the Villa of Mysteries may have had on Rothko, it is helpful to describe its setting and structure. While often described as in Pompeii, the Villa is in fact about four hundred meters northwest of the city
The life-size figures are superimposed on broad sheets of deep red, and seem to float on a plane a few feet above ground level. While the blocks of color behind the figures suggest a flatness or inaccessibility, other elements of the murals indicate depth and space. Trompe l’oeil pilasters in maroon, which both complement and contrast with the red background, are painted at even intervals. While they at first appear to divide the mural into discrete clusters of forms, certain figures seem to be crossing or draped in front of them. The overall effect suggests an encircling stage set, but whether the figures form a single ensemble or represent multiple scenes from the same “performance” is unclear.

Room 5 contains a window in the center of the south wall, but the light entering the room is limited, as it is for much of the rest of the Villa. As his eyes adjusted to the darkness, Rothko would have been confronted with these visual and pictorial enigmas: figures at once a part of and removed from the room in which he was standing, engaged in rituals hinting at a mythological past, but mysterious and ultimately impenetrable. Rothko would also have been cognizant that he was standing in a tomb. As in Pompeii, bodies (or rather, hollow spaces formed when bodies decayed) were found in several of the Villa’s rooms, residents or guests caught in the superheated clouds of gas and debris that buried the Villa when Vesuvius exploded. Walking through the Villa’s rooms, Rothko would likely have been struck by the juxtaposition of the opulent imagery on its walls and the knowledge of how quickly and violently life at the Villa was extinguished. For many—and perhaps for Rothko as well—the Villa’s images are haunting, a portal into a lost realm. These are the rooms and images for which Rothko felt such a strong affinity.

A Roman villa near Pompeii seems an odd inspiration for an artist like Rothko, a naturalized American from southeastern Latvia whose work is most strongly associated with Abstract Expressionism. But threads emerge when viewed in the context of some of Rothko’s earliest influences. Rothko was born Marcus Yakovlevich Rothkowitz in 1903 in the city of Dvinsk (today Daugavpils), which was at that time within the Russian Empire. His father immigrated to Portland, Oregon and in 1913, Rothko, his mother, and his sister followed. Rothko’s family was of Jewish descent, and they left behind a community that would be devastated in World War I and almost entirely exterminated as part of the Nazis’ Final Solution. 12 To the extent that the Villa of Mysteries bore witness to the extinction of a cultured world in a single moment of volcanic fury, it may have symbolized for Rothko the destruction of his homeland in the cataclysmic upheavals of modern Europe.

As a student in Portland and later at Yale, Rothko read widely and pursued interests that would influence his career as an artist, specifically, Fried rich Nietzsche’s The Birth of Tragedy, and his assertion that Greek mythology played a redemptive role in mankind’s struggle with mortality and spiritual emptiness. 13 After one year at Yale, Rothko dropped out, moved to New York City, and decided to become a painter. 14 He enrolled in classes at the New School of Design, then the Art Students League. 15 His instructors were some of his early influences: Archile Gorsky, then experimenting with impressionist and structural techniques, and the Cubist artist, Max Weber. 16 By the early 1930s, Rothko had developed a close relationship with the painter Milton Avery, who simplified natural landscapes and human figures into “flat, lyrical areas of opaque color.” 17

A comprehensive overview of Rothko’s early career is beyond the scope of this essay, but it is worth providing a general sense of his artistic trajectory during the 1930s and 1940s. Like Avery’s work, Rothko’s early paintings from this period explore figurative and landscape imagery, though with a frequent emphasis on cityscapes rather than nature. In Sculptress (early 1930s), a woman seated in a chair extends her arm to an unfinished statue on a pedestal. The exaggerated planarity of the woman’s face, arms, and cloak echo the rough cut of material in front of her. In Street Scene (1936), a mother and her children...
stand, as if marooned, atop a flight of steps beside the oversized classical façade of a building. Both paintings employ geometries of color—in Sculptress, ochres and browns; in Street Scene, tans and grays—applied with impressionistic imprecision. But unlike Avery’s paintings, in which colors could be florid, Rothko’s early canvases are muted, their figures subjected to a compressed isolation.

As the world plunged into war, Rothko’s style began what might be viewed in retrospect as a march toward abstraction. His paintings in the early 1940s abandoned realism for surrealist imagery infused with mythological references—fantasias of shapes, limbs, and animal parts. In The Omen of the Eagle (1942), derived from the Agamemnon Trilogy of Aeschylus,16 a tangle of malformed feet support what appear to be a series of drop-shaped columns or arches, tortured allusions to classical architectural forms. In the top half of the canvas, a row of yellow faces surmounts a pair of stylized eagle heads, wings extending outward in ribbons of red and brown.17 In The Syrian Bull (1943), inspired by a story involving the Persian god of light, Mithra, a bull in translucent yellow (and with eight legs) stands on an empty plane, his head a bulbous protrusion, his tail a steep triangle pierced by a gaping hole; Mithra sits astride him, his body obscured by geometric patterns in brown and red.

In the late 1940s, Rothko disposed of figurative imagery entirely, adopting “multi-form” canvases that soon evolved into his signature style. His tangled, surrealist masses gave way to indistinct patches of color, then to rectangular color fields;20 their edges diffuse, floating above or beyond a sea of misty light. The new approach represented a radical simplification visually, but infused his paintings with an undeniable presence. His canvases from this period are warm and bright, sunset colors of yellow, orange, and purple, occasional bands of blue and white. This simplified approach was accompanied by an increase in scale. His new canvases were several feet across, and even larger vertically. But Rothko maintained that their expansive proportions were intended to envelope the viewer, to draw him in rather than intimidate him. “I realize that historically the function of painting large pictures is something very grandiose and pompous. The reason I paint them however . . . is precisely because I want to be intimate and human.”21

This quest for intimacy, for his paintings to be experienced rather than simply regarded, led Rothko to take an active role in how his pieces were presented. For his work to be sold meant to lose paintings with a sense of mystery. To height and placement in an attempt to maximize the paintings’ intensity. At the Janis gallery, which began representing Rothko the same year, he insisted on dimming the lights in order to achieve the right ambience and to imbue his paintings with a sense of mystery.22 But Rothko’s desire to control the environment for his work presented a conundrum: to sell his paintings meant to lose control of them, but he needed to make a living.

In 1958, a solution presented itself: he was commissioned by Seagram and Sons to create a monumental set of murals for the Four Seasons restaurant on the ground floor of the new Seagram building in midtown Manhattan. Accounts vary as to Rothko’s enthusiasm for the assignment, but he must have been pleased with the project’s scale. It would be the opportunity to create, for the first time, a permanent, self-contained environment, open to the public, in which his canvases would be prominently displayed. He prepared a studio to emulate the room’s dimensions and got to work. He painted—then repainteds—for almost a year. In early 1959, he decided to take a break and travel to Europe, and boarded the ship for Naples in June of that year.

Given the nature of Rothko’s work in the late 1940s and 1950s—the color field paintings characteristic of his “mature” style23—it is not surprising that others have characterized Rothko’s affinity for the Villa of Mysteries primarily in terms of color and composition. In perhaps the most thorough analysis, art historian Vincent Bruno identifies parallels between Rothko’s work and the second, or architectural, style of Roman wall painting, noting “principles of design that are fundamental to both.”24 Bruno’s analysis begins with color: “The sheer force of pure, abstract color in the Roman walls is made to dominate whole spaces and environments, just as it does in modern art. The best parallel is found in the work of Mark Rothko . . . and his invention of the color field.”25 Bruno notes striking similarities in color palette between the Villa’s murals and Rothko’s paintings: the same “deeply saturated red,” the same purples, “an occasional flash of blue in the sky.”26

Bruno goes on to draw parallels between the Romans’ and Rothko’s use of color to play with concepts of depth and space and create a bridge between the real and the imaginary: “In the Roman murals, as in Rothko’s art, the color field becomes the border that separates the physical world we occupy from the imaginary world beyond the picture plane . . .”27 Bruno points out that both the Romans and Rothko used architectonic details—in the case of the Romans, trompe l’oeil pilasters, friezes, and cornices; in the case of Rothko, rectangular forms and strips of color—to the same effect: to create a bridge between the viewer’s world and an ethereal world beyond the picture plane.

Bruno also identified similarities in the emotional and psychological impact these works had on viewers. According to Bruno, the Roman Wall paintings gave viewers a sense of transcendence, transporting them into this imaginary realm, separate and detached from everyday experience. The Roman mural system, with its “great fields of pure color,” also operated as a “kind of psychological control over the enclosed environment.”28 Bruno saw a natural parallel in the effect Rothko was trying to achieve in his own work: “Rothko wanted to overwhelm the senses with the emotional shock of certain colors in a way that raised pure sensation to the level of transcendental experience.”29 For Bruno, both the Romans and Rothko created surfaces to affect the viewer in a way that was both spiritual and visceral.
In short, Bruno’s account of Rothko’s affinity attaches primacy to color, its use, and its effect. Absent in Bruno’s analysis, however, is any real attention to the Villa’s figurative imagery, including the frescoes in Room 5. This seems odd, given that the figurative images, those mysterious women engaged in various Dionysian rites, are so captivating and tend to have the strongest impact on the average visitor. Did Rothko look through or around these figures, to the fields of color that served as a backdrop, or were they more central to his affinity than others have given them credit?

The relevance of the Villa’s figurative imagery emerges when we return to earlier phases of Rothko’s career. Rothko began his career as a figurative painter, and he would have detected similarities between the Villa’s figurative imagery and his own early paintings. (In *Sculptress*, the woman bows her head forward, as if ducking beneath the top of the canvas, an effect similar to that imposed by the architectonic details that compress space on the Villa’s walls.) But a more striking connection emerges when we look to Rothko’s work of the late 1930s and early 1940s—his surrealist or mythological phase—and then consider how these mythological paintings relate to the color field paintings of his mature style.

In his mythological pictures of the 1930s and 1940s, Rothko was heavily influenced by the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche. Within *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche asserts that “Greek tragedy”—the battles of the Gods as rendered by the ancient Greek playwrights—“served to redeem man from the terrors of mortal life.” Distinguishing between Apollo, the Greek god associated with logic and reason, and Dionysus, associated with instinct and emotion, he describes Greek tragedy as illustrating the Apollonian embodiment of Dionysian insights and powers, a sort of constructive channeling (rather than outright denial) of man’s subconscious energies, his competing and self-destructive impulses. According to Nietzsche, the loss of myth as a salve, the failure of contemporary culture to properly synthesize the Apollonian and Dionysian, had cast man into a spiritual abyss. Nietzsche’s writings would have had particular resonance for Rothko as the world careened into the bloodiest years of World War II.

Inspired by Nietzsche, Rothko drew on Greek mythology to address this spiritual void. He described his art at the time as “a new aspect of the eternally archaic myth,” and adopted a surrealist approach to capture the intensity of the emotions at play: “If our titles recall the known myths of antiquity”—by titles, he is referring to the titles he assigned to his paintings of that period, such as *The Omen of the Eagle* and *Syrian Bull*—“we have used them again because they are the eternal symbols upon which we must fall back to express basic psychological ideas.” His purpose was not to illustrate specific mythological anecdotes, but to suggest the “tragic and timeless,” to achieve a symbolic reunification of Apollonian and Dionysian in his art. To do so, he frequently used the image of the Chimera, a hybrid creature, to “represent opposing psychic forces in a single body.”

In *The Omen of the Eagle*, Rothko’s Chimera incorporates imagery that references both Greek tragedy and contemporary events. The painting’s title alludes to an omen from Aeschylus’s *Agamemnon Trilogy*—two eagles devouring a pregnant hare—revealed to the Greeks on the eve of their voyage to Troy. Breslin paraphrases the story: “As interpreted by the Greek prophet Calchas, the eagles represent Agamemnon and Menelaus, ‘two eagle-kings’ whose predatory violence against the hare and its unborn offspring foretells [the Greek] destruction of Troy and the slaughter of innocent citizens.” As Breslin points out, the eagle was also the national emblem of both Germany and the United States, who were engaged in similar atrocities at the time the painting was created. In *The Omen*’s tangle of talons, limbs, and shapes, Rothko is illustrating the barbarous and self-destructive tendencies in all of us. He has contrived a visual representation of the Dionysian, illustrating man’s unconscious insights and powers.

Rothko was insistent that his mythological paintings, while emotionally charged, were not about self-expression, but about the depiction of an idea. In a catalogue note on *The Omen of the Eagle*, Rothko explained that “[t]he picture deals . . . with the Spirit of Myth . . . a pantheism in which man, bird, beast and tree—the known as well as the knowable—merge into a single tragic idea.” He also saw an analog between his paintings and the performing arts, invoking Greek players on stage. “I think of my pictures as dramas; the shapes in the pictures are the performers. They have been created from the need for a group of actors who are able to move dramatically without embarrassment and execute gestures without shame.” What Rothko means when he refers to “shame” and “embarrassment” is far from clear, but by analogizing his hybrid forms to actors, Rothko distances himself from the themes his paintings are meant to convey.

From what we can gather from his limited statements from the late 1940s and 1950s, Rothko continued to view his paintings as depictions of ideas conveyed through performance, even as he abandoned figurative imagery for outright abstraction. The impetus for the visual simplification of his paintings—from surrealist forms to fields of color and rectangular shapes—seems to have been driven by a quest for clarity, a desire to increase the immediacy with which the viewer experienced the psychic conflicts he sought to portray. As he stated in the October 1949 issue of *The Tiger’s Eye*, “The progression of a painter’s work is toward clarity: toward the elimination of all obstacles between the painter and the idea, and between the idea and the observer.” In other words, Rothko was clearing out the underbrush. But he denied that the absence of figures in his color field paintings meant that the ideas themselves had been removed. In an interview with William Seitz in 1952, he maintained that, “the shapes in the later canvases were new substitutes for the figures,” that
The first thing we notice, as Bruno did, is ambiguity. In color. In space. These are in-between colors. Red becomes rust. Gray becomes brown. Maroon dissolves into gray. Deeper layers of paint filter toward the surface, then seem to recede, as if encased in a cloudy veneer. There is an unsettling illogic here. We observe shapes—rectangles, squares, columns—that seem to float on a plane of color, then dematerialize, becoming windows or slats that give way to a void. The shapes extend outward toward the edges of the panels, then stop short, contained. We lose focus. We take a few steps forward, hoping to make greater sense of what we are seeing, but as we do, the edges of the panels slip into the haze of our peripheral vision and we lose focus a second time.

We gaze at the shapes themselves. Are they portals? Doorways? For whom? To where? We sense something otherworldly about them, something primal. If we are familiar with Rothko’s work, we think of the Dionysian, of leaving the ordinary world behind and entering a trance, an intoxicated state of being where the rational restraints of the world melt away. We see these shapes as instrumental in this psychic journey; like participants in a Dionysian rite—like the Villa’s entrancing figures—they show us the way. But just as we begin to lose ourselves, we notice drips of paint that have congealed near the edge of the canvas, a reminder that these are materials, that these shapes are the product of an artist’s hand.

