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Beside Ourselves: Trauma, Self-Relation, and Autofabulation

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

English

by

Alexandra Wood

June 2026

Dissertation Committee:

Dr. Courtney R. Baker, Co-Chairperson
Dr. Traise Yamamoto, Co-Chairperson
Dr. Jennifer Doyle

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2026

The Dissertation of Alexandra Wood is approved:

Committee Chairperson

University of California, Riverside

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Dedication

For survivors.

For my sister.

For myself.

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Beside Ourselves: Trauma, Self-Relation, and Autofabulation

by

Alexandra Wood

Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Program in English
University of California, Riverside, June 2026
Dr. Courtney R. Baker, Co-Chairperson
Dr. Traise Yamamoto, Co-Chairperson

In *Beside Ourselves: Trauma, Self-Relation, and Autofabulation*, I consider the narrative problem of trauma through new terms of engagement inspired by survivors themselves. Despite the hegemonic expectation for documentarian forms, survivors use a diverse array of techniques to tell their own stories. I develop the term “autofabulation” to describe survivors’ use of the fictional, fabricated, and fantastic. My usage of fabulation is derived from historian Saidiya Hartman’s “critical fabulation” and performance studies scholar Tavia Nyong’o’s “Afro-fabulation.” Hartman describes critical fabulation as a methodology that combines research with imagined narrative in order to address archival gaps occasioned by violence. Nyong’o builds from Hartman’s premise with Afro-fabulation, which enacts a “tactical fictionalizing of a world that is, from the point of view of black social life, already false” to critique structures of oppression in the present while also projecting a vision of a better world.

I add the auto- prefix to critical/Afro-fabulation to indicate both 1) that artists use this to represent their own experiences and 2) that the process creates another “auto” or self. The combination of critical autonomy and a relationship between the “selves” in the text is especially important when reading survivor narratives in particular. The intentional use of fabulation resists what Nyong’o calls “demands for legibility and transparency,” thus subverting the adjudicative skepticism faced by survivors. The self-relation involved in the act of constructing another self also responds to the internal separation and dissociation that survivors experience but does so in a way that does not totalize or pathologize “brokenness.” Like autofabulated narrative itself, the relationship between the selves is mediated by the survivor. In the process, the autofabulative mode creates an other self, which opens up new possibilities for self-relation for survivors, and, by extension, relation between survivors and audiences. When audiences replicate the racist, misogynist, and/or homophobic logics that disempowered the survivor in the first place, the survivor’s trauma is further compounded. Conversely, autofabulation models a reading practice that prioritizes survivors’ agency and authoritative control of the narrative, thus expanding analysis beyond the binary of un/believability.

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Introduction

Emily Doe and the Narrative Problem of Trauma

I have created a self inside the suffering.

— Chanel Miller, *Know My Name*

Before I met Chanel Miller, I met Emily Doe. So did the millions of people who read Miller's victim impact statement, published online the day after rapist Brock Turner was officially sentenced. To protect her identity in the widely publicized case, Miller had been referred to only by her pseudonym, Emily Doe. In 2019, three years after the victim impact statement was published, Miller released her memoir, which she titled *Know My Name* as a reference to the reclamation of her identity. In her review of *Know My Name*, critic Doreen St. Félix comments that Miller's writing in both memoir and victim impact statement addresses not only a legal injustice but a narrative one. Media attention around the case had produced so much information about Turner that "in literature, we might call him the protagonist."¹ In contrast, the "narrative attention" paid to Emily Doe too often reflected dehumanizing tropes that discredit and blame victims of sexual violence.

Miller's impact statement directly confronted this narrative injustice both explicitly by systematically dissecting Turner's own excuses and implicitly by refusing to perform as a sterile, polite victim. Her statement is angry, sarcastic, even occasionally funny. Her voice comes through with increasing vividness. The statement is remarkable not only as a

¹ Doreen St. Félix, "The Irrepressibly Political Survivorship of Chanel Miller," (*The New Yorker*, 2019). <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/the-irrepressibly-political-survivorship-of-chanel-miller>

legal document, but as a piece of writing. St. Félix writes that by “eclips[ing] the narratives that hinged on appraisals of the social worth of her assailant,” “Emily Doe unwound the literary problem.”²

And yet Emily Doe’s work was not done. In *Know My Name*, Emily appears throughout the text in various roles. Miller writes that Emily is “born” from Miller’s response to reading critical internet comments that blamed Emily for her rape. Emily becomes a container, a way for “the body being publicly taken apart” to not be Miller’s own “me but not me at all” that Miller can hate, reject, and blame.³ When the trial begins, Emily continues to function protectively as a way of “keeping the selves separate,” although Miller soon wonders how long she can continue to “manage this back-and-forth between worlds, the rotation of selves [that] require[s] two entirely different modes of being.”⁴ When, after eight months, Miller decides to see a therapist, she describes her desire to “show her [therapist] Emily[,] bring her to the scene where [Emily] was found beneath the trees.”⁵ Emily is still external, but Miller’s relation to her is changing. On the day that Turner is finally convicted, Miller is struck by a vision of “Emily” on the morning after the assault, “struggling to stand up straight.” Miller realizes that the hatred and fear she has felt toward Emily is not her own, that she had internalized “the voices that told [Emily] she was a humiliation [and] deserved the damage.” “How badly I had

² St. Félix, “Survivorship of Chanel Miller.”

³ Chanel Miller, *Know My Name* (Penguin Books, 2019), 37.

⁴ Miller, 53, 67.

⁵ Miller, 100.

wanted to abandon her,” Miller thinks to herself, “How little I’d thought of her life.”⁶

Later, when Miller sits down to write her victim impact statement, she imagines the “present version of myself” walking toward “the girl who woke up on the gurney.” When Miller finishes writing, she sees “past self and present self hu[g], and past self disappea[r].”⁷ Here, Miller’s relationship to Emily shifts again, this time toward caring self-relation and integration. Notably, the past self here is never called Emily by name.

Through the work of the victim impact statement, Emily Doe becomes a public figure and resource. The next time her name appears, it is in a letter of support sent to Miller by another survivor, who signs her letter “Past Emily Doe.”⁸ This letter, and hundreds like it, take on Emily Doe’s position to encourage Miller that she is part of a large community of survivors. Stepping into the position of “Emily Doe” allows Miller and the letter writers to “try on each other’s lives” and imagine different pasts and futures. The survivors, Miller writes, “gave me one thousand futures to grow into;” in turn, the survivors “became young again, finally declaring what they deserved, reclaiming all that had been taken.”⁹ Emily Doe is Chanel Miller, but she is also millions of women who have survived sexual violence.

I am fascinated by the way that Emily Doe becomes a resource to challenge the same narrative injustice that created her, to “unwind the literary problem.” The literary

⁶ Miller, 207.

⁷ Miller, 223.

⁸ Miller, 251.

⁹ Miller, 252.

problem is bound up in questions of authority that trauma survivors regularly face. Trauma survivors need and deserve to be received as credible and authoritative, but instead, audiences frequently turn both survivors' narratives and survivors themselves into objects of debate, study, or even entertainment. Miller confronts this problem by claiming not only authority but authorship. At its most fundamental sense, to author means "to create" or "to increase."¹⁰ To protect herself from external and internal danger, Miller "increases" herself by creating Emily. Within the text, Miller as author deploys Emily to perform different literary acts of narration, metaphorization, and perspective shifting. In the process, Emily becomes a means of developing both compassionate self-relation and solidarity with others.

In *Beside Ourselves: Trauma, Self-Relation, and Autofabulation*, I consider the narrative problem of trauma through new terms of engagement inspired by survivors themselves. Despite the hegemonic expectation for documentarian forms, survivors use a diverse array of techniques to tell their own stories. I develop the term "autofabulation" to describe survivors' use of the fictional, fabricated, and fantastic. My usage of fabulation is derived from historian Saidiya Hartman's "critical fabulation" and performance studies scholar Tavia Nyong'o's "Afro-fabulation." Hartman describes critical fabulation as a methodology that combines research with imagined narrative in order to address archival gaps occasioned by violence; her decision to "imagine what cannot be verified" both "tell[s] an impossible story" and "amplif[ies] the impossibility

¹⁰ "Author," The Online Etymology Dictionary, <https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=author>.

of its telling.”¹¹ Nyong’o builds from Hartman’s premise with Afro-fabulation, which enacts a “tactical fictionalizing of a world that is, from the point of view of black social life, already false.”¹² Its priorities are speculative rather than representative; Afro-fabulation “present[s] the falsification of the ‘true’ order as a pathway toward its correction.”¹³ Nyong’o’s definition of fabulation as “tactical fictionalizing of a world that [is] already false” speaks to the ability of the fabulative mode to critique structures of oppression in the present while also projecting a vision of a better world.

In my work, I add the auto- prefix to critical/Afro-fabulation to indicate both 1) that artists use this to represent their own experiences and 2) that the process creates another “auto” or self. The combination of critical autonomy and a relationship between the “selves” in the text is especially important when reading survivor narratives in particular. The intentional use of fabulation resists “demands for legibility and transparency,”¹⁴ thus subverting the adjudicative skepticism faced by survivors. The self-relation involved in the act of constructing another self also responds to the internal separation and dissociation that survivors experience but does so in a way that does not totalize or pathologize “brokenness.” Like autofabulated narrative itself, the relationship between the selves is mediated by the survivor.

¹¹ Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” *Small Axe, Number 26* 12, no. 2 (2008), 12.

¹² Tavia Nyong’o, *Afro-Fabulations: The Queer Drama of Black Life* (New York: NYU Press, 2019), 10.

¹³ Nyong’o, 15.

¹⁴ Nyong’o, 6.

In the process, the autofabulative mode creates an other self, which opens up new possibilities for self-relation for survivors, and, by extension, relation between survivors and audiences. As queer theorist José Estaban Muñoz writes, “performed care of the self” invites others to “see and imagine a resistance to entrenched systems of domination.”¹⁵ This strategy is especially subversive when deployed by survivors of sexual trauma, who are regularly accused of “making up” their experiences. By asserting their creative autonomy over *fabula*, defined by Hartman as “the building blocks of narrative,”¹⁶ survivors implicitly critique this accusation and stake a claim for their own authority. This shift also models and demands ethical engagement and reception from their audiences, a move with profound ethical, political, and pedagogical consequences. Autofabulation is thus a self-representative strategy that can elide the demands for “authenticity” that constrain and harm survivors of trauma who choose to represent their experiences publicly; its existence implicitly critiques the credibility rubric.

Despite the autobiographical context, autofabulation is equally concerned with the practices of witness and reception performed by audiences in response to trauma narratives. When audiences replicate the racist, misogynist, and/or homophobic logics that disempowered the survivor in the first place, the survivor’s trauma is further compounded. Conversely, autofabulation models a reading practice that prioritizes

¹⁵ José Estaban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (University of Minnesota Press), 144.

¹⁶ Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” 11.

survivors' agency and authoritative control of the narrative, thus expanding analysis beyond the binary of un/believability.

Prior to discussing the case studies of autofabulation that guide my chapters, I pause here to discuss a few key terms and their narrative problems: trauma, witness, and self-representation.

Trauma

Trauma as a concept has a contested history—and present. Critics such as Parul Seghal argue that trauma as a term has become so overdetermined and diluted that it fails to register meaningfully. As Seghal writes, “the claim that trauma’s imprint is a timeless feature of our species, that it etches itself on the human brain in a distinct way” fails to account for the evolution of its terminology, from “railway spine” to “shellshock” and beyond. Even traumatic flashbacks, often considered a hallmark of traumatic experience, only began “to be reported after the invention of film.” In light of this, Seghal asks, “Are the words that come to our lips when we speak of our suffering ever purely our own?”¹⁷ In response, I argue that the examples Seghal offers demonstrate not trauma’s conceptual flimsiness but rather the human need for shared sociocultural narratives to clarify and provide language for experience. Language is social, and so is never “purely our own.”

Trauma’s unique relationship to language has fueled debates about whether it can be represented at all. In Cathy Caruth’s field-defining *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma,*

¹⁷ Parul Seghal, “The Case Against the Trauma Plot,” (The New Yorker, 2021), <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2022/01/03/the-case-against-the-trauma-plot>.

Narrative, and History, she uses a Freudian psychoanalytic framework that defines trauma as an event “experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor.”¹⁸ The break between the unconscious and conscious mind is fundamental to the Caruthian model’s insistence on trauma’s fundamental unrepresentability. This model misses three central aspects of trauma: its corporeality, its sociality, and its political structure.

When trauma is solely considered as a problem of representation, its essential corporeality and materiality can be overlooked. As Naomi Mandel writes, “By *seeming* to privilege experience (specifically, the unbearable experience of suffering) as the locus, origin, or performance of the limits of speech, [the rhetoric of the unspeakable] keeps experience under erasure.”¹⁹ In other words, the unspeakability model’s tendency to prioritize silence and lacunae can reinforce a belief in trauma as a totalizing, even obliterating force, and in turn overlook the actual language and material experience of the survivor in the present. Sharon Marcus expands on this with regard to rape specifically; language that conceptualizes rape as “terrifyingly unnameable and unrepresentable” reinforces a philosophical belief in “violence as a self-explanatory first cause” and in turn

¹⁸ Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 4.

¹⁹ Naomi Mandel, *Against the Unspeakable: Complicity, the Holocaust, and Slavery in America*, (University of Virginia Press, 2006), 70.

“implies that rape can be only feared or legally repaired, not fought.”²⁰ Perhaps most urgently, Mandel explains that the unspeakability model “silences suffering’s crucial corporeality,” and in doing so, “facilitates a forgetting of our own corporeality, our own vulnerability to suffering.”²¹

The embodied presence of both survivor and witness is a further reminder that while trauma is often conceptualized as an individual experience, the nature of suffering is irreducibly social. I ground my understanding of trauma as social in Judith Butler’s description of the body as “a social phenomenon,” “exposed to others, vulnerable by definition.”²² As they explain, “bodies are bound up with others through material needs, through touch, through language, through a set of relations without which we cannot survive.” Our bodily vulnerability is the condition of possibility for “subjugation[,] cruelty” and grief; and yet this same vulnerability also enables desire and love.²³ To put this more directly, while the affective, corporeal, and psychological experiences of a trauma survivor cannot be literally shared by another, in Sara Ahmed’s terms, “the

²⁰ Sharon Marcus, “Fighting Bodies, Fighting Words: A Theory and Politics of Rape Prevention,” in *Feminists Theorize the Political*, ed. Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott (Routledge, 1992), 387.

²¹ Mandel, 70.

²² Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (Verso, 2009), 33.

²³ Butler, *Frames of War*, 66.

impossibility of feeling the pain of others does not mean that their pain is simply theirs, or that their pain has nothing to do with me.”²⁴

Psychiatrist Judith Herman states it concisely: “the study of psychological trauma is an inherently political enterprise because it calls attention to the experience of oppressed people.”²⁵ Similarly, Ann Cvetkovich, in *An Archive of Feelings*, describes trauma as “the hinge between systemic structures of exploitation and oppression and the felt experience of them.”²⁶ It almost goes without saying that members of oppressed communities are far more likely to experience trauma caused by interpersonal violence as well as the chronic trauma inherent in systems such as racism, sexism, homophobia, ableism, and capitalism.²⁷ The prevalence of trauma in the lives of the oppressed should prompt us to reconsider the description of trauma as something that falls outside of “normal” human experience; this “normal” implicitly assumes a non-oppressed subject. For example, Harriet Jacobs’s experience of routinized sexual abuse did not “fall outside” the “normal” experience of enslaved Black women and girls. Sharon M. Wasco emphasizes that defining trauma as something that shatters one’s belief in the world as

²⁴ Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Second Edition (University of Edinburgh Press, 2014), 30.

²⁵ Judith L. Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*, Fourth Edition (Basic Books, 2022), 337, Kindle.

²⁶ Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Duke University Press, 2003), 12.

²⁷ Even if the initiating trauma is not linked to oppressive systems, such as a natural disaster, the support that survivors receive is inevitably shaped by their social status. As a representative example, consider the government’s response to the majority Black and working-class victims of Hurricane Katrina.

“safe, just, and predictable” “excludes people whose worldviews, at young ages, are formed by the knowledge that the world is not necessarily just or safe,” such as people of color, poor and working class people, immigrants and refugees, and child victims of physical and/or sexual abuse.²⁸ Finally, awareness of the political dimension of trauma refuses the tendency to pathologize or totalize victims. As Ahmed writes, “the transformation of the wound into an identity cuts the wound off from a history of ‘getting hurt’ or injured.”²⁹

My refusal to separate the personal from the political or the individual from the social is a first principle of feminist and queer trauma theory, and, in turn, of feminist and queer theories of trauma. Herman’s own groundbreaking work *Trauma and Recovery* crucially insists that trauma stemming from sexual and intimate partner abuse is an urgent problem with deep structural roots. By advocating for the recognition of c-PTSD (complex post-traumatic stress disorder), she provided language for the psychological damage caused by long-term, chronic trauma, previously ignored in the event-based diagnostic criteria. Her theory of chronic and complex trauma has proven especially useful for understanding the harm done to structurally vulnerable subjects, such as children and rape victims. Herman’s book also sets forth the three-part model for trauma recovery (safety, narrative, community) that I discuss in further detail near the end of this introduction.

²⁸Sharon M. Wasco, “Conceptualizing the Harm Done by Rape,” *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse* 4, no. 4 (October 2003): 312-313, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1524838003256560>.

²⁹ Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 30.

A further dimension of my understanding of trauma as political is sourced from critical disability studies. Because of trauma's effect on the bodymind (even though these effects vary widely among survivors), and because of the accessibility barriers faced by many survivors, I classify trauma as a disabling force. "Bodymind," a key term and foundational principle in critical disability studies, popularized by Margaret Price, denotes the "imbrication (not just the combination) of the entities usually called 'body' and 'mind.'" ³⁰ ³¹ Conceptualizing the bodymind as one whole indexes the psychological and physical symptoms that commonly follow trauma. For some survivors, this is temporary; other survivors deal with chronic psychological or physical impairments. In any case, conceptualizing the effect of trauma on lived experience benefits from Susan Wendell's observation that "the theory of disability is also the theory of the oppression of the body by a society and its culture." ³² Critical disability studies draws attention to the normalization of the medical model of disability, which locates the "problem" of inaccessibility and suffering within the body of the disabled person, and thus demands that the disabled person pursue cure in order to "solve" the problem. As Eli Clare demonstrates, "cure" is used ideologically as it "valu[es] some body-minds and devalu[es] others," which in turn "intensifies the forces placed on people deemed

³⁰ Margaret Price, "The Bodymind Problem and the Possibilities of Pain." *Hypatia* 30, no. 1 (2015): 270. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24542071>.

³¹ Price notes that she originally came across the term "bodymind" in a trauma studies context, Babette Rothschild's *The Body Remembers: The Psychopathology of Trauma and Trauma Treatment* (2000). The term's specific use in disability studies, as I describe it here, is Price's work.

³² Susan Wendell, "Toward a Feminist Theory of Disability," in *The Disability Studies Reader*, Second Edition, ed. Lennard J. Davis (Routledge, 2006), 254.

troubled.”³³ Devaluation commonly attaches to conditions that are not easily cured and to patients who do not readily accept prescriptions (and proscriptions) intended to cure.³⁴ Trauma survivors often fall into these “troubled” categories. The social model of disability intervenes by locating the problem not in the bodymind of the disabled person but in the disabling structures of oppression that limit and constrain disabled people’s life chances. As the late Patty Berne put it, “my body doesn’t oppress me[,] but society—that can be incredibly oppressive.”³⁵ In this vein, I locate the “problem” of trauma with the oppressive forces and actors that *cause* trauma rather than with the victims recovering from trauma’s aftermath.

In this project, I ground my understanding of trauma recovery in Judith Herman’s three-part model. As Herman emphasizes, even though “stage” implies a sense of linear progression, survivors move freely between stages throughout the period of recovery. The first requirement is to “establish safety.” This begins with physical safety but extends to more metaphorical or felt safety, such as establishing a predictable routine. The next stage is referred to as both “narrativization” and “remembrance and mourning.” In this stage, the survivor narrates her experience and memories through speech or writing. Herman specifies that telling this story requires the survivor to mourn not only her

³³ Eli M. Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection: Grappling With Cure* (Duke University Press, 2017), 94.

³⁴ Clare’s discussion of the d/Deaf communities’ responses to cochlear implants are helpful illustrations of this phenomenon.

³⁵ Patty Berne and Stacey Milbern, “My Body Doesn’t Oppress Me, Society Does,” May 9, 2017, posted by the Barnard Center for Research on Women, YouTube, 5 min., 8 sec., <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7r0MiGWQY2g>

material losses, but the loss of the belief structure that formerly organized her life. The narrative is thus a theoretical project. As a narrative, it also requires an audience beyond the survivor herself. This can be a therapist or loved one, or a much larger public audience. The survivor often finds that the creation of an external narrative enables her to bear witness to her suffering in a new way too. This stage is pivotal because it functions as a performative: “this work of reconstruction actually transforms the traumatic memory, so that it can be integrated into the survivor’s life story.”³⁶ The third stage is “reconnection” with oneself and with a supportive community. The survivor integrates “those aspects of herself that she most values from the time before the trauma, from the experience of the trauma itself, and from the period of recovery,” and in doing so, “she creates a new self, both ideally and in actuality.”³⁷ In all three stages, the support of others is essential. The primary emotional experience of trauma is isolation. When recovery takes place in the context of relation, support, and care, that isolation is replaced by connection and community.

Witness

This socially informed collective framework is of vital importance when considering the reception practices around traumatic experiences that involve gendered, racial, homophobic, and sexual violence. These histories are complicated and compounded by other structural violence, especially anti-Blackness and homophobia.

³⁶ Herman, 250.

³⁷ Herman, 288-289.

These problems are also made difficult due to the forms of representative communication readily available to survivors. As Linda Alcoff and Laura Gray demonstrate in their Foucauldian analysis of survivors who “speak out,” confession runs the risk of reifying the authority of the “confessor,” or existing power structures.³⁸ Survivors, then, face a sticky web when it comes to representing their experiences. Will their testimonies be heard, or “deform[ed] by doubt”?³⁹ Will the response be voyeuristic? Will it bring them any relief, and/or will it shape the community response? And, even if the reception could be guaranteed, what about that problem of language? Can any words really encompass and express what is needed? Then again, can silence?

These questions are reflected in a critical approach to the practice of witnessing.⁴⁰ Developing an ethical and effective practice of witnessing is politically urgent. As Herman explains, any trauma resulting from interpersonal or political violence requires active resistance to the discrediting of the victim, with the knowledge that “the more powerful the perpetrator, the greater is his prerogative to name and define reality.”⁴¹ Saidiya Hartman further emphasizes that the structures of power also work through “the

³⁸ Linda Alcoff and Laura Gray, “Survivor Discourse: Transgression or Recuperation?” *Signs* 18, no. 2 (1993): 260-290. <https://doi.org/10.1086/494793>

³⁹ Leigh Gilmore, *Tainted Witness: Why We Doubt What Women Say About Their Lives*, (Columbia University Press: 2017), 6.

⁴⁰ Although “bear witness” can refer both to testifying and to receiving testimony, in this project I exclusively use “witness” to refer to the practice of listening and receiving.

⁴¹ Herman, 15.

precariousness of empathy and the uncertain line between witness and spectator.”⁴² The ethical witness, according to Hartman, must resist redoubling “spectacle” and “prurience” as well as resist the “narcissistic identification that obliterates the other,” all of which are more likely to occur when the victim is of lesser social power than the witness.⁴³

I find two related frameworks foundational to my own understanding of witnessing: Leigh Gilmore’s adequate witness, which is contextualized by sexual violence, and Courtney R. Baker’s humane insight, contextualized by anti-Black violence.⁴⁴ An adequate witness, Gilmore writes, “receive[s] testimony without deforming it by doubt, and without substituting different terms of value for the ones offered by the witness herself[...] resists the rush to judgment and learns how to attend to accounts of gendered harm and agency made by impure victims in conditions of complexity.”⁴⁵ An adequate witness consciously resists narratives and frameworks that discredit victims and reify the status quo. Relatedly, Courtney R. Baker uses “humane insight” as a guiding principle to witnessing scenes of Black suffering and death; it is a

⁴² Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, 25th Anniversary Edition, (W.W. Norton & Company, 2022), 27. Apple eBooks.

⁴³ Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 27. Hartman is specifically discussing white voyeurs of Black suffering; my use of her framework in a somewhat broader sense is an attempt to build from rather than dilute or erase that vital context.

⁴⁴ Baker’s framework is developed in a specifically visual context in resistance to the gaze. I extend her framework here to include a metaphorical sense of “seeing” as witnessing in addition to physical vision.

⁴⁵ Gilmore, *Tainted Witness*, 5-6.

“decision to identify the body being looked at as a human body, [...] recognizes violations of human dignity, and bestows or articulates the desire for actual protection.”⁴⁶

Self-Representation

The construction of a self is, like trauma, political and social—and narrative. The fields of autobiographical writing and self-representation have explicitly served as sites of meaning-making and its rhetorical and political repercussions, particularly in the tradition of African American autobiography.⁴⁷ Perhaps the most important insight from autobiography theory as it pertains to trauma narratives is the separation between the writing and written selves; that is, between the artist and the object of study. Despite its basis in the writer’s life experience, autobiographical art is always inherently designed, manipulated. Its decisions are intentional. Although readers do still tend to read autobiography as direct reportage, especially for minoritized writers (a problem I discuss in chapter four), the art object is not equivalent to the artist. As I will continue to emphasize throughout this dissertation, survivors’ self-representations must be read and analyzed *as* art rather than as documentary objects precisely because survivors are artists, not totalized sociological data points.

⁴⁶ Courtney R. Baker, *Humane Insight: Looking at Images of African American Suffering and Death*, (University of Illinois Press, 2015), 5.

⁴⁷ I discuss the central importance of African American autobiography in chapter four.

Instead, feminist autobiography theory insists that autobiographical subjects are created in the act of representation, “produced not by experience but by autobiography.”⁴⁸ Put another way, Sidonie Smith explains that “narrativity performativity constitutes interiority[;] the self that is said to be prior to the autobiographical expression or reflection is an effect of autobiographical storytelling.”⁴⁹ The performative self derives from Butler’s description of gender as performative and the Austinian sense of the performative. As a performative utterance, the written self is always distinct from the writing self. Smith further emphasizes that the fact that the self is performed for heterogenous audiences necessitates multiplicity. Multiple, heterogeneous performance allows for a subject that may be layered or fragmented. Gaps that within the performance allow space for silence, pauses, even contradictions. Such gaps resonate with Caruthian trauma theory’s description of the self as shattered; however, my project contends that instead of preemptively fetishizing fracture, we consider gaps, multiplicity, and unstable boundaries as spaces of possibility.⁵⁰

The act of self-construction occurs in the context of an audience, which introduces specific risks and vulnerabilities. Sara Ahmed and Jackie Stacey point out in their critique of “testimonial culture” that “the desire to tell one’s own story can easily

⁴⁸ Leigh Gilmore, *Autobiographics: A Feminist Theory of Women’s Self-Representation* (Cornell University Press, 1994), 25.

⁴⁹ Sidonie Smith, “Performativity, Autobiographical Practice, Resistance.” *A/b: Auto/Biography Studies* 10 no. 1 (1995), 18. doi:10.1080/08989575

⁵⁰ For a thorough philosophical discussion of the self as relational, narrative, and autonomous, see chapter three, “Outliving Oneself,” in Susan J. Brison’s *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self*.

support particular neo-liberal or even conservative agendas based on a heroic construction of the individual and of the individuated self.”⁵¹ These concerns are of particular importance when the autobiographical subject is disclosing traumatic experience, which, as I have argued, is inevitably politically contextualized. Many survivors respond to this tension by embedding social or political analysis in their work. For example, Chanel Miller explicitly discusses the role of white supremacy in both Turner’s lenient sentence and the extrajudicial murder of Philando Castile.⁵² While reception can never be guaranteed, the performative self can be constructed in a way that comments on the conditions of its own existence and reception. Many survivors, such as Miller, also explicitly, even pedagogically, discuss how their experiences have been or could be misread.

Audience’s generic expectations for autobiographical writing are currently expanding. Two such expansions of interest are autotheory, which I discuss in chapter one, and autofiction, which I discuss in chapter two. Although these terms are relatively new, the practice of integrating personal experience with theoretical and/or fictional elements has a strong genealogy in Black feminist thought in particular. Audre Lorde, for example, wrote both—such as *The Cancer Journals* and *Zami* (which she called “biomythography”). Both terms frequently appear under a variety of definitions. As I discuss in chapter one, autotheory is a new term but not a new practice, or a monolithic one. I follow Alex Brostoff and Lauren Fournier’s definition of autotheory as a mode that

⁵¹ Sara Ahmed and Jackie Stacey, “Testimonial Cultures: An Introduction,” *Cultural Values* 5 no. 1 (2001): 4. DOI: 10.1080/14797580109367217y.

⁵² Miller, 279.

integrates personal experience within a larger citational network, and thus enables a way of “thinking with rather than thinking against.”⁵³ ⁵⁴ In my own practice, I prefer Arianne Zwartjes’s emphasis on embodiment as it pertains to autotheory as that which “brings in the vulnerable elements of personal narrative and of one’s own body” in order to “refus[e] the objective voice, the pretense of neutrality, the fabrication that we can be all brain and no body, with body’s accompanying pleasures, embarrassments, and disappointments.”⁵⁵ Establishing a similar ideologically informed definition for autofiction is more difficult, especially how difficult it has been to categorize.⁵⁶ I am less concerned with differentiating autofiction from the earlier term “autobiographical fiction.” Rather, I use the term to signal an increasing contemporary awareness of work that blurs life writing and fiction via both content and form.

⁵³ Alex Brostoff and Lauren Fournier, “Introduction: Autotheory ASAP! Academia, Decoloniality, and ‘I,’” *ASAP/Journal* 6, no. 3 (2021): 490.

⁵⁴ This ethos of “besideness” is not guaranteed by any means. As I discuss in chapter one, the use of a citational network can just easily be used to reify and grasp at institutional and/or hegemonic authority.

⁵⁵ Arianne Zwartjes, “Autotheory as Rebellion: On Research, Embodiment, and Imagination in Creative Nonfiction,” *Michigan Quarterly Review*, n.d. <https://sites.lsa.umich.edu/mqr/2019/07/autotheory-as-rebellion-on-research-embodiment-and-imagination-in-creative-nonfiction/>.

⁵⁶ For more on this confusion, see Max Saunders, “Autofiction, Autobiografiction, Autofabrication, and Heteronymy: Differentiating Versions of the Autobiographical,” *Biography* 43, no. 4 (2020): 763-780. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/bio.2020.0078>

Methodology

How do you hold the pain of others? In other words, how do we tell impossible stories? And how do we listen to them? These are ethical questions but also theoretical and methodological ones. In “Venus in Two Acts,” Saidiya Hartman models the kind of thoughtful introspection and moral responsibility that I aspire to in my own work. As Hartman writes, the goal is “both to tell an impossible story and to amplify the impossibility of its telling.”⁵⁷ For Hartman, impossibility is defined by the gaps in the archive, the irrecoverable lives destroyed in the Middle Passage. Impossibility also marks the story of trauma, which disrupts the bonds between experience, memory, and language. What do we—survivors and witnesses—do with suffering that exceeds the boundaries of what feels—or even is—representable?

Autofabulation provides a fascinating way to work through and with the narrative problem of trauma. In my project, I trace autofabulation’s affordances and capacities through the work of survivors’ self-representative narratives and performance. As I previously discussed, my use of fabulation throughout this project directly invokes Saidiya Hartman’s critical fabulation and Tavia Nyong’o’s Afro-fabulation. In these frameworks, fabulation works specifically to address and (possibly) redress violence, including the violence of erasure within the archive. The critical imaginative work performed by fabulation is thus more consciously directed toward justice than the broader concept of “fictionalization.” Fabulation reorients our understanding of truth as something other than mere facticity. Toni Morrison reminds us that the key distinction to

⁵⁷ Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” 11.

make is not between fact and fiction, but between fact and truth.⁵⁸ How might rearranging the narrative elements of one's self-representation work to expose the falsity that subtends conditions of oppression? How might it thus bring readers *closer* to the truth?

In addition to the centrality of critical and Afro-fabulation, much of my citational archive is drawn from Black feminist studies. Black feminist thought illuminates that any claim for "objectivity" is premised on the assumed centrality and neutrality of white supremacy, cisheteropatriarchy, ableism, and capitalism. Rigorous scholarship instead *must* include a rigorous attention to both politics and embodiment. In fact, any study of violence and trauma that was not grounded in the acknowledgement that forms oppression intersect would be fundamentally incomplete. Relatedly, because my scholarship strives to incorporate the social, political, embodied, and affective, I echo Ann Cvetkovich's statement that studies of trauma and queer theory are "fellow travelers because they seek ways to build not just sexuality but emotional and personal life into models of political life and its transformation."⁵⁹ In fact, the next version of this project will likely need to address to what extent autofabulation is a definitively queer practice. Without necessarily intending to do so, I selected queer artists as my chapter-grounding examples in eight out of nine cases.⁶⁰ Autofabulation is, after all, a direct descendant of Nyong'o's Afro-fabulation, which he identifies as specifically Black and queer. While further reflection will likely produce more precise analysis, I can at least for now

⁵⁸ I discuss this further in chapter four.

⁵⁹ Cvetkovich, 48.

⁶⁰ The one non-queer artist is Michaela Coel, although the character that she plays in her series announces that she is not straight.

highlight autofabulation's investment in imagining otherwise and in the recurring interest in forms of kinship outside the cisheterosexual nuclear family.