If we know Rothko’s story, we also think of Pompeii. We sense something volcanic in the deep reds of these walls, the fiery clouds of ash and debris that descended on the city as it slept. We can feel the sting of the embars, the stifling heat. We shield our eyes, claw our way forward, and search for an escape. We feel the weight, not just of the tragedy that befell Pompeii, but the tragedies of our more recent history, the inexplicable carnage of a century of war, and the personal tragedies that each of us endure.

And then we notice, perhaps, that the room has emptied, the other visitors have left. We think of something Rothko said to John Fischer as their friendship bloomed. “[Rothko] insisted that a painting ought to be savored only by that ‘rare individual’ who really could appreciate it, in the privacy of his own home.” And we consider that this is what Rothko may have seen in the Villa of Mysteries: an enveloping series of paintings in what was once a private residence, where activity long ago ceased, and where one is left to contemplate myth and tragedy, beneath the mountain, alone.

NOTES

2 John Fischer, “The Easy Chair: Mark Rothko, Portrait of the Artist as an Angry Man,” in *Writings on Art*, ed. Miguel López-Remiro (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 130. Fischer’s account identified the vessel as the USS Constitution, but Rothko biographers have subsequently concluded, based on Rothko’s correspondence from the time, that Rothko and Fischer were aboard the USS Independence.
3 References to Rothko’s “signature style,” “mature style,” and “color field paintings” refer to the pictures he produced beginning in the late 1940s and continued to paint until the end of his life, characterized by large rectangular blocks of color.
4 The biographical details in this paper have been drawn primarily from James Breslin, *Mark Rothko: A Biography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).


Fischer, “The Easy Chair,” 131.

Ibid., 136.


There is not universal agreement on whether the cycle in Room 5 is a copy in whole or in part of an ancient Greek or Hellenistic original, or if it was created specifically for Room 5 based on local, Roman, and/or Hellenistic prototypes.


Ibid., 174.

Ibid., 50. In one version of this artistic awakening, Rothko met a friend at the Art Students League, “saw the students sketching a nude model, and ‘decided this was the life for me.’” Ibid., 55.

Ibid., 56.

Ibid.

Ibid., 95.

A brief description of this myth is provided later in this essay.


See endnote 3.


See endnote 3.


Ibid., 255.

Ibid., 237.

Ibid., 238.

Ibid.

Ibid.

The summary of relevant portions of Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy* is drawn from Breslin, *Mark Rothko: A Biography*, 174-176.


Ibid.


I have relied on Breslin for a summary of the myth, and the quoted text is from Breslin, *Mark Rothko: A Biography*, 166.


Fischer, “The Easy Chair,” 133.
I couldn’t tell you whether I’ve been on this train for five hours or five days. The snow never melts and the train never stops. Nobody speaks my language. This is about as remote as I’d like to get.

Vodka? I understand that and yes please, thank you, now would be fine. Later would be fine too. Look at the snow, I say, and a boy stares at me the way boys stare at foreigners. I’m deep into this and I’m not getting out anytime soon. Thousands of miles away from where I came and thousands away from where I’m going.

The boy stares. Titanium-dioxide, I say, you know, white paint. Your country looks like it. I want to jump off this train, but the chilled vodka is warm in my stomach. And this boy is my friend.

He talks to me into the night. Into the afternoon, I don’t know. Night passes same as day here, I never know what is what. I can’t understand what he says, and he knows it, but he likes to talk. I’m not sure if he is asking about my life in America or my wife in America, or anything even close to that. I tell him I never had much luck with women, but that is all about to change. The train grinds to a halt.

They’ve run out of money. That’s the word here. It happens, I’m told. The train just stops and when there’s enough money it starts again. When I complain they charge me for more vodka. I buy a bottle and pass it around the compartment, and now there is a line at the toilet.

I look at the picture of my new bride, as beautiful as any of the women on this train. Two hundred and sixty thousand rubles, a little more than twelve hundred dollars. That and the cost of her passage. Could have booked a flight straight to Irkutz, but I thought a train ride would be romantic, give us some time to get to know each other on the way back and save money too. I close my eyes and imagine her waiting on the boarding platform, sitting on a suitcase that holds her life. Waiting.

I would have more money, too, if I hadn’t kicked in the extra sixty thousand rubles for the fertility guarantee. More vodka and the boy’s drivel is replaced by the attendant, blonde-haired, blue eyed. She’s been relieved of her position, indefinitely or until the train starts moving again. She has family in Irkutz, and a tattoo she’s not afraid to show me.

We have sex in the luggage car and I think again of my wife sitting on her suitcase. I return to my seat to take a nap. I try to sleep until the train starts moving again but I can only manage about forty-five minutes. The train doesn’t move. My friend joins me again. She pretends I am her rich American boyfriend and I go along with it. I try to pay for something warm, but they don’t have anything except chilled vodka and they won’t change my ten-dollar bill because it’s too old, nineteen ninety-five. For a moment, I think I am happy with this Russian girl falling asleep on my shoulder. I lean back, her head slides down my chest onto my lap and she dreams about titanium-dioxide horses while I run my fingers through her oily hair.

We wake up with frozen breath, bleary eyed. The compartment has emptied and we can see people waiting outside, some with luggage, some without. We walk on the rubber legs of sleep. The door is open and the air is crisp.

The snow along the length of the train has been trampled as attendants run back and forth dragging Samsonite this way and that. They are not working for the Trans-Siberian Railroad any longer, they just need money to get home. Twelve hundred rubles for my clothes and an attendant is happy to take my nineteen ninety-five series ten-dollar bill but he doesn’t have change.

I wave him along and he returns with a broken shell of the suitcase I got on the train with. Some of the clothes in it are mine, some are not. My friend, she stares at the white underwear size fifty-five and I grin sheepishly, shrug my shoulders. She laughs and I pause because it sounds like Rachmaninoff.

Taxicab, a distant voice and the faint rumblings of a small combustion engine over the rhythm of the train. Yes, I’ll share the ride and that means I will pay as well, but I know that. The car wasn’t designed for snow like this and can only make a few furtive movements toward us before digging out each time.

Thirty-five more miles, he says. Every ten miles he says thirty-five and could you help me dig this out, it’ll only take a minute. She has a certain style with throwing snow that renders me lazy and thoughtful. Our driver likes to drive and he treats every curve with starved passion because they are rare. He seems disappointed when we get to the main highway. I imagine he’s thinking of the dollars in his pocket and making plans to change them. The speedometer wavers between thirty and ninety. I twist my head to the blue sky and wonder how this place ever gets snow.

He demands more money. My friend refuses categorically and the hand in my pocket melts around a twenty-dollar bill. The commies really had no sense of aesthetics, I say. Then for the next ten miles our driver can speak only
of football. Football? He fades back for a pass, the car drives itself. Yes, he says and shakes his head violently as he plays air guitar. The car drives itself into a bank of snow. Rock and roll—you could help me dig this car out? He hands my friend the shovel.

Close to Irkutz, I'm holding her hand like a prom date. What's your name? Wigger, she says and I don't think that sounds Russian. Wigger? She shakes her head, no time to explain through the language barrier. She knows only phrases of arrival and departure.

We stop in front of the station in Irkutz. Our driver counts his money and shakes his head. I give him a five and he opens the trunk. I give him a twenty and he throws my suitcase on the ground. Rock and roll, he says and drives away. Wigger touches me with her lips moist in the dry air, then walks me to the boarding platform and points me to my wife. She's certain of the one, and somehow she's right. I introduce myself.

"Thanks for the ride," Wigger says. My wife is like her picture and to hold her is warm. "Thanks for the ride," I say.

"My papers?"

Yes, of course. I pull a bundle from my coat pocket and hand it to my new bride. Is there someplace to eat around here? I thought we could get something to eat and find a hotel for tonight. I catch a glimpse of Wigger still standing behind me and I wonder what she's doing.

"Your wallet."

"What about my wallet?"

"Give me your wallet."

I pull out my Washington driver's license and hand it to her, thinking she wants identification. She grabs the wallet out of my hand instead. She opens her suitcase and a life-size blow-up sex doll unfolds, then falls onto the floor.

"Your wallet."

"What about my wallet?"

"Give me your wallet."

I feel a bulge in my pants pocket. I pull out my travel wallet.

I turn to look at Wigger, searching her face for an explanation. "Happy honeymoon," she says in English as she kicks me in the shin with a black, steel-toed work boot. My wife shoves the metal suitcase into my face and follows Wigger across the crowded platform. I stand up, grab the naked doll and run after them, but the doll is heavier than I imagined and difficult to carry.

I get to the parking lot in time to watch my beautiful wife jump on the back of a Ducatti right behind Wigger. They disappear behind a bus and the sound of the noisy two-stroke fades away. The blue sky is gone and snow is falling.

I sit on the curb, look at the doll more closely. A tag tied to her wrist tells me her name is Babette and she can fulfill my wildest fantasies. She is anatomically correct in every detail, crafted in Switzerland by a reputable company dealing in the latest erotic therapies. Unlike her less expensive imitations, she

has been constructed of a material similar in color and texture to real skin. Stuffed, not inflatable as I first thought. She's put together very nicely, but hardly worth the twelve hundred dollars I paid for that bitch who stole my wallet.

She has something written on her breasts in black permanent marker: Ural Mountains. She's got a fucking map drawn on her, with roads and names of places and towns and lakes and rivers, here's Irkutz right here, south of the Ural Mountains, but it should be North. I turn her upside down and squint my eyes.

There is a red line from Irkutz straight down Lake Baikal. I trace it with my finger to a location next to the shore, about forty miles past Babette's navel and marked with a red X. I feel a bulge in my pants pocket. I pull out my travel papers. Among them is a railway schedule, the number to a hotel, a receipt for my wife, and three American dollars. I study the schedule even though I know the next train to Moscow is in three days. I have no other clues but this map. The receipt is worthless. On the back there is a return policy but it is written in Russian and I can't understand it. Anyway, I have nothing to return, and nothing to return to. Nothing makes sense to me except that three dollars will not buy me three days in this hotel where I had planned on staying. I have a map, three dollars, and three days. I will find her. In three days. And we will go back on the train and we will live in a house in a cul-de-sac with a big barn yard and a garden. We will have a dog named Dammit and a fireplace and a television that we will never watch because we will spend too much time playing cribbage on the picnic table in the back yard. She will love me and Dammit will love me and we will all be happy together. Yes. That is what is going to happen.

Several people stare at Babette splayed out on the ticket counter. "I need to get here." I point to the red X under her mound of fake pubic hair. "How do I get here?" The ticketing agent seems disturbed, she speaks very loudly and quickly, pointing to me like I’m some kind of freak. Some people in line behind me are staring.

"Listen, I’m not a head-case. My wife gave me this and it's got a map on it, see! She's a real joker, you know?" Babette sits up on the counter and everyone can see she's got a map drawn on her torso. They seem to understand that I'm not crazy, but the ticket agent is still in distress and the manager is helping me.

"Listen, just forget it," I say to the manager, "just point me to a copy machine."

"I'll show you," he says, happy to drag me away from anything he's responsible for. He takes me to an office with a few people sitting at small metal desks and points to a copy machine. I wrestle Babette onto the copy machine, close the lid on her back and press the copy button. Nothing happens. I check her position and slam the lid shut, which causes her to go into convulsions
I keep my mouth shut.

“Babushka’s cabin,” he says. He puts his nose back on the windshield and corrects his course. He’s got one bad eye, a wandering eye. The good one’s watching the road, but I think he’s half blind in that one because we keep losing the trail. He starts driving in a huge serpentine pattern from shore to shore until he finds the tracks again in the patchy fog.

“Old grandmother lived there twenty years ago. Froze to death tryin’ to catch a fish one winter. Old trucker found her there, still has her fishin’ pole.”

“Who lives there now?”

“No one. Vacant.”

I can’t see through the windshield anymore. The defrost clears a small hole in the driver’s side window, where he has rigged a second plexiglass window about two inches from the glass.

“Might be snowed in. Will be tomorrow for sure if it isn’t already.”

“I gotta get there tonight.”

I feel like sleeping. I shift my weight, lay my head against the window.

“I am so wet!” Babette says.

“Do you need a towel?”

“No, uh, no thanks.” She just talks. She just says things like that. I’m getting used to it.

“Straight up through those trees, not too far. About fifty paces. I can’t get you any closer.”

“Right, thanks.”

I fall out the door. Babette follows me and the truck sends a column of black smoke into the air as it moves on. The frozen carcass of a chicken falls off the truck and lands in the snow a few feet away from us. I can see a faint flickering light in the distance.

The chicken under my arm is colder than the wind. There is a cabin in the clearing just ahead, three snowmobiles parked in front. I look for the Ducatti and it makes me wonder about my sanity. Who would drive a motorcycle to a place like this? I feel good about thinking this. Insane people don’t question themselves. They don’t question their sanity.

“You drive me crazy!” Babette says.

The three snowmobilers seem friendly enough. They are dressed in wool and cotton fibers. I am certain they will be able to clear this whole thing up for me. I drop my glove and the chicken in the snow and pull the receipt out of my pocket. I reach my hand forward to show it to them. I’m surprised when the short one swings a lead pipe at me. It doesn’t hurt very much. I feel myself falling. I hear them tearing Babette. She thinks they like her.
I see Russian currency swirling in the wind and snow. Laughter. The sound of three snowmobiles fading and then silence.

Babette is deflated, slumped in a distorted heap of erotic tatters on the wood-frame couch. The fire turns to embers, the wood is gone, and snow covers the plexiglass windows. I lift her carefully to the floor, and kick the arm of the couch. It creaks and I can tell it will give way with enough effort. I think about my wife, my money. My face is hot. My blood is burning. I want to scream.

The couch splinters. Babette stares into the fire. You bitch. You whore. I throw the splintered wood into the fire. Worthless piece of cheap ass rubber swiss cheese. The wooden legs give with little effort and are placed on the fire with gentle rage. Flung. Cheesy twelve hundred-dollar garbage don't look at me like that.

Babette looks better stuffed and patched but I wonder if it would have been better to destroy the table first, then the couch. That way we would have somewhere comfortable to sit for a while. Obviously I wasn’t thinking rationally. I put my arm around Babette and make a mental note to call and report my credit cards stolen. We stare blankly into the fire and I feel a warm romance.

And I thought only characters in film alternated between laughter and tears in the shower when it thundered.

When it was my turn to cry, I bent my head and closed my eyes and the colors were a diaspora.

I spent a lot of time deciphering twigs from worms.

My horoscope says many Leos will die today. Another horoscope says strut your stuff. That a whole generation won’t know the sound of a rotary dial in their ear.

I swallow and think of who you last loved, bent over the way I am. I bend my head to take her into me. You will experience a Disintegration.

If there is anything to be known about obsession, it is to say by staring, I could take her into me.

I've stared at someone's name for that long, the tears decrescendo, sunset shampooed and alive.

Mondrian doll faces in the grime of the window, Botticelli shoulders, mermaids and anime girls with pearl earrings.

It's 10:36: I was born at this time. You will laugh as the thunder comes. Your mind will wring you dry.
Another Storm Heard From
Reflecting on the Natural Metaphors Assigned to the Arab Revolts

Anna Reumert

The political revolts that emerged in Cairo, Damascus, Tripoli, Sanaa, Tunis, and beyond in winter 2011 have received remarkable attention internationally. Within this ongoing production of knowledge on the Middle East, in media, research and political debate, the revolts are often described through metaphors associated with natural phenomena. Besides the obvious cases—Arab Spring, and the subsequent Syrian Fall, Libyan Winter—metaphors of wave, storm and bloom occur continuously in narratives of the revolts. Metaphors have long been deployed in political rhetoric; indeed, it has been argued convincingly that metaphors frame not only how we think but how we act.² Perhaps because metaphorical language constitutes what we “live by,” the significance of the metaphors deployed in assessments of the ongoing revolts has not been sufficiently explored within current research.

In this paper, I take language seriously as a construct and in turn a constructor of our social world, as I look into the implications of assigning complex political process to a language of natural forces. Discussing how the deployment of “naturalized language” works as an instrument of both imagining and making sense of the Arab revolts, I ask: What do we talk about when we talk about waves, storms and seasons? Do these metaphors help us make sense of the revolts?

Dissecting the metaphorical language used to understand the 2011 Arab revolts, I identify two analytical strands implied in references to weather; the first regards revolution as an exceptional phenomenon and the latter regards revolution as cyclic. Both approaches obfuscate the genealogy of revolt and political mobility that has passed through the region in the past century. Consequently, the metaphors tend to negate the human agency behind the revolts. This negation, I argue, reflects a tendency to render the political manageable within consisting categories. In the context of studying and gazing at the Middle Eastern subject, the desire to name and categorize hints of an Orientalist remnant within current epistemological structures. Through a discourse of documenting, exhibiting, reordering and thus archiving the politically incomprehensible, the revolt-as-event is rendered past while it is still in motion. Consequently, by categorizing social actions through a system of natural metaphors, we risk making the revolts “yet another storm heard from.”

Introducing the Arab Uprisings

In December 2010, a street vendor burnt himself alive in downtown Tunis to protest against the structural inequalities that had deprived him of any basic socioeconomic stability. The police’s brutal treatment of him that same morning was only the latest instance of injustice that sparked his reaction.² In the same way this singular event has a genealogy of struggle and frustration in the life course of a street vendor, the Arab revolts that spread through the Middle East in the months following this carry deep historical precedents.³ The particular revolts that brought masses of people to the streets in Egypt, Libya and onwards to Syria, Yemen and Bahrain in the spring of 2011 were motivated by the events in Tunisia. However, the expansive level of civic networking and political mobilization witnessed in these revolts attests to a long history of protest. The lessons learned from previous demonstrations by labor unions in Tunisia helped organize people in the 2011 revolts⁴; likewise, a strong tradition of civic movements in Yemen helped facilitate the expansive and cross-sectional mobilization of the 2011 uprising.⁵ While the events of 2011 have often been described as a political project of collective self-determination, it is important to remember the material roots that played an equally consequential role in spurring the protests. Taking the three slogans voiced in the Egyptian uprising—bread, freedom, human dignity—Killian Clarke argues that these express broad socioeconomic themes in Egyptian political discourse: economic conditions, lack of democracy and political abuse.⁶ An atmosphere of positive heterogeneity and collectivity characterized the early stages of the uprisings, as very different fractions and classes of society—Islamic parties, feminist collectives, student movements, public servants and even segments of the army in some cases—were able to unite on a common political goal. As Farhad Khosrokhavar has argued, the democratic ambience marked the foundation of a cross-sectional identification both within each national uprising and regionally, as people motivated and supported each other across the different countries.⁷ However, as time went on, the democratic ambience led to a stage of chaotic heterogeneity, in which the protesters were unable to formulate a coherent political plan. Several commentators of the revolts have argued
that the political multiplicity had a counterproductive effect, as the revolts remained “leaderless” and without direction. As a consequence, in several countries, various military or authoritarian fractions took advantage of the political heterogeneity to monopolize power in the name of stability, as we have seen happen with the military coup in Egypt, the current fights between different Islamic and tribal factions in Yemen, the ambush of the Bahraini uprising by the Saudi-Arabian army, and, not least, the confusingly multifaceted political battle taking place in (and beyond) Syria. As I show below, the current state of the uprisings produced a new set of metaphors that rendered the Arab spring into zones of winter, darkness and decay.

**ENTERING THE METAPHORS OF THE ARAB REVOLTS**

In his attempt to locate the origins of the Tunisian uprising against Ben Ali’s regime in winter 2011, Moncef Kartas argues that the revolt “was not ignited by a well-organized political, popular movement, with a visible leadership, but by a wave of spontaneous protests and insubordinations.” Commenting on the “networked” nature of the Syrian revolts, Enrico the Angelis equally invokes the trope of wave. The metaphor of storm is present in several accounts, as in Benjamin Barber’s description of the “stormy summer” following the initial “Arab spring.” In relation to the image of spring, metaphors of bloom and blossom likewise appear in accounts of the revolts. In his praise of the “new sun” of the Arab revolts which will forever disrupt the postcolonial “landscape” of East and West, Hamid Dabashi writes, “The Arab Spring is blossoming, like a beautiful constellation of water lilies, from the muddy and murky waters of once cruel and fertile grounds.”

The connotation of the Tunisian uprisings as the “Jasmine Revolution” evokes the same image of blossoming soil. In contrast to the image of fertility and hope connected to the protests, Toufic Haddad refers to the old regimes in the region as “the dry forests,” and the list goes on.

Conceiving that “our ordinary conceptual thinking is fundamentally metaphorical in nature,” George Lakoff and Mark Johnson define metaphor as a way of “understanding and experiencing one kind of thing or experience in terms of another.” Humans deploy metaphors not to substitute for a lacking word, but to make that word or concept more conceivable; to bring it into being. In her work on historical and literary narratives of the French Revolution, Mary Ashburn Miller describes the popular use of the volcano as a metaphor for political rupture. Miller argues that “the tendency to explain and describe violence in language drawn from natural history and the natural world” sustains a conception of human-social events as guided by natural forces, “nature’s justice.” The metaphorical allusion leads to a “simultaneous politicization of the language of the natural world and naturalization of political rhetoric.” As I will argue in the following, this effect clearly plays out in the metalanguage of the Arab revolts, through which the political takes on a naturalized, and potentially depoliticized, character.

Reflecting on the metaphors deployed in assessments of the revolts can tell us not only how spectators perceive of these revolts, but equally what that perception says about the revolts or even, potentially, about revolution on a broader scale. While metaphors of storm, wave, bloom, and seasoning signify different “moods,” they reflect the same image of natural forces functioning outside of and beyond human control. These metaphors invoke a temporal conception: natural phenomena are unpredictable, and thus exceptional, yet they are equally expected as part of a natural cycle. As Miller highlights, nature is potentially constructive, yet equally “volatile and terrifying.” Waves, storms, and bloom have a purifying effect. They signify a state of temporary exceptionality as they clean the air and disrupt the order of things. Miller argues that metaphors containing danger and volatility are deployed to describe the unpredictable, intangible, and ‘passionate’ character of social events. This can be connected to how revolutionary processes represent optimism, hope, violence, fragmentation, and disorder all at once. In an illustration of this ambiguity, Binod Shankar discusses whether the “Arab Spring” may not “bloom” into stability—one might respond to this rationale that it seems difficult in any case to imagine a “stable” blossoming.

In following the trails of exceptionality and of the cyclic, I attempt to decode the natural metaphors through abstracting accounts of the revolts.

**REVOLUTION AS EXCEPTIONAL**

A sense of disorder, fragmentation and instability pervades many if not most accounts of the 2011 revolts. Several authors connect the disorder to a lack of authority. Farhad Khosrokhavar refers to the revolts as “leaderless”; a characteristic that he argues benefitted the democratic atmosphere during the early protests, yet led to a state of deconstructive anarchy in Syria, as the revolts became increasingly atomized. Ghait Abdul-Ahad explains the leaderless notoriety of the Syrian uprising through a logic of cultural essentialism, by arguing that factionalism is a natural characteristic of the “Middle Eastern people,” defined here as a naturalized entity. Bassam Haddad refers to this kind of factionalism in Syria as a “war of position.” Assessing the same atmosphere of factionalism in the Egyptian case, Cihan Tugal argues that the revolts have developed from leaderless to leaderful. In David Kirkpatrick’s assessment, the “leaderful” character of political struggle in Egypt takes on a more volatile tone. A certain double logic runs through several of these descriptions, as they praise the collective character of the revolts, yet at the same time express anxiety about the lack of monopolized power. The implied—and sometimes explicit—narrative in these assessments suggests that political disorder feeds anarchy, a form of total war, which may be counterproductive
to the democratic process. As Touffic Haddad writes, the “democratic” revolts appeared more as a collective “nervous breakdown.”

The notion of a total war is articulated in several reports on Syria. Paulo Pinto characterizes the uprising as decentralized and fatally lacking a nationally unifying call. Enrico de Angelis describes the disorder in the Syrian social media distribution network as chaotic and in lack of direction. Sheila Carapico catches the chaotic mood of the Yemeni uprising as she terms it a “multilayered revolutionary theatre verging on the macabre.” As democratic disorder turns to a violent state of political chaos, the language follows suit; “bloom” is replaced by darker metaphors of “explosion,” as in Tariq Ali’s analysis, and of “earthquake,” as in Perry Anderson’s powerful image of the “volcanic social pressures” that led to the protests currently “shaking the region” (emphasis added).

In a more positive tone that equally describes a disruption, Laurent Bonnfoy and Marine Poirier refer to the “wake” of the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings. As Alessandro Bruno demonstrates, the notion of a regional awakening is closely associated to that of “spring.” Both metaphors imply a potentially teleological progression, though one wonders: towards what? The conflation of the metaphor of spring with notions of volatility and disorder suggest that this question remains a concern for many of the authors. An atmosphere of anticipation and anxiety about what the “bloom,” or storm or wave, will lead to runs through these comments. In the following excerpt from Barber, the metaphor of spring works counterproductively to the argument: “The Arab Spring, astonishing and admirable, has been dogged from the start by often unrealistic expectations, a growing and deep confusion about the conditions that enable democracy, and a persistent lack of patience.” By blindly deploying the metaphor, Barber reproduces the pattern of expectation and impatience that he criticizes.

The references to natural forces articulate a sense of volatile fragmentation that is perhaps inherent to social political action. Cornelius Castoriadis argued, “The revolutionary project is not a logical inference derived from correct theory.” Equally, in her theorization of political revolt, Theda Skocpol critiques the voluntarist stance that perceives revolution as completely “purposive.” In Skocpol’s view, it is illusionary to believe that revolution has been “made” overnight by a consenting collective. Revolutions do not emerge ready-made. Conflicts and revolutions are complex, diverse processes with no lingering monopoly in the fighting. The conflictual landscape of the Middle East, in which power continually shifts between various segments and actors, exemplifies this fluidity. Yet, as Castoriadis further assesses, while revolution must necessarily be spontaneous, this does not make it an “unconscious” act. This serves as an essential reminder when we deploy terms such as “awakening” and “wake” to social action.

**Revolution as Cyclic**

While natural phenomena signify a state of exceptionality, they equally provide a cyclic function. The connotation of “wave” hints at revolution as a cyclic, recurring phenomenon that creates a productive change by rinsing the air for better times. Metaphors of purification and pollution have been deployed as rhetorical weaponry during the uprisings. Jeffrey Alexander shows how both the regime and protesters in the Egyptian revolt played on binaries of sacred and profane. Placing themselves on the sacred side, the protesters sought to “purify themselves and pollute the regime.” Chillingly, Syrian President Bashar Assad attempts to legitimate the regime’s violence by referring to the protesters as instances of “pollution and microbes” that attack a general territory of coherence and purity: “what you have been seeing in this region is a kind of disease.” Mary Douglas has written most eloquently on the cultural implications of purity and pollution: “Granted that disorder spoils pattern, it also provides the materials of pattern . . . It symbolizes both danger and power.” In this image, “disorder” is internal to the system of order.

In her classic discussion *On Revolution*, Hannah Arendt argues that the conception of revolution as implying “freedom and a new beginning” is a deeply modern concept: revolution was not always understood in terms of novelty. Before the French Revolution, Arendt argues, revolutions often served a restorative, rather than a transformative purpose. In the same vein, William Sewell argues that a revolutionary event contains ritual action and that, revolution in itself, may serve a ritualistic purpose. To illustrate this train of thought, in a report on the (lacking) repercussions of the 2011 revolts on life in a remote village in Abydos, Upper Egypt, the village president invokes the notion of revolution in cyclic time: “revolutions, they come and go, but we continue to work.” Later, he continues with a suggestion of metaphor: “If a cloud forms in Cairo, it evaporates by the time it gets here.” It is worth reflecting whether the notion of revolution as cyclic may lead to a naturalization of the political. If this language is read without critical reservation, it potentially could lead to an ontological negation of the social agency behind the revolts themselves. In her critique of the seasonal metaphor, Mayta Alhassen argues that the connotation of political action with seasonal change negates the human agency behind the revolts. To exemplify such rhetorical subscription of political agency, Vijay Prashad argues that while it was “people’s power” that produced the revolutionary wave, the transnational interferences ushered a “Libyan winter that cast its shadow over the Arab Spring.” In this Third Worldist demarcation of the world into a hegemonic West and a resistance East, the “people,” as an imagined entity, are assigned to notions of wave and spring as opposed to the neocolonial and regional (super)powers that cast shadows and turn spring to winter as by a Snow Queen’s deadly touch. It is difficult to locate the social agency within Prashad’s fable of the Libyan people victimized by dark and macabre seasonal forces.
“Managing” Revolution

Commenting on the 2011 revolts, Nate Haken—a representative of the American think tank Fund for Peace—writes, “In analyzing the Arab Spring, metaphors matter. If it was a seasonal awakening of democracy we should throw open the windows, that is, welcome it. If it was a contagion of unrest, then we should board up the doors, i.e., control it. If it was a pressure cooker blowing its top, the response should be cautious and deliberate; in other words, we should manage it.” This desire to “manage” requires attention, as it categorizes the Arab Spring into an object of governmentality for the Western expertise. Haken’s references to “awakening,” as if the Arab region was asleep prior to 2011, and to “contagion,” as if the protests form a disease, exemplify a tendency to regard the revolts as not only exceptional but also instable and potentially self-destructive; in Mary Douglas’ terminology, the revolts appear as “matter out of place.” Rooted in this judgment is the assumption that the protesters do not know what they are doing, as once stated by Marx in reference to the peasants of the French revolution. Through Haken’s rhetorical rendition of the protesters as unaware of their own actions, the observers of the revolts emerge as a body of expertise who, as “objective” spectators, can inform the people of the revolution of their own politics.