With these commitments in place, much of my analytical methodology has trended toward practices of description and close reading. I work to destabilize (or outright ignore) the boundary purported to separate theorists and artists. Instead, inspired by José Esteban Muñoz (among many others), I consider artists to be co-theorists. I strive to highlight the theoretical interventions that I see them already making through their work. I use artist as a capacious term; since autofabulation is a strategy rather than a genre, the autofabulists I study in the following pages use poetry, photography, and television as well as in fiction and nonfiction. Given that my driving questions are so concerned with cultural narratives and frameworks, it is perhaps unsurprising that my chapter studies' analysis refers frequently to literary considerations such as genre, form, and reading practices.

Finally, before providing a preview of my chapters, I want to discuss the phrase that serves as my title: "beside ourselves." I draw these words from Judith Butler's "Violence, Mourning, and Politics," which discusses how language, narrative, and "cultural frames" shape how we witness others as members of the human community. Butler here is "speaking to those of us who are living in certain ways *beside ourselves*, whether in sexual passion, or emotional grief, or political rage.[...] all of which tear us from ourselves, bind us to others, transport us, undo us, implicate us in lives that are not

our own.”⁶¹ To be beside oneself can imply ecstasy or excitement, but just as often conveys devastation and despair. The configuration of the phrase implies an emotional experience so transformative that doubles and relocates the self to the space “beside” one’s original position. The language of being torn from oneself or undone is reminiscent of how trauma survivors describe their shifting sense of identity and even existence. But the configuration of the side-by-side self also suggests the shape of self-relation that I describe as produced by autofabulation in the chapters that follow. These experiences are also inherently relational: they “bind us to others” and “implicate us in lives that are not our own.” The preposition “beside,” as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick notes, also avoids the hierarchical configuration of beneath or above; it implies a sense of companionship and co-presence.⁶² Lauren Fournier, taking up Sedgwick’s description, contends that feminist theory “introduces another way of being with theory that is less assimilative . . . and more akin to an ally or a friend, something positioned beside.”⁶³ This is the orientation I hope to embody in my work as a scholar, teacher, and witness.

⁶¹ Judith Butler, “Violence, Mourning, Politics,” *Studies in Gender and Sexuality* 4 no. 1 (2003): 14. DOI: 10.1080/15240650409349213. Italics mine.

⁶² Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Duke University Press, 2003), 8.

⁶³ Lauren Fournier, *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism* (MIT Press: 2019), 110.

In my first chapter, “Seeing Double: Autofabulist Others and Autotheoretical Self-Relation in the Works of Saeed Jones and Lola Flash,” I introduce the term autofabulation as an extension of autotheoretical modes and practices in the poetry of Saeed Jones and self-portrait photography of Lola Flash. In my reading, I develop my doubled sense of the term autofabulation as indexing both the autobiographical mode and the hypervisible construction of a second self. Jones and Flash depathologize the doubled/split subject—or, as I prefer, the singular-plural or contiguous self. In the process, they also model the vital self-relation at the heart of autofabulation. Each artist’s other self functions as a resource: Jones’s doppelganger represents his “pain” in the sequence “Saeed, or the Other One,” Flash’s avatar, syzygy, creates acts of memorial that do not spectacularize suffering. The work of both Jones and Flash is also concerned with the imbrication of visibility and vulnerability for Black bodies in white supremacist contexts. As Nyong’o writes, “fabulation can be deployed against hegemonic demands for legibility and transparency that so often simply expose and endanger minoritarian lives.”⁶⁴ In alignment with autotheory’s injunction to stay with one’s own body, this chapter also includes sections of personal reflection and narrative that focus on my experience as a child in the “testimony culture” of white evangelicalism and its subtending white supremacist logic.

In my next chapter, “Off Script:” Unconventionalizing Sexual Violence in *Feel Good* and *I May Destroy You*,” I expand on the performative aspect of autofabulation and its unique capacity for sexual violence survivor narratives by

⁶⁴ Nyong’o, 15.

analyzing two recent miniseries created, written, directed, and performed by survivors: Michaela Coel's *I May Destroy You* (2020) and Mae Martin's *Feel Good* (2020-2021). Both Coel and Martin explicitly invoke writing and authorial choice as tools they leverage in the healing process. In *I May Destroy You*, Coel plays a version of herself, Arabella, a writer who is assaulted during a writing break, just as Coel was while writing the second season of her first show, *Chewing Gum*. In *Feel Good*, Martin plays a version of herself, Mae, who processes a past adolescent experience of prolonged sexual abuse, which Martin has clarified in interviews is directly based on their own experience. In my analysis, I demonstrate how both Coel and Martin subvert the expected conventions of sexual violence narratives through the uses of fictionalization and fantasy, which in turn underscores their role as authors of (rather than objects in) their own stories.

In chapter three, "'You Are This House's Ghost': Ungrievable Grief and Haunted Forms in Carmen Maria Machado and Ocean Vuong," I argue that Vuong and Machado queer forms pertaining to haunting and ghosts in order to grieve the ungrievable. I borrow "ungrievable" from Judith Butler to describe traumatic losses rendered illegible or silenced by dominant cultural frames, especially those pertaining to heteronormativity, such as the death of a queer romantic partner or experiencing abuse within a lesbian relationship. Inspired by both Derrida's conception of the spectral and Avery Gordon's theory of haunting as that which registers histories of violence, I trace Vuong's and Machado's queer formalist use of ghosts, phantoms, and haunted houses to resuscitate the socially dead—including themselves.

In chapter four, “‘This Too is Real Life:’ Reading Trauma as Relational Praxis,” I discuss the “demand for autobiography” that attaches to fiction from Black writers. As an intervention and response, I look to Toni Morrison’s critical work to develop a reading methodology that resists objectification and preserves ethical relationality within fictional contexts. I model this method in an extended close reading of intimate encounters in Brandon Taylor’s *Real Life*, a novel which implicitly teaches its reader how to approach its scenes of interpersonal violence. Finally, I apply Kiese Laymon’s ethic of rereading and revision to my own reading practice in order to further develop the responsiveness and responsibility that both Morrison and Taylor invite from readers.

Chapter One

Seeing Double: Autofabulist Others and Autotheoretical Self-Relation in the Works of Saeed Jones and Lola Flash

She told them that the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine. That if they could not see it, they could not have it.

— Toni Morrison, *Beloved*

My first exposure to autotheory happened in a pew on a Sunday night. I sat quietly next to my family, facing toward the huge, arched window above the maroon-carpeted stage where my grandfather, uncle, and father preached by turns on Sunday mornings. But on Sunday nights, the stage was empty; Sunday nights were for testimony. The testifier stood at the bottom of the stairs leading to the stage, in front of the white plaster table that held tiny plastic cups of grape juice during communion. Each testimony was different, but they all followed the same three-act structure. First, the testifier described in detail what their life was like before converting to Christianity, then they narrated the conversion experience itself, and finally they resolved the arc with a reflection about how glad they were to be a Christian now.

In many ways, their testimonies functioned as autotheory, which Lauren Fournier defines as “the integration of the auto or ‘self’ with philosophy or theory, often in ways that are direct, performative, or self-aware.”⁶⁵ On stage, they wove together their experiences with textual and theoretical insights, but they cited Paul and Peter instead of Barthes and Derrida. Unlike autotheorists, however, the available citational archive was

⁶⁵ Fournier, *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism*, 6.

limited entirely to the pages of our Bibles, and any analysis had to conform to the preordained conclusions of orthodoxy. Every confession had the same goal: to reaffirm the authority of our church, to reassure all of us that we were right, safe in our pews. It was straight out of Foucault, not that I knew who Foucault was then.

I tried to focus my attention on the testifiers' spiritual insights, but I was always most interested in the preconversion first act of their story. No one admitted it, but the first act was by far the most important—and the most interesting. The more dramatic the “before,” the more invested we all became in the “after.” The problem was that I was a terrible testifier. I barely had a first act. Instead, I had prayed the “sinner’s prayer” at four years old and had spent every moment of my childhood either at church, at the Christian school connected to the church, or at home with my ministerial family. I knew that no amount of spiritual insight could make up for my lack of dramatic material.

Twenty years later, I was sitting in a graduate seminar, trying to follow a rapid-fire discussion that had started out focused on identity in Stuart Hall’s work but had shifted into something more personal. Disclaimers about positionality escalated into increasingly personal disclosures that felt oddly competitive, as if the person who could claim the most traumatic experience would gain the authority to hold the floor. I welcomed the chance to learn more about my colleagues, but something about the increasing reliance on traumatic disclosure felt eerily familiar. Or, perhaps, it is more accurate to say that what felt familiar was my anxiety about the value of my own experience. I felt I had somehow been here before.

Arianne Zwartjes describes her autotheoretical process as a repeated return to the question, “Where is your body in all of this?”⁶⁶ My answers to this question have often felt irreducible to a single time or location. In my research, I could locate myself as the critic or the academic, trying to read closely in order to excavate meaning. This was complicated, however, by the fact that most of my work recently has taken up questions that circulate around the ethics of witnessing and commodifying trauma, a process that has seemed increasingly in tension with the fact that I have been doing this work in exchange for the caché and material resources of a PhD. My work includes studying Saeed Jones’s four-part prose poem sequence, “Saeed, or the Other One,” and activist photographer Lola Flash’s *syzygy, the vision*, a series of self-portraits, one of which is the cover of Jones’s *Alive at the End of the World*. And thus Jones, Flash, and I are bound together in this autotheoretical enterprise.

Testimony and pain take center stage in Saeed Jones’s “Saeed, or the Other One.” The speaker, a poet named Saeed Jones, has just finished speaking at a poetry reading when he notices a white man in the audience who raises his hand before the applause has even finished. When Saeed⁶⁷ reluctantly calls on him, the man asks, “Do you think you need your pain in order to write?” In response, Saeed quips “in a voice that was [his] as much as it wasn’t, ‘Oh, honey, . . . you’ve got it all wrong. My pain needs *me*.’” His tone and facial expressions provoke a laugh from the audience, but Saeed is internally

⁶⁶ Arianne Zwartjes, “Autotheory as Rebellion.”

⁶⁷ I use “Saeed” to refer to the poem’s speaker and “Jones” to refer to the poet himself, but the blurred lines between the two are important to note, as I discuss in a later section.

unsettled. In the sections that follow, Saeed is alarmed to discover that his pain, embodied as his doppelganger, has taken up residence in his living room “to find out why [the pain] needs [him].”⁶⁸

In April 2023, the man’s question and Saeed’s to himself were on my mind as I attended a talk in which Jones described the process of life-writing and then read from *Alive at the End of the World*. When I returned to reread the “Other One” series afterward, I realized that my mental image of the poem’s setting had shifted to resemble the auditorium I had been sitting in. My memory and the poem were entangled; my body was not only reading but also sitting in the audience, scribbling frantic notes. In that virtual memory space, I looked around to see if I could spot the white man, with his “white balloon of [a] blank stare,” raising his hand. And then I realized I recognized him—in myself. As much as I abhorred the logic driving the question, I had to admit that I also wanted to know the answer. After all, I thought, it would be great to be able to cite Jones’s answer in this chapter. The pronouns on the page flipped: Did *I* need *his* pain in order to write?

The encounter that Jones stages is a literal self-reflection that materializes on and through his own body. By placing his embodied experience alongside his theoretical investments and claims, Jones’s work models a form of autotheoretical practice. This autotheoretical practice is at work throughout *Alive at the End of the World*, the collection that houses the “Saeed, or the Other One” sequence. *Alive* is polyvocal, formally inventive, and explicitly grounded in an eclectic citational archive. Several of

⁶⁸ Saeed Jones, *Alive at the End of the World* (Coffee House Press, 2022), 19.

the poems are staged in direct dialogue with theorists, such as Frank Wilderson and Toni Morrison, along with performers, such as Little Richard and Aretha Franklin. By performing his own iterative interaction with the text, Jones situates his writing within a network of theory. In the final section of the book, “Notes at the End of the World,” Jones includes both detailed citation endnotes and further commentary. Many of these notes contextualize, recontextualize, and even destabilize the poems to which they are appended; these notes, combined with the cyclic and reiterative structure of the collection, prompt rereading and develop a temporal layer of repetition and multiplicity.

The autotheoretical modality and performance in *Alive* is similarly leveraged by activist photographer Lola Flash in their series of self-portraits, including the one on the cover. According to Flash, the title of this series, *syzygy, the vision*, refers both to the planetary alignment of pasts, presents, and futures and to the name of Flash’s “avatar” in the photographs.⁶⁹ As syzygy, Flash embodies a mythic, gender-neutral being who appears in an orange prison jumpsuit and a white astronaut’s helmet. Flash originally titled the emergent series “Afrofuturism,” a label that remains attached to the artist’s description of the series posted on their website. Although Flash has worked with critical attention to the political affordances of portrait photography in previous series,⁷⁰ the

⁶⁹ Karen Jaime, “Talking about Joy, Legacies, and Afrofuturity: An Interview with Lola Flash,” *ASAP/Journal*, March 8, 2021. <https://asapjournal.com/talking-about-joy-legacies-and-afrofuturity-an-interview-with-lola-flash/>.

⁷⁰ See, for example, in the description of *[sur]passing*, Flash cites Kobena Mercer’s “pigmentocracy” to ground their meditation on colorism in the Black diaspora. Flash uses a large-format camera and installs the portraits above eye level “so that the viewer has no choice but to ‘look up’” to their subjects. For more, see Hannah Abel-Hirsch, “I Want My

syzygy, the vision series marks their most explicitly conceptual work to date.⁷¹ *Syzygy, the vision* is also Flash's first series of self-portraits. Flash stages their body in relation to theory, especially in the Afrofuturist speculative sense of theory that envisions a world to come. By explicitly labeling Flash's work as "autotheory," I align their work with Fournier's insistence that autotheory is a "fundamentally transdisciplinary . . . mode of artistic practice."⁷² Flash's methodology enables an insistence on collectivity and relation that theorizes an "otherwise" path through questions of representation and pain.

Like Flash's methodology, autotheory engages recognition by situating narrated experience within a citational network. Fournier uses "intertextual identification" and "intertextual intimacy" as paired terms that refer to "that moment of seeing oneself in an other, or recognizing one's experiences in a new way," a way that ("often, though not always") appears in autotheoretical citational practice as "a way of referencing or placing alongside."⁷³ I use "recognition," here, to refer to a process of both relational understanding and understanding achieved through relation.⁷⁴ Writing with Alex

Subjects to Be Seen, Not Scrutinized," *The British Journal of Photography* (2019), <https://www.1854.photography/2019/07/i-want-my-subjects-to-be-seen-not-scrutinised/>.

⁷¹ This assessment of the level of conceptual content in Flash's work is their own evaluation. See Jaime, "Talking about Joy, Legacies, and Afrofuturity."

⁷² Fournier, *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art*, 2–3.

⁷³ Fournier, *Autotheory as Feminist Practice*, 149.

⁷⁴ The use of recognition also evokes connotations having to do with the legal system. This sense is relevant to my later concerns about the linkage between visibility and human rights, but my usage here and throughout the article is focused on the social sense of the word as I describe here.

Brostoff, Fournier emphasizes that “[autotheory] privileges thinking with over thinking against; its politics of citation unveil its relations.”⁷⁵ The relational web of citation that autotheory enters can be a sticky one, both in the colloquial sense of difficulty and in the “effect of the histories of contact between bodies, objects, and signs.”⁷⁶ Leila C. Nadir points out that autotheory’s entanglement with theory can easily slide into another form of grasping at institutional cultural capital, especially when writers of color are expected to include white citations in order to gain credibility.⁷⁷ Fournier further extends the question by pointing out that trouble can come not only because of whom we cite but also because of how we do so. For example, she notes the possibility for citation to function as “a way of incorporating others into oneself—a figurative cannibalization—for primarily one’s own benefit.”⁷⁸ Fournier’s response is to attend to the spatiality of “feminist theorizing,” which “introduces another way of being with theory that is less assimilative . . . and more akin to an ally or a friend, something positioned *beside*.”⁷⁹ Vilashini Cooppan incarnates this spatial relationship by describing autotheory’s citational practices as “a critical touching of one text to another to another that reveals a critical

⁷⁵ Alex Brostoff and Lauren Fournier, 490.

⁷⁶ Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 90.

⁷⁷ Leila C Nadir, “More Life after Ruins: Autotheory, the Politics of Citation, and the Limits of the Scholarly Gaze,” *ASAP/Journal* 6, no. 3 (2021): 540.

⁷⁸ Fournier, *Autotheory as Feminist Practice*, 197.

⁷⁹ Fournier, *Autotheory as Feminist Practice*, 110 (emphasis added). Fournier continues by referencing Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s meditation on “beside” in *Touching Feeling*; my italics for *beside* here are intended to carry over Fournier’s emphasis on the term in her discussion of Sedgwick in the original text.

kinship, relational synergies and strange bedfellows [which] enac[t] a fleshly, bodily poetics, and adopts a formal practice of bringing things together.”⁸⁰ This kind of autotheoretical citational practice can thus also blur the borders around the self—that is, the writing “I”—enmeshing into and with the Other. The inclusion of the auto- offers an opportunity to reject the spectating posture that theory historically imposes in order to include the body as attached, specific, and material.

With this in mind, it might seem paradoxical that I am interested in the virtual body of Saeed’s pain-double in “Saeed, or the Other One” and Flash’s “avatar,” syzygy. My interest in the virtual and the avatar brings together two dimensions of autotheory: its attention to embodiment and its sense of multiplicity and plurality. I suggest that the autotheoretical body itself can be multiplied not only discursively but also virtually and performatively. I term this process “autofabulation” in order to gesture toward its imaginative and speculative possibilities and also to establish it in a genealogy of theory that explores how narrative, falsity, and performance open up new ways of seeing and responding, both to others and to ourselves. (Or to be more precise, I should say “myself.”) Perhaps not surprisingly, autofabulation as a critical keyword appears more frequently in discussions about autofiction than about autotheory. Vincent Colonna coined the term “autofabulation” (*la fabulation de soi*) in 2004 in order to index the

⁸⁰ Vilashini Cooppan, “Skin, Kin, Kind, I/You/We: Autotheory’s Compositional Grammar,” *ASAP/Journal* 6, no. 3 (2021): 587.

utility of “falsehood which intentionally troubles narrative elements taken to be true.”⁸¹

Colonna’s sense of the word derives from Bergson’s “fabulatory function,” which describes myths deployed by religious groups to maintain control. Bergson is concerned that “a fiction, if its image is vivid and insistent, may indeed masquerade as perception and in that way prevent or modify action.”⁸² The power for the “fabulatory” and fictional to modify action is certainly borne out in my own experience within a high-control religious group, but studying doubles has taught me to look for multiplicity and cross-purposes.

The most challenging piece of exploring Jones’s and Flash’s autotheoretical interventions has been the imperative not to excise my experience, my implication, my body, my “I” in the process. In what follows, I attempt to return to Zwartjes’s question—“Where is my body in all this?”—to reflect on my own “critical touch,” where and how I leave fingerprints. Sara Ahmed insists that “theory can do more the closer it gets to the skin,”⁸³ and so I want to use my body and my experience critically. My body and my experience strengthen and clarify the analysis of my theoretical work, while my theoretical work prompts me to analyze my lived experience with ever-increasing rigor. In other words, I want to remain a terrible testifier with no allegiance to a predetermined outcome. As I have thought about testimony, I have found it helpful to reflect on my

⁸¹ Benoît Loiseau, “Against the Tyranny of Fact: Autofabulation as a Queer Strategy of Resistance,” *NECSUS*, 2022, <https://necsus-ejms.org/against-the-tyranny-of-the-fact-autofabulation-as-a-queer-strategy-of-resistance/>.

⁸² Loiseau.

⁸³ Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Duke University Press, 2017), 11.

evangelical upbringing as an embodiment of many of the white supremacist logics that Jones and Flash subvert. My childhood and adolescent experiences in white evangelicalism fostered unquestioning allegiance to white patriarchal structures of objectivity and authority alongside a deep sense of self-doubt. My experience also programmed me with a fundamentalist sense of binary, black-and-white logic that has proved difficult to shake. Even rejecting rigidity has proved treacherous. For example, in writing this paragraph, I have struggled to resist the temptation to stage a dichotomous opposition between my past and my present that would imply that my present self represents a perfect antithesis to the fundamentalist white supremacy of my past. As much as I would like to fall back into the rigid security of “or” and “rather than” to propel me away from that which repels me, the re/doubled folds of autotheory’s subjects and methods require “both/and.”

In the spirit of both/and, I turn to the figure of the double, which is another term for Saeed’s virtual body and Flash’s avatar. Although I remain committed to a sense of multiplicity beyond a binary, I am interested in the double’s characteristic of repetition and resemblance and also in its ability to reproduce an Other in relation to the Self. In this way, it resonates with the inescapable self-constitutive effect of autobiographical writing more broadly. Sidonie Smith argues that the “the interiority or self that is said to be prior to the autobiographical expression or reflection is an effect of autobiographical storytelling,” which, in turn, challenges the “assum[ption of] an ontological and

integumentary relationship of interiority to bodily surface and bodily surface to text.”⁸⁴

The doubling process confronts the assumed one-to-one relationship between interiority and surface, via either the excessive surfaces of replication or the excessive interiorities of a divided subject.

As a trope, the double can be roughly sorted into the categories of external double and internal double. External doubles are replications of the “original,” usually appearing as doppelgangers. Internal doubling is more of a division than a multiplication—this is the person “of two minds,” the double consciousness, the split personality. In contemporary discussions of autotheory, this sense of internal fracture and fragmentation appears regularly. One form that fits neither category, or rather fits both categories, is that of the reflection, or mirror image. A reflection does not have the doppelganger’s autonomy,⁸⁵ and yet it is regularly recognized as something “other” to the interiority of the self. Freud uses the doppelganger in his discussion of the uncanny, defined as that “species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar.”⁸⁶ The familiar element is startling not only in its appearance but also in its apparent autonomy as “something that has been repressed and now returns” without

⁸⁴ Sidonie Smith, “Performativity, Autobiographical Practice, Resistance.” *A/b: Auto/Biography Studies* 10 no. 1 (1995). doi:10.1080/08989575

⁸⁵ Except in the cases where it *becomes* an external double, in which it takes on the uncanny valence I discuss later as pertaining to the doppelganger. The frightening opening scene in Jordan Peele’s *Us* (2019), in which a young girl’s “reflection” reaches out to strangle her, is a representative example of the terror the boundary-crossing reflection can create.

⁸⁶ Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, trans. David McLintock (Penguin Books, 2003), 124.

warning or consent. This return is often troubling for both epistemological and ontological reasons, given that “the boundary between fantasy and reality is blurred” and that it includes confronting “the reality of something that we have until now considered imaginary,” such as “a symbol [that] takes on the full function and significance of what it symbolizes.”⁸⁷

The Freudian *uncanny* maps surprisingly neatly onto Jones’s encounter with “the Other One,” or his pain. Their encounter begins firmly entrenched in the Freudian uncanny and the doppelganger’s association with deadly threat. When Saeed returns to his apartment following the reading, he is startled by “what looked like a dead body sprawled on the couch.” When he turns on the light, however, he finds “a me that wasn’t me,” a phrase that recalls the earlier description of the “voice that was [his] as much as it wasn’t” in the earlier section of the poem. Saeed’s initial terror is dispersed by the beginning of recognition and relation. As he looks across the room furtively at the Other One, he notices the double is doing the same—and “it started to feel silly: me in the corner of my living room and me on the couch, taking turns pretending not to be inspecting my selves.” The humor of the predicament eases his terror, and the Other’s reflected smile prompts a realization of “just how much [Saeed] likes [his own] smile.”⁸⁸ Thus, Jones’s encounter with the Other One transposes and transforms his double from a force of estrangement to one of relation.

⁸⁷ Freud, *The Uncanny*, 147.

⁸⁸ Jones, *Alive at the End of the World*, 39.

In the encounter with the Other One, recognition and familiarity are dynamic. The Other One at first “look[s] like the idea of myself coming into focus.” As Saeed blinks, he sees a series of increasingly intimate resemblances: first “a white policeman’s description of me,” then a “Black policeman’s description of me,” followed by “a resemblance that could fool the neighbor,” and finally one that could prompt “several aunties at my family reunion [to call] him by my childhood nickname.” The criterion for resemblance is relational and moves from surveillance to connection, as constituted by Saeed’s own recognition. As the two begin to speak, Saeed notes that “it was unnerving until it wasn’t” to be in “his company—our company,”⁸⁹ the shift in pronouns highlighting a shift in relation and Saeed’s perception of the Other One’s alterity (or lack thereof). As he moves through and beyond the terrors of the uncanny, Saeed finds a sense of kinship and mutuality with his double, one that becomes a resource for self-reflection and self-relation in the sections to come.

Unlike the gap or space that separates the doppelganger from the self, the internal double forms along a sharp dividing line within the self. Its trace marks a scene of rupture, laceration, even wounding. Like the doppelganger, the internal double also historically invokes the frightening, violent, and uncanny as it stages a battle for self-possession.⁹⁰ Internal doubling can also work as a response to external pressures. Take, as

⁸⁹ Jones, 39.

⁹⁰ It is important to note here that the alter ego’s frequent correspondence with evil and violence is imbricated with ableist stigma attached to real conditions, such as dissociative identity and schizophrenia. I am interrogating cultural assumptions here, not psychological conditions.

a key example, DuBois's description of double consciousness as "two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body," which is formed as a result of "always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity."⁹¹ The divide between the "two warring ideals" forms in response to the lacerating force of white supremacy.

Related to DuBois's "twoness" is the Cartesian split between mind and body, another line that historically cuts through the theorized self. In the white evangelicalism of my upbringing, the split between mind and body was more commonly discussed as a split between the body and the soul. A well-traveled aphorism asserted, "You don't have a soul: you *are* a soul, you *have* a body."⁹² This cliché was most frequently used to condemn anything "of the flesh" in favor of the domain "of the spirit," which included holier pursuits, such as prayer, service, and spiritual discipline. As I learned quickly as a soul who had a female body, the hierarchy of spirit and flesh fueled a hierarchy about *kinds* of flesh, especially with respect to gender and race. The flesh is a metonym for "sin nature," a nature attributed first to Eve. Opinions varied about the causal relationship between her gender and her sin, but what did not vary was the belief that women were considered simultaneously spiritually inferior to men *and* responsible for their souls. Eve had tempted Adam, after all. This responsibility was largely relegated to the "fleshiest"

⁹¹ W. E. B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (A. C. McClurg & Co., 1903), 8.

⁹² This was usually attributed to C. S. Lewis, but it is actually a paraphrase from George MacDonald; see C. S. Lewis Foundation, "Quotes Misattributed to C.S. Lewis," 2023, <https://www.cslewis.org/aboutus/faq/quotes-misattributed/>.

domain: sexuality. Every few months, my youth group leaders divided us by gender. While the boys were playing dodgeball in the gym, the girls were instructed about the spiritual danger of spaghetti straps and cutoff shorts.

Less explicit but equally omnipresent were corollary beliefs about whiteness. The “mark of Cain” and its descendant beliefs were not disavowed by the Southern Baptist Convention until 1995, when I was still attending the nursery at my own Baptist church. The textbooks at my school came from Bob Jones University, whose vehement anti-Blackness motivated a Supreme Court case.⁹³ Years later, I read excerpts from Florida’s denialist history textbooks with a sense of grim recognition. My evangelical upbringing was deeply insular and disconnected from the “secular” world, but its DNA was cloned from the nucleus of American white supremacy.

When I entered academia, the familiar hierarchy of spirit and flesh also appeared in the primacy of a “life of the mind” that frequently ignored bodies’ real conditions. In the last few years, these conditions have included a raging pandemic, intensifying police violence against Black people, a graduate student worker strike, and, most recently, a globally broadcast genocide against Palestinian people. I was reassured to hear discussions that were informed and compassionate, but I was disheartened to see so many efforts begin and end with drafting statements. The gap between thought and action, mind and body, has felt disturbingly familiar, haunted by the imperative to preserve the status quo.

⁹³ See *Bob Jones University v. United States*, 461 U.S. 574 (1983).

Reading and thinking alongside autotheorists such as Jones and Flash reminds me that these gaps can—perhaps must—be bridged. The autotheoretical “I” includes both the “I” that thinks and the “I” that exists in the material world. Acknowledging the body at the scene of theoretical analysis also further clarifies that claims for objective authority are always claims made and adjudicated by systems of bodily hierarchy. Audre Lorde addresses this in “Poetry Is Not a Luxury,” in which she contrasts the Cartesian “white fathers [who] told us ‘I think, therefore I am’” with “the Black mother, the poet, who whispers in each of us, ‘I feel, therefore I can be free.’” Poetry, in Lorde’s analysis, includes the “language to express and charter [the] revolutionary demand,” placed alongside the “experience [that teaches] us that action in the now is also necessary, always.”⁹⁴ Pursuing the integration of thought, feeling, experience, and action is and ought to be the work of the autotheorist.

Insisting on the integration of mind and body can also open exciting possibilities formally and artistically. Flash demonstrates that an integrated approach can read a doubled self as something plural rather than split. Flash illustrates this plurality by using self-portraiture to depict and perform a collective and communal self. The fact that syzygy is embodied by Flash illustrates a layered and reciprocal relationship that is present in their body but not confined to its borders or edges. Syzygy also can enfold a multiplicity of others. Flash narrates the decision to dress syzygy in the orange prison

⁹⁴ Audre Lorde, “Poetry Is Not a Luxury,” in *Sister Outsider* (Crossing Press, 1984), 38.

jumpsuit as a move to honor and acknowledge others “who look like me,”⁹⁵ individuals who are victims of racist mass incarceration.

The connection Flash makes between resemblance and relation also allows Flash to communicate outside the pure documentarian representational mode historically attached to photography as a medium. In “In Memory of Trayvon,”⁹⁶ Flash stands outside a yellow building that looks like the back of a high school. One of their feet rests a few inches in front of the other, as if taking a step forward—or backward. Their hands are open in front of them, and they have just let go of handfuls of Skittles, which have scattered on the sidewalk in front of them. A few pieces of candy still cling to their open palms. They are framed from behind by a long outdoor pavilion supported by golden-yellow pillars, which stretch behind them like a tunnel. The photograph is staged during the photographer’s golden hour—the shadows are long and the colors are warm. The colors, posture, and composition echo that of saints’ portraits: Flash-as-syzygy is haloed by the pillars, hands open in supplication, maybe even benediction. This is not a portrait of Trayvon Martin but an elegy for him, a representation of the grief and love of his community. Flash represents the scene of violence without reifying it, instead suffusing the frame with light and spiritual reverence. This move challenges and subverts white American culture’s tendency to simultaneously spectacularize and naturalize Black trauma and death. By taking on the posture themselves, Flash joins with Martin in spirit, layering love and community into a moment defined by Martin’s isolation and

⁹⁵ Jaime, “Talking about Joy, Legacies, and Afrofuturity.”

⁹⁶ Lola Flash, *syzygy, the vision*. <https://www.lolaflash.com/syzygy>.

vulnerability. In interviews, Flash has commented that “there’s a little bit of me inside” each of their portraiture subjects. Here the equation is reversed: Syzygy holds their community inside their singular body.

Multiplicity in a singular body inevitably raises the specter of the “authentic.” To be double is often read and received as that which is duplicitous. This was the doubleness that haunted me most as a child in the white evangelical church. After my early conversion, I was supposed to have been “born again” after praying the “sinner’s prayer,” a kind of Austinian performative in which the confession of sin and statement of belief in Jesus brings about salvation. My fleshly self was supposed to have been totally replaced by a new, higher, spiritual self that could act with moral perfection. My anxiety stemmed from the fact I could never achieve the perfection demanded. My sinfulness was proof that my prayer of salvation had failed, and since God could not fail, the problem had to spring from my own lack of authenticity in the act of prayer itself. One Bible verse that I memorized was Jeremiah 17:9: “The heart is deceitful above all things, who can understand it?”⁹⁷ That word, translated by most English Bibles as “deceitful,” is the Hebrew word *aqob*, which literally means “foot-tracked,” connoting the same “heel-grasping” that gave the deceitful, usurping Jacob his name. I was terrified by the prospect of being irredeemably deceitful, suspicious that even my good intentions were evidence of my duplicity, that I was lying even to myself. I began to pray “insurance prayers,” asking to be saved again “just in case” I had not “meant it enough” before, and then “just in case” my insurance prayer had not been authentic enough, and on and on. It became an

⁹⁷ NIV translation, which was the most frequently used translation in my church.

endless loop of self-doubt, a paradigmatic example of the Foucauldian power of confession to reify the authority that oppresses. With twenty years of perspective, I can now imagine the “deceitful heart” marked the footprints left by doubling back, seeking out new paths on rough terrain, Derridean traces⁹⁸ that signify both what has been and what remains.

My eventual acceptance of my own multiplicity is ultimately what drew me to artists such as Jones and Flash, who intentionally embrace multiplicity while engaging the problem of authenticity. Anxiety about the “real” and authentic has a long history in modalities of writing the self. This anxiety often slips into a demand for transparency on the part of audiences, who equate “authenticity” with a perfect correspondence between the writing and written self. By intentionally highlighting the gap between their writing selves and their performed avatars, Jones and Flash both evade this demand. The mutually constitutive relationship between the writing and written self is mediated through performativity, but that performance is always situated. Sidonie Smith argues that credibility and authenticity are closely related to the way that “discourses that comprise the sense of the ‘credible’ and the ‘real’”⁹⁹ are part of a larger process of “the cultural regulation of always already identified bodies.”¹⁰⁰ The reception of an auto-

⁹⁸ I am indebted here to Gayatri Spivak’s translator’s note in Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), xvii: “I stick to ‘trace’ in my translation, because it ‘looks the same’ as Derrida’s word; the reader must remind himself of at least the track, even the spoor, contained within the French word.”

⁹⁹ Smith, “Performativity, Autobiographical Practice, Resistance,” 110.

¹⁰⁰ Smith, “Performativity, Autobiographical Practice, Resistance,” 109.

performance is thus shaped by existing racialized hierarchies, especially when audiences “expect a certain kind of performativity that conforms relatively comfortably to criteria of intelligibility.”¹⁰¹ These expectations subtend the double-bind of legibility that minority auto-performers are forced to navigate—appearing “authentically” can require relinquishing autonomy, expression, and even safety.

In navigating this tricky terrain, Jones and Flash refuse what Tavia Nyong’o calls “dominant representationalist politics.”¹⁰² Their doubles move past the binary of authenticity/performance to the both/and of fabulation. In doing so, they open up new spaces of potentiality and possibility for themselves and their communities. The relational affordances of autofabulation are illuminated by tracing a genealogy for the term rooted in Nyong’o’s Afro-fabulation and Saidiya Hartman’s critical fabulation. By adding the auto- to these senses of fabulation, I look for how the fabulatory function is at work when the self serves as both subject and medium.

Afro-fabulation, defined by Nyong’o, enacts a “tactical fictionalizing of a world that is, from the point of view of black social life, already false.”¹⁰³ Its priorities are speculative rather than representative, especially given that “what seems true, evidenced, and/or empirical in any given instance will always turn out to be saturated through and through with ideological mystification.”¹⁰⁴ Instead, Afro-fabulative art and performance

¹⁰¹ Smith, “Performativity, Autobiographical Practice, Resistance,” 110.

¹⁰² Nyong’o, 19.

¹⁰³ Nyong’o, 10.

¹⁰⁴ Nyong’o, 19.

“present the falsification of this ‘true’ order as a pathway toward its correction” and thus resist “demands for legibility and transparency.”¹⁰⁵ The fabulative function includes a kind of epistemological multiplicity, insisting on “points of incoherence” that Nyong’o renames “sites of . . . impossibility.”¹⁰⁶ “Impossibility” encompasses what is not yet here and yet is “virtually present,” a doubled vision of what is and what could be.¹⁰⁷

The doubled “impossible” is also apparent in Saidiya Hartman’s critical fabulation, an approach that seeks to ethically contend with individual and collective trauma, just as Jones and Flash do. Critical fabulation is not merely an academic exercise; it is, explicitly, a form of redress for suffering. Hartman emphasizes that it is “not possible to undo the violence,” but critical fabulation as a practice is a “double gesture”¹⁰⁸ that works to “imagine what cannot be verified”¹⁰⁹ in order “both to tell an impossible story and to amplify the impossibility of its telling.”¹¹⁰ Fabulation’s redress may be “all that is realizable when overcoming the past and redeeming the dead are not.”¹¹¹ At the same time, Hartman is wary of embracing fabulation as purely reparative. “What do stories afford anyway?” she asks. “A way of living in the world in the

¹⁰⁵ Nyong’o, 15.

¹⁰⁶ Nyong’o, 6.

¹⁰⁷ Nyong’o, 18.

¹⁰⁸ Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” 11.

¹⁰⁹ Hartman, 12.

¹¹⁰ Hartman, 11.

¹¹¹ Hartman, 3.

aftermath of catastrophe and devastation? A home in the world for the mutilated and violated self? For whom—for us or for them?”¹¹² Nyong’o explains that Hartman’s “emphasis on irredeemable loss” is imbricated with her “scouring critique of the many ruses of the liberal antiracist imaginary—which must repeatedly produce abject and derelict figures of blackness as part of its larger apparatus of rescue and redemption.”¹¹³

This apparatus, which uses Black pain as a resource to fuel its own production, is the alternative side of the trauma-testimony culture that defines Jones’s and Flash’s contexts—and my own. Trauma culture fuels and is fueled by the “burden of liveness,” defined by José Esteban Muñoz as a “cultural imperative within the majoritarian public sphere that . . . call[s] the minoritarian subject to the stage, performing her or his alterity as a consumable local spectacle.”¹¹⁴ The push to commodify and consume is often in direct proportion to material threat and harm—“the minoritarian subject is always encouraged to perform, especially when human and civil rights disintegrate.”¹¹⁵ Nikki Yeboah identifies a similar tendency in which racial violence is commodified into content. She describes this as “trauma porn,” “the exploitative ways in which people, especially people of color, are encouraged to share the most harrowing details of their struggle in order to have their stories heard amidst all of the noise.” Visibility and recognition can serve to challenge the violence of white supremacy, but the visibility

¹¹² Hartman, 4.

¹¹³ Nyong’o, 20.

¹¹⁴ Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 182.

¹¹⁵ Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 187.

engendered by trauma porn “invites a tourist’s gaze, one that objectifies [rather than] open[s] pathways to genuine contact and community building.”¹¹⁶ The white man’s “blank balloon of a stare” resembles this tourist’s gaze. When pain becomes a resource, spectacle is normalized as necessary. Do you need your pain in order to write? What about someone else’s?

Jones acknowledges and critiques these interlocking forces of trauma commodification by foregrounding the white man’s question at the beginning of the series. His question and stare demand a performance from Jones to make his pain and his relationship to it visible, transparent, consumable. Given the frequency with which Jones writes about anti-Black violence and racial trauma, the white man’s question also implies broader racialized and representationalist assumptions about a constitutive relationship between racial trauma and Black art. I recognize here that I am committing the cardinal sin of collapsing the speaker of the poem with its author, but I do so at the invitation of Jones. The white man prefaces his question with a remark about the “*bruising*”¹¹⁷ nature of the poet’s work, a clear allusion to Jones’s first collection, *Prelude to Bruise*. Saeed the speaker is thus explicitly identified as an avatar for Jones the writer, which allows him to speak doubly in both critical and confessional modes.

Whereas Jones doubles up on his rhetorical positions, Flash slips past the burden-of-liveness by embracing a multiple temporality. The project’s title, which began as

¹¹⁶ Nikki Owusu Yeboah, “‘I Know How It Is When Nobody Sees You’: Oral-History Performance Methods for Staging Trauma,” *Text and Performance Quarterly* 40, no. 2 (2020): 134.

¹¹⁷ Jones, 19 (*italics original*).

“Afrofuturism,” now includes the sense of syzygy as the “configuration of pasts, presents and futures.”¹¹⁸ Several images are staged at and as sites of memory, such as a set of concrete steps in Tulsa and a moss-covered cabin at the Stagville Plantation. Others include aquatic and naval imagery that evokes the Middle Passage, and yet others are grounded firmly in the contemporaneity of pandemic-emptied subways and at a protest following George Floyd’s murder in 2020. At the same time, the Afrofuturist influence is present visually via Flash’s astronaut’s helmet or the recurrence of a disco ball prop and is further indexed affectively and conceptually in Flash’s continued gaze toward the horizon. Flash’s willingness to depict the imaginative alongside the memorial further emphasizes what Nyong’o calls “the necessity of trying to represent what we cannot.”¹¹⁹ The *syzygy* photographs, and Flash’s autofabulative performance within them, “embrace the impossibility that conditions our knowledge of the past and animates our desire for a liberated future.”¹²⁰

This liberated future is imagined through relation, both between performer and audience and between performer and self. The centrality of relation is made tangible when the autofabulist produces a body of a virtual double, such as syzygy or the Other One. Nyong’o asserts that “black bodies that were objects of speculation can become speculative bodies.”¹²¹ In this claim, I hear the doubled sense of both bodies that are

¹¹⁸ Flash, *syzygy, the vision*.

¹¹⁹ Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” 13.

¹²⁰ Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” 13.

¹²¹ Nyong’o, 25.

speculated into existence and bodies that can speculate. Nyong'o returns to Deleuze, who describes the fabulist's "tendency to project—into things, into reality, into the future, and even into the sky—an image of himself and others so intense that it has a life of its own."¹²² By literally projecting (other) bodies that have lives of their own, Jones and Flash enact both a spatiality and relationality that Nyong'o describes as "fabulationality," "a vision of relationality . . . directed toward a life that is not singular or individual, but a life lived in the singular plural."¹²³ This singular plural ostensibly refers to the collective "we" of the plural first person. At the same time, it contains an image of the plural self. In this way, autofabulation can also blur and transcend the line between self and other. The speculative bodies of the Other One and syzygy materialize a sense of self as Other that echoes Lacan's mirror. Rather than ending in self-alienation, as we find in Lacan's theory of the mirror stage, Jones's and Flash's encounters with their Others result in a profound sense of connection. This crucial difference hinges on the presence of a body. Vilashini Cooppan emphasizes the "poetics of critical touch" that mark autotheoretical practice, particularly in the Black feminist tradition. When the self is "at the crossroads of seeing and being seen," a "relational hinge" forms that is "imaginable through [a] fold, a fleshly fold, a fold that enfleshes, which is to say, a fold that makes a relation with alterity."¹²⁴ Autofabulist avatars enable a different kind of self-relation; as contiguous rather than continuous, they can exist as both connected and distinct. The "relational hinge"

¹²² Nyong'o, 17.

¹²³ Nyong'o, 18.

¹²⁴ Cooppan, 592.

represents the dynamic relation between joined parts, for its range of motion enables both coming together and spreading apart. I think about the hinging knee joints in my own body, which allow my thighs to rest on my calves when I kneel. Without the separation between these parts of my leg, and without the joint hinging at that very point of separation, those parts would never touch. The space between plural selves makes self-relational contact possible.

The image of a contiguous self-relation is embodied by syzygy's posture in Flash's *Keep on Pushin'*, the image that covers Jones's *Alive*. Flash is dressed in the orange jumpsuit and white helmet, the blue visor closed over their face. Syzygy's back is to the camera. They lean with their hands on the back bumper of a car covered in reflective chrome, which rests in the middle of a clearing in the woods. The grass, sky, and clouds are all reflected alongside Flash's body in the car's surface, but the reflections are somewhat distorted. Here, as in other portraits in the series, Flash takes on a recognizable posture but infuses it with ambiguity: Are they actively pushing the car, or are they taking a moment to rest? Their posture and position also mean that the reflective surface of the car doubles Flash-slash-Syzygy's image but does not twin it—a *second* Syzygy appears to reach out from inside the car's surface to touch Flash's hands in a gesture of communion and support.

In the final section of "Saeed, or the Other One," touch similarly embodies a compassionate self-relation. As Saeed and the Other One converse, Saeed attempts to tell the Other One about the question that brought them together. Saeed compares the man's question to a "clearing" in the woods that presented a variety of possibilities: He "could

have done anything in that clearing,” from “danc[ing] in wild, erratic circles,” to “gather[ing] flowers for a crown,” or even “[lying] down and rest[ing].”¹²⁵ Most poignantly, Saeed reflects that he could have “yelled out the names of everyone [he] loved and missed[,] could’ve marched right into the middle of that field and listed [his] hurts one by one until [he] was free of them.”¹²⁶ Despite the possibilities for joy, rest, and cathartic expression of his grief, Saeed also knows that the space offered by the metaphorical clearing comes with an audience attached. “They want to see me in that clearing,” Saeed explains. “Maybe they think I need it or they need it or maybe they just want it . . . but I don’t want to go out there for them.”¹²⁷ Saeed desires to be visible and understood, but he knows that his racial trauma will more likely be commodified as entertainment than received by a compassionate witness.

The Other One’s response is physical; he crowds into the armchair alongside Saeed, holds him, and kisses his tear-soaked face. The contact and connections relieve Saeed: “It felt so good to be known,” he says, “that I almost cried again.”¹²⁸ In the silence that follows his confession, Saeed rests cheek-to-cheek with the Other One. In this embrace, he feels the Other One’s facial muscles move “the way they do when we’re about to make a joke”; then, the Other One slyly offers to “be you out there, for a little

¹²⁵ Jones, 73–74.

¹²⁶ Jones, 74.

¹²⁷ Jones, 74.

¹²⁸ Jones, 74.

while—I mean, I’m pretty good at it.”¹²⁹ This move affectively refracts the inciting joke of the series, this time inverting the idea of pain-as-legible-representative into a strategy for fugitivity. Saeed embraces his Other—or more precisely, he is embraced *by* his Other—in an act of fabulative self-relation that charts a path beyond demands for legibility.

The paradox, of course, is that the claim for opacity occurs legibly, on the page. Jones renounces the audience in a medium intended to be read. In some ways, at least, it is a gesture that contains its own failure. If that much is visible, however, what remains that is *not* visible? The final part of the poem concludes, as the others do, with a notation reading “—*continued*” in the bottom right corner. The only difference is that here “continued” is followed by a period (“—*continued.*”) rather than left unpunctuated.¹³⁰ The last piece of information connotes both the ongoing and the final; the work continues, but its representation ends on this page.

For a long time, I struggled to acknowledge what could not be seen on the page. I felt a pull to arrive at a grand conclusion, to demonstrate the salience of my research by extrapolating a triumphant theoretical intervention. The writer and the writing teacher in me feel compelled to build to a crescendo. And at first, I followed that pull. Earlier iterations of this chapter worked toward emotional release, an annunciation of love and grace. It felt right to me—or more accurately, it felt familiar. The strategies that feel most familiar to me are often the discursive strategies of the sermonic mode that shaped my

¹²⁹ Jones, 74.

¹³⁰ Jones 74.

Sundays. I reach, sometimes without realizing, for grace, for love, for mercy. I am deeply moved by art that takes up this discursive shape and moves it somewhere else, like Baby Suggs's sermon in *Beloved*. It feels like an opportunity not to call the first twenty years of my life wasted, as wasteland, salted earth. "You are the salt of the earth," Jesus said. "Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven."¹³¹ I looked up that verse to make sure I remembered it correctly, but I had it right the first time. Scripture still bubbles up like that for me, ten years out now from the last time I actively memorized it, like a literalization of Saeed's description of the conversation with his Other as a "call and response inside the church of myself."¹³² If inside me there is a church, it is hard not to imagine it with the same purple pews, the same picture window, a virtual doppelganger for the building and the belief I tried to leave behind. Did I leave it behind?

I think the answer is perhaps to avoid the binary of yes and no when I answer that question, to reach for both/and. After all, the reach for conclusive answers can slide easily into a reach toward my own comfort and peace of mind. Hartman reminds me that "it is tempting to fill in the gaps and to provide closure where there is none."¹³³ And so, to me, my failure seems like the right place for me to end—to follow Jones and Flash as far as I can, to sit with the multiplicity they offer, to sit with the multiplicity they uncover in my own self-reflection and self-relation, to reach back across and toward my

¹³¹ Matthew 5:13–16 (NIV).

¹³² Jones, 74.

¹³³ Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 8.

reflection. In writing, I can see these reflections, ghostly doubles, and past selves appear on the page.

As I worked to rethink and rewrite my conclusion(s), I recognized a similar concern reflected in Fournier's *Autotheory*: "Does being honest about one's own limitations and theoretical short-comings in a text preemptively defend these shortcomings from criticism?"¹³⁴ I recognized my own tendency to make my reservations visible on the page, to visibly perform self-scrutiny in an attempt to avoid becoming one of the trauma consumers I condemn. And, yet, even the refusal leaves a trace of what it disavows. Fournier goes on to ask, "Is this kind of self-effacing honesty rhetorically or philosophically effective or subversive, or does it reinforce what is stereotypically expected of women?"¹³⁵ I recognized this too in the deep self-doubt I marinated in as a child, a tendency I could see more clearly through the process of writing about it. Sometimes recognizing a double feels like a revelation; at other times it can feel much more like trying to navigate a house of mirrors. "Which one of me is the *real* one?" I keep asking. "The right one?" This has been one of the hardest things of white evangelicalism to let go of—the attachment to one right answer. But there is no heaven to get to on the other side of the page. There is just another page. And another. I will keep returning and rereading and revising, and I will also try to live with the fact that I am working asymptotically, approaching but never arriving. Getting closer, though. Getting

¹³⁴ Fournier, *Autotheory as Feminist Practice*, 167.

¹³⁵ Fournier, *Autotheory as Feminist Practice*, 167.

closer. Close to the skin. I will try to watch myself fail, try to encounter my own limits, working like a wheel that moves in circles to move forward. Keep on pushin'.

Chapter Two
“Off Script:” Unconventionalizing Sexual Violence
in *Feel Good* and *I May Destroy You*

The central task of the survivor [is] telling to live, which I now see as a kind of letting go, playing with the past in order not to be held back as one springs away from it. After gaining enough control over the story to be able to tell it, perhaps one has to give it up, in order to retell it, without having to ‘get it right,’ without fear of betraying it, to be able to rewrite the past in different ways, leading up to an infinite variety of unforeseeable futures.

— Susan J. Brison, *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self*.

Perhaps no trope is more familiar to survivors of sexual violence than the “he said”/“she said” dismissal. The structure of the phrase itself reveals how power structures responses to survivors who come forward, whose accounts of sexual violence are reduced to words “said” rather than events experienced. Moreover, these words are immediately contextualized by and compared to whatever “he said,” whoever “he” may be. In our ostensibly “post-#MeToo” era,¹³⁶ the framework persists. Rather than being heard on their own terms and merits, survivors must also continually address the narrative put forward by their abuser. Survivors who do offer testimony about the violence they experience are frequently met with skepticism, doubt, and outright refusal: “Sure, you felt that way, but what *really* happened?” “Was it really that bad?” “I’m just not sure what or

¹³⁶ I initially wrote this sentence in 2022. Today, in 2026, I am reading it thinking about the enormous backlash that followed #MeToo and, especially, the apparent eagerness of too many people to excuse and empower rapists like Epstein and Trump.

whom to believe.” Needless to say, responses such as these further compound the trauma victim-survivors experience.

These responses are produced with such regularity that they have become the expected norm. Skepticism works in parallel with the he said/she said formulation with such predictable precision that the survivor narrative form has developed its own set of conventions. In other words, testimony about sexual violence and its reception is structured by and as its own genre. Genre describes not only expected conventions; it extends beyond “the substance or the form of discourse” to “the action it is used to accomplish.”¹³⁷ This action works on both the writer and the audience: it moves either toward empowerment or toward containment. As a salient example, the conversation and attention generated in 2017 by the usage of the #MeToo hashtag on Twitter was predicated on the utility of using the phrase as a convention that could structure testimony. Conversely, the conventions of stigma and doubt can silence survivors before they have a chance to speak.

Genres create and are created by conventions, norms, and scripts. Awareness of these scripts, however, can illuminate options for writers and audiences to subvert expectations and move beyond the conventional. Moments of rupture, ambiguity, and evasion become charged with possibility. In this consideration of unconventional narrative responses to sexual violence, I follow scholars and writers “off script” to imagine the healing potential of survivor-centered trauma recovery in scholarship and in two recent television series, *Feel Good* (2020-2021), created by Mae Martin, and *I May*

¹³⁷ Carolyn R. Miller, “Genre as Social Action,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 70 no. 2, (1984): 151, DOI: 10.1080/00335638409383686.

Destroy You (2020), created by Michaela Coel. In their simultaneous roles as autobiographical writers and performers, Martin and Coel script and embody responses to violence that prioritize personal healing over generic and social expectations.

Trauma Testimony and the Autobiographical Subject

Skepticism, doubt, and fact-finding are also relevant genre concerns regarding testimony itself. Autobiographical writing is in unique relation to its audience. In popular reception, questions of authenticity, reality, and truthfulness pervade, and credibility is not an automatic given. Just as in the he said/she said paradigm, external forces are at work: reception and belief are inevitably influenced by the reader's perception of the writer, which is itself socially situated. The notion that autobiographical texts are created, even manipulated, highlights the gap between the writing and written selves. This gap is further charged by controversy when the writing testifies to violence and harm. Readers of life writing often implicitly expect—even demand—a sense of truth and total authenticity from life writing.¹³⁸ In narratives offered by victims, this expectation intersects with cultural scripts around whose testimony about violence can be believed. For survivors of sexual violence in particular, charges of exaggeration, distortion, and even deception are common. These charges are then further intensified by cultural biases

¹³⁸ I cover this demand explicitly in chapter four.

about “trustworthy subjects,” in which the degrees of “trustworthiness” correspond to degrees of privilege in positionality.¹³⁹

A foundational tenet of scholarship on autobiography is that the autobiographical subject is created in the act of autobiographical representation. Questions of identity and representation are deeply entangled. As Leigh Gilmore writes, “the autobiographical subject is a representation and its representation is its construction” and is “produced not by experience but by autobiography.”¹⁴⁰ As a discursive production, the autobiographical subject is inherently performative rather than expressive of an “inner self,” to paraphrase Sidonie Smith. Smith takes up Judith Butler’s description of gender performativity to underscore how the autobiographical subject is interpellated and created through multiple, often conflicting, discursive relations, and so “autobiographical subject finds [...] herself on multiple stages simultaneously, called to heterogeneous recitations of identity.” Smith further emphasizes that “these multiple calls never align perfectly. Rather they create spaces or gaps, ruptures, unstable boundaries, incursions, excursions, limits and their transgressions.”¹⁴¹ These gaps and transgressions, however, as Smith implies, create openness to possibility.

At the risk of conflating performance and performativity, I want to focus on the image of the autobiographical subject on stage. I find this metaphor especially useful

¹³⁹ Consider, as an obvious example, the “benefit of the doubt” granted to Brett Kavanaugh, who was credibly accused of sexual assault, as opposed to the intense scrutiny aimed at Ketanji Brown Jackson, despite her unobjectionable record and qualifications.

¹⁴⁰ Leigh Gilmore, *Autobiographics*, 25.

¹⁴¹ Smith, ““Performativity, Autobiographical Practice, Resistance,” 110.

because it clarifies the relationship between subject and audience—and in turn highlights how that relationship is frequently misunderstood. No theatergoer assumes they are watching a documentary about the Danish royal family when they go to see *Hamlet*. If the play is instead a one-woman show, it is more likely that audiences assume a correspondence between the performer's life and her performance, although they maintain awareness of the performance *as* performance. When the performance takes place on the page or screen, though, this distinction seems to waver. Mediated performances seem more likely to register as a material or cultural object, over which the reader/viewer can exercise more control than in a theater setting (pausing, skimming, rereading, rewatching, even purchasing or owning). When the autobiographical narrative is understood as a performance, it is difficult to ignore that the autobiographical subject takes on more than one role. In the metaphorical theater, she stands on stage. What happens, I am wondering, when we see her simultaneously sitting in the director's chair? Or, to use another metaphor: what happens when audiences recognize that she is *both* the great and powerful Oz and the magician behind the curtain?

Autofiction deliberately presses on this tension. The autofictionist is difficult to locate definitively: she is simultaneously the playwright, the casting director, set designer, director, *and* performer. Her multiple points of relation to the text implicitly challenge the assumed binary distinction between fact and fiction. The staging space created by fictionality highlights the relation between, rather than collapse of, the writing and written selves. This spatial and relational reorganization is particularly useful for

trauma survivors, for whom the demand for facticity—“what really happened?”—is fraught on multiple levels.

As a genre that lives in the gaps, autofiction also carries the potential to slip past scripted norms of genre and convention in artistic and sometimes even social registers. Cultural expectations of autofiction and its authors are, as yet, somewhat fluid and dynamic as debates continue around what the genre’s “requirements” are. At the same time, popular awareness of autofiction as a specific genre continues to grow, due to both the increased use of the term in marketing and the increasing visibility of authors as celebrities and social media personae. These phenomena can make the “writing self” of the author feel uniquely accessible to the reading audience. The boundaries of social convention, already altered by our increasingly parasocial digital landscape, are further blurred by the unique sense of intimate access provided by autofiction. In many ways, this reflects the intimacy of any autobiographical voice; readers often feel that they “know” the subject of autobiography.¹⁴² Autofiction can compound this felt intimacy; paradoxically, the knowledge that anything might be factual or fictional can allow readers a sense of access while inhibiting outright voyeurism. In reshaping the terms of engagement between writer and reader on the page, autofiction also creates new terrain for writers and readers to navigate as social subjects. Genre structures readers’ expectations of both texts and authors. Autofiction intentionally confuses, evades, or subverts expectations, on the page and off.

¹⁴² In some ways, of course, they do—but I am referring here to a sense of social or interpersonal relationship.

Evading conventional norms can also be deployed strategically by autobiographical subjects whose bodies place them at odds with what Sara Ahmed terms the “norms” of hegemony. Minoritization is worked out materially on bodies “through repeating some gestures and not others, or through being orientated in some directions and not others” until “bodies become contorted [and] get twisted into shapes that enable some action only insofar as they restrict the capacity for other kinds of action.”¹⁴³ In both autobiography and autofiction, subjects inevitably navigate the space between their bodies and social, racial and cultural norms. This space takes on different risks, dangers, and violences depending on how much the norms depend on the subjugation of the body. The autofictional mode can reshape this space by explicitly reclaiming the distance between self and convention as self-determined, autonomous, and creative. For readers, then, it is imperative to consider the socio-cultural contexts of each unique autofictional space. Considering the strategies that autofictional (and autobiographical) subjects employ can be both illuminated by and illuminate the materiality of their embodied, socio-cultural situation.

In many cases, close attention to these strategies also illuminates important trends and patterns. In her consideration of Black women’s autobiography, Mae Gwendolyn Henderson writes, “if the psyche functions as an internalization of heterogeneous social voices, black women's speech/writing becomes at once a dialogue between self and

¹⁴³ Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 145.

society and between self and psyche.”¹⁴⁴ This is both related to and distinct from “double consciousness,” as the self must reflect not only across the axis of race but across the line that purports to separate the writing and written self. As Henderson points out, attending to these several layers of voice in the text can frame “writing as inner speech...what Bakhtin would describe as ‘a unique form of collaboration with oneself’ in the works of these writers.”¹⁴⁵ To collaborate with oneself establishes an intra-text relationality that can also shape readers’ ability to relate to and reflect on the text, which underscores and further informs autofiction’s relationality. In autofiction, both genre conventions and subjects’ specific, embodied experiences inform the audience’s expectations and response.

Sexual Trauma as Genre

The idea of survivor-centered response and overdetermined scripts has proved a difficult problem for trauma studies broadly. From its inception, trauma studies followed Cathy Caruth’s model, which assumes that experiences and memories of trauma are “unspeakable” because the violence exceeded the capability of language and the memories themselves were inevitably repressed. In *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of the Self*, philosopher and survivor Susan J. Brison comments that she is

¹⁴⁴ Mae Gwendolyn Henderson, “Speaking in Tongues: Dialogics, Dialectics, and the Black Woman Writer’s Literary Tradition,” in *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*, ed. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (The University of Wisconsin Press: 1998), 345.

¹⁴⁵ Henderson, 345.

“puzzled” by the Caruthian model’s definition of trauma as “unclaimed” or “missed” experience, given that research on trauma overwhelmingly indicates survivors do remember their experiences (often with upsettingly intense clarity), but that the meaning and emotional weight of those experiences must be processed over time.¹⁴⁶ Instead, Brison quotes Paul Fussell: “We have made *unspeakable* mean indescribable: it really means *nasty*.”¹⁴⁷ Unspeakability should be understood not (or at least not only) as neurobiological, but as *social*—the unspeakable is whatever the listener finds unbearable, unhearable. As Régine-Michelle Jean-Charles points out, he claim that trauma is inherently “inexpressibl[e] and unimaginabl[e]” tends to reinforce the socially enforced silencing of the visceral, material accounts brought forward by victim-survivors.¹⁴⁸ Furthermore, Judith Herman emphasizes that the “dialectic of trauma” includes both “the will to deny horrific events” as well as “the will to proclaim them aloud.”¹⁴⁹ If we are to “take survivors’ experiences seriously,” Brison insists that “we cannot know what these [experiences] are a priori.”¹⁵⁰ No one can speak for the survivor but the survivor herself.

¹⁴⁶ Susan J. Brison, *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self*, New Paperback Edition (Princeton University Press: 2022), 32.

¹⁴⁷ Brison, 51.

¹⁴⁸ Régine Michelle Jean-Charles, “Toward a Victim-Survivor Narrative: Rape and Form in Yvonne Vera's *Under the Tongue* and Calixthe Beyala's *Tu t'appelleras Tanga*,” *Research in African Literatures* 45 no. 1 (2014): 54.

¹⁴⁹ Herman, 8.

¹⁵⁰ Brison, 28.

More recently, a “pluralistic model” has gained scholastic ground over the repressed memory model. In this model, “the assumed unspeakability of trauma is *one among many* responses to an extreme event rather than its defining feature.”¹⁵¹ This more open posture toward possible responses to trauma also better aligns with contemporary understandings of neuropsychology instead of the more traditional reliance on Freudian psychoanalysis. The pluralistic model shifts authority away from a theoretical paradigm (trauma’s unspeakability, the centrality of repression to memory, etc.) and instead supports close attention to the texts produced (or “spoken”) by survivors. In this way, the pluralistic model also better avoids prescriptive audience expectations. Despite this, even the pluralistic model falls prey to overdetermining hegemonic structures. For example, in the 2014 anthology edited by Michelle Balaev, *Contemporary Approaches in Literary Trauma Theory*, every scholar who contributed is white.¹⁵² This is a problematic contradiction to the pluralistic model’s stated goal to attend to “multiple responses,” as quoted above from Balaev herself. The failure of the editors of this collection to include the work of scholars from minoritized racial positions serves to further entrench white (and often heteronormative, frequently patriarchal) cultural norms as unexamined foundational frameworks in the field of trauma studies more broadly.

Sharon R. Wasco points out one of many dangers in the unexamined bias of trauma studies as it relates to sexual violence in particular. Traditionally, definitions of

¹⁵¹ Michelle Balaev, “Trauma Studies,” in *A Companion to Literary Theory*, First Edition, ed. David H. Richter, (John Wiley & Sons: 2018), 360. Italics mine.

¹⁵² Michelle Balaev, ed. *Contemporary Approaches in Literary Trauma Theory*, (Palgrave McMillan: 2014).

trauma and PTSD have insisted that trauma “shatters” the victim’s expectations of the world as safe and just. Of course, this only holds true for those who have experienced the world as safe and just in the first place. For many survivors, she explains,

rape may confirm assumptions that violence is a routine part of life or that they do not have sexual control over their bodies. The damage to these survivors may be more pervasive than a single act of rape, and the intersection of factors such as gender, class, ethnicity, and previous victimization history may generate a pattern of harm and recovery that is more intricate than what has been accounted for in most published literature on trauma.¹⁵³

Again, the question of the specific body must be foregrounded. Bodies are put under different pressures and contorted around norms differently (to return to Ahmed’s phrasing). Trauma studies must endeavor to relieve that pressure rather than compound it—which itself is only possible if scholars interrogate their own expectations as readers and audiences.

Conceptualizing these social structures and demands as generic reveals how expectations of both survivor and audience shape the conditions of possibility for survivor narratives. Jean-Charles notes how even the choice between the terms “victim” or “survivor” tends to foreclose the audience’s perception of the narrator.¹⁵⁴ Narratives about sexual violence are frequently expected to embody conventions around victimhood or survival, such as foregrounding the victim’s innocence or highlighting her “strength” in the aftermath. I put strength in quotes here not to suggest that survivors of sexual violence are weak, but rather that audience’s expectation for their resilience can create a

¹⁵³ Wasco, 312.

¹⁵⁴ Jean-Charles, 40.

relation of “toxic positivity” by demanding a “happy ending” as a condition of the audience’s support for the narrator. For this reason, Jean-Charles argues for a persistent hyphenation of labels, “victim-survivor,” in order to clarify that subjects experience these identities as dynamic roles, not as totalizing prescriptions. The hyphen also underscores that “surviving rape is processual...an extended rather than accomplished act” and moves toward a “focus on the need for healing and retelling as integral aspects of the post-rape experience.” This is not only a concern of priority and principle, but of the material effects on technique in the text: victim-survivor narratives devote the majority of pages to the aftermath rather than the assault. Considering the victim-survivor testimony as a genre also foregrounds “narrative devices, ruptures in temporality, and the use of language” at work in the texts and the commentary these elements provide about trauma and recovery itself.¹⁵⁵

Genre expectations can range from benign to insidious, especially when “genre” is considered beyond bookshelf labels. In a salient example, Leigh Gilmore addresses the testimony of women who have experienced sexual violence as a kind of genre unto itself. While the expectations may not be explicit, the tradition of responding to these women with doubt, stigma, and “sticky judgment” has entrenched a set of expectations around the way they can—or perhaps even should—be received.¹⁵⁶ Gilmore calls for a shift in the genre of *response* to sexual trauma survivors with what she terms “adequate witness.”

¹⁵⁵ Jean-Charles, 45.

¹⁵⁶ Gilmore, *Tainted Witness*, 7.

An adequate witness is

one who will receive testimony without deforming it by doubt, and without substituting different terms of value for the ones offered by the witness herself [and who] resists the rush to judgment and learns how to attend to accounts of gendered harm and agency made by impure victims in conditions of complexity.¹⁵⁷

Witness as a concept is typically assumed to prioritize the journalistic/documentary mode and/or the facticity of an account. This connotation more accurately corresponds to one facet of witnessing: eyewitness testimony. Witness, however, is a dialectical mode that includes not only testimony, but a response: “bearing witness” (understood here as bearing “adequate witness”). Hyunji Kwon notes that tension forms between the two modes along the grain of temporal expectation, because “eyewitness testimony positions the subject in a finite moment as a victim of trauma, while bearing witness requires a trauma subjects’ infinite response-ability of subjectivity to witness one’s own and others’ trauma.”¹⁵⁸ In a move resonant with Jean-Charles’s notes on the genre of victim-survivor narratives, Kwon proposes deploying Dominick LaCapra’s model of “working through,” in which a traumatized subject “critically engages with the past...with a different performativity.”¹⁵⁹ Although “working through” is typically positioned in binary opposition to the more compulsive “acting out,” LaCapra clarifies that the two processes are “implicated in each other.” The distinction between these two parts of healing-oriented narrativization lies in their orientation to time and to

¹⁵⁷ Gilmore, *Tainted Witness*, 5-6.