In his monumental discussion of orientalism, Edward Said describes the epistemological project of creating “the Middle East.” The colonial power in the region produced knowledge, histories, subjects, and frontiers into manifest facts that appeared “rooted” in time. The Orient came to exist only through the colonial gaze. As Said writes, “Orientals were rarely seen or looked at; they were seen through, not as . . . people, but as problems to be solved or confined.” The Orientals were depicted as “irrational” subjects, unable to represent themselves. Writing for CNN, Kenneth Roth from Human Rights Watch argues that the West carries a responsibility to “support” the Arab revolts. Yet in his article, curiously titled “How to keep the Arab Spring blossoming,” Roth goes beyond mere support in addressing clear steps for the protesters on how to direct their revolts into a consistent “blossom.” This train of thought resonates of the Orientalist desire to not only understand but equally direct and manage the behavior of the Oriental Other, in effect constructing the Other’s identity as such.

This attempt at an epistemological imposition invokes Susan Sontag’s discussion of the spectator. Faraway suffering can seem arbitrary to the distant gaze, and arbitrary pain is not significant to the mediated sight. Political suffering and struggle—which the Arab revolts are immediate examples of—must be translated into terms and images which the spectator can identify with. The pain of others must be humanized for people to respond to it. Revolution gains public attention not merely when it is televised, but when a certain discourse of knowledge is produced on it, which people can refer to. Revolution makes sense to us once we name it. Similarly, in a debate on the language of revolution, Paul Sedra argues that it is crucial to keep referring to the protests as a “revolution” and thus by pronouncing its possible existence, we broaden the conceptual imagination. To Sedra, it is not essential whether revolution is “there” or not; as long as the protesters on Tahrir Square call what they do a revolution, it would be counterproductive to oppose this definition. In response to Sedra, Robert Springborg warns of the tendency to mainstream, and thus devalue, “revolution” stating, “let us reserve the term for the real thing.”

This discussion exemplifies the ongoing knowledge production of the Arab revolts, in which spectators, positioned as experts, attempt to intellectually “manage” the Arab revolts by making sense of and naming them. As intellectuals they stand apart from the events, regardless of their national origin or geographical proximity to the “street.” But, as we have learned from Said and Sontag, the distanced position is neither unproblematic nor is it objective. The human gaze is never naked, but comes heavy loaded with a historical baggage of knowledge and power and, certainly, with a language bathed in metaphors.

In 1978 Said wrote, “If the Arab occupies space enough for attention, it is as a negative value.” Arguably, with the geopolitical incitement of intervention and Islamophobia that has domineered Western discourse on the Middle East in the last decade, this phenomenon has only grown. However, witnessing the changed approach towards the region amid the 2011 revolts, Khalidi argues that the people of the Middle East have finally stepped out of the plethora of negative images previously assigned to them in international public discourse. Dabashi takes this notion a step further, as he argues that the Arab uprisings have remapped the Oriental imaginary landscape of domination and its adjacent regime of knowledge. This topographical and discursive transformation has de-museumized the region. Orientalism and its epistemological production of rule have in turn become historic artifacts, out of time with the contemporary order of things, in which the Arab people are not passive receivers of Western domination but rather in charge of shaping their own political present.

Yet, it appears that the mediated gaze on the revolts has reproduced the act of regarding the Other. While a new language on the Middle East, constituting a different epistemological and ethical ground, is arguably forming within media and research, the field does not appear entirely post-Orientalist. International academia, media and political discourse continue to address the Middle Eastern subject as a concern of management: managing knowledge, managing events, and managing potential disorders.
Revolution as Metaphor, Revolution as Myth

“Spring is a time of planting, not harvest,” writes George Bajalia reflecting on the Arab revolts. “Planting is the difficult part, as it demands meticulous, time-consuming attention.” Paraphrasing Marx, Prashad states similarly, “the breaking free to the surface is the spectacular part of the Revolution, but it is the burrowing, the preparing, that is the most important part.” As Adam Sabra (2012) reminds us, “revolution is not an event, although it often requires dramatic events for the larger process to proceed.” Revolution is hard work, and yet, the metaphorical language assigned to the revolts suggests a sense of impatience with this time-consuming factor. From the spectator’s standpoint, it appears that spring quickly turns to winter. Assessing the failures of the revolts to implement consistent change, Asef Bayat argues that the revolts went “too fast.” Bayat interprets this as a disjunction between event and transformation. Whereas sudden, rapid movement is ignited by a “desire for novelty,” but often ends in a counterrevolutionary state of restoration, actual, structural change requires organization and is thus more “gray” in character. A revolution that transforms takes time.

In his discussion of the symbolic significance of Bastille in narratives of the French Revolution, Sewell argues that the events we abstract as significant from political revolts are not necessarily the ones that matter on the ground, yet their symbolic force make us perceive and talk about revolution in new terms. The same is evident in the use of metaphors. Lakoff and Johnson argue that metaphors can help us broaden our conceptual understanding, as they recontextualize a foreign situation through common language. The meanings behind the metaphors deployed reveal disjunctions between the spoken and the materialized. While the natural metaphors do imply certain fundamentals of the revolts—disorder, heterogeneity, violence, rupture as well as hope, optimism, and a sense of novelty—a quick glance at the historical and socioeconomic trails of the revolts suggest that the protests were not only rooted in time, but equally prepared and motivated through decades-long social action, reflection, and struggle.

In Living in the End Times, Slavoj Žižek argues that in the contemporary state of things, the (privileged) citizen imagines natural catastrophes much easier than they imagine political change. The apocalyptic image of natural phenomena suits the postpolitical era of today, since—as has been argued in this paper—it negates human agency and simplifies the disorder of social life. In a response to the discussion on naming revolution between Sedra and Springborg, Elliott Colla reminds us that the “present continuous” is a difficult time to look at or speak of and thus, “language allows us to give an appearance of order to the mess of an open-ended present, the only moment we inhabit.” The implicit note here is that the desired order remains an illusion. Revolution, while appearing fast, runs slow, sometimes in circles, and sometimes backwards and sideways. The danger is that the spectator cannot grasp this distorted movement. Instead, revolt is assigned to the “natural,” and thus removed from its historical and social base. The revolts become frozen in time within the span of cycles and seasons.

Language has a pacifying effect in this instance. To draw on Roland Barthes’ conception of myth, the events become depoliticized. Connoting the revolts “spring” is thus not neutral speech; it create images and installs expectations. Once rejected from the categories of wave and spring, as the chaos shifts from “democratic optimism” to a morbid gloom, the revolutionary image turns “cloudy.” Barthes describes the lingual transformation of a concept, or a sign, into myth as a displacement. Removed from its original context, the concept becomes signified in a “second order” that impoverishes its meaning. This shift naturalizes the historical basis of the concept; it comes to signify something else, and that substitution evaporates what was there before. In passing from history to nature, “myth acts economically: it abolishes the complexity of human acts . . . it organizes a world without contradictions because it is without depth, a world wide open and wallowing in the evident, it establishes a blissful clarity: things appear to mean something by themselves.” A similar process happens when a metaphorical deployment changes our understanding of a concept. Naming these revolts “Arab Spring” may in fact limit political imagination: lest we forget, people, not nature in the form of waves or storms, shaped the protests at Tahrir Square.

Concluding Perspectives

In this paper, I have attempted to decode the metaphorical language assigned to the Arab revolts. Obviously, my focus in this analysis lies not on the political language of the revolution as articulated by the protesters. Likewise, I do not attempt to explain the revolts or describe their dramaturgy in any coherent manner. As I highlight, these tasks have already been and continue to be addressed by many others, and this ongoing process of making knowledge of and on the revolts has produced yet another language that demands further attention. While recognizing, in the footsteps of Lakoff and Johnson, that metaphors provide conceptual canals for us to articulate the otherwise infeasible, I have considered the second part of this argument—language makes real—as equally essential. Thus, I have asked: What does it signify when we refer to political rupture in terms of natural forces and what are the implications of this metaphorical substitution?

The allusion to natural phenomena suggests an ambivalence of dual fascination and frustration, optimism and anxiety, among spectators of the revolts. The tropes of nature reflect forms of arbitrary violence that disrupt human jurisdiction and control. Containing elements of both the cyclic and
the exceptional, phenomena of waves, storms, and seasons represent temporal shifts in order, which contain elements of danger, or volatility, as well as of constructive destruction, as they purify the air. Natural metaphors provide gateways for better conceiving that which appears "complex." However, this naturalization may limit our understanding of social political processes to rushed conclusions. Historical accounts of the revolts suggest that the revolts were neither unprecedented nor did they erupt “out of nowhere.” Similarly, theoretical discussions on revolution by Arendt, Castoriadis, and Skocpol show that revolutions, as large-scale sociopolitical processes, are residually “stormy” and also fragmented. Revolutions cannot be contained to one season, or even one annual span; rather, they expand in place and time continuously.

Metaphors can shape our understanding of political revolts as “eruptions” in ways that delimit the human agency behind these processes. As examples discussed in this essay have suggested, interpretations of the Arab revolts that follow a teleological logic of history as one-directional, or cultural essentialist assessments of the revolts as “awakenings,” often close in on themselves. By hurrying impatiently through social revolts, one easily misses the bigger picture.

Metaphors are not inherently “dangerous,” as our cognitive framework is fundamentally metaphorical. It would be illusionary, and not necessarily preferable, to escape metaphors altogether. However, since language shapes our conceptual and, effectually, our behavioral patterns, it is necessary to play closer attention to the meaning behind the metaphors that we instrumentalize. Arguably, metaphors sometimes do more to obfuscate than to clarify. Not least in a postcolonial setting that has already once been assigned to the museum by external powers of knowledge, it remains crucial to address political revolts in an active consideration of the past that came to shape these events. Invoking the notion of history as “alive,” Elliott Colla writes, “History is not the past. It is not a picture to look at.” Indeed it is too early to tell what will happen, though, in the meantime, let us not render the Arab revolts myth, but allow them to continue as active history.

NOTES
16 Miller, Mary Ashburn, “Mountain, Become a Volcano: The Image of the Volcano in the Rhetoric of the French Revolution,” French Historical Studies, 32 (4) (Fall 2009), 556.
17 Ibid., 559 18 Ibid., 567
19 Shankar, “Arab Spring may not bloom into stability”
22 Haddad, Bassam, “As Syria Free-Falls…A Return to the Basics (Part 1),” Jadaliyya (August 31, 2012),
25 Haddad, “The Arab Revolutions Reloaded.”
28 Carapico, Sheila, “Yemen, in Dispatches from the Arab Spring (2013), 101-121, 102.
32 Bruno, “The Arab Storm.”
33 Barber, “A Stormy Summer for Democracy: The Arab Spring at Risk.”
My cat when he was alive purred out odors of what I suppose were urine and canned fish riding the breath of his dander. I’d rub the down of his stretching tummy, hunting for his nipples, which I swear were confusingly the same size as his tiny cat penis, erect only when he washed it. My cat had Grandpa Seymour eyebrow whiskers, much like my father, whose beard is now gray and black, much like my cat Jimmy’s fur was, though Jimmy’s fur was striped, his tummy was white, he had a tail, and he was not balding. These are the primary differences between Jimmy the cat and my father. Also my father is still alive, and Jimmy is dead.

Hot dust always smells like California to me, though I rarely encounter hot dust these days. I’ve barely seen a mountain outside of the Sierras and the Coastals.

My hair smells peaty like faint mold, maybe, when I am aroused. It is pleasant insofar as it helps me remember that I too exist. My parents’ cedar closet in which I used to dare not lock myself was layered with woolen sweaters the colors of birds’ nests and flowers not native to the Los Angeles River Basin. Cocoons from Madison and Minneapolis. Lucy when I am close and sniffing exudes the invisible sweat of a coyote. There was a brief time when Frederick used to smell like dimestore arm pit hair. He wears buttondowns that could unite all of Brooklyn now, and his hair has finally become cool.

Once I cut his roommate’s hair in my bathtub. My old apartment used to
smell alternately like your dead grandmother, someone else's vomit, malt liquor, everyone's pot, Ben's magic beans, my conditioner.
I wonder what your eyes smell like.
I would turn my flesh to cedar—
what did Apollo do to Daphne again?—to hold your sweaters

You’d rub my cat's belly and sniff behind my ears.
I'd let you watch me open the covers
of Gravity's Rainbow and King Lear and I bet
you haven't even read Elizabeth Bishop but you know she has my name
and I would slowly lower my nose to the poem
about the waiting room and the one about the fishhouses
and then we could move on to Lowell’s “Skunk Hour” and
I'd trace out villanelles in the grease of my nose

Like Rudolph tracing the territory,
I would piss to keep you safe

I like to eat
steak but

I don't like the way
dead furs smell
so we'll have none
of those on our sleigh.
Sun #5
Archival inkjet print from camera-less paper negative
Nicole White

Pulls at Your Heart Strings
Archival inkjet print from the series Conceit
Eve Kalugin
Prepare for a Harsh Critique
Archival inkjet print from the series Conceit
Eve Kalugin

Caution
35mm Kodak Portra 400, 24 in x 15 in
Ayten Tartici
Poetry

Dinosaur Skin
Nicholas Goodly

The sand dunes roll into each other like the backs of sleeping dinosaurs. The night pulls out from them while the desert flowers peep, open and close before you know it.

Not as an immense teetering boulder, but grain by grain the rock will tumble from its pillar. The day pulls out. Night, in. and nothing has fallen out of balance.

Folds in Nature
Monotype/Collage, 30 in x 23 in
specially created paper, bee's wax, tree moss, natural materials
Eleanor Neal
The flask glints like a knife in Shawn's hand. I grab it and take a quick swallow. The whiskey burns through me, but I don't mind—this whole summer already has.

"C'mon, Clay. You queer."
I was stupid to think he'd understand, is all.
At least it's a decent night. Nice breeze, mad stars, the Chevy's hood still warm beneath us.