¹⁵⁸ Hyunji Kwon, “Writing Witnessing, Witnessing Writing: Working Through Trauma Using Performative Autoethnography,” *Visual Culture & Gender* 11 (2016): 7.

¹⁵⁹ Kwon, 7-8.

self. For the survivor locked in “acting out,” “one relives as if one were the other, including oneself as another in the past.” By contrast, “working through” requires “[trying] to acquire some critical distance that allows one to engage in life in the present.”¹⁶⁰ I argue that the “critical distance” in working through aligns with the gap between contiguous selves enabling a relation of self-care that I discussed in my first chapter. In *Aftermath*, Brison explains that “temporarily splitting the self into an active—narrating—subject and a more passive—described—object [...] can help to resubjectify a self objectified by trauma.” The narrativization process can also “enable the survivor to gain greater empathy with herself.” As Brison recollects, “It was only when I managed to write a narrative of my assault...and then read it, that I realized, ‘My God, what a horrible thing to happen to someone!’”¹⁶¹

Internally, traumatized subjects may engage in a similar reprocessing, including imagined revisions of reality. As Janice Haaken writes in her critique of the repressed memory model of trauma therapy, scholars must affirm “the right of women to recognize the role of fantasy and desire in mental life, capacities that are fundamental to resisting patriarchal control and imagining a world beyond it.”¹⁶² This call is intentionally

¹⁶⁰ Dominick LaCapra, “‘Acting Out’ and ‘Working Through’ Trauma,” interview by Amos Goldberg, *Shoah Research Center*, Cornell University, 1998). <https://www.yadvashem.org/articles/interviews/dominick-lacapra>

¹⁶¹ Brison, 73.

¹⁶² Janice Haaken, “The Recovery of Memory, Fantasy, and Desire in Women's Trauma Stories: Feminist Approaches to Sexual Abuse and Psychotherapy,” in *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*, ed. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), 352.

gendered, since “women have been limited in the kinds of stories that can be told and on the areas of conflict which may be explored.”¹⁶³ It is also a model that accounts for and speaks to reception and conventional expectations as relationally bound and binding, since “the project of converting private knowledge into a narrative form is a social one, where speakers and listeners mutually influence the story that gets told.”¹⁶⁴

These potentials, possibilities, and affective investments uniquely position autofiction as a response to sexual trauma that can create space for witnessing while resisting overdetermined scripts by inviting imagination, fantasy, and “adequate witness” catalyzed by the audience’s empathetic connection to the text. From this foundation, I turn to two recent autofictional television series that directly confront sexual violence and promote ways of healing that challenge overdetermined scripts: Mae Martin’s *Feel Good* and Michaela Coel’s *I May Destroy You*. In my consideration of each, I examine how the autofictional mode opens space for resolution outside the confining norms usually available to victim-survivors.

Source, Screenwriter, Star

In *Feel Good*, Martin writes, co-directs, and stars as “Mae,” the autofictional protagonist who shares Martin’s name, birthday, and most of their biographical history¹⁶⁵.

¹⁶³ Haaken, 353.

¹⁶⁴ Haaken, 354.

¹⁶⁵ For clarity, I refer to the character as Mae and the writer as Martin throughout this essay. Martin recently came out as nonbinary and uses they/them pronouns, and Mae does the same in the series finale.

In interviews, Martin comments that the fictional Mae is “where I was about 10 years ago”¹⁶⁶ and that while elements are fictionalized, “the emotional truth is real,”¹⁶⁷ although “the character of Mae wouldn’t have the self-awareness to write the character of Mae.”¹⁶⁸ Like Martin herself, Mae entered the comedy circuit at the incredibly young age of 13, then became addicted to drugs, cocaine in particular. The addiction became so severe that Mae (and Martin) was kicked out of their home as a teenager and taken in by an older comic, “Scott,” who, as we learn in the second season of *Feel Good*, sexually exploited them. After several chaotic and traumatic years, Mae and Martin recovered and got sober. Season One explores addiction, love, and dependency as Mae meets and falls in love with George, who has previously never been in a queer relationship. Season Two reckons with Mae’s PTSD, their complicated relationship with their abuser, and their gender identity. In the process, they and George work out how to be together supportively rather than codependently.

In *I May Destroy You*, Coel writes, co-directs, and stars as Arabella, who experiences the same assault that Coel did in the process of writing her previous show, *Chewing Gum*. On January 22nd in south London, both Arabella and Coel break from

¹⁶⁶ Martin, Mae. “Mae Martin Wrote *Feel Good* About Herself. Or Did She?” interview by Ariana Romero, *Refinery 29*, March 19, 2020. <https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/2020/03/9568098/is-feel-good-netflix-real-mae-martin-interview>.

¹⁶⁷ Martin, Mae. “Mae Martin Embraces Ambiguity in 'Feel Good,' and in Life.” interview by Maya Salam, *The New York Times*, 24 May 24, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/24/arts/television/mae-martin-feel-good-netflix.html>.

¹⁶⁸ Martin, “Mae Martin Wrote *Feel Good*,” interview by Ariana Romero.

their writing to meet a friend for drinks. At the bar, Arabella, like Coel, is drugged and raped by a stranger. The memory returns in pieces to Arabella as she works out what happened that night, as well as how to navigate the world in the aftermath, including her relationship to the legal system, the writing and publishing world, and the multiplicity of her own response.

Coel takes advantage of the multiple perspectives allowed by autofiction and by television to explore multiple characters' encounters with consent and violation, especially Arabella's best friend, Kwame (played by Papaa Essiedu, Coel's longtime friend). Kwame also experiences an assault, but as a gay Black man, he receives a much different response from both the legal system and from others. Like *Feel Good, I May Destroy You* is rooted in love. Arabella's friendship with Kwame and Terry, her best friend since childhood, grounds the series and Arabella herself. As Arabella and Terry frequently repeat, "your birth is my birth, your death is my death." While Arabella must deal with her trauma in her own way, Coel is insistent on the power of healing in community.

The televisual medium itself allows for unique possibilities regarding performance, especially when considering the role of embodiment. Both Martin and Coel live in visibly minoritized bodies: Martin is trans and nonbinary; Coel is a Black (Ghanaian-British) woman. Both also exist in bodies with histories of invisible trauma and oppression: Martin struggled with drug addiction for over a decade; Coel grew up as a second-generation immigrant in public housing. Their histories are positioned socially and experienced bodily.

In both cases, their bodies have also experienced sexual violence and the symptoms of PTSD. Considering PTSD in conjunction with each text and its production illuminates the parallels between performance and therapeutic experience. Current recommendations for therapeutic treatment of PTSD focus on modalities that use embodiment and re-narrativization, such as prolonged exposure therapy (PE) and eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR).¹⁶⁹ Fundamentally, PTSD occurs because traumatic experience affects the parasympathetic nervous system as part of the body's response to the perceived threat to life and/or safety. It is also important to note here that trauma is an intentionally broad term that also includes things that did *not* happen, the lack of which also communicated danger and threat (such as in cases of parental neglect). For the purposes of this project, however, I attend to PTSD symptoms developed in response to a sexually violent event or pattern of events. In the aftermath of sexual violence, trauma is "stored" within the body as a kind of embedded memory. This memory and parasympathetic response can be activated by both predictable and opaque triggers. In therapeutic treatment, the goal is to reprocess the traumatic memory in order to develop new means of processing the event, relevant triggers, and the aftermath. Experience and embodiment are essential: regaining an authoritative connection to both the narrative and one's bodily response can provide survivors with peace and healing as they integrate past and present selves.

¹⁶⁹ American Psychological Association. "Clinical Practice Guideline for the Treatment of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in Adults," *American Psychological Association*, <https://www.apa.org/ptsd-guideline/>.

Television is not therapy, but performance too connects the body to narrative through reprocessed experience. In the cases of both Martin and Coel, the televised performance directly connects to their own lived experiences. While specific images, faces, and details may differ on the set as compared to their “real-life” counterparts, writing, directing, and performing a version of their past selves is about as close to embodied re-processed narrative as art can come.

In each series, this effect is also doubled due to each writer’s choice to make their characters life writers as well. Like Martin, Mae is a stand-up comedian whose sets are intensely confessional. Performance and stand-up comedy frame the series: the pilot begins with a tracking shot that follows Mae into the comedy club and up on to the stage to perform. In their first lines, Mae repeats the opener that Martin uses to begin their own sets¹⁷⁰ (“Hey guys! Did everyone have a good...childhood?”) and then introduces themselves to the diegetic (and nondiegetic) audience. Similarly, Coel achieved meteoric publicity after the success of her (also autobiographical) one-woman show *Chewing Gum Dreams* and was writing the teleplay adaptation when she was assaulted. Similarly, Arabella is assaulted when she takes a break from writing her second book, a contract she received after her first self-published book achieved Twitter fame. The title sequence of *I May Destroy You* emphasizes the centrality of writing: in each episode, it appears letter by letter beside a blinking cursor as if typed. Then, the cursor highlights the word “You” and deletes it, deliberately playing on the title’s ambiguity. Who is the “you” that will be destroyed? Is it Arabella’s rapist? Arabella herself? Or is even the idea of “you”

¹⁷⁰ I have seen Martin perform four times, most recently in April 2026. To the best of my recollection, all the shows started with this line.

swallowed up by the force of destruction? As both life-writers *write* life-writers, intriguing possibilities open for reading their writing and performances as doubled, which in turn invites layered readings of how Mae and Martin, and Arabella and Coel, both overlap and diverge.

Genre Instability: Comedy & Drama

Both series also invite questions around genre as a stable categorization since both challenge the boundaries between drama and comedy. This genre play challenges the way that, as Rebecca Wanzo explains, “situating the comedic in proximity to rape — and vice versa — has been seen as an ethical, representational failure.” The use of humor as a tool for processing sexual trauma is frequently controversial, although the controversy usually collapses cruel jokes at survivors’ expense and the leveraging of humor by feminist comedians (e.g. Cameron Esposito, Margaret Cho, Tig Notaro) to process and address sexual violence. Coel and Martin demonstrate that this automatic assignment of rape narratives to drama and tragedy *alone* overlooks the full humanity and rich lived experience of survivors. The violence and grief they experience is not and cannot be funny, but the way they choose to respond, cope, contextualize, and re-process their experiences makes room for a full spectrum of emotion and expression.

Feel Good is difficult to describe—is it a very dark comedy or a very funny drama? Martin brings their skill as a comedian to the writing alongside friend and fellow comedian Joe Hampson. Together they create moments that are both deeply felt and deeply funny. For example, a running conversation throughout the series involves the

resentment felt by Mae's mother, Linda (played by Lisa Kudrow), who blames teenaged, addicted Mae for breaking her ornamental crystal pears. In the middle of the first series, Mae and George meet Linda and Mae's father Malcolm (Adrian Lukis) in Blackpool. Mae is determined to follow step nine of their twelve-step program, which requires an apology and making amends. After Mae reads their scripted amends, however, their mother quips, "Mae, I'm in the middle of my Scotch egg," and abruptly ends the conversation.¹⁷¹

Later, the two hash it out while riding the local "haunted train" carnival ride. Linda begins to unload exactly what she thinks of Mae's past behavior while various campy horror props pop out of the walls toward the two. As concludes her rant with "You threatened us, you overdosed, you *stole* my ornamental pears—" the last accusation is a bridge too far for Mae, who interrupts, "I never fucking touched those fucking pears."¹⁷² The juxtaposition of absurdity and pathos is not only simultaneously funny and moving, it also effectively replicates the irrational nature of conflict among families, in which deep pain often lurks beneath mundane detail. At the end of the series, Mae's father finally reveals that he was the one who broke the pears and buried them in the garden. As the three stand around the makeshift gravesite, they together resolve to be more open and trusting of one another. In Martin's comedic universe, pain is specific, often absurd, and sometimes even open to repair.

¹⁷¹ *Feel Good*, episode 1.4, written by Mae Martin and Joe Hampson, directed by Ally Pankiw, Netflix, 2020.

¹⁷² *Feel Good*, episode 1.4.

I May Destroy You similarly defies genre categorization. While its marketing campaign labeled the series as a “consent drama,” it too plays generously with comedy. Much of the affective ambiguity is centered in Coel’s dynamic performance as well as the writing that frequently punctures moments of gravity with sharp one-liners and her wide smile. In the pilot episode, behind on her book deadline, Arabella moves restlessly about the office, then Googles “writing for dummies,” which she peruses with hilarious intensity.¹⁷³

The intensity is frequently matched and taken to extremes when Arabella and Terry are together. After so many years of friendship, the two easily riff off each other in any circumstance. A paradigmatic example of their dynamic occurs in episode 8, “Line Spectrum Border,” when the two return to the police station nine months after Arabella’s assault. As the two (female) detectives in charge of the case enter the small interrogation room, Arabella and Terry are delighted to discover that both women are pregnant. Arabella, ecstatic, turns to Terry. “We need to be pregnant baes, you know, it’s goals,” she begins. Terry completes her thought: “My birth is your birth, literally! Ooh, we’ll make a YouTube channel and an Instagram page, ‘Pregnant Baes,’ oh my god, do it.” Arabella, delighted by the idea, turns to the detectives to ask if they too will “like, film

¹⁷³ *I May Destroy You*, episode 1, “Eyes Eyes Eyes Eyes,” written by Michaela Coel, Sherie Myers, and Stephanie Yamson, directed by Sam Miller, BBC and HBO, 2020.

each other's births?", unaware of the ways that the specificity of her intimacy with Terry are bizarre when transposed into the detectives' context.¹⁷⁴

When Funmi, the lead detective, hesitates, Arabella grins, then intercepts, still smiling: "Ah, yeah. That's our shit. We're kinda trashy like that." Funmi then attempts to get the meeting back on track, and Terry and Arabella both pull back, still smiling but far more serious. Funmi turns to her notebook while Arabella, as the script notes, looks on in "hopeful anticipation."¹⁷⁵ The news is not good. The DNA sample the police did find was so weak that their options for genetic comparison were limited, and a lack of a conclusive match means that the department has closed the investigation without filing charges or even identifying a suspect.

In the script notes, Coel specifies that Funmi "seems reluctant to communicate away from the page."¹⁷⁶ Arabella and Terry's freewheeling improvisation is cut short by the harsh, scripted reality. The contrast between the two highlights Arabella's idiosyncratic humanity. Arabella is never reduced to a stereotype or predetermined role; she retains her full emotional range, from giddy hilarity to quiet devastation. The audience isn't watching a generic "rape victim" but a real person with her own emotions, quirks, and inside jokes. This reminder intensifies the devastation of the legal system's

¹⁷⁴ *I May Destroy You*, episode 8, "Line Spectrum Border," written by Michaela Coel, Sherie Myers, and Stephanie Yamson, directed by Michaela Coel and Sam Miller, BBC and HBO, 2020.

¹⁷⁵ Michaela Coel, "Line Spectrum Border: Shooting Script," *I May Destroy You*, BBC and HBO, 2019: 12. <https://deadline.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/I-May-Destroy-You-Script-It-Starts-On-The-Page.pdf>.

¹⁷⁶ Coel, "Line Spectrum Border: Shooting Script," 12.

failure to enact anything close to justice—for Arabella, specifically, but for victim-survivors generally as well.

Un-conventional(ized) Gender

Considerations of performance and response, genre, and sexual violence also invite discussion around gender. In this essay, I contextualize each series within the history of scholarship on women’s autobiographical writing, but not without some hesitation. Autobiographical texts about sexual violence are frequently assumed to *automatically* belong to women’s life writing. This creates obvious problems; after all, nearly a quarter of all men and nearly half of all transgender people report experiencing sexual violence in their lifetimes.^{177 178} This assumption is also insidious in its tendency to flatten all women's experience into one “woman” type, one that is usually based on white, straight, middle-class, white women. For this reason, Martin’s and Coel’s choices to foreground gender in each series are further examples of questioning, defying, and reimagining conventional scripts.

For Martin, gender is emphatically fluid. Until shortly before the premiere of *Feel Good*’s second season, Mae and Martin both used she/her pronouns. In Martin’s earlier comedy, explicit commentary about experiencing the world as a woman (especially a

¹⁷⁷ The National Sexual Violence Resource Center. “Statistics.” *The National Sexual Violence Resource Center*. 2021. <https://www.nsvrc.org/statistics/>

¹⁷⁸ The National Sexual Violence Resource Center. “Sexual Violence & Transgender/Nonbinary Communities.” *The National Sexual Violence Resource Center*. 2021. https://www.nsvrc.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Transgender_infographic_508_0.pdf

queer woman in a male-dominated space) is prevalent. Martin's history is situated in women's experience and life writing, although they now occupy those spaces differently. Martin herself came out as nonbinary after the second series had aired. This was unsurprising to *Feel Good* viewers, who had witnessed the deep uncertainty about gender (and ultimate resolution) that Mae experiences throughout the series, expressed in both self-deprecating jokes and moments of deep heartache. When Mae sees George for the first time in the pilot episode, for example, their friend Nick encourages them to go say hello, but Mae refuses, because "she's like England's rose, and I'm like a kernel of corn somebody glued onto some sticks."¹⁷⁹ ("Season 1: Episode 1"). While this is ostensibly about how intimidating Mae finds George's physical beauty, the juxtaposition of a traditionally feminine image with the comedic and nongendered "kernel of corn" foreshadows the developments ahead.

Mae's anxiety in their relationship with George continues for much of the series, as Mae's biggest fear is that George, who has never been in a queer relationship before, will leave them for a man. After a late-night conversation during which George, half-asleep, tells Mae that she would probably go back to dating men if they broke up, Mae panics. The next day, they stand naked in front of the mirror, pensive, before putting on a dress. The scene is totally silent, but the discomfort, pain, and dysphoria Mae feels is tangible. As their relationship (and the series) progresses, this anxiety gradually subsides as Mae moves toward integration and healing. In the series finale, after Mae and George walk away from another incident of Mae being addressed as "sir," Mae tentatively asks,

¹⁷⁹ *Feel Good*, episode 1.1, written by Mae Martin and Joe Hampson, directed by Ally Pankiw, Netflix, 2020.

“When you think of me in your head, do you think of me...like a boy or a girl, would you say?” George shrugs. “Just...you, really,” she answers. “More importantly, how do you see you?” Mae agrees and echoes George’s phrasing but nervously adds that “that feels like not really a thing. I don’t know what that means.” George stops and turns toward Mae. “I think that is a thing.” She reaches out to touch Mae’s arm tenderly. “That’s nonbinary. I do think you should Google it.” They both laugh softly. “You tell me,” George continues, “and I’ll use the right words.” Mae pauses, visibly moved, then embraces George. “Did I say the right thing?” George asks. “Yeah, you said the perfect thing,” Mae says, touching George’s face. “Maybe I could Google a therapist, too,” they add, while both laugh.¹⁸⁰ The exchange is marked by simplicity, specificity, and tenderness. Neither Mae nor Martin seem invested in confrontation or conflict. Instead, Mae’s need for new language and understanding is expressed and received in a context of relation and care. Here, as in the rest of the finale, personal integration and healing relationally are inextricably intertwined.

In *I May Destroy You*, Arabella diegetically discusses her emerging relationship with her own gender in light of her experiences as poor, Black, and an immigrant. Following her assault, she sits with her agents to read a passage from the book she writes throughout the series:

Prior to being raped, I never took much notice of being a woman. I was busy being black and poor. Daring to observe the hazard my gender may pose to my freedom and survival feels like a betrayal to the council flat I was raised in....The

¹⁸⁰ *Feel Good*, episode 2.6, written by Mae Martin and Joe Hampson, directed by Luke Snellin, Netflix, 2021.

Bible says you cannot serve two masters. Am I too late to serve this tribe called women?¹⁸¹

Here, as in other moments, the gap between Arabella and Coel feels both perceptible and uncertain. The writer is certainly present in this scene, but is the writer Arabella or Coel? Arabella, certainly, writes from deep reflection—but in order for Coel to have written the scene, she would need to have both Arabella’s perspective *and* perspective *about* Arabella’s perspective. This doubling does not distract the viewer but rather intensifies the effect of the scene. Arabella’s points are compelling and insightful, and the implicit acknowledgement of the strength of Coel’s own skill in producing them emphasizes both the importance and potential for a more expansive consideration of gender for victim-survivors. Coel insists here that Arabella be read not only as a neutral type for Woman, but as, crucially, as a poor Black woman. Gender, as Hortense Spillers reminds us, is inevitably shaped and changed by the history of racecraft and racial violence.

Furthermore, Arabella and Coel emphasize that she simultaneously experiences the world as Black, female, and poor—once again grounding the text and its subject in a specific, material reality—and that her race and class determine her experiences as a woman. After Arabella struggles to complete the draft of her book after the assault, Arabella’s agents insist that she be “assisted” by a man in the same publishing house. Although Arabella is visibly shaken by this, she agrees, because she has spent her advance, and now must finish the book on the terms required by her agents and publishers in order to survive materially. This man later rapes Arabella “by deception,” a

¹⁸¹ *I May Destroy You*, episode 7, “Happy Animals,” written by Michaela Coel, Sherie Myers, and Stephanie Yamson, directed by Michaela Coel and Sam Miller, BBC and HBO, 2020.

term in U.K. law for the removal of a condom without consent during a sexual encounter. It is not only Arabella's gender, but her gender experienced as raced and classed, that compounds her vulnerability and violation.

Unconventional Resolutions

In order to further explore the possibilities for healing opened by autofictional performance, I turn now to the final episodes of each series, each an exemplar in survivor-centered healing narratives. Resolution here works both literally and figuratively: as the narratives conclude, both Mae and Arabella negotiate and navigate options for healing.

The second season of *Feel Good* is centered on Mae's understanding and confronting their PTSD. Mae returns to Canada for a brief stint in rehab after a relapse, where they reconnect with Scott, the older comic who took Mae in when they were kicked out of their childhood home for substance use. When Scott arrives to visit Mae at the rehab center, they decide to leave the program entirely, because, as they assert, "I'm trying to move forward, and they keep pulling me back."¹⁸² Scott drives them back to the same comedy club they performed in as a teenager, where the irony of being "pulled back" rather than "move forward" is either lost on Mae, or intentionally ignored by them. Before Mae takes the stage, they lean in to kiss Scott, but he backs away. Mae looks bewildered. The sound begins to distort, and by the time Mae walks from the sound booth

¹⁸² *Feel Good*, episode 2.1, written by Mae Martin and Joe Hampson, directed by Luke Snellin, Netflix, 2021.

to the stage, it is clear they are in the midst of a full panic attack. The camera cuts to them lying on their back under the couch. Images of Mae lying on their back under couches and beds become increasingly common as the season progresses, although Mae struggles to articulate why they feel compelled to “lie under the bed like a plank of wood.”¹⁸³ In the third episode, when Mae talks about this phenomenon with a doctor, the doctor immediately recognizes that this response to triggering moments is almost certainly indicative of PTSD.¹⁸⁴

As the episodes progress, so does Mae’s growing understanding of PTSD and their childhood relationship with Scott. At the beginning of the season, the nature of their relationship is vague, but increasingly comes into focus as defined by an abusive sexual dynamic. When George meets Scott virtually on FaceTime in the third episode, he jokes about rolling Mae over in bed to stop them from snoring. George laughs along, but when the call concludes, asks Mae if Scott was their roommate or their boyfriend. “I guess maybe I’m thinking about it for the first time,” Mae says to George, “Scott...I mean, he’s like family,” but “I was like, fifteen, sixteen at the time.”¹⁸⁵ Scott was thirty. While these memories are not repressed in the sense prescribed by the traditional trauma model, Mae does begin to reprocess the memories. As an unhoused and addicted teenager, Mae did not (or even more likely, could not) recognize that a sexual relationship between a

¹⁸³ *Feel Good*, episode 2.2, written by Mae Martin and Joe Hampson, directed by Luke Snellin, Netflix, 2021.

¹⁸⁴ *Feel Good*, episode 2.3, written by Mae Martin and Joe Hampson, directed by Luke Snellin, Netflix, 2021.

¹⁸⁵ *Feel Good*, episode 2.3.

fifteen-year-old and an adult is predatory and abusive by its very nature. As adult Mae continues to reprocess memories of their adolescence, they feel more and more distress about their dawning understanding of Scott's abuse. In the final episode of the series, they decide to return to Canada to confront him, accompanied by George and their roommate Phil. Mae will not have to do it alone.

The finale, set in Martin's and Mae's hometown of Toronto, is thematically structured around homecoming, which in turn allows Mae to reexperience and reprocess in the environment where they experienced abuse. In the middle of the episode, Mae and George stumble across the house Mae lived in with Scott. As they peer into the back bedroom window, Mae murmurs, "I think I used to lie under the bed, like hide under the bed sometimes." It is clear that this moment has crystallized their emotional understanding of their past. Not long after, Mae begins to cry as they tell George, "I wish I knew what kind of person I would have been if I never met him."¹⁸⁶ Their wish for an alternative past goes beyond the wish to have escaped the trauma itself (although that wish is certainly present). Instead, Mae expresses the desire to know and experience not only an alternative past, but an alternative present, in which they could know and experience what it might be like to live outside the shadow of Scott's abuse and their resulting PTSD.

The next day, Mae returns to the comedy club to confront Scott, in the course of which he reluctantly admits that Mae "didn't want [a sexual relationship]" but that he felt "entitled to a bit of relief" due to the "stress" of taking them in. Scott then launches into

¹⁸⁶ *Feel Good*, episode 2.6.

an apology that quickly morphs into self-defense: “You can say I’m the root of all your problems, but the truth is you were fucked up when I met you.” “I know that,” Mae responds, “and I’m working on that, but first I’m talking to you.”¹⁸⁷ This statement works across both diegetic and nondiegetic registers. As the audience has observed, Mae has spent the last two seasons learning to take responsibility for their own healing, but now also recognizes the importance of identifying Scott’s abuse for what it is. This statement also works nondiegetically, even pedagogically, if the audience considers themselves interpellated by the “you.”

As the confrontation continues, Scott turns to two common scripts. First, he insists that he loved Mae, that they “were my best friend, and we had a home.” Love is not a defense, however; in fact, since the majority of sexual violence survivors are abused by loved ones, Scott’s statement is even more damning. Mae (and Martin) clarifies this when they respond that “that’s why it hurts...because I trusted you.” When Scott again tries to defend himself by asking “so what, now I’m just a bad person?” Mae refuses to follow this common script. Instead, they respond, “I don’t even know what that means.,” and unexpectedly reach out to offer Scott a hug. “I love you,” Mae says. “And I don’t want to see you or talk to you ever again.” With this, Mae turns away and walks back out of the club.¹⁸⁸

After this confrontation, Mae and George leave together to spend a weekend in the woods. In the final scene of the series, the two sit by a lake and check in with each

¹⁸⁷ *Feel Good*, episode 2.6.

¹⁸⁸ *Feel Good*, episode 2.6.

other, gradually moving away from emotional intensity to a playful discussion about photosynthesis and chlorophyll. This conversation is a playful callback to Phil's earlier remark that Mae and George's "drama" is "exhausting" and that, as a representative example, he never hears them "talk about science" or anything but their own relationship. The choice of photosynthesis and chlorophyll also works thematically considering the series' focus on growth and processing past experience into new life, just as in photosynthesis, plants transform the raw ingredients of sunlight and water into nourishment. The conversation takes place on a dock next to a small lake, a setting further emphasized by the increasingly wide drone shot that concludes the episode. Given the concurrent discussion of photosynthesis, the water connotes the idea of nourishment and new life alongside traditional connotations of cleansing and baptism; it also calls back to Mae's comment in the beginning of the second season that they're "not that into nature." By concluding the series in the woods near a lake, Martin highlights the holistic growth Mae has experienced in their journey toward healing.¹⁸⁹

In going off-script, Martin creates space for the multitude of survivors who are abused by someone they love. Rather than attempt to bend their emotions and experiences to fit the conventions for the ways victim-survivors "should" address their abuse, Martin creates a personal script that resists convention. In an interview published at the conclusion of the season, Martin addressed the pressure they felt to write a "revenge fantasy," but that they were "more interested" in "the ripple effect of the

¹⁸⁹ *Feel Good*, episode 2.6.

harm.”¹⁹⁰ For Martin, the revenge fantasy script would reduce them and their experiences to convention rather than center their own healing. Demanding a performance of vengeance centers the audience’s desires. Its logic also depends on a juridical concept of justice—which reinforces a system that historically mistreats victims. In demanding a scene of punishment, audiences place themselves in the judge’s chair. While this desire for justice often arises from empathy, the slippage from justice in the abstract to enforcing conventional scripts does not actually support the non-abstracted victim-survivor. By resisting this script, Martin writes a new one. Their script isn’t intended to replace others or become a new paradigm; it is, crucially, singular and personal. It models a resolution—both narratively and personally—that prioritizes healing and recovery.

To seek out her own healing and recovery, Coel emphasizes her own agency in the process of writing a new script. Writing is diegetically entwined with healing for Arabella, who uses her manuscript to reprocess her experience throughout the series. In episode 8, after a failed attempt to reunite with a past boyfriend in Italy, Arabella goes to an empty beach in the middle of the night. It is a dark moment for her: she is completely alone, and her fear is legible in her facial expression and hunched body language. In an attempt to self-soothe, she takes out a paper and pen and begins to write. In an interview, Coel explains she wrote in this moment because she herself uses writing to cope with

¹⁹⁰ Mae Martin, “Mae Martin on ‘Feel Good,’ Labels, and Getting Kicked Off Hinge,” interview by Drew Burnett Gregory, *Autostraddle*, June 7, 2021. <https://www.autostraddle.com/mae-martin-interview/>

moments of fear and distress.¹⁹¹ As the sun rises on the beach, Arabella sets down her paper in the sand, stands up, and begins to walk into the ocean and away from the camera. Gregorian chant music swells ominously as more and more of her body disappears into the water. Once she is completely submerged, the camera pans back to an extreme wide shot, and there is a long pause. It seems to viewers for a moment that she will not reemerge, but in the final second of the episode, her head reappears above the waves. The imagery resembles nothing so much as a baptism (as (under)scored by the monastic music), as Arabella uses writing and water to claim a new beginning.

In the subsequent episode, Arabella and her therapist have a crucial conversation that introduces the shape her healing process and her writing will take. Like Martin, Coel also explicitly advocates for replacing emphases on binaries with calls for integration. In a pivotal conversation between Arabella and her therapist about the unsuccessful end of the investigation, Arabella mentions that the bags of evidence from the investigation are under her bed. The therapist pauses, then suggests considering a model for integration, which she illustrates while speaking. At the top of the page, she draws an “A for Arabella” to represent Arabella’s sense of self. Beneath it, she draws a line, which she suggests could also be “a bed.” Beneath the line, she draws an X to represent “dangerous things, dark things, anything that contradicts or threatens your perceived reality.” This line, she explains, creates a hard separation between binary pairs such as bad/good,

¹⁹¹ Michaela Coel, “Michaela Coel Reacts to I May Destroy You Scene,” *GQ*, video, June 29, 2020, <https://www.gq-magazine.co.uk/video/watch/michaela-coel-reacts-to-i-may-destroy-you-scene-gq-action-replay-british-gq>

friend/foe, men/women, black/white, them/us, criminal/victim, and god/devil¹⁹². While creating the separation can feel safe, the therapist also explains that “it helps us to deflect, avoid feelings like guilt, uncertainty, self-blame [which] are crucial in the stages of recovery.” Integration, rather than stratification, must be the goal, since “if we can’t process and understand [these feelings], we can’t process and understand ourselves.”¹⁹³ Arabella silently nods, then slides the notebook toward herself and draws the following symbol:



This exchange explicitly describes (and diagrams) the stakes of the remainder of the series. Arabella’s goal will not be justice, but integration.

¹⁹² This final example nods to the fact that during their meeting, which takes place on Halloween, Arabella is dressed as a “dark angel,” complete with fangs and black wings.

¹⁹³ *I May Destroy You*, episode 9, “Social Media is a Great Way to Connect,” written by Michaela Coel, Sherie Myers, and Stephanie Yamson, directed by Michaela Coel and Sam Miller, BBC and HBO, 2020.

In the final episode, Arabella's journey toward integration is achieved by utilizing fantasy to explore multiple resolutions, many of them taboo. Each of these fantasies is structured by the act of writing. The series itself opens with a flash-forward shot of notecards taped up on the walls in Arabella's bedroom. In the penultimate episode, these cards are revealed to be the outline for Arabella's book. Each fantasy opens in the same place, the courtyard garden Arabella shares with her roommate Ben, then moves to the bar in which she was raped, and finally concludes with Arabella writing a different card to tape up in the space for "the end."¹⁹⁴

In the first fantasy, she spots David, her rapist, and springs into action. She pulls a disguise out of her bag for herself, Terry, and their friend Theo, who runs the sexual violence survivors' support group Arabella attends. Together, the three women drug David, then drag him into the street. Arabella is soon completely carried away, and in a near-trance, unzips the unconscious David's pants to expose his genitals. She then leads the women in beating him to death. Arabella stores his bloodied body under her bed, in the same place where she kept the evidence from the prior legal investigation. She then sticks up the final notecard for her book, covered in blood.¹⁹⁵

In the next scenario, the roles are shifted, if not reversed. Arabella lures David into attempting to drug her again, then fakes an altered state while he once again guides her to the same bathroom stall in which he raped her. When he is about to initiate another

¹⁹⁴ *I May Destroy You*, episode 12, "Ego Death," written by Michaela Coel, Sherie Myers, and Stephanie Yamson, directed by Michaela Coel and Sam Miller, BBC and HBO, 2020.