"When are you leaving again?" Shawn asks when I hand him his flask.
"Same as I've been telling you. Tomorrow. 7:00 a.m."
"Oh."
He looks out across the water.
Then, "It's just, we haven't hung out practically at all."
Which is exactly why I don't wanna hang out tonight, especially not at this stinking crater they call a lake. Poets write all this stuff about it, that it's—what's the phrase—a cauldron of moonshine, but that's a crock of shit if I ever heard one. Truth is, the lake's got bloodsuckers. Big ones. The bottom's all mucky, there's clouds of damn mosquitoes, and it gets so hot that by June the whole thing goes bad, totally curdles, so it smells worse than Shawn that time he wolfed a week's worth of my mom's chili.

But he insisted we meet here, so I caved. It's not like there's anywhere else to go.
"I've been busy," I say. "Packing and everything."
He won't meet my eye, just keeps staring out at the lake. This far up, it really does resemble a crater, smooth and black but kinda shimmery at the same time, on account of the moonlight. I try to watch the shimmering but my chest's feeling kinda tight, so I look at the woods that surround the lake instead. They're dark, too. Sometimes if you listen real hard you can hear coyotes sniggering, people getting busy, but I don't hear any of that now.
Shawn's working around to something. I know 'cause his lip's curling, and now he's fingering his black hair off his forehead, and this is also how I know I'm doomed.

"You hung out with that queer Kyle," he says.
I should mention Shawn's got this thing about queers. Everybody does, but it's different with him. Personal. No kidding, queers get Shawn's balls in such a bunch that he claims he'd run one out of town soon as he found out about him. Too bad Shawn's not that tough. The only thing he's good at besides slugging whiskey is tattling his damn head off.

"Can we talk about something else?" I say. "How about that job with the county—you get that yet?"
"I guess."
"Well, that's great."
He nods.
We both know this is fucking terrible.
"Road crew," he goes on.
"Figures."
Roads are the only thing the county's got, besides the lake.
"You know," I try—"down in Stony Brook, there's stoplights everywhere. When me and my mom went for accepted students' day, it was like, stoplight, stoplight, stoplight. Takes ten years to go a mile."
Shawn's not listening. Some commotion across the lake's got his attention. That's the other beach, where the bottom gets raked daily and doesn't smell like farts.
"I know that song. " His head's sideways. "Starship. Swear to God it's Starship."
"Uh-huh. " All I hear are mosquitos whining, but there's always music on the other side. Parties we say we'll crash but never do. "Listen, what I was telling you about Stony Brook—"
Shawn slides off the hood.
"—the thing is, you're taking this kinda personal, and—"
His belt hits the dirt with a jingle.
"No way, man."
He grins and his eyes glint, yellow as a coyote's. "Don't tell me you're afraid of a lil' water."
Afraid. Hah.
But sitting on the hood of the truck, that's enough. I can see the lake...
perfectly fine from here, so close and smooth and black and suddenly not
stinking like usual, but smelling musty, closed up. Everybody here, they’re so
closed up.

“Long as we don’t go too deep,” I mutter, but Shawn’s already galloping
down the bank, buck-naked. I ditch my clothes and follow with less enthusi-
asiasm. There’s this path you gotta go down to get to the water, a dribble of soft
brown sand that turns to mud soon as you hit the beach. You can really smell
the weeds down here. Damp, oozy, like the gunk between our toes. The moon
hangs overhead all half-assed, reflected blearily in the water. We watch it to-
gether for a sec, gnats bouncing off our junk. There’s fireflies—no, a bonfire
on the other side.

Shawn dips a toe in the water.

“The others are gonna be here soon,” I remind him.

“So?”

“So maybe we should wait—”

He runs in whooping, so I got no choice but to run after him. The water’s
freezing. I concentrate on my breaststroke, my chattering teeth gritted hard.
A pale ass bobs in front of me.

“Hey!” I shout. “That’s far enough!”

Can’t he see we’re almost at the middle? I take a deep breath, let it out
slow. We’re not swimming long. Only till our friends get here—Matty and
Kyle and whoever else got invited. Then I can go home. Finish packing. Try
to sleep—

Something’s got my arm. Shawn. Jesus, he swam up outta nowhere. I
struggle like hell, but since the water’s so cold and everything I’m pretty much
powerless as he drags me farther, farther, into the gleaming center of the lake.
Then we go belly up, gasping.

“Dickweed.” I’m too winded to be that pissed at him.

“Queer.”

“Dude. Queers kiss other guys.”

He giggles. “Bet they call each other honey and shit, too. Like a real cou-
ple. I tell ya, I ever found a queer living here I’d—”

“Run him outta town, yeah yeah. You mean gab him out. Even a stinking
queer wouldn’t be scared of you.”

That sure shuts him up.

We float around some more. Shawn blurs with the water. His hair’s so
dark, especially when it’s wet. I pick my head up a little, trying to see shore,
but there’s nothing. Blackness on every side.

“You don’t have to leave.”

There he is. Drifting to my left.

“Yeah,” I say.

“But think of all the crap you can do here that you can’t on Long Island.”

“What, spread asphalt? Hold that stupid SLOW sign so nobody gets run
over? Look, this is a mad good opportunity for me. I even got a scholarship
cause they liked what I wrote in my personal statement, and that was just a
bunch of BS about trying my best and getting an early start to the day. You
could’ve…” I’m about to say he could’ve done the same, but he’s drifting away
again, and besides, it’s not true.

“You didn’t answer my question.” His voice comes from far off, trickling
with the water into my ears. “What are you gonna do?”

“I dunno,” I shiver, “but that doesn’t matter. Jesus Christ, man. Why
can’t you be happy for me?”

For a while there’s no sound. Slithering water. A lonely owl’s call.

“We’re brothers,” Shawn says.

Before I can answer, his hand closes around my throat.

Water gushes into my mouth. I thrash, claw, but he’s too strong, he’s got
the upper hand so tight around my windpipe I can’t—

Just try to—

Breathe—

(shoved under again, spluttering gagging on filthy water churning with
stars)

Coughing stop Shawn stop for the love of his pale face like the moon
above me before everything goes black again and I clamp my mouth tight but
the muck’s already pushing in, I can’t, I won’t—

There’s a yelp. My fist connecting with something soft.

Breathe.

I am.

Breathing.

Splashing away, gasping. “The fuck. What the fuck…” till I glance back
and see Shawn treading water, clutching his mouth.

We swim to where we can touch. I reach for him but he throws an arm
out, tells me to screw off.

He lets me look on the second try. I tilt his face this way and that, but
aside from the moonlight there’s not much to see by. Our noses are inches
away. Sleepover close. Like when we were eight. Or ten. I don’t exactly recall.

Blood seeps down his chin, warm and sticky.

“And you wonder why we haven’t hung out,” I say.

He rips free and doggie paddles for the shallows. I’m not gonna follow
him, but then my belly brushes the soft bottom and we hunker side-by-side,
knees strapped to our chests. The breeze saws at us. I tuck my chin, mumbling,
“I told you I didn’t wanna go too deep. I told you, and you made me.”

Shawn shifts and the water ripples, shivering like us. “I thought I could
change your mind. I thought if I could get you to the bottom of the lake…”

“But it’s so cold down there. It’s so goddamn dark.”
He stands and sloshes for the bank, but I stay put, huddled in the cold black water.
Breathe.
I can’t—
This is how it’s gonna be, every time. When I’m home for Thanksgiving, and Christmas, and spring break after that.
I lunge for Shawn’s wrist and he whips around, eyes wide and wild in the dark. He doesn’t pull away like I figured he would, but watches me close, the blood dripping off his chin blacker than the water.
A distant roar. Tires gnashing gravel.
“The others,” he says, and giggles. Sorta.
So I yank him toward me so our noses are as close as they were before, grab his slippery face in both hands and plant a big fat one on his stupid rotten tattling mouth. It’s a real kiss, all right. Our lips get crushed, our teeth grind together, and I taste whiskey and muck with a seam of blood. He staggers backward, but I’m too strong for him. I’ve always been too strong.
“I’m never coming back,” I whisper, his jaw squirming in my hands like the bloodsuckers at the bottom of the lake. “You got that, honey?”
I leave him standing there, in the water.
My clothes are piled by the Chevy. I toss them on, not bothering to dry off, spitting into the weeds as headlights jackrabbit over me. The others are here. They leap from their trucks, hooting and staggering, oblivious to Shawn wading toward them, the disgust boiling in his freaky yellow eyes. They only see me. The reason they’re here.
“Hey, Clay!”
“Where you goin’?”
“Clay? I thought we were celebrating!”
Yeah—celebrating the last time I’ll ever slam my car into reverse here at the lake. Come morning, tales of my degradation will have spread through the whole town.
Except when I glance in the rearview mirror, it’s the strangest thing. Shawn’s standing in the middle of all our friends, only, his mouth’s not framing the words.

“I know.”
We sit quiet for a long time. Clots of foam wiggle up by the bank. Mermaid piss, we call them. There’s another one for the poets.
I’m remembering about the bloodsuckers when Shawn says, “You were screaming pretty loud back there.”
“Horse-shit. I couldn’t scream. There was muck in my mouth.”
“There wasn’t—”
“Was too!” I holler. “This whole place is muck!”
I thought my hollering would startle Shawn, make him flinch a little, but he only laughs. “Muck,” he echoes, his chest jumping. “Muck.” He reaches under the water, drags up a huge wad of the stuff and smears it on me, the mud and twigs and rotten leaves.
“We’re muck,” he says.
I stare at him. The pieces I can make out.
“You wanna go to college,” he goes on, “then fine. Be my goddamn guest. But no degree’s gonna change what you are. Nobody sees us. Don’t you get that? Nobody sees us.”
“Everybody sees you.”
He shakes his head.
Mud drips down my chest. I hunker low, rinsing it off. “The way you go running your mouth, drawing attention to yourself. Get a goddamn grip.”
“I give you a week,” he says, lip curling. “One week before you come running buck.”
“I’m not quitting school! No way in hell.”
That’d mean it’s all a mistake. An accident that I can remember dates, and poems, and the names of like every country on the map.
Shawn drags up another fistful of muck and squeezes it, letting the mud seep through his fist.
It’s not a mistake. It can’t be.
“You got any idea how sweet county gigs are, anyway?” he says. “Vacations, holidays off, a cushy retirement to boot.”
Holidays off. That’s true. Not just the big holidays, but all those little bullshitty ones everybody always forgets about. Then there’s personal leave, sick leave, all your leaves paid for.
“Clay?”
Health insurance, too.
“Yo. Clay.”
Dental. Can’t forget dental.
“Clay!”
Splash.
I spit, pawing water from my face.
“The others are gonna be here any second. I need a hand with the cooler.”

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Blowing Up Narnia
Toward a Black Male Feminist Thought
Marquis Bey

For many heteronormative men, women and gay men lack an interiority that is independent of the male imaginary. That is to say, the private geography of experience and meaning that women and gay men possess undergoes erasure when maleness takes hold. Gay and female interiority contains nuances and complexity that in large part creates the amalgam of one’s identity—it makes one human. Thus for the male imaginary to vitiate the complexity and nuance of gay and female interiority erases their subjectivity and thus dehumanizes bodies marked as gay or female. Indeed, “authentic” maleness is predicated on a flattening of female and gay subjectivity and a consequent negating of that flattened subjectivity in order to provide the foundation upon which maleness rests. To be authentically male and intelligibly masculine is to pass as un-feminine. This, in fact, is what maleness is. “Authentic” maleness, in effect, is the positivized negation of a flattened (male) construction of homosexuality and Femalelessness.

Maleness is constructed through what Charles Mills calls an epistemology of ignorance. Mills characterizes this epistemology through a racial lens, but the premises apply to gender and sexuality as well. Of this epistemology of ignorance, he states:

[it is] a particular pattern of localized and global cognitive dysfunctions (which are psychologically and socially functional), producing the ironic outcome that [men] will in general be unable to understand the world they themselves have made. Part of what it means to be constructed as ”[male]” (the metamorphosis of the sociopolitical contract), part of what it requires to achieve [maleness], successfully to become a[n authentic male] (one imagines a ceremony with certificates attending the successful rite of passage: “Congratulations, you’re now an official [man]!”), is a cognitive model that precludes self-transparency and genuine understanding of social realities. A requisite of maleness is the precluding of full gay and female subjectivity, of being ignorant of the complexity that lies within women’s humanity, thus creating a particular stance not only toward women but toward one’s own male embodiment—to continue to be an intelligible male one must continue to jettison any memory or knowledge of female and gay interiority.

In Narnia, the imaginative world created by C. S. Lewis as the primary location for his series of fantasy novels The Chronicles of Narnia, one cannot hope to successfully breach the wardrobe and emerge in the land of Narnia if one is searching for it. In Lewis’s first book of the series, The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe, the only way to reach Narnia is through an old birch wardrobe, but one must be ignorant of Narnia’s existence in order to get to it. Only when one operates under an epistemology of ignorance can one hope to reach the land of Narnia, otherwise one is merely stuck in an old chifforobe. Maleness, then, is akin to the land of Narnia, the Promised Land whose only requirement is the occlusion of knowledge and memory.

It is now time to blow it up.

The following text is one of perennial progress, knowledge-acquirement, and immense transformation. It chronicles my own journey through feminism as a Black male. There is an unfortunate dearth of theoretical scholarship on Black male feminist thought. Establishing an, albeit, very cursory but necessary theoretical grounding for Black male feminist thought supplements a gap in the field of feminist and gender studies. Indeed, it is imperative that not only Black women speak on the unique circumstances of their own plights—as they have eloquently done for decades—but also Black men who have been edified by those Black women and seek to use our privilege and subject positions to reach other Black men. Each section is a pivotal moment, a tipping point of sorts that stamps my journey with an important milestone in my feminist growth and understanding. It is autobiographical in nature—as I know myself and my experiences best of all—but it is also largely critical and intellectual. This text, then, is what Henry Louis Gates, Jr., would call an “autocritography,” that is, “an account of individual, social, and institutional conditions that help to produce a scholar and, hence, his[-through-]her concerns.” Put simply, an autocritography is “an autobiography of a critical concept.” The critical concept: Black male feminist thought.

Black male feminist thought signifies not an ideology that only Black men can exhibit but, like Patricia Hill Collins shows, the perspective of an “outsider-within,” a distinctive angle of vision that illuminates the previously hidden crevices of feminist thought. While all people can work toward the
goals of Black male feminist thought, it is a thought that is situated within the social positioning of Black men whose ideological perspectives are rooted in the intellectual traditions of Black women. Drawing from Black feminist thought, which has as its founders people like Sojourner Truth, Zora Neale Hurston, and Patricia Hill Collins, Black male feminist thought is a manifestation of the intermingling of the feminist perspective of Black women and the social perspective of Black men, a perspective driven by tension (precisely because of the intersection of Black male socialization and Black feminist thought) toward dismantling injustice. Put another way, Black male feminist thought is an expansion of feminist goals through the inclusion of the unique perspective of Black men inculcated in feminism.