¹⁹⁵ *I May Destroy You*, episode 12.

violent encounter, she turns around and says, “Hello, David.” He is initially stunned, but his defensive shock quickly curdles into frightening aggression. As he rants, his repeated address of Arabella as a “stupid little whore” shifts into self-address as he begins to repeat the phrase “a stupid little whore, David.” His self-address continues; every injunction ends with his own name: “don’t tell anyone, David;” “it’s our little secret, David,” “you’re worthless, David.” The strong implication here is that David is now repeating a script he absorbed from his own abuser. He breaks down into sobs and repetitions of “I’m sorry.” Arabella, deeply moved, brings him home, where the two talk quietly on her bed until the police arrive to arrest him. Their conversation does not exonerate or excuse David’s behavior; he tells Arabella that he’s been incarcerated for “all different types of rape.”¹⁹⁶ Through tears, he discusses his own confusion that she has let him in at all, especially into her bedroom, since “if you’re not scared, don’t know how I’m meant to be.” As the police lights shine through the window, he panics and begs her not to leave him. As he is pulled out through the doorframe of her bedroom, Arabella begins to cry. She wipes away her tears with a notecard, which she then tapes on the wall as another possible ending.¹⁹⁷

In the third scenario, Arabella sees David in a surreal, near-empty version of the bar. She pursues a connection with him, and instead of drugging her, David reciprocates her interest. When the camera again returns to Arabella’s bedroom, the two are engaged

¹⁹⁶ The list he subsequently provides is a nod to the show’s own pedagogical focus on exposing multiple forms of sexual violence, such as nonconsensual explicit photography and rape by deception.

¹⁹⁷ *I May Destroy You*, episode 12.

in a consensual encounter, which concludes with Arabella penetrating David. In the morning, when they wake up, he says to her, “I’m not gonna go unless you tell me to.” She smiles. “Go,” she says. “Okay,” he responds, then gets up and walks, naked, out the door. As he leaves, the bloodied corpse from the first fantasy crawls out from under the bed and follows him. This time, Arabella stands up, and instead of taping up new notecards, tears down two. The final notecard in the series is now “Garden—Ben.” Arabella taps it gently, then walks out the bedroom door. The scene returns to the courtyard, but this time, Arabella decides to stay home with Ben instead of returning to the bar to seek out her rapist. This moment becomes the quiet new ending for her book.¹⁹⁸

Arabella’s fantasies allow her to pursue various opportunities for resolution. In the first fantasy, she imagines following the conventional rape-revenge fantasy and redoubling David’s violence. In the process, though, it becomes apparent that this approach would also transform her into a violent assailant, like David. When she returns to the fantasy, a new kind of empathy is apparent, although this empathy provides only for David’s needs instead of her own. In the third, she is able to become intimate enough with her trauma and experience that she can clearly and authoritatively reclaim her space and power. The fantasy convention also allows each David to stand in for a psychological aspect of Arabella’s own reprocessing: The first David is a receptacle for her own rage and desire for vengeance; the second David, in his request for her to stay with him, represents the hesitation and fear Arabella feels about letting go; the third David creates the opportunity for Arabella to fully assert her own agency, sexually and otherwise. This

¹⁹⁸ *I May Destroy You*, episode 12.

trio of encounters materializes the process of integration depicted by Arabella's diagram. The horizontal border has been literalized as the bed (just as the therapist suggested) and David's fantasized bodies stand in for the X trauma. Arabella processes through options—shoving David's corpse under the bed, speaking with and sexually dominating him on top of it. Finally, in telling David to go, she reclaims her space, fully occupying “under,” above, and on the line itself. She accepts that her healing and trauma are not engaged in a fight for dominance, but in a mutually integrated relationship.

In the final scenes, Arabella prepares to give a reading of her finally published book. The title, *January 22nd*, alludes to the date that Coel and Arabella were assaulted; the cover image is the integration symbol. She opens to the first page and takes a deep breath, preparing to read aloud, but instead of her voice, the sound of ocean waves begins. The scene cuts to a shot of Arabella on the same Italian beach where she “baptized” herself in episode 8. She looks directly into the camera and smiles, revealing the same fangs she was wearing on Halloween night while talking with her therapist. After a moment, she turns away from the camera, and this time, instead of wading into the water, she runs along the shoreline, barefoot, arms spread wide like wings. The screen cuts to black, and a blinking cursor appears before typing “End.”¹⁹⁹ The framing here calls to mind not only the stylization of the title sequence, but the story-within-a-story device that has framed *I May Destroy You* itself. Arabella and Coel conclude their narratives together. While the work of reprocessing and integration has not concluded, the work accomplished by writing (Arabella's book and Coel's screenplay) has reached

¹⁹⁹ *I May Destroy You*, episode 12.

its end. Like Mae, Arabella has responded to trauma on her own terms, opening new possibilities for healing and recovery. In turning her gaze directly past the fourth wall and toward the viewer, Coel inverts the viewed/viewer structure of television. Because the gaze, as Foucault points out, aligns with power, by claiming the gazer role, Arabella and Coel claim power. In this way, Coel also reclaims the narrative space of *I May Destroy You* for herself, rather than as a space for profit, entertainment, or spectatorship. In this final moment, Coel underscores that healing narratives, even when shared publicly, belong not to the audience and their expectations, but to the victim-survivor and her agency.

Conclusion: Under the Bed

By refusing to force a conventional resolution, Martin and Coel open space for their own. Their refusal of the binary between the victim/survivor, hero/villain, even man/woman takes to task not only the script they refuse, but the logic that subtends those conventions. José Esteban Muñoz describes this kind of departure as “a modality of being off script, off page, which is not so much a failure to succeed as it is a failure to participate in a system of valuation that is predicated on exploitation and conformity.”²⁰⁰ Failure, as Muñoz describes and Martin and Coel demonstrate, is a “political refusal” of “the mandate that makes queer and other minoritarian cultural performers work not for

²⁰⁰ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, 10th anniversary edition, (New York University Press: 2019), 174.

themselves but for distorted cultural hierarchy.”²⁰¹ In valuing their own complexity and humanity—by refusing the script—Martin and Coel refuse the norms and logics that structure and enable their abuse, logics which subtend the traditional binaristic juridical system and typically empower abusers.

The irony of “he said/she said” is that the slash between the two does not actually denote equality. It might be better represented as “he said” *over* “she said. When “his” and “her” narratives conflict, the primacy of authority accrues to him. In cases where a man is the defendant, this trend is in alignment with the principle of the presumption of innocence in the legal system. Of course, this is a fundamentally important principle, but in the “court of public opinion,” the presumption of innocence perverts into the assumption of victim’s unreliability instead. This further demonstrates why the logic of the legal system cannot be transposed without revision into discussions of justice for victim-survivors. The terms are not equivalent. By replacing the primacy of “justice” with an insistence on healing, Martin and Coel creates space outside the courtroom, a space designed for their own healing instead of legal resolution.

For both creators, this space is created “under the bed.” This space is rich with connotative meaning: the bed itself is frequently a metonym for sexual contact, but the space beneath is where children claim that monsters hide. The space accrues individual meaning for each creator’s avatar as well. For Mae, the space under the bed is charged with the hope for safety and security. For Coel, the space under the bed illuminates

²⁰¹ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 177.

Arabella's need to accept and integrate the elements of her experience she would prefer to ignore.

As a thought experiment, it's intriguing to consider what this space might look like in a universe shared by Arabella and Mae. I imagine Arabella leaning down to shove bags under the bed, and find Mae there, hiding. I wonder what they might say to each other; I imagine their responses to one another would be equal parts curious and compassionate. I can see Mae asking about the bags beneath the bed and then offering Arabella radical acceptance and solidarity. Arabella would ask Mae why they're there, and then she'd tell them they're safe with her. In this universe, the bed exists on a soundstage, surrounded by lights and cameras. The director's chair is empty—both directors are busy acting. Someone calls cut, and both Martin and Coel crawl out, then stand and stretch. This bedroom is a set, but its artificiality doesn't make its space any less important. They've written their own scripts, literally and figuratively. Both creators then also embody those scripts as performers and as co-directors. Their multi-hyphenate on-set roles further underscore their agency and authority over their own stories. Even without these titles, though, that agency and authority would persist. As both Martin and Coel demonstrate, the voices best positioned to narrate the stories of victim-survivors are the victim-survivors themselves. In the process, they also move through and around other constraining conventions around gender, genre, and trauma. By intentionally grounding the texts in the gaps created by the autofictional mode, both writers confront the obsession with facticity that is often used to question the credibility of life-writers. Instead, they work to deconstruct audience expectations and imagine new, more

expansive and compassionate possibilities in their place. As the field of trauma studies continues to expand and refine its approach to victim-survivors' narratives, attending to texts such as *Feel Good* and *I May Destroy You* can chart new courses. Approaching accounts of trauma recovery with an awareness of what we expect and a willingness to be surprised (or even challenged!), can illuminate fruitful possibilities for both scholarship and care in everyday life as victim-survivors lead the way toward imaginative possibilities for healing.

Chapter Three

“You Are This House’s Ghost:” Ungrievable Grief and Haunted Forms in Carmen Maria Machado and Ocean Vuong

And then, it occurs to you one day, standing in the living room, that you are this house’s ghost.

— Carmen Maria Machado, *In the Dream House*

Sometimes our words are few and far between, or simply ghosted. In which case the hand, although limited by the borders of skin and cartilage, can be that third language that animates where the tongue falters.

— Ocean Vuong, *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*

“What does it mean for something to be haunted, exactly?” asks Carmen Maria Machado in the first lines of “*Dream House as Haunted Mansion*,” a chapter that falls roughly in the middle of her experimental memoir *In the Dream House*. According to Machado, the answer is a “formula” we know “instinctually”: “a place is steeped in tragedy.” The recognition of haunting happens in the gut, an instantaneous neural connection from sensation to feeling to interpretation. A chill wind blows open a creaking window, and with it comes a felt sense of dread, one we may not understand but certainly *know*. We recognize “a place steeped in tragedy,” but not what that tragedy may be. “Death, at the very least,” Machado offers, although “you don’t need to die to leave a psychic mark of pain.”²⁰² The first words that the ghost of Hamlet’s father speaks are “Mark me,” a demand for attention and memory. The “psychic mark of pain” demands the same—from the reader and from Machado herself as she comes to terms with her experience of

²⁰² Carmen Maria Machado, *In the Dream House*, (Graywolf Press: 2020), 127.

intimate partner violence over the course of the narrative.

In the Dream House performs this work of attention and memory. In the prologue, Machado uses the haunted house as a metaphor to describe the “violence of the archive,” in Saidiya Hartman’s terms.²⁰³ Following Derrida’s description of the archive as the “house of the ruler,” Machado extends the spatialized metaphor to describe “gaps where people never see themselves or find information about themselves. Holes that make it impossible to give oneself a context. Crevices people fall into.” These gaps, holes, and crevices are haunted by “ghost[s] that has always been here,” markers for concepts too-long underacknowledged, such as, in the case of intimate violence, “the male victim, the female perpetrator, queer abusers, and the queer abused.” Machado explicitly states that the book to follow is intended to “speak into the silence” by narrating her experience of intimate partner abuse in a lesbian relationship.²⁰⁴

To speak about unspeakable things involves asking “how to tell impossible stories,” to use Hartman’s parlance. Machado phrases it this way: “How do we direct our record-keeping toward justice?” As if in response, the next paragraph describes the work of the memoirist, framed as “an act of resurrection.” The memoirist can “re-create the past, reconstruct dialogue...manipulate time; resuscitate the dead,” Machado claims, all of which serves to “put themselves, and others, into necessary context.”²⁰⁵ The memoirist as necromancer summons up both the dead and the past, and in doing so redresses

²⁰³ Machado, 4. Machado specifically quotes this line from Hartman’s “Venus in Two Acts.”

²⁰⁴ Machado, 5.

²⁰⁵ Machado, 5.

archival silence. Once brought back from the dead, the revenant can find “necessary context.” Machado is attentive to many archival ghosts, but the one that haunts her most is “you.” Much of the book is written in the second person, a deliberate splitting apart of Machado’s point of view. As she explains, the first person “I,” “that assured, confident woman,” “left, and then lived,” moving forward after the period of abuse. The “you” is locked inside the abuse: “you” “drove seven hours to Indiana every other week for a year” and “cried in front of many people.”²⁰⁶ Machado maintains this split point-of-view throughout the book. Chapters that take place during the abuse are written in second person, while first-person is used for essayistic interludes that convey Machado’s updated perspective as well as events that fall either before or after the abuse timeline. “*Dream House as Haunted Mansion*” is a “you” chapter. After the initial call-and-response about the definition of haunting, Machado notes that “it occurs to you one day...that you are this house’s ghost.”²⁰⁷ This “you” should be read specifically as Machado’s second person “you.” The earlier chapter on point-of-view concludes with Machado’s “I” addressing the “you”: “I thought you died, but writing this, I’m not sure you did.”²⁰⁸ The ghost that Machado is resurrecting is her own.

In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida exhorts the reader to “learn to live *with* ghosts.”²⁰⁹

²⁰⁶ Machado, 14.

²⁰⁷ Machado, 127.

²⁰⁸ Machado, 14.

²⁰⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, translated by Peggy Kamuf (Routledge Classics, 2006), xvii.

This “*being-with*” emphasizes the ghost as a social figure who invites “conversation and companionship;” ghostly sociality includes and creates a “politics of memory” that enables us to “live more justly.”²¹⁰ Derrida describes this relational and ethical imperative as “welcoming the specter,” a phrase that deliberately invokes the sense of the homely and, as he writes later, “hospitable.” Would welcoming the ghost home create more haunted houses, or fewer? If the ghostly, the haunted, and the spectral register memory, it stands to reason that every house is haunted. The key difference lies in whether or not the resident ghosts are acknowledged and welcomed. According to Machado, haunted houses remind us “that space exists in four dimensions...that the past never leaves us.”²¹¹ A just politics of memory insists that time does not heal all wounds, especially when the pain is disavowed and unacknowledged. Can you see ghosts? It depends on whether you believe in them or not.

In Ocean Vuong’s autobiographical novel *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*, he offers an example of welcoming the ghost—or, in this specific case, the phantom. The protagonist, Little Dog, recounts a Sunday morning he spent with his mother Rose at the nail salon where she works.²¹² An elderly white woman enters the salon and asks for a pedicure, then haltingly unstraps a prosthesis to reveal that her right leg has been amputated just below the knee. Rose begins to work “without skipping a beat” on the

²¹⁰ Derrida, xviii.

²¹¹ Machado, 127.

²¹² Little Dog and Rose are analogous but not equivalent to Vuong and his mother (even though her name was also Hong, “pink” or “rose” in Vietnamese).

woman's left foot, but when she has nearly finished, the woman asks haltingly, "if it's not too much" if Rose could also work on her right leg. "I can still feel it down there," she says. "I know it's silly, but I can. I can." Rose pauses, but only for a brief moment before performing a pedicure's ritual massage on the "air where her calf should be" and "the invisible foot." After the massage, she takes a towel from Little Dog and "pad[s] down the air, the muscle memory in [her] arms firing the familiar effective motions, revealing what's not there, the way the conductor's movements makes the music somehow more real."²¹³ The word "reveal" registers that the phantom limb has an existence; Rose makes it "*more* real" but does not invent or create it. It already has a ghostly presence. The phantom limb may no longer be physically present, but the pain the woman feels is very real.

The word *phantom* comes from *phaninein*, which means "to bring to light or make appear."²¹⁴ Phantoms are apparitions, manifestations—they make the invisible visible. When Rose caresses the phantom limb, she engages in the co-creative work of welcoming the specter. I want to emphasize here that this is embodied work. The invisible becomes visible when she *holds* it; it takes shape once something (in this case, the towel) wraps around it. To make the invisible visible is the political work of the artist, especially when that which they bring to light has been deemed invisible or immaterial by hegemonic power. The apparition summoned by the artist can also give tangible form to

²¹³ Ocean Vuong, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, (Penguin Press: 2019), 82-83.

²¹⁴ "Phantom." *The Online Etymology Dictionary*.
<https://www.etymonline.com/word/phantom>

intangible abstraction. When that invisible, intangible abstraction is pain, the artist who summons up an apparition also performs an act of bearing witness.

After all this talk of haunting, phantoms, and specters, perhaps it is unsurprising that I am thinking about grief. In particular, I am thinking about grief that is “ungrievable.” I include here both how Judith Butler describes the concept—grieving the loss of lives that are “unmarkable” and “unnameable,” unrecognized *as* human lives.²¹⁵ I also am thinking of when grief itself becomes unspeakable, whether because it exceeds language (as in trauma) or because it is illegible to or disavowed by the public—often, ungrievable grief encompasses all these factors. This is certainly the case for both Machado and Vuong. Machado’s grief responds to intimate partner abuse, a form of violence that is already too often dismissed, especially if the abuse is psychological rather than physical. For Machado, this dismissal is compounded by her identity as a queer woman of color and, most of all, by the fact that her abuser was her lesbian partner. Vuong, like Machado, navigates the structural oppression faced by queer people of color. His novel itself takes on multiple sources of grief, none of which register as officially grievable: the traumatic violence of the American invasion of Vietnam, his mother’s abuse, the overdose death of his first love Trevor, and the death of his grandmother and (anticipated) death of his mother, two Vietnamese working-class women.

In what follows, I argue that Vuong and Machado both use queer formalism as a strategy to grieve the ungrievable. I do so by returning to the haunted house as a cultural form that can shape our understanding of grief and trauma. The haunted house is a

²¹⁵ Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, (Verso: 2004).

material structure brought to (queer) life by an animating force that acts on its inhabitants. Formalist analysis, especially queer-of-color formalist analysis, considers both the structure and its animating force, its history and its possible futures. Vuong and Machado leverage queer formalist interventions to redress the silencing of ungrievable grief. I will first spend more time on how grief and form are connected, then discuss how “ghostly” forms such as the haunted house provide particular clarity for ungrievable grief. At that point, I move into extended analysis of how Vuong and Machado each use queer formalism to “welcome the ghost.”

Foundations of Grievability

To begin: What is grief? Perhaps the defining trait of grief is that it registers an absence, a rupture, a gap. Grief is premised on the fact that something is not or no longer *there*, whether that something is a person lost to death, a relationship ended in heartbreak, a dream deferred, a future lost. In “Mourning and Melancholia,” Freud famously distinguishes between the socially preferred “mourning” and the pathologized “melancholia” by describing how the griever responds to the absence. Freud’s mourner performs what he calls “the work of mourning”: determining through “reality testing” that the beloved no longer exists, then withdrawing all libidinal attachment from the beloved. In other words, the mourner responds to absence by accepting the hole left by the beloved as part of the new shape of the world itself.²¹⁶ By contrast, the melancholic

²¹⁶ Sigmund Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud: Volume XIV*, translated by James Strachey, (Hogarth Press: 1999), 244-245.

refuses to “let go” of the lost beloved and instead abandons their own self-regard, transmuting the external loss into an internal (/ego) loss. Like many others, including Freud himself in 1927’s *The Ego and the Id*, I find the distinction between mourning and melancholia largely artificial. I mention it here to highlight how our cultural scripts around grieving, and especially grieving “the right way,” depend on how we conceive of absence, and what that conception demands from us in response.

For Freud, the appropriate response to grief is to detach from the lost loved object and reattach to a new substitute. The transactional undertones of the “work” of mourning surface here: if you put in enough psychological effort, you will be rewarded with a new object to love, as if successful grieving could follow the pattern of trading in an old car at the dealership. As Judith Butler contends, this fixation on “full substitutability” as successful mourning aligns with a “Protestant ethic when it comes to loss,” in which a griever could determine, “Oh, I’ll go through loss this way, and that will be the result, and I’ll apply myself to the task, and I’ll endeavor to achieve the resolution of grief that is before me.”²¹⁷ In this transactional model (rooted, as Butler aptly notes, in cultural histories of whiteness and capitalism), grief seeks out another form to fill the gap, replacing absence with presence.

“Reality testing” is an evocative phrase. In Freud’s usage, it denotes the griever using objective reality as a metric against which to test her own perceptions, something tested *against* reality. Read against the grain, though, this phrase could just as easily denote testing reality itself, turning reality into the test subject to be evaluated. “Test”

²¹⁷ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 21.

includes assessment, but it could also communicate a sense of being tried or tested out. Derrida envisions the “virtual space of spectrality” as fundamentally unsettling—or testing— “the sharp distinction between the real and the unreal, the actual and the inactual, the living and the non-living, being and non-being.”²¹⁸ In their discussion of grief and the “grievable,” Judith Butler underscores the political implications of reality testing. As Derrida theorizes, the boundary that divides the real/unreal and living/dead is porous—or rather, that it is not a boundary at all for the specter, who is both always and never in both realms. Butler calls attention to the construction of the un/real boundary as inherently political. Lives marked as “ungrievable” have already been marked by the “violence of derealization,” which means that “they cannot be mourned because they are always already lost, or, rather, never ‘were.’” The insistence on derealization and ungrievability produces a subject with “a strange way of remaining animated...they seem to live on, stubbornly, in this state of deadness.” Butler notes that the derealized Other, “neither alive nor dead,” is thus “interminably spectral.”²¹⁹ For this reason, Butler insists on an “insurrection at the level of ontology, a critical opening up of the questions, What is real? Whose lives are real? How might reality be remade?”²²⁰

Butler is also describing how grief moves across the boundary between the public and the private. What private griefs are recognized as such in the public sphere? And how do the public “cultural frames for thinking the human set limits on the kinds of losses we

²¹⁸ Derrida, 12.

²¹⁹ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 33-34.

²²⁰ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 33.

can”—collectively *and* privately—“avow as loss?”²²¹ Some of these “cultural frames” exist at the level of language and thought, but others are more material and formal. Butler writes about the obituary, for example, as an “instrument by which grievability is publicly distributed.”²²²

Butler is working specifically here with material violence and death, a specificity I certainly do not wish to evacuate. At the same time, their framework describing the relation between derealization, ungrievability, and spectrality also aptly describes a category of grief and loss itself. In their description of the mourning process that “inevitably” follows traumatic experience, Judith Herman explains that “when the victim is already devalued (a woman, a child), she may find that the most traumatic events of her life take place outside the realm of socially validated reality.”²²³ This phenomenon redoubles when the loss *itself* is framed as “outside socially validated reality,” such as the loss of a queer relationship (or partner in that relationship) or the grief following an abusive relationship. Even the meager assortment of “frames” that might fit these losses inevitably demand a conformity to type, and, often, a clear recourse to “objective evidence.” In Machado’s case, for example, she is 1) already an “ungrievable” subject as a queer, fat, brown woman, 2) mourning a relationship that is ungrievable both because it was abusive and because it was queer, and 3) the fact that the abuse was primarily psychological and emotional rather than physical means that Machado is left without

²²¹ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 32.

²²² Butler, *Precarious Life*, 34.

²²³ Herman, 16.

“evidence” (such as photos of bruises) that would make her suffering legible to others through the available cultural frames.

Haunted (House As) Metaphor

Ungrievable grief aligns in many ways with Avery Gordon’s theory of haunting, which “act[s] on and meddl[es] with taken-for-granted realities” to describe spectral, ungrievable losses that can be neither witnessed nor mourned.²²⁴ Gordon defines haunting as “one way in which abusive systems of power make themselves known and their impacts felt in everyday life, especially when they are supposedly over and done with or when their oppressive nature is denied.”²²⁵ Gordon distinguishes haunting from trauma in that haunting produces a “something-to-be-done,”²²⁶ but as a trauma studies scholar who rejects the paralyzing conception of the totalized and unspeaking victim, I find this somewhat puzzling. To my mind, trauma *always* produces something-to-be-done in that traumatic experience creates a demand—a need—for witness, even for mourning. In order for the survivor to heal (as I have discussed), the survivor must be able to establish safety, to narrate the trauma story, and to be received and supported by community. Trauma, like haunting, is also inherently political and sociological. As Ann Cvetkovich puts it, “trauma becomes the hinge between systemic structures of exploitation and

²²⁴ Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, New University of Minnesota Press edition, (University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 8.

²²⁵ Gordon, xvi.

²²⁶ Gordon, xvi.

oppression and the felt experience of them.”²²⁷ Not every traumatic experience originates in social oppression (e.g. natural disasters, unexpected death, PTSD suffered by combat veterans), but every traumatic experience is shaped and contextualized by sociological forces, even simply because trauma temporarily or permanently moves the survivor into the category of disability.

I used Gordon’s framework when I taught both Vuong’s and Machado’s books in a class I themed around trauma in contemporary American literature in the summer of 2024. My students were especially taken by how Gordon reads Derrida’s “hauntology.” We returned again and again to his description of spectrality defying “the sharp distinction between the real and the unreal, the actual and the inactual, the living and the non-living, being and non-being.”²²⁸ Ghosts, we said, are boundary crossers: neither and both here/absent, past/present, spiritual/embodied. Trauma destabilizes the relationship between the past and present; for many survivors, responding to a trigger depends on their ability to determine *when* (not only where) they are. Trauma also reveals the imbrication between the material and immaterial; the “unspeakable” violence is manifested within the body. Indeed, one might say that trauma indicates how history (memory) and violence (pain) live on within the body. When the presence of trauma is ignored or refused, it often produces even further disturbances, not unlike the poltergeist causing increasing chaos to get the attention of the haunted house’s occupants. What is invisible will still make itself known.

²²⁷ Cvetkovich, 12.

²²⁸ Derrida, 12.

We were hardly the first to make this comparison, but I mention it because it helped me understand—or maybe remember—something about teaching. We can learn through pure didactic language, but we learn more and better when we are given something to hold, to touch, to feel. When Toni Morrison was given the task to address the world about the power of language, she described a bird, maybe dead or alive, held by children. We want metaphor. We need a way to put a shape around the haze of an abstracted idea, catch the fog in a jar so that we can reach our hand in and feel what it is like. We never get all the way there: language is never fully commensurate with experience. “Sometimes our words are few and far between, or simply ghosted,” Ocean Vuong writes, “In which case the hand, although limited by the borders of skin and cartilage, can be that third language that animates where the tongue falters.”²²⁹ I was worried about explaining to my students what trauma *is*, but what was more important was learning with them what trauma *feels like*.

During that same summer, I lived through the most traumatic experience of my life thus far. I have written, deleted, rewritten, and re-deleted this paragraph many times. The main point is this: one afternoon during the second week of that summer class, I came home to find that my husband was abruptly abandoning me. In the aftermath, thanks to support from my family and friends, I was able to understand and, eventually, articulate how abusive the relationship had become over the course of the seven years we spent together. That is, I can talk about it with people who have lived through it with me, who know at least what it felt like for them to watch: first, as I shrank in his shadow, and

²²⁹ Vuong, 33.

then again when I slowly (very slowly) crawled back out. Disclosing the information to someone new is an altogether different challenge. It surprised me how often it came up that I was getting divorced, and how varied the reactions were. Some were compassionate, even edifying (one favorite came from Crystal, a member of our program's administrative staff, who immediately congratulated me). In too many cases, people hearing the news responded either with truisms that felt more like thought-terminating clichés ("I'm sure it's for the best") or with voyeuristic, invasive questioning ("Why did you get divorced? Was it like one of those crazy stories on Reddit?"²³⁰).

Not long ago, still navigating this tension almost two years out from the initial implosion of my life, I asked my friend McKenzie for advice. McKenzie is also a survivor of an abusive relationship, and (luckily for me), has a real knack for letter writing. "I tried for years, and I never found a line or spiel that neatly encapsulated how insidious that experience was," she wrote. Instead, "I realized—or maybe accepted rather—that no one would be able to feel the heartbreak I felt. Not through my words and most likely just never, because they hadn't been in my shoes." Later in the letter, she describes being told that "grief is permanent, which means we go through life piling it up—but I think it becomes less volatile. I think of all of the layers of rock that settle into different layers in the earth. Metaphors abound." That last phrase pinged something in my memory. Metaphors abound—where had I read that before?

"What does it mean for something to be haunted, exactly?" Machado asks. The chapter starts by answering this question with the formula I discussed above. It doesn't

²³⁰ This is, incredibly, a direct quote.

end there, though. Being haunted also means, Machado writes, that “metaphors abound,” such as “space that exists in four dimensions.”²³¹ I was struck by this small echo, especially since McKenzie had not read Machado’s book at the time.²³² Why do we turn so instinctively to metaphor when faced with pain? Aristotle defines the metaphor as something that “expresses true facts under impossible conditions.”²³³ Impossible conditions: unspeakable trauma, ungrievable grief. Saidiya Hartman offers that one way to “tell impossible stories” is to “imagine what cannot be verified.”²³⁴ She is specifically referring here to the use of the subjunctive in archival research, but the foundational importance of imagination to bearing witness is instructive. Vuong comments in an essay that “metaphor in the mouths of survivors [is] a way to innovate around pain”—not as euphemism, but as a method to “render the horrific via an alternative speech act.”²³⁵ Near the end of the novel, when Little Dog discovers a troupe of drag queens performing at an impromptu wake, he thinks that “grief, at its worst, is surreal, and demands a surreal response.”²³⁶ I read the “sur” here as indexing that which is beyond or beneath the real,

²³¹ Machado, 127.

²³² I asked. When she said no, I promptly shipped her a copy. Many thanks to her for helping me understand both this essay and my own life—something she’s done for me for ten years now.

²³³ Aristotle, *The Poetics of Aristotle*, translated by S.H. Butcher, (Project Gutenberg: 2008). eBook.

²³⁴ Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” 12.

²³⁵ Ocean Vuong, “The Ten Books I Needed to Write My Novel,” *LitHub*, October 21, 2019, <https://lithub.com/ocean-vuong-the-10-books-i-needed-to-write-my-novel/>

²³⁶ Vuong, 226.

the socially verified, and the legible.

Machado uses metaphor as the structure for each chapter of *In the Dream House*,²³⁷—that is, every chapter except one, “*Dream House as Not a Metaphor*.” The dream house is very much a real place, Machado warns, although “the rumors of the dead buried within the foundations are, almost certainly, a fiction.” At the end of her description, Machado comments that “the inhabitant gives the room its purpose. Your actions are mightier than any architect’s intentions.”²³⁸ No haunted house is designed to be one as such, unless it is planned as some theme park ride or film set. Ghosts and poltergeists are not featured in the blueprint. They move in, and by inhabiting it, they transform it, give it a new purpose, weight the meaningless (creaky floorboards, squeaky hinges, rattling windowpanes) with new meaning. The house becomes a signifier, each attribute pointing not to itself but to its animating presence. The haunted house is thus not only a metaphor in itself, it is structured like one.²³⁹

The haunted house is also a classic example of the Freudian *unheimlich*, literally the “unhomely”—what should be familiar made strange. The familiar strange is itself a formalist concept, associated most closely with Russian formalist Victor Shklovsky, whom Vuong claims as foundational to his own work. In a recent interview, Vuong quotes Shklovsky that “the estrangement of things” in art can “create the sensation of

²³⁷ The word “as” signals a simile; simile is itself a subdivision of metaphor writ large.

²³⁸ Machado, 9.

²³⁹ Extra gratitude here to Courtney Baker for setting me on this track of thinking.

seeing and not merely recognizing things.”²⁴⁰ This is what metaphor does: it moves the familiar toward the strange in order to better illuminate an animating force. It provides language to represent the unrepresentable, and in the process can also clarify the connections between phenomena.

The haunted metaphor is of special importance when discussing violence that has become so familiar, so commonplace, as to become cliché. Machado writes that this process is “dangerous” because “your brain can’t engage a cliché, not properly—it skitters right over [it] without a second thought.” Clichés also appear frequently in accounts of abuse because the effects are so universal. “If I stayed, I would have died,” for example, is true, yet it is also “straight out of central casting...making singularly boring what is in fact a defining and terrible experience.” In her archival research, Machado finds one particular account that stands out as both the embodiment and inversion of cliché. In a 1984 edition of the *Gay Community News*, Anne Franklin recounts the time her girlfriend threw stones at her on a beach. Machado is struck by the way this act of violence is haunted by the traditional (to the point of cliché) punishment for homosexuality. In a footnote, she reflects that this image “gets at this question of the way queer abuse feels like—is—homophobia, the same way abuse in heterosexual relationships feels like—is—sexism.”²⁴¹ My own paperback copy of the book almost automatically falls open to this page. Rereading this footnote a week after my ex-husband

²⁴⁰ Ocean Vuong, “Ocean Vuong: The Art of Writing,” interviewed by David Perell. *David Perell’s How I Write*, March 25, 2026, <https://howiwrite.substack.com/p/ocean-vuong-the-art-of-writing>.

²⁴¹ Machado, 233.

left clicked something into place for me. The metaphor told me what the emotional texture of abuse felt like—but it also illuminated the tether between structural and personal violence. I knew I lived in a house haunted by sexism and misogyny, because all houses in America are haunted in that way. But the “feels like—is” construction gave me “necessary context.” Understanding my abuser’s actions as animated by a larger structure of violence confirmed for me that I was not crazy. I knew what gendered violence felt like. I recognized its haunting presence.

Ghostly Form/Formalist Analysis

The ghost is “one form by which something lost, or barely visible, or seemingly not there to our supposedly well-trained eyes, makes itself known or apparent to us.”²⁴² This initially seems like a contradiction in terms. Ghosts are, after all, ephemeral and immaterial by definition. Their spectrality enables them to cross boundaries: they come from the past to the present, move through the walls of the haunted house. And yet we experience them through the language of form, the desire to put language around an absence, or to see a description linger on long after its referent is gone. As I studied up on grief, I was taken by (what I saw as) a frequent return to language about shapes, figures, forms, and bodies. Gordon calls the ghost a “figure;” one of her primary examples is *Beloved*, who seems to become *overembodied* as she gains power over

²⁴² Gordon, 8.

Sethe.²⁴³ Freud's description of the successful mourner as one who can substitute the love object made me think of something literally changing hands, returning one book to the library and pulling another down off the shelf. In his discussion of the ghost of King Hamlet, Derrida wonders whether the armor is part of the apparition, or whether it's wrapped around the apparition—or even if the armor is what gives the shape needed for the apparition to appear. Over and over, seeking to understand grief and trauma led me back to asking questions about form.

When thinking etymologically about form, this becomes even more interesting. Form is shape, contour, a figure. A theory for its origin claims it came about as transliteration of the Greek *morphe*,²⁴⁴ which to my modern ears recalls change (metamorphosis, shape changing) but also language (morpheme, morphology). In Ovid, Morpheus is the god of dreams, whose name literally means “maker of shapes.” The morpheme is the smallest unit of meaning in language, perhaps a reminder that underneath every set of fixed meanings is the potential for shapeshifting, for change, and a reminder that language (or at least written language) is ultimately the work of making shapes, changing shapes, dreaming like a god.

For the mortal, to give something a form is an attempt to understand, to make something comprehensible by virtue of its visibility and tangibility. To transform, then—to move among, between, beyond the given shape—makes an ontological statement. The griever transforms, is transformed by grief, moves through and around and beyond forms

²⁴³ If you believe the theory that Beloved is Wild in *Jazz*, she is at this point pregnant with Paul D's child, so—extra-bodied.

²⁴⁴ “Form,” *The Online Etymology Dictionary*, <https://www.etymonline.com/word/form>

in search of a meaningful shape for reality. I return here to Butler's demand for an "insurrection at the level of ontology, a critical opening up on the questions, What is real? Whose lives are real? How might reality be remade?"²⁴⁵ This is reality-testing, as I've discussed, but these questions also read as formal questions in the most basic sense: what *is* this loss? How can I take hold of it? What shape does it take? What shape have I taken on in response? After deformation and reformation, how do I understand the world to work? After deformation and reformation, how do I understand myself?

In using "form," I want to denote a somewhat flexible idea of shape as well as a more specific sense of aesthetic convention and strategy. While the criteria evaluated in a formalist analysis vary widely according to discipline and school, formalisms tend to center three key aspects: attention to 1) shape, 2) uses, and 3) context. The first of these is the most straightforward: what shape does the object of study take? How does this shape resemble others? From here, the natural impulse is to begin considering how shape influences (or is influenced by) function, or use. If genre is, to use Carolyn Miller's definition, about what a text *does*,²⁴⁶ form is genre's substrate—how it's formed, shaped, and how that shape interacts with its function and affordances. Affordances, as formalist critic Caroline Levine explains, is a term originally borrowed from design studies: "the affordances of materials are the kinds of uses or actions that are latent in them [such as diamonds' durability or wood's combustibility]," and "specific designs, which organize

²⁴⁵ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 33.

²⁴⁶ Carolyn R. Miller, "Genre as Social Action," 151.

these materials and others, then lay claim to their own range of affordances.”²⁴⁷

Affordances are shaped by raw material and by the design of an artist or manufacturer, but are also open to interpretation and change on the part of the user: a chair designed to securely support someone in a seated position can easily become an impromptu stepping stool for a short person to reach something on a high kitchen shelf. This flexibility is limited, however: the chair cannot realistically be used as a food source or a garment (at least, not without radically altering the material itself). For this reason, Levine explains, “it is useful to think about how some forms afford some kinds of thinking and knowing better than others.”²⁴⁸

We can also think about the affordances of the formalist analysis we pursue. Queer formalism takes on the key aspects above (shape, use, context) and applies them within a framework explicitly designed to interrogate cisheteronormativity. Queer formalism also embraces an open-ended approach to the “use” of an object or form. If (strategic) formalism, as Levine asserts, demonstrates that “some forms afford some kinds of thinking and knowing better than others,” queer formalism interrogates what “better” means and can mean. For example, does “better” include efficiency, clarity, legibility? For whom? And when might the opposite—opacity, fugitivity, difficulty, etc.—be more “useful”? As David Getsy explains in his conversation with Jennifer Doyle on the subject, “knowingly, willfully using something wrong has been deployed by many

²⁴⁷ Caroline Levine, “Forms, Literary and Social,” *DIBUR Literary Journal* 2 (Spring 2016), 76. <https://shc.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/2015-11/Dibur-v02i01-article07-Levine.pdf>

²⁴⁸ Levine, 77.

as a tactic for allegorizing normativity's disavowal of its own partiality," such as camp, which "values the devalued, and its energy comes from its rejection of 'commonly accepted' worth."²⁴⁹

For the queer formalist critic, the balance between emphasizing use and aesthetics is fundamental but fraught. Formalism is often accused of a tendency to prioritize the aesthetic at the expense of the social. Kadji Amin, Amber Jamilla Musser, and Roy Pérez contest this accusation in their introduction to a special issue on queer formalism. They explain that

Aesthetic innovation and formal manipulation are, however, the very substance of many of these artists' engagement with legacies of social violence. Aesthetic form offers resources of resistance to the violences of interpretation that prematurely fix the meaning of minority artistic production within prefabricated narratives.²⁵⁰

This reminder speaks to the necessity of evaluating queer art as an aesthetic production rather than a solely sociological one. On the other hand, attending only to affordance can tip into the too-common tendency to evaluate art and performance from minority subjects solely against the rubric of their disruption of the normative. The disruption is valuable, but not only *as* disruption. Attending only to the degree of deviation indirectly reinforces the centrality of the normative. The task remains, then, to read queer artists *as* artists—neither empty ornamentation nor objects of study.

²⁴⁹ Jennifer Doyle and David J. Getsy, "Queer Formalisms: Jennifer Doyle and David Getsy in Conversation." *Art Journal* 72, no. 4 (2014): 58–71. doi:10.1080/00043249.2013.10792864.

²⁵⁰ Kadji Amin, Amber Jamilla Musser, and Roy Pérez. "Queer Form: Aesthetics, Race, and the Violences of the Social," *ASAP/Journal* 2, no. 2 (2017): 227-239. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/asa.2017.0031>.

Before I go further, I want to clarify that the queer formalist analysis I am interested in is rooted in queer-of-color critique. A queer-of-color formalist analysis recognizes that the established use of any given form is nearly always shaped by the haunting co-presences of cisheteronormativity and white supremacy. While one system of violence may appear more relevant than the other, they always both demand to be reckoned with for queer-of-color artists and subjects. While much of my analysis to come focuses on the centrality of queerness to Machado's and Vuong's ungrievable losses, I want to take a moment here to illustrate how white supremacy shapes their experiences as well.

In the earlier passage about the phantom limb in *On Earth* that I discussed, the astute reader has likely already considered how racial hierarchy structures the encounter between Rose and the woman with the amputated leg. While Rose's actions do demonstrate care, it is equally important to note that the women's whiteness and Rose's position as an undocumented Vietnamese worker structure their encounter. Does Rose really have the ability to refuse the woman's requests? Maybe—but only with difficulty, and likely with consequences. Rose's ability to soothe the woman's pain is also part of a larger pattern, in which Rose suffers physically as a direct result of her work in the salon. This passage is bookended by two different examples of Little Dog considering the physical toll that working in the nail salon has taken on Rose's body. The relief she gives this woman is not without cost. Even the physical position of the two is a reminder of the power structure—Rose kneels below her customers, constantly craning her neck upward to speak with them.

Though Machado writes less frequently about her racial heritage than Vuong, two direct references illuminate the role of white supremacy in her interracial relationship with the woman in the dream house. In an early chapter, “*Dream House as Erotica*,” Machado writes that the woman “loves to marvel over your differences: how her skin is pale as skim milk and yours, olive; how her nipples are pink and yours are brown. ‘Everything is darker on you,’ she says.”²⁵¹ While I hesitate to make any concrete claims about racial fetishization, it is important to note that many abusers intentionally seek out partners who are already socially disempowered in some way.²⁵² Even if the woman is not consciously seeking out a nonwhite partner, the power that whiteness accords the woman still haunts the edges of the frame.

Much later, Machado goes to visit her grandfather’s hometown in Cuba with her brother. While they are there, her brother relays a story from their grandfather about one rainy day when a “rich, white Cuban man” tried to “summon this little brown kid” to do something for him. Their grandfather steadfastly refused to speak with the rich man until, at last, “Granddaddy told him to go fuck himself.” As Machado digests the story, she “let[s] the phrase *go fuck yourself* roll around in my mouth; a satisfying response, years too late.”²⁵³ Her adoption of the phrase reflects the symmetry she sees between herself

²⁵¹ Machado, 42.

²⁵² “The perpetrator is nevertheless exquisitely sensitive to the realities of power and to social norms. Only rarely does he get into difficulties with the law; rather, he seeks out situations where his tyrannical behavior will be tolerated, condoned, or admired.” Judith Herman, 112.

²⁵³ Machado, 237.

and her grandfather and the rich white man and her abuser. This chapter is titled “*Dream House as L’esprit de L’escalier*,” the French phrase that, when used in English, refers to the feeling of thinking of the right response too late to actually use it. In French, the phrase more literally means “spirit of the staircase,” or “staircase wit,” an allusion to an anecdote from Diderot. In the story, Diderot is insulted and left speechless in a salon on the *étage noble*, the architectural level above the ground floor. To leave, he must descend a staircase; at the bottom of the staircase, which marks his definitive exit from the party, he thinks of a retort.²⁵⁴ Again, the spatial and architectural metaphor seems especially apt to me. To have the right reply at hand in the right moment (*go fuck yourself*) rather than at the bottom of the stairs is to have at hand the means to resist the structural imbalance of power.

Machado: Necessary Context, Queering Form

To construct *In the Dream House*, Machado relies on a diverse array of forms. I use “forms” here in a capacious sense that includes genre as well as motif and trope. Some sections discuss the title directly, such as “*Dream House as Queer Villainy*,” an essay on the repeated troping of Disney villains as queer. Others are presented as a frame for the reader to use in the narrative section to come, such as “*Dream House as Bildungsroman*,” which narrates teenage Carmen’s experience of being groomed by her youth pastor. The chapter title refers not only to the definition of the word but to its associations and connotations. A coming-of-age story is distinguished not only by its

²⁵⁴ Eric Stephany, “L’esprit D’Escalier,” <https://www.ericstephany.com/L-ESPRIT-D-ESCALIER>

temporal setting in adolescence, but by associations with identity formation, increasing awareness of the adult world, and, especially, lost innocence. Reading the account of her youth pastor's predation through this lens implicitly establishes sexual violence as a fact of adulthood and the outside world. How we read that implication is not guaranteed, but it does tell us about how Carmen the character understands the world.

In the early pages of *Trauma and Recovery*, Judith Herman comments that "folk wisdom is filled with ghosts who refuse to rest in their graves until their stories are told."²⁵⁵ Machado uses this idea literally as a structuring conceit for most of the book. In an early chapter ("*Dream House as Famous Last Words*"), Machado begins to footnote her text with citations to Stith Thompson's *Motif-Index of Folk Literature*. She discusses this more explicitly in "*Dream House as Folktale Taxonomy*," which summarizes three different folktales concerned with the literal silencing of girls and women ("The Wild Swans," "The Goose Girl," and "The Little Mermaid"). Machado emphasizes the visceral horror in her retellings, such as her comparison of the sea-witch cutting out the mermaid's tongue with "slic[ing] a pork chop with a shitty Ikea knife."²⁵⁶ She contrasts the fate of each protagonist, remarking that "the story always looks a little different, depending on who is telling it."²⁵⁷ Here, she links abstract and material silence, abstract and material vulnerability. The cost of silence is borne in the body; women's vulnerability to it is a sort of time-honored multi-cultural tradition. She could easily

²⁵⁵ Herman, 8.

²⁵⁶ Machado, 36.

²⁵⁷ Machado, 37.

include many more: the little mermaid's fate in particular is shared by Philomela and Lavinia, by indigenous women attacked by conquistadors, by enslaved women fitted with the bit by their torturers. This is the "necessary context" offered by the alternative narrative archive. It clarifies how women's voices—their tongues—have long been a target for those seeking power. This is not to equate Machado's fate with these brutal attacks, but to place her experience along a continuum that clarifies the motivation for the violence against her. Cultural narratives constrain us, but in the right hands, they can also give us context to understand our own story. Machado uses the footnotes to annotate her own experiences over fifty times in *In the Dream House*, a repeated insistence that her experience is not singular but contextualized by a community of survivors both past and present.

The folktale motif-index appears regularly throughout the text until a pivotal chapter, "*Dream House as The Queen and the Squid*," an original folktale of Machado's own design. This folktale offers an allegorical version of Machado finally resisting the woman in the dream house. According to an interview, this chapter originally consisted of a series of emails between Machado and her abuser.²⁵⁸ When it became clear that reproducing these emails would not be legally feasible, she decided instead to represent the conversation through the lens of a folktale. The squid stands in for Machado (in a lovely detail, the letter the squid writes in the story is produced with ink from her own body). The squid is initially summoned to be a companion to a lonely queen, but one

²⁵⁸ Carmen Maria Machado, "The Aboutness of a Story: An Interview with Carmen Maria Machado," interview by Krys Malcolm Belc. *Passages North*, September 16, 2019, <https://www.passagesnorth.com/passagesnorthcom/2019/9/16/the-aboutness-an-interview-with-carmen-maria-machado>

night discovers a large dungeon filled with other animal companions that the queen has discarded throughout the years. She leaves in horror. When the queen discovers the squid is gone, she attempts to win her back in a series of manipulative letters. After three of these, the squid finally replies, “My queen, your words are very pretty. And yet they cannot obscure the simple fact that I have seen your zoo.”²⁵⁹ This is a fairytale about discovering your own context, about recognizing a pattern that exists outside of you. Not every victim will find a “zoo” in her abuser’s history, but she will certainly find that the patterns used against her are actually not special or unique.²⁶⁰ Recognizing that the pattern exists outside of you is a crucial part of understanding that the abuse was not your fault, could not have been your fault. You can see the other animals, see how obviously they are captive and confined and hurt. Sometimes you have to see others before you can see yourself.

After this chapter, there are only two more instances of citations of the folktale motif-index: once to reference the less-desirable effects of being freed from an evil spell,²⁶¹ and once to contextualize people’s unwillingness to believe victims.²⁶² They both contextualize other tropes of the experience of abused women. Beyond that, the references disappear. By writing an entry of her own, Machado has changed her

²⁵⁹ Machado, 204.

²⁶⁰ “The methods that enable one human being to enslave another are remarkably consistent...Even in domestic situations, where the batterer is not part of any larger organization and has had no formal instruction in these techniques, he seems time and again to reinvent them.” Herman, 113.

²⁶¹ Machado, 207.

²⁶² Machado, 223.

relationship to the archive. It provides her with context, and then she enters in a narrative of her own. She moves from consumer to producer, from object to subject.

At other times, Machado deliberately breaks (or queers) the form she uses. In “*Dream House as Word Problem*,” Machado uses the setup of a classic math problem to describe a long-distance period in the relationship that required Carmen to “spen[d] the entire second year of her graduate school experience shuttling back and forth to Bloomington,” where the woman in the dream house lives. “In one trip,” she begins, “she can listen to 75 percent of an audiobook.” The format continues to add variables for time, speed, and distance: “If she is driving at sixty-five miles per hour, and the average length of an audiobook is ten hours...” At this point, a reader expects the word problem’s central question to come—likely something to do with how many miles it takes for her to drive to the house.²⁶³ Instead, Machado swerves: “how many months will it take for her to realize she has wasted half of her MFA program driving to her girlfriend’s house to be yelled at for five days?” This swerve doesn’t only throw the reader off balance (although it does do that). It also gets at something fundamental about how the reality-twisting nature of abuse compels the victim to use the wrong metrics, to measure the wrong thing. The woman in the word problem thinks about finishing audiobooks when she should be noticing how much of her time is spent being mistreated. The question then warps into self-recrimination, an echo of victim-blaming logic: “How many months will it take her

²⁶³ For the record, my math says one trip is 7.5 hours, times 65 miles per hour, equals 487.5 miles.

to realize the fact that she functionally did this to herself?”²⁶⁴ Some may read this as a simple conclusion, or a final note emphasizing the sense of helplessness and frustration that runs through the whole section. Another reading, though, posits that this is a second layer, a repeated incidence of asking the wrong question. A trauma-informed reading asks not “why did you do this to yourself?” but “why do you believe that how she treated you is your fault?”

The Choose-Your-Own-Adventure section reflects how form itself can be used to maintain power. In this chapter, Machado explains in an interview, “I wanted to gaslight the reader.”²⁶⁵ The chapter begins with a dilemma that appears simple enough: “you” wake up and are told by the woman in the dream house that your movements in your sleep kept her awake. There are three options for a response: to “apologize profusely,” to tell the woman in the dream house to wake you up in the future if you disturb her, or to tell her to calm down.²⁶⁶ But all three are false choices. In the first two scenarios, in which you are deferential, the woman responds the exact same way—“fuck you”—and the choices at the bottom of each page all lead to the same “next page.”²⁶⁷ In the third scenario, in which you tell the woman in the dream house to calm down, the book

²⁶⁴ Machado, 115.

²⁶⁵ Carmen Maria Machado, “Difficult Questions about In the Dream House,” interview by Suzette Smith, *Portland Mercury*, January 16, 2020, <https://www.portlandmercury.com/arts/carmen-maria-machado-interview-difficult-questions-about-in-the-dream-house-27817971/>

²⁶⁶ Machado, 162.

²⁶⁷ Machado, 163-164.

responds, “Are you kidding? You’d never do this. Don’t try to convince any of these people that you’d stand up for yourself for one second. Get out of here,” and directs the reader to exit the section.²⁶⁸ A similar pattern repeats throughout the chapter: the only way to proceed is to acquiesce to the woman’s hostility, and any choices the reader makes lead either to the same chain of events or to a dead end. The events are cyclical; if the reader follows the directions, the choices lead again and again back through the same sequence, an endless chain of waking up next to hostility that cannot or will not be appeased.

The curious reader, though, will notice that there are extra pages, pages she has flipped past on her way to the directed choices. There are three pages that can only be read if the reader disobeys the directions. The first is angry and accuses the reader of cheating, the escalating accusations echoing the ad hominem attacks of an abuser: “what kind of person are you? Are you a monster?”²⁶⁹ The next is less angry and alludes to the first-person narrator, acknowledging that “you flipped here because you got sick of the cycle. You wanted to get out. You’re smarter than me.”²⁷⁰ The third instance asks if “you think that by flipping through this chapter linearly you’d find some kind of relief.” The voice then replies to this rhetorical question: “Don’t you get it? All this shit already happened, and you can’t make it not happen, no matter what you do.”²⁷¹

²⁶⁸ Machado, 166.

²⁶⁹ Machado, 165.

²⁷⁰ Machado, 167.

²⁷¹ Machado, 170.

These interjections mimic the internal dialog of a victim of psychological and emotional abuse, especially the way that the voice of the abuser continues in the victim's head after the abuse ends. Recollecting the cyclical experience (without intervention) often causes self-recrimination and hopelessness. A key symptom of PTSD is the belief that the world is fundamentally unsafe and evil and that violence cannot be prevented or resisted. The abuse pattern repeatedly reinforces the victim's helplessness and worthlessness, and its power is cemented through the repeated confirmation of reality as told by the abuser. This cognitive distortion is difficult for victims to unlearn. Many subtle shifts must take place, as demonstrated here. First, the victim must process and reject the belief that she deserved her treatment and especially must reject the belief that she is fundamentally an unlovable person. Then, the victim must also deal with the intense self-blame and shame she feels for not exiting the abusive situation. Some of this is self-protective, a way to minimize the power of abusive people by claiming it as one's own failure that can be remedied and improved upon. The difficult reality to accept is that psychological abuse is designed to leverage a victim against herself. This, in turn, can create a strong feeling of fear and powerlessness: "you can't make it not happen, no matter what you do." Nothing can change or redeem or undo the violence. We move forward, and it grows more distant in the rearview mirror. But we never get to go back, to steer our past selves around the chasm waiting to swallow them up. The only path forward is through it.

The only way to exit the sequence according to the directions is to imagine something different. On the second occurrence (the repetition) of the morning, this time

on page 175, a third choice appears, imagining a “theatrical” escape that allows you to flip to 176. On 176, the book replies, “That’s not how it happened, but okay. We can pretend. I’ll give it to you, just this once.” I don’t think this is wishful thinking, or a revisionist history meant to paper over reality. Imagining what could have or should have been is an act of critical fabulation. In describing the “capacities of the subjunctive” as it relates to her method, Hartman quotes Lisa Lowe’s description of the “conditional temporality of ‘what could have been,’” which opens up “a space of productive attention to the scene of loss.”²⁷² Hartman and Lowe are both thinking specifically about the violent losses that are absent in the historical archive. My application of critical fabulation to the personal archive of memory strives to honor that original context. The goal is not to erase or even ameliorate the original violence, but to clearly mark what was made impossible, to see the ghostly afterimage of what should have been otherwise. This requires a finely tuned attention to the external forces of violence that haunt the scene and disavow the loss. The dramatic escape that Machado imagines is not about comfort; it is a recognition of what could have—perhaps should have—happened instead.

I recognize I am treading delicate ground here: the question of “what should have happened” slides very easily into victim-blaming logic. Victim blaming locates the victim’s moment of choice incorrectly; it implies a causal link between the victim’s choices and the abuser’s willingness to harm her, which precisely replicates the scene of abuse. Victim blaming locates the moment in need of revision in the time *before* the abuse occurs—that if she had only made a different choice, she could have prevented her

²⁷² Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” 11.

abuse. In Machado's revisionist memory (and in survivor revisionist imagination practices generally), the moment in need of revision is the one just *after* the abuse has occurred. Initially, the victim acquiesces to the abuser's version of reality, in which the victim deserves or has provoked the abuse. In the revisionist memory, the victim revisits the scene, tests the reality, and rejects it. She refuses, and she escapes.

In therapy settings, this is analogous to a form of reprocessing usually called imagery rescripting.²⁷³ In this process, the patient first imaginatively recalls the traumatic memory, typically from the beginning until the point of the violence itself. At this point, the therapist invites the patient to imagine their present self intervening on behalf of their past self. Imagery rescripting guides the patient both to see the traumatic event from new perspectives and to perform care for the self. Crucially, rescripting does not change the behavior of the abuser but imagines a different response from the survivor. This distinction is what allows rescripting to be empowering for survivors. A key component of recovering from post-traumatic stress disorder is integrating one's newfound understanding of the unpredictability and unforeseen depths of violence. Rescripting integrates that new understanding of reality while simultaneously rehearsing a different response that centers the survivor's inherent worth. Toni Morrison writes that

²⁷³ Marion Bosch and Arnaud Artz, "Imagery Rescripting for Patients with Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: A Qualitative Study of Patients' and Therapists' Perspectives About the Elements of Change," *Cognitive and Behavioral Practice* 30 no.1, (February 2023): 18-34, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1077722921001243>.

“imagination fosters real possibilities: you can’t imagine it, you can’t have it.”²⁷⁴

Revising and rescripting memory builds familiarity with what is possible.

Vuong: Guiding Shapes, Bodily Form

Vuong seeks out “different guiding shapes” for the novel. The first of these is kishōtenketsu, a structure used in Chinese poetry and Japanese narrative. Vuong chose deliberately as an alternative to the centrality of conflict in the Western novel.²⁷⁵ The traditional kishōtenketsu formula involves four parts: the introduction, development, change, and conclusion. This should not be confused for an extended Western three-act structure (set-up, rising action, resolution). The third element, *ten*, can refer to a change in circumstances, but can also refer to a change in perspective or a time jump. In the original four-line poetic form, the third line functioned somewhat similarly to the *volta* in a sonnet, usually emphasizing a sense of reflection or introspection rather than an action-oriented conflict. The fourth stage, *ketsu*, also differs from Western resolution in that it only means an ending, which can be open-ended and ambiguous instead of directly addressing the central conflict.²⁷⁶ Vuong’s work does not correspond to these stages linearly; instead, the novel moves in and out of these stages fluidly. It may be more

²⁷⁴ Toni Morrison, *The Source of Self-Regard: Selected Essays, Speeches, and Meditations*, (Penguin Random House: 2019), 320.

²⁷⁵ Ocean Vuong, “Survival as a Creative Force: An interview with Ocean Vuong,” interview by Spencer Quong, *The Paris Review*, June 5, 2019, <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2019/06/05/survival-as-a-creative-force-an-interview-with-ocean-vuong/>.

²⁷⁶ Patricia Thang, “Kishōtenketsu: What It Is and 8 That Books Use It,” *Book Riot*, August 25, 2021, <https://bookriot.com/kishotenketsu/>

accurate to say that the ethos or sensibility of *kishōtenketsu* informs the structure of the novel. As Vuong describes it, *kishōtenketsu* “insists that a narrative structure can survive and thrive on proximity alone. Proximity builds tension.”²⁷⁷ The use of a non-plot-driven structure also shifts the function of violence in the text, especially American violence against Vietnamese people. By using a structure focused more on relation than action, “violence becomes a fact and not a vehicle towards climax.”²⁷⁸ This gesture also resists the totalizing stereotype of trauma narratives, in which the traumatic incident itself tends to overshadow the characters themselves. Establishing violence as part of the setting, so to speak, accurately reflects the entrenched nature of colonial/imperial violence as a structuring force; placing it as literal background also foregrounds the characters themselves.

The novel is implicitly structured by the logic of *kishōtenketsu*. Explicitly, Vuong uses the epistolary form to shape the text, which underscores the centrality of relation, intimacy, desire, and loss to the novel. The novel is, at least in part, presented as a letter from Little Dog to his mother, Rose. Like Vuong’s own mother, Little Dog’s mother cannot read. In some ways, the impossibility of his mother’s receipt of the letter enables greater vulnerability for Little Dog. Prior to the first of multiple detailed sex scenes with Trevor, Little Dog’s first love, he explains, “I only have the nerve to tell you what comes after because the chance this letter finds you is slim—the very impossibility of your

²⁷⁷ Ocean Vuong, “Survival as a Creative Force.”

²⁷⁸ Ocean Vuong, “The Ten Books I Needed to Write My Novel.”

reading this is all that makes my telling it possible.”²⁷⁹ While his intimate relationship with his mother shapes the text, so too does the inherent paradox of writing to someone who cannot read. The novel is formatted to build intimacy, and yet this goal is forever destined to fail. At the risk of sounding flippant, I want to ask: isn’t this all language? We reach toward one another, we put words around feeling, we speak knowing that it’s inadequate, that perfect communication is impossible. We lean on metaphor to “explain the impossible,” and even then we know something will be elided, left out, left over. The reach is what seems to matter the most, the effort to come as close as we can. In this way, I see the impossibly addressed letter as a metaphor in itself for the limitations of language as well as its intimate allure.

The literary form that Vuong employs that interests me most is the elegy. The elegiac form blends memory and desire in a tradition George Haggerty argues is uniquely queer as “the poetic form concerned with the erotics of mourning.”²⁸⁰ Here, Haggerty describes the attention paid by the elegy to the body of the beloved and the desire for the beloved’s presence to return to the speaker. The queer erotics of mourning describe the longing for a body made doubly unavailable—first, by the “contours of hegemonic cultural practice” and then by death by itself.²⁸¹ Vuong carries this relationship out even further by entwining desire and mourning formally within the text. Due to the novel’s

²⁷⁹ Vuong, 113.

²⁸⁰ George E. Haggerty, “Desire and Mourning: The Ideology of the Elegy,” in *Ideology and Form in 18th Century Literature*, ed. David H. Richter (Texas Tech University Press: 1999), 187.

²⁸¹ Haggerty, 187.

nonlinear timeline and Little Dog's proleptic commentary, the reader learns early on that Trevor will die. All descriptions of their intimacy that occur after this moment are inevitably always read as painfully vulnerable and ephemeral.

In the center of the novel, the prose shifts into a more poetic register to offer up a kind of elegy for Trevor. In mourning Trevor, Little Dog begins with a temporality outside time, represented by a syntactical structure composed without verb tense. The section begins, "Trevor rusted pickup but no license. Trevor sixteen; blue jeans streaked with deer blood. Trevor too fast and not enough."²⁸² The pages that follow stay close to Trevor's difficulty in making sense of his queerness alongside his inherited white American masculinity. Trevor is simultaneously "the hunter[,] Trevor the carnivore, the redneck, not/ a pansy, shotgunner, sharpshooter, not fruit or fairy" but is also distraught when he learns that "the difference between veal and beef is the children."²⁸³ The lines continue, "The children, the veal, they stand very still because tenderness depends on how little the world touches you. To stay tender, the weight of your life cannot lean on your bones."²⁸⁴ The image of the captive calves repeats throughout the poem; in the final lines, the sound of "a calf / shuffling inside, hoofs soft as erasers, the bell on its neck ringing / and ringing" becomes "the sound buried deep in Trevor's chest."²⁸⁵ In the elegy,

²⁸² Vuong 153.

²⁸³ Vuong, 155.

²⁸⁴ Vuong, 156.

²⁸⁵ Vuong, 159-160.

Little Dog offers both his past self and his memory of Trevor a kind of tender care that speaks back to the vulnerable “tenderness” both feel under “the weight of [their] lives.”

While this section was initially published as a stand-alone poem,²⁸⁶ in the world of the novel, the elegy has “afterlives” in two further sections. In a chapter set just after Trevor’s death, Little Dog describes Trevor’s chemical dependence, which began when he was prescribed oxycontin for an ankle injury at age fifteen. Little Dog’s indictment of the pharmaceutical industry that enabled harm in pursuit of their own profit drives much of the chapter, interrupted by a recurrence of an inverted form of syntax that structured the elegy itself:

Trevor was into *The Shawshank Redemption* and Jolly Ranchers, Call of Duty and his one-eyed border collie, Mandy...Trevor was a boy who had a name, who wanted to go to community college to study physical therapy. Trevor was alone in his room when he died, surrounded by posters of Led Zeppelin. Trevor was twenty-two. Trevor was.²⁸⁷

The sentences break down slowly, shaving detail and context away sentence by sentence, until we are left with only Trevor’s death, then only his age, and then only his existence, that he “was.” The shifting specificity of detail here speaks to the earlier poetic form of the elegy but also to the rage articulated by the chapter more broadly. Trevor is not another faceless or nameless “addict” claimed by death: he was deeply loved. This speaks to the political charge of the elegiac. To insist on the grievability of a life is to insist on that life’s value.

²⁸⁶ This further highlights the question of authenticity. Poetry challenges our commitments to generic boundaries: although we as readers are taught to separate the poet from the speaker, the temptation to consider all poetry confessional is difficult to resist.

²⁸⁷ Vuong, 178.

Vuong's most literal ghosts appear as animals. On the first page of the novel, Little Dog writes to his mother about the time in a rest stop when she "stared, horror-struck, at the taxidermy buck hung over the soda machine by the restrooms, its antlers shadowing your face." Rose is horrified by this "death that won't finish." "Can't they see it's a corpse?" she asks. "A corpse should go away, not get stuck forever like that."²⁸⁸ Dead, undead, and nearly dead animals appear throughout *On Earth*. Trevor is compared to a calf raised to be veal in his elegy. Trevor's grandfather tells both boys a story about a time a moose was caught in a hunting trap that cut off most of its hind leg; he describes the enraged cry of the moose as "almost like a man's...like you and me."²⁸⁹ One evening, while Little Dog and Lan, his grandmother, are watching Animal Planet when they see a herd of buffalo charge over a cliff. When Lan asks "why they die themselves like that," Little Dog tells her that "they're just following their family," establishing buffalo as a representative motif for generational trauma.²⁹⁰

Near the beginning of the novel, Little Dog compares refugees like his family to the monarch migration. Those who fly south do not survive long enough to make the return journey, so "the final monarch lands on a branch already weighted with ghosts."²⁹¹ Later, Little Dog describes "imagin[ing] the monarchs fleeing not winter but the napalm clouds...flying from the blazed blasts unscathed." From a distance, their wings resemble

²⁸⁸ Vuong, 3.

²⁸⁹ Vuong, 117.

²⁹⁰ Vuong, 179.

²⁹¹ Vuong, 13.

“debris that kept blowing” so closely that those who look up to the sky to watch them “can no longer fathom the explosion they came from” and instead see “only a family of butterflies floating in clean, cool air, their wings finally, after so many conflagrations, fireproof.”²⁹² Here, again, is the revisionist work of imagination. The image of the monarch replaces the evidence of destruction, emphasizing Vietnamese refugees’ identity as distinct from the violence that displaced them. As Little Dog remarks near the end of the book, “All this time I told myself we were born from war—but I was wrong, Ma. We were born from beauty. Let no one mistake us for the fruit of violence—but that violence, having passed through the fruit, failed to spoil it.”²⁹³ Too often, trauma survivors’ identities are totalized and reduced to what they survived. The war did not create Lan, Rose and Little Dog; the violence failed to destroy them, failed to reduce them to debris. The monarchs survive—and exist beyond and outside of survival alone.

The most wrenching depiction of animal death and suffering in the novel concerns a macaque monkey. The chapter is set in 1968 Vietnam (the Year of the Monkey) and intercuts scenes of young Lan and baby Rose trying to pass a U.S. military checkpoint with an extended description of a fertility ritual that involves trapping a macaque monkey and eating its brain. The gruesome, violent scene further underscores the urgency of Lan’s situation. The macaque, Vuong explains, has a brain “closest of any mammal to a human’s;” they are capable of introspection, self-doubt, and possibly even language.²⁹⁴

²⁹² Vuong, 14.