“I Am Not What I Am”

I do not wish to be a man. Despite the imperatives to “man up,” “be a man,” or Steve Harvey’s “Think Like a Man,” I do not wish to concede to these imperatives. Why? To be considered a “real” man, I must be made intelligible as a man; I must fit within the existing, sensible categories of maleness. But since all categories of maleness are predicated, in varying degrees, on the denigration of what is deemed Femaleness and “homo,” it follows then that if my brand of maleness is currently intelligible it must to some degree still be based on a repudiation of those two. Therefore, I seek to create a maleness that is rendered unintelligible to the current lens of identity classification; I seek a type of what Mark Anthony Neal calls “NewBlackMan,” “that myriad nigga-intellectual, the homeboy-feminist, the recovering homophobe.” Neal’s NewBlackMan is “for those willing to embrace the fuzzy edges of a black masculinity…anyone who can be based on a repudiation of those two. Therefore, I seek to create a maleness that is rendered unintelligible to the current lens of identity classification; I seek a type of what Mark Anthony Neal calls “NewBlackMan,” “that myriad nigga-intellectual, the homeboy-feminist, the recovering homophobe.” Neal’s NewBlackMan is “for those willing to embrace the fuzzy edges of a black masculinity that in reality is still under construction.”

As an identifiable Black man, my body is a discursive text onto which scripts are inscribed. I am socially understood and rendered intelligible by my adherence to certain scripts inscribed into my skin. Not only are those scripts ones of criminality and pathology, which immobilize and circumscribe my humanity, but also scripts that demand that I have a certain sexist and homophobic posture toward women and LGBTQIA folk; indeed, inscribed onto my Black maleness is an un-femininity and hyper-heterosexuality. I am seen and acknowledged as a Black man because of what my Black maleness signifies—in large part an un-femininity and circumscription of gay and female interiority.

To be a cis-gendered Black male is to corporeally signify an inimical stance toward the bodies of women and LGBTQIA folk. The constant plight of women and LGBTQIA people is best described in their own words. Women are subject to pampered pedestals (as is mostly the case with White women) and, in the unique case of Black women, subject to denigrating stereotypes that stymie any hope to achieve an actualization of the complex humanity stemming from their interiority. Kay Lindsey deftly illustrates the marginalized positions of women in general but Black women in particular in her essay “The Black Woman As Woman” from Toni Cade Bambara’s famous anthology, The Black Woman:

Where the white woman is the wife, the Black woman is the mother on welfare and the bearer of future workers for the state; where the white woman is the call girl or mistress, the Black woman is the street prostitute; where the white woman is married to a man who can afford it, a Black woman takes over the care of the home and children for her. In short, to be a Black woman is to operate almost totally as a physical body without the inducements offered her white counterpart. While white females are sexual objects, Black women are sexual laborers. White females are the tokens among women in this society, in that they have the titles, but not the power, while Black women have neither—although Black women are frequently described by the white agency in terms that suggest power, such as “strong,” “domineering,” “matriarchal,” and “emasculating.” … when we are defined by those other than ourselves, the qualities ascribed to us are not in our interests, but rather reflect the nature of the roles which we are intended to play. But the dominion of the kitchen and the welfare apartment are hardly powerful vantage points.

Gay men, especially gay Black men, also experience anti-gay sentiments emanating from Black male embodiment. Marlon Riggs, the late independent producer, director, writer, and university lecturer, succinctly describes his gay Black identity and its purported incompatibility with Black maleness: I am a Negro faggot, if I believe what movies, TV, and rap music say of me. My life is game for play. Because of my sexuality, I cannot be black. A strong, proud, “Afrocentric” black man is resolutely heterosexual, not even bisexual. Hence, I remain a Negro. My sexual difference is considered of no value; indeed, it’s a testament to weakness, passivity, and the absence of real guts—balls. Hence, I remain a sissy, punk, faggot. I cannot be a black gay man because, by the tenets of black macho, black gay man is a triple negation. I am consigned, by these tenets, to remain a sissy, punk, fag. And, as such, I am game for play, to be used, joked about, put down, beaten, slapped, and bashed, not just by illiterate homophobic thugs in the night but by black American culture’s best and brightest.

Black sexuality has always been hypervisible and subject to the racist projections of being primitive, wild, and monstrous in nature by white supremacist ideology. These projections also imply, for the White viewer, a level of spectacle—“Come one, come all! See the strange, beastly sex of the wild Negroes!” Scholar C. Riley Snorton calls this the “glass closet”: the space
in which Black sexuality is “marked by hypervisibility and confinement, spectacle, and speculation.” This hypervisibility, though, also feeds strict disciplining and policing of sexuality within Black communities, particularly by Black males of other Black males’ “deviant” sexual acts and preferences. Snorton goes on to say that “[t]he glass closet shares with its syntactical cousin the glass ceiling a sense of immobility; each term describes alternatively how the materiality of racial and sexual difference structures a restrictive parameter that precludes movement.” What is also interesting to note is that this structurally restrictive boundary of the racial and sexual difference of gay Black men needs to be policed more harshly, precisely because they signify the immobility of heterosexual and cis-gender Black men. Gay Black men connote for many heterosexual Black men ‘male submission or capitulation, especially those men who are penetrated like women . . . ’faggots,’ ‘punks,’ and ‘sissies’ constitute the extension of the seeming symbolic emasculation of . . . Black men.”

Furthermore, Black gay men also connote a site of contamination in the eyes of maleness. Take the comedian Kevin Hart’s stand-up routine as an example. Hart begins to tell a story about his cousin Al, an ex-drug addict and born-again Christian. As Hart tells it, Al, after conveying to Hart that he needed to establish a better relationship with Jesus, says

“Kevin, let me tell you something. I know I was on drugs, but I found Jesus. Granted, I didn’t know him when I was out there suckin’ dick for money…” I said, “Wait a minute…First of all you not gon’ speed past that like you didn’t just say what you just said!” I said, “When was this? What year was this?” He said, “It was in the ’80s, everybody was doing it.” This [sic] the shit that pissed me off. He said, “Ya dad was back there wit’ me.” I said, “What?!”…I told my dad to go get one cup and put your name on it. That is your cup. You ain’t gon’ drink out another goddamn glass in this house. That’s it for you.”

Hart’s depiction of Al’s and his father’s homosexual act (suckin’ dick for money) brands his father as perennially contaminated, so much so that he is no longer allowed to drink from any of Hart’s cups. The implication is that the gayness will rub off onto Hart. The stigmatization of gay men is clear: as “male submission or capitulation, especially those men who are penetrated like women . . . ‘faggots,’ ‘punks,’ and ‘sissies’ constitute the extension of the seeming symbolic emasculation of . . . Black men.”

Moreover, the materiality is indeed phobic imperatives required of constituting an “authentic” Black maleness, I argue. Black male feminist thought must remedy. Black male feminist thought is a call to reconstruct the Black male body through a reconceptualization of the scripts of “authentic” Blackness and the language of Black maleness. Indeed, the consequencialness of rewriting the language of Black maleness is evident in light of how philosopher Martin Heidegger conceives of language—as the “house of Being.” If language is the house of Being, that is, the structure of our understanding of our reality, then rewriting the sexist and homophobic structure is imperative.

Because my body is a textual subject mired in a homophobic and sexist social milieu, it “functions almost as a ‘black box’ in this account: it is acted upon, inscribed, peer into; information is extracted from it and disciplinary regimes are imposed on it.” As a Black male subject to the sexist and homophobic imperatives required of constituting an “authentic” Black maleness, I indeed should not be a feminist. To be a Black male feminist strikes one as an oxymoron because Black maleness, as it has been scripted, is markedly anti-feminist. My body’s inscriptions do not determine me, however. My body’s “materiality also entails a resilience, and thus also (potential) modes of resistance to power’s capillary alignments,” and therein lies Black male feminist thought. There is an inherent potential for subversion, subversion of my sexist- and homophobic-constituted intelligible Black maleness, in the performative nature of identity. As Judith Butler notes, [the subject] is always the nexus, the non-space of cultural collision, in which the demand to resignify or repeat the very terms which constitute the “we” cannot be summarily refused, but neither can they be followed in strict obedience. It is the space of this ambivalence which opens up the possibility of a reworking of the very terms by which subjectivation proceeds—and fails to proceed. The performative nature of my identity lends itself to the possibility of its subversion. Black male feminist thought lies in the fissures of my own corporeal performance. I must only take those chances to act.
Feminism Is For Everybody?

In a Black male feminist thought pattern, it is imperative that one—that I—thematize one’s location. Put simply, I must “fess up.” Stating outright my position as Black and male, along with all that that may signify (a formative sexist mentality, an urge to perform a type of hypermasculinity, etc.), “functions to signify an awareness that one’s theorizations and knowledge-claims are mediated relative to where one stands. We must properly historicize and contextualize our epistemological claims.” Awareness and ownership of this acknowledges the fallacy of the assumption that thinking takes place *sub specie aeternitatis*, that is, wholly objectively.21

A question I get asked a lot, quite simply, is “how?” How did I, a tattooed Black dude from West Philadelphia, become a feminist? “If there is any type of person to whom feminist ideology is incredibly averse, you fit the description, Quis.” It seems somewhat justifiable for people to make these remarks. The comments do, however, imply an archetypal image of whom feminist ideology is attracted to, namely those who are not tattooed Black dudes from Philly. The logic is problematic in that it always already disqualifies certain people from being valid, believable members of particular ideologies. It shrinks the ambit through which one sees the adherers of feminist ideology, effectively whitening, feminizing, and attributing suburban affluence to its affiliative requirements.

As bell hooks says in her eponymous book, “feminism is for everybody.” I recall a moment during my sophomore year of college being troubled by my passion for being feminist-identified, yet not having a solid definition of feminism. There was a moment of crisis in which I desperately needed an intellectual push to experience a revelation. I asked a beloved mentor of mine, Cathy Romagnolo, for advice: what does it mean to be a feminist? She subsequently provided me with hook’s book and in it feminism is defined as such: “simply put, feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist mentality, an urge to perform a type of hypermasculinity, etc.), “functions to signify an awareness that one’s theorizations and knowledge-claims are mediated relative to where one stands. We must properly historicize and contextualize our epistemological claims.” Awareness and ownership of this acknowledges the fallacy of the assumption that thinking takes place *sub specie aeternitatis*, that is, wholly objectively.21

I take on the identity of a Black male feminist because these women—Black women, women of color—are inextricable from my own fate; because I have been constituted by Black women, beginning with my mother and continuing on through a myriad of other influential women shepherding me through the rigors of life; because I wish to become fully human and I cannot accomplish that while oppressing other humans. Indeed, Black male feminism is a cry for Black male humanity—full humanity.

Throughout the history of Black feminism, beginning as early as the era of American racialized slavery and originally being made most evident with the organization of the women’s liberation movement, it has become a quotidian practice for Black feminist scholars to point out the racism within White feminist movements, the “white solipsism,” as Adrienne Rich calls it, of White feminists who continually erase the unique experiences of Black women and women of color in general. Even though this practice has become almost passé, especially within feminist scholarship, it points to an important value of uniquely Black feminist thought as it addresses the specific plights of women of color.

Catherine Belsey, in 1985, said, “One of the central issues for feminism is the cultural construction of subjectivity.”24 It is this quest for subjectivity that is primary in Black male feminist thought. Underlying the repudiation of anti-gay ideology, White solipsism within feminist movements, dismantling patriarchy, and redefining maleness is a drive to construct subjects with subjectivity. As oppressive hegemonic forces are based on the construction of its targets as shallow, vapid, essentialized entities, creating subjectivity within marginalized groups, namely women (of color) and LGBTQIA folk, is of utmost priority.
Confessions

As is the case with most, if not all, people, I am not perfect. There exist cracks and fissures in my Black male feminism. There are weak points, reluctance, and cowardly corners in my feminist activism. I reveal these personal instances of willed ignorance, collusion, and exploitation not to brag or evoke pity/sympathy, nor to make excuses. Rather, I reveal these shortcomings to practice honesty; to make apparent my most insidious weak spots, thus allowing me to better remedy them; and to open myself up for trenchant criticism, and consequently substantial growth and improvement.

One of the most potent constitutive components of “authentic” Black maleness is the imperative to be sexually prolific. Historically, Black men have been deemed lascivious, lustful, and sexually rapacious beasts, as the all-too-common “Myth of the Black Buck/Rapist” lustig after pure White women makes evident. Moreover, the myth of the enormous Black phallus still persists. Few Black males forming their identity in a society that offers them diminishing opportunities will pass up on a mythology that constructs their phalluses as large and desirable. This mythology is then utilized to obtain the bodies of women in order to sexually consume them, aiding Black men’s “rep” and indeed making them “real” Black men. I myself have used this mythology and my maleness to have sex with women, to increase my male authenticity. Women’s bodies were merely receptacles to put to rest any skepticism of my authentic Black maleness, merely means to achieve my end of pleasure and “street cred.”

I was mentored by Black men
With brown skin
Who turned yellow at the sight of
Swollen bellies filled with half their DNA...

This trope of being mentored, being taught, is startling considering the adage “the student always surpasses the teacher.”

I was taught that a woman’s vagina
Is just an underground railroad to masculinity;
That real men have tunnel-vision
And treat girls like subway cars, like nothing
More than a space to parallel park
Our genitals...

I used the bodies of women only to aid myself, only to display how “down” I was for the whole Black male thing.

I also fear gaining knowledge of the horrors of which women and LGBTQIA folk have personal, visceral knowledge. I fear reading and learning about rape survivors’ stories, fear listening to and following the incredible fight that someone like Jada—the 16-year-old high-schooler in Houston who was drugged, raped, and humiliatingly displayed via the Internet—has been putting up. I fear knowing the trepidation that gay and non-gender-conforming people feel simply from going out in public—a trepidation unfortunately bolstered by the deaths of other gay and queer folk. I fear knowing the pain of women because I have been privileged to not have to feel, or think about feeling, that pain. Perhaps this fear, this willed ignorance, is a defense against the knowledge of female interiority and reality that would dismantle the tenets of my maleness. Knowledge of the dark realities of women’s oppression would shatter the epistemology of ignorance upon which my maleness is premised. Perhaps my fear is, ironically, a fear of a maleness not predicated on ignorance of LGBTQIA and female subjects, a fear of actual Black male feminist thought.