²⁹³ Vuong, 231.

²⁹⁴ Vuong, 41.

Most importantly, they can recall past experiences to solve new problems, or, in Vuong's parlance, "they employ memory in order to survive."²⁹⁵ In Lan's parallel story, she manages to appease the guards at the military checkpoint by recalling and repeating the words "USA number one, no bang bang."²⁹⁶ Even though her home language, Vietnamese, is "a tongue made obsolete by gunfire,"²⁹⁷ her memory and use of language enables her to protect her daughter and to survive.

In the final passage of the novel, Little Dog has an ecstatic vision of himself running toward a cliff. His movement is positioned as resistant to loss: "even if no one I know is dead yet, not Trevor, not Lan....I run thinking I will outpace it all, my will to change being stronger than my fear of living."²⁹⁸ The scene of the vision is set in the past, prior to Lan's and Trevor's deaths, perhaps not unlike a revisionist memory. As he picks up speed and comes closer to the horizon, he "think[s] of the buffaloes somewhere, maybe in North Dakota or Montana, their shoulders rippling in slow motion as they race for the cliff, their brown bodies bottlenecked at the narrow precipice." As the image progresses, the imagined buffaloes become moose, then dogs, and then a troop of macaques that "float," "the crowns of their heads cut open, their brains hollowed

²⁹⁵ Vuong, 43.

²⁹⁶ Vuong, 42.

²⁹⁷ Vuong, 38.

²⁹⁸ Vuong, 240-241.

out...the hair on their limbs fine and soft as feathers.” Just as the first monkey steps off into the abyss, the troop of macaques “ignite[s] into the ochre-red sparks of monarchs.”²⁹⁹

After this metamorphic montage, Little Dog returns his attention to a conversation with Rose about her birth year, the Year of the Monkey. If she is a monkey, then, Little Dog wants to know, “why didn’t they get you?” Macaques are marked out for death, and even their dying is extended inhumanely. Yet in Little Dog’s vision, the injury suffered by the monkeys seems to make them float, weightlessly. Rose answers him that she survived “because I was *fast*, baby. Some monkeys are so fast they’re more like ghosts, you know?”³⁰⁰ Spectrality is transformed from living death to a pathway for survival as the monkeys shift into butterflies, on their way to welcoming and becoming ghosts. Vuong’s imagined race toward the cliff is an example of the use of imagination to acknowledge ungrievable loss. Gordon might describe it being “haunted in the name of a will to heal[,] to allow the ghost to help you imagine...that it could have been and can be otherwise.”³⁰¹

Conclusion: Life After Death

In her description of the therapeutic purpose of narrativizing traumatic experience, Judith Herman emphasizes that the goal is “integration, not exorcism.” In fact, she explains, the “transformation” of the traumatic experience works toward

²⁹⁹ Vuong, 241.

³⁰⁰ Vuong, 242.

³⁰¹ Gordon, 57.

allowing that experience to be “more present, more real” through the “restorative power of truth-telling.”³⁰² If the haunting presence of trauma is a ghost, it must be welcomed rather than feared. Or rather, welcoming it to become “more present, more real” may help to bring us closer, to let the manifestation settle into something more solid, maybe even more recognizable. After all— “you are this house’s ghost.” Testing reality in the aftermath of ungrievable trauma requires reckoning with the ways violence pushes us into living death. As Toni Morrison reminds us, “anything dead coming back to life hurts.”³⁰³ Being haunted in the will to heal necessarily requires a determination to grieve.

This is much easier to write than to live. Even the writing has been far from easy. This essay alone has, somehow, taken nineteen months to write. I have been tremendously frustrated by this. I have read so many stories about people who turned to art after loss, who became excessively productive as a means to process their pain. Why couldn’t I be one of those workaholic griever? When I said this to my dissertation chair, she responded, “Well, you have been working on it. You’ve been living it.”

“Living it” is not understanding it, not exactly. It is understanding what it *feels like*. I am still getting to know the new architecture of my life, of life as a survivor and a witness, of life that integrates aftermath. I am growing more familiar with the strange. Around the time I finished filing my divorce paperwork, I went to a coffee shop in Riverside to work on the beginning stages of this essay. I decided to reread Judith Butler’s “Violence, Mourning, and Politics,” something I had found incredibly clarifying

³⁰² Herman, 258.

³⁰³ Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, First Vintage International Edition, (Vintage Books: 2004), 42.

and grounding as I prepared for my comprehensive exams six months prior. This is where Butler describes the futility of imagining that mourning could be as simple as saying, "Oh, I'll go through loss this way, and that will be the result, and I'll apply myself to the task, and I'll endeavor to achieve the resolution of grief that is before me."³⁰⁴ I recognized myself in that description. Even at that early stage, I had already begun asking my therapist how long this would take, when it would be over. At what point, I wanted to know, can I evict this ghost? This is the wrong question. As Butler explains,

Perhaps, rather, one mourns when one accepts that by the loss one undergoes one will be changed, possibly forever. Perhaps mourning has to do with agreeing to undergo a transformation (perhaps one should say submitting to a transformation) the full result of which one cannot know in advance. There is losing, as we know, but there is also the transformative effect of loss, and this latter cannot be charted or planned.³⁰⁵

I read those lines several times over—that day, and many days since. To grieve is to transform, to change shape, to let new meaning animate old structures. Transform is both an intransitive and transitive verb: the grief itself will change, and it will also change *you*.

In "*Dream House as Ending*,"³⁰⁶ Machado comments that the idea that "there is really an end to anything" is "the lie of all autobiographical writing." Instead, she offers up the ending to a Panamanian folktale from her research: "my tale goes only to here; it ends, and the wind carries it off."³⁰⁷ In the final section, "*Dream House as Epilogue*," she

³⁰⁴ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 21.

³⁰⁵ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 21.

³⁰⁶ Despite the title, this is not actually the last section of the book.

³⁰⁷ Machado, 239.

revises that last line. First, though, she addresses the “you” that names the version of herself that lived through the abuse. As she looks around at a moonlit landscape, she wishes “everything had this much clarity, [that] I had always lived in this body, and you could have lived here with me.” As she walks back to her cabin (where she is writing this book), she sees her “dark silver moon-shadow walk[ing] in front of [her].”³⁰⁸ The past self, the “you,” is without language: she is the second person, always addressed but never addressing. But she is present. And she is welcome. Machado ends the book by revising the Panamanian folktale: “My tale goes only to here; it ends, and the wind carries it to you.”³⁰⁹ Who is the trauma story for? What—whom—does truth-telling restore? Who resurrects? Who else if not “you”? Who else if not me?

³⁰⁸ Machado, 242.

³⁰⁹ Machado, 242.

Chapter Four

“This Too Is Real Life:” Reading Trauma as Relational Praxis

And what do stories afford anyway? A way of living in the world in the aftermath of catastrophe and devastation? A home in the world for the mutilated and violated self? For whom—for us or for them?

— Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts”

“So if you create art by revising memory,” my advisor asked, “isn’t that just...lying?”

Well—is it? And if it is, then what?

I have been developing the idea of autofabulation as a method that works with one’s past experiences to create something other-than-documentary, something that announces itself as created, invented, as art. That the telling of the story is productive in its performativity, that its self-consciousness as art allows for a formal recognition and reckoning as communal event. But this question does recur: does the autofabulative approach somehow disrespect or disempower the reader? Or more precisely, does it violate the reader’s trust? Most essentially: how should readers engage?

When James Frey appeared for the second time on *Oprah* to apologize for falsifying events in his purported memoir, *A Million Little Pieces*, Oprah claimed to “feel duped” and accused Frey of “betray[ing] millions of readers.”³¹⁰ As it turned out, Frey had originally shopped the book to publishers as a novel; after it was rejected, he changed the generic label and successfully sold the project as a memoir.³¹¹ The key element of

³¹⁰ Oprah Winfrey and James Frey, “Excerpts from the Oprah Winfrey Show,” *The New York Times*, <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/ref/books/excerpts-oprah.html?pagewanted=all>.

³¹¹ Gilmore, *Tainted Witness*, 108.

“betrayal” was not inherent to the content itself but to Frey’s claims that the events were nonfictional. On a basic level, he had changed the terms of engagement with the text—and, most importantly, he had done so without readers’ knowledge or consent.

The violation of readerly consent (so to speak) is contextual, especially with respect to genre and form. Readers may welcome a genre shift, provided it does not introduce elements they would presumably not have consented to.³¹² Lauren Berlant defines genre as “an aesthetic structure of affective expectation, an institution or formation that absorbs all kinds of small variations or modifications while promising that the persons transacting with it will experience the pleasure of encountering what they expected.”³¹³ In the autobiographical context specifically, readers’ expectations coalesce around what Leigh Gilmore terms the “confessional compact” between reader and writer. As Gilmore explains, this compact includes “a demand on the writer to render a transparent truth” based on the presupposition that the writer “has already assented to this quasi-judicial relation” by virtue of the decision to represent the text as autobiographical.³¹⁴ Analysis of this assumed “compact” lies outside my purpose (and has already been deftly performed by Gilmore); instead, I am curious about the ways that

³¹² For example, I was charmed when the horror film *Fresh* began as a romantic comedy, but was horrified when *Bugonia*, advertised as a dark comedy, treated child sexual abuse and suicide as banal set-ups to its punchline.

³¹³ Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (New York University Press: 2008), 4.

³¹⁴ Gilmore, *Tainted Witness*, 103.

this particular writer-reader relation appears in contexts outside the strictly autobiographical.

The pressure of readers' expectation and engagement were at the forefront for novelist Brandon Taylor following the publication of his debut novel, *Real Life* (2020). Both readers and reviewers frequently asked Taylor, in his words, "why I had chosen fiction instead of nonfiction to tell the story."³¹⁵ Taylor comments that this question is founded on "the presupposition that what I had written in the book was true and that I had done something *deceptive* by calling it a novel," and thus that "I had subordinated the truth to fiction."³¹⁶ The sense of betrayal communicated by these readers implies that they interpreted Taylor as somehow violating the confessional compact, despite the fact that the book's genre categorization as a novel would ostensibly prevent that compact's formation. What then prompted these "affective expectations?"

The demand for autobiographical disclosure outside of genre bounds is a relatively predictable phenomenon. It is more likely to attach to debut publications, for example, perhaps because the lack of other comparative works makes it easier for readers to assume an equivalence between the fictional world and the author's own. The assumption of autobiography also frequently appears when a novel's protagonist shares some identificatory characteristics with the writer. Key among these are race and gender, although anything that marks the author and protagonist as outside the "norm" (e.g.

³¹⁵ Brandon Taylor, "the tiny white people in our heads," *sweater weather* (Substack), May 11, 2021.

³¹⁶ Taylor, "the tiny white people in our heads." Italics mine.

queer, disabled, working class, immigrant, etc.) will also serve the purpose. This is true for writers of color in particular; as (queer Black writer) Bryan Washington comments, the writer of color's "contributions to the canon are treated as anthropological excavations, and as crossovers for mass (white) audiences, rather than intentionally crafted art."³¹⁷

Brandon Taylor and *Real Life* tick every box. There is the provocative title, *Real Life*, and subtitle "A Novel," the combination of which both implies and ironically distances itself from verisimilitude. Wallace, the novel's protagonist, is a gay Black man, as is Taylor. Wallace is a graduate biochemistry student at an unnamed Midwestern university that closely resembles the University of Wisconsin, Madison, where Taylor also pursued a biochemistry Ph.D. In a central passage within the novel, Wallace describes the sexual abuse he experienced as a child in Alabama. In an essay posted on his Substack, Taylor names this chapter as "the part of the novel that comes directly from my own life."³¹⁸

Of course, one could argue that I am reinforcing the tendency to assume that *Real Life* is "real life" by reproducing these references, especially given that I clearly went out of my way to find and include Taylor's extratextual comments. In fact, part of the reason that I know the campus town in *Real Life* resembles Madison, Wisconsin, is that I have spent time in Madison. I point this out in the hope that it will underscore my next point:

³¹⁷ Bryan Washington, "Based on a True Story," *The Awl*, September 26, 2017.

³¹⁸ Brandon Taylor, "trauma is a ghost, who knew?" *sweater weather* (Substack), October 29, 2021.

the problem is not inherent to a reader's knowledge of author and text, but the reader's relation to them. As Taylor describes, readers who are intent on "look[ing] for holes in the author's defense through which the poorly disguised light of biography shines" are engaged in "an oppositional relationship."³¹⁹ Taylor compares this method of reading for autobiography to paranoid reading, which he defines as a method in which "the reader approaches a text from the defensive supposition that the author is out to deceive and beguile and misdirect."³²⁰ This paranoid relationship assumes an author deliberately desirous of violating the terms of engagement the reader consents to; ironically, however, the paranoid reader is actually the one attempting to change the terms by demanding autobiography rather than the stated genre (fiction, in this case).

The tension over so-called "authenticity" intensifies when the writer in question is a trauma survivor. As I discussed in my introduction, terms like "authenticity," "credibility," and "truthfulness" are ideologically loaded for trauma survivors. The disclosure of trauma nearly always prompts a demand for verification, as I discussed in chapter two. This demand intensifies the demand of the confessional compact that the text be authenticated or authenticatable in some way. What particularly intrigues me is the resulting tendency for readers to treat textual traumatic disclosure as an ironclad sign that the text is autobiographical. In these cases (cases like Taylor's), the confessional compact seems to work in reverse by assuming the content is autobiographical and then decrying the writer for not using the genre label to authenticate their assumption.

³¹⁹ Brandon Taylor, "emotional support trauma plot," *sweater weather* (Substack), January 14, 2022.

³²⁰ Taylor, "emotional support trauma plot."

In this essay, I am interested in tracing how methods of reading shape and are shaped by the relationship between the reader and the text. To do so, I turn to Toni Morrison's critical work to develop an ethos of reading fiction that resists objectifying and oppositional tendencies among readers, particularly white readers encountering Black authors.³²¹ I argue that a Morrisonian model of participatory reading sets the terms for a mutually responsive and responsible relationship between reader and text. I then tailor this model slightly to specifically address texts with traumatic content, which I term intimate reading. This guides me through a reading of *Real Life*, in which I argue that Taylor models forms of reading and reception, from paranoid to intimate, as part of the novel's larger commentary on the "cruelty as a conduit of pain" that is either perpetuated or interrupted in relation to others.

In this way, I offer a response to the question with which this chapter opened. Autofabulation intentionally blurs the boundaries between auto- and third person modes, which challenges readers to develop new frames of reading outside of the quest for authentication. I am reminded here of a salient comment from Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus's discussion of reading methodology, in which they critique the tendency of paranoid reading to "conflat[e] three pairs of oppositions: present/absent, manifest/latent, and surface/depth."³²² As they point out, these sets of binary oppositions do not quite

³²¹ I recognize that to some extent I am sliding between "author" and "text" too freely here; I hope that the next section on authorial objectification clarifies how I see readers performing that slide.

³²² Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, "Surface Reading: An Introduction." *Representations* 108, no. 1 (2009): 4. <https://doi.org/10.1525/rep.2009.108.1.1>.

cohere; something may occupy a space (present) without being immediately obvious (manifest), for example. I am most interested in the implied distinction between surface and depth. When reading with the body in mind, it becomes clear that surface and depth are not oppositional but rather in communication. Sensation on the surface of the skin travels through the nerves and to the brain, literally located “deeply” inside the skull but also metaphorically the seat of the mind, soul, or spirit, all of which are associated with “depth.”

Objects of Study

Toni Morrison shared Taylor’s frustration with the fact-finding oppositional reader. She describes this kind of reading as “the research of the ‘Oh yes, this is where he or she got it from’ school, which gets its own credibility from excavating the credibility of the *sources* of the imagination, not the *nature* of the imagination.”³²³ This school of thought thus depends on the assumption that the writer in question is a conduit of information rather than a creative artist, an assumption that often closely resembles the model of “writer as native informant.” When this model is applied to African American literature in particular, Morrison notes that readers read African American literature as “sociology, not art.” To be more precise, she further enumerates three “postures” commonly taken in evaluating African American literature: 1) “examination and diagnoses of the patient,” 2) “inoculation against intolerance,” and 3) “insistent celebration and recognition of cultural health and beauty (which could, by association or

³²³ Morrison, *The Source of Self-Regard*, 238-239. Italics mine.

osmosis, heal others).” In each case, both texts and authors become means to some other predetermined end—an end that usually preserves the racial status quo and protects the fragile feelings of white audiences. In an evocative metaphor, Morrison describes this phenomenon as if “the work itself had become another kind of houseboy, opening doors for guests to enter a party to which it had not been invited.”³²⁴

As the imagery implies, Morrison traces this tendency back to the historical pressures placed on African American autobiography, especially the slave narrative. As Nellie Y. McKay explains, the autobiography provided “the most effective forum for defining black selfhood in a racially oppressive world” as Black writers “appropriated the master’s tools to write themselves into being and their communities into freedom.”³²⁵ In “The Site of Memory,” Morrison describes the goals of the historical African American autobiography as twofold: 1) to represent one’s life as both “singular, special” *and* representative of “the race,” and 2) to convince (white) readers of the selfhood, and thus humanity, of enslaved African Americans and of the need to immediately abolish chattel slavery. Morrison argues that these goals were enormously successful, but that “more difficult was getting the fair appraisal of literary critics.”³²⁶ In other words, African American autobiography has a history of being (mis)read as case studies rather than expressions of art.

³²⁴ Morrison, *The Source of Self-Regard*, 201.

³²⁵ Nellie Y. McKay, “The Narrative Self: Race, Politics, and Culture in Black American Women’s Autobiography,” in *Women, Autobiography, Theory*, 96-97.

³²⁶ Morrison, *The Source of Self-Regard*, 234.

The tendency to flatten African American autobiography into objects is thus rooted in the history of *white reception* of Black art (not Black art in itself). By regarding the person of the author and the artistic product as indistinguishable, this objectifying reception practice treats the person of the author as equally and simultaneously available for consumption—consumption strictly delimited by the motivated interpretive frameworks outlined by Morrison above. As Taylor emphasizes in a recent essay, this tendency to objectify is intensified by the parasociality experienced by public figures, especially with respect to social media. In Taylor’s words, this dynamic makes it “impossible for [objectifying readers] to encounter me as a person because I am already a story, an object.”³²⁷ Taylor goes on to argue that to “view other people as abstractions more than people [...] requires a total eradication of the human in the other.”³²⁸ In other words, the narrative and/or discursive objectification of the writer by the reader can prime the reader to accepting or even condoning violence committed against others. In this way, reading methodologies are indicative of and responsive to the politics of dehumanization. How one reads is implicated in her response to violence, abuse, and trauma suffered by others.

To frame reading as fundamentally relational, as I am doing here, inevitably brings up the question of the separation between author and text. I have argued that the historical and contemporary tendencies of white readers to view Black authors as consumable objects is grounded in a basic rejection of the human dignity of these same

³²⁷ Brandon Taylor, “american symbolism,” *sweater weather* (Substack), January 14, 2026.

³²⁸ Taylor, “american symbolism.”

Black writers. I want to be clear here that I am *not* implying the existence of any potentially ethical use of the objectifying equation of author and text. A reader cannot “fix” her oppressive racial politics simply by employing certain reading practices, and an ethical and attentive reader may still be remarkably bigoted in their day-to-day life. The key point I want to highlight is that the demand for autobiography parallels the objectification of Black artists, which ought to underscore for readers that the stakes of reading methodology are political and ethical as well as technical.

Methods for Reading: Surface and Depth

Any discussion of reading methodology must discuss two pairs of oppositions: paranoid/reparative and depth/surface. These are usually implied to work in parallel. A paranoid or symptomatic reading employs a “hermeneutics of suspicion” that prioritizes “depth” in its assumption that “meaning [is] hidden, repressed, deep, and in need of detection and disclosure by an interpreter.”³²⁹ Although reparative reading (popularized by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick) and surface reading (popularized by Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus) are not exact equivalents, they each work in opposition to the paranoid model’s fundamental assumptions that violence is “hidden” and requires “exposure,” and that the critic is “a hero who performs interpretive feats of demystification.”³³⁰ As an alternative, Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus advocate for a practice of “surface reading,” which prioritizes “what is evident, perceptible,

³²⁹ Best and Marcus, 1.

³³⁰ Sedgwick, 140; Best and Marcus, 13.

apprehensible in texts; what is neither hidden nor hiding...what insists on being looked at rather than what we must train ourselves to see through.”³³¹ Surface reading functions in alignment with reparative reading practice. The reparative reader positions herself alongside rather than against the text, which demands a kind of submission in its willingness to be surprised. The reparative position is a vulnerable one; as Heather Love explains, it “gives up on hypervigilance for attentiveness” and accepts “being affected.”³³²

Despite the dualistic framework of opposition, paranoid/depth and reparative/surface reading work not as staunch ideological opponents but as flexible and contextual positions that readers move between. The question, then, becomes not which position is superior, but which position is called for at each specific moment. In other words, what do we mean by the “close” in “close reading?” In our own most intimate relationships, we want to be taken at our word, or read on our surfaces, to be sure. Yet we also cherish the hope that our intimates will listen to more than only what is said, but how we say it—our embodiment, our affect, perhaps even our silences.

The scene of the trauma survivor disclosing traumatic experience highlights the difficulty here. The survivor needs not only to be heard, but to be witnessed. I return here to Gilmore’s definition of the “adequate witness” who “will receive testimony without

³³¹ Best and Marcus, 9.

³³² Heather Love, “Truth and Consequences: On Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading,” *Criticism* 52 no. 2 (Spring 2010), 238. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/crt.2010.0022>

deforming it by doubt, and without substituting different terms of value,”³³³ a description that resonates with Best and Marcus’s emphasis on attentiveness “to all the potentials made available by the text,” which “does not reduce them to instrumental means to an end.”³³⁴ This would seem to foreclose any symptomatic reading. Bearing witness requires close attentiveness to the trauma story as disclosed by the victim—but it requires something more than that, too. As Judith Herman explains, bearing witness is a political act: “to hold traumatic reality in consciousness requires a social context that affirms and protects the victim and that joins victim and witness in common alliance.” This works among friends and family at the personal level, but “for the larger society, the social context is created by political movements that give voice to the disempowered.”³³⁵ To be an effective witness requires a critical awareness of the social structures of oppression and violence regardless of whether the victim in question explicitly references these systems.³³⁶ The witness is responsible not only to hear the victim, but to name and resist the external social forces that enabled the violence she experienced. To see and identify the social machinery working beneath the surface of the event may require a paranoid position.

³³³ Gilmore, *Tainted Witness*, 5-6.

³³⁴ Best and Marcus, 18.

³³⁵ Herman, 14-16.

³³⁶ An obvious example here is the child victim. I am also thinking of those who have been prevented from a full understanding of their experience, whether through deliberate information suppression (e.g. a teenage rape victim growing up in misogynistic purity culture) or through reality distortion (e.g. Machado’s experience as detailed in the previous chapter).

In working through the tension between the reparative surface and the paranoid depths, I turn again to Toni Morrison. In her own reading practice, she describes “[reading] slowly, digging for the hidden, questioning or relishing the choices the author made, eager to envision what is there, noticing what is not.”³³⁷ While “digging” seems reminiscent of paranoid reading practices, Morrison emphasizes that she “surrender[s] to the language” and “enter[s] it,” a posture that would not be possible in a purely suspicious mode.³³⁸ Instead, Morrisonian reading is an act of intimacy and “participation.”³³⁹ This relationship can also be visualized through two useful metaphors in Morrison’s work describing her relation to language—and, for my purposes, the reader’s relation to the text—which I will metonymically refer to as “the home” and “the haptic,” although Morrison never puts it in quite those terms. To develop my understanding of Morrisonian reading, in what follows I perform a close reading on these two concepts as explicated by her critical work and modeled in *Jazz*.³⁴⁰

“Home” for Morrison is premised on the identity of and relationship between host and guest. Early on in *Jazz*, which meditates on the relationship between text and reader, the personified voice of the book remarks that being abandoned by the reader can make

³³⁷ Morrison, “The Reader as Artist,” *O, the Oprah Magazine* (July 2006), <https://www.oprah.com/omagazine/toni-morrison-on-reading>

³³⁸ Morrison, “The Reader as Artist.”

³³⁹ Morrison, *The Source of Self-Regard*, 349.

³⁴⁰ Morrison herself uses the same passage from *Jazz* to demonstrate other critical points in “The Source of Self-Regard” (*The Source of Self-Regard*, 302-321).

one “inhospitable, which is the last thing I want to be.”³⁴¹ For Morrison, the hospitable home is distinct from the “racial house” constructed from the “architecture of race” and governed by “house rules” instituted and maintained by the figure of the master or mistress. Morrison very explicitly aligns the house with the plantation “big house” -- recall the metaphor of the “houseboy” (quoted above) used to describe how African American literature is conceptualized and positioned by (white) academics who read it only as “sociology.” In the address from which I draw this metaphor, Morrison also insists on “home” because it “domesticates the racial project [...] away from an impossible future or an irretrievable and probably nonexistent Eden to a manageable, doable, modern human activity.”³⁴² The project of deconstructing the house’s racist architecture is thus an everyday, even habitual task for which all of the house’s residents are responsible.

A sense of home is presented as the ground for intimacy in the much-celebrated coda to *Jazz*. The penultimate image is that of a couple in bed, a shelter within the shelter of home:

Breathing and murmuring under covers both of them have washed and hung out on the line, in a bed they chose together and kept together nevermind one leg was propped on a 1916 dictionary, and the mattress, curved like a preacher's palm asking for witnesses in His name's sake, enclosed them each and every night and muffled their whispering, old-time love.³⁴³

³⁴¹ Toni Morrison, *Jazz*, First Vintage International Edition, (Vintage Books: 2004), 9.

³⁴² Toni Morrison, “Home,” in *The House that Race Built*, ed. Wahneema Lubiano. (Pantheon Books: 1997), https://public.archive.wsu.edu/hughesc/public_html/morrison_home.htm.

³⁴³ Morrison, *Jazz*, 228.

Intimacy is wrapped up in descriptions of shared domestic responsibilities and decisions that create a space to “enclose them” in safety and peace. This space also allows for travel between interior and exterior; they are “inward toward the other.” The sense of an under layer is also present here: the couple are of course under the covers; they reach for “something...way, way down underneath tissue;” the entire paragraph is summed up in the final sentence’s statement that their inwardness toward each other is what is “underneath their undercover whispers.”³⁴⁴ The image here is presented alongside the final section in which the bookvoice speaks to the reader, implying a sense of parallelism between the two relationships.

This image and the section addressed to the reader are also both explicitly concerned with intimacy and haptic touch (what you touch also touches you). Morrison described this ending as a “plea” for “an exquisite, shared, highly eroticized private relationship between reader and page.”³⁴⁵ This “gesture of choice and love” is imbued with both pleasure and responsibility: if we extend the metaphor of the erotic encounter, we can also pull in questions of consent, respect, tenderness, and care. The emphasis on the erotics of reading appears again in Morrison’s description of how she creates “gaps that are deliberate, and deliberately seductive” by choosing how, when, and if she provides the reader with certain pieces of information. These gaps are like “a gate partially open and begging for entrance,”³⁴⁶ a metaphor that recalls the language of the

³⁴⁴ Morrison, *Jazz*, 228.

³⁴⁵ Morrison, *The Source of Self-Regard*, 320.

³⁴⁶ Morrison, *The Source of Self-Regard*, 348.

homely threshold as well as the intimate encounter. This ethos upends the power dynamic of the traditional paranoid reading model. Rather than antagonistically attempting to “catch out” the writer, the Morrisonian reader recognizes ambiguity and aporia as invitations, even demands, for participation. The participatory reader moves between both surface and depth. Crossing the threshold moves the guest from the home’s exterior (surface) to interior (depth); the erotic connection may end in the “depth” of emotional intimacy but inevitably works via the surface of the skin.

Surfaces and depths also provide a useful mental model for the practice of reading, especially reading trauma. Trauma comes from the Greek for “wound;” the Latin root for “wound” gives us “vulnerable.” The surfaces and depths of the body meet through wounding: to lacerate is to break the surface and expose the depths. Violence and violation, relatedly, come from the sense of trespass or invasion—the knife violates the surface of the skin, the blood beneath surfaces. Surfaces and depths also communicate via sensitivity. Colloquially, to be sensitive is to have “thin skin,” an easily breachable barrier between surface and depth. Note that the surface isn’t eliminated—the skin, the point of contact remains—but what touches the surface moves to the depths quickly, even inevitably. Sensitivity itself is a multi-faceted concept, used to describe the aftermath of physical pain, the acuity of emotional pain, hyper-awareness of one’s environment, precision of a measurement or instrument, socially or emotionally difficult topics, and consideration for others’ feelings. To be a sensitive reader also requires engagement: while the text can make ideas, objects, and characters “sensible,” the work of attending to detail, and attending to it tenderly, falls to the reader.

My model of intimate reading intentionally stages the work of reading as an extension of a practice of bearing witness to trauma. I return here to Leigh Gilmore's "adequate witness," which I discussed in chapter two, as a guiding principle. To bear witness to survivors of sexual violence, the adequate witness "resists the rush to judgment" and resists the temptation to "substitut[e] different terms of value for the ones offered" by the survivor in question, thereby "altering the practice of judgment itself."³⁴⁷ My understanding of bearing witness is also indebted to Courtney R. Baker's "humane insight," which she defines as "a kind of looking,³⁴⁸ one in which the onlooker's ethics are addressed by the spectacle of others' embodied suffering." Humane insight responds to the history of how Black suffering and death has been used discursively to signify who "counts" as human. Unlike the gaze, which "ignores or denies the humanity of the person being looked at," humane insight makes a "decision to identify the body being looked at as a human body, [...] recognizes violations of human dignity, and bestows or articulates the desire for actual protection."³⁴⁹ While Gilmore and Baker are both discussing interactions between nonfictional human bodies, I argue that a commitment to ethical, adequate, humane witness serves as a fundamental orientation to the suffering of others, which inevitably shapes readerly as well as "real life" responses.

³⁴⁷ Gilmore, *Tainted Witness*, 5-6.

³⁴⁸ Baker contextualizes humane insight as a specifically visual practice; I am taking the liberty to think of the "look" more loosely as an encounter mediated by text rather than image.

³⁴⁹ Baker, 5.

Fiction's Surface and Depth

This discussion of reading methodology, however, has only begun to respond to the scene of Brandon Taylor's oppositional readers demanding to know why *Real Life* was fiction rather than nonfiction. The question is not only why *not* autobiography, but why fiction? Taylor's oppositional readers suggest that he has somehow "subordinated the truth to fiction," which implies a separation and hierarchy between fiction and truth. This question gets at the opening question from my own advisor, too—if a writer *could* convey their trauma story in a nonfictional mode, does the choice to fictionalize instead violate the terms of the text-reader relationship?

Morrison claims that "the crucial distinction for me is not the difference between fact and fiction, but the distinction between fact and truth. Because facts can exist without human intelligence, but truth cannot."³⁵⁰ This distinction corresponds to the social work of critical and Afro-fabulation that I center in this project. By decoupling truthfulness from facticity, Morrison invites readers to consider how fiction can perform work that nonfiction cannot. In other words, to return to the formalist terms I asked in the previous chapter, "some forms afford some kinds of thinking and knowing better than others."³⁵¹ What, then, does fiction afford that nonfiction does not, especially when it concerns traumatic material?

³⁵⁰ Morrison, *The Source of Self-Regard*, 239.

³⁵¹ Levine, 77.

According to Morrison, “fictional literature can be an alternative language that can contradict and elude or analyze the regime.”³⁵² In this respect, Morrison anticipates Saidiya Hartman’s critical fabulation (albeit located in fiction writing rather than archival research). To return to Morrison’s parlance, this enables her to “explore two worlds—the actual and the possible.”³⁵³ This work takes place both at the level of plot and the level of language itself. In writing *Beloved*, for example, Morrison relocates the focus from the institution of slavery to the enslaved people themselves in *Beloved*. This is a shift that, as Saidiya Hartman notes in “Venus in Two Acts,” is not possible within the confines of the archive, which represents people solely as silent commodities. At the level of language itself, fiction has greater flexibility in its use of figurative language and multiple layers of meaning. As critic Namwali Serpell notes in her work on Morrison, “fiction has no obligation to dispel ambiguity. It can make use of it—even intensify it—in order to evoke and transform experience.”³⁵⁴

When considering fiction’s affordances, it is also helpful to consider a foundational concept in narratology that describes the two layers/levels at work in narrative (whether fiction or nonfiction, although fiction is what I’m most concerned with here).

³⁵² Morrison, *The Source of Self-Regard*, 100.

³⁵³ Morrison *The Source of Self-Regard*, 241.

³⁵⁴ Namwali Serpell, *On Morrison*, (Penguin Random House: 2026), 159.

Various terms are (or could be) used for this doubled structure:

Fabula Story Material Story time (chronology) The “what”	Syuzhet Plot/Discourse Design Narrative time (pace) The “how”
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Essentially, the first layer could be described as the “what” of a narrative: the events, characters, setting. The second layer is the “how” of the narrative’s construction, the level that close readers often attend to. At times, these two layers are also described as the “exterior” and “interior” of a narrative, respectively; they could as easily correspond to surface and depth.