I am also apprehensive about engaging with women and LGBTQIA folk about their lives. I shy away from disagreement often—how can I disagree with her about feminism, she’s a woman! How can I argue with her about gender performativity? My apprehension often immobilizes me, stifling dynamic and productive conversation that could potentially lead to breakthroughs and new discoveries. This bespeaks a fear pertaining to the limits of my feminism. To what extent can I contribute to feminist efforts considering the hostility of my male embodiment and identification? How “in the streets” and grassroots do my efforts need to be in order to be considered “real activism”? Of course, I accept the limits of my feminism—I cannot speak to feminism the same way women and LGBTQIA folk can; I do not have personal experience of oppression based on a female or LGBTQIA identification—but I often wonder if the limits of myself and my thought are enough. My social positioning precludes a type of knowledge; I am shielded from personal knowledge of sexism and heterosexism that women and LGBTQIA folk can draw from. In this sense my positionality is vital because, as D. Soyini Madison makes clear, “it forces us to acknowledge our own power, privilege, and biases just as we denounce the power structures that surround our subjects. A concern for positionality is a reflexive ethnography; it is a turning back on ourselves.”

While I acknowledge this and find utter truth in it, I cannot help but wonder whether my limits are sufficient to do the feminist work that I wish to do. Are they?

I do not know if these fears and apprehensions will ever fade. Perhaps they may even magnify. What is certain, though, is that they keep me reflective; they push me to continually reexamine, redact, criticize, and reform my Black male feminist stance.

Hip-hop Pseudo-Apologia

It is widely known that hip-hop is a genre riddled with sexist and homophobic discourse. References to “bitches;” “faggots;” “hos;” and “queers” saturate artists’ lyrics. Because of this, my relationship with hip-hop is vexed. On one hand, as a feminist it is often difficult for me to condone and digest the
sexist, misogynistic, homophobic, and violent ethos that seems to saturate the vast majority of hip-hop songs. The valorization of “fucking bitches” too often leaves me cringing about the discursive effect the lyrics have on the minds of young male listeners; the denigration of “hyperfeminine rappers” and “homo thugs” perplexes me; and the glorification of ghetto life, “real niggas,” and the number of “bodies” one has slain (violently and sexually, although the two are not mutually exclusive) has become a stale record doing more than metaphorical harm. On the other hand, however, it seems to me that hip-hop is the only genre of music I have come across that values, as I do, the power of language. Hip-hop artists, to me, are truly artists, crafting words, bending syllables, fashioning new terms and putting them to linguistic “work.” Historically, hip-hop was a forum for marginalized Black and Hispanic youth to speak the plight of their world into controllable existence and thus use their words to validate their existence in a world that shunned them; harness language to cope with and change the texture of that world; and create art from cracked concrete, project houses, and liquor stores. Hip-hop is the most linguistically dexterous genre of music to me, and for that I must acknowledge its value, especially in relation to Black male feminist thought.

Because bodies are discursive texts onto which scripts and meanings are inscribed, and this discourse is authoritative in nature, hip-hop’s unique discursive position and fundamentals can be fertile ground for Black male feminist thought. Michel Foucault notes in *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1 that “power’s hold…is maintained through language, or rather through the discursive act of discourse that creates, from the very fact that it is articulated, a rule of law. It speaks, and that is the rule.” Hip-hop’s articulation of misogyny and homophobia play a substantial role in dictating the inscriptions of social bodies. For someone like rap artist Crooked I to say “Hyperfeminine rappers claim your troops / Let ya lynch me in an orchard before I hang with fruits,” effectively asserting that it is better to be lynched than to fraternize with LGTQIA folk, makes an authoritative statement as to how one should comport themselves in the face of cohabitation with LGBTQIA people in social spaces. Artist Dr. Dre saying that “Bitches ain’t shit but honeys and tricks” discursively writes the “bitch” and “ho” identity onto female bodies, which dictates how others interact with those bodies.

It would prove useful for Black male feminist thought to rewrite the discourse of hip-hop. Inserting alternative articulations into the genre of hip-hop music can speak authoritative claims about women and LGBTQIA folk that affirm their humanity, interiority, and subjectivity. Artists such as Common Market and Macklemore, and slam poets (as slam poetry falls under the umbrella of hip-hop) such as Joshua Bennett, Rudy Fransisco, and Guante, while not perfect, are making strides toward a Black male feminist thought circulating within hip-hop music and culture. Here, hip-hop’s trope of “talking back” can prove useful. I use the phrase polysemically: drawing from bell hooks, in one sense the phrase is somewhat pejorative— “Don’t you dare talk back to me!” Rappers often respond to, or talk back to, other rappers in “diss” songs. This talking back, though, is also a perennial intergenerational and social commentary where artists will allude to other artists or sample other artists’ instrumentals and revise the meanings of other songs. In talking back, they use language to build bridges, constructing constellations of hip-hop artistry connected by recycled rhymes and classic beats; they use language to fashion new social truths and disseminate them. Hip-hop is fed by the realities of those “in the streets” and hip-hop talks back to them.

So in this talking back one can imagine that the streets listen to what hip-hop has to say. What if, instead of “bitches,” “hoes,” and “fags,” hip-hop said to the streets “Black male feminist thought?” Would it listen?

**This was not intended** to be an opportunity for an expression of guilt, for anyone to feel sorry for me, nor was this meant to garner praise. This is an act of disruption, a militant attack on injustice. It is a potent form of activism. I have the words of Alice Jardine echoing in the background of my Black male feminist ideology:

> We do not want you to *mimic* us, to become the same as us; we don’t want your pathos or your guilt: and we don’t even want your admiration (even if it’s nice to get it once in a while). What we want, I would even say what we need, is your work. We need you to get down to serious work. And like all serious work, that involves struggle and pain.

I have struggled, and will continue to struggle, with my feminism, with Black male feminism. This struggle is not something I wish to rid myself of, for it is the struggle, the constant tension that expands and refines my feminist ideology. This is only the beginning, academically and socially—my feminism, I hope, will lead to a more thorough theorization of my own Black male feminism as well as an increase is feminist-identified Black men in particular pushing for political, legislative, social, and personal feminist agendas. What is needed is a movement—not demonstrations or head-shaking but ideological uprooting of patriarchal sedimentation, talk-walking activists willing to disseminate their feminist efforts via scholarly discourse, lectures, political reform, providing havens for survivors of domestic violence, consciousness-raising sessions, impromptu interventions in the presence of street harassment, and any other effective avenue of knowledge-dissemination possible. All of this, though, requires a first step. This is mine.
I wish to be clear here: I intend the term “women” not to be inherently essentialist but rather use the term to acknowledge its social currency (as “woman” has a history that has lent to the subjectivity of those whom it categorizes that I do not wish to erase) as well as to denote those bodies that are subject to sexual oppression and marginalization. While there is no homogeneous female standpoint, my use of the word “women” is meant to signify women’s collective standpoint, which does exist, a standpoint characterized by the tensions that accrue to different responses to common challenges (Collins, Patricia Hill. Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment.)

To “pass” here is not meant in the traditional sense in which one is said to pass as something one is “truly” not. Rather I am in line with cultural theorist Nadine Ehlers. While Ehlers focuses primarily on race, the same can be said for maleness and masculinity. To read a quote from her book Racial Imperatives: “there is no internal ‘truth’ to [male-ness]. Rather, through being read as ‘belonging’ to a particular [gender] category—that is, visually appearing and conducting one’s acts, manners, and behaviors in accordance to disciplinary [gendered] demands—all subjects are passing for a [gendered] identity that they are said to be” (Ehlers, Nadine. Racial Imperatives: Discipline, Performativity, and Struggles against Subjection. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012.).

5 My seemingly peculiar way of redacting the common phrase “his or her” to read “his” whenever it is necessary to acknowledge the non-binaryness of biological sex. To say “his or her” denotes only two sexes when in fact there are a multiplicity of sexes outside of the male/female binary, which we broadly classify as intersex. The characteristics or traits that are most often considered when determining the sex of a person include chromosomal makeup, presence of a womb, hormones, external genitalia, and whether the body has one or two external genitalia. There are “girl-looking” bodies with male genes and internal structures and vice versa; there are bodies born with ambiguous genitalia. These disorders of sexual development (DSDs) dissolve the binary thinking of male and female, thus in an effort to enact more inclusive language I connote the sex spectrum rather than the binary by using “his-through-her” (and also “male-through-female,” “him-through-her,” etc.).

6 Awkward, Scenes of Instruction, 7.

7 Collins, Black Feminist Thought, 12.


9 Jackson, Scripting the Black Masculine Body. Here I am drawing on the work of a mentor of mine, Ronald L. Jackson. In his book, he delves deep into the ways in which the Black male body has been the receptacle of projections from the white imaginary and acts as the projection site for white fears and anxiety.

10 Roberts, Killing the Black Body, 13. The full quote reads: “The myth of the lascivious Black woman was systematically perpetuated after slavery ended. 14 While white women were placed on moral pedestals, “every Black woman was, by definition, a slut according to this racist mythology,” writes historian Gerda Lerner. Lerner notes a number of practices that reinforced this view: “the laws against intermarriage; the denial of the title “Miss” or “Mrs.” to any Black woman; the taboos against respectable social mixing of the races; the refusal to let Black women customers try on clothing in stores before making a purchase; the assigning of a single toilet to both sexes of Blacks.”


12 Riggs, “Black Macho Revisited,” 390. In this essay, Riggs further comments on the parameters of “authentic” Black maleness, what he calls, drawing from Michelle Wallace, “Black Macho”: “By the tenets of Black Macho, true masculinity admits little or no space for self-interrogation or multiple subjectivities around race. Black Macho prescribes an inflexible ideal: Strong Black men—Afrocentric Black men—don’t flinch, don’t weaken, don’t take blame or shit, take charge, step to when challenged, and defend themselves without pause for self-doubt. Against this warrior model of masculinity, Black Macho counterpoises theemasculated Other: the Other as punk, sissy, Negro Faggot, a status with which any man, not just those who in fact are gay, can be branded should he deviate from rigidly prescribed codes of hypermasculine conduct” (394).


14 Snorton, Nobody Is Supposed to Know: Black Sexuality On the Down Low, 4, 16.

15 Collins, Black Sexual Politics, 174.

16 Small and Story, Kevin Hart.

17 From Heidegger’s classic text Sein und Zeit, or Being and Time. Further commenting on language’s import, Jeffrey Powell notes that “in the case of language, it does not serve to represent the objects of the world or beings as a whole, but rather it is a means through which the world reveals itself.” Powell, Heidegger and Language, 3. If language provides the means by which the world reveals itself to us as “true,” then a sexist and homophobic language will inevitably reveal the “truth” of women and gay men as sites of pathology and deviance.

18 See Crooked I’s song, “Everyday,” in which he raps, “Ain’t no rally for the feminists…Real niggas fuck with real niggas” as an example.

19 Grooz, Volatile Bodies, 146.

20 Butler, Bodies That Matter, 84.

21 Yancy, “Feminism and the Subtext of Whiteness,” 156.

22 hooks, Feminism Is for Everybody, 1. What I also like about hooks’s definition is its gender unspecificity. There are those who assert that men cannot be feminists, only women because of their lived experience of sexism, and maintain that those men who wish to be allied with feminist efforts identify, at best, as profeminist. The argument appears valid in that male-identified people do not and cannot draw from a lived experience of sexism. This logic, for one, is incredibly transphobic—FTM people can very well draw from lived experiences of sexism despite their being male-identified at present. The logic also erases genderqueer folk by upholding the gender/sex binary. Are transmen/women allowed to identify as feminist? Further, although there is a dangerous legacy of women’s intellectual contributions being invalidated and silenced by men, it is my opinion, but more importantly the opinions of numerous female feminist scholars, that men, too, can identify as feminists.

23 Small and James Foster, and Guy-Sheftall, Still Brave, 5.

24 Belsey, “Constructing the Subject: Deconstructing the Text,” 164.

25 See, for example, Marriotti, On Black Men and hooks, “It’s A Dick Thing” in We Real Cool.

26 From Rudy Francisco’s spoken word poem, “Chameleoon.”

27 Ibid.

28 Stewart, “I Am Jada.”

29 Gender neutral pronoun so as not to privilege “he” and also used for those who do not wish to identify as a particular gender or are genderqueer.

30 Quoted in Alexander, Performing Black Masculinity, 1.

31 Foucault, The History of Sexuality, 83.

32 See Common Market’s “Love One,” Macklemore’s “Same Love” and “Otherside,” Joshua Bennett’s “What’s in a Man” and “Dream of a Ridiculous Man,” Rudy Francisco’s “Chameleon,” and Guante’s “Ten Responses to the Phrase Man Up” as examples.

33 Jardine and Smith, Men in Feminism (RLE Feminist Theory), 60.
Bleed Soaked

Oakley Merideth

Nerve wash & never
an instant
marred or unbolted—cleansed
& bleed soaked,

we wash away
our return. Some memories
are oranges, crushed
into splinters of juice
& peel skin. No charm

of pulp, all residue ungored
of its portrait. Now we house
skeletons without,
house so little
a night can orbit
& not cross bones.

Above
sightless & weary
the stars are shrapnel yet to fall.

abre aquellos ojos,
ojos con sombras,
ojos sin luz).
went back about as far back as two people can go when one of them is sitting behind the wheel of a newish Camry celebrating another night of being the golden child. Now she turned around and giggled and licked the blunt from end to end, saliva pulling across the corner of her mouth like a spider web. Her tongue flicked between her lips, pink and so pillow-y-thick they made me shiver every time I let myself look. She handed me the blunt and I ran a lighter under it until the seams of the green leaf pulled tight together and the air started to smell blue.

It was on a side street over near where Lea lived. Her parents lived in a neighborhood of little Cape houses, the kind of place where old white people lived out their last years alongside Caribbean families who could swing the mortgage. Her father had mango trees out back with a sliver of always-green lawn. It was a little slice of the American dream. Whenever I came by to sit on the leather sofa in the living room and watch Lea flip through the high-numbered channels, I wished I’d never have to leave.

For some reason she and all of her friends thought it was cool to just roll up in front of somebody’s house, park, and spark up a blunt or two. Seemed crazy. When I smoked with my boys we drove around with the windows down and worked plenty of cigarettes into the rotation to clear the air. But here we were, parked under a streetlight so we could break up the bud on a Mariah Carey CD and split the Dutch up. We’d get so we wouldn’t even move for what seemed like hours. We’d just sit there in an amber haze, running through all the stuff her friends got into, which was pretty much what my friends got into, except we had to pay for it.

Before we even got the blunt into rotation Lea wanted to tell me about this dream she would have most nights. She’s trying to talk to her grandmother but the words won’t quite come together; suddenly she forgets every drop of Spanish she has ever known and her grandmother leans in, smiles, pats her on the thighs and starts to tell her something, but her ears turn into thick gray skin and sprout hair and she can’t make out a thing her grandmother is saying. When she leans in she gets these shooting pains in her stomach. Her head starts to wobble and she feels she has to jump up, to run away, and only when she is far far away can she make out her grandmother’s words. But all the old lady’s saying is fall, fall, fall.

I said I understood her completely, but I didn’t. One of my grandmothers was dead and the other one I never met, so I couldn’t imagine their coming to me in a dream. I had fallen for her so hard that I told her whatever I thought would make her feel good. We were at that point in the summer when I would try really hard to convince her that I should be her man, and she’d pretend like she didn’t notice. It happened every summer back then. Each week was on a loop, and if I wasn’t at work or cooking with my mom, I was probably sitting in a car somewhere passing a blunt. If Lea asked me to come over, I would scoop up my cigarettes and lighter, pull on my jeans, hop down the front stairs, bound out across the porch that sagged six inches with each step, hop in my car and pull off real carefully, barely making it past the rusted-up work trucks and beater HONDAs parked against the curb. I didn’t give a thought to how it made me look, always running out to see her like this, scrambling for whatever scraps of time she would throw my way. I had fallen. I didn’t care. I would roll down the windows, put on some Ghostface and wind my way through the side streets, down the worn alleys between big three-decker where old men sat talking and past the park where dudes were still shooting baskets, until I got to the bridge and crossed over into elsewhere. I went on still, past the bored corner stores, past the dazed strip malls, past it all until I pulled up in front of her house. I would dust the cigarettes off me with some cologne and walk casually up to her front door, knock as politely as I knew how and then pull it open, since it was always unlocked anyway.

I lived like that for as long as I could.

My dreams aren’t like Lea’s. I don’t lose anything. Usually I’m sleeping when something wakes me up. I start to look around the room but I can’t make anything out but shadows. I have pillows piled up around me like a fort because there’s something out there. I feel panic scurrying the hollow corridors of my bones. I push through the pillows and run out into the street and then I see them, a pack of wolves, the nails of their paws clicking on the pavement. I know I can’t outrun them but I try anyway. I wake up before they reach me, which means that the wolves are free to come again. There will be no resolution.

Shit changed real quick, but I pretended it hadn’t. I would call up Lea, or she would call me up, and I would sit on the stoop of one of the big buildings on the Green and stare out into the starless night sky and talk to her. I’d tell her about a party that weekend. Front like my plan wasn’t to go down by the river late at night and flick butts into the water and see if I could get up the guts to throw myself in and inhale its depths.

I was spending my weeks across the river on the East Side, in the dorms. I went to class and studied at the library, but I left before anyone had time to notice that I had snuck in. See, I had a full scholarship, or as close to a full scholarship as anyone else I met, which meant free room, free meals, free classes, and free access. It was supposed to be a gift but it felt like a trick. I sat in class, exhausted, with a faded hoodie and boots stained with a summer’s worth of grease. Around me were couples back from visiting their prep school friends in the Hamptons and curly-haired trust fund kids from Connecticut. The offhand comments about the janitors and the cooks, all of them my neighbors, their kids my classmates, didn’t help either. The assholes rapping
along to Biggie, but turning his one room shack into a parody, his success into a failure, had me wishing I had the guts to bust into a frat with an uzi.

My dreams started to change. No more wolves: now there are people running through the night naked, carrying burning embers in their palms without getting burned. Their feet press down against the cobblestones and push back up without ever actually touching it, flying in tandem like butterflies dancing. When they get to the summit they cast their flame to the ground and it throws up sparks and the sun rises.

You know what a chupacabra is? I didn't either until Mikey on my cleaning crew started talking about his trips back to Ceiba. He'd go out into the campo with his girl to fuck, whispering to her below the revs of his dirtbike that the chupacabra was gonna get her. Once they were deep into the bush, he'd run off. When he'd come back after a while she'd be terrified, so scared she was wet again, he said, and everybody laughed so hard they smacked their hands against the table to keep from pissing their pants. When we were all laughed out it got real quiet and we finished up our lunches in silence. I didn't get it, really, but I knew that these guys were much tougher than me and they had all gotten silent with respect or fear or something, so I'd better too. We finished our burgers, piled into the back of the truck and drove back to the stadium to change the rest of the trash cans so we could go home. Ice cream left in a garbage can for a few days in direct sunlight turns into a sort of white tar that burns if it drips onto your skin but then stays there, sticky, pulling the little hairs together in a swirl that has to be scrubbed off with soap. Those summers waiting for Lea to say yes, were a lot like melted ice cream.

That same summer of the chupacabra, she told me she couldn't do it, and that was it. She had given up, I thought. She was going down to Kingston and was going to study sociology. She was going to be really happy, going to go to the club a lot and smoke lots of weed and forget about everything. It was cheaper for her parents if she went there, too. Not everybody gets scholarships, she reminded me. We were out on the sidewalk in front of a three-decker where some people lived. Down in the basement guys were passing blunts and listening to Raekwon and up on the third floor there was Bacardi and Hennessy and all kinds of fruity mixers and reggaeton. She leaned in close to me and I reached my arms around and linked my fingers together over the brown speckled oasis low on her back, above the faded denim of her short-shorts. Her lips were sticky and her skin smelled like coconut. Tasted like coconut too. We stood there for a minute, just like that, and then I let go.

She turned around and wiggled her butt in that exaggerated way she had. She wanted me to say what a great butt she had. She was inordinately proud of it. I wanted to tell her it was her brain she should be proud of. I didn't. Ever. Who was I to say that? I just smiled and nodded. I wanted to walk home so I could suck the mentholated night air into my lungs and fantasize about somebody testing me on the walk home so I could prove I was still worth something. But I didn't do that either. I went downstairs and squatted down on the cement among a bunch of faces I sort of knew and took the blunt when it came to me and passed it on when I was done and when they started talking about the chupacabra I knew exactly what they meant. Never mind what anybody else tells you about it: the chupacabra is this evil little sucker that makes everything run on repeat like an endless river that never makes it to the sea but never lets you see you're not getting there, either.
Emerging
January 24, 1959
Catherine Young

Emerging, January 24, 1959 is composed from news reports on that date and is centered on the Knox Mine Disaster. This event precipitated the collapse of anthracite coal mining in eastern Pennsylvania, creating a huge shift in our coal-based economy.

Emerge. To uncover; become known. To come out of obscurity. To appear from behind something. To rise from or out of anything that surrounds or covers. To come out of a condition—especially a difficult one. To come forth from that in which anything has been enveloped.

Concealed
Corner Brook, Newfoundland

In a paper mill town, a nineteen-year-old girl gives birth during the night, in the bathroom of her workplace, the boarding house, then lapses into a coma. When she regains consciousness, the baby is dead.

The girl panics. She finds a shoebox. She lifts the lifeless body of her baby, places it in the shoebox, and ties the box with twine. The box bulges oddly. Anyone seeing it would be curious about the contents, so she places the box in a paper shopping bag with twisted paper handles, the kind used at Christmas time. The girl brings the box to the trash.

It is the discarded shoebox discovered at the dump that leads that the police to the door of a female retail clerk whose residence is located near the boarding house. After canvassing two hundred residences in that area, the RCMP center on this one. They enter and search the clerk’s house. Under her bed, they find a suitcase that serves as a coffin; inside, the body of a second infant. The RCMP press the woman with questions. She denies any knowledge of an infant in a shoebox, but she is sent to a doctor to be examined. Perhaps she has had twins. But no, the shoebox baby is not hers.

The investigators trace the shoebox to a local shoe store, and then to a man in Port au Port whose specialty shoes mark him as the one who discarded the shoebox in the boarding house bathroom. Back at the boarding house, all the female members of the staff are medically examined to discover who had recently given birth. The nineteen-year-old girl is found, and admits the baby is hers.

The women are prosecuted for concealment of birth and negligence to obtain reasonable medical assistance in childbirth. The Corner Brook Incident is written up in the RCMP Quarterly. The Corner Brook women are never called mothers. Almost unbelievable, the police say as they wrap up the investigation.

Concealment of birth is not uncommon, the investigators admit, though the discovery of two infanticides emerging in the same block is a strange coincidence.

Revealed
Stockport, United Kingdom

Tucked away among the brick facades of Stockport, elderly people live alone in houses and small apartments without anyone to care for them. These people over eighty years of age have seen the Victorian era through the Edwardian. Many of them have been the backbone of Stockport’s hatting and milling industries. They have witnessed two world wars in their country and the economic depression sandwiched in between; have huddled in basements through bombings; lived through rationing and meager meals. And now, because they have lost relatives to war, or simply have outlived them, these Stockport residents have no one to nurse them when they are in need. They have remained hidden like the old aunt in the attic in Jane Eyre.

The very elderly continue to live on meager portions, as if war food rationing had not ended six years ago. Because they have no one to prepare meals for them, they may only be able to prepare one warm meal a day. If these elderly people cannot cook, their only warmth may come from a cup of tea.

Thanks to a social research team at Manchester University, this is about to change. Through newspaper advertising, wireless, and house to house visits, the elderly are learning about welfare services. Their doors open to social workers and students with clipboards in hand, ready to listen and give help. The old people who were tucked away are now emerging as supported members of their community.
tunnel of the Knox Mine, looking at maps moments before the waters crashed in. He kept the miners calm. He asked them to turn off their headlamps and wait for him while he and another miner raced to find passage through the Marcy Vein. It had already filled up with water. Looking for a sign, they found one: chalk markings on a rotted doorframe that read, To Eagle Shaft. They felt air pushing upward into the shaft; they shouted for the men to follow them.

Beneath the river, anthracite miners in coveralls, flannel shirts, and boots slogged in chest-deep icy water. They followed the air being forced out as the water rose. They crawled over debris; clawed through cave-ins. They saw a light coming towards them—a light no one could later explain. Joe and the men kept shouting until a search party hauled them out. Then Joe went back into the mine to rescue others.

Fifty-six men were in the Knox mine at River Slope when the Susquehanna River broke through and smashed the workings. Thanks to Joe's fast action, only twelve miners remain unaccounted for.

Now as Joe stands above the steel-gray Susquehanna watching the whirlpool, a hole as wide as a two-story tower, men with rails, bulldozers, and floodlights try to fill that hole. Hopper cars drop and disappear into the swirling icy waters as if they had never existed; as if no iron had been mined, melted, shaped and riveted into their structure. The railcars plunge into the whirlpool along with hay, bailed excelsior, utility poles, railroad ties, and the largest rocks available. There is no sucking sound as they vanish.

For three days Pennsylvania Congressman Daniel J Flood uses television, radio, and newspapers to demonstrate his concern and reassure everyone that twelve missing miners will be found and that a flooding river is a catastrophe no one could predict.

Joe doesn't say anything as he watches. But when it comes his turn he will tell how, only two weeks earlier, he warned officials that they had mined ten feet beyond the permitted point beneath the river.

Joe Stella does not tell reporters what it sounds like in a coalmine under a January river when the waters rise; when men wearing miner’s hats begin to cry, yell, and bargain with God, not knowing if they will ever emerge alive.

Laughter Escapes

London, United Kingdom

Two nurses dressed in white from their perky caps to their crêpe shoes accompany two doctors flanking the iron lung in which Peter Wood lies. But for his head, Peter has been encased in the contraption for the past ten months, since he was afflicted with polio. Breath by breath, the device removes pressure on his diaphragm so he can inhale, then restores pressure for
him to expel air. Outside the iron lung, beyond Peter’s feet, a circulating rod
turns and pumps bellows. Machinery reminiscent of a windmill, but which
draws breath instead of water.

Many hope the new Sabin oral polio vaccine will finally wipe out polio, but the vaccine is not yet widely available. For Peter, the vaccine comes
too late. Most patients stay in the iron lung for only two to three weeks. The
doctors believe it is time for Peter to leave behind his comfortable womb.
Thirteen-year-old Peter needs to begin breathing on his own. The doctors and
nurses will trick him into it—with comedy. They take Peter to the London
Coliseum, to Rodgers and Hammerstein’s Cinderella, starring Yanna.

As Peter is wheeled into the theater on his back, he takes in the view
of the newly-renovated dome and the striking black-and-white circles sur-
rounding it. He also takes in the odors of the crowd: damp wools scented with
naphthalene, musky perfumes, hair crème, and cigarettes—so very different
from the hospital’s ever-present odor of wintergreen alcohol.

The overture begins; Peter turns his head to the side. “The Prince is giving
a ball! The Prince is giving a ball!” the cast sings as they parade around the
stage. Peter smiles. The town crier onstage operatically begins his list of pre-
posterous names: “His Royal highness, Christopher Rupert, Vindermier Vland-
damier, Carl Alexander, François Reginald, Lancelot Herman…”

“Herman?!?” the cast questions, incredulous.

“Herman,” the town crier sings decisively, with exaggerated seriousness,
“…is having a ball.”

Peter laughs. The nurse beside him springs into action and turns off the
iron lung. She watches through the side port window as Peter breathes on his
own for twenty minutes.

The next time Peter laughs, he breathes for forty minutes on his own.

Peter won’t break out of his iron cocoon tonight, but he is breathing on
his own. Laughing and breathing.

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484th and Broadway—a square number.
I can count the stars that sleep in these city skies on my hand.
5,6,7, where the deer and the antelope.

529th—I have teeth more yellow than white, hair more branch than nest.
Thoughts more whiskey than tea, skin more lover than monk.

576th—24 squared and too far to walk.
These things I can say with confidence:
My shirt, mint green. Shorts, black. Socks, white and sleek. Shoes, black.

One night, Ninety five dollars
One “your friends are shit” Four House Beers
One tear (not my own), Three shots of Scotch
One “We are all single.” Two Gin and Tonics hold the crying let me have this.
One unnoticed exit.

This is an imagined 577th. This is 578th.
This is a train that will not take you back.
Colophon

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The text of Anamesa is set in Minion, an Adobe Original typeface designed in 1990 by Robert Slimbach. Inspired by classical serif fonts of the late Renaissance, Slimbach’s design is highly adaptable to digital media. The “typographer’s bible,” Robert Bringhurst’s Elements of Typographic Style is set in Minion, and the typeface is beloved for its combination of practicality and elegance.

Anamesa’s titles use Adobe Caslon, the same typeface as the body text of The New Yorker. Designed in 1990 by Carol Twombly, Adobe Caslon is based on a mid-18th century specimen page of the Dutch Baroque typeface designed by William Caslon I but adapted for modern and digital use. Caslon was a favorite in 18th century British and American printing, and was even used to print the American Declaration of Independence. As the old typographer’s saying goes, “When in doubt, use Caslon.”

The letter A in Anamesa’s logo uses Play Ball, a font designed in 2011 by calligrapher and designer Rob Leuschke. Leushke designed Play Ball as an “athletic” font, recalling baseball jerseys and team logos, and the uppercase A features a distinct curving swash.

The remainder of the Anamesa logo is set in Crimson Text, a typeface designed by Sebastian Kosch in 2011. A serif typeface in the Garamond tradition, Crimson Text is intended for book design and inspired by the work of the giants of modern type design: Jan Tischhold, Robert Slimbach and Jonathan Hoefler. Kosch hopes it will become a “beautiful workhorse,” an alternative to the standard Times.