The exterior/interior layers of narrative are useful in conceptualizing what Taylor calls “moral worldbuilding.” Here, I want to be careful (as Taylor is) to clarify that “moral” refers to D.H. Lawrence’s definition of that which “preserves the true relation between things” rather than a religious or ethical ideal. For Taylor, moral worldbuilding refers to a sense of ethical and ideological infrastructure that organizes the text’s values, priorities, and stakes. Taylor pulls the term “worldbuilding” from discussions about speculative fiction, in which readers expect to have a certain amount of “how this world works” explicitly laid out.³⁵⁵ As Taylor explains, however, this term was formerly also associated closely with realist authors such as Dickens, Wharton, Tolstoy, and Austen,

³⁵⁵ This explanation in itself can be a site of intense interest for a certain type of reader (consider, for example, Tolkien’s extensive appendices concerning genealogy and cultural histories or even George R.R. Martin’s famous quip that we don’t know enough about Aragorn’s tax policy).

whose work is deeply concerned with “the edifices of civilization and the exterior trappings of its manners and habits of mind.” As a salient example, Taylor closely reads the opening of *Sense and Sensibility*, the dramatic stakes of which are dependent on the reader’s understanding of both literal inheritance laws and unspoken social mechanics governing how wealth, status, and personal security are distributed according to gender; thus, in Taylor’s words, “Austen makes the values of her world legible to the reader through the consequences of her characters’ actions.”³⁵⁶

In terms of craft, moral worldbuilding takes place in the lower layer, below the scene and event, in what Taylor calls “the underdark.”³⁵⁷ Less abstractly, moral infrastructure runs beneath every beat of the narrative, but it is usually most clearly visible within the narrative’s more interior-facing components, such as exposition, backstory, and characters’ interiority. This description resonates with Morrison’s claim that “the underground life of a novel is the area most likely to link arms with the reader and facilitate making it one’s own.”³⁵⁸ While the “trappings” of writers’ worlds may vary, the necessity of moral infrastructure is universal. As Morrison writes, “all questions writers put are questions of value.”

³⁵⁶ Brandon Taylor, “living shadows: aesthetics of moral worldbuilding,” *sweater weather* (Substack), February 22, 2024.

³⁵⁷ I have been informed by my brother Luke Wood and my friend Loren Barbour that this term is likely borrowed from an alternate dimension setting in *Dungeons and Dragons*. As I am not an expert on *Dungeons and Dragons*, I am likely missing many interesting implications of Taylor’s choice of metaphor; the allusion to fantasy and alternative dimensions does seem pertinent.

³⁵⁸ Morrison, *The Source of Self-Regard*, 195.

It can be useful to read “value” here as imbued with some of its meaning in the context of visual art, in which value describes lightness and darkness. In work without color, value manifests as shades of gray; in color, value can also work along gradients of intensity. Value is what gives work dimensionality and communicates how objects exist in space and in relation to other objects. Value is also used to communicate atmosphere and mood depending on levels of contrast and the overall lightness/darkness of a piece (Monet’s “Portraits at Sunset” demonstrate this). I am reminded of one of my own favorite lines from a realist novel, George Eliot’s *Middlemarch*. Eliot describes Dorothea’s unhappy realization of the distance between the Mr. Casaubon she imagined and Mr. Casaubon as he really is as “an idea wrought back to the directness of sense, like the solidity of objects—that he had an equivalent centre of self, whence the lights and shadows must always fall with a certain difference.”³⁵⁹ Reading value through “solidity” and “lights and shadows” recalls Elaine Scarry’s description of the technology of reading itself. Despite the fact that “the imagined object lacks vivacity and vitality [because] it is not a perceptual object,” Scarry asserts that in literature, images *do* take on exceptional “vivacity” when readers are “under the instruction” of skilled writers.³⁶⁰ The sense of vivacity in this model is dependent on readers’ ability to perceive “solidity” in the objects presented to their imagination. Scarry explains that the imagined object is not “incidentally” but fundamentally two-dimensional, that the “perceptible world...is not

³⁵⁹ George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, (Project Gutenberg eBook:1994).

³⁶⁰ Elaine Scarry, *Dreaming by the Book* (Princeton University Press: 2001), 9, 11.

just incidentally but essentially solid.”³⁶¹ To achieve solidity, imagination must engage with dimension and depth, as connoted by the common colloquial use of “flat” or “two-dimensional” to describe writing that fails to create “lifelike” characters and situations. The “lights and shadows,” interestingly, do not comprise the center of self, but rather fall within it. As Scarry explains, one of the most effective techniques to establish solidity is to pass something transparent over it, such as a light or shadow. The “equivalent centre of self,” then, acquires solidity, dimension, and depth.

Surfaces, Depths, and Embraces in *Real Life*

In Brandon Taylors’s novel *Real Life*, surfaces and depths work as central motifs that relate through sensitivity. The events of the novel take place over a single weekend, following protagonist Wallace as he navigates both prickly social conflicts with his grad school peers and a burgeoning sexual relationship with Miller, a white man in his program who previously considered himself straight. For Taylor’s characters, the surface is the space of contact and relation. Contact and relation here can both enhance and deny intimacy. When Wallace and Miller touch, Wallace feels “the edges of his body tingle;”³⁶² when Wallace is criticized by a classmate’s boyfriend, he feels his friends’ gazes “strike the surface of his body like pellets.”³⁶³ In both cases, affective and relational information is received as mediated by Wallace’s skin. The depths beneath these

³⁶¹ Scarry, 14.

³⁶² Brandon Taylor, *Real Life* (Penguin Random House: 2020), 54. Apple eBooks.

³⁶³ Taylor, 98.

surfaces consist of interiority, memory, and emotion. Wallace describes his “sadness like fiberglass, like cotton stuffed into the cavity behind his face, in his hollow cheekbones;”³⁶⁴ as well as noting that “memory dislodges from some dark inner continent and rises to the surface of his thoughts.”³⁶⁵

In moments of vulnerability, surface and depth interface and interchange. When Miller asks Wallace to tell him about his childhood trauma, for example, Wallace “sinks a little deeper into himself until he’s butted up against the cold flat surface of his past. It’s there under him, undulating like a sea beneath ice.”³⁶⁶ This moment occurs just after Wallace’s white friends (including Miller) failed to defend him from another student’s racist attempt to humiliate him. As Wallace reflects on that failure and Miller’s request for him to be vulnerable, he thinks, “There will always be good white people who love him [but] no matter how good they are, no matter how loving, they will always be complicit, a danger, *a wound waiting to happen*.”³⁶⁷ As I described above, both “trauma” and “vulnerability” originate in the threat of a wound, which breaks the surface of the skin to expose the depths of the body. Despite his hypersensitivity to his own vulnerability, Wallace does choose to disclose his history of child sexual abuse to Miller. This appears in the text as a stand-alone chapter written in the first-person (the rest of the book is in third-person). The shift into first-person, as well as the lyricism of the prose,

³⁶⁴ Taylor, 181.

³⁶⁵ Taylor, 190.

³⁶⁶ Taylor, 191.

³⁶⁷ Taylor, 130. Emphasis mine.

increases the sense of vulnerability and sensitivity. The shift in perspective also signals the reader's implication as a witness to Wallace's trauma, which demands a reading practice that embodies sensitivity.

In what follows, I read a series of three embraces in *Real Life* as models for the reader's encounter with the text. Each of these encounters includes some form of physical embrace alongside emotional disclosure. By drawing the reader through these intimate exchanges, the novel itself models and invites intimate reading. I argue that the first two encounters (with Emma and Brigit) depict responses to trauma disclosure that represent objectifying (Emma) and intimate (Brigit) reading models. These examples work pedagogically to prepare for the reader to sensitively respond to a difficult scene between Miller and Wallace, which begins with Miller sexually assaulting Wallace and concludes with apparently consensual sex morphing into a physical fight.

Emma's Kiss

The first of these exchanges, fittingly enough, revolves around Wallace's first kiss. In the opening scene of the novel, Wallace discloses to his friends and classmates that he is considering leaving their graduate program, which stuns and disconcerts the group. Wallace, taken aback by his own recognition that he "wants to leave his life," decides to sit by the lake to "gather himself until he could once again present to his friends a reasonable semblance of happiness."³⁶⁸ Wallace's contemplation is interrupted by Emma, another classmate with whom he shares a friendship based on the shared fact

³⁶⁸ Taylor, 27.

that “neither of them was a white man in their program” and strengthened by “four years of quiet conversations...moments when it seemed that things might get easier for them.”³⁶⁹ Emma, sensing Wallace’s distress, asks what the matter is, but Wallace struggles to explain his depression and passive suicidality. Instead, he tells Emma that his father died a few weeks prior “because it was as true as any other thing.”³⁷⁰ Wallace’s grief for his father is complicated by Wallace’s father’s abandonment and his lack of response to Wallace’s childhood sexual abuse. Emma, however, is unaware of this complexity—and crucially, unable or unwilling to exchange it for her own frame of reference.

When Wallace explains that the funeral has already passed, Emma “look[s] positively startled” and responds, “It was *your dad*, Wallace.” Wallace feels “chastened,” and reflects that, “the trouble with these people, with his friends, with the world, was that they thought things had to be a certain way with family, [that] you had to feel something for them, and it had to be the same thing that everyone felt or else you were doing it wrong.” Her sympathy is genuine, but because she does not attend to Wallace’s reality and instead superimposes her own, her response functions as “a kind of ventriloquism,” in which Wallace’s grief becomes “an excuse for [her] to feel what it was [she] wanted to feel.” Her response also forecloses further intimacy, as Wallace responds by “mak[ing]

³⁶⁹ Taylor, 31.

³⁷⁰ Taylor, 32.

his face into a calm mask of quiet, still sadness” that covers over the depths of his genuine feelings with the response, or surface, that Emma expects.³⁷¹

The touch that follows further prioritizes Emma’s needs above Wallace’s. Emma, overcome by the force of her own sympathy, begins to cry. Wallace, “alarmed [by] this display of grief [over] a loss she felt he must have felt,” holds Emma in an embrace and comforts her while she sobs. Emma’s display slides quickly into a spectacle, as “people at nearby tables [...] hoot and holler at them, clapping and blowing kisses.” Wallace, clearly uncomfortable, attempts to bring the moment to a close by saying that “that’s enough of a show,” but instead Emma escalates by kissing Wallace on the mouth.³⁷² Wallace, who “had never been kissed before, not by anyone, not really,” feels “vaguely like something had been stolen from him,” and indeed, it has been.³⁷³ The kiss is not *for* Wallace; it is for Emma and for the voyeuristic spectators. Despite Emma’s felt intentions, her tears and her kiss create alienation rather than intimacy. This alienation is further exacerbated by the fact that Emma soon informs the rest of the group about Wallace’s father’s death in Wallace’s absence, a further violation of his privacy and consent.

Brigit’s Hug

Later in the novel, Wallace returns to the lake with Brigit, his closest friend. As they sit side-by-side, Wallace voluntarily discloses that his father died. Brigit turns

³⁷¹ Taylor, 33.

³⁷² Taylor, 34.

³⁷³ Taylor, 35.

toward him with shock, and Wallace, conditioned by Emma's response, immediately begins to apologize: "I'm sorry I didn't say anything. I'm sorry." Unlike Emma, Brigit instantly re-centers Wallace instead of her own feelings in her response: "Don't apologize to me. No. Are you okay?"³⁷⁴ Wallace, taken aback, pauses. He almost begins to reassure her with an answer that "would make this easy, make it simple for them to move past this moment." In the intimate and sensitive space that Brigit has opened, though, Wallace "wants to say that he's just barely hanging on, that within he's raw and sad and spinning down and down and down." Such intense emotion, though, is so difficult to articulate that he retreats, because "it's too real, what he wants to say [and] when someone is shocked in this way, you don't shock them more." Paralyzed by both the intensity of his emotion and the desire not to further "shock" Brigit, Wallace can only say "yep...yep."³⁷⁵ Brigit continues to ask what he means, and Wallace finally begins "it's been hard" but finds he cannot speak further. Rather than press him, Brigit "presses her face against his sweaty hair and she just holds him tight to her." Brigit recognizes that "she has no way to comfort him for the things that he has no way of expressing, and so they are coming as close as they can" in their embrace. Wallace finds genuine solace in Brigit's touch, and "having told her about his dad, he doesn't feel the need to tell her anything else [because] it feels sufficient, in a way, the part telling the whole."³⁷⁶

³⁷⁴ Taylor, 265.

³⁷⁵ Taylor, 266.

³⁷⁶ Taylor, 267.

Later, as the two eat ice cream together, Brigit discloses how difficult the program has also been for her. Wallace, saddened by his inability to comfort her, “sees the hard flat surface that separates even them...they’re pressed up against either side of it, but cannot break through.”³⁷⁷ Surface here enforces the boundary that inevitably separates people from one another, no matter how intimate they are. Here, Wallace is forced to confront the hard fact that even in intimate relationships, perfect knowledge of the other is still impossible. In our intimate connections, we “come as close as we can” and hope that the care we extend to each other can bridge the gap that remains. Brigit’s response models a method of care—and thus of reading—at a pivotal moment in the text. By the time Wallace returns home, the events that precipitate Miller sexually assaulting him are already in motion. Brigit’s care is essential, therefore, for the reader as well; she models the attentiveness and care that the reader will need in order to bear adequate witness to the violence that follows.

Miller’s Grip

The necessity for intimate reading is doubly important when reading accounts of so-called intimate, or sexual, contact. Intimate contact works along the grain of the relational; as Sharon Patricia Holland puts it, “the touch can alter the very idea as well as the actuality of relationships, morphing friends into enemies and strangers into intimates.” Touch also gestures toward the potential for vulnerability to tip into violence; it “can encompass empathy as well as violation, passivity as well as active aggression. It

³⁷⁷ Taylor, 274.

can be safely dangerous, or dangerously safe.”³⁷⁸ The shift from tenderness to violation describes the trajectory of Wallace and Miller’s sexual relationship in *Real Life*. Their relationship begins with caring touch. In the opening chapter, Wallace helps wash jalapeño residue out of Miller’s eyes with milk, reflecting as Miller bends over the bathroom sink that Miller is “perfectly vulnerable.”³⁷⁹ In response to Wallace’s care, Miller “reache[s] for his hand...and just [holds] him” until they exit the bathroom and “tentatively, reluctantly, become separate people again.”³⁸⁰ Their initial tender intimacy is quickly complicated: their sexual relationship is the first queer relationship of Miller’s life, and the first nonabusive sexual relationship in Wallace’s.

Before I go further, I want to emphasize that the complexity of Miller and Wallace’s relationship is due to homophobia, not queerness. Assertions that queer sex is somehow more prone to violence pathologizes queer people. Queer sex is sometimes difficult because, as Taylor himself has written, “you can’t separate desire from the system in which it is embedded”³⁸¹ (“Is It Thirst of Mortal Dread?”). Any expression of queer desire or intimacy is always already “embedded” in the larger system of heteronormativity, which is particularly insidious because “heterosexuality is not...simply an orientation toward others, it is also something we are oriented around, even as it

³⁷⁸ Sharon Patricia Holland, *The Erotic Life of Racism*, (Duke University Press: 2012), 100.

³⁷⁹ Taylor, 29.

³⁸⁰ Taylor, 30.

³⁸¹ Taylor, “IS IT THIRST OR MORTAL DREAD?” *sweater weather* (Substack), August 29, 2019.

disappears from view."³⁸² Attending to this phenomenon exposes—or denudes—the ways in which oppressive orientations can seep into intimate spaces. Violence, in other words, cannot be checked at the bedroom door.

The overlapping violences of internalized homophobia, toxic masculinity, and trauma follow Miller and Wallace, pushing at the border between vulnerability and violence until it ruptures. The moment of violation begins, fittingly, with a touch. Miller appears at Wallace's door bearing the signs of a physical fight; when Wallace asks what happened, Miller laughs, then "reaches out and grips Wallace's shoulder." Miller's grip communicates physically and emotionally as "fear floods Wallace." The grip is also animated by domination; when Wallace tries to pull away, "Miller will not let him go, will not unclench...his grasp is absolute."³⁸³

From the first touch, their encounter is prefigured by the exploitation of vulnerability, power, and pain. Miller forces a kiss on Wallace, then "loops an arm around his neck, not choking him, but close."³⁸⁴ This posture recalls the men in Barbara Kruger's "Untitled (You Construct Intricate Rituals.)" Kruger's text reads, "You construct intricate rituals which allow you to touch the skin of other men." Like the men in the photograph, Miller's desire to "touch the skin" of Wallace is filtered through a "ritual" that converts potential homoerotic intimacy to violence, a form more tolerable within boundaries drawn by compulsory heterosexuality and toxic masculinity. In this

³⁸² Sara Ahmed, "Orientations: Toward a Queer Phenomenology," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 12, no. 4 (2006), 560.

³⁸³ Taylor, 281.

³⁸⁴ Taylor, 282.

position, Miller also has a visual advantage: he can see Wallace, but Wallace cannot see him. In this position of multivalent domination, Miller mentions he has just come from a bar fight, then asks if Wallace is afraid. Despite the fear Wallace has already disclosed to the reader, he denies it to Miller, who is still “holding Wallace against him, cradling his body [in a way that] would be tender if it weren’t also a choke hold.” Wallace recognizes the “threat of violence” in “such an embrace” because “Wallace has been put in choke holds before, by people stronger and bigger than he, people who have meant real harm.”³⁸⁵ Wallace’s emotional retreat and refusal to disclose his fear stems from his own history of trauma; his masked responses to Miller emanate from an ingrained trauma response and urge for self-preservation.

Miller laughs at Wallace’s denial, then ominously asks, “almost too quiet to hear, ‘Do you know that story about the wolf, Wallace?’”³⁸⁶ Miller refers here to the fable of the three little pigs, because, as he explains to Wallace: “You let me in... I knocked on your door in the middle of the night and you let me in. I could be a wolf.”³⁸⁷ In Miller’s version of the fable, the wolf is instantly granted entry, and so his threat to destroy (to “huff, and puff, and blow the house down”) remains latent. Miller’s “wolfish” violence is more accurately described as his internalized homophobia and toxic masculinity. Miller’s awareness of and attunement to these violent forces is catalyzed by prior vulnerable and intimate exchanges with Wallace. After a vulnerable Miller confesses he once beat

³⁸⁵ Taylor, 285.

³⁸⁶ Taylor, 282.

³⁸⁷ Taylor, 285.

another teenager nearly to death, which he “never let[s] anyone know,” Wallace tries to comfort him, but leaves when Miller falls asleep.³⁸⁸ After waking up to an empty space in the bed next to him, Miller explains that he “felt like the wolf in that story...like [he’d] just killed someone.”³⁸⁹ The irony of this feeling following a confession of near-murder is apparently lost on Miller.

Instead, Miller fixates on Wallace’s refusal of intimacy and claims it has incited his own affective response. “You fucked with my head,” Miller accuses Wallace.³⁹⁰ Here, “fuck” aptly connotes sex and violation at once. Miller obsessively ruminates “about how this guy I like, a fucking guy, no shit, how I like him and now all of a sudden I’m not good enough. I’m trash. He just used me and left. This guy I thought I knew.”³⁹¹ Miller’s own anxiety about his queer desire entangles with his sense of hurt and vulnerability, so that when another man at the bar “bumped into [him] and...called [him] a faggot,” Miller “had to set him straight. Because I’m not a faggot, Wallace. I’m not.”³⁹² Miller’s choice to describe a violent response to a homophobic slur as “setting straight” illuminates the force with which heteronormativity presses on Miller. The violence of the slur and

³⁸⁸ Taylor, 287.

³⁸⁹ Taylor, 288.

³⁹⁰ Taylor, 288.

³⁹¹ Taylor, 289.

³⁹² Taylor, 290.

Miller's usage of it harms Wallace too: "each time [Miller] says the word *faggot*, it's like he's spitting it, throwing a punch to Wallace's gut."³⁹³

This transmission of structural violences shapes the assault that follows. When Wallace confronts Miller and asks if he "want[s] to fuck [him] up too," Miller's response is ambivalent but aggressive: he tells Wallace "you don't want this," while he "grips Wallace's throat, the roughness of his palm hot on his skin."³⁹⁴ Wallace responds from the template of his prior childhood abuse, looking at Miller "in the way he practiced back in Alabama," and responds, "it seems like you do." Miller spits out another "Fuck you, Wallace," and begins to assault him.³⁹⁵ The assault is brief but brutal. Miller, stunned by his own violence, stammers, "I don't know why I did that." "Because you're a wolf," Wallace responds, obliquely naming the violence that activates and drives Miller.³⁹⁶

Afterward, Miller attempts to restore the intimate connection he has violated by initiating another sexual encounter. At first, Wallace pretends to enjoy the sex, but "beneath the surface of his [performed] pleasure there is a vast, roiling rage," and he begins to physically fight back.³⁹⁷ The physical violence seems to afford partial catharsis for both men, although the relationship remains violated. As the two lie in bed afterward, Miller attempts to "talk about it," but Wallace refuses because "it's a part of us now. It's

³⁹³ Taylor, 290.

³⁹⁴ Taylor 290-291.

³⁹⁵ Taylor, 291.

³⁹⁶ Taylor, 292.

³⁹⁷ Taylor, 295.

part of our history. You can't pick it up and throw it back like a fish you caught. You can't replace it like a broken window. It's permanent."³⁹⁸ Wallace, continually sensitive and perceptive, privately reflects that

cruelty...is just the conduit of pain. It conveys pain from one place to another—from the place of highest concentration to the place of lowest concentration, in the same way heat flows. It is a delivery system, as in the way that certain viruses convey illness, disease, irreparable harm. They're all infected with pain, hurting each other.³⁹⁹

Miller and Wallace are cast in opposite roles in a violent system: Wallace the victim, Miller the perpetrator. Miller is undeniably culpable for his actions, but Wallace recognizes that as perpetrator and victim, they are both constrained within the same violent system. Cruelty is the corruption of intimacy. Instead of disclosing and caring for one another's pain, Miller attempts to transmit his pain to Wallace. His violence breaks the bond forged by vulnerability and tenderness; the intimate space between them is permanently damaged.

The reader is here invited to reflect on the intimate space that exists between herself and Wallace. Attentiveness and adequate witness are required if the reader is to extend care to Wallace rather than perpetuate violence. Attentive reading highlights the high level of disclosure that Wallace offers the reader through his private reflections and detailed narration, details that further reveal the structures of violence that press on Wallace and Miller. Attentiveness then must move toward humane insight and adequate witness if it is to refuse the violence of voyeurism. This sensitivity creates space for

³⁹⁸ Taylor, 299.

³⁹⁹ Taylor, 300.

Wallace's troubled (and sometimes troubling) responses to Miller; the intimate reader recognizes the need for compassionate witness rather than detached, stigmatizing judgment. In this way, intimate reading reflects not the spectacular kiss that centers her own affect and experience, but the caring embrace that extends care and dignity to Wallace and resists the violence that harms him.

Concluding, Revising, Concluding Again

The first time I concluded this essay, I wrote about a scene at the end of chapter 9:

Real Life, like real life, offers little sense of resolution. There are no dramatic confessions or revelations; the plot can hardly be said to resolve so much as stop. Wallace makes no decisions regarding his relationship with Miller or his future in graduate school. One small, quiet moment, though, reaches out to the intimate reader. In the early hours of the morning following the assault, Wallace stands in the kitchen frying fish for the two men to eat. Miller accuses Wallace of being "a million miles away," but while Wallace may be far from Miller, he is close to the reader. "I'm here," Wallace says, "I'm here in the world" (Taylor 312). Miller laughs, but Wallace privately continues disclosing to the reader: "He is both here in his body with Miller and elsewhere, beyond; ...all the moments of his life are gathered up in this moment...all of it has been for this. He is in the world, everywhere he has ever been and everywhere he will go, simultaneously. Yes, he thinks, yes."⁴⁰⁰ Wallace's sense of peace in this moment is tangible, a peace that

⁴⁰⁰ Taylor, 312.

arises from his sense of grounded presence. Presence, as Claudia Rankine writes in *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, is a precondition for intimacy: “[the word] *here* both recognizes and demands recognition...in order for something to be handed over a hand must extend and a hand must receive. We must both be here in this world.”⁴⁰¹ Wallace’s affirmation of his presence is an affirmation of his belonging and place in the world.

Now, I’d like to revise that. I need to layer in one more understanding of reading praxis: reading and rereading as revision.

When my advisor mentions Kiese Laymon’s work to me, she doesn’t refer to it by book title, or even generically as “work” or “scholarship” or “writing.” She calls it wisdom. This seems especially apt to me after spending time with Morrison’s demanding vision of reading as participatory, something bearing mutual responsibility and care between text and reader. Laymon is an exemplary writer and thinker and—or rather, because—he is an excellent reader. In *Heavy*, he describes rereading as “the reader version of revision” and claims “you haven’t read anything if you’ve only read something once or twice.”⁴⁰² In the new author’s note prefacing the second, revised edition of *How to Slowly Kill Yourself and Others in America*, Laymon describes finding “radical friendship in the authors and texts I imaginatively met...I walked with my friends, talked with friends. We spent tens of thousands of hours in each other’s homes, wandering

⁴⁰¹ Claudia Rankine, *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, (Graywolf Press: 2004), 131.

⁴⁰² Kiese Laymon, *Heavy: An American Memoir*. (Scribner: 2018), 130. Apple eBooks.

around each other's guts."⁴⁰³ Here again is the Morrisonian image of reading as hospitable and haptic.

Morrison says that truth requires human intelligence, unlike facts or data. In describing how this intelligence can be developed through education, she describes a process that moves from data information, from information to knowledge, and from knowledge to wisdom. Laymon's use of revision to find truth moves along the same vector, emphasizing the processual nature of seeking wisdom and truth. As he explains,

I realized telling the truth was way different from finding the truth, and finding the truth had everything to do with revisiting and rearranging words. Revisiting and rearranging words didn't only require vocabulary; it required will, and maybe courage. Revised word patterns were revised thought patterns...Revision was practice.⁴⁰⁴

In the context of writing, the work requires the willingness to revisit and change previous conclusions; in the context of reading, the same principles of revisitation and reconsideration. This takes practice and requires—is—praxis. Laymon's principles of revision intentionally collapse the division between writing and life. Because revision demands radical truthfulness, it can't help but involve the whole person. For this reason, Laymon claims that revision is an act of love.

I love *Real Life*. So, I revisited it. I wrote before that the novel ended with that scene between Wallace and Miller (or at least implied it), that the plot ends there. What is more accurate is that the story events end there. The narrative itself does not. There is one more chapter that follows this scene, which loops backward chronologically to a day

⁴⁰³ Kiese Laymon, *How to Slowly Kill Yourself and Others in America*, Second edition, (Scribner: 2020), xii.

⁴⁰⁴ Laymon, *Heavy*, 82.

before the beginning of the novel, the day Wallace arrives in the Midwestern city for graduate school and meets the people (including Miller) who will shape the next years of his life. Truthfully, I didn't write about it because I didn't understand it. As an epilogue or conclusion, it made less emotional sense to me to end there versus ending with the image of Wallace and Miller, together but separate. So I wrote about what I could understand, at least partially, and left the last chapter alone. And then, in the intervening years, my revisionist memory forgot about it. When I opened the book again to revise this essay, I was actually surprised to see another chapter there for a moment.⁴⁰⁵ So I reread it, and it opened up to me in a way it never had before.

The chapter begins with "It was an exceptionally hot day in July the day Wallace arrived in the Midwest,"⁴⁰⁶ a syntactical parallel to the first sentence in the book, which begins, "It was a cool evening in late summer..."⁴⁰⁷ The parallels multiply. In this retrospective scene, Wallace is again positioned at the pier, waiting to meet his (yet to be) friends. His internal dialogue is full of negotiating expectations. He expects that the Midwest will immediately feel different to him, but "he found the air just as heavy as he had left it down south."⁴⁰⁸ He feels both hopeful that his grad school classmates are "the

⁴⁰⁵ I have read this book at least four times, so I really don't know how I could forget this. I suppose that speaks to how what we write can calcify our memories? Or maybe just that it's been an intense few years and my memory is not what it used to be.

⁴⁰⁶ Taylor, 218.

⁴⁰⁷ Taylor, 5.

⁴⁰⁸ Taylor, 218.

people to whom he felt he would belong,” but also “foolish” for hoping so.⁴⁰⁹ The reader is introduced one by one to characters they already know: Emma, Lukas, Yngve, Miller. And then, Wallace begins to cry from overwhelm. (In a canny moment of foreshadowing, Emma “step[s] forward to hug him,” saying that she “know[s] the feeling.”⁴¹⁰) As Wallace interacts with each of his new friends, he increasingly feels “giddy, almost sick with excitement, to be in this place, among these people,” thinking that it feels like “the accomplishment of a long-held wish, a dream come true.”⁴¹¹ The accomplishment here is not so much the academic status of grad school but the achievement of finding “people to whom he felt he would belong,” especially after his long-held sense of “incompatibility” with his Southern home as a queer person. Reading Wallace’s vulnerability here is undercut by the knowledge of how each of the people he meets will hurt and disappoint him.

Once the group has gathered at the pier, they take boats out to a park on the peninsula on the far side of the lake. As they walk toward their reserved space, they pass “other little gatherings” from which they see “a flicker of flame as they pass” and hear “voices reac[h] out to them in the dark.” After building their own fire, they decide to make a toast. Wallace watches the firelight through his plastic champagne flute as “golden bubbles rippl[e] up to the champagne’s surface.” Lukas, one of Wallace’s classmates, says that “This is it. Our life. It starts now,” and the rest of the group takes it

⁴⁰⁹ Taylor, 219.

⁴¹⁰ Taylor, 220.

⁴¹¹ Taylor, 220-221.

up as a repeated chant “to life!...imbuing those words with all their hope and all their desires for the future.”⁴¹² Again, the reader feels a bittersweet tension between the hope for the future with the knowledge of the disappointment and disillusionment to come. This toast also pulls on the thread of the repeated contrast between grad school and “real life” that characters discuss throughout the novel (a commonplace, in my experience). In my reading, I see a shade of gentle irony here from Taylor, holding up this moment for our consideration—as if life *could* stop and start based on location or sheer will.

Wallace contemplates leaving grad school throughout the novel. As he explains to his friend and labmate Cole, even though he “[doesn’t] have any skills to live in it,” he still sometimes wishes to “be in the world,” “with a real job, a real life.”⁴¹³ “Real life” is also used as a rhetorical weapon by Cole’s boyfriend, Vincent (who is not an academic and has a “real job”), when Wallace exposes Vincent’s infidelity. Rather than take accountability, Vincent attacks Wallace for being insensitive, asking if he understands that “this is real life.”⁴¹⁴ As Wallace walks home after this incident, he looks around the crowded street and thinks that “this too is real life...not merely the accumulation of tasks, things to be done and sorted, but also the bumping up against other lives, everyone in the world insignificant when taken and observed together.”⁴¹⁵ With this context in mind, I see further irony in the younger grad students toast “to life,” a life defined by their status

⁴¹² Taylor, 221.

⁴¹³ Taylor, 93.

⁴¹⁴ Taylor, 163-164.

⁴¹⁵ Taylor, 168.

as graduate students and their location at the university away from their prior homes. To be at this fire, making this toast, they walk past other gatherings just like theirs, voices and flickers of light reaching out to them through the darkness. As they conclude their toast, Taylor writes that “on the shore they have left behind, people were eating dinner and laughing and crying and going about things as they always had and always would.”⁴¹⁶ They are all “here, in the world,” just like every other human life.

This reread is the first time I felt I understood why Taylor had chosen *Real Life* as the title of the novel. By placing the phrase on the cover, Taylor invites the reader to consider how to define “real life”: as a rhetorical barrier circumscribing the grad student characters, as an ideological invective about whose feelings are most consequential, as a metonym for the uncertain future that Wallace fears. The answer lies below those surfaces: real life is always already in motion, people “bumping up against each other” and “going about things as they always had and always would.” At the moment of the toast, Wallace is hoping to be granted access to a space to which he already belongs.

Epilogue

Discussing “real life” in the conclusion of the last chapter of my dissertation seems a little on the nose, I admit. Lately, I have caught myself using the same language in anxious internal monologues about what happens next (“you’d better write the hell out of that dissertation now, because in real life, you won’t ever have the same kind of time or support again.”) When I am thinking more clearly, I am typically frustrated (as both a

⁴¹⁶ Taylor, 221.

student and a teacher) by the rhetoric that positions school in opposition to “real life.” I credit this to Paul Zielinski, my soft-spoken student teaching mentor, who once commented that he avoided making threats about “real life” to his students. “This *is* their real life,” he said. “What about this isn’t real?” Ten years later, I am still thinking about that simple lesson in ontological insurrection.

I think perhaps Paul’s words have had such lasting power because he spoke to an old anxiety I have carried. As a kid, I got in trouble for reading instead of participating in real life. While my younger siblings played outside, I preferred to curl up in an old red armchair with a book from the library or from my own little bookshelf. Sometimes, I would set a second book on the table next to the chair, ready for action as soon as I’d finished the book in my lap. Most of the time, I would become so absorbed that I was unaware of my surroundings—although I think I can now finally admit that I did hear my mom asking me to unload the dishwasher a lot more often than I pretended I could. I felt happy and safe and alive inside books. I echo Kiese Laymon: they were friends and companions to me.

This was especially true as I grew older and felt an anxious certainty that I was somehow misunderstanding or missing out on real life. Chalk it up to growing up in a high-control religious community, or to undiagnosed neurodivergence, or just being young, or all of the above. A full narrative arc stretches between that dreamy kid, that anxious teenager, and who I am now. This is not the right place for that story. The important thing is that I did eventually decide my life is real enough. And my real life includes my life as a reader. Toni Morrison compares the work of reading with “look[ing]

at a very good painting, [in which] the experience of looking is deeper than the data accumulated in viewing it.”⁴¹⁷ Reading is not a substitute for experience: reading is experience in itself. This too is real life.

⁴¹⁷ Morrison, *The Source of Self-Regard*, 264.

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